

Praise for The Blind Bowman

'It's dark and violent, a gory fantasy mashup with Game of Thrones and X-Men in its DNA' Guardian

'Astonishingly good. ★★★★★' Sun

'T.K. Hall has produced an original, savage, powerful and incredibly moving story. He captures the harshness and darkness of the ancient woodland so vividly; it is like the author himself has slid back in time. Robin and Marian are like you have never seen, and I am sure this novel will grip anyone who reads it, as it thoroughly gripped me'

Jilly Cooper, Mail on Sunday

'A bold interpretation that's weird, wild and wonderful. . . Game of Thrones-style'

SFX Magazine

'Magic. If you love Alan Garner, Mythico Wood, wild gods and wild places then read Shadow of the Wolf. Reading this book takes me back to that place in my teens where a book carried me away from all the worries of the world and the chaos in my head to another place. Breathless.

*Haunting. Wild. Magic' Jackie Morris, co-creator of
The Lost Words and The Lost Spells*

'One of the debuts of the year' Books for Keeps

'Mesmerising, don't miss it!' **The Bookseller**

'My favourite book of the year. Beautiful writing, a stunning mix of action and mystical folklore.

A brilliant story'

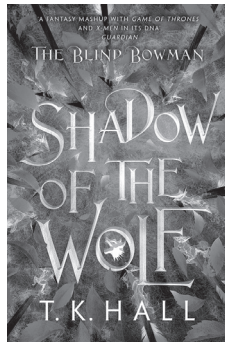
Sally Green, author of Half Bad

'This is the darkest, strangest, and possibly coolest version of Robin Hood I've ever seen. Highly Recommended'

YA Yeah Yeah

'It is incredibly rich in detail, wonderfully written and so unique that this truly is a Robin Hood tale unlike anything you could ever have dreamt of' A Dream of Books

'I truly cannot rave about this book enough. I've always loved the Robin Hood legend and have read quite a few books based around it but none of them clicked with me until Shadow of the Wolf. It is undoubtedly the most interesting, gripping take on the legend I've come across' Reveries of a Bookworm



WILD WOOD RISING

T. K. H A L L

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For Lizzie, Beatrix and Matilda

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*How long must you wander this wasted world?
How much time has already passed? A day – a month – a year?
Impossible to tell. The seasons ended when the great forest burned.
All time since has been but a single midwinter's night.*

*Why, then, won't you lie down to die?
This body is ravaged – as blackened as the ground on which it walks.
Every breath is torture to your lungs. Every footfall hot needles in
your bones. Your mind screams to perceive what the Earth has become.*

*Yet still you drag this walking corpse across this lifeless land. Perhaps
death simply does not want you. Not after all you did – all you failed
to do.*

*Or is there some yearning, even now, drawing you onwards? Some
promise of . . . what? Redemption? Vengeance? No – these are mere
phantoms – more so than they ever were.
What then . . . ? Refuge?*

Yes. That is what you seek.

*Even now, when all else is lost, you cling to that final hope. That you
might find a place to welcome you home. Where you may lay down this
hollow flesh, this burden of guilt and grief, and allow the dust and the
years to blow over you.*

Where at last you may cease all your struggles . . .

And sleep your final, never-ending sleep . . .

Prologue

‘The wind’s rising,’ Lucas called out to his sister as dust eddied around his feet. ‘Time to find shelter.’

‘Just a little further,’ Arora called back. ‘We’re on track today. I can feel it.’

‘That’s what you said yesterday, and the day before that. And what have we found? A few clipped shillings. Some arrowheads.’

‘Which were the surest sign of all,’ Arora said, her head low to the ground, like a hound following a scent. ‘I’m telling you, little brother, our luck’s on the turn.’

One of these days you’re going to push our luck too far, Lucas thought to himself. He paused to peer back the way they had come, then swept his gaze across this whole blasted landscape. It was always a dismal place, the bare ground grey and eroded, layered with dust and sand. From horizon to horizon it was featureless, save for the occasional naked hillock or stone-dry riverbed or shadowy ravine. But today, to Lucas’s eyes, the Lost Lands appeared more wretched than ever. Not so much as a lone buzzard broke that hard white sky. No sign of even a sand serpent or a lizard.

He turned and hurried after his sister. At first, with a spike of fear, he failed to see her. Like him, she was dressed head-to-toe in sand-coloured rags. They kept scarves wrapped around

their mouths and noses to keep out the cloying dust, and their hoods raised against the punishing sun. To soften the glare of white light that blazed off the leafless ground, they wore bone blinders with narrow slits.

Dressed like this, Arora blended with the landscape, especially now she had stopped and dropped to one knee. As Lucas fixed his gaze on her at last, something else caught the top edge of his vision. It was a hulking white outline.

‘Sis, up that way – a fallen tree,’ he said, hurrying to her side. ‘We can take cover there.’

‘All right. We’ll go as soon as I’ve got this.’

She was using her knife to chisel away at the sun-baked soil. As she dug around the object, one edge of it gleamed. Despite his eagerness to get on their way, Lucas watched, intrigued. And when she finally stood with the find, brushing it clean of dry soil, he stared, spellbound. The object was made of copper. It was dented and discoloured. But there was no doubting what it had once been. It was a goblet.

‘It really belonged to them?’ he said in hushed tones, as she offered it to him. ‘To the outlaws of Sherwood?’

‘Who else?’ She smiled. ‘Whose lips do you think it touched? Will Scarlett? Blodwyn Kage?’

‘What do you think it’s worth?’

Arora shrugged. ‘These things are trinkets. Father always said so. One day we’ll be standing in Robin Hood’s Cave. Then you’ll see what treasure means!’

She was moving off again, but Lucas remained where he was, cradling the goblet in both palms, his mind full of wonders. The twins were twelve years old – too young to have ever known the fabled forest, Sherwood, that they say once carpeted this land. Growing up, their father had told them endless stories of it. How the wildwood was so saturated with life that you could not set your foot upon the ground without creatures scurrying

from your path. How when you needed to eat you had only to reach up and pluck fruit from a tree. When thirsty, you merely knelt at a spring or a stream.

Wandering the wastes, treading this cursed earth, Lucas often found these stories hard to believe. Except at moments like this. Standing here, holding this relic from that mythical past. From that golden age of heroes and gods, when forest fighters lived in the treetops and waged war against the enemies of the wild!

From the west came a hollow howl. In the distance, a column of dust spiralled skywards. Hurriedly stowing the goblet in his backpack, he hastened after his sister.

Ahead of him, she had dwindled to almost nothing. She appeared to be moving to lower ground. And as he gained on her, he saw that, yes, she had entered a wide depression – like a bowl scooped out of the earth.

He moved down the slope after her. The ground down here was different: it was dotted with smooth, round pebbles, and with tiny bones fused into rock.

‘There was water here,’ Arora said as he joined her. She was kneeling once more, digging again with her blade. ‘I think it was a lake.’

A lake.

Lucas stared around him, trying to make it real – to envisage this great expanse filled with sparkling water and swimming with life. The effort was beyond him. Look at it now. As the sun lowered, becoming red and angry, it bathed the whole bowl in a crimson hue. It made the land look raw, like flesh peeled of skin.

Again the plain howled, heavier and more tormented than before, and the wind reached Lucas with enough force to pelt him with grit.

‘Whatever that is, sis, leave it. There’s a dust storm brewing. We need to go.’

'I've almost got it,' she said, through gritted teeth, twisting her blade. 'It was buried deep, but I think . . . Ah ha, yes, here it is!'

She stood with the object resting in her palm. It was made of greenish rock, like jade. It was in the shape of a teardrop . . . or a heart.

'What is it?'

'An amulet,' she said, delighted. 'Or . . . a love charm! Yes – look – this fissure down the middle – I think it was in two halves! The heat of the Great Fire must have fused them together!' She grinned as she pocketed the charm. 'I told you our luck had turned. What will we find next?'

They headed towards the fallen tree they could see on the far side of the old lake, the wind swirling around them as they went, stirring dust and dead flies.

Climbing up out of the bowl, they came in clear sight of the tree. Fire had stripped it to a bare skeleton. The sun had bleached it white as bone. At close quarters, it was enormous. Even lying on its side, its trunk towered over the twins.

And now they could see it was not alone. Beyond the first tree, they found the scattered remains of another two, and a fourth – and more. There must have been dozens of these trees in all. They arched up from ground like colossal ribcages and backbones.

'It's a giants' graveyard,' Arora said, her voice hushed as they moved deeper amid the remains.

Lucas wrapped his robes close, feeling chilled. The sun was setting and the temperature was falling fast. Night-mist, green and sickly, was seeping up through the cracked soil and snaking through the twisted skeletons of the trees.

'Look!' Arora whispered. 'Do you see it? Is it a mirage, or . . .'

Both of them stopped dead and stared. The mist had swirled aside to unveil a phenomenal sight.

It was another ancient, broken tree. Except this one had not been uprooted. Instead, the trunk had snapped, leaving behind a hulking stump. But what amazed the twins – what held them here, awestruck – was the fact that this stump appeared to still be *living*. Green shoots grew up out of its exposed roots. Its top was bushy with shrubs, like the hair on an old man's head. All around its base sprouted wildflowers and ferns and even small saplings.

In all their journeying across these wastes, the twins had only ever seen scraps of vegetation: the occasional corpse flower, or clump of burn weed. And now, here in the middle of these ash-white bonelands, there blazed this beacon of green.

'Here's our refuge,' Arora whispered, as wind moaned outside the Giants' Graveyard. 'See – the stump is hollow. There's our way in.'

As she moved towards the green oasis, Lucas stayed put, suddenly on full alert. He drew his slingshot and knelt to pick up a rock. A flash of something had crossed his path. There – he saw it again. The blur of reddish fur, the flash of golden eyes.

Whirring his slingshot, he stared into the shadows beneath the twisted trees. He saw nothing more, yet had the intense impression he was being watched. There was *something* there, studying him, he was sure there was . . .

'Sis, wait,' he called, going after Arora. 'This place . . . Something's wrong.'

'It keeps out the wind, doesn't it? What more do you want? Are you going to let me do all the work, as usual?'

She had collected a pile of firewood, and was now dragging it towards the ancient tree stump. On this side of the stump was a triangular fissure, like the jagged entrance to a cave. Arora was now edging backwards into it, disappearing into the blackness.

Scurrying to pick up sticks she had dropped, then pausing to sweep one last look around the Giants' Graveyard, Lucas ducked in after her.

Inside was a world of its own. The walls of this tree-cave must have been as solid as stone, because every last murmur from outside now died away. The aroma in here was fresh and green, albeit with a hint of decay. The ground was soft with mulch, which emitted a slight warmth, putting Lucas in mind of a creature's burrow.

'See,' Arora whispered. 'The perfect place to overnight.'

It was almost pitch-black in there, though. Working by touch, in tandem, the twins built a small pyramid of kindling. Lucas added a spark from his strike-a-light, and then they carefully fed the flames with sticks. The fire ate greedily, the fuel bone-dry, the hollow tree stump acting as a natural chimney.

From his backpack, Lucas took a large sand-rat he had trapped that morning. He quickly skinned it with his hunting knife, then started skewering it onto a sharpened stick.

But then he paused. He put down the stick and the rat. He picked up his knife.

Then he became very still. Arora was already motionless. The noise of her breathing. The faintest moan of the wind outside, and the pop-crackle of the fire.

Finally, Lucas said: 'We're not alone, are we? There's something in here with us.'

Arora gave a slight nod. 'What do you think it is?'

He went on staring. The twisting light of the flames. The blackness at the rear of the tree-cave.

'It looks . . . man-shaped,' he said.

'Does it?' Arora murmured. 'I thought I saw fur.'

'It hasn't moved. Maybe it's dead.'

Arora lifted a burning brand from the fire.

'What are you doing?' he hissed.

'We need to look closer.'

'What? . . . No!'

But she was already on her feet, and was moving towards the

back of the chamber. Lucas went after her, his eyes fixed on the menacing silhouette. That black shape in the deeper blackness.

As they edged closer, and the shape resolved itself, Lucas took hold of Arora, hissed in alarm.

'Sis . . . Don't!'

'It's all right,' she murmured. 'He can't hurt us.'

'H-how do you know?'

'You were right,' she said. 'He's dead.' Freeing herself from her brother's grip, she edged forward. 'After all this time . . . how could he not be?'

'H-he?' Lucas stammered. 'It's . . . human?'

Arora crouched in front of the dark figure, lifted her light, illuminating a deathly face. 'Don't you know who this is?' she murmured. 'What we've found?'

'You don't think . . . It's not actually . . .'

'Who else could it be? Just look. Exactly the way Father described – just like in all the stories.' She turned with the torch, and she was smiling, and her eyes were wide. 'I told you we were in luck's way, didn't I? Trust me, little brother, this is worth more than a treasure hoard. This will change *everything*. Me and you . . . We just found Robin Hood.'

Part One

Buried Seeds

I. Bloodlines

‘On your guard!’

At the clipped command of his swordmaster, Rex set his fighting stance. Gripping his ironwood blade, he met the eyes of his opponent. He was a tough ranger named Neville. He was twice Rex’s age and built like a bull. But he would not get the better of Rex – not today. Not with his father watching.

Rex raised his eyes, briefly. There, on the viewing platform, was his swordmaster, Alpha Johns. And standing next to him was Rex’s father. He held himself as still as stone and might almost be a statue, except for those eyes of his which blazed ice-blue and missed nothing. Rex’s grip tightened on his sword, and he stood ready.

The sun was low, its red glow touching the battlements. But even at this hour it was sweltering in the combat yard, Rex already sweating beneath the padding of his sparring suit. A hot wind was blowing too. It came from the west, howling out of the wastes, roaring up through the city streets before reaching the castle. The wind carried with it grit and dust, a fresh flurry of which now found its way over the ramparts and down into the yard, where it swirled across the cobbles.

His every nerve braced for battle, Rex ignored the howling

wind, refused to acknowledge the dry taste of it in his mouth or the itch at the back of his throat.

Finally, Alpha gave the command.

‘Begin!’

Neville came heavily forward, hefting his weighty training sword. Rex circled, giving his bigger opponent space. Rex feinted left, spun right – just in time to avoid Neville’s blade as it swept down in an overhead strike.

Rex counterattacked with two quick hits aimed at the midriff, which Neville turned with a backhand defence. Neville attacked once more – a vicious reverse that would have floored Rex had he not ducked away a moment before.

For all Neville’s size, he was quick on his feet, and in these opening exchanges Rex found himself on the retreat, meeting his opponent’s barrage with soft blocks and snatched counter-attacks. As he was driven back across the yard, and the dust swirled around his feet, he felt his courage slip. A small voice whispered that his confidence had been misplaced – that he would leave here in disgrace.

The wind strengthened, howling around the ramparts so heavily that a pennant was torn from its pole and flapped away towards the Keep. With each breath, Rex felt the hot dust tightening in his chest, and for a moment he feared it would be this that defeated him.

No – not today – I won’t allow it, he told himself, while his father looked on. *This fight is mine!*

With a quick flick of his blade and a feint, Rex spun away from Neville, leaving him thrashing at thin air. Rex attacked from Neville’s blindside, forcing his opponent into a desperate improvised defence. While he was off balance, Rex struck again and again, darting around his adversary, slashing at his legs, his chest, his midriff.

‘Hit!’ Alpha called out from the viewing platform as Rex’s

blade stuck his opponent on the knee. The impact was cushioned by his padded leather greave, but even so the blow made Neville groan and stumble, and before he could properly regain his feet, Alpha was calling, ‘Hit!’ once more as Rex’s sword caught him square on the shoulder.

Neville was on the back foot now, flailing, all precision gone from his parries, no proper form in his stance. Rex, in contrast, had found perfect poise and rhythm, his years of practice condensed down into this moment – this flick of the sword – his blade in fact now operating of its own accord as it swept left and right, probing for openings, narrowly missing Neville’s padded helm and the decisive strike that would end this contest.

His eyes, of their own volition, darted once more to his father, his cold gaze as inscrutable as ever. Was he impressed by what he saw? Proud of his son for so easily besting a veteran of the Guard?

These thoughts came and went, Rex’s full focus locked once more on his opponent. Building on his dominance, he increased the intensity of his attacks, which kept Neville flailing like a baited bear. It would not be long now. Soon, one of these strikes would land and Rex would be crowned victorious.

Another surge of wind, even heavier than the last, howled over the battlements and down into the yard. It lifted grit and sand from the cobbles and hurled it at the swordsmen.

The bombardment hit Rex in the back. It caught Neville full in the face. The ranger cried out in pain as he lifted his free hand to his eyes.

To Rex, everything became slow and clear. His opponent’s sword waved uselessly before him. His head was fully exposed. Strike now, and Rex would win this contest.

Yet his own blade remained still. He just watched Neville trying to force open his eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Afterwards, Rex could not have said how long he hesitated.

But in that space of time, the world spun on its head. In pain, enraged, Neville roared and lashed out blindly. The blow was so unexpected that Rex failed to raise his guard. It caught him full in the chest and sent him sprawling.

Perhaps this surprised Neville as much as it did Rex, because the ranger made no move to build on his advantage but merely stood there, blinking, his eyes red and streaming. Rex tried to stand, but failed. The blow had left him breathless. And now, as he had feared, his lungs betrayed him. Succumbing to the hot dust, he began to cough and cough, curling into a ball as he wheezed and gasped for air.

Through blurred eyes, as he fought for breath, he watched Neville just standing there, looking pained and uncertain. Then the big ranger dropped to one knee, bowed his head.

Rex saw why. His father had left the viewing platform and was coming down the steps into the combat yard. He made his slow way towards the swordsmen, his black robes billowing in the wind.

The Sheriff stopped and looked down at Rex. The ruined side of his face, puckered like melted wax, was livid in the last light of day. But his expression remained neutral, his cold blue eyes giving nothing away. Finally, without moving his gaze from Rex, he addressed Neville.

‘Who ordered you to halt the contest?’

The ranger raised his head. ‘Sire? I . . .’ He glanced towards Rex’s sword, which lay out of arm’s reach. ‘My . . . my opponent is defenceless, sire.’

‘As were you, when you were blinded by the grit. You were at my son’s mercy. Yet he hesitated. I trust you will not make the same mistake.’

With both hands, Neville gripped his ironwood sword. ‘You mean, you wish me to . . .?’

‘I wish you to finish the contest. Nothing more, nothing less.

You know the rules. Three clean strikes to the body, or one to the head.’

‘Wait,’ Rex said, fighting for breath, struggling to stand. ‘I can continue.’

‘Certainly – should your opponent allow you the chance.’ The Sheriff looked fully at Neville. ‘Of course, if he should lose this fight, from such a position of advantage, he will have proved himself unworthy to be a ranger of the Guard.’

Rex made a lunge for his sword. This galvanized Neville into action, and he brought his own blade thumping down onto Rex’s back. The blow flattened Rex, drove the air once more from his lungs. He broke into another coughing fit. Above the noise of his own rasping, he heard his father say: ‘Hit. Continue . . . Ranger, I said continue.’

After a pause, the heavy, blunt-edged sword thundered down once more. Even through the padding of his sparring suit the blow was jarring, pain shooting through Rex’s ribs. Already rasping for air, he now endured nightmare moments were he was entirely unable to breathe.

‘You pulled your strike. No hit,’ he heard his father say to the big guard. ‘Continue.’

The ironwood sword slammed down once more, heavier than before. And it crashed down a third time, and a fourth, while the Sheriff berated the soldier for his poor form.

‘No hit. Again.’

Thrice more the blade came down, while Rex shuddered and shook and coughed, while his breath rasped in his lungs and black spots swam before his eyes.

There was a pause. He braced himself for the next strike. It never came. He went on coughing, until finally the fit subsided and he became still. Tears pricked behind his eyes. He bit his lip hard and focused on the pain.

Finally, he rolled onto his back and looked up, the world

blurred. Neville was nowhere to be seen. But his father was still here, his hands behind his back, watching him. He looked pale faced now, and his chest heaved visibly as though he was struggling to draw his own breath.

‘You are aware,’ the Sheriff said at last, speaking slowly, ‘what age I was when I became the Sheriff of Nottingham? I was fifteen years old. The age you are now. I did not have the luxury of sparring swords. Of second chances. At my word, fighting men lived and died. Stand up, son. Look at me.’

His lungs on fire, every inch of him throbbing with pain, Rex rose as steadily as he was able, forced himself to hold his father’s gaze.

‘I see defiance in your eyes,’ the Sheriff said. ‘Perhaps even a shard of hatred. Do you suppose I am wounded by it? Let me assure you of one thing. My role, as your father, is not to be loved. Nor even to be liked. It is a father’s role to shape his son for purpose. To forge him into the man he must become. Make no mistake, I will play my role, no matter what it may take.’

With that, sweeping his black cloak around him, his father turned and strode away, until he was swallowed into the shadows beneath the Keep.

Hanging his head, Rex listened to the howling of the wind. The swordmaster came to stand at his side.

‘You know,’ Alpha said, ‘not every father cares enough to teach their son a lesson.’

Rex ground his teeth. ‘I should count myself lucky.’

‘He sees greatness in you. We all do. But this path of yours won’t get any easier. So yes, perhaps in time you’ll be grateful for his methods.’ He put a big hand on Rex’s shoulder. ‘But you’ve had enough for one day. Come on, let’s get out of this wind. I’ll help you stow your equipment, then we’ll raid the kitchens, what do you say?’

*

It was fully dark by the time Rex walked back through the castle, past the bustle of the scullery, through the Inner Ward. Watchfires now blazed atop the ramparts, the flames frenzied in the wind. Sentries were calling watchwords from one tower to another. From the direction of the stables came the whinnying of horses, and the stamp of hooves. This wind was spreading agitation throughout the whole castle. Scullions and apprentices dashed here and there, while their masters shouted and doors slammed.

For Rex’s part, he was too sore and exhausted to care about anything other than reaching his bed. Now that his blood had cooled, the pain in his ribs was sharper than ever, and he felt unsteady on his feet.

When he reached the White Tower, two sentries snapped to attention. A third man rapped on the iron-studded door with the butt of his spear, before a porter heaved it open. None of these people looked Rex in the eye, only stared dead ahead as he went inside and started up the spiral staircase.

He passed the small dining hall and the receiving rooms, and continued to the top floor chambers – the so-called Queen’s Apartments.

As he walked along the corridor towards the Solar, he became aware of a disturbance. From the other side of the double doors came a crash, followed by a yell.

‘I said, get out! All of you! Now!’

There was a heavy thump and something smashed, before the doors burst open and three body-servants came rushing out. They almost ran straight into Rex, then stopped, wringing their hands.

‘B-begging your pardon, my lord,’ one of the young women stammered, looking fearfully back towards the Solar at the sound of another crash. ‘We only went to light the lamps and to help her try on her new garments.’

There came an almighty thump, and the sound of something breaking, at which the servants jumped, and one began to cry.

‘It’s all right,’ Rex told them. ‘I’ll talk to her.’

‘B-but your father,’ the first maid stammered. ‘His orders were—’

‘It can’t be helped,’ Rex said. ‘If anyone asks, I told you to leave.’

The young women glanced at one another, looked at Rex with a mixture of fear and relief, then stepped around him and fled.

Rex continued to the double doors. As he entered the Solar, something sailed towards his head. He ducked away and the flask exploded against the wall, splattering it with red liquid.

‘I said, leave me be!’ his mother shouted, preparing to hurl another missile before blinking and fixing her gaze on him. ‘Oh, it’s you. Where have you been?’

Rex took in the scene. The usual opulence of the Solar had given way to ruin and disarray. Heirloom furniture had been tipped over; the big gilt-edged mirror had been smashed to smithereens. Garments lay strewn everywhere.

His mother’s appearance echoed the chaos. She was half dressed in kirtle and tunic. Her hair was knotted and dishevelled. Dark lines of face-kohl ran down her cheeks like black tears. At her feet was a large flask, its stopper removed, dribbling the last of its contents.

‘Yes, I’ve had some wine,’ she said, fixing him with an unfocused glare. ‘Why shouldn’t I? You leave me here with these parasites. These sycophants.’

‘You frightened the maids. You could have just asked them to leave.’

‘You’ve been running around playing toy soldiers, I suppose. Acting the little prince. You know what I’ve been doing? Listening to dukes and lordlings singing my praises – smiling while they bring me gifts. Look at all this – look at it!’

She kicked at the garments on the ground, and stamped on them. ‘They all want to see me wearing their dresses – like I’m their private doll to be prettied!’ She scooped up a brocaded gown, then began hunting the room, flinging open cabinets, sweeping objects off tables. ‘I need a knife! Why can I never find a knife when I need one! He tells them to hide them, I swear! Nothing sharp – nothing real!’

Giving up the search, she attempted to destroy the gown with her bare hands, tearing at its sleeves. ‘Do you have any idea what it’s like for me, sitting there nodding my head, admiring their wit, when I want to slit every one of their throats! All his flatterers and lapdogs!’

‘Mother – calm yourself. What’s happened?’

‘Nothing’s *happened*. Nothing ever happens! We sit in this gilded cage, waiting for the world to end. Except it already has! He ended it! And what do these fools do? They bring him gifts – and me – his queen! They honour the man who killed the world! We’re already in hell – where else could we be?’

‘Mother, please, you’re delirious. I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘No – you don’t, poor boy.’ She laughed – a mean sound, and desperate. ‘Oh, there are things I could tell you, little prince, that would spin your head. You better leave me – go on – before I gabble it all and be damned.’

Rex set himself. ‘I won’t leave you like this. You need—’

‘I said go! I – I want to be alone.’ She gave up trying to destroy the gown, dropped it to the ground. As she did so, all the fury abruptly went out of her and she slumped back onto a padded bench. ‘Please,’ she said softly, without looking at him. ‘I . . . think . . . I need some time to myself.’

Rex looked at her, weathering a storm of resentment and regret, wanting to go to his mother, to help her, but something holding him back. Knowing in any case that it would be futile.

Now that the fire had burned out of her, there was barely anything left. She looked pitiful, sitting there with those slug-trails of kohl on her cheeks. She looked . . . old. Her skin wan and her shoulders slumped. Even her eyes – those vital, varicoloured eyes of grey and green – had suddenly lost their lustre, and had become watery and vacant.

Rex had seen his mother like this before, of course, on many occasions. Often after one of her outbursts she would retreat into the opposite state. She would sit motionless, unblinking, as though staring into the deep past. These melancholies could last for hours, or days, or even weeks. How long would she remain buried in this one? Was there anything he might do to pull her out of it?

He shook his head. He knew from experience that nothing and no one could reach her when she was like this. Only time could bring her back to him.

So thinking, with sorrow and exhaustion pressing upon him like a dead weight, he slouched away to his bedchamber, desperate to lose himself in the oblivion of sleep.

II. Captive Queen

Locked in her stupor – in this hateful state between wakefulness and sleep – Marian was unable to say what had actually occurred and what she might have dreamed. She had a memory of fat men with red bulbous faces – and they were showering her with gifts.

And afterwards . . . she had talked to Rex, hadn't she? Had they argued? She had the vaguest recollection of lashing out with her tongue – of wanting to hurt him with her words. Why? What had he done? What might she have said to him? Not knowing sent a jolt of fear down her spine, sufficient to shake her from her trance.

She blinked around her, as if waking, taking in the disorder of the Solar. The remains of amphorae. The smashed statuettes. She barely remembered doing any of this. Her head throbbed and her vision was fuzzy. How long had she been lost in her blank melancholy? The moon was full and high, casting its bluish light through the large oval embrasure. She judged it was a little after midnight.

Unsteadily, she stood, her head pounding, and she went down the corridor to Rex's bedchamber. The door was ajar. She stood looking in. Rex lay sprawled on his back, bare-chested, half-covered by a sheet.

She crept inside and knelt at his bedside and watched him sleeping. As she did so, she suffered a wave of emotion for which she had no name. Sadness and dread and regret all rolled into one. Gods alive, look at him! He was a man already.

Yes, that formed the core of this heart-wrenching emotion: a sudden jolting fear at the passing of time; as if she had blinked and years had slipped by. How had her baby boy become this? Those broad muscles of his chest. That untamed, shoulder-length hair. That dark, flawless skin, just like hers when she was his age. Those strong lines of his jaw and cheekbones, so much like his –

She severed this thought at the root. Over the years she had trained herself to push such ideas from her mind, as if even to think them would be too dangerous . . .

As she watched him, and the wind howled against the tower, Rex became restless. His breathing became more rapid and uneven. He tossed his head from side to side, his eyes visibly darting beneath the lids.

‘No, you can’t . . .’ he murmured. ‘You mustn’t. It must live . . .’

She stroked his hair. ‘Shh, it’s all right. You’re having a bad dream. You’re safe. You’re here with me.’

He began thrashing his limbs, as though trying to wake himself, and he gabbled more fearful words. It wrenched Marian’s heart to see him like this. All his life he had been visited by night terrors. She examined one of his bare arms, and she saw, as she suspected, that the skin there was chapped and raw. This was another of his afflictions: vulcanism of the skin. It often erupted when he was most agitated.

‘It’s just a dream,’ she whispered, shaking him gently. ‘Whatever it is you’re seeing, it can’t hurt you. It doesn’t exist.’

Abruptly, Rex awoke, startling her as he sat bolt upright, wildness in his eyes and his bared teeth. He took hold of her, one hand closing around her throat.

‘Rex, it’s me,’ she gasped, catching her breath. ‘You’re safe. You were having a nightmare.’

He stared at her. Slowly the savage look left him and he lowered his arms.

‘Wherever it is you go, I wish I could come with you,’ she told him. ‘I’d face it for you in a heartbeat, you know that.’

He lay back down, turned his face away.

‘You don’t need to be ashamed,’ she said.

‘I’m not.’

‘Your arms look sore. I’ll fetch something for it.’

She went out and returned with her apothecary casket. She took out a balm made from willow bark and primrose and field mallow, and she began applying it to his arm.

‘There’s no need,’ he said blankly. ‘It’s fine.’

‘Your skin is on fire. I can see it is. This will douse the flames.’

He shrugged her off. ‘I said stop.’

As he rolled away from her, he winced. He tried to wrap himself in the covers, but not before she had caught sight of his ribs.

‘Those bruises – how did this happen?’ she demanded. ‘Now what’s he been making you do?’ She lifted the bedclothes and hissed between her teeth. His whole back was shades of black and yellow and blue. ‘Rex – you need to tell me – what happened? He might have killed you!’

He pulled the bedclothes away from her. ‘As if you’d care,’ he mumbled. ‘I doubt you’d even notice.’

This sat Marian back on her heels. She took a long breath, watching Rex, not knowing whether she wanted to yell at him or sob or scream. Finally, she closed her eyes, laid a hand on the back of his neck.

‘It’s happened a lot recently, hasn’t it?’ she said quietly. ‘I’ve been . . . absent.’ She stroked his hair. ‘But I’m here now. And I’m staying, I promise.’ As the wind moaned, ghostly against the tower, and moonlight bathed the chamber, she leaned towards

him. 'What's more . . . I'll prove it. What would you say to an adventure?'

Finally he half-turned and opened one eye.

'What kind of an adventure?'

She smiled. 'As a matter of fact, I've had something in mind for some time.' Her smile widened, a hint of madness in her grey-green eyes. 'It's not for the fainthearted. Do you think you're up to it with those bruises? Of course you are. All right then. Get dressed, quick as you can. With this moon, and this wind – yes – tonight's the night we've been waiting for!'

What lunacy was this? What had possessed Rex to follow his mother out into this wild night? Just what did she have in mind?

To avoid the sentries at the foot of the tower, they had climbed out of the big oval embrasure, then clambered down using the ivy that grew all across the stonework. From there, wearing their dark cloaks and hoods, they had crept across the Great Ward and the inner cloisters, then used more vines to climb up the side of the Scullery, and were now scampering across its tiled roof.

The wind tore at Rex and forced him to stay low and fight for his footing. Ahead of him his mother leaped across the gap that led onto the roofs of the kitchens. To his brief alarm, it was not a clean jump, leaving her sprawled on the far side. But quick enough she was up and running on once more. Rex made the leap, landing with a jolt of pain in his ribs, then scampered after her.

In spite of himself, he found he was grinning. So many times, when he was younger, he and his mother had run reckless adventures like this. In his mind, *this* was his mother, and always would be – this figure ahead of him, bursting with life, full of surprises and schemes.

She was crouched now, one hand raised. Rex knelt at her side. 'Bandogs down below,' she whispered.

'They won't catch our scent – not with this wind.'

She smiled at him. 'What about those sentries in the barbican tower?'

'They're too close to their watchfire. It'll make them blind.'

Her smile widened, and she nodded. 'So then, our path is clear. You take the lead from here. We're heading for the Menagerie.'

'We are? Why?'

'You'll see. Trust me, it'll be worth it. Go on – get going.'

Rex went onwards, using creepers to rappel to the ground, before flitting past the Guards' Barracks and the Arsenal, sticking close to the buildings, his dark form and that of his mother's blending with the moon-shadows.

They crept together past the aviaries: row after row of goshawks and gyrfalcons sitting on their perches, their eyes stitched shut to blunt their hunting instincts. Then they were stopping again on the edge of the Menagerie. It was a menacing looking place in the moonlight, with its heavy cages and the shadowy, half-seen shapes within.

'What are we—' Rex began, before his mother cut him short.

'There's someone coming,' she whispered. 'Out of sight!'

They hid behind a shed used for storing carcasses for animal feed, the stench of old meat thick in Rex's throat as he held still and watched. Two figures were now clearly visible, moving amid the cages, the light of their storm-lamps gleaming off the iron bars and sometimes catching too the gleam of dark fur, the glint of yellow eyes.

The older, hunched figure was the beastmaster. Rex recognized him by his limp. The young man at his side must be his apprentice. The pair of them moved slowly down the line, lifting their lamps to peer into cages, eliciting here and there a growl or a hiss from the creatures within.

'You're always hearing phantoms,' Rex heard the old man

grumble. 'This wind stirs them up, that's all it is. Let's get back indoors.'

The glow of their lamps turned and dwindled and was gone.

'Path clear,' Rex's mother whispered, excited. 'Here – take these. You remember how, don't you? I'll start that side, you start this. And be quick!'

To Rex's astonishment, she had pushed a set of metal rods into his hand. They were curved at each end. Lockpicks. Did she really mean to . . . ? Yes – she did – and she was already doing it! Going to the first of the big cages, she was working at the lock.

'Mother – what are you doing?' he hissed, going to her side. His heart was thundering, and he didn't know if he was exhilarated or horrified. 'This is . . . it's . . .'

'It's long overdue,' his mother whispered, her eyes gleaming wild. 'You know where these creatures come from? They say there are mountains in the east that pierce the heavens. Forests as old as time. And now they live like this!'

Her voice, beneath the wind, did not sound like her own. Was she still wine-addled? Or had her sanity cracked?

He stared into the big cage. In the deepest shadows he could just make out a black sinuous shape. And a pair of piercing yellow eyes.

'Won't they attack us?' Rex murmured.

'What with? You think he'd keep them here if they were dangerous? He has their claws removed. Their teeth filed to stumps.'

As she said this, there was a metallic clunk and the lock released. Rex's disbelief spiked as his mother hauled the door open. Rex sprang away, expecting the creature to make a lunge for freedom. Instead, it remained huddled at the back of the cage.

'It's all right,' Marian whispered to it, standing there unafraid. 'You can go.'

Then she was on to the next cage, her fingers working the lockpicks. 'Come on,' she laughed to Rex. 'Get on with it. Free them all!'

Perhaps her madness was contagious – or was it this wild, moon-bright night making him lunatic – or just the untamed joy of seeing his mother once more full of fire and mischief? Whatever the reason, Rex found himself hurrying to help, going to the cage opposite hers and working its lock. As he did so, he sensed the creature within watching him. What was it thinking?

This beast was even larger than the last, and its fur was striped orange and black, like fire. It remained utterly motionless and silent as it watched him with amber eyes. Its smell washed out to him – a savage aroma of damp fur and old blood – and this made his heart thunder. It had been a long time since he had picked a lock but his mother had taught him well, and soon the mechanism clunked and the door fell open. Rex heaved it wide, and without daring to glance back he was onto the next cage.

'That's it, almost there,' his mother whispered. 'Three more to go.'

The next lock took Rex longer, his fingers starting to shake. He closed his eyes. One of the beasts was here – right at his back. He could smell its breath, feel the heat of it on his neck. But then, when he steeled his heart to turn, there was nothing there. He returned to his work, and soon the last cage yawned open.

'Come on, quick,' his mother whispered. 'We need a vantage point.'

Not far from the Menagerie was the soldiers' barracks. Climbing onto a loaded wagon, Marian led the way onto its roof. There they sat, in the shadow of the old watchtower, their hoods raised, and they watched.

The Menagerie now made a bizarre sight to Rex, all the cages standing wide open, and suddenly it seemed unreal that this was

their doing. His heart lurched afresh as the first of the beasts padded out. It was the one with orange and black stripes. It moved with a power and grace that Rex found mesmerizing. It flowed like fire. It merged with deep shadow and disappeared.

As if this first was a signal to the others, all the other creatures began to emerge. Another big cat, this one as black as the night, sinuous as water. A bear, scarred all over, limping and growling and finally bellowing as it lumbered free. Other creatures hissing and snarling and prowling and darting away, some of them so quick that Rex barely caught a glimpse.

And now came the screams. From somewhere over by the barbican tower came a wail of terror, and Rex's mother smiled. Shouts and gargled yells filled the night air, and doors slammed, and people were running, and then all across the castle there was pandemonium.

'The beast – the beast has come!'

'Lord save us!'

'Guards! To arms!'

The wind howled, carrying sounds of fear – shouts for help and calls of alarm and horrified cries, mixed with the terrified whinnying of horses.

'You're sure they won't hurt anyone?'

His mother shook her head. 'These predators are for show only. Mind you,' she added, as more screams filled the air, 'not everybody knows that. And the fear is real enough.' She smiled. 'This castle has slept long enough. It's time to wake up!'

By now the barracks had burst open and soldiers were pouring out, half dressed, gripping spears and crossbows. From somewhere unseen, Rex heard the hiss-thwack of quarrels letting loose, followed by a howl of animal pain.

'They'll kill them,' Rex said, the realization only now hitting him. 'They can't get out of the castle grounds. They'll corner them and kill them all.'

'They were already dead,' his mother said. 'Worse than dead, caged like that. This . . . will be a mercy.'

As she said this, her tone changed. Turning to her, he saw that her wild jubilation had given way to a pensive expression. Her eyes were glazed, as if looking at something far away, or long ago. Rex suffered a pang of loss. Was it finished, then? Was his mother once more sinking into herself, leaving him here alone on the surface?

Rex hugged his knees, listening to the grunts and growls and howls of pain. A heavy creature slumped to the ground with a last bellow, and people were shouting, barking orders.

At some point, Rex realized that all these sounds were dying down. And so was the wind. On the battlements, flags and pennants barely fluttered. The moon had taken on a ghostly glow. In an hour or so it would be dawn.

'So then, that's done,' his mother said in a dead tone. 'For better or worse. For what it was worth.'

Something told Rex these were the last words he would hear from her for some time, and indeed she raised her hood and held her silence as they stood and returned the way they had come, sneaking like phantoms back towards the safety and seclusion of the tower.