

The Mourning Queen

A Novella by

Peter Hanson

This story takes place in a savage time, when nations rose and fell outside the view of historians concerned with empires and eras. Yet even in the untold chapters of the human story, a theme prevails—the mystery of how souls find their like.

One

As a youth in his dirty country village, Roland of Magister never dreamed he'd earn a knight's title. Standing in the procession of soldiers advancing toward the throne of Dunsbrook, he wondered at how life had brought him to this circumstance.

Born a commoner, Roland endured a laborious childhood tilling the fields of his family's small farm. Once he reached adolescence, his body grew to massive proportions, a change quickly noticed by the regional magistrate. At the age of fourteen, Roland was assumed into military service. Over the next five years, he matured into a monstrous adult, club-like arms dangling heavily off his sloping shoulders and trunk-like legs extending from beneath his hulking torso. By the time he was chosen for knighthood just shy of his twentieth birthday, Roland's colossal form was feared and respected on battlefields throughout the monarchy.

So it was with great surprise that Queen Eleanor got her first look at the boyish face atop Roland's fearsome bulk. It seemed a child stood inside the adult's armor.

Like the other soldiers chosen for knighthood, Roland felt lost about how to behave in the presence of royalty. Their anxiety was unnecessary. In wartime, battlefield attrition made the anointing of new knights a necessity rather than a rarity. The king had lost many of his finest leaders in recent skirmishes, leaving him no choice but to elevate those soldiers who demonstrated the greatest boldness.

Roland easily met that prerequisite. In five years, he had gained an intimidating reputation for his ability to wade through combatants with his broad-bladed battleaxe. It was said that at the Battle of Thrombor, his fury was so hellacious that the craven Prince Feston withdrew from the fray rather than risk a confrontation with Roland.

Queen Eleanor felt sure the giant with a babe's face was the Roland of whom she had heard such awed descriptions. He stood a fist taller than any other soldier, his height accentuated by his posture. While the other fighters looked cowed by the pomp of the

moment, Roland held himself proudly. No, not proudly, Eleanor thought to herself. Without shame.

Standing twenty yards from the monarchs’ thrones in the great hall of a decaying castle, Roland never contemplated looking directly at the queen. He kept his eyes dead ahead, on the royal colors filling the enormous banner over the thrones.

He certainly wanted to look at her. The songs and parables about Eleanor’s beauty had stoked the imagination of the kingdom since her marriage two years previous. She was a distant cousin of the king, one of those rarified creatures who, it seemed to commoners, were hatched in some faraway palace, then bred to perfection before their public unveiling. When King Mikk debuted his bride-to-be in a ceremony at the royal castle, onlookers among both the nobility and the servant class gasped at the sight of her.

A tall, lean woman whose lithe physique defied the voluptuous norm of the day, Eleanor had pale skin that glowed like the moon on a winter night. Her long, thick black hair, usually worn in a decorative braid, shone like silk from an eastern land. The green eyes that royal poets so cheaply likened to emeralds glistened with such life that the comparison to earthly gems was insufficient for capturing their sparkle. And the sensual, ripe lips that provoked jealous whispers among ladies of the court were like the tender petals of some exotic flower. More than any gold or bauble, Eleanor was the finest treasure her husband possessed.

Or so Roland imagined. His simple mind had conjured a vivid image of the queen, piecing together the descriptions contained in every song sung after a battle, every tale spun around a fire. Ever since he encountered the lore that a kind glance from Queen Eleanor ensured a knight’s survival in his next battle, Roland had been infatuated with the mystery of a woman who bewitched a nation.

As musicians raised their trumpets to announce the entrance of the king into the hall, Roland righted his posture and prepared for his fleeting encounter with the royal couple. He understood the protocol—step forward, receive a brief benediction and a tap to the shoulder with a ceremonial sword—yet he still wondered if fate would grant him one of the queen’s storied glances.

King Mikk strode into the hall amid a throng of sycophants, waving them away like insects. A short, fat man of fifty years with a white-flecked beard and small, black

eyes, he passed hissing flatulence when he raised his stumpy leg toward the throne platform. The attendant charged with holding the trail of his velvet cloak frowned in reaction to the odor, then immediately regained his composure. Roland marveled at the interplay of grandeur and vulgarity, stifling a laugh.

And then, as Roland watched Mikk plop lazily into the throne that was too big for his tiny blob of a body, it happened. Roland looked at Queen Eleanor.

Later, when he replayed the moment in his mind, he convinced himself he gazed her way by accident. But at the moment it happened, all Roland knew was green. The green of those eyes. The green of the open ocean, of fields growing wild, of a forest caught in a swaying wind. The green of life.

For the instant in which Roland’s eyes met those of his queen, he lost himself in the depth of her.

She turned away so quickly Roland felt sure she hadn’t noticed his look. He sighed, believing he’d simply made the mistake of glancing across the hall at the same time she did. Roland’s relief was considerable, because everyone knew the penalty for looking in the eyes of King Mikk’s ethereal bride was death.

The attendant who had seen to Mikk’s cloak moved to his next duty, holding out the ceremonial sword. The king placed a loose hand on the hilt, and the attendant nodded for the first soldier to approach. Once the soldier was in place, Mikk emptily recited a short speech about duty and honor. After the soldier knelt beneath the sword, the attendant guided the flat of the blade to his shoulder. The king didn’t bother to grip the hilt; his leisurely grasp was sufficient to legitimize the ceremony.

Moments later, after the soldiers ahead of Roland had received their laurels, Roland knelt beneath the sword, keenly aware that his heart was beating so fast it threatened to burst from his chest. Because there, amid the king’s fetid emissions, was a wafting hint of the queen’s floral perfume. And there, barely visible in the soft periphery of his vision, was the red of her royal robe. Even as Roland bowed his head and awaited a light tap on his shoulder, he quaked with the desire to see if her beauty was as magical as it had seemed during their fleeting contact.

But he dared not. Instead, he listened to the king’s bored whine. “Rise, Sir Roland of Magister.”

Magister, Roland thought. Were his parents even still there? His father, the coarse farmer who strode out to the fields every morning with a massive scythe slung over his broad shoulders? His mother, the dull woman whose skin was as pockmarked as the potatoes she pulled from the ground? Magister. What would the plain people of Magister make of the idea that one of their own was now a knight of the realm?

Roland’s attempts to busy his mind with these thoughts were defeated by a soft sound that issued like a kiss blown into the wind. “Roland of Magister,” the strong, honeyed voice spoke.

“The queen favors you, boy,” the king barked. “Honor her with your eyes or lose them.”

Roland nodded toward the king, raised his brow until he looked at Queen Eleanor in her regal finery. She was everything he had imagined, everything he had glimpsed. In that moment, she was simply everything.

“Battle well,” she said plainly, her gossamer features betraying no discernible emotion.

“Well, on with you, boy,” the king said. “That’s all the fortune we have today for the likes of you.”

Roland looked to his feet and ignored the laughter that filled the hall, then strode to his place among the other knights standing ceremoniously against a tapestry depicting King Mikk’s coronation. Roland fixed his posture as straight as he could, puffed out his chest, and jutted his chin, trying to remember what life felt like before he, like so many before him, surrendered to the thrall of Queen Eleanor.

That evening, as attendants peeled away her raiment, Eleanor thought of that strangely sweet face. These ceremonies of knighting soldiers had become tiresome, and they were always colored with the knowledge that the men being “honored” were lambs for the slaughter. But this Roland of Magister was something different. The queen wasn’t sure what struck her in that face, but she thought it was evidence of a soul. For all their talk of nobility, the knights in her experience were savages with titles. Roland had the look and reputation of a killer, yet the kindness of his features suggested something unexpected.

A loud, moist fart echoed through the hallway outside her bed chamber, announcing the king’s impending arrival. Eleanor quickly threw all thoughts of kindness from her mind.

Her attendants, well familiar with the king’s wishes, removed the rest of the queen’s clothing and pulled down the blankets from her bed. Now nude, Eleanor slid into the sheets and lay motionless as attendants sprayed her with perfume and brushed her hair into a pattern like black wings extending from her temples. By the time the king’s fist pounded against the door of the bed chamber, Eleanor was displayed like a piece of erotic artwork.

“Come,” she purred as her attendants disappeared through side doors.

King Mikk burst into the room wearing just his nightshirt, grunted with something like approval, and raised his nightshirt above his knees as he climbed onto the bed. Slipping one hand beneath his clothes to stroke himself, he yanked back the blanket and exposed his wife’s pale body. Mikk extended his tongue and licked the palm of his free hand, then groped one of Eleanor’s breasts. The cold wet of the sensation sent a shiver through her, so the queen used all her theatrical ability to disguise the shiver as a pleased sigh.

The king grabbed and squeezed for the few moments it took his aged equipment to rouse, then slapped her legs apart by thwacking her inner thighs with his knuckles. He yanked up his nightshirt and dropped onto her. Then he pushed into her with the grace of a battering ram. She thanked the gods for his miniscule size even as she recoiled from his harsh arrival. As always, it was over in an instant. Eleanor waited for the telltale sign of saliva dribbling from her husband’s mouth to indicate he had exerted himself into sleep. When that moment came, she eased him off her and slipped over to the wash basin.

Cleaning herself was easy. Cleansing herself was impossible.

Roland shuddered as he felt his battleaxe stop. The weapon was buried deep into the torso of his latest interchangeable opponent, having cleaved through his shoulder and dug nearly to his gut. Roland yanked the weapon free, watched the mangled soldier tumble to the ground. Then Roland raised the bloody axe above his head, looking for someone else to kill. But there was no one. The fervor of Roland and his fellow knights

of Dunsbrook had won the day. As a cheer rose through the surviving knights, Roland wiped the gristle from his blade, gazed out at the gored bodies that would soon bake in the noonday sun. He turned his eyes to the sky, saw the black Vs of carrion swooping toward the carnage. It was a good day.

Sliding his axe against the grass to clean the last of his enemy from the rough metal, Roland walked to an overturned tree and dropped onto it, spent. This unplanned battle had erupted when Roland and his compatriots chanced upon an enemy encampment. Roland called out his counterpart, they exchanged words, and the battle was joined. This was the sort of behavior that increased Roland’s stature; whereas most Dunsbrook soldiers were content to fight the battles into which King Mikk sent them, Roland was notorious for antagonizing the enemy.

Though all of Dunsbrook thought him motivated by a lust for glory, Roland kept a secret close to his heart. He sought battle because he was tired to his bones of war. The more enemies he killed, Roland reasoned, the sooner the conflict would be forfeited. And if he fell in his bloody quest for peace, so be it. Better to die now than live another five years of horror.

As Roland grabbed a skin of wine from an attendant and took a deep swig, he tried to picture the future. Usually in these moments of quiet after combat, Roland envisioned the mountains that rose in the distance beyond Magister. He wondered what it would be like to climb those mountains, to feel the chill he had been told cut through the air at the peaks. He wondered what it would be like to make an adventure of his own, an adventure that didn’t involve killing. Roland didn’t miss the simplicity of his youth, the rigors of being worked by his cold father like one of the farm’s mules. Instead, Roland missed the times he paused the fields, looked into the mountains, and dreamt himself free. Looking out at the scavengers picking gold and weapons from the bodies of enemies and countrymen alike, Roland couldn’t dream himself free anymore. Something kept pulling him back to the grim reality of this moment, of this life.

And then he realized what was pulling him back.

A group of minstrels wandered through the battlefield, singing an inane rhyme meant to bolster the soldiers of Dunsbrook.

“Victory we have this day, victory in King Mikk’s name! Victory by axe and sword, for the beauty of Eleanor!”

The war had raged for seven years, since the death of Dunsbrook’s beloved monarch King Linden. A reflective statesman who retired his sword at a young age to keep the peace with neighboring nations, Linden sprang from the same lineage as every other ruler on the continent. Respected by fellow royals and by all but the lowliest of his subjects, Linden ruled Dunsbrook for five decades of unprecedented calm. And though all knew his last years on the throne were marred by senility and physical incapacity, his death at the age of seventy-one was regarded by many in the land as a miracle, for surely only a just man could live to such a ripe age.

The goodwill Linden engendered during his rule evaporated within moments of his extravagant funeral. Before he was in the ground, his two sons were at each other’s throats in a quarrel over whose birthright trumped the other’s. Linden’s elder child, Mikk, was the presumptive heir until his younger brother, the dishonorable Prince Feston, claimed Mikk was a bastard. Were Mikk’s lineage sullied, the crown would pass to Feston, the son of Linden and his second wife. Although the nobility of Dunsbrook urged Mikk to dispel the rumors by swearing in church to his maternity, Mikk instead banned Feston from the royal castle, saying that his brother had shamed himself by dirtying the name of their father.

Perhaps that was just the maneuver Prince Feston wanted.

Whatever the case, the banishment emboldened Feston to gather others to his cause, mostly landowners out of favor with Linden and his successor Mikk. Sure they would receive more favorable treatment from Feston’s scepter than Mikk’s, these landowners put their soldiers into the service of Feston’s insurgency.

Had Mikk entertained any notions of dispatching his brother’s rebellion quickly, those notions were suffocated in the early months of combat. Feston revealed himself to be a clever, ruthless strategist. By entrenching himself in the western regions governed by the landowners sympathetic to his cause, Feston claimed rule over half the realm of Dunsbrook. He even had the audacity to rename his territory Dunshire.

But in the last two years, the tide had turned.

The reason was Eleanor.

Even his most loyal subjects acknowledged King Mikk as a fool, though never publicly. Possessing no mind for military matters, his only desire was gratification, which he sought in the most vulgar of distractions—food, women, gambling, jesters. It was even said he found his greatest satisfaction in the torture of disobedient subjects. Mikk’s crude amusements fanned the gossip that he was in fact a bastard.

Occasionally, though, even fools stumble into wisdom. Mikk’s betrothal to Eleanor was nothing if not wise. A rare beauty of impeccable sophistication and otherworldly poise, Eleanor enchanted Dunsbrook’s people. From the moment she ascended to the throne, Dunsbrook’s soldiers fought with a new sense of purpose. They fought for Mikk in name, for Eleanor in their hearts. Poets whispered that she knew the sacrifice of her beauty to Mikk’s unclean touch was the price she paid for saving a nation from endless civil war. That made the people of Dunsbrook love her even more.

The people of Dunshire, if the loose collective of rebels could even be called a people, took a far different view of the queen. Every lyric and poem they heard about her beguiling eyes infuriated them, because they knew that as long as Dunsbrook fought for the beauty of Eleanor, Dunshire could offer no inspiration of commensurate power. Queen Eleanor was the symbol that Dunshire could never defeat.

In the chaos that ensued after the assassination, none verified the source of the deadly arrow.

Some claimed it shot from within the throng in the great hall; others swore it flew in through a window.

The result was the same.

King Mikk was dead.

Roland heard the news as he sat around a campfire with other soldiers, resting for their next push toward Dunshire’s border. A runner bearing the king’s colors soared into the gathering, took the briefest of breaths, and told all the king was gone. Before any of the knights could react, the runner was off to spread the word to the next unsuspecting warriors.

A hush fell over the knights, and Roland’s first response was the same as that of the others—he knew that duty demanded outrage. Yet he could find none. King Mikk was a dolt who had sent his people to war over a point of pride, and Roland was ashamed to realize he was glad of the news. So it came as a relief when a knight to Roland’s side stood to his full height, unsheathed his sword, and held the weapon in the air as he shouted “Hail the king!” Roland and all the others around him repeated the action, repeated the words. At least appearances were preserved.

Then Roland returned to his seat and closed his eyes. He tried to peer through the fog in his mind, tried to find the thought that pressed into him like a dagger.

The thought was of Eleanor.

In an instant, Roland knew why he couldn’t muster even perfunctory regret. Mikk’s death sentenced Eleanor to the ritual of bereavement. When a monarch of Dunsbrook died by an assassin’s hand, his wife could not leave mourning until that assassin’s hand was delivered to her throne. Parables told to children in Dunsbrook sang of young wives doomed to this enforced grief for the rest of their natural lives.

The thought of Eleanor spending her remaining years shrouded in a black veil ripped Roland open. He wanted to believe that his reaction was altruistic, indignation at the idea of Dunsbrook being denied the favor of Eleanor’s beauty.

Yet he knew his anger was selfish. One look at Eleanor was insufficient for any man.

Roland decided then and there he would kill anyone and anything for the honor of lifting the veil off his queen’s breathtaking face.

Two

Lord Willem and Lady Dotrice arrived in darkness two nights after Mikk’s death. The clacking hooves of their carriage horses and the mounts of their guards echoed through the castle courtyard, rising to Eleanor’s bedchamber high above. She stirred, walked to a window, saw Willem’s colors flying on the carriage. Her heart rose.

After summoning her sleepy handmaiden for assistance, Eleanor dressed hastily and scampered down the stairwell to the courtyard. Had it not been shrouded beneath her black veil, her bright smile would have lit the night.

Without words, Willem grasped her shoulders. Then he kissed her cheeks, his soft lips pressed to the black lace covering her features. Eleanor extracted herself from his clammy embrace, rushed into Dotrice’s warm arms.

As servants attended to the carriage and luggage, Eleanor led her guests toward the dining hall. An attendant stoked the hearth while Eleanor, Willem, and Dotrice warmed their hands over the fire. Eleanor and Dotrice kept exchanging smiles decorated with trilling laughter; the joy of their reunion was almost more than they could stand.

It was only when wine started flowing that Lady Dotrice began the conversation. “Strike me dead as a traitor, but the bastard got his due,” she said.

Eleanor laughed so enthusiastically her nose stung from wine drawn into her sinuses. Damn propriety, she thought. If a queen can’t share a crude laugh with her sister, then what use is royal privilege?

As was her way, Dotrice nodded to sleep halfway through her second goblet, and Eleanor sighed happily when the soothing sound of her sister’s snoring reverberated throughout the hall. The grinding noise was the lullaby of Eleanor’s youngest years, and a comfort in adulthood.

And as was his way, Willem moved to a seat beside Eleanor’s the moment his wife succumbed to fatigue and drink. An inveterate cad, Willem had made his feelings

for Eleanor clear since their first meeting at Dotrice’s betrothal ceremony. “So now the matron sleeps,” he cooed.

Eleanor felt discomfort seep into her mood, knew it showed on her face. Only the thick weave of her veil hid Eleanor’s reaction from Willem’s eyes.

“Much has changed in two years,” he said, kissing the words out of his mouth and gently stroking the cuff of her velvet sleeve. “When last we saw each other, you were an inviolate maid. Now you are a widow doubtless possessed of certain useful experience.”

He slid his fingers up her forearm, then down. She pulled her arm away, stood. “Sleep beckons,” Eleanor said softly.

“Sleep or the bedchamber?”

“I thank you for bringing my sister to me,” Eleanor offered in her kindest tones. “And I’ll thank you for accepting the hospitality of my finest guest chambers.”

Eleanor touched Dotrice’s face, rousing her. Then Willem stood and helped his plain wife to her feet—while never taking his eyes off her sister.

Roland spent the morning plotting his escape. He knew that many in his contingent would follow him blindly on any mission, especially one of vengeance, but that wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted to do this alone. For his queen, for his country, for himself. For the first time in his life, Roland knew desire so deep he was willing to discard all he’d known in the service of that longing.

The first things he discarded were his colors. Roland stepped away from the other soldiers, to a wooded cove that stank because members of the contingent had deposited their waste there, and stripped off the tunic marking him as a soldier of Dunsbrook. He held the tunic in his hands for a long moment, straining to comprehend the full weight of his actions, then laid the tunic across a branch, where it flapped like a flag when a gentle breeze blew.

Roland walked from the cove to a dry riverbed, then kept walking. This small river once flowed strongly through all the lands of Dunsbrook, but even a river can be a casualty of war. Once hostilities began, King Mikk ordered the river dammed so its waters would no longer flow into Prince Feston’s lands. So while Mikk’s subjects frolicked in the new pond created by the damming, Prince Feston’s trekked miles for

alternative sources of water. Damming the river was one of Mikk’s few sound strategic decisions, and also one of his most heartless.

The sounds of Roland’s fellow soldiers faded into silence as he continued his walk along the riverbed. Roland felt exposed without the tunic over his armor, and he knew the position into which he had put himself. Without colors, he was a man without a country—subject to the protection of no crown, vulnerable to the subjugation of any crown. Yet even as he entertained thoughts of the million dark fates to which he could now fall victim, Roland never wavered in his determination. If anything, the realization of the dangers he faced made Roland more certain he had chosen the right path.

As lengthening shadows indicated day was giving way to night, Roland heard sounds ahead. He knew what they meant. He had ventured into Dunshire, and would soon encounter soldiers of that realm. There was still time to retreat, to abandon this insane quest.

Instead Roland quickened his steps.

A few moments later, he saw hints of the enemy’s colors through the trees abutting the riverbed. A small fighting party, maybe two knights and a handful of foot soldiers. Roland shifted his axe from one hand to the other, wondered if even his prowess was enough to surmount such numbers.

Then a Dunshire knight stepped out of the woods and onto the riverbed, loosing himself to discharge the ale filling his bladder. As the round-bellied lout splashed his stream against rocks and scratched his chest with his free hand, Roland clenched his axe tightly. Bile rose up in Roland’s throat as he realized what he had to do. Stifling any thoughts of the honor his actions would desecrate, Roland crept behind the man and prepared to deliver a craven blow.

The sounds of his footsteps masked by the noise of the knight’s flow, Roland took his position and raised his axe. Because he was a good six inches taller than his target, Roland had an easy task before him—just drop the axe and cleave the lout in two.

Roland hesitated. Was he really so desperate to pursue his mission that he was willing to discard his dignity? He lowered the axe, murmured a prayer, and waited for the knight to sheathe himself.

Then the knight turned around, saw Roland. Confusion filled the lout’s face, and surprise filled his voice. “Whose crown do you serve?”

“Arm yourself” was Roland’s only answer.

The knight called to his party.

Roland gripped the axe, took a defensive stance.

“You know you must remarry,” Dotrice said as she sipped tea and glanced out the sitting chamber window at low clouds and green hills.

“Yes,” Eleanor sighed, her thirst suddenly gone.

“A country at war won’t unite behind a queen, no matter how beloved.”

“Yes,” Eleanor repeated.

“Then you know word must be sent to Milver.”

Eleanor didn’t answer. She just peered through the latticework of her veil at the countryside sprawling before her.

Prince Feston raised his eyebrow.

“Say that again,” he hissed.

His adviser, Milver—a stoop-shouldered man of sixty years whose dark eyes hid under drooping brows—repeated the news. “A scouting party near the border was slaughtered, my lord. There is no other more apt description, from the reports I received. Those who found the bodies said it was as if a storm passed through and obliterated all in its wake.”

“And none of Mikk’s measly knights took the glory for the attack?”

“Our spies say Mikk’s forces were as surprised as we.”

Prince Feston rose from his chair, took a few steps that echoed through the church. A monarch with neither a crown nor a throne, Feston held court in this stone structure, a tall wooden chair on the dais the seat of his tenuous power. The most religious of his comrades bit their tongues about the sacrilege inherent to his choice of headquarters, confident the travesty would end upon his ascension to a proper throne. Feston, five years his brother’s junior and as lean as his late sibling was corpulent,

walked to a tall window, looked out through the colored glass at the nearby hills. Even through his distorted view, he saw the storm clouds creeping over the horizon.

“Revenge,” he said softly.

“My ears failed me, lord. Please honor me by repeating your words.”

Feston didn’t oblige. He merely crossed his arms, set his jaw, and looked out the window, wondering for the first time in his entitled life whether there was such a thing as hubris, and whether it carried the cost in reality that it so often did in legends.

It was the handmaiden charged with braiding Queen Eleanor’s hair who told her. Sitting in her bedroom, the only space where she was allowed to remove her veil and feel air caress her face, Eleanor mostly ignored the gossip among the women attending to her. Pampered all of her life, she long ago learned how to ignore the nattering women who fretted over her appearance. Yet the handmaiden’s idle comment caught her ear.

“Say that again,” Eleanor called in a strong voice.

“Of course, my queen. The men speak of a savage roaming the lands of Dunshire. They know not whether it be man or beast. They know only of the carnage it leaves behind. Three times the savage has struck, and each time a dozen soldiers of Dunshire have fallen.”

“Then it would seem this savage has our cause close to its heart,” Eleanor remarked.

“As you say, my queen.”

For a few moments, Eleanor struggled with the horrifying images that filled her mind, scenes of a hairy animal pouncing on soldiers and rending their limbs. But then the gore gave way to another vision. A vision of a boy’s face on a monster’s body. The realization that prompted took Eleanor’s breath from her throat.

“My queen!”

Eleanor shook her head, looked at her attendants. They all stared at her, frightened. She realized she had gasped. Sharply aware she couldn’t explain her reasons for being startled, she swatted the hand of the attendant tightening the sash around her waist.

The attendant bowed her head contritely, loosened the sash.

Yet as Eleanor glanced around herself, she suspected her feint had failed. She saw in the eyes of her subjects the questions that would inevitably fill the next day’s gossip. What vexes Dunsbrook’s beautiful queen? Why was the graceful lady terse with a loyal aide? For what reason was she fascinated by tales of battlefield bloodletting?

The queen felt rumors gestating, knew her carelessness was the cause. Sleep would wait for another night.

The crackling hearth masked his footsteps, so Eleanor didn’t hear Willem’s approach. Lulled into a reflective state by the dancing flames, she jumped when she felt his cold hand slip under her veil and touch her neck. Her surprise was so great that his hand was nearly beneath the collar of her dress before she grabbed his fingers, moved them away. She stood, shock stealing her voice.

Willem grinned wickedly. Eleanor couldn’t stop herself from glancing at the protrusion beneath his tunic. Her astonishment grew.

“No longer a delicate flower, but rather a fertile field,” Willem said. “I never dreamed I’d find you without a husband’s honor protecting you.”

“My honor should be protection enough,” Eleanor said between choppy breaths.

“The privilege of the court, Eleanor. We nobles had best keep our pleasures in the family.”

“You’re an animal.”

“An animal ready to rut,” he said with a laugh.

Hot with disgust and anger, Eleanor rushed out of the room, nearly crashing into Dotrice.

“Oh!”

“Dotrice, I’m sorry!”

“What a lady gets for entering before she’s announced. Oh, there you are, Willem. I thought we were retiring.”

“As sound an idea as any, I suppose. With your leave, my queen.”

Willem stared crudely at Eleanor as he exited the room.

The queen constructed a smile before turning to her sister.

“Tried for you, did he? Oh, don’t be shocked, Eleanor. He’s hardly the first man to lose his eyes for me once he sees you. But his blood is noble, even if his manner is not. Willem takes his pleasures where he finds them, as I do mine.”

“Dotrice!”

“Eleanor, don’t tell me you were loyal to that ogre.”

“Of course I was.”

“Then you honor your station better than your sister does hers. Come and sit, dear. I will tell you how to make your next marriage bearable.”

“My next marriage,” Eleanor said blankly. “You forget the ritual of mourning.”

“And you forget you have a champion.”

Eleanor looked away, returned to her seat. Dotrice smiled softly, walked to the fire, warmed her hands.

“You’re wise not to entertain rumors,” Dotrice said.

“Perhaps I’m tired.”

“Perhaps you’re being coy with someone familiar with your ways, Eleanor. Tell me, this champion... Someone you sent?”

“I lack that cunning.”

“In the same measure you lack guile, I’m sure. Just tell me this. Your champion, who you cannot name and did not send... Has he the audacity to accomplish his mad crusade?”

“That alone I can say for sure, Dotrice. But of course audacity may be insufficient.”

“Hope that it is not, then.”

“I do.”

“If you have the sense for that, then you have the sense to explore other options. Did you arrange the meeting I suggested?”

“Yes, sister.”

“Then I will depart for sound sleep, unless my husband aims his affections for you my way.”

Laughter lifted Eleanor from her dark mood. She stood, playfully swatted her sister’s hand.

“No doubt his attack will boast more fervor,” Dotrice said, heading out of the room with a quickened step.

Her amusement fading fast, Eleanor looked into the fire. She thought of her champion, as Dotrice had named him. She wished him warmth.

As the blue of afternoon surrendered to the black of night, Roland pulled his arms close around his body. Even burrowed into this tight cave, he knew the small hours would be brutally cold. Ten days into his campaign, Roland was deep into Dunshire, with just a day’s unhindered march separating him from Prince Feston’s stronghold. The terrain he occupied was the worst he would face in his journey, as was the opposition awaiting him. Aware that his coming had resounded through Dunshire, Roland suspected Prince Feston had marshaled his finest warriors into the woods surrounding his church. Roland knew that even on his best day, cutting a swath through that many knights would be impossible.

This was not Roland’s best day. He had changed his strategy after the first days, slipping deeper and deeper into Dunshire by night, avoiding conflict whenever possible. And though it had been two days since his last skirmish, his body was far from recovered. He was battered and bruised from head to toe, and it was only due to his great prowess that his most severe injury was a slice across his right leg. He could walk on the limb with some effort, and burning the wound with a torch’s flame had stopped the bleeding. Roland knew he was not the fighter he had been just ten days previous. He wondered what would be left of him by the time he reached Feston’s court.

“Prince Feston,” he said to himself, spitting the traitor’s royal title like a vulgarity.

The moment he heard of Mikk’s assassination, Roland knew the late king’s treacherous brother was to blame. And while reason suggested stealth as the best means of divining the name of Feston’s agent with the deadly bow, rage prompted Roland to take a different course. Somewhere along his journey, without ever articulating the thought, Roland decided to wring the name of the assassin from Feston’s dying throat. If he was to sacrifice himself in the act of avenging Mikk, Roland was determined to do so in such a spectacular fashion that even failure could be deemed a kind of success. Roland knew that even if he failed to deliver the hand of King Mikk’s killer, the death of the

criminal behind the assassination would be sufficient to liberate Queen Eleanor from mourning.

The night’s first icy blast wended into the cave and clutched Roland’s shivering body. He closed his eyes and conjured the vision that soothed him to sleep each night.

He pictured himself lifting Eleanor’s veil.

Three

Moonlight brightened the rugged field as the carriage shuddered to a stop. The tall grass was brown with the dried blood of soldiers whose bodies had been gathered in a heap and burned.

The driver tied off the reins, dropped from his seat to the ground. He opened the carriage door, then knelt to create a step with his aching back. Milver pressed his foot to the driver’s back, stepped out with his other foot to catch the ground. He wobbled, forcing the driver to spring up and steady Milver’s step. But even once the wizened advisor found his balance, he kept shivering. The night air was cold as the ocean.

Milver stared through the blackness to a moving shadow. He pulled his arms close, cursed the need for secrecy.

The shadow stepped into the moonlight, which pierced the veil covering Eleanor’s magnificent features.

Unaware he was doing it, Milver righted his posture, stiffened his features. It was said no man could resist preening before the queen, and no shroud, be it nighttime or a thin veil or both, could mask her charms sufficiently to stifle a man’s fancy. Milver suddenly forgot the cold, the danger, the circumstances.

“Your majesty,” he said with a courtly bow.

“Milver,” she responded with a corresponding gesture. “With the hour so late, the air so icy, and the situation so grave, let us commence the negotiation without further ceremony.”

The wily old man smiled, impressed by the queen’s acumen. Seeing her made him understand why she inspired a nation; hearing her told him why the nation had only begun to discover her value. Milver bowed once more, peered through the dark and through the veil to find the endless green of Eleanor’s eyes.

“I come bearing the offer of a truce, my queen.”

“With what conditions?”

“Spoken with the directness of a true royal.”

When she didn't return the compliment, he sensed her impatience. Moreover, he sensed her lack of fear. His opinion of her rose still further.

“One condition. Your hand.”

Eleanor drew in a deep breath, held it for a long moment before exhaling. Knowing to expect this demand didn't lessen the impact of hearing it spoken aloud. Her hand. In marriage. To sniveling Prince Feston, the traitor. She composed herself, rediscovered her voice.

“If a union with my husband's brother is the cost of ending this war, then it is a price easily paid,” she said softly.

“I shall relay your message.”

Milver bowed, turned toward his carriage. His driver kneeled once more, forming a step, before a voice stopped Milver.

“A question, if you will.”

Milver turned to the queen, waited for her to continue. She took her time. Then, finally: “Why did Feston accept my invitation for this conference, Milver?”

One side of the crafty advisor's mouth rose in something easily mistaken for a smile. “The rumor is that my liege fears a fate this union might forestall, my queen. Any illumination you might turn on the mystery that worries him would be met with great gratitude.”

Eleanor hoped her veil hid the satisfied curl of her own lips. “It's a mystery to us all, Milver.”

“Of course, my queen.”

Milver climbed into his carriage, and soon the driver led it away.

Eleanor stood alone in the field for several long moments, till the chill of the night drove her back toward the attendants who remained hidden in the woods. As she took reluctant steps toward them, she pondered this queer turn in her nation's fortunes. The threat of a killer of whom she could admit no knowledge had shattered the nerve of a prince who himself could admit no knowledge of the assassin he undoubtedly commanded.

One man, she thought. One man from Dunsbrook found the courage to take the fight to the enemy. One man from Dunsbrook, probably with the opposite intention in his heart, had created a means for reuniting his divided nation.

It was only once Eleanor was securely ensconced in blankets for the carriage ride back to her castle that she realized to what she had agreed—a life spent enduring the ministrations of the one royal lower in character than her late husband. Looking out at the silhouetted hills and forests of her country, Queen Eleanor wondered if Dunsbrook deserved her sacrifice.

Roland screamed as the blade snapped bone, severing the small finger of his left hand. A gush of blood spewed from the stump and sprayed his eyes, so he flailed wildly with his axe. He recognized the wet thump his weapon made when it connected with the trunk of a man, so even temporarily blinded, he felt confident his opponent was defeated. Taking a breath and drawing the forearm of his injured limb across his face to wipe away the blood, he took in the scene.

The knight who slashed Roland lay quivering on the ground as life flowed from the gaping hole in his torso. The four other fighters in this band lay around the clearing, two missing arms and one missing a head. The amputated soldiers were still alive, barely. In any other circumstance, Roland would honor the gallantry of these men by waiting until a doctor was called to tend to their pains. But this was not any other circumstance. Roland knew that if even one member of this party survived, that man could send word of what path Roland was taking toward the church.

So with a muttered apology—to his victims, to himself, to God—Roland finished them.

He compounded his shame by ripping one of the men’s tunics—his royal colors—and fashioning a bandage from the fabric. Roland felt sure his hand should throb with ache, but his whole body was wracked with such torturous sensation that his newest injury was just another screaming voice in a cacophony.

Roland didn’t know how much longer he had to travel to reach Prince Feston’s church stronghold. Once he had penetrated the forest in which the sanctuary was located,

he simply pressed forward, forward. The trees were thick with small, roving bands of soldiers charged with the sole task of preventing Roland’s arrival.

The soldiers were all strong and determined, but the force that drove Roland’s axe was more ferocious than loyalty to any flag. It was a thing of supernatural power, and the heat with which it burned frightened Roland. He didn’t know its name, but he knew he was its servant.

It told him to continue.

Milver loathed the “garden,” as his sniveling liege called the graveyard adjoining the church, but he knew its allure. Whenever gripped by an unusual degree of anxiety, Prince Feston walked through the headstones, comforted by an inarguable fact—those beneath his feet were the only subjects of Dunsbrook with no ability to impede his ascension. Ambling among the dead, Feston was able to lay aside his crippling fear of the living.

Watching his lord and, possibly, future king, Milver brooded on their tenuous predicament. As Feston’s advisor in the royal court, Milver felt he had no choice but to accompany Feston on his traitorous endeavor five years previous. Had Milver stayed behind, his alliances would have always been suspect. And the fact of King Mikk’s ineptitude was no small consideration; whatever reservations he had about the sort of ruler Feston would make, Milver never doubted Feston’s ability to wrest the throne from his brother.

Until the queen.

Eleanor’s ability to rouse her people was a variable Milver never anticipated. Though he remained confident that a prince trumped a queen by dint of masculinity, he knew only an alliance between Feston and Eleanor could unite the land. She had the sophistication to understand this, but did the prince?

“My lord,” Milver called softly.

Feston took a breath, spoke with his back still to Milver. “Will they bury me here?”

“A royal in a commoner’s grave? Hardly.”

“Ah, but not a royal,” Feston said, turning to reveal an anguished expression. “A traitor, if I’m killed before my plan bears fruit.”

“True, my lord. A commoner’s grave for you if you fail. So we will see that you do not.”

“I see an idea shining in the dark of your old eyes.”

“A means of a truce.”

“Speak on.”

“Eleanor.”

Feston studied his advisor, his lips twisting wickedly. He laughed, not robustly but with detached amusement. “Your hubris dwarfs even mine, Milver. I thank whatever fate put you in my service.”

“So you understand, my lord, and accept?”

“Accept the hand of a woman who could drive a monk to lust? Accept a bargain that would legitimize my claim to the crown? Accept an offer to trade my fugitive’s fears for a king’s comforts? You toy with me, Milver.”

“Never, my lord.”

“Send word I accept.”

Milver’s face turned sober. Prince Feston looked at him a long moment, then laughed again. “You’ve already sealed this contract in my name, haven’t you?”

“I extend my shamed apologies.”

“You do no such thing, in fact or intention,” Feston said as he turned his gaze to a decaying headstone. “You merely do as always—deliver the spoils of your machinations.”

“Only as you wish.”

Feston made his next remark so quietly Milver doubted it was for his ears. “Pray I’m never caught in those machinations,” the prince mumbled.

Satisfied his task was accomplished, Milver withdrew until he heard his liege call out once more. “And the champion?”

Milver took a deep breath, held it while he gathered his thoughts. The unsteady sensation in his stomach warned him a bright outcome was unlikely, yet he knew the

folly of expressing something so ephemeral as a premonition. Hardening his features to their customary stone, he turned to Feston.

“Be he real and not a battlefield myth,” Milver said, “he will be deterred.”

Prince Feston probed the features of his wrinkled advisor one last time. His ability to parse truth from the inscrutable lines written across Milver’s face remained as weak as ever. He felt a shudder, knew it well. A coward’s terror.

As Queen Eleanor reached for a goblet of water, she noticed her hand was trembling. She glanced around the bedroom, hoped her attendants would mistake her quiver as a reaction to the chill in the air. Their furtive glances told her they knew better. Eleanor clenched her jaw, realizing she’d given herself away once again.

The night before, upon returning to the castle from her clandestine conference with Milver, Eleanor had summoned her most loyal private guard and given him a duty the nature of which he was to keep secret from all he encountered. The guard was charged with penetrating Dunshire and finding the berserker who was cutting a swath through Feston’s forces, then relaying a message.

Come home.

Steadying herself sufficiently to raise the goblet to her lips, Eleanor tried to banish the dark reality she knew to be obvious—there was no way the message could be delivered in time.

With the icy night stabbing his exposed skin, Roland felt a surge of desire when he saw the orange glow in the distance. A campfire. Girding himself for the untold dangers of nighttime combat, he grasped the base of his battleaxe, pressed forward. There were no caves in this part of the country where he could hide and stay warm, and he couldn’t risk starting a fire of his own in sight of enemy soldiers; his only choice was to steal their fire by force. The prospect of another dishonorable confrontation sickened Roland.

As he drew closer, Roland realized he might not have to fight after all. He heard no raised voices, no laughter, no bustling of servants. This wasn’t a knights’ camp. And when he saw the fire clearly, he realized how right he was. The only figure by the flames

was a small, shivering merchant, his cart of wares parked by the fire, his decrepit mule shaking in the cool air.

The merchant gasped when the sound of Roland’s clanking armor and heavy footsteps drew his eyes. An old, underfed man whom even a determined boy could best in combat, the merchant displayed open terror when he saw Roland.

“Peace or pain,” Roland asked.

“Peace, friend,” the merchant said with a trembling voice.

Relieved to avoid dispatching so feeble a citizen, Roland swung his axe, dug its blade into the ground, and sat by the fire. The warmth felt as sweet as sin. A long moment passed before a grumble from Roland’s stomach intruded on the quiet scene.

The merchant reached for a leather pouch, and Roland’s hand grasped the old man’s wrist before the merchant even saw his companion move. Roland’s hard scowl explained his suspicion.

“Food,” the merchant said.

Roland retracted his hand, watched warily as the merchant withdrew half a loaf of stiff bread. Sensing his companion’s hesitance, the merchant ripped off a bite, stuffed it in his mouth. Then he extended the food, and Roland accepted it hungrily. He devoured the whole loaf as the amazed merchant watched. After, the merchant slowly picked up a skin of water, handed it over.

“My thanks,” Roland grumbled as he grabbed for the water, slurped a mouthful down.

“Something special,” the merchant said, reaching once more into his bag. He extracted a strip of dried beef.

Roland eyed the meat lustily, then softened his gaze and looked at the merchant. “Too much kindness,” Roland said roughly. “Take some.”

The merchant nodded, snapped off a third of the strip. He handed the rest to Roland, who took a quick bite before relaxing so he could enjoy the treat over time. It was only then he realized how much tension he carried through his body; the stress drifted out of his muscles like a receding wave.

“You are good to a stranger,” Roland said.

“Not really a stranger.”

Roland felt some of the tension roll back into his muscles.

“Word of a rampage like yours spreads like disease, friend. All of Dunshire fears your coming.”

“So you say.”

“So I know, friend.”

“You call me ‘friend,’ yet you trade in Feston’s land.”

“The nobles who allied with him have subjects, of which I am humbly one. Surely you know not all subjects share the will of their lords.”

“You hold loyalty to Mikk?”

“I hold loyalty to the true throne, no matter its occupant.”

“Then to you,” Roland said, grabbing the skin for a toast and sipping the water before handing it over.

The merchant took the skin, sipped, eyed Roland. The tired knight ignored his host until the silence grew uncomfortable.

“Speak if you will,” Roland barked.

“I risk much to do so.”

“More than you do by feeding me?”

“I suppose not.”

“Then speak.”

“I said the realm fears your coming, friend. So too does its ruler.”

“Feston?”

“From another merchant whose path crossed mine, I learned something shocking. Feston so trembles at your approach that he fled his stronghold.”

“I go there now. To the church.”

“Indeed, and doubtless only a trap awaits you there.”

Roland rose to his feet, infuriated. The fire in his voice burned hotter than the wood warming his body. “Then where is the coward?”

“At Dragon’s Perch,” the merchant said in a small voice, his eyes turning meekly toward the flames.

Fear choked Roland until he shook his head, dispatching the unfamiliar emotion. Even Roland of Magister knew to dread Dragon’s Perch. A mythical place few believed

existed, it was a castle in the remotest part of the land now called Dunshire. Long abandoned as dangerous and even cursed, the Perch stood atop on a high cliff. And in its spire lurked, according to legend, the last dragon alive.

“Superstition,” Roland hissed.

“The word of the land is that Feston lives under the dragon’s protection.”

“You believe this madness?”

The merchant shrugged.

Before first light the next morning, Roland awoke with a start. His body ached and he still craved sleep, but he knew it would be unwise to lay defenseless in daylight. Glancing at the sleeping merchant and nodding silent thanks for the way his growling stomach had been calmed, Roland rose, yanked his axe from the dirt, and started walking.

The distant hills were silhouetted vaguely against the sky, which was turning from black to blue. Roland knew that moving straight ahead would take him to the church, and that turning south would lead him to Dragon’s Perch. He glanced back a few steps at the merchant, wondered about the credibility of the information. Then Roland acknowledged the obvious. So far, his quest had been charmed. Though wounded and exhausted and sick from fighting, Roland was deep into enemy terrain and still intact. Had he undertaken an impossible task only to find it possible? No, Roland thought. He had undertaken to slay a dragon for a queen. It just never entered his mind the dragon would be anything but a metaphor.

Roland started south.

Four

Two days and one minor skirmish later, Roland smelled salt in the air. The ocean was near, which meant Dragon’s Perch was as well. According to lore, the dreaded castle rose, as if from the rock itself, upon a craggy cliff overlooking the great waters. A thick, dark forest stood between Roland and his destination.

That night bore an even sharper chill than the ones before, the air howling through the forest laden with the ocean’s brutal cold. Roland gritted his teeth and tensed his muscles to keep from shivering, wary that if he gave in to trembling, he might never stop. His axe felt heavy in his hand, and the meager food he had foraged since leaving the merchant—a rabbit he killed by launching a rock, a bellyful of berries—was insufficient to sate his hunger. Mostly he wanted shelter. And as his path took him toward a hollowed-out log he thought might suit his needs, Roland entertained that attractive notion of rest. Determined as he was to pursue his goal, the weary knight was in no hurry for what he knew would be the battle of his life.

Then he saw something through the trees. A shape, tall and sharp, illuminated against the sky. Roland stopped, peered through the thick brush that he realized was the edge of the forest.

He saw flame.

A ring of torches encircled the castle, basking the deteriorating building in a pale orange glow. And atop the building, bathed in as much shadow as light, rested the dragon.

Roland gasped. Even after two days’ travel during which he prepared himself, he was rattled by the sight of something he knew could not exist.

The beast’s trunk was as thick as the tower it used for a perch. Its great head, resting against the trunk, was the size of a war wagon. And its wings, laid flat to its sides, seemed as vast as the tapestries in the royal hall. Though the monster was still, Roland

felt sure it was the heat from the dragon’s body that warmed his skin. The knight shifted his axe from one hand to the other, nearly dropping the weapon from his quaking fingers.

Roland held his breath, kneeled. His first thought was to ask God for strength, but he knew God wanted no part of this bloody quest. So Roland conjured the only image with enough power to energize him for battle. His queen. Hidden behind the veil. He stretched his imagination to its utmost limit, securing Eleanor’s face in his stormy mind. The veil obscured her, denying him a clear view of those eerie eyes. His frustration grew till rage lifted Roland to his feet.

He was ten paces from the treeline before he realized he had mounted a direct attack. And when that thought pierced him, he winced and moved through the fear that strove to paralyze him. What use is stealth, he thought, when your enemy is a monster with eyes the size of breastplates?

Fighting to walk with legs that seemed made of lead, Roland reached the ring of fire. The perimeter felt like a challenge. Roland hesitated, then damned himself for a cur. Where was the vaunted courage that won the loyalty of soldiers, the laurels of a nation, the benediction of a king? Where was the great Roland of Magister? For at this moment, Roland felt like a skittish woman, not a warrior of the realm. He looked down at his feet, at the pools of torchlight that formed the ring. He closed his eyes, said her sanctified name once more, then opened his eyes a knight. His posture broadened, his shoulders lifted, his eyes narrowed. From this moment forward, he promised himself, fear would be a stranger.

Roland stepped over the perimeter, putting himself just a few steps’ walk from the castle door. He looked up, expecting archers. There were none. He peered to the sides of the castle, looked back behind himself. There were no soldiers. No defense at all.

And then he gleaned the truth. This castle had all the defense it needed, slumbering atop a stone tower.

Roland decided he was tired of waiting.

“Feston!!!”

His shout echoed through the clearing, then faded, replaced by the lapping sounds of waves breaking against rock just beyond the castle.

Roland didn’t have to wait much longer after that.

The beast’s eyes opened slowly, with an audible creak. They glowed like the mouths of furnaces. And then its great head reared up, slowly and deliberately, joints crackling like the arm of a catapult being pulled back for attack. Once the head hovered high above the body, the wings extended with noises of their own—a rumbling of musculature, the flapping of massive spans caught in wind.

Roland held his ground, his fear suppressed but his awe visible in his open mouth, his gaping eyes.

The dragon roared, its call a thunderbolt that rose from the beast’s bowels to its dreadful maw.

Roland felt sweat trickle down his temples, felt the salty water sting as it met the cold air.

Then came fire.

Warned by the orange glow rising in the beast’s throat, Roland ran to his side just as a stream of liquid flame splashed to the ground where he stood. The incendiary emission spattered geysers of flame all about the point of impact, and one of them caught Roland across his back.

He screamed, feeling the heat fuse links of his armor to the flesh over his ribs. He stumbled, dropping his axe to the ground for balance.

Looking through tears of pain, Roland stared up, saw the last droplets of fire dripping from the horrible mouth.

It was all real.

Roland darted toward the door, saw the flame rising again. He met the door with his axe, ignored the sound of more liquid fire splashing behind him. Until another geyser seared across his neck, melting the skin on contact. Roland screamed again, yanked his axe free, attacked the door with primitive fury.

The dragon roared once more, the sheer volume of the noise shaking Roland’s bones, punishing his ears. He screamed through the torturous pain, doubled the force with which he pummeled the door.

Roland knew the beast was soon to take flight, knew he was doomed.

But to his considerable surprise, Roland took three more swings at the door before the dragon even called again. Had the beast grown soft, flightless? Or was Roland so

laughable a threat that the dragon wanted to toy with him? Not knowing elongated the torturous moments.

Roland had nearly cut through the wood around the door handle when the monster breathed fire a third time. The flame splashed everywhere but on Roland this time, and the knight took that to be an encouraging sign. Had he found a chink in the dragon’s armor, a place outside its horrible reach?

The door gave, and Roland kicked it open. He swung his axe high over his shoulder, ready to obliterate Feston’s guards.

Only there weren’t any.

The main hall of the castle was empty.

Outside, the dragon roared.

Confused but more and more assured the monster was flightless, Roland pressed forward.

Then came a scraping of metal against stone. Roland knew well the noise made when a sword was dragged across a castle floor. He looked all around for the bearer of the sword, saw nothing—until a shadow appeared on a winding stairwell. Someone approaching from an upper level.

Roland gripped his axe in both hands.

He expected Feston. He got Malcolm and his brother Waggart. Two brutes big as bulls, dirty as pigs, fierce as wolves. Savages as bloodthirsty as any knights Roland had known, as vicious as Roland himself was thought to be. They wore Feston’s colors.

Words were unnecessary. It was clear these killers were a last line of defense for anyone brave enough to run the dragon’s gauntlet. Roland knew the time had come. Past them was Feston. Past them was the conclusion of his quest.

He brandished his axe, goading his opponents. Malcolm, the one who had dragged his sword, accepted the invitation by charging, lifting his blade to grip it with both hands. Roland met the plunging sword with the hilt of his axe.

A moment later, Waggart added his sword to the fray. Adrenaline enabled Roland to dodge the first blow, but before the fight was done, Waggart’s blade would taste Roland’s blood.

Eleanor approached her sister’s door and was poised to knock till lurid grunts stayed her hand. She recognized the voice as Willem’s, recognized the character of the noises as well. Eleanor pitied her sister, turned back down the hall. Sleep was impossible, so she descended to the main hall, where a small night fire burned. Eleanor took a chair, sorted her thoughts. Soon only one occupied her mind.

There had been no word from her messenger.

Eleanor listened to the crackling flames, felt worry pound at the sides of her head like an animal trying to break from its cage.

After several unbearable moments, Eleanor snapped from her preoccupied state when Dotrice entered the room, took the next seat.

“He sleeps, of course,” Dotrice said with a laugh.

Eleanor grinned, too tense to laugh but happy for the levity. She watched her sister through the lace of her black veil.

“You know we take our leave tomorrow,” Dotrice said.

“Yes, I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Comfort yourself by remembering he leaves with me.”

Eleanor smiled again.

“Who is he?”

The queen looked at her sister, confused. Dotrice adopted a scolding expression, waited for her question to strike home. When it did, Eleanor blushed.

“A noble, I hope.”

“Hrdly.”

“Then so long as discretion is used, what harm is there?”

“It... It is complicated, Dotrice.”

“You’ve never changed, Eleanor.”

The queen looked at Dotrice quizzically.

“Even when you were a girl, you hid your pain. If you scraped your knee playing, Father never learned of it. If I bruised your feelings, you pretended I had not. Even when your womanhood came, you kept it secret till a handmaiden told Mother of the blood in your bedclothes. You’ve made a life’s work of suffering for others. From what little I can glean of the situation, it seems you’ve found someone to do your suffering for you.”

“I cannot even be sure I understand the situation. I have only my suspicions.”

“I understand the situation, Eleanor, all save one thing. Does your champion suffer in vain?”

Eleanor drew and released a deep breath, looked into the fire.

“Uncertainty,” Dotrice remarked. “A fertile ground in which hope can root.”

“Perhaps,” Eleanor answered softly. “But what if I lack the favor he seeks?”

“You confound me.”

“My heart,” Eleanor said, her eyes glistening. “I fear Mikk’s touch turned it cold.”

“So somewhere a man fights for a prize that does not exist?”

Eleanor’s only response was a quivering lip.

Malcolm fell dead at Roland’s feet, his skull cracked open by Roland’s axe.

Roland swayed, fatigue throbbing through his arms, his legs, his head. And still Waggart stood. His sword was red, as was the wound in Roland’s shoulder it had cut. They faced each other, equals in brutality.

“I was charged with killing you for my prince,” Waggart spat through choppy breaths, “but now I gladly kill you for my brother.”

Waggart lunged, and Roland dove forward, diving beneath the sword and smashing into Waggart’s body with all his weight. Air shot out of the swordsman’s lungs, and his huge body rose off the floor with the force of Roland’s battering. Roland withdrew, and before Waggart regained his breath, Roland swung his axe with desperate abandon.

By the time the blade found a home in the swordsman’s side, half of Waggart’s left arm was on the floor. He screamed, dropped his sword, put his sword hand over the gushing wound. Then he realized what he’d done, glared at Roland with simmering hate. “Damn you,” Waggart said.

Roland swung his axe again, buried it deep in Waggart’s chest. His shoulders tugged as the swordsman’s limp body slumped to the ground, taking the axe with it. Roland let go, caught his breath. Looked at Waggart’s dimming eyes. Roland put his foot on his opponent’s abdomen, grabbed the axe with both hands, stepped on Waggart for leverage while he yanked the weapon free.

He heard a horse outside.

Bracing for another fight, he turned toward the open castle door, saw a figure racing away from the castle. An old man. The merchant?

Roland felt sure his mind was failing him, then remembered his predicament. If madness was coming, now was not the time to embrace that fact.

Roland headed up the stairs.

Several moments later, he rose to the top chamber of the tower, expecting to confront the monster’s talons and hindquarters—expecting to encounter his death.

Instead, Roland found a bizarre workshop. Ahead of him, a weak, malnourished bear lay slumped in a cage. Beyond that, several small-bodied workmen cowered by a vat of oil and an intricate array of wooden machinery. Roland’s head hurt trying to make sense of the lunacy before him.

“Where is Feston?”

None of the terrified serfs answered.

“Where?!!!”

“By your leave, sir, he is where he has ever been,” the youngest of the serfs offered meekly. “His church stronghold.”

In his mind’s eye, Roland saw the old man scampering away on his horse. It was the merchant. And he was a betrayer.

“What is this place? Where is the dragon?”

“This is the dragon,” the serf offered.

Roland’s incredulous reaction prompted the serf to step forward. “We are not warriors, sir, just workers. If it pleases you, we will demonstrate. All we ask in return is mercy.”

Confounded but in no rush to spill more blood, Roland nodded for the serf to begin. “First the neck,” he said, nodding to two men by a large pulley system. They grabbed onto the handles that directed the system, yanked with visible effort. Roland took a startled step back when he heard a huge creaking of wood. He looked up and saw the inner architecture of the wooden dragon, saw how the pulley articulated the neck.

“Next the roar,” the serf continued as he pulled a hot poker from a stove. He jammed the poker into the cage, prodded the bear in the ribs. The weak animal let loose a sickly moan, which blew into a horn that amplified the sound.

“The wings,” the serf said, motioning to workers on either side of the cramped room. They grabbed their pulley rigs, and Roland heard the beast’s great wings flap outside the chamber.

“Finally the fire,” the serf concluded. He gestured to the last of his crew, a trio of men positioned along a stepladder. The lowest man drew a bucket of oil from a large vat, handed it to the man hanging off the middle of the ladder. The man atop the ladder took the bucket, splashed it down the throat of the beast—where it ignited on contact with a torch positioned inside the dragon’s maw.

Roland watched the whole spectacle, stupefied. His befuddlement emboldened the frightened serf to continue.

“By your leave, sir, the beast was erected on this cliff a generation ago to frighten marauders from distant lands. At Prince Feston’s command, it was turned inland to lure you here.”

“And by telling me this, you think you earn your lives?”

“We are but servants, sir.”

Roland looked at the terrified workers, their gaunt figures, their pale skin. He pictured them trapped in this hellacious place for years on end, waiting on the whims of fickle nobles. Their lot pained him.

“You will have your lives,” Roland said, “after one more task.”

An hour later, the malnourished bear scrambled down the castle steps, roaring in fear and pain and anger all the way, as its keeper hid petrified over the top of the opened cage. Roland and the other workers stood outside the castle, discreetly out of view of the door, until the bear loped out of the castle, broke for the woods. Then the group turned their eyes to the tower.

Fire rose in the eyes and maw of the dragon once more, only now it wasn’t the beast’s attack that summoned the flame. Licks of fire spat out from its sides, caught the fabric of its wings. The dragon was burning.

The bear’s keeper, the last of the serfs, ran out of the castle, the torch he used to ignite the workshop still in his hand.

All in the group looked up, saw flames engulfing the false monster.

Once satisfied the unholy apparition was burning beyond salvation, Roland turned his axe toward the leader of the serfs.

“Feston knows I come,” he said. “If he learns more, I will know who told him.”

“None of us will speak of you, sir,” the serf said. “By destroying a treasure of the realm, we have made ourselves fugitives.”

“Then you shall have your mercy,” Roland said. “But know my revenge has equal power.”

Eleanor squinted against the morning sunshine, watched Willem berate servants for not loading his luggage onto the carriage properly. She squeezed her sister’s hand, looked over at Dotrice’s pained face.

“I would much rather stay,” Dotrice said gently, “but duties of the court summon, especially in this time without a king.”

“Thank you for coming to me.”

“I would never do otherwise.”

They stood for a moment, hands entwined, as Willem finished his supervision at the carriage. Then he came to them, took Eleanor’s free hand, kissed her knuckles so lasciviously her hand was wet when he was done. Willem looked up at her with eyes saying he wished he could explore the rest of her body in like fashion. He angled to lift her veil and kiss her mouth, so Eleanor turned, giving him her cheek. A petulant look on his face, he snarled to Dotrice while he started back for the carriage.

“I would be home by nightfall,” he said.

Eleanor and Dotrice shared a private laugh. “I don’t know whether he becomes more crude with each passing day or merely sheds another layer of pretense that he was ever otherwise,” Dotrice said. “Either way, I know each day with him takes one from my life.”

“I wish you could extract yourself from his embrace,” Eleanor said softly.

“Such is not a woman’s prerogative, sister. At least I’m not bound by fidelity. No man gets jealous if his plain wife strays. I fear beauty dooms you to a life of watchful eyes.”

“You misunderstand me, Dotrice. I do not share your cravings.”

Dotrice laughed throatily, ignored her husband’s impatient glare. “If the only touch you have known is Mikk’s, I imagine you do not.”

Eleanor escorted her sister toward the carriage. Just short of Willem’s earshot, Dotrice leaned close for a whisper. “Your champion, sister... I wonder if his hands possess tenderness yet unfamiliar to you.”

“His hands are for killing,” Eleanor shot back. “I must protest your implication.”

“Well...,” Dotrice said, genuinely surprised. “Perhaps Mikk has spoiled you more than I thought. You lack even the imagination to want what has been denied you.”

“I want only peace,” Eleanor said, handing Dotrice off to a servant who helped her into the carriage. “And even that I want for all, not myself.”

Dotrice looked at her sister a long moment before speaking. “I was wrong,” she finally said. “You have changed. Where once I saw my timid sibling, I now see a determined queen. I hope someday the people of Dunsbrook understand at what cost they inherited such a rarified soul.”

Five

The sun burned unseasonably hot on the clearing. When Roland stirred with the first glimmers of wakefulness, he absently moved his hand toward a rock jutting from the tall grass. It felt like touching fire, so Roland flinched, suddenly alert. He instinctively grabbed for his axe, which was stabbed into the ground by his side, before he realized he was alone. After all his troubles getting this far, it surprised Roland that he had survived another night in this land of treachery and bizarre dangers. He wanted this task done.

Roland emptied his bladder against a tree, then moved through nearby woods till he found a thicket of berry bushes. He ate till his hungry stomach quieted, looked at the sun to figure his path. Roland started walking.

Two days had passed since the episode at Dragon’s Perch, and Roland felt sure he would reach Prince Feston’s true stronghold after one more day’s travel and one more night’s sleep. He wondered if Malcolm and Waggart were the fiercest of Feston’s warriors; certainly that would explain their encampment at so elaborately set a trap. But Roland knew he hoped in vain. No royal, not even the simpering Prince Feston, would allow his best defender to stray from his side. Without knowing the name of his inevitable adversary, Roland felt sure he had yet to face the best Dunshire had to offer. Listening to the aches and throbs of his burns, his cuts, his battered bones, Roland closed his eyes and prayed for the strength to make it one more day. The insult of making it this far only to collapse from fatigue and hunger so close to achieving his goal was too horrific for Roland to contemplate.

Music.

The sound seemed so out of place that Roland pondered what its true nature might be. The braying of an animal’s cry, the fluttering of a wild stream, the whistle of wind through reeds? But as Roland pressed on, he knew his ears heard true. Music, from ahead.

He slowed his steps, listened. There, amid the music, was laughter. A woman’s laughter. Not the rude cackle of some harlot or barmaid, but the soft tones of a lady. The sound was so sweet it froze Roland where he stood.

Then a yapping dog burst from a distant treeline, started running toward Roland. He raised his axe, expecting the animal’s master to follow with a poised weapon, but no one came. Roland looked at the dog, a small hound with a round middle and wet eyes, and knew it for an animal of the court. He relaxed his grip, let the dog approach. It scampered around him, barking madly between flushed breaths. This animal was as much a hunter as Roland was a poet. The bewildered knight stood still, watching the cheery dog hop up and down, feeling the caress of the animal’s sandpaper tongue each time it lapped his fingers.

A glimpse of white drew Roland’s eyes to the treeline. Fabric, flowing. A moment later, the figure bearing the white fabric emerged fully from the woods. A woman, short and stout but not displeasing to the eye, clad in a dress as colorless as her pale skin. She held a harp in one hand. The moment she saw Roland, she gasped—only without a sound.

Roland peered all around her, saw no one else. So he reached down, scooped up the eager dog. It barked brightly, licked his face. Roland set down his axe, held out his hand in a gesture of submission, walked slowly toward her.

By the time he reached the small woman, she was shaking with fear.

“I only wish to pass,” Roland said, handing the animal over.

She took the dog, cradled it in her arms, studied Roland.

“Speak, woman.”

She opened her mouth, revealed the grisly stump where her tongue once was. It told her story concisely. During King Mikk’s contemptible reign, it was rumored this was how he silenced his mistresses once he grew tired of their favors. Gossip held that dozens of mutilated women wandered the realm, too shamed for the courts and too cultured for life with commoners. Roland had always heard these women lived off the kindness of those who knew them before Mikk plucked them from the court for his bed.

“You are safe,” Roland said. “I need food if you have any.”

Eyeing the giant knight skeptically, the woman nodded toward a small campsite in the woods. Roland followed her there.

Once they sat, she produced a round of fragrant cheese and a loaf of soft bread. He grabbed both, started eating sloppily till he caught her aghast expression. Remembering the few manners to which he'd ever been exposed, Roland slowed his chewing, tried to keep most of the food and saliva in his mouth.

After swallowing several hearty mouthfuls, Roland looked at his benefactor. “Fresh food and a clean dress,” he said. “You just left a patron.”

Yes, she nodded.

“A relative?”

No, she nodded.

“A friend?”

No again.

“Such gifts out of kindness?”

No, once more, this time with averted eyes and a downturned mouth. Sighing deeply, she patted her dress, just below her belly.

His ability to process subtlety almost nonexistent, Roland looked at her stupidly a long moment before he understood her meaning. “You pay with your body?”

Still averting her eyes, she nodded yes.

Roland looked at her soft face, the curve of her hips, the deep trench exposed by the low front of her dress. He felt his pulse quicken, his skin grow hotter. Here, on a scorching morning in the middle of hostile terrain, was the closest Roland had ever come to a moment like this. Whenever fellow soldiers had encouraged him to buy the services of a wench, he had demurred, more from shyness than any other reason. He knew his brutish physique repulsed most women he met. As for proper ladies, he was so new to knighthood that he had yet to attend an event at court. Life had never brought Roland close to an encounter.

Yet here was a unique opportunity. A woman beyond shame, without defense or even the means to tell of her violation. Roland felt himself rise.

The woman looked up, read his face. In an instant, the life drained from her features. She looked at Roland a long moment. Then she kissed her dog, set it onto the ground, and lay back. She pulled her dress up to her waist, exposing herself.

Roland was stunned. Trembling, he reached for her knee, flinched at how strange the soft skin felt to his rough fingers. He traced his hand up her thigh, flinched again when he touched hair. Roland pulled his hand away.

He pictured Eleanor. Not splayed out like this, of course, but standing to his side. Watching. Shame pulsed under his skin, pushed out as nervous sweat.

With trembling hands, he pulled the woman’s dress back down to her knees.

She rose, her face bright with surprise.

Roland turned away, unable to withstand her casual scrutiny, until he heard a strum of music. Roland glanced over, saw the woman had picked up her harp.

She played him a bittersweet song, its melody rising with lovely simplicity, then descending into melancholy complexity. The flow of the music tugged at Roland, distracting him so fully his arousal waned to nothing.

When the song was over, Roland stood, looked down at the sad creature with the white dress and the harp.

He left without another word.

As night fell, Queen Eleanor watched the horizon anxiously. Her messenger should have returned by now. Drawing her cloak against a dusky chill, she took comfort in the thought that at least Prince Feston had yet to arrive. She wondered what held him back, then smiled weakly. Of course he doesn’t feel safe traveling through his own lands, Eleanor mused. Of course he doesn’t.

Prince Feston paced the floor of the church.

Peering through the colored glass and inspecting the woods, the gloomy sky, the soldiers patrolling the perimeter, Feston wondered. The killer stalking him had conquered every defense the prince placed in his path. And while Feston knew in his mind that no single man could press through the ring of force established around the church, the sallow prince wondered in his heart whether the attacker was truly just one man. For could one man have shaken the resolve of every warrior in Dunshire? Could one man have risen from rumor to legend in a fortnight’s time? Could one man have changed the course of a nation?

Feston looked across the church, saw Milver sitting in a pew, reading sacred words. The prince didn't need to ask his advisor why he was praying.

Word got back to Eleanor before she sat down for the lunch she didn't want to eat. The most trusted of her royal guards was dead, killed in a skirmish just over the Dunshire border. His commander was perplexed as to why this loyal man had abandoned his post.

The queen's face quivered, realizing her gambit had died in its infancy. Desperate to protect appearances, she reached over to an onion, cut it open. A single tear traveled down her cheek, and a single drop of blood issued from her finger. In her haste, she had sliced her own skin.

Attendants scampered to her side, tending to her injury.

She let them perform their duties, concentrating her own energy on steeling her features, her emotions. It was now just a matter of waiting. Waiting for word that the scourge preying on Dunshire's soldiers had been killed, word that the sickly Prince Feston was on his way to claim his throne and his bride.

Six

Dax was a hard man. Hard of body, hard of heart. A knight whose only loyalty was to the landowner who sired him, Dax hadn't blinked when he was told to switch his colors from those of Dunsbrook to those of Dunshire. He hadn't shown any discernible reaction when the war started, nor even in the worst of the battles. To his comrades, Dax was a man incapable of expression, a killer deadened to savagery.

Yet when Dax saw the figure emerging from the woods surrounding the church, his mouth fell open.

A behemoth of well over six feet, the creature might once have been a man. Now it was just walking viscera. The armor on the thigh of the beast's right leg had been ripped away, revealing a gruesome burn and brown tracks of dried blood. The thing's right hand was swathed in filthy fabric darkened with fresh blood. From its chainmail-encased feet to its bald, bruised head, the creature was covered in blood, filth, twigs, leaves. It was as if the forest itself had belched up all the violence ever done in it, then set the abomination to walking.

So it wasn't until the limping, panting monstrosity raised a bloody battleaxe over its head that Dax even thought to react. At the last possible instant, Dax raised his shield. But the axe came down with such terrible force that it slammed Dax's shield arm into his torso, snapping the arm with a moist crack in the process.

Dax heard himself call his compatriots to his defense.

Hot, stinking urine trickled down Feston's stockinged leg. He didn't need to look out the window to know his fate was at hand. Only two options remained at this late stage of the game. His soldiers would protect him, or the murderer from the forest would enter the church.

The prince knew his life hinged on whether the church door remained closed until the combat was done.

In his pew, Milver set down the book and began praying audibly.

Had any of them survived to describe it, Prince Feston’s soldiers would have called the battle a taste of hell. The giant with the axe held his ground, swinging his massive weapon with his good hand and slashing a purloined sword with his injured one. Summoning energy and anger that mystified his opponents, the wild man was a whirlwind of brutality. Stories told about this rout credit the brute with killing twenty men in one stand, though others scoff the actual number was half that. Whatever the truth of the matter, the result was the same. One man did the impossible.

The church door slammed open with a sickening crackle of snapping wood, and a beam of daylight blasted down the aisle.

Prince Feston, shivering from the way his flow had wetted his clothing, stood in the center of the aisle, holding his decorative dagger in a shaky hand.

As the hulking mass lumbered toward him, grunting with labored breaths and reeking with death, the prince gave a moment’s thought to flight. Surely this thing stumbling down the aisle lacked the strength to pursue an able-bodied man after enduring such ferocious combat.

Fear froze Feston’s feet.

And in a moment, his choice was taken from him. The killer was upon the prince, his fetid stench assaulting Feston’s nostrils.

The thing spoke, its issue barely recognizable as words because the voice was choked with exhaustion and blood and wheezing pain. “Give me the assassin,” it said in a taut whisper.

“You have him,” Feston said, quivering. “Dax.”

Feston raised a trembling hand, pointed to a gored body visible through the church door.

Roland turned that way, saw the quiver on Dax’s back. The quiver from which was extracted the arrow that killed King Mikk, the arrow that chained Queen Eleanor to her mourning veil. Roland smiled.

And then fire shot through him. He spun back toward Feston, looked down. The feeble prince’s knife was dug deep into Roland’s stomach.

Roland looked up, gazed into his assailant’s terrified eyes.

So this is who kills me, he thought.

Roland summoned his remaining strength, swung his battleaxe one last time.

Feston’s body fell to the church floor, a wound six inches deep almost separating the traitor’s head from his neck. His useless life seeped out of him, staining the stone red.

Roland panted, feeling his own life wane, as he turned to Milver.

Shock coursed through Roland’s exhausted frame.

The old man facing him was the deceitful merchant who drove him to his ordeal at Dragon’s Perch. Roland’s simple mind convulsed with the effort of divining this liar’s true identity. He clenched his axe, savoring the opportunity for vengeance.

“Stay your hand, killer. The war is over. Queen Eleanor has won.”

The music of her name arrested his bloodlust.

The court was summoned quickly for the unplanned ceremony. Knights who rushed to the castle wore half their armor; ladies called unexpectedly shifted in their places, embarrassed by their unbraided hair.

The mourning queen sat quietly in her throne, waiting.

Attendants opened the doors, and the congregation gasped as one.

Roland stood in the doorway, using the staff of his battleaxe as a walking stick. He took a step forward, then dragged the axe’s blade across the stone floor with an echoing screech. He pulled his injured leg forward, the limb all but useless, then forced himself to take another step. Blood seeped through the bandage around his midsection. Every surface of his exposed skin was bruised or cut or dirtied. To the flushed men who knew the pain he felt and the horrified ladies who could only imagine, Roland was a walking corpse. His tattered breath and sunken eyes amplified the morbid effect.

He carried a bundle wrapped in bloody cloth.

Queen Eleanor rose to her feet.

Roland reached the throne platform, dropped to the knee of his good leg. His exhalation was filled with such audible suffering that the strongest men in the room grimaced.

“I...,” he began. “I bring you...”

“I know what you bring, Roland of Magister,” Eleanor spoke in intimate tones. “And I greet it with gratitude.”

The muscles in his fighting arm succumbing to complete fatigue, Roland lost his grip on the axe, and it fell to the stone floor with a loud thunk. For an instant, it seemed as if he would fall.

But he steadied himself. Righted his shoulders, squared his jaw. He set the bundle at his queen’s feet. One finger of Dax’s hand protruded through the fabric.

Roland took a breath, summoning all his will for a final task.

Leaning forward and pressing his hands to the floor for balance, Roland lifted his good leg, pushed himself up to a shaky imitation of standing. With his injuries, his exhaustion, his waning force, Roland occupied barely five and a half feet of his normal towering height. But this diminished stance was all he could muster.

Shaking along the length of his body, Roland reached for his queen.

And then Queen Eleanor did something that entered myth as quickly as any of Roland’s bloody deeds. Standing before this commoner who became a knight and then a champion, the most beautiful queen in the history of her land leaned forward to meet his hands.

She lowered herself to her servant.

With that gesture, she allowed Roland of Magister to fulfill his destiny.

He lifted the mourning veil off her face.

In his delusional, fading state of mind, Roland felt sure the sun had come out at just that moment to shine a beam of pure light onto the face that had haunted his dreams, the face that had doomed him to a lover’s death.

For in that last moment, all Roland knew was green. The green of those eyes. The green of the open ocean, of fields growing wild, of a forest caught in a swaying wind. The green of life.