

Riding Curse

The rancid odor of triceratops dung stings the inside of my nose as I wheel the last cartload into the blinding blue morning. The earth trembles under my feet.

In the steep-walled pit of the bullpen, Curse, our blooded bull triceratops, bucks against his chains in rage, sending shivers across the stable yard. Squire Laurent still hasn't given up trying to ride him. Normally I'd cheer for the young lord, but after Beltane, I hope he cracks his noble nuts on the saddle.

I dump my reeking wheelbarrow in the marshy fens and march it back towards the stables, so wrapped up in my own simmering indignation that I hardly notice Katia walking towards me with our morning meal. Even though my guts are still scrambled from that torturous Beltane dance, I feel a flood of relief as soon as she smiles at me.

“Goodday, Master Aryn.”

She hasn't used a title with me as long as I can remember, and the formality of it sends a pang of fear through my heart.

If she's going to talk like that, I will make it double. "G'morning, m'lady Katia."

She seems to miss the joke, gazing in concern across the stable yards to the bullpen.

Laurent, you thieving cur.

"I'm afraid the squire is getting quite the ass-kicking this morning," I say.

She scowls at me. "It's too dangerous a job for jokes, Aryn. We should be honoring the lord's bravery, not mocking it."

Of course, no one knows that better than me. I grew up in these stables, and I've seen all manner of injuries and deaths. Her concern for the young lord sends my heart plummeting to the bottom of my belly again.

Seven years I waited to jump the Beltane fires with Katia. On the very night I planned to ask her, the young lord Laurent cut ahead of me. A passing fancy on his part, I'm sure, but she fell swiftly under his spell.

In the eaves above us, a wood thrush harrows a sparrowhawk away from his nest.

"Katia—"

"Yes?"

But what can I say? That I love her, that I have always loved her, since we were just a pair of stableyard scamps, hiding from chores in the rafters and pestering Old Tim?

A fat lot of good those words would do me when she only has eyes for the squire.

Before I can open my mouth and embarrass myself, there's a commotion up at the bullpen and then we hear it—a rumble of deep rage from Curse's lifted beak, like a human

nooooo. Every man in the stables knows exactly what it means. Curse has had enough. Squire Laurent can either dismount or die.

“Something is happening with the Squire,” Katia says, striding off towards the bullpen.

I follow, huffing under my breath. “Not if I can help it.”

When we reach the bullpen, that fool squire is hanging on for dear life in Curse’s saddle. He isn’t the first man to try to ride Curse, nor the first to cling to his back in terror. Curse was actually a docile calf, until Laurent’s elder cousin bludgeoned the back of his neck to a bloody pulp.

Then one morning, just a few weeks before they were supposed to join King Charlemagne in the blood-soaked fields of Saxony, Curse realized that he was a great deal larger than the spiteful knight on his back. And he rolled him off and stomped him to a bloody pulp.

Since then, Curse has had his way with half of Lord Aymere’s bloodline, leaving them with shattered limbs and dead dreams of riding in the dinosaur cavalry. Lord Aymere even offered spurs to any of us commoners who could master the trike, though none have been fool enough to try. Let the lords enjoy their honorable deaths. All my happiness requires is a small plot of land and Katia by my side.

I leave her on the edge of the crowd and sidle up to Stablemaster Edouard. He massages the dead eye under his eyepatch. “A little late to the party, aren’t we, Master Aryn?”

He’s bitter because, just an hour ago, I wanted nothing to do with Laurent's attempt to ride the mad beast, and he sent me to shovel shit instead. I don’t blame the stable master for being upset. It’s bad form to shirk your duties during a ride, and not a man knows the trikes better than me. I may be just sixteen, but my father taught me everything he knew before he rode off the war with Lord Aymere.

“I’ve finished mucking the stalls, stablemaster. And it sounded like you could use the extra hand,” I reply cautiously.

As if to prove my point, Curse wallops the pit wall with the broad side of his tail, and our knees collectively buckle. If our bull had one more ounce of strength, I swear, he would rip the roof right off of Hell.

Before the stable master can scold me again, Curse looses another earth-shaking roar. Squire Laurent throws his arms around the saddle pommel and looks up at the stablemaster in panic.

“Alright, you miserable runt,” the stablemaster says to me, “help me pull him out.”

Stablemaster lobs a knotted rope to Squire Laurent’s grasping hands. I am spiting the highborn under my breath when, he jerks to a halt, suspended between the trike and the edge of the bullpen.

No one breathes. Laurent’s right foot has twisted in the stirrup. He holds the rope for an agonizing second while the blood drains from his face. And falls, yanking free of the stirrup, tumbling off Curse’s ribs, and landing like a sack of flour in the shallow bed of sand.

On dinosaurback, the line between life and death is as fine as fishbone. Even an accidental sidestep from Curse would break every bone in Laurent’s torso. And take care of my problems once and for all.

An arrow of shame rips through me. My father would never abandon his liege lord in a time of need. And perhaps an act of bravery would endear me to Katia, as well. I remember the wood thrush from earlier, beating its wings valiantly over the head of the more powerful raptor, driving it away from its nest.

I jump down the eight-foot wall of the bullpen, landing hard in the dirt next to the still-dazed Laurent.

“Aryn.” The stablemaster suppresses his roar to avoid spooking the trike. “What in God’s name are you doing?”

But I know exactly what I’m doing. And I’m careful. I make almost no sound as I drag Laurent out of range of Curse’s hind legs and close his fingers around the dangling lifeline. Curse does not appear to be looking at us, but I know he senses us in his periphery. I tug twice on the rope. A pair of stable hands haul Laurent up the wall while I lift from below.

The next seconds unfold deliberately, like a sheath of fine linen in the hands of the chamberlain: Squire Laurent’s feet scuff for purchase halfway up the bullpen wall. Curse swivels one yellow eye toward us. I drop to my belly just as Curse’s tail broadsides the bullpen wall above my head. This close, it is like kneeling in a thunderhead.

Laurent gasps with relief as the stable hands pull him to safety at the rim of the bullpen. They drop the rope again for me. I rise slowly, braided leather in my hands, looking at Curse out of one eye. His tail sways gently, a branch in the breeze.

“I’m going up now,” I tell the animal, though I cannot say why. I have always talked to him like this, from the time he was a milky-eyed calf lowing after cycads.

I scramble up the wall of the bullpen faster than a spider. No sooner have I crested the ledge than Curse starts flailing again. The stable hands pull me to my feet, clapping my shoulders and patting my back. Though I know the stablemaster will never commend me for my bravery, he’ll show his gratitude in other ways. But the real accolades I am looking for come from a certain young woman, who at this very moment is just a few paces away, talking with ...

I see them standing together in the center of the stableyard, speaking in hushed tones. Katia gazes up at Laurent's face while he rethreads his auburn braid, and I'm suddenly so overwhelmed with despair that I'm actually dizzy. But it lasts only for a second before jealousy sinks its claws in me, that choleric temper surges through my veins, and I push past the stable hands and square up to the pair of them directly.

I tremble with fear or anger, I can't say. "You're welcome, Lord."

Squire Laurent turns slowly. "Pardon me, bondsman?"

"I said, you're welcome, lord."

Laurent wraps a violet ribbon once, twice around the end of his braid and ties it in a tight bow before meeting my eyes. I can feel the eyes of my brothers on my shoulder blades and only assume that the stablemaster is about to boil over. But I'm too hot-blooded to think of anything but Laurent and Katia.

The squire stares down at his nose at me. Even after that brutal beating in the saddle, he's still the picture of a highborn, broad chested, embossed leather vest, aquiline nose. His voice feels like cold iron.

"I thank you for your bravery, bondsman. Reckless as it was. You're dismissed. Now."

Is this arrogance what Katia sees in him? That truly is the mark of a noble, isn't it. To be saved from death, and still think that you're superior. She hangs on his every word, gazing at the side of his face. Well, now I have to say something stupid.

"Maybe you should stick to the beakpigs for now, m'lord. Till you have a better feel for the saddle."

His backhand cracks across my face, and I drop to a knee. It takes a few seconds to blink away the darkness. He's fast, at least. I'll give him that.

Laurent calls across the stableyard. “That’s four lashes, Stablemaster, for an uncouth tongue in the face of his sworn lord” Laurent turns abruptly and the glossy leather heel of his boot kicks gravel in my face. “Wash up, boy. You smell like trike shit.”

I lift my head; she’s finally looking at me. But the look I receive isn’t admiration or even pity. It’s shock and ... I can’t place the exact nature of her curled lip ... and then she turns her back to me and strides after Laurent. I hear the rage in Edouard’s footsteps behind me.

“Aye, Squire, I’ll make it five. On your feet, wretch. Get this beast turned out.”

Edouard hauls me up by my collar and throws me towards the stables. My eyes burn, though not from the fear of lashes nor the sting of Laurent’s knuckles.

The last thing I see before I duck into the musty gloom of the stables is Katia laughing at some joke Laurent has told, then covering her mouth modestly, as if the mirth of it is too precious a thing to share.

#

When I have finished every chore in the stables, the cheese and ale are long gone, and the stable hands inform me that my punishment shall be meted out on the morrow. Someone throws a heel of bread into the beakpig pen, daring a mutt to fetch it.

I climb down a rope ladder to the floor of the bullpen, where Curse has toppled onto his side. We’ve been plying him with wine-soaked moss and cycads since Laurent dismounted. Only in the thrall of drunken slumber can we safely move him.

His labored breath washes over me with the smell of damp leaves and vinegar, and I ease down to a seat in front of him. I wonder if the trike remembers any of the lullabies my father used to sing to him as a hatchling, before all those noble knights tried to break him. “You deserve better than this, old boy.” I rest my fingertips on the cool scales above his beak. “We both do.”

That night, sleep evades me. Even though it's been three weeks since Beltane, when I close my eyes, all I can see is that night, his face, her smile ...

#

The night began with promise. As the moon rose and the roast boar dwindled to bones, the dancers gathered around the towering Beltane fire. I waited two rounds on the edge of the circle before I found the courage to ask Katia to dance.

“So sorry, Katia,” I said, the second time I stumbled over her toes.

“You’re drunk.” She giggled and touched the primrose braided around her temples. “And I told you not to worry.”

“I’m not *that* drunk,” I lied. I had gulped down two horns of strong ale while waiting for my moment. We whirled together, and I prayed the dance would never end.

“Has anyone asked you to jump the fire yet?” I asked, as the lute slowed.

“Not yet.” Katia looked up at me, cheeks aglow with mead and exertion. As long as I’d known her, I’d been waiting to ask her to jump the Beltane fire with me and secure God’s blessing for our future together.

But before I could put the words together, a hawkish whistle pierced the night. Squire Laurent beckoned me across the dance with a wave.

“Go to him, Aryn,” Katia said. “He’s your lord.”

“Save me another dance?”

She gave me a little smile and nudged me towards the young lord.

“You’ve a merry face tonight, bondsman.” Squire Laurent pressed me into the bench between his cousins. “Let’s make it merrier still. Mead for the boy!”

He slapped an urn of fiery mead on the table beside me and lowered his voice. “I’m to ride the bull again.”

“Aye, lord.”

“Four months, Aryn. Ten times I’ve been up in his saddle, and I’m no closer to mastering him than when it was my cousin on his back. It was your father who broke him, I recall. Have you any counsel before I’m on his back again?”

Squire Laurent had never spoken to me this way. The same way his father, Lord Aymere, spoke to my father, his trusted groom, and I swell with pride.

“Curse was a good egg, before his riders set upon him with the poker. Favor the brush, m’lord.”

Laurent sighed at the stale advice. So I added, “Let him smell you, lord.”

“Smell me?” Laurent leaned back and smiled. “Well now, that’s a new one. But tonight, the trike can wait.” Laurent lifted the urn and passed it around again. “The gods of Beltane demand we ride other creatures. Tell me, bondsman, how well do you know the maids of this house?”

“Some well enough, m’lord. Though not as well as the trikes, I’m afraid.”

The young lords laughed at my jest, but I still felt the embarrassment burning in my cheeks. Laurent studied the dancers, the distant orange pyre flickering in his eyes.

“What about that one, with the flaxen hair? Katia, is it?” He said her name slowly, as if enjoying it on his tongue. “She’s a ripe little plum.”

“Oh, Katia? Her?” My mind raced to all manner of terrible outcomes. “She’s a good woman, m’lord. Humble, godly.”

“I could use a godly woman.”

The young lords broke into drunken guffaws.

“M’lord, she is beneath your station.” My voice careened dangerously upwards. “What would you say if a lowly stable hand was to attempt to ride Curse?”

Laurent drained the last of his horn and tossed it into the shadows beyond the firelight. He hopped to his feet and clapped me on the shoulder, his smile flashing downward.

“You recall my father’s decree, bondsman. If you can ride the beast, ride him.” Laurent trained his eyes on Katia, fixing her flowers. “I fully intend to.”

What could I do? He was a lord, *my* lord. I couldn’t rightly tell him *no*, much less raise my fists. And in Katia’s eyes ... he was every inch the strapping young hero, from his shining hair to his polished boots. All I could do was pray.

So I prayed. But Christ has never favored me, and the old gods have their own agendas on Beltane. When Katia took Laurent’s hand, she was beaming.

I waited and waited on that wretched bench for my dance to come again, until the pyre chewed itself down to purple coals and the lot of them disappeared.

#

Three days after my whipping. Woden’s Day. The funerary procession arrives on the western road, tired soldiers on tired horses under a sky of molten lead. At its head, a swaybacked, one-eyed hadrosaur bears a painted wooden chest.

Squire Laurent grits his teeth and maintains his composure until the honor guard hands him the chest, carrying the meager remains of his lord father. Lady Aymere’s wails crash in heavy waves across the stable yard, and the rest of the manor house follows suit.

I hide the shame of my caning wounds under my tunic and ask one of the footmen if he has heard word of my father.

He shakes his head. “Dead or taken. It is all the same.”

I swallow and brace myself for a convulsion of grief. “Is there not even a token of him? He wore a bronze pendant ...”

The footman limps off, muttering about ale. Even though I know he is dead, I cannot help looking for my father among the weary soldiers.

Not an hour later, the heavens break open, jagged white spears falling over the hills. The friar says these rains are the tears of the angels, lamenting our lord’s untimely passing in the jaws of a Saxon tyrannosaur. The mourners have gathered in the Lord’s House to sing their laments, but I retreat to the fetid gloom of the stables, where no one will hear me weep. Where are the songs for my father, or the other servants of Lord Aymere who passed in the battle?

When the downpour finally breaks, I take my supper to the knoll above the lord’s pasture and summon the nerve to rest my peeling back against the upturned bed of an oxcart. Ale and mead flow liberally in the manor house, but I would rather be here, watching the clouds and sun spar, cracks of rose and violet sundering the belly of the sky.

I hear the soggy hillside scrunching under delicate feet, and Katia appears beside the ox cart, gazing out on the sunset. I bask in her presence for a long moment before I say her name.

“Katia.”

She spooks an inch into the air, sees me, and laughs. “Aryn! Sorry to bother you.”

“No bother at all. Please sit. Share the view with me.” As gently as I can, I say, “I thought you were avoiding me.”

Katia eases down next to me like I’m a half-trained dog and produces a bowl of honeyed cream and a wedge of bread. “In truth, I was. I thought it would be for the best, just for a time.”

Somehow, those words make sense, even though my heart is thrashing like a river dragon. “Well, there’s no need for that. We’re both grown adults, right?”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I can see the relief spread across her face, and she leans a little closer to me. A knot uncinches in my abdomen, releasing an overdue sigh. We watch Old Blue, the half-blind pasture trike, flatten a patch of betony into purple carpet. Katia dips a piece of her bread into the bowl of milkfat and brings it to the bow of her lips.

“This was one of the first places you brought me when I arrived at the manor house. It seems like so long ago, now.” She licks a white drop off her little finger; the sight of her is pickling my brain. “You were always trying to cheer me up, back then.”

“Do you remember when we hid up in the rafters above the stables and dropped bits of wood on Old Tim?”

“We were such beasts!”

“Oh, we weren’t that bad. We weren’t even trying to hit him.”

Katia giggles and clasps her hands under her chin, and I fall into the memory: the sullen-eyed little girl arriving at the manor house. Dead mother, despondent father. Her uncle, the chamberlain, suggested I show her around the stables, as she had never seen a dinosaur before.

“Katia?”

“Yes?” Still smiling, Katia wipes a dribble of cream off her chin.

My words catch in my throat, hard as a chestnut. I doubt she even remembers those silly games we played as children. But I do. Every seed we planted in the garden, every stupid joke, and every little joy and sorrow.

But if I speak these truths aloud, and she doesn't feel the same, it would crush the life out of me. Katia wipes her bowl clean with her crust and offers it to me. As I take it, our fingers touch. I pray this will be the moment her face turns to mine—so close I can feel its heat—and she realizes that I am not the nine-year-old boy who held her hand through those long days.

But she only wipes her fingers on the rain-soaked grass and presses to her feet. The words unsaid ache in my chest.

“It's about time I get back to the house. Marte gets flea-bitten if I am gone for more than a wick. It was lovely to see you, Aryn.”

“Katia?” Fluster. Panic. Stall. “Do you remember that place we called the keep? In the hayloft above the stables?”

“You mean that filthy, cobwebby place you had filled with carvings in the rotting wood?”

“Yes.”

“Fondly.”

“I love you so much.”

It is terrifying to hear the words aloud. More terrifying, still, to behold her reaction. Katia draws her smile in and down, until it bears such womanly dignity it can hardly be called a smile at all.

“That's very kind, Aryn.”

My knees are so weak that I grab the ox cart to get to my feet.

“Do you think that, someday...?”

“Aryn.” Words are such cruel and potent things, where even the timbre of my own name can crush me. “You're a good man. But I'm already promised.”

“Laurent has already asked for your...?” I can hardly speak.

She looks at a patch of wet moss. “The squire is keen to sire an heir before he is called to arms in place of his lord father. God rest his soul.”

The shyness of her words is almost too much. I should be happy for her, to marry into land and title. But at that moment, all I can feel are the broken pieces of my life, each jagged edge cutting into my soul. She turns to leave.

“But don’t you love me?” Now that the sluice is open, there’s no stopping me. “You know how much I love you. You know that I would do anything for you.”

I hold my breath for a burst of tears, a confession. Instead, she chews her lip. “I do love you, Aryn. But it is different.” She touches my arm. “I’m sorry about your father. He was as kind a man as I ever knew.”

She fades into a shadow down the slope, and I remain stuck on that hilltop, watching clouds win the battle for the night and waiting for the feeling to subside. But it only builds, beat by beat, until I decide that I’m done with this miserable heart and stride out into the darkness.

I plod across the soggy pasture until cold water splashes up to my knees. The mist shivers with a blast of thunder: Curse’s breath, nervous, probing, twenty yards away.

Mist swirls around us. My mother was taken before I could walk, my father lost in service to Christ and King. Katia was the final blow, my secret light, smothered. I stand before the looming behemoth, pitiful, small, and alone. With only a few more footsteps, I’d end up as dead as his other riders.

An insane thought bubbles to the surface of my mind, one last desperate chance to be the man that Katia wants. A man with land, title, and status.

If I ride you, I shall be made a knight.

Curse warbles a warning from his reptilian belly, and I can almost hear my father crooning, *Lalla, Lalla, little one*. But there will be no lullabies in our next meeting, only the whip, poker, and brush.

“Ready yourself, old friend.” I retreat slowly into the mist. “For tomorrow, we ride.”

#

The next morning, while bleary-eyed stablehands loiter outside the stables, I inform Stablemaster Edouard of my decision, and he guffaws in my face.

“Saddled and chained.” I wipe a fleck of spittle off my cheek. “If you please, Master Edouard.”

Squire Laurent shoulders his way through the stable hands, pale with rage. “You can’t be serious, you dimwit. You’re trying to steal my steed?”

If I die today, that look will make it all worth it.

Fast as an adder, the stablemaster slams me against the clapboard wall, startling the beakpigs in their sty.

“You want him saddled, do you?” Fury grinds in the back of his throat like a millstone. “Are you a knight? *No*. Are you a squire? *No*. Then what business do you have on the back of a dinosaur?”

It takes all my effort to gather my breath. “Our late Lord Aymere promised spurs to any man who could ride the trike, and as long as this is his house, I trust that his word is law.”

Edouard’s knuckles dig into my collar bones like iron pegs. I fix my gaze on his good eye and will myself not to break.

“We’ll saddle him in the open paddock, then. No chains.” He lets me fall back against the clapboards. “If we drag that beast in from the pasture, then he won’t have a chain around his neck. And the two of you will be off on a merry romp around the paddock.”

“I understand, stablemaster.”

“He’ll break you like a twig, you little fool.”

The stable hands, as close as my own blood, look at me like a changeling, strange and repulsive.

“Saddled,” I tell Edouard, and he spits a wad of heather an inch from my toes.

“In Christ’s name, Aryn, you’re just throwing your life away.” His good eye gleams with what looks like a tear. “God rest your father’s soul.”

#

Every man in the stables stands in attendance for my last walk across the yard, their frowns leaden, hands clasped. The rest of the lord’s house, dressed in the black of mourning, spills out onto the knoll overlooking the paddock, the vast bermed enclosure where Curse awaits.

I am halfway through the crowd when I hear Katia’s voice over my shoulder.

“Aryn.” Her voice is hurried and hard-edged. “Don’t do this. Please.”

Those pipers tales, in which fearless knights prove their love against all odds, seem so childish to me now. But since I will never stop wanting Katia, I have no choice but to try to win her back. “Whatever happens in there, it’s not your fault.”

She flees into the crowd, throwing up a gray cowl over her braids. And I step up to meet my fate.

At the edge of the paddock, a stable hand waits with the lifeline. “Saddled and ready for you, Master Aryn.”

Stable Master Edouard claps me on the shoulder, as if this is just another Jove's Day. "Your sweet beastie down there is still a little bleary from last night's feast of wine-soaked fronds. I'd hop on now, before he's bright and chipper."

He nudges me towards the edge of the wall and mutters in my ear, "God be with you."

Four feet below us, Curse kneels on his forelegs, slowly working one hoof at a time. I muster the last feeble dregs of my courage, pull the rope taught, and lower myself into the saddle. Release a stale breath. As I pull the second stirrup around my foot, Curse stands.

I finally understand just how small I really am.

"Take it slow, lad," the stablemaster says. "Just let him feel your weight."

Not that there's much weight to feel. Curse has thrown men twice my size across the paddock with ease. On the rim above me, the stablehands argue over which training tool I should use first. Curse plods a few steps, testing the boundaries of his world. No chains, no narrow bullpen walls hold back his violence.

"What's it gonna be, lad?" Edouard hurries along the embankment beside us.

I pull the whip out of a saddlebag.

I crack the whip handsomely above Curse's frill, the signal to stop. Instead, he disgorges a groan of displeasure and tosses his massive mantle. I clutch the saddle pommel to stay upright. He's only just waking up.

With each crack of the whip, Curse grows more ornery, groaning and stomping the paddock floor like he's going to pound the earth to dust. Stable hands clamor with advice—*try the brush, try the poker, only if you want to die lad, the brush!*—though I can hardly hear them. My legs aren't used to this, to say nothing of my balls. I crack my chin on the pommel and my mouth fills with the tang of blood.

My only hope is the brush, a bundle of horsehair bristles at the end of a four-foot shaft. I draw it from its saddlebag and reach in vain for the tender spot at the base of his frill. My father told me once that it reminds them of their mother's breath.

Suddenly, Curse cranes his beak up to the sky and freezes, and I allow myself a brief moment of hope that I have touched that magical spot. Then I hear it, the abject rage drawn up from the deepest pit of his belly. My death knell.

The stablehands fall silent.

I let the brush fall away and grasp at saddle straps, shoulder plumage, anything my fingers find. I pray, hard and fast, to Lord Jesus Christ, God in Heaven, my own father, and anyone else who can hear me. Just get me out of here.

"Aryn!" Master Edouard swings the lifeline through the air. "Get off of him! Get off and make a run for it, before he—"

Curse bucks and I am free, flying, spinning.

#

I lick a sheath of mud off my teeth and blink. Curse, our bull triceratops, the dark god of this land, blots out the sun above me.

The fear is so intense that, for a moment, my mind is gone.

Curse stamps his foot, thunders, and tosses his horns. I hear a woman weeping in the distance, and I'm certain it's my mother, dead now for sixteen years. The dinosaur still hasn't crushed me, so maybe she really is here, a sylph whispering in his ear.

With a tremble, I remember what it means to be alive. Every detail of the world burns into me—the gravel under my knees, the jagged range of Curse's frill, the wormwood scent of his breath. The heat and pressure of my own building tears.

My name rings over the paddock. Stablemaster Edouard stands at the top of the wall behind me, dangling the lifeline down the embankment. Curse lowers his horns. It's a twenty-yard dash and I'll have a head start of one second, maybe two.

But I can't move. I hear gasps from the grassy slope of the paddock. Without meaning to, my eyes find Katia, pale as a lily, standing shoulder to shoulder with Laurent. And maybe, because I have only seconds left to live, I finally see that their love is real, and my passion was nothing more than a fantasy. I accept the strange puppet strings of our wandering stars—jealousy, arrogance, and loneliness—that pulled me along to this bleak destiny.

Every fiber of my being wants to run to that lifeline, but I think of my father, who faced his fate bravely and fully. The tune of his lullaby stirs up from some dizzy part of my memory. I may be forever known as the idiot who died serenading a trike, but I gather my breath:

“Lalla, lalla, little one,
Tie one knot, for Father Time,
Mine in yours, and yours in mine.
Lalla, lalla, little one...”

Curse takes one deadly step and balks, cocking his ear. I shuffle closer, singing my stupid cradle melody. The moisture of his breath passes warm then cool across my face. I reach a trembling hand to his beak. Remember me, old friend.

“Lalla, lalla, little one...”

How long we hold there, unmoving, the scaly slit of his nostril huffing and sealing, I can't say. When I finally slip past his outstretched horns, only the deadly jewel of his eye follows me. I slide to Curse's saddle belt, all the while humming my lullaby.

And I climb.

Curse quivers as I scurry up his ribs but doesn't try to shake me off. He ambles along the paddock wall, grating his horns through several inches of rammed earth like he's scratching an itch. The stablehands toss me training tools from the lip of the paddock wall.

I crack the whip; Curse pauses. I brush his ear.

A shiver ripples through him. He grunts, wavers, and slams his tail against the bermed wall so hard the stablehands fall to their knees. But I am not afraid. I sing my song more loudly, so that Curse might hear every word, the way I feel every beat of his great heart through the saddle leather.

A snap of the whip. You and me, Curse. A stroke of the brush. Remember the man who raised us.

This is our dance, our rhythm. I hear clapping from the grassy slope above the paddock. The whole host of the Lord's house erupts in cheer, and even Katia applauds. But I know that nothing has changed. She and Laurent will share a life together, children, a warm bed on a winter's night.

With Curse to support me, I am strong enough to bear this fate.

I steady myself in the saddle and lift my brush to the men and women of the Lord's house, above all, one kitchen girl, hiding beneath her hood.

The sun breaks free of the morning clouds. Instinctively, Curse turns east, towards the King and bloody Saxony, as if he too can hear the drums of war. And we salute whatever spirits watch over us from beyond those parting clouds.