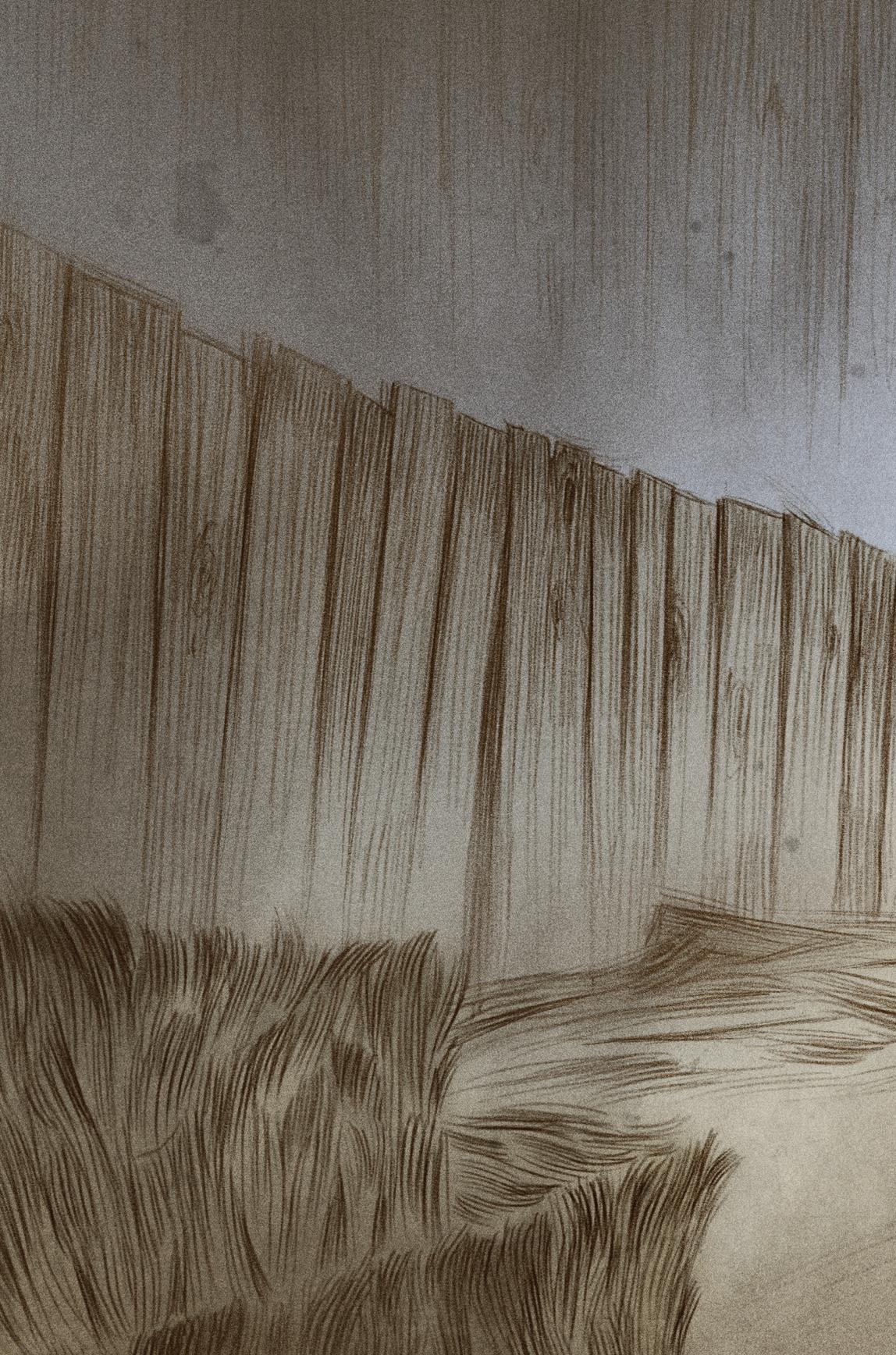


II



The Prince
of Elfhame
Is Rude





any times in his first nine years, Prince Cardan slept in the hay of the stables when his mother didn't want him in their suite of rooms. It was warm there, and he could pretend he was hiding, could pretend that someone was looking for him. Could pretend that when he was not found, it was only because the spot he'd chosen was so extremely clever.

One night, he was wrapped in a threadbare cloak, listening to the snuffling sounds of faerie steeds, of deer and elk, and even the croaks of great riding toads, when a troll woman stopped outside the pen.

"Princeling," she said. Her skin was the rough bluish-gray of river rocks, and she had a wart on her



chin, from which three golden hairs grew. “You are the youngest of Eldred’s spawn, are you not?”

Cardan blinked up from the hay. “Go away,” he told her as imperiously as he could manage.

That made her laugh. “I ought to saddle you and ride you around the gardens, teach you some manners.”

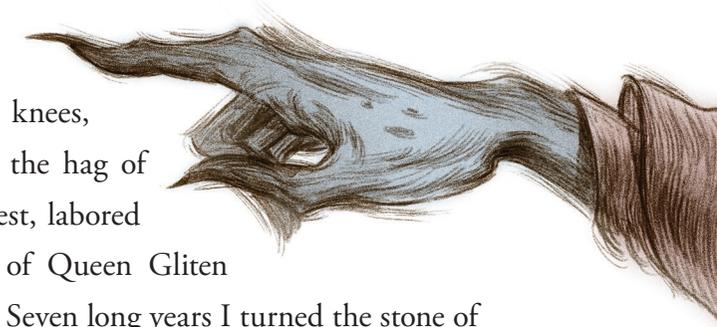
He was scandalized. “You’re not supposed to talk to me that way. My father is the High King.”

“Better run and tell him,” she said, then raised her eyebrows and ran fingers over her long golden wart hairs, curling and uncurling them. “No?”

Cardan said nothing. He pressed his cheek against the straw, felt the scratch of it against his skin. His tail twitched anxiously. He knew the High King had no interest in him. Perhaps a brother or sister might intercede on his behalf if they were nearby, and if it amused them to do so, but there was no telling whether it would.

His mother would have slapped the troll woman and ordered her off. But his mother wasn’t coming. And trolls were dangerous. They were strong, hot-tempered, and practically invulnerable. Sunlight turned them to stone—but only until the next nightfall.

The troll woman pointed an accusatory finger at him. “I, Aslog of the West, who brought the giant



Girda to her knees, who outwitted the hag of the Fallow Forest, labored in the service of Queen Gliten for seven years. Seven long years I turned the stone of her gristmill and ground wheat so fine and pure that loaves of it were famed all over Elfhome. I was promised land and a title at the end of those seven years. But on the last night, she tricked me into moving away from the millstone and forfeiting the bargain. I came here for justice. I stood before Eldred in the place of the penitent and asked for succor. But your father turned me away, princeling. And do you know why? Because he does not wish to interfere with the lower Courts. But tell me, child, what is the purpose of a High King who will not interfere?”

Cardan was uninterested in politics but well acquainted with his father’s indifference. “If you think I can help you, I can’t. He doesn’t like me, either.”

The troll woman—Aslog of the West, he supposed—scowled down at Cardan. “I am going to tell you a story,” she said finally. “And then I will ask you what meaning you find in the tale.”

“Another one? Is this about Queen Gliten, too?”

“Save your wit for your reply.”



“And if I don’t have an answer?”

She smiled down at him with no small amount of menace. “Then I will teach you an entirely different lesson.”

He thought about calling out to a servant. A groom might be close by, but he had endeared himself to none of them. And what could they do, anyway? Better to humor her and listen to her stupid tale.

“Once upon a time,” Aslog told him, “there was a boy with a wicked tongue.”

Cardan tried not to snort. Despite being a little afraid of her, despite knowing better, he had a tendency toward levity at the worst possible moments.

She went on. “He would say whatever awful thought came into his mind. He told the baker her bread was full of stones, told the butcher he was as ugly as a turnip, and told his own brothers and sisters they were of no more use than the mice who lived in their cupboard and nibbled the crumbs of the baker’s bad bread. And, though the boy was quite handsome, he scorned all the village maidens, saying they were as dull as toads.”

Cardan couldn’t help it. He laughed.

She gave him a dour look.

“I like the boy,” he said with a shrug. “He’s funny.”

“Well, no one else did,” she told him. “In fact, he annoyed the village witch so much that she cursed him. He behaved as though he had a heart of stone, so she gave him one. He would feel nothing—not fear, nor love, nor delight.

“Thereafter, the boy carried something heavy and hard inside his chest. All happiness fled from him. He could find no reason to get up in the morning and even less reason to go to bed at night. Even mockery gave him no pleasure anymore. Finally, his mother told him it was time to go into the world and make his fortune. Perhaps there he would find a way to break the curse.

“And so the boy set out with nothing in his pockets but a crust of the baker’s much-maligned bread. He walked and walked until he came to a town. Although he felt neither joy nor sorrow, he did feel hunger, and that was enough reason to look for work. The boy found a tavernkeeper willing to





hire him on to help bottle the beer he brewed. In exchange, the boy would get a bowl of soup, a place by the fire, and a few coins. He labored three days, and when he was finished, the tavernkeeper paid him three copper pennies.

“As he was about to take his leave, the boy’s sharp tongue found something cutting to say, but since his stone heart allowed him to find no amusement in it, for the first time he swallowed his cruel words. Instead, he asked if the man knew anyone else with work for him.

“You’re a good lad, so I will tell you this, although perhaps it would be better if I didn’t,” said the tavernkeeper. “The baron is looking to marry off his daughter. She is rumored to be so fearsome that no man can spend three nights in her chambers. But if you do, you’ll win her hand—and her dowry.”

“I fear nothing,” said the boy, for his heart of stone made any feeling impossible.”



Cardan interrupted. “The moral is obvious. The boy wasn’t rude to the innkeeper, so he was given a quest. And because he was rude to the witch, he got cursed. So the boy shouldn’t be rude, right? Rude boys get punished.”

“Ah, but if the witch hadn’t cursed him, he would never have been given the quest, either, would he? He’d be back home, sharpening his wit on some poor candlemaker,” said the troll woman, pointing a long finger at him. “Listen a little longer, princeling.”

Cardan had grown up in the palace, a wild thing to be cosseted by courtiers and scowled at by the High King. No one much liked him, and he told himself he cared little for anyone else. And if he sometimes thought about how he might do something to win his father’s favor, something to make the Court respect him and love him, he kept that to himself. He certainly asked no one to tell him stories, and yet he found it was nice to be told one. He kept that to himself, too.

Aslog cleared her throat and began speaking again. “When the boy presented himself to the baron, the old man looked upon him with sadness. ‘Spend three nights with my daughter, showing no fear, and you shall marry her and inherit all that I have. But I



warn you, no man has managed it, for she is under a curse.’

“I fear nothing,’ the boy told him.

“More’s the pity,’ said the baron.

“By day, the boy did not see the baron’s daughter. As evening came on, the servants bathed him and fed him an enormous meal of roasted lamb, apples, leeks, and bitter greens. Having no dread of what was ahead, he ate his fill, for never had he had a finer meal, and then rested in anticipation of the night ahead.

“Finally, the boy was led to a chamber with a bed at the center and a clawed-up couch tucked into a corner. Outside, he heard one of the servants whispering about what a tragedy it was for such a handsome lad to die so young.”

Cardan was leaning forward now, utterly captivated by the tale.

“He waited as the moon rose outside the window. And then something came in: a monster covered in fur, her mouth filled with three rows of razor-sharp teeth. All other suitors had run from her in terror or attacked her in rage. But the boy’s heart of stone kept him from feeling anything but curiosity. She gnashed her teeth, waiting for him to show fear. When he did not, but rather climbed into the bed, she followed,

curling up at the end of it like an enormous cat.

“The bed was very fine, much more comfortable than sleeping on the floor of a tavern. Soon both were asleep. When the boy woke, he was alone.

“The household rejoiced when he emerged from the bedchamber, for no one had ever made it through a single night with the monster. The boy spent the day strolling through the gardens, but although they were glorious, he was troubled that no happiness could yet touch him. On the second night, the boy brought his evening meal with him to the bedchamber and set it on the floor. When the monster came in, he waited for her to eat before he took his portion. She roared in his face, but again he didn’t flee, and when he went to the bed, she followed.

“By the third night, the household was in a state of giddy anticipation. They dressed the boy like a bridegroom and planned for a wedding at dawn.”





Cardan heard something in her voice that suggested that wasn't how things were going to go at all. "And then what?" he demanded. "Didn't he break the curse?"

"Patience," said Aslog the troll woman. "The third night, the monster came straight over, nuzzling him with a furred jaw. Perhaps she was excited, knowing that in mere hours her curse might be broken. Perhaps she felt some affection for him. Perhaps the curse compelled her to test his mettle. Whatever the reason, when he didn't move away, she butted her head playfully against his chest. But she didn't know her own strength. His back slammed against the wall, and he felt something crack in his chest."

"His heart of stone," said Cardan.

"Yes," said the troll woman. "A great swell of love for his family swept over him. He felt a longing for the village of his childhood. And he was filled with a strange and tender love for her, his cursed bride.

"'You have cured me,' he told her, tears wetting his cheeks.

"Tears that the monster took for a sign of fear.

"Her enormous jaws opened, teeth gleaming. Her great nose twitched, scenting prey. She could hear the



speeding of his heart. In that moment, she sprang on him and tore him to pieces."

"That's a terrible story," Cardan said, outraged. "He would have been better off if he'd never left home. Or if he'd said something cruel to the tavern-keeper. There is no point to your tale, unless it is that nothing has any meaning at all."

The troll woman peered down at him. "Oh, I think there's a lesson in it, princeling: A sharp tongue is no match for a sharp tooth."