## PRAISE FOR *THE HARM TREE*:

"A country on the brink of war, and two best friends turned enemies in a world where nothing is as it seems, Edwards has created a rich, compelling epic that will leave even the most hungry fantasy reader sated."
MELINDA SALISBURY

"*The Harm Tree* is absolutely phenomenal. I was gripped from the very beginning and could not put it down. Rose Edwards magnificently navigates you through a kingdom on the brink of war and takes you on a journey filled with fear, grief and power. You fall in love with characters and experience their journey as your own. Brilliantly written and absolutely amazing!"
CHARLOTTE ROTHWELL

"It pulls you in quietly but fiercely, like a rip tide . . . It's sinister, it's beautiful, it's fun, it's exciting, it's terrible, it's haunting . . . you never find yourself quite where you expect, and yet you're always somewhere fascinating and right. The plot feels a bit like riding the outer edge of a whirlpool, slowly circling at first and then faster and faster as you converge on the point of no return."
HARI RAI

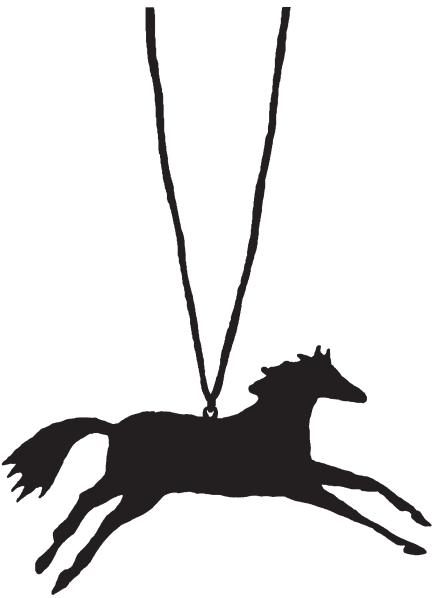
"Very gripping and unputdownable . . . I hope Rose writes more because her writing is so good."
RACHAEL

"Rose Edwards' debut is STUNNING. At the collision of the old ways and the new ways two best friends find themselves manipulated on opposite sides of a war. Beautifully crafted from Norse inspired roots, I enjoyed every second of Ebba's and Torny's journeys. There is never a right side. And this beautiful [story] explores so much of life, faith, love and loss. Keep an eye on Rose. She's going to go a long way."
BETH KNIGHT

"I was hooked from the beginning and stayed invested until the very end. No irks or qualms ever, just a great story with fantastic characters. Not to mention depth and a thought-through history and context to develop her world on top of (and blimey, is Rose Edwards good at world building). Really really REALLY good."
AMYJD

"Your mission is to pick up a copy of *The Harm Tree* and immerse yourself in its unique, complex world . . . Grab your sword, change your horse's shoes and get ready for a journey you'll never forget."
JAMES PHOENIX

ROSE EDWARDS



# The HARM TREE

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*To my parents*
*Eddy & Diana*
*who told me 'just do it'*

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## THE TELLERS

**Torny Vafrisdota:** sent away from home, dreams of being a warrior

**Ebba Rathnasdota:** 'not from round here', dreams of going home

## FRITHBERG AND THE PLAINS

**Aud:** works at the wayhouse, suspiciously good with a rolling pin

**Kelda:** serving girl at the wayhouse, keeps her hands clean

**Jarle:** stable hand at the wayhouse, tells dangerous stories

**Berger Sorleyson:** runs the Frithberg wayhouse, doesn't like trouble

**Lord Frithrun:** the lord of Frithberg, relies on his reputation

**Big Hakon:** one of Lord Frithrun's warriors, likes a drink

**Spraki Spitnails:** Lord Frithrun's skald, doesn't like visitors

**Berger Dagomar:** a wealthy merchant, looking to expand his market

**Sebson:** a generous horse breeder, and his sister, Lana Sebsdota

## SOUTHERNERS

**Berengar of Vellsberg:** Erland's protégé, likes lists

**Medard:** a soldier from the Southern Empire with a sunny disposition

**Abelhard:** a soldier from the Southern Empire, doesn't speak Northern

**The Southern Emperor:** ruler of the Southern Empire, Arngard's neighbour

**Theogault of Vellsberg:** Lord of Vellsberg on the Vells river, the border between Arngard and the Southern Empire

## HILL COUNTRY

**Galen:** veteran of the war, a man on a mission

**Roaki:** Galen's comrade, lost his luck

**Fenn:** thrall from beyond the Iron Sea, owned by Thorkel

**Thorkel:** veteran of the war, misses the old days

**Laugi:** Thorkel's second in command, adapts quickly

## ELDINGHOPE, BIRCHHOLD AND THE EASTERN FARMLANDS

**Uncle Ulf Berrson:** Ebba's uncle, master of Eldinghope

**Cousin Rafe:** Ulf's son and heir

**Arf Berrson:** Ebba's father, Ulf's brother; died when Ebba was young

**Rathna:** Ebba's mother, outlander; rescued from Raiders by Arf Berrson

**Stig Rathnason:** Ebba's brother, following in his father's footsteps

**Mistress Una:** Birchold's village healer

**Nanna and Hella:** Mistress Una's helpers

**Raiders:** marauding seafarers, widely feared

## GULLCROFT AND THE NORTH

**Vigdis:** Torny's aunt, Vafri's sister, a Staffbearer

**Vafri the Wanderer:** Torny's father, died at sea when she was young

**Brenna:** Torny's mother

**Sklep:** Torny's stepfather

**Thorpe Thorpeson:** pigherd

**Ranvig:** Staffbearer, not to be crossed

**Drifa:** Staffbearer, a scour

**Carr of Hellingap:** warrior, wants peace

## PALACE OF SUNACRE

**King Kolrand 'the Cub':** Arn's youngest son and successor, pays tribute to the Southern Emperor

**Prester Grimulf:** warrior-priest of the White God, raised in the Southern Empire

**Erland of Hellingap:** captain in charge of the Southern soldiers

**The Bearskins:** elite regiment under Kolrand's command, known for their discipline

## THE WAR OF THE ARNSONS

**King Arn 'the Good':** Uniter of Arngard, whose murder started the war

**Prince Geir Arnson:** Arn's eldest son; murdered his father on Bloodnight, killed at the battle of Hellingap

**The Slipskins:** Prince Geir's warriors, known for their loyalty; hunted after the deaths of Prince Geir and the Sungiven

**Sungiven:** hero of the Staffbearers, who rallied the Northern forces and rode against Kolrand at the battle of Frithberg

## GODS AND SPIRITS

**Wise One:** Arngard god of death, winter and war

**Cornmaiden:** Arngard goddess of the sun and the harvest

**Staffbearers:** magic-workers of the Arngard gods

**White God:** god of the Southern Empire

**Blessed Walpurgis:** a saint in the White God's religion, worshipped in place of the Cornmaiden in Arngard

**Harrower:** ancient spirit of Sleeper's Howe

**Luck:** spirit that keeps a person from harm, everyone has one

**Follower:** spirit that appears in dreams to prophecy

**Scour:** someone who sees visions

**Spirit Walkers:** shamans from beyond the Iron Sea, who can see and converse with spirits

**Spirit Rider:** a spirit that has attached itself to a person, invited or otherwise; may try to possess its victim for its own ends

The Iron Sea
Far Isle
Gullcroft
N
W
E
S
Drovers Road
Raiders
Floodlands
Hellingap
Sleeper's Howe
Eldinghope
Drovers Road
Hill Country
The Eastern Farmlands
Ridgemouth
The Ridge
Birchold
Grain Road
Frithberg on the Plains
War Road
To the Royal Palace of Sunacre
To Vellsberg in the Southern Empire

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

The names of people and places in Arngard are loosely based on the Norse language. The letter 'j' is pronounced as a 'y', so the name Jarle is pronounced 'Yarle'. People are known by their first names, while their second names are patronymic, meaning 'son/daughter of X'. So Torny Vafrisdota is Torny, daughter of Vafri (her father). In rare cases, maternal names are used: Ebba and her brother Stig are called Rathnasdota and Rathnason, after their mother Rathna.

"Nine years ago, in the year of the eclipse, which was followed by pestilence, Arn, King and Uniter of Arngard, departed this life on the ninth day of the ninth month, which the heathens call Bloodmonth, it being their season for sacrifice. It is said that in the sacred grove at Sunacre on Bloodnight, Arn's own son, Geir, strung his father from the idolatrous tree, slit his throat, and declared himself king. This I cannot vouch for, but it is true that thereafter the King's youngest son, Kolrand, defied his brother's treachery, and the two princes waged war on one another, until there was not a mother in the whole kingdom who had not lost a son. Here in the Southern Empire, it is said that the sun sank the night of Arn's death, and did not rise again until his son Kolrand sat upon the throne and swore fealty to our Emperor and our Lord God, whom they call the White, and promised to fill his war-torn land with the Lord's light. But there are in Arngard those who cling to their idols, and they say the sun rose because a great warrior rode out of the North to rid the land of the usurper, and though she was defeated, yet she will come again."

*History of Arngard*
Berengar of Vellsberg

"To the Holy Patriarch and Emperor, Ruler of the Southern Empire, by the grace of God, I send greetings and thanks. That Your Holiness should ask further correspondence with me, most lowly of your flock, both honours and shames me. For I must report that, despite King Kolrand's pious rule, and your many gifts to our humble mission, the True Faith remains but a candle flickering in the midst of darkness. Recently I have come to fear that the darkness again gathers, takes shape, begins to move against the will of God. I beg, with the blessing of my King, that you send me men, believers all, to trace this darkness to its source, and cut it out."

Letter to His Imperial Majesty,
Emperor of the Southern Empire,
from Grimulf, Prester of Sunacre

# Part One: FRITHBERG

# One
# GOLD HORSE

## TORNY'S TALE

*A gift exchanged between allies, a reminder of oaths*

Winter is a white wolf with frost on its breath, and a thick coat that darkens the sun. That's what my father's sister Vigdis told me when I was young, and we were waiting for him to come home. Now I'm the one who's missing from the hearth, but no one's waiting for me.

My body is still heavy with sleep, and the first breath of the white wolf has chilled my face. In the dark of the attic, I squint at the bedroll next to me, where Ebba is curled up. I reach out and shake her shoulder. Her straight dark brows draw together over her brown nose.

"Wake up."

Ebba groans and rolls away from me. "Go'way, Torny."

"It's Grainmarket, remember?"

"Uuuuurgh." Ebba drags the blanket over her head, but she'll get up now. I pull my dress on under my covers, crawl past the other bedrolls, and open the trapdoor. The bedroll closest to the trapdoor is empty – even this early, Aud is already up. I slide down the steps and wait in the corridor below, combing my hair with my fingers, trying to plait it. It's springy, almost impossible to tame, white-blonde and short. Before they sent me to Frithberg, my stepfather shaved my head like I was a yearling lamb. I can still feel myself burning with the indignity of it. Now I'm sixteen, I wonder if he'd dare do the same.

Probably.

Still, I've learnt a few tricks since.

Ebba joins me, feet first. She's shorter than me, and with her feet on the planks the top of her head barely reaches my nose. She has brown-black hair that falls in waves, eyes like autumn leaves, and unlike me she actually suits the plain woollen smocks we both wear. Skirts make me itch, I feel like a scarecrow in them, but Ebba's always neat and pretty, even in rough homespun. Used to be I thought I was the only one who noticed her prettiness, but recently I've seen others following her with their eyes. It shouldn't bother me, but it does. Ebba hurts easy, and I don't want her hurt.

I rub my left arm, where a bruise is still tender under my wool shirt. That scuffle with the boothboys down Smithgate left me a few keepsakes to remember it by.

Ebba turns so that I can braid her hair, laughing quietly at my ridiculous plait, wonky as well as short. "Lambtail," she says, tugging it.

"Give over," I say, nudging her. Her hair is soft between my fingers. She's forgotten her hair-tie, so I take my whalebone pin

from my breast, twist her braid up, and pin it there. She turns and smiles at me.

"Come on," I say.

It's just before dawn, and the wayhouse is quiet. We tiptoe past Berger Sorleyson's door. He runs the wayhouse, and we work for him. These rooms are for richer guests; when the house is full for the summer fairs we hear their talk coming up through the boards under our bedrolls. This morning the only sound is Sorleyson's snoring. The ordinary folk sleep in the dining hall on the other side of the kitchen. Frithberg's a market town, with plenty of visitors, and the Grainmarket will bring in more than usual.

In the kitchen, Aud is kneeling beside the huge hearth, getting the fire started. Her mousey hair is hidden under her grey kerchief, and a sturdy apron covers her grey dress. Aud's older than us. She runs the kitchen for Sorleyson, and she never talks idly. She looks up as we come in. "Up already, girls?"

"We're goin to market," says Ebba, no trace of her sleepiness left in her dark eyes. "Are you wantin anythin?"

Aud shakes her head. "Just be back in time to help at noon. We're going to be busy."

Ebba bobs down to give Aud a quick hug. Aud tuts, but her usually stern face softens a bit.

"Thank you," I say. "For giving us the morning together."

Aud shoos us out the door into the yard. "Don't be late," is all she says.

Outside the air is cold. Lazy stampings come from the stables across the yard, but there's no sign of Jarle the stable hand. We slip out onto Astgate. Frithberg's main street is bustling. Astgate leads from the town gates to the marketplace, and the

The grey wolfhound growls at me as I approach.

I reach out and watch in surprise as the hound lunges, its fangs closing over my wrist. I yank back, the pain in my ribs winding me. The hound's teeth have left bright red scratches on my skin. The hound stands over the young man, growling a warning.

No dog has dared come near me all winter.

I guess she really is gone.

I look past the hound to the man. Blood and freckles stand out against his white skin, and he's obviously in pain, but he's pushing himself back against the steps, away from me.

My hand drops to my side.

This is what it's going to be like, isn't it?

"Fetch! Down, boy!"

Ebba runs up beside me and crouches down face to face with the hound.

"Fetch, sit." She pushes the hound out of her way, but gently, the same gentleness she showed me. "Rafe, don't move. I need to see your wounds. Berengar?"

"Yes?" The young soldier is beside me.

"I need you to get Torny out of sight. People will be lookin for her."

The soldier and I exchange glances.

"Everyone will be looking for her," he says. "There is nowhere far enough to save her from her people, or ours."

Ebba spins on her heel, coming up to stand face to face with him. Her eyes flash.

"Berengar of Vellsberg!" she snaps. "I did *not* just save my friend to have her torn to pieces or executed, d'you understand?"

The soldier's black brows knot together.

"It is not so simple as —"

"Do I make myself clear?"

"But —"

"Do I?"

I can't stop myself. The laugh bubbles up from my stomach, and even though it hurts, I can't hold it back. They stand and stare at me as I laugh and cry all at once, the tears and the pain and the love all mixed up in me till I can't tell which is which.

"I'm sorry," I hiccup. "I'm sorry."

After a moment, the soldier turns to Ebba. "Erland is below," he says. "I will tell him."

"Are you sure?"

They both look at the prester's body.

"I think I should tell him," says Ebba. "But you get him."

I help Berengar roll the prester onto his back and close his eyes. We cross his arms over his bloody chest, and Berengar goes to find his captain. I put the golden helm and the golden torque on the ground beside the body.

Fetch still growls when I come near Ebba and Rafe, so I slip past them, through the blackened doors and into the fire-kissed kirk.

It's dark and warm, the blackened wood impossibly still standing, although it creaks around me. I wonder for a moment if it might collapse, but find I don't really care if it does. Everything inside is dead. The gold offerings are all gone, and only the pale outstretched arms of the White God's image hang in the darkness.

I walk up to it, looking at its long face, its hollow eyes.

"I'm done with gods," I say to it. "I don't know what help you

gave Ebba, or even if it was you. But I know it only worked because it was her. She's the one who saved me, not you."

There's nothing. No hum, no clash of swords, no sense that anything's listening. To be honest, it's a relief.

"Torny."

I turn to Ebba's voice, her shape outlined in the open door. Gladly, I go towards my salvation.

Ebba explains to Erland why he can't kill me. It sounds thin, even to me.

She talks about prices, and how sometimes they have to be paid. That sometimes they aren't the soldier's price, death for death, but the price of the living. The price paid daily, so that there can be peace.

Which side are you on? she asks. The side of order, or the side of ash?

Erland looks at me. I wonder if he wants me to fall to my knees and beg, but my ribs warn against sudden movements, and anyway, I'd be lying.

If he decided to kill me now, I don't think I'd fight.

But instead he looks away, to the blackened kirk, and the steps where Grimulf lies.

"How did he die?" he asks.

"By fire," says Ebba. "Martyrdom by fire," and Erland meets her unblinking gaze, shaken.

And I think, Ebba argues for peace, but when she had to, she chose the soldier's price too. She fought. And she would do it again.

"There's a band of townsfolk holed up in the wayhouse," Erland

says to her. “Mistress Aud wasn’t exactly pleased to see me, but I think you’ll get a better welcome.”

They don’t take me there, of course. There aren’t going to be any welcomes for me no matter where I go. They hide me in a chicken coop round the back of the stables.

I sit in the hay and the mess, and the chickens fuss and scratch as they go in and out, and I begin to remember. Fragments come back to me, as if I’m being let back into my own head. Just flashes – aces, blows, voices I can’t quite hear – but the feelings that come with them make me regret Erland’s mercy. They fill my skin like poison. I want to vomit them out of me, to scream and spew until I’m empty. Several times I start up, determined to leave, to find someone who will run me through without hesitation. But each time I freeze, gripped by a fear so intense I think my heart will burst.

Finally, long after sunset, someone comes for me. They knock on the side of the coop, and I wriggle out of it, gasping at the now constant pain in my side.

Aud stands there, in breeches and shirt. Her mouse-coloured hair is cut short.

“You owe me a pair of trousers and a sheepskin cloak,” she says.

And then she holds me while I cry.

She doesn’t mind. The stables are warm. The horses in their stalls stand quietly, and that’s new too. I’m used to them bucking whenever I’m near. There’s a bed made up by the fire, and a steaming barrel.

Jarle’s asleep in the bed, his face bandaged.

“What happened?” I ask, although the answer scares me.

“He got cut,” says Aud. “One of the Slipskins. Poor boy might

not be able to rely on his looks so much anymore." She puts an arm around my stiff shoulders. "Come on."

She pours water from the cauldron into the barrel. It's already quite full.

"In you get," she says.

The steam smells like hops and summer. I undress, and Aud tuts when she sees the angry red bruise across my ribs.

"Still," she says. "Could be worse."

The water turns my pale skin pink. It burns. Aud hands me a hunk of soap.

"If you drop it," she says, "you dive for it."

I crouch in the hot water, soaping every part of me I can reach. Aud does my hair, avoiding the bump above my left ear.

"Why are you being kind to me?" I ask.

Her hands, tangled in my hair, pause for a moment.

"I've done terrible things," I say, and my whole body shakes as another flash sears through me. I can't meet her eyes.

"So did Suniva," says Aud quietly. "Rinse."

She pushes down on my shoulders, and I dip my hair under the water. Behind my screwed up eyes I see a woman with hair like corn.

"She was the Sungiven," I say when I surface, "wasn't she?"

Aud nods, holding out a towel. I climb out of the barrel and scrub myself as vigorously as I can. I don't want to be cold ever again.

A smaller cauldron hangs over the fire now, and when I'm dressed again in some breeches and a shirt, Aud hands me a bowl of stew with dumplings.

"Suniva wasn't like you, Torny," Aud says. "She was a real warrior, trained and recognised, though not always respected. She helped guard the Staffbearer's sanctuary at Sunacre. She

knew Vigdis and Geir. She had a son a few years before the war, and she decided to raise him away from court. It was only when Geir went north to Hellingap that she decided to join him. And I followed her."

I look at her in surprise. "But you're —"

"Too young?" Aud grins. "I was sixteen when I followed Suniva to Hellingap. We arrived the night before the battle."

"And you fought?"

"For what it was worth," says Aud. "It was a short battle. We scattered north, and the Slipskins took Geir's body into the hills. We regrouped. Vigdis was the highest ranking Staffbearer left, though not the oldest, and she had a plan. So we followed her."

"When did you find out what she was going to do?"

"She asked Suniva if she thought it would work. Whether warriors would follow a god. Suniva said she thought they would follow anyone who gave them hope." Aud smiles again, but this time it's sad. "And that person was her. The few Slipskins that joined us had relied on their prince and Thorkel, and without their brothers they were lost. Suniva was a leader. She rallied the retreat. She made sure everyone who joined had training, and she punished anyone who looted or attacked the villagers."

I feel that horrible sinking feeling in my stomach.

"But then they did the ritual."

"Were you there?"

She shakes her head. "No one was allowed to witness it. When she came back, she was glorious. She seemed to shine, even at night. She was more beautiful than I'd ever seen her." Aud closes her eyes. "But she was harder too. She could fill you with righteousness, but she couldn't remember your name. Even those

of us who'd known her for years became unimportant. She was still just, but she became less and less human. She killed more and more often."

Aud looks up at me, and I'm amazed to see tears in her eyes.

"I took Jarle when she didn't recognise him anymore," she says. "I took him and I left, and then, when it was all over, I brought him back here, and wore skirts, and worked for Sorleyson, and every day I lived alongside the people whose fathers and brothers and sons had died, either for or against her. So it's not hard to be kind to you, Torny. I know what was done to you."

I look from her to the sleeping Jarle and back again, and put down my bowl.

And I say the thing that's scared me the most since my fragmented memory started coming back to me.

"I think I killed Vigdis."

Aud doesn't gasp, or pull away from me. She just says, "Why do you think that?"

So I tell her about the ritual, about Far Isle and the stone pillar and the labyrinth, and how Fenn was the only one who tried to save me, and how Ranvig killed him. I tell her how I stepped outside myself, and how the Harrower stepped in. And how there's a blankness, a gap, between the Harrower entering me and when I woke up in the boat with Laugi.

How Vigdis and the others were never mentioned again, except for when Laugi told Carr that they'd gone before us, open-eyed, and showed us their staffs around the curse pole.

Aud listens, her face calm.

"You didn't kill your mother, Torny," she says. "Laugi may have, but not you."

"But how can you know?"

Aud sighs. "Going open-eyed was a ritual the Staffbearers practised," she says. "A knowing death. If she wished, a Staffbearer could choose to take her own life. It was one of their secrets, the ingredient that allowed you passage from life to death."

Aud puts her arm around my shoulders.

"I can't take your doubt away," she says. "But it seems to me you wouldn't have killed Vigdis. Even after months of control, the Harrower couldn't make you kill Ebba, could she?"

I think of that moment, when my blade hovered at Ebba's throat an my muscles strained against each other, unsure which will to obey.

"No," I say. "She couldn't."

"Then I don't think after a few moments she could have made you kill your mother."

"But I didn't protect her."

Aud strokes my hair back from my forehead. "Vigdis didn't protect you either," she says sadly. "You could worry at this for years, Torny. For the rest of your life, if you like. But you may never know. All you can do is trust yourself."

She makes up another bed beside the fire, and lies down beside me in it, her arm around my waist. She falls asleep almost at once, but I lie there, each breath grating, listening to the horses snort and stamp, watching the rafters flicker in the firelight.

I miss Fenn. I miss him curled asleep beside me, and I wish I could have seen him in life the way I saw him in my visions, well-fed and happy. I miss Galen. I wish I could have helped him heal from the wounds of the past, from the curse of his second, unwanted Luck.

I know I'm going to miss Ebba most of all, and it seems unfair, because she's still whole and healthy, and I should have more time with her. But I know how this is going to go. She's a hero, and I can't pretend to myself that I can stay here with Aud and Jarle for long. Anyway, she can't give me what I hoped.

I get up, not as stealthily as I'd like, but Aud just rolls over and starts to snore. I take her cloak, her boots and her knife. Guess I'll just have to owe her again.

I don't know how I'm going to get away, but I can't bear to stay another day in the wreckage I caused.

I open the stable door, and look into Ebba's face.

Her hand is still outstretched to knock on the door.

"Oh good," she says. "You're ready."

I look past her. Three horses stand ready, Berengar checking their girths.

"What's this?" I say.

"You can't stay in the hen coop," she says. "Someone's goin to come lookin for their eggs sooner or later."

"You can't come with me," I say. "It'll be dangerous."

"It'll be more dangerous alone."

"I thought Berengar was Erland's armsman?"

"He's got a new one now. Rafe will help him manage Eldinghope."

I glare at her.

"Torny," she says, "I only just found you. I en't goin to lose you again." She takes my hand. "I en't sayin you gotta stick with us for always. But at least let us get you on your way."

There's only one way I can think of to make her understand why she can't do this.

"Ebba," I say, "I love you."

She puts her arms around my shoulders an squeezes.

"I know," she says. "I saw. I know I can't be your lover, an I know you might not like seein me wi Berengar. But I love you too, Torny, even if it's not the way you want. An I will always love you. So please let me come."

I hug her back. I can't think of anything else.

"You've grown," I say into her hair.

"You too," she says.

"We must leave now," says Berengar. "Can you ride?"

I let Ebba go and approach the horse whose reins he holds. I hold out my hands, and the soft white nose wrinkles and snuffs at my palms. Hero whickers softly, an I turn my face into her mane to hide my tears.

"Yes," I say.

"I can't," says Ebba cheerfully. "I'll ride wi you. You're lighter'n Berengar."

"Insolent Northerner."

"Snotty Southerner."

"Are you going to be like this all the way?" I ask, climbing into the saddle. "Ow."

"Is it your ribs?" asks Ebba. "We'd better walk instead of trot."

"You mean it'll take longer?"

"It is better to discern the path of right-thinking, than to rush onto the thoroughfare of ignorance."

"What does that mean?"

"Shut up you two, we need to leave quietly."

So we shut up, and we leave. At the broken gate a large captain and his red-headed armsman throw us salutes, and Berengar

salutes back. A huge grey wolfhound by the almsman's side whuffs softly as Ebba an I pass, but doesn't follow us.

The west is still dark, but the breeze that comes out of it is the first soft breath of spring. It carries lost things in it.

I turn my face into it, Ebba's arms around my waist.

*Aimu,* says Fenn's voice in my ear.

The world breathes.

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