

VOLUME ONE

Thornfield

— ◆ —
A BORROWED NAME

KAI

ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Thornfield

VOLUME ONE

A Borrowed Name



KAI

For adult readers

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A detailed, symmetrical floral border in a dark, muted green and brown palette. It features climbing vines, small white flowers, and large, textured leaves, framing the central text area.

THORNFIELD

PROLOGUE

The Ash and Lantern

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Rain ticked through three old faults in the roof of the Ash and Lantern. Mara Venn had set bowls beneath two before the first supper pot came off the hook. The third leak fell behind the settle near the western wall, where the rushes had gone dark in a circle and old Brannick kept moving his boots whenever the damp reached them.

Nobody complained. The barley had needed rain for a month, and most of the room had barley in the ground somewhere beyond the shuttered windows. Rain capes and open cloaks steamed from pegs beside the hearth. Loose trouser legs dried dark around field boots; short work vests and crossed wraps left shoulders, arms, and stomachs bare to the warmth. The smell of damp linen and oiled canvas lay thick over onion broth, woodsmoke, horse, and the sharp yeast of the small beer Mara had drawn before dusk. Outside, wheels ground through the road mud at long intervals. Each wagon announced itself first in the cups, a faint trembling along the shelves, then passed the inn in a wash of rain unless the driver saw the lanterns and decided there were worse places to lose an hour.

The Ash and Lantern had stood beside the Blackmere road longer than anyone in the village could prove. One end of the common room had settled low enough that a round cup would creep toward the hearth if set carelessly on the table. The oldest beam bore the notches of five generations of Venn children, though Mara's grandfather had planed away the uppermost names during an argument about smoke damage. Travelers sometimes called the place crooked. The village men sat with one boot hooked around a table leg and let them. The young gentleman in the blue coat had taken the driest chair.

He'd been in it since the middle of the afternoon, when he'd returned out of the rain alone and put a silver round on the counter before Mara could ask whether he wanted food or lodging. His long blue traveling coat was too fine for the road. It had no sleeves and fell open from shoulder to thigh, split at the sides for riding. Water had darkened it almost to black across the shoulders, but the silver stitching along its edges had not run. Beneath it, a short ivory vest lay open over his chest, its edges held by two fine silver chains and his stomach bare above loose dark trousers. His road boots were soft leather despite the mud. He wore no badge, livery, or stamped clasp that told Mara whose silver he was spending.



The room had made space. By supper, nobody shared the long table with him.

He had the face of a church-window saint after the painter had learned spite. Pale skin, fine bones, long black hair tied at the nape with a ribbon that cost more than Tobin's best rain cape. The open cut of his clothes showed a lean, carefully trained body, and he carried it with the easy straight-backed balance of a boy taught from childhood that every room would make space for him.

The room had made space. By supper, nobody shared the long table with him.

Tobin came through the kitchen door carrying four bowls along his left arm and a fifth in his hand. He was eighteen that spring, tall enough to look older until somebody spoke quickly to him. A sleeveless linen wrap crossed his chest and tied beneath his ribs. Loose work trousers ended midway down his calves, and a broad apron covered their front without hiding the narrow strip of stomach above its knot. Orders stayed in his head when they were given one at a time. He knew which carters wanted salt before their stew and which old men had to soak their bread. When the room grew loud, he returned to the kitchen and stood beside the flour chest until the voices separated again.

His mother had done the same work before the fever took her. For the month since the burial, Tobin had worn her old key cord looped twice around his wrist. There were no keys on it. Mara had watched him check for them each morning and had never told him to put the cord away.

He set Brannick's bowl before him, then crossed to the two brothers from the south farm. The last bowl went to the young gentleman. Tobin placed it carefully in the clear space beside the man's wine cup.

The gentleman examined the stew. "Is this the meat portion?"

"Yes, sir. Lamb."

"I can see that it's lamb. I asked whether this was the meat portion."

Tobin turned toward Mara. She was drawing ale for a cooper at the bar, close enough to hear and too far to save him without making the saving plain.

"There's meat in all the bowls," Tobin said. "Yours has more."

The gentleman moved one piece with his spoon. "Then your more is disappointing. Bring bread."

Tobin fetched half a loaf from the board beside the hearth. He had turned away again when the gentleman caught the end of his apron between two fingers.

"You can bring yourself upstairs after the kitchen closes," he said. His voice carried cleanly to the rafters. "Washed, without this sack tied around you. I have coin enough to improve your evening."

The dice stopped under Brannick's cup. At the south table, one of the farm brothers lowered his spoon without taking his eyes from it.

Tobin freed the apron with a short pull. "I don't go upstairs with guests."

"You haven't gone upstairs with me. That was the invitation."

"No, sir."

Tobin returned to the kitchen. His pace stayed even until the door swung shut behind him. A stack of wooden trenchers clattered on the other side, followed by Cook Ressa's low voice and the knock of a ladle against the pot.

The gentleman broke the loaf at its middle. He dipped the softer half into his broth and ate while the room recovered around him. Brannick rattled the dice again. The cooper asked Mara whether the rain would hold through morning, though he had spent sixty years beneath the same sky and knew she couldn't answer. Conversation returned by pieces, each voice pitched lower than before. Near the hearth, the thin boy watched the gentleman eat.

He had arrived before noon on a grain cart and paid for a place in the stable loft with two copper bits worn almost smooth. Straw-colored hair hung into his eyes. His

hands showed beyond the edges of a patched cloak, the wrists narrow enough that Mara could have closed a hand around either with room left over. Beneath the cloak he wore only frayed shorts and worn sandals. He had eaten every scrap of his first bowl, then wiped the wood with his thumb and licked it clean. When Mara gave him a second, he accepted it without thanks and carried both bowls back to the kitchen afterward.

She hadn't asked where he was going. Boys traveling alone gave true answers rarely. His eyes had gone to every door before he chose the chair beside the hearth, where he'd kept a patched cloak around his shoulders all afternoon. Heat brought no color into his face. The young gentleman raised two fingers for wine.

Mara left the cooper with his mug and crossed the room. "You've had the last of the red, and there isn't another bottle."

His gaze moved past her to the shelf. "I can see three."

"Spiced cordial, pear brandy, and lamp oil."

"The cordial."

"It's dear."

He placed another silver round beside the empty bottle. "Then we have found a use for my money."

Mara took the coin. A man could become worse on wine without becoming better sober, and refusing him now would leave the silver on his side of the counter. She brought the cordial with a clean cup. The bottle was meant to last through Harvest Week. He filled to the rim and drank half before tasting it.

The outer door opened on a gust that bent the candle flames. Orren Hale filled the doorway, rain running from his beard onto an oil-darkened mantle worn open over a short work vest. The mantle left his broad arms and much of his chest bare. Mud covered his loose trousers to the knee and his boots past the ankle; his right hand was bare, though the left still wore a work glove. Mara set the cordial down.

Orren searched out Tobin's empty place by the kitchen door. Then he saw the blue coat.

The young gentleman had visited the Ash and Lantern before. On an earlier visit, he drank through an afternoon and left with a merchant's purse that nobody saw him take. When he returned, he asked after Arlen Hale.

Arlen had served tables for Mara in the years before his marriage. He was quick with figures, strong through the shoulders, and too ready to answer mockery with better mockery. By noon on the day after the gentleman's last visit, Arlen was dead.

The magistrate called it a properly witnessed duel. Arlen had carried a borrowed sword and accepted before six men. His widow took their daughter back to Orren's house before the blood had dried between the paving stones.

Orren crossed to the hearth and pulled off his remaining glove. He held both hands toward the fire. Neither trembled. The thin boy shifted farther along the settle to give him room, but Orren remained standing.

"Ale," he said.

Mara drew it. Orren drank at the bar with his back to the room. His mantle dripped steadily onto the boards. The gentleman finished the cordial in his cup and filled it again.

For the next hour, the inn did what inns did when nobody wished to leave and one man had made staying difficult. Supper bowls came back. Ressa banked the kitchen fire. The south farmers argued over a boundary stone with such grave attention that neither had to look toward the blue coat. A wool factor from Briartown tried to begin a song, reached the second verse alone, and took refuge in his beer.

Tobin worked the room. Mara kept him to the tables near the kitchen, but empty cups migrated toward the gentleman until only his remained. When Tobin collected the cordial bottle, the gentleman held it down with two fingers.

"Bring another."

"Mara said there isn't another."

"Mara was mistaken."

"She owns the bottles."

A few people laughed before they could stop. Tobin hadn't made a joke. The sound startled him, and he turned over his shoulder to see what had happened.

The gentleman smiled. "Does she own you too?"

Tobin pulled at the bottle. The gentleman kept two fingers on its neck. "Answer me."

"No."

"Good. We return to my earlier proposal."

Tobin's face tightened. "I told you no."

"You repeated a word. I allowed you time to reconsider it."

He released the bottle, then caught Tobin by the wrist when the boy lifted it. His thumb pressed into the cords beneath Tobin's palm. Tobin stood very still, his empty hand opening and closing beside his apron.

Mara came around the bar. "Take your hand off him."

The gentleman drew Tobin one step closer. "He can answer for himself. Slowly, if that helps." Tobin struck him across the face.

The sound carried farther than the earlier invitation. The gentleman's head turned with it. A red mark rose along his cheek, narrow at the jaw and broad where Tobin's fingers had landed.

Tobin dropped the bottle. It struck the boards without breaking and rolled beneath the table. He pulled against the hand on his wrist.

The gentleman released him. "There. You understood that quickly enough."

Tobin backed toward Mara. His breath came through his mouth, hard enough to lift the linen crossed over his chest.

"Your keeper made excuses for you last time," the gentleman said. "Said your mother had died, as though grief explained the slowness. I asked if she'd been slow too. Mara didn't answer me then either."

The thin boy rose from the settle. He left his cloak behind. His ribs showed beneath skin that had seen too little sun, and the frayed shorts hung from the points of his hips. He crossed the rushes with his hands low and stopped between Tobin and the long table.

"He said no," the thin boy said.

The gentleman touched his reddened cheek. "The room has produced a champion."

"Leave him alone."

"Or what? You'll turn sideways and disappear?"

The thin boy kicked him in the shin. It was a poor kick, delivered in a sandal with a split sole and no room behind it. The gentleman's chair scraped back. The thin boy shoved at his shoulder with both hands, putting his slight weight behind the effort.

The gentleman rose. He was taller by half a head and broader everywhere that mattered. He caught the thin boy by one upper arm and the waistband of his shorts

and threw him aside. The boy struck the end of the settle, folded over it, then slid to his knees among the damp rushes. Orren set down his ale.

He crossed the room with the slow, heavy stride of a man accustomed to lifting things that couldn't help him. The gentleman watched him come. A pleased attention replaced the boredom in his face.

"You've put your hands on enough boys in this house," Orren said.

The gentleman's gaze traveled over Orren's wet mantle and broad chest. "I know you."

"You knew my son."

"Briefly."

Orren's hands curled at his sides. Mara saw the nails bite into his palms. He had promised his daughter-in-law he wouldn't seek this man. Mara had heard him make the promise beside Arlen's grave, with the baby's crying carrying over the wall from the house.

"He told you no," Orren said. "Again and again. You followed him to the market. You called him out before half the town."

"I offered him a fair sum for the service. More than fair, given what he was."

"My boy wasn't a whore to be bought. He had a wife and child at home."

The gentleman picked up his cup. "Well, he should have taken me up on my offer, then. Children are expensive to raise. Now you have to do it." Orren reached for him.

The gentleman moved inside his arms. One hand caught Orren above the elbow. He turned on the ball of his foot, drove his hip across Orren's path, then struck upward with the heel of his other hand. Orren's teeth clapped together. His boots left the floor for the width of a finger.

The gentleman released him at the end of the turn. Orren crashed through the nearest bench and struck the boards on his side. His head bounced once. A cup fell after him and broke against his shoulder.

Mara reached him first and put two fingers beneath Orren's jaw. His pulse beat hard against them. Blood showed along his lower lip, but his eyes remained closed when she called his name.

"Ressa," Mara said. "Blankets. Brannick, help me get him away from the table."

Brannick and the cooper lifted Orren beneath the arms. His heels dragged two clean lines through the rushes before they laid him beside the hearth. Ressa came from the kitchen with folded wool and the thin boy followed her, one arm clamped across his middle.



His breath hadn't changed.

The gentleman straightened one of the silver chains across his vest. His breath hadn't changed.

"He'll wake," he said. "The floor did most of that."

Mara covered Orren and wiped the blood from his mouth. "Go upstairs."

"I paid for supper."

"You ate it. I gave you the best room. Use it. At first light, you leave."

He glanced toward Tobin. Ressa had put the boy behind her near the kitchen door. Tobin held his mother's key cord in one fist.

"Very well," the gentleman said. "I was going to bed in any case."

He climbed the stairs without touching the rail. Every step landed softly despite the drink in him. The door to the best room closed overhead.

Mara locked the cordial in the cupboard. Brannick righted the broken bench and found one leg split along the grain. The south farmers carried it to the wood store

without being asked. Ressa made a paste of comfrey and cold ash for Orren's jaw, though there was little she could do until he woke. The thin boy returned to the settle with his cloak, moving carefully around the place where he'd struck his ribs. Tobin went into the kitchen and began washing bowls.

Mara found him bare-armed at the sink, scrubbing the same wooden bowl long after the grease had gone. Water had soaked the front of his apron and darkened the ties of the wrap across his chest. His mother's cord remained wound around his wrist, dark with dishwater.

"Leave those for morning," Mara said.

"There are six."

"Ressa can do six."

"She does the bread first."

Mara took the bowl from him and put it on the draining board. Tobin's fingers remained curled around the empty space.

"You'll sleep in my room tonight," she said. "I'll take the chair."

"My blanket is upstairs."

"We'll get another."

"Mam made that one."

The servants' rooms occupied the narrow end of the upper passage, beyond the guest rooms and beneath the steepest pitch of the roof. Tobin's door was the last. To reach it, he would have to pass the gentleman's room.

Through the kitchen doorway, Mara saw that the wool factor had left alone despite the rain. Brannick remained. So did the cooper, both south farmers, Ressa, and the thin boy. Orren breathed beneath the blankets by the hearth.

"I'll go with you," she said.

Tobin shook his head. "You have to close the shutters."

"They can wait."

"I can get it."

He picked up the kitchen candle before she could take it. Mara caught his shoulder at the door. Tobin glanced down at her hand, then faced the stairs.

"Straight there and back," she said. "If his door opens, you come down. Leave the blanket."

"Straight there and back," Tobin repeated.

The stair boards complained beneath his steps. He carried the candle close to his chest, lighting the worn plaster a few feet at a time. Mara watched until his feet passed above the beam and the upper darkness took him. She should have gone with him.

The thought arrived while his steps were still moving overhead. Mara put down the towel in her hand and crossed the common room. She had reached the foot of the stairs when the movement above stopped. The best-room door opened.

"No," Tobin said. The word came clearly through the boards.

Mara climbed. The candle struck the wall above her. Wax spattered the plaster, and Tobin made a sound through his teeth. Mara reached the turn in time to see him wrench free of the gentleman's doorway. The linen wrap had been dragged open at one side, one tie hanging loose against his bare stomach. The gentleman held one end of the empty key cord.

Tobin twisted his wrist. The cord slipped from the gentleman's fingers. He pushed with both hands against the blue coat, gained one step, then another. The gentleman caught at his waist. Tobin struck the hand away and ran.

"Help!" he shouted. "Mara! Help me!"

Mara flattened herself against the wall. Tobin came down past her, one hand sliding along the plaster because the stair was too narrow for speed. She caught his arm at the bottom and pulled him behind her.

The gentleman stood at the turn above them. His ribbon had come loose. Black hair lay over one shoulder, and a fresh scratch marked the side of his neck.

"He misunderstood me," he said.

The common room had risen. Brannick stood beside Orren with the broken bench leg in his hand. Ressa had come out of the kitchen carrying the iron stirring hook. One farmer held the wood axe he had used to split kindling after supper. His brother had nothing except the heavy clay pitcher from their table. The cooper pushed the outer door shut and laid the bar across it.

The thin boy stood nearest the stairs. His face had gone white around the mouth, but he planted both worn sandals on the floor and remained there.

Mara moved Tobin toward the kitchen. He caught the back of her apron.

"Stay behind me," she said.

The gentleman descended three steps. "You should consider what you're doing."

"I have friends who will ask where I am."

Brannick shifted the bench leg across both hands. Ressa lowered the hook until its iron point rested against the boards.

He came down another step. His gaze passed from Brannick to the axe, then settled on the barred door. He counted the space to the outer door and glanced once toward the kitchen.

"Move," he said.

The thin boy kicked him in the shin again. The gentleman struck downward. The boy turned his face and took the blow across his shoulder. He fell against the wall, carrying a framed tally board down with him. Brannick swung the bench leg.

The gentleman ducked. Wood broke against the stair post, showering splinters across the boards. He drove a fist into Brannick's stomach, then caught the back of his neck and sent him into the cooper. Both men went down among the stools.

The clay pitcher struck the gentleman's temple. It burst against his head and filled the stairwell with the smell of sour beer. He staggered, caught the rail, then tore it loose from its lower peg when the first farmer came at him.

Mara pushed Tobin through the kitchen door. "Bolt it."

"Mara..."

"Bolt it."

The door closed between them. The wooden bar dropped into place on the other side.

Mara turned back. The gentleman had the loose rail in both hands. He thrust its end into the first farmer's chest and knocked him across a table. The axe lay under the settle, kicked out of reach. Ressa hooked the iron around the rail and pulled. The cooper seized the other end. For a moment the three of them strained over it while boots slipped in beer and rainwater.

The second farmer hit the gentleman behind the knee with a stool. His leg folded. Brannick rose from the floor and caught him around the shoulders. They went down together.

Afterward, Mara could never put the next minute into order. Brannick lost the bench leg. The stirring hook scraped across the floor. Something sharp opened the gentleman's cheek from the bone beneath his eye almost to his jaw. He came up once with blood across his face and drove the cooper into the bar hard enough to shake every cup on its hooks. The thin boy clung to one of his legs until a heel caught him in the chest.

Hands closed again. Boots struck the blue coat. The gentleman reached the long table and tried to pull himself over it, upsetting cups and the cordial bottle. A knife flashed low beneath somebody's arm. Mara saw the dark hilt and lost it among bodies and hanging cloth. The gentleman jerked, one hand clamping over his left hip as blood darkened the coat beneath it.

He tore free long enough to gain one backward step. His heel struck the raised border of the hearth. Brannick caught at his shoulders while the farmer still held his coat, turning him as he fell. The back of the gentleman's head struck the broad hearth flags.

The impact made one hard sound beneath the shouting. His right hand opened against the rushes. Brannick still held the front of his coat in both fists.

Mara touched Brannick's shoulder. He raised his head. One eye was swelling shut, and blood ran from his nose into his beard.

"Enough," she said.

Brannick released him. The gentleman's head settled against the stone.

The gentleman's chest remained still. Mara knelt and pressed two fingers beneath his jaw, as she had done for Orren. Warm skin. No pulse. Behind the kitchen door, Tobin called her name.

Mara rose and lifted the bar. Tobin came through with Ressa's bread knife in both hands. He saw the body by the hearth and stopped. Mara took the knife, set it on the nearest table, then put both arms around him. He stood rigid against her until his forehead came down onto her shoulder.

"He can't touch you," she said.

Tobin's fingers closed in the apron at her back. Across the room, the thin boy sat against the wall with one knee drawn up. Ressa crouched beside him and felt carefully along his collarbone.

The cooper faced the shuttered windows. "Someone will have heard."

"Everyone heard," Brannick said.

The rain beat harder on the roof. Water overflowed the bowl behind the settle and spread beneath Orren's boots. He slept through it, his breath rough but steady.

Mara released Tobin and surveyed her common room. No one had seen the whole fight. No one in it had remained untouched by what happened.

"He left," Mara said. "After Orren fell. He took the north road."

The cooper wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "In this rain?"

"He was drunk."

Ressa helped the thin boy stand. "He said he knew people in Briartown."

Mara met her eyes. Ressa's face was grey beneath the flour caught in her hair.

"Then perhaps they saw him," Mara said.

Brannick fetched the mop from the kitchen. The farmers lifted the dead man beneath the arms and carried him through to the stable while Ressa gathered the broken crockery. The cooper pulled the bar from the door, checked the rain, then barred it again.

Blood came out of the boards with cold water first. Hot water fixed it into the grain. Mara knew that from lambing, kitchen cuts, and Arlen Hale's clothes after the duel. She knelt beside Brannick with a bucket between them and scrubbed until the water turned pink instead of red.

In the stable, the farmers stripped the dead boy. His sleeveless blue coat, short vest, loose trousers, and fine road boots would carry his description farther than his face. They wrapped the clothing in an oat sack for the lime kiln. His pockets held loose silver, a narrow comb, and a square of clean linen without a stitched initial. Nothing carried a name.

The ring appeared when they pulled away his underthings. Dark metal fitted the base of his soft cock, tight against the pubic bone, with shallow symbols around its face. Brannick tried his fingers, lamp grease, and nippers from the tack wall. The band contracted when he pulled, and the nippers left no mark.

"Leave it," Mara said. "We need him off the road before dawn."



At the edge of the Thornwood, the old road narrowed beneath the trees.

They loaded the naked body onto the cooper's low cart and covered it with the same sacking used for wet staves. The rain had emptied the road. Two lanterns showed only the nearest hedges, heavy with water, and the ruts ahead gleamed before the wheels reached them.

Mara rode beside the cooper. Brannick sat in back with one hand on the body when the cart tipped through the deeper holes. The thin boy came as far as the inn yard, his cloak pulled close around his ribs. Tobin stood behind him under the eaves.

At the edge of the Thornwood, the old road narrowed beneath trees that had broken the paving stones with their roots. The cooper stopped where a washout had carried half the shoulder into the ditch. Travelers slowed there even in daylight. A body below the bank would be found, though rain and animals would have time with it first.

Brannick took the shoulders. Mara and the cooper lifted the legs. They carried the gentleman past the ditch, laid him face-down in the road mud, then pulled the sacking free. Rain thinned the blood on his face and hip.

They returned to the cart. Brannick climbed in back, leaving the front bench to Mara and the cooper. Behind them, rain struck the leaves, filled the wheel ruts, and washed the young gentleman's blood toward the ditch.



THORNFIELD

CHAPTER ONE

The Wrong Side of the Road

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Jack came back unable to breathe. Mud sealed his mouth. It packed one nostril and gave beneath the other in cold, sucking grains. Something crushed his chest against the earth, although afterward he understood that it had only been the weight of his own body and the blind terror inside it. He clawed at the road. His right hand struck farther away than he meant it to, found no purchase, and raked four useless lines through the mire. The need for air took him before thought did.

He wrenched onto one shoulder. The road tilted. Loose stones went from beneath him. He rolled over its broken edge, through nettles and wet fern. A root struck his ribs. Another caught him behind the knee and turned him once more, so that he arrived in the ditch on his back with black water closing over his ears. Air tore into him.

He coughed it out again, along with mud and a rope of bitter spit. His heels dug at the bottom of the ditch. Dead leaves slid under them. He tried to rise and succeeded only in driving himself backward beneath a shelf of moss, where the water ran colder and the stones had not known the sun. For several breaths he could do nothing but choke. Then he screamed.

The sound flew thin and ragged among the trees. Birds broke from the high branches, though he saw them only as a scattering of shadows across a pale strip of morning. His voice came back from somewhere deeper in the wood, smaller than it had left him, and then there was only dripping water and the long complaint of boughs moving overhead.

No brakes. No horn. No one shouting that an ambulance was coming.

Jack pressed both hands to his face. One palm covered too much of it. He had been walking home from school.

That fact returned first, ordinary and useless. He had turned eighteen a few months before. Graduation was close enough that teachers had begun counting the remaining weeks aloud, and an apprenticeship waited for him when it was done. He had been good with his hands for as long as he could remember. Give him a broken plug, a loose hinge, a stripped screw, and he could usually understand the failure by touching it. The apprenticeship was supposed to make a life from that.

He had been on the pavement with the road to his left and a row of darkened shop windows to his right. The traffic light ahead had changed to green. An engine had risen above the evening noise, not louder at first, only wrong, climbing when it should have fallen away. Someone across the street had shouted. Jack had turned toward the sound and seen a wash of white headlamps jump the curb.



An orange rolling free beneath the green light.

The last few seconds came in pieces after that. A silver hood slewing sideways. His own hand opening. The small paper sack he had carried striking the bricks before he did, an orange rolling free beneath the green light. The hard white flare of pain. Then nothing. He dragged his hands down his face. "I wasn't in the road."

His voice was wrong even when it whispered. Lighter than he expected, raw from the scream, with none of the familiar weight in it. "I wasn't even on that side of the street."



There was no street.

There was no street. There was only a ditch beneath a broken road and ranks of wet trees beyond it. Nothing mechanical answered him. The ditch water hurried beneath his body over amber stones, clear where his panic had not clouded it. Its smell was of moss, wet bark, and iron-rich earth. It ran under his ass and pooled, shockingly cold, around his balls before slipping away between his thighs. Jack went still. He lowered his hands.

He was naked. Not stripped down to his underwear, not missing a shirt or one shoe after whatever had happened. Naked. Mud streaked him from shoulder to ankle. Fern fragments clung to one shin. There was no phone within reach, no wallet, no coat caught in the nettles above him. He could not see so much as a torn thread of his own clothes. The thighs framing the stream were not his.

They were longer first of all. That was the fact his mind accepted before it would consider anything else. His knees lay farther from his hips than they belonged, lean and sharply made beneath the mud. Muscle drew clean lines along them when he tried to bring his feet closer. His arms had the same impossible length. The hands at their ends were narrow across the palms, long in the fingers, with hard ridges beneath the skin where a weapon or a tool had worn it. He looked down the rest of himself.

The body was lean enough that every division showed. The paired muscles of his stomach drew inward toward his hips; his ribs were visible when he breathed, and

the wet skin shifted over a chest built in long, spare planes rather than bulk. There was beauty in it, an almost deliberate severity, as though someone had labored over the shape for years and refused to permit it one unnecessary ounce. But it was not an ornament.

Jack planted a hand against the bank and pushed. His shoulder locked beneath him with a strength he had not prepared for. He rose too quickly, nearly pitched face-first into the road, and caught an exposed root in his other hand. The root was thick as his wrist. His fingers closed around it and held his whole weight while his feet scrabbled for the ditch bottom. He stared at that hand.

The arm shook, but it did not fail. With one pull he brought himself into a crouch above the water.

Whoever had owned this body had trained it past prettiness. The narrow waist and cut stomach belonged to the same design as the callused palms and the strength hidden in the shoulders: reach without wasted mass, speed with enough force behind it to matter. It was the body of a dancer, perhaps, if dancers were taught to hurt people. Jack's breath shortened again.

Below the sparse dark hair at his groin hung a cock markedly larger than his own had been, soft from cold and still impossible to overlook. The balls drawn tight beneath it were heavy enough to pull a physical awareness from him that felt obscene only because none of it belonged to him. Around the base of the shaft sat a ring.

It was made of dark metal without jewel, hinge, or visible seam. Shallow symbols ran around its otherwise plain face, none belonging to an alphabet Jack knew. The band fitted close against the pubic bone. Mud had gathered along its lower edge, but the metal itself was unstained, and when Jack touched it he found it warmer than the flesh around it. He snatched his fingers away. The ring remained warm. "No."

He took hold of it again, this time with both hands. There was barely room to put his fingertips beneath the band. He twisted. The ring moved perhaps the breadth of a nail and stopped. When he pulled harder, it seemed to draw tight around him. The pressure did not injure him, but the warning was unmistakable. Jack released it. The pressure eased at once. He crouched naked in the ditch, water whispering around his feet, and stared at the first impossible thing that had answered when he touched it. Then pain opened across the back of his skull.

It came so suddenly that the trees folded toward him. Jack dropped to one knee and caught himself against the bank. His empty stomach heaved. Nothing came up except a thread of muddy water and the taste of metal.

He put a hand behind his head. The hair there was black, thick, and much longer than his own. Beneath it, his fingers found a swelling broad enough to fill his palm. The skin had closed, but the bone beneath seemed to pulse with each beat of his heart.

Another pain burned along the left side of his face. He followed it from beneath the eye toward the jaw and found a raised seam, wet and tender. His fingertips came away pink. The cut should have been open. He could feel where its edges had drawn together unevenly, leaving only two short places that still wept. There was more blood on his left hip.

It had dried down his flank, across the sparse hair at his groin, and onto the inside of his thigh before the ditch began washing it away. At its source lay a wound long enough to admit two of his fingers and deep enough that he did not dare test it. Yet that, too, was closing. New flesh shone dark red between swollen edges. When he bent, it pulled but held. Jack sat back on his heel.

Everything he still possessed belonged to somebody else. Not quite everything. Thornfield.

The word rose without warning, carrying no image with it. Jack held still. The water passed his ankle and divided around a pale stone.

Thornfield Academy. Briartown. Drake.

The last was not a place. It was a name, and some hidden part of him knew it belonged to this body. A Drake. Expected at Thornfield. Sent there by... Eomer.

Uncle Eomer, though Jack could summon neither a face nor the sound of his voice. The name brought a small correction to his spine and a tightening low in his stomach. Respect, perhaps. Or caution. When he reached after it, pain drove a white bar through the back of his head. Other things moved behind it.

Rain rattling against shutters. The silver-edged fall of a fine blue coat. Sour beer sharp in his nose. A fair-haired serving boy with one hand raised between them, his face frightened and furious. The images came apart as Jack tried to hold them. He found no beginning, no order, and nothing that explained the mud, the wounds, or why he had been left naked in the road. "Thornfield," he said.

This stolen voice knew the word. His mouth shaped it without hesitation.

Jack waited for more. Nothing came. The memory had left facts behind without the life that joined them together, like road stones after the earth between them had washed away. The forest waited around him.

It was not empty. Small things stirred beneath the bracken. Water spoke over stone. Somewhere far off, beyond the ranks of ancient trunks, a call rose that was too deep for any bird Jack knew and too measured for a beast crying without purpose. Another answered from farther north.

He looked up at the ruined road. Its two directions vanished alike beneath the trees.

"All right," he said, although nothing was. He set both hands against the bank and began to climb.

A detailed botanical illustration of a vine with large, deeply lobed leaves and small, five-petaled white flowers. The vine is adorned with small, round, golden-brown berries. It forms a decorative border that curves around the bottom and sides of the central text area.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER TWO

Where the Trees Make Rain



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The bank was not high. Jack climbed it badly.

His first handhold tore loose, releasing a mat of roots and black soil into his face. He caught himself with the other hand, drove one knee into the bank, and discovered that the new leg could lift him farther than he expected. His foot cleared the lip of the ditch and struck the road beyond it. The rest of him followed in an ungainly rush.

He landed on both hands and his right knee. Pain flashed through the wound at his hip. The long cut on his cheek pulled tight. For a moment he stayed as he had fallen, naked on all fours in the middle of an unknown road, waiting to learn whether anything inside him had torn open. Warm blood traced one short line down his left side and stopped. "Still alive," he said.

The forest gave no opinion. Jack stood carefully. Even careful was too fast. He rose through more height than his balance expected, swayed, and put one foot forward until the road ceased moving beneath him.

It was older than it had looked from the ditch. Flat stones remained beneath the mud in places, fitted together once and lifted now by roots thick as arms. Two wheel ruts passed around them and continued under a shallow sheet of brown water. Down the middle, grass bent beneath the weight of the rain and raised itself again by slow degrees. The road went left and right.

He faced left first. The road descended a little, curved around the grey foot of an immense tree, and vanished. To the right, it climbed a little, curved around another immense tree, and vanished. "Helpful."

He crouched beside the nearer rut. Water had softened every mark until hoofprints, bare feet, wheels, and falling branches were only dents within dents. A narrow stream ran along the road's lower edge, but that told him where the ground fell, not where people lived. Moss covered the north faces of the trees. It also covered the south faces, the fallen limbs, the stones, and one another in soft green layers.

Jack searched the canopy for the sun. It admitted brightness without direction. Even if he found north, Briartown might lie anywhere.

He waited for one of the dead boy's memories to answer. Thornfield. Briartown. Drake. The names remained where he had found them and opened onto nothing. There was no sensible reason to prefer either direction.

Jack was already facing the left-hand road. He went that way.

The choice felt too small to carry a life, but it did. His first bare footprint filled slowly behind him until the water made it part of the road again.

He kept to the grassy crown when he could. The mud there was thinner and the buried stones less likely to turn beneath his feet. Where roots crossed the road, he tested them before trusting his weight. He had always understood things better through his hands, and touching the road gave him what looking could not: which bark would peel under pressure, which stone rocked, where the grass concealed a hole deep enough to break an ankle. That did not make him a woodsman.

He knew how to replace a wall socket, mend a lamp cord, free a rusted screw without stripping it, and make an old hinge hang true. None of that told him which distant call belonged to a bird and which belonged to something waiting for an answer. He walked.



The forest kept yesterday's weather beneath a clear sky and made the rain again.

Water descended through the forest though the visible scraps of sky were pale blue. It gathered at the tips of long leaves and struck his shoulders in heavy drops. It ran down his back, followed the cleft of his ass, and cooled the ring where it sat close around the base of his cock. Sunlight touched the highest branches in brief gold fires, but little warmth reached the road.

Jack had read about places like this. Semi-tropical rainforests where the trees held mist and storm long after clouds passed. Water rose, gathered, fell, and rose once more. The forest kept yesterday's weather beneath a clear sky and made tomorrow's among its leaves. Knowing that did not make him less wet.

The trees were greater than any he had seen outside photographs. Some rose straight and pale through the lower growth before opening far overhead. Others divided close to the ground into buttressed roots broad enough to shelter a man between them. Vines descended in cables. Ferns stood taller than Jack's shoulder. Pale flowers grew in the forks of branches without any soil he could see, holding rain in waxy cups.

There were no wires, roofs, aircraft, or distant engines. Once he stopped to listen for them and heard only water traveling through leaves, insects working invisibly in the heat, and a slow wooden knocking from somewhere beyond the road. He began walking again before whatever made the knocking came closer.

His feet suffered first. The road's buried stones bruised the balls of them, while gravel opened small cuts along the softened skin beneath his toes. He adjusted his stride and discovered another difference in the body. The legs wanted to carry him. Once he found their pace, each step passed cleanly into the next, long and efficient. He could cover ground this way. He could not do it forever.

The wound at his hip tightened whenever his left leg reached forward. The ache behind his skull thickened until turning his head too quickly made white motes cross his sight. His stomach had begun as an empty pain. By the time the road rounded its fifth or fiftieth bend, it had become something larger, a hollow weakness reaching into his arms.

He drank where clean water fell directly from a shelf of stone beside the road. It tasted of leaf mold and minerals and was cold enough to make his teeth hurt. He cupped it in both hands until his stomach sloshed and the thirst stopped pretending to be hunger. Then he walked again.

The ring had remained warm all morning. Near midday it began to pulse, stopping Jack in the road. His attention dropped to the dark band at the base of his cock. "Don't."

His cock hung soft between his parted thighs, the shaft low in the heat and his balls loose and heavy beneath it. Nothing had changed except the beat of warmth at its base, slow and regular, with a faint pressure that spread into his pelvis each time.

He resumed walking. The pressure followed. An hour later, perhaps less, he found the fruit.



Hunger was not evidence that something was edible.

The tree stood close enough to the road that its lowest branches reached above the ditch. Broad leaves hid most of what grew there, but fallen fruit lay among the roots: oval things somewhat larger than plums, green-gold beneath a bloom of silver. Several had burst upon the stones. Their flesh was a deep orange, threaded around flat black seeds, and their smell reached him warm and sweet through the wet earth. Jack's mouth flooded. He did not pick one up.

Hunger was not evidence that something was edible. Neither was sweetness. He searched the branches and found small dark birds moving among them, each with a red patch beneath its tail. One drove its beak into a ripe fruit, swallowed, and remained alive. At the roots, a gnawed rind showed paired tooth marks from something larger.

Animals ate things that poisoned people. He remembered that much from somewhere.

He selected a fruit that had fallen without splitting. The skin yielded beneath his thumb but had no punctures, mold, or sour smell. He washed it under the nearest run of ditch water, tore it open with his fingers, and touched the orange flesh to the inside of his wrist. Nothing burned. He waited as long as hunger permitted, then put the smallest piece against his tongue.

Sweetness came first, followed by an acid sharp enough to tighten his jaw. The texture was closer to a peach than anything else he knew. He chewed once, swallowed, and waited again. The ring pulsed hard.

Heat climbed from the base of his cock through his stomach. The empty cramp there loosened for a breath, not because the bite could already have fed him, but because something had recognized it. Jack stared down at the ring. "You know what this is?"

Warmth answered. Or digestion did. Or his concussed mind found intention because intention was less frightening than magic without one.

He ate half the fruit slowly. When no numbness, cramping, or dizziness followed, he ate the rest. He chose another from the tree itself, then a third. The juice ran over his hands and down his wrists. He licked it away because wasting any of it felt impossible.

The fruit filled his stomach without satisfying it. The desperate edge withdrew, leaving behind a deep demand that seemed to come from the wounds rather than his belly. Beneath his fingers, the seam in his cheek had closed another fraction. The blood at his hip had dried. Healing was costing him. The ring pulsed again, stronger than before. His cock began to thicken where it hung free between his legs. Jack nearly dropped the last fruit. "No. Absolutely not."

There was nobody to hear him, but he lowered his voice anyway. The erection did not arrive like desire. He was cold, frightened, bleeding, and too hungry to mistake his state for arousal. Yet blood gathered all the same. The shaft lifted by slow degrees until its weight drew it outward from his body, heavy and unfamiliar. The ring held tight at its base, not painful, but firm enough that the pulse of his heart remained trapped there.

By the time it stopped growing, it was easily seven inches long and thick enough to fill one hand completely. The shaft throbbed with each beat caught behind the ring.

He looked because it was impossible not to look. Then he kept looking.

He could not remember ever being turned on by a penis. He had seen them, including his old one often enough, without thinking any of them beautiful. This one was something special: long, heavy, proportioned so well that even the size looked elegant rather than ungainly.

Admiring it felt voyeuristic. Alien. As if the boy who owned it might catch Jack staring and demand an explanation. Except there was no other boy. It was his cock.

The realization did not make the body familiar. It did send a quieter pulse of appreciation through him that had nothing to do with the ring. Jack resisted the urge to close his hand around the shaft and find out how its weight felt in his grip. A clear bead appeared at the slit. Jack wiped it away with the heel of his hand and kept walking. The ring produced another.

Curiosity stopped him before obedience did. Jack caught the shaft loosely and drew the foreskin back with his thumb. It moved without resistance. The glans beneath was moist and clean, perfectly shaped, with the clear bead bright at the slit. He rubbed it away, let the skin slide forward again, and removed his hand.

The ring produced another bead while he walked. Movement spread the wetness beneath the foreskin. Warmth traveled through his groin, up his spine, and settled behind his ribs. With it came an urge too simple to be mistaken for a thought. Taste. Jack stopped in the road. "No."

Taste. The ring had no voice. The demand lived instead in his mouth watering, in the sudden knowledge of the wetness cooling against him, in the way his hand kept wanting to rise from his side. It did not seize his arm. It did not bend him. It made refusal feel like standing beside water while dying of thirst. He closed both hands into fists and walked.

The pressure eased after a time, but his cock remained half-hard and leaking. Whenever hunger sharpened, the ring warmed. Whenever the wound at his hip pulled, another drop gathered. The pattern followed him through the afternoon. The forest grew dim long before the sky changed color.

Jack began looking for shelter without leaving the road. Hollows beneath trees were plentiful, but many held standing water, dung, bones, or tracks. One root cave smelled sharply of an animal he could not see. He gave that one the whole width of the road.



By every measure available to him, he had done enough to survive the night.

At last he found a windthrown tree lying parallel to the verge. Its roots had lifted a wall of earth and stone taller than he was. Beneath the leaning trunk, two great roots formed a narrow wedge roofed by packed soil. The ground inside was damp but not flooded. More importantly, the pale run of the road remained visible through the ferns.

Jack collected three light-colored stones from the roadside and stacked them where he left it. The marker was unnecessary while he could still see the ruts, but darkness changed distances. He counted nineteen steps to the roots.

He found a fallen branch longer than his arm and pushed it into the shelter first. It disturbed beetles, a small grey lizard, and nothing large enough to object. He scraped away the worst of the dead leaves, checked the overhead earth for loose stone, and crawled inside.

The space had been made for a smaller creature. Jack folded one long leg beneath the other and rested his back against the root wall. Damp earth chilled him wherever it touched. The air remained warm beyond the shelter, but his skin had not been dry since waking, and a faint trembling had begun in his thighs.

By every measure available to him, he had done enough to survive the night. The body was still failing.

Darkness gathered beneath the tree. The wound at his hip throbbed. His empty muscles seemed to draw inward around the small amount of food, taking it before his stomach could claim any comfort from it. The ring became hot. Jack's cock hardened fully.

There was no gradual confusion this time. The ring tightened and blood drove into his cock hard enough to make him gasp. A clear thread slid from the tip and broke across his stomach.

He tried to force the erection down with both hands over his face and his thoughts fixed on the road, the wounds, the things calling in the forest. The ring answered each fear with another pulse. Fluid welled steadily from his slit. "I ate," Jack whispered.

The ring burned. Taste.

This close, the fluid had a scent: salt, skin, and something faintly sweet beneath both. Jack wiped it away with one finger. Warmth leapt from the ring into his hand so sharply that his wrist flexed. He held the shining fingertip before him. "This is insane."

The forest had already supplied evidence for that. Jack touched his finger to his tongue.

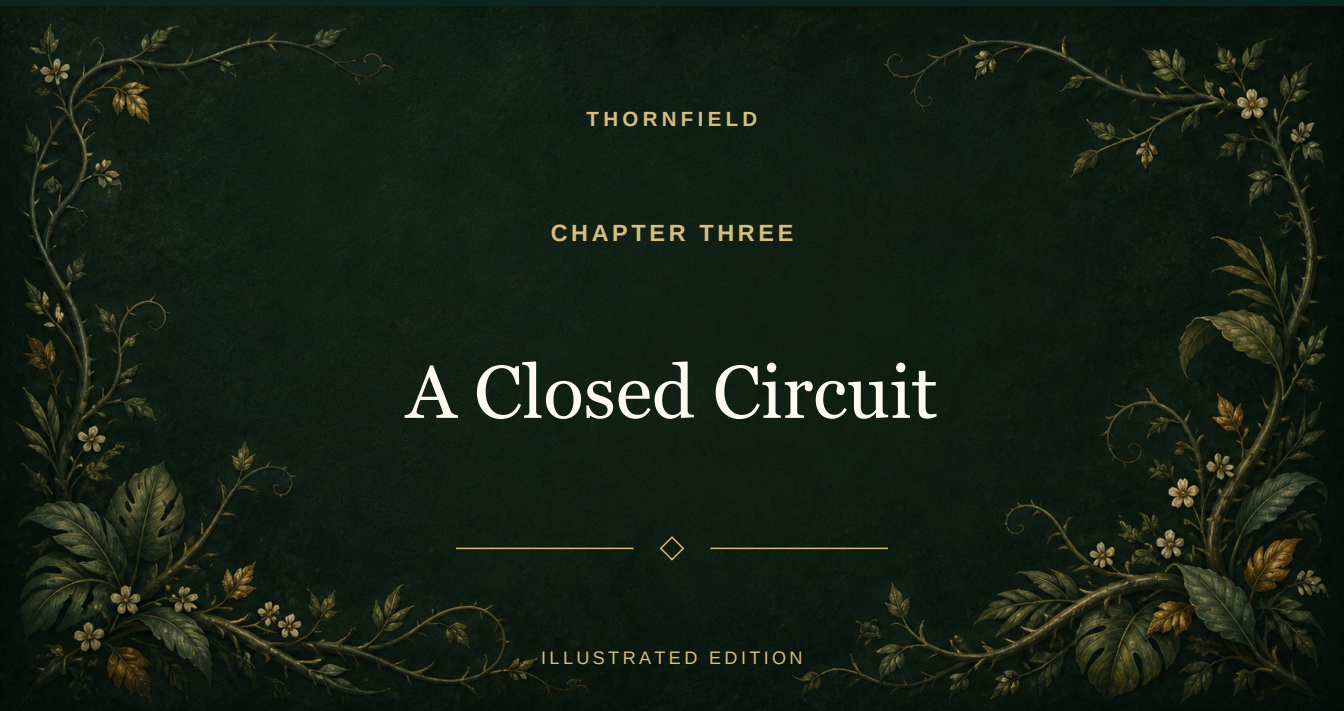
Warmth spread through his mouth. The taste was lightly salted and sweeter than it should have been, but the change in his body mattered more. The cramp beneath his ribs eased before he swallowed. When he did swallow, heat followed the fluid down his throat and opened behind his sternum like a small second breath. The ring pulsed once. The ache in his hip receded.

Jack pressed his fingers to the wound. The flesh remained swollen and hot, but the deep pulling pain had loosened. Even the pounding at the back of his skull withdrew a little from his eyes. "Oh," he said as another bead formed. The ring was keeping him alive.

Jack gathered the next drop with his fingertip and swallowed it.

The ring did not ask permission. It did not care that his hands shook, that the erection frightened him, or that the act turned his stomach for reasons hunger could not overcome. It cared that the body lived. For tonight, perhaps, that was enough.

Jack drew his knees toward his chest and listened to the wet forest settle around him. Through the fern he could still see the road, a pale strip fading beneath the trees. Water fell from leaves though stars had begun to appear in the scraps of sky above them. At the base of his cock, the ring cooled from burning to warm. Something in this world wanted him alive. He wished that felt kinder.



THORNFIELD

CHAPTER THREE

A Closed Circuit

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ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Jack did not sleep.

He tried. He lay on his right side beneath the roots, because the wound in his left hip objected when he put weight on it, and pillowed his head on one folded arm. The earth had kept the day's warmth. Dampness breathed from it against his skin, rich with the smells of root, stone, leaf rot, and the small hidden lives that worked beneath all three. Beyond the shelter, the Thornwood changed its voice for darkness.



Beyond the shelter, the Thornwood changed its voice for darkness.

The high birds had gone quiet one by one. In their place came chirrs without pause, the sawing of wings, and deep calls that traveled so far through the trees that distance stripped the creature from them. Water continued its patient descent. It struck broad leaves with a sound like fingers drumming on hide, gathered, spilled, and struck again below. Sometimes a whole branch released its burden at once, and rain fell beneath stars. Jack closed his eyes. The pounding at the back of his skull grew larger in the dark. He opened them again.

The road beyond the ferns had faded to a pale interruption among black trunks. He could no longer see his little stack of stones. Nineteen steps remained nineteen steps, he told himself. At morning he would find them. At morning he would get back on the road and keep walking toward whichever future his blind choice had purchased. Morning required him to wake. He shut his eyes once more and counted the drops striking the root above his face.

One. Two. Three.

At thirty-seven he lost the pattern and began again. The second count reached nineteen. The third never reached four. Jack jerked upright.

His hand was in the mud beside him. His neck had folded forward, chin nearly to his chest. He did not remember lowering his arm or closing his eyes. The forest looked the same. It might have been a few seconds. It might have been an hour. Nausea rolled through him.

He turned onto his hands and knees before his stomach clenched. Water and orange fruit came up together, not enough to account for what he had eaten. The acid burned his throat and ran in a thin line through the leaves. He spat until the string broke from his lip. The motion set his skull ringing.

Jack remained there with his forehead close to the ground, breathing through his nose. Light moved at the edges of his sight where no light existed. His left hand tingled. He flexed it, touched each fingertip to his thumb, then did the same with the right.

He remembered a first-aid lesson at school, desks pushed aside and a red plastic dummy laid on the floor. The teacher had corrected someone about head injuries. Sleep itself was not poison. You did not keep an injured person awake merely to keep them awake. You also did not leave them alone.

Someone stayed with them. Someone watched for vomiting, worsening pain, confusion, speech that changed, sleep from which they could not be woken. Someone else decided when tiredness became something worse. Jack had no one. He sat back against the root and said, "My name is Jack." The words came clearly enough.

"I was walking home from school. I am eighteen. I am..."

A Drake. The inherited name seemed a poor comfort under a fallen tree. "I am going to Thornfield Academy."

His voice had not slurred. He understood himself. He could move both hands. None of that changed the piece of night he had lost or the pressure swelling behind his eyes. At the base of his cock, the ring warmed. Jack looked down.

His erection had faded after the last drops. The shaft hung thick but soft between his narrow thighs, wetness trapped beneath the foreskin. His balls had loosened again in the close, humid air, low and heavy beneath it. "You already helped."

The ring pulsed. His cock began filling before he finished speaking. The change was steady and impersonal, blood moving at another will. The shaft lifted from its

hanging weight and lengthened between his legs. His foreskin drew tauter over the growing head. His balls shifted closer as the erection rose. Jack wiped a new bead from the opening and tasted it.

Sweet beneath the salt. Warmth passed into his tongue, down his throat, and settled in the wound at his hip. The pounding in his skull softened for three breaths. Then it returned.

Another bead formed. Jack gathered it. Swallowed. Waited. The relief was smaller.

The ring tightened until the pulse in his cock became a hard beat he could see. Fluid welled again, more than a bead now, glazing the foreskin and gathering at its tip. Taste.

The demand contained no word and allowed no confusion. His mouth watered. His attention narrowed to the clear wetness and the living source of it. Fingers were wasteful. The ring wanted the shortest route. Jack stared at his own erection. "You cannot be serious."

The ring burned. "Right."

He brought one hand around the shaft. It filled his grip as completely as he had imagined on the road, smooth skin over hard pressure, heavier than its appearance prepared him for. His own touch traveled both ways. He felt the hand enclosing him and the cock enclosed by it, two sensations arriving together without agreeing on which one was Jack. His hips moved once before he stopped them.

The shelter was narrow, but not too narrow. He cleared twigs and stones from the space between his feet, then sat with his back away from the root wall and spread his legs. The long muscles behind his thighs resisted when he straightened his knees. He bent them again, planted his heels, and rolled his hips until the erection angled toward his stomach. He leaned forward.

His ribs met his thighs. The wound at his hip pulled sharply. The head of his cock remained an accusing distance beneath his mouth.

Jack reached lower with his hand and drew the shaft upward. His lips came close enough to feel warmth from the glans. Pain drove through the back of his skull.

He recoiled and nearly struck his head on the root above him. Nausea rose, weaker than before but present. He sat with one hand buried in the wet leaves and waited until the white sparks left his vision. The ring continued leaking over his knuckles.

"I know," Jack whispered. "Give me a second."

The absurdity of negotiating with jewelry did not make the negotiation less real. He considered the problem as he would have considered a stubborn fitting or a wire that would not lie where it belonged. Force had put his neck in the wrong position. The reach had to come from his hips and spine together, not from crushing his chin toward his chest.

Jack widened his knees. He moved his heels closer, let them fall outward, and tilted his pelvis. One hand braced behind him while the other controlled the shaft. He breathed out and folded from the hips, allowing his back to round a little at a time. The new body knew the range even if Jack did not.

His stomach compressed. The scar at his hip burned. His mouth reached the head. For one suspended moment his lips rested against the foreskin. The ring went still. Jack opened his mouth. He drew the skin back with his thumb and took the exposed glans between his lips.

The first sensation was heat. The second was the living weight of the head settling against his mouth. Its surface yielded softly beneath his lips, while the erection beneath remained hard enough to hold its shape. A clear thread touched his tongue. Sweetness spread through him. Jack closed his eyes and swallowed.

Warmth crossed his tongue, throat, chest, and stomach in one unbroken line. The ring answered at his groin. Something seemed to pass through the circle at his base and return by the same path, a current finding ground. The pain behind his eyes loosened.

Jack held still. His lips remained around the head. His own pulse kicked once inside his mouth. Then again.

He felt each beat twice: a firm movement against his tongue and a deep answering throb at the root of his cock. The doubled sensation stole a sound from him, small and muffled around himself. He could stop.

The command had withdrawn. His mouth no longer watered with desperate compulsion. The ring had cooled enough that it did not hurt. The nausea was receding, and the headache had drawn back from a crushing pressure to an ordinary ache. Jack could release the shaft, unfold, and collect whatever else the ring produced with his fingers. Instead he moved his tongue.

He pressed the broad part of it against the underside of the glans and licked slowly upward. The flesh gave softly at the surface, moist and smooth, then resisted with the hardness beneath. His cock flexed in his mouth. The pulse struck his tongue again, stronger. Jack shivered.

"Oh," he tried to say, and felt the muffled vowel hum through his own cock.

That was new enough to make him do it again. His lips worked farther over the head. The foreskin moved with them, drawing back when he sucked and sliding partly forward when he eased away. He learned the motion by feeling both sides of it. His tongue found the rim beneath the glans, traced it, then flattened along the underside where the shaft joined the head. Pleasure rose at the base of his spine.

The ring had gone quiet. This was Jack choosing pressure, angle, and the small push of his hips because the result felt good. His cock. The words returned with greater force than they had on the road.

He sucked again. Saliva escaped the corner of his mouth and ran down the shaft into his hand. He spread it with his palm and stroked the length he could not reach, slowly at first, matching the movement of his lips. His shoulders trembled from holding the fold. His wounded hip complained each time his body tightened, but the pain was distant and diminishing. Jack took another inch.

The fullness stretched his lips. He breathed through his nose and felt the shaft's pulse travel against the roof of his mouth. When he drew back, the glans pulled at his lips before slipping free to the rim. He did not let it leave. His tongue circled, broad and wet, and his hand moved once from the ring to the base of the head. The pleasure sharpened.

His balls drew upward. The loose weight beneath the shaft tightened close, and the ring warmed with every stroke of his hand. Jack's breathing became too fast for the position. He paused with only the head in his mouth, drew air through his nose, then resumed more carefully.

He had never wanted a penis before. He wanted this one now. The admission passed through him without shame because there was no room left for shame beside hunger, pain, rain, and the feel of his own glans moving beneath his tongue. Jack rocked his hips.

The first motion was small. The second carried the head deeper. His mouth tightened by instinct, and sensation burst outward from his cock so strongly that his hand slipped against the wet shaft. He nearly stopped.

Not because he wanted to. Because the pleasure frightened him in the same way the body's strength had frightened him: another capacity already present, waiting for him to discover it. Jack set his hand again and continued.

The forest receded without becoming silent. Water fell. Insects sawed and clicked. Something large moved far beyond the road, breaking one branch and then another.

Beneath the roots, Jack heard the wet pull of his own mouth and the roughening breath through his nose.

His hand stroked. His lips held. His broad tongue worked the soft surface over the hardness beneath until every pulse in his mouth answered at once through his belly and spine. The climax gathered quickly after that.

Jack recognized it too late to pretend he had not chosen the road toward it. His balls tightened. The shaft swelled against his lips. He drew the head deeper. The first pulse struck his tongue hot and thick.

Jack swallowed from surprise. The movement closed his throat around what little of the shaft he had taken, and the answering pleasure broke the rest of him open. His hips jerked. A second mouthful followed, salt-sweet and warmer than the drops before it. He swallowed that one deliberately. The ring flared. Gold light showed faintly through the wet skin around its edge.

Jack came again into his own mouth. He felt each contraction at the base, in the shaft, against his tongue, and in the tightening pull of his lips. The circuit left nowhere for sensation to escape. His hand milked upward once. Another pulse spread across the glans. He held the head between his lips and swallowed until the contractions weakened and the flow became a final sweet thread. For a while he could not unfold.

He rested with his forehead near one knee, lips still touching the softening head, his whole body trembling around the difficult curve. Rain breathed through the leaves. The gold at the ring faded. Jack released his cock.

The foreskin slid forward over the wet glans as the erection softened. Saliva and the last clear fluid shone along the shaft. His balls loosened slowly beneath it, descending again in the humid warmth. He sat upright one careful piece at a time. Silence filled his skull.

Not true silence. His heartbeat remained in his ears, and the damaged place at the back of his skull was tender beneath his hair. But the crushing pressure was gone. His eyes focused cleanly on the roots before him. When he turned his head, no sparks crossed his vision.

Jack touched his cheek. The long cut had sealed from eye to jaw, leaving a tender raised line beneath his fingertips. At his hip, the swollen edges had drawn together into a dark new scar. He bent one knee, then the other. The wound pulled but did not open. Even the small cuts beneath his feet had closed, leaving grit embedded against smooth new skin. The healing was nearly complete. His hunger was not.

It struck while he still had two fingers pressed to the scar. One moment his stomach was empty. The next it cramped so violently that Jack folded over it, arms locked across his middle. Saliva flooded his mouth with no sweetness in it. His jaw ached with the need to chew. Three fruits might never have existed.

The ring had not made life from nothing. It had taken water, fruit, blood, and whatever reserves remained in the body and driven them toward repair. Even the fluid Jack had swallowed had come from him first. He had closed a circuit, not found a source. The body was whole enough to feel how starved it was.

Jack crawled to the mouth of the shelter and searched the dark verge as if food might have appeared there while he was bent over himself. He could see only fern, road, and the pale undersides of leaves turning in a breath of wind. Going back to the fruit tree in darkness would mean leaving the shelter, retracing hours of road, and probably dying with greater efficiency. He returned beneath the roots.

The ring sat warm and quiet around his softened cock. No command followed. No fresh erection answered the hunger. Whatever had acted through it considered the emergency finished. "Easy for you," Jack muttered.



For the first time that night, he believed he would wake anyway.

He lay on his right side again, one hand beneath his head and the other pressed over his stomach. His thoughts remained clear long enough to hear the forest settle around him: water descending from the high leaves, the deep call from the north, the near whisper of a lizard returning to the shelter it had surrendered. Jack had no one to wake him. For the first time that night, he believed he would wake anyway. He fell asleep with the road a pale line beyond the ferns and hunger gnawing cleanly beneath his hand.

A detailed botanical illustration of a flowering vine with large, deeply lobed leaves and small, five-petaled white flowers with yellow centers. The vine is adorned with small, round, golden-brown berries. It forms a decorative border that curves around the central text area of the page.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER FOUR

The Sound of Wheels



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Jack woke to something cracking above him. He opened his eyes beneath the roots and did not know what he had heard. The shelter had brightened from black to the green dimness of light passing through leaves. Water ticked from the fern outside. A second crack came from somewhere overhead, followed by a wet tearing sound and the industrious tap of a beak. A bird was eating breakfast. Jack's body received the news poorly.

Hunger seized him before he had fully uncurled. It was no longer the clean, clawing agony that had folded him over after the ring healed him, but it occupied everything from his throat to the bottom of his belly. His mouth felt dry despite the night's rain. His jaw ached at the thought of chewing. When he pushed himself upright, his stomach drew in so sharply beneath his ribs that every ridge of muscle stood out. He stopped and waited for the headache. It did not come.

There was soreness at the back of his skull, broad and deep as a bruise beneath his hair. Turning too quickly made the shelter shift by a fraction before settling where it belonged. Nothing pressed behind his eyes. Nothing flashed across them. He could remember where he was, how he had reached the roots, and what he had done beneath them. That final memory encouraged him to leave promptly.

Jack crawled from the shelter on hands and knees, lifting his hips before anything could drag through the mud. Outside, the air was already warm. The ring remained a quiet pressure against his pubic bone.

He checked the wounds. They remained closed, although the hip pulled when he straightened. The body had repaired almost everything except its need to eat.

Jack stepped around the fern and found the three stones where he had left them. Rain had washed their upper faces clean. They made a small, foolish monument beside the road, and he loved them for being exactly where they ought to be. The road looked different by morning.

Fresh marks had been laid over the storm-softened surface. A horse had passed recently enough that the edges of its prints remained sharp. Two narrow wheels had cut parallel lines through a shallow patch of mud, and water had only begun to gather in them. Along the higher verge, vines had been severed and thrown back before they could trail across the way. The cuts were pale, no more than a few days old. Someone maintained this road.

Jack crouched at its edge. A stone-lined channel carried water from the uphill forest toward a culvert beneath the paving. Leaves crowded the little channel but did not

block it. As he watched, one broad brown leaf drifted to the mouth of the culvert, caught there, and trembled. Then the water climbed.



Magic drains. Of course.

It rose the height of Jack's smallest finger against the natural fall of the ground, carrying the leaf with it. A blue mark glimmered beneath the surface on one of the fitted stones. Water and leaf slipped together through the culvert. The mark faded. The channel resumed flowing as though it had not just contradicted gravity. Jack stared after it.

"Fine," he said. "Magic drains. Of course."

The forest offered no opinion. The proof of traffic made his direction feel less ridiculous, but it did nothing for his stomach. He studied both sides of the road while he walked. The green-gold fruits from yesterday had not seemed rare. Birds had known them, and the road might carry seeds farther than any one tree's shadow. He found the first silvered rind before he found the tree.

It lay at the bottom of the ditch with its orange flesh eaten cleanly away. Another rested several paces beyond it, torn open beneath a screen of glossy leaves. Above them, three young trees leaned out of the forest toward the broken light over the road. Their branches were not high enough to mock him. Green-gold ovals hung beneath the leaves in clusters, some hard and dark, others silvered with ripeness. Jack laughed once, breathlessly.

The sound seemed too large after a night alone. A flock of the little dark birds burst from the branches, red patches flashing beneath their tails. He reached for the nearest ripe fruit before they could reconsider ownership. He washed it in the road channel, split the skin with his thumbs, and ate.

Sweet orange flesh yielded around the flat black seeds. Juice ran over his fingers. The first fruit scarcely touched the hunger. The second quieted the ache in his jaw. He ate the third more slowly and sat on one of the culvert stones for the fourth, scooping the flesh from the skin with his teeth. By the fifth, his belly had stopped trying to consume the rest of him.

Jack held a sixth fruit in both hands and considered it. He was still hungry, but it had become an ordinary hunger, the sort that could wait for bread, eggs, or anything warm enough to have a smell. Eating until he made himself sick beside the road would solve nothing.

He set the fruit on the culvert stone. He could come back for it if the road remained empty. The road did not.

At first the sound belonged to the forest's endless dripping: a dull beat arriving without direction. Then iron struck stone. Leather creaked. Wheels ground through softened gravel with a wet, wooden complaint. Horses. Jack looked down at himself. "Oh, hell."

The road bent behind him. Whatever approached was still hidden by trees, but the clopping grew louder with each breath. He snatched the fruit from the stone through an instinct against waste, hesitated with it in his hand, then placed it beneath the glossy leaves and hurried off the road.

He did not plunge into the forest. Ten paces beyond the ditch, an enormous tree divided into buttressed walls of wood before rising into the canopy. Ferns filled the spaces between them. Jack slipped behind the nearest buttress and lowered himself where he could watch through overlapping fronds.

Squatting brought his knees wide. His cock and balls hung in the open space between them, safely above the leaf mould, while one hand steadied him against the ridged bark. He could remain there. He only needed not to sneeze, slip, attract an insect, or present any portion of himself through the fern. The approaching wagon had not yet appeared. Waiting made him aware of the air.

A light breeze followed the road through the trees. It reached beneath the fern and moved over skin that had been wet, cold, hurt, or frightened since he awakened. Now the air felt good. It passed along the inside of his knees and tickled the loose skin of

his low-hanging sack. His balls shifted with it. His cock gave a sudden, interested jump beneath his belly. Jack stared down. "Really?"

The shaft thickened by a degree, lifting from its soft hang without becoming hard. His body was fed and warm, and movement no longer hurt everywhere. That was sufficient cause for celebration. The breeze touched him again. Night opened behind his eyes.

Not this forest night. A town, close-built and dark, rushed past him in broken pieces. Stone beneath bare feet. Shuttered windows leaning over a lane too narrow for daylight. Cool air streamed over a body as naked as it was now while a boy his age ran naked beside him, pale hair flying loose and one hand clamped over his mouth to hold in laughter.

"Stop this instant!" a guard bellowed somewhere behind them.

That nearly finished both of them. The pale-haired boy caught his wrist and dragged him beneath an arch before their laughter could steal the strength from their legs. Their bare shoulders struck the wall. They clung to each other, breathless and helpless, while a lantern bobbed at the far end of the lane.

The boy grinned, dropped to his knees, and closed his warm mouth over Jack's cock. The remembered body leaned into him before Jack could separate reaction from memory. His pale head bobbed twice, then a third time, each a quick, wet pull while both of them struggled not to laugh aloud.

The guard shouted again, closer now. The boy let the shaft slip from his lips, sprang up, and seized Jack's hand. They fled the arch together, naked and giggling, with the lantern's glow swinging after them. Then a room.

A door kicked shut. Lamplight across a bare back. A mouth against his neck to swallow another laugh. Cold skin warming against cold skin, then heat, the salt of sweat, and the weight of that same body drawing him down into a bed already in disorder. Wanting surged through Jack with the memory. He came back crouched beside the road, one hand dug into tree bark and his cock half hard between his knees. The wagon rounded the bend.

Jack's face burned. He fixed his attention on the road with such determination that the first horse might have been an examination question.

*Briartown.*

There were two of them, broad-backed chestnuts darkened by rain along their legs. Brass discs hung from the harness and flashed whenever a shaft of sun found them. The wagon behind was roofed in waxed green cloth, its sides painted with yellow vines badly enough that Jack could see the brushstrokes from his hiding place.

A woman drove. She wore a blue wrap crossed over her chest and tied beneath it, leaving her stomach bare above loose divided trousers that ended at the knee. Her arms were brown and heavy with muscle. A strip of yellow cloth held her hair from her face. Beside her sat a prosperous-looking man in cream and red. He was far too fat to be wearing so little.

The thought arrived complete and immediate. The man's sleeveless red garment ended well above his navel. A cream kilt wrapped his hips, leaving his round belly wholly uncovered where it rested over the waist. Gold chains crossed his chest. More gold circled both wrists and glimmered in the soft folds beneath his chin.

He did not tug the garment down. The driver did not glance at his stomach. Two workers walking alongside the wagon wore less than he did: one bare-chested in short green trousers, the other in a cropped grey tunic and a wrap-skirt divided for walking. Nobody appeared to be suffering a public disgrace. The fat man lifted the front of his red garment and wiped rain from his face with it. Jack reconsidered.

The day was warm already. The forest sweated around them. Cloth that covered more skin would only become another wet thing requiring care. The man's kilt was richly woven, his wrap precisely fitted, and every bright piece of him announced money. He was not dressed despite his size. He was dressed exactly as he meant to be. Jack, hiding naked in a fern with an inconvenient erection, was not in a position to govern anyone else's dignity.

"At this pace, we'll hear the noon bell before we see the Briartown gate," the man said.

Jack's attention sharpened. "At your requested pace," the driver replied. "You asked me not to shake the glass."

"I asked you not to break it."

"Then we'll reach Briartown when the road permits."

The nearer worker laughed. The fat man made a wounded sound and settled against the seat as the wagon passed. Briartown.

Jack understood the word. He understood all of them. He could have called out.

The realization came while the wagon remained close enough to stop. Four adults, two horses, covered cargo, and a road leading precisely where he needed to go. They might have spare cloth. They almost certainly had food. The driver looked competent; the workers looked ordinary; even the passenger's worst visible crime was impatience. Jack opened his mouth.

The memory of lamplight moved again behind his eyes. His half erection had not subsided. He was naked, scarred, filthy, and unable to say where he had come from.

Someone had cut this body open, stripped it, and discarded it beside the road. Until Jack knew why, friendly-looking strangers were still strangers. He closed his mouth.

The wagon continued toward Briartown. One worker said something too quiet to catch. The driver's answer carried back as a burst of laughter. Branches closed behind them, then opened again around the diminishing roof. Jack remained hidden until the last harness bell faded.

When he stood, his knees objected. He waited behind the tree until his cock softened and hung low again, then returned to the road. The fruit remained where he had left it beneath the leaves. He retrieved it and carried it in one hand as he followed the wagon's new tracks. His choice of direction had been luck. Now it was a road to Briartown.

The forest changed by small degrees as he walked. Cut stumps appeared beyond the ditch, old enough for moss but too square to mistake for storm damage. A low wall wandered among the trees, its stones swallowed by roots. Twice he passed drainage marks like the first, blue lines beneath clear water coaxing leaves through culverts that should have clogged years ago. Then another road joined from the south.

It was narrower, paved only at the meeting, but its ruts were fresh and numerous. A waist-high stone stood between the two routes. Rain had darkened an engraved sheaf of grain on one face and a many-windowed tower on the other. Jack could not read the shallow lettering beneath either symbol. The shapes stirred nothing in the inherited memory. He had barely passed the marker when he heard hooves again.

This time two riders came from the side road. Jack retreated behind a screen of broad leaves and watched them turn toward Briartown. Both wore short dark kilts beneath pale sleeveless coats, with high boots protecting their calves. Long staves rode in loops beside their saddles. The coats bore the same green emblem at the shoulder, though distance hid its shape. A patrol, perhaps.

Neither rider searched the verge. They spoke about a washed-out garden wall and whether someone's husband had built it badly enough to deserve the repair bill. Their voices faded up the road. Jack emerged. He made it forty paces before a donkey cart rattled from the side road. Back into the leaves.

An elderly couple occupied its narrow seat, both in loose wraps that bared their shoulders and stomachs. Bundles of wet reeds filled the cart behind them. The woman complained about mildew. The man blamed the roof. Neither noticed Jack watching from behind a tree. He waited, returned to the road, and walked faster.

Three people approached on foot before he had found his rhythm. Jack heard their conversation in time to hide, though not gracefully. He stepped into the ditch, crossed the enchanted drainage channel in two long strides, and crouched behind a fallen limb furred in moss.

They were Academy students, or at least the first people he had seen who might be. All three were near his age. One wore a pleated kilt and a cropped white wrap edged in blue; another had short fitted trousers, a bare chest, and a blue sash passing from shoulder to hip. The third wore a loose sleeveless tunic with open sides over an equally blue wrap-skirt. Their clothes showed stomach, back, thigh, and the easy carelessness of people who had never been taught that those parts required concealment. The sight would have been a feast under different circumstances. Jack held the unbitten fruit over his crotch and tried not to breathe loudly.

The students passed arguing about an examination. Jack caught the words wards, structure, and east practice hall, but none of the rest gave him anything useful. He stayed down until their voices vanished around the bend. By then he was beginning to resent civilization.

The empty road had offered no food, clothing, or answers, but at least it had permitted him to walk down its middle. This road gave him proof that he was close to all three and then drove him into the shrubbery every few minutes.

Jack climbed from the ditch. He ate the final fruit as he walked, tearing the skin with his teeth and spitting the black seeds into the verge. Perhaps in a few years another hungry fool would find a tree there.

Ahead, through gaps in the trunks, the road had begun to brighten. The canopy thinned. Sun lay across the stones in broad white bars, and somewhere beyond the forest a bell sounded once, too deep and ordered to belong to any bird. Jack quickened his pace. Wheels answered from behind him. "You have got to be kidding me."

He fled the road again with sticky hands, crossed the ditch, and pushed into a stand of ferns tall enough to conceal him. Their wet fronds closed over his shoulders. He lowered himself between them, knees apart, one palm against the earth, and listened to the next wagon approach the junction. The road ahead was no longer empty enough to belong to him.

A decorative border of dark green leaves and small white flowers with yellow centers, framing the central text area.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER FIVE

A Beautiful Flower



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The wagon reached the junction and turned toward Briartown. Jack watched it through the ferns. Its single horse had white stockings and a tail braided with strips of green cloth. Two women sat beneath the canvas roof among baskets of wet flowers, talking about the price of salt. The wheels passed close enough to spray the ditch with muddy water. He waited for them to go.

"What a beautiful flower," someone said behind him. "I don't imagine you'll fit in my bag."

Jack turned with a high-pitched yelp. His supporting foot slipped in the leaves. He tried to rise, found a fern stem instead of a branch, and went backward onto both hands. His legs spread to keep him from rolling down the shallow bank. His cock and low-hanging balls settled into the damp dirt between them, fully exposed to the stranger standing three paces away.

The stranger was young. Jack's age, perhaps a year older. Sun and weather had browned him everywhere except beneath the frayed legs of his shorts. Near-white curls crowded his head and caught gold where the light reached them. He wore no shirt. A faded brown cloak hung open from his shoulders, and a canvas bag rested against one narrow hip. His pale blue eyes went down.

"I can explain," Jack said. "I woke up back there and I don't know where I am or what happened to me, but somebody left me in the ditch and I think they thought I was dead, so please don't call anyone until I can figure this out."

The boy's expression changed from amusement to complete confusion. Jack heard his own voice. English. Every word had been English.

Everyone Jack had heard on the road had made sense. So did the stranger when he raised both hands and spoke slowly.

"Slow down, slow down. First, although I really enjoy the view, we need to get you covered up."

Jack understood him. The stranger plainly had not understood Jack.

"Why can I understand you?" Jack asked in English.

The stranger's brows drew together. Jack pushed himself more upright. The movement dragged his balls through cool grit. He stopped, acutely aware that panic had not improved the presentation. The boy continued looking, but the appreciation had left his posture. His attention moved over the raised cut on Jack's cheek, the dirt in his hair, the new seam at his hip, then returned to Jack's face. He unfastened the cloak. Jack flinched before he could prevent it.

The boy halted with the cloth in both hands. He lowered it to the ground halfway between them and stepped back. His arms remained loose at his sides.

"For you," he said. He touched his own hip, then pointed to the cloak and made a wrapping motion. "Covered."

Jack knew what the gestures meant. More unsettlingly, he knew what the words meant. He checked the road. The wagon had gone. No voices followed from either direction.

This boy could have shouted. He could have run back to the travelers or whatever patrol kept the road. Instead he had surrendered his cloak and moved out of reach because Jack was frightened.

Jack drew one leg beneath himself, then the other. He picked up the cloak and stood.

The cloth was soft with age and smelled of sun, green leaves, and the clean salt of the body that had worn it. It was also shaped like a cloak. Jack held the broad middle across his groin and discovered that the ends did not know what he expected from them. The boy watched him try once.

"May I?"

Jack understood that too. He nodded.

The boy approached without haste. Up close, he was slighter than Jack had first thought, narrow through the chest and waist, with fine golden hair bright across his forearms. He took one corner of the cloak, passed it behind Jack's hips, and brought the opposite edge across the front. The ring remained uncovered at the root of Jack's cock. The boy's hands stopped.

His gaze fixed on the dark band and the shallow symbols circling it. Recognition moved across his face before caution could catch it. He leaned closer and reached down. Jack jerked his hips back. The boy's hand recoiled as if the ring had burned him.

"Sorry! I think I recognize some of the symbols on it, sorry."

His hands rose again, palms open. The apology came quickly enough to trip over itself.

Jack's heart struck once against his ribs. The ring stayed warm and still. The boy had not touched it. When Jack moved away, he had stopped. Jack pulled the front of the cloak over himself.

"Finish," he tried to say.

English came out. The boy waited.

Jack thought of the word he had heard. Covered. Its sound existed in his mind beside its meaning, two things he had mistaken for one. He remembered how it had occupied the stranger's mouth and moved his tongue deliberately.

"Finish," he said again.

This time the word was not English. The boy's pale blue eyes widened.

"You understand me."

Jack searched for each sound before allowing it into his mouth. "I understand you. I wasn't speaking your language."

The words felt wrong and familiar together. His tongue knew where to strike his teeth. His throat knew how to soften the final consonant. Jack had not learned any of it, but the body had. Speaking was less like translation than reaching into a drawer in someone else's room and finding what he needed arranged inside.

"What were you speaking?"

"English."

The boy attempted the unfamiliar word and produced something close enough to make Jack's chest tighten. "Is that a country?"

"A language." Jack swallowed. "From very far away."

The answer did not satisfy either of them. The boy glanced again at the scar on Jack's cheek but did not press.

"May I finish the cloak? Only the cloak."

Jack nodded. The boy wrapped it around Jack's hips, folded the upper edge twice, and tied two narrow corners at the left side. The result fell to just above Jack's knees and overlapped enough that walking should not expose him. It resembled a rough sarong more than anything the cloth had been made to do. Jack inspected himself.



Better. I'm Caleo.

The faded brown sat low on his narrow hips. The improvised garment left him bare from the waist up, but after watching half the road travel dressed much the same way, that no longer felt entirely naked. He cut a dashing figure.

The thought surprised him. So did the small return of vanity required to have it.

The boy leaned back to inspect the knot. "Better. I'm Caleo." It took Jack a moment to understand that this was not another word he had inherited.

"Jack," he said. "Thank you."

Caleo smiled. "Jack from Very Far Away."

"It seems so." Jack's attention returned to the road. "I woke in a ditch with those cuts. No clothes. Nothing except the ring."

Caleo's smile disappeared without taking the warmth from his face. He considered the thinning trees, the traffic, and the direction Jack had come from.

"I'm from Briartown," he said. "We're close. I know somewhere you can eat, and somewhere you can wash without paying for either."

Food answered inside Jack before caution could. "The people who did this might be there."

"They might." Caleo did not insult him by denying it. "But out here you have a cloak that isn't yours and fruit juice in your hair. In Briartown you can have a door between you and the road."

Jack touched the sealed line on his cheek. "You don't know me."

"No." Caleo bent and recovered the canvas bag. "You are beautiful, lost, and either telling the truth or committed to an extraordinarily inconvenient lie. I can work with all three until breakfast."

He turned toward the forest, then glanced back when Jack did not immediately follow. "I have to finish gathering. Half an hour, perhaps less if you help. Then Briartown."

Caleo had work, and Jack chose to follow him.

The collection bag was patched canvas, darker at the bottom from whatever damp things it had carried before. Caleo gave it to Jack after they crossed the drainage channel, not as a burden imposed but as if Jack's agreement to help had made the division obvious.

"Moss first," he said. "The silver kind beneath roots. Not the green sheets on the stones. That holds too much water and rots when you dry it."

Jack adjusted the strap over one shoulder. "What do you use it for?"

"Wards. Poultices. A woman near the dye market puts it beneath loose floorboards to keep biting ants out. She swears at me when I bring the wrong kind."

"Does the right kind keep ants out?"

"No. But it holds the ward that does."

Caleo moved through the forest without behaving as though it were an obstacle. His bare feet found dry roots and patches of stone beneath the leaf mould. He ducked vines without breaking stride. When the way narrowed, he turned sideways and let the plants pass across his skin rather than fighting every leaf.

Jack's longer legs helped. The body knew how to balance on wet ground even when Jack did not know which foothold it had chosen until his weight was already there. He kept one hand near the knot at his hip for the first several minutes. The cloak held.

Caleo found the silver moss beneath the northward curve of a fallen tree. He used a small knife to lift a strip without cutting into the root, rolled the moss loosely, and passed it to Jack. "Keep it whole."

Jack laid it in the bag without crushing the delicate fan. Caleo gave him a small, satisfied nod before leading him to a log so softened by rot that his fingers sank into the wood. Broad grey mushrooms grew along its length. He took two from a cluster of seven.

"Always leave more than you take," he said. "Otherwise you have performed theft against next week."

At the next fallen tree, Jack spotted the grey caps first. He crouched, counted six, and twisted two free at their bases.

Caleo turned each one over in his hand. "You did that exactly right."

Jack had braced for a correction. "I watched what you did."

"I can tell. You learn quickly."

Caleo smiled at him through the green light. With his near-white curls, bare brown chest, and little knife still in hand, he looked less like someone Jack had met beside a road than some strange forest nymph who had decided to test him. Jack remained lost, half dressed, and thoroughly intimidated by him.

The praise eased something anyway. Jack placed the mushrooms carefully in the bag.

The pale-rooted plant took longer. Its leaves grew close to the earth in sets of five, nearly hidden beneath taller ferns. Caleo found one and loosened the soil around it with his knife.

"This one we take whole," he said. "Leaving the root does nothing useful."

He pulled. The plant did not move.

Caleo shifted his grip and set both feet. Muscle appeared along his narrow back and shoulders, finer than Jack's but sharply laid beneath the skin. The root came free all at once with a wet tearing sound and a clot of red earth heavy enough to make Caleo step backward.

"That," Caleo said, holding it up, "was needlessly dramatic."

He shook away the soil and wrapped the pale root in a damp scrap of cloth. Jack watched the hands doing it. They were small, scarred across the fingers, and much stronger than the rest of Caleo suggested.

"The ring," Jack said. "What did you recognize?"

Caleo's fingers slowed against the knot in the cloth. "One mark means the body. Or flesh. The old books disagree depending on whether they want to sound respectable. Another has to do with returning something to its source." He glanced at Jack's hip. "The scars are new?"

"Yesterday. Both of them."

Caleo went still. Jack wished immediately that he had lied.

Caleo glanced toward the road as though someone might be standing there listening. "Then we're done. We should get you inside."

Jack held on to the collection bag. "Show me the next thing."

Caleo studied him for a moment, perhaps deciding whether this was courage or head injury. He handed Jack the wrapped root.

"Blue-veined leaves. They grow where the ground stays wet but the sun reaches it."

Jack found the clearing first. It opened where a tree had fallen years before, leaving a wound in the canopy that younger growth had not yet closed. Sun poured through. Water shone among low plants at the clearing's edge, and blue veins threaded the leaves nearest the mud.

Caleo showed him how to pinch each leaf at its stem without bruising it. Jack worked down one side of the patch while Caleo took the other. By the time the bag held enough, the sun had warmed the back of Jack's neck and sweat traced the center of his thin chest.

Caleo straightened and stretched, both arms reaching overhead. His ribs showed beneath brown skin. He scratched absently through the pale hair below his navel, faced a broad tree at the clearing's edge, and continued explaining how the leaves were dried.

"Never over a stove. Too fast ruins the oil. A shaded window is better, unless the rain comes sideways, which it will as soon as you trust the window."

He hooked his thumbs into the frayed waist of his shorts and freed his cock. Jack's attention followed before modesty could invent somewhere else to look.

A small mound of golden pubic hair showed above the lowered cloth. Caleo's cock hung long and thin while soft, pale where the rest of him was tanned. He took it in one hand and pissed against the tree without interrupting himself.

"If you tie them in pairs, you can move the whole line inside quickly. Three leaves to a knot. Four traps water between them."

Jack's face heated. He could have turned away. Caleo had not asked him to watch, and nothing prevented Jack from becoming fascinated by the canopy for half a minute. He wanted to see. So he did.

The stream darkened the bark and stirred the leaf mould at its roots. Caleo's hand rested easily around the soft shaft. There was no performance in the act, no hesitation, and no suggestion that a body required apology merely because someone else stood nearby.

Caleo finished, gave his cock a careless shake, and tucked it back into the frayed shorts. When he turned, his eyes found Jack's before Jack could arrange his face into innocence. Caleo smiled.

He said nothing about it. That made the smile worse.

Jack tightened the collection bag and stood. He had retained the lesson despite where his attention wandered. Caleo's lingering smile made clear that he knew both.

They returned to the road with the bag full enough to pull at Jack's shoulder. Traffic had thickened again. A line of carts moved through the last trees toward open daylight, and beyond them Jack could see the upper courses of a stone wall.

Briartown appeared gradually rather than all at once. First came smoke above the trees, then tiled roofs rising beyond the wall, red and moss-dark green. The road widened. Ditches became fitted drains. The deep bell sounded again, followed by two lighter answers from somewhere farther inside.

The main gate stood beneath a square tower. Guards in pale sleeveless coats checked carts beneath the arch. They did not stop everyone, but they opened bundles, lifted tarps, and made one driver unload a stack of baskets while the line complained around him. Caleo saw them and left the road.

"This way."

Jack followed him onto a narrow path running beside the wall. "Is there a reason we aren't using the entrance built for entering?"

"The man on the left enjoys searching my bag."

"Why?"

"Because the things in it are for people he doesn't like, and because he knows I dislike him. We have a rewarding relationship."

Jack checked the guards. None had noticed them leave the road.

"Is climbing the wall legal?"

Caleo considered. "It is an old wall. Perhaps the law has forgotten it."

The path narrowed between stone and thorny growth. Caleo knew exactly where to stop. Here the wall sagged outward by a fraction, its older blocks broad and uneven, the mortar recessed deeply enough to leave holds. On the far side came the slap of wet hides and a smell sharp enough to sting Jack's nose. Caleo took the collection bag from him and slung it across his back.

"The yard belongs to a tanner who doesn't ask questions before breakfast," he said. "Watch the pale stones. They crumble."

He climbed. Three quick steps carried him to shoulder height. His fingers caught a seam Jack would not have trusted. One bare foot pressed flat against the stone, calf tightening; then Caleo pulled himself upward with a smoothness that made his narrow body briefly horizontal. He hooked an elbow over the top and disappeared. The full bag followed a moment later, lifted above the wall in one hand. Caleo was quite strong. His empty hand appeared over the edge.

"Come on."

Jack considered it, then the wall. Old Jack had used ladders. Ladders had rungs, level feet, and instructions printed along one side. Gym class had offered painted floors, padded equipment, and teachers waiting to shout when someone used either incorrectly. They had not climbed walls at school.

He did not want to begin this new life by being hauled over every obstacle by the first beautiful boy who found him. He set his right foot into the lowest deep seam and reached.

The inherited body understood climbing better than he did. His left hand chose a hold. His weight shifted close to the wall. Long arms gave him the next stone before his feet seemed high enough to earn it. The sarong pulled across his thighs but held at the hip. Jack reached the upper course. A pale stone broke beneath his foot.

His body dropped. His right hand scraped down the wall, finding nothing. Before he could fall, Caleo caught his left wrist. The stop jarred Jack from shoulder to hip.

Caleo lay braced across the wall with one hand locked around him and the other gripping the far edge. The collection bag remained on his back. His arm trembled but did not open.

Jack's feet swung less than three feet above the leaf mould. If Caleo released him, he would land upright. He might scrape his palms or sit down hard if the unfamiliar body betrayed him, but the wall was not high enough to do real harm.

Jack found another foothold.

"I have it," he said.

"Good. Climb."

Jack pushed. Caleo pulled only when the next stone put Jack within reach, adding force rather than replacing his. Jack got one forearm over the top, then his stomach, and swung a leg across. For a moment they sat together astride the old wall, breathing hard above a tannery yard full of vats, stretched hides, and workers pretending not to watch. Jack's attention dropped to Caleo's hand still around his wrist.

Caleo released him only after Jack had settled securely across the wall. On the outer side, the pale stone lay in fresh pieces beside the path. Jack laughed, breathless with relief and a little embarrassed by it.



Breakfast waited somewhere beyond the tannery yard.

Below them lay Briartown: close roofs, narrow lanes, smoke and steam lifting into the brightening day. Somewhere beyond the tannery, bread was baking. Jack could smell it beneath the lime, hides, and forest damp. Caleo dropped lightly into the yard and tilted his head up.

"Breakfast," he said.

A decorative border of green leaves and small white flowers with yellow centers, arranged in a symmetrical, vine-like pattern around the central text.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER SIX

The Mayor in Frayed Shorts

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ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Jack found his own way down from the wall. The last drop put both feet beneath him, just as he had insisted it would. His knees bent. The borrowed cloak pulled tight across his thighs but remained knotted, and he landed in the tannery yard with nothing worse than grit under his palms from the wall. Three workers had watched the whole descent while pretending to scrape hides.

One of them, a broad woman with her hair wrapped in red cloth, rested her knife across the beam. A copper hoop swung from one ear. "You're using my wall again."

Caleo adjusted the collection bag on his shoulder. "Your gate was closed."

Jack turned. The gate stood open behind her. He caught the knot at his hip as if discovering the danger again.

"You made me climb a wall in this... thing! It could have come open at any time."

"I wouldn't have minded," Caleo said. He waved Jack's objection away and headed across the yard.

"Neither would I," the tannery woman said.

Jack sighed and blushed from his throat to his ears. The woman returned to the hide with one corner of her mouth raised.

Jack followed him between vats large enough to drown in. The yard smelled of lime, wet leather, urine, and something animal that the heat had worked deep into the stones. Workers stood bare-armed and bare-bellied in stained aprons, their feet protected by thick wooden sandals. Blue marks glimmered along the rims of two vats, keeping the liquid inside at a slow turn without paddle or hand.

No one challenged Jack's presence. One man glanced at the scar on his cheek and then at the sarong. Whatever conclusion he reached, he kept it. Caleo slipped through the open gate into a lane barely wide enough for a handcart. Briartown closed around Jack.

It did not end with the worker lanes surrounding him. The city spread across the broad lower slopes and into the basin beyond, roof after roof descending through a haze of cook smoke, kiln smoke, and damp heat. Streets vanished behind whole districts and emerged again as pale lines on the opposite rise. Above all of it stood a fortress.

Dark outer walls crowned the hill, too extensive to belong to a single house. Square towers rose at uneven intervals where newer roofs and windows had been fitted behind the old battlements. However the streets turned, some portion of the fortress

remained above the town: a tower between chimneys, a length of wall beyond the laundry, iron roofs catching the sun over crowded gables.

The houses leaned over the street in timbered layers, upper floors shading plaster patched in six different colors. Water ran through fitted channels at both sides of the paving. Laundry crossed overhead on ropes and moving pulleys. Somewhere above, someone beat a rug against a rail. A woman shouted the price of onions from a doorway. Hammers answered one another from workshops farther down the hill. Everything worked.

Not cleanly, not quietly, and rarely without a repair showing, but it worked. A broken gutter had been redirected with half a clay pipe and a square of hammered copper. One window shutter hung from mismatched hinges, both polished from use. At the next corner, a public pump bore a blue-white symbol like the culvert marks. A child pressed the handle, and cold water rose with a flash beneath the spout. Jack wanted to stop and inspect it. His stomach wanted breakfast more.

Caleo took three turns without hesitation and entered a narrow rear door beneath a painted loaf of bread. Warmth struck Jack first, followed by yeast, cinnamon, and browned butter. His body tightened around the smell so strongly that he had to put one hand against the doorframe.

The kitchen occupied most of the ground floor. Two ovens opened along the far wall, their black iron doors surrounded by old tile. A honey-colored stone sat in a cradle beneath each one. Lines of light moved through the stones like banked fire. Three bakers and two younger workers moved between the ovens, cooling racks, and long tables. One fed shaped loaves onto a wooden peel. Another braided ropes of dough with both hands while a flour-covered boy carried full trays toward the front shop.

A heavy woman commanded the central table, cutting dough with a broad knife while empty trays shifted themselves along a groove beside her elbow. She looked up at Caleo, then at Jack. The others looked too, but none of them stopped working. Her gaze took in the scar, the naked chest, and the familiar cloak tied around unfamiliar hips.

"Sit him down," she said.

Jack sat. The nearest chair had one leg shorter than the others and rocked beneath him. He put his bare foot on the crosspiece to steady it. The woman set down a wooden bowl filled with eggs, potatoes, peppers, and torn bread fried together in fat. A heel of fresh loaf followed. She placed a cup of water beside it and went back to her dough.

"Thank you," Jack said.

"Eat before you fall through my floor."

Caleo dropped the collection bag near a shelf. "Auntie, this is Jack. I found him hiding in the ferns beside the south road. He was completely naked, and he spoke a language I've never heard, except then he spoke ours, and he says that cut happened yesterday, but look at it. And the ring has marks from the old book. Some of the body ones. I think."

His voice climbed on *completely naked* and went higher again over the ring. He sounded like a child explaining how he had found a turtle in the road and why it ought to be allowed inside. Jack tightened one hand around the knot at his hip.

"Jack can tell me who Jack is when his hands stop shaking."

They had begun shaking. Jack had not noticed until she named it. He ate.



Jack can tell me who Jack is when his hands stop shaking.

The first mouthful burned his tongue. He swallowed it anyway. Crisp potato gave way to soft egg and sweet pepper, with enough salt to make his eyes water after a day of

fruit. He slowed only when the bowl was half empty and the kitchen had stopped narrowing around it.

Caleo opened his bag and laid the forest gathering across the end of the table. Moss went onto a drying screen. The pale root disappeared into a jar beneath damp cloth. He hung the blue-veined leaves in pairs from a line near the window, three leaves to each knot. Jack watched him do it correctly and returned to the food.

When one of the bakers reached the end of a row of unbaked loaves, Caleo washed his hands and stepped into the open place beside her. She passed him the scoring knife without asking. He cut three swift lines across each loaf, turned the tray, and sent it down the groove toward the ovens before returning to his bag.

The woman slid two cinnamon rolls from a cooling tray onto a square of paper. One went beside Jack's bowl. Caleo wrapped the other and tucked it into the collection bag.

"The one beside your bowl is yours," she told Jack.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"You can call me Mrs. Gowrie."

She returned to cutting dough. He ate his roll while it was warm. Cinnamon and sugar stuck to his fingers. Across the kitchen, Caleo inspected a row of small stoppered bottles, selected two, and put them in the bag with his untouched roll.

Jack finished everything Mrs. Gowrie had given him. Hunger remained, but it had become a distant, ordinary thing that could believe another meal would happen. The chair rocked when he shifted.

Jack lifted it by the seat. The shorter leg had not worn down. Its joint had opened beneath the frame, leaving a narrow dark gap where the glue had failed.

"Do you have a mallet?" he asked.

Mrs. Gowrie stopped cutting.

"Why?"

Jack turned the chair so she could see the joint. "The leg is working loose. If I drive it back and pin the corner, it should stop rocking." She pointed the knife toward a cupboard.

The tools inside were old but recognizable: mallet, awl, small saw, iron pincers, coils of wire, nails stored by size in chipped cups. Jack chose the mallet and a narrow

wedge of hardwood from a box of scraps. He tested the joint with his thumb, scraped old glue from the edge, then drove the leg square beneath the frame.

The body gave him steadier hands than his own had been, but the work belonged to Jack. Pressure, grain, fit. He knew those. He trimmed the wedge, coated it with a little glue from a covered pot, and tapped it into the opened seam until the leg stopped moving. Caleo had come to stand beside the table.

Jack set the chair down and put his weight on each corner. No rock.

Mrs. Gowrie dragged it toward herself, sat once, and returned to her feet. She took the knife back up.

"Cupboard door next time," she said.

Jack glanced at the cupboard. Its upper hinge sagged.

"I can do it now."

"You can do it after Cal finishes the deliveries he's been avoiding by bringing home strays."

Caleo collected the bag. He did not defend himself.

Jack could have stayed. Caleo had done enough. Jack returned the mallet to the cupboard.

"I'm coming with you."

Caleo's smile appeared quickly and remained after he turned away. "Good. I need someone respectable to carry the criminal moss."

Jack picked up the drying screen instead of answering. Caleo took the hint and led him outside.

Their first stop was three doors down, where an old woman waited beside a shutter removed from its window. Ants moved along the lower edge in a black line. Caleo knelt, mixed a pinch of silver moss with oil from one bottle, and pressed it into a groove cut along the wood.

The old woman held a loop of red thread ready for him. Caleo tied it through two holes in the shutter, drew one symbol with his stained fingertip, and breathed across it. The thread tightened. A dull red light traveled from knot to knot. The ants broke formation and scattered into cracks between the paving stones.

"Three weeks?" the woman asked.

"If you don't wash the groove. The last one had a drier month."

Caleo capped the bottle and slid his hands beneath the shutter's heavier end. Jack understood and took the other. Caleo's narrow, scarred hands kept the frame level while Jack's forearms strained beneath his share of the weight.

Together they raised the shutter to the empty window. The old woman guided the iron straps over their pins while Caleo held it steady. When the last pin dropped into place, she swung the shutter closed, then open again. The red thread remained taut in its groove.

She accepted this and gave him a paper twist containing six sugared nuts. "Morning, Mayor."

"Morning, Mistress Vale."

Caleo ate one nut before they reached the corner. He offered the paper to Jack, who took one, and folded the remainder into his bag.

"Mayor?" Jack asked.

"A joke that outlived everyone responsible for it."

The answer closed rather than invited more. Jack let it.

The next lane opened into a market street. Canvas shades stretched between buildings, making colored rooms of the daylight. Fish lay over blue ice that did not melt. A seamstress displayed cropped wraps and short kilts on wooden forms. Men and women shouted over fruit, lamp oil, nails, spices, and secondhand books. Jack searched automatically for the markers he would have used at home.

There were no cars parked at the curb, no phones appearing whenever conversation paused, no new trainers beside split ones. Those differences belonged to everybody here and told him nothing. Poverty survived the missing inventions. It showed in cloth patched until the patch needed repair, in a knife sharpened narrow, in whether a person ever spent money on something that served no purpose except beauty.

Almost everyone wore some small ornament. A porter with rope burns around both hands had a copper ring in one ear. The fish seller wore blue beads at her throat. Two girls sweeping beneath a spice awning had braided colored glass into their hair. Even the tannery worker had possessed one swinging hoop. Caleo had nothing.

No ring, bracelet, earring, bead, chain, or guild cord marked him. His frayed shorts had been mended twice with different thread. The small knife at his hip had lost half the width of its blade to sharpening. Now his cloak belonged to Jack. At a narrow shop between the seamstress and a seller of ink, Caleo stopped.

Jewelry covered the back wall in modest rows. Most of it was copper, polished brass, colored cord, and glass. Near the center hung a small necklace: a green glass leaf on a fine bronze chain, no larger than the first joint of Jack's thumb.

Caleo's gaze rested on it. His fingers touched the bare place below his collarbone.

A price had been painted on a square of wood beneath the chain. Jack could read the numerals through the body's borrowed knowledge without understanding yet what the amount could buy. Caleo understood. After several breaths, he continued down the street.

He did not sigh. He did not make a joke about it. The empty skin at his throat became more conspicuous than the necklace had been. Jack followed.

They delivered the mushrooms to a woman boiling bandages in a courtyard, and the pale root to a man whose left hand had swollen around a splinter. Caleo opened the swelling with a cleaned needle, applied something ground from the root, and left one of the small bottles behind. Neither person paid him.

The woman gave him two little cakes flavored with lemon peel. Caleo ate one. He carried the other until a girl sitting beneath a stair called his name, then placed it in her open hand without interrupting his explanation of how often the bandage needed changing. Jack waited until they had left the courtyard.

"Why don't you charge them?"

Caleo shifted the lighter collection bag higher on his shoulder. "They have nothing to offer me that they can afford to lose."

"You need money."

"Yes."

Caleo did not soften the answer or pretend virtue made him less hungry. He held up the paper twist of sugared nuts. "People give me food. Thread. Soap. Whatever appears when they have extra. I keep what I need." Ahead of them, hammering rose above the market noise, followed by a man's shout.

"Move, boy! The mortar's setting while you dream over it."



Let him sit down.

A brick building was going up beside a narrow square. Scaffolding covered its face. Men worked above with their stomachs bare and cloth wrapped around their heads against the sun. At ground level, a thin boy struggled to lift a wooden hod loaded with bricks.

He could not have been more than sixteen. His shirt and shorts had been cut for someone broader, perhaps older, and belted until the extra cloth folded around him. Redness ringed both eyes. Mortar dust streaked one wet cheek. The master mason shouted again from beside a mixing trough. Caleo stopped. He took the wrapped cinnamon roll from his bag and crossed the square.

"Ren," he said. "Put that down and eat."

The boy looked at the mason before lowering the hod. "He's working," the mason said.

Caleo placed the roll in Ren's hands. "You owe him six days, he's been carrying your bricks since sunrise without breakfast, and your shouting can be heard from the dye market. Let him sit down."

The higher, boyish note Jack had begun to recognize in Caleo's ordinary speech was gone. His voice was not deep. It was level, unhurried, and left no room for the mason to mistake him.

The mason's face hardened. He was twice Caleo's width and old enough to be his father. Caleo stood before him in frayed shorts, bare feet white with road dust, and no badge or weapon except the narrow little knife used on roots. The mason scowled. Then he turned back to the mortar trough.

Ren sat on the curb with the roll held in both hands. Caleo crouched long enough to say something Jack could not hear. The boy nodded and began eating. Jack tried to understand what he had seen. Caleo returned to him.

"How old are you?" Jack asked.

"Eighteen."

The same age as Jack. Caleo walked on without waiting for surprise to become praise. At the next corner, a carter bent over a harness called, "Morning, Mayor!" Caleo raised one hand.

A woman leaning from a second-floor window asked whether the rat ward had held. When Caleo called back that he would check tomorrow, she thanked the Mayor loudly enough for the lane.

An old man outside a cooper's shop waved with his whole arm. Two children followed Caleo for half a street until he divided the remaining sugared nuts between them and sent them back. The title began to make sense. Some people still turned their faces away when he passed. A shopkeeper lowered an awning rather than meet his eyes. Jack wanted to know how a boy with no office or money had become so difficult to dismiss.

The rest of the afternoon passed in small work. Caleo read a letter to a woman whose sight had failed. Jack held a warped shutter level while Caleo reset its ward cord, then used borrowed pincers to bend the latch until it caught again. They carried a sack of flour from a cart to the bakery. Caleo disappeared twice into buildings and returned both times, which Jack noticed more than he wanted to.

Caleo was easy around people. He remembered a cobbler's cough and a washerwoman's grandson. He flirted harmlessly with a fruit seller old enough to laugh at him and listened without interruption when a frightened man described a landlord entering his room. He was charming when charm helped. When it did not, he remained kind. He remained kind to Jack after Jack had eaten, worked, and ceased being an emergency beside the road. Jack could fall for him.

The admission came in Jack's own internal voice. No foreign street opened behind his eyes. No remembered mouth closed over him. The ring remained quiet beneath the sarong.

Jack had never thought of himself as gay. At least, he could not remember ever applying the word to himself. He had assumed a future without examining its details: apprenticeship, work, some home reached by the same streets he had always known. Whoever had owned this body had certainly desired boys. The naked run, the mouth beneath the arch, and the disordered bed had left little room to doubt that.

The body's interest in Caleo might be inherited. The quickness of arousal, the ease with which Jack had watched him piss, even the warmth that returned whenever Caleo came close could have roots Jack had not grown. But the dead boy had never met Caleo.

He had never watched Caleo give away a cinnamon roll he probably wanted. He had never seen an eighteen-year-old in ruined shorts make a mason stop shouting. He could not be responsible for the relief Jack felt each time Caleo returned from a doorway. That much belonged to Jack.

They reached the bakery near sunset. The enchanted oven stones had dimmed from honey to deep amber, and the day's heat escaped through the open rear door. Mrs. Gowrie put Jack to work on the cupboard hinge before he could ask. He reset the pin, added a thin washer cut from scrap leather, and made the door hang level. Caleo carried the empty collection bag upstairs. Jack finished the hinge and followed.

The room beneath the roof was larger than he expected and poor in a different way than the streets below. Nothing in it was ornamental unless it had been found. Bundled herbs hung from rafters. Papers covered a small desk, weighted by stones, cups, and tied packets. The bed was wide enough for two but the blanket had been mended along one edge. A gable window stood open above the bakery garden. A barn owl slept on the dresser in a nest made partly from socks.

Caleo set down the bag. The owl opened black eyes and gave a soft, questioning trill.

"Percy," Caleo said, and every public note left his voice. He crossed the room and stroked the owl's head with two fingers. "Hello, darling. I was gone longer than I promised."

Percy leaned into the touch and closed his eyes. Jack thought of a dog waiting beside an ordinary door in another world. The memory hurt differently now that he was fed and no longer alone enough to avoid it.

Caleo remained beside the dresser until Percy settled. Then he pulled a clean cup from beneath the desk, filled it from a covered pitcher, and gave it to Jack.

"Auntie has the bath heating," he said. "You can sit here until it's ready. Afterward, tell me whatever you can about the ditch. You don't have to make the missing parts sound sensible."

Jack sat on the edge of the bed with the cup between both hands. Below them, Mrs. Gowrie and the bakery hands cleaned around the last batch of loaves. Pans knocked together, someone laughed, and evening voices crossed the lane outside. Caleo opened the window another inch for the breeze, then stayed in the room with him even though the rescue was over. Jack drank and watched Percy sleep.

A decorative border of green vines with small white flowers and large green leaves, framing the central text area.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Name in the Water



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The bath was ready when the last customer left the bakery. Jack heard the front bolt drop below. One of the bakers called goodnight from the lane, another answered from farther off, and the kitchen settled into the smaller sounds of work done without an audience. Water ran through a pipe. A peel scraped clean. Someone stacked bowls inside bowls.

Mrs. Gowrie came upstairs carrying a folded towel and a pair of thin linen shorts. "These should stay up," she said.

Jack set his cup aside and accepted both. The shorts had been washed soft enough that the ties had curled. One knee bore a square patch sewn with small, severe stitches. "Thank you, Mrs. Gowrie. I can work for them. The cupboard wasn't difficult, and I saw two loose boards beside the ovens."

"You can see them again tomorrow if you're still here. Tonight you can stop looking for employment in my furniture." She turned to Caleo. "Don't let him fall asleep in the water."

Caleo leaned one shoulder against the bedpost. "I was going to let him drown and bring home someone else in the morning."

Mrs. Gowrie held him beneath a level stare until his smile failed. "I'll keep him awake," he amended.

She left them with the towel and shorts. Her tread descended the stairs, heavy on the third board and almost silent on the fourth.

Jack ran his thumb over the patch. He wanted to argue that the repair gave the garment more value, not less. He also wanted to be clean badly enough that he could smell the road on himself despite the bakery below.

Caleo took the lamp from beside the bed. "Come on."

The bathing room occupied a stone addition behind the kitchen. It had no window, only a square vent high in one wall and a clear glass globe set into the ceiling. The globe brightened when Caleo pressed two fingers to a mark beside the door. Warm white light spread across a broad copper tub, shelves of soap and folded cloths, and a floor sloped toward a grated drain. It had the soft fullness of sunlight passing through thin curtains.

The room had been made for work rather than luxury. Two pipes entered above the tub. One carried cold water from a roof cistern. The other passed through a clay housing built around a honey-colored stone like the ones beneath the ovens, though this one glowed more softly. Steam drifted from the surface.

Caleo set the lamp aside and tested the water with his hand. "Auntie thinks every bath should cook the person in it."

Jack touched it. The heat bit pleasantly into his fingers. "This is fine."

"You lived through a ditch. Your judgment is damaged."

Jack kept his hand in the water. "I can wash myself."

"I believe you. I'll be outside. If your head gets worse, call before you hit the floor."

Caleo showed him which jar held soap and which bottle was for hair. He placed a wooden brush within reach, moved the towel away from the splash line, and left without trying to watch Jack undo the cloak.

The closed door changed the room. Jack put one hand against the knot at his hip. He had worn the same piece of cloth since late morning, had climbed a wall in it, carried shutters and flour, sweated through the market, and repeatedly caught strangers noticing what little it concealed. Removing it in private should not have required courage. He loosened the knot, and Caleo's cloak fell around his feet.

The sunlike light showed everything the forest had hidden. Dirt filled the fine lines of his palms and darkened the calluses. Mud remained beneath two toenails. The cut on his cheek had closed into a raised red seam, while the wound at his hip had contracted to a narrow crust surrounded by new pink skin. Scratches crossed his shoulders and shins. Faded bruising spread behind one knee where a root had caught him.

At the base of his cock, the ring sat clean. Nothing else on him was. Sweat had darkened the sparse hair above it. Road grit and grime had collected in a dark ring where his foreskin was damp around the partially exposed head. His soft shaft hung low between his narrow thighs in the humid room, with his balls loose and heavy beneath it. The metal ring alone held no dirt in its markings. Its dark surface reflected the ceiling globe as if freshly polished.

Jack stepped into the bath. The water reached halfway up his calves before the heat made him stop. He gripped both sides, lowered himself another inch, stopped again, and finally sat with his back against the curved copper. Water rose to his chest and carried gray streams away from his skin.

"Oh," he said, the sound escaping before he could decide whether anyone outside should hear it. His shoulders loosened. His hip ceased pulling. Even the ache behind his eyes withdrew beneath the heat until it became something he could imagine forgetting.

Jack washed his face first. Dirt clouded the cloth. He rinsed it, washed his neck and chest, then scrubbed each arm until the skin beneath showed pale and unmarked except for the little injuries already closing. He could manage. He worked soap through the hair at his groin and cleaned carefully around the ring. It did not tighten or warm. When he drew back his foreskin, he found more dirt than he liked and washed until the skin moved cleanly beneath his fingers. The familiarity of the task helped. Different body or not, it had become his responsibility.

His back proved harder. Jack twisted with the cloth pulled between both hands. The motion tugged his hip. He changed direction and reached over one shoulder, but his long arm did not solve the angle. When he tried to wash his hair, both elbows raised above his head and the room shifted several inches to the left. He caught the rim as water struck copper behind him, and the door opened at once.

Caleo remained on the threshold. "Jack?"

Jack kept his grip on the rim. "Still conscious."

Caleo waited there until Jack's eyes focused on him. "A thrilling success."

Jack waited for the floor to settle beneath the tub. The position left him bent forward with one arm braced against the rim and wet hair hanging into his eyes. Asking for help should have been easier after everything else Caleo had done for him, but it was not. "I can't reach properly," he said.

Caleo entered without making him repeat it. He rolled a low stool beside the tub, dipped the brush, and rubbed soap into its bristles. "Turn around."

Jack shifted until his back faced Caleo. The tub narrowed toward that end. He drew one knee up to make room, leaving the other leg extended beneath the water.

The first pass of the brush traveled from Jack's shoulder to the middle of his back. Its bristles were firmer than the cloth but not painful. Caleo worked slowly across the places Jack had missed, using his other hand at Jack's shoulder when he needed him to lean. The contact was practical. Jack felt every finger anyway.

"You said the cut on your face happened yesterday." Caleo's next pass ended at Jack's waist. Two fingertips stopped beside the wound at his hip without touching the crust.

"I think they both did. This one was open when I woke up. Deep enough that I could see into it."

The brush stopped. "That should not look like this."

Caleo leaned nearer. Jack felt his breath disturb the damp hair at the back of his neck. The fingers beside the wound moved down, following nothing Jack could see, until they reached the water and withdrew.

"Some of the marks on the ring are body signs," Caleo said. "Flesh. Holding. Return, perhaps. The old book uses a different hand, and half the pictures are copies of copies."

When Jack asked whether Caleo could remove it, Caleo sat back enough to see Jack's face. "Not without knowing what the other half says."

It was not the answer Jack wanted. It was better than false confidence.

Caleo resumed brushing. "What do you remember?"

Jack watched the cloudy water move around his raised knee. Caleo had promised he could leave gaps. That made choosing one feel less like constructing a lie.

"I was going somewhere," he said. "I think I was expected past Briartown, at Thornfield Academy."

Caleo drew the brush along Jack's spine. "That's about forty minutes uphill on foot. You've been looking at it all day. The old fortress above the town is Thornfield."

Jack pictured the dark walls returning above every street, too large and too high to lose behind Briartown's roofs. He had taken them for the reason the city existed there, not a school.

"I knew the name, but not what it belonged to. I didn't know what Briartown looked like either. I knew it when you said it."

Caleo drew the brush over Jack's shoulder. "Like remembering a word you've forgotten?"

"More like finding someone else's note in my pocket." Jack pressed his thumb into his palm beneath the water. That came too close, but Caleo did not seize on it. When he asked whether anything else had returned, Jack gave him the name Eomer.

"I think he arranged the Academy. Or paid for it," Jack said. Caleo's next stroke slowed beneath the name. Jack pressed on. "And Drake. That's mine. Jack Drake."



Jack Drake.

The brush left Caleo's hand, struck the rim, and dropped into the water. It floated against the copper behind Jack.

Jack started to turn, but Caleo stopped him. "Stay there."

Caleo reached past him. His chest came briefly against Jack's wet shoulder, and his arm disappeared into the water beside Jack's ribs. He caught the brush before it drifted beneath the curve of the tub and sat back with water running from his elbow.

Caleo rubbed his thumb once across the bristles. Jack watched the unnecessary motion. "You know that name."

"Everyone in Briartown knows it." Caleo dipped the brush again, although it was already wet.

Jack asked why. "Because names like Drake are made difficult to avoid."

That was all he offered. The brush returned to Jack's back, careful and regular. Its rhythm was the same as before. Caleo was not.

Jack considered forcing the question. Caleo had earned more trust than anyone in this world. He had not earned every truth Jack possessed merely because there were so few. The distinction worked both ways, so Jack let the silence remain.

Caleo rinsed the soap from his back and poured water through his hair with a small copper jug. He worked in the sharp-smelling liquid from the bottle, fingers pressing carefully against Jack's scalp. Near the crown, one touch found the injury. Pain flashed white behind Jack's eyes, his hands locked around the rim, and a different road opened behind them.

Dark shop windows stood to his right, traffic to his left, and a green light shone on wet pavement. A silver hood slewed sideways beneath white headlamps. Someone across the street shouted, and the memory broke before the headlamps reached him.

"Jack." Caleo's hands had gone still in his hair.

Jack could tell him about the pavement, the lights, and a machine Caleo had no reason to believe could exist. He could tell him that the road belonged to another world and the body in the tub had belonged to someone else. The name Drake had already made Caleo drop the brush. The rest would give a boy Jack had known for one day every piece required to expose him, so Jack kept those pieces.

"A cart hit me," Jack said. "A big metal one. It left the road and came straight at me."

"And after that?" Caleo asked.

Jack shook his head beneath Caleo's hands. "Nothing until the ditch."

Caleo rested one hand at the base of Jack's neck until his grip loosened from the rim. Then he lifted the copper jug. "Close your eyes."

Jack obeyed. Warm water poured through his hair, carrying soap down his neck and shoulders. Caleo used his fingers until the last of it ran clear. He did not ask what kind of cart could be made entirely of metal or how it had left Jack naked. He finished the work Jack had asked him to do.

When Jack opened his eyes, the bathwater had gone gray. A darker residue circled the drain valve. The body beneath it looked less like something pulled from a ditch.

Caleo stood and took the towel from its hook. "Can you stand?"

"Yes." Jack put both hands on the rim and rose carefully. Water streamed from his chest and stomach.

Caleo did not turn away. "I've seen you naked already, Jack." Jack paused with one foot still in the tub.

That had been necessity. Standing clean in the globe's warm light and allowing himself to be looked at was different.

Jack stepped out. Caleo's attention passed over him, no longer clinical. It lingered at the lean planes of his stomach, moved lower, and returned to his face. The look was brief enough that Jack could have pretended not to notice, but he did not want to pretend.

Some quiet, vain part of him wanted Caleo to see what the water had uncovered. He wanted that quick stillness to belong to Jack rather than to the wounds, the ring, or the beautiful dead boy who had worn the body first. Caleo opened the towel and held it out.

Jack took it before wanting became an erection they would both have to address. He dried himself and pulled on the borrowed shorts. The linen contained him loosely. When he tied them, the waistband rested just above the ring.

They returned upstairs to find Percy on the bedpost with one foot drawn into his feathers, watching the room through black eyes. Someone had brought up a covered bowl while they were gone. Steam escaped when Caleo lifted the lid.

Potatoes, onions, and pieces of dark meat filled a thick broth. Two slices of bread lay across the top to keep them warm.

Caleo uncovered the bowl. "Auntie has decided you remain in danger of falling through the floor."

Jack sat on the bed and accepted the bowl. "She fed me enough for two people this morning."

Caleo settled near the foot of the bed. "She'll regard that as evidence she was right."

Caleo sat cross-legged while Jack ate. He did not ask questions between mouthfuls. The room had darkened around the gold-white street lamps outside, and moving light from the bakery garden trembled across the ceiling whenever leaves crossed them.

Jack finished half the bowl before giving Caleo the rest of what he was willing to share. He described waking wounded in the ditch, the ring guiding his survival, and names returning only when something pulled them loose. He left out what the ring had demanded and how completely he had obeyed. Caleo listened with both hands loose around one ankle.

Caleo let the silence following Jack's account settle. With his hands still loose around his ankle, he said, "A cart doesn't explain why you woke naked with that ring."

Jack touched the patch at his knee. "It doesn't explain it to me either."

Caleo regarded him for several breaths. Caution had returned to his mouth, the same reserve Jack had seen after the name Drake disturbed him. It did not erase the day behind them. "All right," he said.

Jack had expected another question. The absence of one made the next words come more quickly.

"What am I supposed to do?" Jack asked.

"Tonight? Sleep. Tomorrow is less simple."

Caleo leaned back against the footboard. "If someone named Drake was expected at Thornfield, the Academy will have its own record. They keep records for people who matter to them, and people who owe them money, and I suspect a Drake would manage to be both."

Jack asked what would happen if Thornfield's records rejected him.

Caleo rubbed his heel against the bedframe before answering. "Then you'll know more than you do now."

Jack's fingers tightened around the bowl. "What if they say I am?"

Caleo's gaze rested on the scar across Jack's cheek. "Then you'll know what they're expecting you to become."

Jack disliked that answer because it was honest enough to preserve the danger. He could remain in Briartown, find work with his hands, and avoid every person who might recognize the name he carried. The ring and borrowed memories would follow him. Hiding would make the questions quieter, not answer them.

When the alternatives had finished circling, Jack put the bowl aside. "I'll go to Thornfield."

Caleo nodded once. "I'll take you."

Jack kept one hand on the bowl. "You don't have to."

Caleo reached for the bowl and set it back in Jack's hands. "That's not why I'm going. Finish that."

The answer warmed Jack more than a promise made beautifully would have, and he finished eating while Caleo undressed for bed. Caleo pushed his frayed shorts down and left them beside the dresser without replacing them. Jack tried not to stare and failed selectively. Caleo's cock hung long and narrow beneath a small patch of golden

hair. When he crossed naked to the bed, Jack's attention followed the lean curve of his ass before returning hurriedly to the bowl in his hands.

The bed was wide enough for two. That fact had seemed merely descriptive when Jack first entered the room. It became more important when Caleo turned down the blanket on both sides.

"Where are you sleeping?" Jack asked.

Caleo pointed at the bed. "You can have the wall if you think I'll steal the door."

Jack took the wall because it gave him something solid at his back. Caleo pressed the globe beside the bed, dimming it until the room held only a low twilight. Percy resettled on the post, spread one wing, and tucked it close again.



Without touching him and without leaving.

They lay on separate sides with the window open above the garden. Jack kept the borrowed shorts on. Caleo lay naked beneath the warm linen as though sharing his bed with a stranger required no alteration to the way he slept.

Jack listened to the building finish its day. A bar settled into place below. Water moved through the wall and ceased. Mrs. Gowrie spoke once, too softly for words, and someone answered from the kitchen. Then even those sounds ended.

Beside him, Caleo breathed without touching him and without leaving. For the first time since the white headlamps crossed the pavement, Jack allowed sleep to arrive without wondering whether he would survive it.

A decorative border of green vines with small white flowers and large green leaves, framing the central text area.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Likable Person



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Jack woke by degrees to warmth, pressure, and the slow complaint of a bedframe that had not been making that sound when he fell asleep.

The room remained gray with early morning. The globe beside Caleo's bed had gone dark, but daylight had begun gathering at the open window and laying pale bars across the floor. From the garden below came the wet shake of leaves surrendering the night's rain. Percy had left the bedpost. Somewhere above them, claws traveled briskly across the roof tiles.

Jack lay on his side facing Caleo. They had crossed the empty space between them in their sleep. One of Caleo's legs had slipped between Jack's, and Jack's arm lay over Caleo's waist beneath the blanket. Caleo's face was tucked against Jack's throat. His hair smelled faintly of smoke, crushed leaves, and the soap from the bathing room.

Lower down, Jack's borrowed shorts had twisted around his hips. His erection strained beneath the thin linen. Caleo was hard too. His naked cock lay caught between them, long and hot against the cloth covering Jack's own, and every sleepy movement of Jack's hips slid the two together.

Jack pressed closer.

The pleasure was soft at first, blurred at the edges by sleep. Caleo's shaft shifted against his through the linen, bare skin dragging over the damp cloth. Jack tightened the arm around Caleo's waist and moved again, more firmly. The bed answered beneath them. Caleo made a low sound against Jack's neck.

That sound brought Jack far enough awake to understand what he was doing. It did not make him stop. He drew his hips back until the pressure eased, then rolled them forward deliberately. His cock slid along Caleo's. The sensation sharpened at once. He wanted the cloth gone. He wanted to know what Caleo's skin felt like against his without anything between them, and the certainty belonged to him before any inherited memory could offer an opinion.

Caleo's hand closed around Jack's hip and held him still.

Jack opened his eyes. Caleo had lifted his head. Sleep remained in the creases beneath his eyes, but his attention had cleared.

"Are you awake?"

"I am now."

Caleo's hand stayed at his hip. He did not move away, and Jack could still feel the hard length of him pressed between their bodies. "Do you want to keep doing that?"

Jack's first answer caught somewhere between embarrassment and the pressure in his shorts. He made himself give the useful one. "Yes. I want you."

Caleo watched him for another breath. Then he leaned in and kissed Jack's cheek, just below the bone.

His mouth was warm from sleep. Jack caught the back of Caleo's neck and held him there while Caleo kissed the same place again, then followed the line toward his ear. Caleo shifted closer. Their erections pressed together, and Jack moved his hips on purpose until Caleo lifted his head with a breath against Jack's temple.

"Those need to come off," Caleo said.

Jack pushed at the waistband. The shorts had knotted themselves during the night, one tie buried beneath his hip. Caleo freed it with more patience than Jack possessed and drew the linen down. Jack lifted first one leg and then the other, and Caleo dropped the shorts beside the bed.

Cooler air moved across Jack's bare skin. His cock stood hard against his stomach, foreskin drawn behind the swollen head. A clear bead had gathered at the opening and stretched when Caleo passed one thumb beneath it. Jack's breath shortened.

Caleo did not resume their grinding. He moved down the bed instead and folded the blanket away from Jack's legs. "Lie back."

Jack settled onto his back. His head found the warm place where Caleo had slept. Caleo swung one knee across him and straddled Jack's legs just above the knees, keeping his weight in the mattress rather than on the healing hip. Naked in the growing daylight, he was no longer the strange forest boy who had stepped out of the ferns. Jack knew the scar crossing one palm, the pale marks on his knees, the narrow ribs beneath his skin, and the small patch of golden hair above his cock. Familiarity made him more desirable, not less.

Caleo let his attention travel down Jack's chest and stomach to the erection standing against it. "That isn't fair. You get a body like that and a cock to match."

Jack smiled slightly. He kept his eyes on Caleo's chest instead of trying to meet that frank appraisal. "You're gorgeous," he whispered.

Caleo leaned forward. His erection lowered with him and came to rest across Jack's loose balls, its underside hot against them and its head reaching the base of Jack's cock. The contact made Jack's balls draw closer. Caleo placed one hand beside Jack's hip and wrapped the other around his shaft.

Jack's whole body tightened around the first stroke.

Caleo drew the foreskin forward over the head and then back with his hand. His grip was firm without being hurried. He watched Jack's face rather than his own work, adjusting when Jack lifted into his palm and again when Jack's breath caught. The ring remained close and dark at the base, warmed only by their bodies.

"You can move," Caleo said.

Jack did. He pushed up into Caleo's hand and felt Caleo's cock slide against his balls at the same time. Caleo rocked with him. The underside of Caleo's shaft dragged over the loose skin, leaving a line of wetness as the clear fluid at its head spread between them.

Jack reached down. His fingers closed around Caleo near the base.

Caleo stopped moving. For an instant Jack thought he had mistaken what was permitted, but Caleo did not take his hand away. He shifted his knees wider, giving Jack room to hold him without trapping his wrist between their bodies.

"Like this?" Jack asked.

Caleo answered by moving into his grip.

Jack stroked him as far as the position allowed. Caleo was slimmer than Jack but nearly as long, with skin that moved easily over the shaft. Jack drew his thumb across the wet head, watched Caleo's stomach contract, and did it again. The pleasure on Caleo's face was less composed than anything Jack had seen from him the day before. His lips parted. The easy amusement went out of his eyes.

Caleo's hand tightened around Jack. Their rhythm failed, found itself, and failed once more when Jack pushed too eagerly. Neither of them corrected it with words. Jack learned the motion from what Caleo's body did above him; Caleo learned Jack by the sounds he could no longer keep quiet. The bed creaked beneath the joined movement of their hips.

Jack had not known whether wanting a boy would feel like something foreign added to him. It did not. Caleo's cock was hard in his hand. Caleo's hand moved over him with practiced attention. Jack wanted both facts and did not need a word large enough to contain them before he was allowed to enjoy them.

Caleo bent over him and pressed his mouth beneath Jack's ear. The angle settled Caleo's cock more firmly across Jack's balls and trapped Jack's hand between them. Jack released him long enough to pull Caleo closer by the waist. Caleo's hair fell around their faces, and his lips traveled once down the side of Jack's throat. His

strokes shortened as their bodies crowded together, working the head and the upper half of Jack's shaft while Jack rocked into his fist.

The pressure built too quickly. Jack tried to slow himself and found that he had already spent most of his control while half asleep. Heat gathered behind the ring and climbed through his cock. He turned his face into the pillow to breathe.

"Caleo."

"Let it happen."

Jack disliked the calm answer enough to reach for Caleo again. His fingers found the wet shaft lying across his balls. He closed his hand around it and stroked hard enough to strip the calm from Caleo's next breath.

"With me," Jack said.

Caleo's eyes closed. He drove once into Jack's hand, then opened them again and looked directly at him. Whatever private refusal had lived behind his easy giving did not win. Caleo lowered his weight, his cock sliding hot between Jack's hand and balls, and worked Jack faster.

Jack came first.

The initial spurt struck high on his chest. The next crossed his stomach in a thick white line. Caleo kept his hand around him. More followed than Jack expected his body to hold: white semen mixed with clearer, thinner fluid, spreading across his skin, running into his navel and over his side, and collecting between Caleo's fingers. His cock pulsed again and again. Jack's heels pressed into the mattress. He heard himself make a helpless sound and could not spare enough thought to be embarrassed by it.

Caleo stared down for half a second, startled into stillness by the amount. Jack tightened his hand around him.

"Don't stop."

Caleo moved.

Jack stroked him through the last weakening pulses of his own climax. Caleo's hips lost their careful rhythm. His cock slipped wetly over Jack's balls and pushed into Jack's fist. Caleo braced both hands beside Jack's hips, leaving Jack to work him. His head dropped. The muscles of his stomach pulled tight beneath Jack's knuckles.

Caleo came across Jack's groin. The first hot release struck the underside of Jack's softening cock and spread over his balls. Another followed when Jack drew his hand

upward. Caleo shuddered above him, thrust once more into Jack's grip, and then remained there breathing hard, his forehead nearly against Jack's chest.

For several breaths neither of them moved. Morning continued around them with offensive normality. A cart rattled somewhere beyond the garden wall. A woman called an order in the bakery below, and pans answered against a worktable. Jack lay beneath Caleo with semen cooling across his chest and stomach and more warm between his legs.

Caleo lifted his head. His gaze traveled over the mess on Jack's torso, returned to Jack's face, and stayed there.

"That was more than I expected," Jack said.

"Does anything hurt?"

Jack tested the question against his body, then shook his head. Caleo leaned down and left a slow kiss against his temple, with one hand resting beside Jack's ribs.

When he sat back, their skin pulled apart damply. Caleo reached for the shorts on the floor, reconsidered what condition they were meant to remain in, and left them there. He crossed naked to the washstand and returned with the basin and two cloths.

Jack took one. "I can help."

"I hoped you might. This is partly yours."

They cleaned one another without pretending the work was dignified. Jack wiped the release from Caleo's stomach and the pale hair at his groin. Caleo washed Jack's chest in broad strokes, rinsing the cloth twice before the water stopped clouding.

Caleo used the second cloth between Jack's legs. His touch remained gentle around the ring, but no longer clinical. Jack cleaned Caleo in return, drawing the foreskin back just far enough to wipe beneath it before letting it settle over the softened head. Caleo watched his hands and made no joke.

The basin water had gone milky by the time they finished. Caleo set it on the floor and lay beside Jack again rather than rising to dress. Jack rolled onto his side with his back to Caleo. The position was easier on his healing hip, and the room had begun to cool wherever the blanket did not cover him.



Think we can be friends?

Caleo drew the blanket over them both. A moment later his arm came around Jack's waist. He settled close enough that his chest warmed Jack's back, and his mouth rested near the hair at the nape of Jack's neck.

"Think we can be friends? You're a likable person."

The question hurt more than Jack expected. After all Caleo had given without being asked, friendship was the one thing he offered cautiously. He had offered his body with less hesitation than he now offered the hope that Jack might remain in his life.

Jack covered the arm around him with his own. "Yes," he said. After a moment, because the first word did not seem sufficient, he tightened his hand around Caleo's wrist. "I want that."

Caleo exhaled into his hair. The arm around Jack drew closer, and neither of them tried to turn the answer into anything easier.

They remained beneath the blanket until the bakery made staying impossible. The first oven door opened below with a hollow iron bang. Someone dragged a sack across the kitchen floor. Mrs. Gowrie called Caleo's name once from the bottom of the stairs, not loudly, and received no answer.

"She knows we're awake," Jack said.

"She knew before we did."

Jack considered the bedframe and could not dispute it.

Caleo rose first. He poured the dirty water into the pipe beside the washstand, rinsed the basin, and dressed in the same frayed shorts he had abandoned the night before. Jack put on the patched linen pair. They had survived the floor, but not the morning without evidence; Caleo washed the damp place at the front while Jack wore them, wrung the cloth into the basin, and declared the result passable.

Jack found the gesture should have embarrassed him. Instead it left him watching Caleo's bent head and wanting to pull him back into bed.

"If we don't go downstairs," Caleo said, "Auntie will come up, and then you'll learn how little privacy belongs to a person who sleeps above a bakery." He drew a breath through his nose and glanced toward the bed. "The room smells like sex. I couldn't bear for Auntie to catch me up to my elbows in cum."

Jack tied the shorts securely. "We're still going to Thornfield?"

Caleo raised his head from the basin. "Did you change your mind?"

The fortress would be waiting above Briartown. Jack had not changed his mind. For a few minutes he had forgotten to be afraid.

"No," he said. "I'm going."



For a few minutes he had forgotten to be afraid.

Caleo handed him the folded cloak. Jack wrapped it around his shoulders rather than his hips. It left his chest bare and fell almost to his knees, but the shorts remained where Mrs. Gowrie had promised they would. Caleo adjusted the cloak once at Jack's collar, smoothing the fold flat with both hands.

They went downstairs together.

A detailed botanical illustration of a flowering vine with large, deeply lobed leaves and small, five-petaled white flowers with yellow centers. The vine is positioned in the bottom corners of the page, framing the central text area.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER NINE

What the Name Bought



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

Mrs. Gowrie gave Jack four eggs, half a loaf, stewed fruit, and a cup of milk, then watched until he began eating before she returned to the ovens.

Morning had filled the bakery while he and Caleo were upstairs. Three bakers moved between the stone tables with their sleeves rolled high and flour whitening their forearms. A girl at the front counter tied paper around two loaves while a queue gathered beneath the raised shutters. Heat rolled from the open oven each time its iron door swung wide. The light globes overhead had dimmed to pale glass in the stronger sunlight, though the honey-colored stones beneath the ovens still glowed through their clay housings.

Jack sat at the end of the kitchen table with Caleo beside him. The patched shorts remained damp at the front despite Caleo's efforts with the washcloth, and every shift against the bench reminded Jack why. Caleo ate a heel of bread spread with plum preserve and appeared entirely undisturbed by either the morning or the room they had left smelling of it. He stole a piece of stewed pear from Jack's bowl.

Mrs. Gowrie passed behind them with a bowl against one hip. Her attention touched Jack's damp hair, then Caleo's, then the two of them sitting close enough that their bare shoulders met. She said nothing. Jack lowered his face over his eggs.

"You have your own breakfast," Jack said.

"I have bread. You have fruit."

Jack moved the bowl between them instead of protecting it. Caleo took another piece and left the rest alone. They ate while the bakery worked around them, without the silence becoming something Jack had to repair.

When his plate was empty, Mrs. Gowrie set two wrapped rolls beside his hand. "One for the hill. One for when somebody important keeps you waiting through dinner."

Jack stood and folded both into the inside of Caleo's cloak. "Thank you, Mrs. Gowrie. For the food, and the clothes, and letting me stay. I can come back and fix those boards beside the ovens. I meant that."

"Get yourself admitted first." She brushed a spot of flour from the cloak where it crossed his shoulder. "Then you may negotiate with my floor."

Jack wanted to hug her. The impulse reached his arms and stopped there, checked by the solid way she occupied her own kitchen and by how little he knew of what people here permitted. He settled for thanking her again. She received it with a small movement of her head and turned to rescue a tray from one of the younger bakers.

Caleo collected his bag from its peg and followed Jack into the lane. The day had cleared bright after the night's rain. Water shone in the gutters and lay caught in every crack between the paving stones. Deep eaves kept the shopfronts in shade, while sunlight struck the upper stories hard enough to turn wet plaster white. Laundry hung from covered galleries where air could reach it without another shower undoing the work. Briartown smelled of damp stone, hot bread, horse dung, leaf mold, and the faint metallic bite of wards waking beneath doorframes.

Thornfield stood above it all. The Academy had followed Jack through Briartown the day before, appearing at the end of streets and above tiled roofs whenever he thought the buildings had swallowed it. Now Caleo led him toward it without taking the direct market road. They climbed through narrower lanes where gutters ran openly beside the paving and old trees had been allowed to break the walls rather than be cut down. Roots lifted stone into ridges. Vines curtained shaded courtyards, and broad leaves spilled over roofs built strong enough to carry gardens.

Jack asked three questions about the Academy before they reached the second turning. Caleo answered the two he could. The registrar's office stood inside the eastern gate. New students usually arrived on induction day. No, Caleo did not know whether a missing student remained enrolled after failing to appear. When Jack began asking what happened to people without papers, Caleo let him reach the end of the question before admitting he did not know that either.

"They'll have something," Caleo said. "Schools keep records because they enjoy having records. You remembered the name before I told it to you."

"I also remembered Eomer, and I don't know who he is."

"Someone rich enough that Thornfield took his money."

That was probably true. It did not tell Jack whether Eomer would recognize the face he wore or call guards when he saw what had returned in it.

The houses thinned as they climbed. Briartown's upper wall had long ago become a row of foundations, garden terraces, and workshops built from its stolen stone. Beyond it, the Academy hill rose green and steep. The road turned back across the slope twice before reaching the gate. Drainage channels bordered both sides, lined with fitted rock and running full from the forested heights behind the fortress.

At the first bend stood a weathered pillar bearing Thornfield's crest. Lichen softened the cut edges of the mark, but hands had kept the thorn-crowned tower clean enough to read. Caleo stopped beside it.

Jack took two more steps before the absence beside him became noticeable. He turned. Caleo had hooked both thumbs beneath the strap of his bag. With his cloak around Jack's shoulders, Caleo stood bare-chested in his frayed shorts, the lean body Jack had learned with his hands that morning exposed to the sun.

"You're not coming up?"

"I've got work." Caleo glanced toward the gate and then down the hill, where the bakery quarter lay hidden beneath roofs and trees. "And they don't need me to tell them you're you. I couldn't do that anyway."

Jack had known the last part would be alone. Knowing had not put enough air in his chest for it.

Caleo rubbed one thumb over the worn strap. When he spoke again, his voice had lost the easy lift he used with strangers. "Don't forget about me, all right? Visit sometime."



I'll visit Saturday. I promise.

Jack crossed the space and put both arms around him. He did it too hard. Caleo's breath left against his shoulder in a startled huff, and one heel shifted on the wet

stone to hold them both. Jack loosened his grip by a fraction but could not make himself let go. Caleo's arms came around his back. One hand settled between his shoulders, over the brown cloak.

"Thank you," Jack said into his hair. The words came too quickly once they started. "For finding me. Bringing me home. All of it. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't found me. I don't think I would have made it here."

Caleo held him without interrupting. Jack could feel the rise of each breath where their ribs pressed together.

"I mean it," Jack said. "I don't know how to thank you enough."

"You can breathe first."

Jack eased his arms. Caleo drew a deeper breath and kept one hand at the back of Jack's neck, his fingers resting in the short dark hair there. He did not step away.

"I'll visit Saturday," Jack said. "I promise. Even if they tell me I'm not a student. I'll come back Saturday."

Caleo studied his face as if the promise required more care than the sex had. Then he leaned in and pressed his cheek briefly against Jack's shoulder. "I'll see you Saturday."

Jack released him. The place his arms had occupied felt wrong immediately, but the road waited above. He turned uphill before fear could turn the goodbye into another hour.

At the second bend he looked back. Caleo remained beside the pillar, one hand raised. Jack raised his own. The road bent again, and the green slope took Caleo from sight.

*

The Academy grew less beautiful as Jack approached and more formidable. From Briartown it had been a crown of dark stone and high windows. Up close, the hill revealed what the fortress had once expected from visitors. The road narrowed between steep banks where archers could have fired downward from three sides. Old slots opened in the outer wall at shoulder height. The gatehouse stood forward from the greater buildings, square and blunt, with grooves in the stone where more than one set of doors had once fallen. Thornfield's founders had turned murder into architecture and built well enough that centuries of students had failed to soften it.

The present Academy had done what it could. Flowering vines covered one watchtower. A notice board occupied the wall beneath an arrow slit. Students sat on

the old parapet with their books spread between them, bare feet swinging above a drop that would have made Jack's former teachers evacuate the building. Water ran from carved mouths into a long basin where two boys were washing red practice dust from their arms.

The uniform found Jack before the gate did. Students came down the hill in loose trousers that moved like water around their legs. The cloth gathered at waist and ankle without binding either. Short vests left shoulders, chests, and stomachs bare, held partly closed by a chain across the breastbone. A broad student carrying three spears wore brass gone green at two links. Beside him, a narrow boy with oiled black hair had silver bright enough to cast a line of sun onto his chest. Gold crossed another student's dark skin, and tiny red stones had been worked between its links.

There was muscle everywhere Jack allowed himself to look. Shoulders shaped by weapons practice. Stomachs tightened as students climbed. Broad chests, narrow chests, soft bodies and hard ones, all exposed with none of Caleo's deliberate ease because no one here appeared to know there was anything to be deliberate about. A boy passed the gate carrying a stack of ledgers against his bare ribs while another argued beside him about drainage theory. Neither interrupted the argument to acknowledge that half the school seemed dressed for a martial-arts demonstration held during a heat wave.

Jack had spent the morning naked with another boy. Thornfield still managed to make him stare.

The two gate guards did not wear the student vest. Light scaled panels covered their torsos, with open sides beneath the arms and Academy green worked into their belts. One guard had been watching Jack's approach for long enough that pretending composure would accomplish nothing.

"Induction was two days ago," she said when he reached the shade of the gatehouse. Her gaze began at his bare feet, passed over the patched shorts and borrowed cloak, and stopped at the healing cut on his cheek. "You're late."

"I was hurt on the lower road."

"You were expected?"

"Yes. Jack Drake. I was delayed on the lower road, and my papers and belongings were lost."

The second guard shifted his hand away from the hilt at his side, not more relaxed, merely choosing a different kind of problem. The woman pointed through the gate.

"Registrar's office. Round the eastern wall, blue door beneath the covered stair. Give him the short version first."

"Thank you."

Jack entered Thornfield with both guards watching his back. Inside the wall, the old fortress had unfolded into courts, galleries, additions, and roofs at half a dozen heights. Warm stone surrounded a central green large enough for a village fair. Covered walks joined buildings that had once stood apart. Cistern spouts fed narrow channels along the paths, and small bronze grates swallowed the runoff before it could cross the paving. Here and there the fortress remained visible beneath the school: a battlement enclosed to become a reading gallery, a round tower cut with new windows, an old well surrounded by benches and flowering shade trees.

Jack found the blue door by following the eastern wall. It opened into a room that smelled of ink, old paper, and the bitter oil used to keep insects from eating either. Shelves climbed to the ceiling. Every ledger wore a strip of colored cloth at its spine, and the stacks on the desk had been squared so precisely that Jack suspected the older man behind them measured their edges.

The registrar finished the line he was reading before raising his head. His vest reached lower than the students' and carried a plain silver chain. Gray hair had retreated from his forehead but remained thick over his ears.

"Name."

"Jack Drake."

The registrar's attention sharpened without becoming recognition. He took in Jack's face, cut, clothing, and bare feet as separate pieces of evidence. "Drake."

He opened a ledger on his left, found a ribbon, and moved one finger down the page. Jack could read none of the marks upside down. The registrar checked a second book, then removed a folded card from between its pages.

"Eighteen," he said. "Sponsored by Eomer Drake. Residential placement paid through the year. Expected two mornings ago."

Relief struck Jack hard enough that he had to put one hand against the chair before the desk. The chair shifted a finger's width beneath his palm. Something here had expected the name.

"What proof have you brought?"

The relief vanished. "None. I was attacked on the lower road. My papers and belongings were gone when I came to. Caleo found me and brought me into Briartown."

"Convenient."

"It hasn't been."

The registrar regarded him over the ledger. Jack held still beneath it and wished Caleo had come up the hill, though Caleo could not have answered the question either.

"Who is Caleo?"

"People in Briartown call him the Mayor."

The registrar's mouth drew inward. "That filthy street child playing at magic. You will steer clear of him if you remain here. He keeps company beneath his station and practices whatever scraps he can steal from books he has no right to possess. There are worse stories."

At the bottom of the hill, Caleo had asked not to be forgotten as though forgetting him were the ordinary outcome.

"He saved my life," Jack said.

"That does not make him suitable company for a Drake."

"It makes him better company than someone who says those things without knowing him."

The words left the room very quiet. A page turned in the adjoining office. Outside, shoes crossed the covered stair and faded upward.

The registrar laid both hands on the desk. "You arrive two days late, barefoot, without proof of name or history, wearing another boy's cloak, and spend your first minutes inside Thornfield arguing with its registrar."

Jack's grip tightened on the chair. "Yes, sir."

The registrar's eyes narrowed at the answer. Jack could not tell whether he had made matters better or worse.

"Your name, age, general description, and arrival window agree with the enrollment," the registrar said at last. "That is enough for provisional entry, given the deposit already held. I will send confirmation to your sponsor's address today. If Eomer Drake denies knowledge of you, your provision ends."

The registrar wrote across a narrow form, sanded it, and pressed a square stamp into the corner. "Your sponsor deposited an allowance for clothing and incidentals. This authorizes the first uniform issue. The School Store is across the central court through the western arch. Afterward, report to Housing."

Jack folded the authorization and put it inside Caleo's cloak with the rolls. The question of who Eomer Drake was crowded against his teeth, but the registrar had already lowered his eyes to the ledger. Jack kept it there. The interview was over because the man who understood the rules had decided it was.

*

Outside, the covered stair emptied Jack into the central court. The sun had climbed above the eastern wall and struck the galleries in long white planes. Students crossed between bells in loose streams, their chains flashing as they moved.

Jack began sorting them before he knew he was doing it. Brass belonged to most of the students carrying their own laundry or eating from paper. Silver appeared among better cloth and cleaner shoes. Gold traveled with embroidery, rings, servants, or the easy habit of leaving books unattended on a bench because no one would dare take them. Gemmed chains were rare enough that he could remember every one he saw.

He touched the folded authorization through the cloak. Whatever Eomer had deposited, Jack expected brass. Brass would hold the vest shut. That was the job.

The School Store occupied a vaulted chamber that might once have stored grain for a siege. New shelves stood away from the old walls to let air move behind them. Uniform cloth filled one side in deep Academy green, gray, cream, and muted blue. The opposite wall held paper, ink, practice wraps, soap, needles, rain capes, sandals, and more objects Jack could not name than he wanted anyone to notice.

A line ended at a long counter. Jack joined it and watched the students ahead of him because they all knew what would happen next.

One handed over a torn vest and paid for a replacement brass link. Another collected trousers with reinforced knees. A tall boy leaned against the counter while a clerk fitted a gold chain across his bare chest, complaining that the links lay unevenly. The clerk corrected the left hook by half an inch and sent him away satisfied.

When Jack reached the front, the cashier held out her hand. He gave her the authorization.

She read the first line, then raised her gaze to him. Her attention did not linger on the cut or bare feet. It settled on his face as if comparing him to an expectation she chose not to share.

"Drake issue," she called to the stockroom.

A second clerk returned carrying folded trousers, two short vests, underthings, sandals, a rain cape, and a narrow wooden case. He set them on the counter one piece at a time. The fabric was serviceable, tightly woven, and plain enough that some inherited part of Jack recoiled before his own judgment formed.

Cheap. The word arrived with the dead boy's certainty. The weave lacked depth. The dye would flatten his skin. The trousers had been cut for a body rather than for his body, an insult grave enough to deserve anger.

Jack pressed his fingers into Caleo's cloak. One shoulder seam had been repaired with thread two shades too dark. He had never valued a piece of clothing more.

The cashier opened the wooden case. Gold lay against black felt. The chain was finer than those Jack had seen in the court, made of paired links small enough to move like cord. Tiny emeralds had been worked between them at regular intervals. They were not large, but they caught the store's light and held it green.

Jack stared. "That isn't mine."

The cashier checked the authorization again. "Jack Drake?"

"Yes, but I thought it would be brass."

"The chain attached to this issue is gold and emerald."

"Why?"

She turned the form so he could see the stamped corner, which explained nothing to him. "That is what the account authorizes. If you want the account changed, speak to the bursar or your sponsor."

The clerk lifted one vest. "Try the set before we wrap it."

A screened alcove stood behind the counter. Jack carried the uniform into it and closed the folding panel. He removed Caleo's cloak, then hesitated over Mrs. Gowrie's shorts. The new trousers had no fastening he recognized at first glance, only overlapping cloth at the waist and two long ties. He found the logic after turning them once in his hands. The ties crossed, pulled the waist close, and knotted at one side. The legs fell loose from his narrow hips to his ankles.

The vest was less cooperative. It ended above his navel and had no buttons. Two small hooks waited at the open edges, too far apart to meet. Jack put it on and emerged holding the front with one hand.

The cashier came around the counter with the wooden case. "Arms down."

Jack obeyed. She hooked one end of the emerald chain near his left breast, drew it across the open vest, and fastened the other end beneath his right collarbone. Gold and green lay over bare skin. The chain held the cloth partly closed without concealing his chest or stomach.



The uniform made the body appear intentional.

Jack studied his reflection in the tall mirror beside the fitting screen. The uniform made the body appear intentional. Loose trousers emphasized the narrowness of his waist before falling in long folds. The short vest framed his shoulders and left every ridge of his stomach visible. The emeralds brought green into gray eyes he still did not think of as his. The cut on his cheek saved the image from becoming too polished, though not by much.

Two students near the paper shelves had stopped pretending not to watch. One wore silver. The other's brass chain had been repaired with a piece of dark wire. Their attention rested on the emeralds, then moved to Jack's face.

"Can I have brass instead?" Jack asked quietly.

The cashier's expression changed by a degree. "You can buy another chain when you have your own account. This one has already been issued."

Jack had no account, no coin, and no idea how much any of it cost. He touched one emerald with the end of his finger. The stone was no larger than a grain of corn and probably worth more than everything Caleo had worn yesterday.

"Keep the borrowed clothing separate if you intend to return it," the cashier said.

"We can wrap it."

"I'll carry it."

Jack changed back into Mrs. Gowrie's shorts and Caleo's cloak. He could not climb through the Academy wearing emeralds he did not understand. The clerk folded the uniform into brown paper, put the chain back in its case, and tied both into the parcel. Jack tucked the wooden case beneath the top fold before the twine closed.

The receipt listed garments and issue marks in a careful hand. Jack recognized the numbers but not what they purchased. He turned the paper over. The back remained blank, as useless as the front for answering what came next.

The store continued around him. Students arrived with lists and left with parcels. A girl argued for a lighter rain cape. A boy with a brass chain counted coins twice before buying ink and left without the practice gloves he had set beside it. Everyone knew where to stand, what to request, and how long they could occupy the counter before they became an obstruction.

Jack moved aside with the parcel against his ribs. He waited for someone to tell him what came after buying a uniform. No one did.

He stepped into the hall. Five paces beyond the store, the corridor divided around a broad stair. Plaques marked doors in the local script, which he could understand when spoken and not read at all. Students turned left and right without breaking conversation. A bell sounded somewhere above, and the flow around him changed direction as neatly as water diverted through a gate.

The dead boy's body knew how to stand as if it belonged. Jack felt his shoulders settle and his chin rise, a posture ready to carry him confidently down whichever corridor he chose. It offered no knowledge of which corridor that should be.

Jack turned back to the store. Annoyance touched the cashier's face, then vanished as her gaze dropped to his white-knuckled grip on the parcel.

"I don't know what comes next," Jack said. "The registrar told me to report to Housing, but he didn't tell me where it is."

The student sorting chains at the far end of the counter stopped working. Jack kept his attention on the cashier.

"Housing," she said. Her voice had lost its counter sharpness. "Down this hall, left side after the second arch. There is an open desk beneath a blue-and-white tile panel. Give them your name and the registrar's issue mark."

Jack took the receipt she tapped. A blue stamp occupied its corner. "This?"

"That. You aren't the first late student."

She pointed toward the door. "Second arch. Left side. Blue and white."

"Thank you."

This time Jack reached the Housing desk without choosing a wrong turn. Blue-and-white tiles covered the wall behind it in a pattern of towers and thorned vines. Ledgers stood in disciplined piles along the counter, and a row of keys hung from hooks beneath painted floor numbers.

The assistant behind the desk was perhaps twenty. His silver chain lay slightly crooked across a soft chest, as if he had dressed in a hurry and never found reason to correct it. He took Jack's receipt and asked his name.

"Jack Drake."

The assistant found the entry. His finger stopped on it, moved to a second column, and stopped again. "Private room. South Wing, third floor, room twelve. Tuition includes board and ordinary meals."

The words private room lifted something inside Jack so quickly that embarrassment followed it. A room meant a door he could close. A bed, a basin, a place to put down Caleo's cloak without keeping one hand on it. He pictured the sloped ceiling above the bakery and Caleo's arm around his waist beneath the blanket.

"Sign for the key and schedule," the assistant said. A quill waited beside the form. Jack picked it up. The handle was thinner than a pen and top-heavy from the trimmed feather. A small black pot sat open near his wrist. Metal point, liquid ink, paper: he could guess the arrangement even if he did not understand the instrument.

Jack lowered the nib into the ink and drew it out. A black drop gathered beneath the point. He touched it to the signature line. The quill scratched, caught in the paper, and jumped sideways, leaving a broken mark with a blot at one end.

He tried again with less pressure. The nib wrote nothing. On the third attempt, too much ink ran down and spread across the line.

"Not so deep," the assistant said.

"The nib keeps catching." Jack heard his own voice climbing and tried to bring it down. "I can't make it write."

The assistant's mouth twitched. A small breath escaped him.

Jack put the quill down before he snapped it. "Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing at you."

"You did. I can hear. I'm trying, and I can't even write my own name with your stupid bird feather."

Two students farther down the counter had turned toward them. Jack hated that he knew without looking. The assistant glanced toward the waiting students, pulled the form out of reach of further damage, and scattered sand over the blot.

"That is a mark," he said. "I'll witness it."

"I didn't sign my name."

"Housing needs a mark from the person receiving the key. You made one." The assistant tipped the sand away, took a key from the third row of hooks, and slid it across the counter with a folded schedule. "South Wing. Cross the main square, left arch beneath the clock. Third floor. Match the mark on the key tag to the one carved on the door."

Jack gathered the key and paper. The assistant had already drawn the next ledger toward himself. "Thank you," Jack said, receiving no answer before the next student stepped forward.

He crossed the Academy square with the uniform parcel beneath one arm and the key held in his fist. Sun warmed the old paving. Students moved around him in bright chains and open vests, carrying books, weapons, baskets, instruments, and private knowledge of where each path led. Jack followed the clock tower to the left arch, found the stair, and climbed.

Room twelve stood at the far end of the third-floor gallery. The carved number meant nothing to his eyes, but the shape beneath his fingers matched the mark on the key tag. He unlocked the door.

A narrow window opened onto Briartown, where roofs descended toward the wet green mass of the Thornwood. Jack could not identify the bakery among them.

He closed the door and put the parcel on the bed. Caleo's cloak came next. Jack folded it along the seams worn into the cloth and laid it beside the Academy uniform. Brown wool and mended thread rested against the paper packet containing gold and emeralds.

Saturday, he had promised. Jack set the room key on the desk where he could see it and sat on the edge of a bed bearing somebody else's name.

A decorative border of green vines with small white flowers and large green leaves, framing the central text area.

THORNFIELD

CHAPTER TEN

A Room Bearing Somebody Else's Name



ILLUSTRATED EDITION

The bed gave beneath Jack's weight with a dry complaint from its ropes. He sat listening until he was certain the sound belonged to the bed and not to someone about to open the door.

No one did. South Wing continued on the other side of the thick wood without him. Feet passed along the gallery. A door shut two rooms away, followed by a boy calling through it that he had left his wraps in the yard again. Another voice advised him to grow a second head and keep the wraps on that. Their argument moved toward the stairs and became part of the building's general murmur.

Jack put both hands on the mattress. The ticking was coarse and densely packed beneath the linen. The bed frame had been repaired at the near corner with a new peg driven through old wood, its end pared flush by someone who knew how to make the repair disappear beneath varnish. The desk had not received the same care. One leg stood on a folded square of leather to keep it from rocking, and three generations of students had cut initials into the edge.

He ran one finger through the nearest set of marks. They meant no more to him than the schedule waiting beside the key.

The room was not luxurious, whatever the emeralds implied. It was simply private. The narrow bed stood against one wall. The desk and chair occupied the other, leaving a clear strip of floor between them. A wardrobe had been built into a shallow recess beside the door, its lower hinge dark with fresh oil. High on the outer wall, the window opened beneath a deep stone arch and looked across a tumble of Briartown roofs. Beyond the last tiles, the Thornwood rose like weather made solid.

Jack searched for Mrs. Gowrie's bakery until the roofs blurred together. Somewhere down there, Caleo had gone on with his day. He would be carrying something for someone, or turning up in a doorway where he was needed, or standing barefoot in the road with his cloak moving behind him while people called him Mayor as if the joke had become an office through long use.

Saturday was not far away. Four nights, if Jack had understood the morning correctly. He could manage four nights. The folded schedule on the desk made the claim less convincing.



Someone in the building could read it.

Jack opened the sheet and spread it flat. The page had been ruled into narrow blocks. Numbers appeared along one edge, recognizable even where the inked forms differed slightly from those he knew. Everything beside them remained a disciplined field of hooks, stems, and loops. Several marks repeated. One might mean a class. Another might be a room. He could not tell which, and staring only made the headache behind his eyes gather itself again.

He stopped before pain could become panic. The page was not going to surrender because he glared at it. Someone in the building could read it. The danger lay in how he asked.

The Academy parcel resisted his first attempt at the knot. The clerk had pulled the twine tight enough to sink it into the paper, so Jack worked one thumbnail beneath the crossing and worried the cord loose instead of tearing it. He set the wooden chain case aside and arranged the folded clothes in the wardrobe. A flat cloth kit hidden inside the rain cape supplied a comb, needle, thread, and three spare hooks for the vest. A towel and square of harsh-smelling soap waited on the lower shelf as part of the room issue.

It was a competent issue. Whoever had assembled it expected clothes to tear, rain to come sideways, and students to wash without being reminded to bring a towel. Jack appreciated the thought until he remembered that none of it had been chosen for him. The measurements, account, and emeralds belonged to the name in the registrar's book.

He took off Caleo's cloak and folded it before it could touch the floor. Mrs. Gowrie's shorts followed. The hip wound pulled when he bent, not sharply, but enough to make him straighten with one hand against the bedpost.

Jack dressed in the gray trousers and one of the vests. The waist ties made sense after the fitting at the store, though he had to redo the knot when the overlap shifted too far left. The vest hung open until he took the wooden case from the desk.

Gold lay against the black lining with tiny emeralds spaced through it. He lifted the chain by one end. It moved with more weight than something so fine ought to possess, the paired links slipping over one another without catching. The chain was not merely decoration; without it, the vest had no buttons or overlap to hold its front together. One hook fastened near his left breast. He stretched the chain across and caught the other beneath his right collarbone, then studied the result.

It was worse without the store mirror. The green stones sat directly against his skin, bright enough to draw the eye to every bare part of him the vest did not cover. Caleo's cloak had made his near-nakedness look improvised. The uniform made exposure official.

Jack considered taking the chain off. The vest would hang loose, and every person who knew the rules would see that he had chosen not to wear the required piece. He considered covering it with Caleo's cloak and disliked that more. The registrar had already treated the mended wool as evidence against them both. Jack would not carry it through the Academy until someone spilled stew on it or decided poverty made it theirs to insult.

He left the emeralds where they were. If Eomer had bought him a target, Jack could at least learn what people did when they saw it.

The sandals fit. That surprised him more than the clothes. He stood, tested the straps, and crossed the room twice. The sole bent in the right place beneath the ball of his foot. No rubbing at the heel, no loose edge waiting to blister him. Whoever had written down the dead boy's measurements had known his feet too.

A bell rang while Jack was putting the second uniform back into the paper. The sound entered through the window and the stone together, deep enough that the

water in the basin trembled. Doors opened along the gallery. Conversation swelled, and footsteps turned toward the stairs. Jack took the key and followed them.

The boy ahead of him wore his brass chain slightly off center and carried two rolled practice mats beneath one arm. Jack kept him in sight down the first flight, then nearly lost him when three other students joined from the landing. At the second floor, the flow divided. Half continued down. The rest crossed toward a covered bridge leading into another wing.

Jack caught up before the boy with the mats chose a direction. "Excuse me. What bell was that?"

The boy shifted both mats higher. His attention dropped to Jack's emeralds before he answered. "First supper. Second rings in half an hour. Kitchens close after third."

"Where is the dining hall? I missed induction."

The explanation settled something in the other boy's face. He pointed down the stairs. "Main square, north gallery. Follow anyone who looks hungry."

"Thank you."

The boy went across the bridge. Jack continued down with the larger stream, repeating north gallery once in his head before the directions could slide out of place.

Evening had softened the Academy without cooling it. The old stone still returned the day's heat through Jack's sandal soles. Under the covered walks, glass globes were beginning to shine inside bronze cages, each giving off the steady amber of a well-trimmed lamp without smoke or visible flame. A woman in a work apron passed beneath one and touched two fingers to its cage. The light strengthened behind her and then continued brightening from globe to globe along the gallery, as though her hand had sent fire running through the wall. No one stopped to watch. Jack nearly walked into the student in front of him.



No one asked for money.

The dining hall occupied what must once have been the fortress's great hall. The ceiling climbed through two levels of dark beams, high enough for heat to gather above the long tables. An old hearth large enough to roast an ox had been bricked into three smaller ovens along the northern wall, and generations of smoke remained in the stone above them. Shutters stood open between pillars on both sides. Evening air moved through carrying wet leaves, cooked onions, and the mineral smell of rain that had fallen somewhere beyond the town but not yet reached the hill.

Students took shallow wooden trays from a stack inside the entrance. Jack copied them. The ordinary meal occupied three counters: stew thick with beans and torn meat, flat rounds of bread, greens cooked down with yellow spice, and bowls of sliced fruit sitting over pale tiles that breathed a faint mist. A fourth counter offered glazed cuts of meat and bright pastries beneath a painted sign. Coins changed hands there. Jack kept moving.

At the stew counter, a server set a bowl into a shallow ring carved in the stone. Orange lines woke beneath it. Steam lifted from the surface before she passed it to Jack.

He received bread, greens, and fruit the same way. No one asked for money. The food belonged to the board Eomer had already paid, and Jack hated how much relief that gave him.

The tables had organized themselves without signs. Students in stained aprons crowded one end near the service doors. A group wearing practice guards had spread bandaged wrists and elbows across half a table while they argued about someone named Master Draek. Gold gathered with gold in several places, though not everywhere. Brass occupied most of the hall. Silver moved between both as if it had learned the useful art of belonging wherever it sat.

Jack saw open spaces. None were invitations. Bags rested on benches, elbows guarded room, and conversations bent inward around histories he did not share. He chose a place near the end of a table where no one would have to move for him.

The stew was too hot to eat. He broke the bread, dipped one edge, and watched the room while it cooled. Nobody stared continuously, but the emeralds drew glances that arrived in pairs: first at the chain, then at his face. A few students looked at the cut on his cheek. One boy in gold said something behind his cup and made the girl beside him turn. Jack could not hear the words. He kept eating.

Hunger made the meal better than it was. The beans were soft, the meat stringy, the greens bitter beneath their spice. He finished every scrap and used the last bread to gather what remained at the bottom of the bowl. The sliced fruit tasted faintly of pear and strongly of pepper. He ate that too.

People returned their trays through an opening beside the kitchens. Jack waited until he had seen three students do it, then carried his own there. A gray-haired worker scraped the bowl into a pail and stacked it without looking up.

Near the doors, two South Wing students were complaining about the showers.

"Use the fourth stall," one said. "Third runs cold whenever the laundry heats its vats."

"Fourth smells like somebody died in the drain."

"Then bathe cold and complain quietly."

Jack crossed the square behind them, then turned aside while they continued toward South Wing. The route now had landmarks: the clock arch, the blue mosaic visible through the lower hall, the stair whose second newel had been replaced with wood a shade too pale. Repairs turned the buildings into something other than fields of identical stone.

Room twelve remained locked. Caleo's cloak lay where Jack had left it, folded beside Mrs. Gowrie's shorts. Nothing else had moved. Jack set down the schedule, took the towel and soap, and went to find the showers before fatigue could persuade him that road dirt was acceptable for one more night.

Steam had gathered beneath the lintel of the washroom. Inside, a central aisle divided two rows of private stalls. Each had three tiled walls, a curtain, a drain, a narrow shelf, and a dark stone plate set at shoulder height. Pale marks had been cut into the plate and filled with something that caught the room's light.

Jack chose the fourth stall. It smelled of wet stone and strong soap, not death, and he was willing to call that a victory.

He undressed, folded the uniform on the driest end of the bench, and hung the towel from its peg. The plate had no handle or spout. Above him, the ceiling tiles met without any visible opening for water.

Jack pressed the center mark. Nothing happened. He pressed harder, then tried the upper mark and received a brief pulse of warmth beneath his fingertip. The ring answered with a smaller pulse around the base of his cock. He removed his hand from the plate.

Water began hammering against stone in the next stall. Someone swore at the temperature, then gave a satisfied grunt when it changed.

Jack rested one forearm against the partition. "Sorry. These controls are different from the ones at home. How do you start the water?"

The answer came through the tile with the mild impatience of a person already washing. "Draw up the middle for flow. Circle left for heat, right for cold. Tap twice when you're done."

"Thank you."

Jack put two fingers at the bottom of the middle mark and drew them upward. Water dropped from the ceiling in a solid cold sheet.

He lurched backward into the curtain. Its rings shrieked along the rod while his breath left him in a sound too high to preserve any dignity. Laughter broke out in the neighboring stall.

"Circle left," the boy reminded him.

"I heard you."

Jack found the left mark with a wet hand and traced it. The water warmed so quickly that steam rose around his wrist. He adjusted it back before it could scald him, then stepped beneath the fall.

The water came from hairline seams in nine ceiling tiles, each stream joining the others before it reached him. No pipe knocked behind the wall. No tank labored above. The plate held a low, sunlike warmth beneath his fingertips while the stone around it remained cool.

Jack decided he preferred the soup.

The soap bit at the cut on his cheek. He worked more carefully there, washing dried sweat from the fine hair near his temple and the last forest grit from behind one ear. The water still found dirt along his ankles and beneath his nails.

When he reached the hip wound, he slowed. The blade had entered low on the left side. What had been a sealed ridge that morning was now a raised pink line no longer than the first joint of his finger. He pressed around it, then directly across it. Tender, but solid. His body had spent food and rest closing flesh that should have taken stitches and weeks.

The cut on his cheek remained visible because it had been laid open wider. He followed it with one fingertip from beside his mouth toward the cheekbone. Beneath his wet hair, the back of his skull held a sore place the size of his palm. No skin had broken there. The bone beneath felt whole.

Someone had cut this body, stabbed it, struck its head hard enough to end the life inside it, stripped it, and left it beside the road. Thornfield had a ledger ready to receive the same boy two days later.

Jack lowered his hand. He did not know whether the people who had done it lived behind him, below him, or nowhere near Briartown. Until he did, the road attack remained the only story anyone else was getting.

He washed the rest of himself without hurry. The ring did not come free when he tested its edge with soapy fingers. It fitted too closely to pinch and too loosely to hurt, dark metal encircling the base of his soft cock. The carved symbols held no soap when he rinsed them. Water slipped away as though the metal refused even that much evidence.

Jack tapped the plate twice. The shower stopped at once, leaving water to patter from his hair and elbows into the drain. In the sudden quiet, the neighboring boy began humming tunelessly.

The washroom mirror ran along the wall above a row of basins. Jack waited until two students had left before standing in front of it with the towel around his waist.

Wet hair made the boy in the mirror look younger. The emerald uniform folded under Jack's arm made him look expensive. Neither impression told him what the dead boy had done with eighteen years.

He combed the knots from his hair because it needed doing. He did not search the reflection for himself. There was no reason his old face should appear simply because he wanted it.

Back in room twelve, Jack hung the towel over the chair and spread the uniform where the moving air from the window could reach it. He put on the spare underthings and sat at the desk with the schedule once more.

The numbers divided the day. That much he could use. A repeated mark appeared beside the first block on several lines. Another occupied the final block before the page ended. Room marks, class names, instructor names: any answer was a guess.

He could knock on a stranger's door and ask the stranger to read it. He could take it to Housing and give the assistant another chance to laugh. He could leave it folded and follow whichever group looked most certain in the morning until somebody noticed he did not belong.

None of those choices appealed to him. The first was merely uncomfortable.

Jack folded the schedule small enough to fit inside the hidden pocket sewn into the gray trousers. Tomorrow he would take it to breakfast. He would find one person who did not look eager to turn ignorance into entertainment and ask which room came first. A late student asking for directions was ordinary. He would keep the rest to himself.

The plan did not solve the language. It got him through one door. For tonight, one door was enough.

He placed the key beside the folded trousers and touched the wall globe near the desk. The glass brightened beneath his fingers, flooding the room with amber light. A second touch dimmed it. By the fourth, Jack understood the sequence well enough to leave it at a low glow.

That small success pleased him more than it should have. He lay down wearing only the underthings and listened to South Wing settle around him. Water moved through stone without pipes he could hear. Doors opened and shut. Someone laughed until another student struck the wall and told him to save it for daylight. Rain reached the

Academy sometime after dark, whispering first against leaves below the window and then drumming across the deep eaves.

Jack turned toward the desk. The key caught what little light remained. Beyond it, Caleo's cloak rested on the wardrobe shelf above Mrs. Gowrie's folded shorts, both waiting to be returned by the person who had promised he would come back. Jack slept before the rain stopped.

The first bell woke him into gray morning. For an instant he reached toward where his phone should have been. His hand found cool linen and an empty strip of mattress.

South Wing answered the bell with doors, feet, and voices. Jack rose before he could lie there and listen to everybody else begin without him. He washed at the basin, dressed, and fastened the gold chain across his bare chest. Then he put on the sandals, slid the room key and folded schedule into the hidden pocket, and checked both by touch. Caleo's cloak remained on the shelf. He closed the wardrobe door over it and left.

This time Jack did not need to follow one particular student. The whole wing was going to breakfast. He joined the current down the stairs, through the clock arch, and across a square washed clean by the night's rain. The enchanted globes faded as daylight gathered beneath the galleries.



He entered the hall and looked for someone safe.

At the dining-hall entrance, conversations divided and traveled toward tables already claimed by habit. Jack stopped long enough to find the tray stack and no longer. The schedule pressed against his thigh inside the pocket. Somewhere in this room was one person he could ask. He took a tray and crossed the threshold.

A decorative border of dark green and brown leaves and small white flowers frames the central text area.

THORNFIELD

End of Volume One

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A Borrowed Name