

The Broken Sword

Written By

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EXT. TRAINING GROUND OUTSIDE CLOVER - MORNING

Steel rings across a patch of trampled grass. Beyond it, the village of Clover wakes.

The YOUNG KNIGHT turns aside a cut from the OLD KNIGHT OF CLOVER. A quick step, a twist -- the old man's sword drops. The young man stops his point an inch from his teacher's chest.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Yield?

The Old Knight looks past the blade.

OLD KNIGHT

Who are you protecting?

The young man's smile fades. He lowers his sword.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I thought we were practicing.

OLD KNIGHT

We are.

A CHILD approaches along the path, struggling with a pail of water. The Old Knight stoops for his sword. The young man immediately raises his guard.

OLD KNIGHT

You know how to beat me. What else?

The child stops, waiting for the blades to clear the path. Water slops over the rim.

The Young Knight notices. He sheathes his sword and takes the pail. The child rubs a reddened palm.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Which house?

The child points toward Clover. The Old Knight steps aside.

OLD KNIGHT

A sword is only as honorable as the hand holding it.

The young man glances back.

OLD KNIGHT

You'll meet men who can't stop you
drawing it. That doesn't make it
your right.

The Young Knight nods. He follows the child toward the village,
the pail swinging gently at his side.

The Old Knight watches him go, then sheathes his own sword.

EXT. CLOVER - TOWN SQUARE - DAY

A few benches face the well. Beyond the last houses, open
country stretches to the tree line.

Clover has squeezed the ceremony between its chores. A baker
stands dusted with flour. Someone still holds a chicken.

The YOUNG KNIGHT kneels before his teacher. He straightens his
back, then wonders what to do with his hands.

The OLD KNIGHT unfastens a worn silver clover from his cloak.

OLD KNIGHT

Will you keep watch over this
town, and answer when its people
call?

YOUNG KNIGHT

I will.

OLD KNIGHT

Will you give your strength to
those who need it, and hold
yourself responsible for its use?

YOUNG KNIGHT

I will.

The Old Knight pins the clover to his student's cloak. An old
dent runs through one leaf.

OLD KNIGHT

Then rise, Knight of Clover.

He rises to warm applause. The child from the path whistles through two fingers. The Young Knight finds the child in the crowd and grins.

He touches the insignia. His hand is trembling. He drops it before anyone notices.

OLD KNIGHT

Breathe. They already know you.

YOUNG KNIGHT

That's what worries me.

The Old Knight smiles. Around them, benches scrape back. The baker begins handing out rolls.

OLD KNIGHT

Clover's a quiet place. You'll have time to grow into it.

A woman presses a warm roll into the new knight's hand and squeezes his arm. Before he can thank her, another neighbor steps forward.

The Old Knight moves aside to let them through.

INT. CLOVER - TAVERN - NIGHT

Tables pushed together. Muddy boots beneath them. The YOUNG KNIGHT squeezes past neighbors with two brimming mugs.

MARA, the innkeeper, catches a spill with her apron. She has been doing this for him for years.

MARA

Mind the floor, Sir.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You never minded it before.

MARA

You never wore your best cloak to spill on it.

She lifts the cloak clear of a puddle and steers him toward a chair.

BRAM, the blacksmith, makes room. A burn scars his wrist. He notices the loose clasp on the young man's sword belt and pinches it tight with one broad thumb.

BRAM

Bring that round tomorrow, Sir.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You too?

Bram hides a smile in his mug.

Across the table, EDA, a farmer, tears a heel of bread in half. She gives the larger piece to the child from the path, her daughter NELL.

NELL

Will you still carry our water,
Sir?

YOUNG KNIGHT

Only if you stop calling me that.

NELL

Yes, Sir.

Laughter. Eda nudges a plate toward him before it can disappear down the table.

The OLD KNIGHT sits by the hearth, his sword belt hanging from a peg. Mara offers him another drink. He almost covers his mug, then lets her fill it.

OLD KNIGHT

First time in thirty years I can
finish one slowly.

The Young Knight raises his mug to him. His teacher settles deeper into his chair.

Nell reaches for the bread. Without breaking conversation, the new Knight of Clover passes it to her.

INT. CLOVER - TAVERN - CONTINUOUS

The doors bang open.

BACKBREAKER ducks beneath the lintel. Three men follow him. An iron club hangs from his fist, its thick head dented and blunt, its grip wrapped in filthy leather.

Mara stops pouring. Bram lowers his mug.

MARA

Backbreaker.

He drags a chair from the table. Its legs scrape through the silence. Eda draws Nell onto her lap to make room.

Backbreaker takes the child's bread. One of his men lifts a jug from behind the counter.

MARA

You pay before you drink.

He lays the club across the table. A bowl tips, spilling broth into Eda's lap. She flinches but makes no sound.

BACKBREAKER

Put it on my account.

His men laugh. The Young Knight rises.

YOUNG KNIGHT

She asked you to pay.

Backbreaker notices the silver clover.

BACKBREAKER

That yours?

YOUNG KNIGHT

I'm the Knight of Clover.

Backbreaker looks from the young man to the Old Knight by the hearth.

BACKBREAKER

Already? He still looks frightened of you.

The young man keeps his hands at his sides.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Pay Mara. You can eat like everyone else.

BACKBREAKER

And you'll have the honor of letting me?

He wipes his greasy fingers on the edge of the young man's cloak.

BACKBREAKER

There. Something else for her to wash. All this honor keeps her busy.

Mara sets the jug down. Behind Backbreaker, Eda edges Nell toward Bram. The Young Knight waits until the child is clear before meeting Backbreaker's eyes again.

INT. CLOVER - TAVERN - CONTINUOUS

Bram guides Nell behind him, into Eda's arms.

BRAM

Mara buys that food. Same as anyone. Pay her.

Backbreaker looks up at him. He takes another bite.

BRAM

You heard me.

Backbreaker's hand closes around the club.

One short swing. The iron catches Bram beneath the ear.

He drops against the table, overturning his mug. Before he can fall clear, Backbreaker brings the club down on his head.

Bram hits the floor. Still.

The Young Knight stands frozen. The clasp Bram repaired is bright against his belt.

Eda turns Nell's face into her skirt. A chair falls somewhere behind them. Nobody picks it up.

The Old Knight rises from the hearth, one hand reaching toward his sword belt on the peg.

Mara kneels beside Bram. She touches his neck, waits, then presses harder. Her eyes lift to the Young Knight. She shakes her head.

MARA

Get out.

Backbreaker catches her by the hair as she starts to stand. He pulls her up against the table. Her hands fly to his wrist.

BACKBREAKER

You still want paying?

His club rises.

Steel leaves the Young Knight's scabbard. He steps within reach of the club and sets his point beneath Backbreaker's jaw.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Let her go.

Backbreaker stops. His men push back from the table.

The young man watches the hand tangled in Mara's hair. His sword stays level.

INT. CLOVER - TAVERN - CONTINUOUS

The Old Knight takes his sword from the peg. He leaves the belt hanging.

OLD KNIGHT

Backbreaker. Let her go. You know me.

Backbreaker glances at him. His grip loosens. Mara pulls free and stumbles behind the Young Knight.

The Old Knight steps between the two men, his blade low. He eases his student back with his free hand.

BACKBREAKER

Thought you were finished.

OLD KNIGHT

So did I.

Through the open doors: a mounted man waits across the square. Another emerges from the lane beside him. Neither looks surprised by the silence inside.

The Old Knight speaks without turning his head.

OLD KNIGHT

His riders are outside. More will
be close. Take the back door. Ride
to the central city.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I'm the Knight of Clover. I can't
leave.

OLD KNIGHT

Find the royal guard. Tell them
Backbreaker is here. Bring
soldiers.

The young man looks down at Bram. Mara has covered his face with her apron.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We can hold them together.

OLD KNIGHT

Two swords. And who guards the
houses? The fields?

The young man has no answer.

OLD KNIGHT

Clover needs help. You can still
reach it.

BACKBREAKER

What are you whispering about?

The Old Knight advances a step. Backbreaker lifts the club from his shoulder.

OLD KNIGHT

Go. I'll keep him here.

Behind his teacher, the Young Knight lowers his sword. He looks toward the kitchen door. Mara meets his eyes and moves aside.

INT. CLOVER - TAVERN - CONTINUOUS

The Young Knight reaches the kitchen door. He stops with his hand against it.

Backbreaker swings. The Old Knight slips outside the club and opens a cut along his forearm. A second stroke catches his cheek before he can recover.

The Old Knight never looks back.

OLD KNIGHT

Go.

The Young Knight pushes through the door. It swings shut behind him.

Backbreaker touches his cheek. Blood on his fingers. He grins.

He drives forward again. The Old Knight turns him with a short parry, steps clear and cuts his shoulder. Backbreaker scarcely checks his stride.

One of the gang kicks a bench into the Old Knight's calves. He stumbles. Backbreaker flings a mug at his face and follows it with the club.

The Old Knight ducks the mug. Steel meets iron. The blow jars his arm.

Backbreaker strikes the blade again. And again. Each time the Old Knight moves it, the club follows. He is hunting the sword.

The Old Knight withdraws his blade and thrusts. Backbreaker twists; the point scores his ribs. He crashes into the old man before he can pull away.

A boot hooks behind the Old Knight's heel. Backbreaker slams him against the table, trapping his sword across its edge beneath the iron club.

The Old Knight wrenches at the hilt. Backbreaker bears down.

CRACK.

The blade snaps. Its broken length skitters between the bowls.

Backbreaker releases him. He could strike now. Instead, he steps back to admire the jagged stub in the old man's hand.

BACKBREAKER

Go on. Show them.

His men laugh. The Old Knight tries to steady his damaged grip. Backbreaker watches his face, enjoying the effort.

EXT. ROAD OUT OF CLOVER - NIGHT

The Young Knight rides hard out of a narrow lane, bent low over his horse. The last houses fall behind him.

A bell starts ringing in Clover. Fast. Uneven.

He looks back. Lamplight trembles between the buildings. A scream carries out across the fields.

He hauls on the reins. His horse wheels toward the town, hooves churning the road.

For a moment he sits facing home. The bell rings on.

His hand closes around his sword hilt. He begins to draw it, then stops. The silver clover rises and falls against his chest with each breath.

OLD KNIGHT (V.O.)

Find the royal guard. Tell them
Backbreaker is here. Bring
soldiers.

The Young Knight pushes the blade back into its scabbard. His hand stays there.

Another cry. He flinches toward it.

Then he turns his horse away from Clover and digs in his heels.

The bell grows fainter beneath the pounding hooves. He keeps looking back long after the town is lost in the dark.

EXT. CLOVER - TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The bell has stopped. Gang members herd the townspeople against the well. Others carry sacks from the houses to waiting horses.

Backbreaker emerges from the tavern, wiping his club on a tablecloth. A RIDER hurries to meet him.

RIDER

The young one got out. Took a
horse behind the tavern.

Backbreaker stops wiping.

BACKBREAKER

Which way?

RIDER

East. Toward the capital.

Backbreaker looks at the road beyond the last houses.

RIDER

We'll be gone before he brings
anyone.

BACKBREAKER

From here. He tells the guard
where we were tonight, they know
where to start looking tomorrow.

He drops the cloth.

BACKBREAKER

Rook.

ROOK looks up from tightening a saddle girth. Lean, patient,
missing the upper half of one ear. A short hunting bow sits in a
leather sleeve beside his knee.

BACKBREAKER

Get ahead of him. Before the main
road.

ROOK

He's had a start.

BACKBREAKER

Then stop talking.

Rook checks the girth once more. He looks east, then toward a
gap in the houses to the north.

ROOK

The road bends round the mill. I
can cut through the pasture.

BACKBREAKER

He doesn't reach the guard.

Rook mounts. One of the men offers him a torch. He shakes his head and rides into the unlit lane.

Backbreaker watches until the hoofbeats fade. Then he turns on the waiting rider.

BACKBREAKER

Watch the horses this time.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

The Young Knight passes a farmhouse with a light in its window. Farther on, another stands dark. Then only fields.

His horse settles into a trot, its neck damp. He loosens the reins a little.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I am the Knight of Clover. I
require an audience with the
commander of the royal guard.

He straightens in the saddle.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I have come to request...

He shakes his head.

YOUNG KNIGHT

To report an attack. Backbreaker
and his men have attacked Clover.

The road forks beside a leaning signpost. He reins in and bends toward its weathered lettering. CAPITAL. An arrow points along the narrower branch.

He searches the darkness beyond it for another light. Nothing. He takes the turn.

YOUNG KNIGHT

My teacher is holding them. If you
send men now--

His voice catches. He swallows and starts again, louder.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I am the Knight of Clover.

He looks down at the insignia. A dark grease mark stains the cloak beneath it.

YOUNG KNIGHT

They killed Bram.

He rides a few strides in silence.

YOUNG KNIGHT

The blacksmith. They killed our
blacksmith.

Ahead, the road curves between bare fields. He urges his horse on.

EXT. MILL ROAD - NIGHT

Across the pasture, Rook rides parallel to the road. Through a gap in the hedge: the Young Knight passes, talking to himself.

Rook watches him disappear around the long bend toward a dark mill. He turns his horse downhill, cutting across the field.

At the millstream, he dismounts beneath the trees. He loops the reins over a branch and slides his bow from its sleeve.

Beyond him, the road narrows onto a stone bridge. Half its parapet has fallen into the water.

Hoofbeats approach. Rook nocks an arrow.

The Young Knight rides onto the bridge.

An arrow strikes his upper arm.

He cries out and jerks the reins. His horse shies against the broken parapet. He grabs for the saddle, misses, hits the stones hard.

The horse bolts. Hoofbeats recede.

He tries to breathe. The arrow shaft catches beneath him as he rolls. A sharp gasp.

Boots scrape nearby.

He drags his sword free just as Rook comes over the low wall, knife first. The young man swings from the ground. Rook jumps back. Steel strikes stone.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Stay back!

Rook kicks grit into his face.

The young man scrambles upright, blinking. He finds his training stance. His injured arm sags.

Rook darts toward that side. The knight turns too late. A knife tears through his cloak. He lashes out, catching only cloth as Rook slips behind him.

An arm clamps across his throat. They slam into the parapet.

The Young Knight catches Rook's knife wrist with his wounded arm. His knees buckle. Below the broken wall, water rushes over black stones.

The knife inches toward his ribs.

EXT. MILL ROAD - BRIDGE - CONTINUOUS

The Young Knight plants his heel and turns inside Rook's grip, forcing the knife wrist outward.

For a moment, it works. He steps back to bring his sword between them, searching for the distance he knows.

Rook follows him in. He grabs the arrow shaft protruding from the young man's arm and twists.

The knight screams. His guard collapses. Rook drives him onto his back, a knee pinning his sword wrist.

The knife comes down. The young man catches Rook's forearm with his wounded hand. The point touches his throat.

His heels scrape uselessly on the stones.

He lets go of his sword. His free hand claws at the road, closes around a loose stone and swings.

It hits Rook above the ear. The knife slips sideways. The young man strikes again.

Rook falls across him. He shoves the weight away, scrambles onto his knees and raises the stone once more.

Rook doesn't move.

The stone hangs in the young man's hand. He lowers it slowly.

Only the stream. His own ragged breathing.

He touches Rook's shoulder. Shakes it. Then recoils from what he has done.

He crawls to the broken wall and retches.

After a while, he returns. He has to make himself touch the body. He searches the coat with his good hand.

A purse. Flint. A folded notice, soft from being carried.

He opens it against the stones: a crude likeness of Backbreaker above a reward. Beneath it, smaller drawings of known accomplices. One has a cropped ear.

The Young Knight looks from the drawing to Rook.

He folds the notice and puts it inside his cloak. Then he reaches for his sword. His shaking fingers miss the hilt.

EXT. HILL ABOVE THE CAPITAL ROAD - DAWN

The Young Knight climbs the last stretch on foot. Dried blood stiffens his sleeve. A strip torn from his cloak binds his wounded arm, the shortened arrow shaft caught beneath it.

He reaches the crest and stops.

The capital fills a vast crater in the desert basin below.

Terraces descend into the earth. Gate towers crown the rim. Far below, a royal palace shines in a column of sunlight while the surrounding city remains in shadow.

Far down the slope, carts wait at a gate cut into the crater rim. A column of mounted soldiers passes them, armor flashing in the dawn.

The Young Knight straightens. He takes a breath that almost becomes a laugh.

Then he looks back.

The road disappears among distant hills. No sign of Clover.

He stands between the two views, his good hand resting on the silver insignia.

Bells sound from the capital. Slow, measured strokes.

He turns toward them. Wipes his mouth with the cleanest part of his sleeve. Pulls his torn cloak into place.

The Knight of Clover starts down toward the gates.

EXT. CAPITAL - CRATER GATE - MORNING

The Young Knight limps beneath an arch cut through the crater rim. Sand rasps across the stone behind him. Ahead, a descending passage opens onto an immensity of shade.

He stops at the first terrace.

The city drops away beneath his feet. Homes cut into the crater walls, one above another. Stairways disappear under stone overhangs. Bridges cross gulfs between crowded ledges.

Shade cloths span the market streets in overlapping strips. Beneath them, porters bend under sacks. A woman shakes bedding from an alcove scarcely wider than her shoulders.

The young man follows a mule train down the steps, keeping his injured arm clear of the loads. Nobody makes room. His silver clover draws no glance.

A temple doorway passes, immense figures carved into the rock on either side. Worshippers enter its cool darkness. Farther down, soldiers drill in a barracks court beneath a shelf of stone.

Then a gap between the awnings reveals the center.

A great well stands within a broad white court. Beyond it rises the palace, its open colonnades bright enough to make him squint.

One shaft of sunlight falls through the crater's mouth onto the entire complex. Clouds cross the opening high above. The light on the palace never dims.

At the well, attendants lower vessels on long ropes. Guards stand where the shaded streets meet the brilliant court.

The Young Knight leans against the rough wall. Below him, a palace fountain spills into a shallow basin.

He wets his cracked lips with his tongue and starts down toward the guards.

INT. PALACE - HALL OF SWORDS - DAY

The Young Knight slows beneath a high stone arch.

Swords cover the walls. Hundreds of them, each resting above a name cut into the stone. Sunlight catches their edges in long, ascending rows.

He steps closer. A narrow blade, polished like a mirror. Beside it, a broad sword with a bite missing near the hilt. Higher up, an ancient weapon worn almost black.

His lips move over the names. He recognizes them. He follows one inscription with a finger held just clear of the stone.

Across the far wall, above an empty mount:

THE HIGHEST HONOR OF THE REALM.

THEIR VIGIL ENDED. THEIR EXAMPLE ENDURES.

The Young Knight straightens his cloak over his bandaged arm. For a moment, he stands as he did before the people of Clover. Then his gaze stops on a name.

BACKBREAKER.

Above it rests a plain, heavy sword. No jewels. The leather grip is dark with use. Shallow nicks run along its edge, but the blade is whole.

He looks back at the neighboring names. Then at this one again.

Beneath BACKBREAKER, in smaller letters:

KNIGHT OF THE REALM.

FOR VALOR IN ITS DEFENSE.

He pulls the folded notice from inside his cloak. Opens it beneath the sword.

The same name. The face from the tavern. A price beneath it.

His eyes travel from the paper to the carefully tended weapon. Someone has polished the brass mounts. There is no dust on the blade.

Footsteps sound beyond the arch. He folds the notice, hiding the likeness against his palm.

He stays a moment longer, staring at the sword.

INT. PALACE - PRINCE'S APARTMENTS - DAY

A magnificent sword leans against a couch. A shirt hangs over its jeweled pommel. Wine has dried along the mouth of the scabbard.

ROMERIS sleeps on the couch, one boot still on. Beside him, engraved armor lies in a heap. A broken buckle has been replaced with knotted cord.

The KING'S SON sits at a gaming table littered with coins and empty cups. He rolls a pair of dice.

KING'S SON

You owe me six.

ROMERIS

I was asleep.

KING'S SON

You said one more.

ROMERIS

Yesterday.

A PALACE ATTENDANT opens the shutters. Sunlight floods the room. Romeris pulls the shirt from his sword and covers his eyes.

ATTENDANT

Sir Romeris. Shall I have your armor taken down?

ROMERIS

Is it in your way?

ATTENDANT

To be cleaned, sir.

Romeris lifts a corner of the shirt. The attendant waits, holding the battered breastplate with both hands.

ROMERIS

Mind the fastening. It's delicate.

The attendant nods solemnly at the knotted cord.

KING'S SON

Tell him how it broke.

ROMERIS

He has work to do.

The prince laughs. Romeris sits up too quickly and waits for the room to settle.

The attendant offers him a cup of water. Romeris takes the wine beside it.

ATTENDANT

Will you need your sword, sir?

Romeris looks at it, then toward the open shutters. Somewhere below, soldiers call their morning drill.

ROMERIS

Leave it there.

He pulls his remaining boot off and reaches for the dice.

INT. PALACE - PRINCE'S APARTMENTS - CONTINUOUS

Romeris rolls. The Prince wins again. He reaches for the coins, but Romeris catches his wrist and turns his palm over. A third die.

ROMERIS

Your father should know what he's raising.

KING'S SON

He taught me.

They laugh. The Prince pushes a plate of bread toward him.

KING'S SON

Eat something. You look buried.

The attendant returns with a folded duty roster. Romeris recognizes the seal and groans.

ROMERIS

The eastern wells?

KING'S SON

I had you moved. You're escorting the trade delegation to tonight's reception.

ROMERIS

From where?

KING'S SON

The guest apartments.

ROMERIS

A dangerous stretch.

The Prince takes the roster and signs it against the gaming table.

KING'S SON

Have the marshal copy this. Thank you.

The attendant bows and leaves. Romeris watches the door close.

ROMERIS

Who gets the wells?

KING'S SON

Someone who hasn't done them as
often as you.

Romeris accepts that. He tears off a piece of bread.

KING'S SON

Besides, I need you tonight.
Father still introduces me, then
answers every question himself.

ROMERIS

Try getting an answer in before he
draws breath.

KING'S SON

I want them to know who'll be
ruling them.

Romeris studies him. The Prince lets the seriousness pass and
steals back a coin.

KING'S SON

When the throne is mine, you'll
never ride beyond the walls again.

ROMERIS

Put that in writing.

The Prince reaches for the roster, remembers it's gone. They
laugh again. Romeris pours them both another drink.

INT. PALACE - OPEN COURT - DAY

Petitioners wait beneath tall columns. At the far end, the KING
leans forward on his throne, listening to a POTTER and a MILLER
talk over each other.

KING

One at a time. Who moved the
boundary stone?

Both men point. The King waits until their hands drop.

KING

Send a surveyor. Until then,
neither of you touches it.

A clerk records the order. An ELDERLY WOMAN steps forward with a cracked water jar.

ELDERLY WOMAN

The lower cistern's been dry six
days.

The King turns to an OFFICIAL beside the throne.

KING

You told me the channel was
repaired.

OFFICIAL

The work was completed, Majesty.

KING

Then go with her. Find out why the
water hasn't arrived.

He waits while the official joins her. A clerk beckons the next petitioner.

The Young Knight steps into the light. Conversations fade at the sight of his bloodstained sleeve and the shaft beneath its binding.

He kneels awkwardly.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Your Majesty. I am the Knight of
Clover. Appointed yesterday.

The King rises.

KING

Bring him a chair. And a
physician.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Armed men came last night. Their
leader killed our blacksmith.

A guard brings a chair. The young man grips its back but stays
standing.

YOUNG KNIGHT

My teacher stayed to hold him. He
sent me for soldiers.

KING

How many men?

YOUNG KNIGHT

Three inside. Riders outside. I
don't know how many.

He holds out the folded notice.

YOUNG KNIGHT

One followed me. At the mill
bridge. I... he's dead.

The King comes down from the throne and takes the paper.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Please send help. They were still
ringing the bell when I left.

INT. PALACE - OPEN COURT - CONTINUOUS

The King sets the folded notice beside the clerk's ledger,
unread.

KING

Tell me from the beginning.

The Young Knight lowers himself into the chair. A PHYSICIAN
kneels beside him and begins loosening the bloodstiff binding.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We were celebrating. At the
tavern. They walked in and helped
themselves. Mara asked them to
pay.

He looks at the physician's hands.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Bram backed her up. Their leader
hit him with an iron club. Twice.
Then he grabbed Mara.

KING

What did you do?

YOUNG KNIGHT

Drew my sword. My teacher stepped
in before we fought.

The physician lifts the torn sleeve. The young man grips the
chair.

YOUNG KNIGHT

There were riders waiting outside.
My teacher said more would be
close. He told me to come here.

KING

Did you see them attack the
houses?

YOUNG KNIGHT

No. I heard screaming as I rode
out. The alarm bell.

A courtier lowers a document he has been reading.

YOUNG KNIGHT

The man at the bridge was waiting
for me. He shot before I knew he
was there.

KING

You believe he was sent to stop
you reaching us.

The young man nods toward the notice.

YOUNG KNIGHT

His likeness is on that. With the
others.

KING

Who led them?

YOUNG KNIGHT

Backbreaker.

The King's hand closes on the back of the chair.

The clerk stops writing. A whispered conversation by the columns dies unfinished.

The King opens the notice. He studies the likeness, then looks directly at the young man.

KING

You saw him yourself?

YOUNG KNIGHT

Close enough to touch.

No one speaks. The Young Knight watches the King's face.

INT. PALACE - OPEN COURT - CONTINUOUS

YOUNG KNIGHT

I saw his sword. In the hall.

The King folds the notice along its worn crease.

KING

I put it there.

The young man waits.

KING

During the siege of the eastern pass, he held the retreat open. Three days. Families, wounded men, wagons. Everyone who could still move came through behind him.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He was a knight?

KING

One of our finest.

The physician pauses to let the young man relax his clenched hand.

KING

He brought back fewer than half
his company. Refused to enter the
city until the last wagon had
arrived.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I thought the swords were for men
whose service was over.

KING

Usually. We made an exception. He
stood beside me when we mounted
it.

The young man looks toward the doors leading back to the hall.

YOUNG KNIGHT

What happened to him?

The King looks down at the crude likeness on the folded paper.

KING

He stopped coming to court. Then
he left his post. For a time, no
one could tell us where he was.

YOUNG KNIGHT

And then?

KING

Caravans robbed. Settlements
burned. Survivors began giving us
his name.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Why did he leave?

A pause. The King meets his eyes.

KING

I won't give you a guess and call
it an answer.

He lays the notice flat.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Bram never knew any of that. He
only asked him to pay.

KING

What he did for this realm gives
him no claim on your people.

The King turns to the waiting officers. The notice remains
beside the ledger.

KING

How long since a patrol reached
Clover?

The officers look to the MARSHAL.

MARSHAL

I would need the district returns,
Majesty.

KING

Get them.

A clerk hurries away. The King returns to the ledger and turns
back several pages.

KING

The outer settlements send half
their taxes. You tell me the
harvest failed. Three caravans
disappear. You tell me the road is
difficult.

MARSHAL

The local lords are responsible
for those roads.

KING

And when you ask them for men?

The Marshal hesitates.

MARSHAL

Some have not answered.

KING

Some?

MARSHAL

Four. Two others demand payment
before their levies leave their
estates.

A murmur among the petitioners. The King closes the ledger.

KING

Payment. To keep the king's peace.

He looks toward the Young Knight. The physician cuts away
another strip of ruined cloth.

KING

And while we wait for their terms,
a murderer walks into Clover and
sits down to supper.

MARSHAL

We can reinforce the eastern
districts.

KING

With whose permission? Mine, or
theirs?

The Marshal lowers his eyes.

The King steps toward the open colonnade. Below, a line of royal
guards crosses the brilliant court. Beyond the palace, the city
terraces vanish into shade.

KING

Here, an order reaches the next
room before I finish speaking. Out
there, a boy has to bleed on my

floor before I hear that a town
needs help.

He turns back.

KING

Bring every unanswered dispatch.
Not a summary. The letters.

The clerks move at once. The Young Knight watches the notice
disappear beneath the first stack of reports.

An attendant opens a side door for the Prince and Romeris.

Romeris has found both boots. His sword hangs at his side, its
scabbard wiped hastily clean. The Prince murmurs something that
makes him smile. Then they notice the silence.

KING

Send riders to Clover. A relief
force behind them, with a
physician and supplies.

The Young Knight starts to rise. The physician keeps a hand on
his shoulder.

KING

If Backbreaker has gone, we
follow. No stopping at a district
boundary. No waiting for a lord to
invite us through his gates.

The Marshal bows.

KING

He will be found and brought
before this court to answer for
what he has done.

The Young Knight looks along the officers. A gray-haired
commander stands beside the Marshal, one hand resting on a plain
sword hilt. The young man watches him, waiting.

KING

Romeris.

By the side door, Romeris looks toward the throne.

ROMERIS

Majesty?

KING

You will lead the pursuit.

The Prince turns to his father. Romeris waits a beat, as though another instruction might change the first.

ROMERIS

I am assigned to the delegation.

KING

They can find the dining room.

A few courtiers lower their eyes. No one laughs.

Romeris glances at the Prince. His friend has nothing ready to say.

The Young Knight follows their exchange. His gaze drops to the dried wine still caught beneath the lip of Romeris's scabbard.

Romeris steps away from the Prince and into the open court. He bows to the King.

KING

A small company. Knights who can travel quickly and live beyond a palace gate.

ROMERIS

How far into the outer territories?

KING

As far as the pursuit takes you.
The Marshal will see you supplied.

Romeris inclines his head. His jaw tightens.

KING

The Knight of Clover will accompany you.

The Young Knight looks up.

YOUNG KNIGHT

With the company?

KING

You know the road and the people.
Guide them home.

The young man stands before the physician can stop him. Pain checks him halfway. He steadies himself on the chair and finishes rising.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Thank you, Majesty. They'll
shelter us. Feed the horses.
Whatever you need.

KING

We'll bring our own provisions.
They've given enough.

The young man nods quickly. A smile breaks through his exhaustion.

ROMERIS

He can barely stand.

KING

Then let the physician finish
before you put him on a horse.

Romeris looks toward the Prince. His friend is studying the floor.

The Young Knight turns to Romeris, eager now.

YOUNG KNIGHT

My teacher will know your name.

Romeris says nothing.

YOUNG KNIGHT

When he sees you riding in--

He stops at Romeris's expression. The older knight stares at him, tight-lipped, as though the entire order has come from his mouth.

The physician draws the young man back into the chair. He sits, still trying to catch Romeris's eye.

Romeris turns to the Marshal.

ROMERIS

I'll need the roster.

The Marshal offers him a folded list. Romeris takes it without opening it.

ROMERIS

Majesty. May I speak plainly?

KING

Please.

ROMERIS

If this is a pursuit, there are younger men who can ride harder. If you mean to restore order in the outer territories, send the army.

KING

The relief force will secure Clover. Your company will find the man who attacked it.

ROMERIS

Give the command to someone who needs to prove himself.

The King lets that sit between them.

KING

You spent years on those roads. You know where a company can water its horses, which passes close, which lords open their gates only after dark.

ROMERIS

Those were different times.

KING

And you knew Backbreaker.

Romeris stops turning the folded list in his hands.

The Young Knight looks from the King to him.

ROMERIS

I knew him when he carried a sword.

KING

You rode together.

ROMERIS

Yes.

KING

Then you know more about him than any young knight I could send.

Romeris glances at the wanted notice beneath the reports.

ROMERIS

That may not help you bring him back.

KING

It may help bring your men back.

Romeris looks up. The King holds his gaze.

KING

You have your orders.

A moment. Romeris unfolds the roster.

ROMERIS

Yes, Majesty.

He studies the names. This time, he reads them.

INT. PALACE - PRIVATE GALLERY - DAY

Romeris catches the Prince by the sleeve. The Prince dismisses an attendant with a nod and waits until the door closes.

ROMERIS

You might have said something.

KING'S SON

With half the city watching? He
would have sent you twice as far.

Romeris releases him. The Prince straightens his cuff,
unoffended.

KING'S SON

Give him a few days. He was angry.

ROMERIS

He was quite clear.

KING'S SON

He's getting old. Every missed
payment looks like a rebellion.
Every order has to prove he can
still give one.

Romeris looks toward the closed door.

ROMERIS

People died.

KING'S SON

And he's sending soldiers. Clover
will have its help. You don't have
to spend a year chasing a man
through the hills.

The Prince takes the roster from him and glances at it.

KING'S SON

Ride around for a few weeks. Catch
some thieves. Come home a hero.

ROMERIS

Without Backbreaker.

KING'S SON

You searched. He was gone. By then
I'll have found a reason we need
you here.

He folds the list and returns it.

KING'S SON

Father won't run every appointment
forever.

Romeris studies the names through the thin paper.

ROMERIS

If I stayed on the main roads,
waited for proper reports...

He leaves the thought unfinished. The Prince rests a hand on his
shoulder.

KING'S SON

Keep your men safe. Let me handle
the rest.

Romeris folds the roster once more, small enough to hide in his
palm. He makes no promise. He does not give it back.

The Prince drifts toward an old map hanging between the windows.
Gold leaf marks the borders. Some of it has flaked away.

KING'S SON

My father still thinks the kingdom
ends wherever the old maps say it
does.

He searches the eastern edge until he finds Clover.

KING'S SON

A garrison here. Patrols here. A
road washed out every winter. What
comes back?

ROMERIS

Wool. Grain, when the harvest
holds.

KING'S SON

Enough to pay for the road?

Romeris shrugs.

KING'S SON

The lower terraces need water. We heard her in court. How many channels could we mend for what this expedition will cost?

ROMERIS

Those settlements were promised protection.

KING'S SON

Then promise what we can actually give. Offer them land nearer the city. Defend a border our soldiers can reach.

ROMERIS

They won't all leave.

KING'S SON

No. But must everyone else pay for that decision forever?

Romeris studies the long road between Clover and the capital.

ROMERIS

We used to lose more horses supplying those posts than fighting over them.

KING'S SON

You see? You know what it costs. He sees a smaller map and thinks it means a smaller king.

The Prince rests a finger on the capital.

KING'S SON

I'd rather keep the promises we make here.

Romeris rubs his thumb along the folded roster. Then he tucks it away.

ROMERIS

You'll have to tell him that
yourself.

The Prince smiles faintly. Romeris looks once more at Clover, a
small name beneath the peeling gold.

An attendant appears at the gallery door.

ATTENDANT

Sir Romeris. The King asks for a
word. Alone.

Romeris exchanges a glance with the Prince, then follows.

INT. PALACE - KING'S STUDY - DAY

The crown rests beside a stack of opened letters. The King
stands at a plain table, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Romeris bows. The King gestures toward a chair.

KING

Sit down. Please.

The attendant withdraws. Romeris remains standing until the door
closes.

ROMERIS

If this concerns the expedition--

KING

I'm frightened, Romeris.

Romeris sits.

The King places two letters in front of him.

KING

Same district. Same month. The
governor says the roads are clear.
A merchant says he paid three
separate tolls to men wearing no
colors.

ROMERIS

Have you sent someone to verify
it?

KING

Twice. One returned with the
governor's assurances. The other
hasn't returned.

He draws another letter from the pile.

KING

This village asked for a knight
three years ago. Every spring, we
list it as visited. Their headman
says no one has come.

Romeris takes the letter.

KING

I order patrols. The local lords
keep the men for their own
estates. Their replies still call
me sovereign.

He sits opposite Romeris. Without the throne between them, he
seems suddenly tired.

KING

My son thinks I can put down the
burden by drawing the border
closer.

Romeris looks up from the letter.

KING

He sees what those places cost us.
He hasn't seen what happens when
people stop believing anyone will
come.

The King smooths a torn corner of the headman's letter.

KING

I don't know how much of my
kingdom still exists outside this
room.

Romeris lowers the letter. For once, he has no ready answer.

ROMERIS

You should tell your son this.

KING

I have.

The King looks at him across the scattered letters.

KING

He listens to you.

ROMERIS

Usually because I'm saying what he wants to hear.

KING

I know about the wine. The women.
The duties that somehow become
someone else's.

Romeris leans back. The King raises a hand before he can answer.

KING

I also remember you walking into
this city with your saddle on your
back. You'd given your horse to a
wounded levy boy.

ROMERIS

He couldn't walk.

KING

You didn't ask who his father was.
Or what keeping him alive would
cost.

Romeris looks away.

KING

That man is still the one my son
thinks he drinks with.

A long pause. Romeris rubs at the dried wine beneath his
scabbard's rim. It does not come away.

ROMERIS

What are you asking me to do?

KING

Find Backbreaker. But look at the places you pass through. Listen to the people. When you return, tell my son what you saw.

ROMERIS

You think he'll change his mind?

KING

I think he'll let you finish speaking.

The King gathers the letters, then leaves the headman's plea in front of Romeris.

KING

One day, those people will be his responsibility. Help me leave him something he can still learn to care for.

Romeris picks up the letter. This time, he reads past the first lines.

ROMERIS

May I take this?

The King nods.

Romeris folds the letter carefully along its existing creases.

ROMERIS

I thought you wanted me out of the palace.

KING

I want you where I need you.

Romeris nods, eyes lowered. He slips the letter inside his coat beside the roster.

ROMERIS

You may be remembering a better man.

The King waits. He offers neither reassurance nor rebuke.

Romeris starts to speak again. Stops. His hand rests over the papers inside his coat.

ROMERIS

I'll go. I'll look for him.

The King lets out a breath.

KING

Thank you.

Romeris looks up at that, then away. He rises.

ROMERIS

I'll still complain about the horses.

A tired smile from the King. Romeris almost returns it.

At the door, he adjusts the sword hanging awkwardly against his hip. He has to loosen the belt and try again before it sits where it should.

Then he leaves.

EXT. PALACE - STABLE YARD - MORNING

Eight saddled horses wait beneath an awning. The Young Knight stands beside his, boots polished, borrowed armor cleaned and fitted around a fresh dressing. His supplies lie in precise bundles.

Six knights gather nearby.

SEREN, spare and weathered, moves a heavy sack from a tired packhorse to her own mount. She checks the animal before her weapons.

GARRAN counts the waterskins against a list. HALWICK, silver-bearded, fastens his cloak with ceremonial care.

GARRAN

Two skins missing.

HALWICK

Then we wait.

GARRAN

I meant fetch two more.

PELL, young enough to enjoy an audience, practices drawing his sword without looking. VOSS watches, chewing an apple.

PELL

First man to find Backbreaker gets
his name in the report.

VOSS

Last man alive gets to write it.

ILES kneels beside a stablehand whose palm has been rubbed raw by a rope. She binds it with a strip from her own linen roll.

HALWICK

That linen is company issue.

ILES

He was loading our horses.

The Young Knight looks toward the gate again.

Romeris finally appears, squinting beneath an untidy fringe. He stops beside Garran, takes a waterskin and drinks deeply.

GARRAN

You said first bell.

ROMERIS

I heard it.

He notices the young man's bundles. Identical knots. Buckles facing outward.

ROMERIS

Expecting an inspection?

YOUNG KNIGHT

Expecting to leave.

The others go quiet. Romeris presses two fingers against his temple.

ROMERIS

Then put it on the horse.

The young man lifts a bundle. His wounded arm falters. Seren catches the weight without comment.

YOUNG KNIGHT

My people are still out there.

ROMERIS

The relief column left yesterday.

This company rides on my order.

He hands back the waterskin and walks past. The Young Knight tightens a strap until Seren puts a hand over his.

SEREN

It's tight enough.

The Young Knight releases the strap. Across the yard, Romeris struggles with a stiff buckle on his saddlebag.

The young man approaches, more cautiously this time.

YOUNG KNIGHT

My teacher told me about Red Ford.

Romeris keeps working at the buckle.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You carried the standard across
under fire. The whole company
followed you.

ROMERIS

Someone had to carry it.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He said you went back into the
river three times.

For a moment, the young man sounds younger than he has since Clover.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I used to make him tell that part
again.

Romeris stops pulling.

ROMERIS

The crossing was deeper than the
scouts said. Men stepped off the
shelf in armor.

YOUNG KNIGHT

But you brought them out.

ROMERIS

Two of them.

The Young Knight waits for the rest. Romeris looks back at the
buckle.

YOUNG KNIGHT

The story says three.

ROMERIS

Three times in. Two men out.

A horse stamps behind them. The young man shifts aside without
looking.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I didn't know.

ROMERIS

Why would you?

He pulls the strap free at last.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You still went back.

Romeris looks at him. Then he drops the saddlebag into the young
man's good hand.

ROMERIS

Make yourself useful. Hold that.

The young man holds it while Romeris threads the strap through.
Neither speaks.

INT. PALACE - HALL OF SWORDS - MORNING

The Young Knight stands before Backbreaker's sword. Dressed for the road now, he reads the inscription again.

Bootsteps echo beneath the arches. Romeris stops beside him.

ROMERIS

Your horse is ready.

The young man nods but does not move.

YOUNG KNIGHT

How does someone like this become
someone like that?

Romeris looks at the sword. His eyes settle on a notch near the guard.

He reaches toward it, then lets his hand fall before it touches the blade.

ROMERIS

Usually slowly.

The Young Knight turns to him. Romeris keeps looking at the weapon.

A cleaner works along the far wall, polishing the brass beneath another knight's name. The cloth squeaks in the silence.

Romeris shifts his own sword behind his hip.

ROMERIS

Come on.

The young man heads toward the doors. Romeris remains a moment longer.

His hand rests against his coat, over the folded letter from the King's study.

Then he follows.

EXT. CAPITAL - OUTER GATE - MORNING

The gates open. A widening blade of sunlight cuts across the shaded passage.

Romeris rides through first. The Young Knight follows, then the six others, leading their packhorses.

Beyond the crater rim, the desert stretches to a pale horizon. Wind lifts sand across the road. The horses narrow their eyes against it.

The Young Knight turns in his saddle.

Through the open gate, terraces descend into shadow. Far below, the palace and the great well shine in their unbroken column of light. Royal banners stir above the walls.

He looks along the company: their swords, their shields, the supplies bound behind them. He sits a little straighter. His good hand closes over the silver clover.

Ahead, Romeris draws his collar against the blowing sand and keeps riding.

The gates begin to close behind them. He does not turn.

The Young Knight faces forward and urges his horse alongside him. Eight riders follow the road into the desert.

EXT. CLOVER - OUTSKIRTS - DAY

The company crests the low rise outside Clover. Dust coats their cloaks. Below them, the road runs past the trampled grass where the Young Knight trained.

ROMERIS

Seren, find the relief captain. We
need tracks, numbers, which road
they took.

The Young Knight rides ahead.

Beyond the first houses, roofs are missing. Black rafters stand against the sky. A royal soldier carries a bucket through a doorway with no wall around it.

The young man slows.

EXT. CLOVER - TOWN SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

Cupboards lie open in the street. Bedding has been slit and shaken out. A broken cart blocks the lane beside the well.

Two relief soldiers lift a charred beam. Beneath it, a hand appears. One soldier calls for a blanket.

The Young Knight dismounts. He leaves the reins hanging until Garran takes them.

He passes the bakery. Its oven still stands; the rest has fallen inward.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He was handing out rolls.

Romeris follows his gaze to a body laid beside the wall. Flour still whitens one boot.

The young man kneels and draws the blanket over it.

Farther along, a gray-haired woman sits on a doorstep, holding a man's coat. He recognizes her and starts toward her.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Tessa?

She looks up. Her eyes settle on the clover at his throat.

TESSA

You came back.

He nods. She makes room beside her. He cannot bring himself to sit.

Behind him, Iles takes the blanket from a soldier and goes to the collapsed house. Pell unbuckles his sword to help lift the beam.

The Young Knight looks from doorway to doorway. Then toward the tavern.

He starts walking. Romeris leaves the horses and follows.

EXT. CLOVER - TAVERN YARD - DAY

The Young Knight rounds the tavern. Its rear door hangs open -- the door he left through.

Bodies lie beneath blankets along the wall. A relief soldier kneels beside the last, drawing a covering over a pair of worn boots.

The young man stops at those boots.

He approaches slowly. Kneels. Folds back the blanket.

The Old Knight.

Dirt in the creases of his face. One eye swollen shut. The young man brushes a little grit from his teacher's cheek with his thumb.

Romeris stops several paces away.

SOLDIER

We found him inside.

The young man looks toward the open door.

Beside the body lies the sword. The soldier has brought out both pieces and laid them in the dirt.

The Young Knight picks up the hilt. His thumb finds the hollow worn into the grip by his teacher's hand.

He reaches for the broken length with his other hand. Pain checks him. He sets the hilt down and brings the pieces together on the ground instead.

For a moment, the familiar shape.

He shifts the hilt. The blade does not follow.

He sits back on his heels, staring at the gap.

Behind him, someone calls for another blanket. A cart wheel rattles over the stones.

The young man turns back to his teacher. Straightens the collar that has folded beneath his neck.

Romeris crouches nearby. He says nothing.

The two pieces of the sword lie between them in the dirt.

EXT. CLOVER - BURIAL GROUND - LATE AFTERNOON

Fresh graves beside older, weathered stones. The earth lies in uneven heaps. Shovels lean against the fence.

Clover gathers around the shrouded dead. Tessa holds the same coat. Nell stands pressed against Eda, watching the ground.

The company waits behind the townspeople, heads uncovered. Dirt stains Pell's sleeves.

Beside the Old Knight's grave, the Young Knight finishes spreading a cloth beneath the two pieces of his teacher's sword.

He rises. The townspeople turn toward him.

He looks to Romeris. Romeris waits with the others.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We are gathered to honor...

He stops. His gaze moves along the shrouds.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Bram fixed my belt. That night. He
saw it was loose and fixed it.

Eda lowers her head.

The young man swallows. He tries to straighten, but his wounded
arm pulls and he lets the effort go.

YOUNG KNIGHT

My teacher told me a sword is only
as honorable as the hand holding
it.

He looks down at the broken blade.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I thought he meant mine.

A long silence. Wind moves the edge of the cloth. He kneels to
tuck it beneath the hilt.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He stayed with you.

His voice fails on the last word. He remains kneeling.

Tessa steps forward and rests a hand on his good shoulder. After
a moment, he covers it with his own.

Romeris takes a lowering rope. The others move to help.

The Young Knight stands with them as they lower his teacher into
the earth.

The last mourners drift toward Clover. The graves are filled.

The Young Knight remains beside his teacher's mound, wrapping
the broken sword in its cloth. He draws the cord tight enough to
cut into his fingers.

By the fence, Romeris watches him pull the knot a second time.

ROMERIS

It won't come loose.

The young man stops pulling. Romeris approaches.

ROMERIS

You got to the King. You brought
help back. We've put soldiers
here. Clover is still standing.

Beyond the fence, smoke rises from a ruined roof.

ROMERIS

We've done what we came back here
to do. You don't have to ride any
farther.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We haven't found him.

ROMERIS

There are other knights who can
follow a trail. Let them. Stay
with your people.

The young man picks up the wrapped pieces. Holds them against
his chest.

YOUNG KNIGHT

The King ordered me to guide you.

ROMERIS

And you did.

Romeris glances at the bundle.

ROMERIS

I've ridden with men who carried
something like that. A brother's
knife. A dead friend's ring.
Before long, every road led to the
same man.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You think I want revenge.

ROMERIS

I think you haven't looked at
anyone living since we put him in
the ground.

The young man looks toward Clover. Tessa waits at the cemetery
gate.

Romeris steps aside, leaving the path to her clear.

The Young Knight takes a step toward the gate, then stops.

ROMERIS

Who knows which families have
somewhere to sleep? Which stores
survived? The relief captain has
been here a day. You know every
door.

The young man looks at Tessa. She turns to help an older mourner
over the uneven path.

ROMERIS

They need roofs. A watch they
trust. Someone to settle things
before two hungry neighbors start
fighting over a sack of grain.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I know.

ROMERIS

Then stay. Be their knight.

Romeris glances toward the road beyond the village.

ROMERIS

I can leave supplies with the
captain. Have the local patrols
keep looking. With you here, I can
report that Clover is secure.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Report from where?

A pause.

ROMERIS

The capital. Eventually.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Without Backbreaker.

ROMERIS

If the trail has gone cold, riding
in circles won't warm it. The King
needs to know his people are
protected.

He says it easily. Almost the beginning of a report.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Has it gone cold?

Romeris looks back at him.

ROMERIS

Seren is asking.

The young man shifts the wrapped sword under his good arm.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Then we don't know yet.

Romeris starts to answer. At the gate, Tessa calls the young
man's attention with a small wave. Both men look toward her.

For a moment, the offer still stands between them.

The Young Knight raises a hand to Tessa: a moment. He turns back
to Romeris.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I'm coming with you.

ROMERIS

To do what?

YOUNG KNIGHT

Find him. Bring him before the
King.

Romeris looks at the bundle beneath his arm.

ROMERIS

Are you looking for justice, or
revenge?

YOUNG KNIGHT

Justice.

The answer comes quickly. Romeris waits, but the young man holds his gaze.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He'll do this somewhere else.

ROMERIS

He might.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Then stopping him is our duty.

ROMERIS

Everyone calls it justice when
they start.

The young man looks toward his teacher's grave.

ROMERIS

If he puts down his weapon, what
happens?

YOUNG KNIGHT

We take him alive.

Romeris studies him. The young man adjusts the bundle, easing its weight against his ribs.

ROMERIS

Remember you said that.

He starts toward the gate. The Young Knight remains beside the grave for another moment.

His fingers find the hard edge of the broken blade through the cloth. He loosens his grip and follows.

EXT. CLOVER - TOWN SQUARE - EVENING

Seren has cleared a place on the well's low wall. Garran waits with a scrap of paper and a charcoal stub. Romeris and the Young Knight join them as Tessa sits.

TESSA

They kept us here while the others
went through the houses. Then a

rider came. Said the young knight
had taken the capital road.

ROMERIS

You heard him say that?

TESSA

I was where you're standing.

Romeris nods for her to continue.

TESSA

Their leader sent a man after him.
After that, everything hurried.
Sacks on horses. Men shouting for
the others to come out.

SEREN

Did they stay until morning?

TESSA

No. It was still dark when they
rode.

Nearby, Iles finishes listening to Eda. She brings her over.

EDA

East. I saw them from the loft
after they let us go.

ROMERIS

All of them?

EDA

I couldn't count. There were
horses tied behind the riders.
Ours among them.

A MILLER, waiting with Voss, points beyond the ruined bakery.

MILLER

Past my yard. Same road. One of
the loads caught my gatepost. You
can see where it split.

Garran marks the paper. Romeris looks to Seren.

SEREN

Two more told the relief captain
east. He has scouts checking the
turnoffs.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Toward the capital.

ROMERIS

Along the same road. We don't know
how far.

He turns back to Tessa.

ROMERIS

Thank you. All of you.

The Young Knight studies the charcoal line on Garran's paper.
Romeris follows it with one finger to the edge.

Romeris keeps his finger on the paper.

ROMERIS

Get the road map.

Garran unrolls it across the well's rim. Seren holds one corner
against the breeze. Romeris finds Clover, then traces the
eastern road.

ROMERIS

He used to stay out here.

His finger follows the scattered settlements along the border.

ROMERIS

A day between villages. Longer
before anyone misses a wagon. By
the time word reaches a garrison,
he's somewhere else.

SEREN

He could still turn off.

ROMERIS

He could. But why bring loaded
horses this way first?

The Young Knight leans over the map. His own route to the capital branches away beyond the mill. The eastern road continues through a web of toll stations and market towns.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Where does it go if he stays on
it?

Romeris stops at a broad circle where several roads meet.

ROMERIS

Riproin.

Garran looks up from the map.

GARRAN

Half the eastern trade passes
through there. Grain, cloth,
silver. You can wait a day just to
get a wagon through the gates.

YOUNG KNIGHT

How many people?

GARRAN

Thousands. One of the largest
cities in the realm.

The Young Knight studies the small mark that represents Clover.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Then we have to warn them.

ROMERIS

We'll send word.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Before he does this again.

He gestures at the ruined square. Romeris shakes his head slightly.

ROMERIS

Clover has a knight. Riproin has
gate companies, watchmen, walls.
He knows the difference.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Then why go there?

ROMERIS

A stranger rides into a village,
everyone watches. In Riproin, he
rents a room.

SEREN

And the gang?

ROMERIS

Different gates. Different inns.
Sell the stolen horses, buy new
coats. They know how.

The Young Knight looks again at the roads converging on the
city.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You think he's hiding.

ROMERIS

I think we should find out before
we decide what he's doing.

He takes Garran's charcoal and marks the last turnoff before
Riproin.

ROMERIS

Have the scouts check here. And
get a warning to the city watch.

Seren nods. Romeris keeps the map open.

EXT. RIPROIN - ROADSIDE CAMP - EVENING

Riproin's walls rise beyond a stream of wagons. Smoke from a
dozen cooking fires hangs over the roadside.

Backbreaker bends over a basin. Pink water runs from his face.
The cut on his cheek has begun to close.

He pulls on a plain wool coat, easing one arm into its sleeve. Beneath it, a stained bandage circles his shoulder.

Around him, his men exchange riding leathers for work shirts and patched cloaks. One folds a sword into a blanket and lashes it beneath a cart. Another buries an axe under sacks of feed.

GANG MEMBER

We could still turn north. Nobody
watches those tracks.

BACKBREAKER

They will now.

Backbreaker wraps his iron club in sacking. He slides it under the cart's bed, within reach of the driver's seat.

GANG MEMBER

And if someone knows you?

Backbreaker nods toward the traffic. A drover passes, arguing over the price of fodder. He scarcely glances at them.

BACKBREAKER

Ask him who I am.

The man watches the drover go.

BACKBREAKER

They know a name. Most have never
seen my face.

He takes a cloth cap from the cart and puts it on.

BACKBREAKER

Two at a time. Different gates. If
you see me inside, keep walking.

He climbs onto the cart. Waits for a gap in the wagons. Then clicks his tongue to the horse.

The cart joins the slow procession toward Riproin. Behind him, the men drift apart.

EXT. EASTERN ROAD - DAY

The company rides east. The wrapped sword is strapped behind the Young Knight's saddle. At each rise, he stands in the stirrups to search the road ahead.

Seren draws alongside Romeris and returns a dispatch to him.

SEREN

The scouts followed the loaded
horses past the capital turn.
Still east.

The young man hears. He urges his mount forward.

ROMERIS

Walk him.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He's rested.

ROMERIS

I'm not.

Voss laughs. The young man reins in.

A wheel rut jolts Romeris in the saddle. He shifts his weight,
grimacing.

ROMERIS

Someone is collecting tolls for
this.

EXT. ROADSIDE INN - YARD - AFTERNOON

Horses drink at a trough. Iles checks beneath the Young Knight's
dressing while he watches the road over her shoulder.

ILES

Hold still. Looking harder won't
bring him closer.

Under an awning, Romeris drinks wine from a chipped cup. Pell
shakes dice over a table. Voss pushes a coin forward.

PELL

Halwick?

HALWICK

I don't gamble on duty.

VOSS

He loses off duty too.

Halwick ignores him and checks a pack strap. Garran counts feed into eight measures.

Iles finishes tying the dressing. The Young Knight goes straight to Romeris.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We could eat in the saddle.

ROMERIS

You could. The horses prefer this.

Pell rolls. Romeris gathers the coins, including Voss's.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Do you intend to spend all
afternoon here?

Romeris takes another drink before answering.

ROMERIS

Ask Seren when the horses are
ready.

The young man turns away. Seren is already saddling hers.

SEREN

They're ready.

Romeris looks at his unfinished cup, then sets it down. The Young Knight is the first to mount.

The Young Knight waits beside the yard gate as Romeris checks his girth.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Do you actually want to find him?

Pell stops packing the dice. Romeris looks up.

ROMERIS

Say what you mean.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You drink. You play. Every time we
stop, you find a reason to stay.

ROMERIS

We're following men who change
horses and leave the road when it
suits them. You won't catch them
by galloping until yours falls
down.

YOUNG KNIGHT

The horses were ready before you
were.

Romeris glances toward the table. His cup is still there.

ROMERIS

Yes. They were.

He pulls the strap through its buckle.

ROMERIS

And yesterday you wanted to follow
every rider we saw. Half of them
were coming toward us.

YOUNG KNIGHT

One of them might have known
something.

ROMERIS

Then ask. Listen. A pursuit takes
patience. You keep mistaking
motion for getting closer.

YOUNG KNIGHT

And you keep calling it patience
when you don't want to move.

Romeris mounts. For a moment, neither looks away.

ROMERIS

You think wanting him badly enough
will make you good at this.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I think it should matter whether
we find him.

Seren leads her horse between them to reach the gate. Neither
gives ground until she has to stop.

SEREN

Are we riding?

Romeris turns his horse onto the road. The Young Knight follows,
leaving a horse's length between them.

EXT. EASTERN ROAD - DRY CANYON - DAY

The road winds between pale walls of rock. Eight riders and
their packhorses move through the narrow shade.

Wind whistles over the rim. Hooves strike stone. Loose buckles
click.

At the canyon's foot, a thread of water darkens the sand. Reeds
cling to it. The horses lower their heads as they pass.

EXT. EASTERN ROAD - FOOTHILLS - DAY

Farther east. Scrub gathers along the watercourse. Then low
trees, their roots gripping the banks.

The company fords a shallow stream. Red dust washes from the
horses' legs and trails downstream.

A bird calls. Another answers from farther up the slope.

EXT. EASTERN ROAD - FOREST - MORNING

Damp leaves brush the riders' shoulders. Water beads on the same
dusty packs. Above them, branches meet across the road.

Voss swats at his neck. Pell ducks beneath a strand of spider
silk. Insects whine in the green shade.

The Young Knight loosens the cloth covering his mouth. He
breathes in.

Beside the road, two streams join. Their sound deepens beneath
the birdsong.

EXT. EASTERN ROAD - RIVER RIDGE - DAY

The trees open onto a broad river, brown and fast. Barges move
around its bend. The road follows the bank toward distant
farmland.

The company rides down into the valley, small against the sweep of water.

EXT. JUNGLE RIDGE ABOVE RIPROIN - DAY

The horses climb a steep switchback through broad leaves and hanging vines. Beneath the insects, a low roar grows louder.

At the crest, Seren parts a curtain of wet branches.

An enormous waterfall splits the landscape.

White water plunges from a jungle plateau into a ravine lost in mist. And all around it -- RIPROIN.

Houses cling to the cliffs in crowded tiers. Balconies jut over the drop. Huge trees rise among the buildings, their trunks encircled by platforms and steep wooden stairs.

Bridges span the ravines. People cross through drifting spray, vanish, emerge on the other side. Bright laundry snaps above their heads.

Canals branch from the river above the falls, feeding ranks of waterwheels. Mill shafts turn. A saw bites through a log. Grain sacks rise on a creaking hoist beside a cliffside warehouse.

Bells, hammers, boatmen shouting below. The waterfall swallows none of it completely.

The Young Knight reins in. Mist beads on his face. He wipes it away and keeps looking.

PELL

Where do you even start?

Romeris surveys the bridges, the stairways, the streams of people passing between them.

ROMERIS

At the gate.

He rides on. The others follow the road as it curls down into the green.

The Young Knight lingers a moment. Far below, a bridge fills with people leaving a mill. He searches their faces from an impossible distance.

Then he follows the company toward the roar.

EXT. RIPROIN - MARKET CANAL - DAY

Seren questions a carter while Garran notes his answer. Across the canal, Voss and Pell show a copied likeness to a ferryman. He shakes his head.

The Young Knight waits as a fish seller studies the drawing in Romeris's hand.

FISH SELLER

Hard to say. That could be my husband.

Farther along, a porter recognizes the description of a fresh cut across one cheek. He points toward an inn wedged between a mill and a huge tree.

INT. RIPROIN - INN - DAY

The INNKEEPER opens his ledger. Beyond the windows, a waterwheel turns.

INNKEEPER

Plain coat. Cloth cap. Yes. Came two nights ago. Some friends joined him later.

ROMERIS

How many?

INNKEEPER

Four at supper. Might have been another upstairs.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Did he threaten you?

The innkeeper looks puzzled.

INNKEEPER

Paid for the rooms before he saw them.

He turns the ledger around. A neat mark beside each charge.

INNKEEPER

Meals too. Bought a round for the table by the stove.

A MILLWORKER at that table looks over.

MILLWORKER

That fellow? Good company. Had a story about a mule and a bishop. Got old Fen laughing. Nothing does that.

The Young Knight stares at him.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He killed a man for asking him to pay.

The millworker's smile fades.

INNKEEPER

I can only tell you what happened here.

The young man pushes the likeness closer across the counter.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Look again.

Romeris lays a hand on the paper, stopping it.

ROMERIS

He has.

The Young Knight steps back. His eyes stay on the tidy column of paid accounts.

ROMERIS

When did you last see him?

INNKEEPER

After breakfast. Two hours ago, perhaps. Said he wouldn't need another night.

The Young Knight looks toward the stairs.

INT. RIPROIN - INN ROOM - DAY

The innkeeper unlocks the door. The Young Knight pushes past him.

An empty bed. Open shutters. A chair drawn up to a small table.
The young man checks behind the door, then beneath the bed.
Nothing. Romeris stays at the threshold, taking in the room.

A strip of bloodstained linen lies in the washbasin. Beside it,
a few dark hairs cling to a sliver of soap.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Which way did he go?

INNKEEPER

Down the stairs. I was serving.

The Young Knight crosses to the window. Below, two bridges feed
into a crowded market. Barges pass beneath them.

Romeris approaches the table.

A cheap wooden practice sword lies across it, snapped through
the middle. Its two pieces have been carefully aligned. A coin
pins a scrap of paper beneath the hilt.

ROMERIS

Was this here before?

The innkeeper shakes his head. Romeris lifts the coin.

On the paper, in a neat hand: FOR THE NEXT KNIGHT.

The Young Knight turns from the window. He sees the broken wood.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He knew.

Romeris looks toward the open shutters.

ROMERIS

Or wanted us to think he did.

He folds the paper and pockets it.

The Young Knight stands beside the empty chair. Outside, someone
laughs above the steady clatter of the waterwheel.

INT. RIPROIN - INN DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Eight bowls arrive at a crowded table. The knights make room
among damp gloves, crumpled notes and an untouched jug.

Seren rubs the bridge of her nose. Garran discovers a split in his boot. Pell reaches for the bread; Voss moves it out of the way to set down his bowl.

PELL

I was taking that.

VOSS

Then take it.

The Young Knight remains standing beside his chair.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We should still be at the docks.

ROMERIS

The watch has men there.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Men who let him walk in.

ROMERIS

Men who know which boat goes
where. We spent an hour asking the
same ferryman the same question.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You let him leave before I was
finished.

ROMERIS

He was finished. His answer wasn't
going to improve.

Halwick breaks a piece of bread. He waits for a gap.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We missed him by two hours.

ROMERIS

I know.

YOUNG KNIGHT

How long did we spend over your
dice?

Pell lowers his eyes. Romeris sets down his spoon.

HALWICK

Enough.

Both men look at him. Even Voss stops shifting in his chair.

HALWICK

Sit down. Eat something. Then we
can decide what to do with the
morning.

The Young Knight sits. Halwick takes a spoonful of meat and
broth.

ROMERIS

At first light, we--

Halwick coughs.

He covers his mouth, holding up a hand. A moment. His spoon taps
the rim of the bowl.

Another cough, thinner. Then nothing.

His mouth stays open. No breath comes.

Iles looks up sharply. Halwick grips the edge of the table, his
other hand at his throat.

His chair scrapes back.

Pell rises, reaching to steady Halwick.

PELL

Something caught. Help him.

Iles moves behind Halwick. Before she can get a grip, his whole
body stiffens. His legs drive the chair sideways.

Blood beads at his lips. A violent tremor runs through his
hands, rattling the bowls.

Romeris sees it.

ROMERIS

Poison. Nobody eat.

He knocks a spoon from Voss's hand. Seren pushes the nearest bowls out of reach.

Halwick buckles. Iles and the Young Knight catch him and lower him between the benches.

ILES

Get a physician!

Garran runs for the door. Pell stands in his way until Romeris shoves him aside.

On the floor, Halwick fights for breath. The Young Knight supports his head. One of Halwick's hands catches his sleeve.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We're here. We're here.

Iles bends close, listening. Halwick's back arches once, then settles.

His hand loosens.

Iles searches his neck for a pulse. She moves her fingers and tries again.

The Young Knight waits for her to do something else.

She looks at Romeris. Shakes her head.

Around them, diners stand frozen. A cup rolls beneath an empty chair.

ROMERIS

Seren. The kitchen. Voss, watch
the doors. Don't let anyone touch
this table.

The innkeeper backs against the counter, staring at Halwick.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You said he left.

INNKEEPER

He did.

Romeris looks from the freshly served bowls to the kitchen doorway.

ROMERIS

Someone stayed.

The Young Knight is still holding Halwick's head. Romeris draws his sword.

Romeris turns to the innkeeper.

ROMERIS

Was there a woman with them?

INNKEEPER

Not at their table. A lady came yesterday. Asked after the man upstairs.

ROMERIS

What did she look like?

INNKEEPER

Dark hair. Beautiful. Knew everyone's name by the time she left. I thought she was someone's wife.

Seren returns from the kitchen and hears him.

SEREN

Veyra?

Romeris looks back at Halwick.

ROMERIS

It could be.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Who is she?

SEREN

The poisoner. Three deaths at a governor's supper. She was helping his wife receive the guests.

ROMERIS

Backbreaker trusts her. When he
needs someone close, she gets
close.

The Young Knight looks at the abandoned bowls.

ROMERIS

Not just the meal. Find out where
Halwick went today. Who he spoke
to. What he drank.

SEREN

She could have been gone for hours
before this started.

The innkeeper looks toward the crowded room. Familiar faces.
Half-finished drinks.

EXT. RIPROIN - MERCHANT'S TERRACE - NIGHT

Lanterns glow above a private gathering overlooking the falls.
Silk sleeves, silver cups. Servants thread between laughing
guests.

VEYRA listens to an elderly merchant describe something with his
hands. Beautiful, composed, entirely at home.

She remembers his wife's name. Asks after her. The merchant
brightens and beckons another guest over.

MERCHANT

You must meet her.

Veyra offers the newcomer a warm smile.

Across the terrace, a servant drops a spoon. Several guests turn
at the clatter. Veyra does not.

She draws the newcomer into the conversation. Beyond the
balustrade, bridges glitter with people moving through the
night.

INT. RIPROIN - INN KITCHEN - MORNING

Seven bowls wait on a scrubbed table. No one has slept much.

Garran raises a pitcher of water to the window, tilting it
toward the light. He pours a little into a bowl. Watches it
settle.

ILES

Looking at it won't tell you.

He sets the pitcher aside anyway.

Voss breaks a loaf apart, picking through the soft center. Pell stares into a cup of wine, then empties it into the drain.

A KITCHEN MAID stands before Romeris, twisting her apron.

ROMERIS

Who carried the bowls last night?

KITCHEN MAID

I did.

PELL

And before you?

KITCHEN MAID

The cook filled them. I told you.

PELL

Did you leave them anywhere?

She looks from one knight to the next.

KITCHEN MAID

I put them down to open the door.

Pell turns sharply toward it. Romeris rubs his eyes.

ROMERIS

Enough. She's answered.

At the hearth, Seren watches the cook crack eggs into a pan. The Young Knight stands beside her, following every movement of the cook's hands.

Iles gathers the bowls and carries them over herself. They eat standing there, each taking only what they have watched from pan to bowl.

The maid reaches for a spoon beside the young man. He catches her wrist.

They both freeze.

KITCHEN MAID

It's dirty.

He releases her. She takes it and moves away.

His sword knocks against the table as he steps back. He looks down at the hilt, then at the food in his hand.

Across the room, Voss abandons the ruined loaf. No one tells him he is being foolish.

Romeris takes the loaf from the table and sets it aside with the untouched pitcher.

ROMERIS

Stop tearing the place apart. We
need to find who touched him, not
frighten everyone who feeds us.

Pell looks away. Romeris pulls out a chair for the kitchen maid.

ROMERIS

Sit. No more questions unless we
have something new.

He takes Garran's notes and reads them standing up.

VOSS

She killed a knight without
drawing a blade. Saved herself a
fight.

Romeris lowers the paper.

ROMERIS

He was eating his supper.

VOSS

I'm saying it worked.

ROMERIS

I know what you're saying.

His voice is quiet enough that Voss stops.

ROMERIS

He couldn't yield. Couldn't run.
Didn't even know there was a fight
until it was over.

Romeris looks at the space where the eighth bowl should be.

ROMERIS

All those years learning how to
defend himself. And we held him on
the floor while she was somewhere
else.

The Young Knight watches him. Romeris folds the notes once,
carefully.

ROMERIS

Seren, with me. We speak to
everyone who saw Halwick
yesterday. Garran, take the
description to the watch. Ask who
can place her with him.

PELL

And us?

ROMERIS

Stay together. Finish the accounts
of his movements. No guesses. If
you don't remember, say so.

He moves toward the door, then stops beside the Young Knight.

ROMERIS

Bring your notes.

The young man sets down his bowl and follows. Romeris is already
outside.

INT. RIPROIN - INN UPPER ROOM - AFTERNOON

Witness accounts cover the table. Romeris sets them aside and
draws a rectangle on a clean sheet.

ROMERIS

Tomorrow evening, we dine
downstairs. Ask the innkeeper to
reserve the long table. Let people
hear it.

YOUNG KNIGHT

She knows we're watching our food.

ROMERIS

She watched us tear this place
apart. We give her one man who's
tired of it.

He looks at Voss.

VOSS

I can manage tired.

ROMERIS

You argue with me. Take a table by
the canal door. Order your own
supper.

He marks the second table on the paper.

ROMERIS

You don't eat it. You don't drink
anything handed to you.

VOSS

Best meal I'll never have.

No one laughs. Romeris draws a line from the kitchen to Voss's
table.

ROMERIS

Garran and Iles in the kitchen.
The cook stays with them. Every
dish, every cup accounted for. No
strangers helping.

SEREN

I can see that door from the mill
steps.

ROMERIS

Take Pell. Ordinary clothes.

The Young Knight leans over the drawing.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I'll watch the stairs. Once we see
her interfere with the meal, we
close the doors. Take her alive.

Romeris studies the route between the two tables.

YOUNG KNIGHT

She can tell us where Backbreaker
went.

ROMERIS

Watch her hands. Don't move until
I do.

He gathers the papers. The Young Knight takes a length of
binding cord from his pack and coils it on his belt.

Romeris notices. He says nothing.

As the others leave, he draws his sword a few inches and checks
that it runs freely in the scabbard.

INT. RIPROIN - INN DINING ROOM - FOLLOWING EVENING

The long table is reserved. Romeris sits with the Young Knight,
untouched cups before them.

VOSS

You can watch your supper go cold.
I'm eating.

He takes a chair beside the canal door. Romeris lets him go with
a disgusted wave.

In the kitchen, Iles receives a bowl directly from the cook.
Garran watches the cups. Through the open canal door, Seren sits
on the mill steps in a plain cloak. Pell waits farther along.

Veyra enters on the arm of the merchant from the terrace. She
laughs at something he says, then notices Voss sitting alone.

Iles places his bowl before him. Veyra pauses beside the table
as her companion goes to greet the innkeeper.

VEYRA

Have they banished you?

VOSS

I escaped.

She smiles. Draws the empty chair aside to let a server pass. For a moment, her body conceals the bowl from the room.

From the stairs, the Young Knight catches a small movement of her hand above it. A tiny vessel disappears into her sleeve.

He rises. Romeris catches his wrist beneath the table.

ROMERIS

Stay.

Veyra rejoins the merchant. A few words, a touch on his arm. She takes her leave through the canal door.

Seren looks toward Romeris. He gives a small downward motion of his hand. Let her pass.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I saw her.

ROMERIS

So did I.

Iles removes Voss's bowl before another hand can reach it.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We have her. What are we waiting for?

ROMERIS

She may go back to him.

Outside, Seren rises after Veyra has crossed the bridge. Pell falls in farther behind.

Romeris releases the young man's wrist.

ROMERIS

Leave the cord. Come quietly.

EXT. RIPROIN - NIGHT MARKET - EVENING

Veyra slips between stalls crowded around the roots of an immense tree. Lanterns hang from its branches. Porters shoulder baskets through the press.

Seren follows past a spice seller. Ahead, Pell crosses to the other side of the canal as though he has somewhere else to be.

Romeris and the Young Knight enter the crowd farther back. A hanging carpet swings across their view. When it lifts, Veyra is gone.

The Young Knight quickens his step. Romeris catches his sleeve and points: Seren, still walking. They keep her in sight.

EXT. RIPROIN - SUSPENSION BRIDGE - DUSK

Veyra steps onto a narrow bridge above the falls. Mist streams through the ropes. Below, white water drops into darkness.

She pauses to let laborers pass, resting a hand on the swaying rail. Seren stops at a stall near the bridgehead.

The Young Knight waits beside Romeris, jaw tight. Only when Veyra reaches the far side do they move.

INT. RIPROIN - PASSAGE BEHIND THE FALLS - DUSK

A tunnel curves through wet rock. Openings reveal a solid curtain of water. Its thunder swallows footsteps.

Veyra passes beneath a lamp and around the bend. Pell glances back once before following.

The Young Knight tries to speak. Romeris cannot hear him. He signals forward.

EXT. RIPROIN - GARDEN TERRACES - NIGHT

They emerge into hanging gardens. Vines spill from stone troughs above stairways slick with spray. Through the leaves, Veyra descends into a mist-filled alley.

The market noise fades behind them. Fewer lamps. Shuttered houses. Seren lets the distance widen.

Veyra passes the last open doorway without looking in. Beyond it, the path narrows along the cliff, beneath roots thick as a man's waist.

Romeris stops at the corner until she disappears around the next turn. The Young Knight waits beside him, breathing through his mouth.

Then they follow her out of the crowded districts.

EXT. RIPROIN - OLD MILL STOREHOUSE - NIGHT

Veyra unlocks a narrow door beneath a disused water channel. She enters alone.

The knights wait in the dark. A lamp glows behind a shutter. No voices.

Seren moves around the building. Returns. One rear window. Pell takes position beneath it.

Romeris draws his sword and approaches the door.

INT. RIPROIN - OLD MILL STOREHOUSE - NIGHT

Veyra turns as the door opens. Romeris catches it before she can slam it against him. His blade comes up.

ROMERIS

Hands where I can see them.

She stops. Slowly opens her hands.

Seren takes her wrists and draws her away from the table. The Young Knight passes them, searching the corners.

One room. Two pallets. An open chest, emptied of everything but a torn shirt and a length of packing cord.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Where is he?

VEYRA

Gone.

He pulls back a hanging cloth. Bare shelves. No other door.

ROMERIS

Out of the city?

Veyra nods toward a scrap beside the lamp. Romeris picks it up.

The same neat hand as the note at the inn: LEAVING RIPROIN. NO MEETING. MAKE YOUR OWN WAY.

ROMERIS

When?

VEYRA

Before you arrived. I came back and found that.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Which road?

VEYRA

He didn't tell me.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You expect us to believe that?

Her composure slips.

VEYRA

You followed me here. What have
you found?

Romeris looks at the stripped pallet, the empty chest.

ROMERIS

The others?

VEYRA

Waiting for word. Same as me.

He lowers the note.

ROMERIS

Nobody knows where he went. Nobody
can lead us to him.

Veyra says nothing. Her eyes return to the paper in his hand.

The Young Knight stands before the empty chest. Behind the wall,
water runs through the old channel.

Pell enters from the rear window. Seren searches Veyra's
sleeves, sets a small stoppered vessel well out of reach, then
binds her wrists with cord from the chest.

Veyra watches Romeris lay Backbreaker's note on the table.

ROMERIS

Before he left. Did he name a
contact? Someone who owed him
shelter?

VEYRA

He knew half the men whose swords
hang in your palace. Shall I list
them?

ROMERIS

Who in Riproin?

VEYRA

You think he tells me everything
because I smile at him?

Romeris draws a chair opposite her. He remains standing behind it.

ROMERIS

Did he tell you to kill Halwick?

She studies his face.

VEYRA

That was his name?

Pell takes a step. Seren stops him with a hand against his chest.

ROMERIS

He was sitting at a table.

VEYRA

Would you have preferred a field?
A banner? Someone to blow a horn
first?

ROMERIS

He had no chance to defend
himself.

VEYRA

And if he had? Would he be less
dead?

Romeris grips the chair back.

VEYRA

Dead is dead. You people just like
ceremonies around it.

The Young Knight looks at the sword in Romeris's hand.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You could have left. He wasn't
stopping you.

VEYRA

You all came here to stop us.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We came to take you alive.

Veyra looks from him to Romeris.

VEYRA

Did you?

Romeris pulls the chair aside. Its legs scrape across the floor.

ROMERIS

Who helped him leave the city?

Veyra leans back against the wall. The smile returns, smaller
now.

VEYRA

You really think the sword makes
it better.

Romeris looks down at his blade. He lowers its point.

ROMERIS

No. The chance does.

The Young Knight watches him.

ROMERIS

A warrior lets another person face
death. See it coming. Stand
against it, run from it, ask for
mercy.

VEYRA

And if you're faster? Stronger?

ROMERIS

Then I still have to face what I'm
doing. And he still has a choice
to make.

Veyra glances at her bound hands.

VEYRA

How generous.

Romeris does not rise to it.

ROMERIS

Halwick died trying to understand
what was happening to him. You
took even that.

Water ticks from a cracked joint in the wall. Romeris waits
until she looks at him again.

ROMERIS

That matters to me.

The Young Knight searches his face for the familiar sneer. It
does not come.

He takes a small step closer to Romeris, then notices Veyra
watching the blade.

Romeris keeps it lowered. He has not put it away.

ROMERIS

One place. Where would he go?

Veyra looks at Backbreaker's note on the table.

VEYRA

If I knew, I wouldn't still be
here.

No smile now. Romeris studies her, then looks toward Seren.
Seren has finished searching the last shelf. She shakes her
head.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We can take her to the watch.

Romeris steps past him.

The first blow knocks Veyra sideways against the wall. She cries out, bound hands rising too late.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Romeris--

He drives the sword into her. Pulls it free awkwardly as she folds to the floor.

She is still moving.

Seren catches his shoulder. He tears away and strikes again.

Pell backs into the door. The latch rattles against the wood.

Then Veyra lies still.

Romeris stands over her, breathing hard. The sword hangs low, its point touching the floor.

The Young Knight has not moved from where he offered to take her away.

Seren kneels beside the body. Veyra's wrists are still tied. She checks for a pulse, then looks up at Romeris.

He looks away first.

The little vessel sits untouched on the shelf. The note lies open on the table. Nothing else in the room has changed.

Romeris tries to sheath his sword. Misses the opening. Stops.

No one helps him.

YOUNG KNIGHT

She was our prisoner.

Romeris wipes the blade with a cloth from the table.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We had her hands tied.

ROMERIS

I saw.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Then you saw she couldn't fight you.

The cloth stops moving.

ROMERIS

She murdered Halwick. She tried to do the same to Voss.

YOUNG KNIGHT

And we could prove it. She should have stood before a court.

ROMERIS

Until she smiled at the right jailer. Or someone paid to open a door. Then another man dies at supper.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You don't know she would have escaped.

ROMERIS

I wasn't going to wait for another body to find out.

Seren rises beside Veyra. She stays where she is.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You asked me what I'd do if Backbreaker surrendered.

Romeris looks at him.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You made me say it.

ROMERIS

This is different.

YOUNG KNIGHT

How?

Romeris pushes the sword into its scabbard.

YOUNG KNIGHT

We take them in. We answer for what we do. Knights don't get to

call it justice because they're angry.

ROMERIS

You've been a knight for a few weeks. Don't tell me what knights do.

The young man flinches at the force of it. Pell looks toward the floor.

Romeris waits for the young man to step aside. He does not.

YOUNG KNIGHT

You told me.

Romeris moves around him and leaves. The Young Knight stays beside Seren and the body.

EXT. RIPROIN - OLD MILL PATH - NIGHT

Romeris waits beside the channel. The Young Knight emerges. Behind him, Seren sends Pell to fetch the watch, then stays at the storehouse door.

The young man stops beyond Romeris's reach.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Backbreaker stood over my teacher with a weapon. Tonight I watched you do it.

Romeris turns.

ROMERIS

Your teacher was protecting people. She was murdering them.

YOUNG KNIGHT

So the difference is who you decide deserves it?

Romeris looks toward the open door.

ROMERIS

You want to come through this with nothing on your hands. That isn't the same as honor.

YOUNG KNIGHT

There's already blood on mine.

A beat.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I know why I killed that man at
the bridge. He was trying to kill
me. She was tied up.

Romeris tightens his jaw.

ROMERIS

Then go back to Clover.

YOUNG KNIGHT

So you can find Backbreaker
without anyone asking what you do
with him?

Water spills over a broken sluice between them.

ROMERIS

You won't find him alone.

YOUNG KNIGHT

No. You know his roads. His
people.

He looks toward the crowded lights beyond the mill.

YOUNG KNIGHT

And you need someone who saw
Clover. Who can stand before the
King and say what he did there.

Romeris studies him.

ROMERIS

You'll say what you saw here, too.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Yes.

Neither offers a hand.

Romeris starts toward the inn. The Young Knight waits for him to pass, then follows several paces behind.

INT. RIPROIN - INN UPPER ROOM - MORNING

The contents of the hideout lie on a cloth. Backbreaker's note. The torn shirt. Cord. A small purse.

Seren turns the shirt inside out. A folded scrap catches in the pocket lining. She eases it free.

A provisioner's receipt. Beside a list of supplies, a separate charge for passage: NORTH LANDING. ONE RIDER. ONE PACK MULE.

SEREN

He left this in the old coat.

GARRAN

Shirt.

Seren glances at him. He takes the receipt.

GARRAN

I'll find who wrote it.

Romeris nods. Across the table, the Young Knight waits without looking at him.

INT. RIPROIN - INN UPPER ROOM - LATER

Garran returns and spreads the road map beside the receipt.

GARRAN

The provisioner remembers the cut on his cheek. Sold him dried food, a mountain cloak, and passage on the north ferry. The ferryman confirms he crossed.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Toward the mountains.

Garran traces the river to a landing. Beyond it, a narrow road threads through a broad stain of green before climbing into the peaks.

GARRAN

Only road from that landing to the foothills.

Voss leans over his shoulder. His expression changes.

VOSS

Blackfen.

PELL

The swamp?

VOSS

My last captain left six horses
there. We found two saddles.

Romeris studies the crossings marked on the map.

ROMERIS

He's counting on us turning back.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Are we?

Romeris folds the receipt and hands it to Garran.

ROMERIS

Find us someone who knows the way
through.

The Young Knight looks down at the mountains. Between them and
Riproin, the swamp fills the map.

EXT. BLACKFEN APPROACH - DAY

The company follows a narrow road beneath dripping leaves. Their
hired GUIDE walks ahead with a long staff, a coil of rope over
one shoulder. Three young SQUIRES sent with fresh supplies from
the city watch bring up the rear, leading pack animals.

Behind them, the river and its ferries vanish through the trees.

Vines hang lower. The riders duck, then dismount to lead their
horses. Moisture gathers beneath collars and armor. Nothing
dries.

The road dwindles to two flooded ruts. Then even the ruts
disappear.

The guide probes ahead. His staff sinks through a mat of leaves
into black water. He redirects them along a ridge of roots.

A horse balks. Seren strokes its neck and tests the footing herself.

GUIDE

There's a charcoal burner's yard
on the next rise. Last dry ground
wide enough to hold them.

ROMERIS

We leave the horses there.

PELL

All of them?

ROMERIS

Before the deep water. A horse
goes through the crust, we won't
get it out.

Pell looks at the animal beside him. Mud already covers its fetlocks.

EXT. BLACKFEN - CHARCOAL YARD - DAY

An old burning mound rises above the flooded forest. The guide speaks with a CHARCOAL BURNER while Garran counts out payment.

The knights begin stripping their saddles. Food, rope, blankets. Everything they take must fit on their backs.

The Young Knight lifts the wrapped sword from behind his saddle. He secures it to his pack, leaving his own blade within reach.

Romeris notices the added weight. Says nothing.

Seren leads the first horses into a rough enclosure. Garran keeps his own beside him, still saddled.

Ahead, the guide steps off the rise. Water climbs to his knees.

ROMERIS

Stay in his footprints. If you
can't see them, wait.

The company shoulders its packs. Behind them, a saddle creaks.

Garran swings into the saddle. His gray warhorse shifts beneath him, a white scar running from its ear to its jaw.

ROMERIS

That includes yours.

GARRAN

He can manage water.

Pell looks up at the scarred animal.

PELL

That's the horse from Dunmere?

GARRAN

Carried me out with a spear
through my leg. Three campaigns
since.

He rubs the horse's neck. Pell studies the pair with new respect.

GARRAN

They put us on a banner. Now I'm
to leave him in a pen because the
road is wet?

ROMERIS

The things in there hunt horses.

Garran looks toward the flooded trees. The guide waits motionless in the water.

GARRAN

Then he stays close to us.

ROMERIS

That brings them close to us.

GARRAN

I've ridden him through worse.

ROMERIS

Not through this.

Romeris reaches for the bridle. Garran draws the horse back a pace.

GARRAN

He never left me. I won't leave him.

SEREN

He'll have feed here. Someone to tend him. We can send for him.

Garran looks down at her, then at the waiting charcoal burner.

GARRAN

You leave yours.

He turns the horse toward the water. Romeris steps into his path.

The animal stops between them, ears working at the sounds beyond the trees.

A ripple moves against the wind.

The guide lifts his staff. Beneath the black water, something passes between him and the yard.

GUIDE

Back. Get them back.

Garran's horse snorts. Romeris catches the bridle, turning its head toward the rise.

The water erupts.

Jaws clamp around the horse's hindquarters. A broad, crocodilian head rises against its flank -- then keeps rising, carried on a long, muscular neck.

Garran pitches from the saddle. The horse screams.

Romeris is thrown clear as the creature rolls. Its armored body unwinds through the shallows, longer than two horses, short clawed limbs scrabbling beneath coils of scaled flesh.

The horse and its rider vanish in a burst of brown water.

Behind them, the other horses crash against the enclosure. A rail snaps. Seren leaps aside as one bolts down the bank.

ROMERIS

Up the rise! Leave the packs!

Pell wades toward a hand breaking the surface. He catches Garran's wrist.

A ridge of scales sweeps between them. Pell loses his footing. Both men disappear.

The Young Knight drops his pack. The wrapped sword lands in the mud. He scrambles toward the water, but Iles catches his collar before he steps off the submerged edge.

Voss hacks at a coil pushing through the roots. His blade skids. The creature lashes sideways, tearing a young tree from the bank.

For an instant, the warhorse surfaces beyond it. Empty saddle. Hooves beating at nothing.

The jaws close again. Water rolls over its head.

Seren drags the charcoal burner clear of the broken fence. Romeris snatches the guide's rope and throws one end toward the bubbles.

No hand takes it.

The water surges against the bank. Underneath, something enormous turns back toward them.

Pell breaks the surface beside an exposed root. He catches it with both hands. Seren drops flat on the bank and reaches for him.

Farther out, Garran surfaces beside his horse. One arm hooks over the saddle. The animal's nose lifts clear, dragging in a ragged breath.

Romeris wades in to his thighs and casts the rope again. It falls across Garran's shoulder.

ROMERIS

Take it!

Garran catches the line. Romeris braces and pulls. For a moment, the knight comes toward him.

Then the horse screams. Garran stops, looking back.

ROMERIS

Leave him!

Garran turns into the water. He drags the rope toward the saddle, trying to pass it through the frame.

GARRAN

Pull us both!

The line jerks taut. Romeris and Voss haul together. The saddle shifts, but the horse does not move.

An armored ridge rises behind it.

ROMERIS

Let go of the saddle!

Garran presses himself against the horse's neck. One hand works desperately at the rope.

The creature strikes from below. Its jaws close across horse and rider. Garran's cry cuts off.

The rope rips through Romeris's hands. He lunges after it. Voss catches him around the chest as the line snaps tight beneath the surface.

A violent roll. The horse's legs rise out of the water, then vanish. Garran goes with it.

Romeris tears free of Voss and grabs the trailing line. Pulls.

It comes back slack, the loop he threw still empty.

On the bank, Seren drags Pell onto the roots. He coughs water into the mud.

Romeris stares at the place Garran disappeared. His palms are raw. The rope hangs between them.

Bubbles break the surface. Then only widening rings.

A horse screams from the shattered enclosure.

Romeris drops the rope and backs onto the rise. The water stirs again at the sound.

ROMERIS

Open the upper rail. Send them
back up the track.

The charcoal burner pulls the crossbar free. Seren and Voss drive the frightened animals toward the higher opening, away from the water.

One balks with its reins caught on a post. The Young Knight cuts the leather. It surges past him into the trees.

The others follow. Hooves pound the retreating track, then fade.

Romeris looks at the saddles piled beside the fence. One still bears a bright royal badge.

ROMERIS

Food. Water. Rope. Leave the rest.

No one argues.

They divide the supplies among their packs. Iles helps Pell stand. He tries to thank Seren but cannot stop coughing.

The Young Knight retrieves his bundle from the mud. He wipes the cloth around the broken sword and straps it back into place.

The charcoal burner shoulders a small sack and follows the horses toward the ferry road. The guide points the company along a narrow spine of roots.

EXT. BLACKFEN - FLOODED TRAIL - DAY

Six knights and the three squires walk behind the guide. No space between them for a horse now.

Romeris leads Pell around a hole concealed beneath leaves. Voss drags a boot free of the mud. Seren waits until everyone has crossed a fallen trunk before moving on.

Branches snag cloaks. Water slaps against greaves. Each step takes an effort.

The Young Knight looks back. The rise and its abandoned saddles are gone from view.

Ahead of him, Romeris stumbles, catches a root, keeps walking.

The young man follows. Mud closes over their footprints.

EXT. BLACKFEN - RAISED CAMP - NIGHT

Rain hisses through the canopy. Pell lies beneath a cloak, shivering despite the heat. Each breath catches in his chest.

Iles looks up at Romeris. He crouches beside her.

ILES

He goes back. Now.

Romeris nods to the guide. Seren begins dividing food into two sacks.

SEREN

I'll help carry him.

Pell tries to sit. Cannot. Romeris puts a hand on his shoulder until he stops trying.

The three squires lash branches into a litter. The Young Knight gives them his spare cloak for its bed.

EXT. BLACKFEN - STONE CAUSEWAY - DAWN

The guide leads Iles and Seren back with Pell between them. The others watch until the litter disappears into the mist.

Ahead, old stone markers trace the causeway toward the mountains. Romeris checks the map, then starts walking.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - ROADSIDE SHRINE - DAY

Days later. The ground has begun to rise. Voss limps into a small shrine where travelers sleep beneath a patched roof.

He lowers himself onto a bench. His ankle is swollen above a boot cut open down one side.

VOSS

Give me an hour.

Romeris watches him try to put weight on it.

ROMERIS

Stay here. Send word to Riproin.

Voss starts a joke. Nothing comes. He hands Romeris the remaining coins from their gaming purse.

Outside, the Young Knight redistributes Voss's food among the squires. Romeris returns with his waterskin.

Five figures leave the shrine: two knights and three squires. One squire carries Garran's supply list, the names beside each ration crossed out and rewritten.

EXT. MOUNTAIN APPROACH - DAY

Farther ahead, Backbreaker climbs the same rising country. His coat hangs loose. No pack mule.

Two exhausted gang members follow. One stops beside the remains of a charcoal fire, staring at the slope above.

GANG MEMBER

I'm done.

Backbreaker keeps walking. After a moment, the other man follows him.

Behind them, their companion sits down. Neither looks back.

High above the road, the mountains disappear into cloud.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL - DAY

Blackfen spreads below them, a dark expanse of treetops broken by silver water. Far beyond it, mist hides the country around Riproin.

The Young Knight pauses at the last stand of trees. No towers visible. No mills. He turns uphill.

Five figures pick their way across a slope of loose stone. The squires walk between the two knights. Romeris leads; the Young Knight brings up the rear.

Grass thins to pale tufts. Even the twisted shrubs give out. Wind moves freely over the bare rock.

They pass a cairn. No road beyond it, only a track winding higher. No smoke anywhere on the slopes.

EXT. MOUNTAIN LEDGE - LATE AFTERNOON

A squire shakes the food bag over a flat stone. Crumbs fall beside a heel of bread and a little dried meat.

Romeris divides it into five portions. The Young Knight watches the knife, then looks away.

SQUIRE

Is there a village on the other
side?

Romeris unfolds the map. The mountain ridges fill its upper edge. No settlements marked.

ROMERIS

Eat slowly.

The squire takes his share.

Romeris offers the Young Knight a portion. Their eyes meet briefly. The young man takes it without a word.

He sits at the other end of the ledge, the wrapped sword across his knees.

Below, cloud closes over the last green country. A pebble dislodged by one of the squires ticks down the slope until they can no longer hear it.

Romeris folds the map. The Young Knight shoulders his pack before he is asked.

They climb on.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRACK - DAY

A silver cup catches the light beneath a thorn bush.

One of the squires retrieves it. Farther up the slope lies a split pack, its contents scattered: candlesticks, buckles, a folded length of embroidered cloth.

Romeris searches the pack. An empty food pouch. No waterskin.

ROMERIS

They kept what they could eat.

The squire turns the cup in his hand, then sets it beside the pack.

A little farther on, bootprints cross a patch of damp ground. One set climbs. Another turns downhill, the deeper heel marks cutting across the earlier tracks.

The Young Knight follows the descending prints with his eyes until they disappear among the rocks.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Someone went back.

Romeris studies them, then nods.

EXT. MOUNTAIN HOLLOW - DAY

A cold fire beneath an overhang. A man lies curled against the rock, one hand tucked under his cheek.

The Young Knight crouches beside him. Stops before touching his shoulder.

The face is gray and still. A strip of cloth binds a swollen leg. Beside him, a cup holds a little frozen water.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He was in the tavern. With
Backbreaker.

Romeris checks the man's coat. Empty pockets. The blanket beneath him has been cut in half; the other half is gone.

The squires stand close together at the mouth of the hollow.

SQUIRE

Did he leave him alive?

ROMERIS

I don't know.

The Young Knight unfolds the remaining blanket over the man's face.

Beyond the hollow, a single set of bootprints leads through a dusting of snow. Beside every few steps, a blunt iron end has punched into the crust.

Romeris rests two fingers inside one of the marks.

ROMERIS

Still carrying the club.

The Young Knight looks up the empty slope. No horses. No followers. Just the two uneven lines climbing into white.

EXT. MOUNTAINSIDE - CAVE MOUTH - LATE AFTERNOON

The tracks bend beneath an overhang and end at a narrow opening. Meltwater runs across its lip, carrying a gray smear of ash.

Romeris raises a hand. The squires stop among the rocks. He loosens his sword in its scabbard.

The Young Knight comes beside him. Together, they listen.

A wet cough from within. Then silence.

INT. MOUNTAIN CAVE - CONTINUOUS

Daylight reaches a few paces into the rock. A dead fire lies in a pool of its own ashes. Gnawed bones and filthy strips of cloth litter the floor.

Backbreaker sleeps against the wall.

His plain coat is stiff with dirt. The half-blanket beneath him ends at his knees. Water drips behind his shoulder and seeps through the mud where he lies.

The iron club rests across his legs. One hand remains curled around its grip.

The Young Knight stops just inside the entrance. His eyes adjust. He studies the sunken face, the cracked lips, the stained bandage showing through a torn sleeve.

Backbreaker shivers in his sleep. Pulls the scrap of blanket closer without waking.

Romeris stands beside the young man. Neither speaks.

A drop strikes the club. Another darkens the mud beneath the sleeping knight.

A boot scrapes at the cave mouth. One of the squires has followed them to the opening.

Backbreaker's eyes open. His hand tightens around the club.

ROMERIS

Stay outside. All three of you.

The squire retreats. His shadow slips off the wall.

Backbreaker watches the two men from the floor. He plants the club in the mud and uses it to stand.

Romeris waits until he is upright before taking another step. The Young Knight moves beside him.

BACKBREAKER

Romeris.

He says it without surprise. His eyes move to the silver clover on the younger man's cloak.

BACKBREAKER

And you came back.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Put it down.

Backbreaker looks at the iron in his hand. He shifts its weight off the ground.

The Young Knight draws his sword. His wounded arm stays close to his side, but the point holds steady.

Romeris draws more slowly. He glances toward the entrance, where the squires wait beyond the light.

Then he steps clear of the young man, leaving space between them.

Backbreaker straightens against the rock. The effort costs him. He tries to hide it behind a smile.

Three men on the bare earth. Two swords and an iron club. No one else comes through the opening.

ROMERIS

Put the club down. You come with
us. Alive.

Backbreaker lets the iron head drag across the stone.

BACKBREAKER

So they can hang me clean and
warm?

ROMERIS

The court decides.

BACKBREAKER

Then tell the court no.

Romeris shifts his footing. The Young Knight steps forward.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Let me face him.

ROMERIS

We didn't come all this way for a
duel.

YOUNG KNIGHT

He's refused to come. Someone has
to stop him.

ROMERIS

That doesn't mean it has to be
you.

The young man keeps his eyes on Backbreaker.

YOUNG KNIGHT

My teacher told me the sword
didn't give me the right to use
it. The people who needed me gave
me a responsibility.

Backbreaker watches them, almost amused.

YOUNG KNIGHT

I'm the Knight of Clover. I won't
ask you to do this for me.

ROMERIS

And if he yields?

YOUNG KNIGHT

I stop.

Romeris searches his face.

BACKBREAKER

Let him try. His teacher did.

The Young Knight's grip tightens. He takes a breath and loosens it.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Will you face me?

Backbreaker lifts the club.

BACKBREAKER

Come on, then.

Romeris looks at the uneven floor, the young man's injured arm. Slowly, he steps toward the wall. His sword remains drawn.

ROMERIS

Remember what you promised.

The Young Knight moves into the space he has left. Backbreaker waits, club low beside his leg.

Backbreaker swings before the young man has settled.

The Young Knight steps outside the arc. His blade opens Backbreaker's forearm and returns to guard before the club comes back.

No flourish. One measured breath.

Backbreaker advances, sweeping low. The young man gives ground onto a dry patch of stone. The club misses his knee. A short thrust catches Backbreaker beneath the ribs, glancing along bone.

Backbreaker grunts. Tries to close. The Young Knight pivots clear, keeping the point between them.

Against the wall, Romeris watches the feet. The boy is choosing where they fight.

Backbreaker slashes the club across the sword. The young man withdraws the blade instead of meeting the blow. Iron strikes rock.

He cuts Backbreaker's thigh on the recovery.

A knee buckles. The young man brings his point toward Backbreaker's throat.

YOUNG KNIGHT

Yield.

Backbreaker scoops ash from the dead fire and flings it into his face.

The Young Knight turns his head. The club clips his shoulder. He staggers, eyes streaming, and catches the next rush with a thrust that forces Backbreaker sideways.

He blinks the grit away. Finds his footing again.

Backbreaker seizes the edge of his cloak and yanks him close. A forehead smashes into his nose.

Blood spills over his mouth. He lets the cloak slip from its fastening and steps free, leaving it in Backbreaker's fist.

His sword cuts the hand holding it. Backbreaker drops the cloth.

The young man advances now. A feint high, a cut across the club arm. Backbreaker retreats into the wet hollow by the wall.

Romeris straightens. For the first time, Backbreaker has nowhere easy to go.

The young man does not rush. He resets his feet and raises the point.

Backbreaker looks at the blade, then at its owner. He shifts both hands onto the iron grip.

The Young Knight steps in. Backbreaker drives forward to meet him.

The Young Knight thrusts. Backbreaker twists, taking the edge across his side as he brings the club down over the blade.

Iron catches steel. He drives it against a projecting shelf of rock.

The young man tries to pull free. Backbreaker crowds him, pinning the sword across the stone with both hands on the club.

The young man's boots slide in the mud. He changes his grip, struggling to lift the blade clear.

Backbreaker leans his weight into the iron.

CRACK.

The sword shatters.

A long piece strikes the wall. Smaller fragments skitter across the floor, ringing against stone before the mud takes them.

The resistance vanishes. The Young Knight stumbles backward with the hilt clenched in his hand.

Only a jagged length of steel remains above the guard.

Romeris takes one involuntary step from the wall.

Backbreaker straightens. Blood runs beneath his coat, but he is smiling now.

The young man looks from the broken weapon to the pieces in the dirt. The same shape he tried to put together beside his teacher's body.

The last fragment stops moving.

Backbreaker lets him look.

The Young Knight lowers the broken sword. His shoulders sag.

Backbreaker steps closer. He glances at Romeris, showing him what is left of the boy's weapon.

The Young Knight drops beneath his reach.

He catches Backbreaker's coat with his free hand and drives the jagged blade into his thigh.

No stance. No clean stroke. He throws his whole weight behind the hilt.

Backbreaker cries out. The club strikes the young man across the back, knocking him sideways. He tears the broken sword free as he falls.

Blood pours down Backbreaker's leg. He clamps a hand over the wound. It wells between his fingers and spatters the stone.

His smile is gone.

The Young Knight scrambles backward on one elbow, the ruined weapon held between them.

Backbreaker tries to follow. His injured leg folds. He catches himself against the wall with the club.

Another heavy rush of blood. The patch beneath him spreads.

Romeris looks down at it, then at Backbreaker's face.

Backbreaker sees that look. He presses harder, breath coming in short, furious bursts.

Across the cave, the Young Knight struggles to his knees. He watches the blood run toward one of the scattered sword fragments.

He does not look pleased with himself.

Backbreaker looks at the blood escaping beneath his hand. He presses once more. It keeps coming.

His eyes lift to the Young Knight, still on his knees.

He takes his hand off the wound and closes it around the club beside the other.

Romeris moves.

Backbreaker throws himself from the wall, dragging the useless leg behind him.

The Young Knight starts to rise. The club catches him across the head.

He drops. The broken sword leaves his hand.

Romeris takes a step forward--

Backbreaker strikes again. And again. No room between the blows.

Romeris reaches him and drives his shoulder into him, wrenching him away. Both men stumble across the cave.

The Young Knight lies where he fell.

Romeris turns back to him. Waits for a breath, a movement.

Nothing.

His mouth is slightly open. One boot rests against a shard of his sword. The silver clover has twisted beneath his shoulder.

At the entrance, a squire makes a small, involuntary sound.

Romeris cannot look away from the body.

A scrape of iron behind him.

Romeris turns and rushes at Backbreaker, sword raised.

Backbreaker tries to lift the club. It rises a few inches, trembling, then drops against his knee.

His leg gives way.

Romeris stops short. Backbreaker catches himself against the wall and slides down it, leaving a dark smear on the stone.

Blood runs from the wound the Young Knight made. Backbreaker presses his hand against it again. His fingers slip.

Romeris looks from the wound to the club. He lowers his point.

Backbreaker sees the movement. He reaches for the weapon with both hands, trying to bring it up between them.

The iron drags through the mud. Stops.

His hands fall away.

Romeris stands over him, close enough to strike. He does not.

Backbreaker searches his face. His mouth moves, but only a shallow breath comes.

The water keeps dripping. Romeris watches the effort of each breath grow smaller.

Romeris kneels in the mud beside him. He lays his sword within reach, its edge turned away.

Backbreaker's hand claws at the wound. His eyes fix on Romeris, hard with anger. Then they flick down toward the blood.

ROMERIS

That's mortal, sir.

No mockery. He says it as he might once have spoken across a campfire.

Backbreaker tries to answer. His breath catches. He bares his teeth against the pain, but no words come.

Romeris looks at the hand pressed uselessly against the torn cloth. Then at his own, resting beside the sword.

Dried blood remains in the creases around his knuckles. He rubs it once with his thumb. Stops.

Backbreaker reaches toward him. Whether to grasp him or push him away is impossible to tell.

The hand falls short.

Romeris stays where he is.

Another breath. A long wait before the next.

Backbreaker's eyes shift toward the cave mouth and the thin daylight beyond it.

He breathes out.

Romeris waits. Nothing follows.

He reaches forward and closes Backbreaker's eyes. Then sits back on his heels, his knees in the same mud.

Behind him lies the Young Knight. For a while, Romeris does not turn.

Only water dripping into the mud.

Romeris rises. Crosses the few paces to the Young Knight and kneels beside him.

He frees the silver clover from beneath the boy's shoulder. Straightens it against his chest.

The broken hilt lies beyond his open hand.

Romeris picks it up. Blood darkens the jagged steel above the guard. He looks toward Backbreaker, then back at the young man.

He sets the hilt on a clean fold of his cloak.

A longer piece of blade rests against the wall. Romeris reaches for it. Then another, half-buried beneath the boy's boot.

He gathers them one at a time. His hands move carefully now.

The pieces do not quite meet. A sliver is missing.

He searches the mud until he finds it.

At the entrance, a squire takes a step inside. Romeris looks up. The boy stops, waiting.

Romeris makes room beside him.

Together, they spread the cloak over the Young Knight's body, leaving the gathered fragments on a separate fold.

Romeris does not try to make the sword whole. He wraps the pieces as they are and rests the bundle beside the boy.

His hand remains on it.

EXT. MOUNTAIN CAVE - DAWN

Four figures emerge into a colorless morning.

Romeris and two squires carry the Young Knight on a litter made from their poles and cloaks. The third carries the packs. Two separate bundles of broken steel are lashed across the top.

They stop at the first steep turn. Change their grips. Go on.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - ROADSIDE SHRINE - DAY

The keeper of the shrine meets them on the path. He sees the litter and opens the gate without asking for payment.

Romeris helps lower it beneath the roof. Nearby stands the bench where Voss waited.

SHRINE KEEPER

Your man went south with a grain wagon. Left word. The others made it back to Riproin. The sick lad's still abed.

Romeris nods. His hands remain curled as though holding the poles.

The keeper brings a bowl of food. Romeris gives it to the nearest squire first.

EXT. SOUTHBOUND ROAD - DAY

A borrowed handcart creaks under the shrouded body. The squires take turns pulling. Romeris walks beside it, steadying the load over stones.

Travelers pass. Nobody knows what to make of them. Nobody cheers.

EXT. WAY STATION - EVENING

A royal courier is changing horses. Black cloth hangs beneath the badge on his saddle.

Romeris notices it while filling a waterskin.

ROMERIS

Who died?

The courier takes in his travel-stained clothes.

COURIER

The King. Twelve days ago.

Water runs over Romeris's fingers.

COURIER

His son has taken the oath. The succession was peaceful.

Romeris closes the waterskin. Checks the stopper a second time.

COURIER

You served him?

ROMERIS

Yes.

The courier mounts and rides on. Romeris remains by the trough.

He reaches inside his coat and takes out the village headman's letter. Its folds have nearly worn through.

Behind him, a squire waits beside the cart. Romeris puts the letter away and goes to help.

EXT. CAPITAL - OUTER GATE - DAY

The gates open onto the descending passage. Black banners stir above them.

Romeris leads the cart out of the desert glare. The three squires follow beneath the arch.

INT. PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER - DAY

The Prince sits on his father's throne. The crown fits. He keeps touching its rim as though checking.

Romeris stands below him, washed but hollow-eyed. His armor has been mended with plain fittings.

The NEW KING rises at the sight of him. Comes down the steps and takes his arms.

NEW KING

You're home.

Romeris bows his head. For a moment, his friend holds on.

NEW KING

They say Backbreaker is dead.

ROMERIS

The Knight of Clover killed him.
Died doing it.

The new King glances toward the waiting clerks.

NEW KING

We will record his service.

ROMERIS

And Halwick. Garran. I have their
names here.

He produces folded papers. The new King takes them himself.

NEW KING

You brought the others back. You
ended it.

Romeris does not answer.

The new King dismisses the clerks with a gesture. When the doors
close, his voice softens.

NEW KING

I wanted you here when it
happened.

ROMERIS

I'm sorry I wasn't.

NEW KING

Everyone watched me. Even before
he was cold. Waiting to see
whether I knew what to do.

He looks back at the throne, then makes himself smile.

NEW KING

Stay. Take command of the
household knights. Rooms here. A
seat at council. Whatever staff
you need.

Romeris looks around the room. The light falls exactly where it
did before.

NEW KING

No more sleeping in the rain. I
promised you, remember?

ROMERIS

I remember.

The new King waits for the smile that should follow.

ROMERIS

I can't take it.

NEW KING

You don't have to decide today.

ROMERIS

I've had the whole road.

He lays the headman's letter beside the new King's papers.

ROMERIS

Your father gave me that. He
wanted me to see the people who
wrote to him.

NEW KING

And I need someone I trust beside
me. You could help them from here.

ROMERIS

Perhaps. But I know what I do
here. I let someone else go.

The new King looks down at the letter.

ROMERIS

There's no knight in Clover now.

NEW KING

I'll appoint one.

ROMERIS

Appoint me.

His friend searches his face. There is no joke waiting behind
it.

NEW KING

After all this, that's what you
want?

ROMERIS

They need someone to stay.

The new King walks a few paces away. Turns back.

NEW KING

Will you at least write?

ROMERIS

If you'll read it.

A small smile passes between them, then fades.

ROMERIS

There's something else I must put
in the report. In Riproin. What I
did to a prisoner.

The new King looks up. Romeris stays where he is.

INT. PALACE - PASSAGE OUTSIDE THE HALL - DAY

The three squires wait beside the two cloth bundles. Beyond them, attendants carry the Young Knight's shrouded body toward a covered wagon.

Romeris emerges with a sealed appointment. He tucks it away and kneels beside the younger squire.

He opens the bundle containing the Young Knight's sword. Short hilt. Long fragment. Small splinters of steel.

ROMERIS

Take this into the Hall. The
keeper has the order.

The squire stares at it.

SQUIRE

It's broken.

ROMERIS

That's how he carried it. When he
finished what we couldn't.

The boy reaches for the long piece, trying to align it with the hilt.

ROMERIS

Leave it as it is.

Romeris lifts the other bundle -- the Old Knight's sword -- and carries it toward the wagon.

The squires take the younger man's fragments into the Hall together.

INT. PALACE - HALL OF SWORDS - DAY

A keeper unwraps the steel beneath a vacant section of wall.

He measures each piece. Fits separate supports for the hilt, the blade, the smallest shard.

The squire watches him hesitate over the gap.

SQUIRE

All of it. Just like that.

The keeper nods.

Along the wall hangs Backbreaker's old sword, straight and whole above its inscription. Farther down, the new mounts hold the broken weapon with daylight visible between its pieces.

Beneath them: THE KNIGHT OF CLOVER.

EXT. CLOVER - TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Romeris rides into Clover at a walk. A covered wagon follows, driven by one of the squires.

Hammering from the bakery. New beams above the old oven. Eda and a neighbor carry boards across the square.

Romeris wears a plain cloak. His armor is sound, without polish or ornament. He dismounts before anyone comes to meet him.

Tessa sees the wagon. Then Romeris's face.

She sets down what she is carrying.

EXT. CLOVER - BURIAL GROUND - DAY

Fresh earth beside the Old Knight's grave.

Romeris lays the teacher's wrapped sword at the foot of the older stone. He stands between the two graves, then turns toward the people waiting beyond them.

Tessa gives him a shovel. He takes it.

EXT. CLOVER - TRAINING GROUND - MORNING

Some days later. Steel no longer rings across the trampled grass.

Nell swings a wooden sword at a sack tied to a post. She overreaches, turns halfway around and nearly falls.

Romeris stops on the path with a bucket in each hand.

ROMERIS

Bring your back foot closer.

She looks over. Tries again. Hits the sack, but the blow pulls her forward.

He sets down the buckets.

NELL

Are you staying?

ROMERIS

Yes.

NELL

Mother says you were important at the palace.

He approaches the post and moves it clear of a root.

ROMERIS

I spent a lot of time there.

Nell offers him the wooden sword. He holds up his empty hands instead.

ROMERIS

Show me where your feet go.

She places them carefully. He nudges one boot sideways with his own.

ROMERIS

Now move. Don't hit anything yet.

EXT. CLOVER - TRAINING GROUND - MORNING

Later in the season. The sack has been patched. Nell's wooden sword is worn smooth at the grip.

She advances on Romeris, who carries a practice stick. He turns her first cut aside. She recovers instead of stumbling.

He gives a small nod. She smiles, then attacks too quickly. He steps clear.

ROMERIS

Again. You have time.

Beyond them, new roofs rise over Clover. Someone calls his name from the path.

Romeris lowers the stick and listens. Nell waits. When he turns back, she has lowered her sword too.

INT. PALACE - HALL OF SWORDS - DAY

Visitors move along the walls. Their footsteps slow at the shattered blade.

A child leans closer to the gap. The adult beside him starts to speak, then reads the name beneath it.

EXT. CLOVER - TRAINING GROUND - MORNING

Nell gets past Romeris's guard. The wooden point stops against his coat.

He looks down at it. Then at her.

She lowers the sword without being told.

Romeris steps back and gives her room to begin again.

INT. PALACE - HALL OF SWORDS - DAY

The broken sword hangs among the others.

Each piece has its place. Nothing bridges the empty space between them.

FADE OUT.

THE END