

# Wynter's Thief

S H E R R Y L J O R D A N

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## Narrative 1: Fox

There is a wild danger, a dancing on the knife-edge between sacredness and devilry, when a witch works magic. It is like that today, with the maid. Around her, the burning air shimmers, prickly with suspense. She strides ahead, wand outstretched, bare feet swift on the scorched earth. We follow, feverish with excitement, and musicians march alongside, banging drums and playing pipes. Dust rises about us, bright like a holy cloud, leaving us breathless, dazzled in her wake.

She is a water witch.

The long, hot summer is nearing its end, and the village well has sunk to mud. The river has dwindled to a dirty brook, and the wheat and rye droop in the parched fields. More than a month past, the village lord sent word for the water witch to come. She had been powerful busy and arrived but yester-eve, riding in a covered wagon drawn by four horses, her father holding the reins. Straight they had gone to the manor, where doubtless they feasted well; but now it is morning, and she has come to work her marvels against summer's ruin.

Every soul in the village is here, following her beside the river's miry remains. In a narrow lane between two fields, the water witch's footsteps slow,



and we fall silent. A solemn hush hangs in the stifling air, broken only by the cries of the wheeling crows and the rustling of the wheat.

I am near the front of the crowd, a little apart, for I am an outsider; but I creep along unnoticed, until I can see her face. And my heart stops, and beats on, mayhap too fast for my own good. I had imagined a dried-up dowser, severe and disagreeable, like the droughts she works in; but this water witch is comely, slender and tawny-haired, with eyes as grey as glass. She has a solitary look about her, intent and purposeful, as if she stands alone beside the withered wheat, and none of us are here. She half closes her eyes, and I see the jagged shadow of her lashes across her high cheekbones, for she is pale as morning milk.

All her attention seems to be on the witching rod in her hands. It is a forked wand, and its tip hovers horizontal in the heat. Of a sudden, it starts to tremble and she walks on swiftly, as if drawn by it. Graceful she is, almost dancing, her face filled with joy. In silence it happens – just a swing of the wand towards the dust, and the stopping of the maid, so suddenly that the villagers closest to her heels almost stumble into her, and the moment's magic is spoiled by a few curses. The crowd shuffles back, and she contemplates the ground by her feet, the wand motionless.

Then her father goes to her, says something in her ear, and she nods. He makes an announcement. “Here’s the water, but you must dig down to it.”

Several of the men have brought hand-drawn carts bearing shovels and buckets, and they push forwards with them, and begin to dig. We are still in the lane between two fields, and they dig right there in the middle of it, throwing shovelfuls of dust onto a heap beside the brown wheat. The maid’s father comes and offers her his arm, and she leans upon him as he leads her a little distance away. Someone brings one of the empty carts and she sits on the end of it,



her head bent, the wand on her lap between upturned palms. After this, she is ignored, as everyone crowds around the men who dig the well.

I notice the priest is with us, clutching a golden cross in his podgy hands, as if warding off evil. Mayhap he is only jealous, for over the past weeks he has kept his flock penned up in church, hours at a time, stinking hot and bleating for rain, and all to no avail. He frowns as he watches the diggers, his thick lips muttering. I suspect that he prays there will be no water, so he can shepherd us back to prayers in the holy fold of his church. I suspect that, but I fear worse. Though I have been in this village of Nettle Hill but two months, I know Father Villicus has a nose for sniffing out heretics or dabblers in devilry, and I fear the work of the water witch will come under the latter. I am not the only one who notices the priest's disapproval. After a while, the musicians start up a sombre hymn, and several people murmur Sunday prayers, perhaps to appease the priest, or to protect themselves. How quickly they go from wonderment to fear! There is but a fateful heartbeat betwixt the two.

The water witch is sitting close to where I stand, and I stare at her, intrigued, wondering if she knows the dangerous edge she dances on. But she seems only weary, as if divining has taken all her strength. Of a sudden, she looks straight at me, her gaze flicking first to the mark on my face, then to my eyes. There's something disarming and otherworldly in that gaze, and I am trapped in it, caught in the uneasy notion that she divines my soul and sees all my faults and felonies, besides the one that marks me.

I am a branded thief. The letter **T** is burned large into my right cheek, a scar raised in bold relief, stark and unmistakable. It is all people see when they look at me – my great crime emblazoned on my face. But as the maid observes me this day, she slowly smiles, and there is no contempt in her look, no suspicion or judgement. Just those eyes as luminous as skies at dusk, and



her lips curved in rare warmth. And how I burn in that warmth! Like a fool I blush deep, and swallow hard and turn away. I am even more disconcerted when she gets down from the cart and comes over to me.

“You are not watching them dig the well,” she says. Her voice is slightly rough, as if she thirsts, or does not often speak. “Think you they’ll find nought else but dirt?”

Struck as witless as a turnip, I manage to mumble, “I have no doubt they’ll find water, lady.”

She smiles again, her eyes sparkling. “Aye, they will,” she says, “if they dig deep enough. But if they give up afore they reach it, I’ll be blamed as a charlatan, or worse.”

“That is hardly fair,” I say.

“Life is not fair. I am trapped in a skill I wish I did not have, and you are trapped in a skill you can never give up.”

Her perception astonishes me. True, I am trapped, for I am hardly ever given honest work. The painful mark intended to make me give up thievery is the very thing that keeps me enslaved to it. But why does she wish not to divine, when her face shows so much gladness?

I am about to ask her when a shadow falls across us. It is her father, brawny and baleful and bitter-faced. Without a word, he grips her arm, and she gasps with pain as he hustles her away. I glimpse his hand and see that the fingers are misshapen and scarred, as if they have melted together. As he pushes her through the mob and back to the village, no one else notices, focused as they all are on the well diggers.

Shocked, I feel as if an enchantment has been broken. We have spoken only a handful of words, yet I feel a kinship with her, a bond betwixt my heart and hers. As I watch her driven roughly off by her brute of a father, I am briefly



tempted to run after them, bash him over the skull and run away with her. Instead, I turn to watch the well diggers and spy a stick on the soft dirt, not far from her small footprints. Turning my back on the crowd, I pick it up and walk a little distance away, where no one can see. It is her witching rod. I half expect to feel something in it – some force flowing through, a vibration perhaps, like the string of a harp when plucked. But for me, there is nothing. Yet as I hold her wand, I realise, with a surge of joy, that it does indeed hold power for me – not the power to find water, but one even more miraculous: the almighty power to connect us again, the comely water witch and I.

All day the well diggers work, for the ground is baked as hard as rock. The musicians give up playing and sit in the lane to watch with everyone else. John Strongarm returns, staggering and reeking of ale. At dusk, women go back to the village for baskets of food and flagons of cider, and people sit in family groups to eat and talk and watch.

As always, I am alone and hungry, the unwelcome felon. Resisting the urge to sneak back to the empty cottages and steal myself a meal, I trot along the lanes towards the manor lord's orchard. I heard earlier that the water witch and her father have their covered wagon there. I find it parked under an old peach tree, the horses grazing nearby. It is dim under the trees, but the canvas covering of the wagon roof gleams golden from a light within, and I see the shape of someone sitting inside. I wait until I am sure no one else will come, then creep to the wagon. Peering in the front opening, where the canvas is rolled back, I see the water witch sitting alone on a pile of cushions, her arms wrapped about her knees, her eyes wide and watchful. She does not look surprised to see me, and I have the uncanny feeling that I am expected.

“Ho there!” I say, cheerful-like. “How goes it with you?”



“Not well, I suppose,” she replies, “unless you’ve come to tell me they have found water.”

“Not yet,” I say, “but they’re still digging. A sure sign in your favour.”

She smiles. In the lamplight, her curling hair is golden-brown like honey, and her eyes are amber like a cat’s, and beautiful. For a few moments we say nothing, and I am awkward of a sudden. Then I remember why I came and withdraw her divining wand from inside my shirt.

“I found this, after you left,” I say.

Without a word she takes it and places it on the cushions beside her. Behind her, running the length of the wagon, is a chest where doubtless they keep clothes and blankets and other belongings. There is little else, save for cooking pots hanging on hooks and the lamp suspended from the framework of the canvas roof.

I linger, wanting to talk. “My name is Fox,” I say.

“A strange name for a thief.”

“I started by stealing chickens, so the name fitted well enough. It stuck.”

Again that smile, and those dancing eyes. “My name is Wynter,” she says.

“A strange name for a water witch.”

“I was born in winter, when our village was in flood. I think water got under my skin and into my blood, and now it calls to me and I hear it.”

“Is that what happens when you divine? The water calls to you?”

“In a way. ’Tis like listening to music afar off.”

Encouraged, I say, “I would like to talk more with you. Come for a walk with me?”

She replies, “I cannot leave. But if you’ve a mind to stay, sit there on the step and talk.”

“Why can’t you leave?”



She moves something in the cushions near her feet, and a chain clanks. Lifting the frayed hem of her skirt, she reveals an iron manacle encircling her ankle. She is chained to an iron ring in the floor. I am speechless with shock. Her ankle has grown a thick scar all around, from the rubbing of the metal. At last I say, "This is a great wrong! Why the chain?"

She is a while answering, and I sit on the step, leaning my right arm on the floor.

At last she says, "My father keeps me here. I earn money for him, with my dowsing. I tried to run away once, and he caught me. And he has other reasons for keeping me chained."

"God's belly!" I say. "'Tis wrong, Wynter."

She sighs, wraps her arms about her knees again and says meekly, "He is my father. He owns me."

"God help us if every father got the notion he could chain up his children! Don't you have a mother to defend you?"

"I have no one. They all burned to death in a house fire when I was five summers old. Papa burned his hands badly trying to get them out. He can't get work. Now there is only him and me. My divining supports us."

"It's still wrong. Your father is wrong."

"Maybe so. But my life is bound with his, and I have come to accept it." Of a sudden, she smiles and adds, with her amazing eyes on me, "But tell me of your life, Fox. How came you to be a thief?"

"I think I was born one," I reply. "From when I was a little child, I worked with a man called Meredith. I thought he was my brother, but he was not. He told me he found me wandering in the street when I was a toddler, crying from hunger and cold." I hesitate, remembering. Meredith's name has not passed my lips since they killed him. At last I go on. "He was a thief, and cunning with it.





We worked together, and he protected and fed me. I was little enough to crawl through holes in fences and walls, and the first thing I ever stole was a chicken from a henhouse; that's why he called me Fox. I would not have survived if Meredith had not taken me under his wing. He was exceeding good to me."

"What happened to him?"

I look away from her, out at the orchard where the gnarled trunks of peach and apple trees glow faintly in the light from the doorway where I sit. I cannot speak for the awful memories that pour over me.

"Tell me," Wynter says.

When I look back at her, her eyes glimmer as if she feels my pain.

I reply, my head bent. "When I was still small – about six summers old, I suppose – we were accused of stealing a loaf of bread from a town bakery. We had not; we never stole bread from shops, because bakers put stones in bread to make a loaf up to the legal weight, and once Meredith broke a tooth on one and was in agony all winter until the tooth fell out. After that mishap, we only ever stole bread from houses. But we were judged guilty, and no one spoke for us, and we were called vagrants and liars and much else besides. Meredith they dragged from the court and hung on an oak tree outside the town. I was too young to be executed – seven is the hanging age – so instead, they branded me."

"That was a terrible injustice, for both of you," she says softly.

"Aye, well, there's injustice aplenty in the world. The poor have no voice and no one to speak for them, and the judges are fools who can't see beyond rags and misfortune and their own blind bigotry. You spoke true when you said I was trapped in a skill I could never give up. I cannot count the times I've asked for honest work and been turned away. So I stay a thief, will always be a thief. It is my sealed fate."



She is silent, and when I look at her, I see tears on her face. “My life has not been so bad,” she says.

“Well, neither has mine,” I say, trying to sound jocund. “I have not starved to death, as you see, and I am warm, thanks to clothes donated unwittingly from a house in a town twenty miles off. But your pity means much to me. The rest of the world thinks my tender heart isn’t worth a turd.”

She says, her lips curved, her eyes still on mine, “You are a brave man, Fox.”

“Foolhardy, more like,” I say, returning her smile.

She shakes her head. “Brave.” Then she bends her brow on her arms folded about her knees and sighs deeply. She looks small and vulnerable, and I want to protect her.

Again I have the feeling that something compelling lies between us, an empathy sprung from the fact that we are both prisoners, of a kind. But it is more than that. On my side: I have a powerful liking for the maid, because she looks at me straight and talks to me without false shyness. Most maids regard me with haughty contempt because of my brand. Others simper and give alluring smiles, thinking me a dangerous, loose fellow. And I confess that twice I have gone with such tempting maids, from sheer curiosity and loneliness. But there was no joy in it; I was lonelier after and despised myself, besides, for giving away cheaply what should have been kept for someone worthier. What I really long for is a friend, another human soul who sees me for who I truly am, and loves me for that alone. I fancy, rightly or wrongly, that Wynter might be such a soul. Except she is a prisoner, and when her father takes her away, I will likely never see her again.

“What is on your mind?” she asks.

I glance up, the colour rising in my face. She has a talent for making me blush, this strange maid.



She adds, with a smile that is all warmth and honest interest, “You have been thinking long and hard, Fox.”

I am tempted to tell a lie, but say instead, “I was thinking we might be friends, you and I, if you were not a travelling diviner, and a prisoner.”

“Are you not a travelling thief?” she asks. “You mentioned a town twenty miles away. Most people never go more than five miles from their home. You are a mighty traveller, I think.”

“I need to be,” I say. “In my trade, it does not bode well to hang about too long.” I glance behind me through the orchard’s gloom. “’Tis getting dark,” I add. “Your father will be back soon. I’d best be gone. I heard folks say his name is John Strongarm, and I don’t doubt he’s earned the title.”

“He’ll not come back till late,” she replies. “He’s been invited to feast at the manor.”

“Him, and not you?”

“Someone will bring me supper.”

“Why were you not invited?”

“I used to go to manors with my father, for the feasts. But people asked me questions, and sometimes . . . sometimes my answers were displeasing – to them, or to my father. After that, my father decided I was half mad and not fit to eat at table. ’Tis another reason he keeps me chained. To keep me safe from curiosity and scorn.”

“He has strange judgements, your father. I see no madness.”

She smiles, but her eyes are grave. “Madness, witchery, dwimmer-craftiness, whatever it is, I am not like other people.”

“True. You’re a good deal prettier than most. And being different is not a felony. Though I confess, it can at times be dangerous.” This time the smile reaches her eyes. She asks, “Are you hungry, Fox?”



“It is my permanent state,” I say.

She crawls over to one of the long chests, dragging her chain after her. Delving in the chest, she comes up with a package folded into a piece of cloth. Unwrapping it on the floor between us, she takes out bread and offers it to me. I shake my head in protest, but she pushes the food into my hand, saying, “I’m not hungry after divining. Take it, Fox. And the cheese. I’ll eat later.”

So I eat, trying not to gulp the food.

When I have finished, she asks, “When did you last eat, Fox?”

“Not since yesterday’s yesterday,” I say, picking the last crumbs from the front of my shirt. “I have work here for once, but still the food isn’t exactly plentiful.”

“What work are you doing?”

“I empty chamber pots for the innkeeper, and he pays me in stale bread and leftovers from his guests. But for the past two days he forgot to feed me. Or perhaps he considers what he’s given me to be payment in advance. People seldom bother keeping their word to a thief.”

“Is that the only work you do? Emptying chamber pots?”

“If I’m lucky. It’s either that, or nothing. And it’s mostly nothing. The longest I’ve ever worked was in London, emptying barrels from latrines into the city’s cesspits, choking half to death in the stinking fumes. I was free of suspicion there. Even a branded thief is hardly likely to creep off with a bucketful of stolen crap. I worked there one summer long till I got a fever and couldn’t stand. Mostly I’m forced to thief for food. But it is not my choice, Wynter.”

She sighs deeply. “It is hard to have no choices, no power over your own life.”

“What would you do, Wynter, if you had choices? Would you still divine?”



“Not for water.” She is silent a long while, thinking. Then she says, “There is one gift I have that I would use all alone, if I could. I have used it only once before and was cursed mightily for it, by my father. Yet it is the best, most joyful thing I do.”

“Can you tell me what it is?”

Smiling a little, she shakes her head. “Some things are best not spoken of. Truth to tell, Fox, I think I am safer locked away in here. If I was free, I wouldn’t know what I could reveal of myself and what I ought to keep secret. Only my father talks with me, and I believe what he says. I do not think I would be safe in the world.”

“It is a perilous place, to be sure. But now you are talking with me, and any secrets you tell are safe.”

“You do not know all my traits, Fox.”

“Then tell me, so I will know.” Smiling, I settle back on the step, leaning against the wagon side, and wait expectantly for her to speak.

Instead, she looks sad. “I think you should go, Fox.”

“Why? I will not judge you harshly, I swear.”

“I think you should go.” Something in her voice defies argument. She may be small and captive, but I see the strength of steel in her.

I say, standing up, “Then I will take my leave. Thank you for the supper, Wynter. I hope we talk again.”

“We may. Be off, Fox. Quick!”

So I run away between the trees, and when I look back, I see a young man approach the wagon from the direction of the manor. The sight of him startles me; did she sense he was coming, that eldritch maid? He is alone, bearing a plate of food. He takes it to Wynter, and they speak for a moment or two. I wait until he is gone, then wander off and find a twisted old peach tree to climb,



where I settle myself between forked branches. It pleases me that I can glimpse, through the rustling leaves, the soft glow of her wagon. Satisfied in belly and mind, I lie back to sleep, safe above the troubles of the world and near to the stars that seem, this extraordinary night, wondrously aligned in my favour.

Perhaps because I have talked of him, I dream of Meredith. Yet it is more than a dream; it is a powerful remembering.

In the dream, I am four or five summers old. On a clear night in midwinter, we are breaking into a merchant's home to get food. There is a small window-hole at the back of the house, and Meredith lifts me so I can see inside. It is so dim I see only vague shapes, and the glimmer of pottery on shelves; but I smell cheeses, pies, fresh-baked bread and crab apples.

"'Tis the larder," I whisper down to Meredith. He lifts me so I can grip the window ledge and wriggle onto it. The stones are icy, and I tremble from cold. Pulling myself across the wide ledge, I hang half in, half out, peering through the dark to see what is directly below. Fortune is with me; plump sacks of flour or apples stand there, so I lower myself onto them, and then to the floor.

I work quickly, taking a leather bag tucked into the rope wound several times about my waist, filling it with booty from the shelves. Going mainly by smell in the dark, I take cheeses, small pies and loaves of crusty bread. When the bag is full, I tie it closed with one end of the rope I unwind from around my middle. Standing on the sacks under the window-hole, I throw the other end of the rope out to Meredith. He pulls slowly, and soon the bag is across the ledge and outside.

Standing on the sacks, I wait, my hands under my arms for warmth. Of a sudden, I hear a hound barking somewhere in the house, and a man shouts. I call softly, urgently, to Meredith, and the end of the rope is thrown in across the



ledge. I grip it and he pulls me up. In our haste the rough edges of the stones tear my tattered shirt, scrape my bare belly, and I squeal. The dog barks in earnest then, there are more shouts, and I hear footsteps. I fall into Meredith's arms, and he sets me on my feet, scoops up the booty, grabs my hand, and we run. Down narrow alleys we flee, where the cobbles are slick with ice, along Butcher's Street, where we skid across frozen offal, and out along Mill Lane towards the edge of town. Dogs bark behind us, and I realise the merchant has raised the hue and cry, and the town's constable has set his hounds on us.

Terror falls on me, and I can hardly breathe for cold and fear. We come to the towering walls of the mill, ghostly against the stars, and the great shape of the waterwheel rising out of the black waters of the pond. Meredith slithers down the frosty bank into the water. I slide down after him, gasping as the icy waters enfold me, and climb onto his back, my arms about his neck. In one hand I hold the bag of food. Our feast is safe, for the bag, well greased with fat, is waterproof.

Meredith swims with me across the pond. The coldness numbs my arms, and I am terrified I will drop the bag, or let go of him. Behind us, the dogs stop at the water's edge, snarling and barking. A man joins them, shouting at them to attack, but they stay at the edge, whimpering. I tighten my arms about Meredith's neck, hear his breaths hoarse and hard and his teeth chattering with cold. Though he swims quietly, the splash and ripple of the water sounds loud in the night air. I hope the constable has not brought his bow, else if he sees us, he will surely shoot.

But we reach the other side without harm, and I slither from Meredith's back, still holding the bag, my feet in soft mud and weeds. He pulls himself up onto the grass then hauls me out. In the brittle moonlight the ground is covered with frost, but I am numb, beyond feeling.



The dogs are barking again on the far side of the pond. Meredith grips my hand and we make a break for it. The cold has turned my naked feet to blocks of wood and I stumble often, but Meredith pulls me up and drags me on. We run through woods, where shadows lie black across the glimmering ground and bare trees stand stark against the wintry stars. The woods are familiar, our winter home. We come to an embankment on the other side of the trees, far from houses and roads, where a mighty oak leans over, its ancient roots sheltering a small cave. Panting and gasping, we crawl in, scraping our backs on the tangle of bushes across the opening. For long moments we sit still, listening. Outside there is no sound.

“We lost the hounds,” says Meredith. “A good night’s work, little Fox.”

“We have pies,” I stammer, teeth clattering.

Meredith reaches for a blanket we have stored in the back of our cave. He helps me off with my sodden clothes, already crackling with ice, and wraps the blanket around me. I watch as he builds a fire from twigs and the charred remains of our last one, takes the knife he wears on his belt and uses the blade to strike sparks from his flint. Soon we have a small blaze going. Then he removes all his clothes, except his breeches, and spreads them with mine across the thicket in the entrance. The cave fills with smoke, and we cough as the warmth of the flames seeps into our skin. At last we feast on the night’s treasure. But still I shake and shiver, and when we have finished eating, Meredith leans against the wall at the back of the cave, and, still in the blanket, I crawl into his arms for comfort. “Tell me a story,” I say.

“I have been thinking of one, Fox. A tale of heat and blazing sun, of desert sands, and strange beasts with humped backs and feet the size of meat platters.”

“Is it a true story?” I ask, settling more cosily within the circle of his arms, warm at last.





“Aye, true,” he replies. “My own father, a great merchant, sailed to such a land and traded with the strangers there for exotic spices and oils, which he brought back to England and sold for a fortune. The land was called Arabia, and it was ruled by a great king called a sultan, who wore flowing robes of pure white silk and had a hundred stallions more splendid than any animal we will ever see in England.”

“Did he have the humped beasts, too?” I ask.

“Aye, hundreds, but they were worth nothing compared with his stallions. The prized horses lived with him in his magnificent tent in the desert, and slept on carpets as soft as moss, and ate dates and pomegranates and fruits such as we have never seen.”

“What was his tent like?”

“It was huge, stretched across golden poles, and made of crimson and gold silk that billowed in the desert winds, and was guarded by fierce men with great curved swords.”

“Did he have enemies?”

“Aye, other tribes who wanted to steal his horses and water from his well. There was danger everywhere in the desert, and not just from men. There was quicksand, deep pits with sand as slippery as a barrel of eels, which, if you walked on it, sucked you down and you were never seen again. And there were huge storms of wind and sand, that rolled as high as castle towers across the land and engulfed everything caught in them, both men and beasts. All that were overtaken died, as surely as if they drowned in ocean waves.”

I ask, enthralled, “Did anyone ever escape those storms?”

“Ah – one did,” Meredith replies. “There is a tale of one of the sultan’s sons, a brave lad called Rasheed, who was almost caught one day in such a storm. The cloud of sand was so high it blocked out the sun, and it rolled across the



desert faster than an arrow flies. But Rasheed rode his stallion before that vast wall of sand, rode swifter than the wind, and the sand never caught him.”

While he speaks he makes gestures in the air, and, against the fire’s radiance, his hand describes the vast sandstorm rolling, and in the smoke I see the dust and feel the mighty wind of it, and hear the pounding of the hooves of Rasheed’s horse.

Meredith continues, “After that, Rasheed’s father held races every year to encourage the young warriors to ride fast, but Rasheed always won. He became famous in the land and married the most beautiful and valiant woman in the world. Her name was Yasmin, and they had twelve sons, all legendary horsemen.”

“Did your father tell you this?”

Meredith is silent a while, for he does not often speak of his father. At last he says, “He told me about Arabia’s markets and trade. A travelling minstrel told me the real tales of the land, about its heroes and their glorious deeds. That minstrel gave me a love of stories. I always wanted to be like him, to travel the length and breadth of England bearing news and telling wondrous tales. But my father wanted me to be a merchant like him. He said storytelling was for women. To toughen me up, he sent me off with the king’s army, to fight in France. I was fourteen summers old. He said battle would make a man of me.”

“And did it make you a man?”

“No, Fox. It did the opposite. It made me less than a man, turned me into a heartless machine, murdering because I was told to, doing things that went against my nature and everything I believe. It would have destroyed my soul if I had not fled the battleground.”

He hesitates, his eyes on the fire, seeing something far beyond. I wait for him to go on.



Sighing heavily, he says, “I ran away from the battle, and as I was leaving I came across an enemy soldier. He was sorely wounded and could not walk. He was a lad just like me, Fox. I helped him, and we left the fighting together, leaning on each other for support. But we were both hurt, confused, and by accident went back towards the edge of the battle. We were discovered by soldiers of my army. They slit the throat of the lad I was helping and said I’d be tried for treason, and hung.”

“What’s treason?” I ask.

“Speaking against the king, or refusing to fight for him. It’s the worst crime you can commit in this land.”

“Worse than thievery?”

“Far worse. But they didn’t hang me; I escaped. I couldn’t go home, because my father would have named me a coward and delivered me back to the army to be hung, drawn and quartered. It’s a long, slow death, the most terrible anyone can suffer. I’m a hunted man, Fox. That’s why I daren’t stay in one place for long, even for work, in case I’m recognised. It’s why I have to thieve for a living and can’t look after you properly. I can’t tell you how sorry I am for it.”

“You do look after me properly,” I say. “My belly is full of pork and apple pie. I’m warm. And I have my own minstrel to tell me tales.”

He chuckles, and in the comfort of his closeness, I doze.

I wake in the fork of the peach tree in the orchard, and for two heartbeats think I am a child again and the branches are Meredith’s arms. Lying very still, I look up between the leaves at the stars. I am put in mind again of Meredith’s last words to me before he died. Often I have thought of them, and this night they come back to me more strongly than ever, doubtless because I have dreamed



of him. *Be true to your heart, little Fox*, he had said, just before they dragged him off to the gallows-tree.

But I am not true to my heart, for I am a thief and wish not to be. I turn my head and look across the shadows to where the wagon is, its canvas cover gleaming under the starlight. The lamp no longer burns within, and I suppose she is asleep, the maid who also wishes not to be what she is forced to be.

My gaze returns to the stars, still brilliant though dawn approaches, and I wonder again if they are, this strange night, aligned in my favour. But common sense says they are not, for nothing in this bitter world is in my favour. No matter what I wish for – whatever my hopes or dreams or desires – they all are blotted out by one irrevocable truth: that I am branded on my face with what I am. A thief, ill-fated and unworthy – and the only certain thing in my life is the tree on which I will surely, in the end, be hanged.