

THE AFTERNOON THAT DAY

While walking on a trail through the woods, Prince Bright paused before a bridge to admire everything. It was no wonder the kingdom's painters were so renown: if they only captured a hundredth of this, they had made something worthwhile. In the beacons of sunlight which came down in the places between the oaks, a thick blanket of red flowers grew, scarlet petals alike to rings in a suit of chain mail or heads in a crowd. A songbird practiced nearby, piping her call time and again, at times more brief, and at times a more protracted longing, the briefer the more sweet. Ahead, a familiar and sturdy bridge over a wide stream that seemed mirthful in its trickling voice, and the Malamute Courtly whom Prince Bright had ventured out with on this walk. The very large and very thickly coated grey-and-white hound stood at the start of the bridge, looking back at Bright, tail high and wagging in reserved measure.

Bright took in a big breath of the cool air, and began onward, towards the bridge.

Courtly barked, and stepped into Bright's path, wagging more quickly.

Bright gave a put-on scoff to the dog, put his hands on his hips, and asked as though it were an imposition, "Here?"

Courtly's wagging still rapid, the large dog came forward in quick happy steps, and forced his nose against the prince's left hand, prying it off from the prince's hip with eager nudges and sniffs.

“Oh, very well,” the prince said gladly, and lowered himself onto his knees.

What a perfect operation the two of them had it down to. With his left hand, Bright pet the dog along the back a few times, as the two of them nuzzled their heads against each other, pressing their weights into one another. Then, hand never leaving touch with the dog, Bright slid his fingers down the side of the dog’s lush coat, and placed his hand lifting along the dog’s belly, the wisps of fur there all so soft, though in possession of some fragments of some dead leaves. After a few rubs of the standing hound’s soft and warm belly, Bright then wrapped his fingers around the hound’s bulky sheath, feeling through it the hound’s erect and ready phallus. With the prince’s hand in place, Courtly mounted onto the prince’s arm, grabbing it by the forearm, fuzzy chin pressing down and subduing human shoulder. While the dog began mounting, the prince slid his hand forward, so that the thumb and pointer finger formed a loose hold over the front of the delightful sheath: when the hound began humping, the sheath was slid back from the penis by the thumb and forefinger, and the red and slick penis itself, hot and throbbing, pushed forward into the prince’s awaiting hand. There before the bridge, the dog continued to hump, while the prince continued to bear the dog’s weight pressing down upon him and give the dog a pleurably shaped hand to thrust his penis into.

When the humping was finished, Courtly well satisfied, the prince released the dog’s phallus. Briefly, Bright and Courtly shared a kiss, canine tongue gracing human lips, human lips smooching canine muzzle. The prince then gently, carefully, positioned himself onto his back underneath the standing hound, and fellated the animal while the red penis was still engorged out of its sheath, and would otherwise be exposed to the open air, if not for the human care given.

Quite some time later, Courtly’s penis became limp enough that it slipped back into its sheath, slithering backwards from off of Bright’s tongue and out from between his lips.

Bright got up off of the ground, he and Courtly kissed once more, and then, this time, when Bright attempted to continue

on along the trail, over the bridge, Courtly allowed it, and walked along a small ways ahead of the human.

The two of them went on, around some hills of blue flowers, and down and up a green valley with a small stream at the bottom. Across the stream were cut stones, and the prince and the hound jumped from one to the next until they were over. Cresting the valley, the last stretch of the trail came into view. At the end was a pavilion which was set in a small clearing in the woods. A figured moved about there. As the prince and the hound drew nearer, the sound of a harp being plucked could be heard.

Courtly ran galloping ahead, and approached the man at the harp. The man gave a loud and warm greeting to the hound, stopping his playing to bend over and pet the animal's thick coat.

Prince Bright, on arriving, said, "Greetings, harper."

He knew well that this minstrel's name was Daniel, though it was a bit of good humored ribbing between them that Bright often called him by whatever instrument he was in possession of. Greetings flautist, greetings trumpeter, greetings drummer, at times with a wand in the minstrel's hand even greetings conductor was apt. And here, harper.

"Greetings, Prince Bright," the harper said, sitting facing away from his instrument, hands on his knees.

Courtly came back to Bright, and Bright bent and ran a hand over the hound's coat some times.

The harper went on, "I had not anticipated an audience, and I imagine—though I will be flattered if wrong—that you had not anticipated your servant Daniel. A pair of lovebirds wandering out alone into the woods I should think seld seeks company. If you would like the pavilion, I can pack up and be gone in the minute."

Prince Bright laughed warmly, and said, "Stay, harper, if it suits you. Sides the harp, have you brought anything other to play?"

"This lute, my lord," Daniel said, reaching into a large soft pack and withdrawing it.

"I would delight in playing a bit with you, if you would allow."

Daniel chuckled, and said, "You are more talented than your pretense suggests, my lord. Please, have it and play."

Daniel handed over the instrument. Under the pavilion were two tables, each with its own two benches. The harper and the prince seated themselves on the inward benches, each facing the other, with the hound finding a spot to lay down between the two, on the ends of the prince's feet. The prince also unshouldered the satchel he had brought, and from inside of it set out on the table behind him a bottle of wine, and some cheeses wrapped in wax paper.

The prince plucked a few preliminary scales and chords, to test the instrument was correctly tuned. As he did, he said to the harper, "In truth, I practice so much for him. If I play well, it relaxes him. If I play poorly, he worries." The prince found with satisfaction that Daniel's lute was tuned perfectly.

The two played. It was nothing like one would be bored by in a formal court. The prince, nodding vigorously, produced a rhythm on the lute that was lively, fit for folk to dance joyously to. The harper expertly picked out accompanying accents, nodding along himself after a time, falling into that which resembled choruses and verses, repeated motifs and varied melodies.

When the two of them slowed, and then eventually faded to a stop, Courtly was lying heavily on the prince's feet between them, snoring.

Softly, Prince Bright said to the harper, "Thank you. I do think I will leave off there, however, before I too much repeat the limited things I know."

With a wry smile, as though he were sharing something that he should not, the harper told the prince, "More than half the skill of an entertainer is in repeating yourself shamelessly."

Daniel accepted the lute when Bright offered it out. The minstrel tucked the lute back into his pack.

The prince asked, "Would you play for us a while? I don't think we will be long, but a song as we rest here would make the afternoon all the more wonderful."

"Please, my lord," the harper said, "of all I have occasion to play for, you have the most generous ear of them all. Of course I will play."

“What mean you by that?” the prince asked.

“Please, my lord, even having said it, I ask you think nothing of it.”

“I compel you,” the prince said. “If my ear is generous, then whose is not?”

The harper shook his head, and then said, “In truth, it is your brother. If I will play slow, he will say, ‘Faster, faster!’ If I then play faster, he then says, ‘Slowly, slowly! One cannot think in that noise!’ Be that as it may, I do not mean to be complaining too loudly. It is my office, after all, to... Oh, here he comes now.”

Prince Bright turned around on his seat, and observed his brother, Prince Stand, coming forth along the last small stretch of the trail approaching the pavilion.

Prince Stand was the king’s firstborn, and his being the firstborn was related to the reason why Prince Bright had been called Bright. After the birth of Stand, the king took more wives, and Stand’s mother worried that she would never bear another child again, as the king’s heart turned to the other women. In fact, Bright was later born before the other wives had yet conceived any daughters or sons, and so she named the newborn Bright, because he was a brightness upon her days. Prince Stand was called such because it was rumored that at his birth, his feet had emerged first, and he had stood and beat away the physician who had been delivering him. As of yet, Prince Stand and Prince Bright were the only two children of the king.

Though next in line for the throne, it was rumored that Prince Stand was severely ill. A year prior, when the rumors were first being whispered about, it had been quite easy to put the whisperings out of mind as thin scandal or rotten politics, as at that time, Prince Stand continued to have some glow to his appearance. As he neared the pavilion though, he seemed grey compared to the green surrounding. His steps, both with the left foot and the right, were slow, and though the prince did not appear crippled, the labor of walking was all the same heavy upon him. Dark bruise-like semicircles hung under his eyes. Though the day was indeed cool, and a thick garment with long sleeves would not be amiss, the approaching Prince wore over his thick autumn clothing a thicker winter cloak, dark green in

color, fastened shut to keep in any heat, and a scarf about his face, which he lowered only as he came up the pavilion steps.

Courtly wagged, and got up and greeted Prince Stand, offering himself to be petted. Stand did indeed run his hand over and over again along the large hound's back, remarking, "Yes, so good to see you, good Courtly. I hope your mate has dealt kindly with you. I'm sure that he has."

Stand came forth to the tables and set down his own satchel beside Bright's emptied satchel, and then took a seat beside Bright, both princes looking out at the trees. A pair of cardinals flew about, landing up on this branch and then that. Courtly came over and laid down once again on Bright's feet. Behind them, the harper began to play.

Prince Bright mentioned, "The new bell tower in the northern abbey is coming along nicely."

"Yes, I've heard them ringing the bells."

"Oh, is it that far along already?"

"I've heard them just this morning," Prince Stand said, rocking slightly in a way of nodding. Within his cloak, he crossed his arms one over the other, holding them tight to his body. "It must have been the northern abbey, I think. None of the other towers have bells that strike that high, and the sound did come from the north as I was leaving, anyways."

"Yes, it must have been, then," Bright agreed.

"Is this music to your liking?" Stand asked.

"Oh it is. I love this piece. Bonetti's 7th. Begun at the second movement. Yes, this piece is very good."

"Very good," Stand said, and ruminated on that, then asked, "Is there a favorite you would rather hear, though?"

"On this afternoon, no, the harper has made a superb choice," Bright said, quite truthfully. Courtly was nearly asleep again. "For this lively bracing day, Bonetti's 7th is an excellent sound. It seems to converse with the songbirds themselves, in a way."

"Hm. So it does."

The princes looked out at the flitting cardinals.

Stand inquired, "How do the days treat you?"

"This day, or all of them?" Bright asked.

Stand smiled slightly at that in a way of laughing, and said, "All of them."

Bright thought about it, and then answered, "I'll admit, all days are perfect lately. Though as a rude child I remember bemoaning all the pomp of attending functions, there was a complete switch at some stage, and I delight in all the conversation and speech, and I have absolutely found most gatherings of people to be beautiful to the eye with everyone's elegant dress and a room's gay decorations. My studies, lately, bring me to topics I've found new passions in: where I once might have thought pouring over written poems was an exercise in monotony, I've recently found it to be a rather pleasantly engaging endeavor, seeing a greater journey towards a realization by way of a great many petty wits; I find sounds in a poem alike to steps on a stroll; I say 'stroll' and not another word because one asleep on my feet will hear it, even in his rest, and be keen on venturing again, even though we venture already. And, speaking of him, he is my truest love. That is not easy to say, because I do remember very strongly the love of some who have left us. But the days out and around with him, his charm, his playfulness in spirit and yet his patience to wait on dull human things, his beauty, bluntly his lovemaking, and falling asleep face nestled within his thick coat, completely taken in his tickly hairs and his smell that is him." Bright rubbed his chin briefly, and then said, "I have been doing some writings on him, so some of my thoughts there may have come out already more articulately just-so than you should credit me for. But I have been writing, and now saying, very true things on how I love him."

"That is beautifully put, O Bright," Stand said. "I know full well, I like to think, of the type of love you speak of, for I have felt many of the same ways with Jester, and you have articulated something in that better than I might have."

Jester was of the very same parentage as Courtly, though from an earlier litter. It was well known of both princes, Bright and Stand, that at any function they were present at, a Malamute stud was most likely to be seen accompanying.

It was the way of princes to be given mares and bitches, stallions and studs, whatever it was that most suited their desires, so that they may exercise their young lustful passions to the fullest, while saving themselves for matrimony.

Stand went on, "I am glad the days have been so kind to you."

The cardinals flitted off to elsewhere in the woods. The harper played alone, though still as sweetly.

Stand bent around and took his satchel off of the table. Facing forward towards the empty woods again, he reached inside of the satchel's mouth, and drew out an ornate box, dark and polished wood accented with silver. He set the empty satchel back behind himself, and then lifted open the box, showing a pistol inside, lying atop the velvet cushions in the box's interior.

Stand said, looking into the box with Bright, "You are not much for guns, I know."

"I was once impartial, but the noise frightens Courtly greatly. So yes, I have picked up an aversion."

Stand patted the side of the box, not so harshly that it made a sound, a gentle pair of taps. He said to Bright, "You may find this one interesting as a curiosity. The bullet comes forth from this mechanism, here, and in the pulling of the trigger rotates the entire mechanism to another bullet, without need for the marksman to reload. Six missiles may be issued without need to fiddle with powder."

With a little smile, Bright said, "I think, then, that I should like this particular gun six times less."

Stand took the pistol up out of the box, and examined each side of it. He remarked, "You truly are blameless of anything, greatly kind, and have indeed been a brightness upon all whom have had the pleasure of sharing your company. Think of that."

Prince Stand gave a moment for him to do so, and then shot Prince Bright, Courtly, and the harper.

With aching joints, he stood up, returned the pistol to its box and the box to its satchel, and then departed from the pavilion to be at the king's bedchambers in the night, leaving Prince Bright's wine where it was on the table.