Unbinding

Much later, when Tol thought back on his last year in the village, he felt as though he was standing on a mountaintop, looking down into a valley. Everything was laid before him, tiny but clear. He found the house where he had lived, and then there he was, walking down a forest path beneath the winter moon. The little figure bent and reached down to something at his feet, stood, turned and went back. The scene was quiet, even peaceful, but now as then it marked the end of one thing and the beginning of another.

Tol's life, back then, was simple. In the morning he went to the fields to haul stone and cut brush. In the evening he returned to the village and ate dinner with his family. They had bread made from the King's grain, or greens from the fields, or cabbage soup, and occasionally a portion of meat of one kind or another. Life was not easy, but neither was it unbearably hard. Tol shared a small house with his family: his grandmother, his aunt Kira, and her two daughters, Ana and Kal. Their home was one large room, with a movable screen that one person or another could use to section off a corner for a little privacy. Eventually, when someone died or when the Earl saw fit to hire a troupe of builders, there might be a house of Tol's own for him to live in, and take a wife. He was not particularly looking forward to it; the girls of the village and the nearby country seemed as dull as the land that raised them. And dull, he had to admit, as Tol himself. He dreamed of something more than rocks and beet greens, of finery, perhaps, and of grandeur. But most days he felt he hardly knew enough to dream of anything, and the visions he stitched together out of half-remembered children's tales and the occasional sidelong glimpse of nobility were never rich enough to satisfy.

Eight times a year, the people of the village kept the old ways, performing little rituals to mark the passing of the seasons and pray for a good harvest or a light winter. Three of the eight

holy days were festivals, and so at the break of spring, at the beginning of the harvest, and in the dead of winter, the dozen or so families of the village and the surrounding fields would gather, on the village green or under the roof of the little stone meeting hall, and feast, and dance, and sing the songs they sang back then, in that part of the world. The festival days were the closest thing in Tol's life to the richness he craved, three joyful breaks in a long and tiresome routine of cutting, lifting, and hauling, clearing the rocky loose earth for fields that never, after a couple of seasons, seemed to bear the wealth of sugar beets that had been expected and hoped for.

Sugar beets were the only crop for a day of travel in any direction, endless fields of broad, floppy, yellowing leaves, worm-white taproots burgeoning in the soil below. Every year more fields were cultivated, and with the increased acreage came an increased quota, set according to royal estimates of the productivity of the land. At the harvest, men with weapons and little pencils arrived with teams of oxen and empty carts to be filled. The amount of flour and goods the village received in return would be proportional to the number of carts that were filled, and as Tol worked and the new fields were cleared and planted every year, more carts appeared come harvest time.

This year, because of an irregularity in the cycles of the moon which Tol understood only vaguely, the harvest festival came early, before the farmers had uprooted more than a few bushels of beets. There were mutterings of worry among the people. Tol's grandmother, rocking in her chair by the fire, was certain that the king's men would not arrive to begin collecting beets until the usual time, a week or so after the harvest had begun in earnest. His aunt, sister to his dead mother, was not so optimistic.

"They're greedy, those castle men. Hungry like weevils. They don't care about a thing besides finding a way to take a little more and give a little less." She set down the dress she

was hemming up, a colorful thing for Kira to wear at the festival. “And you can be sure they have the same calendar we do. They’ll be here next week, or sooner, if I know a damned thing.”

The festival came around. It was meant to be a joyful time, with fresh venison from the forest, fruit puddings, and all variety of food and drink. Beer flowed freely. But with the shadow of the tax-men hanging unspoken over the proceedings, people were uneasy, and some drank too much, and others not at all.

Tol fell into the latter group, while Lina, the baker’s daughter, took her place among the former. Tol sat quietly by himself, at the end of one of the three long wooden tables that had been set on the village green for the festival. He had claimed a leg of wild fowl for himself and was munching rapturously, eyes closed. He could tell Lina was drunk from her laughter—she was loud and unbridled, with something of a braying tone creeping in. Tol smiled a little, trying to enjoy her enjoyment even if the sound grated. Lina was one of the girls whose name came up when his aunt talked to his grandmother of his eventual marriage, and so he tended to pay special attention to her. He was shy, and rarely spoke to her or anyone, but when they happened to pass each other on the paths he would smile at her, and he listened to her when she happened to be having conversations within earshot.

Opening his eyes, he was surprised to find that Lina was looking directly at him. Her friend Astin, daughter of the blacksmith, was speaking close to her ear and sending a sidelong look his way. Seeing him seeing them, Lina’s lips split into a wicked grin and she tilted her head invitingly. Tol averted his eyes, embarrassed, and feeling his cheeks flush, he took what was left of his drumstick and scurried off the green, away towards his house.

Later, alone, having had a couple of mugs of beer after all, he allowed himself some thoughts he didn’t like to let himself think, thoughts he worried would drown him if he indulged them too long. He hated the village. He hated the fields, he hated the stinking piles of clammy

white beets, he hated the endless, pointless work of clearing fields, he hated his cousins and his aunt, he hated his parents for dying and leaving him here where nothing would ever happen. Tol gritted his teeth and rolled his eyes, imagining tearing the things he hated apart with his own hands, using the muscle he had earned through countless hours in the fields. He thought of Lina and her stupid donkey laugh, the presumption that lay behind the lurid grin she had shown him at the feast. As if she already owned him. Everyone thought they owned him. His family, the king, even the fields. The endless rocky dirt, the broad yellowish leaves of the beets, insinuated in their own way that they would have him for his whole life. Until he died he would tend them and clear them and break himself down in their service, and then he would be buried among them. Reveling in his anger, Tol got up from his bed, pushed aside the screen that separated his corner from the rest of the house, and went past his grandmother asleep in her chair and out the door of the little house into the night.

He turned left, away from the path to the village green and the fields, and entered the woods by the road towards Earlskeep, a day's journey away. The moon, not quite full, sat impartially above the trees. The fall night was cool against his hot cheeks. Out here, the indignation that had felt like a ravenous fire was reduced to a tiny flicker, dwindling against the damp gnarled darkness of the forest. Noticing it, Tol became aware of the depth of that darkness, and of the wolves that lived among the trees. As if on cue a distant howl went up. Tol froze for a moment, waiting for an answering nearby cry, but none came. Still, the thought of the things that might lurk in the darkness snuffed out the last of his anger, leaving him with a sudden and surprising calm. He weighed his options and decided he would walk a little further, since he was here already, and then return to the little house on the edge of the fields. Nobody owned him. He would make the best of the life he had—after all, things could have been worse.

He walked along, thinking about a future in the village. There might be more interesting work than cutting brush and shifting rocks that he could do. He was strong, and young, and he could learn. Maybe he could seek an apprenticeship with the blacksmith, who had no son of his own to take over the forge when he grew too old. Anything was possible.

Tol was just turning to walk back towards the house when something on the path caught his eye, glinting white in the moonlight. If it was a stone it was unusually bright. It sparked Tol's interest, and he walked the extra few paces to pick it up. It was smaller, up close, than it had appeared, seeming to shrink as he approached. Bending, he plucked it from the dust for a closer look.

Later, it would be tempting to think that this moment was beyond his control, that he was already tangled up in the skein of a story that necessitated his action. That his hand reached down of its own accord to lift the little fragment from the ground, that the choice was not his own. But if he was bound to this path, it was not because of magic or some external fate—his own curiosity, his own search for something beyond the edge of the world, these pulled him down the forest way in the nighttime, these brought his eye to rest on the little glinting object there, these brought his fingers together to gently pinch and raise up the thing to look at it.

It was a tooth. A human tooth, by the shape and size of it—an eyetooth, white as the moon in the sky. It was pointed, and curved slightly, flared on the concave side, with a soft, yellowish root where it had been attached to the bone of whoever had lost it. He stared, focusing all his attention on this thing. How had it come to be here? Who had lost it? Was it human or animal, had it been lost through some natural process or by violence? Tol felt, suddenly, that he should throw it away into the woods, or drop it and step on it, pressing it back into the dust. It repulsed him, a sign of unnatural machinations, of dark knowledge of some kind. Surely a tooth shouldn't just be sitting alone on a path in the middle of the forest and the middle of the night, surely it

was by someone's intention that he had found it. Maybe that person or being was watching him even now, handling a thing that had grown in their mouth, from their own flesh and bone.

What if they wanted it back?

Tol looked nervously around at the trees on either side. Some underbrush at the edge of the path rustled and he nearly swallowed his tongue in fear, but nothing further happened. Slowly the night regained its stillness.

It wasn't until he was back at the house, sitting on his bed and feeling a great wave of sleep rising up to overtake him, that he realized he had not thrown the tooth away, that here it still was, clutched in his hand. On the verge of dream, he tucked the tooth away where he kept the few precious things he had—shoved into the ticking of his straw mattress, directly underneath the pillow—and was overcome.

Weeks went by, and Tol hardly thought of that night. The harvest proceeded; the king's taxmen came to collect the beets. As his aunt had predicted, they came earlier than usual that year, appearing with their carts before the vast bulk of the white beets were out of the ground. Two carts came and left almost completely empty before enough of the plants were ready to fill them, and two corresponding black marks were put down in the taxman's ledger. With less grain for the people to eat, it would be a long winter.

They began rationing almost immediately when the grain carts came. Tol's little family had weathered hard years before, and they would weather this one. They traded a little grain and a little fabric to the family down the lane in exchange for a share of the cabbage they had grown in their garden, and stored them in the little cellar beneath the house. As long as there was work to do outdoors Tol's aunt continued to bring grain flour to the baker to be baked into coarse bread, but when winter came properly and the ground became hard and frozen they went without,

subsisting on cabbage soup, seasoned with dried herbs from the summer garden. With no work and little food for energy, the days passed as in a dream. The woods surrounding the little house seemed to exist in one long, shifting twilight, the sky grey, the fir trees standing thick and dark. On days when the sun did shine, Tol would go out and feel it on his face, letting it shine red through his eyelids.

The midwinter holiday came, and despite the lean year the families of the village came together for the meager feast they could afford. They drank beer again and slaughtered a pair of geese, and under the roof of the stone meeting hall they ate and sang in low voices, the walls hung with tree boughs so that the room smelled of pine and meat and good cheer. The winter would pass.

Shortly after the holiday, word went around that the old widow Astrid had died. Her unmarried daughter was leaving to live with cousins in Earlskeep, where she would join the women who spun yarn and made the winter clothes that they wore in that part of the country. The house where the widow and her daughter had lived was empty, for the moment. When Tol's cousin Ana relayed the news, his aunt gave him a meaningful look.

He had never voiced his reluctance towards marrying Lina, keeping carefully neutral about it in public as as he did about most things. But his aunt was canny, and must have sensed something of his feelings, because she did not broach the question directly. Instead she came to him when he was sitting on the rock behind the house, enjoying the rustling of the trees, hoping for a ray of sunlight to bathe in. She sat on the rock next to him and kept quiet for a moment.

"You know," she began, "your cousins are getting too big to share that bed." Tol kept silent for a breath and she continued. "And I think you'd be happier with more space, too." Tol turned

and looked into her face. “You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?” she asked. She was not gentle, but her characteristic sharpness was lessened; she did not grate or raise her voice.

Tol knew what she was talking about. He imagined the house where the widow and her daughter had lived, empty now, dust on the floorboards. It was a fine house. But he could not live there alone—it would be a waste. A new married couple would have the right to it, but there were others who were more deserving of it than a single field worker. “I don’t want to marry Lina,” he said, interrupting his own line of thought. His aunt looked at him and was silent a little while. He wondered, for the first time, if she might understand how he felt. He knew very little about the circumstances under which her husband, the girls’ father, had come into and passed out of her life. That had all been before he was born.

“You should marry Lina,” she said. “Do you want to talk about why?”

Tol looked back at her and saw earnest, well-meaning kindness, a wish for him to find happiness. “No,” he said. “I know why I should marry Lina. Give me a little time to think about it.”

She gave a small nod and then got up without another word and left the rock. Tol sat for a little while longer, until the sun finally found a gap in the clouds and shone down on the grey bulk of the stone, and then he got up and went inside.

Later, Tol sat in his corner of the house. His aunt and the girls were asleep in their beds, and his grandmother sat snoring gently in her chair by the fire. Tol sat on his bed, thinking in the dim reddish light. He could marry her, he thought. He was sure to find some value in a companion, and he could, he felt, learn to love her. His aunt was right that the family would be better off with the extra space, and he would be able to contribute more to the well-being of the village as the head of a household as well. It all made sense. An easy decision, certainly.

Then why did he hesitate?

He looked around inside himself for the hatred he had felt after the harvest festival, but it was absent. He no longer felt the desperate fear of being controlled, of being owned by the people around him. What, then? Was it simply his wish for something more—something he could not even imagine? He reached for it in his mind and found a thrill of desire, of longing, and at the same time a wave of fear washed over him, deep and sickening. Overwhelmed, swept up by twin impulses of attraction and revulsion, he thrust his hand into the straw of his mattress and retrieved the tooth he had found on the path that night in the fall. It had sat untouched and unthought of for months, and now he found it without a thought; his wonder and terror seemed to find their root in it. Unable to look at the little tooth, he squeezed it tight in his left hand. Too tight; as he closed his fist around it he drove the sharp point into his palm and a bright pain rose up there. It drove away his fear, and he clutched the tooth tighter, letting his head clear. Bringing his focus onto the direct experience of pain, he bound himself to the present.

Something went wrong, then—he felt a wriggling, and the pain deepened, overwhelming, and then receded, its sharpness replaced with an ache. He opened his fist and reached for the tooth with the other hand, but met only skin, split with a small wound. Blood welled up from it. The tooth was nowhere to be seen.

Tol's first panicked thought was that the thing had wormed its way into his hand, into his body—no, he said to himself, that was impossible. Impossible, he repeated in his mind, more firmly. He must have dropped it, surprised by the sudden pain. That was the only possibility, because when he considered the alternative, a terrible ringing began to sound in his ears, and a prickling heat rose from the pit of his stomach and climbed towards the crown of his head. He must have dropped it. He did not see it on the floor, but it must have fallen between two floorboards, or rolled away, or dropped on the bed and burrowed its way back into the mattress,

and Tol simply refused to waste his time looking for something as trivial as a stone, found in the forest, that happened to look like a tooth. Ridiculous, he thought.

When the rawness of his fear had faded, he did get down on his hands and knees to look under the bed, and dug a bit through the mattress. It was nowhere to be seen. And the palm of his left hand was still stained with blood. It was no dream. He was bitten, by what he did not know.

There didn't seem to be anything else to do about it, so Tol laid down, trying to remain alert for any further development. While he waited, he listened to the sleeping breaths of the rest of his family. He felt hot, hyperaware of his body, waiting for the little tooth to make its presence known, to pierce his heart or his lung or to worm its way out through his skin. He was afraid, but recognized that there was nothing to do but wait for something to happen.

If he lived, if nothing else came of the magic that had descended on him, he would marry Lina, he decided. It would be the least he could do in exchange for the miracle of living unscathed through a brush with the impossible, and the least he could do for his family. These people had raised him, and loved him, and he had a duty to remove himself, to give them the space they needed to live in.

In the morning, the fear and confusion of the night's strangeness had been washed away by sleep, but his resolve remained. He told his aunt that he'd made his choice, that he would ask Lina for her hand, and assuming she and her family agreed they would move into the empty house come spring. His aunt, not prone to displays of emotion, turned her head away, but smiled. "I knew you'd make the right decision," she said, and the warmth in her voice made Tol sure that he had.

The wedding was to take place at the spring festival, when the weather was beginning to warm and turn, and the fresh smells of the living earth, rich and foul, were rising among the paths of the forest. Tol had asked Lina for her hand a month earlier, presenting her with a beautiful red kerchief that Tol's aunt had squirreled away for the purpose. Lina had been expecting the proposal—late winter was the traditional time for engagements—but the kerchief was a surprise, and the unguarded happiness on Lina's face as she admired the vividness of color still present in the well-worn cloth swept the last cobwebs of reluctance from Tol's heart and allowed him, finally, to cleave to the story that he was choosing to tell with his life. He sighed, relieved.

A month later, Tol and Lina stood at the front of the village hall, which was decked out in its ceremonial dressings, red and gold. The priest, who traveled from Earlskeep for weddings and burials, stood beside them and opened his book of ritual. Tol's family and Lina's sat and stood observing, along with the elders of the village—Tol's grandmother, and an old man named Lysander who had been an elder since before Tol was born. Tol had never spoken to him but today his presence was an honor, albeit a necessary one. The priest began to speak the words. Tol looked into Lina's face, and she into his, and their life stretched before him. He saw contentment, and moments of excitement, and years of boredom in service of a quiet, productive life. And then the door of the meeting hall opened, and someone strode in.

Later, Tol would recall the fineness of the black cloak the stranger wore. He would recall the way that the light shone on their long black hair, and the way he found himself looking with growing curiosity at their face, trying to make sense of their features. They appeared at first to be a woman dressed as a man, but after a moment's observation, something in the shape of their jaw suggested masculinity. They stepped closer, crossing from the door to the center of the hall, and the grace of their walk, their economy of movement, brought back the initial impression

of femininity. Every moment that Tol watched them, they seemed to slip and shift from one thing to another, and every time he thought he had spotted the underlying truth, things changed again. In their eyes Tol found something wild, hiding behind the composure of their expression. He could have observed them for an hour. And then they smiled, and everything changed again. There on the right side, where the eyetooth should have been, was a gap, a hole, and the pink gum showed below the edge of their curled lip. A missing tooth. Tol felt a shock—they were there for him. A dull ache throbbed its way to his attention in his left hand, and then an opening sensation, and he felt cool wetness flowing down his fingers. He looked down expecting to see blood, but the stuff bubbling out of his palm was clear, like water. He felt tears well up in his eyes. There was still silence in the hall except for the stranger's steps on the stone floor.

Acting out of instinct, Tol knelt, dropping to both knees with a thud. He cupped his right hand around his weeping left. The water filled the hollow of his palm and overflowed, dripping between his fingers onto the floor, running down his arm to wet his shirt. It was cold on his chest.

Distantly, Tol was aware of the priest behind him stepping forward, shouting something. He was calling the stranger a demon, a monster, and then the place where he had stood was empty, peaceful, and the stranger stepped close to Tol, and lowered their beautiful face to his cupped hands, and drank of the spring that had found its source there.

Tol knelt there for a time, the stranger's hands cupped under his, their face an inch from his palms, drinking their fill of the cool water. Still it overflowed and ran onto the stone floor, a dark stain spreading over the swept flagstones. And then, at last, they raised their head again, and the water ceased to flow, and the stranger took his hand in theirs and lifted him to his feet, and looked into his face. They were alone in the hall. Light shone around them, more light than the windows could admit, shining from everywhere. It illuminated the stone walls and the

wooden beams, the fabric and gilt of the festival drapings, and the skin of the stranger's face and hands.

"I am called Ael," they said, in quiet voice.

"Tol," said Tol, not trusting his voice beyond his single syllable.

"Will you come with me?" Ael asked.

"Are they alright?" Tol looked where his family and his bride-to-be had been, moments or hours ago.

"If you desire it, they are," said the stranger, and beneath their words Tol perceived possibilities so vast that tears began to roll down his cheeks again, and he felt ashamed. But there were tears in Ael's eyes as well, he saw. With that, their alien features fell into place, and he recognized them.

"I will come with you," said Tol. And they embraced, and walked out of the hall, and out of that place and time, and Tol was not seen in that part of the world again. And later, much later, he stood on a mountaintop in his mind and wondered what his life might have been if he had never found the tooth in the forest, and never been so brave, or so blind, as to pick it up. But he could not go back.