

The Sledge-maker's Daughter by Alastair Reynolds

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She stopped in sight of Twenty Arch Bridge, laying down her bags to rest her hands from the weight of two hogs' heads and forty pence worth of beeswax candles. While she paused, Kathrin adjusted the drawstring on her hat, tilting the brim to shade her forehead from the sun. Though the air was still cool, there was a fierce new quality to the light that brought out her freckles.

Kathrin moved to continue, but a tightness in her throat made her hesitate. She had been keeping the bridge from her thoughts until this moment, but now the fact of it could not be ignored. Unless she crossed it she would face the long trudge to New Bridge, a diversion that would keep her on the road until long after sunset.

"Sledge-maker's daughter!" called a rough voice from across the road.

Kathrin turned sharply at the sound. An aproned man stood in a doorway, smearing his hands dry. He had a monkeylike face, tanned a deep liverish red, with white sideboards and a gleaming pink tonsure.

"Brendan Lynch's daughter, isn't it?"

She nodded meekly, but bit her lip rather than answer.

"Thought so. Hardly one to forget a pretty face, me." The man beckoned her to the doorway of his shop. "Come here, lass. I've something for your father."

"Sir?"

"I was hoping to visit him last week, but work kept me here." He cocked his head at the painted wooden trademark hanging above the doorway. "Peter Rigby, the wheelwright. Kathrin, isn't it?"

"I need to be getting along, sir."

"And your father needs good wood, of which I've plenty. Come inside for a moment, instead of standing there like a starved thing." He called over his shoulder, telling his wife to put the water on the fire.

Reluctantly Kathrin gathered her bags and followed Peter into his workshop. She blinked against the dusty air and removed her hat. Sawdust carpeted the floor, fine and golden in places, crisp and coiled in others, while a heady concoction of resins and glues filled the air. Pots simmered on fires. Wood was being steamed into curves, or straightened where it was curved. Many sharp tools gleamed on one wall, some of them fashioned with blades of skydrift. Wheels, mostly awaiting spokes or iron tyres, rested against another. Had the wheels been sledges, it could have been her father's workshop, when he had been busier.

Peter showed Kathrin to an empty stool next to one of his benches. "Sit down here and take the weight off your feet. Mary can make you some bread and cheese. Or bread and ham if you'd rather."

"That's kind sir, but Widow Grayling normally gives me something to eat, when I reach her house."

Peter raised a white eyebrow. He stood by the bench with his thumbs tucked into the belt of his apron, his belly jutting out as if he was quietly proud of it. "I didn't know you visited the witch."

"She will have her two hogs' heads, once a month, and her candles. She only buys them from the Shield, not the Town. She pays for the hogs a year in advance, twenty four whole pounds."

"And you're not scared by her?"

"I've no cause to be."

"There's some that would disagree with you."

Remembering something her father had told her, Kathrin said, "There are folk who say the sheriff can fly, or that there was once a bridge that winked at travellers like an eye, or a road of iron that reached all the way to London. My father says there's no reason for anyone to be scared of Widow Grayling."

"Not afraid she'll turn you into a toad, then?"

"She cures people, not put spells on them."

"When she's in the mood for it. From what I've heard she's just as likely to turn the sick and needy away."

"If she helps some people, isn't that better than nothing at all?"

"I suppose." She could tell Peter didn't agree, but he wasn't cross with her for arguing. "What does your father make of you visiting the witch, anyway?"

"He doesn't mind."

"No?" Peter asked, interestedly.

"When he was small, my dad cut his arm on a piece of skydrift that he found in the snow. He went to Widow Grayling and she made his arm better again by tying an eel around it. She didn't take any payment except the skydrift."

"Does your father still believe an eel can heal a wound?"

"He says he'll believe anything if it gets the job done."

"Wise man, that Brendan, a man after my own heart. Which reminds me." Peter ambled to another bench, pausing to stir one of his bubbling pots before gathering a bundle of sawn-off wooden sticks. He set them down in front of Kathrin on a scrap of cloth. "Off cuts," he explained. "But good seasoned beech, which'll never warp. No use to me, but I am sure your father will find use for them. Tell him that there's more, if he wishes to collect it."

"I haven't got any money for wood."

"I'd take none. Your father was always generous to me, when I was going through lean times." Peter scratched behind his ear. "Only fair, the way I see it."

"Thank you," Kathrin said doubtfully. "But I don't think I can carry the wood all the way home."

"Not with two hogs' heads as well. But you can drop by when you've given the heads to Widow Grayling."

"Only I won't be coming back over the river," Kathrin said. "After I've crossed Twenty Arch Bridge, I'll go back along the south quayside and take the ferry at Jarrow."

Peter looked puzzled. "Why line the ferryman's pocket when you can cross the bridge for nowt?"

Kathrin shrugged easily. "I've got to visit someone on the Jarrow road, to settle an account."

"Then you'd better take the wood now, I suppose," Peter said.

Mary bustled in, carrying a small wooden tray laden with bread and ham. She was as plump and red as her husband, only shorter. Picking up the entire gist of the conversation in an instant, she said, "Don't be an oaf, Peter. The girl cannot carry all that wood *and* her bags. If she will not come back this way, she must pass a message on to her father. Tell him that there's wood here if he wants it." She shook her head sympathetically at Kathrin. "What does he think you are, a pack mule?"

"I'll tell my father about the wood," she said.

"Seasoned beech," Peter said emphatically. "Remember that."

"I will."

Mary encouraged her to take some of the bread and meat, despite Kathrin again mentioning that she expected to be fed at Widow Grayling's. "Take it anyway," Mary said. "You never know how hungry you might get on the way home. Are you sure about not coming back this way?"

"I'd best not," Kathrin said.

After an awkward lull, Peter said, "There is something else I meant to tell your father. Could you let him know that I've no need of a new sledge this year, after all?"

"Peter," Mary said. "You promised."

"I said that I should *probably* need one. I was wrong in that." Peter looked exasperated. "The fault lies in Brendan, not me! If he did not make such good and solid sledges, then perhaps I should need another by now."

"I shall tell him," Kathrin said.

"Is your father keeping busy?" Mary asked.

"Aye," Kathrin answered, hoping the wheelwright's wife wouldn't push her on the point.

"Of course he will still be busy," Peter said, helping himself to some of the bread. "People don't stop needing sledges, just because the Great Winter loosens its hold on us. Any more than they stopped needing wheels when the winter was at its coldest. It's still cold for half the year!"

Kathrin opened her mouth to speak. She meant to tell Peter that he could pass the message onto her father directly, for he was working not five minutes walk from the wheelwright's shop. Peter clearly had no knowledge that her father had left the village, leaving his workshop empty during these warming months. But she realised that her father would be ashamed if the wheelwright were to learn of his present

trade. It was best that nothing be said.

"Kathrin?" Peter asked.

"I should be getting on. Thank you for the food, and the offer of the wood."

"You pass our regards on to your father," Mary said.

"I shall."

"God go with you. Watch out for the jangling men."

"I will," Kathrin replied, because that was what you were supposed to say.

"Before you go," Peter said suddenly, as if a point had just occurred to him. "Let me tell you something. You say there are people who believe the sheriff can fly, as if that was a foolish thing, like the iron road and the winking bridge. I cannot speak of the other things, but when I was boy I met someone who had seen the sheriff's flying machine. My grandfather often spoke of it. A whirling thing, like a windmill made of tin. He had seen it when he was a boy, carrying the sheriff and his men above the land faster than any bird."

"If the sheriff could fly then, why does he need a horse and carriage now?"

"Because the flying machine crashed down to Earth, and no tradesman could persuade it to fly again. It was a thing of the old world, before the Great Winter. Perhaps the winking bridge and the iron road were also things of the old world. We mock too easily, as if we understood everything of our world where our forebears understood nothing."

"But if I should believe in certain things," Kathrin said, "should I not also believe in others? If the sheriff can fly, then can a jangling man not steal me from my bed at night?"

"The jangling men are a story to stop children misbehaving," Peter said witheringly. "How old are you now?"

"Sixteen," Kathrin answered.

"I am speaking of something that was seen, in daylight, not made up to frighten bairns."

"But people say they have seen jangling men. They have seen men made of tin and gears, like the inside of a clock."

"Some people were frightened too much when they were small," Peter said, with a dismissive shake.

"No more than that. But the sheriff is real, and he was once able to fly. That's God's truth."

###

Her hands were hurting again by the time she reached Twenty Arch Bridge. She tugged down the sleeves of her sweater, using them as mittens. Rooks and jackdaws wheeled and cawed overhead. Seagulls feasted on waste floating in the narrow races between the bridge's feet, or pecked at vile leavings on the road that had been missed by the night soil gatherers. A boy laughed as Kathrin nearly tripped on the labyrinth of crisscrossing ruts that had been etched by years of wagon wheels entering and leaving the bridge. She hissed a curse back at the boy, but now the wagons served her purpose. She skulked near a doorway until a heavy cart came rumbling along, top-heavy with beer barrels from the Blue Star Brewery, drawn by four snorting dray-horses, a bored-looking drayman at the reins, huddled down so

deep into his leather coat that it seemed as if the Great Winter still had its icy hand on the country.

Kathrin started walking as the cart lumbered past her, using it as a screen. Between the stacked beer barrels she could see the top level of the scaffolding that was shoring up the other side of the arch, visible since no house or parapet stood on that part of the bridge. A dozen or so workers " including a couple of aproned foremen " were standing on the scaffolding, looking down at the work going on below. Some of them had plumb lines; one of them even had a little black rod that shone a fierce red spot wherever he wanted something moved. Of Garret, the reason she wished to cross the bridge only once if she could help it, there was nothing to be seen. Kathrin hoped that he was under the side of the bridge, hectoring the workers. She felt sure that her father was down there too, being told what to do and biting his tongue against answering back. He put up with being shouted at, he put up with being forced to treat wood with crude disrespect, because it was all he could do to earn enough money to feed and shelter himself and his daughter. And he never, ever, looked Garret Kinnear in the eye.

Kathrin felt her mood easing as the dray ambled across the bridge, nearing the slight rise over the narrow middle arches. The repair work, where Garret was most likely to be, was now well behind her. She judged her progress by the passage of alehouses. She had passed the newly painted Bridge Inn and the shuttered gloom of the Lord's Confessor. Fiddle music spilled from the open doorway of the Dancing Panda: an old folksong with nonsense lyrics about *sickly sausage rolls*.

Ahead lay the Winged Man, its sign containing a strange painting of a foreboding figure rising from a hilltop. If she passed the Winged Man, she felt she would be safe.

Then the dray hit a jutting cobblestone and the rightmost front wheel snapped free of its axle. The wheel wobbled off on its own. The cart tipped to the side, spilling beer barrels onto the ground. Kathrin stepped nimbly aside as one of the barrels ruptured and sent its fizzing, piss-coloured contents across the roadway. The horses snorted and strained. The drayman spat out a greasy wad of chewing tobacco and started down from his chair, his face a mask of impassive resignation, as if this was the kind of thing that could be expected to happen once a day. Kathrin heard him whisper something in the ear of one of the horses, in beast-tongue, which calmed the animal.

Kathrin knew that she had no choice but to continue. Yet she had no sooner resumed her pace " moving faster now, the bags swaying awkwardly, than she saw Garret Kinnear. He was just stepping out of the Winged Man's doorway.

He smiled. "You in a hurry or something?"

Kathrin tightened her grip on the bags, as if she was going to use them as weapons. She decided not to say anything, not to openly acknowledge his presence, even though their eyes had met for an electric instant.

"Getting to be a big strong girl now, Kathrin Lynch."

She carried on walking, each step taking an eternity. How foolish she had been, to take Twenty Arch Bridge when it would only have cost her another hour to take the further crossing. She should not have allowed Peter to delay her with his good intentions.

"You want some help with them bags of yours?"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him move out of the doorway, tugging his mud-stained trousers higher onto his hip. Garret Kinnear was snake thin, all skin and bone, but much stronger than he looked. He wiped a hand across his sharp beardless chin. He had long black hair, the greasy grey colour of dishwater.

"Go away," she hissed, hating herself in the same instant.

"Just making conversation," he said.

Kathrin quickened her pace, glancing nervously around. All of a sudden the bridge appeared deserted. The shops and houses she had yet to pass were all shuttered and silent. There was still a commotion going on by the dray, but no one there was paying any attention to what was happening further along the bridge.

"Leave me alone," Kathrin said.

He was walking almost alongside her now, between Kathrin and the road. "Now what kind of way to talk is that, Kathrin Lynch? Especially after my offer to help you with them bags. What have you got in them, anyways?"

"Nothing that's any business of yours."

"I could be the judge of that." Before she could do anything, he'd snatched the bag from her left hand. He peered into its dark depths, frowning. "You came all the way from Jarrow Ferry with this?"

"Give me back the bag."

She reached for the bag, tried to grab it back, but he held it out of her reach, grinning cruelly.

"That's mine."

"How much would a pig's head be worth?"

"You tell me. There's only one pig around here."

They'd passed the mill next to the Winged Man. There was a gap between the mill and the six-storey house next to it, where some improbably narrow property must once have existed. Garret turned down the alley, still carrying Kathrin's bag. He reached the parapet at the edge of the bridge and looked over the side. He rummaged in the bag and drew out the pig's head. Kathrin hesitated at the entrance to the narrow alley, watching as Garret held the head out over the roiling water.

"You can have your pig back. Just come a wee bit closer."

"So you can do what you did last time?"

"I don't remember any complaints." He let the head fall, then caught it again, Kathrin's heart in her throat.

"You know I couldn't complain."

"Not much to ask for a pig's head, is it?" With his free hand, he fumbled open his trousers, tugging out the pale worm of his cock. "You did it before, and it didn't kill you. Why not now? I won't trouble you again."

She watched his cock stiffen. "You said that last time."

"Aye, but this time I mean it. Come over here, Kathrin. Be a good girl now and you'll have your pig back."

Kathrin looked back over her shoulder. No one was going to disturb them. The dray had blocked all the

traffic behind it, and nothing was coming over the bridge from the south.

"Please," she said.

"Just this once," Garret said. "And make your mind up fast, girl. This pig's getting awfully heavy in my hand."

###

Kathrin stood in the widow's candlelit kitchen - it only had one tiny, dusty window - while the old woman turned her bent back to attend to the coals burning in her black metal stove. She poked and prodded the fire until it hissed back like a cat. "You came all the way from Jarrow Ferry?" she asked.

"Aye," Kathrin said. The room smelled smoky.

"That's too far for anyone, let alone a sixteen year old lass. I should have a word with your father. I heard he was working on Twenty Arch Bridge."

Kathrin shifted uncomfortably. "I don't mind walking. The weather's all right."

"So they say. All the same, the evenings are still cold, and there are types about you wouldn't care to meet on your own, miles from Jarrow."

"I'll be back before it gets dark," Kathrin said, with more optimism than she felt. Not if she went out of her way to avoid Garret Kinnear she wouldn't. He knew the route she'd normally take back home, and the alternatives would mean a much longer journey.

"You sure about that?"

"I have no one else to visit. I can start home now." Kathrin offered her one remaining bag, as Widow Grayling turned from the fire, brushing her hands on her apron.

"Put it on the table, will you?"

Kathrin put the bag down. "One pig's head, and twenty candles, just as you wanted," she said brightly.

Widow Grayling hobbled over to the table, supporting herself with a stick, eyeing Kathrin as she opened the bag and took out the solitary head. She weighed it in her hand then set it down on the table, the head facing Kathrin in such a way that its beady black eyes and smiling snout suggested amused complicity.

"It's a good head," the widow said. "But there were meant to be two of them."

"Can you manage with just the one, until I visit again? I'll have three for you next time."

"I'll manage if I must. Was there a problem with the butcher in the Shield?"

Kathrin had considered feigning ignorance, saying that she did not recall how only one head had come to be in her bags. But she knew Widow Grayling too well for that.

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Of course." The widow hobbled around the table to one of the rickety stools and dragged it out. "Are you all right, girl?"

Kathrin lowered herself onto the stool.

"The other bag was taken from me," she answered quietly.

"By who?"

"Someone on the bridge."

"Children?"

"A man."

Widow Grayling nodded slowly, as if Kathrin's answer had only confirmed some deep-seated suspicion she had harboured for many years. "Thomas Kinnear's boy, was it?"

"How could you know?"

"Because I've lived long enough to form ready opinions of people. Garret Kinnear is filth. But there's no one that'll touch him, because they're scared of his father. Even the sheriff tugs his forelock to Thomas Kinnear. Did he rape you?"

"No. But he wanted me to do something nearly as bad."

"And did he make you?"

Kathrin looked away. "Not this time."

Widow Grayling closed her eyes. She reached across the table and took one of Kathrin's hands, squeezing it between her own. "When was it?"

"Three months ago, when there was still snow on the ground. I had to cross the bridge on my own. It was later than usual, and there weren't any people around. I knew about Garret already, but I'd managed to keep away from him. I thought I was going to be lucky." Kathrin turned back to face her companion. "He caught me and took me into one of the mills. The wheels were turning, but there was nobody inside except me and Garret. I struggled, but then he put his finger to my lips and told me to shush."

"Because of your father."

"If I made trouble, if I did not do what he wanted, Garret would tell his father some lie about mine. He would say that he caught him sleeping on the job, or drunk, or stealing nails."

"Garret promised you that?"

"He said, life's hard enough for a sledge-maker's daughter when no one wants sledges. He said it would only be harder if my father lost his work."

"In that respect he was probably right," the widow said resignedly. "It was brave of you to hold your silence, Kathrin. But the problem hasn't gone away, has it? You cannot avoid Garret forever."

"I can take the other bridge."

"That'll make no difference, now that he has his eye on you."

Kathrin looked down at her hands. "Then he's won already."

"No, he just thinks that he has." Without warning the widow stood from her chair. "How long have we

known each other, would you say?"

"Since I was small."

"And in all that time, have I come to seem any older to you?"

"You've always seemed the same to me, Widow Grayling."

"An old woman. The witch on the hill."

"There are good witches and bad witches," Kathrin pointed out.

"And there are mad old women who don't belong in either category. Wait a moment."

Widow Grayling stooped under the impossibly low doorway into the next room. Kathrin heard a scrape of wood on wood, as of a drawer being opened. She heard rummaging sounds. Widow Grayling returned with something in her hands, wrapped in red cotton. Whatever it was, she put it down on the table. By the noise it made Kathrin judged that it was an item of some weight and solidity.

"I was just like you once. I grew up not far from Ferry, in the darkest, coldest years of the Great Winter."

"How long ago?"

"The sheriff then was William the Questioner. You won't have heard of him." Widow Grayling sat down in the same seat she'd been using before and quickly exposed the contents of the red cotton bundle.

Kathrin wasn't quite sure what she was looking at. There was a thick and unornamented bracelet, made of some dull grey metal like pewter. Next to the ornament was something like the handle of a broken sword: a grip, with a crisscrossed pattern on it, with a curved guard reaching from one end of the hilt to the other. It was fashioned from the same dull grey metal.

"Pick it up," the widow said. "Feel it."

Kathrin reached out tentatively and closed her fingers around the crisscrossed hilt. It felt cold and hard and not quite the right shape for her hand. She lifted it from the table, feeling its weight.

"What is it, widow?"

"It's yours. It's a thing that has been in my possession for a very long while, but now it must change hands."

Kathrin didn't know quite what to say. A gift was a gift, but neither she nor her father would have any use for this ugly broken thing, save for its value to a scrap man.

"What happened to the sword?" she asked.

"There was never a sword. The thing you are holding is the entire object."

"Then I don't understand what it is for."

"You shall, in time. I'm about to place a hard burden on your shoulders. I have often thought that you were the right one, but I wished to wait until you were older, stronger. But what has happened today cannot be ignored. I am old and weakening. It would be a mistake to wait another year."

"I still don't understand."

"Take the bracelet. Put it on your wrist."

Kathrin did as she was told. The bracelet opened on a heavy hinge, like a manacle. When she locked it together, the join was nearly invisible. It was a cunning thing, to be sure. But it still felt as heavy and dead and useless as the broken sword.

Kathrin tried to keep a composed face, all the while suspecting that the widow was as mad as people had always said.

"Thank you," she said, with as much sincerity as she could muster.

"Now listen to what I have to say. You walked across the bridge today. Doubtless you passed the inn known as the Winged Man."

"It was where Garret caught up with me."

"Did it ever occur to you to wonder where the name of the tavern comes from?"

"My dad told me once. He said the tavern was named after a metal statue that used to stand on a hill to the south, on the Durham road."

"And did your father explain the origin of this statue?"

"He said some people reckoned it had been up there since before the Great Winter. Other people said an old sheriff had put it up. Some other people'í" But Kathrin trailed off.

"Yes?"

"It's silly, but they said a real Winged Man had come down, out of the sky."

"And did your father place any credence in that story?"

"Not really," Kathrin said.

"He was right not to. The statue was indeed older than the Great Winter, when they tore it down. It was not put up to honour the sheriff, or commemorate the arrival of a Winged Man." Now the widow looked at her intently. "But a Winged Man *did* come down. I know what happened, Kathrin: I saw the statue with my own eyes, before the Winged Man fell. I was there."

Kathrin shifted. She was growing uncomfortable in the widow's presence.

"My dad said people reckoned the Winged Man came down hundreds of years ago."

"It did."

"Then you can't have been there, Widow Grayling."

"Because if I had been, I should be dead by now? You're right. By all that is natural, I should be. I was born three hundred years ago, Kathrin. I've been a widow for more than two hundred of those years, though not always under this name. I've moved from house to house, village to village, as soon as people start suspecting what I am. I found the Winged Man when I was sixteen years old, just like you."

Kathrin smiled tightly. "I want to believe you."

"You will, shortly. I already told you that this was the coldest time of the Great Winter. The sun was a cold grey disk, as if it was made of ice itself. For years the river hardly thawed at all. The Frost Fair stayed almost all year round. It was nothing like the miserable little gatherings you have known. This was ten times bigger, a whole city built on the frozen river. It had streets and avenues, its own quarters. There were tents and stalls, with skaters and sledges everywhere. There'd be races, jousting competitions, fireworks, mystery players, even printing presses to make newspapers and souvenirs just for the Frost Fair. People came from miles around to see it, Kathrin: from as far away as Carlisle or York."

"Didn't they get bored with it, if it was always there?"

"It was always changing, though. Every few months there was something different. You would travel fifty miles to see a new wonder if enough people started talking about it. And there was no shortage of wonders, even if they were not always quite what you had imagined when you set off on your journey. Things fell from the sky more often in those days. A living thing like the Winged Man was still a rarity, but other things came down regularly enough. People would spy where they fell and try to get there first. Usually all they'd find would be bits of hot metal, all warped and runny like melted sugar."

"Skydrift," Kathrin said. "Metal that's no use to anyone, except barbers and butchers."

"Only because we can't make fires hot enough to make that metal smelt down like iron or copper. Once, we could. But if you could find a small piece with an edge, there was *nothing* it couldn't cut through. A surgeon's best knife will always be skydrift."

"Some people think the metal belongs to the jangling men, and that anyone who touches it will be cursed."

"And I'm sure the sheriff does nothing to persuade them otherwise. Do you think the jangling men care what happens to their metal?"

"I don't think they care, because I don't think they exist."

"I was once of the same opinion. Then something happened to make me change my mind."

"This being when you found the Winged Man, I take it."

"Before even that. I would have been thirteen, I suppose. It was in the back of a tent in the Frost Fair. There was a case holding a hand made of metal, found among skydrift near Wallsend."

"A rider's gauntlet."

"I don't think so. It was broken off at the wrist, but you could tell that it used to belong to something that was also made of metal. There were metal bones and muscles in it. No cogs or springs, like in a clock or tin toy. This was something finer, more ingenious. I don't believe any man could have made it. But it cannot just be the jangling men who drop things from the sky, or fall out of it."

"Why not?" Kathrin asked, in the spirit of someone going along with a game.

"Because it was said that the sheriff's men once found a head of skin and bone, all burned up, but which still had a pair of spectacles on it. The glass in them was dark like coal, but when the sheriff wore them, he could see at night like a wolf. Another time, his men found a shred of garment that kept changing colour, depending on what it was lying against. You could hardly see it then. Not enough to make a suit, but you could imagine how useful that would have been to the sheriff's spies."

"They'd have wanted to get to the Winged Man first."

Widow Grayling nodded. "It was just luck that I got to him first. I was on the Durham road, riding a mule, when he fell from the sky. Now, the law said that they would spike your head on the bridge if you touched something that fell on the sheriff's land, especially skydrift. But everyone knew that the sheriff could only travel so fast, even when he had his flying machine. It was a risk worth taking, so I took it, and I found the Winged Man, and he was still alive."

"Was he really a man?"

"He was a creature of flesh and blood, not a jangling man, but he was not like any man I had seen before. He was smashed and bent, like a toy that had been trodden on. When I found him he was covered in armour, hot enough to turn the snow to water and make the water hiss and bubble under him. I could only see his face. A kind of golden mask had come off, lying next to him. There were bars across his mask, like the head of the Angel on the tavern sign. The rest of him was covered in metal, jointed in a clever fashion. It was silver in places and black in others, where it had been scorched. His arms were metal wings, as wide across as the road itself if they had not been snapped back on themselves. Instead of legs he just had a long tail, with a kind of fluke at the end of it. I crept closer, watching the sky all around me for the sheriff's whirling machine. I was fearful at first, but when I saw the Winged Man's face I only wanted to do what I could for him. And he was dying. I knew it, because I'd seen the same look on the faces of men hanging from the sheriff's killing poles."

"Did you talk to him?"

"I asked him if he wanted some water. At first he just looked at me, his eyes pale as the sky, his lips opening and closing like a fish that has just been landed. Then he said, "Water will not help me." Just those five words, in a dialect I didn't know. Then I asked him if there was anything else I could do to help him, all the while glancing over my shoulder in case anyone should come upon us. But the road was empty and the sky was clear. It took a long time for him to answer me again."

"What did he say?"

"He said, "Thank you, but there is nothing you can do for me." Then I asked him if he was an angel. He smiled, ever so slightly. "No," he said. "Not an angel, really. But I am a flier." I asked him if there was a difference. He smiled again before answering me. "Perhaps not, after all this time. Do you know of fliers, girl? Do any of you still remember the war?""

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth. I said I knew nothing of a war, unless he spoke of the Battle of the Stadium of Light, which had only happened twenty years earlier. He looked sad then, as if he had hoped for a different answer. I asked him if he was a kind of soldier. He said that he was. "Fliers are warriors," he said. "Men like me are fighting a great war, on your behalf, against an enemy you do not even remember.""

"What enemy?"

"The jangling men. They exist, but not in the way we imagine them. They don't crawl in through bedroom windows at night, clacking tin-bodied things with skull faces and clockwork keys whirring from their backs. But they're real enough."

"Why would such things exist?"

"They'd been made to do the work of men on the other side of the sky, where men cannot breathe because the air is so thin. They made the jangling men canny enough that they could work without being told exactly what to do. But that already made them slyer than foxes. The jangling men coveted our

world for themselves. That was before the Great Winter came in. The flier said that men like him " special soldiers, born and bred to fight the jangling men " were all that was holding them back."

"And he told you they were fighting a war, above the sky?"

Something pained Widow Grayling. "All the years since haven't made it any easier to understand what the flier told me. He said that, just as there may be holes in an old piece of timber, one that has been eaten through by woodworm, so there may be holes in the sky itself. He said that his wings were not really to help him fly, but to help him navigate those tunnels in the sky, just as the wheels of a cart find their way into the ruts on a road."

"I don't understand. How can there be holes in the sky, when the air is already too thin to breathe?"

"He said that the fliers and the jangling men make these holes, just as armies may dig a shifting network of trenches and tunnels as part of a long campaign. It requires strength to dig a hole and more strength to shore it up when it has already been dug. In an army, it would be the muscle of men and horses and whatever machines still work. But the flier was talking about a different kind of strength altogether." The widow paused, then stared into Kathrin's eyes with a look of foreboding. "He told me where it came from, you see. And ever since then, I have seen the world with different eyes. It is a hard burden, Kathrin. But someone must bear it."

Without thinking, Kathrin said, "Tell me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I want to know."

"That bracelet has been on your wrist for a few minutes now. Does it feel any different?"

"No," Kathrin said automatically, but as soon as she'd spoken, as soon as she'd moved her arm, she knew that it was not the case. The bracelet still looked the same, it still looked like a lump of cold dead metal, but it seemed to hang less heavily against her skin than when she'd first put it on.

"The flier gave it to me," Widow Grayling said, observing Kathrin's reaction. "He told me how to open his armour and find the bracelet. I asked why. He said it was because I had offered him water. He was giving me something in return for that kindness. He said that the bracelet would keep me healthy, make me strong in other ways, and that if anyone else was to wear it, it would cure them of many ailments. He said that it was against the common law of his people to give such a gift to one such as I, but he chose to do it anyway. I opened his armour, as he told me, and I found his arm, bound by iron straps to the inside of his wing, and broken like the wing itself. On the end of his arm was this bracelet."

"If the bracelet had the power of healing, why was the Winged Man dying?"

"He said that there were certain afflictions it could not cure. He had been touched by the poisonous ichor of a jangling man, and the bracelet could do nothing for him now."

"I still do not believe in magic," Kathrin said carefully.

"Certain magics are real, though. The magic that makes a machine fly, or a man see in the dark. The bracelet feels lighter, because part of it has entered you. It is in your blood now, in your marrow, just as the jangling man's ichor was in the flier's. You felt nothing, and you will continue to feel nothing. But so long as you wear the bracelet, you will age much slower than anyone else. For centuries, no sickness or infirmity will touch you."

Kathrin stroked the bracelet. "I do not believe this."

"I would not expect you to. In a year or two, you will feel no change in yourself. But in five years, or in ten, people will start to remark upon your uncommon youthfulness. For a while, you will glory in it. Then you will feel admiration turn slowly to envy and then to hate, and it will start to feel like a curse. Like me, you will need to move on and take another name. This will be the pattern of your life, while you wear the flier's charm."

Kathrin looked at the palm of her hand. It might have been imagination, but the lines where the handles had cut into her were paler and less sensitive to the touch.

"Is this how you heal people?" she asked.

"You're as wise as I always guessed you were, Kathrin Lynch. Should you come upon someone who is ill, you need only place the bracelet around their wrist for a whole day and " unless they have the jangling man's ichor in them " they will be cured."

"What of the other things? When my father hurt his arm, he said you tied an eel around his arm."

Her words made the widow smile. "I probably did. I could just as well have smeared pigeon dung on it instead, or made him wear a necklace of worms, for all the difference it would have made. Your father's arm would have mended itself on its own, Kathrin. The cut was deep, but clean. It did not need the bracelet to heal, and your father was neither stupid nor feverish. But he did have the loose tongue of all small boys. He would have seen the bracelet, and spoken of it."

"Then you did nothing."

"Your father believed that I did something. That was enough to ease the pain in his arm and perhaps allow it to heal faster than it would otherwise have done."

"But you turn people away."

"If they are seriously ill, but neither feverish nor unconscious, I cannot let them see the bracelet. There is no other way, Kathrin. Some must die, so that the bracelet's secret is protected."

"This is the burden?" Kathrin asked doubtfully.

"No, this is the reward for carrying the burden. The burden is knowledge."

Again, Kathrin said, "Tell me."

"This is what the flier told me. The Great Winter fell across our world because the sun itself grew colder and paler. There was a reason for that. The armies of the celestial war were mining its fire, using the furnace of the sun itself to dig and shore up those seams in the sky. How they did this is beyond my comprehension, and perhaps even that of the flier himself. But he did make one thing clear. So long as the Great Winter held, the celestial war must still be raging. And that would mean that the jangling men had not yet won."

"But the Thaw'Í" Kathrin began.

"Yes, you see it now. The snow melts from the land. Rivers flow, crops grow again. The people rejoice, they grow stronger and happier, skins darken, the Frost Fairs fade into memory. But they do not understand what it really means."

Kathrin hardly dared ask. "Which side is winning, or has already won?"

"I don't know; that's the terrible part of it. But when the flier spoke to me, I sensed an awful hopelessness, as if he knew things were not going to go the way of his people."

"I'm frightened now."

"You should be. But someone needs to know, Kathrin, and the bracelet is losing its power to keep me out of the grave. Not because there is anything wrong with it, I think " it heals as well as it has ever done " but because it has decided that my time has grown sufficient, just as it will eventually decide the same thing with you."

Kathrin touched the other object, the thing that looked like a sword's handle.

"What is this?"

"The flier's weapon. His hand was holding it from inside the wing. It poked through the outside of the wing like the claw of a bat. The flier showed me how to remove it. It is yours as well."

She had touched it already, but this time Kathrin felt a sudden tingle as her fingers wrapped around the hilt. She let go suddenly, gasping as if she had reached for a stick and picked up an adder, squirming and slippery and venomous.

"Yes, you feel its power," Widow Grayling said admiringly. "It works for no one unless they carry the bracelet."

"I can't take it."

"Better you have it, than let that power go to waste. If the jangling men come, then at least someone will have a means to hurt them. Until then, there are other uses for it."

Without touching the hilt, Kathrin slipped the weapon into her pocket where it lay as heavy and solid as a pebble.

"Did you ever use it?"

"Once."

"What did you do?"

She caught a secretive smile on Widow Grayling's face. "I took something precious from William the Questioner. Banished him to the ground like the rest of us. I meant to kill him, but he was not riding in the machine when I brought it down."

Kathrin laughed. Had she not felt the power of the weapon, she might have dismissed the widow's story as the ramblings of an old woman. But she had no reason in the world to doubt her companion.

"You could have killed the sheriff later, when he came to inspect the killing poles."

"I nearly did. But something always stayed my hand. Then the sheriff was replaced by another man, and he in turn by another. Sheriffs came and went. Some were evil men, but not all of them. Some were only as hard and cruel as their office demanded. I never used the weapon again, Kathrin. I sensed that its power was not limitless, that it must be used sparingly, against the time when it became really necessary. But to use it in defence, against a smaller target—that would be a different matter, I think."

Kathrin thought she understood.

"I need to be getting back home," she said, trying to sound as if they had discussed nothing except the matter of the widow's next delivery of provisions. "I am sorry about the other head."

"There is no need to apologise. It was not your doing."

"What will happen to you now, widow?"

"I'll fade, slowly and gracefully. Perhaps I will see things through to the next winter. But I don't expect to see another thaw."

"Please. Take the bracelet back."

"Kathrin, listen. It will make no difference to me now, whether you take it or not."

"I'm not old enough for this. I'm only a girl from the Shield, a sledge-maker's daughter."

"What do you think I was, when I found the flier? We were the same. I've seen your strength and courage."

"I wasn't strong today."

"Yet you took the bridge, when you knew Garret would be on it. I have no doubt, Kathrin."

She stood. "If I had not lost the other head—if Garret had not caught me—would you have given me these things?"

"I was minded to do it. If not today, it would have happened next time. But let us give Garret due credit. He helped me make up my mind."

"He's still out there," Kathrin said.

"But he will know you will not be taking the bridge to get back home, even though that would save you paying the toll at Jarrow Ferry. He will content himself to wait until you cross his path again."

Kathrin collected her one remaining bag and moved to the door.

"Yes."

"I will see you again, in a month. Give my regards to your father."

"I will."

Widow Grayling opened the door. The sky was darkening to the east, in the direction of Jarrow Ferry. The dusk stars would appear shortly, and it would be dark within the hour. The crows were still wheeling, but more languidly now, preparing to roost. Though the Great Winter was easing, the evenings seemed as cold as ever, as if night was the final stronghold, the place where the winter had retreated when the inevitability of its defeat became apparent. Kathrin knew that she would be shivering long before she reached the tollgate at the crossing, miles down the river. She tugged down her hat in readiness for the journey and stepped onto the broken road in front of the widow's cottage.

"You will take care now, Kathrin. Watch out for the janglies."

"I will, Widow Grayling."

The door closed behind her. She heard a bolt slide into place.

She was alone.

Kathrin set off, following the path she had used to climb up from the river. If it was arduous in daylight, it was steep and treacherous at dusk. As she descended she could see Twenty Arch Bridge from above, a thread of light across the shadowed ribbon of the river. Candles were being lit in the inns and houses that lined the bridge, tallow torches burning along the parapets. There was still light at the north end, where the sagging arch was being repaired. The obstruction caused by the dray had been cleared, and traffic was moving normally from bank to bank. She heard the calls of men and women, the barked orders of foremen, the braying of drunkards and slatterns, the regular creak and splash of the mill wheels turning under the arches.

Presently she reached a fork in the path and paused. To the right lay the quickest route down to the quayside road to Jarrow Ferry. To the left lay the easiest descent down to the bridge, the path that she had already climbed. Until that moment, her resolve had been clear. She would take the ferry, as she always did, as she was expected to do.

But now she reached a hand into her pocket and closed her fingers around the flier's weapon. The shiver of contact was less shocking this time. The object already felt a part of her, as if she had carried it for years.

She drew it out. It gleamed in twilight, shining where it had appeared dull before. Even if the widow had not told her of its nature, there would have been no doubt now. The object spoke its nature through her skin and bones, whispering to her on a level beneath language. It told her what it could do and how she could make it obey her. It told her to be careful of the power she now carried in her hand. She must scruple to use it wisely, for nothing like it now existed in the world. It was the power to smash walls. Power to smash bridges and towers and flying machines. Power to smash jangling men.

Power to smash ordinary men, if that was what she desired.

She had to know.

The last handful of crows gyred overhead. She raised the weapon to them and felt a sudden dizzying apprehension of their number and distance and position, each crow feeling distinct from its brethren, as if she could almost name them.

She selected one laggard bird. All the others faded from her attention, like players removing themselves from a stage. She came to know that last bird intimately. She could feel its wingbeats cutting the cold air. She could feel the soft thatch of its feathers, and the lacelike scaffolding of bone underneath. Within the cage of its chest she felt the tiny strong pulse of its heart, and she knew that she could make that heart freeze just by willing it.

The weapon seemed to urge her to do it. She came close. She came frighteningly close.

But the bird had done nothing to wrong her, and she spared it. She had no need to take a life to test this new gift, at least not an innocent one. The crow rejoined its brethren, something skittish and hurried in its flight, as if it had felt that coldness closing around its heart.

Kathrin returned the weapon to her pocket. She looked at the bridge again, measuring it once more with clinical eyes, eyes that were older and sadder this time, because she knew something that the people on the bridge could never know.

"I'm ready," she said, aloud, into the night, for whoever might be listening.

Then resumed her descent.