

The Eyes of a King

Catherine Banner

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About the Book

These are the last words I will write. 'Tell me everything from the beginning,' you said. 'Explain to me why you did it.' I have. There is nothing left to tell you any more.

Leo North has spent five years remembering. He has recalled the tediousness of attending military school and the oppressiveness of living with his pious, fearful grandmother and his younger brother. He has relived the moment when everything changed.

Five years ago, Leo found a blank book in the snow and was amazed when words started to appear on the pages. Passages wove together his family's past, the history of his country, Malonia - and that of a parallel world called England, where Ryan, the heir to the Malonian throne, had been exiled following the assassination of his parents.

At the same time, Leo's narrow path took some unexpected tragic turns and the mysterious book, initially an escape, became inextricably linked to him and his world. Leo has spent five years retracing his steps and filling in the blanks of the journey he made. This is Leo's story. This is the book.

Dark intrigue, murderous uprisings and unrelenting danger: enter the world created by the astonishing imagination of Catherine Banner.

THE
EYES OF A
KING

Catherine Banner

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THESE ARE THE last words I will write. 'Tell me everything from the beginning,' you said. 'Explain to me why you did it.' I have. There is nothing left to tell you any more.

The dust drifts across the paving of the silent balcony. A dark wind - the first wind of autumn - rifles through the pages and draws the stars behind it into the fading sky. Light and laughter are rising from the rooms far below; still further below that, the lights of the city are emerging in the settling darkness. When you were here, half an hour ago, you lit a lamp for me. The breeze makes it waver now and turns the pages back to the beginning. This book is the past five years of my life. How can I close it now?

I do not have the strength to go down into the noise and the light of the party. So I turn the pages of the book instead, tracing the words I wrote. There are parts of this story that still haunt my dreams, that repeat themselves in all my waking thoughts and refuse to let go. But I did not begin by writing about those things.

I began with the book, and the snow.

The snow began to fall as I walked home. It was dark, though barely five o'clock, and cold. My breath billowed white in the darkness and everything was quiet. Even the jangle and thud of the soldiers' horses seemed deadened. The flakes were so cold that they almost burned where they touched my face, and they lodged on my clothes and stuck fast. I tried to brush them away and pulled my coat up tighter about my neck.

I was used to snow - we all were - but not at the end of May. It looked set to stay cold for at least a week. We got

more than enough snow in the winter.

There was a sort of beauty in it, I suppose. The clouds had closed like a lid over the narrow squares of sky, and already the gas lamps were lit. The snow caked on their panes and glowed yellow. I stopped still, and then it was almost completely silent, without even the wet crunch of my footsteps. Quiet, not silent. Through the still air I could hear the feathery sound of the snowflakes settling.

I looked up into the sky. The way the snowflakes swelled in towards my face made me feel as if I was rising. It got darker. It got colder.

I started to think about going home, but I didn't.

I began to shiver, but I went on staring into the sky. It got still darker. I would have stood there all night, perhaps. It was like an enchantment. And I did not want to go home yet anyway. The constant frantic motion of the snowflakes made me dizzy, and my neck ached from looking upwards. Still the snow fell. I was hypnotized.

Suddenly I felt someone was near to me. The spell was broken. I was back in the street again.

I looked around, but there was no one. Only a presence in the air, as if someone was hiding in the shadows. I felt sick suddenly. There were ghosts here perhaps, invisible spirits moving close by. I turned away.

Before I had taken three steps, my foot met with something heavy and I stumbled. There was a black shape in the snow, spotted with the flakes my feet had thrown up. At first I thought it was a dead animal - a rat perhaps - lying there frozen.

I bent closer. And I saw that it was not an animal at all but a book. Just a book. I reached out towards it cautiously. I could still feel a strange presence - someone else's thoughts like a vapour in the air.

I willed the book's cover to lift itself, with the slightest tensing of my fingers and my mind. It didn't stir. That was a trick I'd known for years, and it usually worked. Although it

was only a cheap trick, no more. It did not even work on the Bible.

I was suspicious of the book. I did not know if I should touch it. Perhaps it would be better to leave it where it was. I turned to walk away. But I could not. I was going to pick it up; I knew I was. It was unavoidable. There was no point in reasoning with myself, then.

My fingers drew close to the dark leather of the cover even before I had decided. I watched them hover above it for a moment, as if they were someone else's. I tried to pull my hand away. I couldn't. For a second I was frightened. Then my fingers closed around the book, and at the same moment the presence vanished. I picked up the book and flipped the cover open.

The pages were stiff and suntanned yellow, like sheets of bone. The first one was blank. I turned to the next. Nothing. The next one and the next one too were empty. I fanned the pages out loose, impatiently, bending the covers back almost to breaking point, so that the dry glue in the spine bristled. They were all blank.

The weather had changed while I had looked away. The wind growled through the narrow streets, the pitch of its voice heightening. The snowflakes dashed at my face like ground glass. My jaw ached with cold, and my fingers on the book's cover were raw and wet from the melting snow. I pushed the book into my coat pocket and set off for home.

Later, when I held the book to the light of the oil lamp in the bedroom, I wondered if I should have left it where it was. There was a strangeness about it that made me uneasy. I had been sure that there was someone behind me in the street, and I could not help connecting the book with that presence. Perhaps it was a stupid thing to think. It was only an empty book.

I turned away from the lamp and pressed the side of my face against the window to create a shadow that I could see

out of. The wind had rent a hole in the snow clouds, and a few stars shone through. I liked looking at the stars. One of them was called Leo, but I did not know which one. I never knew which one. The snow was freezing hard in the streets. It caught every faint glimmer from the gas lamps and reflected it ice blue. Tomorrow would be cold - very cold.

A sound made me turn back to the room. 'Leo!' came my grandmother's voice sharply. I pushed the book across the floor, into the darkness under my bed, and sat back on the windowsill. 'Leo!' my grandmother said again, and she stepped into the room. She looked at Sterling, asleep in his bed in the far corner. Then she turned to me. 'Leo, do you need that light?' Her eyebrows lowered, casting her eyes into shadow, like a skeleton's. 'Put it out!' she told me. 'You're wasting oil. What are you doing?'

'I was going to go to bed.'

'Aye. It's late.'

She gazed at me for a moment. She looked so old in the shadows, though she was only sixty-five. Her grey hair shone, tight across her head, and the loose wisps about her ears caught the light of the lamp. The lines around her eyes and mouth were pronounced, and her face was tense. Her face was always tense when she spoke to me.

'You were kept after school again?' she said. 'Leo, I am losing count of how many times this month.'

I did not answer. She looked at me for a long time without speaking. 'What is it?' I said eventually.

I expected her to continue nagging me. But instead, she looked away and said, 'You have grown so like Harold. His eyes were grey too when he was your age. That was what I was thinking.'

'Grandmother?' I said, and stood up.

She turned back to me. 'What?'

I changed my mind. 'Nothing.'

'Goodnight, Leo,' she said sadly. 'God bless you.'

She looked as if she might reach up and put her hand on my shoulder, then seemed to decide against it. She left, and closed the door behind her. I heard the door of her own room rattle shut. It needed fixing. The screws were rusting, and one of the hinges had snapped. I would have done it. That door was going to fall soon. But it was hard to get hinges these days, when the factories only made bullets.

I waited for a moment before kneeling and reaching under my bed for the book. I felt a corner and caught hold of it. But what I pulled out was a different book altogether. Larger, and older. I blew the dust off the cover, as quietly as I could, and it prickled in my nose. This had surely been there a long time.

Then I remembered what it was. It was years since I had put it there. My grandmother would have gone crazy if she'd known I still had a copy.

The Golden Reign by Harold North. A hardback book, leather. It was a bestseller. Hundreds of thousands of people read that book. Then it was banned. They burned the entire second print run. My father was already far away. It was strange that my grandmother had just mentioned him, and now here was his forgotten book in my hand.

I ran my fingers over the cover. He was the best, my father, the best writer of our time. But seven years had passed now and I hardly remembered his face. I had been eight then, Stirling's age. Perhaps my father would not have known me either.

The cover peeled away from the title page reluctantly. Underneath the printed title my father's signature still stood out in yellowing writing. I remember he autographed it for me, because I asked him to. I said I wanted to be a writer, like him.

I slammed the cover down hard, pushed the book back under my bed, and turned to blow out the oil lamp. But I didn't have to. The oil was finished. The lamp flickered once . . . twice . . . and went out.

The next morning I woke to cold white dawn. White, not grey, because of the strange light of the snow. That was what I saw when I opened my eyes – the snow in the street, like pure white waves frozen in a channel, and above the dirty houses snow hanging heavily in the sky. Then I remembered that I couldn't see the street from my bed. Every morning, when I woke, I saw only the sky. But I was looking down into the street now.

I was sitting on the windowsill. My head was pressed hard against the freezing window, and it hurt to pull away. Why was I here? I remembered going to bed the night before, after the lamp had gone out. I stood up.

The book was lying on the windowsill, beside the stone-cold lamp. That book I had found in the snow. It was strange, because I was sure that I had left it under my bed, where I'd shoved it carelessly the evening before. I picked it up and fanned out the pages absentmindedly, blinking. It was early, and I was tired. It could not have been much later than six o'clock. Then I started. There was writing in the book!

I snapped the book shut. It had been empty the day before; I had checked every page. I opened it again. Yes, there was writing. Close-packed black writing that I did not recognize. Surely then, the book was more than what it seemed. It could only be evil. I put it quickly back on the windowsill, afraid to keep hold of it. I stared at it for a long while.

I knew that I was going to read it. I wanted to find out what the writing said. Perhaps I had been stupid to be afraid; a book could not harm me. I tried to open it again with my willpower. I concentrated my mind on it as hard as I could. My brain ached from the effort, but it didn't work. The book stayed shut. I considered it for a moment, then snatched it up and opened it.

There were several blank pages. I turned to the beginning of the writing and started to read.

As the first sunlight drove out the bleak grey dawn, it glowed through the curtains of the hospital room. The young man opened them quietly and looked out. He watched the light cross the railway lines and spread over the roofs of the square grey houses. It transformed the ragged weeds on the siding into clear purple flowers standing motionless in the silence of the morning. The tears were running down his face, but he stayed there at the window until they were gone. A train passed and faded again. He thought of the people just waking in the houses, and the people on that train, who thought this was an ordinary day, when the sun had risen so differently to him.

The young woman called his name. He turned and went to her, and laid one hand upon the baby's head. She did not wake. He took the woman's hand. His eyes fixed on her for a moment, though she did not see it. Her blonde ringlets fell onto the baby's face as she held her, and she looked out of the window, across the deserted tracks, to a broken fence where birds hopped and sang. They could not be heard through the glass, and the baby slept. The sunlight spread into the room and turned everything to gold.

A long time passed before the silence was broken. A middle-aged woman hurried in. She looked at the sleeping baby and began to cry herself and then laugh, and the younger woman was laughing too and hugging her mother. The baby's grandmother took something from round her neck. It was a gold chain with a heavy charm on it - a jewelled bird that caught the sun now and sent spots of light flying around the small white room. The baby opened her eyes suddenly, though it must have been chance. 'Your necklace, Mam,' said the young woman.

'I will give it to her now,' said the older woman. 'I will give this to my granddaughter.' She handed it to the baby's father. 'Keep it for when she's older. One jewel is missing, but it always has been.'

'It doesn't matter,' said the young woman. 'Let her wear it now, Mam, just for a minute.' Her husband fastened the clasp around the baby's neck and straightened the chain. The jewel came down almost to her waist, she was so small. In silence, they looked at the baby.

'I can tell already that she is going to be beautiful,' said the baby's grandmother.

'I wish I could live to see her grow up,' said the man, and he kissed the baby's face. A tear dropped from his eye onto her cheek, and she began to cry then too.

Far away in a lofty stone room, another baby was sleeping. His mother leaned over, pushing aside the velvet curtain of the bed, to watch him. Her husband had the baby in his arms while the priest spoke a blessing over the child. 'Protect this prince and let him grow in wisdom,' the priest was saying, making the sign of the cross, but the king was not listening. His eyes were on his wife's. The early sunlight reflected scarlet off her face, and her tiredness and that light made her look younger even than she was. The king tried to trace her face and his own in the child's, then stopped because it made the tears rise in his eyes. He was not yet eighteen and she was younger, and he felt like a boy now, with this baby in his arms.

Not long after the priest had gone, the baby woke. The king put him back into the queen's arms carefully and knelt beside her, and they looked down at him in silence. Already his eyes were strange - large and dark, with an unusual strength for one so small. The eyes of a king, the people would say later. An odd stillness hung over the room as they watched the baby. He did not even cry. 'What will this boy's future be?' said the king, thinking of his own life.

'I have you, and now a son,' said the queen, brushing the tears off her face. 'If we are always like we are now, if we always stay together, I will never ask for more than this the rest of my life.'

Five years passed and they were always together. And that last evening, the three of them were on the highest balcony of the castle when the queen heard shouts and turned to look down into the city. The prince and his father were fencing with wooden swords behind her. 'What is it?' said the king, glancing at his wife.

'I cannot see.' She turned back to them. 'Go on with your match.'

The king dropped the sword to his side and smiled. 'I do not think I should be playing games like this.' But he handled the toy as if it was a real weapon. The queen smiled too, to see that.

The prince, catching his father off his guard, knocked the sword out of his hand. They all laughed then, and the king lifted his son and swung him into his arms. 'He would make a fine soldier,' said the queen.

'Do not talk of that now,' said the king, stroking the child's hair. 'He's still a little boy.'

Birds settled in the trees of the roof garden below. The sun was setting blood red. They watched it in silence, standing together like any family anywhere. Then it was no longer silent; close by, people were shouting.

The castle gate fell with a loud explosion. Suddenly on their knees, the king and the queen stared at each other. 'Don't move,' the man told his son. Rebel troops were shouting below. Over the edge of the balcony, the boy could see them swarming into the castle yard like ants. The family clung together. The king drew a knife from his belt and it glinted red in the sunset. There was a sudden burst of gunshots in a room below. 'They have guns,' the man breathed into his wife's ear. 'They have guns; is this possible? Who has been making guns?' She caught his hand; the small click of their two rings touching was harsh in the quiet.

Heavy footsteps were coming closer below the balcony door. The king stood up, and the queen followed. His eyes

never leaving the door, the prince clutched at his mother's hand and found it. She moved between him and the doorway. The footsteps came closer.

The door shot open, the king ran forward, and two gunshots echoed suddenly around the towers and rooftops of the palace. The knife fell from the king's hand and clattered to the ground, and the king and the queen landed hard on the stone of the balcony. No one had resisted the attack. It had been too sudden.

There was silence. One minute the man and the woman had been living; the next they were not. The blood crept quietly over the stone, and no one moved.

The prince's tears stuck in his throat, and he picked up the knife and threw it at the soldier who had shot. It sliced into his eye and the side of his face and stuck there for a moment. The man dropped the pistol and fell to his knees, his hands clasped to his face. Blood spilled between his fingers, thick and dark, and splattered onto the stone. Another soldier raised his gun. 'No!' cried the injured one, his hands still over his face. 'Remember the prophecy! Do not kill the prince!'

They were on their way home. The girl - now five years old - and her grandmother. The radio was playing and the woman sang a few lines and turned it up louder. The little girl waved her arms like a dancer. Her grandmother laughed. 'You'll be dancing on a stage one day.'

'I hope I will, if I practise hard,' said the girl, so earnestly that her grandmother laughed again. The bird charm still hung around the girl's neck, and her eyes had sharpened to a bright blue now - the same blue as the jewel in the centre of the necklace, as though it had been made for her.

The lines of traffic moved fast. On the other side of the road, the cars stood in long queues, crammed close to each other. The girl began to doze in the evening light, rocking with every slight turn. Sandy shells and pebbles clattered on

the dashboard. The woman reached across and touched her granddaughter's cheek as she slept.

Suddenly horns blared through the music. A lorry swung across the road, rocking. The girl woke, confused and already screaming in the swerving car. The last thing she saw before darkness was her grandmother struggling to turn the wheel one way then the other, while lorries loomed over the car and tyres screamed somewhere close. 'It's all right, it's all right,' said her grandmother desperately, though the girl did not know why she was saying it. Then the car turned over and everything vanished.

The girl cried all that night in her mother's arms, in a cold white hospital with the dark close outside. They could have gone home, but neither of them thought of it. The little girl had been here many times before. This was the hospital where she had been born; a year later she had been carried here every day for three weeks while her father was dying. She had been here many times before, but this was the time she would remember.

The boy cried too, suddenly alone in a strange country, with only a stranger who could not comfort him. He looked out at the evening star, the star that was the first to brighten outside his window in the castle, but even the star was wrong and different here. It was pale and faded in a dull orange-grey night sky. 'Come away from the window,' said the stranger, putting a blanket about the boy's shoulders. 'Try to get some rest.' But the boy would not move. Not that night, or the next, or the night after that.

The girl lay on her bed and watched the same stars. She saw them appear in the evenings and fade in the mornings. She heard the clocks chiming in the city and counted each hour as it passed her by. But there was nothing they could do, either of them, to stop the time from passing.

The writing finished there. I sat still, the book open across my knees. The strange thing was that I had read this story before, I was certain. And it was not pretend. I was sure that it was real; it had really happened.

It might be, I thought, that the little boy was the prince who had been born the same year I had, the prince who was supposed to have been exiled to that legendary country. Prince Cassius. What was the country's name? Angel Land, or something very like. But that country was not real. Lucien's troops killed everyone in the castle that night; they killed the king, and the queen, and the prince. His adviser Talitha had been responsible for it; she had great powers, and it would have been an easy thing for her to kill a five-year-old boy. This was no more than a story, then.

But what about the girl? Some of the words in the passage about her I did not understand. What was a car, or a dashboard, or a radio? They sounded like foreign words. Perhaps she was in another country. Perhaps Angel Land too. Then she also was pretend.

'Leo! Stirling!' my grandmother called. 'Get up quickly. It will take longer to walk to school in the snow.' Stirling rolled over, muttering. I put the book into my coat pocket. I did not know yet what powers were in it, and I wanted to keep it with me.

As I went down to fetch water, I remembered that pretend country's name. That legendary land, in another world, that my grandmother used to tell us fairy stories about. It wasn't 'Angel Land' at all. The name was 'England'.

On the way to school, I was still thinking about the book. Where had the writing come from? Perhaps I should not have picked it up. The story was nothing to do with me, and now I might be involved with it. But I was interested; I could not help wondering if that boy was the prince, and if so, whether he was still alive. If he was still alive, the prophecy could be fulfilled. But—

'Leo?' I came back from my thoughts. I was surprised to see the street and the snow and the houses still there. I turned to Stirling, jogging beside me. I had been walking fast, absentmindedly - too fast for him.

'What?' I said, slowing my pace.

'Leo, what are you thinking about?' he asked me.

I shook my head, smiling at his upturned face, so serious. 'Nothing. Only a fairy story.' I shrugged. 'One of those old ones about England, but you probably won't remember.'

'England?' he said. 'Yes, I remember.'

'What, then?' I asked him.

'England was the place Grandmother used to tell us about. The explorers went into a different world and found it.'

I was surprised. He could not have been more than three years old when she used to tell us those stories.

'And the prince went there,' Stirling went on. 'The prince was sent to England.'

'Prince Cassius, who would have been Cassius the Third,' I said. 'You remember the stories too?'

'Yes, of course. Only I don't think they were stories.'

'How do you mean?'

'I think the country is real.'

'Real?' I said.

He nodded.

'How can it be real?'

'A lot of people think it is,' he told me. 'I'm not the only one.'

'You are the only one these days, Stirling.'

'No, I'm not,' he insisted. 'And I've thought about it a lot, and it makes sense, England being real.'

As we walked on I watched him carefully, still startled that he could remember these things. 'Why?' I said. 'Why does it make sense?'

He thought for a moment. 'The prince was sent there, for one thing. And the prince was real.'

‘Most people think that the prince was killed,’ I told him.
‘I don’t.’

I smiled at his certainty. ‘Is that all?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘The poem that Grandmother’s brother wrote said the prince would go there, not die.’

‘The prophecy written by the great Aldebaran.’ Aldebaran was our great-uncle, but we kept quiet about it. Harold North as our father was enough. ‘No one pays attention to those old prophecies these days,’ I told him.

‘They should,’ he said. ‘It isn’t old – it’s sixteen years. Besides, they are usually right.’

‘Perhaps. What do you know of prophecies?’

‘Not a lot. But all the real ones that I have heard of have come true. If the great ones who make them can actually see into the future, then they must be true.’

‘Well, perhaps this was not a real one.’

‘It was a real one,’ he said. ‘That means England is real.’

‘All right then,’ I said. ‘It may be that England is real.’ But I did not really believe it, now that I said it out loud.

‘Speaking of the prophecy . . .’ he began.

‘What?’

‘I wanted to ask you – but . . .’ We were nearing the school gates, and we always reduced our talk to harmless chatter when we got to this point in the road. It was understood, though we never said it – this point opposite the newspaper stand, on the corner of Paradise Way. ‘Later,’ he said.

There was no queue, so I bought a newspaper. ‘What’s the headline?’ Stirling asked.

“‘Deadlock.’”

‘What’s that?’

‘When a situation is going nowhere.’

‘The war, then. What does the rest say?’

‘Too much to tell you now,’ I said.

‘Will you read it to me when we get home?’

‘All right.’ I folded it and put it into my pocket. ‘You know, you need to learn to read. You’re eight years old.’

'I can read, almost. Anyway, you can get clever without reading.'

'I know. You think a lot.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Mostly in class. And in church. Do you think that is bad?'

'No,' I said. 'Grandmother might, though.'

Our grandmother took Stirling to Mass with her every day. His First Communion would be in July - July the twenty-first; the date was already set. I had never made my First Communion, and now that I was fifteen, Grandmother had given up suggesting it. And I refused to go to church except on Sundays. I think that it had as much to do with hating to be told what to do as with not being especially religious, though both were true.

'Yes.' He laughed. 'Grandmother might. Would God think that it was bad?'

'I doubt he even notices.'

'He does. He notices everything. The sparrows and everything. So he'd notice for sure if people didn't listen in church sometimes. If it was bad.'

'All right, all right,' I told him. 'Don't preach. And you know I don't like to be asked these religious questions.'

'Why not? I'm only asking what you think.'

'Stirling, leave it.'

'Sorry.'

He said it so humbly that I went on, more gently, 'I'm sure he doesn't think it's bad. Anyway, I am the one going to hell, because I *never* listen in church.'

He laughed. 'Come on,' I said. 'We're late.'

The last boys were stumbling past us through the gate and rushing through the slushy snow in the yard to line up. Sergeant Markey, Stirling's teacher and the worst in the school, was surveying them with his usual expression, which was hard to identify as any emotion. It changed to contempt when he saw Stirling and me. He hated us and made no secret of it.

I glared back and gave Stirling the look I gave him every morning – a look of patient endurance, like a criminal resigned to his execution – and we turned to the gate. The look annoyed Sergeant Markey. ‘Boys, for God’s sake, get in here now!’ he spat. He must have been about the only person in Malonia who had no qualms about taking the name of the Lord in vain. I saw Stirling frown as he said it.

Sergeant Markey saw the frown too. We went in, but we didn’t hurry. I made a point of dragging my heels, to annoy him. Sergeant Markey glared, but Stirling walked in so meekly that he could say nothing.

The snow was freezing hard as we walked home from school; it was treacherous. The streets were in shadow and bitterly cold. ‘So, do you think I could be right?’ Stirling asked me again as we skittered down Paradise Way. ‘Do you think the land of England could be real?’

‘It could,’ I said. ‘There is no way to prove it.’

‘But the prophecy—’

‘All it said was that the prince would be exiled. It never said to where. And even though everyone thought it was England, where Aldebaran was sent, it wasn’t necessarily.’

‘But it was another world.’

‘If he was exiled at all. If he was not killed. You know, death’s another world. You cannot trust the words people use, sometimes.’

‘I don’t think they would have killed him. They would have known there was a prophecy.’

It was true that Aldebaran’s prophecy had been respected once, and perhaps Lucien’s men would have been reluctant to kill the boy because of it. The prophecy had definitely said that no one could harm the prince. It said that he would not be killed but exiled.

The snow made the yellow brick of the houses look filthy. I wondered if the clouds gliding together over the city were snow clouds or rain. The largest one, just above the church

far below in the square, looked exactly like a stretching hand. It was so close to the cross on the building's top that I imagined it could reach out and touch it. But the movement was just the wind.

'So, it could be real,' Stirling persisted.

'What?' He had been talking, but I had not heard.

'England could be real.'

'Yes,' I said wearily. 'Cannot you stop talking about it now? I should never have brought up the subject; since first I mentioned it, you have not stopped. And we are never going to find out.'

'No,' he said. 'But the prophecy . . .'

'What about it?'

'If it came true, then we would find out whether England was real or not. Because the prince would come back, and —'

'Stirling,' I interrupted. 'The prophecy - you were going to tell me something about it. Remember? This morning, you said you'd tell me later.'

'Oh yes . . .'

He glanced around. 'All right.' He lowered his voice to a whisper. We had stopped still now in the silent street.

A woman appeared suddenly round the corner and hurried past us, clutching a coughing baby wrapped tightly against the cold. Stirling waited until she had passed, then bent his head close to mine. 'Remember when Grandmother burned Father's books?'

'Oh yes,' I said. 'I remember.'

'You don't have to speak in that way.'

'What way?'

'Like that. It wasn't her fault.'

'He told me to look after them while he was gone. She made me break my promise, and—'

'About the prophecy . . .'

Stirling interrupted. We'd had that conversation several times before. 'When Grandmother

burned them, I took one. I still have it now; I found it again last week. And I worked out what it says on the cover.'

'You read the cover?' I said. He nodded. 'So what did it say?'

'It said this: "A prophecy of the lord Aldebaran, written in the sixth year of the reign of Cassius the Second."'

'That is the very same one,' I said. 'It must be.'

'I thought so. And I wanted to ask you to read it to me. It took me an hour at least to read the cover, and you read fast, Leo.'

I stared at him. 'That is a very rare book. And I never even knew you had it.' He grinned at that.

We resumed our careful walk. 'If Grandmother knew, she'd kill you,' I remarked. 'You know that book is on the Highly Restricted list. You could get three months just for having it.'

'Three months? Three months of what?'

'Three months in jail! It is a serious offence. Grandmother would be very angry if she ever found out.'

'Yes, I know. Shh.' He looked around anxiously. 'Don't tell her, please.'

'All right, I won't.' I'd never intended to. I just wanted to caution Stirling. 'And I can read it to you if you want.'

'Thank you,' he said. 'Thank you, Leo.'

'You still should not have it.'

'I'm not the only one who's hiding books,' he said, grinning.

'What?'

'You've got that one Father signed for you - *The Golden Reign*.'

'How did you know about that?'

'You used to look at it all the time, when I was really small. When you thought no one was watching you. You used to—'

'Yes. Well,' I said, cutting him off. 'That's different. *The Golden Reign* is only Restricted. That prophecy is on the Highly Restricted list, which is serious. And besides, that book was mine. I didn't steal it. You took that—'

I stopped short. Reaching a meeting of the roads, we almost careered into the middle of a group of soldiers on horseback. We stumbled upon them as they broke into abruptly raucous laughter. The nearest horse skittered sideways and the rider reined it into the circle again. We hurried on past the next block of houses. The snow on the ground muffled everything strangely, and we had not heard them.

We walked quietly, not looking at each other. 'Do you think they heard us?' whispered Stirling when he seemed to judge that we were out of earshot.

'Of course not,' I told him. 'And it is no matter if they did.' And I hoped he couldn't hear my heart beating as loud as I could. The sound of it angered me. I was not scared of the soldiers. It was just coming upon them suddenly that had startled me.

'Stirling, watch this,' I told him. I pointed my finger at a deep snowdrift and sent a spray of orange sparks into it. Another trick. The snow leaped upwards, leaving steaming pockmarks like bullet wounds where the sparks had landed. There was a loud bang, and I heard one of the soldiers' horses whinny, perhaps in surprise. They were not so far off as I had thought. But maybe it was just chance. They were used to gunshots, after all.

'Don't do that, Leo,' Stirling whispered fiercely. 'Stop showing off.'

'Why are you so worried?' I demanded. 'Are you scared of the soldiers or what?'

'You're the one that's scared, trying to pretend you're not,' he retorted quickly. 'It's true.'

I turned away, quickening my pace. It was only a moment before Stirling caught up with me and grabbed my arm. He had to reach up to do it. 'Leo?' I ignored him. 'Leo? Sorry I said you were scared of the soldiers. I know you weren't really.' I still didn't speak.

Stirling hated it when anyone was angry with him. 'Leo, that trick was good really,' he said. 'It's just because of the soldiers. I don't want them to put you in prison for doing magic . . .'

I gave in, and slowed my pace to let him catch up.

'You know what, Leo?' I didn't answer. 'I think,' he continued, 'I think you could be like Aldebaran one day.'

I was pleased in spite of myself. 'Really?'

'Yes, really. It runs in the family, doesn't it? Someone's got to have powers after him, and no one has yet.'

'But they're just stupid tricks,' I said. 'Not real magic.'

'Well, if you practised, I think you could be really good. You could train in magic and be named a great one, the lord Leo. When you grow up, I mean.'

'Stirling, I *am* grown up. And I'm going to be a soldier.'

He looked at me for a moment, frowning so that the freckles on his nose slid together. 'But you don't want to be a soldier.'

'I know.'

He went on frowning as we walked. 'Couldn't you train in magic instead? Aldebaran did.'

'That was a long time ago. Before King Lucien. You know how it is with children who have powers these days. High-security schools, and they teach them a lot of rubbish. They are scared that if there was a revolution, those children could fight against the government; that's what I think.'

'What's a revolution?' he asked. I could have sworn that he knew all this. But I liked telling him things that I knew and he didn't, so I tried to explain.

We walked in silence after that. We were nearing home now. As we got closer to it, the castle rose over the white sky, high on its rock above the city. Flags were flying from every tower and battlement, and even from this distance below, I could make out the lion and the dove in the Kalitz family crest. That washed-out blue always made me think of school, because the flags were everywhere there too.

The castle rock was plastered with snow, even on the flat surface. The cannons watched us like a band of hungry vultures. Soldiers were constantly marching up and down the rock face on the zigzag road. Especially in these past months. King Lucien wanted more troops than ever to guard the city.

I would have liked to live in a castle like that. It used to look like an ancient temple, carved from the red rock of the very peak of the volcano itself. I could remember when it glowed like an orange coal in the morning – the first part of the city that the sun reached – and every window was a spark too bright to look at. Lucien had reinforced it with new guard towers and walls so that it no longer looked like it was part of the old island city.

But they said that from the highest balcony you could see the whole of Kalitzstad – the church, the square, the Royal Gardens – everything laid out like a map; and the river, winding round both sides of the city as it ran from north to south. To the west you could see as far as Port Hopeful and even the shadow of Holy Island on clear days; the other way, as far as the Eastern Mountains. Or that was what I'd heard. It was just a rumour. Everything seemed to be just a rumour these days.

'Is it a good thing, then?' said Stirling. He was thinking aloud.

'What?' I said.

'A revolution.'

'Well, when Lucien took over, that was a revolution. I think. And that was a bad thing.' I looked around when I said that. Luckily, no soldiers were in sight. That comment would probably have constituted high treason.

'Does it always turn out the same, a revolution? Does it always turn out bad?'

'I don't know. I only know about Malonia.'

'Is it always by fighting?'

'I don't see any other way that you could take over a country.'

'There must be other ways.'

'Sometimes the only way to do something is by armed conflict.'

'Sorry, but I disagree,' he said firmly.

I laughed. 'Listen to you - eight years old and talking like a lawyer.' I was the one who had taught him the word 'disagree'. Before that, he used to say 'I don't agree.' And it used to irritate me, because he said it a lot. 'Maybe you will be a lawyer,' I said. 'You like arguing, for sure.'

'I don't think I'll be a lawyer,' he said.

'All right, so what do you want to be?'

'A priest maybe. Like Father Dunstan. Don't roll your eyes. What's wrong with being a priest?'

I shrugged. 'A priest doesn't earn much money' was all that I could come up with.

The streets were darkening as the clouds got thicker. A ragged paper fluttered down the street, like a bat, and landed flat on the wall. It was a WANTED poster. I plucked it off as we passed it, and examined it carelessly before throwing it aside. 'What was that?' Stirling asked.

'Just another dangerous criminal,' I said. 'Some kind old grandfather who apparently plotted to kill King Lucien.'

He laughed.

We were rounding the corner of our street now - Citadel Street. It led to the castle eventually, though it was not the only street that did, and the apartments were cheap because of the constant thoroughfare of soldiers day and night. 'What's wrong with being a priest?' Stirling said again. 'If you don't want me to be a priest, Leo, I won't be a priest.'

'Why are you so impressionable?'

'What's that?'

'Easily swayed by what other people say. I mean, if it's what God's told you to do, it is what you have to do. Who's

more important, God or me?’

‘But like Jesus said, if I hurt you, I hurt him. Like it says, “Whatever you do to one of the least of these my brothers —”’

I laughed. ‘Stirling, shut your mouth and be a priest if you want to. I can’t think of you being anything else.’

‘Unless I have to be a soldier too.’ He frowned. ‘Maybe there’ll be another revolution by then. A good one. Maybe the prince will return.’

‘Shh, Stirling. Do you want to go to prison?’

‘Sorry, Leo.’

He began to hum, and we walked the rest of the way without speaking. It was not far.

The next morning I was disappointed to find that there was no more writing in the strange book. I had hoped that there would be. I had expected, even, that there would be. I went on checking the book when I remembered, but after a week with still nothing, I began to forget it.

One evening I came home late and alone. The snow was still frozen in hard grey slivers at the edges of the streets, where the sun never reached. It was the beginning of June now, but it might as well have been winter. I hurried. I did not like to approach people suddenly in the shadowed alleys when I did not know who they might be. But that day the streets were almost deserted. The air was so still that I could just hear the gunfire and explosions from the northeast border, where Malonia meets Alcyria. It was a long way away, but on days like this it could be heard.

I trudged down the alleyway beside the house and let myself in at the side door, shaking the hard ice off my boots. That day the sky was dark with clouds, and dusk was falling in the stairwell. My footsteps echoed coldly on the stone as I hurried up the stairs. I passed the two lower doors – reinforced steel, identical to ours – then reached the third one, second from the top. The top apartment had stood

empty for years, and dust lay thick on the handrail and the steps beyond our door.

‘I’m home, Grandmother!’ I called, shutting the door behind me.

My grandmother marched in. ‘Leo, where have you been? Where is Stirling?’ I sat down on the sofa, dumped my coat beside me and put my keys back into my pocket. ‘Leo, where is Stirling?’ she asked again.

‘He got kept in late,’ I told her. I spoke slowly, because I knew she wanted me to speak fast.

‘Again?’ She stopped in front of the sofa and regarded me, frowning. ‘What did he do this time?’

‘He wouldn’t do drill. It was target practice, and you know he never does that.’

‘Why wouldn’t he today?’

‘I didn’t ask him.’

My grandmother sat down in the chair beside the window, throwing up her hands in a gesture of despair. ‘Honestly, Leo!’

‘What? What did I do? It’s not my fault that Stirling is a pacifist, or whatever the hell he is.’

‘Leo, he is not a pacifist,’ she told me, standing up again restlessly. I looked at her but didn’t say anything. ‘He doesn’t even know what a pacifist is. He’s only eight! You are a bad example to him, Leo, for one thing, and for another – he’s lazy.’

‘I think you underestimate him sometimes,’ I ventured. ‘He’s very clever. Anyone can see he’s very clever and if—’

‘Don’t tell me,’ she interrupted. ‘However intelligent he is, he won’t get anywhere with it. Intelligence is worthless unless it’s applied to something. What use is a scholar in the family? No one needs professors or lawyers. We need soldiers and farmers and factory workers. Books and lectures do not put food on the table.’

‘It’s easy for you to say that! My father did none the worse for being clever. How do you put food on the table, then?’

With the money from his books, that's how. You do not work.'

'Would you have me work, Leo?'

'No. All I'm saying is that you don't.'

'I don't have time, with looking after you and Stirling.'

'You don't need to, because you have all the money from my father.'

'Aye, and we are extremely fortunate that no one has found out. And look what Harold's cleverness cost him. My only son, fleeing in the night like a criminal, and now—' She stopped and began again. 'Your great-uncle - so famous and powerful - his cleverness got him nowhere either. Dead. Is that where you want to end up?'

'Yes,' I told her. I should have just let it go, but I was tired of her constant lecturing.

'Yes?' she repeated, her voice rising. 'Yes? Well, that's where you are going to end up if you don't start working. I'm sick of you always complaining about school. Don't you know how lucky you are?'

'Lucky?'

'Don't you know what some boys would give to have the education you are getting? Don't you know how fortunate you are to be able to become a soldier? And you are so ungrateful as to say—'

'What's ungrateful?' I shouted. 'What is there to be grateful for? All I said is, I'd rather end up dead. I mean it. I'd rather be dead if it means I don't have to end up as some bastard soldier. They think they're so bloody smart—'

'Leo!' I had not heard her shout so loudly in a long time. 'Do not dare to talk to me like that!' I was always in trouble for swearing. 'You are the one who thinks he's smart,' she yelled. 'Well, you've got a lot to learn! Including some respect.' 0

She turned away, breathing heavily. Her face in the glass trembled, yellow with fury, and for a moment I thought I was frightened of her. I suppose I was remembering how I used

to be scared when she shouted, when I was very young. I watched her for a moment. I suddenly felt like laughing at the response I had got so easily. I don't know why.

It got darker and darker in the room while I sat there. My grandmother made no move to light the oil lamp on the table. She stood as if she was carved of stone. The only sign that she was not a statue was a circle of mist on the window, getting larger and smaller, and then larger again, as she breathed onto the glass. The room was cold and I wanted to put my overcoat back on, but I was caught in the silence and I could not break it.

I wished then that I had not shouted at her. She was, after all, quite old, and I should have known better. I was not a little child. I should have made an effort. I vowed to myself that I would try to understand her better. I would try to control my temper. I wondered idly if she would ever move.

Eventually she turned back to me. The clouds were so dense outside now, and the light so dim, that I could not make out her expression. 'Leo, why did you not wait for your brother?' she asked. She was carrying on the conversation, though her voice was shaky. She was still angry, I judged.

'I tried to wait,' I said, 'but Markey caught me.'

'*Sergeant* Markey,' she said, her voice tighter. 'I want you to go back and meet Stirling.'

'What? I stood there more than an hour before I came home - more like two hours. I'm still cold. It's below freezing out there.' And it was a long way back to school. But I knew I was going to go.

'You heard me. It's not safe for him to walk by himself at six o'clock with the weather dark like this.'

'All right,' I said. That was it. I was going to try to control my temper. I crossed to the door.

'Leo.' I turned to her. 'Don't forget your overcoat.'

I could tell by her voice that her anger was gone. It sounded like an apology. Stupidly, I had to take advantage of it. I reached out towards the coat, and with a snapping