

somehow expect to see green. But it's just a shabby little room with a dirty corrugated plastic ceiling. There are plates piled high in a sink and a grimy bed in the corner, and everywhere else — pretty much everywhere — empty bottles. It stinks.

“So, oak girl, you going to tell me what you want?”

I gulp. “We need a way out. Of the city.”

“We?” he asks sharply.

“M-my little brother and I,” I stammer, unsure whether I’ve done the right thing, to come out and say it. But what choice do I have? There’s no one else to go to.

He looks at me more closely. “You think you can survive out there?”

“We’re resistant,” I say defiantly. “To the disease.”

Silvan throws back his head and laughs. “You think that’s enough? You think it’s that easy?” He reaches for one of the bottles and flips off the top.

“No,” I snap. “Not easy. But we can’t stay here. They want our blood.”

Silvan looks interested. “They’ve tested you then?”

“My little brother. And I’ll be next.”

Silvan nods slowly. “A few years ago they rounded up some Warren people for tests. They found the lucky few. But they didn’t feel lucky when Steel sent them out there to be her eyes and ears. Portia Steel didn’t reckon on the isolation. What that can do to a person.”

“What?” I ask tentatively.

Silvan grins and points to his head. “They went properly wild. Only a few ever report back now. That’s what they say. And they’re properly crazy, begging to return.”

“Are they the people that send the meat?”

Silvan shakes his head. “No. There have always been traders out there. People passing by, seeking business with the city.” He points to the floor. If you listen carefully, there’s the same muffled gurgling as under the pub. “Things come in by water.”

I frown. “The river? Could we get out that way? If you helped us?”

“You think I can help with that?”

“Our mum came to you once. Marian.”

A blaze of red flares up on Silvan’s yellow face. “No names. I don’t want any names.” He swigs more liquid from the brown bottle in his hand.

“We could pay you. I could bring you plants. Our grandmother’s a Plant Keeper. One of the last.” I pause. “There should be plants here. This was the garden once. They might make you feel better.”

Silvan stares at me with actual contempt.

“You think that’s what I want? To remember what things were like once? It’s money I need. Cash. Gold.” He holds up the bottle and takes another swig. “This is the only thing that makes me feel better now. Anyway, what do you