



THE TWYNING

TERENCE BLACKER

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PART I

But O! 'Tis human vanity
That will bewray Mankind.
Our fate and that of humble Beastes
Will ever be entwined.

—*Sir Edmund Gower, 1558*

1.

There was a smell of hope in the Great Hollow that night . . .

. . . and loyalty, and sadness, of course. And somewhere in the cold, damp air was the sharp tang of fear.

But overpowering them all, singing through the brain of every rat — buck and doe, wild and fragile, twyning and ratling — was the scent that made us dizzy with pleasure.

Love.

In a harsh and dangerous world, where loss and death waited around every corner, it was the smell of love that gave each of us strength and hope to survive, even when a king was facing death.

Without strength, the sadness of loss would make citizens weak.

Without hope, the act of acclaiming his successor would lose its meaning.

Without love, the kingdom itself would die.

The multitude waited in silence.

On each side of the river that ran through the Great Hollow, there was a carpet of rich brown pelt, pulsing with life.

Dark eyes glittered from every crevice and ledge on the brick walls.

The high timbers that supported the vaulted roof writhed with expectation.

Only a series of steps on the far wall of the chamber, leading upward from the watercourse, was visible, unattended by those who waited. No rat, unless he were part of the Court of Governance, would lay a foot upon the Rock of State.

There was an order to our assembly. Each of the courts who conducted the work of the kingdom had taken its place according to rank and status.

Against a far wall, members of some of the junior courts had gathered. The Court of Entertainers was there, the Court of Tasting, the Court of Translation, the Court of Historians.

Beyond the river could be seen the Courts of Spies, of Correction, and of Prophecy, and behind them, taking up an unnecessary amount of space, were members of the Court of Warriors.

Then, in front of the Rock of State were two groups whose place had not been gained through strength and power but through weakness.

A mottling of white, gray, and brown betrayed the presence of those known as "fragiles." Although every court in the kingdom brings some kind of skill or strength, it is for some citizens difficult to understand quite what the Court of Fragiles provides.

These lightly colored, slack-muscled rats have been raised among the enemy, bred in captivity for some kind of strange human sport. Quite how they return to the world below remains a mystery to us, but what is certain is that they are weaker and less able to fend for themselves than any rat should be.

Although some attend the Courts of Spies or of Translation, where their knowledge of the ways of humans is occasionally of some use, most fragiles do little real work. The rest of

us accept that they are what they are. It is not really their fault that they have been infected with the most deadly disease that a human can bring: doubt.

The problem with the fragiles, it is generally agreed, is that, like the enemy, they think too much. As a result, they soon become in the kingdom what they have been in the human world: amusements for those who are more powerful than they are.

Standing in front of the Rock of State, given a respectful amount of space by all other citizens, was a group of thirty rats, none of whom had a name but who, together, were owners of a strange kind of power within the kingdom.

They were the Twyning. They tugged against one another, forever in motion, forever going nowhere. For almost all their lives, they had been united by an accident of nature that had occurred while they were still in the nest.

Their tails had become inextricably entangled. As they had grown, the knot of living tissue that was at their center melded and fused together so that, with adulthood, each of them was less an individual rat than a limb on a greater shared body, a spoke on a wheel of flesh.

A twyning confers its own special blessing on the kingdom. As it grows, it is fed and kept alive by citizens, and is respected by all, even by the Court of Governance and by the ultimate source of power among rats, the king. Many beings in one being, it stands for unity in the kingdom. It is a force of spirit, embodying the past, the future; the strong, the weak; life, death.

Each member of a twyning will have the gift of hearing. At times of great peril, it is they who will sense the glow before any other citizen.

Already, we could hear the sound of plaining, which only members of the Twyning can make. It starts with a throbbing

pulse of rhythm created by the chattering of teeth. Soon, a clear, single note will be heard, then another and another, until every rat in that sacred circle is part of the plaining. The sound they make can thrill or chill the youngest or oldest heart.

Rats who are part of a twyning are nameless. They would never be asked to fight, nor to forage, nor to father or to mother, but in times of peace and war it is to them, to it, that courtiers, warriors, and even spies and historians will turn for wisdom and guidance.

The Twyning expresses life's mystery. Unable to move in any one direction except at an awkward, complicated shuffle, it has its own kind of strength.

And above all, it shows the power of the kingdom.

For it is love that keeps the Twyning alive.

In a corner at the back of the hollow on that fateful night, Alpa, captain of the Tasting Court, glanced around her. Although she had been at two gatherings in the past, there was always a new worry.

This time it was a young apprentice whose past was a mystery, whose future was uncertain, but whose present was always trouble. He was considered by many in the court to be too undisciplined to be a successful taster, too small to be a warrior, too restless to work in the dustier Courts of History, Translation, Strategy, or Prophecy. He was something of an outsider even among the other rats of his age.

It was said that his father had escaped from a prison in the world above. Certainly the dash of white between his ears, like the crest of a bird, suggested that some rogue blood, a hint of fragility, ran through his veins.

Yet there was nothing fearful or weak about this apprentice.

He had the oddity of a fragile but none of its dependence on other rats.

Alpa, who had mothered many ratlings, had learned that there was no fighting a wild spirit. Her bones aching, she sat up on her hind legs and peered over the multitude. Raising her eyes, she caught sight of a smudge of white on a ledge high above her head.

— Efren! Efren!

She revealed with all her strength, but it was too late.

From my perch on high, I looked down on her without moving a muscle.

There was no going back.

I, Efren of the kingdom, wanted to find out more.

2.

River, path, doctor, moon . . .

. . . shining over the rooftops.

Home.

Autumn night.

Sound of water.

Horse and cart on the road above.

Ahead, the doctor has seen something. He lays down the walking stick he is carrying. He crouches on his knees, like a man in church.

“Rats.”

He looks around and sees me on the path.

“Rats have been here, Dogboy. We are in luck.”

He walks on, his stick tapping the path.

The cage is heavy in my hand.

He waits on the path, until I am near to him.

He shakes his head and sighs.

“Is there anything happening in that head of yours, Dogboy Smith?” he says.

Then, continuing his walk, he murmurs to himself, “I fear not.”

3.

Gazing down at the hollow ...

... I waited, my young heart thumping fast within my breast. My captain, I knew, would prefer me to be with the other ratlings, but I avoided her stare.

The feelings of duty within me — respect for my elders, loyalty to my court, obedience to Alpa — were at that moment little more than a distant niggles at the base of my spine. I knew of course that all good ratlings should be with their court when the kingdom gathered. And I was obviously aware that it was right and natural that we young rats should be quiet and respectful, catching only glimpses of the ceremony beyond the adult rats that were in front of us.

By this time in my life, though, I had already discovered that as far as other rats were concerned, I was not good, nor right, nor perhaps even natural. There was a stronger urge within me than that of obeying my elders.

Curiosity. A hunger to know, to understand.

I wanted to see the shape of the ceremony through my own eyes, hear through my own ears. I wanted to feel for myself, not as part of a crowd.

Many times Alpa had told me that I was too selfish for my own good. Old and wise rats of the Tasting Court saw the way

I was and said that I suffered from a weakness of character that almost certainly would lead me to an early death.

But I had no choice. It was just life. The life that I, Efren, wanted to live.

Below me, the sharp smell of excitement rose up from the restless bodies of the congregation, pricking my nostrils. From an entrance behind the Rock of State, members of the Court of Governance filed out, one after another, forming an arc at the top of the steps. Moments later, from beneath the brick arch under which the river ran into the Great Hollow, there was a movement. At first I thought it was some great fish, making its way beneath the murky waters, leaving a trail of silvery ripples behind it. Then I saw that each ripple was a rat from the Court of Warriors, swimming slowly and in perfect time.

As the procession glided into the Great Hollow, the gathering grew still and silent so that only the rhythmic chatter of the teeth of the Twyning could be heard. Then a stout branch of oak, with a warrior on each side and one behind it, came into view. Upon the wood there lay the still presence of a single mighty rat.

It was the first time in my young life that I had heard the sound of a plaining, and it seemed to reach into me, making every muscle tremble. The kingdom replied. At first it was like a general whisper, caressing the senses, but soon it grew in volume until it echoed off the high ceiling and around the glistening walls of the Great Hollow.

King Tzuriel, upon his royal raft, was being acclaimed for the last time by his subjects.

The king, old and dying, stirred, raising his gray head, which seemed bonier and older than the rest of his body, so that his subjects could see him.

The acclamation grew until it seemed that the earth itself was breathing its loyalty and love for the king. From my ledge, I felt the sound enter my being, making me stronger. My blood felt hot and thick in my veins. Now, involuntarily, my teeth began to chatter, like those of the thousands of rats below me.

It was my first acclamation and, for all I knew, my last. Most rats, I had been told, rarely experience an occasion like this more than once or twice in their lives.

Soon the hammering of my teeth had set my whole body shaking. In that moment I knew that nothing in my life would ever be the same again.

4.

The doctor stops, cocks his head . . .

. . . like a blackbird listening for a worm.

“What was that?”

He speaks in a whisper.

“I heard something. In the sewerage.”

We stand.

At that moment, a sound comes from the earth beneath our feet. It is like a ghostly, distant scream.

“It’s them! The rats!”

He kneels on the ground, his frock coat spreading on the path around him.

“They must be in the main sewage chamber. The flushers who work in the drains told me I would find them here. Rats love underground waterways.”

He stands, takes a white handkerchief from his pocket, and wipes the dirt off each hand.

“Let us continue our search.”

I stay, and he looks back.

“What is it, Dogboy? You think it would be better to wait here?”

I nod.

“You’d better be right,” he says.

5.

Pain shone white . . .

. . . and bright as the king entered the Great Hollow for the last time.

I imagined the dazzling ache within him. King Tzuriel seemed aware of the presence of his citizens all around him. It was as if we were a single being, staring at him with one pair of eyes, acclaiming him with one set of chattering teeth. Watching him, I felt a surge of sympathy. He looked alone. He looked cold.

The three warrior rats who had been propelling the oak branch forward were slowing now as they approached a step that was a few lengths from the Rock of State.

King Tzuriel looked around him. There had been a smell of respect, of awe, in the air. Now there was something else.

Anticipation?

The king sniffed, his nose nodding upward. It was more than mere expectation.

Excitement?

That, of course. But also a scent that he would not have smelled for years.

Impatience.

Without knowing it, his subjects were eager for newness. He was the past. They had drawn belief and strength from him until now, when there was nothing left within him except death.

By the time the branch was being held fast against the dark brick step, the plaining and the acclamation had slackened, and silence was returning to the Great Hollow.

The king gazed upward for the last time at the place of his greatest glories. At the top of the four steps stood two of his most devoted friends: Quell, slender, elegant, and smoothly powerful; and Grizzlard, the greatest warrior in the kingdom, his pelt marked by the scars of ancient battles. Behind them, arranged in a respectful arc, were members of the Court of Governance.

Painfully, he made his way to the edge of the raft, where he was helped ashore by two warriors. Breathing heavily, he ascended the first step — two, three, four — to reach the Rock of State.

He turned to face the mighty congregation, gazing first at the citizens who waited beyond the rippling water, looking up at him, then raising his eyes to those who were perching birdlike from bricks and timbers around the wall. For just a second, he gazed at me. I could swear it. Perhaps every rat in that Great Hollow felt the same thing.

Tzuriel had never been handsome, but I could see that in his prime there must have been about him a magnificent ugliness that spoke of strength and honesty. Tonight, alone on the Rock of State, he seemed to be gazing at us from the gates of death, reminding even those courtiers who stood in a respectful group behind him of the skeleton beneath skin, of the fate that awaits us all.

Rats live for life, not death. It is why we are strong. No

matter what we have been through, however painful a loss, our duty to the kingdom, to our court, to our family, to ourselves, is to survive. That is the simple truth that every citizen understands. It is now that matters, not then.

Go: that was what those thousands of eyes, gazing in silence, were now saying to Tzuriel. Do the kingly thing. Do what you have always done so well. Make us feel better about our world. Your last great duty is to disappear.

With a final surge of strength, the king gave the last revelation of his life.

— My subjects.

It was like a shock coursing through my body. Nothing I had been told had prepared me for the power with which the king's words entered my brain.

Revelation, you should know, is one of life's highest skills. It is something humans have never managed: communication through thought. As a young rat, I had the strength to reveal to two or three of my fellows at most. A captain (Alpa, for example) is able to address a group of a hundred or so rats. A king, or a courtier who dreams of being king, can address thousands. His power lies in revelation.

— I am here to bid you a last farewell.

The only sound to be heard was the lapping of the river as it passed through the hollow.

— We live in a time of tumult. The victories of the past, that of the great invasion, our mighty journey across the world above, still course through our veins.

A few of the rats closest to the platform began to chatter in excitement, but a sharp, silent reproof from the king, like a whip-crack in the brain, silenced them.

— They are as nothing. They are as dust.

For an instant, King Tzuriel seemed to lose track of what he was saying. Then he raised his weary eyes to the stone ceiling over his head.

— Above us, there is change. We have information from the Court of Spies that those who have the power to harm us will not hesitate to do so. It is important that we understand that power, that we stare it in the face.

The king paused now for so long that Quell, the most senior courtier, moved closer, ready to remind his friend and monarch what should be said.

— I shall name it now, as my last act as king. It is . . . humankind.

The sharp scent of fear filled the hollow. Had the approach of death turned the king's mind? It was accepted that the greatest danger that faced the kingdom should be known but never ever named. Giving it a name gave the enemy strength.

— Humankind. — Tzuriel looked around. — Let us not cower from the word. Too often we think in fear of the evil that struts and stalks the world above. It is, we tell ourselves, the enemy. That is all we think we need to know. It is not. The enemy is . . . human. They fear us. We fear them. Yet, in many ways, we depend upon their kind. They provide us with our food. Their habitations and burial grounds give us shelter. We need them, citizens. Perhaps they need us. If we live our lives, they will one day learn to live theirs.

The king twitched, as if the pain within him had twisted like a torturer's blade.

— Please. — The revelation was growing stronger now. — I address you as a warrior who has seen too much fighting. Live your lives in peace.

The king paused. Breathing, it seemed, was difficult. He moved forward toward the steps. His legs weak, he almost fell

upon the oak raft. No one moved to help him now. Kingship was falling from his shoulders.

Old and alone, he faced death.

In the water around the raft, the young warrior rats looked toward Quell. The old courtier, the king's most faithful friend, cast one final look at Tzuriel, and then turned and limped away. Those who had been holding the raft retreated, letting it go. The king gently drifted away.

Tzuriel slipped from the raft into the water. Proud to the last, he swam rather than drifted toward the archway, where the river disappeared into the darkness beyond.

For a few strokes, all that Tzuriel would have heard was the ripple of water, the rasp of his own breath, but then, through the whiteness, came the sound that he had last heard on the day he had become king and his predecessor, Calix, had departed. The kingdom was keening.

He closed his eyes and swam, allowing the dark water to direct him. It was almost over. He was going home.

6.

The scream from the earth . . .

. . . goes on and on.

For a moment, the doctor looks scared.

Then, recovering himself, he murmurs, "Interesting," and scrambles down the bank.

By the time he has reached the water, the sound has faded into the night.

I hear a noise coming from the place where the river emerges from under the ground. A movement in the dark water.

I click my teeth and point.

A ripple. It is a creature, swimming slowly.

I hear the doctor whisper, "What the deuce . . . ?"

It might have been an otter or a dog, but it is a rat. I have come across many rats around the town, but this is the largest I have seen.

The rat swims toward the doctor. For a moment, it seems to rest its chin on the bank, then hauls itself out of the water.

On land, it lies down. Its flanks are heaving from the effort.

The rat is dying.

It stands unsteadily. Walking stiffly, more like a hedgehog than a rat, it crosses the towpath.

There is loose earth by the path. It begins to burrow feebly.

The doctor grips his walking stick more tightly in his right hand.

Slowly, he approaches the rat.

7.

Sadness comes with the end of a reign . . .

. . . and I had been warned of that.

There would be a sense of loneliness, Alpa had told me, of having been abandoned by someone dearer than a parent. But then, I had also heard, there would be celebration and hope for the future as a new king was proclaimed.

Here is the truth: I felt not the slightest stirring of joy. It seemed wrong to me, the way the kingdom had deserted our king, left Tzuriel alone to face death.

In the Great Hollow, attention had returned to the Rock of State. Quell, the revered courtier whose coat was now almost white with age, was explaining how the Court of Governance had debated as to who should succeed Tzuriel, weighing several issues. The candidates. The moment in history. The kingdom and its needs. There was silence in the hollow. It was as if King Tzuriel had never existed, as if only the future mattered. I felt, not for the last time in my life, out of step with other rats.

What did tradition matter at this moment when a great king was dying alone? How could citizens behave as if Tzuriel had been but a name in the past?

Across the Great Hollow, there was movement behind the Rock of State. Quell was welcoming forward the kingdom's most famous warrior to a surge of acclamation. Grizzlard. As he stepped past Quell and onto the Rock of State, I realized that there was to be a revelation.

Another revelation.

I was restless. There had been enough revealing. More than enough. What did the court, the Great Hollow, the mighty process of government, matter when my king was facing death?

I wondered where Tzuriel would be now. Would he have found a place to die, pawed a small cradle of earth in which to await the end? It seemed a cold and lonely way to depart the world.

As I thought, I noticed something. Along the ledge, above where a small stream issued into the river, a small crack in the brickwork was visible.

I glanced in the direction of Alpa. My captain's eyes were fixed on Grizzlard as he started his revelation to the kingdom. I moved backward, slowly down the ledge until the dock of my tail touched the gap in the wall.

From where I was, I could now see that light from the world above seemed to stab the dark earth beyond the Great Hollow.

Light is danger, as every rat knows, but something drove me on, backward along the narrow ledge. Afraid that turning would draw attention to me from the rats below, I edged toward the opening, pressing my body against it, feeling the cold brickwork scraping my skin. I pushed harder. Then, when only the front half of my body can have been visible in the hollow, something unexpected happened.

The earth beneath my hind legs crumbled. Suddenly I was falling downward, my legs scrabbling for purchase on the sides of the narrow gap until, with a splash that would have

been heard by many in the Great Hollow, I plunged into the water.

Surfacing moments later, I found myself gazing back through the low arch under which, not long before, Tzuriel had swum. I saw the river's course through the hollow, citizens flanking it on each side, so caught up in the occasion that many of them had let their tails hang in the cold water.

There was no going back. For a young ratling such as myself to be in the river at any time is forbidden; to be there on a day such as this could only mean a one-way visit to the Court of Correction. I felt the tug of the current beneath my belly as it pulled me away from the throng.

I turned and swam slowly, not knowing where the water would lead.

I had been swimming for only a minute or two when I saw the source of the light ahead. The river was taking me toward the dangers of the world above.

I emerged under the brightly shining moon, the mist of my breath skimming the water before me as I swam. There was a ditch close to where the river issued from its underground course. I scrambled onto the dry land.

Immediately I felt the trem, stronger than that of a dog or fox. The enemy. Looking upward, I saw two humans, an adult and a younger one, standing on the bank.

The larger human was carrying a stick in his hand. As I watched, he raised the stick and stood, motionless, just long enough for me to see a sight that has remained scarred in my memory to this day.

The stick fell, stabbing downward.

I heard the scream. I was some fifty lengths from the scene, but where I stood in horror an acrid whiff of terror reached my nostrils.

The small human moved closer and I saw now that he was holding a cage. He reached for the shape held under the cleft stick of the larger man, then lifted a writhing body. It was my king.

The adult human gave a shout of cruel laughter, said something to the child, and stared into the prison for a while. Then, whistling softly, he began walking away from me, down the path.

The child followed, the cage containing my king and the ruler of all the rats in the kingdom swinging from his left hand.

At moments of extreme danger, a deep calm descends upon us. We see what is happening to us as if from afar, yet allow our instincts, the blood memory of thousands of years, to guide us to safety. A rat is never calmer than when alone and facing death.

It was my body, my history, that sent me hurtling into the darkness of a crack in the bridge wall behind me. I plunged downward away from the dangerous light, along the touch-path, which, worn by the pelts, teeth, and feet of countless generations of citizens, requires no sight or even smell.

Pausing briefly in a rest, I caught my breath. I seemed to be in the ruins of an old human burial place. Amid the rubble before me, the white of a long leg bone glowed in the darkness.

To be truthful, the remains of a dead human have no more importance to me than a piece of flint. Alive, you are dangerous. Dead, you are food. When only your bones and teeth remain, your corpse is merely part of the earth.

I looked downward and wondered, without too much alarm, which direction would lead me back to the Great Hollow. As I waited, I became aware of a distant sensation, not more than a tickle, in the base of my skull.

Revelation.

I listened. There was no doubting it; the tones of Grizzlard, low, droning, solemn, and dull, could be heard within my brain. I moved out of the rest, down a passage, and with every length, Grizzlard's revealing became clearer.

Following a track along the base of the wall, I reached a crevice through which the smell of life indicated that I had reached an entrance to the Great Hollow. I pushed. The wall was soft. I was pressing against flesh.

I pushed harder. The body blocking my passage moved slightly to reveal the dark, irritated eyes of a young warrior rat, looking over his muscular shoulder. I knew I had to be brave.

— I have urgent news.

The warrior's response was to turn his back to me.

I tried again.

— It is important that I am let through.

The warrior revealed to another large rat that was beside him. I noticed that their backs were shaking with amusement.

No ratling in its right mind will press a point when dealing with young warriors. The Court of Warriors is second only to the Court of Correction when it comes to cruelty. Its members pride themselves on neither asking nor responding to questions. They communicate one way to those that annoy them. With their teeth.

But then, I was not born to be sensible. I nudged the rump once more, and revealed.

— King Tzuriel has been captured.

At first it seemed as if even this revelation would not penetrate the warriors' brains, but after a few seconds, they glanced at one another and shuffled apart, allowing me to move between them.

— What was that? — one of them asked.

I stood on my hind legs, peering toward the Rock of State.

— It's the king . . . in the world above —

But, at that moment, attention within the hollow shifted to what was happening before them.

Grizzlard's bold, honest, tedious revelation seemed to be drawing to a close.

— I shall say again what I have said before. In the event of my winning the noble prize of kingship through the support of you, the inhabitants of this great kingdom, I shall be proud, pleased, and honored to continue down the path of peace trodden with such dignity by our great and beloved ruler Tzurriel.

— To this end — Grizzlard actually raised his right paw toward the congregation — I humbly place my person at the disposal of the kingdom.

— No.

There were gasps from several of the rats around me. What was happening? Another revelation, louder and clearer than that of Grizzlard's, was reaching them.

It was a female revelation.

Even I, a ratling unversed in the ways of the kingdom, knew that this was very strange indeed. At any one time, there are never more than two or three does within the inner court. Mothers and sisters enjoy a certain power within the kingdom as captains of some of the courts. Yet they are rarely, if ever, admitted to the Court of Governance. In matters of war and death, it is a basic rat belief that those who have brought life into the world will see less clearly than the bucks who are their husbands or brothers.

Ahead of me, the crowd pressed closer to the platform where Grizzlard stood, caught in a rare moment of indecision and bewilderment.

Behind him, there was a movement among the courtiers. Pushing forward, past the bulky figures of those who were in

the front row, there emerged a figure who was so small that at first I thought a ratling had found its way into the court.

It made its way forward with a busy scuttle, as if impatient with the slow, dignified gait with which, traditionally, courtiers would move on a state occasion.

Slender, tense, female, the rat reached the Rock of State. Then, to a rustle of astonished disapproval, she stepped to the front lip of the platform, in front of Grizzlard, standing between the king-elect and his citizens.

Attempting to exert his authority, the senior courtier Quell advanced toward the newcomer, towering over her with a glowering revelation.

— Courtiers are required by convention to introduce themselves before addressing the gathering.

The newcomer did not offer, nor even humble before the might of Quell. Ignoring him, she gazed toward the back of the Great Hollow.

— I am Jeniel. But then, many of my friends know that.

She showed her teeth, and those near the front of the crowd pressed closer to catch her revelation. There was something unusual about this Jeniel that drew them in. Even the most distinguished members of the court were uneasy when communicating to the kingdom; it was as if kingship could only be expressed by a cold and clumsy awkwardness.

Jeniel was different. She addressed them like someone telling secrets. Although her revelation was as clear as that of Quell or Grizzlard, it was also confiding, gentle.

— I speak to the friends I know and to those I have yet to meet, to those who know me from the Court of Translation and those who may have heard of me.

She glanced briefly toward Quell and Grizzlard.

— I am suggesting that there is a new way forward. My old

friend Grizzlard, with all his many words, is unable to understand it. He is sharper with his teeth than with his revelations.

A rustle of amusement spread through the hollow like the wind in the trees. One or two of the members of the Court of Governance, standing beyond the Rock of State, looked at one another in surprise. Citizens were actually laughing at the rat who would be king.

Jeniel waited. Then her revelation continued.

— It has always been a good thing in times of certainty to have experience and strength in a position of power. But now the world is different. There are new perils. It is the moment for change.

Quell had heard enough. He moved toward her, his bony old body dwarfing hers. For a moment he seemed to be about to attack her, but instead he revealed.

— It is for the court to deliberate these matters.

Jeniel inclined her head slightly to one side.

— The court? And what of the people? Many rats, ordinary rats who will fight and work and mother for the kingdom, believe that it is not right to be told from on high who is to be king, who is to live and to die in the kingdom. We are all rats together. We should listen and love one another. We can create a kingdom of the pulse, in which every citizen can share. Power is good, friend Quell, but there is something that is better. Respect for one another will make the kingdom strong. Has Grizzlard truly earned this respect?

Grizzlard, looking uneasy, remained silent.

— Perhaps he has. — Jeniel pondered for a moment. — He has fought many battles. But it is we who should decide.

I felt restless. For me, the strange quarrel that was taking place on the Rock of State seemed meaningless and trivial beside the enormity of what I had just seen.

King Tzuriel, the stick falling, the scream, the wire door to the cage slamming shut.

I nudged the warrior rat to my right.

— We must do something. The king has been captured.

Something then happened that even now I find truly astonishing. The two young warrior rats glanced at one another and then began to move forward through the crowd. One, then both of them repeated my revelation.

— King Tzuriel. He has been captured.

— The king is in danger.

Rats in front of them seemed to melt away, at first slowly but then accelerating, as if the importance of their message was spreading through the hollow. The three of us moved through the Courts of History, of Prophecy, of Spies, until a single obstacle remained between us and the Rock of State.

The Twyning.

— Yes?

One of the many bodies of the Twyning loomed out of the mass. As it shifted its position, I noticed that the fur between it and its neighbors had been rubbed away, leaving the skin shiny and dark. Its eyes were wide, like that of the most innocent ratling.

I revealed.

— King Tzuriel has been captured.

Several other heads on the Twyning turned toward me. Out of nervous politeness, I addressed them all.

— I . . . I saw it with my own eyes.

For a few seconds, the Twyning was still, as if absorbing this information into all thirty of its brains and bodies. Then it set up a shimmering motion, spreading across its backs like a breeze rippling over the water of a pond.

Seeing it, Grizzlard, Quell, and Jeniel looked down. No rat,

not even a courtier on the brink of kingship, would ignore the Twyning.

The head that was closest to the Rock of State delivered a revelation that reached all of the Court of Governance and many rats in the congregation.

— There is news from the world above. It concerns our king.

8.

I was not born with the name Dogboy . . .

. . . and I did not always live on the streets. I had a house, a mother, a father.

Once I was Peter Simeon.

Sometimes, even now, the memories catch me before I can stop them.

I remember warmth, a bed with heavy blankets, the sounds of the house — Mary, the maid, singing as she worked; the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall; my mother and father talking.

We were happy. We were the Simeon family.

My father went to work every morning, in his suit, the worried look of a busy man already on his face.

And my mother? She was beautiful. She still is, probably. She talked to me; she played with me. Sometimes when my father was not there, I sat upon her lap, warm and safe.

Home, school, food, walls, servants. How could all that have been a dream?

It was soon after my ninth birthday when late one night, I was awoken by the sound of voices. My father and mother were having an argument.

All parents argue, but, lying there in the darkness, as he shouted and she cried, I knew that this was different.

The next day, I was told to take my breakfast in the servants' quarters.

My father had left for work by the time I came upstairs from the kitchen.

My mother, as pale as death, her eyes red, avoided me. She cast not so much as a single look in my direction. Mary took me to school.

Soon I became used to looking for her large uniformed figure at the end of the school day.

A few times I asked her what I had done wrong. She would frown and say, "They're grown-ups. Sometimes grown-ups are like that, Peter."

From that moment onward, I ate all my meals with the servants. Now and then I would catch them glancing at one another as if they were in possession of some important, terrible secret.

Fights between my father and mother continued. Every night, after we had all gone to bed, the voices would start, rising and falling in the darkness. Often I heard them mention my name.

What had I done? What awful deed?

Soon I no longer asked myself the question. A feeling of cold dread entered my heart. Something bad, beyond my understanding, was happening.

I slept lightly, like a cat. The slightest sound awoke me. Even when my father and mother were not arguing, I was waiting for the next fight to begin.

I would sit on the landing in the dark, listening to the voices below. I wanted to understand.

One word, shouted by my father every time he argued with my mother, confused me.

Bastard.

What was a bastard?

I asked the children at school. None of them seemed to know. When I asked a teacher, she made me stand in the corner.

I asked Mary and she looked away, as if I had said something sinful.

"What is it, Mary?" I asked again. "Please tell me. What is a bastard?"

Mary's face was as big and pale as the full moon. She was kind and sometimes would sing to me when my parents were not in the house.

Now, though, she frowned and pursed her lips.

"Bad blood, Master Peter," she said. "It means bad blood. Better not to talk of it."

There came a night when there was no argument. The silence was even more frightening than the angry words. The next night was the same.

One evening, during this time of quiet, something unusual happened. When my mother said good night to me, she cried. She held on to me, squeezing the breath out of me. Then, quite suddenly, she pushed me away from her.

"Good night, Peter," she said. It was as if she had suddenly been reminded of the terrible thing I had done, of my bad blood.

At dead of night, I was awoken by a sound.

This time, it was not an argument. Someone stood at the door to the bedroom. It was Frank, the footman.

"Put some clothes in this," he said, holding out a laundry bag.

"Clothes?" I sat up in bed.

"And get dressed. Quietly. We are going for a ride."

I put on some clothes, and I looked in my chest of drawers for a shirt, some flannel britches. Was this some kind of test?

"Warm clothes. You'll be needing a coat." Frank spoke gruffly. "Get moving."

I opened the wardrobe and took out my only tweed coat. When I turned, Frank was on his way down the stairs. I followed him, past the door to my parents' room, down into the hall, out the front door.

Waiting there, in the dark, was a carriage with a coachman slumped at the front. Frank held my arm, as if afraid I would run away, then pushed me, in a way that was not polite, into the carriage.

The carriage jolted forward.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see." Frank looked out the window.

Plucking up my courage, I asked the question that now worried me night and day.

"Is it because of my bad blood?"

It was as if I had not spoken.

After some time in the carriage, and only then, when it slowed, did Frank speak. "This will do," he said, and tapped on the back of the driver's seat. When the carriage came to a halt, he stepped down and looked around him.

"Out you get," he said. "Take your bag."

I stood beside him on the pavement. It was dark and we were in a part of town I had never seen before.

"You wait here, lad," he said, almost kindly.

He stepped back into the carriage and immediately it moved off.

I watched it go, listened to the horse's hooves until I was standing there in the quiet of the night.

Minutes. Hours. I looked down the street, waiting for the carriage to return, but it never did.

Light began to break. I was cold. I was hungry. I was alone.

I began walking. As day broke, the streets came to life, strangers hurried by. One or two glanced at me, then quickly looked away.

Bad blood. They could smell it in my veins.

So began my new life. Where does a boy find food and warmth on the street of a great town? Not among humans, that was for sure. I learned soon that to survive, I had to stay close to the dogs who lived wild. Something strange. They were as hungry as I was, but I discovered that while they would fight each other for scraps, they would become quiet when I spoke to them. The moment we looked into each other's eyes, dog and human, we understood that we were stronger together. I could help them find food. They could protect me and keep me warm as I huddled close to their bony, scabby bodies at night.

People began to say that I had a gift, that I could tame wild curs and make them do what I wished, but the truth was simpler. Dogs and I were close because together we could survive.

There is work of a kind for those who can understand animals. Men who hunted the fields and rivers would use me for pegging out rabbits for their ferrets, or simple skinning work. Sometimes I would go ratting or netting hares. Once I was put down a fox's earth to retrieve a terrier that had found a vixen and cubs. At the end of the day, I'd be given food or a couple of pennies for my labor.

I soon discovered that it was not only my bad blood that brought trouble. When I spoke, men and women seemed alarmed, children stared openmouthed.

My tones were too gentle for the ragamuffin way I looked. They asked questions. Who was I? Why was I there?

Soon I kept my talk for the animals. With humans, I said little or nothing. I was a silent shadow in their company.

“Dogboy,” they called me.

I became used to the streets. I lost all sense of time passing. I found a home of sorts.

Some years later I was working for a rat-catcher called Bill Grubstaff. A tall, whiskered gentleman in a frock coat would pass the compound, watching Bill and me as we worked.

One evening, as I returned home, he talked to me in the park. He told me his name was Dr. Ross-Gibbon. He was a scientist and was working with rats.

He asked me if I wanted to earn some pennies, helping him catch “specimens,” as he called them.

I nodded my agreement. That evening, he showed me where he lived and asked me to come by the following day.

“And what do they call you, my boy?” he asked.

“Dogboy, sir.”

He laughed. “Do they, bigod? Well, I shall call you Mr. Smith. You shall be Mr. Smith while you work for me.”

That was how I met the doctor.

The Twyning

Terence Blacker

"The much-maligned rat emerges as an intelligent and sensitive creature in this exciting novel." – *The Independent* (U.K)

