

No House But The King

by

Roope Rainisto

Using

BeatBandit

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INT. EBERHARD'S HALL - DAWN

A clerk's reed pen scratches over a charter. Wax waits in a brass spoon above a small flame.

LIUTGER OF WEILBURG, late twenties, stands among kin in travel-stained wool. His right hand bears an empty signet ring. The hollow face catches firelight.

DUKE EBERHARD OF FRANCONIA sits in the high chair, broad under a cloak pinned with a boar clasp. Hounds crowd his boots for scraps from his plate.

CLERK

The lower mill at Nassau, with
meadow and fishing right, to
Conrad, son of Adelbert.

A young cousin steps forward. Eberhard presses two fingers to the boy's brow. The hall murmurs approval.

Liutger keeps his hands folded. A leather cord of account knots hangs at his belt. His thumb finds one knot, tightens it.

CLERK (CONT'D)

The vineyards above Lahnstein,
owing three carts at harvest, to
Meinhard.

Another cousin. Younger. Red-cheeked. Landed now.

RUDOLF, a hard-faced count in a clean cloak, watches Liutger more than the grants.

Eberhard takes the charter. His cloak hem turns in his fist; something sewn inside clicks against his ring.

CLERK (CONT'D)

For Weilburg--

Liutger's fingers stop.

CLERK (CONT'D)

--stewardship remains under ducal
hand until further counsel.

A small sound moves through the hall. Not shock. Measurement.

Liutger looks at Eberhard.

Eberhard does not look away.

EBERHARD

The house keeps what the house must
keep.

Rudolf lowers his eyes to hide a smile.

Liutger steps forward. Every cousin shifts to see whether he will speak.

He bows.

Low enough.

As he rises, he turns the empty signet inward against his palm.

Eberhard comes down from the chair and takes Liutger by the back of the neck. Public warmth. Firm fingers.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

My boy. Patience feeds longer than anger.

LIUTGER

Then I will eat patience, lord.

Eberhard's thumb presses once at his nape before letting go.

The clerk sands the charter. Liutger returns to the line of men with his ring hidden.

EXT. EBERHARD'S STABLE YARD - MORNING

Wet straw smokes in a dung fire. Saddles hang under the eaves. Servants drag trunks toward packhorses.

Eberhard steps into the yard. Men stop moving.

EBERHARD

Leave the grey saddled. The rest, out.

Servants scatter. A groom hesitates over a girth.

RUDOLF

Out means out.

The groom goes.

Liutger appears at the far side with a torn riding glove, needle tucked between his teeth. He stays half behind a post.

Rudolf takes a folded strip from his sleeve. Eberhard gives the smallest nod.

Rudolf feeds the strip into the dung fire.

The edge blackens. For one breath the ink holds: OTTO...
VIA... FORD...

Liutger's needle stops.

Rudolf grinds the burning paper down with his boot. Smoke thickens.

EBERHARD
No scraps for dogs.

Rudolf crouches, stirs ash with a twig.

A charred corner slips free, blown against a trough. Liutger moves to a dropped buckle, bends, and closes the scrap into his torn glove.

Rudolf turns.

RUDOLF
Lost something, cousin?

Liutger lifts the buckle.

LIUTGER
Only what was already loose.

RUDOLF
That explains much.

Eberhard watches them both, then points to the house.

EBERHARD
Liutger. Court clothes. We ride to the king before noon.

He says king with careful teeth.

Liutger tucks the glove under his belt. Ash marks his palm black.

INT. DUCAL WARDROBE CHAMBER - LATE MORNING

Ranks of folded cloth cover a trestle: fur, dyed wool, belts with bronze mounts. Men dress for rank as much as weather.

Liutger repairs the torn finger of his riding glove with neat stitches. The scorched scrap lies hidden beneath his account cord.

Eberhard assigns garments with a steward's rod.

EBERHARD
Conrad rides at my left. Meinhard bears the boar banner.

The newly landed cousins receive good cloaks. Rudolf receives a sword belt worked with silver.

Liutger waits in his plain tunic.

Eberhard lifts a dark belt from the end of the table. No silver. Keys and a cup hook.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

You will serve near the council
table. Wine, tallies, names of men
who fail to stand when they should.

A cousin snorts.

LIUTGER

Near enough to hear, then.

EBERHARD

Near enough to be useful.

Liutger looks at the belt, then at the cloaks already gone.

RUDOLF

Some men are made for doors. They
open and close.

Liutger takes the belt from Eberhard's hands before Rudolf
can enjoy the pause.

LIUTGER

Doors see who passes.

He buckles it on. Too tight. He fixes it without looking
down.

Eberhard draws him close enough that only Liutger hears.

EBERHARD

Do not spend pride before the king.
We have too little coin for that.

Liutger ties a fresh knot on his leather cord.

LIUTGER

I keep accounts.

EBERHARD

Good. Keep gratitude first.

Hounds bark beyond the wall. Men lift cloaks, weapons, gifts.

Rudolf opens the chamber door. Candle smoke bends toward the
corridor where Franconian lords gather.

INT. PRIVATE COUNCIL ROOM - MIDDAY

A door shuts on the last servant. Candles burn though the
shutters stand open. Two hounds sleep under the table, jaws
wet with grease.

Liutger remains with the wine jug. The steward's belt makes him furniture.

Eberhard sits among FRANCONIAN LORDS. Rudolf stands near the latch.

LORD HATTO

The Saxon boy sends bishops to
count our bridges now.

LORD WERNER

King, crowned, anointed-- choose
the word. He still smells of his
father's saddle.

Eberhard feeds a strip of meat to a hound. His hand falls to his cloak hem. A cracked Carolingian coin shows briefly between two stitches before his fist closes.

EBERHARD

Old roads do not ask a boy's leave.

Rudolf watches Liutger fill cups.

RUDOLF

The royal horses leave after terce.
Their master likes dry ground.

LORD HATTO

Then give him dry ground until the
ford.

Liutger pours for Werner. The jug tilts too far. Red wine splashes across the table edge and onto Werner's sleeve.

WERNER

Blind bastard.

Liutger drops to one knee with a cloth.

LIUTGER

My lord's sleeve costs more than my
eyes. Let me save it.

He blots slowly. Under the table, boots shift. A map corner hangs near Hatto's knee: river, chapel mark, ford scratched twice.

EBERHARD

No names beyond this room. No brave
tongues in corridors.

RUDOLF

I will send the order clean.

Liutger's hand stills on the cloth.

Eberhard looks down at him.

EBERHARD

Enough. Take the stain with you.

Liutger rises, cloth red in his fist.

Rudolf opens the door before him and leans close.

RUDOLF

Wine remembers hands.

LIUTGER

Only poor wine.

Liutger exits. Behind him, the council drops to whispers. Rudolf follows a moment later, not toward the road but toward the stables.

INT. EBERHARD'S STABLES - MIDDAY

A restless horse stamps beside Liutger's saddle. DIETRICH, sixteen, thin and eager, polishes the bridle with spit and sleeve.

Rudolf enters. The horse tosses its head.

RUDOLF

Boy.

Dietrich turns too fast, nearly drops the bridle.

DIETRICH

My lord count.

Rudolf holds out a sealed packet. Fresh wax. No address visible.

RUDOLF

You ride ahead of Duke Eberhard's train. Royal stable master gets this before terce.

Dietrich does not take it.

DIETRICH

Lord Liutger said I keep his spare mount close.

Rudolf steps in. Dietrich backs into the saddle rack.

RUDOLF

Lord Liutger owns a spare mount now?

Dietrich's ears redden.

DIETRICH
I meant-- his riding horse. His things.

RUDOLF
You serve his things. Today you serve the house.

He presses the packet into Dietrich's chest.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)
Say the words back.

DIETRICH
Royal stable master. Before terce.

RUDOLF
At the lower ford beyond Saint Remigius. Not the bridge. The ford.

Dietrich closes both hands around the packet. They shake.

Liutger appears in the shadow outside the stall, unseen by Dietrich. He sees the seal. Hears the ford.

DIETRICH
If Lord Liutger asks--

RUDOLF
He will not.

Rudolf catches sight of Liutger's boot in straw. He smiles without turning his head.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)
And if he does, you obeyed a count.

Dietrich nods too many times.

Rudolf exits past Liutger. Their shoulders nearly touch.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)
Court road is dangerous for boys who carry nothing.

Liutger waits until Rudolf is gone.

Dietrich slips the packet inside his tunic and cinches Liutger's saddle with clumsy haste.

EXT. ROYAL CHAPEL PORCH - AFTERNOON

Otto's movable court clogs the chapel yard: petitioners, pack mules, spear shafts, clerks with tablet cases. Bells mark the hour.

BROTHER ANSELM, narrow and ink-stained, holds two wax impressions on a board. He squints at them like wounds.

Liutger enters with Eberhard's party, dust on his boots, steward's belt visible. His empty ring stays turned inward.

Anselm blocks his path with the board.

ANSELM
You are Franconian.

LIUTGER
Often accused.

ANSELM
Read.

He points to a tablet beside the impressions. Latin route instructions. The words are cramped, the case endings careless.

Liutger glances toward the royal hall where Eberhard's men gather.

LIUTGER
Find a clerk.

ANSELM
I found six. Three lied, two guessed, one corrected the ablative and missed the road.

Liutger takes the tablet.

INSERT - THE TABLET

...equos regios ad vadum inferius Sancti Remigii...

BACK TO SCENE

Liutger's thumb smears dust along the line.

ANSELM (CONT'D)
Well?

LIUTGER
Royal horses to the lower ford of Saint Remigius.

ANSELM
Not the bridge.

LIUTGER
The Latin dislikes the bridge.

Anselm tilts the board. Two impressions of Otto's seal sit side by side. Same nick near the king's cheek. Same shallow drag through the cross.

ANSELM

Wax has habits. This has obedience.

Liutger gives the tablet back.

LIUTGER

A seal obeys the hand that holds
it.

ANSELM

Or the hand copied badly by a man
who thinks God does not read wax.

A royal usher calls from the hall. Anselm lowers his voice.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

If more Latin comes through
Franconian hands, bring it before
it rides.

Liutger looks toward the stables beyond the yard.

LIUTGER

Many things ride before men
understand them.

Anselm watches him go, the two matching seals balanced in his
palm.

INT. ROYAL HALL - AFTERNOON

KING OTTO I stands before a small reliquary and hears a
farmer argue over pigs. He wears gloves despite the heat. A
travel crown chest rests behind the chair.

OTTO

How many pigs?

FARMER

Six, lord king. Five living. One
eaten by his men before witness.

Otto looks to the accused reeve.

OTTO

Five pigs and a fast day for the
sixth.

The hall laughs carefully. Otto does not.

An usher sets stools beside the royal chair. One carved high.
One plain. One lower by a hand's width.

Eberhard enters late with Rudolf, Liutger, and Franconian
retainers. Spur noise stops the petitions.

Eberhard reaches the proper distance. He bends, not fully, not quickly.

EBERHARD

Lord king.

Otto waits. The hall counts breaths.

OTTO

Duke.

He gestures to the lower stool.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Sit near enough to hear petitions
from your roads.

Rudolf's face shuts. Franconian hands settle on belts.

Eberhard smiles and sits. The stool's lower height forces his knees awkwardly up.

Liutger stands behind the wine line and takes it in: the stools, the reliquary, Eberhard's bent knees, Otto's still gloves.

A Saxon lord whispers. A Franconian answers too sharply.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Let witnesses speak.

Silence snaps back.

A clerk brings the next petition. Otto folds a piece of bread once, twice, and leaves it uneaten on the table.

Eberhard's hand drops to his cloak hem. The hidden coin clicks.

Otto's eyes move to the sound, then to Liutger.

Liutger lowers his gaze a fraction, not enough to bow.

The petition drones on. Seating has done what steel has not.

INT. ROYAL HALL - WOMEN'S GALLERY EDGE - LATE AFTERNOON

A knot of courtiers blocks the narrow passage beneath the women's gallery. Men argue over a stool with carved arms.

COURTIER

My uncle held it at Quedlinburg.

FRANCONIAN

Your uncle is dead. Move.

Liutger carries an empty cup tray through the press. He stops before GISELA OF MERSEBURG, composed, veiled, a psalter tucked against her ribs. Ink stains darken the skin beneath her rings.

She has already counted the passage, the stair, the side door.

Liutger steps back and clears space with the tray.

LIUTGER

My lady.

GISELA

You give ground quickly.

LIUTGER

Only ground that was never mine.

Her eyes drop to his right hand. The empty signet faces his palm.

GISELA

A careful ring.

Liutger shifts the tray to cover it.

LIUTGER

A cheap one.

Above them, women lean to watch Otto's hall. Below, Eberhard's men refuse the lower benches. An usher tries not to sweat.

Gisela opens her psalter. Several names have been cut from the prayer list with a fine blade. She closes it before Liutger can look too long.

GISELA

Saint Remigius has two roads, they say.

Liutger stills.

LIUTGER

Most saints collect more roads than sinners.

GISELA

One road keeps horses seen. One puts them near alder trees and deep mud.

A dispute flares behind them. A stool scrapes. Men reach for daggers, then remember the king.

Liutger lowers his voice.

LIUTGER

You watch stables from the gallery?

GISELA

I watch doors. People forgive women
for that.

Brother Anselm appears across the hall, lifting two fingers
to summon Liutger.

Gisela turns as if to leave, then stops beside him.

GISELA (CONT'D)

Wrong roads cost someone. Ask who
is paid.

She moves up the women's stair. Liutger watches only until a
guard notices, then crosses toward Anselm.

INT. CHARTER CHAMBER - LATE AFTERNOON

Candle heat softens wax on a slate. Charters hang from cords
along the wall. The room smells of tallow, dust, and warmed
parchment.

Anselm sets three impressions before Liutger: one royal, one
duplicate, one clipped from a sealed order.

ANSELM

Do not touch. Nobles touch evidence
the way children touch sores.

Liutger keeps his hands behind his back. His fingers close
around the scorched scrap hidden in his glove.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

The king's true seal has a nick
here. Old damage. See the cheek?

He turns the candle. A tiny break appears near Otto's stamped
face.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

A proper impression repeats a flaw
because the matrix is wounded. A
copied seal repeats it too cleanly.
No drag. No dirt. No human hand.

LIUTGER

Which order carried that one?

Anselm looks up.

ANSELM

You know an order?

Liutger says nothing.

Anselm slides the clipped seal closer with a bone stylus.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

This came from a travel instruction
presented to the royal stable this
morning. Before it was withdrawn
for correction.

The nick in the wax matches the tablet Liutger saw. Matches
the packet pressed into Dietrich's tunic.

Liutger places the scorched scrap on the table. Blackened
edge. OTTO survives in brown ink.

Anselm's mouth tightens at the sight of it.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

Where did you get that?

LIUTGER

From a fire that was meant to
finish its work.

ANSELM

Name the hand.

LIUTGER

Not yet.

ANSELM

Not yet is a coward's Latin.

Liutger leans over the impressions, eyes on the false nick.

LIUTGER

Where do the royal horses assemble?

ANSELM

West yard. After none. Why?

Liutger is already at the door.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

Lord Liutger.

He stops.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

If you run with half proof, you may
arrive as the proof.

Liutger opens his hand. The empty ring faces outward for a
breath, then turns back into his palm.

LIUTGER

Then pray the other half can still
ride.

He leaves. Anselm gathers the wax, fast now.

EXT. ROYAL STABLES - LATE AFTERNOON

Mud sucks at boots. Grooms haul tack from the west yard in a rush.

Dietrich's saddle hangs on a rail, girth cut loose. His cap lies in the straw below it.

Liutger pushes through two stable hands.

LIUTGER
Where is he?

A GROOM looks at the saddle, then away.

LIUTGER (CONT'D)
The boy who rides under this.
Where?

At the tack room door, TWO OF RUDOLF'S MEN block the latch. One rests a hand on his knife.

RUDOLF'S MAN
Closed.

LIUTGER
To horses?

RUDOLF'S MAN
To you.

Liutger steps close enough to smell ale on him. His right hand turns the empty signet inward against his palm.

LIUTGER
Open it.

The second man shifts his weight. Behind them, a low scrape from inside. Then silence.

RUDOLF'S MAN
Find your uncle if you want doors
opened.

Liutger studies the yard. Too many eyes. Too many men with hands free.

He backs off.

Near the water trough, the groom who looked away works a knot that is already loose. Liutger moves beside him and cuts the leather clean with a small knife hidden in his riding glove.

The groom stills at the blade.

LIUTGER
You saw my squire.

GROOM
I see dung, lord. Mostly dung.

Liutger folds the glove knife shut, then places it in the groom's palm. Bone handle, sharpened thin from use.

LIUTGER
Then buy yourself cleaner work.

The groom closes his fingers around it fast.

GROOM
He was taken from here. Not
dragged. Walking quick. Followed
two women with baskets. One of Lady
Gisela's, I think.

LIUTGER
Name.

GROOM
Hidda. Red veil. Always checks
behind her before she lies.

LIUTGER
Which way?

The groom nods toward a narrow service arch beyond the wash shed.

GROOM
Women's stair. Men do not go there
unless invited or stupid.

One of Rudolf's men watches from the tack room.

Liutger picks up Dietrich's cap. Wet straw clings to it.

LIUTGER
Today I may be both.

He tucks the cap under his belt and heads for the arch.

EXT. LAUNDRY YARD - LATE AFTERNOON

Steam rolls from copper tubs. Women beat linen against boards. Soap water runs gray through the mud.

HIDDA, red veil pinned tight, spots Liutger before he speaks. She shifts a basket to block a narrow stair door.

HIDDA
Lost, lord?

LIUTGER

A boy came through here.

Hidda wrings a sheet until water streams from her fists.

HIDDA

Boys come through everywhere. They
drip and break things.

Liutger shows a clipped silver coin between two fingers. Not
enough for a noble. Too much for a laundress.

LIUTGER

This one wore my belt colors.

HIDDA

Then ask your colors.

LIUTGER

I ask you.

She looks past him to the yard gate. Two servants pause
there, listening badly. Hidda snaps the wet sheet at them.

HIDDA

Hang it or wear it.

They move.

Liutger offers the coin lower, hidden by the basket.

HIDDA (CONT'D)

Coin makes a mouth open. It does
not keep a head on.

LIUTGER

I can keep your name out of mine.

HIDDA

You have a name men can ruin
slowly. I have one they can finish
before supper.

Liutger pockets the coin.

LIUTGER

What price, then?

Hidda tips the basket. Under the linen, scraps of wax scraped
from old tablets cling to a wooden stylus.

HIDDA

Lady Gisela's leave.

LIUTGER

She sent the boy?

Hidda gives him a flat look.

HIDDA

I did not say that. I said you will
not buy her household through me
like onions.

Liutger lowers his voice.

LIUTGER

Men with sealed orders use that
stair?

Hidda's fingers worry the edge of her veil.

HIDDA

Some men forget women count doors.
A servant of Count Rudolf came up
after prime. Same boots later
behind your boy. Mud from the west
yard. Not chapel mud.

LIUTGER

Where is Dietrich now?

HIDDA

Not with us.

A bell sounds from the chapel. Hidda gathers the basket,
leaving one wax shaving on the rim.

HIDDA (CONT'D)

If you want more than stair gossip,
stand where she can see you after
prayer. Do not follow.

LIUTGER

And if I do?

HIDDA

Then Margrave Siegfried will have
the answer he wants before he asks.

She lifts the basket and disappears through the steam.

INT. ROYAL CHAPEL - LATE AFTERNOON

Incense hangs low. Courtiers crowd the side aisle, fighting
for holy sightlines and better elbows.

Gisela kneels near the rail, psalter closed under both hands.
Ink stains hide beneath her rings. Her eyes mark the side
door, the nave, the screen.

MARGRAVE SIEGFRIED offers his hand before she rises. Broad,
Saxon, dressed for peace like it might require armor.

SIEGFRIED

My lady has prayed long.

GISELA
The psalm was short.

He smiles for the watching court and keeps her hand.

 SIEGFRIED
Merseburg breeds pious daughters.
Good for a border house. Quiet
lands are best held by quiet wives.

A few men nearby hear enough to approve.

Gisela rises. Her sleeve catches on the rail. Hidda steps in to free it, blocking Siegfried's view for half a breath.

Gisela slips a small wax-scraped tablet from her psalter. It falls near Liutger's boot with a soft tap.

Liutger bends as if to retrieve a dropped prayer card. The tablet shows a gouged psalm number and a clean crescent of wax removed from one corner.

 GISELA
Lord Liutger.

He straightens with the tablet hidden against his palm.

 LIUTGER
Lady.

Siegfried's smile thins. His thumb presses over Gisela's knuckles.

 SIEGFRIED
You know my promised wife?

 LIUTGER
I know where to stand in a narrow
aisle.

 SIEGFRIED
A useful skill for a man seeking
place.

Gisela takes her hand back to cross herself.

 GISELA
The Lord gives place to the lowly.

 SIEGFRIED
In heaven.

He guides her toward the chapel door. Gisela's glance touches Liutger's closed fist, then leaves him.

Siegfried catches it.

At the threshold, he turns back.

SIEGFRIED (CONT'D)
We ride after the king's business
settles. Peace will suit her.

Gisela does not answer. Hidda follows with the psalter.

Liutger opens his palm. The gouged number marks the hour.

INT. GUEST HOUSE CHAMBER - DUSK

A fire burns too hot. Eberhard feeds a hound a strip of meat from his own plate. Rudolf stands by the shutter, rain ticking behind him.

Liutger enters with mud on his hem and Dietrich's cap tucked under his belt.

Eberhard sees the cap. Says nothing.

EBERHARD
You ran hard.

LIUTGER
The court scatters a man.

EBERHARD
Court scatters boys. Men choose a
bench.

He wipes grease from his thumb and beckons Liutger closer. With his other hand, he touches the cracked coin sewn in his cloak hem.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)
Come here, my son.

Rudolf looks at Liutger when the words land.

Liutger steps into the firelight. His account cord hangs from his belt, knots dark with rain.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)
Tomorrow we ride where the king
sends us, and Franconia will be
seen together. You beside me. Not
below the salt. Not running after
clerks.

LIUTGER
Beside you as what?

EBERHARD
Blood needs no clerk's word.

LIUTGER
Land does.

The hound noses Eberhard's knee. He lets it wait.

EBERHARD

This again.

LIUTGER

After the journey. Name me a holding. Small enough for men to laugh, large enough for them to stop.

Rudolf shifts near the shutter.

RUDOLF

Bold request in another man's chamber.

EBERHARD

He may ask me.

Eberhard takes Liutger's right hand. Turns it palm up. The empty signet ring sits inward, blank face hidden.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

I remember your father at Lorsch. He came back with one boot and no horse, laughing because he had kept his sword. You have that laugh when you let yourself.

LIUTGER

Memory does not stable horses.

Eberhard closes Liutger's fingers over the ring.

EBERHARD

Ride with me. Let the morning pass. A house does not set stones while the roof burns.

LIUTGER

And after?

Eberhard kisses Liutger's knuckles, a father's gesture made before a witness.

EBERHARD

After, we speak as family.

Liutger pulls his hand back slowly.

LIUTGER

Family has postponed me well.

Rudolf watches the empty ring turn outward as Liutger leaves.

Eberhard finally gives the waiting meat to the hound.

INT. DARK SOLAR - DUSK

A single lamp burns behind horn. The room holds folded veils, locked chests, and the quiet labor of women who hear walls speak.

Gisela scrapes old wax from a tablet with a small knife. Her psalter lies open beside her. Several names are cut clean from the prayer list.

Liutger waits by the door, leaving it cracked.

GISELA

Close it or open it. Half doors are for eavesdroppers.

He closes it.

LIUTGER

Your woman says I need your leave.

GISELA

Hidda has kept more people alive than most captains.

Liutger places Dietrich's cap on the table. Gisela does not touch it.

LIUTGER

He passed your stair.

GISELA

At the psalm I marked. Miserere. The fifth verse, if the chaplain was not rushing God.

LIUTGER

With whom?

GISELA

A servant of Count Rudolf. Split left boot. He carried no basket and looked at no woman. That is how men announce secrets.

Liutger takes the wax tablet from his sleeve and sets it beside hers. The gouged number matches.

LIUTGER

Can you say this before Otto?

Gisela scrapes too hard. Wax curls under the blade.

GISELA

Before the king, I become Siegfried's bride speaking of stairs with another man.

LIUTGER

Then I will not use your name.

GISELA

You will, if you need to live.

Rain taps the shutter. Liutger looks toward the cut names in the psalter.

LIUTGER

Who cut them?

She shuts the book.

GISELA

A careful daughter.

He absorbs the rebuke, then bows.

LIUTGER

Lady, you have given enough.

She offers her hand for dismissal. He takes it. His lips touch her knuckles and remain one breath too long.

Gisela's fingers tense, but she does not pull away.

The door opens.

Siegfried stands beyond the threshold, Hidda behind him with a tray she no longer pretends to need.

SIEGFRIED

My lady receives counsel in dim
rooms now.

Liutger releases her hand.

GISELA

My lord came for prayer notes.

Siegfried looks at Liutger's mouth, then at Gisela's hand.

SIEGFRIED

He found them close.

Liutger steps aside to leave. Siegfried does not move until their shoulders nearly touch.

EXT. COVERED WALKWAY - DUSK

Rain hammers the roof tiles. Water pours from carved mouths into the yard.

Liutger strides under the arcade. Rudolf steps from behind a pillar, dry beneath his cloak.

RUDOLF
You lose yourself in women's rooms
now.

LIUTGER
Your news limps. Siegfried already
carried it.

Rudolf smiles and falls into step, too close.

RUDOLF
A promised bride. A blank ring.
Court loves that meat.

LIUTGER
Then feed them slowly. Men choke
when greedy.

Rudolf's hand flashes out, pinning Liutger against a post by
the cloak, not the throat. Enough to insult. Not enough for
witnesses to call assault.

RUDOLF
Listen well. Sons are counted at
table. Wards are counted when
stores run low.

Liutger looks at Rudolf's fist on his cloak.

LIUTGER
That was practiced.

RUDOLF
Your boy is under guard.

Liutger's eyes lift.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)
Do not make me say it twice.

LIUTGER
Where?

RUDOLF
Safe from bad masters.

Liutger grips the post behind him. His knuckles whiten. He
does not strike.

LIUTGER
You set traps like a poor hunter.
Too much stink on the bait.

Rudolf's smile drops for the first time.

RUDOLF

Vespers. He moves then. If he carries a theft, he carries it alone.

LIUTGER

He cannot read an order.

RUDOLF

A thief need only know silver from wax.

A SERVANT appears at the far end. Rudolf releases Liutger and smooths the wrinkled cloak with two pats.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)

Wash before supper. The king dislikes mud unless it is under his horse.

He turns to the servant.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)

Tell the stable court. Bring the boy out now.

The servant runs into the rain.

Liutger starts after him. Rudolf's men step from the next arch, blocking the straight path.

Liutger takes the long way into the storm.

EXT. STABLE COURT - EVENING

Rain turns the yard black. Servants gather under eaves. Stable boys peer from stalls until older hands shove them back.

Two guards drag DIETRICH into the open. His lip is split. One boot is missing. He searches the faces and finds Liutger at the far arch.

DIETRICH

My lord.

Rudolf stands on an overturned feed bin, dry beneath a servant's held cloak.

RUDOLF

This boy was found hiding royal orders.

He lifts a sealed packet. Mud stains the cord. The wax bears Otto's face.

Dietrich shakes his head hard.

DIETRICH

I held what I was given, my lord. I
did not hide--

A guard cuffs him behind the ear. Dietrich drops to one knee.

LIUTGER

Touch him again and answer to me.

Rudolf turns with mild pleasure.

RUDOLF

Good. His master attends.

Liutger steps into the yard. Mud splashes his boots.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)

Did you order him to take this?

LIUTGER

Ask who gave it.

RUDOLF

I ask the thief.

He tosses the packet to a clerk, who opens the outer fold
without breaking the main seal.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)

Latin travel instruction. Royal
stable matter. Worth coin to the
wrong lord.

Dietrich looks from the parchment to Liutger.

DIETRICH

I cannot read Latin.

A few servants murmur. Rudolf raises a hand. Silence closes
fast.

RUDOLF

But your master can.

Dietrich's mouth trembles. Blood runs from his lip to his
chin.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)

Say his name, boy, if he set you to
it.

DIETRICH

My lord, I carried. That is all.

RUDOLF

Whose errand?

DIETRICH
My lord--

RUDOLF
Whose?

DIETRICH
My lord, I do not read Latin.

Rudolf steps down and grips Dietrich by the hair, forcing his face up toward the watching servants.

RUDOLF
Stupidity is not innocence.

Liutger moves. Two men catch him. He stops fighting when a blade touches his side beneath the cloak.

Dietrich sees it. He stills.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)
Last chance.

Dietrich closes his eyes.

DIETRICH
I cannot read Latin.

Rudolf releases him with a shove.

RUDOLF
Tack cellar. No food until he remembers letters.

The guards haul Dietrich toward the tack room. He twists once, trying to see Liutger.

DIETRICH
My lord.

The cellar door opens below the tack room, a black square in the mud wall.

Liutger watches the forged packet vanish into Rudolf's sleeve.

The door slams on Dietrich. A bar drops into place.

INT. EBERHARD'S GUEST CHAMBER - NIGHT

A table knife scrapes slow against a whetstone.

DUKE EBERHARD sits in a travel chair, boots still muddy, boar cloak over his shoulders. A single candle gutters beside a plate of meat gone cold.

LIUTGER enters without announcement. His empty signet ring faces his palm.

EBERHARD
You forget doors now.

LIUTGER
Rudolf took my squire.

Eberhard keeps sharpening.

EBERHARD
Boys who carry sealed orders should
learn whose road they walk.

LIUTGER
He cannot read them.

EBERHARD
Then he should have feared the men
who can.

Liutger steps closer. The knife keeps moving.

LIUTGER
Release him before morning. I say
nothing of the ford. Nothing of the
packet. Nothing of the servant with
the split boot.

Eberhard stops. He studies the blade edge with his thumb.

EBERHARD
You bring me a bargain in my own
chamber.

LIUTGER
I bring you a way to keep me quiet.

Eberhard rises. Slow. Heavy.

EBERHARD
A house does not survive because
every child is spared the ditch.

LIUTGER
He is not your child.

EBERHARD
No. He is yours.

That cuts the air clean.

Eberhard crosses to Liutger and pulls him into an embrace. One hand cups the back of Liutger's neck, the old public tenderness made private.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

My boy.

Liutger does not return the hold.

LIUTGER

Give him to me.

EBERHARD

I fed you when other kin counted
your mouth. I clothed you when your
father's land could not clothe
itself.

LIUTGER

And the debt eats every year.

Eberhard's hand drops. He touches the hem of his cloak where
the cracked Carolingian coin is sewn in.

EBERHARD

Blood remembers what hunger tries
to sell.

Liutger looks toward the door. He could leave. Instead he
lowers to one knee.

LIUTGER

Then bless me.

Eberhard's face goes still.

LIUTGER (CONT'D)

If I am your blood, bless me before
I go to the king.

Eberhard rests two fingers on Liutger's bowed head. No warmth
in it now.

EBERHARD

Blood forgives hunger. It does not
forgive disloyalty.

Liutger stays kneeling a moment longer. Then he stands.

The knife lies on the table between them.

LIUTGER

Keep the candle. Morning will need
honest light.

Eberhard's hand closes around the knife.

Liutger leaves.

INT. ROYAL ANTECHAMBER - NIGHT

Wet gloves steam on a brazier. Armed men line the walls, silent and tired.

KING OTTO stands over a small map board, travel crown locked in a chest behind him. BROTHER ANSELM waits near the door with a wax tablet and stylus.

Liutger is brought in by an usher. Mud has dried on his hem.

OTTO
You asked for me alone.

LIUTGER
I asked before dawn makes fools of us.

Otto dismisses the usher with a look. Anselm remains.

OTTO
Speak.

LIUTGER
Your horses are being sent toward the east ford. The order is false.

OTTO
By whom?

LIUTGER
A man close enough to touch royal wax.

OTTO
Names have weight. Use one.

Liutger glances to Anselm's tablet, then back to Otto.

LIUTGER
Count Rudolf of Lahngau has your packet. My squire was planted under it.

OTTO
Rudolf serves Eberhard.

Liutger says nothing.

OTTO (CONT'D)
And Eberhard serves me.

LIUTGER
By oath.

Otto steps closer. He is young enough for the room to test him, old enough not to show the bruise.

OTTO
Do you accuse a duke in my
bedchamber?

LIUTGER
I accuse a road.

Anselm lifts his stylus, then stops writing.

OTTO
A road cannot hang.

LIUTGER
A road can kill a king.

Otto studies him.

OTTO
You want me to turn a royal
progress on a landless man's
whisper.

LIUTGER
I want you alive long enough to
hear witnesses.

OTTO
Witnesses you do not yet have.

Liutger's mouth closes. Otto notices.

OTTO (CONT'D)
What name are you swallowing?

LIUTGER
One that would start more fires
than it ends tonight.

Otto lets the silence punish him.

OTTO
Brother Anselm.

ANSELM
Majesty.

OTTO
Keep him near the chapel. If he
runs, stop him. If he speaks to
Franconians before I permit it,
stop him harder.

ANSELM
A pastoral custody.

OTTO
Call it what you like.

Anselm opens the door. Liutger does not move.

LIUTGER
Dietrich is in a cellar.

OTTO
Bring me proof that survives a
hall.

Otto turns back to the map.

The crown chest stays locked.

INT. WOMEN'S SOLAR - NIGHT

A shutter bolt slams into place.

GISELA stands beside a work table scattered with scraped wax, ink, and trimmed parchment. Her psalter lies open. Several prayer-list names have been neatly cut away.

MARGRAVE SIEGFRIED crosses the room and tests the shutter himself. HIDDA waits by a linen chest, red veil low.

SIEGFRIED
You were seen with him.

GISELA
Many men walk under roofs.

SIEGFRIED
This one looked at you as if no
contract had been written.

GISELA
Contracts do not blind the eyes.

Siegfried picks up her psalter.

GISELA (CONT'D)
That is for prayer.

SIEGFRIED
Then it will pray in my keeping.

He flips pages. His thumb passes over the cut gaps.

SIEGFRIED (CONT'D)
Who taught you to remove names from
God's ear?

Gisela reaches for the psalter. Siegfried lifts it out of reach.

SIEGFRIED (CONT'D)
Until we ride, you remain here. No
chapel. No gallery. No private
doors.

GISELA
Will you set men at the privy too?

SIEGFRIED
If gossip crawls through it.

Hidda lowers her eyes and shifts the linen chest lid with her
hip. Gisela's hand drops to the table.

Siegfried gathers the psalter and a wax tablet.

SIEGFRIED (CONT'D)
Your patience has been praised. Try
deserving it.

He starts for the door.

GISELA
My lord.

He turns.

Gisela has moved one step nearer, hands folded. While
Siegfried watches her face, Hidda takes the cut pages from
beneath a scrap of cloth and slips them into her sleeve.

GISELA (CONT'D)
A bride locked away invites more
talk than one seen at prayer.

SIEGFRIED
Let them talk of obedience.

He exits with the psalter. A key turns outside.

Gisela waits until his boots recede.

Hidda pulls the pages free. One bears a gouged psalm number
and a smear of candle wax.

HIDDA
If they search me?

GISELA
Drop them in the ash. Keep the wax.

Hidda nods once.

Gisela scrapes a last shaving from her tablet, small and
marked.

GISELA (CONT'D)

Find the chapel side door. Do not
let him make you brave in public.

Hidda hides the shaving with the pages.

The shutter holds against the rain.

INT. CHAPEL SACRISTY - NIGHT

A candle flame bends under Anselm's breath. Wax softens in a shallow spoon.

Relic boxes crowd the narrow table. A strip of parchment lies pinned with a knife. Liutger stands close enough to see, not close enough to touch.

ANSELM

Falsum. Not falsus. The order is
false. The Latin should at least
confess its own crime properly.

LIUTGER

Can grammar free a boy?

ANSELM

No. Witnesses can. Grammar only
keeps fools from hiding in fog.

Anselm holds two seal impressions near the candle. The first carries Otto's image with the ordinary nick at the rim.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

A royal seal is struck once on each
order. Pressure changes. Wax cools.
A thumb slips. Each impression is a
little mortal.

He warms the second. A bright crease opens at the edge, the same nick, too clean, too sharp.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

This one was copied from an
impression. See how the wound
repeats with no hand behind it.

Liutger leans in.

LIUTGER

Show that to Otto now.

ANSELM

In a small room, it is a monk's
concern. In a hall, it becomes
memory. Men deny what they hear.
They fear what their neighbors also
hear.

LIUTGER
Rudolf has the packet.

ANSELM
Then make him bring it into
daylight, or make him deny touching
what others saw him hold.

Liutger takes his leather cord from his belt and knots it
once, twice, counting pieces.

LIUTGER
Seal. Route. Boy. Stair.

ANSELM
And the hour.

LIUTGER
The hour lives with a woman no one
will believe if a man can call her
loose.

Anselm looks up from the wax.

ANSELM
Then do not ask the hall to believe
desire. Ask it to believe time.

Liutger pockets the cord.

LIUTGER
What are the rules for accusing a
count before the king?

ANSELM
You stand where all can see your
face. You name the act before the
man. You offer surety for your
words.

LIUTGER
Surety.

ANSELM
Land, oath, kin. Whatever you have
that can be taken.

Liutger turns the empty signet ring outward, then back into
his palm.

ANSELM (CONT'D)
Ah.

LIUTGER
Say the rule.

ANSELM
Your name will do, if the king
accepts it.

A soft knock at the side door.

Both men still.

INT. CHAPEL SIDE DOOR - NIGHT

The door opens a hand's width. Cold rain spits across the threshold.

Hidda slips in among two altar boys carrying spent tapers. She keeps her basket high and her face turned from the nave.

Anselm blocks the view from the corridor with his body.

HIDDA
They are searching her chest.

LIUTGER
Siegfried's men?

HIDDA
His, or men who like his purse.
Does it matter?

She sets the basket on a stool. Under damp linen rests a folded scrap and a bead of pale wax no bigger than a pea.

HIDDA (CONT'D)
She said ash for paper if hands
come near. Wax for you.

Liutger lifts the bead with his nail. A tiny nick cuts one edge.

Anselm brings the warmed seal impression beside it. The flaw matches.

ANSELM
Deus misereatur.

HIDDA
Is that good?

ANSELM
Rarely.

Hidda snatches the folded scrap back before Liutger can open it fully. A gouged psalm number shows, then disappears into her sleeve.

HIDDA

No names from the solar. Not hers.
Not mine. Servants get blamed when
noble tongues grow tired.

LIUTGER

I need the hour.

HIDDA

You have it. The psalm mark. The
chapel bell heard it too.

LIUTGER

Rudolf's man used the stair then.

HIDDA

Split left boot. Mud like black
pitch. He made Dietrich carry the
pouch because the boy smiled when
ordered. Some boys do that. It
keeps teeth in their heads.

Liutger closes his fist around the wax.

HIDDA (CONT'D)

If this walks back to me, I never
left laundry.

LIUTGER

You remain unseen.

HIDDA

Swear it on something you own.

Liutger looks down at his hands. The empty ring. The repaired
glove.

LIUTGER

On my name.

Hidda gives a humorless breath.

HIDDA

Poor thing to spend. Spend it well.

She takes her basket and vanishes into servant traffic.

Anselm watches the door close.

ANSELM

The hall, then.

Liutger pockets the wax.

LIUTGER

At morning, before horses move.

INT. TACK ROOM - PRE-DAWN

A rat noses a crust near the barred cellar door. Liutger crushes it under his boot by mistake. No crust remains.

He crouches beside the planks. Below, darkness breathes damp and sour.

DIETRICH

My lord?

LIUTGER

Quiet.

A pause. Then a rush of whispering.

DIETRICH

I did not sell it. I swear. He said carry this, stand there, wait for a bell. I thought it was stable work. I thought royal men had too many papers, and I was helping, and then they asked letters, and I do not have them, and I should have run.

LIUTGER

No.

DIETRICH

I should have asked you.

LIUTGER

Yes.

Dietrich laughs once, thin and broken.

DIETRICH

My mouth is large when horses are listening.

Liutger presses his forehead to the plank, then lifts it before the wood can take the gesture from him.

LIUTGER

Are you hurt?

DIETRICH

My lip. My foot is cold. They took the boot because it had mud from the stair, I think. Or because it was funny.

Liutger pulls at the bar. It holds. He could make noise. He stops.

DIETRICH (CONT'D)

Do not fight them here.

LIUTGER
You give orders now?

DIETRICH
Only stable ones.

A guard coughs somewhere above. Liutger lowers his voice.

LIUTGER
At morning I will stand before
Otto.

DIETRICH
Will that help?

Liutger does not answer fast enough.

DIETRICH (CONT'D)
My lord.

LIUTGER
It is the only door with hinges.

Dietrich shifts below. Chain scrapes stone.

DIETRICH
If they ask again, should I say
your name?

LIUTGER
No.

DIETRICH
If they hit me?

Liutger pulls off one repaired riding glove. The stitches along the thumb are uneven, his own work. He pushes it through a gap in the planks.

DIETRICH's fingers find it from below.

LIUTGER
Hold that. Give it back when you
are above ground.

Dietrich grips the glove.

DIETRICH
I can still saddle the bay with one
boot.

LIUTGER
You will not saddle anything until
you eat.

Footsteps cross outside. Liutger rises.

DIETRICH

My lord?

Liutger waits.

DIETRICH (CONT'D)

I am sorry I smiled at him.

Liutger puts his hand on the door, over the gap.

LIUTGER

Keep breathing.

He leaves before Dietrich can hear him fail.

EXT. ROYAL COURTYARD - PRE-DAWN

Grooms tighten girths by torchlight. Horses stamp steam into the blue dark. A clerk calls names from a travel list.

The east gate stands open.

Otto exits the guest house in a riding cloak. Anselm follows with a satchel of wax and parchment. Guards move to form around the king.

Liutger steps into their path.

Two spears lower.

OTTO

You were told near the chapel.

LIUTGER

I brought the chapel with me.

Anselm lifts the satchel a fraction.

OTTO

Speak fast.

LIUTGER

No. Before witnesses.

A groom looks over. Then another. Rudolf's men stand near the stables, watching.

OTTO

You choose the yard for courage?

LIUTGER

I choose the hall for fear. Fear is better there. It has benches.

Otto's eyes flick to Anselm.

ANSELM

He has wax that matches the false impression. The hour may be tied to the chapel bell.

OTTO

May.

LIUTGER

Will. If Rudolf is made to deny it where servants can hear him lie.

OTTO

You still circle the duke.

LIUTGER

Summon him as witness.

Otto steps close enough that the guards cannot hear every word.

OTTO

And if your count laughs? If your woman stays locked? If your boy breaks in his cellar?

LIUTGER

Then take my name for the lie.

OTTO

Your name buys little.

LIUTGER

It is what I have left that men can strip in public.

The clerk stops reading. A horse tosses its head against the bit.

Otto looks toward the open east gate. Beyond it, the road waits in darkness.

OTTO

Anselm.

ANSELM

Majesty.

OTTO

Prepare the hall. Bring the seal table. Candles enough to shame blind men.

Anselm bows and moves fast.

OTTO (CONT'D)

You.

He points to a guard.

OTTO (CONT'D)
Wake Duke Eberhard. Count Rudolf
too. Say the king requests their
eyes before departure.

The guard runs.

Liutger lets out no breath.

OTTO (CONT'D)
Do not mistake this for trust.

LIUTGER
I would not know what to do with
it.

Otto mounts without help.

OTTO
Then learn what a hearing costs.

He turns the horse away from the gate, toward the royal hall.

Grooms stare as the mounted king rides back into his own
courtyard. The open road remains empty.

INT. ROYAL HALL - PRE-DAWN

The hall doors stand open to the blue courtyard. Cold air
pushes candle flames sideways.

A seal table has been dragged before the dais. Nobles crowd
benches half-dressed in cloaks, belts half-buckled. Servants
hover at the walls.

LIUTGER stands in the center aisle, his empty signet turned
inward. His leather cord of account knots is looped around
his fingers.

OTTO sits above him without the crown. That makes the room
lean closer.

RUDOLF waits below the Franconian benches, clean, composed,
amused.

OTTO
You asked for witnesses.

LIUTGER
I asked for answers in reach of
witnesses.

OTTO
Then reach.

Liutger bows once to Otto. Not low enough for Rudolf.

LIUTGER
Count Rudolf, before the bell after
lauds, did any man of your
household use the private stair
beside the women's gallery?

RUDOLF
My household does not creep through
women's passages.

A few Franconians laugh under their breath.

LIUTGER
No groom. No servant. No boy
carrying a packet.

RUDOLF
You have stables on the brain. Ask
after horses. Leave women to men
who can afford wives.

Liutger's thumb works one knot loose on the cord.

LIUTGER
Then you deny the stair.

RUDOLF
I deny your little play.

LIUTGER
The stair only.

Rudolf looks to the benches, lets the smile widen.

RUDOLF
No servant of mine used it. No
packet passed it. No woman there
saw anything worth troubling a
king.

Liutger turns toward Otto.

LIUTGER
Then let Hidda of Lady Gisela's
chamber give her household account.

SIEGFRIED stiffens near the side aisle.

Rudolf does not look at him. He keeps smiling.

RUDOLF
By all means. Fetch the laundress.
Fetch the hens too.

INT. ROYAL HALL - CONTINUOUS

An USHER crosses to the side door.

HIDDA enters first, chin down, a folded cut prayer-list page pressed under her thumb. Men shift to see who owns the voice behind a curtain.

GISELA follows.

She stops at the threshold, neither inside the council nor outside it. Ink stains darken the skin beneath her rings. Her eyes count the open doors, the side passage, the dais.

SIEGFRIED steps into her path.

SIEGFRIED

My lady has no place in a quarrel
of servants.

GISELA

Then I will speak only of prayers.

SIEGFRIED

You will return.

Gisela looks at Otto, not Siegfried.

GISELA

Majesty, I was kept to my chamber
this morning.

OTTO

You heard the question.

GISELA

I heard a denial.

Siegfried's hand closes around the edge of his cloak.

GISELA (CONT'D)

At the psalm we sing before the
Benedictus, Hidda opened the lower
shutter. The bell had not yet
finished. A man passed up from the
service court. Mud on the left
boot. A packet under his sleeve.

RUDOLF

A woman at a shutter sees mud and
invents a count.

HIDDA

I saw his belt, lord. Red braid.
Your kitchen men wear it when they
travel.

Rudolf's smile loses its ease.

SIEGFRIED

Enough.

Gisela lays one palm over the cut page in Hidda's hand.

GISELA

Obedience has hours. We are taught
them so we do not miss God.

Otto watches Siegfried force himself still.

OTTO

The hour is entered.

Gisela lowers her eyes. Not to Siegfried.

Liutger does not look at her until she has stepped back into
the threshold's shadow.

INT. ROYAL HALL - MOMENTS LATER

BROTHER ANSELM sets two sealed orders on the table. Beside
them: Gisela's wax shaving, wrapped in a scrap of cloth.

He places a candle close enough that nobles lean away from
the heat.

ANSELM

If you crowd the table, lords, your
sleeves will testify before you do.

No one laughs. They step back.

Otto rises and comes down from the dais.

OTTO

Show them what you showed me.

ANSELM

Gladly. With less interruption from
horsemen.

He lifts the first seal with a small bone spatula and turns
it toward the hall.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

Royal impression. True matrix. One
nick at the lower cross. Known to
chancery clerks who pay attention.

He warms the second seal. The red wax softens. Under the
flame, a tiny ridge lifts, then splits at the same lower
cross.

A murmur spreads.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

The false order bears the same
damage. Not a new blow. Not chance.
Copied from an impression already
made.

RUDOLF

Wax cracks.

ANSELM

Latin also cracks when men who
dislike books command scribes in a
hurry.

Otto glances at him.

Anselm adjusts.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

The order names royal authority
with a borrowed hand.

He warms the shaving. The same nick rises, a small red tooth
under the candle.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

Three impressions. One flaw. The
seal was duplicated.

Rudolf reaches toward the table.

Two royal guards step between his hand and the wax.

ANSELM (CONT'D)

Touch it now and I will ask whether
you fear heat or reading.

Rudolf pulls his hand back.

The hall has gone quiet enough for candle fat to spit.

INT. ROYAL HALL - CONTINUOUS

Rudolf turns from the table to Liutger.

RUDOLF

There. A monk's trick. A woman's
hour. And him.

He points.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)

A landless liar with a hungry hand.
No hall. No seal. No man to answer
for him unless pity is counted as
blood.

Liutger's fingers close around the empty signet. The metal bites his palm.

RUDOLF (CONT'D)

He would sell a cousin for a stool
near Saxons. He would sell his dead
father's name if anyone offered him
pasture.

A Franconian on the bench looks down at his boots.

OTTO

Liutger.

Liutger releases the ring. His palm is marked red.

LIUTGER

The royal horses were to leave by
the east gate.

RUDOLF

Every groom knew that.

LIUTGER

Not every groom knew the remounts
were ordered to the east ford
before sunrise. Six chestnuts and
two greys, no banners, no baggage
carts.

Rudolf's eyes move once toward the stable doors.

LIUTGER (CONT'D)

Dietrich carried the packet because
a boy can be blamed for stolen wax.
He cannot read the route. He can
only obey the man who gives it to
him.

RUDOLF

Your boy steals and now you dress
it in loyalty.

LIUTGER

Your red-braided servant took the
private stair at the psalm hour.
Hidda saw the belt. Lady Gisela
marked the bell. Anselm found the
king's hand copied badly.

Rudolf steps closer.

RUDOLF

You name everything except the
house that fed you.

The words hit harder than the insult. Liutger keeps his eyes
on Otto.

LIUTGER

I name the ford. The hour. The
packet. The messenger. The man who
denied the stair.

Otto studies him over the heads of the hall.

Rudolf has no answer that does not open another door.

INT. ROYAL HALL - BEHIND THE DAIS - MOMENTS LATER

Otto steps behind the hanging cloth of the dais. Two guards,
a clerk, and Anselm follow. The hall noise dulls to a held
murmur.

A mud-spattered SCOUT kneels, breath tearing through him.

SCOUT

Men at the east ford, Majesty.
Hidden below the alder bank. More
horses than traders need.

OTTO

Banners?

SCOUT

None shown.

OTTO

Colors?

SCOUT

Franconian cloaks. Some turned
inside out.

Otto takes the travel list from the clerk.

OTTO

No royal horse leaves east. Send
the crown chest by the high road
with twice the guard and no herald.
My saddle goes last.

CLERK

Majesty, the court will see the
change.

OTTO

Good. They may wonder loudly.

He points to one guard.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Stables. Seize every rider holding
orders not written in Anselm's
hand. Quietly first. Loudly if they
reach a gate.

The guard goes.

OTTO (CONT'D)

You. Franconian lodging. Packets,
spare seals, boots with river mud.
Bring the men, not gossip.

Second guard exits.

Anselm watches Otto cross out the east route with the blunt end of a stylus.

ANSELM

And the duke?

Otto does not answer at once. Beyond the cloth, Rudolf's voice rises and falls.

OTTO

A duke arrested before proof
becomes a martyr before breakfast.

ANSELM

A forged road nearly made you one.

Otto hands the list back.

OTTO

Then we keep breathing until the
right man lies in the right place.

He lifts the hanging cloth and returns to the hall before the murmurs can turn into factions.

INT. ROYAL HALL - CONTINUOUS

Otto comes back into public view. The hall stills by pieces.

A GUARD enters from the rear with a bound MESSENGER whose cheek is scraped raw. The man's boots are wet to the knee.

GUARD

Taken at the stable gate, Majesty.
He carried two route strips sewn
under his cuff.

OTTO

Who lodged you?

The messenger looks at Rudolf. Rudolf gives him nothing.

MESSENGER

Franconian house, lord king. Near
the brew shed. Count Rudolf's men
gave the strips. I did not read
them.

ANSELM

Men who cannot read are very busy
today.

Otto raises a hand. Anselm stops.

OTTO

Open the doors wider.

The ushers hesitate. Cold and courtyard noise pour in as they
drag both leaves fully back.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Let the grooms hear. Let cooks
hear. Let every man with a horse
hear where his king now sits.

He turns to the guard captain.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Bring Duke Eberhard. Not under
spear. Ask him to witness the
examination of his kinsman.

Rudolf's face hardens.

LIUTGER stands alone in the aisle. He does not turn toward
the door.

Boots sound in the courtyard.

DUKE EBERHARD enters wrapped in his dark cloak, boar clasp
bright at his shoulder. His Franconians fill the doorway
behind him, careful not to cross before permission.

He surveys the open doors, the wax table, Rudolf, then
Liutger.

His smile arrives last.

EBERHARD

Majesty. A busy dawn.

OTTO

Duke Eberhard. Your eyes are
welcome.

Eberhard inclines his head. His gaze settles on Liutger.

EBERHARD

My boy.

INT. ROYAL HALL - CONTINUOUS

The words travel through the hall faster than any messenger.

My boy.

Eberhard walks down the aisle with the ease of a lord entering his own supper. He stops close enough to touch Liutger, but does not.

EBERHARD

You have made the king rise early.
Your father hated mornings.

Liutger keeps his hands at his sides.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

He also hated waste.

Rudolf looks between them, seeing shelter.

RUDOLF

My duke, this ward throws filth at
your household to buy himself
favor.

Eberhard does not look away from Liutger.

EBERHARD

Does he.

Otto steps down one stair from the dais.

OTTO

Count Rudolf has denied the stair.
Denied the packet. Denied the false
route.

EBERHARD

A man should deny lies.

Eberhard's fingers find the cloak hem. He presses the sewn cracked coin through the cloth, the small private motion of oath and memory.

Liutger sees it. His breath stops for one count.

OTTO

Liutger of Weilburg. Finish what
you began.

Siegfried watches from the side aisle. Gisela stands in shadow behind Hidda, face still.

Liutger turns to the wax table. Not to Eberhard.

LIUTGER

A copied seal made a false royal
order. A servant in Rudolf's travel
braid carried it by the women's
stair. Dietrich was used to move it
from stable to road.

(MORE)

LIUTGER (CONT'D)

Riders waited at the east ford for
a king who was meant to arrive
without his full guard.

RUDOLF

Say whose riders.

Liutger looks at Rudolf now.

LIUTGER

Men who trusted your packet.

RUDOLF

Say whose house.

Eberhard's smile remains. His thumb presses the hidden coin
harder.

Liutger's empty ring turns against his finger.

LIUTGER

I accuse the order. The route. The
messenger chain. I accuse Count
Rudolf of denying each link before
witnesses.

Rudolf's mouth opens.

Otto cuts him off with one step.

OTTO

Duke Eberhard.

Eberhard releases the cloak hem.

OTTO (CONT'D)

What did your household know?

INT. ROYAL HALL - MORNING

Rudolf stands before the charter table with wax shavings on
his sleeve. Two royal guards hold the captured route strips
open for the hall to see.

Otto remains one step down from the dais. No crown on his
head. The crown chest sits behind him, strapped and guarded.

OTTO

The east ford.

RUDOLF

I know the road. Every man here
knows it.

OTTO

The horses waiting there.

RUDOLF
Not mine.

OTTO
The packet under your travel braid.

RUDOLF
A servant's theft.

BROTHER ANSELM warms the false seal over a candle. The lower-cross nick darkens in the wax.

ANSELM
Copied from a true impression.
Badly served by worse Latin.

A few clerks lower their eyes. The nobles do not move.

RUDOLF
Monks see devils in ink.

OTTO
I see a route I did not order.

Rudolf looks past Otto, past the guards, to Eberhard.

Eberhard gives him nothing. Only the still face of a duke at court.

OTTO (CONT'D)
You denied the stair. Hidda named the belt. Lady Gisela named the hour. The messenger named your lodging.

RUDOLF
Servants name what saves their skins.

OTTO
And counts?

Rudolf's mouth tightens around the answer he cannot spend.

Liutger stands at the side of the table. His right hand closes over his empty ring until the knuckle pales.

Otto lets the silence run through the benches, past Franconian lords, Saxon men, grooms jammed at the open doors.

OTTO (CONT'D)
Duke Eberhard.

Eberhard releases the hem of his cloak.

OTTO (CONT'D)
What did your household know of these orders?

INT. ROYAL HALL - CONTINUOUS

Eberhard turns first to the hall, not to Otto. He gives the benches his profile, the boar clasp at his shoulder catching the candlelight.

EBERHARD

My household knows its prayers, its
rents, its dead.

OTTO

And the false route?

EBERHARD

No order left my hand.

Rudolf blinks. A small animal motion. He looks back to Eberhard for the rest.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

If Count Rudolf carried a private
foolishness, let him answer.
Franconia does not hide in his
sleeve.

RUDOLF

My duke--

EBERHARD

Do not spend my title to mend your
tear.

The words cut Rudolf loose. Men who stood half a pace behind him shift away.

Liutger looks toward Dietrich, brought in under guard near the side door. The boy's lip is split. His wrists are bound with a groom's lead rope.

Liutger does not speak. His eyes go from Dietrich to Eberhard.

Eberhard sees. He holds the gaze.

OTTO

And Liutger of Weilburg?

Eberhard finally looks at him fully. The tenderness on his face is quiet and public.

EBERHARD

My ward brought suspicions to his
king. Alone.

A murmur moves through the open doors and dies under Otto's stare.

OTTO

Alone.

EBERHARD

He has always had a quick ear. Not
always a guided one.

Liutger's fingers open. The ring turns inward again against
his palm.

Rudolf takes one step toward Eberhard. A guard's spear butt
stops him.

RUDOLF

You know who sat in council.

EBERHARD

I know who now stands accused.

Otto watches Eberhard. Then Liutger. Then Rudolf.

OTTO

Good.

The word gives no comfort.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Then Count Rudolf stands without a
duke's shadow.

INT. ROYAL HALL - CHARTER TABLE - MOMENTS LATER

Anselm lays three wax impressions in a row: royal order,
chapel duplicate, false route strip. The nick repeats like a
wound.

OTTO

Read the hand.

ANSELM

The royal order bears my script.
The false route does not. The seal
was stolen in likeness, not in
custody.

RUDOLF

A monk protects his desk.

ANSELM

Gladly. It is better ruled than
your Latin.

A hard breath of laughter breaks from the servants at the
door. Otto kills it with a glance.

OTTO

Dietrich.

The guard shoves the boy forward. Dietrich drops to one knee too fast.

DIETRICH
My lord, I carried what was given.
I did not-- I cannot read the
words.

OTTO
Who gave it?

Dietrich looks at Rudolf, then at Liutger.

DIETRICH
Count Rudolf's man. Red belt. He
said my lord Liutger needed speed.

RUDOLF
Stable boys will say anything under
rope.

Liutger steps closer to the table.

LIUTGER
Cut his rope.

Otto does not move.

LIUTGER (CONT'D)
Please.

That costs him. The hall hears it.

OTTO
You ask for him first.

LIUTGER
He followed a name used against
him.

OTTO
And if I call him still answerable?

LIUTGER
Then bind me beside him. He earned
no noose from this.

Otto studies the boy's torn lip, the rope, the wax.

OTTO
Dietrich served as a misused
messenger. He is released from
Rudolf's charge. He remains under
royal peace until I dismiss him.

The guard cuts the rope. Dietrich's hands shake loose.

DIETRICH

My lord.

He says it to Otto, then to Liutger, not knowing which lord can keep him alive.

OTTO

Count Rudolf will be held for further judgment. His men, his servants, his packets, all taken.

Rudolf spits on the rushes.

RUDOLF

A king made brave by a landless boy.

Otto looks to Liutger.

OTTO

A landless boy made useful by better enemies.

INT. ROYAL HALL - DAIS STEPS - CONTINUOUS

Rudolf is dragged toward the side passage. He twists once toward the Franconian benches.

No one rises.

The doors stay open. The court watches Otto climb the first stair and stop before the royal chair.

OTTO

Liutger of Weilburg.

Liutger approaches. He does not kneel until the last pace. His repaired riding gloves hang from his belt, one finger stitched in dark thread.

OTTO (CONT'D)

You wanted reward named before witnesses.

LIUTGER

I wanted a future with walls.

OTTO

Walls breed private councils.

Liutger looks up.

LIUTGER

Then give me a road.

Otto takes that in. A king counting a knife by its handle.

OTTO

You will serve my court. Messages, names, routes, households that speak too softly. You will report to me, and to Brother Anselm when ink touches the matter.

ANSELM

God help my table.

OTTO

You will sleep under my roof. You will ride where I place you. You will not leave the progress without leave.

LIUTGER

No land.

OTTO

Not today.

A smile starts on some noble's face and dies when Liutger turns his head.

LIUTGER

Where should I stand?

Otto points to the space behind the royal chair. Close enough to hear petitions. Far enough to be watched by every guard on the dais.

OTTO

There.

Liutger rises. He steps around the chair and takes the place. The hall adjusts to the sight of him there.

Otto sits.

Eberhard remains standing at the hall edge, looking at the new arrangement with a hand resting on his boar clasp.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Let supper be set. Let no man say this court was starved by lies.

INT. ROYAL HALL - HALL EDGE - LATER

Servants clear the charter table. Wax flakes stick to the boards. The benches scrape back into supper order.

Liutger steps down from the dais for one breath of space.

Eberhard waits at the edge of the rushes.

EBERHARD

Come here.

Liutger stops two paces away.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

Still counting distances.

LIUTGER

They have kept me fed.

Eberhard reaches out. Liutger lets the hand settle at the back of his neck, the old grip from childhood made gentle for witnesses.

EBERHARD

Your father would have struck me
for leaving you hungry.

LIUTGER

He is dead. Men have done as they
pleased with him.

Eberhard's thumb presses once under Liutger's ear.

EBERHARD

Blood remembers.

LIUTGER

When it is useful.

Eberhard kisses Liutger's brow.

The hall sees it. Grooms at the door. Saxon captains.
Franconian cousins who looked past him at dawn.

Eberhard steps back.

EBERHARD

No nephew of mine stands behind a
Saxon chair.

The words leave Liutger without cover.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

You are stranger to my hearth.

Liutger's mouth opens. The child in the gesture vanishes
before sound comes.

Otto watches from the dais. He does not rescue him.

EBERHARD (CONT'D)

Ask pardon now, and perhaps God
will teach me softness.

Liutger turns his empty ring under his thumb. Then stops
touching it.

LIUTGER

A man must stand somewhere.

Eberhard's face closes. He passes Liutger and walks down the aisle.

His Franconians follow by twos and threes. One of them leaves Eberhard's supper stool where it stands, empty and angled toward the dais.

Liutger remains with the kiss cooling on his skin.

INT. CHAPEL PASSAGE - DUSK

Liutger rinses his brow at a stone basin. The water runs pink from a split at his cuticle, opened by the ring.

Gisela stands under the arch with Hidda behind her. Her psalter is back in her hands, the cut prayer pages hidden beneath the clasp.

GISELA

You washed the wrong place.

Liutger dries his hands on his sleeve.

LIUTGER

The other mark is public property now.

She steps closer. Not close enough to touch.

GISELA

Dietrich lives.

LIUTGER

For tonight.

GISELA

That is more than many bargains buy.

Liutger looks past her. At the far end of the passage, Siegfried waits with two men. He does not call her. He does not need to.

LIUTGER

He will make you pay for the hour you named.

GISELA

He will call it concern.

LIUTGER

I can speak to Otto.

Gisela's fingers tighten on the psalter clasp. Ink stains show beneath her rings.

GISELA

And say what? That I helped you
because your eyes were kind in a
stair? Because you need one thing
in this court that was not bought?

Liutger has no quick answer.

GISELA (CONT'D)

Do not make my help into a claim.

LIUTGER

I have no house to put a claim in.

GISELA

Claim is not possession.

Siegfried shifts at the far end. His hand rests on his sword belt, polite and useless.

Gisela lowers her voice.

GISELA (CONT'D)

Live carefully near chairs. Men
behind them still fall.

She turns before he can answer and walks to Siegfried. Hidda follows.

Siegfried offers his arm. Gisela takes it because the passage is full of eyes.

Liutger stands by the basin until their footsteps fade into the chapel dark.

INT. ROYAL HALL - NIGHT

Supper fills the hall with knives on trenchers, low talk, candle smoke. The court has learned how to eat around fear.

Otto sits in the royal chair. The crown chest rests behind the dais, sealed and strapped for the changed road.

Liutger stands behind him.

No stool. No cup unless called. Every glance finds him and moves away too late.

Anselm eats from a small board near the clerks, guarding the wax impressions under a folded cloth.

Gisela sits beside Siegfried below the women's gallery. She keeps both hands visible on the table. Siegfried leans close and speaks into her ear.

She looks at her trencher, not at Liutger.

A servant carries wine to the Franconian place. He stops before Eberhard's empty stool. The cup trembles, then moves on.

The empty place remains angled toward Otto.

Dietrich appears at the lower tables in a clean tunic too large for him. He sees Liutger and bows from the waist.

Liutger gives him the smallest nod. Enough.

OTTO

The high road before prime.

Liutger bends near the king's shoulder.

LIUTGER

With the crown chest behind the second wagon. No herald. Chestnuts up front if Your Grace wants speed.

OTTO

I want men to wonder where I am after I have passed.

LIUTGER

Then put greys at the ford road. Let them be seen.

Otto cuts a piece of bread. Considers.

OTTO

Tell the marshal.

Liutger steps back into place.

Across the hall, Eberhard's stool waits without a lord.

Liutger looks at it once. Then at Otto's chair in front of him.

His right hand turns. The empty signet faces outward, a blank round mouth in the candlelight.

The nearest courtiers see it.

Liutger keeps his hand still.