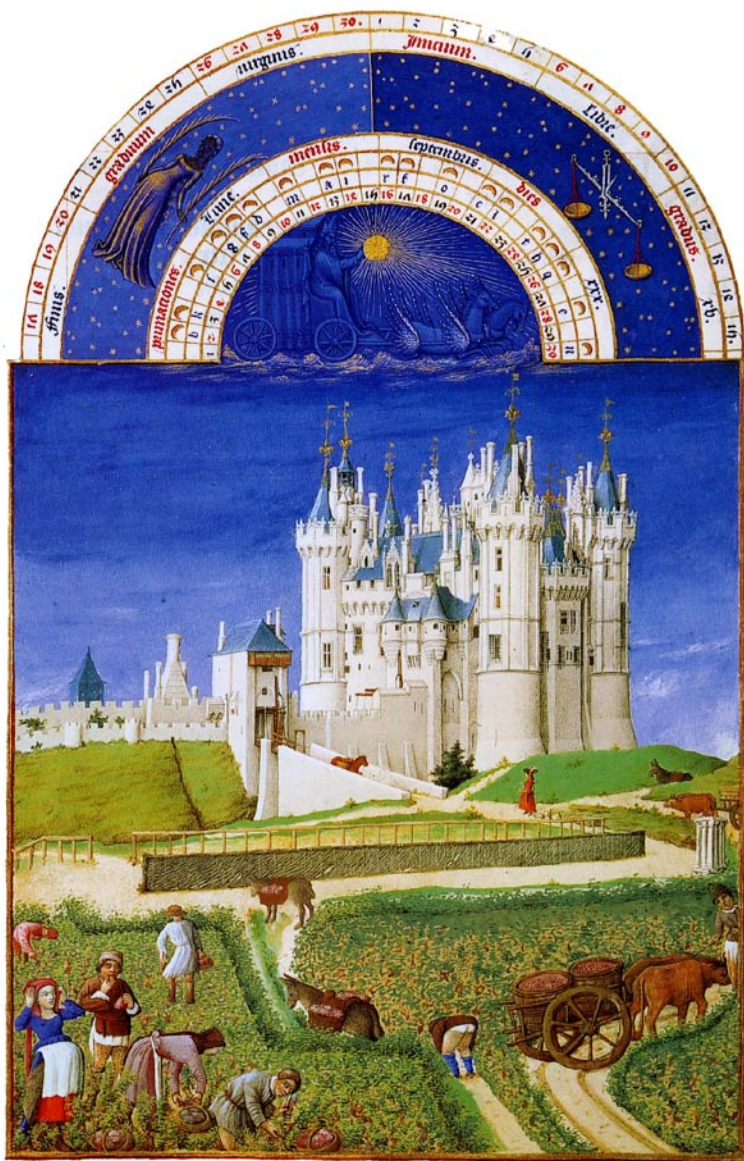


PIG & RABBIT



Jonathan Schütz

They rode through the night, bent forward low over their horses' manes. Sparks showered where hooves fell, iron on stone, but the horsemen did not slow for a moment. The moon glittered on the stream that ran next to the road, and yet they did not raise even their eyes to this beauty, but rode on, ever on, into the night. At the centre of all of them, one rider clutched to himself a bundle, a blanket, something tightly wrapped and precious, so precious that despite the speed he dared ride with only one hand on the reins.

At last, before the dawn began to break, their horses foaming from the constant gallop, they came to a hill and rode up. The lead horse stumbled, the others flowed around it, scarcely breaking their stride, and the stumbling horse was wrenched back under control by its rider. Atop the hill they came to a walled town and, milling around, they struck hard blows on the wooden gate, over and over. Not once did they remain still. The gatekeeper poked his angry, bearded head through the hatch – then flung the gate wide, when he saw who it was. The horses leapt in, and by the time the bemused gatekeeper had slammed the wooden gate shut, they had reached the central palace, dismounted, and hurried through the doors, the precious bundle carried inside.

In the stables, animals and peasants shared straw to sleep on. Someone had a candle-stub, and an unsteady light flickered across the forms, two and four-legged, that were turning back and forth in their fitful sleep. To one side, two creatures were awake together. Maybe once they had been animals and now were human, maybe it was the other way around. For as long as they could remember, they had been together, and for as long as they could remember, they were called Pig and Rabbit, so long, that they couldn't remember if those were their names, or the name of their species.

Pig started at the crash of the gate, and nudged Rabbit. He started.

“What was that?” he demanded.

“Something happening,” said Pig. “Up at the palace.”

“Oh,” said Rabbit. “The palace. Always something happening up there.” He scratched himself behind the ear, first idly, then with more concentration.

“I don’t like it,” said Pig. “What do they think they’re doing, all this coming and going?”

“Of course you don’t like it, “ said Rabbit. “Nobody does. Just because they’re *regal*, just because they’re *aristocrats*, they think they can do as they please.”

“Alright, alright,” said Pig, snuffling around for something to eat. She always ate when she was embarrassed, and she was embarrassed quite often.

“No, I’m serious,” said Rabbit. “I mean, I’ve nothing against royalty, really I haven’t. But sometimes – well, they get ideas above their station.”

Pig snorted with laughter, and spluttered some turnip over a snoring peasant.

The horsemen rushed through the halls and corridors of the palace, lit only by the blue light of the moon through the tiny panes of glass in the windows. Their shoes clattered on the black and white marble squares of the floor.

At the end of a long corridor they reached a door, and threw it open. Beyond it was a narrow spiral staircase, and they hurried up, two in front, two behind, the man holding the bundle in the middle. At the top was another door, outlined in golden light. Here at last all movement stopped, here they knocked, here they waited.

“It’s no good,” said Rabbit. “I can’t sleep.”

“Why not?” asked Pig, although she knew well enough.

“There’s something going on. There’s something going on, and I’m sure it’s not right.” Rabbit chewed his lower lip fretfully.

“Either that, or you just want to know what the lords and ladies are up to.”

“Well, is that so wrong? I’m curious, that’s all.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway, there’s something going on, and I want to know. I’ve a feeling about it, and it’s not a good feeling.”

“So what do you want to do about it?” Pig asked practically.

“What can I do about it? Lie here. Not sleep. Something like that.” Rabbit scowled. “I hate being a peasant.”

“It does stink,” said Pig. “That’s true.”

A snorer rolled over and jerked open an eye. “Can you keep the politics down over there? Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Rabbit glared. “Whatever happened to ‘workers of the world, unite!’?”

The snorer grunted and threw his neighbour’s boot at Rabbit, missing him, but landing it in Pig’s collection of root vegetables. She jumped up.

“Come on,” she said.

Rabbit looked up at her in surprise. “What?”

“Time to go,” she said. “You’re not going to settle until we’ve seen what’s going on. And I’m not going to get any sleep either, not with you antagonising the others, I’m not.”

“Alright,” said Rabbit.

They left the stable into the night.

“Good riddance,” muttered the snorer behind them.

The door opened, casting a golden shaft of light into the stairwell, across the eyes of the horsemen. They were blinded, and barely made out a figure in the light.

“Your Highness?” asked the man with the bundle.

“She’s here,” said the other. “She’s waiting for you, Lord Elmo.”

Elmo entered the chamber, the other horsemen following him in. The lady-in-waiting closed the door behind them.

Pig and Rabbit made their way across the courtyard, and past the town gate. They could hear the gatekeeper muttering in his chamber beneath the giant hinge of the gate. As they rounded the corner, Rabbit stopped.

“It’s dark,” he said. The palace was before them, and true enough, it was shrouded in darkness. In all its thousand windows there was not one light to be seen.

“It’s dead,” said Rabbit. “The palace is dead.”

“Not quite,” said Pig, gesturing with her head. High up in a tower they could see a small window illuminated by the flame of a candle.

“That’s it!” said Rabbit. “That’s where it’s happening.”

He scurried over to the tower wall, but it was sheer and it was high, and Rabbit would never be able to scale such a wall. He looked around for a ladder, for something to climb, but saw nothing. Pig looked at him, then pointed to a large oak tree standing nearby. In a few seconds, they were climbing the tree, though neither was built for tree-climbing. They clambered from branch to branch, making their way up higher and higher, ever upwards to find a point where they would be able to look across and into the small window at the top of the tower.

Beside a screen decorated with embroidered scenes of family life – the family life of the wealthy lords, of course – stood a young woman, her back to the new arrivals in the room. The lady-in-waiting stood to one side, allowing Elmo to pass. He stepped forward a single step, then stopped. In a short second he took in her bowed head, the down on her neck, the glimpse of an ear-lobe, and felt his heart race, his face fill with blood, his throat constrict.

“Elmo,” said the Princess.

“Yes,” he said, wanting to add “Your Highness”, but the phrase caught its heel and tripped before it could enter the space between them.

“You’ve returned,” she continued, still turned away from him. “With success?”

“With success,” he replied.

She turned her head a quarter turn. “Success?” she repeated, breathless. “Really?”

He could hardly hear her soft words for the beating of his heart, for almost catching her glance. “Yes,” he said, holding out the bundle.

Now she turned, her face all excitement. “Show me!” she cried. “Come on!”

Elmo stepped towards her.

The branch they had found bowed alarmingly under their weight, but Pig and Rabbit were able to see directly into the little room.

“Are you happy now?” asked Pig?

“We can see right in!” exclaimed Rabbit. “Right in!”

“Well, I’m glad you’re happy,” said Pig. She was finding it difficult to keep a grip on the branch and her fingers kept slipping off. The branch quivered alarmingly.

“Is that the Princess?” asked Rabbit. “That’s the Princess! Who’s that with her? I don’t recognise him.”

“No idea,” said Pig, her attention on keeping hold of the branch they were on.

“Should we be doing this?” asked Rabbit after a second. “It’s not right, is it, this spying.”

“No,” said Pig, “It’s not. We could go now, if you were ready. Damn!” She had slipped, and steadied herself again.

“Keep still!” said Rabbit. “What’s he holding? He’s got something there. What’s he doing?” He leaned forward, and the branch swayed alarmingly.

Elmo held out the bundle to the Princess – she rushed forward, then stopped short. She hesitated, then took it. It moved, and she shrieked, looking for a panicky, smiling instant at Elmo, who took a step forward. She didn't drop the bundle, however, but pulled at the folds of cloth at one end.

“What is it?” asked Rabbit. He could see the Princess's face lighting up as she inspected the bundle's contents. Something about the way she was holding it, though, gave him an idea. “You know – I know what it is – it's a –”

“He –” the Princess broke off. “It is a he?”

Elmo nodded.

“He's beautiful. Just what I imagined.” She looked fondly down, entirely engrossed.

“I –” he began, but the Princess was not paying him any attention. He gave a slightly forlorn smile. “My work here is done,” he said, and turned to go.

The bundle cooed, and a small, pink arm made its way out of the rags and grasped at the Princess's face. She chuckled.

“I knew it!” cried Rabbit excitedly. “I knew it! Did you see that? Did you see what it is?” He swivelled rapidly round on the branch.

“No!” said Pig, crossly. “I didn't. I was holding on. In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not built for climbing trees, and will you stop jumping around because –”

Because she'd lose her grip. She did, and slid (rather gracelessly, thought Rabbit, involuntarily) off the branch. Relieved of her weight, it catapulted up and sent Rabbit spiralling into the air, way above the treetops. At the apex of his trajectory, rotating gently in the moonlight, he could see beyond the town walls, beyond the shining strip of river, beyond the forest, right the way to the sea, shimmering over to one side, and to the mountains, silhouetted against the stars on the other. It was a shame, Rabbit thought,

that such singular moments are rare and fleeting, and he was consumed by melancholy by this, as well as by the realisation that in a few short seconds, he would come crashing to the ground. His melancholy was only reinforced by a low moan emanating from Pig, who had already reacquainted herself with gravity and the solid earth beneath the tree.

It was fortunate that Rabbit was quite small. He landed on Pig, and bounced off, unharmed. Pig moaned again, more in dolour than in anger.

“It’s a baby!” said Rabbit.

Elmo stopped in his tracks – there was a loud crashing and twanging and moaning going on outside. Quickly, he gestured to his men, and in a flurry of capes and swords, they charged down the stairs. Their drawn swords caught the stone walls of the narrow staircase and they were showered in sparks as they ran.

The Princess looked up to say something about the baby to Elmo, and noticed he was gone. “Oh,” she said, in some surprise. The lady-in-waiting caught her eye, and curtsied, but the Princess ignored her, and she rolled her eyes before starting tidying up.

Elmo and his men ran over to the oak tree, and at its foot found Pig and Rabbit lying there, face up to the stars.

“What are you doing, spying on the Princess?” said Elmo, threateningly.

“Not spying!” said Pig, fretfully.

“Baby!” said Rabbit. “Barren Princess, got baby! Can’t be hers!”

“The Princess? Barren? Ha!” cried Elmo, but his cry was false. Even he recognised that. “How do you know?”

Rabbit sat up and rubbed his elbows, on which he had landed. “Oh, everyone knows. Common knowledge. And you don’t get more common than us!” He laughed ingratiatingly.

Pig looked at him crossly. “Speak for yourself!” Rabbit laughed again, even more ingratiatingly.

Elmo was troubled, and Rabbit decided to be decisive.

“Well, if that’s all, we’ll be off –” He stood up and pulled Pig – with an effort – to her feet.

“Oh, no, I don’t think so,” said Elmo, out-decisiving Rabbit. “You’ll be coming along with us, while I think what’s to be done.”

Rabbit looked around, thinking of running. Running he was good at. And jumping. But Elmo’s men had already circled round behind them, and they were caught. Maybe he could have jumped over their heads if he had been alone – but he had no intention of leaving Pig alone with them.

“Oh, this is wonderful,” said Pig, as they were marched into the palace. “You’ve got us arrested.”

“What are you complaining about?” asked Rabbit, as they were marched down a long corridor. “You’ve always wanted to see the inside of the palace.”

“Well, it’s not quite as I imagined it,” said Pig, as they were marched into a dungeon. “I was more thinking of staterooms. Silk, velvet, jewels, gold. Opulence. Luxury. Servants.”

“I agree,” said Rabbit, looking around the dank cell as the door slammed shut and the bolt was thrown heavily shut. “It’s a bit of a let-down. Though nothing a spot of paint couldn’t cheer up.”

Pig sat on the floor. “Don’t think dungeons are meant to be cheerful,” she said.

“You’re probably right,” said Rabbit. “Still, we can probably get some sleep – at least nobody’s snoring.”

Lord Elmo scratched his head as he stood outside the dungeon door. This was turning out to be a strange evening. All in all, now would be a good time to eat. He said as much to his men, and they broke out in grins. They turned, and their capes billowed. This irritated Elmo – why all the drama every time they changed direction? He pulled his own cape off and slung it over his arm. That was better.

Soon, he and his men were seated around a long wooden table in the kitchen. Their swords were propped together in a spindly pyramid, all their cloaks flung over chairs. They had stoked the fire, and

raided every pantry they could find, and put together a makeshift feast. Elmo wasn't convinced that beans were the best idea, especially if there was any amount of riding in the near future, but beans there were aplenty, and they'd done a good night's work. Hang the consequences, he thought recklessly.

The corridors of the castle were empty but for the moonlight. Peace descended across the whole realm – it was dead of night. And then the silence and the well-being were torn apart. A cry went up, a single cry, gentle at first, but becoming ever louder and more insistent. The cry echoed around the corridors, it bounced off the stone walls, passed through doors and up the chimneys, penetrated floor after floor of the castle, until it rattled the windows in the highest tower and the crockery in the deepest kitchen. It even percolated into Rabbit's dream, destroying in a wisp of steam his vision of green fields and sunshine, of an unnamed lover and an overwhelming sense that all was as it should be. His eyes opened, and he sat up and listened to the cry.

In the kitchen, Elmo's men were mostly asleep, with their heads on the table. One had his back to a pillar and his face to the fire, and was playing a wistful quietly on a small guitar. Elmo was listening, his eyes drooping as he sank slowly into sleep. The cry cut into the kitchen, and the musician looked up, and then stopped playing. Elmo heard the cry, but didn't register what it was for a moment through his tiredness, then jumped up. He paused, and the cry came again, this time stronger. He left the kitchen, as ever with purpose in his stride.

In the tower, the Princess was standing above a cradle, a candle in one hand. She stared into the cradle helplessly, and reached into the cradle tentatively with the other hand. The cry increased, and she snatched her hand back. She was muttering to herself: "What should I do? What should I do?"

The door opened and Elmo entered. The Princess looked to him hopefully – he was always reliable, Elmo always knew what to do. But his face took on a reflection of her own expression and he ground to a halt some paces from her.

Behind the Princess, the lady-in-waiting appeared, wrapped in night garments and a blanket. Losing patience, she brushed past the Princess, lifted the bundle from the cradle, and inspected it fore and aft. She then held it out to the Princess, who took it gingerly.

“Change,” said the lady-in-waiting. “Change and feed.”

She turned and left. The Princess looked at Elmo, and Elmo looked at her. The cry went up again, and they both looked at the baby.

Pig stirred from her sleep. She couldn't see Rabbit, and for a moment was consumed by panic. But a scratching noise behind her alerted her to his presence. He was crouching in the dim light next to the door.

“What are you doing?” she asked. At that moment, the cry reverberated again along the passage outside the dungeon, battered through the heavy door and into her brain. “What was *that?*” she asked.

“You don't know, and you a female and all?” said Rabbit, sardonically. He didn't even look up from what he was doing.

“Good lungs,” said Pig, impressed. “So what are you doing?”

“Getting us out of here,” said Rabbit. “You want to stay?”

“No, no,” said Pig. “Anything I can do?”

Rabbit shook his head. He was concentrating. The bit of wire and stick he had found in the shockingly untidy cell were thrust into the lock, and he was putting all his years of ill-gotten skill and flirtation with seedy underground types to the best use he knew how. The lock, being a palace lock, was proving resistant: royalty always wanted those it locked up to remain locked up. But Rabbit would find a way. Rabbit always found a way. It was what he was good at. And sure enough, within minutes, the door sprang open. Rabbit turned around to receive adulation. Pig was asleep.

“Hey!” he said, annoyed. “Wake up! We're out!”

Pig shifted disgruntledly. Rabbit recognised her state. She was incapable of rational thought – or even waking at all – when she had once launched herself into second sleep. Her first awakening had been chance, not to be repeated. Rabbit knew all this, and

knowing all this still went to her side and pulled at her, trying to get her to stand up.

“Oh come on,” he half-whispered, to himself as much as to her. “We’ve got to go – now!”

Slowly, hardly conscious, Pig rose, and leaning on Rabbit, half-pushing him to the floor, she allowed herself to be led from the cell into the flickering light of the empty dungeons. Step by step, Rabbit led her along, past the other cells and heavy doors which filled this lowest level of the castle. Rabbit was greeted by several acquaintances sealed into cells. He nodded in passing, but knew that if they were to get out, he would have to propel them both ever forward. Stopping to chat with colleagues fallen on hard times was unlikely to help. Some kindly gave directions for them to find their way out of the maze that was the dungeon, but Rabbit preferred to rely on his instincts. It wouldn’t have been the first time that blind trust had got him into trouble.

At last they came to a flight of stairs and emerged into a palace corridor. Rabbit’s eyes took a moment to adjust to the cool silver moonlight, and while they paused, Pig started to slip from his grasp on the polished marble floor. He struggled to keep her upright, but his own feet found little purchase, and slowly and inevitably they sank down towards the floor. And then the cry went up again, echoing around the corridor, much louder than they had heard it before. Pig started awake, as awake as if sleep had never been part of the condition of living. She jerked herself upright and Rabbit tumbled to the floor.

“Come on,” she said urgently. “This way!”

Rabbit stared at her, then scabbled upright and followed her. He could barely keep up, and soon they were in the main hallway, next to the castle’s front door. Rabbit hurried over and began to heave at the heavy bolt.

“Here, give me a hand with this,” he said. When Pig didn’t, he looked over his shoulder. She was wandering away, her head cocked, listening to the cry.

“It’s coming from over here,” she said.

“Who cares? Let’s get out of here before they find us!” Rabbit pulled and pulled at the bolt, but it still wouldn’t move.

“Look – there’s a door!”

“There’s a door here, too, and if we go through it we’re free! Come on, will you!”

But Pig had opened the door, and found the spiral staircase. The cry came bouncing down like a rubber ball, ricocheting from the steps and walls.

“What are you *doing*?” cried Rabbit as she disappeared through the door and started to climb the stairs. “Oh, for heaven’s sake!” It was clear that Fate wasn’t letting him complete the daring escape today, and he rushed off after Pig.

She had moved with surprising agility, and by the time he had caught up with her, she was standing at the door to the chamber at the top of the tower. She was regarding Elmo and the Princess, who were standing there looking at the baby helplessly. Rabbit made a grab for her sleeve, but she had already stepped into the room.

“Give me that!” she said. The Princess screamed, and Elmo stepped in front of her protectively. He went for his sword but found it not at his side. He must have left it in the kitchen, warming itself in front of the fire. Rabbit put his head in his hands.

Pig strode forward and brushed Elmo aside. “Give me that,” she said again, and took the baby from the Princess. She made short work of dealing with the baby, changing it and giving it a bottle. Elmo and the Princess looked on in astonishment.

“If you’re going to have one of these,” Pig said, dumping the now quiet baby, attached to its bottle, in the Princess’s arms, “You’re going to have to learn how to do this kind of stuff.”

“Oh,” said the Princess. After a moment, she said, “That was amazing.” She thought some more. “Who are you?”

Rabbit bounded into the room, and Elmo went for his sword again. “She’s with me!” he cried.

“I’m Pig,” said Pig. “This is Rabbit. We live,” gesturing at the window, “out there. Your friend here put us in the dungeon.”

“He did?” The Princess frowned. “Why?”

Rabbit and Pig looked at Elmo for an answer. He wished he had a cloak to wrap around himself right now, but it too was still enjoying the kitchen fire. He shrugged.

The baby pushed away the bottle. “Oh,” said the Princess again.

“It’s OK,” said Pig. “He’s just had enough. You can put him back to bed.”

All of them watched as she laid the baby down. Elmo tried not to catch Rabbit’s eye.

“So,” said Pig. “You know you’re going to have to give him back.”

“What do you mean?” said the Princess. “He’s mine.”

Pig just looked at her.

“He’s mine,” insisted the Princess. “And I’m going back to bed now. You can watch over him.”

“I don’t think that’s a good –” began Elmo, but a look from the Princess quelled him.

“We’ll watch him,” said Pig.

The Princess swept into her bedchamber and closed the door. Pig went and sat next to the cradle, and Rabbit positioned himself next to the fire. Elmo sighed, and sat down in front of the door.

“Just don’t try anything,” he said.

Rabbit smiled at him, and picked at his teeth with the bit of wire he had found in the cell.

Rabbit woke when Pig kicked him. “Get up,” she hissed. He tried to focus. It was getting light outside, and the fire had died down. “We’re leaving!” she whispered.

“We are?” Rabbit had never spent a night in a royal chamber before, and he wasn’t keen to leave it voluntarily. He’d naturally assumed that he was going to be dragged out by armed guards, while he screamed and tore at the tapestries. He’d been quite looking forward to the scene. Then he noticed what Pig had in her arms.

“Oh no,” he said. “Please tell me that isn’t –”

“Yes,” said Pig. “It is.”

“What do you think you’re doing? Do you want to get us both killed?” Rabbit began to raise his voice.

“Shhh!” She pointed to Elmo, who was slumped in front of the door, his jaw unattractively slack.

“Don’t tell me you –”

“No, of course I didn’t!” said Pig, outraged. “He’s just asleep! Come on, let’s go!”

“Not with that! What are you doing with it?”

“Somewhere someone wants him back. So we’re going to take him to them.”

“We’re going to die,” said Rabbit. He knew that there was no point arguing with Pig, though, because now she had set her mind on it, nothing would ever stop her.

Cautiously they stepped over Elmo and tried to open the door. It thumped against his head. Pig and Rabbit froze. Within his slumber, Elmo felt the percussion like a distant drum, and in that deep place he decided not to wake. It had been a long day. A long week. He turned, and his nose nudged the door shut again.

“Now what?” hissed Rabbit.

Pig was already by the window. “We go this way,” she said, opening it. A flurry of bird-song floated in with a cool gust of morning air.

Rabbit joined her and looked down the sheer face of the tower, to the distant, hard-looking ground. “Oh no,” he said, backing away. “I already fell out of a tree. I’m not jumping out of a tower.”

“Well, find something for us to climb down with, then!”

Pig began tying and tucking the bundle with the baby into her less than clean garment. The baby gurgled happily. Rabbit cast around for something to use for a rope. Pig nodded towards a chest of drawers. “Try that.”

Rabbit opened the top drawer, then the others. “Just underwear,” he said. He lifted out a tiny, silky piece of almost nothing. “Wish I’d found this before...” He flexed it between his fingers.

“Come on, that’ll do!” whispered Pig, briskly. “Tie them together!”

Rabbit started to protest, then did as he was told. Quickly he knotted together twenty sets of the underwear.

“Is that enough?” asked Pig.

“It’ll have to be – it’s all there is.” He looped the end pair of knickers over the raised leg of a statue representing a maiden fleeing from a lusty Greek god and threw the makeshift rope out of the window. Then neither of them moved.

“Well, go on!” said Pig.

“What? This is your idea!” protested Rabbit.

“I’ve got the baby, and you tied the knots. Go on, out you go!” Pig shoed him to the window. Nervously Rabbit climbed onto the ledge. He took hold of the silky rope and lost his footing. He slipped off the edge, and the slack whistled out of the window after him. The loop over the statue held, and the rope tautened, and he bounced – the underwear was all elasticated. He steadied himself on the wall. “It’s good!” he called up to Pig.

“Alright,” she said. “Keep still.”

She clambered out, then took hold of the rope above him. As she let the rope take her weight, it stretched and Rabbit squeaked in alarm as he dropped. But then she started to descend, and Rabbit moved ahead of her. Soon they approached the bottom and Rabbit was relieved as his feet touched solid ground – there had been no mishaps! Extraordinary.

“Keep hold of the rope while I get off,” said Pig. Rabbit did as he was told, then – just too late – as she got off it, he realised what was about to happen. He had no time to let go, however, as the underwear rope, stretched down by Pig’s bulk, snapped back upwards, taking him with it. Halfway up the tower the underwear slipped from his grasp, and he continued upwards for a while. The familiar melancholy assailed him again, even though he now had the opportunity to compare his previous, night-time view with the day-time version. Indeed, the mountains were now beautifully fringed with red, and the sky and the water contained a whole range of colours, from blue to yellow – a faint, delicate shade almost too shy to show its face. But Rabbit scarcely acknowledged it. He was battling with a more profound question, one which touched his very existence. Why was it, he wondered, that Fate so hated him? Why

was it that it sent him spiralling into the air at every opportunity, when it knew – Fate being all-knowing and all-seeing – that that which ascends must inevitably descend, especially when it was a ground-based Rabbit? Was this a reminder of the inevitability of the unpredictable, a further proof of the futility of all endeavour, or simply a lesson in elementary physics? Rabbit was unable to decide. He was descending by now, and philosophy would soon have to give way to the cold, hard reality that was the ground. He had rotated so that he was facing downwards, and he saw Pig’s alarmed face heading rapidly towards him.

At the last moment before impact, she stepped smartly aside. She had the baby to think of, and she was breaking no-one’s fall.

Rabbit hit the ground with a thud. This time there was no bounce. There was silence. Then he picked himself up and shook some earth out of his ears.

“Are you –” began Pig, but he held up a hand to ward off the enquiry. His movements were rather stiff.

“Shall we go?” he suggested decorously. They set off hurriedly down to the gates, as palace workers trudged in the opposite direction, ready for a day’s toil. They hammered at the gates, and the gatekeeper showed his face.

“What’s all the damn noise about?” he asked.

“No idea,” said Rabbit.

“Never any peace,” grumbled the gatekeeper. He set about opening the gates for the day.

“You’re right there,” said Rabbit. He planted his thumbs in the small of his back, arched and pushed. There was a loud, sequential crunching sound. “Ahh,” he said with relief. “That’s better.”

Pig hastened through the open gate and onto the road beyond. Rabbit chased after her.

The sun rose into the sky and splashed onto Elmo’s face, but still he slept. Until a piercing scream tore across the morning. He opened his eyes. The Princess stood above him. Before anything else, he noticed that she was wearing a filmy, almost transparent nightdress, and, he noticed, it was backlit from the open window.

For a fraction of a second he enjoyed the view. Then she screamed again.

Someone tried to get in through the door. It was still blocked by Elmo's head, and it hit him smartly a couple of times before he could get up and the Princess's lady-in-waiting could tumble in. She took in the scene at a glance – the Princess in her nightgown, Elmo in some undress standing before her, and came to exactly the wrong conclusion. She thumped Elmo with all her might.

“Ow,” he said. “What was that for!?” The lady-in-waiting continued to thump him until the Princess, who was paying attention to neither of them, screamed again. The lady-in-waiting stopped thumping Elmo, and he stopped defending himself, and both looked at her. She was staring at the empty cradle.

“Oh good heavens,” said the lady-in-waiting. “You've lost him.”

A surge of energy like guilty pleasure swept through Elmo. He could be a man of action again. There were things to be done, and that's what he did. Things. Pretty well, too, or he wouldn't have got to where he was today. Up a tower with a closeted Princess wearing very little and standing against the light. He shook his head and tried to focus.

“Quick,” he said to the lady-in-waiting. “Get my men.” She almost slipped down the polished stone stairs in her haste. Elmo went to the window. He pulled at the rope and felt its silkiness. Curious he looked at it, then realised what it was made from and dropped it hastily. It unhooked from the statue's leg and slid out of the window to the ground below. A group of peasants appeared from nowhere to investigate. He swivelled quickly round.

“Don't worry,” he said to the stricken Princess. “They can't be far. I'll get them back for you.”

She looked at him sharply. “Yes, you will. And to make sure, I'm coming with you. Give me your trousers.”

Elmo wasn't sure he had heard right. In his surprise he belched. ‘Damn those beans,’ he thought. “What?” he said.

“Give me your trousers. If I'm going to ride with you, I need trousers. And I don't have any.” She gestured at him. Slowly, he took off his trousers, and held them out to the Princess. A cool draught played about his knees from the open window.

The Princess looked in her drawer. “Where’s my underwear?” she asked. Elmo shrugged. She shrugged too, then quickly pulled on the trousers and tucked the nightdress into them. Behind Elmo, who was captivated by this action and the sudden, brief glimpse of leg it gave him, the door was filled with his men. They had seemed fresher. One of them snickered at seeing Elmo in his trouserless condition. Elmo wheeled.

“To horse,” he ordered. He pointed to the nearest. “And you, give me your trousers.”

“But it wasn’t me who –” the man protested. Elmo was obdurate, and the man acquiesced, casting a black look at the sniggering one, who sniggered again now.

Within a few moments they were all mounted, the Princess with Elmo on his horse, behind him, holding on to him firmly. They galloped out of the palace grounds, scattering the peasants from the foot of the tower. Each one, the Princess noticed, had a piece of silken underwear in their hands.

Pig was marching down the road with the baby in her arms. Rabbit lolloped after her, already tired in the sun.

“Do you know where we’re going?” he asked Pig.

“No,” she said, marching on. “But I’ll know when we get there.”

“So how do you know this is the right way?” asked Rabbit.

“I just do,” she said.

They walked in silence and the sun rose higher and beat down on them. After a while, Rabbit squinted at the road ahead.

“Look,” he said.

There was something dark in the haze. As they approached, they could see it was a vast column of men carrying spades and other digging equipment. Pig and Rabbit stood aside to let them pass. They were all dirty, and their eyes shone out of their dark, smudged, gleaming faces. Rabbit nodded to them as they walked by, and one or two nodded back.

“Strange,” said Pig. “They’re not talking.” And so they weren’t – they were marching in silence. At the end of the column a man

with a big, grey beard looked at them, then stopped and brought out a water bottle, which Pig gratefully took, sprinkling some drops on the baby's head before taking a swig herself and handing it over to Rabbit.

"You going that way?" asked the man with the beard, gesturing with his head the way he had come.

"Ask her," said Rabbit, nodding at Pig.

"Yes," she said.

"Well, you don't want to be going that way. We just finished the dam. The waters are rising. It's not safe down there."

"Well, it's where we're going."

The man took his bottle back. "Good luck," he said, with a shake of his head, and rejoined the column.

Pig and Rabbit set off again. Rabbit was thinking about what the man had said.

"You know, I can't swim," he said.

"Neither can I," said Pig. "Don't worry – it's not so far, now."

They set out into the valley ahead.

As they rode, Elmo could feel the Princess pressing into his back, holding tight, her hair blowing against his cheek, her breath in his ear. The reins slackened in his hand, and the horse slowed.

"You know I haven't been out of the tower for twenty years," she breathed into his ear. "Faster, Elmo. Go faster."

He nodded, and urged the horse on, the other horsemen behind.

It was now late afternoon. Rabbit looked around at the landscape through which they were descending. Little trees with twisted trunks were dotted about, bushes like round cushions, and across the meadows, little flowers coloured the grass red in swathes. It was quiet, as if the birds had also been given notice and flown to safer ground elsewhere. He looked behind him at the long road they had walked. In the distance he could just make out the dam-workers

about to pass over the crest of the hill. Suddenly their black mass boiled and scattered, riven in two as if by a sharp knife. He squinted harder, then realised what it was. Horsemen.

“They’re coming,” he said. “They’ve found us.”

“Don’t worry,” said Pig. “We’re nearly there.”

“Which you’ve been saying for hours. I’m not convinced.”

“Well,” said Pig as they turned the corner, “be convinced.”

Ahead was the valley floor. A lake was visibly rising, and next to it, in the shade, was a castle, its door hanging open and the roof in ruins.

“We’re here.”

Rabbit shrugged. If she was mad, she was mad. There was not a lot he could do about it. You make your bed and sleep in it. You can’t have your cake and eat it. The proof of the pudding... Rabbit realised he was very hungry.

“I’m hungry,” he announced. Pig ignored him, as she had so many times in the past.

They walked up the road to the castle. It must have been beautiful once, thought Pig. Beside the castle there was a bench, and on it sat a young man – to judge by his outfit, a prince. Looking even more closely, a poor prince, because the silk and samite were all worn, the tabard had soup stains, and – Rabbit assumed, because he couldn’t see – the seat of his hose was all shiny. He also seemed depressed, as he didn’t raise his head when the two odd figures with their bundle approached. They paused a moment, to decide the correct etiquette in the circumstances. Then Rabbit took the plunge.

“Got a turnip?” he asked.

The Prince raised his head.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “Don’t you know it’s all going to be underwater in a few hours?”

“Yes,” said Pig.

“We’ve got a delivery,” said Rabbit.

“Ah,” said the Prince, losing interest.

“What’s a nice-looking young man like you doing moping around here?” asked Pig. Rabbit was surprised by this way of speaking.

“Nice-looking?” he said.

“Leave me alone,” said the Prince. “And save yourselves while you still can.”

“Oh don’t be so melodramatic,” said Pig. She stepped forward, and splashed. The water had risen up to them already.

“Ha,” said the Prince. Pig sat down beside him. Suddenly the Prince felt like talking. This was the effect Pig had on people. Sometimes.

“Is that a baby?” asked the Prince.

“Yes,” said Pig.

“Nice. You’re lucky.”

“Oh, he’s not mine,” said Pig. “He’s sort of – borrowed.”

“Aha,” said the Prince, a little nonplussed. After a pause he said, “You see this?” He gestured at the land around.

“Yes,” said Pig. “Beautiful.”

Rabbit decided to poke around in case he could find a turnip. He headed for the castle.

“It’s all I have,” said the Prince. “And soon it’ll be under the water.”

“Can’t you just buy yourself another castle somewhere else?” called Rabbit, pulling his head from a barrel near the door.

“If only it were that simple,” said the Prince. “I have no money. Just this. And soon it’ll all be gone. It’s progress, they tell me. We need dams, they said. I told them we need beautiful countryside, too, but they said that countryside wasn’t progress.”

“It’s probably not,” said Pig.

“So I made sure everyone left. They packed everything up and went to live with their families or friends in other places. What little I had, I gave it to them. I hope it helped.”

“What about you?”

“Yes, what about you?” echoed Rabbit.

“No family. Nothing except what’s here.” The Prince looked mournfully into the water. Rabbit rolled his eyes upwards and went through the door into the castle.

“So who’s that?” asked Pig.

“Who’s what?” asked the Prince, curiously. Pig pointed. A little way along was a pile of rags lying near the water. Every so often, it moved.

“Good God,” said the Prince. He jumped up and ran over. He picked up the pile of rags – it could just stand on its own two feet. It was a girl.

“Good God,” said the Prince again. “It’s a peasant.”

“I know someone who’d say that didn’t matter that much. Especially if I were a prince with nothing but an underwater castle...” said Pig.

“Can you stand?” the Prince asked the girl. She nodded shakily. Then she started crying and the Prince had to catch her before she fell back to the ground. He helped her to the seat next to Pig, where she sat and slumped against him.

“Why on earth didn’t you go with the others?” he asked. “You’ve got to get out of here before the water covers us all.”

She shook her head. “No life. Not worth living. I gave him away. Now no life. I shouldn’t have given him away. No husband left, you see – an accident. So let the waters take me. I gave him life, then I gave him away.”

Pig’s bundle stirred, murmured and stuck out a hand. The peasant girl looked at it in shock, then Pig smiled, and held out the baby. With a sob, the girl grabbed it, pulled back the cloth around the baby’s face. Now she was quiet.

“How did you – find him?” She seemed not to be able to believe what was happening.

“I’m someone who believes in second chances,” said Pig. “Your turn to have one.”

“Thankyou,” she breathed.

The Prince smiled and put his arm around her.

Rabbit poked his head out of an upper window in the castle and called down to them. "Did you know we're on an island now?"

It was true. The water had cut them off on all sides.

Pig and the Prince exchanged a glance.

"We've got to save them," the Prince said, and Pig nodded.

Elmo was still lost in the motion of the ride and the clasp of the Princess when the foremost of his men called back. "They're there!"

The horses took them down the hill and round the corner. There ahead was a castle, entirely surrounded by water. The horses plunged to the water's edge, then shied up and back, refusing to go further. Elmo and the Princess stared at the three figures they saw in front of the castle. Another figure leaning out of the window called to the ones below. "We've got company!"

Elmo saw it was Rabbit. Below, Pig pushed the Prince, the girl and the baby forward. Elmo recognised the girl.

"She's got my baby!" said the Princess. "Go and get it!"

Elmo had a sinking feeling. Literally. "I can't," he said, the man of action defeated.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Can't swim," he muttered.

"Oh, good heavens!" She was exasperated.

Elmo turned to his men, who either shrugged or looked at the sky.

"What? None of you can swim?" cried the Princess, disbelieving.

"We're cavalry," said Elmo. "Do stuff on horses. Not much swimming needed in our line of work."

"Agh!" The Princess moved beyond exasperation.

The water was now rushing in faster than ever. Elmo and the Princess watched Pig, the Prince and the girl back away from the rising water.

“They’re in danger!” said the Princess, forgetting her own fury. “What are we going to do?”

Elmo shook his head. “I don’t know.” The horses edged backwards from the advancing water.

The island was almost not there any more. Pig, the Prince and the girl came into the castle as the water lapped around the floor and they started up the stairs, only just keeping ahead of the accelerating water. They met Rabbit on the landing.

“This isn’t good,” he said. “Not good at all.”

“You’re right there, my friend,” said the Prince. “It’s not good.”

And still the water rose. And still they climbed the stairs.

On the bank, the Princess craned to see, but could only see the water rising up the sides of the castle.

“What are they going to do?” she fretted. Elmo shrugged helplessly.

Rabbit was tired of stairs. “Oh let me die here, just so there aren’t any more stairs to climb.” He sat down and let the Prince and the girl step over him. Pig kicked him.

“Keep moving,” she said. “We’re going up. Maybe there’s a turnip somewhere around.”

“True,” said Rabbit pensively. “Let’s go, then.” He got up, and climbed further, overtaking the others again. Strange, he thought, how the thought of turnips gave you more energy than actually eating one did.

And then there were no more stairs.

“This really isn’t good,” said Rabbit. “I suppose we should have thought of this.”

There was a little door ahead. “Where does that go?” he asked. The Prince shook his head. Rabbit opened the door and poked his

head through. “Good news,” he called back over his shoulder. “More stairs.”

They tumbled through as the water trickled around their ankles. There were only six more steps, though, up a little ladder, and then they found themselves in a dark roof-space. Rabbit banged his head on one of the rafters.

“Well, folks,” he said. “This is it. End of the line. But damned if I’m going to go in the dark.” He seized a handy axe and laid to the wall. In seconds, he had knocked a huge hole and the sunshine blazed through. “Oh, that’s good,” he said. He turned around and saw the others all staring at something in the roof-space that the light had revealed.

“I’d forgotten all about that,” said the Prince.

The Princess had been on tenterhooks the past few minutes while the others had disappeared into the castle. And then she pointed. “Look, look!” she grasped Elmo’s arm. A hole suddenly appeared in the roof and a small figure could be seen embracing the sunshine. Rabbit. Then he disappeared inside again. The water was up to the edge of the hole now.

“What are they doing?” asked the Princess. And then something strange happened. Something dark floated out of the hole in the roof onto the surface of the lake. “Look!” she cried again.

“What kind of a family keeps a boat in the attic?” asked Rabbit, sitting at the front. The Prince, rowing, said nothing. Pig just smiled a little smile, as though she had always known the boat was there.

“Which way?” said the Prince. Pig pointed to the opposite bank to the one from which Elmo and the Princess were watching them. The Prince nodded and rowed on. The girl checked to make sure the baby was fine, and he smiled at her.

“Oh, they’re alright!” cried the Princess with relief, and she hugged Elmo in her excitement. And then it happened – without thinking, they kissed. Then they broke away in surprise, before doing it

again. It was some moments before they came up for air again, during which Elmo's men whistled, looked away ostentatiously or played stone, paper, scissors.

"Why did I never see you?" asked the Princess, caressing his face.

"I don't know," replied Elmo. "I was always there."

"Yes," she said. "You were."

When they finally looked back to the boat, it had reached the other bank. Rabbit jumped out and pulled it a little way onto land. The Prince helped the girl climb out, and then stood beside her with his arm around her.

"She looks happy," said the Princess. Elmo nodded and smiled. She waved across the water to them, and one – Pig or Rabbit – waved back.

"I'm glad you came out of your tower," said Elmo.

"So am I," said the Princess.

Pig smiled at the Prince. "Seems you do have a family after all."

"Seems that way," he said. "I'll take her to find the others. They'll be worried. And maybe I'll stay with them. If they'll let me."

"Oh, I think they will," said Pig.

The Prince and the girl began to walk over the hill. He turned back to them after a moment.

"Thankyou – for making me believe in second chances and happy endings," he said, and then they walked on.

Rabbit waved goodbye, then turned back the other way. On the other side of the lake, Elmo and the Princess were embracing again. And then their horse wheeled, and with the other horsemen behind them, they rode off over the brow of the hill into another life.

"So, what now?" asked Rabbit. "What do we do now? Where do we go?"

Pig thought in silence, then said, "Can we stay here for a while?"

“Alright,” said Rabbit. They sat back down in the boat, and while Pig stared into the water with an unusual, distant look in her eye, Rabbit tried not to think of all the turnips he had managed not to eat that day. Talking would keep his mind off it, he felt.

“What’s all this pairing off going on?” asked Rabbit. “What’s wrong with being single? I like the life of the loner. Striking out alone on the path of life, not answering to anyone. Adventure, the unpredictable, something new around every corner...”

While he talked, unheeding, Pig slowly let herself slide into the water. She didn’t struggle or try to swim, but simply went down. The water covered her head, rushed into her ears bringing a loud silence and drowning Rabbit’s words. The water was cool and pleasant and brought with it a welcome calm as the light slowly faded. And then a hairy hand grabbed the neck of her dress and pulled her coughing and gasping back into the daylight. With difficulty Rabbit hauled her onto the bank and dropped her there, dropping himself beside her.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

Pig shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “I really don’t know.”

“Well, don’t scare me like that!”

After a moment, she rolled onto her side and looked at him. “When was the last time you were alone?” she asked.

He thought about it, then said, “I can’t remember. We’ve always been together, haven’t we?”

“Doesn’t that worry you?”

“Should it?” Rabbit was more worried that *she* seemed worried by it.

Pig shrugged. “I suppose not.”

“There are worse things than being together.”

Pig nodded. “You’re right. For a wonder.”

Rabbit was relieved that her sarcasm was returning to her as she dried off. Then he noticed something. “Oh, look,” he said. “I think the water’s stopped rising.”

“Yes, I think it has,” said Pig. “At last.”

And Rabbit was never able to decide whether she'd been speaking metaphorically.

Some hours later, Pig and Rabbit still sat side by side at the edge of the lake. And although nothing had stood in the way of progress, it was beautiful. A silence had fallen pleasantly across them, and the sun bathed them in warming rays as it headed down towards the water.

Footsteps approached. Rabbit swivelled his ears indolently round. Two of them, different weights, but neither creeping, or hurrying, no danger. He didn't bother to turn his head. The footsteps ceased close behind them, and after a second, there was the clearing of a throat.

Behind them were standing the odd pair they had seen earlier in passing. One was rounded, with a big round face and big staring eyes, a hooked nose. His companion had a jutting jaw and a stoop. Her arms were long, and hung limply by her side.

"Greetings," said the one with the staring eyes politely.

Rabbit nodded.

"Allow me to present ourselves," he continued, seemingly glad that communication had been initiated. "My name is Owl. And this –" He indicated his companion. "This is Monkey."

Monkey raised a limp hand in a half-hearted wave.

"You'll have to forgive her," said Owl, confidently. "She gets a little carried away from time to time."

Pig raised an eyebrow.

"We're on our way to the town," said Owl, unstoppably.

"Why d'you want to *go there*?" asked Rabbit, slightly scornfully.

"There's supposed to be lots going on there. Palace, princess, markets, loads of vegetables – lots to do! Especially for people like us – game for an adventure! Should be fun!" said Owl.

"Fun..." repeated Monkey, mournfully.

"And you know, the town holds plenty for the modern peasant, all the more so if you're willing to throw yourself into it!"

Pig pointed. "It's that way," she said.

"Why, thank you!" cried Owl, and, taking Monkey by the hand, he led her off down the hill towards the town, his unhealthy enthusiasm leaving a briefly unpleasant savour in Pig and Rabbit's mouths.

"Strange people," said Rabbit after a few moments.

"Mmm," said Pig, agreeing, looking out to sea.

"I mean, Owl, Monkey! What kind of names are those?"

"Mmm," said Pig again.

And now the comfortable silence could fall again. As they watched the sun slowly sink to meet the water, their hands found their way together and held fast.