I DIDN’T KNOW HOW LONG I had been in the king’s prison. The days were all the same, except that as each one passed, I was dirtier than before. Every morning the light in the cell changed from the wavering orange of the lamp in the sconce outside my door to the dim but even glow of the sun falling into the prison’s central courtyard. In the evening, as the sunlight faded, I reassured myself that I was one day closer to getting out. To pass time, I concentrated on pleasant memories, laying them out in order and examining them carefully. I reviewed over and over the plans that had seemed so straightforward before I arrived in jail, and I swore to myself and every god I knew that if I got out alive, I would never never never take any risks that were so abysmally stupid again.

I was thinner than I had been when I was first arrested. The large iron ring around my waist had grown loose, but not loose enough to fit over the bones of my hips. Few prisoners wore chains in their cells, only those that the king particularly disliked: counts or dukes or the minister of the exchequer when he told the king there wasn’t any more money to spend. I was certainly none of those things, but I suppose it’s safe to say that the king disliked me. Even if he didn’t remember my name or whether I was as common as dirt, he didn’t want me slipping away. So I had chains on my ankles as well as the iron belt around my waist and an entirely useless set of chains locked around my wrists. At first I pulled the cuffs off my wrists, but since I sometimes had to force them back on quickly, my wrists started to be rubbed raw. After a while it was less painful just to leave the manacles on. To take my mind off my daydreams, I practiced moving around the cell without clanking.

I had enough chain to allow me to pace in an arc from a front corner of the cell out to the center of the room and back to the rear corner. My bed was there at the back, a bench made of stone with a thin bag of sawdust on top. Beside it was the chamber pot. There was nothing else in the cell except myself and the chain and, twice a day, food.

The cell door was a gate of bars. The guards looked in at me as they passed on their rounds, a tribute to my reputation. As part of my plans for greatness, I had bragged without shame about my skills in every wine store in the city. I had wanted everyone to know that I was the finest thief since mortal men were made, and I must have come close to accomplishing the goal. Huge crowds had gathered for my trial. Most of the guards in the prison had turned out to see me after my arrest, and I was endlessly chained to my bed when other prisoners were sometimes allowed the freedom and sunshine of the prison’s courtyard.

There was one guard who always seemed to catch me with my head in my hands, and he always laughed.

“What?” he would say. “Haven’t you escaped yet?”

Every time he laughed, I spat insults at him. It was not politic, but as always, I couldn’t keep an insult in when it wanted to come out. Whatever I said, the guard laughed more.

I ached with cold. It had been early in the spring when I’d been arrested and dragged out of the Shade Oak Wineshop. Outside the prison walls the summer’s heat must have dried out the city and driven everyone indoors for afternoon naps, but the prison cells got no direct sun, and they were as damp and cold as when I had first arrived. I spent hours dreaming of the sunshine, the way it soaked into the city walls and made the yellow stones hot to lean on hours after the day had ended, the way it dried out water spills and the rare libations to the gods still occasionally poured into the dust outside the wineshops.

Sometimes I moved as far as my chains would let me and looked through the bars of my cell door and across the deep gallery that shaded the prison cells at the sunlight falling into the courtyard. The prison was two stories of cells stacked one on top of the other; I was in the upper level. Each cell opened onto the gallery, and the gallery was separated from the courtyard by stone pillars. There were no windows in the outside walls, which were three or four feet thick, built of massive stones that ten men together couldn’t have shifted. Legends said that the old gods had stacked them together in a day.