

A sample of Runecursed, Book One of Braenduir Chronicles by Julia P Aspenn.

# BRAENDUIR CHRONICLES

Book One

# RUNECURSED

By  
JP ASPENN

A sample of Runecursed, Book One of Braenduir Chronicles by Julia P Aspenn.

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“And in the dusk when he finds you  
Hidden in the shadows  
He must judge your allegiance  
He won't know if you're on his side  
Or if you will turn against him”

*Amorphis/Pekka Kainulainen, Under the Red Cloud, Dark Path, 2015*

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*For all of you who made writing this book possible*

## CONTENTS

Aelathduir; The Year of the Firth's Crow

### PART ONE; MOMENTOUS ENCOUNTERS

*Come, fly with me  
As far west as the west goes  
This is a dream!  
A bit of a dreamer  
Patience, diligence, vigilance  
You must see behind the veils  
Let's call it a gift, my lady  
Do tell  
I'll scream  
He is mine already  
Did you find what you were looking for?  
I gave my word  
I could change it into a wagon of gold.... Or a kiss  
There's darkness in him  
Rather you than anyone else*

### PART TWO; DREAMS AND PREDICTIONS

*Breathe  
Only a memory  
Cry, scream, roar  
Why, I started to miss you!  
I rather become a dead man than a slave  
Why not?  
I'm not afraid  
It's as good a name as any  
Everyone is more or less endangered  
A white bear!*

*I've dreamed the same dream  
Tonight, and all the nights to come  
Trust no one, but the rightful heir  
With all due respect  
Look at me  
Find the counterpart?  
Surely, a countess can do as she pleases?  
But I love you, sir!  
No talking*

PART THREE; UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN

*I must find my brother  
My dream has always been to be a knight  
Look ou!  
He'll never surrender to a stranger  
Fear me you should  
It was an honor and pleasure to know you  
Go on, fly  
Kneel!  
You can't mean that!  
Tell him, I'll always love him  
That's all the time we need  
Trust no-one  
I trust him with my life  
I've had enough!  
No proof whatsoever  
The Ferryman of Netherworld  
Will he die?  
Ready for an adventure?  
What if something goes wrong, sir?  
We'll find him  
Wherever the swallows go*

Afterword  
About the author

## CHAPTER ONE

*“Come, fly with me.”*

She was in one of the castle’s gardens, sitting under a blooming apple tree. The sky was high and blindingly blue, the new grass soft and jewel-green, and the blushing apple flowers filled her nostrils with their subtle scent. But beneath the sweet smell and brilliant colors, everything was crumbling and rotting, she knew, though she didn’t know how she knew. She just knew, with the certainty of a dream, that underneath the fresh grass, the ground was naught but gravel and ashes, the apple trees decayed under their speckless barks and blushing veils of blooms, and behind the white walls that surrounded the garden, the world was but fire and blood and terror.

She put away the book that she had been flickering through though there was nothing in it. It was a blank book. Very old and handsomely bound but completely empty. No word nor picture had been drawn into its thin, yellowed pages.

As she rose and tried to go and take a walk about the garden, she realized that she was chained to a tree, shackled like a slave from neck and ankles, her golden chain bolted into the trunk. She bent down to grab it and gave it a hard yank. The chain was so thin, not even as thick as her pinkie, and she thought it might be easy to break. It didn’t budge. No matter how much she pulled and tugged, it remained solid and unyielding. She glanced around to find someone who could help her, unbuckle her, for this wasn’t right. She was no slave! She was a princess, and a queen-to-be, besides. The garden was deserted, except for her and the nameless horror outside the walls, squeezing closer and closer by the heartbeat. Suddenly, the fear took her over, and she started to yell for help and soon screamed at the top of her lungs.

No one heard her nor cared about her distress. The horror crept closer. Irana yanked the chain again. It didn’t budge. She ran around the tree, only tying herself tighter to it. Tears flooded down her face, plentiful and uncontrollable. She ran back to her book and lifted it from the ground as if it could help her,

opened it, and flickered through the empty pages. Nothing changed. She tossed the tome away, but instead of a solid thud of it hitting the ground, she heard a splash as if the book had fallen into the water.

She wiped her eyes into her sleeve and peered around, blinking in the piercing-white sunlight that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Another splash caught her attention, and now she saw it. A round, emerald well had appeared among the apple trees not ten yards away, or maybe it had always been there, and she just hadn't noticed it. She wasn't sure, nor did she care, after seeing what was pushing up from the water.

She screamed, fleeing into the trees as fast as she could, forgetting the chain. It tensed, and she flew backward, falling heavily onto the grass. She rolled over in a panic and tried to scramble up, but the thing was already upon her. It was a man. And it wasn't. Lean, impossibly tall, and knobbed like an old ash tree, it hovered above her. The water beaded its olive bark, skin, or whatever it was that covered its sinewy form, leaves, and twigs and beard moss clung into its antlers, and its eyes were abysmal and filled with malice. It bent down over her to brush her cheek with long, twig-like fingers. Irana squeezed her eyes shut, praying that whatever it was about to do to her would soon be over, or she'd pass out during.

The thing sniffed her. She felt its hot breath on her face and neck and smelled its earthy, beastly scent. Despite herself, she opened her eyes. The monster's eyes were only a few inches away from her own. She realized, to her astonishment, that they weren't as dark, abysmal, and cruel as she had first thought but rather sad and agonized. And midnight blue, not black. The fingers on her skin, hard and woody as they were, weren't hurting her but caressing. She swallowed and breathed: "Help me? Please."

She didn't know, what made her say it, but the thing did as she bid. It grabbed the chain and broke it with a sharp yank. Irana pushed up to lean on her elbows and scrutinized the monster's face. It looked like a man who was morphing into a deer or a deer morphing into a man. Queer, yet not ugly. And not the thing she should be afraid of, she understood as the horror outside pressed closer still.

"We should go. The enemy is coming," she whispered though she knew they weren't going anywhere.

Not quite yet, at least.

She didn't object as the creature turned her onto her belly and pushed her skirts up over her buttocks. Instead, she spread her legs and gave herself to it willingly, moaning softly as it entered her. Its member was as woody and lean

as everything else in it, and though it wasn't gentle, it didn't hurt her either. Though maybe that was just because she wanted it so much. She was soaking wet and whimpering in pleasure by the time it spilled its hot seed deep inside her and slumped on top of her pressing its face into the well of her neck.

"You're right," it whispered in an astonishingly humane voice. "We must go. However, the enemy isn't coming. It has been here all along."

The thing pushed up to its feet, and as Irana rolled over and opened her eyes, she saw no antlered monster anymore. In its place stood a man, a tall and gaunt human man whose body was covered in blue tattoos from the hips to collarbones. He had midnight blue eyes, sandy hair, and an apologetic half-smile upon his face. He held out a callused hand. She took it without a second thought, let him yank her up to her feet, and walk her to the garden gate.

The gate was made of black iron bars, thicker than Irana's arm, and bolted from the outside. Beyond it was blackness. Irana shuttered and shook her head: "No... Another way. We must find another way."

"This is the only way," claimed the man and squeezed her hand tighter. "Do you want to be free?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then trust me."

He raised a hand, and his palm started to glow. A burst of midnight blue and lavender flames licked out between the bars, and the gates flung open into the black nothingness. They stood at the edge of the world, at the edge of all existence, it seemed. Irana balked, tried to withdraw, pull her hand off his.

"No... We can't. There's nothing there, can't you see?"

"Don't be afraid," he said, smiling. "That's what freedom looks like. Come, fly with me."

Irana glanced over to the garden that was now decaying openly. The grass had turned yellow and brown. The flowers were falling from the trees, crumpled and brown like flakes of dirty snow. The trunks were crammed with pulps and boils that oozed green and yellowish pus. The horror was there. It had reached the walls and was creeping over them, its black, shadowy fingers coiling like serpents down the white stone.

She squeezed his hand for dear life, stepped to the edge, and into the nothingness. She didn't fly. She fell. As she realized that she was falling, she was startled. And as she startled, she woke up, sweating and out of breath, her heart hammering inside its bony cage, the flesh between her legs throbbing and dripping wetness as if she had laid with the man in the dream for real.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

*“Do tell.”*

**T**rina! Trina...” mumbled Arron Grethsen reaching his hand to Raenn’s face.

Raenn shook his roommate by the shoulder roughly: “Wake up! Damn you for having such an evening without me... Wake up!”

“Trina...” Arron blinked in the blinding morning light squinting at Raenn’s face as he had never seen it before. “Raenn?”

“Whom else?” snorted Raenn Agdassen. “You took me for a woman? Who’s that Trina you called after in such desperation? You could’ve taken me with you to wherever you were last night. It seems you had a blast... What the fuck are you wearing?!”

“I’ve been nowhere,” Arron claimed and sat up, raking his hair with his fingers. “I just had the weirdest dream, that’s all.”

“Indeed, if you’re claiming you got those rags in a dream,” Raenn sneered. “How much you drank to end up mugging clothes from some stranger’s back? Such as those, above all! Though given a thought, it sounds like you to strip a man of his clothes instead of his money...”

“What are you talking about?” Arron grunted, glanced down, and yelped in disbelief. “What the fuck...?”

“You tell me,” Raenn prompted, holding back a laugh. “You’ve bumped into the tackiest dresser in the city, it seems. What was your excuse? To do him a favor by robbing those rags? For his sake, I hope you gave him a tip or three for what to wear in the future so that he won’t slip back to his old, bad habits.”

“I haven’t... I haven’t the foggiest...” Arron stammered, clasping the wheel-shaped pendant so tight, its spokes carved pits into his palm.

The silver was cool and very, very real against his hot, clammy skin.

He groped his hips and wasn’t surprised when his fingers found the round octopus-shaped pommel of the saber. He stroked the leather jerkin that was

squeezing his flanks uncomfortably tight, brushed the silk sleeve of the shirt, and shook his head in astonishment. It had been but a dream, and yet...

“How much did you drink?” Raenn demanded, handing him a clean, green woolly. “Get up, damn you, and get changed, or we’ll miss it!”

“Miss what?”

“You haven’t forgotten, have you?! The recruitment! We’re volunteering and riding for exploits, remember? Songs are written about us long after this city has turned to mere ruins and rat droppings. Hurry up now! You can’t come there feigning a jester!”

*Feigning... Feign... Veil... You must see behind the veils. You must not cross the line. Wrong direction... Heading towards peril... Wait at the gate...*

“Raenn, listen, I...”

“Don’t say you’re showing me the white feather now!” Raenn squalled, yet unsurprised. “Arron, we had a deal...”

*You’re heading towards peril.* The hoarse whisper of an elderly augur he had encountered in his dream echoed again inside Arron’s head. Maybe, he wondered, the dream hadn’t been so much about finding anything but warning him not to go and feign a hero in the war that he had nothing to do with. He caught himself wishing he had had the dream much earlier before letting Raenn talk him into volunteering. Before, he had made a solemn promise to go with him to Erephonia. Now, he knew there was no turning back. A promise was a promise, and Raenn, the snide as he was, his best friend since childhood, or more than that, actually, almost like a younger brother he never had. *Well*, Arron thought, starting to unbuckle his jerkin, *if I am to die, hope it’s for a good cause.* Dying while saving someone else’s life wouldn’t be that bad after all

“Come,” he said, strapping his baldric about his hips. “Let’s go and find out if we’re replaceable enough to ride to the battles and have our heads hacked off by a Vadaskian poleaxe.”

“Hear, Arron. I know you said you’d come with me, but...”

“And I will. Isn’t that what we agreed on, to become war heroes?”

“It is, but you wouldn’t be going if it wasn’t for me. I’m aware that I urged you into it, and I couldn’t bear living in my skins if something happened to you, knowing it was me who dragged you there...”

“Feel free giving a go to drag me anywhere. Look, there’s no chance you could’ve urged me into this if I really didn’t want to go. We’re soldiers, and what are the soldiers for if not war?”

“Guarding the city gates and giving tough times to pickpockets?”

“Been there, done that, haven’t we? You’ve been right all along. It’s a high time for us to find out what it means to be a soldier for real, and in this realm, we’ll never get the chance,” Arron said, sounding a lot more convincing than he felt.

Raenn snatched his bow and quiver a gleeful grin breaking upon his long, narrow face. Arron was quite sure that they wouldn’t have any use for weapons after volunteering. It would be a day off for those enlisting for the war behind the stream. One hell of a profitable day for the city’s taverns, let alone the brothels. He wasn’t in a mood for beer, nor a girl for that matter, but he knew he would have no choice but to go with the other volunteers after the names were written. He wished he’d find the Breeze Bitch again next night, though there was a daunting inkling at the back of his head that he wouldn’t. In a way, he had found what he had been seeking, and somehow, he knew that it had made it impossible for him to find the black galleass anymore in the place Eweret Lingryn had called Bruadduir, the kingdom of dreams.

“Do strangers in your dreams have names?” he heard himself asking Raenn as they walked side by side through the vast, snow-covered yard towards the commanders’ dark double-decker where the recruiting was taking place.

“No, or at least, I don’t remember them in the morning,” Raenn said after some silent pondering. “Why d’you ask?”

“Just wondering... Have you ever had a dream that feels even more real than the reality?”

“Well, now mentioned, I once had a dream where this girl came to me. She was comely beyond belief, one who wouldn’t so much as spit into my face in real life, and she started to undress...”

“I can imagine the rest, thanks,” Arron cut him off. “Such wasn’t what I meant exactly.”

“Then what did you mean? That’s by far the most plausible result of a dream I’ve ever experienced.”

“I meant... You know what, just forget about it. It’s damn hard to explain anyway.”

“Even harder than trying to comprehend what’s all this babbling about dreams, and, what’s more, them being real? What did you take last night?”

“Haven’t I already told you that I didn’t... Never mind, you’d never believe me if I told you what happened,” Arron sighed.

To be honest, he had a hard time believing it himself though there was an airtight proof hanging about his neck, Katrina Reushammer’s silver pendant hidden under his sprig-green woolly and scaled iron aegis enameled to match

the sweater's shade. He wanted to pull it out just to check if it was still there, but they had reached the tall, broad, green, copper-studded double doors of the commanders' building, and Raenn was urging him in. There were no more than a score of soldiers signing up, but Raenn murmured that it was early, and more would definitely come.

"And of course, they're recruiting in Hellenfjord, and the border keeps too," he whispered. "Come the hour of departure, there'll be quite a bunch of us heading west, I bet."

Arron wasn't sure if it was worth risking a copper on that, but he held his tongue and went to the table. Behind it sat three commanders of the city's garrison, taking up names of those willing to join King Hamar's troops at the western side of Naer Heigir, the great stream dividing the west half of Braenduir and acting as the border between Aenerhjelm and the two eastmost kingdoms.

The commander Arron went to, balding, sturdy man in his forties, looked up from the parchment, and gushed out a heavyhearted sigh: "Grethsen. Grethsen, Grethsen... Are you sure this quest is for you?"

*No. Actually, I'm pretty sure it isn't, but what can I do. I've promised to volunteer, so I shall, whether this quest is suitable for me or not.* To Commander Briggassen, he said just: "I'm always in for gaining experience and learning something new, and isn't this the chance of a lifetime for both?"

"A chance of a lifetime indeed," muttered Briggassen. "You are aware that there's a real war going on there? It's not a training camp. It's battling for your life."

"I realize this, commander," Arron assured, glancing at his sides, where other soldiers signed up without being questioned. "I thought anyone willing should be allowed to go?"

"Yes, you got that right," admitted the commander. "It's just... Look, Grethsen, by any means, it's not my intention to diminish you, but you're no warrior. And that's fine. There're very few of such in these troops. I know, of course, as well as anyone, that you're one hell of an archer and not bad with the sword either, but when it comes to killing someone with them... Are you sure you've got what it takes?"

"It's hard to say, commander, considering I've never had a chance to find out so far," Arron shrugged. "So, I guess we'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

"Yes, yes..." uttered Briggassen but continued focusing his bronze-colored eyes on Arron again. "Look, Grethsen, the thing is that you could ascend, as

high as you wanted, with that character of yours. You could even become a commander one day.”

“Wouldn’t it make me even a better one if I had some battle experience?” Arron pointed out, wondering why he had suddenly gotten so keen on leaving, though he had been hoping to find any excuse whatsoever to avoid volunteering only half an hour ago.

“Well, it would, obviously, but as you know, we don’t require such experience for obvious reasons. Look, I’m sure if I spoke for you to the right people, you’d be an officer in no time, get more money, have your private chambers, train rookies...”

“Thank you, commander,” Arron interrupted. “With all due respect, if I ever ascended, I’d rather it was for my personal merits than someone pulling the strings for me.”

“But it would be! Never imagine anything else!” splurged Briggassen. “As I said, with that character of yours, it is only a matter of time anyway. Anything I did would just speed things up a little.”

“I’d rather... Thank you, commander, but I’ve made my decision,” Arron stammered slightly. “I decided to volunteer, so I shall, so, would you hand me the quill, please?”

Reluctantly, Commander Briggassen pushed the quill and parchment towards him. Arron wrote down his name and arm and bowed in a military way with his sword hand on his heart before joining Raenn, who was waiting for him beside the door.

“What kept you?” Raenn asked.

“Briggassen. He tried to stop me from going, said he’d make me an officer if I opted out.”

“Well, you did, didn’t you?!”

“Do what?”

“Opted out, of course!”

“No, I didn’t...”

“Are you insane?!” Raenn barked, adding in gloomy tones. “You’re, obviously, why else would you rather get yourself killed than ascend as an officer being served only... For how long, exactly?”

“Three years in the city guard,” Arron said. “Seven if you include the training.”

“My point exactly! How many officers do we know who’s been in full service for just three years?” Raenn wailed. “You go back to him and say you’ll...”

“I do no such thing,” Arron snapped him off. “What’s done is done. Now, how about having lunch? Somewhere outside the garrison, preferably.”

Raenn nodded, his blue eyes brooding and shadowy. Arron patted his hunched shoulders: “Cheer up, Agdassen! We’re going to have a rare opportunity. The first war the troops of Aenerhjelm are invited in for many a lifetime!”

“But getting a chance to ascend...”

“It would’ve been false, really. Briggassen kissing assesses to get me the badge... Nay, I’d rather be a private for the rest of my life.”

“Like he hadn’t done that to get his badges.”

“He probably has, but it’s not his tongue that concerns me. It’s...”

“Don’t say ‘my honor’,” Raenn snorted.

Arron shrugged. It was precisely what he had been going to say. It might be that there weren’t many officers who hadn’t gotten their silver, oak-leaf-shaped shoulder badges for some other reasons than remarkable military merits, but he had no wish to become one of them. To be honest, he didn’t know if he even wanted to serve in the army for the rest of his life. Joining the military had never been but the least poor option to him.

Arron had been born to a healer mage in a small cottage at the edge of the heather moors spreading northeast from Nortenmoor. There had been just the two of them. He had never known his father, and his mother never brought home anyone else either. Yet, he had never lacked anything save for the ready-framed future. Having had even a kernel of magical tendencies, he might’ve followed in his mother’s footsteps and become a healer, but he hadn’t inherited Greth Nyalladar’s gift, nor had he ever shown any skills worth mentioning in working with wood or iron or anything that could’ve given him a chance to scrape a living as a crafter. The fields around their cottage were small and rocky and hardly covered their own need for grain and greens, so farming hadn’t been much of a possibility either, even if Arron had wanted to get up to it. At one point, he had thought of going to Hellenfjord and trying to get a job on a ship but gotten cold feet, thinking that no captain would take onboard some midland-born brat who had never even seen the sea.

As his last option, he had gathered his things and walked to Nortenmoor to recruit. He had served in the army ever since. He felt he was, at least, capable enough as a soldier, and though he had no passion for using any weapon for real, he was one of the best archers in the garrison. And not bad with the sword either, as Commander Briggassen had pointed out.

It had been an easy life and could still be; that much was true. Aenerhjelm had been living in peace for a long time, and there was no reason to presume that the situation would change any time soon. They had nothing any neighboring countries could want badly enough to declare a war against them. The ground was mostly barren, highlands and moors where there grew nothing but moss and heather, gorse, bramble bushes, and tangled growths of juniper. There were little more than rocks and mountains at the northern coast, and in the northeastern parts of the realm, close to the Gorge, there was a vast weald that was mainly uninhabited. They had no riches worth mentioning either, save for maybe to someone who considered iron and furs as such, and few did. What was more, they had kept to themselves, not meddling with the politics of the Kingdoms or taking any part in the constant debates the southern princes and princesses had with each other save for letting the warriors of the brotherhood sell their swords to them. However, the Sons of Stryader had very little to do with the government. Being an unaffiliated organization, they were free to choose their battles and answered for themselves should anyone claim to have been wronged by their members.

Though they wronged relatively rarely, Arron mused as he stepped after Raenn into the smoky, noisy murkiness of the Three Widows, a tavern where the best lunch of the city had just been dished out. The house was full to bursting, and the level of noise was ear-splitting. Arron clasped Raenn's arm: "Should we go somewhere else? There're no free seats here."

"Here're two, private," said a deep, friendly voice from behind, and Arron turned his head to see two burly men in black uniforms sitting at a small table near the faded, sky-blue door.

The man who had spoken was older, seen maybe fifty or so winters already, grey of hair and beard with warm, brown eyes and the most scarred and capped hands Arron had ever seen. The other looked younger, though Arron couldn't say for sure because he was seated with his back to them. There wasn't any grey in his coal-black hair, and though he was robust, his posture was that of a young man or even a boy.

"If you'll stoop to sit with us, that is," the older one went on.

"The way I see it, it's the other way around," Arron said earnestly. "We'd be honored to have lunch with Stryader's Sons."

"Heard him, Jan?" the man chuckled. "Not all of them are cocky and self-centered little brats, after all. Seat yourselves, then, soldiers, and share our meat and mead, though in a figurative sense, for I'm afraid we can't afford to offer you either."

“Why, that’s not a problem. I’ll cover it for all of us,” Arron offered. “Unless you’ve eaten already?”

“No, we’ve been hoping for a kind soul to come and save us from starving,” the Son japed. “Nay, in truth, we were just waiting for the scrum to lessen a little. You need not cover our costs...”

“I know,” Arron assured. “But it’s a rare occasion, the two of us having just scribbled our names in the recruiting book. It should be celebrated.”

“Why I’m not arguing if there’s a possibility for a free lunch,” the man shrugged. “Volunteers, eh? We’ve got the same destination then for, we too are heading to Erephonia.

A plump, sweaty maid pressed through the crowd to take their orders. She flashed a dazzling smile to Arron: “Meat and mead both, I assume?”

“And for all of us if you’d be so kind, Malda,” he asked, hanging his green, knee-length felt jacket at the back of a chair.

“Aren’t I always?” Malda teased a puckish flicker in her soft, grey eyes, but her tone grew chilly as she snapped to Raenn. “What, Agdassen? Is there a turnip sprouting from my cleavage?”

Raenn flushed to his hairline, lowering his eyes even more. Malda gave a ruthless snort and spun to fetch their pints. The steel-grey Son leaned forth to pat Raenn’s shoulder: “Never you mind, lad. There’ve just been too many hands groping her tush in a rush, I reckon. She’ll relent before long. Come afternoon and the silent hours, she’s forcing those turnips of hers into your face.”

“To Arron’s, you mean,” Raenn muttered, unable to completely restrain the bitterness in his voice. “There’re no turnips for me when he’s around.”

“Maybe if you looked at the whole field, instead of staring just at the beets sometimes,” Arron couldn’t help snapping.

The younger Son chortled, giving him a guarded sideways glance. He had onyx-black eyes, wary and dour, but Arron thought he saw a hint of amusement glinting in them. He flashed a tentative smile at the boy: “Your name’s Jan, right?”

“That’s short for Dristjan, but you may call me that. All my brothers do.”

“I’m Arron,” they shook hands, and Arron turned back to the older Son. “I’m sorry, I must’ve missed your name?”

“Never told it to you, lad,” he said amiably. “The name’s Hunnar Sryddassen, but my brothers call me the Bear.”

“Didn’t you say you’ll join the war, too?” Arron asked, grabbing a tin from the large tray Malda had brought them.

The mead was amber and strong, and the large pan heaped with lamb chops and fried beets steamed and sizzled. The smell of the food was herby and greasy. His stomach rumbled loud enough to be heard over the general commotion. Arron handed the cutlery to his companions before staking a crunchy chunk of beetroot with his fork.

“I sure did,” the Bear confirmed, cutting one of the fleshy, nicely charred chops into morsels. “A man must scratch up a living, and King Hamar has sent a word that he’d take us all if possible.”

“The whole brotherhood, you mean?”

“That’s right. The Elders declined the request, of course. It would be foolish to throw all the swords into the same furnace, for there aren’t as many of us as there used to be. Nevertheless, we’re free to choose our battles, and as it’s been rather chasing the raiders than real warring in the Principalities lately, many of us are heading west.”

“You’ve been in a battle before, haven’t you?” Raenn interrupted, eyeing the Bear’s scarred hands over the pint he was claspng with both hands.

“I have indeed,” the Bear said with an amused edge to his voice. “I’ve been in quite a many of those, actually.”

“Obviously, sorry...”

“That’s alright, laddie. There’s something you wanted to ask about battles, I assume.”

“Yes, I...” Raenn gulped, the apple in his throat working hard, and stammered. “I just wondered... What’s it like? To fight with swords for real, I mean.”

“And with axes and hammers and any weapons imaginable,” the Bear completed. “It depends mostly on what kind of a man you are. Do you fear death?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Raenn countered.

“No, not everyone,” claimed the Bear. “I know men who have never been afraid in the battle and men who have been shit scared until surviving their first. And those who have been in countless battles and still all but soil themselves when the swords begin to sing. As it happens, I am one of the latter.”

Raenn was stunned: “How come you’re a sellsword then?”

“Because it’s not so much about whether you’re afraid or not, but how you handle the fear,” the Bear explained, forking a piece of dark roasted carrot from the pan. “When it comes to how it feels to be in a battle, I can hardly give you a satisfying answer, for it’s a unique experience for every warrior. To some,

it's like a never-ending nightmare, whereas to others, it's nothing more than yet another day in the training yard."

"And in which of those groups do you belong?" Arron inquired.

"The latter.."

"Though you're afraid?"

"Sometimes I'm more scared in the yard with the rookies," the Bear chuckled. "They don't fear me the slightest, see, but the enemy usually does. But being serious, the men like us, meaning all the four of us, shouldn't have much to fear. We've been trained to fight, and what's more, we've chosen for ourselves to go to the war. There're men in King Daeryik's troops who have never even seen a poleaxe before such is shoved into their hands at the edge of the battlefield, and when the commander tells them to hack other men with it instead of logs... Well, they'll close their eyes and swing the ax hoping not to get cut in pieces themselves instead of trying to hit anyone with it."

"Some might say they're the most dangerous enemy, though," Jan cut in, impaling an onion with his knife.

The Bear shrugged, taking a sip from his pint: "Some might. I don't. If you want my advice, lads, I'd tell you to be afraid but not let the fear get the best of you and keep your eyes open and heart closed."

"By that, he means, don't look back even if your friend is hacked down beside you," Jan's voice was grainy with disapproval.

"Well, if you wish to live to see another day, you better not start feigning a hero," the Bear stated. "By all means, help a friend if you can, but it's a rare chance that you could save a life on the battlefield without endangering your ass."

"I'm not claiming I knew anything about warring but isn't endangering one's ass the essence of every battle, anyway?" Arron pointed out, catching Jan's eyes briefly.

The young Son smiled, ever so slightly, behind his pint. The Bear snorted out a reluctant gaggle lifting his hands into a gesture of submission: "Now, I couldn't argue on that even if I wanted to. Be that as it may, I want you to keep in mind that history knows only one kind of heroes..."

"The dead ones," Jan completed. "That's what Tor keeps parroting, and yet, he's the last man who'd turn their back to a friend on the battlefield."

"Indeed, but there's a slight difference between a seasoned warrior like him and greenhorns like yourselves when it comes to battling," Hunnar grew stern. "If you want to be like him one day, lad, the first task is to live through even your first war."

Jan retreated from the argument with no more than a slight shrug though the dark gleam in his onyx eyes gave away that he would've wanted to demur.

They ate in silence for a while. Most of the crowd had gone back to their stores and forges and workshops, and the din had faded into a low humming of speech by the time they fished the last, grease-soaked bites from the pan with their forks. Arron leaned back in his chair, casting a languid glance around. The Three Widows was a relatively small tavern, shabby yet cozy with mismatched furniture and knotted woolen rugs. The common room was dimly lit with only a couple of chandeliers.

The sweet scent of beeswax candles reminded him of his mother's cottage, the slumberous Pyre Moons' days when the moors turned purple, and the sweet, mild aroma of heather, and the constant buzzing of bees and bumblebees, filled the air. He realized he should see her before riding west to bid farewell. He knew she'd be angry at him, and maybe he deserved it. He was, after all, her only child, and now he was about to step into a path from which, most likely, was no return. He heaved a heavy sigh.

The Bear gave him a ponderous, slightly worried look: "You alright, laddie? You've been pretty quiet all along."

"That's just the way he is," Raenn sneered. "Always brooding."

"I'm not brooding," Arron protested. "And I'm fine, Hunnar, just a little tired. I was just thinking about asking for a day off tomorrow, too, to visit my mom before we leave."

Raenn giped in spiteful tones: "Yet it is accustomed to go and see a woman on the eve of a battle; it would be preferred if she wasn't your mother... Hasn't anyone told you that such an act is illegal, besides?"

"If I were you, Agdassen, I'd keep the rest to myself," Arron warned, wondering, not for the first time, why exactly he was so fond of this gangly young man who managed to piss him off every other time he opened his wide, sloppy mouth considering the growing feeling that most of the insults might not even be merely due to Raenn's heedlessness.

"As a matter of fact." The Bear's tone was educating. "It's not illegal to meddle with one's parent, but meddling with your children, on the contrary, is punishable. Or, being precise, it says in the law that *meddling with one's daughter is an abomination that should be punished most severely*. The law doesn't specify whether this means hacking off one's head or some other body part that could be proven to have been involved in the crime."

"What are you, a scribe?" Raenn bedazzled.

“A mere sellsword is what I am, and quite a duncish one at that,” claimed the Bear. “But we’re hunting felons and outlaws more than riding into the battles nowadays, and I’ve flicked through the Northern Law a time or few to see whether it was worthy of all the chafes and frost-bitten toes to catch the whichever criminal in question. Hangings are, after all, events that remarkably increase social cohesion, and for some queer reason, the ladies’ eagerness to practice it in its most natural form.”

His brown eyes had an impish glitter in them, and his words made even Dristjan snort in grudging amusement while Raenn was roaring with laughter. Arron flashed a wicked grin at the Son: “Has your flicking through the law had something to do with falsifying the evidence to make a common pickpocket look like a potential serial killer, by any means? In terms of increasing social cohesion?”

Hunnar burst into hearty laughter: “Perish the thought! Nay, on the contrary, I have a habit of letting the pickpockets free from their cells after collecting my bounty. They’re apt on returning to their old, sorrowful ways, see... There’s one in Hellenfjord whom I’ve snatched half a dozen times, and though he always miraculously manages to snake out of the Six-foot Keep, he never seems to improve his skills in avoiding the long and brawny arm of the law.”

Arron laughed, shaking his head, abhorrence and amusement warring within him, though he was convinced that the Bear was only kidding him. Whether or not, he thought, he liked this freehearted, elderly warrior well and wished he could be accompanied by him and his young friend on the road to Erephonia.

“When are you leaving?” he inquired. “To the war, that is.”

“It depends...” the Bear shrugged his mouth, curling into a mischievous grin under his thick, neatly cropped, steel-grey beard when he nudged his chin towards Jan. “...on him. See, the thing is that I gave a solemn vow that I wouldn’t allow him to ride to the battle before he has had a woman even for once in his life...”

“Let it go already, will you?” Jan grunted. “I can go on living without such an experience.”

“Of course, you can, but you certainly can’t die without having such an experience first,” the Bear stated.

“I’ve got no intention to die,” Jan pointed out.

“Laddie, laddie... I’m glad you say so, but the possibility that you get killed in the next few cycles of moons is as high as the possibility that you survive, so you should enjoy every breath as it was your last.”

“What makes you think that’s not exactly what I’m doing? Have you considered that my way of enjoying life might just differ from yours somewhat?”

The Bear yielded with a sigh: “Suit yourself then. But don’t come haunting me for not giving you a chance to try and find out whether my way would be better before dragging you into the battle. Anyway, speaking of my way of enjoying life, do you privates happen to know whether the sweetest lady called Grethel Aelldar still operates on Lundarad?”

“She sure does,” Raenn cheered up instantly. “Want to pay her a visit, eh?”

“Such was my intention, indeed. I have a hunch that you might be in for accompanying me on such an excursion?”

“You bet!”

“That’s settled then. How about you, Arron?”

“No, thanks for asking, but I’ll pass.”

“Saving his load for tomorrow, I reckon,” Raenn muttered under his breath.

“You seem to have quite an obsession with sleeping with one’s mother,” Jan pointed out in a quiet, icy voice. “It is said that the mouth speaks what the heart is full of, and I can’t help wondering whether that’s the case with you now?”

Raenn arced up, his face flaring crimson: “You watch your tongue, boy, or I’ll...”

“You’ll what, exactly? Keep blushing at me?” Jan mocked in a calm tone though his eyes blazed like embers catching fire.

Hunnar got up and grabbed his black, fur-lined leather coat from the back of his chair. He took Raenn by the arm: “How about us getting on our way then, laddie? Gretha’s girls have been waiting for us for too long already. It was a pleasure meeting you, Arron.”

“Likewise. I hope we’ll meet again fore you set forth.”

“That, m’boy, isn’t a matter of hope but mere arrangements. We’re boarded on the Gate House and not in a rush of hitting the road, so it might well happen that we’ll ride with you lot when you march. Don’t get into trouble wandering about alone, Gruffy. Will you find the way back to the Gate by yourself?”

Jan gave him a sour glance: “Have I ever gotten into trouble or lost?”

“A time or few, I recall,” the Bear grinned. “Just refrain from blasting anything or especially anyone, will you?”

“When have I ever blasted anyone?”

“We’ve had a couple of close calls...” Hunnar punched him on the shoulder in a fatherly fashion. “Take care, lad. I shouldn’t stay for too long.”

“Take your time.”

“Sorry about meddling. It was none of my business,” Jan turned to Arron as the door slammed shut behind the Bear and Raenn, whose face was still blotchy with dull red. “His kind just gets under my skin.”

“That’s fine. I’m so used to his liping myself that I wouldn’t bother bickering,” Arron shrugged, giving him a curious look. “You’re a mage, aren’t you?”

Jan’s face stiffened, and the dour expression reappeared in his eyes. He gave a curt nod turning away from him to take his black jacket from the back of his chair.

“Hey,” Arron said softly. “That’s fine by me. My mother’s one.”

Jan swirled back to him, a glow of surprise and restrained excitement lighting up his face: “She is?”

“Yep, a healer,” Arron confirmed, smiling. “Would you like to meet her? I know there’re not too many with the gift of channeling left, and I bet she’d be happy to get to know you.

“Does she live here, in the city?”

“On the moors actually, a league to the northeast from here,” Arron said, holding the door for him as they stepped out into the glowing white sunlight of the early late-winter afternoon. “How about riding there today? The weather’s great, and we could stay over...”

“I can’t go barging in like that!” Jan sounded aghast.

“There’s no barging in, for I’m inviting you. Believe me, she’d be thrilled!” Arron assured him. “Besides, it would be nice to have company on the road.”

*And I’d rather it was someone less mouthy than Agdassen.* He knew Raenn would invade his company if he didn’t leave until the following day, and he wasn’t too keen on spending the night listening to his bragging about his visit to the Gretha’s place, either. He could stand the boy’s spitefulness well enough, but how he talked about the girls he had slept with was abominable. Arron turned to Jan, asking again if he were sure he wouldn’t want to accompany him.

“Mom would be nothing but pleased, believe me.”

Jan’s expression remained hesitating, and Arron withdrew, hiding his resentment the best he could: “You sure? Very well, have a good day then.” He was about to turn on his heels as the mage said, eyeing him from under his black brows, wary as a stray dog that expects to get hit with the bone offered to it: “It’s not that I didn’t want to come, I just... Why are you so friendly to me?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Arron was confused.

“We only just met...”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know about you, but treating new acquaintances unkindly has never worked out too well for me,” Arron shrugged, backing a few steps further into the bustling street. “But I apologize for encroaching upon you. Such was never my intention. It was a pleasure meeting you, anyway.”

He turned away, striding into the crowd, the hems of his pine-green coat flapping behind him. Jan bit his lip, hovering. The soldier’s straight, slender figure had almost disappeared in the crowd as he made up his mind and started after him, calling his name in a nervous voice. Arron turned and weaved back to him through the mob, a quizzical glare in his amethyst eyes: “Do tell.”

“I... I’d love to come. If you’ll still have me,” Jan blurted out, the words tumbling over each other in their haste to get said.

He regretted letting them out the moment they escaped from his mouth. The redness began to creep up his neck, and he averted Arron’s eyes expecting him to laugh. He never did. Jan glanced up three times as self-conscious and awkward as usually around new people. For no reason, obviously. There was no mock in the soldier’s face. The smile illuminating his clear, aristocratic features was earnest and genuinely delighted, nothing more, nothing less: “Certainly. I need to drop by the barracks to ask tomorrow off and fetch my horse, but it shouldn’t take longer than an hour or so. You do find your way back to the Gate House, don’t you?”

Jan nodded: “Yeah. See you at the gate, then.”

He whirled around, starting down Leikurvig, his black leather jacket billowing about his legs. He was a head taller than any of the men passing by, and something in his appearance made people melt away from his path, though a Son of Stryader wasn’t an unfamiliar sight in the streets of Nortenmoor. Maybe it was his sullen expression or the heedless way he strolled along the street, splitting the crowd in two like a great, black ram, or his unmistakable Jotun blood, which frightened the citizens. The likes of him were a rare sight in Nortenmoor these days, and the parents had kept a debatable habit of overawing their kids into obedience by threatening to give them to ‘the giants’ should they be unruly for as long as Arron could remember.

Even his own, ever-prudent mother had drawn out the giant-will-snatch-you-card a time or few when his reveling had exceeded the limits of her relatively high tolerance. Afterward, she had always regretted her imprudent words and assured him that the Jotuni had never snatched children or been dangerous in any other way.

*Quite the contrary, she had educated. They were very peaceful people, the people of singing and storytelling, and magic. The Jotun mages of old were powerful beyond our understanding and used their magic to build and heal things, not to crush and kill like most of our mages today. Maybe it's a good thing that you weren't born with the gift of channeling, my love. You wouldn't be content on becoming just a common hedge-mage, anyway. You'd join in the brotherhood to walk the blood-stained path of a warrior mage.*

Arron smiled wistfully at the memories as he followed Jan with his gaze until he took a turn into a back alley. Arron hoped he knew where he was going and hadn't just gotten lost. He pondered a moment whether he should run after the Son and see him to the Gate anyway but held back the urge and started towards the barracks through the familiar maze of streets and alleys flanked with workshops and stores, taverns, and inns, all laid with feet high and at least twice as wide blocks of dark grey granite.

The city could've been quite a dismal sight if all the doors and window frames hadn't been painted with bright colors, reds and yellows, greens and all the shades of blue imaginable, all blooming together like wildflowers in a meadow. There were also evergreen ivies crawling up the walls, covering most of the facades with their dark, shiny masses of leaves. Many of the house owners and shopkeepers had put large clay vases beside their doors, and though they were still covered in the soft, slanting heaps of snow, in a couple of moons, they would be filled with pansies and roses shipped from the southern counties where they were grown in the glasshouses by the Elves. Some had wooden flowerboxes fixed under the windows, and those, too, would be pregnant with blooming plants come spring.

A sudden, paralyzing stab of realization speared through Arron as he imagined how Nortenmoor, the Gate of the North, would look in the summertime. The white northern sun would warm the dark stone buildings and pebbled streets. People would laugh and tattle in the squares and street corners, enjoying the short but sweet summer. The air would be thick with the smells of sun-heated stone, flowers, fried trout, freshly baked bread, horses, and dung... The thought that, most likely, he would never see his home city in its summer finery again was like a blizzard inside his chest, making him shiver and gasp for air. The thought that someone like him, a greenhorn whose only battle experience was of occasional wrestling with a drunken rogue outside a tavern in the early hours of the morning, would become but a feast for crows in the fields of war filled his heart with ice and stomach with dozens of coiling serpents. His boots were as heavy as if they had been carved of granite as he

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roved along the streets and alleys bidding silent farewells to the familiar nooks and corners.



## CHAPTER NINE

*“I’ll scream.”*

**A**s the princess came out of her royal father’s study, Toren didn’t need to see her eyes to be able to tell that she was furious. She rammed past him and trotted through the maze of hallways, stairwells, and roofed courtyards back into the Tower of the Sun as fast as she could with her heavy skirts. Toren followed her, always keeping a couple of feet distance between them.

Lady Miona was a smallish girl, though lusciously full-bodied. Even with her ridiculously high silvery-white wig, crammed with all the gimcrack imaginable from glass gems to a bird’s nest woven of spun silver with a real, trophied bluetthroat fixed in it, she remained more than a foot shorter than Toren. That made her short even for a Giranian though it might be, she’d still grow an inch or few. Toren guessed that she couldn’t be much older than four and ten though it was hard to say for the veil that covered her face from the hairline to the tip of her nose.

All the lady courtiers whom he had glimpsed since coming to the palace had worn similar veils and wigs, as well. Some passing fancy, most like, though a relatively impractical looking one. The wig had to be excruciating to wear day in and day out, and the princess had said herself that it was hard to see through the veil. No wonder, as the fabric was so dense, one couldn’t see even the faintest glimpse of the upper part of her face behind its gentle folds. Still, even some of the lords used wigs and had a face more heavily powdered than any cocotte Toren had ever encountered. He had visited the eastern courts for many a time, and in those, too, the courtiers tended to go over the top with their styles. Yet, even the most overblown of the courts of the Principalities appeared very modest and poor beside the splendor and opulence of the court of Girania.

Lady Miona left the door open as she stormed into her parlor, but Toren stopped at the threshold, unsure whether he should enter or stay at the landing

to guard her door. She spun on her heels and snapped: “Well, what are you waiting for?! Come in and close the door!”

He did as he was bidden, lowered his sword and jacket on the floor beside the door in the lack of a rack, and planted himself in front of the entrance.

The princess’ parlor was a sunburst of yellow and gold, its walls overlaid with multicolored tapestries, high, arched, stained-glass windows curtained with gamboge velvet. The stone mosaic floor was covered with dwarf-made silk rugs, lavishly colored and complexly patterned. There were rug knotters in Aenerhjelm, too, but they made their carpets of wool and reeds, and the colors were way subtler, the patterns simpler, than in these western-made pieces of art.

“Have you lost something on the floor?” the princess’ shrill voice spiked into his cognition.

Toren flicked his eye up from the magnificent rugs only to see that the little lady had laced down her dress and underskirts and was standing before him in a shiny pool of apple-green samite and ivory spider silk, wearing naught but an off-white corset, baggy underpants of the same color and thin silk socks that reached just above her knees.

Toren kept his face straight. That had been the first-ever lesson he had learned: always keep your face straight. A blacksmith in the Halls had taught it to him once when he had run into his forge to hide from the priestesses after some prank he had played on them. Thodir had been much feared by most of the children in Uanneach, but Toren had taken a liking to the gloomy smith. And for one reason or another, he seemed to have been fond of Toren, as well. He had offered the lively, onyx-eyed nipper the shelter of his forge for many a time and a bundle of advice in the bargain.

“The women adore you, laddie,” the smith had said with half a smile. “For as long as you keep your face straight and stare them right in the eye as innocent as only a five-year-old can, they never suspect that you did it. They’ll blame the other boys, those with dimmer eyes and sharper tongues, never you. Mark my words, tyke, with that glint in your eyes and honey on your tongue, you’ll squirm yourself free of any trouble in which that slightly overactive nature of yours might tangle you.”

Toren had taken the advice and expanded it into all the fields of life thence. After the childhood, he had done no tricks to the womenfolk if those done between the blankets weren’t taken into account but keeping one’s face straight served well on the battlefields and even better in the company of the highborn, he had come to notice. So, his face remained a mask of indifference as he met

the lady's veiled one: "No, my lady, I was only admiring the rugs. They're crafted most splendidly."

The princess' small, full mouth pouted. Everything in her was small and full, from her rosebud mouth to her short, round calves. Toren was careful to hold his gaze above her jawline, reminding himself that as womanly as the girl's shape might be, she was still only a child. Besides being a lady of noble birth who was soon to be wed. She folded her arms under her plump breasts, which the corset squeezed up almost to her collarbones, and tamped her foot onto the rug: "Why are you staring at my face? There's nothing much to see in them."

Toren hardly ever spoke unkindly to a woman and never said a rude word of their appearance, but now it seemed to have come to either hurting the girl's feelings or meeting with the butcher's block. It wasn't hard to see where the princess was aiming: the king had ignored her complaints about having been given a sellsword as a shield, so she had decided to make it seem like the particular sellsword had violated her. Squirring out of this tangle might be impossible, Toren realized. Should the lady start screaming and claim, he had laid a hand on her, it would be his word against hers, and in this place, his word would weigh as much as a gnat's fart.

"As far as I'm concerned, my lady, there's nothing much to see below the face either," he stated.

The princess' lips trembled, ever so slightly, before she puckered her mouth and yanked her small, sharp chin up, hissing: "I'll scream. I'll scream and tell everyone that you tore off my dress and tried to ravage me."

"Go ahead," Toren urged. "Though what will you say when they ask why it remained only an attempt? Surely, you don't expect anyone to believe that you fought me off. My lady."

At that, she hesitated, but only for a moment. Her voice was thick with malice as she declared: "They'll believe me, no matter what."

"I guess they will, then. Go on, scream," Toren prompted, forcing his tone to remain indifferent.

She did, at the top of her lungs. The thud, thud, thud of running feet answered her in a few heartbeats. Toren budged just enough to let a winded guard ram through the door. The man stopped in the middle of a step at the sight of the lightly dressed princess and averted his eyes hastily.

"W-what's amiss, my lady?" he asked, casting an uncertain look about the parlor.

Lady Miona pointed to Toren with a shaking finger: “He assaulted me! T-the scum r-ripped off my frock and... and...”

She made an exquisite show; Toren had to give her that. Her voice was shivering as on the verge of tears, her rosy lips trembling. The guard looked hesitantly between her and Toren, who remained stone-faced, rooted to the spot beside the door. He didn’t make a move to grab Toren, and the princess shrieked, her voice welling with anger: “Well, what are you waiting for?! Seize him! He attacked me!”

The guard shifted on his feet, the uneasiness plain on his face. His hand twitched in an attempt to curl about the hilt of his short sword, but in the next heartbeat, he let it drop and nailed his doubtful eyes into Toren’s onyx one: “Is that how it went, sir?”

“Would it make any difference even if I said no?” Toren inquired, keeping his cool.

The regret washed over the guard’s face, and he muttered: “No, I don’t think it would.”

He sighed and nudged his head toward the door: “Would you come with me, then, sir?”

“I might,” Toren’s voice was as serene as ever. “But as it happens, I don’t like dark, closed places, which is undoubtedly where you intend to take me. It would be dank, as well, down in the dungeons, I reckon. And I don’t like that either.”

“Please, sir, I do not wish to harm you,” the guard pleaded, beckoning toward the door.

“Nor I you,” Toren replied. “But I will if I must. And anyone else who tries to drag me guiltless into a cell. I haven’t gotten in the habit of boasting with my swordsmanship, but the truth is that if it comes to fighting, the Crown’s Guard will be many a head shorter fore I’ll be seized and shackled.”

The guard swallowed hard, his eyes flitting again between Toren and the princess. He was a man of the middling age and height, lean and sinewy rather than muscular, no match to Toren on his own. He knew it very well himself and started once more to reason with him, trying to convince him that he wouldn’t be beheaded straight away but given a fair trial.

“And then walked to the butcher’s block.” Toren nodded. “I’d rather take a blade through the heart right here and now...”

“What’s happening here?” an out-of-breath, thin voice of an ancient man cut him off.

Toren and the guard both spun about to see Sage Otmar limping across the landing, leaning heavily on the arm of a scrawny, sandy-haired youth in royal blue robes matching his own. The boy had a shrewd look in his cold, light grey eyes that flickered shamelessly upon the half-naked princess. The sage halted at the threshold and scrutinized the scene, his eyes stern behind his thick lenses. Finally, he speared his black gaze into the lady and demanded: “My lady, what is the meaning of this? Why are you only half-dressed? Why did you yell?”

“She claims that the sir attacked her, sage,” the guard hurried to answer for the princess.

“Does she now?” the old sage stepped into the parlor and put a light hand on Toren’s forearm. “And did you, Duirn Eddeesen? Did you lay a hand on her?”

“No,” Toren said. “But I’ve already been told that my word weighs naught, so...”

“Oh, but it does. Girl!”

The old man’s voice lashed like a whip, suddenly so sharp and clear that even Toren winced slightly. He glanced at the princess to see how she’d react to such disrespect and all but yelped in marvel as his eye met another girl scurrying across the room. Even the guard jumped a little at the sight of her, but then the relief broke upon his narrow, deep-lined face, and he backed away into the landing.

Toren couldn’t get his eye off the servant girl, or was she a slave who might come to his aid. She was very tall, barely a head shorter than himself, and slender as a young ash tree, with light-golden hair, alabaster skin, and bright, turquoise eyes. She wore a dove-grey shantung tunic, baggy pants, and soft, suede slippers of the same color. But no ankle chains, he noted. So, not a slave then. She stopped before the sage and bowed low.

“What happened here?” Otmar demanded. “Tell me all and tell it true!”

Before the girl could answer, the princess hissed something to her in a language Toren took a while to recognize as the Elvenish. So, the handmaid was an elf. Of course, he should’ve realized as much... The girl’s hair was coiffed to cover her ears, but Toren should’ve been able to deduce her blood by the soft glow of her exceptionally fair skin and the metallic sheen of her waist-long locks. His sanguinity shattered like a twig house in the storm. Undoubtedly, the girl had been sent to the princess as a gift from her husband-to-be and would never speak against her mistress. He lowered a hand on the pommel of his dagger and readied himself to fight, hoping that it wouldn’t come down to lamming into the sage and his apprentice as well as the guard.

The chambermaid drew her head up and stole a quick glance at Toren before declaring to Sage Otmar in the common tongue so densely savored with the southern lilt that Toren had some difficulties understanding her: "I've been flogged for lesser reasons than telling the truth. The cwr did not harm the princess. She dropped off the clothes herself and screamed for no reason. The cwr never so much as looked at her, save for the face. He has been standing by the door for the whole time since they got in."

"Thank you, my dear." The sage patted her on the forearm. "No one will flog you, I assure you."

The girl bowed again and started to back away into whichever curtain-fold she had emerged from. Toren caught her eyes and inclined his head in humble gratitude: "Thank you, darling. I'd say I owe you, but I don't think I'll be able to redeem my words."

He turned to the sage and bowed: "I thank you, too, sage. It was a pleasure knowing you, even if this briefly."

"Please, Toren, do not dart out quite so soon," the old man pleaded and turned to the guard. "Go and fetch Captain Artemas here to keep an eye on the lady while Duirn Eddesen drains a cup of wine with me."

"At once, sage!" the guard threw a profoundly apologetic look at Toren and hurried on his way.

"Pyetric, you may go as well," Otmar said to his apprentice. "Be kind and see to those scrolls we talked about earlier. I'll be with you shortly."

"As you say, sage," the boy whirled on his heels and started up to the library.

Only after the heavy door had clanked shut behind him two stories above did the ancient pierce the princess with his black eyes. His voice was all but icy as he berated her: "Have you no shame, young lady?! Had Awra not been here, an innocent man would've lost his hand if not more for your heedless whimsy! You should beg on your knees for Duirn Eddesen to forgive your folly!"

"I won't!" the princess stamped down her tiny foot like a three-year-old having a tantrum. "I don't want that wretched oaf as my shield! I want a knight!"

"Well, you will get no knight!" the sage snapped, his eyes flaring. "The knights are needed for the war. And one of them already tried to murder you, besides. Have you forgotten this, my lady? If I were you, I wouldn't trust my life in the hands of any knight after such an experience. Now, get dressed and contemplate what you've done. Awra, bar the door after us, please, and let no one in, save for the captain."

“As you command, lord sage,” the Elf bowed from beside the hefty wardrobe where she had retired to stand soundless and motionless as a figure in a tapestry.

Otmar put a liver-spotted hand on Toren’s forearm: “Would you be kind enough to see me to my chambers and drain a toast or two to my health, for all the good it does me?”



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*"I could change it into a wagon of gold... Or a kiss."*

**T**he Spring Market was as noisy and smelly and wonderful as ever, Irana was delighted to note, as their small company approached the stalls and wagons, carts, blankets, and trolleys sprawled on the fields sparsely and disorderly. In Girania, she hadn't much cared for the event, but her opinion had changed in one fair swoop as she had visited the Market in Erephonia for the first time. In the Conqueror's Cape, the Market was held in the old town, all the traders stuffed into the tiny squares and narrow streets of the three innermost grindles of the city. She had always been forced to go there in a palanquin that was cumbersome and uncomfortable in the jampacked streets, so she had passed the Market as often as not. Now, however, the three days of the Spring Market were her favorite time of the year.

She drank in the atmosphere, the din, and the smells of the event with all her senses. The stalls were covered with striped yellow and red and blue and green canvases, the wagons painted with even brighter shades, and the people had donned their finest clothes, braided many-colored ribbons into their hair tied silk scarfs about their hips. The traders shouted their offers, the buyers hackling, laughing, and greeting each other in merry voices. Children and stray dogs were running about, weaving among the forest of legs, all the jackdaws and crows and pigeons of the city cronking and cawing and cooing on top of the stalls, wafting now and then down into the crowd to pick a piece of bread or a honey candy from the ground.

Sir Righar walked so close to Irana in the scrum that his armored arm brushed against hers. She wished she could link her arm with his, squeeze close to him, and plant a kiss on his cheek as a passing-by blue-eyed girl just did to her smiling, fair-haired companion. But Sir Righar was her knight, not her fiancé, and she was a woman wed, besides, chained for the rest of her days to a, literally, gutless little piglet.

The little prince was ridiculously easy to manipulate, though, and now and then, Irana had toyed with the thought of how her life would turn out should

King Hamar fall on the battlefield. Helbar would be crowned the king, and she would be his queen... She held his strings already, even tighter than Sage Marlian, for the White Lady couldn't give him what he desired the most, the honey between her legs. Irana could twine him about her pinkie and dance him as she pleased just by giving him a taste of her nectar whenever he wanted. And should he refuse to do her bidding, all she needed to do was cross her legs and wait until his thirst grew intolerable, and he'd come crawling to her promising to do whatever she wished if only she opened her box of pleasures to him again. She could become a puppet master and rule the kingdom through him. She'd be one of the most influential persons in Braenduir. She could end slavery and grant women rights such as they could never have even dreamed about... And be mentioned in the books of history as Queen Irana of Erephonia, King Helbar the Reformer's loyal lady wife. Irana grimaced. What was the point in doing great things if the honor went to someone else? The only thing she'd be remembered for would be the number and quality of the children she had whelped to her lord husband. And if Helbar's member wouldn't have a sudden growth spurt, as he was hoping and imagining, the books of history would know her as Queen Irana the Barren if her name was mentioned at all.

"My lady?" Livvy asked in a timid voice. "Could we drop by there?"

Irana looked over in the direction of her pointing finger. The stall her handmaid was longing to look closer seemed to be selling naught but glittering gimcrack, but Irana kept the thought to herself and smiled to the girl: "Of course, dear. And if you'll find something you like, I'll be happy to buy it for you."

"Oh, but you don't need to, my lady!" Livvy exclaimed, chinking the coppers in her pocket. "I've got money of my own."

"As you will," Irana yielded, following her and Sir Grystam to the profusion of trumpery.

Livvy was mesmerized by the glinting glass gem jewelry and little decorative figurines carved of wood and stone and tin and painted with bright, fanciful colors. As she hackled with the seller over a tiny lapdog figurine inscribed with jade, Irana swept over the nearby booths with her eyes. It didn't take too long to find what she was looking for. The stall was covered with fir-green canvas, and the seller was so tall and dark-haired, he had to be a Hjelmen. Irana's heart leaped, and she turned to her shields: "Sir Grystam, would you accompany me for a change? Sir Righar, would you be kind enough to stay here with Livvy? It seems to me she's only just warming the seller up."

Sir Righar didn't object, and Sir Grystam looked pleased for the invitation. His broad face turned even brighter as he saw where she was taking him: "I didn't know you were interested in the swords, my lady?"

"I promised to buy Helbar a gift," Irana explained. "And this looks just the place to start, I think."

"Definitely!" Sir Grystam nodded, his gauntleted hand already fiddling with a bone hilt of a handsome dagger.

The seller greeted them with curt courtesy, but his dark eyes grew warmer as Irana approached him timidly: "Have you any chorim blades for sale?"

"I sure do, lady," he said in his strong, northern accent and moved aside to give her room to step inside the ring of narrow wooden tables upon which he had laid out his goods. "I just keep them out of the reach of the nimble fingers."

"A wise decision," Irana admitted sighing deep as he opened the lid of a large crate in the middle of the stall.

The black steel gleamed dangerously, yet captivatingly, in the sunlight seeping through the green canopy. Though it didn't look like steel at all. It looked like water forced into a solid form. Irana crouched down beside the crate, reaching out a hand to touch the blades. The seller clasped her wrist and shook his head: "They're sharp. The tiniest brush of the edge will cut your finger to the bone."

"Oh... I didn't realize."

"A few people outside Aenerhjelm do." The seller shrugged. "Are you searching for a blade for yourself or someone else?"

"For someone else. I was thinking about a dagger, but... To be honest, I know little and less about the weapons. These all look magnificent, but I couldn't tell which of them is better than the other."

"Every piece is of the finest quality, lady," the seller assured her. "In which kind of use the blade is meant? Rather stab game or slash the throats of the enemies?"

"I truly hope he wouldn't need to use it for the latter too much... But I guess I must say both."

"Very well... How about this one?" the seller picked up a beautiful dagger with a delicate, leaf-thin blade and a rune-engraved hilt made of...

"What's the hilt made of?" Irana frowned, brushing the sparkling white material with a fingertip.

"Believe it or not, it's of unicorn bone," the seller said without as much as a hint of a smile under his black, braided beard.

Irana burst out in incredulous laughter: “Unicorn bone? My dear duirn, do you take me for a fool?”

“Not at all, m’diarn, I take you for a highly literate woman,” he replied, his eyes growing a shade warmer under his dark, bushy eyebrows. “Now, you know the same as I; the unicorns are no more. But they have been once, and this blade was forged a long, long time ago. These are ancient runes, such that aren’t used anymore.”

“Can you read them?” Irana asked.

“I’m afraid not,” the seller regretted. “All I can is guess that this blade has been forged to befit into a hand of a great hero.”

“Well, it sure looks like that... I’m not sure whether I even dare to inquire about the price?”

“The price is negotiable, m’diarn. The truth is that a blade like this is all but impossible to price. It’s hundreds of years old, thousands, maybe, and who could tell a price to a material that can’t be found anywhere anymore? The blade might even be spell-forged... Most likely it is, for the dagger is so old.”

“You are... You are serious with this talk of unicorn bone and spell-forging?” Irana realized.

“Why, of course, I am!” the seller scuffed. “The Jotun smiths of old all had more or fewer skills in channeling the vigor. There’re such smiths in Aenerhjelm even today, though not too many, I’m afraid. You see, the chorim can’t be forged properly without the vigor. It can be worked, certainly, but the results are inconsistent.”

“Oh, I see... So, how much would you want for this spell-forged blade, then?” Irana asked, wondering would even her whole fortune cover the price.

The seller gave her a pondering look. His fair skin glowed faintly in the greenish dusk of the stall. His age was hard to guess; he could’ve been five and thirty as well as five and sixty with his spear-straight posture and net of thin lines in the corners of his eyes which gave away that he was inclined to smile and laugh often and well. He twirled the dagger in his hand and declared: “This blade is priceless. I could change it to a wagon of gold or a good story, to a copper, or a kiss. The latter I’d never dare to ask of such a fine lady like yourself, so, let’s just say that the price depends.”

“On?” Irana prompted, thinking that she could’ve kissed this man with pleasure even for nothing at all, let alone a chorim dagger.

The seller wasn’t a comely man, though not ugly either. He had harsh features, deep-set eyes, a heavy brow, and a crooked nose that had been broken,

and broken, and broken again until its bridge looked like a rough cliff of rock. However, something in him made Irana's belly flutter and blood run faster. Maybe the warm glint in his dark eyes or his low, purring voice...

"On to whom you thought to gift it," he finished, and Irana wrenched her eyes off him, abashed.

"To a knight," she gushed out. "I want to give it to a knight."

The seller glanced sideways at Sir Grystam, who was outside the stall slashing the air with a short sword forged of the common steel quite like a child in its play: "Not to that one, I hope?"

"No," Irana pointed toward Sir Righar, who stood his face to them, patient and dutiful like a well-trained guard dog beside Livvy, who was still hackling away merrily with the gimcrack-seller. "To him."

The Hjelmens scrutinized the young knight for a while in silence, nodded, went back to the crate, and found a scabbard there. It was made of fine, silvery leather that sparkled as it caught a glimpse of sunlight. He sheathed the dagger in it.

"Now, you'll probably tell me that the scabbard is made of unicorn skin?" Irana couldn't help saying.

The corners of his eyes wrinkled: "Well, I should think it is. Be that as it may, here you are. May it serve the young sir well."

He handed the blade to Irana, hilt first. She didn't take it: "But how much...?"

"As I said, the dagger is priceless," he said. "And as I also said, it was forged for a great hero. Weapons are made to be used, m'diarn, and this one has been lying on the bottom of my crate for far too long already."

"I can't take it for naught!" Irana scuffed, shocked.

"You're not taking it at all. I'm giving it to you. There's a difference." The seller nudged the hilt gently against her palm, and she twined her fingers about it as gingerly as if it was made of stardust rather than solid bone.

The hilt felt warm to her hand, smooth and soft though it gave in not a bit as she gave it a tentative squeeze. *Friendly*, she thought irrationally. *It feels friendly*. She raised her eyes to the seller's face: "I can't thank you enough."

"Knowing that a weapon will end up in capable hands is thanks enough to me," he replied. "But now you must excuse me. I need to see to that friend of yours before he hurts himself with that sword."

"Sir Grystam!" Irana raised her voice. "Put away the blade, or handle it like a knight, not like a ten-year-old."

She slipped the unicorn dagger inside the waist of her riding pants where it remained hidden under her jacket and turned back to the seller: "I'd need another blade if it pleases you, duirn. A hunting knife, maybe. For my... husband."

"Those I've got many and more," said the seller. "Though none made of chorim, I fear."

"The common steel will serve brilliantly." Irana followed him a few steps to the table, where he had laid out a handsome collection of hunting blades.

She let him choose for her and bought the sword Sir Grystam was toying with as well, for the knight had already dropped it into the hard, frozen ground at least thrice. The blade seller's prices were modest, though Irana had an inkling that had Sir Grystam bought the sword himself, it would've cost twice as much. She thanked him as courteously as she could and was already on her way back to the gimmick stall as he called her back, holding out a small pouch of black leather: "A whetstone for the hero's blade. No common stone can be used for chorim. The metal hones them, not the other way around. It needs little and less sharpening, to be sure, but a lick or few now and again won't do it any harm, either. Here, the stone comes into the bargain."

"Thank you ever so much, duirn," Irana took the pouch and slipped it into her pocket. "It was a pleasure bargaining with you."

"Mine, mostly." He smiled and folded into a small yet courteous bow. "May the gods watch over your path, m'diarn. Oi, lad! That's my blade you slipped into your pants..."

He whirled about the booth to grab a tiny, dirty boy by the collar. Irana followed Sir Grystam back to the gimmick stall where Livvy had wasted most of her coppers on a selection of animal figurines carved of different stones. Irana stopped her from using the rest by pointing out that they had only just arrived, and she might find something that she wanted even more than these little decorative figures, pretty as they were.

As they weaved deeper into the maze of stalls, Sir Grystam went on and on about his new blade to Sir Righar, emphasizing in every other sentence how the lady had bought it for him. The younger knight's face remained serene, but Irana bristled, wanting naught more than to pull the chorim dagger out and gift it to him right there and then. She couldn't, however, not if she wanted to avoid the fuss and gossip that would sprout over such a gift.

Though there weren't many chorim blades in the Kingdoms, everyone who knew anything about the weapons, in general, understood the value of the metal more than well. If it became known that she had made a gift of such a blade to

a knight of her Chamber Guard instead of her lord husband, the whole court would be sure that Sir Righar was standing through his night vigils in quite a different manner than was intended. *I wish he were*, Irana thought longingly, sneaking a look at him. Most like, he had something to stand out in his pants, unlike her poor little prince, though he might be even less experienced in using his tool.

Had he ever been with a woman, actually? He had been so young when taking his vows... Irana wasn't sure whether the vow forbade the knights from sleeping with a woman or only from taking one to wife. Whichever way, they most definitely weren't to lay with their princesses. And her wedding vows forbade her from taking any other man save for her husband into bed even though he would've turned out to be utterly incompetent. By the law, a husband could set his wife aside if she proved to be barren or a slut, but a wife didn't have the same right. *Obviously*, Irana thought bitterly. *If we had, there'd be more dumped men skittering in the streets than stray cats.*

They had reached the center of the Market, a vast, more or less round space left empty for the copers, slavers, and the tilting contest held tomorrow. Today, it was divided between a copper and a slaver, both of whom were dwarfs. The copper was a lean, bald man who had a thunderous voice in which he was auctioning out a fine, dark bay filly.

Though Irana had thought about buying a new horse, she felt more drawn to the slaver's platform. She couldn't comprehend why, for she most certainly wouldn't buy a slave. Yet, her feet carried her to the crowd swarming about the crude platform upon which a stout, grey-curling dwarf in brightly colored garb was taking bids for a well-muscled, dark-eyed youth.

The boy was clean-shaven, ripped naked from the waist up, and looked all but ready to wrench off the head of anyone who dared to make an offer of him. Many did, nonetheless, for the war had drawn most able-bodied men to the north, and the seedtime loomed just behind the corner. His pecs and biceps would be put to good use in some farm, Irana had no doubt. And by the end of the summer, he would've charmed some maiden or a young widow with them and would be plowing a field of his own. At least, if he stopped scowling and spitting curses in his rough Westang at anyone and no one.

Irana started elbowing her way through the crowd, though she still didn't know why she needed to get to the platform. The urge was overwhelming, however, and she followed it blindly, as if in a dream. And then, all of a sudden, she *was* in a dream. Or so she felt for half a heartbeat as she laid her eyes upon

the ragged, filthy skeleton of a man who was swaying on his knees at the end of the row of slaves shackled to each other by the ankles.

He was but a shadow of the man she had encountered in the dream, but he was the same man, without a doubt. His tattoos gave him away though nothing else would have. In the dream, his body had been slender, not skinny, his muscles trimmed to perfection, his sandy hair clean and neatly cut, not hanging in filthy clumps over his shoulders. He had been clean-shaven, too, but now a silver-streaked beard covered his face, as matted and crusted with filth as his hair. He was naked from the waist up, just as all the men in the row and many of the girls, four of whom looked so alike that they could be sisters, and his shredded black trousers showed more skin than they covered.

Irana shoved aside a sturdy woman with a heavily painted face, who looked like a brothel madame, and a skinny old man in patched breeches wrenched herself up onto the platform and lunged at the man, her heart skittering in her throat.

Her rash action raised a yelp from both the slaver and Sir Righar, who was beside her in a heartbeat, his gilded sword half-drawn: "My lady? What...?"

"Oi! Miss!" the slaver limped to them, his broad face glowing with anger. "What d'you think you're doing, miss? You can't come up here! If you want to buy a slave, you'll bid for one just like all the rest! From down there!"

He pointed to the crowd with his knobby cane. Irana made no move to leave the platform. She snatched her purse from her pocket, tossed it to Sir Righar, and commanded: "Pay him, sir, whatever he wants."

"My lady?" the young knight was puzzled.

"You heard me!" Irana snapped. "I mean to buy this man."

"You may buy him, but in the auction," the slaver grunted. "And he's the last in the row, as you see, so..."

Irana drew up to her full height to tower almost a foot taller than the dwarf: "Name your price and unshackle him! Now."

"Look, wench..."

"You're talking to your princess!" Sir Righar cut in in a cold voice. "Call her a wench one more time, and I swear, I'll make sure your filthy tongue insults no one ever again."

The slaver blanched, scrambled down to one knee, and started spluttering apologies. Irana cut him off: "I've got no use for your regrets. Just unchain this man. I'll pay you whatever price you name for him."

The slaver chinked and clanked his heavy ring of keys, found the right one after a few miss-picks, and removed the shackles from the tattooed one's legs. He was about to leave the collar and cuffs attached with a rusty iron chain, but Irana demanded them off. Sir Righar called for Sir Grystam to bring a horse.

"Take mine," he commanded. "Livvy, come here where I can see you or go with Grystam."

As he spoke, he crouched down before the slave, eased his arms under his armpits, pulled him up against his chest, and ordered the slaver to bring him water.

"Fucking bastard!" he spat as soon as the dwarf had waddled on his way. "He has found something to eat for the others, it seems. Why not for this one?"

The slave mumbled something incomprehensible. Irana stepped closer and touched his arm with light fingers: "What did you say?"

"I was... worse... before..." the man croaked, dropping the words out one by one as if he wasn't quite sure how to form such.

"He was, my lady," the slaver had returned with a waterskin. "I bought him from the outlaws... Or rather, they sold him to me. I had no say in the matter. Anyway, he was in awful shape. I was sure he'd die on me. But he's a tough fellow..."

He helped the slave drink as he spoke, more gently than Irana would ever have expected. She had always taken the slavers nothing but monsters, but this one, at least, wasn't entirely a bad man.

"I would've washed him for the auction," the slaver kept talking. "But I didn't dare risk for him to catch a fever for the cold water."

"And he couldn't catch it for the chilly air?" Irana snapped.

"He had a blanket, my lady," the dwarf pointed down where indeed, a ragged woolen blanket was crumpled on the platform. "But the buyers need to see what they're paying for... What? No more water? As you will."

He stuffed the waterskin under his arm and bent down to pick up the blanket, but Sir Righar stopped him with a curt shake of his helmed head, unbuckled his poppy-red cloak, and draped it about the slave's bony shoulders. He handed Irana's pouch back to her. She opened it, but the dwarf raised a refusing hand: "No, my lady, just take him away. I hope you won't think too ill of me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, my lady." The slaver bowed low, flinging his lacerated, purple tricorn off his steel-grey curls. "It's a great honor for a man like me to have a princess

on my platform and even a greater one to be able to grant her a gift. I'd tell you to keep him well, but that might be..."

"Slightly inappropriate, as he's a man, not a puppy?" Irana suggested in icy tones. "Be that as it may, I thank you for doing the right thing, at least this once. Sir Righar, do you need help taking him down from here?"

"No, my lady, but I think it would be wise to wait until Sir Grystam brings Clap," the knight said. "He can't climb on the saddle, and skinny as he is, he's too big a man for me to lift from the ground... There comes Grystam, already. Livvy, be kind, run to him, and tell him to bring the horse behind the platform."

Irana withdrew to give the young man room to do as he saw best. Only seven and ten he might be, but today he acted like a man twice his age who had worked as a commander for half his life. He needed not to say, but one word and the crowd split in two to make way to Sir Grystam and the horse, and Sir Grystam obeyed his every command like a well-trained hound rather than a fellow knight. Righar helped the slave into the saddle, mounted behind him, and turned to Irana to ask her for leave to ride forth to the castle.

"Of course, you must!" she urged him. "Take him to the sage... No, no, wait. Take him to the empty chambers across from mine own. Tell the girls to make a hot bath for him and send for the sage. Could you do that for me, sir?"

"I'll do whatever you ask of me, my lady," Sir Righar inclined his head, spun his horse around and spurred him into a slow canter.

Sir Grystam offered his arm to Irana to help her down from the platform. He swore softly as she broke into a run as soon as her feet hit the ground. His armor chinked and clanked as he caught her with a few leaps and twined his steel-clad fingers about her forearm. She spun about aghast, her hand half raised to slap him in the face, but he stopped her with a low, angry growl: "Have you taken a leave of your senses, my lady? Do you really want the whole city to tattle about how their princess runs after a slave like a ratty bitch? Come, let's take a loop through the horse auction, make a bid for a steed or two, and grab something to eat on our way back to the castle. Or even better, let's go back to the platform and buy another slave..."

"No!" Irana snapped him off. "But you're right, sir, I was acting rashly. Bidding for a horse sounds brilliant. I was thinking about getting a new steed for myself, anyway. You may let go of me now. I'm not darting anywhere anymore."



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*“There’s darkness in him.”*

**T**he heavy snow had pitched against the cottage’s front, and it took Greth quite a while to shovel her way to the door. A thin wisp of smoke coiled up from the chimney, and the warmth gushed upon her as she yanked the flaky, sky-blue door open. She was about to call out a cheerful greeting to her son, whom she guessed to be the one who had come visiting her, but the words stuck into her throat as she stepped over the threshold. A fire crackled and snapped in the hearth, but its orange glow wasn’t the only thing illuminating the cottage. The dark, blazing shimmer drew her attention, and a gasp stole from her lips as her gaze found the bed.

Arron was there, sound asleep, but Greth barely saw him. She had eyes only for the other young man, the source of the onyx, flaring light, who laid on his side, his face to the door. His black eyes met hers, and she shuttered despite herself. His abysmal gaze was shadowy and sullen. Embarrassment and defiance warred upon his dour yet comely face as he pushed up, sitting: “Forgive me, m’diarn...”

Greth collected herself quickly and lifted a hand to stop him from leaving the bed: “There’s no need for you to apologize. It seems to me, I should, for intruding like this...”

“This is your home, I reckon,” he stated. “And I am the intruder if anyone.”

Greth shook her head and pulled the door shut behind her. She had wondered a time or three why her son had never brought a girl home. Now she knew but digesting the fact would take some time though it wasn’t as big a surprise as it might have been. After all, Arron had never been quite like the other boys. Not once had she spotted him kissing a girl at the bonfires though he had always gotten along with them brilliantly. She had thought him too shy or abstentious to frolic about like his peers and been proud of him for being such a well-mannered youth.

She grimaced into the folds of her green and brown checkered scarf and turned her back to the onyx-eyed mage to take off her green woolen cloak and

hang it on the rack beside the hearth. She yanked off her snow-cruled boots, unwrapped the long, thick scarf about her neck and head, and pushed a hand through her curling, chestnut hair a few times.

As she turned back to face the stranger again, she managed a genial smile at him. He didn't return it. His expression was dark and doubtful, and his aura blazed and fluttered like a storm of lucid, black flames about him. The most potent aura Greth had ever seen and easy enough to read. The young man was very talented but fervent and anxious, slightly disturbed, even. There was darkness in him, fierce enough to make Greth fear him. But there was also love. It glowed like embers under the billowing veils of anger, hatred, and grudge, intense, raw, and untamed. It scared her even more than all his blackness.

He studied her aura the same way she scrutinized his, and she could tell by the shadow falling upon his face that he knew exactly how she felt about him. He started up again, but Arron clasped his wrist and muttered in a thick, drowsy voice: "Stop bouncing around like a mindless rabbit, for gods' sake!" The Onyx's aura flared up at his touch like a pyre that was thrown oil into. Greth saw that it took all his strength not to wrench his hand free and flee from the bed. He inhaled through his nose and pointed out in a hoarse voice: "Your mother's here."

"She won't spank us," Arron assured him and cracked his eyes to peer at Greth through his long, dark lashes. "It's good to see you, mom."

"Likewise," Greth commented. "I was at the village. A young mother had twins."

"How did it go?" Arron blinked his eyes open and propped himself up to lean on his elbows.

"Badly," Greth sighed. "The baby boy had died in the womb. I'm not sure whether the mother will make it, either, though I did all I could for her."

"As you always do." Arron pushed the blanket away and lowered his feet onto the floor.

He didn't have a shred on, and Greth averted her eyes hastily. It wasn't like her, and Arron lowered the arms he had already spread to embrace her.

"Sorry," he snatched his grey long johns from the rafter. "I didn't know we had started to shy each other."

"We haven't," Greth rushed to hug him. "I've missed you."

He was two heads taller than her and hot as a brazier, as always. When he had been a child, she had been startled every time she had touched him, thinking that he had gotten a fever. It had taken a long time for her to believe

that this just was the way he was. He had been an exceptionally healthy child. The plague that had taken a third of Nortenmoor's children to their untimely graves and left most of the rest with more or fewer pockmarks when he had been five had never touched him. She had feared for him day and night, for she had spent most of her days in the city tending the sick and must have brought the disease home in her hems though it hadn't given any symptoms to the adults. She lifted her hands onto his cheeks. He bent down to kiss her forehead: "How've you been?"

"As fair as ever," Greth assured him. "And you?"

"Brilliantly." He smiled and drew away from her to pull on his underpants.

His onyx-eyed partner had slid out of the bed silent as a wraith and was pulling on a black leather jacket beside the door. Arron turned to him: "Surely, you are not leaving without breakfast?"

"I'll just go and check on the horses." The mage glanced over at him.

"Could you gather the eggs as you go to the shed, please?" Greth asked.

"Of course." He hurried out.

As soon as the door had clanked shut, Greth rounded on her son: "Do you have any inkling what kind of a fire you're playing with?!"

"I'm not... This is not what it looks like," Arron claimed. "I met Jan only yesterday and..."

Greth couldn't help the shock welling on her face, and he paused. A jolt of amusement flared in his eyes, but he sounded sincere as he finished: "And fell in love with him at first glance."

Greth swallowed and uttered: "I... I'm happy for you, of course..."

"Mother, I was only teasing you!" he chuckled. "Look, we barely know each other. I met him at lunch in the Three Widows and..."

He trailed off and shifted his feet uneasily. Greth frowned: "What is it? Has something happened?"

Arron ran a hand through his messy tumble of tar-brown hair biting his lip. Her stomach knotted. Whatever he had come to tell her wouldn't make her happy. She straightened her posture and prepared herself for the worst.

"I volunteered." He didn't even try to soften the blow. "For the war in Erephonia. We'll march within a quarter."

The floor swayed under Greth's feet. She clutched the bosom of her homespun linen shirt and blinked back the tears. Arron took her in his arms and squeezed her tight: "I'm sorry for causing you such trouble, but I... I just couldn't miss the opportunity."

“Of course not.” She forced her voice steady. “Is your... friend coming with you?”

“Yes.”

This gave Greth some comfort but not enough to soothe the fear and anger raging within her. She pushed her son at an arm’s length and slapped him hard on the cheek. His dark, wing-shaped eyebrows arched, and even higher, as she leaned forth to kiss the red mark her palm had left on his skin.

“A queer way to wish me luck,” he observed, his amethyst eyes glinting in restrained amusement.

“You deserved both,” Greth snapped. “Have you taken a leave of your senses, Arron?! What do you know about warring?”

“I’ve served in the army for seven years...”

“You’ve played with training swords with other kids in the garrison’s pen!” Greth couldn’t hold herself back. “That’s got nothing to do with a real war! Why? Why did you bound yourself to such folly?”

“If I want to ascent...”

“Whenever has one needed to attend into a war to ascent in Aenerhjelm’s army?!” Greth’s voice grew shrill, and she slapped him again, as hard as she could. “You fool! You thrice-cursed, soft-headed...”

The hinges creaked, and the cold draft brushed her reddened face as the Onyx entered. She fell silent and yanked back her hand that had risen to strike her son again. The mage looked from her to the blazing mark on Arron’s cheek, and his aura flared up like a torch, blindingly bright in its darkness. Yet, his face gave away nothing as he stepped to them and pressed a hand on Arron’s cheek, ever so lightly. His vigor was as onyx as his eyes, a brief lick of it enough to wipe away the swollen redness Greth’s hand had left. He withdrew the heartbeat he was done, wordless, and dug half a dozen big, brown eggs from the pockets of his jacket. He put them on the table and spun on his heels, the crown of his head brushing a rafter: “I’ll be outside. Take your time.”

Arron clasped him by the elbow and whirled him around: “You won’t go anywhere. Doff your jacket and sit down. Or even better, help me with the breakfast. You know how to fry those eggs, I assume?”

The mage’s onyx eyes welled with reluctance. His arm was as hard as a branch in Arron’s grip, but he did not wrench it free. They stared at each, other hard for a few heartbeats, and Greth could’ve sworn she saw an onyx blade clashing into the amethyst one between their eyes. The mage yielded, lowered his eyes, and said in a hoarse voice, barely louder than a whisper: “As you will.”

Arron let go of his arm: “Thank you. Now, how was my fierce warhorse?”

The Son grunted disdainfully: “She had splintered down half of her stall and blooded her hind legs. I healed her wounds and repaired the shed, but there’s no way you could ride her to the war.”

Arron had to agree with him. If the sounds of a storm got the mare combusted enough to kick half of the shed into splinters, noises of the battle were certain to freak her out utterly. He’d have enough to worry about without a bolted horse when they arrived at the Plains of Midathrir, so he nodded as Jan double-checked if he’d consent to return home through Muindern. The Son’s dour face softened a little, and he took off his jacket and boots and crouched beside the hearth to make a fire beneath the iron stove. Arron fetched bread, butter, and honey and the rest of the porkpie they had brought from the pantry. While Jan fried the eggs on a black iron pan, Greth set the table. The three of them broke their fast in awkward silence. The only sounds were the crackling of fire and clanking of the iron cutlery to the tin plates.

Finally, as the plates were almost empty, Greth raised her green eyes to Jan: “It’s the healing magic you wield then, is it not?”

The Son chewed the last bite of his eggs before giving her a curt answer: “That as well, m’diarn.”

His tone didn’t encourage further questioning, but Greth ventured on, nonetheless: “Have you been trained in the brotherhood?”

Jan nodded stiffly and took his dirty dishes to the basin on the worktop. He filled a large pot with water and put it on the fire to heat up. Arron began to gather the empty plates and cups.

“Just leave them, please,” Greth sighed. “I’ve got all the time in the world to do the dishes after you’ve set out.”

She rose from the bench and stretched up to pick a few bundles of herbs from the rafter above the table: “How is your medical bag? Would it require replenishment?”

“No, thank you, m’diarn,” the young man glanced over at her. “I’ve got all the herbs and ointments I could need.”

“Very well...” Greth put the brittle, dusty bundles on the table.

She knew it would be wisest to give up. The Onyx didn’t seem to be amenable to her help or advice. He had judged her by a single moment of weakness and wasn’t about to relent.

Arron carried the dishes into the basin and began to dress. He was in his army greens, and as he buckled on his scaled boiled leather jerkin, it felt to

Greth like a gorge had cracked between them, hundreds of feet wide and unfathomably deep. A son morphed into a soldier, and as he bent down to kiss her goodbye, she knew she had lost him forever, whether he'd come back from the war.

His friend flung a black leather satchel onto his shoulder, granted a curt bow to Greth, and hurried to the door: "I'll tack the horses. Just take your time."

"I've taken as much time as I could need," Arron declared but cupped Greth's cheek with his warm, calloused hand and sighed. "Forgive me, mother..."

"No..." Greth cut him off in a hoarse whisper. "You do what you believe is right. I only wish..."

She swallowed and waited until the Son had closed the door behind him: "I only wish you know what you are doing. The war is one thing, but at least for that, you've trained the half of your life, whereas him... Just be careful with him, Arron, please. There's darkness in him..."

"Mayhaps, but there's also light," Arron interrupted in gentle tones. "And as I said, we've only just met. I could hardly call him a friend yet, and that's all we'll ever be, besides. I still prefer women."

He kissed her once more on the forehead, promised that he'd write as soon as he'd get a chance, and strolled to the door. Greth's heart was a chunk of lead in the bottom of her chest as she followed him outside. The heavy, wet snow that the storm had heaped into the small yard had already started to melt. The sun blazed white in the piercing blue sky, and a lonely raven soared high above on the back of the west wind that swept across the moors.

Greth shivered and wrapped her arms about her upper body. The wind wasn't cold, but the way it whirled and whispered between the buildings made her guts turn to ice. Far above, the raven cawed, a mournful sound that made the thin hairs at the nape of her neck stand on an end. She wanted to rush to her son and beg him to forget about the campaign, but her feet were rooted to the ground, her tongue a frozen clump in her mouth. She could only stand and watch as the mage walked two dark bay destriers from the shed and handed the reins of a smaller one to Arron.

The horse was jittery and pranced about biting her bit as he mounted her in an effortless leap. Arron gathered the reins and spun the mare about to hail Greth one last time before guiding the charger after the Son's calm gelding. She remained by the door for as long as they became but two black smudges between the gently sloping hills and returned inside the tears streaking her face.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*“Rather you than anyone else.”*

“Hit her!” the princess commanded Toren as soon as they returned from her lessons in the library to her parlor, where the elven chambermaid stood waiting still as a statue in her corner beside the wardrobe.

“Excuse me, my lady?” Toren was genuinely confused. “Why would I do such? Has Awra done something to earn a blow?”

“She spoke against me!” Lady Miona spat vindictively.

*But of course... Indeed, the poor girl should be punished for preventing me from striking down half of the Crown's Guard.*

“I'll do no such thing, my lady,” Toren declined.

“Oh, but you will! Or would you rather I send for Sir Dafras and ask him to beat her with a spear shaft? He'll obey gladly, I assure you.”

Toren didn't doubt her words for a heartbeat. He had met Sir Dafras, who was no knight in truth, not even a guard, but an upleapt gong farmer from the poorest parts of the city, briefly at the training yard as he had applied for the job as the princess' shield and disliked the man from the first glance. He was the crown's headsman; Captain Artemas had told Toren later as he had inquired about the gloomy scarecrow at the edge of the yard.

“And more eager than necessary to do his duties,” the captain had added, his face wrinkling in distaste. “A certain amount of bloodlust is essential if one is to act as an executioner, to be sure, but Dafras is way too fascinated by the art of severing heads and hacking off hands. The violence comes as easy as breathing to him, and I like that not a bit.”

Toren played time by putting his borrowed short sword on the floor. There was no way he'd let the butcher lay his scratched hands on the maid, but for gods' sake, he couldn't hit a girl who had just saved so many lives, his own included! He had never stricken a woman save on the battlefield had one drawn a blade against him and wasn't about to start today. He fiddled unnecessarily with the scabbard of his sword to buy himself a few heartbeats to figure out how to squirm out of the hook. The princess' skirts rustled as she began to pace impatiently back and forth.

“Well?” she snapped. “Shall I call Sir Dafras?”

“My lady...” Toren turned to her struggling to maintain his composure. “Awra did only what she thought was right and said no more than the truth. I’ll take the beating in her stead. It would be only fair, anyway, as she saved my back.”

The princess snorted disdainfully: “I don’t think so! A few blows with a cane wouldn’t do you much harm, I reckon. And taught her nothing, besides. She’s my chambermaid, and a chambermaid should never defy her mistress or master. Isn’t that so, Awra?”

The elf looked up at her and gave a stiff nod: “Yes, my lady, this is true.”

“There!” the princess exclaimed to Toren, her voice thick with triumph. “Even she knows, she did ill. So, for the last time, hit her! You’ve pledged to do as I say, haven’t you?”

“No, my lady, I’ve given no such promise,” Toren denied. “I’ve sworn only to protect you.”

“Suit yourself,” Lady Miona stepped to the thin silver chain hanging beside the door to ring a bell that would call a servant or a guard, whichever happened to be at hand, to her chambers.

The chambermaid caught Toren’s eye across the parlor and said in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper: “Rather you than anyone else, cwr.”

*Bloody hell...*

The princess halted and withdrew her hand from the chain. Toren gritted his teeth. The captain had warned him and seemingly not without a cause. The girl was a nasty piece of work indeed... He kept his face straight and tone calm: “Do you believe that your royal father will send me on my way if he hears, I keep a habit of beating the servants, my lady? Pray forgive me if I’m mistaken, but I had thought it’s not too big a deal among your people to abuse the attendants?”

The princess’ mouth pouted peevishly. She wasn’t one to give up easily, however, and snapped: “Be that as it may, she demurred me and must be punished. So, for the last time, hit her, or I’ll yank the chain.”

She grabbed the chain to show that she wasn’t just spitting out empty threats. Toren clenched his fists, fighting against an all-consuming urge to smash in the little bitch’s smugly sneering face. Though he didn’t see her eyes, he could well imagine the malicious glint she had in them right now. She had cornered him well and true and knew it all too well.

The chambermaid stepped before him and stared him straight in the eye, looking as calm as a statue. He ground his teeth, raised his hand, and slapped her lightly into the arm, hating himself more than he had ever thought possible.

The princess hmphed disdainfully and declared: “I thought you knew the common tongue, duirn. I said, “hit her,” not “pat her”! Surely, you understand the difference. Or should I call Sir Dafras here to teach it to you?”

“No!” she snapped as he lifted his hand again to give the maid another blow. “There’s no use striking her into the body. Such teaches her no lesson. Hit her in the face, and...”

She paused at a tentative knock on the door. Toren held back a relieved scuff and hurried to open the door for Pedran, the gaunt lackey who had seen to his needs ever since he had arrived at the palace. The man bowed low, to him more than to the princess, Toren couldn’t help noticing, and said: “My lady if it pleases you, Her Grace requires your presence in the sartor’s salon.” Lady Miona grimaced: “It doesn’t please me the slightest. What does she want?”

“I was only told to bring you, my lady,” the lackey regretted. “But between the two of us, the words ‘wedding’ and ‘dress’ were whispered among the ladies...”

“Oh!” the princess perked up immediately. “Why didn’t you just say so right away?! Finally! I had all but given up hope that Erzibhas would finish the work in time...”

She scurried out of the parlor as she spoke. Toren snatched his sword and followed a few steps behind her out of the Tower of the Sun, past the Tower of the Throne, and into the topmost floor of the Tower of Whispers.

The court sartor’s salon was an eye-piercingly bright place in both light and color, more like a glasshouse than a room, really, for the panes of the octagonal clear-glass roof reached almost to the floor, and even on a cloudy day like this, the light seeping through the diamond-shaped panes was merciless in its brightness. The salon was a flurry of colorful silk and samite, most of which were worn by the ladies of the court who were idling on the low, velvet-upholstered settees and daybeds that had been scattered about the space in a punctiliously careless manner.

A sigh rose from the flock of butterflies like a gust of wind as Toren climbed up the last steps of the spiral staircase similar to the one that joined the two upmost floors of the Tower of the Sun together as a library and dozen veiled heads jerked to him in unison. He didn’t mind such attention. He was exceptionally tall and dark of hair even among his own people, and it would’ve been more a miracle had his appearance not raised any awe at the western side of Naer Heigir. Once, he had been exceptionally handsome, but losing an eye had somewhat lessened his charms. He still had a certain effect on the skirts,

though, and the lispings and giggling that burst in the salon after a few heartbeats of utter silence gave away that the Giranian ladies weren't immune to his appeal either. He kept his face straight and posted himself by the stairs, leaning lightly against the copper railing.

The princess headed towards a lady in a simple gown of teal samite seated on a highbacked, ivory-colored settee guarded by a half-naked, life-sized statue of a handsome young man with a crown of roses upon his brow. The lady held out a delicate hand gloved in white silk, and the girl bent down to kiss it: "Your Grace... You sent for me?"

"I did, indeed. I'm glad you came so swiftly, dear." The queen's voice was a pleasant, mellow alto. "Master Erzibhas needs you to try on your wedding gown. But first, would you be kind enough to introduce your new shield? All the men in the court are buzzing about him, I've been told."

"No wonder, Your Grace. There sure is quite a lot of him to buzz about," one of the ladies cut in, making her companions giggle like a bunch of maidens at the midsummer fires.

Toren held back a smile. The queen's full, carefully reddened lips pouted in a disapproving manner: "Please, Lady Meribet! If you keep going that way, the good sir will think us no more than a flock of witless hens. And for a fair reason, too! Please, sir, you may approach."

Toren did as he was bidden. He went to one knee before the queen: "Your Grace, this is an honor undeserved for a nobody like me. If it pleases you, I am no sir but a simple sellsword."

"Truly?" the queen sounded taken aback. "Well, at least you have courtlier manners than some knights. You may rise and tell us your name."

Toren drew up to his feet but made sure to keep his eye on the floor as he introduced himself. The queen's voice was laced with amusement as she declared: "I didn't take you for a shy man, at first sight, Toren, but perhaps I was mistaken... You may look upon my face, what little there's to see of it, that is. The same goes for my ladies. And by the level of giggling, I should deduce that they might be the more delighted, the longer a look you gave them..."

Her words lifted the level of tittering a bit higher still. Toren allowed himself the tiniest of smiles and a casual glance around. He'd be better off staying away from the women of this court, he had decided already before accepting the post as the princess' shield. The Giranians were way too fond of hacking off hands and heads for even the smallest of reasons, and bedding any of the highborn ladies of the king's court would surely cost a man either, or both, and his member, as well, most like. Toren wasn't too keen on giving

away any body parts, so he kept a solemn face and gave but a curt bow to the rest of the flock.

Someone chuckled, a curvy lady in dusty-pink silks who had jested about his size earlier: “A staid fellow, are you? I bet I could make you smile if given a few hours and a peaceful solar...”

“Lady Meribet, you forget about yourself!” the queen scolded, blushing. “Pray forgive my ladies, Toren. It seems the nearing spring has gotten into their heads.”

“Into our corsets, rather,” muttered Lady Meribet under her breath, and it was all Toren could do not to break into laughter.

The lady had definitely been right, claiming that she’d be able to bring a smile upon his face should they get a chance to be alone together. She was just the sort of a woman with whom Toren preferred to spend an hour or many in the solitude of any kind of a room with some or another kind of a surface soft enough to lay upon, lush of both body and spirit. It was hard to say for the wig and the veil, but by her bold way of speech, he judged that Lady Meribet might well be closer to forty than thirty in years. Which, also, in his opinion, was naught but an asset.

He had never been in for young girls, not even when he was a boy himself. He had lost his boyhood to the eldest whore in the Carnation, the best and most expensive of Hellenfjord’s brothels, a woman twenty years his senior, and never once laid with a maiden in his life. The age in itself was by no means a deal-breaker to him. The younger girls just tended to be too timid and self-conscious for his liking. Lady Meribet most certainly was neither. Toren started to feel slightly uncomfortable in his breeches as he imagined her sprawled on a feather bed in one of the palace’s countless luxurious chambers wearing no veils and corsets whatsoever.

The sartor came to his rescue, poking his heavily powdered head up from the stairwell and declaring in a voice that trembled with excitement: “Lady Miona, we are ready for you now! If you’d be so kind as to follow me...”

“Finally!” the princess came to him, half running. “I was certain you’d never finish the dress, Erzibhas!”

“Well... Frankly speaking, it’s not quite finished,” the sartor confessed but rushed to add. “But it will be, I swear, in a matter of days! This is the final fitting, my lady. I must make sure that the gown fits perfectly before I finish it.”

“Will you do it yourself?” the princess sounded doubtful. “Finish it, I mean?”

“Yes, my lady, I will,” the sartor assured her. “I want to be definite that the dress is no less than perfect. Now, come, come! I can’t wait to show it to you, my lady! It’s a masterpiece, if you don’t mind me saying ...”

“You may stay here,” the princess snapped to Toren as he started to follow the two of them down the stairs.

“No, my lady, I may not,” he objected. “I’ve promised to keep you safe, but even I cannot leap between you and an assassin’s blade if I’m not there to see what’s happening.”

“Are you saying that Erzibhas might try and stab me in the fitting room?”

“I said no such thing, my lady, but there’re quite a few others in the workshop besides yourself and Lord Erzibhas.”

“Oh, do as you will then!” the girl yielded. “But there’s no way you’ll come into the fitting room!”

“What makes you think I’d want to come in there, my lady? I’ll check it before you go in, whether you want it or not...”

Their voices faded as they descended the spiral stairs into the sartor’s workshop. As soon as the sellsword’s calm, ear-caressingly mellow voice had stopped hearing, one of the ladies huffed the excitement and fear warring in her voice: “Fortunes preserve, that man is half a giant!”

“Of course, he’s not!” another scuffed in haughty tones. “Are you silly? There’re no giants in the world anymore!”

“He is *gigantic*, though,” Lady Meribet cut in in a dreamy voice. “I only wonder whether he’s that all over...”

The rest of the flock broke into girlish giggles, and even the queen had to bite back a titter.

The knights had gone on and on about the Hjelmen’s swordsmanship at supper last night, but obviously, none had mentioned that besides being a highly skilled fencer, he was also breathtakingly comely and had that nameless *something* in him that made even Faina’s stony stomach flutter. She couldn’t help silently agreeing with Lady Meribet as she declared: “I bet he’s not as serious as he feigns to be. There’s the most jocund man hiding behind that stern mask of his, mark my words. And one as skilled in wielding his personal sword as the steel one, I reckon.”

“Oh, Meribet, you are so wicked!” shrieked one of the women blushing. Lady Meribet didn’t fluster the slightest but went on: “Did you see how he moves? Graceful as a cave lion... He’s quite a beast between the sheets, I have no doubt. And imagine the pillow talk with that rasp! The mere thought gives me goosebumps...”

“Meribet, please!” the queen cut her off as sternly as she could. “You’re a woman wed. We are all women wed...”

Lady Meribet let out a small, disdainful sniff: “I am as good as a widow now that my lord husband has decided on darting to the war. And dear old Lord Buggleston has never been but on the way in the bed, anyway. Nowadays, he’s not even trying anymore. That’s hardly a loss, though, for his little brother has never been of much use...”

“Now, that’s quite enough!” Faina snapped. “None of us wants to hear what may or may not be going on in your marital bed, my dear lady.”

Lady Meribet pinched her mouth shut, and for a brief while, the conversation returned to the safer matters. The moment of peace didn’t last for too long before someone found a segue back to the sellsword, and soon the salon was ringing with giggles again. The queen admitted her defeat and tried her best not to let her companions’ bawdy talks stir her imagination. She failed miserably as she had known she would.

Her marital bed wasn’t much happier a place than Lady Meribet’s, with the distinction that Faina would’ve been only relieved had her husband stopped claiming his rights. Waldhark was a beast between the sheets, indeed, but far off from the kind Lady Meribet had meant when talking about the Northerner. After his visits, Faina was often all but too sore to sit for days. Now that they had both given up hope of producing more children, the king had given up taking her in the usual manner once and for all. He had been into all kinds of atrocities from the very beginning, but his desires had grown ever more perverse during the long years of their marriage. Faina didn’t even want to think about what he might be doing to the poor slave girls he forced into his bed. It was all she could do not to feel too relieved whenever he chose to spend his night with them instead of intruding into her bedchamber.

The sellsword was a beast of a different fur, however. Even Faina could tell as much. He looked intimidating at first sight, but there was gentleness in the depths of his onyx eye, warmth in his mellow, rasping voice, and a hint of a smile under his neatly cropped, coal-black beard. Faina had never seen a man with such coloring. The people of her motherland, Upper-Urdinia, were dark of colors, but their hair was brown, never black, and not even the dwarfs who had the skin as dark as boiled leather had the eyes as black as Toren’s. Yet, the man’s skin was fairer than the yellow-haired, blue-eyed Giranians’, almost pale against the blackness of his hair and beard.

Lady Sibhonnah might well be right, she reflected. The sellsword truly had a drop or few of the giant blood in his veins, for all Faina knew. The giants, or Jotuni as one of the four native peoples of the Torn Continent had been called

in their own tongue, had indeed been described fair-skinned and black of hair and eyes in all the old bindings Sage Otmar had collected into his vast library. In most of the stories, they were also described monstrously huge, as hairy as bears, and quite as gentle-mannered as well.

Faina hoped from the bottom of her heart that none of her ladies would get it into their head to ask the sellsword about his blood or that at least, would have sense enough not to inquire whether it was true that his ancestors had snatched children as offerings to their brutish gods and kept the Faeries as bedslaves. She cleared her throat to get the women's attention and was just about to tell them to remember their courtesy, as loud rustling and chinking drew all their eyes towards the staircase.

Her youngest daughter climbed up the spiraling iron stairs slowly and rather clumsily, holding up the front of her silver and white skirts. Two seamstresses were needed to carry the nine-foot-long tail heavy with silver lace, sapphires, and sweet water pearls. Miona's wedding gown had cost a small fortune, twice as much as the dresses of her sisters' put together, but for once, the king hadn't skimped. He wanted to impress the Elves, Faina knew, no matter the price. The truth be told, the gown was tacky and over the top, but Faina praised it as an incredible piece of art along with the other ladies.

Miona beamed behind her veil, and Faina felt a stab in her heart as the only genuine commend of the dress she could say aloud without hurting anyone save for the sartor's feelings was: "Dear Erzibhas, isn't the front a bit too... revealing for a maiden of three and ten? I had thought that the elven code of dressing was even more strict than our own..."

"Oh, that!" the sartor waved his carefully manicured hand in a heedless arch. "Don't you worry, Your Grace, there'll be no nipples peeking once the dress is finished. The top will be lined with royal blue silk, but it couldn't be done before this final fitting."

"Very well, then I guess it comes down to how my daughter feels about the gown," Faina yielded, leaving unsaid that Erzibhas could've made the girl don a corset or a shift under the dress as he wasn't even the only man in the salon to see the princess' bosom that shone clearly through the thin, beaded lace of the dress front.

The sellsword paid no attention to Miona's peeping nipples, though. He had withdrawn to stand by the northern roof-pane to give his protegee room to show off her gown, and if his eye did venture upon the princess a time or few in its constant flickering about the salon, the sight stirred not even a whit of interest in his face. If anyone, in particular, his gaze lingered upon Lady Meribet, the queen noted. And why not, she thought, trying not to feel jealous.

Meribet was a beautiful woman still, despite her age of two and forty and a few extra pounds on her waist.

Faina focused on her daughter and managed a warm smile for her: “How do you like the dress, darling?”

“Oh, it’s gorgeous!” the girl exclaimed. “A bit heavy, though, but Erzibhas promised he’ll make me another for the feast. This one is only for the ceremony. Such is the elven way, he says.”

“Yes, I believe it is,” the queen admitted. “And have you already got a vision ready for the other gown, Erzibhas?”

“Only a faint one, Your Grace, but it will be as splendid as this one, at least,” the sartor assured her. “I’ve been thinking royal blue lace, Your Grace, something very light and flowy...”

“I’d rather you’d make it of silk,” Miona interrupted. “Royal blue sounds good, though, and the lightness, as well.”

“As you wish, my lady,” the sartor did his best to hide his disappointment. “Silk it is, then.”

“Very good,” Miona nodded. “Now, could we go and take this off? The hoop is chafing my hips.”

“The pain is the price of splendor, my lady,” Erzibhas reminded her. “But as you will, let’s go and take it off.”

“Come back up as you’ve changed, dear. You too, Erzibhas; we must toast to celebrate your magnificent work,” the queen proposed and sent a slave to fetch wine and some sweets from the kitchens.

Toren checked the fitting room, fashioned beside the eastern wall of the sartor’s workshop of dense white canvas stretched over an iron frame, once again before allowing the princess to go in to change out of her wedding dress and stayed just outside its doorway, looking about the room casually. There was a flock of women bustling about the workshop, hurling brightly colored silks and velvets on the dummies, sewing doublets, and skirts, and embroidering tiny beads on the bodices of the gowns. Another flock of slender, beautiful boy slaves in multicolored silks fluttered among them like a swarm of butterflies, meek smiles frozen upon their faces. There was no life in their eyes, most of which were the dark shades of green, blue, and grey seen at the eastern side of Naer Heigir.

One of them stopped in front of Toren to offer him some honeyed water from a crystal jug.

“No, thank you, I’m good,” he declined in Branang, the tongue of the native people of the Principalities, the Breunniri, which was still commonly spoken through the pryncedoms.

The boy’s pale face welled with surprise. He bowed low and said in a hushed voice: “It’s been a long time since I last heard my mother’s tongue. Are you from the Principalities, sir, if I may ask?”

“You may. I’m from Aenerhjem, but I’ve spent a lot of time in the Principalities,” Toren replied. “Which of them you were born in?”

“Scarletsstone, sir. Have you ever visited there?”

“I have, for a couple of times.”

Rendeunkeld, Scarletsstone in the common tongue, was one of the southmost of the nine pryncedoms and one of the poorest. In there, it was rather a rule than an exception for the parents to have more children than they could afford to feed and sell some of them to the slavers to be dragged to serve the high lords and ladies of the west or suffer a short and miserable life in the gold mines in the northwestern peaks of the Belt of Veremer.

“I last visited there two years ago,” Toren told the boy. “It was much the same as it has always been.”

“I should think so, sir,” the boy flashed him a timid smile. “I was five when my father sold me, so I don’t remember too much of home.”

“You still speak the language, though.”

“We speak it between each other, sir,” the boy all but whispered. “When we’re alone. Actually, I shouldn’t…”

“Excuse me, lad,” Toren whirled about as a muffled gurgle from behind caught his ears.

The soft croak was followed by a shrill shriek laced with surprise as much as fear. Toren drew his borrowed sword in a flash of bluish steel honed to razor-sharpness. The blade had been almost as blunt as a training sword as he had gotten it, but he had spent a forenoon in the library whetting it, and now it cut through the thick canvas of the door flap like a hot knife through summer butter.

The sight that awaited him inside the fitting room was grotesque in its ghastliness. The sartor had fallen on the floor, his throat neatly cut from ear to ear. He was curled up in the feet of a lean, dark-eyed boy slave in crimson silks. The boy had frozen in the middle of a leap with a thin, gently curved knife in his hand when Toren entered the room. Nothing in him moved to save for his chest, which heaved fast with the vigorous breathing. The princess, the slave, who had been about to attack, was naked besides a thin, ivory underskirt, speckled with blood from head to toes. She stood between the slave and her

wedding gown, her arms spread wide as if the garment was what the boy intended to cut into shreds.

The slave's eyes, as dark and emotionless as two frozen ponds, flitted to Toren's face for a fleeting moment before he lunged towards the princess, his thin, blood-covered blade pointed at her throat. Toren flipped the sword from one hand to another, closed the distance between them with a long leap, landing into the pool of blood spreading from the sartor's neck in slowing pulses, and took him down with a single, savage back-hand blow to the side of his head. The crack of bone and a soft thud were the only sounds the slave made as he dropped onto the floor like a puppet whose strings are cut. The knife tinkled as it met the stone floor a heartbeat before its owner. Neither had even fallen before Toren was on the move again, his sword at the ready as he swiftly secured the space.

By the time, he was sure, there was no one else hiding in the fitting room, the seamstresses and the rest of the slaves had found their way to the doorway, and the butterflies were flying down the stairs. The whole flock was screaming and babbling at the top of their lungs, all save for the princess, who was still standing before her dress, frozen on the spot.

Toren snatched her dusty-pink shawl from the back of a stool and flung it upon her shoulders: "You'd best cover yourself, my lady... You are not hurt, are you?"

She gave the tiniest shake of her head as an answer. Toren sheathed his sword: "That's good. Would you come with me? There's no need for you to linger in here. Ladies, if you'd be so kind as to make way to the princess..."

The flock of blathering butterflies split in two as he pushed out of the torn canvas door shoulder first, his right arm looped lightly about the princess. The queen had reached the foot of the stairs and darted to them all but stumbling over her skirts in her haste. She let out a horrified shriek as she saw her blood-spattered daughter: "Fortunes...! Are you hurt? Are you alright? What happened? Did Erzibhas...?!"

"The sartor is dead." Toren handed the princess over to her mother. "His killer as well. Lady Miona didn't get a scratch. The blood is Erzibhas'."

He turned to eye the crowd swarming in and out of the fitting room, searching for a boy slave in ochre silks but saw no glimpse of him. His fellow slaves had huddled together in a tight, brightly colored bundle, but there were no ochre flowers. Their faces, pale to begin with, had turned snow-white, and the feigned smiles had curdled into grimaces of fear and horror. *What will become of them?* Toren wondered before focusing on the missing one again. Had the lad been involved in the murder attempt? Had he distracted Toren to

give his crimson friend a chance to sneak into the fitting room unnoticed? Most likely... Toren swore harshly under his breath and raised his voice to inquire if anyone had seen him.

“A boy in ochre silks? Where did he go?” he demanded of the frantic women, but no one paid him any attention.

He swore again, a little louder, and roared over the ruckus: “Has anyone alarmed the guards yet?!”

“I’ll see to that,” Lady Meribet was the first to regain her composure. “Did you say something about a missing slave?”

“Yes. A tall lad in ochre silks, brown hair, jade eyes,” Toren described keeping his eye on the princess and the queen draping the girl into a length of cobalt samite better to cover her nakedness.

By the time Lady Meribet returned with a short tail of guards, her fellow ladies had squeezed together in a multicolored ball of silk, samite, and lace, hugging and weeping into each other’s shoulders. The seamstresses still fluttered about the fitting room, but none of them was in tears. The sartor’s boys were trembling in a corner, and the queen was holding her daughter in the loop of her arms like any loving mother. The girl was shifting restlessly in her grip, demanding after her wedding gown: “My dress... What happened to my dress?! Is it ruined? What will I wear to the wedding if it’s ruined?!”

Lady Meribet bit back a distasteful grimace and stole a glance at the sellsword who stood behind the princess and the queen, his face as expressionless as it had been for the whole time. His onyx eye flashed at the girl’s words, but otherwise, he showed no sign of even having heard her. The queen, however, drew back and asked, puzzled: “Your dress, dear?”

“Yes, my dress!” the princess snapped. “My wedding dress! If it’s ruined, then what will I wear to the ceremony?”

“I...” the queen was lost for words. “Miona, darling, Erzibhas is dead...”

“I know!” Lady Miona's anger flared. “So, he can’t make me a new one, can he, if the extant is all smeared with blood? And now I won’t get the gown for the feast, either! Where’s the wretched brat who killed him? I want his head!”

“The boy is dead already, my lady,” said the sellsword in a silent voice that gave away no emotions.

The princess squirmed around in her mother’s loosened grip: “Dead? How come? You just hit him! Surely, he’s only unconscious.”

“No, my lady, I assure you, the lad is as dead as a stone,” the Hjelmén swore and added, his eye fixed on the princess’ veiled face. “Such tends to happen when I hit someone for true, my lady.”

The princess flinched ever so slightly, and for the first time, she sounded scared as she stammered: "I... I thought... He should've been given to Sir Dafras."

"My apologies, my lady. Your father never told me I should spare the lives of those who might try and assault you."

"Don't apologize," the queen broke in. "You did only what you've pledged to do. And you did it well, besides."

"No, Your Grace. Had I done my job well, the sartor would still be alive," the sellsword regretted. "I let the boy distract me, and for that, I should be scourged. I should've smelled the rot the moment I refused the refreshment, and he didn't skitter on his way."

"You did no less than what's expected of you," the queen repeated. "My daughter is safe and unharmed, and that's all that matters. The king will hear of this, I promise you. You shall be rewarded, knighted..."

"Your Grace," the sellsword cut her off. "I'm grateful, but I need no rewards, and I certainly don't wish to be knighted over striking a child to death, even if his hand was the one to wield the assassin's blade. The thought wasn't his, though, I'm sure."

The queen glanced about uneasily and lowered her voice: "No... You're right, of course. Someone gave him the order... Fortunes! The whole place is swarming with foes..."

She squeezed the princess closer again as if the girl was her most precious treasure. Lady Meribet knew all too well that the girl herself meant little and less to Lady Faina. The realm was what she was worried about, and right now, the princess was the only one who could secure it. Her marriage with the elven count would bring a fleet of at least forty ships strong to protect the Aureen Isles, and Lady Meribet knew that the king was hoping for reinforcements for the battlefield, as well.

The elven fiefdoms were smallish, and the number of the host Count Faelviren might send to his aid would be humble, but unlike their own men, the Elves were seasoned in many battles. The Counties were warring between themselves as often as not, whereas Girania and Erephonia had last been at war a little over twenty years ago. And even that could hardly be counted a war, Meribet remembered.

She had been in her twenties, married to Lord Bugglestan for five years already, and all but keen to send her husband to the battlefield. She had kept up hopes of becoming a widow and having a chance to wed again to a true man this time, but Lord Bugglestan had returned after a couple of moons' turns as round-faced and incapable as ever. *I should've taken a lover then*, she regretted, not for the first time.

*I should've taken a lover when I could still bear children.* Even if her good-for-nothing husband had realized, the child not being of his seed, had it been a boy, he would've acknowledged it as his, Meribet had no doubt. *Maybe it won't still be too late,* she pondered, eyeing the sellsword appraisingly behind her veil. She still had her flowerings, though they weren't as clockwork-like as they had been when she was younger. Her womb might still quicken if given a few loads of good, vigorous seed...

Her stomach fluttered as she imagined the Northerner naked in her hefty, wide feather bed. Even if he couldn't get her with a child anymore, trying would undoubtedly be pleasant. Right now, he might look as grave as an undertaker, but Meribet knew the men well enough to be sure that behind his mask of severity was lurking a man of easy smiles and hearty laughter. And he had noted her, besides, up in the salon when the princess had been showing off her wedding gown, the man's eye had lingered on Meribet's bodice even though the girl had been whirling before him all but half-naked her tiny, pink nipples peeping through the breath-light top of her gown. He had scarcely seen the princess, but he most certainly had seen Meribet.

True, he was younger than her by more than a decade, but some men preferred their women a little riper. The sellsword might well be one of them, she reflected, resting her eyes on his well-muscled arms, broad chest, and flat, hard stomach. There would be no wobbly bits under his simple, black garb of wool and boiled leather, she thought longingly.

The queen's voice snapped her out of her daydreams. There was an edge in lady Faina's tone as she asked the sellsword: "The boys? What boys?"

"Those boys over there, Your Grace," the Hjelman nudged his head toward the sartor's slaves who were still nestling in their corner, their fearful eyes flitting between the guards who strolled in and out of the workshop and the seamstresses who were just repeating their side of the story to Captain Aelefnar. "Your Grace, you said you wanted to reward me... Would it be asking too much if I claimed them for myself?"

Lady Meribet couldn't hold back a sharp gasp, and the queen was lost for words for good, many heartbeats. Finally, she stammered, failing to keep the disgust out of her voice: "A-all of them? I... I suppose I could grant you one, but... There're nine of them!"

"With all due respect, Your Grace, I can count past ten," the sellsword declared in rather a chilly tone. "I can only imagine the use in which the sartor was putting them, but I assure you, I'm not that kind of a man. Neither am I the kind who stands aside and does nothing when nine innocent kids are about to lose their heads. Those boys have harmed no one, Your Grace, but they've

been harmed by many, starting with their fathers and mothers for all I know. If there's no place for them in the court save for the butcher's block, then..."

He paused and went down on one knee before the queen: "Please, Your Grace, allow me to send them to Aenerhjelm, to the brotherhood. Some might even become Sons one day, and there're much and more work to do in our keeps for those who don't have the will to wield a weapon."

The queen shifted uneasily. She glanced over at the slaves and pointed out, not unkindly: "Clearly, you have a gentle heart under that rough skin, but the Kingdoms are at war. They'd be dead long before reaching the Stonegurgle or snatched into a slaver's cart. Surely, you agree with me that a quick end is better than to get beaten and worse by the outlaws or..."

"Your Grace, pray excuse me for interrupting," Lady Meribet, ever the one to seize an opportunity, swept in. "But there're ships still sailing from our ports to the north. We could send the boys to Hellenfjord on a trading vessel. The city isn't too far from one of the keeps of the brotherhood if my memory isn't deceiving me."

"It's only half a day's ride from the city to Raekendern, Your Grace, my lady," the sellsword cut in and drew up to his feet. "I'd cover their voyage myself, of course, arrange their journey from here to the port, everything. You need not hear half a word of them ever again, Your Grace, if you hand them over to me."

"There'll be room aplenty in my apartment now that my lord husband is taking half of our household to the war," Lady Meribet pointed out before the queen could refuse him. "I could accommodate them till we find a ship sailing to Aenerhjelm."

"I..." the queen fiddled with her teal-colored skirts but collected herself swiftly and said in final tones. "Would that I could heed your plea, mister, but the king won't ever consent. He'll want them to be put down."

The sellsword bristled. His stone-hard composure cracked for the first time since he arrived at the sartor's premises. His eye blazed with onyx flames as he snapped in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper: "Your Grace, those boys there are living, breathing human children, not a litter of unwanted kittens!" He drew up to his full, remarkable height and went on, again in an utterly peaceful tone: "If the king complains, tell him to send for me, Your Grace. I'll take full responsibility for whatever consequences this act might have."

"You don't know what you're volunteering for," the queen warned him in a hushed voice. "My husband is... King Waldhark is an iron-handed ruler. He doesn't respond kindly to any defiance. Besides, the slaves are the property of the crown..."

“Then I’ll buy them,” the sellsword cut her off. “Just name the price, Your Grace.”

“I... I don’t know how much... The treasurer could tell you the price, but...”

“A silver deer per boy and tenth for the trouble,” Lady Meribet closed the case. “But it’ll be I who buys them, duirn. You’d better stay out of it. The king can’t refuse me, for I’ve got a need for new slaves, and the war has withered the market. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Your Grace, I’ll see to the matter immediately.”

“I... Yes, of course, my lady. You may go.” The queen was dazed.

The sellsword lifted his sword hand onto his heart and bowed low to Meribet: “My lady, I can’t thank you enough.”

*Oh, I’m sure we can figure out a way for you to express your gratitude, darling.*

“Mayhaps you’d honor me with your company over supper on one of these nights?” Meribet proposed in casual tones. “You’d need to visit anyway to tell the boys about the brotherhood. I’m afraid I know little and less about it though I’ve learned my maps well enough.”

“I’ll sup with you gladly, my lady, any night, but the honor will be mine entirely.”

Meribet let out a burst of tinkling laughter: “They teach much more than just the swordplay in that brotherhood of yours, it seems. I’ll send someone for you, duirn, sooner rather than later. But now I must fly. I’d better be claiming the slaves before a word of this folly reaches our good king’s ears.”

The warrior bowed once more, and Meribet hurried on her way, her dusty-pink silks billowing behind her. She knew the king as well as the queen. If Waldhark made it into condemning the poor boys to the dungeons or death before she had claimed them for herself, there would be nothing much she could do for them. As she reached the stairwell, she broke into a run and jogged to the Tower of the Throne, gathering many long, marveling looks as she darted through the archways and along the domed corridors red-faced, huffing and puffing as the smith’s bellows. She cared neither the curious eyes nor the rumors that would sprout over her haste to get to the king. She had a price to catch, sizeable and juicy, and the Fortunes curse her if she let it slip off her fingers.



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*Thousand thanks for Your interest in my work!  
May the gods and Fortunes smile at You.*