



When war is all you've ever known,

the promise of peace

is more terrifying than any battle.

TOUCHSTONE

A NOVEL BY
LETITIA COYNE

TOUCHSTONE

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ROLL CALL.

A chill rode the breeze that rose with the sun, tugging shreds of fog across the tarn and up toward the high stone porticos of the fortress.

Freya stretched, yawning, and bunched the furs up closer around her chin as she watched the young soldier dressing. He was strong, confident, and unashamedly naked; youth gave him no cause to hide. His skin was perfect gold, unmarked, moving smoothly over clean flat muscle as he gathered his clothes. The hard training of the past months had polished away any adolescent softness, showing the man he had become, and fitness left him clenched and eager for action.

As a lover he had been exactly as she'd expected: keen, athletic, persistent. What he'd lacked in finesse, he'd made up with enthusiasm and the memory brought a small smile as she studied him in the growing light. She could not recall his name.

Seeing her awake, he smiled, and moved to kneel beside her pallet. "Good morning," he said, and leaned to kiss her. "Are we going down to eat?"

"You go." She stretched again, yawning as she spoke. "I'll be down shortly, there's time."

"But, I thought..." He hesitated, looked uncertain, childlike for the first time. He didn't need to put his thoughts into words, they were written in lines of petulance. As she watched, he weighed dashed hopes against his options, and asked sharply, "Will I see you again?"

Freya stroked his cheek and down across his soft, full lips. He was a smart boy; he only needed a shot of reality. "This campaign will be long and cold and bloody. We'll be huddled in wet tents, sleeping on rocks, and hacking our way through flesh and blood for months. If the gods are kind and you see me anywhere, chances are it will be a long way off and you, like me, will be fighting to stay alive." She leaned across to kiss his cheek. "Don't wait around for me. Live and live well, because none of us know if we'll live for very long."

He stared hard at her, a frown spoiling the smooth brow, and she met the plea in his eyes with a calm smile. At last he stood, snatched up his belongings, and stalked from the room without a backward glance. Young hearts bend a long way before they break, or love and lust would have caused more carnage than wars.

Cold ached into the scar on her shoulder, stabbing and burning deep inside the joint where the tissues had fused roughly. Rolling over flat, she twisted her spine slowly, letting the cracks and pops ease some of the stiffness from her back; cold damp mornings just weren't as easy to shrug off as they used to be. Sighing away any curses she might have uttered, she swung her feet onto the flagging and pushed back the tangled mess of her hair. It needed cutting.

Behind the stonework of the fireplace was a small washroom, its cistern filled with water heated overnight by the fire. It had cooled as the fire died, and Freya worked the hand pump, drawing water warm enough to bathe into a narrow stone trough. She lowered herself in carefully, lying back so the meagre warmth covered her shoulder and let it work the knots out of gnarled flesh.

Eventually she sat up, pushing hair and water back from her face, then pressed her left

hand onto her shoulder as she tried to move her sword arm through its full range of movement. No amount of warmth was going to free the jag and tear or the crunch of cartilage in every rotation. Neither was the liniment she poured into her hand to rub over the scar but she did it anyway, rubbing until a snarling altercation in the corridor outside dragged her out of the tub.

She slipped into a soft flannel tunic and opened her door, searching the gloom for the source of the noise. Dragan sat against the stonework, knees drawn up, and his head down, resting on crossed arms. He looked up as she approached, and then put his aching head back down into his hands.

“Did someone trip over you?”

He grunted, lifted his face and rubbed his forehead, but gave no answer.

“You look awful.” Freya almost smiled. All the red from the wine flagon beside him had pooled in his eyes, and his whole forehead flinched as he squinted through the dim light.

“And you smell dead. You’d better come inside and get cleaned up.”

Slowly he twisted, supporting himself against the wall as he stood, stooped, then forced his cramped back to straighten. At full height he seemed to fill the ancient passageway. Resting a hand on her shoulder, he limped painfully into the room, cursing the glare and looking for a shaded place to sit.

“By the gods, what did you do last night?” This time Freya did smile. In all the years she’d known him, she had never seen the big man in this state of devastation.

“I don’t remember. I started out at the graduation feast for the recruits. I thought you were there.” He rubbed at raw eyelids, clearing his vision or smearing away memories.

“Yeah, I was there a while.” She moved back to the washroom, using the privacy first to pull on her soft suede breeches, then she cinched her belt in tight over the tunic. She called, “I’ll see how much more hot water I can draw for you.” The used bathwater had cooled to tepid and hauling up and down on the pump topped it up to little more than half a tub of barely warmer water, but it would have to suffice. She clutched out a handful of salts and threw them, fizzing, into the water, then thought again and emptied the rest of the pot in as well.

“That water’s none too warm; I’d get into it now if I were you.” Kneeling at the fire, she fanned the embers until they caught and lowered the kettle to the flame. “I’ll go down to your quarters and get you clean clothes. Want me to bring your armour up too? We might as well go down from here.”

Dragan nodded, mumbled unintelligibly, and stumbled toward the washroom.

Working down through the rabbit warren of the citadel, Freya passed a few stragglers, but most of the company was at breakfast by now. She crossed the open foyer of the main keep, passed the doorways to the vast dormitories, and set off upward again in the second wing, tracing familiar steps to her partner’s rooms.

Inside, the bedding was tangled and unmade, but apart from a few clothes folded on the shelves, there was nothing in the room to mark its occupancy. Moving quickly, she threw his

cloak open on the pallet and tossed his clothes -- a jerkin and breeches, his hauberk, cuirass halves, gauntlets and greaves -- into a pile and then checked the washroom.

On the washstand beside the tub stood an empty wine flagon and the remains of a bread and cheese meal. There, too, was a small wooden box which she picked up and carried out to the main room, shaking it and listening to the rattle as she did. Gathering up the corners of the cloak and hanging it easily over her good shoulder, Freya carried the sum total of this soldier's life back to her own rooms.

From the washroom door, swinging her bundle down onto the floor and holding the small box against her side, she said, "If you want to eat, we'll have to go down there soon."

"I don't want to eat."

She smiled. "You want some tea? It'll ease the head. And if you're feeling anything like me, it'll ease the neck, the shoulders, hips, and knees."

He snorted, the laugh a little too close to self-pity, and called back, "Yeah. Strong."

Sitting on the balcony palisade, turning his back on the cold beauty of the early morning tarn, Dragan sipped from his mug. A frown ticked as bitter tea needled his gut, but in a few moments the soothing effect of the opiates had seeped through cramped muscles and cooled the pain behind his eyes. The only concession he made to the cold was to hold the mug up near his face so the steam curled gently under his chin and across his cheek. Bare-chested he sat, the rough cloth of his cloak tied and belted at his hips, broad back proffered as a single defence against the elements.

Freya paused in the shadows. After twelve years of teamwork, her partner's formidable physical presence could still check her stride. She watched him sitting, silent and still, like part of the stonework on which he balanced, as solid and impervious as rock.

There was nothing in him small or mean; the spirit of the man was what you saw. He was in all things constant. Stable. Immovable. She smiled; through those years she'd relied on that strength too many times to recall, or chaffed at his stubbornness, or thanked the fickle gods for his patience. He was everything she knew she could not be and that was good. It served them well. It always had.

He didn't change, or changed so slowly the small erosions went unnoticed. In a world where chance was everything, where there was nothing she could hold that would always remain, he was her one sure thing. In this world, he was the only one, the only thing she trusted without question.

His hair, like her own, would have to be cut. It fell forward like a wreath of rusted wheat that knotted around his ears and bunched into ringlets on his shoulders. When they'd first met it was long, hanging halfway down his back in a thick, sun-bleached swathe over dense auburn curls. It had been the first thing she'd noticed, the beautiful hair. Then the shoulders. Then the butt, wrapped in black leather with easily twenty pounds of studs and buckles. Unnecessary expense, unnecessary weight in battle. Even now she smiled at the vanity. Back then it didn't seem to matter as long as it looked good.

Shaking her head at their foolishness, she silently wished for days like those days again.

Days when her knees did not crack when she bent and her joints moved without complaint. Her hair had been longer then, too, and the poppy tea she sipped as she walked didn't wreak such havoc on her gut.

"You need a haircut." She threw a sheepskin onto the bench and sitting, adjusted it up behind her shoulder, her own small concession to the cold of the stone. He didn't answer, didn't even open his eyes, so she continued. "Are you going to tell me why you're sitting here like a shipwreck, sipping dope instead of eating at the mess and getting ready for Roll Call?"

He lowered his mug to between his knees, raised his face enough to look at her straight and said, "I'm not going."

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MEMORIES.

Sudden cold dreads crowded into her chest, rioting against her gut and shoving her heart up into her throat. Not going? Forcing a hoarse whisper around the congestion, she asked, "And there's a reason?"

"A few." He held her eyes for a moment, then looked into his mug of tea, bringing it up to sip, needing something other than words in his mouth.

"Right. A few reasons. A few reasons that you just came up with this morning? Nothing you could have told me about last week, or last month, or last friggin' season?" Her hand trembled so it splashed a slop of hot tea over her knuckles and she swore again, sitting the mug onto the flat back of the bench. Her throat went dry, and a cold rash of fear grew with realization. It spread up her neck and across her cheeks as the blood left her face.

"I've been thinking." He watched his own hand intently as he placed his mug with deliberate care. "Not just about going back to the front this season. About everything. About why we're here. Why we're fighting. Whether we've got any hope of coming home this time." Still studying his hands, he rubbed at the scars that crossed his knuckles. Softly, he said, "I want to know what you're going to do if I don't go."

If? She couldn't trust her voice not to break on the dryness, so she cleared her throat. "I'm going. What else can I do? Spend my last months in lock-up, make my life up to now a disgrace, every damn thing I've done a waste, and then starve in a ditch begging for coppers? Of course I'm going."

"You'd still go without me?"

"Are you offering me a choice? I can't see it. You go; I go. You don't go; I have to go alone. New partner and not a lot of hope." Her throat tightened, screwing tears up close behind her eyes. "I might make it back; I've only got three months of service left."

"They won't send you back in three months though, you know that. You go out there and you're fighting 'til the season ends. On top of that, they'll have you in the front line. They'll hold the raw kids back and send veterans up to the front." He spoke softly, his eyes were closed again and his hands were still, fingers laced like a prayer or a promise of

inaction.

“Is that meant to make me feel better?” She would have stood to pace, but her knees were weak. She felt sick. Somewhere deep inside she was screaming. “Why didn’t you give me some warning about this? By all the gods, Dragan, this is my life we’re talking about. Didn’t I deserve a hint?”

He pushed himself into a stand, reluctantly, as if the cost of his decision was as heavy as hers, and Freya slid to the edge of her seat. If he left her now, if he walked out the door, she would never see him again and he would leave with far more than her answers and the weight of the world on his shoulders.

In the red light of the fire, he filled a second mug of tea, pouring unmeasured honey into the dark liquid and stirring sluggishly. When he turned back, he carried the small wooden box in his free hand and he held it out to her as he approached. “Shove up,” he said, and she made room on the bench beside her.

Trembling, staring at the box in her hands, she watched him tap the lid with a callused finger. “Want to look through my things?”

“Your thing. This is it. Where’s all your stuff?” Shock wormed its way deeper into her flesh. “Oh hell, Dragan, you already packed everything up, didn’t you? Sent it home.” Realizations were forming through the fogs of disbelief and drawing nausea closer. All his leaving would mean, possibilities she’d never once considered. Why hadn’t she seen this coming? Solid rock was buckling, slipping underneath her, and the sense of collapse brought with it panic. There was ice in the pit of her stomach.

“No. Open it up,” he said, prompting her with a nudge of his elbow.

The little box offered its treasures humbly. Not quite a foot long and completely unadorned, its pale wood had been carved out by an unskilled hand. Freya lifted a wide brass buckle and a cock’s tailfeather from among an array of small things: a broken spearhead, pebbles, some squares of bloodstained cloth. Some were familiar, some weren’t. “Why am I looking at this?” she asked. “I still have to get ready.”

“No you don’t. They won’t go without you. There’ll be pounding on the door long before then. Do you recognize these things?”

The hollow, sickening distance in her head was making it hard to concentrate. It was irritating, and this box of bits was not answering any of the questions she needed to ask. “Why am I looking at this?” Her question was more urgent this time, louder over the pounding of her pulse. “Is this a little pack of mementos for me to remember you by? Or for you? A little box of ‘I remember when...’?” Anger was clearing the fog, but the sickness remained, the terror.

Dragan laughed; if her hands had been empty she might have hit him. “That’s my life, or ours. Same thing.” Gently he took the feather from her fingers, curving its silky length across his lips. “This is everything I kept; all the rest I burned.”

He slid the feather over her mouth, just as he had done his own. “Do you remember the year you wore these? All stitched up your shoulders and around like a collar.” His lopsided smile was still there and she looked from the feather into the foolishness of her youth.

“Yes, I remember.” The touch of the feather brought the past crowding back around her like someone else’s ghosts. “Stupid. Vain. How did we ever survive?”

She had been twenty, fresh from two years in light cavalry when the ranks were redesigned. Someone somewhere decided there would be a Dyad force, pairs fighting as a single guerrilla unit, and she had been first in line to enlist for the change. Cavalry had been fast and fearless; a sisterhood of warriors who held the lines at the front, all speed, skill and adrenaline, and wagging your smartass tail at the boys on the ground. But all these years later she still dreamed the screams of horses run onto pickets.

So she'd made the change and met the partner she'd live or die beside.

She picked a brass stud out of the box and held it beside the buckle. "I had to make something spectacular. You were wearing a ton of black leather and brass. All long hair and bare chest."

"And look." He lifted out a small lock of her hair; darker than his, tied with a long silver thread and glass beads.

"Where did you get that?" She looked directly at him for the first time since he'd sat, but he didn't meet her gaze. She faced him squarely and tried to imagine the man she'd known so long collecting all these tiny souvenirs. This was a side of him she'd never seen.

He shrugged. "I picked it up when you cut it short, remember?"

She remembered. The images and smells of a battlefield filled her head; hard campaigns, cold and sticky with sweat and old blood. Her hair had tangled across her face and caught in the cross-guard of her sword once too often, and when an instant was too long to pause, there was no vanity that would suffice to argue.

"You were tired and cranky as hell, and just like that, you took the knife and cut it all off."

Freya nodded. "I had to." All her life, she'd kept her hair long, and yet she'd never had a second thought about cutting it. She couldn't remember the year, now, things like that blurred together after a while. "When does common sense start to cut through the adrenaline and bravado?" she asked.

"When it starts to hurt." The answer was a simple truth: age, experience, mortality; and with them the knowledge of how many ways there are to fail.

She kept staring at his face, and just as carefully, he studied the contents of the box. "Why won't you look at me?" She moved a hand up to the rough stubble of his beard, turning his face toward hers, but he kept his eyes down. His thick lashes were fair; his eyes deep and wide-set under knotted brows. His nose was too big, and the green irises, although she couldn't see them, were flecked with golds and browns like pebbles in a stream.

He closed the box, sighing and looked up. "I don't want you to go."

"I don't have any choice." There was a plea in her voice she didn't like, but her options were too awful for pride. "You've always said you'd finish with me," she reminded him. "You promised me one more season. I wish you'd told me when, and why, you changed your mind."

"I changed my mind when I carried you back from the front last year. Because I thought you were going to die. And after all these months of healing, and watching you train back up to fit..." he paused amid an unfamiliar stream of words.

His gaze was too intense to hold, livid with the remnants of excess and emotion. Hot blood rushed into her cheeks on fires of humiliation, as she readied herself to hear him to say

she was no longer good enough. Her pulse was pounding in her ears. Not good enough. Suddenly she wished she had not asked for answers.

When he spoke again it was barely a whisper. “You are, without a doubt, the finest, surest,” he smiled, “most fearless soldier I have ever known. I never had to guess where you were, I always knew you’d have my back.

“I never thought you’d get hurt. I did what I had to do and I knew you’d be behind me.” He stopped again, rubbing his palm slowly over the surface of his box of treasures. If he’d thought so long about this, he had failed to find all the words he was going to need.

Riding the rise of returning nausea, sure of his next words, Freya hurried him. “And now my shoulder is shagged and your back is open. Now I’m a liability?”

“No, that’s not it.” He took her hand, sun-browned and callused, marked across the knuckles with scars like his own. It was a strong hand, lean and certain. “It’s what I said before; you only stop to count the cost once it starts to hurt.

“I thought you were going to die, and I had never considered what I would do if you weren’t out there with me.

Dragan sighed and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Twelve years. Twelve hard seasons.

“There were years I loved it, I can’t deny that. In the early days, I loved it. There was nothing to fear out there because we had nothing to lose. I fought hard and stayed alive because I didn’t consider the possibility you might get hurt. Now, I can’t think of anything else. And I don’t want to go back out there.”

She frowned, her face aching as she strove to read the complex lines of his expression. There were too many implications hidden in his words, too many terrors, and her heart was flogging her pulse hard up into her temple and kicking her stomach. Lurching to her feet, she strode to the balustrade and threw herself double, retching up bile, straining against the cold stone railing. Convulsions surged through her again and again, until her legs buckled and she folded down, shaking, onto her knees.

Her forehead rested on her wrists as she tried to breathe away the fear. Strong hands pulled her back, turning her easily. Shaking her head at him as he squatted in front of her, Freya wiped a trembling hand across her mouth, and said, “Let me get this straight. You won’t re-sign for this campaign because you think you can’t cut it, but you’d send me out there to trust my luck with a new partner, alone.”

“You don’t have to go.” His eyes were pleading now, but his logic, if there was any, was way too illusive for Freya to catch a grip.

Closing her eyes, she rested her head back on the carved stone of the balcony and coughed away the bitter taste in her throat. “Don’t I? Okay, so you tell me how I break my contract three months early, stay out of the brig, live as a civilian without my payout, and live down the humiliation of failing at the only thing I can do.” She opened her eyes and they filled with angry tears. “And tell me quickly because I’m due at Roll Call, yesterday.”

“Get yourself discharged. Medical. Use your shoulder. Just stall them off, dodge them. Hell, stay to train the new intake if you have too; it’s only ninety days. At worst they’ll keep you here while you argue the point. That way you’ll get your pay-out same as everyone else.” His explanation had become urgent; his hands were open, pleading, or measuring a place for

her between life and death.

She looked at his hands as if to gauge their capacity, and shook her head. "I can't. I can't run away now. I can't make my whole life a lie. I can't choose to fail."

"You can choose to live. As for failing, or disgrace, this is not all you can do; it's just all you've ever known. You know how many ways you can lose, but you have no idea how many lives there are to live.

"Every off season, while you stay here, training up, celebrating with the girls, and playing with the boys," he stepped back from the words, turning to pace, "I go back to the mountains. I check the vines, I sit on the slopes with the sheep, and I think about the way this whole empire works."

"You're not the only one who can think," she interjected. "But I decided long ago not to do it. You think too hard, you freeze up. Better to do what we do and not think about it." She rested her head back again, closing her eyes on his agitation. Her stomach was settling, her body overriding the cocktail of dread, washing it down with resignation.

Ignoring her, he kept on his thread; he hadn't finished and his point was too important. "How long have we been at war? Two hundred years? Three? Every year there's a new threat. We need to take more land. We need to defend land somewhere else. Every year another group of kids come through here, just like we did: poor, starving, never thought about doing anything else because that's what the sons of poor men do. They go to war.

"Meanwhile, the merchants get fatter. Trade goes on across the front lines; the economies grow. The rich get richer, the poor breed up kids to go and fight. Nice little system of attrition. And what do we get? Shit to live on, trying to get to the day we're paid out. Fifteen years, for what? And how many of us get there? How many of the cavalry girls you trained with are still alive?"

He paced his narrow circuit and came back to stand in front of her. "Freya, how many men have we killed?"

There was no answer to that. She had no intention of holding onto gory receipts for the cost of her profession. Answers like that made nightmares. "I don't want to listen to you anymore." She held up a trembling hand for help to her feet, grasping his wrist as he pulled, and crying out involuntarily as her weight tore at the misalignments in her shoulder.

Her left hand flew to the scar and she tried to turn away, but he refused to release her right hand, stepping sideways to hold her attention. "You can do this. It will work. It's a solution that means your life."

Rounding on him, pulling her hand back sharply, she snapped, "This is my life! This is all I have. You have a family, some rocky shit heap of a farm, and some ugly, fat-ass farm-girl waiting for you. Look around you. This is what I have.

"You're right. I couldn't wait to join up. I had no family and no food. Back then my choice was this or prostitution. It still is.

"You can't make this life and all I've done a lie. What I do is important and I'm good at it. I made myself someone here and you can't take that away from me. You don't have the right to do that, not to me, not with what we've been through together." She tried to walk away, but the balcony was small and the fear and anger in her gut were too big to burn in silence.

Her voice rose as she strode back to confront him. “You spend the off season away. You go back to the hills and fuck your sheep. This is my home. It's the only home I've ever had.”

He didn't speak, had no answer, so she pressed close against him, and hissed up into his face, “This is my life. It's the only way I can live.”

He stood for a moment in the wake of her indignation, his silence pleading. Then he turned away, lumbering wearily in toward the washroom as the horn sounded Roll Call.

Freya dropped onto her pallet and straightened and relaced her boots with shaking fingers. From the shelves, she took her greaves and fastened them tight around her calves, cinching the buckles up tighter than she intended, acknowledging the pain as the first of many. She threw the gauntlets down at her side, rifled through her pile of clothes for a cloak clip, then strode back out to the wooden box, and pulled out the brass buckle. It would do.

When she looked up, Dragan stood in shadows by the doorway, dressed, slouching crookedly, hands on his hips. Pieces of his uniform lay at his feet. A last long breath blew over the stubble on his chin.

“There is no ‘fat-assed farm-girl,’” he said quietly.

He dropped stiffly into a squat, pulling his boots on and lacing them tight. He lifted the greaves from the pile beside him and bucked them into place. She wanted to stop him, to hold him still and make him explain himself, but she was paralysed by hope and fear.

“My father is old. I go back each year and try to work enough food out of his ‘rocky shit-heap of a farm’ to keep them going ‘til I can get back again. It's not enough, I know. But I always promised them I'd be back for good. Every year, I tell them again, things will soon be better.”

He stood, pulled mail over his tunic, and settled the cuirass into place over it, buckling it in at the shoulders and sides. “They have my pay-out. It's not enough to live on, anyway.” This was an explanation that told her nothing she wanted to hear. She wanted to stop him; she wanted to fall at his feet and thank him. She was too ashamed to move.

He straightened the cloak over one arm, under the other, shoving his cloak clip through the rough fabric, and paused to face her squarely. “You figured on dying out there, anyway, didn't you? You just didn't want to do it alone.”

Tears burned up into her eyes and down, running over her cheek like he'd opened a vein. There was no rubbing them away this time, and no way to answer his bluntness. She didn't want to die. She didn't. She shook her head at him again, wishing they could start over, from the beginning. He had taken away the only thing she could trust, and now he was giving it back broken. She had no other life.

These were things she had refused to acknowledge even to herself, and here he held them up before her like an accusation. He couldn't do this. It was unfair. “But I wasn't afraid. I wasn't afraid.” Her voice broke. “Until now.”

If she went back to the front, he would go, too.

It was all she had wanted. He was ready to live or die beside her and now, stripped of guts and glory, cold and tactless, it was too much to ask. She had never considered the need to ask. He'd always been there. Nausea resumed its gnawing, but there was no room in her consciousness for it now. It was just too unfair. Trembling had seized her body. She was hot and cold and her stomach lurched and threatened. Her hands were too weak to clench and her

breath came in sobs. “This is too hard,” she whispered. “Why didn't you give me time to think?”

“I only decided last night. You were busy, so I got drunk instead.”

A fist pounded on the door behind him, and a voice demanded, “Assembly, soldier. Fall in, now!” This was not how it was supposed to be. Nothing was as it should be. There was nothing left to trust.

“One way or another,” he said, “we walk out this door together, now. I'm asking you to trust me; we don't have to die out there. For the last time, come home with me. Come be a fat-assed farm girl.” He smiled again and the room slipped sideways as she fought to breathe. Everything had shifted.

Swallowing hard over dust and acid, she whispered, “Don't smile. You don't know how terrified I am.” If her feet had moved, it would have been to follow the life she knew. It was all she knew and the only happiness she'd ever known. But no part of her would move; even her hands were no longer her own.

“I do.” He walked to where she stood, weak and frozen by too many loaded choices. “But I'm scared of any life without you in it and I don't want to follow your stubborn ass knowing we'll die for nothing. If this was combat, you'd know which way to go.”

He was standing too close, too near to the fire; sweat was blistering across her lip and clamming in her palms. Her heart was going to stop, or choke her on its rush.

“Okay.” Her stomach lurched again, her own voice echoed.

“Yes?” His hands were on her shoulders, his eyes searched hers.

“I don't know what else to do. I don't....” Tears kept running down her cheeks and he tried to wipe them away. She felt so damned small beside him, she always had. Some things, at least would not change. “I don't know how to be, Dragan. I don't know what to be.”

“You'll be fine.”

“But....” How could she put into words fears she could not even name. Out on the field, death might come. It was there as it always was, in the places she knew and understood. An end. But this, this choice he brought was a vast unknown, and it had no end. “I don't know how to be a farm-girl. I won't know what to do.”

“You'll learn.” He ducked his head, leaning in close so she could not look away. There was no way to avoid his eyes or the question she was fleeing. “Will you do this? Will you try?”

“All right. Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.” Her head went light, spinning and she stumbled forward. If she fell against him, she was unsure, but he caught her and held her still. She pressed her cheek against the cold hard leather on his chest, closed her eyes and let the howling black panic rush like a tornado, until at last it exhausted itself, and her, and leaked away. It left behind weakness, pitiful, soul sapping weakness, and she leaned on his strength.

It was no way to start a new life.

“Okay, let's do this. Yes?”

She nodded, trying to draw deeper breaths. She had no idea what she was going to do. She had no thoughts she could call her own.

“You want to sit?”

She nodded again and stepped back, opening her eyes to find the bed a few steps behind. She sat staring at the fire without seeing it, and he sat beside her.

“There's no hurry now,” he said quietly. “When you're ready. The world will wait.”

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RANK.

The sheen of polished brass always reflected a certain arrogance, and it was immediately evident in Paske, the officer who sat behind his desk, waiting. Short blond hair, square tanned face, cold eyes. It was an attitude that Freya found grating but not one she usually paid much heed; it was simply the attitude of rank and she was accustomed to it. It made her task no easier. His eyes called her worthless.

“Discharge.” It wasn't a question, more an accusation. “Now. As we mobilize. Now, as we speak?”

“I couldn't come earlier, sir. It was a difficult decision and I only made it today.” She wanted to drop into a squat and hug her knees, anything to keep the cold shame and dread from spreading out through her flesh. But she was here now, the approach had been made. “Now,” she added, shrugging apologetically. “This morning. Sir.”

“This morning.” Another sneered accusation and she nodded, tacitly accepting the charge of cowardice. He had scrolls in his hand, and he flicked the curled edge of one, then another, down to better see the reports written there. Drawing one free from his bundle, he tossed the others aside and used a silver-capped cane to spread his chosen document wider across the table. “It looks to me like you've passed all your fitness assessments. You've regained an acceptable range of movement, I see. There is a note here from the medical officer who conducted your last battery of tests specifically praising your levels of strength and endurance. ‘Remarkable tenacity’ he's written here.”

Using the heavy silver spur on his cane as a pointer, he sat back, opening the document for her appraisal, waiting for an answer to a question he hadn't asked. Freya leaned closer, clamping her hands into fists and holding her breath to keep it from trembling. The markings on the page were meaningless to her; if they had not been upside down, they would have made no more sense, but she searched them urgently for a clue or an excuse.

The study drew boiling blood up into her ears. “I, ah” Humiliation slipped from her lips with the attempt at speech, and she sucked in a deeper breath, stretching her cramped lungs. “I did my best. That's all. I tried hard to pass and to be fit to fight. But....”

“That's all we ask. And look,” he tapped at a red mark which cut across the inky lines of text, “it was enough. Look!” He jabbed again at the scroll, reprimanding a stupid child. “See there? What does that say?”

He held his cane against the red marks, tapping them impatiently as she stood mutely staring at the unintelligible symbols that would decide her fate. She glanced up at his face and read the contempt in his features on the instant, but the page before her offered no such

insight. Nothing.

He tapped another block of writing, also marred by crimson slashes. "Here then, what does it say here? Can you guess? It says, 'Recommendation: immediate medical discharge'" His words were growing louder and sharper, raising blistering shame.

At that moment she might have withdrawn. It was too much to be so embarrassed, and to stand like a fool with her weaknesses held up to ridicule while she begged to be allowed to take the coward's way.

If not for the fact that Dragan waited in the yard below with the weight of his life thrown against her, she might have dignified herself with a nod of deference and returned to the field. She could have taken her chances on the parade ground with the casting of the lot.

There was no room to move in here, and no answer to her humiliation but anger that fed on the ice in her tormentor's glare. "That's what I'm here for," she managed. "I want my medical discharge."

"You can't have it!" Paske rose forward suddenly, pushing his face into hers, forcing her to blink and give ground. "You have been passed fit!" he bellowed, shoving the report up at her. "Repeatedly!"

"Sir," she responded automatically, pulling herself erect, her spine and shoulders straightening.

"Read it!" He shook the useless page at her. "Passed! And again, 'Recommend assessment'. Passed! Can't you read?"

"No, sir."

"No, so take my word for it. Four, no five times you have had the opportunity to accept a medical discharge and refused. Now you have been marked fit. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I am not stupid, sir."

"Are you not? Let me be the judge of that." He stepped back, picking his cane from the desktop and slapping it thoughtfully down his thigh. Against the thick woollen pleats of his treggs the bar made a hollow thwack, suggesting just enough violence to make Freya flinch. Violence she could answer. That she understood. "Why now?" he asked the air.

"Why sir?" She steadied her breath. "I don't believe that I can fight. I want to. I want to believe I've been able to train hard enough to be as good as I was, but I don't. I can't."

"The medical officers think you can. You were adamant they should pass you fit. What changed your mind this morning?" Again he tapped the cane, the ornate silver hook tangling in fabric and rattling against a studded boot. He caught a sharp breath and turned suddenly, lifting the cane to point at her chest. "I know you, don't I?"

In better circumstances, Freya would have speculated aloud that everybody knew her. In the mess hall or on the parade ground she would have wagered blood on it; she would have hawked the sour taste of certainty from her throat and spat it at his feet. Here though, she chose to meet his interrogatory glare with silence.

"Yes." He chuckled, nodding his head slightly. "Yes, I do."

He moved back to stand by his desk, tucking the cane under his arm rather than relinquish his hold, while he freed his hands to straighten the documents he had earlier discarded. He read, nodding and clucking to himself, making an occasional small noise of surprise or admiration. "Something of a hero? Quite a record and previously uninjured.

Favoured by the gods, are you?” He looked up. “Or just lucky?”

Frustration burned. It rolled through the muscles of her back and neck, clenching in fists and strangling the breath in her throat, but she said nothing, only glared her defiance at the wall and willed the harm she could not move to inflict. In everything about him there was the reek of toad.

The brass on his breastplate shone where no verdigris had ever had cause to bloom. The skin of his face was smooth even if there was some silvering at his temple. There were no marks of the sun or the wind or snow in the softness around his eyes. He sat his chair and rolled his papers and judged his reading more useful than horsemanship. He handled a cane where there was no sword for him to hold. And he had a sneer to sharpen his words where words were all he had in abundance.

“And here you are at the end of your contract, almost.” The twisted lips turned into a smile. “And your partner is done, I see. Is he lucky, too?”

“No sir, he's good. Very good.” Words she would have awarded herself if she could; if they had not amounted to an admission of fitness to serve.

“Is he? And I suppose after so many seasons together he could have been relied upon to carry you and your injury. No chance of him bringing a slur against your great name, is there? But a new partner, that would be a different story, wouldn't it? No certainty there. None at all.

“Tell me.” He stepped up close. “How do you weigh the risk of death in battle against the threat of tarnished glory; a failure on the field or a coward left behind?”

“There is no risk to balance, sir.” She stole what she could of Dragan's passion, using his arguments as if they were her own. As calmly as she could, she said, “There are only certainties. If I fail in the field, and I will, there'll be no partner to carry tales. He'll be dead beside me. No question. There is no chance I'll return in disgrace. I'll be a corpse among the corpses, and whoever you assign as my partner will leave this citadel a dead man.”

“Noble, then? You'd rather the shame of being recognized as a coward than to risk the life of a partner. The name, the face that has inspired the best in our young warriors for years now, remembered at the last as the one who slunk off into the mists to hide.” His grin widened.

“A medical discharge, sir. There is no shame in that.” The lie tore something inside, something hot that throbbed.

“You can't have a medical discharge. You're fit and I have the reports to prove it. I know it. You know it.” He turned away, walking slowly toward a wide arras worked in swirling greens and browns that covered most of the chamber wall. “Everybody knows it.” He smiled.

His hands were pink, the nails immaculate, and his fingertips soft and rounded. The heavy weave of his thegn showed no sign of pilling or unnoticed threads tugged loose. Even the segmented leather laminate that hung down his thighs fell from the bands of a gilded girdle. No blood or marrow grease had ever dried and stained his skin. The grime of battle and the shit of fear had never crusted under his fingernails, and yet he had the gall to call her a coward.

She was fit. Fit enough.

From below, the calls of men assembling, falling into marching columns, laughing, living, clapping shoulders and vowing their blood, one for another, rose like the perfume of

better days. Out there, somewhere below this toad in his clean stone tower, was the life she knew, and its call was stronger than she could easily bear.

Men died in battle. They knew that, all of them, and yet they stood together, ready to walk out into fear and blood and glory. It was not Dragan's choice. He could not force her to this humiliating place. Out there, they knew her. If one of them lived or died beside her...

“Can you read a campaign map?”

“Yes sir.” Maps were the mainstay of any battle plan. Scratched in dust or burned into leather, they shared the vision of one with many. A campaign map could be no different.

“This is what you're running from.” Standing before the vast arras, he clapped the stiff oilcloth with his cane and Freya stepped forward peering into the mess of colour, frowning. Words and symbols rose into focus; dotted lines traced their way over the surface, some black some red; arrows noted circles large and small. It was like no map she had ever seen.

The sneering toad watched her.

The maps she knew showed landmarks: peaks, waterways, crossroads, and they were marked by their likeness. Here the things marked were known by their words, and she could make no sense of it. A river snaked through it; that was all she could easily recognize.

“We're here.” He snapped the silver spur against the map, and where it rested she saw there was a likeness of Orlik citadel, tiny squares that curved around the pale circle of the tarn. Instantly her vision widened. She was not looking at a mud map, not the square of a field where a river ford was easiest, but a vast area wider than the valleys and peaks, spreading further than the cities to the west.

And there they were. She didn't need the words for them; she could see the neat grids of the streets she had once known. It was an easy five days' ride west to the city of Talsiga, so the area shown away to the east of the citadel was at least equal to that.

Behind their ancient fortress, the land rose steeply into the vast boulder-strewn passes of the Delian Mountains. That was where the empires, like two massive bovids, locked horns and shoved until the bedrock of their lands were driven up into the sky. And where the resulting ranges rushed from north to south, there on the map were the snow fields and cliff faces, the narrow paths and the wide rich valleys between.

It was extraordinary. Treks that would take a troop a week of murderous slog for every league they gained were shown here in the length of a finger. Parts of the mountains where even goats could slide to their deaths, here were flat beiges and greys. She reached to trace a journey with her finger, trailing from the fortress walls through the dense foothill forests, and on upward toward the active front lines, just stirring with the spring thaw and ready to draw blood.

A month or more she could study this map and still wonder at its magnificence.

Paske the toad was smiling again. “No, I can't give you a medical discharge. I won't.”

Freya snapped her attention back to the discussion at hand, ready to concede. It was not Dragan's choice; she could not let it be. She could return to her life on the front. Some choices cost more than life.

“But I think I have another solution.” Sliding the polished cane through his hand like a slick span of phallus, he grinned and sent ice prickling through Freya's gut.

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NEEDED.

Dragan chewed the knuckle of his thumb, pinching the soft skin inside his lip against his teeth and swearing at the sharp sting. It was taking too long.

He had no real confidence, when it came to the test, that Freya could stand in the face of hard questions and keep up her determination to leave. He knew that while he stood with her she could lean on his certainty, but he'd left the decision too long. In doubting himself and in doubting his partner, he had let their chances of survival slide toward inevitable failure. Freya feared failure more than death. To him they were one and the same.

Behind him, the parade ground was clearing. Young men had been gathered into units and marched off to war. The process was swift and orderly but it still took hours, and now those hours had passed. Midday was closer than he would have liked it to be. The mess hall had long been empty, but now the tide was turning as the permanent members of the defence establishment, those who remained in the safety of stone, drifted back in toward their luncheon.

He had no interest in their progress, but he checked the door with each new arrival, anxious for Freya's return. It was no small surprise, then, that the face he saw entering was not one he had expected.

A young clerk, no more than a child, nervous and gangly in his movements, was making a beeline for where Dragan sat, and a young woman followed behind. She was modestly covered, a heavy blue cape pulled in close about her shoulders and a hood pulled down over her hair, shading her face. She looked up, relief rushing over her features as she found him.

The clerk nodded once in silent acknowledgement, and turned away to attend to other pressing duties.

Dragan stood, and his guest seized both his hands in hers as she rushed to sit on the trestle opposite. "Lenka. Why are...? Did you travel here alone?"

"Yes, alone, and it wasn't easy, Dragan. I was bad scared." She drew a shaky breath, peering around at the men who sat at nearby tables and judging every one a threat. "I rode the old mare, rickety as she is, but there was no choice. We've been tried, really tried, and I have to bring sad news."

Dragan slipped his hands free, guessing at the news that would drive such an uncharacteristic journey. "My father?" He knew the answer, felt the jolt of certainty hit deep in his chest before he could read the confirmation in the pale blue of her eyes.

She nodded, her hood slipping back over platinum silk. She snatched at her cowl, pulling it hastily back into place, hiding from these crowds of strangers in the shadows it lent. She leaned to whisper, "He's been laid out many a night, now, and you didn't come. You've got to come now; your mother's been in a terrible state. She's watched for you going on weeks now."

He had left all things too long, waited, when he should have acted. Again the fates laid their accusations at his feet. Too much had moved beyond his control.

“She says you're done with fighting. She says you're coming home to manage for her. Weeks now, Dragan, she's been watching.”

“I couldn't come when the season ended. There are things here I had to finish. But today I'll know, I hope. Soon. Lenka, I might not be finished with the army yet. I may have to go back out.”

The chilly wind had chafed the blush of roses onto her full cheeks, but around the pink, the skin had drained as pale as milk. She shook her head, denying the possibility. “No,” she breathed. “You must come. There's no one else.”

Here was the weight that had slowed his decisions; the knowledge that this must come, and the responsibility it carried with it. There was no one else to take care of the farm. Lenka was the daughter of a neighbouring farm, an orchard with rich fields that lay down along the Iultea River, but for all her strength and skill, the world she knew needed men.

“Don't say you won't come. You're needed.”

And needed by his mother not least of all. He knew. She had no need to lay more guilt on him; he knew just what his choices would cost. Or Freya's choices. He needed to see her, to know what she had decided. The wait that had been trying only moments ago, now weighed like a millstone on his conscience.

“Soon, I'll know soon.” He looked hopefully toward the door, but no one came. However Freya had needed to make her case, it was taking much longer than it should. Too long. Warnings began to tick and click at the back of his mind, unformed and meaningless.

“Have you eaten?” Suddenly the needs of this woman, here alone to retrieve him because there was no one else, broke through his reverie. The mores of a life from which he was too long removed accused him again.

He was in uniform, for all anyone around him knew he was still in service. With all it had taken, the army could offer some small hospitality to his guest. He stood, glancing once more at the door, and then moved to fetch a tray of food and warmed cider.

“Where're you going?” Lenka snatched at his hand, half-standing in her haste to prevent him from leaving her. “This isn't a place I'd want to be alone.”

“I'm not leaving. I'm going to fetch you some food and a warm mug of cider. I won't be further away than there.” He directed her attention to the nearby wall and the smorgasbord.

“I'd rather you stay,” she said nervously, but the thought of food drew her hand back to her lap and she settled slowly back to her seat. “I'm not used to so many men about. Strangers.”

Dragan smiled. “Not so many now. This mess can fill three times over with men when they're mustered together. All the fighting men have gone.”

Words dropped from his lips, dull with the weight of realization, “Oh no. No.” He looked around, but there was nothing to rebut the fear that rushed adrenaline through his system. How many hours had he waited, wasted. No point in moving now, or searching. If she had gone with them, then she was gone. It was done.

Looking down at Lenka's questioning expression, Dragan let the burning ice of frustration, anger, and hurt wash over him, leaving cold sweat on his lip and a dry burn at the back of his throat. For the moment he was too shocked and appalled to think. There would be things he could do, decisions he could make, but in that instant he felt nothing more than a

conviction that Freya had chosen the brutal reality of death over the less, he thought, brutal reality of life.

“Dragan,” she said softly, “I’d eat if you’d fetch some food.”

“Yes.” He nodded, dragged his feet toward the counter and mechanically loaded a platter with hot food and drink.

His father was dead, and Lenka had travelled all this way alone to bring him the news. She should never have had to take such a risk; he should have been there. He could have been there when the last season finished and his contract expired. Would have. Should have.

His father was dead and he was his mother’s only hope, and she had waited for him to come home. Watched and waited. Now Freya, the single reason he had put everything important in his life on hold and turned his back on his first and greatest responsibilities, had vanished. He set the platter in front of Lenka and slid down onto the opposite trestle.

“When will you know?” The words were slurred around an eager mouthful, but were clear enough.

He rested his forehead down onto his hands and rubbed at eyes still raw from the night before wondering how to answer that. He could say, ‘I know now’. But then, would he add ‘Let’s go home,’ or ‘I’m leaving now, to try to find the woman I’ve loved for...’? How long? He didn’t even know the answer to that.

“Soon,” he said. “What happened to my father?”

“He fell from a ladder, grafting apple slips. He was tired, with lambs coming and the drystone courses needing chocks, and the field to be turned, and slurries for the vines. Powerful tired. And your mother on him all the time, watching for you all the days.”

Dragan nodded, shouldering more guilt. He should have been there.

“She’s in a bad state, Dragan. Moaning alone, won’t rise, won’t eat. She left me to manage the lambs and such. I’m not crying on it, but it isn’t my place.”

“No.”

“Don’t say you won’t come.”

“No.” He watched her eating for a while, pushing food into a vacuum and watching him watching her from under her brows. He couldn’t refuse, but the image of his mother weeping on her bed brought a tentative hope. There was a place he could check, one small stone cell in all the world that would affirm his fears, one way or another. “Come on, finish up. I’ll go now for my answer.”

Lenka stood, shoveling a parting forkful and slurping the mug of cider one more time before she followed from the mess hall and through the maze of high stone halls. The heavy skirts she wore slowed her progress, and Dragan paused impatiently as she puffed and struggled up worn stairways and dark halls. Her awkwardness forced him to slow, or else he might have run.

Nearer to Freya’s room, his pace slowed and his heart rate rose. It might be empty. She might be there. Both possibilities filled his chest with hard air and left little room for breath.

The door was closed and he stopped dead. If there was a way to prepare for what lay on the other side, it was beyond his ken, so he knocked, quietly at first, then with the side of his fist, and called, “Freya.”

There was no answer; he pushed. The door stayed firm, its bolt thrown from the inside

and he came close to a laugh of pure relief. Lenka moved the implications of her presence closer to him in the gloom, and the tide of relief ebbed as suddenly as it had risen. “Freya,” he pounded the door again, determined that she would speak, and her words would resolve the tensions dragging him in opposite directions. “Open up, girl.”

When the bolt slid and the door yielded slowly under his pressure, Dragan raised a finger to Lenka, asking her to wait as he moved cautiously inward, leaning on the heavy oak for support. The light from her open balcony filled the room and her small fire blazed, hopelessly insufficient to warm the solid block of air that rushed in off the water. Freya sat on her pallet facing the fire as if its flames held a greater fascination than he ever could.

“Well?” he asked as he moved slowly toward her.

“Well,” she answered flatly, and shrugged. When she turned her face up he saw the remnants of tears, but they had dried and left her eyes empty. There was no expression on her fine features; her hands were open, cupped loosely in her lap as if she had nothing left to hold.

Dragan felt like an oaf, awkward and graceless. He couldn't stand over her, couldn't sit on the narrow military cot beside her, and could not touch her; his hands were not made for such delicate contact. He needed her to move and to speak. He needed her strength, her grace, and her humour, but he could see none of them.

She nodded, as if she understood all he could not say, and looked back to the fire. “No discharge,” she said and he closed his eyes. She moved a fraction, sliding down the cot as if the small space she made was the difference between having someone at her side or not, and he moved to sit beside her. “It's all right, they have plans for me. None for you; you're free to go.”

There was a tremble in his fingers and heat in his breath when he spoke. “What kind of plans?”

“Plans.” She shrugged again and her hands moved together, her fingers lacing and squeezing as if they were trying to choke the air from some unseen throat. “I'll be here, mostly. They have maps, campaign maps, and I have to revise them. I have to learn the scale of the battlefields and advise the officers about the conditions on the ground. They don't know, you see, they don't go out there in the snow and mud. They stay here with their papers.” She turned to look at him again. “And I will have to stay here with them.”

He looked hard at her words, trying to find the horror she saw in them. “That's going to be all right, isn't it? It's honest work, useful. And you only have three months.”

She laughed suddenly, and snot left from her crying bubbled out. Wiping a hand across her nose carelessly, she said, “Three months with words and papers and men who know more about words than wars. Three months as one of them: them that you say are to blame for the fighting, them that get rich while they send poor men to defend their gold.”

He slipped an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against his chest and whispered, “I don't think I can ever forgive you for this.”

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MAPS.

The days alone in the chartrooms were bearable. It was rare for anyone to interrupt her studies, and Freya found the images endlessly fascinating. Some places she knew better than others; some battle sites were more notable or more recent, and always the memories came back on the flood.

Blood and death. And exhilaration.

Life; and blood that swam with light and heat. When your heart drove you so hard you swelled and grew huge and unbreakable, there was nothing you could not do, or see, or believe. A sword arm was fluid fire, legs iron bands, shoulders were wings, and lungs burst with the need to laugh and scream. In battle you glowed from within. In the heat of a fight you were a god.

She looked down at her map and raised the flame to brighten the cold stone gloom. There was no life here.

The large hanging in Paske's chamber was a composite and not one she could often study. Section by section, square by square, it had been produced and reproduced, and she worked on the template for each separate area. She had a small key to work with, just a handful of likenesses and with them, their words. Most of them she had already learned to recognize.

When she found a landmark missing she could mark it in, carefully. But when she remembered an important fact that needed a notation, or when the tiny images she transcribed needed words of explanation, she had to take it down along the corridor to where a cabal of clerks huddled in flickering light, scratching away at parchment. Arrogance in an officer was to be endured; smugness in these glowworms was galling.

Before her now, the massive cliffs of Rodo Vendre showed pale and wide against the green background, and Freya chewed at her lip, moving her finger in slow circles over an area an hour's march to the south. Several seasons past, her scouting party had been pinned in the lee of a heavily forested hillock, ambushed from the tree cover and trapped when their attempted retreat brought them against a deep coombe bog. They were death to men on horseback; icy, silted meres covered from edge to edge in turfy green, but acid black below. Even if a soldier was saved from drowning, the dark water poisoned their lungs, and in the mountain air, to be soaked and have no fire was just as deadly.

They had lost three of their eight men that day. Urte, mounted and arrow-struck, had hit the bog at full gallop. She had vanished beneath the mantle in an explosion of kicks and shrieks. Another, who had no name Freya could recall, had fallen as the company dropped, spread wide, and turned back in a crouching dash for the cover of the trees. Back toward the enemy.

Freya grinned, no longer seeing the chart at her fingers. She was light and fast and sure. With Dragan a few hard strides behind, she had slipped through the sabine copses that trailed into the forest shade, oblivious to scrapes and scratches. One part of her mind counted flights from above, noted origins, sized up her opposition. Another part slipped ahead, picking shade from deeper shade, cover from peril, on the route toward their nest. Without any thought, she slipped the quiver and light bow from her shoulder; amid thorns and branches it was only a

hindrance, and she drew the short blade from her back. It was in her hand where it belonged as she hunted.

Tethered horses on the path ahead forced her to move from the flank. The archers' camp was well hidden, but protected by an outcrop of rock only from the front. Rising into a run before the panicky horses could sound an alarm, she burst from the shadows, leaping over a low bracken bank, and whooping as the sharp golden light of her blade shone red.

She heard without seeing the screech and clash of swords behind her head, and she ducked and spun. Opening the space for Dragan's reach and range, she turned in and around behind him as he forced his way into the confusion of defenders. Others were joining them, jumping into the middle of the fray from all points.

If the enemy had been smarter or older, if they'd had more experience, they may have had watchers in position above the camp, ready to move in as back-up under attack. But these men were young, their defence frantic slashing, their lives forfeit from the start.

So they'd fallen, all of them, dead. And all in the time it would take to throw up your arms and scream thanks for the victory and curses for the gods at a clear mountain sky.

She rubbed gently at the paint. The bog should be noted; it could cost men their lives. Slowly she traced the low profile of the map, its carefully applied colours forming layers of revision.

She could do this, of course she could. What were they but worms?

They looked up as one when she stood at their door, seven pasty dough-faces reflecting the lamplight, their eyes dark myopic holes. Some turned back to their scratching, some grinned. Kulle, the least offensive of them, silently moved his document aside to make way for the map that needed annotation. "Here," Freya said softly. "These hills are shown correctly, but it should be noted how densely wooded they are. They are just forward of the front; they should be watched. This area is a coombe bog, deep enough to drown horses." Her finger moved over the map, but she stole suspicious glances at the men around her.

She met one grinning face as it expostulated, "That where you hid the bodies of your family?"

A small titter spread around the room and a second, braver clerk quipped, "No, that's where she won the war for us. Single handed, too. She drowned a whole battalion there, didn't you, Oernen?"

Oernen was the name Dragan had given her when he'd learned she had no family name. And more, he had taught her to sign it in a wide sweeping hand. The eagle, a great predator of the heights as she was, and this insect had no place for the word on his tongue.

On the bench in front of him, a small sharp blade for trimming the styluses glinted in the broken light. In a moment, she could drop his tongue into his hand where he could better learn to hold it. But bloodshed here would cost too much; it might cost more than she could imagine. Before she could move back, he added, "Come on, tell us tales of your glories. Who did you kill there, a monster? A devil? A thousand?"

Freya stepped closer and he hadn't the sense to back away. "No," she smiled, close. "It was children. Only children." If she had cut a sliver from his cheek or chopped down on a finger-joint, the look on his face could not have been more satisfying. Spreading his sheaf of scrolls across the desk, she lifted the ink pot and slowly and carefully emptied the red-brown

wash over all his precious words.

* * * * *

Paske sat behind his desk, slapping his cane against his hand. He *tap, tap, tapped* it in an irritating imitation of a time waster, while Freya stared past him at the arras. She let her thoughts wander slowly along the curved line that marked the journey to the city of Koldem. She had time to waste. She still had fifty-five days.

Now she could see errors in the likeness. In reality, the city she remembered was not so neatly laid, and the symbols for the palace and the temple were wrongly shown together against the northern wall. She shook her head, the slightest movement, acknowledging how little it mattered if the western portions of the map were wrong.

On the day troops needed accurate information on the layout of their cities, the front line would have moved across the mountainous borders, swept by the citadel and its sister far to the north, moved on past the great forests of the central plains and all the wide tracts of farmland. In fact, if the war had moved to the cities' gates, there would be nothing left of the empire to save but the palaces.

Tap, tap, tap.

She watched the shine slide up and down the length of the cane as it rose and fell. The wood was pale, its grain open. Soft wood. A smile twitched at her lip and she bit down on it and straightened her shoulders. It was apt, she thought, when it so resembled his cock. And he really loved it, never let it out of his hand.

At least it was not a truncheon and he was not a sheriff. When she was four years old she'd hidden for weeks with an arm bone cracked by the sheriff's kosh. Huddled in shadows she'd waited in silence, with bruises down the side of her head, a closed up eye, and a split lip. The little ones were always easiest to catch, and even the fast ones like her could be bowled over and belted before they could scabble back onto their feet. Street shit; best beaten to death.

Tap, tap, tap.

"There's no pleasing you, is there?"

She closed her eyes, listened to her own breath, listened for a pulse, and then opened them again. "Sir." There was no life here.

"I let you hide in the safety of my walls. I even kept you from the ridicule of the men." He paused, perhaps to accept her gratitude, perhaps to listen to the echoes dying in the cold hard corners. "I don't think there are many among the other ranks who would even know you are hiding here."

No. The other ranks were away from the safety of stone out on the other side of the mountains. By now they would be fully engaged on the front giving their lives for the glory and prosperity of the empire. "No, sir."

"And yet you waste my time. You waste everybody's time. It'll take a month to transcribe the documents you destroyed. Should I add a month to your conscription?"

The words hit her like a blow, and she struggled to keep her face calm. Fear burned in her chest and the skin of her throat and cheeks prickled. If he thought for a moment he had

scared her, he'd have won a victory greater than the sum of all the empire's striving. "No sir."

"No." He stood and moved around the desk like a predator, and her heartbeat lurched into a gallop. His tread fell slowly, heavily and the skin of her arm, down her side, and up the back of her neck began to bristle. She could feel him behind her just as surely as if he was a naked flame.

"No," he repeated from close behind her. "Tell me, what are you saving yourself for?" His fingertips skimmed over her hair, the touch so light she was uncertain whether she'd actually felt it, or simply imagined more than his breath at her shoulder.

Her back straightened slowly, the hard muscle of her upper arms clenching and drawing up fists. On the desk in front of her lay an ornate knife, much as the clerk's had been, but made of silver and embossed bone. It was within easy reach and she turned slightly, moving her left shoulder closer to him and her right hand a little closer to the knife.

"Sir?" she hissed, letting her tone speak warnings her rank forbade.

"When you are released, what then? You'll be safe, your life spared." He shifted back to her right, his lips and hot words brushed her ear. "But what possible use could you be?"

Paske stepped back sharply as her left elbow jabbed the air where he had been. The cane smashed down hard on her injured shoulder, and the trimming knife, already held, skidded from her numb fingers.

Freya cried out in pain and fury as he thrust down again on the length of his cane, forcing her legs to bend. His knee jabbed up into her kidneys hard enough to knock out another grunt of pain, and he bent over her to smile, and whispered, "There is no pleasing you. You need to learn some manners. You've been living out there like an animal for far too long."

He walked away, long strides carrying him back to his chair, and Freya doubled over, clutching the injury that roared like fire down into her chest. Her right arm was numb, the fingers of her right hand flared with pins and needles. Using the edge of his desk, she pushed herself back to a stand, riding waves of pain and dizziness that threatened to drop her into darkness.

"From tomorrow, you have new duties." He smiled, fresh, as if they'd had no more than a morning tête-à-tête. "You will scrub the mess hall floor, end to end, between every food service. Beginning tomorrow, of course, our new intake will arrive. You will have more than enough to keep you busy, then, won't you?"

"Oh, but wait. I have one thing more for you. A surprise." While she steadied herself on the edge of the desk, he flicked through a pile of documents.

"Here now." He handed her a square of parchment neatly inscribed with small, intricately interlaced words, painted in gold. It shook in her hand and she made no pretence of studying the script. "That's right, how insensitive of me; you can't read that, can you? It's an invitation. For our great war hero. There are guests coming out from Talsiga to view the new intake, and they want to see the stuff of legend. That's you." He could contain his joy no longer and he laughed, tipping back in his seat and crossing his ankles on the desk as his eyes sparkled with enjoyment. "Be sure to wear something elegant, won't you?"

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FLYING.

Dragan laboured in the fields from sunup until dark. When the sun was gone, he sat at his table mending harnesses by lamp light and sharpening the blades of the shears and scythes. He slept because his body could do nothing else and woke when the cocks crowed. He went out at dawn to drag fresh hay for the cows and ewes, and to turn the early lambs from the warmth of the house out onto pasture.

When fatigue or frustration slowed his steps, he turned himself around so he could see in every direction and imagined the scene through Freya's eyes. This was his 'rocky-shit-heap-of-a-farm', and that truly was what it was. But it was his, and it was safe, and in a very few weeks it would be hers, too. In too short a time, he had to make it fit for her to see.

Wolves and foxes had decimated his sheep and chickens, their pens and pastures gone to ruin in the time since he had last been at home. Everywhere the drystone hedges were slipping, but every pass of the tiller pulled new stone to the surface of his fields, so there was never an end to walling. And nothing drew sweat or hardened muscle like lugging rocks.

He rubbed his wadded tunic over his face and used it to wipe sweat down the middle of his bare chest as he watched Lenka cross the high field toward him. The sun was overhead, and she was bringing meat and cider for his dinner. None too soon. He walked up the slope a short way and turned to sit in the thick spring grasses.

“You've been a help to us, Lenka,” he said as she knelt and laid the drawn cloth flat.

She nodded once and flashed a quick, coy smile. A dense cob of rogenbrot, a soft cheese, and a pat of smoked eel sat together on the cutting block. Beside them she stood the glazed pots she had strung: one brimming with cider, the other half filled with a sop of beef broth.

As he ate, dropping some hunks of rye bread into the sop to soak and smearing cheese and flakes of eel on others, she sat back onto her feet, away from the feast. Quietly she slipped the corners of her shawl from under her belt and lifted the dark cloth from her shoulders. The red scarf, too, which was tied over her hair, she slipped loose and put to the side.

His attention was fixed on his meal and his thoughts ran ahead, as always, over work that remained to be done, but he turned as her hair burst into silver fire in the late morning sun. His eye was drawn to the length of it, rolled into a loose platinum plait that fell forward over her shoulder. The long creamy line of her throat ended abruptly where her tight laced basque pushed full breasts up into the gathering of her underslip. Soft mounds of pale flesh swelled and fell with every breath.

With some difficulty, he moved his view to her face. Her eyes were down, but her cheeks coloured slightly. She raised her chin to the side, stretching her neck and leaning almost imperceptibly closer so the sunlight slid over the contours of her décolletage. A smile touched her full lips again and her breath shortened.

Dragan lifted the crock of cider to his mouth and said, “Is my mother well today?” He looked down toward the stream below, but back again when she sighed.

“Better.” She straightened her shoulders further, arching her back a little, drawing the length of her braid up slowly, and dropping it behind. Her empty fingers trailed back, their tips following her neckline to where the bright ribbons that laced her bodice were tied. Slowly she twisted a finger, twirling the laces in slow circles, her eyes now on his, her lips forming a soft moue.

Even as he recognized the dance, he allowed his gaze to wander over all the soft expanse of her chest, her shoulders, throat, and breasts. All reason told him he should look away, as it had with each successive visit from his neighbours and their daughters. It was harder now to hear the voice of reason when the sun raised perfume from her skin and the skittish breezes slipped it to him over the remains of a good meal.

A hard burn rolled in his belly and a pulse kicked behind it.

It would not be hard to accept this silent offer. More, it would be bliss to hold the softness of her and to bury himself in the sweet warmth and comfort she held out. But the reasons that made this woman a prize above of all those paraded before him in the last weeks, were the reasons which best argued the need to refuse.

There were no men here.

The farms had, for too many years, lost their best and strongest to the war. For too many generations.

Daughters grew to work like men in the fields and orchards of the poor. They slaved as he did, hauling rocks and snigging logs. They burned beneath the summer sun and froze in winter fields, flogging horses or oxen down the straight lines of the plough.

They cooked and cleaned and tended the hearths; they cut the sheaves and pitched them onto wagons; they thatched their ricks and carted bedding straw. They bargained their grain prices at market and bought and sold their wool. Then at night, they spun and wove their cloths, stitched and mended, and preserved their fruit against spoiling.

But in the end, there were still too few men.

For winning husbands and fathers for their children they had little to commend themselves. Each was one among so many. The farms hereabout were poor of everything but daughters. And so women struggled to keep those things which made them most desirable.

Lenka held, in abundance, everything that made her first among the many.

Her father's orchards grew on fertile land that repaid his husbanding many times over. He sold his apples, pears, and plums, and brewed the massive store pots of cider, brandywines and liqueurs that rolled west to meet an endless thirst in the cities. He paid workers each season, so his only daughter's hands stayed smooth, her skin pale and soft, unmarked by the sun.

His wealth showed best in her full figure. She was tall and strong, with ample breasts and wide curved hips, a round-cheeked face that was pleasant to look at, full lips, and eyes that sparkled blue.

She was beautiful. Warm and soft. Sweet. Willing.

He looked back to the stream and washed the ache from the back of his throat with a wide swallow of cider. And he ascribed her her virtue, intact because it was too valuable in these times to be wasted. Most valuable.

Below him, the stone hedge he'd been working on threw back the sunlight. There was

too much to do, and so little time. In too short a time, Freya would be coming home. “Thank you,” he said, and left her to clear away the meal.

A stiff wind rushed up the dark face of the citadel. It rolled down from the mountains, across the tarn, and up to snake in through balconies that wailed like a thousand open mouths. Freya leaned out over her balustrade counting the terraces that gaped below her own.

Four, hers was the fifth. There were more flights of stairs to climb, but the foyer and the parade grounds were lower, the citadel built into the fall of the foothills. Her wall and balcony, like so many others, opened directly above the water. She leaned out, hooking her feet into the carved stone, her hips resting against the top rail, and flung her arms wide into the wind.

It felt like flight. It whipped through her hair and stung her face and eyes with its icy breath. If she had wings, she would match the eagle. She would soar out over the battlefields, her view just like that of a mapmaker.

But she had no wings.

Her hands were rough; the skin in the joints of her fingers was cracked and raw from the lye. Her back ached. Her knees were bruised from kneeling on the stone floor of the mess hall, and her shoulders.... She pressed her left hand onto the scar and moved her arm through its range. Every day her free movement was less, the stiffness more. Cleaning the stonework meant leaning on one hand and scrubbing with the other. No matter which way she did it, or how often she changed hands, the weight and the action were tearing away any healing she had been able to do. If it kept up many more days, she would not be able to continue.

She had forty-three days to go.

She turned and leaned back on the rail, picturing the terraces above and to the side: a thousand, thousand dark holes in the stone. When she looked back into the half-light of her bare room, she thought again of Dragan.

It was something she tried to avoid. He wasn't here, which was not unusual; every off season he went back to his farm. But when her body ached beyond endurance, when young men who could not guess what they would face made jokes at her expense or kicked food scraps at her, when she gouged a mark in the stone of her wall to count off days, or when she considered the ordeal she would face tomorrow night among people she had despised from birth, he was all she could think about.

If not for him, she would not be here.

The wind sucked at her hair and pushed up under her tunic, puffing and flapping it against her body. In a moment of inspiration she dropped to a squat. Her boots were soon unlaced, the breeches shoved down roughly and kicked off to the side. As she raised her bare foot to the rail, the wind wailed its encouragement and she pushed up, almost overbalancing, and stood, arms out in space against the wind.

Laughing, filling from her toes to her ears with bright joy, she caught her flapping tunic and lifted it up and over her head. Her blood had turned to quicksilver rushing through her, aching in nipples grown hard and greedy for the cold suck of the wind. Naked, laughing hard,

laughing full into the moonlit void, she stepped out from the stone and flew.

She punched her fists up and whooped with joy, looking down just as her heels hit the water. It was harder and deeper than she'd imagined, jetting into every naked space, and pushing the air from her lungs. When she stopped shooting downward and the surreal swirl of bubbles began to make sense, she kicked, rising up to the cold, clear surface.

When she broke free, she gagged on great lungfuls of air and coughed them out again. She was alive and every nerve was singing. Still laughing, she rose to lie on her back and kicked slowly toward the closest open shoreline.

“You fucking idiot! What the...? Hey, are you all right?”

Freya spun, shocked by the voice so near in the darkness. Someone was splashing, rushing towards her. She was near to the shore and he had reached her in a few strides, grabbing at her arms and pulling her to her feet.

The moon lit the terror in his face, the absolute horror at what he had seen, or thought he'd seen, and she started to laugh again.

“Are you crazy? What...?” He was dragging her onto the hard, pebbly aggregates that held the tarn's great boulders and the citadel's footing in place, turning as he did to look back up the stone face, shaking his head in wonder or shock.

“I'm okay, I'm fine.” She stopped the rush forward, braced her knees and made him pause. “Who are you?” she asked bluntly, then, “No, don't tell me. Why were you out here?”

“You screamed,” he yelled in exasperation, his face close to hers. “I wasn't out here, I was in there.” He pointed through the darkness to a lower floor balcony and the room beyond, dimly lit from within. Ground floor; down at the bottom of the pecking order; brand new and untried.

“You just get here? Part of the new intake?” Freya was starting to shiver. Adrenaline, shock, and the cold night air were all making themselves felt against her bare skin.

He noticed her skin then, too, and stepped back, nodding, so the moon was not hindered by shadows. “You'd better come inside, you'll freeze.”

“Yes,” she agreed. Stretching up onto tiptoes she kissed him hard, her hands sliding down to pull his hips in against hers. “Fuck me,” she said, biting onto his lip.

He froze, his eyes wide.

“You heard me,” she grinned. “Warm me up.” Her hands slipped over the rough new suede on his ass, and as she spoke she walked, forcing him back toward the balcony he'd left. “I'm cold right through to the bone.”

One way or another it was true enough, and there was no way to tell if the man in her hands would be able to reach the part of her that was coldest. But it was worth a try.

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BLOOD.

Sheep's blood ran as freely as a man's, and looking into the wide yellow eye, Dragan believed man and beast stared after the same vision as it darkened. Blinking slowly, but still,

the beast hung by its back legs and watched as Lenka moved the bucket that caught the draining flow. Although he'd never once seen her flinch when a sword or arrow broke the skin of a man, Freya had wept more than once for the life of a dumb creature slain.

Horses were by far her most loved, but he'd known her to fret over dogs and goats left to run wild over a battlefield or abandoned after the event. She had once carried an injured pup for miles. She'd shared what little food she had, and would have shared his with it, too, if he'd agreed. He smiled at the memory. It was a need to love and nurture, he decided; the need for babies that every woman felt.

"More'nough for blodwurst, with the tongue and backfat." Lenka moved her full bucket safely aside, replacing it with a smaller bowl while Dragan turned and skinned the carcass. With hands on her hips, she watched and waited as he opened the gut and let the entrails drop. "Half to Pa," she reminded him, fishing through the fallen mass for the liver first. None would go to waste; the intestines and caul for sausage; the stomach, heart, lungs, and sweetbreads for hoggva; the liver and kidneys for tonight's supper. She worked at dividing the treasure evenly into her trays.

Blood stained the white skin of her arms and a smear crossed her cheek.

It was illogical. Food was needed and a beast was slain, but the slaughter and the butchery went hard on him, much harder than they should have. For those like him who worked the land, meat was easily come by, and it was rare to go to sleep on an empty stomach. There were people all over the empire who had little enough to eat at all, and any kind of meat was a luxury seldom seen.

But it was blood. There had always been so much, and now, here in the peaceful green of the farm, a dam of blood seemed to break in his mind: years of life flowing out across the green fields and freezing in the rocky passes. He'd seen too much blood. This silent rush was just the last in a scarlet wash that never had an end.

His mind's eye flashed up the face of a man, numb with horror, iced with sweat, lying propped against a stone and holding his own innards. Between the gore soaked mail and piss stained breeches, a waterfall of lifeblood washed in pulses over his hands and gut, as fresh and red as any mountain poppy. He was staring after something, something only he could see, his breath coming in sharp, heaving jabs.

Dragan recalled that face, the creases deep in the corners of his eyes where he'd laughed in the face of his calling through too many seasons. He never knew his name or where in the green earth he had come from; never knew his past or any of his hopes. He knew he was good at what he'd done; the hair at his temples was turning to white, so he'd survived more seasons than Dragan had himself.

But he remembered that man. He recalled his death as clearly as if he hung there before them from the bier rafters. It was the first time he'd begun to wonder why they killed these men who tried with all their might to kill them back.

He had to think of other things. As always, he thought of Freya.

He worked and slept and ate more than he'd eaten in years. Food enough to fill the emptiness, enough to sleep on a full belly every night. As he worked and order began to emerge from the chaos he had inherited, the days warmed and lengthened and seemed to drag out the time until her release. He marked them down.

Every morning brought restless energy to drive him from his bed. There was always so much to do. But every day that restlessness plagued him with visions of her impatience. She was trapped in a world she hated, counting down the long days with him, but alone and a long way away. The thought left him cold. Every day he feared her impulsiveness would drive her from the safety he had wanted for her.

Lenka brushed her hair back with a gory forearm, drawing his attention. He said, "My mother is much better now. You should look to your own needs, and go home to your father's house."

She didn't look up but paused in her gut raking. "She'll need me here a while yet."

"I think she's relying on you being here. She's poorly because she knows you will stay. If she has to get up and get on with life she will be better for it."

"No. I don't mind helping." She moved a lobe of liver, straightening it neatly in the tray. "Your father's death went hard on her."

"But it's not your place. I'm here now, and I can care for her."

"Shhht." She laughed, as if the idea was ludicrous. "I like to have a man to care for."

"I told you. I will be bringing a wife home, soon."

The smile dropped from her lips and she went back to her work, stripping the contents from the intestines in silence.

It was tempting to let the silence grow. He had tried once to discuss Freya with his mother, but she had refused to hear him, refused to respond. She liked the idea of Lenka for his bride. She may have carried that hope with her for years, and she would not discard it easily.

He'd carried his hope just as long. Recalling her face was as easy as closing his eyes and letting her light fill his mind. Always smiling, through snow and ice or blistering summers when they stood on mountains too close to the sun.

Dawn was always restless. Afternoons were heavy with fatigue, whether it came from walking or fighting, or boredom from the lack of both. But dawn was always restless.

The sun brought, every morning, a tightly coiled sense of urgency that burned in his stomach. There was uncertainty for what the day would bring, and with it, the need to leap up and begin. And always there was frustration at the ball that lay curled in her cloak. Over rocks or in tussocks of grass, it never seemed to matter to Freya where she slept, as long as she could go on sleeping.

The sky was silver and plumes of frost leapt from his lips on every breath. A grand, heavy silence weighed on everything around them, broken only by her snores. He nudged her again. "Freya, wake up. Time to move."

At the fire, he worked to raise a flame without too much smoke. Around the camp, others were stirring. Sixteen men, most he'd known for a season or more; some were so new their leather squeaked when they moved.

An arrow hit stone and skidded past his feet, the first in a hail of shafts, and all across the camp calls went up. Most were an alarm, some were cries of pain. He bolted toward his

shield and sword, crouched under a dense knapsack of supplies. Before he'd cleared half the distance, his partner was beside him with his shield held up and their sword belts dragged between them. Together they gained refuge in the rocks and ice-tipped bushes.

"You're awake." Dragan peered through the half-light to the rock piles further up the slope. They were cover, not a lot, but that was where the archers hid.

"You started without me." She was grinning.

"Four or five of them," he guessed aloud, but Freya paid no heed to the archers or their place.

Her attention was divided between the half-light of the downhill slope where the next threat would likely emerge and a trio of their own men, unarmed and huddled in a clump of spiny gorse. Dragan stood, spinning his heavy pavise through the air like a monumental discus so it skidded over the gravel at their feet. He took her lighter shield as she handed it up, and holding it above their heads, he covered her when she dashed to a cache of weapons and quickly threw them toward the trapped soldiers.

As they took up arms, sheltered from the arrows above by the heavy leather-bound planks of Dragan's shield, they stood to face a rush of infantry. Attackers burst from the tree cover and swarmed over the camp like a torrent of blood-hungry ants. At his side, Freya clamped her teeth into the stubby haft of a dirk, watched for the deadly rain from above to cease, and moved into the fray with her sword drawn and ready.

There was no time and no need to speak. Wherever he moved his proficient steel, through a mass of sweat and muscle, she was beside or behind him. Fast; a blur of pale skin and leather. They had only a moment to dent the number of infantrymen before the archers from above could muster on the field in support, and Dragan slashed wildly to injure, maim and slow. Death could be left to his partner.

It was in those first few moments that a fight was won or lost. For all their strength and skill, no battle could last past the endurance of men who were cold and exposed, underfed, and weighed down by the only protection they could carry. And so those moments gushed with blood. It sprayed in wild jets across the field; it muddied sandy ground and made the boulders slick under his feet.

Where frost was shrinking back from the rising sun, the heat of life flowed over his ankles and into his boots. Warm and thick and salty, it splashed into his open mouth as he gasped for breath, or sucked between gritted teeth on every bite of steel. And sweat ran over his skin in his body's vain attempt to cool and wash away the gory stain.

When the archers dropped down to meet them, they were still outnumbered but closing the gap. In their wisdom, the powers trained young men as archers first; it gave them a season or two with a chance to survive. It held them back from the hand to hand combat while they learned the face of warfare. And when they did run in, it sent tender boys into a charnel house.

They were fresh and wielding razor sharp blades; they were fair game.

Muscles in his back and shoulders burned, but adrenaline fortified the hot blood; his ears caught every thump and grind. The morning light was magnified, shining on crisp clear movement; on clean gashes and bone chips; on faces known and unknown enemies.

And when the frenzied movement finally stopped, when there was no one else swinging

swords or axes, air rushed into his chest like a vast wheezing bellows and he flashed an assessment over the field.

They had survived.

Freya was doubled over, her legs were straight but she hung head down, gasping for air. The hands on her thighs were shaking like she was gripped by a fever and she coughed and spat.

“You okay?”

“I need a pee.”

He grinned and nodded. “Of course.”

The scene was grim and his smile set hard for a moment before it twitched and fell from his cheeks. Four others stood. Two of theirs lay injured.

Every other body lying in mud was dead. Even if they continued to breathe, they were dead men. There was never a time they'd brought in prisoners. To lose your feet here was to die, sooner or later. Freya straightened, arched her back and made the same observations he had. She wiped a hand down her face, breathed the stench deep, and kicked herself into action.

Somewhere in the mess were the two small blades she always carried. Used together in one quick action, their razor sharp edges crossed each other just under the chin, and the light in a man's eyes dimmed and faded. She was swift, even gentle. And she always spoke to the man at her feet. Dragan had never asked what she said to them.

“Back to base?” he asked.

She nodded. Two others nodded. It was decided. They'd carry their wounded back to the camp they'd left the night before last.

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INTENTIONS.

Torches lit the parade ground, flaring in greens and blues by some strange alchemy, revealing the ranks of young soldiers filing by. Line after line moved below, stiff with pride and driven by the staccato rhythm of the drums. A blur of faces, mostly male, turned up in unison as they passed, their anxiety over this once in a lifetime formality made obvious by their jerking step.

A small corps of females marched to one side, their faces shining less with awe and more with native distrust. They looked harder than Freya remembered having been, as if they had already seen as much hell as they needed. She appraised them all from where she stood, at the rear of the dais, in a group positioned well back behind the speakers. They were beautiful. Strong and able, the best of the empire: its hope and its future.

In alcoves formed under the citadel's arched buttresses, musicians drowned all thought with soaring chords and resounding drums. Wide, gilt-edged standards, one for each of the seven noble families, dropped full length from battlements so high above they blurred into the shadows of the night sky. All together, the sound and the light and the lines of young men,

still at last and ready on command to deliver a single clenched fist cry, drew a picture of an empire which could never fail while blood remained to be shed in its name. The cheer rang out and raised arms snapped down to their sides, as silence as pure as patriotism filled the grounds from wall to distant wall.

“Wonderful.” The visiting dignitary, a tall woman trailing layers of filmy fabric, raised a fair hand and waved in the general direction of the field. She was breathless and not saying more, but the Commandant, who Freya could not remember ever having seen in the flesh, stepped up to the podium to deliver his speech. His volume matched the passion of his troops, his fist pumping the air in violent punctuation, his finger marking points of accusation, ready to shame and damn any thought of dissent or cowardice. He did not need to speak for long; his voice strained hoarse, but his message was known by rote by every child of the empire. He put into words all the anger they knew and turned it into a cry for glory. It was enough for the recruits. They raised another, even greater cheer.

When at last her party filed from the balcony into the ballroom in order of importance, Freya waited, smiling. It was theatre and she was feeling buoyant. Better than she'd felt for a long time.

She took her turn, passing by the officers in their gleaming brass and shining leather, nodding and hand shaking, as the soldiers below and behind them filled the massive, echoing hall. The Commandant was in position beside his willowy visitor, and he took Freya's hand to pull her into place as he introduced her. “This is the one-time warrior we spoke of, Grevinde. Sadly, she has chosen to retire from the field.”

“Ah.” The woman was impressed, but spoke to her companion, not to Freya. “I see. But do the women here all dress as men? Should she have a dress, some corsetry, a smock, at least?”

“They are all men, here, Ma'am. Male or female, their role is the same. All soldiers are men. Katarin, Grevinde of Ludz-Obila Province, here is Freya Oernen, with us tonight safe and warm and not on the front lines fighting for our empire.”

Freya took the slim hand in hers, bowing slightly as she said, “Here indeed, Ma'am; hiding here, where all the officers hide.” She smiled broadly and stepped back, opening her free hand to extend her slur to every man standing in the line. The grevinde, unsure if this was a gruff form of military humour or a great insult to her hosts, smiled tentatively and nodded.

The Commandant was not unsure, and the men who stood nearby were not unsure. Icy stares rounded on her from both sides and conversation along the line suddenly quieted. Behind them, the hall was filling and Freya's excitement grew as the numbers swelled.

Every new spectator raised the stakes. Her superior had whitened and lost all expression, his eyes were sharply focused and cold, but the urge to laugh in the face of his fury beat in her chest. Her blood was already hot, her senses piqued, her desire for battle raging.

“I am not here by choice, Ma'am,” she said, too loudly for the shrill acoustics of the room. Pulling her tunic open at the throat, and pushing back the strapping of her breastplate, Freya bared the savage purple and silver scar that gouged her shoulder. She turned her head, craning her neck away to expose as much of her torn flesh as she could, to as many watchers

as possible. "If I could take a sword right now, I would." Her smile burned brighter at the thought. "But these are our superiors, Ma'am, as you know, more and greater than we who go to fight and die for our homeland. Divinely decreed. They know best."

"More and greater, indeed." From behind, Paske grabbed the fabric of her tunic and dragged it roughly into place, laughing to break the mood as he leaned on her in subtle warning and turned her up toward the waiting tables. "But we all have our place in the defence of our empire, Ma'am." Leaving an arm around her in a gesture of camaraderie, he hurried Freya up the line.

"You are here as an honoured guest, Oernen. Would you let your blood betray you?"

"It's only blood, it can't speak for itself. If it could..." At the top of the line, he turned sharply to the right, propelling them both from the ballroom, down the stairs and out into the chilled night air. Still holding her too tight, he shoved until the gravel crunched under their boots as they crossed the parade ground.

"Remember you are not here by any order, save your own request to be kept from the front." He stopped their headlong rush suddenly as they moved into shadows. "You are an embarrassment here, to us and to yourself. You would not be on display tonight if the grevinde herself had not asked about..."

"I made no request to be here. You remember my request for discharge."

"You are not entitled to a discharge," he spat. "You're entitled to nothing; you can't even justify the price of your food here. What little you contributed to our cartographers you negated with your little act of vandalism. There is no good place for you."

"I could teach." Dragan's logic still argued for her when shame and rage filled her chest with burning and made her words too small to defy him. If she hated it, if it was the very argument that had left her pinned against the cold stone might of the citadel, it was still the only defence she could make. All her life she'd been nothing, no one, worthless. Here she had made herself something great, and her skills had value, she knew it.

"No you can't, you're broken. Would you teach the young ones what not to do? Teach them how to fall under an enemy sword? It would be better for us all if you were never seen by our young men. If you were the hero we pretend, you would not be here at all, you'd be out there."

Tears of shame were rising and she hated those, too. Her hand moved to her shoulder, not in remembrance of her wound, but feeling instinctively for a sword that was not there. Her throat was dry and hollow; the only answer she wanted to make was in steel. Even a small knife would have opened him wide enough.

"What of all the years I fought?" she croaked. "I've dedicated my life to the defence of this empire."

"And you were fed and clothed and kept for your trouble. When you needed care, physicians healed you. Now you shirk your simple duty in the hope of gold to relieve the poverty of your contemptible old age. And for what? You'll skive off into the muck that spawned you, to riot and fornicate and breed more of your despicable ilk. You are filth, born of filth. That you are left to breathe at all is a crime."

For all his self-assurance, he was slower than he should have been. The fist that snapped up under his jaw came hard, whipping his head back and forcing a backward step. Before he

had recovered enough to defend, a shove against his armoured chest took him back again. But the second punch was too slow and he turned his face in time to let it glance across bone.

Following her momentum, he caught her fist and turned it up behind her back. “Even the young men,” he jerked it higher, “who should laud your glories laugh at you.” He spat to the side and wiped a hand over his mouth.

“They laugh at a drudge scrubbing the floor; they don't know who I am, who I was.”

“What you were.”

“They'll know now, though, won't they?”

Shifting his weight, he pushed her hard against stone of the wall. “If you cannot appreciate the honour of being raised up among us, then at least you won't embarrass us any further.” Standing too close, his hot breath washed down her cheek and over her neck and shoulder. The sharp angles of segmented leather on his hip and thigh pressed against her back, and the rough stone grazed her cheek.

With one arm locked behind her, and the other pinned high above her head, she tried to turn her face enough to see him clearly. In the shadows, his pupils were wide and dark, his nostrils flaring over a sneer of disgust. But there was another threat trembling in the cheek that brushed hers. The heat of a furnace reached from his body and spread down her back where he pressed his weight against her. A growl vibrated from his throat, harsh with stifled emotion. “I should take your miserable life myself.”

“If you gave me a sword you could try.” Her arm burned; so did her eyes.

“I've bettered you once before tonight. Twice now.” He held her there for long moments, breathing hard, studying her, close. Behind his eyes, his mind was racing, but his distraction did not affect the strength of his hold. She stood still, refusing him the satisfaction of a struggle.

At last he stepped back enough for Freya to draw breath, and said, “Yes, I'll give you a sword. I'll have you out those gates tomorrow at dawn and I will make certain you do not come back.”

Bowls had been piled high with liver and onions and mashed turnips, more than any man could eat at a sitting, and yet it was set before him. Dragan ate, and as he ate, he drank the sweet cider and fortified wines he'd traded from Lenka's father for fresh meat and offal.

When his plate emptied, she stood nearby to refill it. She sat, as was her custom, slightly behind him near to the fire, but while he ate she rarely took her seat. The table was a man's domain. And his mug was never empty.

It had been a good day. The stone hedges were done, the mutton butchered, and Lenka had stoked the smokehouse fire around stones all day, so he returned to the steaming comfort of a sauna and bath. Now with food and wine, he was more relaxed than he had been for months. Maybe years.

He had intended to deal with her presence tonight. He had intended to bring his mother from her bed and face them both with his decision. But his best intentions had sighed away with the steam. They'd faded as the warm glow of cider loosened the clench of his shoulders

and carried the worries that twisted his gut to a dim distance.

As he pissed a torrent against the hillside, watching the steam rise into the darkness, he decided; tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with it all again. Fresh linen covered the straw of his mattress, and furs were piled in soft warmth that drew him down into dreams almost as soon as he lay down upon them. It had been a good day.

As the old woman sopped her crusts into the thick sauce, Lenka sat watching. Her hands twisted nervously in her lap and too often she smoothed the rough wool of her skirts down her thighs as she waited.

“Don’t you lose heart now, girl.” Goda took her cup of cider in age-weakened hands, her fingers thick and twisted. “There’s no more to this than’s natural. You’ve seen the bulls, the boars and the rams. It’s spring and all of life is calling to life. You don’t lose heart.”

“No.” Lenka didn’t want to lose heart. Her breath was short, struggling against her heartbeat in shallow gasps that made her mouth go dry. She sipped her wine, too.

“You’ve no ring on your hand, but that’s of no mind. That’ll come.”

“Yes.” She’d heard this all before. Women followed after a ring on their finger, but bulls were led by a nose ring and for men, the ring was.... Her breath failed her again, and her head went light.

“Drink this. Come, child; you’re not growing younger. I know you’ve got no better course planned and no one else to bind to.”

It was true, and in the light of day, she knew this was a good plan. It was right. She would have what she wanted most: the boy she had wanted since she was a small girl. If Dragan was just a little more drunk, or a little less willing than she would have hoped, it was nothing time and care would not correct. He was no drunker than her father when he scabbled onto her mother in the night.

Goda fumbled with the fabric of her smock, then brought her hands up and patted them down onto the table. “You fetch a little grease from the mutton if you need it,” she said, then stood, holding herself upright on the table top as she limped slowly toward Lenka. “You rub a little here.” Her bent and swollen fingers patted Lenka’s lap, but her meaning was clear enough. “It will make it all a little easier for you.”

“Yes.”

“You need to help nature sometimes. You want to be rounding with child, and soon.” She touched Lenka’s cheek and kissed her gently on the top of the head as she shuffled toward her own rough pallet. “But remember, you mustn’t sleep.”

“Mother.” Lenka caught her hand. “What if he won’t have me? What if he sends me away as he says? What will...?”

“Hush girl. You’ll get yourself all tense. While this roof is over my head, he’ll not send you away. Now, you clean away these leavings before you go to him. He can’t know I’ve been up, yet. There’ll be time enough for that once you’re bound.”

“Yes.” There was nothing for it. This was how her life would be, and there were worse lives. As Goda lay down into the shadows, pulling her blankets up tight around her face and turning to the wall, Lenka stood and began to gather the evidence of her meal.

Behind her, Dragan snored softly, unaware of the cool night air on his bare shoulders. She stood with her mug trembling in her fingers and watched his breathing, deep and regular.

There was little to keep her; her chores had all been done before nightfall as her fears drove her hands to work more quickly.

She rubbed the dimpled knuckles of her hand and the backs of her fingers where no iron band marked her right to protection. If her father was enraged, his anger would soon be settled. He had been the one to send her here when he knew Dragan was returning from the war. Dragan worked hard and her father was old. When he died his orchard would be cared for, his wealth saved, and his place on the river bank marked for generations to come; that was what mattered most to him.

There was no one in this world of war and hardship who would not understand her actions. No one would condemn her, not if they put themselves in her place. She lifted her mug of cider and drank down a deep draught, closing her eyes and trying to settle her breathing.

She would be happy. He was as much as she needed, she knew that was true. These last months, while she'd cared for his needs and fussed over his house had been happy times. She liked to be with him and when she watched him work, watched the hard muscle of his chest and the tight line of his belly, her blood warmed.

As it warmed now, standing by the lamp watching him sleep.

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PROMISES.

Lenka picked the lamp from the table and carried it to where he lay.

The light chased shadows from his skin, tanned to golden brown in the warmth of spring sunshine. His hair was thick, spreading across her clean linen, sun-blond with dark auburn curls that coiled into ringlets behind his ears. It took all her courage to reach, but she slipped her fingers into the silky mass of it, combing it gently from his temple.

Her heart beat so loud she was sure he would hear it. It thumped at the base of her throat making it hard to breathe, hard to swallow, hard to think. The shake in her hands ran from her fingertips, into her elbows, and up to quake in her jaw. Her teeth clattered as if she was naked in the snow, but there was no chill on her skin. It burned.

Her lips burned, too, and she slipped the tip of her tongue between them, wetting them, wishing for another sip of cider. The lamp rattled in her hand, and the flame flashed and flared, sending a shock of guilt and shame through her. Quickly, she bent to place it onto the floor.

She had moved so very near. The warm smell of his skin rose to her, and she bit onto her bottom lip as she moved her face closer to him. Holding her breath, feeling her chest constricting in pure terror, she leaned and pressed her lips gently onto the taut skin of his side.

He twitched at the touch and she jumped back, tears welling in her eyes. If only he would wake and reach for her. If only he would hold out his arms to her, and smile and ask her to come to him.

That would come, she promised herself. That day would come. For now, it was enough

that she should make this move for them both, knowing he would follow once she set her path to lead.

Grimly she leaned to the lamp and puffed out the flame. The night went dark, leaving only the faintest glow from the hearth coals. As tears rolled down her cheek, she was thankful for the darkness. It would help to hide her shame; the shame of this brazen act, and the shame of how much she ached for it.

If only he would wake.

She unbuckled the wide belt at her waist, freeing her shawl and loosening her heavy skirts. She folded her shawl over her arms and set it onto the table. Her skirts were gathered along a cord and she slipped the bow easily, allowing the thick wool to slide down the length of her legs, over the soft linen of her underslip.

Letting her held breath escape in a long slow sigh, she began to unlace her bodice. Every day of her life she had dressed and undressed, but tonight her fingers fumbled with the ribbons, bunching them into knots that slipped and caught and slipped again, until the firm hold of her basque released with sudden ease and freed her heavy breasts.

Under the loose slip, her nipples ached and she rubbed a hand roughly across them, groaning at their tenderness and the sharp stab of pleasure that grew from the touch. Without the comfort of her clothes, the cool night air touched her skin and she shivered. Carefully, she lifted the fur that draped across Dragan's hips, and pulled it around her own arms. Again he stirred, lifting his shoulder, and she pushed as carefully as she could, encouraging him to roll onto his back.

His chest was uncovered, dark against the sheet, and her fingertips trailed down over the flat muscle. Her breath was too short, her head was light and she gasped, her fingers spreading over the silk of his skin, brushing the tight puckered bead of his nipple. How often in the daylight had she wished for the courage to reach out and touch him? Now, here he lay, unaware, and her courage was still barely enough to sustain her.

There were two laces, one at each hip that held the front of his breeches closed. She tugged each one gently until it came free.

Her shaky legs buckled, dropping her sharply to the floor and she huddled there on her knees, her forehead resting onto the pallet beside him as she sobbed silently, caught between terror and growing desire. Clutching the furs tight at her shoulders, she closed her eyes and moved closer.

She had never seen a bull or ram asleep. Tears slid over his skin as she pressed her face into the warmth of his belly. Her lips moved. Heat was growing in his flesh, and the smell of a man swelled inside her head, in her chest, and under her skin. It ran over her like a million invisible fingers, teasing nerves that cried out for his touch.

As Goda had promised, his body did not need his direction. Beside her cheek, his cock stirred itself to life. Groaning softly, she moved her shaking fingers up to stroke its length and felt it firm beneath her touch.

If only he would wake.

Sniffling back thick tears, she stood on weak knees and lifted her slip up to her waist, raised her leg across him to kneel on the bed, and positioned her hips over his. If she balked now at all, her strength and resolve would fail. With one hand clamped across her own

mouth, she did her best to guide him and slowly let her weight take her body down onto his.

For a moment Lenka was frozen by awkward vulnerability. Then tears and laughter, shock and burning pleasure burst together from her lips in a muffled cry as he filled her. Relief and terror flared in her blood and she raised herself, settling again as the rhythms of nature slowly overrode her fear.

From some far off fantasy Dragan responded, straightened his back, mumbling as he slipped his hands up her thighs. Gripping her hips, he moved in time, his head back, aware of pleasure and asking nothing more of his dreams.

In the darkness below her, his throat was exposed and she leaned to kiss him there, wanting to feel the hot blood pulsing under his skin. Heat was building deep inside her as she worked against him, and every movement stoked the flame like a bellows. Instinct was driving her hips harder and faster, and he moaned, grimacing and holding tighter to her as a sheen of sweat broke over his chest.

She caught his wrists bringing his hands up to cup her breasts, and the touch sent a jolt bucking through her. She needed to feel his mouth on hers even as she gasped for air she could not find. Again the muscles of her stomach jolted, and with it a bright bolt of light burst deep inside. Her eyes went wide and closed as she slumped down against him, and her strength seeped away on a sigh.

She lay forward in the dark silence panting, listening to his heartbeat and wishing she did not have to move. Goda had warned her not to sleep. She must move away, she was told; come to him again tomorrow, and again, as often as it was possible. All Goda hoped for was a child, and seed did not always take.

Better to be sure before she risked his anger. But the trembling in her flesh now was from joy and relief, not fear. She closed her eyes for a moment, with her cheek pressed onto his chest. Just for one moment.

* * * * *

Dragan woke in the darkness with soft warmth pressed against him and the sweet scent of cider wash rising from her hair. In that rare and comfortable silence, his first instinct was to pull her closer and drift in that warmth for a few moments longer. But the cock's crow stirred him again and sudden realizations rushed him awake.

He didn't need a second moment to know who it was there beside him, even before his movements startled her awake. Lenka drew herself away as if she feared he might hit her. She slipped from the bed, dressed still in her light undergarment and holding her arms across her chest as if the linen and shadows were not enough to hide her form. He couldn't make out the details of her face, but he didn't want to look at her anyway.

His mind raced, spinning through a rash of half formed thoughts that each brought with it a confusion of emotions. Anger first, and with it embarrassment and a sense of having been compromised. He was shocked by her recklessness, and at the same time, appalled by how calculated her actions had to have been.

In the darkness by the hearth, she sobbed quietly, shuffling her feet nervously in the fresh straw. "Please don't send me away, Dragan. You can't send me back to my father. Not

now.”

“I can,” he said with more force than he intended. “What have you done? Why?” He knew the why, or at least he recognized the pressures that were pushing her toward him. Her father, he guessed, would not be concerned. Not until she was sent back.

“Haven’t I been a help to you here? Haven’t you said that yourself? I can stay on now. I can look after your house and care for your mother. I’ll work. I can work beside you, you know. I don’t mind.”

Her desperation softened something in his gut that had been tight, but it only made his irritation stronger. “No, you can’t. I’ve told you, many times, I am going back to the citadel to get the woman I want for my wife.”

“There’s no need,” she pleaded. “I can be a wife to you, and helper. I’ll raise healthy babies, too, I promise.”

He threw back furs that had tangled around his ankles and sat, angrily tying the cords of his breeches together. There seemed no point in this discussion. All the time the sun was rising and he had chores that needed his attention. Frustration wailed in his chest; he wanted to yell at her to silence her pitiful appeals.

“Wait,” she begged. “I’ll bring up the fire.” Already she was bundling kindling onto the coals and fanning, on her knees and blowing into the flame to encourage it to burn. “I’ll warm some ale. I’ve got yesterday’s crusts and a broth to sop.” She stood too quickly, pulling a stool up for him and patting the tabletop. In the rising light she trembled like an apparition formed from pure terror.

“No, no it’s not that simple. You can’t stay here now and you must know that. Why would you do this to yourself?” He stood, meaning to walk to the door and away, but his feet carried him closer to where she stood.

“It’s spring, and soon I’ll be rounding with your child, Dragan. You won’t send away your child.” She moved closer, taking his wrists in her hands. “I can be all you’ll ever need, I promise. I promise you. I won’t ever refuse you. You won’t want for anything.

“And my father is wealthy, Dragan. His orchards would be yours. You could pay hired workers, just as he does, and you could sit in the hills as you’ve always done. And you could travel to the cities, to the markets, and wear fine sewn linen. I’ll stitch it for you. I can work fine embroidery.”

“Lenka, listen. I don’t want you for my wife. You’ll make someone very happy, I’m sure, but it won’t be me.”

“Who? Who will be my husband? Where will I go to look for such a creature, have you asked yourself?” She wiped angrily at tears. “There are no husbands. But if there were, if there was a line of men who came to my father to ask for me, I’d turn them all away.”

“Then you’d be a bigger fool than I thought. I am not the man for you, I have my own plans.” He started to turn away, annoyance sharpening his tongue.

But she had no intention of releasing her hold. “I’m not a fool, and I’ve never been a fool. If I seem foolish it’s only because I waited, year after year. When you still refused to see me, I moved us both toward the best of it, that’s all. I’m right, I am, and if you think on it a while you’ll see it, too.”

She had deluded herself, that was plain, but he had never noticed her waiting. It was

true, if he thought about it, she was often here when he'd returned home to work. She was his mother's close companion, but he had never considered her attentions were aimed at him.

"Please, see me now. Notice me here. I've wanted no one else but you since I was a little girl. While you were away at the war I stitched and mended your clothes, and I prepared all the things a bride would need for the day she was bound. I even wove this cloth." She dragged his attention to the pallet and the fine soft linen sheet he had slept on. "And I stitched little dresses for my babies. I never thought to do these things for any other man. Now I am not young anymore and I want to have those babies; your babies.

"I've always loved you. Did you never see me? Never?"

"No. Never." His answer was blunt but true and he hoped it would be an end to the conversation. His mouth was as dry as a witch's tit and he pushed past her taking up the jug of ale which stood on his table.

Her face broke into a mosaic of pain. Every line of her crumpled features was the mark of a deep hurt. He wouldn't have wished it for her, but he finished the ale in a gulp and turned again for the door and his work.

"Then look at me now." Desperate, she pushed the neckline of her underwear clumsily over her shoulders, dragging it down her arms. The way she stood, with her elbows pulled too tightly against her sides as the shift slipped to the floor, said she was mortified by her nakedness, here in the light of the morning's fire. But she stepped forward again, pressing her bare flesh against his chest and stretching up to bring her lips against his throat. She gripped his arms in clawed fingers and tried to pull him closer.

Dragan freed her hands and forced her to step back. "I won't change my mind. I don't want you for my wife. And now," he turned to walk out of his doorway, "get dressed and get out."

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TEARS.

Goda left her to cry for a long time. When she finally lifted her face from the bed, the sun was bright in the room. It glared off her white skin as if she was lit from within, and her embarrassment grew into a raging flush of heat as she remembered her nakedness. Glancing around with swollen eyes, she located the piles of her discarded clothing and swooped onto each piece, dressing as quickly as she could.

The old woman was sitting on her bed waiting patiently. "Better?" she asked. "Are you done with your weeping now?"

"Yes," Lenka lied. Weeping filled her up. It made her whole head feel waterlogged and dull and her heart as heavy as a stone. A lifetime of dreams had broken inside her and the pain was more than she could stand.

"You didn't wake and leave him as I told you. It would have been better if you had done as I planned. But he knows now, and he would have known sooner or later. That much is done and you have to decide what to do next."

Do? There was nothing to do. He had sent her away, knowing how she loved him he had sent her back to her father's house. He wanted another woman for his wife.

"Fetch me my morning ale and cook me some blood soup. Half the day is gone."

"Yes, Mother." The fire had died again, and she took some time to raise the heat. Now, these small tasks would no longer be hers and the thought almost brought fresh tears.

"Well? What will you say when he comes back in from the field? Or better, take him his meal as if nothing has changed and be silent. Let him work over his own indignation."

"He told me to leave. I've to go back home to my father as I feared."

"Rubbish, girl. I told you he won't send you anywhere while I live under this roof. Let him plan on other wives, he's only a man. There's only ever one queen bee in a hive and that is me. I won't have his street urchin warrior for a daughter." Goda spat at the floor and took the mug of ale from Lenka's hand. "How could he think I'd have such city dregs in my home, in my son's bed, raising filth for my grandbabies? It won't happen. Now, fetch my soup and help me dress while we plan on what you will do next."

* * * * *

Dragan walked into the house, his eyes cold and steely as he considered his mother, sitting on her high-backed chair by the fire, in her best market dress and bright shawl.

"Why am I not surprised?" he asked, but he didn't wait for an answer. "Your idea, was it? How many years have you dreamed of having Lenka as your child?"

"As many as you think, perhaps more. It shouldn't surprise you. I'm your mother and I have always wanted the best for you."

"So you pretended illness and misery so she would stay in my house?"

"In my house, and yes. Not altogether pretended, but I haven't been as poorly as you might have thought. I miss your father more every day. I loved him as dearly as my own flesh for forty years, and he would be here with me still if you'd come home when you should have."

"That's your argument? It's my fault my father died and so you should choose my wife? I won't have it, Mother."

"You will because you'll have no other choice. I won't have that gutter slime you dream of here under my roof. It is her fault your father died. Her fault you didn't return months before you did. Her fault you mope and waste away on the hills year after year, when you should have been starting a family and raising my grandchildren." She stood slowly, using Lenka's hand as a prop. In her bent old age she did not reach past the middle of his chest, and yet she used her stature to command her son as if he was a small child.

"You are the fool, boy. How long have you believed your war would end and you would bring that midden home to me? How long? Really, I want you to tell me. Because I want you to think carefully about how long it is you've loved her while she never loved you back."

Dragan's eyes went cold and his mouth formed a hard, tight line over his teeth. Lenka feared him then as she had not feared him before. The flare of anger in his features told her just how profoundly that judgment had wounded him. Hardly daring to look, she raised her face only just enough to watch his mouth as he answered.

“I am a fool, then, if that’s the case.” He strode to the table and seized the pot of ale, gulping away a bad taste. “But it’s not true. She’s no desperate farm girl, hovering over any man. She’s strong and you will learn to love her for it. Now, will Lenka leave here?” He turned his fierce glare on her and she wilted, wanting to sink back against the wall or to melt down into the floor at her feet.

“No. She will not,” his mother answered, her determination just as fierce.

“Then I’ll be the one to leave.” Already he was moving to the chest where his clothes were folded. As he spoke he began to throw small items he might need onto the table before them. “When I’m ready, I will bring my wife here to my home. Do you understand me? Both of you?”

“Yes,” Lenka squeaked.

“Good.” He glared at her contemptuously and she studied the floor as her cheeks caught fire. He was leaving and her tears had not yet even begun.

* * * * *

A horse.

Freya leaned into the hollow of its neck and shoulder, breathing deep the perfume of the gods themselves. The ride would be long, but it would be out among the mountains she knew.

The fortress of Aporta stood seventy miles to the north, on the western foothills of Eumidea, in the Delian mountain range. The road which connected the twin citadels was not well used, being so far to the east of the centres of commerce. The only travellers who needed roads out here were military supply wagons and an occasional clutch of officers who made the journey in rare and extreme circumstances.

So, four days on empty roads, in clean air, under open skies. With the familiar comfort of her sword and dirk, a horse, and simple orders to follow. Bliss. If this was the discipline Paske had marshalled against her, it was worth all she’d paid. Four days there, four days back, it was more than enough time to imagine pain for him, and the thought raised a smile.

New tears deep in the scar tissue made mounting more difficult, but once seated, she was free of weights too long hanging on her, choking her. Balconies leered from every wall, and an itch between her shoulders told her somewhere up there, he was watching. She refused to look. Turning the horse to the gate, she moved away from the ancient stonework and all it had become.

The pack she carried was sealed and she had no idea what it might contain. There would be nights at camp with nothing better to do than satisfy such curiosities. It could wait.

* * * * *

From his window, standing back so dawn shadows covered his form, Paske watched her readying to leave. He had made a gift for her of all the parchments she had ruined, dried by the fire and gathered into a heavy roll. He had even tied them, extravagantly winding reams of military ribbon in scarlet and black firmly around the shaft of the scroll, sealing it deliberately with his own blood-dark signet. So official; so authoritative. He knew she would

never resist the urge to judge the importance of what she carried.

He studied the sky's growing light and grinned. By late afternoon she would be nearing Galla Mere. He knew it well. No traveller who would be on the road for days would pass such a perfect campsite. A chuckle rattled up from his chest. Yes, he knew the road well. He had a few hours yet to ready himself for the journey.

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Well before evening, the shadow of the pines stole the sun's warmth, leaving the road cold and pale as it wound between dense forests and the impatient rise of the ranges. The road picked a careful line between stone and wood, and even the water that fell in rain and snow was hemmed in, trapped in narrow gullies where rock falls had halted its escape.

Around a low rise, as she rose above the crowding trees, a wide mere opened to view lipped on three sides by alpine meadow, rich and green. It was a scene of pure beauty, and somewhere deep inside her a small recognition of the fact formed, but first and foremost she weighed the convenience of flat open ground and fresh water, against the threat of exposure.

Past the verdant paddock, scattered all over with yellow field daisies and fist-sized gibbers, the far bank was rocky and part covered by the encroaching tree line. She looked up at the sky; there would be good light for a few hours yet. She had passed no one on the road all day; not a soul. Apart from a line of goat tracks disappearing into the woods, she had seen no evidence of movement anywhere along the journey. Still, life had taught her well enough that it was those you did not see who were most a threat.

Leaning forward, easing her bruised bottom, she considered the aches that came from so long away from a saddle, and with that last consideration she moved the horse down the slope and angled off toward tree cover on the far side.

In the last hours of light, she gathered a stock of dry, dead wood, best for a hot, smokeless fire. She dug the fire pit under the lee of two large boulders so the light and heat would be deflected down to her small sleeping place, preserving for her the boon and disguising the flame from all sides. Then, she stripped and waded into the cold, clear water to bathe.

Her horse had grazed while she'd moved around, then she'd tethered him well back into the tree line. While she bathed she scanned the open sides of the lake, up toward the road. From where she swam her small campsite was invisible, and she was pleased with her efforts. But it was not water she could laze in long, the cold ate into her muscle chilling her to the core, and she soon moved back to her fire.

As she chewed the drying bread of her road rations, she weighed the pack she had been ordered to deliver. It was long but not heavy, and she shook it. It rattled with a solid thud. Resting it between her knees, she worked quickly to unbuckle the line of straps that held it secure and removed a squat leather cylinder. Again she shook it. Documents? She twisted the tight fitting lid and slipped it off, emptying the contents onto her lap. A roll of parchments, bound by official ribbons. Sealed. And bloodstained? Buckled and stained by...?

From where he stood deeper in the forest, her horse cried out a long welcoming whinny. Darkness was settling fast and she crouched forward, turning to peer over boulders and past

the mere at the meadow and the road above. She could see nothing, no movement. Then an answer came from high in the clearing, the loud reciprocation of another mount.

When she picked out the movement of the horse, she watched as it followed shadows down from the road, tearing sheaves of sweet green grass as it sauntered toward the waterline. Riderless. It raised its head, turning sharp ears toward the place her horse was tied, and called again. Riderless, but saddled; it had thrown a man and wandered alone; or someone had cursed the broken silence and opted for the concealment of the ground and the cover of darkness.

Freya silently took up her sword and moved back into the trees, away from the fire to higher ground, and waited. For long, cold ages nothing happened. She shifted her weight quietly, easing the aching cramps of her hips and thighs. She wriggled toes buried deep in her boots and flexed and extended her fingers. When a man stepped into the light of her fire, she was ready.

Deep in her throat she groaned; if only she had carried her quiver. She'd have slipped her first bolts through his thighs; first one, then the other. Her next, perhaps through his shoulder as he tried to flee. Then, one from close, from where he could see her eyes; she would loose one through his neck. Such were dreams of vengeance when he wore the face and carried the weight of all her humiliations. But she had no quiver.

Instead she moved with expert care across the distance between them, closing on him from behind, her sword drawn.

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CURIOSITY.

A slight height difference would be his only advantage, and Freya stood back from the firelight considering the best way to negate it. His back was protected by stylized armour, his shoulders weighed by brass and scale, and long straps of laminated leather dropped from his waist below the cuirass and cincture. Under that, he wore the ceremonial kilt of his rank, suede breeches and knee boots. That left her clear access to his head, neck and bare forearms.

One wide swing to the back of the neck would resolve many of her grievances in one blow, but there remained the temptation to look him in the eyes, to let him see her victory. This was her home ground; here she held the rank of experience and plain bloody-mindedness.

She could hold the point at the base of his skull; any movement, any suggestion of resistance, and she could end him like dumping a sack. But as she stepped forward into the arc of light, he dropped before her into a squat, his attention on the scroll of stained papers. Freya grinned. It was all she could do to keep from laughing aloud.

As the tip of her blade pressed the softness under his ear, she said, "Well, sir. Have you come to keep your promises?"

He could not hide the fright that jolted through him, but he let it pass as he dropped his weight from his toes to his knees. He raised both hands to the sides, one still holding the

scroll, the other held open, palm up, in a gesture of sincerity. “Promises?” He began to turn toward her but froze as the sharp sword tip drew blood. “There was more to your package. I rode to catch up with you, that’s all. No sense in leaving half the dispatch behind.”

“I don’t even pretend to believe that.” A hot burst of light rushed her pulse. It flashed through her body, tingling in every extremity, tightening threads of pleasure in her breasts and belly.

“It’s true. Why else would I be here?” He moved his free hand toward the blade, and she jabbed it again into the soft tissue.

There was such a surge of pleasure in the power she had taken back. It throbbed hot at her groin and squeezed shallow breaths out behind her words. They came hot and husky from her mouth, and she licked at the dryness they left on her lips. “You followed me. You said you would make sure I didn’t come back and here you are to keep your promise.” She wanted him to turn, wanted to see his fear while he knelt in the dust before her. He could dress his words in bravado, but she wanted to see her certainty reflected in his eyes. “Yes, you followed, because I’ve earned my place here; I have a respect from men that you can’t take away. And you will never know what that’s like, never, not as long as you live, and it galls you.”

She took two short steps to the side, sacrificing a little of the immediacy of her threat as the point of the sword came out of his flesh. “For all the status of your birth you were sent to rot in the stone of the citadel, writing your words about wars you never see. I wonder how high you were born,” she laughed, “to hate my kind so much.” Two more steps and she stood beside the fire, looking down into the cold clarity of his contempt.

He wore a hard smile, white under the shadows on his skin.

“Freya.” He moved his hands in small gestures of appeal. “This is foolishness; you’ve been too long in the barracks, too long thinking about the choices you made.” The heavy scroll moved as an extension of his arm, and he held her attention with the frank ice of his stare. “You make these arguments, but in the end you only speak to convince yourself. Or try to. The only worth you have, all you could ever have, was afforded to you by your valour on the field. As soon as you sacrificed that you surrendered any right you had to admiration or respect. You know it. I know it. To say differently is to lie to us both.”

Freya began to deny. She turned her head and he smashed the scroll out hard against her sword, pushing it clear of his throat and rising in a fluid movement to stand over her. Faster than thought, her reflex spun her into a squat that ducked his backswing and brought her sword, fully extended, to slash against his left thigh.

Studded straps broke the momentum of the blow but did not keep the blade from biting into muscle. Blood welled up through layers of cloth and hide and he howled in rage as he clasped his hands over the wound. No sooner had the sword bitten in, she pulled back, slicing as she reversed her swing and raised the sword, turning full circle to bring it back against his opposite side, this time meeting the scale clad flesh of his right arm.

The sword met discs of steel but the blow drove him back to his knees, and Freya shifted her weight, leaning back as she withdrew her blade and snapped a foot up under his chin, knocking him unconscious before he hit the ground.

* * * * *

Paske opened his eyes at first to pain, but slowly surprise and suspicion followed. Despite his wounds, the fact that he was still alive seemed more miraculous the longer he considered it. Darkness clung in close. He could see no more than the ghost of trees in weak firelight, light that came from behind him. His mouth was thick and dry, gagged by a foul cloth and clotted with the blood of his bitten tongue.

An attempt to move proved unsuccessful. He was lying on his right side with his knees bent, the laceration on his upper arm throbbing against the rocky ground. His wrists and ankles were bound behind him, caught together by thonging. But stillness might have been his best course. There was no possible way Freya could allow him to live. She had no choice. And his only choice was to remain alive until he had the chance to kill her.

That understanding had to be assumed.

It didn't trouble him.

Freya hauled on his shoulder, dragging upward with her left hand. "Bend," she ordered, and he struggled to pull his legs up closer to his chest so he could tilt sideways and onto his knees. His wrists twisted painfully at his heels, but with rough support he came half-upright. The movement caused a sucking tear along his thigh wound as it reopened and a new ooze of blood seeped up through his uniform.

Past the fire, both the horses stood, saddled. The camp was clear except for an untidy pile of parchments thrown over stones and forest mulch. Unrolled scrolls all stained with ink. Freya stood beside them, smiling. She sipped from a flask, making his throat contract involuntarily with the hope of moisture. "There's nothing in your saddle pack."

He shrugged, there was no other answer.

"And this," she moved her hand across the pile and sipped again, "is the urgent dispatch I am carrying to Aporta. Will we start again?"

He nodded, grunting into his gag to demonstrate the impossibility of his situation. He wanted his mouth free. He knew how to cut this beast; he knew how strip it of its thickest skin and leave it bleeding, and he didn't need a blade. He knew the claustrophobic grip of nausea, her frustration at being trapped under the weight of bitter fates. And he knew how to gouge at her deepest pain, how to shred what was left of her courage and pride. He knew her wounds intimately. They were the same as his own.

"No. I won't take that off, you understand. You can nod. I'll make it simple for you."

Damn. He looked toward the pile of scrolls. He needed to speak. He coughed and choked on thickness and lack of moisture. Freya waited.

"You resent the fame of our war heroes and you fester over the fact that even though we are born in the lowest of castes, we are responsible for the success of everyone in the empire. Without us, there would be no nobles, no artisans, no merchants. You spit on us all, but without us, there would be no empire. You followed me because you resent my success." She sipped her flask loudly, deliberately, and smiled at him. "Am I right?" She raised her eyebrows, waiting for his nod of admission.

Gagging again, with bile burning up from his gut as his dry swollen tongue triggered his reflex, he shook his head and motioned toward the parchments. She had to let him speak.

Freya dropped to a squat, her face inches from his. “Am I right?” she repeated.

Again he shook his head. The line that would save or damn him was fine and he had no way to move her across it. But he could see the fever in her eyes, the wide dark pupils, the shallow breath, the flush of heat across her cheeks. She had the upper hand and he could damn near smell the wet want on her. That was an ache he knew, too, and if he survived he would see that she never imagined herself above a man again. He would make certain of it.

He dropped his face, closed his eyes, let his shoulders sag over a sigh. He waited just long enough, then looked up at her, hopeless, his eyes pleading. Once more he nodded toward the pile.

If it had been possible a smile might have twitched over his lips, but the gag pulled hard on his aching jaw. Freya stood, walked toward the scrolls, and nudged them with her foot. She couldn't be certain there was no more to learn and it burned her. It burned and he wanted that fire stoked. She looked back at him, doubtful; the need to know what his secrets were was going to override her good sense. Curiosity, my dearest Oernen. Curiosity will kill you.

“There's nothing in these. Nothing. You sent them just to goad me, to make sure I knew the dispatch was a waste of my time.” She turned back. “These were just a reason to get me out the gates, so you could follow.”

An involuntary rush of bile burned his throat, forcing tears up into his eyes. Inwardly he cursed. By all the blind and useless gods, he would see her choke. Hatred churned deep in his chest, hardening around his lungs and making every breath a rasping hell. She would pay in blood for this pain and humiliation. Mastering every fiery nerve, he schooled his face to a calm appeal and willed her to remove the choking gag.

He watched her watching her own foot as she lifted the ragged parchment, studying its edge. How she must ache at her own illiterate stupidity. Inwardly he smiled.

Trying to speak made him choke again, but he forced himself to go on. Nodding, vehement now, he showed her in any way he could the importance of letting him voice his thoughts. Words. They had never failed him. They were all he had ever had.

“All right. All right.” She slipped a knife no bigger than an arrow head up between his cheek and the gag and ripped it free. “There. What's in the papers?”

The cloth was gone, but his parched mouth was no less stopped. “Water,” he rasped, waiting for her impatience to overwhelm her sense of mastery. When she held the flask to his lips he drank, holding a wide mouthful, puffing his cheeks with the merciful liquid. His jaw clicked, jolting a loud spike of pain into his eardrum and he stifled a cry.

From now, he reassured himself, from now he could speak. She didn't have to like what he had to say, she only needed to think he was worth more alive than dead. The pendulum was swinging and from now every moment brought the weight of power back toward the centre. Soon enough he would feel the heat of it in his own blood and she would rue the day she ever raised her hand against him. He would take away the only thing she had. He would take away her pride in her place.

“My work,” he managed at last. “A month of my work. Do you know what it is I do? What all of the administrative officers do?”

Behind her eyes the stock standard answers rushed, but she was obviously smart enough to guess he was not going to tell her they organized the catering and marshalled their troops

for action. When she'd been silent long enough, he sighed again. "More water."

Speech was painful, but he was riding a wave of adrenaline now as the field levelled beneath him. "I write stories, Freya. Every month I take reports from the ranks, or if needs be, I make them up. I file my work with a whole range of other reports, from other officers, on other subjects, and collectively they go back to the cities to be disseminated to the masses."

He watched her struggle with possibilities. The firelight was fractious and made it hard to grasp clear and certain detail, but he could see the seeds of a subtle fear beginning to sprout. Perhaps this was something, a suspicion or a nightmare, she had considered before. Perhaps she was unwilling to consider some of the possibilities even now. She shook her head. "You embellish our battles? You make them seem more glorious?"

"No Freya." He grinned. "We make up the war."

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LIES.

The night was still full-dark and close to moonless, and Freya needed light to read his lies. Striding away from him into the forest, she paced out a circle, her fingers tapping a stiff tattoo on the handle of her small flint knife. She had stifled her first impulse: to call him a liar and cut his throat. Now she curbed the anger that carried her off on useless tangents and returned to her pile of firewood. She was careless in her selection, throwing an armload of smaller branches and twigs into the fire pit and crouching to stir them into a blaze. When it brightened even the branches high above, she moved back to where he knelt.

"Liar," she said, forcing more confidence into her tone than she felt. What does any condemned man do when he sees the gallows-fall? He lies. He lets the words rush over his tongue in any order they please. Any desperate fool will do the same.

His grin was full of contemptuous conceit, and she wanted to wipe it from his face. "This is no *made up* war. I've seen it, day in, day out. I've lived it. I know the blood and the cold and the hard rocky strain of it. No one has made up any part of it. It is real, as real as you and I."

"Don't mistake hand to hand combat for war. Sending men to kill and die is not a war. It is..." He paused, looking to the gods above for inspiration or confirmation. "Maintaining the natural order." The laugh he tried caught in the rawness of his throat and he coughed. "I can read; I have access to a hundred years of history. How far do you think the front has moved in all those years?"

It was not far, Freya knew that. Everyone who moved on the frontlines season after season knew their battlefields intimately. Year after year they were the same. She speculated, as Dragan often had in years gone by, maybe ten leagues, give or take, all along the flanks and peaks of the dividing mountain range. And what of it? That was the border of the empire. That was where the great and evenly matched armies met.

"What about the forces?" His voice was growing rougher and he tried repeatedly to clear the acid-scarred thickness from his throat, but he would not stop. "I know how the

numbers have declined, but even you must see it. Fifteen years. Fifteen seasons of counting the dead and seeing each new rank of recruits falling. You must have seen how our strategies have changed. They've had to. We don't have the men to spend as freely as we once did. We've done our job too well.”

She stepped back, mentally and physically making room for herself to judge. The implications of his words might have been slower dawning if Dragan had not raised these same questions right before he had taken away the only certainties she'd ever known. But both men had a motive in their arguments, both had needed to shock. Dragan wanted her to leave her life and her notoriety, so he'd tried to make her question their need to go on. Now this man wanted to take away the pride, the status she'd earned for herself, so he made everything she'd worked for a lie.

“I won't believe that,” she said, reassuring herself as she spoke. “The empire must be defended. Without us the Verdian would rush over our fertile land and our rich cities. We know it. Every child knows it.”

She knew it still, but she recalled her early seasons, riding in the cavalry with the sisterhood of warriors.

Most had come, as she had, from the city streets or shanty towns that pressed against the city walls. Among other castes, it was rare for women to enlist. Noble women never did. Nor did the feted artisans. Women who did not create beauty for the beautiful tended to withdraw behind jewelled curtains and become the adored courtesans so desired by noble men. The daughters of merchants, tradesmen, and husbandmen carried on in the relative wealth of their father's professions, or slaved on the land, working to produce the empire's food and wine.

But for Freya and her fellow recruits, life had gone from hunger and hardship, where women cowered or fought for their lives against young noblemen who raped for sport, to warmth and food, armed and on horseback, where men stood aside out of respect and women learned the pleasure that came with that power.

She had ridden with a unit of thirty-five, and collectively the cavalry must have numbered a thousand or more. Young and fit, with only a light rein on the massive warhorses, a high pommelled saddle and long skirts of mail; even the memory stole her breath and brought a smile to her face. But what was there now of the cavalry?

She had not been alone in choosing to leave. When she had teamed with Dragan as a dyad, they had learned the skills of guerrilla fighters, moving in small groups, in raiding parties, and mobile defensive units. That was the skills-set in demand. And in the years since, the stable complexes had been reassigned or stood empty, the horses now used by messengers and officers alone.

And the gala for the latest intake? Looking beyond the lights and the men in strict formation, and past the orchestration and the stirring speech about loyalty and glory, the night had not been as full as she remembered. One parade ground crowded with men, not six or seven regiments waiting their turns in the wings. No more than a handful where once there would have been thousands. Once, all the rooms of the citadel would have been filled. How many were empty, now?

“It's how we keep the numbers down, how we keep the vermin from overrunning the empire. Did you never guess that?” Fire reflected from his eyes as if they were no more than

crystals of ice, and in their depths there was no hint of caution or uncertainty. If he was lying, these were lies he loved, lies he treasured.

He was telling her a story he savoured for all its bigotry and perversion, and it was a story she could not allow herself to believe. Not with what she had seen; the images that stayed with her, year after year; the men she'd known, and the horrors she had suffered in the name of this empire. Those things could not be made a lie. No one could call that sacrifice worthless.

"You've said enough." Turning from his smug superiority she moved to her horse. A small pack, no more than a personal grooming kit, hung from her saddle and she slipped it open along its cord. Within it was the confidence she had to match him: two small, razor sharp blades that never failed in their intent.

She knelt in front of him. Crawling heat rose over her skin, crackling in her blood, tightening her chest and burning in her fingertips. The light-headed nausea that drove her to sublime heights when life and death were hers to share flashed across her nerves. He would die for his lies, and his blood would wash the memory of them from her mind.

She leaned in close, the blades crossed just above his Adam's Apple. It would be a job well done. She whispered, "For every tear I ever shed."

"Wait," he wheezed, and it might have been real fear she saw. "You know it's true, even if you don't want to believe it. Killing me now won't make it a lie. Kill me now and you'll never know the whole truth."

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For only the second time in his life, Tobias Paske felt the kind of fear that burned through his gut like quicksilver and turned his bowels to scalding water. Only clenching his ass with all the strength of his held breath saved him from a great indignity as he searched her face for signs of hesitation. "There's more. You'll never have another chance to hear the truth."

She was unpredictable, but whether it was superior intelligence or gross stupidity that drove her impulses, he could not yet tell. It made her more dangerous than he'd thought and the miscalculation might have been fatal. But as his throat worked feverishly against the blades, she paused, and he waited.

"How far off is the dawn?" He changed tack, desperate for any chance of reprieve. "If I am not back inside the fortress walls by morning, men will come, and they will come at a gallop. Do you understand, Freya? If men come looking for me, they will come fast and they will be hunting you."

She grinned, her nostrils flaring over hot breath and her eyes wide and dark with pleasure. But she saw no need to answer. She wasn't threatened by the possibility.

"I'm worth at least that, alive, when they come. And I'll go with you to the citadel at Aporta and show you the proof of everything I say. It might make you angry now, but think about it. Think about it carefully. How much is it worth to you to know the whole truth? Changes are coming. Huge changes. The old ways are failing; you must have seen it. Do you want to stay ignorant?"

The smile did not waver as she answered, "I would ride into Aporta and hang for it. I told you once before, I'm not stupid."

Praise the demons who spawned her and all her filth, she had reconsidered. "Then come back to Orlik with me tonight. We'll go back, I'll sign your discharge and you can hold it. You can hold the key to the door and I can show you on the maps, I can read to you from the journals, I can even tell you what will happen as the system starts to fail."

"You're a lying maggot." She lifted the knives away from his throat and walked slowly to her flask and drank keeping her back to him. Beyond his power to control, rigor spread through him as relief surged in his blood, his joints shook, and his teeth chattered. His head dropped forward and another sharp pain stabbed into his eardrum from his damaged jaw. He whimpered and she turned.

"A man who I've never once had cause to doubt told me something similar." She came close and bent forward, her hands on her knees, her face near his, "You're so full of shit I can smell it on your breath, but he never lied to me. He had no business telling me my life and all I'd done was a lie, but he did because he didn't see any reason to die for this empire."

"You, you don't have any business saying it either, except you want to hurt me the only way you know how. But now you have to see things my way, don't you? I can't go on to Aporta. I have no dispatch to deliver, no reason to be there. I can't go back to the Orlik citadel because your rotting corpse will damn me to hang there, too."

"I can't just desert; I am not a coward. If I could have done that, you and I would never have met." She raised her hands wide in a question, still grinning. "Where does that leave me? What should I do, then? I could kill you. In fact I should. I would like to. But you know, you're right. You are worth at least a little to me alive."

"I can only go over the mountains to the life I know. It is the only thing I can do, the only thing I want to do. I can go to the men I know, who know me, and I can tell them what you've had to say. The trouble is they won't believe me. They won't want to hear it any more than I do, and they won't want to believe it's true. But you can convince them. Maybe. You can tell everyone who fights out there that their lives are worthless."

Thought became a dark rushing void. Relief that had shuddered through his flesh and melted his bones now cleared away and left only black thoughtless horror. She would do it, too. She would take him over the mountain passes to the front and bring him face to face with the worst of the worst. Not as it should be, in the safety of his citadel, but out among them in the wilds.

If she made it that far, they would kill him. There could be no doubt on that score. He had to think, had to try to force some clarity in the maelstrom of his worst fears. Hell and fire, the implications. The implications! The implications of revealing the truth to the filthy masses, armed and pissed off, with no way to vent their fury.

Freya moved around behind him slowly, obviously relishing her complete mastery of the situation. She slipped her razor sharp blade into the thonging that held his hands to his ankles. Grimacing as she grabbed the shoulder strap of his cuirass, she hauled him to his feet. Ducking again first to release his feet, she sauntered back to face him.

"Now you say men are coming? Well then, that settles it for us. We have to leave here tonight. How is your horsemanship, desk jockey? How will you fare on the mountain tracks,

in the dark and the cold?”

If they made it as far as the front, he was dead.

He couldn't allow her to make it that far. It could be no more than a two days ride, unless the trails were monstrous. And he had given her two months to pore over maps of these passes, every day gaining more oversight and perspective. Damn it. He had to think.

It was two days on difficult terrain, maybe more, and so at least two nights at camp. There would be a time, there had to be a time that her guard was lowered.

She shoved from behind and he stumbled into step, not seeing where he put his feet. The gash on his thigh pulled and opened with every stride, and he limped like an afterthought, barely conscious of the pain.

“Climb up there and step over,” she ordered, moving his horse in to stand beside a cluster of boulders. “I hope your balance is good.”

He wanted to believe he was equal to this. That he had days to find an answer and to dream of driving pain and shame into her flesh. But his body was weak, losing blood and racked by the shock of the nights events, without food or water since ... he couldn't be sure. He was numb. All that burned in his belly was a deep dark fear.

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NORTH.

It had taken Freya no more than moments to finish clearing the camp. The scrolls which she had been planning to burn were back in their cylinder at her side. The path she chose toward the heights was rough and moving backwards, but above them the peaks were covered by snow and cloud. The pass to the south looked best from the ground, and there would be time enough to reconsider once daylight cleared her view. A moment more brushing their tracks from the dust of the road and she was bent over her horse's neck and leading up into higher ground.

Paske followed, and the tension in him amused her every time she turned to check his progress. She led his horse while his hands were still tied at his back; if he had no natural balance he would fall until he learned to keep his seat.

Ahead there would be worse. While darkness obscured the detail, she moved with caution. Once daylight came, she could make better time, but it would also leave them exposed on open foothills that had leapt up so suddenly they seemed to have left the trees behind them. In the darkness, she chose to follow the gullies and waterways, where animals had made paths through low scrub and over shale.

Something that almost felt like happiness had stirred in her stomach, making it light and fluttery. The chill of the air brushed over her skin and raised a sudden rash of gooseflesh as if she had been numb and unaware until that moment. Every now and then a laugh tried to bubble up through her chest even though she had no idea what was funny. For the first time since Dragan had left her at the fortress, she had begun to feel alive. And for the first time, she let herself think about him without restraint.

He wasn't here.

She was moving toward the front line, following her blood as it rushed toward a warzone, and he should have been beside her. He had always been beside her when life mattered.

She looked back over her shoulder, down the slope, and across the dark forests to the west. Somewhere out there he was sitting by his fireplace sipping cider, or, with the sky showing hints of dawn light, he would be rising from a warm bed and doing things every farmer did. She could not picture what those things might be, but they would be earthy things, honest things that needed a steady hand and muscle. By the gods he had those things; she smiled. He was like the earth, like stone. Solid.

And he would be happy there. Happier than he would be if he was beside her now, and he had earned his right to happiness. Still, her joy would have been complete if tonight had been like all the other nights before, when they were together, firing up a fight like sparks from a forge and indestructible.

They had only ridden together once. So many years ago now, she could not have said with certainty how long they had been paired up, but it could not have been very long. Three seasons? Four? She could picture him still; hair dragged back from his temples in twisted shanks that fell into a mass of silk over his shoulders; bare chest, crossed by a studded leather baldric from wide shoulders to narrow hips, and tight leather breeches; thick muscle on a lunging warhorse, both glossed with sweat.

The memory brought a stab of pleasure to her groin and tingled in her breasts. He was beautiful that day, elemental, a force moving through the chaos, and she had wanted him so bad she'd ached with the low groaning heat of it.

It was a tough fight, too. No one had known what they were doing; a mass of men thrown in a headlong run into a line of enemy defenders. She and Dragan had been given horses and sent out on the wing because she had once been cavalry. She laughed aloud, surprising herself with the sound. Incompetence! How had anyone survived?

They'd made it, though. They'd cut through men and boys and broken the defences all the way from Mount Cesalpia to the cliffs of Elborg. They'd slogged it out in fast-moving forays, and then driven the lines back in wave after wave; regroup and attack, regroup and attack. By dusk, they had joined the ranks in hand to hand combat on the ground, and the last of their foe had succumbed.

That night they had celebrated with the thick smell of blood still on their skin and the roar of fires and victorious revelry all around. They had fucked harder than any flesh should stand, driven to supreme heights of passion by the cold clutches of death and the glory of their own escape. They should have torn, muscle and bone should have ripped to shreds and ignited. But they'd survived that to.

Freya sighed and returned from her memories, shaking. They'd always survived, and it wouldn't feel right while he was not here beside her. She looked back to check that her companion was still hanging on.

Paske did not look good as dawn began to show his form more clearly. He was loose, his head slumping forward and snapping back, overcompensating in an exhausted attempt to hold his balance. Down his left thigh, the shadows were lifting showing the sticky black stain

of lost blood. The wound was worse than she'd allowed.

“Hey!” The yell startled him briefly, and he made an effort to raise his face. It was far too pale, his lips were dry. If he held on until the morning light was brighter, she'd have to stitch him up. “Don't fall, you bastard, we've got a long way to go yet.”

She waited, hauling the lead rein so his mount drew up level. “Water,” he slurred. “I need a drink.”

“I'll just bet you do. You look a bit pasty. But you can't expect to leave the field with that little scratch, sir.” She smiled for her own amusement and held the flask of water to his lips.

He leaned, slurping at the cool liquid and dropped from the saddle like a rock, rolling from his shoulder onto his back between the horses. Unable to break his own fall with his bound hands, he hit the pebbles with his face, grazing a temple and splitting his cheek.

Freya looked down without compassion. “If you weren't so vile, you'd be a joke, you know. I wish Dragan was here. He'd laugh.” He wouldn't though. Nothing about this officer was funny. Dragan would have killed him. Months ago. If he'd been here.

* * * * *

The citadel was three easy days' ride and Dragan had done it in less than two. That had required no great effort, except he had also detoured north a short way to the small market village of Bralz, built where the open farmlands bordered the forests.

His mother's views were not entirely new to him and her judgments not unconsidered. The people he had grown up among lived a different life to any Freya had ever known. In the midst of wide pasturelands and fields of crops, a code of tradition had held its sway for generations. Since ancient times, the men and women of the land had known their rights and their responsibilities. They knew what was decent and what was not, they knew how to judge and who to ostracize, even where the classes rarely clashed.

Freya would be met with discrimination where ever she went, except in the safety of his home. There, he would make sure she had a safe and peaceful haven; somewhere to let all the wounds of her past heal. He would insist upon it.

But some chafing could be minimized. A little compromise here and there would make their dealings with neighbours a little less strained. The simple act of wearing skirts would help her blend more peacefully into the community. He had never seen her in full skirts and a bodice, a shawl and apron, or a scarf. He smiled at the thought.

But he had paid the seamstress in Bralz to have her make the most beautiful garments he could afford. That would be his gift to her when they returned this way in a little over a month.

The massive stone walls of Orlik were at once as familiar as home and as despised as a prison. He had hoped to make this journey when the day of her release came, so he would not have to be inside its walls any longer than necessary. But if Freya could work her way through ninety long days here, he could stand a month for her sake. If boredom became too much, he could always take on a troop of recruits and train them with sword or in archery.

As he approached the gate house, there was nothing familiar about the scene he glimpsed inside, and he slipped down from his saddle.

A caravan of spectacular wealth sparkled in the midday sun as it was prepared to move out along the road. Officers and recruits alike were massing in the open parade ground, or hurrying along the terraces.

He was halted at the gates; not stopped briefly with half-assed questions as he would have expected, but halted at spear point. A young man, unshaven fluff all tufting on his chin and cheeks, held the spear at Dragan's chest, shaking as if he would run it through out of sheer terror. "What is your business here?" he asked, his voice trembling as much as his hands.

Dragan ignored him, searching the guard booth and peering around the gateposts for a familiar face. When he found one, he called, "Arnas, why am I being held?"

The summoned guard limped closer, taking Dragan's hand in his and meeting chest to chest with their forearms linked between them. "Can't you see? If you'd come in yesterday or tomorrow, you could have flown in on a swan and no one would have noticed. Today, we have the Grevinde of Ludz-Obila gracing us with her exit. She came to witness the new intake."

"Strange times." Dragan laughed. "Have we become a circus now, to entertain them as well?"

"Anything's better than nothing, my friend. Why have you come back?" Arnas faltered, stepping back. His face, one moment grinning widely, went to sudden calm as if he couldn't risk an expression.

"What?"

"You heard? About Freya? You shouldn't have come in here. What if they hold you?"

Dragan stepped back, too, concerned by the rapid change and moving away from the implied threat of the fortress walls. "Heard what?"

"I didn't even know she was still here. No one seems to have known. And I don't know what she did, except what they said about the gala. I wasn't there."

"What do you think I've heard?" he asked, dragging Arnas by the tunic back toward the shadows outside the gatehouse. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Not a lot. There aren't many veterans left here, and the new kids don't talk to us. She was at the Grevinde's gala and something was said. She upset the Commandant; I don't know really, Dragan. I just heard she got mouthy."

"And?"

"And then she was sent out on some sort of errand yesterday. That's when I saw her. Only when she went out the gates, or I wouldn't even have known she was here. Like I said." Arnas moved in closer, covering his words with care, turning his back on his young and nervy associate. "Paske went out a couple of hours later, riding hard. Then, when he wasn't back come this morning, all hell broke loose." He shrugged, raising his hands in consternation. "A squad was sent out after her. Hard men, too; training officers and rough kids from the new lot."

"That's it?"

"That's it. But if you turn up today, just when they've sent men out after her for whatever reason, it's going to look the same to them as it looks to me. Like you came back for her. To help her, or at least like you know where she is."

“How would I know where she is?” Dragan hissed. “How would I even have heard what she's done?” Hot and cold were warring in his stomach, and the steam they made was rising under his skin. Fear and anger, fury and frustration all bloomed at once across his thoughts. “Which way was she moving?”

“North. Straight up the road north. First light yesterday.”

He had no more than light provisions for an easy ride, but there was no time to fuss over small comforts like food. He'd been cold and hungry before and for less reason. Swearing roundly he dragged his horse around and stepped up onto his back. “You didn't see me. Is he okay?”

Arnas shrugged. “I didn't see you. Him? Who knows? Good luck.”

Glad of the confusion churning through the ranks, he jogged back along the access formwork and onto the road. North it was, then. There was nothing on the road north for three or four days' ride. It took you to the fortress at Aporta, and nowhere or anywhere in between.

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CRIMES.

Paske was weakened, there was no escaping it. It was going to slow them down. If she kept him with her.

He'd lost a lot of blood, far more than she had realized, and it meant he was weak, dehydrated and cold. All potentially fatal under the circumstances. But she'd freed his hands. She'd let him sleep. She'd let him drink. She'd let him wrap both capes around his nakedness.

The sun was high, but she'd tucked him back into shadows while she watched the road far below. If riders were coming as he said, they would be this far along the road soon. Above her was a bare expanse of mountainside, windblown grass and frost bitten rocks for as far as the eye could see. The only shelter on the climb was the scrubby gully where they rested.

So his needs had not come at a cost. She was safest sitting still until the riders had passed, or until nightfall covered their progress. She chewed at salt-beef and watched him sleeping.

Men always shed their masks when they slept; it was something that had fascinated her for many years. The vilest face softened and the child a mother had once loved was revealed when thick lashes pressed dark against a cheek. It made her no more inclined to credit them with virtue, but it interested her none the less.

She'd stitched his wound with horsehair. It meant peeling the theyn away from his thigh and taking down the suede breeches that had clotted inside and out with shed blood. And she'd unbuckled the armour he wore like it mattered. It did nothing more than announce to the world that he was higher in the kicking order than she was, as did his theyn and segmented leather kilt, and she tossed each piece over the scuffing rocks. And the scale-armoured hauberk, with ring-tasselled shoulder caps. And even the soft linen tunic he wore under the rub of steel mesh. There was a helplessness in nakedness that answered for some of his sins.

His body had surprised her, as much for its hard lines and well-proportioned form as for the smooth perfection of skin that had never been defiled by warfare. He was fit; much fitter than she would have thought. And he was higher born than a position as administrative officer of the military allowed; it was written everywhere in the vanity of the man, and she wondered again how far he had fallen and what had been his sin. At some time he had been cast out by his own, thrown down among the lesser mortals for some unknown crime.

Being born into nobility was crime enough.

Freya had been born in an alleyway in Koldem City: lying in their filth, feeding on their waste, covered by their muck, and squelching their shit between her fingers and her toes. They were the first enemy she had needed to survive, hating them as she crawled across their lavatory floors to collect their piss pots for the fullers, or scraped the shit from their pampered pets into bowls to sell to the tannery, or ducked a blow, or fled a sheriff, or hid while her family and friends were hunted and killed.

They weren't alone, of course. They were simply the worst, the top of a top heavy system of brutality that taught its least to fight and kill from the day they first drew breath.

Below them were the merchants who would pay in copper for stolen treasure, then call for a sheriff as she fled into the shadows, or the tradesmen who would pay in coppers for her hand or her mouth or her ass, or pay with a smack across the head and a kick to the stomach. She hated them all, and she had hated needing them even more.

At least as she grew she had learned to fight. She had been twelve the first time she was caught in a raid by young noblemen on horseback who carried off women as prizes to share, and she had killed the man who caught her. She had held a rock, too small to be much of a weapon, but she had hit him square in the Adam's Apple and run away.

And she'd kept running until she'd escaped. When she reached the citadel, the things she knew had value and her strength earned respect and her skill had earned her fame. In the army she had found a home at last.

In her tin mug she had soaked two bits of dry bread, and she moved to where he lay and nudged him awake. His jaw was swollen, and now his right eye was blackening and his smooth cheeks were abraded, but he'd be able to chew some soft bread. "Wake up. You need to eat." Freya was pleased with the overall effect of his injuries. She liked the way they took the edge off his arrogance. And she liked the fact that she had given him every single mark.

"Why aren't you moving while there's light?" he mumbled. "Leave me here; you can make better time over the mountain without me."

Freya laughed. "Yes, but I don't want to leave you here alive. You want me to end it for you? No, you don't. Times are changing. Big changes, you said so yourself, and you want a chance to tell all my brothers-in-arms about it. Remember? So you eat your bread and be ready to ride come nightfall."

* * * * *

It was not hard to follow the riders; they were moving fast and the horses had dug their toes deep into the dust, clawing their way like coursing hounds. Dragan followed. His horse was tired. He'd jogged from the farm and now he was running, but for generations his sires

had been chosen for endurance. His legs were as thick as a man's arms, his fetlocks as heavy as clubs, and he pulled his box-head in against his chest, filled his great lungs with heaving air, and he ran.

Foam was running up the reins, and sweat was freezing on Dragan's lip by the time he gained the rise above the mere. His mount blew like a bellows, and he stepped down watching men moving below. They had found a camp and were scouring the area around it making too much noise and tramping any useful information beneath their inexperienced feet. They were clearly only part of the original team of riders. There were only four of them.

Dragan checked the sky. He had maybe two or three hours of good light left. To pass the searchers he would need to go further into the treeline and ride wide around the bottom edge of the mere. It made for a long ride, but on the high side of the road there was almost nothing: occasional scrub, some rocky outcrops, but nothing substantial enough to depend on for cover.

From where he sat, it seemed the only choice. Above him the mountains pushed into the clouds, steep and almost bare. Nature had long since stripped them of any verdure and even the rocks were chipped and blown. There was no alternative hope there. Entering the trees, he moved on foot hoping to get close enough to the searchers to hear something, anything of use.

When he rounded the last curve in the road, to where the meadow opened before him, he froze. The men had gone from the opposite side of the water. He watched and waited. Nothing. As he straightened, about to shift his position to try for a better view of the road, a shout went up.

They had crossed the road to the base of the high slope and he shuffled to the edge of the shade, watching them, trying to judge the cause of their excitement. They had found spoor. Every move and yelp of celebration painted them more clearly as dogs on a scent. They were circling now, excited and slobbering, readying themselves for the chase.

He felt for the hilt at his hip. One small hunting knife, it was the only weapon he carried. When he'd left the farm he had no cause to arm himself and now he swore at the lack. They were armed, all of them. Three of the four had drawn their swords and were waving them dangerously; young men not yet comfortable with the instruments of war.

He stood back from the light and walked a short circle looking for a club, anything solid with enough length and weight would do. His targets had remounted and were driving their horses upward over slippery scree and around the stones of a crowded gully. He could see no benefit in riding. Slapping the horse affectionately on the neck, he turned him off onto the grass and jogged to the road and across in pursuit.

When he reached the place they had circled, his heartbeat charged into a gallop. There was blood. Not just a trace, a speckle or two spattered over the stone, but enough to have pooled and run over the pebbles. It was dark and dry, but it had fallen from a wound deep enough to matter. He dropped to the stones touching the darkness. If Freya was hurt, she would have turned back along the road she had followed; she was nearer the Orlik citadel than the far distant fortress of Aporta. Unless she feared pursuit. She would never try to outrun followers over three days going onward, so she had to have gone up, just as the track suggested.

To his eye there was no reasonable route upward. Any way she went, she would run out of cover before she could get out of sight. That meant she would have to go to ground, and if she was already hurt....

Using his makeshift club as a staff, he started to run.

The way was difficult but passable, steep and unstable but he made as good time on foot as those he followed made on horses that skidded and shied. The muscles in his thighs were burning, and he pulled his shoulders back, deliberately making himself breathe more deeply. Already, he was in constant sight of the rearmost rider, making tiny gains with every step. Frustration burned all the more acutely for the sense that the path stretched endlessly before them.

If he had not slewed to the side, he might have toppled as the horse ahead backed onto its haunches and its rider dropped from the saddle, awkward but gaining his feet. The pursuers he followed had stopped, abandoning their wheeling horses as they grouped in the narrow gully ahead in defensive positions. But they defended to the front, and he rose from behind.

The men were crowded onto a small plateau, their quarry backed in against a rock wall and he swung, not for the head, but for the base of the skull where it met the spine. The first soldier dropped before his comrades had noticed their danger. The second turned, yelping with surprise but biting onto his shock enough to rally with a well-aimed swing of his broad-bladed sword. Steel bit into Dragan's only weapon, catching deep in the wood and twisting it roughly in his grip.

In the half-seconds of battle, the instants that dragged apart into slow-motion clarity, Dragan spied the sword of the fallen soldier, released his club with a violent thrust to the side, and ducked to grasp the discarded weapon for himself. The weight of the wooden club caught the young soldier in an unwieldy turn, dragging the arc of his sword off to the side and sharply down. Dragan stood into the wake of the swing, directly in front of his adversary, with nothing between them but air and a sudden look of horror. The young soldier glared at him, his scarred face testament to a life of violence and his eyes bright with recognition. He died as his mouth snarled around a war cry and his shoulders bunched to draw the overbalanced sword back up into play.

The third was not a raw recruit. Dragan knew his face and his reputation. He was one of the training officers, Jan, and his reputation glowed. Beside him, taking the small advantage of hard rock and slight elevation, Freya ducked a wild swing from her immediate opponent.

If he had stood still one moment more to watch her, he would have fallen. Jan launched into the fight with a vicious backhand that knocked Dragan back two steps followed by a heavy downward blow that he could do naught but block and try to hunker down and under. He vaulted upward throwing all of his strength against the blade and, twisting as he did, drove his enemy's sword up and away. Freya turned, plunging her red-stained steel into Jan's unguarded side, and as quickly as it had started, the battle was over.

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TELL HIM.

Freya leapt over the dying man at her feet, trusting the arms she had always trusted to catch her. A tremor ran up through her chest, a rapid tattoo of sobs or laughter that caught at the back of her throat. Whether they were tears or giggles, she couldn't be sure.

“You came back!” Just what that meant she couldn't begin to consider, but he was here, right where the fates had dumped her. Somehow, he had come to the middle of nowhere and found her on this wide mountain side. How much more proof could anyone need that this was where they were meant to be? She threw her head back and laughed; the perfect joy she had imagined could be hers after all.

“I heard you had some trouble.” Dragan set her down and crouched to the side of his fallen foe. Jan lay twisted between rocks on the cold ground, paralysed by the agony of a mortal wound. His eyes were fever bright, his breath a hard pant over lips pink with blood. Dragan asked, “You want an end?”

Jan grappled weakly with the hilt of Freya's sword where it stuck out from his side. It would be rank cruelty to move it, despite his feeble efforts to do so, and Dragan rested a hand lightly on the silver cap of the pommel. “Why were you following her?”

The man's breath hiccupped, fighting internal demons in an effort to force air into words. “Paske,” he managed.

Freya dusted Dragan's hand away from her sword, reefed it out, and forced it down between the heaving ribs to still his heart. Jan's painful struggle ceased and she stepped onto his chest as she pulled the blade free.

“I want to know why they were sent after you.” Dragan stood, raising his hands in exasperation.

“So ask him.” She pointed into the shadows of the rock face where her companion still huddled.

“Who's he?”

“That is Paske.”

Already, Freya was moving to conceal what she could of the bloodshed. If the other riders returned, they would see the signs of ascent and follow. Maybe if they fled upward now, with the sun only good for another hour or so, they would make it to the cover of another gully or knoll, or at least put good distance between them and their pursuers. Best then if those pursuers rode on past this spot and its dead, believing their comrades continued ahead of them.

“We need to move,” she called. “Get him up and steal him some clothes. I want to get as close to the crest as possible, and soon. There are four more where these came from and they will be back.”

Dragan was kneeling with Paske, his back to her as she gathered loose weapons into a pile and readied herself to drag the lowest body up to the shelter of a low coppice. When he stood, she could see a clash coming in the set of his shoulders and the deep furrow of his brow. He slouched there above her, his face grey and casting its own shadows. “This one's not going anywhere if you want him to survive for very long. And why go up when down is quicker?”

“We can't go down.” She laughed just a little too loudly. “I told you, there were other riders with these boys. They rode on along the road, but they won't go far. They'll be back sooner or later.” She strode up the incline until she was on the level ground where he stood and she could clearly read his features. “I'm taking him to the front; he has news for the men there. He has theories about our war.” She kicked Paske lightly, and he pulled the capes tighter around himself, sitting huddled like a miserable child. “Tell him,” she said.

“Tell him yourself.”

She grinned again. “Tetchy isn't he? I'll tell you while we ride. Dragan, come on. You're here now, just as you should be. I'm not stuck in the middle of a dark rock like some long dead snail; I'm out here, not five leagues from the front lines, with nowhere else to go.” She stamped her foot with impatience. “And we have to go now.”

He shook his head slowly, taking moments they should not waste to consider things he knew nothing about, and the frustration that rose up her back pushed her close to bursting point.

“No,” he said quietly. “I'm not here to go to war. I'm here because I heard you had a squad riding hard after you. I don't know why, and I'm not sure I care anymore. But if he's the officer who ordered the pursuit, I've got problems with taking him to another squad of armed men. He might be administration, Freya, but he's an officer. We're taking him to tell his men what, exactly?”

“Why are you so stubborn? Let's get moving and talk on the way.” This was too much like last time they'd talked and the time before that, and the slope that she stood on was too likely to slide. His views on the fighting were too close to the stories Paske told. Why did he suddenly want so much with words? They'd never been his strong point before.

“Tell me,” he demanded without raising his voice. “If it's a fight here or a fight over there, I'll take here and now, unless you can give me a good reason to go further.”

It was not his choice to make, and he could not take this freedom from her. Not again. Not when her life was so close she could taste it on the breeze. Not when he'd come from nowhere to her side, just as he should have. “No! Trust me, you said. Trust me, stay here. It'll be fine. You'll be okay.” She wanted to tear at the frustration that was hardening around her limbs and stopping her from moving forward, and she gripped shreds of air in her fists, holding them up like a challenge. “It's not okay. I'm not fine.”

“I can't go back; he's made sure of that anyway. I can't run away. I won't. I am going up that mountain and I'm taking that rancid goat turd with me.” She was yelling and she had not heard her voice rising. It had climbed higher as cold fears rose inside; fears and furies she had held in careful check for two months or more. “If you're not coming, then don't, but you won't make me turn away from my life and my journey again. You won't make me!”

She spun away, glancing over the bodies around her for anything suitable for her prisoner to wear when her foot slipped in the scree, skidding her to one knee in a graceless stagger. Her supporting hand fell on a small rock and she turned and threw it hard at where he stood.

Dragan ducked the stone easily. “Okay, I won't,” he answered, grinning, and turned to pull Paske to his feet.

* * * * *

Freya rode ahead, dragging the spare horses behind her as if they represented everything in this world that wanted to hold her back. She wanted to run; Dragan could see it in the tension of her shoulders and her grim insistence on taking the lead. He rode behind in silence, watching their injured companion.

He was content for the moment to give her the space she needed. The time at the citadel had been hard on her. She was pale and the strength he'd known in her grip had gone. Her spirit would never suit the dark rooms of bureaucracy, but he had hoped she would stay. A vain hope.

She could not return to the front, not if she had any thought of surviving. It was suicide as surely as throwing herself down from these heights. So, he could follow and let her have some room to breathe, and when she was ready, she would tell him what she had planned.

The mountain rose under them as the sun set at their backs, and for as long as he could see, there had been no sign of riders on the road far below. As shadows closed in around them, there was at least a sense of reprieve. "Freya! Your man here needs to stop or he's going to fall. The horses could use a spell, too." He would have added, 'So do I', but that would have been giving ground in the argument yet to come, so he kept the sentiment to himself.

"Let him fall," she called back and showed no sign of turning off. The ground was steep and rising; it was not a good place to pause anyway, so he chose to bide in silence. When she did break and make camp, it was because the darkness had become a threat in itself. The fine slip of a moon offered no guidance, and the horses spooked at rough ground, nervous for their own safe footing. It was well past time, and she had pushed his patience and his resolution to their limit.

Their companion had endured in silence and it didn't bode well for him. Dragan doubted he had chosen stoicism, which left weakness, and there was no doubting the damage that blood loss, fatigue, dehydration, and hunger had already done. Again, Freya alone could answer for his woes.

"Will you take the first watch?" She stood before him like an angry child, hands on her hips, with a look of defiance or the anticipation of a coming brawl. "I didn't sleep last night."

He nodded and handed the pack rations from the soldiers' saddlebags to her. "And until then you can tell me how you plan on surviving when you get over these peaks. If you do. We've got time."

"I told you," she said, kneeling at the small fire to set a pannikin of water to warm. "I can't go back to the citadel. He told me before I left that he would make sure I didn't come back, and then sent me out with a roll of papers...."

She leapt up quickly and ran to her saddle and pack, dragging a satchel free and rushing it back to where he sat. "Here! It's all about this. What's on these? What do they say?"

Dragan began to unbuckle the pack. "Keep talking," he said.

"There isn't much more to tell. His ambush didn't go as he'd planned, and he is as you see him." She grinned as she tore strips of salted beef from the store and began to chew.

"You didn't kill him." For some reason, it seemed, she had decided he was going over the mountains with her. The leather cylinder was free and he twisted the top from it, pulling

the ragged sheets out from where they had bunched and jammed.

“He said some things. They can't be true, or I hope they're not, but they make an awful kind of sense. The same things you said before you left me there.”

Dragan grunted and nodded. For many years he'd recognized silence as a valuable tool in conversation. What he didn't understand now would become clearer with time. The scrolls were crumpled, the damaged areas separating where they had bent and twisted. They had all been soaked with dark liquid and dried so the integrity of the parchment itself was compromised. If they had ever been arranged in order, that had been completely disrupted and the staining had erased most of the text, anyway.

“He said the war is not important. He said it serves no purpose but to rid the empire of filth. Us.” She tapped her chest in emphasis and moved closer, as if peering over his shoulder would make the words on the parchments he held make more sense to her. “He said it was working. Too well. He said our numbers were down because they'd done a good job of killing us off.”

Across the fire, lying on his side and possibly asleep, Paske began to look like someone Dragan had no cause to save. His words, as Freya spoke them, turned a cold hard churn of anger deep in his stomach. Too often his life had seemed a pointless struggle against men who had no more cause to hate him, than he had them. And yet, for all the sense it made, there was a heart, a core of reason that would not let such thoughts be true.

To believe it was to make the lives and deaths of generations nothing. To accept it made all the things he had ever believed about his home and the empire and the place of everyone in it a lie.

It made the empire a lie.

“What's on the scrolls?” She reached for two loose sheets and spread them flat in the poor light of their fire. “I brought them with me because I knew there would be men there who could read. I want him to tell them all what he told me, Dragan. I want him to stand in front of the men they send to die and tell them what they've done.”

In the firelight, there was an air of fanaticism in her face. She'd looked at an impossible situation and found a way to hold onto the life she loved. She could return to the troops, not lame or flawed, but as the bearer of the greatest revelation the empire had ever known.

In a single flashing moment, he looked along the narrow shaft of possibility at the future and what it would hold. All the hopes he had nurtured, all the work, all his plans, gone in a rush of blood that would spread away from the border and run over the mountains, the forest, and farms. All the way to his one safe haven.

Selecting a scroll that had large sections of text still clear, he began the slow and laborious process of reading. He had to be sure, at least, that what this monster said was true. If Freya carried this information to the men who were armed and trained in death, sooner or later revolution would sweep through the empire, and no one would be safe from war.

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TRUTH.

From where he sat, Paske could pick the darker darkness of her sleeping form. The man who'd joined them had wandered into the night. How far? He couldn't be sure. Pulling the cape in closer around his shoulders, he held a hand up before his eyes. The shake said more about his weakness than the cold itself. Cold ate into the heart of him. Cold rode his teeth until they no longer chattered, they just clamped together burning into aching misery. But the shake that ran in irregular bursts up his spine, or settled in his hip joints so his legs seemed somehow disjointed, that came from weakness more profound than anything he had ever imagined possible.

If he had just one moment, just one, and the strength to stand and cross the distance to where she lay, he would have clubbed her there with a rock or stick or with bare fists. He watched his fingers tremble. He didn't have the strength of a newborn foal. Even if he could pretend his limbs were his own to control they would not carry him past the fire.

The anger that came with the realization burned as deep as the cold. His lip twisted into a sneer and he would have cried for the shame of it, but a step from behind shocked him from his vicious reverie.

"You can tell me what's not written there." Dragan dropped a fleece saddle cloth to the stones and sat down on it, close enough to speak in hushed tones. "Or what's been washed away."

"Why would I tell you anything?" The damage done to his throat when he was gagged had worsened with the appalling dryness of his ride. His voice crackled like twigs on gravel, the taste of blood rose on each breath, and the effort of speaking sent his foggy brain into a spin.

Dragan held up the flask of water. The temptation to lunge for it was more than Paske could bear and the ability to reach beyond him. All he managed was a groan and a mistimed snatch.

"Yes, you can have it. I want to know how much of what you told her is true."

His captor didn't risk the water; he held it steady while Paske drank, his own feeble hands no more than guides on its way to his mouth. He could think of nothing to say that would save him, and there was no way to know what might damn him on the spot. He shook his head. "What do you want? I'll tell you anything you'd like to hear."

"Just the truth. I'll judge whether I like it or not."

Paske knew how little of the text on the scrolls was readable, and making sense of it out of order and context would be near-on to impossible, but Dragan must have read enough to have raised real doubts. Paske nodded. The faint heat of the fire was pressing his heavy eyelids. They wanted to close. His mind was a fog of pain and dissociation. He wished for the strength to fight. He wished for the strength to slash and punish. He wished for the strength to turn his wit and charm into a weapon. But all he had was a thick tongue, a parched throat, and the will to stay alive.

"It's all true," he said at last. With that said, the weight of consequence seemed to burst like a bubble. He had no more say in his life or death and a laugh stuttered from his chest. He motioned again for the flask, his eyes barely open, slurring like a drunk. "It's all true." He swallowed, then tipped his head back and gargled away the dryness. "And more. Are you

going to kill me now?"

"Tell me the more."

"More. How long have you been on the front? Why wouldn't you know anything I can tell you? Are you all as stupid as you look?"

"Maybe."

"I don't want to go over that mountain. Is anything I say going to stop that from happening?"

Dragan was silent. He held the flask out again, generous with the water, anxious to make the sharing of this information smooth.

Paske could see no love in the expression of the big soldier, but there was a complex confusion that might have suggested reluctance. Or was it the moving firelight? Paske dropped his forehead onto his wrist and rubbed, smearing away a recent scab. "There's more. For the last twenty years numbers on the front have been falling. You'd have seen that. Weapons are better; each year there are fewer men with experience on the line; young men die faster." He shrugged, indifferent to the facts. "We could scale back the campaigns; battle strategy could have been better." He raised his face and smiled. "But we've gotten so good at ridding ourselves of you all, it seemed a shame to stop."

Hatred moved on Dragan's face now, but his hands stayed steady, holding the flask in easy reach.

"The middle classes love a story of war glory. They love to hear how our brave men suffer for the love of them and their empire. The nobles love to hear they're safe, secure behind a wall of flesh and blood." Again he laughed. "And every decent man wants to know that the slums and the ghettos are being drained of life. Every decent man alive wishes fire and destruction on the nests of them huddled in their filth around our cities. Leeching and fornicating and breeding"

His vehemence drew a hoarse cough, and Dragan pulled the flask away, letting the paroxysm pass before he offered the drink again.

"You're not like them, are you?" There was something clean about the big man. He didn't cower like the ranks of veterans usually did. He didn't limp or twist when he moved. There was almost a nobility in his flesh, albeit earned more than borne by nature, and the idea came that maybe this man, like Paske himself, was the victim of cruel fates. "Where were you born?"

There was no answer. Maybe shame; such things were not easy to discuss. Paske's eyes were heavy, dry, and thick with scum that blurred his sight. The water, for all it soothed his raw throat, did little to ease the thick inarticulation of his tongue. "I've fallen too," he said softly, speaking to the echoing depths as much as to Dragan.

"There's more," Dragan prompted.

"Yes." He nodded, and the movement sent his head spinning wildly. He caught his brow in a weak hand and sighed. "The husbandmen," he mumbled. "The cities are getting hungry. The population of good citizens is growing and we are running out of room to live comfortably. The craftsmen build more cities but we can't find the food we need. The farms, you see. Pressures are building. Unrest." He shook his head and tried to look clearly at Dragan. He needed to assess the impact his words were having. In the firelight it seemed that

this man understood. He seemed to grasp the implications, the stresses.

“Too many of the poor men from the farms have been drawn in to the military.”

Dragan nodded, and the acknowledgment drove him on;

“You understand? You know what must come, now?”

There was silence still, his captor staring coldly at the fire, chewing hard on his own thoughts. “Second sons of noble families are being sent out into the wilderness.” Again Paske laughed; the irony of high-born men being shaken down the line just to keep the top in place struck him as poetic justice. Those who had judged him and sent him down would themselves end up of a lower caste than he was, and it was his tales of glory that would convince them of the need to go. For the last time he drank deeply.

“We need the surplus, you see. If we haven't enough to feed ourselves, what can we trade with Verdan? We have no mines.”

* * * * *

The words were slurred and mumbled, and probably would not have made much sense if Dragan hadn't felt the echo of each syllable deep inside. What little he'd read in the scrolls he'd had no desire to trust, a smattering of words he knew in a rash of those he didn't and that in parts and pieces. He had read some of it aloud to Freya and she'd seen no more proof in it than he had.

But Paske was full to bursting with the love of his own wisdom. What wasn't written was far more important than the fantasies of a few deranged liars telling tales to suit themselves about battles they had never seen. What mattered was his hatred of generations of men whose crime was to be born among lesser mortals. There were no lies in his loathing. It was a simple truth and one he felt needed no explanation or excuse. He and his like were ridding the empire of its lowest life and he was proud of the work of his hands.

And Dragan had known it. For years, with the healing peace of the pastures easing the horrors of the battlefield from his mind, he had reasoned through the way the world worked. He himself had chosen the best and strongest bull calves and castrated the rest knowing he would keep the best herd while only the strongest and finest bred. He himself had selected the weakest, the oldest, and the lame when he chose the next beast for the table. He understood the rationale.

And with the faces of men he'd known suddenly so clearly there before him in the firelight, he was sickened to his stomach.

He knew, too, the truth about the need for men on the land. The call for fleece, for stock, and crops was growing all the time and the pressure to provide the demands of the tariff meant many good farms were losing their breeding stock and seed crops to the taxman. The land needed men to work it and the cities were going to send them.

Because they needed to trade.

Paske had droned into silence and Dragan ground his teeth over the obscene cost of it all. Everything was as it had always been, longer than anyone could remember. The strong governed; the weak went to war.

Not just the weakest, now, but a generation of husbandmen had been sacrificed to

maintain this precarious balance. His breath was coming harder as he thought, his stomach churning over realizations that made him want to puke.

He shook the flask they both held, shocking the officer back from the fugue into which he'd slipped. "What do they want?"

Paske stirred, but it was getting harder for him to hold his head up. Freya had stopped his wound bleeding, but he needed a physician. In a field hospital with all the herbs and instruments on hand his injuries might not have been fatal. Here and now they were. He shook; constant spasms of shivering ran through him, and despite the cold in the air his skin was hot to touch. He would be lucky to see the sunrise.

"Who?" he managed, but it was a hoarse whisper.

"The Verdan. Why do we have to defend against them? What are we protecting?"

Dragan did not expect the shock of laughter. Paske looked as if he might have thrown his head back for the simple joy of what he had to say, but weakness and fever had crippled his responses. His mirth was a choked and bubbling thing, an ugly sound. "Nothing!" He reached for the flask, struggling to direct it to his lips and coughing when he breathed liquid in with his chuckles. "Nothing. We trade our excess crops for their steel. They have no need to take anything."

Steel. The steel of weapons? They traded weapons to use in the war.

Dragan stood.

Looking down on the man at his feet, he briefly debated the means of a quick death. He had no heart in himself for outright cruelty, but no kindness pleaded on Paske's behalf. He opted instead to pull the officer to his feet. The way they had climbed was steep, barely more than a cliff-face formed of rubble. Dotted with rocky outcrops and rain-scoured washouts, it was a wide expanse of death. Cold. Exposed. And contemptuous of weakness. He'd lived on mountainsides like this for fifteen years.

Holding Paske by the shoulder of his borrowed tunic, Dragan moved him to the edge of the small flat on which they stood, grabbed the seat of his breeches, lifted him easily, and pitched him down the mountain.

Squatting by the fire, he stared at the flames and past them to where Freya slept.

He checked the progress of the stars. He should be waking her for her watch, but he had no need for sleep. Let her rest.

From the document cylinder he drew the scrolls and one by one he fed them into the flames.

Freya could sleep. At sun-up they would move, but he had yet to decide in which direction. He had thrown away their hostage and he was burning what little evidence they had. Morning would be soon enough to tell her that.

He rubbed at his chin. It was not just a question of proof, even if Freya had imagined she would need Paske or his scrolls. Together they were well enough known to give any message to the troops credibility. If they were to go. No, it wasn't proof, and if Paske had died in his bedroll and the scrolls lay safe in their cylinder it would make no difference to anyone. But it felt better. Somehow destroying the evidence made the horror less stark. Their lives had been no more than surviving an atrocity; their skills, far from being a valued commodity were just annoying techniques that had kept them alive.

On the front lines tonight and tomorrow men would fight and die. And for nothing.

But he was finished with it. He had served his term and survived. He had earned his small piece of safety and by all the festering demons he wanted to take what he had earned and enjoy it. If he went ahead with Freya and they spread the word along the line, that every man there was the victim of a cruel system that played their lives for chips, the war might end. It would.

And thousands of angry men would be looking for blood and revenge.

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COME WITH ME.

It was dawn when Dragan woke her. Freya stretched her aching back before she tried to sit up. Lying near a failing fire with little to keep her from the stony ground, she wished for her tub of steaming water and the small luxuries of the citadel. When she did rise, scratching at her scalp and yawning, he put a mug of steaming tea and some bread from the soldiers' rations before her. It took a moment to realize Paske was gone.

"Where is he?" Her pulse kicked up, but she was willing to hear Dragan speak before she jumped to any conclusions. In the state Paske was in, he was unlikely to have run away.

"Dead."

Two of the horses were saddled, and a selection of gear collected from the various packs lay across the fire from where she sat. "Bastard," she grinned. "I wanted to keep him around a bit longer."

"Eat," he said, "and let's move."

Freya pushed herself to her feet and climbed a small outcrop of rock, looking along the crest they had gained and down into a small hollow running due south. Beyond the dip, the pass between peaks was clearly visible and the route looked straightforward enough. "Easier in daylight," she said half to herself. "We can cross the range there and then start moving east."

She accepted his silence as agreement. Riders might be closing in by now, and the easy way had to be the best way. They needed to cover some ground. Returning to her tea and bread, she lifted the document cylinder and noted its weight. "Where are they?" She held up the empty case and frowned.

"Burnt."

"Why?" Uncertainty flared, and suspicion goaded her heartbeat into a panic. She dropped the cylinder and followed him as he carried packs to the horses and tied them in place. "What have we got to show the men, now?"

"Nothing. We don't need anything." He was keeping his back to her and it set her nerves on edge. He always hid his eyes when he had secrets to keep. Without looking up, he pushed back past her to the fire and began to stamp it out.

"No? Paske is dead and you burned the only other evidence I had of what he'd told me. It wasn't much but it would have shown them at least that the administrative officers are lying

about the war to the people in the cities. No one is going to want to believe this; I hope you can explain it all when we get there.”

“We're not going to the front.” He was still keeping his face down, intent on small duties, speaking as if the decision was his to make and of no importance to her.

Damn it all, damn it, damn it all; irritation whined in her throat and she stamped across the ground behind him. “We are! I told you. I'm going, whether you come with me or not.” Running just to match his stride, she circled, tried to block the way toward the gear he was loading. Of course he'd caved too easily the night before, and she cursed the sun and moon and every instinct in her body that should have warned her that this would come.

“I'm not. There's no point. The front's east, home's west.”

“You can't go home, Dragan. You can't just go and not tell the men we've fought beside for fifteen long years that this is all for naught. Don't you want to stop this? Isn't it you who says there's nothing for men to fight and die over but someone else's gold?”

“I've said it before. Didn't stop anyone then.” He ducked past her, reaching for a blanket roll and gathering it under his arm. As she stepped forward, he moved again to lift a half full food pack.

“But now we know it's true. Now we've heard it from the serpent's mouth. We can stop the fighting. Centuries of war, and we can put an end to it today!” She rushed to follow again as he moved back to the horses.

“We have to move,” he said, buckling the straps of the food pack to his saddle, handing the reins of her mount to her, and striding off toward the line of spare horses. “Those riders will be close behind by now.”

“So that's it? That's the end of it all? I'm riding east to do my duty to my comrades, and you're going west to go home?” She was still trying to run, hobbling over tussocks and lichen-loose stones. When he stopped and turned she slipped in his tracks.

“What duty? You don't even know it's true, but if it is -- *if* -- then you don't have a duty to this empire or its war. You and I don't owe a single thing to anyone, except ourselves. We owe ourselves some peace. We've paid for it in blood.”

“And the others? They don't deserve the same freedom?” She was going back. The fates had spun their wheel and after all she'd cursed and wailed she was at last going back. “I'm going back. This is my life; this is how it is supposed to be. They know me. The men who fight out there know me, and I won't be remembered as a coward who ran away from the fight. I will be the one who gave them all the freedom they earned with blood.” He would not take away her glory. Not again.

“If it's true!” he bellowed. “If there is a single word he said that counts as more than bigoted spite.” Coiling the horses' lead rope as he freed it, Dragan raised his arms; “Yah! Yah!” The startled horses jumped back, spun, and gathered to rush along the southward crest and over the valley toward the distant pass.

“If it's true.” He spoke more quietly, but when he stepped in closer there was fire and fury in his eyes. “If. And if you go to those men, the ones you are so determined to be loved by; if you tell them everything you think you know, what then? Oh, you'll be their hero as always. You'll be the one that took away their purpose and took away their pride and gave them all the fiercest anger ever lit in any man.” He straightened, pulling his mount in closer

as he finished. "You'll be the one that turned them back from fighting on the mountainsides to fighting all across the empire, turning back to get their revenge on anyone who made them nothing." He stepped up onto his horse, looking down on her like she was a wretched urchin cowering in his shadow. "You'll be the one who turned them from a war with Verdun to a slaughterhouse in the cities of their own kind."

* * * * *

He had one more jibe, and only one, and if she gave him cause to use it, it might be the one that broke his heart. Already he could see the cost of every word he'd said. The shadows in her cheeks and eyes had darkened, and a death mask glared up at him, shocked and silent. Every word had cut her, stripped away the fantasy she valued more than simple life or death, and left her with a stark reality he hoped she could not deflect.

"You're leaving me?" Her words were so small they barely crossed the cold space between them, but they struck him like ice picks. All the hours between midnight and dawn had not been enough to breed confidence. No conviction, no determination that there was no other way to play the hand he held, could suffice against the image of her, hurt and alone.

"We're both leaving. I'm going west." He was glad of the saddle and the strength of the horse under him. If he had to stand close enough to say the words he'd settled on, she'd have seen the fear that trembled behind his knees and twisted in his stomach. It was hot, rolling like eels in a bag; like a slimy black knot of betrayal. She'd have called his bluff. She might still. "Which way are you going to go?"

"Come with me," she begged.

She had no other way to argue, he could see it. Her arms reached, her shoulders slumped and her chest hollowed over the need. It was pleading from the core of who she was and what she believed. But what she believed would kill her. She was small and grey in the shadows of morning, frail and childlike. There was nothing of her to throw against the machinations of power, nothing but broken flesh and bone.

"Dragan, please. Come with me. This is how my life is supposed to be. I don't want peaceful freedom; I can't survive that." She jogged back, as fast on her feet as ever, but the lift into her saddle pulled on torn muscle and bone. She couldn't hide it, even though she made no sound. The pain flashed across her features like a flare. She nudged her horse closer. "We can do it this way, you and I. We survive, don't we? Everything. No matter what. We always make it through. We always have."

"I'm going home." It wasn't enough to say it. He wanted to beg too, as he'd done before, but the choice he had made for her then had been wrong. Even if it was the only one he could make, staying at Orlik had hurt her more than he had imagined possible. He had hoped she would find some middle ground and some pride, but he couldn't have known the days in the citadel would take so much of her strength.

He pushed his horse forward, moving along the southward ridge, trying to focus on the terrain ahead as if finding the best way down was all that mattered. Four steps along and she hadn't followed. Five. Six. Seven. How many could he stand? How far could he go before he broke and turned back to plead?

“Dragan.”

Reflex jerked the rein but he made his heel press the flank. He had to keep moving. Eight. Nine. Ten.

“Dragan, stop.” She kicked her mount to follow and relief leaked from his lips like a prayer. He kept moving, and she kept following. “I tried. I gave it my best and it didn't work out, and here I am. Look at me. This is where I belong. And you belong with me, out here, in the mountains.”

“No I don't.” This was cause to stop. With this argument he could look her in the eye and speak from the heart. “I've had all I can stomach of this life. I've had enough of blood and enough of cold and enough of wondering if each day will be the last. I belong with you, but that's the end of it. Not out here. Not over the mountains. I have my life planned, I have had for years, and now I can see it, I can feel it. I can take hold of it, if you will just let go of this absurd fascination with fighting and come with me. Haven't you had enough?”

“No, I guess not.” She even tried a small smile, but it didn't convince either of them and she let it go. “I miss it. I want to feel like me, like I'm alive.”

He knew that was true. He'd seen the light of mania shine in her eyes; he knew the heat that rose in her flesh, the thrill and the laughter that burst from her lips when the risk was all or nothing.

There were other thrills. She would find new joy. Babies.

An image of Lenka pleading, begging for the chance to be a mother, came to mind and he nodded to himself. All Freya needed was the chance, too. If she could just find the peace within herself, she would know the longing every woman felt. She would be content. He knew it.

What she needed was safety. A place she could relax and let go of all the fears that she had lived with. A haven. A nest. And he had made that place for her, if only he could get her there. If only he could make the rest of the world stay away.

Injured, with or without him, she would return to the field to die. There was no doubting it. But looking at her pain, at her longing, he could not bring himself to tell her that single damning truth. She was not what she wanted to be. Time and pain had cut away the edge she'd relied upon. That he'd relied upon, as well. But he couldn't say it. He could not twist that one last knife to cut her free from her dreams.

Her voice became a whisper, a desperate plea. “We can at least tell the men the truth. We can leave after that. We can leave them to fight, or to rebel, or to get drunk in celebration, but don't we owe them that? Can't you give me just that one concession? Please?”

No, he couldn't. If they rode down the mountain together, they would die there. Her injury would damn them both to death and there was no need for it. Everything he'd ever wanted was waiting for them just beyond the forest, in the foothills and pastures along the Iultea River. He couldn't tell her the truth, and he'd never lied to her. But now, there was too much at stake to quibble over details.

“It isn't true.” The words burst from his lips. There was no chance now to consider truth and lies or the ethics of right and wrong. It was as simple as choosing to live. It was his only choice. “Nothing Paske said to you is true. He told me. Last night.” The sudden darkness that flooded her eyes almost gave him pause. His words had hit their mark. He'd found the one lie

that might keep her from martyrdom. There was only one more nail to drive home, and she would be held. “He’s already branded you a coward. If you return to Orlik, or if you go to the front, you’ll be flayed as a deserter.”

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NUMB.

Freya heard him and the cold morning air filled her up from her toes to her ears and iced over like a hex. With all the words that wanted to be spoken, not one could make itself heard. The expressions that went with them skittered and flicked across her face, just as erratic and without order. She shook her head, her shoulders twitched toward a shrug that questioned or denied or asked what was next. None of those thoughts took form.

Dragan pulled away the support his focus had given her. He looked away. He looked ashamed.

He turned his horse back onto the narrow path along the ridge, moving slowly southward. Looking into the distance she could see his reasoning. Had to keep moving. Had to keep moving. There was a fold in the skirts of the mountain up ahead; there was some low scrubby vegetation clinging into the sheltered rucheing; there was likely to be a path of sorts in the shadows. Likely enough, and he had to keep moving.

She sat there, surprised by the fact that she was not breathing. She pulled her shoulders back a bit and coughed. That made it easier.

To the east the rising sun was lifting a thin fog from the shallow gully beside her. Past the silvered grasses and over the rise lay the pass between peaks. The freed horses had cut dotted lines through the frost, marking the way to the easier paths of the eastern flank of the ranges. Odd the way they rose so stiffly on the west, but fell in gentler layers on the eastern side.

Her chest had set hard again without her notice and she drew in a deep breath and held it, stretching.

Dragan was a way ahead now. She turned her horse and looked back at the campsite they had left. He’d made no real attempt to clear it. Discarded bags lay by the firepit. Saddles. A mess. Once he’d have taken care to clean the site. Spread the waste. Make their footprint harder to see.

Below her the mountainside seemed to bow outward. The road was down there, but the slope contrived to hide it from her view, and if the riders they should flee were climbing now, there was no way to see them. There was no smoke column from a camp anywhere on the air. Maybe there was no pursuit. It looked from her vantage point as if the forest spread below unmarked. Darkest green spread as far as she could see. Except for the mere.

All of the empire spread out before her, past the darkened trees, further than her eyes could see and all of it lay down there at her feet. All she’d ever known of that world was a city far to the west. They were still out there, too, the cities of the empire. She’d seen them all on the arras, spreading around the coast, clinging to the edges, leaving the hardships of the

farmland, the forests, and the mountains to the less deserving.

Yet again she found she'd stopped breathing while she looked at the world around her. It was empty. She was empty too, and she let her chest fill again. It seemed a bit pointless, breathing, if she thought about it. She rubbed the back of one cold hand with the other. Her fingers were icy.

It was funny, but she couldn't smile. Here she was on top of the world, with open air and freedom stretching away on all sides, with nothing but the vagaries of the landscape to dictate where she could go, and nothing gave her any direction. She was sitting in the middle of one of her maps, looking at the swirling greens and beiges. And there seemed no point at all in moving.

On the front lines... she cut off the thought. There was nowhere to go, that way. To the north, if she followed the crest of the mountains maybe she would find herself at the walls of Aporta. No. Nothing there.

South, Orlik. She coughed again, but a lump had formed in her throat and the sound strangled. Home. Her home. Icy fingers rose to scratch a tickle from her cheek. Everything she was. Nothing south. Not now, not anymore.

A small whine rose in the back of her throat and escaped through her nose.

Her life and all she wanted was below her to the east, and she couldn't go there. She couldn't even think about it. She didn't want to move, except maybe to lie down on the rocky ground, roll in a ball and sink into the mountain. The peaks swallowed men, that was a certainty she could always count on. The rough ground ate the flesh and drank the blood. Wolves took what they wanted and left the rest to bleach into dust.

If she had died on the field last season, she'd be bleached bones by now, or ash, burned up in glory and blown on the wind. That was gone, that possibility. She couldn't even hold it as a dream.

She tugged at her reins again, pulling the horse's head back to the south. Dragan had stopped, frozen on the path ahead, slouched over and not looking back at her. Last time she'd let his reasons take the place of her dreams, she'd been jammed into rocky shadows and she'd hated him for it.

There was nothing she could do, nowhere to go, and there was not enough heat in her blood to call anger. Nothing at all. She had slipped back from the brink of perfect happiness into an abyss of limitless freedom. A prison of circumstance, without walls, or paths, or purpose. Or anything solid to rail against.

Just like the small child who had hidden under market barrows and in sewers, she had nowhere to belong. Nothing to hold. Nothing to do.

Really, she couldn't lie down on the rocks. And she couldn't sit on this horse on the crest of a mountain until she fell to dust. She had to move, had to keep moving. She drew in another deep breath, stretching all the stiffness out of her chest and blew it out in a long hard gust.

Touching her heels to the side of her horse, she pushed him into a jog and followed the tracks Dragan had left over grass and stones.

* * * * *

By moving directly west, keeping the sun always ahead, Dragan pushed through the pine forests without the benefit of roads. The tall straight trunks presented little difficulty for the horses, and the stretches of dense-leaved darkness were mercifully short. He dealt with the silence of the ride by pressing as much speed out of it as possible.

Freya rode without comment or complaint, and he convinced himself again and again that as never before, the end of this journey would justify any means. A small lie, and so much in return.

He made no move to stop through the day; he had no interest in food. Ahead, no more than twenty leagues, was the future he had made. The sooner they were safely home the better. Then they would have time to mend; time to settle and to find a life together. The faster they moved the better. And if he pushed them hard enough all day, he could clear the forests and follow the road north to Bralz. It was too soon for his gift to be ready, but he'd find some way to give her the best of this life.

He would find ways to make the lie worth its cost.

"Dragan, that's enough." Her voice startled him, as if he'd been caught or compromised, and he pulled the horse up hard. "I need to stop, this is ridiculous."

"We can stop," he answered, regretting the necessary delay just as much as the need to keep pushing ahead. Plainly she was out of breath, and he chided himself as she lifted her water flask and drank deeply. "We can make it through the forest and out onto the road by nightfall if we keep moving, that's all. But we can take a break."

"Of course we can damn well stop. You weren't afraid of those riders on the mountain; I can't see why you're so desperate to outrun them down here."

Her logic stopped him for a moment, and he laughed. "I'd forgotten them." It was true, he'd given no thought to the men sent after Freya from the moment she had decided to follow him down the rough slope and on into the forest. None of his thoughts had travelled backwards. All of his concentration was on the journey ahead.

"Yeah, right." She swung down from the saddle and arched her back. "We aren't running away from the mess I made, are we? We're running toward.... No, it escapes me." Tugging loose the straps of her saddlebag, she stretched an awkward smile over her mouth. There was no way she could pretend it was real humour, or that their situation was amusing, but it was an attempt at making everything okay, and normal, and he smiled back.

"Paradise," he finished for her. "You'll have to take my word for it, but it's there."

"Good." The smile had gone, and she searched through her open bag for bread. She tore off a lump and threw it up to him, reminding him he could climb down out of his own saddle. There was a bag of dried apples, and she sniffed at them, grimaced and threw them too, to where he stood. "They didn't plan on being away for long, did they? Look at this muck."

"No." He'd given it no thought. "I suppose they figured on catching up with you yesterday, and then back in barracks by nightfall."

"Eight of them." There was a little more joy in the grin she threw at him, a little bit of pride, even if it twitched and faded into a silent nod. "Not bad for one defector."

"Not bad."

They ate, and Freya walked some of the kinks out of her back. She didn't speak about

the fact that all she had ever wanted from life had gone in a moment. He didn't question her silence. Before he could be forced to acknowledge his avoidance, he called her back to the journey. In the half-light of the woods, it was more gut than science that told him the hours left of daylight were few, and he assured himself as they moved off again, that they had to make it home soon. As soon as they were home safe, everything would be okay. The sooner, the better.

Darkness had fallen hard by the time they broke free of the trees, but the road was clear and wide, cobbled in pale stone and easy to follow. Bralz was within spit, with the promise of hot food and comfortable rooms.

Bralz had other ideas.

With the hours of riding cramping in his back and thighs, Dragan allowed himself the small relief of slouching, letting go of the rigid determination that held his back straight. He even smiled, nodding a brief hello at the first two villagers who watched their progress toward the market square. The inn, or what passed for an inn, was away from the town centre, dumped between the village green and the market stockyards.

The front room smelled stale, with ale and piss rising over the hot stench of slow rotting straw. A stew pot stood on an open fire, and a barkeep sat among the dozen customers, apparently uninterested in the arrival of his guests. He was alone in his disinterest. Every other man in the room watched openly as they entered, or covertly from under their brows and behind their mugs.

“You've come through here before?”

Dragan nodded to the speaker, a small man with nothing to mark him as any more than a local drinker. “And I'll take a room again. Two meals, two ales.”

“You could take a stable.” A second local chipped in, less inclined to stand free of deeper shadows at the back. Dragan took a single step forward, not toward any one person, but deliberately away from the door.

Beside him Freya straightened, and he could feel old angers rising to heat her skin. Her eyes moved quickly over the assembly, narrowing as she made an assessment, and he was thankful her sword was strapped to her pack. At least it was not in her hand.

The proprietor, a man who valued peace or recognized an uneven contest for what it was, stood. “There's a table,” he mumbled. “Got stew. And ale. Room's at the top of the stairs.” He moved his own jug of ale and some mugs to a nearby table, then shuffled slowly toward the stew pot, and one by one the watcher's eyes settled back onto their own affairs, or onto hands more used to ploughs than swords.

Dragan motioned to the free table and she took a seat, facing out so he sat with his back to the room.

“They're old,” she said quietly, sipping ale and calmly evaluating every other man in the room.

“They are.” He nodded. She was gripping the handle of her mug tight, and lines of strain had formed around her mouth and eyes. The innkeeper dropped two bowls onto the table in front of them, and as he did several patrons stood to leave. “And they're nothing to us. Eat.”

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RING.

Freya watched them watching her as they walked from the room, and savoured the bitter taste of her past. She filled her mouth with thick brew and swirled it around, sucking it back through her teeth as she swallowed. “You didn’t have any trouble here, before?”

Dragan didn’t look up from his meal. “Eat,” he repeated as if food would fill any holes she might have torn. “I want to talk to you. There are things we should settle.”

Lumps of grey gristle skidded away from the tip of her spoon, and grey-green turnip hid in grey-green gravy. There was no appetite this food was likely to satisfy. Under the vague awareness of hunger, her stomach churned. It was empty, and it seemed a good deal easier to pour herself another mug of ale and let the bitter tonic fill her slowly to the brim.

It was easier, too, to look away from things that hurt too much for words. Until now, some of the issues that arose from her choices had been sketchy. Until now, there remained in her the hope that everything might somehow return to the way it should have been. Until now.

In a market town where old husbandmen gathered to drink and moan, atop the stairs in a dirty inn, a room was waiting. On top of the mountain there had been too much of nothing and nowhere to go, but now she found she had followed at breakneck speed to find a tiny room where four walls might cut off all her air.

She caught a turnip lump with her spoon and squashed it flat. “If push came to shove, how many of them do you think we could take? I think all, but it looks like most of them would rather spit at me and leave than stand to argue their point.”

“Eat.”

“I don’t want to eat. Drink. Here, let me pour you some more of this fine bitter ale.” She poured until his mug slopped over, and he moved it from her reach. “Don’t waste it,” she said. “Drink it.”

When he looked up, pushing his empty bowl away and bringing the overfull mug to his lips, there were shadows in his eyes that made her churning stomach flip. “If you don’t want to eat, we should go upstairs.”

“I want to drink. And maybe make some new friends, here. What do you think are my chances?” She tried a smile, and hoped it was brighter than it felt. Her cheeks had gone cold, and a numbing fear was spreading up her spine. The hand that held the jug of beer shook.

“It’s your clothes, that’s all. If you wear skirts, this won’t happen.”

“That simple, huh? Well, let’s drink to that.” She tried to refill his mug but he covered it with his hand and looked directly into her eyes. She set the jug down, reaching instead for her own mug but he caught her fingers. His free hand reached to his throat, to a trifle tied inside his tunic and he pulled, snapping the cord that held it.

“This is for you.” He slapped his hand down onto the table and when he moved it away he’d left a silver ring. The leather cord still wound through his fingers and he lifted slowly, letting the ring slide off to roll and settle between them. It was a simple band, a twist of wires beaten flat, but it terrified her.

“I haven’t had a contract drawn, I thought I had time, but it’s easy enough.” He smiled at her, and a buzzing started in her ears that made his voice seem very far away. He held onto her fingers, tight, they were beginning to throb with the pressure of his grip. “Everything I own is yours to share.”

Suddenly, she wished she’d eaten. The ale was bubbling up toward her brain making her uneasy stomach lurch and spasm, and there didn’t seem to be enough air in the room. She kept trying to breathe but her chest was refusing to fill. “And me?” she whispered, her mouth dry and hesitant. “What do I give to you?”

“You. Just you.”

“Me. I give you me?” That was a high price to pay for a bit of land somewhere with sheep. It was a high price indeed.

There was an earnestness in his expression that terrified her even more than the small piece of silver that still sat among the splinters and spilled beer. Should she take it? Should she put it on her finger?

If four small walls had seemed constricting, now she had the circumference of a tiny silver band to fit every part of her life into. “This is what I’ve chosen, isn’t it?” Until he answered, she could not have been certain whether she spoke the words aloud.

“Yes.”

“What you’ve chosen.” It was his choice, his arguments, his dream. Her frozen body was trying to move backward, wanting to pull away from the table and all it held, but she was unable to do more than brace her feet against the filthy floor. Only her insides moved and writhed. Fears as vast as Hades opened in her belly and everything that made her solid fell into its pit.

“Yes.” He looked down, moving the ring with his finger, rolling it slowly back and forth like a silent debate, but when he looked up at her again she saw fear in him for the first time. It mattered what she said, here and now. With the urge to cry, to beg and plead for another answer burning behind her heart, and the sure and certain knowledge there was no other path she could take choking her on resentment, it mattered how she answered.

She’d done her begging, and there was no more to gain from whining. The future had made itself. His choice or hers, it hardly mattered. It was the only choice she had. Trying to hold it steady, she reached her hand toward him and let him slip the ring onto her finger.

It wasn’t too tight. If it had been it might have sent her running for the door and out into the night, alone and ready to slash and punish anything that got in her way. It was loose, spinning easily below her knuckle and she pulled it off and moved it to her index finger. There it was a snug fit, and she looked at its shine against skin that was still chapped and dry from her weeks of scrubbing. It was her hand, but she held it at a distance, trying to word any thought that didn’t concern ownership.

“So, that’s it?” It was all she could manage.

“That’s it, unless you want witnesses. Who’s left behind me? Anyone you think looks like a wedding guest?”

“No. No one special.”

“It’s not what you imagined.”

“I never imagined.”

“Let’s drink, then.” It was the kindest thing he’d said all day. They could drink to the joy of a newly bound couple, to a future not imagined. She could drink.

“Our health,” she said. She forced a smile. It didn’t come easily, but it mattered; she knew it mattered to Dragan.

“A clean start,” he said.

And the tears she’d forced down burned hot as she wondered when he’d thought she was dirty.

The room was small. The wooden floor was carelessly laid and smoke from the fire below filtered up on drafts. A grey pall clung against the low ceiling. A dirty lamp added greasy smut to the mix without offering any useful light. That might have been for the best. What she could see did not impress.

Dragan couldn’t stand. He ducked the door frame and remained hunched over until he chose to sit on the wad of dirty straw that presumed itself a mattress. Even rocks and tufts of grass were clean. Freya preferred a military cot; at least the frame and bands were usually free of vermin. The mattress here looked and smelled like it had housed many and varied generations. Some were plainly still in residence.

“Nice,” she declared half-heartedly, and he laughed. With their saddle bags laid against the wall, the room was full and yet there was nothing in it to discuss. The window was a narrow loophole, used as a roost by rock doves at some time in the past. They had left their opinion of the amenities streaked down the wall, and when she walked to the opening to pull the shutter closed she brushed away a layer of dust and feathers. “The stables were cleaner. He wasn’t being an ass, he was offering advice.”

“It’s warmer in here.”

A remark about hot blood rushed up to her mouth, the sort of thing she would quip without thought on any other night, but here she bit it off, afraid of the implications it might hold. She didn’t want to turn back to face him, but standing with her fingers on the dirty sill and looking at a closed shutter was too obviously an evasion.

She wanted to scream.

It was a scream that had burned in her bleak centre for as long as she could remember. And the mechanisms, whatever they were, that had always stilled its hysteria, pushed it down so far into the darkness inside she could only hear its echoes. Except when she felt cornered and powerless.

Tonight she could hear it ringing in her ears, and she could feel its icy burn.

She made herself turn; made herself smile. This room was too small and she did not want to give herself to anyone. Not even Dragan. Not even him. The rush of noise inside her head was making her breath short and her palms clammy, and there was nowhere for her to run.

She couldn’t fight. She had no reason to smash him in the face, but her hand trembled with the urge to do violence as she rubbed it up and down the roughness of her hip. And none of it was his fault. The shaking in her hands was getting worse, and she spun back to the window and pushed the shutter wide. There was no more air to breathe there, only dust and dander.

“Freya?”

“Huh?” She snapped the shutter closed again, turned and used the momentum to keep herself moving. It was only two steps; three. She couldn’t make any more intelligible sounds, but she’d moved close enough for him to reach for her. To touch her hand. To hold it.

She wanted to pull it away, but mastery was rising over fear. Her throat was working hard to swallow something she could not make into words, and she made herself look at him.

“What’s wrong?”

A short sharp laugh shocked from her mouth, and she combed her free hand back through her hair. “This room stinks. We should go outside.” Inspiration clutched at straws. “We should go out onto the green. There’s no moon. Come on, we could give them all something to mutter about.” She pulled at his hand, but he didn’t move.

“They’d kill you. They’ve killed others for less.”

“They could try.” Desperation was pushing a potent cocktail into her system and she laughed again. “They’re a bunch of old farmers.”

“No, they’d be a mob. Different animal altogether and not one you want to try to face down.” Shaking his head slowly, Dragan used his grip on her hand to help pull himself into a crouching stand. Carefully he shuffled past her to the window and pushed the shutter open wide again. He grunted, nodding slightly as he reached back for their cloaks, took her hand and said, “Come on.”

Passing down the stairs, he handed Freya her cloak and mumbled about the cold. Grins flickered and giggles of relief were starting in her chest, and she forced her face to model serious intent as she followed through the nearly empty bar room and out into the night air.

He walked as if he had been called on an urgent errand and she jogged every second step to keep up. Where ever they were going, they were going to get there soon and the churn of emotion that fired in her blood was boiling itself into aphrodisia. They crossed the muddy green and into the shadows of an open bier. It was little more than a thatched hayrick; feed stored for the stock brought to market.

With her back to the fragrant straw, he stopped suddenly and pulled her against himself. “Close enough?” he whispered.

“Close enough.”

His mouth was hot, and the night air bit her skin, raising gooseflesh sensitive to every brush of flesh or breath. All around her the silent night had eyes. The village shadows were full of threats, vague and invisible but she could feel every one.

Her hands were eager, skilled and unerring as she unbuckled the wide leather belts from their hips, and drew the laces of his trousers. His tunic was stiff, woven from coarse-spun wool and she dragged it roughly up his back, struggling with the bulky weight of it. Liaisons had been so much more easily accomplished in the days when they’d dared to wear less. But experience counted for something, as he reached over his own shoulders, gathered the garment up his back and tugged it off over his head.

Even as she slipped the ties of her breeches and wriggled them down over her hips, her eyes traced the shadowed contours of his chest. She knew the scent of his skin, the shape and form and feel of his shoulders, stomach and arms. She knew every ripple, mound and dip where muscle met bone, and she didn’t need moonlight to see him. Her fingertips remembered every curve. Her tongue knew the sweet taste of him.

And his hands knew her.

They lifted her higher against the haystack, rucking her tunic up her sides and opening the softness of her belly and breasts to the cold air and the heat of his mouth. Her skin puckered and drew up tight in response, and a sob of pleasure broke the cold silence.

Her breeches were still laced into her boots, and they tangled at her ankles, frustrating her attempts to raise her feet. Straw was scratching against her back with every thrust and her tunic was bunching up under her arms and around her throat, but the small constrictions made no difference in the end. Even when the ring she wore caught in his hair she redoubled her grip, weaving her fingers tighter against his nape, and released herself into the wash of pleasure he brought her in return.

If she had to submit herself to any man in this world, there were worse choices than this.

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HOME.

She slept as she always did, whether on a mountainside or in a bed: arms crossed, hands pushed tight into her shoulders, and knees pulled up hard. And as he'd done at every opportunity, Dragan tucked the cloak closer in around her shoulders, then he slipped off the filthy mattress and crouched to dress.

There were things he needed to do in the village, and she could rest. The door was only woven oak and willow. He would have preferred something more substantial, but there was no way to lock her in or strangers out. The day was dawning again on a ropey ball of tension that he couldn't shake, and the desire to keep her safe, to protect her, was just one more knot.

Looking down at where she slept, he shook his head slightly. The smoky stench of the room had worsened overnight, but he left the shutter closed against the chill of morning air. She'd returned to the room without complaint and slept soundly in the squalor she'd hated the night before. He looked around himself; he could see nothing in here that had made her so fearful. Sometimes she was a mystery.

The seamstress had quickly recognized both his urgency and her advantage. The clothes he had managed to buy were not the soft, expensive garments he'd hoped for. They were coarse woollen skirts and a plain bodice, with none of the fine embroidery or coloured laces other women seemed to like. They were made for another customer and had cost the same as the finer garments. Compensation for the inconvenience. The underslip was fine soft linen, but it had been made for someone fuller-figured than Freya. He hoped it would do.

When he returned to the room, she was waiting impatiently.

"The horses are ready," he said as he entered.

She stood at the tiny window, staring out across the green. "Good. The sooner we leave here, the happier I'll be."

He tossed the roll of clothing down onto the mattress and waited for her to turn.
“Maybe.”

“Why?” She eyed the bundle suspiciously. “What is it?”

“Your concession. These people don’t find change easy.” He watched her kneel on the mattress and pull at the clothes with a look of disappointment or distaste on her face.

“They’re suspicious of a woman in uniform.”

“Bollocks. They want their women in uniform. This uniform.” She held the underslip up and pressed her face into it, peering at him through the near-translucent cloth. When she dropped it she picked up the heavy overskirt. “These are harder to run in.”

There were ghosts in her eyes, old fears that still haunted her, but this was a small compromise and one that would be worth the effort in the long run. “There’s nothing to run away from out here.”

She didn’t answer, but her look said there were things that would keep her running for as long as she lived. Things, he guessed, he would never understand, but they turned his thoughts to the men Paske had ordered in pursuit.

If they had returned to the lakeside camp they were unlikely to track her as far as Bralz. Even if by some miracle they had been able to follow through the forest, once they hit the hard surface her direction was open to the winds. Paske alone knew Dragan was with her, and he would not be sharing his thoughts with anyone else.

There was not a great possibility that they would try to follow anywhere. With their comrades dead and the officer who ordered the chase lying frozen on the mountainside, they would most likely return to Orlik. An assumption could easily be made that Freya had continued on eastward and disappeared into the ranks of the dispensable.

It could do no harm to keep his thoughts on pursuit to himself. All they needed was to gain the safety of his farm, and that as soon as possible. If she moved all the quicker for the thought of being pursued it would be for the best.

She turned into a corner in a bashful attempt at privacy as she changed. He had known her body’s blinding naked passions for a decade, yet in cold daylight she always turned away into shadows. There was food to pack and miles to ride, and he left her to her deal with her dress dissatisfaction alone.

At their second meal stop, late in the afternoon, her expression was still reproachful. The skirts were harder to ride in and the shoulder straps of the bodice slipped down her arm repeatedly, but they had passed close by to a number of dwellings, all with watchful eyes, so the choice had been justified despite her complaints.

“Do you think they’re still following?” She picked at the bread she held, rolling the heavy crumb into balls and placing them in her mouth one by one.

He leaned in to the fire, stirring cold mutton and morels gathered from the forest floor into a coarse gruel of barley and lentils. When the thickening mix bubbled, he sat back to look at her. The plain answer was no, but he didn’t want to say it. Instead, he answered, “They can’t track us on the roads. Even if they followed us as far as Bralz, they have no way to know which way we moved. If they are still coming, they’re running blind on the chance they chose the right direction. We will be at home by sundown and no one will find you there.”

“No.” The answer didn’t cheer her, and she flicked flakes of crust at the flames. Her thoughts were running in anxious circles, visible in the ticks and frowns that formed and fled as she stared at the fire. But he couldn’t read their content.

There was nothing to fuel her rising agitation. He stirred the porridge and readied her mug to take a portion. “There are sixteen lambs this year,” he said calmly, as he ladled and then held the mug toward her. “Two sets of twins.”

She looked up sharply, ignoring the food. “I don’t know anything about lambs.”

“Not yet, but you will. It’s spring. There are babies everywhere.” He lifted the mug higher, forcing her to acknowledge it.

“I don’t know anything about babies, either.” She stood to snatch the offered food, and pulled the loose bodice down into place once again. “I don’t know anything about this home of yours. Or spring. Or lambs. These are things I’ve never had to think about.”

Dragan watched her. Her free hand raked through her hair repeatedly, tugging down through the length of it until her fingers pulled free with wisps of hair caught around them. The terror that shone from her eyes was that of an animal cornered, and it made no sense.

She was safe; he’d made sure of it. “You’ll get used to it.”

Freya froze, glaring at him as if he had accused her, or ridiculed her, or at very least ignored her opinion. If her anger had a point, it was not one he could see.

“What are you worried about?” he asked, but the question had rhetorical undertones and he stirred his own meal, easing some of the heat before he selected a lump of mutton and ate. Her answer was silence, and she stalked off toward the nearby riverbank, tripping and catching at her skirts as she went.

Sighing at the inevitability of her moodiness, he searched through his food for the dark shreds of mushroom. There was time for her to come to terms with all that was changed in her life.

The farmhouse stood in a sheltered hollow, its louvered ridge-cap smoking gently and soft lamp light spilling through the open doorway. As they approached, Dragan was pleased with the scene it presented. The home he had always known was solid and well built. Its heavy thatch was clean and dark in the evening shadows. The smokehouse and the bier stood near, higher on the slope, so the cottage itself seemed to nestle comfortably amongst the budding fruit trees.

It looked as much like a home as any he’d seen, and he was proud of what he had made of it.

There was not enough light to gauge Freya’s reactions, but he pulled his horse to a walk and waited for her to ride abreast. “That’s it,” he said plainly. “Home.”

She pulled her horse to a stop and sat looking at the scene below. When her silence had grown cold, he reached to rest a hand on her shoulder.

“Tell me again it will be all right,” she whispered. “Tell me this is my best choice. My only choice.”

“It will be better than all right. You’ll see. I asked you to trust me; I won’t let you

down.”

“You never have.”

“So let’s go down there and get out of these saddles. I’ve ridden enough in the last few days to last a lifetime.”

“Funny,” she said, “I was just getting used to it again.”

He led down the slope slowly, watching ahead and keeping a wary eye on the lit doorway. He was home a good month before they would expect him, and even if Lenka had obeyed his command, which was unlikely enough, she would have stayed on with his mother while she thought he was gone.

They dismounted at the bier, turning the horses into the safety of the house-yard, and she followed as he walked the narrow path with their packs over his shoulder. When they reached the door a cry went up and Lenka burst from within. “It’s him, Mother. Dragan’s come home.”

She dropped to her knees in the weak light, sobbing on the path before him. “You’ve come home,” she repeated, sobbing and gripping the roughness of his breeches.

“Get up.” He had no patience for this kind of foolishness. Not now. Not tonight. Ahead, as he grabbed Lenka’s arm and tried to pull her to her feet, his mother’s face appeared around the jamb.

“Get up, girl.” She echoed her son, strength enough in her voice for a woman too frail to manage her life. “Get up now, I tell you. He’s not alone.”

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BURDENS.

Freya had found her fears deepening as the night came on. Rationalizations that spun in ever decreasing circles kept her vacillating between a state of near panic, and a numb despondency bought on by exhaustion. In her mind, the journey’s end had not been a cause for sighing relief, but the approach of a monumental dread. There was, waiting there, the certainty that she would be forever trapped in a silent world of utter boredom and obscurity.

Still, in all she’d imagined when she’d followed her partner, the vision of a young woman, hysterical and clinging to his leg as he wrestled with their packs, was not one she had ever considered. The more he swore and tried to free himself, the more determined this girl became to keep her not inconsiderable weight against him. And the old woman matched him, curse for curse.

Just when her own situation seemed to have reached the point of unbearable frustration, here was a sideshow to rival the best and Freya found herself beginning to laugh, despite herself.

Dragan was not so amused and his temper was clearly rising, which only made it all seem funnier. By the time he had thrown the packs to the ground and used both hands to pry the woman loose, Freya had stepped back from the weak light and was watching it all, delighted.

“Don’t you laugh.” From nowhere, the old woman’s anger sought Freya out. “You’ve no business here; this is all your fault.”

It was hard to take the small, bent figure seriously in the circumstances, but Dragan clearly did. He had succeeded in driving the young woman off, and she’d fled inside as he carried the argument up into the matron’s face. “I warned you, Mother.”

“Warned me what? What will you do? Send an old woman out into the pastures to freeze?” She too, turned back into the house with her son at her heels, and Freya stepped up to the packs, shaking her head in amazement as she carried them to the door. She was reluctant to step through when she was clearly unwelcome, but she peered in to watch.

“Lenka, go back to your father’s house. My mother doesn’t need you here and I don’t want you. Get ready; I’ll saddle you a horse.” His tone was even, but Freya could hear the fury in his tightly clipped syllables.

“I told you, Son, she’s staying here with me. When you come to your senses, she’ll be staying here with you and that one out there will go back to where she came from.” No one spared a look at her, but Freya let the amusement slip from her mouth as she began to realize just how much animosity she had inherited with her ring.

“You can’t send me away. Don’t, please Dragan. Let me stay with your mother, to help her. I won’t get under your feet.” Lenka’s lips were pale, and her eyes were reddened by her earlier performance, but there was some defiance in the lines of her face even as she begged. “You can’t put me out in the night, not with wolves loose and no moon to ride by.”

Freya could see her determination to stay where she was, and she wondered just what he would do if both women refused to obey him.

“He’ll not put you out, girl. You steady yourself and get that fire burning. He’ll want a meal and some ale. You go off now and fetch him his due.” His mother comforted her companion, and then turned back to jab a finger toward Freya. “What do you want that for? What can she give you half as good as you have here? Send her back to her own kind, and stop acting the fool.”

Her own kind? Even here, she was not free. Paradise, Dragan had promised. Peace. But here too, there was hatred and bigotry. There in the shadows, the howl of her inner scream began to rise as humiliation and anger burned into red hot shame.

“This,” Dragan seized her hand and dragged her into the room, exposing her to the light, “is my wife.” He held her hand up, dragging her along behind him like she was a streamer trailing from the prize of his wedding gift. He turned with it, flashing the silver ring into Lenka’s face.

The girl covered her mouth with both her hands, beginning to sob again as she recognized what he held. “No,” she sobbed. “No. You can’t have wed her. Not her.”

“I have. As I said I would.”

Freya tried to pull her hand back, to wrest some small dignity from the appalling situation, but his grip was tight and his determination to make a point too strong.

Lenka ran to stand with his mother, still weeping loudly into her hands, as if the old woman could somehow recant any vows he had made. And Freya felt inclined to give her consent. She watched him, furious and arguing with his mother over choices he had made, choices which had become her life, and he spoke as if she was not even in the room.

“I’m bound to him already,” Lenka cried over their bickering, raising her tear streaked face to Freya and holding her hands cupped around her ample belly. “I bedded with him. Even now I might have his baby, here.”

Her earnest confession shocked a laugh. “Good!” Freya pulled her hand back hard, and succeeded in ripping it out of his grasp. “That’ll save me the inconvenience of having to bear him any.”

The furore stopped. In an instant every word was stilled and the vast emptiness of the outside world rushed in on the silence. All eyes were on her. All the cold anger Dragan had directed at his mother and their hysterical guest, was turned toward her. Slowly, she watched his emotion reform itself, and the light in his eyes turn to hurt and confusion.

She took a perverse pleasure in seeing her own pain reflected. He had brought her to this. None of it had been hers to choose, but she had trusted him.

All Lenka’s noise was still, but the tears ran down her face as she turned to look at Dragan, waiting to hear his reaction to this outrage. His mother was quicker. “There. There you have it. As I told you. They’re not natural, her kind. She’s not for you, Son.” She spoke so solemnly, it seemed she was sealing a vow more binding than those Freya had never made.

And Dragan answered in a voice not much louder, but as sharp as her two best blades. “She’s my wife.” With his fists caught in silent strain, he walked past Freya to the door. Over his shoulder as he stepped out, he said, “I’ll saddle the horse for you, Lenka. You’re leaving.”

Lenka’s weeping began again, and she stood briefly glaring her terrible grief at Freya, then she turned and ran out the door after him, calling and begging as she ran.

“Well then. That’s my only comfort gone, thanks to you.” Dragan’s mother leaned across the table to ensure her words and meanings could not be lost. “You are nothing good, nothing. And nothing good will come of you being here. Are you pleased with yourself? That poor child is out there now, alone in the night.”

Freya leaned on the same surface, her face close to the old woman. “Yes, she’s gone. That’s one down, one to go.”

“You are fooling yourself, you stupid girl. You don’t belong here, and you won’t ever belong.” She laughed. “You don’t even want to be here, do you? You won’t see me out of my home. Not now, not ever. And my son will realize his mistake, soon enough.”

“He will never prosper, not while you’re here. Every neighbour in the district will know of you. We don’t need more women here now, and never your sort. As long as he has you beside him, he will earn nothing from them but contempt. And this life is too hard to survive alone.”

There was an awful power in her certainty. Freya would have chosen to laugh in her face, but she could find no humour in the words. If she’d stood across from a man, she might have taken the chance to free some of her pent up rage in blows. She might even have drawn a weapon. But as it was, she wished only for the cover of deep darkness so she could weep for sorrows too profound to be brought into the light.

She might have run out into the darkness of the night, but Dragan was out there with his hysterical lover and his anger. Away from him there was nothingness for twenty leagues in every direction. The closest thing to a familiar sanctuary was the city of Talsiga to the south, with its wealth and its guilds and its cruelty.

Her adversary struggled to the door instead. “Don’t you worry yourself my darling,” she called out, as she leaned on the jamb. “You have a home here, tell your father that. As soon as we can, we will have you back under our roof. Don’t you fret.” Carefully she stepped out into the night still calling encouragement to Lenka as she went.

The costs of Dragan’s choices weren’t all hers to carry, then. He had accepted his share of the burden without ever making her aware of it, just as he always had. The heat from some of the shames she knew crossed into her cheeks. She needed to apologize to him for her words. But there was no way to take them back, no matter how much she wished she could. Or how much she wished they were untrue.

But there was more she could do. She could try hard to be happy here, for his sake if nothing else.

Her dress had twisted, the basque turning easily on her each time the shoulder slipped, and she straightened it self-consciously. She hated it. She hated the coarse cloth and the heavy skirts. She had worn her suede breeches for as many years of her life as she had worn dresses, and she felt she would choke on the masses of ill-fitting fabric.

But she could wear them without complaint if she had to.

Walking quietly to the door, she collected their few possessions and brought them in and laid them in the light. There was nowhere to put riches if they’d had any, so they would not be missed. There was, against the near wall, a bed with clean linen and thick blankets and furs. There was also, by the table and stools, a small open hearth that smoked up to the roof vent. Past that was another smaller bed, a single high-backed chair, and a chest. On the chest was Dragan’s box and she walked to it and flipped it open.

All the small mementos were there just as they had been, and she slid the feather across her lips, trying to remember better times. For both of their sakes.

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WEIGHT.

Dragan swept his hand through the winter’s barley, smiling at the weight of the ears, silver green as yet but heavy with grain. Harvest was nearly upon them already, and his meadow would yield well. There was contentment here, as summer crept onto the farm. For too many years he had been called away before the fruits of his winter labours could be seen.

Now the barley ears were full, the grape vines were lush with the winter’s muck-heap slurries he’d run, and fruit was setting. His animals were fat and well. All across the pastures wildflowers and moths, bees and dragonflies lifted a haze of buzzing colour. Everything felt as it should. Yes, he was content.

Yells or curses broken by distance rose on the air and he searched for their source. Over the rill, where the pasture climbed up into the beech woods, Freya ran after scattering sheep. Her frustration was clear, as the animals gathered and paused to watch her approach, then took to their heels again, separating, circling wide, and rushing off through the trees.

He laughed as he watched her. How she had managed to get them into that part of the

pasture was anyone's guess. They had been fenced in by the house and her only chore with them today was to open the gate to the house-yard and give them access to the bier. They were due for shearing and he wanted them in close at hand. Yet, there they were; rushing through the beeches, in a paddock two gates over from the one they should be in.

He chuckled as he started walking, heading with no great speed toward the footbridge over the rivulet that separated them.

Each morning, now, she had a set of tasks that freed her from the house and from his mother's spite. She fed the hens, turned the sow and piglets out into the yard, milked the milker and turned her out on the pasture with her calf for the day. Then she could skim the milk and set aside the cream for churning. There was nothing difficult in anything he'd given her. He thought.

And there could be no doubt she had put her best into every effort she made. He had heard not one word of complaint since their arrival. The peace of the countryside was calming the restlessness in her spirit. It was just as he'd hoped it would be.

Only one concern weighed on his mind.

In all the years he'd known her, Freya had never been freely available to him as a lover. She had, in every sense, chosen times and places in accordance with her own eccentric bursts of passion. And, at any time in those years, she had been as likely to choose another man as him. He'd taken some time to accept it, but he had come to a sense of pride, knowing she would come to him without duress, without bind or obligation.

Always, the risk was worth it when she came with passion trembling in her flesh, with her skin and mouth burning and her eyes alight. She was elemental. It was everything he loved in her from the first; the hot blood and passion, the fearlessness and refusal to be cowed and bullied. In her he'd found a lover like no other he'd ever known.

But somewhere on their journey that light had gone out and taken all its scintillating heat with it. Since the night of their arrival she had lain in his bed like a puppet made of warm, soft flesh that lacked the rods to animate it. She returned his kiss and little more.

It was a great shame, even if it was an attitude better suited to a wife. He had loved her well enough as she was, and he missed that vital spark.

"What man works all day and then comes in to cook his own meal? No man."

"No," he agreed, as he stirred the soup bones, lifting them to keep them from catching. It saved argument.

"We've too much butter. See it sits there turning rank. It's too far to take it fresh to market and we could have bartered it for good black cherries, if we still had neighbours who would trade."

"Yes," he said, as he dropped onions and turnip into the pot. He no longer heard the words she used, only the noise of her speaking.

Freya sat with her forehead and elbows on the table and her hands laced behind her neck, trying to ignore the constant drone. Beside her was the whetstone and shears, their blades as keen as razors, glinting like a threat in the soft lamplight. If there had been

something of interest to share with her, he might have tried to distract her from his mother's constant criticism, but the past had proven it only gave the old woman ammunition for her cruelty.

When Freya spoke, it was unexpected. She turned to where Goda lay and asked, "Did your husband fall from his tree, or did he leap?"

The temptation he felt to laugh at the bitter truth of that observation fled as his mother took the bait.

"My husband died because my son left him with too much work. He should have been here helping with the winter chores as we expected. But he was too busy chasing after you."

It was an endless round and he stepped away from the fire and pot, took Freya's hand and pulled her to her feet. "Come for a walk," he said quietly.

Out in the summer night, the moon was rising near to full and a breeze spread just a hint of chill on the air. It was a time, he knew, for comfort and affection, but they were not gestures that came easily to him. Instead he said, "I'm sorry. Short of throwing her out into the yard, there's nothing I can do to stop her and she knows it."

Freya gave him no more than a tired smile which might have meant she understood. In days gone by she would have had a mouthful of obscenity to offer his mother, and likely, one for him, too. She had made no real attempt to defend herself, not physically, not even verbally. Most days she let the insults and the bigotry slide off her skin as if she didn't hear it. She did. He knew she did and he knew the fierce anger that burned in her when she was insulted. But she showed nothing of it. He hoped it was just the calming effect of farm life.

Once she would have laughed and suggested solutions that involved steel and blood. Instead she stood quietly in front of him, watching her feet and tugging at the bottom of her bodice.

"Perhaps I was wrong." As soon as he said it, he knew she had leapt to false conclusions. Her eyes shone with the sudden light of hope as she snatched at possibilities, but he took her hand and rushed to explain. "I sent Lenka away because I don't want her here, but that might have been a mistake. As long as she is here, my mother has someone to wait on her hand and foot and she thinks she is in command. While she's gone, you have to face her every day. Maybe if we bring Lenka back to care for her some of the bickering will stop."

As quickly as the lights of hope had filled her face, the shadows of disappointment took their place. A tiny frown ticked between her brows and she nodded, leaving her face turned down from the moonlight.

"Yes," she agreed softly. "At least I won't have to stay with her all day. That alone might be worth it." The tired smile touched her lips again as she added, "But she will never let you forget she won. Or me." She pulled her hand back, crossing her arms in tight across her belly, watching her toes as they twisted a divot in the dust at her feet.

"You wouldn't care if she was here?"

"No."

That hurt. He wanted her to care, or at least show some sort of concern, but she shrugged away any suggestion of jealousy or resentment.

"She was never a lover," he offered.

"No? Well, she seemed to think she was."

“She wants a husband; she thinks she should have been first in line.”

“You're a limited resource.” She nodded, smiling. “What else can I do? I'm never going to manage the house. It isn't even a question of learning how to do things. I don't know what it is that's supposed to be done.”

“That is one of Lenka's virtues, but if you took her onto a battle field she would never have done as well as you've done here. A wife is all she ever wanted to be. She'll do everything and be pleased for the chance to do it.” He wanted her to hear the praise in that.

“Lucky girl.”

“And you can come out into the field with me.”

“Lucky me.”

“It's hard work, but it's outside. There might be something in it that will make you happier.” There was so much he should say. Beside his thighs his fists formed and fell open, but there was no way for him to reach across the silence filling the distance between them. He wished it was easier, that she stood closer or that she had not wrapped herself so tightly in her own embrace. “I wish I could make you happier, Freya.”

She looked harder at the ground and what was left of her smile fell away. “So do I.”

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A GOOD WIFE.

The straw was piled high in the bier, bright and golden and smelling as clean as a summer's day, while inside the house, the odour of decay had pushed Freya past her determination to be content.

Layers of straw and rushes had been laid, and every year a new thatch was levelled over the floor. The old was left beneath the new, year after year, with the waste of life matted down into its depths and left to fester. The stone of Orlik was as hard and cold underfoot as the life it supported, but the warm stench of living in a compost heap was much worse.

The decision had come easily, inspired by the rush to be out of the claustrophobic confines of the house and away from the exasperation of fists clenched in endless frustration. Happy to be moving again in the open air, she tugged armloads of clean straw free, carried them to the door and piled them there, ready. When it seemed she had enough, she set to work with a hayfork and rake, dragging all of the rotting floor covering out into the sun.

As she worked, Goda whined incessantly and Freya ignored her, redoubling her efforts whenever she felt tempted to silence the old woman. It was hard work, and the packed earth floor was damp and musty when its covering was removed. Still, it was worth the toil when she spread the new straw across the floor, and the house began to smell fresh.

Dragan was away on the slopes with his vines, and she knew he'd be pleased by the improvement when he returned. It was something she could do, something to work her strength against and an effort that would ease the prickling memories of filth and destitution. But the old flooring was piled by the door where she'd pushed it out and it ruined the effect. Shrugging, blowing a hard breath full of fatigue down her chin, she looked at the damp grey

pile. She would need to rake it, bit by bit, to the yard for the chickens.

Or she could burn it.

Inspiration spurred her into action once again, and she took a lit brand from the fire and shoved it deep into the driest part of the waste pile. It took a moment to catch, but breezes teased the flame and encouraged it. In a few moments flames were crackling and licking out across the surface, drawing down into the mouldy depths, and smoking. The rotting grasses gave off thick grey smoke that billowed up and rushed into the house on the wind.

The louver above could only release a small amount of the smoke and although the window streamed, Freya coughed and choked as the house filled. The smoke smelled of rotten vegetation, and she caught up the pail that held the day's water and cast it over the flames. It dented the blaze a little, but only made the smoky smoulder worse. Coughing, she tried to avoid the worst of the billows as she threw a heavy fleece onto the flames and walked up onto it, stamping her feet. Her weight and the thick cover compressed the mass starving the deeper parts of air, and the flames themselves were dying down, but their vapours now carried the reek of singed wool as well as the putrid odour of damp, smoky rot.

She was smeared in sweat, soot, and damp mould when the emergency was finally dealt with. The pile of straw and ash still seethed on light breezes and it still blocked the doorway with filth. Far from smelling sweet and clean, the house reeked of dirty smoke and burned hair. It was a disaster. Between fits of coughing, Goda wailed from within, demanding help to get out of her home, and Freya rushed back in to help the old lady struggle out into the clean air.

As they crossed the doorway and out into the sunshine, Freya looked up from her misery to find Lenka standing with their horse, staring, horrified, at the fire. She seemed frozen, as Freya and Goda doubled against each other, gagging the smoke from their lungs. She dropped the reins and ran to them, seizing Goda in loving arms. "Mother, what's happened? Are you all right?"

There was no enquiry after Freya, but it was a relief to hand over the weight of the old woman. Goda had begun to weep, loudly praising the child of her heart, hugging Lenka hard against her breast, and stroking her hair and her cheeks like she was a precious golden icon.

Shrugging her cape from her shoulders, Lenka strode into the house and emerged with the high backed chair and set it steady for Goda to sit. "I had to come back, Mother. My father sent me and said I wasn't to leave here." She glanced over her shoulder at Freya and away, kneeling at the old woman's feet and clasping her hands. "Will he be angry, do you think? I'm afraid of what he'll say."

Freya answered for Goda, hoping she could head off another tirade. "He won't be angry. He's spoken of sending for you, anyway."

Shock dropped Lenka's mouth open. "When? Should I have come earlier? Why didn't he come for me?" She'd turned and seemed ready to leap up and sprint across the pastures.

"Goda needs someone to help her and I don't want to do it. He said he might keep you here to do for her."

"He'd keep me?" She smiled, having selected enough of the statement to suit her own purpose and turned back to Goda to share her joy.

"He needs someone to care for his needs, more like," Goda snapped. "He works all day

and then does a woman's chores when he comes in. There are some here who have no useful skills in a home. They'd be best suited to the barn."

It was going to start no matter what she did, so she picked her rake from where it leaned against the wall and began to rake the fetid mass toward the yard gate and the chickens.

Lenka's smile widened. "I should fetch him a meal. Where is he now?"

"Out with the vines. You go, quickly. There's pork belly and corn bread in there. He'll be glad of some proper food to work on."

"I should help you clear the smoke, first. You can't stay out here alone." Lenka stood with her hands on her hips, her thick ankles well-spaced and reliable.

"You're a good girl. My own sweet daughter. I'll be better now you're home, won't I? And he'll soon remember how good it was to have you here, before she came." Goda dropped her voice, but Freya worked no more than four paces from them so her words were easily heard. She rested her hand on Lenka's stomach and asked, "Has there been any show? Do you know yet if you're rounding?"

"No, no show. That's why my father sent me. I've been home a month and there's been no cycle to see. He's bent on Dragan keeping me. He says he must." She walked swiftly up to the saddle bags and lifted them down, holding them out as she walked back. "He sent these for you. He said you wouldn't have a good choice for fruit with things as they are, so he sent them for you and for Dragan. Also these."

One of the pouches was filled with cherries and plums, and tied to the handle of her basket were four stout jugs. Alcohol, Freya guessed, and she watched the basket that held them move. She hoped they were brewed strong. A well-earned blinder would do her good, especially after she'd finished raking this mess.

As darkness fell, she watched Dragan walk across the top of the ridge with Lenka walking slightly behind. The country paragon had wafted the smoke from the building as well as she could, and set the table with bowls of ripe red cherries and a large wedge of cheese. There was cold pork belly fat and onions left out ready to fry. A fine meal, indeed.

And she'd set a pot of vinegar to boil over the fire, its sharp steam driving the smoke vapours away from the walls and the thatch above. She'd taken out the furs and fleeces, all the blankets and linen, and draped them over the stone wall and briars to air in the sun. Then, when she had done all a good wife should do, she'd set out across the field with her basket filled with food and drink for Dragan.

Freya stood by the door, waiting. She had spent the afternoon raking her mess away, and then gone down to the river to try to wash some of the stench from her own skin and hair.

She'd wanted to open the first jug of strong wine and make a start on it, but she'd made herself wait, as she must. Impatiently, she counted the steps it took them to reach the house, trying to will them both to run.

Even as he ate, Lenka sat behind him, holding the jug of brandywine on her lap and waiting for him to drink from his cup before refilling it. His plate was piled high with seared pork and onions. The fruit bowls were moved into easy reach. Under her thigh she'd trapped a skewer, rolling a knob of cheese over the coals to soften and melt for his bread.

She was the perfect wife; Freya knew it with the same certainty that insisted she herself was incompetent. It was an irritation to see her so composed. Lenka knew how to do things

that Freya had never guessed anyone needed to do. Freya's response was to take one of the brandy jugs to herself and a chock of bread and some fruit, and to take a seat at the opposite end of the table. She nibbled at the solids, but she poured the warming liquor down her throat with absolute relish.

Goda laid on her bed, contented, a bowl of softened cheese, bread, and fruit resting on the floor in easy reach.

Everything was calm and ordered. Peaceful. There was no need for Goda to point out any deficits tonight, when simple perfection shone for her from the stool behind her son.

Dragan was tense and silent. He didn't speak at all when Lenka served him, or when she brushed her abundant breasts against his shoulder and arm as she served. Although Freya watched her every movement steadily, Lenka never returned her gaze. She was careful to always keep her eyes averted, but that didn't stop a smile of smug satisfaction from flashing across her lips from time to time.

Freya smiled, too, and poured herself another drink.

There was warmth in the air and in the wine. And watching annoyance tighten Dragan's brow while Lenka either ignored it or was oblivious to it, warmed her too, with the expectation of sport. For too long, here, she had let her heartbeat tick away the hours. There was fun to be had in this grim situation, and she grinned just a little as she considered the possibilities.

When the meal was done and Lenka had moved into the shadows by Goda's bed, Dragan leaned his elbows onto the table and raked his fingers up through his hair. "The grapes look good," he said to Freya. "They had enough rain over winter. If it holds off now, they'll be sweet and full at harvest."

There might have been something she could say to that, but it was of no interest to her. Grapes grew. Sheep fattened and had lambs. Each morning there were eggs to collect from the hens and milk to drain from a cow. Farming was not work that needed any genius, as far as she could see.

"Good," she said.

"The barley is heavy, too. It'll be a good crop, but harvest will be hard work."

"Why?" No genius, maybe, she thought, but muscle and sinew did not ever go astray. She had caught and dragged sheep for shearing, and their small size belied their brute strength in a tussle. Everything about working the land seemed to her to be hard work.

Lenka leapt from her chosen place and rushed to stand by his side. "Father'll send workers for us," she said, smiling her smug half-smile. To Freya directly, she said, "Since you came, none of the neighbours who'd come to help with the harvest will make the journey, like as not. It's a terrible hard job for one man, but if I ask, my father'll send hired workers." She grinned widely, "And even the neighbours'll come if there is money to be made."

"Problem solved." Freya shrugged and grinned back. "What a helpful little poppet your farm girl is, Dragan. So many ways she can help around the house."

"Leave it," he warned quietly, still resting his forehead onto his hands.

"Skilled. I'd say she was widely skilled. We're lucky to have her here. Where do you suppose she should sleep?"

"Lenka, go back to my mother. This is none of your concern."

Her full lips drew into a pout and she dropped her face like a spoiled child, but she dragged her feet off toward the far corner of the house obediently.

“Yes Lenka, go back over there.” Freya yawned with an exaggerated stretch. “I need to talk to my husband about grapes.”

Dragan looked up from under his brows and shook his head, smiling suspiciously. “Grapes?”

“Yes. This brandy that Lenka was kind enough to bring for us was made from grapes. But, I can taste another fruit.” She stood and moved up closer. “You tell me what it is.” Leaning in along the top of the table, she turned her face up under his and kissed him softly on the lips. “What's that taste like?”

Feeling Lenka's cold stares across the width of the room, Freya had no need to turn. She wanted to laugh, and a smile played on her lips and sparkled in her eyes, but she stood instead and slipped the bows from the lacing of her bodice. Dragan shook his head at her again, but there was no conviction in his rebuke. His smile had grown wider, and there was a strange light in his eyes that moved from sadness or regret, to nostalgic amusement. She just had time to hike her skirts and move to straddle him where he sat, when he reached quickly for the lamp and snuffed the flame.

The stool was too small to hold them both safely, and he chuckled from deep in his chest as the legs wobbled unsteadily. Her basque was easily discarded, its laces serving to hold it closed and nothing more. She lifted it free and wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing loud breaths between kisses and moaning in the darkness as she slid her lips across his cheek. “Tell me about the harvest,” she breathed against his ear.

Her teeth brushed the hard muscle of his neck and the heady scent of his skin brought a flush of heat up her throat. He didn't answer, running his hands along her thighs, under the swathes of fabric that draped her hips. His hands cupped her ass, pulling her tight against him and he dropped his mouth to her shoulder. There was no pretence in the rush of her pulse when he stood, lifting her with him, and moved to sit on their bed. In the darkness, Freya slid to the ground between his knees, slipping his tunic up so her lips found the hot skin of his belly. Above her he exhaled in a soft pant, and as she loosened the laces of his breeches, quiet sobbing began in the far corner of the room.

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HORSES.

The piglets at his feet were fat, growing rounded, and perfectly content with their lives. Dragan stared between the trees and over the stream to where the cottage nestled, searching low in his belly for that same warm glow of satisfaction. Like the piglets, he had more than enough to eat. He had a warm bed and the safety he'd always dreamed he'd find. He'd made this home. He'd shed enough blood and sweat to pay for every apple tree and stalk of grain. He'd earned it, and he'd given this freedom in equal measure to Freya.

But in place of calm and contentment, he found himself irritable and struggling with a

rising tide of frustration. The gift he'd given to his wife, it seemed to him, lay untouched and unappreciated. She took no joy in the life he'd made for her. The only time she smiled was when she polished her blades on the whetstone, or when she stripped the heavy winter coat from the horses.

He'd been considering it for some time, but it was only in the week since Lenka had returned with the second beast that he had come to a decision. Grooming animals that did no more than stand to crop the grass was a complete waste of her time. "We can sell the horses," he said. Keeping them made no sense. When they travelled to market, they would use the bullock wagon to carry the excess wool and produce and the grain to be milled. They had no need for saddle horses.

It was a long time since he'd seen any real anger in his wife, but it flared from her eyes in response to this simple practicality. "No. I look after them, and they're not costing you anything in feed."

She had, at least, been calm and accommodating, not making any demands in the running of the farm or complaining about the chores she'd had to keep up. With Lenka ensconced in the house, she'd followed him into the fields each day, working beside him at anything and everything that needed doing. She'd biddable in all things. Until now.

"They're just good money standing in the yard." He met her anger with the flash of his own brooding temper. "They're solid horseflesh. Someone will pay well for them."

"Money for what? To buy golden buckles? Fancy clothes? I think Lenka has her stitching all planned for the next few years. She's spun new wool to weave already, so we don't need money for clothes." She had her hands on her hips and her feet firmly planted on the ground. He knew that look and that stance. In the last few days, she too, had been angry and argumentative, tensions had been building, and today she was obviously not planning to back down.

Her determination on this point made him equally stubborn. "Why do you think you need a horse?" There was nowhere on the farm more than walking distance and if she did choose to travel to market with him, it would be in the wagon. There were too many memories tied into keeping those horses and he recognized that fact; there was no other reason for her to want them here. They stood nearby with the promise of escape on their broad backs and she had no need for escape. Not anymore.

"Why are you so intent on getting rid of them? Nothing's changed to make you suddenly decide to sell."

Ignoring the question, he stood. The sow they were watching had moved out of sight with her piglets, and he followed through the trees until he caught sight of the foraging family. Freya's anger at the prospect of losing the horses sent a cold rush of concern up his spine. More than concern, it was a genuine annoyance.

When she followed she was stomping along, lifting her skirts high to keep from tripping and skidding down the leafy slope.

Choosing a mossy log, he tapped it with his staff and then sat. "You need new clothes, or at least some linen for Lenka to stitch something new." It was true, she wrestled constantly with the loose dress, tugging the bodice down and lifting the skirts. In the summer sun, its heavy wool brought a flush to her cheeks and sweat to her hairline. When she worked in the

fields, she tucked the hem up into her belt so her legs were bared to the thighs. "You must want something that fits."

"That fits! I don't want this at all." She held the skirt out at him, waving the mud-stained hem in his face. "It's nothing for me to work in the fields like a man, but I can't dress as comfortably as a man. I have to wear this? There is no more stupid idea in all the world than that. Look at it."

She had carefully put the worn suede of her uniform aside, he knew. It was folded and placed lovingly at the bottom of their chest, and more than once he'd considered burning it. It was probably something he should do. "That's just how things are done down here, I told you that." Like the horses, the uniform represented a tie to a different time and a different life.

"You told me the neighbours would expect me to dress in skirts. You said they didn't trust a woman in uniform." Her hands gripped her hips again and she'd squared off in front of where he sat. "I could tie branches to my head and cavort naked in the moonlight every night and no one would know. No one comes here. No one cares!"

"It's early days, yet. They'll come around." The image of her dancing naked across the pastures brought a smile, and his smile made her lips go white. "And some of them will start to soften just knowing Lenka is here now." There were times in a past life, when he'd enjoyed stirring her anger just to watch her temper bloom. There were other times, usually when she had access to some sort of blade, when he'd known enough to be careful not to goad her at all.

"Will they now? You said they'd judge me by what I wore, but that wasn't true, was it? Their judgment was already made. It doesn't matter what they say of me, though, they'll come to visit for Lenka's sake. They'll work with you if she's in the mix. And that's what we want, isn't it?"

He shrugged a small apology. "It makes everything a lot easier." He was still grinning, even though he knew it was a mistake, even though his niggling was bringing to light issues he'd thought were settled.

"They'll all be pleased to see Lenka here. You said there was no fat-assed farm-girl. She's easily three pick handles across the rump, that one. So that wasn't true either, was it?"

He'd explained these things; she couldn't accuse him of lies. "Not as you mean it. But it has been better since she's been here." The smile was slipping from his mouth. "A lot more peaceful."

"If things get any more peaceful here, Dragan, I swear to you I will turn into that log." She kicked the log he sat on with such sudden force it cracked, and he stumbled forward as he lurched to his feet, almost falling with its pieces. "As it is, I lie in bed at night and count my own heartbeats just to be certain I'm still alive."

Damnably temper the woman had. "Yes, I've noticed." There were things she should start to count in her favour. If it wasn't perfect, this farm was safe. It was the only place she had. There was nowhere else for her, she'd said so herself. No one else. "I've had to check you were breathing, myself."

"You know," she said too quietly, "I'd kill any other man who said that."

"Left a trail of corpses, have you?"

"I should have. I could always start today."

He nodded, regretting his words as they'd left his tongue. There was too much pain in

the darkness of her eyes and the tight line of her mouth, too many hidden tears. There was too much of her life they'd left behind, and she hadn't complained. Strains of remorse coloured his thoughts. He could afford to give her more time if she needed it to begin to belong here. After all, he had everything he'd ever wanted right now, and she had nothing of her own. And he'd never known her to make an idle threat.

Dropping his face, he asked, "Was this about horses?"

She didn't answer and she didn't look away. The coldness of her glare touched him without needing to see it, and the regret he felt at his jibes slipped over his skin like a shadow.

"Keep them, I don't care. Like you said, they cost nothing to feed." He turned to follow the snuffling piglets and he listened for her footsteps following.

The sow had moved deeper into the trees to where the leaf litter was thick and damp. The rustle of their rooting and the quiet grunts of the mother calling to her young were the only sound. The cool darkness of the forest shade and the still, earthy air caught in chills on the back of his neck. When he finally turned to see where she had gone, he stepped back in surprise. Freya was standing behind him, silent.

"Why do you want to sell the horses?" she asked, the words as quietly challenging as her frank stare.

"I told you, they're wasted here. They're money on the hoof, money I could use."

"You don't need the money."

"Right, so keep them."

"Why do you want to sell the horses?"

"All right, then." If she was adamant he should tell her; if she wanted the truth. His voice rose. "Because you don't need them." She looked from his eyes down to his feet and her brow furrowed, but he'd begun and the words continued, the accusations. "You want them because you hope you'll get the chance to leave here one day. To go back to doing what you love."

"And I won't."

"No."

"And you want to make certain by making sure there is no way I could escape."

"Escape what?" He laughed derisively. "This is the life we chose. This is it. This is all there is. Outside of this farm there are the cities you hate and a front where you won't survive."

"So you keep saying."

"Accept it. For the love of all things holy, Freya, you are not the soldier you were. You haven't trained for four months, and you're getting soft. You favour your right side all the time, in everything you do. You must see it by now! Even if you are still good, you're not good enough to stay alive out there anymore."

There was no expression on her face at all. Her eyes were vacant, staring past him at something he could not see. The strident tension in her back and arms had fallen into a slouch, and she shrugged and nodded.

She turned away from him and started walking back toward the riverbank.

"Freya." There was no answer as she kept walking slowly through the trees. He jogged after her, his heartbeat rising toward panic. Catching her arm, he turned her back to face him.

“I’m sorry. You know that. I wish I’d not had cause to say it.” But it was said and he cast about urgently for some way to pay back what he’d taken. There was nothing more he could give her, nothing that made up for what was gone.

“And forget the horses. They don’t matter. Keep them. Keep everything. I gave you everything I have when we wed.”

She smiled, a wan drawing of her lips over her teeth that did not light her eyes. “What made you think I wanted everything you have?” She pulled her arm free and kept walking slowly away.

* * * * *

Freya left him and walked back along the riverbank, seeking the small hollow she had made her own private space. She did not get there often, but at times when she wanted to be sure there were no eyes upon her, it was to this place she came.

For two days now she had felt the rhythmic cramps niggling deep in her pelvis, getting slowly worse, and now the pain was growing sharper with every step. She knew the pain; she’d lost count over the years of how many times her body had spat out its contempt for nature.

At first, as a child, she’d had the tiny lives dragged out by the women above the ale hall using their long, hooked bone. Or she’d been blistered and burned by their pessary wads of black hellebore and rue. As an adult, though, she’d never had the need for intervention. Her body knew she was not fit and fertile ground. Seed never settled in her body for more than a few months.

A trickle of warm blood seeped down her thigh and smeared as she walked, and she lifted her skirt, careful not to let the stain touch any of the fabric. She groaned with one sharp spasm and leaned against the nearest tree, holding her breath to keep from crying out until it passed. Then she walked to her small private place and lay down on the mosses to wait for the pain and the bloody mess to pass.

It was easy to believe the tears that ran silently from the corners of her eyes as she lay there were tears for the pain. When she began to sob, she told herself it was because she was alone with her loss, again, and not because she cared at all for what he’d said. But even when she rolled into a tight ball and cried from the depths of her soul, she knew that this time, like every other, was a simple blessing and one of the few she had ever known.

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WAR.

The sun was low as Freya sloshed the wet cloth up over his shoulder and down his back, washing away the muck of a difficult calving. Dragan rubbed his arm with a heavy block of ashy soap, the rough texture scraping at the drying blood.

“Freya.” He hissed her name and she spun to the urgent call. “Look.”

On the rise above the bier, tracking cautiously down the path toward the house were three riders. In the low light, there was little to see clearly enough to identify them. They were armed. One rode with his sword drawn. A long quiver of arrows hung from another saddle.

They were dressed in dark, earthy tones and at least one showed the glint of metal, suggesting mail. That was as much as they could gather, but soon enough they would know more. The riders were slowly approaching them, warily scanning the pastures and buildings for movement or threat.

Freya crouched low and shuffled to the wall where the scythe and harvest hooks hung. She lifted them down carefully and carried them back to where Dragan stood.

The leading rider had noticed the movement and he held out a hand to halt his companions while he walked his horse slowly forward. "Dragan?"

The light was too low for safety, but Dragan stepped forward wiping the damp from his skin.

"We were told you were here, but we weren't sure which farm."

From where she hid behind the cover of straw, it was hard to hear the conversation clearly. Once Dragan had moved close enough to speak to them without yelling, it became impossible, but Freya watched as they clasped hands like comrades. The other riders approached, dismounting, their weapons sheathed. Dragan welcomed them all and they turned to walk the horses through into the house-yard.

These were farmlands; there were no armed and mounted men in these parts. Unless they were searching for someone. As the riders followed Dragan into the house, fear and excitement gelled in equal measure, quaking in Freya's knees and bubbling cold in her stomach. Armed men, here. Tucking the smallest reaping hook into her belt at her back, she edged along the dark wall to the doorway.

Their conversation carried clearly in the warm air, and the first words she heard hit her heart like a jab.

"We heard Freya was here, too."

They were looking for her. There was no good reason for the tears that rose or the urgent need to laugh or sob, but she rested her head back on the daubed wall and slid down onto her haunches. Men had been sent after her. They were fools to walk into her house and sit like ducks, but her desertion mattered enough to the hierarchy for them to send men after her. She pressed a hand over her mouth to muffle the confusion of sobs.

It was too dark on the hillside now for Freya to be certain there were no riders following, so she waited in shadows, listening. Dragan was noncommittal, digging for information from them rather than sharing, and their answers, as they came, stopped her breath and her tears.

"There's been a revolt on the front lines. Not everyone yet, but word is spreading and countless men have already left the fight and turned back to their homes."

A revolt? In the centuries of war there had never been talk of insurrection or revolt. Insubordination, yes, of course. Men had broken on the wheel of constant strain. They had taken up arms against their comrades or against their superiors. But never revolution.

The only time she'd ever heard someone question the authority and direction of the

empire, it had been Dragan. Before she left the mountain.

Inside the house, the strangers went on, but Dragan broke across the gush of detail, and spoke her burning question for her, “Wait. A revolt? What kind of revolt?”

“It's all been a lie, Dragan, and now we know the truth of it. We heard it from an officer. Right from his mouth.”

Freya listened with sickly apprehension. She knew the story, she'd heard it firsthand. The officer was Tobias Paske, it had to be, and she felt the rock hard certainty of it in her bones. He wasn't dead.

Dragan continued with his questions, teasing out the details with a few flat words that seemed heavy with reluctance. But the answers came in a rush of bitterness and passion for revenge. A few months ago, they had mustered in a marching camp behind the front lines, getting provisions and medical aid, when an officer had been brought in.

“He was near dead and the boys that brought him in were all from the citadel. They'd been sent out looking for him. And Freya.”

Paske had been taken across the peaks to the closest surgeons, and he'd been talking. The men who'd carried him in were already incensed at his ravings by the time they reached the camp. And when the surgeons had him stable enough to be questioned, there was no protocol that could stop the fighting men around him from demanding answers. He'd told them everything. All that he'd laughed and told her. It was true.

Now that same truth had come back in the mouths of the men Freya had abandoned.

“He explained how it is, Dragan. There's a lot didn't believe him, as you'd expect. But I heard him. I was there and I walked away from it all. I might have lived in doubt all my days, but when we got home we found he was telling the truth about this.

“Young noblemen are moving out from the cities into the farmlands and acquiring any land they want. We don't have enough men working the land, and they don't have enough room to live. They're sending us off to die and now they're taking the homes from our wives and daughters.”

All the fear and joy had drained from Freya's face with the heat of her blood.

Dragan was wrong. Paske was alive. It was all true. Everything he'd said was true. And worse.

Her heartbeat was deafening, pulsing hard against her ears, but there was no drowning out the relentless monologue. The strangers were impatient, even enthusiastic in their rush to bring their truth, and as she listened to them, everything Freya had believed began to crumble into dust.

“There was talk all through the valley about you being here, and we volunteered to come looking for you. Others have ridden back to the front to try to convince the men there that they have to come back, that our blood's better spent keeping our homes. They're taking our land, Dragan. Our homes have been claimed and they're moving down the river, this way.”

Dragan had been silent while the stories kept coming. Tales from men they knew, and rumours spreading through the ranks of the war weary from all across the empire. But Freya no longer needed him to voice any questions. She no longer needed to hear the stories told.

She shoved back onto the hard surface, using its stability to push herself up to a stand.

He was silent, and she wanted to see his face. She needed to see how he took the news that Paske was not dead. She needed to hear him explain his mistake. He didn't need to ask any more questions. He needed to answer them.

Rolling against the wall, she turned her shoulder to the doorframe and stepped out into the shaft of light. "He's alive," she said bluntly. The faces at the table might have been familiar if she had troubled to look at them. But she only saw Dragan.

Two stools skidded backward as their occupants stood suddenly. "It is you." One rider dipped his head in a small gesture of respect and smiled. "Matias. We fought together last season. You remember me?"

Freya flashed a stiff smile at them. "Yes," she lied. Her attention went back to her husband. "He's alive. Paske is still alive."

The second standing soldier bobbed his head toward her, too. "Lukas," he said, and pointing to his seated companion, "Onni."

Again she flicked a smile toward the men, and walked steadily closer.

"He can't have been too lively; I threw him down the slope." Dragan watched his hands, and the standing men moved slowly back into their seats, aware of the tension.

"He was alive enough to talk, Dragan."

Matias had not finished with his appeal, and he broke in over the solid silence between them. "The thing is, Freya, the farms along this valley are being taken. There's barely a league between here and the nearest stolen property. They killed the old man and his wife from the big orchard."

From where she had hidden in Goda's dark corner, Lenka let out a wail of grief and horror. All eyes turned to her and the old woman who pulled her down to comfort her, but Matias continued. "They have a small guard, maybe a dozen. No more. All young men. But they'll only stay there a few days. By then they'll have in provisions and more mounted men will have come down from the north, and they'll move to the next place they feel like taking."

Matias made a fist of one hand, grinding his anger and frustration against the palm of the other. "That's how they've been working so far, and we need every man that can hold a sword. We have to stop them now, before they dig in any deeper. Once their numbers get too high, we'll have no hope but to run." He turned his plea back to Dragan. "Will you join us?"

* * * * *

Nothing had changed in the room. Not the light, not the air, and yet it seemed darker and colder than it had been a moment before. To Dragan, it seemed even the smell had subtly altered. In one instant he'd had everything he'd planned in his life, and in the next it was gone.

The approaching nobles might come or not, but the core of his hearth and home would be forever changed. The war had come to find him. And so soon.

"How many of you are there?" His voice was already rough with the rub of foreknowledge.

"Here we have thirty-four. That's all. Most of us are veterans, but we've only got the weapons we carried with us. We need every hand, every sword."

"How long until you expect men back from the front?"

“There aren't enough horses. The riders we sent out will have been on the frontline for days now, but how long it will take them to stir up dissent, and how many will come and in which direction they'll move, I can't say. Any that do come this way will be traveling on foot.”

Freya was glaring at him; he could feel her contempt without looking up.

“You have enough men. If you say there are only a dozen young bucks, all city boys, you can take them without us. Keep their horses and their weapons.”

“They're not untrained.” Lukas took up the plea. “Whatever they were planning in the cities, they've been planning for a long while. These men are trained up. They're not an easy target, but we can stop them, if we stop them here.”

“No.”

Freya started to speak but he stopped her with a movement of his hand. “Where are you from? Do you still have a home to go to?”

“My farm has been taken,” Mathias answered.

“Gersamian,” the others answered in unison, naming a city further west.

“This is my home.” Dragan spoke quietly to own his clasped hands. “If nobles are coming and they're as close as you say, then I'll be staying here to keep my own roof safe. As for those already at the orchard, you have the men to deal with them, you don't need us. Take my horses.”

“Don't speak for me!” Freya had waited as long as she was content to wait, and he turned up to look at her for the first time. Her face was a mask of pain and anger, but her eyes sparkled with new life. “And no one will take my horses.”

She took a seat beside him, her arms crossed on the table. “That farm is not an hour's ride from here. If we don't stand and fight this time, we have no hope of stopping the young lords when they get here.” She turned to face him. “You know I'm right.”

She was. All the weights he'd balanced so carefully had shifted, and the crumbling of his lies left no solid ground beneath his feet. In the hard lines that set around her mouth, he could read the words she left unsaid. They were accusation and he had no defence. They were reproach and he had no answer. And she would go.

Lenka's sobbing argued her case with irritating clarity, while his mother made soft cooing noises and stroked her hair in the darkness. He knew Freya was right; even when his heartbeat was too slow and heavy to admit the cold terror that was rising in his chest; even when he knew it would cost him everything he had. She would go with them, and without her there would be precious little left here worth defending.

“When do you ride against them?” His words slipped out like a sigh of resignation, and he wanted to call them back.

“Tonight, if you're coming. We'll attack at dawn.” Mathias' face lit with hope he had been afraid to admit. “The others are assembled between here and the orchard.”

“Good.” Freya nodded, her voice low and loaded with censure. “We're in.”

* * * * *

Ahead, scouts moved silently across the summer pasture and her blood rushed with

them. She was trembling; each heartbeat seemed to echo from her knees to her fingertips. She would have laughed aloud for the sheer joy of being in uniform, but this was not the time for celebration.

She waited in the trees above the house, where the sun would rise behind her. The men who crouched around her watched silently for the signal that the guards had been dispatched. In all her years of warfare she had never faced a siege and neither had any of her companions. But the novelty caused her no concern, a battle was a battle. When it came to living and dying there was only the rise and fall of swords. If the buildings were inconvenient, the simple solution was to be rid of the buildings.

Flames smudged orange against the predawn sky as the thatch caught alight. Lenka's family home was fine and wide, with a stone annex and chimney pot over the vent, but its magnificence would not save it from the fire. The men sleeping within would have no choice but to engage on open ground. Their horses were of no use to them, and their sword skill would be matched.

Already the morning felt like a victory.

As the flames slowly took hold, her comrades stood, ready. She didn't look for Dragan; she knew he would be behind her.

In a howling sprint they covered the short distance to meet their enemies, as men burst from the doorway in gouts of smoke. Some were unarmed in their haste to escape. Those clung in close to the mud walls, taking cover between their sword wielding brothers and the heat and falling embers of the roof.

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THE END.

The young men fought bravely, all swordsmen. Their action seemed effeminate and contrived before the brutal onslaught of the veterans, but it kept them alive for a short time. From the moment they burst out of the burning house, Dragan could see it was a rout.

They were outnumbered two to one by men who had survived nine months of every year by killing, and the line of veterans moved as one, bearing down on the cornered defenders.

To his left, Lukas swung a war axe, its twin blades as wide as a man's chest and its handle doubling his reach. The boys who faced him ducked and feinted, but fell.

His own sword bit into flesh, just as it always had, and he moved forward without looking at the faces in his path. He fought because he had no other choice. It would be the last time, he promised himself. There was no case but men at his own door that would make him bear arms again.

To his right, Freya moved with the line. Her step was as fast and as confident as ever, as if she had not been through these months of hell and torment. Her expression was all focused rage, bearing down on a doomed foe. She swung her sword high, turning her weight into the blow as she brought it down on the lighter blade of her opponent. The blades locked, hers

sliding down onto his quillon and protective gilded basket, meeting hilt to hilt.

Her position was superior, and Dragan turned away, raising his own sword in attack, bringing it down onto the young man ahead of him, slicing first down onto his unprotected shoulder, then, as his victim reached instinctively to his wound, Dragan changed direction, thrusting up into his exposed stomach and chest.

He stepped onto the fallen lad, using both hands to draw up the blade which had stuck fast against bone. Beside him, Freya's opponent took his weight onto his thighs, shifting his balance and using the main strength of his back and legs to drive upward against her hold. He doubled her weight easily, and that in hard, youthful muscle. As Dragan roared in alarm the youth lifted her sword high, turned at the zenith and reversed his swing. His light blade with its fancy hilt and shining gilding flashed.

Freya leapt back, speed and agility still her best defence, but the tip of the blade caught the excess in her tunic, ripping it, catching and dragging her weight awkwardly to one side. In an agony of slow motion horror, Dragan watched her spin. Her left knee twisted, buckling as she turned away from the point. Her sword arm came up and out instinctively to brace against her fall, but the injury in her shoulder was a weakness for which no skill could compensate. Her arm straightened and jarred, her eyes were tight closed, and pain roared from her open mouth as her chest and shoulder caved. She hit the ground hard.

His sword came free, trailing blood in a fountaining arc toward where she lay.

Her attacker had regained his balance and held his sword vertical in a double-handed downward stab. Dragan turned into a backhand swing, the sharp tip and razor edge of his blade rising to catch the young noble just below his ribs. As his momentum carried him in a tripping stumble over where she lay, Dragan swept the lighter sword's threat aside and slashed back, taking the youth's head cleanly from his shoulders.

To fall out here was to die. Ahead, the crack of Lukas' axe filled the gap in their line, his swing making good use of the space. Dragan stood above her, straddling where she lay, with his fist and forearm wrapped in the tunic of his headless-foe. He held the gouging corpse like a shield as he peered down at her gore-stained form. None of the blood was hers, but it soaked her like an omen, sliding into dark, gelatinous puddles and draining into the thirsty earth.

Her eyes were wide with pain, and ran with tears of shock. The sword that had once turned like an extension of her own flesh, lay just out of reach as her curled fingers twitched and trembled in the mud. He lowered his sword arm, bending to offer the support of his wrist, and she turned her face up to his, glaring from her own Hell up into his.

For a long moment she lay still, as realizations that needed no words passed between them. Looking away, searching for her sword, she spat and wiped the bloody drool from her lips. Then cradling her right arm tight against her belly, she reached for the strength of Dragan's forearm, and he pulled her to her feet.

The guerrilla fighters rallied, digging-in in the familiar formation of a marching camp as the sun rose over the burning ruin of Lenka's home. They had increased the count of their

horses by ten, and their weapon count had doubled. It was a start in a war that would end when there were no more horses to ride or men to wield the swords.

Dragan left them with his blessing and Freya followed him, cursing silently as they rode the track back toward their home. The silence that clenched her anger tight was filled with too many words. If she began, they might never end and she wanted to scream out her frustration, to argue some kind of defence. And if words failed, to slap away the look of relief that eased the lines of Dragan's face.

His wordless calm spoke to her of justification. He need not answer for lies; his judgment had been proven right. He'd called her incompetent and he'd seen his call vindicated. He was wrong. He was wrong.

Blood had dried in itchy scabs across her arms and inside her tunic and she picked at the irritation, scratching and flaking the accusing marks from her skin. The blood was not hers; how often had she worn the blood of other men? How often had she caught a sword that had been meant for him? It was only a moment. The morning was a workout after too long in a cold stiff hibernation, but her blood would warm again.

It was only a moment. He was wrong. But she couldn't find the confidence to say the words aloud.

* * * * *

In the darkness, Freya wept silently. Beside her, her husband slept, his breathing slow and even. His arm was her pillow, and as her sadness curled into her back and shoulders, she turned her face into his side, breathing the warm familiar smell of him deep. If every other dream he'd cherished had been a lie, at least he had made her feel safe when she slept beside him. He had made that one impossibility real.

Harder sobs rose at the thought and she sat up, pulling her snuffled breath away for fear of waking him. The air was cold, rushing up her back with a breath of ridicule, and she pulled a woollen rug up over her shoulders. Beneath the coverlet, the warmth of him spread across their bed, surrounding her hips with its comfortable wash. Perhaps sensing her movement, he rolled in his sleep, turning to reach for her, resting his hand on her thigh. It too, was warm against her skin.

Fat tears pushed from under her screwed up eyelids and a breath hiccupped, as loud as a cry in the silence of the night. She lifted his hand and held the warm palm against her face, letting her tears run into the deep lines of fate. There was strength in his hands, in his long fingers, and she covered them with her own and pressed them close against her cheek. She turned her lips and kissed each finger, forcing a gag of silence over her breathing. The long lost infant she had been clung to him, drawing on the comfort and security the world had never offered her.

Dropping her face in desperate shame, she wove her fingers through his, and held their clasped hands tight against her belly. She had begun to rock, and her tears fell onto the sheet that bunched around her. The silver ring which had grown tight around her index finger, now showed as a dark shadow on her middle finger.

Her hand was fatter. She was fatter and softer.

She'd never eaten so well in her life, and for the chance to be full, to have eaten until there was no hunger gnawing, she had Dragan alone to thank. The little girl within her could never have dreamed of a day when there would be too much food. Smearing tears across her cheek and wiping her nose with the back of her hand, she leaned and kissed his shoulder.

A corner of the sheet hung free and she eased it up and used it to wipe the dampness from her hands and her face. She wadded it tight and pressed it hard against her nose. It worked as well as anything might to muffle the sound as she tried to snort back the thickness that throbbed in her sinus. Two deep breaths through her mouth helped to quieten sobs that still kicked and coughed from her throat.

The crying had to stop, but it was not an easy intention to put into effect. For just a few moments she sat, trying not to think, just breathing some sense of control into her system.

Beside her he snored softly. Her free hand moved out and traced gently down the line of his jaw. Awake or asleep, his features did not change. They were so familiar. He didn't smile enough, he never had, but this was a face she had grown to love. The heat of fresh tears burned her eyes, and she cursed silently to herself, shaking her head at the pointlessness of all this, and wiped them away.

He loved her, and the burn that knowledge brought was deep in her chest. It seized her heart, stopped its rapid beat with a clench that prevented her breathing. Everything inside set hard and only the screaming that never stopped wailed in her head. She would never deserve that love. It was beyond her and above her.

She brought her knees up hard against her chest and pressed both fists over her ears, as if the noise inside might be silenced that way. Nothing ever stopped it but violence. Nothing but action. She forced herself to straighten, then to curl herself around and onto her knees, and she climbed over him to the floor beyond.

Out of the corner of her eye, a movement caught her attention and she turned to look. Lenka had lifted her head and shoulders and lay propped on an elbow, staring silently at Freya over the ashy fireplace. There were no words to pass between them. Freya felt nothing for the girl lying in those deep shadows, neither friendship nor animosity. In all, she supposed, they were the same, both looking for a way to get what they needed from a world with little enough to spare for anyone.

In his sleep Dragan frowned deeply, mumbling, and a weak smile trembled on her lips for his confusion. "This world makes no sense to me, either," she whispered. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I love you."

* * * * *

Dragan woke with his heartbeat heavy. It throbbed a hard pulse in his chest and throat, and it echoed in his head. Before he had woken enough to clear his thoughts of dreams, his body thumped its warning from deep inside. He was aware of the cold air first, and then the emptiness that caused it.

Without opening his eyes, he slipped his hand out to cross the bed beside him. Freya had never woken early, not in all the years he'd known her. His bed was empty and there was a bitter inevitability in that fact. Even the slight hollow where she had lain was cool to touch.

All the warmth of her flesh had vanished into the night.

If he rose, he could follow her.

Around him the air was only just beginning to lighten; the house was dark, with only the kiss of silver on the sill. It was unlikely she had been gone more than an hour, and he knew in which direction she would ride. She would join the mustering forces to the north. And she knew he would know where she was, but this time it would not matter if he followed. There would be no more lies, no matter how necessary.

The cock called for him to begin the day, but he stayed. Tears burned hot, and a lump rose in his throat that would not move. With his eyes closed he could believe, just for a few more moments, that she was still beside him. He would rise and she would groan, and snuggle deeper into the pillow and try to stay asleep.

The chance had passed. Too many chances had passed. And he lay on the bed and recounted every one. Just this once he would have held her, and said, "I love you. I need you with me."

It was too late. She was gone.

-END-

About the author:

Letitia Coyne is alive and well and living in Australia. She writes, paints, draws, sews, plays with old wooden furniture, revives jewellery and sings very loudly. She also feeds animals and adolescents. And sleeps.

Discover other titles by Letitia Coyne at www.obooko.com

Britannia – Book One.

Maia and her step-brother Cilo were raised in an opulent but isolated villa in the Seine Valley. At fifteen Cilo escaped to the army in Britannia, leaving Maia alone and afraid.

Lucius, Luc, is commander of an auxiliary cavalry unit of *Legio XX, Valeria Victrix*. The

son of a Caledonian mercenary who joined Rome, he and his four brothers are soldiers of renowned ability and bravery. At twenty-five he has served ten years, has another fifteen to serve, and has had enough of killing. Exhausted and battle fatigued after the brutal AD77 Cambrian campaign, he has been weighing up his chances of survival as a deserter.

As a matter of convenience, Maia is married off to her stepbrother, and once again abandoned when he returns to his post. Seizing her one chance to escape, she joins an exclusive group of travelling prostitutes on their way to Britannia. With them, she finds herself moving through a complex web of lies and deceptions, where everyone knows more than they will say and everyone she meets has their own agenda.

If she can trust Lucius, he will take her to her husband. But everything she knows about the world will change -- if she can survive the journey.

Hispania – Book Two.

Although the siege of Numantia in 133BC marked the end of organized resistance to Rome, the Celtiberian tribes of northern Spain maintained their heritage of warrior elites -- and their hatred of Rome. They accepted the comforts, infrastructure and the benefits of Empire, while remaining independent tribal city-states under the control of noble families.

Marella was the daughter of one such family.

Falsely accused by a vile and corrupt Druidic high priest, she is set to be executed. Her rescuer is Marcus, a Roman deserter from Britannia who has made his home in the Gallego valley above Caesaraugusta.

Finding no purpose in the life he leads, bored and frustrated, he relishes the chance to face the challenges that come with saving the life of this young noblewoman. Her best chance of survival lies in travelling across the province to Numantia, and her only chance of survival is to do that with Marc.

Somehow they must stay ahead of High Priest Leucetius and the priests of a Romanised and corrupted temple; Marella's noble brother Taran and his standing army; and the army of Rome itself.

Away from the capital, the Roman world was a complex, sometimes bloody, blend and clash of cultures. The people were not stereotypical Roman ladies and gents consumed by the politics of Caesar's court. Hispania is a glimpse into the less well known lives of Rome.

Caledonia – Book Three.

By AD83 the Romans in Caledonia held a line of glen-blocking forts, (now known as the Gask Ridge forts, from Glasgow to Perth) and the three active legions, XXth, IXth and IInd, were split along this defensive line.

Calgacus was one of a number of first century Pictish barons -- part of a landed class in northern Celt society with access to slaves, money, men and arms. He fixed on the plan to unify the Caledonian Celtic tribes against Rome, beginning with the tribes of the Forth-Clyde area. After a crushing defeat at a fort along the Roman line, Calgacus tried to bring together all the Pictish tribes and rallied an army of perhaps sixty thousand men (and women) for the Battle of Mons Graupius.

Once Calgacus' lover, Eirbrin has been sent north to her family lands on the Gleann Mor

above Inbhir Nis. Fanatical dedication to the fight to free Caledonia from Rome has been her only way to deal with the deep and disabling shames of her past. When she meets Antony she believes she has found a mystic, a man of power who can help her to overcome the demons of guilt and shame.

He is a spy, a *Natione* -- native Britons conscripted to the Roman auxiliary army -- used extensively by Agricola in the Caledonian wars where the Celt's guerrilla tactics and harsh terrain made Roman success near to impossible. Everything about him should warn Brin of his deception, but her longing to atone, her need to be free of shame, and her growing desire for him allow her to deny or justify any doubts that come.

To him, she should be no more than an enemy, and with her ties to the leader of the Picts, a formidable source of information. But as they move through the Caledonian midlands toward the gathering battle, her beauty and courage, her innocence and the unfaltering faith she places in him draw him into an impossible situation.

Trapped between an irresistible love and an immovable duty, he must find a way to untangle his web of lies, or return to a life of service, to live or die alone.

[Petra.](#)

Petra, Arabia Provincia, 120AD

Aya grew as a filthy scavenger, trailing the Bedouin caravans that crossed the Nafud wastes and the Rub' al Khali. Bought from the arena as a young man, his new life as Sethos, the adopted son of a wealthy Roman merchant, is stained by the stigma of his past.

Jaida and her sisters were raised in luxurious slavery, destined to be the virgin oracles of Isis at provincial temples throughout the Roman Empire. When the fall of a dice brings the girls' future into question, it is Seth who must define freedom and slavery, life or liberty – for himself and for them.

He has money, strength and cunning. She has no more than her faith.

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