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OF THE
REALM

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SCOURGE OF THE REALM

ERIK SCOTT DE BIE



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For Shelley, whose heart sings the same song.

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and William Kenney.*

 PRELUDE 

BALLAD OF THE
DARKSINGER

Brave and wise was the Bard, who saved all from a fate most dire.
They named him High Singer, a station to which all men might aspire.
But the darkness was in him, and his ambitions ran deeper still,
He became the tyrant Darksinger, and so the Darksong worked its will.

Over a century he ruled, through violence, lies, and song—
His wit charmed mighty warriors, no matter how strong.
He slew one great Queen and seduced another's Mistress,
His power over Iavor waxed, all under the Darksong's aegis.

They arose, the four heroes, from hill and from desert, from forest and dale:
The Fire Lord most fearful, the Swift Blade so keen, the Fey Lady so pale;
And first among them stood Korvin, strong and brave and dour,
They threw down the Darksinger, and thus ascended to power.

But the fallen bard had one last curse, for the new-crowned King in his victory,
The very power he sought would prove his undoing and unravel his story.
Know this, though you laugh and pay no heed to his call,
The scourge of the realm has fallen, and so might you all.

—*Scourge of the Realm, a Ballad of Iavor's Darkest Days*



THE PRINCESS FLEES FOR HER LIFE

Princess Sidion ran because to stop was to die and to die was to fail. Blood leaked between plates of her armor and between her fingers to dot the fresh-driven snow. It absorbed the silvery moonlight of Solué in pools of swirling ink that brightened to glowing pink with her magic. Even had it been a moonless night, the blood would have picked up the song wafting through the air and given her away. The droplets sank into the melting drift, pocking the powder with tiny patches that bloomed like flowers under the three moons.

Her own life she could sacrifice—and would gladly—but hundreds of thousands of souls depended on her, and them, she could not fail. Her sister. Her fellow servants of the Goddess. Her kingdom. And so she pushed on through the pain and growing weakness.

The corpse forest of Dead Thulthir closed in around her with every step, stark white trunks like walls. Skeletal fingers caught at her gnarled black hair and tattered cloak.

Legends spoke of a vile song that echoed in the woods—a long forgotten melody trapped eternally in the hollow white trees. The cursed forest craved warmth and life where it had none and fed upon those foolish enough to venture in. It was a madman's ballad meant to frighten.

But fear had never been Sidion's weakness, and she pushed it away now. As she ran, she hissed a chant through gritted teeth, striding to the rhythm of its

ancient syllables. The ballad might have soothed had her life not dangled madly between its chords. Somehow, she had to keep her feet moving and her guts inside her body. She moved slower and slower as she lost blood. She did not even have the time or strength to use it.

“Sid!” came a cry from behind her. “Stop!”

She could not see her pursuer through the trees, but he had dogged her for hours. He could hear her song almost a league away and follow her blood trail even closer.

She was going to die this night. A man she had once called friend—whose bed she had shared many cold and lonely nights, whose song entwined with hers and created fantastic symphonies among the stars—was going to kill her. He was going to kill her, and no one would remain to save the kingdom of Iavor.

“Sid, wait!” her pursuer called, his voice louder than before. Closer. “You’re bleeding fast. You cannot keep going.”

He was right. As more blood flowed over her hand and lit the trail behind her, Sidion knew that she could not simply keep running. She had to make another plan.

Sidion leaned against one of the trees, putting more of her weight than she intended on her arm, to catch her breath. She peered back but saw no sign of her hunter. She tore loose the fringe of her tunic and wound it around her middle. She tied the crude bandage off with a grunt that interrupted her singing, then continued her lullaby. She hoped the cloth and the song would hold her insides together. She had only a moment to spare.

She looked down at the third finger of her right hand—at the silver ring with its glassy black stone. If she used magic, it would lead the inquisitor right to her like a beacon. Did she have a choice?

Then branches like fingers closed around her throat and cut off her song.

The skeletal figure shivered its way out of the darkness, gray lichen parting like split flesh to reveal bone-white limbs that twisted and bent to embrace her. It made neither cry of rage nor groan of hunger, but its foul song thundered in her ears. The tree wrapped around her and squeezed the breath out of her lungs. She could not even cry out in terror.

Some legends, the princess realized, were true.

A terrible chill crept into her limbs as the thing drained the life from her. It sucked hungrily at her body, driven not by hate but by desperate, limitless

need. The dead could never be warm enough to live, and their song could never be completed. The forest's music echoed on and on in her ears, eternal and impossibly tragic. It encapsulated and devoured her, drowning her song into lonely silence. Even as she struggled, movements growing sluggish and weak, her heart wept to hear so sad a melody.

Then, cutting through the song of Dead Thulthir, a violent crescendo of war struck her ears. This new song was that of murderers and destroyers as they descended upon their prey. Its rising pitch told of sweat and blood and steel. She had sung it herself in the heat of battle.

Crack went a crossbow somewhere behind her, and a chunk of wood sprang out of the limb that had captured her. Sidion felt the air part around the bolt's passage, not a hand's breadth from her cheek, and the bit of tree flesh slapped her shoulder. The gnarled fingers dislodged from around her neck and the tree reeled. Instinct took over. Sidion threw herself aside just as the magic in the bolt ignited and the tree exploded in an inferno of shrapnel. Shards of wood stabbed into her, and she bit off a cry.

An instant later, her body smashed into the snowy ground, and her shuddering limbs traced swaths of snow and mud around her like the wings of a broken angel. The world became a ringing, bleary, confused mess, and she could not think, let alone move. Her heart thudded between her ears, and she could hear over it the hungry song of the dead trees rattling and roaring with pain and terrible confusion.

Her hearing began to return, and she was aware of another sound: deep booms like peals of thunder. He was coming.

She saw the inquisitor at the edge of the firelight, crossbow clutched in his fist, his face painted in shadows and pain. The inferno of deadwood cast flickering light across his steel hauberk and illumined a pink ruby carved in the shape of a heart over his left breast. It blazed in the light of the red moon Corpus like a burning eye, staring at her. She saw her blood also, glowing with the same brilliant hue, dripping from his free hand. He stepped toward her, reloading his crossbow. He took his time. His lips moved, but she could not hear.

Fingers shaking, she reached for her sword, but what good would that do against his crossbow? She knew well its terrible power. She'd tried to elude the inquisitor at Myender Ferry, but he'd shot her with a blessed bolt in the side that pierced her plate armor like nothing and cut open her flesh. At least she'd bought herself an hour by cutting the guide rope when she had crossed the river,

ruining the ferry, but he was implacable. It had taken him less than a day to catch up to her, and she could run no more.

“Oulus,” she murmured, hating herself for even speaking his lyrical name. Their song stirred in her heart, and she could not help but give it voice. The ballad was his and hers both, a song they had made together and that no other could sing.

He paused at the sound of her voice and lowered his crossbow to his side. “Sid, I—”

Then a ravenous tree pounced upon him like a pouncing lion, and he shrieked in surprise and terror. Sidion fought to her feet and ran. She didn’t look back.

She staggered through the graveyard of trees, panting hard at the effort to stay up. The world floated around her, unfettered from her perception. Somewhere behind her, Ars Oulus struggled with the haunted trees, grunting and cursing. There was no magic in his words, but they seemed like a disjointed song to her nonetheless. She could see how it would end and knew he would be after her soon. Her blood stole the light of the silver moon, leaving a glowing trail he could not help but follow.

She pressed her fingers to her still bleeding wound and knew she could not outrun him.

“Stop!” Oulus sounded angry now, and she heard him crashing through the woods. “Stop on the king’s command!”

Damn his orders and damn his king. Sidion had to think.



Stones skittered down the creek bed as Ars Oulus staggered down the rough embankment over a fallen tree specked with glowing pink-crimson. Magic made Sidion’s blood glow: the magic of centuries, bound up in a long line of sorcerer-singers who had shaped the kingdom of Iavor from the shadows. To a trained inquisitor, it sang in a deafening symphony. His crossbow stood at the ready, its dagger-long bayonet gleaming hungrily. He splashed through the snowmelt along the path Sidion’s blood traced as clearly as torchlight.

“Sid?” he said. “You have to come with me. I don’t mean to—”

He stalked toward a patch of light just past the stream, mud dripping from his boots. His crossbow covered the darkness ahead.

“Princess? Is that you?”

He crept forward into the clearing where a dark body lay on the ground. Luminous blood dripped from the fringe of her cloak, carving furrows in the snow. His face grew worried, and he reached for her. Fingers trembling, he pulled the cloak aside.

A fallen log.

A sharp note split the darkness—voice raised in a warrior's song.

From behind, Sidion hit him as hard as she could with the stoutest tree branch she could find. The club was crude compared to a proper sword, but it served to stagger Oulus back a step. If she hadn't bled most of her strength all over Thulthir Wood, Sidion might have laid him out on the ground with that blow. Following the song, she shot out a horizontal sweep that smashed Oulus's hand, and he cursed at the sudden pain. The crossbow sizzled into the water.

"Dragging—!" He let the curse trail off, put up his hands, and started his own Warsong.

Sidion kept singing, trying to align her movements to the melody as she had been taught. She shot a knee at his belly, but he twisted and caught it on the hip instead. She wound up for a third strike, but Oulus caught her wrist and slapped the club from her weakening fingers. They leaped apart and faced one another, hands raised. They were both trained in fighting bare-handed—indeed, they had spent hours sparring with one another. Never had they fought each other for their lives, both singing in time and for power.

He probed at her defenses with two quick jabs, but she caught them on her shoulder and barreled into him. Her knee smashed into his thigh, and she landed two punches on his mailed side that made her hands shake in her gauntlets. Her weary arms and especially her legs shook, but she had to keep fighting. He caught her with a left hook hard to her wounded stomach, and the air rushed from her lungs.

They tore apart a few paces and stood panting in the silver and red moonlight. She tried to keep singing but only coughed.

"You have to stop," he said. "Come back with me. We'll figure this all out."

"You don't understand." She hated how weak her voice sounded. "They'll kill me."

"What are you talking about?" The inquisitor looked confused. "No one wants to kill you. I know you're not a traitor. You won't—"

"It's the Darksong," she said. "The power Lord Malagant wielded. It's turned Korvin and the others into something horrible. My sister, Emerald, she—"

She shook her head. Thinking was hard. “You don’t understand. I have to stop Korvin. I’m fighting for you. For us.”

“Sid,” Oulus said. “You want to protect Iavor, I understand, but this isn’t the way. Iavor may have changed, but I haven’t. And I was not the only voice in the hall that spoke up on your behalf. Nor am I the only one after you.” He stepped toward her, and his hands touched her shoulders. “Please. Come back with me. I’ll protect you. We can fix this.”

He brushed back sweat-soaked hair that had fallen in her eyes. Her heart hammered out of her chest. His face was so close to hers. It was her Allure. It had swayed him. She knew he wanted to kiss her, and she wanted to kiss him back.

“Come with *me*,” she said. “Help me stop them. Don’t make me your enemy. Please.”

Oulus’s face grew red and angry. Frustrated. “This is madness, Sid. It’s not—”

He didn’t understand. He didn’t see. No one did.

When she opened her mouth, she sang their song: a melody forged in battle and cemented in the hot darkness of a canvas tent. The words spoke from her heart to his, and she felt his circles open to her. Even without meaning to, he began to move in time with their song, so she knew how to defeat him.

She wound up and launched a massive right hook. Or at least it would have been if she hadn’t been wavering on her feet or if she’d been able to sing to focus her strength. It landed against his left eye socket and knocked his head to the side. Her gauntlet cut open his brow, leaving the kind of wound that bleeds, but it served more to anger than harm him. He caught her arm and held her against his left side. Their song wavered.

“Dammit, Sid,” Oulus said, blood pouring down his face. “You can’t—”

Sidion caught at the hilt of his sword to steady herself and, with a sharp utterance, slammed her knee into his side. Knee met armor with a shock of pain that radiated through her leg. With a roar, Oulus shoved her back, and his sword scraped out of its scabbard in her hand. Singing in his rage and blindness, he did not see the naked steel between them.

Their song came to its end.

They came together like the comrades in arms they were, greeting one another after a long campaign of blood and violence, singing each other to pleasure and sleep. His strong arms wrapped around her in an embrace that had comforted

her on so many nights, and his lips trembled against her neck. He whispered something—perhaps her name, perhaps a broken bit of song that would never find its climax.

The sword protruding from his back dripped dark gore onto the snow.

Sidion shook off the giddy haze of the song, and the world rushed back upon her. “Oulus,” she said. “Oulus!”

He went stiff in her arms, sending a shock through her. He slumped to the ground, body bucking in agonized spasms. His lips pulled back from his gnashing teeth, but only choking sounds burst from his throat. Sidion caught at his face, heedless of his hands slapping at her, and stared into his confused, terrified eyes. She heard his inner song grow frenzied.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I had to. Goddess, I—” Tears choked her.

Oulus coughed blood, spattering her face. He twisted like a grappler trying to escape, and she didn’t have the strength or heart to stop him. She sat heavily in the stream, the chill of the water shocking against her sweaty flesh, and let his gushing body snake away from her. The blade caught on a rock and stopped his crawl. He gasped, bashed his head on the creek bed, and finally lay still.

Sidion breathed heavily in the stillness, watching steam rise from her nose and mouth. The tears on her cheeks felt like icy sludge, and sorrow threatened to steal her thoughts. This had to be done, she knew, but . . . Goddess, she had never wanted this. She could not rise—could barely move. This was the end.

Despite the wound in her side stealing her strength, despite the blood drenching her hands, despite the clawing madness at the core of her mind, she opened her mouth and gave voice to the first words of a remembrance song. Sorrow filled the dirge, and joy of a life lived and given for a greater purpose, even if that purpose was not its own. Darkness was there also, and she could feel the very thing she fled infuse her music: the Darksong. Her ring gleamed dully in the light of the third moon—blue Menta—its magic beating low and quiet.

Sidion heard, somewhere distant in the forest, another fainter song, and her heart leaped. She knew those words and that broken voice. Perhaps she would succeed after all.

Then Oulus’s body moved. Sidion sucked in a breath and trembled as Oulus’s powerful arms pushed against the wet stones. The body rose, bloody sword gleaming in the moonlight, and turned to her. Oulus’s eyes had turned blacker than the night, and her friend’s tortured expression curled into a death mask’s smile.

“The Darksong,” she whispered.

When the revenant spoke, its broken voice haunted her, then and forever.

“Hail, Black Princess Sidion,” it said. “Murderer. Traitor.”

It lunged toward her, sinews straining, limbs compressed like the pistons of a terrible machine. She crawled away on her hands and backside, but it pursued her, bent low like a ravenous beast. It had no song of its own—Oulus’s was long extinguished—but danced like a devil marionette strung on the chords of the Darksong.

She kicked out and connected with its face, but the creature hardly slowed. It leaped onto her and struck her in the face with a blow that shattered its own finger bones. The Darksong consumed a revenant from within, and Sidion watched as Oulus’s body deteriorated before her eyes: the skin shrank against the bones, the gums receded to turn its teeth into fangs, and the muscles stretched to the breaking point.

Dizzily, Sidion punched at the creature, but she was too weak, and it felt no pain. It bit at her face, and she barely dodged. She thrust her left arm against its throat, holding its snapping jaws at bay. The pommel of the sword thrust through its body ground into her ribs.

“Always hated you,” the revenant said. “You and the rest of the Goddess’s whores. The Lord of Fire’s busy raping them all. Some will learn, the rest will die. You should be grateful.”

It grasped her warding left arm and twisted. The agony wrenched a scream from her throat, though the creature cut off the sound by punching the side of Sidion’s head. Her face plunged into the water to strike the stones, and she spat blood into the cold creek.

“Not so pretty a face,” the revenant said. “Make it so no man will stick his cock there.”

The creature could have torn out her throat but contented itself with savaging her left arm. Its teeth couldn’t bite through her mail, but the grinding force on her tender arm threatened to overwhelm her. The Darksong made its instinct not to kill but to torture. It would slay her only when she could no longer feel pain.

If only she had time to sing the Bloodsong . . . but she was practically dead already.

Through teary, blood-soaked vision, she saw the butt of Oulus’s crossbow

protruding from the icy water. She strained but could not reach it. She was going to die.

She heard him before she saw him: a broken, haunting melody that skipped from wavering high octaves to guttural rasps. It would offend the untrained ear, but Sidion saw through its ugliness to the tragic beauty at its core. The song that had brought a nation to its knees and would—if she succeeded in her quest—do so again.

The dark-cloaked man on the embankment looked down at her critically where she lay beneath the revenant. She stared at him, pleading with him to help her.

“Well?” His eyes flashed violet in the moonlight, and his voice was dark and terrible and made her heart break. She remembered the beauty it had once been and heard all its ugliness now. Perfection spoiled. “Finish him, or have you no mercy?”

Sidion understood, then, what she had to do.

She strained, forcing her arm past its limit, and caught the butt of Oulus’s crossbow. She swept the soaked weapon across, and its bayonet flashed into the revenant’s left arm just below the shoulder. The creature hardly seemed to notice and brought its teeth down on her arm with another dull burst of pain.

Awkwardly, Sidion stabbed it again, then worked the blade back and forth. Blood gushed over her face. The bayonet snapped off, and she discarded the crossbow with a grunt.

“Stupid whore,” the revenant said. “Hurt me all you want. I cannot—”

Finally, she cried out and kicked up with all her strength. The revenant rose away from her, and its trapped arm tore free. The creature staggered back and looked, confusedly, at its ragged stump. Its mouth worked but could not form words.

Sidion summoned her last reserves and pushed herself up. She could hardly stand, and her heart thundered in her chest, but she knew what she had to do. She faced the revenant, tossed the dead arm in the stream, and bent low in readiness. “Come on,” she said. “Come on!”

Malice rose in the revenant’s face. It charged, hand raised, fingers curled like claws.

Sidion dug in her back heel, caught the hilt of the sword as the creature came, and turned with its momentum. She tore the blade free of the revenant’s chest, spun again, and brought it scything around to hack the thing’s head from its

shoulders. The revenant's body staggered another step before collapsing to its knees and then to its belly. Ars Oulus's head landed at her feet, staring up at her in pure hate. She did not feel it. She felt nothing.

Shaking, Sidion turned to the man on the riverbank. His violet eyes scrutinized her, and he gave the slightest of nods.

The sword fell from her nerveless fingers to clatter on the wet stones, and she felt as though her legs slipped through the ground.



The singer knelt in the creek beside the battered woman, who shivered and moaned, obviously slipping into death. He touched the wound in her side, coating his fingertips with fresh blood, and held them up for his inspection. As he watched, the blood caught the moonlight and flared like pink fire. He touched the blood to his tongue and spit.

He should leave her to die. He knew this. And yet . . .

The Darksong sang to him, echoing from her whispering lungs and closing throat. It called to him like lotus incense to an addict—like sweet wine to a prisoner locked away from the world for far too long.

And he would answer.

A PASSIONATE PLEA

Light came back to her gradually, seeping into the cracks of her fragile world. Awareness floated like a cloud she could not quite grasp; it diffused through her fingers the tighter she tried to hold it. Finally, she just waited impatiently while she came back to herself. Her body and mind stirred at their own separate paces, but her heart burned with a wakeful fire as though it had never slept. There was so much to be done, and she thanked the Goddess she yet lived to do it.

Focusing, she hummed a deep, wavering note that spread through her wounded body. She was naked but for bandages, and her wounds had been treated and treated well. As her devotions to the Goddess had taught her, she explored each wound with her internal sense like a chiurgeon with a probe. Her left arm was sprained, not broken, and heavily bruised. The armor had kept the teeth from breaking the skin. A poultice rested on the wound to her side, warding off infection and slowly healing the damaged flesh. The revenant's fist had left a massive bruise on her cheek and split her now-swollen lip, but the damage there was only superficial. Also, she boasted about a dozen deep gouges from the hungry tree, but her healer had removed the slivers. Her body lay pure of foreign material.

When her circles aligned, Princess Sidion found herself in an unexpectedly soft place. She had not rested in a bed in so long that she had almost forgotten what one felt like. A wool blanket enfolded her, cushioning her limbs against

the already warm one-room worker's cabin. The room was dark, lit only by candles and moonlight through a window. The smell of tarred oak and wood dust suffused the cabin as well as the scent of vegetables days past their prime. The sickrooms of labor had grown tainted with the smell of rotting meat and the song of the dying, both mercifully absent. This place had a peaceful melody, tinged with a darkness beneath. The air was cool on her cheeks, and a soft dampness lay on her forehead.

"You're—you're awake," said a voice in the room. "Thank the Goddess. You've been asleep two days now."

In the dim light, she perceived him only vaguely: a handsome face with regular features, a powerful nose, and unkempt blond hair that looked unwashed but smelled faintly of lilac. He sounded young, and his eyes shyly did not focus on her long. The one part of him she saw clearly was his best feature: his bright blue eyes, into which she could easily imagine gazing for long moments while the world shrank.

"You—" He grew nervous under her scrutiny and looked at the bedside table, rather than at her face. He indicated a clay tankard and a plate of dark burgundy bread with creamy cheese. "I brought you some food."

"No flesh," Sidion murmured.

"No." The young man looked nauseated at the concept.

"I reached the Westerlands, then," she said. "Thank the Goddess."

The youth looked intrigued but uncertain. "Uh, my master says . . . he said you have to drink a little water. Slow-like. And eat a little if you can."

"All right." Sidion shifted to sit up, keeping the blankets wrapped around her body.

"Uh." Awkwardly, trying very hard not to gawk, he held out the tankard. "Here."

She reached out, and when her right arm slipped the covers, half a dozen crisscrossing scars gleamed against her skin from wrist to elbow. The young man looked away courteously.

"Thank you." She accepted the water, letting her hand touch his ever so briefly. The water was very cold and nourishing. She kept her senses on him, listening for the chords of his heartsong. Sweet and powerful, a melody she found appealing.

"Not too fast," he said. "Master said you'll get sick."

"Thank you again." She smiled at him.

“Right.” Color touched his cheeks, and he turned away.

The lad was ensnared deep in her Allure. All servants of the Goddess had such power: an internal song that only those trained in the ways of the three circles could discern consciously. The Allure gave pleasure to those around them by enflaming their bodies, quickening their hearts, weakening their minds, or all three, and as such, it could be equally a blessing and a curse. Until she knew this lad’s purpose and intentions, she would allow her Allure to befuddle him and loosen his tongue. Also, she rather liked his circles and would not mind listening to him more.

Sidion looked around the surprisingly spacious cabin, taking in the saws, hammers, and various tools that lay upon a long bench. “You’re a carpenter,” she said.

“Apprentice carpenter,” he said. “My master is the carpenter. I’m learning. Uh. Right.” He beamed at her awkwardly.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Rillemar, but friends call me Brill.” He pronounced the words with pride, then sputtered over the next, like a child realizing his own foolishness. “If it please m’lady.”

Interesting. “My name is Sid.” She sipped the cool water. “Do you know who I am?”

He shook his head, then nodded. “What, not who. You’re a noble of Iavor. I seen your skin and hair. Your clothes, too. They’re finely made. And folks in the west don’t wear armor like that. Iron, not steel. My master recognized it, I think, but he didn’t say anything.”

He sounded intrigued rather than confused about his master’s reaction, and he’d been perceptive enough to notice it. His mind was stronger than Sidion had first thought. Untrained, but full of potential.

She wondered about Brill’s master and whether he had seen the same thing in the lad.

“And the scars? Do you recognize those? And what they mean?” When he looked decidedly uncomfortable, she smiled. “It’s all right.”

“You’re—” Brill made a warding gesture she didn’t recognize—from one of the westerling religions, no doubt. His voice grew very quiet. “You’re a diabolist.”

That made Sidion laugh aloud. Country folk. She had been much like Brill once.

“A wizard can summon demons, certainly, but that is hardly the extent of magic.”

She handed him the half-emptied tankard, then cleared her throat. She sang a high-pitched note, then added a second with a word in a celestial tongue. Above her outstretched hand appeared a serpent of light, which slithered around her fingers and danced through the air. It hissed at Brill in the same song she had used to give it life.

“Goddess!” Eyes going wide, Brill started up from his chair. The tankard fell to the floor and cracked in three pieces, spilling its contents over the creaking boards.

Again Sidion wanted to laugh, but she contained herself and only smiled. “Apologies,” she said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No—no harm done.” Brill collected himself and looked at the flying serpent made of light. “That’s amazing.”

He scrutinized her magic, and she scrutinized him. In the light, Brill seemed older than she had first thought: a little younger than her, but a man grown. A westerner for certain, he had a working build as of a farmer or woodsman but none of the edge of a hardened warrior. The manner of a wide-eyed peasant coated his stance and his mannerisms, but behind his blue eyes beat a keen intelligence and a desire to learn. Sidion rather liked this Brill.

“My clothes.” She glanced down. “Did they survive?”

He shook his head. “Master Herme had me collect something for you to wear, though.” He indicated a poorly folded tunic and leggings. “Sorry it’s not a gown or sommat your ladyship might wear.”

“It’s fine. I prefer breeches, in fact. But this even more so.” Sidion pushed the covers free and rose, fully aware of how enticing her naked body looked in the magical light. There was soreness but no real pain, and for that she was glad. She smiled. “Well?”

Brill’s eyes went wide and his mouth hung open. When she took a step toward him, he twitched as though at a loud noise and whirled away to stare at the foggy window into the dark night. He stammered something that sounded like an apology.

“Will you not join me in the Embrace of the Goddess?” she asked. “Does my body displease you?”

“No! No, I—I’m well pleased.” Brill murmured something that sounded like a prayer.

Of course. Sidion cursed herself for a fool. Had it been so long since her youth she'd forgotten what country folk were like? Attractive as he might be, like as not, this Brill was like the country lads among whom she had grown up, who dreamed of the village girls but dared not touch them. He had learned to look upon sex with shame, and that hurt her heart.

Still, his circles did please her, and it had been so long since she'd had any genuine pleasure for herself. She had awakened with a hunger—a need that craved fulfillment after the horrible flight and the struggle in the creek. Another curtain of bloody horror to forget. The Goddess desired homage, and Sidion desperately wanted to give it. She decided to try once more.

“If you are afraid, you need not be. I am well trained and will guide you.” Sidion laid a hand on the small of his back, and he jerked up straighter than a spear. She took her hand away. “I did not mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No, I—” Brill glanced back over his shoulder and immediately looked the other way. “I’m just not used to noble ladies and their ways.”

“Not all noble ladies are like me, I assure you. I was trained in the Triune Fane, and I celebrate her gifts. They should not be a source of shame.”

“It’s not shame, it’s . . . I haven’t—”

Finally, Sidion understood. “You’ve not been initiated in the ways of the Goddess.” Sidion retreated and turned away from him. “I apologize. The First Embrace is a sacred thing and not to be taken lightly. I should not have pressured you.”

He turned toward her, face still red, and averted his eyes from her bare flesh. “That isn’t it,” he said. “I’ve . . . *embraced* before. It is about what is proper. I barely know you.”

And you missed your chance to know me better, Sidion thought.

“As you will,” she said. “If you think it proper to look away while I dress, then do so.”

“Of course.” He turned toward the window.

Sidion’s interest in Brill faded somewhat. It saddened her to see circles as fine as his wasted. She sympathized with whatever poor village maid had to deal with his insecurities.

“This master of yours,” she asked, taking care to seem idle in her questions. “You said he recognized me, but he did not warn you about my ways?”

“No.” Brill sounded discomfited. “Herme said to wait with you until you woke up. He didn’t say you’d—well.”

“Well indeed.” Sidion pulled on the breeches, one leg at a time. These had belonged to a girl, she realized, and they fit her quite well. “Is Master Herme a traveler himself, that he would know the ways of Iavor?”

“Can’t say.”

That gave Sidion pause. For an instant, she wanted to step forward and caress him, use her song to overcome his irritating propriety and wrench the answers from his begging lips, but she suppressed the urge. “Can’t or won’t?”

“Both.” Brill shifted uncomfortably. “Herme done told me little of his life before. He wasn’t born here but came from the east.”

“I see.” Sidion slipped into the borrowed tunic, wincing as she forced her battered left arm through the sleeve. The billowy garment felt awkward over her wiry frame, but she belted it around the waist and it fit well enough. “You are safe, good ars.”

Brill looked around, and she noted his relief. A peasant’s world felt safer when everyone had clothes on. Still, he watched her with barely contained fascination. Sidion doubted he had ever met a woman like her. She stepped toward him, and Brill bit his lip. She was about to speak when the door of the small cabin opened.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Unlike his apprentice, the man at the door was anything but physically impressive. Thin limbs and delicate bone structure gave him a frail appearance, and his once-black hair was mostly gray. He wore a thick black scarf around his throat, and Sidion knew it had less to do with the cold than concealment. He considered her with his deep, almost black eyes, and Sidion felt herself shrink. The song inside him was dark, quiet, and beautiful. Sidion felt her heart shrivel and her amorous desires burn to angry ashes. She had never forgotten why she’d come, but seeing *him* brought it crashing back. She bit her lip.

“Sorry, Master Herme! I broke your cup.” Brill immediately fell to one knee to gather up the fragments. “I’ll take care of this.”

“See that you do,” said the withered carpenter, though his eyes lingered on Sidion. They both knew the sound of breaking crockery was not what had brought him.

Sidion knew that voice anywhere. It had filled her dreams for too long. It was the last voice she had heard before the darkness that had brought her to this place. Her world cracked with jagged shards of rage that weakened the impenetrable hymn she’d sung around her heart.

“My Lord,” she said and gave a short bow.

They stared at one another for a moment, and Brill paused in picking up the shards to look between them speculatively.

“No *lord*,” the man said. “Stop torturing the boy. If you have questions, ask them of me.”

Then he turned and strode out to the porch. The cabin door slammed behind him.

She closed her fists to try and keep her breathing under control. The sight of the man, after so many months of searching, and all she felt was anger. She could feel Brill’s eyes on her back, hear the confused undertone to his personal song. It was the sole spark of light in a room that swirled with haze.

“M’lady?” Brill sounded anxious. “Something is wrong?”

Silently, she went outside.



After the close heat of the cabin, the night air made her skin feel dry and chapped, and Sidion could see her breath rising before her eyes. Thick mist curled around her as she moved. Her tunic and breeches did little against the cold, but she sang a brisk melody that shrouded her with the warmth of the dry kingdoms far to the south. She breathed easier.

“Careless,” the old man said from the other end of the porch. His weed pipe flared, illumining his lined face with orange firelight. “Flaunting your magic in the open where any might see. Careless.”

Sidion crossed her arms and nodded at the dense forest that surrounded them. Her words were sharp and cold as quenched steel. “Who is there to see? I think we are alone in this place. You, your apprentice . . . and that boy, I suppose.”

“But my apprentice *is* that boy. Surely you do not mean . . . Ah. Clever. Hrm.”

He made a sound that might have been a musical laugh, had he still had his marvelous voice. Instead, a tiny, derisive, inward snort. Not the voice of the dark enchanter who had taught her so much.

“Shame on you for trying to confuse an old man. If I had an apprentice so ripe and gorgeous as you, my dear, would I waste my time carving wood?” He looked her up and down, particularly at her sprained left arm. “How are your injuries? You should wear a sling for that.”

“Don’t deflect.” Sidion leaned back on the rail and crossed her arms. She opened her body to his and felt his circles react, ever so slightly. “You want to help me.”

“Allure me all you like, the way you did that poor boy in there. Country lads are no match for noble ladies.” He blew an intricate smoke ring, then coughed and touched his hacking throat. When the fit was done, he looked back to her. “But I know your kind of woman, and I know your true purpose. And alas, you have come to the wrong place.”

“I do not think so. Or did you think I would not recognize you, Lord Malagant?”

The old man dragged deep on his pipe and merely watched her, his violet eyes glowing. Her anger rose, a rage that had been building since she had left Iavor weeks ago. She had not come this far to return empty-handed.

“Fine.” Sidion waved away the purple smoke. Her words grew hot. “I have traveled months and hundreds of leagues—by saddle, boat, and on foot—because I need your help. Korvin, the barbarian usurper—”

“Hrm,” Herme said, interrupting her with his growl. “Walk with me.”

“Walk with you?” Sidion bristled. “Walk where?”

The old man glanced back at the window of the cabin where furtive movement suggested Brill was listening. Then he took his cane and headed down the steps into the misty pre-dawn world. Sidion followed, uncertain and frustrated. She had no time for this. Not when her people were suffering, their homes burned, their children stolen, and their very way of life wrenched away into barbarism.

The road led down into a valley, to a small village. She could not see much through the trees, but by the number of smoke trails rising into the morning mist, she knew it could not be large. Abruptly, Herme stepped off the trail into the wood. At first, Sidion hesitated, unpleasantly reminded of her struggle in Thulthir Wood, but she summoned her courage and pressed on. The moon cast more than enough light, and she could see dawn glimmering at the horizon.

She was suddenly aware of flies buzzing around her, but she smelled no rot. Her guide was gone. “Malagant,” she said. “Malagant!”

“Herme,” the ragged voice corrected from above her. Somehow, in just a few breaths, the crippled old man had climbed to the top of a centuries-old stump more than five paces in diameter. The felled tree lay in pieces nearby, each a colony of new growth covered over in dirt and loam. The trees grew around it, nurtured by their lost ancestor. “That other does not exist.”

She had no time for this. Gingerly, she took hold of a root growing into the old stump with her left hand and pulled, but pain stopped her short. She felt it in her side as well, but the wound had not broken open. Her glowing blood would have shone through the bandage.

“Do not strain yourself, Princess.” The old man seemed quite relaxed on top of the stump, smoking his pipe and gazing up at the stars. “Your wound is tender yet.”

Heedless, Sidion pushed. She climbed, scrambling up the stump with one hand and two feet. At least Brill hadn’t brought her a dress.

“Has—” A root tore free of the stump, and she found a new handhold. “Has this village felt Iavor’s wrath? Is Korvin’s reach so long?”

“Of course not. You don’t think I dwell here for the fine culture or cuisine, do you? The loveliness of their boys or the tractability of their women?” The old man coughed. “No. I know because I foretold it. Or did you think my last words to the kingdom meant nothing?”

Sidion remembered that night all too well. “You were roaring drunk.”

That drew a broken laugh from the old wretch. “True, but the point remains. I told you what would happen, and now, you come to me, surprised that it has.”

Sidion clambered over the lip of the stump and climbed to her feet. The old man sat on a weathered patch of wood he must have carved out of the dead tree. Her breathing was a touch heavy and not just from the exertion.

“Cease these games,” she said. “Call yourself what you like, but you *will* listen to me.”

Slowly a contented smile crept across his lips. He had been testing her, and the realization only stoked her temper.

“Very well,” he said, and his whole demeanor changed. He looked darker than he had—mischievous, rather than irritable. “Fancy that. My little Black Princess, a woman grown.”

They stood together for a moment, and it seemed to Sidion that twenty years melted away. She became once again a wide-eyed child from a distant land, introduced for the first time to the most powerful man she had ever met. Lord Malagant the Darksinger, Vizier and Magister in service to Queen Phila, had looked upon Sidion and—particularly—her mother Nyx with unrestrained interest. They had not dwelled in Starmantle ten days before Malagant ceased teaching the bright White Princess Emerald in favor of her darker bond-sister, Sidion. Before being a knight or a priestess, she had been his apprentice.

The images weren't her imagination, she realized, but actual visages conjured through Malagant's song. She waved away the images of the capital and her girlhood, and they faded into moonlight. Even with his voice broken, Malagant could accomplish so much more than her paltry dragon made of light. He had taught her that trick, too, when she was a little girl.

Sidion refused to let nostalgia distract her. "I need your help," she said. "King Korvin—"

"No, no, let me guess, Princess. Your brother-by-gilt has gone insane with his newfound power and now threatens to destroy all he fought to protect. All he took from me." He took another drag of his pipe and blew out smoke. "Close enough for a bard's tale?"

"So come with me," she said. "Bring the boy if you've grown attached to him. We could use another strong arm."

The light of the pipe cast strange shadows across Herme's expressive, powerful face. "You must be insane or out of hope if you would come to the scourge of the realm himself, demanding his aid."

"I am asking. Begging." Sidion sank to one knee on the hardened wood. She forced down her frustration and pain and tried to steel herself. "Please."

The old man paused, eyes on her face, then looked away into the night. "Is this a personal request, Princess?"

"Yes," she said. "From the center of my heart, mind, and body."

"Well, in that case." Herme blew out a smoke ring. "No."

"No?" Sidion felt like he'd thrust a dagger into her. She clutched at her stomach to make sure he had not. His rejection fanned the coals of her anger, and she spoke again, this time making no attempt at diplomacy. "Do you have any idea what Korvin is doing? What his Burned God is doing to the Triune Fane? Hundreds of my brothers and sisters are raped and murdered every day. Thousands of our people are suffering, dying."

"*Your* people, not mine." The old man leaned back against one of the smaller trees growing out of the stump. "You can hear it in my voice. I'm no friend of favor."

Sidion stood and faced him, hands trembling with the repressed desire to hit him. To seize him by the throat and shake him or strangle him. "Korvin was your greatest enemy. He maimed you. Ruined you. Destroyed your life. I ask you for help against him. Does that mean nothing?"

Herme shrugged. “Less than you think. Korvin defeated me. He won the kingdom. What else is there to say?”

Sidion hadn’t wanted to use this last weapon, but draw it she did. Her frustration didn’t care about causing him pain. “Do it for my mother,” she said between gritted teeth. “For the love you once bore her.”

They’d not been in the capital a month before Malagant took Nyx to his bed, and the two had been lovers for many, many years. Even as a child, Sidion had known that.

The old man let the silence linger between them for a time. He gestured with his pipe to the east where the sun rose, painting the landscape in the rich colors of blood and life. Hundreds of leagues in the distance, the Barbarian King abused Sidion’s people: pillaging their crops and homes, profaning their Goddess upon her own altar, destroying their way of life. All because he had been their hero, and then their greatest villain. She could not stand for it. She could not let it come to pass.

“I am sorry you wasted your journey, Princess,” he said at length. “And your hope.”

No. He could not say *no*.

Sidion balled her hands into fists. “I cannot accept that. I must take you back with me. Else, I will find only death waiting.”

“Perhaps you should stay here, then,” he said. “My little cabin is full just at the moment, but in the village, you might find a home and work not too demeaning for such a noble lady. It is not as beautiful as the capital, but it has a rustic charm.”

He gestured around at the forest. Flowers she had not seen in the darkness turned their blooms to the rising sun, and tiny creatures rustled amongst the branches and needles of the trees. Sidion looked down into the stream at the base of the stump and could see her reflection as clearly as in a silvered glass. Beside her, the old man who had once ruled Iavor looked withered indeed, but she heard his song: soft but smooth, powerful in its depths. It curled in harmony around hers, a harmonious ballad of vengeance long denied. Malagant, Scourge of the Realm, was not dead yet.

She raised her head, resolute. “If I must face Korvin alone to save my people, I will.”

The old man yawned and continued his thought as though she had not spoken. “If you wish to go, fear not: we have taken none of your coin or equipment. The

coin should fetch you all the supplies you need in the village: horses, tack, food, tents. Though of course you can remain here as long as you want, so long as you remain peaceful.”

“I will hire three horses,” she said. “For you, Brill, and me.”

He looked at her very directly. “This is my place. There are no songs sung of it. It might as well not exist. I have a life here. Perhaps you should think of finding one yourself.”

Sidion looked away at the rising sun. Its rays burned away the mist, and she could feel the warmth. “You know I cannot stop.”

The old man shrugged. “Stay here in exile or go and die a traitor. Either way, I will not sing of you.” Out of the corner of her eye, Sidion saw his hand stray to the black scarf around his neck where much of his voice had been chopped and torn away. “Korvin saw to that.”

Sidion turned to him, but abruptly, he was gone, vanished like the morning mist. She could still hear traces of music at the edge of her consciousness. A jet-black fly buzzed around her head. She waved it away.

She looked down at the gleaming ring on her finger. “He cannot say no,” she said.



On the summit, looking down into the valley of his adopted home, the man who called himself Herme puffed the last of his pipe as the sun rose. Far below, he saw smoke rising from his cabin. Age had weakened his body, for certain, but his senses had lost no acuity. He saw her climbing awkwardly down from her perch. Despite her wounded left arm, she was surprisingly spry. The blessing of youth, he supposed.

Her arrival was . . . interesting. Not something he had anticipated. So little had interested him the last few years. He should turn her away, and yet . . .

Of all his failings, and there were many, curiosity had always risen to the top.

He blew out the smoke of his last drag to melt away into the cool morning air. He sang a note—not as clear or pure as it once had been, but still powerful—and the hazy cloud shivered. It drew together and formed images that swirled in the smoke: faces, bodies, crying out in pain and fear. A woman’s face, her smile filled with sharpened teeth.

Time grew short.



As the sun peeked over the horizon, the Scythe drove two clawed fingers into the hanging peasant's belly, making the man screech in agony. Blood seeped onto her gauntlet and down his chest, away from where he hung by his feet from the gallows tree at the edge of the Thulthir. The warrior-king's chosen had stalked and taken the woodsman much as he had tried to take down a deer. He had chosen the wrong day to hunt at the outskirts of the cursed wood.

"We are seeking a woman," Vexen said in her deep, powerful voice. "She passed this way, not three days ago. We know this trail is right. Tell us where she has gone."

She offered no assurances or reward—no promise that the pain would end or that she would cease maiming the hapless prisoner. The people of Iavor were weak and soft, and the westerlings even worse. They were too squeamish even to kill *animals* for food.

Moritir—the third ranked Scythe in Vexen's death squad—grinned viciously, and his expression only widened when Vexen looked at him. She knew spilled blood made him hunger for violence and sex, and it pleased her to make him pine for her. He had not earned a bride.

The man babbled a denial to her painted face—he'd grown incoherent after a mere hour of torture, the pathetic creature—and Vexen sighed. She seized hold of the next finger and twisted it past the breaking point. His screams amused her as did the frothing blood and spittle that turned his beard to foam.

A shadow loomed out of the darkness, but she'd felt the man approach long before he arrived: Carator, one of her scouts. She smelled his musk and sweat and heard the familiar creak of bones on leather that marked his trophies. "Speak," she said, in the gruff tongue of the Korom.

Carator bowed his head in respect. "Found the body of the softlander, Oulus."

"Dead," she said.

"Stabbed, beheaded," the scout's words terse and indifferent. "Found this nearby."

Carator brought out a scrap of rough-hewn leather, which he carefully unrolled to reveal a stone polished smooth by flowing water. A light pink residue

gleamed with the last rays of the setting moons. When silver Solué dipped below the horizon, its glow faded to a dull echo.

Vexen made a deep rumble low in her throat, and the leather shivered. The edges of the hide began to crisp and blacken as magic touched it, and the blood gleamed bright before the leather burned up entirely.

The princess had been here. They were indeed on the right track.

Vexen turned to the huntsman. Without preamble, she wrenched the claws of her gauntlet across his face and throat. His scream became a gurgle as the blood flooded out of him, and he became just another carcass strung up after a hunt.

“He was useless to us in life, but not in death.” She gestured to the corpse, and Carator and Moritir drew their knives. They bickered over who would take the choice cuts—after their huntress’s belly was full, of course.

Vexen looked to the west, then down to a black obsidian ring she wore. It glowed brighter near the bloodied river stone.

She smiled with a mouth of filed teeth.

THE SCYTHE FALLS

Sidion did not go back to the cabin as she had suggested. Instead, she lingered on the edge of the clearing, watching the place with keen, black eyes. Finally, Brill pushed out the front door, a bundle of laundry in his arms, and she waited longer to make sure he had gone.

When the Princess felt certain no one would discover or interrupt her, she knelt on the forest loam, wincing at the soreness in her muscles. The temptation was there to call upon the Goddess's healing magic, but this other chore took priority. She could always share the embrace later: the boy Brill seemed a likely partner, though she'd have to get through his youthful embarrassment.

Sidion took off her silver ring and held it lightly. Then, softly, she sang a rising string of notes, wordless and flowing, making her ring glow brightly. The answering phrase she sang as well, in a different but harmonizing voice. Some singers could subvocalize—sing two voices at once, or sing and speak at the same moment—but in her weakened state, she had to sing them one at a time. Fortunately, when she sang her part once more, she heard an answering melody from far away. She sang together with this phantom voice, unfolding their unique song, even across the vast distance between them.

The ring rose into the air and spun, casting a thousand points of light. The magic was primarily auditory, rather than visual, flowing around a fine-featured face with eyes like gleaming emeralds. They left traces of green light drifting through the air like lines of smoke.

The face looked to her and smiled. “Sister,” she said.

“Emerald.” Sidion loosed the song, and the magic held. As always, she’d feared her call would go unanswered. “Are you well? Has he hurt you?”

“Korvin? No.” Emerald’s face tightened. “He barely touches me anymore. He was angry when you left, but that’s all.” Her impish, familiar smile could be heard in her voice. “I said the worst things about you—called you certain names. He doesn’t know I’m singing to you.”

Sidion blew out a sigh and suppressed curling uneasiness. Of all the hard choices she had made, leaving her sister in the hands of the Barbarian King cut her to the depths of her bowels. Emerald was the rightful Queen of Iavor, but Korvin’s anger was boundless. It may not have fallen on Emerald as yet, but her sister was yet in danger.

But of course Emerald would not see that—she always saw the light in everyone while Sidion saw the darkness. For twenty years, Sidion had shielded her sister, and she would not fail now.

Amerald prattled on, talking about inconsequential matters. “It’s disgusting, really, the way the brutes sit and belch and eat *animals*, of all things. Just like beasts,” Emerald said. “And since you left, fashion at court has spiraled into barbarism. Now, they expect me to wear not only horse leather but furs. *Furs*, Sister!”

It reassured Sidion, to see Emerald’s innocence untainted: the whole horrible quest faded, and she could just be herself for a few moments. Time was short, though.

“Sister,” she said. “I found him.”

Amerald’s eyes flashed loudly. She had not expected that. “The Darksinger? For true?” Her breath caught.

Sidion nodded. “And he has refused to help us.”

Silence reigned between them, heavy with shock and fading hope.

“No?” the queen asked. “He cannot say no. He must help us!”

“I know,” Sidion said. “I—”

Amerald’s song wavered, her face shifting like a swarm of buzzing flies. She had looked over her shoulder, Sidion realized. “Someone is coming. I have to go.”

“Emerald, wait—” The song wavered, distorting Sidion’s words.

“You have to convince him,” her sister said. “Learn what’s holding him back. Do whatever it takes!”

The song evaporated, and Sidion sat alone in the forest, her heart racing. She fought down a wave of helpless nausea. Slowly she managed to calm herself, closing her hands into tight fists, the nails drawing blood. She would not fail. She could not.

No matter the cost.



Brill felt around in his suds-filled bucket for the bristling brush. He rubbed at the bloodstain on the cloak, working at the edge on which he'd spent the last quarter hour. Pink blood flecked off into the cold stream water, diffusing and mingling with yellowish soapy froth.

There was an implicit violence in the act, and Brill felt that all too keenly every time he slammed the cloak underwater. The sodden fabric felt like thrusting a body into the river, and that made him distinctly uncomfortable. He saw a face in the cloak when it was under the water and brought it up, only to find it was merely fabric.

He tried very hard not to think about the naked woman back at his cabin.

He had watched her reflection in the window, of course—he hadn't been able to help himself. She danced through his mind, always wearing that enticing smile. And just as her image had enthralled him, her invitation had shaken him. It was ridiculous. It was not proper. And yet—

Won't you join me, Brill? she said in his mind and opened wide her embrace.

Brill didn't realize he was not alone until a big round stone landed in the water an arm's length from where he crouched. With a startled cry, he scrambled away and fell on his backside in the muddy water, submerging himself past the hips. He cast a sharp glare at the source of the ringing laughter, which only increased in intensity.

"Skittish little foal today, huh?" Emry stood a few paces away, hands on her hips and bucking with mocking peals. "You should see your face."

"Very funny." Brill slapped the water to catch the cloak, which had started to drift away.

"I thought so." She picked her way closer, taking care to step only on dry stones. "What are you doing washing, anyway? Don't you have wood to be chopping? Or—" She eyed him sidelong and looked down at his crotch. "Did you need help with that?"

Brill started to get up, then realized the water was at least partly hiding the swelling in his breeches. “No, I’ve got it.”

“As you will.” She plucked up another stone and tossed it farther down the river.

With her thick brown hair and rough skin, her smith’s build and big green eyes, Emry looked as little like Sidion as another woman could. He found his friend very easy to look at, but that morn, he couldn’t help comparing her to the mysterious traveler. And then he started thinking about both of them. Together

...

When Emry threw her second skipping stone, Brill realized he’d been lost in his daydream. His friend was looking at him with a third stone in hand as though considering him as a target. He rose awkwardly, holding the cloak in front of his pelvis, and tried a reassuring smile.

“Ugh.” She hopped down the riverbank. “Give those here.”

“No!” Brill clutched the cloak to hide himself. “This is man’s work. Not for a good lady.”

“Never you mind.” Emry waved away his protests. “I wash clothes with me da all the time, and you’re obviously rubbish at it. Now give it here.”

She held out her hands insistently, but he drew away and plunged the cloak—and his arms—back into the pool. His feet had churned up plenty of mud, so the garment came out of the river filthy. At least it hid the substantial bloodstain.

“Dammit,” he said.

Emry chuckled at him, but his anxious grimace dampened her mirth. “What’s got you so dour of a sudden?” she asked. “You were practically playing with yourself when I came up.”

“No!” Brill blushed. “I just—Master told me to wash this cloak, and I’m doing it. That’s all. Nothing unsavory.”

“Here.” Emry took hold of the cloak in his hands. “I like washing clothes. And I like you, too.” She leaned in to kiss him.

The image of Sidion’s black eyes made him turn away.

Her light-hearted manner dissolved. “You’ve not done that in a long time, not since we was kids. What’s a matter with you?”

He blushed despite himself, then sighed. Thankfully, his body had decided to ease its enthusiasm, and he could stop trying to hide his crotch. “Sorry, just distracted.”

“Fortunately, I like you being cloud-headed,” Emry said. “Get out of there, you’re going to turn blue. I know how to cheer you up.”

He climbed out of the river and onto the bank where Emry promptly hit him with a flying tackle and they went rolling through the grass and mud. Her clean clothes got as filthy as his, but neither of them cared. Her lips were warm and inviting, her hands felt good on his muscular body, and her breasts felt even better, but his mind still dwelt far away. He wanted to let it go—be in the moment with her—but somehow he couldn’t, even when Emry slipped her hand down his breeches.

Finally Emry rolled off him and sighed up at the sky. “All right, who is it? I’ll march right up to her and tell her she’s a no good harlot who’s making you go all limp and stupid.”

“Sorry,” Brill said. “It’s just—the body does as it does.”

“As the mind goads it. I know you, Brill.” Emry rolled onto her elbows. “So who is she? This girl you’re thinking of who int me while I’m making a fool of meself?”

“All right, all right,” Brill said. “So there’s this girl. *Woman.*”

“Right there is.” Emry’s face reddened and her eyes narrowed, like a fire had lit in her belly and she was struggling to keep from coughing up the smoke. “Is it Sahrđ? Talle, with that drooping eye of hers? I’ll knock her dragging head off, you watch.”

“No, I—I just met her yestereve. I can’t stop thinking about her.”

Based on how Emry glared, that had been the wrong thing to say. She bolted to her feet and crossed her arms. “How can that be? It’s nary a big village, Brill.”

“She’s a traveler,” he said. “Not from the village. I never met anyone like her before.”

The fire went out of Emry’s visage, and her frown turned slightly worried, rather than angry. “Did—did she *embrace* you?” she asked in a softer voice. “Is that what happened?”

“No!” Brill climbed to his feet and crossed his arms in a firm denial. “No—no, of course not. I’ve never done that—not with anyone. We haven’t even—”

“Good,” Emry said. “Because after what you let me do to you in the hayloft—”

“That was special—for both of us.” Brill took a step closer to her and put his arms around her waist. “And I didn’t *let* you do anything. We both wanted that.”

Emry didn't quite look convinced. "And you still want us to? I mean, you want to have sex with me first?"

"Of course I do." Brill smiled, doing his best to mean it. "When the day comes."

They had grown up together, he and the apprentice smith. Both had assumed for years that they would have a whole brood of children. Their lives were on the same path. Until last night, when the mists had parted and Brill had seen—what?

Whether he believed it himself, his reassurance seemed enough for Emry. Her shoulders visibly relaxed and she smiled. "Good. Don't much fancy sharing your first embrace."

Brill knew that, unlike him, Emry had had sex before, but his inexperience had never been an issue between them. He'd been relieved to plan to share his first embrace with her as they had always known would happen, but now . . . now, he felt unsettled.

"Since you're going to anyway," Emry said, smiling. "Tell me about this woman."



The village of Baeleis was like dozens Sidion had visited in Iavor, yet it had a distinct flavor born of the rugged region. She basked in the village's warm song as she went about her business: securing horses, filling up packs with supplies, and generally preparing for the journey back. Some of the villagers looked upon her with wariness—this bruised stranger with foreign coin—but she found enough friendly faces. She acquired three horses as the man called Herme had suggested and had them delivered to the woodcutter's cabin. The stable woman stared at her, caught in her Allure, but most of the villagers aided her regardless. Good people.

The folk of the western frontier owed loose fealty to the Sonorous Throne, but the agreement yielded little beyond the promise of aid should something catastrophic occur. If the grimkin raised a horde and swept in from their hill and mountain caves, Iavor would march, true, but mostly to secure her own borders. Any westerling village in the horde's path would be little more than rubble and smoke when the Iavoran army arrived. As such, each village needed a robust, independent song and a harmony.

Living with theoretical protection meant the westerlings developed a fierce sense of courage in spite of difficulty as much interdependent as self-reliant. The villagers were well schooled in the basics of survival and accomplished most chores themselves: mending clothing, repairing buildings, or growing their own food. Each stone townhouse was a citadel unto itself, flanked in a forest of herbs and vegetables that could be protected with lean-to coverings in inclement weather. Root vegetables—easy to grow, easy to keep for long stretches—provided much of the nutrition, yielding hardy folk who had never tasted the soft bean paste delicacies of Iavor. Those who had more than they could eat brought them to the center of the village for a market of sorts where barter was more common than coin.

Baeleis's song reflected that fierce cooperation: a deep beat that coursed under scores of independent yet interconnected voices. The harmony made her feel safe and determined. The community was strong, but Sidion knew any of these westerlings could thrive anywhere in the frontier and raise a family on less than a citizen of the capital consumed in a month. The awful consumption at the heart of Iavor in these latter days was yet another grievance to lay at the feet of Korvin the Usurper.

Sidion, who had grown up in a westerling village not unlike Baeleis, found it refreshing to see folk who could thrive on their own, independent of the horror the Sonorous Throne had become. Since Korvin had risen to power, introducing the barbaric custom of feasting on animals, nearly every village in Iavor had built pens for fowl or hovels for swine, but not so in Baeleis. The simple freedom of the place—where none owed anyone else anything but respect and basic courtesy—stirred something deep within her that longed for the same. It felt like coming home after a long sojourn in a nightmare.

Here, life was simple. Pure. Folk worked alone for their own goals or united together for mutual benefit. Sidion watched a crew of women and men assemble around a partially built stone house, meeting in the early hours to barter food, compare their dreams of the previous night, and gossip about who was sharing whose bed. There was a measure of shame to the gossip that Sidion recognized but still found foreign: an aspect of her childhood she'd left far behind her and no longer fully understood. Still, these folk seemed happy, and that lightened her heart.

She could not dwell on nostalgia for long, though—not if she wanted to spare them the same fate that had befallen Iavor. In her mind, she saw the market

square hung with bodies dripping blood into clay basins. The stone buildings became burned out hulks strewn with the bones of those who had dared to resist. She heard the screams of the tortured and the laughs of the barbarians, and tears streamed down her face at her own impotence.

Sidion realized she had lingered at the edge of the square, shaking from her toes to her fingers. Her heart was beating out of her chest. Using the exercises the Darksinger had taught her, she forced her breathing back under control and hurried. She had to make him see.

She made no great secret of following the old man: wherever he went, she took care to be bartering for horses or equipment not far away or admiring the apples a village man had brought to the square. She looked sufficiently like the westerling she had been born that she fit in the tapestry of the village, and her song fit its harmony well enough.

The man called Herme was certainly aware of her, but he seemed not at all troubled. He checked on a village woman's chair he had apparently built, inquired after her family, and left her smiling and a little flushed. Not three breaths later, the same woman gave Sidion a distasteful glare and went back to her knitting. The princess watched him draw a draught of water from the well at the center of town. He helped a child fill his bucket, then circled back the other direction, toward the market. He might have been taking a pleasant morning stroll.

Sidion finally lost her patience after he'd spent nearly a quarter hour inspecting every single green apple at the same cart the Princess had visited. She strode up to him.

"Apple?" he said, without looking at her.

"No." She gritted her teeth. "Our people are dying. Are you really going to—?"

"Pity." He held up one of the fruits, which looked like a fist-sized uncut emerald in his hand. "Ever tasted one of these? It's not at all like the crimson apples of the Chessen orchards or the golden delights of Starmantle."

"They call the capital Korvket now," she said.

He paused a breath, then turned his attention back to the apple: "Sour, crisp, and forgettable."

"Like life in this village."

"Exactly." The old man took a bite. "Perfect."

"You really should stop interrupting me," Sidion said. "It's quite rude."

"You can humor an old man, surely." He brought the apple toward his mouth,

but abruptly, he froze. His hand began to tremble, and the apple fell to the ground. He sank to one knee. "It comes."

The suddenness of his collapse drew numerous eyes, and Sidion felt immediately self-aware and vulnerable. She was a stranger among these folk, and if they decided she had attacked him . . .

"Sweet Goddess," he murmured. "I can hear it. How can you not hear it?"

"What's wrong?" Sidion reached for him, but he recoiled. "What do you hear?"

"That sound . . ." he said.

Sidion shook her head, but she was aware of a faint buzz in the air. It sounded like crackling flames, like the howling wind searching for its lost sister. "What is it?"

"Beautiful and terrible. I know it even after so long without it. *Especially.*" The old man who called himself Herme smiled sadly. "The Darksong."



Brill was confused. His stories of Sidion only grew warmer as he spoke, yet the more he told Emry, the more she smiled and laughed. The apprentice smith had been unsettled when the conversation began, but by the end, she seemed unconcerned.

Finally, Brill shook his head. "You're well with this? I tell you about a beautiful woman, mysterious and naked in my bed, and you're laughing?"

"You have, my fine lad, and I am," Emry said. "And every word convinces me of one thing: you're too much a coward to do anything about it." She laughed uproariously.

Brill felt like she'd punched him in the gut. He opened his mouth to protest and, instead, found himself looking down at Sidion's sodden cloak. He turned and strode away.

Emry's laughter faded. "Oh come, Brill, it was only a *juh*—" Her words cut off sharply in an exhalation of breath. Brill glanced over his shoulder, confused, and saw her staring at him with a blank expression. She looked down at something black and wet protruding from her chest.

When it turned blood red, Brill realized it was an arrow.

Blood flowed from Emry's mouth, and she sank to her knees. A choked scream stuck in his throat, Brill reached for her, but a second arrow slammed

into his stomach, knocking him onto his backside. It felt like a hand had reached in and was pulling out his guts. Emry lay unmoving on the ground, eyes wide and filled with tears and blood.

“Nnhh,” Brill said, and looked wildly around. He clutched the arrow as though to remove it, but doing so filled him with a fresh sunburst of pain that made the world shake around him.

Three dark figures emerged from the wood, clad in darkened leathers and inked with bright colors that flashed in the moonlight. One of them sighted an arrow on Brill, but his superior—a bald woman covered with tattoos—shoved his arm aside. They were singing a series of deep grunts and growls: a song of war.

Somehow, Brill managed to get to his feet and hobble back toward the village. He had to warn them. He had to warn Sidion.



His aim ruined, Moritir relaxed his draw and turned to Vexen with a snarl. “I had to listen to that worm mewl for long enough. A man afraid of a woman is not a man.”

His master shot out a gauntleted hand and caught his throat. Vexen’s clawed fingers teased the hard line of his jaw. “And yet, you fear me,” she said. “What does that make you?”

The fight dimmed in his eyes somewhat. Carator chuckled.

Vexen tossed Moritir aside and looked to the scout. “Speak,” she said.

“You are not a woman,” Carator said. “You are a cruel wind. You are a flame that eats.”

Vexen smiled. She might enjoy rutting with Carator over the corpses of these westerlings while Moritir watched, chastened and thinking about what he had done wrong.

Duty before pleasure.

Six more Scythes stepped out of the wood: vicious men and women who wore blackened hides for armor and carried blades sharpened past the point of visibility. Nine soldiers, for the nine victories of the Burned God over the heathens of the world. His champion, Korvin the Destroyer, had subjugated the mighty and decadent Empire of Iavor. Surely, Vexen could do the same to a pitiful westerling village.

“The woman that worm fears is the princess,” she said. “Carator and Moritir, with me. The rest of you, to the village.” Vexen smiled. “Leave none alive.”