

22: Of Sorrow and Joy

The storms were getting worse.

We weathered the harshest in the warm tunnels of the sewers, but even there—sometimes miles beneath the earth—the cold permeated. It breathed in through our tunnels, pumped like blood through an artery to the heart of the Underspan, where refugees bled and shivered and died while they prayed to their All-Mother for an end. Any end: death, captivity, slavery, freedom, anything but the cold.

“I can’t stand this waiting and planning. It’s going to drive me mad.”

Aerwyn panted as she paced back and forth across my room. She had taken to visiting often, or as often as someone of her station could call upon someone like me. She was an important Twyth-ani woman—the first co-Valkr in ten thousand years of tradition—which effectively made me her dancing monkey, a momentary entertainment to be discarded when of no more use. Or at least that’s how the Valkræ looked at me. I could still feel the ghost of her kiss, could still feel the sting of our angry farewell days before and told myself that I knew her better than they.

She was distant still, and I suppose I had been distant, too. The sheer hours of preparation that had gone into the planning of the upcoming battle were already mind-numbing, though the damn thing was still a whole week away. And she was the crux of it all—the keystone player, the organizer and mover. I could see her

facade of control fracturing with every mounting request, but I could do nothing but watch in horror as she spiraled into the darkness that waited for her.

“Are you even listening?” She spun, eyes bright with consternation. I stammered, focused, and replayed the last two minutes of her talking.

“Yes, I expect that Lord Hinrik’s man will be here very shortly. We’ll have his response—don’t worry.”

“It’s not the ‘if’ that I’m worried about,” Aerwyn snapped and resumed her pacing. I was about to stand and try to comfort her, offer a warm embrace, a fumbling reparation, or otherwise embarrass myself when a Valkræ page-boy—an especially annoying little brat who was fast on his feet but not so fast with his wits—burst into the room.

“Honored Valkr.” He flew into his obeisance with the particular energy only children can muster and babbled his message too fast to even comprehend. My mastery of the Twyth-ani tongue—the *Cainntr*, as they call it—was adequate only to the point of singularities. I picked out a few jumbled words, but the overall meaning of the message was lost.

“Slow down, Sawyl,” I urged, catching the boy’s eye. “No need to burst in without knocking and then embarrass yourself by mishandling your words.”

At my upraised hands, he blushed but took a steadying breath and started over. I picked out a few non-translatables—Hinrik, human, that sort of thing—and pieced together the rest.

“And now we toss the dice,” I muttered.

Aerwyn turned to me. “Why do you say that? What have dice to do with anything?”

“An old habit, from my gambling days,” I answered honestly. “If Lord Hinrik sent a messenger in person, he must be delivering big news. A Fae-Human alliance would be big news.”

“I suppose.” Aerwyn steeled herself, and did not sound one iota convinced. Following Sawyl and picking up an entourage of attendants, messengers, and bodyguards along our path through the slanting hallways of the Bastion, we made our way down a spiral of moss-covered stairs into the deepest of the depths. Our shuffling feet—unsteady upon the slippery surface of stone—were accompanied only by the steady and distant *drip* of water. The whole of the sewers seemed to be more damp than usual, but I wagered that was from meltwater from the snows above.

We stopped in front of the cell; its serried bars were pitted like rotting teeth. As soon as I saw who was imprisoned within, I could not help but chuckle at the ineffectual convention of the rusty cage.

“I’ll be damned.” I couldn’t laugh around my own astonishment. “Is that you in there, Sigmund Black-Kettle?”

“By the shit-faced gods, the Fox is still alive!” Sigmund roared from within the paltry cage. His frame was but a silhouette amidst the hungry shadows, but he looked just as hulking as usual—a close rival to Stendahl’s own stature.

“Taveol...do I know this man?” Aerwyn’s eyes were clouded, as she focused on Sigmund’s booming voice. Worry spiked through me.

“Yes. He helped us escape from the Sons. He told us how to find the Valkræ.”

“Of course, of course,” she said hollowly.

“Well you all gonna jerk around out there while I rot, or are you gonna let me out?” Sigmund grunted around a wolfish smile. Aerwyn immediately beckoned to the guard who held the keys to Sigmund’s cell; he quickly opened the cross-worked iron door with an outrageously jarring squeal.

“Real proper way to treat messengers,” Sigmund smirked.

“A precaution, nothing more,” Aerwyn assured, and Sigmund stepped into the light of our torches; I felt my own eyes widen in surprise. He was dressed in an ill-fitted tabard of dark blue trimmed with gold over top a clean cotton shirt. His cape was all fur, and well-sewn, and his boots even were soft calf-skin.

“You’ve moved up in the world...” I said. He looked quite out-of-place without his Reaving armor atop hard-boiled leather jerkins and pauldrons.

Sigmund tugged the hem of his cloak with one huge, calloused hand and inspected it as if it had just appeared on his person. “I suppose this is what I get for working for a King,” he smiled slyly and curtsied.

“You have Lord Hinrik’s reply?” Aerwyn interrupted, all business.

“Haven’t taught them any manners, have you Taveol,” Sigmund grunted, and gave Aerwyn the cursory up-down. “You somebody important now?” She did not have time to answer him before Stendahl stepped forward.

“You look upon the Valkr, the Mother of the Twyth-ani, the Eternal Watcher and our living vengeance. Show some respect, human.” Stendahl had emerged from the shadows of the retinue and stepped toe to toe with Sigmund. They eyed each other, two massive brutes covered in rippling muscle and years-old scars. Stendahl bared his razor teeth and Sigmund stepped back, though not out of fear.

Sigmund sniffed then bent to one knee with some measure of reluctance. Stendahl’s wild eye rolled in its socket as he stepped back into the shadows like a demon into the night. If I concentrated hard enough, I could still see the burning orb of his singular eye glinting from the dark.

Aerwyn considered my long-time friend and partner in crime, eyes laden with judgement.

“My apologies, envoy. Let us eat and drink first. Then, we can hear your message.” The entourage about-faced and ascended the spiral stair bolstered in numbers by one. We swept into a small room hung with low lanterns that guttered in pools of their own wax. The clangor of the kitchens was not far distant, and soon a variety of dishes was set out on the small, circular table. Sigmund had quite a go at the fishes and various deep-dwelling snails and crustaceans that clung to the walls of the sewers, feeding off of the sludge and shit. I might have cautioned him to be mindful of those nasty brown sauces and their lingering burn of the throat, stomach, and asshole sequentially, but the thought of Sigmund Black-Kettle as a prisoner of the latrines made me chuckle. He was undeterred, as the lot of us watched him devour plate after plate of rice, steamed clams and oysters, pickled sweat-meats, and chicken livers. Sucking the marrow out of a bone that he *popped* open, Sigmund stretched and swiveled to face us, apparently satiated. Though I knew that Aerwyn was as anxious about the missive as I was, her face was a mask of even control, tempered by a drop of serenity as she waited for Sigmund to relay his message.

“King Hinrik,” he began, but I interrupted, kicking my voice over his.

“Lord. Lord Hinrik,” I reminded with a smile.

“As if what I call him fucking matters,” Sigmund laughed. “He’s still rich and paying my salary.” He spat out the chicken-bone. “Anyways, *Lord* Hinrik

sends his most amenable regards, whatever that shit means. He says that he is pathetic to your cause, er, empathetic I mean.” He chewed his lip and peered to the ceiling as if the formal words had been told to relay were scrawled there. “He says he wants to help you fuck up, er, devastate the ranks of the invaders, but he needs a little something in return.” His gaze fixed on Aerwyn, and the next set of words fell from his mouth, evidently more practiced than the rest of the message. “He says that he’ll help, as long as he gets to marry you and make you Queen of Avengarde. To...*solidify* your alliance.”

My mouth fell open wide, and my head jerked involuntarily so that my eyes could lock onto Aerwyn.

It took her only a moment to respond, and her face twitched but once. “Of course.”

My heart dropped into my shoes, and my stomach whirled and twisted nauseously.

“Those are acceptable terms,” she concluded, nodding to herself.

I limped to her side, reeling. “Don’t you think this is the kind of decision you take time well...deciding upon?” I asked, breathless, head spinning.

She regarded me with her deep golden eyes which flashed with a hint of sadness. “I will not hesitate if it means saving the Twyth-ani. If this union will keep my people alive, then I will marry Lord Hinrik as soon as possible.”

Around her, Valkræ eyes narrowed. Their mutterings were discontent to say the least. Perhaps a few humans and Twyth-ani exiled themselves to be lovers, but an official union, looked upon by the eyes of gods and men? *Never*.

I held on to Aerwyn's elbow. "You'll lose the support of your people if you consort with a human, you told me that much yourself," I pleaded quietly.

Her face tightened as she leaned in with a vehement whisper. "Enough! The Twyth-ani may not like this union, but they'll be alive because of it, and that will be solace enough for me." Her voice lowered even more. "We can't all be selfish like you, Taveol. This is my *duty*, and I must see it done." She looked away and confronted Sigmund sternly.

"So I'll tell him you say yes?" Sigmund asked slowly, looking from me to Aerwyn and back again.

"Your personal delivery of my acceptance is not necessary. My adviser..." She glanced to me, lips pursed. "...has told me some interesting things about your past *exploits*. You could be a useful asset in the coming battle. Will you stay here to act as my future husband's temporary ambassador?"

Sigmund's eyes narrowed. "What about my wife, my children? How will they know I'm alive and well?"

"I'm sure that your Lord could see to it that they are protected and cared for during the coming weeks," Aerwyn answered quickly.

Sigmund looked uncomfortable, but started nodding, his grimy white beard stabbing into his too-clean tabard.

“Good. Gwythyr will find lodgings more...suited to your station,” Aerwyn stated, and then swept from the room, pulling her retinue on her cloak-tails.

“Damn,” I spat, feeling more foolish than ever.

* * *

She avoided me for the rest of the day. I could feel it, like a buffeting wind. And I was a bird, trying to fly into it and getting turned back at every move. With a heavy heart, I skipped supper and moved on leaden feet to my room, imagining Hinrik’s pudgy hand clasped around Aerwyn’s slim waist. That made my insides boil, but I couldn’t push the image from my mind’s eye. It festered there stubbornly, like the gruesome and riveting sight of broken bone protruding from torn, bloody skin, so horrible that one cannot help but to stare in repugnant awe.

I had been useless at the planning session earlier, eyes moving over the maps without really seeing, brain stumbling over mental obstacles I could normally clear with ease. *This is what it must be like to be of average intellect...how frustrating.* My thoughts had been turned to the ever-forbidden fruit, and I cursed myself for the delusion of believing that the impossible was possible.

“Best just get on with it, like a man,” I said to myself. It was something my brother would have said to me, when we had served in the Sons of Dawn together.

Or my father before him. Their steely eyes would have pinioned me just as their ruthless smiles haunted me.

I remained awake much longer than I should have, and though my body demanded rest, even threatened unconsciousness, I could not sleep. Instead, I perched on the edge of my cot and thought about nothing while massaging my maimed leg. The old wound was burning more than ever these days. A splotch of blood by my knee stood out against the simple brown of my trousers. It had been decades since I was dealt the blow that had given me my limp, yet the wound bled like only a week had passed. *Idiot leg*, I reprimanded my appendage sternly and went back to thinking.

My eyelids had finally begun to droop when my lock *clicked*, and my door swung open. Lamplight—dying from want of oil and wick—barely illuminated Aerwyn’s taut body as she stood in the doorway.

“May I come in?” she asked quietly, not meeting my eyes.

“Of course,” I muttered, and made space on the cot, though she chose to stand. I rubbed my eyes awake and yawned.

“I came for your apology,” she said, arms crossed.

“My...my what?” I sputtered, rising though my leg protested. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” she said, pausing. “You are always second-guessing my decisions. You have no respect, and no tact, and I have been advised to dismiss you the next time you undermine my authority.”

“Wha—” I stuttered, getting a hold on my tongue. “And what if your decisions are foolish? Who would tell you, besides me? Your ‘advisers’ would sit back and let you wreck this ship yourself before telling you you’re off course and headed for the shallows, and you know it. They did it to Croethfyre, and they’ll do it to you.” My voice rose more than I wanted it to, but Aerwyn’s hurt—if any—was covered by her anger.

“How dare you...” Her voice smoldered. She stalked for the door, but I limped across the room and forced it shut.

“Marrying Hinrik is not the only way to get the help of his armies,” I hissed.

“No? Then *you* come up with something, Taveol. Use the genius you always talk about and conjure a solution.”

“You can’t marry him,” I said stubbornly, ignoring her challenge.

“Have you always been this selfish? Am I just now seeing it?” Her voice was shrill.

“Fine. I’m selfish, I admit it. I don’t want you to go marry some fat lord, because *I* want to be with you, damn it.” I found the words tumbling out of my mouth and immediately wished to recall them.

Aerwyn stilled.

“Damn...” I muttered, suddenly and completely spent of energy, “I’m tired of hiding. I’m tired of this stupid game we play whenever we’re not alone.”

I took in a steadying breath. “I just need to know why you keep pushing me away.” I found the strength to look her in the eye, and I saw tears, realized that I was also crying. *Gods, I am so tired...*

“I...I need to be focused on the things that matter. Big things, future things. That’s not us; we could never last. And besides, I’m about to be married, Taveol.

“Those are poor excuses and you know it,” I said, seeing how far I could push.

“You’re right. I can’t even say it,” she breathed in raggedly. “I don’t want to say it because it *scares* me too much, Taveol. I have no idea who I am, and I can’t even sort out which thoughts are mine and which are not.” Her face darkened.

“How could I return your feelings? I don’t even know my own.”

I slouched against the door, uncaring of the splinters that poked through my tunic and into my back.

“You’re right, and I’m such an ass for asking.” I could not meet her eyes. “Us...it could never have lasted. You’re right about that.” I hated the words even as they came out of my mouth. Halfway down the wall, Aerwyn’s arms wrapped around me. I stood with her help.

“But when we’re together like this, I forget all the reasons,” she said. I felt her heart beat through her chest in quick, little *thumps*. “Whenever we’re close, I just want to be with you. I want to be with you now, for as long as I can, because the only thing I am certain about—the one thing I know—is that I love you.” She repeated herself, again and again, growing more confident with every retelling. My breath sucked in and I shook. A single tear dripped from her cheek and on to my shoulder. Her embrace tightened.

“And I...” My voice shook. “I love you.” The utterance caught me in a place between exquisite pain and joy, wrenched me apart.

With a sudden move, she kissed me, and my existence narrowed to that contact alone. It was a thing of complete passion, of both sorrow and beauty, caught at the tail end of what fleeting time we had left together. I kissed back, hardened cheek pressed against her soft one, tears pushed away. We reeled, embracing, against the wall, the door, hands now moving across each other. We kissed, but this time, we did not pull apart.

She was yanking off my tunic, I realized, still staggered by her energy, by the joyous grief that wrapped around us. I barely even noticed as she slipped out of her robe and we tottered toward the bed, somehow managing to land on the small cot. I could feel her breath coming quickly now, hot against my bare skin as we pushed the sheets out of the way, kissing still. Her soft breasts pressed against my

chest as she straddled me, quivering with energy. Reaching down, she unlaced my trousers and I tried my damndest to remove them myself, but after a moment of flailing, had to ask for help anyways. We both laughed, but another need was more pressing as Aerwyn straddled me again, pushing me into her.

With a little moan, her back arced, pale skin covered in a sheen of sweat, fiery hair sweeping over the openness of her naked back, where I ran my hands up and down. I hit my head against the stone wall but neither noticed nor cared as we made desperate love amidst the entangling sheets. Aerwyn cried out for a final time, sweaty form pressed tightly to me, and shuddered as tiny gasps escaped her delicately parted lips.

Our racing hearts slowed and we lay still, tangled in each other, holding each other and not ever wanting to let go. She was crying again, and I knew that hers were tears of both sorrow and joy. So we held each other while we could, against the cruelty of the world, and fell, exhausted, to sleep.

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I awoke to the sound of her breathing, to the gentle up-down rocking of my hand as it rose with her chest. Her warmth was beautiful in and of itself. Though I must say: I kept inhaling fine little strands of her red hair, gagging noisily each time. Our ephemeral happiness was an illusion I wanted to cling to, but the world waits for neither lovers nor murderers, and I was destined to be both this day.

A frenzied knocking at my door jolted me into wakefulness. Aerwyn sat up quickly and snatched at her clothes, which lay scattered on the floor. We said nothing as we dressed—me more painfully slow than she—and I finished pulling my tunic over my head when the door burst open. Stendahl barged in, beside Gwythyr and Sawyl, whose knocking had woken us.

“Praise the All-Mother,” Gwythyr rushed the appellation, breathing so hard that his sides were shaking. He bowed to Aerwyn stiffly. His side was still patched with poultices, but he moved lithely despite his wounds. I envied his youthful energy as I struggled to pull my well-worn boot on while my leg screamed in pain.

“We have been in a frenzy. We thought that you’d been abducted from your chambers,” he said, glancing first to me, and then to the rumped bed.

“Did this human cause you any trouble?” Gwythyr growled. Aerwyn bid him stand; her face was relaxed, devoid of the tension that had anchored itself there for so long now.

“He is a good friend and adviser; we were just...talking,” she said, and when Gwythyr’s eye only narrowed, she added, “I trust him. You should too.”

“Very well,” he muttered and turned. When his footsteps faded into the distance, I turned back to Aerwyn.

“We should really...” I started, but Aerwyn was already nodding.

“I can go again, but we’ll have to be quick.” She pushed my door shut with her toe and bundled me back onto the bed, kissing me fiercely, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her what I was going to say.

* * *

The day flew on fleet wings, a blur of orders and preparations. My role by Aerwyn’s side began to evolve into a secondary sort of help. I added my strategic touch here and there in the forms of various traps, ambushes and informative critique based on my experiences fighting with and against the Sons. The whole of the battle formed in my head, and I imagined the human and Twyth-ani forces clashing, imagined the strategic retreats of each Spear fist so as to draw the Sons forward bit by incremental bit, imagined the forces of Eirlys Godtfed and Lord Hinrik crashing down on the Sons’ flanks when given the signal, and imagined the massive slaughter resulting in a rout that was sure to follow. *Appear weak, but not too weak, and then crush them between our three armies. As long as they think we’re without allies, they’ll never see the ambush coming.* I tried to picture Gareth Flynt’s face as his forces beat a hasty retreat, but all I could see were his steely eyes.

It would be a tight thing, like walking barefoot on a razor edge, but it *could* be done. We briefed the Spear-Leaders, giving them their individual orders, and like good soldiers, they did not ask for the details of the larger picture. They were

satiated with their specific missions, knew that they were but one cog in a huge machine that must run smoothly if we were to have a hope of victory. All the while, Croethfyre hung on the periphery. I tried my best to isolate her from the inner circle, but sometimes she weaseled her way in. Aerwyn appeared not to notice, and though some of the officers squirmed at her presence, her contributions—while suspect—were well-reasoned and of sound logic. Still, whenever hers was the voice advising Aerwyn and the generals, I could not help but to grip my dagger tighter.

Dinnertime came, and we adjourned from the map room, eyes blurry, and heads clouded from reading minuscule numbers demarcated in Silje Blackeye's flowing script. Hastily, the table was set and the meal began. I drank my sour wine suitably sourly, buried in the rim of the cup, eyeing up and down the table like an errant shadow. Valkræ eyes turned to a commotion at the opposite end of the table, where one Fae man had stood, honey-wine out-thrust. His chanting was soon joined by others in what I had come to know as a Twyth-ani drinking ritual that was apt to get too exciting.

As a rule, I always look the other way when there's fireworks. I like watching people's faces, for one, but mostly I want to see who's capitalizing on the distraction. It's during this time when I would have lifted a few purses myself, many years ago, and it was this instinct that gave me a split-second view at a small

Fae boy. The cupbearer, and the empty vial that disappeared into his tunic pocket. My hand flew to my dagger, as he approached the head of the table. Looking amused, Aerwyn watched her commanders join the chant and casually accepted the goblet of honey-wine. She raised it to her lips, and my eyes tracked the movement of the serving-boy, as he ran along the walls, hastily trying to find the servant's exit. In a single instinctual moment, the sliver of deadly metal had left my hand. Years of practice converged in a single point as my thrown knife pierced the boy's tunic and pinned him to the doorframe.

Aerwyn stood from her chair at the sudden hush, which was punctuated only by the cupbearer's terrified thrashing. I watched as Aerwyn glanced from the servant to her wine and back again. She cast her goblet away, splashing wine across the table. Ignoring the silence, I hobbled around the table to kneel by the boy's side. His eyes were caught open in surprise, as he struggled to escape.

"Give me the vial, or you'll have a blade for a tongue," I whispered into his ear, but when I looked into his eyes, I knew that he had not heard me. With a grunt, I prized his hand open; a small, empty vial dropped with a *ping* onto the floor.

"Poison?" Gwythyr breathed out in fury, dusky face lined with rage. I held the vial up and struggled to my feet. No words were needed, no explanation required. Eyes tracked from the vial to Aerwyn's wine spilled across the petrified wooden table and the connection was instantaneous. They saw what I had glimpsed

not moments before. With a jerk, I pulled my dagger out of wall post and handed the child over to the waiting guards. Stendahl flowed to my side, more a shadow than a substantial being. He helped me balance as I wavered. I tried to look past him, at Aerwyn, but she would not meet my eyes.

“You gain honor, human-Taveol,” he chuckled as the room burst into frightened murmurs. “But the child deserved that knife in his neck. Poisoners have no honor.”

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again—I don’t care about your honor. I’m just trying to do right by the Valkræ.” I caught his eye. “And if I’d have gutted the brat, there wouldn’t be an interrogation, would there?” I limped back to my place at the table but could not force myself to eat as the Valkræ officers set down their wine nervously. The meal resumed, albeit with warranted hesitation. Mute chatter squabbled beneath the clatter of pronged chopsticks the Twyth-ani use to eat. Halfway through the meal, I shoved my chair back, got up, and left. I could feel their eyes on my back like pinpricks. Aerwyn tracked me down some time later as I meandered through the twisted halls of the Bastion. I couldn’t help but to worry that every shadow contained a hundred black-robed assassins.

“I find myself in your debt again,” she said, taking the lead.

“Debt? Heh.” I dismissed the idea like the pebble I kicked down the hall. “I just can’t wrap my head around this world sometimes; he was a child. An idiot boy

burdened too soon with adult problems. There are still Fae who insist Croethfyre is the one and only Valkr.”

“So would you blame the Sons if they tried to kill you?”

“No.” I shrugged, eying her point. “But when I look back at the tapestry of my life, all I see are all the reasons this world is completely, head-over-heels fucked, and I just added one more. That child shouldn’t have to suffer because of his parents’ war, but now he will.” I tried to still my shaking hands, as I imagined the interrogation the boy—*poisoner*—would certainly face.

Aerwyn took my hands and warmed them in her own. Her fingers pulled back only a little when they found the stump that was my missing digit. “Taveol,” she called softly.

I was still muttering to myself. “Gods below, I actually had to think about whether I should kill a *child*. As if doing it to save you would somehow justify the act.” I couldn’t help but let the words pour forth.

“Taveol, stop!” Aerwyn insisted, pulling my hands to her chest.

“I can see my past too, when the memory comes back,” she murmured. “When the *other* looks through, tries to take control.” A strange look crossed her face. “My past is bloodier than yours. And it’s getting harder to keep her out. Sometimes, I feel like the pressure’s going to make my head explode.”

“I...I had no idea,” I said, trying to mask my worry.

“Of course you didn’t. You *couldn’t* have any idea what this is like,” she snapped, eyes hardening. “Did it ever cross your mind that you’re not the only one with moral dilemmas?” She must have heard herself, must have realized that her tone had become razor sharp, for she pulled back. “I’m sorry, Taveol. This...” She put her palm to her temple. “...this fight is mine alone. I don’t want to drag you in; I don’t want to hurt you.”

We instinctually pulled apart at the sound of running footsteps clattering toward us. It seemed that Aerwyn’s attendants had finally found us. *A leader’s time is never their own, especially during war.*

Their clamoring pulled Aerwyn away like a ship into a maelstrom, and I was left adrift, staring at her retreating back.

“But you don’t need to fight alone,” I murmured to her, as she disappeared down the hallway. “You could always use another blade at your side.” I slumped against the wall and waited for the din of the entourage to die down, taking the time to collect my thoughts. There was nothing else for it, so I dragged myself along the corridors to the map-room, where I worked until I couldn’t think straight before hobbling back to my room and falling to sleep on the floor, because I didn’t quite make it to the cot. *One night closer to the battle, one day closer to death.*

Aerwyn came to me that night, found me on the floor and helped me into bed. She visited the next night, and the one after that as well. Each time, our love-making

was more desperate, more passionate, and each night we collapsed beside one another as the inevitability of time dragged forward, and the feeling of anxiety's slow-burn crept into our every muscle and pore. The looming apprehension was lessened during the moments we were together, which made life bearable until once more reality knocked over our tenuously constructed illusion, but it was a temporary salve at best. With a start I realized that I had begun to measure time by the hours that separated us, and I yearned for the night when we could lie together naked and forget the machinations of fate.

Remember Taveol, there can be no "we."

* * *

"Do you think you'll be able to visit me when I'm Queen of all Avengarde?" Aerwyn mused with a small smile, pulling my worn blankets over her bare shoulder. I pressed myself closer, still breathing hard.

"Somehow, I think that is unlikely." My returning smile was sad. I've never been very good at pillow-talk.

"Gwythyr suspects something. I think he may be jealous," she whispered, kissing me softly.

"And right well he should be." My smile was true this time, and with my maimed hand I traced the contours of her jaw, her neck, the small of her back, trying to commit them to memory. Unbidden, my gut churned. Time, our Beloved

Dictator, had whisked the week away. Tomorrow was not just any other day; it was *the* day, the fruition of hundreds of collective hours of planning, a crux on which history wobbled. On which side would it fall?

“Do you think we’ll die tomorrow?” Aerwyn asked as I rested my palm on her cheek.

“Tomorrow or a hundred more tomorrows, what happens then happens. But that is not *now*. That is not what we have. Nothing can take this away from us.” I took hold of her hand. The words felt foolish as I uttered them, but they matched the cadence of my heart.

“No more talk of death. There will be enough of that tomorrow. Tell me about life, Taveol. Tell me what you remember.” She lingered on the word, looking inward. Her golden eyes were distant yet close. Her finger traced my Dawn-Son tattoo idly before running down my shoulder to the three old scars that adorned each arm. “Tell me about these scars...”

“Oh, that’s quite a long story,” I said, brushing away from the painful memories.

“I’d like to know you,” she whispered, waiting for me to speak.

“I could think of better ways to spend our time,” I said and let a sly smile creep onto my face. But she took hold of my roaming hands and stilled them, pushing toward me until our foreheads touched.

“Please, Taveol. This is important.”

“Ah,” I sighed. “I’ll try. No promises, though.”

“No promises.” She smiled, urging me on with a little squeeze.

“Well, let’s see...I was young. Younger than most of the men who enlisted. My father was a merchant, and after my mother died the only things he lived for was his business and my older brother. The one time I saw real pride on my father’s face was when my brother came home one day with a white sword and a white cape; he had joined the Sons of Dawn. A campaign was starting soon, in the far West, past Orlyn and Isaar, past the Spine, near my homeland.” I paused. Recalling these memories was like climbing into a patch of thistles whose braided barbs only stung more the deeper I dug. “I had no idea what the Sons fought for, or why they accepted my brother and I so readily, since I had followed him, wanting only to please Father. I read the holy manuscripts, prayed feverishly though I knew not to whom, mastered the sword and the bow and the spear. But my brother’s shadow was a hard place to live in.” My voice tightened, threatened to betray me. “One day, the Lord-Captain himself visited us and told us that we would begin our crusade.”

“Gareth Flynt?” Aerwyn interrupted. I gritted my teeth instinctively.

“We had been told that our righteous crusade was against an army of darkness and sin. We only marched for a few days before we found our first

‘enemies.’ It still felt like an adventure, then, when we pitched camp on a bluff overlooking a little village. It was a Twyth-ani village, though I did not know that at the time.” I tried to control the shaking in my voice, but could not. Aerwyn’s smooth palm was warm against my face.

“I was a young idiot, but I was still curious: I wanted to see the face of my enemy, so I snuck down to their village that night. I cannot describe my disappointment: spying on that village, I didn’t see the demons we had been taught to hate, I didn’t see anything evil-looking in any way, I just saw some strange-looking people. Even then, their home looked much like my own. Imagine my confusion. At muster the next morning, our Captain told us to prepare ourselves for a glorious battle within the week, when the rest of our forces arrived, but I had seen no opposing army the night before, just that quiet village.

“I doubted the truth in the Sons’ God, doubted of the just-ness of the crusade. It was not an army of hell we fought, but regular people. I deserted just before dusk, but I was naive and scared, and they found me soon after I had run.”

I held my left hand—the one with the missing ring finger—for Aerwyn to see. “The Sons took it as punishment for desertion.” Aerwyn sucked in a sharp breath.

“The Lord-Captain ordered my punishment while my brother stood by and watched.” I flexed the hand; I still felt a ghostly itch scurry up the missing digit

every now and again. “My brother was appointed leader of the front-most assault force. When I got the news, I wrote a letter to my sister; I knew that if anyone could divert my brother from the slaughter that I knew was about to happen, it would be her.” My voice trembled despite an attempt to steady it. Emotion struck from a place in my heart I thought long-dead.

“I don’t...I think it would be best if we slept now,” I managed to say, feeling the tightness in my chest creep into my throat.

“Please,” Aerwyn’s plaint was but a whisper, a flutter of butterfly’s wings against the screaming of a gale. “I am here; I am with you. Please go on.”

Her warming presence shored up my resolve, and though my voice faltered, my story continued. The tale bled from me, like pus a surgeon has drawn from a sore. “My sister met me soon after she received my letter. She was convinced that she could save my brother from his madness, that she could stop him from riding into that Twyth-ani village. But she was wrong. He rode her down, drove his lance through her heart in the name of his God. She...her name was—”

“Aerwyn,” she cut in, shuddering in realization. “I’m so sorry; I didn’t know.”

“The name suits you.” I stifled the upwelling of memory that threatened to burst forth now that the dam had been breached. “There are times that I wish I

could forget, like you did. I envied you then.” I brushed a lock of her red hair away from her face, back behind a pointed ear.

“You shouldn’t,” she said quickly. “In place of memories, I had nothing.”

“Nothing doesn’t sound so bad,” I whispered.

“Nothing is not bad, nor is it good. It’s just emptiness,” she shuddered. “And sometimes, I’m filled with it.”

I wanted to catch her as she retreated into herself, to snatch her from the free-fall that I knew was imminent. Without thinking, I pulled her into a kiss that she returned hesitantly at first, but then with more intensity. Our words were forgotten, our memories put aside, and our consciousnesses condensed. Every breath we took, ecstatic or sorrowful, measured a slice of time taken from an already alarmingly small quota, yet we were increasingly passionate in defiance of this immovable brink, as if we could stand up against time itself with only the energy of our two worn bodies and somehow force the universe to blink. And yet, we both acknowledged the folly of it all, understood that if our passion survived the coming night, it would die of its own intensity when removed from the microcosm we had created for it.

So, we shut our eyes to the future and made love in the face of endless nothing.