

Warrior's Atone



he twin moons of Osha settled over the farthest hill in the farthest corner of the fiery western sky. A chill filled the air; the kind of chill that reached the marrow of one's bones and that turned one's face from the wind. It had been colder than most times, during this last season of Ron, causing villein and noble alike to search the sky, praying for a return of the warming sun to their island kingdom.

Cervus stood in the moonlit night. He was one of the few of the kingdom who did not look to the heavens. Indeed, he seemed immune to the cold, uncaring that the wind nipped at his great black beard or ravaged the graying strands of his hair. His mantle was thrown open to reveal a barrel chest dressed in a surcote of rough wool, narrowing to a sturdy waist and massive tree-trunk legs. The darkest purple of his long tunic blended with the midnight dark of his mantle, so that he appeared to be a statue-like figure encased in the shadows. Only the eyes of the gryphon on the silver belt at his waist moved in the night—dancing—to the flames of the nearby bonfire.

By this time tomorrow night, she would belong to another man.

At the sound of a low harsh trill, Cervus turned. His eyes flicked in the direction of the saucy whore's lean-to at his back and then to the snow-covered footpath leading to High Tower. His fingers instinctively found the crossbow that dangled loosely from the hook on his belt. The bow was in his hand and positioned for the sight before he took his next breath. His eyes searched the darkening shadows, his body tensing, taut, ever ready. Not until he recognized the popinjay scarlet of the new overlord's stocking cap did he relax, did he pull his mantle about him, did he mount his stallion to start the long journey to his own lodge.

His thoughts were his only companion and he wanted it that way. He had sent Mix, his squire, ahead with his favorite wolfhound prancing at the boy's heels. So he was alone—as he had always been alone. The sentinel. The guardian. The protector. Alone. Cervus, the lady's champion, known by those who feared him as *The Warrior*.

She did not fear him. She had no reason to do so. From the moment of her birth, he had sworn to protect her. He did so everyday, without thinking, without failing, while she was a babe in arms, while she was a playful girl in short skirts pestering him for a ride on his warhorse, until she was a ripe maiden pledged in marriage to the young overlord.

When she turned sixteen, on the eve of her ascension, he noticed her for the first time. How could he not? She cast her siren's eyes at every man in the Great Hall, enchanting them all with the promise of her lips and the swell of her breasts. His cock had grown long and thick and hard watching her promise and then renege—only to promise again. He felt shame at his mind's image of her in his bed, beneath him and screaming in pleasure when he rammed her and rammed her again until her virginity, both of mind and body, was no more. He knew her when she was no larger than a scrawny pup, sucking her thumb in the arms of her nursemaid. She was not for him. She was not for *him*.

Every man, from young stripling to ancient greybeard, fell under her spell. As it should be. Her beauty, grace, and perfection of body drew them and held them. She asked them for their allegiance, they gave it willingly. From him, she asked nothing; she knew that she held his liege in the palm of her slender hand. Yet, she seemed to want more. She was restless around him, frisky and restless, snapping one moment, tearful and wan the next.

By the time that Cervus had stamped the snow from his fur leggings and boots, Mix had cracked open the door to the lodge. Fighting the wind that was fighting the door, the lad managed to stand respectfully at the thatch-way. He offered Cervus a bowl of warmed mead with a shy smile in his eyes, and Cervus took it with a nod of thanks. Even though his every muscle ached from the long journey through the snow, he still ruffled the lad's hair as he passed into the courtyard. Well-trained, Mix fell into lockstep behind him, to trail him the requisite seven steps through the narrow confines of the mercy-gate. Close enough to protect his master's back from a would-be assassin, but far enough that he would not hinder a pivot-and-fly from Cervus's longbow or an axis-and-slash from his broadsword.

At the rampart of the spiral staircase leading to the solar, Cervus turned to study the countryside. The twin moons had merged into a fiery ball. A new day was in its infancy, a portent of the strange and the wondrous. The powerful Osha Kingdom would soon have a new ruler—that popinjay fop—and Cervus a new master—the same popinjay fop. In a few short hours, the hand-fyrd would begin, the rite that would irrevocably bind her to Popinjay. Did she know that her bridegroom had already spilt his seed in the straw of the village whore? Did she care? Or was she wondering why he, her captain of the guard, had left her side, excusing himself from the revels? Omen, that tartar, had raised her bushy brows but had wisely and, for once, bit her tongue. He would not be missed. She would not miss him. She was rapt in the last details: the perfection of her gown; the sheen of her hair; the radiance of her jewels. She was not for him, but he wanted her with a hot passion, an unfulfilled, unanswered passion that weighed his loins like an ice-cold stone.

Cervus let out a deep sigh and watched as his breath curled in the frosty air before him. “Treat them well,” he said as he handed Mix his bows and war shield, next his quiver crammed with quarrels and arrows, then his broadsword, helm, and stilt. His heavy, fur-lined mantle and gauntlets, both blazoned with his coat of arms, followed, and the lad's knees almost buckled under the weight. “Not a flea of rust.” He raised the latch on the solar door and pushed it open, only pausing at Mix's whispered words.

“My liege,” Mix spoke lowly, his voice muffled by the pile in his arms which threatened to cover his head. He mashed down the fur mantle and his eyes peeped up.

“My liege... she is here.”

“Who? Not Agatha.”

“No.”

“Who then?”

“She. My lady, the Princess—”

The words froze on the boy’s lips and he shied away under Cervus fearsome visage. Without cause. Though Cervus was a stern master, he was also a fair one. He rarely scolded and never struck his servants. Unlike other fighting men of the warrior caste, he showed patience to the young lordlings placed in his household.

“Where is she?”

“In the bedchamber, I believe, my liege.”

“Did you attend her?”

“Yes, but she said that she required nothing.”

“She came alone?”

“Yes, but by chariot.”

“Her stallions?”

“I covered Swift and Tor and took them to the woods. I tethered them there, in the cave by the brook.”

Cervus’s lips formed into a thin grim line across his face. He nodded.

“Did anyone see her?” he asked.

“I’m cannot say. The guards on the watch turret, I’m sure, but she was veiled.”

“Huh,” Cervus grunted out before giving Mix a straight look under his silver-tined brows.

“Strive to forget, boy, that you saw her.”

“Yes, my liege.”

“And ignore any...sounds that you may hear.”

“Yes, my liege, of course, my liege...bon air de mer.”

Cervus let the solar door slam shut. He stalked across the inner ward to the entrance to his bedchamber. He knew she knew better than this. To come to a man’s lodge, *his lodge*, without

ceremony and alone and unattended, on this day of all days, on the eve of the hand-fyrd. She must have gone twin-moon-mad to so break protocol. Yet, she was here. Whatever the circumstances, whatever the cause, whatever the outcome, she was here—in his home, in his bedchamber, perhaps even in his bed.

He snapped back the thick tapestry curtain to the archway, letting his eyes sweep the dimness of the smoky room. She lounged on the bearskins before the open hearth, idly feeding sweetmeats to his wolfhounds. She had doffed her cloak and chausses as well as her veil as soon as entering for this bulky outer-garb rested in a pool at his feet and she was wearing only her chemise and slippers. The chemise was of the finest silk and made with a man's desire in mind, being cut low, so low that the bodice of bullion lace barely covered her breasts, so low that it tempted her dark, ripe nipples to pop forth through the silver and gold threads.

“You will spoil them, my lady,” he said, picking up the garments. He tossed them on a crude wooden chest. He moved to take up an offensive position before the scores of gonfalons that he had captured in battle. He stood there with his arms folded across his chest and his feet spread wide apart.

“They deserve to be spoiled.”

“And you?”

“What?” She did not look up.

“You?” he asked. “What do you deserve?”

“Your attendance upon me for one thing? Why did you leave court?”

“Why are you here?”

She fed the largest hound—one with a hoary coat and scars of many battles—another sweetmeat before answering.

“Can't I visit a dear old friend, the dearest oldest friend of my father?”

“On your wedding day?” he asked. “Mere hours before you are to pledge yourself to another.”

“Ah. Prince Gallin of Shere.”

“Aye, I believe that is he.”

“You don't like Prince Gallin, do you?” She ruffled the dog's coat.

“He is to be my overlord, lady. There is no question of like.”

“Hmmm. You know I’ve never been in your lodge before.”

“Better if it had stayed that way. He is not a plaything, my lady.”

“I’m the reigning sovereign of the realm. I may go where I please when I please,” she said, feeding another nit-bit to the hound. The dog snapped at it, his strong, white teeth chomping open and close. She still had not looked at him.

“ ‘Waryful, bewareful. You may not break protocol, as well you know.’ ”

“You sound like Omen.”

“Omen has her uses.”

“So why did you leave court?”

“I am old, my lady princess.” Cervus smiled. “I needed my rest.”

“You will never be old, my warrior. Even when the sea has worn the mountains away, you will still be the young knight who dropped to his knees in the rushes to take my small hand and pledge his liege to me. Yours were the first eyes that I saw from my cradle. I loved you since that first moment.” She finally looked up and into those eyes. There was a mingling of sadness and of yearning.

“I will have Mix escort you back.” He turned to leave.

“Ouch!”

Within a hairsbreadth, he was at her side and crouching, the dogs giving way under his imperious charge.

“Thanks be to the gods,” he said, “it’s only a scratch.” He wiped the sudden sweat from his brow. “He didn’t break the skin. I told you. These dogs are *not* pets.”

“They snap and snarl like you. Yet there are gentle too.” She noticed the fear in his eyes, the sweat on his face and smiled. “So you do care.” Her hand reached up to stroke the ravine at the bridge of his nose made by the press of his iron helm guard, the gash at his chin where a cruel blade dug deep, the old wound at his brow that had healed poorly and left a dark puckered scar.

He shook her hand away to look into the fire. The silence between them grew.

“I’ve spent my life protecting you,” he said.

“That’s not the same. Your duty versus your love.”

“I cannot allow myself to feel anything more than my duty. On morrow—today—you will pledge yourself to another and tonight—this night—you will sleep in his arms. He will be the one to find his nest within you, to show you the ways of love, to take your virgin-hood gently, sweetly, and with passion.”

“There is nothing for us then?” she asked.

Cervus shrugged and turned away.

“Warrior, I’m neither blind nor a child. I know my betrothed, the so valiant, the so dashing, the so loyal Prince Gallin has already found his way to Gelsha’s hut.”

“A true lady would take no notice of such things,” he said.

“You echo Omen.”

He snuffed out a taper that had burnt low in its lamp before facing her.

“Do you know how old I am, girl?”

“Does it matter?”

“Nine and thirty.”

“Hence the grey at the temper,” she said with a grin.

“You look at me and you see me in my youth. Your father’s champion, your protector, the knight who fetched ice for you from the Hem Mountains when you fevered from the ague. But I am old, my princess, old and ugly.”

“You are *not!*”

“And when the wind blows down from those very mountains, my limbs stiffen and ache and my sword arm falters. Even my hair pains me.”

“You are *not* ugly.”

He pulled her into his lap, her head on his shoulder. A stray tangle of her hair tickled his nose and he curled it behind her ear, tucking it there. The rough wool bit into her skin as a single tear slipped down her cheek.

“Methanks,” he said. Nevertheless, I am. You deserve a mate—a husband—who can fuck you all night long, every night, from the nightingale’s song to the meadow lark’s call.”

She raised her head to look at him. She was a child again. “You could do that.”

“Fooche-finger you, maybe, but my time for fucking a woman nigh night long has ended. More nights than not I fall asleep over my wine—”

“—You lie—”

“—and drool into my beard.”

“Even Omen says that you are still a fine figure of a man.”

“Bah! Who is lying now? No, I am not for you. You must marry a man who has the youth, the strong right arm, to protect you and your heirs and your kingdom.”

“So you would condemn me to the Popinjay. Um-hum, I know that’s what you call him.”

“You always were a pitcher with big ears.”

She pouted then, at his words that harked of her childhood. She looked so fresh and so lovely that it took all his strength to forbear a kiss.

“I do not want him,” she said, pouting more, her lips curving and cherry-ripe.

“It’s a little late to say that, my princess fair,” Cervus said. He shook his head, chuckling deeply.

“And you do not want me to want him.”

“Did I object to the hand-fyrd?” he asked.

He poured two bowls of dark-red wine and handed one to her. She reached for it only to grab his thick forearm instead. She pulled him to her so quickly that he did not have time to protest. She fastened her lips to his lips, forcing her tongue through his teeth, and explored the recesses of his mouth. At first, his lips tasted cold and unyielding, but when she stroked the roof of his mouth with the tip of her tongue and then let her tongue dally there, his best intentions failed him. She heard him moan, deep in the back of his throat, and slanted her lips across his to enhance the friction. Without breaking contact—indeed their lips seemed locked—she pulled herself to her knees to straddle him until they sat face-to-face, her breasts pressed flat against his chest. Her hands ruffled the fine hairs at the back of his neck, her fingers ravishing through the dark curls that she found there, and she held his head firmly, resolutely, in fear that he would attempt to break way.

“My love, my love,” she murmured when she could murmur at all for her lips plundered. She nibbled at his full bottom lip, his cheek, the jagged corner of his mouth. “How can you deny us, deny this? We were born to be mated. I knew it from my beforetime. In truth, I wanted you even then.”

“This is wrong, so wrong,” he said even though his tongue darted out to trace the curve of her ear.”

“Why deny what we feel.”

“I’m old enough to be your grandsire.”

“You would have to be, all those years, the wait for me to become a woman, so we could do this to each other, feel this for each other.”

“If you knew—”

“Cease talk and feel,” she said, planting her mouth on his. She gripped a handful of his silvery black hair to tilt his head so that their mouths merged and became one, holding his head tight lest his noble intentions overrule his baser ones.

But no thought of ending the kiss entered Cervus’s mind. His arms encircled her, her flesh warm and willing and all the things that he had dreamed about these long winter nights. His mouth pressed against hers, her lips coy and shy one moment, demanding and insistent the next. His cock rammed against her belly, her hips rising and falling, slapping against him, sending the lava-hot message to his brain that she was ready to be fucked.

Like a fluid wave of the Oshan Sea, he flipped her on her back, threw his leg across her waist, and mounted her, the fitchets at the sides of his surcote aiding him. His cock rode between her legs, notched there, having found its home in that hot, welcoming vortex. Aside her now, he felt her wrap her strong calves around his much thicker ones and felt her jerk down, pulling him to her, trying to suck him in. Only the thin fabric of her chemise and the linen of his breechcloth prevented his entry, prevented him from tearing her maidenhead asunder, prevented him from spilling the bloody proof of her innocence onto the animals skins below.

Her hands ripped at that cloth, greedy hands, tearing hands, hands that wanted him in her hands, wanted to struggle to wrap her tiny palm around the thick shaft of his cock, feel the pulsating ripples, the engorged head as it burst through the barrier of foreskin. But the cloth would not, maddeningly would not, give way forcing her to redouble her efforts, then a ripping sound in the cold, quiet stillness of the bedchamber, a ripping sound that tore the cloth into tatters, and he was free.

She pushed herself away from him, raising her hips despite the heaviness of his body. For a second, Cervus thought that she regretted her rashness and that his dream was over. He knew

fear—a fear so different from the fear of the battlefield for this fear unmanned him. He grunted in reaction and bore down. That was enough. His seed shot from him in a potent jolt to stain her hand, the clear cum like jelly there.

“That is why you shouldn’t be here,” he sighed out. He buried his face in the swanlike slope of her neck. He inhaled her delicate scent, like thistle and cream. His body relaxed, becoming dead weight, and he let her take the heaviness.

“Next time,” she whispered in his ear as she caressed the broadness of his back, uncaring that his massive torso pressed down so hard upon her that she could barely breathe. “We have the morn...and the night too.”

“As if I could,” he said with a slight smile.

“When your manhood is up”—here she giggled—“we will once, twice, no, three times, well, as many times as we can until we must leave for the journey back to court. We will tell the High Council together—”

Cervus raised his head from her shoulder and his grey eyes, hard and flinty, stared into her innocent blue ones. He pulled himself from her arms. He adjusted his clothing, pulling his surcote down, covering his naked cock still slick and shiny, still shimmering in the smoky light. She was looking at him, but she did not truly see him.

“You spin more webs than a mother spider,” he said with a peevisish snap.

“—and—”

“What of your betrothed?”

“—and face them down,” she said as if he had not spoken. Her private plots took flight, enticing illusion, excluding reality.

“I say again. What of your betrothal?”

“We can be hand-fyrd by and by, we can be happy, we will be happy.”

“Won’t it be crowded in your bed? The three of us?”

“We’ll rule Osha together, it was destined, destiny, you at my side—”

“The-three-of-us?” he said again. He gripped her shoulders and shook her hard.

“What?” She spoke sharply, resenting his hard-faced intrusion into her dalliance.

“What of Prince Gallin?” he asked.

“Prince Gallin?” she mocked as if she knew no such name.

“Aye, Prince Gallin. The man whom you are to wed when this dawn breaks.”

“Oh. Him.”

“Aye. Him.”

“We can safely shut the prince from our plans,” she said.

“We can?”

“Popinjay can ride from my land.”

“You believe that you can forswear your pledge? Or that he would let you?”

“For all I care, he can ride from my land with my gold in his purse.”

“Likely to return with his father’s cartel of war in his saddle,” Cervus quipped.

“If I lay a casket of gold in Popinjay’s greedy palms, he will relinquish all rights to my person. I know it and you know it. We are a knowing pair. Kiss me.”

“If you never intended to speak your vows to him, why the courtship, the marriage parley, the push for the alliance with the Isle of Mar?”

“I-I-I wanted to hurt you. I knew about Agatha and I wanted to punish you.”

“You burned with the green-eye?” he asked.

“I was green-eyed,” she confirmed, speaking softly.

“Without cause. She was never anything more to me than—”

“—than a willing bedmate who—”

“—who you tired of quickly. I know.” She turned so that the side of her body laid candlestick straight on a pelt coverlet. On the palm of one hand, she rested her head. With the other hand, she ran her fingers through the pile, stroking the fur first one way, then the other.

“When you sent her away,” she continued, “I realized that she was not my rival, that you wanted me and I wanted you.” She looked straight into his eyes. “I swear to have you, my warrior, whatever the costs.”

“So you will throw sop at Prince Gallin to mate with me,” he said. “And what, my lady princess, will your High Council pronounce to that?”

“Why nothing when I elevate you to the baronage.”

“Ha!” Cervus grunted out, leaping so fast to his feet that the wolfhounds raised their shaggy heads and the still falcons beat their wings. Raking his locks into magnificent disorder with fingers more like talons than fingers, he stalked to the solar doorway and flipped back the tapestry curtain.

“Mix!” he bellowed in the long passageway.

“You won’t get rid of me that easily.”

“He will give you escort back to High Tower. Mix!”

She came to stand behind him. Wrapping her arms around his chest, she pressed herself tightly against his back. Her head found a resting place at the back of his shoulder and the palms of her hands found a resting place at the flexing muscles near his breastbone.

“By the Poseidon's great beard! Where *is* the lad? *Mix!*”

“Do not,” she whispered. “Don’t try to send me away.”

There was the pitter-patter of running feet, first from a distance then sounding closer and closer, but the passageway was so dark that Cervus was not sure if Mix heeded his call or no. Suddenly, the lad’s head popped up in the darkness around the corner of the stone staircase, his face shiny in the glow from the torch that he carried.

“What stayed you, boy?” Cervus asked.

The lad’s forehead puckered from concentration.

“I knew not whether to come or stay,” he replied, running forward.

“If you are summoned—”

“I knew not your wishes.”

“Knew not my wishes,” Cervus repeated slowly. “Has all Osha gone twin-moon-mad? If I call for you—”

“Except, my liege, you bid me to ignore any sounds...”

“—If I *call* for you—”

“...that I heard coming...”

“—then, by Poseidon's sacred face, I want you to attend me.”

“...from your bedchamber,” the lad finished on a solemn note.

“No *those* type of sounds.”

“When *what* sounds, my liege?” the lad asked, looking innocent.

“Never mind. *Never mind.*”

At a low, soft chuckle, Mix looked around his liege-lord, craning his head to peer into the smoke-dim bedchamber. His eyes grew as big as the twin moons in the sky when he saw how his princess hugged his lord. And, how his lord permitted it. Indeed, he seemed to like the feel of the silken limbs wrapped around his chest.

“Your servant has scored a thrice,” she said referring to Skull and Bones, the favorite dicing game of the warrior caste. She brushed her face across his shoulder, rubbing the tip of her nose over an old scar that she found there.

“Leave off!” Cervus said. “Not you, boy,” he corrected when he saw that Mix had stepped back. “Heed me. Fetch her lady’s horses. Lead them to the lean-to at the rear ward.”

“Pay him no mind,” the princess said.

“You are to be her escort to court,” Cervus continued as if she had not spoken.

“Heed him not.”

“Understand?” Cervus asked.

“Yes, my liege,” Mix said.

“Then go.”

“Stay,” she ordered.

“Go,” he ordered right back.

Behind Cervus's back, the princess pointed to her head, made circles with her forefinger, and then pointed significantly at her vassal. When the lad's eyes grew even larger—if that was possible—she smiled and nodded her head.

“Go! Now!” the warrior said.

“Stay! Now!” the princess said.

With another soft chuckle, she pulled Cervus into the demi-darkness of the archway and stepped around him to stand in front of him. She ground her body up and down his like a sleet fat cat, her ass fucking him. Quickly, his cock grew large and hard and thrust itself against the barrier of his surcote, seeking its freedom, wanting its nest.

“Why do you linger, boy?” Cervus asked through gritted teeth. He reached around to halt her too public fuck of him. “Go, I say.”

“Stay. I command,” the princess said.

Mix looked from one to the other, puzzlement written across his face.

“In truth, my lord,” the boy said, struggling to keep the mirth from his voice, “it does not appear as if you want this errand.”

“Ah. It is a wise servant who knows his master's true wishes,” she said. “Have a meal prepared and bring it when you hear the gong.” She bent a hard stare at the boy and her voice took on an imperial tone. “Not before.”

“My lord?” Mix asked.

“As she commands.”

When Mix had departed and they were alone, Cervus pushed her from him.

“Is there no end to your shame or your shame of me?” he asked.

“We were discussing your rank of baron,” she replied.

“We were not! As well you know, I am of humble birth.”

“O, my warrior, why doubt me?”

“The nobility would never sanction it.”

“A fig for their sanctions.”

“Clan war is ugly, my lady princess, as would be my head on a pike.”

“We will face what may come together. Verily, I expect little opposition. Your hero’s service to the kingdom warrants advancement. A hint of the gleam of your sword for those too pigheaded to yield will do the rest. Noble and villein, merchant and serf, priest and slave, all will bow and accept it. I want you at my side. I am well-loved. I *must* have you at my side. Is that too great a thing to want?”

“Aye. Perhaps too well-loved,” Cervus spoke cryptically.

“You have said so yourself, I can do no wrong in the eyes of Osha.”

“Except, methinks, to ally yourself with your baseborn captain of the guard. He who has no wealth to commend him except his knight’s fee.”

When she threw him a hot look, he sighed and shook his head. With lagging steps, he walked to the farthest corner of the chamber. Trestle tables stood there, stacked against the wall. He pulled one down and set it upright. From a sheath laced to his boot, he drew a dagger and placed it on the table. Then he dragged his armchair over. The chair was expensive—the only expensive furnishing in the chamber—and heavy, with monster-like arms and legs and thumb-thick leather slats; so heavy, that it made deep roads in the rushes where he dragged it. He planted it firmly next to the table. The chair looked odd next to its crude table-mate.

“Sit,” he said.

She turned up her nose and turned away.

“My lady, I do not wish to lay unkind hands upon you. Sit!”

At that, she stalked over. He noted with a crooked grin how every facet of her carriage was stamped haughty, haughty and proud. She sat down with a flounce and the silk of her chemise fluttered with her indignation. It was chilly there, in that corner of the chamber away from the fire, and he knew that she would soon feel the cold. He brought her cloak to her, draping it around her, and fastening it at her shoulder with her bejeweled fibula.

He knelt on one knee before her, but his eyes were downcast.

“I want to tell you an ancient tale...before these plots of yours go further.”

“Once upon a time,” she said with a curl of her lip.

“Aye. Once upon a time, there was a common whoreson from the Isle of Mar who had nothing but his sword and his sword-arm. At age ten and two, his mother had saved enough coins from her diligence on her back to buy a boon from an insignificant warlord. She placed her son with this lord for training, and, as Poseidon would have it, the whoreson excelled in the war-like exercises. In due course, he won his knighthood.”

“I suppose this ‘whoreson’ was you, my warrior.”

Cervus continued as if she had not spoken. In truth, his mind was lost in the past, the misty dark past that he could never forget, that he could not escape.

“But this young knight was not satisfied with being a lowly yeoman in the service of another. No, he had lofty ambitions...dreams laden with gold and silver. So, he killed the insignificant warlord. The killing was ruled a lawful killing by the marshals, an accident in the press of battle, but the whoreson knew otherwise. There was a tiny break in the shaft of the warlord’s battle-axe, you see, a break chipped there by the whoreson himself so that the shaft would crack at the slightest blow. Thus, the whoreson became seizin of the land of the warlord. Alack! Such a small fiefdom did not appease the whoreson’s dreams of gold and silver. He sold it and used the blood money—for blood money it was—to seed his work as a mercenary.”

“Why tell me this? Do you think I care about your tales of ancient history? You were a loyal vassal to my father, faithful and just to me for all my life. Who cares for your ambition? Give to. Give *to!* I care nothing for this.”

“Listen anon. Methinks you will. The whoreson—”

“O my warrior, cease that.”

“—the whoreson-turned-mercenary journeyed far, to the farthest corners of all the islands. He slew giants whose heads grew from their chests; fought horned serpents that spit fire; aye, even saved demoiselles in peril—if their fathers’ reward included more than mere thanks. No dark shifty service was too trivial for his sword. He would do anything for coin. His reputation grew, his victories in battle became legend, and he thus returned to his island home. Many wondered why he did. His mother had died from working on her back and he had neither father nor family nor friend to urge him home. Those who wondered were wise to wonder. No ties bound him and no sentiment moved him. He had heard rumors of dissent in Osha and of opportunities that could bring him vast riches.”

“Ho! As if you care so much for riches,” the princess broke in. She looked around the chamber. “Your possessions value less than ten and twenty. Even the bracelets at your forearms are made of copper. Oh. I see. You seek to push me away, to make me doubt your loyalty.”

“The whoreson was a different man then, my lady, not the man who you see before you, not the man whom you know. No honor bound him. Before long, he had traveled to this kingdom and took service with King Wroth the Great.”

“My father,” the princess said proudly.

“Aye. Your father. The whoreson put his hand between the king’s cupped ones and vowed homage to him.”

“You served my father well until he was murdered. Then you served me. Your name “*Serve-Us*” shouts your allegiance to my family, to my kingdom, to me.”

“You are right...but only half.” He rose and walked to stand before the hearth. The tip of his boot rested on the cast-iron railing and his arm rested on the deep stone recess of the chimney. He stared into the leaping flames as if he could find answers—perhaps even peace—there.

The princess looked him over. “If you rebuke yourself for my father’s murder,” she said, “you do so without cause. No one blamed you.”

“Did you never wonder about the old king’s death?” he asked.

“Nay...why would I?”

“Or my role in it?”

“Since my cradle, I have known, always known. You were the first of his household to heed his cry. You burst into his tower bedchamber, others followed you, to find him slain.”

“No, my lady princess.”

“Then what?”

“That is what you were told, the story peddled by the nobles and accepted by them as well to quiet dissent in an unquiet realm. It is myth and it is time—past time—that you know the truth.”

The princess’s hand fluttered at her neck. “Do I wish it?” she asked.

“The whoreson was not the first to arrive at your father’s bedchamber. He was the last to leave.”

“What-what-what are you saying?”

“The whoreson...he...I...only pretended to arrive. I had been there before.”

“Why, of course! You enjoyed my father’s favor. You oft slept outside his door.”

“I was at the tower archway when I heard others running and I ran back. I pretended to join them and held them off. I pounded on the door, calling *Sire...sire...are you safe...Sir King, answer us!* But I knew he was dead.”

The princess sat as still and as cold as the icy seas surrounding Osha.

“I suppose,” she said in a quiet voice, “that you pretended to be the first of my father’s court to rush to his door to buff your reputation as his captain of the guard.”

Cervus turned to look straight into her eyes. His grey ones held her blue ones for a long beat. Then, he said, “I knew that he was already dead because I slew him.”

The princess rose from her chair.

“You lie.”

“I did not think that an old man would bleed so much—”

“If you wished to hurt me, to drive me away, you have done so.”

“—or that he would struggle or cry out. I walked boldly to his couch, not creeping, for I was always welcome in his bedchamber. I leaned over him. He looked at peace, lying there. Maybe some sound, maybe some instinct, roused him and he opened his eyes to smile at me. When I spoke not, his eyes lifted with question and roamed over me until he saw the unsheathed dagger in my fist. Only then did he struggle. I did not think that an old man would be so strong. Ere...I was young with a mighty sword-arm. With my forearm at the pit of his neck—I remember that the spikes of my wrist-gauntlet bled his skin—I forced him back into the hide coverings. He cried out. I climbed on top of him, pressing my knee into his gristled belly to stifle his cry. I slit his throat from ear to ear. I watched him choke on his own blood. I did not think that an old man would be so unwilling to die. Aye, he fought to live until his pasty-white hair ran red with blood and his beard grew slick and sticky.”

“I do not believe you.” She laughed, harshly. “Why, why, this is a tale to frighten children. My warrior, I did not know that you dabbled in fairyland...”

She stopped and turned from him for she could look into his face no longer.

“I think you know I speak the truth,” Cervus said.

“But-but-but...what of my father’s nobles? The High Council? Omen? She loved my father. Surely, she would not permit his assassin to go unpunished. Why she would have raised such a hue and cry that the castle walls would have crumbled.”

“O girl,” Cervus sighed out, “you are so young. Omen was my abettor.”

“Omen.” She shook her head. “Omen has been more than a mother to me.”

“Aye. She was there when your mother died in childbirth. Ere that, she loved your father, but King Wroth for all his greatness was a lecher. He took Omen—Proud Swan she was known as then—as his lover and she was content. Anon, he tired of her and treated her as nothing more than a whore. He passed her among his vassals, forcing her to couple with them in the plain-eyed sight of any who would watch. In truth, I say that the court *did* watch and mocked her. She became as much a part of the evening revels as the jester’s tricks, the bear baits, and minstrel shows. For which, she vowed revenge. She lured your father to his bedchamber early that night. She fucked him until he was dry, worn out; he drifted into a sated sleep. Then, I went to work.”

“So this woman who loved me—nursed me with my father’s blood on her hands—vengeance drove her. And you?” She spat out the words. “What drove you?”

“What drove me? What drove the whoreson? The dreams of gold and silver.”

The princess’s throat filled with bile and she rubbed her stomach. Slapping a hand across her mouth, she tried to force the vomit down, but the urge to purge herself was too great. She made it to the chamber pot before the bile spewed forth. She bent over, her eyes closed, her hands gripping the slippery rim as she disgorged herself. Anon, she rested among the rushes, her sides heaving, feeling hot and cold, dizzy and nauseous—and yet somehow clear-headed.

Cervus wet a linen cloth with water from a nearby horn and took the cloth to her. Though she pushed his hands from her, he pressed it to her lips. The wet from the cloth mingled with the wet on her face. She wept until she had no more tears.

He swept her high into his arms, with her head resting against his chest, and carried her back to the chair. The dagger still rested on the table—the same dagger that he had used to slay her father. It looked new and well-preserved for this day.

He possessed himself of her hands and cupped them in his larger ones.

“Now you understand,” he said.

“You have ruined everything,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Why we can never be together. That whoreson, that man who I was before, could have killed his king and married the daughter, but I cannot. A tiny princess whose blue eyes filled her face and whose life was entrusted to me purchased me such honor.”

“I thought you loved me, all this time, *I thought you loved me.*”

“O my dear heart! I do. I *do*. I love you more than life itself, too much so to dishonor you. You are the one thing in my life that I have loved and you are the one thing that I must deny. That is how I atone for the blood that still stains my hands. To forsake the one thing—the solitary thing—that I want more than life itself. Aye. Even if I die from the wanting.”

He played with the fingers of her hand, idly, his mind returning to that night which would be frozen in time forever. His eyes slowly brimmed with tears as he concluded the final verse in the whoreson’s tale.

“The kingdom was unsettled, its weal vulnerable on all sides. Villeins chafed under the yoke of your father’s might. The neighboring lands burned hot for revenge and to free themselves from tribute. The warrior caste threatened rebellion, never fully brought to heel. The nobles wanted no scandal involving the captain of the guard, the king’s champion. Necessity hushed all. There were suspicions, whispered words, but nothing could be proved against me. No one wanted such proof. Just as well for I was needed, too-well-needed, to serve as your sentinel, guardian, protector. *The Warrior.*”

“What dastard placed the gold and silver in your filthy palm to kill my father?”

“Why, Popinjay’s father, of course.” He watched her face turn pale then red from the sudden fire that burned inside her. “I was a mercenary then, my lady princess, and my sword went to the highest bid—”

She clenched the dagger. It was a cruel instrument in stark contrast to the pretty pinkness of her hand. She slit his throat before she thought the deed. How quickly love can turn to hate, how quickly one can grow old, and how quickly innocence can vanish.

As he slumped to his knees before her, she stood before him with right regal royalty to pronounce sentence.

“You have conspired with the enemy of your king and kingdom for private hire and, by your own words, stand condemned. Not even your years of faithful service, not even your newfound honor, not even your love” —here her voice cracked— “your love for us can blot out this foul deed. Your actions warrant death. No mercy. Such is our judgment. It shall be done. It will be done. It is done.”

The warrior's lifeblood seeped from him as he listened to the slow calm beat of his beloved's voice. When she finished, his eyes widened and seemed to gleam with a unsaid message—as if to say, “I knew it would end this way.”

She was not for him. ■