



moonblood

ANNE ELISABETH
STENGL

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TALES OF GOLDSTONE WOOD



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*To my Erin . . .
and sweet Annie!*

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PROLOGUE

THE UNICORN STOOD before the gates of Palace Var. It guarded the paths to and from Arpiar, watching them with eyes that burned through all tricks and disguises. The roses climbing the stone walls of Var cast their moonlit shadows upon the unicorn's back in dappled patterns. If a wind swelled, those patterns shifted, but the unicorn never moved.

The Queen of Arpiar could see the unicorn through a window in her chambers, where she lay upon her pillows. She turned her gaze away, closing her eyes.

"My queen," said her headwoman. "The child lives. You have a daughter."

Across the darkened chamber, a newborn made no sound as gentle hands wrapped it in red and gold. When the babe had not cried at its birth, the queen had thought perhaps it was dead.

"A daughter," she whispered. Tears slipped down her cheek. "No."

Before she could dash traces of weeping from her face, her husband entered. Without a glance for his queen, he went to the cradle and looked inside. He smiled, and though his face was more beautiful than tongue could tell, the queen shuddered at the sight.

"A daughter!" Triumph filled the king's voice. He turned to the queen and laughed in her face. "A pretty daughter, my pretty bride. With blood as red as the red, red rose. Her name will be Varvare."

"Please," his wife spoke in a small voice. "Please, my lord."

"Please what, sweet Anahid?" The king laughed again and moved to the queen's bedside. He took her hand and, though she struggled against him, would not release his hold. "You'd think I was disappointed in you. On the contrary, beloved, I could not be better satisfied! You have proven more useful than I dared hope."

He dropped her hand and addressed himself to her headwoman and the other attendants present. "See to it you care well for my darling Varvare. My perfect rose."

With those words he vanished from the chamber, though the shadow of his presence lingered long afterward.

Nevertheless, the moment he was out of sight, Queen Anahid rallied herself. She pushed upright on her cushions, turning once more to that sight out her window. The unicorn stood at its post in the shadow of the roses, and it was hateful to her.

"Bring me clothes and a cloak of midnight." She turned to her attendants, who stared at her. "At once."

They exchanged glances, but no one moved. In all the realm of Arpiar, not a soul could be found who loved the king. But neither was there a heart that did not sink with fear at the mention of his name. Thus the queen's servants remained frozen in place when she spoke. The queen stared at them with her great silver eyes, and they would not meet her gaze.

"Will no one serve her queen?" she asked.

They made no answer.

Straining so that a vein stood out on her forehead, Anahid flung back the soiled blankets of her labor and rose from her bed. Her headwoman gasped, "My queen!"

In that moment, the princess, who had made no more than a whimper since the time of her birth, gave a cry from her cradle. The piteous sound worked a magic of its own on the assembled servants. One leapt to the cradle and gently lifted the child. Another ran to the queen's side, and a third did as the queen had asked and brought her clean garments and a cloak as black as the night.

The queen was weak from her labor, but her strength returned in the face of need. She let her servants clothe her, then took and wrapped the deep cloak about her shoulders. “Give her to me,” she said, turning to the youngest of her maids, who stood trembling near to hand, shushing the babe.

“My queen,” her headwoman spoke, “are you certain—”

“Do you doubt me?” The queen’s eyes flashed. She took the baby, adjusting the scarlet and gold cloth that bound the tiny limbs tight. She tucked the warm bundle inside her cloak, close to her heart.

“Tell no one I have gone,” she said, striding to the door. “Any of you who follows me does so at your peril.”

The blackness of her cloak shielded Queen Anahid and the princess as she made her way through the corridors of Palace Var, unseen save by the roses, which turned their faces away and said not a word. She slipped from shadow to shadow. Woven enchantments whirled in endless, grasping fingers everywhere she turned, but these Anahid had long ago learned to see and to elude.

But all Paths from Arpiar led past the unicorn.

The queen stood in the darkness of the courtyard, breathing in the perfume of roses, gazing at the silvery gate that stood between her and the empty landscape. She felt the tiny beating heart pressed against her own and gnashed her teeth. “Would that he had been devoured on the shores of the Dark Water!” Then, closing her eyes and bowing her head, she cried out in the voice of her heart, a voice unheard in that world but which carried to worlds beyond.

“I swore I would never call upon you again.”

An answer came across distances unimaginable and sang close to her ear in a voice of birdsong.

Yet I am always waiting for you, child.

“I ask nothing for myself, only for my daughter. She does not deserve the fate the king has purposed for her.”

What would you have me do?

“Show me where I can take her. Show me where she may be safe.”

Walk my Path, sang the silver voice.

There in the darkness of Arpiar, a way opened at the queen’s feet. The one Path that the unicorn could not follow. Anahid stepped into it, full of both gratitude and shame, for she had vowed never to walk this way again. But she had no other choice. She followed the Path to the gate, pushed the bars aside, and stepped onto the plains beyond.

The unicorn did not see her. She passed beneath its gaze, her heart beating like a war drum against the bundle on her breast. The unicorn was blind to her passage.

Queen Anahid strode from Palace Var without a backward glance, her daughter held tight in her arms. As she went, the silver voice sang in her ear, and she almost found herself responding to the familiar, half-forgotten words:

Beyond the Final Water falling,

The Songs of Spheres recalling.

Won’t you return to me?

She followed the song across the hinterlands of Arpiar, speeding along the Path so quickly that she must have covered leagues in a stride. She came to a footbridge, just a few planks spanning from nowhere to nowhere. But when she crossed it, she stepped over the boundaries from her world into the Wood Between

The unicorn felt the breach on the borders of Arpiar. It raised its head, and the bugle call of its warning shattered the stillness of the night. Anahid, even as she stood beneath the leafy canopy of the Wood, heard that sound across the worlds. She moaned with fear.

Do not be afraid. Follow me.

“It will find me!”

I will guide you. Follow me.

“Only for my daughter!” the queen cried. “Only for my daughter.”

Her feet, in dainty slippers, sped along the Path as it wound through the Wood. She could feel the unicorn pursuing, though it could not see her. But the nearness of its presence filled Anahid with such dread she nearly dropped her burden and fled. But no! Though she had come so far, she was still too close to Arpiar.

“Please,” she whispered. The silence of the Wood oppressed her. “Please, show me somewhere safe.”

Follow, sang the silver voice, and she raced after that sound. Her feet burned with each step. How long had it been since she’d followed this Path? Not since she was merely Maid Anahid, a lowly creature unworthy of a king’s notice. She had not known then and did not know now where it would lead. She only knew the unicorn could not catch her.

It may have been days; it may have been minutes; for all she knew, it may have been centuries. But the Path ended at last, and once more the forest grew up around her. The queen stood with her heart in her throat, straining her senses for any trace of the unicorn’s presence. Panting from her exertion, she struggled to draw a deep breath and almost gagged.

“The Near World,” she said. “I smell mortality everywhere. How can my daughter be safe here?”

Follow me, sang the silver voice.

“Will you not accept her into your Haven?”

Follow me.

She saw no choice but to obey. The trees thinned and ended not many yards distant, and though the undergrowth was difficult to navigate in the darkness, Anahid broke through the forest at last. The ground was rocky and inclined steeply uphill, but after a few minutes’ climb she was able to take stock of her surroundings. She stood at the bottom of a deep gorge filled from one end to the other with forest, twisting on around a bend beyond her sight. A trail that looked as though it had not been traveled in generations led up from the gorge to the high country above. And over her head, in fantastic, impossible beauty, arched a bridge, gleaming white in the moonlight. She recognized its Faerie craftsmanship and wondered that the world of mortal men should boast so beautiful a creation.

The climb up the trail was difficult, and the queen was near the end of her strength when at last she emerged upon the high country. This was not a land she knew, but it was far from Arpiar. She smelled rose-free blossoms unsullied by her husband’s hand. And the moon that glowed above was no illusion. By its glow, she could discern the contours of an enormous garden or park. A king’s grounds, she thought. A fit home for her daughter.

The unicorn sang from the Wilderlands below.

Anahid screamed at the sound and started to run but tripped on the uneven soil and staggered to her knees. The baby wailed.

“Why have you brought me to this place?” the queen demanded, though she did not speak aloud. “We are unprotected in the Near World. Even my husband’s enchantments must fade. It will find her for sure!”

The Fallen One may not enter the Near World. It must remain in the Wood Between.

The unicorn sang again. But it did not call for the queen, so she could not understand the words. Her daughter ceased crying, and when Anahid looked at her, she was surprised to find two wide eyes blinking up at her. “Don’t listen,” she said, trying to cover the baby’s ears.

She cannot hear its voice. Her ears are full of my song.

Anahid breathed in relief and got to her feet. She moved unsteadily across the terrain until she came to a

rosebush, not far from the great bridge. Kneeling, the Queen of Arpiar placed her bundle there and stopped a moment to gaze into her child's face, watching it wrinkle and relax and wrinkle again as though uncertain whether or not to be afraid.

Sorrowfully, Anahid watched the change spread across the little face as the enchantments of Arpiar frayed and fell away. She closed her eyes and placed a hand upon her daughter's heart.

"With all the love I have to give," she murmured, "though that is little enough." Then she closed her eyes and raised both her hands toward the moon, cupping them as though to offer or receive a benediction. "I cry your mercy, Lord, and beg your protections upon my child! Shield her within this land from my husband's gaze. So long as she dwells in this high country, let her escape the spells of Arpiar."

A flutter drew her gaze, and she saw a bird with a white speckled breast land in the rosebush above the child. Its wings disturbed the blossoms so that they dropped great red petals upon the baby's face, the most delicate of veils.

Your child is safe in my protection, now and always.

"Do you promise?" said the queen.

I promise. I claim her as one of mine.

"Then I shall return to Arpiar glad."

You may stay, child. You are not bound to that world.

"I will return," she said.

Another voice disturbed the night, an old voice as rough as the earth, rugged with mortality. "Oi! Who's there?"

Anahid leapt to her feet, cast one last look at her daughter, and fled into the night. At the edge of the gorge, she turned, her enormous eyes watching from the darkness. She saw a stocky mortal man, a gardener perhaps, with gray beginning to dominate his beard, step off the Faerie bridge. He went to the rosebush and knelt. Anahid held her breath. She heard the sharp intake of breath; then the man exclaimed, "Well now, ain't you a sight, wee little one! How'd you end up out here on so dark a night?"

I claim her as one of mine, sang the wood thrush to Anahid.

The queen watched the gardener lift her child, then bowed her head, unwilling to see more. The next moment, she vanished down the trail, swallowed up by the Wilderlands below.

The unicorn met her there.

A decorative rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical floral and scrollwork patterns on the left and right sides. The frame is light blue and contains the text "PART ONE" in a dark blue, serif font.

PART ONE

THE PRINCE

THE PRINCE OF SOUTHLANDS was bewitched. It was common knowledge. Rumor of his bewitchment had been spreading like a plague throughout the kingdom ever since he was sixteen years old: how the prince had returned from a summer in the mountains, bringing with him a demon child and installing her as a servant in his father's house.

Cheap chitchat, to be sure. But fun fare with which to scare the children on a cold winter's night. "Watch out that you put your muddy boots away where they belong, or the prince's demon will come fetch you!"

At first, nobody believed it. Nobody, that is, except the servants of the Eldest's House, who worked with the girl in question.

"She gives me the shivers!" said Mistress Deerfoot to Cook. "With those veils of hers, she looks like a ghost. What do you think she hides behind them?"

"Her devil's horns, of course. And her fangs."

"Go on!" Mistress Deerfoot slapped Cook's shoulder (for she was rather keen on him). "Do be serious!"

Cook shrugged and said no more, for the demon herself passed by just then, carrying a bucket of water. That bucket was large, with an iron handle, and when full probably weighed nearly as much as the girl herself. Her skinny arms did not look as though they could support such a load, yet she moved without apparent strain. Her face was so heavily veiled in linen that not even the gleam of her eyes showed.

She did not pause to look at Cook or Deerfoot but hastened on her way without a word or glance. When she vanished up a servants' stair, Deerfoot let out a breath she had not realized she held. "Coo-ee! Unnatural strength that one has. What can the prince be thinking to keep one like her around here?"

"He's bewitched," muttered Cook. Which was the only natural explanation.

So the demon girl remained at the Eldest's House. And it was she, said the people of Southlands, who called the Dragon down upon them.



Prince Lionheart stood before his mirror glass, gazing into a face he did not recognize. It was not the face of an ensorcelled man, he thought, despite the rumors he knew people whispered behind his back. It was the face of a man who would be king. A man who would be Eldest of Southlands.

It was the face of a man who had breathed deeply of dragon smoke.

The stench of those poisons lingered throughout Southlands, though in the months since the Dragon's departure it had faded to a mere breath. In the Eldest's House it was the most prominent. On dark nights when the moon was new, one smelled it strongest of all.

But life must go on. Five years of imprisonment under that monster had taken its toll on the people of the kingdom, but they must struggle forward somehow. And Prince Lionheart would struggle with them.

He adjusted his collar and selected a fibula shaped like a seated panther to pin to his shoulder. He never allowed his bevy of attendants to help him dress, rarely even permitted them into his chambers. He'd been

five years on his own, five years in exile while the Dragon held his kingdom captive. During that time, he learned to button his own garments, and he would not have attendants bungling about him now.

Besides, their questioning gazes unnerved him. Every last one of them, when they met his eyes, silently asked the same question:

“Did you fight the Dragon?”

His fingers slipped, and the point of the fibula drove into his thumb. “Iubdan’s beard!” he cursed, chewing at the wound to stop the blood. The pin fell to the stone floor at his feet. Still cursing, Lionheart knelt to pick it up. He paused a moment to inspect it, for it was of intricate work and solid gold. The seated panther was the symbol of Southland’s heir. When he became Eldest, he would replace it with a rampant panther.

“Did you fight the Dragon?”

He closed his hand around the brooch. “I did what I had to do,” he said. “I had no other choice. I did what I thought best.”

Of course you did.

This voice in his head might have been his own. But it was colder and deeper, and it was no memory.

Of course you did, my sweet darling. And now, with the Dragon gone, you will have your dream.

“My dream,” muttered Lionheart as he gazed into the mirror once more and fixed the fibula in its place.

He must make his way downstairs now to the half-constructed hall where a banquet was to be held that night. The scaffolds were pulled down for the week, and the signs of construction hidden behind streamers and paper lanterns. The Dragon had destroyed the Eldest’s Hall before he left Southlands, but rebuilding was well underway. And though the winter wind blew cold through the gaps in the wall and roof, the banquet must, for tradition’s sake, be held there, for this was the prince’s wedding week.

A shadow passed over the sun.



Lady Daylily sat in her chambers, gazing at her face in a glass that revealed a young woman who was no longer as beautiful as she had once been. Not that her beauty was far faded. But the poison that yet lingered in her lungs pinched her features, sallowed her complexion, and left her once vibrant eyes filmed over as with dull ash. She was still lovely, to be sure. But she would never again be what she had been.

Her attendants bustled about her, laying out her gown, smoothing the long headdress as they pinned it to her hair, selecting furs to drape over her shoulders and protect her in the drafty Eldest’s Hall. Daylily must be as elegant as human hands could make her this evening.

After all, the prince’s wedding week was hers as well.

“Out.”

The woman pinning the headdress into Daylily’s curls paused. “My lady?”

“Out. Now.” Daylily turned on her seat. Her face was a mask. “All of you. I would be alone for a moment.”

“My lady,” said Dame Fairlight, her chief attendant, “the banquet—”

“I believe I have made myself clear.”

The women exchanged glances, then, one by one, set aside their tasks and slipped from the room, closing the door behind them. Daylily sat like a stone some minutes before moving softly to her window. There she gazed out across the Eldest’s grounds.

Like a prisoner gazing on the boundaries of her imprisonment.

Daylily’s view extended over the southern part of the Eldest’s lands, off into the parks and gardens that

sprawled for acres. These, like Daylily, were no longer what they had once been, ravaged by both the winter and the Dragon. Most of the shrubs and bushes had withered into dry sticks and would never bloom again, come either spring or frost. Only the rosebushes remained alive. But these had not flowered for twenty years and more.

From her vantage point, Daylily saw all the way to where the grounds broke suddenly and plunged into a deep gorge. She saw the white gleam of Swan Bridge, which spanned the gorge in a graceful sweep. But she could not see the darkness of the Wilderlands, the thick forest that grew in the depths of the gulf.

For the briefest possible moment, Daylily thought how she should like to throw on a cloak, slip from the House, make that long walk across the grounds to the gorge, and vanish forever into the Wilderlands.

It was a wild fancy, and she shook it away even as it flashed across her imagination. After all, she was Lady Daylily, daughter of the Baron of Middlecrescent, the most beautiful woman in the Eldest's court (despite the Dragon's work), beloved of all Southlands, and bride of Prince Lionheart. Prince Lionheart, who would one day be Eldest, making her queen. It was her father's dearest wish, the purpose of her entire life.

But how bitter was its fulfillment! Daylily clutched her hands in her lap, refusing even a trace of emotion to cross her face, though there was no one to see. If only she had kept her heart in check. If only she had remained the icy and unreachable statue she must be in order to fulfill this role. If only she'd never permitted herself to love—

She shook her head sharply, refusing to admit that thought. No, better not to dwell on such things. Better to focus instead on the cold reality of her dream come true.

The Prince of Southlands would marry her. But he did not love her.

A movement near to hand caught her eye. Daylily dragged her gaze from the bridge and the gorge to a closer plot of ground. A small figure, stooped and thin, walked among the struggling remnants of the garden. A nanny goat followed behind her like a tame dog, nosing the shrubs for any sign of something edible, while the girl gathered what greenery she found into a bundle on her arm.

She wore a white linen veil that covered the whole of her face.

Daylily gnashed her teeth. In that instant, she looked like a dragon herself. "Rose Red," she muttered. "Witch's child. Demon."

She trembled with sudden cold when the shadow passed over the sun and fled swiftly across her face.



The day was cold, especially for Southlands, which was used to balmy weather even in winter. The goat snorted, and streams of white billowed from her nose. But Rose Red, bundled from head to toe in her veils, scarcely noticed the chill. She searched the bushes of the one-time garden for any sign of life. Some shrubs had miraculously escaped the Dragon's fire and, though withered, still managed to produce some green. Rose Red ran her hands through them, not noticing if the thorns caught at her gloves or pierced her sleeves. She put her nose up to the leaves, and they still smelled sweet.

It was difficult these days to find anything that could bring freshness to the poisoned chambers of the Eldest's House. But Rose Red cut stems as she could, gathering an armload. She would spread these through her master's chambers while he was busy at the banquet tonight. Perhaps it would cheer him to return and find greenery among those gloomy shadows. Or perhaps he would not notice.

"Beana!" She turned suddenly on her goat, who had a large sprig of leaves sticking out of the corner of his mouth. "Don't eat that. You'll be sick."

"Bah!" said the goat, spattering leaves about her hooves. When Rose Red reached out to snatch the

mouthful from her, she shook her horns and turned her tail on the girl.

~~“Beana, I need every bit I can find. There’s precious little as it is without you snackin’ on it! You don’t~~ behave yourself, and I’m puttin’ you back in the pen where you belong.”

The goat muttered and trotted several paces back up the path, still chewing. Rose Red turned back to her bush, parting the thin stems to better reach a patch of lingering growth.

She paused, taking a startled breath.

Deep within that tangle of brown and dying leaves, almost hidden by thorns, was a blossom. Pure white, as though made of light itself, and fragrant, extravagant even. It was like nothing the girl had ever seen before.

But when she blinked, it was gone.

The goat, standing some distance now from Rose Red, turned suddenly and shivered. “Bah,” she said and trotted quickly to the girl’s side. “What do you have there?”

Rose Red backed away hastily. “Nothin’ you need to see. You’d probably eat it anyway.”

She moved on down the row of bushes as her goat stayed put, poking her nose into the tangled branches. Beana’s yellow eyes narrowed, and she stamped a hoof. “Rosie!” she bleated. “What did you see?”

“Nothin’, Beana,” Rose Red repeated without turning to the goat. Her arms were full by now, and she would need to put the stems in water soon if she hoped to keep them alive long enough for her master to see. “You’re goin’ to have to go back to your pen now.”

“I don’t want to go back to the pen.”

“I’m sorry, but I cain’t take you inside with me. Not so long as you insist on bein’ . . . you know . . . a goat.”

Beana blinked slowly. “And what else would I be, dear girl?”

Rose Red did not answer. Many things had changed for her during those five years with the Dragon, even more in the months following his departure. Everything she had known was gone. The man she called father was dead. Her home was destroyed beyond recall. Her teeth, her goat wasn’t even a goat!

And dreams came to life and walked in the real world as living, fire-breathing nightmares.

Sometimes Rose Red did not think any of the events in her recent life could possibly have happened. The rest of the time, she simply pretended they had not. Best to focus on the tasks at hand. She must serve her master. And she must stay out of everyone else’s sight as much as possible. Because they all believed it was she who brought the Dragon upon Southlands.

In a way, perhaps she had.

Rose Red sighed as she led the goat back to her pen, where other goats raised lazy eyes and bleated disinterested greetings.

“What was that heavy sound for?” Beana demanded.

Rose Red sighed again. “Sometimes I wish . . .”

“Yes?”

“Sometimes I wish we could go back to the way things were. To the mountain. We were lonely, sure. But we were happier then, weren’t we? With old Dad to care for, and our cottage to keep, and no one to . . . to . . .”

She could not finish her thought. How could she bear to say it? No one to look at her like she was a monster slaving to eat their children. No one to startle in fright whenever she entered the room. No one to whisper about her when she’d gone.

She tugged at her veil, adjusting it so that it would not slip off, pulling out stray rose thorns and dropping them to the dirt. Beana’s gaze was fixed upon her, and she did not like to meet it. She knew exactly what her goat was about to say.

“We can go back, Rosie.”

Rose Red shook her head.

“We can,” said the goat. “Your master will provide for our journey. He’s said so before. He won’t keep you here against your will. We can go back to the mountain. It was foolish to have let him talk us into returning in the first place. Have we really done him any good?”

Rose Red did not answer. She plucked thorns from the long stems, rubbing her hand over the smooth bumps left behind.

“He’s more distant than ever, hardly the boy you once knew,” the goat persisted. “You rarely see him, and when you do, you rarely speak. He’s not your responsibility, sweet child. He never was. And it was wrong of him to place such a burden on you, asking you to come back to the lowlands. It’s dangerous here.”

Beana stopped herself. To continue would be to say too much. There were some dangers it was best to keep the girl unaware of.

To the goat’s disappointment, Rose Red said nothing but opened the pen gate and ushered her pet inside. “Rosie?” said Beana as Rose Red closed and fixed the latch.

“I cain’t leave him, Beana,” said Rose Red. “He needs me. He came back and found me because he needs me. I know it’s foolish to say it, even to think it, but . . . but, Beana, I’m the only friend my master has. Though he rules the whole kingdom, he needs me still.” She bowed her head, gazing at the bundle of green under her arm. “Even if there’s little enough I can do for him.”

The goat watched as the girl made her way back through the gardens and on to the Eldest’s House. She felt helpless, and for a moment she cursed the shaggy coat and hooves she wore. “It’s tearing her up,” she muttered as she lost sight of the girl. “This marriage of the prince’s. It’s tearing her to pieces inside. Light of Lumé above, I wish we’d never met him!”

A shadow passed over the sun.

Beana shivered and looked up, squinting. That was no cloud. Perhaps a bird. But it must have been a large one, an eagle even, to make that shadow.

A moment later, she thought she caught a familiar scent on the wind. A scent of poison and of anger. But it vanished, and she told herself it was nothing more than the remnants of the Dragon’s work.

After all, Beana had bigger things to worry about.



Festive music began to play as the guests of the Eldest arrived and filled the new hall to celebrate their prince and his bride to be. Women in gaudy colors danced with men in silken garments, and their smiles flashed as bright as their jewels, so determined were they to rejoice and forget the nightmare in which they had so recently lived.

Prince Lionheart met Lady Daylily at the door and gave her his arm as support when they entered. Each wore a smile that outshone all the paper lanterns, but they did not look at each other. Cheers rose up from the assembly, drowning the music.

A burst of fire lit the Wilderlands for an instant. A few moments later, a solitary figure began to climb the gorge.

EVERYONE AT THE BANQUET watched the prince from behind their smiles.

He was not the boy they remembered. A far cry from it. In the five years of his exile, he had grown into a man. His frame had filled out, though he would never be large, and his face was well shaped behind a black beard. As he sat at the right hand of King Hawkeye, it was impossible not to see the resemblance between father and son. Save for the set of his eyes. Those had the deep-set sharpness of his mother, Queen Starflower's, may she rest peacefully with the Mothers of Old. But the expression in his was nothing like that of the dead queen. No, hers was always an expression of strength. Her gaze could pierce the soul of any man in the Eldest's court and wrest his secrets from him in a moment.

Lionheart's, by contrast, was that of a haunted man.

"Did he fight the Dragon?"

Lionheart could almost hear the whispers passing from table to table. Every time a lady of the court leaned close to her neighbor to whisper something behind her fan, he could have sworn he heard the words. He found it nearly impossible to concentrate on the flow of talk going on around him. His bride to be sat on his left, carrying on a lively conversation with her father, the Baron of Middlecrescent, and with Lionheart's cousin, Foxbrush.

At least Daylily's part of the conversation was lively. Her father spoke hardly a word but kept glancing from Lionheart to King Hawkeye and back again, sometimes turning to look at Foxbrush. And Foxbrush answered only in mutters and refused to meet anyone's gaze.

Poor Foxbrush. Lionheart took a moment from his own concerns to spare his cousin a pitying thought. He was so far gone in love with Daylily, Lionheart could feel the jealousy seeping from him.

Not that Foxbrush would ever have had the courage to speak up to her himself. He was much more comfortable buried in his academic pursuits. No, Foxbrush would never have what it took to marry a woman like Daylily. Daylily was a consort fit for a king.

You will be king, sweet prince, spoke the cold voice in Lionheart's head. For an instant, he saw white eyes before his own. *I have promised you your dream, and your dream you will have.*

The vision vanished, and Lionheart found himself eye to eye with Baron Middlecrescent. He quickly dropped his gaze. The baron always reminded him of a cross between a fish and a bulldog, all staring eyes and jaw. Thank the Lights Above, Daylily didn't take after him!

"Did he fight the Dragon?"

Lionheart ground his teeth and pinched the bridge of his nose. The talk in the banquet hall whirled in his head, a hurricane of babble, but all he could discern was that one phrase, again and again. He thought he would suffocate.

"My son." King Hawkeye's voice was as tremulous as a man of eighty's, though he had not yet reached his sixtieth year. The Dragon's poison had aged him far before his time. But he placed a thin-skinned hand on Lionheart's shoulder. "My son, are you unwell?"

Lionheart turned to his father. So many words rushed to his mouth, words he longed to speak. "I did what I could, Father!" he wanted to cry out. "I ensured Southlands' safety! Perhaps I did not fight the

Dragon. Perhaps I did not slay him. But who can face such a monster? Is it cowardly of me that I could not do what no man has done before me? I did all that was within my power, and I made certain he would never return. Don't think it cost me nothing! I gave up that which was most dear to me; I gave him the heart of my love in exchange for safety. Was that an easy price?"

But the words died upon his tongue. Instead he said, "The excitement. It's been a long day."

Hawkeye smiled the ghost of a smile. "You need a dance with your lady to cheer you, lad. What say you Daylily?"

For the first time during the banquet, Daylily turned her brilliant smile Lionheart's way. Yet it was to the Eldest she addressed herself. "What would you have of me, dear Majesty?"

"A dance."

"With pleasure."

"No, no, not for me! My dancing days have passed. But for this son of mine whom you seem inclined to wed at the week's end. Dance with him for me, will you?"

At last Daylily looked at Lionheart. Her smile never altered, but he saw the veil that fell across her eyes as clearly as Rose Red's linen covering. "I will gladly dance with my prince," she said through that smile.

He rose and bowed over her hand, then led her to the floor. The Eldest gave the signal; the court musicians hastily took up their instruments and struck a tune. Lionheart took Daylily in his arms. She was soft and supple as granite, but she moved with expert grace, refusing to meet his eyes.

They danced a few measures, Daylily's long skirts shushing softly across the floor, the train of her headdress floating lightly behind her. One of the musicians began to sing:

*"Oh, Gleamdren Fair, I love thee true,
Be the moon waxed full or new!
In all my world-encoping view
There shineth none so bright as you."*

Lionheart groaned.

"Something amiss?" asked his lady.

"This song." He stopped dancing, not caring that all the court looked down on them in surprise. "I hate this song."

Her masklike face altered into the most subtle of frowns. "It is a song of Eanrin, Chief Poet of Rudiobus."

"I know," said the prince. "Believe me, I know."

"It is the most renowned of all his ballads." Her voice was as cold as a winter morning before sunrise, contrasting with the brilliance of her smile.

"I won't dance to it," said Lionheart. "It's the worst verse ever written, and that's saying a great deal for Bard Eanrin." He started to go, but her hand suddenly tightened.

"Don't leave me, Lionheart," Daylily hissed. "Don't leave me standing here."

"I won't," said he. "You can return to the table with me until the musicians learn to play something bearable."

"You cannot insult me like this. In front of the whole court." No one watching them could have guessed at her words from the expression on her face. "You cannot."

"It's not an insult if you walk with me."

"I will not."

"There we are, then."

"Dance with me, Lionheart," said Daylily. "Or—"

"Or what? You'll threaten me?" He shook his head and dropped her hand. "I'm not playing your games."

With those words he turned and strode away. The singer faltered, but the musicians kept playing. Lionheart approached the table, meeting first the gaze of his father, then that of Baron Middlecrescent. The baron looked like thunder. Lionheart sank into his seat beside his father and took a deep gulp from his goblet.

“Lover’s quarrel?” asked Hawkeye.

“I hate that song,” said Lionheart with a shrug, setting his goblet back down. Then he sat upright, gripping the arms of his chair, his mouth dropping open.

For Foxbrush had made his way to the dance floor, taken Daylily in his arms, and whirled her away in time to that music beneath the warm glow of the lanterns. The musician sang:

*“Sing ye of all the lovers true
Beneath a sky of sapphire hue.
In light o’ the love I bear for you
All theirs must fade like morning dew.”*

And every one of Southlands’ barons saw it.

Lionheart knew what he should do. He should rise up, storm to the dance floor, challenge his cousin to a duel . . . or simply take Daylily from his arms, laughing it all off like a big joke, and dance away to that pathetic tune. Either of which would have satisfied her. Either of which would have satisfied the barons.

Lionheart pushed back his chair, not caring how it scraped and drew the attention of every man and woman in the room, nobility and servant alike. He bowed to his father with as much dignity as he could muster and withdrew from his own wedding banquet.

He hastened along the dim corridor, uncertain whether he was furious or relieved to get away. The passages were mostly deserted here, for everyone, even the servants, was busy back at the hall. He needed a few moments of peace. That was all. A few moments to collect his thoughts and reinforce himself before returning. He needed—

“Lionheart!”

He turned, and Daylily stood before him. The light of a wall sconce cast a glow upon her hair and lit her eyes ablaze in her otherwise still face. “Lionheart, how can you do this to me?”

Lionheart drew a deep breath before answering. It would be best not to shout. Even in these quiet passages, someone might overhear. “Do what, Daylily?”

“Desert me on the floor, in front of everyone. And then huff out of there like a merchant’s spoiled brat.”

“I told you. I don’t like that song.”

He could almost feel the pressure of her anger hitting him like a wall as she neared. Yet her face remained quiet as death. “Can you be so foolish, Lionheart?” she asked. Her voice was deep for a woman’s, strange coming from that dainty mouth. “Can you not have realized?”

He made no answer but allowed her to draw nearer until she could drop her voice still lower.

“Your life is not about likes or dislikes,” said Daylily. “Not anymore.”

His eyes narrowed. “What are you saying?”

“You may become Eldest someday, but your power in Southlands hangs by a thread.”

Everything went still inside Lionheart. For the moment he had control of himself. He needed to grab hold of that moment now, with all his might, or regret it forever. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Daylily.”

“Don’t I?” She was so close now he could have reached out and given her a good shake if he allowed himself to. “I am the Baron of Middlecrescent’s daughter. I know what goes on in your kingdom better than you do, better than you ever have. Remember, you were absent those five years. You escaped.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Wasn’t it? If not escape, what was it?” Her words, though spoken softly, were harsh in his ears. “How did you manage to elude those years of enslavement, of poison? How did you manage to slip out when everyone else who tried was burned to a crisp? How did you time your little jaunt across the Continent so swimmingly as to return just after the Dragon had ceased to find our poor land interesting? If not escape, Lionheart, what was it?”

“You know why I left,” he said, his voice near a whisper. “You were there when I made my decision. You sped me on my way. I went to find the secret to defeating the Dragon. I left in order to help you.”

“Is that why you returned so boldly *after* the Dragon had torn apart your father’s house? *After* he ravaged your people’s lands? *After* he killed your mother?”

“Stop now. Stop.”

“No, Lionheart! You need to know what they’re saying about you. Friend of demons, that’s what they’re calling the man to whom I am betrothed. Bewitched.”

He snorted. “And you believe this nonsense?”

“How can I know what to believe? The Dragon did not harm you. He let you escape the poisons under which the rest of us suffered. Did you ever watch your dreams burn and die and burn and die again before your very eyes?”

I will give you your dream, whispered the cold voice in his mind. *You will be Eldest of Southlands.*

He grimaced, shaking his head as though to rid himself of that ever-present voice. “What do you want, Daylily?” he demanded. “What will it take to please you? That I fawn over you, that I jig to every nonsensical ballad that strikes your fancy, just for your amusement?”

“Not for my amusement, Lionheart. For my father’s.”

With an inhuman effort he forced back the words that threatened to spill like fire from his tongue. But she continued.

“It is only by his will that you remain Prince of Southlands. Have you not guessed it? Should the Council of Barons vote to disinherit you, your father will have no choice but to comply with their wishes. Or risk revolt.”

Lionheart’s mouth was dry. His veins seemed to pulse fire. “The Council has not been called.”

“Not yet. But it can and will be called faster than you can imagine should my father say the word. Can you really be so ignorant? Your father knows, though he may not let on. Should the Council be called, they will vote against you, and Hawkeye will appoint a new heir.”

Lionheart could not speak the name aloud, but his lips formed it even so. “Foxbrush.”

“I will be Queen of Southlands, one way or the other—”

Before she could finish, Lionheart grabbed her shoulders. It took everything in him to keep from shaking the teeth from her skull. Instead, his fingers dug into the furs draped about her elegant frame, and his eyes burned into hers.

“Don’t threaten me. Not now. Not after everything I’ve gone through to come this far. I won’t hear it from you, nor from your father. I am the Eldest’s only son, and I will sit on my father’s throne. There’s nothing you, your father, or anyone can do to prevent me from having what has been promised me. So keep your threats, my lady! You waste your breath.”

“Oh, Leo!” For a moment, her mask melted away. He saw a flash of true compassion, of sorrow, even fear. “I am not threatening. I am warning you!”

His fingers relaxed in surprise even as Daylily lowered her lashes, shielding her eyes. When next she looked at him, she was herself again, cold and unreadable. “Do you think I want to see your fool of a cousin on the throne?”

Lionheart let go and backed away, turning from Daylily. She put out a hand and almost touched his shoulder but withdrew it at the last. “It need not happen as I have said. You can prevent my father from calling the Council.”

“How?” said Lionheart through clenched teeth. “By making a fool of myself before the court with display of doting affection?”

No one watching could have guessed at Daylily’s thoughts had they seen her face. She swallowed slowly and blinked once. “That will not be necessary,” she said. “There is a much easier method of winning my father’s approval and the approval of all Southlands.”

“And that is?”

“Get rid of the demon.”

He turned upon her. She stood like a queen of old going into battle, her shoulders set and eyes hard. “You know of whom I speak.”

No words would come. His mouth opened and closed.

“Rose Red,” said Daylily. “That creature has bewitched you long enough. Have you not heard how she consorted with the Dragon? Have you not heard—”

“Not another word, Daylily,” he hissed.

“No, you will hear me!” she declared, and this time it was she who grabbed him, clutching the front of his shirt in a tight fist. “That stoop-shouldered monster has ensorcelled you since you were a boy. Don’t you think it strange that none of the rest of us is so enthralled by her? Have you not heard what my father has whispered into the ears of everyone in court? How the creature kidnapped me and dragged me back to the Eldest’s House to join the other prisoners. How she sacrificed your mother—”

He took her hand in both of his and wrenched her grasp away. “You lie.”

“Maybe,” she whispered, once more lowering her eyes. “But I would do much more, Leo, to see you dismiss her.”

Lionheart’s hands tightened painfully over her fingers, but she would not pull away. “You have always preferred her. She has always been your friend. And what of me? Was I never good enough? Must I be forever inferior to that . . . monster?”

“Rose Red is no monster.”

Daylily laughed. “Are you blind as well as a fool?”

“And I am no fool.”

He pushed her hand from him as though he would like to banish her from his presence. Daylily backed step away and clutched her crumpled fingers to her chest. But she did not break Lionheart’s gaze.

“I will not dismiss Rose Red,” he said. “Nor will I see any harm come to her. She is under my protection as sanctioned by the Eldest himself. Even your father cannot gainsay the Eldest’s express order.”

“Not yet,” said she.

They stood in the shadows, lit by a solitary candle sconce, two specters in a haunted house. Far away, the music of the banquet continued to play as the people of Southlands celebrated the upcoming nuptials of their prince and his lady.

“Will you return to the hall with me?” Daylily asked.

“I will not.”

The Baron of Middlecrescent’s daughter turned and floated back down the corridor as silent as a shadow vanishing around a bend. Lionheart watched her go, his mind whirling with too many thoughts to sort through. He turned blindly, continuing up the passage, taking the first turn up a servants’ stair.

He found himself face-to-face with Rose Red.

Moonlight fell from a window in the passage and lit upon her veils, making them luminous in the

otherwise dark stairway. She was a phantom, a ghost of some troubled past, standing there in the silver light, her face shrouded, two porcelain pots clutched in her arms. Lionheart startled back. Then he growled.

“Did you hear?”

“Y-yes, my prince,” she whispered.

He pounded a fist against the stone wall, then leaned his forehead against it, sighing. “Rosie,” he said, “I was wrong to ask you to come back. I should have—they don’t understand.”

“They never have,” she replied. “No one ever has. Except you.”

He shook his head. “I’ve been unfair to you. It was wrong of me to have brought you here, to have asked you to leave the mountain.”

“But . . .” Her voice was very small, trembling. “But I’m glad you did.”

Lionheart shook his head. Imprisonment and despair closed him in on all sides. He must struggle for his dream. He must fight. He’d come too far to back down now. “I think I must send you back, Rosie. For your own sake.”

“No!” The agony in her voice startled him, and he took a step back in surprise when she suddenly went down on her knees before him, setting aside her pots and wringing her hands. “No, Leo, don’t say that.” He smiled a little at her use of his old nickname. She never called him that now that she was his servant. It wasn’t right. But somehow, it was natural coming from her, his oldest friend. “Send me away,” she said, “if it’s for your sake. But I vowed to serve you, and I won’t leave unless it’s what you want. I’ll serve you, however you need me to. If that means goin’, I’ll go tonight. Only let me help you, my prince!”

“Rose Red,” he sighed, taking her by the hands and gently pulling her to her feet. When standing, she was still scarcely more than half his size, though he was no giant himself. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. We’ll speak of this again after the wedding week is past. I cannot think now. I cannot make a decision. Try to stay out of sight though, as much as possible. I fear some harm will come to you. I don’t know if I could forgive myself were that to happen.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, her head bowed so that the hem of her veil reached to her belt. The belt was of faded red cloth, frayed with age, though among the frayed ends yet lingered glimmerings of gold. Once it had been a blanket, but years of hard use in the mountains had reduced it to no more than a rag. “Don’t worry about me. You have enough worries as it is.”

“Tubdan’s beard, yes!” Lionheart said. Without another word he stepped past her and continued on his way up the stairs. A cold voice rang in his head, a voice that no one else could hear, and he staggered as he went.

Rose Red watched him go, cursing her ineffectiveness. She looked down at the empty pots she had been on her way to fill with water, intending to arrange more greenery in them. How would withering rose stems lift her master’s spirits now?

She fled the passage, leaving the pots where they lay, and slipped unseen through the back corridors of the House. Rose Red had always possessed a gift for going unseen when she wanted to, and she avoided the other servants with ease. She escaped through a door and pelted across the near garden. In the struggling rosebushes, she thought she glimpsed many white blossoms, translucent under the moonlight. But when she drew near, they vanished.



Beana startled awake at the creak of the door. Other goats lazily opened their eyes, but Beana lurched to her feet and bleated, “Lumé, child! What’s the matter with you? Did you hear . . . Rosie, tell me, did you

hear the Fallen One speak?"

Rose Red sank to her knees beside her goat and, wrapping her arms around Beana's neck, plunged her face, veil and all, into the coarse fur. She began to weep.

Beana blinked. "Oh. Well, maybe it's not that after all." She shook her horns, muttered goatily, and knelt down in the straw. Rose Red shifted so that her face was now buried in her goat's back. Tears soaked through her veil, so she removed it. She sat and sobbed, barefaced, in the darkness.

Beana chewed her cud.

When at last the sobs reduced to sniffs, the goat swallowed and said, "All right, child. If you can manage to talk without hiccups, tell me."

Rose Red sat up and pulled her knees to her chest. Her face was nothing but shadows in the darkness of the shed, but her eyes gleamed like small moons.

"I need you to talk sense to me, Beana."

"Do I ever talk anything else?"

"I need you to tell me," Rose Red said, "that I'm a fool."

"If it makes you happy. You're a fool." Beana gave Rose Red's ear a slobbery kiss. "Now, why don't you toddle off to bed? You'll feel much better after a night's sleep, though you'll have a fierce headache after all this weeping and wailing—"

"I cain't seem to help myself." Rose Red sucked in a long breath and bowed her head to her knees. "I cain't seem to help lovin' him, and I know that she don't, but she'll marry him, and who's to stop her? And he'll never see!"

"Never see?"

"Never see the difference! Between me and her. He'll never see how I love him . . . because he'll never see me."

A long silence lingered in the goat shed. One of the other goats bleated, and several shifted. Otherwise all was still.

"Oh, Beana," Rose Red whispered at last. "My mind plays such cruel tricks sometimes. I can pretend out a whole story of a prince who loves a girl, not because of her beauty, but because she loves him and serves him. Because she would give up everythin' for his sake. And I can pretend his heart is so moved that he finds it possible to look beyond a face like . . . mine."

Beana said nothing. She nuzzled the girl again, but Rose Red pushed her away.

"It's stupid, I know. No one could ever love someone like me, and sometimes, well, sometimes I could just eat my own hand off!"

"Don't do that. It'll disagree with you."

Rose Red turned and buried her face in her goat's fur once more. Beana felt hot tears seeping into her coat. "Please, Beana," the girl said, "please tell me to . . . to buck up or somethin'! He's gettin' married this week, and I've got to serve him, and I cain't do that with all this dreamin'!"

Beana sighed and began to chew her cud again until the girl had finished her second, less stormy cry. When Rose Red sat up once more, snuffling and wiping tears from her cheeks, the goat said quietly, "The dreaming is dangerous, child. You start letting yourself live in dreams like that, and you'll find yourself open to such evils. I've seen it happen time and again to those I loved. . . ." She shook her head violently, clanking the bell about her neck. Then she put out her long nose and licked tears from Rose Red's face, allowing the girl to stroke her soft ears.

In a gentle voice quite unlike a goat's, she said, "But I'll never tell you to stop loving. You see, I believe in hopeless love. Oh yes. I believe in it with all my heart, though you may discount the heart of an old nanny like me. For real love brings pain. Real love means sacrifices and hurts and all the thousand shocks of life.

But it also means beauty, true beauty, such as the likes of that brilliant Lady of Middlecrescent couldn't imagine.

"You say it's impossible for anyone to love one like you? I tell you otherwise. I know deep down in the secret places of my soul that a person can learn to love someone like you. Someone uglier by far! With a deep, lasting love that would . . . that would dare to stare in the face of Death himself and shout threats and shake fists for the sake of the one beloved!" She laughed a little snorting laugh and smiled.

Then she was no longer a goat. Anyone looking in that dark shed would have seen at its far end a woman clad in brown and white—a mirage of the moonlight, perhaps—her hair wrapped in crowning braids atop her head, and her arms around the scrawny shoulders of a gangly, ill-formed creature in servant's garb. An awful sight, yet one touched by a certain holiness. And somewhere, beyond the dankness of the stable, a wood thrush sang. Its song filled the night with vast spaces and clarity. In that song, Rose Red's heart lifted though releasing a heavy burden, and she breathed in clean air.

"This I know," whispered the woman. "I know the depths of impossibility. They are dreadful depths when plunged. More dreadful than you yet know. Even so, do not forget him. Do not forget your love. Not for a moment."

Rose Red raised her face from where it rested against a warm beating heart. But that vision of a tender face, that dream of warm, encircling arms vanished, and she sat nose to nose with a dusty goat.

THE NIGHT WAS FRIGID, filled with songs that no one could hear. Or, if they did hear, no one understood the words, no matter how the songs might call to them. Only the moon seemed inclined to listen, and her great eye was dewy with tears.

The moonlight was more unbearable than the cold. Lionheart drew his curtains against it. Someone—Rose Red, most likely—had built a small fire on the grate in preparation for his evening, but its glow did little to ease the gloom around him. He stood awhile with his back to the blaze, drawing deep breaths. His old drapes had been burned and replaced months ago, and some chambermaid had put fresh cuttings in vases and urns about the room. But he still smelled dragon poison.

“Friend of demons.” Daylily’s voice rang in his head.

He wanted to break something with his own hands, to crush and destroy, anything to relieve the anger that, even now in the privacy of his chambers, he dared not release. No one would understand. No one could understand.

He closed his eyes and rubbed a hand down his face. Day after tomorrow, Lionheart would wed the friend of his youth, at last fulfilling the expectations of his dead mother and his half-dead father. With Daylily by his side, he would rebuild his once fertile kingdom, restoring green growth to the desolate fields, reviving life in the ghostly figures of his subjects. If only he could regain their trust!

“Did he fight the Dragon?”

No wonder they doubted now whether or not he was the right man to serve someday as Southlands’ Eldest. How could he have left them for so long! And for no purpose—

“No!” he growled. “No, it was for good purpose.”

Lionheart took a seat in his high-backed chair and drew it near the fire. He felt no warmth from the dull brands. Flames burned brightly in his mind instead.

Softly he whispered a name.

“Una.”

The night stretched before him, sleepless and frozen.



In the darkness before dawn, Beana knelt in the straw of her pen, her eyes wide and alert. Rose Red lay with her head pillowed on the goat’s back, her veil partially falling off her face. Gently, Beana reached out and pulled it back into place. Then she lifted her head again, nostrils quivering, ears twitching.

She listened for those silent songs. Although she could not hear them, she knew they must be near. But the air was chilled into otherworldly stillness. Even the moon had set.

The dawn chorus would not begin for another hour at least, a collision of sounds from all the birds flowing to Southlands for the winter. There were fewer than in olden days. No birds had lived in Southlands during the years of the Dragon, and even now the usual migrants, displeased with the unnaturally cold winters in

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