

Call of the Herald
Book One of The Dawning of Power trilogy

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The World of Godsland

Fantasy Series

The Dawning of Power trilogy

Call of the Herald

Inherited Danger

Dragon Ore

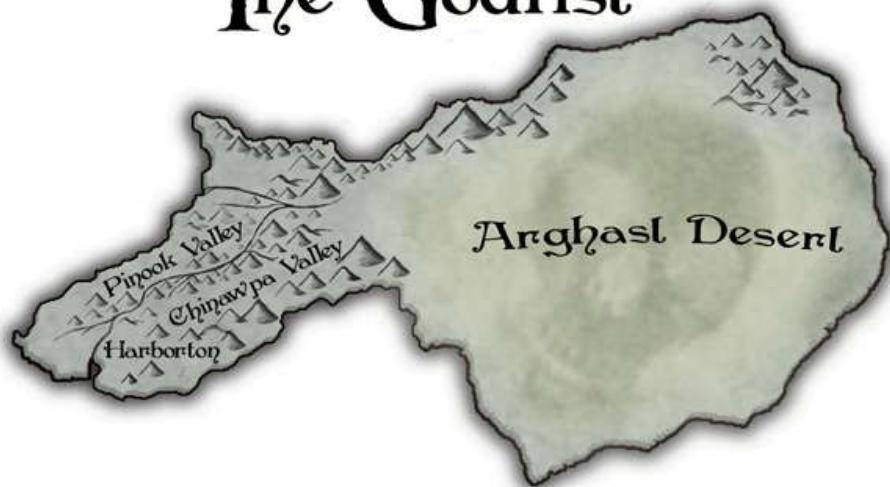
The Balance of Power trilogy

Regent

Feral

Regal

The Godfist



Prologue

Within his cabin, General Dempsy adjusted his uniform, making certain every medal was straight and every button oriented properly. Moving automatically to counter the movements of the ship was normally as natural to him as breathing, but he felt unsteady on his feet, as if his years of sailing had suddenly been forgotten. It was not a feeling he was accustomed to. At sea or just about anywhere on Godsland, his power was undeniable, his orders obeyed without question. There was one place, however, where his power was surpassed, and even a man of his accomplishments must exercise great caution: Adderhold, seat of the Zjhon empire. It was from there that Archmaster Belegra ruled with an unforgiving will, and it was to there that General Dempsy was destined.

He had no reason to expect anything but a warm welcome, given his success, but there was an uneasy feeling in his gut. Again, automatically, he adjusted his uniform, as if a single stitch out of place could decide his fate. The general cursed himself for such weakness, yet he jumped when there came a knock at his cabin door. After cursing himself again, he answered in his usual commanding tone: "Come."

Mate Pibbs presented himself and saluted. "Adderhold is within sight, sir. We've been cleared by the sentry ships, and there is a slip reserved for us. Do you wish to be on deck when we land, sir?"

General Dempsy nodded, and Mate Pibbs saluted again before turning on his heel. To some the salute is a source of great pride and a feeling of power, and most times General Dempsy felt much the same, but on this day it felt like mockery. After a final check of his uniform, he made his way to the prow. From there, he watched Adderhold grow larger and more intimidating with every passing moment. It was a feeling that should have passed long before, but the builders of Adderhold had done their job well. The place looked as if it could swallow his entire fleet in a single strike.

When they reached the docks, General Dempsy was unsure of what to think. There was no fanfare; no throng awaited the returning army, and there was not so much as a victory dinner to celebrate their conquest of an entire continent. The Greatland was theirs to rule, yet Adderhold bustled with preparations for war. Barges surrounded the island, and they sat low in the water, piled high with grain and supplies, ready to transport the goods to the waiting armada. These were not the usual preparations for an assault on a coastal province. The scale of their

provisions foretold a lengthy sea voyage, and the taste of victory turned to bile.

General Dempsy knew, long before the page arrived with his new orders, that the Church had declared holy war. He tried to convince himself otherwise, but what he saw could only mean an invasion of the Godfist, a preemptive strike intended to stave off the prophecy. He thought it was sheer madness. Archmaster Belegra would ruin everything by sending them on a fool's quest. This was a hunt for some fantasized adversary, one not only destined to destroy the entire Zjhon nation, but also one that might herald the return of a goddess Archmaster Belegra and the devotees of the Zjhon Church had both dreamed of and feared. The devout believed that Istra would imbue them with miraculous gifts but that her presence would also mark the return of their greatest adversary.

In the face of such fanaticism, General Dempsy struggled to maintain his equilibrium. To him, the Zjhon beliefs made little sense. Though he had played his role in many ceremonies, he believed none of it; he simply did what the Church asked of him because it furthered his own goals. His military genius had only served to strengthen the Zjhon and their beliefs, and though it had granted him the power he desired, he suddenly wondered if it had been a mistake--a grave and deadly mistake. To say his army was unprepared for an assault on the Godfist was a gross understatement. Two-thirds of his men came from lands that had only recently been conquered; few were well trained, and fewer still were loyal. With his experienced and trusted men spread throughout the regiments, he was barely able to maintain control. He knew it was a suicide mission and that it would be years before they were ready to undertake a long-distance campaign.

Orders to get his army ready for the invasion confirmed the insanity, and when he saw them, he requested an immediate audience with Archmaster Belegra under the pretense of misunderstanding the mission. It was highly unusual for any member of the armies to meet with the archmaster in person, but General Dempsy felt he was entitled. He and his men had offered up their lives for the empire, and they deserved to know why they were being thrown away.

Days passed before he was granted the audience, and that gave him time to ponder every word he might use to implore the archmaster to change his mind. When a page finally arrived with his summons, the uncertainty was festering in his belly. Archmaster Belegra was the only person with enough power to have him executed, and his every instinct

warned that the wrong choice of words could send him to the headsman's block.

A slight figure in dark robes greeted General Dempsy with little more than a slight bow. Though his features were concealed within a deep hood, the general knew of him. He was the nameless boy whose insolence had cost him his tongue. As he led General Dempsy to a private hall, he served as a silent warning. This had the potential to be a very dangerous encounter.

When he entered the hall, General Dempsy saw Archmaster Belegra swathed in thick robes and huddled in an ornate chair that was pulled up close to the fire. Though the years had barely grayed his hair, he looked like a feeble old man. As austere as ever, he did not acknowledge General Dempsy in any way, as if he were oblivious to his presence.

"A humble servant of the Zjhon requests the consideration of the Church," General Dempsy said in a polite tone, trying to sound unassuming, but he feared it came out sounding forced and insincere. Archmaster Belegra did not look at him, nor did he speak; he simply extended his right hand and waited. The general did not hesitate in moving to the archmaster's side, taking his hand, and kissing the signet ring, wishing to dispense with protocol as quickly as possible.

"The Church recognizes her child and will suffer you to speak."

"With all due respect, Your Eminence, I must ask you to reconsider this course of action. Launching an attack on such a distant nation, when we've barely secured the lands surrounding us, will put everything we've achieved at risk." General Dempsy was more direct than was advisable, but he was determined and pushed on. "It's not that I don't believe the prophecies, but sending two-thirds of our strength on a--" Archmaster Belegra raised an eyebrow, and Dempsy stopped. He knew he was treading in dangerous waters, and he preferred to keep his head.

"The prophecies are quite clear on this matter, General, but I will refresh your memory if I must. Vestra, God of the Sun, has ruled Godsland's skies for nearly three thousand years, but he will not always reign alone. Istra, Goddess of the Night, shall return to preside over the night skies. A harbinger shall be born of her hand and will be revealed by the power they wield. Thus, the advent of Istra shall be heralded. Faithful of the Church, beware, for the Herald of Istra shall desire your destruction and will endeavor to undo all you have wrought."

General Dempsy despaired. The prophecies were impossible to argue since no proof could be offered to discredit them. They were sacred and above reproach.

"It is your responsibility to protect this nation and all the inhabitants of the Greatland. The Herald of Istra poses an imminent threat to the Church and the entire Zjhon empire. The holy documents have rewarded us with clues regarding the timing of Istra's return, and we must use these divine gifts to our full advantage. To do otherwise would be sacrilege and blasphemy. Is that clear?"

General Dempsy nodded, mute. He struggled to find words that would drive away the madness, but they remained beyond his grasp.

"You have your orders, General. You know your duty; the army is to set sail for the Godfist by the new moon and is not to return without the Herald of Istra. Go forth with the blessings of the Zjhon Church."

Chapter 1

Life is the greatest of all mysteries, and though I seek to solve its many riddles, my deepest fear is that I will succeed.

--CiCi Bajur, philosopher

* * *

Immersed in its primordial glow, a comet soared through space with incredible speed. Three thousand years had passed since it last shed its light upon the tiny blue planet known to its inhabitants as Godsland, and the effects had been cataclysmic. A mighty host of comets followed the same elliptical orbit as the first as they returned from the farthest reaches of the solar system. Their light had already charged the atmosphere of Godsland, and the comets themselves would soon be visible to the naked eye.

The cycle of power would begin anew. Radiant energy, though still faint, raced toward Godsland, bearing the power of change.

As the force angled over the natural harbor where the fishing vessels were moored for the night, it soared beyond them over the Pinook Valley, and nothing barred its path. Beyond a small town, amid foothills dotted with farmsteads, it raced toward a barn where a young woman dutifully swept the floor. A slight tingle and a brief twitch of her eyebrows caused Catrin to stop a moment, just as a chance wind cast the pile of dirt and straw back across the floor. It was not the first thing to go wrong that morning, and she doubted it would be the last.

She was late for school. Again.

Education was not a birthright; it was a privilege--something Master Edling repeatedly made more than clear. Those of station and power attended his lessons to gain refinement and polish, but for those from the countryside, the purpose was only to stave off the epidemic of ignorance.

His sentiments had always rankled, and Catrin wondered if the education was worth the degradation she had to endure. She had already mastered reading and writing, and she was more adept at mathematics than most, but those were skills taught to the younger students by Master Jarvis, who was a kind, personable teacher. Catrin missed his lessons. Those approaching maturity were subjected to Master Edling's oppressive views and bland historical teachings. It seemed to her that she

learned things of far more relevance when she worked on the farm, and the school lessons seemed a waste of time.

Master Edling detested tardiness, and Catrin was in no mood to endure another of his lectures. His anger was only a small part of her worries on that day, though. The day was important, different. Something was going to happen--something big; she could feel it.

The townies, as Catrin and her friends called those who placed themselves above everyone else, seemed to feed on the teacher's disdainful attitude. They adopted his derogatory manner, which often deteriorated into pranks and, lately, violence. Though she was rarely a target, Catrin hated to see her friends treated so poorly. They deserved better.

Peten Ross was the primary source of their problems; it was his lead the others followed. He seemed to take pleasure in creating misery for others, as if their hardships somehow made him more powerful. Perhaps he acted that way to impress Roset and the other pretty girls from town, with their flowing dresses and lace-bound hair. Either way, the friction was intensifying, and Catrin feared it would escalate beyond control.

Anyone from the countryside was a target, but it was her friend Osbourne Macano, son of a pig farmer, who bore the brunt of their abuses. The low regard in which his family profession was held and his unassuming manner made him an easy target. He had never fought back, and still the attacks continued. Chase, Catrin's beloved cousin, felt they should stand up for themselves since passive resistance had proven fruitless. What choice did they have?

Catrin understood his motives, but to her, the problem seemed unsolvable. Surely retaliation would not end the struggle, but neither had inaction, which left her in a quandary. Chase seemed to think they needed only to scare the townies once to make them realize such treatment would not be tolerated. That, he said, was the only way to gain their respect, if not their friendship. She could see his logic, but she also saw other, less appealing possibilities, such as a swift and violent response or even expulsion from the school lessons. Too many things could go wrong.

Chase was determined, though, and she would support him and Osbourne in their fight, if that was their choice. But she did not have to like it.

From bribing a woman who had once worked as Peten's nursemaid, Chase learned that Peten had a terrible fear of snakes--any snake, not just the venomous varieties. Chase planned to catch a snake and sneak it into the hall during lessons, though he admitted he had no plan for getting it

near Peten without being seen. Just thinking about it, Catrin began to feel queasy, and she concentrated even more on her work. As she slid the heavy barn door closed to keep out the wind, she was submerged in darkness and had to resweep the floor by the light of her lantern.

Her father and Benjin, his close friend, were returning from the pastures with a pair of weanlings just as she lugged her saddle into Salty's stall. She watched the skittish colt and filly enter the barn wide eyed, but they gave the experienced men little trouble and would soon become accustomed to frequent handling. The lamplight cast a glow on Benjin's dark features. Bits of gray showed in his neatly trimmed beard, and his ebon hair was pulled back in a braid, giving him the look of a wise but formidable man.

Salty, Catrin's six-year-old chestnut gelding, must have sensed she was in a rush, for he chose to make her life even more difficult. He danced away from her as she tossed the saddle over his back, and when she grabbed him by the halter and looked him in the eye, he just snorted and stepped on her toes. After pushing him off her foot, she prepared to tighten the girth, and Salty drew in a deep breath, making himself as big as possible. Catrin knew his tricks and had no desire to find herself in a loose saddle. Kneeing him in the ribs just enough to make him exhale, she cinched the strap to the wear marks. Salty nipped her on the shoulder, letting her know he didn't appreciate her spoiling his joke.

Dawn backlit the mountains, and heavy cloud cover rode in with the wind. A light spray was falling as Catrin walked Salty from the low-ceilinged barn into the barnyard. Salty danced and spun as she mounted, but she got one foot in the stirrup and a hand on the saddle horn, which was enough to pull herself up even as he pranced. His antics were harmless, but Catrin had no time for them, and she drove her heels into his flanks with a chirrup to urge him forward.

In that, at least, he did not disappoint as he leaped to a fast trot. She would have given him his head and let him gallop, but the wagon trail was growing muddy and slick in the steady rain. Cattleman Gerard appeared in the haze ahead, his oxcart leaving churned mud in its wake. Trees lined the narrow trail, and Catrin had to slow Salty to a walk until they cleared the woods. When they reached a clearing, she passed Gerard at a trot, waving as she rode by, and he gave her a quick wave in return.

Fierce gusts drove stinging rain into her eyes, and she could barely see the Masterhouse huddled against the mountains; in the distance, only its massive outline was visible. Harborton materialized from the deluge, and as she approached, the rain dwindled. The cobbled streets were barely damp, and the townsfolk who milled about were not even wet. In

contrast, Catrin was bespattered and soaked, looking as if she had been wallowing in mud, and she received many disapproving looks as she trotted Salty through town.

The aroma of fresh-baked bread wafting from the bakery made her stomach grumble, and the smell of bacon from the Watering Hole was alluring. In her rush, she had forgotten to eat, and she hoped her stomach would not be talkative during the lessons, a sure way to irritate Master Edling.

She passed the watchtower and the large iron ring that served as a fire bell, and she spotted her uncle, Jensen, as he dropped off Chase on his way to the sawmill. He waved and smiled as she approached, and she blew him a kiss. Chase climbed from the wagon, looking impish, and Catrin's appetite fled. She had hoped he would fail in his snake hunt, but his demeanor indicated that he had not, and when the leather bag on his belt moved, any doubts she had left her. How he had concealed the snake from her uncle was a mystery, but that was Chase, the boy who could do what no one else would dare attempt.

His mother and hers had died fifteen years before on the same day and under mysterious circumstances; no one understood what killed them. Since then, Chase seemed determined to prove that he wasn't afraid of anything or anyone.

Catrin pulled Salty up alongside him, and they entered the stables together. Once clear of the gate, she turned to the right, hoping to slip into her usual stall unnoticed, but instead she saw another insult. All the stalls were taken, despite there being plenty for those students who rode. Many of the townies, including Peten, rode to the lessons even though they were within walking distance. In a parade of wealth and arrogance, they flaunted their finely made saddles with gilded trim. It seemed they now felt they needed pages to attend to their mounts, and they, too, must ride. It was the pages' horses that had caused the shortage of stalls. Catrin stopped Salty and just stared, trying to decide what to do.

"What's going on, Cat?" Chase bellowed. "Have the townies gotten so fat they need two horses to carry each of them?"

"Hush, I don't want any trouble," she said with a pointed glance at his writhing bag. "I'll stable Salty at the Watering Hole."

"Strom may let you stable him there, but certainly not for free. Where does it stop, Cat? How much abuse do they think we'll tolerate?" he asked, sounding more incensed with each word.

"I don't have time for this now. I'll see you at the lesson," she said, turning Salty. Chirruping, she gave him a bit of her heels, trotted him around the block, and slowed only when she neared Baker Hollis, who

was busy sweeping the walk. He gave her a sidelong glance and shuffled into the bakery. Inside, Catrin saw his daughter, Trinda, who stared with haunted eyes. She rarely left the bakery, and it was said she spoke even less often. Most thought she was daft, but Catrin suspected something entirely different, something much more sinister.

As she turned into the alley behind the Watering Hole, she whistled for Strom, who emerged from the stable looking tired and irritable.

"Cripes, it's early, Cat. What brings you here?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. He had once attended the lessons and had been friends with Catrin and Chase. After his father died, though, he had gone to work as a stable boy for Miss Mariss to help support his mother. He was shunned by most. His humble circumstances and departure from the lessons marked him as undesirable in the eyes of many, but Catrin enjoyed his company and considered him a good friend.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but I really need to stable Salty here today. The stable at the academy is full, and I'm already late. Please let me keep him here--just for today," she asked with her most appealing look.

"If Miss Mariss finds out, she'll have my hide for a carpet. I can only stable a horse if the owner patronizes the inn and pays a copper for the stall," he said.

Digging into her coin purse, Catrin pulled out a worn silver half she'd been saving for an emergency. She tossed it to Strom. "Buy yourself something to eat and take good care of Salty for me. I have to go," she said as she grabbed her wax pad from her saddlebags.

Strom rolled the coin across his knuckles as she sprinted away. "I hate to take your money, Cat, but I assure you it won't go to waste!" he shouted.

Catrin raced back to the academy, turning toward the lesson hall at a full run. Master Beron shouted for her to slow down, but she was nearly there. She reached the door and opened it as quietly as she could, but the hinge betrayed her, squeaking loudly. Everyone in the room turned to see who would be the target of Master Edling's ire, and Catrin felt her face flush.

She entered with mumbled apologies and quickly sought a vacant desk. The townies gave her nasty looks and placed their wax tablets on the empty chairs near them, clearly indicating she was not welcome. In her rush to reach the desk next to Chase, her wet boots slipped on the polished floor, leaving her suspended in air for an instant before she hit with a crash. The air rushed from her lungs with a whoosh, and the room erupted in laughter.

As soon as she regained her breath, she immediately held it, seeing Chase take advantage of the distraction. He slinked behind Peten and slid the leather pouch under his chair. The drawstrings were untied and the top lay open, but nothing emerged. Catrin stood and quickly took the seat between Chase and Osbourne, still blushing furiously.

"This isn't going to go well for you, Cat. Edling looks boiled," Osbourne whispered, but Master Edling interrupted in a loud voice.

"Now that Miss Volker has seen fit to join us, perhaps she will allow us to commence. What say you, Miss Volker? Shall we begin, or do you need more leisure time?" he asked, looking down his nose, and several of the townies sniggered, casting her knowing glances. Catrin just mumbled and nodded. She was grateful when Master Edling began his lecture on the holy war; at least he was no longer adding to her embarrassment by making a bigger fool of her.

"When Istra last graced the skies," he began, "the Zjhon and Varic nations waged a holy war that lasted hundreds of years. They fought over conflicting interpretations of religious documents, none of which could be proved or disproved. Meanwhile, the Elsic nation remained neutral, often acting as a mediator during peace talks. Many times peace was made only to be broken again upon the first provocation.

"Then there came a new Elsic leader, Von of the Elsics. He ascended the throne after killing his uncle, King Venes. Von had been clever and murdered his uncle during the harvest festival, when there were hundreds of people in attendance who might have wanted the king dead. No one could identify the killer, and a veil of suspicion hung over the court. Elaborate conspiracy theories were rampant, and Von encouraged them since they served his purposes well. Those who believed treachery was afoot were much less likely to speak out for fear of being the next mysterious death."

The teacher droned on. "Von believed his nation's historical neutrality in the war was folly and that it would be better to conquer both nations while they were weakened by the prolonged war. The Elsics did not condone the use of Istra's powers, claiming it was blasphemous, and none of their scholars were skilled in arcana. Von had no large army at his disposal either, so he concluded that Istra's power was the only way he could defeat both nations. He would use the very powers that were flaunted by the Zjhon and the Varics as the agents of their destruction.

"He staged clandestine raids against each nation, disguising his men as soldiers from the opposing nation. His instructions were clear: he wanted people captured, not killed, because he wanted slaves. Those captured were transported in secret to the Knell Downs, which we

believe to be high in the Pinook Mountains. Camps were built, and the slaves were forced to experiment with creating powerful weapons using Istra's power.

"There were many failures, as most of those captured had no experience in such things, but after countless attempts, a slave named Imeteri made a deadly discovery. Weakened from working in stuffy quarters, he convinced his captors to let him work outside whenever the sun shone. His efforts were fruitless for many weeks, and many of his experiments lay about in disarray, unfinished or forgotten completely, except for the details in his copious notes. Most of them consisted of various compounds of elements he placed in clay mugs, which he sealed with mud. One day, while working on his experiments, an explosion knocked him off his feet, and he knew one of his concoctions had worked. It took many more efforts for him to duplicate his success.

"One major problem was that his explosive needed to charge in the light of both Istra and Vestra before it would detonate. As it became saturated with energy, it would begin to glow, gradually getting brighter and brighter until it would eventually explode.

"Von was pleased by Imeteri's discovery, and after several refinements and small-scale demonstrations, he declared it the success he had been looking for. Imeteri was raised to the highest status of slave, barely less than a free man. Von ordered the other slaves to build enormous statues in the likeness of Istra and Vestra sharing a loving embrace. These great behemoths became known as the Statues of Terhilian, and packed with the new explosive, they were sent to the various Zjhon and Varic cities. Appearing to be tokens of peace, they were readily accepted and revered. The wars had drained the Zjhon and Varic nations, and lacking the resources to fight, they were relieved to receive the gifts.

"It was an abominable tactic and one I hope is never eclipsed. Drawn to the statues like moths to a flame, the faithful and war-weary congregated in enormous numbers around the likenesses of their gods. All but a few of the statues detonated, resulting in cataclysmic explosions that leveled entire cities, killing countless souls. The toxic aftermath debilitated those not killed by the initial blasts, and most died soon thereafter. And so began mankind's darkest age, a time known as the Purge," Master Edling continued, his unvarying cadence threatening to put Catrin, and most of the other students, into a deep sleep.

The snake, which Catrin now saw was an olive-green tree snake, was lured from Chase's pouch by the stillness, its slender head and neck poked from the pouch, looking like a bean pod with eyes. Catrin held her

breath as it slithered forward and coiled itself around the chair leg. Peten noticed Catrin's sideways glances and gave her a snide look, tossing his long, blond hair over his shoulders.

With his muscular build, strong jaw, and piercing blue eyes, he cast a striking figure, but his attitude and ego made him the least attractive person Catrin had ever met. She felt little pity for him as the snake continued to follow its instinct, which was to climb. Peten was oblivious to its presence and continued to look bored, casting his own glances to get the attention of Roset Gildsmith.

The snake slithered up the slats on the back of his chair; it brushed against his curls, and still he remained unaware. He shifted in his seat, as if sensing the stares of Catrin, Chase, and Osbourne, and turned his head to glare at them. As he did, his eyes met those of the snake, and he shrieked. His high-pitched scream and sudden movement alarmed the snake, and it struck, biting him on his nose. Catrin knew the snake was not venomous, but Peten obviously knew nothing of the sort.

He leaped from his chair, sending his desk and the snake flying. Charging from the hall, he knocked Roset and another girl from their chairs. He showed no concern for anyone in the hall, and it was obvious his only care was for his own safety.

Master Edling stormed to the back of the hall, fuming, and snatched the agitated snake from the ruins of Peten's chair. After releasing it at the base of a tree in the courtyard, he returned, pushing Peten before him, forcing the shaken young man to return the desks to order.

Chase's eyes danced with glee, and Osbourne let a giggle slip. The townies and Master Edling glared at them with eyes like daggers. Catrin sat quietly, hoping the situation would somehow improve, but instead it worsened.

"Peten Ross, you are a coward and a boor," Roset said with a haughty look. "Do not aspire to speak to me again." She turned smugly away, her jaw stuck out in defiance.

Chase seemed to think things were going very well, but Catrin could see Peten's fury rising, his embarrassment fueling his desire for retribution. How Chase could not see mounting danger was a mystery to Catrin. Perhaps he was simply caught up in his own thirst for revenge.

Master Edling concluded his lecture and dismissed the class curtly. Catrin was just glad to have the lesson over and tried to flow out with the rest of the crowd, but Master Edling barred her path.

"Miss Volker, I would have a word with you," he said, and he clearly did not wish to compliment her.

"Yes sir, Master Edling, sir," Catrin replied softly. "I'm sorry I was late, sir."

"I'll have no excuses from you. It is your responsibility to arrive before the appointed time. If you cannot do so, then I recommend you do not attend at all. Since you wasted my time at the beginning of class, it is only fair I waste your time now. Be seated," he said, and Catrin slumped into the chair nearest the door, anxiously waiting for her punishment to be concluded.

* * *

Outside the lesson hall, Chase ducked into a darkened recess and waited for Osbourne. Roset came first, and she cast him a haughty glance, but he was grateful that she said nothing. Using the darkness for cover, he held his breath as Peten stormed by, followed by a mob of agitated townies. Minda and Celise walked by, and Osbourne seemed to be trying to hide behind them. Hoping no one noticed, Chase grabbed Osbourne by the shirt and dragged him into the alcove. Osbourne let out a small yelp before he realized it was Chase who had grabbed him, and he looked over his shoulder more than once.

"Looks like Edling held Catrin after class," Chase said.

"I told you he looked boiled," Osbourne said, but there was a tremble in his voice, and he looked nervously over his shoulder. "Are you going to wait around for Cat?"

"I can't. I promised my dad I'd help with the afternoon deliveries."

"I can't either," Osbourne said. "I've chores to do, and I should probably study for the test we have coming up."

"Bah, who needs to study?" Chase asked with a grin. "Just remember everything Edling says; that's all."

Osbourne shook his head. "That may work for you, but my father'll tan my hide if I bring home bad marks. I'd better get Patches saddled and get going, or I'm going to run out of light."

Chase peeked around the corner before walking back into the light, half expecting to find Peten and the rest of the townies waiting for him, but the stables were eerily quiet. Only Patches remained in her stall, and Chase stayed with Osbourne while he got her saddled.

"Never seen everyone clear out so quickly," Chase said.

"I'm starting to think the snake was a bad idea," Osbourne said as he tightened the girth. "Feels like I've got squirrels in my guts. You don't think they'll do anything to Cat, do you?"

"You worry too much," Chase said, but he secretly wondered if Osbourne was right. It seemed strange that Peten and the others had left so quickly, and letting Osbourne and Catrin travel home alone suddenly seemed like a very bad idea. There was nothing he could do about it, though, no way to take back what was already done, and he tried to drive the worry from his mind. "I'm sure everything will be fine."

"I hope you're right," Osbourne said as he mounted. Patches, who was a well-mannered mare, must have sensed Osbourne's nervousness, for she danced around the stable, her ears twitching as she spun. Osbourne soothed her with a hand on her neck, and she trotted away with her tail tucked. "I'll see you tomorrow," Osbourne said with a wave.

"Be careful," Chase said, betraying his own fears, and Osbourne rode away looking more nervous than ever.

Checking around every corner as he went, Chase made his way to the mill. At each turn he expected to find the townies waiting, and their absence only increased his anxiety. "I wish they would just get on with it," he mumbled to himself as he passed the market.

When he saw his father waiting with the wagon already loaded, though, he forgot his fears. They had enough work to keep them until nightfall, and he would have time to think of little else.

* * *

After sitting far longer than needed to make up the time she had missed, Catrin began to wonder if Master Edling had forgotten she was there. He was completely engrossed in his text, and she was hesitant to interrupt. She tried to be patient, but she desperately wanted to talk to Chase, and she shifted in her seat constantly.

"You are dismissed," he said suddenly without looking up.

"Thank you, Master Edling; it won't happen again, sir," Catrin said as she rose to leave.

"It had better not. And do not think for a moment that I'm unaware of your involvement in today's disruption; you can pass that along to your cousin as well," he said, and Catrin did not bother to deny it, knowing it would do no good.

She walked quickly to the Watering Hole, arriving to find Strom busy with the mounts of two nobles. She waited in the shadows, not wanting the nobles to complain about riffraff hanging around the stables; it had happened before, and she didn't want to impose on Strom. Once the nobles made their instructions abundantly clear, they strolled into the Watering Hole, and Catrin emerged from her hiding place.

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