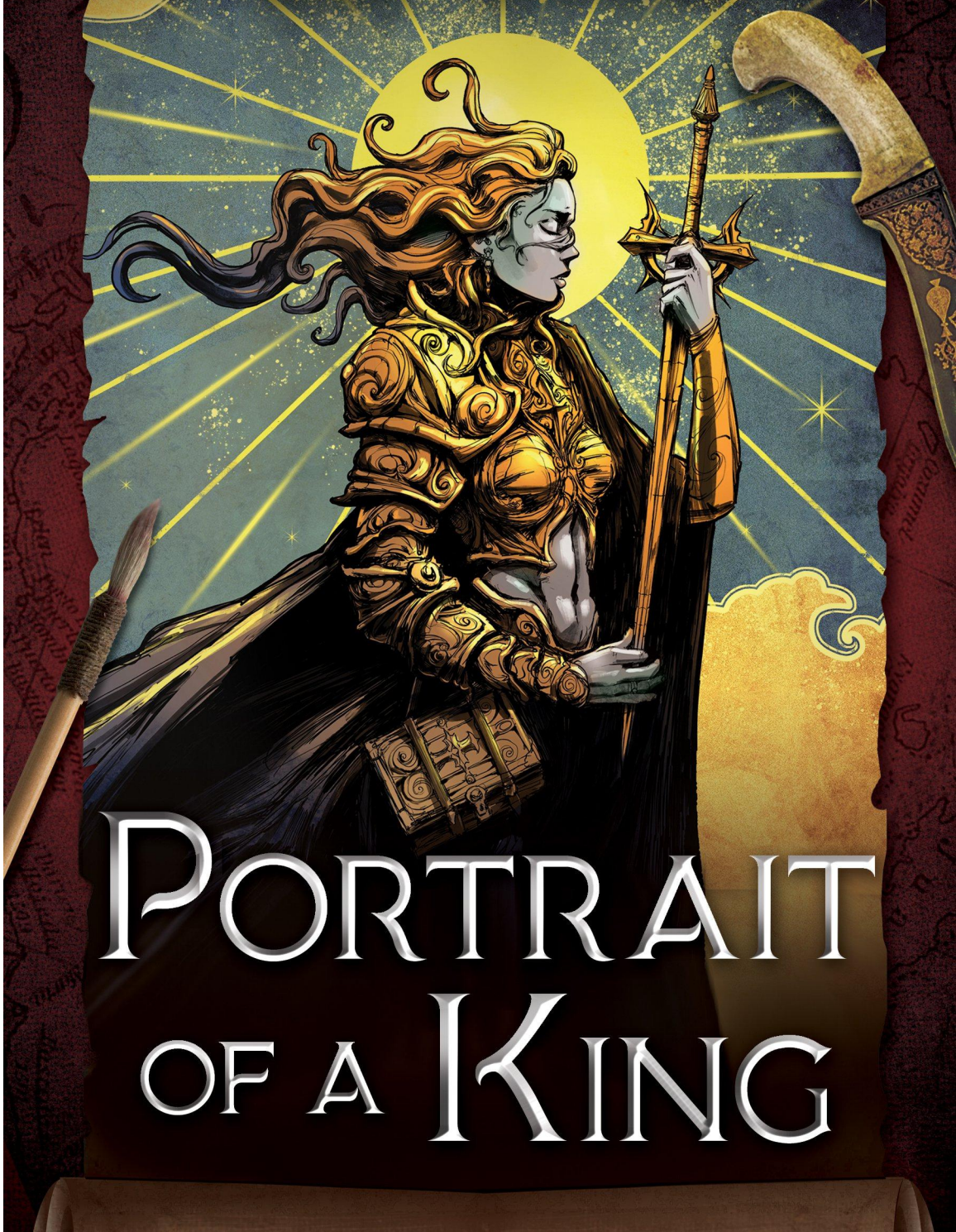


L.A. BUCK



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## Table of Contents

Map.....	3
One.....	4
Two.....	8
Three.....	11
Four.....	13
Five.....	16
Six.....	20
Seven.....	22
Eight.....	25
Nine.....	27
Ten.....	30
Eleven.....	32
Twelve.....	34
Thirteen.....	37
Fourteen.....	43
Fifteen.....	47
Sixteen.....	49
Seventeen.....	51
Eighteen.....	53
Nineteen.....	58
Twenty.....	63
Twenty-One.....	64
Epilogue.....	67
Want to read more?.....	72
About the Author.....	73
Find me online!.....	74



# Map



## One

Lyara fumbled with the soggy quilt, not for the first time cursing her height.

Her mother used to assure her she'd grow. "*We're tall in this family,*" she'd say, unconsciously straightening to increase her own respectable stature. "*Our ancestors, on the other side of the ocean, they were warriors. Drink more Mucuna.*"

Lyara scoffed as she heaved the quilt over the clothesline. Her ancestors had braved the sea and its monsters—running from that country—for a reason, and at twenty-four, going on twenty-five, she knew no amount of tea or anything else would change her fortunes. She'd just have to spend the rest of her life struggling with the wash.

"Here," Adela said, grabbing hold of the one corner Lyara'd managed to flip over the line. "Let me."

Lyara helped heave the freshly cleaned cloth over the clothesline anyway, as if that proved something. Her mother's maid was five years her younger and already a handbreadth and a half taller. They had the same black hair, though, and the same white skin and round, light blue eyes—most strangers mistook them for sisters.

Adela fished a clothespin from her apron pocket and leaned towards Lyara as she secured the quilt. "He's still watching us."

Lyara sniffed and looked over her shoulder.

Her father owned a large house at the edge of the Inner Circle—that left their lives comfortable, though still filled with the menial chores the wealthier paid others to do. Their clothesline ran from the wall of their second story to the post set in the court square fountain, one of a dozen in this tight-packed neighborhood.

All the grey stone buildings were houses, but a few families made their living by turning the lower floor into a business. Lyara had the fortune of living beside the bakery, while across the street sat the only bar permitted to operate within walking distance of her district.

A single soldier—his crimson cloak and his white tunic, with the blackbird and crossmarks, gave him away—sat on the ground beside the bar's now closed door. He might've been her age, but the well-trimmed black beard on his cheeks made him look older. His long, dark hair was greasy, pulled back and hastily tied, but his bright green eyes watched her and Adela work with a soft smile. Like a pilgrim gazing at the sunrise.

Lyara shook her head and pulled one of her mother's dresses from the laundry basket to hang it on the line beside the quilt. Any *decent* man would've put three hours of work behind him by this time of morning. Or, he'd at least have climbed out of the bar's shadow and looked toward the mountains to watch the actual sky.

But, uselessness was not a crime—a lucky thing, the city of Edras would be a den of criminals if it were.

“I don’t like it,” Adela whispered, stealing glances in the soldier’s direction as though he were a rabid dog that might notice and snap at her. “What’s he doing?”

Lyara grunted. “Working through a hangover, I expect.”

An entire troop had closed the bar last night, drinking the barrels dry, shouting and dancing in the streets into the dark of the wee morning hours. The din *would* have kept her up—revelers at the bar often did, no matter how much her mother complained—and made her cross, except this time her oil paintings did a better job. Her inspirations were so fickle lately, she’d taken to letting the muse consume her the rare occasions it reared its ugly head.

“He’s not right,” Adela said, hanging Lyara’s father’s shirt beside the dress.

Lyara tilted her head. “A soldier has more right to drink than most men.” Especially last night.

Avaron’s troops had won a decisive victory against a Lovarian raiding party by the Rohgen Mountains. A rarity—not the victory, but the fact King Hilderic had actually deployed men to defend the poor border towns at all. Lyara’s parents said Hilderic used to allocate resources equally among all his subjects, but in her years she’d only seen him expend effort on those citizens rich enough to pay him back.

“I’ll have to walk past him on the way home,” Adela continued, too worked up to keep her whisper. “What if he follows me?”

Lyara lowered the trousers she’d picked from the basket and gave Adela a smirk. “Do you want me to go talk to him? Tell him to leave?”

Surprise sprang in Adela’s eyes, which quickly turned to a conflicted sense of relief. “No. You’re probably right, it’s nothing.”

Lyara chuckled. She dropped the trousers, wiped her hands dry on her pastel violet skirt, and turned to stride across the courtyard.

“Wait!” Adela called out, then yelped and covered her mouth as her voice echoed within the small ring of houses. Lyara didn’t turn back.

“Hey,” she said, stopping less than a stone’s throw from the soldier to cross her arms. “My friend doesn’t appreciate how you’ve been staring at us. Maybe it’s about time you went home, huh?”

The man held her gaze, his grin widening the longer she spoke. “No trouble. I wasn’t watching her, anyways.”

She rolled her eyes. “Watching, like what? A ravenous wolf?”

He kept staring, with that stupid grin. “Like a damned fool trying to pluck up the courage to go talk to you.”

She wouldn't give away her good graces that easily. "Look, I appreciate your service, but don't you have somewhere to be?"

The soldier just shook his head.

Lyara frowned, scanning him up and down. Dried mud splattered his riding pants and boots, brown splotches of blood stained his white tunic, and he even had a bandage wrapped around his left forearm. Apparently, he wasn't habitually useless. A half-empty bottle of whiskey sat on the street at his side.

She scoffed. "Isn't it a bit early for drinking?"

"Early?" He picked up the bottle, sloshing the amber liquid within before returning it to its place beside his leg. "I assure you, milady, I started drinking at the proper time and I simply haven't finished yet."

She sighed. Adela was a poor judge of character—too nervous to see the kindness in this man's eyes—but that didn't make his behavior any less despicable. "How much overindulgence do you need to celebrate killing?"

The smile faded from the soldier's eyes for the first time, and she was almost sad to see it go. "I kill, sure, but I don't celebrate *that*. I celebrate because what I killed won't have the chance to kill you."

She lowered her arms, her heart softening. "What's your name?"

The soldier's smile returned, tinged with disappointment. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

Lyara frowned, studying his face again. She ought to be able to place those striking green eyes in her memory, but she couldn't. A past suitor, possibly? She'd had her share—usually the better-off in the Outer Circle, trying to marry their way deeper into Edras. The unwed daughter of a successful merchant was a worthy pursuit. Though, none were rich enough that her father insisted she entertain them, and few suitably captured her attention to court her more than one or two dates.

The soldier laughed, fully smiling again, and pointed to an upper window in the house beside the bar. "I used to watch you from up there. Still like a damned fool, just a lot younger so I might have had a better excuse." He pointed next to the alley beside Lyara's house. "Back there, you knocked Gode Evrich on his ass after he pulled your pig tails. And Mhiler took the fall for it, but I know you were the one who goaded him into filling the fountain with weaver's dye on Iverset."

Lyara caught herself smiling, too. "We went to school together?"

"Until fifth year. My father remarried that summer and we moved deep into the Inner Circle."

She squinted at his face, trying to picture all her old classmates. It wasn't easy—fifth year was a long time ago, and only a man grew a beard like that.

“Dradge,” the soldier said with a laugh. “Son of Rhowan.”

“Rhowan!” She remembered that name—everyone in the neighborhood remembered those of their peers who succeeded in the generational quest to creep closer to the castle Avtalyon.

Dradge nodded sheepishly. “No one here seems to forget my *father*...”

“Haven't you been home? I'm sure he's waiting for you.”

“Nah. I'm not welcome there any longer.”

She pursed her lips, unsure whether to offer sympathy or think he deserved it. “Sharp as a cane rod, gentle as the growing field, a father molds the clay of his children into the statues of men,” she said, quoting *A Poor Son's Dialog*.

Dradge grimaced, as though struck. “Oh, don't tell me you spend your time these days reading that shit. Please.” He resettled in his seat, grasping the whiskey bottle by the stem. “Actually, if you do, just let me down now and I'll get back to my drinking.”

She laughed heartily. It'd been a long time since she'd done that. “My father encouraged me to memorize different passages, he thought it'd help attract a suitor of a higher station. Though, I do enjoy a little of Ivard of Gebrama's *Summerwind*.”

“Yeah?” Dradge peered up at her, ragged grin spreading across his face. “*Summerwind* is poetry, right?”

“Mostly.”

He nodded, relaxing his grip on the whiskey bottle. “I can work with poetry.”

She shook her head, still smiling to herself. “You eaten breakfast?”

“Nope.”

She offered him her hand. “My mother's always happy to cook something.”

“Gods Lyara, I'm drunk! I'm not meeting your parents.”

She re-folded her arms. “So you want to keep sitting there in the dirt? Adela's going to have to walk past soon and she very much wanted me to chase you off. Besides, my father's away on business.”

“Yeah?”

She held out her hand again, more forcefully this time. “Just leave the bottle.”



## Two

Dradge hunched over his meal, elbows on the table, shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth as though he hadn't eaten in days. Lyara sat on a stool beside him, one leg crossed over the other, tempted to laugh—she would have, if her mother wasn't watching. A dusty soldier in a threadbare uniform was just so deliciously out of place in this pristine white marble kitchen.

Honora walked a plate of fresh biscuits from the stone oven to the long table, her smile polite but strained. She wore a simple yellow dress, casual flowing skirt the same style as Lyara's own, but had her hair braided against the back of her head for that constant touch of formality.

"Are the eggs seasoned to your liking?" Honora asked.

"Yeah, they're—" Dradge started, nodding, before he seemed to notice he was talking with his mouth full. He swallowed, straightening in his seat, then cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

Honora's brow creased as she nodded in reply, and Lyara caught herself grinning at that, too.

"You say you're Rhowan's son?" her mother asked. "I thought he sent his boy to the University at Drosala to study."

Dradge froze, spoon of eggs halfway to his mouth. He nodded again but didn't meet her gaze. "Yes ma'am, he did."

Honora's frown won out this time, and she even added a quiet, disapproving *hmm*.

"Plenty enough men read books as it is, mother."

Dradge gave her a bit of a smile after hearing that, but Honora huffed and turned back to her wood-fired stove. "And there are plenty of women left to take in strays as well."

Dradge glanced between the two of them, eyebrows raised, then slowly reached for one of the fresh biscuits.

Lyara kept smiling at her mother's back as Honora tamped out the fire in the hearth. "When the tamed men hide behind their tomes, leaving the poor to die, while the untamed look death in the eye for all our sakes, which would you say are truly astray?"

Honora turned around, hand on her hip, more bemused than frustrated. "Is that what this is? Another attempt to get a rise out of me?"

Dradge frowned at Lyara, mouth full of half a biscuit, but she shook her head. "No, mother. I'm sorry. I only speak my mind."

Honora nodded, expression softening. "Well, I suppose I won't fault you for that, dear." She stepped forward to push the plate of biscuits closer to Dradge. "We do appreciate your service, young man. Take as many as you would like."

Dradge held Honora's gaze as if weighing her sincerity, then snatched up the remaining biscuits—he shoved one in his mouth and the rest in his pockets.

Lyara grinned again as her mother's eyes bulged. She held no animosity for Honora—she was a kind woman, strict though gentle—but sometimes the walls of her parent's expectations pressed on her and she *had* to scratch at them. Same as she pushed against any boundaries, perhaps, but theirs were the most constant and readily available.

It was far worse when she was young. Although, of the three here, it appeared only she and Dradge remembered those days. Her parents should be grateful she now restrained herself to snide comments.

A knock sounded at the door. All of them turned to look, but Lyara rose and walked down the two short stairs to pull it open. Three soldiers—in clean uniforms—stood in a row on her stoop. They were all about her age, two of them probably a bit older, and the middle one smiled at her.

“Hello, ma’am,” he said with a curt bow. He had bright grey eyes and a neatly trimmed brown beard, and while bearing the fewest patches on his right sleeve, he seemed the leader of this little group. “This may be an odd inquiry, but we’re searching—” He glanced into the kitchen and his gaze fell on Dradge. “Hey!” He laughed. “What are you doing? We were beginning to think someone walked off with you.”

Dradge started to answer, but on the other side of the table Honora folded her arms and all four soldiers stopped to stare at her.

“Ma’am,” one man said, bowing at the waist, and the other two at the door followed his lead.

“Our apologies,” the grey-eyed soldier said, a smile creeping back to his face as he met Honora's gaze. “Would you like us to collect your garbage for you?”

“Oh,” Dradge said, grinning, as he pushed himself to his feet. “Is that how it is?” Swaying a bit, but keeping his balance, he turned to Honora and slapped his right fist to his chest in a formal salute. “Ma’am, forgive me for my part in it, but your hospitality is the best I’ve received in weeks.”

Honora managed a true smile this time—demure, her lips pressed thin, but it lit up her light blue eyes. “Stay safe, all of you.”

Dradge almost stumbled down the stairs. Both Lyara and the middle soldier jumped to catch him, but he steadied himself against the wall, as though it were a matter of pride that he moved only under his own power. Lyara held the door open as he and his fellow soldiers stepped out into the street.

Dradge stopped suddenly and spun around. He pointed at Lyara, and with jaw set met her gaze. “Can I have permission to call on you?”

She smiled, stomach fluttering with foolish emotions she hadn't felt in years. “You may.”

Dradge grinned, big and stupid, his green eyes alight with such sincere excitement. He gave her a wave, then stumbled after his friends. She watched them a moment—the other men slapped Dradge on the shoulders in congratulations—the whole time bearing a big and stupid grin of her own.

Honora sighed deeply as Lyara shut the door. “Precious daughter of mine, do you ever find it in your heart of hearts to show your dear mother even the occasional small mercy?”

Lyara laughed softly as she climbed those stairs and retook her seat at the table. “He might not even call on me.”

She grunted incredulously at that. “You were up late again, painting? All men in uniform?”

Lyara glanced down at her hands. She didn’t intend to stay up, but after she looked out her window to see what the commotion was about, she’d settled down for a few sketches before attempting to fall asleep again. She’d only *painted* the one of the group tossing a member of their squad in the fountain.

“It was ironic, Mother, that’s all. The harsh lighting was straight from the Lothwarde Era, the scene properly focused on the downfall of man, but all the subjects were so *happy*.” She smiled. “Can you imagine what Master Ribaud would say if he saw that piece?”

“I imagine he’d mourn once again the sum of firri I wasted trying to get you educated.” Honora walked to Lyara’s side and planted a kiss on the top of her head. “You should always *listen* to your heart, but don’t presume you have to follow it.”

## Three

Lyara adjusted the set of her green veil as she sank to her knees at the last row of kneelers.

Thunder pealed in a low rumble outside, a light rain pattering against the slate roof of the modest chapel. The room was small—larger than a house in the Outer Circle, but about the size of her parent’s sitting room. It was modestly lit with fat, scented candles set on iron stakes against the walls. The air hung heavy with cedar-wood and cinnamon.

The alcove was mostly empty—two other devotees knelt in prayer towards the middle-front of the rows of kneelers—but current *Láefe* traditions only demanded a prayer once a month. Lyara’s parents dutifully attended that required service, they’d brought her since before she could walk, but as she grew she found that frequency inadequate.

This was a centering experience, a reminder of the wider world beyond her, contained within a single building of solid stone she could touch and breathe in and *know*. She hadn’t yet found what her place in Edras—in anywhere—should be, but here it felt like she might have an idea. Devotion gave her a purpose—however idealistic, however diminutive.

She bowed her head, tapping her right fist against her chest six times—one for each of the founding Fidelis houses—and mouthed her favorite prayer.

*Essence, shield me from the blade, guard me from the arrow, and keep me from destruction. But if I should die, let it be with my sword in hand and my face toward home, on the field of victory.*

It was a tad dramatic for her to say, considering she hadn’t faced a *true* danger in her entire life and had never even picked up a sword, but she loved the sentiment. It was confident, it carried a certain raw strength; the spirit of it reflected in her soul, even if she couldn’t technically emulate the particulars.

Besides, Gallian himself wrote it. His prayers probably carried more weight than the others.

Lyara glanced up at the center wall. Center was a bit of a stretch; the alcove had six walls, each adorned with the sigil of one of the founding Fidelis houses, but the caretaker had arranged the kneelers to face the particular wall which held Gallian’s. It was a sweeping line edged by three linear marks—it somewhat resembled a head of wheat, or the wing of a bird. Most chapels etched the symbols in stone, but here Fidelis themselves had come and crafted their house marks out of their respective preferred elements.

Gallian’s sigil burned in a constant, low flame, fed by an oil-soaked wick the caretaker replaced daily.

Two hundred years ago those six troops—some blood relatives, some sworn by oaths—left a land of tyranny behind and settled here on this continent. They drove back horrid monsters called *saja*—none had been spotted in Avaron for generations—and fought with marginal

success against the centaur tribes. Gallian emerged as the first Fidelis and first King of Avaron—as *fonfyr*—before those beast-men slaughtered him.

The more frequent devotees typically came to pray for the *fonfyr*'s return. A warrior with the same strength and ideals was supposed to come back, one day, and bring peace with him. There was a prophecy. Lyara was a bit ashamed to admit in public, but sometimes she prayed for his return, too.

It seemed the least she could do; every age waited for some kind of savior, why should she not hope for the same? Fewer believed now than they'd used to, but at the monthly service, *Láefe* stretched into the street.

Only, this hero was more than a hundred years late.

She folded her hands and placed them on her lap, bowing her head. She hadn't come to pray for that tonight, anyway. Lightning flashed behind the window shutters and she whispered her prayer again—this time altering the words to offer it up for the Avaronian soldiers fighting for her life in Edras to keep trickling lazily from one day to the next. That was her custom. Tonight she said it again, a certain soldier in mind above all the rest.

After all, that prayer was meant for men like him.



## Four

Clutching her hands to her chest, Lyara pretended she didn't notice how her heart pounded. Her father sat in an armchair behind her, reading the latest issue of *Whispers in Brief* and smoking his pipe, but she stood pressed against the railing of her home's balcony, peering over the rooftops at the main street winding through Edras and toward Avtalyon.

She was a fool to fall for a soldier. She told herself that every night as she fell asleep, smiling like a giddy school girl. Soldiers courted danger, a soldier's wife would be forced to do the same. Perhaps that was what she wanted.

Dradge had waited one day to call on her, and then only two days after that to call on her again. The third time he'd showed up at her door in his chain-mail and plate armor to bid a quick goodbye before heading back out on assignment.

Centaurs were raiding western villages. *Centaurs*. Lyara filled their month apart picking through her father's basement library, studying the histories that'd been such a chore to read before. She'd sketched a few and painted one: a fearsome beast, eyes cold, flanks splattered in blood. Though proud of the work, she kept it hidden in the bottom drawer of the guest room dresser, where it wouldn't catch her gaze unbidden.

"You're not still printing these on my printers, are you?"

Lyara glanced back and found her father frowning as he held up the periodical folded open to the center, displaying a pointedly unflattering cartoon of King Hilderic lying fat and drunk on a bed made of the corpses of peasants.

Lyara snorted. She was rather proud of that one. "Adela introduced me to a man in the Outer Circle with an old machine. Takes us a lot longer and we can't make as many, but it should keep you from being implicated in any of it. But we won't get caught."

Her father nodded, with a grunt, then unfolded the periodical to turn to the next page. If she remembered right, that was a crude limerick about guild taxes—Orvist's narrowed eyes and wrinkled nose just about confirmed it.

"I don't write much these days," she said. "Really, the whole thing has taken off without me. I think it resonates with a lot of people. Gives them an outlet for their frustrations."

Her father grunted again, and she knew he didn't believe a word she said. "I hope you recognize your mother and I tried our best to keep your idle hands busy about something useful."

Lyara smiled. "Are you saying my *Whisper* is not useful?"

"The intemperate who sows discord one day reaps it," he said, quoting *Epigram*, "and the world will weep with him."

"And tyranny finds the man who runs fastest from it," she said, another line from *Epigram*. An easy quip, since the text was a collection of contrarian proverbs. "Maybe that silly thing is the best I can do."

Orvist looked up at her with a smile, his manicured mustache and beard hiding most of his lips. "I suspect I'll rue the day you finally realize that isn't true."

A cheer rose somewhere near the base of the hill and Lyara's breath caught. The crowd in the street below parted to make way for the procession. Dozens of soldiers, all on horseback, paraded towards Avtalyon, their horses' hooves clapping against the paving stones. She studied each face, looking for those green eyes.

The men were tired, dirty, their faces haggard. Still, they smiled, waving to folks they knew and even strangers. This was a victorious return, but not by much.

With a heavy sigh, Lyara's father closed the periodical, leaving it on the side table, and rose from his chair to join her on the balcony. They watched the procession in silence, and Orvist gently draped his arm over her shoulder. The sweet scent of his pipe-smoke enveloped them both.

"Father, I'm alright."

He simply nodded. "I know you are."

At the end of the procession, cartmasters drove open-topped wagons filled with the wounded. The dead didn't return; they were buried with honor in the ground they bled to defend. There were three carts in total. Some men sat on the edges, various limbs wrapped in bandages, smiling and waving with perhaps greater enthusiasm than the healthy riders. Others lay on beds of hay, still or writhing in pain.

Three riders rode among the wagons. The two on the ends reached for the man in the middle as he tried to stand in the stirrups to look at the houses above him. Lyara's heart leapt in her chest, relief washing through her.

She waved, and after a moment Dradge noticed her. Was his leg broken? It was splinted and wrapped in bandages, the left stirrup extended to accommodate his straight knee. Grinning, he waved back, his eyes on her the entire time his attendants tried to get him to sit back down in the saddle.

Orvist squeezed her shoulders. "He'll leave again. You know that. Are you willing to go through this, day after day?"

She stared at Dradge, his smile making her smile. "I might be."

Orvist released her, nodding to himself. "So long as you know."

Lyara patted the hand her father rested on the railing, then charged down the stairs to throw open the door and run out into the street. The crowd filled the town square and her accursed height left her staring at backs and shoulders. Fortunately, the folks before her moved aside to make way for three horses that broke from the procession.

Dragde's two fellow soldiers dismounted first and rushed to catch both his horse and him as he struggled to dismount. These were not soldiers she recognized, both were older than

Dradge—one looked older than her father—but they doted on him like he was King Hilderic himself.

“I’m alright,” Dradge grumbled, trying to fend the two men off, but they forced him to let them lower him to the ground. He winced as he tried to put weight on his splinted leg.

“Stop that,” the older soldier said, whacking Dradge over the shoulders with the crutch he pulled from beneath the stirrups.

“Let me,” Lyara said, slipping her shoulder under Dradge’s arm in place of the crutch. Maybe her height was good for something after all.

Dradge peered down at her, smiling as he pulled her close. He studied every curve of her face, as though it’d been decades since he’d last seen her. “You waited for me.”

“Just how many suitors do you think chase me in a month’s time?”

He shook his head. “Dozens?”

She laughed, cheeks flushing with heat. In truth there’d been one, a freckle-faced scholar from the Inner Circle she’d rejected outright. And even his offer was a rarity this past year. It seemed most eligible bachelors in Edras appreciated her curt wit and mischievous tendencies about as much as her parents did.

“You watch him, miss,” the old soldier said, handing her the crutch. “He’s not supposed to walk on that leg for four weeks at least.”

Dradge grunted in disagreement. “It’s a *simple* fracture. The bone never stuck through the skin. I’m fine.”

The other soldier scoffed. “A simple fracture in at least three places. Please try, ma’am. Maybe he’ll listen to you.”

Dradge muttered something under his breath, but Lyara looked up at him with a grin. “So, they’re saying you need a place to stay?”

His smile quickly returned, sheepish this time. “I can try and speak with my father. Or lodge at the barracks. But, I thought I might ask you first.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear those other options. I’m sure my parents will take you in, since you have nowhere else to go.”

The two other soldiers laughed, the older letting out a low whistle. “Oh, she’s a troublemaker too? Well, that could be the only chance anyone’s got at making him listen.”

## Five

Dradge muttered curses as he stubbed his foot on the guest room door frame.

“Sorry,” Lyara said, helping him the rest of the way to the bed.

The cover was another of her mother’s quilts, colorful and intricate in its design but dusty from lack of use. Guest rooms only had purpose when guests visited, and in recent months those who could afford to avoided travel. The centaurs were the newest scourge, years before that vicious talking animals—the nostkynna—had dogged roads instead. But not in Edras, of course.

Dradge sucked in a sharp breath as he lowered himself onto the bed. He offered her a smile, and almost hid the way pain tightened the creases beside his eyes. “See? No trouble.”

On the opposite side of the small room, Adela pulled back the curtains to let the last burning rays of the evening sunlight warm the air. Then, she plopped down in the upholstered armchair in the corner.

“You won’t even notice me,” Adela said, meeting Lyara’s gaze in apology. She pulled a newly started knitting square, needles, and a roll of yarn from her apron pocket. “I hope you aren’t mad at me for agreeing to this, but your mother pays well. I promise, I’m on your side, really. I’ll have nothing to say unless she presses me.”

Lyara scoffed, cheeks flushing with heat, and made a point to leave Dradge’s side and wander to the other end of the room. “We’re not going to do anything.” She fiddled with the unlit oil lamp on the bedside table.

Adela just nodded and turned furiously to her knitting. “Pretend I’m not even here.”

Eyebrows raised, Dradge glanced at Adela sitting in the corner. When she didn’t look up from her knitting needles, he shrugged, then hauled himself onto the bed and leaned back against the headboard. He sighed contentedly and shut his eyes.

Lyara watched him, not sure if she wanted to let him rest or if she was ticked at him for trying. “How’d you hurt your leg?”

“Trampled,” he said, not opening his eyes.

“You were *trampled*? By your own men?”

He chuckled. “They can’t always help it. But no.”

Old fears stirred in her heart, and she sank to a seat on the bed. “...what are they like?”

He opened his eyes, slowly, and stared pensively at his own feet. “Big.”

She started to grin, ready to poke fun at his answer, but he continued.

“Stronger than me. Faster than most cavalry mounts, too. I would’ve been fine, but the thing got me in the chest with the butt end of a pole-arm and knocked me off my horse.” He

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