

The Bound

jm douglas



The cover image is taken from “July” of *Très Riches Heures*, a French book of hours from the early 1400s.

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Readers particularly sensitive to violence, alcohol, sexual assault, or loss of mental control should be forewarned these are topics they may encounter.

To Anne, since when we were children I promised I'd dedicate a book to her, though it's unlikely she remembers.

1.
The Morning City



The print shop's selection was insultingly thin. It held nothing other than propaganda, but Finian hadn't come to shop. He considered slipping a few of his political fliers into the books, but the clerk kept looking his way.

Finian opened a plain pamphlet from the rack in front of him. From its pages, a clan born extolled the various virtues of the Sovereign. Finian leafed ahead and glanced out the street window.

There she was, at the lip of the stairs, coming onto the third tier. He slipped the volume back into place and exited the shop, thanking the clerk as he did.

He tailed her for a street before he caught up.

"Hi, guardsperson," Finian said, drawing next to Rowena.

She started, then smiled, then frowned.

“Fin. What are you doing here?”

“The city? Living, same as always.”

“No, talking to me,” she said.

“Don't worry.” He hefted the bag slung across his shoulder. “I bear gifts. Well, gift.”

“I'm tired. I'm going home,” she said.

“I'll walk you.”

“Fine,” Rowena said, and began to cut through the marketplace.

He had to strain to keep up without jogging. She was remarkably fit. Rowena moved with a warrior's unconscious grace.

They made a strange pair. He carried very little with him. The keys to his shop, which was also his home. A little belt-knife, more useful for opening box strings and cutting food than fighting. A few coins in his left shoe, because emergencies were rarely predictable. And, in the canvas bag, a bottle of dark wine, the top sealed with colored wax. With it, two ceramic cups.

Where Finian was slender and pale, Rowena was fit and dark. She wore her curly hair in long braids and carried a long knife on her belt. It was a blade meant for doing violence, and she was trained in its use.

Finian was clean and soap-scented. He wore a single brass ring in one ear, though he could have afforded nicer. His clothes were well-cut but loose; his chest was bound flat. From his narrow waist and thicker hips, a hawkish observer might still guess he had been pronounced female at birth.

Rowena wore the uniform of the guard. She smelled like sweat. She did not look presentable or neat; she looked tired.

“Here,” he said, pointing down a street. “A detour.”

“I just want to be home,” she insisted.

“Please, Rowena. I want to talk.”

“You can talk here.”

“Please, please. I won't take long.”

She scowled and followed him. The streets quieted; they emptied into a small park. They were its only occupants. Benches lined a grass square. A squat fountain attended by a yellow bird sat at the center. The bird ruffled its wings.

Finian sat on a bench and patted the seat beside him. Rowena continued to stand. He pulled the bottle out of the bag, and set the cups on the bench.

“I don't have time for this,” Rowena said.

“One drink, and then you'll be home. For old time's sake.”

Rowena folded her arms. She opened her mouth to retort, and then sat down instead. With his belt knife, Finian cut through the wax film on the bottle's head.

“One drink,” she said.

“It's been how long? Half a year?” He poured.

“At least. I've been busy.”

“Let it breath a moment,” he said as he passed the first cup to her. “This isn't the swill you normally drink.”

Rowena ignored him and took a long swallow. She tried not to wince. It was strong wine, full-bodied and sharp.

“My mother’s own vintage,” he said. “We’re selling it to the Righardan clan as a table wine. They’ve already ordered two cases.”

“I should be flattered. Whatever you want must be big.”

He sighed, and looked around. The gesture seemed casual, but Rowena watched too closely to miss its purpose. He checked each street-mouth and window before he spoke.

“I want you to work for me again,” he said.

“When you say work, you don’t mean sweeping floors and counting coins.”

“No. Of course not.”

“Find someone else,” said Rowena. “I’m done.”

“I can’t,” said Finian. “There’s no one else.”

“Nobody else, in the whole city?”

“Nobody for the job. Nobody in your situation.”

Rowena sighed and lowered the cup, cradling it in both hands. Rather than meet Finian’s gaze, she peered into the dark drink.

“No. I’m sorry, Finian. If you want to be friends again, that’s fine. I’ll always be grateful for the help you’ve given me. But the rest of it—I’ve moved on. I’m done.”

“I thought you believed in what I was doing. What *we* were doing.”

“Not enough to risk a hanging. I have to think of my sister.”

“I’ll pay you well. Her future would be secure. You wouldn’t have to work for the clans anymore.”

“I make enough to support both of us *without* breaking laws. If that’s all you want, you’d better leave.”

“You had no problem breaking laws before I got you this job,” Finian said.

If anyone were listening, it would have seemed like an odd statement. Wine merchants, as a rule, did not get anybody a position in the guard. The guard was where monarchs sent their third or fourth cousins and the children who were born too late to inherit. It was not *unheard* of for a common born person like Rowena to enter the guard, but it *was* highly unusual.

“I know you’re scared,” he continued. “After what happened—but it’s different now, we’re careful now—we can’t give up. Please, Rowena. Just this one time. It’s important. You know it is, or I wouldn’t come to you.”

“Look,” said Rowena, “I owe you my gratitude, but I won’t break any more laws.”

“Why not? You know they’re wrong. The guards are just thugs.”

“How dare you. I protect the lesser born as much as I protect the clans.”

“Listen to yourself. *Lesser* born? I was wrong about you. You must love it there.” He stood up, draining the last of his wine.

“You know I don’t,” Rowena said angrily. She hadn’t moved from the bench. “That doesn’t mean I’ll turn assassin for you.”

“Land and skies! I came here asking you to save a life, not take one.”

“What do you want, Finian?” Rowena said.

“I need a prisoner released.”

Rowena's eyes widened. She laughed disbelievingly.

"Bribe the Justice."

"No, a bribe won't do. They won't release her." Picking up the bottle of wine, he squinted at the color through the light: a red so deep it gleamed black through the tinted glass.

"I thought money bought everything," said Rowena dryly. "What did she do? Kill a clan born?"

"No. She's not even twelve."

"What, then? A... a political prisoner? Someone's child?"

"Just a thief."

"I'm sorry. I can't do that, Finian."

"I'll give you four thousand. Gold."

Rowena's eyes widened considerably. She leaned back, thinking.

"Four...? Whole, not halves?" He nodded. "Finian, how did you come into money like that?"

"By my own business. Do you want it or not?"

"It's a lot. Why do you care so much? Does she work for you?"

"I don't hire children. You know that. She's my cousin."

"Oh. I need to think about this."

"You'd better think fast," said Finian. "Her execution is the day after tomorrow."

Rowena took a large mouthful of the wine.

"Anyways," Finian said, "You still owe me. It's getting late, and I have other visits I need to make. Promise you'll come by the shop tomorrow."

"I'm not sure if..."

"A child's life. Really, is there any nobler cause?" He took her empty cup. "Just come by the shop, please. You owe me that much. We'll talk it over."

He was gone, the half-empty bottle perched in his place. She took it by the neck and set towards home.

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Rowena ate breakfast in the dim guardhouse cafeteria. At the end of the long room, a hired reader droned verses from a patriotic ballad. Her own thoughts consumed her, blotting out the noise.

She wouldn't go. She wouldn't help Finian. The girl would die, but that was that. Death was inevitable; it claimed victims of every age. To stay alive, you had to look out for yourself.

That was no good. She still felt sick. The girl was barely older than her sister!

She would go to Finian's shop when her morning rounds finished, and they would come up with a plan. Finian was clever, and he had resources: four thousand whole gold coins was no laughing matter. He had never been so rich when they were friends. Something in his situation had changed. Surely there was a way to free the child without a jailbreak.

Today she was assigned to a neighborhood on the second tier for her rounds. She took one of the staircases down through brick and clay neighborhoods, past houses with elaborate

gardens and past tall apartments that rose three, four levels off the ground. Slowly the houses became smaller, the yards rarer, the apartments more common. The wide manicured side streets became twisting alleyways. The path spat Rowena out onto the broad main square of the second tier. She wandered through the market there, looking for trouble.

Vendors from colorful carts sold oatcakes, spitted pigeon, onion pastries, canned fruits, drinks of every sort, strange concoctions to better your luck or protect your business. None of these worked. Blankets spread across the ground held bracelets, necklaces, bolts of fabric, bags and belt-knives. Nobody was buying very much.

At the tenth bell, a young man saw her staring and broke into a sprint. Rowena only chased him for half a block before giving up, stopping dead in the middle of the empty side street as the heel of his boot disappeared around a corner.

At the end of the morning shift, Rowena returned to the guardhouse to report to her captain. She had a sudden idea: perhaps the child could be freed legally. She was so distracted that even when guardsperson Tyne knocked into her on purpose she was barely angry.

The meeting was brief. Captain Chilton gave them updates on the rest of the city. He was a brown, balding man just reaching his thirties.

“Tomorrow morning I want everybody in the training yard at eight. We could stand to sharpen up. Now tell me your stories and get to your lunches,” he said. The other fourteen in Rowena’s squadron swarmed forward, but Rowena hung to the back so she could speak with him last.

Rowena barely remembered her rounds and breezed over them with an uncharacteristic vagueness. Chilton nodded at what she said and didn’t seem to notice.

“Alright. That’s all.”

“Actually,” Rowena said, “there’s something else. You once told me about a project you were working on. I have a favor to ask of you.”

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More than two years had passed since Rowena set foot inside Finian's shop, and it had changed. The wooden chairs were cushioned now, and the tables painted bright apple-red. The walls held framed portraits of the Aiteach clan nobles. Finian was no relation to them, but his family's vineyards were in the Aiteach lands. It looked like he was trying to garner favor. That was a joke, almost. The Finian *she* knew was more likely to spit on a clan member than bow or smile at one.

The shop patrons looked well off, well dressed. It was a different crowd than his shop had once drawn. Now they were the type of people Rowena would have stolen from, when she worked for Finian. She turned her thoughts aside quickly, glancing at her captain beside her. Chilton knew nothing of her past, and she intended to keep things that way.

Finian stood beside one of the round tables. He spoke cheerfully with a customer. He turned when they entered, and his expression soured immediately. He made brief apologies and farewells to the customer before approaching them.

“Rowena, lovely as always. What are you doing here?” He smiled, but still managed to look mortified.

“You said to stop by,” Rowena said. “I told Captain Chilton about your cousin. He’s going to help.”

Finian smiled tightly and nodded.

“Thank you for that. Well, what do you want? Red, white, ale? Something stronger?”

“Just water,” said Chilton. “Do you have food?”

“Only bread.”

“I’ll have it.”

Finian nodded again and waved them to a table. He turned heel, vanishing into the back of the shop.

It was a little cruel. She knew how Finian felt about guards, on the whole. Involving her captain ruined any chance of Finian rescuing the girl unlawfully. He was doubtlessly angry. But she was certain Chilton had the best chance of helping the girl, whether Finian liked it or not.

A serving girl came to take their order just as Finian returned.

“I have business with them, Ide. See to the others.”

He set down a tray with two full glasses, two little plates, a jam-jar, and a loaf of sliced bread.

“I used to come here all the time after work,” Rowena was saying. “Dice, cards, drinks—it’s a very different shop at night. Or, it was.”

“Join us,” Chilton said to Finian.

“I don’t have long,” Finian said, sitting.

“Of course,” said Chilton. “I’m sorry about your cousin.”

“Oh, well,” said Finian. “Rowena has been very kind, but I feel wrong bothering a captain of the guard.”

“Nonsense. This is my job. Actually, if you’ll forgive my crudeness, this may be a perfect opportunity.”

“Opportunity?” echoed Finian.

“I’ve had an idea for a program for some time.” Chilton took a slice of the bread and began to eat it. “I think I can save the child’s life, and guarantee her a career in the same breath, if she’s suited to the work.” He frowned and pulled the jam-jar closer, slathering a thick pat of something orange onto the bread.

“What?” Finian asked.

“I may want to make her a guard.”

“You... what? Truly?”

“I’ll have to see the child first, of course; there are a number of variables. I never pictured taking on a criminal. Rowena says she was arrested for thieving, is that right?”

Finian nodded.

“What was she stealing?” Chilton asked.

“Forgive me,” Finian said, “but... why? Children can’t be warriors.”

Rowena shot Finian a look, asking him silently to cooperate. Chilton put the bread down and clasped his hands in front of him.

“I’m meeting with the General today, and I may ask her to hand the girl into my custody. I’ve been looking for a candidate for some time, and I’d be pleased if I could save a life in the same breath. I was surprised: parentless children are blessedly uncommon in our city. Those I’ve found are the wrong age, or unsuited. One does not go before the General unprepared, or with frivolous requests. So, please, answer my question: what was she stealing?”

“That’s a lot of pressure on a young child,” said Finian. “Perhaps you should look elsewhere.”

Chilton caught Finian’s gaze and held it. Neither looked away.

“This is her only chance at a pardon. Would you prefer she died?”

“No, you’re right. Please excuse me. I’m worried, is all. Of course I’ll help however I can. She was caught in the treasure room of the Dorchalt house.”

“Clan business,” said Chilton, shaking his head.

“Dorchalt? The Proper, or the city palace?” Rowena said, startled to interruption.

“The Proper, out in the country. Oh—you’re from there, aren’t you?” Finian asked.

“It’s where I grew up. What’s her name?”

“Yedda,” Finian said.

“I don’t know it. A newcomer, I suppose. You never told me you had family in Dorchalt.”

“I didn’t know until my uncle wrote me, asking for help. I have a big family.”

“Tell me, how did an eleven year old *get* into the treasure room of a clan palace?” Chilton said, pressing on with his questions. He picked off a piece of the bread, popping it into his mouth.

Finian sucked in his lips and shook his head.

“I haven’t got a clue,” he said.

“Her parents?”

“I asked. Her mother’s dead. Her father was sent to the Sands.”

“The Sands? For what?” Chilton lifted an eyebrow. It was a harsh punishment: exile to the wasteland. There was no telling how many survived.

“Debt, I think. I never knew him.”

“Anything I should know about her? Physical problems, or mental ones? A bad temper?”

Finian shook his head.

“I really don’t know much about the girl,” Finian said.

“Alright. I’m intrigued. I’ll judge for myself,” Chilton took one last bite from his bread and drained the water glass. Standing up, he extended a hand to Finian across the table.

“I’ll send a messenger tonight, to let you know what the General and I decide.”

“Thank you,” said Finian.

“Rowena. Training yards, tomorrow, 8th bell.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a nod, Chilton left the shop.

“What have you done,” Finian gasped softly.

“What?” said Rowena. “I found a way to save her, without risking *everything*...”

“No, no, no,” said Finian, and buried his head in his hands. Other customers were looking now.

“Come on,” Rowena said. “D'you want to go to the backroom?”

“I want you to leave,” said Finian from behind his hands. “Just go away, Rowena. Hungry stones! I never should have gone to you with this.”

“If that child lives tomorrow, it won't be because of you,” Rowena said, and fled out the shop's front door.



Chilton never liked dungeons. They were ill lit and poorly ventilated. The stale air tasted thick with grime, and it was impossible to breathe through one's nose comfortably.

He entered the jailhouse with an unpleasant pang. The building itself was small and tidy, full of record books and weapons-stands. The twisting stairwell to the dungeon yawned at the back of the lobby. Beside it sat a plain desk staffed by a guardsperson.

“I need to go below,” said Chilton, unclasping one of his captain's triangles. The woman at the desk accepted it wordlessly and inspected it to make sure it wasn't a forgery.

“Who'll you be speaking with?”

“Her name's Yedda. I've been told she's in third row.”

She consulted a broad book in front of her.

“She's not marked for a visit.”

“This is guard business.”

“Without an order? She's a clan prisoner, not a city one.”

“I want to see her.”

“Sorry. Her case is marked closed.”

With a sigh he removed a necklace from beneath his uniform's leather chest piece. A circular pendant dangled from the end. The base was orange marble, wrapped in a thick gold

ring. A fat arching fish made from tiny blue gems sat flush inside the marble. Thin gold lines marked its scales. Its eye was a diamond.

It was the symbol of the Gillemar clan. No distant cousin would wear such a gaudy marker.

“Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't realize... third row, the fifth door. You'll want a lantern,” she said, pointing him to the shelf. She stood up and poked her head down the stairwell. “Keril! Sending a visitor.”

“Got it,” a muffled voice responded.

Chilton lit the lantern from a candle on the desk and descended.

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Yedda didn't know how long she'd been in the cell. Time had no meaning in the dark. She spent hours studying the strip of orange light at the base of the door, or running her hands over the wet stone walls, or pacing to warm up in the cold room. Meals were the only marker of time, but given enough days they blurred into each other. By the time she thought to count, she wasn't sure how many of them she'd had.

Footsteps halted in front of her cell. There was a scraping noise of a key being tried and turned. The door swung open, and Yedda squinted in the light. The man in the doorway was tall and dark. He carried a lantern and wore the same uniform as everybody in the place.

He was not here to feed her or to collect her plate. It was time for her to die, then. Yedda's throat closed. She wanted to hide in the back corner of the small room, but her legs wouldn't work.

“Don't do that,” the man said. He sat beside her on the bed, which was hard and narrow enough to be a bench. “I haven't come to hurt you. My name is Chilton. What's yours?”

“Yedda,” she whispered.

He studied the eleven year old with a careful eye. She didn't look like much, gaunt and quietly crying as she was, but Chilton was not a fool. He had seen enough prisoners go in and out of the jail to know what it did to people. His questions were about her future, not her present.

“I can't make promises to you, Yedda,” Chilton said. “So I don't want you getting hopeful yet, alright? But if I were to tell you that you could leave this place, that you could train to be a guard instead of ending your life on a rope...”

“Yes,” Yedda said. “Please.”

“I'm going to ask you some questions. I want you to answer honestly, okay?”

She nodded. Her dark, narrow eyes were suddenly sharp and focused on him. She tucked her matted mess of hair behind her ears and sat up straighter.

For an hour Yedda answered questions. He wanted to know about everything from her past to her opinion on moral quandaries. He checked her teeth and her fingers, tested her vision and her reflexes, and had her punch his hand as hard as she could. Then he took her into the hall and had her sprint from one end to the other and back.

“Can I try again?” she immediately asked when she slammed into the wall at the end.

“Why?”

"I can do better," she said.

"Alright. Show me."

He thought long and hard as he watched her.

"Again," she said at the end.

"No, Yedda, that's alright. Let's go back into your cell."

She stood and didn't want to move.

"Please," she said. "I'll do *anything*. Don't let them kill me."

"Let's sit down and talk some more," Chilton said.

Once they were seated in the cold damp room, Chilton reached into his pocket. He took out a wooden box the size of his palm, clasped shut.

"Being a guard is hard work, Yedda," Chilton said. "You'll often be asked to do things you find difficult. Our job is not all glory. It's also violence and dirty work, cleaning up the dredges of the city. It's not something you can quit. If the guard saves you, you'll be a member of the guard for life, serving the Sovereign and the Sovereign's law. Can you do that?"

She nodded.

He opened the box. Inside was a small gray mouse, no longer than his thumb, who immediately scurried out. Chilton trapped the mouse in both of his hands, dropping the box in the process.

"I want you to prove it to me," said Chilton. "I want you to kill this mouse."

Yedda was not sentimental. She'd grown up in the country. A mouse in the storeroom could mean a difficult winter. She swallowed and nodded.

Chilton extended his hands.

"Careful. It might bite. Don't drop it."

She took the mouse quickly and felt its soft head butting panicked against her fingers, nosing towards freedom.

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"Yes, Chilton, that's all very well, but pray tell why you picked a girl on the *gallows* list?"

The General's office was a large room with tall windows, plush carpets, and brightly glowing lanterns on the walls. At that moment it felt incredibly cramped to Chilton. He sat across from a pale blond person with a gaze as glum as a glacial freeze. She belonged, Chilton thought, in the mountainous north, not a sunny cheerful city like this one. He shuddered. He didn't feel he'd ever get the dungeon's cold out of him.

"Well, ma'am," started Chilton, "First of all, Yedda won't be missed. Another child would. What sane mother would entrust her youth to a band of warriors, when we've never done this before?"

"Any mother whose child is hungry enough," said General Dawn.

"Still, we won't be under the same scrutiny. There's no loss if we fail. "

"No loss if she dies, you mean. If we turn out a bad guard, well, there's a loss right there."

"What qualities do you look for in a guard?" said Chilton.

“Captain Chilton...”

“Please, ma’am. Humor me for a moment.”

Dawn sighed and lowered her head, peering up at him with a little frown. She was young for the position, and at that moment trying to determine whether captain Chilton was going to make her look bad. She had been the Righardan clan heir until a family scandal removed her titles, putting her uncle’s family in charge of the clan instead of her mother’s. Dawn was pardoned of guilt and given the post of General by a softhearted second cousin high in the government. Most Generals in valley history had been better trained, but from slightly lower social status. Monarchs and their heirs did not have to work unless they wanted to.

Despite her inexperience, it was not merely fortune that Dawn was good at the job. The second cousin had a good sense of people’s abilities and liked to see them well matched. Dawn had learned fast.

At last, she answered Chilton’s question.

“Physical ability, courage. A sense of justice and honor. Loyalty. The ability to follow orders.”

“Physical ability and courage,” Chilton parroted back. “An eleven year old girl, who broke into the Dorchalt’s treasure room?”

“I don’t want criminals for guards,” Dawn said. “Nor do we need a feud with the Dorchalt clan.”

“No, of course not. But the girl doesn’t have to stay a criminal. To be sure, she’s poorly raised, but children are still impressionable at that age. I was a terror, myself. You can’t teach courage, but you can teach manners. She’s a lanky thing, already tall. She has all her fingers. She’s missing no primary teeth, only milk ones. Good eyesight and hearing. She speaks clearly, if not properly, and can do basic sums. And she wants to do it. I asked her.”

“Do you have a connection to this child, captain, that you are so taken with her?”

“No. But last time we spoke about this, you said...”

“I said not to come until you had found the perfect candidate. Because the Sovereign’s funds can only be used for a project like this *once*, if it is not successful. But I expected you would find a clan born child, not a lesser born lawbreaker. And a lowlander, at that! I thought we were doing this one step at a time.”

There was a moment of silence in the room, punctuated by General Dawn tapping a finger softly against the wooden arm of her chair.

“You really believe this girl is worth the time and money?” said Dawn. “You aren’t just... feeling sorry for her and trying to save her life? If she turns criminal again after we’ve trained her, you understand that would be catastrophic.”

Chilton thought for a moment before he answered.

“I believe she is a capable girl who would do us proud,” Chilton said carefully, and very slowly. “That said, if I also believe we are doing her a favor—it is to our advantage as well. I mean no disrespect or treason against our births, but you cannot deny many clan folk come into the guard entitled, unwilling to listen—they have no sense of duty. A child to whom we have given a second chance, a child who owes us her life? I do not think we could ask for a better student. A better guard.”

The silence came back.

“I don't know, Chilton.”

“Please, Dawn. It's as though something is telling me to do this. It *feels* right.”

At long last, General Dawn nodded.

“Have the papers for her pardon prepared,” Dawn said. “I'll sign them immediately. Don't disappoint me, Chilton.”

The captain stood, bowed, and went to leave.

“Oh, and Chilton,” Dawn said, when he reached the doorway, “if it doesn't work out, it's back to the gallows. I'll suspend her execution for a year, but if she doesn't impress me I'm pulling the funds, and I'm pulling the girl.”

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A particularly stubborn bit of dirt clung to the toe of her boot. Rowena squinted at it and scrubbed harder. A knock at the door interrupted.

She set the brush on the table and wiped her hands on a rag, then opened the door and greeted captain Chilton with a bow.

“No need for that,” he said.

“What did the General say? Are we taking the child?”

“Yes,” Chilton said. “She was a little doubtful, but she approved it. The General is going to speak with the Dorchalts, to smooth things over.”

“That's not a bad idea.”

“I thought you might want to tell your friend yourself.”

“Thank you. Was that all?”

“The General put me in charge of the child. That changes things.”

“You aren't wearing your triangles,” Rowena said, noticing suddenly that the silver captain's mark was gone from his guard's leather vest.

“No,” Chilton said. “I have no desire to be both tutor and captain at once.”

“But wouldn't it be good for the girl?” Rowena said. “To see what command looks like? Sir, you're a wonderful captain.”

“Maybe when she's older,” Chilton said, leaning against the door frame. “For now, I prefer to demote myself.”

“Who's taking your place?” Rowena asked.

“You aren't going to like it,” said Chilton. “I'm sorry. But Tyne was up for promotion.”

“What? That sniveling—”

“Guardsperson,” Chilton interrupted with a raised eyebrow. “He's your captain now. I know the two of you have had problems, but you'd do well to put that aside.”

“Problems' doesn't halfway cover it,” Rowena said.

“He's the last one I'd recommend. But I didn't get to choose my successor. Commander Dalton and the General did. *Against* my advice, I might add.”

“This is going to be miserable.”

“If you want a transfer, I’ll put in a word for you. I know a few of the captains have room for another.”

“Thank you. I’ll think about it. My friends are here, though. When will you be a captain again?”

“I don’t know. If you play your cards right, maybe you’ll be promoted before then.”

“Oh,” said Rowena, taken aback. “Thank you.”

“Go tell your friend his cousin’s life was saved,” said Chilton.

“Captain?” Rowena asked as Chilton straightened from the doorway. “Does this mean I can sleep in tomorrow?”

“I’m not your captain anymore,” said Chilton. “I can’t order you to the practice yards. However...” he paused and leveled a finger at her. “I will be there at the eighth bell with a sword in my hand. I can only *suggest* you do the same.”

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The sun was setting as Rowena arrived at Finian's, this time in civilian clothes. She didn't want to cause a scene, and her business was as much personal as professional.

The shop was not bustling. One man browsed the labeled bottles on shelves. At one of the tables, three raucous women in colorful dresses enjoyed drinks. Finian stood alone behind the counter with his accounts papers. He looked up when Rowena entered.

“What news?” he asked when she reached the counter.

“The General approved it. The girl won’t be executed.”

“What will happen to her?”

“My captain—former captain—will take care of her,” said Rowena. “I don’t know the details.”

“You had no right to go to him,” said Finian. One of his hands tightened into a fist.

“And you had no right, asking me to break the law,” said Rowena. “I don’t understand, Finian. What’s the problem here?”

“We need to talk,” said Finian. He turned and leaned into the backroom through the open door.

“Ulla?”

“What?” a low voice asked. There was a thudding noise, as if a heavy weight was set down.

“I need you to watch the shop.”

“I have to be off,” Ulla said.

“For a minute. Please.”

A tall square-jawed woman emerged from the back. She was full lipped, strong nosed, dark-eyed, and ocher skinned.

“Thank you,” said Finian, and ushered Rowena into the back.

The backroom was dark. The only light came through the shop doorway on one end and the back-alley’s door window on the other. Rowena remembered the rules: Finian wouldn't allow a flame in the alcohol-laden room unless it was otherwise impossible to see. Barrels and crates of

wines and ales lined one wall, harder liquors among them as well. A washing station and shelves with cups stood opposite. A disheveled stack of boxes, either smuggled goods or wine, sat by the alley door. A ladder led to a cutaway in the ceiling, and Finian's living chambers above. In the center of the room was a round table with mismatched chairs and a scattered assortment: a hat, a half-filled water glass, a set of keys, a sheathed knife.

"Listen, Rowena. The worst place that child could be is in the hands of the guard," Finian said. "You have to get her out of there." He walked past Rowena and began to pace in the small space of the room.

"I know you hate the clans," said Rowena, "but the guard will keep recruiting whether you like it or not. This way she's alive. She'll have a better education than either of us did. And they'll feed her well."

"You aren't listening to me," said Finian. "This isn't about... Rowena, half of what I said was a lie. That girl isn't even my cousin. I've never met her."

"You—what? Then why did you say that?"

"To make you sympathetic! Because I needed your help. You wouldn't have taken a risk for a complete stranger. And then because you *told a captain of the guard* and brought him into my shop. I wasn't about to come clean then!"

"I don't understand," said Rowena. "Whose child...?"

"I don't know," said Finian. "But you have to make your captain choose someone else."

"No, impossible. The papers have been signed. Anyways, why should it matter? She's *someone's* cousin, probably. We still saved her life."

"I don't care about that," said Finian.

"Then why did you want her freed?"

"Never mind. I just need to know—is there anything you can do? Any way to remove the girl?"

"No. Like I said, it's already done. Finian, you aren't making sense."

Finian abruptly stopped pacing and placed his hands on the table, as if he needed the support.

"Rowena. Oh, Rowena! You haven't the slightest clue what you've done."

"I would if you'd tell me."

"They didn't catch that girl *in* the treasure room, they caught her *leaving* it."

"So what?"

"She broke a Binding," Finian said. "She shattered it and let the spirit out."

"But she's not Bound," Rowena said. "The spirit couldn't have..."

"Entered her?" Finian turned to look at her. "They waited a month to issue the execution. Kept her under watch. I don't know why they didn't just kill her... but, no, they found nothing."

"Then why does it matter? The girl isn't Bound. She's human."

"I don't think she is," said Finian softly. "I think there's a spirit in her, and she tricked them. Maybe it hasn't hatched yet. One of the Dorchalt servants found me and told me about her. He was convincing."

"No. It's impossible."

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