

THE  
DEEDS  
HANDS

THE  
HARVEST  
BRIDE

KATI  
WILDE

# THE HARVEST BRIDE

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KATI WILDE

A  
DEAD  
LANDS  
FANTASY  
ROMANCE

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THE HARVEST BRIDE

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# THE HARVEST BRIDE

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## A FANTASY ROMANCE NOVELLA

After losing everything to a curse that struck the kingdom of Galoth, Sarya just wants the world to leave her alone. Yet when a demon begins hunting the people in the forest near her village, staying hidden isn't an option. Neither is avoiding the warrior who helped saved all of Galoth. Bannin the Blowhard has never said a serious word in his life...and yet the warrior claims that he intends to marry Sarya.

Now she's about to discover how serious Bannin can be when her happiness is at stake—and how completely devoted to her pleasure...

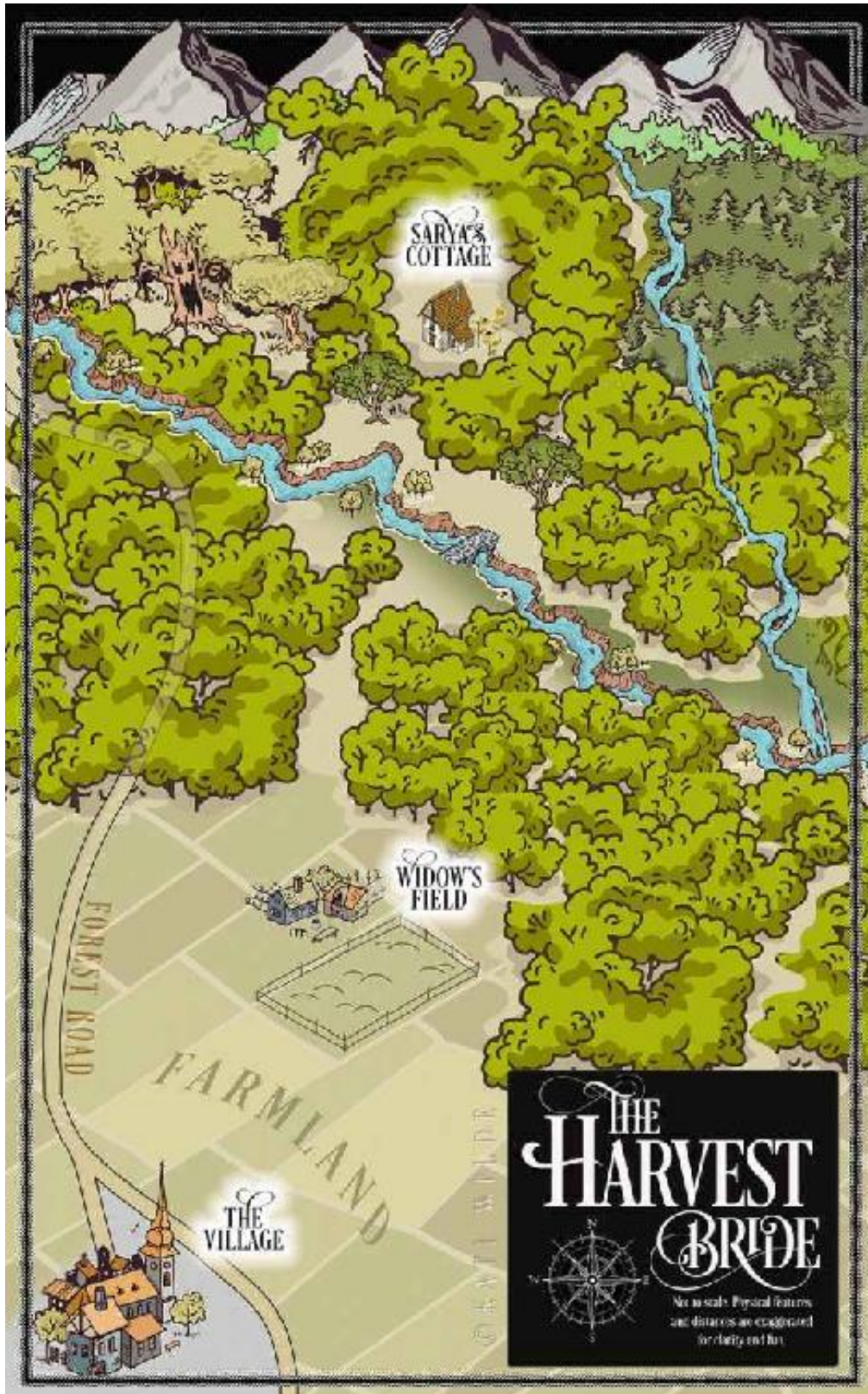
**Please note: Although this novella's plot and romance can stand alone, the story follows the events of [\*The Midsummer Bride\*](#) and the hero was introduced in that novel.**

**This novella was originally written for an audiobook podcast audience in a much shorter format. This ebook edition includes expanded chapters, scenes from the hero's point-of-view, a map, and an epilogue.**

## CONTENT WARNINGS

Fantasy violence, explicit love scenes, indifferent parenting/emotional abandonment, implied alcoholism and depression, mentions of previous self-harm done in hopes of stopping a curse from progressing throughout the body.





# CHAPTER 1

## SARYA THE WARY

**T**he forest was suddenly far too quiet.

Sarya looked up from the cluster of mushrooms she'd been harvesting, clutching a sturdy knife in her right hand and holding a partially filled basket in her left. She wasn't frightened. Wary, yes, because only a fool wouldn't be a little wary while alone in the woods, and Sarya was no fool. But it was curiosity, not fear, that held her still, her head cocked as she listened.

Nothing.

That was...odd. Though many migratory birds had already abandoned Galoth for warmer climes, plenty remained through the winter. Yet none flitted through the trees or sang from the branches overhead. Even the constant humming of the insects had gone silent.

Yet there was *something*. At first, only a dull, rhythmic thud. But growing louder now. Closer. Footsteps? If so, whoever it was had a long, ponderous stride. And there was more—a continuous sliding and crackling. As if something was being dragged over the ground, disturbing the fallen leaves.

Sarya could imagine several reasons to drag something through the forest. She'd done it many times herself...though she'd never made the woods fall silent when she did.

Who would? Or perhaps the question ought to be—

*What* would?

The hairs prickled on the back of her neck. Though still not frightened, wariness overtook curiosity. The trunk of the enormous oak she'd been collecting mushrooms from stood between her and the forest path. She couldn't see what was coming, but neither could it see her.

Though she couldn't have said why, Sarya was certain she didn't *want* it to see her. Perhaps it was merely the harmless old hermit, Fas Lergin, dragging home a deer after a hunt. Or that blasted Bannin the Blowhard, who was rumored to have returned from whatever new adventure had lured him away from Galoth. But her instincts were screaming that it wasn't either of those men.

Sarya trusted her instincts. Her gut never led her astray.

Only her heart had ever done that.

Today, at least, that unruly organ was in agreement with her gut. Her heartbeat thumped faster as the footsteps neared. With her back pressed to the oak's trunk and the knife gripped in her fist, Sarya listened to it pass, not even daring to breathe.

A steady creaking accompanied the steps. The kind of creaking she sometimes heard on windy nights, as the forest bent and swayed around her cottage. Or when she stepped on the loose stair leading up to her bedchamber. She supposed a wooden cart might make a similar sound, yet in the twenty-five years she'd been alive, Sarya had heard plenty of wooden carts, and not one of them had ever made goosebumps crawl over her skin.

By Anhera's blessed jewels, *what was it?*

Her curiosity returned, razor sharp. She *needed* to know.

Yet she was still wary. Mindful of the orange and yellow leaves carpeting the forest floor—the woods were so quiet that even a slight crunch beneath her foot would seem like a shout—Sarya eased her way around the trunk, keeping the oak's solid mass between her and...whatever it was. If it looked back, she'd still be hidden from sight.

Hidden, except in the brief moment when she peeked around the tree. Her gaze quickly swept down the trail it left

behind.

The bloodied trail. And the human hand, dragging along the ground, attached to a body that was wrapped up in... No, not just wrapped up. Impaled. Pierced.

By some...horrible...*thing*.

Lungs squeezing tight, Sarya jerked her head back, concealing herself again. Hands shaking. Breath trembling.

Now she was afraid.

But what had she seen? She didn't know. Except that it hadn't been human, though it walked upright like one.

Sarya knew who that hand belonged to, though. Fas Lergin, the old hermit. Who'd never hurt *anyone*.

Anger began to burn through her fear. There was no saving the old man. Yet the *thing* that had killed him...likely couldn't be stopped by this small blade. She glanced down at her knife. Oh, why hadn't she brought her sword? Or an axe? Anything more substantial than this little prick of a weapon.

Blast. Blast blast *blast!*

From directly behind her, the least welcome voice in all of Galoth whispered, "What are we hiding from?"

Lurching around, Sarya slapped her hand over Bannin the Blowhard's mouth. Thick eyebrows as red as his hair shot upward and he stared at Sarya over her fingers.

Then his green eyes crinkled at the corners and the tip of his tongue tickled her palm.

Despite the racing of her pulse and the danger nearby—or perhaps because of them—Sarya felt that teasing lick over every inch of her skin. Her breath caught in her throat, and her wide eyes locked with his for a few endless beats of her heart.

Then she remembered. Fas Lergin...and that *thing*.

With a warning look, Sarya removed her hand—then swiftly raised her index finger in front of Bannin's stupidly handsome face. No man who'd had a mother and who was still

in possession of any bollocks he'd been born with had ever mistaken that signal to stay quiet.

Bannin apparently still had his bollocks, because his firm lips sealed shut. The gods knew, the silence wouldn't last long. She didn't think of him as the Blowhard without reason.

Quickly she gave him a once-over. Tall, thick, dense. Bannin was a giant oak of a man, but would his strength be enough against the thing she'd seen? Her gaze halted on his woodcutter's axe.

*That* might be enough.

Putting her raised finger to her lips, she set down her basket and gestured for him to follow her.

He opened his mouth—likely to say something about following Sarya to her bed, because in the three years since she'd met Bannin, he seemed to blurt each thought straight from his cock. Then his gaze fell on the drag marks and trail of blood left behind by Fas Lergin's body. Every bit of humor dropped away from his expression.

Sarya's heart stuttered. Suddenly disoriented, she stared at his face, not recognizing the man in front of her.

But she *knew* this unfamiliar man, didn't she? She'd heard stories about him...most of them told to her by the Blowhard himself. Bannin had traveled the world searching for the Stars of Anhera, hoping to break the curse that transformed many of Galoth's citizens into statues; he was the now-legendary hero who'd slaughtered monsters and tyrants in his travels with Warrick the Cursebreaker.

In truth, Sarya had assumed that Warrick had done all the work while Bannin told all the jokes. Now, as his gaze hardened and a deadly intensity came over his features, she wasn't so certain.

She could think on it later, however. After they'd stopped that *thing*.

Dragging the body had created a clear path through the trees. Moving as swiftly as caution allowed, Sarya followed with Bannin on her heels—his steps as quiet as hers, despite

his great size. Perhaps she ought not to have been surprised. At the oak, he'd come upon her without making a sound.

Ahead, the bloodied trail approached a small clearing. Sarya slowed—then stopped.

The track had abruptly ended. From one step to the next, the trail disappeared. Yet no body remained. And the thing was gone, too.

Sarya's breath hissed through her teeth. She turned a slow circle, searching. Nothing. Perhaps the thing had picked up the body and carried it. That would explain why the drag marks ended. Yet she'd heard its heavy, ponderous footsteps. Those would leave some track in the dirt. Even Sarya's boots left an impression, though she was of slighter weight.

She looked to Bannin, who was eyeing the canopy of branches and leaves. Did he wonder whether the thing had hauled the body up there so there'd be no tracks to follow?

Uneasy, she studied the trees overhead. Again, nothing.

Voice low, Bannin asked, "What did you see?"

With anyone else, she might have hesitated before answering. But with anyone else, Sarya could imagine exactly how the conversation would go. She'd say that she saw Fas Lergin being dragged through the woods. They'd ask if she was certain it wasn't a hunter with a deer. She'd point out the drag marks weren't deer-sized. They'd suggest that she'd seen a hunter with a boar, instead. She'd say it wasn't a human hunter, but a monster of some kind. They'd ask how much ale she'd drunk the previous night. She'd tell them she hadn't drunk any ale (it had been cider) and not that much (only a mug with her supper)—because the past three years had been difficult and she hadn't handled her losses well, but she was doing better now.

And she truly was. This last year had been much easier. Not fully good, but easier.

Then they'd say that *everyone* in Galoth had had a difficult time because of the stone sickness, and *they* hadn't run off to hide in the forest and pickle their brains with ale until they

were seeing monsters dragging dead people through the woods.

But Bannin the Blowhard had told Sarya plenty of unbelievable stories. It was her turn to tell him one.

“It looked like a tree trunk. Except it walked. It had arms and legs and...vines. Not green vines, but wooden ropes with sharpened ends. It used those to drag the body—and the vines also stabbed through his chest. And it was tall. Twice as tall as you.”

Nodding thoughtfully, as if he wasn't a bit surprised by what she'd described, Bannin said, “Sounds like a demon for certain. It was dragging the old hermit?”

“Fas Lergin, yes.” She hadn't yet told him who'd been killed. “How did you know?”

“That trail we followed. Bits of that ragged blue cloak of his snagged on a few roots.”

She hadn't noticed that. Only how much blood there'd been. “Why do you think it killed him?”

Sarya had an idea but would rather hear a different one. Bannin instead spoke aloud the thought she didn't want to say.

“Likely for the same reason we drag home prey from the forest: to eat it.” At her sigh, he gave her a sideways look. “Let's hope it isn't also feeding a family.”

She shuddered at the thought. One of those things was more than enough.

His head tilted back and he scanned the canopy. Searching again, now that he had a description of what to look for.

Sarya looked, too. And she realized—“The birds are singing again.”

“They weren't before?”

“Everything went quiet before the thing showed up. Even the bugs.” How was it that he'd identified Fas Lergin from a few bits of cloth but had missed that? “You didn't notice?”



“How could I?” He gave Sarya a look that sent hot little tremors through her belly. “The moment I caught sight of your backside in those red trousers you’re wearing, I could hardly pay attention to anything else.”

Thinking with his cock. Even now, with a monster loose in the forest, he was more concerned with loosing the creature in his breeches. Little wonder she couldn’t take him seriously. Maybe if she could, maybe if he wasn’t always flitting off somewhere, she would give in to the warmth that slipped through her flesh when the big man gave her a heated look like that—or when he made her laugh.

But, no. She wouldn’t give in. Sarya was done with love and every messy emotion that came with it. Including lust.

*Especially* lust.

So she rolled her eyes and didn’t bother with a reply. Instead she started back down the path. No reason to stay in the clearing. The demon had escaped them—and there was no helping Fas Lergin. So the only way forward was to stay alert and slay it when the opportunity came.

Sarya was in the forest often enough, no doubt that opportunity *would* come.

And if she felt a tiny thrill at the idea of putting her sword to use again...? Well, a woman had to find joy somewhere. She’d given up on love and cut back on ale, so slaying a demon was as fine a way as any to get her thrills in.

Bannin caught up to her and shortened his massive stride to match hers. “You’re thinking of how my tongue felt?”

“What?” Sarya skidded to a halt.

He tilted his head and gave a significant look to her hand, which she’d been absently rubbing against her thigh. Because she *could* still feel his tongue against her palm.

“I was wiping off any traces of you.”

“That’s not wiping,” he said, his expression insufferably smug. “That’s an itch you’re trying to scratch. An itch I gave to you.”

“Like a rash?” she asked sweetly.

“If so, then I’m a rash that won’t ever fade away.” Green eyes glittering, Bannin stepped closer, making her abruptly aware of the massive size of him. Not that Sarya ever forgot. She just didn’t let herself think of it much, but when he stood before her, so tall and broad, with his tunic stretched across his barrel of a chest and his leather breeches molded to the thick muscles of his thighs, she couldn’t *not* think of it. “You’ve got an itch that needs scratching, Sarya, and I’ll do it for you. I’ll scratch it hard or slow. With my tongue or any other part of me that you’d like.”

“The only part of you that I ever liked was your beard. But that’s been gone for a year, so...” She trailed off with a shrug, as if to say there was nothing he could do about it now, and as if her mind wasn’t echoing with “*hard or slow*” and imagining how hard or slow he might go.

“Oick!” With a mock scowl, Bannin rubbed his hand over his clean-shaven jaw. “I’ll grow the beard back—”

“Too late,” Sarya tossed over her shoulder as she began striding down the trail again, then nearly stumbled when he continued.

“—and give you a whisker burn between your pretty thighs.”

Now she was imagining *that*, which was treacherous territory for her mind to go wandering around in. Such danger called for caution over curiosity, so instead of responding again, Sarya simply kept on walking.

Bannin fell in beside her, his axe propped casually against his shoulder and his keen eyes scanning the trees around them. Only a few seconds passed before he asked, “Where are you headed?”

“Home.”

“It’s that way.”

Did he think she’d lost her wits? She hadn’t been *that* affected by his tongue. “My harvesting basket is this way.”

He nodded. “And then I’ll walk you home.”

Though wary of what else he might say along the way—what else he might try to tempt her with—Sarya wouldn’t argue. A tree demon was stalking the forest, and her only weapon was a knife. “You’ll warn Helana?”

His sister could then spread that warning to everyone else in the nearby village.

“I will this night. You ought to come along. Helana said to invite you to supper when I saw you today.”

“How did she know you’d see me?”

“Because I mentioned that I was walking to your cottage.”

Sarya threw him a perplexed glance. In three years, nobody had visited her cottage. “Why?”

“So I could court you. Then marry you.”

“All in one visit?” Couldn’t the man be serious for one moment?

“After finding out what the tip of my tongue can do, I didn’t figure you’d want to waste time until our wedding night.”

She grinned despite herself. Then his words hit her again, differently. Painfully.

Bannin abruptly halted. “What’s that look?”

Any possible response to his gruff demand seemed to lodge like a lump in her throat. “Nothing,” she managed and attempted to continue on.

“Not nothing.” Expression dark, Bannin snagged her wrist, pulled her to a stop. Sarya turned on him furiously, though most of her anger deflated when he added, “Something I said hurt you and I don’t know why. But I sure as stone know I don’t want to hurt you again. So what was it?”

He had no right to ask. And Sarya didn’t let herself wonder why it was so easy to tell him. As if she *wanted* to tell him, instead of just wanting him to go away.

She tugged her wrist free as she said, “I was thinking that I’d already learned my lesson about not waiting for a wedding.” When he furrowed his brow, clearly not understanding, she sighed. “I was almost married before. Then the cursed stone sickness struck.”

It had struck *her*.

To Sarya, it had been only a blink of time between the terrifying moment she’d fully turned to stone and the bewildering moment she’d opened her eyes again, flesh restored and the curse broken. For everyone else, a decade had passed.

Understanding softened his gaze, yet his focus on her only intensified. “It got you, or it got him? Or both?”

“Me.”

“How long?”

“Ten years.” She’d been one of the first in Galoth to succumb to the curse.

“He must have died while you were locked in stone?” Bannin guessed in a voice more gentle than she’d ever heard from him before. “That’s what put the hurt on your face?”

“He didn’t die.” Her cheeks heated. “He married another.”

Bannin blinked slowly, then blinked again, as if she’d just told him a story more unbelievable than any tale he’d ever laid on her. “He what?”

Face burning, Sarya turned away. “He married another. The very next summer,” she added bitterly.

A deep chuckle had her swinging back around. To her astonishment, Bannin was wearing a wide grin.

“So you had a lucky escape.”

“Lucky?” she echoed in disbelief. Her heart had been ripped open. Her entire *life* had been torn apart.

“You deserve better than a man who’d give up hope so quickly.” His amusement hardened into contempt. “Or a husband whose heart is so weak and unsteady.”

That wasn't fair. "You don't know him. He's a good man."

Sarya would never have wanted to marry Crase if he hadn't been.

Bannin shrugged carelessly. "Not good enough for you."

"And you are?" she flung back. Not that she took his intention to marry her any more seriously than he took her heartbreak.

"Probably not. But with me, there'd have been no lesson to learn." His voice roughened. "If I'd known you then, if you'd been my woman, it wouldn't have mattered whether you were a stone statue for ten years or fifty—I'd have waited for you. I blasted well wouldn't have married someone else."

Once upon a time, she'd dreamed of hearing those words. After the curse had broken, she'd been caught in a nightmare. Over and over, she'd imagined that the man she'd promised her life to had loved her enough to wait. She'd have been overjoyed hearing such a speech. Now, she just wanted to cry.

She lashed out instead. "You expect me to believe that of someone who's always gone?"

"I come back for you, Sarya."

Sarya scoffed despite the foolish lurch her heart. "Not for your own family?"

"To see them too, sure," he admitted. "But I'm back so often for you."

"And how long until you're gone again?"

The muscles in his jaw clenched before he answered. "After the harvest."

A sudden tightness in her chest constricted her breath. Bannin was only here for a fortnight, then. Though really, had she expected anything different? No matter how pretty his words, Sarya knew what Bannin was. He *never* stayed.

Not that she wanted him to. She didn't. If there was one thing these past years had taught her, it was that Sarya needed someone she could rely on.

They'd also taught her that she could only rely on herself.

"Come with me," he said, his voice low. "I'll see to your happiness, Sarya. I swear it."

Sarya shook her head and continued down the forest path. "I'm happy here."

So *very* happy...and also very much a liar.

---

SARYA HAD to give credit where it was deserved. Despite her rejection, Bannin didn't storm off and leave her to walk home alone.

*So perhaps she could rely on him,* whispered an impertinent little voice in her head.

She ignored that voice—along with the one pointing out that Bannin wasn't a blowhard now. Instead he was as silent and as watchful as she. By unspoken agreement, he kept an eye on the forest behind them while Sarya searched through the trees ahead, looking for anything that might be the demon she'd seen.

Of course, now she was discovering that the blowhard was better for her peace of mind. Because when Bannin wasn't distracting her with the things coming out of his mouth, she spent more time wondering what else he might *do* with that mouth...and how it might be worth a whisker burn.

Probably best that she didn't tell him where her thoughts kept straying.

Her pace increased as they approached the glade where her cottage stood. A slice of her grazing meadow was visible through the trees...but she didn't yet see her gray stallion, Foggy. Her heart pounded, and only the tightest grip on her emotions prevented Sarya from breaking into an incautious run. The glade was *surrounded* by the forest. When she'd left that morning, all was well. But if the demon was looking for meat, the handful of animals on her farm would be easy prey.

Despite the urge to rush, she stopped warily at the edge of the treeline. A relieved breath escaped her. There was Foggy, grazing at the far end of the meadow with sunlight gleaming over his dapple gray coat. All must still be well, then. If that monster had come here, the stallion would have still been agitated—or gone.

And the birds were singing. So she could thank Bannin, and he could be on his way.

She was about to do just that when Foggy nickered a welcome, trotting toward them.

“There’s the old boy.” There was no mistaking the admiration in Bannin’s voice as he watched Foggy come, though the words themselves struck a sharp pang within Sarya’s heart.

The stallion *was* getting old. Oh, he was still strong and had several good years left, but Sarya had already missed out on ten of his years. It would devastate her if his remaining ones were cut short by a demon.

Bannin gave her a hopeful glance. “Still not looking to sell him?”

“Never.”

Foggy was the one reliable thing that remained of her previous life. Sarya would never give him up. She fed the horse one of the apples nestled beneath the mushrooms in her basket, then patted his thick neck before continuing across the meadow.

To her consternation, Bannin came with her. Why would he not leave now? He *always* left. That was what Bannin *did*. And it was far better when he left, because then Sarya could oust him from her head.

Or try to. It was much easier to put him from her thoughts when he wasn’t striding beside her, the sun glinting off hair the color of autumn leaves, his body so massive, and his thighs so thick and strong.

With great effort, Sarya averted her eyes.

“I see you’ve laid in plenty of firewood.” Bannin’s gaze settled on the wood stacked up against the side of her cottage.

“I told you that I would.”

“So you did.” Each spring when he visited his sister, Bannin always cut firewood for Helana to dry over the summer and burn through the winter. The last two years Bannin had offered to do the same for Sarya. Each time, she’d declined. “Not a whole lot of hay, though.”

“Not yet.” Though she owed him no further explanation, when he arched a brow at her, Sarya found herself saying, “I have an arrangement with Widow Elphin. If I harvest her field through the summer, the third cutting is mine.”

“Widow Elphin? That’s a large field.”

“It is.”

“When the time comes, I’ll help you.”

“I don’t need the help.”

“I didn’t figure that you would.” Brimming with heat, his hooded gaze slipped down over her form. “There’s plenty of strength in you. I only offer because helping you would be a full pleasure for me.”

Every bit of Sarya’s skin tightened in response to that look, bringing with it an acute awareness of all that he could see: the bare length of her arms in the thin sleeveless tunic, the cling of her trousers to her ass and thighs, the slight bounce of her breasts and their hardened tips. Each step seemed to put her on display for him...and Sarya could not stop the arousal that stirred within her in response.

What a fool she was.

“Do as you like, then,” she said briskly, increasing her pace. “I thank you and your axe for the escort. Tell Helana that I am grateful for the invitation to supper but I will have to accept another time.”

“But you won’t, will you?” He huffed out a short laugh, his expression unreadable—not because he wasn’t feeling anything, Sarya sensed. But rather hiding something he felt too



much, if the stiffness of his shoulders was any indication. “Helana tells me that you’re more than happy to sit down with her for a drink or three at the tavern. Or you’ll stop and talk at her smithy. But you never go to her home.”

Not true. “I’ve been there.”

“Once. And you were quiet and stiff the entire time, she told me. At least now I’ll be able to tell her why—and I’m just glad it’s not because you’re avoiding me.”

“Perhaps I am.”

“Even when I’m gone?” Bannin shook his head. “It’s her husband.”

“Aven?” Sarya’s chest tightened. “I like him well enough.”

“But he reminds you of what you came here to hide from, doesn’t he? Because Helana waited. Five years, her husband was a stone statue in her bed—yet she waited, taking care of their boy, and trusting that Warrick and I would find a way to break the curse.” Green eyes locked on hers, Bannin stepped closer. “I didn’t understand it before. I figured you came here, grieving. After the stone sickness, so many people were. So I gave you time. But you telling me about the coward who didn’t wait makes sense of why you avoid her home. Because what you’re really hiding from is a reminder of what you don’t have.”

Throat aching, she denied hoarsely, “I’m not hiding from anything.”

“No?”

“No.” Anger began piling up inside her. How dare he peel her heart apart in this way? How dare he look at her with that new face—the face of the hunter, the face of the warrior—as if the decisions she’d made and her heartbreak were some evil he had to slay. “It’s time for you to go.”

Bannin didn’t even flinch at her cold, steely tone. His eyes narrowed. “You think that I’ll leave you alone while a demon’s hunting in this forest?”

“I don’t think you have a choice. If you remain here, who will warn your sister? Who will warn her boy and his friends not to play in the woods like they often do?”

Bannin’s mouth clamped shut. A muscle worked in his jaw while he stared at her. “You have weapons?”

“I do.”

His brow rose. Sudden amusement lit the green of his eyes. “And you’re going to make me walk to the village alone with only my axe for protection? It’s safer for us both to go.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.” She opened her door, then paused in the threshold. “If you meet the demon, just tell him about one of your adventures and bore him to death.”

“Oick. A direct blow.” He flattened his hand over his chest as if she’d wounded him. “This courtship is proceeding just as I’d hoped. There’s nothing more appealing than a strong woman who can put a man in his place.”

Then that’s exactly what she would do. With a smile, Sarya slammed the door in his face.

## CHAPTER 2

## BANNIN THE SECOND

**B**annin's sister was out in front of her smithy when he reached the village. Helana was bent over a mare's hoof, its right foreleg tucked between her thighs, her long auburn braid hanging down over her shoulder.

She glanced up, saw him, and called out, "How goes the courting?"

Without a word, Bannin went to the jug she kept tucked behind her bench and took a swig of the fiery liquor straight from the spout.

"That well?" She snickered while tapping the last nail through the horseshoe, then straightened. "So we aren't to expect her for supper?"

"Not this night." He wiped the drips from his mouth and chin, recalling the feel of Sarya's warm palm when she'd covered his lips. She'd had no easy life, for certain. Her hand has as many calluses as Bannin's did. "Fas Lergin is dead."

Her brow furrowed before she sighed. "I suppose he was getting on in years. Did you find him out there in the woods?"

"A demon did."

She blinked. "A demon?"

Bannin nodded. "In the forest. Sarya said it looked like a tree with wooden vines that stabbed through him."

"And she wasn't tugging your prick? Or drunk?"

Though he'd give just about anything for Sarya to tug his prick, Bannin knew that wasn't what Helana meant. He gave her a warning look that had once cowed a tyrant king.

His sister was made of sterner stuff. "It has to be asked—and I won't be the only one in the village who does. Although," she said, putting away her shoeing tools, "I suppose that I haven't seen her drunk in a while. Not that it was ever easy to tell when she was."

"If it has to be asked, I'll answer. I saw the trail the demon made dragging his body. Then I followed the trail back to where it started."

She studied his face. "Bad?"

Bad enough that Bannin was surprised there'd been blood left in the body to leave a trail. He nodded and took another swig, relishing the burn down his gullet.

Alarm darkened the green of her eyes. "Ouin and the other children in the village play out there some days."

Bannin set down the jug. "So we'd best get the word spread."

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SPREADING the word was done quickly enough. Every village had its busybodies and gossips, so Bannin and Helana went straight to them. By nightfall, almost everyone would know—and signs would be posted to anyone traveling north through the forest road.

It was nearing sunset when they turned toward Helana and Aven's small farm on the southern end of the village. "I need you to stay for supper and tell Ouin he can't go into the woods," she said.

Though Bannin always enjoyed seeing the boy, his plan had been to see Helana home, eat a quick meal in the village tavern, then head back to Sarya's cottage. "All right. But why?"

“I don’t want him getting the idea that he should go hunting the demon himself.” She bumped her shoulder into his as they walked along the road. “It’s all those stories you told him. He wants to a legendary hero like you.”

A legendary hero? Bannin grinned.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t let it give you a swollen head.”

That was one thing Bannin never had to worry about. Not around Helana. “You’d puncture any swelling before it got too big.”

She laughed. “True. Though I wouldn’t need to this time. I’d simply let you read the latest from Mother.”

Oick. “I don’t want to know.”

Helana told him anyway. “As thanks for helping to break the stone curse, a grateful merchant in the city sent to the First a purse full of gold...and the use of his favorite courtesan.”

Bannin scowled. The First was their older brother, also named Bannin. Their parents hadn’t cared to give the second son a different name, so that if the elder died, the younger could slip into his place at the long-held family smithy. Beyond that, they hadn’t cared for their second son at all—or their daughter. Helana would have been married off, but she’d chosen to set up her own smithy as far from their family as she could without leaving Galoth. Bannin had also forged his own path, though his had taken him a bit farther.

“Did the First send the gifts back?” It wouldn’t be the first time someone in Galoth had wanted to thank Bannin for his role in breaking the curse. Even in the village, it was a rare day he wasn’t offered an ale or a meal. And though Bannin wasn’t the sort to throw someone’s gratitude back into their face, he sure as stone didn’t want the First to receive anything in his place.

Yet it wasn’t the first time that mistake had been made. Bannin might be a legendary hero in Galoth, but the description of a big, red-haired man named Bannin also fit his brother.

His sister scoffed. “When has the First ever cared whether he got what was deserved? Or earned?”

Never. Bannin shook his head, then forced himself to stop brooding over a situation that wasn’t likely to change. Even if it did, he wasn’t likely to ever return home. As far as Bannin was concerned, Helana and Ouin were his only family by blood.

Though that put him in mind of other families, and what they ought not learn through gossip. “Does Fas Lergin have any kin?”

“I’d have gone there first if he did.” Helana’s tone said he ought to have known she wouldn’t do any different.

He probably should have. “What of Sarya?”

“Sarya?” Helana abruptly stopped. “Did she get hurt so bad you’ll need to notify her kin? Or are you thinking that with the demon around, she might be?”

“You truly think that I’m not heading back out there to make sure she’s safe?” This time Bannin’s tone said his sister ought to have known better.

Helana only looked slightly mollified. “Should we tell her to come stay in the village?”

“I pity anyone who tries to tell Sarya to do anything.” When Helana laughed at that, he added, “Did she ever tell you what brought her here?”

“*You* told me. She was looking for her horse.”

So she had been, but what Sarya had told him today put a new spin on her horse being missing. Bannin had assumed Foggy was stolen and she’d gone searching for him—and that it had been pure luck that Bannin had been able to help her find the stallion. But he would think more on that later.

“I mean, did she ever say why she settled here. Or why she didn’t go home.”

*How* she’d settled was easy enough to know. Plenty of people had fled Galoth during the curse and never returned, abandoning their homes. Bannin had told Sarya about the

empty cottage in the glade himself. When she'd moved in, he hadn't given much thought to *why* she had. He'd simply been glad that she'd stayed.

But hadn't she any kin to return to? Most families weren't like his and Helana's.

She shrugged and began walking again. "I figured it had something to do with the stone sickness, since it was not long after—and because she was at the tavern so much."

After the curse was broken. Those had been the best of days for Helana. And the worst of days for Sarya.

"She was betrothed to marry," he told her. "While she was stone, he married someone else."

Helana grimaced. "A lucky escape."

A humorless laugh escaped him. Bannin had said exactly the same...and he'd seen the hurt in Sarya's eyes when he did. "Has she ever talked about where she came from? Mentioned any parents, brothers, sisters?"

"Well, of course she..." Helana trailed off, frowning a bit. Her mouth opened a few times as if she remembered something, then closed as she reconsidered. Finally she shook her head. "Never. She mentions what she's doing on the farm or who she's helping in the village. But she's never said anything about where she's from or what she did before. Mostly I'm the one who's talking."

"I am, too." Always blathering on. "I've told her more stories than I have Ouin."

Helana gave him a questioning look.

He shrugged. "She makes me nervous."

Her laugh rang out. "You are in *so* deep, brother."

Bannin had known *that* since the first moment he'd looked into Sarya's honey-brown eyes.

His sister bumped his shoulder again and continued, "But there's plenty we know about her. I told you how she helps Widow Elphin—"



“*She* told me that today. You didn’t.”

“Well, you know it now. But I *did* tell you about the fight in the tavern, that time the cooper’s boys began brawling and slammed into Alia. Sarya had all three of them laid out and crying for their mother before I even got Alia up off the floor. And that was *after* her third ale. But she moved like she was sober, then sat down for another drink.”

That fit what he’d seen today, too. Sarya had gone after the demon without any hesitation once she’d seen his axe and knew someone was at her back...and Bannin sensed that if she’d had her own axe, she wouldn’t have waited for help. That she wouldn’t have *needed* to wait. There was a strength to her—though it wasn’t lumbering like his, all fists and bulk. Hers was graceful. Swift and lithe. Like a dancer.

Or a master swordsman.

Helana’s gaze was on his face. “It worries you, doesn’t it?”

Many things worried him at the moment. Foremost was knowing that Sarya was in the middle of a forest where a demon was stalking human prey.

Yet that wasn’t likely what Helana was asking. “What worries me?”

“Whether she still loves the coward who abandoned her. You couldn’t ever accept being second in a woman’s heart. Not after all those years spent watching our mother and father coddle the First.”

“I might accept it,” he said, though an ache twisted through his chest. “For her.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

His sister knew him too blasted well. “I wouldn’t,” Bannin said.

Her brow arched. “Will you give up, then? Abandon your courtship?”

Bannin laughed, because his sister knew him better than that, too. “Not a chance.”

He'd fight his way into first place. Or kiss his way there. Whatever it took to win Sarya's heart, Bannin would do. Because he'd spoken true earlier.

For her, he'd wait forever.

## CHAPTER 3

## SARYA THE RESTLESS

With a frustrated huff, Sarya flopped over in bed. Again. Sleep had not found her yet this night. All because of that blasted Bannin. She knew he was more than capable of facing a demon—in his stories, he'd faced many before—but in those tales he'd also been accompanied by Warrick the Cursebreaker.

Yet she'd sent him out alone, in a fit of anger that she wholly regretted now. She ought to have gone with him.

Sarya had battled monsters before. Sometimes alone, but most often with other warriors. And she *missed* that part of her former life. Protecting all of Galoth, with someone she trusted fighting at her side.

But Bannin was wrong about her reason for being here. The past three years, she hadn't been hiding. She truly hadn't been. She'd simply been holed up in a safe place and licking her wounds.

That wasn't hiding. It was healing.

And yet, perhaps Bannin wasn't *completely* wrong. Oh, not the hiding part. Sarya didn't hide from anyone...except maybe herself. Because licking wounds was all well and good while they were healing, but after an injury had scarred over, continuing to lick didn't make it better. Instead it rubbed over that spot until the surrounding flesh was bloodied and raw.

She rolled onto her back and sighed, staring up into the dark. She'd known it was time to stop, hadn't she? Despite the lingering bitterness, her heart had healed. Some of her wounds

were still tender, but they'd scarred over. This past year, she'd been so much better.

But she hadn't known what to do next. She couldn't go back to being who she was before the stone sickness, yet her eagerness to pick up her sword and hunt this demon spoke of her need to move forward. She also wasn't meant to live in solitude, though she'd enjoyed these years at the cottage—farm work was often more exhausting than fighting monsters had ever been. And it had kept her active, had fulfilled her need to *do something*.

Yet now it wasn't enough.

And— *What was that sound?*

She sat up, reaching for the sword she'd left beside her bed. Listening. The crickets and frogs were chirping and croaking, so not all was silent. But she thought she'd heard a noise coming from her small barn, where Foggy was in his stall and her chickens and goats were bedded down for the night.

There it was again. A goat, bleating. Not in terror, but they usually made little noise at all after dark. Something must have disturbed it.

Sword in hand, Sarya leapt from her bed and hurried down the stairs, skipping over the creaking step. Outside, crisp air nipped at her face and clouded her breath. Though the afternoons were almost as warm as in summer, the recent nights had a chilly bite, as if autumn crept in after dark to nibble at the sunlit edges of the day.

Only the stars above threw faint light into the glade. Waiting for her eyes to adjust, again she listened. Just the crickets and the frogs—and a quiet breeze whispering through the changing leaves.

Maybe the disturbance had been nothing. But better to be certain.

On bare feet, she silently made her way to the barn. She frowned to see the latch on the broad door was lifted out of its slot; she'd made a point to secure it that evening.

Barely breathing, she eased the door open a crack and slipped through. The chill of the night was not so biting inside, the air warmed by the animals' body heat. A quiet shuffling came from deeper within the barn. Likely one of the goats, but her instincts screamed that she wasn't alone. Straining to hear, she turned her head in that direction when a sudden movement within the shadows pivoted her around, her blade slicing through the air.

“Oick!” An implacable grip snagged her wrist, halting her sword even as a steely forearm wrapped around her waist and yanked her up against a solid wall of hot flesh. “Peace, woman! Peace!”

Bannin. Sarya's heart thundered in her chest as she reoriented herself to his presence, acutely aware of the shocking warmth of his bare skin through her thin nightshirt and the crush of her breasts against his massive chest.

Acutely aware that *his* heart was pounding, too.

In the dark, her every breath seemed full of him. In the way her chest heaved against his. In the way his scent, of harsh soap and warm leather, made her almost dizzy and desperate to press her face against his throat and take more of him into herself.

Then Bannin stole her very breath as his arm flexed, lifting her bodily against him. His mouth found hers, softly at first, stroking featherlight kisses over her lips as if seeking permission to deepen the kiss.

Sarya should have pushed him away. Instead she buried her fingers in his hair and dragged him closer.

He made a sound deep in his throat that reverberated through his chest and made her shiver from head to toe. His tongue slicked over hers, hot and wet. Everything inside her drew up into a taut spiral of want, from the hollow ache at her core to the tips of her breasts. Oh, she needed this. This sweetness, this heat. Bannin angled his head and licked into her mouth again before teasing her with suckling kisses against her lips. His grip eased upon her wrist. She began to pull back her hand so that she could touch him, to revel in the

thick strength bound up in his muscle and skin, but she was still holding—

Her sword.

Sarya froze, remembering where she was. Where *they* were. No need to question what had disturbed the animals—Bannin must have. But she didn't know *why*.

Feeling her withdrawal, Bannin made a low regretful sound but didn't make her struggle to get away when she stepped back. In the dark, there was only the faint shine of her blade, the gleam of his eyes, and their heaving breaths.

A single kiss, yet Sarya was panting as if she'd sprinted the full distance to the village. *Never* had a kiss done that to her before.

She'd left her brain behind somewhere—likely the moment his mouth had covered hers—but eventually the mush inside her skull began sparking up a sensible thought or two. “What are you doing in my barn?”

“I *was* kissing you.” There was still a ragged edge to Bannin's voice, as if he'd been as affected as she. “And you were kissing me back.”

Truly, he was the most maddening man alive. “*Before* that.” Yet she knew, didn't she? He'd have gone to warn his sister and the village about the demon...and then he would have returned to make certain she wasn't alone. But that meant — “Did you come back here through the forest after dark? By yourself?”

Smug amusement filled his reply. “Worried about me?”

A frustrated growl escaped her. Because she *had* been worried. So much that she hadn't been able to sleep. But his going to warn the village had been necessary. Coming back was just stupid. “You didn't need to. I can take care of myself.”

“I realized that when you nearly beheaded me. But you're wrong about the rest. I *did* need to come back. A weaker man might have stayed away while you were out here by yourself. But that's not who I am.” His voice lowered, hardened, and his

looming shadow moved closer. His big hand cupped her face; his thumb smoothed over her swollen lips. “Can you still taste me, Sarya? Because all I can taste now is you—but it won’t be enough. So when you want more, just tell me.”

Her breath trembled. She wanted more *now*. And hadn’t she just realized the need to move forward?

But at this moment, she would settle for moving out of the barn. She pushed open the large door.

“Come on, then. Now that I know you’re here, no need to sleep with the goats.”

His grin flashed. “Are you taking me to your bed?”

“I’ll let you use the floor.”

“I’ll take you anywhere.”

She rolled her eyes and turned to go. He followed, picking up his axe.

Because there was a demon hunting these woods. In the wake of his kiss, she’d nearly forgotten why she’d needed her sword. And as she led him into her cottage, Sarya realized two things.

That she was truly done licking her wounds.

And that Bannin posed more of a danger to her than a monster ever could.

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“TEA OR CIDER?” Sarya offered, lighting the lamp on the table. By all rights, she ought to just head upstairs to bed and leave Bannin to sort himself out for the night, but she wasn’t likely to sleep anyway.

Bannin’s gaze quickly swept the interior of the cottage, maybe looking for any changes she’d made since moving in. There weren’t many. The family who’d fled Galoth had taken few of their belongings, and Sarya had only added what she



needed to live on. His green eyes settled on her again. “Is it a strong, dark cider or one of those weak, sweet ones?”

“It’s stronger than the ale at the tavern. I made it myself.”

“Then it’ll suit me.”

It suited Sarya, too. Her nerves had been rattled since the big warrior followed her into the cottage. Or maybe they’d been rattled since he’d snuck up behind her in the forest. Or maybe they’d been rattled since the day she’d met him.

Fortunately, if Bannin noticed how rattled she was, he would probably think the demon stalking the woods was the reason. But the demon was the one thing that *didn’t* rattle her. Sarya had dealt with monsters before.

What she hadn’t dealt with was a massive warrior who’d intended to sleep in her barn simply so that he could watch over her and make certain she was safe. A warrior who hadn’t bothered to bring anything with him into her cottage except for an axe, and who was only wearing a pair of loose breeches that hung low on his hips. A warrior whose powerful fingers were idly scratching through the crisp hair covering his barrel of a chest while his gaze followed her every move.

A warrior who still had hay from the barn stuck in his tousled red hair.

Biting her lip against a smile, Sarya poured the cider and turned toward the table with two mugs in her hands.

“Do you still love him?”

Bannin’s quietly voiced question caught Sarya by surprise. The mugs clattered against the tabletop as she set them down.

“What? Who?”

His piercing gaze was locked upon her face. Sarya wondered if she imagined the hint of dread in his voice and the flash of vulnerability in his eyes when he said, “The man you didn’t marry. Are you still in love with him?”

“No,” she said shortly—and to her own surprise, it was the truth. She caught sight of Bannin’s relief followed by his

brilliant grin before turning away from him, too unsettled by her own realization to ponder his response.

*She wasn't in love with Crase anymore.* Though she had been once. But now it was just...*gone.*

She hadn't thought love—strong and true love—could fade away like that. So maybe her love hadn't been as true or as strong as she'd thought. But if it hadn't been, would it have hurt so much? So maybe the pain she'd suffered had smothered it instead...or knowing that *his* love hadn't been as true and strong as she'd believed had killed it dead.

Or maybe Sarya was no longer the girl she'd been then.

She liked that explanation best. She wasn't the girl who'd turned to stone and awakened to an altered world. She was someone new. But more importantly, someone with enough experience behind her that she could choose who the new Sarya would be.

Of course, that part would be easier if Sarya knew exactly what she *wanted* to be.

At least she didn't need to hurry and figure it out. Sipping her cider, she settled onto the stone bench in front of her hearth. The fire was banked for the night but still gave off a mellow warmth.

For the first time since entering the cottage, Bannin's eyes weren't on her. Instead they were examining the open trunk sitting atop her table. His broad fingertip traced the rune carved into the trunk's seal—a symbol well known to everyone in Galoth as belonging to the elite team of soldiers who protected the realm.

“You were in the Horse Guards?”

“Once upon a time.” Before the stone curse struck Galoth. Before she'd spent ten years as a statue. Before she became *new.*

Bannin cast her a quick admiring glance before returning his attention to the trunk, moving aside the small wooden chest containing her medals to uncover a steel pauldron with the insignia of her rank upon the shoulder. “A captain?”

“Yes.”

“You hauled all this out intending to fight the demon?”

“I don’t need the armor.” She gestured to the weapon propped beside the table. “Only the sword.”

Both new Sarya and old Sarya loved a good sword.

Bannin eyed the jeweled hilt and gleaming blade appreciatively but said, “You said the demon resembled a tree. An axe might be better.”

“And burning it might be best.”

His brows rose and he shot another glance at the sword, focusing on the ruby embedded in the pommel. His eyes narrowed. “A fire charm?”

Sarya only smiled and sipped her cider.

He drank deeply from his, giving her a long, appraising look over the rim of his mug. Sarya thought that Bannin must possess his own fire charm, for that gaze scorched her right down to her toes. Then she all but melted when he set down his cider, licked the foam from his upper lip, and with a husky note roughening his deep voice said, “If I wasn’t already mad for you, Captain Sarya, I would be after knowing what’s in this trunk. And *that’s* not helping matters any.”

A lift of his chin indicated her person, but Sarya didn’t know whether it was the thin nightshirt that barely reached mid-thigh and did nothing to conceal the hardness of her nipples, the long unbound hair that cascaded over her shoulder, or the smile curving her lips—or all of them.

He sat back in his chair in the widespread way that so many warriors had, clearly accustomed to taking up space with his size...and sporting a substantial bulge at the front of his breeches. Sarya’s gaze only flicked down to measure the size of that thick erection once—or two or three times—as he said, “So that’s why you won’t sell your horse.”

“Hmm?” That bulge really was quite distracting.

“Your horse. It’s said that the Guards are loyal to the mounts they ride into battle with from the horse’s birth to its

death.”

That wasn't true of all the Guards but it certainly was for Sarya. “I raised him from a foal,” she confirmed. “Did all but let him suckle my teat.”

Bannin grinned. “I'll suckle your teat if you keep me as long as you have him. You can ride me, too.”

“I suspect Foggy is far better trained than you are,” she said dryly.

“Likely true.” Idly he retrieved the small wooden chest from her trunk, lifted the lid. “Who sold him while you were stone?”

Sarya stiffened. “What?”

“When you came looking for him, I figured he'd been stolen from you. But even the stupidest thief isn't going to take a Horse Guard's mount. So he must have been sold in the ten years you were a statue.” When she only looked at him, her body a tight line of tension, Bannin said, “You think I forgot the first time I ever saw you? You came into the village looking for your gray stallion.”

And when searching for a missing horse in any unfamiliar area, the first person to consult was a blacksmith. So Sarya had gone to the village smithy, which belonged to Bannin's sister—except this had been in the initial months following the end of the stone curse. So Bannin had been looking after his nephew and the smithy while Helana and her husband reunited after the five long years Aven had spent as a statue.

When she didn't respond, Bannin continued, “You barely saw me, though I told you quick enough that I was with Warrick when he found Anhera's jewels, and that I was there when the curse was broken. Trying to impress you. But the only thing that mattered to you was finding your stallion. So I was left standing there, thunderstruck and thinking that I'd give just about anything to have a woman who was even half as loyal to her man as you were to that horse.”

Sarya stared at him, her mind reeling. She *had* seen Bannin that day, far better than he realized—but her heart had been

nothing but a raw and gaping wound in those months. Finding Foggy had been her first step toward healing. And Bannin telling her that he'd recently shod a dapple gray stallion had been her first glimmer of hope in the wasteland that had become her life.

"I saw you," she finally said in a thick voice. "But I was..."

"Grieving the coward who didn't wait for you. He sold your horse, too?"

"No." It was a strained whisper. "I might have killed him if he had."

As if surprised by that answer, Bannin rocked back, brows furrowed. "Then who?"

"My parents."

He blinked. "You couldn't kill them?"

A reluctant smile tugged at her lips. "No."

"Is that why you didn't go back home after finding him?"

It would be so easy to say yes, though untrue. But Sarya suspected she and Bannin might soon be fighting a demon together. If she couldn't trust him with this, she couldn't trust him at her side in a battle...and neither lies nor evasions built trust.

"After I found Foggy, I went back home for my belongings and told my parents that I'd be living here," she told him quietly. "They said I didn't need to leave. But it was a relief all around when I did."

Bannin scowled. "A relief to have you gone? I can't imagine that."

"Then imagine that in their shared grief with the man who they'd thought would become their son, they began to treat him as one. Imagine they encouraged and supported him when he found his new love. Imagine them welcoming his wife as a new daughter and his children as their grandchildren, and all of them living near to each other as a happy family...and then

imagine that their true daughter comes back from the dead, without any knowledge of the ten years that had passed.”

“They abandoned you in favor of a fickle coward?”

His fierce defense flooded away the bitterness and hurt that had crept in around Sarya’s heart during her recitation. She lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “They truly thought I was dead. They’d put me in the family crypt, you know. That’s where I awakened when the curse lifted.”

“Oick,” he muttered.

“Afterward, all I could feel was their guilt. I told them that I understood—and I do—but...they were happier when I was gone. They weren’t glad I was dead—never would I say that—but during my death they’d gained a son, which they’d always wanted, and grandchildren. Everyone was awkward and unhappy when I was there. So I went and it was a relief to all.”

His gaze pierced her. “A relief to you, too?”

“Especially to me.”

“Good.” He held up a medal from the small wooden chest. “Now tell me what this one is for.”

“My team and I saved a village from a lorewurm.”

Bannin’s mouth pulled into a grimace and he rubbed a rounded scar on his shoulder, as if in painful memory. “Did anyone get stung with its venom?”

“Yes.” Crase had been stung. It had almost broken her heart, believing she would lose him. But Sarya didn’t want to talk about that. She preferred to know more about Bannin’s scar.

Before she could ask him, he selected another medal. “And this one?”

She wrinkled her nose. “A night hound.”

“Oick.” Bannin made a face. “How long did it take to get the stink out?”

“A full month.” Their skin had still reeked of the night hound’s shit when Crase asked her to marry him. “You?”

“We came across ours in the middle of winter. Every stream and pond frozen, and not a single blasted inn would allow us in for a bath because that reek clung to everything we touched. We stank until spring. This one?”

It took her a moment to recognize the last medal she'd received before the curse had transformed her into a statue. “An ogre. But it was Foggy who truly earned that one.” Because she'd ridden into battle with her right foot and lower leg already turned to stone, and without Foggy, Sarya couldn't have moved quickly enough to survive. “He saved my life.”

Perhaps in more ways than one, considering that Sarya's search for him brought her here, where she could heal.

Bannin glanced through the remaining medals but didn't ask about them. Instead he closed the lid, leaned back and took up his mug.

And that bulge was still bulging.

She gulped her cider and ignored the heat in her cheeks when Bannin settled deeper into his chair, as if he knew she was looking and he wanted to give her more to see.

His eyes gleamed when her gaze rose to meet his. “Now that you've had a taste of me, maybe you're rethinking a courtshi—”

A terrified whinny split the night. Bannin bolted to his feet, sloshing cider over his chest. Heart thundering, Sarya snatched up her sword. She was aware of Bannin grabbing his axe and his feet pounding behind hers as they raced out into the chill air.

He'd brought the lamp, too. Quick thinking, as the night was so dark. Yet Sarya didn't need it.

A single word sparked the charm etched into her sword. Her weapon blazed to life, illuminating the clearing around the cottage with a white-hot light.

No demon in sight. And aside from Foggy, everything was quiet.

Too quiet.

Swiftly she moved to the barn. The door was still locked, the walls intact. A brief glance inside told her that despite the stallion's agitation, the animals were unharmed. She calmed Foggy with a murmur, gaze sweeping the forest surrounding her glen. Unease shivered down her spine. The demon could be there now, undetected among the trees. Watching. Waiting for them to turn their backs.

"Sarya," Bannin said, his voice grim.

He stood in the shadows beside the cottage, still holding her lamp. As Sarya approached, her sword provided brighter illumination and revealed dozens of bones, some with bits of flesh still clinging to them, scattered carelessly on the ground.

Her stomach lurched. "Fas Lergin?"

Or what was left of him.

Jaw tight, Bannin nodded.

The crickets began chirping again, followed by the familiar croaking frogs. Those sounds likely meant the demon had gone...but only after they'd discovered the bones. As if it had waited to see their reactions. Was it taunting them with Fas Lergin's remains—or perhaps threatening them? Had it hoped to witness their fear?

It wasn't fear that Sarya felt. It wasn't fear that she saw burning in Bannin's gaze.

It was fury.

"We hunt it tomorrow?" she asked, though the only true question was the 'we.' Regardless of what Bannin did, Sarya would be stalking the woods come the morn.

"We hunt it," he confirmed.



## CHAPTER 4

## BANNIN THE NIMBLE

**A**fter a near sleepless night, dawn came too blasted early and brought with it a little goat that mistook Bannin's toe for a teat. Which wasn't so bad. The gods knew, he'd had worse things suck on different parts of him. He opened his eyes just long enough to make sure there wasn't anything else about to nibble his bits, then let his head drop back to the pile of hay he'd bedded down on.

After burying Fas Lergin's remains, they'd both ended up sleeping out in the barn. Sarya, to protect her horse and other animals. Bannin, to protect her. Not that he'd said so. Instead he'd claimed that he would help her look after the animals, too.

Apparently the goats appreciated his help. More than Sarya did, anyway, considering that she wasn't licking his toes. Oh now, *there* was an image. With his forearm flung across his eyes, Bannin wallowed in a fantasy featuring Sarya's pink tongue until the hard response of his cock was followed by the insistent consequence of the cider he'd drunk the night before.

Blast it all. Although the horse and goats pissed inside the barn, Sarya might think less of him if he did.

Blearily he stumbled his way out to the latrine. The biting air had him well awake by the time he returned to the barn, where he found Sarya shoving a squawking chicken into a crate and looking as tired as he'd felt a few minutes before.

In spite of the shadows under her eyes, she was a lovely sight. She'd traded her thin nightshirt for warm trousers and a

woolen tunic, yet the bulky clothing couldn't conceal the elegance of her every movement, even while wrestling with outraged fowl.

His gaze lingered on the sword she'd strapped to her back. Given the way she moved, her choice of weapon was no surprise. Some warriors—such as Bannin—were akin to battering rams that pounded an enemy until it splintered apart. Other warriors approached a battle as if it were a dance, and the enemy was defeated because it couldn't keep up with the steps. Clearly Sarya was that sort of warrior.

So if Bannin hoped to win her heart, he'd have to be more nimble than he usually was. She'd dance right out of the path of a battering ram.

Just as she'd always done, he realized. Because a battering ram was exactly how he'd always approached her before, overwhelming her with stories he'd hoped would impress her—and flirting every chance he got, hoping for an invitation to her bed. So maybe he'd try for subtle instead. Though he hardly knew what *subtle* looked like.

Thinking, Bannin scratched at the whiskers on his chin—opened his mouth to tell her that his beard had grown enough to give her a good burn between her thighs—then clacked his jaw shut.

By the gods, she made him nervous. He couldn't account for the shit that just tumbled out of his mouth.

He focused on what she was doing and tried again. “Are you taking the animals into the village?”

After last eve, no doubt she didn't want to risk leaving them here while they were out hunting.

“I thought it best.” She stuffed the last of the hens into the crate and glanced over at him. “You think Helana could look after them? It'll be chickens, goats, and Foggy.”

“Sure, she's got room, but it'll likely be Ouin looking after them.”

She smiled faintly at the mention of Helana's boy. “That'll be fine.”

“You’re taking the horse, too? Even though he’s trained for battle?”

“He is, but fighting while mounted is best for open ground. Better to be on foot in the forest. Especially since, when we find the demon, it’ll likely be because he’s hunting for *us*.” She gave him a glance as if seeing whether he’d argue. As Bannin agreed with her, he had nothing to say. She climbed into the goat pen, where the kid that had been sucking his toe had found a proper breakfast with its nanny.

“Need any help getting them ready to go?”

“No.”

Then he’d make himself useful in other ways. He gathered the eggs left by the chickens and headed to the cottage. By the time Sarya came in, Bannin had a breakfast ready and a midday meal wrapped up for them to take along on the hunt. After a look of surprise and a word of thanks, she sat at the table. They ate too quickly to say much, though Bannin had about a thousand things that he wanted to declare to her, and a thousand more things he wanted to know. But he held off instead of barraging her with them.

Nimble steps, not a battering ram.

Though when she paused before leaving to gather up her medals, the sheer unexpectedness of the action made him say, “Are you planning to pin those on your chest to warn the demon away? ‘Here stands Captain Sarya the Mighty’?”

Her grin was a thing of beauty, and Bannin determined there and then to make her smile as often as he could.

“I thought to give them to Ouin. As thanks.”

“There’s just about nothing that could thrill the boy more, but there’s no need to pay him. He’ll be so proud that you thought him man enough to look after them, that’ll be reward in itself.”

“Even so...” She shrugged. “I don’t want them anymore.”

Well, what could Bannin say to that? Nothing. Last night, he’d seen how talking about the medals had dredged up as

many painful memories as good, so he'd stopped asking about them. Most likely, those memories were tied to the coward she'd almost married. Ridding herself of the medals wouldn't make those memories vanish, yet she *could* rid herself of the reminders. And in the meantime, the medals would be in the hands of someone who could enjoy them.

Though if she was going to offer them to Ouin and reveal her history with the Horse Guards, best that Bannin told Sarya of his own.

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HE DIDN'T TELL her anything until they'd made their way to the outskirts of the village. Along the forest path, there'd been no chance to talk. Sarya had led Foggy, who was harnessed to a small cart that held two baby goats and the crate of chickens. Three nanny goats were tied behind, with Bannin bringing up the rear—axe at ready and listening to the sounds of the forest around them.

As soon as they cleared the trees, he moved up to her side. “When you give those medals to Ouin, Helana’s going to tell you how I applied to join the Horse Guards.”

His sister wouldn't miss any opportunity to rag on him a bit. Bannin preferred to tell Sarya of his failure in his own way.

Her eyes widened. “You did? When?”

Seemed like a long time ago. He had to think back. “It was the last glass year.”

“That was the year *I* joined.” She looked him up and down as if trying to place him there, while Bannin was coming to the realization that they were the same age, though he'd assumed she was younger. Every recruit joined at thirteen, because the training took years to complete...but then, she'd been locked in stone for a decade. So the same age, but also not. “Why didn't I see you there?”

“I was rejected.”

Her jaw dropped. “How? Why?”

Her clear disbelief that he ought to have been accepted made his chest swell a bit. “They thought I was too selfish.”

“*Selfish?*” She sputtered a laugh. “Compared to whom? Do you know how many soldiers in the Horse Guards are swaggering, glory-seeking braggarts? You couldn’t be worse than any of them.”

Though pleased that at least he wasn’t the worst of the warriors she knew, Bannin only shrugged. “I don’t suppose they were wrong. Though I was in a rage to prove that they were.”

And humiliated by the rejection.

The sudden softening of her gaze told Bannin that Sarya understood that part without him saying. “Is that when you first left Galoth?”

He nodded. “I joined up with a band of mercenary soldiers —”

“At *thirteen?*”

“I was a strong lad even back then. Though a bit skinnier.”

She snorted. “I can imagine.”

He grinned. “Have you studied my strapping form so closely, then?”

“I’ve seen plenty of thirteen-year-old boys,” she said dryly. “All of them soft in the cheeks, with the tall ones made up of elbows and knees. You’d have been the tallest of them all—and topped by flaming hair? Oh yes, I can imagine it well.”

His hair had been even brighter red then. But the picture she’d painted wasn’t otherwise wrong. “I grew into my height quick enough.”

“You’re as solid a man as I’ve ever seen, that’s for certain.” Before he could wallow in the pleasure that statement gave him, she asked, “Where did you go after joining up with the mercenaries?”

“We made our way across the Illwind Sea.” And eventually halfway around the world. “That’s when I met Warrick. I’d ended up playing guard to a princeling. I didn’t know then he’d only hired us because no one who knew his reputation would work for him. And when Warrick showed me what the princeling had done—”

“Showed you?”

“A ghost. A girl.”

Bannin had told her of Warrick’s ability to see ghosts before, so that wasn’t new. But he hadn’t shared this story with her before.

“What did you do?” she asked, the softness of her tone suggesting that something in his face revealed how much that girl haunted him still.

“I killed the princeling. Then joined up with Warrick.”

And soon after, he and Warrick had begun searching for the jewels that would break Anhera’s stone curse—a search that Bannin had never abandoned, though it had taken ten years.

“And together you saved all of Galoth,” she said with an admiring glance.

Though Bannin had told her himself how he’d been with Warrick when the curse was broken, now his face heated in embarrassment. “In truth, I didn’t have much to do with that. I would have helped Warrick bring the jewels back to Galoth but...Helana sent a message that Ouin’s feet were turning to stone.”

Sarya gave him a look that said he’d left out an important part of the story. “Helana once told me your arm had begun to turn, too.”

Next to the devastation of knowing what was happening to Ouin, his own suffering hardly mattered. “If I could have helped Warrick bring the jewels, I’d have stayed at his side even if I turned into a statue before it was done. As it was, I’d have only been in his way. So I returned to help Helana and

Ouin—and trusted that Warrick would arrive before it was too late.”

No one had known then that those who’d been fully turned to stone would become living flesh again. Most people had thought them permanently dead. Sarya’s parents hadn’t been alone in that.

Yet they *had* returned to flesh. Bannin had been glad of that since the moment the curse had broken, but knowing now how Sarya had been one of those statues, and knowing he’d never have met her had the outcome been different...

He couldn’t bear to even think about it.

Sarya’s thoughts had apparently turned in a different direction. “You weren’t surprised when I described the demon. Have you seen a monster like it before in your travels?”

“More often than I’d like, and not as distant or as long ago as I’d wish. Though I haven’t before seen a demon that resembled a tree—or maybe it can simply disguise itself as one. Hard to know.”

“Not long ago? You’ve seen demons recently?” She frowned when he nodded. “Where?”

“A valley up north, near Aleron.”

“That’s where Warrick the Cursebreaker is living now, isn’t it—as king consort to Aleron’s queen?”

Bannin had to smile. He himself had first called Warrick the ‘Cursebreaker,’ and the name had spread throughout Galoth. Over the years, the barbarian warrior had become closer to Bannin than his blood brother had ever been. But then, Warrick was a true brother.

Now his true brother was a king. “He is.”

“You think this demon came from that valley? That it made its way south over the Glass Mountains?”

“I do. We’ve been trying to slay the demons before they escape the valley, but some slip out.” Then killed as many people as it could. “Don’t mistake them for the usual monster. These things come from the scaling of a spell gone wrong.



This demon probably began as a real tree. Maybe even a twig. Then corrupted magic got into it.”

Her brows arched. “The usual monster?”

“The wyrms. The night hounds. They’re just beasts.”

“*Big* beasts.”

“And they *act* like beasts. These demons are something else. They’re smarter.”

“So is an ogre.” Her tone said that she wasn’t arguing with him, but simply seeking clarification.

“True, but most ogres just want to be left alone. The only reason the Horse Guards are called in when one begins killing humans is because they’re so blasted big. But every single demon is... ”—he hesitated, searching for the right word before settling on—“*malevolent*. As if their only purpose is to hurt and terrorize people.”

Understanding dawned on her face. “So that’s why, despite all of the animals in the forest that the demon could have hunted, it killed Fas Lergin?”

Bannin nodded. “Just as it’ll likely hunt us.”

“I hope so.”

So did Bannin. Better them than people who weren’t prepared to fight it.

Sarya seemed to ponder all that he’d told her for a moment. “Malevolent. So it *was* taunting us last night.”

“By scattering the bones where it did?” At her nod, he said, “Most likely.”

She looked to him curiously. “Is that why you’ve been away from Galoth these past three years? You’ve been slaying demons in that valley?”

“It is.”

Where had she thought he’d been? And hadn’t he told her during his visits? Thinking back, he’d told her plenty of stories...but he hadn’t told her that.

Nor had she asked.

That realization made his chest ache, but only for a moment. Because she was asking *now*.

“So you’re returning there to fight more demons after the harvest?” Her golden brown eyes had taken on a faraway look as she gazed down the road, her voice tinged by a note of yearning.

What was she longing for? To fight demons? To leave the village? Or to leave with *him*?

Bannin opened his mouth—then shut it again. A battering ram demanded answers. But this was a dance.

So he only said, “I’ll stay until we slay the demon. Even if it’s after the harvest.”

A variety of emotions flitted across her face before her expression hardened into resolve. “Let us hope it doesn’t take that long.”

What did that mean? Was it only that she wanted to kill the demon as soon as possible? Or was there more to her meaning? Did she wish Bannin gone earlier, too?

He bit back a growl of frustration as he tried to figure out exactly what she’d meant...and he was determined not to ask. He would *not* demand answers.

In the end, Bannin was only certain of one thing: he wasn’t very good at dancing.

## CHAPTER 5

## SARYA THE LACKING

**D**espite all of the stories he'd told her, she hadn't really known Bannin at all.

A tight, painful knot of confusion and shame had taken up residence in Sarya's chest, and had grown steadily throughout the morning.

How many times dismissed him as the Blowhard? Until yesterday, she'd thought his many stories were exaggerations, with him playing the jester beside Warrick the Cursebreaker. And she had *liked* to think that way, in truth. Because Bannin had disturbed her. Because he'd disrupted her peace, had flirted and made her laugh when she'd wanted to feel nothing for anyone again. And her attraction to him was easy to disregard when he seemed not serious at all.

Yet the boy who'd left Galoth seeking to prove himself in the wake of rejection was no jester. And there could be nothing more serious than killing a princeling for what he'd done to a girl—or hunting malevolent demons to stop them from killing people.

And although Bannin did not credit himself with saving Galoth, it hardly mattered to Sarya that he hadn't brought the jewels back by his own hands. Warrick the Cursebreaker was not from Galoth; he came from the Dead Lands, half a world away. If not for Bannin, the barbarian would likely have never even heard of the curse or the missing jewels, let alone spent ten years looking for them.

Sarya had always been thankful for Bannin's part in breaking the curse—she would still be stone if he hadn't been so dedicated—yet she had let herself think so little of him, because he'd always been going on about his adventures, and she'd assumed that he was a glory-seeking blowhard and flirt.

But was that truly what his stories had told her, or was it what she'd wanted to hear?

She had no time now to think back and discern whether there was a difference between what he'd said and what she'd believed. And no matter what, her thoughts had been...unkind. She didn't know if kindness was a true and powerful magic, as the barbarians in the Dead Lands claimed it was—but whether magic or not, Sarya knew the value of kindness. Hadn't Bannin's kindness helped her to find this place, where she'd been able to heal? And in return, she'd fought against liking him. At least she could forgive herself for fighting her attraction to him—in grief and pain, she hadn't wanted to be close to anyone in that manner—but she'd never been as generous in thought to him as he'd been in deed to her.

Though perhaps it didn't matter. Because just when she'd begun to feel a glimmer of possibility toward opening herself to more, Bannin had cooled toward her. Oh, he was still kind. Yet not once this morning had he mentioned courtship again. And when he'd spoken of leaving Galoth, this time he'd said nothing about her going with him.

Bannin was not a subtle man. He was big and loud and took up space and did not leave his thoughts unspoken. If he'd still wanted her to go, he would have said so.

Though perhaps she shouldn't have expected any different. After all, she'd slammed a door in his face. That had not seemed to deter him last night, when he'd kissed her. Or later, when he'd asked whether she'd reconsidered accepting his courtship.

Had she? Perhaps. But it didn't matter if *he* had reconsidered, too.

It seemed as though he had. And why would he not? Only last eve, he'd found out that not only had Crase replaced her

quickly enough, her own parents had replaced her, too. Sure, he'd criticized them. But that was the instant emotional response. Maybe the slower rational response was to wonder whether there was a reason. Learning how she'd been shunted aside by everyone she'd ever loved might have opened his eyes to every reason *he* should also shunt her aside.

Or perhaps she was tormenting herself over nothing.

She was glad when they neared Helana's farm, where she could put away these thoughts for later, though the heavy ache in her chest didn't recede. They had just turned up the lane when Ouin bolted out of the cottage toward them. Though only eight years old instead of thirteen, the boy was already tall and all elbows and knees, the shock of his red hair not at all dimmed by his father's brown.

"Uncle Bannin!"

"A brave warrior comes!" Bannin boomed out. "All is well?"

"I protected them all night, just like you told me to!"

"Even your sister?"

"I slept right beside her!"

His nephew came to a skidding halt in front of them, and it struck Sarya that only three years past, when she'd first met Bannin and Ouin, the boy would have launched himself into his uncle's arms. It seemed in those days, Ouin was always being tossed squealing and giggling up into the air, or riding upon Bannin's broad shoulders and using fistfuls of his hair as reins. She suspected the boy would be mortified to do so now—would consider himself too grown up to be held—but she wondered if Bannin missed those days.

He would make a wonderful father, she thought with a pang. He hadn't needed to tell her stories for her to know that. She'd seen it with her own eyes.

Eagerly Ouin stood on his toes and tried to see past Foggy's bulk. "Did you kill the demon? Is its head in the cart?"

“There are eight heads in the cart, all still attached to their necks—just as a head ought to be. Now, where are your manners?”

The boy quickly greeted Sarya before investigating further. “Two baby goats! Are they for me? I want this one!”

“Ouin!” scolded Helana, who’d left the cottage at a more sedate pace than her son. “You cannot simply claim a goat for your own.”

“But there’s one for Ulana, too!”

“A baby doesn’t need a goat. Good morn, Brother. Sarya. What is all this?”

“A visitor came to Sarya’s cottage last eve,” said Bannin after a quick look at Ouin, whose attention on the kids would likely be distracted by any mention of the demon.

His sister was not slow to understand. Helana’s brows rose. “But all else there is well?”

“It left a...rather unwelcome gift,” Sarya told her, conscious of the boy’s nearness.

“Perhaps you’ll tell me of it.” Raising her voice, she said, “Ouin, help your uncle herd these animals to the barn. Aven! Show Ouin which pen to use for the goats?”

Her husband had come around from behind the cottage, a pitchfork in his left hand and carrying their infant daughter in a sling against his chest. The empty sleeve on his right was pinned to the side of his tunic. Though likely uncertain why Sarya had descended upon them so early with her farmyard in tow, Aven merely called a greeting to her before gesturing for Bannin to follow.

Aven was a sweet and amiable man, and Sarya liked him very well—yet Bannin hadn’t been wrong when he’d said Sarya wasn’t comfortable around his sister’s husband. He’d simply mistaken the cause.

Sarya hadn’t been pining for what she didn’t have, seeing how Helana had waited for Aven. Instead, meeting Aven had

forced Sarya to confront whether she'd *deserved* to lose everything.

Because when Sarya had been struck by the stone curse, she had not even *thought* about trying what Aven had, in his desperate attempt to stay with those he'd loved. When his arm turned to stone, when he'd realized Helana and Ouin would soon be left alone, sweet and amiable Aven had chopped off the limb, praying it would stop the curse's progression. It hadn't—and five years into the curse, after many other people in Galoth had attempted the same, Aven had likely known it wouldn't halt the transformation. Yet he'd done so anyway, on the merest hope it would.

For such a man, for such a love, it could be no wonder why Helana had waited.

Doing the same wouldn't have helped Sarya, either. And yet during those horrible months when Sarya had still been trying to understand *why* Crase had been able to move on so quickly, perhaps it had been inevitable that—in the depths of her grief and pain—she'd settled on the belief that something in herself was lacking. That she hadn't loved him enough. That she hadn't been willing to bear any pain to stay with him. And after seeing what others had sacrificed for their loved ones, Crase had known it.

He'd known she wasn't worthy of his complete and utter devotion. And so her parents must have known, too.

Over time, Sarya had come to a more rational view. Yet a sense of guilt—that every loss was her own fault because she hadn't done enough, hadn't loved enough, hadn't *been* enough—still lingered. Usually, she could push such thoughts away. Yet it wasn't so easy when faced with Aven, and the evidence of all that *he'd* been willing to do.

At least she wasn't struck with guilt on this day. As Bannin and Ouin went ahead, Sarya followed more slowly with Helana and told her of the bones the demon had left.

“An unwelcome gift, indeed.” Helana's expression tightened. Her gaze flicked to the hilt of Sarya's sword, which



jutted up over her shoulder. “Where will you hunt for it today?”

“Along the forest road.”

Her brow furrowed. “Across the river from your part of the forest? If it was there last eve, should you not start nearer to your cottage?”

“If this thing came over the Glass Mountains, a river does not contain it. But it’s also so we can leave warning to anyone entering the woods from the north.”

Helana nodded, her gaze on Ouin, who was helping Bannin untie the nannies from the cart. “My brother gave to Ouin last night the task of protecting us so that he wouldn’t be tempted to hunt the demon on his own. Or with his friends.”

Sarya smiled. She’d gleaned as much from the way Bannin had greeted his nephew.

“The young ones in the village all wish to be as my brother is.”

Uncertain how to judge the other woman’s tone, which seemed rather pointed, Sarya only agreed quietly, “He is the best of men.”

“And yet you rejected a courtship? But perhaps it is for the best.” This time there was no mistaking the note of challenge in her voice, or the hardness of her eyes as her gaze raked Sarya from head to toe. “A lucky escape for him.”

As if she’d been punched in the gut, a gasping breath wheezed from Sarya’s chest. She would have called Helana a friend. Not an intimate friend—Sarya had none of those anymore—yet she liked and respected the other woman, and she’d believed that regard was returned. But Helana—who had waited for her husband, and who was so much like her brother—had found her lacking, too.

“*Helli!*” Bannin snapped.

All the world seemed slow and thick, though the turn of her head was likely quick. Bannin was watching them, a

thunderous look upon his face, his furious gaze leveled at his sister.

“Stop. Your. Tongue.”

From nearly the first moment of their acquaintance, Sarya had seen the brother and sister snipe and poke at each other—yet always with affection and tolerance. There’d been many a time when Bannin had told Helana to hush her mouth. But his anger now sounded nothing akin to their usual exchange.

Seeing how taken aback Helana was, it likely wasn’t. Helana left her side even as Bannin stalked toward them, and as brother and sister passed each other, Sarya heard her say to him in defiant tones, “I only wish for your happiness.”

Jaw clenched, Bannin said nothing.

His expression softened as he neared Sarya, green eyes searching her face. “What did she say?”

Had he not heard? He must have only seen her reaction. Just as yesterday, when he’d seen her response to his joke about not waiting for marriage and demanded to know what had hurt her. And Sarya...had blurted out half her history to him.

Yet she could not repeat what Helana had said. Not while being choked by the lump in her throat. As it was, she barely managed a whispered, “Nothing of import.”

His brows drew together. “It was not *nothing* that—” He broke off, grimaced. His chest rose on a few deep breaths before he said, “I won’t demand an answer. Tell me only if you wish to.”

He’d demanded answers before. But not anymore?

Heart aching, she slipped past him to unharness Foggy from the cart. Then she remained by the stallion, stroking his neck and breathing in his familiar scent, letting his steady presence soothe her tattered emotions—and letting his massive body hide her from sight.

“A captain in the Horse Guards!”

Ouin's excited cry drew Sarya out of herself. She led Foggy to where Bannin was speaking with Helana's family near the goat pen. Though she felt both Aven's and Helana's curious gazes upon her, Sarya's focus was only on Ouin, who'd turned to her with a hopeful expression.

"Uncle says you want me to care for your special horse while you hunt the demon?"

"The goats and chickens, too, if you can. They'd be in danger at my home—so I would be counting on you to protect them, just like you're protecting your family."

"I can do it!"

Though the way he puffed up his narrow chest made her want to smile, she narrowed her eyes. "Are you certain? You'd also have to feed them, collect the eggs, milk the nannies—those two brown ones, not the one with the babies—and Foggy likes to be brushed every day. It's a lot of work."

"I'm strong enough."

"All right, then. Let me introduce you to Foggy so he knows who you are. Stay still, he's going to smell you." The boy didn't move a muscle as she brought the stallion near to sniff his shirt, the horse's large nostrils blowing. "Foggy, this is Ouin. *Ouin*. He's our friend. *Ouin*."

"I'll protect you," Ouin said softly to the big horse. He looked to Sarya. "Can I ride him?"

"Do you know how?" She looked to Helana and Aven for confirmation. When they nodded, she said, "You may. But not in the woods. And only after you've finished all of your other work. If you do it well, you can earn these."

His jaw dropped when she brought out her medals. She flicked through them, letting him see the impressed designs.

Awe filled his voice. "These were for fighting monsters?"

"For protecting Galoth. Just as you will earn them by protecting your family and home. I'll give them to your parents and they can decide when you've earned one. All right?"

Eagerly he nodded, then looked to Bannin. “Do you have any medals, Uncle?”

Bannin grinned. “I wasn’t in the Horse Guards, so all I’ve earned fighting monsters is a few thumps on the head.”

With a sudden smirk, Helana began, “But you might have \_\_\_”

“Too late. I already told her.”

“Pfft.” Helana pursed her lips, then looked to Sarya as she approached with a double handful of medals. A conciliatory look softened her eyes as Sarya passed them over. Quietly she said, “Thank you—for Ouin. And...ask my brother about being second.”

Though baffled, Sarya gave a small nod. She turned and found Bannin near, the small sack that held their provisions for the day slung over his broad shoulder and his axe in hand. “Ready to hunt?”

Bannin nodded, his gaze moving between Helana and her. He seemed about to say something...then didn’t, and Sarya felt like she’d been kicked in the chest.

*For the best*, Helana had said. Maybe it was. So what if his kiss set on her fire? If his look melted her inside? She didn’t need this hurt. She’d sworn off lust and love for this very reason.

Better to just focus on the hunt.

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THEN AGAIN, the necessity of remaining quiet while hunting meant that she was trapped in her own head, so she could do nothing *but* think upon Bannin’s unusual reticence.

Because she’d misjudged him before. What if she had again? What if she’d let her own fears and worries color her perception?

For certain, she’d discovered something true and unexpected about *herself* this morn—that being abandoned by

Crase and her parents had damaged Sarya even more than she'd known. She *had* healed. But the scar that remained was far more sensitive than she'd realized. Probably because nothing had pressed against it before.

Until Bannin had pressed it. Then Helana had pressed hard, too.

And in her pain, Sarya had retreated and assumed they'd found her lacking.

But that wasn't fair to Bannin. Perhaps it wasn't fair to Helana, either, but at least Helana's motivation was clear. She wanted her brother to be happy. Sarya could hardly blame her for doubting whether happiness was possible with someone who'd rejected him. And still, at the end... Helana had possibly given her a way forward.

Perhaps she *was* a friend.

And what had been Sarya's own motivation? She'd slammed the door in Bannin's face because she hadn't thought him serious. But that had been *before* she'd understood him better. Before she'd realized he was far more serious than she'd believed. So if she took all that he'd said about courting her, about how he would have waited for her, and if she *believed* it... then she simply could *not* believe that he would give up any thought of courting her merely because he'd learned that everyone else she loved had given up.

Either he was serious or he was not. And she believed he was.

So his reticence had to be something else.

Though not fully confident, her heart was lighter by the time they stopped for luncheon, sitting back-to-back on the bridge spanning the river. In this way, they could still keep an eye on their full surroundings—and she rather liked the warm and solid feel of him behind her.

She tore a chunk from a thick slice of bread and decided not to torment herself any longer. “Helana said to ask you about being second.”

A soft growl escaped him before he said, “That’s already settled. It’s not the issue she believes it is.”

“What isn’t an issue?”

“Whether you’re in love with someone else.”

The bite of bread wedged in her throat. Why would that not matter unless he’d decided not to court her? But she wouldn’t assume that. She wouldn’t. Still she could say nothing, desperately trying to swallow while blinking the blur from her eyes. It would be stupid to die because she hadn’t seen the demon come while she was crying.

Then Bannin continued, “I’m not truly the second. My father is a Bannin, as was his father, and *his* father...for thirty-five generations. In the city, which smithy do you use?”

Swallowing with difficulty, she said, “I used the Horse Guard’s own. But my family uses the smithy near Anhera’s temple.”

“That is my father’s smithy.”

“Oh,” was all that she could say as understanding ricocheted through her. In the hierarchy of Galoth’s trade classes, that smithy sat at the top, and an apprenticeship there was worth its weight in gold. “That is a heavy legacy.”

He nodded. “Though not *my* legacy. I’m the second because my older brother is Bannin, too. I was to replace him if a horse ever kicked him in the head. So I was to work in his smithy until I was needed for more than a strong arm and back.”

And had thought to join the Horse Guards instead. “Being a spare didn’t suit you?”

“It didn’t,” he said, the amusement in his voice suggesting that was a gross understatement. He paused for a moment before adding, “Everything I ever received from my mother and father was a cast off from the First. If we’d been a poor family, perhaps I could have accepted that. Or if they had said there was no point in wasting his old things. But neither was the case. They simply did not want to expend the effort of caring for me.”

Though estranged from her own parents, at least Sarya couldn't lay a lack of care at their feet. They had been caught in a situation that was impossible to fix. They *would* have fixed it, if they'd known how.

And she understood Helana's concern now, fearing Sarya loved someone else. She'd wanted more for her brother than to be second.

Sarya wanted more than that for *herself*.

"Your kin use my father's smithy?" Bannin asked carefully.

She smiled faintly. Of course he'd understood what that had meant. His father's smithy was nobility among the trade classes, and those who used the smithy were nobles in truth. "My mother and father are both magistrates."

He gave a soundless whistle. Galoth had no king, no royalty. Instead the warlords of ancient times had become wealthy, powerful families that formed a peaceful council of magistrates that oversaw Galoth's protection.

"Yet you joined the Horse Guards?"

She shrugged lightly. "I have enough cousins to take up the mantle of magistrate. And my parents were always supportive of what I wished to do."

He was quiet for a moment. Then he laughed.

She nudged his back. "What is it?"

"Helana once wondered if you had begun to spend less time in the tavern because you'd drunk through whatever coin you'd brought with you. But the daughter of a magistrate would not lack for gold."

Sarya grinned. "I do not."

He laughed again, then seemed about to say something... but didn't. Yet instead of a kick in the chest, Sarya ate the meal he'd prepared and amused herself by imagining what he might have said. Perhaps joking that her wealth was just another reason to court her. Or claiming that *their* daughter would never lack for gold, either. Or suggesting that she need not

take him to her bed or her floor when he could just take her on a pile of coins.

She wasn't certain why he was holding back, but surely it wouldn't continue for long.

Sarya could wait.

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THE WARM AFTERNOON cooled to a chilly rain and a trek through sodden leaves and a dripping forest. By the time they reached the cottage, Sarya was cold and tired, and her only intention was to eat and then fall into bed.

Bannin's unusual reticence continued through dinner, which was an unexpected—and wholly welcome—hot stew that he'd left simmering on a bed of coals before they'd left that morning. Shivering in her nightshirt and robe, she quickly hung her wet clothes in front of the fire and sat to eat. She shoveled in the first mouthfuls, then settled down to savor it, and the warmth spreading from her belly to her limbs slowly roused her brain from a cold stupor.

She glanced over at Bannin, who gulped from his mug of cider. He was not saying much, but he seemed...tense. Unable to settle. And rarely looking at her, though he'd always used to.

Perhaps he hadn't intended to be so open with her about his parents? Likely he hadn't expected her to ask about his being second.

Yet she was glad to know where he was vulnerable. Not because she wanted to hurt him, but because she *didn't* want to. Especially not accidentally. If they did move forward, it was important to know that he would need her to put him first, and her need to protect herself might make it seem as if Sarya would not. So she would have to make an effort to reassure him even when her instinct was to withdraw.

Because look at what *his* withdrawal—as she'd perceived it—had done to her.



In a way, she supposed they had that in common. Oh, the circumstances were surely different and her parents truly cared for her, but still...they had put someone else ahead of her. If Crase had been a brother, she wouldn't have been so hurt and betrayed. But he wasn't their son and his wife wasn't their daughter, so she *had* felt replaced.

Yet with her parents, the issue had not only been that they'd made a son of the man who'd been about to marry the daughter they believed had died. Perhaps they might have withdrawn from him for Sarya's sake. But by then, they had also become grandparents to his children, and never could they hurt those children by setting them aside. Never would Sarya want them to, either. So it wasn't that they'd put Crase ahead of her. They'd simply had no answer to the difficult question of 'what do we do now to avoid hurting anyone?'

Better that Sarya be hurt than those children. And as for Crase... Well, Crase had *not* put another woman ahead of her, either.

He'd put *himself* ahead.

Her heart seemed to stop at that thought, yet her brain raced. Because here she was, sitting with a man who'd gone searching for a way to break the stone curse long before it touched his family, simply because it was the right thing to do. And when it finally had touched his family, it had only added to his motivation.

Yet Crase had...what?

A memory struck her then, of how Crase had railed against whoever had stolen Anhera's jewels and started the curse, and how he'd ranted about what he'd do to the thief when they were discovered. Yet he hadn't looked for the thief or the jewels. Instead he'd sobbed and held onto Sarya while asking how he would go on without her—which at the time had seemed so loving, so devoted, to claim that he couldn't live without her. Yet *she* had been the one turning to stone and comforting *him* for the loss he was about to suffer. *She* had never lacked anything, except his support and comfort during the most horrific days of her life.

The only lack was his.

Her spoon clattered into her bowl. Bannin's eyes shot up to meet hers.

“What is it?”

She stared at him, wide-eyed. “I...had a realization.”

He looked as if he was about to ask. Then he didn't. Instead he downed the rest of his cider and rose from his chair—then began to pace in front of the hearth. Back and forth. Stopping, turning toward her, appearing as if he was about to ask, then dragging a hand through his hair until it stuck up wildly, pacing again and muttering about something that sounded like “battering ram.”

She watched him, half bemused and half confused, and wholly appreciative of his loosely laced sleeping trousers, which seemed to slip a little lower on his hips with each agitated step. “A battering ram? Do you think we'll need to use one against the demon?”

“It's me!” He tossed his hands up toward the ceiling and pivoted to face her. “I'm the battering ram! Though I'm trying to be nimble as I court you. Yet all I can think of is kissing you. And I'm trying to resist.”

Happiness bloomed through her chest. A nimble courtship? His behavior of that day suddenly took on a new slant. “Truly, you ought not do that.”

“Do what?” It was a near roar.

“Is it a strain to resist me?”

“It takes *all of my strength*,” he gritted out. “And I am *not* a weak man.”

So saying, he spun away from her again, slapping at his dripping tunic as he paced past the hanging clothes, and was slapped by a sodden sleeve in return.

Sarya almost burst into laughter. The poor man. So frustrated. “If it's such an effort to restrain yourself now...and I suppose throughout the night?”—his despairing glance was

answer enough—“What strength will you have left come morn, when we need to fight the demon?”

Bannin thundered to a stop and peered at her disbelievingly. “Do not dance around this. Are you saying that you prefer being courted by a battering ram?”

“I’m saying you ought to kiss me.”

She was suddenly breathless at the sight of him standing before her, so big and imposing and *bulging*. His hands caught her waist and lifted her. She abruptly found herself seated on the edge of the table, her robe slipping down her shoulders, her head tilted back and his fingers buried in her hair. Bannin stared down at her, his heated gaze roaming from her face to her widespread thighs that were pushed even wider as his powerful body filled the space between them. “By the gods, woman. You are stunning. And I ought to have known a captain of the Horse Guards would prefer action over pretty words.”

“No poetry, then? Or flowers?” she said with a grin, and a delicious little tremor quaked through her body when he tipped her head to the side and bent to place a warm kiss upon her neck.

“I had thought to eat you up instead,” he murmured, and her heart tripped over itself and dropped to her cunt, where it pulsed a slow and heavy beat through her most sensitive flesh. “But if it is a rhyme you wish for, I learned many on my travels. Lick, quick, slick, prick—”

Sarya began to shake with laughter, then Bannin’s mouth captured her parted lips. Her amusement subsided beneath an onslaught of need that had been simmering under her skin for so very long. Eagerly she opened to the thrust of his tongue.

To think that only hours ago, she’d been determined to suppress this desire, so afraid that she’d be hurt again when he shunted her aside.

Instead he pulled her closer, and all the hurt was gone.

Sarya’s arms wound around his neck, her senses reveling in his taste, his scent, his touch. Of cider and crisp autumn rain

—and the feel of his solid strength pressed against her. She moaned helplessly into his mouth when his hips began to slowly rock between her thighs, rubbing his thick length against the melting softness at her core and winding new tension through her flesh until everything inside was tight and aching.

Her excitement heightened as he released her hair to tug the wide neck of her nightshirt down her right shoulder, baring her breast. She arched into his palm, gasping when his long fingers tugged at the sensitive peak. Oh gods, she could feel that tease all the way down to her clit.

Frantic to feel more, Sarya tore her mouth from his. “Kiss me there. Please,” she panted. “Please.”

Bannin pulled back just enough gaze down at her soft breast filling his large hand. He groaned at the sight, pinching her nipple as if he could not bear to merely look at that swollen tip without touching.

Without tasting.

He bent his head. Sarya’s heart thundered, her fingers clutching his shoulders, her blood surging in a riot of lust and anticipation as his warm lips skimmed a trail down her throat, then over the swell of her breast.

Then he paused and looked up at her, his mouth poised over her nipple. “You are the one courting with flowers, woman. With this rosy bud—” His tongue darted out to tease the turgid peak even as his hand slid up her thigh, under the hem of her nightshirt to the sultry wetness beneath. “—and these pink petals.”

In a double assault, he claimed her flesh with mouth and hand. Sarya bit her bottom lip against a scream of pleasure, her body overwhelmed by his fingers, his teeth, his thumb, his tongue. Hungrily he sucked her nipple to a throbbing point, while down below his heated touch drove her to madness, stroking through her folds and circling her clitoris until she was a writhing mess of scorched nerves and drenched flesh.

Her toes were curling, her inner muscles tightening, her ecstasy nearing the edge of release when Bannin suddenly stopped.

Yet before she could cry out her frustration and dismay—or yank his mouth back to her breast—he dropped to his knees.

The ravenous need that darkened his face stole her breath and any words she might have said. His hands roughly clamped over her hips and dragged her to the table's edge. Unbalanced by the abrupt movement, Sarya fell back onto her elbows, knocking aside her empty bowl and tipping her mug. The hem of her nightshirt was shoved upward to pool around her waist.

Then Bannin simply stared at her as if stunned, chest heaving and jaw slack. His gaze consumed the pink petals swollen with her arousal, her inner thighs glistening with the wetness he'd already drawn from her with his touch. Only his arm moved, and though Sarya couldn't see what he did, she heard the tug and whip of laces, then the rough stroke of callused skin over hardened flesh, as if the sight of her passion-soaked cunt had brought his cock near to bursting and he had no choice but to relieve the pressure.

“Sarya.” Her name was a hoarse whisper. His gaze rose to hers, and she was overwhelmed by the longing visible upon his face, as if she was everything he'd ever wanted or needed. With his left hand still working his shaft, he brought his right hand up to her quivering thigh. His voice was low and deep when he asked, “Shall I kiss you here, too?”

Trembling with need, Sarya could only manage a jerky nod.

Bannin leaned in closer, audibly breathing in her sultry scent, his eyes closing in ecstasy. Her body shaking, Sarya forced herself to wait, to hold in place, though she could hardly bear it. Merely the warmth of his breath seared her nerves with pleasure. Anticipation of his touch wound her tight, too tight. Then finally, *finally*, he moved. An inarticulate

cry escaped her throat when his long fingers spread the dark curls at the apex of her sex, exposing her clit.

Then his mouth was upon her, and Sarya understood that he had brought poetry to court her with, after all. His ode to hunger, to need, to longing was written upon her flesh with his tongue, his fingers. Each devouring lick that slicked through her folds was joined by his deep and rumbling groans, as if her taste was an endless pleasure to him and to feast from her cunt was an indescribable joy—a joy that filled her in turn, so that even as she writhed in helpless delight, her body electrified by each slide of his tongue through her slit, by each hot flick over her clit, the unmistakable reverence of his ministrations slipped under her skin, under the lust, piercing her heart with the unfamiliar sensation of being utterly *cherished*.

Sarya had no defense against such an emotion.

She didn't know if she *wanted* to defend against it.

Then any opportunity to stop Bannin from penetrating deeper into her heart was lost along with her every thought as he sank two thick fingers deep into her need-drenched sheath, stretching the slick walls therein. Her spine arched convulsively at this sudden invasion, as she was filled with him. Utterly and completely filled with him, from flesh to heart to mind. An incoherent noise gurgled from her throat and was choked into a thin scream when Bannin began sucking at her clit and lashing that swollen nub with side-to-side swipes of his tongue.

It was too much. The orgasm plowed into her with a twisting thrust of his hand, and Sarya came in a rush of wetness that Bannin praised as delicious and beautiful and perfect as he continued worshipping her spasming flesh.

Only when she collapsed back in a boneless heap did Bannin rise between her still-quivering thighs with his massive fist wrapped around his erect length. Sarya's breath caught. The substantial bulge she'd eyed earlier had only hinted at the enormity of the cock that jutted thickly toward her. The ferocity of his arousal darkened his stiffened shaft to an angry red, and the fat head was already dripping with seed.

Sheer need rocked through Sarya's flesh, culminating in a hard clench of her cunt. Never had anyone wanted her as much as Bannin obviously did. Yet when she spread her thighs in wordless invitation, her warrior shook his head, his features contorting into a grimace that looked akin to agony but must have been ecstasy, instead.

Roughly his fist stroked down his shaft—only once, then with a jerk of his hips and a brutal grunt, the dripping seed became an eruption that spurted in hot stripes over her lower belly.

Spent, he fell forward slightly, his softening cock a hefty weight atop the mess he'd made on her stomach, his hands braced on the table at her sides.

His broad chest heaved, and it was between those gusting bellows of air that Bannin managed a short laugh and to explain, "It wouldn't have been a good showing if I spilled after a single thrust. You'd be right to reject my courtship if I proved to be a quick-prick of a man."

When she'd opened her thighs in invitation, Sarya wouldn't have cared if he'd come after one thrust, such was her overwhelming need to feel that massive shaft moving deep inside her. Yet now heat bloomed through her cheeks and she bit her lip in mortification. She had no prevention powders, and in that haze of lust, she'd given no thought to caution.

But she should have, no matter her feelings for Bannin or his intention to court her. A pregnancy would determine much of her future path. Sarya would rather determine a path for herself, which might eventually include a child. She did not wish for one yet, however.

Some unease passed over Bannin's expression, as if similar thoughts suddenly ran through his mind. Then his gaze softened. "Come with me, Sarya. I'll find you a cottage like this and you can hide away all you like. I do not wish to leave you behind again." His large, warm hand cupped her cheek. "I do not wish to leave my heart behind again."

"Your heart?" Sarya echoed, while hers beat wildly. "You hardly know me."

Or he hadn't before yesterday, when it seemed her tongue had been eager to tell him every bit of the grief and humiliation she'd known these past three years.

"I knew everything that I needed to that first day when I learned you'd been searching all over the realm for your horse. If you hadn't found him here, I'd have gone searching with you. If you hadn't stayed here, I'd have followed."

Her emotions reeling, Sarya didn't know what to say. In many ways, she'd also learned all that she needed to know of Bannin that first day, too, when he'd been caring for his nephew and helping his sister. Though admittedly, discovering that he'd been away from Galoth so often because he'd been hunting these demons and not simply seeking adventure had filled in many of the pieces still missing.

"Let me court you," he said huskily, his thumb brushing over her lips. "Whatever you're afraid of, I'll—"

"I'm not afraid!"

"Then whatever it is you don't trust. I'll prove myself to you."

Her breath hitched. "It's just...been so fast."

"Fast?" His eyebrows shot upward. "For three years, I've been after you. Flirting with you every chance I got. I know you weren't ready for me all that time, hurting and healing. But my interest can't be a surprise."

"Yet it is. I've had one day to understand that you aren't joking when you flirt with me. That I'm not just a distraction while you visit your sister. That you're serious."

"So you aren't certain of me?" His jaw clenched, and hurt deepened the green of his eyes. Seeing his pain gripped her with the urgent need to take back her words. Yet before she could speak, his expression cleared and he nodded decisively. "That's what courting is for. To be certain. You aren't making me a promise. Just...trying me out."

His face had darkened as he spoke the last, as if it had taken a great effort to acknowledge that a courtship might not lead to something permanent.



“Clearly that’s not what *you* want,” she said softly.

“I want you standing in front of a priestess, your hand wrapped up in a red ribbon while you vow to be my wife. But if you aren’t ready, I’ll wait. I’ll wait forever for you, Sarya.”

No words could have touch her more deeply. Sarya’s heart lifted, and her voice lightened. “Will your courtship include more of what we just did?”

“Woman,” Bannin said gruffly, his mouth lowering to hover above hers, “you’ll be lucky if I ever get my head out from between your thighs.”

“Well, then,” she said breathlessly. “Let the courtship begin.”

## CHAPTER 6

## BANNIN THE BATTERING RAM

**T**he finest morning of Bannin's life began in Sarya's bed and with her mouth wrapped around his cock. And the sweetness of her cunt was still on his tongue when he stepped outside.

Suddenly, it was no longer the finest morning. Bones littered the clearing around Sarya's cottage. All human...and far more than one human.

Her face pale, Sarya stared at the horror the demon had left. "Who?"

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WORD REACHED the village quickly enough, answering the question of "who". It had been a merchant caravan that had ignored the warning signs they'd posted along the forest road...as if the demon taunted them by killing travelers in the very same area they'd searched for it the day before.

Not merely taunting them, but spitting in their faces.

Their hunt that morning was tense and silent. Luncheon began the same way, as they sat back-to-back on a fallen log. And although the anger and sickness of what the demon had done would not ease until they'd killed it, feeling Sarya against him helped diminish the immediate intensity.

And Bannin was glad she welcomed the battering ram, because he'd been brooding over something she'd said the previous night, and he'd rather not be subtle about asking.

“Why did you think I wasn’t serious?”

“Hmm?”

“Three years, and you thought I was only flirting?”

“Oh.” She leaned back more fully against him, as if to reassure him of her presence even as she said, “Well, most of your stories were ridiculous.”

“But all true.”

“Yes, but...I suspect—*now* I suspect—that you left out the hard parts.” Her voice faltered a bit. “No one wants to hear about the bones outside your home. They don’t want to hear the parts that hurt, and make you feel as if you’ve failed everyone you hoped to protect. They just want to hear about the monster’s blood and guts, and about the victory. They don’t want to hear the parts that haunt you afterward.”

That was true. And he *had* left those parts out, figuring she wouldn’t want to hear them, either.

Not that it was easy to share those parts. But for her, he’d begin making the effort.

“*And,*” she continued, “you always mentioned someone who was so overwhelmed by your heroics that you were able to charm them into bed.”

Blast it all. Put like that, it sounded much worse than he’d ever intended.

As if she could see his scowl, she challenged him, “Would *you* want me to tell you all about the people I’ve been with?”

“Not unless you intend to say how much bigger I am, and how much harder I make you come.” When she snorted, he heaved a sigh and explained, “I was trying to tell you that you’d enjoy having me. That I would know how to please you.”

“What I heard was that you fucked them and left them.” Her shrug jolted her shoulders against his back. “Why should I think I would be any different to you?”

“Because I haven’t been with anyone since meeting you.”

She stiffened. “What?”

“It’s true.”

“Three *years*?”

“There could be no one else. Not now. Not ever again.”

She was silent for a long moment. “You should have told me *that*.”

Relief pulled a laugh from him. “I hardly ever know *what* I’m telling you. You make me as nervous as a pimply little boy.”

Twisting around, she threw him a quick incredulous glance—as if to see whether he was serious *now*.

“Truly.” His gaze fell to her lips. “I want to kiss you again.”

“Now? It would be a stupid way to die.”

“The best way to die.” He grinned, and Sarya smashed her mouth to his before settling back to watch the forest again.

Then her hand slid back to grasp his. And so Bannin ate the finest luncheon of his life, watching the trees with their fingers entwined.

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“I STILL HAVE NO PREVENTION POWDERS,” she panted against his mouth.

“I’ll still make you come harder than anyone ever has,” he said.

Sarya moaned and slicked her tongue over his, yanking on his tunic—though he didn’t know if she was trying to pull it off or use it to pull him upstairs. Bannin solved both problems by dragging it over his head, then carrying her up to the bed.

The chamber was small and dark, yet he could see just enough of her skin, the gleam of wetness between her thighs when he yanked her breeches free of her feet. He kicked off

his own. She reached for him with eager hands, but he pinned her wrists to the mattress and buried his face where his entire life now seemed to pulse, groaning at the slickness that met his tongue, licking until she stopped struggling against his hold and began crying his name instead.

Her entire body surged upward when she came, just as he'd promised she would. Then she fell back to the bed, laughing and liquid, and while she was still breathless he gathered up her legs and held them tight to his chest, then shoved his rigid cock into the slippery wetness between her closed thighs. Stroking his length over her cunt. Over her clit. Again and again, his hips slapping her ass until she was shaking and writhing upon the sheets, gasping, pleading.

This time she came screaming, her head thrown back and tears darkening her lashes, her cunt convulsing against his shaft and drenching his flesh in the flood of her release. And Bannin let himself go, pounding away at the brutal ache that hadn't ceased since he'd first laid eyes upon her, and that he suspected wouldn't end until he drew his final breath.

Yet there was some relief in this moment, in the lightning bolt that was the ecstasy of holding her, tasting her, feeling her. Of making her as helpless to this need as he was.

He grunted as it became too much, jolting down through his cock, unleashing his seed in hot lashings from her belly to her breasts. Then he collapsed over her, barely catching his weight on his arms, while she was folded beneath him with her knees near her chin, laughing and breathless again.

“You *are* a battering ram,” she said.

Bannin grinned and threw himself properly next to her side, his chest heaving for air and his skin slick with sweat. There he kissed her, though it could not last while they were catching their breath.

And he *was* a battering ram. But he would not ask again—not yet—whether she would leave with him, because there was blunt and there was badgering. He would not nag her into a decision she wasn't ready to make.

Especially since nagging would likely only push her away.

Yet he wanted to know why she hadn't yet made a different choice. "Why did you never rejoin the Horse Guards? Clearly you loved what you did."

"I did," she said, then lazily stretched and turned toward him, pillowing her cheek on his biceps. "And the simple answer is that Crase was there and it hurt too much."

In Bannin's opinion, Crase deserved to hurt too much, too. Preferably from a fist in his face. "What's the complicated answer?"

Her fingers rose to his chest and she began playing with the curling hair there. "Everyone who used to fight at my side—it was as if they thought I was ten years out of practice, even though no time had passed for me. But it was more than that. The ranks were different, the relationships different...and perhaps if I had stayed, that would have all smoothed over with time. But..."

She trailed off, but Bannin could finish that for her, because it came back around to her simple answer. "The coward was there." When she nodded, he asked, "Do you wish that you'd stayed?"

Relief slipped through him when she shook her head. "I don't think I'd have healed as easily if I had." She chewed on her kiss-swollen upper lip for a moment before she said, "I have been thinking lately of going to see my parents."

"Will that mean seeing the coward?"

"Probably." She shrugged as if to say it hardly mattered. "But I've been thinking that if I just consider him as a sort of brother instead of someone I wanted to marry, it'll be easier to get along."

Bannin could not imagine loving her and then thinking of her as a sister. But he could easily imagine having a worthless brother. "It won't hurt to see him?"

"I don't think so." Her expression scrunched and then smoothed, as if she'd given a rueful shrug with her face. "Though I just realized that only yesterday."

The moment when she'd dropped her spoon, as if thunderstruck. Her mentioning it now made things easy for him, because that was something he'd planned to ask about next. "What realization was that?"

"I used to blame myself for not being enough—"

"*WHAT?*"

She grinned up at him, as if entertained by his bellowing. "Then I realized *he* wasn't enough."

Bannin had already known that, but he only said, "You *are* enough. Any man would be fortunate to have you...but you should know that I will kill any man who isn't me."

That made her laugh. "You once called it a lucky escape. And I've begun thinking that might be true. He's a fine Guard, don't mistake me. I wouldn't hesitate to fight beside him. But in other ways—as a man who'd said he loved me—I've come to realize he was more shine than steel." Her honey-brown eyes met his, held steady. "Especially now that I've got something more solid to compare him to."

Bannin's heart swelled up so big and so fast, he didn't know how his chest didn't explode. Wordlessly he hauled her closer, and ended the finest night of his life—so far—by using his mouth in far more satisfying ways than talking.



## CHAPTER 7

## SARYA THE MIGHTY

Only the faintest light peeked through the shutters when Sarya awakened in the same manner that she had every morning for almost a week now—with Bannin’s large hand cupping her breast, his solid chest warming the full length of her spine, and his engorged cock nestled along the split of her ass.

She hadn’t yet felt that thick shaft inside her. With every daylight moment spent hunting the demon, there’d been no chance to visit the village’s wise woman and secure the powders to prevent pregnancy. She’d fallen into bed each night so exhausted that much of Bannin’s particular brand of courting happened near dawn instead. More than once she’d awoken cradled against him as she was now, only to immediately find herself on her back and Bannin’s mouth upon her cunt, bringing her to orgasm before the lightening sky announced the new day.

Only one time had Sarya managed to turn the tables, because she could not easily move without waking him first. Yet now, as she remembered the hot, salty taste of his pulsating length, as she recalled the gasping, tortured groans he’d made each time she’d sucked him to the back of her throat, as she pictured the shaking tension of his body and his fists dragging at the bedcovers in his desperate attempt to maintain control—then the explosive violence of his release upon her tongue—her own arousal bloomed deep, and she *needed* to take him in that way again. Needed to watch him come undone.

Slowly she inched her body downward, her hand reaching behind to grasp his morning-hardened erection. Yet no sooner had her fingers skimmed past her own hip did she find her wrist caught in an implacable grip. His sleep-roughened voice was hot against her ear.

“What are you about, woman?”

“I was looking for my sword,” she whispered, “so when I felt something long and hard behind me, I wondered if it had slipped between us whilst we slept.”

“And why would you reach for a sword so early in the morn?” Humor filled his reply, yet Sarya’s every response was lost to her shuddering gasp when his fingers slipped into the sultry wetness between her thighs. “Do you intend to fight me?”

“I intended only to teach you.”

His teasing fingers paused. “Teach me?”

“How to wield a sword,” she said with a grin.

“You think I don’t know? I’ve wielded a sword my entire life.”

She lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug. “I’ve seen no evidence that you can do more than wrap the hilt in your fist and thrust your blade once or twice. Whereas I am a swordmaster. I even have a parchment from the Horse Guards, proclaiming me such.”

A bark of laughter escaped him, then Bannin snatched his hands around her waist and Sarya abruptly found herself on her back. “Have you forgotten the battering ram so quickly? You *do* wish to fight.”

He attempted to pin her arms over her head. Nimbly Sarya twisted away, then leapt for her prize—which had not deflated at all over the course of their sparring. Bannin caught her thigh and altered her course. Giggling, she shimmied out of his grip. He lunged after her, and though she’d not truly had any intention of fighting, her next attempt to take command of his sword instigated a wrestling contest that left her with a tangled bed stripped of its sheet, a side in stitches from laughing and

lips swollen with kisses, and ended with them both turned around with his head between her thighs and his cock in her face.

Never one to waste an advantage, Sarya declared victory with her mouth. The force of his groan shivered against her hot flesh in the moment before his tongue glided over her swollen clit. Ecstasy shuddered through her, her moan muffled as she took him deeper, her hand working the length of his shaft that she couldn't possibly take any farther past her lips. Oh, though she wished to. His cock was incredibly thick, as all of Bannin was, and utterly magnificent in its arousal. She'd never yearned for anything like she yearned to be filled with every inch.

She told him so in the moment she dragged her mouth away to suck in a breath. The confession made his erection jerk in her hand, then all control was lost, as she loved to see, as she'd hoped would be. No longer could he focus on her cunt. The instant her tongue touched his ruddy crown, he turned his face against her thigh. He gripped her ass, grunting against her soft skin when her mouth engulfed him again.

On the upward stroke, Bannin groaned that tortured groan that she loved so well. His hips pumped as she sucked him deeper, as deep as she could take him, nearly choking on the massive girth that seemed to grow harder and larger with every slide of her mouth down his length.

She was glorying in the salty taste of each drop that was a harbinger of his approaching release, when unexpectedly he bucked and rolled onto his back. Sarya clung to him, crying out when she felt his mouth upon her again, her legs widespread over his head, his stiffened tongue spearing up into her dripping sheath and thrusting in time with each downward stroke of her lips. Yet it was not long before he lost the rhythm, each lick wild and uncentered, his fingers digging into her ass, his groans ragged. Then he was simply rubbing his face into her wetness, his entire body bowing up off the bed and lifting her with it. His cock pulsed against her tongue, flooding her mouth with his seed.

Sarya could not hide her triumphant smile when the last shudder wracked his big frame. And this time she did not wrestle when he tossed her onto her back.

Bannin scowled down at her smug expression, his lips reddened, his jaw whiskered, his eyes burning. “You interrupted my courting, woman.”

Laughing, she parted her thighs. “You may proceed.”

And proceed, he did. So thoroughly that soon he was the one to look smug while she endeavored to catch her breath. Then he kissed her, just as thoroughly, and when Bannin finally eased back to her side, Sarya was certain that even if they’d fucked, she could not have felt more cherished and satisfied.

As she had been this full week. Never did Bannin put his own needs ahead of hers. And never did Bannin stop until he was certain she’d been well pleased.

Which recalled to her something she’d wondered about since the first day of his courtship. Idly stroking her fingers through the crisp hair on his chest, she asked, “They truly thought you selfish?”

“Hmm?”

“When you tested for the Horse Guards. They said you were too selfish?”

“They did.”

She frowned. Nothing of that word seemed to fit the man she’d come to know. “What did they mean by it?”

“It was those questions they ask. Whether I’d be able to put the safety of Galoth ahead of everything—even ahead of the people I love. I couldn’t say that I would. Never could I sacrifice someone I loved to save everyone else.”

She blinked at such a thought. “Neither could I.”

“Yet you passed the test.”

“I didn’t interpret it the same way. To me, the question was whether I would flee a battle with a monster to go and protect

my family. I wouldn't, because it would always be far better to fight with other warriors to destroy the threat before it ever reached my family's door."

"Huh." His brows drew in as he seemed to consider that. "Maybe I'm not so selfish, then."

She laughed. "I daresay you are not—as you've proved over and over again. Not only did you help break the stone curse and save all of Galoth, but for the past three years, you've also been killing demons in the north so that they never reach our door."

"Yet one demon got through." His intense gaze locked on hers. "Maybe it wouldn't have if there was another warrior to fight them."

Her heart thundered. "Perhaps a swordmaster?"

Without taking his eyes from hers, he nodded. "Or whatever you wish to be. And if you wish for a cottage like this, a farm—you'll have one. Or if you wish to live in Aleron's palace, I can arrange that, too. Whatever you want."

Sarya was certain of what she wanted, and it had nothing to do with where she lived. All that mattered was what she did...and she wanted to fight side by side with Bannin, keeping monsters from Galoth's door.

But she'd been so certain before—and then she'd lost everything. She could not bear to lose him now, too.

So like an utter coward, she said, "You'll give me time to decide?"

"All the time you need."

Though not all of that time would be spent with him. He'd promised to wait for her, and yet he could not remain in Galoth much longer. Only to the end of harvest, he'd said. Or until they killed the demon.

Sarya did not want him to leave. Not without her. Yet fear of losing everything again gripped her throat and the words wouldn't come. Instead she only said quietly, "I need to begin cutting the widow's field today."

Bannin's expression abruptly shuttered, but not before she saw the pain that darkened the green of his eyes. Because he'd taken that as her answer, Sarya realized. Cutting the widow's field would provide Sarya enough hay to see her animals fed through the winter here...which she would only need if she intended to stay.

She had no intention to remain. But staying was not the only reason to cut the widow's field. "I promised her," she told him. "She could not easily find someone else to do it when everyone is busy harvesting their own fields."

"Then I'll help," he said firmly. "We'll get it done faster. Hunting the demon can wait a few days."

Especially since they'd heard and seen nothing of it for nearly a full week—since it had left the bones scattered across her clearing. If the demon had moved on, eventually they'd hear of where it had gone and they'd follow.

Until then, it was better that Bannin wasn't out hunting it alone, so Sarya wouldn't argue with him about helping her. Heart full, she kissed him instead. "I appreciate it."

He caught her face in his hands. "Anything for you, woman. I mean it."

Sarya was truly beginning to believe it.

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SOME HUNTING WAS DONE that morning. Widow Elphin's farm lay on the far outskirts of the village, so Sarya and Bannin had to travel along the forest path to reach the widow's hayfield at the edge of the woods. They reached the farm without incident, though in truth, Sarya would have preferred some distraction, because she could not stop remembering the pain in Bannin's eyes when he'd believed she intended to stay. As he might *still* believe, since she hadn't told him differently.

It was a memory that haunted her throughout the morning. Scything the tall grass was a repetitive, mindless task that

allowed her thoughts to return again and again to Bannin...and why she could not simply tell him all that she felt.

It was nearing midday when she paused to drink from her waterskin. The day was hot, perfect for drying the hay before it was stored, yet she gave hardly a thought to the weather when her gaze landed on Bannin. He was halfway across the field, stripped down to a pair of loose breeches. The heavy muscles in his back flexed rhythmically with each swing of the scythe. Sweat glistened over skin burnished by the sun.

And she loved him.

Staggered by the realization, Sarya braced the blade of her scythe against the ground and watched him work, letting the emotion roll over her until it slipped in and filled her heart to bursting. She waited for the fear to follow—the fear of losing everything—yet it didn't come.

Because Bannin would not let it, she realized, and nearly laughed where she stood. Almost giddy with the understanding that came to her then.

Bannin would *never* give her up. He wouldn't have married someone else. He wouldn't have put her in a crypt. And if something happened to turn her to stone again, he wouldn't remain home and accept that it was the end. Not for one minute. Instead he would go and find the cure. And if necessary, he would battle every demon in the world while he did.

Of that, she was certain. Though she didn't know what future lay ahead, Sarya was certain that she wanted Bannin in it. Whatever challenges and tragedies they would face...she wanted to face them with him.

Beginning now.

With happiness lifting through her voice, she called to him across the field. "If you're thirsty, I've got something wet for you here!"

A drink. A kiss. Whatever he wished.

Bannin turned, yet the grin he wore contorted into an expression of horror. Abruptly Sarya became aware of how



utterly quiet it was. No birds. No bugs. Nothing but the wooden creak behind her.

Then Bannin's roar. "*SARYA!*"

She began to pivot—too late. Agony speared through her side as one of the demon's wooden vines punched through her flesh. She stumbled forward, then caught herself and swung the scythe. Another vine had wrapped around its handle. She couldn't get any force behind the blade, and she screamed when the vine impaling her side ripped fully through her stomach to wrap around her waist, as if the demon intended to drag her back into the forest with it.

Bellowing her name, Bannin charged toward them. He whipped the scythe blade through the vine connecting Sarya to the demon. The tension dragging at her suddenly slackened. Amidst a horrible shriek from the demon, Sarya fell to her knees—then gritted her teeth and snapped the long trailing end of the vine closer to her skin, so that she wouldn't trip over it and rip open her flesh.

"Run!" Bannin shouted, his face a mask of fury, his muscles coiled in preparation to defend her again. But although his scythe had slashed through a vine as thick as a finger, that blade would barely damage the tree-like trunk of the demon he faced.

Sarya stumbled to her feet. Then she ran—but only to the edge of the field, where she'd left her sword and Bannin his axe. Still impaled with part of the vine, her side screamed in agony as she bent to sweep up the weapons. Her head swam when she straightened back up. Desperately she fought the dizziness and spun back toward Bannin, the sword and axe clutched tightly in her hands.

Terror gripped her heart. Before, she'd only had a glimpse of the demon, enough to leave a frightening impression of a creature resembling a tree. But in the full light of day, the demon was a towering nightmare of twisted limbs and splintered teeth, made all the worse for being vaguely human in shape. Bannin had said it might have started as a twig, yet

the corrupted magic people carelessly used had transformed it into this malevolent *thing*—and it was trying to kill him.

A handful of severed vines lay writhing on the ground. But the demon had caught Bannin's scythe in a giant, gnarled fist. Another, thicker vine had harpooned toward his chest. Bannin fought that wooden spear now, gripping the sharp end that fought to drill through his heart, the thick muscles in his arms shaking with the effort of holding it back.

No thought did Sarya give to the agony piercing her own flesh. She sprinted toward the demon, gasping out the word to activate the charm on her sword.

Her blade burst into flames, the steel glowing white-hot. A vine shot toward her. She easily batted it out of the way, then slashed through the spear digging its way into Bannin's chest. The demon screeched, vines flailing, its massive gnarled claw swinging toward her. Her burning blade cut through the wooden block of its fist like a spoon through custard. A limb on its other side fell to a hack of Bannin's axe.

Snarling, Sarya shoved closer to the trunk and shoved her blade deep. She spoke the charm again and the demon shrieked in fury even as its bark-skin began to smoke, her sword burning it from within. Its splintered maw opened wide on a screech before flames erupted from the horror of a mouth.

Abruptly it fell silent.

Bannin's axe thudded into its side. No movement. "Dead?"

Suddenly weary, Sarya nodded. She dragged her glowing blade from the demon's wooden corpse and spoke the word to close the charm. Turning toward Bannin, she swept her gaze over him, searching for injuries. Blood trickled down his chest from a minor wound that could have been much worse had he not been so strong. Raw scrapes covered his arms and hands. But otherwise, he looked well.

Very, very well.

Sarya smiled, then huffed out a laugh, then fell. No surprise was it that Bannin caught her. His hoarse voice called her name.

Then he lifted her and she knew no more.

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IN YEARS TO COME, Sarya would not ever fully remember the journey into the village and the healer's hut. She recalled Bannin's rough and urgent voice commanding her to hold on, forbidding her to leave him.

Soon after their arrival, however, and following the blinding pain of removing the vine in her side, everything remained in perfect clarity—though it was smeared a bit by the liquor the healer gave to her to numb said pain.

As Bannin held her in his strong arms, and the healer pressed a cloth to slow the bleeding, Sarya abruptly remembered the other reason she'd intended to visit this hut.

“Do you have prevention powders on hand?”

The wise woman looked up from the gaping wound on her side. “That is not the hole you ought to be worrying about at this moment, Captain Sarya.”

Perhaps it was the concoction she'd drunk, but that was quite the most diverting thing Sarya had ever heard, until her laughter ripped at her side and left her lightheaded on a wave of pain.

She clutched Bannin's hand. “Don't leave me.”

“Never,” he vowed gruffly.

“Unless you're warded against spells, young Bannin, you'll be leaving quite soon.”

Oh. Sarya met Bannin's tortured gaze. A spell always had a mirrored reaction, though on what scale that reaction would be was impossible to guess. Healing the hole in her side would put a hole in something else—and if Bannin was within the hut instead of outside its warded walls, he could suffer either a pinprick...or a wound too big for even magic to heal.

He said hoarsely, “I'd risk it for you, Sarya.”

“But I will not risk you.” She drew a deep breath. “Before the demon came, when I called to you, it was because I had something to say. I wanted to end our courtship.”

Anguish filled his expression. “Sarya, whatever you need that I’m not giving—”

Her heart twisting at the bleakness in his voice, Sarya stopped him with her hand over his mouth. Softly she said, “We’ll end the courtship, and begin a marriage.”

“Ah.” His wide smile spread beneath her palm, his green eyes alight. Without warning, his mouth was on hers, and she could not stop her happy laugh as she returned his kiss.

“Well, that’s lovely, isn’t it?” the old healer grumbled. “She’ll bleed to death before you can marry, but yes, yes, carry on.”

Bannin broke the kiss but didn’t go far, his forehead pressed to hers and her face cradled in his hands. “I’ll be right outside that door, waiting for you.”

Sarya had not a single doubt.

---

A FULL HARVEST moon was rising overhead when Sarya came out of the hut. Instantly a wild-looking Bannin was there, falling to his knees and dragging aside the hem of her torn and bloodied tunic. In the soft yellow moonlight, he examined at her perfectly smooth skin, turning her this way and that as if to make certain it had healed all the way through. Then he pressed his face into her bare stomach, his breathing ragged.

Once again, she marveled at how this warrior made her feel so utterly cherished—and as utterly necessary to him as he had become to her.

Tenderly she combed her fingers through his hair, then gently tugged until he looked up at her. Softly she said, “I *am* completely healed.” The wounds that were visible, and the ones that were not. “But I hope you understand that, since I’m

in love with you, you are one of the few people in the world who could truly hurt me again.”

“Never,” Bannin growled, then surged to his feet, catching Sarya up in his arms as he did, cradling her against his broad chest.

She laughed. “I can walk!”

“But I can kiss you better like this,” he said, and his demonstration left her breathless, and so weak in the knees that she might not have been able to walk anyway.

His destination soon became clear as he struck away from the village on the path to her cottage. Taking her to bed, Sarya realized with a thrill. Eagerly she clung to him, and returned his every kiss.

Only once did Bannin falter in his step—as they passed the Widow Elphin’s field, where the slain demon stood like a tree with a burned out hollow, the twisted limbs still smoking. Bannin’s arms stiffened, and his kisses deepened, roughened, and she knew he was recalling the demon’s attack and her injury, and thinking of how he might have lost her. Overwhelmed by the same fears, Sarya returned each caress with the same desperate need.

By the time they entered the forest, no longer was Bannin cradling her against his chest. Instead Sarya had turned in his embrace, her thighs clamped around his hips, her arms wreathing his neck—all but riding him in her frantic desire to have the big warrior as close to her as a man could be.

Groaning against her lips, he staggered. “We will not make it to the cottage.”

Sarya panted, “I cannot care.”

Apparently neither could Bannin. He strode off the path and Sarya found herself pressed back against a tree, his mouth devouring hers. His big hand shoved between them and she cried out when a stroke of his thick fingers found her slick with her arousal and aching to be filled.

“So wet, woman,” he rasped against her mouth, then dipped his head to lick her throat, her jaw, before moving back

up to her ear. “Can you take my cock? Or do you want to wait?”

A clench of her inner muscles around his fingers answered even before she gasped, “No more waiting. Now. Now!”

His hand moved between them, tugging laces, ripping aside leather. Then she felt him against her most sensitive flesh, long and hot and thick. The muscles of his back flexed under her hands, his body pushing between her thighs, and she bit her lip against a scream of pleasure and joy when he began to sink into her, slowly working the thick crown of his erection through her snug entrance. Pain threatened as that delicate flesh stretched to accept him, yet it was pure ecstasy when he grunted and shoved deeper, the girth of his shaft forcing her narrower channel to accommodate his size.

“So tight.” His voice was thick with lust as he turned them around, so that his broad shoulders were braced against the oak’s trunk and his boots firmly braced on the ground, with Sarya straddling his hips and fully impaled on his cock.

His massive hands gripped her ass and he lifted her, riding her up and down his enormous length, and in the moonlight she saw his face—his half-lidded eyes locked on hers, the green irises glittering. His jaw was clenched, his lips peeled back in an agonized grimace, his heaving breaths gusting through gritted teeth.

Because he was holding on to the very last scrap of his control, she realized. Well, there was nothing to do but break it.

She bent her head, kissing him even as her hips lifted in his grip, as she braced her hands against the trunk at either side of his head. He grunted as she rocked, taking him deep, again and again—her own control slipping as the position was not just grinding his cock inside her but sliding her clit over the rough curls at the base of his shaft, teasing and rubbing until she was wildly riding him, tension cinching her inner walls tighter and tighter around his rigid length.

Her rhythm stuttered as the orgasm bore down upon her. Feeling how near she was, Bannin wound her up in his arms

and pounded up into her tightening sheath, his cock hollowing her out with every rough stroke. “Come for me,” he ground out against her lips. “Let me feel your hot cunt squeeze from me every drop of seed.”

His words shoved her over, her scream captured by his kiss, her hips writhing over his. Then his entire body stiffened with his thick cock lodged fully inside her, his shaft pulsing against her inner flesh as he pumped his seed deep.

She collapsed against him, utterly spent, their chests heaving together as they tried to catch their breaths.

Sensing that he was not yet ready to move—and neither was she—Sarya slipped her fingers through his hair. “Ask me again.”

His firm lips curved into a smug grin. “Whether you’ll come with me? You just did.”

She laughed. “I did. But ask again.”

His smile faded, and there was no doubt of his sincerity—or how serious he was—when Bannin said hoarsely, “I love you, Sarya. Will you come with me to fight demons? Will you marry me?”

“I will,” she said, her heart completely full. Her hands cupped his face, and she held his gaze to hers as she continued past a burgeoning lump in her throat. “I need you to know that being in love with you means that you are not simply first in my heart, Bannin—you are the *only*. Not the only one I’ll ever love, especially if we have children. But the only man for me, the only husband for me. And I vow to you now that will never change.”

His eyes gleamed in the moonlight. He swallowed hard, again and again.

Then he was kissing her, and nothing more needed to be said.

# EPILOGUE

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# BANNIN THE ONLY

## FIVE YEARS LATER

**B**annin *hated* tentacles. Especially tentacles with suckers. But the very worst were the demons with teeth inside the suckers, as he'd just discovered this one had, thanks to the row of circular bites up his leg.

Roaring, he hacked at the squirming arm—one of twenty squirming arms that this demon had—and his gaze wildly searched for Sarya. His heart stopped when the tip of a tentacle wrapped around her wrist and she cried out, dropping her flaming sword.

“SARYA!” he bellowed, rage overtaking his every thought, and he hacked and hacked, slinging inky blood and green slime across the valley floor.

A frantic whinny cleared his vision for an instant. Sarya had hauled herself into Foggy's saddle, and the stallion reared as a thick tentacle slicked toward him, the demon's giant bulbous body sliding behind.

Sarya pulled on the reins, shouted—and Foggy pivoted, kicking out with his powerful hind hooves. They slammed into the demon's body with a moist *THWACK!*—

And the demon collapsed like a punctured bladder.

Bannin blinked, staring. Waiting for it to begin attacking again.

It didn't.

Just to make certain, Bannin waded through the slimy mass of tentacles and flattened, slippery flesh and began hacking away at its head. Sarya slid from the saddle and joined him, and soon the burning stink of charred demon added to every other reason Bannin had for hating tentacles.

When the only bits of the demon left unhacked and uncharred were no bigger than his fist, he looked to his wife. “Done?”

Tiredly she nodded, smearing slime from her forehead with a swipe of her arm. Her wrist was faintly pink, but he was relieved to see that the suckers hadn't bitten deep enough break the skin.

Even as he looked her over, Sarya was examining him for wounds. "Your leg?"

"All right." Not bleeding anymore, though his breeches had seen better days. "Foggy?"

"The hero of the day." She sheathed her sword and rubbed the stallion's gray muzzle. "He deserves a medal for that one."

The old stallion deserved far more than that. Bannin's heart was still recovering from seeing her sword drop to the ground. "Still intend for it to be his last one?"

Because although the horse was still strong and fast, he wasn't as strong and fast as he'd once been. So he would be retired out to pasture, where his only duties would be to eat grass and being put to stud.

Already Sarya had been training several of his foals. More would come, but Bannin knew that of all her mounts, Foggy would always be first in her heart.

Eyes suddenly glistening, Sarya bit her lip and nodded. A second later she was in Bannin's arms, her face buried in his neck, and the faint swell of her belly pressing against his hip.

He rubbed his hands up and down her back. "And our last one, too?"

"For now." Her voice was muffled.

Because there would come times when they were needed to fight demons, but for now...the child she carried would come first for them both. As it was, in the past year they'd been splitting their time between battling demons and training warriors to fight them. But while their children were young, he and Sarya would move to training all the time.

And when their children were older...well, they would decide when the time came.

Sarya peeked up at him. “I’m waiting for my battering ram.”

Shouting out a laugh, Bannin swept her up in his arms. That first time, years ago against the forest demon, Bannin hadn’t intended to make a tradition of fucking her after a successful battle—yet each time, relief and love for her carried him away. Sometimes it was a desperate affirmation that they were still alive. Other times, such as this one, it was simply fun.

And he’d never been able to resist her.

He looked around for a boulder, a tree, a grassy bit of ground—anywhere that would serve as their bed, whether upright or laying down—but there was only slime and blood, so he braced his legs and lifted her, fumbling with laces, laughing between kisses. Then he was inside her, her sheath so snug and wet, his happiest home. She gasped against his lips, then made him go slow, so slow, her honey-brown eyes meeting his, her love shining from them like gold.

“My only,” she murmured—and how she made his heart burst without killing him, Bannin still didn’t know.

It was some kind of magic she had.

## A Note From Kati

I hope you enjoyed Sarya and Bannin's story! When Read Me Romance asked me to write a short story for their podcast, of course it was a Dead Lands tale! And since I loved Bannin so much after writing **The Midsummer Bride**, I decided to give him a happily ever after.

This novella was originally only supposed to be as long as **The Stoneheart Bride** (about 50 pages) simply due to the constraints and expense of producing the audiobook. However, the story kept getting longer and longer...until I realized that the podcast version and the ebook version were simply going to have to be different.

The audiobook version takes the core of the story and the conflict and only presents it from Sarya's point of view — and entirely skips over Bannin's fear of being second. And although the audiobook presents *a* complete story, it wasn't the *full* story that I wanted to tell. So in this ebook version, I expanded the romance to include chapters from Bannin's point of view, added a bit more action, and widened the emotional scope. And of course, included a map and an epilogue!

We will likely see Bannin and Sarya again in my upcoming fantasy series, **Daughters of the Hunt**. Before that, look for **Only One Bed**, an enemies-to-lovers contemporary holiday story.

Happy reading!

Kati

## ALSO BY KATI WILDE

**Questions? Contact Kati at [kati.wilde@gmail.com](mailto:kati.wilde@gmail.com)!**

(Except for *Going Nowhere Fast*, all ebooks are in Kindle Unlimited. An asterisk (\*) indicates that a discreet print version is available. Visit [katiwilde.com](http://katiwilde.com) for more links and info.)

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