

6 Northward

Mirrager lit his pipe and settled back into the saddle, letting the smoke linger in his hood as he blew it out into the stiff breeze.

He was not pleased to be going back.

Not pleased, but willing to make the most of a burden. The pipe helped some; the beauty of the mountains helped too.

In times of war, it was common to be given a goal to achieve, with little guidance on how to compete it. Fair enough, he could do that. This one though, was the opposite. He was told merely to ride back to the edges of the savage lands, where he had been taken as a boy. He was to ride further in, too, if need be. Above all else, though, he was to return the moment he had seen anything of note.

Anything of note? It was all of note, surely, depending on what one wanted to know, to do, or – as is so common in the minds of kings and queens – to conquer.

Gunthrin didn't want to conquer the high western lands though... there was nothing much there. Trees, yes, but many trees grew in the Southmarch too, and were cheaper and easier to get home.

No, there was some secret reason for him to be there. Some rumor, likely, of invasion from the raiders.

Mirrager himself dismissed such words. He knew the people well, and one constant in his years with them had been the fragmented nature of their tribes and clans. Raiding. Stealing. Squabbling amongst themselves – that was the threat of the north.

He grunted, blew out a generous cloud of smoke as he did so, and rode onward. He would go through Kimberland, through the hills to Normarch, then follow the coast up to Norvale and west to the pass. He would be riding in cooler weather, true, but he didn't mind that, and wanted only to get the journey over with as soon as he could. He liked a ride, a bowl of tobacco, and fresh mountain air...

But he had no desire to see the barren lands of his captivity again.

None.

"In the mines? Really?" Asira asked with an excitement and interest Dule had not encountered before.

"Yes."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"I suppose it can be. Most of the men though, they stay in line."

"No, I mean the mines themselves. Don't they cave in, sometimes?"

"Sometimes, if the men are not skilled."

"Have you seen it?"

"I have," he nodded, "but I am not a pickman. I stay to the main tunnel most of the time, to keep an eye on the comings and goings of the men. I make sure they aren't planning any harm, one to another."

"And the main tunnel won't cave in?"

Dule shook his head.

"Still, it sounds terribly exciting."

Dule smiled. This little handmaiden had a way of making the blood rush to his face, and the heat of it made him feel even more awkward and tied his tongue. She was pretty. Not pretty in the way that Erdith was, with her pouty lips and ample bosom fighting to be freed of her apron... but something better. She made him smile, even when he didn't quite know why.

The two of them had been chatting since Leopeld left them on some errand of his own. She had shown him the servants' quarters they had been given, and some space was found for him in the end of the long room. He had no window, but said he didn't mind the closed in space. Asira offered him the view from her own window, whenever he liked.

"No need," he had said, "I am used to the mines."

He had felt stupid after saying it, realizing that he had just shut down the chance to talk to the pretty young thing. She wasn't really his type – his usual companion was more deliberate in her beauty, he supposed – and Asira was a little thick around the middle for one so slight otherwise... but that seemed a small flaw. Her face was alight, her skin smooth and clear, and her hair long and shining in the little sunlight that stole in through the open doors of the individual rooms. Yes, despite the differences, she intrigued him, and his misstep would have plagued him had his comment about the mines not piqued her interest and kept them talking.

"Perhaps," he said, as if just coming upon the idea, "A look from the window might be nice now and then – for fresh air and light."

She smiled and nodded. "Any time. If I am not here, simply go in and open it up yourself. I don't mind."

They talked on, letting half an hour slip by unnoticed until Leopeld returned and grinned at the sight of the two of them, locked in fumbling chatter.

"The road has been long, dear girl," the bard broke in, "and I have never known King Gunthrin's walls to lack bread or even gravy, for weary travelers."

"Oh, yes! Apologies to you both – I lost myself in fair meetings." She glanced at Dule, though the words were said to the older man. "I will take you up and we shall see what the cooks can spare for you."

As they ate, the table spread with bread and sweet jam and butter, with a small stack of thick-cut cheese, they talked and took liberal drinks of ale and milk, as the mood struck them, and recounted the road from Thorngraad and Dule's initiation into life on the back of a horse.

"I tell you he started like a sack of potatoes," Leopeld laughed, causing Asira to bring a hand up over her mouth to keep from losing her food, "But, aside from one mishap, he was as easy on the beast by the end of the trip as he had been on his own couch before."

"A mishap?"

"No, please, Leopeld," Dule shook his head with a bashful smile, "Don't tell it. Spare me this, I beg you!"

"Oh he must," Asira said, laying a hand on Dule's arm as she did so, "Give him leave to tell me – I do so need a laugh."

Dule, reddening again with the touch, nodded and stared at his bread.

"It was morning," the bard began, in full storytelling mode, "And the clouds were rolling down the from crags above us, letting spears of sun strike down on new-green meadows. With a groan and a great stretch, this brute turns to me and says, as cocky as a new rooster, 'I think I've mastered this riding thing, old man, and could teach you a thing or two if you want me to.' Well as the last word fell from his bragging lips, a falcon dove from above and shot past the nose of his horse and the fell beast took a terror from it. I saw Dule's head lurch backward, his feet rise high above him, and he held on like that, his legs spread to the heavens and his shoulders sliding side to side across the rump of the beast as it kicked and dove over the trail!"

Both Dule and Asira were laughing along at this point, but with true skill, the bard leaned in, and a pall of seriousness brought quiet to the trio.

"In truth," he said, "The sides of the trail were rimmed with sharp rocks where we were, and my heart was here, pressed up against my chin as I saw him clinging to the horse with all of his might. I would not have thought any man capable of holding that grip, not even a great slab of meat like this one," he smiled, "But he did, just long enough to round the bend by a stream that tumbled down from the snows above. One hand's grip failed,

then his body turned and the other gave way. He kicked and fought the air, but air is always the victor in such times, and it was to no avail."

Asira's left hand was at her mouth then, and the other gripped Dule's forearm.

"Down he fell, struck hard against a mossy bank, and crashed, with a shriek like dying rabbits, into the icy waters! Well, he was up and lunging for the shore, wet and red and huffing like an ox under plow, until he set foot on the edge and looked up at me with such a look of surprise and wonder and rage... Then he must have gained a vision of how he looked there, cut down a peg from his bragging and cocksurety, he burst into laughter and the two of us came to tears twice over before we could collect ourselves enough to get after the beast and light a fire to dry poor Dule out."

He smiled at the big man.

Dule smiled in return.

"I would hate to have seen you hurt, my friend. I have grown fond of you on our short trip, and would take it ill."

Dule nodded his agreement, his mutual friendship, and chewed his bread.

"Now," Leopeld continued, this time leaning in toward Asira as if the three were conspirators planning some crime, "Tell me of..."

"Of?" she asked, suddenly reddening much as Dule had done.

"You are with child, are you not?"

She pulled her hand from Dule's arm, as if his arm burned her, and glanced at him and the old man in turn. "I... I..."

"Do not mistake me," he continued, "I am not one to chastise such things. I have three children, each to mothers across the realm, and I've not been married a day in my life. You will find no scolding in my voice or heart."

"You are a man."

"Yes."

"It is different."

"The consequences, or gifts, yes – those are different – but it is no less right or wrong, is it, for one than for the other?"

Asira began to form a word, then pulled it back in.

Dule sat open-mouthed but mute.

She tried a second time to speak, but with the same result. Then she stood, moved her mouth as if to excuse herself, and hustled from the room, leaving the two men there, the one in dumbfounded surprise, the other, with a knowing smile.

"Is she okay?" Dule asked the old man.

"If she is not, there is little you could do to ease it, unless you seek a wife. No, this is a reality she has been hiding from, and it was time a friend pulled away the veil."

"You did that on purpose? Knowing how she would react?"

"Guessing how, yes. It went as I thought it might. I did this for her... and I did it for you."

"For me?"

"A good bard is never far from love, if he wants it," Leopeld explained, staring at the empty doorway through which Asira had fled. "I have seen many women take a shine to men, and there was no mistaking that look in her eye when it fell on you. That hand on your arm was no accident either. It is their way, to hide their strategies and strengths under guises of innocence and weakness."

"Surely she is no such wanton woman!"

"No, not wanton, and not vile – but 'woman,' yes, she is that. It is the way of her kind. They do not have the strengths of men, not usually, and so they find other weapons, other armor, and train in other skills. Their strength is a more subtle one, or the bullies would beat it out of them."

"She is..." Dule began, then faltered.

"Yes, I agree, she is a fine young woman. And now, should you wish to pursue her, or just to spend some time in her company, it will be with your eyes open, and hers. It is my gift to you."

"It is a strange gift."

"The gifts of all bards are strange, Dule. It is both our curse and blessing."

"But now what am I to do. She is upset."

"Yes," the old bard nodded, "She is. She may be so later, or she may not. As for what you do now, it depends on what you want. That is a path for which I can give you no guidance. Each man is his own king when it comes to love. As for this man, he is tired... I am off to rest my bones and eyes."

As he rose, Leopeld patted Dule on his huge shoulder and then walked from the room.

The big man sat in thought, alone, for a long time.

Asira fled at first toward her room. Then she stopped and altered her course. Dule might seek her there, and she did not want to face him. Worse yet, he might not seek her there, and she would spend the remains of her day glancing at the empty doorway, wondering why he did not come. No, the best place to be, would be somewhere he would not expect to find her, or could not do so.

A thought occurred. Before she could banish it, her feet moved toward the stairs and up she rose.

She did not know the way, had never been there, but she had been born to a castle and knew the general thinking involved in the layout. The room she sought would be higher up. High enough for fresh air when wanted, and for safety from those outside the walls who might seek to harm those within. It would be away from the gate, and would have a view of something beautiful, more than likely. She had a general sense of where the main building lay and she chose whichever passages went up or in that direction. When at least she saw a room with thick rugs laid out neatly on the cold stone floors, she knew she was close.

"You," she heard a sharp woman's voice from behind her, "Who are you? Where are you going?"

Sucking in a breath of courage, Asira turned and faced the woman, eye to eye, and looked her swiftly from toe to forehead. A lady in waiting, or perhaps a housemaid of some standing. Graying hair, sharp eyes, and hands used to hard work.

"I am looking for High Lady Kreegs. You can assist me with direction, if you know the way."

"Know the way? Yes, I do. But what business have you with the likes of her?"

"I am her lady in waiting," Asira asserted, pressing her situation to a place of more formality than perhaps it warranted, "She will be expecting me by now – I was longer than expected in getting some of the servants settled and fed."

"The feeding isn't up to you..."

"And yet they were hungry, and so it seems it was." It was a risky move, trying to rise above this older woman in her own home. Tip the wrong way and she not only would get no help, but she may be boxed about the ears and sent squealing down the way she had come.

But it did tip the right way... just.

"Very well then," the older woman said, her head still and her expression less than sure. "No need to be talking of hunger and feeding, and who does what. If you are who you say you are, then no harm in putting you on the right way. It's there," she said, pointing across the hall, "up that passage and to the stairs on the left. One level up, though it's a tall one. Your lady's door is the one with the silver petrel on it, wings spread wide."

"My thanks," Asira curtsied and spun to leave.

"She is not likely there though," the maid continued, "If it is the lady herself you seek, rather than the chambers."

Asira turned, but said nothing.

"She cares for the young lord. His room is higher up by one. The door atop the stairs. Down the hall from there are the chambers of the king himself."

With another nod of thanks, and no desire to wait for the maid to grow any more suspicions than were already apparent, Asira crossed the hall, mounted the stairs, and continued upward until she stood outside of Lady Kreegs' room.

She paused.

To go in would be to push past protocol; she was not, after all, truly lady in waiting to Lady Kreegs. She could stand there and wait. Perhaps no one would question it. But if someone did, she did not think she had the will left in her to face down another servant or, worse yet, some noble or person of standing in the great castle. Leopeld's remark had come like a slap of frigid water. And there, in front of the handsome miner from the capital. Of course she was nothing to him, just a foolish waif, and so he could be nothing to her either... but he had been warm. Kind. Why had the bard blurted out such a thing? Why couldn't he have asked her in secret, if he wanted to know?

Footfalls from below jarred her from her thoughts and she set one foot ahead of the other again until she had mounted the next stairs and stood at the top, a long hall to her left ending in a great carved door and jamb with guards standing either side of it. Ahead of her was a heavy door with a golden rising sun embedded into the wood.

Eric's room.

She could not stay outside of this one unquestioned. Even then, she could feel the eyes of the guards from down the hall scrutinizing her.

Her small fist rose, and rapped on the door.

A moment later Lady Kreegs herself opened it, a look of mild surprise on her face. She smiled a small smile at the sight of Asira.

But she did not step aside.