

Chapter 7: Shadowed Hopes

Dule looked for Asira, from her tiny room to the courtyards and even gazed out through the gate at the road and the little side clearings within view of it. The stables. Kitchens. Woodhouse.

Nothing.

She had been there longer than he had, and knew many of the people; it was likely she knew some secret place to hide and nurse her shame.

But she did not need to hide.

She need feel no shame.

Not many moments had passed, after he and Leopeld spoke, before something in Dule stirred and brought forward thoughts long carried, and seldom brought out into the open of his waking thoughts.

Family.

It wasn't a good fit with the image of the free-dealing, womanizing, scrapper that he had nurtured most of his life, but it had always been there. Lurking. Leavening. A yearning for something more real. Less exciting? Maybe. But as he thought more on it, maybe not. Maybe this would be an adventure beyond anything a smoky tavern or raucous wrestling match could bring.

And perhaps Asira was his answer. And he hers.

It didn't bother him that the father was someone else. He had lain with women many times and with little meaning in it, for many of them. He could become her meaning. Meaning for the child too. And Dule himself: husband. Father. Master of a lively house of a growing family.

And with the money the High King was paying him, he could do it.

But first, he had to find the girl.

Gueninna looked down at Eric's sleeping form and chewed her lip. She had not expected Asira to come to them, not yet. Eric had awakened the day before and met Gueninna's eye, held it. He dozed a while but then awoke again and stayed so for nearly an hour before his eyelids sank again and his breathing fell into the rhythmic cadence it had been in for the past months.

But deeper. This time, Gueninna was sure, the breaths were deeper. Stronger. His hold on life less tenuous.

But now also there were things to be considered, and little time before choices were to be made. Fates decided. When he woke and could speak again, there were things that needed to be discussed. She was no novice to court politics, and she knew that whoever the child may be, boy or girl, there would be scheming and plotting surrounding the little soul from the very beginning. An heir. A key to alliance. A threat to some rival for power.

The child would be fought for, hunted, protected and targeted for death. All around it, boy or girl, would be peril, treachery... and yet loyalty, too, from some. The trick was to divine who were the enemies and who were the friends. She had failed in that, once upon a time, to her own peril. The child must have those around to help. To try to clear a way to success and safety. Without that, the child would not see a second year of life. Perhaps not a first. It had always been that way, and she saw no reason why it wouldn't be so still.

And then there was the issue of what to do with the maid who bore the child. Marriage was out of the question. Such matches had been made before, of course, but by established, powerful lords who fell in love and already had heirs and alliances in place. They had few above them who could object, and they were less likely to bow to the wills of others, even then. They had real power. For Eric it would not be so. He was young. His lands had fallen. He was an orphan and landless, despite his title and his budding fame.

But he had her. The child had her.

She would wait. See him wake. Talk to him, gently of what had come to pass, and she would convince him to take the child as his own, and to give the girl a comfortable living, in the shadows or away in some village, safe and happy as she could be.

He might reject the child. She knew this to be a possibility. But with a frown she exiled those thoughts from her mind. Eric had been a good boy. He was a good man. He would do the right thing by the child, and its mother.

He would.

She busied herself with the duties of a nurse and lady, and the young lord slept on.

Artun stood by the window in his private chambers and stared out at the cliffside across the north branch of the city. The cliff was red with the fading light, its base already in shadow. Lights flickered on here and there, and wains were trundling down from the mouths of the mines despite the late hour. He had ordered it to be so. The mining seldom stopped, even in days of peace and security, but as of that afternoon, they had been ordered to double their efforts, to bring forth iron and any other useful ores from the rock, as quickly as could be done, and all for the city's own use. No exports to other marches. The cost was no barrier to him. Only time ticked by relentlessly, never to return again. It was time alone against which he raced.

Patrayin Uman, mage of the palace, had returned to the room in which Artun had waited, and the old man's face had been pale. His eyes a touch of wildness in them. When the king demanded to know what the man had seen, Patrayin took a long time to tell him.

"I am your king," Artun had said, "and I command you loose your tongue."

"It is not from disobedience that I hold my words," the uman had said, "but from a lack of the words themselves."

"Did you see the enemy?"

The old man nodded.

"And are they strong? Do they have many men?"

"I am no general, my king, but there seemed to be many men. Hundreds of men. Women too, and all of them equipped for war."

"And do they move toward us?"

He shook his head.

"They do not come this way?"

"I... I fear they will, in time, but it was as if they waited for something. For someone perhaps. I felt a great void there. Fell magic, even. There was a darkness on them and it centered around a figure whose form I could not clearly see, but..."

"But?"

"I felt as if I had been seen. As if my presence was not unknown, as it should have been."

"Another uman?"

The old man hesitated.

"Speak! Was there a mage there?"

"I do not know. What I felt there was not the ether of the planes; I felt something else. I know not what it was, or from whence it came, but it was... I did not care for it."

"You did not care for it?" The king's anger was welling up, fueled by his anxiety over what he had just heard.

"I was... in truth I was... afraid." The old man's eyebrows furrowed, as if the words were as much a surprise to him as they were to the king. "I have experience in many things, many roads of the arcane arts, but this was something else. If a guess were demanded of me, I would venture that it was perhaps... a Fey influence I was feeling."

The king stared at him. A small, breath-like word fell from his lips, as if he himself were speaking it again to make sure of its meaning, "The Fey?"

"I cannot be sure. But yes. I suspect it is perhaps so – from what my old master taught me, when I was a smooth-skinned acolyte at his wizened feet."

Neither man had spoken then, for long moments. Then the king commenced.

"You are to tell no one of this. It is a royal secret. Do you understand?"

"I do, my king."

"You will look again, when you are able, and will tell me more of what you see. If there are changes, you come to me. If none, you send word that it is so."

Patrayin bowed in obedience, though his reticence was clear.

The king left him then, stopped briefly at Gherrin's little hut by the pigeons, and then returned down the long stairway, to the dim confines of his room. There he sent messages to a dozen key men in the city, and word for Algar to join him. Then he waited, with nerves raw and humming. In minutes that crept by like days, his advisor entered the room, and did not need to see more than the king's face to know that all was not well in the west.

War was coming.

For two days Gueninna remained in Eric's room, and for most of those two days the young lord slept. It seemed to her that the progress he had made in healing from his terrible wounds might have been a false hope. Perhaps the damage deep inside him had proved too much, and his bright life would be cut short.

On the third day she began to feel the restlessness of the sequestered, and felt a time outside, in the fresh breezes would do her good. She could have stood on the balcony of the chamber, as she had done many times in the previous days, but she had another thing in mind as well. She had conferred with the healers, and they had been to see the young man several times, bringing remedies, such as they had, with them – but she knew there was another man in the castle, one whose fame had reached her ears in the west. His voice was praised, his songs welcomed, but with these traits came also rumors of great healing. It was said that his hands could pull fevers from children, and ease the pain of a birthing mother, and that his music calmed the frantic dreams of wounded men.

Eric had no such dreams, as far as Lady Kreegs knew – but his spirit had seemed to recede backward, deeper into his mortal flesh. Perhaps the songs of this man, or his healing touch, might bring young Eric out again, through this trial at last.

Leopeld, the bard's name was, and she was determined to find him and bring him to see the sick man. It was a last hope, perhaps, but not a faint one.

Her steps took her through the main hall and out into the courtyard. She knew her way. She walked with confidence down the stairways to the long hall the visiting servants would be using, ignoring the stares and curious looks from those she passed. At last, at the foot of the stairs, she paused to listen. Laughter. Cheerful words. Ah, there it was, the plaintive plucking of strings while words were spoken. She followed the sound. As she stepped through the opening into the crowded storeroom, filled with the melodies of music and the stomping and banter of a dozen loitering house servants and stable folk, the noise fell to the floor like a dropped blanket, and all was still.

A pause.

"Welcome, my lady," Leopeld was the first to speak and did so with a bow. "Have you come for music? I am to sing for the nobles this very evening, in the hall of feasting. This here is just..." he paused as if finding the right word, "a few chords amongst friends, and such news as interests simple folk, such as ourselves."

"I am sure your music here would please noble ears as well as common ones," Gueninna said, matching his courteous manner, "but that is not why I have come. May I have a word with you – for you are Leopeld, are you not, the bard who of times has sung in the Westmarch?"

"I am he," he said, "and have sung in many places throughout each of the marches, and some little beyond as well. The years have worn hard on me, I know, but I recognize you as if I had seen you a month past – you have not changed Lady Kreegs, and you could still inspire a song with a glance."

She did not reply to this except with a light smile, and she receded a little, back out through the door, but letting her eyes linger on him, as if for assurance that he would, indeed, follow her from the room.

And so he did.

They walked wordlessly through the passages, retracing the steps she had just made until they reached Eric's room again and they stepped inside. Gueninna started, at first, and then composed herself and curtsayed – King Gunthrin was there, sitting on the padded stool beside Eric's sick bed.

Leopeld bowed low.

"He seems better," the king began, his eyes falling back to look on Eric's face."

"He has been of late," Gueninna nodded, "But he has slept long, this time."

"Still, there is a ruddiness in his cheeks again... some color, as a healthy young man should have."

All three looked on the sleeping form. It was Gueninna who spoke next.

"I have asked Leopeld the Bard to come," she said, "thinking that perhaps some gentle music might soothe him and help him to heal."

Gunthrin looked the bard over. "It wouldn't harm him, I suppose," he said, the habitual diplomacy of a king blending with the practical beliefs of an old soldier.

"Shall I begin?" Leopeld asked, stepping forward and bringing his lute to playing position in front of him.

"You shall, if the lady wills it," the king said through a grunt as he rose from the stool, "but alas I will miss it. I have things to attend to. I look forward to your music and your news and tales with the feasting tonight."

"And you shall have it, Your Royal Highness," Leopeld replied in the proper form, then he stepped aside to give the king an unbroken path to the door.

"Thank you," Gueninna said, her hand touching the king's arm as he passed, "for coming to see him. He would like that, I know."

Gunthrin nodded. "He is my ward and... and my heir. I will come to see him again, when time allows."

Gueninna curtsayed low, taking in the open statement that Eric was now, indeed, next in line for the kingship of Southmarch. All of the fears and complexities she had been considering renewed themselves then, three times over. With the relationship now official and in the open, both allies and enemies would sharpen blades and raise shields for and against him. It had begun.

As the word passed through her thoughts, a light chord was struck behind her, and the bard moved forward toward the sleeping lord, his fingertips pulling soft and subtle tones from the fine instrument, each of these blending with its fellows until the melody rose above the chord and began to wander, to dance, to rise and fall on the current of the beautiful minor key he played. Into this a smooth tone slid, then swelled into a clear vocal note that rose and fell once, then again, riding on the surface of the music like a bird on a coastal swell. The bard's song was without words, but his voice sounded like

another instrument, played upon the skillful foundation of the lute, and the whole of it stirred Gueninna's heart, soothed her tight fears, and brought an ease and depth to her breathing.

She had assumed that the bard had played along with her ploy to the king that Leopeld was there only to play music, but now, having heard it and felt its effect upon her own person, she felt that perhaps she misunderstood, that perhaps it was through the power of the music itself that healing might come. Calmness. Peace. A stillness that she could barely resist, and did not want to.

She drew close to the sleeping form, with the bard standing serenely beside her, lulling both of them with his still, and there she sat, motionless, and bathed in the sounds of a master.

Her soft feet slipped down the stone staircase with little more rustle than a mouse would make. She reached the floor of the inner servants' hall and saw the orange glow of sunset on the floor of her doorway. The sun set in the west, but her room faced mostly eastward, so the skies must be on fire with the evening colors to throw themselves even through her little window. Good. She needed some beauty, and some relief from the turmoil she felt. The loneliness. Abandonment. She stepped into her doorway and froze.

Dule turned and looked at her. "I wanted to... to make sure you were okay."

She nodded.

"What the old man said, about you being, you know – he shouldn't have. It wasn't his place." He hurried on as her face reddened. "But I'm glad he did."

She met his eyes. Expecting condemnation, or even pity to be in them, she instead saw something else. She couldn't place it at first.

"That is a strange thing to be glad of."

"What I mean," he continued, "is that I do not see it as an evil thing."

Her eyes flashed anger then, and he fumbled.

"What I mean is that you didn't do anything others have not done. So many in my city fall into a child way and simply marry afterward, or the child goes to a mother, or sister."

"My child will be with me," she stated, setting her jaw as she did so. She imagined Eric turning his back on her as Gueninna barred her way to him, betraying a promise so recently made. She imagined being cast out of Thorngraad, into the wild lands without protection or means of living. Her anger faded in the light of fear and despair.

"Of course. I only meant that the father isn't here, and you are, and-"

"And what is that to you? I barely know you. You know me not at all. What is it to you, what the father and I do or decide?"

At this Dule paused. He had not considered that the father might still be in her life; in the child's life. Perhaps even, the man was here amongst the servants, perhaps listening in of his fumbling speeches even then. She was not alone then, not in need.

The big man nodded, mumbled something that might have been an apology, and left her room, his eyes studying the wall as he passed her and moved out toward and up the stairs.

She watched him, her flash of anger and despair fading. Her mind brought his face back to her inner eye and all at once she identified the emotion she had first seen on him.

Had it been hope?

And then her inner eye shifted in time and saw the face that had left her, and the hope – that beautiful hope – was gone.

She closed her door and shuttered the window and curled up in her shift beneath the blanket on her bed. As the heat of her body warmed the cool bed, transforming it into a cozy nest, she frowned and pondered the day, those in it, and the part she had played. Mostly she had been rolled along through it like a branch in a stream. A lot of that lately. Too much.

She rolled over, pulling the blanket under her and then settling back to pin it down under her, creating a bundle of herself in the warm bed. She stared at the wall a while, then felt her eyelids growing heavier.

Tomorrow, she told herself, I will let off being the branch and instead become the stream. Or at least I will grasp a pole and try to steer myself.

And she fell into dreams of boats and tumbling waters, until the calls of the terns and gulls awoke her in the predawn glow.