

## Old Friends and New

The sun was high when Dule crested the ridge and saw Thorngraad below him in the distance, a dark cluster of spikes jutting up over the sparkling waters of Westbay in the Glekmull. He didn't know the names of the waters, or the landmarks around him, of course, but he knew what Thorngraad was. Thorngraad was the centre of promise and threat. He had spoken to a blue-robed man at length. That is, the blue-robed man had spoken to him at length; Dule himself had mostly listened, gazed at the unfathomable riches around him, and asked only what he needed to know to get out of there again.

King Artun had asked a favour of him.

Even with no experience in dealing with titled lords, Dule knew what a favour for a lord really was: an order, wrapped in perfumed velvet for the sake of pride and decorum... but an order, nonetheless.

It had been made clear to him that fulfilment of this task would bring many benefits to him. He could buy a home of his own, or at least a better tenancy within a better district of the city. Gold would come with it too, or silver at least, and with that could come a permanent woman. Children.

A family.

All that sparkled to his eye and warmed his bosom had been dangled in front of him, but that was merely one side of a two-sided coin.

On the other side, it had been made clear, below the velvet and perfume, that refusal to take on this will of the king would mean disfavour, loss of income, unwelcome status at best – exile or accidental death at worst.

Without saying any of it, the blue-robed man had made everything clear. Both sides of the coin, as well as the fact that the choice between them was unavoidable. The king had seen him walking the evening streets, confident, at ease with those he saw, both strange and known, and yet with his full prowess

and power on full display. Artun had recognized him, from somewhere, and Algar, the man in the blue robes, had enlightened his lord: The man was the one who had won the wrestling contest at the harvest fete, toppling the giant miller in all three rounds of the final bout, leaving the defeated man with a broken wrist in payment for his resistance.

Yes, Artun remembered.

Algar did not question his king's whim in choosing an unknown man, simply on an impression of him in the evening light. It would have been useless to do so, once the king had an idea in his head, but there was more to it than that. Algar had been in the king's service for more than a decade, and he had seen such whims come to fruition, to the king's benefit, time after time. The advisor did not know what luck or blessing Artun had upon him, but whatever it was, Algar was happy to go along for the ride. His king wanted the wrestler, his king would have him.

At the end of their talk the king himself passed by the room where the two men waited. 'You will do this for me?' he asked Dule, his piercing gaze boring right into him, it seemed.

Dule nodded. 'Yes, uh, Your Majesty.' His own gaze dropped to the floor.

'Good. That will please me.'

The king then turned and left the room, Algar following after him. Dule was left in the care of another man, who led him to the stables, gave him a horse, provisions, a short sword, dagger, and other gear. A second man was there too, a bard in the grey years, yet still vital, with his own horse and gear and a lute strung over his back on a leather strap. From the horn of his saddle hung a small bag out of which popped the head of a small, orange cat. It looked around the room as if startled, gave a single, slow blink, and disappeared within the bag once more.

'That's Cabbage,' the grey bard said, his voice smooth and rich, 'and I'm Leopeld. I'll ride with you. Show you the way.'

Dule nodded his greeting, but did not give his name. 'The mine,' he said to the men who were outfitting them for the trip, 'my job...'

'It is the king who asks this of you,' one of them answered, 'if you need your job it will be there for you when you return. If you do not, it will not matter.'

*If I do not return, or if I do not need it,* Dule wondered as he put a foot in the stirrup and was hoisted up by an ostler to sit, unsettled, atop the horse.

Leopeld chuckled. 'Not a horseman, I see. No fear, you will be by Thorngraad.' He clucked once and his mount stepped forward, out from the stable and into the streets of Freynar.

Dule followed in the same manner.

The bard had not been wrong. Some three weeks in the saddle had set Dule's hips and thighs on fire, at first, but he sat the beast now as one who had been born to it. They had taken the winding tracks alongside the mountains, slow at first, as he grew accustomed to the ways of mounted travel, and then the bard stepped up the pace, belying his apparent age with a show of endurance that impressed even the standards of the giant wrestler.

And now they looked down at Thorngraad under the heat of the late morning sun. By evening, they would be there.

The trail took them east of the castle, through a cover of trees for a few miles and then out onto an exposed road along the seaside cliffs. Dule had never seen such a sight. The vastness of the open space threatened to make him dizzy, and the height of the cliffs carried out the threat the space had made. He gripped his saddle and felt a lurch in his stomach.

Leopeld chuckled. 'Eye Hirrith's head as you ride him, right between the ears. That will ease your discomfort.'

'How do you stand it? I feel as though it will suck me into it.'

'Yes, it is like a sky laid on its edge... but you get used to it. You are not the first from Freynar who has lived most of his life in the confines of the rift. For a man from here, your home would seem like a tiny box... a prison cell, even.'

'I can't imagine it.'

'And yet it is so. There are men who are born to the sea who would rather drown than live on land at all.'

Dule stared between his horse's ears and felt his body ease a little.

‘Do not worry, as you spend time in the castle, the walls will sooth your eyes once again. Thorngraad is a good size, as castles go in the Marches, but it is still a castle, dark and damp for the most part... you’ll love it.’

Both men chuckled as they rounded the final bend in the road and saw the walls and towers up ahead.

It was beautiful. The sun was low enough to cast sharp shadows across it, yet still high enough for them to see the contours and colours of the place. It was big, as Leopeld had said, but still it was smaller than the palace at Freynar, to Dule’s eyes. In reality, the condensed layout of Thorngraad, if compared pace for pace to the palace carved into the cliffs of the Rift, would not have been too much smaller. Less impressive, by a long count... but not much smaller. Had it been a man from nearly any other part of the Marches, who had not seen Freynar or its palace before, Thorngraad would have had the opposite effect. For Dule, though, this place would be a mission to a small cocoon of familiar confines within a dizzying vast world of space.

The road swung out with the coastline, then back in, under the full gaze of a line of seaside windows. Within one of them, seen by the riding men but too far to make out much through the glare of the sun, a young woman perched upon the sill of her chamber window, like a gull, and watched their approach with interest.

Asira stared at the two men. One was old, and bearded. He reminded her a little of Erogel. The other, though, was the one who caught her attention and held it. He was big, like the champion whom Dirridain had fought at Crogmoor a seeming lifetime ago. But this man looked less strange. He was beardless, after the fashion some men had taken on, and his face looked fine, at least from a distance. A chill hit her skin. The sea wind, probably. Maybe best to get out of it and stretch her legs.

She watched a little longer, until the men rode into the more closed in section of road approaching the gates. She hopped gingerly down from the windowsill and made her way down the corridors toward the courtyard.

How many months had it been since she had done something similar at the arrival of a young knight to Crogmoor? Had it been only a single season? Not much more.

She felt the waddle in her stride as she moved, still mostly hidden from others, but shockingly obvious to her own sense of self. Why was she moving toward the man on the horse?

Even if Eric had called for her... even if Gueninna had brought her up to his chambers to help care for him as she had done on the journey... did she have any hope of a life in the shadow of who Eric was? A knight was out of her social reach, but now he was a lord! A lord who, according to the gossip of the local servants, was more like a son than a ward, to the childless king. And she, Asira... a pregnant maid.

Gueninna had promised to keep her, to keep the child, safe and fed. That was something. But where was Gueninna now? Why had Asira not been taken up into the rooms where Eric lay?

The peace she had felt at Gueninna's promise and the rest and safety she had felt when they had arrived at Thorngraad had both diminished in the few lonely days that had passed. Something else had awakened within her.

And so she descended the stairs to the flat area below, fed by the gateway and the road down which the two strange forms had been riding, not unlike many other forms that came and went from the castle – and yet quite unlike them, for a reason Asira did not know or would not admit.

Dule did feel better once inside the walls of Thorngraad. It was a solid place yet smelled like the sea air. It had all of the other odours of confined space and high occupancy, to be certain, but nothing like what he was used to in the mines and the Warrens. To him, it was like a scrubbed version of home.

He liked it at once.

Leopeld greeted all within earshot and eased himself from his horse with a show of fatigue. An ostler immediately stepped forward to take the beast and offer to tend to it. Leopeld smiled, nodded, and then stepped lightly over to Dule as if he had been resting the week away and was fresh as morning.

‘Down you come, good Dule. I’ll have one of these others come for Hirrith. You grab your gear and we’ll make ourselves known to the lords and ladies. Speaking of...’

Asira had stepped from the dark doorway and paused there, suddenly unsure of what reason she would give for being there. Then she decided she needed none, and stepped forward when the older man noticed her.

‘Good day to you, young lady,’ Leopeld smiled as he took her hand and kissed it.

She laughed and pulled it back. ‘You know well that I am no more than a maid. Save your wayward ways for a duller one. I know your kind!’

Leopeld grinned. ‘It has been a long time.’

‘I didn’t even recognise you. This,’ she leaned back and took him in, as if appraising an item for purchase, ‘is a greybeard. An old man. The Leopeld Fire-eater that I know had a chestnut beard, and well kempt... not this shaggy, snowy thing!’

‘And you...’ Leopeld shot back, taking her in with an appraisal of his own.

She froze, struck with fear at once. What would he see? Far more than she wanted him to, that was certain...

‘You are as beautiful as the sunset and young as the dawn. How is it I grow old and dottary, and you refine in grace?’

She could have embraced him, would have, even, had they not been under the watchful eye of the big stranger.

‘This is Dule,’ the bard made the introductions, ‘and this fair maiden is Asira Quen, of the Westmarch.’

‘How you do make me sound like someone important! I will blush.’

‘But you are someone important,’ Leopeld said without laughter, ‘and Dule here should know it.’

‘Greetings to you,’ Dule caught her eye then and it was he who felt the rush of heat to his face. She was pretty, true, but he had had no shortage of beautiful women at his beck and call back in Freynar. She was a little young, maybe. A little thick around the middle. But she shone, and her eyes held a sparkle that tied his tongue and stole his physical grace. He felt like tumbling potatoes as he slid from his horse and his boots struck the cobbled stones of the yard.

‘We must see the steward, or some such,’ Leopeld declared, ‘would you care to take us in?’

‘Garutt can help,’ Asira nodded, and took Leopeld’s arm as they moved toward the dark doorway, ‘and in the meantime you can tell me what adventures you’ve had since you last broke the silence of the western winter... and don’t wreck a good tale with too much truth. I won’t have it.’

‘Your wish, my dear, is to me a command.’

And Dule followed behind in silence.