

Thorngraad

Gunthrin smiled as he saw his ancestral home come into view around a rocky outcropping of the road ahead. The sea crashed and hissed, unseen below the cliff that fell a hundred jagged feet off the right edge of the road.

He was happy.

He was back in his own lands, the worst of the Crogmoor business behind them, and Dirridain had been open-eyed and aware for most of the morning. The leeches were finding it easier to feed the young man, now that he was awake for at least part of the day. For the first month they had fed him in some secret medical way, shoosing all of the women from the room and mixing liquid solutions in pigs' bladders. He supposed they somehow pumped it into his stomach, though there were rumours of another way, which would also explain why the women were sent away for it.

Leeches. He was glad of them, of what they could do, but he was happier yet to have nothing to do with them. Slaying was grim, but it was glorious too... unlike the curtained secrets of leechcraft. That was all grimness and secrecy.

He shook the thoughts from his mind and smiled anew as he saw fishermen point and raise hands in greeting at his entourage and his South March pennants snapping and flapping in the seaside wind.

He was home. Eric was home. All would be well.

The castle was abuzz with activity by the time the slow wains reached it. Beds had been fluffed and fitted with fresh linens, including a special room set up for Dirridain's care and one alongside it for Gueninna, who tended him like a mother. Riders had been sent ahead, of course, and so their return was in no way a surprise. Food and lodgings would be ready for all of them, and Gunthrin's wife would meet him for a formal welcome home.

He didn't mind the welcome, despite the fact that they had not shared a bed in almost two decades, though he did not sleep alone if he wished for company. He had two mistresses – ladies in waiting who did not wait on any lady – who were willing to warm him in the night and to satiate any desires he yet had, grey and thin though his hair had grown. It was more than desire for him, though; it was the need for something else. The queen had not produced an heir. They had had one sickly daughter, who had lived for six summers and then faded with the harvest. It had been a long winter for Gunthrin after that, winter for six long years... and then his friend had died. Phaelon Terek Dirridain had fallen in a skirmish in the west and left a son, motherless and too young to fight for his rightful title. The High King had given the lands over to Kreegs, and Gunthrin had taken the boy.

The change had been gradual. But deep. The king knew at last what it might be like to have a son, and heir, a child of his own to raise up and pass on his titles, lands, wealth, and

wisdom. Dirridain's lust for his ancestral home had vexed that hope, for a while, but with the fall of the castle and the boy's own disillusionment at the difference between hopes and realities... well, there was hope renewed in the heart of the ageing king.

'My Lord,' the queen curtsied as the king reined in his mount and swung his leg over, dropping to the ground with some relief, 'Welcome home.'

'Many thanks, my queen,' he smiled and pecked her on the cheek, 'I see all has been made ready.'

'Yes, all has been prepared. Sir Dirridain is faring well?'

'*Lord Dirridain seems better each day,*' he nodded.

Long habit of civility had let the king and queen be friends, of a sort, and there was little bitterness between them anymore. Despite this, the thought of another woman's child, not even her kin, succeeding her husband to the throne did not please the queen. Such situations could be precarious for a woman without ties to a titled man, regardless of her nobility. She had put away some wealth, in secret, but that was little comfort when compared with the life she was used to. She had tried to love Dirridain the way Gunthrin did, but with less success. There was no hate there, but she felt the bitter tang in her bosom.

'You remember Lady Kreegs?' the king said by way of reintroduction, and gestured toward Gueninna as she stepped down from the wain.

'Of course, Lady Kreegs, so good to see you again.'

‘And you Your Royal Highness,’ Gueninna curtsayed low and held herself there for a moment before rising again. A show of great deference.

The queen smiled. ‘You are tending to Lord Dirridain, I hear.’

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘He is mending well it seems. He was so near death, we thought we had lost him.’

‘You must take him in and get him settled in his rooms then. Whatever is needed will be given.’

The king smiled in thanks to his wife, and she gave a little nod.

‘Come, everyone,’ he said in a raised voice, ‘Be welcome here and rest from the journey. Whatever your wants, you need only ask. This house has plenty.’

At this, a man in dark blue robes stepped forward, a younger man in light blue robes by his side, and took over from the king. ‘I am Harwood, steward of Thorngraad. I will direct each of the noble folk to their rooms, and Garutt here,’ he gestured to the younger man, ‘Will see to the needs of the servants. The evening meal will be served in the Great Hall as the sun sets, which will not be long.’

He then gestured to the waiting ostlers as the courtyard drained of the nobles and guests, while servants of the castle stepped into action, caring for animals, vehicles, gear, and the like. Dirridain was carefully lifted on a stretcher and carried into his rooms. His eyes, which had been open much of the morning, had closed once again in sleep.

Asira was speechless. Crogmoor had seemed opulent to her, safe and rich and abundant with food and warmth. Compared to Thorngraad though, it seemed to be what it actually had been: a small frontier stronghold, eking out an existence on the edge of civilisation.

She had hoped to have been taken in with Gueninna, as her handmaid, but this had been overlooked. The meeting of the queen and finding her rightful place at this new and greater castle must have stolen such thoughts from Gueninna's mind. Perhaps it would be rectified later, of perhaps not. Asira was in no position to influence such things, not very much anyway, and so she let acceptance settle on her once again and followed Garutt to the quarters that had been prepared for them. Down into the lower portions of the castle, into something that felt at first like a dungeon, she followed the man. Some murmuring bubbled along behind her as servants used to at least a little light not and then wondered aloud what dark lodgings awaited them in the stone foundations of the place. They were soon to find out.

At the foot of the stair a long hall stretched out, perhaps eighty paces from end to end, and vaulted. The vaults brought a graceful curve to the ceilings, giving it a shape not unpleasant to the eye. It was dark though. Very dark.

Garutt stopped and allowed everyone to reach the bottom of the stair.

'Here we are,' he said, gesturing the length of the bare room.

Asira's heart sank and she suppressed a shudder.

'Along this side,' he went on, 'are storerooms. This first one, and the second from the end, are empty and for your use. Along this side,' he gestured to his left, 'are your cells. Choose and share as your seniors wish. I will leave you now and return in time to bring you up for an evening meal. You have no need to cook; we have servants of our own for that. Tend to your masters and mistresses, and all else is left to us for now. In time, if you are to stay, duties will be given.'

Asira watched him nod, smile briefly, and ascend out of view. She turned to the other startled faces of her fellow servants.

Then she was the first to step to a door on the left and push it open.

A window.

The little room held a bed, a small table, a washing basin and a chamber pot. Pegs were set into the wall just inside the door, and bedding was folded neatly at the foot of the bed. But what drew her eye and her mind, right away, was the window on the far side of the room. Heavy shutters were fastened over it, but its presence promised more than darkness and dank air, as she had feared. She stepped over to it, the relieved and excited chatter of her fellow servants in the background, and she pulled the fastener free.

The shutters hinged outward, and a startled gull burst from its perch on the outer ledge and flapped off out of sight below her. The wall was thick, almost farther than she could reach, but on the other side of it the broad expanse of the sea sparkled below her, light flooded in, and her heart echoed the sounds

she heard from others as they pulled open their windows and looked with glee upon the light, the space, and the fresh sea air that they all had in abundance.

Gueninna may have forgotten her, for now. Dirridain may be separated from her, for a time. But if this was her purgatory, she could wait and see what was to come of her, and with patience. She smiled. Her hand moved to her belly, the new thickness of it getting more difficult to hide. The times to come would be turbulent, but until then...

A rest. Yes. Until then, she could rest.

Dirridain opened his eyes.

The rafters. The hangings. Even more so the tang of the air. Home.

It was strange to him, thinking of Thorngraad as home. He had grown up there, been trained there – it was almost all he had ever known – but before his time away in Crogmoor he had never thought of it as his home. Not more so than Crogmoor, at any rate.

Crogmoor had been his dream and his legacy. The path to authority, glory and power, that he had had taken from him in early childhood. He had always looked to it as his future. But as he lay there, his senses gradually coming back to him and the days before his injury slowly solidifying once again in his memory, the thoughts that most pulled at his mind were mostly of this place. Gunthrin's home. Gunthrin's legacy.

He tried to lift his head, but pain shot down his spine and out into his shoulders. Stiffness, maybe. He knew he had been

bedridden for some time. His mind had awakened before his eyes had, and he had heard whispers and thoughts in his near slumber.

Crogmoor was gone.

Each time he awoke, the first moments were free of this thought, but as those moments passed, the realisation fell on him heavily, and all at once.

It was gone.

Could he go back and claim it again? Could he rebuild it? Did he have any wealth to do so?

He didn't have the answers to any of these questions. Things had been so much in turmoil in those last days in the Westmarch, with the raiders, and the sorcerer, and... things with Asira and Kadrana. He had not had time to dig into the deeper issues of his new position. The title was his, he knew, and would not be taken away even with the loss of the castle. But what good was the title without the fortress and lands that came with it?

'Eric?'

The voice was gentle. Hopeful. He turned his eyes and saw Gueninna leaning over him.

He managed a weak smile.

'Oh I am so happy to see that,' she said, stifling tears. 'You have had a time of it, dear boy. You were close to the Shadow, I fear, but with each day now the strength returns. I can see it.'

He tried to speak, but only a thin wheeze passed from his mouth, and it tore at his throat, causing him to choke and sputter with the weakness of an infant.

'Do not try... not yet,' she soothed. 'In time it will come. You cannot rush it. But it will come.'

He felt her hand grasp his, and he obeyed.

Deep weariness welled up then, and darkness seeped through his thoughts and took him.

Gueninna stared long at the young man sleeping before her, his hand held firmly in hers. She loved him like a son and had done so from his childhood. She had no children of her own. Her barrenness was a fault that Lord Kreegs had thrown at her many a time, as if his drunken rants could somehow repair her, give her the gift of women and allow her to, in turn, gift him with a son. A son of true blood, to rule his lands when he was gone. A husband to his daughter would never have been enough for him. He wanted the ruler of Crogmoor to be of his own stock. His own mettle.

And he had never let her forget it.

Had she not been of royal blood herself, and a cousin to the high king, Kreegs would likely have put her aside. Despite her status, there had been times when she had feared his ambition for an heir would overcome his respect and fear for her bloodline, and her life might even be in danger.

It had never come to that. Still, it was strange to her that he was the one now in the ground, and she was an honoured guest in Thorngraad, so close to the High March, and to the city of her birth. Gunthrin had been kind to her.

Artun, however, might be another matter altogether. How easily the powerful forget those under them, when their own desires and devices are at stake.

Then she remembered Asira.

She did not want to let go of Eric's hand, not just yet, but she also wanted to ensure that Asira was there when he next awoke.

Then she rethought that as well.

If Eric, like Artun, saw the woman as a problem in the path between him and his desired goals... but would he? She looked down at his face, now peaceful and calm in sleep. Would he be that kind of man?

Perhaps it would be better if she had a word with him before Asira was present again. Gueninna would make sure the girl was comfortable, and make some excuse as to why she should not yet come up to care for him as they had done on the road. Shock maybe. Shock at the news of a coming child out of wedlock might send him backward in his recovery.

That would do.

Then, once she had the chance to gauge his reaction to the girl herself, she would decide how to broach the topic of the baby.

Yes. That was best. Wait a little. Use caution. She was back in the world of powerful men and the women who were so often left struggling in their wake. She did not want Eric Dirridain to be another such man, but until she was sure, she would protect the girl. The girl, and the tiny child within her

womb... and perhaps her own barrenness wouldn't seem quite so empty.