

## A BOW, A HORSE, & A SONG

“PAPA!” KATHERINE SHOUTS from upon her horse, Ironside. “Come ride with me! You’ve been sitting for an eternity... and a half!”

Henry, King of Celdor, grins at his second bastard daughter from his place across the field. The sun hangs high in the cloudless sky as a cool wind blows, swaying the grass from side to side. A perfect day to go riding with his daughter, it is, a perfect day to spend outside with all of his bastard daughters.

“Patience, Young Kitty.” He laughs, enjoying the breeze against his skin. Despite being a king, he has always favored being outside, rather than stuck inside a richly furnished chamber. Give him muddy boots than a silk shirt any day. “I shall ride with you before you can name all the gods and goddesses.”

Katherine pouts. "But there's so many!"

"Precisely!"

The twelve-year-old girl pouts, but begrudgingly nods before she tugs on the reins to make Ironside gallop across the field. She holds the reins masterfully, and wields more skill than even the Master of Horse, Sir Eow-en. As she passes Little Anne, who sits on a mossy boulder, she blows the little girl a kiss, causing his youngest bastard to pause her singing to giggle. His eldest bastard, Jane, stands on the other side of the field with her back to them and her prized bow in her grasp. Her auburn hair blows in the wind as she shoots an arrow into the board... and then another...and then another...and another.

The girl never misses the red bull's-eye in the center. Not once.

Jane, Katherine, and Anne have been called many things in their lives – abomination, half-blood, disgrace, blood-tainted, half-breed, tavern fleas – but unaccomplished is a title they can never claim.

*“...Just pass the sea of dreams  
A caged bird would watch all day  
As the creatures of the world  
Would sing and play...”*

"Brava!" he shouts. "Brava, my Anne!"

Little Anne, the Songbird of Celdor, looks up at her papa and smiles with rosy cheeks, blooming like a bewitched Silverstone rose under his praise.

Returning his attention to the parchment on the table in front of him, he dips the quill into the jar of ink before tapping away the excess.

The letter he writes is of much importance. It's perhaps the most important letter he shall ever write to his daughter. However, as the King of Celdor looks down at the half-written letter, words escape him and he cannot find the right thing to say. How does a man go about writing a letter that holds so much of the future?

*My beloved daughter,*

*The thought that I may one day see you and your sister is the only thing that gives me more joy than the news this letter brings. I would love nothing more than to see my first grandchild. But, alas, we still have time. On my honor, I promise we shall have many more years ahead of us to reunite. Blessed be the gods, the*

The quill hovers above the letter, awaiting its wielder to think of the next words it shall dress the parchment with, and drips a few drops of ink.

He doesn't bother to discard the now soiled letter. It will do him no good to start the letter fresh. Why tempt faith by giving his already blank mind a blank slate?

No, he'll continue this letter. Soiled parchment and all.

\* \* \*

"PAPA?"

He looks up to see his eldest bastard standing over him. There's a bow clutched in her hands as she wears a look of uncertainty upon her pretty face. The look is strange to see, for his daughter has never been known to doubt, especially herself.

"Yes, Jane?" Henry places the quill in the inkpot and moves the letter aside. "Did you finish practicing?"

"Yes, Papa." With a wrinkle of her nose, her gaze flickers back to the target board. "I think I need a new target board soon. This one has too many holes."

He grins. "Then it shall be done."

Jane removes the leather quiver from her back and takes a seat next to him on the bench, placing the bow on her lap and the quiver on the grass. She takes one of the arrows from the quiver and begins to fiddle with the arrowhead.

He bites back a warning for his daughter to be careful of the blade's sharpness. There's no point in warning her what she already knows. It's like telling a fish to breathe underwater.

Instead he asks, "What worries you, my little archer?"

"I'm worried for Annie," Jane admits, finally moving her gaze from the arrowhead. "She's about to turn eight and still doesn't speak."

Henry smiles. "Of course she does. Listen."

*"...That little cage bird  
It never did sing  
For it was blind of the world  
Of the strong lads and virtuous maids..."*

"I mean she has not *spoken*, papa. Kivoc only knows how much Anne sings. Singing is not speaking. What if the people start calling her a simpleton?" Her blue eyes widen as she exclaims, "She'll be known as the Simpleton Bastard of Celdor!"

“Why are you worried about Anne speaking? It’s not as if...” A rock falls into his belly. The king struggles to swallow. This is not how he wanted to tell his daughter the faith of her baby sister. And to be frank, he didn’t want to be the one to tell her, at all. Taiya and Helena usually handle these kinds of things... “Oh, Jane. Your mama gave you the news, did she not? Please tell me she told you. I would hate for you to find out this way.”

Jane purses her lips then leans close. Her voice is low when she asks, “News about Anne? Mama hasn’t told me anything.”

“Our Little Anne has been honored as a Nightingale.”

“Annie’s leaving?”

“Aye.”

Suddenly, Jane’s hands shoot out to wrap around Henry’s wrists. The skin beneath her fingers soon becomes white from lack of blood flow. Years of archery have caused callouses to form on the pads of her fingertips. The rough patches scrapes against the tender skin of his inner wrists.

“Please, papa, don’t send her away,” she begs.

“You mustn’t worry, Jane. All shall be well.”

The fear vanishes from Jane’s gaze as she pushes his hands away. The famous Blackheart Fury rises to the surface of her blue eyes, clouding the rims of the pupils a dark red.

“No,” she snaps. “Anne is too young. She’s afraid to ride ponies and still sleeps with a candle by her bedside because she’s afraid of the dark. How do you think she’ll fare in a strange land, papa?”

*“...And then one night. One night  
A beautiful fox, he came  
Promising the little bird they’d run away  
They’d fly through the fields of grain...”*

"My cousin, Antoinette, will care for our Anne," he tells her, softly. *She is her namesake, after all. Cousin Anne will take good care of her.* "She shall be staying at Rivenhall before she makes the journey to Diamond Rough. Perhaps – "

"To another strange land," Jane grumbles while making a face.

" – you can visit Anne in Rivenhall? You've told me how you desire to visit my cousin's castle. Oh, you would love it, Jane. The palace shines like a pearl in the day and shimmers like the moon in the night. Murals of days long gone carved into the marble walls of the Great Hall. Rivers woven like threads on a tapestry. Grass greener than poison ivy in springtime." He leans forward and smiles down at her coyly. "You can spar with your cousins. Antoinette's daughters are said to be true shield-maidens. Dina can throw a dagger across a field and cut a flower in half."

Jane raises her chin in defiance. "I don't need to visit her. I don't need to visit her because she's not going."

"It will be hard for her," he admits. "Perhaps the hardest thing she will ever do, but it's for the best. After Helena showed me the – "

"The queen?" she exclaims. Her eyes grow wide, only to sharpen into slits. "What does that woman have to do with this madness?"

Henry looks at his daughter with disapproval. "Your stepmother was the one who obtained Anne's position as a Nightingale. Helena was kind enough to make all the arrangements, herself. You should be thanking Helena for showing Anne such kindness."

"Kindness?" Jane barks out a laugh. "Ha! This is not kindness, papa. This is revenge! That woman knows how much you love my sister, how much you love all of us. She's jealous that you favor your bastards over her own litter."

He frowns. "I love all my children."

"Father," Jane pleas, "you must see what that woman is doing to the family...our family."

A sudden urge to grab his daughter and shake her comes over Henry. He wants to shake some sense into her young, naïve mind. The desire appalls him – most strongly and rightly so – for he has always been a man who exercises the utmost patience for his family, especially his children.

The king forces his voice to remain gentle. A tone of reproach will not make his daughter listen to him. It will only make her ears close. "My daughter, you may be fourteen, but you still have much to learn about the world."

Jane grimaces. "I know all that I must, papa, and then some too."

He runs a hand through his hair, though it's not running through much. His hair is now wispy, nothing like the thick curls he once carried. Those curls are long gone, having begun to thin when the girls departed for Maloria five years ago, and continue to thin with every letter that remains unanswered by them. Still, he writes. Every week he writes.

*Is this why the Morgens used to rid themselves of daughters? So they don't lose their hair over the stress of raising them?*

Henry pushes away all thoughts of the Morgens and their old ways, that barbaric and godless tradition. "Oh, you sweet girl. I blame myself for this. I've kept you and your sisters caged within these castle walls like birds your entire lives and for no other reason than wanting to keep you by my side. It seems I have failed you, my little archer. How are you to know about life if you never experience it? My father sent me to be Uncle Serge's ward when I was a lad not much younger than you. Maybe I should've done the same for you and your sisters."

Forcing out a puff of air, he looks away from his daughter to the trees. Then swallowing thickly admits, “But I couldn’t. Not after the Other One was taken from me.”

The Other One – the babe whose wails still echo in the cellars.

“I don’t care about life beyond our walls,” Jane grumbles with a pout. “I’m happy in Ironwick with you, mama, and my sisters...both of them.”

*“...Now it was a precious day  
That beautiful fox unlocked the cage  
He released that little bird  
Coaxed him to come frolic and play  
Give him the promise of a glorious day...”*

Henry reaches up to lightly grip the dimple in the center of her chin. “There are things in this world you may never understand, my little archer, things you may never want to understand. That doesn’t stop them from happening. You must trust Helena, your mama, and I. We only have the purest intentions for you and your siblings.”

“I do trust you and mama. It’s *her* I don’t trust.”

“Jane.”

She sighs, her shoulders slouching. “But I shall try to...for you.”

The king leans down to place a light kiss on her temple. “Good girl.”

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“PAPA! PAPA, LOOK at me!”

Katherine stands on the saddle as the horse trots in a circle – the wide-legged trousers Helena designed for the girl with the purpose of riding



astride hang straight and give the illusion of being a skirt. Her arms are outstretched and leveled with her shoulders, making her look like a lower-case *T*. The position is more for show than balance, the king suspects. Kitty is no one if not a showman.

“Kitty!” Jane screams. Then she gets that look in her eyes, the one she always gets whenever she’s about to enforce her status as older sibling upon the younger two. “Get down before you hurt yourself! How many times has mama told you not to stand on Ironside? Countless!”

Katherine looks at him with a mischievous grin. “Do you want me to get off, papa?”

Henry nods, forcing himself to look grim. “I think that would be best, Kitty. You wouldn’t want Jane to use your papa as a target board, now would you?”

Katherine plops down at the saddle with a pout. “No, I guess not. I don’t want – ahhh! Papa! Help!”

The horse bucks its rear and stands on its hind legs before leaping forward. Its hind legs kick up as it continues to buck wildly around the field. Chunks of dirt are ripped from the ground, causing blades of grass to rain across the field in clumps of plant and worms.

Eyes wide with fear, Katherine holds the reins in a desperate grip as she tries to stay upright while her legs flap around the beast with every buck.

“Kitty!” Jane jumps from the bench and sprints to Katherine and a crazed Ironside with Henry on her heels. “Oh, Kivoc! Hold on!”

The horse releases a final whine, an unnatural, godless whine, as though a creature of Demonos screeched from the depth of the lungs, and gives a powerful buck.

Screaming, Katherine is thrown from Ironside into the air, where she lands on the hard ground with a resounding *thud*.

Henry runs to his daughter and kneels by her side. He places a hand on her chest. It moves. Slowly. "Get Master Larkspur, Jane!"

Picking up her skirt, Jane sprints to the castle, screaming as she goes, "Master Larkspur! Master Larkspur! Master Larkspur!"

Young Kitty lies on the grass. The earth looks as though it is about to swallow her body whole, swallow her through the grass and weeds. Katherine's limbs are covered in dirt and sprawled out in wild directions, half buried beneath the weeds. Her eyes are closed. Only the subtle rise and fall of her chest reveals there's still life in Young Kitty.

Next to her lies the stallion. Unmoving.

Henry scoops up his littlest daughter and gives the beast a swift kick in its hind leg.

"Dead."

*"...And it was a glorious day..."*