

21. Silver Tongue

Shortly after sunrise, the Silver Tongue sent a messenger to the gate extending an invitation to parlay and the council party assembled again in the dining hall to discuss the developments. Initially, the conversation focused on strategies designed to stall the process but during a brief pause, Fae suggested, "Maybe we shouldn't be in so much of a rush to stall. His calculations are off by twelve-thousand. Whatever his plans were, they are no good now yet he rushed an invitation up to the gate first thing in the morning. We could consider instead of stalling, rushing him into action before he has time to think." Fae further asserted in support of his argument, "If I discovered on my way into a fight, I underestimated my opponent by more than half, I assure you, my plans would change in a hurry. He is making a big mistake - If we rush him, he might compound the error."

A long silence followed until Ollis finally asked, "What do you mean by 'might'?"

Fae explained, "He should at least go through the motions of pretending to reassess the situation. Instead, he's trying to pretend our arrival is of no consequence to him - It's an indication of weakness. It's a bluff. We could maybe provoke him into an ill-advised assault on the wall and trap him in a no-man's-land," addressing Ollis in particular, he added, "but of course, you would know that through familiarity, better than I."

Ollis held his mouth open slightly and blinked several times. Tanek finally broke the silence, stating, "I am sorry. I have not a military mind... He outnumbered us by more than two to one and we rely on assistance we have no assurance will ever come. Why is it we want to hurry into a fight with him?"

Fae paused and to his apparent relief, Olorik intervened then addressing both Tanek and Ollis, explained, "He probably planned on a methodical campaign designed to exploit our numerical disadvantage and minimize his losses - He needs to preserve his strength for his real objective; Angora. In his dreams, he probably imagined he would inflict some casualties, we would recognize the futility of resistance and capitulate then he would walk away with a greater number than he brought, expanded by some companies of our guard. With these numbers... if we can coax him into a frontal assault on the wall..."

In the momentary hesitation, Ollis impulsively argued, "What numbers? These numbers are hopeless-"

"-If you had to remove a carrot from a pot of boiling water with your bare hand, how would you do it?" Fae interrupted to inquire, "Would you ease your fingers in slowly or snatch the carrot as fast as you can?" Ollis flexed his eyebrows in reaction to the question but undaunted, Fae further asserted, "When faced with an undesirable task, most of us will try to rush through it and get it over with. If he tries to rush through it and get it over with, he'll take enough casualties just crossing the wall to instantly terminate any plans of a campaign on Angora any time soon-"

"-and this helps us how?" Ollis impulsively countered.

Fae looked Ollis in the eye for a moment with a patient expression and replied, "It helps us by denying him his objective. Even if he overwhelms us, all we have to do is interfere with him enough to disrupt him from defending the wall later then when the Angorans show up, they massacre what's left his army and that's that - He's done." Both Ollis and Tanek reacted with obvious distress. Fae looked them both over and advised, "I'm just some stranger and I understand this probably sounds at least somewhat counterintuitive. I defer to your general; I'm sure you'll consider his recommendations more credible."

Olorik nodded slowly then asserted, “If we stall him too long and the Angorans show up, his scouts will report the developments with enough advance notice for him to strategize with his full strength still intact. It leaves him too many options and gives him too fair a chance. If we coax him into an open assault and keep him occupied, the arrival of the Angorans will force him to frantically over commit to taking the city quickly and then defending the walls against them, or to retreat - Either way, the situation immediately escalates out of his control. His inability to predict the actions of the Angorans is his greatest vulnerability and our greatest strength.”

Tanek squinted with skepticism then cautiously confided, “It sounds like you are contemplating a calculated risk.”

“I am.” Olorik immediately confirmed.

Tanek turned to establish eye contact with Reneta, who evidently did not notice and stared blankly ahead as her face turned white. Tanek nudged Reneta on her shoulder gently then she slowly faced him and nodded. Returning his attention to Olorik, Tanek asked, “What do we win with this?”

“We will never win anything in this.” Olorik explained, “Our objective is to cripple our opponent. The course of action I am suggesting should cripple our opponent.”

“-If- the Angorans show up.” Tanek qualified.

“Yes. If they show up.” Olorik conceded.

“-and if they don’t show up?” Tanek inquired.

“If they don’t show up,” Olorik explained, “we end up in the position we are in now. Coaxing them into an open assault presents the most favorable ratios in any event.”

Tanek wringed his hands and exhaled slowly then repeated, “Ratios. We are talking about human lives.”

Olorik blinked slowly in an exaggerated demonstration of calm control then asked, “Do you measure your profits against the humanity involved, Tanek? Do you wrestle with these moralities with the same trepidation when you tally your receipts? I am not trying to insult you and I do not disrespect you. I only ask for equal consideration. Do not presume my regard for humanity any less than yours because I speak of actual life and death in terms of ratios. I fully appreciate the gravity of my words and actions... because I know the consequences are life and death. This does not necessarily qualify my regard for humanity as deficient and in fact, may even qualify it as greater than your own. You said you have not a military mind. You asked us to explain. We explained. Now is not the time to question my moral integrity. If I survive this, I will happily indulge you any other time at your convenience.”

Tanek recoiled and sat motionless then finally nodded indicating at the very least he suspended any argument until some future convenience.

Rubbing his palms together, Ollis asked tentatively, “What then are we really talking about? Live free or die? For whom do we choose this? Ourselves? We can go out there right now and make very favorable deals for ourselves, correct? We are choosing this for everyone else, not necessarily ourselves. Are we that convinced only we know what is best for them all? How ‘free’ are they really? Are we not really talking about varying degrees of limited superficial freedoms? Cosmetics?”

“Where are you going with this, Ollis?” Reneta responded with an expression of shock, “This is an odd and curious moment for such a crisis of conscience. When did you-”

“-Reneta,” Ollis interrupted as if correcting an impolite child, “your father would-”

“-Please stop telling me what my father would have said or done!” Reneta remarked angrily and with a raised voice then asserted only slightly less agitated, “My sole purpose in life is not to imitate him. My father would tell me to exercise my own best judgment without worrying about what he would say or do!”

“I am not trying to persuade you.” Ollis insisted, “My duty is to counsel you- uh- to counsel the King- or the King’s appointed representative-” Reneta suddenly burst into laughter over the awkwardness of his identification of to whom his duty to counsel applied but with a patient sigh, Ollis advised, “I am only trying to fulfill my responsibility for you. I do not necessarily personally agree with any counsel I offer, I am simply attempting to keep you informed of all your alternatives. It would disappoint me to think you do not yet appreciate this.”

“-and it would disappoint me to think you are actually trying to suggest we should compromise with the Silver Tongue.” Reneta countered, “My father would be disappointed, Ollis, and you know that. If you are going to try to pry me with sentiment, at least don’t select something we both know is blatantly false. You are trying to take advantage of me because you think I am a child. We are all well aware we can make favorable deals for ourselves, and yes, we choose this for everyone else, because we have stripped them of self-determination and only we are in a position now to make such choices on their behalf. They are your responsibility, Ollis, not me, the King, or the King’s appointed representative.” With a brief pause, Reneta inhaled deeply while at some point during her outburst, she stood and as she paused, she glanced about the room looking directly into the eyes of each individual present. Were she an adult, Reneta would have commanded respect but as a child, she qualified as outright awe-inspiring. Closing her eyes for a moment, with complete composure Reneta then asserted, “The time for these suggestions of negotiation is long gone. He is not here for us; he is here for everyone else, for those from whom we have all profited for so long, and that is why he is here. Our prosperity has lured him. We have brought this upon our own. We are responsible. I would rather die obstinate than save myself with a favorable deal. He is here for domination and his only ‘deal’ is slavery. If anyone doubts that, I invite you to go out the gate and volunteer your services to our uninvited guest, but first I offer the King’s personal treasury to carry with you as a bargaining tool, and until someone accepts this offer, I’ll consider the subject of negotiation once-and-for-all concluded.”

In the contemplative moment that followed, none present leapt at the opportunity to carry the personal treasury of the king and offer their services to the uninvited guest, and so evidently, the subject of negotiation truly once-and-for-all concluded.

Although no consensus ever truly formed in favor of rushing into a fight, no consensus formed against it either and the conversation turned to the specifics of the parlay. The invitation proposed noon as the time for the parlay to occur and regional protocol called for a timely response so in the interest of avoiding over commitment in either direction, Olorik dispatched a messenger to the gate and several rounds of haggling over the arrangements followed. The two parties finally accepted terms for parlay but only after exhaustive rounds of haggling ultimately settling on noon the following day. By agreement, Olorik would accompany Reneta outside the gate as her personal bodyguard with Fae as representative of the foreign body, mostly because his party recommended him also as an appropriate bodyguard. Regardless of any strategy upon which the council might ultimately settle, for at least the first day, the stall accounted as the initial tactic.

The following day, the council reassembled late in the morning. Tanek and Ollis advised Reneta to prepare for the parlay and though she apparently objected to a recommendation, with the insistence of Olorik, she reluctantly departed from the dining hall after some persuading then returned shortly before noon dressed in an elegant white gown with an ornamental band of gold fashioned like a braided rope resting atop her head. Tugging at her clothing and constantly adjusting the golden band, Reneta clearly exhibited discomfort with the formal attire. With cosmetic colors painted to sharp points at the sides of her eyes and lips shining dark red, Wyl stared at Reneta convinced she could not possibly be the same girl he saw depart the room earlier and as she noticed his fascination, she smiled subtly, perhaps even a bit self-conscious. Her hands trembled and as Tanek clasped his palm on her shoulder, Reneta gritted teeth then stiffened her posture while Olorik and Tanek each held her by an elbow. The council party then commenced as if in procession through the series of stairs and corridors down to the front gate.

In the vestibule across the street from the gate, Olorik pulled Fae near to review the procedures with Reneta and held her hand while both he and Fae looked carefully into her eyes as he instructed, “Reneta, you and only you will do all the talking. If he addresses Fae or me, only you will respond. Tell him as quickly as possible that Orna is on her way to Angora.” Reneta flinched with surprise over the instruction and Olorik barely acknowledged as much as he further advised, “If he asks about your father, tell him he is ill in bed. You are present to hear his terms and you want twenty-four hours to consider them. You will address these three things and nothing else. Do not engage him in anything else in any other way. If he asks other questions or introduces other subjects, simply tell him outright you will discuss nothing else. As soon as he agrees to twenty-four hours, turn around and go to the gate. Walk casually and do not run unless I tell you. Follow these instructions specifically and do not worry about your performance - You should appear nervous and awkward as if you have no confidence in what you are doing and are simply following instructions. Understood?”

Reneta nodded nervously and looked down.

Fae held Reneta by her chin and turned her head to face him then carefully inspecting her, he inquired, “Can you go through with this?”

“Yes.” Reneta responded almost whispering.

“Are you sure?” Fae inquired looking more intently into her eyes.

“Yes.” Reneta repeated slightly louder than her initial response.

Fae paused and leaned away slightly then remarked, “You look nervous.”

“I am.” Reneta immediately confessed.

“Tell me the truth.” Fae insisted.

With lips quivering, Reneta whispered, “I’m terrified.”

Fae nodded and asked again, “Can you go through with this?”

“Yes.” Reneta responded almost whispering.

Fae nodded toward Olorik then the two each held Reneta by an elbow and walked her out the door into the street where guards held three horses ready for the parlay. As the threesome mounted up, Reneta glanced up at the parapets where hundreds of guards looked on in silence. A few guards lifted up their spears and slammed them against the floor of the parapet as a form of salute then the rest responded and quickly a clattering of spears against stone rumbled as the three riders made their way to the gate. Reneta appeared suddenly encouraged and she held up her hand in appreciation of the gesture.

The gate creaked and moaned as it slowly rolled open. Beyond the archway, a short distance down the road, a horse stood still, turned broadside to the gate. Atop the horse, a man slouched casually, one leg thrown over the saddle so both feet dangled on the same side while blue and purple silks fluttered in a breeze that rippled across the grass.

The sun shined bright in a cloudless sky. Some fifty-thousand sturdy and hairy men in various interpretations of yellow uniform individualized by skins and furs as remedial protective garment stood motionless and silent in ranks and columns that defiled the pastoral beauty of the fields outside the wall. Reneta, Olorik and Fae approached slowly and perhaps even a bit cautiously as the Silver Tongue stared at them with a slight smile, gray streaked golden hair sailing loose around his shoulders and a slender golden band resting on his head weaved into his hair with a single glistening black stone at its center. A thick gray moustache in no way concealed numerous gruesome scars on the face of the Silver Tongue, some of which appeared perhaps even too symmetrical and ornamental for the simple random circumstance of battle to explain.

The party halted some ten feet away from the subject, Fae and Olorik a step back on either side of Reneta. The Silver Tongue examined Fae with deliberation then forced his eyes away in an obvious attempt to conceal curiosity and with a pleasant smile, he then nodded respectfully and spoke in a soft and sophisticated manner more to Olorik than Reneta, inquiring, "Where is my good friend King Andraik? I was so looking forward to speaking with him after so long a time."

"The King is taken ill and bedridden," Reneta responded in a tone of restrained anger and fear, without a reciprocal smile then she informed him, "I am the King's appointed representative."

"Ill and bedridden?" repeated the Silver Tongue and again more in the direction of Olorik, he asked, "-so you bring me children in his place?"

Reneta hesitated and Olorik stated firmly, "She is the King's representative. When you speak, the King hears you. When she speaks, you hear the King."

The Silver Tongue raised his eyebrows in reaction as if both impressed and amused then he remarked, "It is good then the King sends the petulant rebellious one that speaks, as opposed to the mute boy." Inhaling deeply, Reneta gritted her teeth while the Silver Tongue quickly examined her and Olorik individually then raised his eyes up toward the gate, and scanning the top of the wall, he inquired, "-and where is the stone thrower? I expected she should be your Queen by now."

Reneta paused, glanced toward Olorik without turning her head then finally responded, "I do not know this name."

"The Red Witch." the Silver Tongue equivocated with an obvious degree of annoyance, "How about that name? I hope she is not too grievously injured. Some of my attendants on occasion can be a bit impulsive and ill mannered, and I apologize for their conduct. I will surely reprimand those responsible for the discourtesy that occurred upon her arrival. They are mostly of modest intellectual facilities. I am forever inconvenienced with the imposition of dragging such a rabble with me everywhere I go. It is all so unnecessary and wasteful, is it not? -but I hope she is not -- bedridden -- infirmed too near your King or you may discover him stumbling and drooling in a zombie stupor upon your return."

Inhaling in deep stuttering bursts, Reneta obviously struggled to restrain tears then just barely controlled enough to play her role, she advised, "She is gone... She is on her way to Angora, as we speak."

“Is that so?” asked the Silver Tongue, tilting his head as if surprised by the news, “-and for what purpose might she embark on such an undertaking?”

The question clearly exceeded her assigned subject matter and after a pause, Reneta simply repeated, “She is on her way to Angora.”

“Yes.” he acknowledged, “-as you have already stated. Well then!” the Silver Tongue suddenly exclaimed with disproportionate apparent delight, “Now that we have dispensed with pleasantries and exchanged critical bits of information, tell me, for what purpose might you speak? What might be the topic of conversation this day?”

“You invited us.” Reneta replied flatly.

“Of course I did.” the Silver Tongue remarked slapping his forehead as if amused by his ostensible absentmindedness, “I apologize. Where is my sense of protocol?” While digging his hand into his silks and robes, he casually addressed Olorik, commenting, “Such a serious girl she is; always so focused on her agenda; no time for small talk.” then producing a collection of bound papers, the Silver Tongue swung his stray leg over the saddle and extending his hand, advanced slowly toward Reneta with a suspicious smile. As Reneta cringed, Fae stirred in his saddle while his horse shuffled and scratched at the dirt then his eyes met with the Silver Tongue and locked into a stare. Reneta held out a trembling hand but Fae jolted his horse slightly, reached in front of her and snatched the papers as she gasped. The Silver Tongue then backed away and Fae handed the papers to Reneta as she recoiled back into her saddle.

The Silver Tongue swung his horse around into the previous position still smiling and surveying the party then for the first time, he addressed Reneta directly, informing her, “You will find no surprises. I still propose all the familiar generous considerations for you, your family and your council.”

With a weak and shaky voice, Reneta said, “We want-”

“-Yes, yes, of course.” responded the Silver Tongue waving his hand dismissively, “Twenty-four hours. Same time tomorrow then? The same conditions will be adequate?”

Fae nudged his horse forcing Reneta into an about face as the game concluded then Olorik turned to walk at her side while Fae fell back into a cover position.

“Please give the King my warmest regards,” the Silver Tongue shouted, “and wishes of good health, my dear? Tell him if he is feeling better it would please me to shake hands with him tomorrow... and extend my wishes for speedy recovery to the witch as well?”

Reneta drew in deep breaths and gasped as tears ran down her cheeks. Olorik raised a hand in her direction with intent of offering comfort but Fae barked under his breath, “Don’t touch her! No reactions. Casual pace. Don’t look back.”

Crying then even harder, Reneta barely maintained confident posture as her hands trembled. The Silver Tongue kicked his horse and followed toward the gate, staring in fascination with an expression of delight he hardly contained. Fae held rear position, turned his horse and walked it sideways while the Silver Tongue advanced.

“Olorik.” Fae called sharply without turning his head from his subject, and as Olorik and Reneta broke into a run then rushed through the gate, Fae shouted, “Close it!” Sidestepping to bar passage before the opening and demonstrably agitated, Fae glared at the Silver Tongue and advised, “You’ve had your parlay and delivered your terms, and now you know we won’t kill you unarmed at the gate either, just like we didn’t kill you unarmed a moment ago when we had you outnumbered. We are all sufficiently impressed with your recklessness. Call it a day now, and stop pressing your luck.”

The Silver Tongue prodded his horse a step closer, tilted his head and stared then responded, "All right, maintain protocol for now, humble warrior. This is not yet the time and you need me alive - I am the only one among this rabble you think you can predict."

"-That does not necessarily mean we think we need you alive." Fae argued, "It is established courtesy not to kill unarmed representatives at parlay. You don't know the difference between the two. You're just guessing... and we don't necessarily care about predicting you either."

The Silver Tongue squinted, shook his head slightly and smiled then inquired with obvious genuine curiosity, "Who are you? Why do I not know thee and thy clan in green? Such unexpected value you have brought to this otherwise inconvenient nuisance." Examining Fae for reaction and finding none, he appeared only more enamored then whispered, "If it comes to a fight, maneuver your companies into support positions. I would prefer to preserve them for something more constructive than this petty squabble."

As Fae prepared to slip through the last slim crack in the gateway, the Silver Tongue approached easily within the reach of an arm then he advised, "You have counseled the Princess well but do not presume too much. You have provided me with hints as well, modest one, peasant in ostentatiously understated garment. The absence of standard or banner in your companies shows me far more than I am sure you would like. You would have concealed more from me had you displayed but a rag on a stick. You failed to anticipate that. Appreciate your own mistakes and vulnerabilities along with mine as you make your calculations. Fanaticism is all the same and equal... and what care we for sides and causes, my kindred? We've come for the same thing. We've come to discover the meaning of life and make the world submit to our beliefs." Leaning from his horse, he then whispered, "I know you, as well."

The gate creaked to a close behind Fae and he immediately noticed Reneta on her feet under the shadow of the wall then climbed down from his horse and rushed over to her. Although she covered her face with her hands, Fae turned Reneta around, held her in his arms and stroked her back as she cried.

The Silver Tongue strolled leisurely back and forth before the gate then howled out, "Gaths! My kin... If you crush my army utterly on your walls and in your streets, what Reward for your trouble and effort will you collect? Wage and debt? Cereal and hovel? Why would you protect and preserve your own abusers who Prosper from your tribulations and tell you, you are worth no more than this. I offer liberty! ... -and unlimited potential for every man of honor who would ever bare arm for a cause, to pursue and fulfill the natural abilities of his own freewill. Why would you trust me any less than them? How much worse could I ever treat you? Come speak with me - Join me in a new age of independent Prosperity and liberate yourselves from the archaic ways of feudalism. Freedom is inevitable! Why resist your own liberation?"

A rock whistled near the Silver Tongue and glowering down from the parapet, Olorik shouted, "Take your garbage from my wall, Oostrigr. You've delivered your message. Now be gone before I shoot you myself." Olorik then threw another rock, which struck the horse and it jumped, kicked and struggled against the Silver Tongue.

Wrestling his horse under control, the Silver Tongue backed away and smiled up at Olorik then pointed and implored, "Is this for what you fight? Harsh and threatening words and cast stones from a man on a wall for those who would speak in conciliation? Where was your anger and courage old man, when the young girl cried out here?"

In response, Olorik attempted to wrestle a bow from a guard while three others restrained him then relenting, he nonetheless howled, "Load and fire at will!"

The Silver Tongue smiled and laughed quietly to himself as he casually retreated then strolled away on the road toward the field.

Reneta wiped her palms on her cheeks with red eyes and trembling hands then stated, "I'm sorry. I am ashamed of my cowardice."

"No." Fae said gently, "You performed admirably. You are not a coward just because you are afraid or because you cry. You were courageous enough for your people who are depending on you and you accomplished your purpose. You are a hero." Turning her to face the doorway across the street, Fae held her elbow to escort her and instructed, "Go back inside now and don't let them see you cry."

Reneta nodded and Fae led her toward the doorway but halfway across the street, she glanced over her shoulder up at the wall to observe there, hundreds of guards standing in silence staring down at her then stopping abruptly, she turned to face the formations, slowly scanning one side to the other. Suddenly twisting her arm free from Fae, Reneta shouted at the men on the wall, "Who represents you? I offer you fellowship and responsibility, not demented dreams and fantasies! Go now and join him if you find his solicitations so compelling." With trembling lips and tears pooled in her eyes, Reneta pulled the golden band from her head then hurled it angrily some distance away and as Tanek immediately rushed to retrieve it, she shrieked at him, "Don't touch it!" freezing him in his tracks. Returning her attention to the guard ranks, Reneta shouted, "You have no King here but in name. We are all the victims of our traditions and we will find our own way when we set ourselves free of this conditioning. We don't need any help from liars, slavers and murderers. Exercise the freewill he promises you and choose anything you like now, and let no man stand in the way of any other."

In stunned silence, guards stood still and stared for a moment until one among them thrust his spear up over his head, and howled in approval then suddenly most of those present joined in shaking spears and shouting in salute. Fae again clutched Reneta by an elbow and directed her the rest of the way across the street to the door while Wyl discreetly collected her golden band and concealed it under his clothing for the moment, apprehensive the sight of it might only agitate her further.

The council party silently and solemnly gathered inside the vestibule then as the door clanked shut, Reneta timidly asked Fae, "How can he sit there, surrounded by so much destructiveness, with such horrible intentions, and be so... comfortable and amused? How is a man... not a man? Why did he say those things to you? Why would he call you his 'kindred'?"

Fae glanced around, found Wyl nearby, clutched him by the collar then pushed him up against Reneta and as Wyl wrapped his arm around her shoulder and she leaned on him breathing slowly, the party then commenced the procession back up the corridor while Fae remained alone at the door for a moment and stared vacantly as they receded.

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*in a narrow natural gap between high sheer rock walls
in an obscure and remote corner of the world
a narrow strip of land between the barriers
rises in a sharp and treacherous incline*

*from level and stable surfaces above
for uncounted centuries or millennia
clans that might otherwise find their greatest joys
in the simple constructions of their own hands
and would live simple lives and cause no harm
fired darts and cast down stones
to break the heads and bodies
of strangers that might attempt the climb*

*bones and skulls
choke the narrow gap
in a layer unmeasured so as to constitute
the very surface of the earth itself*

it is the southern pass to the Highlands of Geaelen

it is the bone stairway

~

*there lies a chasm
between two worlds
only a narrow way across*

*in the darkness of the bottom
all things equal
all things lost*

~

A dark cover of cloud swirled overhead and a cold wind rustled through the grass. Reneta, Olorik and Fae sat idle upon their horses in the archway as the gate creaked open. Oostrigr the Silver Tongue sat slouched in his saddle with both legs dangling over one side of his horse as the party halted some ten feet away, Fae and Olorik a step back on either side of Reneta. Oostrigr raised his eyebrows expectantly and turned his ear as if to hear the response he anticipated but Fae prodded his horse forward, produced the bound papers from under his cloak, raised them up and tore the document into two halves then hurled the material disrespectfully toward the feet of Oostrigr.

Glancing down at the scraps as they tumbled in the wind, Oostrigr slowly turned his eyes back up to the party with a slight shake of his head and a barely perceptible smile as if he considered it all painfully predictable but suddenly, he demonstrated unexpected and uncharacteristic impatience or even anger. Glaring at Reneta, Oostrigr spit venomously, "I am unimpressed by demonstrative sentiment and the self-indulgent temper tantrums of a spoiled, pampered child. In what risk do you think you engage? What courage do you think you exercise? I need you for credibility and reconciliation. No matter the outcome, you will still be Princess, free to squander your inheritance on beer and delinquency. You have nothing at stake in this. You gamble with the lives of your people, and for what? ... -for some abstract ideal? What makes you think you are any different or more desirable a head of state than me? What makes you think anybody other than you cares which tyrant collects the rent? What do I propose that you do not already practice by long established institution? I offer you alliance and defense for the future. I offer strength to resist our common enemies, and you compromise everything for selfish childish impulses. You are not fit for royalty. You are not fit to represent your father. You are an embarrassment."

Reneta grimaced and once again struggled to restrain tears as she clenched her hands into fists with trembling arms. Fae prodded his horse toward Reneta, stating under his breath, "Olorik." and Olorik then steered her horse around back toward the gate but she turned her head and glared angrily at Oostrigr. Fae snapped, "Reneta." in admonishment and she reluctantly turned her head back around.

Oostrigr laughed, swung his loose leg over his saddle and prodded his horse, following the party only a few steps behind, and he shouted in the direction of Reneta, "Who do you think shows up next? Angorans bearing gifts? More humble rustics in green cloaks? You condemn us both and leave me with nothing left to lose. I only hope for all our sakes, your people exercise better judgment than you and recognize the futility of this while we still have something left with which to build."

Fae softly urged Olorik, "Get her out of here."

Snapping his reins at both horses, Olorik then led Reneta toward the gate at an accelerated pace while Fae sidestepped his horse obstructing Oostrigr and holding him to a slow advance. Glancing over his shoulder all the while until he observed Olorik and Reneta pass under the archway, Fae then turned to face Oostrigr and in the privacy of the moment, he smiled a smile insufficiently respectful or appreciative of the circumstances.

Glowering in disapproval, Oostrigr advised, "Mere fearlessness does not impress me either, modest one, nor ostentatious displays of poverty. You conduct your detached observations and gather your information, but remember I have given you far more information than the one whose word you evidently trust unconditionally. I am no empire from the east. That empire breathes hot on my heels as we speak. I am your ally, and she turns us against one another, weakens us both and seals our fates. She betrays you."

In response, Fae shook his head then stated almost serenely, “It is too late to rattle my confidence. Ten years ago, it might have worked but I’m committed too deep to change course now and it hardly even matters to me any more if I’m right or I’m wrong, if I doubt or don’t doubt. You have had your opportunity to be my ally and you obviously failed. I don’t care who you are or are not, and I don’t care who shows up next. If you want to be my ally, get off my doorstep and show me you can follow instructions. You embarrass yourself with the vanity of so presumptuous an overreach. No one has forced you into anything. You have options. Go consider them, but I suspect what you failed to learn from the witch, you will never learn from me.”

Oostrigr twitched and for a brief moment, the expression on his face betrayed a level of surprise or even more than that, the very hint of lost confidence he intended to provoke with his comments. Perhaps it never occurred to him the modest stranger in green might also know the Red Witch with some degree of intimacy but in any event, Oostrigr stubbornly composed himself then impulsively smiled and stared with fascination until finally suggesting, “We both face the same threats and we are both men of action and resistance. We may squabble over the methods, practices and technicalities but in the end, we both want the same things.”

“No we don’t.” Fae stated with stark deliberation then spun his horse into the archway and passed inside as the gate creaked to a close. At the conclusion of a moment of apparent contemplation, Oostrigr turned his horse and trotted back toward the field.

Wyl awaited Reneta inside the archway and they clung to each other after she dismounted, and even as Fae trotted past, they lingered in the shadows while an eerie silence fell over the ranks assembled upon the walls. With substantial apprehension, Wyl breathed hard and stammered then finally whispered to Reneta, “That’s the man I’ve seen in my dreams.”

Reneta dragged her palms across her face wiping away tears then suddenly squinted with some alarm and inquired, “What dreams are those, Wyl?”

“Orna.” Wyl asserted, “I touched her and I’ve had these dreams. I thought he was just some figment of my imagination but it was him. He talked about freewill, liberty and prosperity. He told peasants they will all be kings. He said he is the oracle, a king among lesser men, and he fears no witch curse-”

Reneta slapped the backside of her hand against his chest and as Wyl fell silent, a distant cheer rose up from the field when the great orator-hero Oostrigr rejoined his army.

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“Please give our horses immediate attention?” Orna requested pleasantly, “They have suffered abuse for our haste and I fear they may cramp.”

The guard appeared suddenly more interested and concerned with the condition of innocent beasts involved then motioned to his companion, who immediately came around from the kiosk and led the horses away.

“Is General Volod here?” Orna inquired.

“Yes. He will be in the duty office, or they will know where he is.” the guard informed her pointing with a finger, “It is right around-”

“-I know where it is, thank you.” Orna stated with a grateful smile then departed.

Leading the way down the street and around a corner, Orna stopped and peeked in a window then instructed her companion, “He is in. Please wait out here. I apologize.”

“I understand.” her companion reassured.

A stone base protruded at the foundation, some eight inches from the face of the wall and the man sat on the narrow ledge digging smoking materials from his interior pockets. A serenely quiet atmosphere enveloped the innermost sanctum of the city that accommodated the ancestral palace of the King, the offices of the Royal Guard, the military headquarters, the fabulous manors of the counselors to the King and the wealthiest merchants of the state. Extravagant courtyards with fountains, statues and trees manicured and arranged like flowers in a garden, sprawled back from the tree-lined streets and a high wall enclosed all of it, forming an approximate circle around. Beyond the walls, the many protective rings of modest homes and shops radiated out in progressively exaggerated levels of poverty to the haphazard shacks and shanties at the very outskirts. Angora, the capital, accounted as the largest city in the known world and its planners estimated its population at something in excess of one-hundred-thousand.

Patting at his waist as if feeling naked without his weapons after checking them at the gate by requirement, the man fidgeted with discomfort then packed a pipe, smoked and gazed out past the space between two stone buildings in front of him into the great courtyard beyond. Large clusters of neatly arranged mature trees rustled at the tops in the breeze and gathered deep shadows underneath in the advancing twilight then after perhaps an hour, Orna reappeared and stated, "We are going to meet with the King."

With her companion following closely, Orna proceeded to the great courtyard then turned up a street alongside the full length of the central greensward concluding at the end where the palace towered up, a lavish eight level affair with ornate spires and towers, balconies and canopies. Atop a wide stairway, two guards stood stationed on either side of the grand entrance and inside the lobby, a receptionist standing post at the receiving station informed Orna and her companion he would arrange announcement of her presence to the King then invited the pair to wait in a courtesy parlor. An escort subsequently led the way through several long corridors and stairways finally ushering the two visitors into a comfortable room with cushioned furniture, large windows and a fireplace with a cozy blaze crackling within. The guard politely informed the pair the king would send for them at his first opportunity then closed the door as he exited, followed by a suspicious click. Urgently working the door handle without result, Orna then angrily kicked the door and her mood immediate degenerated as she stepped to a nearby hospitality table stocked with breads, fruits and bottles of wine on ice, swiped a bottle, worked it open and drank half of its contents in several large gulps.

"Relax, Orna. He will see us soon enough." her companion insisted.

"I expected he might take our visit a little more seriously, given the circumstances?" Orna replied with obvious restraint.

"Temper tantrums will not make him show up any sooner." her companion advised.

Exhaling sharply and shaking her head, Orna demanded, "How can you be so-"

"-I never expected him waiting for us at the gate." he asserted, "Please..."

"Yes... please." Orna repeated then pacing impatiently, she smoked and gulped wine from the bottle while her companion leaned back in a chair and drifted into sleep, fatigued from hard travel and lulled by her soft gentle mutterings.

The door opened with a clank and lying flat on her back asleep on the floor, her legs up on the couch with an empty wine bottle cradled in her arm, Orna stirred and as the bottle rolled on the stone floor with a hollow rattle, she stumbled up in a daze.

"The King invites you to his parlor." the guard stated graciously.

Struggling to her feet and glancing out the window, Orna exhibited sudden distress then asked urgently, "It is still the same day, yes?"

"Yes, Miss." the guard assured, "It has only been a couple of hours."

Facing her companion, Orna rocked her head with a sneer and mocked with a sarcastic tone, "It has only been a couple of hours."

The guard appeared genuinely hurt by her mockery and Orna apologized presently as she followed him through the corridors then approaching an ornate archway again flanked by two guards, the party passed through the opening into a spectacular chamber of extravagant luxury and beauty. From a corner of the room, the King approached with a friendly smile, perhaps suspiciously friendly, dressed in green and gold velvets somehow both casual yet ridiculously overstated with dark hair cropped and fashioned in an unusual style nearly revealing his scalp while what appeared to account as pounds of jewelry sparkled from his fingers and neck. "Orna. How good to see you," the king declared cheerfully as he clasped her hand and kissed it with a bow then added, "I hope you are well. You look... tired."

"Tired... Yes." Orna replied with raised eyebrows and a nod, "We rode here in less than two days from Almath-" then pausing with calculated breaths obviously intending to measure her tone, Orna advised with a gesture of her hand, "This is Koulka, Captain of the Gath Guard. He is here on behalf of King Andrain."

Koulka bowed to a knee, extending his hand and the king clasped it, again with both hands then responded, "Koulka? Good. I am pleased the King is represented well. Please, sit down - Get off your feet. It is no wonder you look tired... Two days! That is impressive." While the party settled around a table in the center of the room, attendants scurried near and served wine and the king played with his jewelry then finally inquired, "Tell me then, what matter so urgently requires my attention?"

"You know why I am here." Orna stated slowly and with obvious restraint.

"I know?" the king responded, "-and how do you know what I know?"

Sipping delicately from her glass, Orna closed her eyes and sat still for a moment while the king maintained his transparent smile, then she stated, "Luthigar, I have not the time or the patience for your usual gamesmanship. The army of Sethia is at Almath now with a number approximate to fifty-thousand. You cannot hide or pretend anymore. It is finally real now and you are next. You can fight them now and at the very least, injure them enough that they no longer present an immediate credible threat or you can wait and face them at perhaps full strength next summer. Are you ready to accept the truth and perform your duty or will you continue to insist on your obstinate position?"

"Obst-?" the king reacted with obvious offense as his transparent smile faded, "Remember to whom you speak, young lady." Suddenly demonstrably angry, the king demanded, "What can you be thinking? Duty? What do you know about duty? I have foreseen this for years. I have done my duty and taken measures to avoid the troubles Almath now faces. They have had the same time as I to take the same measures. I am not their protector and I am not responsible for the foolhardy stubbornness of their King and his feeble advisors -- my apologies, Koulka -- but it is your King and his court that have failed you, not I. Tell them to negotiate. It is time for them to stop pretending, not me."

With a gentle nod, Orna concluded, "Good. Then at least you state a position, which is more than I expected. I also apologize, Luthigar, I would have indulged you forever, if only you had been more reasonable. If only you had remembered to whom you speak."

Turning his head slowly and nearly laughing in astonishment over such disrespectful decorum, Luthigar glared then admonished, “Don’t... test me.” in a threatening tone.

“Test?” Orna repeated as she froze still for a moment then before anyone present understood her actions, she bolted and suddenly held Luthigar by his hair, pulling his head back with a broken wine goblet pressed to his throat as a droplet of blood trickled at the tip of a jagged shard against his skin. Initially rushing to defense, the guards stiffened with weapons brandished obviously anxious any further escalation might in fact only cause injury more grievous to the king than what thus far amounted to merely superficial. Even Koulka reacted in stunned shock as by all appearances, Orna abandoned all hope of cooperation in exchange for a temper tantrum. Slowly looking over all present, Orna defiantly stated, “I have threatened the life of the king and caused injury... punishable offenses.” then backing away, she dropped the broken goblet to the floor and dared Luthigar, “Instruct your guards to take me into custody now.”

Surely all present considered the demonstration a sufficiently convincing ‘test’ as the king obviously entertained no thought of issuing any such instruction while additionally, the guards appeared just as obviously relieved by the developments. With a mischievous smile, Orna concluded, “Yes... and so at last we all remember to whom we speak? Yes? I will leave you to the discretion of your generals, Luthigar, a condition I am sure you will find favorable to my discretion. You have done the best you can to please everyone. You are not responsible now. Stay here and relax - Take no action, and,” she advised glaring menacingly into his eyes while gently prodding his chest with her index finger, “do not attempt to interfere with me.” In fact having exhibited a surprisingly calm and relaxed demeanor throughout the encounter, Luthigar merely crossed his arms in protest as Orna clasped his shoulder and reassured, “Everything will be all right. You will see.” then stated casually, “We are leaving now, Koulka.” as she headed toward the door.

Koulka glanced at the king apologetically and the king responded with a sympathetic expression indicating he appreciated the predicament. As Koulka followed Orna down the corridor, the king shouted from a distance, “You can seize my army and run my country for me, Orna, and you can do the same with Algath, but you will change nothing. You can kill Oostrigr and every Sethian that breathes but even you cannot stop time or prevent the future. The future is here, with or without you... You can’t kill the future, Orna... and you can’t kill freewill...”

On the street alongside the edge of the courtyard, Koulka demanded anxiously, “What now? Why did you do that? Why did you bring me? What is the point of this?”

Orna explained apologetically, “We will return to the duty office to see Volod. What we just did is only a courtesy for him... a form of confirmation, yes? As for bringing you-... I thought-... It was my mistake-... I am sorry for the inconvenience. I just wanted some Gath with me for eh, credibility, yes? -and at least, your presence reassures Volod.”