

THE SANCTUARY

The forest stretched before me like endless night. Even though it was mid day and the middle of summer I still needed my lanterns to see through my way under the thick canopy. My small lantern showed only the road directly ahead, in its struggle against the encroaching darkness of the forest, still I struggled onward. Determined to know what lay beyond these woods. Looking for adventure and a new start, far from the bitter past I had left behind.

Traveling through the constant darkness gave me time to reflect on the last year and what had gotten me to this point. My mind slowly replayed the year's events, leaving me emotionally raw and bitter. I was glad to be traveling by myself. Glad to have left behind the anger and betrayal.

As I broke through into a sudden clearing, the sunlight blinded me. Only the sound of the gentle lapping of the lake on the shores stopped me from stumbling into it. As my eyes adjusted to the light suddenly around me, I took in the beauty of the lake. The clear cool water was quiet and inviting. The clearing was perfect around the shores on all sides. As I stood there admiring the beauty and serenity, I decided to make camp. I had found the perfect vacation spot. And when you were in the position I was, you didn't take such things for granted.

I spent some time fishing, my mouth already watering at the thought of something other than road rations. Planning ahead I thought of drying and smoking the fish to take with me when I left. Not knowing how far I was from any form of civilization. Once that was set-up and

done, and my stomach was full from the fresh fish and various foliage found in the forest, I made a fire and set out to watch the stars till I fell asleep.

Hiding in a shadowed doorway, I can hear the voices of men as they laugh amongst the women's screams. Closer to my position I can hear the laughter of two men as they talk about the joys of unwilling flesh. Between them they drag a young woman, battered and bleeding, she is sobbing quietly.

Cradling my package closer to my chest, I turn away rocking slightly. A single tear of frustration rolls down my face as I let them pass, unable to do anything. My package shifts slightly as I open the door on a now empty corridor.

I creep away, praying to the gods my bundle makes no sound until we are outdoors. I wander through the halls, keeping to the shadows, silently making my way to the kitchen. Once there, I fill my oilskin with milk and grab some rations for the road for me.

Muttering to myself, I slip out of the kitchen doors to where my horse waits. As I mount with difficulty, trying to soothe my parcel as we go. I hear a woman begging from inside. She is beaten into a whimpering silence, as I ride away consoling myself with the knowledge that I was only paid to free my parcel.

As I ride out of the castle gates, I see the bodies of slaughtered men that lay wherever they fell, the enemy not having the honor to remove them before ravaging their women. I lead my horse through them trying to

ignore the familiar places. With a heavy sigh and a heavy heart, I leave the fallen castle behind and ride on to deliver my parcel to its rightful place.

The jarring hoof beats wake the sleeping babe in my arms. I ride into the village with the babe still crying. Humming softly I ignore the disgust on the faces of the villagers. I ride straight to the inn where my employer waits. Singing softly to the babe I swing gracefully out of the saddle. I throw the reins to a waiting stable boy.

The baby coos as I enter the inn. The locals look up, some of the older ones spitting at the ground at their feet. A joyful and relieved woman runs to take the baby from me. Behind her a man throws a pouch of coins at my feet. As I reach to retrieve my payment, the man speaks. The disgust is evident in his voice.

"It's all there, Widow." Spitting the title out as if the sound of it left a bad taste in his mouth, "It is your payment for rescuing your own nephew."

"I'm sure it is Raymond. Telini would only marry a man of his word." I nod back at him ignoring his anger. I turn to leave, anxious to put this all behind me and move on to other parts of the vast world, before the tears show. I am stopped as my sister, Telini, lays a hand on my shoulder.

"Sarrin, our mother would like to see you. She begged me to pay you if necessary . . . she just wants to know you live." Her voice, though quiet, echoes through me.

"That shell is not my mother." I whisper at her over my shoulder.

"My mother died the same night our father and brother did. The same night they took my husband." I begin to step forward as she grabs my upper arm and spin me toward her.

"How dare you betray our family in this way? If you must live by the sword at least do it defending your homeland." Telini says to me, the anger raising her voice.

"Betray the family?" I scoff back at her. "You dare accuse me of betrayal? While your whore mother willingly takes the enemy into her bed to save her title and lands?"

While you pay taxes and take the land the conquering lords give to you to save your husband from a rebel's death? I would rather have neither home, nor a past than be cowed like you. I may not have my family, or our lands or titles. But I have my life, on my terms. Take care of your son dear sister. I have seen great things in Mathias' future."

I stroke the infants head lovingly before walking out the door. Slamming that chapter of my life closed forever.

I awoke crying, my fire dead and the world asleep around me. I wiped my tears and sigh heavily. After taking a few deep breaths I rebuilt my fire. Laying down again I let sleep claim me once again. This time it was deep and peaceful like the night and forest around me.

The next day I set about building myself a home on the shores of the lake. It was a place that was always to be mine. Finally I found place in this world that I would always belong. Regardless of who hated me,

