

THE STARLIGHT MONAD:

The first three chapters

By

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*Section One**Into Starlight*

CHAPTER ONE

Shran one

“You lost, Shran,” Jaldane called from the front of the gauntlet, “and you know what losers do.”

Just looking down the aisle they’d formed, sent a sinking feeling from my stomach to my feet. “Losers” ran the gauntlet, of course.

Jaldane re-gripped his wooden sword, practically salivating with anticipation as he prepared to land a perfect swing. How I wished I hadn’t joined their silly game to begin with. There came the chant as I took a runner’s stance: “gauntlet, gauntlet, gauntlet.”

True, none of them could move from their spots as they swung and thrust those practice swords. Yet if I “happened to” trip halfway through the aisle, I would never escape without getting bruised and bloodied head to toe. How could I show father that face the very day he meant to return? Then again, who wanted a coward for a son?

I needed to do it. I just had to... to... I felt myself turn tail and run for the schoolyard, fast as legs could carry. The rough cobblestone made it easy to fall, yet farther and farther across the courtyard I went.

The young nobles cried, “coward,” and “weakling.” One glance over the shoulder revealed the half dozen lord and ladylings pursuing, waving weapons overhead. I ran still faster, growing the gap between us.

Before the hallway to the schoolyard, the palace had a veritable forest of pillars shrouding a whole area in shadows. The hallway connecting to the schoolyard lay to the right while a servers’

entrance was nestled back at the far side. I weaved between the shadowy columns as if heading for the schoolyard, then slipped in the servers' entrance and bolted it shut behind me.

Pressing an ear to the crack between doors, I listened to the pattering of feet going through to the schoolyard. As that chorus faded away down the connecting corridor, I caught my breath at last.

No telling whether one of them stayed behind to snoop around, so I slid to a seat on the grimy floor. Soon, the palace bell would ring ten, ushering in the head bard, and with him safety to the schoolyard.

A server boy approached, struggling to hold a tub of laundry, and wearing the same expression as if someone had just hopped into the family bed unannounced. He spoke with that up-river accent that turned words like "part" into "pot," and "loud" into "load."

"Beg pardon, master. These doors are having to remain unlocked all the day long," he said.

"Oh. Sorry. I was just... exploring."

"Beggings it again, but these service halls are being very narrow, aye? Our orders are strict to keep them clear and that."

At that, something outside crashed into the bolted doors, raining dust all over. Was it the lordlings? Instead, a middle-aged maid shouted, "open up in there, now." Fast as I could, I slid back the bolt and pulled a door open, concealing myself behind it.

"By thunder," the maid roared as she shoved her cart through the gap. "Who's left the doors locked the dashing day before the Full Moons?"

"I'm sorry, mother," the young server said.

"That'll be making one of you's. Who's hiding back there? Show yourself."

I silently obeyed.

“Master Mattian, what’s bringing you here?”

As I grasped for a better answer than exploring, she scowled at the server boy. “How many times have I told you not to go bothering masters and all that? You’ve got work to do.”

“But it wasn’t my fault,” he said.

“It’s always our fault. Let me find you doing this again and see what happens.”

Seeing the coast had cleared, I squeezed past the fruit cart and headed for the schoolyard. As I rounded the corner into the connecting hallway, someone grabbed my collar. Next I knew, my skull was throbbing, and Jaldane had me pinned against the brick wall.

“Do you think you’re clever, you cheat?” he said, digging thumbnails into my collarbone.

“Just a game,” I mumbled, fighting to keep the pain out of my voice.

“Until you wriggled off into the shadows like a little worm. Do you know what I do to worms, Shranny?”

As I imagined some combination of dangling from a fishing line and tasting a fresh boot-sole, the high tower bell mercifully began to ring for the tenth hour. Jaldane dropped me like wet laundry and scampered into the schoolyard. I followed on his heels, the two of us stepping into rank not a second after the last bell toll died out.

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The palace’s schoolyard housed dozens and dozens of unique statues sculpted after endless figures from Newmund History. While most of those sculpted had died long ago, their feats sat there in stone for all time. Each one had been so finely crafted, it perfectly captured the people and events in question. Why then did we have to memorize a song for every single one of them?

Of course as Falen reminded us last time, countless bards could recite every song for every sculpture in a whole statuary on queue. How all those words could fit in one man's head remained a mystery.

I shook the stray thoughts away as Falen wrapped up the month's final lesson. The colossus he stood beneath depicted the young nobles' own great grandfather. There he was, President Dessidon Stohvan the First, locked in combat with his treacherous brother, Sarlinor the first.

Gradually, my eyes wandered still higher, tracing the marble carvings that wrapped all around the rim of the schoolyard. I supposed many of them got along fine without a hint of noble blood.

"Shran," Falen called, and I tried not to jump. He leaned on the bulbous handle of his standing stick gripped between bony fingers, increasingly blending in with the statuary for stillness. The thoroughly aged man made my skin crawl the way he moved—or didn't move.

"Yes sir?" I sputtered as Jaldane and some of the other students all seemed to leer my direction for a moment.

"Would you kindly summarize today's lesson for us before we disperse?"

I hadn't caught probably the last few minutes, but prayed memory would serve for once. "We learned about the Great President's legacy, how he was very important."

Falen tugged at his peppery-gray goatee. "Do elaborate."

"We learned more about how he united the whole continent, then, his two sons there—"

"In verse please," the bard directed.

In schoolyard fashion, I gazed at the sculpture of the presidential brothers from feet to head, hurriedly ushering the words into my own head. I sang what came out:

O the mighty President

All Othark he united.

He got his Mayors aplenty

To his presidency indicted—

“Invited,” the young nobles corrected, like they knew everything.

“...his presidency invited,” I mumbled.

And out from him did

Dessidon and Sarlinor the firsts

Rule peacefully, the east and west’ly halves

From their due births.

“Needs a little work,” Falen said, “and why does our palace house a monument of two Stohvans from Frandesia?”

“Um...”

“Audible pauses are not part of the English language,” the bard said, followed by giggles from the lordlings.

“Sorry, sir. Because Dessidon the Second married Clenhilda, the last of the Pelterns.”

“Thus,” he said without stopping for a breath, “giving her eldest the mandate to rule Newmund mayorship. Mayor Guilen may have a Stohvan for a father, but the purest Peltern

blood flows through his veins.” He cocked an eyebrow at the warring brothers behind him. “We also ought to honor his father’s father with this sculpture and its songs. Word-perfect recitations are due Monday. You may disperse.”

The palace bell rang twelve noon. Falen grabbed up his standing-stick and disappeared down an adjoining hallway. I sighed in the relief we had not one thing left to hear out, recite, or otherwise learn all weekend. The young nobles broke rank and left while I delayed leaving as long as possible. Who knew what they might have in store for me the moment I exited?

When it appears they really had gone off to their own business, I hightailed it through the main courtyard, dodging between the many booths already being set up for the weekend’s festivities. I went straight out the gate and through Newmund city, soon reaching sweet fields in the open sunlight. An under-trafficked cart path brought me by the jagged crevasses that marked off the forbidden zone. Even from there it hurt my neck to look up at the one structure in the center of it all: the Great Tower.

After checking my flanks, I hiked down the crevasse's gentle incline, which turned into a deep ravine, concealing me from view on either side. It felt almost cozy, knowing no stray eye could catch me.

I rarely dared to break actual rules in the palace, but exploring those barren tracts of land felt different. If anything, wandering through the forbidden zone meant the nobility didn’t have to waste energy turning noses up at me. Everybody won.

After hiking far enough into the crevasses to avoid being spotted, I climbed one of the less treacherous patches of wall back to ground level. From there I dusted off my palms and headed to one of the warm sides the Tower.

The structure beggared belief no matter how many times I'd seen it. About a hundred meters in front of me stood the south side of its northern foundation. It spread wide enough to house the better part of the mayor's palace and rose many times higher than any human structure I'd ever heard of. The whole thing was built from some kind of metal no one could identify.

The four foundations resembled pillars, one placed in each of the cardinal directions, with nothing but empty fields between them. Way up at their tops is where they actually joined, like the spokes of a cart's wheel. From that central point, a spire pierced through clouds and sky until disappearing out of view. Some actually claimed the spire had no top, but either way it was simply too tall and too narrow to ever work. Why hadn't the whole thing toppled or snapped in half at the first gust of wind?

I laid out in the field, grabbing a mouthful of some dry snacks from my side pouch as I pondered the impossible Tower. No words ever came, and if anything the Tower seemed to steal the words from me, though not exactly in a bad way. As I laid there, simply watching it not fall brought the strangest sense of comfort.

"Looking for something?" came a man's voice very nearby.

I sprang to my feet, half expecting one of the mayor's men. Instead, there to my right stood a man with smooth white hair that almost seemed to glow and a clean shaven chin with no beard or even a mustache. He looked about forty, yet couldn't have been, with that hair. His stance gave the strange impression as if he'd been there since time immemorial, watching me with those piercing hazel eyes.

Of course my first instinct was to flee for my life and never return. Yet his warmly commanding presence overshadowed even that fear. He had asked a question of me, so I gave a

deep courtly bow and said, “I don’t know sir. It’s just amazing such a building is here, in Newmund.”

“Ah. And who might you be, young man?”

“Shran Mattian, my father’s one of the mayor’s generals.”

“A Mattian, you say?”

I nodded, and he seemed surprisingly interested from there on.

“As for the Tower,” the man said, “where else would it be?”

“Maybe down in Frandesia, or somewhere more influential.”

“And why is that?”

“No one in our whole mayorship could build something like this, could they?”

The man chuckled. “Son, no one on Tew could build it in ten centuries.”

“What is it, sir? The Tower I mean.” I bit my tongue. Why waste such a man’s time with silly questions like that? Yet the man took no offense.

“What do the bards sing about it?” he asked.

“That it’s from before the Storm, I think.”

“Why should that matter?”

“All I know is, or, I remember part of a song about it. It’s due Monday.”

“Excellent. Sing away then.”

I nodded, straining to make the song come without its statue present:

The man of arcane

Made of metal his brain.

When the Storm came and reigned
All man's knowledge was drained
Till he learned once again
And made song his strong cane.

In reality, I stumbled over a few words, but the mysterious man smiled. "Your song holds true enough, son. Gradually, gradually before the Storm, almost everyone offloaded their knowledge, their intelligence, their ingenuity into various machines made of metal as well as other materials."

"But why would they do that? Wouldn't it hurt?"

"It hurt in more ways than they could imagine. Still, they desired to transcend the flesh that way. And as the flesh between their ears atrophied from disuse, they heaped on more and more machine enhancements to make up for the difference."

"And all their machines got destroyed by the Storm," I said, proud of myself for remembering that.

"Yes," he said. "It pretty well erased all they 'knew' in the times before. If you knew all man's knowledge was drained, why would you ask me what this tower is?"

"I'm sorry, sir." It really was a dumb question.

"No need to apologize. I'd just like to hear your answer."

"Oh. I asked because you seemed like someone who ought to know."

"Well enough, I should say. Better than that, I'll *show you* what this tower is, if you come back tomorrow."

“Inside the Great Tower?” I marveled.

The man nodded. “Make sure to bring your mother along too, of course.”

“How do we break in? And my mother, what if she’s busy?”

He just said, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” and made his way towards the Tower.

I called after him, “sir, who should I say sent me?”

“A relative of sorts,” he said, not slowing.

“A relative? What do I call you? I’ve never seen you on holidays.”

“Steve’s my name,” he said, already some distance away. “Don’t wear it out.”

At the base of the Tower, “Steve” genuflected, and a guillotine door slid open before him. He stepped inside, and it slid shut behind him fast enough to slice a limb loose.

I sprinted after him. Many glowing lines woven into mysterious patterns covered the silvery surface, but I found no hint of a door. Though I took a knee like he had, nothing happened. I couldn’t even tell for sure if I’d found the same spot as Steve had. Clearly no use without him.

At last I turned homeward, not dejected but bursting with excitement. The man had given his word, and so I’d make the greatest discovery in all of Newmund, all of Tew itself. As easily as that, we Mattians would enter legends.

CHAPTER TWO

Liza one

Zieglon should have returned this morning. Of course if I knew my husband, he was off answering the mayor's call before setting a toe inside the palace. Once again, Shran and I sat breaking our fast on the lonely edge of the mayor's table.

The whole court coursed with chatter of the silver stag hunt. Mayor Guilen, his noblemen and my husband had all gone on the hunt. And at his request, half of northern Newmund villagers had abandoned their work mid-harvest if only just to catch a glimpse of the legendary silver stag.

"Whoever catches it receives a great blessing," one woman said.

"We'll just have to ask my Thordin when he returns," said Thordin's wife... Virna, was it?

"And have you heard just stroking its fur heals all sorts of ailments?" another said.

As Shran ate sausage and porridge in silence, I just gave him a little smile. "Are you excited to see your father, back with that stag leashed behind him?"

"I sure hope he catches it," he said, swallowing. "Can I ride it first if he does?"

"You're thirteen already. It couldn't carry you."

"I was kidding," Shran said with a hint of irritation I let slide.

"Sorry. Yeah, that's funny," I said, and he went back to his breakfast. "How are lessons going?"

"The head bard's coming in today, for the monthly reviews."

"That'll be great. Falen must know practically everything."

He chuckled to himself. "He sniffs out the tiniest mistake and makes sure everyone else hears about it."

“It just takes practice, right? You’ll learn all of it soon enough.”

“Our recitations are Monday. I barely know the difference between a Stohvan and a Peltern.”

“Maybe your father can sing them with you tomorrow?”

He nodded with an expression that said, he’d heard that one before.

“What about the other students?”

“They’re all little Stohvans, though.”

“Ha! So you do know the difference,” I said.

He shrugged and lowered his voice. “We don’t get along very well.”

“Sometimes you have to be the first to make a move before you find a friendship.”

“What if I don’t want to be friends with them either?”

“Sometimes you have to,” I said.

“How many have you made here, since we left home?”

I hadn’t really, quite exactly made any. If the nobility treated my husband as an outsider, they treated me more like a slug: hardly worth squishing for the mess it would make. They granted me the basic rights of ladyhood with none of the respect. Of course I couldn’t let on about that with my son. “This is our home now Shran. And we’re here for good reason. Even if we’re not of the nobility, we have lands to our name. We own them. Do you know what that means?”

“It’s not that simple, mother.”

“Because we need to act like it. So what does that make us?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s supposed to make you a lady and me a lord-to-be.”

“Well, you *are* a lordling, I *am* a lady. We need to act like it, act like we belong. Right?”

Shran sighed, “I’ll try.”

Soon enough he went off to the courtyard where the noble lord and ladylings had gone. Perhaps they'd let him join one of their games before going to the schoolyard. That left me with a span of empty seats to my left. I was alone and set on display for everyone in the court below to see. Would that be my life, always apart from and never a part *of* anything? No. I had to bight down and put my own advice into practice already.

A ways to my left sat Haldra, the youngest of the mayor's siblings and the worst of the bunch. Today she had her dark braided hair spiraled up around the back of her head, one dimpled cheek always slightly tensed with the tiniest hint of a self-satisfied smirk. After the death of her husband, she ignored her married name altogether, styling herself simply Lady Haldra.

Haldra cocked an eyebrow expectantly as I looked her direction. I instinctively turned away and stared blankly at the lower court. But, no. I resolved to get over myself. I picked up my dish and sat right next to her and the elder sister, Gilda. The three of them fell quite silent from whatever they'd been speaking about.

"Well isn't this a surprise," Haldra said.

I internally screamed at myself. Why hadn't I thought of one thing to say beforehand? "Placed any bets on whose party will catch the stag?" I blurted.

Haldra smiled. "Honestly, Gilda and I were just debating whether brushing that silver pelt could heal your Zieglon after he gets gored by those crystal antlers."

"Idle chatter, really" Gilda said.

I nodded: idle chatter indeed. "He'd sooner drag the creature here with his own two hands," I said.

That got a giggle out of them, for better or worse. “And anyway, your brother’s fortunate to have a general as fine as him.”

“You don’t worry about him, then?” Haldra asked.

“Not if I can help it.” Not every day at least.

“Hmm,” Haldra said. “It’s just, where would you go without him, I wonder?”

Sometimes my tongue would not allow itself be held back. I had to respond. “Well where would you be if your brother weren’t the mayor?”

Lady Haldra just sighed, letting my rash talk hang in the air.

Gilda swallowed the mouthful she’d been chewing. “No more idle talk, please. Our sons would only be a step closer to the office. May All Father forbid it.”

Deciding I’d had enough embarrassment for one morning, the screech of my heavy chair scooting echoed across the entire court.

“Going so soon?” Haldra said.

I let a breath out and answered in the most courtly tone I could fake. “I’ve just got to be moving along at the moment.”

Haldra smiled. “Smart girl,” she said, and she was younger than me. “You could hardly show up this afternoon in,” she eyed the rough gown I’d thrown over my chemise for breakfast. “With the president arriving and everything...”

“The President?” I asked.

“Pay the silly rumor no mind,” Haldra said. “Chances are he’ll miss the Full Moons banquet this afternoon.”

I shook my head along, pretending I knew all about it. “It’s not this evening?”

“You know how it is. With the siting of the Full Moons, the president en route, and the silver stag to boot, we had to commence sooner, or we’d hardly have time left to sleep before Monday. You don’t mean to show up—I’m sorry but—dressed like that.”

I supposed I’d made a habit of dressing down on the mornings most of the important people were gone. Suddenly, I felt filthy in such common wear. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said with a curtsy.

Back up in the Mattian family chambers, I flung open my wardrobe. It was bared to the boards. “What in three graves?” I cursed. Hurriedly, I checked under the bed, checked Zieglon’s things and even hopped over to Shran’s chamber. Not a scrap of my formal wear remained.

A service bell with a purrium handle hung next to our bed. I lightly flicked its handle and it softly purred, awakening the link to its sister half downstairs. I rang on my end and waited. And then I waited some more before I flicked and rang it again. Where were the servers?

Several agonizing minutes later, a maid found her way up to our chambers, a thick limbed young woman with brown eyes and a cherry red nose. I’d rarely seen her upstairs, and she spoke through a hard up-river accent.

“Grave apologies and that for the delay Mistress Mattian. We caught your ring, but with all these preparations...”

“It’s fine. Just... I have no dresses, no ball gowns, no other clothes at all, nothing. What happened to them?”

“Great Father beyond,” she gasped, “please pardon a poor server girl, Mistress.”

“You’re pardoned. I just need to know what happened to my things.”

“The Lady Haldra, be she haled, told me you needed everything washed for the banquet tonight.”

“Tonight? No. It starts this afternoon.”

“Afternoon, my lady? We don’t have time for that.”

“Could you please just go fetch my clothes before it’s too late.”

“As you please. I’ll be up again directly my lady.” She curtsied out, perhaps more politely than usual.

I dropped into an armchair by our fireplace. How could that woman Haldra be so rude? Why would she go out of her way to make things difficult for me? True, Mayor Guilen gave us some of the “her” allotment down south. But they had to come from somewhere. How could I help that?

The maid took so long I heard the tenth hour bell chime from the high tower, and she still hadn’t returned. I rang for service again, and finally she rolled a cart up to our door. “Begging your pardon, Mistress. There were a lot of these to grab. You’ve no idea how hard it is fishing through wash water betwixt everything else.” Then I noticed all the clothes on the cart were soaking wet and covered in suds.

“What happened?” I asked in disbelief.

“We meant to wash them, of course. They dunked them in soon as they got them from the laundry shoot.”

“It’s past ten already. I can’t go to the banquet in this,” I said, pulling at the rough gown I wore. “I might as well visit the president wrapped in a burlap sack.”

“These are powerful thick ballgowns you’ve got here,” she said, picking through them. “It could take beyond five hours to get them watered and dried, that’s not to mention the fitting them on and everything.”

“That just won’t do. I have to have these by noon. Try fire and fanning and that,” I said, slipping into an upriver vernacular.

“Ooh. You don’t want this fabric anywhere near a flame, and it’d soak up a pungent smoky odor to boot.”

“Then I’m stuck. Haldra will have me dressed in rags at table with the President himself, not to mention Zieglon. I’ll be the laughing stock of the entire Mayorship.” I said, collapsing onto the bed in frustration.

“Is there really nothing that can be done? Could you borrow someone else’s perhaps?”

“Who would I ask?” I said into the mound of pillows.

“Lady Haldra wanted your laundry done. Maybe she’d lend you something of hers?”

“No, no. Please just get this stuff dried as fast as you can.”

“It’ll be hours, mistress Mattian, but as you please,” she said and rolled away with the dripping cart.

Suddenly I had an idea. What if I did “borrow” one of Haldra’s dresses for the afternoon? She probably had so many she wouldn’t even notice it was gone. It was only fair.

I crept my way to Haldra’s chambers. What kind of plan had I gotten myself into? I pondered as I neared the destination. Now I’d thought about it, surely she’d show up any minute if she wasn’t already there preparing.

I rang the hall's service bell. Mere seconds later, a maid emerged from an adjoining server hallway. Apparently some sections of the palace got significantly better response times. "Oh, it's you Mistress Mattian" the maid said, in well-practiced Presidential English. "I half expected Lady Haldra."

"I was just walking here," I said, "have you checked her room?"

"Pardon." The maid curtsied and scampered over to the chamber door.

I hid behind some of the curtains that lined the hall. I wouldn't win any prizes for hide-and-go-seek, but this was practically the first plot I'd ever done. I heard the maid knock several times, getting no response, then I peeked as she opened the door in desperation and stepped inside. Relieved, I hopped out from my hiding spot and made a slow promenade towards the chamber, admiring the gilded wall carvings and marble sculptures on the way. By the time I arrived, the maid re-emerged from the chamber, clearly having failed her search.

"Don't worry," I said. "She had to be somewhere else, and didn't need service after all." It was technically true, I suppose.

"Thank All Father," the maid said, and hustled back into the server hallway.

I cautiously checked over both shoulders and slipped inside. Whereas the Mattian family chambers had a nice cozy feel to them, this one, with its bright color palate and tall vaulted ceiling felt more like a ballroom than a bedroom.

Her walk-in closet wasn't nearly as packed full of garments as I'd expected. Besides that, each ballgown was so unique I'd have to find a way to modify one, disguising it. I grabbed a nice blue themed gown that appeared vaguely similar to some others. Hopefully she wouldn't notice.

As I pondered how to get such a huge thing all the way back to the Mattian chambers without raising eyebrows, a hinge creaked somewhere outside. It had to be the front door, of course. In a sudden terrified flurry, I pulled the closet door shut. Light still poured through the closet window.

Would she go straight for the gowns? I peered out the window, greeted by a very sheer drop. There was no way out.

Voices came through the thin closet door, Haldra speaking with one of the maids. “So what’s become of our friend now?” she asked.

“Well Mistress, I put every scrap of her clothing out of commission for a good minute and kept her waiting a dreadful long time for service in the interim,” the maid said.

“Splendid,” Haldra said, “and she didn’t suspect anything?”

“Oh she thinks you did it, but who would ever expect a lowly maid was up for a bit of fun as well.”

“Absolutely. Even farm folk like her—especially farmer folk like her—never see you coming.”

Indeed I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Why on Tew would two women of such opposite walks of life team up against me? Where was my team?

“Oh and I nearly forgot to tell you,” Haldra said. “the meeting is going to be very important this evening. Big plans, extremely soon.”

“Falling off my seat to know what about, Mistress.”

“Ah-ah-ah. Secret. I can’t say a word of it until we’re all there.”

“Begging your pardon, Mistress.”

“Oh stop, Penna. It’s time for my bath.”

So “Penna” was the same maid who came to my room. One part of me hated her for helping that woman, while the other envied her. How I wanted to be part of something. Beyond that, how I wanted to know what this meeting could be about.

Instead, I stayed trapped in that closet for at least half an hour before the bath was drawn. A whole assembly line of maids had brought bucket after bucket of hot water, until the apparently massive tub was filled and the connected bathroom door closed. Finally, amidst the sound of scrubbing and chattering, I ever so quietly opened the closet door and tiptoed out to the hall with the “borrowed” gown in my arms.

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The eleventh bell rang from the high tower as I slammed our chamber door behind me. Only an hour left. In that time, I needed to make the gown unrecognizable. Unlike those palace nobles, my grandmother taught me the art of mending from my youth. I got right to it.

The frills and ruffles made it easier for a clever woman to hide where she’d stitched something else on or cut something off. I used any fabric I could find—curtains, bedding, table cloths—to make it significantly different. I even lengthened the train considerably, hastily sewing on some heavier fabric to the back. Finally, punching a few new holes for the side buckles made it a perfect fit.

In no time, I wore the modified ballgown and styled my hair and makeup. The woman in the mirror could have been mistaken for the Third Lady herself. I’d never seen a statue of the First or Second Lady, but presumed they would’ve been jealous too.

The twelfth bell rang out from the high tower: I was already late. The banquet would be starting. I flew down to the mayor's court. The doorman looked on me in amazement as he opened the doors.

Inside, there at the mayor's table sat Haldra, Gilda, and Virna, quite casually. In fact, the court was practically empty like no banquet would happen at all. Now I looked completely out of place, but maybe I could play it off somehow?

As I briskly walked inside, a bit of my lengthened train must have caught in the door jam. Before I registered half of what was going on, it ripped a large section off the skirt. I whipped around to grab the fallen fabric, revealing the gigantic tear for everyone at the Mayor's Table to see. They burst out laughing.

I scrambled to cover myself with the fallen fabric, cursing under my breath. They'd made an absolute fool of me. On and on they cackled until I couldn't take any more. I screamed at Haldra, "you liar!" It echoed across the court and out into the hall.

Their laughing died out abruptly. "Oh *I* lied?" Haldra said, swiftly making her way my direction. "When did I ever lie to you, Liza?"

I didn't want to give that the dignity of an answer. I just repeated, "you did lie to me."

"No, no, no. That was just a bit of fun," she said, condescending to one knee as she looked down on my puffy red eyes. "I didn't lie to you, farm girl."

"I am a Lady. A Lady of Newmund."

"But you don't act like one. Here you are, screaming in the halls, crying in your... where did you get this? Oh no." She felt at my collar and sleeves, then whispered. "And you stole it. I may just have to tell Guilen about this."

I scurried out of the court without another word, the tears between my fingers as I prayed no one would recognize me. On and on I went, up the grand stairs and through the halls till collapsing face first onto my bed.

Haladra's words kept repeating in my head. The lies I could stand. The truth hurt far worse.

CHAPTER THREE

Zieglon one

We tread step by careful step through the heart of the Ohha Forest. Each chirp of a bird, each swish of a branch in the wind, each crunch of a fallen leaf sent us its own special message. The only thing I wanted to know, where was the silver stag?

The very morning I meant to return, villagers spotted him: the first of his kind in over a decade, though some claimed there was only one. By mid-morning, Mayor Guilen recruited villagers who covered a twenty-kilometer parameter of forest near the siting.

I jumped at the chance to catch the silver stag myself, and predictably, so did Guilen's brother, Thordin. So, no less than three hunting parties had set out, scouring the forest. One of us would catch this legendary creature. If I had any breath left in my body, I wouldn't let Thordin Stohvan take credit this time.

Something broke a few twigs in the foliage ahead. A common buck could have made the noise, but I held my breath all the same, each quickened heartbeat thumping anticipation. Nearer and nearer we approached the source of the sound. I couldn't afford to let any bards tag along with my hunting party. Bards could make a good hunt sound like a great one after the fact, but for clever game like this, I needed men who knew how to keep silent. I trained them to select each step as precisely as an artist with his chisel. One false move and the creature would undoubtedly escape. The only songs people would hear of this hunt would come directly from me and my men. Finally, there on the forest floor lay the freshly broken twigs. By All Father, had he slipped our grasp?

Then a bird call came from the right flank, it sounded like Hothern, my second in command. His call translated to “target sighted.” Heart racing, I gave the hand signal “horseshoe formation.” The signal propagated from man to man, out of view. It would travel all the way back to Hothern on the right and to the farthest reach of the left flank. Slowly, steadily, my men closed in around the new target, leaving him one direction to travel.

With his keen senses and nimble limbs, completely encircling the silver stag risked losing him for good. As the songs had it, he could jump clear over a man’s head. Only if we pushed him just right, could we cut off his path of escape. As we advanced the horseshoe formation, the distant creature casually meandered onward.

The faint rushing of a small waterfall faded into earshot. I recalled this landmark reached a few meters high, closed in on every side but the entrance. Praying the stag couldn’t jump that, I signaled again, directing towards the falls.

We had to make him notice our presence just enough to saunter off in the right direction without being spooked. So, gradually, gradually we crept forward. The odd “target sighted” bird call from one of my men giving a bearing on the stag’s whereabouts.

Whether he banked left or banked right, hidden in the distant foliage, we gently nudged him back towards the trap. Louder and louder the crash of water grew. Soon the rushing water drowned out sounds of the forest.

At last, I caught sight of the falls through the brush, sheer rocky walls stretching all around it. The stag had no escape but through us. There, by the pool at the base of the falls stood this creature, its silvery coat glistening in stray rays of sunlight, its twelve-pointed antlers clear as

crystal. The silver stag walked as if gravity held no claim on him, as if each step he took were a gift he freely gave Tew's surface. With the same grace, he lapped up a drink from the pool.

Witnessing the beauty of this creature, I almost wanted to call off the hunt. Almost. Instead, I resolved only to trip and bind him. Still hidden in the bushes, I felt for the bolas on my hip.

An awful clattering of hooves and shouting men cut through the sound of crashing water. These riders galloped right on past us, into open air. Thordin, the mayor's younger brother sat astride his ebony horse. He wore over-decorated iron armor, his favorite bards on their mounts beside him.

That dashed oaf. How could he bring those whinnying nags on such a delicate hunt? I still gripped the bolas at my hip, furious. Thordin's rank of horses completely obscured any hope of a shot at the stag.

The stag immediately charged the two dozen riders like a child chasing a flock of birds.

"Loose," Thordin commanded.

They loosed a volley from their wrist-mounted crossbows. The stag only swerved slightly, swatting several missiles out of the air with a flick of his antlers.

"Ready harpoons," Thordin shouted. Before his men could even draw, the stag jumped, soaring over their heads like nothing. This feat spooked Thordin's horses so badly, a few of them bucked their riders headlong into the pool. Even I froze by the sheer grace of this jump, till he landed behind us. The rest of Thordin's men raced into the woods after it.

Wasting no time, I hopped onto a newly riderless horse and whipped it into action. What Thordin's horses lacked in courage, they at least made up for with speed. Soon I caught up to Thordin, riding right next to him. He shot a glare but couldn't take his eyes off the path for long.

We crashed through branches and twigs to stay on the stag's tail. I hacked and slashed with the family sword, just enough to keep branches from striking my unarmored face. No time to slow down.

The stag raced on ahead of us, skipping and bobbing through brush and bramble, his head appearing one moment, and disappearing the next. Once again, there was no way of lining up a clear shot, with the bolas. This silver stag was faster, but he didn't know these woods like I did.

Finally, the creature came to a large clearing. We trailed so closely behind him, he had no other escape. The full sunlight struck his skin, and he shined more beautifully than before. When we too emerged into the clearing, I swung bolas overhead. I studied his every movement, half enamored and half planning my one shot.

Thordin shouted for his men to loose another volley. They had a better shot this time. Somehow the creature anticipated it, skipping two meters in the air, easily avoiding the volley. But then came my turn. I cast my bolas at his hind legs. They twirled across the clearing and entangled round and round his airborne hooves. At high speed, he struck ground, tumbling into a heap in the midst of the clearing. The stag gave a loud mournful cry that carried out into the woods. The bolas immobilized him, without serious injury.

Thordin halted his men, taking a moment to steady himself. "Again," he commanded. Each man flicked the Purrium platelet on his crossbow. The metal platelets' high metallic hum summoned the loosed bolts back again, each to its respective crossbow as if reeled in by an invisible line.

"It's already tripped and bound, Thordin."

“Nonsense,” Thordin said, looking to the bards beside him. “They shall sing that Thordin’s bolts pierced the elusive creature of legend.”

The men cocked their crossbows.

“Aim...”

I lightly snapped a finger to a purrium platelet on my own glove. The purrium sustained a low hum, invisibly linking it to the other half on the tossed bolas.

“Loose.”

With my glove linked, the weight of the ensnared hooves now wrested in the palm of my hand. Clasp ing both hands, I pushed my glove against thin air, and the bolas mimicked the movement, rolling the stag out of the way. As the bolts missed, I silenced the platelet with fingers, dismissing the link. My hand moved freely again.

“Dash you on the rocks, Zieglon. I nearly hit the thing,” Thordin said.

“The catch is mine,” I said.

“Spoken from the back of a stolen mount. Nevertheless,” he said, spurring his horse forward, “my horses and my men that chased him down.”

Just before I kicked off after him, my mount’s ears perked up. I froze as I too detected something and scanned the tree line for its source.

Thordin reached the stag with a bridal at the ready. The silver stag made another mournful cry as it thrashed against Thordin’s bridling.

The birds stopped singing. In the stark silence, I heard it clearly: something sprinting towards us off in the distance. This was big, much bigger than a grizzly, with a gait all wrong. What approached us ran on two legs, rather than four.

Thordin finally secured the harness to my catch. The hidden animal sprinted now, almost to the clearing. Then Thordin and his men heard it too. They scanned the brush, cocking their crossbows uneasily. Branches broke. Trees swayed violently. Thordin scrambled over to his mount, drawing a one meter harpoon to guard the prize from the ground.

I kicked my horse into action, Thordin's men coming after me. I would not let him defend my catch for me.

It burst into the clearing. This hideous thing stood almost five meters tall. Though its face appeared human-like its mouth and nose protruded far beyond the chin, like a rude snout. He had huge cat-like ears poking out the sides of his head, and thick oily fur covered his muscular body. The monster roared as he charged, revealing many jagged teeth.

I galloped forward as Thordin stood his ground.

The monster raised his arm to strike the noble. The men loosed a volley. Unfortunately their wrist crossbows weren't designed for infernal monsters. Several bolts poked through its fur but only enough to startle him.

Thordin took the split-second opening, jabbing at its leg with the harpoon. The monster swatted it into the grass. He grabbed Thordin in one hand and the silver stag with the other.

Finally I reached them. I'd just drawn the family sword when the giant kicked my mount. The horse and I hurdled through the air in a sickening arc. I landed with a thud, rolling out of the way as the screaming horse nearly landed on top of me.

I stumbled to my feet, the world spinning around me, too dizzy to catch the fleeing horse. I shook my head, desperately regaining my bearings. I just caught the last glimpse of the monster, retreating whence he'd come with Thordin and the stag in hand. The riders went off, who knows

where, either fleeing or seeking some route to cut him off. Thordin, though hardly a friend, would surely be killed if I did nothing. I couldn't possibly catch up to the monster on foot, but I had one fool idea.

Behind, the family sword stuck into the ground in the middle of the clearing, but I sprinted straight ahead for Thordin's lost harpoon. I planted its barbed tip deep into the grass and sliced away the insulation at the butt of the weapon with my hunting knife. Finally, I uncovered the harpoon's Purrium core. I gave this a solid clank with the knife. Like a fishing pole with an invisible line, the harpoon yanked towards the monster, somewhere in the surrounding forest. Clearly, Thordin still had the sister-half of the harpoon core attached to his person. The purr grew so shrill, it made my ears ring. Still I dug heels into the dirt as I pulled and pulled against thin air.

The monster had a strong grip but perhaps not stronger than a purrium summons. Indeed, it felt like it pulled Thordin a bit closer, then a little closer, then... slack? Had Thordin's sister-half detached? Had the purrium bond broken? But no. Some tension remained, pulling skyward. I looked up, seeing Thordin plummeting towards me. The closer it was, the stronger purrium pulled. Dropping faster than gravity, he'd be skewered on his own harpoon, not to mention crushed by the fall.

If Thordin died like that, I could lose everything. In the moment, I only had one more insane idea how to save him. I silenced the core, deactivating the summons. Ears still ringing, I cast the harpoon way up into the nearest tree trunk. He'd strike the ground any second now, leaving no time to waste.

"All Father guide my blade," I prayed, then threw my hunting knife at the tree-planted harpoon. It struck the exposed core with a nice solid clank. This summoned Thordin mid-drop,

yanking him by the arm until his glove touched it. The halves silenced as they reunited, allowing the nobleman to land with a clatter somewhere inside the tree line.

I wondered, how had Thordin ended up hurdling so high through the air? Unless something threw him.

The monster broke through the tree line. Ignoring Thordin, it ripped the harpoon from the tree and snapped it in two. Out of habit, I swapped glove platelets, attaching the platelet for my hunting knife to the palm. With a solid snap, I summoned the knife back. Unfortunately, the hairy monster seemed to hear everything quite well. Its beady eyes squinted my direction as those cat-like ears angrily twitched.

How could I be so stupid?

He charged furiously.

In that moment, I felt worse than naked: not a weapon on me, standing right out in the open. About fifty meters away, in the middle of the clearing lay my family sword where it fell. I must've dropped its platelet when I lost that cowardly horse. And about the same distance to the left was the tree line, with the charging monster was only seconds away.

The knife I'd summoned kept flying towards me, leaving precious few options. I could test my fortune battling the monster armed only with a knife, or, perhaps I could buy myself a few more seconds to escape. I yanked out the still-ringing purrium platelet, chucked it high and sprinted for the tree line. The knife and platelet clinked together, silencing each other and dropped.

Forty meters left. It did indeed buy me a few extra seconds, as the monster chipped a tooth biting down on the stray knife.

Thirty meters now. Flailing for absolutely anything in the open field, I lightly snapped the platelet for my bolas, linking to them without summoning. I felt their limpness in my palm. Clearly, they no longer held the stag. I snapped my finger to the platelet as hard as I could, the high pitched purr making my ears ring once more. It yanked my hand right towards the charging monster, who roared angrily at the shrill sound.

Twenty meters. I opened my hand, and the glove simply pulled itself free. It sailed back to my pursuer. He chomped down on it, but the platelet continued to ring out from between his teeth.

Ten meters, freedom right there. A gigantic muscular hand swiped for me. I dove, tucked and rolled, but he stayed right on top of me.

Five meters and another hand came swinging in. It forced me to dive away from freedom, that rock-dashed monster. Behind us a bugle sounded. Thordin's men had returned but too late.

As I landed the roll, two hands grabbed ahold of me, pinning arms to my sides. I wriggled and thrashed as the fiend lifted me to his filthy grinning maw, its teeth still clamped down on the ringing glove. He gratuitously opened his jaws, ready to devour. The glove sprang free, immediately pulling itself to the back of his filthy throat.

The cavalry continued their charge, and the monster coughed on the ringing glove. It only pressed further out of reach. Then, in swooshed my lost bolas, wrapping themselves tightly around his throat. He dropped me, clasping his neck with both hands.

The cavalry arrived, throwing a hail of harpoons at close range. That sent the choking monster retreating into the woods. But for the moment, no one dared try to reel the thing in.

Hothern and the rest of my men caught up with us after the monster faded out of earshot. I led them in the same direction the bolas had returned from. There we located the silver stag: no self-respecting butcher would accept the carcass that remained.

To be continued...