

The New Kingdom

A philosophical fantasy novel

By: Stephanie Nicole McDaniel

With special thanks to Professor Patrick Thaddeus Jackson
Who not only teaches his students to ask questions, but
trusts them to answer them.

Chapter One

Two things fill the heart with renewed and increasing awe and reverence the more often and the more steadily that they are meditated on: the starry skies above me and the moral law inside me.

~Immanuel Kant

"A very long time ago the land was bright. Flowers sparkled, the trees danced and the rivers sang. Their gaiety was not due to any trick or sorcery, though sorcerers abounded in those times. They were glad simply to be alive, for they lived in a land of harmony.

"But this kingdom had not always been the wonderful place of folk-tales. Before the good there was confusion and fear. There was no order and people only had devotion to themselves. Men knew nothing but want and greed and their lives were ruled by it.

"Then a wise man came and said he wanted to unite the nations. He showed them how little they knew and how destructive their ways were. He created a nation of children out of savage men so that they might better learn his wisdom.

"He began with organization and order. People were assembled based on their character and abilities. They were given the tools to determine their true natures and found the balance within themselves. It was during this time of approaching calm that the wise man was made the first king of the new united land. Penjute, they named it, for it was based on just thoughts."

A small girl spoke then, interrupting the tale. "Was that king your ancestor, Gwen?"

"He was part of my family, but our family has never exclusively ruled based on lineage." She smiled softly, "Anyone who is qualified to rule is given an education and tutors will determine if people of noble birth will make just rulers. Otherwise, a steward is appointed until another qualified candidate comes forward. Our family is large and many familial lines have had a chance to rule, but my father was the last, and now the throne is going to pass to me."

She looked up at the sky, her eyes searching the clouds. The young students around her sat in silence, waiting to hear the rest of the story. Her father had been the king of Penjute, the eighth in her line since the original founder. She was not sure how many Kings there had been in total. The Penjuten history had been mostly destroyed until about a century before. Everything she knew about the Kingdom preceding that time was

story. Since then not much had changed as monarchs came and went.

"The King used his newfound power to teach his people and discover other potential guardians and rulers," she continued. "He established a class of warriors and a class of philosophers to protect and instruct. They forsook luxury in lieu of the nobility gained by serving their nation. Their example ennobled the people and everyone sought to achieve the same goodness.

"Inspired by the people's noble actions and righteous deeds, the land began to take notice. They saw the joy permeating the country and decided they wanted to be part of it. One by one, the trees, flowers, and streams woke up. Alive, they could join the land, unite with the kingdom. As a newly formed whole, Penjuste was strong and vibrant and could defend itself and determine its own future for the first time in history."

"Eventually the King grew weary of his rule and handed power to the wisest man in his new kingdom. He sought solace in the mountains and left the people to their lives.

"Without his prudence and wisdom to guide them, people grew lazy. They stopped following his laws and stopped living in common. They grew distant and selfish, only caring for themselves and their families. People no longer had friends to help them in times of need. They did not care for their neighbors and their common bond as Penjustens began to fade.

Before the king left, they had the kingdom, their ruler, and each other. After he was gone, they were meant to put their faith in one another, but without love, wisdom, and a sense a self, they had nothing left to believe in.

“Over time, the earth grew cold. You see, it had relied on the people to sustain itself. Trees and flowers live on sunlight and water and earth, but that kind of life is only half living. Their real being, their souls, come from the spirit of the land. When people are joyful, they care for the land, and the land responds in kind.

“Under their king, people put themselves into the land, giving it a fuller life than it had ever known before. Once he was gone, their egoistic ways led to misery and sorrow gripped the kingdom. The land could not bear to see the despair that had overcome the kingdom and so the trees turned away. They receded into themselves so they would not have to witness the kingdom’s ruin and have not returned since.”

For a moment the listeners were still, soaking in the calming effect of her words. They looked around at each other, each waiting for the next to break the silence.

One of the youngest students, and so the bravest, Robert asked “If the trees have gone to sleep because of us, do you think there is any way to bring them back? I mean, if we are just nicer to each other, will they wake up one day?”

Gwen smiled, thinking, maybe if it were real. "I really don't know whether we can bring them back to life," she said. I have never heard anything more about them than this story. And my mother told me when I was very young. I never asked."

"Then what can we do?"

She tilted her head up, giving the appearance of being deep in thought. "Even if the trees never do wake up - even if it is not possible to reawaken them or if they were never awake in the first place, we ought to learn from the example of our ancestors. The point of the story is that the kingdom was a happier place when people valued wisdom and kindness and community. If we try to recapture that, maybe the trees will come back."

The leaves on the trees nearby rustled in a gust of wind, as if agreeing with her. The sun was at its highest point in the sky and the clouds drifted languidly by. The sky was a warm blue, surrounding the countryside and the group of children who sat amidst the tall grass.

The hills were separated by low stone walls and each square of field was a different color green. Scattered patches of trees broke up the meadows where technology had not cleared them yet. Beside one of the largest stretches of wood was a large brick building, a country house with an elegant garden and a sparkling

pond. The deep red bricks of building offset the green hills so that it was visible for miles.

The children had come from this house, taking the day off school. They sat in a circle just beyond the orderly garden, on the edge of the wood. To one side, their group was bordered by an iron fence. Beyond this border, the hills rolled, dotted with little white sheep and farther along, they grew rugged, overgrown with a covering of purple heather and yellow gorse.

The dozen children in the circle ordered themselves according to age and seniority, the tallest sitting towards the head next to Gwen. They were dressed in identical white jumpers and maroon skirts or trousers. Gwen, the eldest of the group, had dark hair and bright eyes and was sitting on a mossy tree stump, speaking and gesturing animatedly.

One of the children in the back stood up, crossing her arms in defiance. "Did it really happen that way? Were the actually plants alive and the king real? It sounds like all the other stories they tell us to make us stop talking at night."

"I suspect you would have to have been alive back then and seen for yourself to know for sure." Gwen shook her head, "It does sound silly doesn't it? Of course trees can't think or be happy or any of that. But how do we really know? Maybe they can and we just can't see it."

"Adam said your stories weren't true," she challenged. "He said you just make them up."

Gwen frowned, chewing on her lip, "I don't make my stories up. I get them from other people, who got them from other people. They have been passed down in my family for generations, since before they were stories. They are myths, but where do you think myths come from? They're just history that people have forgotten. Even if parts of it aren't real, like the trees having feelings, there was a first king at some point, and he did unite the tribes and create Penjuste."

The group nodded their heads, though some of them still looked skeptical.

"Why aren't there any sorcerers in the story? You talked about them in the beginning. What happened to them?"

Gwen usually skipped over the sorcerers; she was always more interested in the king and didn't know much about them to begin with. The sorcerers supposedly made up a big part of Penjusten history, but she got the feeling there was something vaguely bad about them that she had forgotten.

"Well, the legend was about the trees and the beginning of Penjuste," she said. "I try to tell it the way my mother told me and she mentioned the sorcerers. I don't think I ever heard her say anything else about them though. Isn't that odd? They must have been important, but we never learn anything about them."

"Maybe there was a separate class of sorcerers along with the warriors and teachers," one of the boys said, "maybe they used their magic to help too."

"You're probably right. They are in other stories though, I'm sure. I will have to read through my notebooks to find you a story about the sorcerers," she promised. But she couldn't seem to remember hearing any more stories that mentioned the sorcerers and their magic.

Her lack of knowledge about the sorcerers' existence and role in society was part of the blind spot in Gwen's education. Though she had come from Penjuste and lived there as a child, she knew little about the country itself. She would need to learn more about them if she was going to be queen one day, though neither task was particularly appealing right now while the sun was shining and everyone playing around them.

Gwen was the type of girl who did not accept change gladly. She was slight and willowy with long dark hair. She liked adventures and excitement more than anything else, except maybe telling the other students about her adventures, real or imagined.

Having lived at the Culford School for most of her life, she had not seen her home since she left it ten years previously. Most of her adventures took place in her

imagination, where she could be home rescuing the people from natural disasters and terrifying monsters.

Any time that she wasn't thinking about her fantasy world, she spending wandering the hills near the school and playing with the younger children. Often the teachers would gaze out the windows and find a group of students sitting around Gwen as she sat on her log, telling them story after story to pass the hours until the sun set behind the hills.

Her stories usually featured knights defending villages against dragons and brave children defeating vicious witches, similar to her daydreams. When she was feeling nostalgic, she would tell stories from her home, Penjute. Because she had not been back for many years, she knew only the few legends her mother had told her before bed, but they provided a welcome comfort in her time of exile.

The eldest of the children at the school, she looked after the younger ones. When they went running, jumping and skipping in the outer borders of the school grounds, she would follow, laughing and shouting in their wake.

None of the children attending Culford had families alive in the country. Some had been sent from abroad to protect them in times of war. Many had lost their families and knew the school as their only home. Others, such as Gwen, had been sent

away from very young ages and were only awaiting the completion of their education before they could return home.

All of them were treated equally just the same, whether they had lives awaiting their return or if they would be starting a completely new adventure, they were given their own space, friends to care for, and a thorough education to prepare them for the world outside the red brick walls and endless hedgerows.

Gwen, as the daughter or the last king of Penjuste, had been sent to Culford with a specific purpose. She needed to learn how to rule so they taught her mathematics and physics, then art and poetry, and finally rhetoric and logic.

The only lessons that Gwen could not get at Culford were about Penjuste itself. As the school was quite far from her homeland, the instructors were not equipped to give her any more knowledge than she had come with or could find in books. So she knew very little of her own history or culture. The stories were her only link to her home and they were just folk-tales, fanciful myths told to a child. So she spent her hours alone thinking about the home she could barely remember but would soon need to appreciate and command.

She would walk down the school halls, looking up at the painted wooden trellises and wonder whether the castle had similar ceilings. Maybe her room had been made of stone and the

people miners. Maybe their history was wrought with seafaring and adventure or perhaps they were a quieter people content with farming and natural lives.

Whatever they came from and whoever they were, Gwen imagined understanding her people and getting them to accept her, a stranger, onto their throne was the toughest challenge she would face. As long as she had time to think and figure everything out ...

A sudden voice interrupted her rumination, "Gwen, could you tell us another story? It isn't really dark yet."

During her storytelling, Gwen always entertained her schoolmates until it was too dark to see their faces. The sun was just beginning to set, but already the sky was alight with red and gold.

"I think we can manage one more. I tell you stories all the time though. I am afraid I might run out soon. Or else I will need to wildly invent them as I go along. Maybe someone else would like to have a turn?"

Several faces blanched in reply, raising eyebrows and clenching teeth in protest. The response from those who spoke was a unanimous "no," along with a few terrified into silence at the prospect of their having to amuse the entire group.

"Your stories are always the most exciting" the small boy said, concluding the matter.



"Well, let me think." She looked at the ground under her feet and tilted her head to the side. "His name was Hepni. He was very proud. No one else had been around to name him so he decided what to call himself and was sure it fit him well. So well, in fact, that no one ever forgot him after they had seen him once. As it turns out, this feature of his grand concoction was a bit of a problem because most of the people who saw him ended up very angry for their trouble and would rather have forgotten altogether.

"You see, he wasn't merely peculiar for his name. He carried bad luck around wherever he went. Though he stuffed his pockets with charms, turned his socks inside out, and always politely greeted passing sheep, he could not help but bring misery and misfortune to everyone he met. He suspected this was why he had always been alone, or perhaps that was how the bad luck affected him, but he had long since decided that the past was of no consequence to his future, so he would not let it hinder him.

"One day, as he was making his way to a new village, he saw an old man who most unwisely beckoned him over to the side of the road, where he sat tending his sore feet. Hepni offered his sincere apologies for his discourtesy but said the elderly gentleman could be better served by another traveler and begged his pardon for he simply could not stop. The old man pleaded

with him to stay a while until he could return to his feet. He only needed a bit of company to distract him from the ache.

Hepni, his face contorted in wretched lament, told him that he would be glad to give the old man company. Having spoken at any length with Hepni would doom the old man's fortunes regardless.

"He sat on the log next to the old traveler, fiddling with his hands and taping his feet. The old man told him how long he had been traveling and asked about his journey. The old man had been traveling a long time indeed. He told Hepni that his life was spent on the road, wandering from village to town and back, searching for people. He gave them what they requested, a courier of sorts. On this particular journey he had been sent out in search of a particularly difficult man to find. No one was able to give an account of him and the only people who had seen him refused to give any details. The old man had been traveling up and down this road for days but had not managed to locate his quarry.

"The young man offered his assistance in finding the gentleman. He told the old traveler he had been to every town in the area in recent months and might have seen the fellow in one of them. The old traveler responded, 'well, he is a most curious gentleman. The most hapless creature you will have ever come across. He wanders in sadness, has no family or friends, and

calls himself Hepni.' The young man jumped in shock. 'Why, I am this man!' he said.

"The old traveler's face lit up. 'That is wonderful,' he said, 'I have been looking for you for years.' Hepni responded, 'what do you want from me?' The old traveler smiled, saying 'I came to deliver a message.'

"He stood and threw off his cloak. No longer a ragged traveler, the old man stood tall; he was dark and striking in the grey countryside. The young man stared in awe at this apparition. 'Who are you?' he asked.

"'I am the passing of time and the results which follow. You have spent your entire life ashamed of the grief brought to those around you, but you have spent your time in vain. Any grief that comes is soon overtaken by joys and joys are easily dimmed. Most important, young traveler, you are kind, willing to sit with an old man who needs your help. You should know that hapless circumstances are not the fault of any man; you are not as cursed as you assume. Anything that happens, past, present, and future, are brought by me, and can only be altered by me. Men interpret these things through the perspective of mankind, which is short and ignorant. I can see that everything happens in time and with reason. Despair no longer at misery that you did not bring, and think of me when it does.'

"The wind blew fiercely for a moment, forcing Hepni to lower his head. When he looked up again, both the apparition and the old man were gone. He continued along his way, puzzled about what had just happened to him. When he got into town, he found a roof, a bed, and a place to work. Time passed and his life in the town improved. Soon he had many friends and had amassed enough wealth to buy a house of his own. Then one day, as a stranger was passing by, part of his roof fell onto the stranger's head. He rushed out of his house to help the poor woman, who had been knocked unconscious and was bleeding.

"Hepni fretted while tending to the unfortunate stranger. He tried to mend her injury and give her food, but he was suffering on the inside. He knew that his good luck had caused this. He had always brought misfortune on the people around him and had not been careful enough. As he rushed around his house, the woman woke up and went to him. She thanked him for his help, saying her injury wasn't bad, and could she please have some water.

"As he assisted her, they began to talk. They sat and talked for so long, they did not notice when the sky became dark and the village shut down. In fact, they continued until the morning came, and only the crowing of the roosters altered them to the passing of time. The young man apologized for keeping her there so long. She needed to rest after her injury, but she said

she was glad they had met and would be coming to see him again soon.

"Eventually Hepni and the unfortunate woman got married and created a life together. The young man lived many years without thinking about the old traveler he had helped on the side of the road. When his children were old and grown and he and his wife living together in their old cottage, he thought about how they had met, and how upset he had been at his hapless luck bringing her misery. He realized that one moment of misery had, in fact, brought them both years of bliss. That was when he remembered the old traveler and what he had said: misery brings joy and joy misery, none of which are brought about by men. He knew now his only curse had been his own preoccupation with guilt. He had to accept both bad and good before he could live happily. And that is just what he did."

Gwen looked at the smiling faces of her classmates. "So, you see, that old traveler was fate. He wanted to help the young man who had aided him understand his own troubles."

Several of the students began talking at once before one of them cried "hush!" The deputy headmaster of the school was striking towards them across the grass looking put-upon.

He stopped next to the group and looked at Gwen. "The headmistress requests your presence in the main hall. You have guests who need to speak with you. I will take you there now."

Gwen stood up, saying goodbye to her ring of listeners. "I will be back later with more stories." A chorus of 'bye' calls followed her as she ran to keep up with the deputy headmaster.

They walked back towards the tall Georgian house, its adjacent towers casting the hedgerow beside her into shadow. She kicked a pebble and watched it bounce along the paved stones. The windows on either side of the wooden double doors reached up four stories, reflecting a crimson sun setting in the background. As she reached them, she paused, her hand an inch away from the door, and pulled back. Turning to look again at the garden and her story bench, she saw the other children running around in a game of tag before sighing, pulling on the door handle, and moving forward into the darkness.

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Just beyond the doorway, pink marble pillars reached up towards a vaulted ceiling. Several men sat looking up at the wooden beams, talking amongst themselves about the medieval paintings dotting the structure. At the front of the group the headmistress stood waiting. She was a long, thin, angular woman. She looked up and saw Gwen standing in the doorway.

"You can sit here Miss. Annwyl," she said gesturing to the chair next to her place.

"Thank you."

She moved to the ornately carved cedar chair. Feeling much smaller than normal in the too-large seat, she fiddled with her hands, trying to ignore the curious eyes that had suddenly discovered an object more interesting than the architecture.

A tall man wearing a heavy traveling outfit stood and cleared his throat, bowing forward slightly and flourishing his cloak behind him.

"Your majesty, we represent the Royal Council of Penjuste. I am the Marquis Richard Umbrais. I came here today to speak with you and inform you of the events occurring within the kingdom."

Gwen was not used to people bowing to her or treating her any differently. Everyone was equal at the school. "Welcome to Culford," she said, unsure of herself. "I am glad you came. I have not heard from anyone in Penjuste since I came here." Royalty probably did not have the luxury of timidity.

"I must apologize for our absence from your education," he replied gravely. "We did not intend to abandon you. You were sent here under duress and the kingdom has never fully recovered. Our situation is dire. Because we have allowed the rumblings to continue unabated, the nation is in turmoil. Since your parents died, we have existed in a tense and fragile peace and fear that it may soon break."

"Why would that happen now after all this time?"

The Marquis rigidly glanced at the headmistress. One of the men sitting at the end of the table stood, gestured for her to follow, and led her through a side door into the antechamber.

"For some time now we have been following the undercurrents of rebellion. A few within the kingdom would be glad of its dissolution and see the absence of a monarch as the perfect opportunity to reclaim rule. With the steward tending the throne, the dissenters' numbers remained low, and until recently, we did not view their presence as a serious threat. However ... circumstances occurring outside of the kingdom have increased the distress of our people, and consequently the hostility of the dissenters."

"Circumstances?"

"I am afraid we cannot discuss the details of the situation outside of a secure setting, Majesty."

"If we cannot speak about Penjuste, what had you planned to discuss?"

"Bringing you back, of course," he looked confused. "We should be able to discuss the matter once you are back in the castle. Then we can act on your command."

Gwen visibly froze in her chair. She had not been expecting them to bring her back so soon. Her education would not conclude for another two years.

"Now, you mean?"

"I am afraid so, your majesty. I believe the situation merits urgent attention. We must address the threat with utmost haste."

She stood then and all of the men sitting at the table sprang to their feet, their faces grim, unchanging masks. "I'm sorry" Gwen spoke to the group before turning to the Marquis. In a hushed tone, she added "but I need to speak with you alone."

He strode towards an alcove and pulled aside the tapestry of a green knight which had hung in the same spot for centuries. Walking through the hidden doorway, she entered a corridor which was tight and dank. Water dripped down the walls, passing over candlesticks causing the dim lights to flicker. The Marquis bent low over Gwen and whispered to avoid an echo.

"I was assured we would have complete privacy in this passage, Majesty. What troubles you?"

"I don't understand what kind of problem would justify this much caution. What exactly is the threat?"

The Marquis hesitated for a moment before sighing. "We have, ahem, recently received news of increased dissention in the village surrounding the castle. Murmurs have been traveling across the countryside about a plan to destroy the monarchy for good. For a decade we have watched the discontent rise and fall without much trouble. We had hoped if anyone took extreme measures their fervor would inspire disapproval in the greater

community and create a more favorable political atmosphere for your return. Unfortunately, the council is not prepared to take the risk in this particular situation."

"Why not?"

"We believe they intend to kill you so that you cannot take the throne and the royal line will end."

"Oh."

"We cannot allow their attempt to succeed. Regardless of whether their rashness would generate favorability to our cause, the risk is far too great."

She feebly nodded her head. "I agree."

"Then you understand why we mean to bring you back earlier than planned?"

"Yes." Her face flushed, she gazed at a flickering candle on the wall behind the Marquis. "I will need some time to get my things."

"Of course. We will wait for you outside and depart as soon as you are ready." He bowed her back through the door into the main hall and followed with a ripple of his cloak.

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Back in her room, Gwen slowly put together her belongings. She was being plucked out of the only home she had ever really known to walk into almost certain death. She had always wanted

this, but now would rather stay where she was certain to be happy. Though abandoning her family and duty to her people was out of the question. She had no choice.

As she pulled the door shut and walked down the corridor, she tried to remember her old life from before she was brought to Culford. She could almost see sunlight streaming on golden floors, but whenever she tried to look farther, picture her parents in any detail, she kept coming back to memories of her new family at school.

Little chips sat in the brightly-colored, hand-painted tiles where she and the other students had damaged them while playing in the corridors. Several of the lamps hanging from the wall had been bent round at odd angles. She supposed damaging the building must have been their subconscious effort to make it more their own. She probably shouldn't do the same thing in the castle. The furniture would be worth far too much. Plus, she already owned it all.

Stepping into the cool evening air, Gwen picked her way circumspectly to the crimson carriage waiting for her just ahead. She gazed longingly at the wet grass and daffodils surrounding the large country house. The setting sun shone on the brick façade, giving it a warm, fiery glow. Trying to envision the time when she would next see it, she whispered a

melancholic 'goodbye,' turned, and made her way into the carriage.

The Marquis already sat across the compartment, waiting for her to join him.

"If it is not a burden to you, Majesty, I will be your traveling companion. We have a long journey ahead. I thought it best to make myself available if you had any questions before we arrive in Penjuste."

"Thank you. You are very considerate, but please, do not feel the need to call me 'your majesty' if we are going to spend several hours together. No one has ever addressed me by anything other than my name and I haven't gotten used to it just yet."

"As you wish. Shall I call you Gwen for the time being?"

"That would be nice."

"Then you, your royal highness, should feel free to call me Richard."

Gwen laughed at the little bow he gave to accompany the title. His relaxed manner was contagious. He was quite mysterious though. She had not met anyone so dark before. When she was around him, she felt danger and power, but not fear.

"I don't remember anything about being there except for my mother. Even then, everything is hazy."

"You were only six years old when you were sent away, and memory fades, but I am sure you will be struck by it when you return."

"I imagine so."

"You look tired though, Maje- ah, Gwen. You must forgive my cumbersome manners. A life in service to the crown will do that to a person."

Gwen gave a cynical smile and said, "Perhaps you will not have that problem in the future."

The Marquis frowned and rested his chin in his fingers. "No, that will not be the case. Try not to worry. We are taking the utmost precaution and, believe me, you will have much bigger problems to sort out once we arrive."

"There was something else I wanted to know."

The Marquis inclined his head as an indication to continue.

"I was not supposed to go back until I was fully prepared to rule. I'm not done with school." She chose her words carefully; she didn't want to admit what she was actually thinking. "Am I going to have some time to learn about the country before I become queen?"

"You will have time. The Council has arranged for tutors to live in the castle. You will receive instruction from them. There are two I believe, though I do not know their names. My

work is security, so I have not had occasion to discuss plans for your arrival."

If she had private tutors she could ask them questions about the subjects that had always bothered her. She would finally learn about Penjuste. Just a little knowledge would make her feel much more secure in her quickly approaching duties.

The Marquis had been gazing out the window. It would soon be black outside. Gwen's head snapped up.

"Wait. Security? What does that involve?"

"Yes, Majest- erm. Yes, I work individually, hunting for information. I try to prevent wars as often as I can, but they come in like the tide. Quick and deadly."

"Was Penjuste in a war recently?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then how did you--"

"When I said I served the crown, I did not mention which one. I have served many sovereigns in my time. Most of their kingdoms dissolve in time. I only came to this one recently because I believe it may promise a more enduring future."

"How have you managed --"

"I am terribly sorry to interrupt, Majesty, but the night has fallen and you should rest. We have a hard night's journey left to endure."

"I suppose," Gwen conceded, but she watched her companion for a few hours more before drifting off into sleep.

As they traveled, the hills slowly grew and shifted, eventually becoming great mountains that, in the darkness, blotted out the world beyond. Burgundy and yellowish green flew past the windows of the small carriage. If it had been daylight, the passengers would have seen mounds of heather and gorse and the occasional passing ram.

All along a chilled fog was stealing in and around the caravan. It crept into Gwen's cabin and woke her. Shivering, she had barely caught a glimpse of the blackened sky when the carriage slammed to a halt.

The Marquis was on his feet before Gwen had time to shout. Crouching, he held out a hand to silence her. Someone wrapped on their door from the darkness. The Marquis left the carriage and shut the door behind him with a click.

Gwen heard murmuring on the other side of the door and strained to listen, but the wind blew away any distinct sounds.

After several anxious minutes, the Marquis stepped back into the carriage. She tried to see the other man who had been on the other side of the door seconds before, but he appeared to have disappeared.

"I had my men stand guard along our path. We shall be undisturbed tonight. They may have discovered my plan, but I am glad for our fortune nonetheless."

"You were guarding? What against?"

"Whatever might have hindered our journey. Now we merely guard against the night."

"Your men, do they 'serve the crown,' as well?"

"They are loyal to you, if that is your concern. Otherwise, they are loyal to me. They go with me and investigate. They act as my eyes and ears when I cannot be physically present. Such as now, certain things take precedence, and I must give my full attention to one particular event."

"I could not see him ..."

He smiled and behind it she saw several things left unsaid. "My men are like shadows. It helps them in situations where they are known and not entirely welcome. For now, try not to worry about them. They will do their job well and we will reach Penjoste. Sleep, or else you will not be able to enjoy tomorrow."

She nodded her head in vague affirmation, fatigue overcoming her interest in her mysterious companion and his shadow-men. Despite her confusion, she did not feel unsafe. The Marquis had answered most of her questions. At this point, besides, she had no one else she could trust, and she certainly

would not be better off on her own if there really had been a threat on her life.

As Gwen drifted to sleep for the second time that night, she wondered if her parents knew who they had working on their council. For a brief moment, she asked herself, if he had been working for them and he was so powerful, why did they die? But she was too tired to remember and it disappeared in her dreams.

When she awoke again the stars had set and the sun was just beginning to drift over the horizon. The gentle landscape of her school had been replaced by jagged, icy peaks and dense forests.

Instead of a simple brick building, she saw before her a turreted, walled citadel built of sandstone and flint. Beyond that were clusters of thatched and flint houses, painted pink and white and surrounded by dirt paths and aimlessly wandering chickens. A rooster crowed as Gwen and the Marquis stepped out of the carriage and made their way to the enormous wooden doors.

Above them, engraved on the sandstone was an inscription in a language Gwen could not recognize, and underneath that was the most intricate set of carvings she had ever seen. Twice her height, it told the story of a magnificent king who had brought the land together. The animals and plants were flourishing and the people celebrated. The kingdom grew to a considerable size, when the carvings ended.

"My ancestor," she whispered.

The doors groaned open as Gwen and the Marquis approached. They entered the twilight courtyard followed by the group of severe men.

If the outside looked like a citadel, the inside was more akin to paradise. A small stream trickled through the grass which was dotted with snowdrops and bound by tall, colorful trees.

The castle itself featured two enormous rose stained glass windows through which the gathering light illuminated beautiful and profound images.

They illustrated the land in a new perspective, as if it were joyful. It looked like it was dancing. The trees stood in clusters and the grass swayed to non-existent wind. It reminded Gwen of her myths. Glass, however, could not show such things. She must have been suffering from a lack of sleep; she knew nothing could be that beautiful.

Of course, that was before she entered the main hall. Though the light was still dim, golden tiles sparkled throughout the room. The walls were built of sandstone and pure white marble. Across the hall stood a towering throne made of solid gold and covered with a red woolen blanket.

In the far corner of the room, two men stood muttering fiercely. One tall, dark, and thin, the other short, white-

haired, and rotund, the hushed tone of their argument kept the exact words from escaping across the room except in snatches.

"Reason? Don't be silly."

"There would be no rationale for progress."

"And why should there?"

"Because then they'll be free!"

"She won't" the dark man glanced at her.

Infuriated, the white-haired man barked at the other, "Do you actually believe that?"

The dark man chuckled snidely. His voice dripping with doubt, he replied, "Do you actually believe in universality?"

The white-haired man shouted, "Yes!" angrily, before stalking away.

Gwen paused, watching the exchange, until she felt the Marquis' hand guiding her to the left.

They entered a side chamber and he whispered, "The castle staff has prepared your old room for you. They assured me that it would no longer be furnished for a small child. I imagine you need a bit more sleep before the day begins so I shall leave you there until you wake."

"Thank you."

Her room was absolutely enormous. The window alone was three times her height. She gaped at the oak poster bed, draped

in deep green linens. Her clothes had been arranged in the closet and a fire was softly burning in the grate.

Turning around to face the Marquis, she grinned, her eyes half closed already from the fatigue that threatened to take over.

"I am glad you came with me. This is lovely."

"The pleasure is mine, Majesty," he smirked slightly, remembering their conversation from before. "And I shall see you tomorrow at the banquet."

He turned and strode from the room, allowing his cloak to billow behind him. Gwen went to the window to see the kingdom she had forgotten.

It was an astonishing sight. The village was laid out in a valley in the middle of a ring of mountains. Nearly a hundred houses shone white and pink amidst the dark landscape. There was no movement due to the hour, but Gwen knew it would be alive when she awoke and looked forward to seeing it again at a more reasonable time.

Gwen stood staring out her window for a few moments more. An icy breeze rustled the plum velvet curtains. Just before she turned away, she caught a glimpse of the last star in the dawn sky as it was falling from the heavens. She hoped that would be a good omen.

She climbed into bed thinking about her absurd day. She had begun it chasing down her breakfast in the hen house, and ended it in the land she only knew from faded memories and dreams. All the while she was preparing to become queen and simultaneously facing the threat of her immanent death.

Perhaps later that morning, when she met her tutors, things would calm down. If she was ever going to manage learning how to rule, she would need a minute to breathe and gather her bearings. It really was too bad she was not still at the school. She might have been able to get up early and play a bit in the dewy grass. She could almost hear the other children screaming as their clothes were soaked through and they were reprimanded by the headmistress.

Her eyes were all but fused shut; Gwen smiled merrily and allowed that comforting idea to carry her into her third sleep of the night as the roosters crowed all across her newly reclaimed kingdom.

Chapter Two

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven.

~John Milton

Though the kingdom of Penjuste slept, in Uig, king Feroben toiled through the night, joined by his advisers. The counsel met in the King's study, revealing all they had learned from their observation of Penjuste and proposing plans for further action.

The dozen advisors sat around a long rectangular table with the king at their head. Many leaned back in their chairs, their faces masked in darkness, listening to the evolving argument. Most of the discussion came from the men on the King's right and left, his most senior confidants. They had just returned from Penjuste and disagreed over how to act next. Their frustration growing, they banged their fists on the table, making the candles bounce and flicker.

The king raised his hand for silence. "Now I have heard you out. Were there any practical objections to these plans from the assembled?"

The room was silent. A few heads craned around to observe the other faces.

"If I may, your majesty," said the old man on the king's right. "We could easily crush these people. It has been long since we saw battle, admittedly, but our power has not waned. This child has yet to claim the throne. I doubt the people's affection for her could be so strong they would be willing to sacrifice their lives for her in a battle against the greatest force in the region. Sire, if we move quickly, I imagine there will not be much of a battle."

"I conquer," a face in the darkness added. "I doubt it will take much to destroy their forces or their people. A quick attack and victory may be our best option to avoid wasting their available resources and energy."

"No, I disagree," said the man on the left. "There are severe disadvantages to attacking them quickly and without warning. Penjute has no standing army and has successfully avoided conflict for over a decade of our supremacy. If you attack them now it will look more like a massacre than war. Appearances are incredibly important to these people. This kingdom's identity is bound in its ruler and history. If you

depose the ruler and kill the people, you will be forced to deal with major uprisings from angry, zealous people."

"You may be right on that account. I want the people to love me as much as I want them to fear me," the king agreed.

"Perhaps then, your majesty, the best option would be to give it time and properly announce a war, while simultaneously working to destabilize the future queen. We could create a state of menace among the people and they will lose strength when it is time for the battle to begin. Their resolve will wane as their trust in the queen fades. They may even be eager for a more stable government that can protect them."

The king stood, placing his hands upon the tabletop. His advisers rose respectfully, their chairs scraping against the stone floor. "Your wisdom is valuable, all of you, and I shall take it into consideration. I will decide in due course how to proceed. There are things unknown to any but me and my closest confidants. The problem of Penjute may be more complicated than it at first appears. Thank you, you may leave."

The men filed out silently, leaving the king alone in the warm room. When he was sure his advisers were out of earshot, he spoke again. "You can come out now." From the dark corners of the room a man materialized. Starting from his boots, moving up to his knees and hands, the Shadow stepped into the light. His

dark hair hung down, obscuring his face. "I presume you understood everything they said?" the king continued.

The shadow nodded. "Your people speak far too much."

"That is their job."

"Couldn't you simply read their thoughts and be done?"

"That power is not like opening a book. The subject must be compliant. Even then the picture is hazy, a mere reflection of the thoughts underneath. Definition comes from connotation and that cannot be read."

"Still ..."

"Yet how I derive information from my advisers is not under discussion. No one knows about my abilities. I prefer they think I am one of them for now."

"Do you plan to tell them eventually?"

"If the time is right. Until then my secrets are mine alone."

"Have you decided when to attack Penjoste? The war is inevitable. The Marquis was very clear that the two kingdoms could not coexist."

"He was? That is news. He would know better than anyone. Though, the situation is grim indeed if one of the Endless is fighting for the young queen. That, of course, means that your people will be assisting him. We will need to watch out for

Shadows flitting across my kingdom. I am not in the mood for unwelcome visitors."

"Understood. I will make sure the others don't discover our cooperation. Most of my people are loyal to the Endless' cause, not least to the Marquis."

"I need to act swiftly if I am going to survive, but my advisors were correct." The king counseled, "The wisest route is to wait and drain them of any resolve an immediate assault might inspire. My only fear is that proper warning will give the princess time to garner aid from outside the kingdom. I cannot know how my people will respond."

"Their injuries are numerous. They won't be quick to help the new ruler of their forsaken land."

"Don't judge the Mystics hastily. Their wisdom is not yours. It would be unwise to premeditate their response."

"Then I shall watch them more closely."

"Report back to me when you find any new information."

The shadow bowed with a flourish. "Until then, your majesty," and he retreated into the darkness.

Leaving his study, the king stepped out into the cool night air. The usually silent garden was filled with chirruping crickets and humming fireflies. It was a romantic evening. His moods always fared better when they had a melodic setting to accompany them, so he fell naturally into brooding.

The king pictured how he would surprise the princess, first by sending his message. He would dramatize that initial communication. Then he had to create the tension in her people. They would fear their own village soon. He twisted the image in his mind. On their feet, the people marching and yelling in anger, their wrath soon directed at the castle. What an entertaining thought. Their ignorant bliss could not withstand his assault.

He walked along the wet slate path, stepping in the puddles deliberately. A raven sat in the snowdrops on the grassy hill ahead of him. He climbed to its summit. It felt good stretching his legs. Most of his time was spent locked away in the castle making plans for conquest or dealing with internal politics. If it were feasible, he might consider giving up his throne and moving out into the country where he could avoid all the stress. But then, there were benefits to being king.

At the top of the hill, a frigid wind ruffled the raven's feathers. The king stooped down next to it. He gazed into its dark eyes and grazed its bluish feathers with his fingers.

"Welcome, my feathered companion. What might you have to share?"

The bird hopped onto his arm, expanding its wings. It snapped its beak at him as he stood.

"I apologize. I did forget the civilities. I do not usually take company in my garden. How has your night been?"

He walked slowly along the hedgerows of holly, never taking his eyes off the bird. It sat unmoving on his arm. Occasionally he muttered, but anyone within earshot would have dismissed the noise; the language whistled like wind. Soon they came upon a labyrinth.

"Thank you, your insight has been most helpful. There are some things that even my guards and loyal Shadow cannot see. The Marquis' expedition will not achieve his desired ends."

He walked along the path, occasionally turning left then right. He knew the way by heart. The labyrinth was his favorite place in the castle because sound did not penetrate the hedges.

"You know, after all these trips into Penjoste, I am surprised you keep coming back to me. After all, the Marquis has promised a bright future to all creatures once his little queen takes control of the land. I would think you'd take advantage of a pledge like that."

The raven cawed on his arm. He stroked its head lightly in response.

"No, I trust you." He paused for a moment, contemplating. When he spoke again his voice was full of malice and deliberation. "This is my favorite place to go because it is quiet. The privacy affords for much freedom."

"For example," He clutched its legs in his hand to prevent the raven from taking flight. "No one would notice if I crushed your skull right now. Certainly not the Marquis. And I am afraid you have gotten too close to him, with too much valuable information about me. I enjoyed our conversations. But I fear they are at an end."

The raven choked out a final screeching cry as the king muttered a short phrase. The bird's head appeared to crunch in on itself and in a heartbeat it was dead. A few loose feathers tumbled to the ground. "I do apologize, but necessity dictates." The king dropped the rest of the raven's body to leave for the worms and walked back through the hedges.

Chapter Three

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,"

"I don't know where. . ."

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

~Lewis Carroll

Gwen ran through the castle, skidding to a stop on the olive tiled floors whenever anyone passed her. She pulled her hastily scribbled note out of her pocket. The tutor's chambers ought to be very close by now. A left up ahead and down the parallel corridor.

The morning had been busy; several people had come to awaken her and prepare her for the day and then wouldn't leave her alone. She had only just escaped for a few minutes before one of them told her she needed to see her first tutor, Arête.

Since she had only arrived a few days before, she thought there might be free time. More than anything she wanted to explore the village just outside the castle, but her time had been scheduled in advance.

When she did have time to herself, she spent it looking out the large window in her room. The village beneath was perfect, like a meadow of braided and bound thatch. During the day the people all came out, hurrying about their business. She could see them weaving around each other in the market. The children would gather into groups and head out beyond the village into the hills to play. Then, just before dark, they would all split and run in various directions along well worn paths that their families had probably all taken and carved out over time.

Lost in thought, she almost missed the tutor's chamber and had to run back a few feet. Gasping, she knocked lightly on his door before entering. Inside the warm, sunlit room, a plump man in a robe was reading a handful of tattered pages. He held up a hand for her to wait a moment and looked up at her through thick glasses.

"I apologize for my tardiness."

"Never mind," he said as he smiled up at her. "You did not know the way." It was the white-haired man she had seen arguing when she first arrived. They must have both been her tutors.

There were several creases next to his eyes and his hair grew out in small puffs. The combination of his features and outfit gave him the appearance of a kindly old owl.

"No, I did not," she said, grateful she had not been scolded. If she had been at Culford, the teacher would have made

her apologize to the class for wasting their time. Of course, this leniency was probably one of the benefits of being a monarch. "Perhaps next time my way will be easier."

"I am sure that all of the castle will be familiar to you in time. Soon you will no longer need guides or aids to find your way." He gestured to her notes. "For now, you will find them of great use. Try not to lose them, especially when you venture down to visit my colleague."

Gwen had not looked at the directions her attendant had scribbled to reach the second tutor. She had so little time in the mornings to do anything at all, but she would have to make the time later to investigate the lower part of the castle. If her other tutor was more severe about tardiness, she didn't want to start on his bad side.

"Now what was it you were coming to me to learn?"

Gwen did not respond immediately, she had never been asked that before. What a novel concept, to learn about the things one finds interesting.

"Well, I had another two years left at Culford. We got a basic education about literature, mathematics, history, rhetoric, and natural philosophy. I'd like to keep going in all of those subjects."

"That, my dear, is certainly possible. You and I should meet here twice a week. I will have to discuss arrangements with

Virtu, but I am sure we will work something out that is to everyone's benefit."

"Great, I'm glad."

"Now, I have been told you did not receive any instruction on governing or Penjute itself while you away at school."

"No, I took classes with the other students and most of them were not aiming to be anything in particular, so we stuck to the traditional education. I was the only one from Penjute and one of the few with a kingdom waiting for me."

"It is good they try to give you the basics at your old school. With us, you will continue that where we think it necessary, but we have another objective in mind. We need to prepare you to take the throne because the time is fast approaching. Most monarchs have only a basic understanding of how the world works and very little understanding of their own people. However, Penjute has always aspired for something greater. We don't want our rulers to sit and make ignorant judgments from on high. "

"But the only reason I am becoming queen is because my parents were. I haven't lived here since I was a child."

"Plenty of monarchs throughout history have been foreign. Many didn't speak the same language as the people they ruled. Some never even went to the country they ruled. You are one of these people and they know you. You can learn about them in

time. What is most important is that you know how to institute just laws. Morality is universal; it doesn't require you know the people."

"How do you know that?"

"There is a rational way to look at and think about the world. I can train you to see things through pure reason."

"What if being rational isn't enough, though? To make good decisions shouldn't I know or respect the people? Am I supposed to come up with all the laws and they just listen to me? I have never told other people what to do and now I have to make choices for an entire country."

"Penjustens have always valued wisdom in their rulers. No man should submit himself to another's judgment unless that man is the wiser."

"The people have been on their own for a long time now. The steward was caretaker for your throne, but he did not act as a monarch unless necessary. Now that the people have seen how well they can exist on their own, they will not be eager to regain a master, even a legitimate one. Some are even willing to end the line now."

"You will have to demonstrate your wisdom to regain their love and trust or you will never become a real leader; in their eyes, you will be an oppressor."

He laughed at the worried look that appeared on Gwen's face. Grinning, he continued, "Do not fret, your majesty. That is why I am here."

Gwen left Arête's office in a better mood than upon entering it. Though her confidence had not improved, Arête's faith inspired her.

That morning her attendants had informed her that, once she was finished with her tutor, the steward would meet her straight away at the evening banquet. It would be an important meal, honoring her return to the kingdom. As much as she did not want to be the center of attention so early in her stay, she had put too much effort into avoiding missteps to make such an obvious one now.

A number of discrete individuals sat around a long table in the center of the dining hall. They looked like the courtiers from books, wearing all sorts of bangles and brightly colored garments. Dinner had not yet begun; people were talking animatedly to their neighbors about the journey and the decorations, which were indeed splendid.

Upon noticing her enter, a thin man in spectacles approached and led her to the head of the table.

"The Steward," the thin man held out a hand and nodded importantly. "And I am his valet, your highness. If you need anything in the course of the evening, I shall aid you in whatever way I can."

"Thank you very much."

He gestured for her to sit beside the steward, who stood as she approached.

"Gwyneth, it is a delight to finally see you again, your Majesty," taking her hand, he bowed and kissed her fingers. "I am the Duke Edwin, Steward to the throne of Penjute. I trust you have had a pleasant day."

"Yes, thank you. I spent the afternoon with my tutor discussing what we would be studying over the course of our time together. Our conversation was illuminating."

"I am glad. We have prepared for your arrival with earnestness."

"The reception has been very welcoming. Everyone has tried to make me feel like I am back home."

"Because this is your home. This castle and the kingdom were built by your ancestors. When you are ready, they will pass into your possession. Where I sit, of course, will be your seat shortly and these people will all be your guests to entertain."

"And everyone else will be mine to protect."

"Hm. You sound like your father."

Gwen flushed. "Thank you. I can't really remember him, nothing substantial, anyway."

"He was a great man, your father, proud and noble. He always cared most about doing what was right. It's a tragedy he should have died so young."

Gwen sat silently for a minute, debating with herself whether to ask the question on her mind. No one had ever told her because she had been so young, but she ought to know. "How did my father die -"

The Duke did not hear her, his attention caught by the flurry of servants carrying silver trays of food for the cheering guests. Duke Edwin stood and welcomed them all, presenting Gwen to the attendees who began piling their plates with meats, fruit, and cheeses.

Through all of this Gwen sat unaware. Despondent that her question had been interrupted, she wondered when she would get the opportunity to ask it next, and who would be most willing to answer it.

Every now and then a guest would approach her to welcome her or ask a question. As much as she wanted to pay attention and be friendly, she had trouble concentrating on the substance of these conversations and the interested party would soon notice her distraction and move on, posing questions to the steward instead.

Once the meal had concluded he turned to her, his face full of concern. "Forgive me for asking, but are you well, your highness?"

"Oh, yes, I don't feel ill."

"Only you looked distracted during the banquet."

"I am just tired after the day. First my attendants and then my tutor kept me busy without pause."

"How terrible. You must be exhausted. There was a gathering scheduled following dinner, but I will apologize to the guests for your absence, which should allow you to go rest in your chambers for the remainder of the night."

"I would appreciate that. Please be sure to tell them they will all be invited back and I will make time to meet with them then."

"I will, your majesty. Have a pleasant evening."

Gwen thanked the Duke again before bidding him good night. She fled the room, trying to avoid drawing attention to herself, a particularly difficult task when people stand and bow as you pass.

Once free of the throng of onlookers, she sank down to the floor. She was not adverse to people watching and listening to her. She had been telling stories at Culford for years. In fact, that used to be her favorite thing to do. But this was different. When they all expected so much of you and you knew

you weren't going to be able to deliver, the scrutiny was difficult to endure.

"Having a tough time, your majesty?"

Had it been any other voice, she would have jumped to her feet. The Marquis did not care if she sat on a stone floor, a throne, or in wet mud. He crouched down beside her, his black traveling cloak pooling around him on the floor.

"It is just a hassle to have to be regal around all of them. I just got here. I am not a queen yet. I can't handle all of this plus putting on a show."

"Then you don't have to. Do whatever you feel prepared to do. Remember, though, this is not going to get easier. You have difficult decisions to make in the next few weeks. Eventually you will be a queen so you had better practice while you can. You never know, if you act like a queen often enough, you may wake up one day and discover you have become one." He smirked as he said the words. He did not look serious, but he was reflecting her thoughts. His dark eyes glinted in the candlelight. "You may even be as good a ruler as your mother and father."

She couldn't think. It was like the pressure was building up inside of her and if she didn't strike out, she would burst.

"How would my prancing around the castle make my father proud? I have to learn how to rule a kingdom," she was almost

yelling. "I have to get to know these people who I am never going to see. I have to become a completely new person in just a few weeks. How would you feel if that were you? Would you want to play the pretty princess, or would you want to work?"

"I suppose so. Did you think this was going to be easy? That you were going to do exactly what you wanted?"

"No, but everyone is acting like I am not in any danger - like I am not about to die, as if everything were perfectly normal! I had almost forgotten myself before the Steward mentioned my parents' deaths and how sad it was they died young and I thought about how that could be me in a few weeks."

Gwen's outburst did not affect the Marquis's cool exterior. He placed a hand on her shoulder to quiet her.

"You are exaggerating the danger. We would never let that happen to you. This time we are prepared and have secured the palace against possible intruders,"

Instead of being comforted she felt like a child being mollified, which only served to infuriate her more. "I am not exaggerating! I need to do something about this."

"You know I am making every effort to protect you."

"Yes, but I need to do something. I can't just sit around and wait for someone to kill me. I mean, I know I can't actually prevent them myself, but - I need ... I need to know why."

"We know why. They want to end the monarchy for good. The simplest way to achieve their goal is by killing the last of the line."

"There are reasons behind that, though. They must think that way for a reason. I don't know, maybe we have treated them badly for the last year or the last decade and they decided to take action. If there is a problem, I need to know about it so I can fix it myself. That will be the surest way of avoiding danger. If my people are happy, they will have no reason to fear or hate me."

The Marquis frowned and shook his head. "There are villagers who would be willing to watch the dissidents for minor compensation. If you want I can ask them to - "

"No. No, I want to do it myself."

She could find out who wanted to kill her, maybe find out who had killed her parents, and learn more about her people all at once. She didn't know why she hadn't thought of it before; it was perfect.

"I will go down there myself."

"There?"

"Into the village. I can meet people and talk with them about their problems and concerns. They're my people, I should get to know them."

"Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"We have spent much effort keeping you safe. We brought you up here and secured the castle. We have been watching over the entire village, half the countryside. And now you want to go out unprotected into the masses and have a chat?"

She was surprised at how angry he was, but that was not going to deter her now that she had such a good idea.

"I don't want to - I need to. How else am I going to prepare myself to make laws? I don't know anything about these people!"

"You have tutors."

"They can only show me so much. I need to understand, and that I have to do on my own, in my own way."

"If you go out there, we will have no reliable means of keeping you safe. You don't want to die? Then don't hand yourself over to your potential murderers."

"You could come with me, though, or some of your men could. I would be perfectly safe with them. And I could wear a disguise. No one would ever need to know it was me."

"This is not a good idea."

Resolved, she put all the power she could muster into her voice. "Look, I am going to do this whether you want me to or not. You can either help me, giving me a better chance at safety, or you can sit here and think about how rash I am being

as they kill me. Either way, I will go into the village, and there is nothing you can do to change my mind."

The Marquis looked into her eyes for several minutes. She was getting nervous; she didn't know how long she could keep a resolved look on her face.

"I don't know what is going to happen after you meet with Virtu tomorrow, if you are already this reckless and demanding. He can only be an even worse influence." He paused. "Fine, I will organize a group of men to take you on your 'expedition' in the next few days. Until then, I don't want you to do anything silly. Keep to your studies. You may wish you had never left them."

He stalked away, his cloak billowing behind him. Gwen took a breath. She couldn't believe he had just given in. Cheering, she jumped into the air before hastily recomposing herself in case anyone saw. If the Marquis had been that opposed to her idea, she figured he'd have locked her in the dungeon before letting her go. Perhaps her plan had some merit after all.

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A fierce cold swept the gardens. Wind and rain were one thing, but this was an angry cold. It moved through the castle grounds as though it wanted to decimate them. So Gwen walked through the grass wrapped in her thickest wool blanket. She had

free time and wanted to explore the gardens, which had the added benefit of being far away from busy castle staff.

All along the castle's sandstone walls, roses grew on vines. White, red, and yellow, they snaked their way to the windows and turrets above. If the cold got much worse, the flowers would soon ice over and die. Then the garden would become a grim place indeed.

She was anxious about her impending visit to the village. She had no idea what to say to the people and was worried what they would think of her. After ten years they might have all grown to hate her.

Gwen had been standing still, lost in thought, when one of the ubiquitous attendants found her idling in the garden.

"Your majesty? We have been looking everywhere for you. It is almost time for your session with the Professor Virtu." He shuddered when he said her tutor's name. What had he done to scare these people? This was not a good omen for her day at all.

She sighed and walked back towards the castle with the attendant. "We wouldn't want to keep him waiting. For all I know my punctuality will be tested after racing to Arête's chambers last time."

The journey down to the lower levels of the castle was not as difficult as Gwen imagined. The winding stairs and hidden passages would have presented an impossible challenge had she

not studied her directions thoroughly. Virtu lived as far away from everyone else in the castle as possible. She could not imagine the servants coming down here often. He either enjoyed the complete solitude or was unusually wary of his neighbors.

Outside a large black door, she stopped. It was made of a thick wood and entwined with wrought iron. She had never seen such an impressive door in the rest of the castle. Perhaps it served a peculiar purpose down here, or maybe he had brought it with him. She raised a hand to knock, and was startled when it swung open on its own.

A large imposing man stood behind it. His fine dark hair swung into his eyes, which were deep-set and hawk-like. He was wearing a heavy wool overcoat that swept to the floor. Gwen silently celebrated her foray into the gardens. Without the wool blanket, she would be freezing in his icy chambers. She would need to convince him to light a fire if she was going to be down here often.

"Welcome" he said with a proper accent. He moved aside so she could enter his chambers, which were as different from Arête's as it was possible to be. All of his furnishings were dark and heavy. The furniture and rugs were all stylized bottled green velvet and wool. The tapestries on his walls featured historical figures in subdued shades of greens and blues. Gwen

felt slightly uncomfortable standing in his very precise sitting room.

"Thank you for having me, Professor Virtu. I have been told that you are an excellent teacher and am looking forward to studying with you."

"You are here to learn about becoming a strong ruler." He slid over the words, enjoying them. "Nobility have certain obligations they must follow and you will only be able to make difficult decisions after you are informed of the role you currently face. No *doubt* you were forewarned by Arête what our studies would include?"

"No, actually," she hesitated. "He just told me how difficult it was to find the way down here."

Virtu raised an eyebrow. He motioned for her to sit in one of his stiff chairs and took the other. "What has Arête been teaching you thus far?"

"He told me some about the history of Penjuste. We discussed my parent's laws and the first King."

He smirked then. It didn't reach his eyes. When he looked at her she felt insignificant; his expression conveyed a superiority that she had not seen in anyone else in Penjuste. "The first?" He asked, the smile playing up his face.

"Yes, he brought the kingdom together and created Penjuste based on wisdom and understanding. His image is carved on the

gates outside. I am a descendant of his line. Shouldn't you know all of this?"

"I have heard the story. I am surprised that Arête would discuss it with you, considering its reputation."

"Why?"

"Because," he said humorlessly, "it isn't true."

"What? No." What sort of joke was this? Gwen couldn't believe him. That story had been her only link to Penjuste since she was a child. It had to be true.

"There was no grand beginning. I helped spread that to the people to keep them loyal. After the exile of the others, the King was concerned that more Penjustens would abandon the kingdom and he needed to inspire the people to assure his power."

"The exile?"

He smirked at her. "What did Arête tell you? He obviously thinks he can brainwash you into false hope as well."

"He never told me any of this. Could it all have been untrue?"

He tapped his fingers on the tabletop, obviously tired of the direction the conversation had taken. "It is a myth, but it certainly works well to keep the people in line. Love of the country inspires obedience in even the most rebellious people."

Now our only concern is reminding them that you are the country."

"I am the country?"

He continued, ignoring her. "Then perhaps they may stop trying to kill you."

"So people are supposed to love a lie?"

"No, they love an idea. You give them an idea to treasure so they will follow where you want them to go. They couldn't understand anything else and confused thinking destroys even the strongest kingdoms."

Gwen stood up, indignant. She strode towards the wall, imagining the village just beyond it. "But how could I tell them something that I am not supposed to believe in myself? Why would they trust me? Shouldn't I care about my people?"

Virtu stood as well. Gwen wished he hadn't because he was at least a head taller than she was. "A queen should be caring and understanding to impress her people, but it is far more important to be cunning to ensure the security of one's throne. You must know this if you intend to rule."

"I have never thought like that."

"From now on you must. Every decision you make will be dissected by others so you must scrutinize yourself first. Otherwise you will never be powerful."

"Why do I need power? Wisdom alone gives kings and queens the right to rule in Penjoste - Arête agreed. Power is dangerous. It creates dark lands full of fear and devastation. I don't want to live like that. I certainly don't want to rule like that."

"How do you think rulers became rulers in the first place? They conquer. They exert their influence over the population. If you do not, you will not remain queen for long."

"The first king did not need to conquer. And my family did not either. We were chosen for our wisdom and I was educated to keep that line going."

"I understand that you were taught the same as the rest of the kingdom, but now that you are going to be a queen you need to start thinking rationally. No king rules by wisdom alone. How would the people recognize him for his virtues? He has to manipulate them into thinking that and find some way to capture the loyalty of the population. If he is intelligent, he will not need to kill or enslave them, merely entice them."

"That kind of authority is wrong. Rulers should not be immoral."

"No, you should not act immorally unless it is absolutely necessary, otherwise your people will doubt you. In some cases, however, you will need to ignore the traditions of good and evil in order to be effective. If you do not, others will. Any action

that you need to take to ensure the effectiveness of your power is morally acceptable from now on. As a ruler you cannot risk being conquered by a more flexible man for the sake of outdated codes."

"No. I know what is right and what isn't. I cannot betray myself. I will not be that kind of queen."

Virtu said, "Then you will fail." Frowning, he added slowly, to emphasize his point, "You will fall. And you will have done nothing to prevent it."

Gwen sighed and put her head in her hands. She had always been taught to be good and search for truth, but her teachers at Culford also said that every opinion was valid and useful. But how would you know the truth when you spotted it? If she could not dispute Virtu, was he right?

"You will understand me better when you visit the villagers tomorrow. They need a strong ruler to command them. They have nothing but their purposeless, need driven lives. The monarch embodies greatness amongst a people who only know physical necessity. In order to rule you must inspire and control them. Our lesson is over for today."

Gwen was breathing heavily, trying to keep her anger in check. "Goodbye, Professor Virtu." She had to fight from slamming the door on her way out.

Once she was no longer in that dark, oppressive room with her sneering teacher, she felt distressed and empty. He had so easily dismissed all of the things she had ever known and cared about. What if her ancestors really had been power-driven rulers who were willing to say whatever it took to be in command? There was no way Gwen could be that kind of ruler. If immorality and deceit were necessary to be queen, she would have no part of it.

.....

Chapter Four

You remember this little boy,
They never tell you any more truth than they have to.

~Orson Scott Card

The castle guards wore purple and green tunics with bright armor plates. They were the essence of indiscreet and Gwen was current flanked by four of them. Few villagers, she thought, would be comfortable sharing their grievances with her when they had five foot spears pointed at their heads.

In addition to the brightly colored weapon wielders, five shrouded men, whom she could only assume were the Marquis' Shadows, stood around the room. They refused to acknowledge her presence and every time she tried to ask the Marquis about them, he would pretend he had not heard her question and whisper another piece of advice.

If Gwen had thought the Marquis would be satisfied with her accoutrement, she was sadly mistaken. Every few minutes he

muttered something about 'incompetent,' 'blind,' or 'absurdly reckless,' and pace to the opposite side of the room.

After a few minutes of this behavior, he came and gripped her by the shoulders. Bending to down, he said "You must not do anything foolish today. I know that you do not see any dangers, but they are there, believe me. I have seen them lurking behind corners and in the shadows. If you feel at all unsafe, come back here."

"I really am grateful for your concern," she smiled, "but you worry too much. I won't die. I just need to find out who these people are, so that I know what they need from me. Otherwise I really have no reason to be here. Now - can I go?" She stamped her foot in playful exaggeration.

The Marquis stroked his chin. In answer he said to the guard in front "I want her back before dark," and walked back up the corridor while Gwen beamed at his back.

They walked down to the village, Gwen, her guards, and the Shadows who immediately disappeared into the environment. A warm day, a lot of activity was going on in the market. People buys and selling their usual goods were joined by double their number. The Marquis made sure Gwen's presence was announced beforehand and many people had come out to see the new queen for the first time.

As she drew nearer, the gathering crowds bowed low to the ground, whispering "your majesty" and "your grace" in reverence. Instead of pride, Gwen felt immodesty at their admiration. She had done nothing to deserve it.

"My people, I am glad you waited to see me. It has been so long since we have had an opportunity to be in each other's company. We can learn much from each other and grow as a kingdom."

For a while no one spoke. Most kept their eyes to the ground and some stayed bowed or on their knees. Gwen was not sure how to respond when one of the guards spoke up.

"The Princess wishes to speak with her people."

"Please do speak freely and do not be hesitant."

One of the mass said "Majesty, our lives are simple. We grow food, eat, and sell it. We have families, grow old, and die. As long as we do no harm, we live free. There is nothing more sacred."

Another, wearing plain brown clothes with his eyes focused down said "We serve the crown and it serves us. For a long time the people of Penjoste followed the laws common to us. Every man is equal and no man can claim greatness above another."

From behind the crowd, two men came dragging a third, tattered and weeping and bound him to a wooden shaft in the

center of the square. As they came to join the crowd around Gwen, she called aloud, "Why is that man bound?"

One of the men responded, "He is a thief your majesty. He took from others and tried to have more power for himself so we do the same to him. We have taken his possessions and leave him now to die."

She stared in shock. "But that's horrible. Its cruel. Look at him. He is wretched and should be pitied."

"It is justice."

"Did he not give back what he stole?"

"His suffering is equal to all of ours. Majesty, this has been the law for many years."

Gwen thought for a moment, that might have been the law, but I am going to be queen. "He should not suffer death for his crimes. Otherwise he will not be able to learn. Free him." Two of her guards moved over to the limp prisoner and unbound the ropes holding him to the pole.

He staggered towards the queen, as if prepared to bow, but stopped and looked at her with disgust. He spat and ran away from the crowd of villagers, closely pursued by the two guards. Gwen called to them, "just leave him," but was unheard by either.

"You see majesty? They believe in nothing. They are not like us and cannot live among us. We have Justice. We have

Equality. We have you. Our queen is our guiding light, bringing radiance to the kingdom. You can teach us Justice, majesty."

"For centuries we have survived because of a common goal led by a monarch who respects every man who aims to achieve that goal, and who punishes offenders. We devote ourselves to the crown and to Penjoste."

Gwen thought she saw movement out of the corner of her eye and suddenly several men were shouting and running at her, swords drawn. She caught a glimpse of one of them, looked beyond his furrowed brow into his dark eyes before one of the guards grabbed her arm and ran across the field away from the attackers. Behind her the clash of swords rang out but she could not look back; the guard's grip was too strong.

They fled from the market towards a group of houses on the outskirts of a wood. A man stepped out of the shadows and her guard drew his weapon.

"I am with the Marquis. Your weapon will be of little use. You are being pursued. I can take over while you halt the attackers' advance."

The guard nodded in approval and turned around to meet their pursuers.

Gwen asked the shadow, "who-who were those people? Are they the people who have been after me? Why did they - are you leaving?"

The shadow did not respond. He stepped into the wood and indicated that Gwen should follow. Picking his way carefully through the trees, he stopped at a break where sunshine illuminated the grassy area under the less dense thicket.

"You should stay here. No one will make it beyond the trees with us watching. I will come back to get you after I know the village is safe."

She opened her mouth to ask more questions, but he had already disappeared into the trees. Gwen stared at the space he left through for a few moments until her eyes went out of focus.

She kicked a stone near her foot and sat down in a heap. She should stay where it was safe. That was all anyone had been telling her all week. Small noises surrounded her. Twigs cracked and birds chirped and grass rustled and she really wanted to get up and do something.

Every few minutes a leaf would tumble down from the trees. She had been around the meadow several times, always coming back to spot and sitting down before she would grow restless and pace again.

If there had been a problem, she would not know until it was too late. The shadow would never come back for her and eventually the angry men with the very large swords would figure out where she had gone, then come and find her. No, she told the Marquis that she would stay safe. Actually, she told him she

would go back to the castle if she were in any danger, but to get to the castle she would have to go back through most certain danger. She couldn't sit here much longer. That would be silly.

Gwen stood to emphasize her point. She would not wait around to be killed. Once she was sure it was safe, she would come back the way she had left and make her way to the castle. She still wanted to see her kingdom and if she could not see the village, she could go into the countryside.

Making up her mind, Gwen struck out through the trees, ducking under branches and scraping her ankles on fallen limbs. Her skin stung where it touched the rough bark and droplets of blood appeared on her legs.

After a few hundred feet, she saw light ahead through the leaves. The edge of the forest was delineated by rich grass that hugged the base of the trees. On the other side was a wide meadow, full of delicate flowers and berries. A few trees stood in the middle of the clearing and under the trees sat a boy.

He was not facing her and did not hear her approach. He was preoccupied with twirling a stick in the air. As she came nearer, she saw that not only was he twirling the stick quite quickly, he was not touching it at all.

"Oh!" she gasped. Her mind raced, trying to explain how he had made that stick float.

Startled, he jumped at the sound of her voice, letting the stick drop to the ground. He stood then, facing her. He towered over her. Though his eyes narrowed in suspicion, she could not help but notice they were a rather pretty blue.

"What do you want?" He spat the words out, glaring at her as though she were demanding something from him to which she had no right. She stared at him without speaking. "Well?"

He was being unnecessarily rude. She had not done anything to him. She should just tell him off and stomp away. But he was the first person in a week that had not treated her like royalty.

"I apologize," she conceded. "I didn't know you were here. I was just out for a walk and saw you. I did not mean to intrude. I can go now if you prefer to be left alone."

"You don't have to go. I was startled." He turned and began to walk away from her, pulling out a set of panpipes and blowing a low tune.

"What is that song?" she asked. It sounded like the whistling of a strong wind.

He glanced at her briefly, continuing his song. "It belongs to my people. We used to play it long ago, before we came out to the mountains."

"You don't anymore?"

"There is too much else to worry about. Not many people appreciate music anymore," he said dismissively.

She watched him leaving, conflicted. While he had already been so nasty to her, he was probably one of the more interesting people she'd met so far.

"Don't go. I saw you playing with that stick. "

Suddenly angry again, he turned in a sharp circle, putting his pipes away. "Why do you care?"

"Oh, it's not - I mean. I was just curious. How did you make it spin in the air like that?"

He ran a hand through his sandy hair and looked at the shadows in the wood. "It was just a trick. Don't strain yourself over it. Took me years to learn, so I wouldn't bother if I were you."

Gwen crossed her arms. If it was a trick it should be fairly easily to understand and even easier to explain. She was having trouble maintaining her annoyance.

"I don't know. I am quite capable. Even enough to master your little trick. And anyway, I don't believe you. If it was a trick, why are you so upset about my seeing?"

"I am not upset. Upset and annoyed are two very different emotions. Take a minute. I'm sure your 'capable' mind can deduce the distinction."

"Obviously you are upset. No one could be quite so rude on a regular basis. Fine, I won't ask about your stick twirling, but I know it wasn't just a trick."

"It was."

She glared into his angry eyes. There were little flecks of grey and purple washed into the blue. It was becoming difficult to stay angry. "Here, neither of us has been practicing very good manners." She held out her hand. "My name is Gwyneth."

He took her hand in his, "Drystan."

"Do you live in the village, Drystan?"

"No. I live with my people, over the hills away there." He pointed to a dense wood on the horizon. He pulled out his pipes again, apparently mollified. "We are told not to get this close, but there was an event today I wanted to see for myself."

"What sort of event?"

"The young queen was going to come down from her tower and speak for herself for the first time. I thought it would be interesting to witness. An historic event."

She was simultaneously embarrassed and annoyed, but could tell he was being sarcastic and would not allow herself to become agitated. He was intriguing and she wanted to learn about him. As much, she assumed, as he would want to know about her.

He had begun playing a more complex song than before, this one bouncing between high and low notes in a dancing melody.

"Where in the village are you from exactly, Gwen?"

She tried to think of a good answer, but was struck by the oddity of his question. "How did you know to call me Gwen?"

"I just assumed."

"Really?"

"No, I can read your thoughts." He replied sarcastically.

"Yes, really."

She looked away for a moment, recalling something from her childhood. A boy who lived away from everyone else, could spin twigs in the air, and who knew more than he should. She was letting her imagination run wild, but if there was no simpler explanation...

"I live in the castle." She waved her hand towards it. Looking directly at him she said, "You are a mystic." It was not a question.

His face suddenly went stony. He glared at her with hard eyes. It had not been cold moments before but now Gwen wished she could be in the sunlight instead of under these trees. She shivered, trying not to look into his icy gaze. His eyes, though, were entrancing, even when angry. Then, as suddenly as his anger had come, it lifted and he chuckled. "No, I'm not. What are you talking about?"

"I - you, the twig. It was floating in midair. I saw it."

"I told you it was just a trick."

There he went using that word again. As if he could just convince her that it didn't matter. "I'm not stupid. I know what you are even if I can't explain it."

"And I'm a - what did you call it?"

"A mystic. You do magic and, and ... well, I don't really know any more than that. I know there used to be a lot of mystics in the country until, suddenly they were gone."

"Suddenly?" he snorted. "You think we just picked up and walked away? You think we persecuted ourselves? No, your kind did that. You royals who try to impose your will on others. We were forced out by the faithless masses."

"Sorry, I didn't know. What happened to you? How did you learn to do that?"

His bright eyes narrowed. "Because you are so eager to learn?" He snorted again.

"Look, I am interested. Either you want to tell me about it or you don't. but you can't be more than a few years older than I am, so don't try to convince yourself that you are so much more knowledgeable than I am."

"But I am," He chuckled. "All right. There is a story our parents tell us when we're young about the world. I don't think you'll have heard it before, so just listen."

He cleared his throat and looked at the sky for a moment, remembering the lines.

"First there was being, eternal and unchanging.

'In the darkness it existed alone.

'Suddenly there was one star, then many.

'The universe filled with light.

'And in that light, being created the earth.

"The earth was filled with life, trees and land.

'But being was not merely substance.

'It was also made of ideas.

*'So being created Good and Beauty and Compassion 'to rule
over this new life.*

"Being created the world from itself, yet

'It was part of the world, inseparable and complete.

'The ideas, however, still needed substance to be

'Truth.

'So being created vessels, to whom it gave will.

"First it made Mystics, who knew it for what it was.

'Then it birthed Men, who conquer and corrupt.

'Finally it made Creatures, who sustained the others.

'Eventually all will be undone to rejoin being,

'eternal and unchanging."

His story was massive and beautiful. It reminded her of the legends she told the kids at Culford, but it encompassed the

entire world and things beyond it; it spoke of things she had never imagined.

He stopped and took a breath. "Did you understand it?"

"I did. It was so complex. But it only explained why you are different. How does your people's magic work? Do you, I don't know, have incantations or spell books or anything?"

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "I don't just wave a wand and make sparks come out. I communicate with the land."

"You speak ... to the ground?"

"Yes, in a manner of speaking. A plebian manner."

She ignored the insult, too interested to strike back.

"Does it speak back to you," she snickered,

"conversationally?"

"Don't mock what you do not understand. The land, the trees, the sun, the sky, and the creatures, all of the inhabitants of the Earth have a particular way of communicating. I can speak their language. I ask them who they are and how they came to be. When I understand them, I can manipulate them. I can use the air to lift earth or to twirl a stick."

"That's amazing. How can your people do all of this? How does it work?"

He stood up and walked along the line of the trees, his eyebrows raised. Every few seconds he would look back at her, as if to see if she had gone. Once in the sunlight, he turned

around and walked back to a grassy spot. Gwen followed him with her eyes and moved closer once he sat down.

"Why are you still here?" he demanded.

This was unbearable. As soon as she got him to explain something and open up he would turn into the tiger again and attack. But she hated not knowing.

"Where else should I go?"

He watched her in silence.

"We can do these things because we connect with being. We commune with it."

"Yes, but how?"

"We just do. It is part of who we are. We don't tend to discuss the mechanics of it often. At least, not until you are older."

She frowned. She had heard enough 'because' explanations for one week. With something so incredible, she needed to hear evidence.

"Here," he sighed. "I can show you."

He lowered his head and murmured. The words were clear but in a strange language. Each syllable tumbled into the next like running water. Gwen sat captivated by his voice, oblivious to the rest of the world. When he stopped she realized something very odd had happened.

No longer in an empty glen, they sat surrounded by a dense circle of trees. Light streamed from overhead, illuminating dust particles floating in the air, but could not penetrate the moss overhanging the branches that entrapped them.

For a moment she didn't know how to respond. She tried blinking to see if she had lapsed into a daydream. Maybe she was hallucinating now. "What just happened?"

"I told you. I communicated with being. It responded."

"You mean you asked the trees to move - and they did?"

He exhaled sharply. "In order to understand, you need to try to see the world the way I do. What did you see just now?"

Nothing at all really. Him mostly. How vain she could be. "Well, everything looked a certain way. We were in an empty meadow. Then I was listening to you and it all changed."

"But you didn't see it change?"

"No, it just ... was."

"Well, saw it. In painstaking detail that you would marvel at. I connected with the trees. I sort of spoke to them. Then they uprooted themselves and moved towards us. They linked arms even. They were singing."

That was just a bit too much. He was fascinating and she wanted to believe him, but she would not be made a fool. "How is that possible?"

"Obviously its not." He smirked. "Not in your reality anyway."

Gwen felt her skin go hot. "Be serious."

"If you won't listen I can't explain this to you. I have never been part of your reality. Our perspectives coexist but are at least partially detached, you see? I see one reality and you see another. But we both live in the same overarching reality."

"In the same- but ... what?"

"In mine, anything is possible. Everything communicates and has life. Here, an example. Have you ever been walking alone and felt a strong breeze? You might have seen leaves blowing towards you on the ground. Did you ever get the impression that they were dancing - or that they were watching you?"

She thought like that all the time. The air would be sparking with energy, but only when she was alone. She had always wondered whether other people thought that way too.

"Yeah, like they are almost alive."

"Exactly. That's the way the whole world behaves when I see it."

She felt elated at the possibility. Maybe there was some way she could stop being princess or queen or whatever she was about to become and go live as a mystic instead. Then the world might have some meaning. "This is all fantastic, literally."

"Well, not for me. It is normal. Unfortunately you'll never be able to see everything the way I do. I wouldn't wait around for a sudden epiphany on this one."

"But I don't entirely understand. Why didn't I see them move?"

"Metaphysically or actually?"

"I understand what you were saying about being and different realities ... well, sort of, but the trees actually moved. Shouldn't I have seen something happen? Yeah, maybe it's not possible for me to see them the way you do, but shouldn't it also be impossible for them to move at all in my reality? How can I know they did without having seen them?"

"I think men tend to forget things that they can't explain away or rationalize. What I did was pretty intense, so you were focused on me because you had to be. There is no way you could have done anything else in that situation. Your perspective on reality couldn't handle what was happening to it."

Then at least she wasn't just looking at him for his own sake. The universe made her. She tried not to let him see her smile. "Here's the thing - why did it happen at all, in my reality? If my reality can't support what is happening in your reality, why do they, erm, correspond?"

"I don't understand the mechanics of it well enough to explain actually. Everything is connected. Like I said before,

we all come from being. We can't be completely independent of it or each other, but we can- partially. Basically, you could see what I was doing because I have that power. Mystics can manipulate all of the realities. In ours we see how it all works so we can affect every other version of it as well. In yours you just see that it works."

"That's - well, it's certainly ... wow. But all of that, the story and everything, is it true? How could all of this, the 'beginning,' be real?"

"Of course its real. Otherwise we wouldn't call it wisdom. Better than what your people call wisdom."

Gwen did not need the reminder. The legend of the first king had been a lie. He was right. It was her only piece of knowledge and she had treasured it without knowing whether it was true. Hastily, she tried to change the subject so he wouldn't see her reaction. "Do any of the villagers know about your people?"

"No. we avoid them and they fear us. They have trouble understanding us because they can't speak with the earth. They know nothing of its depth or personality. People always fear what they can't understand. Sometimes they even destroy it."

"They didn't destroy you."

"Not for lack of effort."

She wondered why the mystics had been driven out; who made them leave. "I don't think they would know - if you tried to live together again. They seemed like they just want peace and to be able to run their own lives." Except for the people who had just been attacking her obviously. "Well, most of them do anyway."

"Yes, some want to run everything. I bet it bothers them that you have that power and they do not."

Gwen didn't think the queen ought to have that power either. Maybe the attackers were right about her. She just wanted to give the people what they wanted. If they would prefer to live on their own, fine. "But what if I don't have that right?"

"Maybe not, but that is not how you are judged. The king and queen were always just. They tried to make sure no one person infringed on other people. Except of course, if they weren't considered people by everyone else."

Gwen frowned. She had not thought that the attackers had a firm point of view until now. If the monarch kept causing all of these problems, what was the point? "At least the others don't seem to mind me.... or my judgments."

"Oh, them? They worship you."

"I noticed. It was very strange."

"I would watch out for the villagers if I were you. Hero-worship isn't as cheery as it sounds." He stood up and looked at the sky, the sun had sunk below the opening in their circle of trees. "You should go back."

Back to that castle and the servants; not when she could stay here and pretend to be magical and talk to this curious boy. It wouldn't hurt to be a little brave and just ask him. "Can't I stay and talk to you?"

"If you don't leave, they will come looking for you and may discover us. And I don't suppose you want me harmed."

"I suppose not." Only if you stop being snide, she added silently.

"I know not." He smirked.

"Um - when can I see you again?"

He laughed, looking down. Gwen also looked at her feet, feeling uncomfortable in the silence.

"I will come find you, now that I know where you live. I promise. Now go before they realize where you have been hiding." He led her back towards the woods, pushing her back. "Goodbye."

She turned around, but could not see him in the clearing. Making her way through the woods, she tried to think of what she would say to the Marquis when she saw him again. At least she hadn't died.

Chapter Five

Only the descent into the hell of self-knowledge
Can pave the way to godliness.

~Immanuel Kant

Footsteps echoing, Gwen stomped down the corridors. She had just been scolded by the Marquis for having disappeared out of the wood, then for having gotten into trouble in the first place. He seemed to think it her fault that those men attacked. She was not happy.

She stormed into Arête's chambers without knocking. Incense was burning and a soft orange light illuminated the professor reading in his winged chair by the bookshelves. The sun had just set and darkness spread across the kingdom.

"Why didn't you tell me anything about the Mystics during our lesson?" she asked, her tone full of rage.

Arête frowned, apparently taken aback. He had not expected to see her, but she did not think her question would be entirely unforeseen. He knew she was going to hear about these things from Virtu.

"I did not believe their history was pertinent to your taking the throne."

Ha, how likely. "Not pertinent? One of them met me today and he certainly seemed to think it was pertinent."

"You met one? What was his name?"

Her tutor was suddenly interested, excited even. Perhaps he had not been as complacent in their exile as she had thought.

"They are living on their own beyond the Penjusten borders, expelled from society. How could we have done something like that?"

" I can read to you from our texts so you can understand the time period, but I am unfortunately unequipped to make the sort of value judgments you will want as an historian."

That was fine. The aggravated part of Gwen's mind was cataloging enough outraged responses and plans for both of them.

Arête walked over to his bookshelf and pulled out an old tome that was composed of loose pages. He unwound the leather cord, flipped to a page close to the end, and began to read.

"A century ago, Penjustens were made of varied races. Men ruled, as they do now, but they were joined by magical creatures and Mystics to communicate between the two. The relationship, however, was a shaky one. The Mystics cultivated knowledge of the world that was unavailable to man. Their magic and their knowledge of the world were secret, inspiring jealousy and

mistrust among the other Penjustens. One king in particular thought that he needed this wisdom for himself in order to be a truly wise king and insisted the Mystics share it with him. His advisers tried, but he could not comprehend the wholeness of their knowledge without the necessary skills. Growing angry, he banished them from the kingdom, saying their magic posed a danger to the people. If the king himself could not be privy to their secrets, no one could trust them to remain harmless."

"So the king sent away his own people because he was angry? That is not right."

"We cannot know whether he was jealous and manipulated the people or truly thought they posed a danger to his ideal of a just society."

What sort of just society would it be if anyone who was different got sent away? It was exasperating. "Why didn't the people stop this? Didn't they care?"

"You have to understand. They did not see the Mystics as people like themselves. They were almost a separate species who were peaceful and helpful, but not necessary to the kingdom. They gave the people a knowledge of and explanation for the world that unintentionally made their lives more complicated than clear. Then the king declared their knowledge false and degraded them. The people thought them untrustworthy. They responded the way people always do."

Gwen was disgusted at the selfishness her own people had shown. That her family had shown. So that is what she was descended from. "They protected themselves at the expense of others."

"Exactly. Over time people stopped worrying about them and now the village only has distant memories of the magic people and their supernatural explanations for the world."

"And yet they still aren't happy. Now they want to get rid of me too."

"You shouldn't let the actions of a few people bother you. Even popular monarchs face the threat of conspirators. Most of the population has awaited your return for a decade. Weren't they eager when you went to the village today?"

Eager is not exactly the word I would choose. More like fanatic."

"Yes, they have become a little extreme haven't they? Since the Mystics were sent away, the people had to find new ways of understanding their place in the world. They began to see themselves as the kingdom. It was the most important thing. The king encouraged the people's fervor, creating a majestic atmosphere around himself. He designed imposing towers to top the castle and found an artist to carve the wooden gate featuring the first king. He arranged for bards to travel telling magnificent tales of the kingdom."

"Why did he do all of that?"

"He thought it was the best way to unify the people behind him. His plan worked. Only now they are unified behind you."

"I can't believe my family has been manipulating the people for so long. Everything is a sham. There is no good. There is no liberty or justice or any of that."

"The king did what he thought was right majesty. For better or ill, he established a society of equal individuals. Your job is to carry that society into the future."

Into a dim future- an empty and miserable place where people's lives are all worthless. It'd almost be better to leave them alone to take the chance at having a good life, whether or not they succeed

"But I could change it, couldn't I?"

Arête furrowed his brow. "I'm sorry?"

"I could change the laws; maybe change the future, when I am queen?"

He hesitated. "I don't see why not... I am afraid I do not understand your meaning."

"Don't worry about it. It's nothing." She got up to leave. "Thank you for talking with me. It was very helpful."

Before he could respond she fled from the room. If she was going to be queen, she'd need to know how to fix this situation

they'd gotten themselves into. She needed to make everything right. Otherwise there was no point.

.....

The village weaver was closing up his shop for the night when he saw someone sneaking around the edge of his neighbor's wall. The dark figure was pressed up against the stone, hiding in shadows, making his way slowly around the back of the lane.

"Hey," he called. "What's going on over there?"

The figure froze, noticing the weaver for the first time. They stood still for a moment, regarding one another before the boy sprinted away.

"Wait! Stop!" The weaver yelled, giving chase.

As he turned the corner, he ran past several other villagers who called to him, surprised.

"That boy," he yelled pointing. "Stop him."

Several of the men followed the weaver, a few others going round the back of the lane. He had only gone a few hundred yards before he ran into the other men who had gotten ahead of him.

Bending double, grasping his chest, Drystan growled "what do you want?"

"You were lurking behind my shop in the middle of the night?" the weaver accused. "What did you take?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Drystan replied. "I don't want anything of yours."

He looked up at them for the first time, frustration evident in his eyes.

"Who is that?" one of the other men asked.

"He's not from around here."

"Are you a spy, or one of the people's been causing trouble?"

"I'm neither a spy nor one of your people. Stand aside and let me pass."

"Look at his clothes. He's a Mystic - from the mountains out there."

The men all took a half step back. They'd heard terrible things about the Mystic's power and were not all brave enough to challenge even young ones like the boy.

"What should we do?"

One of the villagers gestured, "Run get the castle guards," and his companion went off in that direction.

"I'm not going to hurt you or your things. Leave me alone." Drystan tried to march past them, but there were several large men blocking his path.

"You aren't supposed to come here, traitor."

"It's none of your business what I do."

"Your people need to stay away. You were banished for a reason." The villagers nodded in assent.

"Yeah? What reason is that?" he yelled.

"Your kind tried to destroy the kingdom. Now you think you can come into our land whenever you want. We don't forgive traitors."

"The only traitor here is you. My people did nothing wrong." Drystan spat at them.

"You can tell that to the guards when you explain what you were doing sneaking around the village at night. The steward shares our view about what we should do to traitors and thieves. I doubt you'll have much chance to say anything at all."

Drystan snickered. "The Princess is in charge now, moron. Don't you Penjustens pay any attention?"

"She's one of us too. Our kind has always hated your kind and having a new Queen won't change that."

"You're wrong. And you're going to regret your injustices."

"Ha. Did your tree Gods tell you that, Mystic?"

"No, using reason told me that. I understand that you aren't capable, but I expect you to at least keep up."

One of the men stepped forward, hitting him in the jaw. His lip split and blood trickled down his chin.

"Don't do anything stupid," another warned. "Just wait and we can hand him over to the guards."

Drystan ran at the man who had hit him, knocking him to the ground. He stumbled but kept going, running from his pursuers while trying to regain his balance.

He ducked around a corner and jumped over a low wall, hiding in the newly planted hedge behind it. The men who had been following him ran down the path, passing him without notice. They were gone long before he got back up and crept toward the castle.

.....

Gwen walked up to her room. She didn't want to do anything or go anywhere, but she didn't want to stop walking either.

Her bed looked distant. She went over the window sill and leaned against it, gazing into the blackness.

It was in these moments when she was alone that she allowed herself to reflect on the future, approaching just over the horizon. Every decision she would make in the future would affect many more lives than she could imagine. Every choice would matter and, at this point, they would all be uninformed.

It left her feeling nauseas, knowing that her kingdom had one what it did to the Mystics. If that was a lie, anything else could be. If there was no way of knowing the truth, she would never be able to make wise decisions.

Even following the advice of her tutors would not help. She had listened to Arête and Virtu intently, but couldn't help

feeling frustrated at the contradictory points they made. Should she seek security or morality?

They had been fighting again that day. She saw them walking down the hall, arguing about how much truth was necessary to ensure their aims. She didn't stay to listen to the entire conversation, though she was sure it was about her. Their arguments were beginning to leak into her subconscious and she was doubting her own grasp of the world.

Most of the lights in the village's thatch houses had been blown out. A few emanated a warm orange glow, the last embers of fire warming the households while they slept.

Her room looked exactly the way it should. It was warm and inviting, but she didn't feel inspired to go rest. Did that mean something was wrong with her?

She picked up one of the pillows and squeezed it. It was too soft. She sat down. The bed was too hard. She stood up again, looking around the room. Maybe she would go down to the village. She might manage it without being seen.

With her hand on the door handle, she looked around the room for something to distract her. No, a walk was best.

Luckily the corridors were empty. It was late enough that most people had retired. Only the candles burning along the walls gave any indication that other people than she lived in the castle.

There were no guards on the door either. That was strange. It was almost as though someone had cleared her way. Well, whatever the case, she owed him thanks. She preferred to be alone when she was miserable.

The garden was calm. A fine mist had left the grass twinkling with dew. Looking at her feet, Gwen admired the way the moonlight made her ankles shine. Her skin looked pearlescent. Everything was so quiet. She remembered an almost constant buzz of activity and noise when she had first arrived. Where did everyone go?

As soon as she thought it, Gwen saw something move in the shadows. It looked like a very tall man. It had to be one of the workers. The Marquis assured her no one could get beyond the castle gates while he was on guard.

She was about to investigate when someone tapped her on the shoulder. She gasped shrilly.

"Jumpy are we?" Drystan chuckled.

"You scared me."

"Yes, well, I'm not creeping up on people in the middle of the night. How did you get in here? And why are your clothes torn?" She picked at the hem of his shirt; a jazzed tear ran across it.

"I just had an encounter with some of your loyal subjects."

"An encounter?"

"It didn't turn out well."

"What happened?"

"The usual: 'hey, you, we know what you are' to which I snarkily reply, 'obviously not.' They chase me, try to capture me and bring me back to their leader. They are ridiculous and resort to violence. I escape."

"They attacked you?"

He raised an eyebrow. He turned to walk along the stony path, looking back at her.

"You're surprised?"

"Yes. I didn't think my people were so violent. I need to stop this."

"Why? It's not your problem."

"It is my problem. They're my people."

"Not really. What makes them your people?" He walked up to a stone and sat down, swinging his legs. He pulled out his pipes and tested a few hoarse notes.

"I am responsible for them."

"That makes them your people?"

She paused, unsure of herself.

"I know my people," he continued. "I grew up with them. I learned their history and rituals."

"Are you happy with them?"

"No, but that's different. They don't appreciate the same things I do."

"Such as?"

"Well, music for instance. It's beautiful, and just as much a language as the one we use to communicate with the world - and with all the rest of you" He played a soft tune to emphasize his point. "But their very narrowly focused. Your people, on the other hand, what have they got? What do they focus on?"

"That's what I'm here to learn." She was suddenly very frustrated. He had caught onto her concern and was picking at it like a scab.

"By sitting in here talking to me?"

"Who are you to question me? Why don't you go back to your people then? Teach them to sing along to your melancholy tune or something"

She turned around, ready to leave, when he called out to her.

"I'm sorry. Don't go."

She turned around. Drystan was rubbing his pipes on a small square of cloth, cleaning off a bit of dirt and avoiding her eyes.

"I think it's important to get to know who you are," he continued. "Figure out who your people are. It'll make you a better ruler. I wish I knew my people better."

"Me too," she admitted. "I've been wondering about that a lot lately. I was sure for a long time, but now I have no idea."

"Reality can be difficult to bear."

"Yeah, it seems safer, believing in the myth. You're much more likely to get a happy ending."

She sat down next to him and took the pipes. There were intricate carvings on them that she hadn't noticed before. Little vines ran up either side in a lattice.

"This is beautiful," she said, looking up at him. His face was much closer than she'd thought it would be and she nearly fell off the rock in her haste to back up.

"Maybe you ought to find out." He had chosen to ignore her clumsy reaction.

"Find what out?"

"Who the Penjustens really are."

"How can I do that? Everyone has either lied to me or given vague answers or doesn't know."

"I'm sure someone knows."

"And is unlikely to tell me."

"Did I say you should ask? Go find out."

"How?"

"How am I supposed to know. It's your castle." He smirked. "Anyway, you're still learning right? The most important thing

you can learn is where to find the information you don't already know."

"I need to find a book."

"If that suits you. I'd just try to read their minds."

"If only ..." She smiled at him. "I'll see you soon?"

"Sooner than you think," he replied.

Gwen went back inside the way she had come, this time with a clear goal in mind. She streaked through the castle, heading down to the lower levels. Less careful than before, she was moved by her frustration, though trying to avoid being seen. Once she reached the darkened corridor, she started walking on her toes, listening for strange noises.

She came up to Arête's chambers hesitantly. There was no noise in the hall, but she felt as though she was being watched. The handle was cold and the door creaked. No one called out to her. She slipped into the room and over to the bookcase, perusing the choices.

He had books on everything. Mathematics, music, and politics. Philosophy, literature, and - there - history.

One particularly large volume had no title imprinted across the red leather binding. She pulled it out, running her hands over the cover. On the first page someone had written "On these celebrated times," with the subtitle "The Penjusten People and their History."

She skimmed the first few pages, flipping through opposite entries of poetry and prose. After a few chapters, the handwriting changed. The book must have been authored by several historians over its use.

The book began blandly, discussing crop rotation and strange weather phenomena, nothing about the formation of the kingdom or royal politics.

With each new author, more details would come out about the royal family and the people in the village, little developments.

Gwen skipped ahead through a large chunk and began flipping the pages. Catching sight of an entry that mentioned Mystics, she searched back for it and murmured the words aloud.

"The Mystics have stopped participating in Kingdom-wide events. They seem to have been distancing themselves these past few months. I wonder whether it is because of the Craelgi."

"The what?" She flipped forward a few more pages. There was a sonnet about native wildflowers followed by more prose. At the beginning of the section, she started to read.

"Our period of waiting is at an end. The deaths which have so disquieted to country of late are laid on the Craelgi. Though we have no word that they were the cause of the children's deaths, the people have leapt at them with an unmatched ferocity. The king has seen fit to exile them with all due

haste. I do not know where they shall go, but the people will undoubtedly be at greater ease."

Gwen turned the page, her thoughts quieted. A small note slipped out, which was scrawled with a hasty script. She picked it up,

"Someone ought to rewrite the beginning of this volume. Unfortunately I haven't the heart. We must add in a creation story about the one true king. His majesty feels it is necessary. As a servant to the crown I am forced to oblige, but I remain a servant to history foremost and cannot besmirch these annals. I have written a small booklet of tales to be placed alongside it, an epoch of Penjuste's founding to which we shall refer henceforward.

"After the rogue Mystics organized the territory due east, we were worried about the reaction from our people, but they have remained loyal - for the most part. I fear the time may come when their people seek revenge on ours, but for now the Uigans are content over the border."

This was all too much. She understood the bit about the Mystics - or thought she did. What had happened with those children who died? Why should there be rogue Mystics who want revenge?



It was not so upsetting that this historian had added the mythical volume. She already knew that the history she had learned was wrong. Worse was knowing that she held the real history in her hands and it had nothing to tell her about the beginning of the kingdom except crop rotations.

She turned the note over in her hands, crinkling the old paper beneath her fingers and stuck it in the book in a different place. The page she had turned to was written with the same hand as the previous, a different one than the note. The words were sharper, harder, as though the author had punched them out with his pen.

"The King gave a speech today about the importance of equality and fairness. He didn't mention his planned exile of the Mystics. I am not sure what happened, but he was angrier than I've seen him before last week after meeting with the Mystic elders. They came to him, aggrieved about the Craelgi, demanding he allow them back. He refused. I do not know what transpired after that. My colleagues saw him pacing in the throne room the next day, muttering that 'his power was greater than they knew. They could not deny him.' I must admit I am worried."

Gwen shut the book, silently fuming. How could he have done that? That historian may not have known what was troubling the king, but she certainly did. He wanted the Mystic's powers. She

understood the desire; she had felt it herself when she first saw it, but that was no reason to force them out of the kingdom.

Though she couldn't understand why he'd had the historians create a false history. Virtu called it clever, a way of keeping the people in line. This king didn't seem to entirely be in control of himself, let alone the people.

Perhaps Virtu was right. Maybe if the only way to keep the kingdom in tact was to deceive them, she would need to do what was necessary. But that idea felt so horrible. Surely she would not need to resort to such heinous measures in the name of stability.

Did that mean she could judge him?

And these people - these Craelgi and the Mystics. They were meant to be under Penjuste's dominion. They were a part of this society. Well, they had been. What were they now? What should she, as queen, do about them? No one knew they had been unjustly exiled, and she could tell them. Though it was doubtful anyone would believe that. They attacked Drystan. The Penjustens hated the Mystics. How could they truly be a part of the same community?

At this point what did community matter at all? The Penjusten history was apparently wrought with injustice and lies. What did that make them?

As Penjusten queen, should she uphold the falsehoods her ancestors established? Should she try to undo them now that she knew who they really were? If that is who they really were; maybe they could be something else now. Though, if their past was just one terrible act after another, how could she in good conscience rule these people? Arête told her to rule justly, but how could she if she didn't know what was just?

Learning her history had given her no answers, only more questions. She couldn't be sure who she was or what she believed. Was she the little girl who would take over the just kingdom, as her ancestors had before and rule according to wisdom? Or was she just another in a line of power-hungry corruptors, who perpetrated fraud against the people and exiled them when they became difficult or stood up to her whims?

Gwen didn't feel like either anymore, but she had no idea what she could be. Her truth - her reality - had been overturned and spilt and nothing put in its place.

She supposed that was her job. As monarch she would need to lead these people. All she could see was a blinding, empty wilderness, bereft of reason or solace.

Gwen went to bed that night conflicted. Thought about that note in the history text and the meaning behind what she had learned. There were very clear options, but none of them were particularly appealing. Acting as a just ruler was just another

lie built on top of a foundation of myths. She ran the risk of becoming as bad as her ancestors, committing more atrocities in the name of her power. And probably nothing more would please Virtu, who wanted to exercise his political prowess on an unsuspecting public. She couldn't take the throne knowing what she did. But she couldn't just abandon her duty. Her dreams were troubled.

Chapter Six

Where there is no common power,
There is no law, where no law, no injustice.
Force and fraud, are in war the cardinal virtues.

~Thomas Hobbes

In Uig, the sky was an eternal pale grey. Not even storm clouds hung in the heavens to give them life. But then, it was a gloomy day all around.

The castle was unusually silent. The king sat back in his private study talking only with his closest confidant. In the last week he had only left the room for meals and sleep.

The servants drew straws to see who would go interrupt his discussion. Two hooded men had just come into the main hall, requesting an audience with the king and refused to leave.

"Our business here is important. Get him. Or you will regret inaction," one of them said.

They tended to regret interrupting the king when he was shut away. Whatever these men could do wouldn't be half as terrible as a week in the dungeon, but if they were wrong,

whoever was meant to inform him would not be around to regret the decision. So they each drew a straw.

The young servant called John trembled as he walked down the granite corridor. He paused a few times, looking back the way he had come.

They warned him to knock briefly and wait to be let in. His rap echoed down the cold hall. When no one came to the door, he raised his hand to knock again, forgetting the warning.

The door swung open and he had to jump backwards to avoid being hit. The man standing in the doorway was enormous, like a particularly irate giant.

"Was there some reason you interrupted our council, or are you just going to stumble around outside?"

"Oh, um, sorry, yes. I apologize. I have been sent to inform the king that two men have come to see him."

"Why? Weren't you told there would be no interruptions?"

"Yes, but they said it was important."

"Be grateful we are busy or else you would regret coming own here," he man said as he shut the door.

"They had a large chest. Said they brought him a gift he had been waiting for. It was very heavy looked like."

When no one responded, he turned to flee back up to the kitchen, hoping they wouldn't remember who he was. Suddenly, the entire meeting entered the hall and rushed up to the main hall

in the wake of the king. John fell backwards in shock, hitting his head on the stone walls. He ha never seen the king in person before and never thought he would see the king run. That gift had to be valuable.

.....

The King and his attendant stood in front of the chest. The two men who had brought it in were waiting on either side of the only door in the room. Feroben caressed the lid. His fingers slid across the carved yew and ran down to the pewter clasp. It was locked. He whispered a few words inaudibly and the latch unhooked, allowing the lid to creak open. The king's attendant reached forward.

"No, I will take care of this particular gift."

He pulled open the lid and smiled. Inside lay a gagged man in a green and purple tunic, his hands and feet bound, his eyes clenched shut. He moaned piteously. The king reached down and moved his arms, revealing the crest of Penjuste.

The two men who had brought the chest moved forward to drag the man from his prison. They dropped him to the floor. He could not stand due to the restraints on his legs and the time he had spent curled, unmoving in the chest.

The King looked down at him and sneered, "You have traveled far from your home, guard. Are you not glad to see me? The ruler

of a foreign kingdom. I am giving you a place to rest." The attendant snickered. "No, perhaps your journey was painful. This box must have been cramped, and you could not move your arms or legs. Untie him," he said to the two messengers.

Free of his bondage, the guard stood, coughing and groaning. They had traveled for days without giving him food and he was too weak to stand without wobbling. "You will pay... for what you did ... to my friend," he gasped.

The King turned to the messengers, a question in his eyes.

"We had to get rid of the other guard. Not enough room in the chest. Unless you wanted half a guard. That we could do." He smirked evilly at the frail man bent double trying to remain on his feet.

"You bastards -," he choked out. He was overcome by a coughing fit when the king spoke again.

"You see, I do not tolerate foul language in my presence. If you insist on speaking rudely, next time you may not be able to breathe at all."

The guard's eyes widened and he lumbered backwards. "Did you - you're one of them, a - ?"

"Now, I wanted some help from you. You work in the palace." It was not a question. "In fact, you have recently escorted the soon-to-be queen."

"I will never betray my duties. You will have to kill me before I am disloyal to Penjuste."

"Actually, that is not such a bad idea."

The King's attendant pulled a knife from his side. It screeched against the silver edge of the sheath. He held it out for the King, who wrapped his fingers around the hilt and examined it as it glinted in the dull light.

Backing away as quickly as he could, the guard tripped over the chest and was pulled back by the two messengers, each gripping one arm. He began to silently cry. "Don't worry," the king whispered. "I have a job for you. If you are dead you will no longer be useful." As he spoke he traced the sharp edges of the knife with his fingertips.

"What - "

"Don't interrupt. I am King after all." He turned to the messengers. "Do they not teach manners to these mongrels in Penjuste? I suppose they will need a firm hand when I am their ruler."

He pondered this possibility for a moment and grinned. Moving to stand directly in front of the guard, he commanded "look at me."

The quivering guard pulled his head up and gazed into Feroben's eyes. They were cold.

"Now," he continued. "I want you to give a message to the young queen. Before she takes the throne, she needs to understand what that will mean for the rest of the country. I do not take new powers lightly and I have highly enjoyed Penjuste's quiet acceptance of my policies for the last ten years. I wouldn't want any hiccups to arise in the form of a silly girl playing at royalty. You need to make sure she understands this."

The guard blinked in disbelief. "Are you just going to let me go?"

"Of course." The king smiled. "You must be quick, or else you won't get there in time. You will be escorted back and my messengers will make sure you make it there alive."

With that he plunged the knife into the still weak guard. It slid past his tunic and through his flesh, hitting a wall of bone before it had entered fully to the hilt. Feroben twisted the knife, admiring its sheen. A dark stain spread across the Penjusten crest on the guard's chest as he coughed up blood. In one quick motion the king pulled the knife out of the guard and handed it back to his attendant before the man hit the ground.

"I do not care how you get him there, but make sure he lives long enough to relay my warning." Feroben bent down to the floor, avoiding the growing pool of blood spilling out around the guard. "Now, for my message..."

.....

"Your majesty, you must come quickly," the attendant ran from the room, clutching his side. Gwen had been sitting in the throne room all afternoon, brooding over her discovery from the night before. She simultanously wanted to shout about it to everyone around and think on her own. She knew if she was just left alone long enough she could rationally find meaning in the lies of the past. But she didn't have that kind of time - or that ability.

Following the attendant and accompanied by her guard, Gwen hurried through the castle. Within the entrance hall, they saw that the oak doors to the courtyard were standing open. Several men were standing clustered around something, muttering and whispering to each other. They fell back to let Gwen pass. In the space within their circle, a man lay huddled and bleeding, being tended by two servants.

"No, you're one of the guards from the market! What happened to you?" she said as she sat beside him on the ground. "Who could have done this?"

One of the onlookers said "two men brought him. Claimed to have found him on their way from Uig and left him here before hurrying off."

The bleeding guard suddenly awoke, frantic and gasping for air. "Your majesty!"

"Don't speak now. You've been very badly injured and need to rest."

"No - message - King Ferober sent me with ... a message. He stabbed me. Told me to tell you..."

"What? What did he say?" Gwen had only heard brief mention of her neighbor, the King of Uig, but she knew enough to want to avoid him. His reign was not a peaceful one and had left his kingdom in ruin. "What is his message?" she asked again.

"He said -" the guard was interrupted by a coughing fit and spit up more blood onto the floor. "He said to prepare. He will come for us. He ... does not appreciate -"

"Speak slowly. Breathe. Don't rush yourself."

"Doesn't appreciate ..." The guard tried to raise himself off the ground to look into Gwen's face. His arms were trembling. She took his hand in hers. The blackened blood caked on them contrasted with his pale skin. "I'm sorry majesty," the guard croaked. "He means to go to war. He said, I would be the first... of many."

He slumped back to the ground, closing his eyes as he sank. He clutched his side where he had been stabbed and whispered inaudibly. The onlookers murmured to each other, some of them with sympathy and others in fear.

"Sleep," Gwen told him. "You have done a great service to me and to Penjoste."

She reached out and brushed the fabric of his tunic, tracing the crest with her fingertips. The Penjusten symbols and motto were barely visible through the bloodstain that stretched across his torso.

'Dum Spiro Spero' it read. Gwen felt a weight settle on her shoulders. This King of Uig had killed a man to send her a message. She would not fear him or his promises of war. But she had no more faith in her kingdom. And now she would have to fight for it. For what? For the ideal? Maybe for an unblemished bit of pride or decency. The irony was overwhelming. Still, she could not abandon these people to the whims of a foreign dictator. They were hers after all, no matter how neglected.

Standing, she addressed the onlookers. "We will not be cowed by threats from any other land, no matter how vicious their intent may be." Looking back down at the dead guard, she said to the attendants, "He should be buried and given a respectful send off. He died honorably."

She backed away, gazing at the tragic tableau in the entrance hall for a moment more before striding back through the corridors towards the throne room. One of her attendants followed, running occasionally to keep up.

"What will we do majesty?" he asked. "No one has attacked this land in decades. We are not equipped for war and the people will be disturbed by the barbaric actions of this foreign king."

She would not let terror take her. If anyone had to be brave in the face of adversity, it was the queen. This certainly qualified as adversity. But even bravery probably would not be enough to prevail. "Do not worry just yet. We will prepare to meet his attack. I will not let my father's kingdom fall to ruin."

As she descended the staircase into the dungeons, the attendant fell back, panting. She did not think she would let the kingdom fall, but did not think she had the power to stop it either. "Good luck, your majesty," she heard the attendant whisper before hurrying back to the entrance.

In Uig, an army was training. Several cavalry regiments were kept on call at all times to prevent invading armies from reaching their lands and to ensure the surrounding villages paid their duties to the king. The veteran soldiers practiced with their weaponry and retrained old horses in preparation for the coming battle.

Across the kingdom captains were choosing additional fit young men to join the infantry. The king said to prepare for complete annihilation. Every captain had a census of the villages wherein he could choose his men. Most did not want to fight, but none wanted their families harassed for disloyalty.

On the outskirts of the kingdom where the forests grew thick, the able men were cutting down trees. The dark twisted limbs reached higher than the walls of the castle, but came toppling down far easier. The men used the thick black trunks to build spears and trebuchets. Day and night they chopped and scraped and sanded the wood until their pile of logs and poles had grown high. Soon they would have enough to take the entire kingdom in a day's battle.

They worked in the forges, casting swords and axes and armor. The chain mail was all of a dark iron so that the men could not easily be seen at night. The king's army preferred to attack when villages and soldiers were asleep. The king wanted to fell as many men to achieve victory without losing his own.

The women prepared food and supplies for the soldiers to take on their journey. In groups throughout the market, they arranged bundles of cheese, dried meats, and bread. They filled the flasks with water and mended old clothing. The soldiers made camp several times along the way and needed to walk hundreds of miles to reach Penjoste. If they were still going to be able to fight after the journey, they would need to maintain their strength.

Mostly, the people toiled so that they would be able to see their families once the fighting was over. The king had an eye

for empire and the army was sent out often. If they were not prepared, the kingdom would break.

While the craftsmen worked and the women prepared, the king stood and addressed his soldiers. His speeches always marked the beginning of a new war. he roused the men. He gave them something to believe in and to fight for. Never mind that many of them would die and never actually know the society for which they fought. Having the ideal made them stronger. That was what mattered. These moments gave them the opportunity to imagine that world when the fighting obscured the future.

At the sight of the king standing in his high balcony overlooking the market square, the crowd swelled. They roared their approval as one. The king soaked in their enthusiasm, smiling inwardly, though keeping a reserved face for decorum. He raised his arms to quiet them.

"Uigans, a new day approaches. Here we gather to meet it. Stagnancy is the detriment of all mankind, so we open this day in a period of change. We will not sit and wait for our society to deteriorate in the vicissitudes of time while a new power emerges. Instead, we shall take the battle to them, as we always have, and we will win, and we will remain powerful.

"We enter this time of war from a position of stability and prosperity. Our society embodies greatness in every way. The command of the region is under our hands. The greatest works of

art and literature were created by our fingers. From our mind comes the epitome of philosophical thought. Should we sacrifice our will and our prosperity to this rising kingdom?

"No, my people." He roared. "I say we shall not. We will test them. We will try them. If they do not accede to our demands and our way of life, we will break them. This is the only way to victory. It is the only way to maintain our power. It is the only way to achieve greatness. We must demonstrate our power to these Penjstens. Our might is strong and our will is stronger. And we will prevail."

As the roar from the crowd grew to engulf his words, the king backed into the cold chamber, out of the spotlight of his people. Of course they would prevail. They always had. There was no other way.

On the other side of the village, the tavern crowd was lively. They had nothing to discuss for the last several months aside from the state of the crops and the overly loud baying of the sheep. Many of them learned to mimic this baying so that they might have more varied conversation, but to no avail. The sheep were also concerned with the poor state of the crops.

Today their subject of interest was the king's impending war. The cluster of men sat around a dirty wooden table topped with enough pints for the whole village. More bottles glinted

above the bar in the corner, ignored by the barman who wanted to discuss politics as much as his patrons.

Their voices rang out in the gloomy tavern. "He's got the entire kingdom working. We haven't seen this much activity in ... how long has it been, Jack?"

"Round about thirty years now, Liam."

"Right you are. Thirty years. And that's when we fought off those Pelopians. Thought we might actually lose that time - so many of them soldiers and they got real close to the castle too."

"Nah, we've never been beat before, 'specially not by some kid and a coupla villages."

"Maybe this time it's different."

Another very shaggy man joined in the conversation. His orange hair was the brightest thing in the tavern. "The king must know somethin' we don't else why would he be king? Maybe them Penjustens got some kind of weapon."

"What kinda weapon would they have that we wouldn't have?"

"I don't know! That's why it's a secret innit?"

"No chance of that, George." He dropped his voice conspiratorial murmur. "No, I think the king is afraid. We haven't been doin' so well lately and I this girl becomes queen she might decide to take us over too. Back when Penjuste was powerful wed had to fight for their scraps. Now that they

aren't, we're the tough guys. I think the king is scared we might not last if they start to get all big again, we'll be the ones that suffer the most."

"We're gonna suffer no matter what."

"you know talk like that can get you locked up."

"Which is why we shouldn't go tellin' other people."

"What we say in the tavern stays in the tavern."

"Right, well I don't wanna get locked up anymore'n the rest of you fellas do."

"Yeah? Well I don't think we should be goin' to war at all. Then we wouldn't have to worry about all this mess 'n getting' locked up and stuff."

"Really? So you think we should just give up the whole business?"

"'course. Like he said, we all end up sufferin' when our people don't come back from battle and the whole country feels it. I don't care what kind of kingdom he's tryin' to create. I just want to live as well as I can."

"Right, and that doesn't involve dyin' for some king."

"Which is why we're all shut in here drinkin' instead of out there fightin'"

"Exactly."

Leaving the balcony, the king moved through his chambers, pausing to admire the tapestries and mosaics along the length of

the room. His castle was full of fine art. Throughout the halls, suits of armor gleamed and statues posed in eternal dance.

The entrance hall was adorned with gilded furniture and topped by a vast mural, depicting the history of his reign. It had taken many victories and years of toil, but his kingdom was rich and complemented by greatness.

In the King's throne room the court stood waiting. The many poets, sculptors, philosophers, and painters he had cultivated bowed in his presence while the nobles and courtesans inclined their heads in humble respect. Their lifestyles were made by his strength on the battlefield. They welcomed any battle he had planned for it would bring more money and labor into the kingdom to provide them with lavish riches and material for great works of art.

The doors flew open to let n a messenger in a muddied cloak.

"Sire," he spoke. "Your men have traveled the countryside looking for aids to the coming battle. Atop a lonely mountain, we happened upon a large gathering of ancient creatures. The Craelgi have reassembled and are living in despondent poverty. Many of them are weak and desperate for whatever help they can get to survive. They allowed us deep into their camp for lack of willing defense. In their state, the men think that they would be willing to come to our aid if we allowed them a place in our

kingdom. Food in the mountains is scarce and their type does not live well in the cold. I believe they will prove an excellent asset in battle for little cost."

"You are right, messenger. It has been long since I came across a Craelgi in person or in mind." He thought for a moment. "Have your men bring some of these creatures to me and I will determine their willingness to join the cause."

"We have brought several of them already, your majesty. In their weakened state, they did not try to resist."

"Good, I shall go out to speak with them. No one else will understand their communications. Men can try to see but the language of the Craelgi is not recognizable to unskilled ears."

He turned to his attendants, who were standing in the corners observing the activity in the room with rapt attention. "Go to my captains," he commanded. "Any with troops in training should double their efforts. If I am able to bring the Craelgi on our side, we can attack Penjoste swiftly. Otherwise I will need all the strength they can summon. Tell the ones who only command veterans that I require their services at once."

"What services, majesty?"

"We will be conducting night raids on Penjoste over the next few days. Any people who get in the way should be killed immediately. The soldiers must not be seen. If anyone from Penjoste discovers my attacks, I will be displeased."

“Yes, majesty. We will inform them right away.” The attendants silently exited through a door behind the throne as the king strode back through the entrance. The doors slammed shut. Talk burst out amongst the artisans and courtiers who had been silent during the king’s exchange. War was coming.

Gwen had not been standing outside of Virtu's chambers for long when she saw him sidling down the hall.

“Why, your grace. To what do I owe this honor?” He smirked.

“I did not think you would be eager to see me after what happened in the village.”

"Now is not the time. We are going to war. I don't know what to do."

"War?"

"Yes!" Didn't he understand how urgent this was? "A king, er, Feroben, he's done something terrible. He means to attack us. I will not let him kill my people."

Gwen felt electric. Her anger would not subside until she had done something to stop this. She needed to be productive. People were going to die.

“Majesty,” Virtu laid a hand on her shoulder. She flinched at his touch. His eyes narrowed. “Feroben is not a rash man. He

will not simply attack us without warning." He pushed open the door to his study. "Here, we will sit and formulate a plan."

They entered and he gestured her to a seat. "You are new at politics but Feroben is not. If he means to go to war, there are calculations behind his actions. He will move swiftly, yes, but not without thorough planning. He knows that were he to attack now, it would lead to a massacre and leave him with no worthwhile gain."

All was not lost. "So do we have time to defend ourselves?"

"We will have time to react. You can ensure we react with cunning."

"Cunning?"

Gwen wasn't particularly eager to enact Virtu's idea of cunning on a battlefield. Even if she did manage to win and establish her right to rule, living with herself as a ruler was a much harder obstacle to overcome.

"Unfortunately your authority is being undermined by conspirators. You are facing two of the obstacles every ruler should fear: another ruler and your own people. But these hurdles will not be impossible to surmount."

He seemed almost excited at the prospect. She felt a mix of pity and hesitation. He was brilliant, but had been stuck advising the rulers of a ruler kingdom. He must never have gotten a chance to test his skills.

"You must demonstrate your resolve; you must be fierce, meet him in battle and show you are not afraid to act cruelly and justly to anyone who challenges your rule."

Gwen resolved to listen to his lecture. Virtu was probably her surest asset to survive the coming weeks.

"We do, luckily, have one key advantage over him. The rule of Penjuste rests on a sacred authority. His people are loyal to him because they fear him. Yours are loyal to you because they need to be. They will fight and die for you as they did for your ancestors.

"Because of their fervor, we can be assured Feroiben will not be able to take rule of the kingdom from you, except by complete force. That kind of action will take some time to muster. In the meantime, we will be able to prepare the people for war."

"Even if he did manage to utterly destroy us, I do not see him deciding upon such a destructive course. The residual value from a complete annihilation is minimal. The people, especially, would not take lightly to his rule were he to amass such a force. No, I see him acting cautiously and respectfully. We should be able to assemble a modicum of defense."

Gwen tried to concentrate on what Virtu was saying. Something didn't click. His solution seems so simple; the theory was precise and thorough.

But nothing she planned thus far had succeeded. Nothing about politics had been simple. The people always managed to add complication upon - oh! That was what she had forgotten. The war was not about winning or losing or trading power or any of that. It was about the people - her people.

"No - this isn't right." She interjected. "I can't walk into this war driven by your cunning alone. Too many people will die if they fight. We will have untrained peasants, boys no older than I, sitting on the walls of the village; they will stand up with too large armor and too heavy swords and die for a kingdom they have barely begun to know. We cannot win against his army. I won't force these people to sacrifice their lives."

"You would rather they die in their homes, oblivious to the threat that even now comes for them in their sleep?"

"Of course not! But we need to think about this before we take any rash actions. Maybe there is some way I can appease King Feroben. There must be something he wants. He is a rational man. We do not necessarily need to go to war right away."

"Your majesty, with all due respect, you have no experience in this field. If you are going to enter into this battle with any chance of success, I highly recommend you listen to my counsel."

He paused to give her time to comprehend his gravity.

"Ferooben will not stop. He will not negotiate. Not when he has such a clear advantage. Your best option now is to prepare for his attack with all necessary haste. Perhaps we can gather enough strength to defend against him for an extended period. Then he will be less ferocious in an effort to make the war worth his effort."

Gwen was devastated. He was already admitting defeat. "That can't be our only option!"

Arête appeared from behind Virtu, walking down the corridor with a book in his hands.

"Violence is not our only recourse, Virtu," he said. "We should arrange a meeting with him - a discussion between monarchs. Perhaps try to understand what Ferooben wants. I am sure a compromise can be had, avoiding unnecessary brutality."

"The man has already wrecked our security. He is only going to kill more. We are at war - there is no time for talking."

"Which is why this is the most important time to be careful."

"Careful? Careful involves not being at risk. We have failed. Ferooben has amassed more power than we can withstand. You want to discuss it with him, Arête? Then you go."

"We need a plan," Gwen interrupted. "This is not the best time to argue unless we're going to reach a solution."

"I do not see you avoiding an attack altogether," Virtu replied with a note of finality.

"Then what can we do?"

He shook his head, eyes downward. He opened his mouth to continue and closed it again, sighing.

"If we do not go to Uig," Arete replied, "We need to protect ourselves."

"I will convene a meeting of the war counsel," Virtu said. "They have not had a chance to discuss political affairs in some years. We will compile a few plans for your perusal."

"Good. Thank you. I'm sure there is something we haven't considered. I just can't imagine what."

"We will leave no source untapped. If you act wisely, I am sure we can avoid the worst possible outcomes of this war."

"But you definitely think war is inevitable?"

He examined her appraisingly; there was some strange emotion behind his eyes. It looked almost like regret, or pity. "I do."

He opened the door to his chamber and showed her through. The clank from its heavy latch echoed down the empty corridor.

Gwen did not know what else to do but wait. She meandered through the castle, stopping to inspect the portraits of her ancestors and little fissures in the walls, imaging the people who had come before her and what they had done in this building

in their time. It was nothing like the havoc she and her school friends brought on Culford's halls.

Leaving the vast interior and all of its history, real or imagined, Gwen wandered around the grounds for a few minutes, thinking about nothing in particular. She came to an area she had not yet seen, there, standing in silent solitude was an old stone wall, crumbling away in the wild grass.

She walked around it, running her hand over the aged stones. On the other side, the vision took her breath away. The ruins of a chapel sat, hidden from the sight of the path.

The fortification looked ancient, but was stately and solid. The walls that remained standing were a complex array of windows and arches, left over from a distant time in which people gave themselves to their creations.

For some reason that she could not place, the old chapel looked familiar. Perhaps she had spent time there as a little girl. Its relative isolation certainly made it a good place to think.

Walking underneath its imposing frame, she saw that it was only about half destroyed. Beyond the main structure, the foundations of several rooms and accompanying columns were still intact. It had once been a massive place. She wondered what they must have used it for - it looked like a place of ceremony,

magnificent and grand. Penjstens didn't create buildings like that anymore.

Three walls in the body remained standing, despite the lack of a ceiling. Beneath the farthest one was a low stone support wall. Moving over to it, she sat down, enjoying the feeling of the cold sandstone against her skin.

She leaned over, supporting her head in her hands. She tried to relax, clearing her mind of the conversation she had just had with her tutors

If she was going to be meeting with advisers to discuss plans any time soon, it would not be wise to ignore them because she was distracted by her own uncertain thoughts.

A clear, familiar voice spoke beside her ear. "You look troubled."

Gwen lifted her head. The Marquis had come upon her secret place rather quickly and noiselessly. If she were not so inured to the day he would have startled her. Maybe he had seen her walking from one of the castle windows. Her chances of hiding were slim when she could be seen from any place in the garden. If only people would leave her alone.

"No, I am just thinking."

"About troubling things?"

If only she had that kind of clarity and insight.



"I just spoke with Virtu about the attack. He says Feroben has been steadily acquiring land and people. He said, whether I had come back or not, Feroben would have not left Penjuste alone."

His reassurances hadn't made her feel any better. The inevitability of the thing at least made it less her fault. Had she been a tougher ruler or managed to stop the conspiracies before they got out of hand or come back from Culford sooner - maybe this wouldn't be happening.

No. Most of these things were beyond her control. As were a foreign king's actions. She just needed to be strong now. She needed to be the ruler her people imagined her to be.

The Marquis sat down next to her on the low wall. He always looked strange when he was close to the ground, like a gargoyle waiting to spring. This certainly was the place. The old chapel spoke of mysteries and magic; maybe some residual power could help her out of this bind.

"You're troubled because you do not want to go to war?"

No, the prospect of war was a dream come true. It was this frustrating desire for everyone to talk at her that was the real trouble... That wasn't fair. The Marquis was the person she trusted most in the entire kingdom. He only wanted to help.

"Well, of course." She muttered. She shook her head, refusing to look at him. She did not want to see the look on his face. Pity and comfort couldn't give her what she needed.

Giving in to his encouraging silence, she admitted, "I am beyond comprehension at this point. I don't even know what he wants or why he is doing this. Does he just want to rule the whole country? Does he enjoy wreaking havoc for havoc's sake?"

Her voice got shriller with each new exclamation. All of the frustration that had built up since the guard lay dying by her side - since before, when she knew the *right* choice would always be just out of reach, suddenly came pouring out.

"I am not in a position where - I don't know if I can - I mean, I'm not up to this. I've barely begun to understand what I'm meant to do here! I'm not nearly confident enough and now I have to be this great strong leader and defend my people and their way of life? Where was the preparation for this in my education? Shouldn't someone have equipped me for this? And I'm not even sure if I'm meant to rule at all; I can't stand what the kingdom has become. I'm disenchanted - at times even disgusted with *my own people!*"

She stopped, relaxing her shoulders, her voice close to breaking. "I don't think I was meant to do this. I'm just not ready."

She breathed heavily. She had been withholding breath throughout her tirade.

"I'm sorry to explode at you. I haven't been able to talk to anyone about everything that has been happening."

He placed a hand on her shoulder. Surprisingly, it removed more weight than it added.

"I understand. You face singular pressures as a ruler. You have people from different backgrounds with different philosophies advising you in contradictory directions. It is naturally overwhelming."

"If I can't think of a good reason why I should be queen over anyone else, doesn't that mean something?"

He shook his head in response. "Actually, I think that in itself is a perfectly good reason why you should be queen."

More confounding half-statements. Why was wisdom never clear? "What?"

"Those people who want you gone in order that they may rule, are only thinking about personal gain. If they do gain power, do you think they would use it to the benefit of the kingdom? Doubtfully.

"People like Ferober seek power. They yearn for it. Your doubts may consume you for the time being, but his urge determines his every action. Those people might be strong rulers, but they will never be wise rulers. They will never be good rulers.

"You may not be able to see it now, but there was a reason I sought you out. I know that you will be a noble queen one day."

Another reassuring speech. Each one she heard was more shallow and meant less. "How could you possibly know that?"

"What does it mean to really *know* anything at all?" He smiled slyly, piquing her curiosity. "I am afraid I cannot spill the secrets of my kind, majesty. If you are able, believe me when I say my vision is clearer than most."

The Marquis had a calming demeanor. Gwen wanted more than anything in that moment to believe what he said, but she knew wanting to believe something and rationally confirming belief were separated by a great gaping chasm of doubt.

Her calm dissipated as quickly as it had come. "I wish I could see what you see. It might give me more confidence in myself. Knowing that you believe in me means a lot, but it is not enough to help win a war. Or to even help me think that I can. I, the people, we're just not ready."

He looked at her for a long minute, the sympathy obvious, taunting, in his eyes. Placing his head in his chin, he spoke again, this time more slowly, watching the grass that was growing up in patches along the stone floor.

"Regardless of whether you are ready, the task has fallen to you. Those people, for good or ill, believe in you. They will follow you to whatever end. So you should lead them; not because Virtu said you need to be mighty or even because I said you will

be good and wise. You should do it because you belong here, and because they need you."

"Besides," he continued in a playful tone. "I think you'll look nice in a crown."

She laughed, loud and long, throwing her head back in mirth. The Marquis had not made a joke since the night they met. Maybe he saved his humor for when it was least appropriate - and most necessary.

"The one thing that concerns me," he continued, his face abruptly clouding over, "is how we could have not seen this coming."

"What do you mean?" She was confused. The entire kingdom had reacted in shock. Even Virtu, the self-proclaimed master of governing in war, had been surprised at Feroben's action.

"My men are particularly ... adept at observation. I have eyes all across the territory. That is how I knew about the conspirators within the kingdom before they acted.

"Feroben managed to plot the first moves of a war without my knowledge. I had no inkling of any of his plans. He even captured one of your own soldiers - probably within the borders, tortured and brought him back, all unbeknownst to me. I cannot imagine how he managed to get around my Shadows."

The Marquis remained silent, lost in thought. Gwen tilted her head to the side, curious. Though she had seen what his

Shadows could do on several occasions, including disappearing in plain sight, she was sure she did not know the full extend of their abilities. That someone managed to fool them was troubling.

Suddenly something moved behind the Marquis' eyes. His head snapped up. he breathed in heavily, looking as though he were trying to restrain himself.

"What is it?" Gwen asked.

"I have nothing but theories, Majesty. Either he or one of his advisers knows I am working for you. That person must be feeding him information about my methods. Possibly even one of my own men."

"Is that going to hurt our chances?"

"Unless we are extremely lucky." He stood up then and his long form blocked the light that had been shining into the ruins. "I will speak with the tutors about my suspicions. They will need to know about this complication when they complete the battle plans for you."

"Thank you. You have helped me more than I thought possible." she smiled to herself. "I probably wouldn't even be alive now were it not for you."

He responded with a sharp look, his tone dark. "Please, don't thank me yet, majesty. We will not have succeeded until you safely take the throne."

How morbid. Maybe he was just as scared as she was. "I will keep that in mind."

"Then I take my leave. May your thoughts give you comfort in this dark hour." He gave her a quick bow, excluding his usual flourish, turned and departed the castle grounds.

The silence was devastating.

Chapter Seven

"But their history can be exemplary for us because it permits us to reflect upon ourselves, to discover resemblances as well as differences: once again self-knowledge develops through knowledge of the Other"

~Tzvetan Todorov

Usually Andrew's days were filled with activity. He woke up before dawn, tended the fields, and fed the animals before heading off to bed exhausted.

Today he sat on a wall.

The sky was grey and still. The sun blazed through the cloud cover, cooking Andrew in his borrowed armor.

Midges swarmed around his head, buzzing near his eyes and pricking his skin. He felt a sudden pain in his right arm and, looking down, saw a horse fly resting where it had bitten him.

"Die, you evil bastard," he slapped his arm, squishing the pest.¹

A second red-haired man sauntered along the wall to where Andrew sat. "Don't be so angry," he chuckled. "The bug wasn't trying to hurt you."

"Patrick!" He smiled as the two clasped hands. "Haven't seen you in ages. You up here with me today?"

"Yeah, ready for my afternoon of guarding. Or, fly swatting as the case may be."

"That, well, I'm just tired. I've been here all day staring at an empty field. And these damn bugs won't give me a rest. The horse flies especially. They'll rip a chunk right out of your skin and lap up the blood. Can't stand the buggers"

"Nah, well, if I see any, I'll smash 'em right quick."

"I'd be grateful to you, mate."

They sat a while in companionable silence, staring out at the fields beyond the kingdom. In the distance, the trees swayed in a mocking breeze that would never make it to the wall.

Patrick pulled out a hunk of bread and began pulling it apart in chunks and handing them to Andrew. They chewed slowly.

His mouth still full, Patrick groaned. "You've really been here all day?"

Andrew chuckled in response. "It's been a really long morning. Saw a few hares and a deer in the woods earlier. We could hunt ourselves a meal."

Patrick looked down at his feet, nodding in response.

"You heard what the guys were saying down at the pub?"

"No."

"Said they saw all sorts of monsters wandering around out there. I think they're just imagining it though if it's been this quiet. I can't believe that a Craelgi would come tromping right around the village walls."

"Yeah, and pub talk is just that. Half those old men are out of their minds."

"But do you think it's possible?"

"What, for there to be Craelgi wandering around?"

"Well, for the Craelgi to be attacking us - in the war and all. The princess seemed serious about this being a dangerous time for the kingdom. But I don't know. We haven't had a war in so long. Why would anybody bother now? What have we got to give 'em except for a bunch of wool and barley?"

Patrick looked over at Andrew, waiting for a response. His was frozen, his mouth open and his eyes wide. He stuttered, pointing at the horizon.

"W-what is that - that thing!?"

Patrick turned to follow his finger, his eyes focused on the line of trees at the edge of the field. From out of the shadows, a massive green blob was lumbering towards them. As it got closer he was able to discern its features.

The thing - there really was no better word for it - was shaped like a giant toad, walking on two thick trunk-like legs. It had a broad, warty back and shoulders, covered by dull,

bracken covered armor. Slime and brackish water oozed from the folds of its skin as it walked.

Had it looked up, it would have seen them frozen, staring in its direction. Luckily for the two men, it seemed to be concentrating on its path, tracing its way along the line of trees.

When he had finally regained his senses, Andrew looked away from the creature, his eyes frightened.

"Maybe they weren't imagining things," he admitted, his tone hushed.

"I don't suppose we should go tell someone?" Patrick asked, his voice cracking.

"Well ... we aren't meant to leave our post."

"But isn't it the reason we're here - to go tell them when stuff happens?"

"I suppose... But what exactly happened?"

"We saw a monster! What if he comes back to attack the village and we don't tell anyone to watch out for 'im?"

"Well, we don't really know that he was going to attack. He seemed to be paying a lot of attention to his feet."

"Have you gone mad? He was wearing armor! Maybe he was a scout to figure out battle plans for when they attack us."

"I don't know. How do we even know what we saw? It is a very hot day. Maybe it was just -"

"Don't be stupid," Patrick interrupted. "I know what we saw. You know how there used to be creatures all over the place? Penjuste used to have lots of them too. That's probably one of them. And I doubt he'd be back to ask for 'is job back after we kick 'em out."

"So, you want to go tell everyone?"

"Hmm. If he wasn't attacking now, I think we're safe waiting until our shift is over. Better to stay on the wall now so we can warn people if something big happens. What if he comes back with friends and they climb the wall and we're not here to see it happen? Then we'd really be in for it."

"Good. Then we wait." They sat together in silence again, this time more nervous and alert. Every so often one or the other would tap his feet or whistle. Eventually, Andrew spoke again.

"So you think he was with Uig's army? That king must be really evil to convince all sorts of nasty creatures to come fight us."

"Evil? Nah. My father was born over there. He used to work in the castle. He always told me King Ferober was a crazy, but not evil. He just doesn't care so much about people. What he likes are things like paintings and books and ... other things like power and control."

"Yeah, but someone who likes killing people just for the fun of it - that sounds like evil to me."

"I guess. But how do you know he likes killing people and doesn't do it for other reasons?"

"He does it often enough. I've heard stories that anyone who travels into the kingdom and makes it all the way to the castle never comes back out."

"Yeah, well I don't know where you heard those stories from. My dad worked in that castle half his life and he never got killed. Though he did say the king wasn't too big on mercy, so he decided to come here to work on a farm for a bit of piece of mind."

"Lucky him. I don't think I'd want to work for someone like that."

"You wouldn't have much choice if you'd been born there either. Inside the castle might be books and paintings and stuff, but the people outside never see any of that. They're lives are just the same as ours, only worse cause they have to deal with all the war and fighting. Whether or not he's got these monsters comin' to attack us, you' better believe he'll be sending his own people to finish the job he started. People like that don't stand up for themselves - they make other people do it."

"So we're just going to be killing more of our own soon?"

"Probably."

"No wonder we've been trying to avoid all this stuff for so long. I'd rather we kept quiet. I wouldn't be bothered having no queen at all if it meant I didn't have to go fight and die."

"You're right about that. But right now the queen's the only one who's protectin' us from King Ferober. You think he's just waiting around for no reason? I'd bet that if we didn't have her, we wouldn't be part of Penjaste anymore. There'd be no Penjaste at all anymore."

"True. Much as I'd like to not die, I quite like it here in the village a bit more."

"Yeah. Certainly wouldn't fancy havin' to start over and take orders from some over-active monarch."

The conversation died off. It was hard to do anything but sit and wait under a midday sun.

Flies buzzed around the two men's heads. Occasionally one of them would smack one and reveal a swished insect where a biter had been.

"I do feel bad for her though." Patrick murmured.

"Who?"

"The princess."

"Why?"

"Well, she's the one as is going to have to fix this problem, isn't she? We're perfectly fine sitting on this wall

talking about it all day. As bad as it is keeping a watch, I'd much rather do this than try to solve all our problems and save the kingdom to boot."

"You know, you've been mightily clever today Patrick," He slapped him on the arm. "Maybe you should go down there and talk to the Craelgi. Don't know, you could figure out what it wants. Maybe negotiate with it "'leave us alone. All we have to give you is beer.' Haha."

"Very funny. Bet I could though. We would have a right good chat, me and the monster. Better than you getting scared and hiding, huh?" He chuckled. "Though you might have the right idea about beer, mate. What do you say we head down to the pub after this? Then we could tell everyone about the Craelgi and make sure someone gets the news to the captain, and rest after a hard day's work."

"All right, though it may be too warm for beer. I'll have to go in for something colder."

"Just get it cold."

"Don't be stupid. Beer is always served warm. Unless you do something different where you come from. Maybe King Feroben serves you iced beer, huh?"

"Ha. Ha. I'd rather he serve you on ice."

"After you, Pat. Right after you."

.....

In a darkened room deep in the castle a dozen men sat around a long oval table. They all started at the princess, who was watching the captain of the guard. He came with bad news.

"Majesty, we have just been informed of a disturbance beyond the wall."

"What kind of disturbance?"

"The guards posted on defense saw something in the trees. They did not, however," he muttered, "seem entirely competent, so we cannot be sure. They said it was a Craelgi."

.....
"A Craelgi?"

"A monster. One of the creatures we banished from the kingdom long ago. Based on what the lookouts said, it sounds as though the Craelgi are working for the King Ferooben."

Gwen sat in silence, her brow furrowed, looking around the table at her advisors. All of their faces were calm but frozen.

"Are they very dangerous?"

"The Craelgi live on their own in the mountains," the captain continued. "They never come down from the peaks. A century ago, they lived among us here in the kingdom, but they were a brutal race. After our population grew large and enveloped surrounding villages, they began killing and devouring our citizens. The king could not control them; their strength is

impressive. So he banished them. We have not seen one in the kingdom since."

"Until now," she amended solemnly

"Yes."

"Well, they're very strong, yes? Are they also very many? They might all be fighting for Feroben."

"We have no way of knowing, Majesty," interjected a wizened man from the far end of the table. "Regardless, they will offer King Feroben a significant advantage on the battlefield. None of our men - "

"Our untrained farmers you mean," interrupted the captain.

"Yes, our soldiers," he fixed the captain with a hard, reproving glare. Turning back to Gwen, he continued more soberly, "they will not be a match for the Craelgi, I am afraid. Even trained and armed, our steel is no match against such a massive brute force."

Her voice hard from restraining the sense of urgency and panic that had been building up in her, Gwen asked "Then what can we do?"

She looked at each of her advisers in turn. Not a single pair of eyes rose to meet hers.

Losing her temper, she shouted "I thought this was what you did. You are advisers. If we are going to get anything done, I need contribution from all of you."

.....

She stood, placing her hands on the table. With the rest of them sitting, she felt taller, stronger somehow. She leaned forward and looked them all directly in the eyes.

"Gentlemen, we are going to war. We need to prepare. I expect you all to have devised some sort of plan when I return. Time, unfortunately, is up."

They all stood as she swept out of the room. She hoped they hadn't seen that flush creep into her face or her hands tremble after she had spoken. Being brave was difficult. It must really be about maintaining calm on the outside because she was terrified at her core.

Shutting the door behind her, she exhaled heavily. The men inside had begun to murmur again. Soon their discussion would devolve into angry shouting as they failed to reach an agreement on a plan.

But what happy relief to not feel their eyes on her, watching and judging and needing. How could she be expected to save the kingdom if all of them with their years of experience and years of study could not?

Asking those sorts of questions invariably led nowhere but down. There had to be something she wasn't seeing. Some simple solution to the problem. All of these people were going to die unless they could figure out a better way to fight.

.....

Because they would fight. They would win. They had to. Gwen gasped suddenly and audibly. She hurried down the corridor to ensure she was out of earshot.

Her memory flickered to when she first met the Marquis. he had assured her that her becoming queen would lead to a good future. Of course, when he thought of good, he could always mean the entire kingdom being destroyed, but somehow that seemed unlikely.

What did he know?

He especially seemed to be the most aware of all of them. His men, as well, his Shadows, who could disappear in plain sight. Surely they were watching Ferober right now.

Even if he only thought she would win and had no idea how, he might at least be able to tell her more about Ferober's plans.

With renewed hope, she struck out in search of the Marquis Umbras.

It did not take long for her to realize she had no idea where he lived. Every time they'd met, he had found her - generally whenever she felt low and wasn't paying much attention.

Well, she couldn't be much lower - so where was he?

Frustrated, she kicked the wall and yelped in pain. Her toes burning, she made her way out of the castle, prepared to

sit and come up with a plan of her own. In the future, kicking sandstone walls was out of the question.

.....

The ruins on the outskirts of the castle grounds looked especially pretty with sunlight streaming through the ancient windows. The stone felt cooler than normal with the sun warming the back of her hand.

Remarkably, the Marquis was standing just ahead, staring quizzically at one of the many carved arches. He remained silent at her approach.

"I was just looking for you." She said gaily, trying to suppress a laugh.

He only appeared when she least expected. It made a kind of ironic sense that he would appear when she wanted him because she didn't expect he would.

"Really? I was just admiring this delicate carving. The artistry of your ancient people is simply remarkable. The amount of time they spent adding detail and richness to every part of their lives is simply astounding. It is a shame we aren't more concerned with our value."

Gwen sat, listening as if in class. Despite its size and magnificence, the castle did not seem to capture the grandeur of this ruin.

"Though I suppose it shouldn't be long now," he continued.
"After the amount of time I have been waiting."

After pulling himself from his reverie, his eyes found hers.

"Now, what was it you wanted to ask me?" He crossed his arms.

Gwen hesitated. Now that she had the opportunity, she was no longer sure. In truth, she wanted him to tell her the answer, but to what question, she had no idea. Perhaps she could simply ask him to be King, ruling in her place and be done with it, assured that he would know how to act.

No. There was an answer and she would find it.

"I have been meeting with my advisers, devising a war strategy. We discovered that Feroiben has the Craelgi fighting for him.

"I was afraid of that." His face turned pensive.

Then he had been watching.

"I am more worried than I thought I could be. I am sending farmers with pick axes to fight powerful monsters. I am sending children to die for a kingdom they have never known. This can't be the only way."

"My advisers are working on a war strategy now, but that won't be enough. We need to be clever. Force won't work if they are so strong."

"No, it will not."

His eyes were hard and distant. She wondered what he could be thinking. She has never asked much of him; he was very secretive. He might be angry at her for prying. If he wanted her to know, wouldn't he just share whatever he had seen?

The time for civilities was over; she'd have to get it over with or she'd regret not speaking up.

Gwen was a monarch. Her kingdom was on the brink of disaster. She needed to take control.

"You have been watching Ferober?" Her voice only shook a little. "You must have some idea of what he is planning."

He clenched his eyes shut. "No." He continued in a murmur, "I am fairly certain one of my men is working for Ferober. They have eluded my eyes thus far. He would not have managed without help. As long as someone is protecting him, I am afraid I can tell you no more about Ferober's secrets than you already know."

That was disappointing. Her hopes were riding mainly on the Marquis' spies.

"Well, then."

She sat on the low wall, facing away from him. The ruin was steadily becoming a good place to think.

Gwen was hesitant to inquire further. The Marquis did not seem like the kind of person to hang around once he was annoyed

or offended, and she had so few friends. To knowingly chase one away ...

He watched her expectantly, his eyes neither welcoming nor condemning.

"I may or may not choose to answer your question, but that is the worst you should expect."

It was as though he already knew.

What was he?

"You said ... one day Penjoste would be a great kingdom. Were you just hoping, or did you know?"

He smirked. "The kingdom certainly has the potential to crumble and decay. What I voiced was a hope." He paused, contemplating. "My hopes, however, are more firmly rooted than most."

More riddles.

"What do you mean?" she prodded.

She was beginning to realize that asking the Marquis anything would only leave her with more questions.

"The future is never certain until you reach it, but I can see how things will likely take shape. As long as there are no major unforeseeable events, my hopes are very likely to come to fruition." His smile was smug.

"Is there anything you can tell me? Any detail that might be useful? I will take whatever help I can get."

He frowned, his face clouding over instantly. "I do not think I should. My kind has always tried to avoid altering the course of history directly. I am not well-liked because of my tendency to aid one side or the other after I have seen their potential futures."

"Their futures?"

"I catch glimpses."

"And you saw me?"

"Not exactly. I saw a future, so I studied a bit of history. I think you can achieve that future. I think you have the best chance."

"So you didn't see me becoming queen? You didn't see the war coming?"

"I can't tune into details about individuals' futures, only about the future of whole peoples, whole worlds."

"Worlds?"

"Not just yet." He smirked at his private joke.

For a moment, she forgot why she had asked. His ability fascinated her. She smiled, trying to imagine seeing the future, seeing whole other worlds. If what he saw was too far removed, though, he wouldn't be able to help them now.

Her face falling, Gwen asked, "is there anything you know that could help?"

He gripped her arms, his eyes searching hers, debating their trustworthiness. He must have approved because he eventually spoke again, his face expressionless.

"In the future, the entire planet was unified. Places you have never imagined existing followed your family's standard. All creatures were at peace; all were virtuous. All were one, blended. They followed one faith and spoke of wisdom."

The worries Gwen had been carrying around grew lighter as he spoke. One day she would be queen. She would be a good monarch and unify the entire world. No one could be exiled and everyone would be happy.

The part about faith and wisdom still confused her though. Exactly whose wisdom would they follow? Surely not hers. She did not know anything. Maybe it would come in time.

Plus, what would they have faith in? They could not all adopt the absurd faith the people had in her. They all worshiped an idea of a queen that wasn't true, before they had even met her. She could have tyrannized them. She could have undone all of their ideals of equality. They would still follow her.

That was the problem wasn't it? Someone already had undone the kingdom's ideals. That was why Drystan's people were not part of the kingdom now, but in the future they would be ...

Gwen paused in her reverie, electricity running through her. She had to gasp for air, the power of her sudden epiphany not allowing for any other processes.

The mystics. They were the answer. Everyone was included in the future - even the mystics. If they all followed on faith, shared a common wisdom, it has to be the wisdom of the mystics. Nothing else fit.

And who else would be suited to bring the mystics back but her? The people believed in her rule, surely they would follow her command. They could learn from the mystics and the mystics could help them. The Craelgi strength wouldn't last against power like Drystan had demonstrated in the glen.

That was it. The mystics would fight for the kingdom. Penjuste might have a chance.

She looked up and saw the Marquis watching her with a curious expression on his face. His mouth was turned up in a crooked smile.

"What are you thinking?" She got the feeling he could read her mind.

"Oh, probably something similar to what you must be thinking." he mused playfully.

His humor was odd at a time like this.

"Do you know what we have to do?"

"What you have to do, you mean."

She frowned, not understanding.

"You will personally have to put your plan into action - whatever it may be. That will be the difficult part." He elaborated.

He could definitely read her mind.

"Yes, I suppose it will." She conceded, but she knew what she had to do ... and where she could go for help.

"Then, if you want to find your friend, I know where he will be."

"You do - how?"

He smiled at her obliviousness "Feroben is not the only person I have on watch."

"How terrible. Don't we deserve some privacy?"

"If you're upset by that, I will remember not to mention your security."

"Please don't. I don't know if I could act the same knowing someone was always watching. In fact, I know too much as is. I am quite happily ignorant about some things. As long as you keep me alive." She rubbed her forehead.

"I will have one of my men escort you in the morning. Until then, princess, adieu."

She looked up to thank him and say goodbye, but he had already gone. Gwen shook her head, smiling.

"What a strange friend."

.....
The shadow never looked at her and never smiled. They walked swiftly along the edge of the village, away from prying eyes. Truth be told, Gwen did not want to face any of her people.

She did not think she could pull off the 'caring monarch' persona today. There was too much at stake and she was nearly spent.

Since dawn - she had not slept well - she had been wracking her brain, devising ways too approach the mystics without offending them. They would not forgive easily.

If they did believe in common good, they should want to help achieve it. She would just need to appeal to their shared moral sensibilities.

They reached the edge of the forest, entering at a place she had never been. They scrambled through the undergrowth for nearly a mile before reaching the clearing on the other side.

The sun stung Gwen's eyes after the cool green darkness of the trees. All around, a golden field extended, the high grass melting into low brown hills in the distance.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We just crossed beyond the boundary of the kingdom." The Shadow responded. "The Meyrin Principality begins beyond this

point. There are no people here anymore. Only a few nomadic tribes roam the hills beyond the forest."

"Is this where the mystics live?" she gazed at the surroundings in awe.

"No. we do not know where they are. Such people have the ability to evade unfriendly eyes."

"Oh."

The Marquis must be frustrated by this important hole in his knowledge. He rarely spoke about the mystics.

It took much less time to cross the fields than it had scraping through the trees.

Once they had climbed the first hill, Gwen saw a little garden in a secluded valley. Rows of fennel and sorrel lined up beside carrots and tomatoes.

Drystan kneeled among the stalks, picking out the nettles. He looked up, watching them as they approached. A small smile played across his face. He brushed off his hands on his trousers and stood to greet them.

"Hello Gwen. How very nice of you to visit me."

"I am afraid I have to impose on you. I came with one of the Marquis' men who knew how to find you." His eyes narrowed at her mention of the Shadow. "I need your help."

He smirked. "I am shock itself."

She felt her inner demons growling. He was uniquely frustrating. "You know, you really ought to be more respectful. I am a monarch after all."

"Not of my people."

"Still. Decorum demands certain civilities."

"We do not partake in decorum. It's a socially constructed nuisance that only brings your people grief." He stressed the last word playfully. "Nor are we ruled by any one man. Though there is a need for rulers, they must be worthy."

"Do you think I am unworthy?"

"I didn't say that."

It shouldn't matter whether or not he approved of her.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"I want to talk with your people."

He raised his head, understanding the significance the meeting would hold.

"They will be hesitant to make any deals with you. They do not trust the Penjusten monarchy after what it did to us."

"I assumed as much, but I need to try. There are no other options anymore."

He smiled, standing up straighter. "Then I shall accompany you on your mission. You'll need my help to understand our strange foreign behavior. People where I come from aren't quite as simple as you are used to."

He snickered in the direction of the Shadow, who had been silent throughout their discussion, facing back towards the castle as though he were alone.

Ignoring his sarcasm, she continued, trying to sound earnest. "I will appreciate any help you can give me. Believe me when I say that all of our futures rest on this meeting."

The look in her eyes must have stilled him. Nevertheless, he made no inquiries about her cryptic remark.

"Come to the place where we first met," he said. Glancing suspiciously in the Shadow's direction, he muttered, "You don't need to bring any of your friends. I have enough people watching over me at home without bringing in more."

Gwen nodded. She would have to mention to the Marquis that his men were more detectable than he thought.

"I am sorry about all of the intrigue. I will come on my own tomorrow. I do not think it would help matters to spy on people I am trying to have diplomatic relations with."

"I agree. My people would not take lightly to spies within our borders. We prefer to be alone."

In order for her plan to be successful they would need to lay aside that particular desire.

"Would they - I mean, do you think they will at least hear me out?"

"Of course," he shrugged. "You are a monarch, after all."

His tone become mocking again as he quoted her. "They will welcome you out of respect regardless. Anyway, you were not the one who banished us. They have no specific grievances against you." He smiled crookedly and tilted his head to the side.

"Plus, you'll be with me."

"In the morning, then?"

"Yes," he smiled wider. "In the morning."

Stumbling, she backed away. The Shadow was already making his way back to Penjoste.

"Goodbye, then"

"Bye."

She turned around and grinned to herself. Tomorrow would certainly be stimulating, for better or worse.

Chapter Eight

What good would it be to possess the whole universe
If one were its only survivor?

~Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Michael threw the last sack of potatoes into the shed, relishing the feeling of his muscles relaxing when he released the heavy burlap. He had spent the day gathering crops from the farm and the sun was just setting.

He could hear his children running and playing in front of the house. The girls were shrieking and giggling.

The three youngest children often played games outside in the evenings before the meal. Their mother liked to cook in the quiet and sent them out. The oldest, a boy, stayed in the attack reading after he had finished his chores. He only had a few books but he read them repeatedly until he had memorized them and would then trade with his friends.

Michael made sure the sacks were stacked on top of each other and wouldn't topple over. Sometimes they fell and blocked

the door and he had an awful time getting it open. He probably ought to reverse the hinges. One day when he wasn't as busy.

He heard a crunching noise as he turned to walk back towards the house. It was time for dinner anyway. His kids must have gone inside; they weren't playing their loud games anymore.

One of the girls yelled again, but this time, it wasn't a gleeful scream. She sounded frightened. When her screaming didn't stop, he ran toward the house to see what the matter was. The children were standing in the front garden, staring across the lane at their neighbor's farm.

Several massive creates were tromping through the fields. Their skin was green and stretched across their bodies in folds.

"Craelgi" Michael said in awe.

Now that he was looking, he could see a few large fires sending up plumes of smoke in the houses ahead. The Craelgi were coming closer, wrecking buildings in their march onward toward the village.

Michael pushed his kids to the door, telling them to go inside and stay there quietly until he came back. When they had disappeared inside he shut the door and ran around to the back of the house, keeping low to avoid being spotted by the Craelgi.

He ran through the potato field, the thick mud full of holes where his crops had been earlier that day. At one point he

fell, tangles in his feet and landed hard on his knees and arm in the mud.

He was close to his neighbor's house. They had been sharing this field for some time because they both planted potatoes and saved the other fields for other crops.

There was a small light on in their den. He ran up to it and banged his fist on the door.

"John! John?"

His neighbor opened the door, his face grim.

"John! They've started attacking us."

"I know," he replied. "Come in. We've just been talking."

Five other the other men in the area were gathered in John's sitting room. They had come from the closest farms, which, Michael assumed, had all witnessed an attack.

"I need to go back," he said. "My family is still at our house."

"You go then. One of us will tell you what we said."

"Thanks, John."

"If you need anything else -"

"I'll come for help."

Michael ran out into the field again, leaving his neighbors in the dimly lit room.

"Do you think he'll be all right?"

"Yeah, Michael can take care of himself. I don't think the Craelgi have been killing people either."

"We still need to do something about this."

"We can't let them come in here and destroy our fields and our houses."

"We need to inform the castle guards."

"They can't do anything. They certainly can't protect us. Not all the way out here. They don't care about the farmers."

"They care about the Craelgi."

"Do you think they want dangerous monsters stomping around the kingdom?"

"Nah, but that doesn't mean they can do anything about it."

"Sure they can. We can go fight them. Put guards on the borders."

"Forever?"

"What do you think they want - the Craelgi?"

"Revenge."

"No, they want our land."

"If they wanted our land they wouldn't be burning everything down."

"Why now though?"

...

"So, what are we going to do about it? If the castle can't help us we need to act."

"I still say we tell them. They'll come and set out a guard."

"Then I think we need to have our own guard until we can get the help. We need to go and put out those fires too."

One of the men stood. "I'll head to the castle now to get help."

"Good. We'll stay here and inform the other families we haven't heard from and start putting out fires."

"What should we do if we run into Craelgi?"

"Just stay low for now. Don't make noise. We don't know how to fight them and we don't have enough people to take on a full force from them."

"We can wait and see what the castle says about fighting."

"Yeah."

"Then I'll head over to the Stone farm."

"We'll go get water for the fire."

"Be careful."

Chapter Nine

The task must be made difficult,
For only the difficult inspires the noble-hearted.

~Soren Kierkegaard

Gwen had not considered what anyone at the castle would think about her solo excursion. She supposed that shadow would inform the Marquis of her intentions. He definitely would not approve.

After going out without hindrance once, the threat from her attackers seemed paltry. Add that to the threat she would face in battle and the men waving their little swords was laughable.

She did not have to wait long for confirmation of her suspicions. The Marquis stood outside her room, waiting for her to come out in the morning. He was flanked by two of the Shadows.

"I heard you wanted to take a trip," he said, pursing his lips.

"We already discussed this." She did not have time to have this argument again. "You agreed that I needed to go. Here I am, going."

"Yes, we did. But how you fell under the delusion that I would let you go alone is surprising at best."

She expected his vitriol and had prepared a defense.

"I won't be traveling through the village to meet up with him. I can go around and keep away from any angry subjects. Besides, it is dawn. Very few people will be awake and those who are undoubtedly will not be out queen-hunting."

His eyes narrowed in response to her joke.

"It is not the insurgents I worry about now. There was an attack on the outskirts of the village last night. Two Craelgis burned a house to the ground and captured the inhabitants."

"Oh. Well, we need to secure the order to protect the people outside the village."

"Your captain has already placed men around the borders in addition to the guards on the wall. Luckily, the sense of dread that has invaded the village will stifle any extremism and hold the insurgents in check. They are too concerned with their immediate safety to cause any political trouble. I also do not believe that the Craelgi will come back this soon after an attack, especially with our enhanced guard."

"Then why can't I - "

"I will not take any chances," he interrupted. "You must go speak to the Mystics. I understand why you should and why you think you need to travel unaccompanied. But I will not allow you to act in such a profoundly thick manner."

"I have to do this. There is no other way."

"Then you will go with my men."

"No, the Mystics would never see me if they come along."

"At least until you leave the borders of the kingdom."

"Once I am with Drystan. And," she amended, "they have to promise not to follow us."

He was silent for a moment, perhaps trying to work his way out of the oath. Competing desires played across his face for a moment before he agreed.

"Then you should go before the sun rises."

She smiled with gratitude and sprang down the hall, ready to be going. The Shadows followed, keeping their distance.

The journey back to the meadow was short. Gwen did not notice as the distance passed; her mind was frantic with thoughts about what she could say to the Mystics.

Once they reached the end of the forest, the Shadows turned and walked back through the undergrowth, leaving Gwen alone with her nerves.

Drystan was sitting under the tree again, just like the first time she had seen him. This time his eyes were focused on her, calm as she approached.

"Are you ready?" He extended his hand.

"Lead the way," she replied, her breath coming in short spurts. She could feel her muscles twitching with nervous anticipation.

They walked for what seemed like ages. As her feet grew sore, the sun rose from the horizon, staining the sky red. Little rivers of color snaked their way up to the clouds on their left as the mountains ahead lit up in reflection.

Gwen looked at the mountains with sudden agony.

"Are we going to have to climb over the ridges to reach your people?" she nearly cried the words.

"No," he snorted. "I don't think you could make it, and there are always easier ways."

"You aren't going to ... I don't know, ask the mountain to move or something?"

He laughed out loud this time, his voice ringing out in the surrounding silence.

"I don't have that kind of power, but I wouldn't put it past the elders. In fact, they might have created the path we're going to be using. There is a gulley hidden between two of the highest mountains. If you can find it, you have a clear, flat

path to the glen on the other side. That is where my people are."

Beyond the immense stone walls was an open valley, green and sparkling in the sun, but completely devoid of people.

"There is nothing here," she accused. Maybe he had lied to her after all.

He rolled his eyes. "Turn around."

Facing back towards the mountains, she cocked her head, confused.

"I still don't see anything."

He stood behind her and directed her towards one of the gentler inclines.

"Do you see those boulders just over there?"

"Yes."

"They aren't all boulders."

The simple stone and wood buildings had grown up along the side of one of the tallest mountains, submerged in a centuries old forest. Had she not known they were there, she would never have seen the houses amongst the naturally occurring boulders and mounds.

As they drew nearer, Gwen saw people sitting in groups around the houses. They all had their heads together, whispering urgently as they passed.



Drystan led her up the side of the mountain, coming to a wide ledge where one of the stone houses sat overlooking the rest.

"This is the home of the elders. They will be waiting for you."

"How did they know I was coming? You told them?"

"No," he murmured, smirking. "They know things."

He stood very still, watching her. Should she knock? If they already knew she was here, surely they would come out to her. She moved toward the entrance hesitantly.

Six men, all wearing the same brown woolen clothing, sat arranged in a circle within the cool shade of the sitting room. The light from the windows played across the air above their heads. Little particles danced in a non-existent breeze. Their faces solemn, the men looked up at Gwen.

"Young queen," the man at the head of the circle spoke first. Each inclined his head to her in turn. "We have waited long to speak with you. And others of your kind."

If they had been waiting, they must have wanted to help Penjuste. Or else they found it amusing to deride her. Which would be entirely unsurprising after everything else that happened.

Swallowing, she tried to force more volume into her voice. She needed to sound more authoritative than she felt.

"I have come to offer the apologies of the kingdom for the wrong you endured. You should not have been excluded from your homeland. I intend to grant you full leave to come or stay, with all that entails."

The old men looked around the circle at each other, reflecting. Energy was crackling in the air. Every so often one of the Mystics would give a slight nod, or his eyes would flicker in the direction of another, as if they were communicating silently.

The man at the head nodded again slowly. Rasping the words, he gave their affirmation.

"We are glad for your apology and accept your offer. We will make it known to our people. Know only that we will not abandon the life we have create here. Some may want to return to Penjuste and for those we will have emissaries, but most of my people, I believe, will remain with us.

This cannot be the only reason you made such an extended journey," he continued. "Surely you could have sent someone in your stead. One would expect, for a queen to come as her own emissary, the task must be of some importance. An apology does not require such urgency."

Don't panic.

She nodded once. "I have come to relate another matter to you, and to ask for your help." Their faces remained

inscrutable. "Penjuste is being attacked by the King of Uig. He has been ruthless in his assault."

She could feel her pulse quicken with a sudden rush of anger. "He killed one of my guards in an intolerably cruel attempt to send me a message and has sent his forces to sack my villagers. On top of the rest, he has employed Craelgi to crush out forces. I do not think we will be able to withstand a full assault."

The oldest man, who had been sitting in the corner, laughed sullenly. The sound stung Gwen, dissolving her indignation. She was not accustomed to being laughed at.

"You want our people - whom you exiled - to help you defeat another people - who you also exiled. Why would we grant such an ambitious request?"

"Because if you will not or cannot help us, all will be lost."

"Do not doubt our power for an instant," the leader spoke again.

"Then you must come," she pleaded. "You must come and fight with us."

"Must?" his eyebrows raised. "You sling moral imperatives as though they were insignificant."

"Which is not surprising from a Penjusten monarch," another of the men interjected.

"This isn't just about me." Gwen fought to keep her voice steady. She wanted to shout. "How can you just ignore the deaths of all these people - the deaths that are to come?"

"Easily," the leader responded. "People die every day. If we fight with you, our people will die with them. It is a fate they do not deserve."

"You won't help me because there is a chance we will lose? Because your people might die? Because you would not sacrifice anything for - I don't know - if not for us then surely for some common good."

"The two bear no resemblance." The leader said calmly.

"Then you are not as good as you claim. And you are fooling yourselves."

She felt hot with anger. The desire to storm out and leave them murmuring in their silly circle was overwhelming. She struggled with herself. The duty to her people was more important than her dignity. But these people's logic was infuriating; she would laugh if she weren't so angry.

"Do you think he will simply stop and leave you alone, once he is done with us? If Ferober controlled Penjute, were he to gain that much more power, can you honestly imagine he would leave you to your seclusion? He would not think to use your power for his benefit? I am here asking - no begging - for your help. I want to save all of our people - not just the ones in

Penjuste - the ones who were meant to be there as well. I can assure you, when he comes, he won't be so polite."

Gwen was seething, exasperated by their continual calm.

When the leader spoke again, it was with reservation.

"We need to discuss what you have said. If you could give us a bit of time, we will inform you of our decision."

Gwen stepped outside, where Drystan was patently waiting for her.

He followed her, stepping lightly in the grass. They didn't speak at all as they made their way down the hill, but she could feel him watching her.

She was having trouble breathing. The gravity of her situation had suddenly fallen upon her. Drystan must have worried about her shallow, uneven breaths.

"Hey," he said in a reassuring tone. "Don't worry just yet. Even I don't know what they're going to say, so you can be sure they are at least giving it serious consideration."

"I'm glad." She stared at his hand, trying to avoid looking at his face. She didn't want to see any worry or pity there.

"But I am still terrified of what is going to happen. I was just given this responsibility and now I am on the brink of ruining everything."

"Is that your fault?"

"I suppose not, but they wouldn't have brought me back if they didn't think I could fix everything. I don't want to disappoint everyone."

"You won't. I have faith in -"

Without warning, his eyes unfocused and he looked beyond her, back up the hill. "They want you to return. They have an answer."

Gwen grimaced and shook her head. "You know, that method of communication will always be strange to me."

He laughed. "Go. They're an irksome lot and they don't like waiting."

Gwen walked back up the hill, half smiling. Her momentary delight quickly faded as she passed under the trees in front of the elders' home. She prepared herself for the worst and stepped in to meet them, the shadows enveloping her.

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Gwen's aching feet screamed at her all the way to Penjoste, first with Drystan at her side and later when they were joined by the Shadows. She ignored the pain as best she could. The journey went quickly otherwise.

She needed to get back to the castle. There was a lot of work waiting for her now that she was certain what sort of force they'd have to prepare for battle.

When they reached the entrance to the city, Drystan stopped and turned back.

"Wait," Gwen called after him. He stayed still, facing the border of the forest. "You are allowed to come and go as you please. The elders agreed to grant your people my offer. You could stay, if you wanted."

"I know," he replied.

"Then why are you leaving?"

"You saying so doesn't necessarily make me welcome. Plus, you're going to be busy for a while. I'll see you again before this is over."

Perhaps it was best for him to leave. It wouldn't do to lose the war over a preoccupation.

"When it is less dangerous, you mean?" Gwen asked.

He turned around to look at her. "Perhaps," he smirked. "But danger doesn't tend to bother me. Otherwise I would never have sought you out," he teased.

"No, you're right. That was a bit unwise."

He walked back into the forest, leaving her to make her way up to the castle with her taciturn guards. She would be happy when she could see the last of them. She preferred solitude.

Once they reached the castle, the Shadows melted into the horizon. For a moment the temptation to run back through the forest and escape the pressure called her, but the thought of

collapsing on her bed and never moving again was just as pleasing.

Just within the doorway, Virtu and Arête were speaking rapidly with their heads down. She had not told them anything about her plans to meet with the Mystics. Maybe they had not found out.

"Where were you? What were you doing?" Virtu called as soon as he caught sight of Gwen.

Gwen glared back at him, suddenly defensive. "Why does it matter?"

He glowered in response. "We are planning a war. We do not have time for dalliances."

His condescending tone of voice incensed her pride. She had already humbled herself once that day, and that was for the good of her kingdom. She would not be spoken to like a misbehaving child. She should not have to endure constant reprimands.

"And I do not need your approval to conduct diplomatic enquires - neither of you," She retorted.

"I apologize, your majesty," Arête said, "but the council cannot take action without your approval and no one in the palace knew of your whereabouts. "

But Virtu was intent on the matter at hand. "What sort of diplomatic enquiry?" he asked.

"I went to speak with the Mystics. I offered them the freedom of the kingdom."

"Whatever for?" Arête asked.

"They were banished for a reason." Virtu exclaimed.

"What did they say?" Arête ignored him.

"They agreed to help," Gwen said, looking between the two tutors. "I was heading to inform the council now. We will need to consider their role when planning for battle."

"How did you get them to agree to fight? I would never have imagined their cooperation." Arête's voice was full of curiosity.

"They didn't want to," she admitted, "but I appealed to their self interest. They protect their own."

"Did you promise them anything else in return?" Virtu spat the words.

"I didn't need to," she replied, affronted. "They accepted my apology gracefully and agreed to help for the sake of avoiding war themselves."

Virtu looked like he had swallowed a whole lemon. "You apologized?"

"Of course."

"Why, might I ask? We did nothing wrong. Their power was a danger to the stability of the kingdom."

"We need them."

"And when the war is over? Will you accept them back with grace after you have seen their powers? When you know how easily they could supplant you? We shall see."

He turned and stalked from the room.

After a moment, Arête spoke again. "I am loath to admit that Virtu has a point. You are building your own barriers to a secure throne." Seeing her brow furrow, he amended his statement quickly, adding "I do think you are doing the right thing. Those people should not have been exiled to begin with. I have always disapproved of the apparent worth of having a kingdom and all the power and glory that goes with it if you do not create good laws and encourage just behavior. I think that being crafty and constantly concerned about keeping up one's strength must weigh heavily on the soul."

"What use is power if you can't do anything meaningful with it?"

"Exactly, though it depends on where you find meaning. Virtu, I suppose, would find it in one's own greatness. King Feroben obviously seems to find conquest appealing. He is a patron of art and literature that will speak of the greatness of his kingdom for centuries to come. I find my satisfaction elsewhere, in study, but then I have never sought to rule."

"Where do you think I find meaning?" she asked, openly curious.

He smiled at some private joke, looking up at the ceiling. "I don't know," he hummed. Shaking his head and looking back at her, he continued, "I suppose you will have to find out for yourself. You do have time just yet. Everyone discovers it eventually."

"Yes," she agreed sullenly. She wished she had some idea of what she believed. Her opinions came and went with her moods, often inconsistent and rarely fully-formed.

She walked with him back to the council chambers, going through the events of the day in her mind. She was just beginning to get flashes of a battle plan and wanted to describe it to someone with experience in actual wars before she forgot.

Her preoccupation soon chased the thoughts of power and justice from her mind. She would not be able to concentrate if she was constantly concerned about the basis of her actions.

Throughout the kingdom, the villagers slept while Gwen sketched out her plan.

Chapter Ten

The tyrant is a child of Pride
Who drinks from his sickening cup
Recklessness and vanity,
Until from his high crest headlong
He plummets to the dust of hope.

~Sophocles

The day had been unusually sunny. On these occasions Feroben did his best to stay indoors. It was not that he disliked the sunshine and blue sky, but he spent so much of his life away from them that he could no longer bear their brilliance. It hurt his eyes.

He stayed in his chambers for most of the day. The Penjusten response had come fairly quickly. He had been hoping they would go to war, especially after all the effort he had put into inciting them.

But there was none of the moral outrage his conquests usually exhibited before a battle. The message was simple and brief. He could not even feel tumult in the air.

The space between their kingdom and his was blank. That was unusual. Could they really be so unconcerned about their fate? They would not be able to withstand a full assault. He imagined

their terror, but could not feel it. Someone must have been blocking him.

He tried to focus his thoughts elsewhere. It was difficult to detach after he had been denied information. It would not do to brood. Instead he turned his attention to his own people. The sun had brought joy to the kingdom. The emotion was overpowering in its simplicity.

He sighed, looking out his window at all of them milling around. He hated feeling lethargic, but it was better than being down there. For a moment he just watched the people as a creeping sensation overtook him.

Something strange was mixed with the general happiness. He couldn't place the new feeling. It floated under several other layers and waves, just beyond his grasp.

A sudden rapping at the door interrupted his daze. He considered ignoring it so that he could get back to his inquiry.

"Your Majesty, are you in there?" his Shadow called.

"Yes, come in."

He entered and quickly inclined his head to the King. "You requested that I come speak with you."

"I did. I have been having trouble gathering information of late." He picked up a quill from the side table by the window and twirled it between his fingers.

"Has there been a problem with the scouts?" His mouth twisted into a smile. "Should I check to see if the men are all still loyal to you?"

"No, that will not be necessary. Not yet."

A flicker of disappointment crossed the Shadow's face. "What is the problem?"

He turned and leaned against the windowsill, his palms pressing against the cool stone.

"I don't know. That is what I need you to find out. Anything you could tell me would be useful. I can usually reach much further but it's as though someone has erected a wall to bar my way."

He caught a glimpse of the Shadow moving out of his peripheral vision. His companion looked troubled. His eyes cast down and his body stiff.

"You are not the only one to face - ah ... difficulty, Majesty."

Feroben felt a shock run through him. "You are also unable to gather information, I take it?"

"Yes, I believe it is the Marquis. He may have discovered our infiltration. Only he would have the power to prevent my coming and going."

"You're right of course. Though I cannot imagine how he knew - never mind. We will have to deal with this problem in

whatever way we can." He glanced at the Shadow sharply. "You know how important the next few days are to me. If he is somehow hindering me I need to know how."

"I will see to it immediately." He turned and strode from the room, the end of his cloak disappearing as it whipped around the corner.

He looked back out the window. Clouds moved across the sun and played darkened splotches onto the people below. He felt around for individual minds, trying to pinpoint the source of the strange new emotion. It did not seem to have a focus. Rather, he thought that most of the people had reverberations echoing just underneath their skin or behind their faces.

After he had conquered Penjuste he would need to see to this phenomenon. If it were dangerous he would need to quench it as soon as possible. In the meantime he most desperately needed to know what was happening elsewhere. He gazed west again.

Despite his efforts his attention kept turning back to Penjuste and the invisible wall that separated his mind from the collective across the forests. It was infuriating.

Whatever the Penjustens were doing now must have been important to the Marquis or he would not waste so much effort trying to exclude him. No matter. They would not beat him in the end, despite their concoctions. This modest trick would be of

little consequence in the upcoming battle. The Marquis could not protect them forever.

Chapter Eleven

But he understood at last what Dumbledore had been trying to tell him. It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose

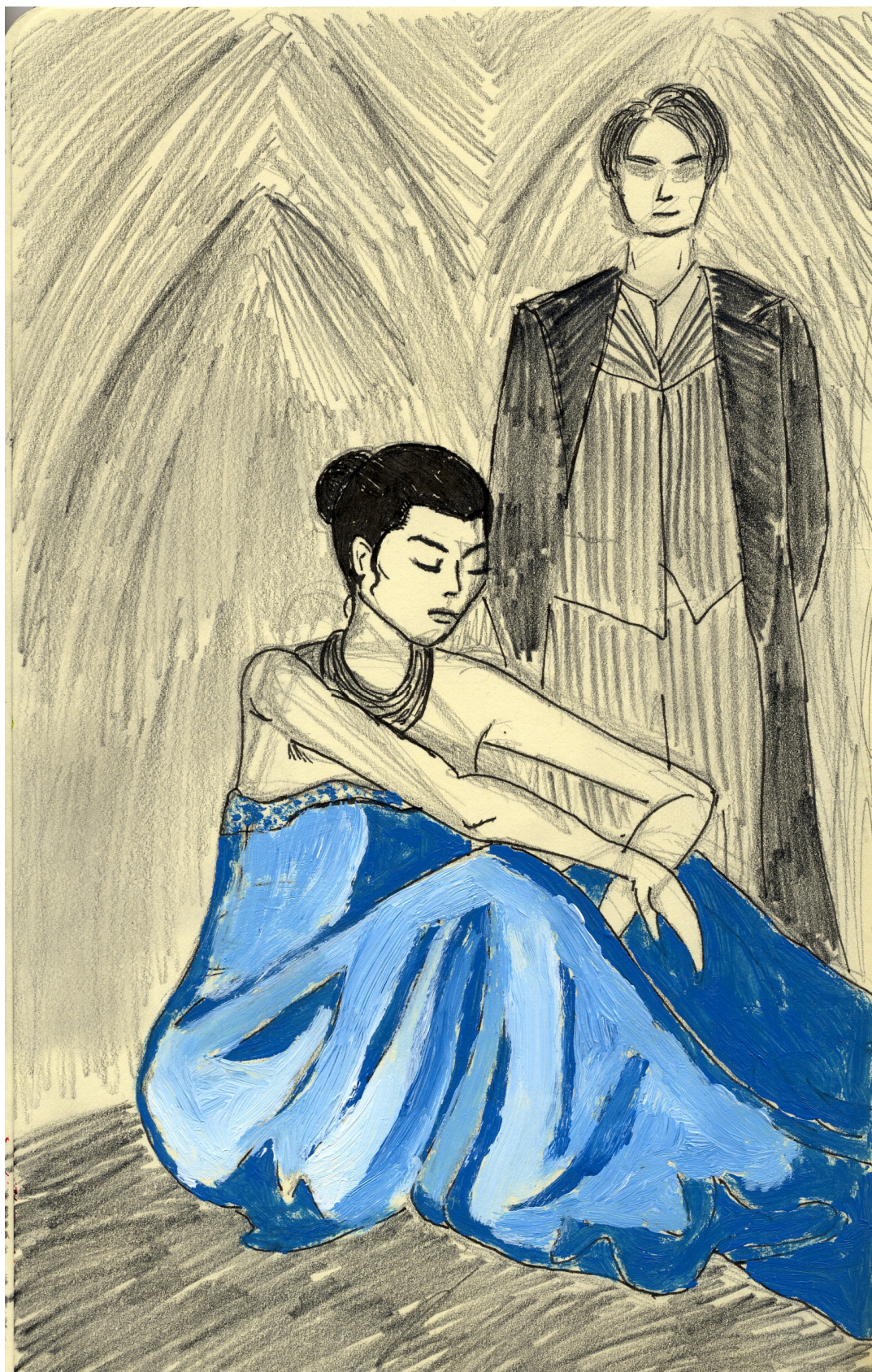
Between the two ways, but Dumbledore knew – *and so do I*,
Thought Harry, with a rush of fierce pride, *and so did my parents* –
That there was all the difference in the world.

~J.K. Rowling

Gwen had spent the morning preparing for her first major speech. The usual flood of attendants was nearly doubled as she dressed and listened to the morning report. They must have been excited for her first monarchical event. She felt slightly ill.

They put her in the most regal, pristine outfit she had ever seen. As different as possible from her usual wool and moleskin, the blue satin gown fell to the floor in feminine waves. Gwen couldn't help but feel like a queen in the smooth, shimmering dress.

The flurry of activity had left her with no time to gather her thoughts, so as soon as she found a free moment, she hid in an alcove behind an old tapestry. The darkness was soothing after the rush of faces that morning.



Unfortunately, she would have to deal with more faces than that in a few hours time. Every person in the kingdom was going to be arranged outside of the castle gates to hear her speech. It suddenly occurred to her that she had no idea how many people lived in the kingdom.

Perhaps the shock of seeing the crowd for the first time would make her speech more exciting or persuasive. Either there would be several hundred people, all of whom she was responsible for and sending into war. Otherwise, they might have all given up on her and she would only be speaking to about thirty or forty people. Either way, the situation was not ideal.

She ought to be more optimistic. They had put so much work into this speech. For hours the night before, she practiced with Virtu and Arête, working out the best things to say and the best way to say them to inspire the people. This was the first time she would address the entire kingdom and it was in the middle of conflict.

But the most difficult part wouldn't be the words or inflection or any of that. It was making herself feel the meaning behind the words. They seemed empty when she recited them last night. How could she speak of honor and justice when she practiced neither?

The problem also was not that she felt broken and bare; she was worried her people would too. If they didn't have hope, they

would never be able to win against Feroben, no matter what sort of help they got from the Mystics.

Overcoming their enemy in battle wasn't the only victory the people needed right now. They needed to become themselves again - to rediscover their essence. They needed to become Penjustens or it would not matter who won; they could not prevail.

Gwen buried her face in her hands. Maybe if she shut her eyes hard enough she could reappear somewhere else. Maybe she could turn into someone else - someone who had all of the answers. Maybe she was only capable of grasping the questions. Maybe it would not matter anymore if they could not get through the next week.

There were too many maybes. There always were.

She heard heavy feet tromping outside the tapestry. Her attendants would not be happy to see her sitting on the dirty stone floor in this magnificent dress. As long as they didn't need to come through this alcove, she wouldn't be discovered.

Now that she thought about it, she couldn't imagine why anyone would want to come through here. The dank corridor just led down into darkness. Apart from the slow dripping, she could hear or see nothing ahead.

The kings and queens who had come before her must have built so many additions to the castle that no one knew what they

were for any longer. Their plans for grandeur had devolved into redundancy.

Well, she would not be caught in the same trap. She had no desire for glory or renown. It was short lived. Who could even remember their names beyond what legends told? What use was there being in legend even if everyone was miserable?

Unless, of course, the legend offered hope for people beyond its time. That would be good; Gwen could inspire Penjustens a hundred years from now for her courage and tenacity.

Though she could make a complete fool of herself with this speech. There was no guarantee the people would go along with it after all. She needed to get them, the villagers and farmers and soldiers all, not only to be brave about the war, but to challenge themselves.

Most of her speech was about people finding themselves, as she had the last few weeks. They needed to wake up from their slumber, take personal responsibility and judge the moral value of their lives.

Especially if she was going to have any success in reopening Penjuste to everyone who had been exiled. No doubt the people would not go along with that easily. They had grown fearing these strangers and now the 'young queen' was going to force everyone to play nicely.

She was not going to be part of a kingdom that lived in fear of itself. She certainly would not rule a kingdom that was content with a lie. Sleep would be hard to come by if there were always threats on her life from discontented subjects. She would rather live with a free mind and face destitution than be a slave in this life they thrust upon her.

Suddenly her name echoed down the corridor, bouncing off the walls just beyond the tapestry. It was so tempting to stay hidden underneath the warm veil. She would need to search for a new hiding place.

"Wait. I'm here." She called out.

The disembodied voice called her name again, moving nearer. If she had waited, he might have missed her entirely.

Pushing the tapestry out of her way, she saw the Marquis standing in the center of the corridor. He had not changed his wardrobe for the occasion, but somehow looked taller and prouder than before.

"Don't tell anyone that I was hiding." She pleaded.

"Nor that you were on the ground?" he asked.

"How did you know?"

His eyes flickered to the hem of her dress. It was coated in dust. She bent hurriedly to brush it off.

"It is nearly time for you to speak. I came to find you and escort you to the balcony."

She swallowed hard.

"Are people gathering already?"

"Not yet," he replied, "but your tutors wanted to go over the ... ah ...finer points of your speech again."

His eyes hid a smile. She couldn't imagine what else they would need to practice. They must be nervous.

He stepped back, allowing her to pass, and walked just behind her with his hand by her back. They didn't speak as they traveled through the narrow corridors. The only noise came from the tapping of her new satin shoes on the floor.

The cold drifting through the stone walls was seeping into her skin. The Marquis threw a glance at her as she shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked, concerned.

"No," she did not want anyone to worry about her just now. "I'm nervous. The feeling is sometimes external." She let her sentence trail off, followed by a small laugh. Perhaps now was not the best time to open her mouth.

She looked down at the ground as they walked. Every glance told her he was still watching with his brow furrowed. Did she look pale or ill? There was no reason for him to stare with such intensity.

They turned a corner and were hit by a throng of castle staff. The velvet clad men and ladies bowed as she approached. Whispers of "majesty" and "your grace" followed her all the way

to the chamber where her tutors and council stood in anticipation.

"That is quite a crowd you've drawn and you haven't even spoken yet." The Marquis whispered in her ear once they were free of the people.

She smiled at him. They all looked glad to see her but not in the same creepy way the villagers had. Their smiles were innocent rather than adoring.

Surprised they had all come to see her, she turned to look at them again. Every face was pointed back at hers, their eyes warm and excited.

"Your majesty," The captain welcomed her. "We have just been discussing the battle plans with those of us who did not attend the meeting yesterday."

"I also shared the news our scouts acquired this morning," one of the advisors added.

"Has anything happened? Has there been another attack?" she asked, alarmed.

The Craelgi had already conducted three raids on the village in the past week. Feroben was trying to wear them down before he ever had to face them in battle.

"No, one of our scouts intercepted a group of Uigan soldiers within our borders. He thinks they were surveying our

retreat options. He did not intervene, being outnumbered by a dozen men, but he ran the information to me immediately."

Feroben must plan to defeat them completely, if he was already looking for a way to intercept a retreat. He would not anticipate her plans, though, and she was counting on his surprise.

It was good she convinced the Mystics to fight when she did. Otherwise they would have been completely unprepared for this battle. The messenger came to the castle with his scroll from the King just after Gwen returned from her mission.

It took a truly sick king to deliver a declaration of war with a murdered man. It took an arrogant one to deliver the time and date for battle in calligraphy. He managed both.

They were to meet in a field halfway between the kingdoms just after sunrise in a few days time. From what her scouts had discerned, he would have extensive cavalry and infantry lined up in the hills. At least twice as many men as her general had mustered from the men of the town.

Feroben's men would all be equipped with thick armor and steel. Gwen still had the blacksmith and his assistant working day and night to make enough swords for everyone. They were not physically prepared for this battle. All of their hopes rested on the abilities of the Mystics.

When she came to her council with the news of their joining the battle, they initially reacted with shock and fear, no less than she expected. After she explained the situation and told them what the Mystics could do, they began to set aside their prejudices.

Once they began discussing the Mystics' role in battle, her captains became noticeably more optimistic. Instead of featuring a mob of half-starved peasants charging at once, the battle plans grew more and more creative.

Soon they had arranged several possibilities and left Gwen to choose which arrangement to begin with. They would not bring the Mystics in until Feroben had a chance to observe their initial forces. She wanted him to be confident in his victory so that he might not think as clearly after the battle began to turn in their favor.

She could still see the hesitation in a few pairs of eyes. They probably worried the Mystics would either abandon them in battle or turn on them once it was over, both of which were fair concerns, but she had met the elders personally. They did not seem as dangerous as people thought. Drystan at least was trustworthy ... and noble.

Though they may have reason to betray her, if they were half as good as their religion preached, they would not seek vengeance for so long. Plus, there was no interest in betraying

Penjuste after coming to the battlefield. They would not gain anything and might even lose lives. Most important though, if she did not trust them, she would have no other hope.

They were her subjects too now and she needed to have faith in something. Facing into the gale that was this war, this kingdom, trusting them was better than nothing.

The council members were all watching her. She tried to control her facial expressions. She did not want to give away any worry or fear. Especially not now. If she could remain stoic in front of her advisors, she would probably manage in front of her people.

Virtu and Arête threw questions at her in turns and asked her to recite portions of the speech. Whenever she hesitated they glanced at each other, their eyes wild.

She had to remind herself that they had never seen battle either, so they had reason to be anxious. Those nervous glances were enough to push her over the edge if she couldn't ignore them.

Eventually their questions dried up. Arête sighed, turning to face the exterior window. He raised his head to catch a glimpse of the gathering crowd. Virtu did not visibly relax, but he probably never did. His eyes never left her face as she sat in one of the chairs by the wall, trying to control her breathing.

It felt like barely a minute had passed before Arête came to her.

"It's time," he said.

Gripping her elbow, the Marquis appeared instantly. As he led her to the window, he spoke in a hushed tone.

"Don't think about it as though you have to convince them all to join you. You already have their loyalty and their trust. Now you merely need to inspire a little self-confidence."

"A little?" she responded sarcastically. "I am welcoming back a powerful race of whom you all are frightened. And oh yes, could you please throw yourselves into the path of this maniac king bent on our destruction?" she smirked at him and continued playfully, "Do you think that will work?"

"It would certainly be a memorable speech."

"I'm sure."

He gave her a swift look and backed away from the door to the balcony. She could hear the crowd murmuring beneath her feet. Behind her, every advisor and member of the castle staff stood solemnly, silent. She took a slow breath, stood up straighter, and stepped out into the view of the crowd.

With the sunlight beaming down, she felt the roar of the crowd before she heard it. Every face in the crowd was somber but every voice cried out excitedly to greet her.

Her feet weighed her down. Every step forward took all the effort she could muster. Looking down, she smiled. Thousands of people stared back; the crowd looked as though it extended forever.

Gwen cleared her throat once the cheer died down. This moment was for her. And for the kingdom.

"People of Penjute, we come together today to confront the threats facing our nation. We are a noble people, but we have not always fulfilled our potential. Instead of following reason and showing compassion, we have allowed ourselves to retreat to the safety of apathy. In our relative contentment, we ignored the potential dangers that faced us. We did not care that our own people were turning against themselves. We did not notice when our neighbor expanded his strength to better destroy ours. Now we will face the consequences of our indifference.

"Uig's strength is renowned, their malice enduring. They have come to our home to force us out of it. This attack is ruthless and unwarranted and will not be ignored any longer. How could we sit idly by as their king instigates rebellion, spies on our people, and murders men in service to the crown? His actions are acutely unjust and we have done nothing to deserve such malevolence, nor will we allow it to continue unchecked. We will meet him in battle and we will prevail.

"In order to overcome these challenges and defeat our enemies, we must first face the problems that restrict our will. Over time this society has deteriorated. We need to have faith in ourselves and act with good will to achieve nobility. Instead, we have wilted. Unless we can rediscover our collective identity and act in accordance with good, we will surely die.

"Our history is rich, though fraught with myth and untruths. Over time we painted an image of ourselves that could not possibly reflect reality and we took comfort in that suggestion. I tell you now, no matter what we come from, we make ourselves through our actions. Truth be told, our actions of late have not lived up to our grand potential. We abandoned our principles when we abandoned our people. Look around you. Do you see the rich diversity we once treasured? We expelled part of ourselves when we stopped being tolerant and virtuous. But this does not have to be the end of the story.

"Our society ought to engender deep convictions and inspire profound devotion from its citizens. We should strive for refined mores, elevated manners, and the desire for glory and renown. If we reach for poetry, grandeur, and justice, we will overcome whatever barriers we face. We will achieve this great enterprise and we will leave an enduring mark on history such as has never been seen before and never will again. Goodness will triumph. It will change the world. And it will start with us."

Chapter Twelve

**You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream;
Yet if hope has flown away
In a night, or in a day,
In a vision, or in none,
Is it therefore the less gone?
All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.**

~Edgar Allen Poe

The village was tense. The blacksmith had been working since before dawn, making enough weapons for every man and boy to defend himself.

Although the market was filled with the usual mass of people, moving between the stalls, carting sacks of potatoes and bunches of carrots, all were quiet. No one spoke or laughed or ran. People who generally sat in the square talking throughout the afternoon were subdued, avoiding each others glances. Any necessary bartering exchanges were made quickly, voices muted and terse. People running errands scurried from task to task, as though they were concerned about loitering for too long in the open. The exhilaration created by the princess's speech had been overwhelmed by the lingering terror.

On the outskirts of the town in the barley fields, the new soldiers were training in turns. The captains stood at the head

of groups of twenty men, joined by the few older men who were around when Penjuste still had a large army.

Arranged in rows, the young men held their swords before them awkwardly, as though they had transformed into struggling animals. Several of the soldiers-in-training snickered to one another while others stood stiffly, feeling powerful and determined.

The captains barked orders as they stomped around the young men, their voices growing louder and more frustrated as the day wore on. The townspeople were unaccustomed to taking orders.

Several of the boys hiding in the back, the most raucous gigglers, were already planning for their evening at the pub. They spent every night at the pub and military training was not worth missing out on the relaxing atmosphere that made the day worthwhile.

At least, they whispered amongst themselves, the military training gave them a break from tending the fields and working crafts. They did not hear when the captains told them about the proper formation or the four primary guards. They had thrown their weapons to the ground long before and were content to hide. Not a word about the war crossed their lips that afternoon.

On the other side of the kingdom, beyond the borders of the village, several women had gathered with their laundry by the

river. Taking it in turns to pad barefoot down the muddy bank, they talked as they submerged white bundles into the cloudy blue water.

"The speech was good anyway." One of the women said, continuing a conversation that began as they were walking up the lane.

"It was," another agreed from her position on the grass opposite. She was wringing out her washing slowly, more interested in the conversation than her work.

All day they distracted each other by debating the upcoming battle. Most of the women kept quiet, whether from moderation or apathy no one knew. Two in particular kept the discussion loud and emotional, giving the others a good show.

"But I still think that we are walking into this whole thing too quickly," a particularly boisterous woman asserted, nodding her head as she spoke. "We don't need to start fighting every other place that wants what we have. How are we going to get anything out of that?"

"They are trying to kill us. They attacked my old cousin out past Lloyd's farm the other day. What are we supposed to do, ignore them?"

"I am just saying, I don't think there is any reason we should let all these boys die. They don't know what they're

doing and there is no way they will by the time we're supposed to go off and fight these people."

They moved down into the river, standing on the rocky riverbed with the water swirling around their ankles. The first woman, Mary, bent over, dunking her laundry into the water. She scrubbed at them with a bar of soap she'd made the previous day, sloshing her clothes in the now soapy water.

"I don't think we need to talk about this sort of thing now, Louise. We are going to go and fight no matter what. You heard what the queen said. We have to be together or else we're going to lose."

"Be serious. She has to say that. Should she tell us we're all going to die? I don't trust those Mystics."

"She told us they were on our side," Mary continued, stubbornly.

"I heard what she said, but no one in my family ever trusted outsiders and that's not going to change because someone said so."

"She's not just someone. She's the queen. She knows what she's talking about."

"Why? She's never lived here."

"She does now. And the queen is, I don't know, she is good and the kings and queens of Penjoste have always taken care of

us and that hasn't changed now so I don't know why you're so disagreeable."

"Then why are we in a war?"

"She can't help that."

"But she can send my son to die fighting those monsters?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it's important."

"There's nothing more important than my son's life. Not to me." She frowned, glaring at her washing as though daring it to challenge the veracity of her words.

"You're wrong. I don't know how to explain it, but you are."

They continued their washing, the other women sometimes joining the discussion. The sounds of their argument drifted over the field and into the forest beyond where it got lost in the trees. It did not go unheard.

The hooded Mystic walked back through the forest, picking his way over fallen branches and piles of crackling leaves. He tried to keep as silent as possible, disturbing nothing on his journey. He was assigned the role of scout for the upcoming battle and was working his way back and forth through the wide forest in attempt to become as invisible as possible. He did not

need the practice to achieve at least a necessary quiet, but practiced for its own sake.

A squirrel ran into his path, stopping to sniff at the ground around his feet. It cautiously lifted its head and looked to both sides. The Mystic stood as still as possible, his thin form relaxed, watching it.

Apparently it did not notice him because it scurried over his boots on its way to gather an acorn. He smiled to himself, pleased that he could disappear in plain sight even before the animal residents of the forest. He might even be able to achieve the skills the Shadows performed if he kept preparing.

He needed to cross to the other side of the forest before long. The rest of his people had been working all day and were meeting at noon for a speech from the elders. If he went quickly he could get back in time. Practicing running silently through the leaf strewn woods would help when they were in battle. He prepped himself, breathing deeply, and then leapt forward, only touching the ground with his toes when absolutely necessary.

As he flew through the undergrowth, Mystics began returning home from all across the forests and fields between Penjute and the Mystic Lands. One by one, they trekked and traveled, running and sloshing home after the long morning training for war.

The older, mature men and women had been outside since dawn, sparring with hands, feet, swords, and bows. They had not

been in battle since long before living memory and had not planned to enter it for a long time to come. Regardless, they regarded with task with unwavering conviction. So they trained.

Before the speech later that afternoon, they began by practicing the combative arts, fighting with their bodies and instincts. This was not their strongest skill, but strength in every necessary field was lauded by the people. So they trained.

After the speeches and midday meal, they would come back to the grassy arena to prepare for their more unique tasks. They would connect with the earth and hone their minds, conditioning both reflexes and power. The wise man understands that battle is unpredictable, so they prepared themselves for any outcome. They trained.

Midday came, interrupting their tireless actions. They walked back, the men and women laughing in small groups, energized after their efforts. Along the way they motioned to clusters of children, calling them home for the meal.

As they came upon the houses, they joined the people who had not been out training. Everyone who was either too old to defend themselves or too young to control their latent powers stayed behind to prepare the meal for the guardians.

Drystan was the only one removed the festivities. He listened quietly as the people gathered, laughing and speaking with each other. A few men sat beneath the trees, resting after

their long morning. Their talk drifted throughout the crowd, making its way to the long tables where the Mystics lined up to take their food.

They did not normally have communal meals, but the elders arranged for the entire village to contribute to the war effort. They said if everyone had a moral duty and an impact on the war, they would be more likely to commit support.

Drystan was in a solitary mood. He had prepared on his own, sitting on a nearby mountaintop, practicing moving the wind. He had never managed in a gale before, but his determination gave him strength. For a while, he almost thought he felt the mountain tremble. It had to be his imagination though, because the wind never changed direction.

The dirt swirled beneath his feet as he picked his way down the side of the mountain. He got to the bottom surprisingly quickly, watching the Mystics wander before the elders came out. He already knew what they were going to say and was not inclined to sit for the show.

He pulled out his pipes, drawing a slow mournful tune. The notes disappeared in the wind almost as quickly as he produced them.

He had kept busy the past few days, speaking with the elders and preparing and traveling without pause. Every time he did stop to rest, he thought of the coming battle and pictured

the two sides rushing at each other on the battlefield, bodies strewn about.

Several stones flew away from him in every direction, reacting to his mood. They fell hard, two-hundred meters away. That always happened lately. It was best to remain occupied. Otherwise nature was disturbed and he didn't want to knock it of balance.

Instead of making his way toward the houses where the other Mystics all stood listening to the Elder's speech, he wandered off the path, into a dense field.

Behind him the speech echoed and he caught snatches of what they were saying. Phrases like "unity of purpose," "righting past wrongs," "the balance of Being" drifted toward him.

Those words meant so much. Their continuation was what made his people fight and die. They had always been there, just as much a part of the community as individual people. Yet now they took on additional meaning as they became the tools his people would take with them into battle.

He collapsed on the ground, hiding in the bushes. He just wanted to sit or a while and think on his own. He had never felt so distracted before in his life and now he could not even stand to be among his people.

Somehow those words had lost their meaning for him. Instead he was entering battle almost out of a duty to his new friend.

He couldn't be sure why he was doing what he was doing. Faced with his own motivations, his beliefs in the ideas of his people became that much more insecure. But that confusion didn't really matter in the end because he'd go along with his people.

So for now, he would sit and watch as they prepared for battle. They would go and fight and protect the people who had exiled them. After that, everything would come crashing down and they would have to arrange it all over again.

"Let's just get to that point." He said to no one in particular.

As the day progressed, the Mystics returned to their training and the Penjstens returned to their everyday affairs, except for those dedicated few who had responded to the Princess's speech with vigor. They kept working, all the while imagining what sort of kingdom they could have if they managed to win.

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A bird flying over the Kingdom of Uig spied a cluster of bugs floating away from the remains of a desiccated tree. The men around the tree were cutting it into chunks and carrying it back away to their village in pieces. The bird dove swiftly in an attempt to eat a few of the oblivious insects. Just when it had gotten the first gushing crunch in its beak, it was hit by

an arrow. It noticed a sharp pain in its breast before tumbling to the ground. It saw and felt nothing once it hit the earth.

The man who shot the bird bent down and wrapped the feathered morsel in a cloth before placing it in his bag. He was hungry and looking forward to cooking it over a fire later that night.

"What are you doing over there?" his companion called. "You know we have to get this wood back to the village before nightfall. The smithy is depending on us."

"I know," he yelled back. "I just wanted to grab a meal before it was time to go. Birds don't usually come out this far and the pantry has been bare lately."

He trotted back over to the clearing the men had just created. They were chopping off the spare branches from the tree and felling six foot hunks from the trunk. They would be up late that night after dinner, carving them into long rods for spears and shorter ones for axes and arrows. War always managed to consume whatever time they had to themselves.

The people had felt the strain more intensely than usual this time. the season had not been good and there were not enough crops to go around. They were forced to pull in extra from the outlying territories of the kingdom and discontent was spreading.

He had only been eating cabbage stew and potatoes for the last couple of weeks. This bird was a great boon to his diet. If there were any more birds in the area he would have to find time to come hunting. It was more difficult than he'd thought to eat meagerly. Maybe once the King was through with this next war, they could take all the Penjusten crops. That had always been a rich land. The King had been giving the people less and less of the spoils for their efforts, though. He must see how difficult life was for them.

Once the men had gathered together all the workable parts of the tree trunk, they set off for the village. As they approached it from the Western Forest, they heard a high metallic banging coming from the road ahead. The nearer they got to the village, the louder the clanking became.

They turned the corner and saw a massive steel cage. Like a great spider it rose from the ground, the walls of the contraption forming spindly bars that clutched at the ground. A group of twenty men were working on the cage, hammering the steel into place and affixing wooden bars around its circumference.

Wary that if he got too close the great spider would reach out and grab him, he stayed to the rear of his own group, balancing the section of trunk on his shoulders. The men attending to the cage were preparing it for any prisoners they

happened to capture. The king wanted to keep them somewhere that was both demonstrative of their condition and public.

Biding them farewell, the loggers finally reached the village where people were going about their business gathering weapons and armor from sheds or requesting new materials be made. None of the villagers looked especially frantic. Wars were a common hassle in Uig. The only difference now was the lack of food. Several men were sitting around the towers outer walls, their clothes hanging off them and their eyes shadowed.

The King rarely showed mercy to miscreants though, and would not be likely to change now, no matter how many their number. The hunger did not bother him much because he knew they would win this war, as they always did, and he would soon have food again. It was only a matter of serving the crown well enough to reap one's reward.

He tossed his log on the pile and went back to help his companions with theirs. The sooner they were done the sooner he could cook his bird and relax before work began again that night.

He was passing the pub when he first heard it. The noise was pouring through the windows. It sounded as though a few of the men had too much to drink and were fighting out some disagreement. As he got closer he recognized a few of the voices. These were no old men. He peered in the window from

where he stood, trying to catch a glimpse of the faces. A large group of people, several he knew well, were sitting around a table in the darkened room.

None of the faces resembled the friendly, intoxicated bunch who usually sat around the pub in the early evening. Each man was angry to a varying degree. Some were shouting and banging their fists on the table. A few had stood up and were pacing across the long, narrow room. One of the men, a butcher, stood up and called for silence. Eventually the mass quieted enough for him to speak over them.

"We can't sit here and argue all evening or we won't achieve anything" he shouted over the roar.

"Here, here!" someone called.

A younger man named Marius stood up. He brushed his dark wavy hair out of his eyes and looked around the crowd before he spoke.

"How many of us have spent days without having a meal lately?" he asked, his voice timid. A few of his listeners nodded along.

"How much work have we put into this kingdom with no chance of reward while the King sits in his castle surrounded by his artists and philosophers?"

A few people clapped at this question, their enthusiasm growing as Marius's excitement shone in his voice.

"Why should we have to endure so much hardship for his benefit? When has he ever recognized our contributions to his livelihood? Never before have we been in such a drastic situation. Never before have we had to scrape at a dry ground for a few measly potatoes. "

Loud cheers followed his last statement. He straightened up, pulling on his vest.

"We will not stand back while our people suffer needlessly. We can take ..."

His speech drifted off into a low murmur as the logger walked away from the pub, leaving its occupants' discussion behind. He didn't need to see this discussion. Knowing too much around here could be dangerous. There were some who said the King could read men's minds. If that was true, he would rather keep his mind empty of treacherous thoughts.

He walked back to his house, trying to forget what he'd heard. A busy night was awaiting him and it would not do to concentrate on unnecessary ramblings. He would cook his bird and get back to chopping the logs. Then he would head to battle.

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Chapter Thirteen

But to be able to fall down in such a way that the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian-that only the knight of faith can do-and this is the one and only prodigy.

~Soren Kierkegaard

Eventually night fell. Gwen might have been the only person in the Penjusten village fretting about something other than battle plans. Her coronation was approaching and she had been obligated to attend a meeting about the logistics of the event.

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Despite her protestations on the subject, she sat through three hours of dress and speech and ceremony discussions. They even had her stand and walk so that she could practice regal movements.

When she was finally free of their incessant planning, she escaped to an empty chamber and was crestfallen to see that the sun had already set. She meant to sit in the garden and relax herself before the big night and would no longer have the opportunity. Her life seemed to be full of important occasions lately.

The latest was another full banquet. She would sit for her meal in front of a large portion of the kingdom. Instead of eating peacefully and leaving her alone for the evening, they would all come up to her in turns and offer their congratulations for her bravery or pledge their undying loyalty, no matter the outcome of the battle.

She would have to fight to keep her focus on the attendants. She had told the worker planning the evening to invite people from all over the kingdom in addition to the wealthy ones. If the kingdom was going to value equality, they had to invite people to the castle who came from humble backgrounds as well as royal ones. Plus, Gwen wanted to give the villagers a chance to see her as something other than a distant, almost deity.

After dinner she would return to the dungeons to meet with her advisors one last time before they headed out. The battle plan they had been working on for the previous few days was almost complete.

They just needed to discuss how she would deal with Feroben when they met. A group of three advisers would accompany her across the battlefield. They would meet and discuss the terms of defeat, whoever won.

Somehow Gwen couldn't imagine it would work out like that in the end. She did not know how she could watch her people

dying to preserve their country and then saunter over their corpses to discuss the outcome like it had all been some sport. They assured her that this was the way these things worked.

She stood outside the back entrance to the dining hall. The wooden door was warping. She could hear voices on the other side. They would be waiting for her to arrive before beginning the meal. She pressed her face against the aging oak panels. One of the cracks was just large enough for her to see through to the other side.

Groups of men and women from the village sat clustered between the more regular gentry. Everyone appeared to be getting on well. They were speaking to each other politely and smiling. She sighed in relief. The castle workers warned her against intermingling between the classes. They said that, at best, the guests would ignore each other completely. Maybe her people did not know themselves as well as they thought after all.

They stood as she entered, their chairs scraping. She smiled as they bowed. The faces were solemn, but every pair of eyes that met hers reflected trust.

The head server moved to bring out the first plate, but Gwen stopped him, holding out her hand. She scanned the faces in the room, servant and guest alike.

"Thank you all for coming tonight." She paused. She had been busy the last few hours. She had not had the time to plan a speech for dinner, but she felt the need to say something.

"I know as well as you that we have very little to celebrate," she continued, her tone quiet and reflective. "We are in the middle of a war and have already seen too much devastation.

"When my parents died, the kingdom went through a period of silence. People lived their lives as they always had, but they lost a bit of themselves in their daily activities. They forgot who they were and stopped caring about what happened to everyone else. But we cannot live in ignorance forever.

"We stand here on the eve of battle. We dine and we talk. We make friends and plan for tomorrow. I promise you that this life we have created here will not be undone. We will not drift away into a state of perpetual apathy. And we will be silent no longer."

The hairs on her arm stood on end as she sat down, waiting for a response but too anxious to look into any faces. Quiet clapping drifted over the rows of tables. She tried not to smile. She hadn't thought she could ever sound like a leader and was beginning to impress herself.

The servants left the room for dishes of food, bringing back trays of fruit, bread, and meats. The smell of salted pork

warmed her. She looked up to see a massive plate of steaming food in front of her.

She thought about the coming days and took more than normal. They would not get another opportunity to eat this well for several days. Living in a makeshift campground on the edge of a battlefield did not lend itself to culinary delights.

After the meal she spoke with several eager individuals. None of the conversation distracted her from the foreboding thoughts about the next few days. She was going to ride out to battle with a group of half-trained men tomorrow. These people could have been discussing anything from the weather to their collective plot to usurp her throne and she might not have noticed.

Her mind wandered on the way down to the dungeons. She tried to focus on the battle plan, but those thoughts soon turned to daydreams in which she was running through an empty field on a sunny day and there were no bodies or blood.

She exhaled forcefully, shaking her head to clear it. She pushed open the door to the assembly room and saw her advisers sitting around the table waiting for her. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Fourteen

Who overcomes by force,
Hath overcome but half his foe.

~John Milton

The battlefield was not far from either kingdom. There would be no fighting until both armies had assembled, which Gwen's advisers assured her would not be until the next morning. She had awoken feeling numb. She dressed and prepared her things for camp alongside her attendants. Needing to keep occupied to stave off the fear, she ignored their protests.

When they had gathered her belongings and saddled her horses, she walked out with her guard and captain into the brilliant sunlight. All around her the soldiers cheered. On foot with packs or on horses high above the rest, they clapped and shouted as she made her way to the front of the group.

She looked around for the Marquis as she walked but could not see him. She had been so sure he would come out with her. His concern was a constant presence since they met but now that

she was walking directly into the most danger she'd ever seen he was nowhere to be found.

She turned to her horse, a massive white creature, and was prepared to climb on his back when she caught a glimpse of the men assembled. Several hundred of them, all lined up in rows expanded around her in clusters. Excitement shone on a few faces but most reflected her terror. A few were even younger than she. The boy just beneath the nearest chestnut mare could not have been older than fourteen.

For a moment she felt as though she could not move, but was certain she was going to fall. Simultaneously the ground held her and let her go. Then there was no more ground at all. She and these soldiers were all frozen here in time and everyone was waiting for her to speak. They waited for her to call them to their deaths.

Would they be better off dying in their homes?

She had soon mounted her horse and kicked off. The ground trembled beneath the hundreds of feet and hooves that marched along. Gwen looked back at the castle through the mounting cloud of dust. It already seemed very far off and they had not left the village yet.

Her attachment for the place was surprising. The golden chambers and marble halls that had originally been foreign were

more her home than anything else. No one would take that away from her again. Especially not now.

The point between Penjoste and Uig would be just off where the main roads met. With a group of several hundred men on foot, the journey would probably take the whole day. They needed to arrive before nightfall to set up camp. Then she would send the scouts out to survey the land. They had already reported on the place once after the initial declaration of war so that they could prepare an informed battle plan. She just wanted to be sure Feroben had not set any surprises for her.

As they rode she gazed off the path to the south. Though she was flanked on both sides by guards, just over their shoulders the tips of the Emıl'būs Mountains kissed the sky. The Mystics would be making a similar journey soon. Because they had to travel around the mountains, they would not arrive in time for the start of battle and there had not been enough time to get them out in advance of the armies. Gwen and her advisers worried initially, but decided their late arrival might work out to her benefit if it gave the enemy a surprise.

No, she corrected herself. She shouldn't think of them as the 'enemy.' Arête mentioned that the day before. If she thought of them as something other than people, it would make killing them too easy on her conscience. As a monarch, she needed to give them the same consideration she gave her own people. Death

was inevitable on the battlefield, but one should never revel in it.

There was something calming about the repetitive motion and noise of hooves on the ground. It gave Gwen time to think and almost made her forget where she was. The men weren't even talking in the background. She had not imagined they would be this grave, actually. The captain's reports from training were not at all complementary. They must be afraid.

The captains stopped. The sun had stopped radiating with brilliance and had instead become harsh and oppressive, beating down upon their weary heads and sweaty brows. Gwen called her horse to a halt. The field was flat and barren with brownish grass extending on all sides.

A group of hills sat in the distance, enclosing their position. Her captains motioned to the hills on the eastern border. They would meet for battle just over that boundary in the morning.

The men dismounted and got to work unloading the cargo and assembling the tents. Hundreds of billowing white structures soon covered the field.

Her own tent stood apart from the rest. It was draped with the royal insignia and surrounded by a loose grouping of armed soldiers. The interior was nearly as nice as her room back at the castle. A small fur rug lay on the ground surrounded by

pillows and silken blankets. Her armor, sword, and helm had been placed against the trunk on one side of the tent and they had even left her a mirror for dressing in the morning. Though it was not essential (she wondered if she'd be sleeping on the dirt), she was glad they had taken so much trouble to ensure her comfort. She found herself hoping the other men had spaces half as nice.

The smell of juicy roasting sausages drifted across the field, followed by the sound of raucous laughter from the men cooking. They had decided on hearty food for their first evening at war - a final meal for some. One of the men brought her portion to the tent and she ate in solitude, thinking through the battle plans again.

No matter how often she chided herself, she could not force herself to relax. Every muscle in her body was tense. She even had to remind herself to breathe at times.

Eventually the sun set and the noise outside quieted to a dull roar as the men retired for the night. The smoke from the dying campfires spread a rich perfume throughout the camp. As she drifted off to sleep, Gwen's last thoughts were of the Mystics, who had surely stopped for rest by now, perhaps just beyond the mountains. She had to reassure herself they would arrive in time. How could they win otherwise?

She dreamt she was wandering through the castle, lost in one of the many corridors. She was looking for a particular door that would lead to wide fields full of sheep, but every time she opened a door that looked familiar, Arête and Virtu appeared behind it, arguing about the definition of virtue. Eventually she ran into the Marquis, who told her that the only way to find the door was to stop looking for it. She wouldn't remember her dream in the morning.

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Dawn came too quickly. The sun shone through the walls of the tent, reflecting the royal insignia around her. Despite the lavish arrangement in her tent, her back ached from the night's sleep. She sat up slowly, stretching.

While dressing in the armor left out for her, Gwen tried to concentrate on the inevitability of the day. For some reason she did not feel panicked. Instead, a shallow calm held her. If it weren't for the impending doom, she'd have found this newfound reserve funny.

When Gwen pictured the soldiers outside getting ready, anger dragged at her insides. It was building up beyond her control as she tried to beat it back down. Ferober did not have the right to control her kingdom. He thought he could just usurp the land and make it his own. As though he thought her people

were objects that could be bought and sold. Her indignation was fierce.

Keeping her anger hidden, Gwen stepped out into the sunlight. She felt the stares of the men wash over her and tried to appear strong and in control. Making her way to the front of the line, she mounted her horse and led the army over the hills onto the battlefield. To her left the head general was watching the path ahead warily, his eyes flickering to the distance. And on the right - she gasped.

"You were gone! I mean, I didn't think you'd be here." She exclaimed.

The Marquis was riding alongside her on the right. His dark armor glinted in the sunlight. He had his regular black cloak on, though it was warm and there was no breeze to ruffle it with his usual flourish.

"I didn't think you'd come." She said again, quieter.

"I did," he responded, his face set. "I wouldn't want to miss this. You're fighting for the future of a kingdom with which you only just got acquainted. Plus," he smirked, "I usually only work in the shadows. A good battle could add excitement and variety to my life."

She heard a snort on her other side but ignored it. Not only was she glad to see the Marquis for his own sake, if he decided to come and fight they couldn't be without hope. He was

not the type of person to sacrifice himself for a cause. She sat up straighter, looking ahead with renewed hope.

The grass crunched underfoot as they continued onto the battlefield. A great shuddering ran through the lines as the Penjusten army lined up in their battalions, facing east. From the distance, a deep drumming echoed through the air.

A swift breeze blew through the soldiers before dying on a whisper. The soldiers' feet shifted. Their awkwardness was palatable. How could a man get comfortable with aching feet and a sore back, standing on the middle of an empty field, sweat stinging his eyes, surrounded by men too closely, and weighed down by heavy armor as an approaching enemy came to destroy him?

The army from Uig now came over the clearing, their armor rattling as they stomped forward. Their men in the back carried heavy drums which they pounded, drowning out the now frightened heartbeats of the soldiers. They were facing, not only men like themselves, the enormous amphibian Craelgi. Hulking towards the Penjustens, their skin folds dripped grimy water and squelched with every step. Their eyes reflected cold death.

The younger men tried to swallow and found they could not as the older men thought fondly of the lives they'd built. Too scared herself to give a properly rousing speech, Gwen turned to her men, her eyes full of pride, and said "Be brave."

For a moment, all was calm. The two armies stood facing each other, swords drawn. The final boom of the drums rang out. The Uigan army began to march towards the Penjustens, their footsteps increasing as they went. Gwen called the advance and soon both armies were running at each other full speed.

They collided in a clash of steel and crash of bodies. The men rammed their shields and thrust their swords into each other, the wounded falling hard to the ground instantly as others climbed over them to slay more opponents. Sweat mixed with the dirt and blood and all became covered in rusty mud. It coated their arms and faces and the teeth that they gritted in pain.

From the back of the fray the Craelgi came tromping up to the men, standing tall over the tiny people. Their feet squelched in the mud. They carried huge clubs above their heads, swinging them down around themselves, bashing Uigan and Penjusten alike and knocking little groups of men out of their way like dolls.

The Marquis charged ahead past Gwen, pulling his sword out in a graceful arch that sliced through one of the Craelgi's warty shoulders. In the same fluid motion, he brought it out and turned his horse around so that he was behind the Craelgi. Swinging again, he cut straight through the Craelgi's back

before it even had the chance to turn around. It fell to the ground in a shuddering heap of green flesh and moved no more.

He charged on and was obstructed by the massive Craelgi. Unwilling to battle such a fearsome foe herself, Gwen turned and began stabbing her sword into as many men as she could, attacking those soldiers she saw on top of Penjustens. She would fight defensively, trying to protect her people as she stormed through the madness.

On either side, terrible screaming rang in her ears. It sounded like eagles shrieking their final cries as they plummeted to the earth. She craned her head in an attempt to see who was in so much pain to go help but she was buffeted by fighting men, her horse surrounded by the slashing arms and crumpling bodies.

Sitting above the worst of the battle on her horse, surrounded by the fray, Gwen tried to catch a glimpse of an individual person. She looked around for the Marquis, desperate for a face to bring her back to reality.

She felt like there ought to be music playing. There ought to be some grand symphony to accompany their bravery in war. Instead, there was only death, quick and cruel.

Suddenly a rough pain on her side jarred her, pushing her into the saddle. The leather horn banged against her armor and the air left her body in a whoosh.

She turned in time to see a giant man swinging an ax at her head. Shield raised, Gwen hid just as the metal collided, nearly unhorsing her. From underneath her shield, she shoved her sword into his exposed gut and wrenched it out again, spilling blood onto the ground. She dug her heels into the horse's side and raced away from her assailant.

Slashing with her sword, she ran with her horse, trying only to avoid getting hit, and not paying attention to who she hit as she thrust her arm into the mob. From one side of the field to the other, she galloped through, hoping that nothing would bar her path.

Up ahead, a group of Uigan soldiers on horseback, she recognized them by their distinctive lack of Penjusten colors, were surrounding a cluster of her own men on foot. Swords drawn, they were taunting their captives, prodding at them like animals.

Fury coursed through her and she abandoned self-preservation altogether. Without realizing it she was shouting. A deep guttural angry sound followed her as she ran at the enemy forces.

They must have been surprised to see a young woman flying at them with sword drawn. In that moment of shock she slid it through one of them, giving her men time to regain control. They yelled with her in unison, rushing at their attackers. Men fled

and flew off their horses as the two groups hacked at each other, each man trying to free himself from the cacophony.

A large broadsword swung at her head. She ducked just soon enough to feel the whistling steel move the air as it passed over her helmet. The man was surprisingly quick. Before she had a chance to defend herself, he was bringing the sword down on her again, this time straight in the style of an executioner's axe. She froze for a fraction of a second, thinking that this would finish it.

But she didn't die. The Marquis was holding off the offender, their swords crossed with his arms over her, shielding her from the attack. His muscles shook with the effort before he threw the man backwards.

"Now!" he called.

Gwen extended her arm and felt the sword slide through his skin, missing the armor entirely. It went in almost to the hilt and stuck there. She had to push her foot against him to remove it. Caught in the suction, it came slowly before ripping apart the outer flesh. He, too, fell to the ground.

"Thank you," she said to him as he turned his horse around in a circle, pulling at the reins.

"Any time." He shouted wordlessly and his horse reared. They rode off together to slay more men.

Gwen looked about for more battles. Most of the men around her were lying on the ground, gasping and bleeding. She managed to take a few more of the Uigans who charged past her, but the kills were growing few and far between. Instead of clashing, men ran from the center of battle, clutching hurt limbs and collapsing to the blood-soaked grass, exhausted from the fight.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the fighting was over. All was silent on the field. Though the hurt groaned from the ground, the rest of the men could not hear them, their senses muted in their pain and grief. Soldiers from both camps strove up and down the desolate field, picking at bodies and carting them away.

Time passed in an age as Gwen looked into the eyes of her fallen men. Probably no more than a few hours had gone by. Eventually the tumult died down and they all departed the field, dragging their injured comrades.

Still bodies littered the ground. Gwen glanced across the field, looking for someone in the mass of struggling people, moving like ants returning to the mound. She nodded once at the Uigan general before turning back to her own.

"We'll tend to our men and let them rest for night before resuming combat."

"We already sent back a few men to prepare for the injured solders." He responded grimly.

"Good. In the meantime I need to send a messenger to the other camp to negotiate a temporary halt of hostilities. Too many men died today without settling anything. I need to speak to King Feroben."

"I shall send someone over as soon as we get everyone back to camp, your Majesty." He rode off at a gallop.

Gwen turned once more to watch the Uigan forces gather the men who were still alive. It looked as though they had each lost an even number of soldiers today. Maybe she would be able to reason with Feroben when she went to discuss a treaty with him. If he had no better chance of winning than she, he couldn't be completely opposed to a cessation of hostilities.

She felt the rage beginning to build in her again. It was a sign of utter disrespect to her and her people for the King to remain behind while his men fought the battle. How could he be so low?

Hitching her horse, she rode off the field following her men. After the initial run she slowed to a walk again, sensing someone behind her.

The Marquis rode up alongside Gwen, looking bedraggled and cut on one cheek. He was still sitting up tall but appeared to be nursing a hurt arm.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, concern tightening her brow.

"Only just." He frowned. "Many of the men face far more serious injuries than mine."

"I never imagined there would be so much chaos," she said, recalling the panic she felt once the two armies crunched into the one horrifying mass of violence.

"I didn't think the Craelgi could be so brutal. They were slaying our soldiers by the dozens."

She caught his use of the word 'our' but didn't say anything. Her momentary joy caused her to miss the commotion rising just beyond the hills out the outskirts of camp.

Some of the men were shouting, standing in a large circle around a massive lump on the ground. Confused, she moved closer, trying to see around the soldiers who were angrily kicking at the thing.

One of them yelled "Hoy, froggie!" and shifted just enough for her to get a clear view. The men had captured a Craelgi. It was lying bound and gagged on the ground as her soldier stood around it, taunting and beating it as it groaned deeply from its massive chest.

Horrificed, she yelled at them to stop, but the sound caught in her throat in a strangled gasp. The Marquis pulled his horse up close to the men and boomed louder than she'd ever heard him speak.

"Stop this instantly. You are not barbarians. Do not defile the crest you wear by acting as such." He stared down at them, his eyes hard.

A few dropped sticks they'd been holding and slinked away. Others, their eyes downcast, fled his sight as quickly as they could manage, stumbling over rocks in their haste.

One of her captains rode up to discover the source of her anguish and was frozen by the sight of the hapless Craelgi lying before her.

"Tend to him. I will come back to speak with him tonight," she said.

He nodded once and she turned back toward the camp, riding with the Marquis at her side.

"Can the Craelgi speak?" she asked.

"Indeed they can. In fact, if I am not mistaken, you may be surprised at their vocabulary. It has, however, been quite a long time. They may have changed."

She did not inquire further. Too tired from battle, she imagined the softness of the bed in her tent with anguish, wishing only to be wrapped in the warm blankets.

As though the Marquis could read her mind, he turned away from her, leaving her with her thoughts. It was a moment before she realized her tent sat just ahead. She lumbered down from the horse, her legs hitting the ground too hard. They could not hold

her weight. One of the guards stationed outside the tent helped her up, his arms still carrying open cuts from the battle.

"Thank you very much," she said, unable to look up.

He led her to the tent and opened the flap for her. Once she was inside she allowed her legs free reign and fell to the ground, reveling in its solidity. It took a while to regain enough strength to stand, but once she did, the rest of the day came crashing on her as well.

So many people had died that day. She could see their faces looking back at her from the mirror as she washed her face. The empty eyes searched her soul from their thankless rest on the bloodied ground. Even when she closed her eyes, she could smell the sweat and the fear. She could feel her sword slicing through an arm or a torso. She could hear the pounding in her ears as her men screamed their dying words.

"Your Majesty?" One of her guards called. "Your messenger has returned from the Uigan camp."

"Thank you." She replied.

Splashing her face with water, she tried to wash away the terrible images from her consciousness. She did not want to think about what would be invading her dreams tonight.

Shaking her head, she stepped out of the tent and saw a messenger standing alone, the guards having returned to their posts, perhaps to give her more privacy.

"I was sent to the camp," he gasped, out of breath, "to deliver your message ... Majesty." He must have run back.

"Yes, what did they say?"

"The general agreed to a temporary cessation. He means to resume battle in two days time. Until then, the armies should recover separately and anyone who crosses the line into the other's camp without the proper flags will be slain on sight."

"A reasonable demand. All right then, I agree." She looked him over. His clothes were ragged and his armor dented on one side. He was only a few years older than she. "You should go rest. You have also had a long day and I may need you again later."

"Thank you your Majesty." He bowed low and walked away.

She returned to her tent, thinking about what she could do with her two days. She needed to relax certainly, and discuss the next battle with her generals and the Marquis. They would likely fare better when the Mystics arrived. All the armies of Uig could not withstand the power they wielded.

The elders would not disappoint her. They had promised to stop Feroben's aggression if she promised to establish peace in the kingdom. With them fighting on her side, literally anything could happen. They would have an incalculable effect on the battle. She could not imagine the many possible outcomes they

were planning. She had not even asked. Her faith in them was strong enough to leave the plan a surprise.

The sounds coming from the camp were more subdued than the day before. No longer rowdy and carousing, the men did not even speak. Only the distant shrieks of the injured floated to her this evening. Perhaps during the meal they would regain their energy. They would need it to face another day of battle. At least that day would not come immediately.

Though, she had to admit, their quiet was not without reason. They had fallen like the rain today. It hurt her to think of them collapsing to the ground, struggling even to breathe as the world went dark around them. She needed to stop this war before they were all destroyed. The Mystics needed to arrive soon for them to have a chance at success.

She collapsed onto her bed, waiting for night to come when she would have to resume her duties. The silence was not as deafening under the silk blankets. In fact, even her thoughts were beginning to fade. Abandoning the pain from that day, she slept.

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Very little time passed before the Marquis shook Gwen from her sleep. They walked beyond the edge of camp, over the first set of hills, to where a makeshift tent had been erected. A

lonely fire illuminated the five soldiers standing guard in the darkness. They sprang to attention.

"Who's there?" one of them asked.

"The Princess." The Marquis answered for her. "Is the prisoner awake?"

"He was the last time I checked."

"None of the men have come by? You've left him alone?"

"We have, we only went in there a couple of times to make sure everything was set. Since then we just stood guard."

The Marquis nodded brusquely and motioned for Gwen to follow him into the tent.

Inside a large Craelgi sat leaning against one of the supporting columns. He did not look up as they approached.

"You work for King Feroben?" Gwen asked.

The Craelgi looked up at her with disdain. He stood carefully, never taking his eyes off her. His bulk reached to the ceiling and took up half of the tent. Removed of his armor, his green flesh looked more warty and bulbous than before.

He slowly opened and shut his mouth again, looking more like a frog than ever.

Unsure, she asked, "can you speak?"

"Of course I can speak, don't be ridiculous." He suddenly spat at her. "I was trying to think of how to phrase a response without coming across the wrong way."

Taken aback, she could only utter a small "oh." She had not expected more than a croaking or half-speech, but the Craelgi was completely surprising in his elocution. Only hearing his voice, she would be left with the impression of gentility. How ironic, considering his monstrous appearance.

"I do not work *for* the King of Uig, as such," he continued, ignoring her surprise. "You could say I work *because* of him or, perhaps, due to his coercion. There are worse things in the world."

"But you support him in the war?"

"Existentially?" he croaked.

"Would I be correct in saying you fight on the Uigan side?" The Marquis interjected.

"Yes, unfortunately," the Craelgi agreed. "My people were threatened. He said that if we did not join him in battle, we would be eliminated with the enemy."

"Why did you agree? You could have fought with us."

"We are not a violent people and do not have the resources on our own and we would not have made it to you. Plus, we have a certain history in common with the Uigans, despite their more aggressive tendencies. Living in the mountains on the edge of Uig is a dangerous place to be, but we were exiled from Penjuste long ago and were not looking to be shunned from ahead while being hunted from the rear."

"So instead you kill my people?"

"No, we protect our own. You should know quite a bit about that, as monarch of Penjuste. Righteous thought, indeed," he scoffed. "We were given a moral imperative and now must play our part to ensure our survival."

"I am afraid we disagree."

"I assumed as much." The Craelgi sat facing the wall again. He hummed to himself, letting her know the interview was over.

"We will keep you here until the war is settled."

He hummed in response.

Gwen turned and walked from the tent, the Marquis in her wake. Just outside they heard the Craelgi call, "I don't suppose I could get some tea?"

Once past the guards' earshot, she threw up her arms in frustration. "This war is wrong."

"Indeed."

"He should not need to conquer and coerce people by force. That alone should be enough to demonstrate his rule is wrong. He had no reason to do that to a peaceful people, and he has no reason to attack us."

"No reason?" he asked quietly. "I wonder, but that is why we fight."

"I need to do more than fight." She was talking more to herself than him. Gwen needed to convince herself. "I have to go

speak to the King. We need to negotiate; otherwise we'll just end in devastation. Already our armies have been decimated. More deaths will follow if I don't do something about it. After all," she laughed mirthlessly, "I am going to be queen."

"Then I will come with you."

"What?" she snapped out of her trance. She had forgotten the Marquis was even there.

"I will accompany you on your negotiation with the King of Uig. I would also like to see reason prevail." He didn't look at her as he said this and wondered what other reasons there might be. He never told her everything he knew. As he was unlikely to answer, she didn't bother asking, but kept the question for later. Regardless, she'd be glad for his company.

"Thank you. I think I may need the help."

"Then we shall depart in the morning?"

"Huh?" she looked up. They had reached the campgrounds. "Oh yes, if we leave at dawn, taking the northern road?"

"We can easily make the journey in a day."

"Good," she said, nodding, her eyes on the ground.

"Until then, your Majesty." He gave a little bow and hurried off into the line of tents.

Gwen continued on her way, thinking about the Craelgis. The only reason they were in this predicament at all was because of her people and what they did over a century ago. She would have

to allow them back as well as the Mystics when this was all over. If they won, that is.

She could not sleep that night. Her mind preoccupied with thoughts of war and justice, she sat up writing. If they could settle this war without being annihilated, she could fix everything else that had gone wrong. And if they couldn't, people still needed to know.

Chapter Fifteen

The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.

~J.R.R. Tolkien

That morning was unusually cold. Gwen and the Marquis were outside of the Tower of Uig, watching the mulling crowds. Several groups of people were anxiously arguing about something and paid them no heed. Eventually a steward from inside the tower came to get them.

Leaving their horses behind, they passed through the great black gates and across the garden to the tower. The Marquis leaned over Gwen, whispering in her ear.

"I will leave the negotiations to you. I won't say anything, but neither will I leave your side. Know that I do not trust the King and neither should you."

Gwen nodded in response, her body stiff. She had not considered that she was in any real danger. The Marquis was right, though. If the King had not proven honorable yet, there was no reason to believe he would now.

They followed to steward through the majestic halls. In every way that Gwen's castle was light and open, the tower was dark and forbidding. The black marble walls felt slightly too narrow while the ceiling was far out of sight, extending into nothingness.

The steward rapped on two great doors with his staff, entering after a momentary pause. He announced her arrival and turned, shutting the door behind them with an echoing boom.

"I did not realize I would have the pleasure of your company, Princess."

The King rose from his throne and came down the steps toward them, inclining his head. He ignored the Marquis.

"I would have thought you'd meet me much sooner. You did not join your army on the battlefield."

He came to stand directly in front of her, towering over her. As he looked down at her the corner of his mouth curled up. Gwen felt the Marquis twitch at her side.

"No," Feroben said, turning back to his throne. "I had business to attend to here. But I suppose my generals did not satisfy their duties. So you have come to speak with me."

Gwen frowned. She did not picture him behaving like this at all. This was the man who had terrorized her people. She justifiably hated him and he was talking to her with complete disinterest. She didn't understand.

"I came to make a treaty with you."

"Did you?"

"After the first day of battle our loss is equaled. In order to stop the wasteful massacre, I propose we make an agreement."

"What would be included in this agreement?" he asked, sitting back down.

"We agree to a ceasefire. Obviously neither of us will gain from an excessive loss of soldiers. If both of us retire to our separate kingdoms and promise not to disturb or directly agitate the other in future, I believe we can coexist. Since neither of us has an obvious advantage at the moment, I think the conclusion of hostilities should also be equal."

He rested his chin in his fingers as she spoke, his eyes never leaving hers. For a moment after she finished, he sat unmoving. She was considering repeating herself when he slowly smiled.

"Lovely as all that sounds," he replied, looking away at the mural on the ceiling. "And believe me, it is picturesque; I doubt my own ability to hold to the terms. I have so much to gain and would be disappointed to give all that up over a few lost soldiers. Honestly, I have never been one for sitting still and this seems like a poor way to develop a new habit."

"Then you will not form a treaty?"

His eyes found hers. "No, I think not."

"You are fighting an unjust war against my people."

"Unjust?"

"And unprovoked."

"I am afraid I have to disagree, young sovereign. I am merely responding to the wrongs dealt me by your people so long ago."

Gwen felt like she was falling. Her ancestors had done so much wrong over the centuries. She had lost nearly all of her faith in them. What could they have done to this foreign king?

"We were exiled, me and my people. You called our beliefs false and said we were dangerous." He smirked at her coldly. "I can affirm that none of my people are dangerous. You forced us off our land and I am here to reclaim it. I cannot allow a tyrant to rule over what used to belong to us."

She suddenly realized what had happened to the fragmented Mystics. He was one of them. His family had created this kingdom, and now he was repaying old debts.

"A tyrant? I am not building an empire."

"You must be mistaken. I am creating a perfect world, ruled by the influence of Being. I am taking the knowledge granted by my birth to shape a world out of my will alone. It will be a grand society."

"In which people die by your will?"

"If necessary."

"Why is it so important for you to devour all of these other nations? Maybe you found some grievance with us, but that can't be cause to oppress everyone under your rule."

"It is not oppression." He looked at her with playful disdain. "I am leading them to Being. If they do not want to come, I will drag them."

"Your way is not right. You should not have to rule with cruelty. That can't be good, under any circumstances."

"I coerce for a good end."

"You're wrong."

Feroben's mood shifted from playful to furious in an instant and back again. Gwen felt her heart skip a beat when his expression distorted, revealing his malice.

She backed toward the door. "If we are at an impasse, I will return to my camp to continue battle. I wanted to have peace, but if that is not possible, I will defeat you by other means."

"After what you have done to me and my people over the decades, I don't understand how you manage all of this ... hostility."

"My people should not die for the wrongs their ancestors committed."

"They are to blame."

"They can change. You obviously cannot. We will end this on the battlefield."

Feroben stepped down from the throne. As she turned away, he grabbed her arm and blocked their way to the door.

Keeping his face impassive, he whispered, "Do you think you're leaving this tower after threatening the survival of my empire?"

She stared at him, appalled by his complete lack of restraint. He did not follow any moral code but his own.

"You can't keep me here. I am the sovereign ruler of Penjuste—"

The Marquis stepped between the two monarchs, breaking Gwen off.

"You will stand aside," he commanded.

The men locked eyes, neither one moving. The energy between them was palatable.

Then, as though he were moved by a distinct force, the King stepped away from Gwen and the Marquis, his expression unreadable.

They took that opportunity to hurry from the room and out of tower, hitching their horses hurriedly.

"What do you think he was planning?"

"I don't know," the Marquis replied, keeping his eyes down.

"He is less sophisticated than I imagined. There are certain rules everyone is meant to follow. I don't think he cares."

"Not everyone does." His voice was distant, his eyes on the groups of Uigans standing around the gates. They were shouting something. Their words were indiscernible in the mob.

"Was he afraid of you?" she asked, trying to regain his attention.

"Possibly." He was still entranced. "We need to get back before anything else happens."

They climbed on their horses and rode back down the road to the battlefield, leaving the gathering Uigans in their wake.

Chapter Sixteen

The prince must consider, as has been in part said before, how to avoid those things which will make him hated or contemptible; and as often as he shall have succeeded he will have fulfilled his part, and he need not fear any danger in other reproaches.

~Niccolo Machiavelli

A few of the demonstrators had seen the pair on horseback, but were more concerned with containing the crowd than chasing after royal guests. The usual angry talk in the pub that night had spilled out onto the streets without premeditation and, before they knew it, the leaders were marching every Uigan who had not gone to war out of their homes and onto the streets.

By the time the impassioned crowd reached Ferooben's tower, people were shouting their grievances as one and waving farming tools in the air and shaping clubs from sticks on the ground. Their anger carried them to the gates. It made them more than they were. It made them a group. It enabled them to abandon prudence and storm the once feared tower.

The crowd moved as one, charging the massive doors. They pushed against it, banging their fists and kicking the heavy oak until it gave way. In a furor, they ran through the pristine

halls, smashing vases and chairs, pulling down the lights and breaking the floor tiles.

The wave of people broke in the tower, washing over everything the King had gathered. It was the first time many of them had seen his magnificent tapestries and statues. It was the last anyone else would see them. The mob bashed the object of their fury with their combined fists. They tore through it until every shred of contempt was gone. They washed it clean.

Once they reached the throne room, they stopped. Feroben was standing solemnly, waiting for them. His face was impassive as he stared at his people. He had no regard for them or the fate he knew was waiting for him.

Marius stepped forward and addressed him. "We have taken this castle and defeated your guards. Your time as tyrant is over."

"Tyrant? You are my people. I gave you land and protected you. And yet now you find fault with me. How could you know what is involved with ruling an empire? I build this kingdom to achieve greatness. We are a vast and noble society."

"Vast, maybe. You left nobility back when you starved and ignored your people."

"I rule for the greater good. My sovereignty is about truth. I'm not surprised you can't understand my motives or

methods. You should have stayed in your hovels. You'll regret this treachery."

"We are dying out there and still you steal our crops and use our men to perpetuate your war! We will not stand for it."

The rebels gave a cheer at Marius's words, moving closer to the King as one. Several of the faces grinned, holding their weapons on alert. The rest kept up their grim visage. They had been waiting for this moment for a long time.

"I didn't expect you would. But I was a good King, regardless."

"You weren't. A good king doesn't treat his people like tools. Ruling isn't about achieving something greater. It's about being good."

"You silly sentimental fool. You have no idea what challenges face you. You need me. You'll see."

"But you won't. Get rid of him," Marius called to the mob.

They ran forward, eager to put an end to the man they had feared their entire lives. They dragged him from the throne room. He did not thrash in resistance and was soon lost in the crowd. When they tore through the castle, took him out into the garden, and executed him, he did not even scream.

Chapter Seventeen

There is not room for Death,
Nor atom that his might could render void:
Thou – Thou art Being and Breath,
And what Thou art may never be destroyed.

~Emily Bronte

Gwen and the Marquis were silent on the way back to camp. The road ahead of them was empty and the flat expanses of grass all around gave their journey a forlorn feeling. That negotiation had been their best plan for ending the war, but if Feroben would not listen to them, they had no other alternatives.

Her conversation with Feroben ran through Gwen's head. He was blaming this war on her, as though she could control what happened to him in the past. Fighting her for supremacy would not right any perceived wrongs. Then again, he probably did not actually care about being exiled. She found it far more likely his aggression was about gaining strength instead of justice.

A bird chirruped in the distance. They had reached the hilly region. up ahead they would see the camp. Gwen tried to block out images of anxious ears waiting for the bad news.

"He was not our last hope," the Marquis said quietly.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Gwen barely heard him. She thought about it for a while before responding.

"I know that, I think - but I can't help feeling disappointed."

"Soon the Mystics will arrive and improve our battle strength. Now is not the time to despair."

"It's just ... I didn't want anyone to die. There's nothing I can do."

"That cannot always be the case. As queen, you will have to act for the good of the whole people. Some sacrifices have to be made. If you let reason guide you, good ends will follow."

She didn't respond immediately. Something he said triggered her memory. The good of the whole people. Penjoste had not considered the 'whole people' in a long time. That was their flaw. Even knowing that, she had not thought of them all, she could not. For the first time, though, she had the opportunity. There was something she could do. She smiled.

"I think I have a plan."

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When they reached the camp, they were not greeted by a torrent of eager soldiers like Gwen imagined. The men were milling around, none of them speaking much, each new face a picture of greater worry than the one before.

They rode up to the tent of the general, who came out to them immediately as they were dismounting their horses.

"The Mystics have not arrived yet." His face was reserved, but his eyes reflected the beginning of panic.

"Should they be? I thought it would take them some time to get here over the mountains." Gwen felt her stomach twist. What if something happened to them? It would be her fault for bringing them into the war.

"Our estimation placed their arrival today," the Marquis said, his eyes on her face. Looking back at the general, he continued "I do not think the time for worry has come just yet. We will go to battle tomorrow, alone or not. There will be no staving off the conclusion now, regardless."

"The negotiation did not succeed?" The general asked Gwen.

"No, King Feroben was not eager for a resolution without bloodshed. He will not call off his troops," she responded, her thoughts still with the Mystics.

"Then I should go over the battle plan again. Would you like me to consider our alternative if the Mystics do not come?"

"No, we will stick with the plan. I have faith they will still arrive on time." She tried to keep her voice from shaking.

She was not afraid of them abandoning her as much as she was worried what would happen if the Mystics could not save her people. Her only two options were about to come crashing down.

Except that those weren't her only two options. She had an epiphany back during the journey. Even if diplomacy was not possible with a sadist, it may be possible with his allies.

"I need to speak with the Craelgi."

On his way inside the tent, the General stopped. "Why?" he asked, his tone merely curious.

"I am afraid it is a matter of some urgency."

"Then, please, do not let me stop you, your majesty. I will take my leave."

She hurried off in the direction of the prisoner's camp, walking as quickly as she could without falling. Why hadn't she thought of this when she spoke to him the first time? It was such an obvious scheme.

She was in sight of the guards before she realized the Marquis was no longer with her. His disappearance enervated her sense of urgency. He had been with her constantly since the first battle. He would not have left without necessity.

Gwen shook her head to clear it. She had not needed him to negotiate with the Mystics and she would not need him now.

Wherever he had gone was for a good reason and she could not allow herself to be distracted.

Striding past the guards into the Craelgi's tent, she addressed him with her most regal tone, "It is time for this to end. If you want peace, you are going to need my help."

The Craelgi was impassive for a moment. He did not give any indication he had heard her. Gwen was growing frustrated and thought about leaving him in his obstinate solitude. Then, when he finally looked up at her, he was grinning.

"Your help?" The Craelgi leered at her. "My people have already had an offer from one corrupt monarch. Do you think we need another?"

Gwen paced in front of him. She had not expected him to cooperate easily, but neither had she thought about how to convince him to join their side. So far ruling had been all about persuading old enemies to die for her.

"I am not corrupt nor do I intend to rule you only to achieve my ends. I want for our people to be at peace."

"Your kind can never be at peace with my kind. You destroyed our livelihood and forced us into exile. What sort of peace is that?"

"I it was wrong - I know that. But the future we're fighting for doesn't have to be that way. We can acknowledge and learn from our mistakes."

"You won't." He turned and faced the tent wall, shutting her out.

"We were once of the same people, you and I. Penjuste used to be great. It used to mean something. If we can work together on this, perhaps we can make it great again."

The Craelgi did not respond. Gwen was losing her patience. They did not have time to deliberate over past wrongs. If he would not believe her sincerity, perhaps he could grasp her urgency. She threw her arms in the air, giving in to her frustration.

"If you bring Feroben a victory in this battle," she continued, "the fighting will not stop. He will use you as a new force, always under his yoke, always moving on to the next conquest. With me, yes, you may not achieve peace; but with him you certainly will not."

The resulting silence rang in her ears. The Craelgi didn't move for a long time except for the rise and fall of his back, his breathing shallow and steady. Eventually, he sighed with a deep guttural growl.

"What would you have me do?" he asked.

.....

The sun rose red the morning of the final battle. Its heat did not reach the men who were putting on their tarnished armor

and sharpening their swords in the Penjusten camp, many for the last time.

They gathered on the battlefield. A cold chill blew through the ranks. In their lines, the men shivered. The ground was trembling from the footfalls of the approaching army. Gwen rode up and down the lines on her horse, watching the faces of her soldiers. Through the apparent fear, she could see a renewed strength. They were ready to fight and go home.

Sitting before her men, anticipation coursed through her.

"We walk out on this battlefield today as equal men. No matter our lineage or abilities, we can all fight and we can all die. The same is true for our neighbors. The men of Uig are just like us, and can be defeated. It does not matter how many wars they have won in the past, or what sort of arsenal they have built, today it ends.

"Today we will stand tall together, men of Penjuste. We will defend our nation from the forces that mean to undo it and we will defeat them.

"It won't be because our army was stronger or our men more devoted, though it is and they are. Instead, we will succeed in battle because of the pureness of our will. The men who come here to kill or to conquer will fall upon their own poisoned malice. But we will thrive. We will face our foe with the rightness of our cause and we will prevail.

"When they come, let them see our dignity, our valor, and our dedication. Let them see us as we are, righteous men, Penjstens. And let justice be done upon them!"

The army roared with approval, shaking their weapons in the air and stamping their feet. Gwen faced her horse around to see the Uigans coming.

Slowly, a line of men rose over the hills and unfolded over the field like a shadow covering the earth. The Uigans marched steadily, their faces betraying nothing. The Craelgi stood at the edges of the lines in clusters, their ranks swaying in time with the wind. The Uigan general came into the center of the field and Gwen rode out to meet him.

"This will be the deciding battle." He spoke brusquely. Apparently Feroben had not reconsidered the treaty. They would not be beaten as easily as he may think.

"If your king believes there can be no peace."

He nodded and he and rode back to his side. She watched him go for a moment, concerned about what was going to happen to his troops, before racing back to her own.

"Be ready," she told them. "Their attack will be swift and thorough. They do not want to spend more time than necessary at battle and think they can end this without trouble. We will prove them wrong."

The men began walking toward each other, picking up their pace as they went. Soon running, the armies clashed, swords slicing through each other with a fierceness that could only be brought upon by the need to survive.

If living meant killing every other man on that field, each of them was prepared to do what it took. The blood flooded the field, soaking the fallen.

Gwen heard the Uigan general shouting from ahead. Gazing over the general chaos, she spotted him at the edge of the field shouting at the Craelgi. They had not moved with the rest of the army. Standing resolute where they had begun, they dropped their weapons to the ground one by one and ignored the general's protests.

Spotting the Craelgi her men had captured among his pacifistic comrades. They had set him free the night before after their talk.

Because his people were not disposed to fighting and would be even less pleased to break a contract, she asked him to convince the Craelgi to simply not fight for Feroben. In return for their loyalty, she promised to renew their Penjusten citizenship and welcome them back into the kingdom without prejudice.

Turning back to battle, she was glad to see her men evenly matched. The Uigans victory was not assured after all. With

renewed hope she plunged into battle, swinging her sword around defensively. She tried to scan the fighting pairs to find someone in need. She did not like to kill at random and would feel less aggrieved if it was in the service of one of her men.

Without warning, she felt an explosion in the back of her head. A Uigan cavalry soldier charged past her, rearing his horse. He held his sword backwards, pommel facing up. The pain was unbearable. He must have hit her with it. Unable to regain her balance, she fell to the ground and her horse shot off into the fray. The attacker turned around to renew his assault. She tried to stand and fell back in the grass, weak with pain. Blood was oozing from her scalp.

He sat over her, a triumphant look in his eyes as he raised his weapon. She was almost glad for the pain to stop; it overwhelmed her reason. When she knew the sword was about to come slashing down, she heard a bellowing "NO!" from behind. The Marquis dashed in front of the swordsman, pulling him down from his horse.

They circled each other for a minute. Simultaneously they clashed arms, the steel whistling through the air. She could see them lunging at each other through her darkening vision, their constantly circling figures drifting farther away.

"I have to ... get up." She struggled to breathe. Everything told her to stay down, except for the vision of the Marquis and a sword flying at his head.

The Uigan brought his sword down, hooking the hilts. He stepped into a tighter stance and used his arm to knock the Marquis off balance, jabbing at his neck. The Marquis rolled on his knees as he hit the ground and came up again to parry another overhead blow. He lunged at the Uigan's center, hoping to make the stab before his opponent could recover. Their swords met on edge again, the steel shrieking.

The Uigan tried for a low attack and the Marquis leap backwards out of the way onto his toes. He used the momentary awkwardness of the Uigan's position to attack. His foot made contact with the soldier's shoulder, knocking him backwards onto the ground.

Gwen sat up again, her head clearing, and focused on regaining her balance. Her side hurt from the fall and she could feel the blood wetting her clothes. Disoriented, she noticed her sword lying in the grass a few feet away and sprinted for it, falling on it in a tangle of feet. She stood again more steadily and ran to help the Marquis. Just before she reached him, the fighters stopped, the spar concluded. Then she saw her friend fall to his knees.

Her eyes burning, Gwen ran at the Uigan as he pulled his sword free of the Marquis's limp body. Around her the battle raged, but all she could hear was the blood pumping in her ears as she lunged at him with a blinding fury.

He swung in sword in wide, circular arches, swinging at her neck and feet as she dodged his blows. She brought up the sword for a parry and the strength of his arm sent a shock rippling through her. He used her distraction to knock her back down onto her bruised side.

The pain rushed over her entire body as he loomed over her, raising his sword above his head for a dramatic kill. He swung it down heavily, missing her by inches. She had rolled out of his reach and his miscalculation plunged the sword into the ground.

In a beat, she looked into his eyes and thought, *you killed him*. Then, shouting in agony, she rammed her blade into his overextended ribcage and ripped it out again.

Without pausing to watch him fall dead to the ground, she ran over to the Marquis. He was lying in the grass, blood pooling around him. His eyes opened when she landed on her knees next to him.

"You're safe." He watched her, his eyes light. She tried to lift him into a sitting position and he doubled over, coughing up blood. "Leave it. I don't think I have much longer."

"Of course you do. I can take you back to camp. We can fix it -"

"No," he interrupted, his voice hoarse. "I need you to understand."

"What?"

"I am not going to be here, so you have to remember what I ... told you." His breath rattled in his lungs and she heard a gurgling from the back of his throat. "The future I saw was real. You will ... unite them. I came to you to make it real. You have to remember."

"I will, I promise. But please don't die."

He coughed up more blood, groaning and clutching his wound. The sword had gone right through him.

"Thank you, your majesty."

"You know I really do prefer Gwen." She bit her lip to keep from crying.

He laughed at her, closing his eyes. "I do seem to recall you saying that."

His eyes fluttered, their light dimmed, and caught hers. They stared at each other for a moment, both communicating their silent gratitude. Then he was gone.

The world around her was silent as she sat on her knees next to the Marquis. They neither moved. So desperate for him to

wake up, she could not even feel the pain from her wound anymore. Her men fought around her and still she sat.

In the east with the sun shining behind them, a mass of people came running over the hills. The Mystics had finally arrived. They stood overlooking the battlefield and shouted in their strange language, their voices forming a mysterious fugue, a harmonic line from another world.

Then the earth turned upside down. The men were clutching at dirt that flew out of their grasp, desperate to stay on the ground that was suddenly above them instead of falling into the deep cloudy chasm below. They desperately clawed with their nails sunk into the dirt, falling back as handfuls of earth came away and left them with nothing to hold onto.

Men were falling and running in every direction as the field turned into an ocean of flowing hills and sinking earth. The world righted itself to be replaced by an unstable living being, trying to escape terrorized soldiers. The grass reached up to the heavens, capturing Uigan soldiers in woven chains as the dirt fell open into great gaping holes that captured any men left standing.

Through the bedlam, Drystan found Gwen. He grabbed her and pulled her away from the Marquis's body.

"I have to wait with him," she shouted at him. "He might wake up!"

"No, we have to go. I can only sustain a calm reality subfield for so long with the elders working to undo it. We need to get out of here before we are tossed into chaos like the rest of them."

She followed him, only half cognizant of what he'd said. As he dragged her along through a haze of normality, she looked around her at reality twisting itself. She saw Uigan soldiers struggling to regain their footing on the ground that was dragging them down or flying upwards.

Across the field, the Penjusten soldiers had gathered, gasping and clutching the ground, glad to be free of the terror they had just witnessed.

Drystan dragged Gwen back to the foot of the hills where the other Mystics stood, letting his affect on the chaos fade behind him. Gwen sat next to him, watching as the earth went back to normal, leaving the Uigans lying scared and immobile on the once again solid ground.

Drystan tended to her head, wiping away the blood that was caked in her hair with a scrap of cloth. He tied it in a bandage and helped her to her feet.

"I am sorry it took so long, but I think the battle is over." He looked in her eyes for a long time, waiting for a response, but did not let go of her arm.

She gazed out at the battlefield. All was still. Even the soldiers left stranded in the middle did not move, either from fear or incapacitation. She was glad to not see the Marquis's body among the fallen.

On the far side of the field, the Uigan general waved a flag in the air, signaling their defeat. The Penjusten forces broke into cheers of victory. Though their excitement was subdued by the multitude of wounded and dead, they were eager to be done.

A group of men on horseback rode up behind the slowly gathering Uigan forces. They had come from the main path and stopped close to the general. Gwen watched them, on alert. If they were going to deal with a surprise attack she would need to keep her mind straight. She was worried about duplicity even when they had been defeated.

The new group of Uigans stood under the same banner of surrender and walked onto the middle of the field. Gesturing for her captains to follow, Gwen and Drystan met their opponents, representing all three of the assembled nations.

Gwen stepped forward, gathering all the strength she had left to speak. "The battle has ended and we reenter the field victorious. I take it you will need to relay this message to your king to settle the dispute between our nations?"

The leader of the new group bowed to her in greeting.

"Renowned Princess of Penjuste. My name is Marius. I come to you as the new representative of Uig. The king has been deposed. He no longer sits on the throne and now sovereignty is in our hands. We cannot undo what has been done on the battlefield but will take responsibility for the actions of our king."

"What happened?" she asked.

"Last night we broke into the tower and found the king there alone. We presented him with our grievances and were inclined to take action when he would not accede to our demands. Our people have been unhappy for some time. We could not let them continue to die at home and on the battlefield for so little benefit to ourselves."

Gwen nodded, her shock numbed in the wake of the battle. This changed things. If the new Uigan leaders did not intend to make war or gain empire, her country was no longer in danger.

"What will you do now?" She watched his response carefully, concerned about a future strong ruler.

"We will try to rebuild society. We want a more peaceful, equitable country. It is good to have greatness, and I understand that the king wanted magnificence, but there is no reason if it cannot be shared. All of that beauty and splendor should not have been wasted on one man - not while his people unduly suffered."

The Uigan general interjected. "I believe we need to discuss the terms of defeat."

"Yes," Gwen agreed.

“Their land could be valuable,” a captain whispered to her.

“Because we have beaten them in battle, it is within our rights to demand whatever we want from them. Our society would be undefeatable if we subsumed them into our own.”

Gwen looked at her opponents, lying exhausted across the field. She thought about these revolutionaries and the bravery it must have taken to bring down a tyrant.

She didn't want to be like him in the end. She entered this war to protect her people. Her duty to them ended there. Now that she had the option to conquer herself, she didn't want it. They had demonstrated their superior skill and won their freedom from molestation. The Uigans deserved to find their own peace after so many years of despotism.

"I proposed a treaty with Ferooben when I saw him last. All I want now is peace. Will you be more open to discuss this possibility with me?"

She looked up at Marius. The revolutionary relaxed visibly.

He nodded.

"I would. We need time to organize ourselves. I believe every Uigan will welcome peace with Penjoste," he said.

"As will we," she agreed.

.....

The atmosphere in the Penjusten camp that night was full of energy and excitement. No longer morose or afraid, the men built massive campfires to cook and celebrate over. The smell of meats and spices drifted through the air. They sang Penjusten folk songs and told stories of their bravery as the sun set over the distant battlefield.

The men engaged in complete camaraderie, ignoring their wounds as they sat around the campfires. They drank to the memories of the fallen and danced the traditional reels, feeling alive for the first time in days. The only person not celebrating was not conspicuous in her absence. She had spent most of her time alone.

Gwen sat at the top of the tallest hill, overlooking the battlefield. She hugged her knees, ignoring the cold seeping into her armor. Instead of changing and joining the men in their celebration, she had come into the night to think on her own.

Every time she closed her eyes, the Marquis's face swam behind them; he looked through her into a world where she could not follow. He died for her when she should have been able to protect him. What kind of queen would she be if she could not even protect her closest friends?

She put her head down in her arms, sighing as she did. Someone settled on the ground next to her and sat without speaking. She did not want to look up. Otherwise she would have to tell people what happened to her friend.

"You're missing out on the food you know." Drystan said quietly. "The soldiers have been roasting everything in sight. I'm actually a bit worried they will start in on the tents and blankets next." When she didn't respond he continued, "not that I can blame them, great itchy uncomfortable things they are. I'd rather burn them than sleep in them this many nights in a row."

Gwen laughed despite herself. She looked up and saw him smiling at her. He looked away at the stars while she rubbed her eyes dry.

"You should see my tent."

He snickered and gestured back towards the warm orange glow coming from camp. "You didn't want to join in the revelry? You have a lot to celebrate tonight."

"No, I don't"

"You won a war. Is that not ample cause for celebration?"

She picked at the grass, running it through her fingers. "It's not won for everyone."

"There are always casualties in war. There's nothing you could have done to prevent that."

"I know, but Ri - I mean ... the Marq - my friend should not have been one of them. He has done nothing but help and protect me since I met him. He wanted me to be queen so badly."

"Then you are doing exactly what he wanted."

"I suppose, but he won't be around to see it."

"He doesn't need to. He knew you would not disappoint him."

"I don't want to, neither him nor myself."

"That's exactly why you won't. You care so much that you will keep trying until you succeed. You will never give up."

She thought about that; it felt true. Plus, it made her feel better.

"Your friend," Drystan began. "He was one of the Endless, right?"

"Sorry?" she asked. Gwen had never heard the term.

"He didn't tell you where he came from?"

"No, he talked about his people some, but didn't seem open to sharing details."

"Oh. Well, my people know a bit about his kind. They don't normally intervene in individual affairs like this. Their self-proclaimed job is to protect the world from disaster or outsiders. It is very unusual for one of them to take a personal interest in an individual. If he died to help you, he must have really cared about you."

She stood hurriedly, trying to hide a sniff. Drystan waited for her to look back at him and stood himself.

"Then I suppose you are ready to rejoin the festivities?" he asked, extending his hand.

"What? I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because ..." She backed away.

"Everyone there lost someone, and they still smile. That is the only way to make it better. Now it's your turn."

Gwen looked back at the camp. She could hear the music and laughter floating on the tempting breeze.

"All right."

Drystan walked up beside her again, holding out his hand. "Now I am only going to ask this once. I don't think I could handle excessive rejection."

"Yes?" she raised her eyebrows.

"Would you like to dance?"

His candor made her laugh. She grabbed his hand and they walked back down to the camp, joining the men in dancing an eightsome reel. The celebration lasted till dawn, when everyone collapsed into their beds, scratchy wool and silk alike, and slept comfortably for the first time in days.

Chapter Eighteen

"I think we have different value systems."

"Well mine's better."

~Douglas Adams

A small group of Craelgi and Mystics traveled back to Penjuste with the soldiers instead of returning to their own lands. They were sent to live among them and liaise with their leaders before anyone else could join them in the kingdom.

The harvest that year looked promising, with healthy green sprouts appearing in every corner of the country. The foreigners quickly found work in the farms and settled into their new lives, leaving every few days to give messages to their people.

After a few weeks had passed and life returned to normal, the villagers began preparing their best crops for the upcoming banquet. Penjuste was going to witness its first coronation in more than a decade and their excitement was obvious.

The day before the coronation, several men gathered in the local tavern. The room smelled of barley and oak. They left the windows open to tempt in the warm breeze.

"You all having trouble with the crows lately? My tomatoes are looking shabbier than I've ever seen them after those birds started pecking away the other day."

"Yeah, Andrew. My fields were covered in feathers when I came home last night. It may be time to put together a new scarecrow."

"Ya .. rp." Every man in the tavern turned his focus to the doorway. Framed in it, a Mystic stood tall, blocking out the light from outside.

The men stared unabashed at the late arrival without speaking. He walked up to the bar, his robe dragging across the paneled floor, and ordered a cider, shooting a glance at the men seated around the table. A few of them whispered in each other's ears, eyeing the bartender and the door warily.

Finally, one of them stood, keen to represent his group. "We don't want your kind here, Mystic. This is our place."

The rest of his group kept their heads down but murmured their assent. Most people had not had much contact with the Mystics and were not prepared to forget their earlier fear. They were still afraid of being spied on by Feroben and thought the Mystics would do anything to gain power.

The Mystic put his drink down, watching the bubbles. He did not look at the men who were challenging him but did not get up to leave either.

When the tension did not diminish, some of the other men stood up, prepared to extricate the Mystic by force if it came down to that.

"Now that is enough." The barman stood, fury behind his eyes. "I know this man," he said, gesturing to the Mystic. "He fought by my side on the battlefield and was part of the reason why you all still have a country. He is as welcome here as any other man."

He turned back around to resume his washing. As far as he was concerned, the matter was settled and anyone who didn't like it could leave.

"Sorry," the leader of the group said, not looking directly at the Mystic. "If you fought for us, you're one of us." He sat back down. "I suppose."

Their talk resumed, this time more quietly. Every so often one of them would glance over at the Mystic, who was now halfway through his drink. The smallest man moved over to the bar and sat down by the Mystic. His red hair stood out next to the Mystic's earthy robes.

"Is it true - you can do magic?" he asked.

The Mystic's eyes sparkled. He looked up at the man and smiled. "I wouldn't call it that necessarily, but yes, it's true."

"How does it work?"

The Mystic thought for a moment. "You really want to know?"

"I do. A friend of mine said you people knew stuff about the world - how it all worked and where it came from. I wondered about that for a long time, but nobody could tell me. I thought maybe you could."

He drowned his drink in one gulp and stood from the bar. "Why don't we take a walk outside and I'll show you." He paid the barman and headed for the door, followed closely by the red head.

In the grassy clearing just outside the tavern, he knelt down and gestured for the other man to join him. A patch of snowdrops had just grown buds. Reaching down, he grasped one of their stems between his fingers.

"You see this flower?" He said something and the bud opened and closed again, flexing its petals.

The villager fell back onto the ground, his eyes wide. "How did you do that?"

"Well, my people see things yours can't. This flower, the trees, the earth ... we can, I guess you would say, talk to them."

The two sat talking, their conversation drifting from the Mystic's abilities to the villager's day and farm life. Each was equally curious about the other and was finally getting his questions answered.

.....

Finally free of their cold, rocky home, the Craelgi took every opportunity to enjoy the Penjusten environment. Every week, a group of three would head down by the woods to sit and eat by a little blue pond.

"This is quite a nice day to take ones tea, isn't it?"

"Yes, I do think you're right."

"And with the kingdom in a tizzy over the coronation, one needs a relaxing hideaway every now and then."

Their talk was always inconsequential. They found politics and history to be tedium and, now that they were done with the war, were glad to do away with it altogether.

They had only been eating a few minutes when several Penjusten men strode off the path towards them. Though a few of the men looked back the way they had come, frightened, the rest fixed hard gazes on the Craelgi with their jaws tightened.

"What are you doing on my land?" the leader of the Penjusten men asked. He was slowly clenching and unclenching his fists and every few seconds his eye would twitch.

"Your land?"

"Yes, this is my land. You're not supposed to be on it."

"Sorry, we didn't know. We were just having our afternoon tea and thought this bit of woods was particularly lovely. I had no idea it actually belonged to anyone. We don't tend to own our land, you see."

The Penjusten man breathed deeply and turned to his companions. One of them spoke up for him, his tone brusque.

"You're still here."

"I'm sorry?" the Craelgi replied.

"Didn't I tell you? Get off my land," the first man growled.

"Oh, yes. Terribly sorry. If there's a problem." The other Craelgi had begun packing up their things.

"You're damn right there's a problem."

"As I said before, we didn't mean to intrude."

"Like last time?"

The Craelgi frowned, incomprehension splashed across his face. "I really haven't the faintest clue what you're talking about," he said.

"All right, I'm sick of these creatures," he Penjusten men said to his friends. "We need to take care of them now before they come for us."

Three of the men took off their jackets and rolled up their sleeves, while the others looked around nervously.

"What are you doing?" one of them asked. They had not planned to cause trouble.

"What does it look like," the first man responded. "I'm not going to let these things get away with it."

"They haven't done anything wrong."

"You think that means they won't?"

The Craelgi cleared his throat to interrupt their argument. "I think you ought to know, I'm not going to fight you. So you may as well put your clothing back on."

"That's too bad for you," the man responded. "You're not leaving here while I'm standing. You just come walking onto my land? I had family who were killed by your lot! You burned down my farm. You think you can just come around me whenever you like, no harm? Sitting on what's left of my land? You think we can be neighbors?"

"I really am sorry for your loss, but be reasonable. I was not there and did not do any of that. Your grievances are with another."

"Yeah? You monsters are all the same. The Queen may not be able to see that, but I can." He advanced on the Craelgi.

"Look, I don't want to fight you, but I don't think you want to fight us either." The other two Craelgi stood. They were at least a foot taller than the tallest man.

The tension broke some of the more hesitant men, who began to back away. "Let's go," one of them said.

"No, we're going to have this out."

Just as the first man and Craelgi were stepping up to each other, the sound of horses rang through the clearing. A group of

castle guards were riding round the bend in the path, on their way out of the kingdom.

They slowed to a stop near the confrontation.

"Is anything the matter?" one of them called.

The Penjusten man never took his eyes off the Craelgi. "No, we're just having a chat," he replied.

One of his friends pulled on his arm. "Let's go. I don't need this kind of trouble."

The man yanked his arm away, his teeth clenched. "This won't be the last time we meet, monster." He turned and stormed away from the Craelgi, following his companions back on to the path.

Once the guards were satisfied that the conflict was over, they rode on towards their destination, leaving the Craelgi alone.

"That didn't go well," one said, packing up the tea.

"No, not at all."

They watched as the guards rode away.

.....

The Mystics were gathering for their weekly discussion. Arbroath had been sitting in a poplar, watching the birds when he remembered it was time. This was the first meeting he was old enough to attend and had been excited about it all week.

He leapt from the tree and made his way back up the hill. Several Mystics had already gathered around the home of the elders, waiting for them to come out. Most of his friends were still too young to join in, but he recognized a few faces.

He felt a hand land on his shoulder and a voice speak just above his ear. "Abroath, you're finally joining us?"

He turned and saw his neighbor, Drystan, standing behind him. "I thought it was about time."

"Well, you couldn't have picked a better meeting. We're dealing with controversy and drama today. Less philosophy and more action - just my type." He winked and smiled.

Arbroath was just about to ask "what sort of action?" when the elders came into the crowd.

"My people," the high elder intoned. "We come together to determine our future today. We have just received a gift from the Penjusten people. They welcome us to contribute to their society and culture. We shall share our stories and our history and our faith. We will instruct them in the peaceful ways our people have mastered. Some of us may even wish to live among them. I sent emissaries to Penjuste, to determine the extent of their welcome. Now we must decide how much of ourselves we want to share and how much we will be willing to take."

"This is a good tiding," a Mystic said. "We will learn much from our neighbors to the north. They have resources and a lively people who can teach us their ways."

"We already knew their ways before, when their ways were our ways. They betrayed and abandoned us. Now we are going to allow them to do it again?"

"I agree. We can't trust these people. We have a good society and no reason to change that."

"No, if we want to be good we should be open to other cultures. We can try to understand them."

"More like teach them about our weaknesses. Open ourselves up to disaster."

"Yeah, and we'd get nothing in return."

"Because we know everything?" Drystan asked.

"Our ways are the only ways."

"That's the kind of thinking that led to our enemy to begin with," Drystan replied, suddenly angry.

"What sort of thinking is that exactly?"

"Strict adherence to our ideal of truth. Have you forgotten? Feroben was one of us before he turned. He wanted to see his beliefs enacted and it led to tyranny and war."

"Feroben was unwise."

"Ah, yeah. That's easy to say now that he's dead, but he wasn't the only one to turn away from the group in the name of

truth - and he won't be the last. Our knowledge forces us to walk a fine line. It can give us peace and serenity, but it is dangerous in the wrong hands."

"Like the Penjusten hands?"

"Maybe," one of the elders interrupted. "But the wise man doubts where he cannot know."

"Which is why we can learn from the Penjustens," Drystan continued. "They might have some wisdom that we do not."

"Unlikely." The arguing Mystic shot a glare at Drystan.

The elder spoke through this, trying to bring the group back together. "As I see it, our relationship with the Penjustens will evolve over time. Once our emissaries report to us, we shall discuss further cooperation. I do not think it best to isolate in this time of peace, nor do I think we should easily forget past wrongs. However, much of our interaction will be on an individual level, so -"

Arbroath did not hear the rest of the speech. Drystan had turned away from the group and he hurried to follow him.

"Sorry I didn't speak up for you back there," he said. "I'm not sure how this should work. I couldn't agree with you just because it's you."

"I understand."

"I'm not sure what I want. I'm just getting used to taking part in our society. I don't know if I can handle a second."

"Yeah."

"What do you want?"

"Me? I want to live with them. All of us. I think it would keep us strong ... and honest. I think we should all be one society."

"But then we wouldn't be us anymore. We'd all be Penjustens and there'd be no more Mystics."

"Maybe all the Penjustens would become Mystics. Maybe it'd be just the same as before."

"You can't know that. I like it that we're all different. Learning about other people is one thing, but I don't want to become them, and I don't think I want them to become like us."

"See? You do have an opinion."

"I suppose so."

"It's no matter. No one agrees with me after all. I can't change our way of life on my own."

"No, but you can be part of both."

"How?"

"You could be one of the emissaries. You'd be a Mystic in a Penjusten world. Decide for yourself which way is better."

"I could. I was considering it."

"What's stopping you?"

"Ah, duty, loyalty. All those things they teach us about that manage to stick."

"Well, I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually."

"I hope so."

"When you do, come tell the rest of us about it. I can't wait for the next community argument. The discord was the best part."

Drystan laughed, "sure thing."



Chapter Nineteen

It may help to understand human affairs to be clear that
Most of the great triumphs and tragedies of history are caused, not by
People being fundamentally good or fundamentally bad,
But by people being fundamentally people.

~Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett

Across the forest in Penjuste, another argument was brewing between the Craelgi and Penjustens. One of the Craelgi was standing amongst several villagers who were all shouting at once. Two guards were standing in the middle of the group and a third had just run back to the castle to get help.

Gwen saw the guard running up the path from the village from where she had been sitting in the garden. Once he was within the gates he dashed towards her, looking grim.

"Majesty, there is a conflict down in the village. A Craelgi and some of the people were creating a commotion. We thought there might be fighting so we intervened and I came for assistance."

"Lead the way."

Gwen followed him into the village where the people had gathered. Half a dozen Penjusten men were standing facing one of

the Craelgi, muttering with furious faces. As Gwen strode over, the castle guards straightened up and the men fell silent.

"What is the trouble here?" She asked.

When none of the villagers responded, the guard spoke for them. "As far as I can tell, these men were all in the shop when this Craelgi entered. He was provoked and attacked the shop owner. We heard the commotion and came over to find them outside yelling."

"What do you mean by provoked?"

The shop owner suddenly found his voice, "that monster has no right to be in my business. I will not see his kind near me and my things again."

"That is not your call to make. I may not be able to stop you all being rude to each other, but my kingdom will not devolve into war. We are going to have to learn to cooperate."

The Craelgi spoke up, exasperated, "Your Highness, I have no desire to associate with these heathens."

"Heathen? You're the foreign creature."

"I am not causing the trouble."

"Stop," Gwen called. "Be silent."

The shop owner kicked a rock on the ground, turning away from the group to face his shop, his hand on his head.

"I have had enough violence for one lifetime," she continued, looking between the pair. "If I have to deal with

more from my own people, I will not be pleased. Go back into your shop." She turned to the Craelgi. "I am sorry you are having a difficult time, but you cannot react violently. From now on I expect you to treat them as if they were your own people."

"Yes," he bowed to her and she turned to walk back up to the castle.

She looked back down the path, the heavy wind whipping around her. The village looked calm but she knew that a hundred little problems were occurring in and among the houses. She needed to find a way to control them.

Once inside the castle, she went to Arête's chamber. He had been reading in his chair before she marched in and began pacing around the room.

"You had a question?" he asked, his tone curious. He put down the book and watched as she crossed the old rug for the fifth time.

"I wanted everyone to get along. After fighting in a war together, they still can't see each other as anything but monsters."

"And you expected a renewed camaraderie?"

"Yes."

"There is a long history of hatred there. It cannot be overturned in a night."

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"But they are all Penjüstens now. There's nothing they can do about it."

"When did rationality ever control people?"

"I don't know what to do."

"Well, if they won't readjust on their own, perhaps you should help them. Intervene a bit."

"The Craelgi have already separated themselves out. They live in their own hamlet, but when they interact, as they inevitably will, they can't stop fighting. Maybe we can't escape the violence."

"If you help them, I believe that over time they will grow to respect each other."

"But that may take decades, or centuries. Will I have to be there to adjudicate every conflict?"

"Perhaps."

"Then I'll need help. We need someone to oversee their affairs, someone who will make sure everyone is treated fairly."

"Then why not form a council to adjudicate? It could enact your will when you are not available, and have the power to punish transgressors if need be."

Gwen looked into the fire, imagining a group of people sitting around a table discussing mistreatment. "We could put Craelgi and men on it to force them to work together. And we

would need guards to manage conflicts. How quickly can I set this up?"

"As soon as you want." He shook his head, smiling. "You sound like a proper monarch."

"Really? When did that happen?" she joked, calming in the wake of a proposed solution.

"Concern for your people is necessary. It will keep you strong. Even in the face of difficulties like this one."

"I hope so," she said. "I am going to draw out a plan for this council for the next advisory meeting. Will you be here?"

"For most of the day. I also have work to do."

She stopped in the doorway, gazing back at him. "Thank you, for everything you've done. I would not have lasted this long without guidance from you and Virtu."

"Don't thank me. Since you came back, you have been my queen, in every way. We might not have a kingdom right now without you."

She thought about this for a moment and grinned, before disappearing into the corridor.

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Alone in a tower where she would not be interrupted, Gwen began preparations for her grand ceremony at the castle. She practiced the coronation ritual every day and spent every night

working on the speech. Most of that time was spent alone. She'd been too busy to be social and did not feel capable of sustaining conversations even if she'd had the time. She wanted to keep her focus on the coronation. Becoming queen was about more than just her now; she had to fulfill this duty to her people, especially the ones she'd already lost.

Gwen watched her reflection in the mirror. It looked more animated than she felt. In fact, it didn't look tired at all. She recited the first few lines of her speech. The reflection stood up straighter, moved its mouth with a regal air and a look of authority in its eyes. Was that what everyone else saw?

She kept practicing her speech until the sun set. Then she went into the throne room and walked through the steps of the coronation. The night passed quickly.

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Dressed in a long, white, beaded gown, Gwen walked behind the head elder of the Mystics. He was leading the coronation. His head was bowed, covered in a grey woolen hood. In his right hand he held the enormous leather bound book that contained the ceremonial instructions.

This would be the first time a Mystic conducted the ceremony in many years. It had always been their allotted role, so that the Being could grant the monarch the authority to rule wisely and reasonably. The Mystics had not been available to

crown the last few Kings and Queens, but he agreed to take part in this event to mark the occasion.

When he got the signal that everyone seated in the hall had calmed, they would enter the throne room and begin the ceremony. Her long hair was held up close to her head in pins so that they would be able to fit the crown around it. She longed to pick at it, restraining herself by gripping the sides of her silky dress.

The Mystic elder turned to her, nodding. He pushed over the large golden doors and walked into the throne room, Gwen following in his wake.

Light streamed through the high windows, splashing the floor with rainbows of color. Chairs had been arranged on either side of the hall and lined with a deep golden sash that crawled up to the elevated throne. White flowers lined the rim around the wall, sitting in delicate vases shaped like miniature glass trees. On the platform, the members of the counsel stood with the tutors, Arête and Virtu. They were all beaming down the way at her.

They walked through the mass of Penjustens of every race and creed; they bowed deeply as the Queen passed. Murmurs and sighs drifted through the crowd while Gwen tried to place her feet in front of her deliberately.

The Mystic elder read from a large, jewel encrusted book as her tutors sprinkled her with water. She recited the lines she had practiced all the night before, promising to protect her people and enact virtuous laws and ensure that bliss reined over the kingdom forever and ever.

Once the ceremony was over, Drystan walked over to her, holding a woven golden circlet. He placed it lightly on her head, watching her with a smile in his eyes, before moving back to his position on the side of the hall.

The elder moved forward and held his hands high. "I present Gwyneth Annwyl, the Queen of Penjuste.

The people in the hall leapt up, cheering for their new monarch. The noise rang like bells in the echoing hall, creating overtones that twinkled and danced in the rafters. They clapped and smiled and cheered until their hands and faces hurt. They finally knew the kingdom was moving forward and it made them glad.

Gwen faced her people, finally aware of the glory and dignity that came along with the weight of sovereignty. She could sense pride from everyone she knew and everyone she had yet to meet. One more thing so that she could feel it herself.

"People of Penjuste, *my* people, we come together today, not in celebration of one woman, of one monarch ascending to the

throne. Today we honor our kingdom and the new time of peace and prosperity we achieved these past few months.

"Our sweat, our fears, our very blood went into the creation of a new, open nation which we will not lose sight of again. From now on we will value tolerance and peace, we will strive for virtue and greatness and with our every action we will honor the good and the just.

"We did not achieve this victory without pain, nor could we have... There was loss... Many have died, and they will be missed - every day. But there was also much gain. We defended ourselves against a mighty foe, and in so doing, became a people again.

"I do not know how we got lost, only that we were. We were adrift in a world of apathy and tedium. We abandoned our principles for the sake of a tarnished ideal and sacrificed our nobility to the gods of tyranny and fear.

"But we found ourselves through our struggles. From the ground up we unveiled the image of a mighty Penjute that backs down from no fight and consents to no injustice. This is who we are, who we always have been, and who we always will be. We had simply forgotten, but never again.

"From this day forward, Penjute is a nation build on reason, and we are a righteous people. From this day forward, we will thrive. From this day forward, the world as we know it will change. Our common wisdom will illuminate it, from moor to vale,

peak to glen. My people, I welcome you. Let us now move onward into that brilliant new day."

She sat down in her throne for the first time as Queen and felt the golden circlet balanced heavily on her head. The colors from the glass windows washed over all the moving people in a bright spectrum. The stone floor quaked under the stomping feet.

Gwen looked around at her friends. They were cheering along with the villagers. Dotted among the people, the Mystic emissaries and Craelgi joined in the applause, noticeable in Penjuste for the first time in a century. She had done that; now she could be proud. She closed her eyes and let the feeling wash over her. It actually was a new day.

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At the end of the night, Gwen escaped to an empty chamber to relax after the festivities. She had never been one for noisy parties. The echoing stillness of seclusion was preferable.

She sat in a burnt leather chair that had been leaning against a long window on the far side of the room and listened to the hum emanating from the banquet hall.

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, clacking footsteps moved down the hall outside the room; they were moving further into the castle. She peeked around the doorframe, and seeing, her tutors, stepped into the hall behind them.

"You're leaving?" she interrupted their hushed conversation.

The two men looked over their shoulders at her and gave small bows. "We were discussing business, your Majesty." Arête said.

"Yes, inane chatter is detrimental to planning, so from the party we flee," Virtu said.

"What are you planning?" she asked.

"Business of state. We thought it would be best to have a few sketches laid out for implementation of your settlement proposal in the morning," Arête told her.

"Incorporating all of Craelgi into society will be difficult at best and we each had a couple of approaches in mind. Soothing their entry is our first task, though I would not be against a more decisive military presence." Virtu eyes got a faraway look in them, as though seeing this ideal in a daydream.

"I have considered it, but I hope that level of protection will not be necessary," Gwen asserted, "but we will need enforcement." She could already imagine how her people would react with a constant guard watching over them. Few people thrived under disorder, but they would not be able to cooperate on their own just yet, not after a century of hatred and fear.

"The details should be ready by the council meeting

tomorrow," Arête said, shaking his head at Virtu. "We will be working in the library until then."

They turned to leave, giving another cursory bow. Gwen hoped the etiquette was a reaction to the new title, rather than recurring behavior.

"Wait," she called. "Before the official meeting tomorrow, what do you both think about the hospitality law?"

They glanced at each other, wary of sparking the other's outrage. Cooperation between the tutors was rare and hard-fought and the slightest insult could lock one or the other away in his study for days. But their philosophical arguments often lead to shouting and cursing, making their relationship a volatile, if not captivating, one.

Virtu, always the aggressor, spoke first, "While I find the notion of tolerance humorous in itself, I cannot condone your flagrant expression of compassion for these foreigners. They will only invite discord and laxness among the other people and that could quite easily prove your downfall. Furthermore, it betrays the nation's inherent weakness to undo everything that we built to prove our strength."

"He means the origin myths," Arête clarified.

Ignoring this interruption, Virtu continued. "Unless, of course, inviting these people into the kingdom is itself a ploy to demonstrate your superiority over everything you purvey,

including your enemies." He stroked his chin. "I would actually like that."

"While my colleague schemes to take over the kingdom in his fantasies, I would like to say that I approve of this plan. It smacks of goodness to avenge wrongs your own ancestors committed on innocent people, and creating a more understanding and virtuous society may usher in peace. However, I agree with Virtu that there will be serious problems in the foreseeable future. You have a population who hate and fear the newcomers, many not without reason, and who now have to accept them as their own without warning. As if that were not enough, you also need to reeducate a group of people who grew up with only bitterness towards the kingdom. Inspiring devotion in a very powerful and possibly dangerous bunch of individuals will not be an easy task."

While Virtu's response was not unexpected, Arête's gravity shook her certainty. "Do you think we won't be able to make it work?" she asked.

"No, I do," he assured her. "I merely wanted to stress the difficulty of the task we face. We may never finish reorganizing society. By necessity, it will be a constant reevaluation of how to best achieve good with no clear end."

"But it is important that we try," she said.

"Undoubtedly," Virtu smirked. He inclined his head to her again. "We should go work or else we might have to resolve the situation with my plan."

"Then I will see you tomorrow."

Gwen watched them walk away, quietly arguing now that they were moving again. At the end of the hall, Virtu shouted, towering over Arête. She laughed at their camaraderie before walking away into a hidden corridor on the side of an alcove.

This particular pathway led outside to the garden. If she came out of the castle around the back, she might remain unmolested by the people spilling out of the banquet hall into the warm night.

Once outside she could hear their talk again, bubbly in the otherwise still night. The warm light from the open double doors spilled onto the grass, stretching the mass of shadows out over a path that led right to her. Gwen hurried off in the opposite direction, seeking solace in the quiet.

The ancient ruined chapel stood on the remote edge of the castle gardens, its cold stone walls stoic until the end when they would crumble into dust. The moon shone blue over the old floor, the last vestiges of color splashed across the few broken tiles that had not been overcome by the summer grass.

She sat on the low stone wall, pressing her hands against the rough surface and letting the cold seep through her skin.

The last time she was here, the Marquis had spoken to her of a vision of a future world. She wanted to bring that world to life so badly, but when she sat in this place and thought of him, the tradeoff seemed too harsh to bear.

"Late again," a new voice interrupted her thoughts. "I probably should work on that." For one wild moment she thought the Marquis had inexplicably walked into the ruin. She blinked and saw Drystan standing there instead. His eyes sparkled in the moonlight.

"Where were you? You disappeared after the coronation. I wanted to see you," she said, swallowing back the burn from her mistake.

"Oh, I had business back home. We were talking about your new flock of sheep and our renewed business with the kingdom," he said with playful sarcasm. "Most of us have decided to stay where we are, but there are a few who thought the challenge of moving amongst the people could be exciting. Though, it requires preparation. My people aren't used to dealing with other cultures and ... teaching them to not immediately scoff at the illogical opinions your people are burdened by takes time."

She tossed a stone in his general direction and watched it bounce on the rock foundations a few feet away from where he stood. Drystan walked over and sat next to her on the wall.

"I didn't realize my tardiness would cause such a strong backlash," he teased. "I must organize myself better in future. Your aim might improve."

"Sorry," she laughed. "It has been a long month. I need some time to calm down."

"I'm not sure you are going to get it. Ever again," he added, "in fact."

"No, I suppose not. Though these chance encounters will help. I need to talk to someone with a sense of humor."

"I am glad to be of service," he bowed deeply, never taking his eyes off her, "Your Highness. Say the word."

"Be serious."

"That wasn't the word I had in mind, but I can try." He stood up straighter and fixed an imaginary monocle in his eye. "You ought to be asleep this late at night. Shall I escort you?" he held out his arm for her.

"Not that serious."

"I do apologize, but I do not understand you."

She shook her head at him.

Adopting a received pronunciation, he flapped at her. "Now, now, this is not the time to dawdle."

She burst out laughing when he clucked his tongue. It was a perfect imitation of one of her old teachers at Culford.

"You're ridiculous."

"If it works. Are you calmer now?" He was inexplicably smirking to himself.

"I am." She smiled, climbing down from the wall. She stood in front of him and reached for his hand. His thin fingers were cold. "Let's go inside. Tomorrow we begin again."

Epilogue

Nations, like stars, are entitled to eclipse.
All is well, provided the light returns and the eclipse does not become
endless night. Dawn and resurrection are synonymous. The reappearance of the
light is the same as the survival of the soul.

~Victor Hugo

A bird trilled in the forest between Penjuste and Uig. Both countries were busy on the anniversary of the truce. A year ago today, they ended a terrible war over empire, legitimacy, and vengeance.

In order to mark the occasion, the Queen of Penjuste and the Executive Representatives of Uig met to discuss the political affairs between their people over a mutually prepared meal. They would then travel down to the old battlefield where the people would wait assembled and plant a tree to represent their desire for creation and growth.

The sovereigns were standing in the entrance hall of Penjusten Castle before their meal. One of the Uigan Executives had just apologized for not being able to hold the meeting at the tower.

"We are having representation problems." He told the Queen. "Some of the old empire nations want to be subsumed under our rule, but the people are rioting. They've been charging us with claims of despotism. We feared a royal ceremony might inflame the situation."

"I understand," she said. "We're still debating who owns the land that was apportioned a century ago after the exile. I want to tell them to work it out for themselves, but I would rather not instigate any countryside skirmishes. Farmers can be quite stubborn when given reason."

A steward came into the hall and motioned them inside.

"We should begin the meal." Gwen turned to her guests before entering the hall. "The King will be joining us later. He had prior business with an old friend."

They went into the hall and discussed their domestic political issues and efforts to establish a relationship with other villages and kingdoms across the country before heading outside for the tree planting. Uigans, Penjustens, and Mystics alike stood together on the old battlefield, creating life where they had once destroyed it.

For now there was only one tree, standing in the center of the hilly countryside. Over time a dense forest would grow here, and people who passed it on the road north could read about the

battle that secured the Penjusten future. For now, the people stood in the relatively empty field, and remembered the dead.

One kingdom had fallen while another rose. The future that supposedly lay in wait for Penjuste was known by none other than Gwen and would not come to pass for many centuries.

These events were remembered for generations as the start of a new era of understanding, though many forgot why they had occurred. As naturally happens, Queen Gwen evolved into myth, known both as a great historic queen and heroic savior. The people forgot, but the ideas evolved and the people never lost the identity Gwen had given them. The Penjusten people were one, and could decide their own futures, for good or for ill.