

Retreat of the Leaflord

Leia paced across the wooden floor of the open hall, empty except for her and her young prentice, Jossa.

“Glide the mop as if you were on ice; careful, sweeping, delicate. It will shine like the moon when you are through.” Leia was teaching the new maiden her routine. She had been excited to have another girl to share the workload, but Jossa was proving a slow learner; not grasping the full responsibility of being house-maiden to a great king. Lately though, the kingdom had lost some of its allure. The name of Roth did not carry the same awe as it once had. King Tobel had been gone for too long and his presence had all but left Roth. The outer reaches of the kingdom had realized the weakness from within. This is why, night after night, they mopped the floors.

“Jossa, stepping where you have already cleaned will not do. You must never tread the same path twice, mop where you have stepped already.” The floor had been caked thick with ale and dirt. The both of them had worked scrubbing on hands and knees for nearly an hour on the stubborn spots. Young men from all over the land invaded the great hall daily to waste the days with spoils of this dying kingdom. They began a while back, at first trying to claim the throne through winning Beatella’s hand. The Queen, thus far, had not given in to their demands, but she could not hold out for much longer. She also could not send them away for fear of open battle with neighboring kingdoms. Without their general, the King, a battle would only end in loss and war.

When the mopping was nearly finished, Beatella came wandering through the hall. Her eyes had a far away look and she was walking on the near dry floor.

“Can you draw me a bath Leia?” she asked.

“Yes my lady.”

“Has Tobias returned?”

“No my lady.”

“He may before the night has ended. Prepare the hall for a great feast, for he may bring back with him my lord, your king.” As she said this, she looked out the window, northeast towards the great river Uil. Near seventeen years had passed since she watched her husband sail north. Her son, Tobias, left one year ago, sailing the great river as well, to find his father; one he did not remember, but loved faithfully. Nearly every night after his departure, the Queen ordered her hall prepared for the return of her broken family.

“The hall will be ready.” Leia assured her mistress as she dreamily walked toward the west quarter of the castle.

“Jossa, pull my lady’s bath. Be sure to have her oils ready and add just a droplet of the Royal Medium’s sleeping aid to her wine, so the Queen will sleep well tonight. I will take care of the feast.” Jossa nodded, made a slight bow, and went obediently to the bathhouse.

Leia took the mop and retraced the footsteps the Queen had made, then put out the lamps, and headed to the housekeepers’ quarters; she made no effort to prepare a great feast.

From the north, the land of the mountain dwellers, came a sturdy clan of men to make their presence felt in Roth. For some time they trudged up through the mountains and down through the plains of Roth, back and forth always. Lately though, like the others, they had taken this land as a part of their own. Amonus, captain of these blue-

eyed men from the caves, led them to the great hall at his leisure. Hassling all who worked in the castle of Roth, these men took advantage of a kingless throne. Amonus was always testing the lady of the house's patience, he was the worst of the warriors to enter the hall of late. The second party consisted of blond men from the east and they are the feistiest of them all. It was these dark skinned seamen who first began drinking the king's ale. Delphio, a princely man who commands the sandy shores, loved his festivities and insisted on their being held daily in the forgotten King's hall. From the south, the slender tree-climbing wanderers had too claimed seats at tables of the Great Hall of Roth. Pale they stalked around the kingdom, quiet as their nature, they caused little trouble, but their leader was the most adamant of all the Queen's pursuers. Chlorian he was named, and carried a short blade ready at his hip. With green eyes he constantly stared at his royal hostess, unrelenting and ravenous. He was a jealous keeper of the woodlands who stood as a silent predator.

At the beginning, these companies came and left, curious all, successful none. They now have permanent camps set up around the outer walls of the city, entering and leaving at their will. There is much tension between the competing companies, each pursuing the Queen to expand their empires. Roth lies in the most fertile of land, between the mountains, the vast forests, and the windy beaches. Capturing this land would give reign between all kingdoms, strengthening trade between regions, and holding passage to the great river Uil. Roth has often been regarded as the mightiest of lands.

Her duties for the day finished, Leia crumpled on top of her soft cot, exhausted from the day's work. All she wanted was the escape of sleep, but she still had planning to

do for tomorrow's preparations. Every night she organized and posted jobs for each member of the King's staff, according to what was needed that day. She had no way of knowing for sure who was to grace the King's hall on any given day, although she guessed the men from the south were to be tomorrow's unwelcome guests; they had not yet come to the hall this week. Chlorian had always been Leia's least favorite prince to come to the hall; however, his disrespect for her Queen and her staff had turned her feelings to that of hate and loathing. Rumors had surfaced of his abuse of the staff and his particular obsession with the young boys of Roth. Leia wrote carefully the daily list of chores, softly hummed to herself, and planned her revenge.

The green-eyed prince, they called him, because of his deep pine eyes, but the people of Roth named him thus for his unwavering stare. He pierces with his envious eyes; unrelenting they sparkle as emeralds following whatever or whoever he desires.

During the fifth year of the King's absence Chlorian entered Roth and approached the Queen on her throne. For years she had stayed proud on her throne before these suitors tarnished her land's name, and now she hid alone in her bedroom. He knelt before the bronze throne.

"I came to ask the Lady of the Great Hall for her hand in marriage. To unite the endless plains and the vast forests and together rule the world. I am a great woodsman, a stealthy fighter, and an honest ruler. With a beautiful queen such as your majesty we would make a strong match for any enemy who would dare to cross our path." He stood and bowed low, all the time his eyes looked up at the Queen.

"The only enemy to cross this land of late is you and your unwelcome, barbaric

hoard. A disgusting lowly man you are and not fit to scrub the stalls of my mules.” She stood higher than him up on the throne and looked down on him with utter abhorrence.

“My Lady, your King was a great man and...” She silenced him.

“He *is* a great man! And he would feed your liver to the eagles if he knew you had dishonored his Queen. Leave my land now.” She motioned to her guard who walked with her out of the Great Hall. As she passed the woodsman, she spat at his feet, looking into his emerald eyes. He clenched his fists tight and stared hard at her until she left the room.

Since the Queen’s unwavering rejection, Chlorian had taken to terrorizing the outskirts of Roth. A few of the King’s battalions had even died protecting the townspeople, ordered to do the best they could to stop these woodland warriors. The Queen, however, could not risk open war with such a strong enemy. The city was forced to live in fear that their crops might be destroyed and pillaged, or their women raped. The prince threatened he would continue his rape of the Roth people until the Queen made him her king. At least when he came to the Great Hall his men were away from the people; so every day the staff prepared to host these evil men, to keep them content with ale and food, lest their boredom turn to anger.

One night, around a great bonfire in the field outside the hall, the keepers had all gathered together. It was after the Autumn Celebration, a night when even the king's staff were permitted to indulge themselves before the winter season. They were giddy with excitement and wine, around the warm fire they huddled close, weary with work from the day’s preparation. One of the young guard boys, Naled, was experiencing his first bout with the effects of good ale. Leia, having always been a mother to the keepers, listened to

the boys rambling with an open heart; the wine was strong in her as well.

"He looks for me often," said Naled with glazed eyes, "Even if I hide he sends someone to look for me."

"Who is it you speak of?" Leia wondered.

"I told him it would dishonor my king and his house, but he threatened me, his lust is too strong and I am just a boy." He looked at Leia with pain on his face. "He told me he would hurt my sister and mother. He told me he had plenty of men looking for healthy women." His voice was frantic but stern. "I cannot let that happen."

"Who did?"

The boy whispered, "He tells me to meet him always behind the tapestry- the one of the Great Ship. I have shamed my family and my King."

Leia held the boy's head in her lap as he cried; he was not older than 14 years. Training as guard, he kept the King's hunting dogs and often roamed with them in the fields before the great hall entrance. Leia calmed the boy, talking and singing to him- he was the same age as her boy was when he had gone off as a mate with the King many years ago. He would be a man now. She felt within her a great sympathy for Naled and gently asked him if he would help her trap the green-eyed prince, to save the Queen and her people.

Jossa ran through the great castle to find Leia. Out of breath and nearly unintelligible she yelled:

“They are all here!”

“Who my dear?” Leia patiently asked.

“The men who hunt our Queen, all three parties my lady.”

“All right, dear, keep to your chores as planned. I will alert the kitchen to the arrival of our guests.” She sent Jossa away and hurried to the kitchen. After telling the cooks to triple the feast, a task they scorned her for, she went outside make to sure Naled still wished to expose the prince.

“Of course I will, I would do anything for my King,” He said, nearly spilling with pride. Leia’s heart went out to him, knowing how scared the boy was, and admiring his courage for his country.

They came just after noon, as predicted. The men from the north wearing their thick furs; the men from the east, their sturdy armor of turtle shells; and from the south they wore tough worn leather of dark greens and browns. They sat as if the room was divided into sections, each captain at the head of their table. They yelled insults across the hall, echoing off the stone walls. By the time the food came out, the men had already drained four full barrels of ale. After they ate, they took to sport. Seeing who of their company could drink the fastest, who could belch the loudest, who could comment on the Queen the crudest. In all the commotion Naled slipped in through a side door quietly and towards the tapestry. Chlorian, who rarely took part in his company’s sport, noticed and followed the boy with his eyes, but made no move. He was sly and meticulous and waited until the crowd roared with laughter over some amusement or another, then slowly

strolled towards the outer wall where all the tapestries hung. Once he disappeared Leia waited a few minutes; she let Naled do his part, hoping he could sell the seduction.

There was a rope, which when pulled, rolled up the tapestry revealing a rectangular inlet. Here, mops, brooms, buckets, and such were stored for the keepers' access during a celebration or feast, usually they would simply slip behind to get what they needed, but tonight Leia had planned to pull hard and quick and make public a scandal. Earlier that day she had the royal medium charm the closet so neither the prince or Naled could hear any mischief from the outside hall.

She grabbed two bottles from the nearest table and threw them with all her might high on the wall. They crashed with a loud shatter, raining shards of amber glass over the nearest table. The men from the south looked at the wall with confusion; at that moment Leia pulled the tapestry upwards.

As the Great Ship rolled up, Chlorian lay on the stone floor; Naled lay shirtless with his head on Chlorian's lap as he gently stroked the boy's hair. Chlorian held the boy's hand and brought it slowly up to his lips, kissing it softly, and holding it up against his cheek for a long moment. He then saw Leia standing over them; startled he stood up quickly, pushing the boy from his reach. The hall stood in utter silence. Naled walked out slowly, chin down, and stood next to Leia. The men in the hall began to murmur amongst themselves, which quickly led to a roar: Men from the north and the east pointing and hollering at the southern prince. Chlorian began firing orders at his men who only stared back, not knowing if their captain could be trusted. At first his orders were for them to resume the feast, but none moved. He sat down to finish his glass, but no one followed. He then ordered their leave: to pack up and go, and he quickly paced out of the hall,

laughter and angry words following behind him. His men then began to file out in no order, leaving quietly and slowly.

The next morning word came swiftly that the men from the south had retreated. Naled kept out in the field the entire day, embarrassed and shamed. Leia carried on as if nothing had changed. She managed the staff as usual and conducted her chores the same, but the castle was buzzing with excitement. Naled was revered as a hero once he came back. Still constantly aware of the unwanted men outside Roth, they were happy for the loss of one unwanted man. It was a small battle for them and they celebrated that night with wine and dancing, and Leia let them.