

*Across the grassland they rode at pace*

*Hoping to win a hopeless race*

*A lightning bolt of equine grace*

*Their heads held high and eyes aflame*

*And his true love's colours in his mane.*

- From the Lay of Sir Brand, by the Equine bard Moralin.

The tavern door opened with a bang, a chill wind ripping off the plains and through the opening to strike at the patrons like a knife and banish the comforting warmth of the common room.

“By all the Gods Trevin see to the newcomer and close the door you useless colt!”

Trevin sighed and scurried towards the door, the innkeeper's harsh words echoing in his ears and making his face burn in embarrassment. The other patrons looked with a mixture of sympathy and mischief at the young stallion, before returning to an earnest contemplation of their ale. Any regular was used to the bad tempered wolf's torrents of abuse towards the horse, and it had become something of a spectator sport to while away the hours of boredom. There was rarely any other kind of entertainment.

The young stallion surveyed the intruder for a moment as he wrestled with the door, finally closing it with a resounding thud before smoothing out the lines of his heavy cloak. The youngster could make out few details yet in the gloom, the unexpected visitor was lost under the dark fabric and a voluminous hood covered his head. Trevin's nose was still working though, and as the cold wind was banished and the scents from inside the tavern reasserted themselves, he picked up a new scent. A stallion; unmistakable for any equine. His nostrils

twitched as he unconsciously registered the scent, mentally cataloguing and comparing against his list of known equines from the town. He drew a blank; this one was a newcomer after all, a rare phenomenon.

Trevin realised he was staring at the horse, and he gave a rueful grin and shook his head before remembering his manners. He hoped the stranger would not complain, he had already had a beating from Krang this week and didn't relish the prospect of another.

"Greetings sir, and welcome to the Grey Wolf Inn. How may we help you this night?"

The stallion regarded his fellow equine for a moment from under the hood, before slowly removing it to reveal his head. Trevin took a half step back, hooves scraping against the rough cobbles of the common room as he took in the sight of tonight's mystery guest.

The stallion was older than he, though he could not determine an exact age. The face was a mixture that made it hard to read; young and distinguished, the rich brown fur matched by black mane and ears that said bay stallion, though the breed was uncertain. A hint of feathering at the wrists of the dark cloak said draft stallion of some kind, big but not massive. The expression was a kind one, at least superficially, an easy smile spreading over the stallion's muzzle.

The eyes though; something about the eyes made the hair of Trevin's mane stand on end, a thrill that went through his body with a corkscrew twist and made him shake his tail and flatten his ears without thinking. Dark grey, like steel, so dark as to be almost black, and yet piercing like the wind that the stranger had let into the tavern. The eyes were not young, nor were they kind. Neither were they menacing; they were simply...other. The younger stallion gave a shudder and mentally said a charm to ward off evil that his mother had taught him as a young colt.

"I would like a room for the night, my young friend. I am expecting to meet someone here, but it may be some time before he is ready for the meeting. I also need my horse tended to. I believe you have a stable managed by your friend? I would be grateful if you could ask him to do me the honour of his

attention on such a miserable night. My mount is my only companion, and I would see him attended before you attend to me.”

The voice too, unnerving like the gaze, but not piercing so much as it filled and warmed, the rolling words leaving Trevin feeling like he did when he curled up by the embers of the fire after the guests had gone, his head resting on his knees and ears flicking in contentment. The realisation made him blush again, and stammer a little. He felt undressed, almost taunted and he did not know why. The stranger had been courteous to a fault, yet he felt like the stallion could see his thoughts, the voice carrying an edge of gentle needling.

“Y...yes sir, Malas manages the stables, and I will see to it that your horse is well settled for the night. In the meantime, would you like to warm yourself in our common room? Perhaps some food and drink?”

“Hmm...your idea is a welcome one youngster. I will sit by the fire as you suggest.”

Trevin was about to open his mouth in apology, directing the stranger to the table by the bar as all the ones by the fire were taken, when he stopped in mid-sentence, realising that the bank of occupied tables he was pointing to suddenly had an opening.

*What had happened to Weskan and his mates? The old grey wolf had been there just a moment ago...*

With a shrug, Trevin watched the stranger walk on heavy hooves toward the table, the common room suddenly silent as many pairs of eyes watched his progress. The young stallion thought of staying a while to make sure everything was ok, but something told him the stranger could look after himself. Instead he motioned to the young wolf at the bar to attend to the guest as he braced himself to brave the winds and lunged through the door into the night.

He found the stranger’s horse tied to the railing of the tavern , a huge brute from what he could make out, and by the smell a stallion. The horse snorted disapprovingly in the cold night, his breath looking like a dragon’s as a sliver of moonlight illuminated it in the yard. Hooves echoed as he stomped the

ground, seemingly impatient for the young stallion to get on with his duties and get him into a nice warm stable.

“Easy boy, I will be back in a moment.”

A grumbling whinny was his only reply.

Hurrying to keep out the cold, Trevin headed for the stable next door, banging on the door to rouse his friend from his own nightly routine. Malas would be tending to his last chores for the night, and he would not welcome a new horse to tend to at this late hour.

“What in all the world is it?” came an exasperated voice.

“Mal it’s me. A new guest has arrived at the tavern and will be staying the night. He needs his horse stabled.”

Opening the top portion of the door, Malas looked out from the warmly lit room to see his friend and broke into a broad grin, one matched by Trevin. The two young stallions were best friends, two youngsters far from home lost in a life of bonded servitude until their contracts were up. They had been in the town now for four years together, and Trevin did not know how he would have survived alone.

Over time their closeness had become a source of pain and regret for him as well. Trevin had begun to feel things for his friend, things he could not easily express let alone acknowledge. A tingling in his body when he watched his friend bathe in the river. A tightness in his chest when they were together. These feelings were getting stronger, but he dared not give them voice lest his friend reject him for them. He would rather half of what he hoped, than risk the chance of losing it all.

On a night like this he found the bargain hard to stick to. He would often sneak into Malas’ room and sit beside him, sharing the warmth of his friend’s body, as Malas would read to him from one of the books of equine lore that so fascinated him. He so wanted more than just the feel of his body; he wanted to kiss, to touch, to give in to the need. It took all his willpower to remain controlled.

His friend loved stories from the old times, the times when the High Equine Kings ruled the land with honour and justice, and peace and prosperity were the norm. They sounded so different to the chaos and terror that had followed the final fall of the old world after decades of ruinous war, famine and plague. Now his kind were more often slaves than lords, their presence tolerated by the other races where they were useful, killed where they were not.

Malas spoke of legends of heroes who would rise up to redeem the kingship for all their kind. It was an agreeable fantasy, but Trevin found it hard to believe. The fantasy was too good to be true, but he went along with it for Malas' sake. The stories were enjoyable whether or not you believed in them; and the chance to nuzzle against his friend was too good to pass up.

All this flashed across his mind as his friend unbolted the door and collected his lamp and keys from the racks beside it, before he emerged into the night.

"Well, we had best get him inside. If he is still a stallion, he won't be for long in this wind, his balls will freeze off before the hour is done. I doubt his owner would like to hand over a stallion and collect a gelding."

As the two laughed together, they headed over to the horse still standing impatiently waiting for attention. He let out a loud whinny that almost shook the walls, and nodded his head rapidly as Malas untied the reins from the railing.

"He is a beauty! Look at his size! This is no ordinary nag Trevin, he looks like one of the warhorses of the old kingdom. What does his owner look like?"

"I could not see much. Stallion, probably a bay shire. There is something about him Mal, I can't put my finger on it. He could easily be a lord of some kind, though I did not think there were any more horse lords left in the land. More likely he is some sort of mercenary. He looks like he could handle himself in a fight."

"I daresay Trev, especially with this."

The stallion looked to where his friend pointed, the obvious outline of a scabbard resting on the horse's flanks.

“As I said, mercenary, warrior, bandit, take your pick. It would explain his strange look, he seemed old and young at once. Probably seen enough to age before his time.”

“Well, if we don’t want to age before our time, I suggest we get his horse inside and settled so we can get back to somewhere warm for the night.”

Trevin was more than willing to go with that plan, and his nickered assent was enough for Malas to lead the proud warhorse towards the stable proper. Behind the living area, the main stables were secured by a heavy wooden door, and Malas cursed under his breath as he struggled to unlock the padlock and main lock before swinging the door open. In these difficult times, you could never be too careful of your horses, there were too many around more than willing to “liberate” them from their owners.

The two friends led the big warhorse into a free stall, setting the lamps so they could see enough to complete their task. They got a good sight of their charge finally, confirming Malas’ suspicions. The warhorse was a sleek spectacle, a big bodied but still graceful Clydesdale in black with white feathering. He seemed biddable enough at least, letting the two young equines lead him without complaint. Trevin could see his tail was braided with what looked like silver thread, and his mane was tied with a length of silk cloth, gold and blue.

“What is that for?”

Malas finished setting some oats for the horse in his feed bucket, before examining him more closely.

“That is odd. In the Old Kingdom, knights would wear their lover’s colours, a length in their horse’s mane, and a length in their own, when they rode into battle. It was a way of keeping their hearts close when they needed them most. There haven’t been any knights in the land since the final destruction of Tanhold though; I thought the custom was long gone.”

“Well maybe this stranger is a follower of the old stories like you Mel. Or maybe he has a mare waiting for him somewhere.”

“Or a stallion.” Malas blushed but continued undaunted. “Amongst the knights of Tanhold, it was common to take a lover amongst their order. One of the

most famous knights of the first war rode alone to his death to avenge his lost stallion, and saved the kingdom by his sacrifice. I have told you the story before Trev, though it is better sung. The Lay of Sir Brand; my sister could sing it beautifully.”

Trevin could see his friend become sombre at mention of his sister. He had never known exactly what had happened; merely that she had died in a slaver raid. He did not want his friend to feel uncomfortable though, and Trevin was also keen to change the subject for his own purposes. All the talk of stallion lovers was reminding him of his own turmoil.

So instead, he hurried his friend into finishing, the warhorse now set for the night with blanket, feed and water, his saddle carefully laid in the tack room, and the stranger’s bags and sword unhooked from the horse. With a farewell whinny, Trevin sent his friend back to the warmth of his room, and headed for the tavern and the mysterious stranger.

Taking the back stairs, Trevin selected room 8, the best of those available, and set the stallion’s belongings on the floor. After setting the fire and lighting all the lamps to make the room more inviting, he was about to head back to the common room to tell his guest his room was ready, but something held him back.

His eyes were drawn to the sword, laid carefully against the wall, the scabbard gleaming even in the low light. By the light of the oil lamps, he could make out the design on the scabbard; silver inlaid with gold, with the gold forming the design of a stylised dragon. The dragon’s eyes were red points of flame, as if they picked up the light of the fire. It took him a moment to realise that they were formed from two small red gems.

Whoever this stallion was, he was not short of money.

Not really understanding why, Trevin reached for the sword, his shaking hands gripping the scabbard and the hilt, before slowly drawing it out. The metal shone like the sun as it emerged from the scabbard, and he could see the same dragon design etched in the blade. The blade was not perfect however; as he drew more out, he could see notches in the edge, and finally a deep dark stain in red.

Startled by the scent of blood, he dropped the sword back into its scabbard hurriedly before collecting his thoughts. Whatever the stranger may be, he was no mere dandy. Based on the look of the blood, he had killed very recently. Not wanting to imagine who might have been his victim, Trevin carefully laid the sword against the wall again and prepared to head downstairs. Whoever he had killed, in these parts the stallion was likely in very serious trouble for doing so. If Trevin could help him evade whatever fate awaited him, he vowed he would do it.

Returning to the common room, Trevin saw the stallion still seated by the fire, an empty bowl at his table and an empty mug by his side. The crowd had thinned, only a few die-hards remaining and seemingly unconcerned by the stranger now as they continued their muttered conversations.

Trevin headed to the bar, asking for another tankard of whatever the stallion was drinking, before heading back towards his table. Focussed on his visitor, the young stallion did not see the glint of mischief in the eyes of the old Snow Leopard at the table near the bar. As he clopped across the cobbles, the leopard casually stretched out his leg, a nonchalant wink to his companions as he contemplated the results of his prank.

He could not have timed it better, the youngster catching his left hoof perfectly on the outstretched leg which rose higher to catch his fetlock and knee as he fought for balance. Unable to recover, Trevin pitched headlong into the cobbles with the tray and flagon flying towards the stallion and breaking on the stones. The dazed stallion lay there for a moment trying to regain his bearings and stop the pain in his head.

“You clumsy colt! I warned you what would happen if you broke anything else! Time to beat some sense into your worthless hide again.”

The snarling and slightly drunk wolf grabbed a heavy cane and headed towards the prone stallion with decision, his arm held back ready to strike. With fangs bared, he prepared to lay into his charge; but the blow never landed.

Utterly astonished, Krang could only stare at the cloaked stallion, who had moved with surprising speed, rising from his seat by the fire and clasp one massive hand around the wolf’s wrist. In spite of his determined efforts to

move, Krang found that he could not in fact move a single inch. He also found he could not break the gaze of the imposing guest, deep steel grey eyes boring into him like arrows.

“I think that is enough of that good innkeeper. The lad was tripped by one of your guests intent on mischief, he did not fall of his own accord. I will pay for any damage, you can be sure, but I will not stand to see this lad hurt because of such foul play. I trust you will agree with me sir?”

Krang stood still, not moving a muscle, his mind trying desperately to work out what to do. He wanted to bare his fangs and rip the throat from this upstart horse, yet every passing second seemed to confirm his worst fears about the likelihood of surviving such an attempt. Eventually he could only nod dumbly and drop his head, his ears flattening in unfamiliar submission. He felt his arm released, and it dropped by his side, the cane falling from his grip.

“Aye...aye you may be right sir. I will take you at your offer though; four gold this has cost me, and four gold I will add to your bill.”

“Very well. Now I suggest you leave us.”

Still muttering, Krang returned to the bar, his face dark but also fearful. Nothing in the town made Krang fearful.

Still dazed from his fall, Trevin had registered the argument above him but been unable to intervene. Krang liked to administer his punishments in company, it amused his guests and humiliated the horse, both of which he enjoyed. The youngster had resigned himself to taking the beating without complaint, and the unexpected reprieve had him a little uncertain. He sat still on the cobbles, rubbing a hand over his chin checking out his jaw for damage.

He gave a soft cry when he felt a hand on him, still mentally anticipating a beating, but this hand was gentle. The stranger had touched his shoulder, the gesture comforting and warm. He felt a surge of something through the touch, a sensation he could not place. Care? Concern? It had been too long since he knew what it meant, but it felt good.

“Let me help you up lad.”

He reached for the proffered hand, the stallion lifting him to his hooves with effortless strength, then brushing off the dust and grime of the common room floor from Trevin's clothes.

"I take it Firemane is well set for the night, I can see from your face you would treat him well. In that case, are you able to tend to this horse as well my new friend?"

The smile was back again, still warm but with a tinge of sorrow this time. And still the same disquieting eyes, now with the reflection of the common room fire, they almost looked like the dragon's eyes on the sword scabbard in the stallion's room. Trevin stared into those eyes for a moment, testing their depths, wondering if they would open up and take him somewhere. They did not, the stallion merely grinning wider at the stare.

"At your service my young lord."

Trevin shook his head and led the stallion to the back stairs and his room.

The room had warmed since he left it, and he stoked the fire as the stallion sorted through his pack. As he turned to look, he saw the stranger holding his sword, eyes elsewhere as he stared at the scabbard.

"Are you...are you a warrior?"

"I am many things Trevin. I guess that is one of them. It is a word that covers a multitude, and yet says very little."

"Are you....are you a knight?"

The stallion looked at him then, his face unreadable except for a slight tremor that seemed to pass across it so quickly Trevin could not afterwards swear he had seen it.

"I was a knight. Many years ago."

"Your friend, the one you were supposed to be meeting here, was he a knight too?"

"He will be, one day."

“I am sorry he did not come tonight. I hope you see him tomorrow, I don’t know if it is safe for you to stay.”

The stallion smiled again, his grin half knowing, half mocking, a soft laughing nicker bursting from his muzzle.

“Who said he did not come, young stallion? As to my safety...well, you need have no fears.”

The nicker went through Trevin, and again his mane stood on end as some presence seemed to enter his body and his mind, opening cupboards and throwing the contents around like a demon.

“What are you?”

“You know the answer to that already Trevin, though your mind does not want to know it. “

“Will you take me away with you tomorrow? Please! There is nothing for me here, you have seen that already, and I want to learn to be a warrior like you. Will you teach me? I know from the stories Mal reads, a knight will take a squire. Can I be yours?”

The stallion shook his head sorrowfully, a look of understanding on his face.

“No Trevin, I cannot take you with me. Tomorrow I will be gone, and where I am going, you cannot follow. I am not the one to teach you to be a warrior, another will have that privilege. I came here for another reason; to teach you who you are.”

“You...came here...”

“Yes Trevin. For you.”

The stallion crossed the three steps towards Trevin in a heartbeat, his body close, scent building in the young stallion’s nostrils. Trevin felt him, his presence, and then hands gripped his muzzle and held him. He looked again in those deep steel grey eyes, and this time he did feel himself falling, falling into something amazing. Lips met his, and the two stallions kissed, hesitant then harder, a burning hunger unleashed in one touch.

Trevin felt hands all over his body, caressing his flanks, digging into the muscles of his hips, then cupping his rump, the touch electric even through his rough clothes. The stallion was not going to let them stay for long though, as dextrous fingers worked on the tie of his trousers, letting the linen fall unheeded to the floor. Next he felt his shirt lifted over his head, the garment flung to the wall leaving him standing, naked and shaking, but not from cold.

The stallion stepped back for a moment, frankly admiring the youngster, before giving him an admiring nod. As it appeared Trevin was too startled to do anything for the moment, he decided to keep taking the initiative. With slow grace, he stripped, cloak, tunic, boots, trousers, until he stood as naked as his companion, the dim lit room concealing and revealing his form to Trevin. The young stallion couldn't help but let out a startled gasp. The body revealed to him was magnificent, male and hard. It was also covered in livid scars, his torso laced with what appeared to have been deep wounds.

"What are you?" breathed Trevin again, as he reached for the body in front of him, fingertips tracing the line of one harsh scar visible through the rich brown fur on the stallion's chest above his heart.

"What do I feel like Trevin? For tonight, just think of me as your guide. No more questions my beloved, we have so little time before the dawn."

He reached for the young stallion, his body now wrapped around the younger horse in an erotic embrace. The kiss resumed, more controlled, the heat building with each moment. Trevin gave in to the feelings, his hands now running down the muscled back of his lover. He felt the touch of another stallion for the first time, and felt the sensation of another male's hard muscled body pressed on his. A low deep growling moan escaped his lips, the stranger now suckling at his neck as Trevin melted into his arms.

A hand found his sheath, fingertips sliding along the leathery skin and sending shudders flowing through his body. Trevin was no stranger to his cock, most nights would see him feverishly bringing himself to completion while imagining his friend touching him this way. Now the sensations were real, and though it was not Malas, the feeling was more incredible than he could have imagined. In a moment he had slid completely free from his sheath, his stallionhood

thickening with each heartbeat as his experienced lover used an expert touch to draw him into the heights of pleasure.

Without warning, he felt himself lifted bodily, the bigger stallion using his strength to lift the younger male into his arms, still kissing him. He could feel something else now too, something exciting and terrifying. The feel of another stallion's hardness, the massive member pressed against him, a hot and urgent presence against his tailhole.

"Do not be afraid. I will be careful."

As he stared into the stallion's eyes, he felt himself being carried to the bed, and laid down with exquisite gentleness, still cradled in those strong arms. On his back, he felt his lover above him, around him, covering him with his body as he readied for the moment of truth. He was patient though, this stallion, and instead of taking the anxious youngster before he was ready, he took his time, a perfect guide.

Lips and tongue started a journey of exploration, with Trevin a new land of infinite possibilities. Down from his neck, down the soft furred cleft between his pectorals, the slight patch of lighter fur on the grey stallion showing the way to heaven for his lover. The stallion followed that path, down from Trevin's chest, across his taut belly until he reached an aching stallion cock, already leaking in its excitement. The scream of surprised pleasure was cut off quickly as Trevin bit down on his own hand to stifle the noise, but the scream continued soundlessly as he felt another male's muzzle take his cock, flexible lips massaging the flare as a tongue lapped at his tip.

It did not take long before the inexperienced stallion was driven to the edge, the feelings building so quickly. Before he could shout a warning, his cock gave a sudden throb and he spent inside the stallion's hot muzzle, each wave of his orgasm leaving him more enthralled and exhausted than the last. Eventually, his climax receded, and he lay there panting in the aftermath. His guide had only just begun however.

Trevin felt his legs raised over the stallion's shoulders, the lips now nibbling across his balls, nuzzling and licking as he went, until finally he reached the virgin tailhole of the young stallion. The stranger was true to his word, gentle

and careful, and he took his time with the youngster. Fingers probed gently, touching the muscled donut before carefully prising open the lips of his tailhole and sliding first one finger, then a second inside to gradually open the exquisitely tight tunnel.

Trevin could only lay back and moan as he felt his sensitive tailhole prepare with loving care. A muzzle replaced the fingers, and he felt lips on his taint and his pucker before a rasping tongue suddenly sought entry, parting his hole and diving inside to the accompaniment of more startled cries. He never knew it could feel like this, even his erotic dreams with Malas had never encompassed such a sensation. He gripped the bedsheets, bunching them in his hands as the stallion's tongue completed the task of readying him for his first time.

Soon enough, the stallion judged him ready, and Trevin felt him again, body over his, with his legs still raised over the shoulders of his love. He felt it again, the thick blunt end of a stallion cock against his pucker, but this time he was not afraid. This time he knew he needed it more than anything in the world.

With infinite care, infinite patience, the stallion took him. A gentle pressure, building until finally the gates of his tailhole opened to receive the invader, the pain of entry making him bite down on his lover's shoulder to stifle a cry. The stallion held there, just the flare inside, his hands caressing and comforting the virgin, before he moved again, another inch sliding inside before stopping, the kisses tender and warm. The long drawn out entry continued inch by inch until a new sensation told Trevin the it had come, the end of the beginning. A pair of heavy stallion orbs resting against his taint as the stallion lay sheathed to the hilt inside him.

Trevin opened his eyes, realising he had held them closed for long minutes while the stallion filled him for the first time. He saw the same care and love in those steel grey eyes now that he had felt in his body, a question waiting in their depths. He nodded once, and smiled, drawing the stallion into a kiss.

Ever afterwards he remembered the feeling of that first time, the way it slowly changed from pain to mild discomfort to indescribable pleasure. The slow careful withdrawals at first, the stallion sliding back in hesitantly, listening for his pained gasps telling him to stop. Then growing speed and hunger in those thrusts, his body warming and relaxing as he grew accustomed to the invasion.

Finally a hard urgent rutting, the slap of solid muscled hips against his thighs as the stallion abandoned all control and took the now ready youngster with skilled passion.

He felt a burning throbbing need build inside as the deeper harder thrusts slammed inside him, the flat end of his lover's cock touching something that made the most exquisite feelings build with each new entry. The body above him grew harder still, muscles straining and heavy breaths flying from flared nostrils as the stallion reached the end of his own race. Finally both stallions felt the end near.

"Now my beautiful one...now..."

Trevin could not imagine defying this command from the warrior stallion, his first lover. Letting the sensations from his tailhole fill his mind, he became one with the pleasure, head thrown back in an unrestrained whinny, a whinny matched but louder by the bay stallion inside him as both climaxed hard, seed flying from Trevin's cock to coat their chests in their passion as he felt the first spurt of hot seed inside him, the stallion's gift filling his depths and marking him with his essence. Long moments passed as they held, two stallions in a world in ruins, yet caring for nothing except the lover in their arms.

It would be only the first of many times that night, as the stranger true to his word showed the young stallion who he was, and the joy that two stallions could share together. Trevin could have had no better teacher for this form of combat, even if he would have preferred to learn another as well.

In one quiet moment, Trevin lay in the stranger's arms, the fire burning bright after he had loaded the last logs into the hearth to keep them warm. He felt a hand stroking his mane, and reached up to return the gesture, his fingers catching on something tied in the long hairs. Turning to look, he saw something he had not seen before; a short length of silken cloth, blue and gold, tied at the end of a long black mane. The cloth was stained though, large dark patches marring the silk.

"Is this the colours of your love?"

"Yes Trevin. I wear them in his honour, even though he is gone."

“But I don’t understand, you still won’t take me with you?”

“It is nothing to do with him, my beloved. I cannot, though I wish I could. And if you knew me you would not want to go.”

“I don’t even know your name, even though you knew mine.”

“You do, though you do not realise it. Ask your friend Malas tomorrow, he will know.”

A kiss had interrupted further questions, as they had before that night when Trevin tried to bargain with the stranger. He knew he was being stalled, but he did not care. The feelings were too good, too perfect, and soon all he could do was cry out and sigh and moan as he was mounted from behind, his lover’s body bent over him, hands entwined and muzzle on his neck. One more slow rocking ride, hips writhing as one, one more mountain of bliss to climb before they slept.

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Trevin woke suddenly, the light of dawn flooding the room with its cold orange glow. He rolled sideways, hoping to find his lover there, but found only an empty bed. The stallion’s bags were gone, his scent missing from the room as Trevin flared his nostrils and gulped in the air hoping against hope to catch a hint of the scent. A scent now burned in his memory, sweet and yet painful.

*Like love*, he reflected ruefully, bitter tears held back with difficulty.

*He said he could not stay, and yet I hoped it would not be. I was a fool, as always.*

Swinging himself out of bed, Trevin placed his hooves on the floor and stood, letting his ears listen for signs of life in the tavern. There were none; it sounded like he had at least risen before Krang. Thankful at least for that mercy, he prepared to head for the kitchens to start readying hot water and food for the guests.

As he gave the room one last look, his eyes caught sight of something on the dresser. Curiosity won out over caution, and he walked over to it, seeing what

appeared to be a letter attached to a small leather bag. With shaking hands, he opened the letter and read, tears flowing as the words entered his heart.

*My beautiful young stallion.*

*As I told you last night, where I am going, you cannot follow, and though it pains me, I cannot take you. Your time is not here yet, and I am glad for it. You can still ride free across the plains for a time, the sound of hoofbeats filling the wind, your laughter warming my heart until the time comes for you to stand at my side. Until that day, do not ignore what is right in front of you. Happiness is a gift from the Gods, and you should never spurn such a gift. You were wrong when you said there was nothing for you here; reach out for it and it will sustain you.*

*I have left you some things that you will need in the dark days to come. Guard them well, and know a stallion is watching over you.*

Reaching inside the bag, he felt something cold, fine metal against his hands, and a touch of silk. He drew the contents out, the shaking reaching his heart now and not due to the cold of morning.

In his hands was a fine scabbard, a dagger sheathed inside, with the outline of a dragon inlaid in gold on silver, and wrapped around the hilt was a length of silken fabric, but not the colours the stallion had worn. This one was green and gold. As he touched the silk, his vision suddenly clouded, and he saw himself, and yet not himself, as if seen by an eagle soaring high. He rode a handsome stallion, like the stranger's only chestnut, a shining sword and shield in his hands as horse and rider stood upon a plain, the wind whipping his mane behind, a mane tied with a silken ribbon in green and gold.

And before him was a dragon, black and glistening in the sun, such as had not been seen in centuries in their land. The dragon was not alone though; on his back sat a stallion, a mighty Clydesdale with white feathers and black mane, armoured like a knight, and holding a heavy shield. A shield in green and gold, like the ribbon in his hands.

A knock and an urgent whisper at the door broke the spell, and he returned to the here and now, disoriented and with racing heart.

“Trevin! Trevin! Are you there?”

“Wait a moment Mal, yes I’m here.”

Pulling on his clothes hurriedly, the young stallion opened the door, startled at the look on his friend’s face. He had never seen Malas so agitated.

“The stranger, where is he?”

“He has gone Mal, why what is the problem?”

“His horse, that is the problem. It’s gone!”

“Well, I assume he is riding it.”

“You don’t understand Trev. I went in to check on the horses this morning. The padlock, the lock, both were undisturbed. No one could have been in overnight, but when I checked the stall, the horse was gone. There was no sign it had ever been there. It just isn’t possible!”

A sense of forboding began to creep over Trevin, the odd feeling of knowing an answer before the question is asked but not believing it anyway. He was beginning to though, as impossible as it seemed. Before he could answer though, Malas caught sight of the scabbard on the dresser.

“Where did you get that?”

“I...It isn’t important. It is mine now.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the ancient stories.”

“I don’t Malas. At least I didn’t. Why do you say that anyway?”

“The scabbard of that blade; the symbol is an ancient one, but a significant one. It is the device of the house of Rad Taslin of the old kingdom. One of the great heroes of the ancient equine kingdom wore it to battle and into history. I mentioned him last night, Sir Brand of the Lay of Sir Brand.”

Trevin looked at the blade again, his hands more still as he turned it over in the harsh light of morning than they had a right to be. His heart was beating like a drum, and yet it was not from fear. In a faraway voice, he replied, though his mind was elsewhere.

“Tell me the story again Malas. I don’t remember it all.”

Malas gave his friend an odd look, sensing something in his voice, but he liked the tale and his eagerness to tell it made him continue without questioning.

“The kingdom was facing its first great threat, and the High King had summoned his knights to prepare to defend against the marauding enemy army of the Archmage Gonfar, leader of the wolfpacks of the Grey Hills. The equine advance force at Tower Keep was cut off and retreated to join the main force at Tanhold. Sir Brand Rad Taslin was a young knight then, part of the High King’s personal guard, but his lover, Sir Tristam Ulf Warden had joined the vanguard at Tower keep. The two had vowed to meet again in battle against the wolves, in this life or the next.”

“As the High King’s combined forces assembled before Tanhold, with the Archmage’s forces preparing across the plains of Alorthan, Brand sought out his lover amongst the escaped knights, hoping to ride beside him in the battle. As he came upon the remains of the vanguard though, he saw the truth in the gaze of his fellow knights; his love had perished in the retreat, holding his ground against a host of foes to buy his fellow knights the time to escape.”

“Overcome by his grief, Brand’s cries echoed off the walls of Tanhold, but were drowned out by a trumpet call of warning. The lookouts had seen the Archmage’s forces move, but not to attack. The Archmage himself had taken up position at the head of his army, and was in the process of summoning, drawing the elements from the Earth to fling them against the knights and scatter their army before the attack.”

“With a loud cry, Sir Brand set off alone across the plains, his mane streaming behind with his lover’s colours tied into his hair, his warhorse Firemane speeding towards the wolf lines. The Archmage’s soldiers took too long to react, expecting the suicidal stallion to break off the charge, and eventually his pack guard formed a shield wall in front of their lord as he gave himself to the dark power and prepared to finish the summoning.”

“Nothing was going to stop the knight in his charge though, seeking death and glory in one, and a reunion in death with his lost lover. With a whinny that filled the plains, he leapt the shieldwall, his sword piercing the Archmage as

the blades of the wolf guard pierced his own body, his lover's name the last cry from his lips."

"The enemy army never recovered from the loss of their lord and his dark powers, and a concerted charge from the knights eventually scattered them. For long years after, the High Kings continued to rule, and to defeat their enemies even as they multiplied. It was said that the spirit of Sir Brand stood at their side, striking fear into enemies of all kinds."

"It did not last forever though did it Mal?"

"No, eventually there were too many enemies and too powerful for even the knights to defeat. Still, the legends say that Sir Brand will return one day when the time is right, before returning to the land of the dead forever. It is my favourite of the old stories Trev, and not just because of my sister's singing. I thought you knew that, I have told it enough times but you never seemed so interested before."

"I should have listened, I am sorry. I think I believe it now though; I am sorry I ever doubted you."

"Why would you not doubt me? I am just a poor stallion dreaming of better things, hope that there might be something better in this world than the life of a servant, and the hope of love with you..."

Suddenly he stopped, his face a mask of terror, and Trevin knew in his heart of hearts what it meant. The stranger had been right.

*"do not ignore what is right in front of you. Happiness is a gift from the Gods, and you should never spurn such a gift. You were wrong when you said there was nothing for you here..."*

"Mal, do you feel for me the same way Sir Brand felt for his knight?"

The look on Malas' face was painful to behold, equal parts terror and longing. It almost made Trevin want to cry. Instead he did something else, something infinitely better. Reaching forward, he drew his friend into an embrace, his lips seeking out Malas' own. In that perfect moment, two stallions kissed, their bodies relaxing into each other as the pain of years evaporated in a moment, and their embrace went on and on.

A sudden gust of wind blew harshly through the yard, scattering the light pebbles across the ground as the windows shook. In the howling gust, hidden by the other sounds, a ghostly whinny echoed, as in another world a stallion gave full throated approval to the moment, though few might know the cause.

Trevin heard though, and knew the meaning. As he held his friend, and his new love, Malas' head against his chest, he looked out the window at the sky, his lips forming two words.

*Thank You.*

Eventually Malas stepped back, his eyes roaming over his friend with appraisal.

"You have changed Trev. Something about you."

"Is it a good change?"

A kiss was the best reply.

"What are we going to do Trev? I don't see Krang allowing us to be together, nor my master."

"Our contracts of indenture finish soon Mal, and I don't know about you, but I am not staying."

"But where do we go? We haven't got anything, and there is nothing left for us at home. It isn't a good place here, but at least we are safe and fed."

"Tanhold. I am going to Tanhold Mal, and you are coming with me."

"Tanhold! It has been in ruins for years!"

"I know, but somehow, I know I will find what I am looking for there, and I need you with me when I do."

The two stallions embraced again, their kiss resumed but restrained. Both knew they would have no time now for exploration. The night however; the night was a different matter. Trevin could still feel a burning feeling in his tailhole, evidence that last night had not been a complete hallucination. He was eager for a repeat, and he was no longer afraid. As the stranger had been his guide, so he could be Malas'.

“Sing for me a little Mal, I want to hear the Lay of Sir Brand.”

“My sister sang it better than I can.”

“I don’t doubt it. But I am not in love with your sister, am I?”

Hiding his pleasure and his embarrassment, the stallion raised his chestnut head, the wine coloured curls of his mane bobbing as his deep baritone filled the room.

*“Across the grassland they rode at pace”*

Bathed in the sound of his love’s voice, and with the words filling his heart, Trevin headed for the kitchens and the start of a new day.

*Across the grassland they rode at pace*

*Hoping to win a hopeless race*

*A lightning bolt of equine grace*

*Their heads held high and eyes aflame*

*And his true love’s colours in his mane.*

*A winged bow shot across the gap*

*With hoofbeats like a thunderclap*

*They charged upon their final lap*

*Stallions both, neither tame*

*With his true love’s colours in his mane*

*With a cry they leap'd the shieldwall high  
And tamed the reaches of the sky  
One task to finish before they die*

*Straight at a foe of mortal fame  
With his true love's colours in his mane*

*His sword shone red in the morning air  
A last goodbye sigh'd in despair  
As they cut them down without a care*

*He died alone, but not in vain  
With his true love's colours in his mane*

*The wolves did stop when they saw his face  
A countenance so filled with grace  
A beauty that death could not erase*

*Voice now stilled, eyes free of pain  
With his true love's colours in his mane.*

*They say long since that blood filled day*

*When the fate of his kind in balance lay  
Once more the knight will join the fray*

*With a ghostly neigh, cross the plain  
And his true love's colours in his mane.*

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