

The breath of dusk was kissing gently the charcoal walls of Carrosh. Large, hewn stones were glowing fiery in the setting sun, just as campfires amongst forests surrounding the fortress. The night would fall soon and those lights would become sinister eyes of a beast lurking in the shadows. How had it come to this? How many times today had she asked herself this question?

They'd come at night. Quietly and imperceptibly like thieves. Like a snake, invisible until the very end. In the absentia of the master. Like bandits. After all, they are just it. But what do they want?

"You have two days." Was everything they'd said. No requests, no threats. None? No. It was a threat. Threat in the glance of that shadow; threat concealed between words, as a dagger in the darkness, said with a harsh, eastern accent. They had come from the country of the sand and sun, but how did they manage to get there?

The balcony clang to a wall of the rectangular keep. I was old and strong, like the mountain it sat on. Carrosh, while not large by any means was impossible to not to admire. Flanking towers and curtain walls roused up high above heads of inhabitants of the settlement. At the foot of the rocky steepness, fenced with a low stone wall, laid a small enclave, sparkling with lights of torches and windows, bustling like an anthill at the roots of an old oak.

Just like their persecutors, the night was flooding the sky from the east, once and again pulling red banners with stronger wafts. The black wolf on a scarlet field danced and writhed, tousled with these sudden dashes of wind.

"We won't dance." She told herself with hard determination.

She was strong. She, her people... her defenders. Her ...defender. But she wasn't the only one he had to protect. These diligent ants were still there, below. Scared and disorientated. Are they strong enough? And then there was her precious...

She turned and went back inside. The dimly lit bedchamber was only a whit brighter than the night outside. It has already sneaked in here. For some reason that thought bristled the fur on her neck.

Near the large bed a cresset hung from the wall. The warm, yellowish little flame

promising home and love, smelled of the aroma of lavender oil. In the embrace of the flickering light the shadow of the cradle shimmered with every movement of air in the chamber. Back, at the donjon it was warm and the floors were made of wooden boards, however, sir Tancred had insisted on her moving to the keep with her son. The stone floors and thick walls of the old tower were bare and cold, and, as if that wasn't enough, draughts were rushing in through the narrow firing ports and often slammed every doors that had been left open. But she would bear through any discomforts, if only to provide safety for the tiny small bundle sound asleep in the wooden cradle.

The grey snout of the little wolf cub barely protruded from under the blankets and furs. When his mother moved her muzzle closer and gently touched her nose to the black, wet nose of her sweet boy, she could hear his calm, steady breathing. A music of silence, flowing with tickling streams of air with every exhalation. She could stare at him for hours, even though his conception had taken so much effort ...Her, her husband... and...

There was a knock at the door. However, it wasn't the violent and careless one, like the others usually were, so she immediately knew who it was. The pup moved slightly, but didn't wake up. She opened the door cautiously and greeted her protector with a gentle smile.

"Lady," The grey wolf bowed his head before her. Since yesterday he hadn't been parting with his armor, which steel plates in the darkness of the corridor, seemed to be a part of his body, dark, as his fur. Two men were accompanying him.

"Sir Tancred? Is something happening?" Her smile disappeared when she saw the guards.

"No, my lady. Forgive me for disturbing your peace, but we want to call a council. You ought to participate."

"We conferred at dawn. Did something change since then?"

Tancred looked at her hesitantly. It didn't fit him. Didn't fit the strong, mature man that he was. And it didn't appeal to her one bit.

"We have a plan, my lady."

In his indiscreet eyes she could see that what she was about to hear on the meeting, would appeal to her even less. She called the housemaid, and left her son in her care.

They climbed down the stairs leading to the lower floor, towards the council chamber, and the guards held on behind them keeping an appropriate distance.

"Sir Tancred...", she started.

"Later, my lady."

The expression of his face and his golden eyes were so determined that she gave up on asking anything more. The knight perfectly knew and she knew to, but the time for words was about to come soon anyway.

When they entered the room, their guest was already waiting for them. It was much brighter there than in the bedroom chamber above. It glanced off his alabaster fur as sunrays off snow, almost dazzling. Similarly to her protector, the fox didn't part with his armor since the enemy had shown. His armor, however, was matt and pitch-black, and also significantly lighter than wolf's. Lord Skylark was under no circumstances a man as impressing, as sir Tancred, though also undeniably handsome. Still, their eyes met on the same level, when he got up to greet her.

"Lady Raelyn," he bowed. The rings of his chainmail rang quietly under the steel cuirass and little taces.

"Lord Balan," she bowed back to him. "I know you two have come up with some plan," she said when Tancred closed the door behind them.

They gathered around the table on which the castle rose. The parchment was old and yellowed, but solid ink walls resisted the passing time equally effectively as the real ones. Between the mountains, sketched with black ink, ran the very pass which Carrosh was destined to guard. Close to the south edge of the map began a line of trees, the front guard of the wilderness stretching far further on the entire highland. The map had been depicted very solicitously and included all the upheavals, valleys

and also known caves. However, it didn't include the areas lying north of the pass. For several dozen miles to the north laid the domain of the Skylarks, from immemorial times, loyal vassals of the Dormers. The wolf house guarding the pass never feared any threat from the north.

Raelyn had seen this map only a few times, never though were these situations pleasant. Over the sheet stood properly positioned wooden figurines of the knights, soldiers and archers. At the foot of the walls, keeping watch, were placed symbolic posts of the enemy forces. Several wooden tents gathered behind their line represented the enemy camp. She tore her gaze away from the table when sir Tancred took his place.

"This band's commander most evidently is a blind fool. They haven't secured the rear wicket," the knight announced. "I sent three scouts."

"One of them has not returned yet," Balan Skylark pointed out.

"It's still not too late," the wolf retorted to him with a cloudy expression. Raelyn wished she believed that too.

"This is war. This pup was about fifteen years..."

"He IS fourteen. His father serves in the guard."

"Have they brought any news?" The countess changed the subject. She sincerely pitied the boy, but this conversation couldn't bring anything good.

"As we expected. They're mercenaries. No colors, nor flag," answered Tancred.

"Condottieri?"

"Most certainly not, my lady. Their contracts are open. Besides, too many people from the desert," lord Skylark explained. "Even condottieri don't trust them excessively."

"Untrustworthy ones will honor nobody with their own trust," stated Tancred. "Lord Balan is right. These here, they don't wear any symbols; are none of known

companies."

"What does it mean to us?" the lady asked. "We know they came from the sands anyway."

"That's the thing. That's all we know," Tancred replied sourly.

"Somebody clearly doesn't want to admit to the attack on the castle," added Skylark.

"I am not surprised," the wolf agreed and addressed Raelyn, "Your husband will be furious when he finds out about this, my lady."

"Murtagh won't forgive this insolence, even if the Gods themselves stand behind it." The name of Murtagh Dormer awoke fear in the hearts of their enemies. Unfortunately, as it turned out, not from afar.

A week before her husband had set off to Dalarenz heeding the call of the prince. Balan Skylark had arrived on the pass with two dozens of his people just after the departure of his sovereign. He hoped to offer the count congratulations for the birth of his son, but the prince had insisted Murtagh hurry, so they failed to meet. Raelyn offered hospitality to the friend of their family, and he willingly accepted. But the day before all of this this descended upon them unexpectedly, like a bolt out of the blue sky.

"We think we can treat our persecutors properly right away." Skylark's words tore her out from her reverie. "According to our estimates they have at most five hundred people."

"And what if you are wrong? Maybe the rest hid in bends and caverns?"

"We checked it," ensured the wolf.

"That is exactly why we have one scout less. Ahh... fewer."

"We do not know this yet." Tancred looked at the white fox with determination.

"It is necessary to accept the worst possibility. We must assume that the boy got caught, questioned, even killed, and the enemy stays awake."

Raelyn couldn't disagree with Skylark but she kept this thought for herself. Tancred was a noble wolf and he didn't put up easily with loss of the people. Years of service and scars hadn't been able to change this. This she always admired in him. In Murtagh some of those reactions already died a long time ago. And he changed. Forever. His commander of guard kept his heart intact under his armor.

"This, after all, doesn't make any sense," she stated suddenly.

Both men looked at her inquiringly.

"If they really appeared in a force so small, then attacking us is simply madness," she explained. "How many people had Murtagh actually left in the castle?"

"I have two hundreds. Eighty of them are archers. And then, the peasant militia if things turn bad."

"And my unit."

"They won't stand a chance." Maybe she didn't understand the matters of war, but she definitely could count. A crew smaller only by half from besieging forces would finish off any enemies at the first onrush.

"They intend to besiege us?" she asked, immediately realizing how ridiculous and absurd was the thought.

"I would suspect so, wasn't it for their two-days ultimatum," Tancred said.

"What could they do, if we don't open the gates tomorrow?"

"We won't have the opportunity to find out," dropped lord Skylark enigmatically.

"What is that supposed to mean? What do you intend to do?" The question here was unnecessary. Sir Tancred's nervous behavior earlier and all she had heard there told her everything.

"Without a doubt the enemy is aware about the departure of his lordship and approached our walls, counting on a sitting duck," Tancred said "Certainly they assumed we have only little crew left, hence Carrosh lays far away from our borders. We never commit that mistake."

"Rightly so," agreed Balan.

"I intend to take half of our forces and make a sally. We're going to strike at their left wing and pierce through to the very camp of the enemy," announced Tancred showing it on the map and moving the wooden knights on its surface. "They gave us their ultimatum and do not know our number. Now they are waiting for our decision, giving up all the initiative. I'm going to show them the real meaning of the phrase: a grave mistake. We will surprise them, same, as they surprised us. Quick and firm."

Raelyn listened to the resolute declarations of her defenders while looking at the map. All of this seemed so simple down on it. Figurines of soldiers looked like toys. But this wasn't some kind of game. Death danced on the map among the inky rocks and forests. It would dance tonight on the pass. She knew that Tancred and Balan were presenting the plan to her, but they weren't asking for permission. Murtagh had entrusted the command to sir Tancred and she didn't have any say in this matter.

"Are you sure this is not a trap? What if you won't manage, sir Tancred?" she asked looking straight into his noble, yellow eyes. "Carrosh will be left undefended and without a commander."

His face remained imperturbable. Even eyes.

"Therefore, we established that lord Skylark will remain on the castle. He will guard you and your son, my lady. If I didn't return, he will retain the command until his lordship, count Murtagh, comes back."

The world stopped for a moment as this vision settled in her mind. This will not happen, she said firmly to herself. As if echoing her thoughts, lord Skylark expressed his deep conviction in rightness and likelihood of success of their

scheme.

"When do you plan to leave, Tancred?"

"After midnight, my lady. I will lead our troops through the rear wicket. We know the area significantly better, and the in darkness, this gives us even the greater advantage over the enemy."

And with that the council was finished.

"You shouldn't go."

He was looking at her unaffected, his expression unreadable, but his arms crossed on his chest betrayed the stubbornness.

"How did I know it would be so?" he sighed.

"Does it surprise you?" she asked, louder than intended. The puppy moved in his cradle.

"No." He retorted only after a moment, leaning on the balcony's doorpost. The doors were open on the dark night. Moonlight fell on his right side in such a way, that half of his steel-clad body was almost white. Like death.

She snorted. Not so much because of his answer, as for the need to repel this feeling. But he lowered his ears anyway.

"Of course not. I've seen it in your eyes when you came for me this evening."

"Because I knew we will have this conversation anyway" he answered resigned.
"I knew you would worry."

"Then I'm glad I did not disappoint you."

He didn't answer, only closed his eyes and lowered his head. Like a beaten dog. Or wolf in this case. It only took a moment for her to not know anymore, whether she was angrier on him for this plan they elaborated with Skylark, or on herself for her harsh words.

"Why do you do this to me?" he whispered suddenly, his voice trembling with emotions. This voice, somehow louder than yelling, she had heard coming from him only a couple of times. And she certainly didn't expect to hear it now.

"What do you mean?" she asked, taken aback.

"What do I mean?!" Tancred spread his hands helplessly. He stood up at the center of the room, so that weak glimmers of candles sent a delicate orange-haze shroud

over his gray fur. "Who am I, Raelyn?" he inquired.

But what are you asking about, dearest? There were so many answers to that question.

"You are..." she started, looking into his golden eyes. They waited, as if the words to be told weren't supposed to be a confirmation of what was, but a sentence of what was to be. They filled her with fear. "...you are the one I love," she said without an eye blink. "You are the one, whom I should have taken as my husband in the presence of the Gods, that day."

His face warmed up with a smile. A sad smile, but a smile nonetheless. And every smile of Tancred was hers too. He approached her and embracing her delicate paw into his own, mightier ones, he brought it closer to his muzzle and then touched to his cheek. She felt the soft fur under her paw pads. It was darkgray, like steel, and as long as untouched, it always gave an impression of rough and unpleasant. That was the way Tancred was. Severe and tough, but that was just the surface. Anyone who got past it, got to know the spirit in this strong body, knew that he was...

"I know, love," he spoke quietly closing his eyes, sinking in her caresses. "And I do not want it to change... But I'm a knight," he said. She saw firm loyalty, when he looked at her again. "I serve. I serve Carrosh. It's people. You... and your lord husband..."

"He is not mine."

"...and his heir, if gods permit." He finished, looking at the small young wolf cub sleeping in the cradle.

"He is not his."

"Wenzel will rule Carrosh. Like his father," said Tancred with emphasis. "I have duties. I have to defend the castle for him."

"Then defend!" She whispered almost pleadingly, embracing his face with her delicate paws. "They gave us two days. What could they do afterwards? Attack? You will crush them from the walls."

"I will crush them now. They are weak," he assured, returning her gesture. His hands were strong, pads on his palms hardened from hours of trainings with sword. They promised pain to enemies and safety to friends. The certainty of victory in Tancred's eyes equalled the one coming from his mouth. "I already fought in battles and tournaments, you know?" he smiled reassuringly. She wished it was enough.

"I know." She stroked his cheek. "It's just... you know that I am not a fainthearted woman?"

"You are strong and courageous." He touched his cold, black nose to her own. She couldn't resist a smile, in spite of what she was about to say.

"And nonetheless..." She feared for him like never before, but still felt foolish. She lowered her head and in his breastplate, polished as mirror, she saw her own distorted reflection. Beneath it beat the heart, that belonged to her. Would it beat for her, ere the sun rises the next day? Maybe too highly you think of me, beloved...

"What's the matter?" he finally asked, raising her chin. "Tell me."

"I have a hunch. Maybe it's stupid. But... I have a hunch that after this night... I won't see you anymore."

Tears filled her eyes and with a clang of steel she held on to him. Nestling to his neck and chin, she drank off his scent, and he held her tight, giving as much time, as she needed. Both of them needed. She did not know whether a minuted passed or was it the entire quarter, when he broke the silence.

"I have a hunch too, Raelyn."

She stepped aside to look into his eyes. There were seriousness and concern in them.

"I have a hunch that something stands behind this two-day ultimatum. Our enemy, whoever it is, is either a complete fool, or an insidious gambler. Tomorrow I don't want to see from this balcony three times more people at the feet of our walls, you understand?"

"We would know if..." her protest died, when she realised.

"Like we knew about this unit?" tilting his head he indicated the forest outside. "Raelyn, I prefer to get my hands on the enemies, when I still have them within my reach. Easier and safer to beat off the walls five hundred than thousands. With every hour the chances increase that the enemy will receive reinforcements."

"And what about me? About your son?"

"He is not..."

"He is!" she protested. "Even, if only you and I know about this. Murtagh has his child. He took her to Dalarenz."

"She is also your daughter."

"And I love her with all my heart," she ensured, approaching the cradle with the sleeping cub. "And this is YOUR son."

Tancred came along after her and looked at the fruit of his loins. He fought a lost battle and it was long since he had admitted this to himself. The time had come for this truth to see the daylight.

"You know I love him." He said looking warmly at the puppy.

The wolfess took his hand, their fingers interlocking. Her precious, silvery-light fur was standing out against Tancred's, like a moonstone would stand out against basalt rocks.

"I know," she answered calmly. "And never try to change it. For a knight, a smith, a priest one can become. And one can stop being. One cannot stop being a father. With me and Wenzel links you the bond stronger and more important, than any oaths or obligations a knight can swear to his lord."

Tancred smiled hearing these words. Though only a little older than him, Raelyn not seldom amazed him with words that even an aged matron of an esteemed dynasty

wouldn't be ashamed of. And it was all the more astounding when wisdom was coming from such a gorgeous creature. It was always hidden there, in her emerald-green eyes, so beautifully contrasting with the scarlet gown she was wearing.

He felt the warmth in his chest that cold night and draughts of old Carrosh couldn't ever blow away. Reaching with his free paw toward the small wolf pup he gently caressed his cheek. Little one didn't awake, but moved his short, fluffy muzzle and licked his fingers several times. And for these few seconds Tancred felt higher than the Patrons themselves.

"You see?" Raelyn asked with joy in her eyes. In this "kiss" he received from his son, in this look the wolfess was bestowing upon him, was a force so great that the knight would gladly ride into the battle alone, convinced that nobody would manage to match him anyway.

"This is a blessing," he said. "I will ride on the enemy with this moment in mind and destroy them to return for more." He tightened his paw into a fist. The same paw, that a moment ago touched alive innocence, and in an hour will draw a sword.

"Allow me then to give you my own blessing as well," whispered Raelyn.