

# Dance of the Blood Moon

Ferris Argensis

## Chapter 3

In the morning I dressed myself in ornamental robes, dabbed perfume under my chin, gathered four guards in their formal armor, and set off to find Alexis at her homestead. The ride there was direct, swift, with only directions being spoken between myself and the coach's driver. The entirety of the trip my mind was focused on seeing Alexis again, just to enjoy her presence. My heart beat in chokes as I pondered to ask her hand in marriage. I was certain I would summarize the courage; I looked my best, my men looked their best, I even smelled my best - how could she not be drawn to me and accept my proposal?

My coach parked outside of Obi's home. Obi had been taking care of Alexis since I brought her and her father here to live. The old fennec had a wife and two children and lived a leisurely life with the grand patriarch of Ferristead as one of his closest friends. I recall him warmly accepting to provide shelter for Alexis while her father and the neighbors worked on her new home. Yet, passing by Marty's project-home, I noticed it looked more like ruins with the roof and two of its walls collapsed in, than a work-in-progress. I knocked on Obi's door.

A young fennec-pup in a casual black dress answered the door. I recognized her immediately as Tilly, Obi's youngest daughter of three. Unlike her older siblings, she was born outside of my palace. I greeted her warmly: "Hello, Tilly. You've grown."

"Hello, Mr. Argensin." She smirked up at me, then ducked herself left-and-right to register my party. "Are we in danger?" she then asked me.

"No," I responded, then corrected her, "We're looking for your father. Is he around?"

She nodded briefly, gazing up at me at wide-eyes. "Yes, sir, but daddy said I couldn't let anybody in now. You'll have to go now, Mr. Argensin."

Just then her father, Obi, strided for us from around the hall, calling out: "Tilly, it's okay, they're friends."

Tilly stepped to the side for her father, who greeted us by shaking my hand. "It's nice to see you today, Lord Ferris," he said. "Are you looking for Alexis?"

I confirmed and asked that I see Alexis if she's busy. His grey face softened. "She's having a moment or mourning for her father," he said.

I startled. "Did he have the plague?" I asked.

"No," he said severely for our nerves. "Come in inside and I'll explain." He overlooked my entourage and continued, "This doesn't concern them."

I stepped in past him and he shut the door behind me and locked it. Merry was sent to the kitchen to prepare a kettle of tea for us. He asked me: "Which do you prefer? I have black tea, blueberry tea from the imperial city, and a pepper blend made locally."

"Anything to settle my nerves," I requested.

He called out to Merry in the kitchen, "Merry, when the tea is finished would you bring us some of the blueberry blend and my honey whiskey?" He offered me a seat on his couch, which I took, while he made himself comfortable in his leather high-back chair by the fire, where across from it faced his wife's cushioned recliner.

"About Marty," he began before his face went grave. "He doesn't have much time left."

"His daughter and the neighbor's boys brought him in here a few days ago with a sore back. It turned into a cough, and now all that comes up is blood." For a moment he looked regretful and cast his gaze against the fireplace, which needed to be restocked. "I told him to take it easy on himself, or to at least do something that didn't require strenuous labor, but he didn't listen. He said he felt fine, that his arthritis wasn't acting up because of this weather. It was so nice just a few days ago... Winter is coming early this year, did you know?"

"I noticed that," I said. "Didn't think much of it. I was told to expect it, considering how nice the summer's lasted. How's Alexis taking it?"

"She's just a child," he confessed bitterly. "She might look like a maiden, but I assure you there's a reason she hasn't married yet." He turned severe and went on: "She's in her late twenties but she's still obsessed with playing with dolls and building little houses out of pulled-up grass. There isn't a fiber in her that is in the least thoughtful about mothering, being a wife, or even at least courting. I'm hardly convinced she's ever had a crush on a boy before..." I watched him stiffly from the couch until his expression quickly fell and he softly admitted: "Tilly likes her, at least - they play together as though Alexis were just another of her playmates from down the road."

I was deflated with grief at this assertion. "What if she's just eccentric?" I suggested whilst glaring at my lap, and felt gross to be wearing these clothes at all.

"Lord Ferris," began Obi in earnest (he'd always been an anxious man, which I believe all fennec-folk to be), "An eccentric person can still carry adult responsibilities. She can carry them as well as - oh..." he stammered for a moment, "A ten-year-old."

"I don't want to hear anymore," I declared, "I love her. And... even if she's not *all there*, I don't care. I'm going to ask her to be my wife soon."

There was a subtle distress in Obi's voice. "You'd be taking advantage of her sorrow if you proposed to her within the next week. She'd be blinded with grief and say yes to any proposition that she might have a place in someone else's life again."

I shook my head. "Never mind the tea. I'll go see Marty now."

As a I left my seat on the couch Obi left his to reach for me, exclaiming: "He's on his deathbed!"

I continued down the hallway, declaring, "I'm sure he'd like to be visited by a friend."

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I followed the sounds of somber mutterings coming from out of the last room on the left. A hairless canine in just his shorts was standing outside the door - I identified him as the doctor. Some doctors will shave themselves entirely bald and work in a minimum of undershorts to prevent contamination. He noticed me and quickly bowed before greeting. "Lord Ferris," he began, "What might I help you with today?"

"I'm here for Marty," I declared while striding past him and turning into the doorway.

He put his bald arm out to stop me and looked me sternly in the eyes, "I can't permit that right now, for the sake of decency." He was speaking hushly.

I looked inside the room and saw Marty reclined on a featherbed under thin white sheets - he looked so thin, like he hadn't eaten anything in weeks, and his fur had lost its vibrancy from constant loss. His eyes were deepset and pale, and the brown had deepened to black. Alexis was kneeling on the bed, laying over and resting her head on Marty's chest. Her eyes were pink and glazed with grief, and she choking back tears. Marty's boney hand steadily caressed her head while he hummed something fragile and sweet.

"Step back, and we'll speak," said the doctor.

I stepped back into the hall. In whispers I asked him: "How long does he have."

"I don't think he has another two hours. He's old, and traveling here wasn't that good for him, either. You escorted them here from their old village, correct?"

"The plague was coming in from that direction," I told him. "He was fine when he arrived."

"Whatever he's experiencing started when he got here, and got lethally worse with the winter winds started coming in. He should've been resting instead of building a home."

"Wait a minute," I declared, "Don't blame this on me. I'm not the one who - "

"I'm not blaming you," he said. "He's an adult and made a terrible mistake on his part for building a house... he should've just asked the neighbors to do the work and compensated them later. And why was he living in a tent? That's the worst decision for a sick man to make for resting in."

The doctor had more to say, and for everything he added I felt guilt for not doing more to ensure Marty's adjustment to this environment. As I was about to defend myself again, he interrupted me:

"Whatever the case is. He underestimated himself and now he's brought himself to an early grave. I got worried when he stopped coughing up so much blood out-of-the-blue."

"I hardly knew the man," I stated defeatedly.

"He did mention you a day or two ago. He even had a letter written and sent off to the palace. Didn't you receive it?"

"I... No, I haven't."

"You should talk to somebody about that then. But there's nothing that could be done for him yesterday as well. The medicine required to treat this hasn't been discovered yet. Most likely never will."

"I need to go comfort them," I declared.

"Wait 'till she's asleep at least, my Lord."

I stepped back and reclined against the wall on one leg and waited, occasionally peeking into the room and peaking out. The doctor reached into his bag on the floor, pulled out a glass flask and offered it to me. "Bourbon," he stated. I refused him at first, but as he was about to take a swig for himself I changed my mind and drank. Obi eventually joined us in the hall, and the doctor passed the flask to him, and he drank as well. Today was a good day for bourbon - and by the way we passed the flask and shared a quiet cooperation - they thought the same.

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Marty's dark eyes flickered vibrantly if just for a moment when he saw me step inside. He said to me, "Lord Ferris - you got my message?" His voice was like that of an autumn leaf flickering in the wind.

"It never reached me, I confess... There was a mix-up." (I shouldn't have been fooling-around with Clarice yesterday; I would've gotten the message, but what's done is done.) "But I'm here now." my voice quaked just being in the same room as him; I hoped our last encounter would be a pleasant one.

"You're a true coward," he tells me bitterly. "Come here."

I approach him in careful steps, frowning down at him. "Don't forget who I am. This is my city."

He frowns deeply, furling grey brows and shaking his head in disgust. "You had a chance to be on my good side. You had a chance to take my daughter in marriage, but couldn't muster the gut to confront her."

"Excuse me - " I exclaim in cry, "I came here today to propose to her."

"No chance now. Once I'm gone, anyone who comes along would just be taking advantage of her broken heart. I won't allow that - I'll haunt them if I can." He spoke as though making a promise.

"Would it appease you to have your house finished after you pass?"

"She hasn't said a word about you since she came here," he groaned at me. "She thought you were so awesome on the way here, and she loved looking at birds with you at the front coach... But once you took us here you disappeared off the face of the planet. Doesn't matter if you had to deal with the plague - if you love a woman, you'll make ways for yourself to see her."

"I didn't know what to say," I said softly.

"She thinks you hate her because of the way she dances, Ferris. You left right in the middle of her dance the other day, so now she doesn't dance like she used to."

"What about the feral lamb I sent to her afterwards? Surely she must've noticed that gesture."

He sourly shook his head. "She hates the stuff; wouldn't have a bite."

I bitterly pleaded with him: "Is there any way I can undo this?"

"That's up to you." He looked away to cough into a tissue that was wadded-up in his fist, and when he took his mouth away there was dried blood already in the tissue. "But if you want me to like you again, promise me that you'll be her patron when I'm gone."

"Please don't do this." My voice was trembling on sobs. I couldn't look into his fading visage any further, so I looked away towards the wooden floors and saw the toes of my brown-suede shoes sticking out from under my robes.

"I'm going to die," he asserted firmly. "And-..." his breath left off and he had to take another grasp. "It's happening soon... " He reached out his hand towards me. "Promise me."

I approached him wearily, reaching out with one hand to take his. When I shook, he felt so cold and so fragile, like he was made of paper. "I promise," I said, and tried to let go but he held on and glared into my eyes.

He asked once more: "Promise?"

"I promise," I said louder than the first.

"Swear on your life?"

My words fell like pennies into a tin-can. "I promise..."

His grip weakened until it slipped out of my grasp and collapsed on the bedsheets beside Alexis's snoozing head. He shut his eyes and took a weary breath before saying, "One more thing, Ferris."

I knelt down close to him by his side against the bed and took his cold hand one last time. "Anything you want, sir," I asked.

"Promise me... " - he takes a wheezy breath before continuing - "She'll make it out of this alive."

The pulse in his fingers disappeared. He laid his head back against the pillow, and I could hear his last breath passing out between his pale lips. What words I said next were so quiet and so shaken that I wasn't sure they were really spoken at all, but I think he heard me clearly from wherever he was then.

"M-Marty?" I reached forward to nudge him from his sleep. Though I shook his shoulder, he didn't respond. My voice trembled: "Please come back, sir... "

Alexis awoke and noticed me over her and Marty. She rose and shoved me aside, starting to cry: "Daddy? Daddy, wake up!" I jumped away and watched her come undone before his body. She kept calling his name, but he didn't respond. The doctor and Obi ran into the room, shoved the screaming Alexis aside and tended to him. The doctor said gravely with two fingers pressed into Marty's neck: "It's over, Alexis. It's over." They both stepped back, turned away, and let Alexis cling to what was left of her father.

I stepped out into the hallway, fell against the wall, and tried not to listen to her wails. "Come back!" but Marty would never speak again.

Obi joins me in the hallway moments later, looking raggedy and deflated. "He's at peace now."

I shook my head. "No he's not." Obi glared at me. " - He won't be at peace until this is all over."

"The plague?"

I nodded.

"You've dealt with it, haven't you?"

I nodded again. "I'll give it another week for the sick to die off. The needles did their jobs."

"I remember that..." Obi unconsciously rubbed a sore spot on his finger. "I think I took that worst of all."

"And the girls?" I asked.

"They didn't mind too much. They were tough about it."

"Good." A moment passed before I asked him, "What about Alexis?"

"She did fine - but she wouldn't let them anywhere near her father with those needles. Marty had to have a talk with her and convince her to let them."

I slid my back down against the wall until I was sitting against the molding.  
"Marty made me promise to take care of her. I promised to be her patron, take care of her and all that."

Obi looked gravely at me. "You're not going to propose to her, will you?"

"No." I shook my head sourly. "No. She's... just simple. But I'll take care of her like she were my own."

"She'd be your eldest if she were adopted."

"I should adopt her."

"You should... You could leave her a share of her fortune. She'd never worry about food or housing again."

"She'd grow old and alone. I'll give her what she needs, but I don't want her to end up like me. A palace in a lonely place, no matter how many people you try to fill it with."

Another moment passed before I finally confessed: "I should court her instead. Obi, I love her, no matter how simple of mind she is."

Obi frowned bitterly at me. "You don't love her," he said. "You just love the innocence she represents. It's cowardly to hide in her."

*Coward.* "What did you say?"

"It's cowardly," he said again. His eyes drilled into my chest. "You're trying to find your peace in her. She's blind to cruelty, terror, worry - totally dependent and in awe of anyone who will take her in. She might have a woman's body, but she's naive in all the

worst ways." He puts his hand on my shoulder, and tells me something that only a close friend of mine could say: "I'll hate anyone who takes her trembling hand."

Later that afternoon, I, Obi, and his wife approached the cemetery on the edge of the neighborhood. We were looking for the cemetery master to purchase a grave for Marty, but Obi stopped me and pointed into the cemetery. Scores of families were gathered all across the cemetery ground, giving funerals for loved ones lost so recently. An old badger in a black suit hung a sign on the cemetery gates that said: "Sorry, we're not offering graves at this time."

Obi said, "I think he would like it if we buried him by his house."

His wife agreed. "I think he'd like it if we finished it for him. Alexis needs a place to live, doesn't she?"

I remembered what Marty had said in his last moments and confirmed. "I'll send some people over. It'll be finished before the week is over."

Obi smiled at me, laughed as he said, "Make it modest for once, Ferris. No diamond chandeliers or tapestries, okay?"

I smiled meekly at him. "I'll put in only *one* chandelier. Sound fair?"

We broke into laughter and made our way back to his home. My entourage dug Marty's grave and got it done before nightfall. I didn't stay for the funeral, but I was told that Alexis didn't attend until everyone had gone. Before the night was over Obi invited me stay for dinner - to which I agreed. We enjoyed a somber meal, where an empty seat with a flower before the plate in Marty's memory lay. There was another chair across from Marty's seat where Alexis usually sat as well, but was never filled during the meal.

Afterwards I gave my farewells to Obi, and I and my group departed for the coach. As I was about to enter, a window on the side of Obi's house opened up where

Alexis scrambled out to approach me. Her eyes were still glazed and red around the edges, but she stood upright with a forced confidence then.

She asked, "Are you going to come again tomorrow?"

For her, all of my reservations for tomorrow were suddenly canceled. "Yes," I responded, "During the afternoon. I was going to oversee the construction of your home."

"I want to hang out with you, is that okay?" she asks.

I carefully glare over her before answering: "Yes, I'd love to."

She reached out her hand for a moment, then pulled it back in hesitation. Everything about the way she was acting appeared to be poorly rehearsed: the way she stood, how her shoulders pulled-up, and the powerful eye-contact she made with mine, trying not to show any expression of sorrow or elation. "Thank you," she responded. She returns to her home in the same way she came. I and my party return to the palace after nightfall.

Returning to the castle, Clarice approaches me in the foyer. She looked indignant as she presented a small stack of scrolls to me. "These are for you," she scoffed. A knot curled in my gut when I remembered when theses were delivered. I took the smallest in the stack and unraveled it. My expression froze in terror mid-way through. Once finished, I softened and, with trembling fingers, carefully rolled-up the parchment. "Who are the Voidgazers?" I asked Clarice.

"Pessimists gone religious," she answered coldly.

"They're monsters," I replied. "Truthless monsters."

"The people seem to like them," Clarice said whilst folding her arms. She then added: "The people can't get enough of their teachings."

"And what do they teach?" I inquired.

"Insignificance, hopelessness, fatalism. The list goes on. They've been mercy-killing in the camps all day. When they're not killing, they're out in the streets urging everyone to accept their fates."

I carefully handed the scroll back to her, where she turned around and set it on a nearby vanity. "How do you know all this?" I asked, resuming towards the stairwell. Clarice followed beside myself, in synchronized pace.

She answered impatiently: "Because it's infected our palace."

I stopped and placed my hand on her shoulder. "Who?" I begged.

"Some of the staff, a few of your concubines," she responded. "I saw a note with their mark in the pile, actually."

I considered the pile still on the vanity. "I need to hire a lookalike and just disappear for a week or two..."

She grabbed me and pinned me against the wall. Grinning from ear to ear, she said, "Yes! And I know exactly where we could go!"

"Where?" I stammered.

"Back to Everygreen, my hometown." Her claws were prodding into my skin through the fabric of my robes. "I've been meaning to take Arthur there, but if you come, it can be a holiday!" She insisted once more, "Come on, let's get out of here and just come back when it's all over. I'm sure Holume wouldn't mind being give the city. He could even stay in your palace while we're gone."

"I like the idea of that," I confirmed with a mutual grin, then gently pried her paws off my shoulders. "I'm sure the others would like to come as well."

She shook her head slow and firmly at me, keeping her cold eyes narrowed on mine. "It needs to be just us, Ferris."

I shook my head in the same manner, though much more patronizingly - which I would come to regret. "No," I returned. "Where I go, they go. For the sake of my presence." I saw her paws clench against the wall in my peripheral.

"Then wherever we go, always keep me by your side."

"Clarice," I responded soundly, "You're not my *special thing*."

At that, she slammed her fist into the marble wall by my head and jerked herself away, growling. "Bastard!" she scorned, and stomped down another hall.

Realizing my mistake, I sought redemption. "Hey! We can still visit your family, though!" Her distant stomps drifted to silence. The hallway had become too long and too empty all of the sudden, and it carried my echoes as far as it stretched.

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I went to Obi's the next day to retrieve Alexis for our outing together. One of his daughters saw me coming down the road in my golden coach, and momentarily stopped shoveling hay to beat me to the door and inform her father of my arrival. He stepped outside to meet us before I made it to his front door. His arms were crossed, and he looked deeply disappointed in me.

"My Lord, you're going to need a chauffeur," he put bluntly.

"There'll be no need, my old friend," I responded warmly as I approached him with open arms. "She just needs someone to discuss her problems with, someone she approves of."

When I was standing close enough to him, he leaned forward on his tip-toes and whispered into my ear, "She might be simple, but she's still a woman in some ways; she knows to fill a nest when it's empty."

"You don't have a lot of confidence in her," I asked concernedly, "Don't you?"

He lowered himself flat on his feet again, right as Alexis entered into the front yard and saw us both. "I may not've been your brightest servant, but I can spot a pattern," he said.

Alexis's eyes lit-up and she greeted me. "Ferris! You're here!" She gave me a hug, and, for reasons I couldn't discern between spite or surrender, I looked Obi in the eyes and hugged her back.

Obi gritted his teeth behind his soft grin and stiffly waved to us. "Have fun you two," he said and went back indoors. He shut the door.

Once alone outside, Alexis's posture deflated as she realized that it was just the two of us and, that once again, her relationships were dwindling. She parted from my side and bid me: "So, ready to go?"

"I am," I responded. We made our way toward the woods. "Let's visit the river," she suggested. "Why not?" and so we went.

On our way through the woods we walked side by side, synchronized steps, spotting for feral birds again. She seemed to like it, and when I asked her if it was because it was familiar for us, she shrugged and said, "I don't know." There was a moment where I stopped and held very still, and soon enough a nearby bluebird perched in my antlers. "Look," I muttered in refrained excitement. She immediately shrieked and frantically shoo'd away the bluebird back into the trees. "Why?" I asked her. "What if it bit you?" she returned. Moments later we found ourselves walking again as though nothing had happened.

We reached the river - which was more of a creek - and sat ourselves on a cool boulder leaning over the waters. Alexis hadn't spoke since the bluebird incident. Instead, she gazed at the steady waters below ourselves and kicked-off her slippers one after the other, landing them both on the grass on the other side.

"Have you ever seen a parakeet?" I asked her, hoping to spawn a good conversation.

She shook her head subtly, keeping herself fixed on the waters rushing.

"They're a tropical variety," I responded. "They live where it's warmer, like in the north. They're funny little things. They're about as big as ravens, but they love to scream. And they make the wildest shrieks sometimes... but if you give them time, and try to teach them - and they *are* smart - you can teach them to sing the prettiest songs.

"I once owned a parakeet... a little blue one named Bluebell." I laughed, finding myself delighted with the memory. "But I needed to let her go after a while... Turns out birds aren't like most pets, where they're okay to be left to themselves all day long. When you get a parakeet, you become that bird's entire flock. I taught Bluebell to sing the *Good Morning* song once. I was so impressed with myself... and then I got bored of her, so I found other things to entertain me. This happened while I was still young, by the way; about half your age.

"Anyways, I got bored of her, and she was cooped up inside her cage all day long. She got anxious - she wanted to be with me and sing all day - and she'd bite at her bars but the bars wouldn't budge, and so she she started to peck at herself, pulling-out feathers and tearing skin... And one day my father found her at the bottom of her cage missing half her feathers." Looking over, I noticed that I had Alexis's full attention. Stammering, I continued: "and we made the decision to let her go, so she could find a flock that loved her more than I could. Setting her free was the best thing I could do, but I still remember her from time to time. I just wish she understood me, so I could ask her if we were still on good terms with each other." In truth, I cried over the bird, and tried

to wash it off and nurse it back to health. My father saw that I was doing no good for Bluebell, so he took her from me and wrenched her head back with sudden *crack*. She didn't need to suffer anymore, he told me coldly. Reflecting on this, I realized too late that Alexis had been holding back tears all this time.

"I wish I could fly," she confessed before sniffling.

"Where would you go?" I asked softly.

"Home," she whimpered.

"Alexis," I responded in softness, "You can't go. The town's been-... it's gone."

She spoke in fragile whispers: "I don't care."

"You'd die if you went... "

There was a slight pause, then, "I'll be fine."

"Nobody's immune."

Then she tensed, her glazed eyes lit-up and she turned to me, "I'd take the backroads, and enough food to feed myself; I'd walk there!"

"Who will receive you when you return?"

"I - The Monnagans... They'd let me stay."

"Alexis, they aren't alive anymore. Everything outside of these gates is dead or dy-"

"How do *you* know that?" she burst at me. "You haven't been there, you haven't sent any pigeons, or messengers or -"

"I've sent messengers *and* pigeons, and ravens, and everything else," I said. "But they never returned."

Her expression softened again. "So they're gone too?" she moped.

I nodded my head.

There was another moment of silence between us. "I just want my family back... Daddy... Andy, Jacob..." Then she asked, "You promised you'd bring them back to me. Where are my brothers?"

"My men left for them when we got here," I answered, "but they never returned."

Alexis had figured out the patterns. "So they're dead, too?"

I nodded again, deflated and defeated as she was. "I knew their families."

At first there was a choked sob out of her, then she fell against me in tears, wrapping her arms around my chest and crying into my shoulder, *why? Why?* I saw that that she, like that fennec merchant, found herself deprived of the basic luxuries, such as having a people to belong to and a true family that loves you. I wondered that if she could see the whole of our universe, would she be able to say where she stood within it? *Surely not.* I put an arm over her and told her it was alright. It was a crime that something as innocent as her should have to suffer like so; my heart ached for her. "I'm here for you," I said.

In between sobs she lamented, "I never told them I loved them enough..."

"You're not alone in this," I said softly.

She didn't respond directly, but I repeated it again and again as gently and reassuringly a sunrise. I knew she was listening, and that every time I said it made more and more sense to her. Just so, I was hoping it made more sense to her than it did to myself. "There are so many things I wish I'd told you before this all happened."

"Like what?" she asked while trying to control herself.

"Well, just one thing. I promised your father I'd do something for you when I first met him."

There was a stair of anticipation, and I told her, "I told him I'd ask if you'd like to court." Her eyes studied me further until I added, "The first night we met, I was so enthralled by you. Before that night I was skeptical that there anything original in this world - I thought I'd seen everything. And then I saw you at the mess-hall, and I thought *no, there is something new under the sun. Someone can be original and real.* I was - "

"In love?" She winked-out two tears from her eyes.

"Yes," I expelled. "I spent all night trying to define words for who you were. I finally landed on 'exotic,' like one of those rare birds from the desert - the ones with those beautiful- " yet before I finished, Alexis laid her head to rest upon my shoulder. Mutually, I took her dainty hand in mine and entwined our fingers together. She smelled faintly of the dried pine Obi stoked his hearth with, which brought my senses to a simpler time when homes were wood and evening were quiet.

I could feel the moments passing by us like leaves in the wind, which brought me to realize that we'd found solace in each other's company. It was the first time since my childhood that I'd experienced such guiltless comfort in the embrace of another. I remembered sitting in my mother's lap as a fawn, laying my head against her breasts and listening thoughtfully to her heartbeat, realizing how much we had in common in through a simple rhythm.

"Oh Alexis," I said softly, "will you marry me?"

There was a moment and answered: "I'd like to... Yes!" She leapt from her perch of the rock and into my arms. We traded thoughts and concerns, reconciling what we'd done to each other. "So you don't like the way I was dancing?" she asked me. I declared to her, "No, I loved it. I just had to leave to do some paperwork is all." The way her back straightened up after I answered made me realize that she was taller than I

remembered; it was as though a big boulder had been taken off her shoulders right then, and she could finally breathe right.

"We'll need Obi to give us his blessings, though..." she suggested with dismay.

I shook my head and smiled at her. "I know he'll approve."

We discussed our future together along the walk back to Obi's home. We held hands, leaning into each other. Along the way we saw another bluebird, but this time we got it to take some wild berries out of her hand. She was frightened at first, but as the moments passed she saw that it was as well-meaning as she was, and so we watched it there in her hands until it ate all the berries and flew away.

The sun was setting by the time we returned to Obi's place. The old man saw us through the window and met us outside his frontdoor. He'd seen how we held hands, and the way we giggled when attempting to explain our lengthy-walk to the creek, and the expression on his face said to us that he'd figured everything out already. Since Alexis was present he smirked and welcomed us back.

"I take it you had a productive walk, hmm?" he asked us.

We both grinned and nodded. "Yes," answered Alexis with a jolt of glee. I replied to him, "We have wonderful news, Obi."

"Indeed?"

Alexis cheered to him, "Oh please, Mr. Willem, me and Ferris want to get married and we just want your blessings!"

"It's true," I answered stepping forward with her. "We'll start a new life together at my palace. She'll never sleep in a cold bed, go without a meal, or have to fear for leaving family again."

I knew Obi as a person who considered himself upright and honorable, a lover of justice and just folk. I saw in dark eyes and the way that his ears twitched that he was

weighing the news of our engagement: Alexis would have a carefree life of luxury and security, where her children would be raised in a lively household and have the best education affordable; on the other side, however, she would be married to a stag who, without guilt, denied himself nothing his heart desired. It was the submission to the heart that prudent folk like him despised in another, and even through his honorable years in service in my household he restrained himself from lashing out. Today again he would refrain and make the right choice for Alexis's safety.

"I won't stand in the way of love," he conceded, putting his hands together. "You have my blessings." He looked to me and added, "No dowry required. I know you'll give her the life her father always wanted for her."

Alexis jumped to embrace me with a hug, squealing with joy and delight for this turn in her life. Marty watched by, smiling subtly and waiting for a chance to speak with me. When Alexis went inside to share the news with Obi's daughters, Obi frowned and drew within whispering distance of my ear.

"I don't have respect for you anymore," he said. "She can come back again if this doesn't work out, but I'm asking that you keep your distance." He stepped away. "You can send a carriage to retrieve her tomorrow night, once her things are packed. We'll hold the ceremony on Sunday. That'll be the last time we see each other, okay?"

I subtly bowed and answered, "Thank you, Obi."

"I don't believe we're on a first-name basis anymore, my Lord."

\*

The next morning - three days before the wedding - I was awoken from a deep slumber to the commotion of a brawl taking place outside my doors. I heard Holume's wrathful yells and the panicked shouts of the guards Mise and Tjorn outside my doors. As I threw on my morning robes I felt my whole room shake around me and I realized that my rhinoceros guards had been thwarted.

Before I could have tied the strings of my robe I was sprinted for the ornamental spear above my hearth. As I took the spear in both hands and struggled to hold the heavy thing up-right, my rooms enormous doors were shoved open by the comparatively tiny figure of Holume. He looked almost naked without his brass armor, dressed in cotton trousers a shirt. The fur on his scalp and arms had fallen out revealing pink patches of skin. He had his own spear with him - a smaller rod for a smaller figure, but the spearhead was sharper than obsidian and harder than steel.

"My lord!" he cried defeatedly as he stepped through.

My strength for the spear gave out and its head touched the ground. "What have you done to the guards?" I fearfully asked.

"They're fine," he answered, then gestured to the clean head of his spear, "I wouldn't hurt them." He dropped it to the ground with a clatter. "My lord," he began almost silently, "I have it."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

He shook his head, smiled in a bittersweet way. "The plague," he answered, then started walking towards me.

For each step he took I took another step backwards. "Have you gotten tested? What did that doctor say?"

"Everet has it too," he replied. "For our safety he shut himself in the tower and I barred the door. It was his last wish that we might be protected from himself." He started to cry, "My lord, I only have perhaps a few days left."

The butt of my spear *clanked* against the wall. This ornamental spear was the only thing that could keep distance between myself and Holume. "You're going to have to leave, Holume," I painfully replied.

"Where?" he asked redundantly. "The camps?"

"You'll have to join them."

"The camps have become a hell on earth, my Lord! The disease is so devastating that the guards have erected a wooden tower for the victims that they might throw themselves from it!"

*Why hadn't any told me how terrible the camps were before?*

"Then leave the city," I plead to him, "You're free to go."

A tear rolled down his cheek. "I'm not going to die in the forest like some kind of feral," He begged. "Ferris, please, I don't want to leave! Keep me in your dungeon! I don't need food or water - I just want the last comforts of being around friends!"

"You'll spread the plague to us all, Hol'." I dropped the head of the spear to wipe the tears from my eyes. "Just go."

"I'm not leaving here alive." He looked to the spear in my hands - it was the only thing between us then.

"I'm not going to kill you."

"You're the husband of twenty concubines and a father of more than fifty children. They can't go on without you, my lord." He took another step towards me.

"No!" I lifted the spear to his chest with the head's glistening end pressing against his sternum. He was expressionless; he'd already accepted his fate in this room.

Holume gently took the spear's shaft in both hands and replaced the head under his ribcage. "Lower your end and push up hard. If you love me, let me end by your confidence."

My fingers felt frozen and my arms and legs trembled uncontrollably. I couldn't see straight with the tears in my eyes, and though I blinked them away more followed. I shook my head and cried amidst sobs, "Just go, Hol', please... "

Holume sighed and looked down sorrowfully. "I'm sorry, my lord. You're a man of peace and love. You shouldn't have to make this decision - or any of the decisions I asked of you earlier." He fell quietly to his knees with his hands on his thighs. "I remember the day you bought me, and you told me that if I can keep your palace safe, then when you'd let me free I could be the protector of your new city. But I've been cowardly as of recent, my lord, with the plague doing all this. The hangman's noose was always mine to bear."

Suddenly he leapt up from the floor, taking the end of the spear in both hands - while I still held the other end in mine - and drove it through his gut and into his chest cavity. I succumbed to terror and screamed like I'd never before: "Somebody help! Help!" I threw myself back against the corner of the room and watched Holume lay there bleeding on the floor. "Help! Help me! Holume's dying!"

*He's... he's... dead. Oh, my oldest friend...* I quieted myself to gasps of sorrow and removed myself from the corner to remove the spear from his gut. I took the back-end and jerked its head out of his side. "Forgive me," I lamented over him. I set the spear in the corner, then pulled off the linen sheets from under the blankets of my bed and laid it over his body. The white sheets quickly blotched a brilliant-red where they rested over his blood on the floor.

About that time the palace guards and some of the staff sprinted in, shouting my name. "Lord Argensis! Lord Argensis!" They shocked and gasped at the site on the floor, and how I stood over the apparent body. When they noticed Holume's spear by the door, and the bloody otter-shaped figure beneath the linens, they understood who lay beneath. "My lord," inquired a horrified officer, "what've you done?" At that same time, one of the guards who'd previously been body-slammed unconscious had awakened and responded, "The chief was out of his mind, sir."

"He had the plague," I lamented, "but he took his own life here."

Then so began the clean-up. The palace security made sure that only approved staff could be taken up here. Doctors, nurses, and trained officials with leather gauntlets and aprons came to clean up my room. I sat outside my room on a bench and waited in a state of numbness. I felt cold all over - in my arms, legs, fingers, toes, muzzle - exhausted emotionally, and spiritually defeated.

*Where'd you learn to brawl like that, kid?* I recalled in our first meeting years ago, when the full breadth of my riches were coming to realization. He was just a pup then, but abuse and neglect had forcefully reshaped him into someone older and stronger before his time.

*I learned it myself*, he answered then. He'd broken the chain that restrained him by his neck to the wall and attacked one of slave-master's handlers. The handler in question was busy picking himself off the ground.

*Are you crying because of what your master's going to do to you?* I asked him.

*They're going to hang me for this*, he answered, then fought to control himself from weeping.

I couldn't remember everything that we'd discussed then, but I recall with certainty that he trusted me - either for the character he saw in me, or for how I still dressed like a pauper then - but when his master returned and drew his sword to behead the pup, I offered to buy him off his hands. The slaver swore to me: *I'll have his head for this, no matter what your offer.*

*Then here's 500* - five-times the average price for even an adult - *just let me have the pup.* Everyone was smiling then when I presented the handful of cut-sapphires to the slaver.

*What's your name*, I asked him the night I bought him.

*Holume*, he said.

*And where are you from, originally?*

*Esqaatch*, he responded dismally.

*That's quite a ways away.*

*If I'm ever free, I'll go there, no matter what.*

Those days are over now, I realized then; they died with that boy in my room just minutes ago. Even when I set him free a year later he didn't want to leave my side. When I offered him the position to protect my city and keep its people safe, he took the position without hesitation. He'd said it was the best night of his life.

"Lord Ferris," asked a servant while approaching me. He had both the spears in gloved-hands. "What would you like done with the chief's spear?"

"Bury it with him," I said, "Along with his armor."

"And what about this, sir?" he presented the ornamental spear that Holume'd impaled himself with.

"Wait a minute," I said, "Let me see that." I stood from the bench and observed the spear. Apart from the blood, the head was clean. That head was made of purified silver. I took the spear in both hands, where then the servant cried out, "My lord, that's diseased!"

"No it's not," I said coldly, "There's no black crust on the head... " At this point I had mourned all I could, but I wished there was more in the way of tears to offer for him. "Holume was fine all along... Mercy..."

One of the officers joined beside us, having heard this and asked, "Then why was his fur falling out?"

The servant responded: "The chief wasn't sleeping a lot while he was dealing with the plague in the city, sir."

The chief concurred, "That, and he wasn't eating a lot, or anything proper when he did."

I chortled bitterly, "Holome's favorites foods were very nutritious."

"This wouldn't have happened if he just got a good night's rest and a decent meal or two," the officer concluded."

"What do you want to do about the spear, my lord?" the servant asked again.

"Let the blood dry and have it put in the undercroft. I'd like this relic revisited one day."

It was nightfall around the time the servants finished potently scrubbing the floors with a healthy dosage bluebed and refitting my king-sized bed with new linens and blankets. In that time I'd taken a bath in my private sauna beneath the palace, reflecting on memories and the cruel irony of the misunderstanding leading to Holome's cruel death. There was also the camps to consider as well; how can I make them more pleasant - *perhaps if we gave everyone their hearts desire of alcohol and opiates, then they'd fare better?* I shoved that idea out of my mind and continued scrubbing my antlers. Once I was redressed in proper formal wear, I returned upstairs to the first floor to have myself an early dinner, where I was encroached upon by one of my butlers.

"My Lord," he began in a rustic tone, "You have visitor waiting for you in the foyer. She claims to be your fiancee."

"T-thank you, Mortimer," I stuttered whilst sprinting past him up the hallway.

When I reached the foyer I saw Alexis standing by herself with a large stuffed feral wolf in one arm, a purse in the other, and a small bag leaning against her leg on the floor. Her tail flicked back-and-forth in a most curious manner while she peered into a fishtank and watched the koi swim about.

"Oh young lady!" delightedly called Clarice from the stairway above me, "Your husband-to-be is here for you!"

Alexis turned around and dropped everything she was holding as she sprinted for me. She hugged me and passionately snuggled her head against my chest. "Oh Ferris, you're here!"

"Yea-yeah, I am - " I muttered breathlessly. I hugged her in return, conscious then that she was the last true friend I had in this palace.

End of Chapter 3.



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