

BLOODED INTRO

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Aranna ka-Eherrim stood silently two paces behind her lord, her eyes only and solely for him, studying his whipcord-thin form wrapped in leather and ceramic. The harsh light of the arrow slit brought his slender silhouette, outlined in his shimmering protections, into sharp relief. An old vision swam out of her memory—a naked blade jutting free of a pile of cooling bodies, rendered stark black by the sunlight behind it. *He makes of himself a blade; for a blade does not—cannot—feel, cannot go mad, cannot shirk its duties, cannot give up. The only time a blade fails is when it is overpowered and broken, and Eherrim has never been that. Lady of Death grant that never comes to pass, for if he falls, who will stand between the lowlanders and the things they cannot be allowed to have?*

After a long moment, Eherrim spoke, his voice thick and tight. “Why does he keep coming back? What in his mind is worth the number of men he throws onto our blades?”

To give her time for thought, Aranna took two steps forward to join Eherrim at the arrow-slit next to his. She could see him shimmer slightly where the sun reacted with his wards. As the sunlight hit her own skin, she could feel the tingle as the hateful sun sought to reach down into her blood, but her protections kept the light at bay. A dozen man-heights below, Dun Horest’s low wall curved in and out of view. Half a thousand paces beyond, a forest of dark cloth tents sprouted from the nearest rise. The distant figures of men moved among the tents. Aranna had spent enough time following armies,

and later in them, to know the happenings in such a camp. The common men would be maintaining weapons and gear, socializing, throwing knucklebones, anything to fill the hours before the next call to arms. The officers would be inspecting, planning, meeting around map tables in the large tent in the center of the encampment, preparing to sound the next call to arms. Above the command tent rose a gold-and-blue wooden placard emblazoned with the white stag of Protector Allych. The grass between the dun’s wall and the camp was spotted with bloated bodies, the losers of Allych’s initial assault, now food for the squalling crows. The wall was striped with blackened soot, the contributions of Allych’s mages to the first assault.

Aranna locked her own eyes on the stag and spoke with care. “He imagines that if he throws enough men at us, he will breach our walls, and take the artifacts we hoard. He sees them as the key to taking the world that we are too stupid to turn. Weighed against that prize, what is a soldier worth?”

Eherrim gestured at the message-mirror on the wall behind him. “Dun Triann was breached a mark ago. Allych’s men penetrated into the blockhouse before the last was killed. Half Triann’s people lie dead, and no more than a dozen will live out the day. But they hold. At my request, Ehmed will have two Blades to Triann by this time tomorrow.”

“Damnation.” Aranna closed her eyes tight against the pain of her Lord’s merciless words. “Is it my meager twenty decades speaking, or are they pushing us harder now?”

“Three duns breached this year, and one of Ellicard’s taken, no, they have never pushed so many soldiers at us.”

“We are outnumbered. The Dortisian cities can push far more men at us than we can possibly muster in defense.”

Aranna paused until she saw Eherrim nod out of the corner of her eye. "According to Tarryk, the last trader who came through said that that Empire from across the sea has a crossbow that can fire again and again. Seems useful."

"Is that the only argument the Protectors would understand? We should choke them with the blood of their sworn soldiers to keep them off our lands?"

"And what of our people, my Lord? Do their lives, their blood, have no value? Are not their lives more valuable than a soldier of the Dortesian Protectors?" Stung, Aranna spoke her thoughts, and immediately regretted them as Eherrim bent his head, turning closed eyes on the stone between his hands.

After a moment, the bent body straightened, became the blade once again. His black eyes flickered back and forth across the battleground. "Allych will make another push before nightfall. I need your Blade to take his mages from the right. I'll take Allych himself from the left. Archers here, focusing on the gate, the garrison'll need it. Liaise with Tarryk."

"Aye, milord." Aranna could say nothing else as she turned for the dun's narrow stair. She had a battle plan to organize.

The dun's central well echoed with the sounds of soldiers preparing for battle. The rattle of mail and the hiss of whetstone on blade carried under the too-loud banter of soldiers avoiding thought of the madness to come. Aranna leaned on the armory doorway and watched her troops. They packed the wide floor from end to end, their iron weapons and armor gleaming languidly in the

torchlight. Each wore the red shield-badge of the Eherrim Guard on his or her armor, a match to the bright red curls that prevailed among the Tillisian people of these mountains. Aranna was suddenly, intensely conscious of her straight blond Dortisian hair, pulled into tight braids no unruly Tillisian lock would tolerate.

Her Blooded subordinates moved among the troops; advising, inspecting, lending a hand here and there where a task needed more than two hands. None acknowledged Aranna's presence with more than a quick glance. Given the almost preternatural awareness of veteran troops to their surroundings, every man and woman in the chamber was aware of their commander standing in the doorway, but they left her with her thoughts, a courtesy that brought warm gratitude to Aranna.

Aranna wondered how many of her Blade's troops would return to this chamber to strip off their armor in triumph, and how many would need to be stripped, their armor peeled from cooling flesh to be given to some recruit fresh from the Lord's training halls. Would it be Keller, the mirthful mountain in the corner? Would it be the Tarna, the new quiet woman who had said barely a word since transferring to the Blade? Would it be one of her Blooded who abandoned endless life for the Lady's embrace? Her eyes moved to them, followed their ceramic-armored forms between the mortals. The brothers, Jallis and Jethrin, moved along the windowless edges of the chamber. Each was sturdy and watchful, alike as two coins from the same press. Even Aranna could only tell them apart by the narrow beard that

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Jethrin had cultivated on her order eight decades before. Kerrin moved among his bow-armed troops at the center of the floor, his small size and slender build offset by the knife-edge precision he brought to every task and the power of his magic. As she watched, he used a flicker of power to mend a crack in a sharpshooter's crossbow.

Aranna took a step into the chamber, and every eye swung to her. The conversations stopped, cut off as the entire Blade put its attention on her. She gestured to the Blooded, and the mortal troopers returned in fits and starts to their gear.

Jellis, Jethrin, and Kerrin separated from the troops and walked up to her, questions glowing in their eyes. "Allych is probably going to push soon. The garrison's going to be holding the gates, with archers in the tower. The Lord wants us to push, take the mages out from the right."

"What about the left?" Jethrin asked, his voice low and calm.

"The Lord will take Allych from the left."

They were silent for a long moment, trading wide-eyed stares. "The Lord Himself?" Kerrin asked breathlessly.

Aranna nodded. "Aye. This is how we'll do it..."

The sun crawled toward the eastern horizon, announcing the coming death of the day and birth of the night with lengthening shadows. The dun's tower threw its shadow across the walls and onto the waiting troops. Aranna stood on the wall to the right of the gate, in the center of her squad. Jellis' troops were to her right, Jethrin's to her left. Each man and woman on the wall carried a shortsword, a round shield, and a pair of wooden javelins with fire-hardened points. Kerrin's troops carried bows, though the two sharpshooters bore Dortsian-made crossbows. Tar-

ryk's garrison filled the gateway with iron spearpoints. Tarryk himself stood in their front rank, leading them in an obscenity-laced drinking song.

Left of the gate, her Lord stood in the center of his personal squad with a Blooded bodyguard to each side. A long-handled axe was strapped to his back, and she followed his unwavering eyes to the massing Protectorate army.

Allych's force was spearheaded by a shining wedge of heavy infantry pointing at the gate. Behind the wedge, a column of medium infantry formed the shaft to the heavy infantry's spearpoint. Along the near edge of Allych's camp, on the infantry's right flank, his archers had formed a thick line in front of two figures in bright golden robes. Aranna watched her targets closely, studying the currents of power that flowed around the two mages. Judging from the red-orange flows in their auras, both clearly followed the path of fire to which the Dortsian noble courts gave much prestige.

Aranna turned and crouched down to face Kerryn. "Archers fronting the mages. I want them down."

Kerryn nodded, and passed her three red-marked flasks. She handed one to her left and right, then pulled the cork from the last. A sharp-sweet metallic odor rose from the mouth. She looked at Kerryn as he uncorked a flask of his own, twice the size of any of the others. "This is not mutton."

"Nay. 'Tis one of the local shepherds, grown too old to follow the Blooded into battle, he said." Kerryn jerked his thumb at the tower, silhouetted in the afternoon sun. "He's got his hands bandaged and is being made much of by his grandchildren." He took a deep swig from his flask, and Aranna could see the silver threads in his aura thicken and pulse.

Aranna grinned. "Good." She drank from her own flask, letting the power in the blood soak into her daylight-depleted

reserves. As she drank, she felt the muscles of her face shift slightly, letting her elongated canines drop into place.

A blare of horns pulled her out of her crouch and spun her to face the Dortisian army. A herald strode out around the wedge of heavy infantry and stopped just out of bow-shot from the walls. "The wise and formidable Lord-Protector Allych, chosen of the Sun, demands the surrender of Dun Horest and all souls and possessions therein. In his mercy, the Protector generously offers you all your lives in exchange for your surrender."

"And our arms, and our land, and our children, and everything right down to our bones," muttered a soldier at Aranna's side. Aranna drained her flask and dropped it at her feet.

Ehrrim stepped up on the left side of the gate and raised one hand, palm out, thumb and little finger forming a ring and the middle fingers splayed. The gesture, one of surpassing vulgarity to Tillisians and Dortisians alike, wrung a harsh bark of laughter from all within the dun's walls.

The herald turned and ran back toward Allych's camp. When he had passed the archers and mages, the horns sounded again and the infantry began moving forward. Aranna blinked, letting her mind float slightly as she dropped into a place without morality, with only action, reaction, and threat.

A group of medium infantry, about two score strong, broke away from the main column and began running for Aranna's section of wall. She sized them up and whistled to her troops, then clambered onto and over the parapet. She dropped off the curving wall, her troops clattering a heartbeat behind her, and drew her first javelin.

She threw, drew and threw her second javelin, and pulled her sword from its sheath. The massed javelins had felled perhaps half a dozen of the Dortisians, but most of the burnt-point spears had

clattered off their armor. Aranna cursed under her breath. The first volley of arrows and crossbow bolts from Kerry's mob cut down a dozen more. A bolt of silver-streaked red fire followed the arrows, burning a bellowing sergeant into a blackened skeleton, and the Dortisians recoiled from Kerry's unnatural fires.

Aranna bellowed and led her troops into the shocked infantry. The first Dortisian she cut down without thought, her sword flicking out to cut his throat in a red flood. The second she slammed with her shield, stunning him and leaving him open for one of her troops to dispatch. Around her, men and women fought and screamed and bled and turned into meat.

The emerald grass was well-coated with blood, bile, and bodies when the last Dortisian trooper went down, clearing their way to the archers. Aranna glanced around, and saw that only a few of her troops had joined them in the Lady's embrace. On the rise, the group of archers had been reduced by counterfire from the dun, and many of the survivors had gone down on one knee to make themselves smaller targets. Bolts of red-orange flame rose from behind the archers, proving that both mages remained in the fight. Aranna ran toward the archers, and her Blade followed.

They got within a dozen paces of the archers before the Dortisians noticed them. Aranna raised her shield before her eyes as she ran, and felt several arrows hammer home in the laminated wood. Shouts rang out from either side as more arrows found homes in less fortunate bodies. She stopped, gathered her legs, and leapt over the archers. As she sailed through the air, she heard shocked yells from beneath her, followed a heartbeat later by the clash of blade on shield. A voice rose in incantation, and Aranna was wrapped in fire. She shrieked in pain, pain, *pain*, as the fire burned at her hair and shield, but something

in her blood, something old and gray and primal, rose to counter the fire magic and force it away from her with a snarl of rage.

Then she landed on one knee, and her mind registered targets, judged intentions and threats and possibilities, and chose a course of action before the mages to either side of her had realized she lived still. Her sword flicked out as she rose, taking a hand from one mage, then she whirled to the other and dispatched him with a slash to the throat. As her sword separated the first mage's head from his shoulders, the surviving archers broke, running blindly around her toward the treeline and their distant homes. Her soldiers surged around her in pursuit, then halted like sheepdogs at their shepherd's whistle. She glanced around, counted most of her Blade among the standing, thought close to a third bore wounds.

From her position on the rise, Aranna surveyed the field. The Dortisians had broken, and poured away from the dun. Many were dropping armor and gear to speed their way. As they cleared, more of the battlefield became visible. The crows were already beginning to descend on the piles of armored bodies around the dun's gates, but she could see that the garrison still manned the walls and the gate.

The center of the battlefield was mounded with corpses, most so burned and mangled they were barely recognizable as human. Her Lord stood alone in the middle of the charnel, his axe down by his side, dripping a thin stream of blood into the thirsty ground. He looked up at her, his eyes caught hers, and his head moved slightly.

She nodded, waved at the brothers, and picked her way between bodies down the slope to her Lord. "Sir?"

"Aranna." He nodded at her, then

returned his eyes to a hacked-apart and bloodsoaked pile she realized was Protector Allych's corpse. "Who can command your Blade?"

Aranna's breath caught; she ran over the battle and actions before in her

mind trying to determine her error. *What have I done? What have I not done?* Remembering her too-blunt words in the tower, she replied, "Kerryn. He's young, but he's bright. And neither of the brothers would be comfortable commanding the other."

Eherrim nodded, and his lips turned down

sadly. "When we were expelled from Dortisia, when we put the first Protectors on their thrones, we had hopes that they would prove... better rulers than we were, that Dortisia would become a land of true justice." He turned his black eyes on her again. "You were Dortisian, once. How well did we do?"

Aranna, feeling she had little left to lose, spoke her first thoughts. "Not well, my lord. The Protectors and nobles tax the peasantry into starvation to pay for their wars with each other, and then blame us when the peasants complain and revolt. Thus the armies that come up here."

Eherrim nodded once more. "Then we shall need better weapons. Go among the Dortisians, daughter of my Clan, and find them for me."

Aranna closed her mouth as the sharp retort composed before her lord's words quite sank in. When she fully—fully—comprehended his meaning, she merely saluted and turned back to the dun.

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