

DAUGHTER

OF THE

BEAST

THE FIRST STITCH

CAPTURE



i.

It would be the fifth time I'd killed this so-called 'knight', yet the fool just kept coming back for more.

A crackling cascade of sparks erupted into the sulphur air as I parried his blow with the flat of my axe, then twisted to lash out.

But he deflected my attack easily. Perhaps I had underestimated him this time; perhaps he'd actually been... *practicing*.

Controlled quick thrusts. A feint and then a backhand. His footwork, too, was impressive. But it was all too rehearsed, and he wasn't duelling some instructor's pet in the academy now. This was a fight to the death—back and forth atop the two halves of a giant rock that jutted like a broken and blackened tooth from the swirling, hungry magma below.

His order would not reach the Ebony Ziggurat, they would not find my master, and they would not stop the ritual of rebirth. Oh no. I wouldn't let them.

Every muscle and sinew in my body alight with fury, I roared and leapt forward, across the gap. He stepped back just in time to avoid my wild overhead swing, his feet skidding in the ashen dust, and sending pebbles of scoria and obsidian clattering into the fiery depths below. He was off-balance, but he wasn't defeated. Yet.

I pressed the advantage and swung my axe at chest height. But to my surprise he again managed to deflect the attack, and counter with his own: three lunges in rapid succession.

The first I twisted to avoid; the second scraped across my weapon, sparking once more as it went; and the final thrust caught me square in the stomach.

Ting!

It glanced harmlessly off my armour.

“What? That’s dumb! You aren’t wearing armour!”

“Am too.”

“No Zynn timer! You’re a savage minion of the Necromancer. You’re a monster, not a noble knight of the Faer-Reach. And besides, they don’t even make armour for girls!”

“Perhaps the Necromancer got a suit custom made. Maybe he was sick of resurrecting his minions.” I shrugged. “Then again, it’s *you* who keeps dying. Who keeps resurrecting you, anyway?”

“See, this is why I hate playing with you. You just make stuff up and break the rules! You don’t take *anything* seriously!”

Lleyden threw his stick into the brook, and sat down on the mossy rock in a huff. I sighed, cast my weapon away too, then sat on the other half of the great split rock, across from him. I dipped a toe in the water that gurgled happily between the halves. He frowned at me, then grumbled.

“Why don’t you just go make a crown of flowers and stare at yourself in the pond, like you usually do?” he said. “I’ll just fight myself then.”

“Oh come on Lley. Don’t sulk. You know you love playing with me! You’re the one who begs me to come,” I reminded him, and threw a little balled up chunk of lichen at my friend.

“Well who else am I going to play with? Radu? Yaro?” he huffed. “Radu is only six summers old, and Yaro’s mama won’t ever let him come into the woods anymore... Thanks to you.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.”

It was ever since I dared him to stick his hand in that beehive.

I sniggered. It *was* pretty funny.

Lleyden smiled too even though he tried his best to hide it from me. He couldn’t help it, I knew. He must’ve been remembering the look on Yaromir’s fat face.

“You complain about Yaromir and Radu, but imagine how I feel. At least you have other boys to do stuff with—I’m the only girl our age,” I said. “What if I invited you to make flower crowns and stare into the pond? Make up stories to explain the new patterns Mamochka sewed on my dress? Would you want to do that?”

He threw a balled bit of moss back at me. It bounced off my forehead.

“No, Zynn timer. And I don’t even know why you do stuff like that either. Those flowers are just flowers, your mother’s stitching is just meaningless patterns—it’s all dumb girl stuff, totally make-believe.

And besides, Zynn timer, you don't even look like a girl anyway. Makes it even weirder that you like any of it!"

"Well if that's the case, then I ought to stop worrying about all of that betrothal stuff she talks about with your mother too." I shrugged, and Lleyden nodded.

"You ought to," he agreed, then reached across the split in the rock to help himself to our lunch. "I don't want to marry you, or anybody else. I can't imagine anything worse than having to put up with your mother as well as you!"

I laughed at that. Her nagging was *far* worse than he knew.

"Zyntael! Your dress is ruined—and it took a summer to embroider! Zyntael Fairwinter! What have you got tangled in your hair? Oh what have you been doing with that boy again?" was what she would probably say when I returned today.

And what was it Mama had asked me last time—when we made potions of her herbs? Something really weird.

"Why do we do it, Zyntael? Why must mothers suffer children so?" and "What is it for, child? What does it mean?"

I had no idea what she was on about, but at least she didn't punish me for ruining her garden. I hoped tonight would be like that time, and not the usual nagging, extra chores, and no supper before bed.

Though perhaps two springtime adventures going unpunished in a row *might* be pushing my luck a bit—after all, I'd lost my sandals today.

"Reckon Mamochka will be cross again?" I asked Lleyden, between mouthfuls of foraged berries, and the cheese I'd borrowed from the pantry.

He squinted at the boughs above us as though the swaying leaves or the perfumed air of the glade held the answer.

"Well, my mama told me that yours is always annoyed at you because you slack off." Lleyden squinted at me. "Did you help with chores before you came here this morning?"

I watched a bee dance from flower to flower, busy with its never ending work amongst the spring blooms. I wished to never be like that poor, stupid insect. What a horrible life.

"No, I just left," I admitted.

"Then yeah, your mama will probably be cross again today." Lleyden shrugged. "You're such a lout."

I supposed he was right. But village life was so dull, and work only made it more so. Besides, it wasn't as though my parents really needed any help with chores anyway. They really only made me clean stuff, or

tend to Zachya as punishment. For the most part, they seemed to forget that I existed unless I'd misbehaved.

"Mamochka has Magda to help her, and look after the baby anyway. That's her whole job," I told Lleyden. "You've only got to work because your parents are too poor to have servants!"

"Slaves, you mean."

"Whatever. Maybe if you become a wealthy knight you could buy some help. Or capture some in battle," I said.

"My great-great-great-*maybe*-great-grandfather was a wealthy knight, and he didn't have slaves or servants," Lleyden began. "When he slew the magnificent emerald dragon of these woods—"

"And got that scar on his face that was passed from son to son—yeah, I know. I've heard the story of your birthmark five dozen times now. Blah blah blah—didn't once keep slaves, despite all the money he got paid to kill the dragon or whatever."

I finished Lleyden's tale for him, then stared at him expectantly, goading him. "But then why are your parents just bakers, Lley? Shouldn't *you* be rich too?"

Lleyden knew I knew the answer.

"Oh *that's* right! Your father's uncle drank it all away, leaving your family with nothing as proof that it ever happened. Well, nothing but your dumb Magickal birthmark, that is. How very convenient. And honestly, Lley, that really is the best part of the tale!"

Lleyden kicked me. Hard.

"You know Zyntael, sometimes I wonder if your mama doesn't love you because you're horrible, or if you're horrible because she doesn't love you!" the boy hissed, then scurried away before I could hit him with something.

It was quite a hurtful thing to say—far worse than Lleyden usually managed. And only then, that was because it was probably true. But as hurtful as it was, I wasn't going to show it. I wasn't a baby; I was almost eleven summers old. And besides, even if she didn't love me, Mamochka said crying only made one uglier. And I really couldn't afford to risk it.

I so wished there were other girls my age in the village. There used to be, but Olyena died of fever two summers ago, and another family moved away when I was just a babe, taking their daughter with them.

I didn't know that girl's name, but my mother talked about the family a few times. She spoke of them fondly to other people, but she loathed them in private—because they were wealthy too, knowing

Mamochka. Still, I sometimes wondered what that girl would be like. Probably boring.

No matter, I was stuck with Lleyden, as he was with me. Apparently for life, given our inevitable, impending betrothal.

With a heavy sigh, I forced myself to accept that fact, and then joined him in his current activity. But my mood was soon forgotten (along with the reason for it) whilst we chased woodland creatures, clambered over gnarled roots, wrestled in underbrush that hummed with insects, threw stones at birds, and foraged wild earthy mushrooms together until the sun began to burn orange in the undergrowth. It was then that we smelled the smoke.

Infused with the sweet and soothing springtime breeze, and carried from the direction of the village, it evoked excited thoughts of a bonfire and feast.

“Is it Solunstet already?” Lleyden asked.

“Solun-what?”

“The big spring festival. The one with all the singing. You know, when they burn that straw doll on the pole.” Lleyden looked at me like I should’ve known all the names for all the stupid festivals. But I only ever cared about the feasts that accompanied them.

“Oh forget it,” he said. “Let’s go find out!”

He retrieved his favourite stick from where he’d tossed it into the brook, then hurried off down the path. I snatched up the remains of our food, and followed. Feast or no, I wouldn’t want to waste good mushrooms.

I ate them, and Lleyden beat up bushes, as we followed the meandering trail through the woods. The closer we got to home, the stronger the smell of the festive bonfire became.

It was a little odd that there was no music, even if I hoped they’d skipped all that nonsense, and it wasn’t until we’d almost reached the forest’s edge—birds silent in the trees surrounding us, and the sun almost set—when I finally heard people shouting and crying out.

Not cries of jubilation and glee, however, but of terror and panic.

“Someone’s lost control of a fire!” I told Lleyden, then started jogging, to sooner see the spectacle. “I bet it’s your stupid oven again!”

And it was. Lleyden’s father’s bakery was ablaze. But that wasn’t the only building that was wreathed in fire. Half the village was.

“Mama! Papa!” Lleyden cried out, and overtook me as I faltered. He attempted to run towards the inferno, but I caught his arm and dragged him backward into the bracken along the mouth of the trail.

I hadn’t seen them at first, but now I did.

They strode amidst the chaos, armed with cruel blades and vicious spears; cackling and howling beast-things, like nothing I'd seen before.

They were moving from house to burning house—rounding people up. Searching for something.

Someone made a break for the forest trail, over the small wooden bridge and almost directly towards us. There was a hiss then a thud. He let out a grunt, stumbled, and slid face-down to a halt on the pebble-strewn path before us. And there he lay—with a black javelin lodged between his shoulder blades and jutting into the burning air.

Lleyden squealed in panic, and I clasped my hand over his mouth, urging him to remain silent and restraining him as he struggled to run. His blue eyes were wide and full of tears, which reflected the horror before us before spilling over my knuckles.

I took the stick from his hand and assured him that I would defend him. But we were as good as dead.

The largest monster bounded forward to retrieve its spear from our neighbour as the poor man stirred, and tried to crawl away from it all—towards us. And in the light of the burning buildings, I could see that it was Kyrrill—the nice young man who helped Lleyden's father bake bread.

“Run!” he implored us, as the creature wrenched its weapon free.

But I couldn't.

Despite being hunched over and crouching on dog-like legs, the monster was taller than any man I had seen. It wore scuffed and rusted plates of black iron, crudely stitched to a quilted crimson jerkin that it wore over its own dark mottled fur. Its corded neck ended in a bestial, wolfish face—with wild white eyes, and large rounded ears. Black lips were parted in a wide and frenzied grin that slathered and frothed with terrifying glee.

I couldn't have conjured a more terrifying monstrosity in *any* of the stories I told to scare Lleyden. But there it stood; a nightmare made real, and wreathed in an aura of violence and death.

I crouched in the undergrowth, staring at the thing, completely paralyzed by fear and awe as it reached over its shoulder and unhooked a massive cleaver from a strap upon its back.

The weapon was twice the size of me; a blackened and stained slab of iron—with one edge ground roughly into a wicked blade that ran up its monstrous length, and then angled up to a pointed hook.

The creature hefted the cleaver over its head with one massive arm and let out a cackling howl. Then it swung the blade down and ended its victim's struggle in an instant.

It lifted the body to examine its handiwork. Kyrill had only come to the village recently, from some distant city in the north. He had hoped for a simple rural life here. Now he was dead.

The monster stopped suddenly, sniffed the air around it, and howled once more. Then it turned its head, slowly, deliberately, and looked me right in the eyes.

It cast Kyrill's corpse aside and began advancing upon us, gibbering and snarling, each step causing me to wince. Lleyden collapsed into a whimpering ball at my feet.

Every fibre of my being wanted to run, but I stepped over the boy and, both hands clasped with white knuckles, raised Lleyden's stick—his enchanted sword—in front of me.

The monster reached me and stooped down, its face inches from mine, my weapon pressed against its throat.

I could barely breathe—overpowered by its wretched breath, and the stench of its unwashed hide and blood-soaked clothing.

It let out a slow growling laugh that gradually built up into a manic cackling, and before long the beast roared with heaving hysterics. I stood before it, eyes wide and unblinking, the pathetic stick still aloft in front of me.

When the dog-headed creature eventually calmed, it leaned in again so that its face was unbearably close to my own, and its cloudy white eyes bored into my very core.

And to my utter surprise, it spoke:

“Little Bare-Skin pup. Your head matches drying blood, and your age is as it should be. Do you wish to run? Or have I found she who is brave enough to stand and face the weave of the Vyshivka, as was promised?”

But it wasn't bravery that kept me rooted there, it was desperation. Or perhaps it was simply foolish, childish defiance.

Whatever the cause though, I wouldn't let this horrific thing take Lleyden. I would die to protect him. And, as hard as I could, I thrust his sword towards my foe's cloudy white eye.

But quicker than anything I'd ever seen move, the monster caught my weapon in a giant clawed hand. It crushed the magic sword to splinters, and loomed over me, menace burning within its pale eyes.

“Ah! So you choose to fight...” the beast whispered. “You have the Spirit of the warrior within you—the Spirit of the Mother herself. At last I have found you, and you shall be my own.”

Then it struck me across the temple.