

There was a strange weight in the air as the girl and the creatures she so loved descended the lonely mountain. She didn't ride that day; rather she walked at the side of her familiar, a hand on the flank of the immense beast to steady the blind creature. She was silent and so were the creatures that accompanied her. They knew each other well, and even in silence they knew each other's thoughts--after all, their minds were one. Some would say the magic of the land had formed their bond, yet it was not so.

A force far older had created the band of misfits, of creatures old and wise and of a girl whose youth had been stolen by the cruelty of the world and of her fellow humans. The creatures had chosen her for a reason, for they knew when a young soul belonged among the old souls of the land.

The sky filled with clouds and the group halted at the base of the mountain, on the edge of a vast and empty wasteland. It was an old place that had known bloodshed and sorrow long ago, but it did not know the girl. She knew it well, and she knew that here would be the place of an ending and the land would know blood again.

She had known it in dreams, in the intimate privacy of her mind, and she knew these things to be true. She had a gift, one from her mother, and her mother had taught her of the subtle truths among the lies within dreams. Her mother had known of her beloved daughter's fate and of her own, and the girl had always known that her destiny was to be fulfilled in these lands. The girl knew that no matter if she had chosen to run, she would have always found herself here, to do battle with with her blood. Even her mother had faced her death, one predestined, without fear. The girl did not know what would pass, but she was not afraid.

She turned to her beloved creatures and spoke in her low, hoarse voice.

“This is the end. Go now. I've never held you against your will and I won't now.”

In number they were eight, and seven turned to leave. One remained, the creature that the girl had known would. She knelt before it, looking up into its sightless eyes. She kissed its forehead, between its eyes, yet felt no joy in its choice, or sorrow in the abandonment of the others.

“Until the end then, my love.”

She stood and advanced toward the empty land, the creature at her side. She walked for an hour, then two, until she stood in the nadir of the land, surrounded on all sides by cliffs and mountains. There she sat to wait, but built no fire.

She knew she'd be found without it, and warmth was of no concern to her.

It took a cold night of waiting, but the girl didn't sleep or grow weary. She stayed out in the wasteland's open space, even when the rains came. She sat as the heavens cried for what was to come and relished in the bracing cold. Thunder boomed overhead, yet lightning never dared to strike the valley in which she sat. She gave her cloak to the creature that sat beside her; it didn't sleep either. Neither spoke nor cared to move, though they shared the experience as one. The rain watered the land, but it was not satiated, for the land desired blood and this the girl knew. She watched the stars and the sunrise until she felt that she was no longer alone. A small smile crossed her lips as she stood.

“Hello, Father.”

The girl turned to face the man that stood not one hundred paces from her, a man she hadn't seen since she'd been a mere child.

He was a silhouette of fire and rage.

The girl's hands closed around the worn knives at her sides as he reached for his sword. She shut her eyes and allowed the fire within her blood that she'd held for so long to burst free.

The twin infernos collided in a cry of rage and pain. Of anger and betrayal.

The girl fought alone, twirling in a dance of whirling blades and spinning flames. The creature she so loved stood aside, for even she knew that the girl had to fight alone. Her father was as graceful as he fought her, showing no love or remorse in fighting his blood, no affection to the child he'd abandoned so long ago. For the girl who had suffered because he couldn't love another, for the girl who had grown up alone. He didn't see the child who wanted so badly to be loved, only the rebel who had fought him in his rule, the rebel who had stared his violence in the face and fought back with words.

And so the flames danced and the land held its breath for blood.

It would be spilled, but not for another hour.

The two grew tired as their magic ebbed, as their blades clashed and as fire licked their skin but never burned.

The gold-rage burned in the eyes of one and it overpowered the mercy that had been intended, as the father plunged his blade into his daughter's chest.

The land rejoiced for it knew blood again as she fell, gasping as her hands clawed uselessly at the crimson spot growing on her tunic.

As she felt the life slipping from her grasp.

Her father stood over her for a long moment as the golden-rage covered his eyes, but then it cleared and he fell to his knees beside his daughter and gathered her small frame into his arms. Only for a single moment, with eyes tight shut, could he pretend that he was still a father and she still an infant tucked against his chest. She was silent in that moment as she had been as an infant, and her expression was as helpless and fearful. Her blood-slick hand reached for his face, for comfort in her dying moments.

A heartbeat later the girl was limp and gone, her green eyes as lifeless as the emeralds studding the man's sword.

Her blood fed the thirsty ground and it drank greedily. After all it had known bloodshed, yet it took no extra joy in hers, for she had been truly innocent.

The hand that had painted her father's face with blood fell with a soft sound; he grasped it from the ground and held it, a silent plea for life. A plea to undo what had been done. Her features were similar to his, so similar, he realized, as his tears fell, as he stroked her wild hair, the same hair he had, back from her lifeless face.

He sat with her for a time, but in the end he left her where she'd fallen, for he couldn't bring himself to take her and bury her.

To do that would make his unspeakable sin real.

To do that would make his beloved daughter dead.

Even through loss, through the killing of the daughter he so loved, the man, the king, did not change. Even through the grief of lost love, of the sorrow of a childhood lost to fury, and to the end of a fatherhood that never was, he did not grow gentle. Cruelty is learned, as is kindness and pain is no friend to the latter.

Others came to sit with her, lastly a young woman five years her senior with eyes like the girl's and a fate less sad. One who had known the girl through her sixteen years and had loved her. She too would carry the weight of the girl's loss, for she was not guiltless in her fall. She had enjoyed the affection of a father who could never love the girl and stayed silent and complicit in witness to evil.

In time she left too, but before she did, she offered the creature who waited a home.

As if that would make up for what she'd done, for her responsibility in what had come to pass. After all, she didn't understand true loyalty or love, nor did she understand why the creature refused and left her to walk alone.

The creature stayed and waited for her beloved girl, Minerva, as her father had named her, to wake.

Minerva would be forgotten by all but the very land that had known her blood and tasted her death. Her father would be remembered as he continued his journeys, lonely as they were. Never again was he really alone, for the seven that had left the girl walked with him, silent as sin.

He would walk with the seven until his dying days, and even after they would haunt him. He would remember Minerva through their vigil.

He would be remembered by men, until they too were dust.

Seasons would change, and none would visit, and the land would never know blood again.

And the creature would wait a very long time.

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