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## *The Incident at Westwich*

**Qrysta** was sore from two long days in the saddle. They had been riding since dawn, through a persistent thin drizzle. If it hadn't been for her weatherproof, niblun-crafted battle leathers, she would have been soaked to the skin.

She was bedraggled enough as it was. It was another gray day, on another muddy road, plodding west through the bogs that lay between the May Hills and Westwich. Behind her trailed the Palace Guard, looking anything but palatial, their fine uniforms quite unsuited to anything other than parading smartly in fine weather. Captain Qrysta had suggested that they might be better off in proper campaign gear; but the officers that she'd been promoted above had made it quite clear, as politely as possible—with, of course, a deep undercurrent of sneering at this jumped-up girl who was now their commanding officer—that “this isn't how things are done in the Guards, ma'am.”

“Of course, gentlemen,” she'd said. “I'm sure you know best.” They'd tried not to preen at their little victory. *They'll learn*, she had thought.

And they were learning now, two days out of Mayport.

Behind the sodden Guards marched four hundred battle-hardened Orcs. They'd started singing the moment the rain had started. It appeared that Orcs liked rain, especially when it was nice, warm—by

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their standards—southern rain. It hadn't let up for two days, and neither had their singing. Qrysta had heard the playlist so often that she knew all the words by heart.

With titles like “The Wetter the Better,” “Pour on the Poor Bastards,” “Blood and Thunder,” “Storming in the Storm,” “Orc'd Lightning,” Qrysta wondered if the Orcs loved the rain more than sunny skies. It definitely made for more entertaining songs.

Not for the first time since they'd set out from Mayport she thought of Grell. Why wasn't he back there, shambling along with his fellow Orcs, bellowing out the songs? Where was he? He'd left the Victory Feast not long after Daxx had, following a flunkey off into the castle. Nearly a month ago, that had been. She hadn't seen either of them since. She felt lost without them. Confused. She didn't know what she was meant to be doing. They'd always been a team. The best team. They'd *never* abandon her. Which was why their absence worried her. Were they safe? Did they need her help?

If they did, there was nothing she could do about it. She had nothing to go on. She shook the thought away. At least she knew what she was meant to be doing on this campaign: Leading the Palace Guard—escorting the Orc army on its mission to set the realm to rights, under the command of the man who was riding alongside her.

She glanced across at him. He was lost in thought, head down, brooding, water dripping from his black-and-gray beard and straggly hair: Jack Blunt, the master-at-arms who had trained Daxx and Grell up from raw recruits—along with the newest member of their crew, Oller, the slippery sneakthief with his deadly knives. *Commandant* Blunt, he now was, head of the Royal Army—but most people didn't call him that. They called him by his nickname, *Commandant Bastard*. But never to his face.

It was a hard face, Qrysta knew; but, as she studied him out of the corner of her eye, she thought that there was something more in it. Those deep lines had been carved into it by more than just the hardships he'd endured in his life as a soldier. The jaw was clenched, the expression grim, but the dark eyes under the bristling eyebrows were soft. *There is pain there*, she decided. *Suffering*.

Suddenly, she wanted to know more about him. She wondered where to start.

*Home*, she decided.

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“The Wetter the Better” ended in a raucous, final chorus. Taking the opportunity of the pause before the next Orc war song started up, she turned to *Commandant Bastard* and said, “Is there a Mrs. Bastard?”

At her question, *Commandant Bastard* came out of his reverie and looked at her sharply.

“Oops,” Qrysta added, realizing her gaffe. “I mean, a Mrs. Blunt?”

*Commandant Bastard* held her eyes for a moment before calmly turning away from her. “Seeing as you're not one of mine,” he said, “I see no need to chastise you.”

It was Qrysta's turn to glance sharply. Her eyes narrowed as she studied his profile.

He was staring ahead, expressionless.

*Might as well try to read a stone*. But Qrysta could read *this* stone now. In that expressionless expression she read him, clear as a book. *Commandant Bastard* was being funny.

“You're welcome to try, *Commandant*,” she said, turning away to look nonchalantly ahead. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him stiffen. *Gotcha*, she thought. She had hit a nerve: *Commandant Bastard* knew she was his equal. And no one was meant to be his equal. It wasn't right nor proper. He'd have to put this lass in her place.

Only he knew that he couldn't. Qrysta wasn't some recruit in the training yard, whom he could order to use a warhammer, instead of the twin blades she

could wield as well as he could, if not better. Which he both appreciated and resented. Respected, even.

So he let the gaffe pass and turned the question of whether he had a wife back on her.

“Why,” he asked, “are you volunteering? Our sons would be useful, I’m thinking.”

“Daughters,” Qrysta corrected.

“Them too,” Commandant Bastard agreed.

“No,” Qrysta answered, “I’m not the marrying kind. And when, mayhaps in time, I *am* the marrying kind, I wouldn’t want to marry someone I can’t knock sense into when I need to.”

Commandant Bastard’s eyebrows rose. “Now why,” he wondered, turning to her, “would you want to do that?”

Qrysta frowned. She’d thought she was being amusing. Her quip had been intended as a joshing kind of compliment to his mastery of every fighting skill, both armed and unarmed. He’d made it look

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foolish by taking it literally. She looked across at his frank, open face and nodded. She understood that she hadn’t been “being amusing” at all. *What kind of a relationship would that be, one that involved “knocking sense” into your spouse?*

She nodded and admitted, “I didn’t think that through, Commandant.”

It was not the confident warrior answer he’d expected. He could see that she was regretting her flippancy.

“Any man who raises his hand to you would be a fool, Captain,” he said, to reassure her.

“And,” Qrysta said, slowly, “the reverse would also be true. I thank you, Commandant. I’m ... well, I don’t know how to put it. New to this.”

Commandant Bastard grunted. It was a grunt of agreement. “The older we get, I’m thinking,” he said, “the newer we get to everything. My son, now, when he was eighteen, he wouldn’t give me the time o’ day. Thought I was a silly old fart, he did. A right know-nothing. Couple of years later, when he’d growed up a bit, I overheard him saying to his sister, ‘You know, Kitty, Dad’s learned a lot in the last two years.’”

Qrysta said, “So there *is* a Mrs. Blunt.”

Commandant Blunt went quiet. Eventually, he said, “I hope so.” Qrysta waited.

The Orcs behind them launched into another rendition of “Blood and Thunder.”

Commandant Bastard turned in his saddle and looked her in the eye. “I hardly know you, Captain,” he said, “and yet, I feel I know you better than anyone, in some way. Mayhaps because you’re my equal.” He thought about that and shook his head. “I flatter myself,” he grumbled. “Twin-blading, you’re my master—we both know that. If I had to fight you for my life I’d equip myself different, because I know when I’m overmatched. You and your blades, against me and my sword-and-board: Well, *then* we’d see. Not that I have any desire to.” He paused, considering his next words carefully. “What I appreciate, in a warrior, is mastery. I see a master, my heart warms. I don’t need to prove myself against him. Or her. That’s not the point anymore, at our level. We’re not fighting. We’re embodying.” He smiled, briefly but sadly. “But you asked me a question. There *was* a Mrs. Blunt, and I hope there still *is* a Mrs. Blunt, but gods know where she is, and gods know I’ve tried all these long years to find her.”

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He went quiet. They rode on. The Orcs sang on. The rain rained on. The Palace Guards trudged on, soaked and shivering and useless.

Commandant Bastard sighed; took a deep breath and continued, “You may never have loved, Captain, and I both hope you do and hope you don’t. It’s everything and nothing. Everything, while it’s there, and an emptiness you never knew there could be when it goes. Mrs. Blunt stayed home with the babes while I went off to seek our fortune in the far lands; and I found it, but when I came home, she was gone. Which is,” he added, his face going grim, “why I am particular keen to knock some sense into His Lordship of Westwich, because this is where it all started.”

He stopped and sighed again; and the rain fell, and ran off their helms and the horses’ coats; and from the tone of Commandant Bastard’s voice, Qrysta felt that the world, and everything in it, was worthless. “Westwich,” Commandant Bastard continued. “Nice town. Defendable, but we’ll see to that. It can be supplied from the sea, being a port, but Their Majesties’ fleet will blockade it. This job won’t take long. Westwich

was where we lived and raised our bairns, and where I enlisted and trained, and from where I left for foreign parts, where the wars were fiercer and the pay richer, and the promotions quicker for those as could do what was needful. And I rose through the ranks, private third class to lance-jack and corporal and serjeant; and came home with a full purse and a fine future to find my wife gone. She was a good wife, and a good mother, and a good person; and she had a gift. “Her gift was her voice. It was as beautiful as she was. She sang like

a skylark. Well, there’s no point in wasting that. With her Mam and her friends and neighbors, she had help enough to leave the bairns for an hour or two the odd night and do what she loved, which was sing. It filled her back up, it did, after her emptying days of toil and motherhood. And her singing filled back up those who watched and listened in the inns and taverns and chapels of Westwich.

He paused and remembered.

And smiled. “Hmh! There was one night, shortly before I left for the wars overseas, when there was a competition, at The Mermaid’s Arms, for singers. And good singers came, from near and far. And they sang, and my Jenny did the judging and gave the prize to a high-voiced lad from Athendene, who sang like an angel. And the tavern keeper’s wife, who was a jolly soul, said to her, teasing, ‘Now how about him,

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Jenny? Was he not as good as the purse o’ gold he won?’ And my Jenny says, ‘Good he was, goodwife, but he didn’t make them cry.’ ‘What do you mean?’ goodwife says, and my Jenny sighs, and puts down her mug of ale, and hauls herself to her feet, because she was resting after a long day looking after the bairns and didn’t need this. And she gets up on the table, and everyone goes quiet, and my Jenny sings “The Maid of the Moorland.” One of her sad ones.”

“And within a minute, everyone in the room is weeping.” Qrysta was moved. *Wow*. “Mastery.”

“Exactly that,” Commandant Bastard agreed. “Every song is a story, and every voice is its own, and some finer than others. But even the finest voice, if it doesn’t tell the tale, misses the mark. My Jenny never did. No more than you do with your blades, Captain. No. She always hit home. Home to the heart.”

He stopped.

Qrysta waited.

The horses plodded. The rain fell.

Commandant Bastard gathered himself and continued. “As I later heard it, there was a smuggler ship in port—Westwich being notorious for the smuggling. And what is the difference, when all is told, between a smuggler and a pirate? Those who live beyond the law, as they sail the nine seas. And the captain of that ship saw my Jenny and heard her sing. And when the smuggler ship sailed, my Jenny was among her cargo.”

In the silence that followed, Qrysta whispered, “Gods ...”

“I went looking,” Commandant Bastard said, “many years. All over the lands where suchlike sail, west and south and east. I crossed the Northlands too, to the edge of the lands of ice and snow, and they stretch east and west as well. Jarnland’s but a small part of this world, and I’ve seen more of it than many.” He paused, remembering, and shook his head. “I heard rumors. Many a time I found a trail that turned out to be a false one, or to run cold. And many a night I’ve lain in my cloak, under the stars, and watched the scene in my mind, in which I find the man who took my Jenny from me. And there are times she’s dead, and times she’s alive, because who can know the ending? But there are no times he lives, whether he begs for mercy or faces me like a man.”

He fell silent.

“Does he have a name?” Qrysta asked.

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“More than one. Bartle, most often. The Skimmer. Skims his cut off the top of everything that passes through his hands. Redchops, on account of his whiskers. Which will be gray by now. As will my Jenny, if she still lives.”

“How long ago was this, Commandant?”

“Twenty-four year. My lad would have turned thirty next month, had he come back from his wars overseas. He was five when she was taken. And I’ll be one and fifty. Married six years, a living widower for twenty-four. Which is,” he added, “why I made myself a master of every weapon and why I keep myself in form. Training my lads, making men of them. And keeping myself in form.”

Qrysta knew what for. “Job to be done, still,” she understood. Commandant Bastard’s eyes grew hard. “Still to be done,” he agreed. “What with these wars, and that excitement of yours in the Undergrounds, I had no chance to go looking this year; but come the New Year, I’ll be on my travels again. Mayhaps as I’ll find him next year. Mind you ...”

He trailed off, as did the full-throated Orc roar that ended “Blood and Thunder” behind them.

Took a deep breath. Exhaled, slowly.

Continued, his voice lowered, wary. “I’ve heard rumors. Of how he is protected, now, by dark magic. That he has changed, into something no longer human. He knows I’m looking for him, you see, Captain. That makes him fearful.”

“How could it not?” Qrysta said.

“Fearful enough to take risks that no man in his right mind would.” They rode on, in rain and silence, thinking.

“No matter,” Commandant Bastard said. “If he can be killed, I will kill him. If,” he added, with irritation, “he can be *found* ...”

“If I hear of him,” Qrysta said, “I’ll seek him out.”

He looked at her sharply again, but this time with a different look in his eye.

A look almost of panic.

She knew why that was. Jack Blunt wanted his own closure. “With your permission,” she explained, “if I am unable to bring him to you, I would be pleased to end the matter on your behalf.”

The Commandant’s face, normally so stoic, was a kaleidoscope of tells. Fear, hope, loss, longing, anger, confusion.

Qrysta pointed out, gently, “It’s hardly likely.”

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That seemed to relax him. He barked his deep, short laugh. “About as likely as he’d survive a dance with you, Captain.”

She waited as he pictured the scene in his mind.

At which, eventually, he smiled. “Now *that* I’d like to see!” he said. “Yes, Captain. You have my permission. And my thanks for the offer.”

A familiar call-and-response number started up behind them.

Call: *Oh, there’s nothing like a battle when it rains* Response: *There’s nothing like a battle when it rains* Call: *Cos rains make—*  
Response *Mud*

Call: *And hammers—*

Response: *Thud*

Call: *And brains go—*

Response: *Splat*

Call: *And spurt out—*

Response: *Blood*

Call: *And they fall flat*

Response: *And that is that*

All: *Rains and brains and mud and blood Splat and flat and that is that Ohhhhhhh ...  
There's nothing like a battle when it rains!*

Beside her, Commandant Bastard chuckled. "Wouldn't mind seeing this little lot in action, rain or no!"

"Think anyone will oblige?" Qrysta, too, thought that a rampaging Orc army would be a sight to behold.

"Our Noble Lords? If they've any sense they'll fling open their gates and welcome us with open arms and feast us till we burst. It'll be their only chance of hanging onto their lands. Lose your head or swear fealty to the crown—or crowns, as it now is in the realm, what with young Queen Esmeralda co-ruling along with old Wyllard." He shook his head, and chuckled, "Never thought I'd see the day."

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He considered that, then added, "We'll see how it goes with My high-and-mighty Lord of Westwich. Ideas above his station, that one. If he falls in line, word will spread, and the other Noble Lords will fall in line behind him. And our fine Orcs will be back in the Uplands before the year's out, back to their old ways of quarreling with each other." As if on cue, "Balls to Them All" started up behind them *once gain*.

The Orcs seemed to need to keep coming back to "Balls to Them All," because the other marching songs were about Orcs versus Everyone Else, and they'd all had enough of that matey stuff after a while, and needed to get back to Orc business, which was having a go at each other. "Balls to Them All" was an improv number. It seemed to Qrysta that the object of the exercise was to be as bizarre, as well as inventive and insulting—if not necessarily as logical—as possible. It would start with, say, a Graycrag round—again, call-and-response, led by G.C, the lone Graycrag Caller, followed by G.R., a general Graycrag

Response:

G.C.: *Bogginmoor Orcs are as feeble as anything* G.R.: *Blow them a kiss and they'll all of them fall* G.C.: *Can't fight for bollocks and can't even effing sing*  
All (Except Bogginmoors): *Balls to the lot of them*  
*Balls to them all!*

At which a barrage of jeers and raspberries and back-and-forth insults would follow.

Then it would be the Bogginmoors' chance to lead; and, to show their expertise at this game, and their disdain for the pathetic insults that was the best the Graycrag had managed, they'd pick on another tribe:

B.C.: *The Orcs of the Stonefields are wetter than leprechauns*

B.R.: *Blow them a kiss and they'll all of them fall* B.C.: *Ask 'em to fight they're pathetic as peppercorns* All (Except Stonefields): *Balls to the lot of them*  
*Balls to them all!*

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As always a chorus of hoots and mouth farts and insults followed, from all to all, with Stonefields Orcs sneering about *waterlogged leprechauns*, saying, "What's pathetic, mate, is that forced fucking rhyme! Call yourself a bard!?"

Commandant Bastard turned to her and grinned. "Orcs, eh?"

The siege of Westwich lasted less than a day. His Lordship of Westwich rode out with his splendid heralds, and his handsome son, and his honor guard, and made a show of looking over Their Majesties' bedraggled army with disdain.

This sorry-looking bunch was no match for his high walls. Orcs? His archers would turn them into hedgehogs. The feeble old king and this upstart girl who called herself queen had not even had the civility to indulge in the courtesies! Who were *they* to order him around, within sight of his own walls? Who were they to demand four years of taxes, which he had dutifully gathered but kept for himself? And who was this grumpy Commandant, who was clearly common-born, to set him terms? Nothing but a *fool*, he saw with delight, as the man blundered into the trap that he set for him.

They talked of the inviolable rights of the nobility; of allegiance and duty to the crown; of custom, and the needless shedding of the blood of the realm; and, with the subtlety that only comes from high birth and breeding, His Lordship of Westwich mentioned, with regret, the passing of the old way of doing things.

How much simpler it was, he said, in the golden age of chivalry, when matters were settled on the Field of Honor.

And, to his secret delight, the lumpen clodpoll took the bait. "Aye, My Lord is right," the Commandant agreed, sighing, "'twas so in the old days—and better days than ours they were, I'm thinking." "I'd hate you all to have to wait here forever while you besiege my

town," His Lordship of Westwich said, all politeness and sympathy, adding, "and in this rain. I'm sure you'd all much rather be back home." "Indeed we would, My Lord!" the fool admitted, glumly. His Lordship could see all too clearly that the tired old fellow didn't like campaigning. Marching in the rain, when he could be at his fireside, with his dog, and his ale, and his grandchildren ...

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"Then you are in agreement, sir? That we do this the old-fashioned way?"

The other's slow mind took an age to think it through, his huge, scraggly eyebrows knitting together as he tried to work it out. Eventually, he said, "What is My Lord suggesting?"

"Single combat."

That had surprised the old fool, whose scraggly eyebrows unknotted and rose. "Well. Now. I don't know as if Their Majesties would approve ..." he said.

"Are you not here to represent them, Commandant, with full authority to deal with matters as you see fit?"

He watched the man think it over. "Well, yes, my lord is again correct. And that is indeed the Old Way of doing it. But ..." he thought; and thought ... and then thought himself into a corner.

"Begging Your Lordship's pardon, the Palace Guards can't fight, I am ashamed to admit. Should my lord wish a smart parade—why, they'd be your men! If they could find good washerwomen, to clean and starch their uniforms .... Turn out smart as anything, they would, and march up and down, *by the left*, in step and line, slow and quick, not a hair's breadth between them." He sighed, looking forlorn. "They're not used to campaigning, though. Anyone else of us *not* in Palace Guard uniform—why, they'd be honored to step up to the mark against My Lord's champion!"

His Lordship considered. "It would be an honor indeed. If I were a younger man, I would need no champion to fight for me, I would stand to the mark myself. As, no doubt, you would yourself, Commandant." The fool looked down humbly and shook his head. "My Lord is a braver man than I am," he mumbled, ashamed. "I would only let Their Majesties down." He straightened up, his decision made. "We're on *your* lands, My Lord, the which—in the Old Way of doing things—gives you the right to name both champion and opponent. As you see, I have four hundred Orcs with me, all of them veterans of the Wars of the Undergrounds. There's not a man or woman of them I wouldn't have full confidence in. And should Your Lordship's champion win—the which I find highly unlikely, I should warn Your Lordship—why, well, we'll turn around and go back to Mayport, and tell Their Majesties we lost, and to leave you alone."

His Lordship of Westwich hid his glee.

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As did Commandant Bastard.

They looked at each other with all serious solemnity. They both knew what was going to happen. They had both planned it that way.

His Lordship of Westwich, eventually, nodded. "Very well," he said, "let us see. Your champion against mine. Mine," he beckoned behind him, and a tall figure in full plate armor rode forward on his destrier, "is the captain of my garrison. And as for yours ... I understand that I may choose any of you, except those in the uniform of your Palace Guard?"

"That is correct, My Lord," Commandant Bastard agreed, humbly. "Then I pick her." His Lordship of Westwich ponted at Qrysta.

Commandant Bastard, Qrysta saw, was a convincing actor. He sat up, looking confused, after a long moment in which he 'digested the surprising suggestion.' Which he'd known, as surely as she had, would be coming.

"That seems hardly fair, My Lord," Commandant Bastard said.

His Lordship of Westwich said, "All is fair, Commandant, in love and war."

"If you say so, My Lord," Commandant Bastard said, inclining his head in agreement. Then, to Qrysta, he said, "It seems we have no choice but to accept, Captain."

Qrysta nodded and swung down from her mount. It felt good to be on her own two legs again—even if those legs were stiff. She bent and flexed them as she drew her blades from the waterproof cloth below her saddle. Gripping their handles, she once again felt their familiar strength flow back up her arms.

The youth beside His Lordship of Westwich spoke up. "Father," he said, "this is dishonorable."

"Quiet, boy!" his father snapped.

The boy would not back down. His fair face bore a troubled expression. "To pick on a woman, sire. It is a low trick; it brings shame on our house—"

"*You* bring shame on our house!" His father rounded on him. "You, with your books and ballads, and singing and dancing. If you were half a man, I'd stand *you* in the lists against her, but I know she'd cut your balls off, if you have any—and while I'd be happy to lose them, I don't want to lose my town!"

The youth dismounted and walked over to Qrysta.

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"Milady," he said, bowing, "on behalf of my house and name, I apologize."

Qrysta returned the bow. "No need," she said, smiling, "but I thank you."

"I will make sure you are treated with honor, after ..." he tailed off, embarrassed.

"After I'm dead?" Qrysta said. "Don't hold your breath."

The youth did not know the expression. "I'm sorry?" he said, puzzled. "Yes, you said," Qrysta acknowledged. "Now stop apologizing and move out of the way—there's a good lad. I have business to take care of."

She moved to one side, and waited, blades in hand.

The Champion of Westwich dismounted and clanked towards her. The heralds raised their trumpets.

His Lordship of Westwich held up a hand to stop them. "To the death," he said, smiling directly at Qrysta.

Qrysta looked at him thoughtfully. She said, "Is that truly necessary?" "It is the Old Way," His Lordship emphasized, his smile widening. Qrysta said, "It may be, but I ask you to allow me to spare his life.

He is no enemy of mine."

His Lordship of Westwich did not like being questioned. Least of all by a woman.

"To the death," he snapped.

Qrysta contemplated him, for a moment. Then nodded. "If you insist ..."

“I do,” His Lordship interrupted. “...the death will be yours.”

His Lordship’s smile faltered.

The Orcs had been away in the north, returning from their battles in the Undergrounds, when Qrysta had dueled with Commandant Bastard, so they had never seen her dance. They’d heard she was good. They were excited that now they were going to get to see for themselves. They were also a little anxious. They didn’t quite understand what they were about to be watching. Orcs fight double-handed. Warhammer, or—if you’re elite—battle-axe. Thump, chop, slash, whack, jab—block, avoid. They were all damn good at all of the above. They all thought, *Nah, no one with two little twinky swords stands a chance against this big brute in his plate armor, with his broadsword.*

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Commandant Bastard noticed the consternation on their faces when they glanced at him anxiously.

He winked down at them, folded his arms across his chest, and settled back in his saddle to watch Qrysta at work.

She and the Champion of Westwiche raised their weapons to each other in salutation. Qrysta bowed. Her opponent, after an awkward moment of surprise, bowed back.

“For Westwiche!” he roared, and His Lordship’s retinue echoed the cry.

He charged, broadsword whirling. Qrysta danced.

Commandant Bastard was the only one among the onlookers who was not surprised to see her smiling.

At first, she only used her swords to deflect the few swipes that came near her.

She ignored the complaints coming from the Westwiche delegation that she was not standing and fighting fair. She knew what she was doing. Soon enough, everyone else could see it too.

The Champion’s slashes became wilder, then slower and fewer and farther between. Soon there were longer and longer pauses as he gathered the strength to heft his broadsword yet again and drag his plate armor-encumbered body yet one more time towards her. Wherever she was .... He turned his head this way and that, searching for her through the narrow slit in his helm.

Jabs from her blades into his back and legs let him know that he was looking in the wrong direction—which he was again. As soon as he turned, she was no longer there. The Orcs, by that time, were openly laughing. Qrysta’s thrusts were striking home through joints in his armor. He was lost, exhausted, wounded, confused. She was toying with him.

She was also making sure that His Lordship understood exactly what was happening. When, at last, he stopped cheering, then urging, then cursing his Champion on, Qrysta stepped behind the exhausted man and jabbed him to his knees with a blur of steel into each leg. He dropped, gasping. His broadsword slipped from his grasp.

Qrysta walked round to face him.

“You fought well, sir,” she said. “Do you yield?” His Lordship of Westwiche shouted, “No!” His Champion hesitated.

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Qrysta said, gently, “Can you defend yourself?” The kneeling, defeated man shook his head.

Qrysta returned her blades to her belt, held out her hands to him, and helped him to his feet. His companions dismounted and came to his aid, ignoring their furious lord.

“That wasn’t the way it was done in the old days,” His Lordship of Westwiche protested. “The bout is null and void. This is an outrage—a disgrace to my Field of Honor!”

Commandant Bastard hung him out to dry while he shouted himself hoarse.

“Your Champion honored you, My Lord, with his courage and prowess. The matter is settled. I will escort you to Mayport, to plead your case to Their Majesties.”

King Wyllard and Queen Esmeralda had already decided what would happen, should the man disobey their command. He, like they, knew the penalty for treason. The Lordship of Westwiche would pass to his son, a scholarly, artistic lad who was a great disappointment to his stern father. Alaryd was a dreamy, beautiful youth who would rather dance and hear tales and write poems than march to war. It escaped no one’s notice that Queen Esmeralda danced with the new young Lord of Westwiche, at the ball held in his honor in Mayport Castle, more times than with anyone else.

“You do make a lovely couple,” Captain Qrysta said, as her queen resumed her seat at the High Table.

“Stoppit,” Queen Esmeralda muttered, but she couldn’t help but grin, and her eyes were shining.

*Well, Qrysta thought. Should Queen Esmeralda turn out to be the marrying kind, she could do a lot worse than His New Lordship, Alaryd of Westwiche. “A distinct improvement on his father,”* old King Wyllard said to

his young co-monarch.

“Indeed,” Queen Esmeralda agreed. “For one thing, he has a head.” “And a fine-looking one too. Anything inside it?”

“Lots. Books, stories, ideas, poems, plans. Funny too.” “I noticed the two of you laughing.”

“We need more like him,” Queen Esmeralda said, and King Wyllard agreed wholeheartedly.

Their realm had had enough of war.

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