

Endurance

by

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The High Hills

I sat among the late autumn-blooming clover amid a sloping grave-meadow and picked at my memories as if they were old scars. Fat, slow, red-bodied bees bumbled about me as they passed through scattered shafts of sunlight limning the damp, chilly air. Their indifferent drone was desultory. Empires would rise and fall, gods pass from bloody birth to fiery death, every woman who ever lived slip quietly into her final sleep, and still bees would find their flowers.

That was a lesson for me. I was certain of it. Sick of lessons, I ignored the thought.

Recollection served my mood little better. As they always have, the people of my life crowded close in these quiet moments. Federo, locked inside the bandit-god-king Choybalsan, that haunted look in his eyes at the last. Septio, the only man I'd then bedded, his neck snapped within the loving circle of my arms. Shar, the desperate woman who'd lived with my father into the final days of his ruination. Mistress Danae, whose addled mind and ravaged body survived as a shadow among the graves. Cities full of flame and despair, knives in the dark, my fear racing faster than even the flying of my feet.

"Stop!"

The single word echoed among the silent graves scattered across this empty hillside. Tiny birds whirred up from the long, golden grass into the cerulean bell of the sky. My belly twinged as the child within stirred. She was

still so little, this poor god-struck bastard of mine. I placed my hands upon my abdomen and crooned softly. I don't know if the ancient ghosts whose abode this was heard me. Perhaps it didn't matter. My baby returned to sleep and took the bitter sting of memories with her.

In time I emerged from my enclosing song and looked about. Inattention has never been a habit with me, not from my earliest years. Even so, the unquiet dead were no threat, the nearest possible ambush was hundreds of paces away downhill, and this place smelled of safety. Most of the bees had moved on to other stands of clover on their day's rounds. The pallid northern sun had climbed higher into the patient vault of the heavens. The day was as warm as ever it would be at this time of year - almost enough to make me wish for a hood or a hat, rather than simply sitting bareheaded in the wind that carried the first sharp-edged tang of winter. The scent of the clover remained strong, mixed with the dusty-rock odor of the ridgetops.

Even now, I still believe that the High Hills were as timeless a place as I'd ever known, at least since the never-ending summer amid the rice paddies of my earliest youth. No ox stood placid and wise to watch over me. Instead, I watched over myself and my child. These forgotten grave-meadows were safely outside the purview of the several gods who had made themselves so dangerous to me. Nothing here but ghosts, dwindling gently with the slow

passage of years as we all must do.

The grave nearest me offered a smidgen of shadow, but Ilona had said the old king who lay there rested uneasy. It was not so good to place myself close under his touch. A shame, too; his grave was pretty enough. The sepulcher had been dug back into the hill, so that only the face stood clear. That visible portion of the monument boasted a cladding of red stone, carven into small pillars and a carved entablature. The elaborate frieze had long since worn to a tale of shapeless heroism among faceless warriors. Brass and bronze banded the pillars, and served as tarnished ornaments to the tiny stoa. The grave was a miniature of a classical Smagadine temple, rendered through the imagination of some Stone Coast mason who'd likely never even sailed as far as Lost Port.

An idea of a memory of someone else's history. Just as with my own life, from my happy beginnings down all the years since. But also as with my life, in a curious manner all the disparate elements and desperate divisions came together to form something greater than could be inferred from the constituent parts. In the case of this grave, the harlequin whole of the architectural truth served to hold a dead man and his unquiet ghost. The mound that rose behind the facing was pretty, a gentle swale of turf dotted with tiny, wound-pink flowers.

But unquiet. So unquiet.

The ghosts whispered when you walked among them if you

had ears to listen. Ilona had suggested that as I had been god-touched, my hearing was plenty sharp for what was needful here. I'd certainly had my share of arguments with the divine, from the Lily Goddess to Blackblood to Endurance himself.

My god. The one I'd created.

That thought still had the power to stagger me, months later here in my exile.

I wandered along the slopes. Yarrow hissed against my calves. Clover crushed beneath my feet added a sharp rush of bruised green to the already-heavy scent of flowers. Smaller, less forward blossoms peeked eye-bright from among the larger stalks.

And through it all, the graves. Some little more than hummocks of grass, covered in brambles or roses or stranger things, depending on the will of the original mourners and perhaps the sensibilities of the ghost lurking within. Others were more elaborate, such as the final home of the redstone king I'd just left behind. Certain of their fellows were merely collapsed hollows - dents in the earth where I could lay myself down and walk awhile among the strange dreams of the lords of the dead past.

Each carried a whispering voice. Certain of them spoke like wasps under a distant eave: barely a buzzing whine, hints of meaning concealed within the cycling tonality. More resembled chatter after a temple service. Arguments, bargaining, the rhythm of a joke being recounted; the sense

still not quite fully formed to my ear.

A few were awake, aware. Some called my name with voices as forceful as life.

"Green."

"Come here, girl."

"You dare too much."

"You do not risk enough."

Still, they were merely ghosts. Like so many of life's oppressions, the power of such clinging souls is only that granted by the victim. I had already faced worse than any of these would ever wield against me.

"Sleep," I called, invoking the formulation that Ilona had taught me. "Sleep, and rest upon your beds of dreams."

I had no idea if that phrase eased the ghosts, but my use of it seemed to ease Ilona. That was good enough for me. I picked a careful path down toward the stand of dogwoods that marked the lower boundary of this high grave-meadow. These High Hills possessed a view that on a sharp-aired day might contain Copper Downs itself. As ever, I prayed that no one in Copper Downs could see me here.

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Ilona's cottage crouched among the untended apple orchards like a rabbit in a cornfield. More of a cabin, in truth, it was a compact structure of sturdy logs caulked with clay and covered in a neutral gray stucco, topped with a slate roof. The first time I'd come here, I'd been half dead in my flight from the war camp of the late Federo. Ilona had

nursed me back to health and sent me onward without ever revealing her name, let alone much else. When my business in Copper Downs had concluded as much as it was likely to at the time - given an overabundance of fatalities and a shortage of competent governance - I'd traveled back to this place in hopes of a welcoming hearth.

Today Ilona met me at the door, wearing the orange dress of hers that I loved so. I never was able to disguise my interest in that dress, and the way she filled it out. This was well enough. We had not become lovers as I had hoped, but we had become very good friends indeed in the five months I'd stayed here with Ilona and her daughter, Corinthia Anastasia. Given my ragged hair and the scars I'd carved into myself to seam my cheeks and notch my ears, I knew that I was not one to tempt a woman close simply for the sake of my beauty. Still, I never stopped hoping that the fires within my heart might light her path toward me.

Perhaps it did not matter in any case. For the first time since my days with Samma in the aspirants' dormitory back in Kalimpara, someone cared to watch over me while I slept. And I felt safe enough to allow it. Such a rare trust at any time in my life then or since, I yet treasure the memory.

Everyone else was afraid of me.

I set that thought aside and accepted Ilona's swift, welcoming embrace. "Where's Corinthia Anastasia?" As I spoke, I let my lips almost brush her pale ear lest she had

somehow forgotten my interest.

Ilona's hands tightened on my shoulders. "She's gone down to harvest onions. The stand along the Little Bright Creek has grown in nicely."

Nothing up here was more dangerous than me; both Ilona and I knew that. The lynxes prowling these woods would not bother the child. The wolves stayed away from Ilona and any who smelled of her, through some old bargain I did not understand. I was fairly certain the ghosts had something to do with that. Even so, any number of things could happen to a girl wandering alone.

Bandits still roamed the lands Federo had for a time controlled in his incarnation as the nascent god Choybalsan. Most of his army had returned to their fields and farms on disbanding. Some had been burned out of their homes, or turned away for misdeeds and old grudges. A few simply preferred to carry on in predatory packs, knife-armed and ruthless. Most were smart enough to stay away from this part of the High Hills, but not everyone got the word. We'd found that out the hard way twice since I'd come here.

The hard way for them, I should say. I burned the two flames to the souls of each dead man, and made a decent grave in a beech grove far enough from the house that we would never be troubled by their unquiet shades.

We.

That word snuck up sometimes. When it did, it

frightened the life out of me. "I'll check on her," I told Ilona, my left hand straying to cradle and protect my belly. Too many children had been stolen in my earliest youth. Starting with me.

"Green." Ilona put a finger to my lips. "The war is passed. You ended it. If my daughter cannot gather onions for a few hours, then our problems are much larger than we know. Let her roam and let her learn." The older woman grinned. "Besides, she runs fast, and is a fine hand with the boning knife."

Ever since my previous stay here at the cottage, Corinthia Anastasia had made it her ambition to be a Blade like me. Though I was secretly flattered, I had absolutely refused to teach her anything about the business of violence and intimidation. This of course had not stopped her independent experiments in the matter.

"Fair enough." I shuddered to think how far I'd run, only a little older than the girl was now. At least Copper Downs had been no nest of child thieves and youth gangs, as Kalimpura was. We tended to other vices here. The idea of Corinthia Anastasia trying her hand at political assassination made me vaguely ill. Yet slaying the Duke had seemed so needful to me at the time.

Another lesson there, I was sure of it, but I was heartily sick of lessons. Even now, I must laugh to admit it has ever been my habit to follow the long path to understanding. Instead I grasped Ilona by the hand and drew

her across her own threshold. The overlay of my deep brown skin against her pale ruddiness was a blessing, a pair of contrasting gems, each highlighting the beauty of the other. If only she would see it. "Surely we can find some way to pass the time alone together?"

"Yes. You may chop the potatoes, and I will check how the quail stock is coming."

I gave off a halfhearted attempt to squeeze her close again and went to look for a knife that was not intended for killing.

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Corinthia Anastasia returned breathless and reeking of onions, with her feet caked in mud, and rain upon her face. "There's a dark brown man down the hills looking for Green!" the girl shouted as she burst into the small cottage. "I was going to give him a good kicking to, but I ain't got my knife-toed boots!"

"You don't own any knife-toed boots," I said sharply from my place at the table. I was shredding carrots with a too-short, too-safe blade. The nonweapon made my fingers twitch. "And even if you did, your mother wouldn't let you wear them."

Ilona abandoned the pot over the fire and knelt close to her daughter. The line of her thigh pulled my eyes, until I looked away again, torn between embarrassment and lust.

"Who is looking for Green?" Ilona demanded, her voice

low and fierce. "Did he see you?"

"No, Mama." Corinthia Anastasia stared at the floor. "I followed the Little Bright all the way to Briarpool hunting onions, and the man was down there talking to the Saronen brothers. I listened from the bushes, which I think maybe Eller Saronen saw me. But maybe not. He didn't say nothing if he did."

Ilona's eyes met mine over her daughter's head. No accusation glittered in her expression, but this problem was mine, following me into the High Hills. No question. I draw trouble the way a honed edge draws blood - fast and all too easy. I turned to fetch my long knife, the fighting blade I would choose every time over most Stone Coast swords, at least in the hands of most Stone Coast swordsmen. Ill-trained brutes, one and all, in this part of the world. With my long knife and the two short knives, I could bring a swift end to almost anyone's regrets.

"Wait," said Ilona in a voice straight from the Factor's house. We had both been trained there, at the hands of women focused on molding girls into a certain kind of female. Ilona had grown too plump for the role and been cast off, while I had slain my way out some years after her time.

As with so much of my life, that was another memory not bearing close examination, for behind it lay so many deaths. And worse, the broken terror of Mistress Danae, who did sleep among the graves of the High Hills. The horrible

fractures in her mind were slowly being replaced with the horrible fractures of stronger wills long dead but yet restless.

Ilona turned back to her daughter. "Describe the man."

"He was dark, like Green." Corinthia Anastasia touched her own face, as if the freckled paleness of her skin were in doubt. "Brown skin, brown eyes, black hair. He talked funny."

"A Selistani?" I blurted. "Here in the High Hills?"

"More than one, I'd say." Ilona's voice was dry but loving. "You're here, after all."

I collected both my thoughts and my better judgment. At that time, I was still blind enough to believe the Bittern Court was not after me here, protected as I was by the width of the Storm Sea. With equally foolish certainty, I assumed that the Temple of the Silver Lily would not pursue me into the exile they'd laid upon me, either. Not with male agents, in any case. "What did these Saronen brothers tell the searcher?"

Corinthia Anastasia shrugged. "I don't know. I left after a while."

Ilona cast her eyes toward me once more. "They will not speak of you," she said with confidence. "Still, your time of shelter here is nearing an end."

I touched my growing belly. Within, my daughter stirred. Uneasy, already. Five months I'd spent up here, right into the margins of winter. I'd grown so. I blew out

a long, slow breath before replying. "I'd hoped to wait until the baby came."

"That day is three months away, on the other side of winter yet to come. You barely show even now, and your body has not yet begun forgetting the things it needs to forget in order to learn what it must know for the baby to arrive."

Despite myself, I bristled. "I can still run and climb."

"Exactly." Ilona smiled.

"You'll always run and climb," Corinthia Anastasia added with a sturdy loyalty.

"As may be." Her mother's voice snapped though her eyes were still merry. "Now wash those onions. And for Green's sake, keep your eyes and ears open."

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That evening while I sewed another day's bell to my silk in the manner of the people of my birth, Ilona sat beside me on the split-log bench outside the little cottage. A starveling moon rode thin-bellied at the bottom of the eastern sky amid ragged, icy clouds. Corinthia Anastasia was already snoring faintly in the wall bed I normally used. The notion of simply sharing Ilona's bed seemed warmly inviting, but distinctly improbable. That border had not yet been crossed. Perhaps it never would.

Still, our thighs pressed together. Her scent filled my nose - musky, rich, traces of salt and spice and that

sweet-sharp honey of a woman with love on her mind. The evening air carried the cutting odor of windfall apples on the rot, overwhelming the host of small changes night brought to the forested hills. Ilona twined my fingers within her own, causing the silk to shiver and chime, but turned her eyes away from me.

"I shall not tell you to leave. But I am certain you will soon need to return to Copper Downs, regardless of either of our intentions." She sighed. "You cannot bring them so close to the edge of their own disasters, then walk away."

"Of course I can. That is not my city." Even I did not believe that. Inasmuch as I had a city, Copper Downs was it. Or so I understood at the time. In my earliest youth, I had been stolen from a rural backwater, where a settlement of a hundred people was considered a vast, brooding metropolis teeming with sin and darkness. As to the only other candidate for my city, I'd been banished formally from Kalimpara, Selistan's capital and home to the temple of the order that had trained and sheltered me. Otherwise, none of the wretched towns and villages I'd visited on either side of the Storm Sea had any claim on the loyalty of my heart.

"You slew their Duke. By some lights, that makes you responsible for them."

There was nothing wrong with her command of history, but Ilona's grasp of politics seemed to be lacking. "I was

eleven years old. No one sane would have handed me the throne, then or now."

"That is not my point, as you well know." Her grip on my hand tightened. The baby stirred within my belly. She moved so much, for such a small thing. "This is not a matter of ruling, this is a matter of repairing what you have broken."

I glanced downslope in the direction of the beechwood grove and the bandit graves. "That repair is already beyond the work of a lifetime. And I did not inflict the break, only the final blow to what was already rotted. It took the people of Copper Downs four hundred years to dig the hole they find themselves in now."

She followed the line of my gaze. "You are no bandit yourself, girl."

Tugging at Ilona's hand, which suddenly seemed heavy, I brushed the fingers to my lips. All I wanted was to stay here. To love and be loved. To put away my knives and open up my fists and simply cook and clean and live. Quietly.

"I will not go back," I whispered, trying to swallow the quaver in my voice.

Ilona squeezed my hand once more. "As you will, Green. You are always welcome here." She stood, the hem of her dress brushing my thigh. "Tomorrow, will you take some food up to Mistress Danae?"

"She will not be approached by me."

"Perhaps. In any event, you can leave it at one of the

sheltered graves up on Lady Ingard's Hill."

"You think it good for me to be among the dead," I muttered. We had discussed this before.

Ilona smiled and swept into her house.

I sat in the wan moonlight awhile. It had paled Ilona's skin, rendering her nearly into a ghost. My own fine dusky hue simply darkened until I was almost no one at all. Not Selistani, not of the Stone Coast, of neither divinity nor womankind.

Just a shadow girl hidden in a shadow world. As ever, for me, both then and now.

In time, I stretched upon the bench and took my rest. I couldn't bring myself to displace Corinthia Anastasia. If Ilona had wanted me in her bed, she would have invited me. Still my hips twitched and rolled as I settled in toward sleep. The scent of rotting apples was my lullaby, the night mists my blanket.

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Morning brought a pale sky almost brittle blue. The early sun lifted my fey mood of the previous evening into the autumn air. I shook off the veils of gloomy anticipation that had settled upon me, stretched my aching limbs, and ventured forth among the frosted golden grass to capture a hare for breakfast. They were numerous enough in the meadows above the neglected apple orchards, and slow with the summer fat they had not yet lost to the winter coming.

Prowling slowly among the late wildflowers, I realized

that Ilona had the right of it. Even if no one had come asking after me, I could not stay here in the High Hills. The declining weather would strike a wound in me as deep as any blade might hope to cut. Even the chill coastal fogs of Copper Downs froze and shrank my soul with little more than a graying damp that numbed the fingers. Snow up here would pile eaves-high on the north side of the cottage. The streams froze for months.

This was no place for a child of the sun.

I touched my belly again. Just a bump, not so much more than an overlarge meal might leave me with. Other women showed far more than I, six months pregnant. Ilona had said I'd probably carry well nearly to the end. I am not a large woman, and was not even quite to my full height at that time, but she placed much faith in the strength of my frame and the fitness of my body.

"Will you grow here and be happy?" I asked my baby. I didn't know if I meant the High Hills, Copper Downs, or the world at large. And with Septio dead well before her birth, what would my baby miss about her father? I had been raised by and among women, but Papa had been there first, along with my grandmother.

At that moment two hares emerged from a gorse bush. My chase was on. It is a simple enough affair. You close in enough to overtake them; then, when you judge the moment correct, you break right. A hare will randomly break either right or left, but you cannot outthink an animal with

little sense of its own. I always break right. Half the time I have my chance, and I never worry overmuch.

So I ran, scooping up a good-sized rock as I did, watching for the twitch of their stride that meant the escape attempt was coming. I broke right with one of my targets, while the other headed left. Short knife in my off hand, I went for him with a swift toss of the stone. I tripped on something in the grass. Still I caught him, but I lost the blade.

Stunned by my throw, my prey managed to kick, clawing my neck and arms, though I kept my face away until I could break his neck in return. I rose, found my weapon glistening in the damp grass, and paced back a few steps to see what had grasped at me from the earth.

Nothing, in truth. Nothing but my own clumsiness.

I patted my abdomen again. "You do me no favors, little girl," I told the baby. "I cannot feed or protect either of us if you steal my balance away."

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Once I had returned to the cottage, I dressed the hare in the work area out back. The pelt I left for Corinthia Anastasia to prepare for tanning. The offal I dumped in the cracked clay pot we kept outside against such uses, for later disposal. The prepared carcass I carried inside to place in Ilona's smaller iron pot with a goodly portion of well water, some of the previous night's onions, a very generous pinch of salt, and a pair of gnarled carrots that

I shredded. As Ilona still slept, or at least rested, I set about making the day's bread. My earliest lessons with Mistress Tirelle back at the Pomegranate Court had included cookery, and those memories were among the few that I treasured from the years of my enslavement. Dried rosemary and fresh chopped garlic went into the dough along with the leavening, and I worked it just so. The loaf would not rise and bake in time for the breakfast stew, but we would eat well this afternoon, especially with butter or honey.

As I folded the dough back into the crockery bowl to rise, Ilona's hands snaked around me. I stiffened and almost pushed her off out of sheer reflex before stopping myself. Fool! She hugged me tight, just below my breasts, before pressing her head against my shoulder.

"Much cannot be," she said, voice muffled.

"Much can never be," I replied. The moment spun between us like a dropped wine glass. "This is not to despair." I grasped her forearm with my left hand and squeezed it. If only she would turn me that we might hug or kiss! Still, I didn't move for fear of upsetting the mood.

"I worry for your child."

This feeling I understood. Ilona rarely showed me anything but practical strength, but I also knew how she regarded Corinthia Anastasia with a deep and helpless love. The same maternal aspects that drew me to Ilona were brought out in rare force by the prospect of her own daughter.

My own child... Well, a bastard at the least. Neither fully Selistani nor entirely Stone Coast; not with poor lost Septio's seed long since quickened inside of me. If only I'd understood then what lay ahead.

Despite a lack of invitation, I summoned the nerve to squirm about in Ilona's arms and take her in the embrace I'd been craving so long. She pressed her body against mine, and we leaned into the kiss, finally.

Then Corinthia Anastasia spilled out of my cupboard bed with a giggle. I broke away from Ilona, my breasts aching, to turn urgently to my bread. A blind man would have known my heat was up from the scent flooding the air.

My would-be lover stroked my hair a moment, before stepping away with a secret smile into her daughter's needs.