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DUTTON BOOKS



# THE AFTERWARD



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E.K. JOHNSTON

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*To David and Leigh Eddings,  
I really wish I had written you a letter*



—I—

CADRIA





. . . . . A F T E R . . . . .

And so it was in the days before, when the Old God brought ruin to every corner of the world. Great were His injustices and mistreatments of all living things: the birds in the sky and the beasts on the ground, and the humans who laboured in His service. He cared nothing for their pain and suffering. Worse, it pleased Him to inflict horror wherever He could. When He saw the bright wing of a cormorant diving towards the sea for its dinner, He would send scalding water to burn bird and fish both. When a horse pulled a plough behind it, He would strew the path with rocks, to dull the blade and to pain the horse's hooves. For humankind, He reserved his most particular kinds of violence, but, ah, remembering those days causes even the bravest of storytellers too much grief. Better to tell of what came after.

Seven godlings, born of the Old God's discarded human toys, found one another in the ruin of the world. They knew that should any of them stand alone, their small power would be instantly obliterated, but they did not give up hope. They practiced working together, uniting in concert to increase



their chances, but still they feared it would not be enough.

When all seemed truly lost, the youngest of them found a green stone, the sort that humans called emerald. It was of inconsequential size and not particularly striking to behold, but the godling thought that it would suit their purpose, and called upon the others to fill it with their strength. Over and over, the godlings put their power into the stone, until it sang to them with the promise of better days to come.

The Old God felt the stirring of this new power and came to find them, but He was unprepared for their new strength. Godlings no more, they had only to touch the Old God with their gem, and they undid Him. Thus peace came at last to the world, with the Old God vanquished and the new ones much kinder in their treatment of it.

But, alas, that was not the end. The Old God had fled, yes, but some of His servants remained, and though they faced a long wait to restore their Master, wait they did. Finally, after long millennia, one such servant took it upon herself to bring her Master back, even though it would release ruination on the world once more. To that end, the Old God's Servant ensnared the King of Cadrium, centre of the world and beacon of knowledge, in a spell so vile that it ate away at the king's very life.

Fearful that the loss of her king would bring about a war violent enough to resurrect the Old God Himself, Sir Erris Quicksword went on a desperate Quest to find the godsgem again, that same emerald the new gods had used, lost all this

time from history's record. With her rode three champions, each particularly skilled in multiple aspects of the knightly arts, along with the greatest living Mage, and two others, so that their company might number seven, the same as did the new gods.

Great were their trials and tribulations upon the road, yet through mastery of themselves and of their surroundings they did manage, not only to find the godsgem itself, but also to take it to the Old God's altar, rebuilt in secret by His cruel servants, and there destroy Him utterly.

It was in those final moments, when the Old God was at His most powerful and the knights at their most vulnerable, that the wisdom of the new gods showed itself. Sir Erris dealt the killing blow—yes, her sword was as quick as her name foretold—but, without the aid of her companions, picked for their skills but also for their number, she would have been overmatched.

At this most important time, the weight of destiny fell upon the shoulders of a mere apprentice knight. Kept aside during the fighting to guard the Mage's back, the apprentice saw the battle unfold and knew when the moment for her to act had arrived. As she watched her companions quail in the face of the Old God's rising, Kalanthe Ironheart did not falter. She was able to distract the Old God, giving time to Sir Erris and allowing her to use the godsgem to put to rest the Old God, once and for all.

With King Dorrenta unensorcelled and the world made safe once more, Sir Erris and her six companions returned to

Cadria and to the honours and privileges they had earned. Erris herself was married to the king, as had long been both their wish, while the other knights and the apprentice resumed their duties in the palace. The Mage returned to the Mage Keep with the godsgem under his protection, to consult with his fellows how best to conceal within their sanctuary.

The seventh companion disappeared, and little is known about her. The common folk say she was lowborn like them, and a thief besides, but it is far more likely that she was, in fact, one of the seven new gods, keeping watch over Sir Erris's Quest to ensure no misuse of the godsgem.

In any case, with peace returned and the kingdom stabilized, it seemed that the time for great tales was done. The horror and grief of the past was gone, driven out by the light and goodness of the new gods; and under the protection of the knights who served them and the king both, it seemed unlikely that such darkness would ever return.

And they all lived happily ever after.



..... AFTER .....

As a rule, Olsa Rhetsdaughter avoided breaking into a house through the nursery. More generally, she avoided housebreaking, especially now that she operated without protection, but as the rain poured down on the city of Cadria, she was almost grateful to escape the soaking cold. She was used to sleeping rough—had slept rougher, as a point of fact, than she would tonight. But she hated the wet—how it permeated everything from her clothes to her hair to the slick stone of the wall she was scaling—and hated it all the more now that she didn’t have reliable access to a good fire. There would probably be several of those inside the house, as the wealthy owners warded off the damp.

Once she reached her destination, she paused halfway over the sill and surveyed the layout of the room as best she could in the dark. Her preference for a job of this sort was a musty attic or, in a pinch, an unoccupied guest room. There were just so many obstacles in a nursery: toys strewn on the floor; more than the usual number of beds; the family cat; and, of course, the children themselves. Children were restless sleepers.



Children required lamps left lit in case they woke up in the dark. Children *asked questions*.

“Are you Olsa-thief-of-the-realm?” The voice was high enough and young enough that she couldn’t tell whether it was a lad or lass who spoke, but the question froze Olsa in her tracks halfway across the room. Dammit, she’d done such a good job of opening and shutting the window too.

“No,” she hissed. “I’m a demon that preys upon waking children in the dark. Go back to sleep.”

“I think a demon would be taller,” said a second voice. This one was almost certainly a girl. “Also, demons are usually on fire.”

Olsa sighed. All she wanted was a quick, easy job, and those were increasingly hard for her to come by. She’d taken this one because it had been a slow week, because her percentage of the take was high, and because the family she’d be stealing from employed one of the best cooks in the city. She’d been planning her detour through the kitchen on her way out in almost as much detail as she’d been planning the actual heist.

“Yes,” she said, flopping gracelessly into the chair by the fire. She was probably destroying the fine upholstery with her soaked tunic and hose, but the fire was warm enough that she couldn’t bring herself to care. “I’m Olsa.”

“Oh, tell us about the godsgem!” said the little one, a girl after all, bouncing across the room to sit in front of her, as though Olsa were her nurse. “Papa is a gem merchant, so I’ve seen lots of pretty stones, but they say the godsgem is the prettiest.”

“She knows Papa is a gem merchant, Ildy,” said the older girl. She was at the age where she felt it imperative to remain dignified at all times, so she didn’t bounce, but she did come closer and take a seat. “Why do you think she’s here?”

“Be quiet, Mina,” the little one, Ildy, said. “I want a story.”

“If you’ll both be quiet, I’ll tell you,” Olsa said.

It wasn’t the best plan she’d ever had, but short of diving out the window right now and making a run for it, she couldn’t think of anything else. She was caught, but it was better to be caught by these two than by their parents or whatever burly servants they had kicking about the house. Also, it was a very good fire. Olsa decided it was worth the risk.

The girls settled in front her, their white nightgowns tucked neatly under their legs. Soon, they would be too old to sit on the floor. Their skirts and stays would require chairs. Olsa wondered if either of them had ever sat cross-legged in their lives. She’d had to teach Kalanthe how to do it, and Kalanthe wore trousers half the time anyway. Money made a person very strange, and Olsa was more aware of it now than she had ever been.

“The first time I saw it,” she began, “I thought to myself ‘I could see a roomful of gems, all piled up on top of one another, and be able to recognize this one immediately.’”

“What does it look like?” asked Ildy.

“Hush,” said her sister.

“It’s not large and it’s not cut very well,” Olsa said. “From the stories, you’d imagine an emerald the size of my fist, cut with

so many facets that the reflected light goes off in all directions at once. The truth is that the godsgem is much smaller, and almost raw.”

“That doesn’t sound very special at all,” said Mina.

“You hush,” said her sister.

In spite of herself, Olsa smiled.

“It doesn’t look like much,” she continued. “It doesn’t have to. As soon as you see it, you know it’s special. It sings, you see. Imagine the most beautiful hymn you’ve ever heard at the temple. The kind they sing on festival days, where the different sections of the choir layer their voices over each other’s in more than four parts. Now, imagine that, but a hundredfold. The most complicated and the most beautiful music you’ve ever heard, so much so that you can barely stand to listen to it, because you know that once you start, you’ll never want to stop.”

“That sounds dangerous,” said Mina.

“Of course it was dangerous,” said Olsa. She shook herself a bit to try forgetting what the godsgem had sounded like. Of course it didn’t work. It never would. The song would haunt her for the rest of her life. “That’s why they sent all those knights to find it.”

“Quicksword and Stonehand and Fire-Eyes and Silverspoke,” said Ildy, rhyming them off like a psalm. Olsa had seen them all naked, so she was somewhat less impressed by them. “And the Mage, of course.”

“And Ironheart,” said Mina. “And you.”

“Why did they send you?” Ildy asked.

“I asked myself that question a lot,” Olsa said. “The truth is that I’d done Sir Erris Quicksword a couple of favours. She needed a spy, and I was available. Only the men I was spying on got wind of it, somehow, and sent some footpads to cut my throat. I escaped them, but I knew I needed better sanctuary. I didn’t much fancy shutting myself up in the temple, so I went to Quicksword herself and she took me with her. Then I stayed because I didn’t have anywhere else to go, and because the gods like it when the people on a Quest stay the same.”

“They say the king picked those knights and you because you each matched a facet of the new gods,” Ildy said.

“Don’t be foolish, Ildy,” Mina said. “Everyone knows that the king had given instruction to let Sir Erris make her own decisions, and that meant picking her companions, and she picked the ones she thought it would be the hardest for the Old God to tempt.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Olsa said. It wasn’t Kalanthe’s soul she was thinking of. “But, yes, Erris picked who went.”

There was a creak in the hallway, and Olsa tensed. Neither of the girls reacted, and presumably they weren’t supposed to be out of bed at this hour. They wouldn’t get in nearly as much trouble as Olsa would, but no one likes to be punished. Perhaps it was the cat. Olsa knew from casing the house that the family cat was enormous, and it wasn’t in the room with them.

“Tell us about Kalanthe Ironheart,” said Ildy. It was more a plea than a demand. She wasn’t old enough that she was used to being obeyed without question yet.

Olsa paused. Both Mina and Ildy were leaning towards her now, eager to hear a story about the Apprentice Knight. Kalanthe, like herself, had only been on the Quest because of circumstance. Young though she was, she was the same size as Sir Erris and could wear her armour. It was decided that if she came along, she could be used as Erris’s double if the occasion called for it. Since the older knights were much older and the Mage was mostly unapproachable, Kalanthe and Olsa had spent a lot of time together. It hadn’t been very much fun at the start, but, well, it didn’t much bear thinking of, to be honest.

“Ironheart will be the perfect knight someday,” Olsa said. She was plagiarizing a little bit, but maybe these girls hadn’t heard that particular ballad yet. It was easier to think about Kalanthe if she didn’t have to use her own memories to do it. “Tall and strong and dedicated. Pure of heart and sure of arm.”

Less pure and less sure when it came to other areas of expertise, but that was hardly fit for young children. Also, it was exactly the sort of memories Olsa did her very best to avoid thinking about.

“At the very moment when Sir Erris Quicksword needed her, Ironheart was there,” Olsa continued. She could see the scene in her head, replaying as it always did when she thought about Kalanthe and tried not to think about Kalanthe at the

same time. Which happened fairly regularly. “In an act of sheer defiance and bravery, she threw her axe at the Old God’s altar.”

Both girls gasped, their faces lit with glee. They knew the story after all, it seemed, though they hadn’t heard it from someone who had been in the room where it happened.

“You know the Old God’s power,” Olsa went on. “Dark and cruel, it could not be broken by so simple a thing as a knight’s axe, even when the knight was good and righteous as Kalanthe Ironheart.”

She was very proud of herself for saying that last part with a straight face.

“But it was enough to split the Old God’s attention,” she said. “For a fraction of a second, He turned his awful face to Ironheart.”

It had been a terrible moment. Olsa had been certain that Kalanthe was going to die for her bravery.

“And in that moment, Erris Quicksword struck,” Olsa said. “Like her name says, she moved so quickly I could barely see her arm. Instead, it was a blur of motion as her blessed sword came down on the altar and, with the power of godsgem, smashed it to pieces.”

“And that was the end of the Old God,” Mina said. “And the start of the new age with our King restored.”

“Something like that,” Olsa said. She wasn’t particularly fond of the new age. She was a lot hungrier in it.

There was another creak from the hallway. This time, Olsa was sure it wasn’t the cat. She hated leaving a job undone,

but there was no way she'd be able to ditch the children and complete her thievery now. That chance had been lost as soon as Ildy woke up, and now it was time to abandon the house completely. Another failure and another night as the most famous person in the realm who wasn't going to get any supper. At least she was warm and her tunic had dried out. She looked back towards the window, her escape, and counted out how many breaths it would take her to cross the room to it and jump.

Without warning, the door to the nursery slammed open. Though she was prepared for it, Ildy and Mina were not. Both girls screamed at the noise and kept screaming when, instead of the familiar faces of their parents, the nursery filled with soldiers-at-arms in the uniforms of the city watch.

Olsa dove for the window, but as soon as she had it up, she saw the torches below and knew there was no escape that way either. She looked about for another rooftop, but found nothing. That was why she'd had to scale the wall to the nursery window in the first place. The chief gem merchant of Cadria took few chances when it came to home security.

She turned around to face the watch. The girls' mother had come in and was soothing them. Mina looked calm, but Ildy was furious. Olsa did her best to swallow a smile. It appeared she had made another noble friend, for all the good it was about to do her.

"Olsa Rhetsdaughter," said the leader of the watch, her tone more resigned than anything else. "You are under arrest."



..... A F T E R .....

The state of the prison had not improved much from her last visit. Ever since his healing, King Dorrenta had embarked on a massive campaign of public works, including the sewers and the aqueducts, amongst other things, but apparently he had not yet turned to prison reform. The cell Olsa was dumped into smelled like piss, and the straw that covered the floor was at least a week old and starting to rot. The torches were burning tallow, which didn't help clear the air, and the pervasive damp of old-city stone made everything chilly. Olsa wrapped her arms around her knees and glowered.

They hadn't chained her to the wall because, much to the disappointment of the watch leader, she hadn't resisted her arrest. Mina had given her a cape, insisting that it belonged to Olsa and therefore ought to be arrested with her, even though it was abundantly clear that Olsa couldn't possibly own anything so fine. The cape was made of the hide of some animal Olsa couldn't identify, long strips sewn together, and lined with fur. It was much too short for her and since its primary function seemed to be keeping water off its wearer,



it didn't do a lot to keep Olsa warm. Still, there was fur, and every little bit helped.

Her trial wouldn't be until the morning, and long hours of boredom stretched out between now and then. To keep herself entertained, Olsa tried to puzzle out what the cape might be made of. The average street thief would have given up after a few minutes, but the average street thief didn't have Olsa's advantages. She had gleaned her primary education from the Thief Bosses, of course, and could tell good coin from bad as well as any, but her education hadn't stopped there. Once the Bosses had seen her gifts at basic thievery, they had increased what they taught her, including how to determine the quality of materials and work. The fine stitching on the cape she held indicated the latter, and the fact that the work had been expended indicated the former. Whatever the cape was made of, it was expensive and worth the best of craftsmanship.

It wasn't a cow. Cow leather was something any urchin born in Cadria would be able to identify on sight. And the pieces were too small for a bear. No, it had to be something else.

Her mind's eye saw a tall figure with black skin and sparkling plate armour. At almost seven feet, with the broad shoulders typical of a knight and tightly braided hair, Sir Uleweya Fire-Eyes feared very little. Her helmet was crowned with bone, which she said absorbed the shock of an axe to the head, and the steel of her armour always glinted as she moved. Unless it was covered in blood, of course. Then she stopped

gleaming for a while, until she had time to polish it again. She made a very imposing figure, and even without her armour, she was intimidating. Her eyes were dark brown, except when she was working her specific kind of magic. Then, as her name indicated, they were afire with the power that allowed her to see great distances, even at night.

Olsa hadn't spoken to her very much at first because she had an excellent instinct for self-preservation. One night, though, when it was Sir Uleweya's turn to keep watch, Olsa couldn't sleep. It was raining, which it did very differently in the country than it did in the city, and which Olsa found to be unnerving. She wanted to sit by the fire, where it was warm, but the lady knight sat there, and Olsa didn't want to interrupt.

"You might as well come out," Uleweya had said, after several moments but without actually looking at the place where Olsa was standing. Someone with magic in her eyes still had at least four other senses.

Olsa did as she was told and went to stand by the guttering fire. They'd rigged a cover for it, but rain rarely fell straight down, so some of the water made it through.

"Here," said the lady knight, and held out her cape so that Olsa could sit next to her and be protected.

This was far, far more than Olsa had been willing to cope with.

"Oh, stop being an idiot," said Uleweya. "We are on a Quest. I don't want to carry you if you catch your death. Sit down."

Olsa had sat. Immediately, she stopped getting wet. She'd never encountered a cape that did that before. Even the thickest wool got damp eventually and would take forever to dry. She'd tried to turn around and look at it, but there wasn't enough space.

"It's sealskin," Sir Uleweya said, her eyes dancing in the firelight. "Great big creatures that live in the oceans to the north. You can't grow anything up there, and importing food would be too expensive, so they kill seals instead. Wonderfully nutritious meat, very useful hides."

"How did you get it?" Olsa asked, and the lady knight launched into an explanation involving pirates, an endless night, and a series of close escapes that might have been not entirely accurate, but was highly entertaining nonetheless. Uleweya's family had money but no land, so after she was knighted, she had served the realm by travelling widely and had seen a great many things. Several of her stories may have actually been true.

"Seal," Olsa said now, to the oppressive quiet of the dungeon. "And some kind of fur to make it more comfortable. I wonder how Mina got it?"

"No talking!" said a guard from outside her cell. She rattled the bars of her door, as though to remind Olsa that she was trapped by them. She stuck out her tongue, even though she couldn't see her. Prison was the worst.

Retreating to the peace of her own mind, Olsa began to replay the story that Fire-Eyes had told her. She wasn't searching for inspiration, but rather was attempting to distract herself from the boredom of her cell, much the way

Sir Uleweya had been attempting to distract a frightened young thief from the unknown wilds when she'd told the tale in the first place. Usually, Olsa thought her Quest had been pretty useless—personally, anyway. There was no denying she had helped to save the realm. Still, every now and then, even though the knight had probably forgotten her, she was reminded that parts of it would be with her forever.

Or at least until her inevitable hanging.

Daylight pierced Olsa's eyes as she stood before the court. The room, as she had expected, was packed to the rafters, just as it had been the previous two times she'd been tried here. The three times before that, there hadn't been a trial at all. Instead, she'd sat in her cell for a few hours, and then the door had been opened and the magistrate informed her that she had been pardoned by the king and was free to go. Apparently, the king's mercy was extended only three times. He hadn't come to any of her trials, nor had Sir Erris. So much for royal gratitude.

The courtroom of the royal palace of Cadria was a vast room with a vaulted ceiling, much like the temple, only decidedly less ornate. Along one wall was the bench where the magistrate sat, surrounded by messengers, scribes, lawkeepers, and the magistrate's own security force. To the left and right were the viewing galleries, where any member of the public might come to view a trial. Usually the seats were empty, but for Olsa they were crowded, and those with good views were employing great effort to fend off those who found their

view obstructed by one of the numerous support columns. The rear wall was reserved for any wealthier citizens who might choose to watch the proceedings. Olsa, her hands now chained as much for appearance as anything else, was led to the wooden box in the middle of the room, and stood there with great aplomb while the crowd got their fill, and the magistrate lamented her existence. There was no sign of Ildy or Mina, though Olsa saw the girls' father sitting with his own lawkeeper and guard close to the magistrate's bench.

"Olsa Rhetsdaughter!" The magistrate had a booming voice—probably thanks in part to her knight training—and rarely required use of her gavel at all to get everyone's attention. As soon as she said Olsa's name, there was instant silence from the crowd. "You have been brought before us again today. This is your sixth arrest and your third trial. What have you to say for yourself?"

This would be the part where, if she wanted to, Olsa could give up her coconspirators. She'd been hired for this job, after all, and everyone in the room knew it. The chief gem merchant of Cadria was too unlikely a target for a random robbery, particularly in his own house. Olsa could tattle on her employers and throw herself on the court's mercy, but there would be no mercy for her on the streets if she did. Thieves who turned in court didn't long survive the turning.

"It was raining, sir," Olsa said instead. "And I saw the fire through the window. I was cold."

"So you climbed three storeys to break into the nursery?"

the magistrate said. Olsa could tell Knight of Laws was just as frustrated by all the show as she was.

“Yes, sir,” Olsa said. “Nothing like a good climb to stir the blood.”

A good number of the crowd laughed, but the magistrate didn’t so much as twitch. The gem merchant leaned over to his lawkeeper and whispered something. The woman nodded and stood.

“Sir, if I may?” the lawkeeper said, and the magistrate gave her permission. “The thief spent an unknown amount of time with this good man’s daughters. The gods only know what she told them, but we request that sedition be added to the charge of robbery, as surely no one of her character could impart any wholesome information to children so young.”

“I object!” Olsa said. Thievery was one thing and something she was surely guilty of, but she would not have her name besmirched with crimes she hadn’t actually committed.

“You are out of order,” the magistrate said severely, though she shook her head at the guard who would have struck Olsa for speaking out of turn. She considered the request for a moment, consulting the papers before her. The crowd grew restless. “The request is denied. I spoke to the girls myself, and they do not seem harmed by their association with this . . . person.”

Olsa relaxed a little bit, though there were still the other charges to deal with. She wasn’t exactly the magistrate’s favourite

person. She thought the lawkeeper might protest, but she only sat down again and shuffled her own notes.

“If there is no other evidence to be offered?” the magistrate said. Neither Olsa nor her accusers moved. “Then hear the decision of the King’s Court.”

The crowd dutifully rose to their feet as though the king were present, though he was not. Olsa guessed that if he were, there would be a lot more soldiers in the room. Still, with everyone on their feet it made her feel a little less exposed. She pretended they were standing for her, a hero of the realm.

“Olsa Rhetsdaughter, this is your sixth arrest for thievery,” said the magistrate. “Three times you have been pardoned and twice you have been exonerated, yet the pattern before me is a clear one. You are a thief, you have shown no desire to rehabilitate yourself, and you continue to flaunt the King’s Law in your every action.”

Personally, Olsa thought this unfair. She did a great many things without thinking about the king at all. She forced herself to pay attention.

“For the crimes of thievery, housebreaking, and conspiracy, the court finds you guilty,” the magistrate declared. “And in accordance with your past record, we sentence you to be hanged by the neck until you are dead.”

At this, the crowd began to buzz. Everyone knew she had been on that Quest, even if they didn’t know what she’d done while she was on it. Surely, surely, the magistrate would not execute such a person as her.

Olsa stood very still, facing the magistrate and willing herself to ignore everyone else in the room. For the first time, the magistrate's façade cracked.

“Unless”—and here the old woman sighed as though she regretted having been made to get out of bed this morning—“you can find someone who is willing to speak for you.”

Olsa smiled sweetly at her as, right on cue, a familiar voice sounded.

“I will speak for her.”



## BEFORE . . . . .

The first time I saw her, I couldn't tell if she was a lad or lass. Her night-black hair was unevenly cut—like she'd done it herself with a blunt knife—and stuck out in short tufts that were already starting to curl even though they were barely long enough to comb properly. Dark eyes flashed as she took in her surroundings and sized us up. She was covered in red dirt—the kind that came off the cheap roof tiles used in the poorest neighbourhoods inside Cadria's walls—but her skin under that was darker than mine. Her clothes were so old and misused that it was hard to tell what was patches and what was original cloth—or even if any original cloth remained at all. I couldn't fathom why Sir Erris would bring her, even to get a seventh companion. Surely there must be other knights or mages that would be better suited.

“This is Olsa,” Sir Erris said. “She’s a thief, who does work for me in the city. Her face has become known to our enemies, and they have tried to kill her. We’re taking her with us.”

And that was that. The other knights obeyed Sir Erris, and who was I to question her.

I was about a two years away from becoming a knight in the king's name and service, at which point I would have earned the right to speak to them unbidden, but even then I would be far below them in rank. These were champions of the realm, known throughout the Kingdom of Cadrium and possibly even to the continents beyond. It would take me many years to be good enough to call them my sisters, or my friends.

Mage Ladros, whose white hair and lined face made him look venerable instead of vulnerable, was the only one of our party who might have gainsayed Sir Erris, and he chose not to, instead reorganizing his pack in final preparation before we set out. I watched him carefully. Of all the knights on the Quest, only Sir Erris and I had any plain magic to speak of—Sir Uleweya had some sense magic with her sight, but that sort was like breathing; either on or off. Plain magic, my sort, was like a fire, always needing fuel. I was mostly untrained, and so I hoped that by watching Mage Ladros, I could learn a bit, and so not fall behind in my studies while I was on the road.

My yearmates were all envious that I was chosen to go. They would have laughed to hear my worries: that I would lose time at my schoolwork while on a Quest with four living legends. Or maybe they would have said I was afraid. They would have been wrong with the latter. I wasn't afraid of very many things, and with the company I was keeping, there was no reason to be. Either we would be successful, or the Old God would kill us. It was almost reassuring in its finality.

The thief was staring at me. Maybe she was wondering why I was included as much as I had wondered at her. At least I would be useful. I was a competent swordswoman and good with bow, whether I was shooting game or enemies. I hoped Sir Branthear would show me how to use an axe, if we had any spare time on the road for teaching. And I was the same size as Sir Erris, which meant that I could wear her armour—with the visor down, of course; Sir Erris was pale-skinned and her hair was red—to distract our enemies while she committed acts of stealth or magecraft.

I wondered what the thief could do for us, and I continued to wonder the whole first day of our ride, while she eyed each bush and shrub as though it might conceal the deadliest of enemies.

“What is your problem?” I asked finally, unable to stand her jumpiness any longer.

To be honest, my own silence was growing difficult to bear. I was not overly talkative but I was used to talking, and holding my tongue unless I was spoken to was nerve-racking.

“There’s so much space,” the thief said. “No walls or houses in sight. No roofs, no stone work. Nothing but trees and grass and whatever that is.”

“That’s a rosebush,” I told her. “It’s not blooming yet, but when it does it will be very pretty.”

“That’s what roses look like?” said the thief. Olsa, her name was Olsa, and if she was the only person I could talk to, I’d do well to call her by her name.

“Of course,” I said. “What did you think they looked like?”

“Red, usually,” Olsa said. “Sometimes yellow or pink. I saw a white one once, when I was at a lesser temple and, um, working.”

Stealing from funerary offerings, is what she meant. This was going to end in disaster.

“That’s what the flowers look like,” I told her. “This is what they look like without flowers on.”

“So it’s still a rose even when it’s not a rose?” Olsa said.

Ahead of us, Sir Terriam began to laugh, her massive shoulders shaking with mirth.

“Our thief is a philosopher, it seems,” she said. “You watch yourself, apprentice. She’ll steal more than your purse.”

“I wouldn’t,” Olsa said. She wasn’t talking to me, but directly to the lady knight. I tried to catch her eye to warn her off, but she was giving her full attention to her horse. “I don’t steal from my own crew. That’s how you get your throat slit.”

“She’s not your crew,” I hissed. “And she deserves the respect of your silence.”

“Apprentice Kalanthe, I appreciate the deference, but I don’t think that’s going to be sustainable long-term.” Sir Terriam slowed her horse and pulled alongside me. I straightened in my saddle. “I know that in the palace, your oaths include respectful silence, but out here on the road, if you notice something and wait for us to call on you, we might all die.”

“Silverspoke is right,” Sir Erris said. The woman had the sharpest ears of anyone I’ve ever met. “I don’t imagine either of you will abuse the privilege, but don’t hold yourselves to the

courtly quiet out here. Your necks are at risk too. You should be able to ask questions about the Quest we're on."

Mage Ladros laughed to himself and for a moment I wasn't sure why, but then Olsa launched into a flurry of questions about what we were doing and why we were doing it, and I realized that he had anticipated the oncoming storm if Sir Erris had not. Sir Ulewewa was also concealing a grin.

"Olsa, stop," Sir Erris said, but her tone was oddly fond. "I can't answer more than one question at a time anyway."

"Sir Knight, if it pleases you, I'll answer her questions," I said, surprising myself at my forthrightness, even if it had been as good as ordered. "As many of them as I am able to, in any case. And then we will ask you the questions we cannot solve ourselves."

"Where did you find this girl, Quicksword?" Sir Terriam said. "Finishing school?"

"Apprentice Knight Kalanthe is the best of her class." Everyone had heard Sir Terriam's question, and Sir Erris answered in the same carrying tone. I know I flushed at her words, but I couldn't help it. "She is green because it is her first true mission, but we have great hope for her once she wins her full knighthood."

Sir Terriam looked at me for a long moment, and then spurred her horse ahead to join with Sir Branthear at the front. I hoped I had not just lost her good opinion of me.

"Very well, Kalanthe," Sir Erris continued. "I think that is a good idea. You can keep her from pestering the rest of us too much, eh?"

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Don’t I get a say in this?” Olsa asked.

“No,” said Sir Erris. “Loosen your hold on the reins, lass. If you harden your horse’s mouth like that, you’ll never be able to control it in a skirmish.”

Olsa obediently loosened the reins, but I could tell that her tight grip had been the result of her discomfort with the exposure of the countryside. I pulled my horse alongside hers. Now that she was dressed better, I could see that her figure was good. It was nowhere near as developed as mine, probably due to underfeeding, but there was no reason she couldn’t be trained a bit, at least in horseback riding.

“Hold on with your knees, Olsa,” I said, using a voice I might have used with a girl much younger than she. “Push down with your heels. That will make sure your legs are in the right place.”

She bristled at my tone, but followed direction. She wouldn’t thank me tomorrow morning, when her whole body clenched with the strain of newly used muscles, but in the long run, her riding would be improved. Her seat was already better.

“That’s perfect,” I told her. “It’s easier for your horse if you sit properly, and then it’s easier for you if it’s better for the horse. Most knights spend years learning to ride, so don’t worry if you’re not as good as we are overnight.”

“Thank you, your ladyship,” she said, voice over-honeyed.

“Kalanthe,” I said.

“Do you have a knight-name yet?” she asked. “Or do they give that to you when you win your title officially?”

“We usually have our sobriquet long before that,” I said. “We live in close quarters for almost ten years, after all.”

“So what’s yours?” she asked again.

I sighed. It wasn’t that my sobriquet was bad, it was just so misleading. I felt it didn’t describe me at all, and yet it had met with near-universal approval the first time one of my fellow apprentices had said it.

“Ironheart,” I told her, hoping I wouldn’t regret it. “Kalanthe Ironheart.”

“That’s much more suited to ballads than my last name,” Olsa said. “There’s not a lot that rhymes with Rhetsdaughter.”

So she was illegitimate on top of everything else. The gods had given this poor girl no advantages at all, except perhaps her light fingers and her acquaintance with Sir Erris. Maybe that was all she needed. I could help her from here, in any case.

“I don’t imagine there will be any ballads about me for a while,” I said. “Sir Erris rides to save the king, and that is far more worthy of song than the apprentice and the thief who ride with her.”

“You’re probably right, Kalanthe.” She said my name like it was a secret, a sweet on her tongue. “Now, I know about the godsgem and the Old God and the poisoned king, but if you could tell me about the clues we’re following, I would appreciate it. I don’t like travelling blind.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon telling her the stories and

hearthtales about what had become of the godsgem after it had been used on the Old God and laid Him low. She listened to every word I said, asking questions with none of the hesitation I would have felt talking to my teachers, and pointing out logistical errors in the more fantastic of the legends we were hoping held literal truths. At one point, I told a story that contradicted one from earlier in the lecture, and she recited it back to me verbatim to point out the inconsistencies.

“You have an excellent memory,” I told her. I could recite lessons with practice, but not the first time I had heard something.

“People rarely tell a thief a thing more than once,” she replied. There was the slightest edge to her voice, a challenge I didn’t feel like meeting, so I let it pass and kept talking.

The other knights listened, even Sir Terriam, smiling indulgently from time to time, and Mage Ladros did not interrupt, so I supposed I made no errors.

Finally, as the sun was setting, Sir Erris called a halt. We each unsaddled our horses, brushed them, and set them at their pickets, and then turned our attention to setting up camp. Olsa, who, it turned out, had never left the walls of Cadria at all, was quite useless at tent pitching and was dispatched into the forest to collect firewood instead. Given that I knew she was afraid of animals that might lurk there, I was strangely proud of her for doing as she was bid without protest. The rest of us made quick work of our tasks, and Mage Ladros set wards for safety around us so that we would not be surprised in the night.

“Whose turn is it to do the cooking?” Sir Branthear asked, as the last tent peg was driven home.

“Yours,” said Sir Uleweya, though I wasn’t sure how she’d arrived at that conclusion.

Still, Sir Branthear accepted it and turned to the food packs. Olsa came back with firewood, and soon enough we had dinner in our bellies.

“We’ll be making an early start,” said Sir Erris, when we were done eating. “You should get to your beds.”

The others nodded and drew lots for the watch. I went away from the fire to relieve myself before I went to bed, and when I returned, only Sir Branthear was visible, her naked axe on her knees as she settled in. She nodded at me, and I headed to my tent.

I had set up my sleeping space the way we had been taught, tying the knots on the tent flap the way the knight-masters taught us for use on the trail. They weren’t common sailors’ knots, adapted as they were for being untied while wearing gauntlets, and it wasn’t usual for someone who wasn’t a knight to know how to tie them. I knew I had fastened the flap with just that sort of knot, even though there was no real call for it. I also knew that someone had untied it and refastened it almost perfectly. Slowly, I pulled the loop that would release the canvas, and let the light from the campfire spill across the floor.

On my bedroll was a splash of colour. When my eyes adjusted to the dim light of the tent, I saw that it was a single red rose.





..... A F T E R .....

Kalanthe still woke early most mornings, but that didn't mean she had to like it. Any time of day, the life of a knight was harder than most she might have chosen, but she only truly had second thoughts when she had to get out of bed before the sun was up. After the Quest, she had been awarded her own rooms in the palace, away from the apprentice barracks. Though she would hold that rank until her birthday, still some months away, the knight-commanders decided that returning her to her previous comrades would be counterproductive for everyone. She studied alone, or with tutors, and practiced arms with Sir Erris. It was meant to be a great honour, her quasi-promotion. It helped if she reminded herself of that when the loneliness set in.

She's always been the odd one out amongst the other apprentices. Most of them came from wealthy families and could pay the knight fees outright. It was an expensive process, and Kalanthe's family was wealthy, but not *that* wealthy. They could not afford armour and horses for her without a loan. Her parents made it clear that they were happy for her, and proud,



but everyone knew that she must marry so that the bride-price could be used to pay off the debt. Most of the other apprentice knights had no plans to marry, or at least no plans to marry until much later in their lives. They would spend the years of their knighthoods travelling at the behest of the crown or seeing to their own estates. Kalanthe always felt the weight of her future, and it was heavier than any armour.

Her solution was to be the best. She studied hard and trained hard. She listened to every piece of advice her teachers gave her, and she quickly rose to the top of most of her classes. That was an excellent way to build a reputation, but a terrible way to make close friends, and so Kalanthe had very few of these. It didn't bother her. She was not destined to be a leader of other knights nor would she hope for a position of command in the King's Army. She would be a knight at court, or wherever she and her spouse decided to live. It wasn't particularly glamorous, but Kalanthe was determined to make the best of it.

Then, on that fateful day when Sir Erris had come into the hall where the apprentices took their meals, Kalanthe's life had turned upside down again. When she finally returned to the palace more than a year later, Kalanthe had new scars, new stories, and new skills. None of the other apprentice knights could match her, which meant they didn't often try, and she mostly faced her old classmates in carefully choreographed training duels. So now she waited, agonizingly, for her birthday. Then the king would knight her officially, and she would be free to travel under her own colours. Free, at least, until her wedding.

So she continued to rise early, to dress and brush the grit out of her eyes, and go to the practice field in the hope that Sir Erris would be there to spar with. More often, as the business of court kept the newly married queen away, Kalanthe practiced the bow instead. She was getting distressingly good at it. Soon she would have to take up something new, though what that might be she hadn't the foggiest idea.

On this particular morning, however, Kalanthe didn't make it to the practice field. Instead, as she was tying on her hose and preparing to don the bulky linen undertunic she wore beneath her informal chainmail, there was a knock at the door. She pulled on her tunic, called out, and a messenger came into her room.

"Good morning, Lady Ironheart," said the messenger.

She hated that name, but until they could call her "Sir Kalanthe" she was stuck with it, at least in the palace where formality was studied and practiced. Sir Erris said it spoke of her determination, but Kalanthe knew that wasn't the spirit in which the name had been given. The other apprentices had called her Ironheart when the tutors were around, but alone in the barracks it was always *Iceheart*, and Kalanthe despised it.

"Good morning, page," she replied. Her voice was even and kind. The page had clearly been awake longer than she had, and that meant he deserved the best of courtesy, regardless of his rank in relation to hers.

The boy straightened and puffed out his chest a bit at her manner with him. She was happy to let him. *Iceheart* indeed.

“I have a message from the magistrate for you, my lady,” said the lad, and handed over a sealed note.

Kalanthe was momentarily confused as to what business she and the magistrate could possibly have, but then it dawned on her: the only business they ever had with her. She sighed.

“Thank you, page,” she said, and handed the boy two of the tokens he could exchange for coins with the page-master, indication of a job well done. “Please go two doors down from here and fetch my lady’s maid. Tell her I’m sorry, but I’ll need her immediately this morning.”

The lady’s maid was a new addition since her return to court. Triana was delightfully practical and good at several things Kalanthe was not, so they got on very well. Kalanthe required no help to get into her training-armour, though, and thus usually let Triana sleep in on the mornings when she got up to practice. Today was not going to be one of those days.

“Yes, my lady.” The page bobbed his head and set off at a trot. He was smiling and turning the tokens around in his hand.

When he was gone, Kalanthe shucked the linen tunic and began to untie the hose. Triana arrived just as she was peeling them off and took in her nearly naked mistress with aplomb. That was another thing Kalanthe appreciated about her lady’s maid: she had the good sense to ignore Kalanthe’s barracks-trained sensibilities.

“What is it, then?” Triana was wearing a simple wool gown overtop the linen shift that served as her nightdress. Her dark blond hair was in a single braid, but not pinned up for sleep.

“The magistrate has summoned me to court,” Kalanthe said, and sat down at her dressing table. “I’ll need to look the part. And quickly.”

“Right,” said Triana, and disappeared into one of the larger wardrobes. “Those underthings will do fine, but if you could start combing your hair out, I’d appreciate it.”

Kalanthe suppressed a giggle, despite the immediacy of the situation. She was more than capable of dressing herself and taking care of her own hair, but Triana seemed to think she was hopeless at both and was determined to take her in hand. Obediently, Kalanthe picked up a comb and began to untangle her black hair from the braid she’d put it in for the morning’s now-aborted training session.

By the time she was done, Triana was standing behind her with a suitable collection of clothes, and Kalanthe stood to put them on. Being a knight excused her from some of the fashion of the court women—hoops and tight-laced corsets for starters—but she still had two underskirts overtop her shift, then the dark-grey undergown, then a bodice, and, finally, a sky-blue overgown. It was, Kalanthe had come to understand, armour of a different sort. And it certainly smelled better.

“Sit, please,” Triana said, and when Kalanthe was settled, the maid began to do her hair.

The style was simple, like the gown, and lacked ornamentation that would have been unsuitable for both the hour and the solemnity of the king’s court of law. Usually Triana wove gold wire or ribbons into Kalanthe’s hair—the bright metal

highlighting the lustrous black mass of it—but today she settled for coiled braids along the crown of Kalanthe’s head.

“I suppose it’s too early in the day for face paint,” Triana mused, tying off the end of a braid and tucking it into the loop behind Kalanthe’s left ear.

“I should think so,” Kalanthe said.

She didn’t much care for the stuff, but she had to admit that Triana was very good at applying it. It had been the first argument she lost with her new lady’s maid, as a point of fact. Triana was determined to show her what was possible with a few well-placed strokes of the makeup brush, and Kalanthe, equally opposed to the idea, had finally acquiesced out of exhaustion. The first time she’d seen her own face with Triana’s handiwork, it had nearly taken her breath away. It was undeniably her, but her eyes were so much sharper, her lips more vivid, and her cheeks—

“I left you the scar,” Triana had said, her voice almost reverent. “You earned it.”

“Thank you,” Kalanthe said. “I—I didn’t know it could look like this.”

“I’ll get better, my lady,” Triana assured her. “Your colouring is very different from mine, so I’ll have to experiment a bit with the powders to get it right.”

With several months of experience since then, Triana had found a colour palette to suit her mistress’s dark-brown skin. They would not be using it this morning, though.

“Except a bit around the eyes, I think,” Triana said thoughtfully.

“Triana—” Kalanthe protested.

“It’s early!” Triana said. “You need to look awake.”

Part of Kalanthe’s training involved learning to pick one’s battles. As with the rest of her lessons, she’d been good at that, so she lowered her hands and let Triana work. It didn’t take very long, and when the maid was done, Kalanthe could barely tell she was wearing any makeup at all.

“You are very good at this,” she said, not for the first time.

“My lady flatters me.” Triana smiled. “As if you would go into battle in any state less than complete readiness. Now stand up, so I can straighten the gown, and then you’d better be on your way.”

Kalanthe stood as patiently as she could while Triana made the final adjustments. Now that she was ready, Kalanthe’s mind was full of the task that waited for her. She hadn’t seen Olsa in weeks, not since the last time the thief was arrested. She wondered if Olsa was hurt this time, if she’d finally resisted her arrest. She knew the city watch was frustrated. They did their jobs, but Kalanthe had noticed that Olsa’s escorts for her last court appearance were the type who usually guarded violent, unrepentant criminals, and they would not hesitate to rough her up if she gave them the opportunity. She imagined it would be so again today. It was a sure sign that the watch commander’s patience was wearing thin, hero of the realm or no.

Quiet fury replaced concern as Kalanthe neared the courtroom and heard the buzz of pretrial speculation. Olsa had no

reason to keep doing this and yet persisted in breaking the law. She took more and more risks, and when she was arrested she refused to give up her employers. Kalanthe respected loyalty, but she could not condone what Olsa was doing.

Yet, she knew in her heart that condoning it was exactly what she was about to do. She would not let Olsa go to the noose, Ironheart be damned, even if it seemed that Olsa was determined to end up there. Kalanthe chewed on her lower lip as she took her seat at the back of the room in the seats reserved for nobility. She couldn't abandon Olsa, not after the Quest. Not after everything that had happened on the Quest. She wasn't the only one with scars.

The magistrate was on her feet, reading the sentence. Then she paused, and she asked if there was anyone present who would speak for the accused. At least she did Kalanthe the courtesy of not looking at her until she had risen to her feet.

"I will speak for her."