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The disgusting truth about longevity is that any hobby, any skill at all can go from henscratch to masterful execution, because to put it simply, one has the time to perfect it. And so all about Jorun's darkly lit workshop hung all manner of delicate tapestries, threads and strips of cloth woven together skillfully to bring together a delight for the eyes, in scenes from farm life to fairy tale scenery, from delightful feelings of fancy and comfort to foreboding images of war and legend. The walls, the windows, and even the hearth was blanketed in them, each hastily tied off at their bottom end, belying the mastery of their creator.

Jorun did very little else in her time. Aside from her outings to buy wool and dyes, she was a recluse, rarely spoken of and never spoken to. The village of Aoselt was one large enough to draw no attention from the neighbors she paid little mind to, and that was enough for her. With a wealth of memory at her disposal, her crafts never exhausted her ideas and recollections.

A well that a century of weaving could not dry.

The leaf-green eyes delicately folded under thin brows had seen two centuries, far exceeding human lifetimes, and yet her visage was a delicate and young one; smooth, ripe and well cared for. Her slender frame stood elegantly postured, her skin a creamy tone and her long ink-black hair decorated with strands of gemstone beads. A vision of youth and beauty despite her age, and yet a hermit weaving tapestries in a cottage whose door seldom opened and even more rarely heard a knock.

Solitude has its necessity. Secrets she would never betray by divulging them to another soul had led her to this near constant meditation. Not easily would she ever break her silence.

However, the silent may listen, and the village of Aoselt was now abuzz with the unsettling sort of talk that might move a hermit from her hermitage. Rumors of war, political unrest, secret societies, demons, and an infamous Storm Magus whose allegiances were dangerously unstated. It seemed even this remote place was no longer separated from the world of people. Idle survival may now not be the ideal method of action.

Jorun had little sentimental attachment to the tapestries. They were thoughts, fleeting things that she had expressed, and was done with. Though she never discarded them, neither did she return to contemplate their imagery. It would be all the same to her should her cabin workshop be set aflame by some errant candle.

It was that mentality that made it easy to simply toss on her travelling cloak,

gather her satchel of herbs, and return to the vagrant lifestyle she hadn't practiced in a century. The dainty wayward medicine woman in her had returned, and despite her awkwardness, she closed the door of her cabin, leaving it unlocked for reasons she didn't care enough to define. She hurried away, fumbling in her satchel for a coin or two to pay the coachman of a caravan bound for the northern coast, and from there, the nation of Gallodan.

She wouldn't yet say why, but Gallodan was where to be right now, and she'd not stop moving until she'd reached it.

Three strong wooden coaches in a line were the grand route of travel across the continent's narrowest central expanse. Three days would carry passengers from the village of Aoselt to the northern city of Ardensell, a port city belonging to the Nation of Sorvenfell. From there Jorun reasoned she would find her way onto a ship bound for Gallodan.

Sorvenfell, the Nation of Stone Vlints, would be a greater obstacle than a sea crossing. Stone Vlints were a strong, mystical people, with a proud military history and a steep conformity to traditions. Sensitivity to magic sources, knowledge of lore, and militaristic rigidity were things that direly threatened her anonymity in travel. As little time in Ardensell as possible was ideal, but with her money going to just the coach, she would have to be a little more inventive to find a way onto a ship.

Jorun's mind flew in flurries as she handed the coachman her coins, hooded head held low and eyes diverted. He didn't ask her name, as she'd feared he would; he just smiled crookedly at her with his unkempt teeth and ragged beard that couldn't make up its mind on a color to stick to, and nodded his balding head at her to join the two other passengers in the coach.

Two of the four seats were open, throwing her into a frightful indecision. She could take the farther seat and sit by the old woman in a blue shawl, who was clumsily rearranging her things in her lap over and over again, or she could take the seat to her left, straight across from the old woman, next to an ostentatious-looking younger man in a deep gray over-cloak. His earthen hair was done in tightly wrapped dreadlocks, decorated in beads and other bits of jewelry, held together with a bright green head scarf that hung daintily over his shoulder.

He caught her eyes as she mulled over which, flashing a sly smile and a welcoming nod.

Jorun hustled to the seat by the old woman, whose attention didn't stray from the smattering of things in her lap which she was feverishly trying to sort out and fit into a much-too-small handbag. The man across blinked away his smile, then

turned to the window.

What felt like an hour later the coachman snapped the reins and the coach began to lurch forward. Jorun's eyes fell closed as the journey had begun at long last. She hadn't intended to make smalltalk with either the elderly woman nor the presumptuous young man, even if three days of silence seemed implausible to keep up. The swaying of the caravan lulled her quietly to a light sleep, her mind finally taking a rest from its incessant worrying.

A thunderous voice awoke her, not more than a half hour into the voyage. Her eyes flew wide open, to the man across from her, who had for quite no reason at all, broke into heartfelt song.

"A LAAADY, a lady, gone, gone away, from the snowy high mountain, my hooome~" he crooned, eyes shut tightly, dramatically swaying his head with the verse. His voice had a clear ring to it, and his words came thickly accented, but not the least of all this was the flippant manner with which he'd jostled Jorun from her happy respite.

"A laady, a lady, one cold winter's day, how she left me, she left me aloooone~"

Jorun lowered a glare at the man from below furrowed brows, though in his rapture with his song he hadn't noticed. She allowed a bit of voice to leak out, clearing her throat in hopes he would notice.

The man's eyes opened and found hers, his face lighting up with a wide grin. "Aye, there she is." His accent seemed drizzled on like a thick syrup, almost so that Jorun wasn't entirely sure she believed it. He gave another nod as before, then motioned to the window. "A view, ma'am. One to see."

Jorun shook her head, in her mind, wondering why in heaven's name would one wake a sleeping lady to make her look out the window. To humor him, she turned her gaze to the left, out the rustically scratched coach window. The sun was on its march down to the western horizon, casting brilliant pink streaks across the lightly clouded sky and turning the farther horizon into a silhouette of far-away arches and hills of eroded stone.

The weaver blinked at it dispassionately. "Sorvenfell territory?" she wondered of his intent. "I would think a sunset is a sunset."

The man's smile fell away sharply, and his head tilted slightly. "Passion for life, you have."

Jorun glanced to her right at the elderly woman, whom had finally situated herself and was snoring sound asleep even through the man's singing. A half-smile crossed her face, sort of a wince from certain angles. Despite the glaring sarcasm she'd almost wanted to correct him, more to the point of having a gray-scale view of the world. She would be the first to admit it, even in her discretion.

The part about being two centuries old, she'd keep to herself.

For the better part of the night the coach was silent, until the coachman brought the carriage to a stop for the night. No bunk service on this journey; the three of them made themselves comfortable in their seats for the night's rest. Jorun gave a little grimace when the old woman beside her shifted toward her, resting her scarfed head on Jorun's right shoulder, but soon she gave in to the idea and closed her eyes, drifting to sleep amid the ostentatious young man's peaceful humming.

His voice wasn't at all bad; in fact, she'd call it soothing, if she had to call it something. As she sank away, she fancied that maybe his initial appearance was only belying a deeper beauty for her to find. For in all her years, she'd never quite gotten to know anyone *that* well.

Morning came, and with the hustling of preparations to move again, another day of the three-day journey had begun without so much as a few words between the three passengers. The elderly woman, who'd introduced herself as Mananda at long last, had regarded Jorun warmly and had still been intent on leaning against her, of which Jorun surprised herself with her acceptance. Sort of like a grandmother she'd never met, she reasoned.

The ostentatious young man seldom sat silent this time, nearly always humming some tune or another. Jorun began to take comfort in his melodies, finding a mysteriously calming point about them. She still hadn't heard a name, and she wasn't ready to ask... but she was fine with just listening to his humming.

Another morning and midday flew away, finding Jorun's mind wrapping around his tunes and playing out little stories in their landscapes. The young man fell silent near that dusk, prompting Jorun's eyes to at long last open and find that his had closed.

Pity, she thought; his voice had lulled away an entire day, and now he was asleep. A long night lay ahead of them, in this case, though Mananda had entered a profound hibernation on Jorun's shoulder regardless of the ambiance. The coachman's halting of the caravan and the night's rest this time was more a shame than a relief. Nodding her head again she dozed against Mananda, waking again to the motion of the coach and dawn's breaking.

This day the young man sat in silence. Jorun found herself glancing his way frequently, wondering silently what the problem was. The day weathered on slowly, until finally as the shadows were at their smallest she ventured to speak.

"I'm Jorun," she said quietly, eyes trained on his for his attention. He turned to her, brows raising slightly, inquisitively, then falling as a wide grin crossed his face.

"Fenrahd," he replied. The first actual words since Jorun's harsh denial of

the beauty of a Sorvenfellian sunset. "Fair kind to meet yeh."

His name echoed back and forth across her brain. *Singy beady hair... singy beady hair.* Jorun etched him into her memory; having felt the mystery of his voice, somehow, she was quite aware this would not be their last encounter.

Her silence was broken by Fenrahd's returning voice. "So what's in Ardensell for yeh?" The colorful dialect brought a melodic quality even to his smalltalk. Jorun found herself taken with it, enough that the question nearly escaped her.

"A ferry to Richport," she answered, allowing a slow blink for emphasis. "Hoping to find myself in Gallodan before long."

Fenrahd gave a laughing sort of huff at the latter destination, diverting his gaze to the window of the coach with a wry smile. "And in Gallodan, there is..?"

With a tilt of her head Jorun's brows furrowed. Was that disdain? Gallodan, the Holy Nation, was a prolific empire on the rise, with a wealth of trade and commerce that was elevated with its military prowess and the creation of the High Academy, where wizards, soldiers and herbalists were trained to be the world's finest. Despite a lack of political relation with the nation of Sorvenfell and the far-off mountain empire of Zerranden, Gallodan was widely respected and regarded as a fine place to live, work, and above all, be safe from the less savory sorts of the world.

So what was Fenrahd's problem?

"Not sure," Jorun replied, skirting around her reasonings in light of this. "I suppose I'll find out when I arrive."

The man's head nodded slightly, masking the head-shake she knew very well he'd intended for her, even if he didn't actually do it. "Sure yeh will."

Silence took the carriage once more, pushing Jorun's eyes to the window and the midday horizon. The land here was flattening considerably, approaching the high plateau upon which rested the densely clustered but narrow expanse of the city of Ardensell.

There was little more than two hours to their destination now; Jorun could hardly wait to have the freedom to walk about on her own two feet, though the reality of her situation hadn't escaped her mind one bit. She still had the matter of being completely broke and trying to find her way onto a ferry, in a nation where first and last name were just as good as money to get places.

Fenrahd spent the remainder of the trip humming idly; his melodies digressed often and his voice faltered in disinterest. Jorun was aware she'd caused the disruption in his mood, and thusly it had disrupted her own. Nonetheless she added to the silence, only breaking it to nudge Mananda and quietly assure her they'd reached Ardensell, and the coach would be stopping any moment.

Right on cue the coachman halted carriage, calling in to the passengers. "AAAARDENSELL, thank YOU for travellin' with this old man, safe travels hereafter!" Jorun smiled at the man's timbre and hustled out of the coach, leaving Mananda and Fenrahd to fumble with their belongings a little longer. Naught but a satchel and her cloak may have seemed like an unwise travel choice, but she was delighted at her freedom of movement.

She hurried out into the cobblestone street, doing her best not to look too obviously happy to be away from the coach and those within it. Ardensell was a very vertical place; it was easy to slip off into the narrow brick alleys and chattering crowds without standing out too terribly. The hodgepodge of renovated and re-renovated homes and shops, and the distinct smoke of industriousness were both masks behind which Jorun could hide easily. Beneath these pragmatic street lamps of cold iron and makeshift glass, she would be finding her way to Gallodan somehow.

Gallodan, for Jorun, was a safehouse, full of the strongest people in the world, who were just hoping and praying that she, herself specifically, would happen upon their doorstep and ask to stay. As the tides of the world were shifting dangerously, and the waves were cresting in the current situation, threatening to crash down upon those unprepared, Gallodan would always be a haven of preparedness.

Especially for age-defying young medicine woman types with secret names they would never share.

Down those steep declines, past all manner of merchant and traveller, Jorun hurried for the bay, as the lamps were slowly lighting and the shopkeepers were closing their doors. If she hurried she would make the nightbound ferry, nevermind the problem of paying for it. Her mind hadn't ruled out a miracle, at least.

Perhaps she would find a Gallodanian High Knight, state her name, and be ushered with respect to the holy city of Finrehürd, free of charge. Perhaps she'd stow herself in a water barrel. At this point, no option was out, even for a graceful, upright lady such as herself. She'd not even empty the barrel if it meant going undetected.

The weaver's mind was probably not in the right place.

Rounding the bend of the patched and re-masoned street she caught the stifling breath of the sea, filling her head with a wild sort of excitement at the coming struggle, non-struggle, or whatever was headed her way at the dank port of Ardensell. Her dainty moccasins didn't offer a great deal of protection from the damp, cold, brine-laden puddles along the tumultuous coast; she lighted from dry patch to dry patch, betraying her delicate nature against the granite and mortar.

A seaman passing by, clothes filthy and toting a massive sack of something or other over one shoulder, bellowing loudly what Jorun could only surmise as a chanty, however bizarre the lyrics were.

"On a long voyage home, I went roving alone, as some warmth of a woman I craved; so I set at a bar, and wooed a lass thar, but she hollared and ranted and raved~"

Jorun's eyes trained on him, amused at the words he sang, captivated by the strong bone-colored horns protruding from his skull, sweeping back in a soft curve. A stone vlint, she reasoned, eyes catching the pointed ears as a sort of confirmation.

"And my mistress, she batters the hulls of my bow, and my wife, she batters the stern, And alack me the day, that in some fateful way, of each other the other should learn!"

Stone vlints were powerful sorts, by her experience. She'd seen lone stone vlints in the process of moving whole carts of goods by hand, all the while singing a lively tune to keep rhythm. The Nation of Sorvenfell required every stone vlint, of every sex and size, to serve at least five years in the national military, even those in the outer reaches, leaving a nation of robust, disciplined men and women whose national pride was unrivalled. In a rough frontier port like Ardensell, it was entirely necessary.

Jorun's attentiveness on the burly stone vlint man caught up with her as she found herself face-to-back with another burly stone vlint. She recoiled with a quiet yelp, clenching her eyes shut to brace for a retaliative shout or something similar. A flurry of "I'm sorry"s and "excuse me"s flew from her mouth, received with a stout laugh. Her eyes opened again and fell upon an armored stone vlint man, decked up with intimidating colors and scratched - used?- armor, with golden hair that fell to his elbows, looking as if it had been stained in blood at the tips.

The man held in his right hand a tall, stylish spear, looking just as used as his armor, with the various metals showing little spots of oxidation and damage. It was carefully decorated, hung with precious stones and hanging cloth strips bearing unintelligible runes even Jorun wasn't sure of. His smile revealed jagged canines and met her with piercing scarlet eyes, and his voice rang with a deep, scratchy baritone.

"Y'alright?" His frightening appearance belied the warmth of his tone, as his left hand came up almost protectively toward her. Jorun blinked away her startled tremor and nodded at him.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't watching myself." She clasped her hands together, somewhat nervously, and gave a short bow. "I'll be- ... I'll be on my way. Sorry."

The warrior watched as she hurried away, leaving him behind her with the

seaman that had distracted her. She caught half of a sentence between the two of them; "knocking into fair lasses", and "both clumsier than boobies", and then a tirade of laughter, most prominently from the crimson-kissed warrior.

Something about that warrior made Jorun very, very anxious. Despite the kindness in his tone and the genuine manner of his concern, she felt a tightness in her belly at the sight of him that she couldn't fairly explain away, without relying on rumor.

*Was he a berserker?*

Once upon a time, when Jorun was not her name, she heard of a prized Sorvenfellian warrior class whose abilities in battle were driven by the heat of their own hearts, and fed by their rage. The berserkers, or Fire Hearts, as the Sorvenfellian forces called them. At the time she'd heard of them, they were one in many hundreds, and notably waning.

Uncommon but not impossible; however, Jorun still shook her head at herself, both for allowing the rumor to press her reaction to the man and for even smacking into him in the first place.

A ship loomed ahead of her as she finally set her focus once again. The flag of Gallodan flew upon the mast, giving Jorun's heart a skip at its sight. She hurried for it, fumbling about her satchel for some manner of payment or even identity to prove. A few dried herbs and a folded paper of recipes were all she had... but perhaps it would be enough.

As she approached the gangplank and the attendant at its end, a colorful but familiar sight caught her eye; off to her left, on the darkening rampart, toting a cittern over his shoulder, was Fenrahd, the singing young man from the coach ride. Jorun huffed in disbelief, slowing her approach to allow him to enter before her. She moved quietly behind him, hoping against hope that he wouldn't see her, and they could enter the ship without having laid eyes on each other.

An incredulous scowl fought her calm expression, both of disgust to be seeing him beat her to the ship and a bothersome curiosity of his destination. She lingered back, allowing an elderly couple and two Sorvenfellian warriors to take their places in line before her, just as a sort of barrier between herself and that knot-haired bard. He'd distracted her now from her task of conjuring an excuse for the attendant as to why she was attempting to board the ferry without money or proof of identity, but at the worst she would be denied, she resigned. Then, perhaps, she could at least spend time begging until the next one.

The crimson-kissed warrior's voice boomed behind her, this time in a great peal of song as he too approached the gangplank. "*Ah lady, lady, a-waft on the tide, all wrapped up in shining silk, Ah, lady, lady~*"

His singing wasn't quite as melodious as the bard, but it demanded attention.

She turned back to look at him, hesitating a courteous smile, which he returned warmly with a nod of his head. His eyes returned to the attendant ahead, and despite a brief and very intense want to ask for his help in boarding, she kept quiet, unsure if perhaps just sneaking in behind the mountain of a man wasn't a better idea.

Before she was fully aware of things, Fenrahd was well up the gangplank and the elderly couple was handing the attendant their collection of small-denomination coins for fare. The two warriors before her stood quietly and sternly; one, whose hair turned a vivid green at the ends, cast his gaze behind him at the probable berserker, either out of great suspicion or envy, she surmised.

As the elderly couple began up the gangplank, assisted by the two warriors before her, Jorun saw an opening in the attendant's attention as he counted and re-counted the coins they'd handed him, and hurried to the edge of the rampart to try and squeeze in behind. Her speed wasn't quite enough, however, and the attendant's hand caught her left elbow as she passed him.

*Oh for pity's sake. I'm panhandling tonight, I guess.* Nevertheless she smiled sweetly for him, hoping to still find a way past it all. The attendant returned her smile with one of his own, nodding his approval to her, to her surprise.

"Lady Jorun?"

A startled blink caught her eyes but she returned with a nod, without fully understanding how he'd gotten her name. "Aye sir. Is all in order?"

Her word choice was fortuitous, she'd hoped, and her luck delivered. He nodded happily and motioned toward the ship. "Yes, madam. Your fare is paid. Thank you for your patronage."

Unsure whether to be amused at her fortune or suspicious, she gave the man a bow of her head and a sweet smile, and started up the gangplank.

She wasn't entirely sure, as the red-eyed warrior had begun his thunderous singing once more, but she could have sworn she heard the attendant shout after her.

"AND CONGRATULATIONS, MISSES!"