

Chapter 1: New beginnings

Rewrite Ch. 1: Goodbye - 1

“Hi. My name is Jack. This is the story of how I died and got a second chance to right the wrongs I had committed.”

The village dogs barked at nothing, and insects buzzed around in the twilight sky, but Aprilia had eyes only for Paul. She drew large breaths to steady herself, clutching his large, rough hands like a lifeline.

“We have to leave, Paul,” she whispered.

“Let’s marry! You’ll be one of us then. They wouldn’t dare-”

“What about my parents and little brother?” she reminded him.

“They... they can settle in my uncle’s village. It’s quite remote!” his voice cracked from desperation.

“It’s a [pogrom](#), Paul. They’re blaming every Cha for the plague. Anyone found harboring one of us would meet the same end.”

“That’s ridiculous! The only ones who die of this ‘plague’ are those with weak constitutions. The rest recover within a month, *and* it’s already spent!”

“The zealots don’t care about that. They just want to get rid of the ‘damn foreigners,’ and they’ve found a convenient excuse.”

“You sure all those rumors floating around are true?” he said, grasping at straws.

“Yes. People are fleeing cities and bringing news about our men being murdered in broad daylight and terrible things being done to the women. Nanon is not safe for us any more.”

“Is there nothing to be done?” he pleaded more to God than her.

“I’m afraid not, Paul.” Aprilia answered, as she gathered her courage and lunged at him.

He caught her in his arms, surprised to find her lips brushing his. Staring at those beautiful brown eyes, he accepted her invitation and parted his lips to deepen their kiss. They held each other like that for minutes, breathing each other in, which felt like mere moments.

Aprilia reluctantly peeled herself from him, with the world and all its troubles rushing back in between them.

“Where will you go?” Paul asked her, still clutching her hands.

“I’m not sure, but our Elders have formed a Council. They will come up with a plan. This... this is goodbye, Paul. Be safe. Live a good life.” She said, looking at the young man she had dreamt of building a life with, one last time.

“You too, Aprilia. May God keep you safe.” Paul replied, with tears threatening to spill from his eyes.

She quickly turned around and walked away, before Paul could see the tears pouring down her face.

The tightly packed room smelled of sweat and tallow smoke. Dozens of men argued at once, voices clashing like blades.

Elder Hyde slammed his cane down. "Enough! We have come to a decision. Our destination is this valley beyond the Treacherous Bog."

The arguments fizzled into murmurs.

"All those claims come from mouths of drunkards!" someone shouted.

"They do, but they are all consistent with *decades* old records." Erickson replied. "Criminals don't usually frequent land records offices."

"Land records office?" they asked, incredulous.

"I bribed a scribe some years ago to confirm it. The copy he made clearly stated that there is a habitable fertile valley beyond the Bog."

"Why is it empty then?"

"The Bog. It's called Treacherous for a reason. Getting there is not going to be an easy journey, but it's either death here, or a chance there."

Many faces paled in response, but they began to nod, one by one.

"Good. Finish your preparations. I hope all of you have turned everything you cannot carry on your backs into coin?" Hyde added.

Another collective nod of heads.

"Buy plenty of grain and turn it into hard tack. Smoke as much meat as you can afford, but without raising suspicion." Elder Hyde's gaze swept the room, hard as stone.

"Remember, secrecy is essential! Breathe not a word to anyone outside of our circle. Not any of your neighbors, not any so called 'friends,' no one!"

“Aprilia! Where were you?” her mother asked, her voice laden with concern.

“Not far away, mother.” She tried to placate the poor woman.

“You know things are dangerous for us!”

“I know.” She said, exasperated. “Calm down. You’re scaring Vinnie.”

“I’m not scared of anything!” her little brother piped up.

“You should be. There are bad men trying to kill us.” She informed him.

“Aprilia! You shouldn’t be saying such things to him!”

“He’s not that young, Lina. It’s better to prepare him now.” Their father interjected from the door of their hovel.

“Father! How did the meeting go?” Aprilia asked, with trepidation in her voice.

“Well enough. Be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Lina, turn all of our flour into hard tack.”

Their mother nodded in response.

“Aprilia! Lina! Gather everything, now!” Her father came bellowing at mid-day the day after.

She froze on the spot for a moment, her mind uncomprehending, but the urgency on her father’s face jolted her into action.

“What happened?” She asked while packing their things up.

“The zealots found out about our plans. Some fool must have blabbed his flap. They’re coming to the village. We need to go, now!”

Their small two room house turned into a storm of motion. Aprilia stuffed her threadbare cloak and Vinnie’s spare clothes into a sack, while her father checked the knots with shaking hands.

She and her mother swept through their hovel one last time, checking every nook and cranny for anything valuable they might have forgotten.

“Only the essentials!” He ordered the air, while poor Vinnie spun around, looking everywhere, while clutching his wooden toy.

Within minutes, they staggered into the road, packs bulging with their meager belongings. They weren’t the only ones; the village was a flood of Cha pouring out, mothers dragging children, men hauling carts carrying elders and essentials. Aprilia

looked back at the modest mud and stone structure that was their house, one last time. It wasn't much to look at, but it was home; the place where she had grown up in, and now it would be lost to her forever. Her throat choked, but she forced herself forward, following her family out of "her" village.

Their journey to leave the Nanon Kingdom turned out to be even more difficult than any of them had anticipated. Their numbers swelled day by day. While there was strength in numbers, it also made them more visible; a bigger target. It was getting more difficult to sneak through baronies every week. On top of that, carrying the old and the sick slowed them down even further.

Aprilia was massaging away the ache in her legs from walking all day long when her father approached her.

"Aprilia, make sure to cover your face with mud tomorrow."

"Why?"

"We're getting close to the border with Ibrim County, and will probably be there tomorrow. The news of our exodus has already spread through out the lands, and vultures are coming down to take advantage of our weakness."

She looked at him, uncomprehending.

"Many groups have told us that guards blocked their path and demanded 'favors' from their daughters to let them pass through, and... we are running out of money to bribe them."

"Curses upon them all!" she spat.

"Yeah."

"And curses upon this body!" she said in frustration.

“Never say that again!” he chided her. “Your beauty is a gift from God. It will help you find a good man.”

“I had a good man.” The words slipped out of her, before she could stop them.

“What? Who?” he asked in a father’s angry, protective tone.

“Paul.” She confessed, with cheeks burning.

“The miller’s boy?”

She nodded meekly in response.

“He’s a good lad,” he said, reminiscing. “You’re not...?” He pointed at her stomach.

“No, father. We didn’t go that far. I’m not that stupid.”

“No, you’re not. You’re my smart girl. Go get some sleep. We have a long day of walking ahead.”

“Isn’t that everyday?” She asked, and both of them burst into nervous chuckles.

Aprilia waited with baited breath as the guards “checked” the Cha, who had become refugees, again. She had been told that long before she was born, the Cha had fled persecution and settled in the Nanon Kingdom in the hopes of a peaceful existence. It was a good few decades. They weren’t allowed to buy lands or join the military, but their learning and skills with crafts made them useful to lords and commoners alike. Within a decade, there were pretty much no homeless or destitute Cha, as they settled throughout the kingdom in groups and helped each other out. All that progress gone out the window, as the guards took everything they had amassed as bribes.

She thought they would somehow similarly pass through the Nobara County, the last obstacle between them and the Treacherous Bog, when they received the shock of their lives. More than a hundred armed soldiers were lined up in rows, as if ready for battle. Many more peasants were lined up behind them, with makeshift weapons in hand.

“Hear me, Cha scum!” Their apparent leader shouted. “By the order of Count of Nobara, you are not welcome in his lands. Trespass and you will be treated like the vermin you are. We will show no mercy! Begone, and do not curse our land with your existence any further!”

Aprilia was dumbstruck by that proclamation. Sure, many Nanoans considered the Cha nuisances. Some even called them parasites, and worse, but Nobles didn’t give two hoots about their existence, the same way they didn’t care much about their own people. This Count’s overt animosity was something novel. What had the Cha done to earn such hatred? *Did one of us sleep with his mother or something?*

The procession of almost five thousand refugees came to a halt a fair distance away from the border. Aprilia was wondering what they were going to do, when she noticed some men in uniforms approaching them from behind. Fear welled up in her, and she quickly knelt down to rub more dirt on her face. She glanced sideways to saw a handsome young man with dark wavy hair walking toward the Elders.

“What is it?” Hyde asked Erickson gruffly.

“A man claiming to be Viscount Jack Nobara wants to meet the Council.”

“Lothar, make sure your men keep an eye on the soldiers.”

The head hunter nodded. He and fifteen hunters were the only men among the thousands of Cha who had any experience in wielding weapons, so they became their defacto military force. Lothar had assigned two apprentices to each hunter to swell their numbers, but without any experience with weapons, they were almost useless, besides deterrence.

A young man wearing an understated but clearly well made light armor, addressed the Council.

“Greetings. My name is Viscount Jack Nobara. As you know, my father has decided to block your entry into the Nobara County at any cost. I’m assuming that you want to leave Nanon through the Treacherous Bog?”

“What is it to you?” Hyde asked, not bothering to mask his hostility.

“I would like to help you out.”

“Why?”

“My reasons are my own. I will just state the facts; you want to leave Nanon, and the only thing that stands between your goal is the County of Nobara. What other refuge do you have? Sindhu or Nogal? You will have to traverse the entirety of Nanon to reach either of them, if they will even take you. How will you handle the idiots baying for your blood? There is no other path left to you.”

“What are you offering?”

“Guidance. I know every part of this County like the back of my hand. You will need to separate into smaller groups, perhaps five hundred each, and enter the County through separate sites at the same time. My father’s men couldn’t possibly intercept that many intrusions at the same time.”

“Why should we trust your plans? You are that damned Count’s son!”

“I have broken away from him. I pleaded with him to just let you go, but he wouldn’t budge. So here I am.”

“Why don’t we test that by capturing you?” Hyde asked, with clear malicious intent.

“That would be foolish. My father hasn’t publicly disowned me, yet. You kidnap me, you dishonor him, and he cares a lot about his honor. You will make an enemy out of this entire county if you choose that path.”

“What about the group they do intercept? Five hundred civilians won’t fare well against even a few dozen soldiers.” Erickson interjected, trying to change the course of the conversation.

“That is the risk you will have to take, but remember, Nobara is mostly sparsely

populated highlands. I've chosen routes through regions where you're not likely to come across many people. On the other hand, there are hundreds upon hundreds of men across this part of the border ready to stop your advance. I will strongly advise that you don't pick a fight at this moment."

"What do you want in exchange, Viscount?" Hyde asked him.

"Nothing. Just your people's safe passage out of Nobara."

Hyde seemed like he was going to retort when Erickson interjected, "Let us confer among ourselves."

"Of course." The Viscount replied and walked away.

"We can't trust his words!" Hyde stated emphatically.

"Lothar?" Erickson asked the younger man.

"There are almost a hundred soldiers and many times that men with weapons on that border. We can win with our numbers, but we will lose *hundreds* fighting them. And then what? We still have the entire County to traverse and we will have more wounded to care for on top our sick, elderly and children. Once news of the death of those men spreads, more Nobarans will come to avenge their dead. I don't think it's a feasible path, Elders."

"We truly don't have any other option left. We need to take the chance on the Viscount." Erickson stated his position.

"I agree." Elders Reinhold and Gotthold both added.

The Council couldn't come to a unanimous decision, but ultimately agreed to the Viscount's proposal. They seemingly backed away a few kilometres from the border and separated into groups of five hundred. The Viscount gave fragments of parchment with a rough map drawn on them to each group leader.

"Follow these paths, and enter the border on the morning of day after tomorrow."

The group leaders nodded solemnly and dispersed to relay instructions, knowing full well that the Cha's struggle was far from finished.

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