

Chapter One

I liked to think I was one of the men, and that meant I was tough. When the town gathered to witness another burning, I held my frame as per etiquette – back straight, eyes cool and distant, legs neither knitted together nor open for business. Mother tried to hold my hand but I swatted it away. Instead I curled my fingers around the cold handle of my knife. I held it tight, put all my limbs into ‘the extremes’ of what was humanly possible, so that if anyone looked my way, they’d blink but once and say: *what a man!*

So I stood even when the moonrise gleamed her pale fire. That was when the ceremonial burning would begin. The latest death in our town, Herr Palmerston, was barely visible within the pyre: a hand here, a foot jutting out there, the pale face pressed in-between slabs of peat. His rusted sword and ruined bulla amulet, the one he’d worn as a child-boy, crowned his funeral. Just looking at the amulet sent through me a terrible desire to clutch my own, part to assure myself it was still there, part to feel its contours as if it were the last time.

I must destroy it soon. I thought, hoping Mother could not hear my traitorous thoughts. *Then I’ll be of the milk no longer; I’ll be of the blood and the strong! The world subserved to my vigor: brawls, girls, marriage, produce by the plenty.*

My attention fell on the crying luna girls on the western side of the pyre. They surrounded the newly made widow, who sat with icy severity in an upholstered chair

under a black silk canopy. Indeed, while the girls showered Frau Palmerston—a woman aged some forty pregnancies—with kisses, tears, and words of mourning, Frau Palmerston only stared at the pyre in muted fury.

Her apathy is no mystery, I thought. After all, she was the one who killed him.

The town's reverend crone appeared. She hobbled forth, draped in twirls of gloom, her hag-like face accursed with warts: one for each death she had incurred through her long life, and with both hands she grasped a staff embellished with a hundred bulla amulets, the souls of our deceased men.

She will soon add Herr Palmerston to her collection, I thought with unease. This time I actually touched my bulla. Fast, though. Just to see if the crone hadn't stolen it. I sighed a breath of relief: still there, for now at least. Soon, it would have to be broken. I had already worn it much longer than my bulla peers. It was the symbol of adolescence into adulthood, after which it would no longer be a prison around the neck, but rather a memento of what was past – kept until the day I died.

And then the ancient mothers come with their grasping claws.

The reverend crone began to intone many a word, amongst which were: “impotence”, “a wife's right”, and “*the eleventh widowling*”. There was a brief silence as a not-man plucked down Herr Palmerston's bulla from the pyre and handed it to the crone. She affixed it to her staff and turned away, giving off one last, cruel rattle: ” The weak away with peat.”

Then Herr Palmerston burned.

Town square filled with smoke. At first I caught the earthy and mossy scents rising in the air, followed by a more pungent smell – one that stuck on the tongue and in

the throat and in the nostrils: it was the taste of peat and incinerating flesh. Gray curdles of smoke waged a war of attrition against my eyes, but I refused to cry. No. Not a single tear would slip, no matter how much the fire blazed and seared and stung. I kept firm. Frozen in leg and arm, of face and muscle. A protest shot – the desire to cough, but the demand I suffocated and let die. If frailty was a face, I would punch it; if a beggar, I would kick it dead; if a lamenting statue, I would tear it down. Such was the world of Iron. Such was the essence of manhood. The first to cry would be the first to fall.

After the flames had devoured her dead husband, the widow of Palmerston rose. She drifted west to east, like a black shade floating in gray mist, or a louring phantasm, examining every man briefly. It was to see if their posture was firm, if they bore all those traits which inherited great vitality, if they had potential. She was our town's eleventh widow in less than six months, and would, after the twelfth, be cleansed and ready to take on a new spouse – one of her choosing. Iron Law dictated such: once twelve impotent men were slain by their wives, the *Widows' Ceremony* would commence. The widows would become women once more, free to marry any man of their choosing, or, if the selection was poor, to leave town and wander in search of better specimen.

The crones had a saying pertaining to the penultimate widowing: "The eleventh is done; the twelfth will come. Pigs will die and men must marry."

As the widow of Palmerston rounded back, accompanied by her lunar girls, I felt my legs move before my mind. My was body – stalwart, jutting and sharp like iron, no limbs a-dallyin', no quiverin' lip. "If the men of the east do not impress you," I said like a menace, "take a look and consider me!"

She didn't even glance my way. One of the lunar girls tittered, and that was it.

My heart crumpled. I searched the area – for smirks, or laughter, or a belittling look, or any hint as to the attitude of my failure, yet as the women began to withdraw, following the widow of Palmerston as she left town square, I found myself alone, almost isolated. What was worse, I wondered, being ignored or ridiculed?

It was then I recognized mother's patched up tunic, the bedrock to a face turned faint by the years, like a new moon. The peat fire crimsoned her smiling cheeks. She told me many things. It was decrees of compassion and understanding – every word and action laced with pity. The kindness was like knives into my back. I tried to wriggle out of every attack, holding my form tempered and calm, flicking away the comforting hand, and overall ensuring such a composition whereupon any onlooker would know me a force to be reckoned with.

After the long-winded verbal assault, Mother, having to leave with the other wives for some secret meeting, made her closing arguments: "Don't fret, Elu. You are still a bulla, and you will have choice aplenty – once you become a man."

I nodded like she didn't know what she was talking about. She asked me to return home promptly, explaining the night had fully waxed and it would be dangerous for a bulla to wander without protection. I didn't heed her. Instead, the second she and the wives had gone out of sight, I ventured east of the peat fire, where the men gathered.

The conversations surrounded Herr Kaldrogin – my mentor and the leader of the male conclave. He stood a head taller than most, even with his hunched posture, which had come from long years of fighting other men and producing children, and though he

was slim he was by no means meek; there was a stringiness to him, skin like hardened leather, as if decades of grinding had left him but with naught but quintessential properties of man. He ran a finger through his curly stache as he listened to the others. Upon noticing me, waved for me to approach.

He leaned forward. "You are not upset about this, are you?"

Rain. I wiped my face dry. "It's not my fault, Herr Kal. I didn't expect rain."

Kal made no reply. He tapped his cane: *thud, thud, thud*, as the other men upended their own conversations and glanced my way.

"It is only rain!" I said, louder.

"Rain matters naught," Kal said.

"No, Herr Kal."

"Then why do you blame it?"

"Um..."

"Twenty-six pregnancies and unbroken," Kal said in a drawn-out fashion. "Your moxie today to the widow of Palmerston – it was a bit piping, aye, but powerful nonetheless: it is your inner man rebelling against your bulla prison. You are ripe and ready, Ilias. Wait not, lest you rot."

"I will break it," I said, wondering whether I meant it. *But what would Mother say? And would she weep at my betrayal? And what then?*

"And then you will be ready to pump your seed. Fantastic!" Fantastic – the lingering scowl on his face stamped out the meaning of that word. Many other things went around in the male clique. Deaths, widowings, the ceremony. The eleventh is done;

the twelfth will come. Pigs will die and men must marry. With a flourish, Kal turned back to the pyre of Palmerston. “Let us vigil and mourn the utterly incompetent.”

The other men moved side by side in silence.

“We all knew Herr Palmerston,” Kal said.

The men grunted their agreement.

“Could it not be sweeter that he, neither a tangler nor unraveller, is the momentous death to spin our town into bedlam?”

Another grunt.

“Gents, gents, we all knew Herr Palmerston. He was Herr Palmerston the bland – the man who drank water and used no butter on his bread, who equated fetishism with tongue-kissing, and who produced no children despite seventeen years of marriage. He ate no pork. He never committed adultery. He possessed the most vulgar of sins: humility, virtue, austerity. Good gents, we all knew Herr Palmerston.”

“We did,” the men (and I) said.

“Ilias,” Kal said, glancing at me. “Please recite to us the manner of the cuckold’s death.”

I coughed as I withdrew Herr Palmerston’s death certificate – which Kal had granted me possession over for tonight’s vigil. “He was found in his bed on the sixth Friday of spring, the twentieth year of Iron,” I said. The sweet and cruel warnings of Mother clawed at my mind as I remembered how we’d found the man – a scene of horror and dread and fetishism gone horribly wrong. “Propped up on a bed of pillows, Herr Palmerston’s face had been covered by a set of female undergarments, white with a yellow tint to them.”

Kal tap-tapped his cane. “Tell it like it is, Ilias. Herr Palmerston choked on his wife’s piss-soaked knickers. Continue.”

“And his face had turned blue under the...piss-soaked knickers,” I said. “And there was another set of undergarments wrapped around his member—” Kal cleared his throat. “Err, I mean cock. The other was pressed between the belt and his throat. The manner of death was ruled by femologist William Fosfero as one of sexual asphyxiation gone wrong. It was concluded to be a very manly death, and a widowing, for by Fosfero’s conclusion the urine was, based on its sulfuric taste, of female origin: namely, the widow Palmerston.”

“Excellent,” Kal said.

“Closer,” came a voice from the crowds of men. Herr Trugardner, a blind and decrepit old man, approached by the guidance of his not-man servant. They stopped within inches of the Palmerston pyre. The old man quivered as he stooped forward, then he hissed something. I caught only the “I promised you” part, but the context became very clear once Trugardner undid his trousers and dropped them to the ground.

He cackled, wiggling his member: a stream, dark yellow, sprinkled over Palmerston’s pyre and charred body.

“By Iron!” I said. “What is Herr Trugardner doing?”

Kaldrogin pulled his mustache. “I believe that he is pissing on a dead man,” he said, and after another moment of contemplation: “It is quite a feat for someone of his age to go when they have to. *What a man!*”

“There’s something truly wrong about this,” I said.

“I agree,” Kaldrogin said. He gave me a look. “Herr Palmerston would never have put knickers over his own face.”

A few hours later, we returned to Kaldrogin’s home. His chambers contained a lewd amount of phallogentric iron shapes. Not any one place lacked these things which he claimed invoked his utmost manliness: a fire iron above the hearth, a lady’s “resting chair” (as he would have it), and last but not least his crushed bulla amulet hanging from a nail on the wall.

I became unnervingly aware that I clutched my own, my mother’s words echoing over and over in my mind: *you are not ready to crush your bulla, my little boy*. I shook the dread of her kindness away, ignoring the fact that I should have been home now, and gathered a few logs, stacking them over tinder and kindling, striking with steel and flint until sparks turned to flames. The rush of heat was welcome on this cold day. Still hours after the vigil, my clothes stuck wetly to my skin. I thought to myself: *to be uncomfortable is to be, you know, a man or something*.

Kaldrogin sat by the fire, reading my notes on the men of town. “There are half a dozen potential victims that may become the twelfth. We must pay special attention to Herr Dalmack and Herr Brimstaff.”

“Yes, Herr Kaldrogin,” I said.

“Hmmm...”

“Yes?” I waited for an elaboration. His thoughts would only bear verbal cues were he in the process of some mighty revelation. It was a complimentary relationship:

the louder his hmms, the more wisdom he had to proclaim. “Does it relate to the widowings?”

“Hmmmmmmm!” Kaldrogin said emphatically. “Indeed it does, young Ilias. Do you know what the greatest danger in this world is? It is to be an impotent man, for that is no man at all. It is a thing without function, a slave worth only to hold my jacket—cannot get it dusty, of course—while I pump a girl full of children in a ditch somewhere. Do not flush at this, Ilias. It is a truth that the sexes are made purely for this reason – to fuck and spawn fat little imbeciles.”

I nodded in agreement. Kal had once been considered by the Mother Reverend in the last March of Men – an odyssey and chance at Her Majesty’s bed. This brought him above the common rabble of mediocre manhood. He knew things. A great many things.

“He deserved to die,” I said, without doubt. “He was sterile and weak.”

Kaldrogin pulled his mustache. “Herr Palmerston was no more than another failed pump from being deemed a not-man. So yes, the cuckold deserved to go. We do find ourselves in a twist, however: his death was not according to Etiquette.”

I gasped, remembering how the widow of Palmerston had sat under the black canopy, like a shade, or a wraith, with her impassive eyes brimming with fury. Her witness to the burning of her impotent husband was a necessary contingent for her to pass into a new world. *But if she did not do it...*

Kal gave a wise nod. “That scenery was put on by Frau Palmerston. It was not natural, nor was it brutal in the way a stabbing might be. It was a show. A staged act of fetishism, sexual asphyxiation – who would have thought she was such a perverse lady

– in an attempt to hide his murder as if it were done by her. Indeed I believe Herr Palmerston not to have died in a widowing, but rather in a meeleing rut, or a cuckold's duel.”

“That means he would not be the eleventh.”

“Exactly,” Kal said. “We are beset by desperate women trying to force the ceremony to the fore. The twelfth will be attempted, and soon. And while this does rid the world of impotent men—they truly have no use—we are at the penultimate now. Another goes and it is on all of us. We must be vigilant, young Ilias. We must be ready to take this case to the Eyrie; only by the laws of Iron may we save ourselves from these plotting wenchess!”

“What must we do?”

“You must do but one thing,” Kal said. “And you know what that is.”

“I know,” I said, clutching my bulla amulet. *Lest our I'll be the town freak...*

“Do not fret, son. It is a pride to produce.” Kaldrogin sighed or had an orgasm. “I was fifteen when I bore my first son. You know what my peers said? *That was manly, Kaldrogin*. My grandpa gave me an affirmative nod – the first thing from him that didn't include a fist. I felt strong then, knew I was a man. I knew it so hard I pumped another girl full of children the day after.”

“I understand, Herr Kaldrogin,” I said, grateful he didn't badger me about my red-hot face.

“It's time, Ilias,” Kal said.

My fingers pressed hard against the bulla metal. I knew it was time, I'd known so for years, and I think I knew today was the day when I lied to mother about going home. After this, I would never come home again... "I need the key to open it."

"You will find it under her pillow." He nodded to the door out. "I expect not to see you until two days hence when I hold the conclave. There, at twilight, I will give my proclamations on how to deal with these conspiring widows."

Sometime later, Ilias's mother returned home after having had a meeting with the other wives. She was tired yet there was work to be done: sweeping the floor, gathering linens, preparing dinner. The first order of business, however, was to check under her pillow, as she had done every day since her little boy entered adolescence. *Peace of mind comes after*, she thought as she ventured towards her bedroom. *He's still my little boy.*

Or was he? Her little boy no longer had his little shoulders – no longer could she lift him with ease. No, he was bigger now, with slight stubble on his chin and upper lip, and instead of a smile there was that hard line young boys eventually adopted in rebellion. It was just a phase though. He was still her little sweetling, her little darling boy. He was Elu, not Ilias, and he was not ready to be like the grown men. It was not time to give him up, not yet. But still – her heart ached at the memory of that amulet around his throat, the memory of how big it seemed around him just a few years ago, and how the proportions had switched. The throat outgrew the amulet, and for this she felt ever smaller.

The pillow lay there so peaceful and calm – yet she watched it, feared it, and finally summoned all of her motherly determination to finally lift it.

And this time she wept.