

## Chapter I: Guardian of the Swamp

Twigs snapped beneath Jerzy's feet, his cloak pressing flat to the muck. His stomach growled, though he took only the largest mushroom from its cluster. The rest lay under his goddess's protection, for she weaved the fate of the young. She had been matka where he had none.

The roots of bald cypresses reached out like unkind friends, trying to entangle his waterlogged boots. He had been through this ordeal a dozen times. Even if the living roots *did* ensnare him, what could they do? He had a bone knife. He stepped over a writhing root. The way home would be long and little Leon hadn't eaten since his newest fever.

The wind blew the branches about as he walked. Jerzy tried to stay close to nature, but delving too deep left him all alone. Lonely days in the Black Bog turned to lonely nights, and he ended up where the devil said goodnight. Somewhere so far from any village that he could really act himself. Only silent gods and greenery watched him, and they envied those who could shout their names proudly.

He crooned an Old Dormanian song to himself as he strolled. He didn't know what it meant, and—likely half the words were mispronunciations of the old tongue—but only the gods bore witness. *She watches me*, he knew as he passed a woodpecker hole. *The Beldam has a billion eyes, one for every burrow and borehole in the Black Bog*. He strode with caution, though even gods couldn't still him. He had a better place to be—by his brother's side.

Sludge lay around the swamp, signaling spring. They weren't yet free of old Mróz's icy grip, but he eased off the Black Bog. Whether the same occurred through all Dormanar mattered little to Jerzy. He lived for his goddess and his brother.

The mushroom Jerzy had picked for his brother looked plain, but it would do. Leon could eat mushrooms. Most other foods made Leon greener than the canopy.

Jerzy pushed through gnarled branches. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, casting rainbows over the bog water's film. A black-spotted bullfrog bounded toward flies which swarmed a browning pear. Jerzy sloshed over to join them. The frog didn't seem particularly bothered by him—few animals were.

Above dangled some lumpy baby pears. Knowing they were too high to reach, he jumped. He caught one and crashed down, spraying mud across the tree's trunk. Jumping to grab another sent globs of mud everywhere. The bullfrog grumbled.

*I'm sorry, little thing,* Jerzy thought, though the frog didn't care to stick around, bouncing off to some other part of the mire.

*And where am I?* He looked around. *The sun can show me.* Under the sunlit canopy, he grabbed a broken branch. His arms burned, but he pulled himself up the pear tree. It spread into a bouquet of branches tufted lime-green. The sun shone crimson to the west, overlooking leaves of emerald and puddles of brown. Beyond swirled a sea of pure, black water. *It's west that I must go,* and so he'd follow the sun.

He turned around. There was an endless forest, stippled in the distance with hills. One point reigned above the rest: Bald Hill. The gods laughed there as the world slept. If Jerzy wasn't a season late, he might have seen the Riders' feast before they galloped across the sky. Thinking of it made his heart heavy. Soon, at least, they'd be boiling onion skins for Noc Królowej.

The wind was cool as he wiped the mud from his face. He pounced down and splattered more all over himself. *Nothing a good wash can't fix.*

The walk home nearly boiled him. When Jerzy stepped foot into a clearing on the coast, the scent of potato dumplings, savory beet stew, and doughy pastries washed over him. Farther off, garlic sizzled, and its steam rose from one of the many stalls lining the heart of the village.

The houses were brick with creeping moss and ivy, and they circled the clearing all the way out to the town's meager bay; an outlet to the sea between a few shoals. It was their hidden haven. No foreigners would intrude on Jerzy's hometown, but they weren't poor and isolated either. During the Holiday Market, they traded worldwide delicacies. A melon from the far southern jungles, or pink Prawnikós wine.

His house sat at the dockside, raised on a rocky foundation with fraying stilts warped by the constant crash of waves. Moss clung to the base. Where murky bog water and seawater mixed, weeds danced like hair. Vines constricted its walls, showing dark pink points, soon to blossom. He stepped onto a creaky pier, gray cloak swaying. Water grazed the wood's underside.

When Jerzy pushed open the door, it skidded against cobblestones. Inside, the room stunk of dust and mold—no doubt another reason why Leon coughed so bad. But what could Jerzy do, short of tearing the house down and building it anew?

He headed to the cauldron at the end of the room. It hung over a babe's fire protected by clay, its chimney extending through the thatch roof. On the mantle, settled between two varnished pegs, rested Jerzy's unstrung horse bow: a slim black recurve. He used to ride a horse. His boots still had copper spurs and there was a jaunt in his jump when he sat a wide seat, but that made him as much of a horse archer as a tongue-slinging frog on a log.

Besides, he didn't have the time for that sort of escapade. He was Leon's caretaker foremost, and secondly the guardian of his corner of the swamp. That may not have been his official title, but who else had a foreign bow or a bone knife?

He walked to Leon's room, which was small as a wardrobe. A thin cloth sheet lent the boy some privacy, and he at least had a window to recycle air. Jerzy pushed the sheet aside.

There in his cot, head on a straw pillow encased in quilts from every village *babcia*, lay Leon. His hair was flaxen, much like his brother's, though it was ruffled. He wore peace on his lips. Freckles marked his face like a pox. So many, in stark contrast to Jerzy.

Despite the boy's illness, Jerzy planted a kiss on Leon's forehead. They had no parents to care for them, but they had each other. Jerzy redrew the cloth and shuffled back to the fireplace.

He filled the cauldron with well water, then scratched at a steel-tipped arrow with flint until the kindling caught fire. He diced the mushroom up with his bone knife and waited for the broth to simmer. By the time it was done, the thatch ceiling was damp with steam. The walls were marked by a different kind of residue, set in dark streaks. Jerzy hoped they were the remnants of rain, but Leon called it mouse piss. *He's probably right.*

Jerzy guided the pot to his brother's room. The handle was still hot, even with a pair of rabbit hide gloves. Earthy mushroom steam simmered into Jerzy's face. It felt like a real bath.

He pushed back Leon's sheet, wishing for the scent of mushrooms again. Stench clung to his cot. *Is that the cause of his sickness or a byproduct?* It was a chicken-and-the-egg question, *and I'd pick the egg.* Dragons laid clutches long before chickens lived.

And poor Leon looked like a newborn chick—red and huffing. Slime dripped from his beakish nose. Jerzy downed some stew, the broth running easy down his throat. When he'd finished his share, he left it beside his brother. "It's something we can both have."

"You don't need to do that," said Leon.

"Eating the same will make me a better chef," said Jerzy. "If it's bland, then I *have* to give it flavor." To be fair, this recent stew *was* bland, but that was out of necessity. They couldn't

afford a speck of paprika. Bland food was better than bartering their meager possessions, so the boys settled on sparse food and sparser seasoning.

Perhaps some *babcia* would be kind again and donate to their family. While the boys appreciated the quilts, constant aid left Jerzy like a child asking father to remove a loose tooth. There was a point to the help, no doubt, but it was *his* task.

Out Leon's window, a ship pulled into the village bay. It was an oaken merchant vessel no larger than a house, red sails boasting its Valken origin. Plenty of crates sat aboard. Abundance bred abundance and trade bred trade, so perhaps Jerzy could earn a rusty Ducal or an orichalcum Neri for lifting their cargo.

Leon looked up at his brother, then joined his gaze toward the newly-docked ship. "Can I come this time?" His eyes, honest gray like groundwater, bore a layer of tears.

"If you deem yourself fit," said Jerzy. The little boy smiled. "But stay where I can see you. I'm not going on another hog-chase to track you down."

Leon giggled, then hacked up phlegm.

Together they stepped onto the pier and gazed out at the docks where men flocked to peek at foreign wares. A Valken made demands of his crew, and like ants they scrambled. The captain swung about, jet-black braid waving through the wind like a ribbon.

Jerzy and Leon meandered hand in hand to the larger piers. They passed dockworkers, moorers, and waterside bums until they joined the greater crowd, just as eager as Jerzy to earn a pretty penny offloading the new Valken shipment.

"What's here today?" shouted a strong voice.

"Honeyed Prawnikós!" responded a nasally one.

The Valken broke through the banter to bellow, “*By the black and the blue*, should we call up another box from Baracia?” His Nericretian guards forced their way through the crowd. The plank thumped against the docks.

A few mustachioed men in white shirts stomped down from the ship with crates in hand. “Will you give me one?” Jerzy asked. “I can work for a penny.”

The shipworker raised an eyebrow and, with a twitch of his curly mustache, turned away. *Does he not speak Dormanic? He came all this way and doesn't know the language?*

*I'll have to be persistent.* Jerzy had hunted, and he knew the best way to scope out his prey: pay attention to the minutiae and the target would be obvious. A Nericretian walked by in a black jacket with the bearded face of Charkrew, former duke of Wanska, etched into a button on his lapel. *So he's been to Dormanar.*

“Do you need someone to carry that for you? You don't have to pay me much.”

That caught the Nericretian's attention. He shrugged, plopped his hefty box into the boy's arms, and pointed at a stall under construction.

Jerzy tried his best, though the weight might have been too much. He had hardly taken a few steps when his arms gave out and the box crashed to the ground. Bottles clinked together, but nothing shattered. He pushed it, gathering moss and dirt and grass.

His shoulders ached like all hell, but he made it to the stall and collapsed. Despite the pain, he straightened his back to look hardy—as hardy as a boy of sixteen could be.

Then drifted by the prim, pretty, and plump Lady Penelopa, only child of the ruling Count of Błotka. She had inherited his diplomatic look, cheeks ever-rosy and figure ever-soft. She sat an open-air palanquin painted deep purple and a silver circlet rested atop her braids.

It wasn't often that she ventured into town. Jerzy flushed red. He set his shoulders back, flapped the wrinkles from his cloak, and kicked the debris off his boots. Yet when she passed, so high in her palanquin, her gaze was fixed on the merchant vessel.

*Why would she pay attention to me? If this village were a tree, I would be the molding mushroom among the roots.* He shrugged back into his gray cloak. There was a place for young caretakers and village guardians, but it was not at a lady's side. Just as the worker bee never knew the queen, Jerzy showed deference in vain. The only work that *really* mattered was what he did for Leon.

The black-jacketed worker came up with a Ducal penny in hand. In it was engraved the shattered dragon which Kazmer slew a millenia ago.

"Thank you," Jerzy panted.

*Now that all is sorted, where is Leon?* Jerzy scanned the wide marketplace, little more than tracks and a stall-under-construction. He glimpsed Lady Penelopa again, tall and mighty over the peasants. He broke off to shuffle around the market.

"Leon!" he shouted. "Leon!" It sounded like he was calling a dog. He looked between brick houses, but there was nothing. *Nothing still, and damn it all!* He beat his foot into the ground. "Leon!" he tried again. "Where are you?"

The more he looked, the further he got from the market. The village wasn't large. *Where has that boy gone?*

"Leon! Leon!"

A patch of brambles lay ahead, sprouting from the swamp. They bore tiny jotina berries, the color of spring honey. *These could have drawn him in.* When Jerzy studied the ground, he

spotted a set of small, barefooted tracks near the bush. They were set deep before the plant, then carried on through the mud. Ahead, Jerzy saw a crowd.

Seven boys swarmed Leon like wolves, creeping closer. They made weapons of their words, chanting, “Infirm! Infirm! Infirm!”

Jerzy stomped forward, splattering mud. The boys held their ground.

He barreled forth. His shoulder slammed into something firm as meat. He made his fists into clubs and flailed them. It was all too fast. They encircled him.

The air was hot and wet with breath. It smelled like sweat, and somewhere there was a hint of metal. *Blood*. Jerzy looked down. The sturdy boy he had slammed into lay on the ground, shirt soaking beet-red.

Even now, Jerzy’s shoulder was sore. But the thrill kept him going. The other boys were lean and muscled, though not quite so lean as Jerzy himself. They pounced. The blows fell from all around. One to his leg. He toppled over. Another to his nose. Hot blood dribbled from his lips. A kick to the gut. He reached for his belt.

The thrill of the fight was too strong; he didn’t feel the pain yet. He could feel his fingertips, though, brushing his sheath. A kick sent him rolling. Planting his face in the mud. He gripped the hilt of his bone knife. There was hardly a sound. No grand *shing* like an iron blade. Yet as he pulled it out, the rustle died down. Jerzy had retrieved the great silencer.

He forced his way up. Hot rage guided his hand, swinging madly. The boys scattered until only Leon remained. Blood leaked from his lips. He wiped it with the back of his fist. “I bit them.” Red streaks marked the veins of his gaunt hand.



“Good.” Jerzy staggered to his brother and pulled him close. “Don’t let them hurt you.” Jerzy’s head was spinning, but he still took the time to look Leon over. There were really no bruises, at least on the outside.

They walked home through the merchant’s crowd, which would vanish by tomorrow. *Maybe Penelopa will notice me by then*, he thought deliriously. All boys told themselves lies of love.

“They were making fun of me,” said Leon.

“Then curse them. Let the Beldam snatch them up!”

“Don’t say those sorts of things!” sniffled Leon.

“I know, it’s not good luck to invoke her name, but they wronged us.” Jerzy’s joints ached and each passing step pushed him closer to sleep. Darkness crept in as they left the market.

The door wasn’t far. He lurched through. Leon went to his cot while Jerzy’s head pounded. *I need water*. But he had none. He sat on his cot, though it was more hard ground than cushioning. His eyes were almost wet with tears, but something held them back.

*Good thing I had my knife on me. If I didn’t, it could have cost me a few bones*. He rubbed the sore spots all over his legs, back, and the joint at his jaw. He clenched it, and it stung.

Leon was safe. That was all that mattered. Jerzy wandered over to Leon’s hideaway. The boy’s eyes were closed, but his breaths were too controlled for sleep. His face was scrunched up.

“I’m sorry,” said Leon with those big gray eyes. “I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

“That’s not important,” said Jerzy.

“Are you okay?” Leon offered a frail hand. Jerzy held it to his chest. *Let him feel my heartbeat*.

“Just rest. I’ll sleep too.” Jerzy left his brother there for the night. If they wanted to live, they had to make certain sacrifices. *Was my last one not enough?*

Jerzy took out the pears. The second ripest was for Leon. He set it beside the boy’s cot. The third ripest was Jerzy’s. He took a bite and savored the juices, but it was so small that one bite was most of it. He cast the core into the mud. He saved the ripest for something greater.

Jerzy stepped into murky water behind the house. He waded up to his knees, and his pants stuck to his legs, aggravating fresh bruises.

The trees loomed overhead, blocking any moonlight. The evening sky barely showed, purple amid twisted vines and a crossed canopy. So too dangled orange beads, dried nuts, and acorns on twine.

A stump sat amid the foliage, its shelf fungi glistening. Wetness marked it black, from bark to interior, though its top had been carved to a bowl. By who, Jerzy would never know.

He squeezed the pear, its juices flowing into the stump’s center, and he dropped it there. Flies buzzed by. They might have gone for the fruit, but even the most foolish fauna or faithless fiend knew to avoid offerings.

All Jerzy had to do was wish.

He thought of the day’s events. “Keep Leon safe. Let him live as a little boy should.”

He groveled at the stump’s base. He had seen a princess, pretty but poignantly above him. His place was with the flies and fishes; yet if he prayed, anything could happen. “Let the lady notice me. I may be a lonely ranger, but she could see me as something more.”

And that brought him back to the street where it happened. His jaw ached, and his back was tense with bruises. “They ran off like it was nothing.”

But who could he call on for aid? The gods cared little for the happenings of humans. *I braved the fight myself.* Perhaps the warrior-god of thunder. *But I don't want to fight them.* The silent watchers of the woods protected downtrodden beasts. *Leon is a boy, not a beast.*

That left only one. *The protector of the woods.*

“We have been wronged, my lady. By seven boys. May their backs turn to bark.” That was empty, little more than a saying. “Ensure that justice finds them.” He took a deep breath. “Let the Beldam snatch them up.”