

WAR DANCER

A Story of the Spiralchain

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Onus

Rura Holc was not strong. Duke Igar watched the long line of those fleeing the city curl off in the distance, trudging along the road to Ain Holc. They would not be safe there forever, but Rura Holc could not be held. Its walls were low and its garrisons nearly empty. It had never truly recovered from the last war with Hyrak, and now, the warlord brought new weapons to bear. His latest mercenaries were four-armed soldiers with blue skin that struck in the night, ferocious and seemingly tireless. There was little hope of victory against such forces.

Igar sat on the back of a horse that did not particularly like him. Next to him, Duke Rura also sat on horseback. His children were already gone – carried away with the rest of the most important citizens by the Gatemaker. But Duke Rura had insisted on seeing the last of the refugees on their way, and Igar accompanied him.

"It is a hard thing to see your city taken from you," Duke Igar said softly to his elderly companion. "But at least you are able to save your people, my friend. Cherish that."

Rura nodded. "It is not the loss that your own has been. And this is not the first time Rura Holc has fallen to this bastard. I must say... my heart is not in this place anymore. My heart was taken from me long ago. This place is just walls and things. Its heart and mine never came back after the last evacuation."

"And yet, you returned," Duke Igar said. "Just as, one day, I will return to the remains of Igar Holc and start my family's legacy anew." He did not speak of the guilt that clawed at him. Duke Rura was a kind-hearted man, but he would find no sympathy for what Igar had done--for what he had known. So it remained yet another secret between two Dukes of the Council.

It was not the largest of the secrets that Igar kept from old, sweet Rura.

"I will miss my city only in that leaving takes me from my beloved's crypt," Duke Rura said softly. "But I think, perhaps, the time will not be long before I am reunited with Larisa in the Far Halls."

Igar nodded, but said nothing. He remembered a time, long enough ago that the edges of the images in his mind were blurry, when he had brought Larisa, Duchess Rura, home to her husband. The secret of their time together – the weakness he buried in his silence, like so many things--boiled to the front of his mind.

The road stretched before them, and he rode beside Duke Rura, old memories scampering across his mind's eye.

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"This seems a waste of time," Duke Igar complained as the road stretched endlessly before them. It was not his first complaint, but at least it was a new one, and for that Duchess Rura was thankful.

She sighed and adjusted her position on her own dappled mare. She was ill-suited to riding--she didn't have the hips for it, even after all of those children she had brought into the world. But riding was faster than walking, and no matter how skilled the retinue of guards that accompanied them, these were unsafe times to be abroad in the South.

Undeterred by her lack of response, Igar continued his rambling rant. He was a gregarious man and the Duchess feared that there was nothing he liked more than the sound of his own voice.

"Are there even enough men in the whole of Mandor's lands to make a difference?" Igar asked. "Even your own garrisons--smallest in the Council--outnumber his forces. To send us both on a journey all the way to Mandor Arn while Hyrak's forces continue to march towards controlling the whole of our continent is foolhardy at best."

"Excuse me, sir," one of Igar's soldiers said, his voice low and painfully polite. The Duchess looked at the man, but he wore a helmet that obscured his face.

With a negligent wave, Duke Igar dismissed the man's interruption and continued, "It will be months before I am back in Igar Holc, continuing our preparations for Hyrak's eventual assault on my city."

Larisa replied, her voice louder than she intended, "We will be back sooner than you expect. And this is necessary, good Duke. It is not that we must have Mandor's men and arms--it is that we must deny them to Hyrak. It is our good fortune that the despot lingers in the Southeast for now--but he will turn his eyes towards the North once more. You may not miss Warlord Mandor's forces among those defending your walls, but you will certainly notice them if they stand against you. And besides, this is the right time to make the trip."

"Mandor Arn is in the armpit of Onus," Duke Igar bemoaned. "You could have at least let me book passage for us on a ship. We do some small measure of trading with Gollus Arn--that would have sped our journey considerably."

The soldier who had attempted to interrupt before coughed sharply and interjected more forcefully, "Your grace, I think it important that you know something."

"What is it?" Duke Igar snapped.

"This route we travel is not an efficient means of reaching Mandor Arn. We wind too close to the sea, and the Seleris Road is the only expedient way to get into the Stones in the summer time. The heat of the

Vale is too great to endure for your graces, and the summer storms that plague Berik's Reef make coastal travel dangerous," the soldier explained.

"Observant," Duchess Rura remarked. She inclined her head towards her own head guardsman--a tall young fellow named Essindir, dispatched to accompany Larisa by the woman who hosted her family in exile from captured Rura Holc, the Duchess Ain. He was one of the eight soldiers that accompanied them, all on expensive horseback, and he had been the one to chart their course.

Essindir nodded and spurred his horse forward, anticipating the same thing the Duchess feared. Duke Igar was about to lose his temper.

"Duchess, is your man incompetent? You would make this journey even longer, and more dangerous, than necessary? Why?" Duke Igar demanded, locking his eyes on Larisa.

"We are not bound for Mandor Arn," Larisa explained coolly. Her voice was quiet now--the same dreadful whisper that she used when her children were forgetting their place. Hers was not a powerful protectorate, but it was an important one. She grew tired of the way the other Dukes pushed her and hers about, as though Rura Holc worked for them. Rura Holc fed the South, and the Duke and Duchess Rura were among the eldest members of the Council. She was tired of this disrespect. "We are moving in precisely the right direction to accomplish our objective."

"We cannot secure alliance with the Warlord if we do not meet with him," Igar insisted. "In the name of the Purpose itself... What game are you playing? Am I... Are you taking me hostage? Are you working with Hyrak?" He slowed his horse and Larisa watched, with some small satisfaction, as his eyes widened and his flesh paled.

But she shook her head. "Warlord Mandor is not the one who will decide where the armies of the Arn will stand. His wife is. So we go to visit her where she currently resides, in Porin Orus Igar. And to congratulate her."

"Porin? One of my villages? Why is the lady of Mandor Arn living in my protectorate?" Igar asked nervously. "Is this prelude to an attack?"

"You begin to sound like Duke Mendul," Larisa said, shaking her head. "It is not a flattering comparison. She stays in Porin because that is where one of the finest midwives I have ever known lives. Ferna delivered my youngest, and she will also deliver Lady Mandor's newest child. We go to congratulate the Warlord and Lady of Mandor Arn on the birth of their new child... and in so doing, renew old alliances."

This seemed to silence Igar, and the group resumed its former pace. They were still days out from Porin Orus Igar, but knowing they would not be leaving his own territories--once they crossed back out of the Ain Protectorate where Igar's contingent had picked her up in the first place--seemed to ease much of the Duke's tension.

The Duchess turned to the soldier that had first made note of the inconsistency in their course and urged her mare ahead to ride alongside him, grateful for a bit of distance between herself and Duke Igar.

"We had thought no one would notice our route," Larisa remarked. "Few from as far north as the land bridge have experience traveling the southwestern routes."

"I have been many places," the soldier said. "And I have a good memory. I've never seen a map that didn't stick with me."

"You ride under no colors--are you a free soldier?" Larisa asked curiously, and the man nodded. It was a custom in the North, where warriors would swear service to the Council instead of any one Duke, and those so sworn were often among the finest fighters. Such a custom would greatly improve the military assets of her husband--she had never before thought of trying to lure some of those men down from the forests of the North. "What is your name, so that when this is over I can hire you away from Igar?"

The man removed his helm and looked at the Duchess with a small but generous smile. His weathered features were still somehow warm, and she was startled by the intelligence in his brown eyes.

"Abis Coudon, at your service," he said.

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Even with the horses, it was not a swift journey. The roads in this part of the world were ill-maintained, due in large part to the asinine way that trade moved from protectorate to protectorate. Essindir had grown up in the outlying territories of the Ain Protectorate through which they now rode, and even he could summon no sense of pride in their condition.

The war had dissolved any schedule of maintenance that the Duchess Ain had implemented, and they passed more than one village that was abandoned as its craftsmen and farmers fled towards the protection of the great city's walls. Most of the last few days had been quiet, with only the occasional banter between the Duke and the Duchess. Among the men, there was not even the normalcy of good-natured traveling stories. They were a small band stitched together from soldiers in service to Igar Holc, Rura Holc, and Ain Holc, and they were professionals, all.

As the sun crept towards the horizon ahead of them, Essindir found himself working gradually towards the lead of the procession. They approached the village of his birth, and though he had not been back since he had traveled to Ain Holc to swear his service to the Duchess two summers ago, he imagined that he was better suited to smoothing their passage--and request for rooms for the night--than the gruff Ruran that currently served as their formation point.

"Aren't you supposed to be guarding the Duchess?" the old soldier asked in a low, grumbling voice as Essindir nudged his horse alongside him. Essindir thought he detected a note of envy in those sparse words.

He nodded, shifting in his saddle, and replied, "She is quite well protected. The road we travel leads to the village of my birth--I thought I might be best of use up here."

"You thought wrong," the soldier grunted. "The protection of her Grace is your duty. Smoothing the path is mine."

Before Essindir could offer any reasonable rejoinder, an arrow struck him squarely in the left shoulder, piercing the leather armor he wore. He cried out--more in surprise than in pain--and as one the formation of soldiers tightened around the nobles at their core.

Nine men approached, four from concealment on Essindir's side of the rode, five from their own places of hiding on the other side. Two had short bows, the rest were armed with swords of eclectic styles. They had pieces of steel armor amongst them, but Essindir did not think that, all totaled, they could have assembled a single whole suit.

Immediately behind Essindir, the leader of Igar's men, Abis, whispered, "They are not Hyrak's legions--he equips his mercenaries better than this. Can you fight?"

Essindir nodded. He reached up to pull the arrow from his shoulder, but his first tentative effort elicited a sharp bolt of pain throughout his arm. The arrow head was barbed, and its safe removal would require more skilled hands than his own. "Awkwardly," he confessed. "But yes."

"Then get back to your post," the soldier next to him growled.

Essindir nodded and signaled his horse to turn, slipping into the opening in the circled horses created by the others. He alone was directly assigned to bodyguard one of their noble host, and he had made a mistake by slipping away. The Duchess Ain had personally guaranteed the safety of Duchess Rura on this trip, and Essindir was her assurance of that promise.

A few more arrows flew, most striking the dirt of the road, before one of the menacing highwaymen stepped forward and called out his demands. His voice richly accented by the lingering vowels of the coastal villages, he said, "I'll be taking your horses, boys. Step away and lower your blades, and my marksmen won't be poking holes in any more of your friends."

The eight soldiers in the noble retinue--all better armed and armored than their foes--made no reply. They also made no move to dismount.

From inside the circle, Essindir heard the low whispers of the Duke and Duchess.

"We should strike them down to the man," Duke Igar insisted. "If we merely drive them off, they may yet join Hyrak's forces."

Duchess Rura shook her head. "These men are desperate, Igar. This is not a political squabble, it is a financial one. Our horses are worth more on the frontier than any of our coin, and far more than the lives of a pair of nobles."

Before any decision could be reached, the highwaymen lost their patience, and the seven without bows charged forward. From horseback, the Council soldiers were in a far superior position, but even before swords began to clash, the two archers in the company of their foes started firing again.

While their fellows did not appear to be fierce swords men, the archers were far more practiced. They were likely hunters rather than warriors, but in the present situation, the skills required were little different. They shot skillfully, aiming high to avoid injuring the horses they intended to steal, and several of their shots struck true, though none fatally--yet.

"Get down," Essindir called out to the nobles. "Dismount and your horse will shield you from their arrows!"

Duke Igar responded swiftly, his sense of self-preservation overturning his noble dislike of being ordered around. But Duchess Rura--the one that mattered, to Essindir's perspective--stayed seated in her saddle, eyes fixed forward towards the leader of the ruffians.

"He is not fighting," she said simply. "He lets the other men fight and die for his cause, but he does nothing. What do you call that, Essindir?" she asked.

"Smart?" Duke Igar replied from the ground.

"Cowardly," Essindir said. "But not unexpected. It is what most commanders do, your Grace."

The Duchess snorted, and Essindir noticed her brow furrowing into a deep crease. She said nothing more, instead staring at the lead highwayman. It was hard to say if he noticed.

Around them, swords clashed, and men screamed out--but they were never the Council's men. There was chaos in the encounter though, and the circle of horses parted in places as soldiers and horses spun, darted, and slashed at their grounded foes. Arrows continued to fly, but they now seemed focused on evening the odds for their footmen against the superior skill of the nobles' retinue.

In that tangled mass, the leader struck. He dashed forward, drawing a pair of daggers as he left his sword in the dirt on the side of the road. He was quick and wiry, and he slipped between engagements like a seamstress' needle, precise and aware. In the blink of an eye, it seemed, he had entered the small circle where only Essindir stood to protect the Duke and the Duchess.

"I had not realized the value of our prize," the highwaymen said as his lightning pace slowed. He held the daggers at the ready and moved in a low, guarded crouch. Essindir, sword in hand, dismounted to better confront him. As he did so, he realized that, still, the Duchess' eyes were fixed upon the man.

Essindir was a fine swordsman--not a prodigy by any means, but he practiced regularly, and his great height gave him an advantage of reach that readily compounded with the length of his sword to keep the man's flashing, slashing daggers at a safe distance.

But as they danced, blade clashing against blade, Essindir realized that his enemy was also quite practiced with his weapon of choice. His style was that of a tavern brawler, but it was effective in the chaos that surrounded them. He did not care to best Essindir--he was aiming to grab one of the nobles. He darted away from their melee twice, each time snatching towards Duke Igar, but both times the Duke was able to get his impatient and nervous horse between himself and the highwayman. The second time the attacker's outstretched dagger slashed against the horse's flank, drawing a dark line of blood on the beast's chestnut hide.

Finally, Essindir saw his opening. The man broke away again, this time turning slightly to feint an attack on the Duke, but Essindir saw the gambit for what it was and stepped in, sword angled precisely, to cut off the man's intended route to the mounted Duchess. His sword slid directly into the highwayman's belly, and with a wet sound, it ran him clean through.

To Essindir, it seemed as though the sword had done the work, not his own hands. He had practiced with the sword many times, for two long years. But he had never killed a man before. Not like this. Not in single combat. It was not the same as defending the walls or fighting side by side with a troop of men.

He watched the light go out in the man's eyes and, shivering with a disgust that he dared not let the others see, withdrew his sword from his enemy's lifeless body. He looked up, and still the Duchess stared at the highwayman. "Good," she said softly. "It is good that it is over."

Around them, the fight had gone out of the other assailants, and those that could still flee did so. The fighting stopped, and the men finally turned to see if their rulers were still safe.

Of all of them, only Abis looked not at the nobles but at Essindir. He nodded subtly, knowingly, and then asked the Duchess aloud, his voice booming and drawing the attention of the whole retinue, "You are well, your Grace?"

"Of course," she replied. "The finest men in three Protectorates stood between us and harm. We were never in any danger." She looked down at Duke Igar and added, "But we should have been."

Essindir looked at his charge with wide eyes. "Your Grace?" He asked.

"A leader, a ruler... you think them cowardly when they stand at the back of things, when they risk nothing in pursuit of their aims, yes?" she asked, more to the whole of the group than to Essindir directly. "I will not be part of such a thing any longer. Form up, men--we have a fair ways to travel before we can rest. And from now on, I shall travel at the front of this formation."

"But your Grace," the gruff old soldier--one of the few men that was sworn to the Duchess and not here on behalf of Igar or Ain--questioned.

The Duchess held up her hand. "Essindir will ride at my side. But it will not be said that the Duchess Rura is a coward. We have lost our city, our Purpose... we will not lose our honor. Others... others may yet learn from our example."

Essindir thought it rather obvious the way she did not look at Duke Igar as she spoke. In fact, it was almost more telling than if she had.

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Porin Orus Igar was not much of a village. Abis had never been to this particular place before, but he was familiar with many of the coastal villages in the Igar Protectorate. Porin was smaller, and more run down, than any he had seen before. They were at the far southern edge of the territory assigned to Duke Igar in the Council Charter, and that remoteness clearly led to a lack of funds from his noble coffers to support the people of this faltering village.

Beyond the small collection of shacks and cottages, the Endless Sea stretched as far as the eye could see. The setting sun painted its crashing waves a rich, rose color. Gulls clamored overhead, raucous and bickering.

"This place still answers to your banner?" Duchess Rura asked, her voice low. She was not far behind Abis.

After a moment of sputtering, Duke Igar replied, "The villages are fiercely independent. Porin Orus receives all the aid they request."

"Of course," she murmured. Then, louder, she said, "Let us make our way down into the village. If the Lady Mandor is here, I would see our business conducted as soon as possible. Our presence will surely be a draw on the village's *entirely adequate* resources, and I don't care to run an innkeeper into ruin hosting us."

Abis led the way down, Duchess Rura's chief guard immediately at his side. The young Ainishman, Essindir, had fallen back to the rear of the precession at Abis' insistence. Something about the scene before them set his soldier's instincts on edge, though he could not yet place it. Many times before he had been needlessly paranoid – Hessa often chided him for that, on those rare occasions that he was at home with his wife and daughter. He missed them even now.

They rode along the broad, well-worn path into the village with little fanfare. With no walls or gates to speak of, no one challenged their entry. The village was a collection of perhaps thirty homes and businesses, all built of old, repurposed wood. The thatched roofs were in desperate need of patching, and the road that curved through the village and ended, he presumed, at the dock, was as much dirt as it was stone.

There were few people to be seen, though quite a few lanterns lit the inside of homes. They traveled all the way to the square before one of perhaps six men outside of their homes even acknowledged their presence. That man, dressed in dirty clothes and wearing a heavy leather apron marking him a blacksmith, looked up at the mounted group only after they were nearly upon him.

"Good evening, traveler," the man said, his words clipped and short--businesslike. "What brings you to Porin Orus Igar?"

"My company seeks an audience with..." Abis began, but he allowed his words to trail off. The sense of wrongness was stronger--but he had not yet put his hands around the problem.

Duke Igar scoffed in surprise and said, "Abis, I am surprised at you. Your memory is usually so reliable. We seek audience with the Lady Mandor, whom we are told is visiting a midwife in this village. Is this true?"

"I would be a poor subject if I revealed the secrets of my liege to unannounced strangers," the man said, his words much slower, lingering on the word *liege* longer than necessary. Abis slowly wrapped his right hand around the haft of his sword.

Duke Igar, however, was not well-versed in subtlety. Blustering, he shouted down at the blacksmith, "Liege? I am your liege! Porin belongs to the Igar Protectorate, not to the upstart warlords of the Stepping Stones!"

The blacksmith winced, stepping back with obvious fear on his face--but Abis saw the fear was not related to the Duke. The man's eyes darted left and right rapidly--towards the homes nearest the square. He was afraid of *those*.

That was when Abis finally realized what had been bothering him. Porin Orus was a fishing village--all of the coastal villages were. But as the sun set... no fishing boats were returning to the dock. No one had been out fishing today.

Abis drew his sword as the doors to the two houses flanking their position flew open and a tide of men, wearing the black plate mail and red sigil of the rogue warlord, Hyrak, rushed out to into the street.

They had marched into an occupied village and handed two members of the Council of Onus directly to their enemy.

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All around her, the men scrambled to action. Unlike the skirmish with the highwaymen, this was a battle against trained, hardened men--and her forces were outnumbered nearly two to one. Essindir was

at her side almost immediately, the only one not committed to the tight circular perimeter that stood between her and capture by Hyrak's men.

"Dismount and follow me," the tall soldier barked. The Duchess did not resist--this was not the time to stand upon her principles--and her soft boots hit the cobbled road only a second after her guardsman's. He turned to see if Igar had followed suit, but he had not. The Duke of the land bridge had instead drawn his own sword and engaged with one of the black-armored soldiers that broke through the perimeter.

Essindir seemed torn in that moment, but the Duchess said firmly, "You are sworn to me. The others can protect that fool--you will get *me* to safety."

Essindir nodded sharply and, grabbing the Duchess by the hand, he darted forward, sword drawn, towards a gap in Hyrak's forces.

All around them, men and horses roared and thrashed about. Many of the horses were going down, as Hyrak's men did not care to spare the beasts, and their tumbling collapse made their riders terribly vulnerable. Blood splashed through the air, and the Duchess heard Abis shouting orders. The men were fighting hard, and Hyrak's forces were certainly not invincible, but there was no safe place on this field of battle.

Essindir's route brought them face to face with one of the mercenaries, and the man's broadsword clashed against Essindir's long sword. She tried to stay just behind Essindir, in his lanky shadow, but the two combatants moved swiftly, dancing a deadly pattern of footfalls and sword strokes that made her dizzy to follow. Essindir emerged victorious and Hyrak's man went down, his unarmored throat sliced open by a skilled slash.

Before she could even process what had happened, Essindir grabbed her again and they darted away from the fray, lost in the chaos of the battle and able to slip down the alley between two rows of buildings.

"There!" the Duchess called out, pointing at a familiar sign. She had never been to Porin before, but she knew this midwife, Ferna, and she knew the sigil the woman used as a calling card. That same sigil was emblazoned on a plain wooden plank nailed above the door, and if anyplace in this village was safe, that would be it.

Essindir did not bother knocking on the door, instead kicking it in with his big, booted foot. It flew open and the inhabitants of the home screamed. Larisa followed closely behind the soldier and saw the familiar face of Ferna seated beside a low bed, on which a strong, middle aged woman was presently giving birth.

"Watch the door," the Duchess instructed. Essindir nodded, thankfully, and closed the door, fixing his eyes through a crack in the boards to watch for any who might have followed them.

The midwife stood up. "What are you doing here? Get out! Get out! I must have room to work!" She hissed in an angry whisper.

"Larisa?" The woman on the bed asked, her voice weak. "Is... Is that you?"

The Duchess pushed past Ferna and knelt next to the bed, taking Priya's hand in hers. "My dear heart, I had expected you to be quite done with this part when I arrived."

"She doesn't want to be born in a village that belongs to Hyrak," the Lady Mandor said feebly. "This one is a fighter."

"Like her mother," Larisa said. She looked up at Ferna and asked, "How did this happen?"

Ferna crossed her arms and hissed, "The Lord Mandor stuck his--"

Larisa cut her off with a withering glance. "Porin. When did it fall?"

"They came in two days ago. They were waiting for someone—I presume you. Butchered the mayor and his daughter and ordered the rest of us to remain indoors. From the sound of the ruckus outside, I assume you brought enough men with you to give them pause?" the midwife asked.

"Barely," Essindir said. "But it's still going on--some of those men are really amazing, your Grace."

"Join them," Larisa said, standing up. "Don't argue with me, boy. You and I both know that you can do more good out there than in here. If they fall, we will never get out of here--and for now, I am safe."

The young soldier appeared quite torn about what to do, but the Duchess locked her eyes upon him. "A leader does what must be done. You will be a leader, Essindir. Lead by the doing. Now."

He bowed and slipped through the door, closing it tightly behind him.

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The fighting changed dramatically after the horses fell. The Council forces scattered in pairs, back to back as they moved with grim choreography outward from the trap, swords clashing against swords, axes, and armored gauntlets. These were not the finest of Hyrak's men--Abis had fought agents of the Warlord in several campaigns, and these men were properly equipped, but they lacked the intensively drilled skills of the most fearsome of his legions.

So when the seven of them split up, Abis ordered everyone else to pair. He watched his own back.

The advantage the Council forces held was one of mobility. Hyrak's men had stout armor, but it was heavy and limited their speed and agility considerably. The leather armor Abis and the others wore offered little impediment, and their strategic scattering left the armored men winded as they chased after them. Abis personally killed two of the men, sweat pouring down his brow as he swung harder than he would have liked in order to injure the few vulnerable spots on his armored foes.

When Essindir came running towards Abis, he feared for the worst. "The Duchess?" he asked, closing the distance between them and then immediately turning to deal with a pocket of three men, axe-wielders, that were charging towards them. Essindir grabbed a nearby barrel, partly full of brackish water, and slung it towards the men, forcing them to scatter and sloshing the water into the dirt and stone road between them, making a muddy mess.

"She is safe," Essindir said. "The Duke?"

Abis grunted. "I left him with Gryot and Pellod. That was a few minutes ago, and we went different directions."

The first two axe-men made it to swords' reach, and battle was once more joined in earnest. While Abis had fought his share of men with unusual weapons, Essindir struggled with the swordplay required to deal with the heavy, dual-bladed weapons. He was naturally skilled though, and with what little attention Abis could spare, he was impressed with how quickly the lanky Ainishman adapted his technique.

Abis was able to drop low and bring his blade across the back of his sparring partner's left leg, and the weight of the axe and the armor was too much for the man to support solely on the other. He went down, and Abis stepped in tight to finish the work. The man managed a quick backhanded slash of his axe that caught Abis off guard, and it drew a spurt of blood from his arm where the blade bit clean through his leather vambrace. But it didn't stop Abis from doing what had to be done. As he always did, he closed his eyes at the exact moment that his blade ended the man--he could not bear to see the eyes of his foe as the light of their Purpose went out.

He looked up and saw Essindir dispatching of his foe as well. There was a moment of quiet before he realized that the third man with the axe was gone.

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"Will she survive the delivery?" Larisa asked Ferna. "She looks weak."

"The labor has lasted more than a day," Ferna answered. "It is hard to say if she will make it or not."

The Duchess knelt back beside the bed once more. She looked up to Ferna and asked, "Is there any way you might give us a moment alone?"

The midwife glared at her, but after a few seconds her expression softened and she nodded. She slipped through a curtain in the back of the room, leaving Larisa alone with Priya.

"I'd rather you didn't see me like this," Priya said. "I've not bathed in more than a week."

"I am married to a man that bathes enough for the both of us," Larisa said, smiling. "I am happy to see you in any state. It has been too long."

"Even a single day is too long," Priya whispered. "I remember... so long ago. Before children. Before..."

"Before duty," Larisa said, squeezing Priya's hand in hers. "Yours will always be the hand upon my heart."

She leaned over to kiss Priya on the forehead, but the Lady Mandor arched back, receiving the kiss instead on her lips. They were dry and cracked, but the passion in that gesture was overwhelming. It brought memories of a life decades gone rushing back to mind, and for a time, it was as though a life of choices melted away, and they were instead two young women of the Ainish frontier... daring to imagine a life together.

A contraction struck Priya and she screamed, summoning Ferna from the back.

For ten minutes Ferna coaxed the tiny girl from her mother's womb, but still she did not come. Outside, the sounds of battle had grown quieter--and Larisa feared that meant her own men were defeated.

That fear was brought to life when a heavy blow sent the door flying inward, revealing an armored soldier of Hyrak's forces standing in the doorway, a double-bladed axe, wet with blood, in his hands.

Larisa stood up, retrieving the dagger she carried from her boot sheath. She held it out before her and said, her words crafted of ice, "You will lay no hand upon any woman in this home."

Without a word, the man stepped forward.

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Larisa stood firmly between Priya's bed and Hyrak's mercenary. His eyes were dark and they betrayed no emotion, but she glowered at them without flinching. He took another step forward, his axe drawn up over his shoulder, the power of his large arms now committed to the swing.

All that stood between that axe and the Duchess Rura's life was the dagger in her hand. It was small comfort.

She saw a flicker of motion from behind the man--the door war was still open at his back. Then Abis was there, hurling his sword through the air to strike the man in the back.

The soldier turned by reflex, startled by the blow but not injured. A sword was not meant for throwing, and the armor deflected the blade neatly. But as he turned to face Abis--and Essindir, who the

Duchess could now see behind him--Larisa let fly her dagger. Her blade *was* meant for throwing, and she had practiced with it many times.

It struck the man in the back of the neck, just above the mail shirt that he wore under the plate mail. With a sickening thud, he fell forward, dead.

And behind her, she heard the first cry of Priya's baby.

It was over, and for the first time in what felt like hours, she let herself relax. That was a mistake.

"I am sorry," Ferna whispered. "So sorry."

Larisa turned back to see the midwife lifting the crying, blood-soaked baby from between her mother's legs. She thought the worst—that Priya had died in the birthing. But she saw her dearest one lying there, still breathing. The relief of that sight warred with the revulsion and disbelief she saw as Ferna produced a small, sharp knife in the hand that did not hold the baby and leaned forward, towards the throat of the Lady Mandor.

Duchess Rura threw herself forward. She had no weapon, and she slammed into the midwife that had, with her skilled hands, delivered one of Larisa's own children. They fell backwards, and the Duchess grabbed at the newborn baby girl, trying to shelter her from the crashing fall to the wooden planked floor of Ferna's cottage.

She managed to pull the baby away and shelter her in her own arms as her shoulder slammed into the hard floor atop Ferna. Ferna cried out and stabbed with her knife, flailing.

Larissa did not scream as the blade plunged into her side. It did not matter what happened to her.

Essindir and Abis were upon them both in no time at all, Abis helping Larisa up and taking the baby back to her mother even as Essindir restrained Ferna.

"Why?" the Duchess asked from between teeth gritted against the pain of the knife in her side. It had plunged deeply, and the blood that flowed from the wound was already soaking through her clothes.

"Survival," Ferna said firmly, though her hands trembled. "Hyrak promised to spare us if we helped him claim the Stepping Stones. If... if we could drive the Warlord Mandor into a foolish, grief-stricken frenzy... you should not have come. When his consort came and told the men to wait for you, I could not believe it. Why would a Duchess of the Council come all the way to this place? Now you have ruined our every hope. We will never survive his wrath now."

Larisa ripped the knife from her side and hurled it into the corner of the room. "I could have protected you."

"You could not protect your own people, your own home. Even on the coast, we have heard of the fall of Rura Holc," Ferna spat.

“Take her out of here,” the Duchess instructed, and Essindir did so deftly.

“That wound is serious,” Abis said, looking carefully at the Duchess’ side. “We can dress it for travel, but... you must take great care.”

But Larisa paid little heed to the soldier’s words. Instead, she sat down on the edge of Priya’s bed and watched the Lady Mandor snuggle her newborn daughter tight against her. “You are safe,” she whispered.

Priya nodded. “Her name is Presti,” she said softly. “Mandor and I already decided that before I traveled here for the birth. But... were things different, after this day... she would be Larisa. The name of the finest... the finest...”

The Duchess did not hear what came next. The world turned first cold and then, faster than she had thought possible, dark.

□~□~□

The retinue that left Porin Orus Igar was smaller than the one that had arrived. They had a wagon now, taken from the grateful citizens of the village, and in that wagon they carried the body of the Duchess Rura. The seat at the front of the wagon was occupied by two figures – Essindir, consumed by guilt at his failure to protect the Duchess, and Duke Igar, who had fortunately survived.

The guards in their procession numbered only five men now, and all but Essindir walked on foot. The only two horses that had survived now pulled the wagon.

Abis walked at the front, and like all of the men except for the Duke and the Purpose-blessed Essindir, he had many small wounds bandaged by a grateful, if fearful, healer in Porin. They moved slowly, and there was no joy in their travel.

“I worry,” Essindir said softly, finding his voice as the first night of their days-long journey back to Ain Holc settled in around them. The moons both shone brightly, one waxing and one waning. “We are in poor shape to deal with trouble on our return journey.”

The Duke nodded, even as he made preparations to sleep on the bedroll that he alone had managed to salvage from the fallen horses back at Porin. “I suspect that the greatest treasure in our entourage has already been claimed, Essindir. I would be a fool to think that I am as fine a prize for the Warlord as Larisa was. She was a key to the South. I... I am the Duke of a city that Hyrak will never even see. His ambitions drive him deeper and deeper south – I doubt he will live long enough to turn that eye towards the northern continent. Dukes Weldaf and Stes will crush him between their forces soon... and we will reclaim Rura Holc. I only regret that their Duchess will not be there to see their city restored.”

Essindir thought about that – and his own complicity in allowing that death – as night enfolded them all. “She was that and more, I think,” he remarked.

“How so?” Duke Igar asked.

It was not until the words, loosened by guilt and grief, started to flow that Essindir realized that, were she still alive, the Duchess would not have wanted them spoken. “I think perhaps the Duchess was closer to Lady Mandor than mere friendship, your Grace. Her death will assure that Mandor Arn stands with the Council, even if Warlord Mandor never fully understands why. I have seen the look those two exchanged many times at the court in Ain Holc. It is a powerful thing.”

Duke Igar nodded slowly. “That is, perhaps, a secret we should keep amongst us, Essindir. I will determine how best to break this news to the Council.”

Essindir could not disagree with the wisdom of that, and on that note he tried to rest. He slept uneasily, braced up against a wagon wheel, and he was thankful that the others wished to stand watch. He... he doubted he had the strength.

When morning came, he woke late – the sun was already well above the horizon. The Duke slept next to him, his bedroll tangled about him and belying a fitful sleep to match Essindir’s own nightmares.

But there were no other sounds in their small camp. Essindir stood... and what he saw struck him more surely than any dagger.

The others were dead. All of them. They were scattered about, some in restful positions, others upright as though, while on watch, they had simply... passed away.

He roused the Duke, and Igar wasted no time in confirming what Essindir already suspected.

“Poison,” Duke Igar said. “They... their wounds. Hyrak’s men, their weapons must have been poisoned.”

Essindir stood over Abis Coudon – a man he had swiftly come to think of as a friend – and he knelt down to close his deep brown eyes.

“They died protecting you. And the Duchess,” Essindir said. “Not like this. We will not tell those they loved and those they served that they died like this.”

Duke Igar nodded. “It is not a lie,” he said. “Not if it serves only to soften injuries of the heart.”

The memories of that disastrous journey, and the deaths of both the Duchess of Rura and the father of the Fatewaker upon whom the destiny of all Onus now rested, pained Duke Igar as he rode alongside Duke Rura on their retreat.

He considered, not for the first time, telling the old man the whole truth of that dire voyage. The things Igar knew about Larisa, Duchess Rura and about Priya, Lady Mandor... they would break the old man's heart. It served no good to tell those tales.

Duke Igar was a master of keeping secrets that would do no good to reveal. They bubbled within him like acid, eating away at his heart and his conscience, but his tongue remained still.

"My dear wife loved this city more than anything. More even, perhaps, than me," Duke Rura said quietly.

"She was a woman of many loves," Duke Igar agreed. "But she was a ruler, old friend. She knew what it was to lead by example – to sacrifice for the greater good. She held us all to her standard. Our world is the better for that."

Overhead, the sun was setting, and the two moons gleamed – one waxing, one waning. Duke Igar looked up at them and thanked the Purpose that no one would ever have to know much his cowardice, his lethargy, and his arrogance had cost the people of Onus.

It was enough that he knew himself.