

The Last Song of a Sparrow

by
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A scream rose above all other noise in the narrow street behind the northern market square. The approaching midnight had calmed the city of Silvest, but as it was summer, the bustle never completely ceased, especially in the quarters where most alehouses and brothels were located, conveniently close to one another.

City guards rushed toward the sudden sound, and the stir it caused in the street, which was swiftly pinpointed to the Five Lanterns, a shady inn standing in a dead end alley, visited only by people who did not seek shelter, but wished to engage in more carnal pleasures than a simple drink.

"Dead girl! Dead girl in the room!" a hysterical, plump woman, wearing a colorful dress with the most revealing bodice, cried in distress.

"In the name of Anduniel, cut the whining, woman, and tell me what happened," the guard, who arrived first to the rickety house, grunted harshly. Two more men followed him closely, all alerted by the same eerie shriek.

But the woman was unable to say anything sensible. "Dead girl," she kept whining and pointing at the door, which then swung open. Another woman, much younger than the panicking one, hurried out to meet the guards.

Tears in her eyes and visibly shaken, she was still maintaining admirable temperance. "I'm Heta Farak," she introduced herself, fixing her mildly less colorful dress, making sure her ample breasts were as openly presented as they could without risking the chance of being charged for indecency. However, the bright red feathers in her hair, strongly painted eyes and lips, and impossibly tight dress showing everything there was to show pushed what was considered graceful to the limit and beyond. "There's a girl upstairs—" she said as calmly as she could— "murdered in cold blood."

"Take us there," the first guard ordered, no compassion in his hoarse voice.

Heta nodded in agreement, gently wrapped her arm around the upset woman and softly said, "Come with me, Tarla, we have to show it to the guards. We don't want to leave Dahlie by herself up there." Then she gazed at the guards, frowning. "I could swear I saw another group of guards running away from the house just a moment ago. You wouldn't know why they escaped their duty?"

The guard looked perplexed at first, but was clearly not bothered by it. "I wouldn't know," he uttered plainly. "We're the closest stationed guards here, and I'm sure the night patrols don't come to this part of the city."

"Of course," Heta gave a jeering laugh. "Why would they, indeed?" If the man noticed her scorn, he ignored it completely.

Keeping her chin pressed tightly against her own chest, the crying woman was still unable to speak, but she followed obediently. The few curious people, who had gathered around to see what was going on, shrugged and continued their revelries, quickly losing interest for whatever went down in one of many brothels in the mining quarter. Violence between the harlots and clients was not exactly anything new.

While bloody incidents were nothing exceptional in this part of the city, the morbid view that waited in the room seemed to shock even the stern guards to the core. A mindlessly mangled body of a young woman was lying on the bed, once white linen sheets now soaked in blood. Her throat was slit open, her naked body had at least twenty stab wounds around the chest and stomach, and last, but by far not least, her mouth resembled a fountain of blood, her throat swollen and bruised as if her entire windpipe had been sheared from the inside. The clothes she had worn were scattered around the floor, torn and stained.

Third harlot stood by the door upstairs, waiting for the guards to come. She wore the same kind of garments as the others, but there was something different about her demeanor— she appeared cold and calm, completely detached from the tragedy. But they did not know Dahlie Dulmar, daughter of a miner, a mere girl who had suffered from violent abuse at her childhood home for her entire short life before abandoning her family and running away. While she never saw her father doing anything remotely as bad as this to her mother— or herself, the past experience was instantly there, distancing her from what would have normally made anybody severely sick just from looking at it.

When the last guard entered the room, he snorted loudly and poked his comrades. "Looks like somebody had a rather rough idea for pastime."

The other men laughed nervously; one of them approached the body, drew his dagger and forced her mouth open.

"This is incredible," he said, fascinated like a small boy floating his paper boat in the stream. "Whoever did this, maimed her throat to keep her from wailing. I've heard about this from Gildan of the west gate."

"The fat one?" the other guard was curious.

"No, the short bastard who always looks like he's about to be crushed by his own armor," the reply earned a cheerful laughter and knowing nods from the others.

Both, Tarla and Heta, stared at the laughing men, speechless at first, but then Heta's eyes flashed vehemently. "This has happened before?" she demanded an answer, breathing rapidly.

"This would be number eight," the first guard said, still smirking from his fellow's witty remark. "All during this summer."

"What are you doing about it?" Dahlie spoke for the first time, her tone sharp yet calm like the water of Lake Valos. "I saw the man who did this, and I can tell you who he is."

The guards seemed surprised, grinning like she just said something awfully funny. "Nothing," one of them answered. "You should know that prostitution, while widely spread and commonly accepted as necessary evil, is not exactly verified by law as a form of legal trade within the walls of our fine city. You're all pests, and if someone takes the time to get rid of some— well, me and my superiors shall cheer for it. As far as I'm concerned, whoever did this, did a favor for the city."

Tarla broke into tears, sobbing something unclear, Heta was too mad to say anything, but Dahlie did not even blink her eyes. "Despite of what poor Meryl did for living, this is a murder, and as far as I know, murder is a crime against the Immortals themselves, even in Silvest," she explained to the guards, but received no favorable response.

The first guard stepped toward her, his smile had vanished and tone lost all cheer. "If you think Anduniel cares for sparrows, seek help from the Temple Guard, or the Order of the Silver Shield, I doubt they'll heed your words, but don't bother us again. If you feel unsafe, pack your rags and leave, but before you do that, clean up this room and bury the dead. We don't want disease spreading in the city."

They left, joking about the harlots seeking justice, which was hilarious in its absurd arrogance, leaving the women standing there, alone and abandoned. The incident had effectively emptied the house from customers, even the tavern downstairs was eerily desolate, so the harlots, accompanied by the waitress, began the grim task of turning the room back into orderly shape.

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A proper funeral was out of the question, for the combined wealth of everyone working at the Five Lanterns barely covered food and clothing. As much as it hurt, Heta paid a copper coin for conveyer to pick up Meryl's defiled body and carry it outside of the city walls where it was tipped over to a mass grave for the diseased.

"Who was it?" Heta asked as she sat down to gulp down her first glass of cheap berry wine. "Who was the bastard who killed Meryl? You said you recognized him."

Dahlie frowned, staring into the deep red of the wine pitcher. "Revelin Maeron," she answered plainly, avoiding direct eye contact.

A laughter, mocking like the crow's cry, rose from her bulging chest. "The wifeless— really?"

Preening her sand-colored hair away from her eyes, Dahlie nodded. "I saw his missing ring finger as he came in. Together with the limp and a face I could never forget— nasty as a grinning coyote, I'd recognize him anywhere. I've had him as a customer before the maid he raped chewed that finger off. He hasn't changed much in a year."

"So, it's whores against nobleman's son," Heta sighed, took a long gulp of wine, burped gruffly and leaned back. "Our odds are less than nothing."

"Unless we do something about it by ourselves," Dahlie's eyes flared. "An eye for an eye," she finished softly, her complexion pale and gaze stern.

"Merlyn was our youngest and prettiest," Heta reminded, glancing at Dahlie from head to toe, "do you think you could still lure him in?"

"You ought to give me more credit than that, Heta," she rolled her eyes. "There's still no man I can't make drool after me, and when Revelin drinks— and he drinks a lot— he has no means to resist my charm."

Heta took another gulp and sneered shortly. "I certainly hope so," she then said, "for otherwise we may lose our heads for nothing."

"Don't jump ahead of yourself, Heta. Nobody's chopping our heads off just yet," Dahlie uttered, stretching her aching limbs after a short night. "I have connections that may help us."

"I'll tell Tarla..." Heta began, but Dahlie shook her head fiercely before she had a chance to finish.

"No!" Dahlie snapped. "Madame Tarla doesn't need to know about this. She's quite nervous and scared enough as it is. There's no need to trouble her further by telling that we're going to bring a murderer under her roof— again."

"I happen to own half of this wretched hole," Heta reminded, earning a smile from Dahlie.

"Yes, but you're the strongest woman I've ever met. Tarla, while I'm very fond of her kindness, is nothing like you."

Wanting to argue, Heta held her tongue, for compliments like this were not an every day treat at Five Lanterns, and she was going to enjoy it with dignity. Nodding in agreement, she left to prepare the tavern before it was time to open for the day. Dahlie watched her sailing away, complacent smile lighting her face, declaring her undeniable victory with her well placed flattery. Their attempt was going to be dangerous, but it would be more dangerous to do nothing— eventually. A murdering lunatic like Revelin Maeron would hurt business, and business was quite bad enough as it was. The southern crusade was causing a large dent in healthy male population, which had a direct impact on Five Lanterns, but as if that was not enough, the word of the church

was more powerful than ever. Those who still could afford a moment in the loving embrace of paid legs often headed for a mass rather than the shadowy alleys of the mining quarter.

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The connections Dahlie mentioned were, in fact, just one, and the usefulness of it was yet to be determined. The butcher's son and apprentice, Banyan Arnoth, promised he would help, but the price made Dahlie grind her teeth. The ugly yet strong and surprisingly sharp young man was not the most sought after guy among the girls in that part of the city. While the butcher's profession surely guaranteed fairly good and steady income, it also guaranteed that they would never leave that place, and that made most think twice before spreading their legs to someone like him.

The strong scent of rose oil filled the butcher's shop as Banyan closed the door and bolted it shut. Applying the lustrous oil on her voluptuous body, Dahlie made sure of not overlooking any part that could degrade her charm. Her gleaming cleavage captured Banyan's gaze as she gently caressed his bare chest. The room was incredibly warm in the middle of the summer, and any clothing that was not absolutely necessary was clothing that served better folded away. The thin linen he had on came off easily, shrewdly removed by Dahlie's quick fingers.

Before taking off any of her own clothes, Dahlie gestured the man to follow her into the room at the back of the store, a mistake she would regret many times before the first payment for Banyan's service was delivered in full. She only wanted to make sure they would not be interrupted, possibly delayed, for she did not think the butcher's son would raise a finger on a sole promise.

Staring at the chopped off animal heads and partially cut carcasses, Dahlie barely noticed how Banyan, standing right behind her, wrapped his hands around her, squeezing her breasts excitedly as his breathing became heavier, feverishly trying to remove the tight bodice.

Too nervous and heated, Banyan gave up with a frustrated sigh. "Take that off," he ordered, firmly clenching her breast once more before retreating, giving her space to do what he wanted.

"As you wish," Dahlie purred, releasing the strings, allowing the piece to fall off, leaving her breasts exposed.

"Yes. That's much better," Banyan growled, lifted her up easily like she was just a feather, set her sitting on the table and licked her hardening nipple before sucking it into his mouth.

A moan escaped her lips, but it was not of enjoyment, for the man, in his youthful eagerness, was not being very gentle. Fortunately, he could not make the difference between pleasure and pain, for he was too focused on her body to catch such mundane details. Granted, it was not very pleasant

for Dahlie, but she was glad to see him so enthralled by her gleaming softness. It would give her plenty to control him, to demand more compensation for her hefty investment.

"Please, touch me down there," she begged, worried that if he kept punishing her breast, it would cause problems for her to gain enough moisture for what was inevitably coming, and that was the kind of pain she rather avoided.

Sliding his hand beneath her skirt, following the glowing skin of her thigh up, Dahlie cried from genuine delight as his thick fingers reached the folds of her womanhood, slowly slithering into the now wetting spring of lust.

Grasping his hair tightly, she moaned in sudden heat, begging for more, and Banyan was happy to oblige. Drawing her skirt up to her hips, he could not take much more. Watching his fingers entering, seeing how damp the tips of his fingers were, feeling the slippery touch of her labia, was suddenly making his pants awfully confined.

He was unable to continue any further. Wordlessly, he grabbed her by the shoulders, turned her around and pushed her against the table. A simple move that revealed her perfectly shaped rump for him to admire.

"Yes!" Dahlie yelled as loud as she dared, for the walls of the building seemed rather thin. "Give it to me," she incited, shaking her rear seductively. "I want you deep inside!"

Violently tearing his pants off, Banyan cursed, frustrated by how the clothing resisted his hasty attempts. Finally, after considerable amount of huffing and grunting, the pants flew on the floor and Dahlie saw something that made her heart skip a beat. Banyan was a big man— in every possible aspect.

"Banyan, wait..." Dahlie tried, but her voice broke into barely audible whimper as Banyan pushed himself inside with the strength of an aroused bull, unable to hear anything from the fierce pounding of his heart.

Staring at the macabre animal heads stored in buckets, Dahlie's mind was in as much of a whirl as her crotch, overwhelmed by the fullness created by his tool. Feeling the warm drizzle of Banyan's sweat upon her back, she endured, letting out involuntary cries that were interpreted as pleasure. In a different situation, she might have grown to enjoy it, but the environment and the nature of her motif ruined it for her. Hoping for a quick finish, she forced herself to counter Banyan's rushy pounding, giving him deeper thrusts.

Young and keen as he was, it did not take long before his breathing was disjointed, his face turned deep red and it seemed as if he could not control his movements anymore, but resembled that of a heated dog. With a grunt and growl, he unloaded, nearly pushing Dahlie off the table. Panting heavily, he pulled himself out, sending a stream of his seed running down her inner thigh.

"That was truly something!" he shouted excitedly, wiping sweat off of his forehead.

Forcing an entranced impression upon her reddish face, she quickly ran her hand across his cheek as she dropped her skirt back down and picked up her bodice— a brief fondle to remind him of what was still to come. The first payment was handled, now it was his turn to claim the rest.

"At sundown, meet me in front of the Five Lanterns," she said firmly. "Don't be late. We've got nothing if he slips into any other brothel. I must get him first."

"Don't worry," Banyan uttered, hands seeking Dahlie's tempting curves, showing how ready he was for another moment in her sweet embrace. "I'll be there," he promised solemnly.

Dodging his clumsy attempt, Dahlie flashed a sly smile. "Do your part well, and there will be plenty of this," she said, gesturing at her perfectly formed features.

Then she was gone, vanished from Banyan's shop like a ghost at dawn, but the butcher's apprentice smelled her scent still lingering about, and the pleasant memory escorted him back to work with a winner's grin on his angular face.

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As the night softly began to sneak through the hazy streets of Silvest, bringing a refreshingly cool breeze from the lake, the inns and taverns lit their porch candles to attract thirsty customers. In the trading quarter, every watering hole was quickly filling from exhausted townsfolk, seeking momentary relief from the summer's heat.

Among the busy bustle, Dahlie and Banyan made their way toward the Orchard Inn, named after the old apple orchard it was built around. A prestigious establishment where many lords of the land arranged meetings outside of their castles and manor houses. Of course, it also gave them the chance to disappear from sight of their family and servants, giving them a chance to satisfy their needs with someone more skilled than a simple maid. Lord Revelin, the feared son of Earl Andregar Maeron, was widely known as one of the most keen visitors, staying in the city for vastly extended periods of time, but nobleman's path was not to be questioned publicly.

Dahlie, wearing fairly toned-down colors to hide her true occupation as harlots were, sometimes aggressively, frowned upon in these parts, led the butcher's son to the steps leading inside.

"You have everything we need?" she asked before pushing the door open.

Banyan nodded firmly, appearing quite nervous, leering around like a timid animal. "Yes, I got my knife and hatchet, but I pray there won't be need for them."

Gazing at her shivering protector, Dahlie's eyes flared. "He's going to pay for what he has done, so yes, there's probably going to be need for them," she huffed. "It's too late for you to have cold feet now. Keep your eyes on the prize, stay focused and do what we agreed to do. I'd hate to make sure you won't get any services again, even from the filthiest harlot you may find from the stinking mud of the mining quarter."

"I'm not hesitating," he argued, clearly dissatisfied by the open threat that sounded rather intimidating— more than he wanted to admit. "Just go," he then grunted roughly. "I'll be nearby."

Instead of the usual smell of burning grease, cheap ale and sweating people, the air was filled with a mixture of perfumes, delightful fragrances of flavored wines and properly cooked roast. An entirely different world for two confused intruders from the poor side of Silvest. The inn itself was built in three stories; stairs climbed up on both sides of the main hall and, as Dahlie gazed up, the impression of size and space left her gasping in awe.

"You two, what can I get for you?" an exotic looking man behind the counter asked them, instantly forcing Dahlie to return from her dreamy haze. The man, apparently of southern origin, was better dressed than the two abashed customers, but it did not seem to bother anybody.

"Two red wines," Dahlie answered brightly, trying to keep her racing heart calm in the middle of all the shining grandeur.

"Two Calathmarians," the man, who Dahlie recognized as a Trevlin, announced as he handed their glasses.

Her mirth for being in such a glamorous place was short-lived, for the price of thirty copper schillings was more than she usually made in a week. Arguing or refusing to pay would have created an unwanted scene, for people who came there did not mind the cost, so she paid. Grinding her teeth hard together, feeling slightly dizzy by the sudden shock, but she paid.

"Drink slowly," she whispered to Banyan. "This wine is more valuable than our miserable lives."

While the crowd certainly had many men with noble blood running in their veins, it became obvious that people of other classes came there as well. She saw merchants, hunters, foreign traders and other representatives, all wealthy enough to pay the outrageous prices, but the fact that not all of them wore silken clothes or finest fur helped them greatly to blend in.

"Look for a man with missing finger. I'm certain it's something that stands out in this bunch of fancies," she uttered to the man. "Keep your eyes open and let me know immediately if you find him."

"I will," Banyan promised. "Don't wander too far away, Dahlie. We're strangers here," he warned, squeezing her hand firmly to make sure she heeded his words.

She felt slightly taken by his spontaneous, genuine concern, so she gave him a warm glance and quick smile before mingling into the crowd.

As hours passed, Dahlie was getting anxious, haunted by doubts for their effort. So sure of Revelin's presence here, Heta had sworn for her truthful sources, which, as it seemed, were worth less than a Sunday gossip among the sparrows.

But then, as a last attempt to locate the notorious nobleman, she climbed up to the second floor, which had an alternate drinking and feasting area, something they could not see from the ground floor at all—and there he was!

Heavily drunk, most likely going through his last wine before moving on to other activities he loved so much, Revelin was engaged in heated argument with someone who looked like an unhappy, yet excessively rich merchant, wearing more jewellery than she had ever dared to dream of.

Having no time to waste, Dahlie approached the table, wishing Banyan had seen her heading up the stairs before vanishing from sight. Despite his deep intoxication, Revelin picked her luscious form from the crowd with ease. Gesturing her to come forth, he began pushing the merchant, who clearly was not the best kind of company in his acquired state, away from his table.

Dahlie gave him a mesmerizing smile, praying that he would not recognize her from his earlier visits to the Five Lanterns. Her fear quickly turned out to be gratuitous as Revelin gave her a smile that resembled a wolf grinning, introduced himself briefly and invited her to sit down.

"Never knew they allowed sparrows to Orchard Inn," he said straightforwardly, indicating his instant observation. It was not a difficult one by any means, for women rarely entered these places—especially women like Dahlie Dulmar, who, even in her dramatically toned-down dress, was still imposing as compared to the women of higher class. "What might have lured you into this fine establishment?" he uttered, having some difficulty to form words, mouth rigid from the wine consumed.

"Must've been the allure of silver and blue of both moons since I found you," Dahlie responded smoothly, bringing herself close to the man.

"I wouldn't doubt that at all," he chuckled roughly and resumed, "but one snap of my finger and the guards will throw you in the mud where you belong." His voice went from benevolent to malicious in a blink of an eye, then he smirked. "But perhaps you can entice me to do otherwise," he croaked.

"Buy me a drink," she decided to play hard, "and I'll give you a considerable discount."

Gulping down the rest of his wine, Revelin burped, admired Dahlie's bosom far longer than any etiquette would have allowed and smacked his lips. "I'll get you a drink, but you, my dear little

bird, will offer yourself to me for free. Consider that as your payment to me for not calling the guards. If you're lucky, you may still find some good customers, assuming nobody else turns you in."

"Sounds like you have a room here? I was expecting to have a pleasant moment somewhere a bit more quiet" Dahlie purred, but inside she was getting nervous. The plan was to find Revelin and lure him away from the busiest part, not to risk everything in the middle of it! It was too late to back down without completely losing this unique window of opportunity that was approaching faster than she could have hoped.

"I certainly do," Revelin admitted with pleasure. "I spend a lot of time in the city, and my estate is inconveniently far away. Don't you worry about the people, they're too busy to care. It's just not every day when a sparrow lands so tamely right into my palm— usually I have to hunt for one."

Peering over at the staircase, hoping to catch a glimpse of Banyan before accepting, Dahlie felt uncomfortable. She needed the butcher's son as her muscle, otherwise it would be just another unpleasant experience among others with nothing achieved. But despite her efforts, the only familiar face in the inn remained absent. Eventually, she had to make a decision.

"Show me the way," she whispered softly to his ear, anxious by the sudden uncertainty, but skillfully hiding it deep within. The evening was not going by the plan— nowhere close to it.

As a silver lining to her dark cloud, she finally saw Banyan climbing the stairs as Revelin escorted her toward his room. Unable to say anything, she tried to make sure he saw her properly before disappearing around the corner, entering a short dead end hallway with two doors on each side.

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A moment passed, and then another before Banyan realized that Dahlie was not wandering around the hall anymore. The inn was the largest he had ever seen, and the amount of people overwhelming. It felt like Dahlie just suddenly vanished into the thin air. Many additional moments later, it finally dawned on him that she had probably went up the stairs to see what was in there.

As he ascended the stairs, dithering, he was just on time to see her being escorted away by none other than Revelin Maeron himself. Squeezing the handle of his hatchet with whitened knuckles, he cursed quietly.

"Neferlyn's blistered fingers, why she's not leading him outside?" he muttered, knowing that Dahlie would not deviate from the plan unless something had gone wrong. She did not have much to bargain with if the Earl's son decided to propose something that went against their own outlining.

At first, Banyan was not overly worried about this turn. Orchard Inn was packed and noisy by any measurement, and the noise alone would keep their deeds a secret for as long as they remained in the confinement of a room. But the two men, following Revelin down the hallway, were the headline for all of his concerns. Resisting all of his hopes and prayers, they stood in front of the door as Revelin pushed Dahlie inside. Both of them were armed, and they looked rather well suited for a fight, which left Banyan to face a dead end. It would be a plain suicide to attempt breaking through; he had to find another way in.

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Revelin's abrupt push sent Dahlie stumbling onto the bed. Terrified by how this night was going down, she wiped the fallen hair from her face, trying to come up with anything that could turn the tide for her. But, unfortunately, Revelin was the one holding all the cards at the moment.

"You sparrows are all the same," he grunted, untying his pants. "You like it fast and rough for easy, quick money, so you can fly off to the next pair of hands to feed you. But I'm not like that. See, I like it rough, but I usually take my time." His laughter sounded like a hog's oink, sending shivers down on Dahlie's spine, but it also gave her an idea on how to delay this filth of a man.

The slap against Revelin's cheek was so strong it penetrated through his drunken mind, sparkling in bubbles of pain around his head.

"You're wrong, my lord," Dahlie hissed quietly, smirking. "I like it rough, yes, but in ways you cannot imagine. Let me show how this works," she said, reaching for his slowly growing manhood, pulling him toward the bed. "Come and show me what you have!"

Dumbfounded, confused and aroused by this completely unexpected approach, Revelin barely heard his bodyguards knocking on the door, alerted by the sound of what must have been his loud cry as a result of Dahlie's carefully considered swat.

"Stay out!" he commanded harshly. "If we're disturbed, I'll have your groins impaled when we return to Melduin!"

The silence was thicker than leather for a moment, then Revelin turned back to face Dahlie's defiant smile, the gleam in his eyes was a stirred blend of curiosity and heat. "Now, show me," he urged. "Show me everything!"

Revelin was a man of low morale, and as such, he was very keen to learn about this new way of sin. So much that he was willing to give up his own safety for the moment— for the sheer experience, and that was exactly what Dahlie had wished for. Now she had to find a way to take an

advantage of the situation, which, without Banyan's presence, required creativity she grievously lacked.

Peeling of her clothes, she began to tear the sheet into strips, using them to tie Revelin's hands to the bed. As one could expect, it did not go well at first, but drowning his now fully hardened crotch into her mouth, tightening her full, painted lips around him, assuring him that it was all done to guarantee his pleasure, Revelin sighed blissfully and relaxed, allowing Dahlie to proceed.

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Back in the gradually decelerating street, Banyan leered about hastily, looking for a way to the second floor. He saw a wooden deck surrounding the building right above street level, but was there any other way to access it than through the interior? To find the answer, he went around the house, following the deck to a small inner court in the middle. Like a tiny version of an apple orchard, the courtyard was a green oasis amid the city, but stairway to the second floor was nowhere to be found.

"I could use a mystic's help out here," he grunted to himself, frustrated by the unbearable situation.

After a brief moment of nervous peering, he noticed the old apple trees, and their branches reaching past the handrail. A risky attempt, but it paid off. There were windows letting out into the courtyard, but like with so many buildings, they were made of the cheap, poor quality glass, which left the vision so blurry that Banyan's figure remained perfectly hidden among the density of leaves and the darkness of night.

Sweating and shivering from the physical effort and stress, Banyan reached the deck and began peeking through the murky windows, trying to find the right room. A difficult task, but fortunately most rooms were still empty, and he had a good understanding of where to start. Time was slipping by faster than he cared to admit, and with each moment slipping away, he prayed for finding her before it was all too late.

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Having effectively tied Revelin to the bed, Dahlie considered gagging to prevent him from calling help, but the doors of the inn were thin, which rendered such option nearly pointless. She

removed Revelin's pants, peering around like a panicked animal, something the man, as drunk as he was, soon noticed.

"By Morbane's teeth, what are you doing, woman?" he grunted. "Climb up, take it in and do what you're supposed to." His hand landed on Dahlie's throat, squeezing painfully, causing her to tumble off the plan for good. "Are you as bad at your work as you're at tying knots?" he then called out, grinning. "Now, get to it or I'll teach you how to bend over like a good whore should. I'm warning you, I'm not the most patient man."

Startled by Revelin's unexpected freedom, Dahlie sprang up and stumbled backward, but for a man who had trouble speaking clearly, he followed surprisingly fast.

"You must be the worst whore I've ever seen," he grunted, slapped her hard in the face and pulled her back to the bed. "You're lacking focus here, so let's get you back to it. Thank the Immortals I'm not paying anything. You might not walk out of here alive, for this is pathetic performance even compared to the toothless, filthy sparrows around the southern gate."

Grabbing her hair firmly, he guided his partially softened member to her lips. Dahlie knew instantly what was expected of her, and obeyed without further thinking. As soon as she had him in her mouth, he began thrusting, getting harder with each push while keeping her head locked in place with his strong arm, and suddenly Dahlie was struggling to keep herself from gagging as he forced himself deep into her throat.

It did not last for long, for the warm wetness around him was quickly becoming overwhelming despite his intoxicated state. Grunting loudly, he pulled himself free, grabbed Dahlie by the hair and threw her on the bed, following closely behind. Rolling on to his back, he gestured the woman to climb on.

"Take it in, ride it like only a sparrow can," he huffed. "Face the wall, for I want to see how you're working it," he added, smirking in a greasy manner.

Doing as ordered, Dahlie turned her back at Revelin and placed her big round rump on top of his member and slowly slid it in, listening to his delightful sigh as her buttocks pressed against his hips, swallowing his tool entirely.

Staring at his manhood sliding in and out at an accelerating pace, it did not take long before his breathing began to gain speed as well, becoming deeper and deeper as he approached the climax. With a strong clench, he held her by the delicious curves of her hips as he spilled his seed, his body twitching along the shots.

Wiping her crotch as she climbed off, Dahlie's options were shrinking down to nothing, until she noticed something that made her gasp in sudden excitement— a familiar shadow was standing outside of the window, trying desperately to peek inside. There was no time to think. She moved by

the window, which, as a direct gift from Avareth, was not latched. All it needed was a push, revealing Banyan's sweating figure standing outside.

Everything happened so fast— faster than a simple thought. It was all pure instinct, driven by the sudden fear of unknown. Revelin, confused, drunk and naked, struggled to get off the bed, only a heartbeat away from calling the guards. Dahlie, rushing toward the door to make sure the men outside could not interrupt the motion of events, gave one fierce glare to Banyan, who now had the hatchet and knife in his hands.

"Do it— quick!" she sizzled.

Entirely lacking fighting experience, he threw the unbalanced hatchet at Revelin, and unbalanced as it was, he failed to hit him with the blade. Instead, the wooden handle knocked him on the side of his head, but as it was thrown with such force, the impact was enough to cause Revelin fall to the floor, holding his head and cursing— loudly.

Banyan leaped forward with the butcher's knife, overcame any resistance the Earl's son was able to put up, and began stabbing him blindly. The poor aim of his hits made sure there was an astounding amount of noise; grunts, screams, falling accessories from the nightstand as Revelin attempted to avoid the blade. It was plenty enough to alert the guards and, regardless of their lord's order, they began to push through the door.

"I can't keep them out," Dahlie cried as the men were irresistibly coming through.

Instantly disrupting his murderous attempt, Banyan grabbed a sturdy chair, found in every room as a standard piece of furniture, placed it in between the door and the bed, effectively bolting the door shut, which bought them a few moments.

"Get dressed and get out— through the window!" he urged the woman, breathing heavily. "Now!"

The door was giving in fast, splinters flinging about as the steel-reinforced boots were quickly breaking it into pieces. Banyan stared at the door, feeling noose tightening around his neck. Their plan, which seemed so incredibly stupid in hindsight, had failed in every aspect he could think of. Revelin's laborous gurgle on the floor reflected the shortcomings of their grand plan. Candlelight gleamed on the steel of drawn weapons through the cracks and holes of the door. Hoping the man would die to his countless stab wounds, for he had no chance to finish his work in time, he ushered Dahlie out of the window.

Considering to use the apple tree again, he quickly abandoned the idea. "Climb over the rail and jump down," he grunted. "There's no other way down."

She followed the order without thinking, landing with a thud and groan. Banyan followed slightly less disgracefully. A painful move, but it saved them. Hearing the door being shattered into

shards, the guards yelling and heavy footsteps approaching, Banyan rushed Dahlie across the orchard where they could blend into the shadows.

"Get back to Five Lanterns, clean up and keep your eyes and ears open. Chances that Revelin is dead are quite good, which is what you wanted." He was still shaken by the sheer rush, too upset to think of his reward. All he wanted was to get away and hide, and trust in them both remaining faceless and nameless, for assaulting a nobleman was the worst crime only surpassed by plotting against king himself. Hiding in the shadows until sure they were not being followed, he sent Dahlie on her way and headed toward his house. Blood still rushing in his veins, Banyan desired a cool mug of ale, a pipe of sweetleaf and rest.

#

Upon returning to Five Lanterns, Dahlie found Heta sitting in the kitchen, crying. She could tell by her swollen eyes and the trails tears had left on her cheeks, but as Dahlie entered the house, she faced a storm that swept over, leaving her speechless for the moment.

"Where have you been?" was the message she was able to decipher from all of Heta's bellowing. Purposely letting her release some of the steam before raising her hands up as a wordless plea for her to calm down and listen.

Taking a deep breath, Dahlie then explained the course of the evening to Heta, who listened intently, excited at first, but as the story progressed, she grew increasingly apprehensive.

"You left him alive?" she asked, her tone gravely concerned.

"We don't know that," she insisted. "With some luck—"

"With some luck?" Heta countered her sarcastically. "You're putting the faith of all, and I'm not speaking just us, but all the harlots of this city, in the hands of little luck," she said calmly, so calmly that Dahlie was beginning to feel uncomfortable. But she was determined to continue, showing no mercy, whatsoever. "What if we don't have such luck? What if Revelin lives, and in the worst case, recognized you from his earlier visit?"

"You wanted this just as much as I did!" Dahlie finally snapped, having taken enough of Heta's hateful pour. "You're scared, I understand that. I'm scared too, and I cannot speak for Banyan, but he certainly looked quite shaken as well. The plan we had didn't work, so we had to think of something or simply let everything slide and stay the same. Who would've been the next victim? As for your concern about recognition, he seemed oblivious and far too drunk to tell the difference between any two women."

Heta remained quiet for a while before she said anything, shaking her head. "I'm simply saying that we have to prepare for the worst. Perhaps it is as you say, and he dies without spilling another word."

#

The luck was not with them, not as much as they hoped for. Revelin Maeron succumbed to his wounds, but only after he gave a good description of both participants. Finding two individuals in a city that hosted more than hundred thousand people was impossible, which saved Banyan's hide. Dahlie's crime, however, was paid by every harlot living within the city walls as the sparrow hunting squad, deployed by Earl Andregar Maeron, swept through the streets, effectively purging the city. The act was blessed by both, Bishop Cardail, the highest local authority of the church, and Duke Shefren, a regent in king's absence, who was waging a holy war against the southern pagans in Solanar.

Hundreds of harlots, the sparrows of Silvest, were dragged out to face justice, and the verdict was, without exceptions, death by hanging. Heta, Dahlie, and their elder partner, Tarla, escaped, avoiding the fate of so many. Heading east for the town of Teroval, they sought a new beginning. The revenge they so eagerly hungered was served, but the price was too high to keep it sweet. Bitter and defeated, Dahlie found no way to enjoy her achievement, but she survived.

In Teroval, which was much smaller town than the capital of Evoras, they failed to find any kind of ground for their former profession. Dahlie, still living the years of her prime, kept her past a secret and went on to marrying a local carpenter's apprentice, which opened the door for honorable position in the society. Heta and Tarla took over an abandoned alehouse along the southern road, less than a mile away from the town gate. It became fairly popular among the local farmers, fishermen and hunters, generating just enough income to make a living.

The shadows of the past came haunting in their sleep, turning sweet dreams into nightmares over and over again. They would carry the burden of guilt in their hearts until death pardoned their suffered souls.