

Dreams of Stone

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(English sample)



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ARTHMAEL

"Let me see if I've got this straight: you're going to give *my* crown to a bastard?"

An uncomfortable silence settles on the library as my incredulous gaze moves from my father over to the man beside him, on the other side of the table. He doesn't have our black hair, although he does have the grey eyes that my family has shared for generations. He's tall, taller than I am, but it's obvious that he doesn't have the bearing of a prince. Of a nobleman? Perhaps. Although he still doesn't come up to even the soles of my boots, no matter how fancy the clothes he wraps himself in and how he looks down at me from above.

But my father affects to cede the throne to him. *My* throne.

The kingdom that has belonged to me by right ever since I came into the world.

The king also seems to look at this man from the corner of his eye, before returning his attention to me with a tired air. I imagine that this is the perfect day for him to repent a minor slip up over twenty years before. A night with the wrong woman, in the wrong bed; a burden for the rest of his life.

"It is decided, Arthmael," he repeats, as if he hadn't said the same thing to me a minute before. "He is also my son, and he is older than you are." It would seem that I was the only one who understood the difference between the rights of children born within and outside of wedlock. "I have raised you to be the worthy heir that this country needs, but Jacques' position is... legitimate. There is proof that I am his father, he is noble, and all respect him. Besides, he has knowledge enough to hold the seat he has come to reclaim."

Reclaim? He probably demanded it, threatening my father with some kind of scandal. But, must it be like this? Many men commit such infidelities in their youth. Even kings. The solution is to give the bastards a position of so-called power, preferably far enough away from the capital for them not to be a bother. In no case should they be allowed to sit on your lap and try on your crown.

My crown.

In any case, what sort of name is Jacques for a king?

"I have no other alternative," he continues, with an apology in his tormented expression. "You will continue to be the prince and, perhaps, some day, the king of this or another realm."

Which is just another way of saying that I'll need to pray that all those around me die before I do. Or that I help them on their way with a bit of poison in certain goblets. Suddenly, that seems like a brilliant solution.

Jacques watches me and smiles, showing his teeth. He seems to have all of them, but that could be easily solved with a fist.

"I don't pretend to be your enemy, brother."

And I don't pretend to be your friend

"I am the *prince* of Silfos," I remind him, emphasizing each syllable, "by which you shall treat me with the respect owed to me. And as far as I know, one of the conditions to govern is having emerged from between two specific loins: those of the king and the queen." I look at my father. "Perhaps you have forgotten my mother, sire, but she was the woman who shared your bed for over ten years."

His majesty Brydon of Silfos turns scarlet. I had never seen him so furious, but even so he barely raises his voice. "I am the king, Arthmael, and your father, and you shall treat me with all due respect. I have made my

decision and there is no going back on it: Jacques is your acknowledged brother and, as of today, the heir to the throne. His mother was one of the most powerful women of the nobility of Silfos." He furrowed his brow. "Their family, in fact, continues to be as powerful now as they were then, and is known and beloved by the people. Or do you wish for a civil war, boy? Because that is what you will achieve if you fight against this, and I'm not sure that you should win..."

Of course. In the end, it all comes down to power. To how people see you, how they will react when they hear your name. As if I weren't known by all.

I open my mouth to speak, but my father stops me.

"You will be charming with Jacques, impertinent sprat. If you are patient, it's even possible that I'll find you an advantageous marriage with some princess who is heir to her throne, and then you shall reign, as things should be."

He speaks as if there were many marriageable princesses in Marabilia, aside from Ivy of Dione. Well, who knows? Perhaps if I wait a few more moons, some female bastard, in Verves or Idyll, will emerge from under a rock and come to offer me her hand.

"The people know that I shall be king. It has known so since I was born, and anticipates this."

A sound, between a snort and a laugh, escapes from the lips of the purported nobleman. He looks as if he is restraining himself from laughter.

"What do you find so funny?" I mutter at him.

"Your love for the people is a... unilateral matter, Arthmael. At the end of the day, what have you done for them?"

Done? I falter. Well... I was reserving all my great deeds for when I held the throne. And also the ideas for what those great deeds would be, as well. I hoped to have an inspiration. For now, I am just the prince. I go down to the city to enjoy myself, and I suppose that entails giving patronage to local taverns, which is something admirable, even if on a small scale. I also take care of the palace employees, and they are also part of the populace. Or should I specify that it is the women I take care of? I keep their self esteem (and their esteem of myself) high, and give them a few hours of relaxation when they come to see me.

"Well, what have *you* done?" I ask, since I prefer not to get into details in front of my father.

"My family prospers thanks to businesses which offer honest work to the inhabitants of the city. We have opened commerce with neighboring countries, and we have devoted much effort and money to giving sustenance to people who can't work and have no income. Arelies, my wife, always sends them the leftover food from our kitchen, as well as clothing when winter grows sharply cold. The common people know us and love us."

What really affects me is not his little speech: it's more than obvious that no matter how much devotion he has for the people, he has even more for his own voice. What pains me is my father's expression, full of pride for his recently won son. The kind of glance he has never given me.

This must be some kind of joke.

"If you have learned something in all these years, Arthmael, you'll understand that this is the most intelligent decision."

The most intelligent decision is to let some nobody cut me off on the path to what by right belongs to me? It is most intelligent for me to step aside

and allow him to do so? And what more? Perhaps I should turn around and drop my pants for him to screw me literally as well...

What is it that the people want? Someone to adore? Well, I shall be that. I am sure that I can be a much worthier figure than he. I could go out into the streets and adopt a child. That would charm the masses. Or cure the sick. I should go out there and save damsels in distress. Kill monsters and catch villains to bring them to justice...

I smile. Heroes go down in history, not benefactors. Well, not for less than two hundred ships with their holds full of gold. And only if they sink en route. Coins are still washing up on the coasts of Rydia. It was a disaster.

"If the most intelligent thing is to become an idol to a few impoverished souls in order to become king, I can do that as well."

There is one of those silences in which even the fluttering of an eyelash could be heard.

"What?" Jacques says.

I cross my arms, and it is the king I look at.

"I shall become a hero of the people," I clarify. "What do you say to that, sire?"

"What?"

"I am a prince. I have been educated to be a man of resources, strong and brave. And, obviously, this jester here could be as rich as he desires, and benevolent, if he says so, but he has never done anything truly heroic. I speak of the kind of things that will make of a king a legend, the kind of feats that were usually performed in days of yore, but which today nobles don't engage in because they're considered too dangerous. I shall save damsels in distress and rescue entire towns. Then, we shall see who the peasants love." I make a

gesture. "One month. I don't need more than one moon to show all of Silfos... no, all of Marabilia, that I am the sovereign it needs."

The silence stretches for a few more heartbeats, before breaking and becoming laughter. The laughter of that imbecile Jacques, who leans on the table and howls in laughter, doubling over. I frown, ready to make it very clear that I speak seriously, but I am left with the words in my mouth when my father gives him an icy look that shuts him up in almost an instant. Almost. His shoulders keep shuddering, even when he shuts his mouth to silence his hysterical laughter.

"I think that you should retire, Jacques," the king tells him. "I shall continue this conversation with my son. Go find your wife: in her state, she might need you."

I don't know what "state" that is, but if he has inherited our father's marksmanship, I can imagine.

The new heir (may he enjoy the title while it lasts, it won't be a lifelong position) gives a reverence which shows me his noble origins. His lips are parted, and I imagine that the idea of having bothered our father torments him. Perhaps that's why, with the intent of appeasing him, he also bows toward me and says, "Brother."

"Prince Arthmael for you."

I follow him with my eyes until the door closes. Then I snort and turn toward my father.

"They haven't given me a choice," he tells me, before I can even open my mouth. "I don't want conflicts in the kingdom, and the nobility can come to be very difficult to control if they see their privileges threatened or if they believe they could have achieved more power."

"But if you're patient," he continues, "I shall find you a throne suitable for you. This could be a great opportunity for the kingdom: we shall increase our borders and create strong alliances. The princess of Dione is a charming young creature, they say. I have not raised you and taught you everything in order to give you anything less than a prosperous kingdom to lead."

I almost feel tempted. I have never been in Dione, but it is said that their ships are the lightest and fastest, and that sailors from the other side of the sea reach its shores, speaking strange languages that only they understand. They come from lands where women wear short dresses, if they wear anything. Lands where war is so normal that as soon as a boy is strong enough to hold a sword, they send him to the battlefield.

Barbarians.

I erase the thought from my mind.

"I don't desire another kingdom," I reply, wounded by the insinuation. "I want Silfos, and I won't settle for anything less. Dione might be very pretty, and I am sure that its princess is as lovely as they say she is, but that is not my place. That is not my *home*. It is just... some strange land."

It's not this castle. It doesn't have these hallways I've run through a thousand times. It doesn't have our arms yard, always full of soldiers with a smile for their prince. There, probably, I couldn't go into the city and have everyone accept me as their fellow. To have them toast with me in the tavern, with a gal on my lap and her lips on my neck. There I'd get lost in the streets because they were unfamiliar, not because I wanted to wander aimlessly.

It's not the same, no matter how much my father wants to make me believe that this could be the opportunity I was waiting for.

"I can't do anything, son. What do you want? That I have them killed, him and his pregnant wife, and get rid of them that way?"

"Frankly, that's not the worst idea I've heard today."

In fact, I think it's the first idea to fall from his lips that makes sense. At least that way we could restore things to their natural order.

I realize too late that it was a rhetorical question and that, unfortunately, he isn't amused by my comment.

"Arthmael! What the devil is the matter with you? Have you lost all your sense?"

"I'll tell you what I don't have: a crown. And all because of... that."

"His mother's family is powerful." Mine, on the other hand, is dead: my bad luck. "He didn't lie when he said that they had worked for and listened to the people. His mother, in fact, was a great woman, and if you were really up to date with what was going on in Duan, you would know that her loss was felt deeply when she died a few days ago." He sighs, as if he also shared that desolation. "I love you, my son, but what have you done, aside from being the blood of my blood and that of your departed mother? You have never really been concerned for the people, and perhaps that's all my fault, for spoiling you, for letting you live your life without giving you any responsibilities. Have you ever attended an audience? Do you know the hunger or the poverty some of our folk endure? Our duty is to take care of their safety, but you have limited yourself to enriching the brothels and the marketplace, which you go to only to show off among the young ladies."

I raise my eyebrows. The father of a bastard dares to lecture me on morality... At least I've never gotten any woman pregnant. I think.

"You are no paragon of virtue." He seems about to protest, but I raise my hand to indicate that I have not finished. "But, you know what? Enjoy your reencounter with your son now that you can. When I return, everyone will

want me as king. And then I shall kick him out of *my* castle, and not even his peers will support him."

"When you return?" He half-closes his eyes, and the tension in his face and shoulders is visible. "You weren't serious with all that foolishness about becoming a hero..."

At least I have had an idea. And if I don't manage to bring it off... perhaps I'll find some charming village in which to live my retirement. Or perhaps I should fake my death and leave them weeping over my loss, to later return as a man reborn, who has seen the light before returning to life and who has been entrusted with a celestial mission.

I shall dwell on the details along the way.

"Since the only other option is to dazzle Dione so that their daughter makes room for me in her bed, since women can't govern in their kingdom and her father doesn't even want to hear of anything to the contrary, it seems more appealing to me to leave here under my own power. In fact, father, I think I shall set off before morning."

"A good prince would accept his place, Arthmael of Silfos." I know that the conversation is serious because a father only uses his son's full name when he has no other choice, not even reason. "You shall not leave this castle until you've knocked these stupid ideas about heroism out of your thick skull. You've never even been far from these walls. You shall stay here and you shall act delighted to have acquired a new brother. If you go, there will be talk, people will think that you are opposed to him. Is that how you think to win the people's support? By making them think that the castle is full of hate, struggles for the crown?"

"The truth is, I have discovered that you know how to hide things very well: if you've been able to have a son without anyone finding out, I am sure

that you'll figure out how to make my disappearance turn out to your advantage."

The king furrows his brow, filling his face with wrinkles.

"Don't speak to me as if you were nothing to me: you are my son, my legitimate one." I am about to ask him to repeat that, so he could understand why I'm upset, but I bite my tongue. "I have seen you grown up: you are not some stranger, like this lad. That is enough for me, Arthmael. Isn't it enough for you?"

"It is not enough for anyone: evidently, not enough for me to be accepted as the heir."

"Stay," he begs me, and he seems older and more tired than ever, as if he had aged a decade in this one day. "We shall find the solution together. Here, where you belong."

"A place from which you wish for me to stand down from."

"I've told you: I will make a treaty with some royal house..."

"If my place is here, then it cannot at the same time be somewhere else, Sire. I *want* Silfos!" I clench my fists. I try not to listen to myself, I know how childish I sound, like that spoiled child I am often thought to be. "I shall win it in my own way. And you cannot stop me: I am old enough to do whatever I care to."

I am already doing so, in fact, before he realizes that I am going to leave his room. His voice calling for me is cut off when I shut the door. I start to run down the hallway for the last time for a long while and I dash into my bedroom to grab some basic supplies: a change of clothes, a purse full of coins, my sword and my favorite cloak. I don't need anything else.

To be a hero, one only needs a brave heart.

At least, that's what they say.

LYNNE

Lord Kenan collapses upon my naked body with a final grunt of pleasure. I feel his sweat sticking to the skin of my back, and his hands still grip my hips tightly. I can only look at the sheets, waiting for the moment he finally withdraws and lets me move again.

Lets me separate myself from his side.

Lets me go free, this time forever.

Tonight has been my final night. This will be my last time.

Or that's what I try to make myself believe.

I feel his kiss on my back. He doesn't withdraw. He remains within, making me feel him with every inch of my body. I want him out of me. Now. I am disgusted by how his lips travel across my skin; his tongue touches me, staining me with saliva. His hands climb from my waist to my breasts, clinging to them, kneading them. I clench my teeth, but I breathe deeply. I am used to this. Lord Kenan is not the most repugnant man who has come to my bed in exchange for money. There have been worse. Disgusting men who have forced me to do the most humiliating things for less money than their clothes cost. Kenan just has sex with me. Sometimes, if he thinks I'm not focused enough, if he's not satisfied with what I do to him, he hits me. His blows are also not the strongest ones I've received. He, at least, has never left me unconscious.

His breath presses against my ear. I can smell it. It's nauseating, reeking of alcohol and sex, of all the orders he gives and all his brusqueness. It would bother me more if I weren't used to the stench after more than three years.

It has been enough.

"What's the matter, my little flower?" His hips press even tighter against me, pushing him even further into me. Deeper, even though he's already

finished. His teeth bite my neck. I half-close my eyes, looking at the sheets. I am clutching them strongly. I look at the window without his noticing, in a mute desire to fly through it and forever escape from this place. "You seem distant. Today you're not as present as on other nights..."

I think that I need him to pull out of me, before anything else. That he stops clutching me, as he's doing, that he stops kissing me at last. Today I won't let him have a second go.

That's why I turn my head and take advantage of his closeness to kiss him. To make him feel contented. My lips tempt him just the way I know he likes it: smooth, provocative, but apparently innocent. As if I were still an inexperienced girl. As if he had let me be a real little girl.

Fourteen years old. That's how old I was when he brought me to this damned place.

On nights like this, I wonder how I've endured so long.

"I'm uncomfortable in this position, Lord Kenan." I bite his lip with apparent tenderness. In this business, everything is pretense. Adopting the role the client wants you to play. Kenan likes weak, docile, sweet girls. Full of attentiveness for him. I stopped being sweet a long time ago, although perhaps I never stopped being weak. Maybe that's why I haven't fled yet. Because I am still afraid that what's out there might be worse than what's in here.

But that is over.

Lord Kenan still moves his hips a bit more before withdrawing, at last, his hands running across my entire body. He grabs my buttocks, then gives them a slap with a little laugh. I clench my fists, but I hurry to spin around and sit down on the bed. Lord Kenan adjusts his clothes. He never undresses completely, just as much as is necessary. Sometimes he doesn't even take off his shirt, although today his chest is uncovered. I prefer it when he doesn't fully

remove a single item of clothing. The least contact there is between our flesh, the better.

His serious look makes me tense where I'm seated, while he tidies himself up. His blue eyes have always been frozen, although he often tries to melt them with the fake warmth with which he treats all of us prostitutes, to make us feel like we are in a good place even though we live in hell.

"I hope you're not boring our clients, little flower. You know how many here value you... You are held in esteem. You are one of our most coveted jewels. My most prized jewel." His fingers grab my chin, squeezing it, forcing me to raise my face to him. I swallow my desire to spit in his face, but perhaps he sees the yearning to do so in my eyes, because he smiles and kisses me again. Brusquely. Violently. Reclaiming me as his.

But I belong to no one.

I wait until he tires and pulls away, and when he does, I don't wait another second. It is time to leave things clear once and for all.

"I'm leaving, Lord Kenan."

He looks at me. He rubs his fingers through his beard, thoughtfully. I've never stopped to think about how many years difference there is between us. Over fifteen, I'm sure. Perhaps twenty. The same as when he picked me up from the street to stick me in a room and take away what little I had left.

"Other clients to tend to?" he murmurs, as if he had not quite understood what I said. "I am the owner of this place, no one can interrupt us if I don't..."

"I am leaving the brothel. I am getting out of here. Today. Now."

Lord Kenan seems surprised that I dare to interrupt him while he is speaking. When he lifts his head, I almost think that will be enough, that he will

at last understand that he cannot keep holding me here, that he will let me leave.

He smiles, and I know that it won't be so easy.

His hand grabs my face again before I can do anything to avoid him. Only this time it's not with brusqueness; it's sweet, tender. And that is almost worse than the violence he often uses. When he does this, when he smiles, when he caresses me as if he truly did have some affection for me, it's even more dangerous. He always seems so sure of himself. He always is so sure of himself. His caress touches my cheek, tracing the red mark of the blow tonight's first customer left me as a tip. Then it brushes my lip, where I still feel the small wound caused by tonight's third customer, who bit me too hard. If I run my tongue over the area, I can still taste blood.

It's the same night after night. I'm sick of it. Sick of unknown bodies, of being a little doll, of being used and thrown away, of being thrown around as their way of using me. I am sick of not being able to dream of sunlight nor of the world beyond this bed. I'm sick of wearing thin my hands and my skin from rubbing my body with soap in an attempt to feel less dirty. In an attempt to erase the traces of all those men, the taste of all those bodies.

I don't want to stay here.

I can't stay here.

I won't stay here.

"You're going to leave..." Kenan repeats calmly. He still has that smile on his lips that makes me mad. It fills me with rage because I know he laughs at me and my aspirations. At the fact that I want a life beyond... this. "I would swear that we had already discussed this, isn't that right, my little flower?"

I hate when he calls me that. I am no little flower. And even less am I *his* little flower. I am a woman. I am a person. I am not his toy nor am I some

plant to admire and water so as to be able to contemplate it at any time and then pluck its petals. Although all my petals have already been plucked long before.

"Where are you going to go, my sweetling? Here we take care of you. We give you a roof, we feed you, we save you from the street and the cold... What is the alternative for a girl like you out there? Without property, without family, without money... You'd do the same, earning less and in any darkened corner. And that would be so disgraceful, Lynne... Who pulled you from the gutter when you were a lost and bony little girl, a little thief who couldn't even obtain more than a few crumbs a day? Who has transformed you into the brilliant and lovely young woman you are? And all in exchange for what? A few hours of letting us all enjoy your beauty?"

I try to save my will from breaking this time. It is true: we have already discussed this. I have wanted to leave here before. But this little speech has always kept me tied to this place. It fills me with fear to return to the life I once had. The hunger, the darkness, the cold, the starvation. Often, I was on the verge of death, wandering the streets alone.

And even beyond that, I am afraid to discover that I can't be anything more than a pair of legs spread wide.

But I am not going to be intimidated this time. No. I can do great things. If I make the effort, I can be the owner of my own life. I can start my own business, just like my father did in his day, before he died. Perhaps not in Silfos, where women don't have many options, and I would have even fewer, having been a prostitute. But Marabilia is a large continent: I can search for a life in other countries, and if I don't find anything, I shall journey to other continents if necessary. I have read that beyond our seas, a woman can be everything she wishes to be.

I will fight. I must fight.

"I want to live my life, Lord Kenan." I move my face away from his hand. His eyes half-close. "I am grateful for your saving me from the street, but I don't want to rot in this place for the rest of my existence."

"Young woman, what life do you hope to have? What do you want? For some knight to fall hopelessly in love with you and give you a pretty family?" My boss laughs, mockingly, as if there couldn't be a more absurd idea. "Haven't you met enough men between these walls to know what is in store for you?" I open my mouth, but he takes my face in his hand again, and this time not delicately at all. He grabs me with such force that it hurts. "Nobody falls in love with whores, Lynne. You'll never be more than this for anyone."

I breathe with difficulty. He is wrong. I don't want a family nor any man to give me one. He is right that I've seen exactly how men are. All kinds of men have come here: single, married, with a dozen children... They're all the same. I don't hope for anyone to love me. Nor do I hope to love anyone. Perhaps I couldn't even if I wanted to, because I've forgotten long ago what it was to feel affection.

For me, love is just another story from far off lands. I don't want it nor do I hope for it, no matter how pretty it might seem in the stories that happen to others. I just yearn to live my life. To be independent. I want to earn my living honestly and to see what the world might offer me.

"I don't want any man. I don't need one."

Kenan's cackle echoes throughout the room.

"Oh, my little flower. Have you learned so little? Have I been such a lousy teacher? Do you truly hope for something like that? I fear that you have read too many stories of exotic lands on the other side of the ocean. Here, women are not queens, nor do they have any rights beyond giving birth to our

children. You're not worth anything without a man to protect you. And who will protect you if I don't?"

It is more than I can bear. I can't stand that in his eyes (and the eyes of many others) we are nothing more than livestock to be branded. For men like him, we women are a tool: we are just there for them to use us and then to give birth, to perpetuate the order they have created generation after generation.

That will not be my life. Not unless I decide that I want to have children, if I do one day decide to have them. And, needless to say, they won't be the children of any jerk who gets me pregnant in this damned place.

I pull away from him sharply and stand up, proud even in my nakedness. I raise my chin as if I sought to measure my glance against his, even though he is much taller than I am.

"I'm leaving," I repeat, nothing more.

I pass beside him, to retrieve my dress...

Before I can take a step, he grabs my wrist. His nails dig into my flesh with such strength that a whimper of pain escapes me. It is nothing compared to the force with which he tugs me and pushes me against the bed, my back crashing against the mattress, knocking my breath away. I try to stand up, but he is now upon me, pressing his body against my own, his legs trapping mine so I can't kick. Once again, his hand grabs my face and, when I try to shake free, the blow falls: a blow so strong that it leaves me dizzy.

Now I'm worried. Now I'm afraid.

I am still befuddled when he forces me to look at him.

"You are mine, little flower. You belong to me and to this place."

He kisses me forcefully and I whimper in protest. May he stop. May he leave me. May he pull away. May he release me.

His hand on my leg forces me to separate them.

No.

No.

No.

I feel pain when he pushes inside me. I grit my teeth, while he assaults me, breaking me once again.

I've lost count of how many times this has happened.

I can't bear any more.

I let him think that he owns me. I let him think that he can fuck me again. That I will remain by his side. I even give a few pants. I even beg his forgiveness. I even cling to him with one hand.

The other stretches across the mattress. Searches beneath the pillow.

I find it.

When I stab the knife into his back, I don't hesitate. I stab with strength. With desperation. With the assurance that this is the only thing I can do if I want to flee and for this man not to hunt me for the rest of his days.

His first grunt of surprise blows against my mouth, but that doesn't stop me. I squeeze his body to mine, embracing him so that he can't pull away. A second stab. A third. His strength weakens and I take advantage of this moment to quickly push him away, making him fall like a dead weight onto the bed. He's still alive and he stares at me with his eyes wide open. His shirt is drenched with blood.

I don't wait to watch him die.

Quickly, I pick up my underthings and my dress from the floor, dressing as fast as I can. I don't even tie the cords at my back so as not to lose any time. I listen to Kenan's whimpers behind me, trying to survive, trying to call for help; he can't find enough voice to shout. Even so, someone might hear and come to see what's going on.

I pick up the small bag in which I've packed everything I need in order to leave and I look back, at the body staining the white sheets red. His face is twisted in a grimace of pain and he clutches the bedclothes desperately, muttering entreaties.

"I told you that I am leaving here," I whisper to him.

I open the window. I don't even look back at Kenan, I don't even worry how much time he'll languish until he finally gives up and dies.

Gathering my courage, I take the leap toward my freedom.

ARTHMAEL

Duan might not be the best place in this world, but I'm going to miss it. Perhaps that's why I allow myself to stop and drink to the health of the capital of Silfos and its inhabitants. My idea was to enjoy just one flagon, but thinking of the thirst I'll experience along the road, in the end I order three.

When I set off, night is well advanced.

I know that the gates to the city are closed at this hour, so I plan to use a little passageway my father told me about many years earlier. Of course, I know these streets like the back of my hand and I've often held between my fingers the plans from when the capital was built. Strong walls, tall as giants, to see all around. There were no houses surrounding them, then, but the population has increased and now some huts hide themselves beneath the shadow of the walls, seeking protection, although as the histories tell us, it has been centuries since Silfos last saw a war. The last great disaster the city knew was the Bread Rebellion over fifty years ago, when the city's bakers "persuaded" the king to lower the tax on flour. To do so, they mixed into their dough a little plant that left the nobility with constant diarrhea for an entire week. Honorable? Perhaps not. But they managed to achieve what they wanted. Since then, the position of food taster has been a job in great demand.

I stop thinking about that rebellion before I get hungry. I start to hum my country's hymn, as if what I was beginning to undertake were a crusade for its glory, and I feel a little bit more... heroic. Or perhaps the alcohol has gone to my head.

Perhaps that's why I don't hear her before turning the corner.

Perhaps that's why, when she crashes into me, she leaves me breathless and knocks me down, tackling me with the speed of her running. I try to grab

onto something and my hand tangles with an arm. We both fall hard to the floor and my head starts to spin after it bangs against a rock.

Worthy of legend, Arthmael: a good beginning.

I rub the bump on my head and pry my eyes open with a groan. By the light of the moon and some of the houses that surround us, including a noisy tavern which has its doors open, a face stares down at me from above, the tips of its hair tickling my face. I can't avoid smiling. My hand is on the back of a young woman who pants above me. Normally they don't do that until I've lifted their skirts, but I won't complain. I realize that the back of her dress is not tied shut and my fingers touch warm flesh. Lowering my gaze, I see the shape of her breasts tempting me against the neckline of a dress that opens against its will.

"Hello, hello," I hear myself say, and I don't know if its a greeting to her or to her two friends who seem to want to greet me themselves.

The young woman sits up. My hand drops down her back. She watches me and, in the dimness of the night, half-closes her eyes.

"The prince?" she murmurs, unbelieving.

Stupid Jacques. Everyone knows me. Even girls I am sure I've never seen before. I would remember her if I had.

"I see that my fame precedes me." I give her a smile full of teeth. "And despite not usually asking ladies to rise in my presence, it would seem that this isn't the most appropriate place to continue having you atop me."

Although if she wants, there's an alley nearby that's dark enough to push her against the wall...

She obeys without a word and rises. She arranges her dress as best she can, tying it, and I almost feel disappointed. I am sure that we could have taken advantage of her being half-dressed already in a way that would have been

satisfactory to both of us. A sort of farewell to the city, a blowout celebration to shake its highest towers.

Or its gutters, to be more precise.

I get up, brushing the dust and dirt from my clothes. She watches me carefully. Obviously, she can't help noticing how handsome I am.

"Would you do something for a poor and helpless young woman, my good prince?"

That must count as an official petition for aid.

My first damsel in distress.

How thrilling.

"Of course" I answer, with a bow. "Let no one say that Arthmael of Silfos is not a generous and noble man who is concerned for his people!" I look around me and realize that we're alone, although one never knows who might be nearby. Many rumors begin because someone heard someone say something. "Tell me, then, what can I do for such a lovely maiden? Escort you home? Has some delinquent threatened your honor, princess?"

She lifts one eyebrow. I hope that this expression of skepticism has to do with the non-existence of her virginity and not with my declamation. The fantasy that is developing in one part of my mind would be a little more uncomfortable if that were not the case.

"Your cloak," she begs me, holding out her hand. From a nearby street can be heard shouts and hurried steps that seem to make my companion nervous. "Give it to me!"

I would like to think she is just cold, but not even an honorable young man like myself could be so innocent. It is suspicious. And I am certain that no one has ever gone down in history for giving away a cloak. At least unless it was full of worms and caused a rash and later a war. I hesitate. I like my cloak.

Arthmael of the Warm Cloak. That doesn't sound so bad when I repeat it in my mind, and even when I whisper it. He sounds like a pleasant king, who shelters his subjects within his protective embrace. Or who wears only a cloak and it is so warm he doesn't need to wear anything else.

Arthmael of the Warm Cloak sounds better than Arthmael the Never Crowned.

I decide it can't hurt and I take it off to hand to her, even though she has not treated me with the respect that someone of my position deserves. I am merciful with the poor.

She doesn't even thank me; she dons it immediately and hides her face among the hood's shadows. I can hear the sounds of footsteps running toward us, and see the flickering light from some torches scatter through the alleyways.

"You lot, go that way" shouts a voice that makes me alert. They are searching for someone.

Before I can come to the conclusion that they're searching for my companion, she pushes me brusquely toward the shadowed alley. My back pushes against the wall of a house and she pushes against me. It is difficult for me to see her expression, but I feel her body tense against mine, as if she were tensing to leap. She has a certain feline air about her. I wouldn't mind for her to sink her claws into my back as she purred beneath my hand.

I am a prince who is weak when it comes to the temptations of the flesh.

"Listen, maiden..."

Her hand over my mouth immediately silences me.

"A prince immensely concerned for your people, did you say? You would escort me home? Well, you can begin by guiding me as quickly as you can to the exit of this damned city. And you can start right now."

I blink, unable to speak against her palm, and she lets me loose. How adorable, trying to behave like a bad girl. I wonder what she might have done. Rob a house? Seduce the wrong man? Some women can be very territorial, when it came to their husbands. And a spiteful wife is as dangerous as a dragon who hasn't eaten in a week. She might even be worse. They know how to use their knees where it hurts most.

"Let us make some things clear. In the first place, I don't take orders, and even less from plebian women. And in the second, I am no idiot: it's obvious you've done something wrong and aiding you would be counterproductive to the reputation I am trying to cultivate. Something tells me I should grab you and bring you before the guards, and thereby receive congratulations for my exploits." I cross my arms. "Therefore, unless your honor needs to be avenged because you have been unjustly accused of a crime, I recommend that you don't make me lose any more time. Oh, and give me back my cloak: it's my favorite."

I don't know where she pulls it from. I suppose she must have a pocket in that dress and a surprisingly quick hand. I don't know anything, except that suddenly I've got a dagger against my neck.

I focus on not squealing like a little girl.

"Does this convince you that your time is not so important as to ignore me?"

"Are you threatening your prince?" I ask, with a strangled voice. "You should bow before me!"

"Oh, and since you protest so much, I wouldn't mind sinking all of Silfos into sadness with such a loss."

I think she's being sarcastic. I raise one hand, and although she presses the weapon into my neck resulting in an uncomfortable pressure against my

adam's apple, I place a finger on the edge and try to lower it a little. Her hand doesn't tremble, but I am sure that she could give me an unpleasant surprise if she's not careful.

"That's better," I say. And I pray that no one, ever, finds out that on my first night outside of the castle I've been assaulted and taken prisoner by a little girl who barely comes up to my eyes and who, moreover, must be half my weight.

Arthmael the Humiliated. You really are material worthy of myth.

From the corner of my eye I see a light approaching. The young woman tenses against me again. I think she grimaces.

And then, the kiss.

She grabs my shirt and forces me to lean toward her. The knife is still against my neck, but that seems to lose importance while she passionately covers my lips with her own. Her leg wraps around mine; her skirts lift. With one hand, she guides my own hand to her thigh. I could get used to being threatened if it were always going to be like this. She presses herself against me even further and sticks her tongue in my mouth when, through my eyelashes, I see a torch approaching. It illuminates us, me more than her, still concealed by my cloak. I raise my hands to her rump and pull her toward me toward my crotch. With or without a weapon in her hand, she can do with me what she wants. I'm sure she never had the chance to play with a prince's sword.

She pulls away when darkness returns to our alley. She stops so abruptly that I can't help opening and closing my hands, aware that they no longer have anything to grab on to. I pant, and I realize that I can still feel the pressure of the blade against my neck. That was it? I've been used only for such a practical end? Does she pretend to leave me like this, halfway there, with the familiar tickle in my belly and my blood unable to rise to my brain?

What kind of cruel and inhuman creature is this?

"The exit," she spits out. "Quickly."

Slut.

"I am the prince, but I'm afraid that that doesn't give me the right to ask that the gates of the city be opened for me on a whim," I mutter.

I run my tongue over my lips. It's as if she were still kissing me. She is no novice, that's for sure. I half-close my eyes, and I'm sure I'd have some kind of suspicion if I could think of anything other than lifting her skirts. Or in her sullyng the skin of my neck; I think I have begun to bleed.

"Are you telling me that there are no passageways?" she inquires, suspicious. "Some exit that doesn't go through the gate? That would leave the city defenseless if we were besieged."

"Of course there are. But they are meant to be secret, so you'll understand that I can't take you to any of them."

No, she doesn't understand. I know because her eyes seem to glow in the dark. I hold my breath when she presses her knee against my genitals in a warning signal. It's the only gesture that makes me more nervous than the dagger itself. I think all the color drains from my face.

"All right," I agree. She takes a step back and I cover my genitals, protectively.

She is crazy. Better to play along with her until I can get rid of her.

"There is one nearby," I continue, making a careless gesture in the direction I was headed before she crashed into me.

"Well, you're going to be a good prince and guide me there. And then you'll forget you ever saw me."

That last point might be the most difficult to achieve, given the state she's left me in. At least, of course, unless she is going to offer me relief for all this bother.

"Must I also forget the kiss? Because the truth is that it was rather good and..."

She snorts and says something about what we men normally think with.

"I'll give you another if you lead me to this passageway and keep the little secret of my flight."

I don't know if her offer would be worse than the ailment, but I've always been of the opinion that one must accept all opportunities in this life, and at least this way I would get something in exchange for a service that no one must learn that I have done. Helping fugitives is not a good way of earning the respect of honorable people, although this is doing a good for the community: at any rate, it couldn't do any harm.

Curiously, even with a very sharp pointed object in her hand, she doesn't seem... bad to me. Just a little she-devil. And, oh, how I'd love to tame her. Wild mares are, after all, meant to be broken and ridden.

"Why don't you put that away? I shall escort you like that gentleman that I am." When I see that she doesn't respond, I add, "You are safe, I give you my word as the prince."

"From the richest to the poorest, a man's word is always worth the same to me: nothing." I start and protest when she waves her free hand and takes my sword from its scabbard. Suddenly I feel little more than castrated. "You'll go first. I'll follow you."

I sputter, but she gestures with her head and I drag my feet to start walking. I hope that kiss is worth all this. I hope, suddenly, even more worried, that no one dares to recount this little episode anywhere. That would destroy

me. A moan escapes me. I could trick her and guide her to some guard post, but that wouldn't help my situation at all. I would become the most cowardly prince of Marabilia, unworthy of the crown. Throughout the country, the continent, the whole world, people would tell the tale of the idiot who let himself be unarmed by an ordinary girl. Even Ivy of Dione would laugh at me, and there would be neither wedding nor crown... Just enough shame to never appear in public again.

Seeing I have no other choice, I lead her to the passageway. It is in an alleyway, far from my usual haunts. I bend down, tug on an iron ring after moving a cobblestone that I know is loose and, not without effort, reveal an entrance black like the mouth of a monster in which some steps seem to descend into the very bowels of the earth.

"There you go," I say with a neutral voice.

She hesitates for a moment.

"Thanks," she says at last. She holds out my sword, which I take with a grunt. When I strap it on, I feel complete once again.

"My cloak as well," I remember.

The girl doesn't seem to like that.

"This passageway will take me out of the city, right?"

I roll my eyes. No, it will lead you right into the king's bedroom.

"It ends right beside the river, yes."

There are a few moments of silence, which seem eternal to me, while she struggles with the cloak before managing to remove it. I grab it when she hold it out to me.

"What have you done?" I dare to ask. It has nothing to do with me, but I'm curious.

"The less you know, the better; this way, if someone begs an audience in the palace demanding justice and searching for me, you won't know that it was me. That way you won't feel guilty. Thank you for your assistance."

That isn't true. In the improbable case that I were here for that audience, and in the even more improbable case that I wished to be present for it, I would know what had happened. Does she really think I don't know how to add two plus two?

Without looking back at me, she enters the passageway.

I remain still for a moment, undecided, before peeking inside. Her silhouette is just another spot of darkness along the descending stairwell. I think she has one hand running along the wall.

"You've forgotten my kiss!" I remind her.

She stops. I think she turns.

"Are you going to follow me so that I give you your kiss?" I take a few steps down and pull at the entrance to close the gap. "From what I understood, prince Arthmael doesn't need to go begging for it."

We wind up in total darkness when I push the gate back into place. I'm not able to see anything, not even my hands before my face. It wouldn't make much difference if I were to close my eyes. I reach out for a wall and finally find it. A layer of dust and dirt clings to my skin. It smells damp, of earth and decay, as if something were rotting down there.

"The truth is, we're going in the same direction, so I thought that perhaps we could enjoy ourselves a little along the way. I would offer you conversation, but you don't seem very talkative."

"Not in your dreams. If you want entertainment, go back to your castle and ask for it from one of your nursemaids."

Her steps draw away, careful not to slip or stumble, and I follow her. A little more surely, perhaps, but still carefully.

"I am not going back," I say, and I don't know why. I don't like this silence that seems to threaten us. I don't like this darkness, so oppressive. It's cold. I wrap my cloak around me a little more.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, it's obvious that I am too good for this place," I lie. I can't tell her about the bastard. That they've taken away my crown because nobody believes in me. They haven't even made the official announcement yet, and she doesn't need to find out if she's leaving. She might never return to Silfos. "I am going to live my own life. I'll save damsels in distress and fight against dragons. The kinds of things that true princes do."

And if I achieve fame and glory along the way, I won't complain.

"I give you three days."

"What did you say?"

"You're right, three is too many: two days."

As if she had any idea about heroics and the duty of man. She's just a... girl. I snort. An impertinent girl whose father should spank her to put her in her place.

"You don't know me. I'm capable of doing great things."

"Oh, yes. That's why you wound up doing what I wanted on your first night of adventure, frightened by a dagger. What are you going to do when you're attacked by bandits? Or when you're kidnapped. Or when your money runs out? What will you do if you're attacked by something really dangerous? Dragons, you say. They'd use you for a toothpick, princeling. Go back to your castle. You nobles aren't made to leave your comfortable lives."

I clench my fists. Something skitters along at my side.

"And what do you know? You're just a... a... " I doubt. "A woman."

That's it, she really feels the disdain of that insult. You're a born orator. Arthmael of the Dirty Tongue.

"That is the argument all men use when they don't find anything else to reproach us for: 'You're just a woman.'"

"Because you women don't know anything about life." My foot bangs against something. I pray that it's a small stone and keep walking. "You have no worries. You don't have to decide anything aside from which dress to wear. And meanwhile, we men move in the real world, in case you haven't realized. Who rules? Who maintains you? Who keeps a roof over your heads?"

I crash against her. She has stopped without warning and I must take a step back so as not to fall.

"What's the matter?" I ask, perhaps with some alarm. I hope it's not spiders. Or rats. In fact, I hope it's not anything that moves, especially if it slithers. I repress a shudder.

"Your face?" she says, and I almost let out a howl of fear while I lift my hands to my face, afraid of finding it covered in carnivorous ants or something worse. I need a second to realize that she can't see, just like me. I compose myself. She doesn't seem to have noticed anything. "Where is it? I owe you that kiss."

I smile. Well, if the lady wants a kiss, who am I to deny her one? I raise my hands, and our fingers touch. So she likes to kiss boys in dark places. This, at least, is more private than that alleyway. It will be like wearing a blindfold, all one's other senses alert.

"Here."

I pull her toward me and let her place a hand on my cheek. Her caress sends a shiver through me, from my head down to my feet, running through my entire body.

"Yes. Here... " she whispers, and it's obvious that her voice drips with desire.

The desire to slap my face, given the blow that immediately follows. I lift my hand to my cheek. It feels as if my heart beats beneath the skin. It burns.

Where did this madwoman come from?

"We women, you stupid imbecile, are just as valid as you men are. That some have made this world a place for men doesn't mean that we aren't worth living in it, of being owners of our own lives, of doing with them whatever we desire." Her face is close and I can feel her breath, but instead of attracting me, this time I take a step back. What is she talking about? "We are free and intelligent, and just as able to do any task as men. What's more, just because things aren't like that in Marabilia doesn't mean that they're the same everywhere else in the world. Beyond this continent there are countries in which women govern over their own lives and those of all others. Civilizations made up *only* of women." As if I cared about this. "If in Silfos and the other countries of Marabilia, people continue thinking of us women as... useless objects, it's because of people like you: people who could change things, but who decided to remain within those unwritten laws that are so comfortable for you and which let you think only with that member you have between your legs.

"And now, with your royal permission, your majesty, I shall continue on my way *alone*."

Her steps draw away, determinedly, and I let her go. I rest my cheek against the stone wall. It's cold and calms the burning, so I decide to remain

there for a few minutes. Enough time to not run into her again, to let each of us go our own way.

"Crazy. Women are all crazy, they're violent and fickle..." I whisper.

Women: the natural enemy of men and, paradoxically, their only hope for reproduction.