

THE COLLAR

The first time I saw Hadhnri Clan Aradoc, Second-Born Pedhri Clan Aradoc, it was dark and I did not know her. I was lost, in a stranger's roundhouse, in an enemy clan's territory, far from home—far from my father, my brother, my mother-brothers and father-sisters all, who had sung me the songs of warm hearth and battle glory since I was a babe.

How could I know who she would become to me when I barely knew myself?

I was led along with the other slaves that clan Aradoc had taken, stumbling through the wetlands in my boots, which I was allowed to keep, but no coat, which had been stripped from me. I didn't complain. I was too frightened to complain, though later I told myself I had been too brave.

The Aradoc warriors led us to the clan roundhouse down a path lit by their torches. Our steps creaked over wooden planks drawn across the sucking mud and peat. The blood flies buzzed and bit at my ears, and across the night, the frogs croaked and splashed into the water,

the crickets clapped their legs together, and all around me was the drone of the fens in lententide, underlaid by the trill of pipes. The songs by which I knew my clan were gone, replaced by the music of the Aradoc fens.

A shivering bundle of men, women, children, we huddled in the roundhouse. The sulfur scarce covered the blood-and-sweat odor of our unwashed bodies. Others, unlike me, held themselves high-chinned and sharp-eyed, despite their exhaustion. They knew themselves, name and clan. But I did not know myself and because I did not know myself, I had no pride to hold me up.

I knew myself only as chafed and starving, filth-crusted and fear-stinking.

Arranged on their benches and furs, Clan Aradoc leered at us. The long-legged hounds at their feet stopped their bone-worrying to snarl low in their throats, teeth gleaming, hackles ruffled.

In my shivering, I didn't hear what pronouncement Pedhri Clan Aradoc, the new chief among chieftains, made over our fates. It wasn't until the slaves around me drew back that I attended his words. He ordered me alone to stand before him, and I obeyed. He took my chin in his callus-grip hand and looked into my eyes, my teeth, my ears. He checked my scalp, snarling my hair. His eyes were a glowing hazel, his brown beard sparking red in the light of his clan's hearth.

Something passed between him and one of his men, because I was then taken away to be scrubbed with

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a scouring rock, my head shorn like a lamb, and my clothes replaced with comfortable, dry wool. I was too numb to notice its quality, and how it differed from the clean roughspun the other slaves were given.

In the roundhouse again, they fed us thick broth, rich with the marrow of salted mutton. I gulped it down and spent the rest of the night in the slave corner with my knees curled up tight to my chin, protecting my gurgling belly.

For most of the night, no one else spoke to me—not until Hadhnri did. She came to me as a shadow, backlit by the flicker and flash of the hearth. She came to me and, with wide, round eyes, traced me from the top of my shorn skull to my wool-socked feet.

“You.” She pointed at me and crooked a finger, so I unfurled myself and stood, looking up at her from below my lashes.

She was my age, perhaps a year younger or a year older. We were of a height, though she was already wider than me at the shoulders. I could not tell yet how cruel the edge of her smile would be. I couldn't make out the sweet brown of her skin, dusted with freckles, nor the yellow-green-brown of her eyes. Nor did she yet have the crooked cast of a broken nose, or the scar that would split her lip, a gift I would give her. What she did have, though, was a straight-backed pride and a solemn demeanor.

Her eyes stopped this time at my neck. She reached

out with her fingers, and I flinched when she brushed the leather collar locked at my throat. Unlike the collars of the other slaves, it was studded with copper. It splashed fire across the dark roundhouse whenever I moved. Gone, all chances of sneaking.

I flinched, though her touch was gentle as a feather-kiss.

“You are Agnir Clan Fein, First-Born Garadin Clan Fein.”

From anyone else, it should have been a question, but from Hadhnri it was a statement. She named me and I came back to myself, enough to straighten my shoulders, for I was my father’s child. She took it as an answer.

“You are not a slave,” she said, “and will not sleep with the slaves. You are my father’s ward, and he will keep you as such. Come with me.”

I followed Hadhnri into my new life.

THE TALE GOES LIKE THIS

Once, we were all one clan, led by mighty warriors.

Once, we were all one clan, living as peacefully as we could within the Fens.

Once, we were all one clan, plagued by the witch of the Fens.

The witch—who may not have been a witch but a demon—who may not have been a demon but a god—who may not have been any of these things at all—was the guardian of the Fens and claimed our ancestors as trespassers.

Many mighty warriors attempted to kill this creature to free us from the black eye of its attention, which drew ill-luck: children, drowned in a handspan of tepid water; legs of men and legs of beasts, sucked into the muck to break; disease, passed from family to family to family.

They called it trickster, they called it the luck-hound, they called it fates-bane.

Warrior after warrior bent their shoulders to the task, but always something went wrong. The hilt of a sturdy blade came apart right before the killing blow. A twig

cracked or a waterbird splashed, giving away the creeping warrior's position. The string of a bow snapped and took out the archer's eye.

No one succeeded until one man, Bannos the Clever, Bannos the Bold, strong and cunning, turned his ill-luck against the fates-bane. For his victory, Bannos became the clan's leader and led it into prosperity, following the cycle of the land.

In this prosperity, he had many children, and in the way of siblings born to power, they did not agree who should succeed their great father. When Bannos died, the clan split and split and split along the lines of his children and their most loyal. The seat of Bannos's power—the heart of the Fens, where the earth is richest, the peat plentiful—has passed between the splintered clans several times since then, ever at the point of the sword.

That is the tale as we heard it from our fathers and our father-sisters in Clan Fein.

That is the tale as we heard it from our mothers and our mother-brothers in Clan Aradoc.

That is the tale, say the tale-tellers of Clan Elyin and the song-singers of Clan Hanarin.

That is the tale, say the lore-makers of Clan Pall.

That is the tale of the Fens.

THE SPRING

We became fast friends, Hadhnri and I. We took our chores together, hauling bricks of peat and replacing the rushes on the floor of the roundhouse; we practiced the different trades of the clan, rotating from leatherwork and fishing to smithing and weaving; we trained daily with seax and axe and sometimes even the sword, trailing along behind Gunni First-Born Pedhri Clan Aradoc.

Gunni had a few years and a handspan's height over us, with handsome features that the clan gossiped about; some blushed and giggled behind their hands. Like Hadhnri, he was generous with me, teaching me weapon-work as they learned it in Clan Aradoc. Their way was not so different from Clan Fein, but I was eager to learn.

Though they were both kind to me, the tension between the siblings was blood-thick, and never more so than in the little patch of grass that served as our training grounds. I said that Gunni was kind; he was kindest when it was the three of us alone. With his age-mates around, or Pedhri

Clan Aradoc watching, he would sacrifice us—especially Hadhnri—on the altar of their approval. It was after one such time, perhaps a year after my capture, that Hadhnri and I fled the Aradoc roundhouse.

“Wait!” he called after us as we ran, our wooden seaxes pumping back and forth at our sides. “Come back, or you’ll get the hide!”

We didn’t go back. We ran rabbit-fleet and deer-sure over the wet pockets of the earth. Already, with Hadhnri as my guide, I knew the land as if it were my own.

My hair had only grown back to a short cap of dense curls, but Hadhnri’s flew behind her, a cloud of red. Though we’d fled in indignation and frustration, the more we ran, the less helpless we felt. The crease in Hadhnri’s forehead, the jut of her lower lip—they both gave way to grin, her eyes squinting as we rushed against the wind.

Even a river must slow, though, and so did we, legs jangling from a gallop to a canter to a walk. With wind-chapped cheeks and cold-split lips, we stared at each other, chests heaving with this newfound might.

We had said *no*.

Behind us, far, far, far away, I saw a smudge of what might have been the roundhouse and the smoke of the fire rising like a streak of cloud. Before us stretched a carr, the sedge meadow that we’d run through, turning into a forest of skinny birch, reaching naked-branched to the sky. Fog shrouded the ground up to our knees.

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The Baneswood.

Hadhnri's thoughtful pout returned.

"Should we go back?" I asked. Already, I would have followed her anywhere, even there.

Hadhnri's frown deepened, and she rubbed her backside—without realizing it, I think—where Gunni had smacked her needlessly hard that morning, humiliating her in front of the clan after she'd let him get around her guard. He'd paddled her bottom like a child.

"No."

Together, we entered the luck-hound's wood.

As many trunks that stood tall, there were those that had fallen sideways—some dead and some growing twisted and determined. We clambered over and under the ancient yews and, once, rode one like a horse. We whiled away the hours, roaming deeper into the woods, pretending to battle each other across the rough terrain.

Deeper and deeper we went until we could no longer see the hill from which we'd come. Moss muffled our footsteps. We crouched like hunters through hanging willow fronds, holding our wooden seaxes up like spears.

"Agnir. I'm hungry," Hadhnri confessed.

"Shh." I pressed a finger to my lips. I stopped and hunkered lower at the burble of water.

"What is it?" Hadhnri bent close beside me, our shoulders knocking. Her breath tickled my ear.

"A creek, I think? Or a spring."

“There are no fresh springs on Aradoc land.”

But we crept closer and lo, sheltered beneath the trailing fronds of a willow—as a lover is sheltered by the curtain of their love’s hair—a spring. Just stepping near to it gave me a chill; that is how cold it was. I could see down to the gray-brown stone beneath; that is how clear it was. The water rushed from its source and down some path of root and tangle. I considered following it to see where this spring-that-was-not-Aradoc’s would take me.

Hadhnri knelt beside the spring and fanned her fingers into it. She closed her eyes and sighed. It looked wonderful. I followed her, instead.

The water was as cold as the air around us promised. My eyes widened with shock before I closed them in quiet reverence. It wasn’t the frigid cold of a slip into the fen’s marshy waters, unpleasant, unfiltered. This was the cold of waking after the first frost, when every breath is new-scoured by the ice in the air.

Later, when many details about this day had faded, I always remembered one thing, sharp as the leather knife at my thumb: I drank of the spring first.

I cupped the liquid to my mouth and sipped. It tasted as pure as it looked. No sulfur stench, no mud grit. Crisp, like an apple, and sweet.

“It tastes like strawberries.” Hadhnri grinned into her own cupped hand.

“No.” I laughed, scooping another drink. “Apples.”

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Hadhnri splashed me with wet fingers. "Strawberries!"

We splashed and drank and laughed, shouting each new taste we discovered in that delicious moment.

Belly-full, we settled, lying on our sides in the loamy soil, our fingers trailing into the water. I had missed my family, when I had gotten over the shock of becoming Clan Aradoc's ward. I'd been angry that my father surrendered me, that he had not fought harder for me. But as I sat with Hadhnri Clan Aradoc beside that spring, all I wanted was to be near her. For her to like me, no matter that I was First-Born Clan Fein.

"Do you think the clans will ever unite again?" Hadhnri's voice was soft and somber, all her exuberance gone. If she had been the warrior before, slashing at the undergrowth, she was the solemn clan leader now. She gazed into the distance, perhaps all the way to the future, while she wove strips of grass unthinkingly.

"Maybe. My father won't fight your father as long as he has me. We're at peace."

Hadhnri's hands stilled on the grass braid. "We're not united."

The water ran cold against my fingers. I thought of the pools in parts of the fens where the surface of the water was still as stone until a fish broke the surface or a frog leapt out. How the creatures must squirm and struggle beneath the surface no matter how quiet it appeared.

"You're right. Maybe there's no peace either." I sat up

and hugged my knees to my chest. An emptiness stole through me. "What will happen to me if there is no peace, and my—and Clan Fein attacks Clan Aradoc?"

Hadhnri didn't speak the obvious truth: that my life would be forfeit. My father had not said so when I left, and Pedhri Clan Aradoc had never admitted it as he sat me at his own table, dressed me in his own wool, or trained me with his own weapons.

The line between Hadhnri's eyebrows returned, and I had the strangest urge to press it out with my thumb. So I did.

She jerked, startled as a goose. My smile was self-conscious, but hers was not. Her mouth stretched, wide as a wound.

"Agnir." Hadhnri's eyes burned wolf-bright, now brown, now yellow-green. She took my wet hand in hers. "Name me a hero of the Fens."

I was happy to turn the subject away from our melancholy, but I was confused. "What?"

As she looked from me to the spring water, however, I understood. I bent over and cupped more water in my hand, and stood, trying not to spill a drop.

Hadhnri knelt before me. She kissed the blade of her wooden seax before plunging it into the lush earth at my feet. She placed her hand on the pommel and bowed her head. I let the cupped water trickle over her, and it ran from her hair, down her brow and her nose.

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This was how a person became an adult and took their proper place in the clan. I placed my hand over hers on the seax.

"I am Hadhnri Clan Aradoc. By my name and my clan, I pledge myself to the keeping of the Fens and to their people. To their fish and their fowl. To their beasts and their burdens."

She spoke not like a child of thirteen but like a full member of the clan. How many times must she have heard this speech in the tales of the heroes Aradoc? The tales of Bannos the Bold?

"By your name and your clan, you honor us, Hadhnri Clan Aradoc." I smeared my other hand wet across her forehead. If it were fenswater, as it would be when she was named true, a streak of mud would have marked her, but her brow was clean.

Then Hadhnri looked up at me, earnest-eyed and solemn-mouthed. Beads of water caught on the pale brown of her crinkled eyebrows. "By my name and my clan, I pledge myself to you, Agnir Clan Fein."

I cocked my head. "That's not how it goes."

"It is," she insisted. "Will you accept my oath and let me rise?"

"Rise, then, hero of Clan Aradoc." I mimicked the gravity of a roundhouse pronouncement by Pedhri Clan Aradoc—and to a lesser extent, Garadin Clan Fein, whose voice I already struggled to recall.

I offered both my hands to raise her to her feet. Standing, she was almost unbearably close to me. Her eyes held mine. She clasped my hands tightly. I kissed first her right cheek, then her left, as was correct to honor a hero of the clan—

And then she kissed me on the mouth, her lips spring-wet as she pressed them, closed, against mine.

The baying of hounds and men broke the joy-spell between us, and another spell, also—for we both grew aware of the chill and the dark, and the gurgle of our hunger returned. The wood around us was cast in shadow, the gnarled trees ominous instead of adventure, fear speeding our steps instead of exploration.

We followed the alarmed voices until we saw the glow of torches waving through the birches. As we neared the edge of the wood, the dogs howled, but they didn't enter the trees after us. They waited, looking from the clan members in the search party to us and whining.

They jumped on us with muddy paws when we broke from the trees, claws scratching. The world rushed back as if a gauzy film were pulled from my eyes. Though it was dark, color returned.

Pedhri Clan Aradoc loomed, sword in hand.