

Coins for Your Troubles

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D. Moonfire

Broken Typewriter Press • Cedar Rapids

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This novelette contains no scenes of sexual assault.

Broken Typewriter Press
5001 1st Ave SE
Ste 105 #243
Cedar Rapids, IA 52402

Broken Typewriter Press
<https://broken.typewriter.press/>

Version 1.0.0

Chapter 1

The Wait

Genetic magic created the slather as a dog-like beast that preys on the vulnerable populations of a city. The nest size rapidly increases as the slather use their victims as food for their young.

—*Illegal Creations of Genetic Magic*

With a groan, Karin twisted her arm to scratch her back. The spot that itched remained just out of her right, in the spot above her right hip and far enough back she couldn't use her other hand to reach it either. She had to lean into the warrior next to her to get the angle to drag her nails along the bloody bandage that wrapped around her waist. Underneath the fabric, the three gashes continued to throb despite her efforts. She pulled her hand back and looked at the tips, only a little blood had seeped through her bandage.

"You are going to open it up again."

She looked up at the man she leaned against. Without breaking his gaze, she wiped her bloody fingertips on her stained trousers.

He shook his head slowly. The movement lifted her away from him for a moment. "I told you to roll left." His voice

was lower than usual, a rasp of too many combat spells in a crowded space.

Karin slowly blinked at him. She tried to make it deliberate instead of the exhaustion that beckoned her to pass out.

He chuckled. "Okay, I'm sure I told you to roll."

"Yeah, Roal," she said with a grin, "what you meant to say was that you screamed incomprehensibly like a little boy while that Black Slather gnawed on your foot."

His mouth opened to say something, then he groaned. He lifted his bandaged leg from the other bench. "Thanks. I had almost forgotten that."

He leaned away from her to scratch furiously, hissing in pain.

Without his presence, Karin had to tense her muscles to avoid falling. Reaching out with her other hand, she leaned against the table and stretched out to try scratching her back again. The slather had clawed her with a lucky blow, a few inches deeper and her organs would have been spilled out on the ground.

Around her, the rest of the survivors of the hunting party were sprawled out on benches and in padded chairs. The smell of blood, alcohol, and ozone hung in the air like smoke.

Of the twenty-one hunters that went into the slather nest, only ten managed to stagger back to the inn. Three probably wouldn't survive the night.

A perverse mortality kept all of them in the main hall. If she wasn't waiting, there was a bed and a warm bottle of whiskey to keep her company. She needed to know if Stac, Booker, or Maril survived their injuries.

"Who do you think will go first?" asked Roal.

“Not now.” She grabbed her glass of whiskey and drained it. The watery remains burned down her throat. With a sigh, she set the glass on the scratched table.

“I hate this waiting, damn the Couple. Why did there have to be seven of those bastard in that nest?”

“What else are you going to do? Send a scout to die? Try to send a mechanical in and hope they can’t smell the oil? They waited too long to tell us about them.”

Across the room, one of the archers groaned as she stood up. “Fuck all of you, I’m crashing. I’m sorry, I can’t keep my eyes open.” Her voice was hoarse and most of her right side had been bandaged; the blood had long since soaked into the fabric, staining it dark brown.

The others made various noises for the parting warrior, the effort to form words difficult with exhaustion and pain weighing down on all of them. All of them wanted to sleep, none of them wanted not to be there if there was bad news.

One of the waitresses walked past Karin, then slowed to look at the table. Turning around, she leaned over the edge and tapped the glass. “Want another?”

Karin glanced up. The waitress was a younger woman, maybe in her mid-twenties with short brown hair that stuck out at the ends. She had a cute nose, Karin decided, along with a dusting of freckles that started on her cheeks and danced down her neck to her collar.

If Karin wasn’t exhausted and in agony, the waitress would be the perfect distraction until the news came around. Even if the girl was straight, the effort would pass the hours.

As such, she was just a welcoming provider of whiskey and numbness. “Yes... please. Leave the bottle?”

“You know I can’t do that. City ordinance, but I’ll keep you topped off.”

The warm smile from the waitress did more to heat Karin than the burn of whiskey in her belly.

As the waitress headed to the bar, Roal leaned over. "You going to lick that peach?"

It took too much effort to look away but Karin managed. "Do I look like I could stay awake enough? It takes a while to properly please a woman."

He smiled, rubbing a finger along his matted beard. "Well, in that case, I'm going to take a shot."

"You have a bad leg and can barely walk."

"Maybe she'll rub it for me?"

Karin didn't want to argue. "Not tonight, Roal. All I want is her to come back and fill my glass until we get news. Then I'm going to drink so much I won't have nightmares of those damn slathers."

"You're going to wake up in a pool of vomit."

"But I'm going to wake up. So leave the girl alone and just rub one out yourself."

Roal grunted and then leaned back in his chair. He scratched his bandaged leg again as his eyes trailed over to the bar and the waitress bending over it while fishing for a bottle.

Karin rolled her eyes. "Just leave her alone."

A wave of exhaustion slammed into her. Along the edges of the vision, she could almost see the slather tunnels again. The rough edges reminded her of crawling on her hands and knees, half-afraid that the side would burst out in a flurry of claws and teeth.

She knew the edges of a walking dream had clawed their way into her consciousness, but she struggled to keep her eyes open to avoid falling into a nightmare of death.

Shaking, she forced her hand to reach out to grab her empty glass. She brought it to her mouth to tilt it over in hopes of getting a drop of something burning wakefulness.

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There was nothing but dry glass at the bottom.

Chapter 2

Interruption

Though frequently dismissed as just nerves, those in constant threat of battle share many common traits when forced to deal with the relative peace outside of war: nightmares, heavy drinking, and depression.

—*The Hidden Costs of War*

Karin woke up with a start. Her heart pounded in her chest as she looked around for a monster about to attack. Her hand reached down for her sword, but only brushed against bandages and dried blood.

With a whimper, she grabbed her other side, clawing for her backup weapon. She must have dropped it. Half-blinded with exhaustion, she leaned over to find it. When her knuckles brushed against the wooden floor, reality came crashing in and she remembered that she was in a pubic hall.

“F-Fuck,” she gasped and sat back up.

In front of her, her glass had a healthy measure of caramel-colored spirits. The heady scent of whiskey told her it had been freshly poured.

She smiled and grabbed it. Reflexively, she leaned over to Roal to enjoy drinking it but when she didn’t feel his

body, she lurched forward to avoid falling. Her drink splashed against the table and she swore in annoyance.

Afraid that she had missed an announcement, she looked around sharply. Everyone remained where she remembered before she had passed out. No one had gotten up. No one was crying or cheering. There was no hint of any news among the slumbering and snoring hunters. A few of them were shuddering with their own nights; she didn't need to know what they were seeing in their dreams.

With a sigh, she leaned her head back and took a long, deep breath. Surrounding the main room, there was a single shelf of bottles that ringed the walls. They were too high to reach. She wondered if there was something special or if it was just decoration.

She shook her head and pushed herself away from the table. There as no reason to announce it, no one was awake to see her. She hesitated with guilt, they were staying up for the announcement but there was a doubt that it would take days or even overnight before their friends stabilized... or didn't.

Karin sighed and held her half-filled glass tighter. She swayed as she got to her feet and staggered back toward the stairs leading up to her room. Her nightmare swirled on the edges of her vision, she was only a few minutes away from plummeting into horror once again.

She heard Roal's voice before she saw him. He was whispering in his low voice, he thought it was seductive.

"No one else is going to know, they are all passed out. Even the bartender's already to bed. You are just hanging around for a bunch of snoring assholes."

Karin came around the corner.

"And what happens if they wake up and no one is there?"
It was the waitress.

Karin looked down the hallway.

Roal was leaning against the wall near the stairs. His bad leg leaned against the stairs, the bandages were stained dark from his effort to hobble even this far. His hand shook with the effort to remain upright. "I'll make it worth your while."

Standing on the bottom step was the waitress. She leaned against the wall with tray resting against her hip between the two of them. She had an expression of annoyance but also disinterest.

Karin waited for a response.

Then the waitress looked up. When their gazes met, her face brightened.

Roal continued speaking.

Karin leaned against the wall for a moment and then came down the hall. "Hey, Roal."

Roal turned with annoyance. "What are you doing here?"

Karin glanced between the two of them. From the waitress' face, it was obvious that she wasn't interested in Roal but she was being polite. However, her friend was probably too tired and exhausted to see it. Painting a smile on her face, she headed over to them. "Are you sure you are up to this?"

Roal's eyes narrowed.

"With your leg, I mean." Karin yawned. "I mean, most of your favorite positions all require lefty."

"You claiming her after all?" His voice was low and he was blinking, he was struggling to stay awake just like her. Even if he did lure the waitress to bed, he'd probably be passed out in less than a minute before he even got her dress off.

"Just taking care of my partner," Karin said as she slipped her arm around his waist and pinned her half-empty glass of whiskey against his hip. "Come on. You need sleep, old man."

“You’re older than me,” Roal said as he leaned into her. His voice lowered into a whisper. “Changed your mind on that peach?”

Karin glanced at the waitress and smiled.

The waitress returned the smile. Her freckles caused Karin’s body to grow flush but Karin knew she was also too tired to do anything.

“Maybe but neither of us are in any shape to do anything about it.” Karin used her free hand to dig into her pocket to fetch out some coins. She had a few crowns which she handed out to the waitress. “Sorry about him,” she mouthed.

The waitress took them gratefully, her fingertips caressing against Karin’s. She stepped around the two and headed back down the hallway toward the main hall.

When Karin got Roal to his room, she was sweating from the effort. Every second felt like another weight being thrown on her back. She almost shoved Roal onto his bed.

“Night,” he said before rolling fully-dressed and face down in his blankets.

She sighed. “In the morn—”

He was already snoring.

Chapter 3

Injured

Magic reacts poorly with magic. The more powerful someone is, the more they respond to others with incompatible resonance. While it is possible to create a tight-knit team of compatible talents, there will always be painful disruptions.

—*The Curse of Power*

Karin hissed in pain as she peeled her breastplate off. The alchemically-treated leather had one puncture hole along the side. She didn't need to see the skin below to know how deep the wound went. The large opening pierced clear through her breast and scraped against the bones of her sternum. If it wasn't for the heavy padding, she probably would have bled out before the damn monster was killed.

Tossing her armor aside, she inspected the thick padding underneath. The white fabric had turned red from her injury. She reached for her first aid kit and pulled out one roll of fresh gauze. After a second, she grabbed a second.

"Damn the Couple, that looks nasty," Roal said as he sat down on the log next to her.

She cringed as her seat shook. She grabbed her breast to avoid pulling out the padding before she was ready and glared at him.

“Here, let me.”

Karin sighed and handed him the gauze.

“You take the anti-venom?” There was a moment of concern before he pulled a face. “I hate how it tastes but that is —”

“Of course I did, I’m not stupid. Except for the puncture wound, I’ll live.”

His rough fingers peeled back her padding and her underclothes. His fingers were scrubbed clean, revealing the pale skin that would be underneath all the dried blood and mud that covered the rest of him.

Hot crimson dribbled down her side and soaked her waist. She wanted to shove his hand out of the way, but he needed to look at the injury to see how bad she got nailed.

“That asshole got you good. You might lose the titty.”

“Why do you care? You aren’t getting it.” Her eyes blurred with the pain.

“None of your peaches are going to get anymore of this,” he said as he held her naked breast. His warm grip was steadier than her as he twisted from one way to another. He poked along the wound channel, working his way until he found where it had scraped her bones.

Sharp agonies of pain crawled across her chest. She wanted to lash out at him but she knew that he was inspecting the wound.

“Oh, that’s really deep. You’re going to need the alchemical pack.”

“Shit.”

“I know, old woman, but you’re going to lose the titty if you don’t.”

“Fine. Those things hurt forever.”

When he looked at her, she shook her head. “Just get it over and stop pawing me.”

Roal chuckled and called over his shoulder. “I need a pack, who is carrying?”

On the other side of their camp, Stac raised his hand before digging into his large travel packs. He pulled out a copper-inlaid capsule about a foot long and four inches across. It had runes embossed into the copper but they weren’t magical.

He threw it over the fire and Roal caught it. He planted it on Karin’s thigh before opening it. Inside was a glass syringe with a blunt-ended needle. A glittering green and yellow liquid swirled inside the container.

As soon as the capsule was opened, everyone started to squirm. She could feel the energies of whatever was inside scraping against her bones and throbbing in her joints. Her ears pounded by the presence of the magic that radiated.

Roal groaned and twisted. “I hate this damn stuff.”

“G-Get it in. Now!” she snapped.

From around the fire, other hunters said much of the same thing. No one liked the way the alchemical resonance felt against their magic.

Shoving the needle into the puncture wound, Roal depressed the plunger and forced the contents into the bloody wound.

Despite knowing how much it would hurt, Karin still screamed out in pain. The agony burned along her chest as she was forced to experience the same deep puncture again, this time with the sensations of a thousand needles tearing her out from the inside.

She grabbed Roal’s arm and yanked it up toward her face.

He clamped his hand over her mouth, muffling the noise as she dug her finger into his arm, her nails indenting the

leather armor. He finished emptying the syringe and shoved everything aside to hold her still.

After an eternity of agony, the piercing pain faded leaving only a burning sensation across her entire chest, the feeling of a thousand knives digging into her breast from the inside, and a throb deep inside her joints.

Panting, she pushed his hand away. "T-Thanks," she gasped.

Roal grunted and twisted. "Sorry."

"My fault."

"No, it's that asshole mage who let his entire menagerie of monsters loose."

"Y-Yeah," she groaned. "Damn him for having a heart attack, dying, and then having no one check on his mansion for a year. We got the nasty one first, like that slather next last year." She scratched at her arm, trying to get the itch that throbbed from her joints. She knew that feedback from the alchemical mixture would cause her pain for a month but the knowledge didn't stop the maddening itch that sparked along her arms.

Maril walked behind them. The bottom of her longbow smacked against the wooden log they were sitting on. "If you two are done making out, get the hell out of range before I hit you."

Roal chuckled. "You know she ain't got a thing for me, Mar. You should be the one worried."

Maril's lip curled back. She turned to glare at both of them while walking backwards toward her tent. "She isn't getting in my bedroll with that crap in her veins. You know the rules, you get packed, you're trunked for a month."

Roal turned back with a sympathetic look. "Sorry. She's right."

Karin gingerly cupped her bared breast. It was tender and still burning but at least there was no chance of an i-

infection eating it out from the inside. "I know. We got the bastard, so as soon as I get paid, I'll head over to Marowmoth. They have a cheap place I can hole up."

"Speaking of which, you remember those slathers?"

Karin glanced at him. "Y-Yeah? What about them?"

"The Village of Barnsveld is only thirty miles south of here."

"Barnsveld? Why would I go there? I'll just hole up at a cheap inn in Marowmoth. That's just down the road. Same as last time."

Roal smiled. "Yeah, but I remember a certain cute peach at the Barnsveld Inn."

She frowned. A peach? There was a woman she was interested in? Then she remembered the freckles. A smile crossed her face. "I thought you made a pass at her."

He waved his hand dismissively. "I gave you first shot."

"Plus you damaged your leg pretty badly and couldn't do half the things you pretend you do."

His smile grew a little forced. "Do you want to head over there or not? You know I'll show up when you are ready, I always do."

"I don't know."

"You got a month to kill with that damn crap in your body. Even if she's not really a peach, at least she's pretty on the eyes."

"Ten leagues just to pine after a girl?"

"Two days of misery. Besides they had those soft beds on the second floor and that local whiskey—"

"Deal."

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Chapter 4

Checking In

Who is the child who walks into death? To risk everything in search of those single points in time when life on the razor's edge? Who knows, but there is always a need for more to join the ranks.

—*Slaves of War and Blood* (Act 2, Scene 4)

By the time Karin stopped in front of the Barnsveld Inn, she was thoroughly tired of riding on horseback and through the rain. Thirty hours didn't sound so bad, but after the fact, it felt like thirty days.

The pain from her puncture wound had settled across her entire chest. Both breasts and her chest ached with tenderness with the left side adding an uncomfortable lump of the alchemical pack that filled the wound. Every time her horse hit a rough patch of road, the jostling of her breasts caused renewed pains to tear through her senses. Even her nipples rasping against her underclothes were a torture for the last few hours.

The idea of spending a week without clothes kept her going.

She groaned as she leaned to get off the horse. With one arm across her breasts to prevent them from bouncing, she slid off gracefully and hit the ground hard.

A hand rushed up. "Let me get that, madam. Staying for the weekend or longer?"

"A month and don't call me madam."

He nodded. "I'll take of her. Your name?"

"Karin Bedosen of the Rat Hunters."

The hand's eyes grew wide. "Rat Hunters? You were the ones that took out the slather nest. You lost... you lost one of them. I'm sorry."

It had been a while since she thought of Booker. He was a young, foolish man who had dreams of opening a business of his own. A momentary pang struck her. The hunters lost someone every few months while on the job, it was brutal and risky.

On the other hand, they also gained recruits looking for a few months of dangerous but high-paying gigs before retiring. Six years ago, after Karin realized she wasn't interested in her husband as much as he wasn't interested in her either, she had joined for a suicidal thrill. She almost quit after the first time she saw her intestines. Or when she broke her leg. However, she kept coming back and taking the next job the moment she recovered. The thrill of survival and the huge stack of crowns dump in front of her after a job well done was enough to keep her going.

She sighed. There wasn't much a thrill when her chest ached and her joints burned from having another mage's magic stuffed inside her. With her thoughts dark, she headed into the inn.

It was late morning and all of the nightly guests had left. The public hall only had a pair of folks cleaning the tables. The innkeeper that she remembered from the last time sat

at one of the tables, working through piles of paper and accounting.

Karin headed over. "You have a room open for a month?"

The innkeeper didn't look up. He was bald with a short trimmed hair over his ears. He was probably in his sixties. "You a heavy drinker?"

"Give me a double bed on the second floor, probably some laundry service, and a bottle of whiskey a week and I'm not going to cause problems."

"Can't give you the bottle. Town law."

"I remember. Just keep my glass full and I'll keep my head down." Karin knew what he was trying to find out. "I couldn't brawl even if I wanted to. I got hurt badly in the last hunt and I'm not up to any trouble."

"Hunt?" The innkeeper turned to her. "You are one of the Rats?" His face brightened. "You were. I remember you."

She nodded.

"A month you said?"

"Yes."

"Normally, it's thirty a night. Fifty days in Punmahik, so fifteen hundred."

"I can pay that." She could easily afford a year of the inn before having to cash in scrips. Her job had paid well and she didn't have anything else to spend it, so she kept it squirreled away for when she did retire.

"You helped this town so I'll throw in a bottle's worth of the local whiskey in. And laundry, as long as it isn't blood or vomit. Deal?"

"Deal. Cash okay?"

Chapter 5

Discomfort

No greater pleasure, no greater vice, than a warm bed on a cold night.
—Tindel de Prur, *Of Stars Above the Travelers*

Karin hissed in pain as she leaned back on her headboard. She had both of her pillows propped up behind her but her shoulders still rested against the cool wood. As the surface warmed up, she slumped and closed her eyes.

It was almost heaven not having a horse jostling her or even moving.

“I’m never going to walk again.”

Her body still throbbed. There was no escaping the ache in her joints or the pressure in her chest. Her left breast felt swollen and hard, it would be another thirty days before the alchemical mixture broke down. Until then, everything would continue to hurt relentlessly.

She remained still for as long as she could, then rolled to her side. Propping one leg up, she dug her hip into the soft mattress and buried her face against the warm headboard.

After a few minutes, she had to adjust her position again. “I need a damn drink.”

Karin wondered if she had the strength to head downstairs to ask for the bottle. No, a glass. She wasn't allowed to have a bottle no matter what she had done for the village. She snorted to herself and rolled back over to find a new comfortable position.

After what felt like hours, she finally decided to get the will to get dressed and find her bottle of whiskey. No, for her glass. She probably had to stay down in the public room if she wanted to finish the bottle.

Scratching her armpit, she caught some knotted hairs with her fingers. Yanking them free, she winced at the discomfort but it was nothing compared to the pain that radiated from her injuries. She wondered if the hot bath was also included in the room price; her wound couldn't handle being immersed but at least a rag would get her feeling clean.

She sighed and levered herself up. Every movement was difficult but she managed to get her legs off the mattress and on the ground. Sweat prickled along her brow just from the effort of sitting up.

It was going to be a long night.

Someone knocked on her door.

Karin's heart raced as she looked around sharply for her weapon. Spotting the hilt of her sword wedged between the mattress and the frame, she grabbed it and yanked it clear. The blade shone as her magic danced along the metal. In the back of her head, she felt the sharpness of the edge except for a single nick. Reflexively, she smoothed it with a little surge of power.

The door cracked open. "Hello?"

It was a woman's voice, one that Karin vaguely remembered from her last visit.

A throb of pain reminded Karin that she was naked. She reached back and grabbed the thin blanket, pulling it

across to drape it over her nakedness even as she moved her sword to keep it clear in case of danger.

Another knock “Are you in here?”

Karin finally spoke. “Yes?” She cleared her throat. “Yes.”

“I brought dinner and your first glass, if you want. Are you interested? If not, I can leave it outside your door.”

Her stomach rumbled with need. The tip of her sword lowered for a moment. “Y-Yeah, come on in.”

The door creaked opened and then she stepped in carrying a large platter on her shoulder. The first things Karin noticed was the steaming bowls of food, a glass bottle of the local whiskey, and an empty glass. Then her eyes trailed down to the rich blues of the woman’s dress. The white top underneath the loose bodice framed the enticing mounds of her breasts and her slender waist.

The other woman looked into the room. Her eyes widened. “Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you were...” Her eyes, a pale brown, scanned across Karin.

Karin looked down. Most of her body was exposed to the air, the crisscross of countless scars covering every inch. Some of them were thick bands of larger creatures but there was also patches of leech bites, rough skin, and even a rainbow of discolored flesh from needing alchemical healing too many times.

It had been a rough six years.

Karin felt naked under the other woman’s look. Normally that wasn’t a problem, but she wanted to look more appealing than she was. Tightening the blanket over her breast, she spread it out. “Sorry, I forgot... I wasn’t... dressed.

A smile brightened the room. “Old Rooster told me that you were healing from an injury and will be with us for a while.”

With a blush, Karin carefully sheathed her sword before she dragged the rest of the blanket over her legs. “Sorry.”

She felt clumsy and flushed. She clutched the blanket tighter as she inched back on the bed. At least until the back of her knee hit the edge of the bed and she realized she couldn't easily lever herself up without exposing herself more.

"Was it another creature like you save us from? A... slither?"

"N-No," Karin stammered. "We were here for a slather nest. This time, it was one bug, about the size of a cow with a stinger about this long." She held up her hands about eighteen inches apart.

The other woman frowned. "That sounds painful."

Karin's injury throbbed and she tightened her grip on the blanket covering her breasts. "It was."

"Well, I'm glad you decided to stay with us. I'll take good care of you."

Karin's heart beat a little faster. "I-I'm Karin."

"Suras. In fact, if you need anything, just yell for Sur and I'll come running." She smiled broadly while she used her foot to drag a small stool out from the corner and used it to prop her platter on it. She looked around and then held up a finger. "Why don't you get back on the bed and I'll get a bed tray from the newlywed room."

"I can eat at the table."

"Not on my watch. I want you comfortable and the bed is the best place, right?"

Karin nodded with agreement.

"Then move your rear back into place and I'll be right back."

Karin smiled as Suras hurried out the room. She started to push herself back on the bed but then realized she was naked. Groaning, she crawled out of bed and limped over to her pack. Opening it, she was blasted by the smell of musty

fabric, swamp water, and rotting food. Frowning, she dug in for a cleaner shirt.

It took her a moment to find the cleanest shirt. It had a few stains on the sleeves, but it was fairly well protected against the elements by multiple layers of wrapping. She shook it out then winced as her injury throbbed.

Glancing at the door, she slipped it on and started to button it up.

Her fingers were on the second button when Suras spoke up from the door. "Have you really been in the field so long you don't remember how to enjoy a bed?"

Karin turned with a blush. "S-Sorry."

Then she realized her breasts were still sticking out of her shirt. She tugged the fabric together and fumbled with her buttons. "I didn't... I wasn't wearing anything."

Suras set down a bed tray and walked over. "Here, let me."

Karin's heart pounded in her chest.

With sure fingers, Suras brushed along Karin's fingers to capture the second button. She worked it through the hole and then slid her fingertips up to the third to fasten it.

Karin stared at her closing her buttons. The discomfort of having her breasts jostled had somehow faded underneath the rush of having Suras so close.

Suras froze on the third button. "Oh, the Couple," she gasped.

Trembling, Karin glanced down. Her breasts were framed by the shirt, held up by the edge of fabric. The wound on her side was an angry green color with the scabbed edges almost black. In a straight line that ran underneath her nipple, there was a thick dark line that ended in a black and yellow bruise across her cleavage.

A hundred things rushed through Karin's head. Her mouth opened and closed.

Suras tugged the next button slightly. "Does this hurt?" Karin nodded.

Shaking her head, Suras released the button and worked her way down, freeing each one until the two tails of fabric dangled from Karin's curves.

"W-What are you doing?" Karin's body burned with anticipation as sweat prickled her brow. No one had ever undressed her like that, at least no one who wasn't a lover.

"I'm taking off your shirt."

A heat blossomed inside Karin. She breathed deeply as her nipples grew harder and she felt an ache in her chest.

Suras slipped the fabric off Karin's shoulder. "Back to bed."

"W-What about... I'm naked."

Suras smiled, the same brilliant expression that Karin remembered from a year ago. "It won't be the first time I've seen a lovely... a warrior naked. You need to recover and I can't have you in pain just to eat. If you are more comfortable without clothes, then I'll just have to serve you that way."

Karin wasn't sure how to respond.

Suras lead her to the bed. "Please? Just relax and I'll take care of you."

Before Karin realized it, she was nestled back in her bed with pillows propped up behind her back, a cloth covering her thighs, and the tray set up over her legs.

Suras held up a second large cloth above her chest. "Will this hurt if I put it here to catch food?"

Karin felt foolish but shook her head.

Gently lying it down over Karin's breasts, Suras brought the plates of food and set them up. There was a rich stew, a thick cut of steak, and freshly baked bread. In the little holes along the side of the tray, she put bowls of oil, butter,

and spices. "I don't know how you like your meat or how how to spice it."

"Rare, dripping blood. And I like things tangy."

Suras smiled. "I have no trouble with dripping and tangy."

Somehow, the way she said it brought an even hotter flush to Karin's cheeks.

Suras pulled out a short, wide glass and set it on the top of the tray. She followed with a bottle with a blue label that matched her dress. "Here is your measure of whiskey. This is a twelve year Barnsveld. My grandfather set it in an oak cask when he was younger so it's not quite as rich as a fresh cask but it still has a nice mellow taste with a satisfying finish." She spoke as she poured three fingers into the glass.

Karin breathed in the smells. It brought a smile to her lips.

"You know I can't give you the bottle, but I'll be up frequently to check on you and take your dishes. Are you going to want dessert? We have a few apple pies and some rice pudding."

Overwhelmed, Karin just nodded.

Suras picked up her tray and pushed the stool to the side. "I'll be up on the next bell. If you need me earlier, just yell for me. I'll get you a bell or something for emergencies. Anything else?"

"Um... no, thank you."

"Then I'll be up soon."

Chapter 6

Payment

The ravages of war don't stop on the battlefield. Warriors keep fighting them day after day, but the destruction comes at the bottom of a bottle, a turned shoulder, and the nightmares that refuse to stop with daylight.

—A Warrior's End (Act 3, Scene 3)

A few bells later, Karin enjoyed a blissful buzz that took the edge off her pain and made the seconds race past in a blur. She smiled to herself and looked down to her glass; she kept it on the joint of her leg and hip. The caramel-colored liquid was almost the same shade as the patch of hair next to her knuckles, though there was less than an inch left in the bottom of the glass.

She lifted the glass and took a deep breath of the heady scent before sipping it. The warmth and sting of it sliding down her throat felt good. She smiled and set it back down.

Suras knocked quietly on the door. "Still awake?"

"Yes."

The waitress came in and held up the bottle. "Another?"

"No, I think I'm done for the night. Oh, that's for you." Karin gestured to a small stack of crowns on the corner of the desk. It was a healthy amount but more than a tip.

“What’s that?”

“Just some coins for your trouble.”

“Oh, thank you.” Suras immediately gestured to Karin’s packs. “You want me to clean those? It looks... and smells like you went through a swamp.”

Karin laughed bitterly. “A swamp? Yeah, two of them, one at each end of this last tour.”

“How long?”

“Just shy of three months, about a hundred fifty days or so. It’s pretty rank in there, I’ll deal with the larger bag when I’m on my feet. The smaller has my tools, the larger is just foul-smelling clothes.”

Suras wrinkled her nose and then walked over to the bed. She rested her hand on Karin’s outstretched knee. “Anything else tonight?”

There was an instant flush of heat coursing through Karin’s body. The warmth of Suras’s hand on her skin felt good, though in her immediate fantasy, the hand would slide down Karin’s scarred thigh to the warmth between her legs.

Karin’s hand tightened on her glass. “N-No. I think I’m good.”

“If you’re sure.” Suras’s hand tightened briefly before she pulled it away. “Do you like baths?”

Karin moaned softly. “I haven’t had one of those in months. I would love one.”

“In the morning, after the night guests leave, I’ll have a bath drawn for you. That way, you’ll have a couple hours to soak without interruptions.”

“Thank you.”

The younger woman turned and headed out, her hips swaying back and forth. Her blue skirt flared out as she spun on her heels and reached over to grab Karin’s larger

bag. Looking over her shoulder, she hefted it. “Just clothes, right?”

Stunned, Karin nodded.

“I’ll get these cleaned.”

Without another word, she headed out of the room with a flutter of her dress.

Karin held up her almost empty glass but the words wouldn’t come out.

The door shut behind Suras, latching firmly.

Alone in the room, Karin couldn’t help but stare at the door and imagine Suras was still in with her. Her hand reached up to stroke her knee where the younger woman touched her; it was still hot from the caress. Slowly, she drew her fingertips down her inner thigh, pretending it was Suras that was sliding down to the junction of her legs.

Cupping herself, she ground her palm against the heat that had gathered. She smiled and leaned back as she let her fantasies take her along into the night.

Chapter 7

Peaches

Over the years, the term “peach” became synonymous with the growing community of lesbians that stretched from Tarsan and Kormar and clear down to the godless deserts.

—*Women in Love With Women*

Karin tested the water with her finger. It would have been hot for most people but for her, it was barely warm. However, it was better than nothing. There were a few things that being in the fields had taught her: never turn down a meal, keep her underwear as dry as possible, always seal her boots, and never pass up a bath that wasn't filled with mud and leeches.

Slipping off a robe that Suras had found for her, Karin levered herself over the edge of the wooden tub with a hiss of pain. Every movement caused her chest to ache. As the warmth enveloped her, she let out a soft moan and sank into it. She slid along the wooden seat until her shoulders rested along the tub's edge and only her nipples peeked out of the water. Almost immediately, her injuries throbbed more painfully but she didn't care anymore. She was just happy she was immersed in clean water.

“Oh, sweet mother of mercy,” she whispered to herself. She didn’t really believe in the Divine Couple, not after killing hundreds of beasts twisted by magic and alchemy. There were no gods in the world, only the insanity of mages and the corrupting effects of magic.

She reached up and rested her wrist on the edge of the tub. Spreading her legs, she enjoyed the warm currents as they ran along her body and nethers.

“You look comfortable,” Suras said as she came into the bathing area.

“For the most part.” Karin smiled. “Thank you. I haven’t had a bath in months. Even a warm one like this.”

Suras set down a small tray.

When Karin spotted a bottle of whiskey and a glass, she smiled. “You know me already.”

Suras poured a healthy measure into the glass before giving it to Karin. She gestured down to the water and the naked body underneath the surface.

Karin dipped her chest lower, immerse her nipples under the surface. A blush rose in her cheeks.

“How much hotter do you want it?”

Karin grinned. “I doubt you could make it hot enough for me.”

Suras leaned over the edge, her bodice almost skimming across the water. “You’d be surprised.”

Karin found herself only inches away from Suras’s freckled face. The urge to reach up and touch her was overwhelming for a moment. Her eyes slowly rose to focus on the freckles that dusted across Suras’s nose and cheeks. The little dark motes drew her in, she fought not to lift her body out of the water to kiss them. She wasn’t sure how Suras would respond, most women didn’t care for surprise affections.

But that didn't stop the fantasies from racing through her thoughts.

Suras reached out, trailing her fingertips along the surface. She drew a wide circle along the surface, her hand sailing over Karin's submerged breasts, across her side, and then down across her thighs.

The searing heat blossomed in the wake of her movement. She could feel it washing over her flanks and thighs. More of it flowed between her legs, prickling her nethers with a welcoming caress. Her recent injuries burned but she didn't care while immersed in what would be the most perfect bath of her life. "Oh, yes..." she moaned.

She leaned her head back to rest it on the edge. "That is what I need."

Suras lifted her fingertip and flicked a droplet away. "Judging from that adorable sound, I got it hot enough?" She raised an eyebrow and smirked.

Karin panted as she stared at the younger woman. The heat swirling around her made it difficult not to think about how attractive Suras was. The urge to reach out redoubled. She clutched the edge of the tub until her knuckles creaked.

Suras, who still leaned over the edge of the tub, turned to Karin. Her lips pursed for a moment before she smiled.

They were only inches away from each other.

"Anything else you want?" she whispered.

Karin whimpered. "I..." The words died in her throat. She fought the urges of reaching forward to kiss her and the desire to look away to hide her desires.

Suras remained still for a moment. Then she stood up. "Well, if there is anything you need, just call. I don't have much to do until sundown, so I can take all the time I want." There was a pause, almost teasing, before the younger woman straightened. "All you have to do is ask."

Karin froze, a quizzical thought slithering through her head. Was Suras interested in her? Or was it her just being friendly? If the former, then a stolen kiss would bring them closer. But if the latter, then it wouldn't be any chances later down the line.

She closed her eyes for a moment. The older she got, the more she struggled with the fencing of desires among people. She understood the blade. She knew monsters and how to kill them. But beautiful woman—alluring ones—they required a finesse that she didn't think she had anymore.

Karin let out her breath and sank deeper into the water. She glanced up at her glass. She could use a drink but she had to wait until after Suras left, she didn't the younger woman to see her hand shaking.

The door to the bathing area creaked open. "I'll come up in about an hour with more whiskey. Anything else you'd like me to bring?"

Karin waved her other hand. "Just bring yourself."

"Do you want me to bring back some fruit? I have a peach or two that I think you'd love to taste."

Muscles in Karin's check tightened painfully. A flare of heat bubbled between her legs, spreading out through the rest of her body as she let out her breath in a shuddering sigh.

"I could bring two, one for you and one for me?"

Karin lifted herself and looked over her shoulder to the front door. Suras leaned against the door frame, the opening held open with one hand. She had a smile on her lips.

As Karin watched, Suras arched her back and her breasts rose up, hard nipples tenting the fabric. "You know, I like peaches too."

"Y-You do?"

"One might even say, I like them juicy and tangy. Though, not every beautiful warrior coming through the

inn is into them, so I have to step carefully.” Suras stepped away from the door. “So I’m hoping that you like peaches too.”

Karin lifted herself up to turn around, kneeling on the seat. She started to lean against the edge, but pressure on her breast caused a burst of agony that stopped her.

Suras took another step. “So, was I right?”

Gulping for air, Karin nodded. “I-I do, I love peaches.”

Karin watched as the younger woman approached the bath. She tilted her head up as Suras cupped her chin. The touch was electric and overwhelming. It seemed to set her skin on fire.

Leaning over, Suras brought her lips to Karin’s but not quite touching. “I would like to kiss you,” she whispered.

“Please,” came the moan.

Suras leaned forward and their lips brushed. Hers were soft and sweet, with just a hint of fruit and whiskey. She slowly took another kiss and then a third, each time pushing slightly harder to Karin.

Karin’s heart pounded in her chest as she kissed back. Her breasts ached from the effort but the heady embrace pushed it back. The assault of sweetness and discomfort tore through her but she didn’t dare stop kissing the beautiful woman who wanted her.

Suras shifted to the side.

Karin hesitated, unsure of what she was doing.

When Suras lifted one leg and stepped into the tub, Karin gasped. She still wore her dress which immediately billowed in the waters. The fabric tugged along Karin’s bare thighs, caressing and touching.

Suras sank down into the water until she was sitting next to Karin, their lips almost even with each other. Her hand slid down from Karin’s chin to her shoulders. Her fingertips ran along the sweat-slicked skin.

Karin inhaled and pulled back. “Not my breasts,” she whispered.

“Of course. May I go lower?”

Shivering with anticipation, Karin spread her legs and nodded.

Suras leaned forward slightly. The top of her bodice, the white fabric, had turned transparent and clung to her firm breasts. Her nipples stuck out, begging to be sucked.

Karin held out her hands. “May I?”

Suras reached down with one hand, sliding her palms along Karin’s inner thighs as she drew her hand up to the junction of the warrior’s legs. She beamed happily and pushed her breasts forward, filling Karin’s hand with the warmth. “I would very much like that.”

And then her fingers ran along Karin’s slit and it became impossible to say anything.

Revelations

Karin bucked her hips, driving Suras's fingers deeper into her body. Soft grunts escaped her throat as she twisted the sheets, enjoying the rapidly increasing pleasure from the thrusting digits inside her depths and the soft lips clamped on her clitoris.

She arched her back until her injuries throbbed. "J-Just a bit more, a bit more! Please?"

Suras lapped harder, swirling her tongue and thrusting deeper until her knuckles smacked against soaked skin. With every withdrawal, Karin could feel her hairs clinging to her lover's fingers.

Karin's orgasm climbed the cliff, the sensation of pleasure about to burst inside her rose with every grunt and thrust. She screwed her eyes shut and rotated her hips. She cried out wordless as the pleasure continued to build until it finally reached a peak.

With a liquid surge, it exploded inside her. Every muscle in her body began to shake as her leg collapsed underneath her. Her other drew closer to Suras's head and she reached down to grab her lover's hair to pull her close as she lost herself in the waves of ecstasy.

As the pleasure ebbed, so did Karin's grip on Suras's hair. She panted and slumped back, a smile painted on her lips. Her entire body hummed with her afterglow except for the ache across her chest.

Suras gave one last lingering lick before leaning forward to rest her cheek on the side of Karin's inner thigh. She smiled broadly. "I told you I liked peaches."

Panting, Karin chuckled. "Fine, come up here and let me —"

"No."

"What?" Karin started down past her breasts. "What?" she repeated.

"Not until your injuries are healed. I just saw you grimacing."

"I was coming."

"Yes, but you were also in pain. Now, I like the cute noises you make when you come plus..." She brought her fingers to her mouth and licked them. "... you taste pretty good. But until you can handle the pressure, you have to suffer with getting fingered and licked."

Karin started for a moment, then a wry smile crossed her face. "Suffer? But you need to come too."

Suras rocked her head back and forth. With a chuckle, she reached down and lapped at Karin's sensitive clit. "Suffer."

Karin shivered with pleasure and discomfort. She held up her hands. "Okay."

"Good." Suras leaned back on Karin's thigh and ran her fingers along the scarred leg.

Karin enjoyed the touch, floating in the ebbing waves of pleasure.

"So many scars," whispered Suras.

Karin tensed slightly. "It's been a rough six years."

"Six years? All this in that short time?" Suras ran her finger along the countless scratches and wounds that criss-

crossed her body. The touch was electric, even though she could feel the ridges of her injuries underneath her lover's fingertips.

"Hunting is rough," Karin said with a sigh. "Every few weeks, we're going into a nest or breaking into an abandoned mage's mansion. On the good days, it's just animals twisted by magic and resonance. On a bad day, it's someone practicing genetic magic or trying to raise the dead."

Karin reached down to cup her naked breast, her palm cupping over the healing injury. It hurt, but it also felt comforting. "The little scratches aren't so bad... unless they get infected. And I've seen my insides too many times to look forward to it."

"Sounds horrible."

More than once, Karin said the same thing. Usually when she was lying in a bed waiting for an alchemical pack to stop throbbing in her bones or crying out as Roal sewed her stomach together. Her body ached always now, each injury leaving its mark on her bones like her history being written on her skin.

Suras shifted slightly, her small breasts lifting off the bed as she moved her head to Karin's other thigh. She reached up to cup Karin's pussy.

Karin tensed. "No more, at least right now." She squirmed. "I'm a little sensitive still."

Suras didn't move it but she didn't do anything else. Her eyes looked down Karin's other thigh.

Karin felt naked under the look. "I just can't stop hunting, not yet."

Lifting her head, Suras gave her a quizzical look.

Karin felt guilty by what she said. She could stop, she wanted to, but there was never the right situation. No village felt like home, no city either. She longed for the qui-

eter days of her life, but at the same time, it was hard to imagine living without the rush that came from hunting.

She sighed. "I guess I could... if I really wanted to."

"If you don't want to, then don't."

"I've thought about it, just... never happened. I don't have a home anymore and I never found a place to set down roots."

"What happened?"

"Me and my husband realized we didn't like each other anymore. After our son got married, we went our separate ways. Well, he stayed in Briar Patch and I took the first carriage out." Karin chuckled. "Four hours after arriving in Stonenum City, I was on my first hunt."

Suras shifted slightly. Then she pushed herself up to her hands and knees. Her slender body looked beautiful, as much as her glistening face from lapping too hard. She gingerly crawled over Karin's legs and then shifted up to her side.

When she kissed Karin, Karin could taste her own juices on her lover's lips.

Karin smiled and kissed her back.

After a few moments, she broke the embrace. "I can't wait to get healthier before I can have some peaches of my own."

Suras beamed. "Don't worry. I'll be riding your face soon enough. You just have to wait."

She held up her hand and pressed her two longer fingers together. "Unless you want to go another round?"

Karin thought about it but then shook her head. Leaning her head back, she noticed the orange glow through the window. "No, I just want to cuddle. Besides, you have to work soon, right?"

Suras glanced up and sighed. "Yes, but I don't want to."

Karin slipped her arm underneath Suras and pulled her close. “Then just come here until you have to leave.”

Sharpened

Before everyone arrived, Karin had claimed one of the corners booths so she didn't have to worry about anyone coming up behind her. She had her glass of whiskey in her hand, the first for the evening, and she planned on making her drink last until Suras stopped working at midnight.

She leaned back and scratched her side. It had been over a week since she arrived at the inn but her breast and chest still ached. The scab had almost fallen off, a few more days of scratching at the edges, and it would be gone.

Movement to her side brought a smile. She turned to enjoy Suras walking around the tables with a platter. She had dinner, a steaming meal of steak and potatoes, and the ever-present bottle of local whiskey. This week's was an older bottle with a much deeper and richer flavor to it.

"Hello there." Tonight, Suras wore her blue dress again. It looked much different than when it was swirling in the bathtub like the first day they found each other.

Karin smiled. "Hello, Beautiful."

"Here is your dinner, just like you enjoy it: dripping wet with a bit of tang."

Karin grinned and took the plate. "I do love that."

Suras gestured to the glass with still a finger's worth of whiskey on the bottom. "Don't need a refill?"

"Not yet, I want this one to last."

Suras's eyes sparkled. She leaned over, her breasts pushing up against the thin fabric of her bodice. "Don't worry, I'll get something wet later."

Karin reached out and stroked her fingers along the back of Suras's hand. It was warm and touching. "I'm hoping for desert."

Suras glanced around and then reached up. She stretched over until her breast rested in Karin's hand. The warmth was overwhelming as much as the hard nipples that teased her palm. Reaching up, Suras brought her hand to hover over Karin's breast.

Karin cringed.

Suras ground her breast into Karin's hand. "Not yet."

"Soon?"

"I hope so. I'm looking forward to feeling your lips on my pussy."

Karin moaned with need.

The door opened and a trio of farmers came in. Karin had seen them before, they were usually rough and cranky until they got a few lagers into them. They headed straight for the table they usually used and sat down heavily. "Sur, Dinner!"

Suras pulled her breast out of Karin's hand. "I need to work."

Karin nodded with understanding. She watched Suras get their orders before she started on her meal. The steak was delicious, as usual. However, the knife was a bit dull and dragged through the meat.

She concentrated on the edge for a moment, feeling the magic bubble up from her core and sink into the metal. The nearly invisible nicks disappeared. The edge itself nar-

rowed until the edge was sharp enough to score steel. Glancing at the plate, she blunted the metal not to accidentally slice through the utensils.

When she tried again, the blade easily cut through the meat. With a smile, she dug into her meal.

Karin amused herself by watching Suras serve the others. She could easily spend the rest of the month right where she was, with a lover in the morning and good food during the night. Of course, she'd probably get bored and lash out at someone sooner or later. She was a hunter after all.

"Hey, Sur! Why'd you give me the crappy knife? You know I hate this one!" It was Mal, one of the farmers. He held up an offending knife in his hand.

His friends laughed.

Suras came out. She rolled her eyes and took the knife. "Sorry, Mal, let me get you another one."

Karin held up her finger.

Suras cocked her head and frowned in confusion. She headed over, holding the knife by the blade. When she got closer, she stopped. "Yes?"

"Let me see that." Karin held out her hand for the knife.

Still looking confused, Suras handed it over.

Karin could feel the dull edge as she picked up the blade. She turned it over in her palm while sharpening it. When she handed it back, it was sharper than it had ever been before. "Here, take this back. It's fine."

"No, he's right. There is a couple bad blades. Usually I avoid them but I was distracted by someone beautiful."

Karin gently took it back. She held it by the blade and centered it on the remains of her steak. She released it and the blade sank through the meat, cutting it in half.

She looked up and smiled. "I think it's sharp enough."

Suras's mouth opened in surprise.

Karin smirked and handed her the knife again.

With a bemused look on her face, Suras returned it to Mal. The belligerent man resisted for a moment, but when he went to prove it was dull, it easily cut through his food. With a stammered apology, he ducked his head and returned to eating.

A few minutes later, Suras returned. "What did you do?"

Karin shrugged. "That's my talent, I made it sharper."

"Really?"

"I sharpen blades by touching them." She gave a sheepish grin. "That's why I'm such a good hunter."

It also made her a good assistant to a chef. Her thoughts briefly darken when she thought about her husband. They had fallen in love in the kitchen. It was also where they broke apart.

Suras made a surprise sound and drew Karin out of her thoughts. Looking up, she saw the younger girl smile beautifully and realized she was happier since she ceased to be a cook.

Her lover turned quickly, fluttering her dress out. Her right ass cheek bumped against Karin's hand before she headed for the kitchen.

For the first time in many years, Karin considered following.

Turnaround

Karin sat on her bed, naked as usual. She had one hand on her breast, toying with her nipple with her index finger and the fading scars of her injury with her thumb. It still ached underneath her grip but she had to maul herself to really feel the discomfort.

That meant that she was almost ready for the field again. Her thoughts drifted through fond memories of the field: seeing the bright stars far away from the cities, the rush of triumph as she helped clear out a nest of monsters, and even the long hours ranting to Roal about their respective ex-spouses.

But for all the fond memories, there were also the parts she already dreaded. How many days would it be before she woke up in water? Or scratching at some infected wound? She could remember the long nights of being too cold and the days of being too hot. The screams of her fellow hunters as they were slaughtered haunted her dreams, nightmares that were only pushed aside when she was in the comfort of Suras's arms.

Suras. Karin smiled to herself and focused her movement to stroking her hardening nipple. The last month had

been the best of Karin's life. She loved the attention, both sexual and affectionate. Having a comfortable bed didn't hurt, more so when Suras had spent almost every night in it.

Her body grew warm underneath her touch. She rested her other hand along her pubis, stroking along her slit as she thought about the way Suras brought her to an orgasm.

It was Karin's turn now. The only reason she wasn't between Suras's legs every night was because of her injury. She dug her fingers into her breast to prove that the pain had moved into a deep discomfort instead of a surface agony. Even the throb of the alchemical pack had faded into a faint itch between her joints.

Leaning back, she idly played with herself as she waited for Suras to arrive. It was the weekend, when Suras spent her days at the family distillery for her contribution to the town's excellent whiskey. When she came back, she always smelled of smoke and spirits, two scents that paired perfectly with the smell of an aroused lover.

A knock at the door. "Karin?" It was Suras.

A surge of heat danced underneath Karin's fingers. She grew wetter with anticipation. "Yes."

Suras opened the door just enough to slip in. Her dress was shorter to reveal her long, slender legs. The bright blue fabric fluttered up to reveal white underwear. She closed the door behind her, latching it shut.

The smell of ash and wood smoke filled the air. Karin breathed it in, enjoying the heady flavors.

"Sorry, it was burning day. I had to fire a couple dozen barrels." She lifted up her hair and then chuckled. "I smell like smoke and need... a..." Her voice trailed off as she made a double take at Karin. She smiled brightly. "Now, that is something I'd like to come home to."

“Good, because I’m in the moody for something with a little tang.” Karin beckoned with her damp finger.

Suras swayed her hips as she approached. “Are you sure? Your injuries are—”

“I want you,” Karin said. She sat up and grabbed Suras by the buttocks, drawing her closer. Her mouth caught the firm nipple in her lips. The smell of smoke was caught in her lover’s clothes, it surrounded her with the rich scents that would later be infused into the whiskey.

Suras moaned. Her hand rested lightly on Karin’s shoulder. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Karin ground her breasts to Suras’s legs until her injury ached. She sucked on the hard nipple, drawing it to hardness through the layers of fabric between them. Gasping, she moved from one breast to the other, teasing each one.

“Oh, Couple,” whispered Suras. She arched her back into Karin’s questing mouth.

Karin worked the bottom of Suras’s dress up until her palm ground against her lover’s buttocks. That only stopped her briefly before she delved her fingers underneath the slightly sweaty fabric to the hairy slit underneath. Swirling her fingers from both sides, she fingered her lover.

“I... oh... love, I don’t have much time.”

Karin levered Suras to the side.

When her lover fell onto the bed, she rolled on her back. Her cheeks were flushed and her knees spread open. Her lips parted.

Karin knelt next the bed. With trembling hands, she pushed her lover’s dress up to catch the underwear underneath. “I’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

“So have I,” whispered Suras. “However, I need to take a bath before I work.”

Karin grinned and pulled away the fabric from her lover's treasure. "You'll have time. Just let me have a little taste."

Sharpening

Karin sat in her customary spot in the great hall, enjoying the last week of her trip. It was the first day, which meant a new bottle of whiskey. She rocked her empty glass with one hand with anticipation.

Mal and a bunch of farmers came in, wearing their best clothes from going to the small church down the street. A few of them nodded to Karin before sitting down at their tables near the center.

Suras came sweeping in. She had picked out her green dress for the day, one that Karin enjoyed watching her pull on before they had to their separate ways. She had a whiskey bottle in her hand but it looked different than the others she had served Karin before. “I’ll be with you in a minute, Mal.”

“Take your time, Sur.” He was in a good mood, but then church service always brought out the sweeter side of the village.

Suras walked over to Karin and held out the bottle. Her eyes were shimmering as she set it down. “For your last week.”

Karin frowned and looked at the bottle. It had the familiar Barnsveld Distillery logo on it along with the date it was decanted but underneath it was a single name and a number: Suras, Number 2.

Suras started to say something, but then her voice cracked. She wiped her face and then tried again.

Karin looked up with confusion. "Suras?"

"I... I... damn it." Suras pulled out a chair and sat down. "I thought this would be appropriate."

"Why is your name on it?"

A tear ran down Suras's cheek. "It's the family tradition. On our first birthday, we set aside a cask aside. Throughout our lives, we serve those bottles to celebrate special events: when we come of age, when we get married, wedding anniversaries. It's only for special moments in my life, those times when everything changes or to celebrate being together."

Karin realized she was crying herself.

Suras lifted the bottle and looked at the label. "The first one when I turned sixteen." She sighed. "I got really sick and almost died a few times. When I lost most my summer and fall that year, my legs not working and I couldn't leave my bed. It wasn't until this icy winter night that I managed to take my first step again."

She smiled and the room seemed to brighten. No one was talking and Karin noticed that everyone was looking down at the table as they listened to Suras's quiet words.

"The next day, my parents and grandfather came up that night with the first bottle from the cask. Number one. We drank it that week, just a glass at a time as I got stronger."

Suras looked up and smiled. "I lost my father a few weeks later when the roof collapsed on him. He still had bottles left from his, so we celebrated by drinking those. Everyone in the town came to the inn because I still

couldn't walk far. We drank and celebrated until the last bottle remained."

She turned and pointed toward the top of the walls. There was a long shelf of bottles, each one different, that circled the room. "The last one of his is up there along with grandmother's."

In the silent room, everyone held up a glass for a moment. The soft clink of them setting it down was a chorus that had the weight of tradition.

Karin shivered.

Suras set the glass down. "Please? I know you are leaving soon, but you are the most wonderful thing that has happened in my life. I would like this to be your last bottle."

Karin sniffed, she was crying too hard to say anything.

"Please?"

Unable to speak, Karin just nodded.

With a beaming smile, Suras went and got a second glass. She brought it over and poured a healthy measure into both. Setting the bottle down in the center of the table, she sniffed. "I feel silly."

Karin reached out with one hand to hold Suras. "You aren't being silly. I love it. I... thank you for everything."

They toasted each other silently before drinking. It was the smoothest whiskey Karin had ever had. She felt almost sad as she enjoyed it.

After only a few sips, Suras had to excuse herself to serve the others.

Karin watched her lover wipe the tears from her eyes as she got the farmer's orders. She gave Karin a smile before heading into the kitchen area.

She looked down at the glass and felt the tears rising up again. She would have never expected Suras giving anything like that, it felt like she had her lover's heart in her

hand. Slowly, she rolled the glass from one side to the other before she took a sip.

Karin had considered staying beyond. The last month had made her happier than in a long time but she wasn't sure it would last. There was a big difference between enjoying the blush of lust of two new lovers. It was heady as the whiskey in her hand and left a warmth deep inside her body.

It didn't last though. When she married her husband, they were head-over-heels in love and kissing every time they passed in the kitchen. Nights were passionate affairs that slowly became a chore, drudge work, and finally petered off into arguments.

Her smile faded. The last two years of her marriage were the worse years of her life. She still remembered the screaming and fighting. It drove her to becoming a hunter and somehow risking her life every few weeks for change became preferable than to finding love again.

Someone tapping on the table next to her broke her thoughts. She looked up to see Mal standing. He toyed with the front of his good jacket. "I'd like to talk."

Startled, Karin nodded and pointed to the chair that Suras had sat.

Mal took the opposite one. He pointedly move the bottle of whiskey away from him. "You know me?"

"You're Mal."

"Maldir formally, but you can call me Mal."

"Karin."

"Rumor has it that you can sharpen blades."

A pang of sadness darkened Karin's thoughts. "I used to."

"We could use those talents here in Barnsveld, you know. Always a need for sharpening."

Karin shook her head. "I can't go back into cooking, I'm sorry."

He smiled broadly and shook his head. "No, this village isn't big enough for fancy meals. However, there are a lot of farmers here that have good tools that always need a blade: axes, hatchets, and saws. Even the plows, if you can do that."

Karin thought about the one time she had to put a blade on a metal door to kill a tomagoran. A ghost of a smile crossed her lips. She almost said that but then held her tongue.

"I know you are leaving soon but, if you consider staying, we'd have a place for you." He looked concerned and serious.

"Stay?"

Maldir nodded twice.

"Why?"

"We all like to see our Sur happy. She has been nothing but smiles since you arrived." He sighed and drew his finger through some moisture on the table. "We're a small village. We know what's going on."

"And it doesn't bother you?" Karin tensed slightly.

"Not my thing but Sur likes what Sur likes. She's taken a liking to you and we've taken to liking when she smiles."

Karin considered her thoughts earlier. "What if it doesn't work out?"

Maldir shrugged slowly. "It didn't work for my first two wives either. One runs the general store and the other works on Ted's farm." He pointed to one of the other farmers who waved back.

Karin glanced around the room. Everyone was trying not to look at her. It suddenly felt confining, as if everyone in the room was trying to match her to Suras. She squirmed for a moment.

He held up his hands. "If you leave, that's okay too. But if you do, I'm going to ask you not to return."

All the muscles in Karin's back tightened.

"We all love Suras and I don't want to see you tear out her heart every time you walk out that door." His voice had grown more tense as he spoke.

The glass in her hand seemed to draw her attention. She swirled the whiskey as she let her thoughts drift.

"You live a violent life. I lost my husband to an accident, but you run toward the danger. What kind of life is that for a young girl like her?"

Karin closed her eyes. Her son had said the same thing, that was one reason she rarely returned to visit his family. They never knew if it was going to be the last time.

Years ago, that was a risk she wanted to take. With Suras, the idea of leaving felt like a knife digging into her side. She understood Maldir's request, stay or go. She nodded, not trusting her voice.

He stood up. He tapped the table twice before he said, "I'd hate to see you go. It is nice to see the smiles and you mean a lot to our girl." His hand gestured toward the bottle left on the table. "Please, consider staying."

Chapter 12

Coins

Karin had to leave but it tore her heart open to do so. She packed her belonging quickly into her two bags, one of them still had the musty smell of the last swamp she had crawled through and the other was freshly repaired.

The clothes wouldn't remain neatly folded for long, but that was the price of being a hunter. On top of the pack, she put her set of backup knives among the fabric.

When she finished, she looked around the room until the memories rose up. Choking back a sob, she dug into her pack and pulled out a handful of coins to put on the table.

There was already a stack there, covered in dust.

Karin froze, trying to remember when she put them there.

It was the first day, she had given a stack of crowns to give to Suras for her troubles. The young woman had ignored them and took her bags to clean her clothes instead.

Another sob rose in her throat. She closed her eyes tightly and added a second stack of coins. It was pitiful, but she wanted to leave something.

She turned to leave.

Suras stood in the door of the room, tears rolling down her cheeks and her bottle of whiskey in her hand.

Karin froze as her heart pounded in her chest.

“Y-You’re leaving?”

Karin found her own emotions. “I have to.”

“Was it because of Mal? He told me he talked to you.” Suras’s voice was quiet and broken.

“Yes... no, not really.”

“I thought we had the week.”

They did, or would have. Roal wouldn’t pick up Karin until fifth day and it was only third.

Karin shook her head. “We... I have to.”

“Why?” The bottle in Suras’s grip shook, sloshing the liquid inside.

“I... I’m just going to hurt you.”

“No, you aren’t.”

Karin wiped at the tears in her eyes. “Yes, I am. I don’t think I can stop being a hunter and I can’t... I can’t hurt you every time you leave.”

“I don’t mind.”

“You should.”

“I don’t, I’d rather have a night with you than lose you.” Suras gulped before she came into the room. “Please, don’t leave.”

Karin sobbed and shook her head. “That’s the first time you asked me to stay. Would you have said that earlier?”

“I was waiting for you to decide.”

“I... I...” It was getting harder to speak. “I have to.”

A storm of emotions flashed through Suras’s eyes. Karin felt sicker with every passing moment. She couldn’t help but stare at the tears rolling down her cheeks or the way her hand clutched the bottle.

Karin tensed, waiting for the screaming or begging.

Suras held out the bottle. “Take this with you.”

Stunned, Karin stared in shock. “W-What?”

Hurrying forward, Suras pressed the bottle into Karin’s hand. When Karin couldn’t get her fingers to grip it, she reached down and carefully stuck it in Karin’s bag. Then she stepped back, her eyes shimmering and her lower lip trembling.

“Sur—”

Suras shook her head and held up her hand. “This way, you’ll always have part of me with you.”

Before Karin could say anything else, she turned and raced away. Her footsteps rang out in the hallway.

Karin felt like a monster. She looked down at the bottle of whiskey nestled in her back. “Suras, Number Two.” Probably one the most precious things Karin had ever had in her life. She felt like a monster but she had to do it, otherwise she would feel like this every time she went out on a hunt.

When Karin entered the common hall, there was no one there. No farmers drinking away the hours, no one behind the counter. She could hear sobbing in the kitchen and someone speaking soothingly. The feeling that she was one of the monsters rose and she headed toward the door.

It opened before she reached it. Roal came in, his beard sparkling with moisture. “Oh, there you are.”

Karin stopped. “You’re early.”

“No, I’m never early. I only show up when I’m needed. That’s my talent.”

“Yes, in two days.” Karin realized she was hesitating herself, but it was too late. She had already said goodbye.

He patted his ax and looked her from head to toe. “Then why are you dressed to leave? Your peach ended up being an apple?” He grinned. “That mean I have a chance or did you spoil this town for the both of us?”

Fighting the tears, Karin shook her head. “No, I’m was going to the next town over to wait for you. Please tell me there is a job.” Her breast ached with the idea of a fight.

Roal started to smile but then frowned. “No, there isn’t. I mean, I was pulled here so I assumed it was to pick you up. The rest of the Rat Hunters are in Goril, we riled up a massive blood nest and we are probably a few gallons low of blood.”

He turned and looked around. “Though, the pull to pick you up was pretty strong. I figured it meant we’re about to get a really big one.”

Karin sighed. It was going to be a long few months before she enjoyed another soft bed. She shook her head. “We better get going.”

Chapter 13

Blood

Karin was thankful that her horse had been taken care of, but a month without riding meant her rear got sore almost immediately. She sighed and adjusted her position.

“You seem sad. Did you have fun?”

Karin nodded. “Probably the best in my life, Old Man.”

“Then why were you in a hurry to leave. Lover’s spat?”

“No... I didn’t want to.”

Roal only grunted. He pointed to an intersection of two roads that met in the center of the village then slid his finger to the east. “We’re heading that way.”

“Got it.”

They rose in silence through town. The villages that saw her looked sad and she had to look away to avoid cutting her heart. Why was she leaving? Why couldn’t she just accept that Suras would love her?

But the doubt remained, would it last? Was it just going to be a flash in the pan, a love that burned almost instantly? She hated herself for fleeing.

Roal stopped his horse.

Karin looked in surprise. When she managed to rear her mount, she had to back up to meet him. “What wrong?”

He frowned and then grabbed his ax. "I'm being pulled." It was his term for his talent, the ability to show up where he was needed. It usually meant a hunt.

"I swear, if this is just an excuse to bring me back to the inn."

Roal held up his hand. Then his eyes widened. "Shit on the gods!" He reared his horse and kicked it into motion. Coming around, he spurred the stallion into a gallop.

Swearing, Karin charged after him.

They raced through the center of town and headed straight west. She didn't know the path but they were coming closer to the distillery and the farms that surrounded it.

With every pound of hooves against the ground, the feeling of danger rushed faster through her veins. Karin patted the knife on her saddle, making sure it was ready if she needed it.

When they galloped past the sign leading to the Barnsveld Distillery, she breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't want danger to take the city.

She relaxed too soon. Only a few leagues past the distillery, Roal cut across the corner of a field and raced down toward one of the outlying farms.

Then she heard the screaming.

"Ready weapons!" bellowed Roal. He slowed minutely and Karin came up next to him.

Reaching over, Karin pressed her hand against the side of his blade. The edge shone with light as she fixed the burrs and imperfections, bringing into a killing sharpness that could slice through anything.

She pulled her hand back and unsheathed her own sword, doing the same.

They hit the center of the farm where the buildings gathered around an empty area. There was blood and bodies

everywhere. She saw a man kneeling over Maldir's body screaming out in horror. She almost stopped for him but a flurry of movement caught her attention. Two teenage girls were trying to beat away a beast with only a pair of rakes.

The creature was about the size of a dog but with its long, blade-like legs, it looked larger than a cow. A massive mouth, easily twice as wide as its chest, opened up and thick ropes of drool splattered everywhere in flecks of red foam.

A slather.

"Barn on right, two inside!" bellow Roal. He threw himself from the horse and charge into the open door where a severed arm hung from a hook where a crossbeam would be used to bar it shut.

"I'm center then after you," yelled Karin back. She launched herself from her horse. The impact with the ground shook her bones but she tucked into a roll that brought herself up between the two girls trying to save themselves. Shouldering one aside, she brought her sword up and cut the slather in half.

With his head sliced in half, all of its limbs began to thrash out violently without any sense of control or purpose. A cut caught her hip but she knew she couldn't stop. Dropping her sword, she grabbed both of the girls and threw them back with all her might.

The slather's legs lashed out again. Its death throes were deadly, the limbs became a whirlwind of death as it bounced and jerked in all directions. That was one reason they had to be dealt with quickly, they also bred quickly.

Panting, Karin grabbed one of the rakes. Her magic flowed through the metal to sharpen the points. Swinging it around, she slammed the points into the side of the beast. The points punctured into flesh and snapped bone. The im-

pact shook both of them as Karin used it to throw the slather to the side to clear her sword.

She snatched up her weapon and spun around looking for the next target. There was a main house that had blood on the door, three barns, some chicken coups soaked in crimson, and a smaller shed.

One of the field hands pointed toward the main house. "I-In there! It attacked Mal—"

"Stay away then!" she bellowed. She rushed over to the shed and yanked it open. It was a tiny space but she didn't spot any killing beast. She grabbed a few of the tools and tossed them out. Turning on her heels, she gestured. "In there! Hurry! Bring Mal!"

As the farmers crowded inside, Karin helped drag Mal. "It will be cramped but you should be safe," she panted. She knew that Roal was in danger, but saving non-hunters was one of their priorities.

"T-Thank you," gasped Mal. He coughed up blood. There was more from where the slather had cut open his belly and down one leg. He wouldn't be having children ever again, if he survived.

The other farmer grabbed Karin. "He needs a healer."

Her face hardened. "These things hunt in packs. If they catch you in the field, you will both die. Trust me, you need to be safe until we can clear the nest."

As soon as she was sure they were safe in the shed, she dragged a wagon in front of it to block the door. There were too many places for danger and slathers were smart enough to flank but she needed to help Roal first. One of them couldn't take on a nest by themselves.

"Roal, incoming, main door!" she yelled as she dove into danger.

Chapter 14

Yes

Karin groaned as she slid off the saddle of her horse. A sharp pain told her that her stitches had been ripped open. Hot blood dribbled down her thigh. She swayed for a moment, leaning against her mount, before she straightened.

“Are you sure about this?” Roal gasped as he leaned over the pommel of his horse. He was covered with blood and makeshift bandages created from Maldir’s sheets. The smell of smoke clung to his body as he panted. “We can make it to the next town, they have a healer.”

Karin looked toward the inn door. She didn’t know what was on the other side but she hoped Suras would forgive her for leaving. Slowly, she nodded her head. “Yes, I think this is right.”

“No more hunting?”

Karin winced as she held her hip. The cuts covering her body were impossible to distinguish from each other except for the one on her hip. It had chipped the bone and every step was agony. “I think... I want to be done, Roal.”

He smiled and reached down to press his hand against her cheek. “Good.”

Groaning, he sat up straighter. "Just in case, I'll wait at the end of the fence. If you aren't out in an hour, I'll give you another before I head home."

"Don't you want to come in? They have more than one room."

He looked at the lights in the window. It was probably a bell before dawn. "No, this is your peach."

"She might not be after she sees what I did to her bottle."

Roal chuckled and pulled his horse around. "Enjoy the greatest hunt of your life, Old Woman. I hope to never see you in the field again."

Karin smiled as he rode away. She roped the reins of her horse to a hook and then limped to the door. At the entrance, she had to catch her breath. A thousand scenarios ran through her head, few of them were positive. Would Suras reject her? Tears? Slaps?

With a trembling hand, she opened it.

Suras sat at a table in the center of the room with an empty glass in front of her. She looked up with red rimmed eyes. Seeing Karin, she gasped and tears shimmered in her eyes.

Karin thought about everything she could say. "I... want..." No, that wasn't it. She sniffed as she reached down for her bag. It was almost completely empty but there was a few things left. Her bandaged fingers struggled to grab the now empty bottle of whiskey. Shaking, she pulled it out. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Karin!" Suras knocked back the chair as she rushed around the table. She held out her arms and pulled Karin into a hug.

Despite the agony of a thousand cuts, Karin held her lover tightly. "I-I had to use your bottle to start a fire. I-It was the only way to burn out the nest."

Suras's shoulder shook and a sob rose up.

Karin blinked past the pain and her own tears. "I'm so sorry, I had too. I had too." She let out a sob of her own. "I-I don't want to this any more. I'm tired of swamps and sleeping outside. I don't want to hurt anymore. I... I'm done hunting."

Her lover pulled her head back, staring at Karin with tears streaming down her eyes. "Stay? Please stay. I'll give you all my bottles, anything you—"

Karin silenced her with a bloody kiss.

When they broke, both of them sobbing with the effort, she managed to get one more word out. "Yes."

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

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To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

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