

Chapter 8

The Point

“Just *what* were you thinking?” Garm rubbed the bridge between his eyes. He couldn’t believe they had made it out of the city alive, let alone with what they had needed. He lifted his head to see Wylinth standing tall, arrogant and blissfully unaware of the danger she had put herself, and Muldrix, in.

Stubborn woman, Garm thought wearily. *Why did she have to go and show herself and Muldrix to everyone?*

The light of day was waning and Garm could feel his patience going with it too. Wylinth continued to look defiant while Muldrix stood next to her, his head bowed in what Garm hoped was from a guilty conscience. *At least he has the decency to look ashamed for what they did together*, Garm thought ruefully.

“I was worried about you when I saw the dragon flying into the city,” Wylinth said, drawing his attention back to her. She reached out and brushed her hand against Muldrix’s neck in a comforting gesture. “We were both worried.”

Garm watched as Muldrix melted into her touch, and he felt a twinge of jealousy for their moment, but also... something else he wasn’t sure he was ready to admit feeling. He let his frown deepen, unsure how to respond.

A load of logs being dropped to the ground made the three of them jump as they turned to find Foster standing beside the pile he had been collecting. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, hunching his shoulders and glancing at Garm, his eyes wide with concern. Hariter sat not

far away as he tended the evening fire, the book he had taken in his lap and an eyebrow raised expectantly.

Have I become that much of a grouch that even the boy fears me? Garm thought, raising his hand to the bridge of his nose again, his anger dissipating into shame. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be acting out against any of you. I’m not pleased with what you did but that can’t mean I can’t praise you a little for helping us out.”

Muldrix perked up and Wylinth suddenly appeared unbalanced.

“Are you sure?” she asked, tentatively. “You seemed ready to tear me to bits and then feed me to the dogs.”

Shaking his head grimly, Garm moved closer and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’ve been on edge ever since I laid eyes on Carag. Large crowds and I... we just don’t mix.” Wylinth raised an eyebrow and he added, “Too many bad experiences with Muldrix to really be comfortable.”

“Ah,” she said. She looked at Muldrix as she continued to stroke his neck. “I’m sorry. I guess I can kind of understand, in my own way.”

Now it was Garm’s turn to look at her askance as she shook her head. “Speaking to the people always unnerves me. I don’t know what it is, but I just can’t bring myself to do it. It’s like something takes hold of me and I can’t speak.”

Garm nodded in understanding.

“What are we going to do now?” Wylinth asked. “I can see you stole the Golden Gauntlet from Lord Antrielle, but what do we need it for?”

“That is exactly the question that I would like answered.”

Garm and the others spun around to face a man wearing leather armor over his chest and shoulders, a sword in his left hand was held at the ready as his eyes darting around the group only to rest more often on Muldrix.

“General Mortiz,” Wylinth blurted, her eyes growing nearly as big as Muldrix’s scales. “What are you doing here?”

“Tracking you down, although I’d like to ask you the same question,” he said with an accusing glance her way. “Why are you here?”

Wylinth waited a tense moment before responding, “Because I didn’t know who I could trust.”

A palpable silence filled the camp, and Garm’s eyes twitch back and forth between the princess and the general. His body was as tight as a bow string, and his hands were gripping his staff to the point that his hands hurt from the strain. *He’s not here for Muldrix*, he reminded himself. *Just relax. Until he tells us more don’t assume anything.* That last admonition was hard for him to follow as he slowly widened his stance, ready to move at a moment’s notice.

“Can you trust me?” General Mortiz asked, sheathing his sword and holding his hands out to his sides.

Wylinth’s eyes squinted as she inspected him. “I want to. By Olodrix’s light I want to.”

“Then tell me what happened,” the General said. Lowing his hands, he slowly took off his sword belt and threw it and his sword to the ground to the side of his horse. Garm lifted his staff and waited nervously as the general hopped off his horse opposite from where he had

thrown the sword. “I promise not to attack or do anything else other than listen. Please Princess. Tell me how you escaped when the rest of your family was found dead?”

Raising a hand, Wylinth pointed to where they had the beginnings of a campfire and said, “Sit.”

Obediently, the General walked over and sat on the ground, crossing his legs and waiting expectantly for the Princess to join him.

Wylinth was just about to join him, but Garm reached out a hand and stopped her. “Wait. How do we know that we can trust him? What if he was in on the plot to get your family killed?”

Wylinth’s face scrunched up in thought, but the General didn’t say a thing. Garm was hoping for a reaction that would reveal the General’s true intentions, but he remained silent. *He’s good*, Garm thought wearily. *He’s hiding something. He knows more than he’s letting on about all of this.*

Wylinth, however, seemed lost in the middle of it all. “We have to tell him, Garm. Even if he isn’t completely trustworthy, I need to hear about my kingdom and what I can do to help them. And if he is telling the truth then he needs to know what we are doing.”

Garm didn’t like it, but based on recent experience, he doubted whether he could convince her to turn the General away.

“Fine,” he conceded, “but keep it to what happened to you. If he can earn my trust, then he can learn more about me and Muldrix.”

Wylinth gave a slight nod and then joined the General by the pit. Foster and Muldrix scooted closer too as Hariter used his flint to get a fire going. Garm hung back, angry with

himself and with everyone. Leaning on the staff he stayed where he was, intending for the darkness of night to swallow him. Letting his mind wander down dark thoughts.

“...I froze, unable to bring myself to harm him.” The camp was quiet as Wylinth recalled the details of our first meeting in a cave far from where we were now. I had my head resting to her side, letting the heat of the fire warm my face.

I wish I could put my whole head in? I mused wistfully. A smile crept across my face as I remembered the first time I had done that, and Garm’s reaction to seeing me in the warm blaze of the fire. *What if I just put my tail in? Would anyone notice?*

The General would. Despite his body remaining as still as stone, his eyes had darted about like a bird of prey since arriving. Taking in all the details but never betraying his true thoughts or feelings. *No, that isn’t quite right, either,* I reasoned, a frown replacing my smile. I had seen a hawk stalk its prey before, and even I had my ways of revealing I was following my next meal. The twitch of a muscle, the itch at the back of my spine. *No. Mortiz isn’t stalking his prey. He’s trying to decide if we’re prey, or if he is.*

Satisfied with my realization, I pulled the golden gauntlets closer to me while watching the General more closely as he listened to Wylinth’s tale. *Yes, he is learning where he fits into all of this. And so are we.* Turning my gaze away, I searched for where Garm had remained standing, disturbed that rather than join us by the fire he had let the shadows of night envelope him. His mood had been dark before then, but now I could hardly make out his face in the dim light of fire, and an energy no one seemed to notice poured from him in waves across the clearing.

He's changed. I cannot place it, but something about him has changed since his trip to the city. I decided if I had time tonight that I would talk to Garm about his trip into the city. He had berated me and Wylinth on what we had done but had said nothing on what had happened to them in the city.

Garm shifted slightly, and his face lit up from the light of the fire. My bones chilled and I blinked, unable to believe what I saw. When I looked again, his face was covered in shadows once more, his eyes reflecting faintly the fire's light. *Why was he angry?* His face had been contorted in a vicious snarl that I had never seen on him before.

Worry gripped me, and I wasn't sure what to do. I wanted to speak with him, but I also needed to be near Wylinth and the others if the General turned out not to be so nice as he said.

Silence fell as Wylinth's story ended and I glanced around our circle of firelit friends. Hariter and Foster had heard the story before but seemed solemn, and Wylinth looked as if she had aged ten years, her eyes appearing gaunt and streaked with worry.

"This is an interesting tale you have shared with me tonight," General Mortiz said, drawing my attention away from Garm again. "I will have to think about it with you safely back at the Palace."

Everyone in the circle remained silent, staring at the General in a way that I had only ever seen in pictures and statues before.

"The... Palace?" Wylinth rasped out.

"Is there a problem with that?" General Mortiz asked, turning from one person to the next. "I understand that you are on a quest, but that does not mean you could not come back for

some proper food and rest. Princess, you are in no condition to be traveling, physically or mentally.”

Wylinth’s face hardened at his words. “I beg your pardon, General,” she said, grinding the title out of her mouth that made my scales ich. “But after everything that I have gone through I think that a little time away from the pressures of the kingdom might do me some good.”

This time it was the General’s turn to look sour. “Princess, if I could have a word with you in private?”

“General, I—”

“No!” Garm said, finally coming from out of the shadows. “Whatever you have to say you can say it to all of us. We have not traveled together this long just to be set aside because you think of us beneath you.”

“On the contrary,” General Mortiz said, standing and facing Garm. “I hold you in high regard for your endeavors to keep her majesty safe. However, there are secrets that I must keep if I am to uphold my job as Regent to this country.”

“To which I applaud your courage for doing so, but I must insist with Garm in this matter Mortiz. The time for secrets has passed, if I am going to lead our county then I need to do so with those I trust around me.”

“And you trust these men? You know their character enough to stake your life on them?”

“I do.”

My eyes darted back and forth between the Princess and Mortiz, my scales itching to the point that it was becoming unbearable. “Would someone mind giving me a scratch? I can reach it, but it always feels better when someone else can get to it.”

“It speaks!” Mortiz said as Foster jumped to my rescue. His eyes were wide with worry as he came to stand beside me and began to dig his fingernails into my scales.

“Ah, that’s better,” I said, letting out a long low sigh.

Mortiz continued to stand where he was. His jaw was still hanging as if he were about to scream profusely at me.

“The beast actually speaks!” Mortiz finally said, turning to Wylinth.

Her smile was the widest I had ever seen, and she was giggling. She nodded without speaking, her eyes sparkling with the light of the fire. “I told you he could,” she said when she finally seemed in control of herself once again.

“Yes, but...it was just a tale. I thought...I had assumed...”

“You had assumed what, General?” she asked, her voice becoming steely.

General Mortiz’s face lost its wonder and became hard again. “I apologize, Princess. It won’t happen again.”

“Good,” Wylinth said, and it seemed that her bearing started to reflect the General’s too. “Now, I plan on traveling with these men to wherever that staff leads us. Once we have gone everywhere it plans to take us then, and only then, will I return to claim my place.”

“But Princess, really,” General Mortiz pleaded. “What about the Kingdom, or the morale of your people? Ever since your disappearance we have been struggling to maintain peace while

Trellin has been slowly invading and capturing small towns and villages. The people need a leader!"

Wylinth's face faltered slightly as she looked at me and the others. "Trellin has been capturing my Kingdom?"

"We need you. The Kingdom *needs* you. I understand that you have been put on a quest by... by some witch. But your Kingdom needs you now. If I could then I would gladly let you go on your quest if I knew for sure that it would help us, but I don't. And by the looks of it, neither do you."

Wylinth seemed torn as she glanced over to Garm, who had made his way back into the shadows once again.

"Might I make a suggestion?" Hariter asked as he placed his book down and looking between the General and the Princess. "Who said that she can't have both the quest and the chance to help her people?"

We all scrunched our faces in confusion as he stood and began to elaborate his idea.

"I see no reason why the Princess can't still accompany us on our quest. Rather than parting ways, I say why not stick together. The Princess can be toured and paraded in each town we visit. Proving that she is alive and well and that she has not abandoned the Kingdom to Trellin. At the same time, we will follow the light from Garm's staff as it points us to our next destination, and thus to end of our journey that will give both Garm and Lady Wylinth what it is that they are seeking."

"That could work," General Mortiz said with some visible reluctance.

“Then let us do it,” Wylinth said before Mortiz could add anything else. “This will give us both what we need. The people will see me and know that I am not dead, and I can continue the quest with Garm and the others.”

Smiling, I looked back at Garm who was coming out of the shadows once again. *Good, I hate how he looks when he's brooding. Especially on a night like tonight.*

General Mortiz sighed. “I still don’t agree with your plan, but it will at least allow me to provide you with an armed guard should Trellin try attacking you again.”

“So it *was* him!” Wylinth exclaimed, her eyes going wide.

“Hold on,” Mortiz said, holding up his hands. “We only have speculation to go off of—”

“Some very strong evidence I’d bet,” Garm muttered darkly, cutting off the General.

“As it is, it is still just evidence. Trellin has denied all responsibility for the crime and that it was the unfortunate mishap of bandits at work. He’s trying to make himself appear more pious to the people by taking over in the stead of our absent royalty while laying claim to his right as King through his betrothal to you, Princess.”

“Well, we’ll just have to unsettle him with my return from the dead.”

“That won’t be too hard since he’s already seen you,” Mortiz commented dryly.

“Right,” Wylinth said, her chest deflating a little.

“But that does not mean we can’t unsettle his plans,” Mortiz said, gazing at us all. “I agree with the black smith, having you tour the Kingdom would be the best way to rebuke his claim to your throne while weakening the morale of his own people. If they have any values, then hopefully they will want to avoid starting a war they know is unjust.”

“It’s settled then,” Wylinth said, relaxing in her spot. “We will go with you back to the city and —”

“No.” We all turned to look at Garm, his face dark even within the light of the fire. “I’m not going back into that city.”

“Why not?” Wylinth demanded. “We’d all be much safer in the palace. Not to mention good food and a soft bed. Once we’re well rested and I have had a chance to speak with the people there we could then make our way to the next town.”

“It sounds grand,” Garm said, his tone anything but excited. “But so long as Muldrix’s kind are hunted by Trellin, I will not step foot into any city or town that he has been in.”

“Garm, be reasonable,” Hariter said. “Mortiz and Wylinth are offering us food, shelter and protection. Out here in the wilderness we would be on our own and vulnerable should Trellin decide to come after us.”

“And what about spies, assassins? Could you guarantee me, General, that your men could stop them all from hurting any of us while residing in there?”

“I would stake my life on it,” Mortiz said, standing up and facing Garm directly.

“Just as you staked your life on the royal family?”

The air chilled and I shrunk lower to the ground. *What is Garm doing? Is he trying to break us up?*

“What happened with the Princess and her family was not my doing, nor was it within guarded walls,” General Mortiz responded calmly, but coldly. “It was an underhanded move by Trellin to sneak his way into our kingdom.”

“And more than likely would happen again based on who that snake of a man is,” Garm spat.

“Point taken. However, you are missing the point of Trellin’s plan.”

“And that is?”

“He wants to avoid open war,” Mortiz said plainly. “He may be invading towns and villages, but he does not want to be the emperor of a barren kingdom. If he makes any move against us it will not be a blatant attack meant to kill, but rather he will be the snake you claim he is and use his words to poison us. He would have us turn our backs on each other and face him alone, then if it did come to a fight he could win easily by strength of arms. Picking us off one by one. Now it is my turn to ask you, Garm, will you give your support to Wylinth in her greatest need? Will you help her restore her kingdom and bring peace to this land?”

Garm stood rooted to the spot, his dark look replaced by confusion.

My own thoughts whirled about in my head as I watched him struggle with his. To sleep in a palace! To dine and sleep within secured walls that could offer protection like no forest could. My heart pounded with excitement as I stood and brought everyone’s attention to me.

“I will stand with her,” I answered. “I have known Wylinth for only a short time, but in that time, she has become a dear friend, and I would not abandon my friends in their dark hour.”

“Thank you, Muldrix,” Wylinth replied as she turned away her face to wipe her eyes.

“You have our support as well your highness,” Hariter said as both he and Foster rose and bowed to her.

Wylinth nodded her thanks as they all turned to stare at Garm. His face still appeared strained and concern for him welled up inside my being as I watched. *He's always been too careful, too weary to really let his guard down.* Walking over I placed a wing over his shoulders and whispered, “We'll be fine. Let's help Wylinth so we can continue our quest together with her.”

Garm looked at me as his jaw muscles stuck out and his muscles bunched beneath my wing, and for half a moment I was sure he was going to reject the idea all together. The fear shining through his eyes made my stomach clench and I worried he would say no and deny me from accompanying them.

And what would I do if he did say no? Would I go with him, or would I follow them and to the paths they will take.

“I will go too,” Garm finally said, and there was a visible sense of relief on everyone's faces in the clearing. “I don't want to lose you Muldrix, but I could not bear it if something should happen to anyone of you. For this reason, and only this reason am I going to go with you.”

“Come Garm, join us by the fire,” General Mortiz said, holding out a hand and offering his spot to Garm to sit. “I admin your tenacity and would love to hear the tale of how you came to raise young Muldrix here.”

Going back over to my space by the fire, I laid down again and relaxed as Garm retold how he had found my egg and raised me from a hatchling till now. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath as I fell asleep to the sound of Garm's voice.