## **CHAPTER TWO:**

**A Noble’s Son**

JAEMS STOOD AT THE doorstep, facing the two castle guards. They were dressed in the green and black of Baron Ruddler. One was tall and thin, the other tall and wide. They were staring at him expectantly.

“You will stand here all day?” the wide guard spat. The other laid a hand on his shoulder and whispered something in his ear.

“No,” Jaems replied, smiling. “Allow me one moment, gentlemen, I’ll be back shortly.” He said, closed the door and stepped inside, cursing. He stayed up late last night, and woke up a mere minuet before the door was knocked.

The house was a nice thing, -as nice a farmhouse can get after being used to living in a castle. It was a two-story building of stone, with a roof of red brick. It had four large bedrooms, a wide square sitting room, and a goodly sized kitchen, that Jaems mother, Lady Ennis Lorrel used to prepare meals.

He stepped into the sitting room, where his cousin, Ethen sat cross-legged on one of the stuffed armchairs, reading a book and regularly sipping from a cup of tea.

“Who is it?” Ethen inquired softly.

“Guards.” Jaems replied.

Ethen looked up from his book, and looked Jaems in the eye, “Guards?” He mouthed. “What are guards doing at the good ol’ Lorrel farmhouse?”

“If you’d been here yesterday, you would have known.” Jaems replied grimly. “now move up and wake Clauce up.”

Ethen raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t be so hopeful. He drank twice as much as usual last night. Which says much.”

“do you not think he can stand up?” Jaems asked.

“Oh, I bet my second best boots he’s dead.” He said, laughing.

Jaems didn’t laugh. “Why are you still sitting,” he said tiredly, “just go prepare, we are going to the castle.” Ethen moved, placing his cup on a stool, an put the book face down on the chair where he was sitting.

“Why didn’t you wake me up early?” Jaems demanded. “How did *you* wake up early?”

“Hmm, I didn’t sleep. Was busy getting Clauce back here.”

“I swear to the good Twelve, I will have Clauce…” Jaems exhaled heavily. “If he does not wake up, we leave him. I’ll saddle the horses.”

Ethen nodded, and went upstairs.

Jaems took his cloak that was hanging from a peg near the door, and exited the house from the backdoor, and crossed the path to the barn, where the horses were stabled.

There were three stalls, near the back of the barn. Where three horses were kept, a white mare, a dun gelding, and a confused dapple that has been being used in all sorts of hard labour. They weren’t much, certainly none of any treasured breed, but they were the extent of House Lorrel’s current wealth.

Apparently; Ethen, sleep-deprived as he was, was awake enough to unsaddle the horses, and filling a feeding basket for each of them, he even might have done his best rubbing the two that were mounted the night before. So Jaems simply put a saddle on the mare -Fairheart-, and the dun -Stormer. Trusting he won’t be needing the third.

He was finishing off tightening the harness, when Ethen walked in. “He will not wake,” he said, “just as I told you.”

“Won’t matter,” Jaems replied, “we are already late.”

“Late for what?” Ethen asked insistently.

“Py…” Jaems started. “Lord Pyte summoned us,” he corrected. Pyte had become Baron of Torje three months ago. *I should not forget that,* Jaems thought to himself. “He has guests, and we will receive them with him.” Jaems finished.

Ethen gazed, his face empty from any expression, and he stood very still.

“what?” Jaems demanded.

“Dozen-damns” Ethen murmured. “Sometimes,” he announced, “I understand Clause’s resentment.”

“Not now, Ethen.” Jaems said entreatingly. He had one idiot of a cousin, and did not need a second one.

“Don’t not-now me, Jaems, I’m not saying I will not go. I’m just saying I understand him.” Ethen exhaled as he reached out to take Stormer’s reins, still looking troubled.

“well, I don’t think there is any thing to understand about him, he simply has a pouting mannerism. And I won’t hear about it from you as well.”

Ethen paused. “You sound like you hate him.” He claimed.

“He is my cousin, and I love him.” Jaems protested. “But that does not mean that I have to agree to his idiocy.”

“Oh, I like that. Very well, let’s go be showed about as Lord Ruddler’s exotic possessions.”

Jaems had the urge to… “Is that what being in a baron’s entourage means, Magister Dilby would be very proud.” That had a soothing effect on Ethen’s temper.

“It feels bad to be offended.” Ethen said in a low voice.

“That is the whole point.” Jaems said tiredly. “The thing I’ve been trying to tell Clauce for years. The Lord Ruddler did not offend us, he didn't owe us anything.”

“He could've taken us into his court, any Devil-damned thing other than throw us into a farm.” This was the pivoting point of Clauce’s unending arguments. When Jaems, his mother, and his two cousins left Redfield and came to Torje, Pyte’s father; Lord Tonmund welcomed them to Torje, but he did not make any offers. So they had to buy a farm, hire farmhand live off that.

“But he didn’t, and that was the end of that. And I pity Clauce for not understanding it.” Jaems said. “The world is too big for people to keep track of these things. Especially here in Torje, faraway from anywhere.” That was something Jaems’ father once told him.

“Hence, the Lorrels. Look at us.” Ethen gestured with his hands like an actor introducing the cast at the end of a play.

Jaems’ father was named Sir Ryan Lorrel, Protector of Redfield, the year before Jaems was born, as a reward for defending the Kingdom of Hance against Weihtford’s Danyalle the Fourteenth’s sly attack with a patched-together army of farmers and craftsmen, after the armies have left Torje undefended. But that was not what Ethen was referring to.

House Lorrel was much older than his father. It was when the Kingdom of Hance was forged, by two men. Like the stories tell, Tyrrel Hance and Maxmil Lorrel, came alone and empty-handed from Weihtford, and built themselves a kingdom in the south. For hundreds of years the two families ruled together as High King and First Councillor, until House Lorrel died off in Hanceburg. But even Five hundred years later, no play or song dared remove Maxmil Lorrel’s part in the great conquest. Sir Ryan was a descendant of some third son or the like who travelled north at some point or another. But for all Jaems knew, he and his two cousins were the last of Maxmil Lorrel’s blood.

“indeed, the Lorrels.” He replied resignedly.

When Jaems and Ethen pulled their horses out, the two guards were already mounted.

“Finally.” The big one said. “Let's start, Gods know we already took some time we don't have.”

The two Lorrels rode a little behind the guards. Chatting about things they should expect today. The route they took does not pass through the town, it would save the good part of a half-hour. They crossed the Old Mill path. And in the distance to the south, the old building where diseased people these days were taken to be quarantined.

“By the way,” Ethen uttered, “I haven't seen mother today.” That was what Ethen and Clauce called Jaems mother.

“She was escorted to the castle yesterday.” Jaems replied yawning. “I stayed behind to collect the two of you.”

Ethen yawned back and shook his head. “who the hell is Lord Ruddler’s guest?” he asked.

“Duke Middenross.” Jaems answered, earning a wide-eyed look of shock from his cousin.

“Ah,” Ethen said after a long second, tapping the side of his head with a finger. “The appointment. A useless tradition stuck with us since the year of the donkey.”

“No matter.” Jaems said. “Lord Middenross will name Pyte Protector of Torje, and we'll have to be there to receive him. We feast, laugh at jokes, feign interest in hunting stories, and get back home.”

Ethen rolled his eyes, but said nothing.

The castle soon came into sight in the distance. It wasn’t big of course, neither was it rich like the manors Lords are building nowadays. But it was old. One of the oldest castles in the Land of Saryns, or in Hance.

It consisted of three towers, one -the oldest- was square sided, the other two were round, taller and altogether bigger. The castle had a long history that if you looked well; you could see the signs of which on its stones and surrounding walls. Torje was burnt three times; for instance: The first was when Tyrrel Hance claimed the land and named himself King, bringing the wrath of House Borgeah and King Rakkan the Bloody; no surviving records could tell you which party burned the castle, or on which side it was. The second time was by another Borgeah; it was the Great Reconquest -the first one-where a dreamy Danyalle or another wanted to ‘retrieve’ the land of Hance: Torje was as far as he got. The third time was when the Duke of Saryns wanted independence, Torje was burned months after that nameless Duke was killed, but the Baron of Torje didn’t know his Lord lost the war, so he kept fighting until he was killed and his castle burned.

The last was the reason the appointment ceremony exited in the first place. It might not be the same historic incident, but the idea of a person ‘owning’ a castle was erased, every castle and fortification in Hance is the property of the High king, and you were named its protector, and then your son would be after you died. Or he would not -which *almost* never occurred.

They rode at a quick pace, Ethen surprisingly keeping his eyes open and his head up. They reached the gate around an hour before noon.

They entered, unnoticed for the most part; everyone was busy doing something or another. In the courtyard people hurried left and right carrying a bucket or an ancient piece of furniture or something of the sort.

They were halfway through the breadth of the courtyard when the beefy guard who was accompanying them announced, “the Lord will see you first thing.” He caught a boy with his eyes and shouted, “Hey! here come take the horses, boy.”

The boy sighed, and searched around for someone to help him. He signalled to another stable boy with his hand after whistling to catch his attention, and they both came to take the reins from the riders.

The stable master; Master Ragma, followed the two boys, “Sir Lorrel,” he saluted Jaems, smiling, then looked at Ethen, “if I remember correctly; this must be one of your cousins. Another Sir Lorrel.”

“Master Ragma.” Jaems greeted back, dismounting and trusting his reins to one of the boys. “Will you ever stop joking. You know you are closer to a Knight than I.” Master Ragma laughed softly, touching Jaems’ shoulder in a fatherly manner.

“The Baron summoned me,” Jaems continued. “Are you sure you are not behind this, making me come here to help you clean your stables?” he said smiling wickedly.

“Sure to good Adur I need Knights to help me clean the stables.” Master Ragma said, chuckling, “they also better be dragon-slayers. Sim here,” -he pointed at the boy with Fairheart’s reins,- “found a rat the size of a dragon, and let the dozen-damned thing get away.” He finished laughing at his own joke exultingly.

Jaems laughed, mostly at Master Ragma’s Laughter, when the guard alerted him. “The Lord is waiting, Master Lorrel.” which vanished Jaems’ mirth. He was coming to dislike the man, but he nodded to Master Ragma and moved along.

Jaems and Ethen were taken into the castle. And after some inquiring and a little search done by the two guards, they found Baron Ruddler in a reception hall in the old tower.

“-And why under the Dome of Gods is there a yellow rug on the floor of my hall… why is there one in the castle at all.” The young Lord was saying, practically shouting. His clerk was nodding and speaking softly, trying to direct his lord’s attention elsewhere.

“Here come the Lorrels,” Baron Pyte said sighing as he turned to see Jaems and Ethen crossing the hall toward him. “You took your time getting here,” he told Jaems, “and that is *one* cousin I see with you.”

Jaems kept a smile on his face, “One should do,” He mused. “and good afternoon, by the way, my lord.”

“Oh, alright. Good afternoon to you too.” He replied, “and you, Ethen, was it?”

“That is right, my lord. To you and yours.”

“Now Wayd,” Pyte said, “would you please take Jaems and Ethen here to get ready.” He dictated to his clerk, “you bathe and dress, you have an hour,” he said to the Lorrels.

Wayd led the way, crossing corridors behind narrower corridors. Torje was not a particularly big castle, and Gods knew it was not a modern piece of architecture, but moving inside it was convenient; you could reach the farthest point across in some ten minutes.

Wayd took them to the baths first, which Jaems didn’t take as an offense, you just bathed before meeting important people.

They entered the fancy section, immediately welcomed by the heat of almost boiling water. “You gentlemen make the best of it.” Wayd spoke, then gestured a servant; who immediately moved to prepare a bathing basin.

Servants were never this present in Torje, but such events require such measures. No doubt the lord ordered some sort of hiring from the town, and of course some somewhat-young men answered the invitation. It was a chance for them to walk around in the castle, and of course make a neat penny to buy something nice for their sweethearts.

Jaems was taken to one of the booths, where a goodly-sized tub was steaming with the smell of dandies