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| BALDEN  by  M. G. Sinclair |

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| Adult  Fantasy |

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| CHAPTER ONE  Balden |

The day was 9 to Orskoth, Orimor, the 220th year of the Era of Expansion. For seven days now, Balden had been travelling with his father Bjark, king of the Estmar, his retinue, and [council].

They travelled north, from their home city of Nuvanir, to the city of Hellul, capital city of the Gerndel. They went to meet Magnus, uncle of Balden. He’d been away from home for four months now, laying siege to Hellul. It was now a [week] ago, that Bjark had received a letter from Magnus, telling of the cities surrender. Balden remembered the moment his father had read the letter. His father sat at the end of the table, Balden sitting to his right, and Frith beside Balden; a servant girl walked into the room, her head bowed deeply, a sealed roll of parchment delicately placed in her palms. She raised it up to the king, saying nothing, as he took it, breaking the seal, unfurling the cold, cracking yellowed parchment. Balden feared bad news, as he always had when his father received a letter. But after a moment, his father smiled. It was strange, a foigen sight; Bjark so rarely smiled that it was almost unsettling. He raised his head, looked at his son and said, ‘your uncle is more a tactician than I had given credit for. He has finally taken Hellul.’

It was that evening he gave the order to begin packing; they would be heading north at dawn, two days time. And that night, he’d written letters to the lords of the north: the Drowned King of Sovair; Feromar, lord of Annefald, and the Wall; the Pig-King of Jendlek; the Witch Maiden of Envor; and the Rat-Man of Voks. These letters were an invite to a feast that would be held in the halls of Hellul, to celebrate Bjark’s success in the north.

Balden couldn’t understand why his father sent these invites. The lords of the north had been warring, killing, and enslaving each other for centuries. Every one hated the rest, and took every chance they had to enact that hatred. But his father was a good king, a smart one. He had his reasons, even if Balden couldn’t yet see them.

They mounted the knoll; finally to the west the city was in sight. But it was at the moment lacking the splendor that would be expected from a city of its station and significance. Dozens of thin colums of smoke rising from scattered points around the walls. To the north, the encampment of the Estmar attackers sat. Large wooden stakes places around it as a makesift wall, and various people coming in and out; most appeared to be merchants, or farmers looking to take advantage of the chaos, or soilders making their patrols. The kings party took the north road, to the Estmar encampment.

Frith, who sat behind Balden atop [horse], Balden’s young horse, her arms wrapped around his waist, said ‘that smell.’ She winced, ‘this is no happy place.’

And she was right, for about a mile now, the faint smell of sickness, and burning flesh carried. But as they approached, it became increasingly putred. Looking around, most men in the party did not seem dissuaded by it. Many of the women winced and some covered their noses and mouths with hankerchieves, or sleeves. Though there was some strange tingle of recognition that itched Balden’s mind. Ten years ago, Estmar was the sight of a great slave revolt, that centered around Nuvanir. Many were killed, in the end their bodies burned, except for the slaves, who were buried. Though Balden was only a year old at the time, and could not remember it. He did remember the story of how Frith’s father Fritr, who was a house guard for Bjark, saved Balden’s life. For that service, Fritr and Bjark made a [Hvatadrikvatan], the next year, Frith was born, her mother died during the birth, then another year by, and Fritr too fell, to desease. Then, because of the hvatadrikvatan, care of Frith fell to Bjark, who since had been raising Frith as his own daughter.

As the entourage trotted down the road, the merchants, farmers and soilders parted, bowing as they recognized the red [banner] of the Estmar banner they carried. Then, without a moment of hesitation, the encampment’s gates opened to them, and the entourage entered.

‘[ethnaler] Bjark!’ A man shouted, before emerginging from a crowed of soilders that stood at the entrance. A thin man, black hair that fell over his head, resching his eyes, and a small patch of facial hair on his chin. This man was Talek Terensson, Magnus’ [advisor], and hand. ‘[ethnaler] Magnus is in the city. I have already sent a message, notifying him of your arrival. He should be returning on the hour.’

‘Very good.’ Bjark’s voice boomed, with the command befitting a king. ‘We have much to discuss, and I would like to waste no time. On the while, have you a place for us to rest. We are weary from the road.’

‘Of course. If you and your kin would follow me, I’ll see that the rest of your entourage are escorted to their residences as well.’ He took a step back, and spoke to one of the men behind him. The man nodded, then began organizing the soilders in the group, who then began to split up, organizing the entourage, and leading them down various paths.

Bjark; Orethor, Bjark’s [advisor]; Balden and Frith followed Talek as he led them down the main road, passed a large open-aired market area, then down a smaller street, to a wooden home; small compared to those in Nuvanir, but larger than the others around it. To the right, a small roofed stable area, Talek pointed to it ‘hitch your horses here. The horsemaster will be by soon to keep them.’

Bjark dismounted first, followed soon by Orethor, then Balden. Balden helped Frith down, and they all tied the reins to the post. Around the post was scattered hay, and a large water trough behind it.

Frith patted [horse]. ‘Rest well [horse], I will visit soon.’

Talek opened the heavy banded wood door, and the four funneled in. There was a small hallway, then a large dining hall. Doors, led to rooms on either side, ‘the right side is the bedrooms, the ladder on the front leads to the children’s room. The left room to the back is the kitchen, to the front is the privy. I will ensure Magnus meets you here upon his arrival.’

A moment later, a small head poked out from the kitchen. A young girl, long red-brown hair, dressed in long brown robes, dotted with various stains and small tears. She shuffled up to them, her head bowed.

‘Ah, yes.’ Talek said, ‘this is Geri, she will be your cook, and house keep for your stay here. Any questions can be brought to her. Now, if I might be excused, I have matters I must attend to.’