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Balden

by

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Balden had arrived in Helull, two to Enkoth, Merimorn, 202 EOE. He travelled with his father, Bjork Barnusson, King of the Estmar; and Frith Fritrsdotter, the hvatanatar of King Bjork. He rode upon his pony, Finor; as a boy, not yet big, or strong enough to ride a full-grown horse. Frith rode with him, her arms wrapped tightly around Balden, to stay atop the pony.

They mounted the knoll, the city of Helull finally in view, two miles to the northeast. Thin columns of smoke from the city, rising to the silver sky, turned to clouds of black smoke. A halo of destitution. The camp of the besiegers stood between them, and the city, and a great circumvallation erected around it, blocking all roads in; save for a small

The bailey stood with the stillness of the dead, a silent dread over every person in the crowd. Balden had arrived in Helull three days ago, and his departure could not come sooner. He had arrived with his father, and Frith in the last convoy from Nuvanir. That was only four days after Vin Vakensson had surrendered, ending the four-month siege. An image could not leave his mind; riding into the city, on his horse, Finor. A young horse, small enough for young Balden, but strong, befitting himself. Frith sitting behind him, her arms around his waist, holding on, as Finor was too big for her alone. They rode behind Balden’s father, Bjork through the gates; though the first thing he noticed was not any imagery, great architecture, or historical curiosity. It was the smell. A smell noticeable miles away, made ever potent within the stone walls of the city: burning flesh.

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## Time to Grow

The people of Helull had erected pyres and burned masses of bodies. Both those who died in the various skirmishes, and those who died to the disease that claimed the lives of many here over the past month.

Frith sat upon a snow-covered rock below the sun, muted behind thick white clouds. Balden looked at her, trying to find what was wrong. She looked tired, weathered beyond her eight years. They had spent nearly their whole lives together. Frith’s father, Fritr had been a man at arms for Bjark, Balden’s father. During an attack on Estmar, Fritr had saved Balden’s (who was then only a baby) life, and in return Bjark gave him great wealth, and station in his ranks. And they became fast friends. Two years later, the birth of Frith, and since both Frith and Balden were raised alongside each other. Even after nine years, he had never seen her in such a state.

‘I was asking your thoughts on the visitors.’

‘Oh, right.’

He could tell, she still didn’t digest what he said. Her brown hair shone, blowing with the winds, her similarly brown eyes made gold by the sun, while reflecting the white beneath them. Eyes that glistened with burgeoning tears. ‘What eats at you, Frith?’

‘I’m alright.’

‘You’ve never had a skill for lying.’ Balden placed his hand on her arm. For the first time, she looked up from her solemness. Her mouth parted, ready to give an answer, but none came. It took Balden by surprise, she was never unable to confide in him. He decided to change tactics.

‘Right then.’ He stood, startling Frith who looked curiously at him. ‘Come.’

‘Where?’ Much of her distress seemed to fade in a moment, replaced by wide-eyed curiosity.

Balden reached his hand down to help her up. She hesitated for a moment, looking at his hand, though they both knew she would take it, and follow him wherever he led. And she did, following beside him, they started south, the sun sitting low in the sky to the southwest. They didn’t have much daylight left, though that mattered little to either of them. They both preferred the night. The solemn, quiet, and peaceful intimacy, the blue of the moonlight, shimmering off fresh snow. Like gems on tranquil tides. Most men of the Northlands did. And so, by the mother Enev, their ancestral home, Ljakenvel was gifted its months long nights, where the fighting would cease, and celebration would ring. Though south, in the Northlands of Eldewind, there was no such courtesy. And so, the fighting was endless.

‘Where are we going, Balden?’ A small smile crept up her rosy cheeks. Balden remained silent.

They climbed over a small hill, through various patches of thick underbrush and sunken earth, finally standing on a mound, raised by the roots of a fallen tree. It was then they arrived: Nuvanir. The capital of Estmar, and home of the King Bjark, Balden’s father. It was already much more lively than usual, the streets walked by strange men, their wives, and children, with skin the color of beaten leather, and hair, all in rich brown hues. They spoke in a foreign language, a much lighter sound, flowing words like honey. Unlike the much harsher Ljakelskan—Balden’s native language, or even the Union Tongue of English.

All wrapped tightly in furs and silks, they looked keenly out of place here in the white. He’d never seen people like this, though he knew in a moment who they were. The Kilthish. A fine and honorable people—or so he was told by his father. The exonerated descendants of Bavedon, turned friends to, and vital trade partner to the men of the north.

There were others present as well, fellow Northmen. Though being of north blood was the only thing tying them. These men dawned the green of the Gerndelsir, the blue of Jendlek, and the black of Sovair. Between all of them: shooting eyes; under breath plots; and hands mounted the pommels of swords, hammers, and axes. The histories did not look kindly on such a gathering. The only question occupying Balden’s mind was: why?

“Wow,” Frith gasped, “look at that!” She pointed to an old Kilthish man, standing with a cart full of strange antiquities. Clay pottery, and statuettes; tapestries; rolls of canvass painted with images of lush forests, and golden sunsets; articles of odd clothing; and tools that Balden didn’t recognize.

The old man wore long draping green robes, detailed with strips of fine brown fabrics. He had a matching green cap, long at the ears, tassels hanging down either side. It was an expensive looking outfit, but obviously worn by time. The green was faded, and dull; ends were frayed, and details unthreaded; among the various patch jobs of mismatched fabrics.

A moment, and Frith was far ahead, running toward the old man, her eyes on his cart. Balden leapt down from the mound, and ran after her, in a moment, he was beside her. Down the snow blown field, hopping over arching roots, and around razed stumps; onto the pathing stones of the main road. It was then, he took notice of Balden, his tired, sunken, yet no less piercing emerald-green eyes meeting with Balden’s. He smiled. A thin, closed-lip smile, bearing a sense of kinship: like one of an old friend. Frith, focused still on the cart behind the man. It was then Balden led them forward. His face was long, his cheeks were gaunt, and he had large round ears that folded out.

A moment passed. How long exactly, Balden could not tell. His mind was stuck in a spiral, certain he knew this man’s face, but could not place it. The rest seemed to fall away around him.

‘And they say hospitality is lost on the Northmen, but such a welcome party pleases me to be wrong.’ The man said, his smile wide, revealing teeth that seemed too small for his mouth. His demeanor; familiar and friendly, but close and careful.

‘Who says that?’ asked Balden.

‘Southmen.’ Clutching his robes near, to warm himself.

‘What about the women?’ Balden said, not intending humor, but the man laughed. It was only a moment before Balden realized and laughed too. ‘Are you a merchant?’

‘No. I wouldn’t be so brash as to assign such a title to myself—no, that word is better reserved for the men out east. I am just a man. A man who knows many men, and those men tell me that this is the place to be.’

‘Then what is this cart behind you?’

He grinned, this one as an artifice. ‘Merchandise.’ He adjusted his stance, rubbing his hands together, folding them over each other.

‘What is your name, not-merchant?’

‘Kalay Hali, is my name, little lord.’

‘I am no lord. That is the word of the south.’

‘Then what might I call you?’

‘I am Balden, son of Bjark, King of the Estmar.’

Kalay’s eyes widen, leaning in, as if to tell Balden a secret. ‘Oh, my. I suppose that would make you *prince* of the Estmar, no? You’ll forgive me if I fail to bow; my old age—and this cold, has taken a toll on my joints, I’m afraid.’

‘You need not trouble yourself; it isn’t our custom.’