**Chapter Twenty-Three: The Warden Part 2**

**Dorothy Blackthorn**

The smell of something burning tickled my nose and woke me up from the awful nightmare I was having. I couldn’t remember it clearly, but the image of my parent’s dead bodies remained fresh in my mind. The burning smell that woke me up was probably one of father’s calamitous attempts to make breakfast. I pulled the blanket covering me off of myself and rolled over to get out of bed, but even after two consecutive rolls, I couldn’t reach the edge of the bed. I finally opened my eyes and I noticed that the “blanket” I had pulled off was actually a large black jacket and the “bed” I was sleeping on was just grass.

“So you finally decided to wake up huh? You have been out like a light for nearly a day now and I didn’t even hit you that hard. Must have been the stress, sudden shock can do strange things to the human body.”

I scrambled backwards in a panic, holding the jacket to my chest by reflex as I realized that I was naked.

“Relax, I am not going to eat you.”

My slightly blurry eyes popped wide open as I stared at the strange man who sat next to an open fire. He was completely covered in ragged black clothes, so I couldn’t really see what he looked like; even his face was covered with black rags. He didn’t even glance in my direction when he spoke. Instead, he just stared at a pot of something while stirring it with a broken tree branch, but he must not have been doing it very well because it was emitting dark smoke. It was the origin of the smell that had woken me up.

“Who are you? Where are we?”

“Hmm, seems you don’t remember what happened. No wonder you are so calm.”

A foreboding feeling gripped my heart as a certain possibility entered my head.

“What are you talking about?”

He threw the twig he was using to stir the pot and threw it in the fire with a defeated sigh.

“Your town is gone, so are all of the town’s people, so are your parents.”

“Gone? What do you mean gone?”

“I mean gone as in dead.”

I once again remembered the nightmare I was having and piece by piece, it started to slowly come back to me.

“No! You are lying! Take me back to my parents! They are probably worried sick about me by now!”

The man continued to look into the camp fire and pointed at me with his right hand.

“Look down at yourself. That is all that is left of your parents. The rest was burnt away when the cultists burned your town.”

I looked down upon myself and I was horrified to find that I was naked under the jacket, but that wasn’t the worst part; the worst part was that my naked body was covered in symbols made of dry and flecking blood.

“Oh God! It was real? It was all real?!”

“No use calling the name of God. He must have better things to do because he sure isn’t going to answer to our pleas. Trust me, I have already tried.”

“I need to go back! I need to get my parents!”

He snorted in derision and just threw another twig into the flames.

“I already told you, there is nothing left in your town but ashes. Besides, that place is swarming with cultists. You would be dead before you got within a hundred meters of that place. There is no chance of you succeeding, you would just be wasting the effort I made to save you.”

His words reminded me of the miraculous floating pipe that smashed the heads of the cultists.

“Wait, that was you? That’s great! You were able to kill those cultists like it was nothing! With your help, we could just go in there and save my parents.”

“Are you an idiot? Didn’t you hear me when I said they were dead?”

“Maybe they survived when…”

“Their throats were slit in front of you. They bled out right there and then. They did not survive.”

I glared at him angrily with tears running down my cheeks. ”Fine! If you are not going, just show me the direction to my town and I will go there myself.”

He continued to silently look into the fire for a long time before turning towards me for the first time. His face was covered by the black rags and the part that was visible between his black hair and the rags was painted black, even his eyes were black. “Do you think that going back will make you some kind of hero? That throwing yourself into danger will accomplish anything? Do you think that you are the only one who has love for their kin? I saw your parents die. God knows how they survived for so long, but they still had a breath of life left in them, so I saw their final moments when I carried you away. Do you know what kind of expression they were wearing when they passed away? They were smiling. They saw you escaping and they were happy that you were safe. It was obvious that you are more important to them than life itself. How do you think they would feel if you throw your life away? If you truly want to honor their memory, then live on. Dying is easy, learning to survive is much harder. I understand that you aren’t in any state to make rational decisions, so think about what I said and cool off a little before you do anything rash. There is a stream a few steps that way, wash yourself off before we talk about anything else.”

His words hit me like a slap, they made my mind a mess and all I could do was to get up woodenly and walk in the direction he was pointing, all the while grasping the jacket wrapped around me to my chest like it was the only thing keeping me safe. Just like he had said, I found the little stream and jumped into the cold water. I frantically scrubbed my body to get the bloody markings off of me, but at some point I realized that they were actually the only things I had left of my parents and that thought made me feel an indescribable sorrow. All of pain and grief that I couldn’t feel because of shock finally burst forth like a flood and I started shaking and sobbing quietly. I was still crying when the man wearing all black came running at me. I was still naked and the man was a stranger, so I immediately became terrified at the idea of what he might do to me.

“No! Don’t come any closer!”

He ignored me and stretched out his hand, but instead of grabbing me like I thought he would, he pushed me to the side and rushed past me, just in time to meet the gigantic bear paw that would have landed on my head if he hadn’t intervened. The paw knocked him back into the water and when he resurfaced, he had a bloody slash stretching from the side of his face to the bottom of his ribs. The black rag covering his face had fallen off and the water had washed away most of the black paint on his face, so I had my first clear look at the man who had rescued me. Despite the immediate and mortal crisis I was facing, I couldn’t help but marvel at his handsome, almost femininely beautiful face. Even with the giant bloody gash on his face, he still somehow managed to look like a piece of art. I’m sure if a painter drew a painting like him, that painter would never paint again because he would know that he could never surpass such perfection. I wasn’t exaggerating, he was that beautiful, and this fragile looking man wiped the blood the blood off his face with his sleeve, took out a pipe which was tied to his belt, and charged at the hulking bear that was standing on its hind legs and looming over us. It was ludicrous, a man attacking a grown bear with a pipe, but what was even more ludicrous was when he ducked past the bear’s wild swings and used the pipe to hit its knee which bent the wrong way, making it fall to the side. He then climbed over the fallen beast and smashed its head repeatedly until it was nothing but a messy pulp and the bear stopped moving. After he was finished, he seemed to lose all energy and collapsed right there on top of the bear.

Seeing him suddenly fall down, I panicked and pulled him out of the stream and back to the place with the camp fire. I laid him down next to the fire and started to use the shredded remains of his shirt to make bandages and clean his wounds like I used to do back in the farm when the animals were hurt. Sometime in the middle of the process, he coughed weakly and opened his eyes a crack before muttering, “How the hell do you not notice a giant brown bear attacking you?”

“I was a little preoccupied. Don’t try to talk anymore. You have lost a lot of blood and you barely have enough energy to stay awake let alone talk. You need to eat something before you pass out again.”

He pointed at the pot he was stirring earlier which was still somehow releasing plumes of noxious smoke. The effort from moving his hand to point made him grimace and his face turned frighteningly pale.

“Don’t move! Just stay still! As for whatever is in that pot, you are already hurt, I won’t make things worse by feeding you that. Do you have any ingredients that I could use to cook?”

“There is a dead boar over to the side next to that fallen tree, but it hasn’t been gutted or cleaned.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Even though he was sick, he still managed to look up at me cynically. “Are you sure you can do it?”

I ignored his remark which dripped with skepticism and asked, “Do you have a knife?”

“It is in my satchel, next to the boar.”

I went over and found the dead boar. I also found the knife he was talking about in the satchel among other knickknacks; it was short enough that it was more of a dagger than a knife. Thankfully, the boar was not fully grown so it was enough for my purpose. With a practiced hand, I made a few careful incisions and stripped it of its hide.

My father didn’t have any sons, so I was the only one that could go with him when he went out to hunt with his favorite prized bow. My father had been a peaceful man, but he was able to nail an arrow through a red stag’s eyes from fifteen steps away. I grew up idolizing him, so it wasn’t surprising that I was a little tom-boyish. I loved going with him into the woods and learned everything I could from him. It was only natural that I knew how to handle a small boar’s carcass. It didn’t take long before I had strips of meat from the flank.

I dumped the unholy catastrophe that was brewing inside the pot and washed it thoroughly in the clean water from the stream. I looked at the dead bear and thought of bringing it over to the camp, but I discarded that silly thought immediately. I was not nearly strong enough to move that behemoth.

With the boar’s meat, some common edible herbs I found in the area and salt from the satchel, I made a half-way decent broth. As I carefully fed it to the injured man, I realized that I didn’t even know his name.

“What is your name? Mine is Dorothy.”

He stared at me incuriously and replied, “Lucas. I’m Lucas.”

“Why are you staring at me?”

He finished swallowing another mouthful of broth and his mouth tilted into a crooked smile. “Oh nothing, it is just that this is the first time I saw a naked girl butcher a boar.”

That was when I finally realized that in my panic, I had forgotten to get the oversized jacket from the shore of the stream where I had left it. I had somehow failed to notice all this time and now I sat next to Lucas without a stitch of clothing and covered in boar guts.