

starflower

TALES OF GOLDSTONE WOOD



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STENGL



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*For Esther,
my hand-reader friend.*

A NOTE TO THE READER

STARFLOWER TAKES PLACE more than sixteen hundred years (as mortals count time) before *Heartless*. There are dramatic topographical differences between the Near World of Starflower's day and that of Una's, and some characters, though living, are not yet who they will become. Even the Prince of Farthestshore is known by another name. . . .

PROLOGUE

ONCE UPON A TIME, great Etalpalli, the City of Wings, was ruled by a Faerie queen. Her name has long since been forgotten. What is remembered are her youth, her beauty. Her hair was bright as the sun and no less vibrant than the feathered wings sprouting from her shoulders.

She was young when she came to the throne, and her heart was tender and full of love for her people. They flocked in the air, their wings a garden of many colors, and lived in the green-grown towers of Etalpalli. In those high places, they found it easy to hear the voices of the sun and the moon singing and would sing back in joyful echo.

Once upon a time, the City of Wings was a peaceful demesne full of life. Now it burned.

Hri Sora sat up, choking as though she'd swallowed her own tongue. Poisonous fumes filled her lungs. Surrounding her on all sides, towers of fire issued thunderheads of black smoke. She stared about, unblinking. Ashes and flying embers lashed the air, but these could not hurt her. Her thin face and form were those of a woman. But her yellow eyes betrayed her true nature.

The Dark Father stood with his back to her, a shadow, like smoke himself. At first, she thought he must be unaware of her presence. His head turned this way and that as he appraised the inferno surrounding him. The searing air shimmered red. Flames licked at his long black cloak, but it did not catch fire.

Hri Sora staggered to her feet, clutching her stomach. Her body was hollow and cold inside. She wondered if she should speak or back away, avoid the Dark Father's gaze. But he settled that question by addressing her first.

"That, my darling, was quite the tantrum."

She blinked at his broad back and said nothing. He did not seem to expect an answer but shook his head and continued, "Dear, oh dear. I wondered if I should say something to you when you started . . . remind you of those vows you made long ago. 'I shall never return to Etalpalli!'" His voice became a high, unflattering mimic of hers. "'Though I die, the City of Wings will live forever.' Such a fine sentiment. I'm sure you meant it at the time." He shrugged.

Hri Sora whirled about where she stood, dizzy with emptiness. Her eyes widened as she looked again at the towering flames, hundreds of fiery tongues tasting a blackened sky.

"No," she whispered.

"Oh yes," said her Father. He turned to her. The heat in the air rose so strong that the edges of his cloak floated up behind him in a dark swirl. He was more than seven feet tall, and his skin was white, stretched thin over a skull of black bone. He smiled, his fangs gleaming dully in the firelight. "I'm afraid it's true. You, my sweet, came blazing out of the Near World straight through Cozamaloti Gate and set fire to your own city. Do you not remember?"

Somewhere amid the roar of the flames came the deeper roar of a tower crumbling. Hri Sora gasped and clutched her head in her hands. "I did this?"

"Do you doubt it?" Her Father chuckled, rolling his eyes to the burning heavens. "You, who once boasted to me that your fire was greater than my own?"

"No," she whispered. Then, her voice a hoarse bark, she screamed. "*No!*"

She tried to walk, to run, but her feet betrayed her, and she collapsed on her hands and knees. The hot embers covering the streets should have burned her skin, but they did not, for she was a dragon, and this was her own fire. Rather than burn, they warmed her, bringing slow clarity to her addled mind.

Etalpalli. Her city . . .

Her Father laughed outright, the rumble of his voice itself like flames. Then he moved to stand beside her but made no offer to help her to her feet. Instead, he took another slow spin, as though he could not get his fill of the destruction.

“I will give you this, daughter. Not once have I seen any of my children burn so brilliantly before. You always were special, weren’t you? My firstborn!”

She could not make herself rise but remained on all fours like a crawling beast. She, who had once flown to the highest vaults of heaven, into the presence of Lady Hymlumé herself! To what depths had she fallen? Closing her eyes, she strove to remember.

There had been the pure, hateful, cleansing light of the moon shining in her face. She had unhinged her jaw to swallow it whole—the light, the song, everything. Then came that horrible moment, the tearing across the center of her soul, deep into the core of her fire. The moment when her wings had been stripped away.

After that, the fall.

Her head throbbed, and Hri Sora forced herself to forget, at least for now. She was too weak in the wake of her last great flaming, the flaming in which, she guessed, she had destroyed Etalpalli. Her memory was full of ashes, and just then she wasn’t sure she wanted it to clear. Spitting more ash as she spoke, she demanded, “When did I do this?”

“This?” said her Father, sweeping a hand to encompass the burning city. “About a hundred years ago, I should think.”

“A hundred years?”

“Etalpalli is nothing but ruins now, all the greenery burned away, half the towers destroyed, the others hollow shells full of shadows. What you’re seeing here isn’t real. It’s a dream. Rather, it’s the death of a dream.”

Hri Sora forced herself up onto her knees and stared around once

more. The hot air caught at her hair, whipping it across her face. She licked her lips slowly and reached up to touch her cheeks, her nose, her mouth. “I’m still a woman,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You took—” She struggled with the memory, not wanting it to come. But it forced its way in at last. “You took my wings from me.”

“That I did. And your dragon form.”

“Am I no longer a dragon, then?”

The Dark Father sneered down at her. “Of course you are! Do you think any but a dragon could do something like this?”

Long ago, in the heat of her first flaming when she was newly reborn, Hri Sora had burned away the last of her tears, along with her former name. Her heart was gone, replaced with this raging furnace. But somehow, as she looked upon this destruction, dream though it was, she thought her heart must break should she still possess one. She wished for the relief of tears. For a moment, she saw Etalpalli as it once was, the high towers covered in green vines, the air filled with the wings of her people, their plumage bright and flashing.

“They were certainly glorious,” said her Father, as though reading her mind. “All your former subjects. Such beautiful wings! I can see why you couldn’t allow them to live.”

They had still boasted wings when she no longer did.

“I killed them.”

“They put up a fight,” said her Father. “But you were in quite the rage when you returned. Though you walked the ground like a mortal woman, your fire blazed to the sky and burned their wings. They fell like shooting stars at your feet.”

How she hoped that memory would not return, not yet! Hri Sora forced herself to stand, trembling. What a despicable thing was this woman’s body. Much too weak to support the fire inside her. No wonder she had lost consciousness for a hundred years.

“Let me wake up,” she said to her Father.

“Why?” he asked, chuckling again. “Don’t you like this dream of yours? It is your finest victory!”

“Let me wake up. I have work to do.”

He turned a cruel, devouring smile upon her. “What kind of work can a wingless dragon possibly pursue?”

Her mouth opened, but no words came. Her mind suddenly crowded with images, with hate. Her Father watched her face, reading more of her thoughts than she liked, so she turned away from him.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“When you fell from the heavens. I took your wings to punish your idle boasting, and you plummeted so hard and fast, I thought sure you’d die your third death then and there! Obviously, I was mistaken. You landed in the Near World and weren’t heard from for ten mortal years at least. What happened to you during that time in the mortal realm?”

“I don’t remember,” she snarled.

“You burst back through to the Far World so suddenly, it took everyone by surprise. Even those cursed Knights of the Farthest Shore had thought you were gone for good! But no, back you came and, of all things, dragging two children behind you.” He shook his head, a forked tongue flickering between his fangs. “Fancy—me, a grandfather! Ugly little brutes they are, too. Certainly not a brood of which to boast. I’ve found uses for them, however. There’s always more room in my realm.”

“They are mine.” She bit the words out.

“Yes, yes, the little monsters are quite devoted to you,” said he. “I’ve sent them out on several errands, but they always want to return to you, sniffing about and making sure no one comes too near.” He shook his head at her. “But they can’t reach you here. Not in your dreams.”

“Let me wake up,” she said again. “Let me wake up so that I may . . . so that I may find . . .”

“Find what?”

She chewed her lip with dagger teeth, drawing lines of dark blood. Flames burned the back of her throat. “None of your business,” she said at last.

“All your business is my business,” said her Father. “You have a look of revenge about you. Don’t try to deny it; I know the signs. It’s best not to think of it now, however. You are nothing without your wings. Oh, you can flame bright enough to destroy this whole city of yours. But

that's just it, daughter. It was your city. Your demesne. Yours to keep or devour at will. Now it's gone, and you have nothing."

"I have my children."

"For what good they do you!"

Hri Sora turned to him then, planting her feet and throwing her head back. He towered over her, but she was still his firstborn, and she met him eye for eye. Her lank hair swelled behind her in a cloud, and her fists clenched at her sides. The fire in her eyes dominated every womanly vestige. She was a dragon, through and through.

"Give me back my wings!"

"And let you challenge my authority again?" He swept his gaze across the crumbling ruins, then back to her. "Not likely."

"Give them to me!"

"Why should I? You've done your worst, Hri Sora. You've earned yourself a place in history, both in the annals of Faerie folk and the legends of mortals. You have no need of wings or flame now."

But she did.

Somewhere in the world was a dark hut where a man lived—a man she had been unable to kill even when her flame was hottest. She remembered him now, though she wished more than anything to forget. She remembered those years of crawling about in the mortal dust when she had always been meant to fly!

"Amarok." She whispered the name like venom. "My dear one."

"What's that?" said her Father.

Hri Sora did not answer. She drew a long breath, sucking flames down into her lungs. "I must have my wings," she said. "I must. But I will not tell you why."

"In that case," said he, "I do not care to give them back."

"Everything has a price," she said. "Name it!"

In the jet-black depths of the Dragon's eyes, flames flickered. He looked upon Hri Sora's stance, took in the smoldering fire ready to burst from her breast. She was a beauty, he thought, or had been when he first turned her. A shame, really, that she'd puffed herself up so! Nevertheless, she had done more to strike terror of his name into the hearts of all peoples in all worlds than had any of his other children.

His firstborn . . . his prize. Even the Knights of the Farthest Shore had failed to quench her flame.

“There is a price,” he said slowly.

“Tell me!”

He could make her do anything now. She would be willing to dive into the Final Water, to swim to the Farthest Shore and set fire to that unreachable realm if he asked her. Wretched fool! But he could get some sport from her yet.

“I want,” he said, “the Flowing Gold of Rudiobus.”

Her flaming eyes did not blink. She neither moved nor spoke for some time. At last she said, “It is hidden.”

“Most definitely.”

“Kept safe by Queen Bebo.”

“Indeed.”

“She who is oldest and strongest of all Faerie queens.”

“The same.”

Hri Sora shook her head slowly. “No one knows where it is. No one knows what it looks like. It is the chief treasure of King Iubdan Tynan, and no one else has even seen it!”

“A fine addition it will make to my Hoard. Don’t you agree?”

The dragon woman blew a spurt of flame. “What you ask is impossible! Who can penetrate Rudiobus without a call? Who can take from Bebo and Iubdan what they wish kept secret?”

The specter smiled. “There is one other who knows the secret of Rudiobus. Or so rumor would have it.”

“Who?”

“Lady Gleamdrené Gormlaith, Queen Bebo’s own cousin, highly favored in the courts of Rudiobus. Of all Iubdan’s merry subjects, it is said she alone knows the truth behind the legends of the Flowing Gold.”

Hri Sora considered this. “It is well,” she said. “But one must still penetrate the boundary protections that Bebo herself established. No one can enter Rudiobus uninvited. To even set foot in Gorm-Uisce Lake without leave would be death.”

“So much for the power of the firstborn,” said the specter with a mocking laugh.

She snarled at him, spewing drops of blood from her lips. If only she might tear him to pieces here in the nightmarish remains of her demesne! But he was without substance, no more than a shade. No fire of hers would ever harm him, she knew.

There was nothing left, then: No power without her wings; no city to call home. Only the hideous memory of former fires and that burning, driving lust for revenge. Such a pathetic creature she was, reduced to this form.

Unless . . .

Hri Sora smiled. This form was pitiable, but her mind was still good. And dragons command many powerful enchantments. An idea took root, and her smile grew.

Perhaps a soft and vulnerable woman was not so soft and vulnerable after all.

“Very well, Father,” she spoke in a fearfully gentle voice. “I swear to you, I will do the impossible. I will get you this gold and make myself worthy in your eyes once more. Then”—flames flickered in her throat—“you will give me back my wings.”

“Idle boasts,” said he.

She roared. Her woman’s face twisted almost beyond recognition, and fire fell from her bleeding lips. “Wake me up!”

The Dragon laughed at her. Then he put up one hand and snapped his fingers.

The dream vanished.



1

SHARP ROCKS TORE at the girl's bare feet as she ran. Her aching body cried out for relief, for rest, but she dared not stop.

Water lapped near her. Now, at high tide, the ground on which she ran was no more than a narrow stretch of pebbled beach with ocean extending forever on either side. Behind her were the mountains, but she would not look back. She could still hear the howls echoing and reechoing from peak to peak until she thought she might go mad. She fixed her gaze forward, struggling to see through the thick fog that rose up from the ocean and threatened to smother her. Yet the Path was firm beneath her bleeding feet.

The Wood watched her approach, its gaze curious and hungry.

She stumbled along the isthmus, crossing the bay from her own land to the greater Continent of the north. The Wood grew thick here. She had no choice but to pass into its welcoming arms if she wished to continue her flight.

The mist was so heavy she could not see two steps ahead. But she felt

when the ground softened, the sharp rocks of the isthmus giving way to moss and crackling leaves. Her arms reached ahead as though to push the mist away; from her wrists dangled rough cords that chafed her skin.

She caught a glimpse of gold. No more than a glance, like the fleeting burst of sunshine through storm clouds, vanishing in an instant. Yet she turned to that sight, her eyes wide and desperate. For a moment, she stood as though blind. Then she saw it again, this time a form as well: slender legs, a shining coat, a powerful body disappearing into the shadows of the Wood.

Perhaps she dreamed it. It did not matter. Where else could she turn now that the world she knew was shattered?

A sob choked her, and she stumbled to her knees. How desperately she wished to lie down, to close her eyes, to will away the visions in her mind. But the howls were still too close in her memory, so she forced herself up and staggered on blindly, pursuing that distant golden form.

The Wood's dark arms encircled her as she plunged headlong into its domain. She felt no alteration as she stepped out of the mortal world into that place without Time, for her mind was spent.

But a voice without words spoke to her heart in a language she scarcely understood. She followed the voice, propelled by an urgency beyond fear and all human need. It sang to her as she fled:

See the truth, my child. See the truth and speak!



It was a night that would have gone down in history even without the events that followed.

Every night, the merry Faerie folk of Rudiobus Mountain found excuses to dance and sing and dance and sing some more, so that in itself was not unusual. But not every night marked the birthday of Queen Bebo . . . which was especially momentous considering the queen was so ancient that no one, not even her husband, would dare guess her age. The idea that she should have a birthday at all thrilled her subjects. They considered it so brilliant an occasion that they could bear to celebrate it only once every hundred years.

Bebo sat in splendor beside her raven-haired husband and watched with a smile while her subjects danced in her honor. She wore an ancient crown of goblin work (wrought in the ages before goblins forgot their craftsman skills), and a veil of delicate silver covered her hair.

The queen's cousin, Lady Gleamdrené Gormlaith, stood beside Bebo's throne, a jeweled goblet in her hand, ever ready to serve. She kept her eyes downcast, but a not-so-demure smile curved her lips. She was aware of how many doting swains turned their gazes her way, how many hearts beat in desperate hope that she might bestow favors upon them: a smile, a glance even. And oh! to think she might grace one of their number with a dance!

Lady Gleamdrené was the most desired woman in all Ruaine Hall. And she knew it well.

The young bucks pretended indifference. They shuffled their feet and elbowed their friends' ribs. They talked in loud voices of exploits in the great Wood beyond Rudiobus, hoping their voices would carry above the pipers' playing and strike Lady Gleamdrené's ears. A few even vowed to themselves that, before the night's end, they should ask to take a turn about the dance floor with Queen Bebo's fair cousin.

But Gleamdrené, slyly peeking out from beneath her lashes, missed one particular face in the crowd. Her smile slowly melted into a frown and her covert glances became more and more pronounced. "Lumé love me," she whispered. "Where *is* he?"

Yet she could not find the one she sought. He stood in the shadows just outside the reach of torchlight and lanterns. One of the side passages leading from Fionnghuala Gate into King Iubdan's central hall provided darkness enough that a man might prowl there beyond the gaze of searching eyes.

The people of Rudiobus wore green. From the queen's apple-green gown to the rich forest tones in her husband's robes to the olive jerkin worn by the lowliest imp, the kingdom of merrymakers were a verdant garden of emerald and spring leaf, moss and teal. This man wore scarlet.

The Merry People of Rudiobus were rarely seen without smiles, and so it was with this man. A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth, waiting to burst across his pale, angular face. But his golden eyes were serious.

He watched the shadows of the dancers winging across the walls of the mountain hall. He smelled the richness of the fresh-hung pine and holly boughs festooning the rocks and littering the floor. He heard the sounds of ageless voices raised in song. He saw how every man in the room turned eventually to gaze with longing upon Lady Gleamdrené Gormlaith. But she would have none of them.

She looked for him. He knew it with a confidence common only in his kind. He lived ever assured of the ultimate desirability of himself. Who would not crave his presence, nor vie for his esteem? He himself admired no man more, for was there ever such a handsome, a quick-witted devil as he?

“We are alike, you and I, my lady Gleamdren,” he whispered to himself as he watched that fair maid scan the crowds, her face sinking into deeper frowns when she failed to see his. “The Flower of Rudiobus. That’s what they call you. Any man here would give his right hand for your pleasure!”

The smile, which had been tugging at his mouth for some time, finally won out. He grinned, and his eyes shone even beyond the torchlight. “You, my sweet, should be my wife.”

“A fine sight, eh, poet?”

The scarlet man did not startle at the gruff voice that suddenly spoke behind him. He turned, his eyes narrowed, and icily replied, “The queen’s birthday is always a fine display, which is nothing new. It holds little interest for me.”

“Little interest, you say?” The speaker took a step nearer to the poet, entering the light of the nearest torch. He wore a moss-green doublet that would disguise him from hunting eyes should he venture beyond Rudiobus Mountain, and he carried a lance. His appearance was stocky, broad-shouldered, and powerful, opposite of the scarlet man’s in every way save for his shock of yellow hair. In that aspect, the two might have been brothers. Perhaps they were. But they, like all the men and women of Rudiobus, were so ancient in their immortality that none could remember their heritage. “You’re blind, my friend, if you can find no lovely face to light an interest in you.”

“Fine sentiments, Captain Glomar of the Guard,” the scarlet man said. “I was unaware that *your* kind entertained feelings of the higher order.”

Glomar ignored this last with masterful stoicism. Setting his lance momentarily aside, he crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, his face cast into shadows by the torch. "If none other can touch your heart, there's one I think who might." His eyes were bright as he gazed across the hall. "Aye, she's the image of what every lass ought to be; that's what I think."

"I'm going to pretend I haven't the least notion what you're talking about," the scarlet man said. "And I'd advise you to take advantage of my pretense and sneak away now."

Glomar's sandy eyebrows shot up. "Don't tell me you've not noticed for yourself?"

"Noticed what?"

"That lass! What else?"

"*Which* lass, Glomar? There are a hundred and more ladies careening across the floor as we speak."

"Ah, but only one so far as I can see," answered Glomar, settling back comfortably to continue his long-distance admiration. His voice, though rough as dirt and rock, was almost wistful. "I dare you to find a maid alive who can rival Queen Bebo's cousin."

The scarlet man was not surprised. Why should he be? Who beside fair Gleamdren could have caught even stony Glomar's eye? Nevertheless, momentary jealousy surged in the scarlet man's breast. Had he been a cat, the fur on his back and tail would have stood on end. As it was, his lips drew back in something like a snarl, and he turned on the starry-eyed captain a look that might have pinned the poor man to the wall. But before Glomar saw, the snarl melted into a smile.

"You should ask her to dance, good captain."

Glomar's face paled noticeably even in the shadows, and his eyes went hollow and round. "Ach, no! That I could never! Nay, I would not dream to so much as step in her slim little shadow, much less ask to hold her hand in mine! I'm not much of a dancer in any case."

"Wise, then. Wise, indeed," nodded the poet. He too leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. Though in breadth he could never equal Glomar, he stood a half head taller at least. The better to look down upon the captain. "You'd never have a hope with her."

Glomar sighed. "Don't I know it." Then he glared up at his companion. "Nor can any man in Rudiobus hope to be fair Gleamdren's match!"

The scarlet man shrugged. "I could dance with her. If I wished."

Glomar snorted.

"I could," the scarlet man said, smooth as butter. "Anytime I choose."

"Ask her, then. I'm always game for a joke."

"I'm not so much in the mood."

"Not in the mood? To dance with that vision?" Glomar barked a laugh that caught the attention of several of the nearest dancers, who turned startled faces toward the darkened passage. "You amuse me, friend. Are you a bard or jester? Not in the mood, my eye. Ha! You're more a coward than all the rest of your kind together, aren't you?"

The scarlet man opened his mouth to give a reply, but fortunately, King Iubdan chose that moment to cry out in a voice that instantly silenced the music and the laughter of the revelers.

"Where is my Chief Poet?" he bellowed. His tones were round and rich as plum pudding, and his eyes, though black, were the merriest in the room. "Where is Bard Eanrin? Send him up to me at once! Make way, you dancers, and find my poet!"

The scarlet man stepped away from the wall, smoothing down his yellow hair, then jamming a jaunty red cap in place. "Anytime I choose," he hissed in parting before springing from the shadows, leaving Glomar behind in the gloom.

The crowd made way for the scarlet man as he crossed the dance floor, his golden face beaming with smiles. He approached the thrones of his monarchs and swept a bow made all the more dramatic by the flourish of his gold-trimmed cape.

"Ah! There you are, Eanrin," said the king.

"Greetings, most noble Iubdan Tynan, Dark Man of the Merry People, Lord of Rudiobus, who sits enthroned above all in fair Ruaine Hall!" cried the poet, his hand raised in salute. "And most illustrious queen," he continued, turning a gaze of adoration upon Iubdan's wife. "Fair Bebo, who walks among the stars and sings with the Spheres to the cheer and gladness of the Far World. My best wishes upon the anniversary of your birth!"

“Many thanks, Eanrin,” said the queen with a graceful nod.

But Iubdan shook his head and bellowed, “No, no, no! What do I keep you around for, bard, if not for barding? I won’t accept wishes to my queen spoken thus. You must ballad, Eanrin! You must versify!”

Poet Eanrin gave another bow, less hearty than the first; when he stood again, his face was full of woe, and many a lady in Ruaine put her hand to her heart at the sight of such tender feeling. “I fear, my king,” said he, “that a song is not within me this night. You see before you a man broken. And though I would fain—”

“I didn’t ask you to feign,” said his sovereign, his dark eyes snapping. “I require that you perform your duty, Chief Poet, and perform it in proper spirit. It is Bebo’s birthday, and she must have a song.”

“Pray, my Dark Man,” said Bebo with a kindly smile, “do not tax the poet. If he has no song in him—”

“When have we known our good Eanrin *not* to have a song?” Iubdan cried, then quickly added in a gentler tone, “Pardon my interruption, sweet one. But my Chief Poet will earn his keep! I put it to you, Eanrin. Can you dredge up a song?”

The poet raised melancholy eyes to his king’s face and replied, “I can, my king.”

“Then sing for us, will you? Sing in honor of your queen!”

Eanrin placed a hand to his heart and turned to Bebo. But his gaze strayed, if but for the space of a heartbeat, to her cousin standing just behind the queen’s throne. And Lady Gleamdren lowered her gaze to the goblet in her hand and blushed most prettily.

“Queen of my heart,” Eanrin said, a tremor in his voice, “to you I dedicate this ode, composed spontaneously here at your feet.”

Bebo gave a gracious nod. Gleamdren raised an eyebrow, and the corners of her mouth twitched in expectation, but she schooled her face into a frown a moment later. A lady must take care how much she reveals.

The poet, unaccompanied, lifted his arms and sang. His voice was so sweet and so golden that he needed no instrument to fill it out, and his song carried to all corners of Ruaine Hall, into every cranny of that vast cavern, even to places where the torchlight could not penetrate.

*“Hers the voice, the look. Obey
 And sing a humble, longing lay!
 Within the Hall of Red and Green
 Behold my sweet, my love, my queen.
 With merry song and manic pleasures,
 Light of foot in lyric measures,
 First pursue and then retreat.
 Bright upon their fiery feet,
 Within the circling dancers’ meeting
 In time to ancient drums a-beating
 Solemn strains, her homage must declare.
 Where falls her glance, the Graces honor pay.
 I would behold the luster of her hair
 And seek the arms of Lady Gleamdrené!”*

A gasp rushed through the hall. The last echoes of the song died away, leaving the merrymakers wide-eyed and openmouthed, and Captain Glomar looking much more like a badger than he had a moment before. Queen Bebo hid either a smile or a frown behind her hand, while her cousin’s face was a conflict of blushes and scowls.

Only Iubdan laughed.

He threw back his head and howled so loudly that even Poet Eanrin had the sense to look abashed. When he was quite done, Iubdan cried, “So that’s how it is, bard? And here I thought you were singing as fine an ode to my queen as ever I have heard!”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” said the poet with a bow. “Did I misspeak?”

“Indeed you did. Where we should have heard the name *Bebo* sweetly sung, we heard instead that of her cousin. Don’t tell me this was a mistake?”

“If mistake it was,” said Eanrin, turning to fix his gaze upon Lady Gleamdren, “it was a mistake of the tongue, not of the heart! Can I help it if the words that burst from my lips are the truth I feel most keenly?”

Iubdan guffawed again, and this time much of the court joined with him. Even Bebo no longer tried to disguise her laughter. But more than a hundred pairs of fists clenched, more than a hundred jaws set on edge as the young men of Rudiobus turned angry eyes upon the poet. Not

least among these was Glomar, who took up his lance and squeezed it nearly to the point of breaking.

Gleamdren, however, refused to look at the poet, who stood, hand upon heart, gazing up at her.

“I thank you, good poet,” said Queen Bebo at length, stilling the laughter with a wave of her hand, “for bringing such jollity to our hall. I look forward to another song when next my birthday is celebrated.”

Then she bade the musicians take up their playing again, and the dancers returned to the floor. Iubdan rose and offered his hand to his queen, and they joined the others, whirling away in time to the music. Their removal to the floor left Gleamdren momentarily alone behind the thrones. She fixed her gaze upon the dancing monarchs, refusing to look even when Eanrin climbed the stairs and bowed in a fine impression of humility. Her face was fetchingly flushed.

“Fair lady,” the poet began, “please allow me to—”

“Not another word!” Gleamdren said, holding up a hand. “Your impertinence does you no credit, Bard Eanrin. Though really, I should be surprised by nothing you say or do. But good Lumé! Must you embarrass me so in front of all the court?”

“I never meant to embarrass you, sweet maid,” the poet protested, his hands outstretched in supplication. “I intended nothing other than to sing the praises of our queen! But my heart must always dictate my tongue, and my heart said—”

“I care little for your heart and its fool notions,” said Gleamdren with a pretty toss of her head that indicated quite the opposite. She was flattered, and Eanrin knew this. “You’re a dragon-kissed fool, Eanrin, that’s what you are. And tonight you’ve proven it to everyone.”

Here she tempered her words with a smile. It was a subtle dance, this art she practiced, and she was a skilled dancer. She must discourage her beaux just enough to keep them interested, not enough to drive them away.

The poet smiled in return. “Oh, come now, Gleamdren!” he said. “I know you can’t mean that. You were watching every darting shadow for a sign of me. Admit it!”

She turned up her nose. “I admit nothing.” But she gave him a sidelong glance that spoke volumes.

He leapt at the bait. “Not one man in this room is your equal.” He took a step nearer and reached for her hand. “Not one man, save me.”

She avoided his touch with an “Oh!” and gave him an arch frown.

He ground his teeth in a smile and spoke softly. “Enough of this nonsense, fair Gleamdrené Gormlaith. You know you are bored to tears by all these fools vying for your attention. What have they to offer you compared to me? I am the Chief Poet of Iubdan.”

“You’re a silly cat, Eanrin.”

He slipped a hand about her waist. She pursed her lips, struggling to frown when her whole face longed to smile. She dropped her gaze to her goblet once more but did not resist—at least, not too much—when he drew her to him.

“I will go down in history,” he whispered. “The greatest bard of all time. The prince of poetry!”

She rolled her eyes and gave a little shrug. “For what *that* is worth!”

“Every song could be yours.” He bent his head to whisper in her ear. Her white-blond hair tickled his nose and smelled of pine needles. It was an exciting scent. “I shall dedicate my work to you. Every song I write. Every lyric stanza . . . yours! What say you to this?”

“Is what you sang just now an example of things to come?” she asked, turning her face suddenly up to him. Her nose bumped his, and he drew back, startled. Then he leaned in to kiss her.

“No! No!” she cried with a laugh and backed out of his grasp, tossing her head. “Such bosh and nonsense! What girl wants all that romanticized drivel dedicated to her? Throughout history! People will get silly notions about me. They’ll start to say I’m some sort of famous beauty. Insignificant me!”

She was fishing for compliments, but Eanrin was no longer feeling generous. “Come now, dearest of my heart,” he growled. “Give us a kiss, won’t you?”

“Oh, Eanrin,” said she, still laughing. “A kiss you will never have from me!” Her glance said otherwise.

“A dance, then?” said the poet, emboldened by that look. “This reel is your favorite, I know. Give me your hand, Gleamdren, and we’ll show these beggars what dancing is!”

Gleamdren blinked at him, long and slow. Then she turned, swept down the steps, and grabbed the arm of the nearest unengaged gentleman, declaring in a voice of honey, "I'll not dance with you, Eanrin, for I have already promised this dance to—" She turned to discover the identity of her new partner. "Who are you?"

"Captain Glomar of the Guard!" gasped he, his face full of the beautiful terror of a dream come true.

"Yes, you then," said Gleamdren.

Glomar stared down at the little white hands clutching his arm. A flush swept over his face, as red as Eanrin's cape. "Why . . . why, my lady! I'm not much good at dancin'."

"But you have promised to dance with me, haven't you?" said she, gazing up at him in such a way that he would not have contradicted her for the world. Without another word, Glomar swept her into his arms, dragged her across the floor, flung her in a twirl, caught her at the last second, and hurled her again. Gleamdren was out of breath and gasping within moments. But her face fixed into a smile that was intended less for Glomar's pleasure than for Eanrin's misery.

And every man in Ruaine Hall saw the Chief Poet's disgrace.

Eanrin stood, his mouth agape, his heart beating strangely in his breast. This must be what jealousy felt like. Best to remember it; a poet must be keen on his emotions, able to dredge them up at a moment's notice. Gleamdren cast him one last dogged smile, and her eyes flew wide as her arm was nearly wrenched from the shoulder.

The poet could bear no more. He turned on heel and stalked from the hall.