

# Family Honor

By C.C. von Moguntia © 2015

Rhiannah glanced out of the window at the fierce squalls that ripped the last of the fall leaves off the nearly barren branches. She shuddered and turned toward the crackling fire in the fireplace. She took one of the oven rags and folded it twice before wrapping it around the metal handle of the kettle. She lifted it with two hands, not trusting herself with the heavy weight otherwise.

When she stirred honey into the steaming cup, the front door opened. Even though her son was careful to close it quickly, it still sucked the warmth out of the small kitchen.

“Rogan? Goodness!”

He smiled. “Sorry. It is nasty out there.”

“And you leave Alaric out in it?” Her gaze flicked to the door.

He waved her concerns away. “Oh, don’t worry about him. You know he loves to be out with the horses.”

Rhiannah stood and folded her arms in front of her chest. “Love it or not, I don’t like you making him work in this mess as long as you do.”

With a disarming smile, he said, “Mom, you know he is not a child anymore. If it were too much for him, he would have said something by now.”

Rhiannah shook her head and made a face. “Men. One braver than the other, I’d reckon.”

Rogan laughed and kissed her on her cheek. “But you love us nonetheless, don’t you?”

Disarmed by his mirth, she smiled as well. “Of course I do.” She nodded at the stove. “I kept some stew warm for you two.”

Rogan grinned and fetched a bowl and a spoon before he ladled himself some food. He sat down at the simple kitchen table and started eating.

She looked at the cup of tea she had prepared for herself and set it in front of her son. “Should still be hot.”

“Thanks, Mom. That’s exactly what I need on a day like this.”

Rhiannah watched him eat for a moment. “Did you ever speak to Alaric about us, about what happened in the capital?”

Rogan let his spoon sink back to his bowl before he looked up at her, his face somber. “Mother, I think it is better to leave this alone. No good can come of it.”

Rhiannah whispered, “He has a right to know.”

Rogan shook his head. “Right or not, it is better for everyone concerned if we forget we are anybody other than the Ross family. Please, leave it there. That way, the oath of old forever holds and we can live in peace.”

Her piercing stare pinned him. “Alaric is sixteen now, a grown man in the old reckoning. A man should know his roots, whether he follows them or not.”

Rogan pressed his lips together, his face grim. “I am telling you, Mother, it needs to be left alone.”

“You are ashamed of your own heritage?”

Rogan abandoned his food and stood, his face flushed with anger. “That has nothing to do with this, and you know it!”

“I would like to speak to him, nonetheless.”

They locked determined stares for a long moment before Rogan hissed through his teeth. “If he dies on some fool’s quest of blood and glory, I will never forgive you, Mother. I hope you

know that I mean it with all my heart. He is all I have left of her.” He stomped to the door which led to the rest of the house. “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. Good night.” He slammed the door into its lock and soon the sound of the boots on the stairs faded.

Rhiannah sighed and cleared the table to set it again for her grandson.

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The old woman sat by the fireplace and worked on mending clothes when the front door opened with a blast of frosty air. She looked up at the newcomer with a fond smile. “Alaric, there you are. You must be freezing. Your Dad came in nearly an hour ago.”

Alaric set the deadbolt in place, slipped out of his coat and halfheartedly kicked his muddy boots into the corner. “Don’t worry, Grandma. You know me. A little wind can’t hurt me.”

Rhiannah smiled indulgently at his mischievous grin.

He grabbed a bowl of food and gladly accepted the teacup she had ready for him.

As he was eating, she asked, “Are you very tired, honey?”

Alaric shook his head with both cheeks full. “Nah...” He finished swallowing before he continued, “I just rode along the outer perimeter to make sure none of the blown-off tree limbs landed on the fence. Everything is fine. I didn’t have to mend the boards at all.”

“I guess you could sit with your old grandma for a few minutes then?”

Alaric grinned. “Of course, especially if you tell me one of your good stories again.”

Rhiannah’s pleased smile radiated across her face. “I believe that can be arranged.”

She waited until Alaric grabbed his cup and joined her in the second chair by the fireplace. He stretched his socked feet toward the warmth as he sipped the hot, honey-sweetened tea.

She glanced at the closed door by the stairs before she swallowed hard. She did not want to lose her son, but she knew this story needed to be told.

“Alaric, honey?”

“Yes, Grandma?”

“How much do you remember of Pruzzina’s history?”

Alaric shrugged. “The princess spoke of some long-dead kings and their descendants, but I don’t recall much of it.”

She suppressed a knowing smile when he mentioned the girl he was very fond of, much to Rogan and her amusement. “You still miss her, don’t you?”

Alaric’s face turned beet-red before he replied a little too quickly. “I am sure she forgot all about the silly, clumsy stable boy already.”

Rhiannah noted that he really had not answered her question at all. “Possibly.” She fetched a fresh cup of tea for herself before she glanced at him. “I want to tell you about our family.”

“I would love to hear it. Dad is always tight-lipped when I ask questions.”

She nodded. “I know it all too well. Maybe when I am done telling it, you will understand why.”

He turned to look at her fully. “Sounds interesting already.”

Rhiannah smiled wistfully. “Many years ago, a great warrior and his chiefs came from a realm with high peaks and deep snows in search of more productive land to feed his half-starved people.”

When Alaric did not move, nor divert his attention, she continued, “They found the fertile plains of the northern parts of Pruzzina. Of course, the Pruzzinians already possessed the land and were loath to give it up without a fight.”

Alaric wrinkled his nose. “The warrior took their lands?”

She wagged her head. “Well, it was either that or see his people starve to death during the next winter.”

“He could have traded with the Pruzzinians for food.”

Rhiannah chose her words with care. “Those many years ago... it was a different time, Alaric. The warrior only did what was best for the ones in his charge. Maybe trade was not an option. I don’t know.”

When she stopped speaking, Alaric said, “Please continue.”

She smiled. “Right, of course. This great warrior and his men took part of Pruzzina by force, to have soil to till for many generations.”

“Let me guess, the Pruzzinians didn’t take it lying down.”

“You would be correct. They fought back, and soon it was a fight until death, a fight for the survival of Niall’s people.”

“We are talking about King Niall, the usurper? I seem to recall mention of him.”

Rhiannah quickly hid a flinch before she continued in a normal tone. “Of course, the Pruzzinians do not speak well of him, even though he won a big, glorious victory, against impossible odds.” She glanced at him for objections, but other than a disapproving face, the boy said nothing. “It came to pass that Niall was locked in a life-or-death struggle with their king. He had to win if he and his men... and with him, his entire people, should live. Circumstances forced him to kill their king and to avoid further bloodshed, Niall took his crown and subdued their nobles.”

Alaric snorted. “I suppose that’s what usurpers do.”

Rhiannah sighed deeply. The conversation was not going exactly the way she had hoped. “Niall ruled supreme, but soon the slain king’s heir gathered enough support to resist him.”

“I seem to recall he made it, didn’t he?”

She nodded. “After a long struggle, yes he did. But his victory was also short-lived, for Niall’s son took revenge and managed to wrest the crown back into the conquerors’ hands.”

“Sounds like a bunch of useless bloodshed.” Alaric wrinkled his nose.

“I wouldn’t call it useless. Remember, the fate of Niall’s people was still in the balance.”

“Nonsense, the Pruzzinians are friendly people. They wouldn’t have killed women and children or sent them off to certain starvation.”

His grandmother smiled with deep sadness in her eyes. “Maybe you have lived in the capital too long... long enough to think you are one of them.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Alaric squinted his eyes.

She waved his comment aside. “Anyway, Niall’s son reigned for many years until he died of an illness. His son Allarick ascended after him, but he was not as strong as he thought. The great-grandson of King Eduard saw his opportunity and soon raised a purely Pruzzinian army in secret. They fought several battles, one more devastating than the next. Finally, the last battle dawned. The conqueror chiefs rallied their men, even though all knew it was a fight they could not win, a fight to all their deaths.”

“It doesn’t make sense to go in with all your men when you know you can’t win. You’d be killing off your own people.”

Rhiannah smiled and raised her finger as a teacher would. "Honor, my dear Alaric. Honor. They gladly gave their lives at the command of their king. They were most honored to have been chosen to accompany him to the field of glorious battle one last time."

He shook his head. "Dumb, if you ask me. Didn't King Alfred beat them badly?"

"Yes, dear. He did. Almost all our men and of course King Allarick were killed, but before he died, his blade against Alfred's neck in a standoff, he asked for one bargain."

"I'm guessing Alfred would've rather spit in his face?"

She wagged her head. "Hmmm... not quite. In the bargain Allarick offered him own life in exchange for the those of his sister, his wife, and his infant son."

Alaric said, "I suppose Alfred would have been very dumb to let the king's heir live."

"Again, honor, my dear. You will have to learn the meaning of it sooner rather than later." Rhiannah replied with a mildly scolding tone.

"What does honor have to do with letting the heir live?"

"King Alfred was a noble knight, sworn to chivalry. Killing women and children was always frowned upon, no matter how dire the threat to his newly won throne."

"What did he do?"

"To appease the remaining conquerors, he asked for Allarick's sister's hand in marriage. She agreed quickly, of course, knowing her refusal would cost much more than her own life."

"And the heir? I bet he was conveniently lost in some orphanage?"

Rhiannah shook her head. "No, not a child of such high noble birth. Alfred demanded that the conqueror queen swear an unbreakable oath of fealty to the House of Adlerfels, an oath that would stretch across all following generations, from the current heir to the last of the House na Iolair Carraig. The oath promised that no member of Niall's descendants would ever rebel against the Pruzzinian crown again, and especially never seek the crown for themselves."

"Nothing short of that would have sufficed. I agree."

She looked at his impossibly blue eyes and his unruly raven hair and sighed from the depth of her heart. "Alaric, light of my many years, you are a good boy, but you still have much to learn."

Alaric frowned. "Dad said I could run the farm by myself if I had to..."

Rhiannah chuckled once before she shook her head. "Honey, what I am about to tell you is the truth before God, I swear."

At her solemn vow, he looked at her strangely.

"The conqueror queen I spoke of... it was me. I had to bend my knee to King Alfred, to spare my life and that of Rogan, your father."

Alaric gasped. "No! What? Dad, the heir? I can't believe it! You are joking with me, aren't you?"

She met his gaze without a hint of a flinch. "No, I am very serious, as God Almighty is my witness, it is true. You are King Niall's great-great-grandson."

Alaric jumped to his feet and paced the little space between the fireplace and the chairs. "It can't be..."

Rhiannah let him be for several minutes until she said, "That day, in the capital, when you were caught assaulting the king's heir, Holger..."

Alaric stopped to look at her.

"King Gerhardt must have surely thought it was an attempt on Holger's life, and that you might have even seduced his daughter to force the king to give you her hand in marriage, all in a bid for the crown... his crown."

Alaric gasped and stumbled back against the wall. "No! I would never...! I never touched Christiana. You know I could never do that."

She smiled. "I know you are chivalrous, Alaric. Your father has taught you *that* well enough, thank God."

He looked at her wide-eyed, slowly understanding dawned on his face. "Oh, my! If the king thought that, the oath would have been broken. He should've killed me right there in the throne room. Why didn't he, I wonder?"

Rhiannah shrugged with a wistful smile. "From what your father told me, Gerhardt was mad enough to spit fire."

"He sure was."

"Then I suppose your sweetheart put in a good word for you. It's a shame you can't thank her for it since our House is banished from Cliffhaven under the pain of death."

Alaric blushed deep red again. "She is the daughter of the king, not my sweetheart. I am barely worthy to saddle her horse, certainly nothing beyond that."

"Don't debase yourself too low, Alaric. Now that you know you are a prince of a royal House--"

"No, the usurpers are not a royal house, but a gang of rabble who ruled by force and coercion. I remember it well enough from Christiana's history lessons."

Rhiannah laugh was heavy with sadness. "Oh, honey. Think about this for a moment. She read you Pruzzinian history. Stories of the past are often told a bit differently by the winners of a conflict. Of course, they would say we are a bunch of mangy dogs compared to them, and that we ravaged the country."

Alaric set his jaw with determination. "Christiana would never lie to me."

"Of course not. Not knowingly, I am sure. But consider for a moment the Pruzzinian historians who wrote the parchments she read to you." When he still seemed stuck somewhere between skeptical and offended, she added, "I am sure Princess Christiana is a virtuous young lady who would not speak of the animosity between her people and ours."

Alaric nodded immediately. "She is virtuous and she always treated me with the same respect she treated other Pruzzinians."

She sighed. "You still have to forget you ever knew her, honey. It is better if she does not know who your family is, who you are... not yet anyway. Trust me--"

"Not yet? What do you mean? If you think I will betray her one day--" Anger flashed in his eyes when he slapped the back of the chair.

Rhiannah raised her hands to quell his objections. "Of course you would not, and nobody would ask that of you. I am just saying... You are a stable boy. What could she, or any other girl for that matter, see in a stable boy?"

"Dad said it is an honorable profession..." His defense sounded lame.

"Certainly, it is honorable... but not fitting for a prince."

He glared at her with a suspicious frown. "What would you have me do? Join the Royal Guard?"

She shook her head. "No, don't be silly. If it came out who you are, you'd be sent to the front lines of battle until the heir of a rival House would no longer be an issue."

"Christiana would not--"

"Her father certainly might, especially if he remembers how you assaulted his heir, justified or not."

"Oh... uh... right, I guess..." Alaric studied the rough floorboards at his feet.

“Honey, you know I love you, don’t you?”

He looked up at her. “Of course I do.”

“Then would you do your grandmother a huge favor?”

When his gaze remained on her, she continued, “A prince needs to know how to wield a sword, how to read, how to train and ride a hardened destrier, how to hold himself upright, like a noble, how to conduct himself in battle, in charge of men.”

“Father said all of that--”

“Your father is overly afraid of the old oath, Alaric. Think about it. When he came of age and again when he married your mother, he had to go before the king and swear it once more, in his own right and for all those who would follow his bloodline, that he would never break his vow. This is the reason he shuns all bladed weapons and never speaks of our forbearers. He is so afraid... He would never have told you the truth about your grandfather and those who came before him.”

“I am sure he would have, eventually.”

Rhiannah met his gaze and flashed a warm smile. “You are a good boy, Alaric. Really, you are. You have a lot of your grandfather in you. It is well your father gave into my request to name you after him.” She paused for a moment to breathe deeply and gather her courage.

“Alaric, I want you to become a knight.”

He stared at her and snorted. “Me? A knight? Father would never allow it.”

“Leave his permission to me. Please, would you do me this one big favor and do as I have asked.”

Alaric shrugged. “If I am a usurper descendant, the Pruzzinian orders would probably shun me, wouldn’t they? I’d never have a chance.”

She glanced at her mending project lying untouched on her knees. “You might not be able to join one of the holy, noble orders, but surely we can get you into the common order the king established.”

“The Knights of the Eagle? I heard they are impossible to get into and even if you do, ten times as many wash out as actually graduate. I am not sure I am up for that.” He traced the seam of the chair’s fabric with his finger.

Rhiannah leaned forward and captured his attention with her gaze. “If I get you in, will you promise to do your best and make your old grandmother proud?”

Alaric thought for a moment. “I... I don’t know... it is a big decision and Dad will surely be sore when I ask his permission...”

Her eyes filled with tears and she whispered, “Would you, Alaric? If there were nothing standing in your way, would you do it? Could you shake free of your father’s hate of all things honorable in battle?”

Alaric almost said yes at her desperate plea, but then he shook his head. “I will have to think about it... sleep on it maybe. Will you allow me the time, Grandma?”

She set her work aside and rose to walk to him. She embraced him with all the love she had. “Of course, honey. I will not pressure you into something you do not want to pursue, but know I would die a happy woman if you would grant me this one wish.”

“I will think about it earnestly. I promise.”

Her smile was crooked. “Then all is well. However, I should not have kept you up this long. You have to go to bed. You will be up early to help your father.”

"I know." He turned toward the door to the stairs when he stopped to look at her once more. "Thank you... for being honest with me and telling me of... of what Father obviously loathes."

She dug her fingernails into her palm to keep from crying. "It was my duty, Alaric. It was an obligation to my dear husband, may God rest him."

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Rogan hung the kettle on the hook over the fire before he readied the pan with grease. At the sound of footsteps behind him, he said, "You're up early. I haven't even started on breakfast yet."

Alaric dropped himself into the chair next to the fireplace, "I know. I figured as much."

Rogan nodded at the cabinet. "You could start scrambling the eggs to speed things up."

"Sure."

As he got up, Rogan eyed his son. "What's wrong? You're not usually one to volunteer to rise well before dawn."

He stopped what he was doing to meet his gaze. "Grandma talked to me yesterday... about our family."

Rogan stood and barely suppressed an angry curse.

"Would you have really kept all that from me?"

He clenched his jaw for a long moment before he faced his probing gaze. "Son, it was better that you never knew. Why put funny ideas in your head that can never come to anything. Our family was hated when we possessed the throne. When I was summoned before the king to swear the oath of old, I was glad to do it. I have no interest in going on a fool's quest, to ruin thousands of conqueror lives for my own glory, forever doomed to fail..." He tried to calm his emotions. He was not sure how successful he was.

Alaric had watched him and said, "Telling me about our family is not the same thing as going after the throne again, is it?"

Rogan shook his head. "Son, you don't understand. You might not want to commit treason, but if you speak of it and it becomes common knowledge who the next heir is, our knucklehead chiefs would eventually see to it that you are more than a horse farmer, more than a forgotten prince from a long-since-fallen line. And on that day, the king in Cliffhaven might decide to summon you before him. Believe me, if you have to look into the eyes of a member of the royal House of Adlerfels and you cannot be truthful, you'll regret you've ever been born." He swallowed hard. "Look, son..." He blinked his eyes burning with tears to keep from becoming too emotional. "You are all I have left of your dear mother. Don't bring me to an early grave by going on some fool-hearted quest of glory and honor. I can tell you that however well-conceived the plan is, it will fail. The kings in Cliffhaven have a much tighter grip on their reign now than Niall encountered back these many years ago. If King Gerhard were to fall, his nobles would never stand for a usurper on Pruzzina's throne. Even if they had to concede to your bid, which is highly unlikely, they would always try to undermine your rule." He shook his head and sighed. "It is folly, Alaric. If you were smart, you would keep our secret and never tell anybody what you have learned. Stay a commoner, live free with the wind in your hair as you care for our horses."

To hide that he was stirred to the core, Rogan knelt to continue to prepare the bacon for the pan.

When he remained silent, Alaric continued his task to scramble eggs.

Soon breakfast was cooked and both sat at the table to eat. While Rogan quickly filled his cheeks with the hot goodness, Alaric played with his eggs for a while before he brought tiny bits to his mouth.

Rogan finished his bite. "You're not hungry?"

Alaric shrugged. "I am, a little, but..."

"But what?"

Alaric sighed. "Grandma asked me to become a knight. She almost cried, begging me to do so. I had to think about it all night."

Rogan shook his head. "Forget about it. No noble order would knowingly train you at arms. They would draw the king's wrath if they did."

"I thought so, too, but she thinks she might be able to get me in the Knights of the Eagle."

Rogan raised his eyebrow. "The common order?"

Alaric nodded. "I don't know how she could pull it off. I'm guessing the enrollment list will land in front of the Crown at some point."

Rogan stared at his son. "You would want to go if you had the chance, wouldn't you?"

Alaric moved some of his eggs around on his plate. "I can't stop thinking about it. Hundreds of guys compete for a handful of slots each year..."

Rogan ground his teeth. "A challenge then? Well, I dare say the other boys might have had some training with a blade and the bow already. You will be well out of your league for the entrance trials, much more for the course. I hear most guys wash out quickly."

Alaric sighed. "I know, but still..." He raised his eyes to meet his father's. "Maybe it *is* in my blood and I won't be able to rest until I try it, at least."

Rogan snorted. "Your blood? I dare say it might be tainted with the rage and reckless disregard of your forefathers. I think that is much more likely." He shook his head. "Please, Alaric, try to forget. Do not pursue this. You won't ever get in, much less make it. Don't waste your time trying." He finished his food and rose to slip into his coat. To change the subject completely, he said, "I want you to look at the gray dapple's feet this morning. Get him from pasture and wrap it, if you need to. He looked off yesterday."

"I will, Dad. I'll see you later."

Rogan flipped up his collar and stepped out of the house.

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Rhiannah walked to the stable and found her son mending a bridle's buckle. "There you are."

Roanan cast a quick glance at the pasture fence where Alaric was still busy realigning the crossbeams. "You couldn't keep it to yourself, could you? After I asked you not to."

She turned to look at her grandson and hid a smirk. She made sure her face was somber again before she faced her son. "He asked you?"

Rogan snorted. "To become a knight? No, not after I told him it is a foolish, reckless idea and to forget it." After a suspicious glance at her face, he added, "What are you cooking up, Mom? Don't try to take him from me with this stuff. I can't do this by myself." He nodded at the barn behind him to indicate he meant the farm.



Rhiannah shook her head. "I promise I will not make him do anything he does not want to do, but I think it is a little presumptuous of you to want to play God and deny him what may very well be his destiny."

Rogan spat, "Destiny? Pah! Some destiny to ride off into 'glorious' battle and return a corpse, leaving your wife and your infant son at the mercy of your enemy."

She shook her head. "Don't blame your father for his defeat. We both knew there can be only one king. Your father tried to secure the crown for you. And if you are at least honest, you will have to admit he held his own for far longer than anybody else could have managed. He only lost because they outnumbered us and succeeded in wearing us down."

Rogan growled, "Ugh! I am not interested in dumb crowns and victories in war. However, I *was* interested in having a father around." He nodded at his son, working in the distance. "Don't presume to know what his destiny is. You can't possibly know it has anything to do with swords, bows, and battle tactics."

Rhiannah wagged her head in thought. "No, maybe I don't, but I do know this. Whatever his destiny is, if you keep him from it, he will be miserable for the rest of his life."

"He seems happy enough doing what he is doing."

Rhiannah replied, "For now, Rogan, for now."

He threw the bridle to the ground in anger and stalked off a few paces. He turned and pointed his outstretched finger at her. "No thanks to you, he now has a new bug in his ear. I know you will not rest until he believes this knight nonsense to be his fate or whatever you want to call this coercion."

"I will only present another option for his life. He is young enough to try other things and return should they not suit him."

"Oh, presenting other options?" Rogan almost shouted now. "Is that what you call crying and begging him to become a knight? I can't believe you would stoop this low, Mother. I simply cannot believe it. After all you have been through for this blasted 'family tradition'? I would have thought of you of all people should be the first to want to stop this nonsense." He subsided when he saw his son come up to the barn.

Alaric said, "What's going on? I thought I heard shouting."

Rhiannah shook her head and smiled. "Oh, nothing, honey. I came out to ask you to take me to Willowford today if you would."

Before he could reply, Rogan's forehead wore a suspicious frown. "Willowford? What for?"

She said, "I ran out of mending thread and with the winter coming up quickly, I thought I'd get a start on making new mittens for you. The old ones are mere tattered rags."

Alaric looked at his father. "I know how much you hate girl stores, so I will go in your stead if you want."

She smiled disarmingly. She knew her son had a strong dislike for visiting yarn and fabric shops with her. He would always sigh and fidget while she caught up with old friends.

Rogan said, "Fine, you go. But I want to you finish the fence before you do."

Alaric smiled at him with thanks and glancing at her, he said, "Give me half an hour until the front side is done."

Rhiannah laid a hand on his shoulder. "You take your time, honey. The store stays open until the city gates close."

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While his grandmother discussed the respective virtues of yarn with the store clerk, Alaric had the leisure to look around the shop. Except for a wrinkly, old man trying to stuff yarn twists into a wooden box with shaky hands, he was the only male in the store. Several women chatted happily while they showed off their newest handiworks to the others.

Alaric sighed. He would rather be mending fences right now.

His longing gaze at the door was interrupted by one of the young store clerks. "Can I help you with anything, sir?"

When Alaric noticed that she smiled at him, his face flushed with heat before he could prevent it. "Uh... No, no, I'm here with my grandmother."

The clerk turned to glance at her. It was obvious that the sales discussion would not end for some time. She turned back and smiled even broader. "Nice of you. What do you do for a living?"

Before giving him time to reply, she answered her own question. "I bet you are a ranger, aren't you? You have the shoulders for it."

Alaric wished his cheeks were not burning. "Me? No. I'm still learning the bow, much less the sword. I'd probably make a lousy mountaineer."

She batted her eyes at him. "Still, I think you could do it. I've seen scrawnier guys than you strut around with their ranger coats. I believe it would suit you very well. I bet the robbers in the mountains would quake at your sight."

Another wave of heat rushed to his face and he tried hard not to stammer. "Look... I... I think I... I've got to go."

He hurried to close the distance to his grandmother and whispered, "Grandma, I have to get out of here. Can you meet me by the horse as soon as you are finished?"

"All right, sure, but what--"

"I'll be outside." Without waiting for her consent, he stormed out of the store and down the road to the nearest hitching station. He sighed with relief when he reached his horse. Fondly, he slapped his stallion's neck. "Girls, huh? I don't think I will ever understand them."

The horse snorted and shook his head.

Alaric looked to the southwest as if his gaze could pierce buildings, forests, mountains, and leagues of distance. "Yeah, except for that one. You are right. I understood her well enough." He sighed from the depth of his heart before he turned to pick a piece of grass from the stallion's mane. "I told you not to remind me of her, meanie. It still hurts, you know."

After some time, his grandmother came walking toward him. She tried to hold her coat closed against the cold breeze while clutching her wrapped package to her chest at the same time. "Honey, why did you run off like that? Surely, standing out here in this weather is worse than enduring my chatting about sewing patterns."

Despite the freezing wind, Alaric's cheeks warmed again and he avoided her gaze. "It wasn't the smell of wool that got me out of there. It was the store clerk."

"Did she ask you to leave?"

"No, no. She was nice to me, too nice. I didn't... uh... that's not right... and... um..." His face was burning even more.

Rhiannah laughed. "Oh, I think I understand now. Don't worry. You didn't do anything wrong. The young maidens are simply attracted to fine, strapping young men like yourself. They see in you the man you'll soon become and they are very interested."

Alaric wondered if it was possible for his face to burst into actual flames. “Oh, my goodness, Grandma! How can you talk about this so calmly? I am only sixteen. I am not ready for all that girl stuff.”

She winked at him knowingly. “No, maybe not yet, but soon enough. And I would guess they think it is never wrong to get your attention early before some other girl does.”

Alaric could only groan.

Rhiannah laughed. “But come, get the horse, we have one more errand to run.”

Alaric loosened the reins and followed his grandmother to the town’s market square. “I thought all you needed was yarn?”

She glanced at him with a mysterious expression. “All I wanted to say in front of your father was that I needed yarn.”

Alaric thought for a moment. “You were fighting about me this morning.”

She shook her head. “No, not about you, honey. Perhaps for you, or for your destiny and your chance to fulfill it.”

“I don’t want you two to fight. You’re all I have left.”

“I know it would have been easier if your mother was still with us, but such things cannot be helped.” Her voice was soothing. “I will try not to fight with your father anymore, but even he is wrong about certain things sometimes.”

She looked ahead at the red brick church in front of them. “You can hitch the horse there, by the wrought-iron fence.”

“We are going to church? But it is not Sunday.”

Rhiannah smiled mysteriously once more. “You’ll see.”

They entered the dim building and found the large space empty, save for two women kneeling in prayer. She dipped her fingers in the holy water and genuflected before she pulled her thick shawl over her graying hair. Alaric followed her example and crossed himself before sketching only a perfunctory genuflection to be able to follow right behind her.

“Ah, Lady Rhiannah bean-chéile righ Allarick na Iolair Carraig. Welcome to the house of God, Your Majesty.”

Alaric stared at the young priest as if he was out of his mind.

She smiled at the cleric. “Father Luke, it is hardly the address you should be using in public, now should you?”

Luke bowed before her. “There was nobody around to overhear, Your Majesty, so I will gladly use the appropriate address.” He glanced at Alaric for a moment before he focused back on Rhiannah. “But how can I be of service today, Your Majesty? I hope you are well and do not seek prayer for healing?”

She shook her head. “No, praise be to God, I am as healthy as ever, maybe not as strong, but still well enough.” At his questioning gaze, she continued, “If you have an office or something more private, Father Luke. I would appreciate if you could lead us there.”

“Yes, of course, Your Majesty. If you would follow me to the bishop’s study? We should be undisturbed there. He is currently traveling.”

“It will do nicely, I’m sure.”

Soon they sat in front of a large desk presently devoid of all papers. Luke slid gingerly into the bishop’s brocade chair and steepled his fingers in front of his mouth. “How can I help you, Your Majesty?”

Rhiannah glanced at Alaric beside her. “I will need your assistance in getting him admitted to the Knights of the Eagle.”

Luke betrayed his surprise only by a raised eyebrow. "I see." He paused for a long moment before he continued, "I have a man sympathetic to our cause in the order's scribe's office. He can conveniently overlook the prince's identity and enter an alias on the rolls. Unfortunately, that is all I can do for you. The applicants are reviewed by a board of knights, colonels, and generals and they are mostly looking at aptitude scores. If Prince Alaric does not make the trials, then my hands are tied. I do not have the power or influence to sway the admissions board's votes."

Rhiannah smiled at him. "Whatever you can do, it will suffice, Father. If it is not God's will for him to enter the order, then so be it."

Luke looked at her with intensity. "Your Majesty, if he does not make it, you know there are other ways to train..."

Rhiannah rose gracefully from her seat. "I wish for my grandson to attend a proper order for training."

"But a Pruzzinian order, Milady? Would they not brainwash him out of his God-given anointing--"

"Your concerns are noted, Father, but they are hardly justified. If God, in His grace, has seen fit to bestow an anointing onto Alaric then no amount of indoctrination can remove it. I am sure you know that better than anyone, Father Luke?"

"Yes, of course, Your Majesty. However--"

Rhiannah turned to leave. "Have a good day, Father Luke."

The cleric quickly came from behind the desk and passed her to open the door for her. "Your Majesty, thank you for your visit. Please do not hesitate to ask if you need anything further in this matter. I will be most happy and honored to oblige."

Before she left the room, she met his gaze. "Yes, I do require one more thing. Your prayers, Father Luke, that Alaric's arm is strong, his eyes keen, and his aim true during the trials."

"Yes, of course, Your Majesty. I will see to it right away."

"Thank you." She rushed by him, back to the sanctuary.

Alaric had to hurry to keep up. When they were out of earshot, he whispered, "Well, that was an unpleasant fellow."

Rhiannah shrugged. "I know, but for you to join the order, I needed his connections."

"I could have made up any name for enrollment. Why do we need him?"

She flashed a tired smile. "Because the scribes will check the church registries for entries of your christening. Your bid for knighthood would end rather abruptly if you were caught lying on your application."

Alaric looked at her with wide eyes. "What do I do then? The church books would have na Iolair Carraig as my name. I dare not disclose that."

"Exactly. You should use your middle name and the new last name your father fancies so much. Father Luke's contact in the order should recognize the name Roanan Ross readily enough, especially if Luke alerts him to watch for it."

"The name is plain, nobody would suspect who I really am."

She slowed in thought before she stopped completely. "Alaric, do me a favor."

"What, Grandma?"

"Regardless of the priest's words, remain true to yourself. You don't have to be a prince, you don't have to be a knight, or anything else for that matter. Whatever you choose, choose wisely, with your heart. Let it not be said I pressured you into something you don't want to do."

Alaric averted his gaze and thought for a long moment before he looked up at her again. "I think, if I don't try for the order, I would be wondering if I could have made it. And, as you said, if I don't make it, so be it. I can go on, knowing it was not my path to take."

Rhiannah's sincere smile made the wrinkles around her eyes seem like a lacy embellishment. "That is the right attitude, honey, even though I know you well enough to know, when you sense the challenge, you will move heaven and earth to make it. Am I right?"

Alaric grinned. "I think I sensed the challenge when you first mentioned the order."

She walked on with measured steps. "Father Luke is worried a Pruzzinian order will turn you against us."

"That is stupid. The Pruzzinians aren't like that at all."

"And you base this assumption on...?"

"We lived in the Silver Castle for years, Grandma. I had many friends there. They never once called me ugly names because of my eyes and my hair. I know they are not like that."

Rhiannah chuckled. "I suppose Luke's fears were unfounded. It is already much too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Too late to get you brainwashed from a conqueror prince to a Pruzzinian lad."

"Grandma, I was always a Pruzzinian lad, I only found out about the conqueror stuff yesterday."

She laughed aloud. "And that is well, honey."

...\*...

Alaric put the next piece of wood on the block before he swung wide and axed it in half with one stroke. He took up the remaining pieces and chopped those thinner until it passed his muster. He threw them all into the wheelbarrow.

When he had cleaved enough to fill it, his father came up to him. "Here you are, and I was thinking about sending a search party. It will be dark soon."

"I am finishing up now. I'll be in once I've stacked this batch."

His father came around to look at his face. "Are you feeling well, son? You are doing chores I have not even asked for."

"Maybe it is time for me to grow up and think of these things before you have to tell me?"

He chuckled. "I believe in miracles, but not in my own house. What is going on? Chopping wood? We still have enough to last 'till Christmas."

To avoid answering, Alaric took up another piece of wood and set it on the block. With one massive swing, he split the log and buried the ax in the stump beneath.

His father clicked his tongue. "Ah, I see. Practicing, are we?"

Alaric only glanced at him for a second before he lined up for his next piece.

"Grandmother talked you into trying for the Knights of the Eagle, hasn't she?"

Alaric swung and put the remaining pieces into the barrow. "She didn't have to talk me into anything."

"But you still want to go?"

Alaric met his father's disapproving gaze. "I am not doing this for glory, or my illustrious ancestors, or to please Grandma, or to aggravate you, for that matter."

"Then why?"

“Because if I don’t, I would always wonder if I could have made knighthood if I tried it. I don’t think I can live with not knowing for sure.”

His father paused for a moment. “I guess I can see your point, but then again... Have you thought about what you will be doing after you are a knight, assuming, of course, you can get in and graduate, two very big if’s?”

Alaric shook his head. “No, not really. If I don’t make it, I would be making plans in vain.”

He shrugged. “Well, I for one would give it a passing thought at least.”

Alaric picked up the remaining pieces and took up the wheelbarrow to relocate to the wall of their farmhouse. His dad followed him and leaned against the house while he watched him stack the wood in orderly rows.

When the barrow was almost empty, Alaric said, “If I get admitted under a fake name, I assume I could join the Royal Guard with the same name. Nobody would know me.”

“Coming home is not on your list?” His father sounded disappointed.

Alaric smiled. “Of course it is one of my options, but I thought a man is supposed to make his own way and not come crawling back home to Daddy.”

“Son,” his voice was somber. “You would never be crawling back, whether you make the cut or not. I want you to keep ‘coming back’ on the top of your list, even if you are ‘Sir Knight in shining armor’.”

Alaric nodded. “All right, if you would have me back.”

“Of course I would.”

“Are you sure? I know what you think of me going in the first place.”

“That has nothing to do with wanting you to come back, regardless of where you went in the meantime.”

Alaric stopped what he was doing and hugged him. “Thanks, Dad. I wasn’t sure you’d feel that way.”

With a fond smile, he said, “When are you leaving?”

“The trials are the day after Martinmas. To make it to Adlerburg by then, I’ll have to start walking tomorrow.” Alaric continued stacking.

He flinched. “So soon?”

Alaric quipped, “Well if I don’t make it, I will only be gone for a week or so.”

Rogan snorted. “Knowing you, you will make it because somebody somewhere thought you couldn’t, just to prove them wrong.”

Alaric laughed. “I hope it is that easy.” When he had finished stacking the wood against the house, he leaned the empty wheelbarrow against the rows and picked up his coat.

His father gazed at the first stars sparkling in the clear, crisp sky. “Alaric, I have to ask you for a favor.”

“Sure, Dad.”

He shook his head. “No, hear me out first.”

They started walking towards the pasture fence without a real goal in mind. Alaric looked at his father to continue.

“Once you are a knight, you are in danger.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed. “Our people... they are steeped in tradition. They have been dreaming of their own king ruling over them since your grandfather died on the field of battle.”

“How does that have anything to do with me being a knight, or not?”

"I am getting to that. The chiefs have asked me on many occasions to take up the conqueror crown, or at least the presiding seat on the council of elders. They badgered me until I could not take it anymore. I had to start avoiding being seen in the stores, at the market, or the festivals. I never went to the meetings and assemblies, to begin with. I am hoping they'll forget what I look like and leave me alone."

Alaric shrugged. "I don't really have that problem. I have not trumpeted around whose son I am since we moved here like you told me."

"And I appreciate that. I truly do. Unfortunately, somebody always knows, and infuriatingly, your grandmother makes no attempts at secrecy whatsoever."

"I don't think she could. The priest in the church called her 'Your Majesty.' How surreal is that?"

He looked at him strangely. "He did?"

"Yes, and she didn't do anything to make him stop."

He groaned. "See? That is what I am talking about. Once you graduate and you run across the priest again, he will probably know who to tell about your new-found skills."

"Why would he care?"

His father sighed. "Because by now they should have figured out I will not play their games and nothing and nobody can make me take up my father's crown."

"You think they will badger me next?"

"I know they will, son. I know it like I know the sun will rise again tomorrow. And once you are a knight, fully trained for battle and leadership, I know they will not relent."

Alaric shook his head. "I promise I won't let them, Dad. I will remain anonymous for as long as I can. With some luck, nobody will ever find out who the next heir is."

His father stopped and looked into his eyes, now barely discernable in the fading light. "I would have you swear before the Almighty, just so you will remember we had this conversation."

Alaric nodded. "As you wish." He lifted his hand over his heart and spoke solemnly. "I swear, as God is my witness, that I will never seek the crown of my forefathers, that the oath of old will never be broken, and that I will try to stay anonymous, as far as it is in my power, so help me God."

He hugged him heartily. "Thank you, Alaric. You have made me proud today, more than any knightly accolade ever could." They headed back to the house. "Just so you know... One day, when your grandmother passes, or when I go the way of the grave... the king will summon you to make sure the oath of old has not been broken. Make sure to swear the fealty required with all your heart. Have a clear conscience when you look into the king's eyes as you take your knee."

"I will, Dad. That should not be too difficult. I have no intention of becoming king, remember?"

He smiled. "Make sure you don't ever forget. It will come up, maybe not soon but one day..."

"Not to worry, I won't."

"Are you packed yet?"

"Not completely, only a change of clothes, so far. I was going to talk to you over dinner about a few coins for the inns on the way."

His father laughed. "At least you were planning on telling me you were leaving before I found out you were gone. That is encouraging."

Alaric grinned. "I wasn't going to leave without goodbyes. I have to make sure I am welcome back, in case I don't make the trials and all that."

"You rascal." His laugh was tinged with sadness. "Whether you can believe it or not, I wish you much success. If we were normal commoners, like everyone else... I would strut around town, my head held high, knowing my son was training to be a Knight of the Eagle."

"You would?" Alaric blinked at him with unbelief.

"You'd become a knight. A surcoat, holy vows, a blade on your shoulder when you kneel before the altar... I don't think any father could be more proud."

"I would have to make the cut and the training first..."

"I know you will." He spoke with unwavering confidence in his voice.

"How do you know?" The wind tousled Alaric's hair as he slowed to wait for his father's answer.

"I have given this a lot of thought..." He stopped and looked out over the dark pastures.

"And?"

"And maybe your grandmother is right." He shook his head with a snort. "Maybe it is in your blood. Maybe the qualities of a conqueror skip a generation each time, Niall's son, me... I never cared for weapons and battle. I bet he didn't either..."

Alaric met his sheepish gaze. "By your reckoning, I would have them. Niall, Granddad...and now I."

His father nodded. "That's what I was always afraid of."

Alaric thought for a moment. "I could never start conquering like he did. I believe it is wrong, and no amount of badgering by the chiefs will change my mind about that."

"I know, son. Thank God for that." He laid a hand on his shoulder. "If you are considering joining the Royal Guard after this..."

"Then I can put whatever talent for weapons and war I might have to its proper use." He smiled.

The father shrugged. "You might make a mighty general one day. Fight for the House of Adlerfels, instead of against it, maybe give those dastardly Aquitanians a run for it."

"Now you are scaring me. What happened to my Dad who is deathly afraid of anything soldier-like." Alaric winked at him.

His father laughed. "Oh, just forget it. I love you, son. Whatever you decide to be one day." He nodded at the door to the house. "Come, dinner is waiting."

"In a minute."

After the door shut behind him, Alaric turned to face southwest, the hills in the distance a black line against the darkening sky. The night's breeze tugged at his coattails, his raven hair disheveling with every squall.

"If it is in my blood..." He closed his eyes and imagined the impressive fortifications of Cliffhaven and the Silver Castle, perched high on a massive rock. Unbidden, another image came to mind.

"Christiana... No, forgive me. Lady Christiana von Schwarzen-Adlerfels, if it is in my blood, I swear I will never turn against you or your House. If I do have the talent, I would like to pledge my sword to your defense, Milady. By my honor as a knight, I vow to defend your life with mine should it come to that, so help me God."

A broad smile crept on his face. *By my honor as a knight.* He liked the sound of that. He laughed, clapped his hands together and raised his arms. "Knights of the Eagle, here I come."