

Troll By Jury

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"I don't know why she's going through with this if she doesn't want to," Garth Justi's-son said as he and his two companions picked their way along the bank of the Iron River that misty morning. "If you don't want to do something, don't do it, that's what I always say. Life is simple."

"For the simple-minded, maybe." Garth's wife, Zoli of the Brazen Shield, was all grouches and grizzles. The erstwhile member of the Swordsisters' Union was in one of her none-too-affable moods.

"You sound even less enthusiastic to be attending this event than Ethelberthina," Garth observed. "*She's* got to be there because it's her Maiden Morn—a girl turns thirteen just once, if she's lucky—but *you* didn't have to come."

"Ethelberthina asked us to be there," Zoli shot back. "D'you think I'd do this for anyone else? Poor kid, she needs us. Otherwise she'll be surrounded by relatives. *Her* relatives." Even the hardened ex-swordswoman shuddered at the thought.

"You know, I wonder why she *is* doing this." Garth rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It's plain she'd rather die. When I was a lad, a girl *had* to celebrate her Maiden Morn or there'd be talk, but times have changed; folk here in Overford think it's old-fashioned. Skip it nowadays and no one blinks an eye, let alone gossips about it, and you know how we Overfordians love to gossip. Do you think someone's forcing her?"

"Who's got that sort of power?"

"If she were an ordinary girl, I'd say everyone and the miller's donkey," Garth replied. "But seeing as it's her—"

"Indeed." Dean Porfirio, head of the Overford Academy and the third member of the wandering party, gave a fond smile. "I've always said that Ethelberthina Eyebright is a most exceptional child."

"A twelve-year-old who counts a couple of retired sellswords and a wizard as her best friends? Yes, I'd call that exceptional, all right." Zoli adjusted the set of her armored bodice and spat into the reeds.

"The *richest* twelve-year-old in Overford and half the dukedom 'round," the wizard added.

"Maybe she's doing it because someone promised her a nice Maiden Morn present," Garth conjectured.

Zoli stopped, spun around, and hollered in his face: "Would you *listen* to yourself? She can buy her *own* presents! There's no reason she has to endure this stupid Midden Morn nonsense if—"

"*Maiden Morn*," Dean Porfirio corrected her, steepling his fingertips and nodding in that sage manner that so many wizards affected. Even while matching Garth and Zoli stride for stride, he still managed to convey the impression that he was back in his office, sunk deep in a comfortable armchair, delivering an instructive speech to wayward students. "A singular, local custom whose origins are lost in the mists of antiquity."

"Like us," Zoli grumbled. It was that legendarily darkest of all hours, the one that came just before the dawn, and nature had decided to add to the travellers' problems by casting a thick blanket of fog across their path. "We never should've agreed to call for you this morning. A wizard ought to be able to get himself out of bed and off to his appointments. I know the path from our house to the Iron River blindfolded, but from Overford Academy it's another story." She scowled at Dean Porfirio. "The only way we're going to find the river now is if we fall into it."

"We can't be late," Garth said. He sounded worried. "We've got to find the toll bridge, or at least the ford. The ritual's going to be held on the *town* side, and if we're not there soon, we won't be able to see a thing!"

"What's there to see?" Zoli wanted to know.

"Ah, I can answer that!" Dean Porfirio said. "First, the girl herself wades into the river and as soon as she sees the sunrise touch the water, she recites the Prayer for a Prosperous Husband. Then—"

"Prayer for a *what*?" Even through the fog it was possible to tell that Zoli was looking at the wizard as if he'd broken out in a rash of parsnips.

"Prosperous Husband. That's the whole point of having a Maiden Morn, letting a girl send out the word that she's officially on the marriage market. Then, as soon as she finishes reciting the poem—"

Zoli stopped spang dead in the middle of the path and slapped her forehead. "So *that's* it!" she exclaimed. "*That's* why Ethelberthina's gone crabbier than an ogre with the itch: It's that stupid poem!"

"Doesn't want a prosperous husband?" Dean Porfirio inquired mildly.

"Doesn't *need* a prosperous husband, nor any other kind," Zoli said. "What a question! You know the girl as well as I—more to the point, you know her father. From the moment she was born, Mayor Eyebright was her first, best, and only example of a prosperous husband."

Dean Porfirio's brow darkened. "That bloated sack of lizard droppings had me assaulted and left for dead in an alley, once. And Ethelberthina still talks about how he kept trying to get his hands on her trust fund. Hmph! No wonder the child doesn't want to advertise for a husband, even if it is no more than an empty ritual: She must think they're all like her father."

"Even me?" Garth asked in a surprisingly small voice for one who had single-handedly destroyed his share of dark legions, demon hordes, and effete high priests in his salad days.

"Of course not you." Zoli patted her husband's cheek. "It's not that Ethelberthina *never* wants a husband, it's just that she thinks it's stupid to make folks think that's *all* she wants."

"Unlike her sisters," Garth remarked. Everyone nodded. Ethelberthina's elder sisters, Mauve and Demystria, were famous in Overford song and story as being two of the most husband-hungry maidens ever to flutter a fan, drop a hankie, or bat a set of eyelashes at anything midway male. Recently Demystria had succeeded in her quest, using all her wiles and three bottles of Old Dragonbreath Reserve to extract a promise of marriage from a blacksmith's apprentice. Her whoop of joy shattered forty-eight neighborhood windows and her mother's best mirror.

"Ethelberthina's sisters would look quite natural in a pasture, chewing cud," said Zoli. "They take after their mother: No brains, but a baby-maker that works overtime. What's she up to? Seven kids?"

"Eight, and a ninth in progress." Dean Porfirio made a few mystical gestures and created a white-hot ball of light that immediately vaporized the surrounding fog for the radius of a good spear-cast. "Ah, *there* we are." He smiled up at the overhanging bulk of the toll bridge.

Zoli uttered a meaty curse. "Oh, wonderful. We've blundered right *under* the hideous thing. Now we'll

have to climb back up the bank to cross on it."

"Don't bother; we're too late already," said Garth, pointing. The remaining mist had decided to move on before Dean Porfirio sizzled it into oblivion; the view across the Iron River was clear. From their vantage point on the Academy side, Ethelberthina's three friends saw the crowd of guests massed on the farther shore. Ethelberthina herself was already knee-deep, a crown of rosebuds perched at a tipsy angle on her head, her brand-new birthday dress kilted up between her legs but the long sky-blue cloak on her shoulders trailing heavily in the water. A plump, usually chipper child, she currently wore an expression popularized by dispirited captives everywhere. Behind her there hovered a large, obviously pregnant woman whose radiant smile more than made up for Ethelberthina's dejection.

"Stand up straight, dear!" the lady chirped. "You'll get your gown wet otherwise."

"Ah, Goodwife Eyebright," Dean Porfirio murmured. "But I don't see her husband anywhere."

"You wouldn't; this isn't about him," Garth said. "When he's not the center of attention, he stays away."

"Now are you certain you know all the words of the Prayer, darling?" Goodwife Eyebright went on.

"Yes, Mother." Ethelberthina sounded weary.

"You're sure? You wouldn't want to humiliate me in front of all our relatives. I don't mind working and slaving to give birth to you, and to make you a lovely home, and to cook and sew and clean up after you with not one word of gratitude. A mother doesn't expect gratitude. But if you wouldn't mind too much, my precious, could you possibly avoid embarrassing me?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Don't you use that tone of voice to me, young lady! I *gave* you a choice: I said you didn't *have* to do this. I told you that it didn't matter to me if my life became a living hell because all the neighbors would talk about how your sisters had their Maiden Morns but *you* didn't. A mother doesn't mind a little living hell. *You* agreed to this, *I* never forced you, *you* were the one who—" She began to weep without once slacking the pace of her ongoing rant until Ethelberthina loudly reassured her mother that yes, she would recite the Prayer letter-perfect and no, she did not deserve such a devoted parent, wicked and ungrateful child that she was. Goodwife Eyebright's tears dried up faster than a used-ox merchant's guarantees.

Garth looked at Zoli. "Well, that explains that."

"I'll say," said Zoli. "Poor child never had a chance. Who ever thought of motherhood as a deadly weapon?" It was a concept of startling novelty to a woman whose best defense had always been killing the other person first. "We should be over there, standing by her in her hour of need, giving her a little moral support. And we would be, too, if a certain wizard I could mention wasn't such a baby." She gave Dean Porfirio a significant look.

"You could always swim across," the wizard responded coldly.

"Dressed like *this*?" Zoli clanged a fist against her iron breastplate.

"It's not every woman who can bear four children and still fit into her wedding-day garb, eh, Dean?" Garth preened as if the credit were all his.

"Impressive," said a rough and rumbly voice that did not belong to Dean Porfirio. It came from just under the bridge and was followed by the sound of stone grating against stone as a squat, blocky shape came half-walking, half-rolling into view.

"Ah, good morning, Bursar Tailings," said Dean Porfirio.

"Morning is never good to my kind," the troll replied. "Not unless it's cloudy with a chance of showers. Sunlight tends to turn our skin to stone and work its way inward from there."

"It's nearly sunrise," Garth said. "What are you doing out-of-doors at this hour?"

"Ethnic weakness," the bursar of Overford Academy replied in a voice that might be called gravelly and mean it. Like most trolls, he was short and not much bigger than a nail keg, with huge feet, a jutting jaw, and tusks. Unlike the normal run of his kinfolk, his flint-colored hair was neither shaggy nor unkempt, but carefully groomed and slicked back into a short braid. His complexion was granite gray, with a light stippling of acne or chisel marks. "Every so often, we trolls just *have* to spend a stretch of time under a bridge. If a billygoat or two goes tripping-trapping over it, so much the better. It's instinct, like the salmon swimming upstream to spawn, or the swallows returning to Swallow Combackington, or mothers trying to force their children into marriage." He nodded meaningly in the direction of Ethelberthina's massed relatives. "Charming old custom, a Maiden Morn. Especially if you've got no other hope of bringing your daughter to heel. Well, I'll just be on my way now and—"

Dean Porfirio drew his wand and tapped the bursar lightly on one shoulder. Magic was the only way to stop a determined troll in his tracks; otherwise a man might as well try to impede the progress of a runaway boulder. "Just a moment, old man," the wizard said. "I'm confused, and I don't like it. What's this about a forced marriage?"

"Holy schist, do you mean you're the only person in town who *doesn't* know?" The troll was genuinely shocked.

"He's one of three," Garth said.

"Then free my feet and we can go back to the Academy for a nice hot cup of tar and I'll tell you all about it."

Zoli squatted and gave the troll her finest this-will-hurt-much-more-if-you-move look. "Save time; tell us now."

"I *have* no time! You know what'll happen if I'm caught out after sunrise."

Dean Porfirio clicked his tongue. "You won't turn to stone—not all at once—and nothing at all will happen to you if I lend you my cloak. Don't fuss over trifles."

"That's all *you* know about it," the bursar said. "When I was a young troll, my friends and I used to play Dare Daylight, seeing who could stand the sun longest. Look at my skin, why don't you!" He held out one overlong arm for inspection. It resembled the surface of a badly baked clay pot, all flakes and cracks. "My internal petrification's just *this* short of fatal. I'm living on quarried time. One more major dose of sunlight will do me in."

"That wasn't very smart of you."

"Show me the young creature, troll or human, who doesn't think he's immortal, that the rules don't apply to *him*," the bursar countered.

"Looks like you'd best talk fast, then," Zoli suggested.

The troll scowled at her so hard that rock dust trickled down his nose. "Very well, I'll make it short and sweet. Unlike *some* retired swordsisters I could mention. This very morn marks the day of Goodwife Eyebright's revenge."

"Took her long enough. Good for her! How'd she kill him?"

"Not *him*. It's not her husband she wants snagged. Everyone in Overford with half a brain knows that Goodwife Eyebright's greatest grudge stands against her youngest daughter."

"Half a brain . . . that sums up most of this town," Zoli mused.

Garth jabbed her to silence with his elbow. "Why would any sane mother resent her own child?" he asked. "And such a bright one, too!"

"I'll paint you a picture," said the troll. "All that Ethelberthina's ma could ever do with her life was marry and breed. Many a woman's happy keeping house, but only when it was her choice to go that road, not her last resort. Like you, ma'am." He rolled his eyes at Zoli.

"I see," the former swordsister said. "Goodwife Eyebright *had* to marry so she wants her daughters to do the same. The thought of Ethelberthina having opportunities *she* never had riles her."

"Quite so." The troll nodded. "That's where this Maiden Morn claptrap comes in. You see, there's one bit of the ceremony not too many folk know of: The Answered Prayer."

"What's that?"

"It's rather charming, really." A faint smile touched the troll's wide mouth. "If there's a man among the witnesses who's eager to marry the girl, all he needs do to lay claim to her is wait until the *very instant* she utters the last word of the Prayer for a Prosperous Husband, then dash up and winkle himself under her arm or her cloak or her skirt or something and declare his devotion. He's got to time it just right, because if he misses the last word by three heartbeats, he's out of luck. But if he's nimble and determined . . . poof! Instant betrothal."

"Impossible. Such nonsense can't be binding."

"Oh, it is, but only because Duke Janifer's never taken the time to remove the Maiden Morn regulations from the law scrolls. It's such an old-fashioned custom, I doubt he even knows they're still— Uh-oh. What's that?" The bursar's eyes grew great with sudden fear.

What *that* was, was the sound of Ethelberthina beginning to recite the Prayer for a Prosperous Husband. Garth gasped. "Sunrise! Quick, Porfirio, toss your cloak over the bursar!"

"Yes, at once, I—" The wizard reached for the clasp of his cloak. A sickly green came over his face as he realized he hadn't bothered to put one on. Neither had Garth or Zoli.

"For the love of mica, set me free! I'll run back under the bridge!" the troll bellowed.

"Of course, of course!" Dean Porfirio hastened to draw his wand once more. Unfortunately, in his agitated state the wizard went all butterfingers. He jerked the wand from his belt, promptly lost hold of it, and watched in horror as it flew off to sink beneath the current of the Iron River.

"Here, Zoli, we can shift him under the bridge," Garth said. "You take his head, I'll take his feet, and—"

"Look there!" Zoli wasn't listening. Her eyes were wide, her face pale, her hand shaking as she gestured across the river to where Ethelberthina stood performing the most hangdog recitation imaginable of the Prayer for a Prosperous Husband. The girl's apathy was beyond the power of mortal man to measure. Horse thieves had gone to the gallows with more eagerness, hemorrhoid sufferers had greeted a recurrence of their affliction with more zest. If youthful exuberance had a direct opposite, Ethelberthina Eyebright was its personification.

In other words, she was putting so much effort into behaving churlishly, just to show her mother what was what, that she failed to notice the scrawny, oily-pelted young man who was slinking down to the water's edge, a look of intense concentration on his sallow face. Only once did he pause and cast a questioning look over one shoulder. A brawny, stern-faced woman in the crowd jerked her chin at him brusquely, silently urging him on.

"That's Ludlow Pennywhistle," Garth observed.

"Oh no, it couldn't be." Dean Porfirio shook his head rapidly. "Not even the most vengeance-crazed creature alive would willingly bind her child to a malicious good-for-nothing like Ludlow. He's a beast, a coward, and a scoundrel. I had him in my Introductory Invocation class. We had to expel him for demoralizing the demons. He must be in his twenties by now, and I hear he does nothing with his days but loaf about the taverns until they boot him out for toughing up the barmaids."

"Maybe Goodwife Eyebright doesn't realize what she's doing to her daughter," Garth offered.

Bursar Tailings had another opinion: "Maybe she does. She's a Pennywhistle by birth, you know; Ludlow's ma is her second cousin. This way she gets to shackle Ethelberthina with a husband, break her spirit, and keep the girl's money in the family at the same time."

"But that— that's not to be stood for!" Zoli sputtered. "It's atrocious! It's cruel! It's— it's— it's got to be stopped!" Her hand dropped to her belt and found only belt. "Damn it, Garth, why didn't you remind me to wear my dagger?" she shouted.

"And risk having you throw it at someone? Darling, I know you too well: In situations like these you tend to over—"

Across the water, Ethelberthina let the last word of the Prayer for a Prosperous Husband fall from her tongue as though it were a slime-smearred toad. The instant he heard it, Ludlow's lips twisted into a gloating look as he leaped from the riverbank. The girl turned in time to see him but too late to do anything about it, for her cloak was so sodden it weighted her to the spot. Instantly she knew whose hand was behind her plight. She raised her fists to the heavens and wailed in helpless rage, "*Motherrr!*"

Zoli threw the troll.

"—react," said Garth.

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Duke Janifer slowly paced the width of the great hall for the twenty-third time. Before him stood a row of plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses in one of the biggest lawsuit pileups he had ever been called upon to judge. It was all that his men-at-arms could do to hold back the throng that had come to gawk at and gabble over the proceedings. Most of Overford and half of the Academy was there. They filled the hall, overflowed into the passageway beyond, and all but dangled from the rafters.

"Now let me see if I've got this straight," he said. "*You're* charging *her* with assault with a deadly weapon?" He pointed first at Ludlow, then at Zoli. Ludlow nodded and tugged his forelock deferentially.

His fingers came away dripping sheep fat.

"And *you* are charging her with reckless endangerment of your person?" This was directed at Bursar Tailings.

"*Potentially fatal* reckless endangerment," the troll corrected. "That's worse."

"I should say so. Now *you* are charging her with creating a disturbance?" He gave Goodwife Eyebright an inquiring look.

"It was the best I could do, Your Gracious Eminence." Ethelberthina's mother made cow eyes at the duke. "That's what my dear husband told me to do. He said it's the closest we could come to finding a legal term to describe the way that hussy broke up our Ethelberthina's lovely Maiden Morn. I'm just a weak, ignorant woman with very little knowledge of things that don't concern me. I always say we ought to leave law and such confusing stuff to the men who've got the brains for it. Like yourself, Your Unspeakable Wiseness."

"Of course you are." Duke Janifer was not really listening. He continued to pace the hall. Unlike his forefathers, he never sat upon the intricately carved and gilded Siege of Justice when hearing a case. Some said it was because he was a true friend of the people and disliked setting himself too far above his subjects. Others, including his old nurse Wylalie, said it was because he was a fidget, born with that condition commonly referred to as "shrews in your trews."

The duke paused in his peregrinations, coming to a halt before Ethelberthina. The girl stood between Ludlow and Bursar Tailings, with a look on her face even stonier than the troll's calcified countenance. "You're a little young to be in court, my dear," Duke Janifer said kindly. "I take it you're a witness in your mother's case?"

"The Netherrealm I am!" Ethelberthina snapped. Her mother clapped a hand to her bounteous bosom and gasped loudly. "I'm here as a complainant. I wish to file suit against Goodwife Eyebright for Conspiracy to Coerce Matrimony, which you'll find in the Scrolls of Sardor, Volume 23, Section 5, Column B, Paragraph 16, first tried before Duke Merriam the Bizarre in the case of Vila Grubneck vs. Rittana, the Landlord's Beautiful Daughter. Oh, and I also want a divorce."

Duke Janifer stared at the girl, an unreadable expression on his face. "Er, yes," he said. It was something many grownups found themselves replying to Ethelberthina because they simply *could* not think of anything else to say.

"Actually, I believe the correct term is an *unfasting*, since Bursar Tailings and I have only entered into a state of betrothal rather than an actual marriage. I suppose we could ignore it, but I don't want some silly little legality messing up my life at a future time when I might actually *want* to wed."

"Er, yes," said the duke again. "And Bursar Tailings would be—?"

"Me, Your Grace," said the troll.

The duke peered at the bursar of Overford Academy as if hoping to thus convert him into something other than a troll. "How old are you, my good fellow?" he finally asked.

"Two hundred eighty-seven come next Sandpit Day," the troll replied.

"And the girl is—?"

"Thirteen!" Ethelberthina stamped her foot. "As if you had to ask! I just had my Maiden Morn, remember? Which is how this whole muddle got started, and it's all her fault." She thrust a finger at her mother. "Oh. And hers." She pointed again, but no one was at the other end of her finger.

Garth clicked his tongue. "Zoli, my dear," he called into the vast spaces of the duke's great hall. "Come back, please. We can't settle most of these cases without you."

"Keep your codpiece on, I'm coming." Zoli's voice arose from where she had wandered off to enjoy a long, satisfying, mother-daughter visit with her Lily, the lass who had outshone so many of her male counterparts while at Overford Academy and risen to the enviable post of Duke Janifer's senior resident alchemist. The two ladies were snuggled up in a cozy niche below one of the lancet windows, chatting and sharing the contents of a brimming fruit bowl.

By this time the duke was entirely flustered. "How can one woman be responsible for so much chaos?"

"I say she practices," said Dean Porfirio. Like Garth, he was in the duke's court solely in the capacity of witness. "But her husband here assures me it's purely a natural talent."

Something whizzed through the air and hit the wizard at the back of the head, knocking his conical cap off. "My Garth never said any such thing about me," Zoli announced, hefting a second peach. "He knows better." She sauntered back to the ranks of her accusers while Dean Porfirio recovered his hat and plucked bits of fruit out of his hair.

"*Did* you disrupt this girl's Maiden Morn?" Janifer quizzed her.

"Yes," Zoli admitted freely. "You'd've done the same, in the circumstances." She explained the details of Goodwife Eyebright's plot against Ethelberthina.

The good duke was appalled, but compelled to press on with his examination: "Then you admit to assaulting Ludlow Pennywhistle with the flung body of Bursar Tailings?"

"Sometimes I don't know my own strength." Zoli giggled. "Sometimes I do."

"And did you thereby recklessly endanger the life of this troll?"

"I wouldn't say *that*. I recked plenty. I knew Ethelberthina wouldn't let him come to harm. She knows what sunlight does to trolls, so she swept her cloak over him the instant he hit the water. None of us *had* cloaks who *claimed* we did." She gave the wizard a nasty look.

"Yes, but when she threw her cloak over him, that betrothed them, according to the laws governing Maiden Morns."

"What do you want, law or justice? If I *hadn't* tossed the troll, then by the same laws, she'd be hogtied to *that* piece of work instead." She nodded at Ludlow. "The troll's a better deal."

"But it's not *legal* for trolls and humans to marry!" the duke exclaimed.

"Well, they're not married; they're only betrothed." Zoli shrugged. "You're the duke; *un*betroth them."

"I don't have that authority."

"But you *do* have the authority to bother me with all of these silly lawsuits, don't you?" Zoli challenged. "Is *this* what we pay our taxes for? Especially Ethelberthina."

The duke's moustache began to twitch in an unsettling manner. "You . . . pay . . . taxes, child?" he asked the girl.

"Ever since the Swordsisters' Union bought up most of my stock of Mama Ethina's Elixir of Equality," she replied. "It turns dragon-scale armor so brittle that it shatters on contact with a feather."

"*Nothing* can do that to dragon-scale armor!" the duke objected. "That's why the king's men all wear it."

"Nothing *could*," Lily said, stepping forward, her alchemist's robes rustling softly over the stones. "But now something *can*; something Ethelberthina invented, and *that's* why she's independently wealthy." She patted the girl on one shoulder and added, "It's not turning lead into gold, but close. Fellow alchemist, I salute you."

"Fellow alchemist, do you have anything that might shatter my stupid betrothal?" Ethelberthina asked.

Lily smiled. She was a beautiful young woman, with her mother's dark coloring and her father's home-loving nature. When she first entered Duke Janifer's service, many court gossips hissed that he had not hired her for her brains. The whispers stopped when Lily demonstrated that she had also inherited her mother's elementary yet effective way of dealing with rumormongers.

"As a matter of fact," she said, "I do. And it will settle all of these silly lawsuits besides."

"*Will* it?" Duke Janifer gazed at Lily in awe. "Huzzah! Tell us what it is, I beg you!"

"Nothing fancy; just trial by combat. Oh! To the death. It must be to the death. You can't get anything *really* settled unless someone dies."

The hall fell silent, including the spectators.

The sound of Zoli's sword rasping from its sheath broke the quiet. "Suits me," she said amiably.

"It would." Bursar Tailings huffed like an overweight dragon. "Me fight a retired swordsisiter? Might as well ram a chisel through my throat and save time."

"Do we *have* to?" Ludlow whined.

"Not if you drop the charges," Lily said. "No charges, no case; no case, no need for any sort of trial."

"Good enough for me," said the troll. "Consider 'em dropped."

"Me, too," Ludlow said eagerly.

"After what she did to us?" Goodwife Eyebright snapped. Her hand, grown strong and swift in the ministering of domestic justice to her helpless brood, shot out and grabbed him by the ear. "If it weren't for her and her prodigal troll-flinging, we'd both have what we wanted by now."

"I don't care." Ludlow squealed and squirmed. "What good's a dowry if I'm dead? You want your kid married off so bad, *you* fight the tin-plated bitch!"

"All right," said Goodwife Eyebright. "I will."

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"Did I miss anything?" Garth Justi's-son asked Dean Porfirio as he sidled along the row of benches ringing the duke's arena. Normally the sand-covered enclosure was reserved for riding exhibitions, but today it had been hastily judged the best site for the upcoming trial-at-arms.

"Not a thing." The wizard reached into a paper cone filled with salted nuts and munched primly. It was amazing how fast word of the combat had spread, fetching still more people to the ducal palace grounds. With the crowds came hucksters of every stripe. They seemed to swarm out of the ground, like maggots in meat, which coincidentally was what some of them were selling.

"Sorry I took so long," Garth muttered, sitting down. "I had to teach Ludlow some manners. He *might* be walking normally by next Market Day, if he finds an ice pack. No whelp calls my Zoli a bitch and gets away with it."

The wizard stuck the paper poke under Garth's nose. "Nuts?"

"Fair enough, she *is* that. But only a little, and I think our Lily caught it from her. Trial by combat to the death, no less! What *was* going through that girl's head?"

"Probably the notion that she could save you a lot of legal woes. She believed they'd *all* drop their cases because no one would be fool enough to fight Zoli." The wizard ate some more nuts. "Never underestimate fools."

In the center of the sand-strewn ring, Duke Janifer stood between the two combatants and nervously asked, "Ladies, are you certain you wouldn't like to reconsider?"

"I would," Zoli said. "It's not combat, it's bloody murder. I've eaten seafood that had more hope of killing me than *this* idiot." She gestured scornfully at Goodwife Eyebright. "Plus, she looks ready to drop her calf any second now. One needless death on my hands is bad enough, but two?"

"*Will* you withdraw?" Duke Janifer turned to Goodwife Eyebright, entreating her with his eyes. "Pleeease?"

Ethelberthina's mother stood herself up a bit taller and held the sword she'd been given as though it were a carpet beater. "I'd sooner die."

"I was afraid you'd say that." The duke sighed, shrugged, and tossed a bright orange kerchief high into the air. As he dashed from the arena he called back over one shoulder, "When it hits the ground, start fighting!"

The audience gasped and held its breath. Zoli went into her preferred fighting stance, grim and silent, eyes fixed on the floating kerchief. Goodwife Eyebright, on the other hand, began jabbering the instant the bit of cloth left the duke's hand.

"My gracious, aren't you in a hurry? I'm sure it's not going to take you long to kill me, but don't you worry about that. Nor about the poor, innocent, unborn babe I'm carrying that never did anyone a bit of harm. Nor about all my poor little lambkins that'll be left orphaned and helpless, oh no, don't you give any of them a second thought! Mayor Eyebright will probably remarry quick enough, and then they'll have a stepmother, and who knows what she'll be like? But don't you fret over it, you've done your duty, you don't have to bother your head about whether they'll be decently clothed and fed and who'll tuck them into their cold, lonesome little beds of a winter's night with not even the comfort of a loving mother's kiss

on their tiny, tear-stained faces, no. Don't you concern yourself over their bitter tears or their heartbreaking sobs or their—"

"Gnut save us, what's the wretch doing?" Garth exclaimed.

"What she does best." Dean Porfirio sounded glum. "What she did to force Ethelberthina to undergo a Maiden Morn. And it's working again. Just look at Zoli now."

It was true: Under Goodwife Eyebright's verbal barrage, Zoli's sword drooped by degrees, leaving a hole in her defensive posture fit to drive an oxcart through. Her shoulders trembled and, as Goodwife Eyebright expanded upon the tragic fate awaiting her soon-to-be-motherless babies, she sniffled. Just as the orange cloth touched the ground, she burst into tears, dropped her blade completely and pounced on the kerchief in order to wipe her streaming nose and eyes.

Goodwife Eyebright had been a homemaker long enough to recognize something ripe for the plucking. While Zoli howled her heart out, the mayor's wife swung her own sword back, ready to strike. It was not an elegant attack, but with Zoli thus disabled, elegance was unnecessary. The blade swept straight for the former swordswoman's head.

A second blade shot out and blocked Goodwife Eyebright's swing with a clang. Panting hard, holding the hilt of Zoli's discarded weapon with both hands, Ethelberthina glowered at her mother.

"Drop the charges," she ordered. "*And* the sword."

"Young lady, you go to your room," her mother said. "This is no place for a child."

"Says you." Ethelberthina lifted her chin impudently. "I've had my Maiden Morn rite: I'm not a child any more."

"Then this is no place for *you*," Goodwife Eyebright countered. "This case concerns only me and that Zoli person." She nodded at the crumpled swordswoman who was still blubbing on the sand, occasionally wailing something about the poor, comfortless little orphans.

"And my case concerns you and *me*. Or have you forgotten? I've simply decided to move it ahead on the duke's docket."

Goodwife Eyebright laughed in a condescending manner. "You can't be serious, darling. *You fight me* to the death? You'd kill your own mother? Not that you haven't tried to do that ever since the day you were born. But *I* don't mind. A good mother doesn't care if her child—who has been given *every advantage* at *great personal sacrifice*—turns out to be a little viper. I love you anyway."

"Oh, I wasn't planning on killing you." The girl dropped her sword, and grabbed hold of her mother's forearm. With a few quick twists and turns, Ethelberthina had herself under the startled woman's defenses with the edge of the blade pressed to her own small throat. Glancing up, she grinned and said, "Whenever you're ready, Mother."

Goodwife Eyebright tried to wriggle her sword away from her daughter's neck, but in vain. "Ethelberthina, what are you doing and stop it!"

"Not until you do. Drop the charges against Zoli or I swear I'll make you cut my throat. Know what that means?"

"It means you are a very inconsiderate child," the goodwife replied stiffly.

"It also means that you will have to go into strict mourning for two years. That's the minimum acceptable period for the loss of a grown daughter. *Strict* mourning," she repeated. "*No* celebrations of any kind."

"No . . . what?"

"No celebrations," Ethelberthina said. "Oh, like, just for an instance say . . . weddings?" Her smile was a caution to the ungodly.

A cry more bestial than human shot skyward from the crowd. Demystria and Mauve Eyebright burst into the arena, their hair streaming wildly, their faces contorted into masks of mindless terror. Only the thought of what a collision might do to the sword at Ethelberthina's throat stopped them from throwing themselves at their mother's knees. Instead they pitched facefirst to the sand, pounding it with fists and feet while they yowled with grief.

"Do what she says, Mummy!" they begged in unison. "Drop the sword! Drop the charges! Let her go!"

"Girls, girls," the goodwife chided. "If your sister wants me to cut her throat, that's her choice, isn't it? Besides, it's just come to me that if she dies—not that I'm encouraging that sort of thing, mind you—then all of her money goes to her closest living relative. I do believe that should be me. Then Mummy will be able to give you the biggest, splashiest, most expensive weddings that Overford has ever seen."

"And how am I supposed to get married with no groom?" Mauve demanded. "There's no courting allowed during strict mourning! By the time I'm free of it, I'll be *ooold!*"

"That can't be helped; you should have planned ahead, like your sister. *She* knew what to do to get a man!" Goodwife Eyebright beamed at Demystria. "Well, at least *you* shall have the finest wedding ever, and you'll have two whole years to plan—"

"I can't wait two years to get married." Demystria sat back on her haunches and gave her mother a hard, eloquent look. "I want—I *need* to get married. *Now.*"

There were times when Goodwife Eyebright could be as quick on the uptake as Ethelberthina. Her eyes locked with Demystria's, her face lost some color, but she never flinched. All she said was: "Oh."

The sword fell from her fingers to the sand.

"Thank you, Mummy dear." Ethelberthina made a perfect curtsy that was a thumbed nose in thin disguise.

* * *

It was a lovely wedding, the talk of Overford. The Eyebrights hired the entire Crusty Boar tavern to host the festivities. Garth Justi's-son helped break up six knife fights, and that was just counting the ones that broke out before the happy couple cut the bridal cake. He had to: Five of them involved Zoli.

Dean Porfirio finally called upon his magic to compel the retired swordswoman to take a Time Out. One moment she was arguing hotly with Mayor Eyebright, the next she was **poofed** into a locked storage room. Her curses shook plaster from the walls and dust from the thatch.

"Calm yourself, m'lady; we're in for the duration," came a familiar voice in the dark. Bursar Tailings passed her a tankard of ale drawn from one of the many barrels around them.

"Why're *you* locked up?" Zoli asked, sipping the brew.

"I'm here at my own request, to avoid accidental exposure to sunlight. Nothing spoils a good wedding like an unintended fatality, I told them."

Zoli lifted one eyebrow. "This wedding *began* at *sundown*."

"I know." The troll chuckled. "Most of the ale's in here and so am I, with no Eyebrights to say me nay. Not the sharpest bunch of pickaxes in the mineshaft, are they?"

"Except for your betrothed," Zoli teased.

"Oh, that's all off." The troll waved his hand cavalierly. "As a troll I can't wed a human, and it seems that since I was designated a deadly weapon in Ludlow Pennywhistle's suit, I can't be betrothed to a human either. It's against the law."

"*What* law? Since when has anyone bothered to *enact* a law against marrying weapons? Who'd even think of *doing* something like that?"

A ball of parchment sailed out of the dark recesses of the storeroom and hit Zoli in mid-breastplate. The retired swordsisiter uncrumpled it, read it, and blushed.

"An *imperial* law, for your consideration, which is still on the books of this and all other lands once ruled by the Talligar Empire," said Ethelberthina, emerging from the shadows, a cup of sparkling quince juice in her hands. "Rushed into effect more than forty years ago by a certain warrior queen whose only daughter announced she'd sooner marry her sword than any man."

Zoli's blushes deepened. "I was young and idealistic! I didn't know any better! I hadn't met Garth yet! You have no idea how bossy my mother could be! And it was only *thirty* years ago; closer to twenty." Noting the badly concealed smirks of her listeners, she nimbly switched the subject. "What are you doing in here, Ethelberthina? Your sister's wedding is out *there*."

"It's rude to answer your own questions," the girl responded pleasantly. Lifting her cup, she proposed a toast: "To other people's weddings! I'm not losing a sister, I'm gaining closet space." She drained her drink to the dregs.

"You know," the troll murmured, "she really *is* an exceptional child."

"Since she's had her Maiden Morn, she's an exceptional *adult*," Zoli corrected him. "And as such, she'd best be thinking about her future."

"Don't *you* start in on me about marriage," Ethelberthina spoke up.

"Me? Never. But you will be wanting something to do with your life. You can't sell any more of Mama Ethina's Elixir—your stock's as good as all gone—so what *will* you do?"

Ethelberthina tapped her lips with a fingertip thoughtfully. "Well, I'm not exactly the physical type to enter the Swordsisters' Union, much as I'd like to, and I don't fancy further dabblings in alchemy—too stinky. What I *would* like is power: Great honking heaps of unmitigated power, the ability to make people fear me, to cringe before me, and most especially to never, *ever* think they can bully me and get away with it. Not even Mummy. So I suppose what I'd truly *like* to be is—"

"—a wizard?" Zoli suggested.

"—a bursar?" The troll tried to be helpful.

"—a priestess?"

"—a queen?"

"—a lawyer," said the girl.

And the shrieks which burst from the storeroom of the Crusty Boar caused Goodwife Eyebright to go into labor, so that Ethelberthina did not lose a sister that day after all.