

Patterns in the Chain

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Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*.

A shadow drifted across the mouth of Mother Berchte's cave. She waited and rocked, careful to keep her tail away from the stone rockers of her chair. White sparks snapped from her needles.

Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*.

The shadow drifted closer, and Mother Berchte lost patience. "I see you," she growled. "Get in here."

The shadow froze.

"Yes, I mean you. Move it."

Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*.

The shadow hesitantly stepped into the light thrown by the fireplace. The girl was young, not yet twenty. She held a short sword before her with a fairly competent air, though her grip was so tight Berchte was sure she was leaving permanent fingerprints on the hilt. The girl's red-blond hair had recently been hacked off. Probably with a blunt dagger, if Berchte was any judge.

"Well?" Mother Berchte prompted in her harsh voice. "What's your name, girlie?"

Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*. Berchte's needles glowed like angry volcanos. The girl tried not to recoil, and Mother Berchte grinned. Berchte knew full well she was an imposing sight, almost eight feet tall with horns on her head and fangs in her mouth and claws on her fingertips. And a tail, of course. The latter was a bitch if she wasn't careful with the rocking chair.

"Jeweline," the girl said timidly. "My name is Jeweline."

Of course it is, Mother Berchte thought. "And?" she said aloud. "You didn't climb all the way up here just to tell me your name."

Jeweline took a deep breath. Although the inflation of her chest did nothing for Mother Berchte, it earned an admiring snort from Nassirskaegi in his corner. Jeweline's head snapped around and her eyes widened for a split second before she could school her features back into impassivity. Berchte awarded her silent points for quick recovery. Many people reacted badly to giant goats the size of horses, but few hid their surprise so quickly. Nassirskaegi yawned, revealing yellow teeth.

"Um . . . r-raiders attacked our holding," Jeweline said. "My parents were slain, my brothers murdered. My sisters were taken. I need to rescue them."

"With that?" Mother Berchte pointed scornfully at Jeweline's sword with her chin. Her knitting needles flashed through another row, and the swiftly growing shirt clinked in her lap.

"With your help," Jeweline said. "If you'll give it."

Mother Berchte nodded and rocked, knitting without answering. Jeweline shifted uncomfortably. A drop of sweat trickled down her face.

Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*.

"Well, why not?" Mother Berchte said at last. "That's a hell of a climb, and you deserve something for it. Choose one."

Jeweline peered about the dimly-lit cave. "Choose one what?"

Mother Berchte blew at the fireplace. The flames blazed up, throwing the cave into almost painful brightness. Dozens of mail shirts glittered and sparkled from every wall, each with a unique style and design. Different types of wire knitted artfully into the weave created patterns and pictures. This one showed a silvery dragon breathing copper fire. That one portrayed an exquisitely-rendered griffon leaping into a star-flecked sky. Another twisted the eye with a fractal pattern of falling red-gold leaves.

Jeweline gasped and lowered her sword. "You made all these?"

Mother Berchte grinned with crooked teeth and briefly held up the half-finished hauberk in her lap before returning to work. The needles sparked and flashed. Friction and torsion softened the wire, making it easier to work.

Jeweline whistled under her breath, sheathed her sword, and went over to examine the mail shirts. Mother Berchte watched her until the girl's eye fell on a shirt hanging in a corner half hidden by a stout wooden wardrobe. The shirt was old and rusting. It looked like moths had been at it, though what kind of moths would go for solid steel even Mother Berchte didn't care to think about.

Knit one, purl two. Knit one, purl two.

Jeweline put out a finger to touch the old hauberk, and a sly smile stole over her face. Mother Berchte narrowed her eyes and kept on knitting. The girl had obviously heard some of the old tales. Either that or she had been down to the river talking to Father Fluss. Slobbery bastard. And Jeweline was just the type to set him slobbering.

"What about this one?" Jeweline asked, holding up the rusty shirt.

"You don't want that one, girl," Mother Berchte replied evenly. "It's old and poorly made."

"I don't want to be greedy," Jeweline said in a modest voice. "I'll take it."

Mother Berchte shrugged without missing a stitch. "It's your life."

Jeweline pulled the hauberk over her head, leaving wide streaks of rust in her hair, and hurried for the cave's entrance. At the last moment she turned back. "Thank you," she said sincerely, and left. Mother Berchte watched her go.

Nassirskaegi bleated once.

"Sunrise, I expect," Berchte answered.

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Something clinked and clanked at the mouth of the cave. Jeweline entered, sword at her side, battered mail revealing more than it probably should. She was covered with cuts, scratches, and bruises, and her movements were stiff. Behind her, the sun was chasing the last of the stars away from the pale blue sky.

"Didn't work, did it?" Mother Berchte said mildly. Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*.

"You tricked me," Jeweline cried. "This shirt is worthless! If Father Fluss hadn't given me flashflowers to blind the bastards, I would have been killed."

"I told you not to take it, girl," Mother Berchte growled. Jeweline opened her mouth to protest, but Berchte cut her off. "Let me guess. You thought that the best shirt in the bunch would be disguised as a rusty piece of junk. You thought this was some stupid fairy tale to put the kiddies to sleep."

Jeweline snapped her mouth shut and set her jaw. "I just want to get my sisters away from those . . . men."

"Then do something sensible," Mother Berchte scoffed. "The first lesson you have to learn is never settle for less than the best."

Jeweline squared her shoulders. "All right." She shrugged out of the rusty mail shirt, marched over to the wall of mail, and chose another, one tightly knitted from the stoutest steel, yet light enough to wear easily. A two-headed eagle glowered defiantly in the design, and the shirt gleamed softly in the firelight as Jeweline pulled it on. Mother Berchte watched with interest.

Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*.

"Thank you," Jeweline said curtly, and left.

Nassirskaegi bleated a question.

"Sunset," Berchte replied.

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"You filthy, lying old bitch," Jeweline spat before Mother Berchte could say a word. Outside, the sun touched the horizon and turned the clouds a brilliant scarlet. "You told me not to settle for less than the best. Now look at me!"

The mail shirt was bloody and torn, and new scratches tore angry lines down both her arms. Mother Berchte bared her teeth and growled low in her throat at Jeweline's tone of voice, but Jeweline stood firm and matched Berchte's glare. After a moment, Berchte nodded approval.

Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*.

"Let me guess," Mother Berchte said. "Father Fluss gave you blastberries to let you get away this time."

Jeweline stared at her. "How did—?"

"I'm not stupid, girlie," Berchte snapped. "But you are. Start paying attention to the pattern and maybe you'll win."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Jeweline snapped back. "There isn't any pattern."

"Of course there is. It's why you haven't rescued your sisters yet."

"You're crazy as a cat in a violin shop." Despite the angry snarl in her voice, Jeweline had edged forward until she was right next to Mother Berchte's rocking chair. Her head barely reached Berchte's chest, even though Berchte was seated. Nassirskaegi admired her from his corner and nibbled a bit of hay in an extremely suggestive manner.

"Look for the pattern." Mother Berchte's needles clicked faster and faster until her fingers were a blur. "I've already given you the first lesson: never settle for less than the best. The second lesson is that everything happens in threes. You've had your third visit with Father Fluss, if that pouch at your waist is filled with sleepseed like I think it is. This is your third visit to me. And in a moment you'll be making your third try to rescue your sisters."

"What about the armor?"

"You've already destroyed two sets, girlie," Berchte grumped. "You're on your own there. I don't knit this stuff for free."

"Is it true that you take your goat to bed with you?" Jeweline asked abruptly.

Berchte stopped knitting for a moment and lashed out a hand. It caught Jeweline squarely across the face. She cried out and stumbled backward to the mouth of the cave.

"Don't be rude," Berchte told her mildly. She tried to pick up her knitting, but ended up staring down at her lap in puzzled astonishment instead.

"Over here," Jeweline called.

"Shit," Berchte muttered into her lap.

"You're good at guessing," Jeweline continued. "I'll bet you can guess what I want next."

Berchte glared across the cave to the entrance where Jeweline was brandishing the missing knitting needle. "Maybe I'll take up crocheting."

"Yeah, right. Come on—you know what I want. Three lessons, three meetings, three rescues. And three shirts."

Berchte met Jeweline's eyes for a long moment. Then she nodded once and jerked her head at the old, rusty hauberk Jeweline had abandoned on the stony floor. It was still rusty, but when Jeweline picked it up, the holes vanished and the rust fell away, revealing glowing chain links that crackled and hummed with power. Jeweline tossed the needle toward Berchte's chair. She snatched it out of midair and slid it back into her knitting.

Knit one, purl two. Knit one, purl two.

"I'd have given it to you anyway, you know," Berchte said.

"Uh huh." Jeweline shrugged out of the ruined shirt and into the good one.

"Like you said," Mother Berchte told her, ignoring the sarcasm, "three visits, three rescues, three shirts. All part of the pattern. You also have to make a third choice."

Jeweline blinked. "What were my first two?"

"To try rescuing your sisters and to seek the help you needed."

"And my third?"

"Whether you want to stay in the pattern or not," Mother Berchte said. "Whether you really want to rescue your sisters."

Jeweline narrowed her eyes warily. "What makes you think I don't?"

"You're the youngest. You're probably the prettiest. And they picked on you all your life because of it, didn't they? Now you're going to show your sisters once and for all that you're the smartest, the bravest, and the most resourceful. Do you honestly think your sisters will be grateful and pile affection on you? That they'll kiss your fingers and beg forgiveness for all the nasty things they've done?" Mother Berchte spat into the fireplace and the flames flared green. "I guarantee you they won't. They'll blame you for the raid. They'll blame you for your brothers' and parents' deaths. And they'll blame you for not rescuing them earlier. Oh yes, girlie—they will."

"I have to rescue them. They're my sisters," Jeweline said stoutly, though there was doubt in her voice.

"And sisters can be the cruelest of all," Mother Berchte said. "They made fun of you for learning swordwork from your brothers, didn't they? They called you names and gossiped about you and spread rumors that you handled your brothers' blades as well as their swords, didn't they?"

Jeweline flushed and looked away.

"Meanwhile," Berchte continued, knitting needles still clicking on her lap, "you have a man waiting for you in the river at the bottom of this mountain. And maybe if you kiss him, you'll see he isn't as ugly as you

thought."

"He isn't ugly," Jeweline said quickly, then blushed again.

Berchte gave a knowing nod. "The fool likes you, girlie. He never gave *me* blastberries and sleepseed. So choose: your ungrateful sisters or him. Or walk away entirely. No one's forcing you to complete the pattern."

"You're a bitch," Jeweline said. "A horrible old bitch."

"Life's the bitch, girlie," Mother Berchte said affably. "That's your third lesson. You can leave now."

Jeweline gave Mother Berchte once last look, then spun and marched out of the cave. Berchte picked up her knitting again. Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*.

Nassirskaegi bleated a question.

"She's going to rescue her sisters, of course," Berchte replied gruffly. "But I don't think she's going to stay with them. Not anymore."

Knit *one*, purl *two*. Knit *one*, purl *two*. Wire unwound steadily from Berchte's cable spool and Berchte allowed herself a heavy sigh. She had gotten a young girl to start thinking for herself, and that was nice.

But she was really going to miss Father Fluss.