

# Hallah Iron-Thighs and the Hall of the Puppet King

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It was early summer, which meant the annual Bandit Holiday had rolled around again, when the local criminals all headed for the seaside and a bit of sun on their pale, scrawny, pox-ridden bodies. For the next two weeks anyone could travel the mountains in perfect safety. No one would need hired protection until those lazy, good-for-nothing thieves quit gallivanting about and returned to their mountain haunts where they belonged.

As happened this time every year, I, Hallah Iron-Thighs, master swordswoman and mercenary, was depressed. How a girl is supposed to make a decent living under such conditions is beyond me. Those wretched bandits simply have no sense of responsibility about upholding the social contract.

My partner, Gerta, and I were attempting to drown our sorrows with the last of our funds that morning down at the dingy Inn of the Crafty Marmot when an envoy arrived, resplendent in purple silk. A grim fellow with ears like pot handles, he looked as though he'd never drunk an ounce of ale in his entire life.

His nose twitched above a silly curled beard as he surveyed the odorous establishment. "I seek the Lady Hallah Iron-Thighs and her boon companion, Gerta!" he proclaimed in ringing tones. "Can either of you lowly creatures tell me where they might abide?"

Gerta, who had soothed her blues rather thoroughly at that point, fell off her chair with a clink of chain mail and sprawled at his feet. "*Lady!*" Convulsed with laughter, she pounded the floor with her fist. "Hallah, he called you a '*lady!*'"

I drew my dagger and let the light from the inn's single lamp gleam along its serrated edge. "I'm Hallah Iron-Thighs."

"I—see." He produced a scroll tied with purple ribbon. "I am Hermus Zimbolini, Prime Counselor of Bamffle, charged by King Jonquil the Shy to deliver this royal summons."

"Bamffle?" Gerta dabbed laugh-tears from her eyes.

We'd never worked that far west, but fellow mercenaries described Bamffle as a prosperous mountain kingdom of agonizingly small troubles where men fussed over the inadequate size of their buttons and insisted their mothers-in-law should visit more often.

Bamfflian women, our friends had added sourly, worried only that their children were too well behaved, and their daughters might marry above their stations, thereby losing the opportunity to fully develop their characters by overcoming adversity. It was a realm of tea parties and knitting socials, not exactly the sort of place to require a pair of strong sword arms.

We followed the fellow outside, where Gerta unrolled the summons in the sunlight. The parchment was thick and creamy, the border bright gold. She squinted suspiciously. "It has too many letters on it." Of course, any amount of letters always proved "too many" for Gerta.

The messenger eased the summons out of her hand, turned it right side up, then gave it back. He cleared his throat. "His Majesty King Jonquil the Shy wishes you to escort his aunt, the Princess Abyssmina, to her upcoming matrimonial in Hagrishia."

I took the parchment. There were indeed many elegantly scripted letters dancing across the page, a veritable flood of them, but I couldn't make out any *numbers*. "What about payment?"

"I'm certain you'll be handsomely paid," he said.

"Just exactly how handsomely?" I asked, my forefinger tracing the embossed elephant's head on my sword Esmeralda's hilt.

His eyes were flinty. "I assure you that our good King Jonquil is known far and wide for his generosity."

Like we hadn't heard *that* before. "All right," I said. "As we're short on funds with no other offers, we'll bite."

Zimbolini looked pained. It wasn't the last time.

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Unfortunately, the journey to Bamffle proved endless. Mounted on a placid mule, Prime Counselor Zimbolini seemed to have no sense of direction at all, leading us first up one road, then down another, so that we kept crisscrossing the countryside.

The fourth time we forded the River Vallat, Gerta balked and jumped off her gray gelding, Slasher. "I think you're just trying to get us alone so you can have your way with us," she told Zimbolini, then grinned ferally and drew her dagger. "Well, come ahead! It might just be your lucky day!"

He paled, then patted his forehead with a white lawn handkerchief. "Nothing could be farther from my mind."

Gerta looked baffled and her dagger sagged.

I crossed my hands on the pommel of my saddle. "You know," I said, "I don't think the Prime Counselor finds us appealing."

Her blue eyes widened. "You mean he's a *sissy*?"

"Got it right the first time." I winked at Zimbolini.

Rigid with indignation, he kicked his mule into a plod.

"Let's kill him," Gerta said that evening as Zimbolini laid out his red satin bedroll, then tied his beard up in curling papers. "I haven't killed anyone all week, and I don't believe he knows the route anyway. He keeps muttering 'it has to be around here somewhere.' We could say bandits did him in."

"There aren't any bandits," I said. "They're all down at the seaside right now, plotting out ambush scenarios in the sand."

"The king doesn't know that," she said, "or he wouldn't have hired us."

She had a point, but I refused—for the moment. There might, after all, be some gold in this deal, and the Mercenary Code recommends that you never kill a client before he pays.

The next morning, when I roused Gerta, she sat up and blinked groggily at the tree line. The sun was just rising and the sky was an annoyingly cheerful orange-pink. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "That mountain wasn't there yesterday."

I glanced at a single majestic peak in the distance, grey granite interspersed with alpine meadows, the odd stream cascading off the rocks here and there. I must have been more tired than I thought the night before. I hadn't noticed the damned thing either. "Oh, so I suppose it's following us."

"Not necessarily," she said. Her face brightened. "Maybe we're going in circles."

"Never mind," I said. "I'll watch the trail. You just keep an eye on that mountain. It's probably up to no good."

The curling papers in the royal messenger's beard crinkled as he turned over in his bedroll, groaned, then sat up and gazed fixedly over our shoulders. "Well, finally!"

"What?"

"Mount Bleer." He pulled the papers out of his beard. "The ancestral seat of Bamfflian royalty. Keep your voice down or—"

Gerta frowned. "Or what, squishy little toad-man?"

His voice dropped to a whisper. "Or it will get away."

My hand went to Esmeralda's hilt. "Are you having us on?"

"No, I swear!" He bit his lip. "Due to certain extenuating circumstances, Mount Bleer is quite—elusive these days."

I stared moodily at the mountain. It seemed farther away than just a few minutes ago.

"See?" he said. "It's heard us. We'd better hurry!"

"Let me get this straight," I said, as Gerta buckled on her sword. "We're chasing a sodding *mountain*?"

"I'm afraid so," Zimbolini said as he saddled his mule. "Our court magician is quite incompetent. His spells rarely go right, such as this one, which was supposed to protect us from invasion. The wretch caused our beloved mountain home to flee potential invaders, not the same thing at all. At the moment, the only way to reach Bamffle is to be escorted by a native."

While he was explaining, the wayward mountain had drifted closer and now loomed at our backs as though eavesdropping.

"Quick!" He leaped onto his mule. "Before it gets away!"

Gerta and I followed. The mountain lumbered backwards, but not before we made it onto one of its winding trails. We rode upward the rest of the day without incident, finally rounding the last bend at dusk when the castle came into sight.

"Oh, my," Gerta said. She stood in her stirrups and stared.

Oh, my, indeed. I sat back in the saddle and studied the scene. The whole construct, portcullis, curtain walls, even the privy tower, was *dancing*. Mortar dribbled from between the stones with every awkward jiggle so it looked like a demented Morris dancer. Zimbolini pulled his mule up beside us and sighed. "Not again. The court magician cast a spell to make it self-cleaning several months ago and now it's always tidying up."

He stood in his stirrups and pointed an accusatory finger. "Bad castle, bad! In the name of the King, I demand you desist!"

With a rumble, the stones settled back to a more appropriate resting state, only slightly out of alignment. "You just have to be firm with it," he said. "It doesn't really mean to misbehave."

"I'll remember that," I said. We followed him into the castle, leaving our horses with a stableboy in the foregate.

In the great hall, tapestries depicting puppet shows covered every wall. The courtiers, all dressed in shades of red and purple, stared as we entered, then went back to gossiping among themselves. They had strings tied to their wrists and ankles, and moved with strange, jerky motions as though performing some bizarre local dance.

An ornate throne stood back by the far wall, next to an ugly floor lamp. A ten year old boy, dressed in grimy blue, sprawled on his stomach at its foot, busy pulling the legs off a set of tin soldiers. He looked up as we approached. "Wow, are you pirates? I've always wanted to be robbed!"

Gerta turned to me, puzzled. "Is that what passes for a serving lad in these parts?"

"Indeed it is not!" Zimbolini quivered with indignation. "That is Princess Abyssmina's intended, Prince Vigal the Simply Smashing, Heir Apparent of Hagrishia, whom you will escort home."

Vigal eyed Gerta's sword. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

She backed away, her hand automatically going for her dagger. I could tell she was confused, which is never safe for anyone within sword range.

He scrambled to his feet, downy cheeks flushed with excitement. "Would you kill someone now so I can watch?"

Zimbolini straightened his travel-stained tunic, then pulled from his pocket a sock tricked out with button eyes and a thread mouth, slid it onto his right hand, and bowed. "Your Majesty," he said, moving his fingers inside the sock so the thread mouth "spoke," "may I present Hallah Iron-Thighs and Gerta Derschnitzel, mighty swordswomen of the lower reaches."

"What do they want?" asked a peevish voice.

"You sent for them, sire, to escort the princess and her betrothed to Hagrishia. As you may remember, she is required to arrive in the capital by Wednesday or the wedding is off." Zimbolini turned to us. "May I present King Jonquil the Shy, Protector of Bamffle, Lord of the Wild Marches of Eastern

Nimrod, and Holder of the Avenue of Immediate Availability in Mershorn, capital city of mighty Hagrishia herself!"

"He's king of an avenue?" Gerta smothered a snicker.

A puppet popped up from behind the throne and regarded Gerta malevolently. It was clad in pink and purple robes with a bent tin foil crown perched on its tiny head. "That avenue was presented in honor of my aunt's wedding!"

"Bet you wanted something more useful." Gerta elbowed Zimbolini. "Like a set of saucy pictures!" Gerta has always been a huge fan of saucy pictures.

"Actually," Zimbolini said, "it's quite a nice avenue. All the best, um, *gentleman's* clubs, are located on that street."

I scowled. This was a bizarre setup, but we'd seen worse. "So, King Jonquil—"

The puppet promptly retreated out of sight behind the throne.

Zimbolini sighed. "You have to follow court protocol." He pulled out two more sock puppets, one pink, the other purple.

"You've got to be kidding," I said.

"Oh, I love plays!" Gerta took the purple puppet and her voice rose to a wrenching falsetto. "Hello, Hallah. Is that a sword under your friend's robes, or is he just glad to see me?"

The king puppet reemerged to conduct our audience.

Feeling like an idiot, I slid the pink sock puppet onto my hand. "All right. Where is this princess who needs escorting?"

The puppet turned to the ugly lamp. "There."

I examined the floor beside the throne. There wasn't even room for a royal mouse to hide, much less a princess. "Where?"

"You're not fooling anyone, Aunt Abyssmina!" the king puppet said. "Come out and take your betrothal like a royal."

The lamp dissolved into a fortyish female in long pea-green robes. "I'm not betrothed!" She glared at him over an exceedingly crooked nose. "Of course, I don't know why I expected anything better from you!" She sniffed. "You were a nasty little boy, always disemboweling your sisters' dolls."

"Go away, you stupid old lady!" Prince Vigal crossed his spindly arms. "These are *my* pirates!"

"Don't even speak to me, you little worm!" She backed away. "I'm not marrying anyone but Merval!"

Jeez, this play had way more characters than plot. "Merval?"

Zimbolini sighed. "The court magician."

"Not the one who misenchanted the whole kingdom?"

"It wasn't the *whole* kingdom," came a voice from the hall's edge. "Just the royal seat." A tall young man with strapping shoulders and curly black hair stepped into view. "Well, and the Avenue of Immediate Availability in Hagrishia's capital city, but I don't think anyone's noticed it's gone missing just yet. I am working on a counterspell." His eyebrows quirked in the most appealing way. "Do you know a rhyme for 'breast?' "

"Merval!" Aunt Abyssmina flushed an almost maidenly pink. "My pet! Let's elope! I've packed my thong—"

"I'm sorry, Princess," he said, "but I have no time for socializing." He looked wistful. "I do keep telling you that. Besides, weren't you planning to run off with the royal plumber, the one with all the muscles?"

"Oh, that was last week," she said crossly. "I've grown spiritually since then. It's all quite clear to me now. You're the one I want."

"That's very flattering, I'm sure," he said, "but we all know you have to do your royal duty."

"No, I don't!" she cried. "Just tell me what you want! I can transform myself into ninety-six useful

household items!"

"This is all your father's fault," the king puppet said crossly to Merval. "If he hadn't taught my aunt transformation spells when she was a girl, she'd have been safely married years ago."

Merval donned a red puppet. "Yes, it was rather shortsighted of Papà. Mamà always said no good would come of it."

"I can be a spinning wheel," Abyssmina said, "or a spanner. How do you feel about spanners? They're very useful."

"No spanners," I said firmly. "We have to get on the road."

"Can't you do something?" the king puppet said irritably to Merval. "Perhaps cast a spell to make her love the little wretch instead of you? We would consider it a fitting wedding present."

"Of course, sire." Merval pulled out a wand that resembled a bent fireplace poker and closed his eyes.

Remembering the wayward kingdom and the dancing castle, I turned to Zimbolini. "Wait a minute—"

"Blood is red, sky is blue." Merval's arms waved theatrically. "Love the next man you see, if you know what's good for—"

"Can you do a currycomb?" Gerta stepped in front of Abyssmina. "I lost mine last week and—"

"—you!" Merval waved the poker. The air shimmered pink, then fell to the floor in little sparks. The throne room reeked of bay rum.

Gerta looked up, pink sparkles dancing in her hair and eyes. Her brow wrinkled, as it always did when she was trying to puzzle something out. "Merval—darling?"

The magician's eyes flew open. "Blast!"

Gerta tackled him with a flying leap. A breath later, he lay spread-eagled in the middle of the floor, Gerta on his chest. She drew her dagger as I approached. "He's mine, Hallah! Go find your own!" She took a fistful of his hair. "Hold still so I can notch your ear with my family's matrimonial mark!"

He squirmed. "We're not getting married!"

"Having a good time, are we?" I hunkered down beside them.

"We will," she said, "just as soon as he starts being reasonable."

"You could lop off his head," I said. "I bet he would see reason then."

He screeched as she steadied his ear for the first cut. "He is completely spineless. I'm seriously put out that I want him."

"It's not my fault!" Merval bucked against Gerta's weight to no avail. "You got in the way!"

I shook my head. "Just slit his throat, then we'll conduct the princess to her wedding. The king will pay us—how many gold pieces?" I turned to the puppet.

"Three," it said haughtily.

"I was thinking more along the lines of twenty," I said, "or we could just leave you to work this out yourself."

"Ten," it said, "but you have to take Merval too."

"Fifteen," I said, "and we'll take Merval, but what we do with him is our own business."

"Done." It regarded us. "But I want the avenue put back."

Gerta got to her feet, dagger in hand, brow furrowed. She has never been what you would call a deep thinker. Logic in any form, in fact, has always come very hard to her. I knew it was going to take her a few minutes to work this out.

"You stay away from Merval," Princess Abyssmina said. She pushed her sleeves up. "He's a sweet boy and I saw him first!"

"How about this?" Gerta said. "You can light his funeral pyre after the ceremony, if you like." She seized Merval by the collar and held him up like a transgressing puppy. "I'm taking this wretch home to meet my mother," she said to me over her shoulder, "then I'm slitting his throat. Want to come?"

"Can we go by way of Hagrishia?" I asked. "There still is that little matter of dropping the princess and her intended off for their nuptials."

Merval wriggled free and took out his poker/wand, his eyes narrow and determined.

"Oh, no, you don't!" I drew my magnificent sword Esmeralda and advanced on him. "Drop that or I'll lop your arm off!"

"No, it's all right," he said. "I'm just going to remove the love spell." The air shimmered blue and yellow.

I tasted spoiled wine on the back of my throat. The tiny elephant's head on Esmeralda's hilt trumpeted as the hilt twisted out of my hand and fell to the floor. "Leave that boy alone!" it cried.

Hands on her knees, Gerta bent down to look closer. "I didn't know your sword could talk."

"It can't," I said grimly and reached to pick it up.

Esmeralda's trunk slapped my fingers. "Unhand me, you overdeveloped, muscle-bound bimbo!"

I snatched my hand back. "Don't get smart-mouthed with me," I said, "or I'll have you melted down for a doorstep!"

"Like I would care!" Esmeralda turned her elephant face away in a teeny snit.

My hands balled into fists as I rounded on the inept magician. "Some things are sacred, you know!"

"I was forged for the hand of a king." Esmeralda preened her hilt with her trunk. "At the very least, I should be on display in a museum, held in trust for future generations! Instead, I've been dragged through one gritty tavern after another, fondled by sticky-fingered serving boys, jolted about on a sweating horse—"

I muffled the tiny mouth with my right hand and shoved the sword back into its scabbard with my left. The trunk flailed beneath my fingers. "Now, then," I said, "where was I? Oh, yes, killing Merval."

"He is a sniveling little wretch," Gerta observed as Merval fled into the farthest corner. "I don't understand why I feel as though he and I ought to pick out a china pattern."

"Gerta, you idiot, he's magicked you," I said. "You're going to have to use some self-control until it wears off."

"I see." She scratched her forehead. "Do you think they can make the wedding cake rum flavor instead of chocolate?"

"Look," I said, "no one is getting married except the princess!"

The king puppet swiveled. "Farewell, Aunt Abyssmina. Rule well in Hagrishia."

But Aunt Abyssmina had already taken her leave. In her place lay an elegant tortoiseshell currycomb.

"Mine!" Prince Vigal cried and snatched it up.

"Well," I said, "that should cut arguments to a minimum."

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We managed to get down the mountain without Merval enchanting anything else only because I forcibly relieved him of his poker. Gerta was still planning both their wedding and his subsequent funeral, and I didn't trust him to restrain himself.

Of course, once we had left the wandering kingdom of Bamffle, and it was rumbling off into the distance, we had to ascertain just exactly where in the blue blazes we were. A series of grey granite peaks stood before us, wreathed with clouds at the top.

"That's the eastern slope of the Jamplit Mountains," Gerta said. "I recognize that cliff. It's shaped just like a nose."

Then Hagrishia lay on the other side. We would have to cross the pass in order to deliver the prince and his intended.

"Do you think the bandits are back from holiday?" Gerta asked. "I could do with a bit of mayhem."

Back on his fat dun pony, Prince Vigal sighed. He had dressed his currycomb "bride" up in a bit of handkerchief, as though she were wearing a crown, and taken to talking to it. "Princess, we're going to

cross the mountains!" he said. "Maybe we'll be robbed by real pirates! Won't that be fun?" He made the currycomb dance in ecstatic agreement.

I sighed. That boy had obviously been too long in King Jonquil's court.

Esmeralda kept making snide comments and I finally gagged her with a bit of rag. What would happen if it actually came to combat, I didn't like to think about.

When we reached the notorious Yarmly Defile, scene of a thousand ambushes, Gerta stood in her stirrups and scanned the heights. Striated cliffs loomed on either side and a strong wind made pebbles tick against the rock. She urged her gelding onto the narrow trail and we followed one at a time, Merval bringing up the rear.

"In my country, the bride and groom fight a ritual battle the night before the wedding," she said over her shoulder. "Their scars prove their undying love."

"Charming," I said.

Merval looked green. "Can't you just give me back my wand? I'm pretty sure I can remove that confounded spell—"

"No can do, sonny boy," I said cheerfully. "You made this marriage bed. Now, you're just going to have to lie in it."

"But—"

"Shh!" Gerta reined Slasher to a stop and the gelding's ears flickered back and forth. "I hear something."

"Hey, down there!" cried a voice from above. "Do you have a spare bottle of suntan lotion? We're fresh out."

Gerta drew her sword and sported a fierce, joyous grin as she scanned the rocks.

"Is that a pirate?" Prince Vigal's lower lip quivered. "I didn't bring any suntan lotion. Does this mean we can't be robbed?"

"There, there, little fellow," Merval said soothingly. "Don't worry. They can still take our horses and clothes—"

"Both of you shut up!" I wheeled Corpsemaker in a tight circle, all the trail would allow. "We're armed!" I called up to our unseen attackers. "Come down if you want to die!"

"Sorry." A face adorned with a magnificent blond beard appeared above the rim. "We're not on duty yet, so no one's getting robbed today. Could you possibly pop round tomorrow?"

"Oh, please!" Vigal had tears in his squinty little eyes. "We've never been to a robbery before!" He held up his currycomb "bride." "Have we?"

The currycomb shook its toothed "head" solemnly.

"Aha!" Merval said from behind. I turned to find him digging in my saddlebag. "Here it is!" He held up his poker/wand with a triumphant flourish.

"Put that thing down before you turn us all into salt cellars!" I said.

His eyes closed as he began muttering a spell. I heard something about "pest," "dressed," and "messed." "Cut that out," I called, "or I'll part your hair with an ax!"

The air shimmered puce. There was a cry of protest from above. I snatched the poker. "What have you done?"

"I turned them all into rutabagas!" He made a grab for his "wand." "Be careful with that!"

"Hey!" The bandit's head reappeared above the rim. He threw a deflated beach ball at my head. "That would have cost a whole copper piece!" His voice was aggrieved. "If I'd paid for it, of course."

"In case you haven't noticed," I said, "this isn't exactly Free Nachos Night at the Inn of the One-Handed Virgin."

"Not so fast!" A fist-sized rock sailed down and brained Merval. "You've got to make restitution!"

The magician slumped over the neck of his horse, then the currycomb in Vigal's plump little hand shimmered, becoming the not-so-blushing bride. She pried herself free. "Merval!"

A rope was thrown over the cliff, then a trio of bandits, all looking rested and tan from their holiday, not to mention extremely peeved, climbed down.

In a fury, Abyssmina began transforming from shape to shape in the hopes of achieving something lethal with which to attack—scullery brush, stew pot, hoof pick, shoe tree—

"Hold on," said one of them. He eyed the shoe tree with interest. "What have we got here?"  
—toothbrush, rake, mounting stand, road map—

I drew Esmeralda, but the rag binding her mouth slipped and she shrieked, "Unhand me, you overgrown ape!"

The head bandit, who was very golden-headed and very tan, grinned. "Having a spot of trouble with your sword?"

I muffled Esmeralda with my free hand. The tiny trunk writhed beneath my fingers and I held on grimly. "Certainly—not."

—broom, writing quill, washboard, rug beater—

"Amazing!" The blond bandit snatched the rug beater before it could change and held it up in wonder.

Abyssmina reverted to her true womanly form and slapped his face. "Unhand me, you dog!"

"You're a feisty bit of baggage, aren't you?" The bandit caught Abyssmina's hand before she could swop him again and eyed her appreciatively. "And you've got a bit of meat on your bones, not like those silly girls who always moan about their weight."

She flushed prettily. "Well—"

He pulled her nose to nose. "Have you ever thought of taking up banditry? We're short on females at the moment, *and* we have an excellent holiday plan. We only work when we feel like it, and we go to the seaside every summer."

She looked intrigued. "I've never been to the beach."

"Princess?" Merval raised his head and blinked groggily.

Gerta edged along the narrow defile toward us. "Who wants to die first?"

Well, you could put me out of my misery, I thought crossly, but didn't say it. Gerta can be so literal sometimes.

"Sorry," the bandit said as Gerta closed in on him, sword raised. "We're off the clock right now. No fighting allowed."

Baffled, her brows knit. "But—"

"No," he said firmly. "We came back early because we heard about this magical street appearing up here lined with posh gentlemen's clubs, but every time we get close, it slips away."

"A street?" Groggily, Merval pushed himself up from the horse's neck. "Did you notice the name?"

"Didn't see no signpost, mate," the bandit said, "but all the ladies had these really momentous—" His hands cupped.

"That's it!" A hint of color crept back into Merval's face. "The Avenue of Immediate Availability. Now, if we could just find it long enough for me to remove that spell—"

"No more spells!" I said and snatched up the poker from where he'd dropped it on the ground. "If you so much as look at this thing cross-eyed, I'll splatter your brain all over these rocks!"

"But then the avenue will just wander forever," he said.

Abyssmina was gazing from under lowered lashes at her new bandit friend. "Can you do a beach towel?" he said, then smiled broadly as she transformed into a swath of bright orange fabric. "Oh, well done! How about a sandwich case?"

The rock cliffs shimmered and then in the distance I could just make out a street with gaily-painted houses populated by scantily clad females. Wild strains of music quavered on the air and I smelled patchouli.

"There it is!" the bandits all cried.



"Let me get this straight," I said to Merval. "Now that Bamffle is enspelled, only natives can find it."

"Yes," he said.

"And this avenue is part of Hagrishia, so I'm betting only Hagrishians can enter?"

"You know," he said, "that's entirely possible."

I turned to Gerta. "And we are contracted to escort Abyssmina and her intended, a native Hagrishian, home."

She nodded.

"And conveniently that happens to *be* Hagrishia," I said, "or at least a part of it. So, the contract is fulfilled!"

"But—" Gerta tried to work it out.

I motioned to Vigal. "Would you like to be kidnapped?"

"Yes, please!" He was bouncing on his toes.

"More than you want to be married to Abyssmina?"

"Oh, lots!" He was very enthusiastic. Smart kid. He might go far, for a prince.

I motioned to the bandits. "I think it's just possible young Vigal here can get you onto that avenue."

"You want us to baby-sit that brat?" The blond one sneered. "Not bloody likely!"

I took up my mare's reins. "And, then, of course, once the avenue regards you as natives, so you can come and go as you wish, you can ransom the little bugger." I shoved Esmeralda deep into her scabbard to mute her protests. "If you were ever, say, to find yourselves short of cash for a few necessities."

The bandits looked at each other. "So, lad—" The oldest winked at Vigal over a gap-toothed grin. "Like to steal?"

"Quick," I said, "the avenue's going fuzzy!"

With a whoop, the bandits snatched up Abyssmina and Vigal and loped toward the elusive street. The ladies-in-residence, all fetchingly half-clad, waved and shouted encouragements.

"But that's a street of high-priced courtesans," Merval said as the avenue wavered, then disappeared with all concerned, bound for sunnier climes, no doubt. "They'll have to pay for the ladies', um, favors. They don't give free *samples*."

I smiled. "No, indeed, and when they run out of gold, which I'm betting will be sooner rather than later, the management will not be cooperative. I just wish I could be there to watch."

"That's very bloody minded," Merval said.

"Yes, it is," I said and felt better than I had in days. Even Esmeralda muttering down in her scabbard didn't put me off.

Gerta frowned. "But what about my wedding?"

"Well, you should just go ahead and marry this wretch," I said. "Give in to the spell since you can't fight it."

"I will kill him right after," she said, as if that helped.

I nodded. "Even so, everyone for ten kingdoms will know you were spelled into unwilling matrimony, but just don't pay any attention when they all fall on the ground laughing."

Gerta's eyes flashed. "No one makes Gerta Derschnitzel do anything against her will!" The rocks reverberated in echo.

"Except this." I swung up into Corpsemaker's saddle. At least my mare wasn't talking back to me—yet.

"No, I don't want to marry him." Gerta bit her lip. "Do I?"

"You can if you want," I said.

"I'm almost certain I don't," she said, "but I was really looking forward to my wedding scars. My brother's wife got a *slit nose*!" She smiled in fond remembrance.

"Gee, some people do have all the luck," I said.

White-faced, Merval wrenched his horse's head around and clattered back down the trail with a spray of gravel.

"Oh, no." I studied my nails. "He's getting away."

Gerta urged her gelding into a halfhearted trot. I followed, soothed by the clink of Bamfflian gold in my purse.

\* \* \*

We never did catch up with Merval, though we eventually found his horse wandering loose. He must have gone to ground in a cave, the prospect of being doomed to a diet of lichen and snow apparently more alluring than a slit nose and connubial bliss with Gerta.

The next day, the bandits returned to their posts, once again robbing with impunity, so now we have all the work we can handle. I had Merval's wand melted down into a chamber pot, but Gerta is still planning her wedding and has ordered white mail trimmed in ermine in honor of the occasion, should it ever come to pass. As for Esmeralda, she and I have come to an uneasy truce, neither speaking to the other. She does mutter a lot, though, when she thinks I'm not listening.

Sometimes, when we're crossing one of the passes and the wind is right, I hear laughter and wild music and know that somewhere in the mountains, the Avenue of Immediate Availability has once again manifested and bandits are making merry out of season. There's no reason why it should cheer me, and yet it always does.

Go figure.

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