

## Abjure the Realm - by Elizabeth Bear

*Captain, d'ye see the banners brave  
Floating on the wind?  
Fire and folly fear, me boys,  
Hail and hell they'll send.*

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Riordan limped down the parapet to the next guard post, the soft sole of his left boot hissing on black granite as he hitched along in pursuit of the High-King. A cloak of tatters in colors gleaned from half a thousand fiefdoms swung from the bard's shoulders, but he had left his lute and his harp behind this afternoon. He was unarmed.

Aidan, called the Conqueror, glanced over his shoulder. The High-King frowned when a midsummer breeze lifted Riordan's lovelocked hair and blew it across the bard's face, revealing silver at the temples and the nape of his neck. "You should bind that back," Aidan commented, returning his attention to the amorphous smudge staining half of the eastern horizon, distant beyond the steep gabled roofs of the town. The guard stepped courteously aside to give his liege a clearer view, and one of the white-robed wizards the King kept always in attendance stood inconspicuously nearby.

Riordan followed the gaze. The enemy converging on the caer reminded him of ravens gathering when slaughter was on the wind. In fact, he saw a drift of shapes like leaves swept up in a wind spiraling over the enemy ranks. *The harbingers of battle.*

A long way off, but coming.

"I've been in wars before, your Majesty." But Riordan produced a scrap of thong from his sleeve and twisted it through metal-red curls, obedient to the will of the King.

Aidan's lips curled slightly in a sneer as the bard's gesture revealed a half-dozen golden earrings. The King turned back to the encroaching army, resting his elbows on a stone crenellation. "Do you know what that is, Harper?"

Riordan too leaned against the roughhewn wall, taking the weight off his malformed foot. "An army, your Majesty." *Never tell a King he's dull.*

Aidan bent forward and spat off the parapet. "The army of my bastard half-sister the sorceress, Master bard. The undead army of Maledysaunte, the Hag of Wolf Wood."

"Aye, your Majesty."

Aidan shoved himself upright. "The gates of Caer Dun have never been breached. But odds are very good that something will die here today. An old blood debt. And with luck, a wicked woman. I look forward to your songs."

With a final stiff nod, the King turned and stalked away, leaving the crippled bard to struggle after if he cared to.

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*Captain, d'ye see yon maiden fair  
That all in black do ride?  
That iron sword in her white hand, me lads,  
An iron heart does guide.*

---

The Hag of Wolf Wood laid a gentling hand on the neck of her immense black stallion, noticing with amusement that the dirt from her cabbage patch still discolored her nails. She rode bareback and without reins, her steed restrained only by the sound of her voice and the grip of her thighs. Necromancer snorted and tossed his head, his broad dazzling blaze flashing in the sunlight. Murders of carrion birds--corpse-crows black as Maledysaunte's straight, shining hair; enormous whiskery ravens; white-vested hooded crows--wheeled overhead, drawn by the rotting stench of the sorceress's undead army.

Maledysaunte herself wore sachets of lavender and pennyroyal about her neck, the little pouches dangling over the whitework embroidery on her laced bodice. The rest of her robes--voluminous homespun lawn--were dyed black with sloes, giving her the look of one of her attendant magpies. She crushed one of the sachets, rolling the bag between her fingers to release the scent as she turned her head to survey the army of corpses.

Caer Dun, home of her childhood, loomed on the horizon. The gates were not yet closed for siege, and she smiled despite the colorful wardsigns, invisible to the unmagicked, that were written on the air above it. *I'll see you yet avenged, Ygraine, though I damn my soul to do it. See how the old bastard lives in fear of me now? Those are the workings of ten wizards at least.*

She sighed, and shifted her sore bottom on the stallion's back. She scrubbed her hands on her thighs as if they were sticky. *I've tried, Ygraine. But even I could not breach those defenses. Without a distraction. Without having come here myself.*

*I never wanted to come back here, or to pay these prices.*

Necromancer shook his head hard, shying backward as a rotting wolfhound trotted too close to his feet. *What a wand cannot master, the hand must undertake. At least I gave them enough warning to get most of the townspeople away.*

"Sorry, old boy," she said to the horse. "I know, they don't exactly reek of sanctity. But they're all we have."

Patting his withers one-handed, she reached over her shoulder and touched the hilt of the black iron dagger that hung between her shoulderblades, concealed under the fall of a mantle of deepest green. *Well, if I fail this time, I won't get another chance.*

The thought cheered her.

She touched Necromancer with her small bare heels and he pranced forward, displeased slaver dropping from his lips. His head came up as she turned him south and west, away from the stinking vanguard. She nudged him into a gallop, clinging with a hand knotted in his mane and trusting him not to throw her. He left the dead willingly behind.

She guessed they were about to find out.

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*Captain, d'ye hear the trumpets brash  
Sounding the battle call?  
We'll charge to the rolling drums, me boys,  
To the rolling drums we'll fall.*

---

Riordan could have caught Aidan, limp or no limp, but the bard did not hurry as much as he might have. Nigh on fifty years he'd reigned, and he didn't look a day over thirty-five. And after a fortnight in the High-King's court, Riordan was ready to concede that the Hag had a point. Her half-brother was anything but charming.

Still, he was King, and the finest King the realm has ever seen. Witness the peace he enforced from sea to sea.

If Kings were charming they wouldn't need Harpers.

The bard watched the High-King's glossy black curls and cloth-of-gold surcote recede along the battlement, then returned his attention to the field. Teamsters and farmers, wainwrights and coopers and goodwives streamed in through the gates of the caer. A broader river of people fled west across the plains, who perhaps had not truly believed in the Hag's grave-stolen horde until they smelled it.

Riordan shook his head. If he'd a lick of sense, he'd be with that refugee train. Not trapped in a tyrant's summer castle while his evil half-sister rode down.

The warm wind from the east brought a stench of rot. Riordan covered his mouth with one string-callused hand and shaded his eyes with the other, trying to make out some detail of the enemy. Other than the clouds of carrion birds surrounding the advancing ranks, the curious silence and the lack of banners, he could see nothing. There must be a bard here, to tell the truth of it.

It had all the markings of a bleak and epic history, though Riordan had not been born when Aidan and his sister became enemies. The fresh-created King had married his bastard half-sister's half-sister, daughter of another branch of the same royal line. That bastard, a half-hour older than the legitimate Prince and touched with the evil eye, had been made a pawn of other factions, and the King's wife had smuggled her sister out of the caer and been burned for her pains.

But the bastard with the yellow eye had lived.

*Maledysaunte*, Riordan thought. *The Hag of Wolf Wood, from whom no knight escapes.* For nearly half a century, the sorceress had sent their corpses home to her half-brother on biers woven of greenwood and roses, even in the dead of winter. Every so often another of her treacherous gifts had arrived as well, disguised as tribute from a conquered king--a poisoned cloak, a pretty girl slave with a dagger concealed in her hair. Legend had the witch bent and ragged, one eye green as poison and the other naught but a rotting sore with snakes writhing behind it. There was supposed to be a beautiful princess as well, imprisoned in the witch's dank tower.

Every sticky mark of a good story. And here he was, caught in it.

Riordan's teeth grated together. He drew his gaudy cloak tighter over his shoulders, mindful of the brilliant scrap-work twisting on the breeze. He wouldn't place a bet on the snakes.

That sounded the sort of touch Henri of Canton would add to a ballad. Besides, if her brother so belied his age, why should she look any older?

Riordan smiled privately. *Because she's wicked, of course.*

And then the wind brought him putrescence again. The polite soldier gagged, averting his streaming eyes and using the hem of his royal-blue tunic to muffle his face. In sympathy, Riordan clapped his shoulder.

The soldier coughed again before he straightened, and rewarded the Harper with a grateful glance. He's just a boy, Riordan thought, and was ashamed of as soon as the soldier said, "Don't worry, Harper. The King's men will take care of you, and this caer has never fallen to a siege."

Words were already taking shape in the bard's mind, and he was only half-listening. *All under the Lion Banner / On a clear warm day in June....* "What's your name, lad?"

He drew himself up proudly and touched a bronze badge pinned over the tartan on his shoulder. "Captain Dunstan, Harper." A stinking wind ruffled his ash-blond curls.

*Dunstan rode to the battle / and the drummers called the tune.* "Have you ever fought an army like this one, then?"

The young soldier's face blanched behind his bravado, but he did not look down. The bard noticed a signet ring on the lad's finger when he lifted it to scratch his beardless chin. One of the King's many bastards, then. That's why he had the command so young. Aidan had married only the once, and gotten no legitimate heirs before burning his young wife for treason.

Riordan suspected the experience had soured him.

Dunstan spoke. "She's never come out of Wolf Wood before. Nor ever sent an army."

"Sort of makes you wonder what's changed, doesn't it?" Riordan followed after the High-King, already humming the first verse of a ballad and thinking about the words he would put to it, after the battle was won.

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*Captain, d'ye hear the clash of blades  
And the battle cries so fierce?  
We'll cry the more this night, me boys,  
If her blade our hearts does pierce.*

---

Maledysaunte would have lowered her green mantle from her head and paused inside the gates of the caer, pinioned on girlhood memories, but the press of refugees bore her forward. Dust rose in a plume around them, stirred by many feet; the once-familiar high walls, hung with blue and gold, oppressed her.

She had left Necromancer concealed in the sprawl of the town, and now she limped as if footsore and weary. *So many people*. She wanted to gag on the stench of them, like the stench of the dead. The press of bodies assaulted her from all sides. The dull-colored flagstones were rough under her feet.

She refused to look too hard at the children, at a young couple hand in hand, the woman leaning on her husband's arm. At an old man who crouched in the shade out of the flow of traffic, a book--*a book!*--balanced on his knee. At the stout brown-haired woman who smiled and stepped out of Maledysaunte's path with a friendly nod to the weary-looking girl.

Too late. The deal was already struck: blackest necromancy. There was an irony there, that Maledysaunte's inability to get to Aidan had driven her to the very crimes he accused her of.

Debts must be paid.

Permitting the river of townsfolk to sweep her past the guards, Maledysaunte turned into the bailey. The burden of wizardry pressed over her like sodden blankets, and had the encroaching revenant army not already triggered every magical ward on the caer, alarms would have shrilled her presence. She smiled--more a grimace of pain--and closed her eyes to feel her way. And almost ran down the rag-cloaked figure of a bard.

"Pardon!" The sorceress tried to squeak like a terrified townswoman, but her voice was rusty with disuse. She couldn't remember the last time she'd spoken to a man. She never bothered to introduce herself to the knights who came to kill her anymore, instead permitting the forest to murder them while she sat at her loom or dug in her garden. They hadn't offered much entertainment at best: invariably stalwart and of limited imagination.

"No pardon required. If only pretty lasses would walk into me more often. I'm Riordan." He picked up her hand, which hung at her side, and swept a bow over it. His right foot dragged.

*I could have healed that when he was born. A bitter thought, made bitterer by history. But thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. Much less a bastard daughter of the lord who's a half-hour older than the son and heir, and has the misfortune to know how to talk to animals.*

*Wizards are all right, though. Although they never seem to heal anybody.* She kept her eyes downcast, working her mouth around the taste of dust. If he noticed she had one eye green and one amber, he'd find her memorable, and she did not wish to be remembered. "I... Y... Ygraine, master bard." As she stammered over the name, she wondered why she had chosen it.

"A lovely name, if out of favor these days."

"My parents were from the provinces," she lied, extemporizing wildly. "They did not know the name of the King's first wife, nor had they heard the story...."

"A piercing irony that you should find yourself here, girl--besieged by the very sorceress that infamous queen aided in her escape. Let us hope that your name is not a portent, shall we?"

"Let us hope," she said, and curtsied lower when it seemed as if the bard would reach out and lift her chin to see her face the better. "I must... my husband is waiting, Harper. Thank you your kindness."

Infamous. A kinder word than many would have chosen. Still, her teeth hurt from grinding them. She caught herself scouring her hands against her gown and twisted them in the black cloth of her skirts instead.

She turned and scurried toward the keep itself, chafing under the weight of innocent humanity all around her and the itch of the iron dagger hungry between her shoulders.

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*Captain, d'ye smell the smoke of war  
And the stench of burning men?  
Aye, and I hear the screaming, lads,  
In the keep which we defend.*

---

Riordan watched the girl with the mismatched eyes hurry across drab red and grey

flagstones, the spill of hair from under her mantle catching blue highlights in the dusty sun. *Husband*. Something about the word nagged in his mind. *Ygraine. Husband*.

She was gone from sight before he jerked upright and turned to follow her, limping toward the tower keep as fast as he could drag his crippled foot. *Husband. And wearing her hair down on her shoulders like a maiden? Not likely!*

"Dunstan! Captain!" The bard pitched his voice to carry, wishing he had more at his belt than an eating knife only so long as the span of his palm. He caught sight of the captain leaning against a paneled divider and lurched toward him.

The blue-eyed lad turned his head sluggishly when Riordan clutched his arm. "Master bard." He blinked twice, as if struggling to focus.

"Did a girl go by here?"

The young Captain shook his head, but it wasn't precisely denial. "Everything swims in my vision."

"Bewitched." *Or poisoned*. But he couldn't see a wound. Riordan gulped and dragged at Dunstan's arm. "Hurry. The Hag is in the castle!"

"The King!"

"In his study. Go!"

Dunstan all but carried the bard up the spiraling stairs, until Riordan knocked his hand away. "Go. Hurry. I'll follow."

Dunstan nodded and drew his sword, bolting up the uneven stair. Riordan followed more slowly, hauling himself along by means of handholds on the sloppily dressed stone wall. Faster. Faster. He was halfway there when he heard the hiss of blades drawn, only a few steps from the top and able to see over the landing when steel rang on steel and he glimpsed Dunstan, cursing, engaged with another soldier in the livery of the King--a soldier who fought dead-eyed and with inhuman quickness.

Dunstan fought well, Riordan granted. But the lad was a lad, and half-weeping in frustration at dueling his comrade. He was pulling his blows, fighting defensively. The bard lurched higher, catching the shin of his bad leg on the step.



Beyond the combatants, Riordan could see the slight girl in the green mantle, a wicked little dagger clutched in her hand. The body of Aidan's attendant wizard lay at Maledysaunte's feet, blood a banner across the white bodice of her gown. The King faced her, a half-step up on the little platform his gilded desk stood on, his broadsword drawn. The spines of priceless books framed his aquiline profile. Arrogant confidence could have dripped the length of his blade.

Swords chimed together like hammers striking the anvil. Dunstan cursed again and parried. Out of the corner of his eye, Riordan saw blood streaming down the inside of the Captain's arm.

"Surrender," Maledysaunte said to the King, as Riordan attained the landing.

Aidan laughed, loud and true. "I should be saying that to you, little sister." He extended the massive sword in his hand, holding it as if it were light as a willow wand.

"I never would have opposed you. I never cared who sat on your father's throne. I was a *bastard*, Aidan. But half a century ago, on a day like today, you burned a girl."

Riordan took a step closer, transfixed. A grunt and the unmistakable slick hiss of steel into flesh interrupted his concentration. He glanced aside to see Dunstan drawing his blade out of his comrade's belly and flicking the blood from it in a long, spattering arc.

The King turned his head and spat. "Your witchery won't avail. This is your last mistake."

Maledysaunte smiled, a long, cool smile that went into Riordan sharp as the dagger in her hand. "You don't understand, your Majesty. Even if you kill me, my army is coming. And blood was the price of their raising. Your blood." Her throat worked as if she swallowed bile. "They're coming to collect."

Dunstan staggered forward, weaving across the distance to the girl, his blood spattering the floor. He stumbled.

The sorceress reversed her dagger in her hand and spread her arms wide, as if inviting the High-King to strike her down. "Moreso than empire, I am your finest creation, High-King. Look at what you've made!"

He looked. Long and steadily, unflinching, he met his sister's gaze. He stepped forward, hand unwavering on his sword.

Riordan dragged himself painful steps closer. Dunstan went to his knees and planted his

sword as a prop, trying to haul himself upright. His hand slipped in his own blood. He fell.

Maledysaunte hurled the dagger as Riordan lunged. His sound foot skittered on blood-slick stone and he went down hard, catching himself on the palm of one hand. Aidan had only begun raising his sword to parry when the blade went into his eye.

Riordan shoved himself into a crouch before he froze, unbelieving. His hand went to his mouth. The High-King fell ponderously, like an oak, and Maledysaunte had turned her back on him and stepped over Dunstan's unconscious form by the time he slumped unmoving. His sword was still ringing on the stones when she passed Riordan.

She hesitated. And did not glance back. "I've had time to learn skills other than magic," she said in chill even tones.

Not knowing what he did, he reached out and caught the edge of her mantle. "You're the princess. Not the Hag."

She stopped at the top of the stairs, cloth stretched between them like a flag to be folded. She did not turn her head. "Are the two so different, then?"

A great tingling numbness seemed to have fallen over him. Outside, he could hear the bustle of the refugees, the neighing of horses. Words spilled from his throat. "Are we conquered, then? Will you rule?"

Her laugh was a humorless, gasping thing. "The King has many bastards to duel over his throne." She turned back to the bard, and came up close, her mantle furling like a wing. She smelled of lavender and mint, and blood.

The sorceress Maledysaunte raised her thumb to her mouth and bit down on it, blood coloring her sharp white teeth. She smiled pitilessly and reached out, crimson wound like ribbons around the whiteness of her hand.

"The dead must be fed for their labors, but someone should live to tell the tale." She touched him between the eyes with her own red blood. "I won't be back. Let darkness fall."

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*Captain, the women scream and cry  
And the walls are breached at last  
The Captain can make no reply, me boys,*

*And the dark is falling fast.*

---

Maledysaunte's army attacked at sunset, but the sorceress was not among the ranks. Kingless, Captainless, Caer Dun was taken in an hour. By moonrise, all that was left within her walls was the wandering bodies of the dead.... and a staring, green-eyed bard whom no revenant would touch, for he was marked by their mistress.

The Hag's army fell to ash at the first touch of the sun.

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*She stands in her chamber  
Weaving her summer  
In threads green and golden  
Under eaves hung with winter*

---

Winter lay thick on the ground around her tower, snow white on her ebony window ledge. A chime like a glass bell resounded on frosty air as the water in a silver basin clouded and then cleared. Maledysaunte looked up from her weaving, brushing a strand of hair still glossy black behind her ear.

She hadn't heard that sound in fifteen years or longer, since Caer Dun, since her brother's death. She had almost believed herself forgotten.

Curiosity almost moved her to thrust the shuttle through the warp and walk across the tapestry-carpeted floor to the scrying bowl. Almost. She had become what they said she was, and now they feared her enough to trouble her no longer.

There was a moral there.

After a moment, she shrugged and selected a red handful of threads. *The trees will take care it for me.* But she glanced back over her shoulder nonetheless.

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*True Tam dismounted at the greenwoodside  
Tied his mare's reins up to the pommel  
He slapped her flank and he stepped inside  
And she went home with an empty saddle*

---

Riordan shuffled painfully along a deer-trail packed through the snow, leaning on a hewn rowan staff. Pausing at the very edge of the wood, he pulled his many-layered cloak around his shoulders, feeling the winter like ice in every joint. It had been a long few years. He regarded the trees warily, wondering if the branches really were reaching after him.

His mount trotted three steps away and stopped, staring after him as if she could not believe what he meant to do. Her breath frosted on her whiskers, and she nickered softly, as if to say *Get back on, Man. We can still go home.*

"There's a lady in there with a story to tell, Gracie," the old Harper said, with good humor. "Besides, she didn't kill me last time. And her mark is on me still. Her creatures should leave me alone."

Should. You never knew. But if one took no chances, there would be no stories.

Riordan took a breath and stepped into the wintry wood.

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*All in green did my lady go  
All in green went riding  
Among the barrows of the silent dead  
On a white mare, she went riding*

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