



Where Beauty Lies in Wait
Peadar Ó Guilín

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WHERE BEAUTY LIES IN WAIT

By
Peadar Ó Guilín

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USA.

Darrak fell out of bed onto the straw, scraping the stump of his left arm. He cursed, and with his right hand, felt about in the dark for a spear. Outside the sleeping shed, the voice which had woken him continued to taunt his son.

“Parm! Pa-arm! Where are you, lover boy?”

Poor Parm! Darrak remembered what it was like to be an adolescent. He cursed the memory of his own boyhood; he cursed women in general as he stumbled into the night.

The sight of her, lit by the moons, brought him to a halt.

“Away with you,” he said without conviction. His traitorous eyes were already trapped on her six lovely breasts, her skin shining like gray silk.

Cyreen turned to face him. Her gaze dropped to his missing arm and her glossy lips sneered. "I'm doing nothing illegal here; the boy's of age." Then she went back to shouting for Parm to come outside, and what she promised would have made the Goddess blush.

"Away with you!" he said again, more strongly this time, for he saw that his son, unable to resist the call, had moved to the window of his bedroom on the upper floor of the house.

Darrak advanced on the woman, feeling ridiculous because in the darkness of the shed he'd picked up a rake instead of his spear. He would use it if he had to, it could hurt her, scar that lovely skin.

She laughed, "Are you going to hit me with that, half-man?" Cyreen had two of her husbands with her but they stayed outside the garden for fear of hanging. She had no such qualms and stepped forward boldly.

Darrak's only hand shook as her scent rolled over him. He held his nerve. "I'm going to call for the City Husbands," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. "The boy is of age. Fresh, inviting. You cannot stop me. I will have him." She indicated the bulge in Darrak's loincloth, "If I have this effect on you, imagine what it must be like for him only months before the Change. You cannot keep us apart."

"I'm calling the City Husbands. Now."

"Useless half-man!" she gathered her husbands to her and stalked off. "I will have him!"

Darrak retreated to the sleeping shed he'd shared with his brother husbands before war had separated them. Parm no longer stood at the window above. At that age an erection could be powerful enough to knock you out with the pain of it. No wonder so few boys made it to the Change.

"Another year, son," whispered Darrak, "just one more year and oh, you will be beautiful!"

Angry clouds spat rain at the streets as the boys came out of school. Darrak stood with a gang of other husbands, ready with spears and pommanders, to take Parm and his friends home to safety. As boys and men hurried through puddled streets, women's heads appeared in doorways

calling invitations. Some of the youngsters tried to turn back as if dazed, but the men shoved them into line and kept them moving.

“She came again last night,” said Parm’s friend, Rolfop. Darrak could hear the longing and fear in his voice.

“She came to me too,” said Parm. The rain had soaked the boys through to the bone. Darrak hoped it would rob last night’s memories of any heat.

“I tried to go to her,” Rolfop continued. He lifted up a scab-encrusted wrist for inspection, “But the chain held.”

“He should get that wrist bandaged,” thought Darrak. But it wasn’t his place to say so aloud. Besides, Rolfop’s mother could no more afford new linen than Parm’s could new shoes for her remaining child. The war had raised taxes and stolen all husbands involved in non-essential activities. It had forced many women to pay the City to escort their children to school.

Darrak thought of his wife, the Matron, and how she’d allowed him to come home from the war in spite of his missing limb. Darrak was determined to be more than just another mouth to feed. He swore to see his son make it to the Change and become as lovely and important a woman as his mother. But the sight of a lithe female form nearby — all breasts and skin pearly with rain — stopped these thoughts in their tracks... He whirled in time to see Parm trotting off in the wrong direction.

“Back in line, you!” He whipped the spear around to catch the boy on the shoulder.

“You might need a chain of your own, Parm,” said Rolfop fondling his wrist.

The boys’ homes emerged from the drizzle one by one. Soon, only four husbands stood guard over the three youngsters who lived furthest from the school — Parm, Rolfop and Eglin. By now, even the men were exhausted with tension, for while the women they’d passed were only interested in boys, the adults were far from immune and had to press pomanders soaked in male sweat to their faces. Some of them directed jealous glances at the boys and the slaps they doled out hurt more than necessary.

The group soon came to Eglin’s house, hunkered down at the bottom of a hill where other buildings clustered around it like pups on a she-dog.

“Perfect place for a snatch,” spat one of the men. He was younger than the rest and still bitter at his failure to reach the Change.

“Matron’s Council should make the City Husbands help us,” said another man with such thin eye ridges he was constantly forced to wipe rain away from his face. Nobody answered. Men who hadn’t had the decency to kill themselves when their wives died became City Husbands. They belonged to the community and kept its laws with brutal enthusiasm. Darrak would never trust them with his son.

He moved closer to Parm as the little group jogged down the hill towards Eglin’s house. A commotion awaited them. Eglin’s mother was weeping loudly while two of her husbands on leave from the war stood around in confusion. Chained he-dogs growled and strained in the garden behind them.

“My boy!” cried the tall woman, looking up, “My boy! You’re safe! It was a lie!”

Her husbands raised a cheer, clapping each other on the back, pounding spear shafts against the wet earth.

“Nothing wrong with your boy—” began a puzzled Darrak as the woman pushed through the others towards her son. But she ignored Eglin completely. Striking like a snake, she grabbed Darrak’s son, Parm, by the hand while her husbands plowed into the exhausted guards and barged open an escape route for her.

“Parm!” cried Darrak. His spear was taken from him in the fray, but he managed to leap and land with all his weight against the woman throwing both her and his son to the ground. She recovered her feet quickly even as Rolfop stepped forward to help Parm to his feet.

“Get back, you fool!” shouted Darrak, his heart hammering with fear. Too late.

The woman grabbed Rolfop by his scabby wrist and pulled him as far as her own property. She dragged her victim into the garden around her house while her husbands protected her retreat with lowered spears. Her son, Eglin, could only look on in shock.

Darrak had saved his own boy, but knew that his efforts had cost Rolfop, his future. “We too have spears,” he said desperately. But she stood on her property and could laugh at his threats. One of her husbands unchained the he-dogs. They’d been trained to treat the men of the house as their pack and to protect Eglin’s mother as their mate. They snarled and snapped at the strangers.

The tall woman held Rolfop close. His nose lay level with her upper breasts, one cheek pressed against them. His eyes had turned glassy beneath their ridges and the gray of his skin had deepened in color. He shivered all over.

"You must surrender the boy you have kidnapped," said Darrak, "The courts could have you flayed for such a crime."

"But I haven't kidnapped anybody," she protested with a laugh. She looked magnificent. She was not as beautiful as Cyreen who came nightly to tempt Parm, but her body curved sweetly. Her scent floated through the rain to affect even the older men so that they were forced to breathe deeply through their pomanders.

"This boy," she said, "this... this man, wishes to be my husband. Do you not?"

Rolfop blinked slowly, unsure of what was being asked of him.

"You want to stay here and lie with me, pet? You want me to take you in my arms? Take you downstairs?"

His shivers grew more violent.

"Come back, boy," said Darrak, "It's not too late until you sleep with her. Do you want to spend your life as a man? It'll be the war for you for sure." He waved the stump of his left arm, his tone bitter, "You want this to happen to you?"

Rolfop spoke in a thick voice: "I want to stay."

And that was that. The next time Darrak saw him, he was just a man, waiting to pick Eglin up from school with the others.

Darrak spent longer raking up the grass than a normal man would have. He remembered planting it the year before with his fellow husbands. Later, — just when the first green shoots arrived and it turned into the pleasing carpet of summer picnics, — war had arrived.

The stalks were red now. Darrak swept them into a corner where he might collect the seeds for next year's planting. He'd be on his own this time. Two of his brother husbands had been killed trying to kidnap boys from a neighboring city, while the others were either on the front lines or tilling public fields for supplies.

The great roundhouse looked sad. He remembered when all three floors had been filled with the laughter of boys. The Matron had borne

ten children by her husbands, but they'd been captured one by one, until only the son she'd had with Darrak remained. Parm was the last chance of a once great family to produce an heir. Other important families had failed to do so and their houses lay empty, gates swinging in the wind, grass blowing where it would.

Darrak began piling the stalks into a basket, "I'll protect you, son," he muttered, "I'll see you make the Change."

He spent an hour shucking spare seed from the red, prickly grass into a basket. Poor eating, but times grew hard. When the grass cut his hand he watched his blood disappear into the red husks.

A movement by the gate snapped him from his reverie. A thin man stood outside, one hand clenched, the other leaning on the fence near a basket of grass that Darrak had yet to shuck.

"May the Goddess bear your child, Darrak," said the man.

Darrak squinted, unsure how this man, whose very limbs shook, knew him. "Armon?" he said, at last.

Armon bowed his head revealing a scar on his scalp where a spear had nearly finished him. Darrak went to the man and they clenched fists as only soldiers or brother husbands could.

"Your matron..." Darrak asked.

Armon shook his head and Darrak knew then, that broken in the war, Armon had been thrown out. The man shook so much that Darrak doubted even the city husbands would take him now. "I live under a bridge," Armon confirmed, "I should die but, that monster Cyreen took my child and I won't rest until I... I-"

"Don't say it!" said Darrak, scanning the streets, "Why monster? Why do you say that?"

"She has twenty husbands," said Armon, "and her allure never weakens!"

Darrak blinked. "Of course, it weakens. Each husband will give her children, and each child weakens the allure. She is fertile, that's all."

Armon appeared to be struggling with some awful thought. Then he sagged. "I am so hungry," he said.

"Sorry, brother," said Darrak, "times are hard and my Matron permits no charities. But I will go behind the house and fetch you water." He took his time finding the cup and working the pump behind the house.

"I'm on my way back!" he shouted.

By the time he'd reached the fence, several handfuls of unshucked grass had disappeared from the basket, but Darrak said nothing. Armon didn't even pretend to drink the water. "You're a good man, Darrak," he said. The visitor held out his hand. Darrak put down the cup and clasped it. He felt something sharp cut his palm and he thought it a piece of grass.

"She made me do this, brother," whispered Armon. His face had grown suddenly large and his voice sounded as though it came through a tunnel. "I always knew she was a monster. Nobody's ever seen her children. Nobody. Oh, Darrak, forgive me. I'd have starved otherwise."

"Forgive what?" asked Darrak. Then he fell over. This didn't alarm him. He kept thinking: "No children! How, Cyreen, how?" He imagined her scent, her lovely gaze upon him. "Where are your boys?" he asked her. He could almost hear her laughing in reply.

Strange dreams ended in sudden pain. The first blows fell on his left hip and the stump of his missing arm. "My son! Get up you sack of filth! They've taken my son!"

His eyes opened to blurry torchlight. Then a sandal buckle scraped his cheek and a tooth splintered. Darrak cried out, tried to jump up and cover his face. The Matron must have come back from Council during the night. Her voice whipped him with a fury equal to her fists.

"Find my son and don't come back here without him!"

"When—", he managed to ask.

"Now," she screamed, voice hoarse, "just now! I saw Cyreen slip away with her husbands. Who else could it be? Who else? She locked you into your shed and you slept right through it!"

"Drugged!" he thought, remembering the loss of consciousness after a jab to the palm of his hand. He squeezed past the distraught woman, careful not to touch her elderly frame. He ran through the gate and looked up and down the street but if Parm's abductors had carried torches there was no sign of them now.

"Where does she live?" he asked The Matron.

"How should I know?" she hissed, "The city has eight hundred houses. Nearby, I would imagine. Ask! Find him!"

Darrak felt tears coming to his own eyes. He turned and turned uselessly, rubbing at his stump and grieving for his son's ruined future.

"Goddess, oh Goddess, how will I find my boy?" As if in answer, the wind carried dried husks of grass to brush against his ankles. Armon! The old soldier had mentioned living beneath a bridge like the troll-lady of legend. Darrak knew of only one big enough to shelter a grown man. He left the matron in his wake and ran as he'd run in the war when great rocks burst nearby with a hatchet rain of shards. Darrak planned to fall on Armon like such a rock, but when he reached the bridge he found the soldier curled in sleep around some lost boy's cloak and Darrak knew he couldn't hurt the man.

"You're too late," said Armon when he woke, "he's probably on her property by now."

"Where is her property?"

"You can't go there!" Armon whimpered, "She'd be within her rights to have you killed."

"Tell me!"

Armon told him and Darrak ran on with the soldier's pleas for forgiveness evaporating behind him.

He arrived outside an enormous, new house just as Cyreen lead his boy inside. A dozen heartbeats earlier and he might have got there in time to be speared in the streets by her husbands. His eyesight blurred with tears, but he pushed them back and forced a warrior's grin onto his face instead. "It's never too late to be killed!" he whispered. But he couldn't wish the belly fear away. He'd run away in his first real battle and had lost his arm hiding in a ditch. Already he could feel the rope Cyreen's husbands would put around his neck when they caught him on her property.

So he lingered in the shadows with some foraging he-rats, his palm flat against a wall, as though ready to push him forward into the attack. He watched four husbands retreat into a shed, grumbling in hushed voices. None so much as glanced at the upper stories of the house where their boys must surely live. No light shone there, no laughter escaped. Had all her sons been captured?

"I could look," thought Darrak, "I'm dead anyway." But still he hesitated.

Darrak remembered his own wedding night with great clarity. He'd been caught away from home stupidly after a fight with his mother. The

Matron, wasn't even looking for a husband that day, as she told him. She'd birthed many sons already and her attraction had diminished to a point where she had to be practically sitting on a boy to snare him. Darrak had obliged by running into her on his way home. Back at the house she'd had to get the other men to hold him while she bathed — for her allure wore off as soon as she left the room. He'd fought the older men, screaming for his mother all through her hours of ceremonial bathing. He'd changed his tune quick enough when the matron came back and smoothed the sweat away from his eye ridges...

A man left the shed to pee in a corner of the garden and Darrak suddenly realized that if he came back here in a few weeks, he could watch Parm pissing his own life away, guarding Cyreen's gate until she sent him to the war. Now the tears came. Darrak left the shadows and ran to the back of the house. He squeezed over the fence and sidled around the perimeter until he reached the front door. Darrak heard no alarms. He wondered how Cyreen could possess so many husbands and yet be so arrogant as to post no guards. It was almost as if they had no fear of a drugged, one armed coward locked in a shed two miles away. Then his fear returned. He didn't want to be here. Everything was happening too fast – his heartbeat, his breathing, his approaching death. He fell to his knees in front of the door and pressed his damp forehead against cold wood. He could always go and join Armon under the bridge.

The weight of his body pushed open the door. It had been oiled by an army of husbands and failed to creak. No he-dogs waited behind it, nor guards of any kind.

Darrak tiptoed inside. It was only the third house whose interior he'd ever seen. He found himself in a hallway where torches revealed mirrors, tapestries and the expected staircase leading down to the wedding rooms and bathhouse. From upstairs, only silence. But he knew she wasn't up there with her children. Her scent lingered like a beautiful cloud trailing down the stairs and he followed it as quietly as he could.

To the right, he heard the sounds of water pouring into a bath. Men were speaking over it although he couldn't make out the words.

From the left, the soothing voice of a woman: "I won't keep you long, sweet one. It is a fraction of the night before we lie together, no more." The answer was a low protest to which she responded with a laugh.

"Soon!"

Darrak almost forgot to duck under the stairs when he heard Cyreen's footsteps approach and had to fight against an urge to crawl out of

hiding to throw himself at her feet. He tried not to look as she passed, naked, but his eyes trailed after her and caught on a pale, puckered line running down the side of her stomach. "A scar?" he wondered. If so, he'd never seen its like before. Nor had he noticed it when she came to his house to taunt Parm. How could she have kept such a thing hidden?

When Cyreen had gone, he forgot the scar and ran down the way from which she'd come and into the wedding room. It was a mess. Cushions, towels and sheets lay higgledy-piggledy about the room, submerging overturned chairs and empty plates. "A lair," thought Darrak. He had no other word for it. Lanterns burned here rather than torches, but even so, every flicker caused a mad dance of shadow and hid Parm from view for several anxious heartbeats.

The boy was lying naked on a pallet in the corner. Perspiration beaded his brow and his eyes fluttered beneath closed lids.

"Wake up, son," whispered Darrak, crouching down beside him, "Time to be off."

"Not leaving," said the boy. Darrak took his eyes off his son for a moment as he tried to figure out a quiet way to get him moving. As his gaze wandered over the chaos, he spotted something strange and shiny among the shadows. It was a small ceramic container full of dull grey paste: skin colored. Darrak forgot his terror long enough to wonder what Cyreen, or any woman could want with such a thing. Maybe she used it to rub over the scar?

That gave him an idea.

Using a foot and his only hand, he tore away a piece of sheet. Then, he rubbed it against his sweaty armpits. He sat on his son, pinning the boy's arms with his knees. The boy made no resistance until the reeking cloth was shoved over his nose and mouth. He bucked and tried to cry out, but Darrak held firm until Parm opened his eyes, blinking up at his father.

"Better?" asked Darrak.

A nod. Darrak relinquished his hold. "Keep that over your nose," he told the boy, "we've got to get you out of here before she comes back."

Parm didn't answer. Children didn't like speaking to their male parent. They even avoided the word "father" where possible. Darrak didn't mind – he'd been no different himself as a boy.

They stood up and clambered back towards the stairs.

Splashing sounds reached their ears, and words too, as Cyreen sang to herself, her voice innocent. Both men stood stock still listening to her. She was so near that a dozen footsteps would have brought them within sight of her loveliness. Half a dozen more and they could have shared her bath.

With a shock, Darrak realized that the two of them had already moved to the bathhouse entrance and his son, sweaty cloth fallen from his face, was reaching for the door.

He grabbed the boy and wrenched him away, grateful that Cyreen's own voice covered the sound of their footsteps. He made his son put the smelly cloth back over his face and together they climbed the stairs.

At the top, a pair of husbands, one burly, one a bag of bones, stood with their backs to them: probably the same two who had filled their wife's bath returned now to guard the door against just such intruders as Darrak. He grinned to himself. At last, with nowhere to run, he would be a warrior.

The stairs did not squeak as Darrak stepped up behind the chatting husbands. He grabbed the larger man by one ankle and yanked with all his might. His victim came crashing down onto the steps to lie stunned between Darrak and Parm.

Downstairs the singing stopped.

The two visitors ran for the door, but the skinnier of the two husbands blocked their way with a dagger.

"We'll string you up for this, half-man!"

"There are two of us," said Parm, surprising and delighting his father. As if they'd trained together for years, Darrak and Parm moved to circle the skinny husband. He lunged at Darrak who leapt backwards to avoid the blade. The bigger man lying on the stairs, began to stir and Cyreen's voice floated up to them, "What's going on up there?"

Parm pulled a tapestry from the wall and flung it over the head of his father's assailant. With his attacker helpless, Darrak spun just as he'd been taught and shot his right foot into the man's kneecap. Something snapped.

Wet footsteps began climbing the stairs.

"Out!" hissed Darrak, "Out!"

They kicked open the door and ran into the garden. A husband came sleepily from the shed, wondering perhaps if he'd heard a commotion or

only dreamed it. He carried no weapon so the two of them barreled into him, knocking him over. They both fell too, onto the man, pinning him with their combined weight.

The gate lay undefended before them.

But as they climbed to their feet, Cyreen's voice called out, "Parm! Parm! Please stay!"

"Don't look back!" cried Darrak. But Parm had already turned his head. Darrak followed his gaze and saw her, standing in the doorway, lit half and half by moonbeam and torchlight. Wholly conscious of her naked beauty, still dripping from the bath, she walked towards father and son.

They wrenched their eyes away but three more of Cyreen's husbands had come out of the shed to bar the gate with leveled spears. Another pair ran out of the house, one of them the burly man Darrak had yanked onto the stairs.

"Leave my son alone!" shouted Darrak.

Cyreen ignored him. The moons picked out the scar on her side and Darrak knew then with certainty she must have been covering it before. A thought, even more horrible than his approaching death crossed his mind, an appalling possibility. Cyreen stepped over dying grass towards his boy, but Darrak couldn't keep his eye from that scar and what it must represent.

"You want to stay with me, Parm?" asked the monster. The boy could only nod. It, Cyreen, smiled and stroked his heaving chest. "I'll have to go and finish my bath first, as well as the other rituals."

The man whom Darrak had pulled down the stairs approached with a knife. "Allow me to kill the half-man, Matron."

Darrak almost fainted at the sight of the wicked blade, but he held his feet and even his voice seemed steady. "I'm not the half-man, here," he said, "I have a child." A look of anguish passed over the man's face, over the faces of all the husbands present.

"You can kill me," said Darrak, "but there'll still be no boys in your house, nor space for your seed in that monster's womb. For she has none. She ate your lives and now you are nothing."

Cyreen pushed the dazed Parm away from her. "Kill the half-man!" she shouted at her weeping husbands, "Kill him now!" Perhaps if she hadn't been bathing for the ceremony, if her allure had been at its usual virginal strength, the outcome might have been different. Darrak

removed the knife from the limp fingers of the man in front of him. He took a solid step forward and made a new scar in Cyreen's empty belly.

Her eye-ridges arched, and a little gasp escaped from her mouth. "An accident," she whispered, though whether she referred to the first scar or the second, Darrak couldn't tell. Her blood washed warm over his hand and he thought, "I've killed a woman." His actions were almost as unheard of as Cyreen's. But afterwards, when she lay on the grass, her blood mingling with it, the husbands made no effort to stop him leaving with his son.

Halfway home it started raining. "Parm," he said. His boy didn't look up, but leaned heavily on his father as though woozy. "The city husbands won't believe my story about Cyreen. Who would? Who'd want to? Are you listening, Parm? I can't protect you any more..." But even as he spoke, he saw that as often happened, the shock of the evening's events had triggered something in his son; something as yet invisible, but irreversible. A sudden rush of joy filled him, happiness as he hadn't known it since boyhood.

Parm left him at the garden gate — of course! A used up husband and criminal like Darrak wouldn't be welcome there now. She slipped through the front door without a backwards glance.

"Oh," Darrak whispered to his departing child, "Oh! You will be so beautiful!" Then he turned his back on the house and headed for the bridge.

[The End.]

New Section

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Darrak fell out of bed onto the straw, scraping the stump of his left arm. He cursed, and with his right hand, felt about in the dark for a spear. Outside the sleeping shed, the voice which had woken him continued to taunt his son.

“Parm! Pa-arm! Where are you, lover boy?”

Poor Parm! Darrak remembered what it was like to be an adolescent. He cursed the memory of his own boyhood; he cursed women in general as he stumbled into the night.

The sight of her, lit by the moons, brought him to a halt.

“Away with you,” he said without conviction. His traitorous eyes were already trapped on her six lovely breasts, her skin shining like gray silk.

Cyreen turned to face him. Her gaze dropped to his missing arm and her glossy lips sneered. “I’m doing nothing illegal here; the boy’s of age.” Then she went back to shouting for Parm to come outside, and what she promised would have made the Goddess blush.

“Away with you!” he said again, more strongly this time, for he saw that his son, unable to resist the call, had moved to the window of his bedroom on the upper floor of the house.

Darrak advanced on the woman, feeling ridiculous because in the darkness of the shed he’d picked up a rake instead of his spear. He would use it if he had to, it could hurt her, scar that lovely skin.

She laughed, “Are you going to hit me with that, half-man?” Cyreen had two of her husbands with her but they stayed outside the garden for fear of hanging. She had no such qualms and stepped forward boldly.

Darrak’s only hand shook as her scent rolled over him. He held his nerve. “I’m going to call for the City Husbands,” he said.

Her eyes narrowed. “The boy is of age. Fresh, inviting. You cannot stop me. I will have him.” She indicated the bulge in Darrak’s loincloth, “If I have this effect on you, imagine what it must be like for him only months before the Change. You cannot keep us apart.”

“I’m calling the City Husbands. Now.”

“Useless half-man!” she gathered her husbands to her and stalked off. “I will have him!”

Darrak retreated to the sleeping shed he’d shared with his brother husbands before war had separated them. Parm no longer stood at the window above. At that age an erection could be powerful enough to

knock you out with the pain of it. No wonder so few boys made it to the Change.

“Another year, son,” whispered Darrak, “just one more year and oh, you will be beautiful!”

Angry clouds spat rain at the streets as the boys came out of school. Darrak stood with a gang of other husbands, ready with spears and pomanders, to take Parm and his friends home to safety. As boys and men hurried through puddled streets, women’s heads appeared in doorways calling invitations. Some of the youngsters tried to turn back as if dazed, but the men shoved them into line and kept them moving.

“She came again last night,” said Parm’s friend, Rolfop. Darrak could hear the longing and fear in his voice.

“She came to me too,” said Parm. The rain had soaked the boys through to the bone. Darrak hoped it would rob last night’s memories of any heat.

“I tried to go to her,” Rolfop continued. He lifted up a scab-encrusted wrist for inspection, “But the chain held.”

“He should get that wrist bandaged,” thought Darrak. But it wasn’t his place to say so aloud. Besides, Rolfop’s mother could no more afford new linen than Parm’s could new shoes for her remaining child. The war had raised taxes and stolen all husbands involved in non-essential activities. It had forced many women to pay the City to escort their children to school.

Darrak thought of his wife, the Matron, and how she’d allowed him to come home from the war in spite of his missing limb. Darrak was determined to be more than just another mouth to feed. He swore to see his son make it to the Change and become as lovely and important a woman as his mother. But the sight of a lithe female form nearby — all breasts and skin pearly with rain — stopped these thoughts in their tracks... He whirled in time to see Parm trotting off in the wrong direction.

“Back in line, you!” He whipped the spear around to catch the boy on the shoulder.

“You might need a chain of your own, Parm,” said Rolfop fondling his wrist.

The boys' homes emerged from the drizzle one by one. Soon, only four husbands stood guard over the three youngsters who lived furthest from the school — Parm, Rolfop and Eglin. By now, even the men were exhausted with tension, for while the women they'd passed were only interested in boys, the adults were far from immune and had to press pomanders soaked in male sweat to their faces. Some of them directed jealous glances at the boys and the slaps they doled out hurt more than necessary.

The group soon came to Eglin's house, hunkered down at the bottom of a hill where other buildings clustered around it like pups on a she-dog.

"Perfect place for a snatch," spat one of the men. He was younger than the rest and still bitter at his failure to reach the Change.

"Matron's Council should make the City Husbands help us," said another man with such thin eye ridges he was constantly forced to wipe rain away from his face. Nobody answered. Men who hadn't had the decency to kill themselves when their wives died became City Husbands. They belonged to the community and kept its laws with brutal enthusiasm. Darrak would never trust them with his son.

He moved closer to Parm as the little group jogged down the hill towards Eglin's house. A commotion awaited them. Eglin's mother was weeping loudly while two of her husbands on leave from the war stood around in confusion. Chained he-dogs growled and strained in the garden behind them.

"My boy!" cried the tall woman, looking up, "My boy! You're safe! It was a lie!"

Her husbands raised a cheer, clapping each other on the back, pounding spear shafts against the wet earth.

"Nothing wrong with your boy—" began a puzzled Darrak as the woman pushed through the others towards her son. But she ignored Eglin completely. Striking like a snake, she grabbed Darrak's son, Parm, by the hand while her husbands plowed into the exhausted guards and barged open an escape route for her.

"Parm!" cried Darrak. His spear was taken from him in the fray, but he managed to leap and land with all his weight against the woman throwing both her and his son to the ground. She recovered her feet quickly even as Rolfop stepped forward to help Parm to his feet.

"Get back, you fool!" shouted Darrak, his heart hammering with fear. Too late.

The woman grabbed Rolfop by his scabby wrist and pulled him as far as her own property. She dragged her victim into the garden around her house while her husbands protected her retreat with lowered spears. Her son, Eglin, could only look on in shock.

Darrak had saved his own boy, but knew that his efforts had cost Rolfop, his future. "We too have spears," he said desperately. But she stood on her property and could laugh at his threats. One of her husbands unchained the he-dogs. They'd been trained to treat the men of the house as their pack and to protect Eglin's mother as their mate. They snarled and snapped at the strangers.

The tall woman held Rolfop close. His nose lay level with her upper breasts, one cheek pressed against them. His eyes had turned glassy beneath their ridges and the gray of his skin had deepened in color. He shivered all over.

"You must surrender the boy you have kidnapped," said Darrak, "The courts could have you flayed for such a crime."

"But I haven't kidnapped anybody," she protested with a laugh. She looked magnificent. She was not as beautiful as Cyreen who came nightly to tempt Parm, but her body curved sweetly. Her scent floated through the rain to affect even the older men so that they were forced to breathe deeply through their pomanders.

"This boy," she said, "this... this man, wishes to be my husband. Do you not?"

Rolfop blinked slowly, unsure of what was being asked of him.

"You want to stay here and lie with me, pet? You want me to take you in my arms? Take you downstairs?"

His shivers grew more violent.

"Come back, boy," said Darrak, "It's not too late until you sleep with her. Do you want to spend your life as a man? It'll be the war for you for sure." He waved the stump of his left arm, his tone bitter, "You want this to happen to you?"

Rolfop spoke in a thick voice: "I want to stay."

And that was that. The next time Darrak saw him, he was just a man, waiting to pick Eglin up from school with the others.

Darrak spent longer raking up the grass than a normal man would have. He remembered planting it the year before with his fellow husbands. Later, — just when the first green shoots arrived and it turned into the pleasing carpet of summer picnics, — war had arrived.

The stalks were red now. Darrak swept them into a corner where he might collect the seeds for next year's planting. He'd be on his own this time. Two of his brother husbands had been killed trying to kidnap boys from a neighboring city, while the others were either on the front lines or tilling public fields for supplies.

The great roundhouse looked sad. He remembered when all three floors had been filled with the laughter of boys. The Matron had borne ten children by her husbands, but they'd been captured one by one, until only the son she'd had with Darrak remained. Parm was the last chance of a once great family to produce an heir. Other important families had failed to do so and their houses lay empty, gates swinging in the wind, grass blowing where it would.

Darrak began piling the stalks into a basket, "I'll protect you, son," he muttered, "I'll see you make the Change."

He spent an hour shucking spare seed from the red, prickly grass into a basket. Poor eating, but times grew hard. When the grass cut his hand he watched his blood disappear into the red husks.

A movement by the gate snapped him from his reverie. A thin man stood outside, one hand clenched, the other leaning on the fence near a basket of grass that Darrak had yet to shuck.

"May the Goddess bear your child, Darrak," said the man.

Darrak squinted, unsure how this man, whose very limbs shook, knew him. "Armon?" he said, at last.

Armon bowed his head revealing a scar on his scalp where a spear had nearly finished him. Darrak went to the man and they clenched fists as only soldiers or brother husbands could.

"Your matron..." Darrak asked.

Armon shook his head and Darrak knew then, that broken in the war, Armon had been thrown out. The man shook so much that Darrak doubted even the city husbands would take him now. "I live under a bridge," Armon confirmed, "I should die but, that monster Cyreen took my child and I won't rest until I... I—"

"Don't say it!" said Darrak, scanning the streets, "Why monster? Why do you say that?"

"She has twenty husbands," said Armon, "and her allure never weakens!"

Darrak blinked. "Of course, it weakens. Each husband will give her children, and each child weakens the allure. She is fertile, that's all."

Armon appeared to be struggling with some awful thought. Then he sagged. "I am so hungry," he said.

"Sorry, brother," said Darrak, "times are hard and my Matron permits no charities. But I will go behind the house and fetch you water." He took his time finding the cup and working the pump behind the house.

"I'm on my way back!" he shouted.

By the time he'd reached the fence, several handfuls of unshucked grass had disappeared from the basket, but Darrak said nothing. Armon didn't even pretend to drink the water. "You're a good man, Darrak," he said. The visitor held out his hand. Darrak put down the cup and clasped it. He felt something sharp cut his palm and he thought it a piece of grass.

"She made me do this, brother," whispered Armon. His face had grown suddenly large and his voice sounded as though it came through a tunnel. "I always knew she was a monster. Nobody's ever seen her children. Nobody. Oh, Darrak, forgive me. I'd have starved otherwise."

"Forgive what?" asked Darrak. Then he fell over. This didn't alarm him. He kept thinking: "No children! How, Cyreen, how?" He imagined her scent, her lovely gaze upon him. "Where are your boys?" he asked her. He could almost hear her laughing in reply.

Strange dreams ended in sudden pain. The first blows fell on his left hip and the stump of his missing arm. "My son! Get up you sack of filth! They've taken my son!"

His eyes opened to blurry torchlight. Then a sandal buckle scraped his cheek and a tooth splintered. Darrak cried out, tried to jump up and cover his face. The Matron must have come back from Council during the night. Her voice whipped him with a fury equal to her fists.

"Find my son and don't come back here without him!"

"When—", he managed to ask.

“Now,” she screamed, voice hoarse, “just now! I saw Cyreen slip away with her husbands. Who else could it be? Who else? She locked you into your shed and you slept right through it!”

“Drugged!” he thought, remembering the loss of consciousness after a jab to the palm of his hand. He squeezed past the distraught woman, careful not to touch her elderly frame. He ran through the gate and looked up and down the street but if Parm’s abductors had carried torches there was no sign of them now.

“Where does she live?” he asked The Matron.

“How should I know?” she hissed, “The city has eight hundred houses. Nearby, I would imagine. Ask! Find him!”

Darrak felt tears coming to his own eyes. He turned and turned uselessly, rubbing at his stump and grieving for his son’s ruined future.

“Goddess, oh Goddess, how will I find my boy?” As if in answer, the wind carried dried husks of grass to brush against his ankles. Armon! The old soldier had mentioned living beneath a bridge like the troll-lady of legend. Darrak knew of only one big enough to shelter a grown man. He left the matron in his wake and ran as he’d run in the war when great rocks burst nearby with a hatchet rain of shards. Darrak planned to fall on Armon like such a rock, but when he reached the bridge he found the soldier curled in sleep around some lost boy’s cloak and Darrak knew he couldn’t hurt the man.

“You’re too late,” said Armon when he woke, “he’s probably on her property by now.”

“Where is her property?”

“You can’t go there!” Armon whimpered, “She’d be within her rights to have you killed.”

“Tell me!”

Armon told him and Darrak ran on with the soldier’s pleas for forgiveness evaporating behind him.

He arrived outside an enormous, new house just as Cyreen lead his boy inside. A dozen heartbeats earlier and he might have got there in time to be speared in the streets by her husbands. His eyesight blurred with tears, but he pushed them back and forced a warrior’s grin onto his face instead. “It’s never too late to be killed!” he whispered. But he couldn’t wish the belly fear away. He’d run away in his first real battle and had lost his arm hiding in a ditch. Already he could feel the rope

Cyreen's husbands would put around his neck when they caught him on her property.

So he lingered in the shadows with some foraging he-rats, his palm flat against a wall, as though ready to push him forward into the attack. He watched four husbands retreat into a shed, grumbling in hushed voices. None so much as glanced at the upper stories of the house where their boys must surely live. No light shone there, no laughter escaped. Had all her sons been captured?

"I could look," thought Darrak, "I'm dead anyway." But still he hesitated.

Darrak remembered his own wedding night with great clarity. He'd been caught away from home stupidly after a fight with his mother. The Matron, wasn't even looking for a husband that day, as she told him. She'd birthed many sons already and her attraction had diminished to a point where she had to be practically sitting on a boy to snare him. Darrak had obliged by running into her on his way home. Back at the house she'd had to get the other men to hold him while she bathed — for her allure wore off as soon as she left the room. He'd fought the older men, screaming for his mother all through her hours of ceremonial bathing. He'd changed his tune quick enough when the matron came back and smoothed the sweat away from his eye ridges...

A man left the shed to pee in a corner of the garden and Darrak suddenly realized that if he came back here in a few weeks, he could watch Parm pissing his own life away, guarding Cyreen's gate until she sent him to the war. Now the tears came. Darrak left the shadows and ran to the back of the house. He squeezed over the fence and sidled around the perimeter until he reached the front door. Darrak heard no alarms. He wondered how Cyreen could possess so many husbands and yet be so arrogant as to post no guards. It was almost as if they had no fear of a drugged, one armed coward locked in a shed two miles away. Then his fear returned. He didn't want to be here. Everything was happening too fast – his heartbeat, his breathing, his approaching death. He fell to his knees in front of the door and pressed his damp forehead against cold wood. He could always go and join Armon under the bridge.

The weight of his body pushed open the door. It had been oiled by an army of husbands and failed to creak. No he-dogs waited behind it, nor guards of any kind.

Darrak tiptoed inside. It was only the third house whose interior he'd ever seen. He found himself in a hallway where torches revealed

mirrors, tapestries and the expected staircase leading down to the wedding rooms and bathhouse. From upstairs, only silence. But he knew she wasn't up there with her children. Her scent lingered like a beautiful cloud trailing down the stairs and he followed it as quietly as he could.

To the right, he heard the sounds of water pouring into a bath. Men were speaking over it although he couldn't make out the words.

From the left, the soothing voice of a woman: "I won't keep you long, sweet one. It is a fraction of the night before we lie together, no more." The answer was a low protest to which she responded with a laugh.

"Soon!"

Darrak almost forgot to duck under the stairs when he heard Cyreen's footsteps approach and had to fight against an urge to crawl out of hiding to throw himself at her feet. He tried not to look as she passed, naked, but his eyes trailed after her and caught on a pale, puckered line running down the side of her stomach. "A scar?" he wondered. If so, he'd never seen its like before. Nor had he noticed it when she came to his house to taunt Parm. How could she have kept such a thing hidden?

When Cyreen had gone, he forgot the scar and ran down the way from which she'd come and into the wedding room. It was a mess. Cushions, towels and sheets lay higgledy-piggledy about the room, submerging overturned chairs and empty plates. "A lair," thought Darrak. He had no other word for it. Lanterns burned here rather than torches, but even so, every flicker caused a mad dance of shadow and hid Parm from view for several anxious heartbeats.

The boy was lying naked on a pallet in the corner. Perspiration beaded his brow and his eyes fluttered beneath closed lids.

"Wake up, son," whispered Darrak, crouching down beside him, "Time to be off."

"Not leaving," said the boy. Darrak took his eyes off his son for a moment as he tried to figure out a quiet way to get him moving. As his gaze wandered over the chaos, he spotted something strange and shiny among the shadows. It was a small ceramic container full of dull grey paste: skin colored. Darrak forgot his terror long enough to wonder what Cyreen, or any woman could want with such a thing. Maybe she used it to rub over the scar?

That gave him an idea.

Using a foot and his only hand, he tore away a piece of sheet. Then, he rubbed it against his sweaty armpits. He sat on his son, pinning the boy's

arms with his knees. The boy made no resistance until the reeking cloth was shoved over his nose and mouth. He bucked and tried to cry out, but Darrak held firm until Parm opened his eyes, blinking up at his father.

“Better?” asked Darrak.

A nod. Darrak relinquished his hold. “Keep that over your nose,” he told the boy, “we’ve got to get you out of here before she comes back.”

Parm didn’t answer. Children didn’t like speaking to their male parent. They even avoided the word “father” where possible. Darrak didn’t mind – he’d been no different himself as a boy.

They stood up and clambered back towards the stairs.

Splashing sounds reached their ears, and words too, as Cyreen sang to herself, her voice innocent. Both men stood stock still listening to her. She was so near that a dozen footsteps would have brought them within sight of her loveliness. Half a dozen more and they could have shared her bath.

With a shock, Darrak realized that the two of them had already moved to the bathhouse entrance and his son, sweaty cloth fallen from his face, was reaching for the door.

He grabbed the boy and wrenched him away, grateful that Cyreen’s own voice covered the sound of their footsteps. He made his son put the smelly cloth back over his face and together they climbed the stairs.

At the top, a pair of husbands, one burly, one a bag of bones, stood with their backs to them: probably the same two who had filled their wife’s bath returned now to guard the door against just such intruders as Darrak. He grinned to himself. At last, with nowhere to run, he would be a warrior.

The stairs did not squeak as Darrak stepped up behind the chatting husbands. He grabbed the larger man by one ankle and yanked with all his might. His victim came crashing down onto the steps to lie stunned between Darrak and Parm.

Downstairs the singing stopped.

The two visitors ran for the door, but the skinnier of the two husbands blocked their way with a dagger.

“We’ll string you up for this, half-man!”

“There are two of us,” said Parm, surprising and delighting his father. As if they’d trained together for years, Darrak and Parm moved to circle

the skinny husband. He lunged at Darrak who leapt backwards to avoid the blade. The bigger man lying on the stairs, began to stir and Cyreen's voice floated up to them, "What's going on up there?"

Parm pulled a tapestry from the wall and flung it over the head of his father's assailant. With his attacker helpless, Darrak spun just as he'd been taught and shot his right foot into the man's kneecap. Something snapped.

Wet footsteps began climbing the stairs.

"Out!" hissed Darrak, "Out!"

They kicked open the door and ran into the garden. A husband came sleepily from the shed, wondering perhaps if he'd heard a commotion or only dreamed it. He carried no weapon so the two of them barreled into him, knocking him over. They both fell too, onto the man, pinning him with their combined weight.

The gate lay undefended before them.

But as they climbed to their feet, Cyreen's voice called out, "Parm! Parm! Please stay!"

"Don't look back!" cried Darrak. But Parm had already turned his head. Darrak followed his gaze and saw her, standing in the doorway, lit half and half by moonbeam and torchlight. Wholly conscious of her naked beauty, still dripping from the bath, she walked towards father and son.

They wrenched their eyes away but three more of Cyreen's husbands had come out of the shed to bar the gate with leveled spears. Another pair ran out of the house, one of them the burly man Darrak had yanked onto the stairs.

"Leave my son alone!" shouted Darrak.

Cyreen ignored him. The moons picked out the scar on her side and Darrak knew then with certainty she must have been covering it before. A thought, even more horrible than his approaching death crossed his mind, an appalling possibility. Cyreen stepped over dying grass towards his boy, but Darrak couldn't keep his eye from that scar and what it must represent.

"You want to stay with me, Parm?" asked the monster. The boy could only nod. It, Cyreen, smiled and stroked his heaving chest. "I'll have to go and finish my bath first, as well as the other rituals."

The man whom Darrak had pulled down the stairs approached with a knife. "Allow me to kill the half-man, Matron."

Darrak almost fainted at the sight of the wicked blade, but he held his feet and even his voice seemed steady. "I'm not the half-man, here," he said, "I have a child." A look of anguish passed over the man's face, over the faces of all the husbands present.

"You can kill me," said Darrak, "but there'll still be no boys in your house, nor space for your seed in that monster's womb. For she has none. She ate your lives and now you are nothing."

Cyreen pushed the dazed Parm away from her. "Kill the half-man!" she shouted at her weeping husbands, "Kill him now!" Perhaps if she hadn't been bathing for the ceremony, if her allure had been at its usual virginal strength, the outcome might have been different. Darrak removed the knife from the limp fingers of the man in front of him. He took a solid step forward and made a new scar in Cyreen's empty belly.

Her eye-ridges arched, and a little gasp escaped from her mouth. "An accident," she whispered, though whether she referred to the first scar or the second, Darrak couldn't tell. Her blood washed warm over his hand and he thought, "I've killed a woman." His actions were almost as unheard of as Cyreen's. But afterwards, when she lay on the grass, her blood mingling with it, the husbands made no effort to stop him leaving with his son.

Halfway home it started raining. "Parm," he said. His boy didn't look up, but leaned heavily on his father as though woozy. "The city husbands won't believe my story about Cyreen. Who would? Who'd want to? Are you listening, Parm? I can't protect you any more..." But even as he spoke, he saw that as often happened, the shock of the evening's events had triggered something in his son; something as yet invisible, but irreversible. A sudden rush of joy filled him, happiness as he hadn't known it since boyhood.

Parm left him at the garden gate — of course! A used up husband and criminal like Darrak wouldn't be welcome there now. She slipped through the front door without a backwards glance.

“Oh,” Darrak whispered to his departing child, “Oh! You will be so beautiful!” Then he turned his back on the house and headed for the bridge.

[The End.]



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