

## CHAPTER ONE

Warm rays of late-afternoon sunlight flashed across polished steel. Four dancing swords reflected bright spots onto the grass beneath four duellists in white padded doublets and steel mesh masks. They darted and spun around each other, tearing up the lush green lawn at their feet. Though none wore colours, their allegiances were apparent; three duellists had united against their fourth counterpart. Despite being outnumbered, the fourth man gracefully dodged every thrust and parried each cut, toying with his opponents until his interest waned.

The lone duellist's blunt longsword became a silver blur in the sunlight. He disarmed one opponent and left the other two clutching bruised limbs. Then, he flourished his weapon and bowed gracefully.

One of the losers tore off his protective headgear and looked around until he spotted his lost sword sticking point-first into a flowerbed some distance away. His black hair was tangled and matted from sweating beneath a helmet. "I thought we had you that time," he said between breaths.

"It wasn't even close, Harold," said Trent, cautiously rolling his shoulder after being struck. He, too, had removed his helmet, revealing a young face with a moustache groomed in the style typical of Bremerish army officers.

"Well, it *should* have been close, Trent," Harold argued. "And you call yourself a soldier."

"Come on, guys," said Simeon, the third loser. "Calling yourselves fools for losing a duel against Ewan is like calling a rock stupid for losing a debate. We couldn't possibly win; Ewan's a sixteenth-century Sir Beckwith."

They looked to the final swordsman, who had not broken a sweat despite their rigorous duel. Ewan swiped a hand through his auburn hair to smooth it, then straightened his elegant beard and moustache. “You flatter me, Simeon,” he said.

“Hardly,” Harold argued. “Have you ever lost a duel?”

“Well, no,” Ewan replied. “But that doesn't mean I'm undefeatable.”

He walked over to Harold's training sword, plucked it from the ground, and tossed it back to his friend.

“Again?” Harold asked wearily.

“No. I could use a cup of tea. Care to join me?”

Simeon tucked his helmet and training sword beneath one arm and tugged off his gloves.

“I'd love to, but I'm avoiding my duties already, so I should get going.”

“You aren't usually so eager to return to your ledgers,” Harold noticed. “Is there a new tax law I'm not aware of?”

Simeon shook his head, his black, curly hair bouncing around his pale face. “Nah, just a missing merchant ship. It was supposed to go south around the Broken Horn but never reached Auscany.”

“Ooh...maybe the Wraith King's undead army got it,” Harold suggested in a spooky voice.

“More likely, it sank in a storm,” Trent said. “The Horn gets storms this time of year, and Elaria has some unforgiving shores.”

“No, that's the thing,” Simeon argued. “One of our captains saw it at sea after it was reported missing. Of course, the moron didn't think to hail the ship, so it disappeared again. Now I've got the high-ups of the Greater Bremerish Trading Company coming after me for insurance

fraud.”

“You'd better go, then,” Ewan said. “Thanks for coming, Simeon.”

He chuckled and walked away, saying, “It's always a pleasure being your practice dummy.”

Ewan, Trent, and Harold waved their friend off as he wandered through the garden to a waiting carriage. Then, Ewan spread his arms welcomingly to his two remaining friends.

“Tea?” he asked.

Trent laughed, still massaging his injured shoulder. “I'd ask for something stronger if I didn't also need to leave.”

“You, too?” Harold asked, surprised.

Trent stretched one last time, then squared his posture. “The navy's top brass is fussing about something that happened in Auscany. I can't say the details, mostly because I don't know much. Regardless, I need to attend a meeting. Lord Kitwell has summoned the Marine Corps officers to Windham. I'd rather not be late.”

Trent shook Ewan's hand and embraced Harold with a pat on the back. Then, carrying his fencing gear, he backed toward the path out of the yard. As he did, he pointed at Ewan.

“Next time the Queen asks you to be part of her personal guard, you'd better not refuse. I want to see how good your sword is against those gents.”

“We'll see,” Ewan called back. “But I think Her Majesty might have given up on me.”

Trent jabbed his finger at him again to re-emphasise his point. Then, he rounded a tall hedge and was gone.

“You should listen to him,” Harold said. “Being a member of the Royal Guard is a high honour, and it'll be better than conscription. Trust me, I know from experience.”

Ewan scrunched his nose in displeasure. “Honour at the cost of stiff legs, a sore back, and partial insanity. I’ll pass again if I have to.”

Harold looked at him sceptically but said nothing further as he stuffed his padded gauntlets into his helmet.

“You’re not leaving, too, are you?” Ewan asked.

“I promised my wife some quiet time this evening,” Harold replied. “Junior’s been driving her mad this week. He’s teething, I think. We’re letting the nanny handle him tonight while we picnic by the lake.”

Ewan crossed his arms in exaggerated disappointment. “Fine then. More tea for me.”

Harold chuckled. “You’re lucky you can’t get drunk on that stuff.”

“That all depends on what you put in your tea, Harry. It’s a flexible drink, you know.”

“Perhaps. Maybe I’ll stop by later and see what Annabelle can brew me. In the meantime, you should consider the Queen’s guard more seriously. You’ve dodged your responsibility to the Crown long enough, I think. Doing so for longer will get dangerous, especially with the current political climate. The Queen expects contributions from everyone, even us minor lords.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Sure you will,” he said, unconvinced.

“Well...*maybe* I will.”

Harold smiled at his old friend’s predictability. Then, he reached out and shook Ewan’s hand. “Take care of yourself.”

“And you, Harry.”

Harold left promptly, heading for his carriage on a lane at the garden’s edge. Meanwhile, Ewan mindlessly twirled his training sword and pivoted to face his two-storey manor house. Its

yellowed stone walls gleamed gold in the sunlight, and the windowpanes were bright silver mirrors. Seeing the manor rising from its lush gardens, Ewan paused to recognise the beautiful weather they were having. It was late July, and Bremeron was experiencing the height of its three annual months of proper sunshine.

However, even the lovely weather became dull when he caught sight of a young woman standing outside the manor. Annabelle was the most beautiful woman he had ever met. Her golden hair outshone the carved stones of his manor, and her perfect feminine form would put a marble statue to shame. Most striking were her sapphire blue eyes, which were easy to get lost in, even at a distance.

Annabelle smiled when she noticed him staring at her.

“Tea time?” she asked, holding up a wooden tray bearing a tea set. Ewan had not even noticed that she was holding his favourite drink.

He climbed a small set of stone stairs to stand next to her. The scent of tea wafted in the air around them, but it was not strong enough to block the smell of rose petals emanating from Annabelle’s hair.

“How long were you watching?” Ewan asked.

“I saw your last fight,” she replied. “Then I went and got your tea.”

Ewan raised an eyebrow at the tone of her voice.

“But I might have been watching before that,” she added. “I came and went.”

He chuckled, pouring himself a cup of tea. He took a sip and sighed in satisfaction.

Annabelle had a knack for getting tea just right.

“Dinner is ready to be served,” she said.

Ewan lowered his cup, surprised. “Dinner? Already?” He looked up at the sky, only now

noticing that the sun was on its descent. “It appears I lost track of time. What did the chef cook up?”

“Roasted duck.”

Ewan pursed his lips as he considered the response. He ran his hand along Annabelle's arm. “I think I'd prefer something else.”

She grinned. “I'm your humble maidservant. Ask, and I must deliver.”

“Do I need to ask, Anna?”

“Not really.”

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Ewan and Annabelle shared a plate of roast duck while lying in bed beside each other. The meal had gone cold by the time the lovers ate it. Neither of them cared, as both were more interested in each other. When they finished, Annabelle set the empty plate on a side table and snuggled against Ewan's side with her head on his shoulder.

“You should listen to your friends,” she told him.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don't mean literally,” she explained. “Guarding a door sounds boring.”

“What do you mean, then?”

She sighed. “I don't know. I just think you should go out and do something. Preferably something that involves bringing me with you. Wouldn't it be great to go out and explore the world a little bit?”

“It sounds great, but it's far more work than you realise, my dear. Travelling anywhere

means squeezing into a carriage or getting a sore rump after hours of riding. Leaving Bremeron is a whole new problem. That requires taking a ship. You know what happens to me at sea.”

“Yeah, but surely a little seasickness is worth the adventure surrounding it, right?”

He paused for a moment. “Maybe. But not when one is happy already. I have everything I need right here and plenty of things to do. No travelling needed.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close with a light squeeze. She sighed and stared blankly ahead, unbearably silent. Ewan had meant his statement as an expression of love, to say she was all he needed. Now, he realised it sounded better in his head.

“Fine,” he said. Annabelle looked at him, her eyes bright with hopeful surprise. “The Cyrish Swordplay Tourney is happening next month. Perhaps we can attend. You can come, of course. I’ll need someone to clean up after me when I get seasick.”

“Are you serious?”

He exaggerated a thoughtful expression, stroking his beard as he pretended to reconsider. “Well, I don’t particularly like boat rides. And professional duellists tend to be toxic, self-absorbed bastards, so...”

“You are a professional duellist,” Annabelle laughed.

He poked her in the shoulder. “A decidedly unprofessional professional without a profession. But yes, I am being serious.”

She grinned. “It’ll be scandalous when Lord Ewan of Cantershire brings a serving girl to the victor’s banquet.” She brought her lips close to his ear. “Speaking of scandalous...”

They embraced and kissed as they once again slipped beneath the sheets.

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Ewan's brow furrowed as he reclined at his dining room table, his cup of steaming tea neglected beside him as he read the weekly newspaper.

Six days ago, the Auscan fishing hamlet of Bad Glifstein had been bathed in blood as each of its residents was slaughtered overnight. Curiously, their corpses were the only things missing. There had been no looting, vandalism, or flags planted on Auscan soil. Since Bad Glifstein's entire population had disappeared, there were no reliable witnesses and, crucially, no one to identify the attackers.

Reports of what happened became increasingly wild the farther away one heard the tale. Neighbouring settlements told stories of pirates. Others suggested demons had attacked from the sea. Farther from the coast, rumours of plague, sea monsters, and men from the stars jumped from village to village.

Whatever the truth was, the headline read **AUSCAN NAVY SAILS AGAINST CASTELON** in big, bold letters. Ewan suspected Auscan authorities had already decided who was responsible long before the raid even happened.

Ewan stopped reading the article halfway through. The story only accounted for a third of the page; the rest explained how Castelon's supposed attack on Auscany related to twenty-year-old colonial competitions. Sighing, Ewan tossed the newspaper across his dining table. He waited for the paper to stop fluttering, then sipped his tea while listening to the rhythmic ticking of a grandfather clock in the hall.

"Oh, Castelon, Auscany, Adiria, and Coradia..." he muttered, "why can't you all stop bickering and have a cup of tea?" Ewan sipped more tea. "Yes. Tea solves everything."

He closed his eyes, wishing that doing so would make the world cease to exist. It was



depressingly full of trouble, and everyone seemed to expect Ewan to treat that trouble like it was his problem, no matter how little he had—or wanted—to do with it. “As if I don't have enough going on already...”

“Did you say something?” Annabelle asked as she entered the dining room.

Ewan opened his eyes. “Nothing important, my dear,”

Annabelle frowned. “I might need to call the priest if you start talking to yourself too often.”

He shrugged.

Annabelle put her hands on her hips. “I know you're uncertain about travelling, but I can tell that something else is bothering you.” She stepped farther into the room. “What is it?”

Ewan wrote a mental list of troubles. Travelling was one of them, but Annabelle had read him like a book and determined it was a significantly lower concern than other things. *Politics* was the first item, and its first subheading described Harold's warning that the Queen would come knocking to demand service from him. It had been on his mind for a while, but the attack on Auscany turned it into a real problem. With international tensions building toward war, the Queen's soldiers could come for him any minute and force his well-known fencing skills into armed service.

Ewan wanted to tell Annabelle they might be in for a drastic lifestyle change, whether he joined the army, the Royal Guard, or something else. He wanted to explain how a war would seriously decrease their income, affecting their quality of life. He also wanted to tell her they might have difficulty seeing each other if he had to move at the Queen's request.

Instead of saying any of this, Ewan sighed and gestured vaguely toward the newspaper at the far end of the table. Annabelle turned her attention to it.

“How is packing going?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Fine. I only own three dresses, so my stuff was easy to pack,” Annabelle replied as she read the newspaper. “Your things are far more troublesome. They seem to *unpack* themselves regularly.” She glared at Ewan. “You wouldn't have anything to do with that, would you?”

Ewan held back a smile in the face of Annabelle's exaggerated frustration. “I need something to wear while we're still here. You're the one who started packing away everything I own a week before we actually need to leave.”

She sighed. “You're right. Sorry. I've never done this before...” Her frown became a grin. “This is going to be so much fun!”

Her contagious excitement made Ewan smile.

Three loud bangs at the front door promptly wiped it away.

Annabelle looked over her shoulder, then back at him. “Were you expecting someone?”

“No. Darling, please tell whoever is knocking to go away. It's tea time.”

She smirked. “It's *always* tea time for you.”

“Indeed it is. Come and join me when you're back. I'm giving you the day off.”

Annabelle strode away with a spring in her step, and Ewan's eyes followed her swaying hips until she left his sight. He returned his attention to his tea and biscuits while awaiting her return.

“Ewan?”

He started at Annabelle's voice and brushed crumbs from his beard. Looking up, Ewan found her standing in the doorway, her happy glow overtaken by concern.

He rose from his seat. “What happened?”

“Lord Harold is here. You should go to the door.”

Ewan agreed. He walked briskly past her on his way out of the dining room and used the length of the hallway to straighten his doublet. He was presentable by the time he reached the anteroom.

Lord Harold of Dartbury stood in the centre of the room, wearing his newly-acquired military uniform. His red doublet was stretched tight across his stomach, which bulged more than the average soldier's. He had no medals, but a white sash across his body, embroidered with oak leaves and a lion's face, denoted him as a Major in Bremeron's army. A plain side sword hung at his hip, and his brown, knee-high boots were clean and polished. Harold was not a military type, and Ewan would have teased him about the uniform were it not for his friend's grim expression.

“Harold? What is it?”

Harold stepped forward, compelled by the urgency of his visit. “Ewan,” he said in a hushed voice, “we have a problem.”