

Gift for the Grass

The air is a wall of thick, deep, suffocating stench of iron and rot. The ground, trodden grass once lively and stretching, is slicked down with the weight of wealthy blood and corpses. My sword thrashes against soft flesh, thoughtless calculation at the points where their lives hang most dangerously. I can feel the warmth of their ichor on my cheeks, flush with the rushing torrent that comes with battle. Over the screams of violent, incoherent soldiers, and the echoing moans of the wounded and dying, I can hear her shout commands to her men.

Between my metal-clad thighs are the fast and unbridled heaves of the stallion of which I have raised since his mother had grown ill and died. His heartbeat, a powerful thrum, grounds me in the chaos of the fourth battle since Monday. I am vaguely aware of the throbbing pain in my arm, a slash deep and gorily streaming red heat. My eyes, despite themselves, search for the only woman with a golden, rose crest on her helmet.

We have only spoken once, many years ago when my bones did not creak from decades of map-making and war. A peace treaty with her kingdom- an effort to stop the constant teetering on the edge of peace and devastation. She stood, then, next to her father, the King of Marete, her golden crest of rose pinned primly to her Indigo velvet cape. Her eyes were bright, an all-consuming kaleidoscope of emerald and mercury. What was I to do except stare? Her face entrapped me in a cage I have never quite escaped from.

On the field year's later, when she and I had sent our respective fathers over the river, and taken their crowns upon our own heads, I would see her date-colored hair dyed black from the blood of both my men and hers. My thoughts crossed of her life then, raised in the distant and rich coastline of Merete, air always dancing with the rich salt of the sea.

She has a wife, I know of such. It is said that she is the most beautiful woman in Gallium, long black carpets of hair spread evenly over her petite shoulders. How many times, I think now, yanking my sword from the broad chest of a faceless soldier, had she made love to her?

Lain her on their bed, Surely soft and feather stuffed. Kissed those shoulders and tangled that hair with her calloused, eager fingers. Had she carried her to their chamber? Cradling her in her arms built for battle as though she were a daisy to be preserved, and admired. Envy thrashed through me, more powerful even than the battle-charged blood in my ears. My eyes become infinitely more eager than a moment ago to find her, and lay eyes on her again.

Through the endless sea of heads, I finally see her. I can't make out the expression on her face, but she fights with focused aggression, toned and exposed bicep throwing spears with trained perfection. Her hair is frizzy and out of place, grey now and struggling out of her gleaming silver helmet. My urge to race to her is unstoppable. I kick my stallions' hide, thick and rock-like.

I hear a soldier call my name, a plea to return to the men and to lead them, but I am dizzy with my own thoughts.

Get to her.

The soldier calls again, telling me of our destined victory, my unexplained run into the enemy. He is right, I am being foolish, but nothing will stop me from this, even If I die for it.

I am close now, I can see her eyes! Beautiful and rapid, a vibrancy I have seen nowhere else in my life. She catches a glimpse of me when I come close, flickering up and down in anger at my form, tall and slim on my steed.

"Do you come for a duel?" The heavily accented words, thick from her full lips.

"Yes," I say because I will never be able to say no to her. With this, the men of both colors make a field for us, the gladiators.

I do not want to kill her, but she must die. She is a distraction, a burden of which I carry and cannot bear for another night that the sun crests the treetops.

She charges her pearl white horse towards me, and I prepare myself for a shift. When she is a pace from me, I yank my stallion out of her sword's reach and she charges harmlessly by. I feel a hot breath from her mouth on my neck and I want to reach for her, hold her on this field and devour everything she consists of.

"Forget the horses, are you not noble enough to fight me by hand?" I ask as a foggy-brained attempt to graze my fingertips over her gleaming skin.

The smirk she flashes me feels like a rush of something sacred. Something to be worshipped on the days of the new seasons with honeyed wine and the heads of cattle. She could be the daughter of a goddess, I realize. Her movements are too graceful to be mortal. I picture her on Olympus, dressed only in a white toga and golden laurel, sipping the god's nectar through slightly parted lips puckered pink from its sweetness.

When our swords meet, and I can hear her breaths, labored and strained, I resist the overwhelming need to kneel and worship her, kiss her toes surely smelling of sage and cherry blossom oils so plentiful in her kingdom. It is nearly too much to fight her, be in her presence.

I duck under a blow from above, bending to her swiftness, and strike at the exposed, warm flesh of her knee. She staggers back, eyes flashing with pain as her hot, red, liquid nourishes the dry grass.

How lucky it is, I think, to receive such a gift. She strikes at me again, desperate and stumbling, and I know that I will win.

“Kill me,” she stutters, clawing at her gaping wound, “and our kingdoms will never find peace.”

I laugh at her ignorance, “I will kill you for myself. Your very existence burdens me.”

Her bruised cheek turns into a grimace, perfectly aligned teeth stained pink from gore, “We've met only once!”

“I do not remember,” I lie, but her open mouth spreads even wider. It concerns me how much I like her like this. At the whim of my sword, which I could easily use to cut the tender flesh of her throat.

“How have we ever truly wronged each other?” She asks, and if my head wasn't so full of this foreign and dizzying desire I would have heard the hopefulness in her voice.

“Please.”

I am torn. I cannot deny her, yet she does not know that. She is asking me for mercy as a woman; the beautiful, transcendent woman she is, and not a Queen.

I bring my sword to the place where she would break and hover it there, my arm trembling with the strain of emotion. I would give anything to be able to hate her or to be with her. kiss her until there is no breath in my lungs and we have become indiscernible from each other.

My sword falls to the grass with my knees, and for one, blessing of a moment, she reaches for me, tucking my face, which I only realize now is wet with tears, into her sweaty and blood-soaked shoulder. I squeeze her, dreamlike, and she brushes the stray hair from my forehead. Her touch is warm, and I will never feel anything as wonderful as it again.

I get a flicker of what our lives could have been, hands clasped as children as we play games in the brush of the forest, growing into women together as we dance in wide spectral

halls, stolen kisses on the rocky shoreline of the beach as the sun warms our tanned bodies. She almost sees it too, I can see it in those eyes, and we are clinging to each other as the soldiers bash their swords brutishly together. I want this moment to last forever.

My father taught me once to live in the present, that you cannot in fact freeze time. He had said this, of course, as I kneeled before him on the carpeted mat for peasants in front of his throne. This was how I always addressed him. Lesser. Expendable.

Pain flowers in my abdomen, and for a moment I think it is her cunning, but the horror dawning on her sculpted face reveals her innocence to me. A scream parts from her lips, and I am too weak to kiss them.

I am aware the battle has ceased, her cry and my wound catching the soldiers in their savagery.

“No,” she says, and it hurts more than the overwhelming agony in my chest to see tears in those eyes.

"I will wait for you," I say, and I mean it. She grasps for me, as though to keep me from fading, her grasp and the pain drifting with the man who paddles the raft to the other side.

With the strength of a thousand lions, her hand is a vice in mine long after I have left her.