

We will remember them

They were neither one thing nor another, these travellers who had come seeking shelter. Their appearance showed little sign of riches, yet they bore themselves with the pride of nobility. There was no question but that they were friends, even distant kin, yet they brought more danger to the stead than anything else this season. There was no secrecy here, and yet they did not even give their names, much less their clan or tribe. If he was asked if he had seen certain people, he would be able to say that no-one of that name had been here. If the questioners were to ask by description rather than by name, of a red-haired woman and a certain gem, that would be another matter, but that could not be helped. Brol could never admit to having even seen them, yet they went through the formalities of gifting their hosts as if the world were watching. Rich gifts, too, and welcome ones, yet he watched uneasily, reckoning the size of the debt to be paid that they represented. A cloak brooch for him, charmed to keep the wearer dry, daggers for his sons, a packet of needles for his wife, and one for his daughter, just come into womanhood. And then a frown. "You had another daughter, I thought?"

He clamped down on his feelings, using the wilful numbness that had become all too familiar, showing nothing. "We did. It was a hard winter, and spring came late, bringing fever with it. If the taxes had left us with more..." He shrugged: a man did not rail against the fates. "Hardest on the old, and on the young. The strong survived."

"We each fight this war, in our own way," she said, softly.

At least she realised that – so many warriors did not, sneering at those who fed them, and starved themselves to do so. But the resentment was still there. "The last time you came here, you spoke of the glory for those who fought, of how they might die, but their memory would live on. And indeed, how else can a man be great? But who will remember those who fight the quiet war? Who remembers even the name of a little girl who died because there was no food left for her?"

The warriors shifted uneasily, perhaps not wanting to admit that not only did they not remember, they did not care. She did not. "Alebard. You were not with us when we last visited this place, I believe?"

Not a warrior, the man who stepped forward, and bearded. Brol was struck again by the incongruity: a ragged outlaw who took it for granted that she had a loremaster in her entourage.

"Remember this, then." Her words were only for the man she was instructing, and yet she was addressing all of them.

"Her name was Sakira, and she was six years old. She had brown hair and green eyes. When we came here last year, it was her first time serving important guests, and she was nervous but trying not to show it, because a warrior never admits to being afraid. She wanted to be a Vingan when she grew up, but she was going to use a sword, not a spear, because spears were for cottars, her father used a sword."

Brol was startled into interrupting: shock that his daughter could have so insulted a guest mingled with pride that she thought her father's accomplishments more important than those of any visitor. "She told *you* that?"

"Oh, yes." There was laughter there, a fleeting ripple on the surface of something much deeper. "I don't think the implications occurred to her."

The formality returned, she continued. "Her cousin Jenna was here visiting, and was also serving. Jenna was a little older, but Sakira was the better rider of the two. Jenna lived in Swenstown, and had new hair ribbons from the market there. Sakira had no ribbons, and was firmly of the opinion that a would-be Vingan should have no interest in such things. We discussed the comparative merits of Kheldon and Poljoni saddle design, and the best grip for a shield, before she was called away."

He remembered the next morning, and his daughter's shining eyes, and didn't say it. You gave her five minutes of your time, and she gave you her heart. Was it a fair exchange?

She turned to the rest of the warriors. "Many of you were here, too – can anyone add to that?" Some embarrassed shuffling. They wanted to be able to answer her, but only one could manage it. "Dark-haired kid – was she the one who followed us half-way down the valley when we left?"

She nodded. "That's her."

"She was right about being a good rider, then."

The bearded man bowed and stepped back, and she turned to Brol. "And this is - would have been - for her," she said soberly.

He looked at the little bundle in his hand. "Ribbons? The thing she said she did *not* want?"

"Those were her words, yes. Her meaning was very clear: and ribbons given *by* a Vingan are probably free of any taint to her pride." That hint of laughter again, and again lasting only a moment. "As it is – put them on her grave-marker, perhaps."

He could not let tears show on his face, not here in public. She knew. She really had remembered his daughter, and thought about her. But this was a formal exchange of gifts and promises: he reached for the support of formality, yet knowing again that with this strange duality, this was no place for the normal cautious diplomacy, but rather for honesty.

"So. Shelter for the night you have, and as kin, for such you are, with what meat and salt we have to share. What is that *you* are going to deny wanting, that I will end up giving you before you leave?"

She smiled. "I am not six years old... but true, I did come here to ask more of you than a roof for the night." She met his eyes straight on, no deception there, not between kin, no matter how distant. "I came to ask you for your sons."

He held himself frozen, not allowing himself to feel. "To lead them to fame, and glory, and renown that will last for a hundred years?" And lives that would last a season, perhaps two...

"No. As scouts, and guides, to watch the enemy and report on their movements: and to return to their home at night with no-one knowing that they have acted in any way that would bring danger upon you."

"And no fame."

"They *will* be remembered. I promise you that."