

Songbird in the Kitchen

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Broken Typewriter Press • Cedar Rapids

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Chapter 1

The Opened Cage

The Rat Hunters were a famed band of mercenaries who traveled across the land to eliminate the worst infestations of escaped experiments and dangerous creatures.

—Ralisman Dupren, *The Rise of the Kormar Mercenary Armies*

Karin yawned as she hopped off the back of the wagon. Her breath fogged around her as she limped away, making room for others getting off behind her. Her hip protested her landing, and she rubbed it as she glared around her.

There were four wagons pulled into a circle. Two of the younger Rat Hunters were stacking wood for a long night of fire. A third was using his magic to light the cooking pit. Others were setting up a stall for the paymaster. The foolish hunters who tried to line up were quickly volunteered for duty. The others knew to stay away from the stall until the cash box had been opened.

Roal, one of the senior of hunters, approached Karin with two large steaming mugs. “I could have sworn there were only dicks in the wagon with you.”

She stared at him for a moment, then grabbed one of the mugs. “Dicks?”

It took a moment for the scent of tea to penetrate the fog of waking up and realize he was referencing her sore hip. “You know me, I have no interest in a cock between my legs. No, Maril’s damn boots fell out of the netting, and I was too cold to move. Spent the entire night with those steel toes digging into my hip and my tits crushed against one of the crates.”

Roal patted her shoulder and then grinned. “Want me to rub anything better?”

She looked at him for a long count before giving him a sweet smile. “Not unless I can cut your balls off in trade.”

“I meant your hip.” He didn’t seem perturbed by her threat.

She scratched the dried blood scabbing over a recent burn. “I’d rather find a peach instead of an old man like you. Your hands are too big, and I’d rather have something softer near my privates.”

He smirked.

Peach, it was a sly phrase for the women who were untouched by the brutal life of a mercenary. They were soft, beautiful, and lovely to touch. More importantly, peaches were lovers of women like Karin.

Roal had a fondness for the same type of beauty, though they were called apples if they preferred men over women. They both had bonded over their shared appreciation of the female form and made a point of not competing with each other in the days they had between jobs.

“The city council is going to open the gates after they verify that we aren’t going to bring any weapons inside. Apparently San Graif prides itself in being a just and noble city with a high moral caliber.” Roal rolled his eyes.

She gulped down some of the tea in her mug. As it burned down her throat, she smiled back. Being unarmed

wasn't a concern for her. "So, you're saying those city walls contain a lot of ripe lovelies desperate to have a little fun?"

"By the Divine Couple's blessing, I hope so. It also means if we're going to have fun, we need to stay away from these assholes." He gestured to the rest of the Rat Hunters. "Most of them haven't been home in months. The guards are going to be stuck on them like those damn leeches."

"Which ones? There have been so many."

"The big glowing ones that went for the eyeballs." He barked out a laugh. "Remember when I had to use both hands to get the one out of your gut?"

She shuddered. "Oh, I hate those things. I also hate that you accepted that job."

"That's my talent, Old Lady. I'm always where I need to be."

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Chapter 2

Passing Surprise

Everyone has a touch of magic in their blood, though most are limited to only a single talent or ability.

—*Limitations of the Crystal Techniques*

A night sleeping in a comfortable bed had done wonders to ease Karin's aches but she knew the nightmare would resume as soon as she passed out again. A month of comfort wasn't enough to erase her horrors. To get through the next night, she decided to prepare like she was about to enter a monster's nest and went shopping.

Two hours of cool air, warm sun, and window shopping netted her three bottles of rotgut, a few sets of clean underwear, and a new repair kit for her leather armor.

San Graif was a pretty little town, and she rarely had a chance to stroll along the streets. In a town like this, usually she was crawling through sewers, running down the street toward the fighting, or setting up barricades for the bigger assaults.

She smiled and tried not to think about the nightmares.

Karin came around a corner and spotted a dense crowd in front of a store. Instantly, she grew wary and tightened her grip on her shopping bag.

With a second look, she realized the group wasn't unruly. Almost everyone sat on chairs and benches. A few read books. Others had their faces uplifted and their eyes closed. No one crowded the store entrance and there was a clear path for her to walk through them.

With her muscles tensed, she made her way along the narrow path. She looked curiously at the store as she passed but it was just a bakery and a small restaurant. Nothing looked remarkable about it at all except that it was packed with customers sitting at tables.

Karin slowed with curiosity.

Then she heard the sweetest song drifting through the open door. It was a popular ballad, a lover waiting for her missing knight. But Karin had never heard it sung with such clarity or passion.

The woman's voice wrapped around her, tugging on her heart and dredging up a swarm of memories of previous lovers that left her gasping. There were many of them since she had become a Rat Hunter, and most had ended in sweet partings. More than a few begged her to stay. The song reminded her of the longing she heard in their voices.

A tear ran down her cheek. She glanced around but only an old woman sitting near her was watching. The others were lost in their own thoughts with glistening eyes and the occasional sniff. With a blush, she turned and peered around for a seat to keep listening, but they were all occupied.

The old woman pointed toward the restaurant with a knitting needle. "A spot opened up in there, Love."

Karin turned and saw a couple getting up from a table. She said thanks to the old woman and headed inside, slip-

ping into the abandoned bench before anyone else could take it.

Feeling guilty, she looked around as she stuck her bags underneath the table. Her fingers were just pulling away when she caught sight of the singer.

The young woman singing was beautiful with bright eyes and a slender build. She had a few streaks of flour across her cheeks and a dusting caught her short, dark hair. Her smile was brilliant as she delivered a plate of food while still singing.

“Oh, fuck me, Mother of Divinity,” whispered Karin to herself. If there was a archetype for her ideal peach, it was the woman bending over the edge of the table while singing.

Karin stared with desire and rapt attention until the song ended.

There was silence.

Then applause. Karin joined in enthusiastically, clapping her hands against the table. They were applauding even outside of the restaurant.

The singer stood in the center and smiled, her teeth brilliant in the light. She held the metal serving tray against her side as she turned around to face the rest of the tables.

When the sound faded, she turned and headed toward a kitchen.

An older man with similar hair color and nose shape stuck his head over a counter that separated the dining area from the kitchen. “Pay attention and do your damn job! New customer on twenty!”

The young woman turned and looked straight at Karin. She smiled broadly and Karin noticed a dimple on her cheek. Heading over, she brushed her hands on her hips.

Karin inhaled sharply and then smiled back.

When the young woman approached, Karin got a better look. The waitress appeared to be in her early twenties, about half Karin's age. However, she smelled of flowers and fresh baked bread. She held out a menu. "Welcome to Lilard's. My name is Lilian. Is there anything I can get for you?"

Karin's stomach rumbled even as she felt a heat fluttering between her legs. "Do you happen to have any peach pie?"

"I'm sorry, peaches are out of season, but we do have apple and pumpkin pies." Her cheerful voice never changed.

Mildly disappointed, Karin ordered a sandwich and a slice of pumpkin pie with heavy cream. She would have preferred if Lilian had answered with a sultry response. That would have meant that Karin had a chance of company that night; the afterglow of sex always pushed the night-mares away. However, the young woman's response didn't mean no; not everyone used the same codes to make their desires known.

No matter what, Karin could still enjoy the view and the fantasy that the young woman had said there were peaches on the menu. She smiled to herself and leaned back.

Lilian went around the room, gathering orders, then headed over to a large bowl with little strips of paper. Pulling one out with her left hand, she peered at it. With a smile, she rested her hand on an older man's shoulder. "It's your favorite, Bil. 'The Ballad of Lost Waters.'"

The older man sighed and patted her hand.

"Oi!" snapped the older man over the counter. "Off my daughter!"

She favored Bil with a wink and pulled her hand away.

Karin had heard of the ballad. It was one about a lost wife and a man who couldn't accept her death. It was a sad piece to say the least. It was one of the songs a minstrel

would sing near the end of the night, when only those losing themselves in bottles were still around to hear it.

She had heard the song too many times on fruitless nights and didn't care for the difficult tune. In her opinion, no one knew how to sing it properly.

Then Lilian started to sing.

Every sour opinion of the ballad faded away with the intense emotions rising up inside Karin. Like the previous song, it managed to dredge up memories that Karin had long forgotten. With a gasp, she closed her eyes and lost herself remembering the days when her grandmother had died and the night she left her husband.

There was no doubt, Karin had to come back to this place.

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Chapter 3

Return Customer

The rich are the truest evil in the world but culture acts as their armor against accountability.

—*The River Queen Sacrifice* (Act 3, Scene 9)

Karin sat down in her now customary seat at Lilard's. After three days, no one questioned her presence. It was early morning, but the bakery had been open for hours while they set out breads, sweets, and breakfast pies. The rich storm of smells surrounded her and she smiled. It reminded her of a previous life, back when she cooked herself.

“Good morning, Kar,” Lilian said as she brought over a cup of tea and a slice of apple pie. The usual cheerful tone was gone, leaving behind a subdued sound that Karin had never heard.

“What's wrong?”

Lilian's eyes were red. She parted her perfect lips to say something but then shook her head. “Sorry. Would you like your usual?”

“Yes?” Karin said warily.

Lilian smiled but it was obviously forced.

As Karin watched Lilian walk away, she frowned. It was obvious that the young woman had either a bad night or a worse morning. Her gaze drifted to the opening between the rooms. Steam and smells poured across the counter, adding to the atmosphere of the nearly empty dining room. On the other side, she heard Lilian's father speaking in an excited voice.

Lilian wrote up Karin's order and stuck it on a wooden spike for the back. "Order up," she said quietly.

Turning around, the dark-haired beauty sighed before scanning the room. Her gaze stopped on the bowl that contained the song requests. Glancing up at the rest of the room, she reached over and pulled it off the counter before stowing it out of sight.

A prickle of concern raced through Karin. After listening to the sweet tones of Lilian's singing, the relative silence felt like a knife against her ear.

Laughter rose up from the back room. She recognized Lilian's father, but it was the second voice that caused the muscles across her chest to tight painfully. She had heard that laughter more than once since she had become a Rat Hunter: Tristoh da Lamaster, a merchant lord with a talent for funding the wrong thing.

Surprised, she lifted herself from her seat and peered into the back room.

Tristoh was shaking hands with Lilian's father, the distinctive sharp point of his beard was unmistakable from a distance. He looked pleased with himself.

She sat down heavily. "Shit."

Karin suspected a connection between Lilian's sullen mood and Tristoh's presence. She strained to listen to the conversations in the other room but it was too far away. She had to stew in her own thoughts until Lilian arrived to deliver her breakfast.

She reached up and rested her hand on Lilian's. "What is Tristoh doing here?"

The muscles under her palm tightened and Lilian inhaled sharply. Then she looked up with a frightened look before leaning over. "You know him? Who is he?"

Karin frowned and then shrugged. "Me and the Rat Hunters had to clean up some of his so-called investments. The last one was..."

She paused for a moment as she remembered the giant mosquitoes that swarmed through the chimney of the farmhouse they had made their last stand. There was so much blood when it was over, too much of it was hers and she almost died from the attack.

After shuddering, she continued. "... a few months ago. A mage he had hired to research a weapon had accidentally let a swarm of mutated mosquitoes into a village."

Karin sighed and she stroked her finger across the back of Lilian's hand. It was a selfish maneuver on her part, but the soft skin felt good against Karin's scarred fingers. "Almost everyone died before we managed to burn the nest."

"A-And Tristoh?" Lilian's voice cracked.

"He got away clean. The law can't really touch rich assholes like him. Every time, he walks away with a tidy profit and a fucking smile on his—"

A tear splashed on Karin's hand.

Surprised, she looked up to see Lilian crying. "Oh, I'm sorry. What's wrong?"

"H-He..." She looked back at the kitchen. Then she shook her head violently. "I, I can't..."

She pressed a hand over her mouth before she let out a choked sob. More tears ran down her cheeks as she looked around. Then, stammering, she dropped her notebook on Karin's table and rushed for the door.

Karin turned to watch Lilian race across the front of the store and out of sight. She swore violently and chased after her.

It took her only a few seconds to catch up to the sobbing young woman in the alley. The short distance had left Lilian gasping for breath between her cries.

Karin, on the other hand, had spent the last year fighting. She wasn't even winded as she stopped in front of Lilian. She gingerly reached up to take her hands but then hesitated before pulling back. "What did he do?"

Lilian looked up, her eyes shimmering with tears. "He offered to buy my hand in marriage a-and my dad accepted it!"

Karin's hands slumped down. "W-What in the...?"

"Last night! He came home and said I was to be married in a week. I haven't even met him until this morning! He just... that man just bought my hand like a sack of flour! My father... he's... he took the offer!"

Karin flinched. "A bride offer? What does he think this is, Tarsan? We don't do that fucking patriarchal shit in Kormar! He should know that."

"I know!"

"It can possibly be legal."

Lilian let out a choked sob. "The bakery has been in our family for five generations. It was ours! But when I started to argue, my dad swore he would disown me if I didn't marry that man."

Karin spun on her heels. "Screw the gods on this one."

"What are you doing?" asked Lilian but Karin was already out of the alley and storming back across the store.

Tristoh was in the process of leaving out of the restaurant when she reached the door. "Where is my lovely bride—?" he started, speaking loudly. The words froze when Karin stopped sharply in front of him.

She pointed a finger at his face. “What are you doing, Merchant?”

A scowl etched across his face. “I could say the same, Rat?” He reached up to rub the side of his shoulder where she once stabbed him.

Behind Tristoh, Lilian’s father stopped with a look of a surprise.

“Questioning your motives,” snapped Karin. “This isn’t Tarsan and—”

“I know we aren’t in—”

“—and you should know better than to even make an offer. What are you doing?”

Tristoh pulled himself up and pressed a hand against his chest. “I promise you, Rat, I have nothing but the best of intentions.”

Karin stepped forward. “The best of intentions? Did you have those when you told that mage not to worry about that blood sucker swarm? Or fired the guards on that zoo of yours before the monsters all escaped and started killing people.”

“Those were all mistakes of—”

“Of your fucking investments! Every single one, Merchant! Every single one ended in blood and death!”

Tristoh looked around at the gathering crowds. “You should leave before there is trouble... Rat.”

“I won’t let you steal this girl.”

“Why, just because you want her for yourself? Is she the peach pie you were hoping for?” Tristoh grinned and glanced to the gathering crowd.

Karin blushed. She didn’t need to look to know that Lilian had come up near her. Grinding her teeth, she shook her head.

Tristoh leaned forward with a smile. “At least I’m not a deviant lusting after a girl like her. Let me guess? Ask about peach pies the second you met her?”

“Shut up.”

“I have only the best of intents for her.”

“You only have the best of intentions for yourself and you know it.”

Tristoh straightened and brushed an imaginary dust from his shoulder. “Well, fortunately for you, this is none of your business. It’s between me and her father, now isn’t it?”

Karin pulled back her hand to do something stupid but then she heard guards approaching.

“Go on, Rat,” Tristoh said with a grin. “There are thirty witnesses and I’ll have your woman-loving ass in a jail cell before you get your second blow in.”

She ground her teeth together. Then she shook her head.

He smirked. “You won’t win this fight.”

Karin stepped back. She could see emotions painted on everyone’s faces: triumph on Tristoh, anger on Lilian’s father, and sadness and regret on Lilian. But she couldn’t do anything, not at the moment.

With Tristoh laughing, she turned and stormed back to the inn.

Chapter 4

Table Settings

The best and worst ideas are made at the bottom of a bottle.

—Kormar Proverb

Karin sat naked on her bed, her back against the headboard and her eyes focused on a spot three feet in front of her. She couldn't sleep despite her aching eyes. Her exhaustion plucked at the back of her head.

It had been two days since she stormed away from Lillard's and she couldn't stop thinking about Lilian. It wasn't fancy dreams of sex and fun, but the countless possibilities of what Tristoh had in mind for the young woman.

He was going to use her. That much was clear. Nothing she had seen of the vile man hinted that he was capable of romance or love. Even his offer, which had set off a fire of gossip throughout the city, was too large for anything besides one more of his investments.

It had to be Lilian's singing. While she was definitely a beauty, it was the way her songs brought back memories and ignited emotions that made her a treasure. She had a gift, one that Karin could too easily see Tristoh wanting to use for his own profit.

What she didn't know is how. Would he put her on a stage and force her to sing? Would he sell her voice to the highest bidder? Or just rent her out until her eyes were dead and her throat ruined?

Karin pressed her lips tightly together.

Tristoh's next step would be to marry Lilian. The ceremony was in a few days. No one seemed to know what would happen after that but she couldn't imagine the rich man moving from his comfortable estates in Tarsan to a muddy town in Kormar. No, he was going to take Lilian away where she had no family, no friends, and no support. She would be helpless.

With a shaking hand, Karin lifted the mug and sipped at the rotgut that had pooled in the bottom. It was warm and the acrid scents burned her eyes. She closed her eyes to focus on the burn as it ripped down her throat.

She drained the glass before reaching out for the bottle to refill it. When she noticed it was empty, she abandoned the effort and focused on her half-eaten dinner next to it. Underneath the congealed foot was a bright bronze plate.

Annoyed at Lilian's struggle, she set down her glass on the table and picked up the plate. It was fortunate for her that the inn had metal plates. With a tap, she emptied the contents into the garbage can by the bed before bringing the plate to her lap.

With a smile, she thought about the serving trays at the bakery. As she did, she felt the edge warp as the bevel flattened into a sharp blade. She didn't need any pressure or even to touch it, metal sharpened with her thoughts. Absently, she ran her finger and enjoyed the makeshift blade. She continued to sharpen the edge until the entire rim was lethal. Karin continued to focus on it as she honed it even further, narrowing the edge until it was a sharp as the metal was capable of becoming.

“Fucking asshole,” she muttered. Gripping the plate carefully, she drew back and threw it at the wall with all her might.

The bronze disk plunged deep into the plaster and wood; with a blade so sharp, it didn’t need much strength to bury it, but the impact would dull it instantly. The bronze vibrated from the impact.

She smiled as she listened to the ringing. Her ability to sharpen blades in the middle of the fight made her a valuable member of the Rat Hunters. Without her, the armored beasts they fought would dull or nick the blades in only a few strikes.

Too bad it was murder if she attacked Tristoh. But it would be self-defense if she wasn’t the one who initiated the fight.

A bad idea came to mind.

She smiled. It was time to go back to Lilard’s.

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Customer Service

The tradition of the bride price has not caught on among most of the more egalitarian of countries.

—Richol dea Lamaster, *The Tarsan Influence*

Karin moved stiffly as she came around the corner toward Lilard's. Her leather armor, repaired and prepared for battle, creaked with each step. No doubt that Tristoh expected her to come back.

Her ex-husband always said she was predictable.

The usual crowds in front of the restaurant were gone. There was no one swaying in time to music, no one reading books while enjoying Lilian's voice. Tristoh's corruption had already taken root and it was obvious that the restaurant's fate was on a knife's edge.

With a second look, Karin realized she was wrong about the street being empty. The old lady who had pointed out the empty table to Karin remained on her bench. She knitted quietly, her head bowed with concentration.

Karin slowed to a stop near her.

“Looking for Lil?” asked the old woman. Her eyes were narrow as she glared at the glass window, to Karin, and then back to the bakery.

Head already throbbing from her liquid courage, Karin took a moment to process the unexpected question. She nodded. “Yes.”

“She’s in the back.”

Karin turned to face the woman.

The old woman bent over and dug in her knitting bag. When she sat back, she held up an impressively large knife in a sheath. There was a name carved into the side, “Sindil Lillard”. Flipping it over, she held it hilt-first to Karin. “Need a weapon?” she asked cheerfully.

“W-What?” Karin couldn’t help but smile. She peeked into the opening of the bag to see if there was another weapon, but didn’t see anything. The bag had the same name embroidered on the inside.

“You obviously are going in with a plan,” said Sindil.

Karin shrugged. “Well, more of a vague idea. I was just going in to... make sure she knew she had an option.”

“That’s good. The girl needs to know her options. Even if it takes a woman to have the balls to speak up.”

Karin smirked.

“After what Jon did, it isn’t our place anymore. Most of the regulars have abandoned us. The ones left are going through the motions. It’s a shame,” she said shaking her head. “Lillard’s has been in our family for five generations. Thanks to Jon, there won’t be a sixth. He should have just told me. I would have helped, but he always had too much pride and slippery fingers when it came to coin.”

“Is there anything you can do?”

The older woman held up the knife again in a silent answer.

Karin shook her head. A weapon would be nice, but that would make everything worse if she got caught. The city guard never responded well to obvious weapons.

Tossing the knife back into her knitting bag, Sindil picked up her needles again. “Three of his men are at tables one, seven, and fifteen. Two on the right when you come in, the other is by the window behind you.”

Suddenly things seemed brighter. “Thank you,” Karin said. “Who are you?”

The old woman smiled sweetly. “Just an old widow who is severely disappointed in her greedy son. He’s family though, so please don’t kill him?”

“I won’t.” Karin turned, took a deep breath, and started for the restaurant. She stopped. “Are you a hunter?”

Sindil shrugged. “The men who fell for me were always mean drunks. Once I was done with them, I needed a little encouragement to send them on their way.”

Amused, Karin shook her head and headed into the bakery.

Jon, Lilian’s father, looked up from where he was serving food. “You aren’t wanted in here.”

Karin glanced around, spotting Tristoh’s three men sitting at different tables. They were all minions, armed with short swords and leather armor. As one, they turned toward her and dropped their hands to their weapons.

She looked at the counter leading into the kitchen and then to him. “I just want to talk to Lilian.”

Jon stepped toward the center of the room and held the metal tray with one hand at his side. “Get the hell out of my place. You aren’t welcome here.”

Karin shook her head. On one of the tables nearest to the door, she spotted a metal pitcher. She reached over and grabbed it. Her energies flowed through her hand as she fo-

cused on the rim to sharpen it while she spoke. "I'm going to talk to her."

"She's on her way out. You don't need to."

"Your daughter is not something to sell. Tristoh is going to hurt her and you know it."

Jon's jaw tightened. "At least the restaurant will survive. You don't understand how close I was to losing everything. Everyone came to listen but not enough people paid for the seats they warmed."

"She was your daughter!" Karin stepped forward. She flipped the pitcher and held it upside down. Water poured out across the floor.

One of Tristoh's men lurched out of his seat.

She backhanded his face with the pitcher. It collapsed from the impact then she followed up with a left hook.

He fell backwards, his foot catching her elbow before she could bring down the sharpened rim into his thigh.

She missed. The pitcher rim caught the edge of the table and sheared off the corner. The impact shattered the supernaturally sharp edge.

Before the hunk of wood hit the ground, Karin was attacked from the other side. The second warrior swung his sword down, the blade whistling through air.

She jerked back, slipping on the water and ice. Desperate, she funneled her energies into the pitcher's edge again. The metal screeched as it was rapidly flattened and sharpened again. Heat radiated through the metal and burned her fingers. She threw all her weight into blocking the blows.

Karin managed to parry with the opening of the pitcher. The blade sliced into the brittle metal but her magic kept the edge long enough for it to gouge out a large hunk of the forged weapon.

The remains of the sword smashed against her hand before it shattered from the blow.

Karin's knee hit the wet ground. She pulled back with her free hand, balled it into a fist, and punched the man in the balls with all her might.

His eyes almost popped out of his head. A low gurgle escaped his lips.

She released the ruined pitcher to uppercut him. Her knuckles slammed into the bottom of his chin, throwing him back.

Staggering to her feet, she stepped out of the puddle. She should have known better than make the fight worse by spilling water across the floor. Roal could never know she had made such a beginner mistake.

Jon gulped as he inched back.

She grabbed the serving tray from his hand.

He flinched and held up his hand to block the blow.

Karin shoved him out of the way and stalked toward the door. As she walked, she sharpened the edge of the serving tray.

The last warrior stood up, drawing his sword.

She threw the tray at him. The metal edge sliced through his sword and armor to embed itself into his chest. Blood sprayed across the ground.

Karin pointed at him. "Sit," she commanded.

His ruined sword clattered to the ground as he sat.

She slammed the door into the baking area. "Lil!"

Lilian stood in the center, trembling as she stared at the door. Her eyes widened. "Kar? Is that you?"

At the sight of the frightened young woman, all the speeches and things Karin planned to say slipped out of her mind. She rushed over and caught her hand. "I know this is stupid, but I had to tell you this: you don't have to go with Tristoh."

“I-I do. I’ll lose the restaurant if—”

Karin interrupted her. “You’ve already lost this place. If you stay, you are going to rot with it. If you go with Tristoh, he’s going to take you to Tarsan, and you will never return here. I know him, there is nothing good about him.”

Tears sparkled in Lilian’s eyes. “W-Where would I go?”

Karin inhaled and shook her head. She hadn’t really planned this far. “I don’t know where. Pick a place and I’ll send you there. I have enough money, I swear.”

“What about you?”

Karin stared at Lilian for a long moment, fighting her urges. Then she lurched forward to kiss her. The touch of her soft lips to Karin’s was everything Karin had fantasized about. She let out a moan and inched closer to slide her arms around Lilian’s waist.

Lilian gasped, her body still trembling. Her hands lowered to catch Karin’s hip. She didn’t pull or tug but held herself still.

There was no passion, not even a hint of quickened breath or trembling limbs.

Karin broke the kiss with a soft sigh. “Not a peach,” she whispered.

Lilian shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

Karin shrugged. She turned to hide her embarrassment. Spying a stack of trays, she hurried over them. “Pick a place.”

“Even though...?”

Karin took a deep breath to calm herself. She put on a smile before looking back. “I promise you, I will send you anywhere you want to go. Your voice is something that should be treasured as one of this country’s wonders, not something Tristoh will use to enrich himself.”

Lilian smiled broadly. “I... I always dreamed of singing at the Harmony Opera. So maybe Stone Over Moon Waters?”

“Done.” Karin picked up the now sharpened trays. “Come on, let’s get you on the road.”

Lilian looked nervous and pale. She looked around the stone hearths and ovens. “Just leave?”

One of Tristoh’s men grunted as he crawled up on the counter between the front and back rooms.

Karin spun and threw one tray at each end of the heavy wooden beam over the counter. The sharpened rims easily cut through the wood. One side caught on the angle and held but the other plummeted, crushing the man’s hand against the counter.

He screamed out in agony.

She threw another tray to finish the job.

The rest of the beam collapsed.

The warrior looked up and then yanked back to avoid being crushed to death. His hand wasn’t as lucky when the beam slammed heavily on the counter.

Karin grabbed another tray and kicked open the door between the two rooms.

The door bounced off one of the warriors hiding behind it.

She kicked it again as she entered the restaurant side of the building. To her relief, the man with his chest impaled by a tray was still alive but sitting down. The one that she punched in the balls wasn’t visible, so she swung the tray hard and slammed it through the door.

Stalking forward, she headed straight for Jon.

The older man gulped and backed away.

Karin held up her fist inches away from his face. “If she wants to leave, she’s leaving. Do you understand?”

He nodded violently. Then his eyes widened as he looked toward the kitchen.

Karin didn’t look back. She focused her attention on the last warrior in the room who was blocking the door. It was

the first man she had attacked. She pulled back her tray and smiled at him.

He held up his hands and dropped his sword. “He doesn’t pay me that much.”

“Get out of here.”

Karin followed after him.

Outside, the street was empty except for Sindil, who still knitted on her bench, and the retreating warrior. The old woman had a smirk on her lips as her needles clicked together.

Adrenaline surging through her veins, Karin stepped away from the door and prepared for another attack.

Lilian came out after her. She hurried for the old woman. “Nana? I’m so sorry, but I have to leave—”

Her grandmother put down her knitting and hugged her tightly. “Go, my love. Right now, I trust her more than your father.”

“I’ll write. I promise.”

“You better. Now go.” Sindil stood up and gave Karin a hard look. For all her words, there was a threat from the sly old woman.

Karin smiled grimly and nodded. “Yes, Mother,” she said in a deferential tone.

The grandmother gestured with one gnarled finger at the window. “Run. I need to have a long talk with your dad.”

Lilian wiped the tears from her eyes and then headed for Karin. She held out her hand.

Karin took the soft palm firmly. Together, they hurried in the opposite direction of the fleeing warrior. She didn’t know where to go or how she was going to get Lilian there, but she had hoped that Roal would turn up. That’s what he did.

Three streets and two alleys of frantic running later, she came around a corner to find Roal sitting on a wagon with a horse already harnessed into place.

Karin gasped in relief. “Oh, thank the Couple. Roal!”

He didn’t seem surprised to see her; his talent was to show up when he was needed. Slipping off the bench, he came around to open the back of the wagon and held out his hand to Lilian. “Just her or both of you running away?”

No question of what had happened. No hesitation. No doubt. Roal showed up knowing that Karin needed him, and answers would be given later.

Karin worried her lip. “Just her. If I run, the Rat Hunters will pay the price. The best thing is if I surrender.”

Lilian gasped. “You’re staying? No, you can’t do that. Come with me.”

Karin looked at the beautiful woman. It was heartbreaking but she knew Lilian would never be her peach. Without that passion, going along would just be torture for both of them.

Groaning, she turned to Roal. “Draw ten thousands crowns from my pay and give it to her. That should be enough to pay for room and board for a year. And find her someone to take care of her in Moon Waters. Someone trustworthy that won’t take advantage of her.”

Roal grunted and nodded. He helped Lilian get into the wagon and then underneath a heavy canvas tarp. He crawled over to the bench and sat down. “I’ll come back for you.”

“Roal? She’s not a peach or an apple. Please?”

He nodded without looking at either of them. “Of course.”

Karin nodded grimly and looked around. It was going to get messy but she could trust Roal to take care of Lilian.

She smiled at Lilian who was peeking out of the tarp. “Be beautiful and never stop singing.”

Chapter 6

Dessert

In rural civilization, justice is a more fluid concept that frequently becomes personal.

—*An Exhaustive Review of Justice Systems in the Known World*

One of Tristoh's men helped Karin through the bakery's front door with a shove.

With her wrists manacled behind her back, she couldn't stop her face from smacking on the wall inside. With a groan, she collapsed to her knees.

He kicked her ribs. "Get inside, cow!"

Karin pretended to scream in agony; she had been fighting monstrous creatures for a year, a kick was nothing. Not responding would just set off the bastard's pride and then he would put more effort into hurting her seriously.

"Get her up," Tristoh said coldly.

She smiled to herself. Just like his laughter, she had heard the icy tone before. The last time, he had slipped out of town in the cover of darkness. If she was lucky, he would be considering the same thing.

Warriors yanked her into a kneeling position.

Karin blew a strand of her hair from her face as she looked up at Tristoh. He stood with his back to the bar next to the empty bowl that used to have requests for Lilian. He looked annoyed, like she had stolen his toy.

There were others around her. She guessed it was the town elders, the ones who had opinions of monster hunters like herself. Among them were two uniformed men with the symbol of the city on their chests; probably the city guards.

She looked around but didn't see anyone wearing justice robes. That meant this wasn't a trial, at least not yet.

Karin also hoped to see Sindil, but she wasn't present either.

Tristoh cleared his throat. "Where is she?"

She blinked at him, giving him her best innocent look. "Who?"

His face darkened. "You know what I want!"

Karin smiled grimly. "Then what's her name, Tristoh?"

Jon stepped forward. "Where is my daughter, Lilian?"

She ignored him and kept speaking to Tristoh. "What was your scheme? When were you planning on taking her to Tarsan?"

Jon sputtered but Tristoh silence him with a gesture.

Tristoh's eyes narrowed. He looked around as his scowl deepened. "I had no plans of returning to that place."

When she heard his tone, her smile widened. There was no longer a doubt that he would be gone by morning. She could see it in his eyes. "What about the rest of your business in the area? Any investments you plan on abandoning?"

A muscle in his neck tightened.

Karin gave him a hard look. "The last time you left, I lost three good men when those damn leeches got loose into the forest."

Tristoh's lips tightened. She watched him forming a fist.

"Before then, it was in Risol. Do you remember that village?"

"Shut up," snapped Tristoh.

Karin shook her head. "You leave nothing but death and broken lives behind you. Lilian was just—"

Tristoh punched her.

Karin looked back and smiled. "Tonight?"

Another punch.

"Lord Tristoh!" said Jon as he grabbed Tristoh's hand. "Stop that!"

Tristoh shoved him aside with a snarl. Squatting down, he grabbed Karin's throat and pulled her close, jamming his face near hers. His breath smelled of beer and cheese. "Listen, you diseased old goat. I'm going to find the most corrupt judge I can bribe and make sure you have a very short, painful life before you are executed for treason."

Karin had no doubt that he had the money and the anger to do that. It scared her, but there was nothing she could do to avoid it. She turned and smiled at him. "At least she got away, you miserable horse's ass."

She was still smiling when Tristoh and his men beat her into unconsciousness.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 7

The Final Bill

Never underestimate how quickly forgiveness can be given when the only man who can save you is behind bars.

—Sergan Mesar-Lavistol, *Three Drops of Blood at Evening*

Karin groaned and leaned against the rough stone bricks of the jail cell. The cold seeped into the bruises along the side of her face, giving her some relief from the morning's beating. As the stone warmed up, she rolled to a cooler section until the throbbing subsided.

With a sigh of relief, she sat back into her seat. It felt like every part of her hurt, but it was nothing compared to being kicked in the chest by that howling horse with claws or when the leeches had burrowed in her gut.

The men Tristoh had bribed to beat her weren't seriously injuring her. That meant that he still had plans for her. Fortunately, San Graif wasn't large enough for dedicated justice so she had a few more days until her fate arrived.

She thought about Lilian's voice and the memories that washed over her every time she sang a song. Leaning back against the wall, she smiled to herself. Her lips worked

silently as she sang one of the song that Lilian had taught her to love and just let the pain ease away.

Even with her fears, Karin didn't regret a single moment. She didn't find a lover but she saved a songbird. She rubbed her split lip and just leaned back to enjoy the glow.

The door to the cells rattled loudly. She heard keys jingling on the other side.

Curious, she sat up.

The door swung open and a guard came in. It was one of Tristoh's hirelings. She started to steel herself for another round of abuse but then she noticed he was covered in blood with thick bandages over one eye and a makeshift sling holding his arm. "She's in here, Mother," the guard said sullenly.

Sindil followed after him, her knitting bag hoisted over her shoulder and a pair of needles in her hand. The yarn was stained and torn. The knife hilt hung out of a scorched opening. She shuffled forward as she peered around until she spotted Karin and then hurried over.

Behind both of them, Roal came in with a grin on his face and his hands in his pockets. He had blood splattered across his chest and an equally gore-covered ax tucked underneath his arm.

Karin stood up, wincing a little from the discomfort.

Sindil peered at Karin for a moment. Then she turned to the guard. "Well, what are you waiting for? Let her out. Now!"

The guard looked nervously at Karin as he unlocked the gate.

Karin stared directly at him. She didn't think telling Sindil that he had been beating Karin for days would help anyone at the moment. Maybe later.

Roal shoved the guard aside and pulled the gate open. "Tristoh left the city a surprise gift when he stormed away.

A herd of bulls with thick armored plates and able to set fires with their feet. I need my sharpener. You up to it, Old Lady?”

Karin’s thoughts slid away from Lilian with a rush as she steeled herself for a fight. “Of course, Old Man.”

He gestured toward the door before heading toward it. “Come on, Rat Hunter. You need a weapon and we have people to save.”

Karin gave the guard a long hard look before she followed after.

The old woman caught her arm to walk with her. She was spry for her age but Karin suspected that she had fought off one of the creatures with knitting needles.

Karin smiled at the image and rested her palm over the old woman’s. “Thank you. Mind if I have that dagger now?”

Sindil looked her over. “You look more like you prefer a sword, right? What kind?”

“Short sword with a narrow hilt, but..”

The old woman dug into her scorched knitting bag. She pulled out a coil of yarn and a pair of needles. “Hold this,” she said as she handed the yarn to Karin.

Amused and confused, Karin took it.

Sindil reached into the bag, leaning into it as she delved deeper than the bag looked like it could handle. “Ah, there it is!”

She pulled out a short sword from her bag. As Karin stared in shock, Sindil deftly swapped the yarn for the weapon. “It’s a bit dull, but I suspect you can do something about that.”

Karin smiled. Energy danced along the blade as she sharpened it with a thought.

Sindil looked at her for a long moment and then sighed. “I’m sorry it took so long to get you free. Jon was being stubborn and the sheriff is still pissed at me for refusing to

serve his wife when she was the worst tax collector we ever had; he changed his mind when he saw those bulls. A lot of bad blood for this old lady. At least her granddaughter is safe. I got a letter yesterday.”

Karin smiled. “She was worth it.”

“She is,” said the old woman. “Though, things were better when I was running the bakery. Twenty years ago, we didn’t have my granddaughter’s lovely voice but peach pie was always on the menu.”

Karin made it two steps before the words registered. She inhaled sharply and looked over.

The old woman grinned and squeezed Karin’s arm. “Maybe after you save our city, I could make you one? The recipe is on the old side, but I heard the classics are always the best. I’d bet you’d like a slice. I heard it’s got a bit of bite.”

Karin stared in shock and her smile returned.

The old woman hefted her bloody knitting needles, gave a wink, and headed after Roal.

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

D. Moonfire

Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

D. Moonfire

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