

Rolling Fates

Vera Zwerver

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Dedicated to Rene & Puck,
Thank you for your feedback, help and inspiration.

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CHAPTER ONE

Paths Intertwined

For the entirety of the trip, she had interested him. The young human woman in the opposite seat of the open carriage seemed nervous. Her form was somewhat timid, arms and legs kept close to her person, her gaze ever staring down at her feet, her long raven black hair was bound in a braid that was at least a week old already and hung draped over her shoulder. When he looked more closely, he noticed the black curtain of thick, slightly wavy hair was broken by a single snow-white strand. He wondered if it was natural, but given its intensity, he figured it probably was. Odd, he'd never seen someone with such contrasting hair colours before.

She sat a little hunched over the small silver band that she continuously twirled around her left middle finger. It was a pretty ring, even if it was simple and without any extravagances. It looked good on her fingers, which were slender and a little pale. In fact, all of her skin was pale, even more so in comparison to the dark red and black robes she was wearing. As other passengers continued their conversations in a low, constant murmur, he couldn't hear what the maiden was muttering, but telling from the movement of her lips, she seemed to be either praying or talking to herself. It added to her worried and nervous demeanour, which unsettled him in return.

Their carriage hit a rock on the road and the constant murmur in the open carriage stopped for a moment. The young, human woman opposite of him looked up to see what was wrong. He was shocked by how young she looked; he guessed her not even eighteen years old. Her face was small and about as pale as her hands, save for her pink lips and a small, curved scar on her right cheek. Her skin hadn't probably seen much sun and she looked rather exhausted. Her icy blue eyes lay sunken in their sockets with dark bags resting underneath them. Yet, they quickly flitted over their dwarven driver, the road ahead, and then hastily over the other passengers, who seemed just as curious. When the driver ignored the bump and the carriage drove on easily enough, she looked back down again and twirled the silver ring around a little faster. She struck him as nervous and he felt the need to strike up a casual conversation; maybe he could ease her thoughts a little.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to bother you," his voice rose just above the murmur. The twirling of the silver band stopped, and he could tell she was looking at him through her lashes.

"That's a lovely ring," he commented with a smile. "Is it a band of engagement?" She looked back up at him, studying his face for a moment as if to make sure it was him who'd asked her the question. He was a tiefling, she guessed him to be about halfway his twenties, with skin of a peculiar pale blue shade that was only broken in his face by the black of his short-trimmed beard and slightly curly hair that reached just short of his

shoulders. As was common for his kin, two horns sprouted from his skull that bore a dark blue colour and curled forward like a young bull's. His warm eyes were golden with a thin red line around the irises, which both added to the aesthetic of his face, but also gave him an ominous look. Still, he appeared friendly enough and since he'd posed a question, even if she wasn't sure what he meant, she decided to humour him with a reply.

"I... don't think so," she mumbled. "I'm sorry, a what? What's an engagement?" He smirked, and just about suppressed a chuckle. Her ignorance was amusing, but he figured it was rude to laugh. Maybe she was from a different culture, maybe engagement or marriage wasn't something she was familiar with and thus she couldn't know.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I presumed too much. An engagement is when two people promise each other eternal love. It often precedes a marriage, which is when that promise is solidified, if you will, through ceremony. But a ring often symbolises that promise." The young woman nodded in understanding, but then shook her head.

"I see. No, then, it's not an engagement." The tiefling man smirked a little uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry for assuming." She shrugged, waved him away, and let the conversation die, but he still felt there was something nervous about her. He noticed the backpack tucked between her feet. It was of a size reasonable enough for someone to be travelling for several days: a bedroll was strapped to the top, on the side hung a piece of hempen rope and the bag itself seemed rather full of whatever she thought she'd need on her travels.

"Are you travelling far?" he asked. She followed his gaze to the bag between her feet, and her face grew a little wary when she looked back up at him.

"Would it seem I am?" Her voice wasn't necessarily unfriendly, but he could tell she was suspicious. Since that was the exact opposite of what he wanted to accomplish, he quickly tried to alleviate the situation.

"I mean, judging by the bag, I assumed..." He coughed, clearing his throat and then extended a hand. "I'm sorry, where are my manners? My name is Red." The young woman's eyes flitted between the hand and the face, studying him with still heavy suspicion, but when she couldn't trace anything but friendliness on him, she eventually shook his hand.

"Freyja," she introduced herself. "And you'd assume correctly. I am on the road." She let go of his hand and leaned back in her seat. "What about you?" She ran her eyes over his apparel and baggage. The tiefling was wearing a white vestment over a set of scale mail armour, and a pair of dark trousers that were tucked into sturdy boots of studded leather. She suspected he was allied to some organisation, nobility or clergy, an assumption confirmed by the embroidered red flame and warhammer that broke the white of the vestment in several places. By his side rested a shield against the carriage's railing and while the coat of arms was turned away from her, Freyja suspected it bore the same symbol of the red flame and grey warhammer. From a thick, dark leather belt around his waist hung a mace that, judging by the many dents and blunted studs, had seen its fair share of conflict already. She'd taken him for a knight, but wouldn't a knight have his own horse, instead of travelling by public transport?

"On the road as well," Red replied and he gestured to the horizon where the skyline of a village had popped up. A crooked, dark brown line, what was possibly a palisade wall, was broken by the silhouettes of several buildings with pale grey smoke curling from stone chimneys.

"On, uh, you could call it a pilgrimage, I suppose." The young woman raised an eyebrow. So, clergy, indeed.

“Really? In servitude of...?” The tiefling pointed at the flame on his vestment.

“Leander,” he replied a little confused, since he was under the impression that the teachings of His Fiery Might and Radiance were rather well-known in all of Aemeria. Apparently, not as well-known as he’d assumed.

“Ah, right.” Freyja nodded, the name did ring a bell. The god of Flame, War and Conquest, if she wasn’t mistaken. She’d seen temples dedicated to Leander on her travels: large structures of white stone and marble, with red roofs and golden arches as if to emphasise his importance.

“But it’s more of a diplomatic nature,” Red hastened to add. “I’m not here to preach.” Freyja couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Are you sure? Not one word about the Flame? Are you sure people are aware enough of Leander’s existence?” Red smirked along and shrugged a little apologetically.

“Well, maybe one word. One can never have too much Light in their life, after all.” They shared a chuckle and Freyja shook her head.

“If you say so.” She ran her eyes over his luggage, which was barely more than hers. “How long have you been travelling?” She nodded at the backpack beside his feet. “That doesn’t look too packed.” Red grinned and shook his head.

“No, you’re right, I like to only pack essentials and travel light. It makes it easier when there’s no carriages around, you know. And you’re not as attractive a target for bandits and such. But I’ve travelled for about two months now, all over the empire. Well, mostly, I need to still touch on the north of Thoran Kal, In Caelora and Tescantic. But all in due time. I was given a year, which should be enough.” Freyja smiled along and nodded in agreement.

“What about you?” Red inquired. “Have you been on the road for long?” The woman shrugged and crossed her legs, by which Red couldn’t help but feel she was closing herself off.

“For a while, too,” she replied. “I’m headed for the eastern coast.”

“Really? Planning to cross the ocean?” Freyja nodded in confirmation.

“That’s... admirable. What are you planning for when you hit the other shore?” Her lips curled, but her eyebrows creased a little.

“A second chance, to be honest,” she mumbled a reply. “Set up a home, start anew.”

“All by yourself?” Red couldn’t help but be a little concerned.

“Yeah, why?”

“Well,” Red cleared his throat, “I mean, that’s quite the venture, especially to be undertaking on your own. And, I mean no offense, but a young woman like you could be particularly vulnerable on such a long journey.” Freyja snorted and shook her head.

“I appreciate your concern,” she said sarcastically, “but I assure you that I can take care of myself pretty well.” Her eyes glared and Red leaned back as he could see she felt rather insulted and he raised his hands as if in defence.

“Of course, I’m sorry, I truly meant no offense,” he stuttered. “I believe you are quite capable of handling yourself, I’m just... Never mind. I’m sorry.” To his relief, her lips curled again at the edges into a faint smirk.

“Apology accepted,” she snorted. “So, what about you? Do you know how to handle yourself out on the road? All alone?” Red chuckled and crossed his arms, letting his one lower leg rest on the other knee.

“I like to think I stand a fair chance against whatever the world wants to throw at me.” He patted the mace at his belt. “Come beast or bandit.” Freyja chuckled.

“We’ll have to see,” she said. “At least you’ll have an easy night, tonight.” Red laughed along and followed her gaze to the road ahead. The town’s skyline had grown, the silhouettes had gained some detail and the ragged edges of thatch roofs were visible now. “Let’s hope so.”

The road curled north-wards and slightly ascended as they neared the village’s pallid walls. With the sun slowly sinking below the horizon, the guards at the gate had lit torches, making the settlement a beacon amongst the dark meadows that surrounded it.

“That ‘ere’s Eldham, folks!” Their dwarven driver turned around to his passengers. “Last stop for ‘e day.”

“Last stop?” someone exclaimed. “But we need to get to Nestead!”

“Too bad,” the man grumbled, clacked his tongue and let the reins down on the horses’ backs. “I ain’t travellin’ these cursed roads at night. We’s leavin’ at dawn, see ye catch me or wait for the next cart.”

“Please,” a woman pleaded in unison with her husband. “We paid you to get us to Nestead, please, you must take us there.”

“I will,” the driver sneered and as they reached the stables just outside the village’s walls, he pulled the cart to a halt. “On the morn. Now, scram. Find a place at the inn, I don’t give a shit, just scram.” Grumbling and protesting, the carriage eventually emptied out as the passengers looked a little dazed for where to go now.

“I see we don’t have much choice.” Red jumped from the cart and turned around to offer Freyja his hand, but the young woman had climbed down by herself.

“It would seem so,” she sighed and hoisted the backpack on her shoulder.

“You’ll be staying at the inn?” Red asked. The woman shrugged and threw a glance at the dwarven driver, who had engaged in an argument with one of his passengers.

“As you said: not much of a choice.” Red nodded.

“The Crooked Furrier isn’t a bad place to stay,” he smiled soothingly. “The food’s good, the beds decent. Mind if I accompany you?” Freyja lifted an eyebrow, but eventually shrugged again.

“Sure, tag along, I guess.” He walked her up to the gate, where more stranded passengers trickled through into the rural village of Eldham. The guards hardly made note of the many visitors, throwing a casual glance on the men and women of various races as they walked past. As Red approached, one soldier took interest in his robes and, upon recognising the embroidered symbol of Leander’s flame, took a quick bow.

“Welcome to Eldham, sir,” he mumbled. “Enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you. Light be with you,” Red replied with a warm smile, which the soldier returned. Freyja noticed it was a rather young human man, maybe just entered his twenties. His face was smudged, his grey eyes kind and cheerful. He had more of a carefree boy over him than a hardened soldier.

“With you as well, sir,” he replied and tapped his helmet as they passed.

“So, a regular, huh?” Freyja turned to Red when they’d left the gate and guards behind them. Red smirked and shrugged.

“Hardly, I’ve been here maybe twice before. But people recognise the Flame and Hammer. Leander’s Grace is welcomed in all of Aemeria, and probably beyond.” He winked playfully. “Can’t have too much Light in your life.” Freyja laughed along and shook her head in defeat. As they walked through the gate, several buildings caught Freyja’s eye, which Red gladly elaborated on.

“That’s the Fireforge Blacksmith,” he explained as he pointed at the building to their right, just past the bridge that led them into Eldham, which passed over a shallow stream

of water, that probably functioned as the village's sewer system. The smell was putrid, and Freyja pinched her nose.

"It's owned by a dwarf," Red continued. "He also runs the armoury, further up that road." He pointed to their left. "Naturally, named Fireforge Armoury. And I believe that's the general store, 'Dedauw's Trading', over there." Freyja chuckled.

"I thought you weren't a regular." Red smirked and shrugged.

"Not a regular, but not exactly a stranger, either." They continued their way down the cobblestone streets, until they had ended up on a square that by day was used as a marketplace, according to Red. As the sun had set already, the merchants had long since packed their goods and left for the night, leaving the square eerily empty and deserted. In the centre was a public well and behind that, a large, wooden building that boomed with life and laughter. Through the slightly fogged windows, silhouettes of people cheering, drinking and dancing were visible. A few steps of crooked, much-used stairs led them up to a double door, beside which a wooden sign was nailed with rusted, iron letters that spelled "*The Crooked Furrier*".

"Looks busy," Freyja commented as she glanced through the window again.

"Hopefully they've still got rooms to spare," Red smiled optimistically and opened the inn door for her. "After you."

The inn was indeed booming with patrons. Men and women of various races, lines of work and walks of life had found their haven in the warmth and comfort that the Crooked Furrier had to offer. Some drank merrily and they celebrated as their day had drawn to a close, others sat hunched quietly over their tankards, either muttering amongst themselves or not talking at all. Plates of food left the adjacent kitchen at an almost murderous pace. As the last carriage had dropped its passengers presently off at the village gates, some more men and women were trickling into the packed inn and as they desperately looked around for an empty table or chair, Freyja found herself doing the same.

"There!" she hissed and pulled Red along as she darted for what could very well be the last remaining table in the corner of the hall, on the same side as the door. She beat another man by little under a second and quickly sat down.

"Sorry, taken," she mumbled with forced politeness. The man grumbled something inaudible and shook his head as he walked off. Red eyed the man for a moment, but then sat down opposite of Freyja, placing his shield next to him against the table.

"Good call," he smiled. "Bet it's the last one." Freyja nodded and threw a look around the inn.

"I bet, yeah," she muttered and sighed. So many people in such a remote place. Wat in Nine Hells could have driven so many people here? She turned back to Red.

"Where could these people be going?" He shrugged.

"I'm not sure," Red mumbled, "but it seems this place isn't equipped to host this many people." Freyja nodded in agreement and ran her finger along a nick in the wooden table top. Hopefully, she'd be amongst the first to leave. She had no time to lose and if this many people were headed east, maybe a similar situation awaited her at the ports. If so, she'd have to be there as soon as she could. Red rummaged through his gold pouch, but bit his lip dismayed.

"I'm sorry," he said apologetically, "I'd offer you dinner, but... I'm afraid I'm a little short on money." Freyja locked eyes with him, one eyebrow raised.

"Really now?" she laughed. "I thought the clergy was supposed to be rich." Red chuckled a little awkwardly.