

# THE FREEDOM FIGHTERS



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First printing edition: Octubre 2024

ISBN: 9789465122731



This one's for you, my family and friends, who supported me throughout the publication of *The Bond between Sisters* and the rapid writing of *The Freedom Fighters*. You guys showed me so much understanding. I cannot thank you enough. Be blessed!

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# PROLOGUE

**I**t was time. After eighteen long years, which had simultaneously passed by faster than she would have liked, Amelia Liwel had to share her life story with someone for the first time. Out of fear for her life and out of fear for the lives of the remaining rebels, known as the Freedom Fighters, she had kept quiet all those years about the moment her life had been completely turned upside down. At first, she had been afraid to share the story. Afraid that King Lembo would come to Sutarebil with his armies to silence the remaining people she cared about. Afraid he would discover that the leader of the Freedom Fighters had left a gift for his wife. Afraid Lembo would take even more people from her than he already had. Bring more misery than he already had.

As the fear gradually subsided over the years, she refused to speak because the memories of that particular night still pained her. When she thought of all the things she had still wanted to do with her newlywed husband, Heron Liwel, her heart broke into dozens of pieces over and over again. By carrying on with her daily life and living the life she had wanted with her husband, she usually kept the pieces of her heart in place. But as soon as her stubborn mind wandered even slightly to Heron... his crooked smile... his tousled dark brown hair that was almost black and fell over his golden-brown eyes... the attractive dimple in his chin... his strong jawline... but above all, his brave character and good-natured soul... The thought of her husband still made her freeze and shrink from the pain even after all these years.

The gods were her witnesses: Amelia still missed Heron every day. If there ever was a soulmate on this earth, he had been hers. In many ways, they matched perfectly. They shared the same worldview, had the same visions, and saw the same future ahead. In other ways, they were each other's opposites, balancing each other out. Amelia had never really been in love before Heron, but she would have had to marry someone in an arranged marriage if Heron hadn't pulled her out of that matrimony with his irresistible charm and good nature.

The beginning of their short journey together had been anything but standard – she hated him, and vice versa, or at least that's what she had always thought – but she eventually fell for him. And they had experienced so much together in such a short time; many couples couldn't even say the same after 400 seasons together. And she had wanted to add so many more things to that list...

The well-known lump in her throat had formed, and a few unwilling tears began to form in the corners of her eyes. She felt a hand on her forearm, and when she looked up, she met the warm, golden-brown eyes of



her daughter Dana, eyes that reminded her of her husband every day. There was a concern in that look, a concern her 72-seasons-old daughter shouldn't have had to feel if things had been different. However, due to Heron's absence, Dana had quickly taken on the role of father. She had taken care of her triplet sisters Lana and Ivana from a young age and had always felt responsible for contributing to the family, which led her to take a job with Amelia at the sewing workshop of Dalagh Fyrel, a family friend.

Amelia knew it was wrong because Dana had been a child and should have had a carefree childhood too, but things had simply grown that way with her eldest daughter. She had asked several times if Dana would like more free time, but Dana had shrugged and said she was happy with her life. Her caring nature had even earned her a good man, whom she would marry very soon.

Dana's engagement had given Amelia new concerns. Of course, Maragh was the catch of Sutarebil. He was the most handsome bachelor in the village and the sole heir to the Londels fortune. If Dana married him, his wealth would flow to her other daughters and herself. Dana claimed that wasn't her reason for marrying the guy. She swore she loved Maragh too, but Amelia knew how her daughter's selfless mind worked. What Dana had with Maragh wasn't love. Maragh paraded Dana through the streets as if she were a new purchase he had to show off to the world. Dana went along with it because she believed she should be grateful for this man. Amelia believed her daughter felt something for the boy, but it wasn't even close to what she had felt for Dana's father and still felt 72 long seasons after his disappearance.

Amelia didn't particularly like her future son-in-law, nor the rest of the Londel family. The Londels owned a large bank in the city of Amycus. Due to the bank's prominence, Maragh's father, Levagh Londel, had been appointed master of coins of the city lord of Amycus. As the master of coins, he was responsible for managing the city's treasury, collecting taxes, paying debts, and financing events in the city. He had to ensure that enough money was available for the city lord's needs and that expenses and income were balanced. This also meant that Levagh was often involved in negotiations with other major banks, such as the Stone Bank in Calmera, the largest bank in the Eastern Realm.

Levagh Londel was a man of influence, and he made sure the Sutarebilians knew it. Levagh and his son presented themselves as the kings of Sutarebil. When they strolled through the streets, they had to chat with everyone, and it wasn't long before the Londels were boasting about how their business was flourishing and how good the Gods had been to them.

Did they, however, do anything with their fortune to make a difference? Did they help the majority of Sutarebilians living below the poverty line? No, not at all. The Londels were of the opinion that they worked hard for their money. The Sutarebilians who had less should work

just as hard as the Londels to earn more. And as Dana's mother, she would soon have to deal with such arrogant, heartless people daily once her eldest daughter had given her vows to Maragh.

Dana's eyes grew wider with concern when Amelia remained silent, and Amelia quickly smiled at her to reassure her. Nevertheless, Dana cautiously asked, "Mother? Is everything alright?"

"Don't worry, darling. I'm just trying to figure out how best to tell you about your father and everything he meant to me."

Because of her daughters, she now finally wanted to break her long silence concerning Heron Liwel. Dana had confronted her after catching her and Dalagh in a very intimate embrace. The shame of that moment made her cheeks flush again. She hadn't been interested in a partner for years because she was still grieving for Heron and was busy raising the triplets. In the beginning, her best friend Caeleste had helped them daily, but when she fell in love with a merchant who had visited Sutarebil, she unfortunately left for Silvera for her beloved. Amelia had always kept in touch with her of course, but she often missed Caeleste's presence. A letter was not the same as having Caeleste's vibrant personality around her. However, Caeleste was blissfully happy with her husband in Silvera, and Amelia wished her that after her horrible childhood.

Dalagh, however, had supported Amelia in Caeleste's absence and had been there for her when she needed someone to share the struggles of raising three spirited daughters. He had given her helpful advice and supported her where he could. When the three girls were old enough to occupy themselves during the day, Amelia had gotten a job with Dalagh again when he took over the operations of his father's sewing workshop, and later, Dana had also joined their team.

Thus, Amelia had grown closer to Dalagh, also because he understood her like no one else. He had been there that infamous night. He had seen Heron, his best friend, disappear among the Orc soldiers, knowing they would never see each other again. He had gone to find his best friend's wife to deliver the unfortunate news. As one of the few survivors of that night, he also struggled daily with the losses he had suffered. In that misery, they had found and supported each other until the grief slowly but surely wore off and was replaced by camaraderie, which now had turned into...

Yes, what exactly was going on between her and Dalagh now? She had no answer to that question. There were certainly feelings between them, but they had not gone further than deep conversations and exchanging secret kisses whenever they had the chance. Until Dana had caught them, no one outside of the two of them knew about their affair. From Dalagh's side too, something stopped them from starting a relationship, and Amelia wondered if Heron's spirit was that obstacle. Speaking for herself, he was still on her mind, even when she was with Dalagh. Her husband was holding her back from making a decision and truly moving on with her life, as she had promised him. Maybe that was also

because her story ended unresolved. After all, she still didn't know what had happened to Heron...

"Mum?" Dana asked hesitantly, and Amelia realised her daughter had said something to which she hadn't responded.

"Sorry, darling. What did you say?"

"I asked if you're sure you're ready for this. I know I reacted rather drastically the other day when... well, you know." Her daughter blushed as she also remembered Amelia's and Dalagh's kiss. Amelia snorted: she could still traumatise her daughters for life after 72 seasons. What a great mother she was!

"No, Dana. I'll never be ready to tell this story." She lifted Dana's chin motherly when Dana lowered her large eyes sadly. "But that doesn't mean I won't speak today about your father. You're all old enough to hear our story."

A wave of relief washed over Dana's face, and she bowed her head gratefully before picking up the salad bowl and continuing to set the table. Ivana was already seated with a cushion behind her back to ease her recent injury, while Lana placed the plates and cutlery on the dinner table. The three girls chatted animatedly with each other, happy that Ivana had survived her crossbow shot wound and excited that she was home again after she had to stay with the medicine man for a week. Dana and Lana were also excited about finally learning more about their father.

She smiled fondly at her girls. They had turned out so well. Heron would surely be proud of his daughters. Not only were they incredibly kind to everyone, but they were also powerful witches. Already, and they had only had their active powers for just over a week. Deep down, Amelia knew that her girls would make a difference in this world, where she herself had failed, and she was proud that they would follow in their father's footsteps, even though they didn't know it yet.

After serving the girls' hunt of the day – rabbit and deer with fruit, salad, and tubers – she took her place at the head of the table. Ivana attacked her food like a hungry wolf, unaware of the story their mother was about to tell. Dana and Lana, however, nervously played with their dinner and looked at her expectantly. Amelia took her time to organise her thoughts and smoothed a napkin over her lap. Her breathing was erratic, and she noticed her heart pounding against her chest. She took a sip of water to calm herself but quickly set her cup down when her fingers trembled so much that the water spilled over the rim.

Amelia placed her hands in her lap and then said hesitantly, "I promised you I would tell you about your father once Ivana was home." The nerves rushed through her body for no reason. She was just going to tell her daughters a story. No reason to be nervous, right?

"Oh, really?" Ivana asked in surprise, breaking off a piece of bread. "Did I miss something?"

"A whole lot," Dana said, laughing, but then fell silent when Amelia

cleared her throat meaningfully. She mustn't be interrupted now, or she would fall silent again. This was too difficult. She didn't want to relive that life-changing event ever again.

However, when she saw the expectant looks of her three angels, she took a deep breath and began her story: "Our story began approximately 100 seasons ago..."

# I. IRRITATION

“Amelia, get over here!” came the deep, raspy voice of her father from their inn, *The Night’s Delight*.

A young woman named Amelia sighed deeply as she hastily shoved the remains of her belated lunch into her mouth. When working at *The Night’s Delight*, you never knew when your next meal would be. On top of that, today was an exceptionally busy day. It was Harvest Day in Sutarebil, meaning the whole town had been up at the crack of dawn. Farmers and volunteers alike had gathered in the fields at sunrise. From dawn, men, women, and children all headed to the fields together to bring in the abundant harvest. With every sickle that sliced through the grain and every basket filled with juicy apples, it felt as though the earth itself was blessing them. The air had been filled all day with the scent of ripe grain stalks and fresh fruit.

Now that the final harvest had been gathered, Sutarebil was celebrating, giving thanks for yet another year of fruitful bounty. The elders told stories of how the harvest was not only the work of human hands but also a gift from the old spirits and the goddess of the land and fertility, Chiaera, who watched over them.

Once the crops had been brought in, the townspeople decorated the village square with wreaths of colourful flowers and bundles of grain. Long tables were set up, laden with freshly picked fruit, newly baked breads, and jugs of honey wine. Musicians began to play flutes and lyres, and soon the marketplace of Sutarebil was filled with dancing couples. Children ran around with wreaths on their heads while stray cats darted nervously into alleys, startled by the unusual evening bustle. A highlight of the night was the procession, where people paraded through the town with lanterns lighting the way. At the end of the parade, a large straw figure, symbolising the spirit of the harvest, was made. This straw figure was ceremoniously burned as an offering to the goddess Chiaera, so that she would bless them with another good harvest the following year.

Since all the festivities took place in the village square, which bordered *The Night’s Delight*, and the inn was the sole provider of both the honey wine and accompanying snacks and meals, it was all hands on deck at the tavern. *The Night’s Delight* was a small inn run by Amelia’s father, Zafon Mikron, who had inherited it from her grandfather. Because the inn was a family business, *The Night’s Delight* had very few external employees. Most of the daily tasks were carried out by her father, her mother Lyria, and herself. In busy times, her father would ask Arxon Ridel, the butcher’s son, and her cousin Saragh Mikron to lend a hand. Today, these two men were working overtime, but there still wasn’t enough time to even grab a quick

bite.

Speaking of the devil... Arxon appeared, lugging yet another empty barrel of honey wine. When he saw Amelia standing there, he grinned, baring his small teeth.

"Needed to escape the chaos for a moment?" he asked, not unkindly, as he stacked the barrel on top of the other empty ones with a grunt. He wiped his sticky hands on his apron, which already bore more than a few dubious stains. Arxon often brought his other work from his father's butcher shop to the inn, something Amelia found rather unhygienic. However, Arxon didn't want to be paid for his services at the inn, which made her father more than happy with the butcher's son's help.

Amelia forced a smile onto her face and held up her crumby hands. "I needed to grab a bite to eat, or you'd have been one man down. I was about to faint from hunger."

"And what a nice specimen we would have lost!" Arxon exclaimed, pouting as his narrow eyes darted over her body. He held the door open for her and added, "But I'd suggest coming back inside now; your father's about to explode."

"Is the vein on his forehead bulging?"

"My dear, it's throbbing."

"Oh dear. There's a storm brewing then."

She didn't want to duck under his outstretched arm, as that would mean getting too close to him, and Arxon had something about him that made her feel uneasy. It was as though she were walking too near a predator, ready to pounce the moment she let her guard down. However, Arxon made no move to pass, so reluctantly, she ducked under his arm, pressing her body as close as possible to the door to avoid his wiry frame. She swore she could hear him sniff, as if trying to take in more of her scent. At least he kept his hands to himself, which was more than she could say for some of the other villagers now that the honey wine had been flowing freely.

She had barely set foot inside before Heron Liwel, the son of Sutarebil's head guard, jumped in front of her, blocking her path, and began to sing a song for her in a slurred voice, while one of his mates threw a heavy arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a swaying dance. The young man smelled of sweat, drink, and cigar smoke, and Amelia wrinkled her nose as she subtly tried to wriggle free of his grasp.

Once she had finally managed to slip away, another of Heron's friends grabbed her and whisked her into a clumsy waltz while he attempted to match Heron's singing. Amelia had to resist the urge to cover her ears, and she feared that if his caterwauling didn't stop soon, all the stray cats would be gathered on the doorstep.

That's why she gently, but firmly, pushed him against his chest and said, "I believe you gentlemen could use a few more drinks to wet your throats, don't you think?"

Her comment was met with loud cheers, and her dance partner released her to applaud. Relieved, Amelia made her way to the bar, where Arxon had been watching the scene unfold. He snorted. "Can't those men keep their hands to themselves?"

Amelia refrained from pointing out that he could have saved her rather than just stand there watching. "Oh, it was harmless. You just have to know how to handle people like that."

"Even so. You shouldn't be touching another man's woman."

The way he said that sent more shivers down her spine than what Heron's friends had done. As though, somehow, she belonged to him. Crossing her arms, she replied coolly, "I assure you, if they bother me again, I'll have Garen defend my honour. After all, he's my fiancé, and it's his duty to do so."

Arxon's cold eyes met hers, but he smirked slyly. "You're absolutely right. Brave Garen can handle it. Where is your knight in shining armour anyway? Couldn't he lend a hand in the local tavern so his fiancée could eat in peace? Or does he think himself too good to roll up his sleeves? It is, as you say, his duty to look after you. In all ways, I'd think."

She frowned as he threw her own words back at her. "Garen is the son of a count, Arxon. He has his own obligations and festivities to attend to as part of the nobility."

"Shame he forgot to invite his fiancée to those festivities."

Amelia was growing tired of the conversation, especially since deep down, she had to admit Arxon was right. She felt left out by her fiancé. It was an arranged marriage, but she had known Garen since childhood. Amelia's father had once saved the countess from drowning while fetching water from the river as fresh dishwater for *The Night's Delight*. Her father had jumped into the Libera without hesitation and pulled the countess from the water. The gratitude of both the count and the countess had been so great that they had betrothed their son to the then ten-year-old Amelia, who hadn't the faintest idea what it meant to be engaged.

At that age, it had seemed incredibly romantic to think that somewhere out there was a brave, wealthy man waiting for her, someone who would one day whisk her away to his own castle. When she met Garen, little about that image changed. Garen was what many women would describe as the ideal man. He was attractive and mysterious. He had a tall, lean, and muscular build, thanks to his training in the martial arts. His hair was clay-brown and stood up in a nonchalant, tousled mess. His facial features were sharp and elegant, with prominent cheekbones and a strong jawline. This, combined with his marble-like skin, gave him the appearance of a statue come to life.

However, that didn't mean he was emotionless. His eyes were deep and expressive, a lime green colour that seemed to change depending on his mood. He was humorous but also capable of having deep conversations with his fiancée. He listened to her and gave good advice. He was never

judgmental and always had her best interests at heart. In short, Garen was like a man straight out of a fairytale.

Amelia counted herself lucky to have such a perfect man as her fiancé, but there was still a stubborn voice inside her that didn't quite agree. That voice believed in love at first sight, and though she had come to care for Garen in her own way, it didn't feel like the all-consuming, passionate love from the romantic books she sometimes read. There was no passion between them. No butterflies in her stomach. No pounding heart. She loved him as she would a brother or a very dear friend, but nothing more.

She kept telling herself that those feelings would come once they were married. After all, only then would physical intimacy be allowed, and perhaps it would only be then that she would permit herself to love him fully. She had to be patient. Garen was a wonderful man and would be a good husband. There wasn't a malicious bone in his body. He would care for her and, eventually, for their children as well. Of that, she was sure.

The only thing that troubled Amelia was that she hadn't been able to choose him herself. She had few ambitions in life. She knew what her fate was and was content with it. As a woman, she was meant to contribute to the household and bear her husband's heirs. She had always wanted a large family. But she had hoped that she would have those children with a man of her choosing. Her choices were already limited by all of Lembo's rules and laws, but at the very least, she had wished to choose the man she would grow old with. Her father had done his best with Garen, but she still would have preferred to make that decision on her own.

Arxon's sly grin interrupted her thoughts, and she snapped, "Arxon, my engagement is none of your concern. Focus on pouring more glasses of honey wine so Turion's screeching can finally stop."

"You're not going back to those idiots."

"I decide that for myself."

"No, I'm keeping an eye on you while your fiancé's not around. I owe your father that much. You go collect the next round of dirty dishes. I'll deal with Liwel and his band of scoundrels."

Since Amelia secretly had no desire to return, she surrendered and picked up an empty tray to gather the dirty dishes. She weaved her way through the villagers celebrating inside and stepped onto the market square. The sun had long disappeared beyond the horizon, and for a moment, she revelled in the orange light that made Sutarebil look like it was captured in a burning canvas. The heat of this warm late summer day had not lessened, and a thin layer of sweat quickly formed on her forehead as she made her round, collecting empty tankards and plates.

Halfway through, someone grabbed her around the waist, startling her so much she nearly dropped the dirty dishes. However, she immediately heard cheerful giggles in her right ear and smelled the familiar rose scent of her best friend, Caeleste.

"Idiot!" Amelia laughed out. "You nearly made me drop everything!"



Stop scaring me like that."

"You must have a guilty conscience, Amelia."

"Or you're unnaturally light-footed."

"I simply haven't been drinking honey wine, so my footsteps aren't heavy and sluggish."

Amelia studied her friend carefully, but nothing about Caeleste suggested she was lying. She was one of the few people who hadn't indulged in the honey wine. Her long, silky white hair was still perfectly in place, as if she had only just arrived at the festivities. Her slender body never required a corset and still looked perfect in the tight-fitting black dress she wore, which revealed just enough cleavage to be tempting without being scandalous. Around her slender neck, Caeleste wore a heart-shaped ruby, which stood out vividly against her pale skin and matched perfectly with the cherry-red lipstick she wore. Caeleste was a natural beauty, with her oval face, soft feminine features, catlike eyes, and well-defined eyebrows. She had large, ice-blue eyes that often reflected her emotions, giving her a warm, approachable appearance.

Caeleste and Amelia had known each other for years. Caeleste was an orphan who had grown up with her sister Coca under the care of their aunt and uncle. Caeleste's parents had lived in Silvera, but after their untimely deaths, the two sisters had moved to Sutarebil, where they often helped in their aunt's flower shop. That was where Amelia had first met Caeleste, while looking for a bouquet to bring to her mother when she was bedridden with a lung infection. After Caeleste's excellent advice, Amelia had returned to the flower shop to thank her, and the two girls had since begun seeing each other more often. If Amelia worked night shifts at the tavern, Caeleste would often drop by to help or chat during quieter moments.

"I just wanted to say 'hello' to my best friend," Caeleste giggled as Amelia clutched her chest, her heart still pounding. "How was I supposed to know you'd jump like you'd been attacked by a vampire?"

"You do sometimes move about as silently as one."

Caeleste's smile grew wider, almost feline. "Maybe I'm magical. I promise I'm not after your blood, though."

A burly drunk man bumped into Amelia, almost sending the dirty dishes to the ground for the second time. Caeleste saved the plates with a cat-like reflex. Amelia growled in frustration and muttered, "Well, at the moment, there are some villagers whose blood I wouldn't mind drinking."

"Honey wine and beer turn people into pigs," Caeleste observed, taking the heavy tray from Amelia. "Here, let me help. You collect the dishes, and I'll carry the tray."

Though Amelia's arms sighed with relief as they were freed from the weight of the pottery and steel tankards, Caeleste seemed unfazed. Her thin arms barely strained, as though she were holding a cushion rather than a tray full of dirty dishes. She hardly even broke a sweat. Shaking her head,

Amelia quipped sarcastically, "Are you sure you're not a vampire?"

"Why?"

"That weight doesn't seem to bother you. At all."

"Maybe I'm a witch."

"Sometimes, you really can be a witch," Amelia chuckled as she dropped a few more empty plates into the tray.

"Ouch, that hurts," Caeleste replied sarcastically. "Is this the thanks I get? I'm sacrificing my free evening to help you, and you call me a witch? That's not fair."

"What's not fair?" came a lazy voice, and when Amelia looked up, to her great irritation, she saw Heron Liwel approaching, a pipe clamped between his full lips.

"This has nothing to do with you, Liwel. We weren't talking to you, were we?" Caeleste remarked dryly.

"Humour me, ladies." He took the tray from Caeleste's hands, and Amelia couldn't help but notice the way his muscles flexed under his tightly fitted black shirt.

Caeleste folded her arms and raised an eyebrow. "It's not fair that all of Sutarebil is celebrating while my friend has to work twice as hard to keep people like you happy."

Heron's gold-brown eyes turned to Amelia, who, strangely enough, felt herself blushing under his scrutinising gaze. She quickly turned away to avoid those intense eyes and picked up more dirty dishes. She expected an arrogant remark from him, but instead, he simply said, "You're right, that's not fair."

Amelia couldn't resist glancing over her shoulder, and to her surprise, he was smiling at her broadly. There was no mockery in his almost glowing eyes, just a look that made her toes curl inside her lace-up shoes. Heron was the kind of man you'd describe as charismatic and a little dangerous. Every woman fell for him, but most were left with a broken heart. Heron Liwel was not husband material.

He had a confident appearance with a hint of darkness lurking beneath the surface. He was tall and muscular, with an athletic build that emphasised his heritage. Everyone in Sutarebil knew that Heron's father was a prominent figure among the soldiers of Amycus, and everyone knew it was expected that Heron would follow in his father's footsteps. Rumour had it that in a few weeks, Heron would begin an intensive elite training programme in Amycus, with the same soldiers who had shaped his father into the renowned warden he was today.

Heron's face had sharp, pronounced features, with high cheekbones and a defined jawline. But what really drew people in were his eyes—eyes that often looked at you intensely or took you in with mild mockery, adding to his mysterious and sometimes intimidating aura. His hair, brown in the setting sun, could appear as black as onyx in the night. It was always carelessly tousled, giving him a nonchalant but simultaneously irresistible

appearance that melted many a woman's heart.

Amelia wasn't immune to his looks either, but her sense prevailed. For her, a man's character mattered too, and Heron was arrogant, annoying, and a tease. He always tried to be charming, but he only succeeded in getting on Amelia's nerves. Every compliment he gave had a slick ulterior motive, and behind every joke, there was a mocking undertone that could sometimes be downright hurtful. Heron knew he was popular with the women of Sutarebil and acted accordingly. He behaved as if he were above everyone else, like some sort of womaniser and the rest of the world his subjects. Well, he had come to the wrong place with Amelia. She would not bow down to that snake.

"Thank you for your concern," she said sarcastically, "but I don't need your help."

She always felt cornered around him, and her best defence was a good offence. She had just called Caeleste a witch, but with Heron around, she was the one who could be called a witch. And sometimes even worse...

Heron could handle her snarky comments, though, and he always had a retort that made her even more furious. "It must be all the noise, but I could've sworn you emphasised the word 'your.' But that can't be right, can it? I've never done anything to you."

His lazy drawl irritated Amelia endlessly. Nothing seemed to get under his skin, while she was already boiling. "The fact that you exist is already annoying enough."

He was strong enough to hold the tray of dishes with one arm and place his other hand dramatically over his heart. "Your cruelty wounds me deeply."

"The truth hurts, Liwel. Suck it up."

"Okay," Caeleste said awkwardly, taking the tray back. "I don't want to get caught in the crossfire, so I'll take these inside and come back with an empty tray."

"Take Liwel with you so he can continue his serenade from earlier."

But Caeleste swiftly grabbed the tray and almost floated through the crowd of villagers into the tavern. Heron trudged after Amelia unfortunately, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his leather trousers, and remarked, "I get the feeling you don't like me, Mikron."

"For the first time in my life, I have to agree with you."

"And what do I owe your disdain to?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

"Yeah, actually I do. Normally, the ladies swoon for me, so I must be doing something right. Only you seem to resist me."

"Someone has to put you in your place."

"I have to say, you intrigue me."

"Thanks for the compliment. That's exactly what every woman wants to hear."

He showed her a wolfish grin, which, much to Amelia's dismay,

didn't leave her heart unaffected. She quickly focused on her task, turning her back to him. "I love that you always give me a challenge. Makes the hunt all the more fun."

"What hunt? I'll never be your victim, Liwel."

"That's what they all say, darling." Before she could grab the next tankard, he reached past her and took hold of it, his hand brushing against hers, forcing her to meet his gaze.

A grave mistake, because when she felt the full intensity of his eyes on her, it was as though the ground beneath her feet disappeared, and her head started to spin. His long fingers fit perfectly around her small hand, and the warmth of his skin heated her already clammy arm. His firm chest pressed against her shoulder, and she felt as though she was on fire. She could smell his woody scent—more of vanilla and sandalwood than the sour stench of alcohol that clung to most of the villagers now. Clandestinely, she found his scent rather appealing, and she felt a strange urge to turn her head, just to take in more of those earthy smells. Now, she could better understand Arxon's weird sniffing from earlier.

Heron's warm breath brushed her cheek as he softly said, "That's what they all say, until they do fall for me." His calloused thumb stroked her palm, sending tiny electric shocks up her arm.

Amelia shook her head before she could completely lose herself and nudged him aside with her shoulder. "You're unbearable, Liwel." She couldn't deny, however, that she missed the warmth of his hand immediately. Despite the high temperatures outside, the air around her hand suddenly felt cold and uninviting.

He chuckled and rubbed his chest. "Hate is close to love, Mikron."

"Drop dead."

"Maybe someday," he teased, taking the tankards from her hands, turning away and heading back to *The Night's Delight*. "But not today, Mikron."

Amelia felt the urge to throw an empty tankard at his head but held back just in time. She was breathing hard, as if she had just run a marathon. He was such an infuriating, conceited man! He drove everyone mad with his endless chatter! Yet, she hated herself more than him, because she couldn't deny that Heron always managed to get under her skin. No matter how hard she fought it, he always knew how to rattle her. What did that say about her?

## II. KEEPING WATCH

“Heron!”

Heron jolted awake from his light slumber and immediately jumped to his feet, standing at attention. “Sir, yes, sir.” He saluted by pressing his fingers to his temple, trying to ignore the piercing gaze of his father, Heron Senior.

“Soldier, I trust you were not dozing off while on watch?”

“No, sir. I was reflecting on my sins and there’s many of them.”

Heron Senior shook his head, though he couldn’t suppress the gleam of amusement in his eyes. “Heron, keeping watch is a serious matter. It’s not an extra opportunity to sleep off your hangover.”

Heron shuddered. The Harvest Festival had stretched into the early hours of the morning for him. He had even seen the sun rise again before closing his eyes to sleep—a poor decision, given that he had been scheduled to patrol alongside his father that afternoon, a patrol that would last well into the night.

“Sir, there’s nothing to report. All is quiet in Sutarebil. As usual,” he added bitterly.

“Just because it appears quiet, doesn’t mean it is. A good soldier remains extra vigilant during peaceful times.”

“Yes, sir. I apologise for my negligence.”

His father sat down beside him on the wooden bench inside Sutarebil’s only watchtower. He offered him a flask, and when Heron took a sip, he felt a heat burn through his throat. Immediately, he began to sweat, but his head felt clearer. “What is this?” he asked, trying to suppress a cough.

His father took a swig too and replied, “Herb wine. It gives you a mental boost to keep going. One of the many secrets of a soldier’s life.” He gave his son an affectionate slap on the shoulder, and Heron smiled. “But from the sound of things, you had a good time at the Harvest Festival? I didn’t see you at all.”

Heron Senior, one of the few wardens in Sutarebil, had been on duty during the festivities, so he hadn’t had the chance to dance and drink like his son. Now that his father had dropped his role as commander and was talking to him as a father, Heron relaxed a bit more and replied, “I was at *Night’s Delight* with some mates, Father.”

“*The Night’s Delight*, again, eh? That tavern seems to have quite the hold on you, boy.” His father raised his eyebrows suggestively.

“It’s the only place in this village where there’s any fun, Father.”

“Last night, the entire village square was full of entertainment, and yet you chose a warm tavern over the fresh night air.”

“Well, ‘fresh’ is relative. The air was thick with the sweat of huddled

and jostling Sutarebilians. In comparison, *The Night's Delight* was bearable."

"That's the only reason you were there?"

"What other reason could I have for being there?"

"I don't know... perhaps some feminine charm?"

He tried to push the image away, but wavy chestnut hair, eyes the colour of grass, a flawless creamy complexion, and those enticing, warm lips with a soft cupid's bow that he would so dearly like to kiss, flashed before his mind's eye. "No, Father," he said quickly. "I can get feminine charm anywhere."

Heron Senior chuckled and slung a fatherly arm around him. "You're quite the ladies' man, Heron. But don't you think it's more interesting to settle down with one fine woman by your side?"

Once again, that image of a certain barmaid forced its way into his mind, but he shook his head. "My ambition is to become a soldier like you, Father. For now, my focus is entirely on that. Besides, I leave for Amycus in a week for advanced training to join the elite soldiers. There's no room for a wife at this point."

"I'm not forcing you to do anything, son. You don't have to follow in your father's footsteps, I hope you know that. I put a promising career aside to be with your mother, after all."

Heron only remembered his mother faintly. She had died during an epidemic that had halved Sutarebil's population when he was only 32 seasons old. He carried a photo of her in his amulet, which he always wore, but most of his memory of her came from that picture. He no longer remembered how she spoke to him, how it felt when she comforted him in her arms, how she smelled when she held him, or how she looked in anything other than the clothes she wore in the photograph. His father rarely spoke of his late wife, as her death still pained him deeply. He had never remarried, claiming that Martha had taken his heart with her when she passed.

"I know that, Father. But I'm happy with the life I lead now." He grinned. "Though patrolling the quiet streets of Sutarebil can be a bit sleep-inducing at times."

"It wouldn't be, if you didn't let yourself get so thoroughly drunk." Though it was a reprimand, his father nudged him playfully.

"The pleasures of life are just so tempting."

"Temptations should be resisted, though, for they lead you astray."

Heron wisely kept quiet. There was one great temptation he hadn't resisted, and he was growing happier with it every day. His gaze drifted south, toward the vast Dragon's Wood. The forest spanned 800 miles in length and was 1000 miles wide at its broadest point. On one of Heron's first patrols, he had strayed from the rest of the soldiers and gotten lost among the trees. After wandering for hours, he had heard noises, expecting that the soldiers had set up camp somewhere nearby. However, when he

approached the sound, he had come face-to-face with a golden dragon. The dragon had spotted him and chased him for quite some time. Heron had thought his last hour had struck when the dragon had caught him between her mighty forelegs. Neither of them had expected what came next: a telepathic bond had formed between them, revealing that Heron was the Chosen One of the dragon.

The term "Chosen One" was unfamiliar to Heron. In fact, until that moment, he had dismissed the existence of dragons as one of the many myths and legends common folk clung to in order to cope with the real tyranny of King Lembo. As a result, his newly bonded dragon, who he later named Shaera with her approval, had to give him a thorough history lesson about the first bond between man and dragon and what it meant for him to be her Chosen One.

Since that magical first encounter, Heron had spent every spare moment in Sutarebil's small library, poring over every document he could find about dragons, and in his free time, he sought the company of his new companion. He viewed his meeting with Shaera as a divine sign that he was destined for greatness, as long as he prepared well. His father's career gave him the perfect cover to train as a soldier without anyone suspecting anything unusual.

Shaera had been his for twenty seasons now, and they were inseparable. For her safety, she remained in the Dragon's Wood, but their bond was always present. Even now. When Heron opened the connection a little wider, he could sense that Shaera was hunting a wild boar. Despite its size and speed, it was managing to elude her for quite some time, frustrating her. In her irritation, Shaera unleashed her flames upon the animal, which he could not escape. The smell of roasted meat made Heron's mouth water.

He couldn't wait to be with Shaera again after his shift. Most nights, he slept with her among the trees and would sneak back into his bedroom before his morning duties. His father had probably noticed that his son wasn't sleeping at home, but he had never confronted him about it. Likely, Heron Senior assumed his son was bedding different women, and Heron was fine with that reputation. It gave him the perfect excuse to spend his nights with the only female in his life.

With his soldier training by day and his secret life as a Dragon Tamer by night, Heron had little time for other women. That wasn't a lie he had told his father. Of course, Heron still had his occasional flings with the village girls, but most of his time was devoted to his clandestine life as a Dragon Tamer.

Not only had he secretly raised a dragon, but with great effort, he had also gathered like-minded individuals to join him in a secret society. It hadn't taken Heron long to realise that Shaera had been brought into his life not to serve the king but to oppose him.

Even at a young age, Heron had seen that King Lembo's rule was

unjust. The world was full of unfairness, and the king did nothing about it. People should be free to live their lives, but as soldiers of the Realm, they had to arrest or punish anyone who spoke ill of the king. And many did, especially after a few drinks in the tavern. It felt wrong. A man should be able to speak his mind without fear of imprisonment or lashes.

Heron had seen his father whip people, and he had often been forced to take the whip himself, flogging the very villagers he greeted every day, for remarks he secretly agreed with. As a soldier, he had to play a role and follow orders, but that didn't mean he didn't feel more disgusted with King Lembo's tyranny after each act of brutality. It had to stop.

In Heron's eyes, it was time for a new ruler. However, he knew he couldn't accomplish that alone. He needed allies—a fellowship with the ultimate goal of hurting the tyrant king wherever he could. It had taken many seasons, but slowly, word of Heron's plans spread, and others had joined him. They now operated under the name The Freedom Fighters. Their secret society met twice a week to train and share news.

At their last meeting, they had heard that the southern port city of Porta had finally gone to war with Darkor after years of looming threats. It was the only city in the Eastern Realm to openly oppose Darkor's plans, and they were now paying for it with war. The Freedom Fighters had been training twice as hard in the hopes that, one day, they would be ready to join such a big fight.

They were truly gaining the strength to bring about change. Heron and Shaera were no longer the only dragon and Chosen One, nor were they the only Freedom Fighters. Elda Mantir, a female Dragon Tamer from Amycus, had been one of the first to join Heron with her dragon, Luwin. The twins Brandon and Brandagh from Captora had also come with their dragons, Lykiri and Lodor. From the far north, Meira had travelled to the Dragon's Wood to reinforce the Freedom Fighters. There were also about ten rebels from neighbouring cities like Amycus, Captora, and even Anneivis. A handful of Sutarebilians had also joined Heron, including Amelia's colleague, Arxon, and his friends Koya and Mirce Horel, Turion Mason, Stey Rodon, and Heron's close friend, Dalagh Fyrel. The Freedom Fighters had grown so numerous that it was becoming harder to keep their activities secret. Heron saw it as a blessing from the gods that they hadn't yet been discovered.

Did he truly believe that his small group could overthrow King Lembo? No, he wasn't as arrogant as the tyrant. But he did believe the Freedom Fighters could make a difference. With them by his side, he could win battles. He could weaken Lembo's forces. He could intercept weapon caravans. He could cut off key access routes to Darkor with Shaera's fire. These might be small blows to the foundation of Lembo's power, but even small strikes could weaken a structure enough for it to collapse.

He was fortunate to have a father who had been a great soldier in his youth. Unlike his father, however, Heron wasn't going to set aside his