

As a young man, Kieri Phelan helped the Tsaians defeat an invasion by the neighboring kingdom of Pargun. In fact, he saved the day when a Pargunese assassination team penetrated their camp and attacked the Tsaian prince and other lords. As a result, the Pargunese have long considered him a dangerous enemy, and the prospect of his taking the crown of Lyonya, across the Honnorgat River from Pargun to the south, alarmed their king. He sent troops to Verrakai lands in the hope of killing Phelan before he reached Lyonya.

That attack failed, as recounted in Oath of Gold, the final volume of The Deed of Paksenarrion. Now, as a new trilogy begins with Oath of Fealty, the king of Pargun fears he has a dangerous enemy to his south, as well as hostile Tsaia to his west. Though a man of war himself, certain in his belief that strength and valor must be tested, he does not want war in his own land. He cares for his people and wants them to be safe. That matters more than anything—even the happiness—even the welfare—of his difficult eldest daughter.

Cross Purposes

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"That miserable disgusting cow-dung duke has turned out to be elven royalty? I don't believe it." Torfinn, king of Pargun, speared a hunk of sausage with the point of his dagger.

"Our commander, my lord, swears--" Bradatt, the king's most trusted advisor, folded his hands on top of the reports he'd brought.

"He would swear anything, having lost the battle and come home without sword or armor, he and his whole troop. Magical beasts...elves...a dome of light...what does he think I am, a fool?"

"No, my lord, but--"

"Phelan has frustrated my plans for thirty years; he and Tsaia have stolen our land--"

"Er...it was never really ours, my lord--"

Torfinn's fist came down on the table; dishes clattered. "It was north of the river. The damned magelords invaded, enslaved our people or threw them out...it should have been our land--"

"The earthfolk warned us, my lord--it's in the archives--do not go west of the Great Falls."

"The earthfolk--" Torfinn's voice lowered. "The earthfolk are earthfolk; who can understand their ways? They set limits on us in our homeland, giving us no way but the sea to escape when the magelords came. And again, here. *She* said it might be ours. *She* said take what you need, so long as you give me my due..."

"I speak nothing against *Her*. She is the mistress of strategy, as my lord knows."

"Indeed I do." Torfinn glanced around the chamber, empty now but for himself and his most trusted minister, and yet...there were drapes and shelves and scrolls and thousands of places where tiny beings might hide, from which bright eyes might watch, and he none the wiser. His ancestors had made peace with the Weaver, the Lady of Mystery, the--in vulgar parlance--Webspinner, Achrya. She whose smaller children captured noxious flies and other insects that otherwise brought disease and death. She whose strategems no one might ignore, without grave danger. She hated magelords--

who could understand the gods, to know why? She had been the natural ally, when first the Seafolk sailed up the broad river and settled here.

"It is her wish that we take back those lands north of the Honnorgat," Torfinn said. "It has always been her wish, and what has most frustrated me, in my obedience, has been that man, that Kieri Phelan. Even as a young man, he defeated my father, killed my elder brother. It is from him that the implacable enmity of the Tsaians comes...and now he is to rule the country directly across the river? Encompass me on two sides? I will not have it!"

"But the elves, sire...and if he is truly half-elven..."

"Elves! They are but another kind of mageborn, to me. Liars, tricksters, every one of them, and the only way to protect ourselves is to trick them back. With *Her* help."

"The earthfolk say they're Elders, like themselves."

The king shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Our people knew earthfolk in the homeland, but no elves I ever heard of. The first we knew of them was here, where the magelords were. I know what my forefathers said, but I've never seen an elf, and the powers they're said to have are those of magelords: I think they are magelords who did not lose their powers, or have some way to feign powers they once had. Using tame wizards perhaps."

"But our troops were defeated--"

"So they were. I trusted Verrakai, fool that I was. I know him descended from magelords, but also opposed to the Mahieran monarchy...I had his promise that when the monarchy fell, he would return our northern lands...at least in the east."

Bradatt sighed.

"I know," Torfinn said, having noticed the sigh. "I know what you said, and you were right...but it was a chance as comes but rarely. And now that red-headed fellow will be their king...but surely has not yet taken real control. Perhaps if we attack now--"

"Sire...it is but a few tendays until the ice goes; we would risk isolating an army across the river during spring thaw. In the mud."

Torfinn shifted in his seat. "I have to think of something. He might attack--"

"Surely not now. As you said, he has yet to take complete control of his kingdom; the coronation is scarce over. There will be much to do there, to keep him busy. The kingdom's vulnerable--"

"Exactly why I thought *now*--"

"Yes. The old king's health and its effects. But that vulnerability will keep him busy on his side of the river. And rumor has it the elves--or whatever you want to call them--his grandmother included--do not want him fighting."

"Women never do," Torfinn said. Most women, anyway, he reminded himself.

"There's an interesting story," Bradatt said. "About those years he was unknown." He paused; the king nodded. "I heard it through the Verrakai, who sent a message before he left Vérella. Apparently, Phelan was not just stolen away as a child from the court of Lyonya--he was imprisoned across the eastern sea. By one of *them*."

"A magelord?" Torfinn started, and looked hard at his advisor. "Why did you not tell me this before?"

"That messenger went by conventional routes, north from Vérella and then across country. He arrived days later than the battle, the day after we learned of defeat. I was not myself informed until yesterday."

"Mmm." Torfinn considered. The stories the Seafolk had brought with them from across the eastern ocean, terrible and filled with blood and pain, gave him a moment's pause. If such still existed; if the magelords who had migrated there still held the powers they once held, and if they had captured a child...he did not want to think of that. He did not want to feel sympathy for an enemy, especially not this enemy. "Do you think it true?" he asked.

"It was given in testimony at court, before the Council and the crown prince," Bradatt said. "And the elves there--the alleged elves there--agreed it was so. That is all I can say; I doubt we will find out more now."

"It would be a terrible thing for a child," the king said, still holding sympathy aside, but with an effort. "But I cannot see how a child could escape, let alone survive to reach these shores. A small child, alone and friendless...and then, supposing it to be the same child, why did not his relatives recognize him? If indeed he has such powers as his mother's relatives are said to have?"

"That I do not know," Bradatt said. "It seems remarkable, but perhaps he had some innate magic."

"Or perhaps it never happened," Torfinn said. He did not want to believe it; everything in his tradition demanded kinship with those the magelords had captured, and he wanted no kinship with Phelan.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts; he scowled. No one was supposed to interrupt his morning conferences.

"Father!"

Elis. Naturally, it was Elis, the most troublesome of his daughters.

"Come," he said. He glanced aside at Bradatt, who took the hint, gathered his materials, and left the room as Elis came in. She wore a heavy wool tunic and trousers, her fair hair in a single braid down her back. He stared--for a moment she looked almost like that paladin of Phelan's he'd seen once, riding patrol just inside Phelan's borders. But that one's hair had been more yellow; Elis's was silver-gilt like his own, and despite her boyish ways she moved more like a princess than a soldier.

"I came for the money you promised," she said, blunt as always. "To send with my builders, to the north--"

As if he had forgotten the reason. "You're sure?" he said. She glared at him.

"Of course I'm sure. Have I asked for anything else, these last five years, than this chance? And you agreed, at Sunturning, you promised--"

He had, indeed, seeing no chance of marrying this one off--no princes of the right age, or temperament either. Elis had inherited his own lordly ways, and nothing the women had tried changed her.

"There is a new king in Lyonya," he said, just to see how she would explode this time. "He has no wife."

She did not explode, but her ice-blue eyes pierced him like hot needles. "I am not minded to become a wife," she said. "And you have other daughters to bestow, if you're determined to make peace with him. Atonyin, for instance, would like nothing better than to play the queen."

Atonyin was a fool, interested only in flirtations and parties; it was only by the exercise of stringent measures that she had been kept from disaster. "She is younger," he said. "The man is much older."

"Then he is also older than me," Elis said with splendid disdain. "And he has long been your enemy. Do not play this game with me, Father. You promised."

He had promised, but he was the king, and she was but a stripling girl, overwillful, who had not earned what she demanded. "You shall have your money," he said. "I would see the plans of this place you want to build, first."

She had a skin ready, the plans neatly drawn; he had to admit being impressed that she had come prepared. He looked at the plan, half-listening to her description, aware as he had not been for a long time of her body, her woman-grown body...a shame to waste it up there in the north. She could be of much more use than Atonyin; she had the intelligence, the strength of will, and clearly--from this--the ability to plan and execute a plan. What a son she would have made, if she had been a boy...and what a powerful queen she might make, in the right place.

But she would never consent. She stood back, now, giving him stare for stare. She had no modesty, no demure submission, not a scrap of it...and as she was, she was a liability here, where she had already bloodied noses and blacked eyes of those who thought she must be like her sisters.

An idea glimmered below his awareness; he could not pull it up in time, and found himself scribbling a note to his chancellor, releasing the funds he'd promised. He gave it to her; she nodded abruptly, with only the slightest change in expression that might be a smile. "Thank you, Father," she said. "I will render accounts regularly." Then she turned, without asking his permission, and strode out of the chamber.

He stared at the tabletop...what had his idea been? He had only been joking about offering her to Phelan...it would be a great jest if that came to be, for if there was one man who could tame the girl, surely it was a crusty old mercenary commander.

Phelan would be stronger, smarter, proof against her wiles...the king shook his head. Phelan was his enemy. The man would marry, no doubt, but he would marry some sweet simple girl of his own domain, some noble's daughter.

But...as smoothly as a hot knife sliding into butter, another image of the situation eased into his mind; he never considered whence it came. Phelan had been married before, to a soldier-woman. He had shown no interest in sweet simplicity, but in exactly the kind of woman Elis was like to be. And if once Elis shared his bed--unwillingly, for he was sure Elis would never be willing--she might do something. His mind ran through the possibilities: a knife in the ribs as he slept, poison dripped into his ear, or in his food or drink, to kill or control. As his wife, Elis would have opportunity to influence him--or kill him--that no one else could have.

That she would never consent, he was sure, but that a single girl could evade the situation if he set it up without her knowledge was impossible. Of that, he was also sure.

He had not made up his mind when he left the chamber; he would seek counsel of his advisors on this matter. But he eyed his other daughters at dinner that night: Atonyin with her flirting eyes, her dimples...Sargitta who was almost plain and about as interesting as a boiled dumpling without salt...he could not imagine any of them doing what Elis could do, if only she willed it.

What would make her will it?

Elis came to dinner late, her dinner robe rucked up on one side.

"You have boots on!" her step-mother said angrily.

"Sorry," Elis said. "My apologies, sir, for being late, but the red mare foaled."

"And you wore stable boots to the table?"

The other girls giggled, pleased as usual to see Elis in trouble.

"I had no time to change; I was late already."

"Do we not have stable staff to deal with foaling mares?" her step-mother asked.

"You are a princess, not a groom! Your place is here, properly dressed, on time."

"Let her be," Torfinn said. He could play the doting father for once.

They all looked at him in surprise. "But--" her step-mother said.

"She is going, you know that," Torfinn said, forking up a slice of mutton, folding bread around it. "She has chosen to leave court life; I've no doubt she'll come to the table in her northern fastness with stable dirt on her boots every day, and we can't stop it."

"But here--"

"It's only a family dinner. Let her be."

Asgone had been strong-willed once, but the king had convinced her that a queen must show regard for her lord the king; now she frowned, but dipped her head. Elis, he saw, had the sense to sit down quietly, without any triumphant or defiant looks or words, and accept the food the servants offered. She ate rapidly, clearly hungry. Her clear pale skin showed only the faintest color at her cheeks...she had, the king recognized, a beauty that might well appeal to someone like Phelan. Might remind him of that paladin or his former wife.

"How long will it take your builders to ready your steading for you?" he asked Elis. "You are waiting until there's a roof against the weather, aren't you, before you leave?"

She gave him a glance, spoon halfway to her mouth. "They are arranging transport of materials now, sir. Tools and such." She sipped from the spoon,

swallowed, set the spoon down. "I will wait until the foals can travel; by then they expect to have as much roof as I need at first."

"Wise," Torfinn said. So she would be here until snowberries ripened, at least. Probably until Midsummer. Would Phelan be in Chaya, or would he attend the crowning of Tsaia's new king, the crown prince who would ascend the throne? Surely he would be too busy in his own kingdom, so new to him. Surely, too, he would not risk crossing Verrakai lands again, even with Verrakai and his brother dead or in a Tsaian dungeon.

He had time to plan; he had time to consider if he really wanted to risk his daughter, flesh of his flesh, with a man like Phelan...but he had no other plan, nothing else that might make his land and people safer. The girl owed him that--owed their people that. He smiled at her; she gave him a tentative smile in return.

The End



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