

The Trial
by Mervi Hämäläinen

1.

Duncan Esgard looked at the figure huddled underneath the blankets. She was sitting on a narrow cot possibly glaring at him but it was too dark to really tell. Duncan set the lantern on the small table.

"The Dragon's light to you," Duncan said as gently as he could. "I'm Rune Knight Duncan Esgard, a Rune Knight of St Kres, the Lady of Justice and Peace. Your parents are worried and asked me to find out the truth about your situation. "

"Well, you don't have to."

Duncan sighed. "I'm afraid it's not that simple, Ceana of the clan Eagle eyes. Once I've been charged to take over a case I cannot stop until I know the truth and have judged the guilty party."

She stared at him. Or maybe she stared at Brianag who was standing behind Duncan's right shoulder in her impressive black armor.

"Oh, pardon me. This is my bodyguard and wife, Brianag Esgard."

She stared at him in the semi-dark room.

"I'm here to ask you some questions. It's in your own interest to be truthful because I will ask them later in the public hearing and surprises there are not good."

"I want you to stop and go away. I've said all I'm going to say."

"I cannot go away," Duncan repeated gently. "Now, I'd like you to tell me what happened the night Lord Odard died."

She turned her face away.

"I am going to talk to everyone involved and the truth will generally come out. It's easier for everybody if it comes out quickly."

"You can't force me to talk." She hesitated and added: "Can you?"

"Torture doesn't give dependable results. However, in the Forge of Truth you cannot lie or deceive."

"The Forge? Will it... hurt?"

"No, although some, who find it difficult to tell the truth, experience some discomfort."

She bit her lip and frowned.

"What will you do with me, if I'm found guilty?"

"That depends. If the killing was in self defence, I cannot see why you would be put to death anymore than all the soldiers here. If it was a planned murder or done for pleasure of killing, you can be dangerous to those around you."

She stared at him with her eyes wide.

"And then what?" she whispered.

"I do not have many resources here. It depends on many things."

"Will you... will you give me over to Osfrid and... his men."

"No. Two wrongs do not make a right."

She sighed and looked at the table.

"I won't answer your questions."

"That will make my job harder but not impossible."

She shrugged and was silent again. After a long while Duncan sighed and left with Brianag. The deputy was standing outside their door looking bored and sullen. She locked the door again and they went back downstairs.

"How was she?" the sheriff asked

"Uncooperative," Duncan replied. "But that's hardly surprising."

"Yes. When you get more cases you're going to be surprised just how uncooperative the common people can be."

"I doubt it. We've been here only for two months but I've been a Knight for three years. Actually, people are much more cooperative with us than with soldiers or former soldiers." The sheriff looked sceptical.

2.

Duncan looked at the big crowd of people who had come to the hearing. He nodded to the members of the Council who sat in the first row. The fifteen men and two women nodded back. Stocky lord Osfrid Deormund frowned at him.

The former barn was full of people and it was a little difficult for Duncan to make himself forget about the audience and focus on the task at hand.

"We are here to find out if Ceana of the clan Eagle eyes murdered lord Odard Deormund. In order to find out the truth, I will question any and all people I need to in the Forge of Truth. I shall begin with Ceana herself."

"How do we know that the person inside the circle will speak the truth?" the leader of the council, Ivar Sigheard spoke up.

"People who are sceptical are welcome to try it out themselves", Duncan said.

For some time members of the city council amused themselves by making a person stand in the middle of the white chalk circle in the middle of the barn and asking them questions. The person in the circle could only answer truthfully or remain silent. Lord Osfrid, his retinue, and other western people looked on with disdain.

Duncan had expected this because people did this in every community which wasn't used to the followers of St. Kres. He did interfere if the questions became too personal, though.

"I trust that you now know the power of the circle?" he finally asked.

"Yes," one of the councilmen answered, a little breathlessly. "Do you... use it just for trials?"

"Yes. And no, it's not going to be used outside it."

He looked disappointed.

"Do you want to test it, lord?" councilwoman Slainè Featherbright asked lord Osfrid.

"No, I'm quite familiar with it", he growled. "Can we convict my son's murderess now?"

She frowned and opened her mouth but Duncan said first:

"I will question Ceana of clan Eagle eyes in the Forge of Truth."

One of the deputies brought Ceana forward. She walked with her head high but her mouth was a tight line. The deputy motioned for her to step inside the circle. Ceana stopped and looked at Duncan.

"I don't want to answer!"

"You will have to enter the circle but it's up to you to answer or not," Duncan said.

The deputy tightened her grip on her shoulder. Ceana looked at the spectators, squared her broad shoulders, and stepped into the circle. She turned around to face Duncan, glowering.

"State your name, please", Duncan said to calm her before he started to question her more.

She blinked and said automatically:

"Ceana of the clan Eagle eyes."

"Do you know what you are being accused of?"

"Yes, of course! The murder of "lord" Odard. The pig got what he deserved!"

Some of the crowd murmured.

"Did you kill him?" Duncan asked quickly.

Ceana opened her mouth, but then she forced it shut again and just glared at Duncan.

"Do you know who killed him?"

She stood frozen on the spot.

Duncan sighed.

"Do you understand that if you are innocent, all you have to do is say so, and nobody could convict you?"

"Really? Do you think that **he**," she inclined her head towards lord Osfrid, "wouldn't take revenge on his son's killer?"

"If you are afraid of being unjustly assaulted, I can give you protection."

She snorted and looked at the crowd. She refused to answer any of his questions.

"Fine," Duncan said finally and sighed. "I'll have to keep you in jail while I question some other people."

Ceana looked rather relieved and tired when she stepped out of the circle and sat down on the bench near it.

Duncan called in one of the guards who had arrested Ceana. He stepped eagerly into the circle.

"Tell me how you arrested Ceana."

"Sure! I was making my usual rounds in the castle, when I saw her skulking around and-"

"Skulking? In what way?"

"She was in the hallway on the second floor, trying to hide behind a large statue."

"How did you notice her?"

"There were small blood drops near the statue."

"Oh? Could you draw them for me?"

He nodded and drew a pattern in the muddy ground. It seemed that the drops were on the other side of the statue from where the guard was coming. And they were small, indeed.

"Was it dark already?"

"Why, yes!"

"How did you notice such a small drops?"

"Well, I..." the guard stopped and hesitated. Then he blurted out: "I'm used to watching for them. Usually the girls hide around there."

"Usually?"

"... yes."

"Which girls are you talking about?"

"The Lord's," he stopped but blurted out again: "whores. He needs them, like all red-blooded males."

"Why would they be bleeding?"

"Sometimes... sometimes he hurts them."

"And you don't do anything to stop it?"

The guard blinked looking confused.

"Why should I stop him?"

Duncan bit his lip and frowned. This was not really relevant to Ceana's case however much he loathed letting an obvious injustice go unopposed.

"Why did you arrest Ceana?"

"Her dress had some blood on it, she had a suspicious bundle with her, and she was looking like she had done something bad."

"Do you arrest all of the girls who you find near there?"

"Of course not."

Duncan sighed. "What was so different about Ceana that you decided to arrest her?"

"Oh! Her dress had splatters of blood all over it. Some of the other girls don't have blood and some have just small blotches and they are, er, lower. She clutched a bundle of clothes and refused to let me see it. When I threatened her with jail she didn't say anything at all. I had to forcibly take the bundle from her and it was a bloody dress! And she didn't look properly upset. Most of the other girls were crying."

"Didn't the girls get a new dress or some other compensation?"

"Why the Hell would they?" the guard swore. "I... I mean of course not."

"What did she say when you first noticed her?"

"Well, she was crouching behind the statue and said that the Lord was through with her. But then she stood straight and she just didn't look like any of the other... girls my Lord had had. She said that she was going now but she was clutching that bundle. I asked what she had there and she looked scared. I thought she had stolen something and demanded that she show it to me. She refused and just said several times that she wanted to go away. Then I said that I would lock her in jail if she wouldn't show me the bundle. She looked angry and said no. I took the bundle and it had the bloody dress in there."

The audience listened almost breathlessly. Most of the women threw sympathetic glances at Ceana from time to time. Lord Osfrid sat stone faced as did his retinue. Ceana's mother Eithne clutched the hands of both of her husbands. All of them were pale.

"Were you with the guards who found lord Odard?"

"No, sir. I was guarding the girl. The warden took the sergeant and three men to the Lord's rooms. They found him."

Duncan nodded. The guard couldn't give him more information so he called the warden to the Forge.

"Tell me, why did you decide to go to lord Odard's rooms?"

The tall, dark haired man looked at lord Osfrid. After the lord nodded, the warden growled slowly:

"The girl that was arrested, she had bloody clothes. So I decided to check on my Lord just to be safe."

"Why did you take the men with you?"

He looked surprised and blurted:

"I needed witnesses! I mean... if something had happened it was better that I wasn't there alone."

Duncan raised an eyebrow. The warden looked at lord Osfrid again. This time he got no cues.

"Surely you know how these things go. I didn't want to be blamed myself for... for anything that might be there."

He fidgeted and grew quiet.

"What did you see in lord Odard's rooms?"

"The Lord was lying on the floor, face down and there was blood on his shirt and on the floor. We stopped and looked around but there was no-one there. He... he was dead. There was a small dagger next to him on the floor, covered in blood."

The warden stopped and swallowed.

"We looked all around the room but found no assassin. The bed furs were untouched so we thought... that it had to have been the girl he had that night. Would have had. Anyway, the dagger is a girl's weapon and it was clearly used for the killing."

"What did you do then?"

"I sent one of the stable boys to send a word for Lord Osfrid and another to the sheriff. Then I went to see the girl we had arrested. I questioned her but she didn't say anything."

We examined the bloody clothes and kept everything for the sheriff. I had to do all the usual things that are involved in running the castle, too."

Duncan nodded. The warden didn't say anything more useful and neither did the sheriff or his deputies. The other castle guards didn't have anything to add, either.

Some of the spectators had started to wander off and some of the remaining ones spoke softly among themselves. Ceana's mother clutched her husband's hands until her knuckles were white and made pleading looks towards Duncan. He sighed and continued to question the servants who mostly knew rumours and what others had said about the murder. But they did tell that lord Odard had slept with most of the young servant girls. Duncan started the questioning with a girl who cried and confessed that the lord had coerced her into his bed. She was clearly pregnant. She also told that he had had interest in both Ceana and another girl, Freyda, who had a young son. Freyda wasn't married and her parents had abandoned her when she had become pregnant.

Duncan called Freyda to the Forge. Ceana looked at her in concern but became quickly stone faced again.

Short, dark haired Freyda looked scared and dragged her boots across the Circle, which was scuffed. She stopped, blinked her big, blue eyes and said:

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess you have to fix the circle now?"

"No. It's there for convenience's sake, to show you where to stand. Don't worry, the magic isn't affected by the outward sign."

"Oh," she could barely contain her disappointment.

Ceana had been holding her breath and now blew it out. Duncan raised his eyebrows.

"Do you know how to use a dagger, Miss Freyda?"

"Yes, of course. She taught me."

Freyda pointed at Brianag. Duncan raised his eyebrows and Brianag nodded.

"Where were you last night?"

"I... I was at the castle." Every word out of her mouth was laboured. "I mean, of course," she added quickly, "I work there."

"Were you working there last night?"

"I..." she shut her mouth looking frustrated.

"Who was with you there?" Duncan asked after a while.

"She was," Freyda blurted out and looked at Brianag.

Then she shut her mouth firmly.

3.

"What was that about?" Duncan asked.

"What?" Brianag asked too casually as she shrugged off the black armour from her broad shoulders.

"What Freyda said. That you were there with her last night."

She bit her lip and refused to look at him.

Duncan sighed. "It's going to come out anyway. Don't you want to tell me first?"

"I guess."

Duncan stepped in front of her.

"I'd rather know it sooner if I have to hang my wife for murder."

Her brown eyes were full of anger.

The door opened and Alexander stepped in. His happy grin faded quickly even though Duncan turned to smile at him.

"Erm. What's going on?"

"Your husband is accusing me of murder!" Brianag growled.

Alexander's brows shot up.

"No, I didn't! Duncan said and added more quietly: "Not exactly..."

"What's going on?" Alexander asked again.

"One of the more suspicious testifiers at the trial today implicated her. She haven't told me that she had anything to do with the case!"

"So you started to yell and accuse?"

"Well... yes..." Duncan looked at his husband sheepishly. "You're right. I'm sorry, Brianag, honey. I shouldn't have assumed."

Brianag closed her mouth but continued to glare.

"Honey, could you explain it?" Duncan pleaded. "I hate it when I'm blindsided by my own family during a trial."

"When have I-," Alexander started indignantly, but then said. "Oh. Right. Never mind."

"Do you really believe that I can do a cold-blooded murder?" Brianag bristled.

Duncan looked at her.

"Yes. If you had to."

"Had to? When would I "have to"?"

"To protect others," Duncan said quietly. "Us."

Her expression softened.

"But you just assumed and didn't ask..."

"Yes and I'm sorry. I am asking now."

"No, I didn't murder him!"

"Good!"

Duncan hugged Brianag who stood first stiffly but soon relaxed into it.

"I wouldn't want to lose you, either of you," Duncan muttered into her ear.

4.

Lord Osfrid paced on the stone floor of Duncan's, Alexander's, and Brianag's quarters. He turned and shot a murderous glare at Duncan who sat behind the table.

"Just execute them!"

"Which one?"

The count gritted his teeth and picked up an intricately carved wooden horse.

"Don't you want to know who really killed him?" Duncan asked wondering if the count was going to break the little statue.

"Of course! But I also need this to be resolved quickly!"

Duncan looked at him, waiting.

"Murder cases are done quickly and the murderer or murderess is hanged the next day. To do anything else is a sign of weakness! Haven't you been to the south? The Boon Companions are all for quick justice."

"Yes, I've been there, Duncan said quietly. "They are for quick judgment and how things look. Justice rarely has anything to do with it."

Brianag behind his right shoulder tensed. Lord Osfrid flushed and looked Duncan in the eyes. Duncan looked back, calm and collected. Lord Osfrid's hand sought his broadsword in vain; it was waiting for him outside.

After a while the count lifted the right corner of his mouth.

"I really should know better than try to debate with a man of St Kres. All you get is a mouth full of truth. Regardless of if you want it or not."

Duncan waited. He was impatient to start today's questioning. Brianag remained tense and ready. The count just looked at the horse thoughtfully.

Finally Duncan said:

"Is there something I can do for you, lord count?"

"Yes, indeed. You can make the questioning quicker. Just concentrate on the two wenches who are being so closemouthed that they have to know much."

Privately, Duncan agreed with the last bit, but he wasn't going to compromise his trial.

"If you already know so much about us Kresites, then you also know that we don't use torture."

"Of course you don't," lord Osfrid said and smiled wolfishly.

"Would you please sit down?" Duncan gestured toward the chair. "You're making my bodyguard nervous."

The count put the horse back to the side table, sat down, and leered up at Brianag.

"Must be really convenient."

Brianag's face remained impassive and Duncan didn't rise to the bait.

"If you are suggesting that I could use your torturers, I will not do that, either."

Lord Osfrid waved his hand vaguely.

"If a person complains to me about being tortured, I will investigate and render justice accordingly. I cannot use the same methods which I will judge unjust when others use them."

"You limit yourself unnecessarily."

When Duncan frowned, lord Osfrid continued quickly:

"But I'm here just to plead that you be quick."

His tone wasn't pleading.

"A case will take as long as it will. If you are concerned about the details of your family's behaviour becoming a public knowledge that cannot be avoided."

Lord Osfrid frowned in puzzlement.

"Based on the testimonials yesterday, I would have sentenced your son to be castrated. That is if the abused women would have come for me for justice."

Now lord Osfrid flushed again and opened his mouth.

"But that is not the issue here. If you want me to continue the trial quickly, I suggest you stop wasting my time."

The count shut his mouth, stood, and glared at Duncan. He raised his eyebrows. Lord Osfrid stormed out of the small house.

"Is it really wise to anger him like that?" Brianag asked when she relaxed her stance.

"No. But if I'd been wise, would never have become a Rune Knight in the first place. I knew a lot of men like him in the army and I just can't help myself. I guess it's a character flaw," Duncan grinned.

Brianag smiled back and he turned back to his interrupted breakfast.

5.

Brianag stepped into the Forge.

"First off, did you kill lord Odard?" Duncan asked casually.

"No, I didn't."

"Do you know who did?"

She hesitated but continued to look at her husband.

"I wasn't there so I don't know really," she said at last.

"Do you have a good guess?"

"Doesn't everybody?" she said dryly and then nodded towards the servant women. "We have already heard from quite a few **humans** who would have more than a reason to do it."

"Do you know if one of them did it?"

"No," she said quickly and bit her lip.

Duncan eyed her thoughtfully and asked:

"Do you know something relevant to this case?"

"Freyda has already told you that I ran the defence practices which many of the women here participated. So, I have taught most of the women in the castle to use weapons."

"Anything else?"

"Well..." she hesitated again. "I did hear that some of the women were discussing Odard. They were being vague about it but I could guess what was going on. I told them that they should tell you but they didn't want to do that. So I did, well, tell them that they shouldn't put up with that kind of treatment. They asked me how to fend off a man and I showed them. They asked where on a man should they use a dagger or a short sword and I showed them."

"What!" roared one of lord Osfrid's aides. "How could you do something like that!"

The audiences' mutter increased. Brianag ignored them and continued to look at Duncan.

"Did you hear them talking specifically about defence against lord Odard?"

"Yes, but also against some other men."

The audience muttered again. The temple acolyte called for silence and gradually the voices lowered.

"Do you know anything else that is directly related to the killing of lord Odard or the night he died?"

She hesitated again and Duncan smiled a little, encouragingly.

"We, some of the other bodyguards and female soldiers, have started an escort service for women who have to travel alone after the Fiery Dragon has descended. I have escorted some of the women here today to Odard's castle and back again. Two nights ago, I escorted Freyda back from the castle. She was crying but didn't tell me why."

Both Ceana and Freyda slumped back against the bench they were sitting on. They looked at each other but didn't say anything.

"Did she have blood on her?"

"It was too dark to tell. And," she added in a disgusted voice, "I've stopped looking. Too often there is blood and she won't do anything about it."

"Like buy a new dress?" a male voice called from the crowd and laughed.

Brianag frowned and Duncan asked quickly:

"Did she have weapons when she went in?"

"I don't know. I didn't escort her there. I guess she went to work as normal and was then ordered to go to Odard's bedchamber."

"But she knew to arrange the escort the previous day?"

"No. Ceana sent me a note to ask if I could escort Freyda back. The note was sent on the same day."

Duncan's brows shot up.

"Did Ceana also pay for it?"

"It doesn't work like that. They pool their resources and pay us what they can."

Duncan nodded.

"Were you the first one she contacted?"

Again she hesitated.

"I don't know. But it looked like the kid who gave me the note had gone through some others first."

Lord Osfrid snorted and fidgeted. Duncan was sure that if he looked at the count he would get a meaningful look.

"Do you think that Freyda is capable of murdering someone?"

Brianag's thick, dark eyebrows rose and her muscular arm gripped a sword handle.

"If someone threatened her son, maybe," she smiled a little at her husband. "But most of us would be if needed."

"Do you think that lord Odard abused these women enough that they would resort to murder?"

She blinked and glanced thoughtfully at the women sitting on the bench.

"Maybe, although they didn't want to get legal justice by coming to you," she said finally. "But abuse is thought of as a private matter."

Lord Osfrid nodded. Brianag glared at him and blurted out:

"But it's the responsibility of the rulers to make these lands safe!"

He blinked.

"These lands are safe," a huge male on his retinue said dismissively.

"How can they be when half of the population has to be scared of the other half!" Brianag exploded.

Duncan stepped between them and glared at the man before turning towards his wife.

"Do you know where Ceana was the night lord Odard was killed?"

"No."

"Why didn't you tell me you knew something about the case?"

"I... Freyda asked me not to tell anyone. I have now broken her trust."

"I appreciate it." Duncan himself heard how lame he sounded.

He decided to try to question Ceana and Freyda again and asked Ceana to step into the circle.

"Would you like to tell us what happened the night lord Odard died?" Duncan asked pleasantly.

Ceana licked her lips, looking nervous. She opened her mouth- and the doors of the former barn swung open.

"Stop!" said an imperious female voice. "This trial can't judge her!"

6.

"I beg your pardon?" Duncan said in a low voice.

A group of women dressed in hunting leathers and carrying spears, bows, and swords stood in the doorway. The one in front, a blonde, imperious, muscular woman with broad shoulders strode forward and the others followed, some with heads held high, proudly, and others with suspicious glances around them. Murmurs rouse among the audience again and the acolyte demanded silence.

She looked at the audience, glanced at Duncan, and strode toward Ceana.

"Ceana of the clan Eagle eyes, I'm clan leader Mòrag of clan Eagle eyes. Despite your mother's... choices you are a daughter of the clan and therefore under my protection. Do you wish to be removed from here?"

Ceana's eyes widened. She looked at the clan leader with a sudden hope in her eyes. Then she glanced at her mother Eithne who was white as pure snow.

"Forgive me, clan leader, but I don't know your-our ways. What would happen to me if I wished so?"

Clan leader Mòrag frowned at Eithne but answered Ceana:

"I would be obligated to take you away from here in whatever way possible. After that you would have to prove your worth to the clan, and the higher the cost in blood the more you would need to provide."

"Pro-provide what?"

"Hunting, fighting, fishing, midwifery, any useful skills you have."

Ceana looked at her mother again and then at Freyda.

"And... could I take someone with me?"

The clan leader's gaze followed hers and her expression softened.

"No, unless she is your blood sister or spouse. We fight only for ourselves."

"Do-do I have to choose now?"

"No. But you would do well not to irritate me by forcing me to stay long among these... people."

"I-I can't decide now."

"Very well. But I won't stay here for long."

Mòrag strode in front of Duncan.

"Are you the judge here?"

"Yes."

She sniffed and looked at the women sitting on the bench.

"Why did you claim that this trial is illegal?" Duncan could barely hold his temper.

"I'm her clan leader," she said nodding towards Ceana. "I should have been told about the trial and you should have waited until my arrival. I heard about the whole affair by accident."

"You're right." Duncan looked at the acolyte. "Why wasn't she informed?"

The young acolyte blanched.

"I-I-we weren't told that we had to," he stammered. "We... she wasn't here and nobody knew where she was..."

Duncan waved him away.

"My apologies. This is my first trial for quite some time and clearly I need to train my help better."

The acolyte trembled beneath Duncan's glare.

"You'll just start again," the clan leader said and started to turn away.

Duncan opened his mouth to protest but the count was faster:

"No, we won't," he thundered when he roused from his seat.

The blonde woman turned and raised her eyebrows. He strode towards her and glared at her.

"Sit down, wench, if you must be a part of this!"

"No."

"What! Look, the trial has been going on for far too long already. I will not have it extended even further! My son's spirit demands restitution."

"What is your restitution then?"

The count opened his mouth but glanced at Duncan.

"... That's not for me to decide. This time."

"You then?" She turned towards Duncan. "What is your punishment, then?"

"I have not all the facts, yet. But nothing will bring back the spirit that is lost."

"If you plan on giving out no punishment, why are we here at all?"

"I did not say that. Please, we must--"

"I will not suffer through the entire trial again!" the count roared.

"Perhaps we can come to a compromise," Duncan said soothingly. "I was planning on questioning again the most important witnesses because of what my wife's questioning revealed."

The clan leader raised her eyebrows again.

"Would you really want to listen through to the witnesses who did not have much to say?" Duncan asked quickly.

She looked at him for a moment and the corner of her mouth curled upward.

"No. I have no desire to spend any more time here than is absolutely necessary. My heart belongs to the wild forests."

"Would you then allow me to continue now with this most important witness? I can arrange for a second questioning later for the other witnesses who are not heard today."

"That is... acceptable. For now."

She turned. The acolyte had cleared a bench for the women hunters. They looked disdainful but some of the older women sat down while most of them remained standing around the bench in protective manner.

"Are you familiar with the way the Forge of Truth works?" Duncan asked.

The clan leader Mórag shook her head. Duncan told her and after a couple of women from her retinue had tried it and proven that it worked, the clan leader accepted it. Lord Osfrid was drumming his fingers.

Duncan asked Ceana to step into the circle.

"Would you tell us now what happened at the night lord Odard died?" he asked.

Ceana pursed her lips and looked first at her mother and fathers, and then at the clan leader. Her mother Eithne stared back at her with wide eyes.

Ceana shook her head.

"Why don't you just tell him what he wants to know?" Mórag asked.

The audience was shocked into silence.

"Your clan leader has a good point," Duncan said. "Why don't you tell us?"

"Wait a moment!" lord Osfrid said. "Why is she allowed to ask questions?"

"I will entertain questions that are reasonable."

"Why didn't you tell me!"

"Would you like to ask something now? And I will not ask questions outside of the case."

There were disappointed sighs from the crowd. Lord Osfrid shook his head.

"Well, then. Ceana of clan Eagle eyes, why won't you answer my questions?"

The young woman bit her lip and looked at her mother again. She nodded to her. Ceana looked away, at the clan leader. The blonde woman sat without expression.

"I- I can't tell you," Ceana said finally.

"I think it would be easier on you if you told what you know," Duncan said. "This trial cannot end until I know the truth."

This time she looked at Freyda who was weeping.

"I... my hand didn't use the dagger," Ceana's words were forced through her teeth.

"Haa!" Lord Osfrid leapt to his feet. "Hang the other one, then!"

"Lord Osfrid, please," Duncan said.

"Please, what?"

"Sit down."

The count's face reddened.

"I have told you what to do. Like I said earlier, in private, the sooner this is over with the better."

"And as I said to you: I'm here to serve my Lady of Justice, not your interests," Duncan said more sharply than he intended.

A murmur rose among the audience. Duncan's bodyguards tensed. The count sat back down. Duncan asked Ceana some more questions but she didn't say anything more. Finally he asked her to step out and called Freyda again to the Forge. She had stopped crying and looked white as snow but determined.

"I killed him," she said as soon as she stepped into the Forge.

"Don't listen to her," Ceana said over the muttering and gasping crowd.

"Please continue," Duncan said to Freyda.

"No! She doesn't know what she's saying!" Ceana stood up.

"Would you like to step into the Forge and say that again?" Duncan asked.

"Yes! Because I was responsible for his death!"

The crowd murmured again. Freyda closed her eyes.

"It's fine," Freyda said softly. "It's a relief to get it out into the open. It's really my fault, not hers."

"Tell us, please," Duncan said. "And Ceana of clan Eagle eyes, you will also get your chance to tell your side of it."

Ceana sat down, white and furious. She glared at the clan leader and her women.

"I..." Freyda took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and fixed her gaze at Duncan. "Two nights ago, Lord Odard ordered me to keep him company during the evening. I've seen what he does to some of the other women. It's been done to me earlier. He made it clear that I didn't have a choice."

She paused.

"Ceana noticed that something was wrong and eventually I told her. She said that she would take care of everything and that nothing would happen to me. I... I know she meant well and was serious but I didn't really believe that she could do anything. The nobility are... we can't really make them stop."

"Who is your son's father?" the count asked idly.

"You don't have to answer that," Duncan said quickly. "Unless he has something to do with lord Odard's death."

She shook her head.

"Please, continue."

"He... I went to his bedroom as he had commanded and he... made clear what he wanted from me. I tried to refuse but he said that all women want it; otherwise we wouldn't be working for him."

Lord Osfrid was nodding and his retinue sneered at Freyda.

The clan leader looked disdainfully at everyone but her own retinue. Duncan sighed and his bodyguards were tense.

"He grabbed me and I... I was ready to submit to him. I didn't want to be hurt, I didn't want to go hungry, I didn't want my boy to be hungry. I wanted to live." She rubbed at her eyes.

"Then Ceana burst through the door. She... she had a sword and she ordered the Lord to get off me. He laughed and said that two women were even better. Ceana got really angry. She laid the sword tip on the Lord's throat and he-he just grabbed the sword and pulled her close. They struggled for the sword and I tried to find a way to help but... but I..."

She drew a deep breath and continued:

"There was a knife on the floor and I took it. He hit her and she fell to the floor. He started to tear her clothes away and I... I reached at him and slit his throat open."

The audience gasped and started to murmur.

"You murderess!" lord Osfrid yelled looking pleased. "I demand that you hang her by evening!"

"That is not for you to decide," Duncan said. "Do you have anything to add?" he asked Freyda.

"Please, have someone take care of my son..."

Duncan asked her to step out. An acolyte had to help her to the bench.

He called Ceana to the Forge. She stepped in glaring at Duncan and everyone else.

"Would you like to tell us what happened when lord Odard died?"

She just glowered.

"Well, Freyda already confessed her part so staying silent will only make things harder for you."

Ceana bit her lip but in the end she said:

"Freyda told the truth. But it was my fault that she had to kill him. She was protecting me."

"I understand," Duncan said kindly. "How did you get there?"

"When most of the other servants left, I hid in the rooms near Odard. I waited until Freyda went in and then sneaked after her. I heard her scream and opened the door and tried to behead the bastard."

"Odard is no bastard!" one of lord Osfrid's retinue exploded.

"Where did you find the sword?"

"In the room. There were a few other weapons, too, but that one was... was the only one I could use."

"Was the dagger Freyda used yours?"

"I-yes. At first I thought that I would use it, but when I was waiting for Freyda I realized that I had to get very close to use it. And it-it looked quite small and... not effective enough."

She looked embarrassed but quickly started to glare again.

"If you're going to punish Freyda you should also punish me."

Her mother gasped.

"I will think about that," Duncan said dryly.

7.

"The clan leader is certainly through," Alexander said sipping his tea.

"It's her job to know that I'm judging her clan mate fairly," Duncan said.

"You're being very mellow about it."

"Oh, I've learned a thing or two over the years. Such as not getting in the way of leaders doing their thing."

"Hmph. You're getting in the way of Osfrid getting his trial quick and small."

"Ah, but that is not so. It's the formidable Mòrag who's doing that. Mòrag and Osfrid can fight that one out themselves."

Brianag snorted. Her husbands looked at her curiously. She continued to chew and tried to look innocent.

"What do you know?" Duncan asked when she had swallowed.

"Who, me?" she said reaching for more bread.

"Yes, you. You are one of the few people Mòrag's retinue talks to voluntarily."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

"... If it has something to do with the case--"

"No, it doesn't. What they do with their free time with each other or not, is none of your business."

"Basically true... Unless--"

"No, it doesn't. You know that you're very curious. Nosey, even."

"But you love that."

"Of course I do. I married you, didn't I?"

She kissed him hard and Alexander smiled and started on the pie.

When they finally came out for air, he smiled at Alexander and asked:

"How's the statue coming?"

He frowned and swallowed.

"How much longer are you going to make the trial?" Alexander asked.

Duncan lifted his eyebrows and looked concerned.

"It's not much longer," Brianag said. "In fact, Mòrag isn't going to demand any more witnesses so she's likely to ask that Duncan announces his verdict tomorrow so he..."

She looked up, saw the others' faces, and fell silent.

"What's wrong?" Duncan asked squeezing Alexander's hands.

"I'm going to have to scrap the statue and start again..."

"I'm so sorry, honey. I know you've spent a lot of time and energy on that one."

"Then it's lucky that I haven't got a buyer for it. Too."

Duncan and Brianag walked around the table and hugged Alexander.

8.

"What witness would you like to see today, clan leader?" Duncan asked.

"None. I've seen enough. You can pronounce your verdict unless clan member Ceanan wants me to take her away from here."

For a while Ceanan looked rueful. Then she squared her shoulders and said:

"No. I will stand by my best friend."

Clan leader Mòrag nodded and sat. Lord Osfrid stared at her.

"Since all parties are satisfied that they know all the evidence they care to have, I'm prepared to give my judgment. Miss Freyda acted clearly in the defence of her friend, Ceanan of the clan Eagle eyes. However, a man is dead. Miss Freyda is therefore obligated to pay the deceased's father a standard blood price for a man of the deceased's status."

Lord Osfrid's mouth gaped open and clan leader Mòrag's face was an expressionless mask.

"No, I will not accept it!" lord Osfrid choked out. "She will hang like a common murderess!"

"Are you challenging my judgement?"

"Yes, of course!"

"You have that right as the closest kin to the deceased. On what grounds?"

The count sputtered, his face red. Duncan's bodyguards drew closer to him. All three were ready for action.

"It's a girl! A warrior was killed by a girl!"

"I realize that. However, I had already taken that into account."

"A girl can't pay a blood price!"

Duncan raised his eyebrows and waited. The count was in a bad situation: he had raised an objection in front of his retinue and if he backed down, he would look weak. The men would also talk about it to others and the tale would spread. On the other hand, slaughtering an unarmed servitor of Justice didn't look good, either.

The audience was utterly silent except for a few people who sneaked out. Lord Osfrid stared at Duncan who stared right back. The count grunted and looked at the clan leader who was looking as disdainful as usual. Some of the women in her retinue looked openly hostile, others smug, and some bored.

Some of the audience started to trickle out as quietly as possible. Duncan decided to give the count a way out:

"Your complaint has been heard and rejected. Do you have another one?"

The count gritted his teeth and yelled to the clan leader:

"What about you, my Lady clan leader? Do you have a complaint?"

"No, I'm sure that by his customs the verdict is acceptable."

"So you would have decided the same?"

Clan leader Mòrag looked straight into the count's eyes.

"No. I would have had both girls whipped for being stupid enough to get themselves in that position. Of course, no male in the clans would violate a woman so the point is moot."

She sprang to her feet.

"The verdict is spoken and the trial is done. My clan member doesn't need me."

They strode out of the former barn heads held high and weapons ready.

"That woman," lord Osfrid murmured. "She drives me crazy."

Then he looked back at Duncan.

"Fine, have your little victory. But I want the full blood price."

"Noted," Duncan said and inclined his head.

Everybody was staring at the count. He nodded to Duncan and also strode out with his retinue.

Ceana's parents ran to her and hugged her. She was white but smiled at them. Most of the people started to wander out. Freyda sat on the bench and shook.

Brianag let out a small sigh of relief.

"Did you really think he was going to attack me?" Duncan murmured.

"Yes. No. Maybe. He was losing face."

"He would have lost even more face if he had attacked an unarmed man."

She didn't look convinced.

Ceana sat next to Freyda and they hugged each other.

"I don't know how I'm going to pay for the blood price," Freyda said wiping her eyes.

"Don't worry, I'll help you. I'm sure some of the other girls will help you, too."

"How? We're all out of jobs. I doubt the Count's going to accept turnips as payment..."

"We'll worry about that when we have to. I'm sure the temples can loan the money."

"I can vouch for you, Brianag promised.

A slim girl came towards Duncan.

"My mom's in trouble," she said. "Can you help?"

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