

Five

A Lars Hargrove Story

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On the morning before his ninth birthing day, Lars struggled to keep up as his nanny dragged him down the road. His hard, flat-soled shoes were too small and made walking, let alone running, impossibly painful, but Nanny didn't care.

"We have to hurry, boy," she said, huffing down the hill. "Can't be late."

He dared not ask why they had to hurry, or even where they were going, for fear of being impertinent. He wasn't sure what impertinent was, but every time he spoke, and sometimes when he didn't, Nanny slapped him for it. Slapped him hard.

Lars couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken more than a word or two, surely not since before Mama was taken to the hospital, back when snow still covered the lawn. Not that he'd talked much with Mama. She wouldn't stand for real talking, only simple words and baby talk, as if he was still in diddies.

But he didn't need diddies, even though Mama made him wear them. When Mama went away to the hospital, Nanny gave him real undershorts to wear and he hadn't seen a diddy since. He'd waited for other clothes, regular kid clothes. They never came. But tomorrow he'd be nine and everything would change. Father had told him so.

"Tomorrow, you will begin a life far different than anything you have ever known," Father had said, patting Lars on the head. "Make us proud, Boy."

"Yes, Father," he had said, and Nanny had dragged him away to run down the road. He had wanted to stay with Father. Father had never slapped him or made him wear baby clothes, like the rotten hard shoes. No, Father wanted him to wear trousers and shirts he could button himself, and soft shoes he could tie or buckle. Father even wanted him to play outside, maybe ride a horse.

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Mama wouldn't stand for it, and she had told Father so.

But Mama was at the hospital now. Father wanted him to grow up, so maybe Nanny was taking him to get new clothes, maybe even real trousers with pockets! Lars hoped so, but the more they ran, and the sorer his feet got, the more he doubted it. Nanny seemed to be taking him to a funny little shack sitting in a patch of weeds, just a roof on poles with a bench underneath.

"Sit," Nanny said, pointing to the bench as she dropped a cloth sack on the ground beside it. She walked about, panting and waving her face. "Lordy, I hope we made it," she said, holding her hand to shade her eyes.

Glad to get off his throbbing feet, Lars sat and looked up the road. The trees were brilliant green with budding leaves, and the sky was an amazing blue. Lars smiled. Everything looked distant and foggy from the window in his room, not so bright and fresh. As he sat, swinging his sore feet, he tried to remember the last time he'd been outside, in the sunshine. Mama used to lay a blanket under a tree for him when it was nice outside, but he had to sit on the blanket, not run or play. She wouldn't stand for it.

It's nice to be in the sunshine, he thought as a carriage came over the hill. *Father was right. It's all different now.*

"Oh, good," Nanny said. "We're not late." She knelt before him and opened the sack.

Sunshine happiness forgotten, Lars swallowed when he saw that the sack held his clothes and the stuffed horsey Mama made him sleep with. "What? Why?" he asked, shaking his head.

Nanny pulled an envelope from the sack and slapped his face. "Don't be impertinent."

Lars bit his lip and nodded, looking away as Nanny pinned the envelope to his shirt.

She grabbed the sack and made him stand. "You do just what the driver says, you hear?"

Not knowing what else to do, he nodded. He had no concept of where he was, only under a funny shack all by itself beside a road, and no had idea how to run back home. He'd never been so terrified in all his life.

"Don't you start crying!" Nanny snapped, glancing over her shoulder at the approaching carriage. "You're going to be just fine."

He nodded again and wiped the tears away with a ruffled sleeve, but nearly cried out as the carriage stopped right in front of them.

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"Thought I was only pickin' up one," the driver said, looking down at them.

"You are. He's going to Castle Faldorrah." Nanny tossed Lars's sack of clothes onto the top of the carriage then opened the door.

It looked like a cave inside, dark and shifting. Lars shook his head and took a step back.

"That's a whole day and night's drive," the carriage driver said. "You 'spect me to babysit him that long?"

"I don't expect anything," Nanny said, pushing Lars up rickety steps to the darkly gaping maw of the carriage. "He's quiet, won't cause no trouble, and I got his fare right here."

Lars held onto the edges of the doorframe, struggling to stay outside. It stank in there, like piss and smoke and sweat. From inside, a man muttered, "Awful big for a baby, ain't ye?"

"Need more'n the reg'lar fare for babysittin'," the driver said.

"Fine." Nanny shoved Lars through the doorframe. He landed on his face on foul-smelling carpet. "It's just one day. He don't need to eat."

Then she slammed the door.

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Shivering, stomach growling, and desperately needing to pee, Lars blinked at the sunshine when the carriage driver opened the door and made him get out.

This is Castle Faldorrah? I thought castles were fancy.

Lars looked up to a tall wall and through an open gate to the massive stone building beyond. He steeled himself and picked his sack out of the mud. People moved about in the open area between the wall and the castle, working, mostly. A pair of finely dressed Ladies strode toward him with baskets on their arms, and he stood up straighter, wondering if they were there to meet him.

They passed by, chatting, as if he wasn't there.

Nothing looked familiar, not the buildings, the workers' clothes, not even the land. He'd come from a hilly, tree-laden place, where uniformed servants tended the manicured lawn and topiaries around the manor house. This place, this Faldorrah, was mud and grass, wide open sky and, as he turned around to look, pastures. Mostly. It smelled like manure.

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And it's my birthing day, he thought as he turned back to the gate. He took a hesitant step forward, then another, past the gate and into the open area beyond.

An unshaven man exercising a horse paused to look at him, his head tilting. "Ho now. What have you got there, lad?" The man knelt and lifted the envelope pinned to Lars's shirt. He had kind eyes, rough hands, and smelled heavily of horse.

Lars said nothing. After all, the man was a stranger.

"You're a quiet one," the man said, letting the envelope drop against Lars's chest again. "Says here you're looking for Castellan Dubric. You got a problem back home? Someone get hurt? Missing? There trouble of some kind?"

Lars shook his head.

"Dangit, I have to walk the Lord's horses or he'll have my hide." The man sighed and stood, pointing. "Here's what you do. You see that big door there at the castle? Up them steps?"

"Yessir." Lars looked from the door, up the nearest tower to the pointed roof, then over to the crenellated edge along the straight wall.

"You can talk!" the man chuckled. "Go on up, through that door, and tell whoever comes to you first that you're here for the Castellan. Can you do that?"

"Yessir."

"Go on now, and don't look so scared. Dubric won't hurt you. You have trouble, tell them Flavin sent you on in."

"Thank you, sir."

Flavin smiled and patted Lars on the back. "Go on, lad. It'll be all right."

Lars walked straight for the door, pausing only to let workers cross his path. Up the stairs, he had to set his sack down to pull the latch. At last the heavy door swung open.

He walked down a short hall to a great open room with tall windows bright with sunlight and colorful flags hanging from the beams above. Workers moved about the room, tidying up after the morning meal, while a few stragglers ate their breakfast.

"Hello, what have we here?" A man said from behind Lars and he turned, startled.

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The man was very tall and oddly dressed, with a ruffled white shirt beneath an equally ruffled, bright green tunic that nearly reached his knees. Two white feathers poked out of his cap and they bounced with every tiny move the man made. He bent and read whatever was written on Lars's envelope.

"Old Dubric, eh?" The man said, standing straight. "Let's go then. I don't have all day."

He strode between the tables as if he owned them and led Lars through to a hallway. A brusque turn right and the man's stride lengthened, the feathers in his cap bouncing wildly. Lars struggled to keep up, his feet still painful from yesterday's run. The man stopped abruptly at a door and opened it, leading Lars into a room that was empty except for a few benches against the walls. One door stood closed on the far side.

After a single knock from Lars's feathered guide, the door opened and a bear of a man leaned against the doorframe, sighing. "What is it now? Did your new shoes get stepped on again?"

"A visitor for Dubric," the man with the feathered hat said, motioning toward Lars. "But I will have you know that potter, Dulte, is a beast. This morning, he passed wind right—"

"That will be all, Lander," someone said from behind the big man at the door.

Lander *humphed* and turned, his feathers bouncing as he strode away and closed the hallway door.

An old, scarred man in noble's clothes stepped around from behind a desk as the big man looked down at Lars and knelt, smiling encouragingly. "Dammit, sir, the poor kid looks like a scared puppy." He unpinned the envelope from Lars's shirt and handed it back to the old man. "Where you from, boy?" he asked, looking Lars over. Frowning, he lifted a bit of Lars's long hair from his shoulder. "You are a boy, aren't you?"

"Yessir," Lars choked out. The old man was bald and the big man's hair was sheared short, so short it stood straight up on the top of his head. Compared to them, he did look like a girl.

"At last!" the old man said, leaning his hip against the desk as he read.

The big man glanced back at the old one. "Sir?"

"It's Bostra's son, Lars," the old man said. "Sent here to page."

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"This little puppy's *Bostra's* boy?" The big man shook his head and stood. "You've got to be pulling my frigging leg. He's not wearing pants, sir, it looks more like a dress, and his hair—"

"That will soon be corrected." The old man folded the letter, set it on his desk, and came to Lars. He knelt, a wince breaking his smile for a moment, and grasped Lars by the shoulders. "By the King, lad, you look just like your grandfather and you are a grand sight for my old eyes. I have waited a long, long time to meet you. Welcome to Faldorrah."

As Lars got crushed in a hug he smiled. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to him, he was sure of it.

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The big man's name was Dien. He was not happy as he sat with Lars in the kitchen, muttering about kicking someone's ass for not feeding a small kid. Lars was just glad to eat. Sausage and eggs fried up fresh by the massive, red-faced woman who fussed over the kitchen, and a big mug of chilled milk. Lars shoveled in the food as if he hadn't eaten in a phase instead of a little more than a day.

"Get the boy some more eggs!" Dien called out. "Maybe some fried potatoes."

"Poor little blighter's starving," the red-faced woman said, sliding two sizzling eggs onto his plate.

Lars gulped a mouthful of milk and told the woman thank you. Breakfast at home meant porridge or scrambled eggs, sometimes with little pieces of plain toast. Lunch was a bit of meat, all chopped up tiny, along with mashed carrots. Supper was usually the same as lunch, but it might have some mashed fruit or pudding. Nothing was ever hot or cold, always tepid, pasty, and bland, and he had only ever eaten with a spoon. He always polished off every bite because no matter how hungry he was, there was never any more until the next meal. A fork, hot food, cold milk, and second helpings made Lars feel all grown up, even under Dien's grumpy gaze.

"Looks like he hasn't eaten in a moon," Dien said as Lars wolfed down his third egg.

"Growing boys get hungry." The woman spooned browned slices of potato beside the disappearing eggs. Shaking her head, she returned to her stove.

Lars almost swooned as he chewed the first potato. "These are good!"

"They're better with a little salt and pepper," Dien said, sprinkling a bit onto Lars's food. "You act like you haven't eaten fried eggs and potatoes before."

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Dien was right, the salt and pepper made the potatoes grand. Lars chewed happily and took a quick drink. "Not like this. Thank you."

Dien chuckled and ruffled Lars's hair. "Don't mention it."

Lars devoured the potatoes and nearly finished the fourth egg before he couldn't take another bite. Deliciously full for the first time in memory, he took a happy breath then promptly belched.

Mortified, he covered his mouth and leaned back, expecting a slap. Dien just laughed. "Make room for a little more, pup?"

Lars shook his head and belched again, this time behind his hand.

Dien patted him on the back. "Now that you're not going to fall over from starvation on me, let's see to the rest of our tasks, shall we?"

Lars walked with Dien outside to a squat little building where a cobbler pounded nails into a heel. A few minutes later, the horrid hard shoes were tossed away and Lars walked out on comfortable new boots.

"I don't expect those to last you too long," Dien said. "You keep eating like a horse, you'll outgrow them in a moon. Keep them oiled and clean, they'll do right by you."

"Yessir."

Dien chuckled again. "I'm not a 'sir', pup. Dien's just fine."

"All right, Dien."

"There you go. Least you learn quick." He opened a door to another building. "Clothes next. Can't have you running around in that frilly thing." He rummaged through shelves of clothing, holding shirts and pants up to Lars to gauge the size. "Not many tunics for pages your size," Dien said. "I can have the tailor make some, if you want."

"Shirts are fine. Honest."

"And you're easy to please too," Dien said with a wink. He found a sack and stuffed the clothes in. "You do know we're going to have to cut off that hair, don't you?"

"Yes." Lars followed Dien out of the building. "Can I have it cut just like yours?"

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"That might be a bit too short, but we'll see."

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Hair cut short all over to just above his collar and new uniform on, Lars walked proudly beside his new best friend.

"Your room's next on my list, pup," Dien said. "And I think that'll be it for now. You've had a busy day."

Lars grinned. *I sure have.*

"Can you find your way back to Dubric's office first thing in the morning? To the great hall for supper tonight? Without getting lost?"

"Yes, Dien."

A group of boys ran by, jostling each other. Most wore green uniforms similar to Lars's and he smiled at them. Two looked over as they ran by, but none of the others seemed to notice him.

Dien stopped at a closed door. "This is it," he said. "The three lads in this room are a bit older than you, but it should be okay. Just remember to do what I told you. They give you any trouble after that, you tell me, all right?"

"Sure."

Dien knocked once then opened the door and stepped in. "Dammit, Serian, how many times do I have to tell you? Don't be leaving food up here to rot!"

"Sorry, sir," a chunky boy said. He scrambled off his mussed bed and gathered up dishes crusted with mold and dried food.

Another boy, dark haired and confident looking, lay on a bed and grinned as he stared at the ceiling. Lars looked up to see a drawing of a naked woman tacked up there. Cheeks hot, he looked back to the floor.

"This is Lars, your new roommate." Dien set Lars's sacks on top of a stained and battered dresser beside an unmade bed. "Lars, this is Serian and Moergan. Trumble's probably in class."

"I think he's at sword practice," Moergan said, still grinning at his ceiling.

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"Hey," Serian said with a slight wave. He dropped his stack of plates into a crate.

"Hey," Lars said back.

The door burst open and a short kid ran in, his face flushed. "You guys aren't gonna believe this!" he said, gasping for breath. "There's some new kid, a page, but he's dressed like a baby and looks like a girl! Deorsa saw him--"

One grumble from Dien and the boy squawked and fell silent.

"That's probably me," Lars said, admitting his prior state and offering his hand just like Dien had shown him. "Or used to be, anyway. Lars Hargrove."

"Uh. Trumble Kempe." He grasped Lars's hand and shook it, looking uncertainly at Moergan and Serian. "You don't look like a girl."

"That's because I'm not."

Dien said, "Now that that's settled, I'll have one of the linen maids fetch you some clean sheets and blankets. You going to be all right?"

"I'll be fine. Thank you."

"It's why I'm here, pup." Dien glared at the other boys then left, closing the door behind him.

Moergan sat. "Where you from?"

"Haenpar. My father's castellan there."

"Were you really dressed like Trumble said?" Serian asked.

"Not because I wanted to. My folks made me."

"That licks ass," Moergan said, hopping off his bed. "How old are you, Haenpar?"

"My name's Lars and I'm nine. How old are you?"

"Twelve. Serian's almost eleven and Trumble just turned ten." Moergan looked Lars over, from his new boots to the top of his haircut. "You're only nine and assigned to Dubric?"

Lars met Moergan's gaze. "Yes."

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"Peg me *and* my mother," Serian said, whistling through his teeth.

Moergan said, "Assigned to Dubric and admitting you were dressed like a girl? Da-yam. You got bigger balls than I do, Haenpar."

"Lars."

"Lars." Moergan nodded his head in agreement. "Ever peg a girl, Lars?"

"Here we go again," Trumble said, shaking his head and wandering off.

Have I what? Lars tried not to let his confusion show. "No, I don't think so."

"For Goddess's sake, Eineon. He's nine!" Serian said, shoving Moergan back. "He ain't even getting posts yet." Serian turned his head to roll his eyes at Lars. "Eineon balled some slut a couple of phases ago and he's been lording it over us ever since."

"Ah," Lars said, hoping he sounded like he knew what they were talking about. "Congratulations."

Moergan smirked at Serian. "As if you're getting posts yet, moose boy. At least Haenpar here can appreciate the magnitude—"

"Magnitude my ass. You balled a slut and got bugs on your dick. That's not exactly worth crowing about."

"I touched naked titties. Have you?"

"C'mon guys. Knock it off," Trumble said. "So Moergan got laid. Who cares?"

No one but Lars seemed to hear the knock on the door and he opened it to see a woman with an armload of bed linens. "Here ya go, kid," she said, dropping them in Lars's arms and continuing on her way.

Listening to the others, Lars made his bed. Serian and Moergan were still arguing when he finished.

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Dubric looked up as Dien walked in without Lars. "Where is he?"

"I left him with his roommates." Dien sat and ran his hand over his hair. "You sure about this, sir?"

Dubric returned to his paperwork. "Am I sure about what?"

"Hargrove's boy. Lars. You saw what he looked like—"

Dubric glanced up. "A situation I assume you remedied?"

"Yes, sir, he's properly attired and outfitted. But he's never held a sword before. He had no idea what to do."

"Many of our pages have no experience in weaponry when they first come here."

Dien sighed. "He's a nice boy, polite, and very eager. He can't read though, sir, not a word."

"Cannot read? Are you certain? He is nine summers old!"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure. Not even simple signs."

"Blast." Dubric sighed and rubbed his eyes. *What tasks can I set him to if he cannot read or write?*

"It's not his mind, sir, he definitely seems bright enough. But it still puts him a good four summers behind the other lads his age in academics. How can he ever catch up?"

"We will aid him, just as we will train him to a sword."

"That's not the worst of it, sir. I think he's been beaten."

Dubric stared at Dien. "What?"

"He accidentally belched after he ate, sir, and there was a look on his face..." Dien shook his head. "Lasted only a moment, but I think he expected me to hit him."

Dubric cursed and set aside his pen. "I did not anticipate that."

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"We can't have a flinching kid on our staff, not with what we have to deal with. You know that. It's just too much, sir. Skittish, no weapons training, unable to read... I can't see what good he's going to be. It might be better for everyone, certainly safer for the boy, if we just send him home."

"No. Absolutely not. The boy stays here. We will train him ourselves and he will catch up."

"Yes, sir," Dien said, standing.

"He starts primers in the morning for reading and mathematics. Get the proper books for him immediately. Whenever he is in the office, I want him working on academics until he's ready to join his peers in regular classes."

"Yes, sir. What about the rest?"

"Tell Fultin to pair him with Serian, every practice, all melee weapons."

"Serian's our best arms student of all the junior pages. And he's twice Lars's size!"

"Then it will behoove the boy to quickly master his weapons."

"He's going to get the stuffing knocked out of him. Daily."

"I doubt it will be as bad as you fear. Fighting is in that boy's blood."

"If you say so, sir. He seemed rather kind-hearted to me."

"The two characteristics are not mutually exclusive," Dubric said, smiling. "As for mastering the skittishness, Lars will accompany us on every official call, day or night."

"Sir, he's never—"

"Every call, unless he is in a weapon's class. They take precedence. I need Lars to be able to defend himself."

Dien frowned. "Training by fire? Dammit, sir, are you sure? He's just a kid."

"He will excel or he will break," Dubric said, returning to his paperwork. "I doubt he will break."

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"Sir!" Lars ran into the office, excited and out of breath. "Guess what!"

He'd been in Faldorrah more than a moon and had become adept at wearing filthy uniforms, mostly from the mud and dirt Serian knocked him onto every afternoon. He'd also become used to bruises, contusions, and the sprained wrist he'd had a phase or so ago. He couldn't be happier.

"Sir!" he called out again, halting in front of Dubric's desk.

"What is it, Lars?" Dubric asked. "Can you not see that I am working?"

"Yes, sir, I can, but guess what!"

Dubric set aside his pen and regarded the boy. "What am I guessing?"

"I did it, sir!"

A crease furrowed Dubric's brow. "Did what?"

"I won! I beat Serian, just now, at swords!"

Dubric's mouth fell open. "You *what?*"

"Beat him, sir. Knocked him on his butt. Twice! Fair and square and everything."

Dubric closed his mouth.

"I know it's just wooden swords, not real ones, and I know it's only because I'm littler than him, I mean, he's a lot slower, and doesn't protect his left side like he should, so I can duck in quick and hit it, but *still...*"

"You beat Serian? Today?"

"Yessir. Twice. He beat me the first match, like usual, but darn it if he didn't leave his left side open for a moment or two. I managed to hit him once, and between matches I got an idea!"

"An idea?"

"Yessir, that if I was quick, and moved toward his right, but ducked under his sword to hit his left, that maybe I could take him down! And I did! Knocked him right on his butt, sir!"

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You should've seen his face!"

Dubric smiled. "I can imagine."

"And the last match he couldn't touch me at all. Not once. It's like I knew where he was going to swing before he did, because of the way he moved his feet. I just *knew*. Once I figured that out, it was easy to stay out of reach."

"Yes," Dubric said, nodding.

Lars grinned. "So I knocked him on his butt again!"

"Good for you. How are your academics coming?"

"They're coming along," Lars sighed. Dubric always wanted to know about academics. Sword practice was a lot more fun. "Addition is done and I've almost finished a letter to my father. Dien helped me spell some of the words."

"And reading?"

"Sir, I really don't want to read about a rat on a mat or a dog in a fog. It's *boring*, and it's for babies. *Little* kids are reading it. I've seen them."

"It is educational."

"I'd rather read about horses or swords or—"

Dubric shooed Lars toward a desk in the waiting room. "Finish the letter then read the book all the way through. That is an order. After that, you may go."

Lars sulked to his desk and flumped in the chair. Without much gusto, he picked up his pencil and resumed the letter. Time dragged as he tried to sound out words and decide how they might be spelled. Dien always helped him when he got stuck, but Dubric just told him to look it up in the dictionary.

How can I find it in the dictionary if I don't know how to spell it?

Lars looked up as a plump woman came in, fussing and crushing a hat in her hands. "Milord Dubric?" she asked as she neared his office. "Do you have a moment?"

Dubric welcomed her in and closed the door. While they talked, Lars continued with his letter, stumbling over words like *interesting* and *yesterday*, and hoped his father would be proud

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of his work. He looked up again when the office door opened and Dubric led the woman through.

"Come with me," Dubric said. "And bring your sword."

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Lars heard people shouting from inside the house when he climbed down from the saddle. A man and a woman, it sounded like, and a baby screaming.

"Situations like these can get dangerous very quickly," Dubric said. "There is no way to tell if one or both will turn on us, instead of merely fighting with each other. Stay close."

"Yes, sir."

There was a crash, and the woman screeched, calling the man words Lars wasn't allowed to say. The baby screamed louder then quieted, its wails disappearing into the argument.

Unfastening the strap over the hilt on his sword with one hand, Dubric pounded on the door with the other. "Castellan Dubric!" he yelled. "Open this door immediately!"

"Peg off!" the man said, then the woman screeched again.

Dubric tried the latch. Locked. Muttering, he took a deep breath and kicked it, cracking the rotted jamb. He kicked it again and the door sprung open.

Lars followed Dubric into a house torn asunder. Filthy and dilapidated, with an underlying reek of sewage, Lars was astounded that the place still stood. Furniture lay broken and overturned among grimy clothing, refuse, and rotted food. A man and woman fought, screaming and hitting each other as they stumbled through the mess. Both were filthy, bloody, and tore at each other's clothes. Lars wrinkled his nose at the stink of whiskey and jumped aside as a mouse ran over his boots.

The man punched the woman in the face and choked her, banging her head against the cracked and peeling wall, while the woman clawed at his face, drawing blood. Dubric grabbed the man and yanked him aside. The woman stumbled away, past Lars, holding her head and cursing. She tripped over a broken chair and fell sprawling onto the floor.

Dubric blocked a punch with his forearm then drove the man against the wall with his shoulder. An uppercut to the gut and a knee to the crotch, and the man fell to his knees, coughing. Dubric pushed the man forward, onto the floor, and grasped his hands to bind them.

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"You let go of him!" the woman screeched, tottering to her feet. She picked up a table leg and staggered toward Dubric, her face covered in blood, but Lars stuck out his foot and tripped her before Dubric had drawn his sword.

Pushing his sword back into the sheath, Dubric nodded his thanks to Lars and rubbed his eyes as if they pained him. He bound the man's hands, then did the same to the woman. "Which of you useless excuses for parents harmed the baby?"

The baby!

Lars turned, looking, but couldn't hear it crying. He climbed over broken furniture, searching, while Dubric questioned the bound and bleeding pair.

They complained of all sorts of things Lars didn't understand. He rifled through a wad of bedding without luck, only half listening to the adults. As near as he could tell, the man didn't want the baby and the woman didn't want to be stuck at home caring for it. So she hurt it. At least that's what the man said.

No baby under the bed, in a crate, or even the refuse bin. Lars stood in the midst of chaos, knowing it had to be somewhere, hurt, maybe unconscious.

The woman denied harming the baby at first, but the man held fast, and she started to babble. She bawled, pleading for Dubric's forgiveness. Lars didn't understand the rest, and Dubric told her to close her murdering mouth.

Lars smelled something funny. Like burnt meat, only repulsive in a way that churned his stomach and made him want to vomit. He turned, slowly, sniffing. The fireplace.

Oh Goddess. No.

He ran, tripping over a broken chair, and fell to his knees before the fireplace. He wailed at what he saw.

"Lars, get away from there!" Dubric called out, but Lars had already grasped the baby's hot and blistered foot to pull it from the ashes and coals.

The infant looked like a charred doll, blackened and crisped, her eye sockets bubbling. Fat and flesh sizzled beneath split skin, adding to the overwhelming stench. The flesh of her back and most of one arm remained in the flames, smoking, and one leg had burnt away, leaving only blackened bones.

"Lars."

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Bits of her face crumbled off and the flesh beneath spat bloody grease like a half-roasted piece of poultry. The roof of her mouth cracked open with a puff of steam. Brilliant red clumps and fluid seeped out, pooling to cover her grayish tongue with thickening blood and drool. Lars felt his stomach lurch but swallowed it away. *Goddess, they cooked their own baby!*

"Look at me, Lars."

One of the mice, emboldened by the smell, crept forward and nibbled on a stump that had been her hand. Lars snarled and smacked the mouse away, knocking it hard against the wall. It fell and did not move.

Hands grasped Lars by the armpits and dragged him upward but he squirmed and fought, screaming, the primitive wails much like the infantile cries his mother always wanted to hear.

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"I told you he had no business going out on calls," Dien said, slamming the office door.

By the King, what have I done? Dubric's hands shook as he set aside his pen. "It was merely a lover's argument. I did not expect—"

"We never know what to expect!" Dien snapped, pointing back toward the outer office. "He's nine frigging summers old and he pulled a dead baby from a fireplace! What's that going to do to him? How's that going to affect the rest of his life? Hells, just *thinking* about it's going to give me nightmares for phases. When do you think he'll be able to sleep again?"

"Dien," Dubric choked out, "I honestly did not intend for the boy to see such a thing. I had no reason to believe that they would harm the infant, let alone kill it. By the time I'd discovered what had happened, Lars had wandered off, looking for it."

"Of course he did! All that kid wants to do is please us, help us, and I'd *expect* him to go off and look for the baby while I dealt with the shits who killed it. It's what that boy would do, sir."

Dien paced back and forth before Dubric's desk. "Dammit, sir, you don't know bollocks about children. You expect them to act rationally, think like adults, and follow detailed instructions to the letter. Well, sir, they can't! They're children! And that boy," he said, pointing at the closed door, "has come from a lifetime of neglect, with barely enough adult contact to keep him sane. All he wants is a little acknowledgement, a little praise, not more dismissive instructions to 'go sit out there and not bother me'. He's had enough of that shit to last him the rest of his life."

FIRE

Dien was correct, on all counts. *I am more than sixty summers old, unmarried, childless. How could I think I could guide an uneducated child?*

"From here out, I'm taking over the boy's instruction, assuming he survives this. He's staying with Sarea and me until he can sleep through the night again, if not longer. I will tutor him, I will supervise his weapons training, and *I* will take him on calls if and only if *I* think it's appropriate."

Dubric nodded. "All right."

Dien reached for the latch. "And I'll try to be a father to the poor kid. Goddess knows he deserves one."

Dubric barely winced when Dien ripped the door open and stomped out to the waiting room where Lars sat with Dien's wife, Sarea.

§

A sweet little blonde and squirmy infant fell into the fireplace, slipping out of Lars's hands to land on glowing coals flickering with golden flame. She cried out plaintively, arms reaching as she demanded to be picked up, but he couldn't reach her. He scorched and blistered his arms trying to get her, but she was too far away, too lost in the fire. Her screams quieted as she charred, but she never stopped moving. Gurgling, she crawled out of the fireplace, smoking and black and dead. Bits of her charred flesh fell off and scorched the floor while flames flickered in her lifeless eyes. Lars scrambled back, his terrified heart slamming in his throat, but there was too much garbage and broken furniture blocking his way, grasping at him like cold, bony hands.

Trapped under the furniture's clutches, flames spitting all around him, and the baby crawling up his charring leg, Lars took a breath to scream.

"Shh, now. It's all right, it's just a dream. You're fine, you're safe," Sarea said, her fingertips stroking through his hair. "Shh. That's a good boy. Try to go back to sleep."

Lars looked up to see her sitting beside him on the settee, baby Alyson contentedly nursing. He scooped up a bit to lay his head on her thigh.

She pulled his blanket up to cover his shoulders, tucking him in, and laid her hand back on his head. Her fingers traced from his temple to his nape, each stroke a comforting curve around his ear. "Want to talk about it?"

FIRE

What more was there to talk about? Everyone knew what had happened, how he'd failed and a baby had died. He shook his head and snuggled in, drawing his knees up to his chest. He closed his eyes for a few moments then sighed and opened them again. Despite her soothing touch, he wasn't sleepy anymore.

"Dien has nightmares too, sometimes," Sarea said after a long silence. "Not as often as he used to, but sometimes."

Lars looked up at her, unable to imagine that big, strong Dien could ever be afraid. "He does?"

"Yes. There are lots of bad things in the world, some worse than I can imagine. He makes the bad things stop, Lars, that's his job, but, sometimes, he sees something really bad, or gets so scared himself, that it invades his dreams. Just like you."

Lars sat up. "Dien gets scared?"

Sarea smiled. "Of course he does. Everyone does sometimes."

"Not Dubric."

"Oh, he gets scared too," Sarea said, chuckling. "It's okay to be scared, Lars, even when you're trying to be brave." She hugged his shoulders. "You did a very brave thing that day. A heroic thing. Most people wouldn't have tried to save the baby, but you did."

"I guess so."

"I *know* so." She kissed the top of his head and pulled away.

Lars turned his face aside as she lowered Alyson and rearranged her nightgown to cover herself again. "Look at it this way," Sarea said, laying Alyson over her shoulder and burping her. "You've been here at the castle for what, about two moons?"

"Almost."

"Were you scared when you first got here?"

"Yes. But—"

"But you were brave, right? You came into the castle all by yourself, met Dubric, met Dien, and they wanted you to change everything about yourself, from how you looked to how you thought. They *made* you change. Didn't all that scare you?"

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"A little."

"But you were brave and you did it. You never complained, you never whined, you just wore your uniform and did your studies. Right?"

Lars nodded, smiling up at her.

"I bet the first time they showed you all those numbers and letters you were terrified. I know I'd be. But in less than two moons you've learned how to read, how to add and subtract, and how to use a sword, just to start. That's quite a lot, even for a brave boy. Most people it takes summers to learn all that."

"It does?"

"Yes. Because most people make excuses, like it's too hard, or I'm too dumb. They're just afraid to try, and they'll convince themselves that they can't do it. You try anyway."

"It's not the same."

"Sure it is," Sarea said as Alyson let loose a good belch. "Fear is fear, no matter how or why. What matters is if you make excuses or if you do what you need to do. That's all bravery is, Lars. Doing what you need to, even when you're afraid, because *everyone* gets afraid, from smart little boys like you to big brave men like Dien. Don't confuse fear with weakness."

Sarea urged up another burp, a softer one, then pulled Alyson from her shoulder. "Would you like to hold her?"

"I... I've never held a baby before."

"It's easy. Here, put one hand behind her head... Yes, just like that. There you go. Be careful you don't get too wet. She needs a fresh diddy."

He fumbled Alyson onto his lap and grinned as she grasped his finger in her fist. She cooed and kicked, dragging his finger to her mouth to taste it. "She likes me!"

Sarea chuckled and stood. "Of course she does. You're like her big brother. Will you be all right long enough for me to get a diddy?"

Lars nodded, enthralled. Alyson was warm and happy, even with her wet bottom and her head propped on his forearm. She gurgled on his lap as if it was the safest place in the world. He marveled over her little fingers, her plump hands, and the solid weight of her. She was heavier

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than she looked, her mouth was a warm vat of spit, and he smiled at her hard gums gnawing on his finger. She was so sweet, so trusting, and he vowed that no one would ever harm his baby sister.

§

Drinking a chilled tonic and munching on a cheese sandwich, Lars studied at the sitting room table with Dien's daughters. Kia was ten, Jess eight, and Fyn seven. All were well ahead of him in their lessons, but mostly they let him be, or explained things when he asked for help. Mostly.

"You have to reduce the eight," Kia said as if she knew all there was to know about mathematics. "Make it a seven and put a one—"

"Mam said to let him figure it out on his own," Fyn said. "He can do it."

"Can not."

"Can too," Jess said without looking up from her book. "He's been doing fine all day while you were playing hooky with Marin and Ciara."

Kia's ears reddened, the flush rapidly moving forward to cover her face. "Sure, fine. You'd think he'd be more thankful after waking us up so many times. See if I care about the little crybaby." She pushed away from the table and stomped to her room.

"You cry after bad dreams too!" Fyn hollered after her.

"I don't mind her help," Lars said.

Jess glanced at Lars and shrugged. "She just likes to show off."

"And boss us," Fyn grumbled.

Jess returned to her book. "Mam says we're supposed to just ignore her. Remember?"

Fyn sulked. "Yeah, I know."

They worked in friendly silence and Lars realized that it was nicer with Kia gone, mostly because while Kia tried to impress and control him, Jess and Fyn merely treated him like a bother. Maybe even an *older* brother, even though he wasn't as smart as they were.

Lars sipped his tonic and tried to make sense of a new four digit subtraction problem,

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deciding that being an older brother was a fine thing indeed. Older brothers protected their little sisters, but it didn't always work the other way around. Kia certainly didn't protect Jess and Fyn, and his older sister, Maura, had never protected him. Maura was a decade older, too old to have ever played with him, and she'd left home summers ago. It had been so long since he'd seen her that he doubted they'd recognize each other. He'd only known the Saworth girls not quite two moons, but they felt more like family than his own ever had. As he stared at the numbers, he wondered if the dead baby had had an elder sibling that had gone away, or even some other family that had loved her.

"You're doing it again," Jess said, laying her hand on his to stop the restless movement of his pencil.

"Sorry." Seeing that he'd scribbled black, smoking babies along the margin of his paper again, he set down his pencil and slouched in his chair. "I don't mean to."

"It's just kinda scary."

No kidding. No matter what he did, he couldn't escape the memory. Every speck of flame or smoke, rodents, anything black or crunchy, even cooked or raw meat reminded him of the baby. No matter how often he washed his hands or how much soap he used, Lars thought they smelled like burnt flesh. He still had the nightmares, still woke up terrified, but he didn't scream anymore. At least not that anyone could hear.

The door opened and all three children turned, grinning.

"Dad!" the girls cried out, leaping from their chairs with Lars close on their heels. They tackled Dien and he fell groaning to the floor, laughing and wrestling them. Even Kia ran from her room, squealing to jump on the writhing pile. Lars grunted when one of the girls kicked him in the belly, and he hung on for dear life when Dien stood with a growl, all four children swinging from his arms or neck, but mostly Lars laughed until his sides hurt. After a while, exhausted and sweaty, the lot of them fell to the floor in a loose, tangled sprawl.

Sarea stood over them with the baby. "Some days I don't know if I have four children or five."

"Definitely five," Dien said as he sat up. "I'm just the biggest." He extricated his legs from Fyn's grasp and stood, one big foot by Lars's head, the other between Kia's arm and her side. All four kids panted, pleading for more, but Dien leaned over them to kiss his wife.

"Let's do it again, Dad," Jess said, climbing up him.

He laughed and set her on her feet. "Again? You've already about killed me." He looked

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at Lars and winked. "Four against one is just getting too tough."

"But Dad!" all four pleaded.

Dien laughed again as they dragged him to the floor.

§

After supper, while the girls fought over the bath chamber and hairbrushes and things, Lars sat at the table deciphering a multiplication table. It was sort of like addition, only in groups of the same number. Three fours or four threes both added up to twelve. Once he recognized the pattern, it made perfect sense. *This shouldn't be too hard.*

"Hey, pup. Have a minute?"

Lars wasn't certain he liked the expression on Dien's face, but he closed his mathematics book and followed him from the suite and all the way outside.

"Have a seat, pup," Dien said, patting the steps outside the west tower doors. "We need to have us a little man to man chat."

Lars sat, his belly twisting. Dien sat heavily beside him and let out a pained sigh. "You sleeping through the night yet?"

"Sometimes," Lars said. "Every few nights, I guess. Most nights I still have the dreams bad enough to wake up."

Dien rummaged in his jacket pocket. "I'd wondered. You haven't woken us for about two phases now. Taffy?"

"Thanks." Lars accepted the candy and peeled off the wax coating. Beside him Dien did the same.

"Now don't you be telling the girls I have these," Dien said as he popped his taffy in his mouth. "They'll devour them all."

"I won't."

Dien sighed and looked out to the courtyard, to the cow barns and chicken coops. "I wish you were mine, pup, Goddess knows I do."

Me, too.

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"And it's not just me. It's Sarea and the girls. I know you love us, too, but you have a family back in Haenpar."

"Yes." *But I don't. Not really.* Lars chewed his taffy and sighed.

"I'd like to tell you to stay with us as long as you want, maybe forever. Sarea and I have talked about it quite a lot these past few phases, getting you your own room and all, treating you like you were one of ours. But Dubric says we can't, that you're a page here, his responsibility. And he's right. Your father signed papers granting Dubric authority over your schooling and training." Dien rummaged in his pocket again. "Another one?"

"Sure." Lars swallowed the sweet he had in his mouth and plucked a taffy from Dien's palm.

"So, I'm supposed to talk to you about the job, what it really means to work for Dubric. Because he's your guardian, not me, and if you can't do the job, if it's too much for you, then he might have to send you home."

Lars turned to stare at Dien. *No!*

Dien ran his hand over his head, bristling up his hair, then laid his arm over Lars's shoulders. "So. The job. Mostly we're supposed to keep the peace. There are hundreds of people here in the castle and the village just south, and we have to keep them safe, make sure no one's stealing, doing something illegal, or harming folks. That's actually a lot easier than it sounds, pup. Most folks here are good people, not wanting to cause trouble. All we usually need to do is be visible, walk around, talk a bit to folks, and be friendly. We're a reminder for them to stay out of trouble. I'm pretty sure you can manage that part."

Walk around and talk to people? "Yes, that doesn't sound too hard."

"It's not. We're always armed in case there is a problem and we need to defend ourselves, or others. We're the only ones around here allowed to wear weapons. It's another reminder to folks that we keep the peace, sometimes by force."

"Like when Dubric punched that man and knocked him down?"

"Yes, exactly like that. We don't use our swords unless we have to, either for protection or to make a point that we're in charge. Mostly, it's just acting tough. People usually respect us. They don't want trouble, and neither do we."

Dien paused to pull out more taffy, this time in a bag. "Fultin tells me you're doing a fine

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job in your weapons classes and that you stand up to bullies."

"Like Deorsa?" Lars asked, picking another taffy from Dien's bag. "He kept wanting to fight me for no reason. I just ignored him until he punched me, then I knocked the tar out of him. When he started picking on some little kid instead of me, I had to do it again."

"Yes, it's exactly like Deorsa. You can't let folks get your goat, but you can't let them walk all over you either. So that's the second part of this job, being willing and able to protect others, and yourself, but not going out looking for a fight."

"I can do that, sure."

"I know you can, pup, but now it gets trickier." Dien mumbled to himself for a moment as if testing his words. "The last part, the hard part of this job, is that when people do bad things, whether it's a theft, or being drunk and starting a fight, or anything else, we're the ones who fix it. We drag drunks out of the Dancing Sheep, we arrest merchants who cheat our people, we even get reluctant folks to pay their taxes sometimes. It's not always easy, and for some things we're not just responsible for the castle and the village. When there's a crime, especially if it's a bad crime, we're responsible for all of Faldorrah."

Lars's gut clenched. "You mean things like that dead baby."

"Yes. Exactly like that. And, I'm sorry, pup, but there's worse things."

Lars stared at Dien. "Worse?"

"Yes. Sometimes. That baby died quickly, only suffered for a moment, and it was too little to know what was happening. A couple of summers ago, one young woman was fighting with another over some man they both liked. One pushed the other off a gully bridge, onto a bunch of rocks. The girl didn't die right off, she lay there, awake and broken, screaming and suffering for about half a bell until someone came. She died before they could get her out of the gully. I'd take a quick death in a fire any day before being busted up and slowly bleeding to death."

Lars felt like he wanted to vomit.

"I won't lie to you, pup. There have been some worse than that. The really bad things, like rape and murder, don't happen often, but when they do, we're the ones who have to take care of whatever needs taken care of. It might be retrieving the victim, catching the one responsible, or even figuring out who committed the crime. We do *whatever* we need to, even if it's frightening, disgusting, or smells worse than you can imagine, because it's our job. We keep the people of Faldorrah safe and make sure bad people can't harm anyone ever again."

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Lars nodded and stared at his knees.

Dien squeezed Lars's shoulders then stood. "I don't need an answer right now, pup. You take all the time you need to think about it. Not everyone can do this job, that's the Goddess's truth, and there's no shame in admitting that you can't."

Lars looked up at Dien. "How can you pull a dead girl from a gully then come home and play with your kids?"

Dien smiled. "Because I do it for them, pup." He pointed out to the courtyard, sweeping his arm across the horizon. "I don't chase rapists and murderers and thugs for all those people I'll never meet, I do it because I'm a husband and a father and I love my family more than anything in the world. I make the world safer for *them*, pup. Every rapist I catch, every murderer I kill, will never, ever, harm one of my girls."

"You kill people?"

"When I need to, yes. It's part of protecting those who need protected."

Lars looked down again. "I don't know if I can kill someone."

"What if they were hurting Alyson?" Dien asked softly.

Lars snapped his head up, his eyes narrowing, and the voice that came from him didn't sound like his own. It was older, harder. "They'd be dead before they saw me."

Dien nodded. "It's what a man does for his family, pup. Now you need to decide if you can do it for Faldorrah, too."

§

Lars laid awake most of that night and the next, thinking. Dien didn't mention the job again, he just left Lars to his thoughts. Mathematics and reading became hard to focus on, with his mind constantly churning over whether he could do what Dien had asked of him. If he could do the job.

When the girls tried to nudge him to focus on his studies, Dien told them to leave him alone, that he had a lot on his mind.

Sometimes, when he couldn't sleep, Lars stood at the window, looking out to the night. Bad people were out there, he was sure of it, but his old home in Haenpar was out there too. His

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life was different now, just as his father had promised. But could he stay and face the bad people? Could he go home again, knowing how his mother would insist he be a baby?

I want to stay here, with Dien and Sarea and the girls. Be a brother, have a real family, get hugs from my mam and wrestle with my dad, maybe hold my baby sister and let her chew on my finger. He sighed. But I can't. They're not my family, no matter how much I want them to be.

He was awake when Dien left for the office before dawn, and awake when Sarea first stirred to start getting the girls ready for classes. Lars sat quietly on the settee, watching them, listening to the squabbles and laughter. All things worth protecting.

While the girls gathered their books and searched for their shoes, Lars got up and pulled a uniform out of his sack of clothing. He had lazed around long enough. It was time to go to work.