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The Rose Prince

The Rose Prince

by

Harry Steven Lazerus

Comyn bent his head down to the rose. He inhaled deeply. The sweet but delicate fragrance filled his nostrils. Comyn sighed with satisfaction.

Perfect, he thought. Perfect.

For a moment Comyn remained suspended in a state of calm bliss. It was shattered by the sound of a harsh grunt. Comyn raised his head. His father, King Finbar, stood at the entrance to the garden, glaring at him.

“Why do you waste your time with woman’s things?” King Finbar asked angrily.

Comyn sighed again. It was not with satisfaction.

King Finbar was taller and broader than his son. The king had a bushy black beard, wore a leather doublet with metal buckles, and carried a thick, heavy sword by his side. He smelled of sweat and grime.

“Ah, father,” Comyn replied dreamily. “You know why I shave my cheeks smooth, wear a soft, white toga, and make myself smell like roses. It is so that the women will flock to me like deer to the sweet-water pond, so that they will offer me their virtue the way a doting mother offers her favorite child sweets.”

“How dare you speak like that!” Comyn’s

father growled.

Comyn came closer to his father. He calmly held the king’s angry glare.

“I know you wish I were like my older brother,” Comyn said gently. “You probably wish I weren’t your son at all. But be grateful I am one of your subjects. If not for me you would be king only of a small, poor village and a few hundred impoverished peasants. You escaped that fate; you are rich and powerful.” Comyn touched his father’s arm. “Did you come to fight with me, father?”

It was the king who broke from the locked stare.

“I want your counsel,” the king said. “The Teferi have come to our kingdom. The high council has a meeting with them this afternoon. I want you there.”

“Why are they here?” Comyn asked.

“For trade,” King Finbar asked. Then, a moment later, he added, “So they say.”

“You doubt that,” Comyn responded.

The king uncharacteristically shrugged.

“I do not know,” he said. “Even if it is for trade, I still want you there.”

Comyn smiled and pointed back at his roses.

“Father, I tell you, those roses,” Comyn said, shaking his index finger at them, “those roses will make us even richer. From all the lands around us men will toil and fight to get the money to buy its perfume, so they can give it to their wives and girlfriends and bask in their appreciation.” Comyn winked at his father.

The king smiled, and for the first time Comyn realized how worried his father had been, and Comyn knew the concern was not about his flower-loving son.

#

Comyn sat on a stone bench in his garden and looked up at Gara, who towered over him. Gara stood there like a giant dog patiently awaiting the orders from his master. Gara would have been his father’s greatest warrior if he had not been crippled in a training contest as a youth.

“The Teferi have come to Finia,” Comyn explained to Gara. “They are here now in Cadhla. I want you to take some men and find out whatever you can about them. I specifically want to know if they are armed, and if so, what kind of weapons they have. Also, tell me about their horses, and if they have any armor or protection. How many are there in their party, and in particular, I want to know if there are any so fat and out of shape they would fall down if they lifted a sword or would cough themselves to death if they ran a furlong. Also find out if they’ve been asking any questions of people. Gara, I need this information soon. We have a meeting with them this afternoon, and I must know these things before that.”

“I will do as you ask, prince.”

“Thank you,” Comyn replied.

Gara nodded, turned, and limped away. Comyn noted with relief, as he always did, that despite Gara’s disability he still could move quickly.

Comyn sighed wearily.

He didn’t understand why Gara had

insisted on becoming his aide and why Gara served him so faithfully. Comyn always felt a slight sense of unease around Gara. After all, he was the reason that Gara was crippled.

#

The sun had already passed its highest point in the sky. Comyn paced back and forth in the garden. He didn’t like the intelligence Gara had brought. The group of visiting Teferi didn’t have a merchant among them; they all sounded like military men. Further, they had been asking strange questions of people: about their belief in God, about the Gillean religion and holy books, and how often the people prayed. Comyn didn’t like it at all. He also didn’t like that their horses were—

“Daddy, daddy,” a small voice called out to him.

Comyn turned and scooped up the little boy who ran to him. He held his son high in the air and shook him as the child squealed with delight.

“Renny, Renny,” the father cried in response.

Then Comyn stopped shaking his son and put him down. A serious look covered the father’s face.

“Renny, let’s say you have two gold coins and I give you another five. How many gold coins will you have?”

Renny scrunched his face as he thought.

“Father,” he said at last, “I have no gold coins, so you must give me seven.”

A smile spread over Comyn’s face.

“And so I shall,” he told his son.

Comyn looked over at Renny’s mother, who had accompanied the child. The smile disappeared from Comyn’s face.

“I want him to be a warrior, not a scholar,” Renny’s mother said. “That is what the grandson of the King of Finia should be.”

“Aurnia,” Comyn said slowly to Renny’s mother, “he will be what I want him to be, not what you want him to be.” And then,

patting Renny's head, he added, "In the end, he'll be what he wants to be."

"He'll be a bastard until you finally marry me," Aurnia insisted.

"No son of mine is a bastard," Comyn said. "And no wife of mine will be a nag. Ah, Aurnia, you used to be so beautiful when you smiled. Even now, with that scowl, you are still the most beautiful woman in Finia. Your eyes are as rich the sea viewed from the Moran Cliffs, and your skin is softer than the silk of my robes. What happened to your smile?"

"I used to smile when you took me to your bed," Aurnia replied.

"I stopped taking you to my bed when you stopped smiling and started nagging," Comyn retorted.

"You were disgracing me," Aurnia said.

"Aurnia, you came to my bed of your own free will. I never promised you anything. I never lied to you. And you and Renny are as well taken care of as if we had been married by the priest in front of the royal court."

Aurnia looked at him, her eyes pleading.

"Comyn, why do you think that of all the women you've slept with only I have borne you a child?"

"Luck?" Comyn replied sarcastically.

Aurnia flushed with anger.

"I prayed to God for an answer," she said, tears coming to her eyes. "And He told me it was because you were meant to marry me."

Comyn laughed.

"God told you? Then he told the wrong person. He should have told me."

Comyn stepped over to her. His index finger of his right hand touched her cheek and swept up a falling tear. Aurnia trembled.

Comyn put the moistened finger to his lips.

"Sweeter than payan nectar," he sighed.

Aurnia turned bright red with embarrassment. Her lips parted and she stared at him expectantly, as if hypnotized.

"Ah, Aurnia, give me a smile and I will

take you to my bed and give you a glimpse of the heaven that the sacred scriptures speak of."

Aurnia did not smile. She hardened her face into a scowl.

"No," Comyn said. "You will not smile for me. Your pride is stronger than your lust."

Comyn pointed down the path. "My brother is here. I have important affairs of state to attend."

Comyn turn and strode purposefully toward his brother. He did not look back.

#

Comyn and his brother embraced as they greeted each other. Ragnall looked like their father, same build and clothing, but he had his younger brother's smooth, shaven cheeks and he, too, smelled of roses.

"You really should marry Aurnia, little brother," Ragnall said. "She's a good woman and she loves you very much."

"Not you, too," Comyn groaned. "If she loved me so much she'd talk less and smile more. Listen, did you come to give me family advice?"

"You know why I'm here," Ragnall said.

"Yes," Comyn replied.

"Father is worried," Ragnall said.

"He has reason to be," Comyn responded somberly.

#

The main hall of King Finbar's royal residence in the capital of Cadhla displayed the Kingdom of Finia's wealth. A marble fountain stood in the center spraying sparkling water into a clear pool in which long, fat golden fish swam. Statues of men and women were scattered throughout the hall. The walls were adorned with paintings of deer, horses, beautiful women, and King Finbar's ancestors, all of whom had ruled over a kingdom much smaller and poorer than his. Members of King Finbar's court

and his Teferi guests sat in polished wood chairs covered with the finest leather.

The Teferi had thick black beards, hard faces, and cold dark eyes. Comyn noticed them staring with disgust at the paintings and statues. Have they no taste? he wondered.

Three serving maidens entered carrying trays of meat, bread, and drink. The servers wore flimsy tunics that showed their arms and legs. Comyn noticed the Teferi could not take their eyes off the girls. The Teferi chief, in particular, eyed the women hungrily. They have no manners, either, Comyn thought.

The members of King Finbar's court and the Teferi spoke to each other in Caimara, the lingua franca of the whole western part of the continent. Because of Finia's wealth, merchants and workers had flooded into the cities and towns; the merchants to trade and the workers to fill jobs in the kingdom's expanding economy. Because of so many foreigners, almost every person, from the king on down, spoke Caimara fluently.

"We wish to establish a trading outpost here in Cadhla," the Teferi chief said.

"We have an open city," King Finbar replied. "All are welcome. All we ask is that you obey our laws and that your merchants pay our taxes. For that they must submit to an audit by our officials."

The Teferi chief nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps," Comyn offered, "there should be a mutual trade agreement. You establish a trading post here, and we establish one in your capital city. Do you have a problem with that?"

The Teferi chief looked at him. Comyn knew what he was thinking. Comyn wanted to smile, but kept his face straight.

"We have no problem with that at all," the Teferi chief replied. "That is an excellent idea."

Comyn rose from his chair and walked over to the Teferi chief.

"That is an interesting sword you carry,"

Comyn said. "Would you consider it rude if I asked to see it?"

"Not all," the chief sneered, and handed Comyn his sword.

Comyn balanced it in his hand and hefted it once or twice. It was lighter and shorter than the swords King Finbar's men carried, and it was curved, not straight.

"You don't look like a warrior," the Teferi chief said.

"Me, a warrior?" Comyn laughed. "No, no, no! I concern myself with growing things. While others of my cohort were training to be warriors, I was developing the strains of wheat and rye from which we make our flour. Merchants now come from all over to buy it, for this flour makes bread sweeter and tastier than any other bread. But most of all, I was working on my roses, to develop the perfume that drives women wild. No, sir, I am no warrior." And with that Comyn sliced the air viciously with the sword he held in his hand, making blurred circles above his head.

"May I show this sword to some of our warriors?" Comyn asked, and without waiting for an answer, he walked over to his father. King Finbar took the sword briefly and handed it back to his son. Comyn went to his brother who took it and muttered under his breath so only Comyn could hear, "It is a puny thing, no match for ours."

Comyn took the sword back to its owner, who was visibly displeased.

"Sir," Comyn said to him, "my brother over there is so strong he can lift a full-grown bull over his head and throw it twenty feet away. I myself have seen him do this," Comyn lied. "And my brother carries a sword so heavy only one as strong as he can wield it to cut a man in two right down the middle. And the other knights in my father's retinue are similarly strong men with heavy swords. But not many men are this strong."

"On the other hand, sir," Comyn continued, "with a sword like yours even a

man of modest strength like myself, mounted on a horse and with a steady hand, could sever a man's head from his neck so swiftly that his head would hit the ground before he even knew he was dead."

Silence filled the hall.

"Thus have I killed many men in the service of the Lord," the Teferi chief said softly.

"Of that I have no doubt," Comyn replied. "Tell me, do you make these swords in your own country or do you get them elsewhere?"

"We have our arts," the Teferi chief answered.

"Would you sell us swords if we offered you enough in flour and gold?" Comyn asked.

"We do not sell our weapons," the chief replied.

Comyn nodded. He returned to his seat. The rest of the deliberations between the two sides continued, but Comyn was no longer paying attention. He understood the threat his people were facing and what they had to do about it.

#

The Teferi had left. King Finbar's men stood around discussing the meeting.

A short fat merchant named Ronan was in the beginning of what was obviously going to be a long speech. Comyn interrupted him.

"We must not let the Teferi leave our borders," Comyn said firmly.

"What do you mean?" King Finbar asked.

"We can imprison them, kill them, it doesn't matter, as long as we don't let them return to their home country," Comyn said to the shocked gasps of all around him. "And when we attack their party make sure we outnumber them three or four to one."

"How can you say such a thing?" his father asked, shock still in his voice.

"Listen to me, and listen well," Comyn said. "They are here for conquest, not trade. I saw the look in their chief's eyes when he

looked at our women." He paused briefly, then added, "It must be because their women are as ugly as their men."

The nervous laughter died down as soon as the priest, Alban, in a white robe and a red cap, spoke.

"This is not a laughing matter," Alban said sternly. "What you suggest goes against our law. It goes against our holy books. It goes against the word of God."

A warrior named Quaid who stood next to the king stepped forward.

"Only a coward would suggest that course," Quaid said, addressing Comyn directly. "But our warriors are brave and will defend our land nobly. What do you know about courage, Rose Prince?" Quaid said the last two words with a sneer.

Comyn smiled and walked over to Quaid.

"Maybe if you smelled like roses instead of like a goat you'd be able to get a wife."

Quaid turned red at the laughter at his expense.

Comyn stepped closer to him.

"Quaid," Comyn said, "we can insult each other back and forth all day long, but that will not advance the argument one step. A man needs air to breathe, without it he cannot live, but air alone is not enough to sustain life. Likewise, a warrior needs courage, but that is not enough to achieve victory."

Comyn took several steps back and swept the assembly with his eyes.

"I tell you," he said, his voice rising, "these Teferi are far ahead of us in the arts of war. Their weapons are clearly better than ours. Even their horses are better. They can field more men in battle; because their swords are lighter a man does not need as much training to go into combat so even their common folk can fight."

"What I suggest buys us time," Comyn continued, "but if you are unwilling to accept my counsel on that, at least let me return with the Teferi as the head of a trade

delegation. Perhaps I can learn something that will help defend us.”

Comyn waited for a response. At last his father nodded and said, “It shall be as you ask.”

#

Comyn was alone with the priest in his chambers off the main hall.

“What do you know about the religion of the Teferi?” Comyn asked. “They were questioning the people about ours.”

The priest’s long, thin face seemed to grow longer.

“Only rumors,” Alban replied. “They accept our first two holy books, but claim that the next three are lies invented by our priests and scribes. They say that their prophet Miruts gave them the third, and true, last book from God.”

“Are their beliefs and practices very different than ours?” Comyn asked.

“I do not know,” Alban replied, “though I have heard, and this, too, is rumor, that their women cover their hair and faces and hide their bodies.”

“Ah,” responded Comyn, “now I see. What else do you know about them?”

“Know,” the priest responded, “or stories that I heard, which may or may not be true?”

“Sometimes there is a kernel of truth in even the wildest stories,” Comyn said.

“No one had ever heard of the Teferi in your grandfather’s time. They lived as semi-nomads at the edge of the great desert. Then a prophet named Mirsuts arose among them. He filled them with religious fervor. The Teferi spread out from their ancestral home. They multiplied. They started trading with some and conquering others. They conquered the Keenan.”

“The Keenan?” Comyn asked. “Don’t they also live on the edge of the desert? Fierce, primitive, worshipping the sun and moon?”

“Yes,” the priest answered. “The Teferi

gave them the choice of either accepting the religion of their prophet or being put to the sword. Many chose to convert; others died rather than give up the gods of their fathers.”

“How can you force a man to believe in a religion?” Comyn asked, puzzled.

The priest threw up his hands to show that he didn’t understand either.

“What about their dealings with the peoples who follow the Gillean religion?” Comyn asked.

“The Teferi had a trade dispute with the Branduff,” Alban said. “The Branduff claim it was a made-up dispute. At any rate, the Teferi went to war with them. The Teferi conquered them easily.”

“Did the Teferi try to force them to convert?”

“No,” the priest answered. “But they levied a heavy tax on those who did not, and promised special privileges to those who did, including positions of power over the rest of the Branduff.”

“Did many convert?” Comyn asked.

“Most stayed faithful to our beliefs.” The priest sighed sadly. “But there were many who converted to obtain the benefits promised them.”

“This all sounds like more than rumors,” Comyn said. “Where did you hear all this?”

“Years ago, when you were just a little boy,” Alban replied, “a priest from the Branduff visited me. He told me about the Teferi and the conquest of his land. He went back, and I never heard from him again.”

“Didn’t you tell my father about this?” Comyn snapped.

“Of course I did,” the priest replied.

“And he did nothing? He didn’t even consider it as a possible threat?”

“He heard and probably thought it was nothing to worry about,” Alban said. “By now, he has surely forgotten.”

Comyn shook his head with disgust.

“One day, with God’s will, you will be king, Comyn.”

Comyn laughed.

"It is not God's will," Comyn said, "but the fact that the sperm that was my brother reached our mother's womb four years before the sperm that was me. That is what makes my brother the future king."

"Why are you so impious, Comyn? Why do you not marry Aurnia? Why do you sleep with all the young maidens? Everyone knows that you would be king if you would just behave properly. Even your brother would step aside for you."

Comyn rarely became angry. But now his face turned red and he shook his finger at the priest.

"My brother is a good man," he said angrily. "A better man than I. And he will be a better king than our father. He was meant to be king, not I. Ragnall will not disgrace the throne by running around with women, and by opening his mouth when it should be kept shut. He will live his life for the affairs of state. Perhaps my brain is better than his—it is better than everyone's—but his heart and soul are better than mine. And my intelligence will faithfully serve my brother the king."

"No," Comyn went on, calmly now, "my mission is not to be king. My mission is to ensure that my brother sits on our throne, and not some filthy Teferi fanatic."

The priest nodded.

"Go with God, then," he said.

Comyn smiled grimly and thought, It would have been better if God had stopped the Teferi from coming here in the first place.

#

Ragnall's strong hands grasped Comyn's upper arms.

"Let me go with you, little brother," Ragnall pleaded. "It is a dangerous journey you undertake."

"No, Ragnall," Comyn said firmly. "I may not return alive. It would not do for

father to lose both his sons."

"Are you so sure they mean us harm?" Ragnall asked.

"That was not a trade delegation," Comyn replied. "We all know that. And you saw the way they looked at our women. They will conquer us and take our beautiful women by force. Ragnall, it pains me to say this, but all of our brave knights do not stand a chance against their mounted soldiers."

"Ragnall," he went on, "if I thought they could be bought off I would recommend bribing them. So we paid tribute—no, no" he interjected, seeing the look of anguish on his brother's face, "it would still be cheaper than war. They might even make useful allies. But they cannot be bought. They have come here filled with a terrible purpose."

Comyn sighed wearily.

"We must prepare for the inevitable. We must strengthen our defenses. We must make alliances."

Comyn looked into his brother's eyes.

"Tell father we must increase the number of fighting men. Craftsmen, merchants, and peasants must all be trained and armed, each man according to his ability. Even the women must learn to defend themselves and carry arms suitable to their strength."

Ragnall's voice trembled.

"Father will never agree to that," he said.

"Ragnall, one day you will be king, not I. It is time for you to stand up to father. It is not enough to win his approval; you will have to confront him sometimes, too."

Comyn could see that Ragnall still looked hesitant.

"If it helps," Comyn said, "tell him that the advice came from me."

Ragnall looked relieved.

"One more thing, big brother," Comyn said. "If I don't come back, look after Renny for me." Then he added, almost as an afterthought, "And Aurnia, too."

Tears filled Ragnall's eyes.
Yes, he nodded.

#

The party of the Teferi delegation and the men under Comyn traveled for four days before they finally crossed the border of Finia. It would take seven more days until they reached Bekele, the capital of the Teferi. Comyn was accompanied by Gara and twelve men whom he told the Teferi were merchants. However, only nine of them were actually merchants; the other three were military men. Comyn had not included those three for protection; he was under no illusion they would do any good if the Teferi decided to slaughter them. Rather, their role was to report on the state of the Teferi military and the defenses of Bekele. The warriors were there to serve King Finbar and Finia; the merchants were lured with the hope of someday making huge profits.

Comyn rode next to the Teferi chief, whose name was Demissie.

"That's a beautiful horse you have," Comyn said to him.

"We breed them ourselves," Demissie replied with pride.

"How long have you had them?" Comyn asked.

"The grandfathers of our grandfathers bred them. Even before that."

"And your swords?" Comyn inquired.

The Teferi chief gave him a sharp look.

"Our prophet Miruts designed them. He not only gave us our holy book, the Tesfaye, he gave us the means to spread its truth."

"How can you force a man to believe something?" Comyn asked.

"A fair enough question," Demissie replied, nodding. "Only God knows what is in a man's heart. But if a man follows the laws in our holy book, if he prays at the appointed times, if he conducts himself in the proper way, then unless he is truly evil God will show him the error of his previous

ways. More importantly, the man's sons will be raised in the true religion and they will believe."

Comyn said nothing. It was a point of view he had never considered, one that he found frightening.

"I want to ask you something," the Teferi chief said, interrupting Comyn's thoughts. "Why is there no hair on your face? Why do you smell of perfume?"

Comyn smiled and waited for their horses to take a few steps before answering, as he reminisced about the day that his brother Ragnall, after asking Comyn about his success with women, had decided to shave his own beard and cover himself with rose perfume. Not long after, Ragnall won the heart of Duversa, the most beautiful maiden in their father's kingdom.

"It delights our women," Comyn said, a half smile still on his face.

"Then delight your women," Demissie quoted, "and I will be well pleased."

Comyn turned in surprise to the Teferi chief.

"You quoted from our Book of Earnan," Comyn said. "How do you know our scriptures?"

"Our scholars have translated all your holy books," Demissie replied.

"You Teferi are very advanced," Comyn said with admiration. "That you would take such trouble to learn another people's religion... You know," Comyn began, his voice eager from a new-found thought, "our peoples should make an alliance. We could learn from each other."

Demissie stopped his horse. Comyn did the same.

"The Book of Earnan is a lie," the Teferi chief spat out. "This our Prophet Miruts taught us in the Tesfaye. God ordained it the woman's place to serve the man."

Comyn laughed.

"I like your religion!" he said enthusiastically. "But I'm afraid our women

would never allow us to give up our faith for yours.”

The Teferi chief gave Comyn an angry glance, muttered something under his breath, and spurred his horse forward.

Comyn kept his horse still as he watched Demissie ride to the head of the caravan.

These are dangerous people, Comyn thought.

#

Bekele, the capital of the Teferi, reminded Comyn of his father’s capital, Cadhla. Though Cadhla was new—King Finbar having moved the capital of his ancestors from the sleepy, dusty village of Aghamore to the new city he built on the banks of the mighty river Avonmore—and Bekele was not, both cities had the vibrant energy of new wealth. There was building going on everywhere, and men moved about quickly, with the purposefulness of those who understood that time was money.

Men. Not women. For it was only men that Comyn saw when he entered Bekele. When the caravan had been traveling through the land of the Teferi Comyn did see women occasionally working in the fields, covered as the priest Alban had described; in Bekele they seemed to be hidden from view.

Comyn’s party decamped at a modern looking inn of stone and wood, painted red and light blue. There was a huge hall on the first floor with tables and three open kitchens; the next five floors held the lodging rooms. On either side of the inn were sleek, shiny stables where the horses and other pack animals were housed.

As Comyn crossed the hall to the stairs leading to his room, he saw Demissie talking to Gara. Comyn stopped and watched as his aide spoke to the Teferi chief.

Apart from those words necessary to successfully complete the journey, Demissie had not spoken to Comyn since the talk they had after crossing the border of Finia.

Comyn did not like the length of this conversation between Demissie and Gara, and he especially did not like the changing expressions he saw on Gara’s face.

A sense of foreboding that edged into fear filled Comyn.

#

Gara always looked Comyn straight in the eyes whenever they talked. Not this time. The prince’s aide shifted uneasily on his feet and carefully avoided Comyn’s steady gaze.

They were in Comyn’s spare but comfortable lodging room. Comyn sat on his bed; Gara stood before him.

“What did the Teferi chief ask you?” Comyn inquired.

It took several moments before Gara answered.

“He asked me if I had been a cripple from birth. He said it did not appear so.”

“What did you tell him?” Comyn questioned.

“That I had not been born so,” Gara said, regret in his voice.

“Did he ask how it happened?”

“Yes,” Gara replied.

“And what did you say?” Comyn prodded.

Gara raised his eyes and looked straight at Comyn.

“I told him that I became crippled in a training contest with the prince,” Gara said accusingly.

“Gara,” Comyn protested vehemently “you know that was an accident. I did not even want to take part in that contest.”

“That is what they told me,” Gara responded. “That is not how you fought. You were like a wild beast bred and trained for combat, not like a fifteen year old youth who only wanted to grow roses.”

Comyn turned pale.

“Gara, how can you say such a thing?” Comyn asked, though he knew there was truth in Gara’s words. It would have been bad enough to hear such a thing back home,

but here among the hostile Teferi, Gara's words induced not only guilt but fear.

"Gara, have you always felt thus?"

"No," Gara answered. And then, "Perhaps somewhere deep inside." He looked at Comyn again, and Comyn saw the Gara of old. "I do not know, Prince."

"Gara, why would I want to harm you? What could I possibly gain?"

"I don't know." Gara, the old Gara, sounded helpless and confused.

"Where did you get the idea it happened deliberately?" Comyn asked. "From the Teferi chief?"

Gara nodded.

"Did he say why I would do such a thing to you?" Comyn asked.

"I asked him," Gara replied. "He said he did not know. But he said that though you looked and smelled like a woman you are as hard as the steel in the sword Mirsuts gave to his people. And Prince, everyone in our land knows that to be true."

Comyn could feel the old Gara slipping away.

"What else did Demissie ask you?" Comyn asked.

"If I had a wife," Gara answered.

The old Gara disappeared; it was the new one, filled with anger and the desire for revenge that stood before Comyn now.

"Demissie said," Gara went on, "that if I turned to the Book of Tesfaye and its Prophet Mirsuts, if I learned to worship God in the proper way, I would not only have a wife but would become a noble."

"A noble of our land or his?" Comyn asked quickly.

"Ours."

Comyn looked at Gara. Comyn was unarmed. He had not engaged in any kind of combat since he had defeated Gara years ago. Gara himself was armed with a dagger, and though crippled, was still strong, which was probably why the Teferi chief had inferred that Gara had not been born

disabled.

There was nothing Comyn could do.

"Gara," he said, "if you wish to betray your king, your faith, and your ancestors, go ahead. I cannot stop you. But know that no one loves a traitor, and despite what Demissie tells you now, the Teferi will never trust you."

Gara said nothing. He glared at Comyn defiantly.

"Go then," Comyn ordered.

Gara turned and left without saying a word.

Comyn watched him leave with regret.

He served me well, Comyn thought. I shall not see him again.

#

Comyn sat in a high-backed chair. Across from him sat the king of Tefer, who called himself Negus Retta. Whether that was the king's name, his title, or a combination of the two, Comyn did not know. At the king's right stood Demissie. Behind the king a row of armed guards stood at attention. Behind Comyn sat the members of his own delegation, except for Gara, who had disappeared.

It was Comyn's intention to make a few opening remarks and then let the richest and most successful merchant carry on the negotiations. The important thing was for their party to remain in Bekele long enough for Comyn to learn what he could to help defend his father's kingdom.

Comyn scanned the hard faces of the guards and suddenly felt very vulnerable. All of his people were unarmed, defenseless.

The king of Tefer spoke.

"We are honored to welcome the son of King Finbar, King of the Finians. We look forward to having a long and prosperous relationship with your people."

"Greetings, Negus Retta, King of the Teferi," Comyn replied. "As my father welcomed your people, so you welcome me."

As your people made arrangements to open a trading outpost in Cadhla, we wish to make arrangements to open a trading outpost in Bekele.”

“And so it shall be,” Negus Retta replied. At this, Comyn saw a slight smile cross Demissie’s face, and Comyn’s unease grew. “However, there is one small point that must be settled first, before we go on.”

Comyn leaned forward and listened for the next words impatiently.

“Demissie tells me,” the king continued, “that you insulted our prophet and our holy book. That you mocked God.”

Comyn leaned back in the chair. At first he was so surprised he did not know how to reply, and then he recovered quickly and said:

“Sir, if I have given offense I apologize. It was completely inadvertent. I am not even aware of what I said that was improper. Remember, when people of different cultures meet, allowance must be given for ignorance of each other’s customs.”

“This is not a question of manners,” Negus Retta said. “If it were simply a matter of being impolite we would have overlooked it. This is a question of mocking God, which is against our laws and brings severe punishment.”

“How did I mock God?” Comyn asked.

“You laughed when Demissie quoted our scriptures to you.”

Comyn took a deep breath. Were they serious, he wondered, or are they seeking a pretext for a fight?

“Negus Retta, your captain, Demissie, completely misunderstood. I was not laughing at your beliefs. I was laughing with delight. I wish our law decreed that the woman serve the man.”

“Even now you mock God’s law,” Negus Retta said. “Laughter is forbidden when it comes to the holy law.”

“How can I be held accountable to your

laws when I was not even in the boundaries of Tefer when this happened?” Comyn demanded.

“God’s laws know no boundary,” Negus Retta replied.

“And you Teferi are the ones to interpret and enforce God’s laws?”

“Now you are beginning to gather wisdom to your bosom,” Negus Retta said with satisfaction.

“Are you the king or the high priest?” Comyn asked.

“The king is also the high priest,” Negus Retta answered. “Ultimate temporal power and spiritual power must be in the same hands. The holy law requires it.”

“Our law requires the opposite,” Comyn retorted.

“Your law is wrong,” the Teferi king said calmly.

“Tell me,” Comyn demanded, with some heat, “why am I called to account for insulting your religion but Demissie is not called to account for insulting mine? Not a moment before I laughed Demissie said that our Book of Earnan was a lie.”

“Oh, but it is,” said Negus Retta, in the most reasonable tone of voice. “All of the last three of your books are lies. Your scribes and priests deliberately distorted God’s word. It is only because of your ignorance that you do not know this.” The Teferi king raised a book that he held in his hand. “Can you read Caimara?” he asked.

“If it is written in the northern alphabet,” Comyn replied.

“Of course,” the king responded. “I would not give you a present written in our script.” He held the book higher. Demissie took it from his hand and walked over to Comyn.

Comyn took the proffered volume. Demissie returned to his place by the king’s side.

“Thank you,” Comyn said, not fully believing that this was a simple case of being given a present. “I had hoped to learn about

the Teferi people on this visit. And now, if we may, I would like to begin our trade negotiations. Mago, who is—”

Negus Retta raised his hand and interrupted.

“There will be no negotiations until you have read and seen the truth of the Tesfaye.”

Comyn raised his eyebrows.

“Good king,” he said, “I am most interested in your holy book. But we are here to negotiate trade, not receive religious instruction.”

The king smiled.

“Consider yourselves our guests,” he said. “We wish to make your accommodations as comfortable as possible. And if in your reading you have questions, please do not hesitate to ask Demissie, or even myself, if he cannot answer. May God guide your soul.” He waved his right hand as if dismissing them, and then abruptly got up and left the room. The guards behind him remained.

Comyn was stunned. He stood up and asked angrily, “Were you treated in this fashion when you came to Finia?”

Demissie took a step toward Comyn.

“Negus Retta has spoken,” he said, menacingly placing his hand on the sword at his side.

#

Comyn looked out the window of his room in the inn. On the road, heading east, a man led a donkey hitched to a cart filled with bolts of blue and red cloth. Heading west, two oxen pulled a heavy truck loaded with gray and brown bricks. Two men followed the truck. The road was fringed north and south with raised wooden sidewalks. Each had pedestrians moving west and east.

Comyn watched the donkey and oxen pass smoothly, and then he turned away from the window. These Teferi were more than just barbarian religious fanatics.

Still, Negus Retta violated every rule of

hospitality by holding the Finian party hostage to Comyn’s own religious conversion, though for captives, they were not being treated so badly. Comyn suspected the house arrest would end once they knew he had finished the Tesfaye, but then what? Comyn weighed his options, but did not feel certain he could predict what the Teferi would do next. He would have to be cautious.

There was a knock on the door. The politeness of the act struck Comyn as ironic, especially since it was immediately followed by the door being opened by Demissie, without waiting for Comyn’s response.

“I came under a flag of peace,” Comyn said. “Why are you doing this?”

“Prince of Finia,” Demissie responded, “if you return to your father’s kingdom as a follower of Mirsuts, acknowledging the truth of the Tesfaye, the word of God will have won a great victory. And it will happen, God willing, because He Himself gave you the idea to return with us.”

“And if I do not do these things?” Comyn asked.

“I pray that you will, but if not, we will conquer Finia and take your capital and all that is in it.” A slow smile spread across Demissie’s face, and a faraway look appeared in his eyes.

“All that is in it?” Comyn said heatedly, throwing away caution despite himself. “I saw the way you stared at our women. Do you have to go war to find a wife?”

“I already have two wives,” Demissie replied calmly, “of the Teferi people. But your women are beautiful. I would not mind taking one from your people if God does not grant you the wisdom of his truth.”

“Two wives,” Comyn said. “So, you can take up to two more.”

“Ah,” Demissie said, “you have been reading the Tesfaye.”

“Demissie, it has many of the same things as our holy books, including the books you

say are lies. Indeed, they are the same rules all men need if they are to live together peacefully, whether they are followers of Mirsuts, followers of Gillean, or the Keenan who worshipped the sun and the moon.”

Demissie gave him a sharp look.

“But there is one big difference,” Comyn went on, “Mirsuts was a warrior, and all our prophets were men of peace. The greatest of them, Aodhfin, gave his life for his people. He took on a terrible wasting disease, a painful affliction, so that none of our people would ever have to suffer from it again.”

“The Book of Aodhfin is a lie,” Demissie spat.

“Demissie, I do not know anyone who saw Aodhfin’s miracle. I do not know anyone who knows anyone who saw Aodhfin’s miracle. And even beyond that, so long ago did it happen. Perhaps you are right. What difference does it make? No one can prove the truth of any holy book or belief; yours, mine, or the sun and moon worship of the Keenan.”

Demissie’s face grew angry, his eyebrows arched, and his hand went to the hilt of his sword.

“Why do you do this to me?” Comyn asked. “Our two peoples could learn from each other. We could make both our realms better places to live.”

“Our life in this world is not the most important thing,” Demissie said slowly and thoughtfully. “If you were even a Gillean you would understand that. But you are not. You are a sarsa dengel, a heretic, a mocker of God and his holy books.” He regarded Comyn for a moment. “I was right about you,” the Teferi chief said. “It was as I told Negus Retta. A simple reading of the Tesfaye would not be enough. The truth of God’s word will have to be burned into your soul.”

Comyn shuddered, but Demissie did not see it, for he had already left the room.

#

Comyn awoke from a troubled, fitful sleep. It was the middle of the night.

Comyn paced the room nervously. He felt trapped. Whatever the Teferi had in store for him, it would not be pleasant. To make matters worse, he was having trouble formulating a coherent strategy to handle the looming threats to himself, the others with him, and his homeland.

He rubbed the stubble on his face.

He could pretend to accept their religion, go back home, and then prepare his people for the inevitable war. Strategically, the Teferi had just made things easier. While they were a greater danger than he had thought, after what they had done to him it would be a simple matter to enlist allies in the region. Making the case that the Teferi were a threat to everyone would not be difficult.

He stopped pacing and rubbed his face again.

But it might not be that simple. The Teferi were so unpredictable they might insist that a huge army accompany him back home.

He lay back down on the bed and closed his eyes.

The answer is there, he thought. Somewhere just beyond my reach.

Then he fell into a deep sleep.

#

There was no knock. The door opened. Demissie stood there accompanied by three guards. One of them was Gara, dressed in the uniform of the Teferi.

Comyn looked out the window. It was still dark.

“You will learn the power of God, his holy book, and his chosen prophet,” Demissie intoned solemnly.

Comyn looked at Gara. Gara stared back as if he had never seen Comyn before.

“What do you want?” Comyn snapped. “You have already violated every law of

hospitality. Know this, Demissie. After you left our council, I advised my father and the others to kill you and your people before you left our borders. I saw the danger you presented. And do you know what they said? ‘We will not do such a dishonorable thing.’

“I am like you, Demissie. There is evil in my soul. I was a bad Gillean, but I would make a good Teferi.”

Demissie turned red with anger. He waited several moments until he regained his composure, and said, his voice dripping with contempt:

“Let us see how willing you are to mock us when the morning comes, sarsa dengel. Come with us now. It is time.”

Comyn did not move.

“Kill me now, Demissie,” he said, “and get it over with. Kill me now so that all the nations will know the treachery of the Teferi and unite against you.”

Demissie growled something low and guttural in his own language. The two Teferi guards came swiftly at Comyn and seized his arms. Comyn allowed himself to be dragged away.

#

Comyn found himself in the center of a large stadium. He was strapped to a chair with legs so high that his feet did not touch the ground. The chair was metal and stood in the middle of a pool of water. The water covered Comyn’s legs up to his calves. Comyn was naked, except for a loin cloth wrapped around his midsection. His arms, legs, stomach and chest were bound with straps of leather inlaid with metal.

Comyn watched the blackness of the sky slowly edge into dark blue, and then into one of the most glorious sunrises he had ever seen.

Unbidden, the verses of the Book of Aodhfin came to Comyn, the ones describing how the heavens had displayed all their

beauty the morning Aodhfin was born. No one at the time had understood what it meant; it was not until after Aodhfin had given his life for the people that the significance of the sky that morning became clear.

Myths, Comyn thought to himself through gritted teeth. I face some terrible trial and I move toward madness at just the time I need a clear mind.

Comyn looked around. There was enough light now for him to see what confronted him.

A huge wheel was fixed vertically by a long axis in the center. The top of the wheel brushed against a large expanse of some kind of furry material. The whole device was supported by a wooden platform that separated it from the ground. A metal cable resting on another wooden platform snaked out from the wheel’s axis to a large metal box. The box had a lever with a handle that looked as if it were wrapped with some kind of thick canvas. The lever was in a raised position. Comyn could see that the lever could be moved down through an angle of almost 90 degrees.

Coming from that box was another metal cable supported by wooden scaffolding that brought it to the tank of water in which Comyn was held. The cable’s end plunged into the water.

Comyn examined the entire contraption with curiosity.

What’s all this for? he wondered.

As the sky grew lighter the stadium filled with people. Comyn closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. The bonds holding him were too tight, his feet were cold, and the beard now growing on his face itched him.

When Comyn opened his eyes Demissie and Negus Retta were staring at him. Gara stood next to the box with the lever.

The great wheel started to spin as men behind it turned a series of cranks. Comyn noticed with horror that sparks flew from the

top of the wheel where it rubbed the furred material.

Whatever hopeful doubts Comyn had were gone. They were going to torture him.

The stadium was full. Seated in front, where they could easily see him, were Comyn's people from Finia. Teferi guards stood all around them. Looks of anguish covered the faces of the men from Finia. Comyn gave them a weak smile.

The wheel stopped spinning.

"Do you confess," Negus Retta demanded in a booming voice, "that the Tesfaye is God's one true book and Mirsuts is his prophet?"

Comyn had a plan. He would give in, but not right away, lest the Teferi think that the Finians were weak and easily conquered. He would wait until he had borne more than even a strong man could take, and then he would confess to whatever they wanted. At least, that was his plan.

Comyn looked at Demissie and Negus Retta.

"Tell me," Comyn said, in as loud a voice as he could muster, "why I should confess to a religion whose adherents torture their invited guests? You don't need a religion to do that."

Comyn once more saw anger spread across Demissie's face. But Negus Retta only smiled with amusement.

"Then you will know the power of God," Negus Retta said, and with those words he signaled to Gara.

Comyn watched as Gara moved the lever down.

The lever reached its lowest point and at that very instant a terrible force entered Comyn's body, scorching every nerve in it. Comyn's body jerked wildly against the straps that held him.

Comyn had never felt such pain. He had not even known that such pain existed. It was over in a moment, but he felt as if he had endured it forever. Though his body

stopped jerking, the men of Finia continued their own groans of agony at the spectacle of their prince's suffering.

"Did you feel the power of the Lord?" Negus Retta asked in a voice that carried throughout the stadium.

It took several moments for Comyn to catch his breath and reply.

"The power of the Lord?" he asked. "In Finia, a man of genius develops new strains of grain to eat and new varieties of roses so that the woman may cover themselves in perfume. In Tefer, a man of genius develops a diabolical machine for torture. Where is God in this, Negus Retta?"

Negus Retta and Demissie looked at each other in surprise. Good, Comyn thought, I'm tougher than they expected.

"Do you confess," Negus Retta again demanded, "that the Tesfaye is God's one true book and Mirsuts is his prophet?"

Comyn wanted to open his mouth and hurl an ancient Finian curse at them, *May you eat dog excrement*, but no words came out. He simply stared back at his tormentors.

Negus Retta gave a signal and once again the great wheel started to turn.

Mixed with Comyn's fear at the next strike of pain was confusion about why he had not been able to utter the curse. It preoccupied him, even as he became aware that the wheel had been spinning much longer than it had the first time.

The wheel stopped. Negus Retta signaled to Gara. The lever descended.

This time it was worse, much worse. The scorching was not just in his body, but inside his head. The pain was more intense and lasted longer.

Finally it stopped.

Enough, Comyn thought. Enough. I've defended the honor of Finia.

Negus Retta stepped closer to him. There was a look of concern on the Teferi king's face.

"Did you feel the power of the Lord?"

Negus Retta, more softly this time.

Comyn nodded yes. Negus Retta looked relieved. He shouted something and guards swarmed around Comyn, releasing him from his bonds. Comyn stumbled from the pool to dry ground and toward the King of Tefer.

"You will proclaim your allegiance to the Tesfaye and Mirsuts before the people of Bekele and before your own people," Negus Retta said quietly.

Comyn nodded in assent.

"Do you confess," Negus Retta said, this time with triumph, "that the Tesfaye is God's one true book and Mirsuts is his prophet?"

Comyn opened his mouth. He wanted to say yes. He wanted to say yes more than anything else in the world. He took a deep breath.

Comyn's voice filled the stadium. But they were not the words he intended.

"Aodhfin lives!" he cried, to his own surprise as much as everyone else's.

Negus Retta stared open-mouthed at Comyn. Demissie snarled.

This time it was Demissie who gave the orders. Comyn was seized and again bound to the chair.

Comyn barely noticed that the wheel spun and spun without stopping. When it finally did stop and the lever descended, the fire from the wheel scorched down to his soul. His body jerked so violently that bones broke. When it was over, he could still feel the pain but could no longer feel his body.

He heard Gara scream and saw his former aide throw off the Teferi uniform and run towards him. Gara jumped into the pool and threw himself at Comyn's feet.

"Forgive me, noble prince," Gara cried.

Comyn sighed. He could only move the index finger of his right hand. He caressed one of Gara's locks with that finger.

"Forgive me, noble warrior," Comyn said, speaking with great effort. "Forgive what I did to you. I knew it would be a disgrace to the crown if I did not train and thereby lost.

I would be forced into the warrior school until I made a better accounting of myself. If I did train and did well that would prove I could become a warrior, and so I would be forced to continue on that path. Either way, I would have to become a warrior."

The effort of speaking so much while still in pain made Comyn's breathing labored. He had to stop to catch his breath.

"After much thought, I came up with a plan," Comyn continued. "Every day, for hours, I trained fiercely. I took instruction not only from the masters of the stick fighting of our contest, but from the boxers to learn how to deliver a punch between the armor. I even questioned the physicians, to learn which parts of the body were weak and could be damaged. I knew if I turned a simple contest between two youth into real combat, if I showed that giving me a weapon made me vicious and uncontrollable, my father and all his court would gasp in astonishment and then let me follow my own path.

"And I was right, dear Gara, but you paid a heavy price for my freedom. I did not intend to cripple you, but I should have realized that the ferocity of my attack would do so. Forgive me, for what I did to you and what I'm about to do, for I no longer have the strength to resist the Teferi."

Teferi guards came and dragged a weeping Gara away.

Once again Negus Retta asked the terrible question.

"Do you confess that the Tesfaye is God's one true book and Mirsuts is his prophet?"

Comyn wanted to say yes, just as he had wanted to say yes before the last terrible scourging. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out.

Comyn struggled to force himself to follow his intentions.

Otherwise I will die, he thought, and my death will be for nothing.

Still, he could not say the word.

I will shake my head up and down, he thought, so they know I'm saying yes.

A sense of relief flooded through Comyn. He began to move his head.

To Comyn's horror, his head did not move up and down. It moved left and right, several times, vigorously, signifying no.

Demissie roared with anger. He shouted for the wheel to begin turning, and called out, "I will pull the lever myself."

Comyn stared straight ahead as the wheel began to turn.

Negus Retta walked up to the edge of the pool. He looked into Comyn's eyes. Comyn did not flinch. It was Negus Retta who looked away.

The Teferi king raised his right hand.

"Enough!" he cried. "Stop!"

The wheel stopped turning.

"One more time and he will die." Negus Retta's voice trembled. "His death would be a victory for him and a defeat for us."

He looked down at Comyn.

"You will be released and sent home to Finia. Your father's kingdom no longer has anything to fear from Tefer. We will not attack you, we will not conquer you."

A hush filled the stadium. As the last of the noise died away, Comyn lost consciousness.

#

Comyn lay on the bed in his room at the inn. A Teferi physician bent over him.

"How long will I be like this?" Comyn asked. "I can't move at all."

The Teferi physician shook his head.

"I do not know," he said. "We have never seen anyone resist after the first time. You withstood three. I do not know. Perhaps you are strong and will recover." He hesitated, and then asked, "Do you have a copy of the Book of Aodhfin in Teferi, or even Caimara, perhaps?"

Comyn looked up at the physician with surprise.

"No, he replied, "but if you journey back with me to Cadhla and tend to my injuries on the way, the high priest will give one to you."

"Thank you," the physician said, nodding.

The members of Comyn's party who had come with him to Bekele entered the room. Gara was with them.

Comyn spoke.

"Tomorrow we return home," he said. "I cannot travel by horse. I will need a wagon. Some of you will go on ahead to bring word to my father, the rest will travel more slowly with me."

"You are a hero, Prince Comyn," one of the men cried. The others murmured in assent. "You saved Finia from a dangerous enemy. Your deeds will be recounted among our people forever!"

"Not just among our people," another exclaimed, "but among all the Gilleans."

Comyn laughed bitterly.

"I am no hero, my friends," Comyn said. "I am a fool." Then he closed his eyes so the others would not see his tears.

#

The wagon rumbled mercilessly over uneven ground as it carried Comyn back to Finia. Each bump caused him sharp pain, though nothing compared to the Teferi torture machine. Still, he could not sleep or rest.

Comyn remained unable to move his body except for his right index finger. He had to be fed, and his personal needs attended to, by the Teferi physician and the members of his party. It was humiliating, and not helped at all by the reverence with which his men now treated him, a reverence to which Comyn did not feel entitled.

They had traveled for days. Comyn lost count; neither did he know how close or how far he was from his father's kingdom.

There were shouts in the distance. Comyn strained to hear through the wagon's

covering.

“Ragnall, Ragnall arrives with a mounted host!” someone shouted.

Comyn raised his head. The wagon stopped and its cover taken down.

Comyn saw his brother on horseback, with, indeed, an army behind him.

As soon as Ragnall saw his stricken younger brother, he jumped off his horse and ran to Comyn.

“Little brother!” he cried, his eyes filling with tears as he embraced Comyn, “What have they done to you?” He moved away from Comyn, and said, rage in his voice, “I will gather allies and raise a huge army. We will destroy Tefer. I will have revenge for what they have done to you.”

“No, big brother, no,” Comyn insisted. “No talk of war. The king of Tefer gave me his word he will never attack us.”

Ragnall looked down at his brother, not comprehending Comyn’s response.

“Ragnall, there is so much I don’t understand any more...” Comyn’s voice trailed off. “There is so much I need to think about after what I went through... No war. Not now...”

“Comyn, you are a hero,” Ragnall said with awe. “Those who saw you say you became filled with the spirit of Aodhfin. They say you became like him. You will live forever in the memory of our people.”

“No, Ragnall, no!” Comyn cried, beginning to weep. “I am no hero, I am a fool!”

“Little brother, what are you talking about? You defended our faith. You saved Finia.”

The tears streamed down Comyn’s face.

“You do not understand,” Comyn said.

“When I wanted to say ‘yes,’ my mouth said ‘Aodhfin lives!’ When I wanted to shake my head yes, it shook no. I am not a hero; I am a weak and stupid man. I still do not know why I lost my will.” Comyn stifled a sob. “Do I look like a hero to you?” he cried. “Look at me Ragnall! Do you think I chose this? Oh, big brother, what will become of me?”

Comyn finally broke down sobbing. Ragnall hugged him once again.

Comyn’s hand clutched at Ragnall’s arm.

“Look,” Comyn exclaimed, shocked.

“Before I could only move my finger. Now I can move the whole hand. You give me strength, big brother.” And the tears came down Comyn’s face even more freely.

“Little brother, you will recover soon enough, and once again you will shave your face and chase the women. But if you so much as lay a finger on Duessa...” Ragnall playfully shook his finger in Comyn’s face.

Comyn did not smile at Ragnall’s joke.

“No, big brother,” he replied, the tears ceasing. “No more chasing women,” he said thoughtfully. “And if I recover and Aurnia will have me, I will marry her.”

Ragnall took a deep breath, surprised.

“That is truly a miracle, little brother,” Ragnall responded. “And Aurnia will have you, whether or not you recover.”

Comyn sighed.

“Take me home, brother,” Comyn said.

“Take me home.”

The End