

Journey of the Swamp Baron – Until the End of Aretz, book 1

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Chapter 1

Ruby had to cut off his honour, and he laid back his long elf ears as he braided his dark hair. His fingers found the dagger in his belt, and he tightened his grip on the braid but hesitated.

He stumbled to the bank of the small forest lake he had camped at. He let go of the dagger, and it fell into the brown, withered leaves beneath the dense tree crowns, which did not let much light through. He fell to his knees and splashed some water in his face while a jay called to its mate with sorrowful crows. Then he sank to the ground and leant back against a weeping willow. With both hands he clung to his hair. He had to remove this symbol of his honour, or his freedom would be forfeit. *How humiliating and ironic having to pretend to be a slave in order to be able to travel freely.*

A brand on his arm wouldn't be necessary; his long-sleeved shirts would complete the illusion. The carnivores would think that he was trying to hide his shame at being someone's property beneath his clothing. On cold days, he had seen elves in the fields, wrapped in layers of clothing that covered both their shoulders and neck, so the missing slave collar around his neck could be hidden with a shawl when he reached the capital. If he were to travel unseen, he would not reach his destination until late in spring when it would still be cool in these areas. But his hair had to go before he'd be able to move about among humans in Karbon without being discovered and enslaved. It was the most important mark of slaves and so degrading that Ruby could not stand the thought.

It was almost worse than cutting off his hand. He'd never imagined that his voluminous, dark brown tresses, which reached his chest, would be a source of frustration. But he had realized that he couldn't hide them under a hat or scarf, no matter how tightly he braided his hair. His ears could not be hidden, either. He had tried unsuccessfully. He could flatten them but had to concentrate to keep them in place. At the smallest distraction, he would reveal himself. And if people got upset because of his hair here in Montanistan, they would be furious in Karbon where elves – as far as he had heard – were not even permitted to wear head gear.

One's hair was exceptionally private, almost sacred. Ruby knew of no elves who hadn't been able to wash, comb and arrange their own honour by the time they were out of diapers. He vividly remembered the first time he himself had sensed how wrong it was to let his mum, dad, older brother or anyone else touch his hair. It'd been around the same time he'd gained control of his language and learned to control his rhyming.

In his long-term relationships, Ruby had hesitated to allow his partners anything as intimate as touching his hair. And now he had to cut it off.

He looked over the treetops in the glade, up at the peak of the last mountain he needed to cross to get from Montanistan to Karbon. He had expected more options for getting there discretely, but no one had been willing to sail him directly to the infamous land. The sailors warned him about getting near so southerly parts of Manus Orop, where slavery was a common thing.

Ruby had hurried on when the curious sailors asked why it was so important to travel to this elf-hostile land. As he wanted to leave as few traces as possible, he couldn't very well tell them about Damian. If it was obvious that he was fleeing, he risked attracting attention and being remembered. Ruby could only hope that Damian never found the curious sailors.

Finally, he'd chosen the risky smugglers' route to a small fishing village in Karbon's neighbouring country to the north, Montanistan. From there he'd walked with the illegal records in his bag along the eastern coast toward Karbon. Once the papers had been delivered, all traces of his contract with the smugglers that sent him here would be destroyed, and they would place a false trail. Hopefully this would make it even more difficult for Damian to find him. *Karbon is the last place any elf would look.*

Frustrated, he banged his head against the trunk of the tree and picked up his knife. The dishonourable disguise would actually set him free again. *Temporarily lost honour is better than a life as a slave here in Karbon – or the horrors of the past years.*

The air got stuck in his throat. Instead of grabbing his braid, he ripped off his boot and cut the engagement cord off of his ankle and threw it away. Only now, so close to Karbon, he felt fairly sure that Damian would not be able to find him easily. If he caught him and found out that he had broken off the engagement, Ruby wasn't sure that he would survive the punishment. He pulled tinder fungus and dried birchbark from his bag. He scratched some wooden fibres off of an old, dead oak, placed it all on his flint and took out his steel.

He struck the flint with it, powered by four years' pent-up frustration, until the tinder caught fire, and soon the flames devoured the detested engagement band.

He sat there, staring into the air in front of him without seeing the flames or the smoke when the small fire went out. It would take more than fifty years for his hair to re-grow to an acceptable length again, but no matter what, he would have to stay hidden until Damian was dead, which could be several hundred years.

After I've delivered the smuggler's goods, no one will see the shabby locks. I'll find a place to hide. A forest so deep, no human will ever come there. Right now, the biggest threat was not the condescending looks from the other elves, but rather the very real risk that in his attempt to avoid Damian's chains, he would end up in the hands of slavers.

Ruby lifted the knife but then thought better of it and freed a few front locks from the braid. A little would remain; just a few tresses by his face. Then his fingers once again grabbed the hilt, the other hand grabbing the braid at the back of his neck.

Quickly, before my courage deserts me.

The blade cut through his hair far too easily, while birds warbled in their sad, foreign way.

He cried himself to sleep under the willow's drooping branches in the deserted forest, but even in his sleep, he didn't relinquish his grip on the cut-off braid.

Normally, Gavin wasn't proud of how little his rank of nobility showed through the layers of mud on his clothes, but today it was on purpose. He smiled smugly on his horse as he rode into Grinde Rivertown via the dusty cart track with his somewhat older squire, Edgar. Gavin's nobleman's cloak was hidden in one of his saddlebags, and he hadn't shaved for a few days.

He tasted the salty sea air. He found the cries of the seagulls refreshingly different from those of the hen harriers from the bog at home. The chickens clucked as they crowded around the horses' hooves when they stopped at a small half-timbered inn. Gavin jumped from his horse and passed his waterskin to Edgar, who had emptied his own two villages ago.

Edgar drank and rubbed his face while he considered the young man. "How about we just get supplies and ride on?"

Gavin could hear the edge of anxiety in Edgar's voice but said: "My bum is sore from all that riding. We will get there in time". He followed the inn maid with his eyes as she hauled water inside, "The inn looks nice. And I need to sleep in a real bed."

"You'll have to get used to a sore ass and nights under the open sky. As far as money is concerned, it'd also be best if we..."

"... I've decided that we will stay here for the night," Gavin said with a nod.

"As you wish, *my lord*," Edgar said while rolling his eyes.

"I'll behave."

Edgar raised a bushy eyebrow, his lips tight in a strained smile. "I've heard that one before." He nudged his horse forward. "I'll buy bread and some sausage so we have enough for a few days."

Gavin patted his brown workhorse on its neck. "That's fine; I'll give Gringolet some water and barter with the innkeeper in the meantime."

Gavin looked after his friend with a pang of guilt. Of course, it would be better to continue so that they got there well in advance of the tournament and with as much money as possible left for the tasks of the coming months. But now they were finally out of their own sloppy fief and had reached more interesting towns.

He pulled his horse around the corner from where the inn maid with the braids had come. Even though the inn was at the edge of the dockside town, he could hear voices from the market: Men and women in stalls, yelling in competition. The wind carried the sound of applause and the smell of smoked herring.

Maybe I should've gone with Edgar. There's probably a play on at the square.

The few people on the road were all headed toward the square by the small dock. Gavin hesitated but then noticed a slender woman filling a waterskin by the well, her back to him.

There are plenty of street performers. There'll be more than enough entertainment on the way. He smoothed down his wrinkled shirt.

The woman wore a bluish woollen cape and a scarf around her hair. She appeared to be considering the well's lifting device, stroking her thin fingers over it. Her skin was dark, so she wasn't a local.

Maybe a travelling merchant from the north.

She seemed absorbed and didn't react to the footsteps of him and his horse, but when Gavin cleared his throat, she turned around with a start.

"Greetings," Gavin said, tucking his semi-long black hair back behind his ear, where it could just about reach, "could I perhaps have some water for my horse, before you..." Gavin stared at the elf, and his hand stopped mid-air when he realised that he wasn't facing a woman.

A few tresses of hair fell in front of the elf's narrow face, all the way down to his chest. Two points beneath the scarf suddenly appeared in the fabric. The elf quickly swept his hair behind his long ears, which he must have flattened on purpose and kept down until Gavin surprised him. With a nervous start, he adjusted the fabric and managed to force his ears down again. His eyes flitted from Gavin to the horse. He looked tired and was slim – even for an elf. He was almost a head lower than Gavin and small of stature, and he looked tired and scrawny – even for an elf. Hastily, he put down his waterskin next to the low stone wall of the well and made room for Gringolet to drink from the bucket.

Gavin squinted a bit and looked around for the owner. *Why doesn't he lower his gaze?*

The elf reached up and let his fingers run through Gringolet's blonde mane, and Gavin cleared his throat.

"Is something matter?" the elf asked.

"You're touching my horse!"

The elf pulled his hand away as if burned. "I am begging your pardon". He immediately looked to the ground.

He didn't mean to have the owner punish the elf, but he still pointed his thumb toward the inn and said: "Your master, where is he? Inside with others of your kind?"

"Where could he be?

He will be hard to find!

I have no master for you to see

Who wishes me to bind," the elf sneered. He quickly put his hand over his mouth and looked bashfully down again.

"Speak properly to me!"

"I am begging your pardon, I am apologetic."

"It's '*I am sorry*'." Gavin placed his hands at his waist. "Are you a travelling merchant?"

"No, I am travelling in paper and am..."

"... Did you just arrive?" He interrupted, and the elf nodded. "Have you spoken with anyone else?"

"No, I walked in the woods along the coast, but the creek was dried ou..."

"Then you are extremely lucky that I am the first one you've talked to." Gavin let his arms fall to his sides and shook his head. He noticed the little elf's frantic breathing. His pupils filled out almost all of his brown iris. The herbivore seemed to know he was in trouble. *Surely someone would have warned him.*

Just then, laughter could be heard from the road, and Gavin nudged Gringolet's hindquarters so he came to obstruct the view. The elf's lack of understanding of etiquette could quickly result in a beating.

“Where do you need to deliver your papers?”

“In the capital.”

Gavin tried to gauge how young and naïve the elf was. Maybe he really did not understand how dangerous and difficult it would be further inland. He shook his head. “Are you possessed?”

“It is not a possession, merely a job, my interest threads are entangled in quite differe...”

You should find other interests. You can be sure it won’t get any easier in Beltinge.” Gavin scratched his black stubble. “You’ve probably chosen the worst possible country to play at being a postman in. Further north, perhaps...”

The elf had already forgotten about looking down.

I’ll let it pass this time. “But hopefully you aren’t travelling by horse?”

“Oh no.”

“Good! That would border on severing your golden thread. It’s bad enough with the scarf.”

The elf lowered his gaze again, but this time it didn’t seem to be out of deference.

“You cannot simply travel around like that. Any lord or freeman could, no *has a right* to take you as their slave. Also, technically, it’s illegal for you to hide the fact that you are free with a scarf.”

The elf nodded while he studied his boots. “I didn’t intend for anyone to see me here. If it looking like a human in distance, I would have quickly gotten water and be gone, before anyone came close.

“Well, you didn’t succeed. Do you even know the laws?”

The elf looked up. “I know we cannot walk about freely, but I will keep to the forests; and I will only have to face you in few places.”

Gavin couldn’t help but smile. *He seems to forget quickly.* With his arms crossed, he said: “And one more thing, Longears, your kind don’t look us in the eyes around here. You’d have to go far, *far* north for that to be acceptable. Here it’ll be enough for ordinary peasants to tie you to the square post and flog you. And they’ll probably not let you go before their lord comes and collects his new slave.” Gavin looked seriously at the elf. “Here in Karbon, most people will only welcome your race as free labour.”

Gavin followed the elf’s gaze to the flap of his red nobleman’s cloak, which poked up from one of the saddlebags.

The elf’s every muscle was tense, as if he was ready to escape across the field toward the forest.

“Don’t worry, I won’t take you prisoner, even though I could *really* use the money.” Gavin’s smile grew more forced, and he attempted to stuff his cloak all the way into the bag before he gave up and instead stuffed it into his backpack. “But it’s not the attitude you should expect around here.”

“I am understanding.”

“No, if you understood, you would not have come here.”

The elf looked down.

“You shouldn’t be here. The other noblemen have never tried being spat at and trod on. They often forget to show the same kindness to people lower in the hierarchy than they expect to be met with, as prescribed. Everyone has lost a grandfather in the last war against you, so very few Karbonians would hesitate to capture you and sell you.” Gavin padded Gringolet, who’d emptied the bucket. “Drop the papers and go home. If you forget your station in Beltinge, you’ll stand out, and your race is in high demand, so you risk being claimed by someone.”

Thank you for your advice, Sir. ...” The elf was inching away.

”Gavin Sapore, and you’re welcome, Longears, but if you *have to* go into the cities, stick to river and coastal towns like this one, where the trading ships dock. It makes for a terrible reputation and is bad business to take potentially returning customers as slaves. You might be lucky that people there will overlook that you break the rules.”

“Thank you once more. I am much obliging, Mr. Sapore.” The elf backed away, bowed and began running across the small field between the forest and the outmost row of houses.

Gavin shook his head and pulled Gringolet toward the stables next to the inn. He made sure his nobleman’s cloak was out of sight in his backpack before he approached the stable hand to ask about prices.

When Ruby became aware that he had left behind his waterskin, he waited in the forest until it was dark. *I am not taking any more chances.*

Until the unfortunate affair with the nobleman, he had kept a lookout and noted where the fewest people got water, waited until the coast was clear and everyone would be entertained by the acrobats on the square; *and then I get distracted by the well so that a rider surprises me.* Any human on foot, he could outrun, but not one on horseback. *It could have gone wrong.* No matter how interesting their well design, Ruby did not have time for and could not allow himself to be carried away by his passion. The sooner he could complete his journey with the smugglers’ goods, the less chance that Damian could track him down.

The big moon, Muna was waxing, soon in the first quarter, and was glowing dimly, while small Tiga had set hours ago as a narrow sliver of light. In the moonlight, he snuck closer to the annoyingly fascinating well with the low stone wall.

He tightened the scarf around his head, just to be sure, while he tried to spy his waterskin. *There it is.* Ruby reached for the waterskin, which was lying against the low stone wall. *I wonder if all their wells are so low? Or is it a Karbon thing? Or is it that way to allow the children to reach it better, if they are sent for water?*

His ears turned under the scarf. Something was stirring behind the chestnut tree by the corner of the inn. He ducked behind the well and glimpsed over the edge. It was the young nobleman from earlier, staggering toward the tree. He was fumbling with his codpiece and then started peeing.

Ruby squatted carefully and slowly reached for the waterskin.

With a crunch, a dry branch broke under his foot.

Pech!

"Who's there?" Sapore said blurrily and looked toward the well.

Ruby froze in place, but Sapore's face lit up.

"You again?" The young human grinned and staggered toward the well. "Allow me...." He bent and grabbed the waterskin right before Ruby, but overbalanced in the process and tilted dangerously toward the low edge of the well.

Ruby grabbed his shirt and pulled him upright again. "You were very nearly falling in." He reached for the waterskin. *Just take it and get away.*

"You saved my life!" Sapore threw his arms around Ruby, who immediately tried to free himself. "You're my best friend!" He squeezed, and Ruby lost his breath. Sapore released Ruby and quickly withdrew his hands. "My apologies," he said, as if he'd done something wrong.

"You're apologising in relation to what?"

Sapore's drifting eyes settled on the well behind Ruby, and his embarrassed expression turned into a smile. "No, I thank you. I'd like to buy you some ale." He grabbed Ruby's wrist and pulled him toward the corner.

"Oh, no, that will not be a necessity. Just give me my waterskin." Ruby tried in vain to free himself from the big human. *Take it and run!* He looked down. The human had forgotten to fasten his codpiece properly. *He wouldn't be able to keep up, even if he was sober.*

But the young man was strong, and he pulled Ruby around the corner, inside the inn. His heart was hammering against his ribs.

The heavy air and the smell of sweat and ale hit Ruby. He flattened his ears at the noise from the guests who were singing both loudly and out of tune. Had it been earlier in the evening and had the guests had more presence of mind, they would probably have fallen on him, but very few of them looked at him now, and none seemed to notice the two points in the scarf.

He immediately stopped fighting and instead tried to attract as little attention as possible, while the nobleman dropped the waterskin to the floor next to his backpack and pushed Ruby onto a chair at a table in one corner of the room.

He looked around for a window, a backdoor, any kind of escape, in case the mood shifted. The two dozen or so guests in the small inn were too many and too close for Ruby's taste.

He glanced at the dirty wagon wheel that was used as a chandelier. The stench of dead sheep wafted from the tallow candles. It hung in front of the bar and cast its light on the store of ale casks and the hams hung from the ceiling. The light barely reached the corners, and Ruby sank into his chair and hid in the shadows. The only other source of light in the room was the open fireplace at the other end with its crackling flames and smoke rising to the ceiling.

Sapore called for an inn maid. Ruby felt a pang of envy when he saw her braids, and his hand tightened around the backpack with the remains of his honour.

The gray-haired innkeeper waved away the girl – probably his daughter – and wove his way between the tables with the loud guests.

“Baldor, two more ales.”

“What’s that?” the innkeeper asked, frowning.

Ruby hurriedly looked down and toward the door. *If they’re all as drunk as Sapore, I might make it out before they find their feet.*

“He saved my life, so I owe him a mug of ale.”

“I don’t serve their kind.”

“He’s my best friend, and he’ll have a mug of ale!” Sapore repeated a little more insistently.

“You have been calling everyone here your ‘best friend’ since sunset. Remove the scarf, Longears, and get out of my inn!”

Ruby tore the scarf away from his hair and tightened it around his neck so that no one would notice the missing iron collar.

Sapore raised his voice. “He will stay and drink with me.”

“Get it out, right now, before I get my cane.”

Ruby got up, relieved to be given the opportunity to escape. “I am begging your pardon, I am going now.” But he didn’t make it two steps before Sapore’s hand closed around his wrist again.

The young nobleman pulled himself up to his full height, wobbling slightly and regaining his balance without letting go of Ruby. He struck what he himself obviously thought was as an impressive figure, though still with his codpiece only halfway fastened.

“You’ll get those mugs of ale now, before I don my cloak and sword belt and give you a beating by the village flogging post.”

Ruby risked a glance at the stunned innkeeper. He was quite clearly shocked that the young lad might have permission to carry arms. Ruby knew that the laws were strict in Karbon, and anyone who pretended to be a nobleman risked the gallows. The young man’s common linen clothing without adornments didn’t exactly indicate nobility.

Ruby could see from Baldor’s furrowed brow that he doubted the truthfulness of Sapore’s threat.

I don’t have to help him! It’s his problem if he messes with nobility. Nonetheless, Ruby discretely waved his free hand behind Gavin’s back.

When they made eye contact, the innkeeper stared appalled at him.

Ruby nodded toward the black-haired lad and put a fist to the chest – the universal hand sign for nobility.

Baldor frowned. He opened his mouth as if to yell.

Ruby quickly pointed to himself, made the sign for ‘seeing’ and for ‘cloak’.

“You and your elf have...”

Ruby tipped over Sapore’s backpack so that it opened and the red silk peeked out.

The colour disappeared from the old man’s cheeks.

Ruby quickly lowered his gaze again.

“... my unconditional apologies. I beg your pardon, Your Grace.”

“None taken, there was no way for you to know. Just get our ale.”

Baldor hurried away, and Sapore sighed as he lowered his shoulders.

Ruby realised that there was no longer any drunken singing, and that all the guests at the inn were looking at them. Goose bumps appeared all over his body.

Sapore held his head high and looked out over the crowd, and as one, everyone was suddenly very busy with their own drinks and card games. He pushed Ruby back down onto his chair.

Baldor had already returned with two mugs of ale and two wineglasses and a half-filled bottle of wine. “Here’s the rest of the second bottle you started on. It seemed to be as much in your taste as the first one. It’s on the house with my deepest regrets.”

“You’re my best friend, Baldor!” Sapore exclaimed excitedly, as the extra drinks were slammed onto the greasy table. The innkeeper quickly retreated, while Gavin slid the first mug of ale over to Ruby. “Cheers... ehm, what was your name again?”

Ruby, whose attention was on the most fiercely-looking guests in the inn, only halfway heard Sapore’s question. “Rúahbenythod” he answered, before he had a chance to think. He bit his cheek. *Pech*. However, the risk of giving his real name to the drunken human was probably minimal. *His great-grandchildren will be long dead before Damian starts looking and asks after me here*, he thought. He could not help smiling at Sapore’s confused expression.

“Roabiny...” The young human scratched his upper lip with his lower teeth. “Can I call you Robin?”

“Sure, it is closely enough,” he said.

“And you can just call me Gavin. Cheers, Robin, for... why were we toasting?”

Ruby looked from Gavin to the door. “It will be best if I leave.”

“I’m sure there was a reason.”

“You were falling...”

“By É! That is right, cheers to not falling!” Gavin lifted his mug and downed half of it in one go. Ruby did not move. His eyes were on the waterskin on the floor by Gavin’s feet.

“To not fall in war and from grace,” Gavin took another large gulp, “and falling into trouble!” He laughed loudly and looked at the inn maid. A little froth from the beer stuck to his stubbles. Baldor brews good ale, go ahead and drink.”

“It will be best if I leave,” Ruby repeated. He balled his hands into fists, nails biting into his palms.

Gavin, however, didn’t seem to take note of his anxiety. He poured the rest of his wine. “It’s free, drink. You cannot just leave it and go, that would be impolite.”

Ruby reached for the wineglass and downed the spiced drink. Gavin chuckled and emptied his wineglass while the froth from the beer slid to his chin.

“I am thanking you for your kindness. I must go.” Ruby got up and reached for the waterskin, already heading for the door.

“Hey.” Gavin took the skin and put it in his lap, out of reach. “There’s still one beer left, and the night is young still, Muna’s dance across the sky will last a few more hours.”

Ruby sat down heavily and looked toward the door. He could feel people watching him. "You can have it, I am not thirsting." He pushed the mug back to Gavin.

"Of course!" Gavin slapped his forehead. "You'll want tree sap! Isn't that what you drink? Baldor!"

"No no, Your Grace, thanking you much, but I need freshness tomorrow. So I will leave right awa..."

"It's: *thank you very much*," Gavin corrected him before his face lit up in a big smile as the inn maid returned. "Do you have any maple syrup?"

The girl sent Ruby a piercing stare before he remembered his place and lowered his gaze. She took the empty mug.

"I'll see what we have in the kitchen."

"And another mug of ale!" Gavin yelled after her and reached for the last mug.

Ruby noticed that Gavin was looking at her swaying hips until she disappeared through the door behind the bar.

The young human looked back at Ruby. "You're my best friend!"

He smiled and didn't lower his gaze. "You are too kind."

"That's what Edgar said before he left. I think he's upset."

"Who is Etger?"

"*Edgar* is my best friend! And my squire," Gavin added. "He's been a bit like an older brother to me, when I grew up, as I only have sisters. He is actually my brother-in-law as well." Gavin took a long swig of ale. "He went to the barn to sleep some time ago." He looked at Ruby and started giggling. "You look like a girl."

"And you do not look like a nobleman." Ruby said with a cautious smile.

Gavin leaned across the table and whispered loudly: "It's because we have no money."

"But you have a big heart," Ruby said, only halfway paying attention to the conversation, as he kept an eye on the door. *Maybe I could find an animal newly dead from natural reasons and make a new waterskin.* He did not intend to kill an animal himself just to make a water container. *Or I could take the wine bottle with me.*

"Good hearts don't count for much in the upper layers of society," Gavin grunted and leaned back. He took another long swig of ale. "Sometimes it detracts." He fell silent.

At that moment the inn maid returned and placed a mug in front of Gavin and a wineglass halfway filled with thick, brown syrup.

"It's on the house," she said when Gavin started rummaging around for money.

He looked after the inn girl while he pushed the wood sap over to Ruby who stared at the glass in disbelief.

"Cheers." Gavin prepared to empty his mug. "Drink with me, Robin."

Ruby looked despairingly at the thick, golden liquid and hesitated.

"I do not know how much you have been drinking this night, but if I am drinking all that at once, I will lose consciousness." Ruby glanced at the waterskin in Gavin's lap. "Maybe over time, if it was watered down..."

Gavin waved the skin around vigorously. "I have water right here!" Ruby reached for it, but Gavin pulled it back and mumbled: "Oh right, it hasn't been boiled yet and is probably muddy."

"We can drink water even from rivers filled with dirt and silt without getting sick, Your Grace." Finally, Ruby got the skin back. He poured most of the syrup into the empty wine glass, poured a little water in the remaining syrup and stirred it with his finger, while the other hand discretely placed the skin in his lap. He moved forward in his chair. *Just one sip and then away from here.*

"Cheers!" Gavin exclaimed again.

"Avidri!" Ruby said, sucked the syrup off of his finger and carefully sipped the mixture. Heat immediately flooded through him, and his fingertips started tingling. He slid to the edge of his seat, ready to get up, when his ears caught the sound of singing in the street, before the door banged open, pushed by a huge sailor with enough hair on his arms for a wig. He looked like someone who was only looking for an excuse to start a fight, and he pushed people away while he moved toward a free table. One inn maid got a thorough slap on her behind as she moved past him.

Ruby leaned back into the shadows. *Pass the time, say something funny.*

Gavin was lost in his own thoughts.

Ruby considered all the despicable things he knew of Karbon culture and cleared his throat. "An elf, an orc and a human are sitting in an inn at the docks by Pax, talking of their homes;

"The inns back home on the Oxámor islands," the orc brags, "give me every fourth schnapps for free."

"The inns in Gwendylanis," the elf says, "for every two wood saps I am ordering, I get a third one for free."

"That is nothing," the human says, "at the inns in Kandahim, you go to the bar, and they give you the first ale for free, and the second ale for free, and the third ale for free – and then you are taken upstairs where you get sex *entirely for free!*"

"Really?" the orc asks. "Has that happened to you?"

"Well, no," the human says, "but it happens to my sister all the time!"

Gavin laughed and grabbed the table. "I hadn't heard that one before."

"I made it up just now," Ruby said with a smile and licked a bit of syrup from his lip.

"I have never talked to a longear before, but you're alright."

"At what?"

"No, I mean, you're a good guy."

"Oh, thank you." Ruby glanced at the door, but the path was still not clear.

Gavin took another sloppy swig of ale and belched loudly.

Ruby had to restrain himself from rolling his eyes. "Where are your sisters, then?"

"They are taking care of the farm at home, the five of them still living here."

Ruby looked quizzically at Gavin. "I do not understand. Is it normal here for nobility to be doing the physical work themselves?"

“No no. My family isn’t quite normal,” Gavin laughed. “We don’t have enough people.” Gavin halted when the inn maid with the lovely hair walked by and wiped the tables with a wet cloth. “As in; not enough at all. If there is a war, we cannot muster the numbers the baronet is committed to.” His head turned to follow the girl.

Meanwhile, Ruby cast a glance at the greasy stone floor and saw his chance to pour a little of the sugary water onto it without getting caught. “You think she is a lovely woman.” He looked at the inn maid once more. She had a pretty face, but Ruby had a sense that it was her curves more than anything that caught Gavin’s eye. She went to the table where the hairy sailor sat with a couple of bearded mates who were bawling along to his song about scantily clad harpies.

Gavin nodded and followed her with his eyes while Ruby saw his chance to discretely pour even more of the sugary concoction onto the floor.

“Cheers to lovely women!” Gavin cried out. He was taking smaller gulps now. “And to *sinful* women!” He added loudly enough for a couple of card-playing drunkards to yell along with him.

Ruby sighed and downed the rest of the fair amount of watered down syrup. “I need to go.”

“Will you not stay and drink till Tiga rises, or at the least until Muna sets?”

“We should plant trees, not drink from them,” Ruby said and got up so fast that he had to hold on to the back of the chair. He had kept an eye on the door since the hairy sailor entered, and the path should be clear. “I thank you for ordering syrup in stead of ale.”

“A steed is a horse,” Gavin laughed and leaned back to empty his mug. He lost his balance and fell over onto the hard floor. Laughter spread, and people stared.

Ruby suddenly felt exposed as people looked at him. No matter if he ran or walked out now, it would look strange. Somebody would follow him and hold him accountable for the man on the floor.

Baldor came over and kneeled by the semi-conscious baron who had knocked the back of his head against the stone floor. “You should go to bed, Your Grace.”

“I just need to lie down a bit,” Gavin mumbled.

“You cannot stay here.” He looked at Ruby who was rooted to the spot.

He immediately fixed his eyes on the floor. “He simply fell over, I am unblameable.”

Baldor shook Gavin. “You’ve had too much. You have to go upstairs for some sleep.”

Suddenly a loud smack could be heard from the other end of the room, when an inn maid slapped a guest who’d groped her. The man got up and grabbed her while his friends laughed.

“Anton!” Baldor yelled, startling Ruby. “How often do I have to tell you?”

The inn maid with the braids tried to help her sister but was grabbed by a drunkard herself and struggled to get free. “Anton! Bertil! That’s enough! Behave, or you’ll be thrown out again!” Baldor got up. “Get him to bed! It’s the chamber at the end of the hallway,” he said without even looking at Ruby and stomped toward the rowdy guests.

Ruby looked at the door, *There's no way I'll make it out without being noticed*. So, he bent down resolutely, grabbed Gavin's backpack, got Gavin's arm around his neck and with great effort managed to drag the heavy human to his feet and toward the stairs.

"I just need to sleep a little", Gavin mumbled, apparently having a hard time finding his feet. He made to push himself away from Ruby to walk himself, but Ruby kept a hold on him.

"People are staring." Gavin's breath smelled of beer, and his voice shook.

"I am knowing of this". The few people who were not busy with the impending fight were now clearly outraged. He tried pulling Gavin's body closer to his so they could both get up the narrow stairs and away as quickly as possible. It helped when Gavin could hold onto the railing, so that Ruby didn't have to drag him but only make sure he didn't lose his balance and fall down the stairs.

The chamber was small with a narrow one-man bed, a worm-eaten table with a washing basin, a clay cup and a pitcher with clear spring water. Ruby let go of Gavin, who toppled onto the hard bed.

"Just sleep a little." Gavin fumbled with his clothing. "I don't feel too good."

Ruby was already by the door when Gavin suddenly stumbled to the window. A long, wet smack could be heard from the yard. Ruby hesitated but took pity on the poor human. When Gavin was done throwing up, Ruby passed him the mug of water and a root from his backpack for him to brush his teeth.

"You are my best friend," Gavin said and spilt most of the water down his chest.

Gavin squinted against the merciless sunrays of morning. His clothes were spread across the chamber floor. It looked damp.

At least I got into bed. Right then, he felt someone turning over behind him on the hay mattress. It was a rare occurrence that he had the opportunity to flirt with someone at all without a family member chaperoning. A smug smile spread across his face despite the hangover. *Well done! I hope it's the one with the braids*.

He turned carefully, and his heart skipped a beat. He jumped out of bed at the sight of the elf from the well, discovered that he was naked and pulled the blanket in front of him and realised with horror: "You're not dressed!"

The elf sat up with a start and looked around with wide eyes. "Where is the burning?"

"What are you doing in my bed?"

The elf tried to tame his surprisingly short hair and rubbed sleep from his eyes. He looked at Gavin with confusion and pointed to the bed: "I am in sleep."

"Sleeping! And why are you sleeping in my bed?" Gavin hissed through his teeth. *Why doesn't that elf lower his gaze, hasn't he been listening?*

"Did you forget that you were inviting me?" With furrowed brow and a smile Gavin couldn't determine, the elf reached behind him for his clothes, which hung neatly across the

back of the chair and the edge of the bed. The longear continued looking at Gavin as if nothing was wrong. "You were inebriated."

"I've never been *that* drunk!" Gavin said. *Damn alcohol!* He clutched his sore head. He didn't understand why the elf took so long putting on his trousers. Gavin blushed. *Don't look at him!* A thought struck him. "Did anyone see you come up here with me?" he asked, mouth dry.

"Do you really not remember?" The elf pulled on a shirt, which for some unknown reason clung damply to his chest. He pulled an acorn, which hung on a cord around his neck, from his neck to his chest. "The innkeeper told me to get you to bed; you couldn't sleep in the middle of the floor."

Gavin glanced out the window toward the backyard. There were no angry men with rope and pitchforks, shouting for the justice of the prophet Kalifánar and demanding punishment. *Maybe they are waiting by the entrance?*

The elf managed to put his scarf over his rumpled hair, grabbed his backpack and cloak and made for the door.

"Hey, stop, Longears! You'll have to jump out the window when the path is clear. *No one* can see you leave this chamber!"

The elf shrugged, opened the window, and looked down at the empty yard where, to Gavin's relief, the only witnesses were a couple of hens. They were pecking at a pool of vomit below the window.

The elf swung gracefully out the window.

"What happened last night?" Gavin asked and massaged his forehead with his knuckles. He vaguely remembered Edgar leaving the inn, and then nothing. How he got into bed with the elf, without any clothes on, no less, he didn't know.

"Nothing you did not have wants for." The elf smiled and let go of the sill.

"*Wanted!*" Gavin corrected the empty air, while the elf darted across the yard, through the cabbage patch, and disappeared over the field toward the forest. *What was that supposed to mean?*

Gavin quickly got dressed. *Why is it wet?* He smelled it. It didn't smell of beer – perhaps a bit of vomit. He went through all his bags. Nothing was missing.

Where is Edgar? His head was pounding heavily. *Thirsty.* He collected a mug and pitcher from the floor and drank what little water was left. He checked the window once more. *What if someone noticed that he came up with me? Maybe it will be best to put on the cloak.*

Gavin wasn't sure the mark of nobility would matter to an angry and outraged crowd, if there were rumours about him having spent the night with a man, and an elf at that. He put on the red silk, gathered his belongings, puffed up his chest and raised his chin before he entered the stairway.

Baldor was wiping tables. "Good morning, Your Grace," he said, threw the cloth onto the table and rubbed at the greasy wooden surface. "Will you be having breakfast?"

It didn't seem as if Baldor was surprised to see him with his nobleman's cloak on, but he seemed surly, and Gavin feared the worst. His stomach and throat felt as if he hadn't had neither drink nor food for a week. The elf had said that Baldor saw them go up together.

Maybe he's just stalling while someone is stirring up the townsfolk. Gavin shook his head. "No thank you, Edgar and I must be going."

"Safe travels, Your Grace."

Gavin thanked the innkeeper absentmindedly while he glanced out the window before he edged the door halfway open and glanced out. There was no angry mob in front of the inn.

"You hesitate. My daughter can quickly cook up a sausage and a couple of eggs at the fire."

Gavin had to know how much trouble he was in. He could potentially drag down Edgar with him, if the fishermen were in a fighting mood. "How did I get to bed last night?" Gavin asked.

"I asked your Elvish *best friend* to help you up."

Gavin's shirt was already soaked in sweat. "I barely knew him, he isn't my friend, and he knows nothing of the culture around these parts. I hope he didn't behave... inappropriately."

Merely entering was inappropriate, but I am sure you had your reasons for bringing it. Asger and Ferdinand did make some noises about a gay beating as it helped you upstairs, but then, they had both had their share of alcohol. I don't know how it should have gotten you upstairs without putting an arm around your waist. The guys have probably already forgotten it. They are most likely tending to their headaches."

"That's a relief," Gavin said, now terrified, while he clung to the door handle in order for Balder not to notice his shaking hands.

"May luck be on your side in the tournament."

"Thank you," Gavin said and shut the door behind him. He ran to the stables.

Edgar had both horses saddled for departure. "Why the cloak?" he asked and placed his hat on his curly hair.

Gavin hurriedly packed his belongings into the saddlebags. "Doesn't matter."

He pulled Gringolet out of the stables and mounted while looking around. *Still no one. Maybe those two drunkards really have forgotten whatever they saw.*

"What's the matter? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Gavin groaned. "But you were right, we should not have wasted time here, we have to get going."

"No more drinking from now on?"

"Most certainly not!" Gavin said and put his heels to Gringolet's flanks.

The market square was crowded, and there was a cacophony of shouting tradesmen and fishmongers, trying to drown out and undercut each other. Sweat ran down Gavin's neck. He looked nervously over his shoulder at the smelly fishnets that young boys were untangling along the road.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Edgar's voice pulled Gavin from his chaotic thoughts. "Do you need another couple of hours before we continue?"

“No, we need to move on,” Gavin croaked too quickly, while he directed Gringolet through the crowd. He felt Edgar’s gaze on him and looked down as they turned onto the large trader’s road out of town.

“You’re pale. Do you need to throw up?” Edgar laughed, but Gavin could sense he was a little concerned.

“I seem to have already done that,” Gavin mumbled as they rode past the smithy on the edge of town where a horse dealer and his two young companions were negotiating shoeing prices. Gavin jumped when the small group of men laughed. He kicked Gringolet into a trot. “I just need to ride it off!” Gavin assured Edgar through a suffocating nausea.

”I see.” Edgar said, obviously not convinced, as he too urged his horse to increase its pace.