

Secrets and Sons

The wind was crisp at such a height. Marcus's pin-straight blonde hair tickled his ears and eyelashes. He put his left foot in front of his right, balancing precariously on the rim of the high wall in the city square. Twice he looked down, watching the merchants and townspeople hurry about their business. He spotted Madame Predence wrestling with the baker over a price. He laughed. The old crow. She was always complaining that Marcus had been teasing her goats. Marcus was innocent, of course. It had been the girl down the street – Penelope – the one with the bushy eyebrows, or her mangy troll of a cat. He wasn't sure which.

"Marcus!" His sister's high-pitched voice reached him from the ground in an exasperated strain. He located her on the ground and gave her a cheeky grin. Behind her, a group of men – boys – was passing by, dressed in all black. They were led by a large man clad in hard, black armor and bearing a most impressive sword at his hip. The sword looked to be almost as tall as some of the smaller boys themselves.

Two of the taller boys carried banners on long poles, upside-down pentagons flags made out of a deep purple fabric trimmed with gold tassels. Embroidered on the banners were the words, "For the King." The banners bore the fierce image of a lion thrashing its paw.

Sons of the Banner, thought Marcus. These were boys who had left their mothers to serve the king. They would train as soldiers from the day they entered the throng until the day they turned twenty-two. After that, they would be released into the regular army to test their fate and win their glory. They often became commanders and generals, having had a considerable advantage over the regular recruits. Marcus appraised the group of boys behind his sister. A few of them were destined to become knights. Most of these boys would not stop seeking glory until they had achieved knighthood – or died in the process. It was almost an expectation.

There were rumors that not all Sons were members by choice. The families of the boys were well taken care of once their sons volunteered. Whispers of desperate mothers practically selling their sons to the gang in order to keep other small mouths alive often rose over the hills.

The black-dad throng was accompanied by a handful of maidens. The maidens were older than the boys and dressed completely in white with the familiar white tie around their necks. A White Maiden would remain with the Sons until she passed her thirty-ninth

birthday. She would then be released to choose between serving in the Palace Keep or returning to her own people. Most chose to stay in the Great City and tend to the duties of the Keep.

One lady in Marcus's village, Maddan Mollia, had decided to return to her own people after her time as a White Maiden had ended. Marcus's parents said that when she came back she was serious and sad for a very long time. She had come back with several skills that she could not have learned in their little village and made her living weaving tapestries. She could also read. Marcus and the other children of his village frequented her house to hear a grand tale, often accompanied by a biscuit with honey.

"Marcus! Get down here at once!" Annalise approached the base of the wall, calling up to him with all the emphasis she could muster. Her scattered blonde hair punctuated her frustration and she gripped her skirts with the same grip that Marcus had often felt on his shirt collar. "Mother said she would turn you into feed for the goats if you climbed so high again!"

He grinned and then stuck out his tongue at her. He put his left foot in front of his right foot, and then his right in front of his left, and walked faster as his confidence grew navigating the thick lip of the wall. He held his arms out to his sides for balance. Looking down on the other side of the wall, he noticed a small ledge. Beyond the ledge was a thatched rooftop, and from there he judged he could jump down into the alley. He could easily find a doorway to slip through that would take him back to the open market.

First, he would have to have to reach the ledge. He calculated the distance. He was no fool, and a skillful climber, whatever his mother and sister might think. He did enjoy the occasional fright he caused them, though, whenever they doubted his abilities. He shot another mischievous grin over his shoulder. He just had time to see the impatient expression on the face of his sister melt into panic as he turned and slipped from the wall.

Annaliese gave a piercing scream.

It was the last time she would ever see the boy.

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Just as she watched her brother slip over the wall – *Silly boy. Mother is going to be angry. I'm not going to look for him – he can show up late all by himself* – a heavy hand landed forcefully on her shoulder and she screamed.

She tried to shrug off the grip but the hand pinned her firmly in place. She couldn't even turn to see who her adversary was. She craned her neck upward. A scarred face and black, heavy armor met her gaze. Panic set in.

"Let me go – " she struggled. "Mama – mama!" Her voice came out small and strained as she struggled against the grasp of the man. "Let me go!" she pleaded.

"You will no longer be needing your Mama," the man said while appraising her with his cruel eyes. "You will be taken to the Palace Keep to train as a White Maiden. From now on, you will serve the Sons of the Banner."

Terror occupied her whole being. She could not be taken. She *would* not be taken! She must find Mama!

"Mama!" she shrieked desperately. She frantically fought to be free from the grip. She thought she might just be able to get away when he placed another hand on her opposite shoulder. She was trapped.

It was no use trying to hurt the man. He was much stronger than she and she didn't know what he might do to her in punishment. She knew that she could not cry out for one of the local Armament to come to her aid, either. The law stated that the king had a right to draft females for service and this man was a direct representative of the king. Without her mother, she was utterly alone.

She looked around frantically but it completely hopeless. Her mother had sent her and Marcus to the market and stayed behind at the tents to nurse the five-year-old Rhode, who had complained of a burning throat that morning.

It was not as though going to the market was a dangerous mission. Annalise and her brother had been to the market a hundred times without their mother. It was a weekly occurrence to travel the thirty mile distance to the tents where their mother sold her baskets of berries and goat's milk and her father used to practice his medicine.

Four years ago, her father had been drafted as a soldier. Seven months later, they had received a notice her father had been executed for desertion. Annalise was barely nine at the time, Marcus only three. She remembered her mother crying a lot. She had briefly wondered if dying as a soldier meant her father had died as a hero. When she this of asked her mother, her mother had wept even more bitterly and hardly stopped for six straight days.

Annalise missed her father for a while and she was angry with the king for taking him away. As she grew older and understood what her father had done, her anger turned into shame and she wondered if her family had been betrayed by her father, instead.

The black-armored man steered Annalise towards the army of boy soldiers. There was nothing beyond the sea of black. With each step closer the blackness consumed her and the banners towered higher above her head. Her vision darkened around the edges of her eyes and her knees buckled. She stumbled. The man held her firmly upright and kept her moving forward. She wasn't even sure if her feet were touching the ground; for all she was aware, the man could have been carrying her by her shoulders.

They approached the group and the man handed her off to two of the older boys. They might not have been more than seventeen, but to Annalise, they were giants.

"Take this one to be registered," the commander ordered.

The boys each gripped one of her arms and began to pull her toward the town square. She felt herself being jerked and jostled between them. Their grips were much less heavy and their guidance much less smooth than the big man's had been.

She was not fighting at this point. She would be taken to the magistrate where she would be registered as having been taken into service. Her mother and brothers would be notified, just as they had been the day her father's life had ended.

She was going far away and she would likely not return until she had reached her thirty-ninth birthday.