

The Curse of Forgetting or Legacy

By Ivan Berezin

Chapter 1

The Kingdomless King rode through lands that were no longer his. Besides him, with a hand on the lead of the horse and a hand on the hilt of my sword, I followed. The hooves of the King's white mare muted the sound of my own footsteps breaking branches and cracking leaves in the forest.

Apart from the chirping of birds and the occasional fleeing deer, the forest was quiet and alone, the trees would shade us from the sun, while our skins and pelts would protect us from the freezing cold.

I enjoyed the walk and the King seemed to enjoy it too. He had been with me since the start and I had promised to be with him till the end. Everyday we would take the same trip, he would wake me up early, worry in his face, shaking and scared, screaming at me and ordering me to take him to Alzaim, he had to take his kingdom back.

We would ride on the horse, quickly, down this road, all the way to Alzaim, and before we even reached it, from a peak in a mountain, the sight of flags no longer blue, and people no

longer free assured him of what he had feared, Alzaim was no longer his, but most importantly, King was no longer he.

After looking at the taken kingdom, he would sit on a rock, slouching. Except for his King's mantle, not an inch of royalty could be found in his demeanor, and he would sit quietly. While he did his thing, I would make sure the horse was well fed, I would gather the animals my traps had caught, and I would look behind us to make sure no one was coming. It had been more than once that I had to put my sword to use against some pathetic road-side bandits. Little did they know they were stealing from both a King and his best -and probably only- knight. It would suffice to say things did not end well for them.

The King, as he had ordered me to call him, remained static, like a cracked statue. I would eat a sandwich or some crackers, and look back at the city of Alzaim, the place I once called home as well, the King's legacy, and I knew nothing hurt him more but to see it stolen from his hands.

"When did this happen?" He would always ask.

"About three years ago."

He nodded.

"Did we put up a good fight?"

"The best we could, King, the soldiers and the people were honored to have a chance to fight by your side."

"What happened to the prince?"

"He died protecting us."

After years of repeating this routine I knew what the best way to answer his questions was, the way which would cause the least distress, the way which would ensure some sort of

relief, whether it was the truth or not was besides the point, my sole task was, is, and always will be to protect the King, or at least the man who once carried that title.

After hearing of his eldest son's death the King would close his eyes, holding back tears. He'd then turn around and face me. This was always the part that hurt the most.

“That should have been you, Andon.”

“I know King, I know...”

The Kingdomless King would then stand up. Making a clear effort to avoid my gaze, he would get up on his horse and start riding back the way we came from.

His back was straight, his face stoic -unnaturally calm, every muscle so relaxed and free, that paradoxically the King had to put some effort to keep it like that. The calmness in his face would smoothen his skin, making him seem ten years younger despite his white hairs, and unforgiving wrinkles, his eyes kept the same blue shine that they've always have, and if one were to see him like this they would be fools not to see a King.

But then the memories of what once was struck. And we'd lose our King. His back would slouch until he looked like a ball with a head, his face would tense up and make him look as if he was in a constant state of worry, the wrinkles and the brows, now lower in his face, would cover the strong eyes of his.

This had been our daily routine for the past three years, every night his mind would reset, and we'd have to come here for him to get it back. I didn't know which was worse: if the forgetting, or the remembering. What I did know was that the Curse of Forgetting wasn't just a legend like I once thought, it was real, and slowly stealing the King's and my life away. I hoped there would be a way to stop this madness. To find happiness for both the King and I. I didn't know if it was possible, but I knew there's little I wouldn't sacrifice for it.

I wasn't sure when it had first consumed my King. It seemed to me like it had taken a grip of him shortly after we escaped Alzaim. After the Ronian troops barged in, burning and killing everyone in sight. The King impotent and hopeless as his Royal Guard died in front of him while trying to get him out of there alive, only for us to escape in horseback with blood in our hands, clothes, and faces. The palace and the city behind us burst into flames, and screams, and cries.

Perhaps that is when it started... yes... A Kingdomless King was no longer a King, and so the King was no longer anyone.

Chapter 2

After a while, we reached the Inn we had been staying in for the last few years. It had started raining and both the King and I got all wet. I helped the King down his stead and rushed him in while I attended the horse. I took the stallion to the stable and made sure to find him a good spot with a roof and wheat.

I walked back to the Inn, holding a skin over my head to protect myself from the rain, I didn't want to get sick. Who would take care of the King if I was ill? It would not be me, and it wouldn't be anyone else either, I could not allow that.

The big wooden Inn looked almost like a castle, stable and firm in between all the chaos of the wind, ice, and rain. The board in the entrance would fly up and down smashing into the wall with big thumps, and the vane on the roof, with the shape of the Alzain lion, would spin in circles like a tornado.

Inside, the King was fighting with the old landlady, Hosina. The first times this happened I felt quite bad for her but after she told me she enjoyed discussing with a man so arrogant to believe himself to be King I felt less guilty about letting them discuss.

I took off the robes, pelts, and clothes on me which had gotten wet and placed them beside the fire pit, a structure of stone between a building made of wood, and lodges. There were two small couches in front of the firepit, behind them, a large wooden table with many wooden chairs, and behind the table and its many chairs, the counter behind which the landlady would observe and manage her home, most of which was handbuilt by her husband before his death.

I walked up to the King who was moving his finger across the air and raising his voice, "...dare you treat your King like that? Don't you know...", I took the royal, blue, mantle from his back and he rolled his shoulders backwards as he let me take it. He looked at me with worry as I removed it and his face calmed down when he saw me nod. We've had to sell almost everything to stay alive and his grand mantle was the last thing he had left from the times when he was King.

I placed his wet mantle beside my own pelts and walked to our room. I could hear landlady Hosina raise her voice as well, her sweet, candid, old lady voice. "... but mister, you surely don't expect me to believe every crazy man that comes barging into my home claiming to be something he has no proof of being, that would get me out of business!"

I took a couple of towels and returned to the homely living room of the Inn. I sheltered myself under one of them and sheltered the King under another. Landlady Hosina turned her back on us and strolled to the kitchen as I held the King by the shoulders and walked him to the fireplace. I didn't want him getting sick either.

Before sitting down I made sure to pull the couch closer to the fire, then I dried the King with his towel while he leaned towards the fire. "...you dare call me a madman? Don't you have a coin on you, you old hag! They all have my face engraved on them!"

Landlady Hosina returned with a couple of mugs of hot chocolate in her hand, I took mine gratefully. The King flipped her off before grunting and taking his own mug as well. He took a sip of his drink and almost sighed in relaxation before returning to his jest. He was about to open his mouth when Hosina shook her finger and forced him to quiet down.

She placed a hand on one of her pockets, and took a golden coin, from Alzain times, no longer credited for trade, they all had to be returned to the Ronian King and reforged in the fire. I knew she kept it in her pocket for this little trick, the way she chose to carry the discussion changed between four or five different topics depending on her mood that day.

“You mean this?” Hosina showed the coin to the King, it had a face with a crown on it, “this could be any old man like you! Hell, my husband looked more like the King than you sir!”

The King took the coin and inspected it. “Well!” He kept quiet.

“Well what?”

“Well you are right, the face on the coin could be pretty much anyone.”

With a braggy exhalation Hosina quickly turned around and returned to the counter, her baggy dress bouncing behind her. She acted as if she was angry but I knew that while the King could not see her she smiled. She returned to the counter and took some notes on an accounting book or some type of journal. I had already paid for us in advance as well, I gave her some jewels and the horse’s golden blinders, she told me that would buy us more time than we would ever be able to stay, I told her that was fine, we were tired as two men could be that day, we had been riding away from the castle for days by then. We just needed warmth, food and rest. At the time all that seemed priceless.

I wasn’t sure whether Hosina believed the man sitting beside me to be the King or not, either way I don’t think that it would have mattered, everyone else in the town thinks that we are

just a son who won't get rid of his crazy father. That's good, the less people that know who he really is the safer we'll be.

Perhaps he would love to be remembered and celebrated, perhaps that would make him happy, but what good would it do? The Curse of Forgetting would take that joy away come the morning.

The King shook his head and cursed. "That damn hag."

"She makes quite a nice chocolate though..."

The King took a long sip, "Yep..." he sighed, "I guess she does."

After the King was all dry and warm I went for a blanket and walked him to his bed. I helped him undress and sheltered him under the covers. He had taken care of me for such a long time, the only thing I could do in return was take care of him now that he needed it.

I began to undress myself when there was a soft knock on the door. The King grunted in between one of his snores. I tip-toed to the door and opened it slightly.

Landlady Hosina sneaked a little wrinkled eye in the open space and whispered. "Andon, you have visitors waiting."

Chapter 3

Sania sat on the table with a letter on her hand, when she saw me leave my room she stood up, walked up to me, and hugged me. Her auburn hair smelled of lavender. After she kissed my lips, I held her arms and gently pushed her away from me.

“What’s the matter Sania?”

“What? Can’t someone in love go out of her way to see the source of her enchantment?”

I looked at the letter lying on the table and rolled my eyes.

“She sure can Sania, but usually she waits till the morning, and a little something tells me there are some unpleasurable news.”

Sania looked up to my eyes and followed my gaze, she knew she wasn’t fooling anyone. She sighed, and looked at the floor. She held my hand and walked to the table.

“Come, seat, there’s something I need to tell you.”

I sat down in front of her, she sat down and let go of my hand to pick up the letter. The firepit was still burning and Hosina laughed as she read a book beside it.

Sania looked at the letter, she looked at me, she bit her lip. She opened her mouth, she closed it, she played with her hair.

“Sania.” I said.

“Yes?”

“It’s okay, you can tell me.”

Sania sighed. “I got a letter from my brother.”

“Thorben? He went down to Liliar didn’t he? How’s he doing?”

“Yes, he is doing fine, but listen, he sent me this letter, telling me about an event which happened five moons ago.”

“Mhm...”

“Look,” Sania sighed, “Just read it, yeah? but skip the first part... it’s... personal.”

I took off my leather gloves and grabbed the letter without taking my eyes away from Sania. Her vibrant green eyes and red lips were as captivating now as they had been three years ago when I first met her. I still remember that night vividly.

It was our fourth or fifth night in the town. We had already secured a place in the Inn and the rumors about the crazy duo who had stumbled into town were spreading like a bad case of lice. I slouched on the table of the Inn sipping on a beer as the great King discussed with Hosina about the quality of the food. He wore both his mantle and crown, he said it was a symbol which the people had to look up too.

My eyes fell on my feet, and my body ignored the sound of the main entrance opening and closing with a loud thump. There were some soft footsteps, and finally a body sat beside me. I didn’t have the energy to look up, everything was too confusing, everything was too tough, I

had lost my father and my brother, and we had lost our kingdom and our King. I had sworn to protect it, and I would, but I was just so... tired...

“He really is the king isn’t he?” A soft voice said beside me. Security in her voice, she wasn’t really asking as much as pointing out.

I raised my head without turning towards the voice. “Well, he sure thinks so.”

“He has the mantle and the crown.”

“Mhm...”

“He looks just like the face in the golden coins.”

“Mhm...”

“So... If he is the King... then what does that make you?”

I turned around and smashed my mug on the table. I wanted to be done with this mockery. I opened my mouth but no words came out. The young lady sitting besides me was beautiful, rivaled not even by the duchesses and princesses I had grown accustomed to, slim and graceful like a swan or a ballerina in a music box.

“I’m not the prince if that’s what you are asking,” I took a sip of my beer, “The prince is dead.”

I didn’t mind telling her the truth, everyone would know the prince is dead eventually, just like everyone knew, or at least thought that the King was dead. It would not incriminate me and even if it did no one would believe her. The great King sleeping in a little Inn in the middle of nowhere, ha!

“You didn’t answer my question. Who are you? What do you want?”

“I was bound from birth to protect the King, and protect the King I shall.”

Her eyes moved away from me and into the King who was still discussing who knows what with Hosina. While looking at them the girl I now know is named Sania asked: “And when he doesn’t need protecting?”

I turned as well and looked at the King and all his grace -or lack thereof- as he raged, grunted and panted. “Then I’ll just try to keep him happy?”

“You know what makes him happy?”

“I guess I’ll have to find out.”

Through the edge of my vision I could see Sania returned her sight to me, she smiled, and placed a hand over mine, which was holding tight on the beer.

“And who will take care of making *you* happy?”

I held the letter in my hands and began to read, Sania didn’t get her eyes off of mine as they scrolled through the paper.

My beloved Sister,

How is that fool of Andon treating you? If he is being bad to you you let me know and I’ll make sure to kick his a-

I fought to hide my smile as I remembered Sania had asked me to skip the first paragraph. I placed my hand over the paper trying to find where it ended without reading anything else. I found it, the letter continued:

The most terrible thing has happened this week. While I took care of the cows and the sheep I heard the violent gallop of an enormous beast emerge from the roadside, in a town as small as Liliar everyone knows everyone, and their mounts, and so I was as sure as one could be that I had never seen such a beast before. The beast was as black as a cloudy night, the eyes, hair, and hooves just as dark, making the beast seem like a shadow or a silhouette more than a child of nature. And the rider above it, even more of a monster.

The rider wore armor, as dark as his mount's. He carried a flag, red, with the sign of the Broken Sun, Ronian. Not like that was surprising, seeing someone riding around with a blue and mighty Alzaim flag would have been something only a madman would do. Anyway, the rider circled around the middle of the town, and when everybody gathered in the center he took off his helmet. A pale face with dark, thin hair, one of his eyes was covered by a black leather eyepatch which hung from his eye without strings, and the other eye was bright red, the color of blood.

He tied the helmet to a bag on the horse and jumped off. With a threatening voice he started: "Is the old King, King of fools hiding here, as a coward, in between peasants like you? It would not surprise me, but anyone who would be as kind as to point me to whom it is will be greatly compensated."

He took a pouch from the bag on the horse and shook it, the sound of metal crashing against each other made him smile, a smile wide and deadly, like a snake's.

The poor townspeople stood in a circle around him dumbfounded, and when they looked at each other, knowing full well that none of them was a King nor anything like one, they could not help themselves but to laugh.

The dark knight did not take this well, he threw the pouch to the bag and unsheathed his great black sword. "I will not ask again, is thine cowardly King hiding between you?!"

At this point, one of the older men in the town took a step forward, a hoe in hand. "There is no hidden King here, now leave us be stranger, we have not bothered anyone and only ask in return not to be bothered either."

The Dark Knight took a step forward, and by the moment I noticed his intention, I promise oh sister, I promise I was too far away to do anything.

"Ah, a brave old man are you, perhaps you are not as cowardly as I thought... King." With a twist, so quick that it looked like the shadow of a hand waving too fast, the dark Knight spun his sword around. A second later, the old man's body fell to the ground, his head landing a couple of feet away from him.

The townspeople screamed and either took a step backwards or ran to their homes, they were too old or young to do anything. Without any weapons, and just a flame of fury to guide me, I ran towards the monster. He was far away and I guess I knew that by the moment I would get to him I would have been out of energy and easy to kill, but that did not stop me from rushing in.

While I approached, I saw the Dark Knight grab the head of the poor old man by the hair and compare it with a picture in his hand, as well as the engraving in a golden coin. After a second he grunted and threw it away, two kids ran towards the body and jumped on it. Their brown trousers soaking in blood as they held their faces to the body's back and cried.

The Dark Knight looked at the kids with disgust, cleaned his sword on his black hood and got on the horse. The kids mentioned they heard him say that he will need to keep looking. He kicked the back of his horse and the beasts fled into the forest.

It was horrible, sister, the town of Liliar has not been the jolly, dreamlike place it's always been known for ever since the knight struck two days ago.

I've been trying to keep the kid's busy and the town preoccupied so they forget about it, but so far my efforts have been futile. Maybe they just need to grieve...

Anyway sister, I'm not writing this for you to be scared, you look nothing like a King, nor an old person, nor a man, so I'm pretty sure you'll be safe, but perhaps I'd warn Andon, if his crazy father keeps walking around claiming to be the great King of Alzaim then I don't think it will be long till the Dark Knight finds him... and kills him...

With Love,

Thorben.

I placed the letter on the table and sighed. It seems like my job as a member of the royal guard was not done yet after all...

"So..." Sania asked, "What do you think?"

"I think this is trouble..."

"I had to tell you as soon as I read it."

"Yes, I know... Thank you."

Hosina stood up from her comfy corner on the couch and growled as she stretched herself like a cat. She walked towards the counter, and without sparing a second to look at us she said, "I'm gonna go sleep kiddos, make sure to put out the fire before you all go away."

We said our goodnights and watched her enter her room behind the counter. Sania and I were left alone. I took her to the couch while I thought about how things were going to work out, the future is a scary thing, nothing is guaranteed, yet that is no excuse not to think about it or act upon it.

Sania leaned on me and looked up to my face. "What is it that you want?"

That same old question from so many years ago.

“I want to protect the King.”

“No, what do you really want?”

I sighed and leaned into the fireplace to throw in another log.

“I want him to be happy?”

“And are you sure he needs to be King to be happy?”

“His kingdom was the only thing that made him happy, his reign and his prince.”

Sania yawned. The fire made her hair shine red and bright, I leaned down to kiss her. She moved away.

“No, don’t kiss me when you are sad,” Sania cuddled in my chest. You know, I don’t think it was his reign that made him happy.”

“Then what does?”

“The idea of a kingdom rather than the kingdom itself, knowing you are leaving something great behind.”

I chuckled.

“I think you can give that to him.”

I looked at the fire and bit my lip. I had always given everything to the King, but he had always refused me, the words he repeated each morning were still like a thorn in my heart. “The prince died protecting us.” “That should have been you.”

“You know Andon, the offer to help us in the farm is still up, we could always use more sets of hands, your great King could plow the land and you’ll sow the seeds.”

“Mhm...”

“It could be good for you.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.”

A couple of minutes later Sania fell asleep on my chest. I sat there in silence, looking at the fire burning through the wood, the nature of fire is funny. You need to sacrifice wood, something which is perfectly fine by itself, in order to get fire, something also perfectly fine by itself, something which brings warmth and nurture, but at the expense of the wood of course. I guess there is a time and place for everything, and perhaps not only fire works with those principles.

As the fire burned down I placed new blankets over Sania and me. When the fire finally scattered, leaving only gray ashes behind, I finally allowed myself to sleep.

Not before thinking about the ashes of course... Even the mighty power of flames became ashes at the end, but maybe it's not about where or when it dies, but what it created while it burnt.

I quietly laughed at myself, look at me, being all philosophical and poetic for a change.

I looked at Sania, I was no longer sad, I leaned down and kissed her lips before finally falling asleep.

Chapter 4

“We need to return to Alzaim! The kingdom is in great danger!” The King’s screaming woke me up instantly. His eyes were red and furious, his hands gripped onto me as if he was struggling not to fall off a ledge. I looked beside me, Sania was no longer there, she must have gone to work the fields as soon as she woke up.

I looked at the King, grabbed him and said, “We’ll leave in a second.”

I got up and put on some clothes and pelts, I also went for my sword which I had left in our bedroom. It had saddened me deeply the first times this had happened but now it was customary. Every night, while sleeping, every memory from the days before would completely disappear, as if they never have happened, then, after waking up he would remember only that Alzaim was in great danger and we would rush all the way to the hills were we would always repeat the same dialogue, over and over again.

The King had his blue mantle on, and he looked at me as I moved from one side of the Inn to the other. I walked up to him. “Alright, let’s go.”

As I was about to leave the Inn a fat, soft, hand grabbed my shoulder. Landlady Hosina, with her glasses sitting on the tip of her round nose, whispered into my ear, “Andon, there’s something I need to tell you...”

I nodded.

“King, go ahead and fetch the horse, it’s the white beast on the stables, exit the building and walk to the right, you’ll see it. I’ll be with you in a second.”

The King grunted and left the building.

I turned to look at Hosina, she walked back to her chair behind the counter, and talked to me while she leaned on it. “I hadn’t told you before because I wasn’t sure, but I’ve seen the same pattern almost a dozen times already, I’m sure I’m onto something.”

“What is it, Hosina? You know how he gets when we take a long time to leave.”

“It has to do exactly with that...” She looked down, “You see, I woke up early today, before the King, and I was doing some accounting and perhaps reading some novels, and then I saw the King leave his room.

“He left it as if he was scared of what was outside, like a kid who wakes up earlier than he ought to, he opened the door slowly, sneaked his head into the door’s crack, and scanned the room with his eye. After making sure it was safe he went out, he didn’t see me of course, but he looked like a completely different man, he fidgeted his hands, he slouched, he took small, soft steps, rather than his usual annoying stomps. I can’t be certain whether the man out there is a King or a madman, but I can say one thing for sure, the little, old slob, sneaking through the building when he woke up was definitely *not* a King.

“And then everything changed. He saw you sleeping by the fire and he walked up to you, there were no signs that he recognized you or anything, it looked like he was scared to wake you

but wanted to do so to ask you where he was. And then he saw his mantle, he began to shake, his hands reached down for it, he placed it on himself. Then he stopped slouching, he became tall and strong, and he woke you with no shyness, or fear, as if you were his son or his slave.

“And after that, well, you know the rest.”

I frowned. Lady Hosina held one of my hands.

“Are you saying the cape is cursed?”

“I’m not saying anything about the cape, I’m just saying I saw him change. He was not the same man after he saw his mantle.”

“Hmm...” I did believe her, I had no reason not to believe her, she had always been kind and nice and she had no reason to suddenly try to fool me in such a spiteful and heartless manner. But if what she is saying is true then what could it mean? Is wizardry involved in this? A black Ronian Mage cast a spell of the King’s clothes? That sounds crazy, almost impossible, I had been trained to feel magic, I would have noticed it.

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

She smiled and nodded as I left the door and joined the King on his horse.

“Took you long enough.” The King said, looking backwards at me.

I looked at the king and jumped on the horse.

The King grunted, and then he kicked the mare, getting us started on our trip to Alzaim, the same road from yesterday, and the day before that, and the one before that, and the one before that too.

The ground was damp and squishy from all the rain that happened yesterday. For me it was a walk through the park, I was calm and comfortable, if anything a bit concerned, or thoughtful rather, about the things Hosina had told me.

The Great King, on the other hand, was troubled, just like every morning. You could tell from his eyes, which were set forward like a hawk's, their blue color shining as if they were burning. His hands held tight to the mount's mane, so much so that it seemed like the bones and veins would pop off those thin hands if the horse were to take an unexpected jump.

We reached the hill from which the King's old palace and our home could be seen, he stopped the horse by pulling on the lead. He got off the horse, stumbled into the rock he always sat down on, and observed the castle.

When he observed the castle, he changed once again, just like Hosina had told me happened when he saw his mantle. He saw the castle and he suddenly understood. He understood that he was no longer King, he understood that everything had been lost, hell, he even understood who I was. He understood, I was the one who shouldn't have survived, and that I had taken the place the prince should have taken. He understood all these things, and probably many more which I didn't know about and would not know about unless he told me.

I knew this was the Curse of Forgetting's doing, I knew that some of his memories came back when he saw the kingdom, and I also knew that if I didn't take him here, he would find a way to come by himself, alone, without my protection, that's why I decided I would always come with him, even if it meant being spat on the face for the rest of my life. What I didn't know was that his memories would only come back once he saw the mantle, and perhaps if he didn't see the mantle when waking up... perhaps he would go back... perhaps we could be happy... but would it still be the King? Or would I be killing him?

I shook my head, not wanting to think about it.

I knew he would remain there, quiet, just contemplating, for about an hour, so I went ahead and did some chores. I fed the horse, I fed myself. I made sure to look behind us in case any bandits were coming, and I went into the forest to check if any animal had fallen into the traps I had placed on past trips.

With the traps I had captured a deer and a fox. I untangled the rope on one, and unclasped the iron trap on the other and -after making sure the animals were dead, my finger in their neck feeling no pulse of blood and life- I pulled them to the roadside, besides the horse. Hosina would be happy I got a fox, she had been asking for a pelt for a long time now.

I removed my sword from my belt and threw it on the ground beside me so it would be more comfortable when I knelt down. Then I grabbed my hunter's knife from my other pocket and skinned the animals, storing the pelt on one bag, and the now boneless meat on another afterwards.

I cleaned the sweat off my brow and took the canteen from one of the horse's bags. I needed some water. I walked near the King's rock as I noticed it was about time for him to speak up. He hadn't gazed away from the castle in all this time, and he didn't do it now to address me either.

"How long ago did this happen?"

I didn't want to go on like this, I didn't want to keep repeating this dialogue the rest of our lives, it would make him safe, yes, but it wouldn't make him happy. And it wouldn't make me happy, and I could not allow myself to keep this up, especially if what Hosina had said about the mantle was true...

"Why does it matter? It's gone now, Isn't it?"

“You knew about this? And you wouldn’t tell me? Andon, what is wrong with you?”

I sighed, “I have told you, I’ve told you time and time again, but you’d forget, or you wouldn’t listen, and then you’d come by yourself, and get lost, and I’d have to search the whole forest for you, hoping you didn’t fall off a cliff, or got eaten by wolves, or robbed by bandits.”

The King grunted. “Did we put up a good fight?”

“We did not... The Ronian troops were way too many, before we could even react they had almost all the streets and exits of Alzaim guarded. Then they treated your royal guard as if they were training dummies, I’m the only one who survived.”

“You should have died with them, died with honor, not run away like a coward.”

“My promise to both the crown and you had been to keep you alive, if that meant being a coward, if that meant watching all my friends and family die, if that meant living a dishonorable life, then I would do it all over again.”

The King covered his face with his palms, he slouched on the rock, finally he faced up and almost whispered.

“What happened to the Prince?”

Here I had never lied. “He died protecting us.”

“That should have been you, Andon.”

I threw the canteen I was about to drink from to a tree and then slammed the tree with my palm.

“No! It shouldn’t have been me! I protected you, I kept you safe, I kept you alive, I’ve always had. And I know the Prince understood that, and I know the prince understood who I was. I saw it in his eyes, I saw it in his eyes, as he fell to the ground and the large black sword of the knight with the eyepatch and the burning eye slammed into his neck. I saw the comprehension in his eyes, I saw the respect, and I saw the love. He knew who I was, and unlike you, he didn’t

hate me for it. So no, it shouldn't have been me, and you should be thankful that I've taken so much care of you with so little in return."

I slammed my fist to the tree again, and picked up the canteen, I had to calm myself and control my breathing. I could feel my heart bumping strong on my chest and forehead, and slowly going back to normal.

The King turned towards me, "He knew who you were?"

I exhaled and turned around to see him, his white puffy eyebrow rising up in surprise.

"Yeah. I think so."

"You told him?"

"No. I thought you told him."

"I didn't tell him."

Of course not.

"So," he asked, "How did the prince know?"

I sighed. "I don't know, and anyway, that's besides the point, I have a question for you now, if you don't mind, *King*."

The King remained motionless.

"Why is your castle so important? Why do you keep returning to it? Why is it the only thing which could bring you the littlest thing resembling happiness? What is so great about a place that is not even yours anymore? Would you not be happy without a kingdom? Could you not be like everyone else in the world? Happy without a kingdom?"

"The Kingdom is as important to me as the Prince is... was... If I were a normal man, which I guess I am now... And the prince was still with us, of course I'd be happy, it is the only thing worth being happy about."

“Having a son?”

“Having a legacy.”

“And if you’d wish to have one you’d have it, I could be your legacy, only if you’d let me, Father.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Or what? The Prince will find out? The Queen will find out? Mother will find out? It doesn’t matter, they are all dead anyway, but we are still here, and I promise I would keep your legacy Father, you know I would.”

“Do. Not. Call. Me. That.”

“Come on Father, I understand impregnating one of the maids might not be exactly the most honorable thing, but it is what it is, and you know I’ve always loved you, right from the start, you chose to take care of me, I am grateful for that, you did it from afar, and without much thought, but you took care of me, and so now I do the same. Even if you choose to hate me. You’ll forget everything tomorrow anyway, I just wondered, if maybe, maybe there could be a chance for us to be happy, as father and son.”

“You are a bastard.”

“I am your bastard. And I love you.”

“Enough!” Father stood up and walked up to me. He shook his finger to my face, and moved his mouth as he searched for the words to say. He finally grunted and turned around. He got on his horse, and took one final look at me before leaving. “You may love me, but I will never love you back.”

The King kicked his horse and got started on his trip home, the mare didn’t gallop nor skipped, it just walked slowly, the King knowing completely well he had to keep me close

enough to protect him in case anything went wrong, but far enough where I wouldn't ask any more questions. I sighed, he could have been right next to me, on foot, and I still wouldn't dare say anything. He had made his thoughts clear.

Then I remembered what Hosina saw in the morning, and for a second I wondered if the King, the man who said these vile and harmful words, was the same man that had to sneak from his room, worrying whether he would wake anyone up. Perhaps they weren't. And perhaps one of them was my father.

When we reached the Inn, Father, The King, stopped near the entrance, I grabbed the bags with the materials I gathered today and asked him to return the horse to the stable. I was sure he would be able to store it correctly since he had picked it up this morning. Without saying a word he turned around and rode there. I sighed and walked to the Inn. When I entered I saw a demon.

The Dark Knight almost soaked in the light of the place, "...you are telling me, you haven't seen a man like the one in this coin? Come now, you don't have to lie, a dumb kid outside told me a weird man with a blue cape engraved with gold was staying in this very Inn. Just tell me where he is and I promise you won't have any trouble..."

I dropped the bags on the ground beside me, and unsheathed my sword holding it in front of me with both of my hands. His whole body was armored but for his head, I was unprotected, still, I would either kill the man, or I would die trying, even for the man who chose not to be my Father.

With the thump of the bags the Dark Knight turned towards me. His eye patch and red, burning eye moved up as his mouth turned into a smile, a long, wide smile, the smile of a snake.

“Who have we here... Oh! I think I remember you. You left your prince to die, and then you took off with the King. Well, thanks for coming to me and making my job easier.”

The door behind me opened and King took a step into the Inn. “Andon, I think we might be in trouble, I saw a beast dark as night on the stab-”

“Step back King, I’ll take care of this.”

“No,” the snake man smiled as he unsheathed his sword and stepped towards me, “I don’t think you will.”

Chapter 5

The Dark Knight struck. His sword scratched the wood of the ground below me as I dodged his blow. I struck back but he deflected my blow with his sword, then he kicked me and I went sliding down the table. The Dark Knight brought his sword above his head and slammed it down on me, I rolled backwards and barely avoided it. The Dark Knight grunted as his sword got stuck in the wood of the table, and struggled to get it off.

From the kitchen I heard Hosina scream, “Not the table!”

I jumped off the table on the other end and played a couple of rounds of ring around the rosie as the knight walked one way and I the other. Finally the knight screamed, and with a push of his hands he shoved the table away as if it was a cushion or a chair. He rushed toward me and while he did so I calmed my breaths and concentrated on the pace of his steps, the cadency of his breathing, and the tip of his sword.

As he was twisting his body to leap forwards I took a quick step which made his blade miss me by an inch and have him give his back to me. I turned as well, and hit his back with the edge of my sword. He didn't stumble, he didn't move, he didn't shake, I had done as much

damage as a giant being hit by an arrow. His black armor took the hit, and absorbed any damage which could have been done. It was at that moment when I understood what I had to do. I couldn't go for his body, he was fully protected, I had to go for the face.

While his body took the shock of the damageless blow, the Dark Knight laughed. He dropped his sword, the metal clinking as it bounced on the floor, he turned around, grabbed my sword with his gauntleted hands and threw it away. It seemed like I was armless, and so the Dark Knight punched away. He hit my face, then my stomach, a surge of both cold and fire flowing through my body as my system was momentarily shut down by the pain. Each clink of his metallic armor could be felt, like chains punishing a slave.

After another couple of punches I fell to the ground, I grunted and tried to hold myself like a ball, the pain was too much. And just when I thought it was over... It wasn't.

The Dark Knight Grabbed me by the neck of my shirt and pulled me back up on my knees. He punched me once. He punched me twice. And then he punched me another time.

"You know... I enjoyed killing the Prince, and your face as my sword cut through his neck was priceless."

He dropped me on the ground and walked to his sword. As he gave me his back I placed one hand on the floor, praying that I had enough strength just for one more push of my body, one more chance to leap away from his sword, one more chance to protect the King, to protect Father. With the other, I reached towards my belt. Thank the Creator we had gone hunting.

"I wonder if the King will put the same face as he watches *your* head being chopped off."

He took large, heavy steps forward, he lunged his sword above his head for one last time, and then he forced it down with a scream.

I willed all my strength to my arms, every bit of life I had left had to be used in this moment or there would be no more of it.

Everything happened in slow motion, the sword came down, its black silver threatening to end it all. And I evaded it. With one arm I pushed myself away from the blow, slightly forward, slightly to the side. With the momentum of the push I thrust my body forwards, leaping towards the Dark Knight, his hands too busy to push me away.

I twisted my body, throwing my other hand forward, my Hunter's knife, along with it. Like a needle through silk, my knife passed through his crimson red eye effortlessly. A squirm could be heard and after that a scream. The Dark Knight dropped his sword and pushed me away.

I watched from the ground, too weak to get up again. Rivers of blood crawled away from his eye, he raised his face as he screamed, the veins in his neck getting thick and exposed. The hilt of the knife impaled in his eye as if he were the King's juggler.

He removed the knife off his face and this only caused him to scream louder and the bleeding to get worse. He walked around the room in circles, punching the air. I made sure to remain quiet, so as to hide my position. I could see the King on the floor, doing the same thing as me.

Finally, Hosina walked out of the kitchen. Two pans in hand. "Okey Mister. Your time here is done. All the folks in town have arrived, and unless you go now and never return, they won't think twice about ending your damned life for good."

"How dare you command me, you old hag! Do you even know who I am!"

"The door is behind you to the left. You can choose to leave or you can choose to die. I won't ask twice." Lady Hosina sharpened a knife, making it seem like she had just unsheathed a sword.

The Dark Knight cursed, "Fine... But I will be back."

Placing his hands in front of him to avoid collisions he finally stumbled off the Inn. Here I lost consciousness but Lady Hosina told me he took ten minutes to reach his horse and after riding the dark beast he screamed, cursed, and kicked, and finally got on his way back to Alzaim, or I guess, New Ronia.

When I awoke I felt pain, blood and bruises all around my body. I grunted as I forced myself out of bed, and leaned on a wall as my legs got weak and I lost balance. I wasn't dead. The King wasn't dead. Not yet at least. I had to talk to Sania.

I grabbed the King's mantle to cover myself from the cold, and left my room.

Unsurprisingly Sania was sitting on the table, her finger touching the creek created by the Dark Knight's sword.

Sania stood up and helped me to the table. She kissed me on the cheek and sat beside me, helping me drink water and eat food.

"Sania,"

"What is it, Andon?"

"Do you still need two extra sets of hands in the fields?"

She smiled a sad smile and looked at me. "Yes, Andon, we could still use two extra sets of hands."

"Can we start first thing tomorrow?"

Sania laughed, "Not you, but the King sure can if he feels like it. Although I don't know if you'll be able to convince him."

"About that... Help me to the fire."

She placed one of my arms around her shoulder and one of her hands beneath my armpit. She helped me up, and like a soldier helping a fellow mate, or a wife taking care of her drunk husband. She helped me to the fire. It was hot here. I took off the King's mantle. The King's last possession. Excluding his horse, his sword, crown, and jewels all had to be sold.

I looked at the blue and golden mantle with the roaring lion in its back with melancholy. Wood had to become fire. And the wood had to be lost in the process. I've already taken enough care of the wood. I wanted... Nay, I needed fire...

I kissed the mantle, and in my mind gave farewell to the King and our lives before this. I threw the mantle to the fire and watched it get burned and consumed as both the King and it disappeared off the face of the universe, forever.

Chapter 6

Two seasons had come and gone since the Dark Knight struck, my body was almost back to full functionality. The sun was hot and strong, and the sweat covered my eyes as I collected the gifts of nature we had seeded on our first days here on the fields.

All in all everything had been quite peaceful. And happy. And I guess the change was easy for us. And Sania was pregnant. And Hosina, who often got bored from being all alone in the Inn came to the fields to have meaningless discussions and jests with Father.

The basket on my hand was about to get filled and I thought about returning soon. And then I heard an army coming. At least a dozen horses galloped around the fields and towards the houses. I got up on a seat near me and looked at the source of the sound. Black stallions. I dropped the bag and ran towards the homes.

To avoid any suspicion I made sure to calm my breath before stepping into the sight of the Ronian troops. In the first horse, grabbing another soldier by the shoulder, the Dark Knight sat and ordered the troops around.

At his command, everyone got off their horses, all but the Dark Knight, who was unarmed and no longer wore his armor, held spears. The Dark Knight ordered his soldiers to go find every old man and son duo in the village and group them here. After a couple of minutes, everyone was grouped together, in front of the houses, I stood beside Father. A couple other duos also stood together. And Thorben, who had returned from his trip in Liliar, also stood beside his old man.

“Alright you peasants! As you probably know already, I got in a little bit of an altercation here a couple of months ago!”

A soldier coughed, and adjusted the Dark Knight so he would actually give his speech facing us. He grunted.

“I had to make a great sacrifice here. I lost my eye,” he pointed to his left eye, “this one, as you may see, or perhaps not, I lost the other one previously. However, I am neither regretful nor saddened about my loss, it was a small price to pay for the value and information I got out of my trip. You see, I found out a little, mischievous, lying, cowardly King of Alzaim, and one of his royal guards had been hiding here, from proper punishment under command of our holy and great Ronian King.”

As the Dark Knight continued with his speech, Father bumped me with his shoulder, “What is this guy on about?”

I shrugged.

“Now I understand you all love each other and protect each other and probably won’t point me to thou King, but here, I have a bag filled with golden coins, and a picture of his face, as well as a coin of the old currency to freshen up your memory a little bit.”

The whole crowd kept quiet, the tension making the air heavy. Everyone here had heard of the crazy man who believed to be King, only of course, barely anyone believed it.

My Father took a step forward. I tried to hold him back but he pushed my hand away. He looked at the Dark Knight's covered eyes and snatched the old coin out of his hand. My father laughed. "Come on! The face in this coin could basically be anyone." My Father turned around, "Now leave us be."

The Dark Knight suddenly froze, like a cat who saw a bird. "Wait... I recognize that voice." He turned around to his soldiers and said, "Come on! Grab that one, I recognize his voice! He is the old King!"

The soldiers frowned and looked at each other. Some of them coughed. None of them took a step forward.

"What is wrong?! Go get him!"

"Sir, with all due respect, this man is no King. He is just a... well... an old farmer."

The Dark Knight threw his arms to the air, and held the first soldier he stumbled into. "I recognize his voice, you think I'd forget the day I lost my second eye. I'm sure that's him!"

The crowd began to chatter amongst themselves. The Knight before them was no Knight, he was a madman, a snake. Thorben took a step forward.

"Gentlemen! Please listen! This same man came to a passing town Liliar, a couple of months ago, he grabbed an old man, claiming he was the King, and with a swipe of his sword he chopped his head off."

Another man stood forward. "I recognize him too, not at first, the most shocking thing about him was his red eye, and his black beast, but I'm sure it was him, he grouped up three old

men in the village who dared question him and he killed each and every one of them, claiming they were the King, hiding between us.”

Another man stood forward and repeated a similar story, then another one, and then another one as well.

The soldiers behind the Snake Knight looked at each other, finally two of them nodded at each other. And took a step forward, they grabbed the Dark Knight by the arms and carried him away.

“Thank you for your confession. We will make sure due punishment comes to such a merciless man who dares commit such atrocities.”

As the soldiers apprehended and tied the Dark Knight to take him away he struggled and screamed. Fighting to get away, claiming he did everything for the Ronian King, that this is what he would have wanted, and that he was certain that the old, weak man taking care of the cabbages and potatoes was actually the once great and strong Alzaim King.

“Don’t you know who I am?!” The blinded snake screamed, “I am the King’s son!”

“No,” said one of his soldiers, “You are the King’s bastard, and you have shamed him by becoming a criminal.”

When the troops left the townspeople talked to each other about what had happened, being thankful that such a monster had been taken away for good. After a while everyone left home, leaving me and Father alone.

“Crazy stuff, eh?” Father asked.

“Yes.”

“Would you imagine someone like me could ever be King? Ha! Too much trouble.”

“Yes, too much trouble.”

“Well. Aren’t you going home?” He asked. The Curse of Forgetting still struck every night, and he had not seen me in the morning, I left early to tend to the fields.

“This is my home.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were staying with me.” The King leaned on his hoe. “May I ask who you are?”

“Of course, I’m your son Andon.”

“Right.” He looked at the ground as if ashamed of forgetting, but I knew he believed me, and I knew he knew I was indeed his kin. Then he looked up to me. He stood straight, and as his eyes met mine his face light up, the calmness in his face making him seem ten years younger, and the passion in his bright blue eyes glowing just as much as they did when he rode into battle so many years ago, proud to be the leader and the Great King of Alzaim. “Well son, you look like you’ve done a hell of alot of work. You better get home, drink some soup, and get some rest. Now that I think about it, a nice young lady is waiting there for you.”

I nodded, and walked home, facing down, making sure not to be a bother to anyone.

“And, son,”

“Yes, Father?”

“I’m proud of you...”

THE END