

Chapter 1

Old friend

In the kingdom of Kiroshan, the birth of a new heir was eagerly awaited. The birth itself was difficult so King Christian had been ordered to wait outside. He was worried, upset, but also joyous. Impatiently, he walked along the balcony where he usually spent his times of rest. However, relaxation was the last thing on his mind today. He waited for hours. The great ruler who always knew what to do was now helpless. He heard sounds, movement far off in the court, heard the voices of the courtiers who were whispering and walking almost soundlessly. The distant, far off sounds of the city reached him, but his attention was directed at the Queen's chambers. He suddenly heard a sound that was separate from the rest. It was quite near, right behind him. He slowly turned and saw a maid holding a blanket-wrapped baby in her arms. The maid timidly smiled and offered him the small bundle saying:

"Here you are, your Grace. Your beautiful daughter."

"My daughter?!" Christian said happily, taking her into his arms.

News of the great event spread across the city and then throughout the kingdom. A multitude of people had been gathered in front of the court since the morning expecting an heir to the kingdom and the square was already packed. The King approached the balcony rail, lifted his newborn daughter and showed her to his subjects. He proudly exclaimed:

"My heir!"

His words caused a joyous outcry among his subjects. It might seem unbelievable, but the people of Kiroshan loved their ruler. They loved him for his fairness and honesty and were genuinely happy that he had an heir.

Gazing upon the child in his arms, the child who would one day lead them, made them shout out in delight. Christian turned towards the maid, handed her the child and asked:

"And my wife? How is she? Can I see her?"

The maid lowered her head and answered mournfully:

"I'm sorry, master, the birth was hard. She lost a lot of blood. I'm sorry."

The joy on Christian's face turned to fear and he raced to the Queen's chambers. He opened the door and stopped.

Her still figure on the bed froze his heart. He approached the bed on heavy legs and sat on the edge. He tenderly stroked her hair and kissed her sweaty brow. Sonja opened her eyes and spoke to him in a tired tone:

"Christian, dear, I'm tired. I fear that you will have to care for our children on your own. I'm so tired. I love you Christian. Care for the children..." – and silently passed away, her sentence unfinished.

"Sonja, love, don't leave me," Christian cried. But Sonja could not hear him any longer. Without a word, he knelt by the bed, holding her hand. Tears ran down his cheeks. His love had left him. Her final words rang in his head. He jerked.

"Our children?! Servants! Bring me the Queen's midwife! Now!"

The frightened midwife ran in front of the King and fell to her knees.

"Yes, my Lord. It's true. The Queen bore a daughter and a son. I sent a helper to bring you your son, but she disappeared! I beg you, forgive me!"

"A son? I have a son as well?" he looked on her in wonder, but it soon turned to anger, "And where is my son then? Find him! Guards! Find the one who took my son! Immediately!"

As though it wasn't enough that he had lost his Queen. He had also lost a son that he had never even seen.

Soon, the whole kingdom began a search for the newborn prince. They looked in every corner of the kingdom. Soldiers, spies, priests and ladies of the court looked for him. Farmers and blacksmiths, girls and boys. They looked in every house and court, talked with travellers and passersby; offered rewards, threatened, but all was in vain. It was as though every trace had been lost.

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Eighteen years later, in the luscious Kiroshan forests, standing to a young and strong horse, a young hunter prepared to let loose an arrow towards her prey – a rabbit grazing on a bit of grass. The hunter aimed and fired the arrow. The arrow flew and...struck the ground beside the rabbit, which dashed away in fright.

"Run, rabbit!" the hunter ran after the rabbit, trying to catch it. The rabbit was faster and more agile, but it seemed as though the hunter felt more like playing with it than hunting it. During this mischievous game, the hunter's hat fell away and gleaming red hair spread like a waterfall revealing a young girl. It was Caitlin, the playful, untamed princess of this quiet kingdom.

Christian's daughter!

She often snuck out of the castle running from her guards, who, by order of the king, were supposed to guard her daily and nightly, tirelessly watching her every move. Still, it wasn't so tirelessly as she was able to sneak out from time to time. While watching the fleeing rabbit, her attention was caught by something unusual. The howling of wolves was not a common sound in these parts. And in the afternoon as well. The girl quickly got on her horse and in a few quick bounds was at the top of the hill. A valley spread before her and in it, a pack of wolves had surrounded a stag.

She took an arrow out of her quiver and aimed it towards the big grey wolf nearest to the stag. However, while she was still aiming, another arrow flew from the woods on the other side of the valley and killed it.

Surprised, Caitlin lowered her bow and looked towards the distant grove. There, she saw an enormous leopard.

In a few bounds, it was among the wolves, grabbing the nearest one and killing it with one blow of its paw. Standing over its prey, it roared thunderously and bared its sharp teeth at the other wolves, which, also growling, paused.

Even though the size of the cat seemed to be its advantage, the wolves outnumbered it. Who knew how their fight would have ended if it hadn't been for the arrival of two green-cloaked and hooded horsemen.

Their appearance was unusual, for they weren't riding horses, but shining white unicorns. One of the riders was of a smaller, more delicate build and Caitlin assumed the rider was a boy or perhaps a woman. When long, golden hair peeked out of the hood, it was clear that the rider was a woman. She held a bow in her hand and around her waist a quiver was tied. But that wasn't what surprised Caitlin the most.

What was unusual was that she was riding a unicorn without a saddle! And with such skill! Her hands were free, allowing her to shoot freely.

The other rider was a burly man, wide in the shoulders and strong of arm and riding a larger unicorn. He brandished a sword that was gleaming in the sun, so he jumped off of the unicorn and continued running towards the pack of wolves. Not stopping, the unicorn also ran towards the nearest wolf, caught it with its horn and tore it open.

Two wolves jumped the man simultaneously, but the sword in his hand was swift and sharp and the head of one of the wolves was on the ground in an instant. The instincts of the other wolf told it the battle was at an end. It found itself surrounded by the man, his unicorn, the woman and a large cat. It tucked its tail between its legs and quietly whining, looked for a way out. The man moved and let it pass. He didn't need the life of a wolf that had decided to leave the battle.

The man then turned to the stag and called to it. To Caitlin's surprise, the stag approached him without fear. The woman was already next to them. She adeptly jumped from her unicorn and laid her hand on the stag's wound. It vanished without a trace. The stag

jumped, stopped for a moment as if to thank them, licked the woman's hand and swiftly made for the forest.

The riders mounted their unicorn steeds and continued their westwards journey.

"My father will never believe this when I tell him!" Caitlin said in excitement. She mounted her horse and turned towards Libria, the Kiroshan castle, at a gallop.

She knew all of the secret and hidden roads, shortcuts and trails of the Kiroshan forest. She knew the King's scouts, which patrolled the land, would notify the King of their unannounced guests and that the court would be ready to receive them.

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In the Kiroshan castle, King Christian was just finishing with his unavoidable daily business and let himself over to the peace and quiet that ran through the hall. He turned his gaze to the window to the right of his throne, from where he often observed the wooded hills visible on the horizon and listened to the murmur of people and calls of the animals. A quiet melancholy touched his heart. The moments after his kingly duties had almost always been reserved for quiet questions towards the Queen. There was no answer.

The silence was broken by a guard, who approached and bowed.

"My lord, news from the main road!"

"The main road? We have visitors? I do hope they're good-intentioned." The King answered, not turning around.

"Word comes from the Imani road that two riders approach; a man and woman dressed in green. The man bears a sword and the woman a bow and arrows. Both are riding...well, unicorns."

"Unicorns, you say?" Christian looked at the guard.

"Yes, lord, unicorns," the guard repeated, not believing his own words. "Another thing. They're being followed by an enormous wild cat," the guard thought the King would berate him for speaking such nonsense, but he only mulled over the report from the scouts.

"A cat?" Christian rose and looked at the guard sharply, "Does it by any chance have a black-spotted brow-yellow coat?"

"Yes, my lord!" the guard said in surprise. How had the King known? "So the messengers say!"
A smile appeared on Christian's face.

"It was about time!" he quietly murmured and then turned towards the guard, "These are dear guests. The moment they arrive, send them to me."

"Yes, my lord!" the guard bowed and left.

Christian went to the balcony and stared off into the distance, over the castle doors, towards the cobbled path that lead eastwards.

"It's been many years since we last fought side by side, my friend. And now, you have returned!"

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"Open the gates!" the tower guard commanded.

A few guards turned the great wooden wheel at the watchtower and the gates, studded with iron, opened.

An unusual pair of riders entered the courtyard. Stablemen ran to meet them so they could take over care of the unicorns. The riders nimbly dismounted, shook the dust that had gathered on them from a long journey and stretched tired limbs. It was obvious they had come a long way.

Even the big cat that arrived with them needed food and accommodations. The man ordered the stablemen to take care of it as well. Safe in the knowledge their unusual animals would be cared for, the couple followed the courtier, who led them to the King's hall.

The courtier opened the door for them and was about to announce them, but the man grabbed his shoulder and gave him a signal to leave them.

As they approached the King with their faces obscured by their hoods, the King noticed how the bright blue eyes of the man were unusually shining. He went to meet them. They met in the middle of the hall and the guest spoke first.

"Christian, my dear friend, I greet you!"

Christian stopped. A pleasant memory washed over his entire body.

"Elesar!" he cried out in joy. The voice and figure merged into his dear friend's face and he extended his arms.

"My friend, is it really you? How I've missed you! How much time has passed since our last meeting?"

"Too long. But, well, here I am now," Elesar smiled.

While exchanging greetings, the doors suddenly opened and Caitlin entered the hall like a gust of wind.

"Father! You'll never believe what I just saw in the forest nearby! A pack of wolves was attacking a stag that was rescued by a man and woman. They were riding-" at that moment she noticed Elesar and his companion.

"It's them! But that's impossible! I took the shorter way! How did you manage to get here before me? No one knows a shorter way to the castle than me!"

"So, you've escaped the guards again? I wonder if anyone would have bothered to tell me if you hadn't gotten ahead of yourself. Does no one here obey my orders? But, let's not start that now. This meeting deserves me forgiving your disobedience. Only these guests could have arrived before you did," said Christian, indicating Elesar and his companion.

"This is my dear friend, Elesar, a half-elf, and this young lady is an elf...I didn't catch your name," Christian said, turning to the young woman.

"I didn't give it. I am Lauren," she answered shortly.

"Lauren!" Christian repeated, enchanted by her beauty. He brought her hand to his lips.

Lauren shone, unaware of her own enchanting beauty. Her white, well-proportioned face was framed with shining long golden hair that reached her waist and her green eyes sparkled like emeralds.

She was dressed in tight green pantaloons and vest, and about her waist, a quiver full of arrows was tied. She had narrow boot made out of dark leather on her feet and in her hand was a long bow.

While Christian stood there speechless, Caitlin turned to Elesar:

"I'm glad I met you, sir, especially after what happened in the forest."

"On our travels, such occurrences are not rare," Elesar answered.

"And where is that great cat? I'd like to see it!" Caitlin asked and bit her lip, looking at her father. He had always taught her not to be so forward. Luckily for her, the king was still watching Lauren and hadn't heard her.

"You mean Bravecat? He's down by the stable," Elesar answered and spoke to Lauren: "Would you be so kind as to take Caitlin down to meet Bravecat?"

Lauren's look towards Elesar could have been interpreted as: "Do I really have to?", but Elesar nodded and she wordlessly gestured at Caitlin to follow her.

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As the women left the throne room, the two friends sat down. There were many events, meetings and feelings to be talked about. Each told their tale, while the other carefully listened. They strived to condense the too-long time they spent apart into this moment, convinced that nothing was as trivial as to not be worth remembering. They almost forgot about the women, who had left long before.

"My friend, your companion is beautiful! How did life bring you together?" Christian asked.

"Lauren is my niece. We often travel together. Her strength and endurance are only matched by her curiosity."

"Niece?!? But you have neither sisters nor brothers."

"You are correct. She is not actually my niece, but that is how I perceive her. She is one of the daughters of my dear friend who left us many years ago, and I had promised to care for Lauren. And I care for her, as if she is my own daughter, but I introduce her to everyone as my niece. It avoids unnecessary explanations."

"Do you wish to avoid it now?" Christian asked. Elesar smiled pensively.

"Her mother and I..." his voice trembled, "since her husband left her, we spent much time together. When Lauren was but a year old, we were returning from Kaamon-Raht, a city that was still forming then. Lauren's mother, Melody, wanted to see it despite my warnings that it was little more than a den of thieves and bandits. To make the irony greater, we were completely safe there. But when returning, at the border with Black Rock, we were attacked by three robbers. Luckily, Fiona and Kalisa, Lauren's older sisters, have stayed in Valinndor."

Elesar stopped to take a breath and continued, "They were unusual people. They moved very quietly, so we didn't notice them on time. I jumped from the carriage and immediately attacked them to draw them away from Melody and Lauren. I had never met such fighters. They fought equally skilfully with both hands and feet, but I am not lacking in skill or speed either. Melody had stayed in the carriage and was fighting bravely, protecting little Lauren. I killed one robber and Melody another. Neither of us spared any attention for the third, who had sneaked noiselessly behind her and stabbed a knife into her back. I will never forget that moment, even though ninety seven years have passed..." Elesar stopped and his eyes sparkled with tears, "But through Lauren, Melody is still a part of life."

It was clear that Elesar, recounting those sad events, was feeling anew the pain of parting with Melody. Christian turned the conversation to less painful topics.

"I see Bravecat has not left you. How is it possible he is still alive? I thought I would never see him again. So many years have passed."

"He is not only still alive, but is still at full strength. Many cats north of Gateway are, by human standards, long-lived and unusually strong. After the Great Battle, I returned with him to Valinndor, but the elves did not accept him kindly. They feared him, because he behaved differently from other great cats. The problems grew when they saw he would become bigger than any other cat they had yet seen. A cat the size of a pony was unusual for all of them. At first, they stewed in silence, knowing he had saved my life. In the end, the

Council convened and came to the decision he must leave Valinndor because he had become a threat to other animals. I accepted their decision with a heavy heart and brought him from Valinndor to Adazar, the land of mages, in hopes of finding him a suitable home. We passed Gateway and turned towards the mages when we came across a troll..."

"Troll?!?" Christian asked in disbelief.

"Yes, troll. They are real – and tall! Ha ha!" Elesar said through laughter. He saw that Christian was staring at him wide-eyed, so he continued. "Though that troll was still very young and only slightly taller than me. It was an uncomfortable encounter and I feared it would attack us. Luckily, it turned out Bravecat knew it. To my amazement, the troll was very polite, though I had expected him to be violent and bloodthirsty like in the tales. He approached us, greeted me and introduced himself as Razor. Any trace of hostility between us vanished. He wanted to know how I had managed to tame that "stubborn" cat. He told me that Bravecat had first been caught by his uncle, the leader of their tribe Walor. But no one could tame Bravecat, so their leader decided to hold a ceremony where Bravecat would be the main course. Razor freed him secretly, even though he knew that might lead to his exile from the tribe. That is what happened, but as Razor was a passionate explorer and wanderer, he began a journey around the world, feeding his soul with adventures and exploration. Our encounter was the beginning of an unusual friendship. He introduced me to his race, culture and customs, and I introduced him to Elves and Men. That is how I found that this Troll territory was completely different from other parts south of Gateway. Everything was larger, stronger and more lasting there. That is the reason for Bravecat's longevity as well. Razor stayed with us almost a year and Bravecat and I became inseparable. That is when I decided to return to Valinndor and confront the Council. I parted with Razor and returned home."

He swallowed a gulp of wine and smiled.

"I will never forget that day. We burst in the middle of a Council meeting. I decisively told them I would not part with my friend, whatever race he was and that I knew of no reason the Sacred Laws would forbid our friendship. I added that I would rather be exiled from my birthplace together with my friends than live my life in it without them. The Council said nothing at first. An awkward silence enveloped us until the oldest Council member stood up and to my surprise told me I had passed the test. I was confused. This whole time they had been testing me. Their time of ruling had come to an end, so they were searching for a worthy ruler to replace them. My loyalty to my friends was crucial for them, for they judged I would never betray my people or my family. And from that day forth, I became lord Elesar of Valinndor," Elesar finished and titled his glass.

He then looked at his friend, who had listened breathlessly from beginning to end. He could barely believe it.

"You saw a troll? No one has seen a troll and lived to tell of it. And you say that Bravecat is an animal from the world of trolls? Are you aware that you might be the only one to make contact with that remarkable world? Not to mention the "small" detail of you becoming the ruler of Valinndor! Elesar, my friend! You have been gone an eternity and then you appear with such news! This is a cause for celebration. We will hold a feast to remember," Christian said excitedly.

"There is no need for such things, my friend. A good meal and a place to sleep is enough."

"For you, that is always available. And for your friends."

End of Chapter 01