

THE GUILD OF CLIMBERS

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The sun shone directly overhead as a lone man made his way along the old footpath through the brush. He was clothed in animal skins, except for his feet which were bare. A leather belt encircled his waist from which dangled a short sword in its sheath. As he walked, the mild breeze blew gently through his beard and thick, long hair. At the back of his neck, his hair was tied into seven sections – each one with a blue and white string. On his shoulders was mounted a wooden pole with iron hooks at either end from which hung two buckets of water. Firmly gripping the pole with his hands, he did his best to steady it as he moved. Yet occasionally some water splashed out and fell to the ground.

He emerged from the brush, turning onto a much larger path that headed south. Overhead, a pair of red finches darted through the air and disappeared into the forest on the opposite side. The man continued walking along the path for a short distance, and then he made his way into the trees where another trail began.

About 10 minutes later, he came to his destination – a small cabin with a slanted roof nestled at the edge of a clearing. He put his load down carefully, then picked up one of the buckets and brought it inside the cabin. Grabbing a wooden cup off a table, he dipped it into the water and took a deep drink. He then searched around until he found what he was looking for and made his way back outside.

A large stump protruded from the ground near the front door of the cabin, and he sat himself down on it, letting out a sigh. He then looked down at the other bucket next to him. His arm moved over it, releasing a flat stone from his hand which dropped into the water with a small splash. He sat in silence for a moment, looking at the stone in the bucket. Then his head turned in a wide circle to survey his surroundings.

A pile of cut firewood was neatly stacked to the left of the cabin, with an axe sticking out of a log just in front. A small firepit was in the center of the clearing about 3 meters from the cabin's entrance. Off to the other side was a little garden with a wooden fence surrounding it. To keep small animals out, a mesh of rope had been woven together and attached to the fencing.

He frowned, then stood up and scanned the branches of the trees nearby, turning in a complete circle. He then went behind the cabin and looked around but returned a moment later. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he called out.

“Luna!” He waited, but nothing happened. So, he called once more. “Luna!”

A soft growl broke the silence – it came from behind him and overhead. He turned and looked up to the roof of the cabin, a grin forming on his face.

“Getting a tan, are you?” he said with a chuckle. “I don't think you can get much darker than you already are!” He watched as the form of a black panther raised itself up from its hiding place on the rooftop. Two emerald eyes peered down at him lazily. “Come, have a drink,” he encouraged her.

Luna's head turned to look down at the bucket, and then in one swift motion she dropped silently from the roof. Seconds later, her head was facedown in the bucket as her tongue licked up the water greedily. The man sat down on the stump once more

and petted Luna as she continued to drink. His fingers burrowed through her thick fur.

“All right, save some for the garden, will you?” he said at last, grabbing the handle of the bucket and pulling it away from her. He put his hand in and pulled out the stone he had thrown into it earlier. After placing the bucket down on his left side, he put the stone on his thigh and then reached for his sword. Withdrawing it from the sheath, he held it up and inspected it carefully. Then he placed the flat stone in his left hand and slowly ran the edge of the sword along it. Luna settled down in the doorway of the cabin, watching him with mild interest.

After passing the sword over the stone several more times, he held it up once more. Its metal gleamed in the sunlight as he put his finger to its edge to check the sharpness.

“What do you think, Luna?” he asked her. “Sharp enough?” She looked up at him but then her eyes suddenly widened, and her head swung towards the trailhead. Quickly rising to her feet, she growled, her body tensing under her. The man’s head instantly turned to look in the same direction. He stood up and peered into the forest, yet he could see nothing out of the ordinary. “What is it, Luna?”

A minute passed and neither of them moved out of their frozen stance. And then, just beyond the edge of the trees, he could see a figure walking towards them in the shadows. Luna growled again and the man pointed his sword towards the person.

“Identify yourself!” he called out. The mysterious visitor paused a moment. Then he slowly moved forward into the clearing, the sunlight revealing his features.

“Is that any way to welcome a brother?” Krell asked.

A look of surprise appeared on Charlie Bunting's face as his eyes stared towards his half-brother. His body relaxed and he slowly returned his sword to the sheath at his side. Noticing the change in body language, the tension in Luna's body also subsided. She made her way to a new spot by the stack of firewood and settled down once more, eyeing the newcomer cautiously.

"What brings you all the way out here?" Charlie questioned him, returning to his seat on the stump. Krell moved closer and sat opposite him on a large rock next to the firepit.

"I'm sure you've heard about all the recent excitement in town," Krell remarked.

"I have. I came across a couple of your Keepers last night while out hunting."

"You were nice to them, I hope?" Krell asked with a smirk. Charlie looked up at his brother and nodded slightly. "Well," Krell continued, "something else happened last night that you wouldn't have heard about yet."

"Oh," replied Charlie. Reaching down, he picked up the flat stone from off the ground next to him. Slowly, he rubbed it with the fingers of his left hand.

"The Becketts' home was raided." Charlie's fingers suddenly froze over the stone and his head jerked upwards to look at Krell.

"Did they..."

"Abigail is safe," Krell reassured him. "My men were guarding them. They managed to escape, though one of the Keepers was captured. They're staying with Fars for now." Charlie took a deep breath and slowly let out a sigh. He turned his head and stared into the forest looking southward.

“Why did they attack *them*?” Charlie asked. Krell cleared his throat and then stood up, glancing towards Luna. He put his boot up on the rock he had been sitting on.

“Yes, that’s where things get interesting,” Krell stated. “You see, the man that we found at the trapper’s cabin...” He paused. “It’s Abi’s father.”

“What?” Charlie exclaimed, his eyes widening. “Samuel came back?” They were both standing now.

“We’re not sure how he managed to escape yet. He hasn’t spoken a word – not even in the presence of his father and mother.” Krell shook his head. “He’s in bad shape, Charlie. I can only imagine what the Miners did to him down there.”

“I wouldn’t put much stock in anything Samuel says, once he does start speaking,” Charlie responded, his voice trying to hold back a veiled anger. “He abandoned my sister when she needed him most.”

“Surely you don’t fault him for that?” Krell asked incredulously. “The man lost his wife when Abi was born. That’s enough to drive any husband to extremes with grief!”

“He left Mary *before* Abi was born.” Charlie’s words sailed through the air like a frozen gust of wind, hitting Krell with such force that he almost seemed to gasp for breath. Krell sunk down onto the rock once more, staring at his brother in disbelief. He tried to come to terms with this new reality.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “I didn’t know.”

“No one knows, not even Abi. Samuel’s parents covered for him when he left, and they’ve been telling everyone that he only took off after Mary died.” Charlie’s voice grew more agitated. “It’s a lie! They made me promise to keep it a secret, for Abi’s sake.” He shook his head. “I’ll never understand why Mary loved that man so much. He didn’t treat her well. When he left, it broke

her heart. I blame Samuel for her death. This is like a fire in my bones, Jonathan.” Krell looked intently at his half-brother, sensing the emotional turmoil he was going through.

“Is that why you don’t visit Abi?” Krell asked. A look of shame and regret came over Charlie’s face.

“It’s complicated.”

“But surely you care about that little girl, don’t you?” Charlie bit his lower lip when Krell said this. He looked away and rubbed his forehead with his arm.

“She looks just like her mama, and you know how much I loved my sister.”

“Why don’t you come back with me and talk to her then?” Krell tried to persuade him. “She’s heard all the adventure stories about her uncle. Of course, I embellished a little...”

“I said it’s complicated,” Charlie interrupted.

“I see,” Krell said, somewhat confused. He stood to his feet once more. “There’s something else, Charlie. I recently received a report from one of my scouts about activity in the forest north of here. Smoke was spotted rising above the trees. Appeared to be coming from the area where the old Guildhouse is located. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, I suppose?”

“Probably just a trapper camping out,” Charlie replied. “Everyone knows that Guildhouse has been abandoned for years.”

“Yes, well, that area is off limits,” Krell stated with a frown. “If you come across any of your trapper friends, you’ll remind them of course?”

“I don’t have any trapper friends,” Charlie stated bluntly. “I think you better go now. I’m sure you have a lot to sort out in town still.” Charlie walked up to Krell and extended his hand.

“Thanks for making the trip out here to tell me about Abi.” Krell shook his brother’s hand. It was an awkward handshake.

“You’re a tough man to figure out,” Krell remarked. Charlie squeezed his brother’s hand a little tighter.

“You make sure to keep Abi safe,” he commanded. Krell nodded, gave a slight smile, and then turned back towards the trail. Charlie watched him until he finally disappeared into the trees. He then felt something rub up against his right leg. It was Luna, looking up at him with sympathetic eyes.

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“I hope you don’t mind sharing a bed,” Ellen Fars asked, closing the curtains of her bedroom window. Ellen was the only daughter of the head Guideman – an unusually confident 16-year-old with reddish-brown hair, which she inherited from her father. “It’s very comfortable,” she continued, “at least compared to what you’re used to out in the country.” Abigail stood in the middle of Ellen’s room, her eyes admiring all the beautiful things in it. An oil lamp burned on the bedside table, casting a warm glow onto the walls and furniture. A painting of a young woman dressed in white with long black hair hung on the wall behind the bed.

“That looks like your mother, but only younger,” Abi remarked.

“Yes, that’s her at age 18 when she married my father,” Ellen said proudly. “She looks so elegant, don’t you think? A wife fit for a Guideman!”

“Oh, yes,” Abi exclaimed. “She’s lovely!” She paused a moment, then moved to the edge of the bed to get a closer look at the painting. “I’ve never seen a picture of my mother. Sometimes I dream about what she might have looked like.

Nama told me she had blonde hair just like me.” Ellen’s heart warmed with empathy when Abi said this, and she slowly walked over and sat down on the bed next to her.

“I remember your mother,” Ellen said softly. Abi’s gaze quickly turned from the painting towards Ellen’s face, her eyes lighting up with interest.

“You knew my mother?” she inquired excitedly.

“I can’t say I knew her well,” Ellen responded. “After all, I’ve lived in town my whole life and she lived in the country. But I would see her on occasion in town. I was just a child then, of course, so we didn’t talk much.”

“Oh! what was she like? Tell me please!” Abi asked with anticipation and climbed up onto the bed, pulling her legs under her. Ellen looked upwards with a thoughtful glance and then turned to face Abi once more.

“Your mother Mary was quite shy actually, but I thought she was very beautiful. She had a peaceful way about her.” Ellen smiled, recalling a memory. “One time – I think I was about your age, and Mary would have been around 20 – I remember she came to the Circle to get some water. I was sitting on a bench outside Jefferson’s shop while my father was inside talking. It was early afternoon and no one else was around. I saw your mother walk up, sit on the edge, and fill her bucket with water. Then she just sat there a while resting. A Pellenbird flew down and stood on the edge by the water also. She noticed it and got up slowly to come closer, then crouched down right in front. I thought for sure it would fly away, but the bird didn’t move at all. Then the strangest thing I ever did see happened – she reached out the palm of her hand and started singly softly, and you know what?”

“What?”

“The Pellenbird hopped over and jumped right into her hand! It just stared at her as she kept singing to it. She even raised her other hand and petted its head gently. I had never seen such a thing! Pellenbirds are afraid of their own shadow, as I’m sure you know. I couldn’t believe one would just allow someone to touch it like that.” Ellen paused and made a “hmm” sound. “Your mother had a way with animals. For some reason they trusted her completely.” Abi grinned when she said this.

“I love animals, too. My favourite animal is the panther.”

“The panther!” Ellen exclaimed with a gasp. “Why on earth would you like such a dreaded beast?”

“Oh, no!” replied Abi. “Panthers aren’t scary at all. My uncle in Northland Forest lives with one. At least, that’s what I was told. I’ve never actually met him.” Ellen stood up and shook her head, almost laughing.

“It sounds to me like someone has been telling you a tall tale. Now I’ve heard it all! You have quite the family, my dear: a mother who sings to birds and an uncle who keeps company with panthers. Why, at this rate, I’m sure you’ll be riding a dog to school in the morning!” Abi stared at Ellen with a pained look in her eyes, then she pushed herself off the bed and walked towards the window without saying a word. She pulled the curtain aside and looked out into the dark night. Ellen stood silently, suddenly realizing she had offended her little guest.

“One day I’m going to meet my uncle, and then you’ll see he really does have a panther,” Abi finally said, breaking the silence.

“I’m sorry, Abi,” Ellen replied. “I didn’t mean...”

“Ellen!” Abi suddenly interrupted. She stepped back from the window, still clutching the curtain in her right hand. The windowpane started to shake a little. Her eyes widened with fear and her head turned to look at Ellen. “It’s coming!”

“Quickly!” Ellen yelled at her. “Get away from the window!” She ran to grab Abi’s hand, and then yanked her away and they both ran for the door. By now, the whole room had started to shake. Ellen pushed the door open and they immediately sunk down to the floor. With one hand she gripped the frame and she wrapped her other arm around Abi, trying to shield her.

“I’m afraid!” screamed Abi, and she started to cry. The house shook violently and the floor under them seemed to sway back and forth, making an awful creaking sound. Ellen looked back into the room and saw her mother’s painting swaying back and forth on the wall, finally breaking loose and falling to the floor behind the bed. The lamp on the bedside table rocked until it fell over and rolled off, hitting the floor with a crash. The glass broke and the oil inside leaked out onto the floor, igniting in flames.

“Fire!” yelled Ellen, and Abi turned her tear-stained face to see the small blaze flickering in the bedroom. “Stay here and hang on!” Ellen commanded her, and she leapt up to head back into the bedroom, staggering as the floor swayed under her. She made it to the bed, grabbed a pillow, and then started to beat the fire with it to put it out.

Suddenly, they heard what sounded like large rocks grinding together in the distance. There was an enormous shudder that seemed to ripple through the whole house. Abi screamed loudly as the glass in the window instantly blew out and shattered against the curtains, spilling all over the floor. Ellen was thrown off her feet and slammed against a nearby dresser. She collapsed, and the room went dark as the last flames smoldered under the blackened pillow lying on the floor.

“Ellen!” Abi cried out into the darkness. There was no answer – only the rumbling of the house around her. “Nama!” she screamed again with a panicked voice.

The shaking stopped.