

# Year of the Fledgling



**Warning:** *The following excerpt is unedited. You may find typos and grammatical errors galore.*

**Double Warning:** *Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not even end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.*

**Triple Warning:** *Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!*

## ~ **The Legend of the Dark Ones** ~

It is said by some that when one small dwarf planet out there among the stars was young, its creator gathered up all the worst creatures the land had to offer, and she buried them deep in the ground under the Cold Sea just north of the mainland, in the hopes of keeping her people safe.

But the creatures fought back for their freedom. They pushed up against the roof of their prison, heaving at the earth above them until they formed a new island in the middle of the fathomless waters, and then they kept pushing until they shoved a mountain right up into the center of that island.

Decades and centuries passed, and curious voyagers discovered this island created by the dark creatures under their feet until they began to settle there and make it a home for themselves.

But every so often, a dark one would find its way to the surface, and it would cut a swath of death and destruction across the land until its inhabitants set up a system of protectors to safeguard themselves from these evil foes. The earth dwellers called their protectors the guardians.

As it became easier for the dark ones to escape the great mountain, battles grew more frequent, until a prophet finally foretold the end, saying, “the only chance the people of the island have to exterminate the dark ones once and for all will come in the year of the great fledgling.”

Whatever that means!

For no one, not even that prophet, quite knew.

So while the good citizens patiently await this mysterious foretold year, the guardians continue to lay down their lives to keep their brethren safe.

But meanwhile, in the northern most village of Starcast, one guardian has found himself fighting the dark ones alone, with no support from his people whatsoever.

## ~Jarrott & The Last Guardian~

Needing a short break, Jarrott paused at the nearest tree and leaned his face against it heavily, his heaving breaths coming in short, stuttered pants.

He was getting too old for this.

Twisting around slowly until his back was to the bark, Jarrott closed his eyes and tipped his face toward the sky, giving himself a moment to rest. His hand pressed against the stitch in his side as oxygen burned a path up his throat, eager to evacuate his tired body.

Sweat trickled down the side of his brow as the chill of the wet morning blistered the end of his nose. He strained to listen for movement through the trees, but the blood pounded through his head so quickly that all he could hear was his own labored breathing.

“Come on, come on, come on,” he told himself. “You’ve got this.”

He just needed to calm himself and relax. He could find the creature and kill it before the creature found and killed him.

And then, he heard the call.

A long soulful whistle, like a thrush serenading the woods, it was followed by the short elk grunt and was too succinct to come from nature alone. A fellow guardian was signaling his location.

But Jarrott did not exhale in relief, glad for the backup, and he didn’t answer the call.

Eyes flashing open, he scowled in outrage. “Blasted boy,” he muttered, pushing away from the tree. “I *told* him to sit this one out.”

The kid had twisted his ankle in the last hunting expedition, and the healer had told him to take it easy.

Jarrott *needed* him to take it easy. They'd lost enough guardians in the last handful of years. It was just the two of them now. The kid didn't need to go getting himself killed when Jarrott could handle this morning's patrol by himself just fine.

Except, when he pushed away from the tree and took his first step, the pain in his side intensified. He winced and bent slightly, gripping his ribs.

That wasn't just a stitch. And he *didn't* have this. Not at all. "Damn."

The weight of exhaustion pressed down on him, and he reached for another tree, barely catching himself before he stumbled and fell to his knees.

All at once, the past thirty years seemed to press down on him with a sadness he could no longer contain. His very soul seemed to splinter, and his will to forge ahead withered..

Jarrott had been the sole guardian to ever volunteer for service. The rest had been picked from the village, chosen through fate by simple birth order. And when Jarrott's son had drawn that unlucky number, neither Jarrott nor his wife could bear it. They'd already lost three boys to fever and sickness, and then this. Taken into the guardianship, the babe wouldn't have survived a year.

So Jarrott had gone with him, volunteering to become a guardian too, in order to protect him, and still the boy—his last remaining heir—had died not even a decade into his life, killed on his first hunting expedition.

Jarrott gave a hoarse sob and shook his head, telling his brain to swat the old memories aside. He needed to push on; he needed to survive. But he was so tired. And he could no longer see the point.

Everyone else was gone. His son. His wife who'd taken her own life mere days after receiving news of their child's death. His fellow guardians. It was just him and the boy now. And Jarrott was done. He and the kid would be at more peace if they just died too.

But he shook his head, knowing such thoughts were wrong. They were dangerous. Jarrott suddenly realized *he* was the one who shouldn't have left the keep this morning. It was the

anniversary of his son's murder. He wasn't in the right frame of mind. He was going to get everyone killed.

Wiping sweat from his eyes, he drew in a long breath and then returned the boy's call to let the kid know where he was. He was going to need that backup after all.

Young Theron had been trained well. Jarrott and the other guardians had taught him everything they knew. The kid could do this, twisted ankle or not.

Jarrott had just been too sentimental and worried about him. Theron had come to the guardians three years after Jarrott's son had perished. It had been like Jarrott's second chance to raise a guardian properly. And the boy had bloomed splendidly through the years. Jarrott had sensed his talent early on. He could be greater, better than all of them.

And now he would *have* to be because, soon, he would be the only one left.

As if foreseeing his own demise, Jarrott froze when he heard a shift in the foliage nearby. Instinct told him it was the beast.

He stopped breathing and silently slid his hand down to the hilt of his sword. The forest grew silent around him, all its creatures sensing the presence of the deadly predator as well. A dewdrop dripped onto a leaf near Jarrott's ear, and the tiny plunk of sound caused him to startle.

And that was all the movement the beast needed to strike.

The bushes from a mere ten yards away exploded, leaves and twigs flying everywhere to leave a dark one looming in its presence.

Easily a dozen feet tall, the beast had long, spindly arms and legs that were the height of a normal man. Where its bones weren't protruding from its body in a row of jagged spikes, its black skin was coated in a mix of feathers and fur that seemed to have melted into a hazardous sludge, as if exposure to sunlight had begun to melt its usual exterior.

"Mercy be, but you're an ugly one, aren't you?" Jarrott said, facing the creature and unsheathing his sword.

In answer, the beast tipped its whole body back, since it didn't seem to have a neck to lift its head, and it opened a gaping mouth full of blood-strained fangs so it could bellow a resounding war cry. Foot-long claws at the end of both its hands clicked as it opened and closed them. Then, the beast leaped forward, swiping one of its claws straight at Jarrott's head.

Prepared, Jarrott ducked and swung his sword in rejoinder, cleaving the hand straight from the dark one's arm.

The beast screamed in pain and immediately swiped with his other arm, catching Jarrott unaware and slicing straight through his midsection.

Jarrott sucked in a startled breath as a shot of pain gushed through him. Then, he tightened his grip and swung again, cutting the beast diagonally through the ribcage.

Blood spurted from its gaping wound and splattered Jarrott's face, but he merely blinked through the blinding spray and slashed again, hoping he hit something vital when his blade severed meaty resistance that caused his opponent to wail out another animalist cry of pain.

Before he quite had his vision back, though, Jarrott was walloped on the side of the head. The force of it was brutal enough to knock him off his feet and send him flying sideways to the ground. He landed hard, tasting blood and losing his wind.

His sword clattered somewhere onto the ground to his right, but he had no idea where.

Agony ached through his limbs, and he could feel his insides trying to slide from the wound in his stomach.

Something wet dripped onto his face.

Jarrott's lashes fluttered open to find the beast bending over him peering down into his eyes, the drool from his black, gummy lips dripping unattractively.

"And your breath smells too," Jarrott announced.

The beast opened its mouth and roared out its victory before lowering its yawning jaws, mostly likely to bite off Jarrott's head in one snap.

But instead of ending the man then and there, the dark one screamed in pain and tipped off Jarrott sideways, revealing an arrow poking out of its black, gelatinous body. Another arrow appeared, piercing the ugly creature's temple, and Jarrott started to smile and then laugh, even as blood coated his teeth.

Theron had come through.

Damn, he'd known the boy was good.

Lulling his head to the side so he could watch the beast die, Jarrott stared into the its large black eyes, relishing the agony he saw as it struggled to stand again but couldn't as the seventeen-year-old guardian finally appeared on the scene, hurdling Jarrott's prone body in order to dart toward the creature.

Theron had already strapped his bow onto his back so he could wield two long, thin swords. Swinging them in unison, he slashed an X across the beast's chest, then swung again, decapitating it once and for all.

But he didn't stop there. Ensuring the animal was truly dead, he brought one of the swords down and stabbed it through the heart, then he kicked the severed head away from the rest of the body.

Yes, the guardians had taught him well.

Pride wavered through Jarrott as Theron finally turned toward him and rushed forward, falling to his knees at the older man's side.

"Chief?" he rasped in worry, his bright green eyes wild with fear. "Are you well?"

"What do you think you're...doing, boy?" Jarrott scolded, needing more breath than he had to speak. "You didn't check for more... Secure the...area."

"Yes, sir." Dutifully, the boy rose to his feet while simultaneously keeping himself in a low crouch so he could spin in a circle and survey their surroundings, his eyes scanning and ears perked for signs of danger.

When he found nothing, he came back to Jarrott, saying, "We're good. Let's get you back to the keep. This one looks bad. I'll need to fetch the healer posthaste."

But Jarrott lifted his hand and gave a slight shake of the head. "I'm not making it back to the keep," he said. "Just leave me in peace."

Theron's eyes flared with surprise. "What're you talking about? Of course, you're going. We just need to get you back, and you'll be—"

"I'm dying, boy," Jarrott cut him off, unable to listen to any more wishful thinking. The time for wishfulness was over.

"What? *No...*" Theron recoiled as Jarrott's words had stabbed him. He shook his head adamantly. "Y-y-you can't. I won't allow it."

"Allow it or not, it's...happening." Jarrott slowly lifted his hand that was covering his abdomen. When Theron glanced down and saw how severe Jarrott's wounds were, his eyes flared. But he only shook his head harder.

Tears splashed down his cheeks. "You can't," he repeated in a choked voice. "You can't die. You can't leave me."

"I'm sorry," Jarrott said sadly and nodded his head. "But I'm ready. And so are you. I've taught you everything you need to know. It's...your time now."

"No, it's not," the boy said in a stronger voice. "You can't leave me alone. I-I can't do this by myself."

"I love you, boy," Jarrott got out as light faded to dark from the corners of his vision. He managed to lift his hand and cup Theron's hair. "Love you as if you were my own. You can do this."

"No. Not without you," Theron insisted, gripping Jarrott's hand and squeezing, except Jarrott didn't feel the actual pressure. He didn't really feel much of anything anymore.

"Proud of you," he said. "You're the best of us. The greatest. The last...guardian."

"Jarrott, stop. Wait..." Theron begged. "No. Just hold on a little while longer. I can't... Jarrott, *please*. I don't know what to do."

"Survive," Jarrott croaked, the words coming slowly now. "Protect... Preserve."

That was the guardian's creed. It was all the boy needed. It would have to be enough.

Because he was now the only chance the village of Starcast had left between life and death.

Jarrott wanted to say more. He wanted to tell the boy not to cry for him. He was glad it was over. He was glad to finally gain some peace and quiet. He wished the boy didn't have to go on alone. He wished he didn't have to continue to suffer and persist as Jarrott had for thirty years, but he hadn't been lying when he'd said the boy was the best.

If anyone could keep the village from falling to the dark ones by themselves, it would be Theron.

"Please..." Theron begged. "I don't want to be left alone."

But Jarrott had taught him well. A part of him would always live on. In the boy. In that way, he'd never truly be alone. And Jarrott would never truly die.

Jarrott smiled dreamily as the boy's face faded completely.

"No..." Theron sobbed from what sounded like a great distance away.

Nearby, however, Jarrott heard laughter from all four of his sons and then his wife calling his name, beckoning him home.

**~Magda &  
The Fourth Son  
of a Third Daughter~**

**[Seventeen Years Earlier]**

“Magda! I need you in here.”

The healer’s apprentice lifted her face from the bowl at the table where she’d been grinding poultice into a creamy paste.

“Yes, sir. I’m coming.”

Carefully setting her pestle next to the mixture, she lifted the full mortar with both hands and started to turn away, only for a resounding crack of thunder to cause an animal-like whimper to whine from under the very table she’d been working at.

Pausing, Magda turned back and crouched slightly to peer under the surface, only to find a young child huddling there with a short mop of brown hair, frightened green eyes, and two tracks of tears streaking through the grime coating his face.

“Well, hello there,” she murmured in surprise.

This was the youngest boy. If she recalled correctly, he was only two or three years past his birth. She’d seen him and his two older brothers numerous times around the village and at the market with their parents. They’d always been so well-groomed, upstanding, notable citizens, not a hair or fold of clothing out of place.

It spoke volumes to see the child so filthy and unkempt.

The household was not handling this with their usual stately aplomb.

Trembling, the child scurried backward, deeper into the shadows of safety away from Magda.

“It’s alright,” she told him gently. “Everything’s going to be just—”

Her reassurances were cut short by an even louder bang of thunder that caused the windows to rattle along with a woman’s scream of agony that echoed in terrifying waves through the entire cottage.

“Magda!” the healer shouted. “*Now.*”

“Yes, okay,” she murmured, bustling back to her feet, only to pause and whisper to the boy. “Your mama will be fine. I swear it.”

Hurrying now, she hustled the poultice to the closed door, where she could hear the woman’s groaning pleas with more clarity. Two young teen boys had been pacing in front of the portal, but they quickly stepped aside to give her room to enter, while the woman’s husband remained slumped in a chair to the side holding his head in his hands.

“Born during a cursed storm,” he mumbled feverishly to himself. “Bad omen. It’s all a bad omen. I told her we should’ve ended this the moment we realized she was carrying. Third daughter... I *told* that blasted woman.”

*A third daughter?*

Magda sucked in a startled breath and gaped at him before quickly glancing toward his two oldest boys. They looked as scared as their youngest brother under the table. She wished she could offer them a bit of comfort, but if the mad ravings from their father were true...

She knocked briefly on the door, then slipped inside.

“I have the poultice, sir,” she announced, trying to draw in a decent lungful of air in the hot, stifling room. “Would you like me to—”

“Forget it,” her teacher snapped. “It’s too late for that. Just get over here.”

“You don’t—?” Magda glanced down in disappointment at the mixture she’d been so proud of preparing precisely as she should. She’d been hoping to impress the master healer with her superb mixing abilities. But apparently, that would have to wait.

“Okay, then.” Reluctantly, she set the pain-numbing poultice on a nearby chair and hurried over.

“What did you need me to—oh!” As soon as she reached the bed where the healer was kneeling between the spread knees of the panting woman, she glanced down to see more than she’d ever wanted to. “I-I sorry. I hadn’t realized the babe would be crowning so soon,” she stumbled out, blinking in amazement at the patch of hair on the infant head that was trying to push its way from its mother’s body.

Magda had birthed four children herself. She was no stranger to the woman’s agony. But she had to admit, she’d never seen it from *this* perspective before.

“Yes, well...” The healer concentrated on his task as he made a small incision to help the woman extricate her child more easily. “The more you have, the faster they come.”

The woman moaned again as the cut gaped wider, and a slit of blood immediately appeared.

“Get behind her and keep her sitting upright,” her teacher instructed in a distracted voice as he waved Magda away. “It will help her push easier.”

“Yes, sir.” Magda hurried to the head of the bed and made eye contact with the woman for the first time since she’d arrived at the cottage. “Hello...” she offered with a quiet, reassuring smile. “Let me help you upright, may I?” As she held out a kind, supportive hand, the woman blinked up at her from pain-filled, pleading eyes.

“Can you see the babe? Is it a girl?”

Her fingers were clammy and slippery, making Magda tighten her grip so as not to lose her hold of the woman.

“Only the head’s showing,” she offered politely, as she assisted the women with sitting up. Then she crawled onto the bed behind her and scooted in close, pressing her front to the woman’s back. “Feel free to hold my hands if you need.” She lifted them up on either side of the woman’s shoulder in offering.

The woman latched onto her fingers gratefully and nodded at the healer as he lifted his gaze in question. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Magda wasn't sure if ready *she* was, though. She had only been apprenticing under the healer for a couple of moon cycles now, and this was the first birth she had assisted with. She didn't want to do anything wrong.

As the woman clamped down on her hands and grunted through a push, the words *third daughter* kept swimming through Magda's head.

Was this woman honestly a third daughter?

If she was, then the child—if it were a boy—he would be her fourth son.

Magda shuddered in worry.

It'd been so long since they'd had a fourth son of a third daughter in the village, she hadn't even considered the possibility of dealing with such a situation when she'd agreed to become the next healer's apprentice.

This poor, deprived mother.

Magda could only hope it wasn't true.

The next few minutes were tense, but the healer kept such a calm, reassuring voice as he talked the woman through her delivery that Magda found herself in awe of him. He was quite an amazing teacher, and she hoped to learn much from him.

He was smiling and murmuring, "There we go..." before Magda knew quite where the time had gone.

The new mother probably didn't share such thoughts, of course. She slumped back against Magda, panting hard and exhausted after her hours of struggle.

Yet the first words she managed to utter were, "Is it a... Is it...?"

Magda watched the healer tuck the child close and swab his finger over the babe's mouth until it gave a small cry. Its miniature arms and legs jerked indignantly. Then the healer smiled and glanced up. "Healthy lungs," he said.

"But is it a *girl*?" the mother insisted.

Glancing down, the healer's smile faltered. He lifted his face and met Magda's eyes first.

She knew then, the woman would not like what she heard.

“It’s a healthy baby boy, milady,” he finally said.

“No...” the woman sobbed and instantly buried her face in her hands to shudder out her grief.

Magda winced in sympathy.

The woman would only get a few moon cycles—a year at most—with the child before he’d be taken away for his service. Magda couldn’t imagine losing *any* of her children in such a horrendous way.

“Magda,” the healer said, lifting the child in her direction. “Take him, will you? He needs to be cleaned and swaddled. And suction his nose and mouth some more. Keep all his airways clear.”

“Yes, sir.” She nodded and then patted the woman’s shoulder sympathetically before crawling off the bed.

As the bloody child was passed to her, she looked down into his young but wise and fathomless eyes that opened briefly.

“Hi there, little one,” she whispered softly. “My, but you’re a handsome boy, aren’t you? Yes, you are.”

She turned with the infant and took him to a table, where she laid him out on a waiting cloth.

Murmuring soft soothing words to keep him settled as she attended to him, Magda patiently cleaned the afterbirth away and checked all his air passages.

He didn’t cry much, and she had to tickle the bottoms of his tiny toes every few minutes just to make sure he was still breathing sufficiently.

Once she had him swaddled snugly and back in her arms, the baby turned his face her way, eyes closed and frail body trusting. It was as if he were thanking her for her service.

Magda smiled and stroked a finger down the side of his soft cheek. It was impossible to imagine this precious face becoming a hardened guardian. She just wanted to hide him away from his fate and keep him safe forever.

But reality prevailed.

With a relenting sigh, she returned to the bedside and offered the infant to the new mother just as her master finished

treating her. Magda's smile trembled with sympathy as she extended the child forward. "Are you ready to hold him now?"

"What? *No!*" The woman cried out in revulsion and lifted her hands to block Magda. "Keep that thing away from me."

"But—" Magda blinked, not understanding. "He's your *son.*"

"Magda," the healer said in quiet reprimand.

She glanced at him, surprised and confused that he seemed dissatisfied with *her* of all people. She wasn't the one rejecting her own child.

He tipped his head toward the doorway, silently commanding her to take the child out.

Her lips parted. She still couldn't believe the new mother didn't even want to *see* him, or that the healer actually condoned such behavior. As a mother herself, it seemed preposterous. But she nodded her obedience and hurried from the room, where the child's father and two older brothers had crowded eagerly.

"Is it—?" the man started with hope in his eyes.

"A healthy baby boy," Magda told him, making sure her smile was bright and promising as she held out the swaddled form to the man.

But he lurched back as if she were offering him the pox.

"Cursed storm," he hissed and spat degradingly on the floor at Magda's feet. "Get it away from me. Get it out of my house!"

She shook her head. "But you're allowed to keep him until he's weaned. You can—"

"Foul woman, shut your mouth before I smack it off your face," he snarled, gaping at Magda as if she'd been the one to spit at *him*. "Are you suggesting we actually house that spawn of evil in our *home* for one moment longer? How could you—"

"Spawn of evil?" she repeated indignantly, her back going rigid and chin lifted. A righteous heat filled her belly. "Now, you listen here. This is your *son*. He isn't—"

The crack of the man's palm against her cheek resounded through the room muffling her cry of outrage as it twisted her face to the side.

The man's two oldest sons shied backward in surprise as he stepped threateningly toward Magda. "I told you—"

"Sir." The master healer cleared his throat, discreetly interrupting him from the doorway of the birthing room.

The man turned slowly, his eyes flaring with anger, and a cowering Magda scurried backward out of his line of fire.

The healer's lips were pressed thin in displeasure, but all he did was glance at Magda to ensure she was okay, and then he turned back to the new father, his voice modulated and even as he said, "We could, of course, take him to the guardian's keep for you *now*." Then he sent the irate man a tight but calming smile. "If that is your wish."

"You can take it out back and *drown* it for all I care," the new father fumed. "Just get it out of my house. This instant."

The master healer bowed his head submissively but then answered, "Law dictates that every fourth son of a third daughter be given over to the guardians by their first year or ten lashes apiece will be delivered to everyone present here tonight. I assume you don't wish for your boys or your wounded wife to received ten lashes. Ergo, I recommend he be taken to the keep."

"Well, then..." the man blustered for a moment, his face screwing up into an embarrassed pink. "I suppose what must be done must be done, but does anyone have to know the new guardian came from *our* household? Our reputation, you see. It would be ruined. Can't you report my wife's...*incident* as a miscarriage?"

Magda's tucked the infant closer to her chest and scowled at the man for his inhumanity.

Of course, no one wanted to admit to being kin to one of the guardians, but this sweet, innocent child was his flesh and blood. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Sir..." the master healer said uneasily. "The unethical requests you're making aren't very—"

"I'll make it worth your while," the father interrupted. "Twenty coins," he offered. "I'll pay you twenty *over* tonight's

fee. Just don't associate that...thing..." He motioned to the child with a sneer, "to our family in any way."

The healer glanced toward Magda as if considering the man's offer. She lifted her brows, silently telling him she didn't condone any of this.

He turned abruptly to the father. "Twenty apiece?" he asked. "My assistant will need her silence assured as well. You understand."

Magda's lips parted in outrage. She did *not* want to be bought off. Why, she had half a mind to go out into the street right now, amidst the storm and all, to announce to everyone that a new fourth son of a third daughter had just been born in this very cottage.

The father squinted at Magda with mistrust as if he'd rather strangle her to silence than pay a single farthing. But then he gave a slight nod of the head.

"Alright then," the master healer announced, clasping his hands together as if pleased to come to such an arrangement. "We have a deal." Smiling pleasantly from the man to Magda, his grin faltered when he caught sight of her scowl.

Holding out his arms, he instructed. "Give me the child, Magda. I'll take him to the guardian's keep posthaste."

But she tucked the infant closer, no longer trusting the babe with *anyone*. "I can take him," she argued.

Her master sniffed. "Don't be ridiculous. Women don't belong anywhere near the guardian's keep. Besides, you have your own family I expect you're eager to get home to."

Stubbornness fumed to life inside the apprentice, however, and she held fast to the child. "If I'm to take up your post someday, sir," she told him steadily. "Then, I suspect I'd better get *used* to visiting the guardian's keep. *I* will take the child to them myself."

The healer must've seen the determination in her eyes because he paused before giving her a respectful nod. "As you wish, Magda. Just remember... Ten lashes go to anyone who refuses to turn a fourth son of a third daughter over the guardians for his service."

Magda lifted her chin. “I will not refuse my duties,” she said steadily before glancing hard at the infant’s father.

He scowled back and then turned away.

“Then hurry along,” the healer said with a single nod. “I believe there’s a break in the weather. If you time it right, maybe you can avoid getting soaked from the storm.”

“Yes, sir.”

Magda cast the father one last condemning look, then hurried toward the exit. The two oldest brothers stepped forward as if they wanted to see their brother before he was taken away, but with a swift growl from their father, they scurried backward again. Magda’s heart sank for them.

Once she was outside in the bitter elements of the cold night, she paused to tuck the child inside her dress with her to keep him warm. But the wind was brutal and cut right through her cloak *and* her clothing as if she were wearing cheesecloth.

The infant was not a fan of such conditions and began to fuss. He was screaming in short, agony-filled bursts by the time they made it to the edge of town, and she wasn’t even halfway to the guardian’s keep yet.

What was worse, his crying make her milk come. Her youngest daughter was barely three moon cycles old and hadn’t been weaned yet, so her breasts were full of the very nutrients this child needed to survive.

Grinding her teeth, she hurried on through the dark night, wincing when the rain began again, pelting her face in stinging slaps of freezing, cold wetness.

By the time she made it to the large oaken doors of the guardian’s keep, she was soaked through completely. If she weren’t so anxious to get inside and somewhere dry, she probably would’ve been filled with more trepidation, but as it was, she just wanted out of the elements.

With a heavy knock, she rocked the baby and waited impatiently.

She didn't hold her breath and swallow with nervous anxiety *until* the door started to creak open. And then, she took a sudden step back, not at all sure how she would be received.

When a weathered, gray-headed man peered out at her, holding a lantern near his face so he could see, however, Magda blinked in surprise.

She'd never seen a guardian without his cloak on and hood up before.

Then again, edict for them to remain cloaked and covered from head to toe was only for when they went out into public, wasn't it? Of course, they wouldn't be required to shield themselves in their own keep.

Still...

It shocked her to realize he was just a man, like any other old man she might encounter in the village. For some reason, that confounded her the most. He did bear a scar on his temple, but other than that, he looked like a kind, *doting* old man.

"Glory be," he murmured, rushing to open the door wider and let her in. "You're soaked through and shivering. Are you lost, little one?"

"No, I-I..." Magda hurried into the darkened interior, only to slow to a stop when she saw the rest of them. All men, all older than her, all scarred as if they'd spent their lives fighting. None of them were the horned devils she'd always assumed they would be after hearing all the village tales about the guardians. They were just gray-headed, old men.

There were seven of them in total, counting the one who had admitted her into the keep.

The others were seated at a long wooden table, eating their supper by candlelight. As they blinked back at her in stunned silence, the door-opener greeted, "I am Orsando. How may we assist you, milady?"

Magda turned back to him just as child she had hidden away in her dress gave an indigent squall.

"Oh!" Orsando said in quiet surprise as he glanced at the lump under her cloak. "You're not alone."

“No.” She shook her head and started to untangle the babe from her clothing. “I...I have a fourth son of a third daughter here for you?”

As she continue to struggle to work the child free, the rest of the men glancing at each other and murmured their shock before they too rose to their feet and wandered curiously closer.

“Do you really?” Orsando asked in surprise. “Well, I’ll be. This *is* a treat. It’s been years since we’ve had a new recruit. These days, third daughters stop the pregnancy as soon as they realize they’re carrying a possibly fourth son or they drown the little one at birth.”

Drown...?

Magda glanced at him in appalled shock, unable to believe what she was hearing. But surely, giving your son over to the guardians would be far better than outright killing him. She couldn’t understand such barbarity.

“Well, let’s have a look at him, shall we?” one of the other guardians instructed gruffly, twirling his finger to encourage Magda to hurry.

“Krazzle,” yet another guardian reprimanded in a sharp tone. “Patience. She’s working as quickly as she can.”

That one had such a commanding tone, Magda had to guess he was the chief guardian that led them.

When he realized she’d turned her attention his way, he bowed his head to her politely. “I am Jarrott, milady. Chief guardian. And I thank you for bringing him to us.”

She blushed slightly, not ever having imagined that that guardians could be so polite and cordial, but also attractive to the eye.

“Here he is,” she murmured gruffly and stepped forward to carry the babe to the table. The men parted so she could lay him out for all of them to see. As she did, they stepped closer, all eyes focused on the new guardian who’d be joining their ranks.

“My, he’s a wee one,” one of them murmured in hushed reverence. “When did you birth him, ma’am?”

Magda lifted her face in surprise. “Oh... No.” she shook her head fervently. “He’s not mine. I...I’m the new healer’s apprentice—Magda—and I—”

“Benson’s got himself a new apprentice, does he?” one of the men asked in surprise. “Well, there’s another shocker for us.”

Magda faltered at hearing the master healer’s given name. “Y-yes,” she answered, smiling at them. “Pleased to meet you.” She curtsied slightly, feeling ridiculous when she did, especially when the men gaped at her as if she’d lost her mind. “Anyway...” She cleared her throat and motioned to the child. “I was assisting Master Benson this evening with a birth. But the mother and father didn’t...”

She swallowed and winced, ashamed to even say the words aloud.

Krazzle sniffed derisively. “Of course, they didn’t.” He glanced at Magda with anger boiling his eyes. “I don’t suppose they even bothered to name the kid before giving him the boot, either, did they?”

“I...” Magda blinked down at the boy and winced. “Why, no. No, they didn’t.”

“Poor tyke.” Orsando shook his head sympathetically as he gazed sadly at the boy as well. “Now, we’re not even going to know what name to put on his grave marker.”

Magda recoiled in horror. “His *grave* marker?” she gasped. “What do you mean? You’re not seriously going to...to *kill* him? Are you?”

She was fully prepared to swoop the infant back into her arms and run, but Krazzle snorted. “Of course not, but that doesn’t mean he’s got any chance of surviving the night. Not here with the likes of us.”

When Magda frowned in confusion, Jarrott explained, “We’ve never gotten a wet nurse to agree to come up here and help us wean our newborns. And our luck with nursing them otherwise is horribly...low.”

Magda swallowed and her breasts tingled, reminding her how full they were. She needed to get home to her daughter and feed her. Soon.

But instead of nodding and backing away from the men, letting them deal with their problem of the new infant guardian on their own, she set a proprietary hand on the babe's chest. "I can feed him."

The men looked up in surprise.

She nodded, growing more certain of her rash decision the more she thought it through. "I have a young daughter at home," she explained. "Still on the teat. She gets more milk than she can handle. She could share with your little one. No problem."

Krazzle furrowed his brow in disbelief. "You'd have to come here every day. For *months*. To the guardian's keep."

"It's a kind offer, milady," Orsando told her with a grateful nod. "But consider your reputation. You seem like a kind soul. We'd hate to besmirch your good name."

Magda looked down at the newborn who was beginning to fuss on the table and kick his feet. He needed to be fed.

"He'll perish if I don't," she said simply and scooped the boy into her arms. "What would be the benefit of a good name if I only used it to let a child die?" Glancing up at the men, she lifted her brows expectantly. "Well? Is there a rocking chair nearby where that I might feed him or do you expect me to do it standing here in front of you all?"

"Right this way, ma'am."

All seven men hopped into action, eager to do her bidding and show her where she could sit to take care of the young one in private.

Once they led her into a separate room full of rocking chairs that circled a warm, fire lit in the hearth, each man then paused to thank her for what she was doing before they each stepped back in turn to let her have some time alone with the babe.

And then she started the process of feeding. The infant latched on greedily, his mouth opening in eager anticipation. Magda smiled down at him as he suckled peacefully. Then she

stoked her hand over his downy hair. He was such a calm, precious thing. She still couldn't believe that his own parents hadn't wanted him, not even for a short time.

They were idiots, she decided and began to hum a quiet, gentle tune, needing the boy to know that *someone* still wished for his safekeeping.

Once he finished eating and had fallen asleep against Magda's breast, she rose slowly to her feet, gently kissed his small forehead before returning him to the front room to find the rest of the guardians still seated at the main table, their meal finished as they talked quietly amongst themselves.

When she appeared in the doorway, all of them rose respectfully to their feet.

"My father's name was Theron," she announced after a small clearing of her throat. "It's a fine name if you need something to call him."

Jarrott stepped forward and bowed respectfully. "It's a fine name, indeed," he agreed. "So Theron he will be."

## ~Theron & The Flight of a Fledgling~

### [Theron at Age Fifteen]

Patrol with Orsando was Theron's favorite time of the day. Orsando was patient and explained things in a way that made sense. And he knew the name of everything in nature.

Theron was gazing at all the dew that glistened like shimmering crystals in the morning light as it clung to the strands of a spider web that hung between two trees when his mentor called to him from his left.

"Over here, boy. Take a look at this."

Lifting his face, Theron turned and hurried forward.

"Just there," Orsando murmured as soon as the teen paused at his side, and he motioned up toward a bird's nest sitting in the branches. "The hatchling we found last fortnight has fledged and grown wings large enough for him to fly. Just watch. He's trying to leave the nest now."

Theron's lips parted in wonder as the small bird toddled to the edge of its straw home. "I wonder how he knows what he's doing?" he whispered, amazed as it flapped its wing and then just...flew.

"It's instinct," Orsando murmured, his gaze filled with admiration as he watched the bird flutter off into the woods. Then he patted Theron's shoulder in a fatherly manner. "And...the fledgling's left the nest. Miraculous, isn't it?"

"Truly." Theron nodded as he squinted to spot the bird through the trees, but it was already long gone.

He wondered what it felt like to fly and feel the wind on your face as you soared over the entire forest. He'd love to see what the village looked like from above. Or—

“So...” Orsando spoke up, gripping Theron’s shoulder tighter. “In all our excitement here, what have you missed?”

Theron blinked his daydream away and peered over at the older man. “Missed?”

When Orsando pointed toward the ground, Theron glanced down and gasped.

When he saw a distinctive footprint in the earth, he jerked his sword from its scabbard and crouched, already turning in a full circle and scanning the trees, his ears listening to extra sounds.

Next to him, the older guardian merely chuckled. “Look again, boy.”

Theron’s brow furrowed in confusion. He glanced around them one more time, then glanced down at the print. It was clearly left by a dark one. He’d known since he was six what the print from one of the mountain beasts looked like.

Orsando knelt beside him, completely unconcerned however, and he began to trace the outline of the print with his aged finger. “See how the edges here are cracked. They’ve had time to dry in the mud. These prints are old, probably a moon cycle or more. And notice how bits of leaves and debris have filled it.”

Theron nodded and crouched as well. “So this is from the one we captures last moon cycle?”

“That would be my guess, yes,” Orsando nodded. “Whoever it was, it’s long gone now.”

Theron’s face flushed with embarrassment. “I’m sorry, sir,” he gushed, bowing his head shamefully. “I should’ve noticed—”

Orsando held up a hand, interrupting him. “No apologies, boy. You’re just a fledgling yourself. Still learning to fly. You can’t know everything at once. Each piece of knowledge learned should be like picking flowers, I say. One must pluck a single posy at a time over a large range, otherwise the bouquet won’t be quite a sweet and varied. You must learn a little here and a little there over many years to become *truly* wise.”

Theron nodded, soaking in his teacher’s words, even though he would impatiently rather know everything all at once. “Yes, sir,” he murmured.

Orsando smiled proudly. “Go ahead and mark it, then.” He nodded toward the print, and Theron was quick to swipe the pouch hanging from his belt so that he might take a pinch of colored powder from the contents and sprinkle it over the footprint to signal that a guardian had already spotted that footprint and determined its freshness.

“Good,” Orsando murmured in approval as they both stood. “Now...”

Whatever he meant to say, however, was cut short by the long drone of a distance horn that echoed from the direction of the keep.

“The summoning call,” Orsando murmured in surprise.

This specific signal was meant to call every guardian back to their home base. It usually meant there was an emergency, as if a dark one had been spotted from the tower.

Theron still had his sword out, but Orsando whipped his from his belt as well.

“Head on a swivel,” he instructed as the both of them started to race back toward the keep. “Danger could come from any direction. Keep your eyes focused.”

“Of course, sir,” Theron answered, making sure to keep his pace equal to his teacher’s.

By the time they reached the keep, his heart was hammering in worried anxiety, but as soon as they broke through the tree line and into the clearing where their keep lay, they were able to spot their home sitting there quietly with no other guardians rushing about or preparing for battle.

Theron blinked in confusion. “What...?”

“I don’t know,” Orsando answered the unfinished question. “Hurry. Let’s find out.”

Theron followed him through the front doors.

“What’s wrong?” Orsando immediately demanded.

Only Jarrott stood in the front room, awaiting them, hands behind his back, head bowed in thought. When he glanced up, Theron immediately saw the sadness and regret in his eyes.

“It’s Forge,” he said simply.

Theron sucked in a surprised breath and hurried forward, brushing past the chief guardian so he could hurry into the back. Once he reached the hearth room, where their oldest guardian had set up his cot in the corner years back, he jerked to a halt as he spotted Krazzle standing over the cot, head bowed as well with his hands folded behind his back.

“No,” Theron choked out the word.

But not Forge too.

Staggering forward, he reached Krazzle’s side and then fell to his knees in front of the old man’s cot, where flowers had already been placed over his eyes and his hands had been clasped together across his middle.

Theron sniffed, and tears filled his eyes.

He could remember when there had been eight of them. But now, with Forge gone, they were down to four.

Only Jarrott, Orsando, Krazzle, and himself remained.

Theron shook his head, wanting to deny it.

It felt as if his family were falling apart all around him.

Preygar had been the first to be slain when Theron was a mere six or seven years past his birth. They’d always called him Preygar the Clumsy. He’d had a bad habit of dropping his swords in training.

Theron secretly thought he’d been trying to be funny and get everyone to laugh. But maybe not. When they’d carried his body home, clawed to an unrecognizable pulp, Theron had gaped, unable to look away. He’d never seen death before that, and he’d suffered through many nightmares for a handful of moon cycles after that.

But then, a few years later, he’d finally taken up his place in the patrol rounds, and gone on his first hunting expedition, where he’d been the one to *cause* death.

Svear had died during that trip. He’d always bragged about being the strongest and the fastest, but he hadn’t been able to outrun the dark one on that day. He’d just been careless and lost his head... Literally.

Michum, who had loved to cook, and used to make every meal the guardians ate, had been slaughtered only last year.

But Forge...

Forge had no longer gone on patrol. He'd stopped about the time that Theron had picked up a shift after his twelfth birthday. The old man didn't stray far from his bed anymore, actually. They had all expected him to go soon.

But now that *soon* had finally arrived, it still felt wrong to see him lying there, dead.

Theron reached out slowly and touched Forge's cold, lifeless hand.

"We better prepare his burial service before nightfall," Jarrott spoke up. "Orsando? Did you spot any signs of a dark one in activity on patrol?"

"None at all, sir," Orsando replied sadly.

"Good." The chief nodded. "Then, Krizzle...Theron. Best get to the cemetery and dig a grave. We'll bury him first thing tomorrow morn."

Theron swallowed a groan as he obediently nodded. He already knew Krizzle would force him to do all the digging by himself.

## ~ Theron & A Guardian Funeral~

At sunrise, the four remaining guardians strapped Forge's body to two wooden poles with a long piece of cloth and lifted his corpse onto their shoulders before carrying him down the hill from the keep and toward the edge of the village where the cemetery lay.

Guardians weren't actually allowed to be buried *inside* the cemetery, but there was a small section behind the fenced section where they were allowed to house their fallen brothers.

Theron glanced toward the village as they made their trek down the slope. It looked quiet and grandiose in the early morning light. Peaceful.

He rarely entered the streets, as no more than two guardians were allowed inside the city limits at a time, and even then, they were to keep their heads and bodies covered with their cloaks, and they were never to go near the front entrance of a store but rather had to go around to the back and beg at the door for leftover scraps for all their supply purchases.

Not seeing much use for himself in the village, Theron instead opted to take on more patrol shifts in the woods to avoid the townspeople. That was where he truly belonged, anyway, in nature where the birds grew and learned how to fly.

He was grateful that their keep was located far from the village and at the edge of the forest that led up toward the great mountain. The trees were his home.

"Hoods up," Jarrott instructed as they marched close enough to the village that they had to start following its rules.

Behind Theron, Krizzle grumbled moodily. "Damned nuisance. No one's going to see our faces from this distance,

anyway. As if any of them are actually going to *attend* one of our service to pay their respects.”

But Jarrott stuck firm to his order. “Rules are rule,” he said. “And this one’s easy enough to follow with no punishments to worry about.”

Krazzle muttered something else, but Theron didn’t hear what he said, since he’d already lifted his hood and muffled the outside sounds.

At the hole where he’d dug Forge’s grave, they finally paused.

“Who’s going to sing it?” Jarrott asked.

A pang of agony shivered through Theron. Forge had always been the one to sing the funeral dirges whenever they buried a fallen guardian. It seemed wrong that he could no longer fill the air with his beautiful, deep baritone.

“Boy,” Krazzle said, kicking at the back of Theron’s leg. “You have the best voice of the four of us. Get it done.”

Theron sniffed and nodded. A tear slid down his cheek as he began the words, his voice wavering through the pain. He was going to miss the old man. No one knew guardian history like Forge had. He’d been the best at telling stories too; he had never failed to keep Theron riveted to every word he said.

As he sang on, bidding the father-like figure a final farewell, a bird came and perched itself on the branches of the single tree that sat on the edge of the cemetery. As it began to sing along with him, Theron glanced up, wondering if it was the fledgling he’d seen yesterday morning with Orsando, leaving the nest to explore the world on its own.

He was nearing the end of the song when a loud noise—like the pounding of wood—resounded from the village, followed by laughter and happy yells.

Theron’s voice faltered as he glanced over. Whatever they were doing, the villagers seemed to be enjoying themselves.

“Damned inconsiderate boars,” Krazzle snarled. “Don’t even care that we’re having a funeral up here, do they?”

“Just ignore them,” Jarrott instructed softly from the other side of Forge’s body. “Keep going, boy.”

Theron cleared his throat and started singing again, but his gaze was on the village as he watched them erect what looked to be a stage.

They were creating quite a commotion and seemed to be preparing for something big.

He turned away as the song finished, however, and watched as Jarrott and Orsando lowered their side of the poles so that Forge’s swathed body would fall into the hole until he landed at the bottom in his final dirt bed.

Jarrott hissed out a long, tired sigh. “You’ll be missed, dear friend,” he murmured before glancing at the other three. “Alright, let’s cover him up.”

Theron grabbed one of the shovels, only to get it stolen by Krazzle. With a sigh, he glared after the cranky guardian and then reached for the last, remaining shovel that’s handle looked to be broken in half, but Orsando gave him his own, and took the broken one for himself.

As the four worked together, covering Forge, Theron kept glancing toward the village. They seemed much more rowdy down there than usual.

Happier. Joyful.

“What’re they doing, anyway?” he finally asked.

“Causing a ruckus and disrespecting our funeral,” Krazzle snarled. “What’s it sound like?”

But Jarrott paused his work to squint toward the streets before he nodded wisely. “Looks like they’re preparing for the annual harvest festival,” he said.

“What’s that?” the young guardian asked.

“A jolly occasion,” Jarrott explained. “Where they celebrate the completion of getting all their foods from their fields picked and stored away for winter. They eat and talk most of the day, then tonight, after the sun sets, there will be music and dancing for their younlings, like yourself. That’s where the teens go to find a life mate.”

With a fond smile, the chief guardian exhaled. “I met my own wife there. Asked her to dance during the first song and never looked for another partner the rest of the night. *Or* the rest of my life. There was only her from that point on.”

Theron blinked at him in wonder, growing curious about such a festival. “So...” He squinted back toward the streets, trying to picture it. “The villagers... They dance in pairs?”

The concept seemed foreign to him. He’d only seen Orsando dance by himself. On those nights after they caught and rid Starcast of another dark one, the guardians would sit in front of the hearth together, where Jarrott would play the lute and Orsando would kick up his heels and dance around the floor.

Jarrott laughed at Theron’s innocence. “*Most* dancing is done in pairs, boy.” He let out a long, wistful sigh, something he did a great deal of whenever he thought back to his days of living in the village before he’d come to be in the guardianship.

“I wish you could experience it. Just once,” he murmured in a fond voice. “There’s so much you’re missing, living up in that keep, away from the rest of humanity.”

Theron swallowed down a knot in his throat. He didn’t feel jealous over the villagers much. The way Krazzle talked about them, they must be horrible, terrible people. But sometimes, when Jarrott mentioned the finer things they had, that the guardians were never allowed to obtain for themselves, his chest would go tight with an achy longing, and he would begin to wish...

But then Krazzle snorted from beside him. “And why would he want to mingle with those heartless fops who keep all their fun to themselves? They wouldn’t be able to *have* that fun if it weren’t for us, keeping ‘em safe and killing the dark ones before they go near their sacred village. Spit on them all, I say. I don’t want anything to do with a one of them. They can’t even give us a spot of peace while we’re trying to bury one of our own!” The last sentence came out as a shout in the direction of the village, but no one below heard the cranky guardian.

“Not *all* of them can be evil,” Theron decided with a slight frown. “I quite like the healer.”

“And that you should,” Orsando answered with an approving nod. “She’s always been like a mother to you. It’s folks like Magda that we’re honored to protect.”

Theron sent him a grateful glance. Magda was the only woman he’d ever met, and her softness called to him. Pausing, he touched the stitches that were still on his face, cutting through his eyebrow from the time she’d come to the keep after their last kill and had patched him up. She had soft fingers and a lovely smile. His stomach grew warm with adoration whenever he thought of her.

With a moody grunt, Krazzle grumbled, “Magda’s the one and only exception, then.”

Theron merely shrugged as he tossed another shovel full of dirt into the rapidly filling hole. “The healer before her didn’t seem so bad, either.”

He’d been nearly ten years old when Master Benton had died and his apprentice, Ms. Magda, had starting coming to patch them up instead. And honestly, they were the only two people from the village that Theron actually knew. So maybe more of them were fine people too.

“Stop naysaying me, boy,” Krazzle finally snapped. “The villagers could treat us better; that’s all there is to it.”

Theron glanced toward Jarrott, expecting him to defend the people down in the streets. Having been one of them once, he would know better than Krazzle whether they were good or bad. But when Jarrott’s mouth merely hardened into a thin line and he said nothing when more laughter floated toward the guardians from the market square, Theron realized the chief guardian agreed with Krazzle’s assessment.

“Sure would’ve been nice to see one of them dances, though,” Orsando spoke up, nodding slowly. “I bet it’s quite a sight.”

Theron’s stomach tightened with jealousy. “I think I might like to see people dancing in pairs, too,” he agreed.

Krazzle sniffed, and Jarrott remained silent.

And the four of them worked quietly from there on out. It wasn't until they had started back toward the keep, their hoods still lifted, when Krazzle who was walking in front of Theron, glanced back toward the village and suddenly said, "It ain't right. I think the boy should get to go."

In the front of their line, Jarrott glanced back in surprise. "Mercy be, Kraz. What're you rambling on about back there now?"

"That dance," Krazzle spoke up. "The music. I think we should send the boy."

Theron's heart started to beat faster over the very idea. But to see people dancing—with each other—it was something he'd very much like to witness.

"Don't be daft," Orsando snorted from behind Theron. "He'd be whipped until he died for daring to intrude on one of their celebrations."

"Not if they don't know who he is," Krazzle insisted. "Because, seriously, who would *know*?" No one's ever seen his face before. All he'd have to do is blend in with the locals."

"The healer's seen my face," Theron spoke up.

Krazzle snorted. "And Jarrott just said she probably won't be there. It's for younger folk. Like you."

When Jarrott glanced back briefly, as if he were actually considering the idea, Theron sucked in a breath of anticipation.

But could this actually happen?

"If he *was* discovered, they'd hang him," Orsando argued. "It's not worth the risk."

"The *risk*?" Krazzle huffed out a bitter laugh. "The boy risks his life for those people every time he goes out on patrol. They owe him *one night* to get to see the better, brighter side of their world. One night, Jarrott," Krazzle pleaded. "He should get to experience it. For all of us. And you know it."

"Forge would never condone this kind of behavior," Orsando argued. "We're honorable. We don't break rules. And this would—"

“Well, Forge is worm food now,” Krizzle clapped back in a hard, angry voice. “And for what? So they could have their celebrations that we’re not allowed to attend? I’m *tired* of following the rules. I’m tired of dying for them; and getting nothing in return. This is *our* boy, Jarrott. Why can’t he have one fond memory to get him through the horror of the rest of his life? For all of us. For *Forge*.”

“They might not know realize he’s a guardian,” Jarrott finally answered, “But they’ll know he’s *not* one of them. He knows nothing of their ways or customs; he’d be sussed out in minutes.”

“Then teach him how they are,” Krizzle argued. “And if anyone asks, he can just say he’s passing through but he’ll be gone again tomorrow.”

“Passing through from *where*?” Orsando demanded. “This whole idea is insane. You’re going to get the boy hurt.”

“He’s going to get hurt, anyway,” Krizzle spat. “Just like Forge and Preygar and Michum and all the rest. This life is going to take him no matter what we do, and probably in a painful, horrible, unspeakable way that I can’t even think about without wanting to scream in outrage. Don’t you think he should get to experience the perks they do before he dies like that for them?”

Orsando didn’t answer this time, his silence louder than anything he could’ve said.

“I’m not sure what would be worse for him,” Jarrott finally murmured, “To learn just what he’s missing out on down there and growing as bitter at you are about it, Kraz, or to go through his entire life never really getting to live at all.”

“As someone who never got to live at all and it *still* bitter,” Krizzle said. “I say, let him see. Let him go...Just this one.”

As the four guardians reached the edge of the keep, Jarrott hissed out a long breath and tore off his hood to face the others. “Theron,” he finally said, glancing at the boy. “This breaks every rule the village has set forth against the guardians. If you were caught—”

“He won’t be,” Krazzle insisted. “He’s sharp and quick on his feet. They’ll never catch him.”

“If you were caught,” Jarrott repeated, ignoring Krazzle, “it could come back on all of us.”

Krazzle snorted. “And what else could they honestly do us? Force us to kill their monsters and protect their village while keeping us off their streets and away from their women and grand celebrations? Interrupt our funerals with their *laughter*? Treats us like animals who don’t even deserve their scraps? Tell me, Jarrott, how much worse could they really treat us?”

Jarrott scowled at Krazzle for his question, but he didn’t have an answer.

Orsando was the one who finally spoke up. Setting a hand on Theron’s shoulder, he murmured, “As much as I hate to admit it; Krazzle’s right. Theron’s our son. I only want what’s best for him. And if experiencing one night of all the treasures the village has to offer can help broaden his life, then I want him to go too.”

Theron whirled toward Orsando in surprise. He’d been the most against this idea. But with Orsando changing his mind, Theron began to think...

Maybe he could actually do this.

He turned back to Jarrott, who was watching him intently. “Do you even want to try this, boy?” he asked. “Even knowing all the dangers that come with it?”

Theron’s lips parted. He’d never been given this kind of choice before.

And he’d never been given this kind of opportunity.

Knowing he could not pass it up, despite the risks, he nodded once. “I do,” he said. “I want to go.”

“Alright, then,” the chief guardian answered. “I’ll teach you all I know, although it’s probably been forty years since I attended my last harvest festival dance. Maybe we can prepare you enough to trick the villagers for one night into thinking you’re one of them.”

*...And that's where the story is now...*