



THE BLUR OF SOMETHING RATHER LARGE AND heavy flying towards her caught her eye, and in one fluid movement Elisabeth spun away from her horse, her sword flashed from its scabbard, and she cut the melon aimed at her head neatly in two. The halves spun harmlessly past her in a shower of juice and pulp that splattered a broad streak across her heart-shaped face.

She was not exactly certain from which direction the missile had come but, judging from the chorus of curses raining down on her from the approaching villagers, she needed no specifics. If her deft defense against the unexpected attack startled any of the crowd, they did not show it. If anything, the failed assault only enraged them further. This was especially evident when a hasty shower of stones followed the melon and sent her scrambling to the far side of her old Lizarran jennet, Felis, who danced nervously and snorted at the commotion.

Hieronymus, his portly round face framed by an unruly mane of graying hair and beard, clutched his carved wooden staff and stepped between Elisabeth and the crowd, pleading for their attention. “Peace, sons and daughters, peace!” he said in his passable Navarrese, touched with a heavy Boehman accent. “Don’t give in to wrath. Remember what the Son of the Lord would say of forgiveness!”

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Neither the travel-and-ale-stained black woolen habit of his order, nor the arming sword and buckler hung at his hip, made an impression on the crowd. A hail of insults answered him, most directed at her to judge by the count of “whores” and “harlots” screamed by the women of the village. The men mostly kept to the rear and well out of the way, more than a few with looks of utter embarrassment on their faces. The village priest, a handsome man somewhat younger than her twenty-three summers and dressed in a brown woolen habit, stepped forward to join the friar’s efforts to mediate the situation.

“I beg of you, my children,” the priest said, “let justice prevail, not anger. If this woman has wronged you, then let the Lord of All cast his judgment and she will be punished accordingly.”

He turned to Elisabeth. “My child, will you come forward?” he continued, and Hieronymus looked askance at her as well, as if waiting for her response. She gave the slightest nod towards his horse, and Hieronymus slowly inched his way over to Josephus. The old Hackney took the excitement in stride, and browsed on the grasses on the village outskirts where they stabled. “There need not be any violence if you will consent to answer to their charges.”

Elisabeth wiped the melon pulp from her face with one elbow and swept the tail of her brown leather coat back behind her hip to clear her scabbard. She rammed her sword home and flashed the priest a mischievous smirk.

“Oh, there is no need for that,” she said. Her own Navarrese was mostly clean with little in the way of an accent. She swept her black felt hat from her head and held it over her heart. “Bless me father, for I have indeed sinned, and lain with several men of the village. And if the women here are as skilled in their beds as they are at flinging stones, then ’tis small wonder I found them so willing to join me.”

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Hieronymus rolled his eyes as a fresh volley of stones, curses, insults, and oaths filled the village.

“Well, that will certainly smooth things over,” he said in Boehman, as he hurried to ready Josephus for flight.

“We already got paid for the job,” she replied in kind in a low voice, “so there is no need to come back again, anyway. Let us just go before they light the torches.”

The priest managed to contain the crowd again with great effort and turned back to her. “I beg of you, my child,” he pleaded. “For the good of your soul you must make amends to those whom you have wronged!”

Elsabeth tsked at him and set her hat back atop her head at a rakish angle. The broad brim, pinned up at one side, shaded her eyes from the sun. “Oh Father, and I thought my soul was already in such good hands when I was on my knees before you last night. I would think all of Navarre heard your prayers with the way you were carrying on.”

The priest’s face turned a brilliant shade of crimson, and for a moment he sputtered and could not find the words for a rebuke. “Succubus!” he finally spat, and jabbed an accusing finger in her direction. “There for certain stands a servant of the Dark One himself! See how her tongue weaves salacious lies?”

“Well, now you did it, Tetty,” Hieronymus muttered.

“Yes,” she said, “I may have pushed this one a tad too far.”

“In the name of the Lord, seize the witch so she might be hanged, and her corruption lifted from our village!” the priest screamed.

“Time to go?” Hieronymus said.

Elsabeth vaulted into the saddle. “Time to go!”

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As the townsfolk surged forward, Elisabeth gave a cry and jammed her heels into Felis' flanks. Felis snorted, reared, and took off like a shot away from the village. Elisabeth's copper hair streamed behind her like a gleaming banner, with only a glance over her shoulder to be sure Hieronymus was with her and to check for signs of pursuit. However, the villagers had no riding horses to speak of, and thus little hope of catching them.

They rode hard for several miles. Only when the village lay well behind them, hidden by a turn of the road as it passed through a small wooded area, did she pull up Felis and check her pace. Hieronymus rode up beside her and shook his head.

"Well, that was another fine mess you got us into," he grumbled.

"Me?" she protested. "This whole adventure was another one of your schemes. I only tagged along to keep you out of trouble."

"Yes, you. God in heaven, girl! What has gotten into you lately? I have seen you leave a trail of broken hearts — and I suspect very angry wives — from one end of Boehm to the other, but this has been excessive even for you. Did you lay with every man there, or just the ones whose wives were throwing stones?"

"It was actually only two of them. Well, and the priest, but he was a strange one, and insisted only that I—"

He cut her off abruptly. "Enough, girl, enough! That is all I really can bear to hear."

She rolled her eyes. "You did bring it up."

"Only because you nearly got yourself hanged for it! And likely me with you. Now something has been bothering you ever since we crossed into Navarre. I am your priest, such as it is, am I not?"

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Elsabeth eyed him incredulously. “Are you saying you want me to give confession now?”

“Who said anything about confession? I am merely offering you the comfort of my ear. And I rather hope you take advantage of it before the next village you scandalize sees fit to lock up our only means of escape before coming to hang you.”

She sighed again. “If you must know, though ’tis rather none of your business, it has been nigh on six weeks since I have had satisfaction by means other than my own hands, and I am trying very hard not to think of Lord Cuncz and his magic wand. I am likely to get more enjoyment from bumping along in the bloody saddle. And now here I am telling you about it on top of it all.”

“I happen to think ’tis a message. For too long you have willingly opened your body to any man with a pulse. The Lord of All does not wish to see you flitting from bed to bed like a common bawd, ’tis unbecoming.”

Elsabeth glared at him. “And what about you? I am sure He thinks highly of the sort of ‘indulgence’ you offer the laywomen.”

Hieronymus harrumphed and looked towards the sky. “Lord, grant me patience with your wayward daughter! I offer her advice and she responds by questioning my piety!”

“Your piety deserves questioning, and you well know it. Nor did I ask your advice. The sort of bed I make to lie in is none of your concern, so if you don’t like it, you can go and bugger yourself.”

At that they rode in silence for some time. After a mile or so they passed through the wooded area and broke out into open fields stretching out for some distance in all directions. No sign of pursuit followed them, and they passed no one else on the road, though at times they saw laborers at work in the fields. The road itself ran westwards across Navarre. It was a rutted and hard-

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packed dirt track crossed at times by little streams gurgling in stony beds spanned by fords or bridges of crumbling and weathered stone. Here and there they saw the remains of old paving stones peeking through the dirt and turf like old, bleached bones, a rare sign of the great Imperium Valentium that once stretched out of the Free City-States to the south, to cover much of Navarre and Coventry further to the northwest.

It was already midday by the time they set out from the village, and it promised to be well after twilight before they reached their destination, which Elisabeth noted Hieronymus had not been forthcoming about. Finally, she could take no more of riding with only the singing of birds and the steady clatter of their horses' hooves to break the silence.

"Where are you taking us, anyway?" she asked.

"Somewhere to get a drink," Hieronymus replied, "and maybe a bit of work to keep you occupied and out of trouble, though you seem to have a knack for drawing it wherever you go."

She rolled her eyes. "Any time you go looking for a drink and a bit of work, I always end up having to get you out of trouble. Like that time you tried to hustle those gents in Aue and ended up hung by your ankles from the village church."

"That was not my fault! They were easy marks, and I would have had them if you would have just done as I asked."

"My sleeping habits are suddenly much less objectionable once you think you can use them to your advantage. Now, what are you planning this time?"

"My plan was to head for a place a bit up the road the priest back there—" he jerked his thumb over his shoulder and motioned vaguely back towards the village "—mentioned before you were nearly hanged. He called it the Inn of the Four Ways."

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Elsabeth let out a groan of exasperation. “Oh good God, not another inn. Why is it always a bloody inn?”

“Do you know of anywhere better to look for someone needing a sword arm or two? The Four Ways is right at a major crossroads so anyone on the road will be passing through. I am sure there will be no lack of merchants and travelers looking for protection.”

“And ’tis also a good place for you to lose all our money on drink and dice. How long did it take before you had been through your share of the reward from Cuncz?”

Hieronymus glared at her. “As I recall you enjoyed your fair share of the libations along the road, Tetty.”

“Tch. What makes you think I paid for them from my own purse?”

“I wonder. Every innkeeper between here and Leyen I am sure has been singing your praises after we passed through. Not to mention your name, among other things, has been on the lips of every bard and minstrel as well. Now, will you just trust me? I know what I am doing.”

She sighed and shook her head. “It terrifies me every time you say that.”

The rest of their ride was uneventful. Midday passed into afternoon, and soon the sun was sinking into the west, setting the sky alight with brilliant golds and reds as the pale blue ceiling overhead slowly deepened into indigo. The silver-white points of stars ignited in the gathering dark as the golden lights of their destination loomed up ahead of them.

The Inn of the Four Ways was a substantial structure nestled in the northwest corner of the meeting of the two roads whence it took its name. The greater of the two ran north and south across Navarre, and was worn and deeply rutted by the passage of

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merchant wagons. The road Elisabeth and Hieronymus followed westward from Boehm was less well-traveled these days, though once had been a major passage for goods moving overland. In summer months the hard dirt surfaces were a sea of choking dust, making the Four Ways a welcome respite for travelers.

The Inn was virtually a town in and of itself, enclosed within a wooden gated palisade atop a low grassy rise overlooking the road, backed by a small, wooded area with a clear bright pond beside it. A broad path branched off the westward road to run up to the main gate to the south. It bisected the grounds behind the wall before it exited another gate on the north side to rejoin the main highway. Brightly painted half-timbered homes and shops lined both sides of this path, creating a maze of crowded alleys with merchant stalls and several open squares dominated by the Inn itself at its heart.

The Inn straddled the path, with a long, two-leveled wing with peaked roofs and many windows on each side, connected by a central section, through which the road passed by means of an archway. Beneath the main wing were stalls for the sheltering of horses, and a doorway in each of its four corners led inside.

Elisabeth left Hieronymus to arrange the stabling of their horses and made for one of the doors.

She entered through the southeast doorway and found herself on a well-lit landing at the foot of a steep stairway. Golden light filled the room above, and there was music and the fragrance of cooking food along with the sour odor of beer in the air. Elisabeth started up the stairs and soon emerged in the inn's common room, a wide chamber that filled the entirety of the main wing above the stables below. Glass windows looked north and south out onto the road, and thick timber columns supported the ceiling above. A door on either end led to the east and west wings.

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Trestle tables ringed an open space in the middle of the common room floor, where men and women danced to a jaunty tune played by musicians on pipes, drums, and lutes, while serving girls glided between tables and spun out of the reach of grasping hands. Elisabeth flashed one of the pipers a smile when he looked her way, then swept her eyes across the common room. She spied an empty table in the southwest corner, near another stairwell much like the one through which she had entered. She sighed and made her way across the room, keeping to the wall and out of the way as she slipped past tables full of drinkers. Some were stained and worn from the road. Others were locals visiting the Inn to share news of the day and join in the revelry of the evening.

She reached the table, dropped heavily onto the bench with her back to the wall, and propped her sword against the table. Before long, a serving girl appeared bearing a platter of the evening's meal and a tankard of ale for her, which she set down with an uncertain eye on the sword leaning against the table. Elisabeth handed her a silver *pfennig*.

"I have a companion joining me shortly," she said. "Be a dear and have a plate and tankard brought for him as well. If 'tis not here before he is, I'll be dealing with his grumbling all evening."

The serving girl inclined her head slightly and hurried off to the kitchens. Hieronymus arrived presently. He leaned his staff against the table and dropped heavily onto the bench beside her. He frowned at the platter in front of her.

"Well, that is courteous of you; leaving me to contend with the horses and boarding while you sit down to eat."

"Oh, don't start with me. The girl will be back in a moment, though God knows you could stand a fast. So, are we just sitting around and hoping for someone to turn up?"

"More or less."

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Elsabeth sighed and rolled her eyes. “Wonderful. We could just spend the night at ease and move on somewhere work was publicly posted. Instead, we hang around just hoping for something to turn up on its own. Brilliant plan.”

“Show some faith, my girl, and do keep your sword in view.”

“Fine. But I wager our meal and board for the night that nothing turns up.”

Hieronymus smirked over the rim of his tankard. “Wager accepted.”

