

Chapter 03 – A Fallen Companion

With a deep gasp, Ronen awoke in a warm home a few days later. His instinct was to give into confusion and sit up quickly, but he found that he did not have the energy to do so. The companion was still frail. He twisted to one side and caught the image of a woman's silhouette sitting nearby. She sat at a small table working with a mortar and pestle, mixing some herbs. He didn't quite recognize the scents. His eyesight seemed to be blurry, though. He couldn't make her out, and after a moment, rolled back over. His voice was scratched, "I suppose I'm not dead..." He said softly, thinking for a moment that if he survived, "Is Shiri?"

His eyes turned back towards the woman when he didn't receive an answer, only to see an empty seat where she had been. He shook his head and looked around the room for a moment but couldn't see where she had gone. The door to the small room was closed. His eyes took in the sights. There was a small table with the mortar and pestle, bandages, clean water, and a basket of used applications below. He was in a small bed, barely big enough for him. There was a small, shuttered window near the center of the wall, and he could hear farm animals in the distance.

There was a small rocking chair in the far corner, a handmade doll sitting and watching over his equipment. His sword, while cleaned, was beaten and chipped. Likely it was dulled and in desperate need of repair. His Vestry charm hung from the handguard, old clothes tucked between the blade and the wall. His traveling pack was nowhere to be seen, nor was any of Shiri's equipment. He was unsure what happened beyond the battle. Finally, voiced a quick, "Hello?"

It was a moment before the door pressed open, sliding along the dirt floor of the village home. Argi stepped through and glanced to the bed, his eyes wide.

"You... you're awake?" Argi said quietly.

"I'm more surprised than you are at that," Ronen coughed slightly. "Where is Shiri, the woman I was with?"

"She, Uhm," Argi was unsure how to broach that topic, but the Companion quickly shook his head.

"I know she's dead," There was a stoic nature to his tone, but the quivering of the final word gave little question to the idea that he was likely only barely holding himself together. "I mean, where is her body?"

"We laid her in the earth, near the village grove. We don't have a Vestry – but we all agree the grove is where we'd want one." Argi responded. "We..."

Ronen held up a hand. He couldn't discuss it beyond that, not yet anyway.

"I'm sorry," Argi bowed his head and left the topic. Though it was clear he had a thousand questions, but now wasn't the time, and despite his lack of experience with people from outside the village, even he was able to understand that fact. "How are your wounds? Do they feel alright, considering?"

“They seem well-tended too,” Ronen spoke as he pulled himself back up a little on the bed, sitting up slightly. It was still a challenge, and he couldn’t put any weight on one arm yet – or bend at his stomach. Still, he had some mobility. “It isn’t the first time I’ve been stabbed. Though, in the past, one of the Kindlings would have helped things along.”

“Kindlings?” Argi rose back up and starched his neck, curious and unsure if he should have known the word.

“Ah, sorry. I think lay folk call them Torch-Bearers or Light-Bearers, most of the time,” He breathed in sharply as he moved a bit too much and instantly regretted it. He sank a bit to the more comfortable spot he had been before. “We generally prefer not to use terms that evoke power. Companion versus Templar or Knight Protector, for instance....” He trailed off a little bit as guilt started to burn in his chest. “Do I owe the thanks for living to you?”

Argi shook his head. “No, not at all.” He raised a hand, “That would be Ljotr, our Forester. I was with her when we heard the battle – but I thought it best to return to the village. Had we done that, you’d be beside....” He realized what he said and gave a swift bow, “I’m sorry. That was not a good way to,”

“You’re okay, friend. Truth is a large part of me wishes I was.” The final part was spoken with a bit of a whisper before the Companion shook off the dark thoughts, “Forgive me. Morbid as it may be, it is something I’ll need time to process.” He took a breath, and as his mind fumbled with chasing away dark thoughts, he was able to latch onto one thing, “And I’ve forgotten etiquette. I am Vestrian Ronen of the Companions.”

“I’m Argidr,” Argi said quickly, pointing to himself.

“Argidr. I’ll remember it well. And you said Ljotr was the Forester who found me?”

“Yes. She’s,” Argi paused for a moment and didn’t want to speak for her. “She’s a kind person, but her background with the Vestry is fraught, to say the least. So, I offered to keep watch over you, I suppose.” He waved to the room around them, “I also have more space in my workshop than she does in her home.”

Ronen raised a brow, “How is her history... fraught, was it?”

“It’s not my place to say,” Argi raised his hands. “And you’ll forgive me, but I’ve known her my entire life, and you....”

The Companion laid back down. “I understand,” He said quietly, “I won’t press. I’d like to thank her in person. But until she is comfortable, please pass along my sincerest thanks,” He took a breath and adjusted, “I’ll try not to overstay my welcome. And you’ll be repaid for any expenses.”

“I’m not keeping a tab. We’ve got bandages to spare, and Ljotr drops by medicinal herbs each evening – but....” Argi sighed, “Don’t worry about that now. Rest. I’ll bring you a drink and prepare something simple to eat.”

Ronen didn’t respond, staring up at the ceiling for a time before drifting back off. His sleep was tormented by nightmares, reliving the end of that battle over and over. Each time the nightmares would wake him in a cold sweat, one he explained away as part of the recovery process. Argi wasn’t a fool, but

he was not familiar with this scale of injuries, so he left it be. Over the next few days, the two chatted from time to time but kept their distance for the most part. The Companion was left alone to recover. But throughout their conversations, Ronen was able to pick up a lot of little information.

He discovered that Ljotr had done everything she could for Ronen out in the wilds. Her knowledge of local plants and a good supply of bandages kept in her pack for little things let her tend to his wounds, while Argi ran back to the village for more help. It wasn't long before some of the villagers arrived to assist the woman, and after they had helped the Companion as best as they could, he was carried back to the village. Argi and some of the others brought Shiri back to the town at the time. They then returned to bury the attackers.

Argi offered to keep watch over the Companion, but he had not been the only one to offer. A few of the townsfolk were willing to do so. But Argridr lived alone in a somewhat larger home than others, and his position in the village as an artisan afforded him time to take breaks and check on the wounded man. When discovering Argi was a carpenter, there was a quiet companionship that built between the two.

Ronen was the son of a carpenter and a Vestrian. So, as he recovered, he began to help around the workshop – what little he could at least. For those first couple of weeks, the Companion could barely walk or move round the home without assistance, but he grew stronger by the day. When he was able, Ronen began to walk around the house and workshop to help with small carpentry tasks and eventually walked outside more and more.

But he still hadn't met Ljotr. Or at least not officially. He was somewhat sure that she had been making medicine when he first woke up, though it was hard for him to be sure it wasn't just his imagination. She had stayed away as best she could, meeting Argi with herbs and advice, getting updates out of sight of the man, and leaving before anyone knew she was there. That could not last forever, though. She would have to meet him at some point. It could wait, he thought. He hoped that Argridr had been talking to her through the time, and maybe her curiosity would get the better of her long enough for him to say thank you.

But, on this evening, as a soft and cold rain began to fall over the village and surrounding forest, he had a simple request of Argi. He needed to go to the burial site. Though his wounds were not fully healed, he could walk. And the omen of a soft rain was more than enough to warrant pushing himself to visit. The young carpenter refused to let him go alone, though, and chose to walk with him. The two walked in silence to the village Grove in stark, unforgiving silence. With the clatter of rain on leaves and the well-worn dirt paths of the town, there was little conversation. A bit of banter likely would have been welcome – but neither knew what to say. There was a pain in Ronen he could barely overcome. Each step closer to the site was one step closer to losing her, to losing that hope that he was mistaken and that she would once again pop through the doorway as she had before.

He felt the weight of each step, stopping at the clearing that marked the entrance to the grove. For a moment, he stared and struggled to move forward – but then found a little courage. He put a hand on Argi's shoulder and thanked him for the company. But this part he needed to do alone. He stepped out into the grove, one step closer to the earth still disturbed from her burial and the small stone topped with her Vestry amulet.

