

Chapter 1 – The Carriage

“Come, Juilliard... your reckoning awaits!” Symos’ voice came clipped and cold. His tempered fingers curled like a serpent around a gleaming longsword’s hilt.

The promise of peril lay plain in the leering golden eyes of the foe before Juilliard. Symos’ gambeson drew taut with every measured breath. He prowled forward with threat in his steps, twigs and branches snapping underfoot. His auburn sideburns swayed with the forest’s murmur.

Sir Juilliard flinched at the sudden ferocity in his grace’s bearing. Still, he drew for the falchion at his hip with steady resolve. As his hand closed upon his Blessed Sword, a familiar mystical warmth coursed along sinew and bone, prickling his hairs and thrumming through his rivered veins. The blade drew to mid-waist when Duke Symos’ voice rang sharp, “not the Blessed Sword, Juilliard, the other one.”

Juilliard slid *Lightroar* back into its scabbard with chastened reluctance. *Some aid would have been a welcome mercy.* His common reserve sword felt cold and hollow by contrast, and he wondered if the fallen warriors’ echoes within the blessed blade would care that he had set them aside, or if they even could.

The Bassomede knight crouched lower, broadening both feet and frame. *The first strike must be Symos’. Only in his fury might a weakness be laid bare.*

“I never cared for those sideburns of yours, Symos. They look fit for a fox’s arse. If you want, I can trim them to spare you any further shame.” Juilliard smirked, proud of his jab.

A twitching grin fractured Symos’ scowl, and a hoarse laugh clawed through clenched teeth. “And how would I ever find a new wife with my face hacked away?” His laughter faded. He narrowed his gaze and squared his shoulders, chilling all cheer with the ice of intent.

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The Duke of the Heartlands lunged, steel flashing in the sun, eyes burning with merciless fire. Juilliard sprang aside, heart hammering like war-drums. The stroke tore into the wet earth where he had stood. He twisted on instinct and drove an elbow into Symos' ribs. Breath burst from the duke. Juilliard flowed into a counterstrike, his steel hissed past his grace, missing by the width of a finger.

Heat clung thick even under pine and oak. Sweat stung Juilliard's eyes and plastered black hair to his cheeks. Symos came on again, carving upward with a cry half-mad, half-merry. Tremors climbed the warrior's spine, but he turned the blow cleanly. The duke hacked without ceasing, but each feverish strike shattered against Sir Juilliard's disciplined mastery. *Any common knight would already lie broken beneath him. But he's fighting a Bassomede, ... meaning it was never a fair fight to begin with.*

Juilliard snapped his blade through a dogged volley. Symos reeled. Steel scraped against steel. His grace's breath became sharp and uneven. *He's mine*, Juilliard thought, a fervent ember kindling in his chest. He lunged, trying to wrench the sword from Symos' perspiring grip. But the duke didn't yield.

A vengeful boot crashed into the knight's ribs, sending him staggering. Symos surged after him, relentless. Juilliard was forced to give ground, mud splashing beneath his retreat. Resentment curdled in his gut as his parries thinned and doubt crept into his stance. Symos raised his blade with a savage shout. Juilliard planted his feet, dragged in a breath, and braced himself.

But a fickle root caught Sir Juilliard's heel. *No, Ancients fade it all!* He crashed to the earth, the breath fleeing from his lungs as he hacked for air. He squirmed to rise, fighting panic and humiliation, but Symos was already above him with a galling grin, his blade set coolly against Juilliard's throat.

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“Go on then,” the warrior let out a thin hissing breath. “Finish it.”

Symos’ eyes slanted in wicked humor as an earnest chuckle escaped him. He slid his blade back into its sheath and offered his hulking calloused hand. Juilliard felt a grin rising, unwelcome but irrepressible. He clasped the hand of his most steadfast companion in the known world who pulled him upright.

“Your father trained you well,” Symos Ebbertine affirmed, his deep laugh cracked through the grove loud enough to ring in Juilliard’s ears. “But clearly, he skipped a lesson or two in battlefield awareness.”

The warrior’s brows sank in quiet vexation. He felt abashed when he lost a fight. He pondered if he was truly worthy to be a Bassomede; to guard the Emperor’s will and Tilnar’s justice. Worst of all he felt unworthy of the tempering his body had undergone in the secret Tribunal. “I suppose you deserve some measure of credit. You always were the better tactician. But don’t fool yourself, it was the root that beat me... not you.”

“Yes, and who nudged you towards it, knowing full well that you would stumble?” His head canted sardonically, sly satisfaction written plain on his face.

“It makes sense,” Juilliard chuckled, brushing the dirt from his jerkin, “given your advanced years that you would possess wisdom beyond me.”

“Advanced?” Symos scoffed. “I’m twenty-nine summers! Only six years your elder—and a Magnate besides. I should demand more respect from you,” he declared with prideful golden eyes that brooked no argument, though Juilliard knew his jests better than anyone.

Symos’ Magnate eyes had always placed him a step ahead, by law, by lineage, and by right. Juilliard had oft noticed the crevice between them. Their pasts were joined, but their worlds were set apart. Symos was scion of the conquerors of Aldomir; Juilliard was scion of

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mere Knights. The warrior's regard for his cherished Order had emboldened him through the years, but even the Bassomede brotherhood faltered before the Magnates and that truth gnawed at him. Ten Houses of Magnates would always be greater than he and his ilk. Yet one House cast a shadow above all others.

Even Symos bent the knee to someone, and that someone came bursting through the bramble: the successor to the Emperor himself.

"J-j-j-Juilliard, S-s-symos. The c-caravan is waiting," Vestomir's voice rose in a sharp, uneven holler that grated on the ear. Vestomir brushed the needles from his celadon doublet. *Still dressed like court*, Juilliard noted. In the span from his twentieth to twenty-third year, little had shifted in his friend, only that his chestnut hair and beard had become more obsessively groomed and his jaw had become a slight bit more square. A lacquered yew bow hung on his back, a weapon of precision and cunning.

"Vestomir, good of you to find us." Symos clapped Juilliard's back, "I was just reminding Juilliard of his inadequacies with a blade."

"T-t-t-ruly?" Vestomir asked, intrigued. "I d-d-did not t-think, you h-h-h-had it in you, S-s-s-symos."

"Don't act so surprised. It seems Juilliard's lost his edge when it comes to sparring me. Three years apart tends to dull anyone's bite."

"P-perhaps, n-n-n-next time," Vestomir ventured, "you'll l-l-l-et me have a g-g-g-o at sparring as well?"

Juilliard approached the prince kindly, "Vestomir... we all know you're dreadful with a sword."

"U-u-un-true," Vestomir's mouth went agape. "I o-o-once bested S-s-s-ir Halfar."

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“When he was nine.” Juilliard shook his head affably, thinking of the now seven foot knight.

“Vestomir’s right though,” Symos chimed in. “It was rude of me to not invite him to at least watch you fall on your arse.” Symos cackled, and wiped a tear from each of his bulging eyes. Juilliard glowered at him, unamused as ever. *Just wait until next time, Symos... just you wait.*

Vestomir Karnesius smiled, warmth softening his normally tense features like spring upon long-frozen fields. “P-p-p-erhaps another t-t-t-ime. C-come, we must r-r-return, so we can resume the H-h-h-h-hunt.”

They nodded at one another and made off for camp. Brambles clawed at their raiments and gave way with a hiss of leaves. Each step stirred a living scent from the loam and moss. The musk of mushrooms sprouting on fallen logs made Juilliard’s stomach twist in hunger. *This patch of the duchy of Aurellian will make for a fine hunt this time of spring.*

Juilliard clenched his jaw sourly. *Vestomir’s tongue betrays him still*, old frustrations pricking like splinters that could not be dug free. Memories of their shared childhood warding at Symos’ home, the carmine castle of *Bloodbrook*, crept unbidden. First came recollections of the Ebbertine’s Sage. He could hear the old man’s thin voice and the prince’s cries in the black hours of night. Then, came the sounds of the former duke’s taxing lessons by the hearth. Everything the Ebbertines had tried to loosen Vestomir’s speech; spookings, bribings, prayers, and harsh urgings had failed. *Good and just he may be, yet, soldiers follow the man who commands them, not his plans.*

They came upon their hunting party at last. The clearing, once serene, had transformed into a burgeoning camp. The clash of steel, the hiss of whetstones, and the tumult of laughter

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swirled around the tents. Juilliard's stomach clenched at the smell of roasting meat and baking bread. The camp was vast, too vast for his liking. He was used to the measured rhythm of his own steps on a lone mission. *Today is for merriment, not labors*, he had to remind himself. The nobles had sought grandeur to his discontent. Tables were draped in linen, wine glinted like garnet, and two Masters-at-Arms presented weapons as if they were at a storehouse. A Sage named Mirlane; wrinkled as a Drakwyrn and sour as a lemon, tinkered with his vials and poultices in the distance.

“We’ll go ready our hunting weapons,” Symos said. “Come along, Vestomir,” the duke grasped the prince’s shoulders. They strode toward one of the Masters-at-Arms, their boots crackling the forest litter.

Behind the Bassomede, a soft shuffle. A youngish squire approached, hair in disarray, eyes wide and uncertain. “Sir, would you care for some wine?”

“Just a spot. As a habit, I never engage in tomfoolery before a fight.”

A wooden cup was thrust into his hands. The wine was sweet and dark, warming his chest.

The encampment swelled larger and became more opulent the more Juilliard stared. Three Taltus Protectarus strode past in impeccable formation. He raised a hand to the familiar Imperial guards: Grand-Master Halfar Dunn, the Knight of Daggers, with his storm-black beard billowing like a banner. Sir Sedric Zane, the Knight of Great-Sword, whose long golden hair would shame a maiden. And the modest, even-tempered Sir Japhet Brannell, the Knight of Mace. They paced over to Vestomir’s younger brother of twenty summers: Prince Arien who lounged atop a fallen log strumming his lute to a merry tune. *Funny that they should flock to him so*

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dotingly when even the smallfolk jest that Arien guards his Taltus Protectarus, not the other way around.

Juilliard saw a face he had not expected beside the dray of armaments: Lord Rowlyn Thyryssa, gold of hair and eye. Even at this distance, Juilliard could feel the grief clinging to the Magnate, a pall that had shrouded him since his sister Pemmaera's death. Juilliard knew that look well; Vestomir wore it too. Pemmaera had been the prince's wife, and the Four gods had taken her and his stillborn babe the very same day.

"Sir Juilliard," came a steady and young voice behind him, with a firm tap on his shoulder.

He turned to find Sir Viren Bassomede, helm tucked beneath his arm, a golden leopard stitched across his blue surcoat. Juilliard's distant cousin by Maillarn's line was hardly sixteen summers, but his posture carried more discipline than most grown knights.

"I did not think to be asked here, Sir," Viren raked a hand through his cropped black hair. Juilliard had always had a fondness for Viren and had trained him since cubhood. From the age of three, the boy had known the weight of a blade and the rigor of battle. Thanks to Juilliard, his muscles practically coiled around his body, a figure a sculptor would envy.

Juilliard clasped his shoulder. "Symos gave me leave to invite whomever I wished. I thought of you first. I wanted to offer my congratulations for your Tribunal and for hunting down those Marked apostates. Any work done against the Profane Arts is to be commended!"

"Word travels fast amongst the initiates, I see."

The squire serving wine, rushed over to Viren. His heel caught on loose earth and the glass decanter slipped from his hands and shattered against the stones, flashing in the light. Wine streaked Viren's surcoat, staining the leopard red.

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Nearby knights turned at the sound. For a moment, the scrape of boots and armor disappeared into the leaves. All eyes fixed on the boy sprawled upon the dirt, crimson wine spreading around him like a wound that would not close.

Viren's jaw worked as he clenched his surcoat with two fists. "A paltry mistake, Viren." Juilliard helped the boy to his feet with a tender hand.

A roar came from the young leopard, "have you no pride for us then, Juilliard?"

"Pride?" Juilliard croaked, disquieted. He steadied himself and answered with steel for a tongue, "I've no shortage of pride. Yet even our pride must kneel before our honor."

Viren huffed, "who is your master, boy? Tell him to give you a beating and be off with you."

"He's fallen in the sight of knights and Magnates alike. That is punishment enough." Before Viren could reply, Juilliard shouted at the squire, the wrath of compassion burning in his throat, "now off with you, and clean yourself, boy."

The squire scampered away fearfully, "thank you, m'Lord, the Four bless you, m'Lord."

Juilliard threw Viren a troubled glance. "By Vitreyus, what possessed you?"

"The boy deserved a strike at the very least, a lesson to teach him against such failings. You used to train me so hard, when I had failings, that I could hardly stand after."

"Aye," Juilliard replied, "but I never laid a hand on you."

Viren threw back his head, vexed, eyes narrowing as if to pierce Juilliard through. "No doubt it suits you to keep a soft heart for children, perhaps because you'll never sire any of your own." *His tongue drips venom, yet this is a truth I have claimed and made my own peace with.* Viren turned sharply and marched away, his ire scorching the air behind him. He hollered to the nearest knights, "which way to the river? I need to wash away this filth."

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The common ilk may falter, but the leopard cannot. He has yet to fully grasp the Creed. I have more to instruct him on.

“Juilliard, come,” called Symos from beyond the tents, “we’ll be hunting for deer. Fetch a bow.”

Juilliard did as he was bid. Armsman Bulton Richwood, brawny like a log and doused with sweat, handed him a fine bow made of meldar wood. Juilliard said his thanks.

The Ebbertine duke, the Karnesius prince, the Bassomede knight, and Vestomir’s guardians Sir Japhet and Sir Sedic marched from the caravan into the idyllic woodland. Symos led them beyond any rutted tracks and down moss-slick hills. Birdsong echoed from unseen reaches. As they walked, talk rekindled to what it had been like when last they stood in each other's sight. They made talk of the seasons, their dealings in the last three years apart, as well as Aldomir and her many wars.

Before long, Symos began telling japes. Ever the warden of jests, he cleared his throat with a flippant smile. “A Melvarney, a Hayle, and an Ebbertine all have chicken for supper at the inn. The innkeep serves the Ebbertine first. He spies the bones still in place and demands they be removed. The Hayle bites straight through his chicken and swallows the lot, bones and all. The Melvarney goes outside, finds a live fowl, splits it in two, and devours it raw!”

Symos’ laughter burst out, loud enough to startle a nearby warbler. Juilliard managed a wry smile, though his thoughts soon strayed back to duty. *Will Veschelyn have enough men to verify Lady Rossia’s claims? And Bethral, fool that he is, will he remember to keep Morvan on a practice sword until that wound closes? Is the Grand-Master displeased with my absence?*

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Symos brought the warrior's mind out of maunder. The duke, still grinning, offered, "a Heartlander comes to an Archid of the north and asks if he can borrow a shawl for the winter. The Archid smiles and rips the hair from his armpits." Vestomir chortled at that one.

"Oh, come now, Juilliard, loosen up a little. Have some fun," Symos insisted with a nudge of his elbow.

"Sorry... my mind was... with the Order," Juilliard winced, *I feel sour for not being heedful.*

"As always it is." Vexation smoldered within the duke's eyes. "You know, we did not arrange this *little* escapade for mere merriment. We did it because we longed for your companionship. Merrimont lies but three days' sail from Bloodbrook, should the winds hold favor, and scarcely half a day's ride from the Ivory Palace. Three years are too many for brothers to drift as strangers."

Truly? Good gods. Juilliard's shame pressed like a stone in his chest. "I am sorry, Symos," penitence plain in his tone. He sought to mollify his friends, "the Order has demanded much of late, and the Grand-Master has stretched us thin. I fretted over what might occur in my absence and meant no offense."

Symos exhaled, quelling the sparks of his temper. His firm ducal hand, solid as Aeionwood, came to rest upon the Bassomede's shoulder. "You labor too fiercely." A sly glimmer returned to his golden eyes. "Loosen up, or I shall have my men lay you upon the rack."

Symos and Juilliard erupted into laughter. Their mirth was a saccharine balm to Vestomir the conciliator. Their band plodded deeper into the forest, slicing through brambles and vaulting over fallen trunks plagued with musky fungals.

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The knight felt a gnawing in his chest, the weight of questions that had lingered in him too long. “So, tell me, Vestomir... how have you been faring since Pemmaera, I mean?”

Vestomir’s smile slid away as if melting into the soil beneath his boots. “Oh... I-I-I’m alright. I j-j-just... didn’t know h-h-her all that well. We w-w-w-ere married for only a y-y-y-year. F-f-f-ather arranged it.” Vestomir kept his tone even, though his knuckles trembled. The prince had ever been the sentimental sort. His gaze grew glassy and he fell quiet.

“And you, Symos? How have you been since the Red Vine took Clarissande?”

The mere mention of the blight chilled the air. Symos could not bear again the thought of his wife’s veins blooming like crimson ivy before they burst.

“I’m fine!” Symos snapped, voice sharp enough to cut. “I don’t want to discuss such things. She was an Archid I married for sway with the Masseys, nothing more. She was no Magnate... no one to cry over.” Juilliard saw dullness in his bitter eyes. Symos turned aside, seeking armor in conversation. “Will you ever reconsider *your* foolish notion?”

“No, I’m—”

“—Still married to duty, no doubt,” he said with a weary breath.

There have always been jeers lobbed towards me for clinging to the old ways of the Bassomedes, even from my own family. It is a great honor to serve one’s House and only one’s House.

“F-f-f-ather has yet to find me a n-n-new bride,” Vestomir muttered. “I’m c-c-c-ertain he hopes to find me one at the Ball at Sunwing.” They said Emperor Restidge had built his pleasure palace not with granite and timber, but desire itself. The smallfolk in the Heartlands had been nattering about Sunwing for twenty summers. Juilliard had heard of the velvet Pentessian carpets, ivory statuettes from Kesegowase, and golden chandeliers forged by the master

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craftsmen in Aerros being installed. The Ball itself would be held in mere days, and Juilliard, against his nature, had agreed to attend. He hated the dance and the drunken laughter, the endless feasts where nobles fattened themselves on rumor and ridicule. It made any modest soul wish for shadows.

Atop a hill crowned in meadowsweet and bogbean, Juilliard caught sight of a wending stream below.

“Do you remember when we played in the river as boys?” He asked softly, half to them, half to the wind.

“Aye,” Symos rumbled, his voice rough as old oak. “Back when you weren’t so damned dour, and Vestomir could scarce speak at all.” They trudged down, boots sinking into the sodden earth. Symos arched an eyebrow, “if you’re thinking we should dive in, manhoods bare, and let the Sage chase us back to our history lessons, I’ll beat you bloody.” His hearty laugh echoed out.

Juilliard smiled faintly, “no. Only that it was... good. When we were young. When duty hadn’t yet set its claws. I miss—” He halted then, gaze fixed on the creek. Upstream, there was a metallic flash, drifting down with the current. He crouched low, waiting for the object to reach them. The warrior parted the chilling current with his hands to claim it. What met his grasp was a ruined vambrace. Once a fine work of Western art, it was now jagged, perforated, and cruelly marred.

“W-w-what happened to it?” Vestomir asked, pulling his bow from his back.

“I suggest we find out. Could be, someone is in dire need of aid. I move we follow the river.” Juilliard drew *Lightroar*. He felt his heart thrum to life within him as the blessed blade filled his body with a flush of living heat. Symos drew not his blade, but nodded his agreement.

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They trudged along the bank of the stream, the smell of muck and mire filling Juilliard's broad nose. Their boots clung to the muddy ground with every step, like a brick to mortar. Juilliard studied the tracks to see what creatures were nearby. *The perforations on this vambrace are from the maw of something. But what?* Eventually, Juilliard heard a wail. With silent nods, they edged that way.

A rocky overhang jutted thirty feet above the ground. Beneath it, two soldiers lay breathing shallowly in the shadows. Their armor was a dreary grey, banded white, with featherwork at the collar and pauldrons. Their once shimmering plate had been dulled by dust. He crouched lower, studying them. *Those are Nelvairre men, no doubt. What are two Nelvairre men doing out here alone? Their liege Lord's keep is nearby, but why only two?* Bones littered the ground around them, small ones; foxes, hares, deer, even a few hyenahounds. Dark blood pooled over their armor.

Symos thrust out a protective hand, "careful. We don't know what did that to them."

"Which is exactly why we should get them out of here with haste."

"Alright, you and Sir Japhet grab them. The rest of us will wait in the brush to strike from the rear should it come back."

Juilliard stilled himself, "alright."

"Gods keep you, old friend." Symos clasped his hand.

Juilliard darted beneath the rocky crag. The bloodied and battered men lifted their weary eyes as he drew near. One of the men forced a breath into a ragged grin; the other blinked, and his hands unclenched. "What happened to you?" The knight knelt, his knee crushing the bones of a vole.

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One man was lean and dark of hair, his skin the burnished hue of almond with a hawk-nosed visage. The other, broad and copper-skinned, eyes round and glimmering like overripe apricots. “Can either of you walk?” They both rocked on hollow breaths; one curled a hand over his ribs as if to hold them in place.

“Possibly... beast nearly tore me hand off,” rasped the larger man. “Broke Verrano’s ribs. Get us out o’ here, Sir, ‘fore it comes back.”

A low roar rolled through the trees like a storm given voice. Birds burst from the canopy and pebbles clattered from the outcrop above. The sound hit his chest and his spine became ice. He felt the urge to flee, but he forced his feet to stay and turned to meet the calamity that approached him. From a rill to the left, opposite Symos and the others, surged a Broodbear. Muscles rolled underneath its rank matted pelt. Uneven toothen daggers jutted from its maw. Its yellow eyes fixed on them.

It closed in three strides; the earth thudding under each paw. The Bassomede barely breathed before *Lightroar* leapt to life in his hand with tingling deftness. Steel rang against claw. The clash rang in his teeth. The bear’s forelimbs came at him like logs. He ducked, slashed at a foreleg and felt the blade bite matted hide. *Lightroar* yanked his arm away as a paw swept past his head.

Sir Japhet joined the fray, his mace finding the bear’s flank as he circled. The others charged from the behemoth’s behind. The Broodbear spun. With its back turned, Juilliard drove his sword into the ribs and blood spurted like a spring. The roar that followed rattled the crags. Vestomir loosed twin arrows; one buried in its haunch, the other struck the thick neck. Symos’ eyes pulsed. He stabbed upward into the giant’s belly. The bear reared and slammed a hind leg into the mud, spinning violently and sending Symos sprawling, sword skittering from his grasp.

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Sir Japhet and Sir Sedic assailed the front. Japhet's mace smashed against its paw, while Sedic's great-sword crushed a kneecap with a deafening crack. Yet the beast kept rising on shuddering limbs. It lunged for the fallen duke, jaws opening to bite. Vestomir's arrow found its eye as if guided by the Four gods themselves. The Bassomede seized the moment, grabbing hold of a tree branch and hurling himself through the air, landing on the Broodbear's back. He ran lightfooted along the spine, heart trembling. He drove *Lightroar* deep into the nape. The living hill bucked, and he plunged again, deeper. The creature collapsed, heaving; its chest slapped the earth.

"Kill it!" Symos' shout tore through the din. "Kill it now!"

The blade struck again; dark blood ran down the fur into the mud. It exhaled once and went still.

The warrior leapt down, limbs trembling, and hauled Symos upright. "You alright?"

"Fine, thanks to you."

"You would have done the same." Juilliard brushed his black hair off his face and coughed goadingly, "so, who's the better warrior now?"

"Sod off, Juilliard," Symos' smirk was unmistakable.

"Well, your Grace, your Highness," Sir Japhet said, leaning on his mace, "we certainly caught the grandest quarry today, wouldn't you say?"

"I-I-I don't know that I've ever t-t-t-ried Broodbear," Vestomir remarked.

"It's gamey as all shite. It takes a talented cook to prepare it right," Symos replied.

"Perhaps we should bring it back to Sunwing for the—" Symos paused and cocked his head. A whisper rode the wind. Hooves drummed and the unbridled whirr of wooden wheels tore across

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the sod. A dark carriage, lacquer streaked with mud, tore into view; two horses strained at its fore. *We aren't near any roads. What's going on?*

“Look out!” Juilliard shouted, shoving Sir Japhet and Sir Seduc clear of the hurtling mass. They staggered a few strides from the lip of the overhang. Symos grabbed Vestomir by the collar and yanked him back.

The stallions leapt over the narrow river in a single wild surge and tore onward, feverishly driven by some unseen terror or will or haste. The mares cleared the river; the coach pitched, its harnesses fracturing. It rolled and skidded into the mire, wheels windmilling to a stop.

While the others crouched stunned, Juilliard sprang up and ran towards the wreck. *What if there's someone inside?* He climbed the overturned frame, wrenched open the hanging door, and peered into the torn velvet gloom. The red seats were crushed and carved moldings; split. In the far corner, half-curved, was a young woman with sunlit hair and eyes of deep, woodland green. The sight of her caught him utterly, as though someone had lain a hand upon his heart and squeezed.

“It's alright, my Lady. Please take my hand.” He reached down toward her.

She accepted with quiet caution, her fingers trembling like winter needles. *Poor woman... she's shaking after that ordeal.* Once she climbed into the open air, Juilliard took her in fully. Her golden hair fell in curls around a soft, pale face beneath a violet tulle hood. A bright blue gown flowed from her shoulders, cinched by a belt of golden medallions that hugged her shapely waist. Her skin showed no bruise, the splinters from the carriage had missed her altogether. He couldn't place her age; something in her face read both girl and woman at once. His throat tightened and he forced himself to speak,

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“My Lady... who are you?”