

AIDAN: I

Averalaaan, Hundred holdings, 427 AA, 8th of Lattan

Men were fighting in the distance.

It made the people who trudged their way to and from the common, laden with baskets and awkward paniers, stop a moment beneath the cover of the trees for which the holdings were famous. Those trees towered at a height great enough to give little relief from sun's light this early in the day, and they were thick round the base as a small knot of men, which meant they were easy enough to hide behind. That no one did said more about the demands of the festival season than anyone's bravery.

Swordplay was something to stay clear of, no question.

An older woman shouted into the thick of the crowd. Aidan recognized her, although he didn't know her name; he bought the odd curiosity from her in the common when he had money. These days, though, that was never.

A tall man made his way through the crowd at the sound of her hawkish voice, and this man, Aidan did know; he was Primus Telarus of the Magisterial guards, a regular man with slightly broader shoulders and a squarer jaw than most, but with grey hair that grew in a fringe around what was otherwise almost black. Like his dad, except for the hair.

"Over there," the woman said. "Can't you hear it? There's swords being used!"

Primus Telarus bent down, said something to the woman. Made her angrier, from the looks of it, but a lot less frightened.

"Damned foreigners, who do they think they are? There are rules in this city!"

Whoever they were, they kept on fighting.

Magisterial guards, in the streets in somewhat larger numbers than usual because of the approaching festival season, didn't even blink an eye. Whatever the swordplay was, they knew about it, and they didn't much care. The common's regular merchants were made skittish by the influx of cartwheeling hawkers and peddlers, keen to stake claim to good ground as the travellers -- and they were legion -- made their way to Averalaaan for the Kings' Challenge. The magisterians were here to prevent that skittishness from developing into something uglier and more permanent. People were

decent when it was easy to be decent, and when it was hard -- well, that's what guards were for.

That they didn't blink twice at the sound of sword-play probably meant that someone had gotten a permit for it. You had to have a lot of money for that, but at this time of year, there was money in plenty to be found -- in everyone's pockets but Aidan's. It was the challenge season. Merchants from as far away as the Dominion's deserts on one side, the winter principalities on the other, came in droves, almost like the cattle that was sold and traded for in the common.

You could see people tossing sharp daggers in a circle that started and ended with their hands; you could see them sword-dancing; you could see them throwing torches, lit with orange fire; hells, you could see them *eating* fire, here. Off the thoroughfare, which was as wide as any in the hundred holdings, there were tents and wagons -- old wagons, fine as the best carpenters and wainwrights together could make -- and in them, the future waited, if you had the coin. 'Course, if you didn't, men with bigger muscles than brains waited instead, and usually in a bad temper; Aidan strayed close enough to admire the wagons, but not close enough to be noticed -- and in this crowd, that was actually fairly easy.

The Challenge festival was in the air, in the smell of food and ale and sweat. But the air carried other things as well: voices as perfect as those of the bards of Senniel college, and often Morniel college as well -- the Morniel bards were known to be fond of ale over fine wine, good company over the gatherings of the pretentious patriciate.

You could hear almost anything, if you listened hard enough. Even swords. Especially swords.

Aidan knew it was high summer, and he knew that the champions would soon be here, to try their luck, and then their skill, in a test the Kings set. He glanced at the shadows on the ground; slapped himself on the forehead because there weren't any that he could easily see. No one could, there were too many feet in the way. Still, sun was low across the eastern sky. Morning, mid-morning at the latest. Tomorrow was when they'd start. The tents were up in the common -- he could see the poles and the flags, but he wasn't allowed anywhere near the tents themselves. No one was.

Kings guards were all over the place, securing this and that and barking out orders as if they were selling them. The magisterians didn't much like it, and Aidan couldn't say he blamed them; having a bunch of people whose only real claim to power seemed to be an extra sword up either side of a magisterial crest suddenly become top dog in your holding -- well, he

couldn't see liking it all that much, either.

But he wasn't a magisterian; he was just Aidan, and this was the best time of the year, even with the heat. Because -- there, there in the distance -- there was fighting. Clearer than bard's song.

Of course, he couldn't actually see the fight, not yet; he approached it, breath held, feet light against stone and packed dirt. He didn't need vision to know it was something tremendous -- a clash of long, steel swords, slide of metal against metal that daggers were too short for, a silence that was free from the sounds of anger, of ugliness. You couldn't drink and fight like that. You couldn't just swing a large fist, pick up a ladle or a tureen, lash out with a heavy foot. Swords like that meant you had to be special. He knew it. He'd seen it before.

Seen it when he was younger, before his father's foot had gotten trapped by a turning wheel in one of the wainwright's wagons and gotten all twisted up. Had twisted him all up.

It hadn't been so long that he couldn't remember when his father had been a whole man, when his strength had gone into moving things, lifting things, learning to make them.

But it had been long enough that the memory of the one man, strong and certain and silent, made the reality seem so much worse. If you started out at the bottom, the bottom was all you knew. But if you fell, it was different. Hurt more, for one. And things had been good. They had.

I won't be like that. Something bad happens to me and I won't be like that. I'll just die. I'll die first. Aidan couldn't understand why people were so afraid of dying. You went to Mandaros, is all. Everyone who ever listened to one of the Mother's priestesses knew it. His mother had known it too. She hadn't been afraid of death.

Probably why she'd died.

He shook his head to clear it; the sun was hot, and there wasn't enough wind to carry away the smell of sweat and food and horse manure -- someone was going to get it for that -- and fire. He held his breath past the worst of it; breathed through his mouth until he'd gotten past the thick of the crowd. The tents, with their limp red and blue flags, were at his back. But the swords were closer, he was closer to them; he only wanted to catch a glimpse of them, of them and the men who wielded them.

They never shouted. They never swore. They never spoke when they held their swords. And they didn't swing wild when they swung; they seemed to know where to strike, and where the other would strike. Magic,

he thought. He'd never seen magic.

And he wanted to.

This year, he wanted to.

He hadn't eaten today. Wasn't worth it, to try to come up with something to eat; his father had woken earlier than usual because of the heat, and he was in a foul mood. Heat made some people slower. Not his dad.

Try to understand him, Aidan, his aunt had said. *He lost his livelihood and he lost your mother in the same year.*

What about me? Aidan had shouted back. *I lost them both.*

She'd nothing to say to that; that's what she did when he'd said something true enough that she couldn't speak over it or past it. In silence, she'd run her hands through his hair -- his white, white hair, that had nothing of either his mother or father in it. And that's the way he wanted it. Here, in the street, drawing closer and closer to the sound of sword-play, of a magic that neither his mother or father had had time to dream about.

The Kings' Challenge was a little over a week away.

In six years, his aunt told him; in six years, he might be big enough to try; he'd be old enough. To find a sword, and maybe learn how to use it. To impress the men who chose among the hundreds of supplicants, and to be one of the challengers.

Six years ago, he'd believed her. Six years, one at a time, had taken that belief away in bits and pieces, until the only time he had any of it left at all was now, during the challenge season itself. And he kept it tucked away, behind a still face, the words to express it lost with his mother and his father's lives.

He knew that these men had trainers, teachers, weapons that cost more than his father made -- when he'd done real work -- in three years. Knew that six years from now the only way he was going to even have a sword was if he was lucky, there was a war, and the army was stupid enough to have him.

That's what he wanted. At twelve, it wasn't going to do him any good. But at eighteen -- at eighteen, it could change his whole life. So he waited, and he prayed.

And during the challenge season, he loitered around the fighters, when he could find them.

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It would have been easy enough to catch a glimpse of them in the streets, but Kalliaris had never made anything in Aidan's life easy. He was used to

having to work around her. Barely noticed it, in fact. Now if something went right, he knew it was time to worry; you paid for the good things with bad, and it was always much worse.

He was stupid, though -- he prayed to Kalliaris, same as anyone. He was probably the only boy in the city trying to find men using swords. But he knew this part of the hundred holdings fairly well -- there weren't many places they could be and still be that loud. He stopped, as if he were testing the sea wind; listened to the blades.

They stopped, and he froze a moment in bitter disappointment. Even started to trudge back the way he'd come, hands clenched in loose fists, face set into the scowl his aunt hated. But he didn't get far before he heard them again.

There.

#

They didn't fight in the streets, but close enough to them; the courtyard of the building that housed so many foreigners was open to the traffic of the large manse. Merchants came with the produce that the kitchens required and the fabrics that were to be used in the rooms themselves, as curtains and throws and bedspreads wore with age and use; carpenters came, masons, women from the poorer holdings who were certain to find work during the challenge season.

All those people. And between them, if one were careful, a boy too small for his age might sneak, head bowed like a servant or an obedient extra son. It was best, in Aidan's experience, to come in with the wagons that carried the food and drink. They were often crowded with people, and the people were the right kind. The cloth merchants were more refined, and no matter how well he washed, his clothing was stretched to the point of breaking and he sounded like -- like his father's son, not his mother's.

But he wasn't expected to speak, and if a flustered merchant cuffed him upside the head for getting underfoot -- and they did -- the blow was a light tap compared to many he'd received and it served to push him closer to the courtyard, to the men with swords. How could he mind it? He cursed, but his heart wasn't in it, and the merchant, still flustered, was already beyond him.

The steel was ringing in the early morning air. The courtyard itself was dark with shadow, but the men were forced into the sun when they fought; they squinted against the light. So did Aidan; it was cast by polished steel, and the steel was brighter than sunlight, sharper, quicker. You could look away from the sun, but if you looked away from the swords, you missed the

fight.

He counted twelve men in all, although he saw a couple sitting in the shadows cast by awnings that were unfaded by sun, unstained by years of rainy season. New, Aidan thought, for the festival. As if it mattered.

What mattered were the twelve men. Two pairs of six, they seemed to fill the courtyard -- and the courtyard here was large enough to house the wedding guests of two children of large, monied families. But those people would be vacant spectators, and these men were things in motion, slick with sweat, shiny with effort and the grace of effort. Some wore armour, some did not; he couldn't tell if there was rhyme or reason to it. He was certain there was, and that he wouldn't understand it, and besides, if he asked anyone they'd notice he was here and kick him out.

The swords were loud, here; louder than they had been on the city streets. And no wonder. Twelve men. His head darted side to side, like a bee near a cluster of flowers, and like that bee, his gaze eventually came to rest upon two of the twelve.

He lost the courtyard, the open sky, the sunlight; what remained was shadow, sharp reflection, and the way the sword spoke where no words could.

"They're foreigners, you know," someone said.

He ducked his chin into the hollow between his collarbones. He'd learned not to be angry, or at least not to show it; he didn't have the size to get away with it. But he was angry. He wanted to be left alone. Just that: to be left alone to watch. The Challenge would start soon enough, and then the fighters would vanish across the bridge to the isle itself, where no one without money or cause was allowed to go.

Certainly not Aidan, the wheelwright's son.

Not no one, the treacherous little voice said. Remember, the witnesses. They each choose one witness, from the streets, on the first day.

Right. A handful out of the whole city. He hated to dream. More than that, he hated that he couldn't stop it, because he never got what he wanted, he knew he wasn't going to get what he wanted, and it still hurt when even the chance slowly slipped away, champion by champion.

This, this sitting, was as close as he was going to get to the real fight. It was closer than he had gotten in far, far too long. He had this, and he didn't want to lose it.

But his tormentor wouldn't take the hint.

"Why do you come to watch them? If they win, they'll bring honour to

the Dominion, not to the Empire.”

Aidan shrugged, staring at the swords. At the men. At this man’s shadow.

The shadow shrugged in reply, the movement more elegant than Aidan’s, perhaps because it held no anger. When he spoke, he spoke loudly, the words meant to carry across the courtyard’s width. And the language he spoke was only familiar to Aidan because he heard it in the holdings, spoken by the dark-haired, dark-skinned Southerners who somehow escaped the Dominion’s net.

The two men he was watching so intently froze at once.

It took him a moment to understand the connection between foreign words and foreign swordsmen; the utter conviction the cessation of all movement held. The two stopped in mid-swing, frozen in place more completely than the statues along the courtyard’s wide, rectangular walk.

He scrambled to his feet, then, trying to take back his sullen silence, his terrible lack of words. Because the two men looked past him to -- to the man who had asked the question. The man he had ignored.

In a rush, the words came, and he felt his cheeks darken. It almost stopped him from speaking at all. But not quite. Not quite.

“It doesn’t matter who wins and loses,” he told the man, who appeared to be ignoring him as completely as Aidan had done in his turn. “I won’t see it, anyway. It doesn’t matter if they say the South won. Or the North. Or the Northern wolves, and they win most of ‘em.”

Without looking down, the man -- and he was old, Aidan saw, older than his dad, older than his aunt, and yet somehow whole and stronger than either of them -- said, “Yes, the far North carries the wreath most often. The Queen, Siodonay the Fair, is from the North.” He spoke with an accent. Aidan had heard stronger in the crowded stalls of the common. But there was something about the words themselves that was different. Better.

“The South almost never wins,” he said, and then cursed himself. *Good. Insult him. Get yourself thrown out, idiot. Kalliaris’ curse.* “I -- I just like to see them,” Aidan said. “The ones that come -- the ones that are chosen -- they don’t fight because they’re angry. They don’t get bloody. They just -- they just use the swords as if that’s all they know.”

“Yes.” There seemed to be a question in the dark eyes, and Aidan knew he was being tested. He hated that; he almost always failed tests. But he’d already offended the man once and he knew that if he didn’t pass this one, he was back out in the streets again. This man, this man, was the trainer.

The teacher. He would've known if he'd looked up. If he'd just bloody looked.

"And sometimes -- sometimes they get that look in their eyes, on their faces, and you just know -- you know who the best ones are. You know the ones that won't break. They mean it."

"Mean what? I am sorry; my understanding of your language is perhaps imperfect."

"I --" He looked away. "I don't know. They just look like they have it."

"You see the fire," the older man said softly. "We call it Lord's light. Some men will burn with it, and will be extinguished by the flame they carry. Some will burn, but instead of guttering, they will be tempered. You cannot tell when you first see that flame whether you deal with wood or steel, but it becomes clear, with time."

"You -- you're teaching them."

"I try," the man said, a smile turning up just the corner of his lips, and only for a second.

"Do you -- do you teach a lot?"

"I? In the Dominion, I am not called a teacher," he said. "I am called a master. I do not teach, as you put it, but rather, I find." His smile broadened; their eyes met for a moment, and Aidan felt his shoulders straighten out, as if a burden had fallen from them.

He spoke again, in the foreign tongue, and one of the two men looked, quite deliberately, at Aidan.

Who cursed every minute he'd listened to Tora and ignored it as foreign babble. "What -- what did you say?"

"I told them," was the serene reply, "that you have good sight. Vision. You understand what you see. It is ... rare. They will spar for a while longer," the old man said. "You may watch as you like." He turned, and then turned again. "But I must ask a single question. There are almost twelve men gathered here -- why are you watching these two? Not any of the others?"

"Because," Aidan said, settling back down into bent knees and the known safety of a wall at his back. "They're the ones who get that look the most. They just -- you know that they're both the best, if you watch 'em."

The old man smiled. "Yes," he said. "I do." He turned away. "They are unused to the humidity of this city. I would prefer that they fight unobserved; the younger man -- not much younger in age, but younger in carriage and bearing -- is too aware of his audience if it is large."

Aidan said nothing at all.

“And I explain myself to you, a boy of Averalaaan’s many streets.” The words were not said unkindly. “We will be here for three days; after that, I’m afraid there will be no further opportunity for you to bear witness.”

Aidan nodded, pressing his lips together as tightly as possible in case something stupid came out. He wasn’t good at speaking.

“I make warriors,” the man continued, “the way some men craft sculptures. And perhaps I, like that young man, still desire an audience that appreciates that work. Even be they,” he added with a slight smile, “as young and untutored as you appear to be. You see well.

“Come, if you will, and watch.”

Aidan nodded. And he stayed, shifting position only to catch the shade the walls made. The old man did not speak to him again that day.

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“Where in the hells have you been, boy?”

His father’s voice.

His father’s rooms. He stood, a shadow in the door, a boy looking in on a life that he both wanted and loathed. “The Common,” he said at last. Took too long to say it too; he could see his father shift in his chair. “I brought food.” It was true. He’d helped widow Harris with her cart and her mule -- and that mule was as difficult as his father -- got himself a bruise that was already turning both purple and black, and had been offered food as recompense. She knew.

“Tell him he’s hiding behind his leg, same as some men hide behind their wives’ skirts,” she said, salty as the sea. “You tell him I said that -- tell him it’s a shame to make his boy beg when he’s still got strength and a brain. Well, maybe half a brain, but it’s better than nothing.”

He had thanked her profusely for the bread and the cheese, and her frown got considerably sharper. “Never you mind,” she said. “I’ll just tell him myself.”

And she probably would, too. That was widow Harris. But she was busy, and would be until the three-day after the Challenge had been won and lost. She was also pretty noisy, so he’d probably have time to get out of his father’s way, and stay out, after her visit.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Bring it in.” He stood, bracing himself against the table, a broadly built man with a back so bent that he looked a foot shorter than his height. He didn’t like the crutch he’d been given by his friends and his dead wife’s family, and it had cost -- Aidan knew it, even

if his father couldn't acknowledge the truth -- so he hobbled around the house, leaving hand prints on the walls, loping like a one-footed giant. Like, Aidan thought, although he never said it, a monster that's been injured by a hero who can't be bothered to finish him off.

In the old house, his mother would have chased him around with a broom, swatting him, which would have been easy. She'd make him laugh, which wouldn't. Then she'd've made him use the crutch. At least she'd've made him clean up the handprints and the dirt on the wall.

But he didn't want to think about it now; he thought about it every other day of the year.

Aidan scurried into the room, set the food down on the table. He got a knife that looked like a knife unless you examined its edge, and cut the loaf in half. Cut the cheese as well; it was a hard cheese, so it took a bit of work.

His father sat down, dragging the chair across the floor. They'd had complaints about that in the old place -- but they'd long since been unable to afford a home. Here, it didn't matter much. His father went from wall to chair, settling down with a thud, and he sat there for a moment, staring at the bread, the knife, and his son.

What his father said next nearly killed Aidan.

"Got some work."

Tricky situation, that.

He almost believed his father. He did believe his father. But he didn't trust his own beliefs anymore. He wanted to walk a littler closer to his dad to see if he'd been drinking. Probably had, but it wasn't so bad if he had to walk by to check on it, and Aidan was grateful for the little things life offered. Especially today, when it had offered so much.

"Doing what?" He said, before the silence got uncomfortable. His dad liked to take silence and build accusations out of it. Especially when he'd been drinking.

His father shrugged, deflated. "Wainwright needs some help. Merchants are coming in from all over the continent -- and they've wagons that need repair, wheels that need either righting or out-right replacement."

Which wainwright?

"What's the matter? You don't think your old man can be useful around wheels?" Large hands slapped flat out against the kitchen table; it teetered. The floor was sloped beneath one of its legs, and no one was going to fix it; a wobbly table was just another fact of life. Like weather. Or anger.

"No, Da, I didn't say that."

"You didn't say anything." His father picked up the bread as if it were a weapon. On the other hand, it was a pretty hard loaf.

"I was waiting for you. To finish," Aidan added. "To finish telling me about it."

"Not much to tell. There's work, and I've got experience." He grimaced. "Not much but experience. It'll do for now."

"What -- what happens after?"

His father shrugged; it was the single gesture that Aidan least liked. "Maybe if you do a really good job -- maybe if --"

"Aidan, shut up and eat."

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Kalliaris, Aidan thought, in the darkness of a night punctuated by snoring and moonlight. *Give my Da his life back, and I'll give you anything you ask for. Give him back his life. He was the best. He wasn't what he is now.*

Gods were a tricky business. That's what his mother used to say. Tricky. They were like a combination of powerful men and crazy dogs; they held all the cards and you never knew when they would turn on you -- but when they did, that was it.

So you weren't supposed to ask for anything, because if they felt like giving it to you, they asked for something big in return, and no guarantees that what they asked for wouldn't make it worse, either.

Aidan's god of choice was *Kalliaris*, because you saw both her faces, and you knew what she was. Knew she'd frown if she felt like it -- and she did, gods knew -- knew that you could coax a smile from her when things looked darkest. Smile. Frown. Fact of life.

Give him back his life. I'll give you anything you ask for.

He rolled over on the patchy mattress. It was far too hot for blankets, although the worst of sunlight's bite had been driven back for a moment by the night's grip. He felt as if he'd forgotten something, even something important.

Oh. Right. And thanks a lot for letting me find the fighters. For making that old man let me watch. Thanks. I owe you.

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He returned to the hotel's grand courtyard the next day, slipping in once again with harried merchants, and sliding out from their moving mass with the same practiced ease. Better, because this time he didn't earn a stray swat across the back of the head as he left. He was worried because he didn't hear the sound of sword-play.

No. He said he'd be here three days. He said I could watch.

He didn't speak out loud; there wasn't much point. But he stopped a moment, just a moment, to wonder if this wasn't an answer to his prayer. Weighed it: Da's job, and his life, and this day or two of swords and magic.

Wasn't an easy choice, and he didn't much like that it was made for him. But gods were gods, as his mother said. He turned round to go back the way he came, and because he was looking at his feet -- his toes clipping the ground because they'd grown over the worn lip of his sandals -- he walked into the old man.

Old man. Not fair, not really. His hair was still dark, although the whites had gotten to it, and his chin didn't have that sag that some old people's chins did. His arms were dark, and his face; and both looked hard, like finished, polished wood. And he wore a sword.

"You're ... early," the old man said, when he spoke.

Aidan flushed. "I thought -- I thought --"

"That they don't have to eat? That they don't have to perform other tasks, other exercises? This is the Challenge, boy, not a sword fight." The words were harsher than his expression. "They run, in the streets of the high city; they will run for the better part of two hours yet. Tomorrow, we will ride." He smiled then, softly. "But yes, boy. In the south, in the Dominion, it is the test of the Sword that defines a man. Even here, in the North, where so much else about power is political and effete, the crowning test of the Challenge is always the test of the Sword. They'll be back, and they'll spar." He smiled. "I am, myself, just newly wakened. Would you join me in breaking my fast?" He waited, and then, after a moment, added, "I am not familiar with all of your language. I am going to eat, and I would like your company."

Aidan nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak.

#

The hotel's rooms were grander than any rooms that Aidan had ever lived in, and this was not the very finest of the hotels that the holdings boasted -- although he'd heard, and who hadn't, that there were hotels on the isle that were finer by far than any in the holdings could ever hope to be.

He couldn't imagine it. The cloth merchants had found their customers in everything here: the chairs were covered in embroidered fabric, in plush, heavy silks, all of which were vibrantly, brilliantly coloured; the curtains that hung about windows taller and wider than even the jeweller's in the Common; the knotted throws and hangings that adorned the walls. The

walls themselves were pale, but that was fine with Aidan; he found the colours so distracting he almost forgot about the food.

Wasn't actually that hard to do. There was hardly any bread, and what there was of the food was cold and covered in something that looked sort of like sour milk. Tasted all right -- he had to eat it, he knew that much about manners -- but he wouldn't have paid for the privilege.

The actual dishes were nice though, and he thought about pocketing the silver. Thought long and hard about what would happen if he got caught, and reminded himself that to be here at all was so lucky, he was due for a good dose of Kalliaris' ill-favour. He left the spoons where they were.

"You don't eat enough," the old man said.

"I ate as much as you did," Aidan shot back, before he could stop himself. He froze, but the man laughed genially.

"Yes, you did. But you are a young almost-man, and I am an old one; I have built the body I live with, you have not. Come; I've paid in good coin for the meal and I would hate to see it wasted."

Aidan picked up a spoon.

"Do you watch your own fighters as carefully as you watch ours?" The old man asked the question before the spoon had left Aidan's mouth.

"If I could," he replied, around a mouthful of something that had probably once been egg. Bread would be nice. And some cheese. Some meat that looked meat-like. He wondered how much money the meal cost. Worried, for a minute, that he might be asked to pay for part of it.

"Ah. But I believe that there are Imperial soldiers who are practicing within the holdings."

"Probably. Probably all over. But you've got to get a permit, and you don't get one for a place like this without --"

"Money."

"Ummm, well. Yes." Aidan shrugged, self-conscious. You didn't talk about money, for two reasons. If you had it and someone who didn't heard you, you might not have it for long -- especially with so many strangers from so many places just waiting around -- and if you didn't have it, and someone who did heard you, they were like as not to look down their nose and treat you like dirt.

The old man laughed again. "You are Northern, boy, and I forget myself. I did not -- I did not always occupy my present position, and I have had to learn much to live up to it." He laughed again. Lifted his hand, picked up a stick on the table, and struck something that Aidan had assumed -- until

that very moment -- was a bowl.

It resonated in the air with the sweet, clear note of a bell, of a perfectly crafted bell.

A man appeared out of nowhere; that he was standing at all was the only thing that made him appear not to be grovelling.

“Bring us something Northern. Bread, meat. Your food.”

“At once, sir.” He disappeared.

“How many times have the Northern Imperials taken the Challenge crown?”

“The wreath, you mean?”

“It is formally called The Challenge Crown,” the old man said soberly, “but yes, that is what I meant.”

Aidan thought about it for a minute. That was all it took. “Just over three hundred. Three hundred and two times.”

“Can you name all of the men who were so victorious?”

“Not the middle ones. The early ones, yes. There was Eadward Wegnson; he was the first. He was the first of the Challenge champions, and he won the wreath and gave it -- gave it to the King Cormalyn’s wife.”

“Yes. It caused unrest in the court, I believe. He was known for his admiration of her -- but young men with swords and brawn often admire women of beauty. It was said she was also known for the fact that she returned that admiration.” He was silent for a long while as he stared across the table at Aidan. At last he said, “In the Dominion, that would have been her death.”

“What? Because he gave her the wreath?”

“Because she accepted it with cause,” the old man said gravely. “A wife has only one husband, and if the husband rules the land she must be seen to be both pure and untouched.”

Aidan shrugged. “Doesn’t seem fair. A husband doesn’t have to have only one wife in the South. Not like here.”

The old man was quieter for a much longer time. “No,” he said at last. “In the South it is common for a rich man to have many wives.”

“If you have a lot of wives,” Aidan said, and he said it without thinking, “maybe it doesn’t hurt as much when one of them dies.”

Silence.

He looked up; the old man’s face was like stone, like his father’s face the day that widow Harris had come in, come running from the Common, to tell

him that something bad had happened to his wife. He'd had to hobble, he'd had to cling to walls, just to get around, and he wouldn't do it in front of 'that Harris woman'. So he'd stood there, while she urged him to follow, while she offered help; stood there, being a man. Like that. Stone. Aidan had run, at widow Harris's side. Because his mother needed someone. But he'd left his father behind.

What little hunger was left him died the minute he saw the old man's face. He dropped the spoon, but it fell into his lap, making no noise.

Twice. Twice he'd opened his mouth, said something stupid. But this time -- he knew that expression. "I -- it's my father -- he -- my mother --"

The old man said nothing at all. Aidan knew he wouldn't. But Aidan wasn't made of stone yet.

"She died last year. Over a year ago. An accident in the Common. We couldn't get her to the Mother's daughters in time. It didn't hurt her -- that's what she said, the Mother's daughter -- she died quickly, without pain."

"Then she was fortunate," the old man said, coldly. "To die without pain."

The silence was awkward. Only when the man, forgotten until this moment, came bearing bread and meat and cheese -- and fruit! -- did the old man speak again.

"You know a lot about the Challenge for a boy who has never witnessed it. You might as well eat it, boy. It is not food that is overly much to my liking." But even as he said it, he picked up one of the loaves and broke it, messily, in half.

"I went once," Aidan said. "When I was younger. With my Da -- with my father."

"A good father, then, to expose you to things that are as important as the Challenge." He picked up the meat with his hands, ignoring the slender fork that rested on the silver tray for just that purpose. Aidan relaxed then, and did the same.

"I think so."

"How many men from the free towns have taken the wreath?"

"Harder to say." Hard to speak, too, around a mouthful the size that Aidan had taken. He chewed as quickly as he could and swallowed. "The free towns are made up mostly of people from other places. Mercs that settle down. People that are too poor here to want to stay. Things like that."

"Spoken," the old man replied, "like a boy who has grown up in Averalan. Still, how many men who have claimed the free towns as their

homes have taken the wreath?"

"Eighteen," Aidan said promptly. "But my Da says --"

"And from the Western kingdoms, as you call them?"

"Twenty-three, although if you break that down, then most of them have come from just one of the five kingdoms."

"Let us not break them down that far. How many men have come to the crown from the central Empire?"

"Seventy-four." He said that without pause.

"I would not be mistaken, I think, if I assumed you could name them all."

"There was --"

"And I do not believe I have time to hear about seventy-four such illustrious men." He smiled. "What of the South?"

"One."

"One?"

"Well, yeah. But he won twice. He was called Anton Guivera."

"In the south, I believe it would be styled Anton di'Guivera."

"Oh." He chewed on that, and on the meat, thinking that he should probably tell his father that, and then thinking the better of it. "Well, he came from the South, and he won the wreath. Shocked everybody. No one was expecting it. I say, good for him. The North gets too complacent."

"Your father's words?"

"Well, yeah, but I agree with him. Anyway, when Guivera took the wreath, he didn't give it to anyone there -- he said it was for Marianna en'Guivera. I think that was his wife. But she wasn't with him, you know," he added. "She died in a bandit raid a couple of years before. He hated bandits forever after that. They say, on the way here, he cleared a path between Raverra and Averda all by himself."

"I believe," the old man said wryly, "that anyone from the South knows full well the story of Anton di'Guivera. He achieved some fame there for his effort."

"Here too." They ate together in a companionable, if delicate silence. "Do you think you've got another Guivera here? Di'Guivera, I mean?"

"Here? A master does not discuss his students and their capabilities with any but them." The old man's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "You, however, are no such master. Tell me what you think."

Aidan hated to be tested, and he was being tested. But the old man had paid for the meal, and besides, Aidan had a sense that he'd know a lie, even

a polite one. "No."

"No?"

"No."

"How can you judge if you haven't seen the rest of the field?"

Aidan shrugged. "I don't know. I think that two of 'em are really good, but I don't think it's a sure thing. If a man can win the challenge two years in a row, it's a sure thing. I mean -- that is -- I think."

"Good enough. I don't know who you are, boy. You don't know who I am. But we have an interest in common, and I am in a foreign land, far from the comforts and familiarity of my home and my family.

"The testing begins this afternoon, after the mid-day meal. We will, of course, eat early and late around that test."

Aidan was silent; he hoped that his lips weren't moving in time to the fierce, desperate prayer he was repeating over and over.

"You no doubt know that this set of tests, incomplete though it is, will result in the choosing of the hundred men deemed most suitable as candidates and allowed to pass over to the isle as competitors."

Aidan nodded.

"There are probably a thousand, possibly two; most will be passed over instantly."

He nodded again; his hands had found their way to his lap where he was now wringing them.

"I would be most amused if you would care to travel with my party when we attempt to gain entrance to the challenge itself."

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