All I Ever Wanted

Hensdale: 27th day of the Salmon Moon



Reyne

Reyne Brenton surveyed the husks of several calorie-rich alphen nuts. A light fog concealed much of the orchard from his view, but the young proprietor gave it little notice. He brushed his hand over a nut he'd knocked off a nearby branch. His nose captured the bitter aroma of the inner shell escaping the newly formed split in the outer casement. With the Salmon Moon waning, and the emergence of splitting husks, the crop would be ready to harvest in a few weeks—right on schedule. The processing center of his brain glossed over all of it. He operated by rote while thinking about his upcoming marriage.

"Hey! Rey, you out there?" Daedyn called out from the porch of the childhood home the brothers shared.

Reyne, appearing as a ghostly apparition in the fog, emerged through a row of veiled trees.

"Hey, little brother, is that you?" Daedyn stood on the top step, anticipating a reply.

Reyne hated being called little brother.

Still imprisoned inside his thoughts, Reyne barely registered his brother's efforts to get his attention. He'd looked forward to the wedding, eager to begin his new life with Mithany. It wouldn't really be all that new since she'd practically been living with Reyne for the past year in a cozy family unit of Reyne, Mithany, and, of course, Daedyn.

"Don't be a dick. Answer me."

"Yeah, yeah, it's me," Reyne yelled back. "The husks are starting to split. Nothin' yesterday. Just barely splittin' today. I checked out a bunch of trees. All the same. Right on schedule. Looks like we're gonna get lucky. You timed the labor contracts with the harvest perfect this year. Nice job, Bro." His feet, doing the thinking, steered him towards the house.

Daedyn stepped off the bottom of the stairs. He headed towards the orchard where his brother was emerging from the shrouded grove and called out, "Someone had to do it. You got your head up your ass ever since you two announced the wedding date. As though that's gonna change anything."

"Can't wait. It's all I've ever wanted. You're still mad she picked me. Besides, you love the fact the house is clean, and she makes that stew you like. Beats the shit outta the slop you make."

Daedyn shrugged. "Picked you? You can have her. I pick a new one almost every other night. It's *all* I've ever wanted. I just love the Gift of Flesh. You, I see you more as a devotee of the Gift of Love. I'll take the Gift of Flesh over the Gift of Love any day of the week. You follow your heart. I'll follow my dick." He arrived to stand shoulder to shoulder with Reyne.

Daedyn put his arm around his brother. "I'm happy for you, Bro. Really, I am. You two are perfect for each other. Not my cup of tea. And I'm not gonna complain if she picks up the mess every day or cooks now and then. I'm not goin'

anywhere. It's the three of us. Like it's been. Married or not, no difference. My life's not gonna change. Neither is yours. I'm happy for you."

Reyne was the younger of the two brothers, if only by a few minutes, as their mother told the story of birthing fraternal twins. Both were a little bigger and a bit more muscular than average. Almost twenty-two years old, the siblings were of an age some might consider them men. But if you were to ask anyone in the small village of Hensdale, they'd probably tell you Daedyn still had some growing up to do.

Reyne's face showed a firm jawline with friendly, heart-melting, easy green eyes able to charm anyone he cared to. Daedyn was similar in every way, with one exception: he had the propensity to be less than friendly to those he didn't care for.

Reyne's jet-black hair, cropped traditionally like most young men in the rural community, hung a few inches above his shoulders and loosely combed back. The same style as his brother Daedyn. Though not identical twins, the brothers looked a lot alike. If it wasn't for the unique coat Reyne wore throughout fall, winter, and spring, and on exceptionally cool summer evenings, it would be impossible to tell them apart from a distance.

Reyne dumped an alphen nut, husk and all, into Daedyn's waiting palm. Daedyn looked it over and nodded his concurrence with Reyne's assessment of the ripening stage the nut had achieved. "Yep, perfect." He turned his palm down, allowing the shell to fall to the ground. "The dehusking operation is gonna cost us a little more than last year, but it looks like it's gonna be one helluva harvest. We'll make it up in volume."

Nature packed each alphen with more energy than a full meal. Alphens were sometimes called the Jewel of Nuts and coveted all over the continent. The prized nuts grew in a narrow band that included the region around Hensdale. The trees were prolific, and under just the right conditions, produced two harvests in a single year. Each tree begot many barrels per harvest, and the hardy trees required only a small staff to be properly maintained. Harvesting, on the other hand, took a considerable labor force.

"That's what I love about you. You got a good head for business. Means you're not always an asshole." Reyne laughed and punched Daedyn's arm.

Daedyn pulled his younger brother into a headlock. "Not always. Where is she, anyway?"

Reyne broke free, pushing off from Daedyn. "Her and her brother headed out to Owls Neck late yesterday afternoon. They set up a meeting with some merchant to offload excess inventory from their shoppe. You didn't notice she's been gone?"

"I barely notice if you're here half the time." He returned a solid punch to Reyne's arm.

"Ouch! I take it back. You're an asshole all the time."

Daedyn's face spoke in place of words; he was pleased with himself.

"What would you do if you weren't gettin' married to her?"

Reyne's brow scrunched, and his eyes narrowed. "Come on, enough of that shit."

"No really, what would you do?"

"You're a dick most of the time, and you know I still love you, but I can't live without her. You, on the other hand, I can live without." They both knew it wasn't true. Reyne needed both Mithany and his brother by his side. Reyne shoved Daedyn, pushing him back a few steps.

Daedyn's feet scraped the dirt path, keeping him on balance. He took the nudge in the spirit it was intended. "I'm bein' serious. We've talked about it before. Ever since Mom passed, you're different. Used to come out with me on the hunt for the ladies. I miss having you with me like we used to do. Remember the time we met those Ranber girls at the Forest Maiden? That one had those sexy, exotic yellow eyes." Daedyn paused. "Ah, to be forever known as the Night of the Three Sisters."

"Of course. A memorable night. A great night. Can't ever forget those eyes. And when she aimed them at me, she made me believe I was her entire world. At least until she rolled over in your direction and her sisters found their way back to

me. Best night of my life up to that point. That's all behind me. You understand why I gave it all up.

"When Mom died, Dad was already gone. Both died too young. Made me realize what's important. Family. I want what Mom and Dad had. Here at the orchard. Married. A bunch of kids runnin' 'round. It's what I want. It can all be taken away too soon. Why wait? Do it now. I love this place, my life, Mithany, and even you. Even though you can be a pain in the ass sometimes—well, let's be honest, most of the time."

"Think she'll join us runnin' the operation we got goin' here? She already helps with the books."

"Nah, she loves her shoppe on Hensdale's square too much. She told me she and Arek are gonna keep it goin' after we get married. Oh, I almost forgot, she asked me to stop by while they're gone to check up on Ilyn—she's holding down their shoppe all alone. Told Mithany I would see if Ilyn needs anything. Come on. Why don't you take a walk with me into town? These nuts don't need us. They'll split open on their own. Besides, Santander is around here somewhere. I seen him earlier, workin' on one of the drying barns."

"Like I got nothin' better to do. But sure, why not?"

Ten Days Earlier

Jarouhar: 17th day of the Salmon Moon

Dylla | Jirek

Across the street from Lorique's apartment, a team of assassins shared a carafe of coffee at an outdoor café while reviewing their plan to kill her later that morning. The twilight of dawn had given way to the rising sun and passersby from the quaint seaside village of Jarouhar shuffled past the deadly foursome, affording them little notice.

The unit's leader, Dylla Weisner, pointed at Selundra Quith, a well-built middle-aged man with a full head of white hair. She shifted her gaze to a fellow operative sitting next to Quith to include him in her orders. "You two will be on her. We've surveilled the pair for days. She leaves for her job shortly after her husband. That's our window of opportunity, gentlemen. Quick and clean. No mistakes."

Quith offered a casual nod; they'd been over their assigned roles many times.

Dylla faced the fourth member of the team seated at the small wrought-iron table. "You'll be tracking the husband. Remain on him after he leaves. Make sure he stays out of the way."

While sipping his coffee, he gave her a thumbs-up.

Dylla nodded. "Good. You will all report to me when it's done. You know your assignments and what I expect from each of you. There're only two of them left, and one of them is in that room. We've been successful in dealing with the others

who might transport into our reality. These last two will never know what they were capable of. Better they never did, for our sake."

Lorique was one of the few individuals in the Third Age who the assassins suspected of possessing the rare ability to transport between two starkly different versions of Earth. Lorique knew nothing of moving between dimensions or that another reality even existed.

The only other person to have the same potential as Lorique and who hadn't yet been eliminated by the team was a young businessman running a nut orchard, Reyne Brenton. Lorique and Reyne, strangers to each other, had ever guessed at what they were capable of. The ignorance of their unrealized talents meant little to the wetworks team. Death was required of them both.

Dylla continued. "After this, we're headed for Hensdale. That little shithole up north out in the middle of fucking nowhere. The nut grower will be the last suspected Tweener after today. One more associate from our world will join us in Hensdale, if she makes it there in time. I'll brief her in Owls Neck first, one of the little villages near Reyne Brenton. I'll set up there to coordinate our final op."

Quith asked, "You need us in Owls Neck too, or should we just head straight for Hensdale and get rid of Reyne Brenton?"

"Get going as soon as we're finished here. Make it to Hensdale as fast as you can. I want to do it without the new woman we've been told to take on. I don't think we need her, but I've been directed to add her to our crew, just in case. She's supposed to be some young hotshot, and they want to see if she's for real or all hype. This isn't the time to test a new operator, but I have my orders. So, after we get this done today, we're out of here immediately. Are we clear? I want you three to finish off Reyne Brenton even before I meet up with this prodigy to brief her."



Inside the apartment, Lorique's husband Jirek had done a quick rinse off. He carried the scent of lovemaking with a lingering hint of salty ocean air wafting

in from the ocean through their second-floor window. He hadn't left himself enough time to shower, but watching Lorique sleep was worth the sacrifice. He dressed and was ready to head off to work.

He called out, "Honey, I'm leaving. Need my goodbye kiss."

Lorique appeared out of nowhere and hadn't bothered to dress. She stood in the doorframe between the bedchamber and the hallway. Reaching high above her head, one hand came to rest against the top of the doorway arch. Tilting her hips, she taunted him with her other hand. Long, thin, delicate fingers glided over flawless skin and commanded his full attention.

Was there anything in all of creation more beautiful, he wondered. Soft, round powder blue eyes. Long, chestnut-brown hair. A gentle face. Full breasts and rounded hips. All that perfection in one woman proved almost too much for his brain to handle. Even the birthmark on her inner thigh he thought beautiful. She was stunning, at least to him. It mattered little if anyone else thought so.

A notion crossed his mind: he was dreaming. How did he ever get so lucky? How did he ever convince such an intelligent, witty, thoughtful, kind, and loving woman to marry him? As he looked at her standing there, the hyperactive thumping in his chest told him it was real. And he was the luckiest man in the world. He couldn't take his eyes off her or those roaming fingers, which had stopped wandering and found a home.

Waking up next to her every day for the past five years held him captivated by the love she showered on him. He hoped she would continue to do so for all the years to come. At the very least, until the day he died.

Lorique teased, "Okay, put your tongue back in your mouth and pull up your jaw. This is just a little incentive to make sure you get home on time. None of that working late nonsense."

"Oh, by the Goddess Teth, you are stunning," he said, as though seeing her for the first time. His look spoke to her with an aching want in his heart and intense desire in his eyes. It was the fuel that fed the fires of their passion. She often told him he was all the "handsome" she ever wanted.

Lorique ran to him and jumped into his welcoming arms. Her thighs clung to his waist. She squeezed them tight, holding her body off the floor. Her legs wrapped around his back, crisscrossing just above his firm derriere. He held her off the ground, gripping each cheek of her buttocks in the palms of his powerful hands. He squeezed hard.

Her flesh felt good in his grip.

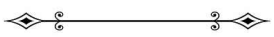
Lorique giggled, telling him she thought so too.

With her calves, she pulled herself in even tighter, ever closer, pressing every inch of her body snug against his. She looked down at him as he held her tight. Their eyes met, and she locked intertwining fingers behind his head. Pulling his face close to hers, they kissed. He poured everything he held in his heart into that single kiss. He always did.

He mustered every bit of willpower to leave Lorique behind and prepared to set out for work.

As he extracted himself from her affections, walking towards the door, he extended his arms out the bedroom window, grabbed both opposing shutters, and pulled them closed.

Lorique's husband could not have known their life together had ended with that kiss. It was the last time he would ever see her.



Across the street, Quith, still seated at the café facing Lorique's apartment, observed two arms reach out the second-floor window. The white-haired assassin didn't speak, but signaled to Dylla, it's time.

Dylla addressed her team. "Okay. Get ready. Her husband will be leaving in a few moments. Leave no trace. And make sure you get rid of her body."