

Friends in the Rain

*an Avarthrel tale by
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The guard patrol marched forth with a calm pace. Lieutenant Facyr Tann lead his men forth; to everyone's surprise, he was looking around much more vigilantly than his recruits, who, for the most part, had not yet gotten accustomed to the Routine.

While vigilant, even he was thinking of unrelated things. He was hoping this return to his old job was only temporary, and hoped to get back to adventuring, No matter how fleeting the fame and glory seemed to be, adventuring was at least a lot of fun and offered a lot of unseen twists. Now, however, returning to the Guard was just about the only way to keep himself from being completely bored.

At least training new volunteers offered some challenges, and the City Guard could always use a competent instructor. The bigger problem, then, was that Facyr felt there was little he could do, and felt he was slightly over-qualified for the job. Compared to the mercenary work and the military, city guard was a little bit less demanding place. Most of his job consisted of trying to raise some fighting spirit among the recruits, because the technical part certainly didn't require much training. Most recruits already knew the fine technicalities of swordplay (that is, you aim the pointy end toward the enemy), and the fine art of using the baton (that is, you hit the bad guy with it). Now, all he needed to do was to motivate the recruits to march in pace and, if needed, run while wearing a heavy armour. It was best, for now, not to mention that many experienced guards would have, if the regulations allowed it, shed the armour and the parade antics: the outlaws did not march in pace, running speed was less essential in the maze of narrow alleys, and very few outlaws were armed well enough to harm anyone wearing a light armour, and fewer still could harm anyone in heavy Guard armour. Yet, most of the experienced guards did admit that with current tactics and equipment, the outlaws didn't really stand a chance.

This summer, it seemed, few things needed to be done. Jenyr Adatel's Adventuring Company was taking a well-earned summer break. Jenyr, according to the official records the owner and treasurer of the company, considered himself to be better fit practically

for the post of a Captain of the Guard. He was busy with the Guard tasks and was more than delighted to have Facyr as his assistant once again. Faira Ativel was busy with her daughter Jaana, her pawn shop, football, and whatever weirdness was happening in the dark alleys. Finally, Gnedrnygr Adithebadoggr did what he did best - he read through a large dusty tome every day.

Following their somewhat odd tale of assassinating incompetent magicians, Facyr, Faira and Gnedrnygr had spent most of the preceding two weeks on vacation in the elven kingdom of Furinel, spending away some of the well-earned reward money - last bits of which was spent on Facyr's least favourite part of the vacation, a trip through a magic portal, taking the adventurers from Furinia to Anchorfall in a blink of an eye. In Facyr's view, the statistically speaking fastest, safest and most expensive way to travel seemed to lead to curiously spectacular disasters at times, often enough to make him feel uneasy...

Now, the Company was supposed to get back on the track - but for the preceding week, the Company failed to accomplish anything, much to the joy, and sorrow, of the four friends. The travellers were back, but the summer continued.

As far as Facyr himself was concerned, the day hadn't started all that well. For the preceding few days, he had been using his own gear, but someone who preferred to stay anonymous, way up there in the *very* highest echelons of the Guard (in other words, someone in the Mayor's office) had apparently summarily declared such disregard of the Anchorfall City Guard Code of Operations completely inappropriate, without bothering to offer him an opportunity to present his view, or bothering to check their predecessor's views.

Early this morning, Facyr had had to trouble the quartermaster, who hadn't been able to locate his old uniform and gear even when he had specifically stored them in a clearly marked box in the far corner of the storage cavern. Right now, he had the personal trouble of getting used to an old, yet *technically* brand new guard uniform - hastily selected, even more quickly fitted, and if it depended on Facyr, soon replaced. The heavy armour didn't really fit him at all, the helmet made his forehead itch, let us not even mention the state of the weapons and the shield - and on top of all this, he felt, generally speaking, a little bit funny. Luckily, the citizens didn't notice his inconveniences, and just waved and saluted him the way they had done in countless other mornings, if they even bothered to notice him at all. All in all, he was set to forget the whole ordeal.

It was an ordinary morning in Anchorfall; quiet, tidy, and apart of minor incidents, the life in the capital of Varmhjelm was as peaceful as ever. The summer morning was warm, the air was humid, and dark clouds were rolling in from the sea - the weather *was* going to turn nasty later that day, it was sure, but for now, the commoners and merchants in the Docks were bustling to and fro, getting to the work.

The cobblestones of Keg Street rarely got any sunlight. The street had tall buildings on both sides, making it look a lot narrower than

it was. In Facyr's mind, even now the street almost seemed to have more people than anyone could imagine to fit there, especially so early in the morning. And when the people really arrived here, by Gods, what a chaos this place tended to turn into...

Facyr hoped that there would be something, anything at all, to spice up the day; even if it was just looking for someone's lost cat or telling a wanderer from a far-away city where the Monument Park was. On the other hand, quiet days were good.

Ahead, in the intersection, there was a random gathering of people, and as a rule of thumb, that meant that the attention of the Guard might be needed - but that seemed unlikely. The crowd ahead was not big by any definition: small in number, its members mostly small in stature. The figure who was the centre of their attention, however...

He turned around and waved to the other guards. "Uh... hold on a bit, guys."

The rest of the squad, a sergeant and the new recruits, stopped in their tracks with a good display of discipline - yes, there had been quite an improvement in that over the preceding days, and Facyr was happy no one fumbled this time. Clearly, each of the recruits couldn't wait for the moment when the officers let go of the strictness and welcomed them to the generally relaxed guard force; Facyr knew that in reality that was supposed to be a gradual move, not a sudden jump from formal drilling and patrolling-for-show to "hold on a bit, guys". Nevertheless, he didn't dwell on that.

Facyr felt confused. He left the squad behind - the recruits glanced around a bit, something in the way they observed their surroundings telling that they hadn't yet gotten used to the post - and stumbled forward. *Oh no, it can't be her*, Facyr thought. *...oh no, not again...* He felt a lot of conflicting things in a surprisingly short period of time: He was nervous beyond imagining, then angry that he was nervous when he hadn't felt that for a long time and thought he had got rid of nervousness for good. Then he remembered that he was always learning - he always tended to forget that. He was always surprised and a bit embarrassed to learn something new when he *thought* he was all-knowing; maybe the same applied to feelings.

He walked forward, stunned and dazed, in a bit of a dreamy state, in which he could barely notice that he had succeeded in stumbling forward a bit, opening the small gate and stepping on the coffee house verandah. He focused, wiggled his shoulders and tried to make the armour not bother him for a while, sighed as he took the much-maligned helmet off, and ran his fingers through his sand-brown short hair, clumsily trying to improve his appearance. He somehow ended up scratching his neck like a fool. He was not really thinking of where he was, but it somehow occurred to him that he was in front of Erwin Hald's coffee house. The verandah smelled of old wood, the coffee here was generally altogether too hot but pleasantly foul-tasting... and now, it seemed, the woman of his dreams was about to come to the same culinary conclusion.

"Woo-oh! Did you really fight T'gak? T'gak the Shadow Beast?"

he heard one of the youngsters on the other side of the verandah railing say.

The young gang leader asking the question was Bert Hormsson, Gavin the Baker's son - every guardsmen who ever had to endure more than a few patrol rounds to the Docks easily learned to recognise the freckled master prankster from the distance of five blocks. It seemed to Facyr that just about the only way to keep him from making a massive nuisance of himself was to have some famous hero to pay a visit to the city, just to draw his attention and admiration. Letting big nasty monsters to butcher a village or two deep in the countryside in the valiant hero's absence was a minor sacrifice compared to the wildest ideas this rascal came up with to amuse himself and annoy the entire surrounding neighbourhood.

To Bert, the woman sitting on the verandah was none other than the Warrior Princess of Aiecaerthea, defender of justice and common folk wherever she went, doom of Xarhygré the liche-king, defeater of the Horror of what-was-his-name in - well, one can't remember everything, some dwarven city of what-was-that-then-again... the bane of the bandits of the North, the slayer of demon lords...

To Facyr, she was all that. But above all, she was Cassandra Arthailia de Tai...

What a fine-looking lady she was: statuesque, strong and buxom; blond and curly-haired. Her beauty was almost surpassed by her apparent deadliness, for she was well armed; on the table rested a sword magnificent quality, and leaning on the railing was a shield with intricate crest painted on it; these arms were not the only indications of her royal heritage, for the way she sat there also told of a noble upbringing and refined manners. Apart of her leather boots and belt, she was dressed in ashen grey: a headband, cloak, trousers, and - Facyr had to admit he was too easily scared by the fact - a vest that was strapped altogether too tight. Facyr had to force himself to think a little bit more clearly, but for the moment, he could only think of her beauty. He tried to push her appearance out of his mind for a moment; after all, it never did any good for him to think of what women looked like. What he really needed to think of was...

"Yes, I did - though I was not sure if I could have done anything about it without the help of my friends", Cassandra said. She took the heavy mug, and reclined so slightly as she sipped some of the coffee...

Oh, what a terrifying beauty she is, like she was back then, Facyr thought; he admitted his mind was weak and couldn't help but to return to her appearance for a while. It was the manner how she sat there, and the manner she spoke...

"And what about the Sea-Worm of Agabligen? Didn't you kill that thing alone?" asked one of the kids, whom Facyr only knew as the Hectic Hector.

"Yes." She grinned. "Though I suppose the tale has been exaggerated a whole lot lately. It was *only* a small sea serpent."

Am I hearing her thoughts? Facyr asked himself. *Am I hearing*

something I could say?

"But sea serpents don't live in lakes! That was so weird about it, wasn't it?" the Hectic Hector said.

"And didn't it have a lot of treasures too?" Bert asked.

She shook her head and smiled kindly. "On the contrary! Sea serpents often live in lakes, especially in the far north. And there was no treasure to be found anyway - it was just something the people believed could be there. Nowadays, we know for sure the sea serpents don't hoard things like the dragons do. The other people searched for the lair for months and found nothing." She sighed and bowed her head a little bit, closing her eyes. "I don't know why people keep harping about that incident - the serpent wasn't even a big nuisance for the people, and I..." she shook her head again, and closed her eyes, smiling widely to herself. "...I guess I just went there and killed the thing. I just don't see what makes it so interesting. Nowadays, for some reason, I would be happier if I just had let the thing live."

She's not joking, Facyr thought. We both know this stuff doesn't matter to anyone else but ourselves... And we do useless things every now and then...

"And the Horde of Thousand Orcs?" said another one of the kids - Larynna, Bert's little sister. Facyr hadn't run into her yet, but he had been forewarned by Jenyr: "Watch out for the tomboy with a wooden sword and a metal bowl on her head. If she makes a face, don't let your feet fail you. Trust me - brave men have run fast when she stuck out her tongue..."

"Are you taking of that time when the orcs attacked those two caravans years ago?" The woman laughed. "The bards have exaggerated that one. It was not a thousand-orc horde. And like before, I could not have succeeded nearly so well without the help of a warrior from the other caravan. Speaking of which..."

Oh no, Facyr thought. The last word sounded a lot like one of the verbal spikes Faira used to throw around when coming to an inconvenient conclusion. Facyr had learned to recognise them, but didn't know what to do when he was target of such a spike.

The woman tilted her head subtly as she looked Facyr's way. Facyr froze, and mulled in his mind - once again - why in the name of nine hells he couldn't do, in these kinds of situations, what most ordinary people could do. He gasped, and was afraid that he looked like a fool - but hoped the assembled crowd attributed his general shakiness to the surprise of reunion. "C... Cassandra?" he said.

"Facyr Tann, in person!" Cassandra said with a gentle smile. "It is a great pleasure to meet you - again. I've travelled so far! Children, this is the guard of the other caravan from that supposed thousand-orc horde."

"Uh-huh", Facyr said weakly. "It was not thousand orcs, more like a few dozen. It seemed like just an ordinary orc raid to me." Facyr shrugged, then shivered.

"But it is such a famous fight? I mean, it's in that song about you, and in the song about Facyr here..." said one of the adults who had

assembled to listen - Facyr didn't know him.

"Pure coincidence. Someone just noticed that two people had been in a same fight." Cassandra smiled, and stood up. "Now excuse me, I've got to help Lieutenant Tann to further protect the city. At least", she asked, "if it is okay for me to give a hand?"

"Um... sure, you can come with us..." Facyr said, and in his mind, he immediately started to regret the part about "us"; he certainly would have preferred to say "me". But then he thought that both options could mean good and bad things; he felt happy that he probably picked the right choice - for now.

"How wonderful! We've got a lot to discuss."

Facyr smiled and swallowed. His head spun; a some kind of a green bird - Facyr could never remember what they were called, but knew them by the song - landed on Cassandra's table, and he absent-mindedly watched the kids scurry one way, screaming and yapping in joy, and the adults depart to another in a bit calmer way. "P-pardon me, Highness", he said. "I w-was just a little bit startled. I forgot my manners..."

"Oh, no need to bow before me!" she said, interrupting Facyr. Her tone was joyfully mocking. Something in these words seemed to hint that she seemed to have used them very often, so Facyr didn't take offence. She smiled kindly. "Just call me Cassandra. Or Cass or Casy or whatever Grycians say - I don't really mind, though I think the shorter names are a bit silly. I'm not a princess any more, just a..." She smiled a little bit, pausing for a few eye blinks. "...somewhat privileged commoner. I'm glad for your consideration, though."

Facyr sighed. Lately, the nobility seemed to be afflicted by a strange need to get "closer to the people" - for the few genuine men and women of world among the nobility, it worked, but for others, it often ended less gracefully. The latter kinds of attempts sometimes scared him. At least Cassandra had years and years of actual commoner's life behind, and certainly did sound casual...

"Glad to be y-your f-friend. Just call me Facyr." Facyr smiled. "It's pronounced like that. With an Y. Not E or I. Well, I don't think it's tricky to pronounce for a Northerner, though I don't know how people pronounce names in Aiecan." He blushed and noticed he was babbling nervously, and tried to get grip of himself.

"It is actually pronounced the same way in Aiecan", Cassandra said and grinned.

"I'm sorry I don't have a beautiful name like you do", Facyr said and blushed - this was either a statement that should have been left unsaid, or maybe a statement full of inappropriate silliness.

Luckily, Facyr thought, Cassandra smiled at that. Cassandra picked up her things and got up. "Thank you, Facyr. Well, let's go now - there's no end of work for a guardsman, is there?"

Getting rid of the unnecessary people had been more difficult than it sounded like.

Facyr had done this by the book, just to leave no one higher up doubting this time: he had Deputised Cassandra Arthailia de Tai (mercenary by occupation, and citizen of the Kingdom of Aiecaertea, a Nation in Good Standing with Kingdom of Varmhjelm), who had, by Clause 2 of Deputy Duty Conditions, entered in a Verbal Agreement with an Officer of the Guard, Volunteered for Guard Duty and, based on a Summary Investigation, passed the Requirements for Volunteer Guards. He then Formed a Detachment consisting of himself and the aforementioned deputised volunteer to Investigate this morning's Report of Largely Unexplained Mummery (not *his* wording, mind you) in the other side of the Old Town. He left Sergeant E. Tramsson in command of the recruits and asked them to take care of the rest of the patrol route.

He could swear the recruits had grinned a bit as they went their way, as if they had had their guesses on how things with Cassandra would turn out. He wasn't sure how that was meant to be taken. He didn't know personally any of the new recruits, and wondered if they knew him as Facyr Tann, or did they know him just as another random man... splitting up and heading to another way with a pretty woman tended to mean, in these situations, different things and different reasons to grin about. And certainly, reprimanding the recruits for grinning simply wasn't wouldn't do, even when it was technically in the Book...

The mere premonition of a storm had first turned into a very real drizzle, then almost immediately into a giant pour of rain. They had dodged into the roof-covered alley between Harald's Café and the Old Town bathhouse - since the café roof was very leaky, Facyr thought this was probably the best place to stay dry.

"A bit bad weather, but at least this gives us a pause", Facyr said.

"I kind of like the rain", Cassandra said.

"Yeah, me too", Facyr said. "Though I really like it best right after the rain. You know, wonderfully humid air, nice gentle breeze, the puddles—"

"Yes! It only gets bad if it pours like this. I just hate getting my clothes all wet."

"I guess", Facyr said. "So... what brings you to Anchorfall? If there is anything I can do to help, just ask, I'll be happy to help."

"I've come to see you." Cassandra smiled kindly.

"Really?" Facyr asked and flinched.

"I sent you a letter a year ago, but I suppose things got a bit complicated and never got a chance to see if the letter got here. I've lived a rather fast-moving life."

Facyr scratched his head. "I do not recall this letter."

Cassandra shrugged. "It may have been lost on the way. I will tell about it in a while, then - but before that, I have to ask you something." She bit her lip a bit.

"What?" Facyr asked, fearing a little bit.

"Before I ask it, I have to say that I already think I know the answer. But it's just a good guess."

"Uh-huh..." *Oh no*, Facyr thought. *She knows exactly what's go-*

ing on - I guess I'm easy to read. Or maybe he's like me - good intelligence is half of the victory.

"I can guess pretty well. And besides, as they say in *Brave Blades*, or at least so I've heard - having good spies on your side is half of the victory", she said.

Facyr smiled. *Probably not a coincidence, here*, he thought. *Or maybe we really do seem to be alike.* "Yeah. Oh well, ask away." Facyr felt much better already, but there was still a lot to worry about...

"All right, then. I'm guessing here, but I *think* you remember the time when we met for the first time, even if it was almost ten years ago." Cassandra crossed her arms on her chest.

Facyr swallowed and nodded.

Cassandra thought for a while, biting her lip again. "So, what I'm really wondering is - have you been *remembering* me since then?"

Facyr didn't answer at first. *Remembering her? I never, never think of other women... besides Faira, and she's just a friend...* He sighed; he realised suddenly that he probably looked a little bit silly - or worse, scary - with his jaw down.

"Remember", Cassandra said, "If it helps at all, I wouldn't be asking this if I weren't half sure that you said *yes.*"

Something in the phrasing made Facyr wary for a passing moment, but he drew a deep breath - the way Cassandra had said the last word gave him exactly the kick he needed right now.

Facyr had been wondering, over all these years, how to say this properly. Now, it seemed to him he was only capable of a mindless outburst of all the wrong words.

"I have been thinking of you all these years. I couldn't stop - well, uh, I didn't *want* to stop either. I can't forget you. I just couldn't. Well, uh, I didn't *want* to forget you either and I didn't even try... or want to *try*, either, that's for sure, I mean, you just was always there." Facyr sighed, and took a deep breath. "That was so strange... I never forgot you even when I barely knew you. You always came back to my mind. Well, *not* that you ever left my mind, anyway, really." He took a breath again. "Why? Why are you asking me *this* question?" *It makes no sense for you to ask about that*, he almost added, but regretted even starting to ask about this. "Not that... I mind... Just a bit odd question to ask, don't you think?..." He laughed with effort, but knew he didn't exactly manage to sound amused.

In fact, he felt defeated. Why, indeed, would anyone ask that? But if anyone did, why would anyone not take the chance to give a good answer? *Why did I have to complain? Please, don't call me an idiot...* Yet, at the same time, he was happy; at least he had managed to say something to her...

Cassandra closed her eyes. "I do not know how to say this without sounding a little bit strange." She sighed, then smiled widely. "But this is what I'm getting at: I have been thinking of you, too. I've never forgot you either." Cassandra beamed. "Yes, I know it's odd... but I like you."

"W...what..."

"I know, this is so strange. I hoped the letter would have made things a bit clearer. Now, coming to see you must be just confusing. Believe me, I am a bit confused too."

"I... I really don't know what to say. Uh... aside of the fact that I really like you too", Facyr said weakly. "You're so wonderful." *This can't be happening. Must be a dream or something. This can't be...*

It was Cassandra's turn to blush a bit as she smiled. "Thank you, Facyr, so much. In the letter, I was just saying I wanted to meet you again - you was so nice back then, and I had been hearing a lot about you since then..." she grinned. "I really want to know you better. I know you're a big hero, a daring adventurer, and a respected Guard, but that's what everyone knows."

"Uh, I suppose..." Facyr said, cheeks burning. Strange, he thought - he didn't usually blush if anyone just rambled about his merits. "I suppose I'm doing good things. You are pretty legendary yourself too."

"Thank you." To a casual observer, Cassandra would have seemed unimpressed, but Facyr was absolutely certain about the true reason behind that particular kind of polite smile: she knew exactly what he had meant with that phrase and had taken it as an appropriately lukewarm compliment from one warrior to another. "I believe you're also a wonderful man as an *individual* - I don't know for sure yet, of course, but I think you are... and that," Cassandra said with a big smile, "is what I intend to find out."

Facyr smiled awkwardly. "I'm sure you're a wonderful woman too... I know you must be." He wasn't sure if this clumsy thing was worth saying, but didn't think there was any other way of saying it. "I want to find out if you're really as wonderful as you sound like - though just listening to you gives me no reason to believe otherwise."

Cassandra blushed and smiled. "I'm glad you understand me, and thank you once again."

"I have to just say that I want to know a lot more about the woman I met once and have been hearing so much about since then", Facyr said, and rummaged his pockets. "Oh, I've got something here..." he said, and pulled out a dented steel ring. "No, it's not a wedding ring!" Facyr said with cheerful, unintentionally unfunny voice, and immediately wished he had not said it. He felt lucky that Cassandra was still intrigued.

"Ooh, a magic ring?" Cassandra asked.

"Yes. Now..." Facyr put the ring on, smiled widely, and took her hand. "Follow me."

Cassandra hesitated, and looked about, clearly worried about the rain, but came along with Facyr as he boldly walked forth.

"Stay close to me - you don't want to get wet, do you?"

They stood in the middle of the street; few people were on sight and even those few who were were very busy running to shelter from the heavy rain. Around them, an invisible dome made the raindrops disappear before they hit the ground.

Facyr looked skyward. "What do you think of this spectacle?"

The thunderstorm followed, and heavy, wet winds roared down the street. They stood in middle of it, all alone and adoring the beauty in the eye of the storm.

"You know," Cassandra said as she looked up, "I'm not much into romantic things, but..." she smiled widely, then looked at Facyr. "...this is very nice. Thank you." Cassandra smiled widely. Then, she simply spread her arms and tilted her head.

Facyr hesitated, if only for a second - the guard duties had dulled his mind a bit in this respect, as they usually didn't demand quick decisions, but this definitely was a situation that called for remarkable actions remarkably swiftly. He hugged her proudly, surprising himself how easy it was for him to just grab her in his embrace and give her a few spins around.

Two warriors stood in the rain, embracing each other. They admired at the stormy skies, looking over each other's shoulders, and whispered to each other's ears.

It was only ever the second time Facyr had hugged a woman, but it helped that this time, it was he who made the first real move. He closed his eyes as he held Cassandra and was happy to feel her heartbeat, even through this blasted armour...

"I want to show you more amazing spectacles", Facyr said and swallowed, "if it's all right with you."

"And I'm glad to come see them with you", Cassandra said and smiled.

Under the stormy skies - the rain just couldn't let its hold - two warriors hugged, enjoying the calm in middle of the chaos.

The room with the private pool was small, cosy and quite familiar to Facyr. He had been here once with the fellow officers of the Watch, and in recent years, he had just come here all by himself every now and then.

Facyr had learned a lot of things from Faira, especially what came to dealing with women, yet there was one thing she *hadn't* told him explicitly. Faira herself had never been too shy and knew little of the intricate specifics of defeating shyness. Yet, she was still probably the best teacher of the most fundamental of the cures of shyness: The theory stated that the first time doing everything was the difficult one, but things get much better very soon afterwards. In Facyr's case, she had demonstrated this practically many times, usually involving a literal good push on the back, and also told him a parable about a fox and a lion. This simple cure was the one that seemed to work in most cases for most people she had dealt with, and yet it proved to be slightly inadequate in Facyr's case.

First time, first time... Facyr wasn't really sure if this was to be considered a second time, or *another* first time.

He didn't remember who had told him another fine piece of advice on how he had defeated his shyness: sometimes it's better to just go ahead and do the thing. Okay, so this person hadn't succeeded that well, but it was worth trying. He decided just to grin

and went ahead anyway, come what may. *Well, this isn't so difficult, really...* he thought. Cassandra was, after all, already sitting in the pool...

The water was almost too hot; it would have definitely woken him up if this was a dream... or is *that* just something that happens in tales, and in *real* dreams, you can't get woken up by things like pinching or hot water?

Cassandra had told Facyr that she had never really visited the great city for a longer time, so Facyr had decided to show a few of the most famous sights in Old Town to her, and in quite unusual conditions. The route took them to many a famed place, and both of the warriors had been impressed by how dramatic these beautiful old buildings looked in pouring rain: the Hill Temple, Yberth's Park with its famous well house, the simple yet intricately carved façade of the Old Meat Market, the Small Garden, the birth-home of the famous playwright Umberth Farrins...

They had spent some good time walking about and talking about the random goings-on in the town coming up later that day. When their route eventually took them back in front of the bathhouse, another problem arose: for the rest of the long hour, Cassandra begged Facyr to take a bath with her. Facyr learned, bitterly, that there simply was no end for her persistence.

But more importantly, he learned also very bitterly that if two people *want* the exact same thing, there really shouldn't be a problem doing it...

Facyr had found out that, when the situation called it, Cassandra certainly had the penchant of making solemn promises from the bottom of her heart, no matter what the topic, right there, without thinking twice about it. In that, she was not unlike him, but instead of - like he generally preferred to do it - just muttering "I'll do it" and rushing forth to do his thing, she actually raised her hand, placed it above her heart, and recited a calm and wordy oath.

"I solemnly swear not to think That Sort of Thoughts about anyone, until we're married", Cassandra had said, at last - and Facyr just had to believe it. She made it sound like not thinking about something you specifically avoided was actually possible - maybe it really was, for her. After that, Facyr just wondered a bit: *What would that oath entail if she chooses not to marry me - this could be bad...*

"Now," she said, "we're both people of the North; when has any of us shied from taking baths with... well, anyone?" she smiled. "You're Grycian; born of the nation famous for bathing. Come along, now..."

The difference between Faira and Cassandra, Facyr mused, was that Cassandra said things like that without a hint of sarcasm. But both apparently knew what to say, and when to say it...

And right now in this humble bathhouse, Facyr did think that if Cassandra was smiling to herself about anything, she was just happy that he was making progress. *Oh, would this have ever been torture with Faira, Facyr thought. Or maybe not...*

Shoulders above the water, and a thick layer of foam covering the

entire pool - apart of the slightly embarrassing problem of getting in the pool, this would be very easy for him. *But well, he thought, if I'm really as nice as she says, what's there to be embarrassed about? Bah...*

Facyr sighed happily. "Oh well - I'm glad to be here, actually. I have to say that I'm just... a little bit confused."

"What are you confused about?"

It's probably just easier to just go ahead and say it, Facyr thought. "Can it really be this easy?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been worrying about meeting you for years now. Yet, here you are, and a hour later, we're sitting in a private pool together."

Cassandra smiled. "You don't believe in coincidences, do you?"

"Not really." He sighed. "Don't take this wrong, having you here, and... talking to me, and... hopefully getting to know you - that is a dream come true. When I met you, my mind was just... saying that this could be just a dream. Or some practical joke." He sighed, and went on to mutter a bit weakly: "Coincidences, coincidences... I'm sure they happen. It's just that often they go very wrong."

"Well, I can just assure you this *is* a coincidence, but not of the bad kind. I'm really here. I won't go anywhere."

"I'm just..." Facyr said, pausing a bit. "I guess I'm worried that I make some mistake and you get mad at me. I really hope that you don't mind my clumsiness."

A time for another solemn oath, it seemed. "I promise I will overlook any clumsiness on your part", she said. Then she laughed a bit. Her laughter was loud but not malicious; if Facyr wasn't in such a bind right now, he knew he might even like it - a lot. "I know where you come from. I've met many people who were in Brave Blades, and you do tend to be... a bit shy in general. But..." Cassandra bowed her head. She raised her gaze slowly and her smile widened as she looked at Facyr again. "From what I've heard, you really don't have that problem at all. You just need to get to know me. I know you can get along with me, if you can get along with others so wonderfully. Don't worry about it."

From what she's heard? Facyr thought. She couldn't... He couldn't... No way... Not them... But is this really the time to be mad at them? It's just like she said - things are working wonderfully... Something finally clicked in its proper place in his head - By the damnation of nine hells - at least I now know why Cassandra asked the strange question...

"Well," he said, "I just can't... make much sense out of all this - please don't take that wrong. It's just that I never thought this would even be possible. Did you really long for me all this time? I mean, I know I did feel for you, but..." he sighed. "Is this really love? Is this what it's supposed to feel like? This isn't real. This has to be a dream..." he sighed. "I'm not sure if this is what it is. And I'm sorry, I can't seem to make much sense today."

"Would it help if I explained what I felt?"

"I think so..."

Cassandra paused, and closed her eyes. "Well, let me ask something first - are you a curious person?"

"In what way?"

"Do you just get curious about something all of sudden?"

Facyr thought for a few eyeblinks. "Not usually, no. Usually, everything will be revealed to me before I get the chance. The side effect of being an adventurer..." Facyr smiled.

"Oh yes." Cassandra smiled in turn. "But without curiosity, there would be no adventure?"

"Yeah. It's just that... if someone says, 'something interesting is buried here, go and find out', I just *go* there. I don't think of it beforehand." *That's Faira's and Gnedrnygr's job*, Facyr thought. "I suppose I would be overworked if I ever pondered questions like 'what happened to that lost kingdom there' and went out there to find out. But usually, I have my hands full with leads like that, without even need to start coming up with those things myself." Facyr smiled. "We live in the age when the world is full of adventures."

Cassandra nodded. "That's a good point. Now - I tend to think about it the same way. The practical curiosity is all that matters. If there's something unexplainable, I have to figure it out. I just get annoyed if I don't figure something out immediately."

Facyr smiled. "That's familiar enough."

"And that was what happened to me when I met you. Curiosity that couldn't be fulfilled." Cassandra bit her lip.

"Why didn't you find out?"

"Lately, because of other more pressing worries that have now been dealt with." she smiled. "But initially, I was just... confused."

"Oh?"

"It wouldn't go away. I was..." Cassandra closed her eyes and shook her head. "I was in love!" she said, and smiled widely. "Then, something happened. The love waned, but something stronger came to its side. Admiration and respect."

The same thing, Facyr thought. *She's been experiencing the same thing... But...*

"Oh my", Facyr said.

"What now?"

"I guess I have got some things mixed up." Facyr chuckled, then laughed... but not very long. A few somewhat grim thoughts came to his mind - strange and grim conclusions.

"What?" Cassandra seemed confused.

"I've been thinking this as a meeting between two separated lovers", Facyr said. "And that happens only in tales. Don't get me wrong... But anyhow, this isn't really that - this is a meeting between two separated friends, something that does happen all the time."

Cassandra nodded. "You respect me, I respect you. We will make wonderful friends." She smiled widely, crossed her arms and nodded. "This is a good thing, isn't it?"

Facyr sighed. *Just friends? Don't they say this is how... Oh no... No, no, no...* He curled up, almost whimpered, and didn't try to hide his discomfort.

"What's wrong now?" Cassandra asked.

"First of all," Facyr said, "o-out of my deepest heart, I w-w-welcome you to my..." He stumbled a bit, trying his best not sound too wrong. "...humble circle of friends. But there's the problem, I-I-I really want to be more than just a friend of yours. I really *wish* this was also a meeting of two lovers." He swallowed. "I felt exactly what you felt. Admiration, respect..."

"And longing?"

"And longing."

"Then all is well." Cassandra smiled widely. "Why are you worried about this?"

"What is this feeling, really?" Facyr muttered, half to himself. "Is this love? Is this... something that's mistaken for it?" He shook his head, and got a little bit of grip of himself, if only long enough to plead, hoping not to make things worse. "Please help me. I don't know what's going on."

"I'm so sorry", Cassandra said softly and looked at Facyr with a gaze full of worries. "I seem to have really confused you now. Don't worry. Don't... worry. Things will be just fine. Calm down."

Facyr hunched further, burying his head deep in his arms. "I... I don't know what to do... I don't know what to say..." He began to weep.

"We're taking our first step together", Cassandra said patiently. "We're starting over from beginning. I have to say this - we don't know yet if love between us is of any consequence. But I want to find out. We've got to *try*." She buried her face in her hands. "Oh, what *am* I saying." She sighed deep. "Sorry, I really should not have said all this either. Look—"

Facyr sobbed and shook his head. "What's the point? I *know* I love you," he cried, "but if this turns out to be something bad... Is this really love..."

"Calm down." Cassandra smiled. "I'm sorry, I'm not the best person to calm people down. But listen... just *listen* to me for a moment. *I know I love you too.*"

Facyr paused, stunned by Cassandra's words, blinked and looked at her. "You do?"

Cassandra smiled. "We've made great progress. We managed to say that to each other. I'm so sorry for being unclear. But when did I tell you I don't love you?" She sighed again, and shook her head. "I'm so sorry - I'm not always clear. I should really sometimes think before I start talking about things close to my heart", she continued a bit weakly.

"I thought you... I thought you said you didn't love me any more... over the years..."

Cassandra sighed. "I'm so sorry about that. I said my love *waned*. It was *replaced* by another *kind* of love. I hope this is a bit clearer."

Facyr paused. "Admiration and respect."

"Deep admiration and deep respect. They're not any less important than other kinds of love. Ask yourself, why would I bother with all this if I didn't care about you at all? Now please, wash away

those tears of yours..."

"I'm..." Facyr said, sniffing. "I'm sorry for this outburst."

Cassandra smiled. "We *all* need to cry at times, and this has been one occasion where tears were really needed."

Facyr straightened up again, and this time, he smiled widely. Cassandra smiled back. It was the first time that Facyr actually looked Cassandra straight in the eyes; he smiled even more widely at that thought, and felt much better. And there was that small nagging feeling; *Hopefully, she thinks what I think*. But he knew that she did.

"You poor thing", Cassandra said, "I'm so sorry I confused you so much." She sighed. "People tell me I talk too much, and don't listen to what I say. I guess you missed my point - all this time, I've just been trying to say that I've liked you all this time and found you fascinating." She grinned. "I'm happy to say I want you to be my lover", she said, "and above that, my friend."

"Thank you. That is what I want myself to be to you too. I want you to be my friend and... my lover." He sighed. "You know, one odd thing - I guess it was getting dark that day so long ago... I never really got a good look at your eyes, I think. Or, at least I don't remember if I did. I only vaguely remembered your face. I've even barely looked at you today... But anyway: I really mean it, with all of my heart," Facyr said and drew a long breath, "when I say you have *absolutely* beautiful blue eyes. Honest eyes, too." He trembled. "Did I tell you how much I like blue?"

"Thank you." Cassandra smiled widely and sighed happily, brushing her hair with her fingers absent-mindedly to the side. She looked at the foam bubbles for a while. "For some reason, few people ever look me straight in the eyes." She smiled broadly. "I'm really glad you are able to do that, even for your own sake."

"I'm happy I'm able to do that. But I'm proud to have such a beautiful friend to look at, too." Facyr smiled.

Cassandra lowered her gaze again, thinking of something else. "I hate to bring this up, but... what about the rest of me? Do I look good?" Cassandra asked.

Facyr smiled. "You're so incredibly beautiful that I can't even begin to describe you without saying something incredibly boring. I'm not an inventor of new words, just a humble warrior."

Cassandra chuckled and smiled widely. "Thank you... in a way." She sighed, closed her eyes, and looked to the side.

"What's wrong?" Facyr asked.

"I really should not have asked that."

"Why?"

Cassandra shook her head. "I think I'm a bit vain - I just feel great if people tell me I'm beautiful. That may have been a selfish question and I took advantage of you." She looked at Facyr, biting her lip. "I hope you don't mind."

It was Facyr's turn to smile broadly. "Well, it doesn't take away the fact that you're beautiful."

Cassandra smiled a bit. "Well, I asked a selfish question and you

took some effort to answer.”

Facyr shook his head. “But my point is, it's true that you're beautiful, and it's true no matter how you ask it. Besides, if I get a chance to call you beautiful, I don't mind what it takes.” He smiled widely. “You know, I feel much better now that I've actually said that to you!”

Cassandra smiled again. “If that is the case, then this should not be that bad – for now. Anyway, I really should not have confused you this much today.” She then thought for a while. “But I really just wanted to make sure one thing is clear...”

“What thing?”

“Love will fade; admiration, respect and friendship will stay. You can always rekindle the love, but it's much easier if you know there will always be other things besides that.”

Facyr nodded. “It is a complex thing, this love.”

“You're a practical man. Practical men want simple ideals. Love can be really complex.”

Facyr felt much better, and was very much happier. “I *like* complex things, it's just that I don't want to *think of* complex things all the time. I'm a city guard, but I'm happier as an adventurer: I can *handle* mindless pacing and annoying criminals, but I don't *want* them to be my day job. I want things to be as simple as possible in normal everyday life. But now that I've met someone who understands complex things better than I do,” he said enthusiastically, “I want you to teach them to me. I need someone who knows complex things, and you're the best teacher on those, it seems.”

“Really?” Cassandra grinned.

“That is true – Faira knows a lot about complex things, but she just keeps joking about them, and Gnedrnygr knows a lot but never explains things well. Speaking of which, you really have to meet the rest of my friends soon...”

In the afternoon sun, the street smelled of wet sand, thatch, moss, turf and wood. Facyr felt that walking on the wet round cobblestones made him feel himself a little bit funny for some reason, but overall, he felt there was absolutely nothing to complain about in this situation. He felt wonderful just to be here – both of them felt delighted after the rain.

When the pair finally arrived to Wilhelmsroad 20, they found that they didn't particularly pay any attention to the fact that the two-storey house had survived the storm admirably. Facyr and Cassandra had taken no hurry to go to this robust little house. They had spent considerable time wandering around the city and talking.

And now, it was the right time to meet with the remaining few of Facyr's close friends. The room, which served as a combination of a perfectly ordinary living room and the headquarters of an adventuring company, was a little bit dusty. Milling beams of sunlight shone through the windows that had seen better days.

“...and this is the living room”, Facyr said as they entered.

“Ooh, cosy!” Cassandra said.

"Hello, Facyr!" Faira shouted cheerfully, yet noticeably dreamily, from an unseen place. The cat-like rogue in black knew many of the subtle tricks of the crafty art of How Not to be Seen or Heard, but after a comment like that, not even she knew how to make an entirely silent yawn not implicitly heard.

After a few brief seconds of calculative search, Facyr noted Faira was lying on top of the baking oven right behind the chimney. It was one of her favourite warm and shaded places to take a nap; usually she was right on the edge, in an easy enough place for everyone to see, but now, when she had lot to answer for, she stayed unseen in the shadow. *Once a rogue, always a rogue*, Facyr thought. *Hiding even in her own home - if there's a need to do so, anyway...*

"Hello, Faira. How was your day? Business as usual?"

"Business as usual." Faira sighed. "Seriously, I've had to take a break from the job - I'm not having much fun staring the wall."

"So Giles will be running the pawn shop again?"

"Yep. Though even he thinks we should close the shop at least for now, and I agree. It's slowly turning into a display of old junk."

"Oh, wouldn't the shop work better as a flea market, then?"

Faira paused. "I'll have to think about that. Most of the stuff there probably wouldn't find a new owner even if we gave it away, but anything is worth a shot."

"How is Jaana?" Facyr asked.

"By gods", Faira said, croaking the curse with a tired voice, but not without a hint of humour. "I tell you one thing: my sweet little girl will one day be feared by the toughest champions of the green fields. A bit of advice, though - just *don't* go in the guest room or you're in for a shock. I have *no* idea how she could kick the ball right through a second floor window."

"Well, uh, that sounds... a bit bad..." Facyr scratched his head. "Anyway, I'm here with a new good friend of mine, I'd like you to meet..."

"Oh, good! How's things, Cassandra?" Faira asked, interrupting Facyr.

So that confirms it, Facyr thought. If there was one thing Facyr had learned so far, it was that Cassandra was quite straightforward person - however, perhaps she had *really* needed, in order to avoid a disaster, a warning or two, a couple of hints and a few helpful suggestions from someone close to the person she was trying to reach...

"Good day, Faira. Thank you for your help, I was able to find Facyr, just as you said."

...And a hint to exercise discretion - though she seems like a tactful woman to begin with, Facyr thought. *But even so, at least now I know how she found and recognised me - though I'm sure she would have done just fine without Faira's help...*

"Good! I take it you've both had a good day, then? So how was it?"

"Uh..." Facyr paused. "Well, I'm happy to say that we're coming from the Hill Temple." A strange noise came from the dark. "...by the

way of the Royal Magistrate's Office. ...We're engaged... as of this date..." Facyr said, a bit weakly, but with enough resolution to make further odd noises come from the shadow. He smiled, and continued with a bit more determination. "Are you having problems?"

Facyr smiled when he heard Faira's comment under breath. "...well, no, apart of the fact that I've got coffee all over my chest now. Eww. ...Cold coffee. Yuck." She sighed. "Well, wow, *that* was a lot quicker than I expected. Oh, sorry, no disrespect intended - congratulations to both of you!"

"Thank you," Cassandra said.

"Thanks, Faira", Facyr said.

"Cassandra is joining the City Guard too, at least temporarily. We also ran into Jenyr. He says it's all right by him for Cassandra to join the Company."

"I just want to make myself useful", Cassandra said.

"Yep, the more the merrier! Welcome aboard - I believe you two make a wonderful team. *We* make a wonderful team. I think we'll get along just fine", Faira said. "Oh well, if Cassandra is moving in, I guess I need to see to the aftermath of Jaana's penalty kick in the guest room. Or are you moving in the same room right away with Facyr?"

"Oh, that would be fine!" Cassandra said.

"Yes, I guess we'll fit in my room", Facyr said and scratched his chin. "A matter of a few arrangements, though..."

"Wonderful, I can keep on napping then. By the way, Facyr - Gnedrnygr said he has went to Thevianpolis to follow some leads on some sort of rare magical widget - I didn't really ask for details... He will be back in a month."

"All right." Then Facyr thought: *Thevianpolis? Really? Did they do magic there nowadays, too? Well, I suppose it could be possible... You learn something new every day...*

"...and, well, I'm sure you two understand - I *really* need to see Thalimve soon, so I'm leaving tomorrow morning, if that's all right with you. I'm taking Jaana with me, and Rosa will also be coming along..."

Facyr scratched his head. "I suppose so. By the way, Jenyr said he's also going to Camp Tuna for the next week, something to do with collaboration between the Army and the City Guard."

"And what the heck is Camp Tuna?"

"Hells take my soul if I know - I've never understood how the Varmian army names their camps..."

"Even stranger names than the Navy used to have." Faira chuckled. "So," she said - Facyr knew from that tone that something inconvenient was about to follow - "you'll be alone in Anchorfall for a few weeks. I'm sure you can get to know each other pretty well in that time. Oh, I just went to see Mathias Warin, his new comedy opens officially tonight in the Great Theatre, I wonder if you want to come with me - I've already got the tickets..."

"That sounds fun!" Cassandra said.

"Well, it should be - it's about two beggars, a servant woman, a

nobleman, three tax collectors and a talking cat”, Faira said.

“Well, sounds like it's hard to resist”, Facyr said. “Oh, and the rain resistance ring you gave me works perfectly. I love it.”

“Hah, just one of the few interesting trinkets Thalimve's wizards came up with on their spare time. I'm glad you found it useful. It was a bit too conspicuous for my use. Speaking of magical trinkets - Facyr, you can have my lovestone!” Faira said.

Facyr blushed. “Is it a really good idea to...”

“Oh, don't worry about *me*. I just saw a really nice one in the magic shop in Baran's Alley, and it was reasonably priced too”, Faira said. “Not a problem! You can have it!”

“Uh, I didn't mean *that*”, Facyr said.

“Well,” Cassandra said and blushed likewise, “you know, Faira, I *had* to kind of swear one thing to Facyr...” Cassandra said.

“You know, a great man once said, ‘We won't be making any more changes’, and a week later, ‘Oh well, I'm eating my words... all right, now we *really* won't make any more changes.’ If anyone else had said that, people would have been annoyed”, Faira said. “But *he* was a great man, and he knew that promise was worth breaking for getting a better end result, so everyone trusted him.”

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