

SUCCESSION

◀ *Quest of Fire* ▶

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Another two days passed and still no word. Meredoch no longer hid his ill-ease about his father's delayed return. The tension wasn't just affecting him. He watched his mother fuss with his sister's hair and dress. *She never did that before.*

Sparring matches became a welcome distraction. Even if the wins officially fell to Duncoin. Meredoch claimed each was a draw. Each time Duncoin insisted on another match.

Duncoin looked quite smug today. Standing across the dueling circle from Meredoch, he rolled his gilded short sword over and over in his hand, making quick jabs for show. By now, the air was eviscerated, as Meredoch dithered over his weapon selection. Last time he had used a similar, if less ornate, short sword. He blamed the weapon for his poor performance yesterday, so he knew he couldn't get away with that this time. And he'd have to win today if he hoped to keep the sparring series going.

"Will you choose already? I 'aven't any desire to test the stone-tales."

Meredoch looked up from his search and scowled. “Stone-tales?”

“They’re fables our parents told us when we’re little to discourage us from being slothful.” Duncoin heavily emphasized the latter. “If an Ord child stands idle too long, he risks being petrified and becoming part of the mountain.”

Studying the weapons again, Meredoch mumbled to himself, “I’m sure many of your subjects are in the throes of grief that you’re here with me instead of enriching their lives with your vast wit.”

Rather than work the Ord up further, he answered with something less sarcastic. “How could I? You won’t let me.”

Meredoch’s fingers drifted past one sword and lingered near the hilt. His fingertips tingled with nearness to the otherworldly weapon, the Spiritsword. Powerful blades inscribed with the very words of the High King, legendary for their sharpness, hardiness, and effectiveness in the hands of a Knight of Light. He’d heard that in a Knight’s grasp, the sword would ignite and burn with fire from the High King.

“The perfect sword,” Meredoch murmured.

Yet he was a mere “child,” forbidden to use a Spiritsword. Their legendary power and potential were deemed as too much for the young. For him. At least in Ord society. Secretly, Meredoch’s father taught him about them, even encouraged him to use the shortsword version stowed away in their home. It wasn’t unlike this one.

“I will be as grey as Mount Fiorsruthain if you don’t hurry up!”

Meredoch ground his teeth. He grabbed the Spiritsword and paused. *No flames?* His father promised in the hand of a Knight of Light, the High King’s power would overtake the blade and set it afire.

He felt a tingle spread from his fingers to the nape of his neck. Suddenly, he felt a rush of warm air.

“Did you say something?” he called to Duncoin.

“You mean besides begging you to choose before I’m old enough to watch my grandchildren spar?”

Meredoch frowned. He thought he’d heard someone whisper to him. *Must be the air currents.* Stories circulated of mysterious voices in Ordumair. Vents carved into the mountain let in cooler outside air. Often people mistook the sound for voices, though some claimed they were the spirits of the Ords who died while slaving over the fortress’s construction. He looked around. There had to be at least a few vents here.

“One problem with that gibe.” Meredoch turned around. “You’d have to find a girl willing to take you before you can have children. Much less grandchildren.”

“Only a problem if you’re still crazy enough to think Caryn likes you more than me.”

Grinding his teeth, Meredoch felt his cheeks redden. They both knew how he felt about Caryn. She was a head taller than all the other girls, and her red tresses glowed in the harvest sun. She was also the only Ord girl who didn’t find Meredoch an anomaly. He felt a sudden pang of worry she might come in and see him lose this match.

Duncoin eyed Meredoch’s choice of sword and smirked. “Feeling unduly confident, I see. You’ll never succeed your father as Defender of the Realm with so little wisdom.”

Shaking his head, Meredoch found his way back to the moment. “I believe you won’t be smiling for long.”

The dwarf didn’t stop smiling. He dropped into a stance known as “The Bear,” an aggressive Ord posture for combat said to have been first used by “The Bear” Thane Ordumair II in the Battle of Stalwart Timbers. That battle had been a decisive

victory for the Ords over the Ecthels. All who fought it had since been nearly deified. Given Duncoin never adopted the style before, Meredoch decided his friend was the overconfident one.

Meredoch eased into a defensive posture common to Ords for single-weapon combat. “Well, let’s see what you’ve got.” He noticed Duncoin sliding a sleek, silver dagger out of an ornate sheath. The blade gleamed as the light caressed it.

“Where’d you get that?” Meredoch stalled, trying to figure a good counter to the added threat.

“A present from Elder Ulster.” He twirled the dagger. “He came to me after I bested you yesterday. Made quite a long apology for the other day.”

Like anything that man says is worth hearing.

Looking at his sword, Meredoch focused. Thinking about the odious Elder Ulster and the enchanting Caryn wouldn’t win him this duel.

He stared at the Spiritsword and noticed that the blade’s inscriptions, usually in the ancient language of the early Knight order, were written in Ord script. As with his book of histories, if he concentrated a bit, he could begin to make out the words.

“The High King is a strong tower,” he read silently. The inscription read like poetry, but Meredoch carried it on his tongue like an invocation.

“Arrgh!”

His eyes flicked up to see Duncoin surging forward. Meredoch had unwittingly wandered into the circle designating the arena of combat. Gasping with shock and effort, he threw up a guard as Duncoin’s heavy short sword hammered the Spiritsword.

The block took a lot of effort, and Meredoch found himself throwing up another and another, narrowly missing a sweeping blow that could have halved him. He leaped over a low swipe

and crashed onto the floor. A quick roll spared him from being skewered as the silver dagger jabbed into the floor.

Someone is being tutored.

Seeing a wild overhead blow coming down, he met it just in time. Young Meredoch gritted his teeth and shoved against the Duncoin's pressure. His friend had taken an awful risk attacking when he was distracted, but it was in keeping with the fighting style. Mercy was not accorded to Ordumair The Bear, so tales told, and so mercy was not to be shown.

Slowly, the blades pushed closer and closer to Meredoch's chest. Struggle as he might, he could not break loose or overpower Duncoin. His friend's eyes were wild, seemingly unaware that the blades were now perilously close to cutting Meredoch.

It took all Meredoch's focus not to let them travel that half-inch more and slice him to ribbons. Had he been able to cry out, no one would hear him. They were alone. Did Duncoin mean to harm him?

I'm going to die!

Meredoch felt his muscles giving. Panic crept through his body.

This can't be happening. This can't be ... Help me, High King! Strong Tower, save me!

Suddenly everything slowed, and the room stretched until all was a blur. A blur more and more consumed by the brightest light Meredoch had ever seen. Then he saw him. Amidst a flash of fire and smoke sat a figure enthroned. Blinding brilliance swelled and overwhelmed Meredoch. Without a doubt, he was seeing the High King of All Realms.

He dropped to his knees, head bowed. "I'm sorry, sir," he blurted. "I didn't mean to ..."

Meredoch couldn't find words to describe his inadequacy before the Great King. He had seen great pomp and respect

shown to the Thane and had been obliged to do the same at various festivities and feasts. He felt honored in the Thane's presence, but this was something wholly different. Meredoch's tongue ached in his mouth with the shame of thinking himself worthy of calling out to the High King.

Then a voice that burned and seared to the deepest core of his being echoed with the sound of breakers battering the rocky coastlands.

The Realms Rightful Ruler spoke to Meredoch, comforting him. A soothing sensation overtook much of the burn, but still, Meredoch didn't dare lift his eyes. "I'm sorry, Mighty King. I did not understand. I didn't know you before. I'm sorry for troubling you.

The voice of the King was both gentle as a summer breeze over the heather but stern as a sudden storm.

"I see. You cannot be called unless you were calling. Then please, my King, tell me what you want. Anything!"

For the moment, Meredoch's impending demise was a thousand leagues from his thoughts, and all that mattered was this. This encounter with majesty.

The boy listened as the Ancient One spoke. Meredoch's throat tightened, and tears rolled down his face. "You want me to pledge my loyalty to you? To become one of your Knights?"

There was a somberness to the reply that undercut the sudden joy and wonder Meredoch felt.

"Oh, I see. Even if that is what I may face, I make my pledge all the same. A hundred years or just this one, my life is yours in service."

The High King was suddenly close, close enough to reach out and touch Meredoch on one shoulder and then the other. Each burned as he never thought possible but did not hurt. The fire spread, tracing patterns familiar yet foreign down his extremities, across his whole body, centering over his chest. It

pressed inside blazing paths along every sinew and bone till everything Meredoch felt he'd brought to this place was gone. Burned away.

He breathed in and out, expecting to see smoke pour from his mouth and taste its acrid tails, but the breath that went out and the air that came in was sweeter than he could describe.

He heard one last command: Rise, Sir Meredoch MacCowell.

Then, the light flared even brighter, and Meredoch could see nothing, but also everything. The world resolved back to the one he had left, back to the contest of wills. Duncoin's feral intensity still etched into his expression. The pressure of the blades against each other still taxing Meredoch's muscles. But he no longer felt weakness in his limbs. Only fire. A fire that traveled down to the Spiritsword or perhaps up from it.

The sensation built and built until Meredoch cried out and slung his opponent off of him.

Meredoch's chest heaved, drawing in deep breaths. Mesmerized, he watched flames dance along his blade, its inscriptions glowing with fiery glee. He looked past the blade to Duncoin. The exultant smile he wore had faded.

Duncoin stared at him, his mouth slack.

"Duncoin, I had the vision!" Meredoch said too quickly and sucked in a much-needed breath. Slower, he had to slow himself. "I had the vision of the Great King. I joined the Order. Have you always been able to see these flames? And ... and ..." Meredoch faltered for words. There was more. So much more. It wasn't just the blade that was different. Everything was sharper, redefined as though he had never truly seen it properly before. All the familiar contours and surfaces of the only home, the only world he had ever known, greeted him as for the first time.

His chest shuddered as he drew in another awed breath.

At last, his eyes roamed back to Duncoin. The Ord still lay on the ground, his dumbfounded expression replaced by something more guarded. As though Meredoch were some kind of lunatic. Or at least a beast he was unfamiliar with and therefore could neither welcome nor ward off effectively.

“Duncoin?” Meredoch reached out a hand and stepped toward his friend.

Duncoin took the offered hand and struggled up. He let the sword he’d wielded clatter to the floor, and Meredoch noticed the dagger from Elder Ulster had been shattered and lay smoldering a few feet away.

Before either youth spoke again, the doors to the training structure swung open and smashed against the stone walls. A trio of soldiers burst into the room. They spread out as if searching for something. One spotted Duncoin and called out, “We’ve found him. He’s in here!”

Two more guards rushed in, and Elder Ulster followed at their heels.

The old Ord’s sharp eyes scanned the room and fell first on Duncoin, then Meredoch, still holding the Spiritsword. They narrowed fractionally. “Disarm him and take him to the dungeon. Bring the Thane.”

Before another heartbeat passed, Ulster whirled around and exited.

Meredoch and Duncoin stared wide-eyed at each other as the first three soldiers flanked Duncoin and escorted him out with gentle firmness. Meredoch’s last sight of his friend was Duncoin straining to look back and uttering a question that got lost to Meredoch as the other pair of soldiers swung their halberds round and shouted, “Drop your sword. NOW!”

Meredoch couldn’t comprehend the order. This was a training room, and the soldiers were in a combat stance reserved for dangerous enemies.

What is going on?

“I said NOW!”

A faint whisper of a now-familiar voice gusted past Meredoch’s ear, telling him to comply. He put the sword down.

The two Ords rushed forward and grabbed him roughly by his arms, forcing each behind his back before closing heavy iron shackles around his wrists. They barely fit, being made for adult Ord wrists, but it wouldn’t have mattered if they were the tightest restraints in the world. The chill of the iron on his skin felt like a viper’s strike. The numbness of the blow spread throughout him. Try as he might to be tough, a single tear slid free and ran down his cheek as he was towed out of the room.