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## TARANIAN MONGREL

Tarek slapped a coin onto the bar and nodded to a barrel of ale with a pair of crossed red swords painted on its side. “Did I ever tell you, Cara, that I know the woman who brews the mighty Red Renegade?”

Cara rolled her eyes. “Yes, Tarek—every bloody time you’ve had one too many Red Renegades.”

“No... Have I?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said, dipping a large wooden beaker into the barrel.

“I told you about Mari, the owner of—”

“The Renegade tavern in Belanore who brews the finest ale in all Northern Taranian?”

“No, Cara,” he said, wagging his finger at the owner of the only tavern in Nabaya. “*All* Taranian.”

She slammed the beaker down, spilling the dark red liquid over the solid block of polished oak that served as the bar. “If you love it so much, write a bloody ballad about it.”

He tapped his nose and winked. “Maybe I will.”

She stared past him and grinned. “I doubt that ballad would go down well with your usual audience.”

He arched his brows and chuckled. “Oh, yes—they’re a tough crowd to please.” He nodded his thanks, then waded through the

crowded tavern until he reached his usual bench beside the fire pit and sat down.

He swept his eyes across the circle of expectant children huddled in tight to the edge of the fire and stopped, catching sight of a boy whose face was covered in cuts and bruises. *By the goddess, Lars—Dagan made a mess of you.* He looked out into the sea of adults surrounding the children until he spotted Lars' father, Garin. Tarek nodded to him, but Garin failed to return the gesture. *Shit! I'm not looking forward to that conversation.* He gulped down his Red Renegade and placed it on the bench.

“Come on, Tarek, you said we could have one more story.”

One of the youngest children was staring up at him, playing idly with a tassel at the end of her plaid shawl. She frowned, then sniggered.

“What's so funny?”

“You've got froth all over your face,” she said, pointing up at his bushy beard. “You look like an old man.”

The adults standing around the children laughed.

Tarek sat back and crossed his arms. “Haven't you lot got better things to do than stand around here mocking me?”

“What? And miss the best entertainment in the village?”

“He's the *only* entertainment in the village.”

Tarek pulled a sour face, then grinned. “And I thought I was the only joker in Nabaya.” He wiped the cuff of his tunic across his chin and returned his attention to the little girl. “Is that better?”

She nodded, then let a giggle escape from her mouth.

“Now what?”

“You still look old.”

“Not as old as the Bwgan.” He made a scary face and waved his arms towards her.

She screamed and dashed across the tavern floor to hide behind her mother and father. As she peered at him through the folds of her mother's skirt, Tarek waved and poked his tongue out at her.

“What's a Bwgan?”

Recognising the voice of his son's closest friend, he turned to the boy with the battered and bruised face. “That's a good question, Lars.

Very few people this far south would know the legend of the Bwgan; it's an old children's story from Northern Tarania."

"Da says that's where you're from."

"He's right—but I haven't been back for over fifteen years, and I doubt I ever will."

"Can you tell us the story?"

Tarek stretched his arms above his head and yawned. "Well, as my little friend said, I'm getting old." He winked at her. "It's well past my bedtime, and yours. Besides, I've already told you two stories."

The children begged him to tell them one more story and turned to their parents, promising to go to bed without a fuss.

He sighed, dramatically. "Very well. I happen to know a shorter version of the story that's in verse." He leaned forward, his face glowing in the warm light of the burning embers. "But I must warn you, children. It could frighten you.... Do you still want to hear it?"

The children nodded eagerly, then hushed.

"Then I'll begin."



A creature as old as the ancient Hen Rai,  
Its home is the forest, in slumber it lies.  
It waits for a movement, a scent or a sound,  
Then out of the forest, the Bwgan crawls out.



As silent as a tomb, it nears its prey,  
All tucked up in bed, sleeping they lay.  
Then out of the shadows, it stretches its limbs,  
Slithering and shimmering on the ground they skim.



It worms through windows, chimneys and doors,  
Slipping past those it knows to ignore.  
Until a child it finds, that brings it delight,  
And steals them away, in the black of the night.



"That's not scary," said Lars, flicking his eyes at the other children

whose faces seemed less sure of the fact. “Anyway, there’s no such thing as a *Bwgan*.”

Tarek smiled. “Maybe there is, maybe there isn’t—but there’s a way to make sure the *Bwgan* never gets you.”

“W-What’s that?”

“Stay away from the woods and make sure you go straight to bed when your parents tell you to. Which is right now.”

“Awww.”

He waved them away. “Go on, off with you. There’ll be more time for stories another night.”

As the children melted into the crowd of adults spread around the smoke-filled tavern, he took a deep breath and weaved his way through the throng until he stood in front of Garin and Lars.

“I-I’m so sorry about what happened the other day.”

Garin placed his hand on his son’s shoulder. “Look at him, Tarek. I know children get into fights over many things, but if I hadn’t ripped Dagan off him, it could’ve been a lot worse.”

“I know. Which is why Runa kept him home tonight and he won’t be allowed out on his own until he’s learned to control his temper.”

“That was more than losing his temper. His eyes were full of rage, like a wild animal. What’s that saying you Northerners have for it?”

“The Red Mist.”

“Yes, the Red Mist. That’s how he looked to me.”

“Well, whatever it was, I’m truly sorry, Garin.” He looked at Lars. “Can you tell me why you were fighting? It might help me understand why Dagan got so angry.”

“Well...Umm...We were play fighting as famous warriors.”

“I remember playing games like that when I was young. Which warrior were you?”

“I was Vasska the Shrewd of Kelaris, but Dagan said he wanted to make up his warrior from two people—Alun Swordstorm and Banan the Giant. When I told him you couldn’t put a Northern Taranian and a Mendarian together, he got angry and said, ‘Isn’t that what I am?’”

“And what did you say to that?”

Lars looked down at his feet. “I-I called him a Taranian mongrel. Then he snapped and attacked me.”

Garin flicked Lars across the head with the flat of his hand. “That’s a terrible thing to say about someone. No wonder Dagan lost control.”

“Please, Garin, there’s no need for that. Even though those words were hurtful, it doesn’t excuse Dagan’s actions.”

“Maybe so—but Lars needs to understand the great risk you and Runa took by marrying.”

“More so for her. Which is why we moved as far away from Mendaria as possible.”

Garin nodded, then creased his brows. “Speaking of the Mendari—do you think the raids on the other villages have something to do with them?”

Tarek scratched an itch in his beard and bit his lip. “Since Kaine unified the tribes, it’s been quiet for years—but if he’s started to push north into the Wildlands, then that would force a lot of angry, desperate people our way.”

“Is that why you volunteered to help the Village Watch?”

“That’s not the word I’d use,” said Tarek, grimacing. “Runa gave me no choice in the matter. What about you?”

“I’d gladly help, but since his mam’s death from the fever—“

“You don’t have to explain yourself, Garin. It can’t be easy bringing up a child on your own.”

Garin laughed. “Depends if the little bugger’s behaving himself—but I’d hate to think of him all alone in this world.”

“You know he’ll always have a place in our home.”

Garin’s eyes filled up. “That means a lot to me, my friend.”

“You’d do the same for us. Let’s just hope the raiders stay well away from Nabaya.” He patted Garin on the shoulder. “Now let me buy you a cup of Red—it’s the least I can do.”

Half an hour later, Tarek opened the door to the tavern and looked out into the night. The pungent aroma of the sweet, smoky peat fire and Red Renegade clung to his clothes until he stepped out into the street and it dispersed into the chilly early spring air. Then, as the bright glowing disc of Golanos bathed Nabaya in her soft, pale light, he wrapped his woollen cloak tight around his body and headed home.

As he walked through the rows of wattle-and-daubed roundhouses, each wearing their peaked thatched roofs with smoke funnelling out from holes as chimneys, he considered what Lars had told him about Dagan. *So he wants to be a warrior?* Despite all his efforts, was his son destined to journey down the same dark path he had taken all those years ago? He knew that no son of his would be welcome in Northern Taranian, and Runa would fiercely oppose any mention of fighting for Mendaria. And then there was the emergence of the Red Mist. He had been around Dagan's age when he first felt the presence of his dark companion. He sighed, blowing a plume of breath into the blackness. No. If Dagan wanted to become a warrior, Tarek would have to tell him the truth about his past life in the north and train the boy to control the darkness inside of him. Then, one day in the future, he hoped his son would learn to bend the Red Mist to his will, just like he had done many years ago. The alternative was unthinkable.

"Tarek!"

He swung around to find Cerys, the leader of the Village Watch, gathered with a group of armed volunteers heading towards the south of the settlement. "What's wrong?"

"One of our scouts spotted a large group of warriors heading up the Southern Trade Route. It must be those raiders causing havoc in the South."

"Did they see who they were?"

"No. They didn't get that close."

"Shit! That would've been useful information." Tarek spat onto the ground. "How long do we have?"

"They're about two hours away."

Tarek nodded. "I'll dig out my old clansguard gambeson and get ready. I hope it still fits."

"At least you've got some protection," said Cerys, twisting her head to view the people behind her.

"Then, for their sake, I hope we stop those bastards from breaching our palisade."

As Cerys waved farewell and disappeared behind a row of roundhouses, Tarek shook his head. The villagers were woefully

under-prepared and ill-equipped for hand-to-hand combat. *We'll need a barricade or a shieldwall, if there's enough shields to form the front line. But not even that'll be enough if they're Mendari.*

Although he was Northern Taranian, he rarely gave the Enorian religion of his people a second thought—but as he considered the possibility of once again facing his old enemy, he prayed to the Goddess Enora to protect his village and his family from the fanatical Mendari and their dark, merciless god, Velak.

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## ALL GOOD THINGS

Tarek had sworn to her that he would never again draw his sword, never again wear his armour and, most of all, never again take the life of another. Yet, it was Runa who opened the dust-covered chest, retrieved his gambeson and lifted it over his head. He opened his mouth to speak, but she placed her finger on his lips.

“I know what you promised, but they need you.”

“The bloody thing’s shrunk,” he said, struggling to fasten the pair of straps nearest his stomach. “Velak’s balls! Could you—”

“Shrunk, you say?” She yanked hard on the leather strips.

“Hey! Not so tight.”

“That’ll teach you not to drink so many Red Renegades.”

Tarek snorted. “Well, it’s not like there’s much else to do in Nabaya.”

She tugged on the last fastening, then slipped her hand inside the folds of padded linen and gripped his groin. “And what other forms of excitement do you desire, dear husband?”

He grinned. “Keep your hand there and I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

She tightened her grip. “Then you’d better come back in one piece.”

“Dad, look at this!”



“We’ll continue this conversation later,” he said, easing his crotch out of her hand. Looking over Runa’s shoulder, he eyed Dagan standing beside his chest, staring wide-eyed at a sheathed sword resting across his hands. “I wondered when you’d find that. Bring it over here.”

Dagan hurried to the centre of their roundhouse and offered it to his father. “You own a sword?”

Tarek gripped the weapon’s handle and slid it out of its sheath. The long, double-edged blade gleamed in the flickering light of the fire pit. “It’s from my days serving in the Nirasian clansguard.”

“You’re Nirasian—did you serve with King Rodric?”

Tarek flinched inside. “Yes, I did.”

Dagan’s eyes sparkled. “It’s beautiful—like the ones you and the visiting bards tell stories about.” He frowned. “But why is the hilt wrapped in plain leather? Is there something underneath?”

“Nothing of interest to you.” He snapped the sword back into the scabbard. He scruffed Dagan’s dark, corded locks. “No more looking in that chest. Besides, you’ve got a bag to pack—just in case.”

“Yes, Dad.” As his son shuffled to the ladder leading to his bed, Runa placed her hand on Tarek’s shoulder. “One day, he’ll put the pieces together and realise who his father is.”

“I fear that day is coming sooner than later.” He stared at the sword. “I should’ve buried it.”

Leaving Runa to finish preparing the provisions for the journey, he walked over to the fire pit, knelt and carefully unwrapped the leather strapping. *Hello old friend.* He inspected the sword’s hilt in the glow of the flames. All along the underside of the steel guard, which was formed into the shape of a bird’s wings in flight, crisscrossed a war’s worth of sword cuts. *I should get those smoothed out.* He chuckled. *I could just imagine Bethan of Vedana’s face when I enter her workshop and ask.* He peered closer, trailing his fingers along the smooth bone carving of the bird’s body and across its tail fanning out to create the pommel. *The wren. How can such a beautiful tiny creature remind me of so much pain?*

He closed his eyes. For a moment, he stood before the red and black banners of his clan on the night of Queen Isabelle Niras’s

assassination. *I can never go back...nor do I want to.* He rewound the leather onto the hilt, stood and secured his scabbard to his side. Taking a few steps, he stopped and frowned. *It doesn't feel right without the rest of it.* Reluctantly, he walked over to his open chest, leant inside and opened two bundles wrapped in deerskin.

“Scale armour...and a helmet!”

Tarek glared up at his son. The boy sat with his feet dangling over the edge of his bed platform. “I told you not to look.” He slammed the lid down hard, swirling clouds of dust into the smoke-filled, musty air of their home.

Dagan blinked, then looked at his mother.

“I think what Dad’s trying to say is—”

“They don’t fit me anymore, son. Like Mam said, I’ve been spending too much time down at the tavern. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

The door of the roundhouse flew open.

“They’re here!”

Tarek locked his eyes on the figure in the doorway. It was Cerys. “How many?”

“Over one hundred warriors approach from the south.”

“One hundred? I thought you said it was a raiding party?”

“That’s not the worst of it.”

He swallowed hard and asked a question he was sure he already knew the answer to. “They’re Mendari?”

Cerys flicked her eyes towards Runa then back at Tarek. “Yes.”

“Velak’s balls!” He reached for Runa’s hand and held it tight.

“Not that you needed any more incentive to fight those bastards. I had no idea we had a veteran of the Mendari War in Nabaya.”

“It was a long time ago. I haven’t fought them since before Dagan was born.”

“I’m just relieved you agreed to lead us.”

“Lead you?”

Cerys frowned at Runa. “I thought you said he’d take command?”

“Runa? What’ve you done?”

Flustered, Cerys backed towards the entrance. “I-I’ll leave you to

sort this out.” She wavered inside the doorway. “Make no mistake, Tarek, we need you.”

As Cerys disappeared into the night, Runa squeezed Tarek’s hand and lowered her eyes. “Please, don’t be angry with me. You can see it in her eyes—she’s terrified. The Village Watch won’t stand a chance against the Mendari—unless...”

“I know. Unless I lead them.”

“Thank you.”

He slid his fingers through the raven-black curls that trailed down to her waist. “How could I ever say no to you?”

Looking up into his amber eyes, she mouthed, “Because you know you’d never win.”

He laughed, wrapping his arms around her, and drew her tight to his body. He kissed her, then pulled away, grinning.

“What?”

“You taste of carrot and turnip stew.”

“Charming. How you wooed all those women to your bed is a mystery to me.”

“Well, there’s only one woman for me now.”

She tutted. “No-one else would have you. You’ve gone to look old. I’d be surprised if anyone in the North would recognise you.”

He shifted his gaze away from her.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s still painful for you.”

“It is when I’m wearing this,” he said, patting the pommel of his sword. Kissing her once more, he stepped over to the ladder and climbed up to the platform. Dagan lay on his bed, flipping a wooden knife into the air. He caught it deftly between his finger and thumb.

“Good catch.”

Dagan said nothing.

Taking a deep breath, Tarek sighed and sat beside him. “I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you talk about your life before you met Mam?”

“Hmm.... How does it make you feel when you remember the fight you had with Lars?”

Dagan looked away.

“That’s how I feel when I think of Northern Tarania.... But I promise, once we’re all safe from this threat, I’ll tell you everything. I think you’re old enough to understand.”

“Well, I’m nearly twelve.”

“Yes, you are.” He smiled at his son and stared into his bright amber eyes. *It’s like looking into a mirror of my younger self.* He wrapped his arm around Dagan and kissed him. “Come on.”

“Where’re we going?”

“I just remembered—there is something I can show you in my chest.”

“What is it?” asked Dagan, vaulting off the bed.

“It’s a surprise.” He followed his son down the ladder and made his way to the chest. “No peeking.” Reaching inside, he retrieved a small, plain knife and handed it to Dagan. “This is for you, if Mam is happy for you to have it.”

“Perhaps I could see it before I decide whether I’m *happy* with it?” asked Runa, stepping behind the pair.

Tarek chuckled. “I’m sure there’s no Mendari alive that could be a match for your mother, but, just in case, I’d feel better if you used the blade to protect her. Can you do that?”

Dagan’s eyes lit up. He flipped the knife in the air and twirled to face his mother. “Can I, Mam?”

“Very well,” said Runa, with a sigh. “But find something to wrap around the blade before you slice your finger off.”

“I’ve got some leather under my bed,” he said, skipping off to find it.

“It’s time.” Tarek led Runa towards the door and turned to face her, his expression grim. “If you hear the sounds of battle nearing, you run as fast as you can to the North Gate. Get over the border into Taleni and don’t stop until you reach Vedana.”

“Don’t think we’re leaving without you.”

“But if they realise you’re Mendari, they’ll—”

“Shush. They won’t hurt me. I have you.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He drew in the warm scent of her skin. He fantasised about taking her to bed and forgetting the troubles of their world. Reluctantly, he released her. “I have to leave.” With one final longing gaze, he turned, walked out of the door and headed towards the imminent battle.

