

THE SUMMONS
A DRAGON KEEP CHRONICLES
SHORT STORY
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The Summons

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Tendrils of morning mist slithered around the hooves of Torin's horse. Every step sent a clatter to echo off the mountainside. Torin glanced nervously around him, expecting to see shadowy figures behind each towering pine that lined the path.

His horse snorted, as if to tell him how ridiculous he was being. Torin stilled his sword as it slapped against his leg. The horse didn't know their destination.

I should have pretended to be sick yesterday. Or found any excuse not to carry the message deep into the Cardic Mountains to the Dragon Keep—the home of the notorious Mountain Baron. The man who would be less than happy to see a messenger from the northern Clans.

Maybe I should have left my cloak behind. But Chieftain MacTavish had ordered him to wear the purple and red checkered cloak of Clan MacLarra as an identifier that he was truly from the Clans. At least I'm not from Clan MacDuffy.

That guaranteed him a few extra minutes of survival. *Stop being stupid. He doesn't usually kill people.*

But then again, no one usually came riding up into the Cardic Mountains bringing this kind of news from the exact people the Baron hated.

Why am I doing this again? Oh, right. Because I don't have a choice.

The path split before him, the left fork narrowing and climbing even higher into the mountain. The right meandered away down the side of the mountain on a smoother path.

With a sigh, Torin spurred up the left fork. He rode in silence for another few minutes before he saw his first shadow.

Heart thundering in his chest, he forced himself to keep riding on with some measure of calmness. Another glance to his right side revealed another shadow in the trees. A hoarse screech drew his gaze up to the branches of a pine tree, where a red-breasted falcon perched, tresses dangling from its talons.

When he looked back to the path, he jerked the reins in surprise, drawing his horse to an uneven halt.

A man blocked the path. He wore dark colored shirt and trousers, and leather jerkin over all. Knives filled the belts crossed over his chest, and he might not even need the sword buckled at his waist.

Torin didn't move. A faint rustle marked the emergence of three more men. Torin swept a quick glance around. They all wore the same non-descript clothing as the first man. Weapons varied, but all carried knives and swords with an unnerving familiarity. They stared back at him with hostile glares.

"What are you doing here?" The first man flicked a knife in and out of its sheath.

Torin swallowed hard at the X branded into the back of the man's right hand. He'd committed a crime severe enough to be banished to the Cardics. But this wasn't the Baron. All reports said that the X wasn't the brand he bore.

"The Clans sent me with a message for the Baron," he said.

The man scoffed. "You have a death wish?"

Torin allowed a slight rueful smile. "Not really."

A bit of amusement crinkled the man's eyes. "What's the message?"

"It's to be delivered to the Baron himself." *You idiot!* Torin cursed himself. He could just deliver it here and now and avoid meeting with the Baron. But he also had to get some sort of a reply from the Baron for the Chieftain and Laird MacDuffy.

"Think you're gonna get very far wearing that up here?" A lanky man jabbed a finger at Torin's cloak.

If nothing else, Torin could always claim the messenger's protection. He didn't know if the outlaws and mercenaries of the Cardics followed the rule, but it was worth a try.

"My name is Torin MacLarrah, and I am an official messenger sent from Chieftain MacTavish of the seven Clans with a message for the Baron."

"Sounds fancy." The lanky man raised an eyebrow, fingering a knife with a look that Torin knew meant he was itching to use it on Torin.

"Luca." The leader held out a hand. Luca subsided with a scowl. "We'll take you to the Keep." Their leader almost seemed to sigh. "Don't say we didn't warn you."

He stepped forward to rest a hand on the reins. Torin didn't fight the action. He kept what he hoped was a neutral expression as the other three men fell in around him and escorted him up the path.

Ten minutes later, they passed under an archway caused by two rocks clashing together across the path, and Torin got his first glimpse of the Dragon Keep.

Grey stone walls towered above him. A dark green banner hung down above the gate, a black dragon coiled across its surface. Figures patrolled the walls, not even pausing to look down at them.

They entered through the wide gate that stood open to the path. A bulky keep rose in the midst of the walls, made of the same grey stone. Some of the stone looked newer in places, same with the walls.

Long barracks and stables spread along the eastern wall, and storehouses stood opposite. A few chickens clucked around the stables. They scattered in disarray as the mangiest looking dog Torin had ever seen bolted towards them. Laughter echoed behind it, and Torin stared in surprise at the two young children that chased after the dog. A cat sunned itself atop the shale roof, flicking its tail in disinterest at the commotion below it.

One of the children, a young boy, came up short at the sight of them. He waved at the leader before returning to the chase.

He must be crazy or someone of a high rank to dare bring children to live here.

Unfortunately, their arrival had begun to attract the attention of more than just the children. Men clustered in the courtyard, staring at him and whispering together. More than a few hate-filled stares were thrown his way though he didn't know what he'd done to earn them. Other than being of the Clans. Maybe the Baron's men knew more than just the rumors that circulated the rest of Alsaya.

"Come with me." The leader interrupted his musings. Torin dismounted and watched with some trepidation as his horse, his only hope for a quick escape, was led away towards the stables.

The other three men still followed as an escort as Torin trailed the leader up the steps and into the keep.

A wide fireplace stretched nearly half the width of the eastern wall. The heat from the blaze warmed him, chasing away the slight chill of early spring. More banners with the coiled dragon covered the walls, interspersed with weapons of varied design. He recognized a few of Gedrinian make. Suppose it wouldn't be hard to find some of those lying around. This keep used to be a border checkpoint between Alsaya and Gedrin.

"What are those?" Torin pointed to the weapons.

"Trophies from the men the Baron has defeated." The leader didn't even break stride.

"Maybe yours will be up there by the end of the day," Luca whispered.

Torin quickened his pace to get away from the man.

"Rorie!" the leader called.

A burly Highlander came towards them, his head shaved and tattooed with blue spiraling designs in the way of his people. One slanting mark stood like a sharp line along his left cheekbone—an outcast.

"Where's the Baron?"

The Highlander shrugged, staring at Torin. "What's this one doing up here, Bryn?"

"He wants to see the Baron."

Rorie crossed his muscular arms. "Do any of us want to see that happen?"

"Watch him while I go find the Baron."

"With pleasure." Rorie seemed unnervingly relieved to not have to be the one to alert the Baron of Torin's arrival.

Torin swallowed nervously again, a hard lump forming in the pit of his stomach. Time seemed to slow as he waited. He dragged his gaze from a massive battle axe above the fireplace to study the rest of the hall.

Long tables and benches were shoved against the opposite wall, likely pulled out for mealtimes. The keep didn't look big enough to house a separate dining hall. A wide dais took up the southern end of the hall. A carved wooden chair, ornate enough for a laird, sat in the center of the dais, draped in the skins of some large wild animal.

Gradually he became aware of louder murmurs of conversation around him. It seemed most of the men from the courtyard had found some reason to come inside. To see—whatever the Baron would do once he heard the news.

A door slammed and the hall fell silent. Rorie prodded Torin forward a step towards the dais. A tall figure strode out of a side door and onto the dais, turning to fix Torin with a soul-stopping glare.

The Baron wasn't old, like many believed. He was perhaps a few years from thirty. He wore dark clothes of blue and black, but no cloak. Nothing to point to his past connection with the Clans.

Torin nearly couldn't find the will to move. Even without speaking, the Baron lived up to his reputation. A scar slashed its way from under his left eye across his cheek to the jawbone. His brown eyes held the harsh light of a man who'd stared death in the face countless times. But Torin couldn't stop staring at the scar that traced half the Baron's throat.

"Well?" The Baron finally spoke in a rasping growl. "What could the Clans possibly want from me?"

Bryn flashed an almost sympathetic look down at Torin from his place behind the Baron. Torin cleared his throat once as he fumbled through the pouch at his belt for the message. He smoothed it out with shaking fingers.

“From Chieftain MacTavish and Laird Brogan MacDuffy,” he began.

A scoff broke from the Baron and he crossed his arms across his chest.

“MacDuffy’s Seer has been taken—”

“What?” The Baron’s voice cut like a whip and Torin’s next words died on his lips.

A wild look crossed the Baron’s face, fury building in his eyes. He strode down the steps and snatched the paper from Torin.

A thunderous curse broke from the Baron in a language Torin recognized as Karanti. So, it was true that the Baron had served in the Sea Wars. So maybe it was also true what they said about him and the murder of the Seabright prince seven years ago.

“This is true?” The paper crumpled in the Baron’s grip.

Torin nodded. He’d seen the aftermath himself, after Lord Adam’s men had taken Sean MacDuffy in front of his wife and children and disappeared over the border of the Clans’ land before they could chase after.

“What’s been done?”

Torin tried to take a step back from the Baron’s anger, but someone, Luca most likely, kept him from moving.

“Chieftain MacTavish and Laird MacDuffy have been gathering allies and trying to find a solution—”

“What’s been done about Sean?” The Baron’s voice neared a shout.

“That’s what they want to speak with you about. They feel you should be involved because you—you’re...” Torin stumbled to a halt.

The Baron had been cast out of Clan MacDuffy for his crimes seven years ago. He could claim no ties to Sean MacDuffy, and to speak of such a thing was against Clan law.

“I’m what?” The Baron asked, dangerously calm. “They proved years ago that I’m nothing to them. What do they want from me that they can’t do?”

Torin drew another breath of courage. “I was only bid to bring you the message about the Seer, sir. Laird MacDuffy will speak with you more at length.”

“Will he?” he scoffed. “And how, *exactly*, will he do that?”

“Chieftain MacTavish requests you return to speak with Laird MacDuffy and gives you permission to return to the Seer’s family.”

The look the Baron gave him could have split a stone in two.

“And if I don’t?”

Torin shrugged almost helplessly. He didn’t dare mention how long it had taken the Chieftain and Laird MacDuffy to send the message to the Baron.

“There are rumors of war. They move to protect the Clans and Sean.”

The Baron narrowed his eyes. He saw right through the paltry excuse. Torin began to feel sorry for the Chieftain and Laird MacDuffy. They might have underestimated the Baron.

“I assume your horse is still fresh,” he said.

Torin nodded. He hadn’t pushed hard on his way up.

“Good. You still have enough daylight to make it a good distance back down the mountain trails. Rorie, see him out.” The Baron turned and began to walk away.

“Wait!” Torin said, surprised by his boldness.

The Baron pivoted, and Torin willed himself to meet those dark eyes.

“I’m to bring a reply back from you to let the lairds know if they are to expect you.”

The Baron stepped closer. His voice came dangerously low. “You can tell them that I don’t have to cater to their whims. You can tell them where to shove that message.” He strode from the hall without another glance.

“Guess that’s a no, then,” Torin muttered.

A hand clapped his shoulder. “Come on, lowlander.” Rorie steered him back to the hall doors.

“Lowlander?” Torin scoffed. “You know the Clans have the higher ground, right?”

Rorie shook his head, a bit of a grin creasing his cheeks. “Sure, we let you think that.”

Torin rolled his eyes and allowed himself to be escorted back outside. A man with an assortment of dogs, a falcon, and what was possibly a three-legged cougar kit trailing after him led Torin’s horse from the stables.

He handed off the reins to Torin without a word and left with his strange entourage. Torin blinked, not quite sure what to make of the Dragon Keep. It had its share of danger to be sure, but a puzzling element lay beneath it.

Cleanliness pervaded the courtyard and keep. There were a few women about, but they seemed nothing more than

the wives of some of the men. He still couldn't explain the children—an odd sight in the midst of the outlaw brands.

He cast one last look up at the keep before riding out. Maybe the Baron did care about something after all.



The Baron watched the messenger leave from the window of his chamber high in the northeast corner of the keep.

The news he had brought had thrown the anger at seeing the Clan cloak into disarray.

Sean's been taken. By one of the southern lords. *Why?*

He rubbed a thumb along the scar on his cheek. *And what are MacTavish and Brogan planning that they need me to go get him?*

But his mind kept returning to Sean, dredging up painful memories from the past he'd tried so hard to wall off.

It had been so long since he'd heard the names of the Clans. Heard the name MacDuffy.

"Gives you permission to return to the Seer's family."

Return to his—He didn't have a family anymore. He didn't know if he could return to the place he'd once been called something other than Baron.

Rhys MacDuffy.

Even thinking his old name hurt. The last time it had been spoken had been in public disgrace.

A knock sounded on the heavy oaken door.

"What?" he growled.

Bryn pushed his way in, coming to stand a few paces away. Bryn crossed his arms, flicking one knife in and out of its sheath.

“What did that mean to you?”

The Baron paused a long moment. “Sean is the Seer of Clan MacDuffy. He is—was—my...” The word stuck in his throat. “We share blood,” he finally finished.

There was a time he’d have done anything for Sean, protected him from anything. But not anymore. Brogan had made sure of that.

“It sounds like he’s in trouble.” Bryn sheathed the knife with a snap.

The Baron cast a sideways glance at him. Bryn never beat around the bush, always cutting directly to the point. It was one reason he’d allowed Bryn to stick around all those years ago.

He bit back the retort that Sean always seemed to be in trouble. He didn’t know Sean anymore. It had been seven years since his expulsion from the Clans. And even longer since he’d seen Sean, thanks to the Sea Wars that had taken him far from the northern highlands and embroiled him in the matters of lords and princes.

What if he doesn’t want to see me? What if he believes everything they said about me, and hates me?

He shook away the thought. Sean could never hate anyone. And Sean would never believe anything bad about him anyway. The thought almost pained him. *Maybe he would if he could see me now.*

“Baron?” Bryn jerked him back to the present.

He turned away from the window, avoiding looking at the chest in the corner that held a broken blade and torn pieces of blue and yellow checkered cloth.

“They want me for something. I’m not going.” He’d do it just to spite MacTavish and Brogan.

Bryn raised an eyebrow. “But...”

“But what, Bryn?” He snapped, irritation flaring deep within him. Bryn was another one who believed that somewhere inside him still lived a decent man. “They turned on me without a word, and cast me out. And now, seven years later, choose to ignore that fact because they need me for something. It wouldn’t surprise me if they invented the story about Sean just to get me to come.”

Because Brogan remembers that once I’d do anything for him.

“I looked at the message, Baron. I don’t think that’s true.”

He refused to look at Bryn, because that would make him admit that he was almost frightened to return to the place of his birth. Maybe not everyone would be as forgiving as Sean could be.

“I’m not going,” he said, edging his voice with the finality that meant bodily harm if he was crossed.

Bryn didn’t argue, just saluted and left the room.

He went back to the window. The messenger was long gone. No movement disturbed the path that wound up to the keep.

The door creaked again, and heavy paws padded over to him. A damp nose shoved its way into his hand. He briefly looked down into the liquid brown eyes of Ajax. The lanky hound was a mix of mastiff and mountain timberwolf, and just as nosy as some of his men.

“Don’t you start too,” he muttered, scratching Ajax under the chin. Ajax huffed and wandered away, leaving him feeling a bit betrayed.

The rest of the day existed just to spite him. No matter what he did, the words kept returning to taunt him.

“MacDuffy’s Seer has been taken.”

And each time he would shove them away angrily and turn to something else.

They followed him into the night, twining through his restless dreams, another way for his mind to taunt him. He woke exhausted and half-smothered by Ajax as the mastiff attempted to nudge him to wakefulness.

He shoved Ajax away and the mastiff retreated with a huff to wait by the door. The Baron dressed quickly, trying to ignore the tenseness that smothered his shoulders and began to creep up his neck.

A knock at the door sent Ajax growling softly, and the Baron scowling in irritation.

I’m going to be pissed if that’s not breakfast.

He crossed to the oaken door in a few strides and wrenched it open with more force than was strictly necessary.

Bryn stood on the other side, noticeably without breakfast.

“What?”

Bryn didn’t flinch from the extra grumble in his voice. “Rake and his patrol picked up the trail of those mercenaries who started encroaching a few weeks ago. He sent a scout back to ask if he’s stopping them permanently or giving them their last warning.”

“Where are they?”

“Down by the hot springs,” Bryn said. “There’s six of them. Looks like they picked up another man since last time.”

The Baron picked up his two-handed broad sword and buckled it about his waist. “Pick five men and meet me down in the courtyard.”

Bryn flicked two fingers to his forehead in a lazy salute and strode off. The Baron grabbed his cloak. Ajax rose eagerly to join him on his way down the winding halls and into the courtyard.

He’d only heard reports of the mercenaries. They’d first been stopped while threatening a small group of foresters that he allowed to work in the territory he’d carved out—for a small tax of course.

After six years of commanding from the Dragon Keep, the Baron had built up a reputation among the criminals and outcasts that populated the mountains. Most that had been there for more than a few years and didn’t want to join his men knew to steer clear of the boundaries he’d set, or paid a small tribute to be left alone and operate their own ‘business’ without interference. In effect, he controlled most of the Cardic Mountains that spread from the northernmost point of Alsaya all the way down to the Dari Sea.

But occasionally, some new band would find their way into the mountains and openly scorn his uncontested rule. Amusing in a way, but he had no patience for their typical heavy-handed tactics.

Even outcasts and accused traitors had a code.

Six horses stood in the courtyard in various stages of preparation as he exited the keep. One of his men led his black horse towards him, already saddled and bridled.

The Baron took Draco's reins and nodded his thanks. Ajax brushed against Draco's legs in greeting as the Baron swung into the saddle. Bryn strode from the keep, pausing only to kiss his wife before mounting. He nudged his horse closer and extended a steaming, savory sausage wrapped in bread to the Baron. Breakfast.

The Baron gave another wordless nod as he took it. In his haste to find something to get his mind off the previous day, he'd almost forgotten about the meal.

The rest of the men mounted and fell in behind him as he led the way from the gates and onto the southwestern path that would lead them towards the hot springs.

The hour's ride passed in silence. Only the faint creak of the saddles betrayed the presence of riders as the horses stepped quietly along the path.

A hissing among the whispering pines alerted him that their destination lay ahead. Wisps of steam rose in curling tendrils, visible among the branches.

Bryn whistled from by his side, and a figure slipped back out from among the trees. Rake's lookout didn't seem surprised to see the Baron.

"We've been waiting for you, sir. We've got them surrounded by the rocks. Haven't done anything yet."

The Baron nodded and pushed Draco forward. The narrow path ran between two pines with scattered flowers at their bases, leading into a wide dell. Smoothed rocks spread out in a wide open space, their surfaces shimmering with water that bubbled over from the waist deep pools pockmarked among them.

Rake and his seven men stood in a loose circle around the outside of the rocks, perched atop the driest formations with spears lazily threatening the figures that lounged among the pools.

The Baron dismounted and stepped up beside Rake, a lithe man with a narrowed face and cold green eyes.

“That one seems to be the leader.” Rake gestured down to the bulkiest of the men who sported a crooked nose and leering smile. A short sword that looked like standard southern army issue lay by his side.

“He’s been going on about their recent exploits down in Trilon Village. Women, valuables, and possibly a murder,” Rake announced loud enough for the men to hear. Not that Rake cared, but the Baron did.

His hand tightened into a fist. The first crime he hated with a passion. He’d seen enough of it during the Sea Wars. The second, he didn’t care as much for. They’d confiscate the valuables and perhaps return some of it. They had something of an understanding with Trilon. He’d get the story of the murder out of the men before he decided what to do with them.

The leader lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the morning sunlight as he peered up at Rake and the Baron.

“Your backup here, little man?” He jeered. “Brave enough to do something about us now?”

Rake tossed him a mirthless smile. “Something like that.”

The leader’s lip curled up in a sneer as he sized up the Baron. “Who’s the broody one? Come to glare us off our land?”

The Baron lifted an eyebrow. *So they think they’re here to stay.*

One of the mercenaries stared up at him. The man's face paled a shade and he reached out to slap the leader's arm, whispering and pointing up at the Baron.

He almost smiled. His leather jerkin sported the coiled dragon sigil of the keep. The fact was well known among the men who came to the mountains. As were his scars and the wild speculations on how he'd gotten them.

The leader squinted back up at him, then returned to his reclined position. "So you're the big bad Baron, eh? Thought you'd be older."

"Most do," the Baron replied, allowing his voice to rasp a little deeper.

At least two of the mercenaries flinched, and one rubbed his throat in sympathy.

The man scoffed. "So what you going to do then, Baron?"

"You've already been told once to leave. What do you think is going to happen?" the Baron returned.

Some of the mercenaries shifted nervously. The leader remained in his relaxed position, but one hand fell to the hilt of his sword.

"I say we stay here. We're not bothering you."

The Baron lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "You're on my land. You've 'bothered' some people that pay tribute to me. I don't want you here, so yes, you are bothering me."

The man sat upright, drawing the sword a little closer to him. "Don't you usually recruit for your Cairns?" He cast a glance around at the men surrounding them.

The Baron allowed a mirthless smile. "Only if I see something of value."

One of the mercenaries swallowed nervously and reached over to tug at the leader's sleeve. "Let's just go, Carran."

Carran wrenched his arm away. "No," he sneered. "I think the Baron here's only threatening because he's got backup. Wouldn't be so brave if he was all alone."

Rake snorted in amusement and a few of the Cairns laughed outright.

"Sure you want to say that?" Bryn asked, his voice laced with warning.

"Why not? I also hear that you allow challenges, Baron. I think I'd make a better baron. Rule these mountains better, and make some of those lords shake in fear."

"Where've you been that you haven't heard the stories outside the mountains?" Rake asked, jabbing his spear towards Carran.

But the Baron rested a hand on his sword, willing to indulge the man's stupidity. It would be a good way to keep his mind off the message from yesterday.

"Well, if you think you can do better," he began conversationally, drawing his sword. "Who am I to deny that?"

He stepped down from the rock, finding footing in a small bit of dirt among the rocks. His Cairns banged their spears on the rocks and moved in closer.

"We'll start collecting rocks for your grave then!" one jeered at the leader as he slowly got to his feet.

Carran gripped his sword tight. The Baron had to give him credit for bravery. Or maybe just for resounding idiocy for deciding to challenge him and disregard the Cairns. His men had as much of a reputation as he did.

The Baron undid his cloak and tossed it to Bryn. Three of his men shooed the other mercenaries back with the tips of their spears, leaving Carran alone to face him.

Carran moved forward until he, too, stood on even ground. He shifted his weight between his feet and lunged forward. The Baron swiped his sword away and attacked. He'd trained with blade masters in his youth. He'd trained in the war against the skill of the Karanti. And he'd trained in the mountain with outcasts who didn't care about a fair fight.

He pushed Carran back under a barrage of blows until he staggered against the rocks. But Carran shifted his footing again and stepped up onto the rocks to give himself leverage. He switched from defense to raining down blows on the Baron.

The Baron stepped back out of range, then took to the rocks himself. Carran's eyes widened in surprise, but had no choice but to continue the fight across the slick rocks.

The pace of their battle changed, pauses lingering between strikes as they scrambled for footing on the rocks. But the Baron kept pushing him back, moving from one rock to the other with confident movements.

Almost there. He watched in grim pleasure as Carran retreated back another step closer towards the largest of the steaming pools. He gambled and flicked a quick lunge, setting Carran off balance as he hastily swung to counter. The Baron jumped forward, shoving Carran down to the rocks. Carran's sword clattered from his hand as he scrabbled to keep himself from sliding all the way into the pool.

The Baron leveled his sword at his throat. "Don't move," he growled.

Carran froze, glaring up at him with hatred. "So now what? You kill me?"

The Baron glanced at the fallen sword. "I don't kill unarmed men." He still had some lines he didn't cross.

"So let me up and let's finish this."

The Baron shook his head. "It is finished. You're done. Be grateful you made it out of this one and go."

He kicked Carran's sword further away with a clatter. Bryn stepped close enough to pick it up. The Baron sheathed his sword and backed a step away before turning. "Escort him out of here. Make sure he knows that he won't see another sunrise if he comes back."

A scuff sounded behind him. The Baron watched the reactions of the men facing him—horror from Carran's men, and near pity from the Cairns. The Baron shook his head and pulled a knife.

Carran bellowed a wordless yell, his own knife ringing free. The Baron whirled around, knife held in front of him. The force of Carran's charge knocked him backwards, but he grabbed Carran's tunic and brought him with him as he tumbled to the ground.

A rock smashed into the Baron's side, leaving him gasping for breath. Carran moved slowly off him, shaking his head to clear it as blood dribbled from a gash on his forehead.

He moved to his knees and slashed an unsteady blow at the Baron. He knocked it aside with his hand, pinning Carran in place.

Carran's fist caught his jaw in a stunning blow and he rolled away, cursing. The Baron pushed up to his feet. Carran wobbled uncertainly, still blinking away blood. Fury heated in

his chest, and the Baron strode forward to plunge his knife into Carran's heart.

The mercenary gasped in shock before crumpling to the ground. You should have just left. The Baron stared down at him before stepping away and cleaning his knife.

Carran's men stood in silence as he strode towards them.

"Anyone else?" he asked.

They shook their heads collectively.

"Hands!" he barked.

They all hastily showed the backs of their hands, free of brands.

"Why are you here?"

"War's brewing in the lower lands," the man that had tried to dissuade Carran from fighting spoke up. "There's some strange druids out and about. None of us wanted any part of that, so we decided to come up here and see about settling in." His throat bobbed nervously. "Which we'll be on our way now."

"Druids?" One of the Cairns pushed up closer. "They wear green robes?"

The Baron tilted a curious glance at the Cairn. Kiro had come to him from the Darvani, a race of people that sprang from the Karanti and their conquered nations. He'd seen more than one country before deciding to come to the mountains.

The mercenary nodded. "I've seen some of what they do. It's not natural. Almost—evil. Pure evil." He twisted his fingers in a warding sign.

Kiro spat. "*Dialan*. Those druids are bad business, Baron. Means trouble if they're here. They worship some creature, demon maybe. The pictures aren't pleasant. And the things they do..." He shrugged. "Magic, maybe?"

Rake scoffed. "Magic? You been listening to Rorie again?"

Kiro shook his head. "Doubt all you want, my friend. I know what I've seen and this man here will tell you the same. Blood magic, human sacrifice, and worse. You don't want to know what happened to the countries that they took over."

The mercenary bobbed his head, almost scared to be seen agreeing with a Cairn.

The Baron rubbed a thumb along his scarred cheek. Kiro always had some tall tales to tell about his adventures outside the mountains, but most had a grain of truth. And the mercenary didn't look like he denied the claim about magic or any of the darker works that Kiro had mentioned.

"Where are these druids?" he asked. "Doesn't sound like Sarksten would much like them around."

He remembered Lord Sarksten from the Sea Wars. The lord of the eastern marches and foothills wasn't one to tolerate something like the druids.

"Down in Lord Adam's lands. Rumor has it he invited them."

The Baron froze. Lord Adam. The one the message named as the lord that had taken Sean.

War. These druids. That has to be the reason he took Sean. But there's too much going on that I don't know.

He ground his teeth in frustration. The only way he'd get the full story was to answer MacTavish's summons.

"Rake, I want a few men out to get some information on their stories."

Rake raised an eyebrow in surprise, but shrugged. "What about them, Baron?"

The Baron regarded the mercenaries. They looked like solid fighters. Carran seemed to be the only argumentative one.

“Which one of you killed a man down in Trilon?”

The mercenary pointed a shaking finger at Carran’s body. There were more than a few murderers among his men, but it always helped to know a man’s tendencies before bringing him into a group like the Cairns.

“You have two choices. Leave my territory and never come back, or try and make your mark up at the Dragon Keep. This doesn’t mean I’ll take you. You have a few tests to get through first. Decide.”

Four men, including the one who’d given the information on the druids, elected to go to the Keep. The other two gathered their things and set off down the mountain, escorted by three Cairns.

He turned away, leaving another two Cairns to bury Carran’s body away from the springs.

He mounted Draco and turned back towards the Keep. Bryn fell in beside him.

“That didn’t sound good,” Bryn remarked after a few minutes ride in silence.

“No,” the Baron spoke around a tight jaw.

“What’s your plan then, Baron?”

He shook his head. Bryn knew him too well.

“I’ll go to the Clans and see what they have to say.” And if Sean had been taken, then he’d go find him. Even if seeing Sean again was the worst thing he could do.

He glanced up at the sun’s position through the gaps in the pines. Their secretive whispers set him on edge.

"I'll leave early tomorrow." He could make it to the Seer's home by early evening. He'd planned the trip in his head more than once in the early days of living in the mountains.

"By yourself?" Bryn's voice held a note of disapproval.

As amusing, and reassuring, as it would be to bring some of his men along into the heart of the Clans' territory, it wasn't the best idea. "I want you, Rorie, and Jes to join me in the lowlands in a few days."

Bryn grunted his approval. All three men were some of his most loyal soldiers. They'd watch his back during the journey and whatever was coming.

He spurred Draco on a little faster as if to outrun the anxiety that swooped in. Once out of the mountains, there would be no way to outrun his past. He had more than a feeling he'd come to regret this decision.



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