

Fire, as a vestige of Sigur's light, is preternaturally effective against the creature. —
Grand Inquisitor Ulrich Vetterand

Selene's mother waited for her in the parlor, a smile on her lips. She always held that smile for Selene, like the world only mattered when her daughter entered the room. Often because that's the only time it did. That was simply the truth, and Selene never shied away from painful truths.

"How did you fare?" she asked.

Selene placed the new dress at the head of the lounge and pulled out her true prize hidden in the length of the frilly sleeve: a waster. A dagger made of solid oak.

"The tailor's son made it for me." She kept her voice low.

Mother sighed, her hand placed to her chest. "Oh, Selene." The tone was one of admonishment, but Selene noticed the smile never disappeared.

"Where's Father?"

"Upstairs reading. He won't want to be disturbed."

They looked at the wide stairs, visible from the parlor. Tension thickened the air. Pressed in from the gilded walls, panels of oak, scalloped columns of stone. All cracked and fading. The rotten sides of a rotten home.

Selene cut the tension. "Have you heard from Tristain?"

Mother shook her head. "No. I would've thought you knew more than me. He writes those letters to you, not his mother or father. You'd think he was your brother by blood."

Nearly was, at least how she thought of it. But then, they'd also shared secrets, and kissed, and more. These were secrets to be kept out of necessity, along with the contents of their letters.

She longed for the time when Tristain would tell her the stories of the brave knights. Those like Leon Strong of Vorland, from the wild South Hills, who slew twenty men with a broken sword.

Father thought it adorable, at first, when his son and his adopted daughter chased each other around the courtyard with sticks and buckets for helmets. Then he'd grown tired of it, and the older Selene became, the more she was expected to do her duty. Sew, knit, clean, care. Learn the duties of a noblewoman, to be married. Wrapped and presented like a prize pig. Perhaps he intended her to marry Bann, the firstborn, but he'd died not a year ago.

Tristain had gone off to join Leon the Strong, in Archduke Albrecht's war in Badonnia. A dream, some would say. A nightmare for her.

All the bad thoughts gave her a headache. She leaned her head around the corner, measuring the silence, counting her breaths. How long before Father descended those stairs?

She sat on the lounge, facing bodily to her adoptive mother.

“Sing a song, Mother,” she said sweetly. She placed her hands in her lap.

Mother tucked a stray lock of Selene’s raven-dark hair behind her ear.

“All right, dear.”

Oh, gentle breeze,

I feel you on my cheek,

You pass by me so gently,

And I miss you so sweetly.

Bright goosepimples raised her neck. Selene felt her love pour out for her adoptive mother, like the goddess Eme’s amphora into an endless cup.

Oh, gentle lover,

I feel you on my cheek,

I pass by you so gently,

And I let you go, so sweetly—

“Where’s that bitch!” Father’s voice roared across the parlor. Mother turned white, her song choked in her mouth like bile.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said, marching into the room. The sound of his feet marked Selene’s death.

He burst into the room with the fervor of an angry, wild animal, doublet open. His face had gone purple.

“But I told you to fix this button,” he said, showing her a brass, acorn-shaped button, hanging loose. “You gallivant around town like a common whore, and I suffer for it.”

Selene stood slowly. It was like talking into the mouth of a bear. “You gave me permission to go to Invereid.”

“Not to spend an entire day there.”

“It’s not my fault you tore the button.” She regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth.

“Sebastian, please,” Mother said as she put herself in his path. “She’ll do what you asked.”

“Get out of my way.” Father’s voice froze with its coldness, like a rime falling on an already icy land. He took his belt off and wrapped it around his hand. “I need to teach her a lesson.”

“Enough. She’s just a child.”

“She’s sixteen. I’d fought for the emperor twice by the time I was her age.”

As you keep reminding us, she thought. But she kept those words to herself. She didn’t feel like being beaten within a hair’s width of death.

“Go, Sebastian.” Mother cooed and put her hands on his shoulder.

He shoved her off and turned against her, facing his side, like a swordsman. A swordsman indeed, one well past his glories.

“I ought to teach you a lesson as well. My only remaining son is off in Badonnia and doubts plague me yet again whether he is even my son. No son of mine would’ve lost that tournament.”

The leather of his belt stretched over his fist, making a horrible noise. He pulled it tighter.

Mother pushed her hand back, finding Selene’s arm.

“Hide,” she whispered.

Selene nodded. Hiding like a coward. Would Tristain have hid?

Yes. No one faced Father’s wrath and survived. She almost thought his firstborn, Bann, hadn’t died in Ostelar, but had just run afoul of his moods one day.

She ran into the hallway to the left side of the parlor, opposite where Father had come from and the stairs. He cried out after her.

“Get back here!”

“Sebastian, no! Here, I’m here.”

Their voices faded out of earshot as she entered his office. She opened the wardrobe at the back of the room and stepped in, closed the door behind her.

You never know just how loud your breath is until you’re hiding from a monster. Desperately, Selene wanted to quiet herself, and smothered at her mouth and lips. Deeper and deeper she shrunk, pushing, sinking herself into the darkest places of the wardrobe. Voices muffled through the wood, full of hate and anger. Selene’s chest constricted painfully at the noise. They’d followed her into his office.

“Of course, he’s yours,” Mother said. They seemed to pace back and forth, their voices getting louder and quieter.

“You weren’t pregnant when I left, wench,” Father roared, voice thick with irritation. “I was gone for the better part of a year, and I come home to find you’ve had a son!”

Tears forced their way out of Selene’s eyes as their voices went quiet again.

Ginevra, Sigur, Eme, anyone of you that’ll help, just save me now! Praying to the Gods, she wanted an end to it, for one of them to storm from the room, as their arguments usually went. But for all her praying, Selene was trapped.

Mother’s voice came around again. “...bringing this up every moon. Why don’t you believe me?”

His vile threat sounded across the room. “I should’ve killed him in the crib.”

“You know what—I’m glad he’s nothing like you. Why would I ever want him to be like *you*? I *wish* he wasn’t yours.”

Selene heard nothing more. The weight of the silence pressed down on her more than all the suffocating blackness around her. She pressed her ear against the door, hoping to hear something, anything.

A piercing scream sent Selene reeling back against the wood. She threw her arm out, shoving herself from the wardrobe.

A great, hairy beast loomed over Mother’s limp body. Father. Selene’s breath left her though she wanted to scream, *No!* Strained eyes flicked over the monster and the violent scene before her, shivers running through her legs and arms and hands and neck, bowing her knees, and bringing her elbows in tight. At last, her voice found her, and she howled at the woman’s twisted, unmoving face, poppy-red blood settling on her dress of silk.

The misshapen man and wolf that was her father turned its icy gaze on Selene, fixing her to the floor, her muscles refusing to listen. Lowered to the floorboards, he stalked towards her, nasty and hideous. Bared, curved teeth brought to a savage point. Bright, silvered eyes of blue, repulsive pools of acid. Deep, cruel snarls filled her ears. Selene flinched as the creature reached out slowly for her.

She ran. Sharp pain tore across her back, but she kept running. Out of the room, down the hall. She heard the tumbling of heavy feet behind her. Gasping for breath, she felt the creature just behind her, feeling inches away from horrible agony.

Bursting through the front door, she screamed for help. She felt something rough and strong close around her calf. She fell hard. Her temple and ear wracked with sharp pain as they slapped against the ground. In a daze, she thought she heard people shouting. She rolled over with a groan. Claws dug into her left arm. Agonizing, blinding pain ripped through her very core.

She drove her head into the ground, trying to escape, trying to focus on anything but the searing throes of anguish she felt. Convulsing, she felt like even boiling water or a hot poker could not hurt this much. The edges of her vision frayed, darkening with hot excruciation. Then her world went dark.

Trying to clear the edges of her swimming vision, she blinked. She needed to look over herself, and wrenched her head up. A silent, pained scream escaped from her mouth. She shook like a leaf. The big blacksmith Tomas lay on the ground, dead, while Father's half-burned monstrous form lay sprawled out next to him. Only then did she notice the smell of burning flesh and singed hair. The beast wasn't moving, for now, but she had to pull herself away. Who knew if it would come back to life? She tried to pull herself away but felt a weight on her shoulder. And below that, nothing. With a clatter of iron, the still-hot half-made blade fell off her left arm as she pulled with her other arm and pushed with her feet.

Shouts and curses came from behind her, in front, all around. She felt it, an unstoppable wrenching and twisting hole digging deeper into her stomach. She blinked, in a blur already to the stables, her heart beating faster and faster. Her mind screamed to get on her horse. She tried to use her arms to pull herself up, but it wasn't working. The air was impossibly warm and stifling.

Using a small step, she flung herself, flopping headfirst onto her horse's unsaddled flanks, and her left arm flailed behind loose and limp. Wild eyes and even wilder screams from the yard. *Oh Gods... I have to run! What if... what if there's more of them?* She strained, hooking one leg over and using her thighs to pull herself upright. The horse took off, knowing what its master wanted, and she closed her right fist around the creature's mane, fingers white, holding on for dear life.

The landscape moved in a blur around her. The horse followed a path only it knew for a time, only it kept track of. Heat rose in her chest as her vision blurred. The air grew stifling again. The world spun, and she was on her back. Pain hit her in waves. She lost feeling in her other fingers and her toes. Above her, an old man in a black robe leaned over, concern on his face. The man kneeled down, long grey hairs falling over his face. *Old... old man of Sigur...* She was delirious. *As the Gods left this world, so too do I...*

She woke several times in a daze, feeling herself being carried, the sound of hooves and wooden wheels grinding dirt. She heard voices talking over her as she lay. Agonizing pain bit into her spine, shooting through her bones. Blissfully, darkness visited her once again.

As the orange sun streamed through a window above, Selene blinked her eyes open. Her vision swam. She moved her eyes with purpose, as though she had to get used to the movement again. A man in a grey robe with a blood-spattered leather apron looked back at her. The room

had walls of stone and was chilly, despite the sunlight. She went to sit up, but only one arm did the job and so she fell on her left side. She gasped.

No... Gods be good... She reached over with her other arm and felt only a bandaged stump. Eyes widened in denial. She screamed, again and again, wishing it weren't true. Writhing in panic, loss, mournful sorrow, she felt two hands grip her tightly. The man in grey restrained her. He called for help.

She was inconsolable, tears and screams coming unbidden. It took two grown men to hold her fast to the bed. She kept screaming until her voice went hoarse and choked. Someone forced a white liquid into her mouth. Exhaustion settled over her, and sleep came quickly after.

Selene had fallen from her horse, she was told. Her left arm was barely attached and had to be amputated. The robed man with the long hair was not an old priest, but a warrior of Sigur, a Golden Sword named Sorenus. He had taken her to a nearby church to be treated, where the doctor was also the priest, Radimir. She blushed as Sorenus came to her in her sickly state. One arm and no good for it. He was beautiful, and she was sure she looked horrible. She certainly felt it.

He had airs of authority, standing straight-backed, with a firm chin and muscular neck. His grey eyes were the only thing dull about him, if that could even be said. Streaks of silver marred his lustrous dark hair tied down the back, with shaved sides. It was an odd style, evocative of a woman's rather than a man's. Still, it did him much favor to attract attention to his sharp, rising cheekbones, a mix of fresh and old scars on them. He wore black; a boiled leather jerkin and black trousers paired with black boots.

"Good to see you're awake," he said quietly. "I was afraid the priest was too generous with the poppy milk."

Selene's throat was hoarse when she spoke. All the screaming, she supposed. "Perhaps he should've been... I might've slept forever."

He sat at the end of her bed. "You know why I saved you? You would've died, the corruption ran so deep."

"Corruption?"

"The wound was infected, that was plain. The priest had to take it up to the shoulder to cut away all the corrupted flesh. That happens when demons attack: corruption takes hold. If you're lucky enough to survive. The strangest thing, though, it was cauterized. I think that was what saved you from bleeding out, allowed you to make it as far as you did on horseback, delirious as you were. My question stands, though. Do you know why I took you to this place?"

"No."

"I saw your strength in your white knuckles clinging to the horse's mane as you fell. The determination in your grazed elbows and skinned knees. The courage in your actions. There is no question that hard steel lies in your heart. The willingness to do what others cannot."

She snorted. He couldn't be serious. She laughed at his stoic look. Clearly, he didn't think it was a joke. "You're not serious! You may as well have left me. What good am I?"

"Everyone has something to offer the world. There is value in all life. It is as Sigur says, 'Each man to their own place'."

Selene took issue. "What about murderers? Thieves?"

"These are but wayward souls, driven to sin by the evil that lies at the root of the world. We can save them, with just punishment."

She sniffed. *Trite answer. But what about...* "Wukodlaks? What value is there in horrible monsters?"

His face darkened. "There is value in their lives."

"How?"

"You wish to bait me? Make me speak something that is not true?" His cold eyes fixed on her. She kept his gaze. She would not cower. He sighed, his face relaxing. "Each one dead brings us closer to the return of the Gods. It was the Great Devil's sin that drove the rift between our world and the Gods. Undoing that sin will heal the rift."

Selene nodded quietly. She didn't know if his words were to be believed, but he certainly seemed to believe them. There was something comforting about them, the certainty with which he spoke. If life was riddled with doubts and fears, this Sorenus had learned how to overcome them.

"Now," he said, getting up. "Time for supper, I think."

The next week, Sorenus had gone out, recruiting as he did. Selene was bent low, sweeping the floor with a short-handled broom. It was hard with one arm, exhausting to use the same hand to sweep, keep her hair from falling into her face *and* open the door to sweep the dust outside. Gods forbid, the wind would blow it back inside. But she was recovering, getting around on her feet now, so she was at least glad for that. Until she tried grabbing for things with her missing arm. Her mind worked on it, but her body just did nothing. Untethered. That was how she felt, and it broke her the first night, and for several nights after. But grief and pain eases in time, just as easily as the sun rises in the morn and sets in the eve.

Managing with one arm had felt impossible, but each day that took her further away from the loss gave her another day to get used to it. She learned how to dress herself with one arm—easier than you think, seeing as there's only two holes to get through instead of three—and how to brush her hair. Harder to bloody do anything, and slower. But not impossible.

As she swept the floors, she looked upon the various golden figures purposefully placed around the church. Mounted opposite the main doors was a cruciform sword, plated with gold, pointing to the sky. Prongs of brass wreathed its base, symbolizing light piercing darkness. In a small alcove to the side was the icon of a woman engulfed in flame—a messenger of the Gods burned at the stake by non-believers. On a plinth by the altar was a golden lantern that would remain unlit until Sigur's return to the world.

The church of Sigur was a haven for believers, all believers of His word. A safe place for kings, peasants, merchants, vagabonds, outlaws all—as long as they believed. Each one of them served Him in their own way, as Sorenus said.

Folk arrived from the local village for midday prayers. She hid. No one should've seen her like this. She recognized the headman and his family, as well as the smith, the butcher, the baker, and even the shepherd with his stinking sheepskin garments. Her disappearance and the attack at the house would set tongues wagging. It was only a matter of time before people found out.

The priest led them in Gebet, in prayer. His sermons echoed off the stone walls, the vaulted ceiling, in High Istrian, the language of their forebears.

“Sigur harden our hearts against the unwilling, the coward, the selfish, those who pursue self-interest and power above all. I say in the name of the martyrs and the Conqueror, the blood, and the spirit. Father be with us.”

As he finished, the congregation sang. Selene's mood lifted as the sweet, somber tones entered her ears. They sang of the strength of Diana, of Orpheus, of Marthea. Hallowed women that gave their lives for Sigur.

After an hour or so—Selene lost track of time—they finished. She hummed along to the tune. *Mm-m. Mmm. Mm-m. Mm. Mm-m. Orpheus found her strength that day...* The congregation filed out the door as the priest caught her eye. He came over to her hiding place and smiled, telling her that Sorenus would soon return. She smiled and nodded, but wondered why he thought it was her business.

She went to her room, unsure what to do now she'd finished her chores. The chores were her condition: not that the priest had asked for payment in swept floors, but they were her own condition, a repayment for all he'd done for her. It was hard work, though, and she was glad it was now over with.

She sat on the bed. Her room was small. There was no gilding on the walls, not like her bedroom at home. No eye-waveringly complex patterns in plaster. No private privies here—she

shared hers with the priest and Sorenus. Only a bed big enough for one, and a sturdy, functional dresser in the corner, behind the door.

A glint of something there caught her eye. She groaned as she got to her feet, feeling more exhausted than she had before she sat down. She pulled back the door. It was a dull silver plate, fallen off the counter. Clicking her tongue, she imagined how long it had been sitting there, without a soul to see it. Beauty like that should never be hidden. She lifted the plate, and caught herself in the reflection.

Nothing but a stump for a shoulder. She screwed up her face. She hoped somehow it had been a terrible dream, but now that she saw it for herself... tears couldn't but fall. She sobbed quietly. *Why didn't I have the courage? I should've... I should've fought back. Grabbed the letter knife he kept on his desk instead of hiding like a coward. Maybe Mama would still be alive.*

Her ears pricked up as she overheard a conversation through the door. She wiped her eyes. "The girl is young and spirited. She seems to be recovering well," Radimir's voice came muffled through the thick wood.

"Good," Sorenus replied. "Her guardian father is dead. I examined the corpse myself. The blacksmith killed him with a blade he was beating into shape, fortunate that it was still hot, igniting the demon's fur. Unfortunate though that before the demon died, it cut the blacksmith's belly open. And Sigur be true, when the blade fell on her arm, it must've done what you said, sealing the wound closed."

"Hm. What will you do with her, Inquisitor?"

Inquisitor? She knew the stories. The name spoke to their purpose. They searched out evil. And the man that had raised her... she bit her lip. Had he really died back there, in the yard? It must've been true. Maybe... maybe she could go home. *No. There's nothing for me back there. Only her stiff body in that horrible, angry place. Tristain is in Badonnia. Perhaps I could go there. But would I even make it? And... I'd have to tell him that his father was a monster, who had slain his mother...*

A long pause drew out before Sorenus replied, "Test her. She may prove herself in time."

The next day, Sorenus came to her as she milked the goats in the little paddock behind the church. He held a broom in his hand. Wind whistled through the valley, rustling the maples nearby. The goats were used to being milked. It took a bit to get the hang of it, hampered as she was. Eventually, though, she found an extra hand was superfluous. Maybe to stop them fussing, but once they settled, they let her take as much milk from them as she needed.

"Don't tell him I told you," Sorenus greeted, waving the end of the broom around. "But Father Radimir feels guilty about letting you do things around here."

She kept milking. The farmer's wives told her how to do it—Greta, she thought her name was. *Gods, that was years ago.* She smiled as she remembered. *Mother took me to see them—she would never let me forget we depend on their work for our livelihood.*

"It is as I told him. I won't let myself become a burden. I want to earn my place here."

He crossed his arms. "And your place in the world?"

She stopped, giving him a confused look. "You speak very cryptically sometimes."

A smile flashed across his lips. Her cheeks flushed. "Hazard of my profession. What I mean to say is, what do you want from life?"

"I still don't understand."

"I mean what I say. What do you *want*?"

She didn't answer right away. She wasn't really sure. Marriage, family, children; all things were destined for her. Her father and mother made that clear, but now? *Sorenus is right... What do I want?*

"I suppose I don't know," she said.

He seemed pleased with the answer, nodding. "Come with me."

"But the goats—"

"They'll live."

They went to the foot of a maple tree where leaves were yellowing at the ends. Autumn was coming soon, it seemed. He handed her the broom.

"What's this for?"

"I want you to strike me," he replied, stone-faced as ever.

"Strike you?" *Attack a goddamn inquisitor! What's he thinking?*

"Do it."

Selene hesitated, holding the balance awkwardly with one hand. She thought of her and Tristain's games of chasing each other, hitting each other, pretending to be knights, and bit her lip. Never again would she have that, and her heart broke for the loss of it.

She sniffed back tears and braced the broom against her side. He waited for her. She lunged forward with the end. Sorenus flashed a devilish grin. He easily stepped aside, catching the end

of the broom with his hand. He yanked, pulling her off-balance. A trip and a fall later, she was face down in the dirt.

She groaned, rolling onto her back. The shock had dashed all thoughts of Tristain from her mind. “Was that fun for you?”

Sorenus helped her to her feet. “Come now, it’s just a bit of dirt.”

She brushed the dust off her robe. She even smiled. “So, how was my test?”

Sorenus tilted his head slightly. “Oh, you were listening?” He smiled. “Yes, well. You could be faster, but bracing your weapon was very smart. Adapt your weapon to balance your strengths and weaknesses.”

“Did me a whole lot of good.”

He handed the broom back to her. “Again.”

They sparred for a while.

“Again! Faster! Move your feet! Not like that! You’ll trip like that. Shift your weight! Pivot on light feet!”

She ended up on the ground time and time again. It was exhausting, and sweaty, and dirty. Her face was caked in dirt by the time they finished. She wondered how many different ways he could flip her onto her back, then dropped that line of thinking before it went too far.

Selene panted, leaning on the broom handle for support. Her sides, her back, everything hurt. It was probably the most physically grueling thing she’d done for years. A top ten for her whole life.

She groaned in frustration. “There’s no way. You’re too quick. And I’m too useless.”

“Yes,” he replied, smugness dripping from his words. She could punch him in the face. If she could bloody touch him. “You keep saying that, but you keep getting back up.”

“Piss off.”

“Sigur says, ‘The strong must defend the weak and the innocent.’ You are the furthest thing from weak—“

“And the furthest thing from innocent?”

He smiled wryly. “Let me finish. You’re *strong*, in spirit, in heart, where it really counts. How old are you?”

“Sixteen. Truly?” she asked, laughing. Sorenus didn’t laugh. “Then why can’t I do what matters? What use am I with... *this?*”

“You ask yourself. Ask yourself what you truly want.”

What I truly want? A betrothal to a knight... a life of having children... a life sequestered away in some bleak place in some backcountry... like Mother...

She pictured Father’s horrible canines closing around her head, tearing it free from her shoulders. She thought of Mother—the woman who’d raised her—and Tomas the blacksmith, and wondered how many mothers and blacksmiths and other folk the demons snuffed out every day. Her knuckles went white as she clenched her fist around the broom handle. *What chance do I have though? They’re monsters, butchers, capable of horrible things. And what am I? Stupid. Nothing. I know nothing of killing.*

No. This man could show her.

“I want to kill demons,” she said with finality. “Tell me how.”