

The Talon and the Seagriff

Tilly immediately noticed the Arcadians enter the tavern. The eldest of the two wore a rather messy braid with customary feathers and gold charms cinched down his length of forest green hair. A spear carved with runes extended from a strap over his back. The other was much younger with scraggly brown hair. His cheeks were full and freckled, hazel eyes blinking ecstatically as he pulled at the cloak of his older companion. From what Tilly could hear, the youngling was bombarding him with questions about the coastal region of Modoc.

Not from around here, Tilly observed, kicking her scuffed leather boots atop her corner table. Arcadians were a faded occurrence in the kingdom of Lokteran. After the Usurper took the continent, the tribefolk quickly dwindled away up the Western coast, including Modoc. Many of them served directly under the crown nowadays, their native lands lost to battle and tyranny. Tilly sniffed with distaste and tilted her head to better hear the newcomers.

The youngling was called Kota, a reminder to always be steadfast in his fortitude and gentle nature. This was something his mentor and elder companion, June, stressed to him often. To remember your name. Remember where you came from. But by the gods, was Kota a curious boy.

Curiosity was dangerous for an Arcadian.

Kota left the side of his mentor and scurried to the bar counter where the owner of the tavern, Borg, raised his brows at the child. “What brings ya’ ere young’un?” He leaned over the counter, bracing his burly arms on the table to meet Kota’s gaze.

“I want to be a pirate!” he chirped, pointing at a rack of leather hats hanging on one side of the wall behind Borg.

From across the room, Tilly's eyes narrowed. Kota's other half had wandered to a bulletin board posted by the door, fingers trailing over various news reports, bounties, and calls for work. The Usurper's new bylaws had just been posted the previous night as well, though the Arcadian barely spared that document a glance. Instead, he ripped off three of the bounties and made his way to the counter.

"All pirates need a pirate hat," Kota was saying. Borg chortled and poured the child a mug of ale. It just so happened that Borg's tavern was a renowned hotspot in Modoc, doubling as a fine trading post over the years, hence the many displays of attire, tools, and knick-knacks displayed about the room and on the walls.

Kota reached for the ale but halted when the older Arcadian pushed the mug out of the way. "That is not necessary," he said gruffly, and laid out the bounty postings. He pulled what looked to be a scroll of thin canvas out of the pocket of his trousers, and flourished it undone to reveal the all-too-familiar crest of Lokteran's newest ruler. "My name is June," the Arcadian man stated. "I've been sent by the Royal Usurper in search of information. I'm told this place is rather bountiful in that area." He nodded to the bounties like it was a funny joke.

The tavern seemed to collectively scowl at the mention of the new leadership, and perhaps more so the now public presence of Arcadians. A woman next to Tilly drew in a deep, mucky breath and spit in their direction, while others murmured quietly to each other.

Tilly uncrossed her ankles and lowered them to the floor, craning to get a better angle of whatever pretentious document was being shown to Borg. The bartender crossed his arms over his broad chest. He scrutinized the canvas scroll, and for a moment, only a moment, his sharp

eyes flitted in Tilly's direction before his expression returned to stone. She leaned forward in her seat, knee bouncing.

In an act of fate, the corner of June's scroll curled back, and Tilly just caught sight of a tiny scrawl on its glossed-over edge.

Now *that* was interesting.

"I'm looking for someone who knows their way around the land," June explained, nodding to the bounties. "These criminals frequent this tavern; don't try to deny it. You can save me the trouble of hunting all of them down and handing them over to the crown myself. I know how much this town appreciates rebels." June's cutting voice resounded arrogantly. Kota had moments ago snuck the mug of ale off the counter and sat at June's feet sucking it down eagerly.

Borg glanced down at the bounties, pointing at each of the haphazardly drawn headshots. "Swift Mist's a pick-pocket thief. This 'ere Shadowed Sword is a powerhouse of magic-wielders ya won't want to mess with..." he trailed off as he got to the last headshot, a young woman with a gnarled bob cropped right at the chin and a line of studded jewelry going up each ear. One of her hands waved smugly, each finger ringed with a gold-forged talon. Borg continued, "The Talon's an infamous pirate. Hasn't been seen in months. From the tales they tell about her, she's practically a myth."

"What kind of tales?" June asked, losing his patience. "Tales about taming magical creatures, perhaps?"

Borg's frown deepened. "More like tales o' her rippin' throats out and feeding 'em to beasts," he retorted. "None of these—what did you call them—*criminals* will be able ta' help you find the mystic realm. It doesn't exist."

Mystic realm. The confirming words floated through Tilly's mind, causing her heartbeat to stutter. After all this time...

June sighed and pulled Kota off the ground, a hiccupping and giggling heap. The boy had little tolerance but had been thoroughly indulging himself as they traversed the expanse of taverns in Modoc.

June met Borg's gaze with an equally cold expression. "I hope you remember this act of defiance against the crown."

"You Arcadians have not a sense of loyalty," Borg called as June and Kota made for the door. "Ya' grovel at the feet of royalty and wander 'round the kingdom doin' their bidding without battin' an eye. Ask yourself who the real criminals are." That earned a slew of cheers and raised glasses from the tavern crowd.

June stopped at the door, shoulders tense. His arm tightened around Kota in defense. "You have no idea," he whispered, and pulled Kota outside into the brisk night.

Tilly stood from her chair, dipped her chin to Borg, and began her hunt.

June and Kota had made it a couple miles inland before the youngling vomited up what June estimated to be four mugs of ale and the contents of his dinner.

"I warned you," June said, but nonetheless felt a pang of sympathy for him. There was a time not long ago when he, too, enjoyed lively nights like this. Dancing and singing by campfires, roasting meats and sugared nuts, having someone to hold in his arms. That was a time Kota would never grow up to know.

He retched again. “We’re not going to find someone who can help us...are we?” He collapsed at the base of a tree, leaning his head against the coarse bark. No response came, and Kota lowered his blurry gaze to the dirt. Little tears gathered at the corners of his eyes. Somewhere nearby, a cacophony of birds stirred out of the undergrowth. “Is the crown going to kill us?”

“No.” June turned his back to the boy and approached the bank of the river they’d been following since leaving their latest attempt at fulfilling their master’s mission. “Not you. I promise.”

The encroaching dawn set his nerves ablaze, but he clenched his jaw and filled his leather waterskin in silence. Though the thick canopy of trees kept them shrouded in darkness, the faint glint of Kota’s lamp allowed June to see his reflection in the water. Deep frown, tired eyes, fear buried so deep down no one could see. He returned to Kota and handed him the waterskin.

The boy’s throat bobbed as if he were wrestling with each drop.

A low rumbling floated out of the darkness, followed by a sharp *ck-ck-ck* that bounced over the river water like a skipping stone. June grabbed his spear off the ground just as a muffled scraping and snapping resounded from just beyond their line of sight.

“Don’t move,” he said to Kota, who remained motionless on the ground, waterskin clutched to his chest.

“Wolves?” he whispered.

“Wolves don’t make so much noise.”

The rumbling grew into a predatory growl, that uncanny ticking nestling into June's head and making blood rush to his ears. He'd never heard quite a sound before but had little time to question it.

He raised his spear and focused on the somewhat clumsy crashing, shifting his angle at each new breaking of a branch, or rustle of leaves. He waited for any glimpse of the beast, praying to the gods there was only one.

Then, a flurry of shadow. He lunged to throw and—

“I wouldn't do that if I were you.”

Kota cried out and June turned to spot a cloaked figure holding a thin dagger to his throat. He could tell by the voice that it was a woman, but her face was covered by a low hanging hood, save for her mouth, which was curled in a venomous smile.

June lowered the spear, oblivious to the fact that the creature in the woods had ceased its advancement. “Let him go,” he pleaded. “He's just a boy.”

Kota sniffed as his tears fell freely now. Their attacker held him up on trembling legs, dagger pinned precisely at the jugular. Even if June threw the spear, it would not be nearly quick enough to spare Kota of a slit throat.

The attacker remained unyielding. “Two Arcadians wandering the coastal towns is quite the spectacle, though I do wonder at your lack of discretion. Lots of listening ears, especially in Modoc. We do love our rebels, just like you said.”

“You were at the tavern?” June pressed.

Kota jabbed her in the gut with an elbow and dropped to ground in one sloppy movement when the woman barreled over. June sprinted forward as Kota crawled away. He met the attacker head on and swung the shaft of his spear, which she dodged easily. The woman hissed in frustration and swiped at June with the knife, nicking his upper arm. Before he could register the sting, he was moving again, ducking and swinging.

The woman was small and lean. Fast. His spear was practically useless at such close quarters, unless he planned on impaling her to death, which was becoming an increasingly favorable idea. But considering their desperation, June couldn't help but hesitate.

"You have something that belongs to me," she seethed between labored breaths.

He braced the base of the spear in both hands as she came at him with a kick that snapped the thing in two. They tumbled to the ground and June wrenched the dagger out of her hand. He chucked it into the river and threw his weight on top of her, pinning her with a forearm across the chest. Her hood fell back to reveal angry brown eyes and strawberry blonde hair, curly and cropped at the chin.

She unwedged a hand from beneath his knee and it shot to his neck. From a velvet sack at her side, a blue mist swirled out and snaked down her arm across each knuckle. June could only pant and watch in dismay as the substance engulfed her hand, first a tingling sensation where her fingers pinched his neck, then replaced by the serrated points of five golden claws.

Not claws. June almost groaned at his foolishness. Talons.

"Gotcha."

He released his grip from the woman, palms raised in surrender. When he tried to move off her, the talons pierced into his skin harder. She began patting him down with her other hand.

“You don’t look like a pirate,” he drawled, feigning nonchalance. She pulled the scroll out of his pocket and unfurled it. The canvas map was elegantly drawn and painted and there was no way it belonged to this heathen.

“Not all pirates wear hats, I’m afraid.”

“*June*,” Kota breathed from a few paces away, still crouched on the ground. His eyes were wide with terror. He pointed behind them.

It was then that June felt a puff of hot air on the back of his neck. The point of a large beak appeared in his periphery and trailed into his vision with threatening ease. Narrowed golden eyes stared him down, beak snapping with a low growl from the chest and that *ck-ck-ck*.

It stepped around to the woman’s head while she tapped a talon casually against his throat. Enormous, feathered wings ruffled in aggravation, and June could just make out hues of blue speckled within the brown plumage and throughout its thick mane. It seemed to have the body of a fierce feline, with the head and digits of an eagle. Talons that doubled the claws of any creature June had seen before framed the woman’s head, and suddenly they were face to face.

“I’m going to forget that last comment you made in hopes that we can come to an understanding,” the woman, the *pirate*, stated. She released his neck from her talons and extended them in invitation. He shook it unwillingly, the golden points grazing his skin. “Tilly,” she amended, her smirk becoming ever more reminiscent of the bounty he’d seen at the tavern. Though, the headshot did not do her justice. “Tilly the Talon. And that’s Seagriff, my water griffin.”

Tilly shrugged under June's weight and pointed to the corner of the map she still held, where her signature *T* was scrawled next to three slashes most notably resembling talon marks. A dead giveaway, if you asked her. June scowled as he connected the dots. "This is my map," she spat. "There are two others similar to it and they were stolen from me. I think you're going to help me get them back. Or I can let Seagriff feast on you."

June could not comprehend how the maker of this map had quite literally fallen into his lap, nor the fact that the infamous Talon had tamed a magical creature from the mystic realm. He decided against telling her that the Usurper was dead set on claiming such a creature for himself. With whatever means necessary. If June could pretend to help the Talon long enough to get her to the palace, she just might be he and Kota's ticket to freedom.

Contrary to June's knowledge, Tilly already knew the Usurper's plans, which was why it was imperative that she get her maps back before anyone else figured out how to access the mystic realm. The Arcadians were disposable, yes, but they were the first real lead she'd gotten in months.

"Alright," June swallowed. "We'll help you."

As if on cue, Seagriff gave a high-pitched series of chirps and took off into the river, splashing and spraying water from his beak. He dipped his head underneath the surface and watted around with humorous intensity, wings splayed to help him balance against the current. He came back up with Tilly's dagger, long tail waving with pride.

"You can get off me now," Tilly said smugly.

June did not hesitate this time.