

THE APOCALYPSE WEDDING

Excerpt #1

She held her arms firmly around Luca's waist. He steered the horse northward, an auburn haze at the horizon. High above, clusters of clouds hovered beneath a pair of thumbnail moons, the smaller moon peeking from behind the larger, its surface radiant and blistered.

Sarna's frayed tunic flapped against the horse's backside. Her exposed forearms and ankles prickled from the evening chill. They'd been riding for over an hour, and her inner thighs pulsed from the discomfort. She craved rest and yelled as much into Luca's ear. She was sure the horse needed rest as well. And to eat. Luca was pushing them too hard.

He ignored her. Sarna felt him leaning forward more, kicking the horse to go faster. Though he had his moments, Luca was a stubborn fool. She considered the possibility that she hated him.

Their destination was the kingdom of Burnya. The bandit and the princess simply had nowhere else to go. Their kingdom had been leveled. The Ghe-sui had fled to the Kholm Mountains to save themselves. While hiding at the Magshaa Temple for over three months, Sarna had no idea who of her family were dead or alive. There wasn't even much

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hope that she or Luca would live much longer. Not in a flimsy, poorly-sanitized hut.

They headed to Burnya despite being unsure of where Burnya's allegiances lay anymore. Her father and King Montrose had always despised one another, so Sarna doubted the Burnyan king would show her much sympathy. Still, they had no choice. The realm of Jyn was overrun with unthinkable dangers, namely the drakksuk—flying creatures that breathed lightning. Also, the temple was out of food. They needed civilization with fortitude and walls. They needed consistent meals and water.

Besides, the remaining shamans had chosen to embark for the Kholm Mountains weeks ago, joining the rest of their kind. They'd insisted the two of them keep the horse since Luca had stolen it.

Sarna pressed against him, their cheeks bouncing together. "We should stop!"

"Not yet!" he barked. "I want to make Burnya by tomorrow afternoon!"

"The horse is exhausted! I am, too!"

Luca remained focused on the path ahead. His long locks smacked her face.

After a while, he said, "There should be a river up here! We'll rest there, all right?"

"How far?"

"A few leagues! Twelve, I think!"

"No, no, no, that's too far! It's too far! Stop!"

He pulled on the horse's reins, far more forcefully than necessary. The animal grunted and dug its rear hooves into the ground. Sarna was nearly flung. She managed to hold on by squeezing Luca's ribs. He cried out.

She went to scold him for nearly tossing her, but Luca held a finger up, signaling for silence. He swung his right leg forward and over. He slid down from the horse. He kept one hand on Sarna's knee, the other on the reins. He surveyed their surroundings, alerted by something unseen. A half-spherical hill bulged from the south, shingled with shards of granite. On their right stood a thin row of thick trees. The wind flattened the high grass in waves.

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“What is it?” she whispered.

He shook his head.

She went rigid, listening for what worried him. She heard nothing but the wind until...voices. With Luca’s help, she slid down from the horse to join him. The insides of her thighs throbbed, nearly sending her to her knees, her legs numb and noodly from the long ride. Thankfully Luca caught her. He motioned for her to follow him as he led the horse into the shadow of the trees. Once there, Sarna stared with him in the direction of the voices.

The tribesmen appeared over a hill, less than a hundred yards away. She counted seven men in loin cloths, doused head-to-toe in tribal paint. The luminous tint of the twin moons revealed the men in stark detail: Their legs and hips were black with a blue band around their waists and abdomens, turning to white over their chests and bald heads. They held spears. Their eyes smoldered with an orange phosphorescence, like hot charcoal, and Sarna realized these were not men at all. Her stomach dropped.

She and Luca held completely motionless as the strange beings walked closer. They spoke in a language punctuated with clicks and whistles, their cadence sounding far from melodic, but at a much higher timbre than she might’ve expected, considering the pure evil of their appearance.

Inevitably, the horse snorted and brushed its rear leg against a tree. The seven strange beings stopped and went quiet, their spears pointed.

Luca took a deep breath and stepped out from their hiding spot. He held his hands up in surrender. “Hello there,” he said to them.

Sarna wanted to scream. Luca’s recklessness was beyond comprehension. However, the befuddlement of these beings seemed to be what had momentarily saved him. They appeared as astonished as she was.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” Luca said. He dropped his right arm but kept his left raised, as if swearing an oath. “I’m with someone very important.” He nudged his head in her

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direction, then apparently lost his mind because he told them: "This girl here is the princess of Tartaria. I'm trying to get her to Burnya."

The nearest being growled, a low-pitched, demonic rumble.

"We wish only to pass on our way," Luca added, his voice faltering, likely regretting this plan already. "Do you understand? Are we all right?"

No one moved. Caught in a moment stretched from terror, Sarna noticed their spears were thin yet heavy-looking, made from what resembled volcanic rock. One of the beings pointed at Luca and said something in a jarring, idiosyncratic meter.

"Do you speak Xhenkhel?" Luca asked him. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand you."

The being with charcoal eyes straightened his back while sucking his bottom lip, an image so unsettling, Sarna felt sure she would remember it for the rest of her life, however short that might be. None of these man-things appeared happy to meet them. In fact, as a group, they appeared more than willing to slay them both for the first reason.

The same being who had spoken, turned and spoke to the rest of his group. They resumed their advancement.

"What are you doing?" Luca asked. "Whoa! Wait! We mean you no harm!"

The beings increased their pace until they charged with their spears leading the way. They made no noise, no battle cry, only those glowing eyes narrowed with focus. The wish to kill.

Luca drew his sword and the beings paused, off-guard, as though it hadn't actually occurred to them their foe might be armed.

The same being shouted at Luca.

"I have no idea what you're saying!" he responded. "Now back off! All of you! Let's please talk this out!"

Sarna held her breath and stepped out of the shadows. She stood next to Luca.

"We mean you no harm," she said, and saw no choice but to behold how dumb she was being herself now. They couldn't understand her! The only hope left was that they might

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favorably interpret her tone at least. Show mercy to a female.

They blinked at her, puzzled but interested. She took this as a good sign.

“Hey, friend!” Luca shouted. “Friends! Let’s be friends!”

The being did the odd thing with his lip again and he yelled. He raised his spear over his head, which inspired the others to imitate him. They continued their charge, their mouths open, revealing rows of slobbery fangs.

“Oh,...” Luca muttered. “Oh, no.”

He advanced to meet them, became surrounded in seconds.

A veteran of Jyn’s Great War, Luca had turned to banditry to survive. Both endeavors left him a fully skilled swordsman. Against his current aggressors, he used his long sword to slice along diagonal lines. He protected his sides while following through in a figure-eight motion, looping as he pivoted. Having such a long sword, he was able to cover himself and Sarna from multiple directions. Luca moved like a dancer, separating body parts in rhythm. The high grass became stained with gore.

Still, he was outnumbered. Sarna could see that maintaining such a whirlwind of movement required incredible energy. Luca fainted to one opponent while striking another. Unfortunately, shielding against the first or even a third blow, he went to his knees repeatedly and this slowed him. Even worse, despite losing limbs, many of the strange man-things kept attacking, unbothered at being limbless.

Luca blocked a thrust from a jutting spear but was knocked onto his back. He tried to get up and stumbled. He fell to his hands, inadvertently giving his blindside to them—the worst thing that could’ve happened. The three remaining beings closed in. The fight was over.

Sarna stepped forward. She’d only meant to make herself a flimsy barrier between combatants, but the world went white. A torrent of energy fountained upwards throughout her body, sparking through every nerve ending, webbing them with lightning, joined in concert. A cosmic sneeze erupted from her core, an all-consuming, uninhibited release of

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control. Her back arched and her feet bent, Sarna exploded. She floated just off the ground and gradually went higher. The ashes of singed grass curlicued in the wind around her.

She noticed Luca staring up at her, stunned and gaping. The strange beings were gone, even the ones already dead, reduced to smoldering stumps. Their spears lay about in scattered shards. A musty, sweet smell wafted in the wind—gasses created from charged air. Sarna felt her hair standing straight out from her head, each strand repelling the other.

“I killed them,” she said to Luca. She spoke slow, entranced. “Every one of them. Did you see that?”

Luca remained on his back, trembling, his eyes locked on her floating figure. She recognized that look. She was becoming far too familiar with it from absolutely everyone.

He was terrified of her.

Excerpt #2

King Shayan first believed the boy was handing him a flower. The object was white, tubular, and curved into a sharp point. But it was hard to the touch. Turning the object in his fingers, Shayan judged it as the tooth or claw of an enormous animal. The king and his small group of men stood atop a raised contour of rocky terra firma, horseshoed by dense woods.

“It’s a drakksuk’s tooth,” said the boy, touching his arms behind his back. He grinned sideways, sheepish. “I wanted you to have it, Your Highness.”

The boy was one of nine volunteers on a quest the king had organized. The goal was to scout what was left of their former kingdom, setting out from their refuge over a hundred leagues away. Shayan wanted to check if there were survivors left behind and how they

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were being treated. His crew was comprised of a fair cross-section of Tartarian outcasts: two older farmers and their four grandsons, and two ex-soldiers. Shayan knew there were far better soldiers and scouts that he could've brought, but his military training had taught him the importance of keeping reserves, saving them for the bigger fight. This quest was largely reconnaissance in nature, so a smallish, amateur crew should've been enough.

Still, just in case, they were joined by General Harloog, a thick but battle-experienced man with a beard like a lion's mane who was never without his smelly pipe. He was the only one who had dared voice concern over this quest. Their home was gone. Taken. They were less than a thousand survivors from a former kingdom of millions. It would take generations before they possessed the means with which to counterattack. In the general's opinion, this made their mission largely pointless. They would observe their decimated kingdom from afar and do what about it exactly?

But King Shayan had insisted. No one had to come with him who didn't want to, and plenty wanted to. He'd even been forced to reject around forty other volunteers. He chose these nine simply for their youth, experience, or stamina, or what he could judge of it on the spot. He was in no position to be terribly choosy since most survivors were women and children. Most male survivors had been maimed beyond use. He believed it best to keep their group small anyway. Easier to avoid detection. Easier to stay light and fast.

He held the tooth up to the sunlight, and it shone iridescent, almost glass-like. "Where did you get it?" he asked the boy. He couldn't recall his name.

"Found it on the street while I was running. During the attack."

"And you stopped to pick it up? Despite everything happening around you?"

The boy nodded. The rest of the crew sat around, having a rest, using the smoother rocks as seats. Many drank from their flasks.

"A drakksuk tooth is magic," the boy said. "It kills whatever you stab it with. No matter what."

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Shayan snorted. "Just like that? Anything?"

"So legend says, Your Highness."

"This is quite the gift then. I'll treasure it." Shayan tucked the palm-sized weapon inside a pouch fastened to his waist.

The boy bowed. When he looked up again, the king flinched from realizing how young the kid was. Barely old enough to shave. He wondered at himself for having chosen him, done at the urging of the boy's grandfather who had come as well. Shayan was new at ruling people and inwardly reproached himself for not being more discriminate. Too easily influenced by the opinions of others.

Following a few moments of rest and drink, the crew trudged eastward. They traveled slow over a terrain of jagged rocks, their holes and ridges filled with rain puddles. Later in the day, the rocks gave way to a clearing carpeted in tall, yellow grass. The sun shone bright and hot through an empty blue sky.

Harloog reached Shayan's side and asked to see the tooth. He took it out of his sack and handed it to him.

"How do you think it fell out?" he asked the general.

"Their teeth fall out all the time. They've got bunches of them."

"It's yours."

"No, Your Highness." The general handed back the tooth. "It was given to you. Seemed as though it meant a lot to him."

"I don't much believe in magic, I'm afraid."

"I didn't either once. It's a bit difficult to deny these days, no?"

Once more, Shayan admired the tooth in his hand. He tried imagining it inside the cavernous, triangular mouth of an actual living drakksuk. He winced at the memory of just such a beast incinerating his father's funeral procession, barely three months ago. He tucked the tooth away again.

At midnight they made camp and Harloog insisted on taking first watch. Claimed he

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wasn't tired enough yet. While everyone unpacked their sleep gear, Shayan watched them. The deposed king of Tartaria had come to feel relatively comfortable with life in the wild. Though it was a far cry from his days as a castle-dwelling prince who slept in silken sheets with a fresh outfit to wear at every stage of the day. Oddly enough, he didn't miss it. He preferred the comforting simplicity of the forest. He found the roughness and cruelty of nature to be reductive, lacking frivolity. Time was no longer filled with fox hunts, social events, bejeweled cloaks, or philosophy lessons. It was food, water, and shelter now.

The next morning brought a sparse breakfast of air-dried donkey meat, then Shayan's party resumed their hiking. He expected them to be within eyesight of their former kingdom by early evening, but he'd miscalculated. At mid-day one of the teenaged grandsons spotted smoke and cried out. Shayan went to quiet the kid, but his grandfather beat him to it, slapping the poor boy to his knees.

As they kept on, increasingly careful to stay silent within the woods, Shayan occasionally paused on tiptoes to check the column of black smoke, making a dark line through the lower sky. He saw the smoke as evidence their kingdom was still smoldering, all this time later.

Everyone walked as Harloog had shown them, lifting their feet while pointing their toes at the ground, making it less likely to get snagged. When connecting with the outer edge of their foot, they rolled the rest down until the sole became flat. They matched each other's pace while breathing quiet and steady through their mouths. Even the slightest amount of forced air through their nostrils was too much noise.

Before long, the once mighty kingdom of Tartaria came into view. Shrouded in ribbons of dirty mist stood the crumbled walls of Shayan's former home. A feeling of bleak shame crept through his gut. Tears spilled, and he couldn't stop them, not caring in the least if his men saw. He heard a snuffle and turned to see Harloog crying as well, despite the amount of noise this made. The king hadn't expected that seeing Tartaria again would

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hit him like this. It was devastating.

Harloog caught Shayan's eyes. Harloog gripped his elbows, then pointed towards the kingdom. It was a hand signal asking, "How close did you want to get?"

Shayan shagged his own hair with his right hand. The signal for: "Not sure." He thought about it, kept his hand flat as he chopped it forward: "Closer."

He led his crew towards the next gathering of elm trees. He decided they would stop between the edges of each clearing to assess the threat level of their position. They would do this until reaching a spying spot. However, before entering the next expanse of trees, he observed a slender, dark shape darting upwards into the clouds, spearing through the smoke. Everyone halted to watch as the shape went ever higher. When the drakksuk's wings fanned out as the creature prepared to level, Shayan felt his blood freeze. He sensed every man holding their breath, feeling the panic that shuddered through every joint and ligament.

The creature dove towards them.

Shayan ran and his men followed. He felt the approaching wind from the thrusting of the drakksuk's giant wings. The advanced displacement of air lifted the king and several of his men from their feet. Shayan tumbled forward and was only able to stop himself by grabbing fistfuls of grass and soil.

He flipped onto his back and spotted Harloog's face nearby, pale with panic. The creature filled the background behind him, a black tarp of scales punctured by pink, sparking eyes, the pupils shaped like keyholes.

Shayan heard sobbing and noticed the boy who had given him the tooth. The kid lay across a large rock while embracing it, his face pinched red with hysteria. The king scrambled to his feet and resumed running while intense heat mushroomed from somewhere behind him. The tops of the surrounding forestry turned yellow, bright with flames. Burning leaves floated like fireflies.

He dove into a field of rocks and landed hard. He prayed the nonflammable stones

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might offer a survivable amount of protection. Also, there was nowhere else to run. The drakksuk had assailed them with unbelievable speed. Shayan folded his arms over his head and waited. He heard more screaming and reflexively lifted his head. He saw one of the soldiers ablaze, running, his arms flapping. One of the old farmers collapsed to the ground in three pieces, serrated by lightning from the creature's thorax—a spray of energy that sliced or detonated everything it touched. The entire area became netted with superhot light.

A few yards away, Shayan noticed a low rock shelf. He rolled towards it as the drakksuk's enormous shadow passed over. More bright flashes. More screaming. He pressed the entire length of his body under the rock shelf. Harloog sprinted towards him, likely hoping to do the same. The two men met eyes as a white cone of light swept through the gap between them. Shayan's last war general convulsed from the electrical currents forking his body. Skin and muscle melted from bone.

The king wiggled in an attempt to further press himself under the rock shelf, yet he remained half-way exposed. His lungs emptied, the air no longer breathable. His tears sizzled on his cheeks. Wood crackled as it exploded. He shut his eyes and waited to die. The darkness behind his lids turned orange from the flames drawing closer.

Excerpt #3

The giants walked within fifty meters of Sarna. The nearest had only to turn its misshapen head and it would see her. She tried crouching into the bush, tucking her folded knees beneath her chin, her best effort at making herself small as possible. The nearest yelkin stopped, causing the other to do the same. She heard them both grunting and

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sniffing. She knew they could smell her because she could smell them, their scent dense and musky, like that of an enormous cow after a hard rain.

She peeked through the foliage. The nearest yelkin looked over its shoulder at the sky, sniffing harder. Sarna checked where it was looking and spotted a dark sliver against a backdrop of milky, orange clouds. Within seconds, the sliver grew larger. The drakksuk cried out as it swooped in.

Both giants emitted throaty howls as they ran, the ground shuddering from their weight. They moved with a speed she would've never predicted from their size. They bounded with the grace of deer while long ropes of slobber trailed between their mouths and fingers. The yelkin both disappeared into a forest of thick-trunked trees lining the other side of the plains. The treetops swayed from the giants' passage, telegraphing their route.

The drakksuk reversed its wings to slow its flight and lower. Sarna covered her head with her arms. She protected herself from the onslaught of debris, though most was already obstructed by the trees. The immense creature landed light as a bird.

She recognized the drakksuk as being the same one who had spoken to her earlier. She couldn't see its entire head through the awning of branches and leaves above her, but she could sense the drakksuk looking directly at her. It moved closer, half-walking, then hopping. She could even smell the creature's breath, like charcoal mixed with baked garbage. She also felt the heat from its center, warming her as it drew nearer.

"Come out of there," it said. "I told you I wouldn't kill you."

Sarna considered fleeing through the forest but was halted by the obvious futility. She felt exhausted, starving, weak. If this was her death, then be done with it. The gods knew she certainly deserved it. She needed to be put a stop to.

The princess held her head up as she stood, then stepped out from her hiding spot. She walked further out from the tree cover where she found the drakk-suk perched on its back legs, gazing down its snout at her.

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"I told you there were two yelkin nearby," the creature said to her. "I told you to hide and instead you walked right over to them. Why would you do that?"

She went to speak but realized she didn't have an answer. She had no clue why she had walked towards the giants rather than hiding or running. She had simply wanted to see them.

"I don't know," she said. She sounded strange to herself. Her voice cracked. "I'm lost. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know why I'm still alive."

"Go find more of your kind to be with. Or you won't be alive much longer."

"I'm headed to Burnya. Or trying to."

"I would go anywhere else but there actually."

"Why don't you go ahead and kill me then?" She felt the tears coming but swallowed them back. The overpowering presence of this mythic beast, so close. She trembled.

"Because that would be a waste," the drakksuk answered, its voice dropping, as though it truly pitied her.

She blinked up at him, stupefied again from the self-awareness that she was having a conversation with an enormous entity that wasn't human.

The drakksuk used its long neck to swing its head around to nibble briefly at an itch in its scaly side. The creature brought its head back around and lowered its face to her, close enough she could make out the mucousy condensation around its snout. "Go ahead to Burnya then. There's no other chance for you, I suppose."

"Is something bad about to happen there?"

"The apocalypse probably. But stay too many nights out here and something hungry will eventually find you. That would be a much worse death."

"Will you fly me there?" she asked, her voice lilting, desperate. "Can I ride you?"

The drakksuk narrowed its serpentine eyes. "Keep me in your presence too long, Your Highness, and I don't think you'll enjoy what happens."

"You know who I am?"

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“Of course I do.”

“How?”

“I know everything.”

“Everything?”

“Ask me. I want you to.”

A disbelieving laugh escaped her. She felt her chest ballooning. She tasted sweat from her upper lip. “What do you mean?”

“If you could know absolutely anything, what would it be?”

“Is my family still alive?”

“I didn’t mean personal things. Ask me something bigger.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I don’t know. Why do we exist then? Where did we come from? Like that?”

The drakksuk lifted its head, gazing down its snout at her again. The creature blinked slow, pondering its words. “The universe and all of its concepts are born from the workings of the great cosmic consciousness,” it told her. “Beyond physical matter, there exists a vast celestial intelligence that is the source of creation and the main force behind all facets of our existence. Everything that exists does so as a consequence of the universal mind. Do you understand?”

“Sure, I think so.”

“Dwell on it. I’ll allow you one more question.”

“What’s going to happen to me when I get killed?”

“You’ll meet dead friends and relatives, travel to your past, walk down a street you once lived on. Meet with guides, so you can learn from them and teach others. You can solve big problems, or you can lie around and hallucinate. Or travel through the universe and explore other worlds. Whatever you choose.”

“And that’s it forever?”

“Until you’re ready for your next life.”

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“And the Great Awakening? What caused it? Where did the Sünsü come from?”

“Magic comes from the lands and the air around you. It was here all along. The soil and atmosphere are charged with an energy that only certain people are sensitive to.”

“Why only certain people?”

The drakksuk made an annoyed groan and flapped its wings. The wind blew her several steps back. She kept from falling by clutching onto a tree. Within seconds, the drakksuk appeared as a ribbon in the distant sky. Still buzzing from the encounter, Sarna watched the sky even though the creature had long disappeared.

She held her stomach. Her hunger had become an animal which threatened to leap out of her. She needed food, shelter, and rest. Why hadn't she at least asked for directions? The drakksuk was right about one thing as much as others: She wouldn't survive too much longer out here. The princess resumed walking towards where she thought she'd seen the light that past evening.

Towards what she hoped was Burnya.