

DOJ

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WHEN KATHERINE DALLANAR knocked on the iron-bound door of Garen's library, a small panel in the door's center slid open – and shut. Locks tumbled and then Garen's aged librarian, Nordo Ness, was cracking the door, peeking out into the hallway, his dark eyes glittering like jewels. Ness saw it was her, shuffled backwards, and let the door swing wide. The ghost of a grin touched his ancient face.

“Lady Katherine,” Ness rasped, bowing as far as his fragile back and crooked walking stick would allow. “Welcome home, welcome home. I thought you might be

joining us sooner rather than later . . . indeed, I did.”

Kate smiled. “It’s good to see you too, Lord Librarian.”

Ness hissed at her use of his formal title, the noise serving him as laughter. The old librarian hadn’t changed, Kate was happy to see. A truly ancient man, stooped and white-haired, his skin pale and translucent, pulled tight over frail bones. He was clean-shaven, but he always missed a few white whiskers beneath either side of his jaw. He wore the same faded blue robe and cowl that she remembered, the wool clean, but threadbare and bleached with age. His fingers were gnarled and ink-stained, the knuckles swollen with years of scrivening. A strange, deep scar ran between his dark eyes, from the middle of his forehead to the bridge of his nose. His voice was a raspy wisp, a librarian’s permanent whisper. Ness lived in the library; rumor had it that he slept under his huge desk on a pad of damaged books. The old scholar’s commitment to the Tarn’s collections – to her brother Garen, to her father Bellános – was absolute.

Ness shook his head, still hissing. “Good to see you, Lord Librarian,” he repeated, tutting, tapping his stick against the stone floor. “Don’t try your flattery on me, dear. Besides, it’s better to be *seen* than *viewed*, I always say. Indeed, I do.” He winked and stood aside from the doorway. His limp had gotten worse, Kate noticed; he placed most of his weight on his twisted stick. When she entered, she kissed the old man casually on the cheek as she passed. He smelled of cloves and clean wool and mint tea. Of books and scrolls and cured parchment.

Of home.

And for just a shadow of a moment, the smell made Kate's heart ache with nostalgia. For her Uncle Dorómy. For her cousins, especially Gia. For her family, unbroken. As it had been before

Before this cursed war

Just inside the library door, one of Captain Colj's massive ogres stood armored and at attention, a huge sword resting point down before him. A large shield that served the ogre as a buckler rested beside him against the foyer's wall. The ogre nodded respectfully to Kate, then looked past her into the hallway, his brown eyes serious and alert. Ness closed the door then locked it with an iron key.

Ness jingled his keys. "In addition to 'Lord Librarian,' dear Katherine, I now play the role of 'sentry.'" He cocked his head at the ogre guard. "Rudj here claims I am worth a half-dozen ogres and Master Falmon has promised me a blade of the finest high silver." Ness flourished his bent walking stick like a sabre, then groaned and reached for his lower back. The ogre, Rudj, grunted something affirmative, but did not break his stance. Rudj had two huge fangs on the right side of his mouth.

"Garen here?" Kate asked.

"In his study." Ness nodded. "Tarlen, Kyla, and Susan are with him. They have quizzes on their lessons this afternoon."

Kate frowned. "Michael told me Garen would be

representing us at parley. He doesn't prepare?"

"Parley is not for another four hours, dear." Ness chuckled.

Kate paused, then smiled. "Of course."

"Time," Ness said, shaking his head, hobbling towards the reading room, stick ticking the pavers. "Time is *precious*. If we stopped teaching our children every time there was a little war, nothing would ever get taught."

At the end of the foyer, Kate took off her boots, tucked them into a cubby, and put on a pair of slippers lined with soft rabbit fur. The cubbies lined the foyer's entire eastern wall and held many other pairs and types of footwear: men's, women's, children's, war brogans, clogs, chappals, house shoes – at least two score in all. Kate even saw a single, giant, iron-shod ogre boot, folded and shoved a third of the way into one of the cubbies. Its fellow lay on the ground, pushed neatly against the wall. Kate glanced at Rudj's feet. The ogre guard wore his war boots.

What kind of ogre wears library slippers? she mused.

Ness noticed her gaze, nodded, and hissed his laugh. "Lord Garen had an extra-large pair made for Doj, the largest of Colj's warriors. Doj, the mighty Doj. Yes, indeed. Probably a head taller than the great Colj himself. And Doj is *young*; they say he's still growing." Ness nodded to himself. "He works on the basic books now. Colj ordered him here to be tutored some months ago. He does good work, although it is quite difficult for him. He never quits – a good sign. Colj takes the education of

his men seriously. There he is, sitting at that far table, by the window there with Keller and Erika.” Ness waved his walking stick in the general direction of the library’s huge study hall. “He always sits there. Only place big enough. Doj and little Erika have become good friends.”

Kate walked to the end of the foyer and looked across the library’s great reading room. Twenty study tables sat in the room’s center, each of them hand-crafted from smooth Konish oak, lit by intricate safety lamps of glass and iron. Men, women, and children of various ages filled the tables, absorbed in their books. Hearths glowed warmly on either side of the chamber, their flames safely sealed behind protective glass. Several plush couches rested beside the hearths and a few leather divans sat near the western windows that opened onto Garen’s small garden. Still more couches were tucked into the hall’s various nooks, their readers curled up with their stories. A few exhausted soldiers dozed, their books folded gently over their chests. At the far side of the room, a trio of scholars passed a cup of high silver around a table, discussing its contents with voices hushed. From floor to ceiling, from corner to corner, bookshelves and rolling ladders filled every wall. The room smelled of pine oil and leather and a hint of mint tea.

“There.” Ness pointed with his stick.

On the far side of the chamber, a gigantic, armored ogre – Doj, apparently – sat between two children on a custom-built stool. The little boy and girl were about eight years old. They sat on adult sized chairs, their legs

swinging as they read. The ogre was bent over a scroll, his huge head very close to its surface. Ness had been right: Doj was truly enormous – at *least* a head taller than Colj. And he made for a strange sight in the library, that was certain. He must've felt out of place. The great ogre had hunched his armored arms and elbows close to his chest, so as not to bump his reading companions, and he'd pulled his legs close together, so as not to disturb their chairs. His big mouth whispered the words silently as he moved his large eyes across the parchment, tracing his way through the words with a massive gray finger, being extra careful not to touch the scroll's surface.

Suddenly, Doj's finger stopped in its place.

He squinted at the text.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

Then closed them even more tightly.

He rubbed his forehead with both hands, looked up at the ceiling, blinking with a mix of concentration and confusion.

After a long moment, he turned to the little girl beside him, Erika, leaned down and whispered to her. Erika looked up at him with enormous blue eyes, smiled, then stood tiptoes on her chair so that she could better see what he was reading. Doj pointed to his scroll, then looked to her, blinking. The little girl looked at the scroll for a moment. Then she pulled the ogre down towards her, put her tiny hand to Doj's huge ear, and whispered something. The ogre's large face was puzzled – then it broke into a huge, rather scary, smile. His fangs were

sharp and plentiful. The little girl kept whispering, gesturing to the scroll, explaining. The ogre kept smiling. Nodding his head now. The smile getting bigger. Then the girl patted him on his mailed forearm. He looked at her for a long moment. Blinked. Then he nodded a word of thanks and went back to his reading. The girl kept her tiny hand on his arm for a moment, then sat back on her chair. She looked up at him fondly, then returned to her studies.

“I see that nothing has changed.” Kate swallowed, touched by sudden melancholy.

Ness bowed, leaning on his walking stick. His dark eyes sparkled. “The great siege outside will pass. But the small victories won in this room are eternal.”

