

Wardens of Time

LOGAN LESHANE



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Pollywog in a Net

“Have you ever gone fishing before?”

Fitz Hilvanleigh asked the question, but Jordi was too scared to answer him. He stared at the Crown Prince of Ebanmoor in terror as the sandy-haired youth removed a knife from its sheath and ran his fingers over it admiringly. Jordi recognized the weapon Fitz held.

It was Devlin Roysley’s Bravian blade.

Dev had left the knife embedded in the backrest of Fitz’ chair, mere inches from the Crown Prince’s head. It was with sadistic pleasure that Fitz now claimed it as his own. He seemed oblivious to the chaos around them as he leered down at Jordi.

“No?”

He was unbothered by Jordi’s silence. The prince pressed his tongue against the edge of his upper lip, inhaling deeply as if to savor the scent of death in the air. When his index finger reached the tip of the blade he tapped it, causing a single drop of blood to form on his skin. Fitz chuckled coldly.

“Father used to take me,” he said, grinning. “No doubt he intended to impart some essential character-building lesson. Damn waste of a day! What kind of fool expects to succeed with only one line?”

A plume of thick black smoke blew across the flat expanse of Jared’s Pass. Jordi coughed, blinking back tears as the acidic substance stung his eyes. There

was a dull, throbbing pain in his head. All he could taste was blood. He lay at the prince's feet, shivering violently from the shock of the explosion that had ripped his MagRyder apart and nearly deposited him into the deadly waters of the Dual Canal. He heard shouts emerging from within the smoke and fog, distorted by his damaged eardrums but easy enough to guess their source.

The deception they used to escape Fizzick had been uncovered. The Bravians were rushing back to the Pass, alerted by the sound of the blast and the frantic screams of their comrades.

Any of the rebels who had not already escaped would no longer be doing so.

Fitz paused as a MagRyder zipped past, violently tousling his hair. The telltale robes of the Shrouden Lords billowed around the riders, and Jordi watched in shock as a Bravian threw an arm up to intercept them. He clotheslined the driver at throat level, knocking both riders to the ground. They careened wildly across the plain until their limp forms finally came to a stop. They lay motionless as the empty Mag flew over the edge of Jared's Pass with a shriek.

The Crown Prince smiled approvingly. His leather boots creaked as he dropped to his haunches in front of Jordi.

"I prefer to use a net," he declared, placing the end of Dev's knife under Jordi's chin and forcing his head up. Jordi stared fearfully into his honey-colored eyes. They were filled with contempt. "Want to know why, boy?"

A scared whimper escaped Jordi's throat. Fitz slowly angled the blade so it pressed into the soft underside of his jaw.

"Because," he snapped, curling his lip in disgust, "even if you don't catch the fish right away, you're bound to snare a bit of bait."

Bait.

Jordi shuddered. Fitz knew his sister well. Lady Clair would do anything to protect those she loved, even if it meant surrendering. In doing so, she would lose more than just her freedom.

And Fitz intended to use Jordi as bait to lure her to him.

He shook his head frantically, eliciting an expression of sadistic glee from the prince. The idea that he would be used to capture the Daughter of Kings was more than he could bear. They had tried so hard to keep her safe! Surely Dev would never allow her to return!

Dev.

Jordi swallowed hard. He hoped the *Bloodfyre* Son of Bravians didn't try to rescue him. Such a doomed venture would almost certainly result in his capture. After all, Devlin no longer had the ability to use CHAS. He would not be able to fight the Bravians. Coming back for Jordi would mean sacrificing himself, and Jordi knew Dev probably wouldn't hesitate to do so. It wouldn't be the first time the youthful soldier selflessly placed himself in danger in order to save his friends.

The tears that streaked down Jordi's face were bitter ones. As scared as he was, he was firmly resolved to do whatever it took to prevent the Offspring of the Throne from rescuing him. Fitz Hilvanleigh must not get his hands on Dev and Clair.

A dark plan began to form in his mind.

Jordi leaned into the blade held against his throat, glaring into the prince's eyes rebelliously.

"I hate to disappoint you," he snarled, "but dead bait isn't very effective."

Fitz yanked the knife away, panic on his face. He checked the blade anxiously for blood, gasping in

relief when he saw that it was clean. Jordi fought the crushing feeling of defeat welling up inside. He hadn't been fast enough.

The prince burst out laughing, patting Jordi on the head appreciatively.

"I'll have to keep an eye on you, little pollywog!" he exclaimed. "You're a lot braver than you look!"

They became distracted by nearby shouts.

"Medic! We need a medic over here!"

Fitz glanced up, his eyes narrowing with anger. Jordi swiveled his body to look back as Godin waved a group of soldiers over. The spiky-haired Bravian had dragged the limp form of Lars Moring away from the burning wreckage of the MagRyder and was doing chest compressions on him. He wore a copper band across his forehead and was barking orders loudly.

"I want every available man back on this plain *now!* We have multiple casualties and a severely injured soldier on our hands!" He paused, checking for a pulse. "No, I don't have eyes on the target! Forget the *bloody* target! They're no longer the priority! Damn it, we're about to lose Moring!"

The prince leaped to his feet, infuriated. He strode towards the Bravian with a scowl.

"Leave him, Godin! He's a traitor!"

The newly appointed representative of the creed shot Fitz an incredulous frown. He continued doing first aid without responding to the prince.

"How long?" he shouted, placing a hand to his forehead and squinting with concentration. Jordi realized he was using the copper band to communicate with his men. He watched Godin's expression darken. "I *know* your Mags have been stolen! What do you think the Shrouden Lords are using?! Figure it out!"

Fitz stomped his foot in irritation.

“Hey!” he whined fitfully. “Didn’t you hear me? I commanded you to leave him!”

Godin didn’t answer. He sat up with a relieved sigh as a medic rushed over. The doctor quickly prepared to administer an injection to the unconscious man. The prince went nuts.

“How dare you disobey me!” he screamed, having what Jordi could only describe as an actual temper tantrum. “I order you to-”

“Your highness,” Godin snapped, “you put me in charge of security, which means *I* command the Bravians, not you! I suggest you allow me to do my job.”

Fitz stared at the soldier in disbelief. His face was an unhealthy shade of purple as he opened his mouth to object, but before he could do so the headmaster suddenly jerked awake. Jordi felt a surge of relief as Lars sat up with a gasp and looked around, wild-eyed. Godin clamped a hand onto his shoulder.

“Lord Moring,” he said, in a tone that betrayed how unhappy he was to utter the words, “It is my duty to inform you that you are under arrest for treasonous actions against the Crown Prince of Ebanmoor. The Bravians will escort you back to the academy, where you will be incarcerated until you stand trial for your crimes.”

Jordi began crawling towards the headmaster as Fitz let out an enraged howl.

“Are you serious?!” he screeched, livid. Godin glared at him.

“I’m sure you can appreciate how difficult a situation this is for the creed,” he informed the prince coldly. “Lars Moring has been a loyal supporter of the King longer than you’ve been alive, sir. It would be an egregious perversion of justice to-”

“Spare me your weak excuses, Bravian!” Fitz seethed, balling his hands into fists. “I gave you the position because I believed you were the man to get the job done!”

Godin gave the prince a dark look.

“You asked me to bring you Roysley,” he corrected, “and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Lord Moring will answer for his crime, your highness, but he is not responsible for what happened today.” Godin’s face clouded with anger. “Devlin Roysley is.”

Lars was looking around frantically.

“Where’s the boy?!” he demanded, struggling to get up. Godin allowed him to do so, although he kept a hand on his arm. “Jordi! Is he alright?!”

“I’m here!” Jordi responded eagerly. He had almost reached Lars when Fitz abruptly attacked the headmaster, driving his fist into the other’s gut as hard as he could. The headmaster fell to his knees, coughing. Jordi screamed in fury and jumped to his feet, launching himself at the Crown Prince. Godin caught him and held him back, clamping Jordi’s arms to his sides with his powerful hands while Fitz brutally beat the injured headmaster. Lars made no attempt to defend himself as Jordi struggled ferociously to reach him.

“Don’t,” Godin hissed warningly, giving Jordi a shake. “We’re not in the arena anymore, boy. Attacking the prince will get you executed!” To Fitz he shouted, “You’ve made your point, highness! Killing him gains you nothing!”

The prince paused, breathing hard. His knuckles were bloody. Lars glared into his face defiantly as Fitz shook the hair out of his eyes with a deranged smile.

“Is that so?” he demanded, yanking the knife from his belt. “How do you think Devlin Roysley

will feel when he finds out it was his own blade that slit the throat of his mentor?”

Jordi went ballistic as Fitz stepped behind the battered headmaster and pressed the knife to his throat. The other Bravian soldiers who had rushed to the scene froze, staring at the prince in horror. No one attempted to intervene despite Jordi frantically screaming at them to do so.

They were powerless to stop Fitz from killing Lars.

Godin let out an anguished moan and threw a hand over Jordi’s face, covering his eyes so he couldn’t see what came next. The soldier’s voice rang proudly in Jordi’s ears as the veteran headmaster of the Bravian Academy gave a final shout.

“Long live Lance Hilvanleigh, King of Ebanmoor!”

Fitz Hilvanleigh laughed.

“Not if I can help it, Moring.”

Jordi tried to bite Godin’s hand, desperate to save Lars. Then he felt the soldier tense up as if surprised. At the last second, something had prevented Fitz from murdering Lars. As Godin’s hand slid from his face, Jordi saw that the prince had his head turned to the side. He seemed to be listening for something. Jordi looked around, unnerved by the sudden stillness on Jared’s Pass.

He heard it, too.

A MagRyder was racing towards them from the east.

Someone was returning.

Jordi swallowed hard. The mist prevented him from seeing the rapidly approaching vehicle, but he had a pretty good idea who might be coming back.

Fitz did as well. A delighted smile broke out on his face as his gaze swept their murky surroundings. His hand remained locked on Lars' shoulder, the blade still pressed to the headmaster's throat.

"Well, now, isn't this just perfect?!" he grinned. "Devlin Roysley is coming to save the day!" His lips curled into a snarl as he leaned down to hiss in Lars' ear.

"And he will watch me kill you, traitorous scum!"