

# THE QUARRY

## A Man in a Marriage

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As winter approached and the trees began to shrug off their burdens, Taron prepared to take up his.

The farmstead was overflowing with visitors and well-wishers, people that Taron had known all his life. Marriage between the blacksmith's daughter and the son of one of the oldest farming families in the district was always going to draw attention. But, as his mother promised him, it was only one day. He could manage.

He maneuvered a path through to the parlour where his new bride was waiting for him. She was perched by the fireplace, the glowing embers casting a gentle light onto her skin. Taron thought she was pretty enough, but he'd barely spoken two words to her throughout the entire day. There was no telling if they'd suit each other. He swigged another mouthful of ale at the thought.

The girl looked up at his approach. She was surrounded by the old matrons of the village who welcomed him coyly, no doubt expecting him to give them something to gossip about. Taron took his seat and tried to think of something to say that would allow him to get the

measure of this girl. But the words eluded him, and he turned back to one of the other women and asked after her son.

He hadn't given much thought to marriage, not until one morning when his mother informed him the roof of the barn was leaking, and it was time for him to find a wife with enough of a dowry to fix it. A suitable match had then been found and a date was set. He'd hardly had any input and the whole affair felt as solid as the morning fog, disappearing in the early air.

Now he was forced to come to grips with his new reality.

'The house is lovely.' Her voice was small, and if Taron had not been sitting so close to her, he would not have heard it. His wife was looking down at her hands, resolute in not meeting his gaze. The matrons talked over their conversation, but he felt the women's interested stares digging into the both of them.

Taron wanted to respond, wanted to tell her all about how his mother had swept through the entire house to make things ready for her new daughter-in-law. He wanted simply to speak, but the words would not claw their way out of his throat. She still wouldn't look up from her hands and he was suddenly awash with anger.

This was his home. He'd spent his years exploring its depths and loving it for the shelter it provided. When his father passed, it had become his own. He had relished that duty, the chance to prove he was now a man. And now here was this woman, this *child*, with whom he must share everything. She had not toiled the land until calluses formed on her fingers. She had not sat all night with the cows as they brought their young into the world. She had not done anything, yet his home belonged to her.

Taron felt his heart beating faster and faster as he tried to get his temper back under control. It would break his mother's heart if he made a scene in front of the entire district but his feet had a mind of their own, and he'd stood up and strode away before anyone could say anything. He felt the eyes of the women, all of them, stare at him as he left.

A heavy burden indeed.

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Mila slammed the jug of water on the table and Taron winced at the pounding in his ears. He reached out and downed another swig, his throat protesting.. His whole body felt wrong, discombobulated, and painful.

‘I had thought to go and speak with Sara this morning,’ Mila said as she worried at the ash on the apron covering her distended belly. ‘They may be able to spare a son or two to help with clearing the barn. And those boys will be far more able to track down the cows who managed to escape.’

Taron didn’t think his burning throat would allow him to voice a single thought and he closed his eyes at his helplessness. All he could do was nod his heavy head and hope that the cattle would be found quickly.

Those beasts had already been through too much. He could still hear the cries they made from their stalls. Brutal and panicked. The flames had made him feel the same. But the creatures, summoning their strength, had managed to break free of their cage, clearing a way through the fire for him to follow.

They had saved him, and he wasn’t even strong enough to make sure the survivors were alright.

‘Taron?’

He came back to himself to find Mila’s gaze penetrating him. She had looked at him in many ways through the years, but never like that. A sad, raspy sound escaped his smoke-damaged throat.

She sat down in the chair across from him, reaching across to wrap her fingers around his bandaged hands. The pain was not as sharp as Taron’s surprise at the intimate gesture. His wife was close enough that he could see the morning’s brightness reflecting off her hair.

‘I thought you were going to die last night.’

The words were a shock to his system, a surprise he wasn’t prepared for. He tried to pull his hands back but she had a grip on them. Pain filled his senses and forced him to stop.

‘You’re not an easy man to like, Taron,’ she said. ‘I wanted my parents to find me a nice man, one I could be fond of. But they gave me to you.’ Her face was stripped of expression and it reminded him of how young she’d looked on their wedding day.

‘I thought you’d made me a widow last night. I thought my whole life had changed again.’

The urge to respond, to rage against her, was strong. He didn’t care how she’d felt. He had been more scared than any other moment of his life. And now the barn he had sold himself for was gone. Her words were the flies that buzzed around the animal’s’ arses.

She broke contact and her hands went to cradle her stomach—his baby. Taron withdrew his hands before she could change her mind.

‘I kept trying to imagine what I would tell the baby. That his father was a good man who died trying to protect his farm? Or that he was an idiot, who cared more about his animals than this family? Which is it, Taron?’

He recognised the emotion in her eyes and he couldn’t help wondering if she saw it in his. They sat opposite one another and the distance between them felt real and impenetrable.

‘You had a choice, last night. And you chose to risk everything that we have.’

Her words made it clear to him. As far as his wife was concerned, he was nothing more than a weight she was made to carry.

Taron’s stomach heaved as he drove the hoe into the earth. The soil needed to be cleared for planting or the harvest would be bleak, and that was the last thing they could afford.

It didn’t seem to matter how many hours Taron spent working in the fields, it was never enough for his family. But the mouths to feed were nothing compared to the taxes he was forced to send to the Crown. The thought of it made him strike at the ground with force.

Just a little bit more, he decided. Then he could go back to the house.

Mila was stewing meat over the kitchen fireplace by the time Taron walked through the door. Her brown eyes observed him disinterestedly before she turned back to her task. Little Micah sat near her feet, flashing his gums at the sight of his father. The boy waddled over with unsteady legs and Taron disregarded the ache in his back, picking up his son.

‘There was a letter today,’ said his wife, attention still focused on the pot.

He placed Micah back on the ground and told the boy to go to his bedroom, and then he grasped the correspondence on the bench and pried open the seal.

His knees buckled beneath him and he slumped his way into the nearest stool. His head felt so heavy and his hands came up to hold it, fingers sliding over his scalp and grasping his hair. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

Footsteps sounded on the stone floor and Mila's scent wafted through his nose. The paper crinkled as she picked it up, and Taron's heart sank as she read it. When she spoke, it was with a tone of incredulousness and he knew it couldn't be good news.

'The King demands we go to war. All able-bodied men are hereby conscripted into the army.'

The words were like wounds, amplifying the sores and weaknesses of Taron's body. It hurt, but he managed to lift his head out of his hands to face his wife. Mila stood, watching him and still holding the letter.

'I'm expected to report to duty in a fortnight's time,' he croaked out of his dry throat. 'I don't know how long I'll be away.'

'Then we need to be practical. There are many preparations that need to be made and not very much time to make them. Micah and I will need to economise. We won't be able to work the entire farm, only enough to ensure that we are fed. We should try and put some money away. Maybe if we sold the cows—'

Taron felt a hot energy pulse its way through his body, drawing him to his feet. He wanted to stalk towards his wife and rage about the generations of his family who had raised those very cows on this very land. The wariness in her eyes suggested to him that she knew exactly what he wished for, but Taron knew he couldn't give in to his temper.

'Sell them if you must,' he said, moving past her. 'But you won't be the only wife looking to get rid of farm animals you can't afford to keep. There will be plenty who'll use your desperation to cheat you out of a good price.'

'I'm not a simpleton, Taron.'

He turned away from her, head pounding and desperate for bed. Her voice made him pause.

'I do hope you make it home, dearest husband.'

Her words were as soft as they were on their wedding day and though she may have fled the room without a response, Taron couldn't help but feel hungry for more of her comfort.

Taron imagined how the women would be folding themselves around the men like scarves, their smiles bright and their dresses almost transparent.

Taron listened to the display as he sharpened his sword, ignoring the tightening in his groin and the pulses of heat that shot through him with every ostentatious moan. The knight's tent was a few feet away, but drink and women often made men louder than they had any right to be. His mind flew to the horrified expression his mother would wear if she could hear what the men were on about, and a wry smile worked its way onto his face.

War was a breeding place for the desires of men, as he'd discovered in the weeks since he'd arrived.

He'd also learnt that there was a hierarchy to the way the camp was run, determined by skill and wealth. The best fighters were the ones with training and expensive weapons, and they were the men the king valued. Taron was young and strong, but he'd never fought in a battle, and his sword was more rust than steel. He was happy enough as a foot soldier, and if he occasionally heard something that disturbed him, he knew enough to keep his mouth shut.

Once his sword was back in its sheath, and he'd passed the whetting stone onto the next poor soul, he started to trudge his way back towards his own bedroll. His limbs ached from the brutality of the day's drills and he was hoping to snatch a few extra minutes of sleep before dinner. He kept his head down as he passed the knight's tent, not wanting their notice, but a voice yelled out to beckon him despite his efforts.

There were five of them, wearing their armour with wide leers. Taron could see the sharp lines and scars on their faces, unmarred by the dirt, which was more than he could say for himself. He swung his torso forward in what was supposed to be a bow, then stood at attention, waiting for the drunken lords to release him. If he felt the stirring of anger in the bowels of his stomach, he didn't let them see it in his face.

'Funny, huh men? Looks just like one o' those tin soldiers that I used to play with as a lad.' Taron couldn't tell the speaker from his companions, as they were all long-haired and

bearded. The only way he had to tell them apart were the different coloured dresses worn by the women in their laps.

‘I think he’s handsome,’ a woman said as she separated herself and walked towards Taron, circling around him like a bird of prey. She was so close he could faintly smell the sharpness of her perfume and he fought the urge to cover himself from her gaze. Her dress was lilac. She gave him one final smirk before reclaiming her place with one of the men.

‘You ever had a girl, boy?’ cried another voice. Taron couldn’t look away from the girl, who smirked back in return. When he didn’t answer, the voice laughed, ‘Not something you’d forget.’

Taron’s head snapped up at the laughter of the men, his limbs suddenly uncomfortable as the attention turned unfriendly. The anger came bubbling back and he choked out, ‘I’ve a wife. And a son. Sir.’

‘She tell you that?’ another man said, while trying to stuff as much meat as possible into his mouth. Taron’s fist clenched as he watched the cretin’s mouth form the words. Mila would have stared at the man with a look of bitter and intimidating contempt. But all he could do was stand there, longing for his bedroll and the relative quiet of sleep.

‘The boy’s got my look.’

‘Renna’ll let you have a go,’ said the man standing next to the woman in purple. He tapped her bottom and pushed her forward, back towards Taron.

But the allure of the beautiful woman had faded, and it didn’t matter how much she smiled or how many times her fingers wove their way through her long hair. She wasn’t his wife and this wasn’t the choice he wanted to make.

‘Excuse me, milords. I’m wanted elsewhere.’

His fist unclenched as the men’s laughter dissolved into the background noises of the camp. He felt free.