

The Miller's Son

by CC Rogers

Part 1

The brigand who stepped out into the forest road in front of Cedrik resembled an enraged bear more than a man. "You're that master carpenter," he accused.

"Journeyman carpenter," Cedrik corrected. He wouldn't be a master unless he set up a shop someday. "How can I be of assistance?" Surreptitiously, he slipped his hand around the hammer under his cloak.

Cedrik was a head taller than the man accosting him, but he didn't let it lull him into thinking the brigand wasn't a threat. Still, there was only one of him...

Members of the man's band filtered out of the trees onto the road behind him and Cedrik sighed. If he hoped to live beyond his current twenty-one years, he had to keep his wits.

The fellow smiled at his cohorts, then turned back to Cedrik. "You did a job for that fat bastard lord who's been trying to kill us."

Cedrik shrugged. "I'm not in a position to turn down the money for my next meal. I'm sure you good men can understand that."

A thin man with a long nose stepped up next to the bear-man. "Yer not from around here."

"No. I was apprenticed in Baern."

The man sniffed haughtily. "I can tell that you're not from there, neither." The corner of his mouth turned down in disgust. "By yer speech, I'd say yer from Rehr Valley."

The large man hissed. "The sorceress's land!" He drew his ragged sword.

"You have no quarrel with me," Cedrik hurriedly reassured him. "There's no need for weapons."

"We'll have none of that unnatural magic here! You're her agent, aren't you?"

Cedrik rapidly assessed his adversaries, trying to decide if the truth was more dangerous than a lie. It was not the first time he'd had to gamble his life on a guess about the minds of others. Most of the men were wide-eyed with fear, so he chose honesty. "I am my lady Selena's loyal subject," he said.

"Kill him!" long-nose barked. The man with the sword waved the others forward.

But the men behind him hesitated. "The sorceress has powerful magic," one argued.

"They say she guards her property with a vengeance worse than death," a second said. "I heard she tortured a man into screaming agony and kept him like that for twenty years. If this carpenter is her man..."

"Nonsense," the brigand in front snapped. "Old wives' tales."

The others exchanged looks and then shook their heads. "Not worth the risk," they decided and ran off into the woods.

Cedrik was left facing only the two men. He smiled at them, projecting the impression that he was in no danger. It had the desired effect, as the men glanced at each other nervously.

"Do it," the thin man ordered nonetheless. The larger man advanced and raised his sword...

In a smooth motion, Cedrik whipped his hammer around and struck the blade, shattering it with a thunderous clap of metallic destruction.

The brigands went white with terror. Pressing his advantage, Cedrik brandished the hammer and advanced on them. They turned and ran for their lives, quickly disappearing into the woods.

Taking a deep breath, Cedrik hung his hammer back on his belt. Then he backtracked up the road to take a different route.

It was time to go home. The world was a dangerous place and he had seen enough of it to have his fill.

Back in Rehr Valley, his worries would be few. In fact, he would likely have only one: being in love with the most powerful woman in the world, a woman that he could never have.

* * *

Selena's hands moved the shuttle deftly as she wove. The rhythmic motion calmed her. She wondered if she would have time to finish the piece. It felt strange to her, to be concerned about time.

Melodic chimes interrupted her work, signaling a caller.

She set aside her weaving and rose smoothly, brushing her hands over her layered skirts. In a stand mirror, she checked that her long black hair was properly brushed.

Her reflection's emerald green eyes stared back at her. Magic held her in her youth, ever unchanging, giving her the appearance of a woman of about twenty years. But soon that would end.

Almost without conscious thought, she gestured at the mirror to invoke her magic.

Her image disappeared, replaced by her colleague, Sorcerer Morris. He was tall and robust, with a touch of gray hair gracing his temples.

"I'm afraid I have no good news," he said. "No replacement has been found."

She gripped her skirts anxiously. "And what does the Council say of my request?"

"It was denied. The law must be obeyed."

Selena resisted the impulse to curse. She had been a sorceress for almost a century. She knew restraint. "That sentences my people to death," she argued.

"Selena, I think you're being overly dramatic."

"These lands have been served by sorcery for two thousand years! It is the only life they know."

"There are many lands that are not. They are ruled by kings instead."

"I'm all too aware of that. Rehr Valley is small, but rich in resources. When I am gone, their armies will come to take it."

"Your time is done, Selena. You must make way for another."

"There is no other!" she snapped in exasperation.

"There is still a chance that one will be found."

"Morris, my old friend, do not waste time in fantasies. There are fewer sorcerers in the world now than ever before. With every generation, we grow fewer and fewer."

Morris paused. "I know," he admitted softly.

"If only they would let me stay!"

"You cannot extend your rule. The Council's decision is final."

"I don't want to rule longer. I just want to stay and help my people, and whoever becomes their new leader."

Morris shook his head. "If you remain, any other purported leader would be nothing more than a figurehead. You know that."

Selena's gaze turned from Morris to the window. In the towns and villages near her castle, thousands depended on her for their protection.

"What will happen to those I care for?"

"They will learn to care for themselves."

"Or they will die," she said bitterly.

Morris looked sympathetic. "Death and life are intertwined. That is why we let it claim us. So that the world can adapt rather than stagnate."

Selena tried to believe his words. They were principles that she had held her entire life, but now all she could imagine were armies killing everyone she knew, burning their houses and stealing their land.

"I can't, Morris."

"You have no choice," he said quietly. "If you do not step down voluntarily, the Council will remove you by whatever means necessary."

With that, the mirror flickered back to her reflection. Selena remained staring out the window as tears rolled down her cheeks. She had to find a way to save them. She didn't have much time.

* * *

A clear, blue sky stretched overhead as Selena walked to the nearest town. The early morning air was crisp, but a bright sun promised a warm day.

She regretted not taking this walk more often. Grain fields rippled in glorious shades of gold. The forests filled her nose with pleasant scents and treated her ears to the sounds of birds and small creatures.

Whenever she had made this trip before, it had been on horseback. She was always in a hurry, rushing to handle some emergency. Only now, when she had so few days remaining to see it, did she take the time to enjoy the walk.

Her mood was darkened by thoughts of her own mortality. She knew something of what to expect, having seen so many people born, age, and die under her reign. She hadn't really been close to any of them, though. She had always held herself apart, to make their inevitable deaths easier to bear.

She wondered if anyone would miss her.

In a section of road surrounded by trees, she came upon a basket lying on its side with apples spilling out of it. She inspected the fruit and determined the basket must have fallen off old Harley's cart not long ago.

For a long time, she stood staring at the apples, wondering what to do. She could leave them there; surely someone else would come along to collect them. But Harley was probably transporting them to town because he needed the money. There was no guarantee that someone else would return them to him.

So she decided to bring the apples with her.

After gathering them up, she considered several options for using magic to convey them to town. But she would have to get accustomed to living without magic, now that her time as a sorceress was nearly done.

She hoisted the basket onto her back. It was heavy and awkward. She continued on her way, but after a few minutes she doubted she would make it to her destination. She considered using magic after all, but that would be admitting that she couldn't survive without magic and the only thing waiting for her beyond the borders of her land was death.

She began to understand why sorcerers sometimes lost their minds at the end of their terms and failed to resign peacefully.

She stiffened her resolve and kept going. But she knew it was only a matter of time before her strength failed. Filled with regret, she wished she had let herself get close to someone. She didn't want to die alone. The basket began to slip.

Suddenly, her burden lightened to weightlessness on her back.

"If my lady will permit," said a man's voice behind her.

Realizing the voice's owner had lifted the basket off her, she turned and found a tall, startlingly handsome man.

There was something familiar about his countenance. There had been a time, some fifteen years before, when the miller's wife had been deathly ill. Selena had gone to the mill to cure her and a very small boy had opened the door. That had been the first time she had met the miller's youngest son. "Cedrik?" she asked in disbelief.

His eyes widened in surprise for a moment. Then he smiled, which only enhanced his features. "I am honored that my lady remembers me."

She couldn't help but look him up and down. "You've, um... you've grown." The last time she had seen him was shortly before he had left for an apprenticeship in Baern. She could scarcely believe that affable, lanky boy was now this broad-shouldered, muscular man. She cleared her throat and forced her eyes back to his face. "Welcome home."

"Thank you, my lady."

Selena laughed. "Cedrik, you needn't be quite so formal. I would prefer if you used my name."

"As you wish... Selena."

Her pulse quickened. Never before had her name sounded so pleasingly intimate. She wanted him to say it again, but closer... with his breath on her ear, and her neck...

She hadn't felt this drawn to a man in a long, long time.

Swallowing nervously, she gestured down the road. "I'm on my way to see the mayor," she said with forced casualness. She resisted the urge to fan herself with her hands. The morning had warmed so quickly! "Would you care to accompany me?"

He nodded and they set off. He carried the basket of fruit easily, as if he barely noticed its weight. "Bringing the honorable mayor apples?"

"No," she said, smiling at the idea. "I found them. I'm guessing they're Harley's, so I'm bringing them to him." The bulging muscles in his arms drew her eyes. The way he took his strength for granted was strangely provocative. It was just so... masculine.

Struggling to keep her thoughts off other attributes of his manhood, she reminded herself that she was a sorceress, not a sixteen-year-old girl! She had to get control of her urges.

It felt like a lifetime since she had last known a man's touch. In many ways, it was. When she became a sorceress, she left everything from that life behind.

Cedrik seemed oblivious to her internal struggle. "If I may say so, hauling apples seems an odd activity for someone of your station. You could have sent someone for them."

"Like some kind of queen?" She shook her head. "I don't want people to think of me like that. Especially now."

Faced with Cedrik's quizzical look, she had little choice but to explain.

"I won't be lady of this land much longer."

Disbelief flashed across his face. "But you've always been our lady. I thought you always would be."

Selena looked away sadly. Why did she feel like she was betraying him? "Sorcerers learned long ago that if we rule indefinitely, it has evil ramifications. Our term is limited to one hundred years."

Worry furrowed his brow. "But... what will happen to you?"

"It doesn't matter," she said dismissively, unwilling to share her bleak expectations. "What concerns me is what will happen to everyone else here. I'm going to the mayor to discuss it. You see, normally I'd announce my retirement and introduce my successor. But there is no sorcerer available to take my place."

From Cedrik's expression, he seemed to understand the dread impact of this news. She wished she could reassure him, but she had no words of comfort to offer.

To her surprise, he looked at her with sudden, confident resolve. "Do not worry, my lady... Selena," he corrected himself. "We will find a solution."

For the first time in her long life, Selena felt like she had someone else's strength to lean on. To her surprise, it made her feel stronger herself.

She had been alone for so long. Walking alongside Cedrik made her wonder what it would feel like not to be alone anymore. She imagined it would feel quite good.

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The shadows grew long as Cedrik waited outside the town hall.

Every moment he had shared with Selena replayed in his mind. Part of him had hoped that, upon seeing her again, he would find no trace of his childhood adoration.

But he loved her now as much as he always had.

Selena was just as beautiful as the day she had saved his mother's life. She was higher than a queen. He shouldn't even exist to her. Yet she had remembered his name and spoken to him as if he were her equal.

A flicker of hope dared enter his heart. Perhaps, once she stepped down, she would no longer be so far above him. Perhaps she might even accept a suitor's gift from him.

He laughed at his own foolish fantasies. Even without being a sorceress, a woman like Selena was too fine to marry a poor carpenter. He imagined she would have her pick of lords and princes. She would go to live in a fine castle, not a thatched-roof hovel like the one he would call home.

The mayor walked out of the hall, pulling Cedrik out of his thoughts. He moved closer to the door.

Selena stepped out of the building, rubbing at her eyes. It had been a very long meeting.

"Are you going back to your castle now?" Cedrik asked.

She seemed surprised to see him. "Cedrik? I thought you'd gone home."

"It's getting dark. I thought you might like company for your walk."

With an amused smile, she asked, "Are you concerned about my safety?"

"I am sure my lady can protect her person quite well. But you might find it more pleasant, not to be alone."

Her smile faded and she stared at him with her beautiful green eyes. He wondered if he'd out-stepped his boundaries. He had been to lands where the nobility would have ordered his death if he had dared speak to them.

But with Selena, his tongue found words that he had no right to say. Just being near her was intoxicating. When he was young, he had fantasized about getting a job at the castle, about being her servant, about attending to her every need...

Suddenly, she smiled. "I think I would enjoy the company. Walk with me, Cedrik."

The sun set as they walked to the castle. A full moon lit their way. "Did you and the mayor form a plan?" Cedrik asked.

Selena shook her head. "It seems we discussed a thousand plans, but none that would work. We have no army, so we can't fight. We have no bargaining leverage, so we can't ally. We have nowhere to go, so we can't evacuate. Surrendering to our most powerful enemy, King Patrick, seems like the best option so far."

Cedrik's hands tightened into angry fists. He had been to King Patrick's lands. "Have you seen how he treats his people? He taxes them into poverty and holds power through ruthless use of his army."

Selena looked at him sadly. "Yes, I have. But we have to face facts. Patrick will see my departure for the opportunity it is. No other king will think it worthwhile to oppose him. If he is going to take Rehr Valley one way or another, it would be better to do it without bloodshed."

Images of his family in virtual slavery to a tyrant made Cedrik's blood boil. "The people here will not accept it." He imagined the reaction of his father and brothers. "We would sooner fight."

"That would be pointless. There is no way we could defeat Patrick's army without magic."

Cedrik disagreed. Selena did not understand a man's determination to defend his home. But he didn't want to argue the point. "There is another option."

She looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and hope.

"No one has to know that you've left."

Her brow wrinkled in confusion. "What do you mean?"

He gestured out at the world. "Most people here see you only once or twice in their entire lives. Most people outside this valley never see you. You've become somewhat of a mythical creature, surrounded in legend. If you left your seal with the mayor so that he could write letters in your name, it could be decades before anyone realized you were gone."

She tapped her lip pensively. "That... that might work."

"In the meantime, we could secretly build our defenses, so that we are not easy prey for invading armies."

Selena nodded and smiled at him approvingly. "I like your plan."

His heart swelled with pride.

He had spent most of his life trying to make himself worthy of Selena. He had learned anything that anyone would teach him. He had traveled the world. He had tried to become the best carpenter that ever was.

But there had come a day when he had realized that he could never make himself worthy of his sorceress. His meager savings might help him establish his own carpentry shop, but they would not impress a high lady.

He had given up hope of winning her favor. And yet here she was, looking up at him in the moonlight as if he were her hero.

He so desperately wanted to be. He would do anything for her. He wanted nothing more than to stay at her side.

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For some time, they walked along in silence. Cedrik was content to do so. He savored every moment in Selena's company.

Then she asked about his apprenticeship and how difficult it must have been to leave his family at such a young age. The conversation flowed easily from there. After they arrived at the castle, they lingered outside the gate while Cedrik told her one of his adventures.

"I realized they were going to conscript me," he said, "so I snuck away in the middle of the night. Luckily, none of them was as good a woodsman as me. I was better at hiding my trail than they were at following it."

Selena had the enthralled look of a child listening to a fairy tale. But after he paused, her expression turned skeptical. "Did all that really happen?"

"Upon my honor."

She smiled. "You're like one of those heroes in stories."

The admiring gleam was back in her eyes. He didn't think anything in the world could please him more. But he didn't want her to think him a braggart.

"No, my dear lady Selena. I was just repeatedly getting myself into trouble and barely escaping."

"Well, that's generally what stories are about."

He returned her smile. She looked lovely in the moonlight, even more so than in his childhood memories.

Impulsively, he took her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the back softly. It was something he had seen knights in other lands do.

"Do you think yourself my champion, Cedrik?" Selena teased.

"Just a man appreciating the graces of a most beautiful woman." He didn't let go of her hand.

Her eyes were large and surprisingly innocent. "No one's seen me as a woman in a long time. Aren't you afraid?"

"Afraid of what? Of you? Never." He almost couldn't breathe. He wanted to confess his love for her, but words failed him.

Then Cedrik did the most reckless thing he'd done in his entire life. He pulled Selena to him and kissed her on the lips.

Part of him expected her to strike him dead on the spot. Part of him felt it would be worth it.

Some bodies fit together as if they were made for each other. The right height, the right curves... Selena filled his arms and pressed against him in all the right places. It was better than even the best fantasy he'd had of kissing her.

And, if he wasn't mistaken, she was kissing him back. Her hands slid over his shoulders and she arched into his embrace.

He ran his fingers through her lustrous hair, reveling in the silky texture. He wanted to push her up against the rocky castle wall and make love to her right there in the moonlight. He wanted to drive her to the height of pleasure and follow her over the brink. He wanted her to be his.

But she was still a sorceress and he was only the miller's son.

He reluctantly broke his lips away from her and awaited his fate.

Her eyelids fluttered as she looked up at him. She didn't look like she was going to kill him, though.

She shook her head sadly. "Perhaps you should be."

"Should be what?"

"Afraid of me."

Then she walked into the darkened castle without a backward glance.

Part 2

For two weeks, Cedrik did not see any trace of Selena.

He knew he must have offended her. To be kissed by the likes of him... she must be burning with shame.

He wanted to apologize. He didn't know what had come over him. But he couldn't find her. She hadn't left her castle since that night. And he wasn't bold enough to knock on her door.

He was afraid she would never speak to him again. He was more afraid that he would never even see her again.

He didn't think he could live without her forgiveness. He wasn't sure he could live without her.

Then he had the most fearful thought of all: what if she was already gone? What if she had left Rehr Valley, never to return?

He couldn't wait any longer. He had to find her.

* * *

Selena brushed her hair, finding it difficult to think straight. Her thoughts kept returning to a certain young man.

Avoiding Cedrik had not worked to diminish his effect on her. It seemed the longer she went without seeing him, the more she yearned for his company.

She stood in front of the stand mirror and looked at her reflection. What did Cedrik see when he looked at her? A powerful sorceress? A high lady? A beautiful woman?

The memory of his kiss overwhelmed her, making her heart pound. At times, she thought it must have been a dream. But she knew it had been real. No dream could feel that good.

Since that night, she had been spying on him, using her magic. The men who hired him praised his workmanship. He would have no difficulty establishing himself in his trade.

She had seen other sides of him as well. He repaired a poor widow's door and refused payment. He taught a group of children a new game. He surprised his mother with flowers.

Succumbing to her weakness, she waved her hand and brought forth the mirror's magic. It flickered with images of Cedrik from earlier that day.

He was working on a grain storage tower, repairing damage from a recent storm. In the midday heat, he had stripped to the waist but was still sweating. She could see every glistening contour of his tanned upper body. He handled his tools with practiced hands, the muscles in his arms and torso rippling.

Her knees felt weak.

She snapped her fingers and the mirror went dark. It was dangerous to want things. It was too easy to abuse her power to indulge her desires. But images and thoughts swirled in her head, unbidden.

She stood rock still, breathing hard, trying to gain control of her thoughts.

What would happen if I didn't leave?

The other sorcerers would come for her. But they were few. Away from their homes, their magic would be weak. But here, in the source of her power, she would be strong.

They might not be able to defeat me.

She could cast away tradition. She could make Cedrik hers. She could make him into a king.

We could live together forever.

Shuddering, she pushed away such dangerous thoughts.

She feared that she was losing her mind.

A moment before he knocked, she saw, through her magic, that Cedrik was outside her door. She scrambled for a place to hide, realized that was ridiculous and froze in a panic.

"My lady?" he queried softly as he knocked. "Are you there?"

If she had been paying attention, she would've known the moment he snuck into the castle. Maybe then she would've had time to escape. But as it was, she had only one dignified course of action.

She opened the door.

His eyes were filled with pain and remorse, but he seemed relieved to see her. "You haven't left," he whispered, as if reassuring himself.

"No, not yet," she said. It was clear that he needed something from her and she was eager to help. Just seeing him made her heart leap with joy. She ushered him in and shut the door behind him.

He looked as if he might drop to his knees in supplication. "Have I displeased you?"

She was too confused to respond. What was he talking about? Then she realized: the cause of his pain was... her.

"Displeased? No. Why would you think that?"

"You've been avoiding me."

She considered denying it, but decided it would be pointless. "Yes, I have been," she confessed. "But not because of anything you did." She sighed and sat down on the edge of her bed.

He looked around for a place to sit, and she gestured for him to sit next to her.

He swallowed nervously. "My lady, I think that might be... inappropriate."

"Sit down, Cedrik. And stop calling me that."

He sat.

She folded her hands in her lap. "Do you know anything about sorcery?" she asked.

"A little," he said. "I don't know how accurate what I've heard is, though."

She chose her words carefully. "Sorcery is power beyond your imagination. I have that power, but it comes with an obligation. Every day, I must use it judiciously." She raised her hand and flicked a finger at her

stand mirror. It glimmered briefly, then showed images of vast destruction. Towns and forests burned. People screamed and died.

"In the past," Selena said, "sorcerers used their power for their own gain. They nearly destroyed the world."

The images changed to a group of solemn men in dark robes.

"The sorcerers of old formed the Council to stop the madness. They formed rules. They formed traditions." She looked into his eyes, hoping he would understand.

"Is that why you've been alone all these years? Is that one of your rules?"

She shrugged. "More of a tradition. The risk of jealousy and hatred and violence..." He was so close, listening intently to her. "It's too dangerous to let ourselves fall in love," she continued. She couldn't remember what she was going to say next. His eyes were so beautiful. She wanted to kiss him again. She could imagine how wonderful it would feel. Her eyes began to close and she leaned toward him.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," he said, snapping her out of her fantasy.

"What?"

"To deny yourself the most valuable part of human existence, because of the fear that you might do something awful if you get hurt? That's ridiculous. We all have the capacity to do bad things. But we control ourselves. That's part of being human."

She examined his face, looking deep into his eyes. "You're not afraid to love a sorceress?"

"No," he said with certainty. "I'm not."

Suddenly, the reasons for keeping away from him seemed insignificant. She needed him to quench the flame of desire that threatened to consume her.

Part of her felt guilty, knowing that she was exploiting his loyalty. He would do anything she asked, even if it led to his own destruction.

But at the moment, she didn't care.

* * *

As Cedrik watched the glow of morning fill the room, he felt happier than he'd been in his entire life.

Between passionate interludes the previous night, he and Selena had spoken to each other quietly in the dark. He had told her stories of the places he had been. She had shared her dreams and her fears. He had comforted her and made her laugh.

He would treasure those intimate moments forever.

Selena looked like she had finally fallen asleep, nestled in his arms. With a sigh of regret, he decided he should leave. He tried to extract himself from the bed without waking her.

She stirred, opening her eyes sleepily and smiling at him. He smiled back. She snuggled into his embrace and he abandoned his attempts to detach himself. "Cedrik," she murmured as he caressed her cheek.

"Selena," he began. There was something he needed to know. He was almost afraid to ask, but he had to. "Where will you go, when you leave Rehr Valley?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

"There isn't a tradition for that?"

"Sure there is. I'll go someplace far away, to live quietly and invisibly in retirement until I die. That is, unless I lose my mind. In which case, they'll have to kill me."

He tensed in alarm. "What do you mean?"

"It happens sometimes. Actually, it happens a lot. Sorceress Trina, the one who taught me how to use my magic, refused to step down at the end of her term. I tried to talk sense into her, but she was completely irrational by that point. She just couldn't accept losing her magic."

He tightened his embrace. "You don't think that could happen to you, do you?"

Her silence spoke volumes.

"Selena, look at me. You are not going to go insane, alright?" She didn't look convinced. "You just need to start a new life. Put sorcery behind you. Have something else to live for."

She smiled a small smile. "You have something in mind?"

Throwing caution to the wind, Cedrik said, "Come away with me. My master in Baern told me there would always be work there for me if I needed it. It won't be the kind of lifestyle you're accustomed to, but I could take care of you. I could be... I could be a good husband to you."

He held his breath, waiting for her response. Her gaze flickered back and forth between his eyes. She blinked away tears. "I can imagine no finer husband in all the world," she said.

"Then you'll come with me?"

"Yes."

Overwhelmed with joy, he peppered her with kisses. "I love you, Selena." He said the words before he realized it and instantly regretted them. Why had he said that? She would think he needed her to love him back, which was of course impossible, and he didn't ever dare hope that she-

"I love you, too, Cedrik," she said with an admiring smile. "I've never known anyone like you." She ran her hands over him. "I've never needed anyone so much." And she kissed him.

He grinned with anticipation. But suddenly she sat bolt upright in alarm. "What is it?" he asked.

"Someone's at the gate," she said.

* * *

Cedrik hid in Selena's wardrobe until after her serving woman left.

Selena had only two servants, an aging couple that lived in the castle with her. Everyone knew Selena ran her castle with magic, but there were times when even she needed a servant's help. Receiving couriers was one such time.

The box that Selena had received was ornate. She set it on her writing table as Cedrik extracted himself from her wardrobe.

"What is it?" he asked.

She ran her finger lightly over it. "I recognize this design. This is from King Patrick." She clicked a latch he couldn't see and the lid popped open.

She reached into the box and pulled out a beautiful, golden necklace laden with jewels.

Cedrik gaped at such wealth. Why would King Patrick send her that?

Selena's expression was stony. "It's a suitor's gift," she said.

* * *

"Did you think I would deny a normal audience?" Selena asked as she swept gracefully into the presence of her royal guest.

King Patrick smiled. "The thought did cross my mind."

She held the necklace out to him. "There is no need for such games."

Patrick shook his head. "A man of my stature does not allow suitor gifts to be returned."

"Well, I can hardly accept it, can I?"

"As long as you have it, I consider my pursuit in play."

Selena resisted the urge to throw it at him. "You have no interest in me. What is it that you want?"

He licked his lips. "Although our individual lives are short compared to yours, the collective memory of my people is long. Your hundred years are at an end."

Selena's eyes narrowed. So much for the plan of keeping her departure secret.

Patrick continued, "I was wondering when you were going to introduce me to your replacement. That is the custom, isn't it? A smooth transition of power."

"My replacement is not available at this time." She was careful not to lie. Lying always caused more complications than it was worth.

He smiled knowingly. "Truly spoken, but not the whole truth. There is no replacement." He paused a moment, as if daring her to deny it. She held her tongue. His smile broadened smugly. "As long as you are a good, obedient wife, I will leave the people here alone. And who will dare oppose me, while I have a sorceress in my service?" His eyes lit with greed.

She made no effort to hide her disgust as she imagined what services he would demand of her. "Have a safe journey home, your majesty. My maid will show you a room if you wish to stay until morning."

Anger flickered in his eyes, but he quickly covered it with a well-mannered bow.

She withdrew to her own rooms. This was not good. Not good at all.

Part 3

Cedrik watched the most pathetic assemblage of fighting men he had ever seen in his life.

After an announcement by the mayor, Selena's impending departure and King Patrick's threat were common knowledge. As Cedrik had expected, his people had chosen to fight rather than subject themselves to Patrick's cruel rule.

The men gathered in the village green. Cedrik's older brother, Logan, joined him to watch.

"I can only surmise that those bumbling antics are meant to be drilling," Cedrik said.

"What else can we do?" Logan asked. "We have to learn to defend ourselves however we can."

One young man named Sven was better than the rest. Practice sword in hand, he was defeating all the others, one at a time, and laughing haughtily.

Cedrik shook his head in disgust. Sven noticed and yelled a rude challenge at him.

"None of you know what you're doing," Cedrik responded. "You're going to get slaughtered."

"Big talk," Sven sneered. "Why don't you show me what you've got, old man?"

Cedrik's eyes narrowed. Everyone had stopped to watch this exchange. He had to show them, before they got themselves killed.

He shed his leather jerkin but retained his shirt, then pulled a wooden practice sword out of a pile of mock weapons.

With honed precision, he performed a warm-up sequence of sword forms. Several people watching him gaped openly.

Then he turned to Sven. "Begin," he said calmly. He held his sword ready and waited.

Sven looked scared, but didn't have the sense to step down. He raised his wooden sword and attacked clumsily but forcefully.

Cedrik blocked him, knocked the sword from his hands and struck him in a slicing motion that he would not soon forget.

Crying out in pain, Sven recoiled and fell. If Cedrik's sword had been real, Sven's innards would have spilled on the ground.

Cedrik flourished the mock sword. "You don't know what you're doing," he repeated. "And false confidence will get you killed."

He offered a hand to Sven, who hesitated only a moment before taking it. Cedrik helped him to his feet.

"Where did you learn that?" an astonished Logan asked.

"Here and there," Cedrik said. "I spent a lot of time away from home, and carpentry wasn't challenging enough for me."

Logan clapped him on the back. "You have to teach us that."

"It would take years," he replied.

"Then let's get started!" Logan grinned.

Cedrik looked around at the hopeful faces of the men. It wouldn't be enough. Patrick's army was full of seasoned killers.

But surely anything would be better than nothing. If these people were determined to fight for their homes and families...

Cedrik sighed. "Line up. Let's start with the basic forms."

* * *

Splashing water from a basin over his face, Cedrik couldn't remember ever feeling more fatigued. His lack of sleep the previous night was catching up to him.

Logan leaned against the basin. "Why didn't you tell me you were a sword expert?"

"I'm not an expert, Logan. That's what I was trying to tell you earlier. The men in Patrick's army will be better with their blades than me."

His brother blanched slightly and Cedrik began to hope his point was getting through. Maybe knowing just how outmatched they were would keep them from doing something stupid.

"I didn't know you even owned a sword," Logan said.

"I don't."

"But then why did you learn it?"

Cedrik gripped the basin's edge. "I thought it would be a useful skill. But it's one I would just as soon never use again."

"Why?"

His brother's curiosity was annoying, but understandable. "I was an arrogant youth. I thought swordplay was a game. I got myself into a bad situation, and I hurt someone. I hurt him very badly."

Logan listened, finally appearing to take this seriously.

Cedrik displayed a scar on his arm. "The boy drew first blood and I got angry. I should've talked my way out of the situation. I've spent hours thinking about how I never should've gotten into that fight at all."

"Did you kill him?"

"No. I cut off his hand."

Logan gasped.

"He didn't die right away, but he couldn't stand the thought of life as a cripple. He drowned himself in the river a few days later." Cedrik had worked through the guilt long ago. The boy had not been blameless, but he still regretted what had transpired. "This isn't a game, Logan."

"I know. Lives are at stake. Our parents. My wife. I understand the price of failure here."

"Good." Cedrik dipped his hands into the water.

"So what's your plan?" Logan asked.

"Plan for what?" Cedrik splashed more water on his face. He wished he had a dry shirt to change into.

"For defending Rehr Valley from King Patrick's army."

Cedrik stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"It's pretty clear we're going to need you to lead our forces."

"Me? Why in the name of... why me?"

"Well, who else is going to do it? You obviously know more about warfare than anyone else here!"

He shook his head. "You have the wrong man, Logan." He pulled his sweat-soaked shirt off and splashed water on his chest. "When the fighting starts, I'm not even going to be here."

After a moment, he realized Logan was staring at him silently, looking betrayed. "Who is she?" Logan asked quietly.

"Now what are you talking about?"

"You're abandoning us all for a woman. Who is she?"

Cedrik didn't like to lie, especially to his brother. "What makes you think that?" he asked carefully. He wasn't about to sully Selena's reputation by admitting his relationship with her.

"You've been disappearing in the evenings ever since you came home. Last night you didn't come back."

Cedrik shrugged. "I like spending time in the woods. You know that. I slept outside all the time when I was young."

Logan's expression was icy. "I can't imagine what kind of trouble you've gotten yourself into, little brother. I just hope she's not married." He turned and started striding away. "You might want to cover your back," he said over his shoulder.

Too late, Cedrik realized what Logan had seen. Too late, he remembered Selena's nails digging into his back as they made love the previous night.

Mentally kicking himself, he slipped back into his wet shirt and trotted towards the castle.

* * *

Selena had been crying. Cedrik could see it from the redness in her eyes, but she was an emotionless statue now. She stared out her bedroom window and did not turn as he approached.

"What are you planning to do?" he asked.

"What I have to," she replied.

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Do you want me to marry King Patrick?"

"No, of course not."

"Then I have no choice. I will stay and fight."

Cedrik felt a chill. "Fight who? Patrick? Or the other sorcerers?"

He had never seen Selena look so dark and menacing. "Everyone," she whispered.

Cedrik's throat tightened. "No..."

"It's the only way."

"They'll kill you!" he shouted.

She turned to face him and her emerald eyes were like voids. "Yes, they will," she said calmly.

Terror gripped him. She was losing her mind. Or maybe she had already lost it. "Selena, come back to me. I can't lose you like this."

She didn't seem to hear him as she stepped closer. "You would do anything for me, wouldn't you, Cedrik?"

"Of course." Her sudden change of topic couldn't be a good sign.

"Leave Rehr Valley."

That was the last thing he expected her to say. "You can't... you can't be sending me away from you."

"I am giving you an order."

His anger flared. "So I'm just your servant, then? I'm supposed to obey without question?" He made an effort to calm down. He needed to appeal to her reason. "You're losing your mind, my love. Remember Sorceress Trina?"

"This isn't the same. I'm not doing this for me." He saw the clarity in her eyes and knew she was not insane... at least, not yet. "I can sacrifice myself, but I can't bear to sacrifice you. Go, Cedrik. Leave this land. It is the last thing in this world I demand of you."

"I can't do that. Whatever happens next, we should face it together."

Her eyes closed in resignation. She pressed her hands together and a glowing aura sprang to life around them. "Don't make me compel you with magic, Cedrik."

He shook his head in disbelief. "You wouldn't do that to me."

She looked him in the eyes and he knew that she would. She raised her hands.

From what he understood, magical compulsion destroyed part of a person's mind. Selena had said she would never do such a thing. And yet, here she was.

Cedrik backed away, scarcely believing what was happening. "I will leave," he promised. "As you command." He felt like his world had shattered. Selena had always been perfect, in his eyes. He had thought he would follow her leadership until his death. Now he saw that she, too, was capable of making mistakes. "But this will be the last order of yours I will ever obey," he said coldly.

He ran from her presence, running as fast as he could, out of the castle and into the forest, running until his breath gave out. He fell to the ground and wept.

He was losing everything. And there was nothing he could do about it.

* * *

Selena greeted the mayor and elders with a heavy heart. Without Cedrik, she felt empty.

"My lady," the mayor said. "The people refuse to surrender to King Patrick."

"I know."

"I understand he is returning here shortly."

"Yes."

"And your term is ending today."

"Yes."

The mayor shifted nervously at her terse responses. "The elders and I think that King Patrick should negotiate with your replacement."

She stared at him flatly. "What replacement?"

"Since there is no sorcerer coming, we selected our new leader."

She blinked without comprehension. She had assumed the mayor would rule when she left. Not that she intended to leave anymore.

"We have chosen a man of notable skill in his profession, a man who has demonstrated his intelligence and compassion. A man that we feel can face King Patrick without flinching. We have selected Cedrik, the miller's son."

Selena couldn't believe her ears. "You want Cedrik to replace me?"

"Yes. I know he's young, but he is mature and responsible. We think his strength and fighting skills will garner respect from the likes of King Patrick."

She wanted to cry, but she had no tears left. "I'm so sorry, honorable mayor. I sent Cedrik away."

"You... you did what?"

"I didn't know your plans for him. I wanted him to be safe."

The mayor sputtered. "Safe? None of us is safe! Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because I love him," she said. It surprised her, how easily this admission came. She had cast away the shackles of past traditions.

She drew on her magic, filling herself with power. The air crackled. The mayor and the elders looked around fearfully.

"I will do what I can to protect you," she said. She could feel her eyes glow. "But I suggest you leave now."

"I can't let you do this," came a voice from the shadows.

Selena turned and found Sorcerer Morris stepping towards her. She was impressed with his ability to hide his presence from her. "Morris, my

old friend," she greeted. She had hoped he wouldn't arrive until after she had dealt with Patrick's army.

"Don't make me fight you," Morris said. "Your time has come. You must relinquish your power."

"You can't defeat me."

Morris shrugged. "You're probably right. But I have no choice but to try. You know what damage you could do, if I let your madness loose on the world."

Selena trembled. "I don't want to kill you, Morris."

He spread his hands, palms up. "I don't want you to, either."

His hands glowed. She knew she should strike, but she couldn't. Using magic to kill people was always bad business, but this... this was unconscionable.

And yet she knew that the moment she let her magic go, Morris would destroy her. He had no choice. She was too dangerous to leave alive.

Unexpectedly, as she faced her death, her deepest regret was that she hadn't even told Cedrik goodbye.

* * *

Cedrik could scarcely believe the scene before him. Selena and the sorcerer looked ready to unleash unspeakable magic on each other, while the mayor and elders looked on in terror.

He strode into the room and mustered his most authoritative voice. "Everyone stop," he ordered.

Selena looked shocked. Sorcerer Morris looked at him curiously. "Who are you?" he asked.

Cedrik hoped his new clothes impressed the sorcerer. He had spent his entire accumulated fortune on a fast horse, a regal outfit, and a fine sword that now hung at his side. "I am Cedrik," he replied calmly.

"Lord Cedrik," the mayor corrected.

Cedrik quirked an eyebrow at this title, but decided it would be best to question that later. Maybe the mayor was just supporting his new look.

He hoped his illusion would serve its purpose. King Patrick would not look twice at a poor carpenter. But he would be forced to face the man Cedrik had become.

And hopefully the sorcerer would take him seriously as well.

"Selena and your lordship, I ask that you both release your magic."

The glow around Selena popped out of existence and the air stopped sizzling. Cedrik suppressed a sigh of relief as Morris hesitantly lowered his hands and dropped his magical aura as well.

"You disobeyed me," Selena whispered.

Cedrik shook his head. "No. I left Rehr Valley. You didn't say I couldn't come back."

She made a choking sound somewhere between a cry and a laugh.

"My lord, you are a clever man."

Hearing the title from Selena's lips jolted Cedrik. He realized what it meant. "We don't have much time," he said, turning his attention to the mayor and elders. "Patrick will be here soon."

"Yes, my lord," the mayor said. "We do not want to surrender to him. You must represent us."

Cedrik nodded. Selena moved in front of him.

"You can't fight him, Cedrik," she said desperately. "The bloodshed will be horrific. You must surrender."

He looked at her, then at the others. "We will not surrender," he decided. The mayor and elders nodded in agreement.

"That is madness!" she exclaimed.

"Your rule is over," he said, as gently as he could. "I have heard your advice, but this is not your choice. You must let your people go."

Selena looked as if he had slapped her. She shook herself and the Selena he knew and loved returned to her eyes. She curtsied deeply. "As you say, my lord. Please forgive me."

Just then, a fanfare announced the arrival of King Patrick.

He strode into the room, accompanied by a lieutenant and a servant. "Selena," he greeted curtly, ignoring everyone else.

Selena bowed her head. "I am no longer in power here. This is Lord Cedrik, the ruler of Rehr Valley."

Patrick's gaze fell on Cedrik, pausing for a moment on the hilt of his sword. Cedrik knew his appearance was having the desired effect, because Patrick did not dismiss him out of hand.

The king looked annoyed. "What game is this? You think to retain these lands without your sorceress?"

"We do," Cedrik replied.

Patrick laughed. "You can't seriously think you can repel my army?"

Cedrik remained cool. "We are willing to fight for our homeland. You will find victory here more difficult than you expect."

Patrick's eyes narrowed. "Then I will see you on the battlefield, my friend." He turned to go.

"Wait," Cedrik said. "There is a way we can settle this faster."

He turned to Selena. He drew a small, ornate box from his belt pouch and offered it to her.

She accepted it with an unspoken question in her eyes.

"It's a suitor's gift," he said. Her lips parted in surprise, but no words came forth.

Cedrik turned quickly back to Patrick. "It seems we both desire the same woman. It is customary, I believe, for us to settle this with a duel." This was Cedrik's desperate gamble. He would reduce the battle down to just Patrick and himself.

The king was clearly astounded. He laughed. "You would fight me? Do you really think you could best me with a sword?"

Cedrik shrugged. "There's only one way to find out."

"Do you even know how to use one?" Patrick asked disdainfully.

His lieutenant leaned over and whispered in his ear. From what Cedrik overheard, it was clear that Patrick's spies had seen Cedrik training the men at the village green.

Patrick grunted. Cedrik didn't know if he could beat him, but he knew he would put up a fight. Patrick seemed to recognize this, too.

Cedrik waited, with his hand resting on his sword's pommel. He mentally prepared himself for a fight to the death.

For a long moment, he and King Patrick stood, facing each other, while no one moved.

Then Patrick said, "Most men would have drawn their swords by now."

"I am not a man who prefers to settle things by force," Cedrik replied. "I will draw this sword only when you have left me no other option."

Patrick looked thoughtful. "And what other option do you hope I will give?"

Cedrik rapidly reassessed his opinion of King Patrick. He had expected arrogance. He had expected a fight. But Patrick had given him an opening for dialogue.

"I think you would find us better allies than enemies," he said cautiously.

Patrick met Cedrik's eyes, clearly reassessing him as well. Then he smiled. "I like you, Cedrik," he said. "A man who knows how to use a sword but is reluctant to do so." He pulled out his riding gloves and threw them at Cedrik's feet in a formal gesture of concession. "Selena is yours. And I will consider the terms for our alliance." He started to go, but paused. "You seem surprised at my decision, Lord Cedrik."

Cedrik didn't know what to say. "I am."

Patrick laughed. "I am a hard man, but I am not a fool. The pieces on the board have changed. I change my strategy accordingly."

He offered Cedrik his hand. Cedrik shook it firmly.

"Does that mean you're not going to invade us?"

"For now," Patrick smiled. Then he departed, with his men trailing behind.

Cedrik allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief. It wasn't a final solution, but it was more than he'd hoped for.

He went to Selena and took her hands in his. He was almost out of time. "Selena, will you marry me?"

"But... I have to leave."

"We can wed before you go. I will visit you, wherever you are, as often as I can."

She looked deep into his eyes. Then she nodded. "Yes."

He kissed her, wrapping his arms around her and nearly lifting her off her feet.

"We'll be okay," he whispered into her ear. "It's not perfect, but it's what we have. We'll make the most of it."

"Cedrik, I'm sorry I sent you away."

"I know."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

He hugged her tightly. He never wanted to let her go. By the way she clung to him, he knew she felt the same.

Sorcerer Morris cleared his throat. "I see that the situation here has changed somewhat."

"How's that?" Selena asked.

"The people here rejected your leadership in favor of Lord Cedrik's. It's clear that you have stepped down peacefully and that your reign has ended. I think it would be acceptable... if you remained here."

Cedrik's hopes soared. "You will let her stay?"

"As your wife," Morris clarified. "Not as a ruling sorceress."

"I think that can be arranged." Cedrik lifted Selena up and spun her around. He felt dizzy in more ways than one.

She laughed. Then she held up the small, ornate box he'd given her. "What did you get me?"

"It's empty."

"It's empty?"

"I ran out of money. This sword was ridiculously expensive. Besides, what could I possibly buy that would impress you?"

She smiled. "I don't need things. I just need you."

"That, I can give you." He stroked her cheek. "I never dreamed things could work out this way."

She smiled at him lovingly. "You're like one of those heroes in stories."

"Yes," he grinned. "I guess I am."

The Miller's Son

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