Mary Robinette Kowal Wordcount: 8300

http://www.maryrobinettekowal.com

The Bound Man

by Mary Robinette Kowal

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Light dappled through the trees in the family courtyard, painting shadows on the paving stones. Li Reiko knelt by her son to look at his scraped knee.

"I just scratched it." Nawi squirmed under her hands.

Her daughter, Aya, leaned over her shoulder studying the healing. "Maybe Mama will show you her armor after she heals you."

Nawi stopped wiggling. "Really?"

Reiko shot Aya a warning look, but her little boy's dark eyes shone with excitement. Reiko smiled. "Really." What did tradition matter? "Now let me heal your knee." She laid her hand on the shallow wound.

"Ow."

"Shush." Reiko closed her eyes and rose in the dark space within her mind.

In her mind's eye, Reiko took her time with the ritual, knowing it took less time than it appeared. In a heartbeat, green fire flared out to the walls of her mind. She dissolved into it as she focused on healing her son.

When the wound closed beneath her hand, she sank to the surface of her mind.

"There." She tousled Nawi's hair. "That wasn't bad, was it?"

"It tickled." He wrinkled his nose. "Will you show me your armor now?"

She sighed. She should not encourage his interest in the martial arts. His work would be with the histories that men kept, and yet... "Watch."

Pulling the smooth black surface out of the ether, she manifested her armor. It sheathed her like silence in the night. Aya watched with obvious anticipation for the day when she earned her own armor. Nawi's face, full of sharp yearning for something he would never have, cut Reiko's heart like a new blade.

"Can I see your sword?"

She let her armor vanish back into thought. "No." Reiko brushed his hair from his eyes. "It's my turn to hide, right?"

#

Halldór twisted in his saddle, trying to ease the kink in his back. When the party reached the Parliament, he could remove the weight hanging between his shoulders.

With each step his horse took across the moss-covered lava field, the strange blade bumped against his spine, reminding him that he carried a legend. None of the runes or sheep entrails he read before their quest had foretold the ease with which they fulfilled the first part of the prophecy. They had found the Chooser of the Slain's narrow blade wrapped in linen, buried beneath an abandoned elf-house. In that dark room, the sword's hard silvery metal--longer than any of their bronze swords--had seemed lit by the moon.

Lárus pulled his horse alongside Halldór. "Will the ladies be waiting for us, do you think?"

"Maybe for you, my lord, but not for me."

"Nonsense. Women love the warrior-priest. 'Strong and sensitive.'" He snorted through his mustache. "Just comb your hair so you don't look like a straw man."

A horse screamed behind them. Halldór turned, expecting to see its leg caught in one of the thousands of holes between the rocks. Instead, armed men swarmed from the gullies between the rocks, hacking at the riders. Bandits.

Halldór spun his horse to help Lárus and the others fight them off.

Lárus shouted, "Protect the Sword!"

At the Duke's command, Halldór cursed and turned his horse from the fight, galloping across the rocks. Behind him, men cried out as they protected his escape. His horse twisted along the narrow paths between stones. It stopped abruptly, avoiding a chasm. Halldór looked back.

Scant lengths ahead of the bandits, Lárus rode, slumped in his saddle. Blood stained his cloak. The other men hung behind Lárus, protecting the Duke as long as possible.

Behind them, the bandits closed the remaining distance across the lava fields.

Halldór kicked his horse's side, driving it around the chasm. His horse stumbled sickeningly beneath him. Its leg snapped, caught between rocks. Halldór kicked free of the saddle as the horse screamed. He rolled clear. The rocky ground slammed the sword into his back. His face passed over the edge of the chasm. Breathless, he recoiled from the drop.

As he scrambled to his feet, Lárus thundered up. Without wasting a beat, Lárus flung himself from the saddle and tossed Halldór the reins. "Get the Sword to Parliament!"

Halldór grabbed the reins, swinging into the saddle. If they died returning to Parliament, did it matter that they had found the Sword? "We must invoke the Sword!"

Lárus's right arm hung, blood-drenched, by his side, but he faced the bandits with his left. "Go!"

Halldór yanked the Sword free of its wrappings. For the first time in six thousand years, the light of the sun fell on the silvery blade bringing fire to its length. It vibrated in his hands.

The first bandit reached Lárus and forced him back.

Halldór chanted the runes of power, petitioning the Chooser of the Slain.

Time stopped.

#

Reiko hid from her children, blending into the shadows of the courtyard with more urgency than she felt in combat. To do less would insult them.

"Ready or not, here I come!" Nawi spun from the tree and sprinted past her hiding place. Aya turned more slowly and studied the courtyard. Reiko smiled as her daughter sniffed the air, looking for tracks. Her son crashed through the bushes, kicking leaves with each footstep.

As another branch cracked under Nawi's foot, Reiko stifled the urge to correct his appalling technique. She would speak with his tutor about what the woman was teaching him. He was a boy, but that was no reason to neglect his education.

Watching Aya find Reiko's initial footprints and track them away from where she hid, Reiko slid from her hiding place. She walked across the courtyard to the fountain. This was a rule with her children; to make up for the size difference, she could not run.

She paced closer to the sparkling water, masking her sounds with its babble. From her right, Nawi shouted, "Have you found her?"

"No, silly!" Aya shook her head and stopped. She put her tiny hands on her hips, staring at the ground. "Her tracks stop here."

Reiko and her daughter were the same distance from the fountain, but on opposite sides. If Aya were paying attention, she would realize her mother had retraced her tracks and jumped from the fountain to the paving

stones circling the grassy center of the courtyard. Reiko took three more steps before Aya turned.

As her daughter turned, Reiko felt, more than heard, her son on her left, reaching for her. Clever. He had misdirected her attention with his noise in the shrubbery. She fell forward, using gravity to drop beneath his hands. Rolling on her shoulder, she somersaulted, then launched to her feet as Aya ran toward her.

Nawi grabbed for her again. With a child on each side, Reiko danced and dodged closer to the fountain. She twisted from their grasp, laughing with them each time they missed her. Their giggles echoed through the courtyard.

The world tipped sideways and vibrated. Reiko stumbled as pain ripped through her spine.

Nawi's hand clapped against her side. "I got her!"

Fire engulfed Reiko.

The courtyard vanished.

#

Time began again.

The sword in Halldór's hands thrummed with life. Fire from the sunset engulfed the sword and split the air. With a keening cry, the air opened and a form dropped through, silhouetted against a haze of fire. Horses and men screamed in terror.

When the fire died away, a woman stood between Halldór and the bandits.

Halldór's heart sank. Where was the Chooser of the Slain? Where was the warrior the sword had petitioned?

A bandit snarled and rushed toward them. The others followed, their weapons raised.

The woman snatched the Sword from Halldór's hands. In that brief moment, when he stared at her wild face, he realized that he had succeeded in calling Li Reiko, the Chooser of the Slain.

Then she turned. The air around her rippled with a heat haze as armor, dark as night, materialized around her body. He watched her dance with deadly grace, bending and twisting away from the bandits' blows. With movement as precise as ritual, she danced with death as her partner. Her sword slid through the bodies of the bandits.

Halldór dropped to his knees, thanking the gods for sending her. He watched the point of her sword trace a line, like the path of entrails on the church floor. The line of blood led to the next moment, the next and the next, as if each man's death was predestined.

Then she turned her sword on him.

Her blade descended, burning with the fire of the setting sun. She stopped as if she had run into a wall, with the point touching Halldór's chest.

Why had she stopped? If his blood was the price for saving Lárus, so be it. Her arm trembled. She grimaced, but did not move the sword closer.

Her face, half-hidden by her helm, was dark with rage. "Where am I?" Her words were crisp, more like a chant than common speech.

Holding still, Halldór said, "We are on the border of the Parliament lands, Li Reiko."

Her dark eyes, slanted beneath angry lids, widened. She pulled back and her armor rippled, vanishing into thought. Skin, tanned like the smoothest leather stretched over her wide cheekbones. Her hair hung in a heavy, black braid down her back. Halldór's pulse sang in his veins.

Only the gods in sagas had hair the color of the Allmother's night. Had he needed proof he had called the Chooser of the Slain, the inhuman black hair would have convinced him of that.

He bowed his head. "All praise to you, Great One. Grant us your blessings."

#

Reiko's breath hissed from her. He knew her name. She had dropped through a flaming portal into hell and this demon with bulging eyes knew her name.

She had tried to slay him as she had the others, but could not press her sword forward, as if a wall protected him.

And now he asked for blessings.

"What blessings do you ask of me?" Reiko said. She controlled a shudder. What human had hair as pale as straw?

Straw lowered his bulging eyes to the demon lying in front of him. "Grant us, O Gracious One, the life of our Duke Lárus."

This Lárus had a wound deep in his shoulder. His blood was as red as any human's, but his face was pale as death.

She turned from Straw and wiped her sword on the thick moss, cleaning the blood from it. As soon as her attention seemed turned from them, Straw attended Lárus. She kept her awareness on the sounds of his movement as she sought balance in the familiar task of caring for her weapon. By the Gods! Why did he have her sword? She had left it in her room not ten minutes ago in order to play hide and seek with her children.

Panic almost took her. What had happened to her Aya and Nawi? She needed information, but displaying ignorance to an enemy was a weakness, which could kill surer than the sharpest blade. She considered.

Their weapons were bronze, not steel, and none of her opponents had manifested armor. They dressed in leather and felted wool, but no woven goods. So, then. That was their technology.

Straw had not healed Lárus, so perhaps they could not. He wanted her aid. Her thoughts checked. Could demons be bound by blood debt?

She turned to Straw.

"What price do you offer for this life?"

Straw raised his eyes; they were the color of the sky. "I offer my life unto you, O Great One."

She set her lips. What good would vengeance do? Unless... "Do you offer blood or service?"

He lowered his head again. "I submit to your will."

"You will serve me then. Do you agree to be my bound man?"

"I do."

"Good." She sheathed her sword. "What is your name?"

"Halldór Arnarsson."

"I accept your pledge." She dropped to her knees and pushed the leather from the wound on Lárus's shoulder. She pulled upon her reserves and, rising into the healing ritual, touched his mind.

He was human.

She pushed the shock aside; she could not spare the attention.

#

Halldór gasped as fire glowed around Li Reiko's hands. He had read of gods healing in the sagas, but bearing witness was beyond his dreams.

The glow faded. She lifted her hands from Lárus's shoulder. The wound was gone. A narrow red line and the blood-soaked clothing remained. Lárus opened his eyes as if he had been sleeping.

But her face was drawn. "I have paid the price for your service, bound man." She lifted a hand to her temple. "The wound was deeper..." Her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped to the ground.

Lárus sat up and grabbed Halldór by the shoulder. "What did you do?"

Shaking Lárus off, Halldór crouched next to her. She was breathing. "I saved your life."

"By binding yourself to a woman? Are you mad?"

"She healed you. Healed! Look." Halldór pointed at her hair. "Look at her. This is Li Reiko."

"Li Reiko was a Warrior."

"You saw her. How long did it take her to kill six men?" He pointed at the carnage behind them. "Name one man who could do that."

Would moving her be a sacrilege? He grimaced. He would beg forgiveness if that were the case. "We should move before the sun sets and the trolls come out."

Lárus nodded slowly, his eyes still on the bodies around them. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"What?"

"How many other sagas are true?"

Halldór frowned. "They're all true."

#

The smell of mutton invaded her dreamless sleep. Reiko lay under sheepskin, on a bed of straw ticking. The straw poked through the wool fabric, pricking her bare skin. Straw. Her memory tickled her with an image of hair the color of straw. Halldór.

Long practice kept her breath even. She lay with her eyes closed, listening. A small room. An open fire. Women murmuring. She needed to learn as much as possible, before changing the balance by letting them know she was awake.

A hand placed a damp rag on her brow. The touch was light, a woman or a child.

The sheepskin's weight would telegraph her movement if she tried grabbing the hand. Better to open her eyes and feign weakness than to create an impression of threat. There was time for that later.

Reiko let her eyes flutter open. A girl bent over her, cast from the same demonic mold as Halldór. Her hair was the color of honey, and her wide blue eyes started from her head. She stilled when Reiko awoke, but did not pull away.

Reiko forced a smile, and let worry appear on her brow. "Where am I?"

"In the women's quarters at the Parliament grounds."

Reiko sat up. The sheepskin fell away, letting the cool air caress her body. The girl averted her eyes. Conversation in the room stopped.

Interesting. They had a nudity taboo. She reached for the sheepskin and pulled it over her torso. "What is your name?"

"Mara Halldórsdottir."

Her bound man had a daughter. And his people had a patronymic system--how far from home was she? "Where are my clothes, Mara?"

The girl lifted a folded bundle of cloth from a low bench next to the bed. "I washed them for you."

"Thank you." If Mara had washed and dried her clothes, Reiko must have been unconscious for several hours. Lárus's wound had been deeper than she thought. "Where is my sword?"

"My father has it."

Rage filled Reiko's veins like the fire that had brought her here. She waited for the heat to dwindle, then began dressing. As Reiko pulled her boots on, she asked, "Where is he?"

Behind Mara, the other women shifted as if Reiko were crossing a line. Mara ignored them. "He's with Parliament."

"Which is where?" The eyes of the other women felt like heat on her skin. Ah. Parliament contained the line she should not cross, and they clearly would not answer her. Her mind teased her with memories of folk in other lands. She had never paid much heed to these stories, since history had been men's work. She smiled at

Mara. "Thank you for your kindness."

As she strode from the room she kept her senses fanned out, waiting for resistance from them, but they hung back as if they were afraid.

The women's quarters fronted on a narrow twisting path lined with low turf and stone houses. The end of the street opened on a large raised circle surrounded by stone benches.

Men sat on the benches, but women stayed below. Lárus spoke in the middle of the circle. By his side, Halldór stood with her sword in his hands. Sheltering in the shadow by a house, Reiko studied them. They towered above her, but their movements were clumsy and oafish like a trained bear. Nawi had better training than any here.

Her son. Sudden anxiety and rage filled her, but rage invited rash decisions. She forced the anger away.

With effort, she returned her focus to the men. They had no awareness of their mass, only of their size and an imperfect grasp of that.

Halldór lifted his head. As if guided by strings his eyes found her in the shadows.

He dropped to his knees and held out her sword. In mid-sentence, Lárus looked at Halldór, and then turned to Reiko. Surprise crossed his face, but he bowed his head.

"Li Reiko, you honor us with your presence."

Reiko climbed onto the stone circle. As she crossed to retrieve her sword, an ox of a man rose to his feet. "I will not sit here, while a woman is in the Parliament's circle."

Lárus scowled. "Ingolfur, this is no mortal woman."

Reiko's attention sprang forward. What did they think she was, if not mortal?

"You darkened a trollop's hair with soot." Ingolfur crossed his arms. "You expect me to believe she's a god?"

Her pulse quickened. What were they saying? Lárus flung his cloak back, showing the torn and blood-soaked leather at his shoulder. "We were set upon by bandits. My arm was cut half off and she healed it." His pale face flushed red. "I tell you this is Li Reiko, returned to the world."

She understood the words, but they had no meaning. Each sentence out of their mouths raised a thousand questions in her mind.

"Ha." Ingolfur spat on the ground. "Your quest sought a warrior to defeat the Troll King."

This she understood. "And if I do, what price do you offer?"

Lárus opened his mouth but Ingolfur crossed the circle.

"You pretend to be the Chooser of the Slain?" Ingolfur reached for her, as if she were a doll he could pick up. Before his hand touched her shoulder, she took his wrist, pulling on it as she twisted. She drove her shoulder into his belly and used his mass to flip him as she stood.

She had thought these were demons, but by their actions they were men, full of swagger and rash judgment.

She waited. He would attack her again.

Ingolfur raged behind her. Reiko focused on his sounds and the small changes in the air. As he reached for her, she twisted away from his hands and with his force, sent him stumbling from the circle. The men broke into laughter.

She waited again.

It might take time but Ingolfur would learn his place. A man courted death, touching a woman unasked.

Halldór stepped in front of Reiko and faced Ingolfur. "Great Ingolfur, surely you can see no mortal woman could face our champion."

Reiko cocked her head slightly. Her bound man showed wit by appeasing the oaf's vanity.

Lárus pointed to her sword in Halldór's hands. "Who here still doubts we have completed our quest?" The men shifted on their benches uneasily. "We fulfilled the first part of the prophecy by returning Li Reiko to the world."

What prophecy had her name in it? There might be a bargaining chip here.

"You promised us a mighty warrior, the Chooser of the Slain," Ingolfur snarled, "not a woman."

It was time for action. If they wanted a god, they should have one. "Have no doubt. I can defeat the Troll King." She let her armor flourish around her. Ingolfur drew back involuntarily. Around the circle, she heard gasps and sharp cries.

She drew her sword from Halldór's hands. "Who here will test me?"

Halldór dropped to his knees in front of her. "The Chooser of the Slain!"

In the same breath, Lárus knelt and cried, "Li Reiko!"

Around the circle, men followed suit. On the ground below, women and children knelt in the dirt. They cried her name. In the safety of her helm, Reiko scowled. Playing at godhood was a dangerous lie.

She lowered her sword. "But there is a price. You must return me to the heavens."

Halldór's eyes grew wider than she thought possible. "How, my lady?"

She shook her head. "You know the gods grant nothing easily. They say you must return me. You must learn how. Who here accepts that price for your freedom from the trolls?"

She sheathed her sword and let her armor evaporate. Turning on her heel, she strode off the Parliament's circle.

#

Halldór clambered to his feet as Li Reiko left the Parliament circle. His head reeled. She hinted at things beyond his training. Lárus grabbed him by the arm. "What does she mean, return her?"

Ingolfur tossed his hands. "If that is the price, I will pay it gladly. Ridding the world of the Troll King and her

at the same time would be a joy."

"Is it possible?"

Men crowded around Halldór, asking him theological questions of the sagas. The answers eluded him. He had not cast a rune-stone or read an entrail since they started for the elf-house a week ago. "She would not ask if it were impossible." He swallowed. "I will study the problem with my brothers and return to you."

Lárus clapped him on the back. "Good man." When Lárus turned to the throng surrounding them, Halldór slipped away.

He found Li Reiko surrounded by children. The women hung back, too shy to come near, but the children crowded close. Halldór could hardly believe she had killed six men as easily as carding wool. For the space of a breath, he watched her play peek-a-boo with a small child, her face open with delight and pain.

She saw him and shutters closed over her soul. Standing, her eyes impassive, she said. "I want to read the prophecy."

He blinked, surprised. Then his heart lifted; maybe she would show him how to pay her price. "It is stored in the church."

Reiko brushed the child's hair from its eyes, then fell into step beside Halldór. He could barely keep a sedate pace to the church.

Inside, he led her through the nave to the library beside the sanctuary. The other priests, studying, stared at the Chooser of the Slain. Halldór felt as if he were outside himself with the strangeness of this. He was leading Li Reiko, a Warrior out of the oldest sagas, past shelves containing her history.

Since the gods had arrived from across the sea, his brothers had recorded their history. For six-thousand unbroken years, the records of prophecy and the sagas kept their history whole.

When they reached the collections desk, the acolyte on duty looked as if he would wet himself. Halldór stood between the boy and the Chooser of the Slain, but the boy still stared with an open mouth.

"Bring me the Troll King prophecy, and the Sagas of Li Nawi, Volume I. We will be in the side chapel."

Still gaping, the boy nodded and ran down the aisles.

"We can study in here." He led the Chooser of the Slain to the side chapel. Halldór was shocked again at how small she was, not much taller than the acolyte. He had thought the gods would be larger than life.

He had hundreds of questions, but none of the words.

When the acolyte came back, Halldór sent a silent prayer of thanks. Here was something they could discuss. He took the vellum roll and the massive volume of sagas the acolyte carried and shooed him out of the room.

Halldór's palms were damp with sweat as he pulled on wool gloves to protect the manuscripts. He hesitated over another pair of gloves, then set them aside. Her hands could heal; she would not damage the manuscripts.

Carefully, Halldór unrolled the prophecy scroll on the table. He did not look at the rendering of entrails. He watched her.

She gave no hint of her thoughts. "I want to hear your explanation of this."

A cold current ran up his spine, as if he were eleven again, explaining scripture to an elder. Halldór licked his lips and pointed at the arc of sclera. "This represents the heavens, and the overlap here," he pointed at the bulge of the lower intestine, "means time of conflict. I interpreted the opening in the bulge to mean specifically the Troll King. This pattern of blood means--"

She crossed her arms. "You clearly understand your discipline. Tell me the prophecy in plain language."

"Oh." He looked at the drawing of the entrails again. What did she see that he did not? "Well, in a time of conflict--which is now--the Chooser of the Slain overcomes the Troll King." He pointed at the shining knot around the lower intestine. "See how this chokes off the Troll King. That means you win the battle."

"And how did you know the legendary warrior was--is me?"

"I cross-referenced with our histories and you were the one that fit the criteria."

She shivered. "Show me the history. I want to understand how you deciphered this."

Halldór thanked the gods that he had asked for Li Nawi's saga as well. He placed the heavy volume of history in front of Li Reiko and opened to the Book of Fire, Chapter I.

#

In the autumn of the Fire, Li Reiko, greatest of the warriors, trained Li Nawi and his sister Aya in the ways of Death. In the midst of the training, a curtain of fire split Nawi from Aya and when they came together again, Li Reiko was gone. Though they were frightened, they understood that the Chooser of the Slain had taken a rightful place in heaven.

Reiko trembled, her control gone. "What is this?"

"It is the Saga of Li Nawi."

She tried phrasing casual questions, but her mind spun in circles. "How do you come to have this?"

Halldór traced the letters with his gloved hand. "After the Collapse, when waves of fire had rolled across our land, Li Nawi came across the oceans with the other gods. He was our conqueror and our salvation."

The ranks of stone shelves filled with thick leather bindings crowded her. Her heart kicked wildly.

Halldór's voice seemed drowned out by the drumming of her pulse. "The Sagas are our heritage and charge. The Gods have left the Earth, but we keep records of histories as they taught us."

Reiko turned her eyes blindly from the page. "Your heritage?"

"I have been dedicated to the service of the gods since my birth." He paused. "Your sagas were the most inspiring. Forgive my trespasses, may I beg for your indulgence with a question?"

"What?" Hot and cold washed over her in sickening waves.

"I have read your son Li Nawi's accounts of your triumphs in battle."

Reiko could not breathe. Halldór flipped the pages forward. "This is how I knew where to look for your sword." He paused with his hand over the letters. "I deciphered the clues to invoke it and call you here, but there are many--."

Reiko pushed away from the table. "You caused the curtain of fire?" She wanted to vomit her fear at his feet.

"I--I do not understand."

"I dropped through fire this morning." And when they came together again, Li Reiko was no more. had it been like for Aya and Nawi to watch their mother ripped out of time?

Halldór said, "In answer to my petition."

"I was playing hide and seek with my children and you took me."

"You were in the heavens with the gods."

"That's something you tell a grieving child!"

"I--I didn't, I--." His face turned gray. "Forgive me, Great One."

"I am not a god!" She pushed him, all control gone. He tripped over a bench and dropped to the floor. "Send me back."

"I cannot."

Her sword flew from its sheath before she realized she held it. "Send me back!" She held it to his neck. Her arms trembled with the desire to run it through him. But it would not move.

She leaned on the blade, digging her feet into the floor. "You ripped me out of time and took me from my children."

He shook his head. "It had already happened."

"Because of you." Her sword crept closer, pricking a drop of blood from his neck. What protected him?

Halldór lay on his back. "I'm sorry. I didn't know...I was following the prophecy."

Reiko staggered. Prophecy. A wall of predestination. Empty, she dropped to the bench and cradled her sword. "How long ago...?"

"Six thousand years."

She closed her eyes. This was why he could not return her. He had not simply brought her from across the sea like the other "gods." He had brought her through time. If she were trapped here, if she could never see her children again, it did not matter if these were human or demons. She was banished in Hell.

"What do the sagas say about my children?"

Halldór rolled to his knees. "I can show you." His voice shook.

"No." She ran her hand down the blade of her sword. The edge whispered against her skin. She touched her

wrist to the blade. It would be easy. "Read it to me."

She heard him get to his feet. The pages of the heavy book shuffled.

#

Halldór swallowed and read, "This is from the Saga of Li Nawi, the Book of the Sword, Chapter Two. 'And it came to pass that Li Aya and Li Nawi were raised unto adulthood by their tutor.'"

A tutor raised them, because he, Halldór, had pulled their mother away. He shook his head. It had happened six thousand years ago.

"'But when they reached adulthood, each claimed the right of Li Reiko's sword.'"

They fought over the sword, with which he had called her, not out of the heavens, but from across time. Halldór shivered and focused on the page.

"'Li Aya challenged Li Nawi, saying Death was her birthright. But Nawi, on hearing this, scoffed and said he was a Child of Death. And saying so, he took Li Reiko's sword and the gods smote Li Aya with their fiery hand, thus granting Li Nawi the victory.'"

Halldór's entrails twisted as if the gods were reading them. He had read these sagas since he was a boy. He believed them, but he had not thought they were real. He looked at Li Reiko. She held her head in her lap and rocked back and forth.

For all his talk of prophecies, he was the one who had found the sword and invoked it. "'Then all men knew he was the true Child of Death. He raised an army of men, the First of the Nine Armies, and thus began the Collapse--'"

"Stop."

"I'm sorry." He would slaughter a thousand sheep if just one could tell him how to undo his crime. In the Saga of Li Nawi, Li Reiko never appeared after the wall of fire. He closed the book and took a step toward her. "The price you asked...I can't send you back."

Li Reiko drew a shuddering breath and looked up. "I have already paid the price for you." Her eyes reflected his guilt. "Another hero can kill the Troll King."

His pulse rattled forward like a panicked horse. "No one else can. The prophecy points to you."

"Gut a new sheep, bound man. I won't help you." She stood. "I release you from your debt."

"But, it's unpaid. I owe you a life."

"You cannot pay the price I ask." She turned and touched her sword to his neck again. He flinched. "I couldn't kill you when I wanted to." She cocked her head, and traced the point of the blade around his neck, not quite touching him. "What destiny waits for you?"

"Nothing." He was no one.

She snorted. "How nice to be without a fate." Sheathing her sword, she walked toward the door.

He followed her. Nothing made sense. "Where are you going?" She spun and drove her fist into his midriff. He grunted and folded over the pain. Panting, Reiko pulled her sword out and hit his side with the flat of her blade. Halldór held his cry in.

She swung again, with the edge, but the wall of force stopped her; Halldór held still. She turned the blade and slammed the flat against his ribs again. The breath hissed out of him, but he did not move. He knelt in front of her, waiting for the next blow. He deserved this. He deserved more than this.

Li Reiko's lip curled in disgust. "Do not follow me."

He scrabbled forward on his knees. "Then tell me where you're going, so I will not meet you by chance."

"Maybe that is your destiny." She left him.

Halldór did not follow her.

#

Li Reiko chased her shadow out of the parliament lands. It stretched before her in the golden light of sunrise, racing her across the moss-covered lava. The wind, whipping across the treeless plain, pushed her like a child late for dinner.

Surrounded by the people in the Parliament lands, Reiko's anger had overwhelmed her and buried her grief. Whatever Halldór thought her destiny was, she saw only two paths in front of her--make a life here or join her children in the only way left. Neither were paths to choose rashly.

Small shrubs and grasses broke the green with patches of red and gold, as if someone had unrolled a carpet on the ground. Heavy undulations creased the land with crevices. Some held water reflecting the sky, others dropped to a lower level of moss and soft grasses, and some were as dark as the inside of a cave.

When the sun crossed the sky and painted the land with long shadows, Reiko sought shelter from the wind in one of the crevices. The moss cradled her with the warmth of the earth.

She pulled thoughts of Aya and Nawi close. In her memory, they laughed as they reached for her. Sobs pushed past Reiko's reserves. She wrapped her arms around her chest. Each cry shattered her. Her children were dead because Halldór had decided a disemboweled sheep meant he should rip her out of time. It did not matter if they had grown up; she had not been there. They were six-thousand years dead. Inside her head, Reiko battled grief. Her fists pounded against the walls of her mind. No. Her brain filled with that silent syllable.

She pressed her face against the velvet moss wanting the earth to absorb her.

She heard a sound.

Training quieted her breath in a moment. Reiko lifted her head from the moss and listened. Footsteps crossed the earth above her. She manifested her armor and rolled silently to her feet. If Halldór had followed her, she would play the part of a man and seek revenge.

In the light of the moon, a figure, larger than a man, crept toward her. A troll. Behind him, a gang of trolls watched. Reiko counted them and considered the terrain. It was safer to hide, but anger still throbbed in her bones. She left her sword sheathed and slunk out of the crevice in the ground. Her argument was not with them.

Flowing across the moss, she let the uneven shadows mask her until she reached a standing mound of stones. The wind carried the trolls' stink to her.

The lone troll reached the crevice she had sheltered in. His arm darted down like a bear fishing and he roared with astonishment.

The other trolls laughed. "Got away, did she?"

One of them said, "Mucker was smelling his own crotch is all."

"Yah, sure. He didn't get enough in the Hall and goes around thinking he smells more."

They had taken human women. Reiko felt a stabbing pain in her loins; she could not let that stand.

Mucker whirled. "Shut up! I know I smelled a woman."

"Then where'd she go?" The troll snorted the air. "Don't smell one now."

The other lumbered away. "Let's go, while some of 'em are still fresh."

Mucker slumped and followed the other trolls. Reiko eased out of the shadows. She was a fool, but would not hide while women were raped.

She hung back, letting the wind bring their sounds and scents as she tracked the trolls to their Hall.

The moon had sunk to a handspan above the horizon as they reached the Troll Hall. Trolls stood on either side of the great stone doors.

Reiko crouched in the shadows. The night was silent except for the sounds of revelry. Even with alcohol slowing their movement, there were too many of them.

If she could goad the sentries into taking her on one at a time she could get inside, but only if no other trolls came. The sound of swordplay would draw a crowd faster than crows to carrion.

A harness jingled.

Reiko's head snapped in the direction of the sound.

She shielded her eyes from the light coming out of the Troll Hall. As her vision adjusted, a man on horseback resolved out of the dark. He sat twenty or thirty horselengths away, invisible to the trolls outside the Hall. Reiko eased toward him, senses wide.

The horse shifted its weight when it smelled her. The man put his hand on its neck, calming it. Light from the Troll Hall hinted at the planes on his face. Halldór. Her lips tightened. He had followed her. Reiko warred with an irrational desire to call the trolls down on them.

She needed him. Halldór, with his drawings and histories, might know what the inside of the Troll Hall looked like.

Praying he would have sense enough to be quiet, she stepped out of the shadows. He jumped as she appeared, but stayed silent.

He swung off his horse and leaned close. His whisper was hot in her ear. "Forgive me. I did not follow you."

He turned his head, letting her breathe an answer in return. "Understood. They have women inside."

"I know." Halldór looked toward the Troll Hall. Dried blood covered the left side of his face.

"We should move away to talk," she said.

He took his horse by the reins and followed her. His horse's hooves were bound with sheepskin so they made no sound on the rocks. Something had happened since she left the Parliament lands.

Halldór limped on his left side. Reiko's heart beat as if she were running. The trolls had women prisoners. Halldór bore signs of battle. Trolls must have attacked the Parliament. They walked in silence until the sounds of the Troll Hall dwindled to nothing.

Halldór stopped. "There was a raid." He stared at nothing, his jaw clenched. "While I was gone...they just let the trolls--" His voice broke like a boy's. "They have my girl."

"Mara?"

He nodded, looking as if he were surprised that she knew the name of his daughter.

His daughter.

Reiko felt her anger slip away. "Halldór, I'm sorry." She looked for other riders. "Who came with you?"

He shook his head. "No one. They're guarding the walls in case the trolls come back." He touched the side of his face. "I tried persuading them."

"Why did you come?"

"To get Mara back."

"There are too many of them, bound man." She scowled. "Even if you could get inside, what do you plan to do? Challenge the Troll King to single combat?" Her words resonated in her skull. Reiko closed her eyes, dizzy with the turns the gods spun her in. When she opened them, Halldór's lips were parted in prayer. Reiko swallowed. "When does the sun rise?"

"In another hour."

She turned to the Hall. In an hour, the trolls could not give chase; the sun would turn them to stone. She unbraided her hair.

Halldór stared as her long hair began flirting with the wind. She smiled at the question in his eyes. "I have a prophecy to fulfill."

#

Reiko stumbled into the torchlight, her hair loose and wild. She clutched Halldór's cloak around her shoulders.

One of the troll sentries saw her. "Hey. A dolly."

Reiko contorted her face with fear and whimpered. The other troll laughed. "She don't seem taken with you, do she?"

The first troll came closer. "She don't have to."

"Don't hurt me. Please, please..." Reiko retreated from him. When she was between the two, she whipped Halldór's cloak off, tangling it around the first troll's head. With her sword, she gutted the other. He dropped to his knees, fumbling with his entrails as she turned to the first. She slid her sword under the cloak, slicing along the base of the first troll's jaw.

Leaving them to die, Reiko entered the Hall. Women's cries mingled with the sounds of debauchery.

She kept her focus on the battle ahead. She would be out-matched in size and strength, but hoped her wit and weapon would prevail. Her mouth twisted. She knew she would prevail. It was predestined.

A troll saw her. He lumbered closer. Reiko showed her sword, bright with blood. "I have met your sentries. Shall we dance as well?"

The troll checked his movement and squinted his beady eyes at her. Reiko walked past him. She kept her awareness on him, but another troll, Mucker, loomed in front of her.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I am the one you sought. I am Chooser of the Slain. I have come for your King."

Mucker laughed and reached for her, heedless of her sword. She dodged under his grasp and held the point to his jugular. "I have come for your King. Not for you. Show me to him."

She leapt back. His hand went to his throat and came away with blood.

A bellow rose from the entry. Someone had found the sentries. Reiko kept her gaze on Mucker, but her peripheral vision filled with trolls running. Footsteps behind her. She spun and planted her sword in a troll's arm. The troll howled, drawing back. Reiko shook her head. "I have come for your King."

They herded her to the Hall. She had no chance of defeating them, but if the Troll King granted her single combat, she might escape the Hall with the prisoners. When she entered the great Hall, whispers flew; the number of slain trolls mounted with each rumor.

The Troll King lolled on his throne. Mara, her face red with shame, serviced him.

Anger buzzed in Reiko's ears. She let it pass through her. "Troll King, I have come to challenge you."

The Troll King laughed like an avalanche of stone tearing down his Hall. "You! A dolly wants to fight?"

Reiko paid no attention to his words.

He was nearly twice her height. Leather armor, crusted with crude bronze scales, covered his body. The weight of feast hung about his middle, but his shoulders bulged with muscle. If he connected a blow, she would die. But he would be fighting gravity as well as her. Once he began a movement, it would take time for him to stop and begin another.

Reiko raised her head, waiting until his laughter faded. "I am the Chooser of the Slain. Will you accept my

challenge?" She forced a smile to her lips. "Or are you afraid to dance with me?"

"I will grind you to paste, dolly. I will sweep over your lands and eat your children for my breakfast."

"If you win, you may. Here are my terms. If I win, the prisoners go free."

He came down from his throne and leaned close. "If you win, we will never show a shadow in human lands."

"Will your people hold that pledge when you are dead?"

He laughed. The stink of his breath boiled around her. He turned to the trolls packed in the Hall. "Will you?"

The room rocked with the roar of their voices. "Aye."

The Troll King leered. "And when you lose, I won't kill you till I've bedded you."

"Agreed. May the gods hear our pledge." Reiko manifested her armor.

As the night-black plates materialized around her, the Troll King bellowed, "What is this?"

"This?" She taunted him. "This is but a toy the gods have sent to play with you."

She smiled in her helm as he swung his heavy iron sword over his head and charged her. Stupid. Reiko stepped to the side, already turning as she let him pass.

She brought her sword hard against the gap in his armor above his boot. The blade jarred against bone. She yanked her sword free; blood coated it like a sheath.

The Troll King dropped to one knee, hamstrung. Without waiting, she vaulted up his back and wrapped her arms around his neck. Like Aya riding piggyback. He flailed his sword through the air, reaching for her. She slit his throat. His bellow changed to a gurgle as blood fountained in an arc, soaking the ground.

A heavy ache filled her breast. She whispered in his ear. "I have killed you without honor. I am a machine of the gods."

Reiko let gravity pull the Troll King down, as troll shrieks filled the air. She leapt off his body as it fell forward.

Before the dust settled around him, Reiko pointed her sword at the nearest troll. "Release the prisoners."

#

Reiko led the women into the dawn. As they left the Troll Hall, Halldór dropped to his knees with his arms lifted in prayer. Mara wrapped her arms around his neck, sobbing.

Reiko felt nothing. Why should she, when the victory was not hers? She withdrew from the group of women weeping and singing her praises.

Halldór chased her. "Lady, my life is already yours but my debt has doubled."

He reminded her of a suitor in one of Aya's bedtime stories, accepting gifts without asking what the witchyman's price would be. She knelt to clean her sword on the moss. "Then give me your firstborn child."

She could hear his breath hitch in his throat. "If that is your price."

Reiko raised her eyes. "No. That is a price I will not ask."

He knelt beside her. "I know why you can not kill me."

"Good." She turned to her sword. "When you fulfill your fate let me know, so I can."

His blue eyes shone with fervor. "I am destined to return your daughter to you."

Reiko's heart flooded with pain and hope. She fought for breath. "Do not toy with me, bound man."

"I would not. I reviewed the sagas after you went into the Hall. It says 'and the gods smote Li Aya with their fiery hand.' I can bring Li Aya here."

Reiko sunk her fingers into the moss, clutching the earth. Oh gods, to have her little girl here--she trembled. Aya would not be a child. There would be no games of hide and seek. When they reached adulthood, each claimed the right of Li Reiko's sword... old would Aya be?

Reiko shook her head. She could not do that to her daughter. "You want to rip Aya out of time as well. If Nawi had not won, the Collapse would not have happened."

Halldór brow furrowed. "But it already did."

Reiko stared at the women, and the barren landscape beyond them. Everything she saw was a result of her son's actions. Or were her son's actions the result of choices made here? She did not know if it mattered. The cogs in the gods' machine clicked forward.

"Are there any prophecies about Aya?"

Halldór nodded. "She's destined to--"

Reiko put her hand on his mouth as if she could stop fate. "Don't." She closed her eyes, fingers still resting on his lips. "If you bring her, promise me you won't let her know she's bound to the will of the gods."

He nodded.

Reiko withdrew her hand and pressed it to her temple. Her skull throbbed with potential decisions. Aya had already vanished into fire; if Reiko did not decide to bring her here, where would Aya go?

Her bound man knelt next to her, waiting for her decision. Aya would not forgive Reiko for yanking her out of time, anymore than Reiko had forgiven Halldór.

His eyes flicked over her shoulder and then back. Reiko turned to follow his gaze. Mara comforted another girl. What did the future hold for Halldór's daughter? In this time, women seemed to have no role.

But times could change. Watching Mara, Reiko knew which path to choose if she were granted free will.

"Bring Aya to me." Reiko looked at the sword in her hand. "My daughter's birthright waits for her."

END

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