



CHAPTER 1

TANWEN



COLORED RIBBONS OF LIGHT POURED FROM MY FINGERS. ONE strand broke free and soared above the crowd's head, glowing golden in the afternoon sun.

A child in the crowd gasped. "Look, Mam!"

I swallowed my smile and pushed all my focus back to my words—practiced over and over until I could say each phrase in fancy, schooled Tirian. Couldn't let any common village speak bleed into the stories all Tirians know so well. My storytelling mentor, Riwor, loomed near the edge of the crowd, eyes narrowed and watching my every breath. She'd make me pay for it if my practiced peddler words slipped into my usual lowborn drawl.

Again.

But when I opened my mouth, my best storytelling voice carried on the breeze through the village square, just like it was supposed to. "The orphan princess, Cariad the Stone, now forced to rule Tir in the wake of her parents' untimely deaths, vowed ever to be strong and noble for her people."

The swirling story strand hardened from glowing light into a swathe of matte gray fabric, then wove itself into a braid. It cinched tighter as I told the old tale.

"Cariad, though she was so very young, held fast to her vow."

I circled my fingers, and the braided fabric followed my command. It coiled around itself like a snake in the garden, until it looked less like fabric and more like a tiny stone tower from a fairy-story castle.

“Countless suitors from the best families of the realm courted her hand to no avail. She did not wish a husband’s ambitions to direct the course of her people, whom she had sworn to protect.”

The tiny tower stacked higher.

“But when the Stone Princess grew older, she fell deeply in love with her most trusted friend—her cupbearer, poor and unhandsome, but wise and loyal.”

From one finger on my right hand, a grass-green story strand unraveled and wove through the stones of Cariad’s tower.

“Cariad tried to convince herself that an alliance with her cupbearer would be disastrous, but as the years ticked by, her love for him only grew.”

I glanced up. Every gaze was fixed on the story I was building. Perfect. With a flick of my fingers, the grassy vine that was meant to show Cariad’s cup-bearing lover burst into bloom. Tiny red velvet-petals sprang forth all over. The children squealed, and several women gasped.

Good. I’d likely sell this one. Riwor would be pleased as a pickle.

“Cariad found herself unable to displace the loyal cupbearer from her heart, but she saw no reason to break her vow to the Tirian kingdom. So she bestowed the rule of her people and the title of king to her chief advisor, an honest and brave man whose line would rule Tir for two centuries.”

I made a swirling bit of yellow light in one palm, then lifted my hand so it looked rather like the sun rising behind my stone tower—it was supposed to be the dawn of a new life for Cariad.

“And so Cariad and her cupbearer left the palace and lived simply and happily in the country for the rest of their days.”

This was it. The end of the story. Time to change those fluid strands of idea into something solid—something to sell.

“The lesson of Cariad’s story is . . .” I peeked sideways at Riwor.

She stared at me, face darkening by the heartbeat. It was always as if her disapproval chiseled out the creases around her mouth so they were deeper each day. She placed a gnarled old hand on one hip and glared her worst at me.

My voice wavered. “The lesson is . . .”

But I hated this ending. Giving up the palace? Trading fine gowns for peasant rags? That was addlebrained, if a body wanted my opinion.

Which no one did.

My story quivered before me, seemingly waiting for my next words.

But maybe I didn’t have to shovel out the old, tired ending I hated. Maybe I could tell an ending all my own.

“Cariad and the cupbearer were happy—until they realized what she’d given up.”

A smooth, black strand ribboned from my hand. It danced around the tower in a slow circle. A strand to represent Cariad’s ambitions—a strand I could actually relate to.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Riwor’s arms waving away.

Guess she doesn’t like my new ending.

A couple villagers around the edge of the crowd stared at her, flapping like an old blackbird caught in a snare. But most of the crowd stuck fast to me and the new strands oozing from my hands.

“So Cariad unscrambled her brains long enough to raise an army.” The rolling hum of my storyteller voice flitted away, and words that proved my peasantry gushed out instead. “A big army, with swords and bows and arrows and suchlike!” I hopped off my wooden stool and shot a strand of glowing red light into the air.

“Tanwen!” Riwor’s hiss reached my ears, but my new ideas had carried my mind too far away to care.

“It was an army full of peasants wanting to live in the palace, too!”

Story strands volleyed everywhere. Different colors, materials, textures—they wheeled every which direction, all over the blooming place.

“And they took the palace back so Cariad could be princess again—no, queen! No, empress!”

Then the strands froze like time had stopped. The tower with

the red velvet-petals and my rogue, made-up strands stayed fixed in midair, gaping at me, if such a thing were possible.

Then, like a dropped glass, it all shattered to pieces. Before the story shards could fly into the crowd of wee ones, I swept my hand over the bits and they dissolved into light. I blinked, and the entire mess vanished.

I was left staring at an empty space where this week's supper money had been sitting.

Hovering around the back of the throng, the men of the village erupted into laughter.

"Nice try there, lassie." One man tipped his floppy farmer's hat in my direction. "Had us going for a moment, you did."

"Waste of time, this is," said another, grabbing a woman by the arm and leading her away.

Three older women brushed the dirt from their skirts as they stood.

One stared down at me and flashed a frosty smile. "We'd best be off. Some of us have real work to do, eh?"

They all chuckled and turned to leave. I made a face at their backs.

A young farmer grinned at me. "It wasn't all bad. I liked when you made the flowers come out, and I liked that the ending was different than I've heard before." He shuffled his feet in the dirt. "Say, what's your name?"

I forced a smile so as to be friendly to the customers, even if I felt like sinking into the dust. "Tanwen."

He smiled. "Have a drink with me at the tavern, will you, Tanwen?"

It took me a heartbeat to eye his shabby clothes and calloused hands. "I don't think so. But stop by next time we're in town. I'll sell you a story."

His smile collapsed. He nodded once, then trudged off.

I grabbed my stool and muttered to myself. "Sorry, but if I had a drink with every smitten farm boy in every village's scummy tavern, I'd never see the light of day again."

Still. He didn't seem like a bad fellow. A bit of guilt pricked me. Didn't help that the lad looked forcibly like Brac.

I sighed and turned to help Riwor load up the donkey cart. Figured I might as well face her wrath sooner than later. Except it found me first.

Sound and pressure exploded over my ear as she boxed me on the side of the head.

"Foolish girl!" Fire blazed in her eyes. "You were right at the end! What's the matter with you? Can't you just stick to the stories, like I've taught you?"

I rubbed my ear and stole a look around. The crowd was gone, except a few stragglers.

Good. I didn't need the whole village of Lewir watching me get torn to bits by a toothless crone—master story peddler or not.

"I'm sorry, Riwor. I just wanted to try something new."

"Something new?" She boxed my ear again. "There's something new for you to try, eh?"

Except Riwor boxing my ears wasn't anything new.

"Aye. Thanks," I grumbled, mostly to myself.

She snatched the wooden stool from me and shoved it onto the wagon with force. The lazy donkey picked up his hooves and brayed a mournful note. "And anyway, I told you to ask me before you tried to sell the Cariad story again. It wasn't on the latest list of crowned stories, and the last thing we need is one of the king's guardsmen taking offense."

My shoulders drooped. "I forgot."

She tossed a tarp over the donkey cart. "Fool thing to forget, Tanwen, unless you're looking to land in the dungeon. Stick to the crown-approved stories, or that's where you'll end up. And I don't mean to follow you there."

I sighed out my breath in a long huff that sounded like defeat. "Suppose it's just as well the blasted thing blew up. I don't get that Cariad story anyway. It's hard to tell it and sell it if I don't get it."

"Get it?" Riwor looked at me like I'd sprouted another head.

"I mean, I don't understand it. Why would anybody give up being a princess in the castle? It don't make sense."

"*Doesn't* make sense." Riwor grunted. "You ignorant child."

Ignorant? My speech was getting better all the time, and I was one of the few peasants I knew who could actually read. Just because I'd never had a tutor. . . . But I bit down hard on my annoyance and didn't backtalk Riwor. Never helped anyway.

"It doesn't make sense," I corrected myself. "Why would Cariad leave the palace?"

Riwor pressed her palm to her forehead like I was too dumb to breathe. "That's the whole point of the story, Tanwen. The lesson is that no price is too high to pay for true love." She yanked on the donkey's reins. "Standard romance thread, fool girl. Think you can sell it?"

She didn't give me a chance to answer. Didn't really want me to, of course. Always had to have the last word, the hairy old monster. She busied herself about the donkey, and I contented myself with feeling miserable while I waited.

"I thought it was nice 'fore it blew up."

I turned to the sound of a small voice. A wee lass, no more than six years old, stood behind me. A gap showed where she was missing two teeth in front.

I knelt down and smiled at her. "Thank you, lassie. Want me to tell you a story?"

Her eyes lit up, and she plopped down cross-legged in the dirt.

I scooted next to her. "Once, there was a little girl."

A strand of blue light curled from two of my fingers. It glittered as it swirled before us.

The child giggled. "It's same as your eyes."

"Shh." I winked at her. "This little girl was very poor. Her mother was dead and her father . . ." I frowned, and my story strand almost disappeared while I tried to rope in the right words. "Her father was gone too." I smiled at the lass again. "So it was up to her to find a way to take care of herself."

"Did she?" The lass's eyes brightened with the question.

“She did. She took care of herself when she was just a wee lass, like you. But she kept her dearest dream safe inside, where no one could touch it.”

A pale golden light unfurled from my palm and swallowed up the blue ribbon. “She would have liked nothing so much as to live in the palace like Cariad once did.”

I directed the light strands until they swirled into a circle and three points formed along the front of the ring. “And that’s exactly what she aimed to do.”

At my last words, the ring of light turned solid—into a golden crown, just the proper size for the lass. Sunlight glittered through the crown, delicate and clear, like crystallized stories were supposed to be. It dropped into my lap with a soft *plink*.

I picked it up and handed it to the lass. “There. That’s for you.”

Her smile dimmed. “Oh. I ain’t got money.”

“Don’t worry about that. You can have—”

“Fenir!” A man’s voice cut into my words. “What are you doing with that story peddler?”

“Papa, I—”

“It’s all right, sir.” I flashed a smile at the red-faced man. Smiles never hurt in trying to soothe men, at least in my experience. “I was just telling her a story.”

“And trying to filch a few coins from her pocket, doubtless.” He dragged the girl to her feet by her arm.

She cringed at his tug, and I leaned away from his breath. Smelled like he’d spent the last of their coins at the tavern. “No, it was a gift. No charge.”

He snorted. “Oh, sure. A free gift. Ain’t no such thing in Tir, everybody knows.” He wrenched his daughter’s arm again. “You can’t trust these people, Fenir. Give me that.” He snatched the crystallized story from her hands and chucked it to the ground. It splintered to bits against the hard-packed dirt road.

“Hey!” I jumped to my feet. “That was for her!”

His eyes lit up like the drunks’ eyes back home did when there

was about to be a brawl. “Aye? So’s this!” He slapped the little girl full across her face. She cried out and crumpled to the ground.

I lunged for her out of instinct, but she held up her hand. “It ain’t no trouble, miss. I’m all right.”

Like blazes she was.

The man waved me away. “Get out of here, you. I told my lass you people was dangerous. Take your storytelling rubbish and leave our village be.” He took a few lurching steps away. “Come on, Fenir.”

Fenir scrambled to her feet. She watched her father go for a moment, then spoke quickly to me. “He don’t mean it. Harvest was bad this year, so he can’t pay the king’s taxes. Mam says he’s turned to the ale because he don’t know what else to do.”

“We all have it hard under the taxes.” I brushed my hand across her red-streaked cheek. “It doesn’t mean he should hit you.”

She nodded to Riwor. “She hits you.”

I paused. Clever little lass had a point. “Still. He’s your daddy and it’s not right.”

“I gotta go.” She smiled sadly. “Thank you, Peddler.”

“Bye, Fenir.” I watched the little lass disappear down the road after her father.

Maybe she was right. I scoffed to think of my early hopes when Riwor had first sought me out as her apprentice. I’d thought she could fill that empty, echoing space in my heart—that place the love of family was supposed to fill. I’d hoped maybe she would be like a granny to me. Fool idea that had lasted all of an hour, until the first time she struck me. A full six moons ago that was. Yet here I was, still standing beside her.

I tried to remind myself why I put up with Riwor. Was it because she taught me how to peddle and not just tell stories? Because she was the one to show me how to sharpen my gift and kept me using it in a way that wouldn’t land me in the king’s dungeon? Or maybe because she was my pathway into the unknown villages of the Eastern Peninsula?

Truly, it was because I had no other choice.

THE STORY PEDDLER

“Tanwen!” Riwor’s voice ripped me from my thoughts. “Unless you’d like to relieve the donkey of his duties and pull the cart yourself, I suggest you get over here. Now!”

I sighed. “Coming.”

THE STORY PEDDLER

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