

## The Tyrant's Bride

Margaret was tired of hearing about Ragnar. None of the news about the latest political mess was going to change that it was harvest season. She had her hands full as it was. Tilling the fields, replanting, and harvesting; repeat. Widgin' earth wasn't going to farm itself. She didn't have the luxury to worry about tomorrow, unlike merchants and nobles who gossiped about politics because they had nothing better to do. For Margaret, there was work to be done today. And those lofty sorts of thoughts could wait.

Her husband Jerald had just come home from the market and she needed him to get his widgin' arse out to help her with the fields. Lord only knows she could use the help. Fortunately, that sweet honeymellon of a man strolled out of the farmhouse with his work clothes and enough tools to fill a shed and smiled his pretty smile. The other wives said she and Jerald were a perfect match. They were the only two farmers in the whole Hillstanes who had good teeth. But his smile was different this time. If one of those two-timing harlots had tried to seduce her Jerald she'd... Her thought was interrupted by Jerald's sugary voice, "Margaret, my blessing. I know we don't have much silver in our coffers, but I went ahead and got food for the rest of the twoweek. I want to be working in this field as much as I can."

Margaret blinked, confused by this irregular decision, "My, Jerald, did you get hoaxed by one of those widgin' deals by the gap-eyed salesboy?"

Jerald shook his head, "No, Mar. I only wish that were the case. Blessing, there's talk of war with Ragnar. They're saying the farmers are the first on the draft."

Margaret scowled. Ol' Ragnar had made this farmer as angry as daggers. No one goes and takes her husband during harvest season. She hated Ragnar, and their leader: Xir'Kai Felzerath.

Since a young age, Shallash had learned to fear Ragnar. She learned to not speak of them, she learned not to disrespect them, and lastly, she learned the one responsible for feeling this way about Ragnar: Xir'Kai Felzerath. But the people of Navek were rich in resources, which made them a desirable acquisition for land-hungry nations. Even though the mountains protected them, she knew that one day Ragnar would come marching on their doorstep. That day had finally come, but it was not heralded by the thunderous clamor of soldier's footsteps. It was not brought by the pangs of hunger as the embargo constrictor snake wrapped its eager coils around Navek, squeezing it until it ran dry. Instead, it came by a letter and a rose. It was a marriage arrangement between princess Shallash and the dreaded tyrant himself: Xir'Kai Felzerath.

It felt impossible that she should be standing in front of the Felzerath stronghold, deep in the heart of Ragnar. Unarmed, unescorted, and unafraid. Behind those heavy obsidian gates stood the prince of conquest, no doubt clad in ceremonial Ragnarian war plate, bladed scepter in hand. Would his footsteps ring out through the undecorated walkway like hungry thunder? Or would they be rhythmic and orderly, like the beat of a battle drum?

The guards put the Belerisk horns to their lips. When those vortex-like horns sounded, the gates would be open, and she would be face to face with the most feared man on all the continent. After terse apprehension, their horns finally rang, the sound like the wheeze of a

defiant beast. The crackling tempest of rock against rock broke the music, the laborious process of opening those dreaded gates had begun.

The stubborn gates dragged along the granite floor at an arduous pace. She held her breath as they opened. She wanted to run. To scream. To cry. To punch the bastard in his smug face. But there was no smug bastard to punch. As the gates finally opened, there was no war plate. No bladed scepter. No thunderous step. Xir’Kai Felzerath had shirked attendance for his own introduction. What a lousy husband.

Shallash slumped against an imposing Gerarch tree and sighed tiredly. The guards gave excuses about the tyrant’s absence, but she could see through their thinly veiled fibs. The most feared man in the world had simply deemed this event not important enough to attend. Despite the imposing architecture and endless patrols of soldiers, Shallash admitted internally that Ragnar did have quite the beautiful array of flora, so distinct and different from the ones from Navek. The royal gardens were a haven of peace and beauty amidst a nation of war and fear.

“I see you have found the gardens. They are my favorite area of this whole fortress. It undermines the purpose of this imposing facility, true. But I cannot help but admire their perseverance. Water has more value in the desert. By that same understanding, I believe art has more value in Ragnar.” Shallash instantly corrected her posture, her eyes alert as she searched for the source of those words. She found the source behind her, a young man grinning brightly, “I apologize for intruding on your repose, Your Highness. I merely came here to collect my thoughts in a peaceful space, and it appears that you have done the same.”

The princess nodded, startled, “Yes, to collect my thoughts. I suppose it is only reasonable considering my soon-to-be husband will not do me the courtesy of introducing himself to his prospective bride. It is only reasonable that I require meditation.” She crossed her arms in a huff, unable to contain her frustration.

The stranger leaned against the tree, his smile fading, “My apologies, lord Felzerath can be difficult. The position he maintains, that of strength, requires sacrifice. I know Ragnar is not the most welcoming of nations, but places like this garden, water among the desert, are the true beauty of this domain. If you only take the time to find them, that is.”

The princess sighed, “You hold nostalgia for this place because it is your home. But perhaps that is the lens I need to see Ragnar through if I’m to stay here as a political peace prize. However, I am surprised that you are so bold as to speak of the fortress in this manner. You must not maintain that high of a position if you hold such an irregular mindset.”

Laughter filled the garden as the man smiled, “You have fabricated an amusing misconception about my dear nation. My position is not as lowly as you believe. It is easy to hate Ragnar. A military state that mongers war and fear is hardly the most disarming kingdom. Yet despite this hatred, you have chosen to come here and accept the marriage proposal with the leader of our people.”

“It is no different from most marriages between the powerful. Purely politically motivated. If marriage will protect the lives of my people, given the threat of war, then my sacrifice over that of thousands is the clear choice to make.”

“So, you swallowed your pride and tempered your anger to save your people. Navek is lucky to have you as their princess.”

“I doubt I will have any authority once I’m married. Just a trophy to display as a symbol of Ragnar’s victory.” She sighed, watching the meandering garden stream grant water to nearby plants, not unlike the irrigation system used by own country.

“Being a great leader isn’t about how long you rule or how powerful you are, but putting your people first and making the right decisions for them. Despite the pain those decisions may bring.”

“Those are quite the words of wisdom coming from a servant in the fortress.”

The stranger’s smile brightened, “Still believe I’m a servant, eh? I assumed as much. Strangers in beautiful gardens are not the most trustworthy of individuals.”

Shallash’s mouth curved, failing to hide her grin, “I happen to be grateful for this particular stranger. He helped me forget that I was in the worst place in the world for a moment and that my husband doesn’t want to appear in public with me.”

“Perhaps he got cold feet,” the man replied.

She shook her head, “Another reason to doubt your position in this stronghold. If you’ve heard anything about him, a man whose artistic medium is fear, you would know he does not get cold feet.”

“I would. What have you really heard about him? Only that he’s a man to fear? How could a woman ever love the most feared man in the nation? Could she ever truly be happy living in a lifeless, warmongering stronghold with this minute garden as her only escape? People will talk. Spread rumors of how the tyrant treats her. Abusing her, chaining her, neglecting her. But if he neglected her, she would never be hurt. She would never suffer those rumors. She could have her own life, perhaps even meet someone she truly loved, and could even find her own

happiness despite the expressionless walls and tasteless furniture of her political prison. I think that's more than ample reason for a tyrant to get cold feet.”

Shallash could see the depth of emotion in his eyes as he spoke. The sorrowful way in which he imagined his life in this scenario. She gasped, taking a step back. She knew it couldn't be, and yet, the presence she felt from this man... “What position did you say you held?”

“I didn't. I do not think you would believe me if I told you the truth.”

Her head shook in disbelief, “You are Xir’Kai Felzerath. I felt it in the way you spoke about your feelings towards the marriage. I cannot grasp why the man I met today, who seems a poet and a man of peace, would hold such warmongering and fear-provoking policies and propaganda. I heard that you made an emperor cry with your threat letter!”

The tyrant turned his head, looking up at the sky in contemplation, “I told you that I believe being a great leader is putting your people first and making tough decisions. The path I have taken as the ruler of Ragnar is a continuation of that philosophy.”

Shallash balled her fists in anger, “You believe Ragnar serves its people best as an oppressive military state? How blind are you?”

“Oppressive? Tell me that after you have been to every town and village. You will find no soldiers there, unlike what they tell you in Navek. You will find prosperity. A people who feel safe and heard. It was once a nation ripe for the plucking, lacking unity and leadership. My father assembled all the pieces to fulfill the dream of making Ragnar strong and safe. He got his hands dirty. I simply inherited his reputation. Most of Ragnar's soldiers do not encounter bloodshed. Their main goal is to serve as a reminder to other nations that we can take what we want if

someone crosses us. Now your nation, once abused and coveted for its natural bounty, will never be the target of greed again. Not while the Ragnarian army stands.”

“So you’re telling me everything I know about Ragnar, about you, is wrong?”

Felzerath hung his head in shame, “It was a necessary illusion. I understand if this is a lot to take in. If you refuse my marriage offer, I can’t be publicly refused without repercussions, but I’ll figure something out. Navek will go untouched by Ragnar, as promised.”

Shallash turned away. She couldn’t bear to suffer his gaze as she made her way out of the garden. His eyes were so sincere, so burdened and caring. But she couldn’t dismiss everything she thought to be true of Ragnar after just one confrontation. He was a tyrant who had inspired fear in many a nation. But he did so for the right reasons. She could tell he believed that what he was doing was right. She had never read someone so easily before. He was an open book with her. She felt comforted by his trust, by his ideals. No. She shook her head. She wasn’t really charmed by him, was she?

She kept walking, wandering without aim or direction. The guards didn’t stop her. It was probably Xir’Kur’s will, as was everything in this militaristic nation. After a length of time that she had little reference for, she came upon a small Ragnarian town. In all of her imaginings of Ragnarian civilization, she would have never expected this. No soldiers patrolled the placid village, no lifeless stark red fortresses that they called houses, and no defensible walls or frightened faces. Instead, she found a town very much like one she’d find in her homeland of Navek.

It was calm, with a lazy stream meandering through the town. Comely houses with inviting hearths neatly lined the dirt streets, each with its own personality. Children laughed and

played, the townsfolk were polite and friendly, and there wasn't a weapon to be found. It seemed impossible.

As Shallash made her way through the town, she spotted an old man tending to his garden. He tipped his hat to her in greeting, smiling. She curtsied in return, "Pardon the intrusion, father, but I am new to Ragnar and find myself in a state of confusion."

The elderly man nodded, pausing his gardening, "There's no shame in asking, miss. On behalf of the town of Renfall, welcome to Ragnar. I may not be able to answer all of your questions, but I will try my best."

The princess bowed in appreciation, "Thank you, father. Are all towns like this? Where are the guards? Where are the fortresses? Ragnar is a military state, is it not?"

The aged man grinned, "Ah, it often seems that way from the rumors, I'm guessing. Yes, many towns in Ragnar are just like this one. There is no need for guards in every town. What purpose would they serve? We are content, our harvest bountiful. What reason would we have to serve as a threat to the government?"

Shallash sighed, "I suppose you make a point. But I cannot bring myself to believe that everything I heard about Ragnar is a misconception."

The old man smiled softly, "Each side tells its own story. A military hero in one country is a nightmare figure to scare ill-behaved children with in another. Nobles can be philanthropists or leeches depending on who you ask. If you only confine yourself to one circle, to one country, you will only ever hear one side of the story."

She took a moment to take in the elder's wisdom, "That is very insightful, father. You have given me a lot to think about, thank you."

The elder waved goodbye before returning to his gardening. Shallash took a little longer to explore the town, to enjoy its peace. She wondered what misconceptions other nations made of her own. She wondered if she held other biased views of foreign nations based on false rumors. A single day outside her own kingdom's walls had given her just as much insight as any advisor or tome had ever offered her on the subject of rulership. Everything about Ragnar seemed to point to stark oppressive militarization, but Xir'Kai was right. Within Ragnar, there was peace.

By the time Shallash returned to the stronghold, the servants were already packing her belongings. Xir'Kai believed her decision final. He was following up on his word and permitting her to leave. But her decision was not final. Her eyes were now open to the beautiful truth of Ragnar, and she had to let the ruler of this fine nation know how she truly felt.

She broke into a sprint, racing across the cold stone floor. She let her ceremonial heels fly off her feet as she ran, much more mobile on her feet bare. The guards gave her confused looks as she dashed into the obsidian fortress, racing through the stark red halls. She smiled despite herself. What a sight she must have been! The princess of Navek, soon to be bride of the most feared man in the continent, barefoot with frumpled clothing and messy windblown hair, running down the sacred halls of the most secure structure in all the nation.

After her lengthy run, she finally found him, Xir'Kai Felzerath, surprisingly handsome, strikingly imposing yet with deep, caring eyes. He turned away from his guards, grinning at Shallash with a surprised but joyful expression, "You came back."

Shallash smiled in return, "How do you know I'm not just here to say goodbye?"

He chuckled, looking her up and down, “Because you ran here with determination and a sparkle in your eyes that is rarely seen. The eyes of someone who has made a decision.”

Shallash nodded, “I have. I want to stay here with you. I want to find more water in the desert. I want to proudly keep those of our nations safe and protected. I want to love Ragnar as you do.”

The idealist from the garden took her hand and smiled warmly, “Then let’s get married.”