

*I sat and pondered beauty. The book read. I wondered how beauty came to be known by so many different faces. Paintings, sculptures, and songs all have their own unique beauty; a beauty known immediately by some, and known only later by others. I wondered how one man would ignore a woman, but a different man would be unable to keep her face from his mind. How can beauty be so recognized, and so ignored?*

*And so, after decades of war, death, and fire, my journey as a philosopher began. It would become the defining journey of my life, leading me to study not just beauty, but justice, freedom, faith, and government. Some say you can't teach an old hound new trick. Well, that is not what I have found. Once I put up my sword, it was not difficult to turn my mind from tactics and strategies to wondering at the workings of mens' hearts.*

*And what I discovered was wondrous indeed.*

Marstýs sighed and let the book drop into his lap. Still inexplicably bed-bound, now almost three weeks after the attack. *It was just a slash on the leg, shouldn't I be walking by now?* But he still could not put weight on it. The sword had pierced through the muscle on his thigh, scraping bone in what had been the most painful wound in his life. Two different doctors had seen to him, and neither knew why it refused to fully close and heal. Four times he had torn it open, and thrice more his veins had been bulging and black when he awoke. He told no physician about that. *No, best not to frighten them.*

His uncle Maelon had lent him a copy of Hrad'ard Wedar's book *Man of War, Man of Peace* in an attempt to get his nephew's mind off his... infirmity. The book had been written by the first king of Revine, and chronicled his journey from general to scholar. It was a centerpiece of modern philosophy, and laws around the world were derived from the words of that ancient king.

He scowled at the leather covers. *The damn author must have been mad, talking about beauty as unrecognizable and immediately known.* Marstýs blinked. Had he really just thought that? He had read other works by Wedar, both on tactics and philosophy, and the man had been knowledgeable about what he wrote, and he wrote convincingly and in a very straightforward way. He rubbed his eyes. *What is happening to me? First attacking Jenna, now being angry at a man I've respected for years. Even though he's two thousand years dead.*

With another sigh he picked the book back up, then carefully set it on his bedside table. His uncle was very particular about the way his, or any, books were treated. He drank from the odorous concoction sitting by the small stack of tomes, and gagged as it went down. The drink was supposed to accelerate the healing of his wound, but so far it seemed only to make his stomach turn.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Enter." He growled, the foul taste of medicine still in his mouth.

His father strode in, tall and regal as always. It seemed of late that his father held himself more like a king than the actual king did. His mostly white beard was trimmed neatly, and his hair hung at his shoulders, curling slightly at the tips. The silver circlet on his head, set with a ruby, glittered from the sunlight pouring through the open window.

On seeing him, Marstýs relaxed, realizing he had been holding the cup with the medicine in a white-knuckled grip, ready to throw it. His hand quickly pulled away and, not certain what to do with it, folded his hands in his lap as he sat up.

“Relax, son. I merely wanted to see how you were.”

Marstýs deflated a little, showing his weariness. “I walked from the white sands to the edge of the sea, and on my journey learned many truths of men.”

His father smiled a little. “Quoting philosophy now, are we?”

The younger Gerpen nodded. “I feel as if I walked that distance, except without learning the truths of men.”

“The truths of men are quite the thing to learn, son.” His brow furrowed. “The truths of men which, with none to record, will pass like dust on the wind.” He said, finishing the quote.

Marstýs smiled. “It’s been a long time since you read Wedar’s works, hasn’t it?”

His father nodded, making his way to a chair next to the bed. “I’ve been too busy running a fifth of our country.” Ceshmir Gerpen was the Ruling Head of Dan’welden, the governor of Delcarom and the surrounding area. “But no politics now; how are you faring, Marstýs?”

He looked away. His father would know if he lied and Marstýs did not want to tell him he hadn’t been getting better. Both would pain the older man. “I...” He thought of the men laying dead around him when the San’hadar pulled back, of his cousin with dark blood spattering her riding dress, of how he had *failed*. “I don’t know, father. It’s not just that,” he gestured to his leg, bound and suspended above the bed, “it’s the things I *saw*.” His eyes drifted across the room, looking but not seeing. “They cried for their mothers.” He said softly. “As those men lay dying, they cried for their mothers to help them. When the horses started screaming, when the escorts started dying, I... I *panicked*, father. I panicked and I couldn’t control the men. Then when I was wounded, Enarë took charge and turned defeat into a rout. But I just sat on the road and bled. I *failed*. Mírren was under my escort’s protection, and I *failed*.” He stared forwards, looking at nothing.

His father was silent for a time, but when he spoke, he did so softly and with no hint of reprimand or disappointment. “All men fail at some point in their lives. It’s simply a question of when and how often. If you never fail, it means you never *tried*, son.” He put a hand on Marstýs’s shoulder and squeezed softly. “The master has failed more times than the beginner has tried. Wedar, Ironsides, Kharne, do you think they won every time? Do you think that men who succeed have never lost? You will not win every time, either, son. The most important step is always the next. And when you fall, you will rise, each time, a stronger man.”

Marstýs simply stared ahead, eyes unfocused.

The older man pursed his lips, then stood up. “I’ll leave you be, son.”

When the door closed behind his father, Marstýs squeezed his eyes shut. *They won’t stop. Lords and ladies above, they won’t stop screaming.* Almost thirty men had died, pierced through and slashed open by San’hadar arrows and spears. Marstýs placed trembling hands on his forehead panting through clenched teeth as he remembered the attack.