

Chapter One — “Let There Be Ale”

It would be very easy, Daine Orban, Knight of the Road, thought, to lose perspective now.

There had just been too many village halls. Too many earnest, sun-reddened faces. Too many discordant, insistent demands for her attention over too, too many years.

It was not that her role had become unnecessary or redundant — far from it. She found herself with more to do now than when she took her first step on the Road all those years ago. It was just that, day by day, tale by tale, complaint after complaint, it had all become hauntingly, banally familiar.

Had it not been one of Old Gant’s host of unwritten rules that, come the third Tour, the excitement of it all would pall?

“But that’s for starry-eyed wanderers with dreams of slaying dragons and banishing warlocks,” he had cackled. “Not for the cynical ones like you, Daine Darkhelm. Not for the ones who really know their business. No illusions for you, love, are there?”

She had grimaced and dipped her head in acknowledgement at the nickname, knowing she was in truth one of those dreamy wanderers. That she would gladly spend her blood and her lifetime on the King’s Road. It was, quite simply, the right thing to do. She had accepted her peers’ mockery, good-natured, and otherwise, knowing all would be well once on Tour. Her justifiable reputation for morose taciturnity would be neither here nor there once she began fulfilling that sacred duty.

On days like this, though — and were they not all days like this recently? — that time of naïveté felt a world away.

With a sigh, she refreshed <Intimidation>, drew the short sword at her hip and began swinging it, almost absentmindedly. The petitioners awaiting their turn instinctively stepped backwards under the pressure of her aura. When she spoke, the softness of her voice stood in stark comparison to the physical presence of this legendary knight in full plate and helm. “You will appreciate I feel more than a touch of scepticism at these claims, Lord Trellec. I see your son in front of me.” She made a casual gesture with her blade toward the skinny, sullen youth of ten or eleven with a bloodied nose. “A boy who has, I sense, had more than his share of scrapes over the years. To speak plainly, he does not possess the look of a defenceless victim. But I have been wrong about such things before, and I accept there may be more to this incident. I then turn to his assailant” — a nod to a small, sobbing, bundle of clothes wrapped in her mother’s arms — “who seems somewhat miscast in her role as the aggressor. So, what do we have? A slip of a girl assaulting, without provocation, a Lordling twice her age and more than twice her size. It seems an unlikely tale, does it not?”

The older man in the delicate red-and-gold robes did not quite manage to keep the sneer off his face. He looked around the wooden hall, raising his arms to encourage comment

from the group of villagers waiting silently behind him. Dozens of pairs of eyes intently studied the floor. “That is not the point, my Lady. It is not for you to parse such things. There is right, and there is wrong. And there is the Justice of the Goddess. This girl, a commoner no less, struck my son, and blood was spilled. We have innumerable witnesses. I fail to see the complexity here. You must do as is required.”

Yes, she thought, eyeing Lord Trellec and finding him rather too pleased with himself. *All too easy to lose perspective.*

It had all gone as she had dreamed for those first few years. She would travel the Road, and she would deliver judgement: there were bandits to be slain, corrupt officials to be toppled, and monsters to be rooted out. Most villagers were happy to see her. Of course, some would resent her intrusion into their lives, but that was to be expected, and there had been more bouquets than brickbats in those early days. True, there had been violence — more often of late, now that she thought of it — and she had done things over the years which troubled her.

But that was the role she had chosen. And she did it well. Since those first few days, she had never turned her face from what needed to be done, and she would not do so today.

The casual swinging of her sword fell, unconsciously, into an old training pattern. “As you say, Lord Trellec. As you say. Right and wrong. And the Justice of the Goddess. And blood. But that’s the trick of things, don’t you see? That is why we are charged to make our Tours and why the Goddess travels with us when we do. Right and wrong. How do we tell the two apart? A Lordling has his nose broken, which is certainly a matter for a Knight of the Road. We can’t be having that sort of disorder in the outlying regions. One bloody nose in the West leads to smashed windows, leads to riots in the town, and, before you know it, we will have venerable elders with their heads on pikes and the commonality dancing toward the palace with pitchforks and ill intent.”

The excited hubbub that had greeted Lord Trellec’s call for justice hushed to a tense silence. All that could be heard was the hum of Daine’s sword as it carved ever more complex shapes in the air.

“But there are other matters also for Knights of the Road. Some of us — not so many nowadays, to be sure, but enough of us to make a difference — look askance at young Nobles throwing around their weight in what may be considered to be an inappropriate manner. It may be felt that any . . . retribution that came the way of a young gentleman overstepping his boundaries would be entirely proper. I feel the need to mention that some may feel a wise father would deliver his own justice when coming across such a matter and should not seek such wide attention” — Daine indicated the crowded hall — “for unfortunate, youthful indiscretions. Indeed, I seem to recall, Lord Trellec, that you chose not to attend my last Tour: were heard, if rumour be true — and is it ever? — to describe this Court as a ‘backward, tyrannical ritual of which we would do well to be rid.’ I may be misquoting, of course. My age, you see. You have the reputation of a clever and thoughtful man, sir. Thus, I may find myself questioning your motives this day.”

The sword paused its intricate spirals, its tip hovering in front of Lord Trellec's son. The boy stared at her without emotion, seemingly able to ignore the blade inches from his face. She said, "Noble blood has been shed —and for that, as all know, there is a dire penalty. But you ask for the execution of this girl in compensation for a bloody nose, my Lord."

Trellec raised his chin. "That is the law, my Lady."

Dain nodded. "So, it is. And, as that is the law, this 'backward ritual' finds it should grant you what you seek."

There was a soft sigh in the room, undercut by the sobbing of the condemned child. Her mother, eyes huge at Daine's words, tried to comfort her.

"But, in calling down the Goddess to witness that judgement, other crimes —perhaps ones of which you are entirely, innocently, unaware — may well come to Her notice."

The outstretched sword did not move from its place in front of the youth's face. Daine's brown eyes, seemingly so tired and unremarkable a few moments ago, now glowed with the power of the summoned Goddess. "Are you quite convinced you want judgement in this matter, Lord Trellec? Once summoned, the Goddess can be implacable in such things."

Trellec looked considerably less sure of himself than he did barely half a bell earlier, when he pushed his way to the front of the supplicant line dragging his son's "assailant" with him.

Suddenly, he dropped his head, unable to withstand the weight of her Goddess-given power pressing down upon him for a moment longer and cleared his throat. "I wonder, my Lady . . . well, now that I have properly considered the matter, whether this is not more a case for the village Constable? In retrospect, it was just the shock of things, I'm sure. I am sorry to have troubled you with such a trivial matter. Master Flynn will be happy to take this off your hands for a less extreme remedy."

"But it *is* in my hands, Lord Trellec. You brought it to me. And here it sits, like a turd on a Naming Day cake. What shall we do about this turd, Lord Trellec?" The sword continued to be held, without wavering, in front of the nose of Trellec's son. Yet the boy did not show an ounce of fear throughout. Few even those thrice his age, would be so collected in the circumstances. "Blood has been spilt, my Lord, but mayhap there is more to discover about the events that led to that outcome. Should I sound the judgement of the Goddess?"

The boy held her gaze; wholly defying the Goddess' regard. She stared back at him, not quite amused at his impertinence but intrigued nonetheless. He was either entirely innocent of what she suspected, or . . .

The silence stretched out. She could see that Lord Trellec was unwilling, or perhaps constitutionally unable, to withdraw his case in front of so many witnesses. She could feel him prepare to do whatever it took to save face in front of his neighbours, even if that

meant sacrificing at least one child. She had met his type before. The death of children, even his own, would not squat for long on his aristocratic conscience.

Daine cursed softly. Even after all these years, she still had not learned how to compensate for her low Charisma. She had gotten by too easily by upping the ante. Had become too comfortable in her capacity to dominate to ever accept the possibility of compromise. She had not left him room enough to back down. “*Sometimes a sucker deserves an even break,*” Gant rasped in her mind. Sometimes they did, but not today, it seemed.

She began to channel <Divine Justice> to deliver her doom when the mother of the crying child took a step forward. “I would, my Lady, petition for a mutual closure of this case. The young must be able to make mistakes, and I am sure my Belle meant no harm. And whatever Drunnoc may have done” — her eyes shifted to the dead-eyed youth who stared impassively back at her — “well, boys will be boys, and no more needs to be said.”

The tension in the room audibly broke. *A clever woman*, Daine thought. Everyone, even Lord Trellec, should be able to accept that with no loss of status. An admission of fault on both sides with nothing more needing to be said. Or done.

“‘Boys will be boys’? I’ve found that to be true. At least until I brought it to a halt. Permanently, and on more than one occasion, if memory serves. Lord Trellec? It is your complaint. Should I accept the petition for mutual closure, or do we see whether a ‘boys being boys’ defence survives the judgement of the Goddess?”

For a heartbeat, it seemed Lord Trellec would not accept the lifeline. Then good sense won the battle with pride, and he bowed low. “Of course, my Lady. I would be happy to see such a conclusion to this disagreement. I misspoke and gladly withdraw my complaint in the spirit of mutual closure.” He pulled his seemingly reluctant son toward the door and exited with a swirl of retainers and hangers-on. The boy — Drunnoc, was it? — kept his eyes fixed on her the whole time. “‘Boys will be boys’ indeed.”

She ended <Intimidation>, slipped her sword back into its scabbard, and Daine Orban, Knight of the Road, the Lady Darkhelm of a hundred tavern tales, on her third Tour of the West Coast and well into her fifth decade, smiled for the first time that week. “Excellent. Now, let there be ale.”