

Kate Orr

“Meeting”

Character Development Short Story – Fantasy Adventure

If someone had been looking for it, they would have seen it, but to the casual shoppers in the marketplace, there was nothing unusual about the young woman walking through the square. She was browsing a textiles stall, chatting with the man selling fabric. She swung the large leather pack off of her back and set it down beside her, placing her wares inside. If someone had been looking for it, they would have seen her give a quick tap to the bag, as if she were unlocking it, or signaling something inside. It was quick and carefully casual, but she packed up, and moved along to her next stop.

The High King was dead. That much was certain, despite the confusion surrounding his successor. A death from old age, as opposed to war, warranted celebrations of the person’s life and the citizens were happy to oblige. Though the people mourned the good king, he had lived a long full life, and celebrations were always better than the alternative. Naturally, the market place was where everyone would go to hear the latest news and make festival arrangements. Which of the Kings or Queens would take his place? The announcement would be made in four days’ time. Four days of Honor Festivals, then the Coronation Festivals would follow.

When the woman re-shouldered her pack, the long braid of dark hair hanging from under her wide brimmed hat fell across the top of the leather pack. If someone had been looking for it, concentrating for the split second it happened, they would have seen the end of the braid get pulled under the top flap, from inside.

“Tist. Kiska. I felt that. I’m pulling my hair back out, and it had better be the right color.” She said under her breath, giving the pack a bounce as she walked.

She reached back and flipped her hair over her shoulder, glancing at the end of it. She sighed as she realized the orange tie she placed on it that morning was now blue. “I suppose I should have been more specific.” She muttered as she bounced the pack again.

If someone had been listening, they would have heard laughter. Faint and musical, even someone listening would have had a hard time telling if it really was laughter, or someone playing a flute far away.

The woman made her way through the throngs of people buying the usual staples from the shops lining the main street. After the fresh chaos surrounding recently added festival stalls, the regular chaos of the shop street seemed more orderly and calming. The Sturdy Paddle was already doing business, though the sun had been up for only a few hours. She chuckled to herself as she caught the song its patrons were singing. It was "Good King Terrendon," but the bawdy version usually sung by kids. She picked up the tune as she made her way to the castle gate. If someone had been listening to her lyrics, they would have noticed it had nothing to do with King Terrendon, and more to do about a promise to behave, punctuated by tugs to her pack.

The crowd lessened as she approached the drawbridge leading to the castle grounds. There were several people lined up to go inside, and she could see a few guards checking them through. She considered just walking to the front of the line and asking to see Marod directly as he was supposed to meet her here about now, but didn't feel the need to broadcast self-importance and resigned herself to the end of the line. She had been cautioned to be as unobtrusive as possible. Just as she settled in to wait, she stepped back out again as she saw Marod's familiar shape appear at the admissions gate. She caught his eye and they both smiled as they walked to meet each other. She couldn't help notice he looked like 4 days of festivals were the last thing on his mind. Though his dark skin hid most of his wrinkles, she could tell there were a few more tired worry lines since she last saw him a few weeks ago.

"I see you got the message. Good. Come on in." He said as they headed back toward the gate. The guards saluted as Marod walked past and he nodded in return.

As she stepped into the courtyard, she was struck by how familiar everything was, but how different it all looked from her memories.

"Been a long time since you were inside, huh? Lost in thought?" asked Marod as they made their way to the opposite end of the square.

"Yeah. Just visiting some memories. I believe this is where we met, Guard Captain."

"Oh yes. It's where I meet a lot of the country's youth for the first time. It's a good place to terrify on a first impression." He chuckled, shaking his finger at her in a too-familiar gesture that solidified the memories even more. He changed his tone. "You were a very good student though, very determined. I wish I had been able to keep you in my guard, but – where was it they shipped you off to next? Was it The Birch?"

"No, I trained at The Birch before I came here, then again only a few years ago. No, when training was done here, I went to the Greenwood Archers." She said.

"My goodness, child. I forgot you went to the Archers." They walked in silence for a moment, then Marod stopped before opening the door to the inner courtyard and turned to her, looking her in the eyes. "It's an amazing thing to have been through so much, but you'll thank your father for it, and soon I imagine."

She nodded, though not entirely sure why. "Does this have anything to do with why I've been summoned?"

"Oh, probably. I'm not the one with the words for it though. Come along. I'd better get you to Dorin before he starts looking for us. We're supposed to meet your father together." He opened the door and ushered her through. As he stepped into the hall, he cleared his throat and said in a louder voice. "I almost forgot – Master Gardorin wants a word with you before we start. We have about half an hour so that should be plenty of time for you to get sick of him." Marod winked at her as he shut the door behind them.

A voice from the trees at the other end of the courtyard drifted over to them. "I know *you* may be getting old, my dear friend, but *my* hearing is perfectly intact." A tall thin man with wispy white hair and a thick grey beard walked toward them, closing the book he had been reading. He arched his eyebrow at Marod. "I heard that."

She laughed. "Still encouraging each other's bad habits?"

"Always, my dear. It's what keeps us so youthful, despite our grey hairs." Said Dorin, stroking his beard.

Marod grinned. "We've known each other for over forty years now. New material is a challenge."

She turned back to see Dorin's brown eyes piercing into her green ones.

"What–"

"You haven't been sleeping well lately, have you child?"

"I, well–"

He gently reached forward and took her chin in his hand. "Ah, yes. It is a good time to be seeking insight into your past, for the time is fast approaching to seek your future – and your family needs you."

"Um, okay." She was used to Dorin's somewhat cryptic insights, but a little unsettled that he could tell she'd been having nightmares.

Marod cleared his throat again. "Well, I'm off to check that we're ready. Bring her along by noon –try not to be too melancholy, though – that's what council meetings are for."

"Guard Captain."

"Chief Council."

Marod gave her a pat on the back as he strode back the way they had entered. Dorin took her arm and led her over to the bench where he had been sitting. Though he was less muscular and broad than the Guard Captain, Dorin's walk was strong and determined. 30 years on the King's Chief Council gave him a different kind of toughness than Marod.

"Now then, how much do you know about what your father does here at the castle?" he asked.

She frowned. "Dorin, is father alright? He and mother just came to see me last week, and didn't mention anything strange."

"No, no. Everyone is in good health. My apologies. Just a little political question to prepare for the meeting."

"Ah- well, my father is on the First Council. He's been here for – well before I was born. He helps the king, gathers information, that sort of thing. Gives advice, I suppose. I saw him very little when I was a child – I was with my mother for most of it. I see him now about once a month."

"Hmm. In a way, you are correct about all of those things, but also you are not. That will become clear shortly. How much do you know about the king? Do you recall having met him?"

"No, I don't think so. He oversaw the ceremony when we completed Marod's training basics. I saw him at festivals – he sits at the podium where games are announced. He's not very tall, but not short, either. I remember him having reddish brown hair and beard, but that describes most of the men in our country. Um, he was wearing a crown, so I'd say that gave him away the most."

"What do you think of our king – about how he rules our country?"

"That's a tricky thing to answer inside the king's own castle. Is this a test?" she asked, shifting her weight on the bench.

Dorin reached over and patted her hands which were twisted in her lap. "No. Not really. I'm sorry for the mystery, but there is a very important meeting we are attending and I need to know what you already know before I can tell you more. Perhaps that doesn't make sense now, but it will."

"Well, I know we're the smallest country under the High King, but we do alright. Our mineral exports keep us pretty friendly with the neighbors. We haven't had war since our king came to power, and we rebounded from the drought pretty unscathed. We have been okay." She shrugged. "As far as the people know, we don't have nearly as many problems as the south. Having to learn about their wheat tariff systems while I lived there with mother probably turned me off from paying much attention to politics." She chuckled and continued, "probably why mother got Aunt Cressa to take over and came back here. Our relations with the other countries are stable, even the east. I suppose when there's nothing really bad to notice, people don't really notice." she finished, as she glanced at Dorin then back to the trees in the yard.

"People don't, but I take it you have noticed something?" he said, less a question than a statement.

She drew a long breath slowly, then let it out quickly. "I don't know. I mean, yeah, I've noticed . . . something. I don't know what it is. Yet."

They both sat in silence a moment, and watched the breeze turn the leaves.

Dorin nodded, then stood and offered her his arm. "Well we should be going now. Thank you for indulging my questions."

"Any time, friend." She said as they walked.

"One more thing, though – I trust that your, ah, guests in your pack have been instructed to behave? This is not a good time for mischief." Dorin said, eyeing the pack.

"Yes. Even though they usually take my instruction as more of a suggestion, I believe even they understand how serious this is." She said, bouncing her pack as they stepped through the doorway.