

Desertion

"Isha Cloudberry," the sergeant began, pausing while two of his soldiers hauled the woman to her feet. "Isha Cloudberry, you have confessed to the crime of desertion and must now endure the appropriate punishment. Do you have anything to say?"

The woman answered by spitting at his feet, a goblet of saliva spattering the toe of his left boot. In her loose white shirt and long brown skirt she looked like an ordinary villager, but the tattoos on her hands were regimental insignia and identified her as a warrior. The sergeant shook his head in disappointment, remembering her as she once was, when her valor in battle had earned her the right to wear the coveted badge of heroism on her red tunic. In those days she had worn her long blonde hair in a smart ponytail, tied with a black velvet ribbon, but now her tresses hung in a wild tangled mane around her shoulders. Like many deserters she had eluded the military authorities for several months, living under a false identity, until her capture on a lonely highway. The sergeant admired her for that, for she was tough and courageous, the type of woman he felt honored to march alongside.

"Well?" he repeated. "Do you wish to speak?"

"Yes," she replied. "I do indeed have something to say." With a shrug she shook her arms free from the clinging grasp of the two soldiers who held her. They were taller than she, and younger too, their scarlet tunics and white trousers showing the luster of newly-issued uniforms. Behind them stood two gray-bearded men in peasant garb, each holding a bundle of short ropes and, further back still, a dozen villagers huddled together while observing the proceedings.

"Hear my words," Isha continued, keeping her eyes fixed on the sergeant but addressing her statement to anybody within earshot. "I do not deserve this cruel punishment, nor do I consider myself guilty of any crime. Have I not served this kingdom admirably for ten years, risking my life on countless battlefields? And now, at the age of twenty-nine, I've had enough of war and death. That is why I escaped from the regiment six months ago, to find some sanity in this wild and dangerous world. The things I have seen ... "

"Enough!" cried the sergeant, raising his hand. "This is not the time for sermons. Let the punishment commence!"

Isha took a deep breath, staring up into the clear blue sky as her shirt was ripped from her

body. Strong hands tore the white material to shreds before tugging her skirt down to her ankles. A murmur rose from the huddle of village folk as they watched the brutal stripping. Isha recognized the voices, especially those that giggled and sniggered. Immediately behind her she heard a soft whistle from one of the gray-bearded peasants, and she twisted her head to glare back at him.

"Enjoying the view, Bargate?" she inquired.

"Yes, indeed," came the reply, the man licking his dry cracked lips as he spoke. "Your ass is round and firm, my lady, like a ripe apple."

The sergeant clicked his tongue at the remark and signaled to both graybeards, beckoning them to a small patch of bare ground, in which a deep narrow hole had been dug. Beside the hole, on the green grass, lay a wooden cross, its post more than twelve feet high, its beam fixed with rough iron nails. To the cross the soldiers now led Isha, naked but defiant, while the others followed close behind. The spectators from the village moved slowly forward to gain a better view, their faces full of excited anticipation.

Isha spoke no word of protest as the two young soldiers laid her down on the cross, their hands pulling her arms taut along the beam. Bargate and his companion knelt at either end of the beam to bind her wrists to it, wrapping the ropes tightly and securely. The sergeant stood solemnly at the foot of the post, gazing down at the deserter and feeling a flicker of remorse at his part in her degradation. Isha stared back at him, her blue eyes showing no emotion, though her face winced as the knots were tightened.

Near the base of the post two smaller crossbeams, each barely twenty inches long, had been fixed with nails. To the ends of one the gray-bearded men now bound Isha's ankles, so tightly that the cords chafed and reddened her skin. When the men had finished, her legs were slightly parted, displaying not only the triangle of dark hairs at her crotch but also the pink slit of her womanhood.

The sergeant coughed, shuffling his feet awkwardly, trying to avert his gaze, feeling his former comrade's shame and humiliation. Then, with a click of his fingers, he ordered the cross to be raised.

Isha clenched her teeth against the pain as her body's weight dragged on the ropes binding her wrists, and she gave a small yell when the post settled into the waiting hole with a spinejuddering jolt. For a brief moment the pain in her wrists burned like fire, but

suddenly eased when her heels found the lower of the two smaller crossbeams, for she was then able to support her body without exerting strain on her arms. It was some time, however, before the initial surge of panic dissipated, her large round breasts heaving as she struggled to regain her composure. Her gasps attracted a few sly chuckles from the village folk, who now crowded together ten yards away, their upturned faces staring as though transfixed.

"Corporal Cloudberry of the Sixteenth Infantry Regiment," the sergeant declaimed, gazing up from the base of the cross. "Here on the edge of this village, beside the ancient military road, you will hang as a warning to all deserters. Stripped of your dignity, displayed without honor or respect, you will remain in this place until noon on the day after tomorrow. Then, to atone for your disloyalty, you will toil for a year in the king's personal silver mines. So be it!"

"So be it!" echoed Isha, aiming a second gobbet of spittle at the sergeant as he turned away. The projectile struck his back, staining his red tunic, but he ignored the insult and walked off along the highway, taking the two young soldiers with him.

Bargate stood near the foot of the cross, his waist on a level with Isha's feet, his weathered old face leering up at her body. Isha looked down at him, her mouth curling in disgust as she felt his gaze crawling over her nakedness like hot rough hands. She recalled feeling similar disgust when he tried to grope her breasts and buttocks in the tavern three months ago, soon after her arrival in the village. On that evening she had struck him with her fist, knocking him out cold, earning herself the fearful respect of many folk but incurring the bitter hatred of Bargate and his cronies.

Even as she glared down at him, her tongue worked a fresh blob of spittle around her gums, her eyes narrowing as she waited for an opportune moment. But Bargate perceived her intent and stepped aside just as she spat, the missile landing harmlessly near his feet. By now, the other old graybeard was slowly trudging back towards the village, but two of the spectators approached the cross, the rest having already dispersed. These two were a man and woman in their early twenties, both of them brown-haired and swarthy, the man barechested in dirty breeches while the woman wore a filthy dress of gray wool.

"Wait a while!" the woman hissed, looking back over her shoulder. "The other folk will soon be out of sight."

Her companion nodded, though his attention was distracted by the vision of Isha's naked

body, his eyes admiring the smooth curve of her hips and the firm round orbs of her bosom.

"They've all gone," Bargate observed, casting a glance behind. "We're alone, my friends, alone with the warrior slut. How I wish we could take our revenge upon her!"

The scruffy woman snarled, baring her yellow teeth and forming her hands into cat-like claws. Her brown eyes smoldered with rage and disdain as she looked up at Isha.

"You bitch!" she rasped. "You came to our village and tried to seduce our menfolk with your city charms. But we've got you now, just where we want you!"

With that, she clawed her hands down Isha's thighs, her sharp fingernails leaving livid red stripes on the skin. Isha whimpered in pain, her legs instinctively tensing and stretching.

"Stop it, Keesa!" hissed Bargate. "The law forbids us from harming her. Leave no mark on her flesh!"

"He's right, cousin," said the other man, idly stroking his bare-chest with a grimy thumb. "If we hurt the bitch properly we'll be in serious trouble when the soldiers come back to cut her down."

Keesa nodded, then grinned like a tiger, licking her teeth and slavering. Again she reached out, but this time higher and using only her right hand. For an instant the hand hovered over Isha's crotch, before the fingernails scraped slowly through the triangle of dark bristles. Keesa gave a satisfied smirk when she heard the helpless woman's plaintive squeal and, when she withdrew her hand, she sniffed the fingertips.

"A strong scent," she observed. "The typical aroma of a warrior woman: fear and sweat!"

The two men laughed, Bargate clapping the younger fellow on the back. "Go on, Miggot!" he urged. "Try some of that sweet honey for yourself!"

Miggot stepped closer to the cross and looked up at Isha, relishing the sight of her naked body. For weeks he had dreamed about seeing beneath her garments, ever since she rebuffed his clumsy advances in the tavern. He had guessed then that she possessed a fine figure, for the way her clothes clung to her lithe form hinted at the beauty they concealed from his leering eyes. He remembered, too, the jealous envy that had boiled in his veins when he saw her kissing a shepherd in the meadow beside the river. Now, as his gaze

followed the sleek shape of her legs, upward to the place where her thighs parted, he glimpsed the pink lips of her vagina and guessed that the shepherd had been welcomed within. Miggot wished desperately that his own manhood, its shaft already stiffening in his breeches, could probe that succulent orifice, but there would be no opportunity to do so. In two days, Isha would be taken down from the cross to be borne away to the silver mines, far away in the south of the kingdom. With a heavy sigh he reached up and with his right hand caressed the exposed slit, his fingers stroking it gently, almost tenderly, before the forefinger pushed inside to explore the warm inner flesh.

Isha's whole body tensed, the muscles in her limbs stretching taut, her belly flattening to become a hollow beneath her heaving breasts. A hiss of mingled loathing and disgust escaped from her grimacing mouth, her blonde mane thrashing her shoulders as she shook her head violently.

"You ugly bastard!" she rasped. "Go back to your pigs!"

Miggot withdrew his finger and held it to his nose, meeting Keesa's intense stare as his nostrils flared.

"She smells so good," he whispered. "No wonder all the men of the village followed her around like thirsty dogs!"

A faint slurping noise behind made him turn around quickly, his puzzled expression changing to a grin when he saw Bargate masturbating openly and furiously. Beads of foam flecked the gray whiskers at the corners of the old man's mouth and his trousers hung around his knees. His eyes were locked in a wide upward stare, transfixed by the vision of Isha stretched high and naked on the cross.

Keesa licked her lips, looking from Bargate to Isha and back and forth between the two.

"Yes!" she hissed. "The tattooed slut does look very beautiful today. I'll wager no image is more arousing than the sight of a crucified woman. If I had a cockstem now, my friends, I'd be rubbing it just as vigorously!"

"Ah!" said Miggot knowingly. "So that's the source of your resentment, cousin? You tried to seduce the bitch into your bed, and she rejected you?"

"Hush, fool!" Keesa crowed, baring her teeth in a snarl. "That was a secret, held only by Isha and me!"

At that moment, Bargate ejaculated with a growl of pleasure, his semen leaping towards the cross and spattering Isha's feet. Her toes wriggled among sticky globules of white fluid, a sensation that to her seemed more horrible than the degradation of her punishment.

"Clean it away, you old goat!" yelled Keesa, aiming a kick at Bargate's knee as he stood crouching, gasping hoarsely, his flaccid shaft slimy and glistening as it dangled between his legs.

"No," retorted Miggot. "The law states that we must not attend to a crucified deserter. No food, no water, nothing must be brought for her comfort. Nor are we permitted to respond to the needs of her body. If anyone sees her feet being cleaned with a rag, they might tell the soldiers!"

"Simpleton!" Keesa snapped, striking his ear with her fist. "Why do I have an idiot for a cousin?"

"I'll clean it up," said Bargate, straightening as he caught his breath. "You two should return to the village at once, or the others will become suspicious of our motives."

Miggot looked up at Isha and gave a wistful sigh. "I wish we could take her down tonight and carry her off to the big barn!"

"So do I," Bargate replied, buttoning the front of his trousers.

"Yes," said Keesa, giving a last glance at the cross as she turned away. "That would be nice!"

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