

Thursday, September 24, 2009

7

We drove in silence for what seemed like hours. I kept waiting for her to say something, but she stared straight ahead, clucking at the oxen occasionally to keep them from straying after the lush grass that lined the road. Finally, my curiosity got the best of me. "What's he doing?"

"Do you know what a Mask is?"

"Of course."

"So?"

"The Masks are Mora's servants. They are the keepers of secrets. They can speak to each other's minds across the Reia and the Weald, and they speak in a language that no one else can understand."

She giggled. "That's what they want you to think, anyway."

I huffed. I didn't like having a girl laugh at me. "So what do they do?"

"You're mostly right. They are Mora's servants, at least most of them. Some of them serve silver drachms more than they serve Mora. They are the keepers of secrets, and the oracles of Mora, but they can't actually speak to each other's minds. They have trained pigeons that carry their messages. One of their pigeons can fly from Aster to Norwood in three days. The messages that the birds carry are written in the language of the Masks. I've heard people say that once upon a time, some Masks could speak the language, but that time is gone. Now, it's only a written language, and even that is hard to read."

"Oh." I knew that she was trying to answer my question, but I still wasn't making the connection. "So, what's he doing?"

Her exasperated sigh told me that she thought the answer was obvious. "He's reading, or trying to read. And he's probably writing a response, too."

Once the silence was broken, talking became easier. As Sal rowed the sun toward its resting place, she told me about the birds, how they were trained, and what I would have to do as the Mask's bird keeper.

"Why doesn't he have you do it?"

She greeted my question with a long silence, and a wistful smile. "It's different in the city." Gesturing toward the trees of the Weald, she continued. "Out here, and in the villages, men and women work together. Nobody gives me a second glance, or even a second thought if I'm helping my father. In the cities, though, I can't be seen helping with things like this. It would be unseemly."

"So, what do you do in the city?" In my mind, a city was just a big village. I couldn't imagine a place where women weren't out helping the men with the crops or the herds.

"I sew, I read, I clean our house, and I prepare our meals."

"What about your mother?"

"She died a long time ago. I don't really remember her."

"Oh. Sorry." Her smile in return was sad. I looked away, staring into the shadows.

In my mind, I relived the moment when Mora's thread had turned my life. The gleaming black mask glared at me again over the wattled wall of the corral. Its deep voice shouted at the hapless boy scrabbling at his feet. "A trade," it shouted, over and over again.

"What if I'm not good enough?" I whispered.

I didn't think my voice would even carry to where Lena was sitting, but it did. "You will be," she reassured me.

"Mora will teach you."

"Couldn't Mora teach him, too?"

Her face went hard. "He wasn't Mora's." She spat the words. "He wasn't even sure whose he was. He was born to Festian, but he liked Sal better."

Again, I didn't know how to reply. I couldn't imagine someone trying to choose who his ara would be. Lena noticed my dismay. I felt her touch the back of my hand. "You'll get used to it. You just have to let people go their way, and make sure that you don't lose yours."

Posted by Johnny Elbows in The Apprentice Mask at 21:47