

Apprentice Bound

Ddrill rode along a shabby track heading toward the next village. He was frustrated, as his search for new apprentices had proved futile so far. What did he expect? This was Marinndi. The land of xenophobia and sexism. He sighed.

He went off the track a little to the lake. While his horse was drinking, he looked at his map. The next village was Katran.

Pipe music filtered through the air and he looked up in surprise. It seemed to be coming from near by. He rolled up his map, placed it into his sack and went to investigate the source of the soft and tranquil music.

Fifty paces away, he spotted a girl who appeared no older than twenty. Her long light brown hair fell around her small face. Her eyes were closed as she played the pipe with passion. This was remarkable! It was unheard of in this land for girls to play musical instruments as the men prohibited it. What was even more remarkable was that this girl was wearing leather breeches. An unusual sight indeed.

The girl frowned, faltered playing the tune and stopped. She opened her eyes and appeared startled to see him watching her.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded.

'I am sorry to startle you dear lady. I heard your beautiful music and was enchanted. I am on my way to the village of Katran. Are you from there?'

The girl narrowed her eyes for a moment but then nodded.

'What is your business in the village Sir?'

'My name is Ddrill and I am recruiting for the Order of Enchantment. I am seeking apprentices from throughout this land.'

The girl frowned. 'You look too young to be a wizard. Where's your white hair, wrinkles, and staff?' she asked.

Ddrill laughed. 'I'm a Sorcerer actually and dear lady, I am just shy of my 900th year. Working with the Power increases one's life span. I appear to you as a person with a normal life span would appear at thirty. I still have quite a few centuries to go, Gods willing.'

The girl raised her eyebrows.

'Oh, you want proof.'

She nodded. 'Wouldn't you?'

'Sceptics. They're everywhere! But fair enough. Look toward the water.'

She did so and Ddrill collected his will. He formed an image in his mind and allowed his energy to expand. The water rose in the middle of the lake. It formed in the shape of a pipe and an enchanting melody played from it. Ddrill looked at the girl for a brief moment.

'I believe you,' she whispered whilst mesmerised by the image.

Ddrill let the image play for a moment longer before he waved it away with a motion of his hand.

The girl turned to him. 'My name is Arnah, Sorcerer. Welcome to Katran.'

Ddrill bowed to her. 'I am pleased to make your acquaintance Arnah. Can you tell me if I could find lodgings in Katran?'

'My father owns the only inn in the village, so you shouldn't miss it.'

'You are not coming with me?'

'No Sir. If the Women's Committee see me with you, it would set their already loose tongues flapping and I do not feel like any gossip regarding myself this day. But I shall see you later at the inn. My father's name is Briant. Tell him 'endaxi'. He will understand and look after you.'

Ddrill recognised the word as Amcarian and it meant that things were all right.

'Would your father accept me at the age I am now?'

Arnah's expression was puzzled and this turned into surprise when she saw Ddrill change his appearance to that of an old man.

'Or would he accept me more like this?'

'My father would accept an honest person no matter what his appearance. The other men in the village would expect you to appear the way you do now. It was a misconception I too had until only a few

moments ago. They do not like strange men. I suspect it's a macho territorial phenomenon.'

Ddrill laughed. At her age and in this land, her intelligence was quite a breath of fresh air. Usually the Women's Committees were the only female intelligence acceptable to the males. They received respect due to their husband's rank in the village and they were usually older women. In some towns they were quite powerful. While in others they were harsh.

'Until this evening,' Ddrill said leaving Arnah with her thoughts and her music.

The village residents including Arnah and her father had gathered in the square.

'This town likes to put things on display,' whispered her father.

Arnah smiled. They both knew that Ddrill would have preferred to interview potential members for the Order in private. However, the Mayor of the village had insisted that the interviews be held in public. After all, he had said, it was in the village's interest. He had repeated himself so many times that she suspected that Ddrill had agreed just to shut him up. Ddrill had the power to have made him stop but that would not have looked good for the Order. However tempting or justified it may have been!

A podium had been erected in the centre of the square. Ddrill, the Mayor and the Elders were seated on it.

Ddrill was in the guise of an old man with stark white hair and long flowing beard. He held a staff and his dark blue robes were made of fine silk. He appeared every bit the image of the wise man.

In front of the podium was the latest candidate, Rhon. He was a blonde, tall and muscular twenty-year-old who was the village's favourite son. His looks made him the object of affection for most of the village girls. Arnah however found him to be a bore. He talked about himself in a constant babble, as well as repeating his stories over and over again. In fact, she had poured a jug of ale on him when he tried to grab her bottom one night at the inn. This had caused a fury in the town. How dare 'that' girl treat the village favourite that way!

Arnah looked at her father and was glad he was different to everyone else. His guidance and support had kept her grounded. He encouraged her to be herself and to educate her mind.

Briant had seen the world as a General in the Queen's army in the land of Amcar. He was accepted in the village because of this. It was not often that a General settled in a village and it was seen as an honour for Katran. The villagers lived a life of adventure through his stories. Therefore, they tolerated his daughter and her 'strange' behaviour.

Arnah was different and she relished in the fact. She could read, write and play music. She had an opinion that her father listened to, and she wore clothes she felt comfortable in including breeches.

Her attention was directed to the podium when she heard Ddrill ask Rhon why he wanted to be an apprentice. Rhon looked startled. No doubt he had expected the test to be one of strength and not of the mind. He looked around aware that all eyes of the village were focused on him.

‘To be powerful and defend my village,’ he stated in a proud stance.

There was applause from the other villagers.

‘Is your village in any danger?’ Ddrill asked him once the applause died down.

‘Why, no.’

‘So what would you do with the time whilst waiting for the chance to defend Katran?’

Rhon looked puzzled. Arnah shook her head. Poor Rhon, he was in over his head.

‘Um... I think I would help the other villagers. I could tend all the fields quickly and no-one need work.’

‘What do you think would happen one day when you were not there to wield the Power?’

Rhon shifted his weight from one foot to the other. 'I wouldn't have to worry about that, would I? I would be there.'

'Actually no, you would not always be there. As a member of the Order you would be expected to go on assignments or even attend meetings. So during your absence the villagers would have to return to work and they would resent you for it. All because you would have made them lazy and unappreciative.'

Ddrill looked to the silenced gathering and then back at Rhon.

'It was a noble answer but not the right one. However, you do have potential as one of the Order's Guards. But you would need to be interviewed by them.'

There was a murmur rippling through the crowd but Arnah saw that Rhon walked away with a smile on his face. Being a Guard was more to his liking, she mused.

'They're surprised that their favourite was not chosen as an apprentice,' Arnah heard her father whisper.

The crowd silenced as Ddrill stood up. 'I have been told that I have seen all the candidates but I beg to differ. I would like to see female candidates also.'

This set the crowd buzzing.

'He definitely knows how to get a crowd going,' Briant commented with admiration and humour in his voice.

Arnah looked up at him. Laughter was reflected in his eyes but he kept his face impassive. Arnah smiled at him.

‘What makes you say that. The fact that the Mayor’s face is as red as a beetroot, or that the Elders look as if they have seen a dragon.’

Ddrill stared down at the crowd and they fidgeted. He then faced the Mayor waiting for an argument. The Mayor had tried to debate the issue but the penetrating stare from Ddrill changed his mind. ‘On the morrow, I shall see some female candidates,’ Ddrill stated.

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The next morning, Arnah and Briant found themselves once again at the village square. The crowd was restless. Waiting in front of the podium was a selection of girls chosen by the Elders and the Women’s Committee that were deemed appropriate. This left Arnah out of the selection.

Ddrill walked onto the podium. He looked at the crowd and sat down. For the next hour he questioned the candidates. Arnah was frustrated at the responses the girls gave. She knew it was not their fault but that of the prejudice and the narrow mindedness of the village. She could have been like them if her father had been a different man, she thought.

After questioning the last girl, Ddrill stood up. He looked in Arnah and Briant's direction. 'I have noted that I have not talked to all the village girls. Arnah, please come forward.' he stated.

'But she be a brat,' someone from the crowd yelled.

'She is not one of us,' echoed another.

Briant squeezed Arnah's shoulder and then walked to the podium. The crowd silenced.

'Who speaks against my daughter?' he demanded from the crowd. He waited for a moment.

'I see that you are all too afraid to say anything to my face. I know that you have never accepted her partly because of her behaviour and partly because she was not born in wedlock.'

Briant took a deep breath. 'My daughter is not responsible for the circumstances of her birth. Her mother and I loved each other but war kept us apart. Our daughter was borne from this love. Her mother gave her to me to raise before she passed away, preferring Arnah to have an upbringing in a peaceful land. You have no idea what it is like to live in a war torn country - death, decay, famine, and disease... thus I found Katran.'

Briant sighed. 'I just wanted a proper upbringing for my daughter. I have given her a chance to become her own person and not to be some slave to any man. So she *shall* be a candidate.'

Arnah's heart pounded in her throat. She knew how hard it was for her father to talk about her mother. Tears welled in her eyes and pride filled her soul. The army must have relished having him as a General.

Ddrill looked at her. 'Come here Arnah. I shall like to question you child.'

Arnah walked to the podium. The crowd divided to let her through. They all stared at her. Some with sorrow in their eyes, some with guilt and others with anger.

Once at the podium, she bowed to Ddrill. He in turn nodded and sat down.

'Now Arnah, what would you do if you saw someone who was starving?'

'Help them to help themselves. I would teach them how to tend the land to produce food or to catch their own food.'

Ddrill smiled. 'What if a village was being terrorised by a dragon?'

Arnah took a moment to compose her answer.

'Kill it stupid,' she heard Rhon's voice from the crowd.

Arnah ignored him and looked at Ddrill.

'Unlike some others, I would first try to seek the dragon to ask what reasons might lay behind the attacks. It could be that the dragon is hungry and has nothing to eat, or that the villagers have disturbed

its lair. Then I would decide on the best action. I would not ride in there like some bubbling idiot thinking to be a hero with a dragon's head as the prize.'

She looked at Rhon. 'I do not need to prove I am a hero or macho. I believe in using your brains first. Only if a fight or force is necessary should it be used.'

Ddrill ran his hand through his beard. He appeared to be in thought. 'Very well,' was all he said.

Ddrill closed his eyes for a long moment and took a few deep breaths. The crowd waited, as did Arnah.

'One final thing Arnah,' he commented at last.

He stood up and placed a hand on her forehead. A burst of energy ran through her body. She felt exhilarated and in pain at the same time. Her thoughts became a jumble but this settled after the initial shock. She could hear Ddrill but could not see his lips move. She realised that she was hearing his thoughts, so she concentrated.

Good, you are doing well. Remember to concentrate on my voice.

Look toward the crowd.

Arnah did so. They all stood with their mouths agape. All except her father who smiled at her.

Why do they look at me like that?

Because you are their enlightenment and you shine. Look down at yourself.

Arnah looked down and saw that she did indeed shine. It was as if a green light emanated from her body.

From now on, things in Katran will change. They will see the error of their ways and will try to change to become more forgiving and understanding. It is a great day in this village's history. They have seen the vision of Wisdom in us.

Arnah looked back at Ddrill and realised that he was now the image of how she had met him. His youthful face glowed, as did the clothes he wore.

Is this illusion or real?

It is the Power.

Ddrill broke contact. The light faded and he was once again in the guise of the old man. 'I have found the Order's latest apprentice.'

The crowd were in awe by what they had just witnessed. The sound of clapping rang throughout the square. Arnah could see that it was her father. Then someone else was clapping. It was Mistress Sene from the Women's Committee. The clapping rippled through the crowd and soon the whole village was applauding, including the Mayor. Arnah could not believe it.

'You are the chosen one Arnah,' Ddrill whispered.

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For the next week, Arnah made preparations for her departure. Rhon was also coming along so the Guards could interview him.

Everyone now treated her with respect and she realised that she had always longed for this deep in her heart. She was finally accepted. Even Rhon apologised to her in a mumbling sort of way.

Changes were occurring in the village. The Elders and the Women's Committee combined to make the Circle. Girls were admitted to school and were now given a say about who they should marry. She was ecstatic to see this happen. It had all been overdue.

Her father was supportive. She wanted him to come along but he said that he had been on many adventures in his time. It was now her turn, he said.

'Arnah, I want you to have this.'

Briant held out an amulet. The green stone shone in the sunlight. 'It was your mother's.'

Arnah felt tears run down her face. 'But don't you want to have it as a memento?'

Briant shook his head. 'No, it belongs to you. Your mother wanted you to have it.'

He smiled and embraced her. 'I shall miss you, my incredible child.'

'I shall miss you too, Father.'

As they walked arm in arm through the square, the villagers gathered around. Everyone wanted to wish her luck. Arnah felt overwhelmed, as she knew that she would be missed. Her life had changed forever.

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