

***Daughter of the Storm***  
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Translated by Sean Mark

**Chapter 22**

‘You seem determined.’ Astrit’s look was like a dry well, conveying nothing. We were alone in the attic and it was almost dark; the day was fading, and Leda and Ben would soon be back.

I nodded.

‘You won’t be able to change your mind.’

‘I won’t change my mind.’

In the end, he was the first to move. He walked over to the bed, picked up the bundle he’d tossed onto it when he’d entered the room, and put it in my arms. Then he went to lean against the opposite wall, turning to gaze out the narrow window overlooking the village where the first lights were coming on. I sat down on the mattress, away from him, clutching the bundle, almost cradling it in my arms. For a while we remained in silence, facing in opposite directions. Then I found the strength to get up. I laid out the clothes on the bed, smoothed out the wrinkles on the shirt and examined the patches on the trousers, the fabric that had become frayed at the knees.

‘Don’t look,’ I murmured.

‘I won’t, I promise.’

I pulled off my skirt and slipped out of my shirt. I folded them dutifully, placing the tidy pile on the bed, then told myself it was the last time I’d ever do this, that I’d have to forget all these feminine gestures. I tried to stop my hands shaking.

*It’s nothing. Jump to the other side. That’s all it takes.*

I took the men’s clothes which belonged to him. I put his shirt on. It was loose at the shoulders and stretched at the chest. Over it, I pulled on a rough jumper that smelled of him.

His trousers were too long, and I had to roll them up around my ankles. As I slipped the belt through the loops it struck me that I was too skinny, that there weren’t enough holes in the belt. I stood there frozen and dazed, clutching the belt strap in my hands as if it were a dead snake. Though he wasn’t looking at me, the silence told Astrit realised that I’d stopped getting dressed, that I was standing there motionless and didn’t know what to do.

He turned around and saw me there, caught halfway, like someone lost in a forest who can’t turn back and can only go forward.

‘I’ll take care of it,’ he said, making sure he kept his eyes on my hands, never on my face. ‘We’ll make another hole.’

He approached, circumspect. He took out his knife and pushed its tip through the thick leather. The room was getting darker, and he had to kneel closer to widen the hole. Focusing on the task, his breathing became heavy. I kept my arms stiff at my sides and forced myself not to touch him. As the knife dug into the leather, a cold turmoil churned in my stomach.

I could still reconsider, I told myself. I could ask him to forget all about it, give him back his clothes, pretend it never happened, adjust to the life that was in store for me. So many others had done it before me and they'd all managed, getting used to it quickly; why wasn't I like them?

Then Astrit got up again quickly, and I forced myself to shake off my uncertainty. He stood in front of me as I fastened the belt which now fit snugly. Hurriedly, I untied my braids—cutting them off cleanly would be too violent; I didn't know if I could bear to see them fall to the ground intact. I took the knife out of his hands and hacked at my locks with clumsy jerks, severing them at the roots. The blade hadn't been sharpened and I needed to saw, to persevere, and curse. By the time I'd cut off half my hair, my wrist began to ache. I stopped, my fingers tingling. Astrit gently took the knife out of my hands.

'I haven't changed my mind,' I blurted out. 'My hand hurts. You've got to help me or I'll be here all night.' He didn't budge, so I tried again, more insistently this time. 'It's like shearing a sheep, same thing.'

'It's not the same thing. You're not a sheep.'

'Just do it, Astrit. Please.'

He acquiesced. He was better and faster at it, handled the knife better, tilting the blade at the right angle.

When the last strand of hair fell, I felt exposed, the night air biting at the nape of my neck. I ran my hands over my skull, brushing the hair off my face and neck. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the light brown mass, soft and untidy, that lay on the floor. Someone else would clean it up, it wasn't my job anymore.

*What now? What would be my tasks now, my new responsibilities?*

Astrit stood behind me. 'You've got to choose a new name. You can't keep your girl's name.'

I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I would take my brother's name, or my father's—though Ben would never have put up with that. I didn't know any other men, and I wouldn't have wanted to be like any of them.

'I can give you one.' He placed a hand on my head, burying his fingers in the sparse, untidy tangle. 'There was a wolf, once, up on the mountain. This was before you came. He'd started following me, circling me. Every time I went up there, there he was. I'd hear him in the undergrowth, find his footprints still fresh where I'd set up camp. He wasn't afraid of me, and he never attacked me. I only saw him twice, and only because he wanted to show himself. After that, when you came to the forest, I never saw or heard him again.'

'Maybe he didn't like me.'

'I'd given him a name. In my head. Things are less scary when you call them by name.'

'What did you call him?'

'Mael.'

'That's not an Albanian name. I've never heard it before.'

'I don't remember how it came to me. Maybe I just made it up.'

I repeated the name to myself a few times, raising and lowering my voice. I could see why he had chosen it. It was as quiet as a breath, its syllables combined made it very easy to whisper, to slip through quiet lips; in contrast, it was more difficult to shout, requiring an effort that didn't quite fit the letters that composed it.

‘Would you like me to take it?’

‘If you want to, yes.’

‘Fine by me. I’ll take the wolf’s name.’

It was then that he grabbed me by my shoulders, turning me around. Our mouths collided, our teeth clashed, a fierce connection that had the urgency of a fight, that same desperation. Covering my ears with his hands, he bit my lips with his thin, sharp teeth. He didn't want to hurt me, just kiss me; but we'd given so few kisses in our lifetimes that we didn't know how. We were in a hurry, hungry; the fear that it'd be over too soon or that something would interrupt us made our movements aggressive, furious, fractious. I didn't want to break away from him, I felt that if he was taken out of my arms a piece of me would be missing forever. When he realised that I didn't want to break loose, that I was fighting not to push him away but to hold him close, he calmed down, let himself be held and held me in turn, breathing into my mouth. When he pushed me against the wall, I offered no resistance and pulled him against me. We both knew it could never happen again, that we were drawing a line between before and after, and that line would be definite and uncrossable, and we'd have to live with it for the rest of our lives. And that was when we slowed down, taking the time to kiss each other slowly and silently. Then we broke apart to catch our breath and reality came rushing back. I could feel his ribcage expand against my chest as he licked my moist lips. It was the last time.

He pressed his forehead against mine and closed his eyes. His thumbs sank into my cheeks.

‘Hira, we weren't meant to live like other people.’

That was the last time he would ever call me by my female name.

Over the months and years that followed, my family would sometimes get mixed up, calling me by my old name—habit is a tough root to pull.

But it never happened to Astrit.

I waited to hear them come back in, then went downstairs to join them. With his back to me, Ben was fiddling with the stove. He recognised my gait, and without turning around ordered me to go to the kitchen and help Leda. I didn't move, clearing my throat to force him to look at me.

‘What is it? What do you want?’ Then he saw me and fell silent. Drawing in the air with a sharp breath, he clenched his jaw. Something unfathomable shone in his eyes, a light I'd never seen before. He limped back to the table, leaned against it for support. Then he rubbed his short, rough beard.

‘What's this supposed to mean?’ he demanded, trying to control his astonishment, his disbelief.

‘I refuse to marry Ujmir Plaka. I will not dishonour our family. I vow to remain a virgin, to wear men's clothes, behave like a man, speak and act like a man,’ I said in one breath. I had come up with the oath and memorised it, repeating it in my head through the night. Ben's silence drew on for so long it became unbearable. ‘Will that be enough, father?’ I pressed him.

I thought he would order me to knock it off, change back into my old clothes and get back to the kitchen; we'd cover the mess I'd made of my hair with a handkerchief, and come up with something to explain that abomination to others, to my future husband and his family.

But Ben was eyeing me warily instead. He seemed to be taking the measure of my new appearance, the way I had already begun to live in it.

'You do realise what it is you're doing?'

'Yes. A woman has become a man before. I know it's permitted. I know I can't go back, and I have to live with the decision I've made.'

From the corner of my eye, I made out Leda's silhouette in the kitchen doorway. A grimace curved the corners of her mouth. She held the doorframe with both hands, steadying herself as if during an earthquake. Ben turned towards her. Husband and wife looked at each other without speaking, a secret conversation only they could decipher.

Astrit came down the stairs, making his footsteps louder and heavier to announce himself. He stopped on the last step, in full view.

'Did you know about this?' Ben questioned him. 'Are these clothes yours?'

Astrit nodded. The light of the room rained down on him like a curse, hollowing his face, hardening his already grave and strained expression.

Ben walked towards me slowly. I was afraid he was about to lose his temper and fly off the handle, but I was wrong. He grabbed me by my shoulders and looked me in the eye. Then he placed his hand on my head, grabbing my short tufts and tilting back my head.

'A boy,' he muttered. 'So you want to be a boy, you want to take the oath.' I couldn't tell from the tone of his voice whether he was furious, bewildered or something else. I stood motionless, his hands above me.

'I have already taken the oath. If I must show myself in the square to make it public, like Hilmi Sulaj did, I will.'

'Hilmi Sulaj did it almost forty years ago.'

'And I'm doing it now. Father, I told you I wouldn't accept this marriage. But I do not wish to bring you dishonour.'

*Perhaps he'll beat me. The moment his hand hits me I'll know I'm still a female, that he doesn't accept me and will never respect me.*

Ben let go of me. He withdrew and ran a hand over his eyes, over his forehead.

'Is this what you want?' he asked. 'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure.' I was astonished by how firm and deep and grave my voice sounded, how casually I'd begun to refer to myself in the masculine. Ben nodded several times.

'So be it. Tomorrow I will speak to Ujmir Plaka. I will convey your decision to him, and we will rescind our deal. Do you already have a name?'

'Mael.'

'Mael. Son. It is an honour to have you at home.' He leaned his forehead against mine and squeezed my left shoulder, the way men greeted each other in the North.

'*Mirë se vjen burre,*' he murmured. Welcome, man.

His tone hadn't changed from when he'd asked me if I was sure about taking the oath. But only then did I realise what it was. It was neither anger nor dismay.

It was the wild, unexpected, barely restrained joy of being able to be the father of a male, the kind of man everyone would respect.

Ben had taken me seriously, had listened to me.

His heart was bursting with pride.

We sat on the *shilte*, cross-legged the way men do, and I faced Ben without fear. Leda brought out a bottle and three glasses; my glass was filled and I drank it down. The raki burned my throat, a healing poison.

I was offered a smoke. I smoked, hiding my cough and nausea. Astrit gazed at me hungrily.

We talked for a long time between men—a heated conversation between Uncle Ben and I about my duties, what I would have to do, what I would have to learn, what it meant to be a son and not a daughter. By the time Leda brought out another bottle, my head was spinning. I'd never drunk before in my life.

'You'll get used to it,' Ben said, hiding his smile under a frown. 'With a little practice, you'll get to like it. No man has ever lived who doesn't like raki.'

Leda, who had been standing behind me, reached out to touch me. I felt her soft fingers creep reluctantly over my badly shaven head. She hastily withdrew them and slipped the hand she'd touched me with into her pocket. When I looked at her, she lowered her head, moved perhaps, or saddened or disappointed. When she retreated to the kitchen, I had to suppress the impulse I had to follow her, to go help her. That was no longer my responsibility.

The kitchen was now a forbidden territory, out of bounds to me.

Many hours later, in the dead of night, the bottles on the table were empty and we were exhausted. Ben said we should inform the village of what had happened in the Hasani *kulla*. Astrit got up off the *qilim*. Without saying a word, he picked up the rifle hanging on the wall. He looked at me, awaiting my nod.

'Go,' I said. 'Let everyone know.'

He stepped out into the darkness, leaving the door open.

A few seconds later, in the silence of the mountains, the shot rang out.

Astrit had announced the birth of a boy.