

The Secrets of Alaburg



GREG WALTERS

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MARKET DAY

Sleepy, his face frozen red from the cold, Bryn was struggling to get the large bundles off Reven, his horse. Once he was done, out of breath, he unknotted the piles of animal skins, throwing them on the wooden counter of his market stand. Bryn was a slim, slightly built boy, a bit small for his sixteen years, with a thin, kind face and large, blue-green eyes. He was apprenticed to Gerald, the gamekeeper, with whom he lived. Over the winter, they would have to buy enough grain, beer, clothes, and other provisions to last the next few months with whatever Bryn was going to earn today from the skins. Soon, it would grow too cold to go hunting in the forests.

Bryn set up his stand as usual. He was hot from all the work, and sweat trickled down his face. His warm clothes, necessary in the forest, had become too bulky and were slowing him down. He hurriedly pulled off his thick-padded gloves and his fur cap. Dark blond hair fell over his face, which he kept brushing back with a flick of his hand.

Bryn arranged the skins on his counter—the snow fox skins on the far left, the rare red deer skins next to them, then the wild boar, roebuck, and rabbit skins, and, finally, the bearskin. He had been carrying that heavy skin to and from the village for months now, but no one had shown any interest.

Trade on the weekly market was getting worse and worse, especially in freezing temperatures like today. Only a few merchants from Toronham or Gerundfeld now made the long journey to Sefal to buy skins, precious stones, or forest herbs.

After several groups of merchants had been attacked in recent months in the thick, isolated forest below the Arell Mountains, many were now afraid to travel so far north.

Bryn finished setting up and stood behind the counter. With few customers about, he decided to take a look around the marketplace. Nearby, Marel had just finished setting up his stand and was busy tying bunches of herbs to the canopy. In his shack, Hondry, the village butcher, after laying out a long string of sausages and several large hams, rubbed his fat belly and

stared about, looking grumpier than usual. Across the way, several village women piled rolls of dyed, handwoven fabrics on wooden tables, the colors an odd contrast to the rest of the snow-covered scene. To his side, Krell, the old hermit, tried to sell the shimmering, bright stones he had collected from the Heling River. Bryn, however, was more interested in the wooden building diagonally behind him. Zeffi's Roasted Nuts, said the bright-colored painted letters. From its chimney, smoke wafted toward Bryn, thick with the delicious smell of roasting candied hazelnuts.

I wonder if she will be there today.

Bryn had not been able to stop thinking of the dark-haired girl he'd first set eyes on four weeks ago.

His feelings left him confused. He rarely thought of girls. He never understood why Gerald talked so much to Marielle, who owned the Laughing Boar Inn, why she blushed so often in his company, why his frugal master left her such generous tips. Some of the older boys from the village were always talking about girls, especially how they looked, or making crude jokes about them that Bryn didn't understand. That kind of talk had always bored him. Wasn't it more interesting to talk about a new bow or hunting? Nonetheless, after encountering the young shop assistant in Zeffi's roastery, Bryn slowly realized that girls were more interesting than he'd thought.

Though she hadn't been there the last few weeks, every market day, Bryn would sneak around Zeffi's lopsided old hut, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. She only turned up on market days from time to time, he learned. But that didn't dampen his excitement, and now he made his way to the roastery, furtively glancing inside.

"We're still closed," a beautiful female voice said from the rear of the hut. "The sugar's not hot enough yet. Come back in half an hour."

As she came closer, Bryn saw the dark-haired girl was maybe two or three years older than him.

It was her. She was in Sefal again, finally.

"Should I tell you when it's time?" she asked Bryn, smiling.

He couldn't speak, startled by her sudden appearance. He noticed how hot his head was getting. *Oh no, I'm blushing*, he thought, embarrassed.

"Can't you talk?" she asked him kindly.

"Ah ... er ... yes."

"Well, you don't talk much, but you're not dumb," she said, smiling. "My name is Drena. I'm Zeffi's niece from Toronham. Sometimes I help out here and my uncle pays me a few guilders—but my mother doesn't like it when I travel with the other merchants because of all the robberies in the last months. Mothers, you know ..." She rolled her beautiful brown eyes. "It's nice to meet someone who isn't a bad-tempered merchant or one of those common mercenaries or soldiers. What's your name?"

Her smile was the most enchanting one Bryn had ever seen.

"Bryn," he said, still confused that such a beautiful creature would even speak to someone like him.

"Hello, Bryn," she said, offering him her hand. As if in a trance, he reached out and held it. Her skin was incredibly soft and warm. "Nice to meet you. You're the one who sells the skins over there, aren't you?"

She knows who I am.

Bryn's thoughts began to swirl, and he almost forgot to answer. "Um ... yes ... yes." She chuckled softly to herself. "Well, Bryn, it was nice chatting with you. I have to go

now or the sugar will burn. Come back around noon, and I'll give you some candied hazelnuts when Zeffi's not looking." She winked at him and turned away, dark hair swirling behind her, and disappeared into the back.

He stood there for a while, almost unaware she had gone. He slowly walked back to his stand, where he was forced to shake off his shock so he could haggle with customers over the price of his skins.

Bryn was having a good day at the market. He'd already sold several rabbit and fox skins, but the massive bearskin still sat there. The hazy winter sun was already high overhead, and Bryn wondered if he should accept Drena's invitation. Her beautiful name constantly echoed in his head. He was daydreaming about casually walking over to Zeffi's place and what he might say to her when suddenly, someone spoke and wrenched him out of his thoughts.

"Are you ssselling these ssskins here?" asked a hoarse voice.

Bryn had a hard time understanding the man's lisps and rattles. He was tall and wrapped in a black cape, with a hood cast so low over his face that he resembled a shadow. At his side dangled a large sword. And when he moved, Bryn could hear the clinking of what sounded like chainmail under his heavy coat.

"Yes, I am. How can I help you, sir?" Bryn asked, more confidently than he felt.

The stranger ran his black-gloved fingers over the display, prodding at the different skins.

"What do you want for the bearskin?" he asked abruptly.

Bryn sensed a good deal and set the price extra high for a reasonable return after the inevitable haggling. "Twenty-five guilders!"

That was a fortune, but bearskins were rare. Hardly anyone climbed that high up the mountains to even get near the fearsome creatures, let alone hunt them. Gerald was the only one in the valley who dared. Bryn hoped the stranger would not walk away.

"That'sss a lot for a sssingle bearssskin! I'll give you twenty guilderssss, lad—and not a penny more!"

That was almost double what Bryn was expecting. "Deal!"

"Wrap it up for me! I have other thingsss to do. I'll pick it up shortly before the market clossses."

Bryn took a deep breath, and just as he was about to argue he couldn't reserve the bearskin all day, the stranger said, "Here'sss ten guilderssss as a depossit. I'll give you the ressst later. Have we an agreement, lad?"

Bryn nodded, took the money, and carefully counted the silver coins.

"So we'll sssee each other in a few hoursss, lad. I hope I can trussst you," the stranger said and disappeared into the crowd.

Twenty guilders!

Bryn couldn't believe it. Gerald would be proud of him. Now they had more than enough money to see them through the rest of winter. With a huge grin plastered across his face, Bryn decided it was an excellent time to visit Drena.

As he approached the roastery, Zeffi's old, weather-beaten face suddenly appeared in front of him.

"What are you doing here, Bryn? You never have any money, and you certainly won't get anything here for free. So, what do you want?"

Somewhat taken aback, Bryn stopped, but to his amazement, he said boldly, "I've come to see Drena, if you must know."

The old nut seller raised an eyebrow. "She's not here. She left late this morning. The first blizzard of winter's about to hit, and I sent the girl off with the first caravan so she'll be back in Toronham tonight. What did you want with her?" he asked bitterly.

Bryn's heart sunk. *She's gone?* His mind began to race. He'd only just seen Drena again after so long—she'd even talked to him—and now she was gone again.

"I just wanted to talk to her, that's all," he said sadly.

"Oh, you want to talk, eh?" Zeffi said, lowering his voice menacingly. "I know what lads like you, who spend most of the year alone in the woods, want. Well, you can't have it! Get that right out of your head, Bryn! She's too old for you anyway. What would Drena want with the

likes of you?" He snickered viciously. "Besides, she'll be coming here even less now the winterstorms have arrived. She'll stay in Toronham with her mother. The journey's too dangerous in all that ice and snow, even without these attacks."

He turned to the next customer as if Bryn had ceased to exist.

Hopeless, Bryn returned to his stand. *When will I see Drena again?* A peculiar, sad feeling crept upon him. Strangely enough, he'd never considered the age difference between them. Why would he? That didn't matter to him.

Over the next few hours, with his thoughts elsewhere, Bryn let himself be taken advantage of by several customers while haggling over money. All he could think about was the beautiful Drena. Thankfully, business had been sluggish since noon, and the twenty guilders for the bearskin were more than enough to make up for those poorly negotiated sales.

FOOLHARDY

The day was drawing to a close, and it had become much colder. The sunset lit up the storm clouds filling the sky. It would start to snow soon; Bryn caught that telltale metallic scent in the air. Most of the local traders had already packed up and left, leaving only a few people wandering around. Bryn started to pack his things on the back of his loyal friend, Reven. He should have gone home long ago. The journey back to the log cabin was long and dangerous in the dark— even without a blizzard. But he was waiting for the stranger who'd given him the deposit for the bearskin.

Time passed, and Bryn became more and more impatient. He was also thinking of Drena, cursing himself for not getting to know her sooner. He scanned the growing darkness around him for the stranger. He didn't want to take the ten guilders and not give the man a chance to return and pay the rest of it.

Then, it began to snow. Bryn took a moment, then decided to leave the bearskin at the Laughing Boar Inn. Everyone, sooner or later, ended up there anyway.

"Come on, Reven, old fella," he said. His breath hung in the air. "Let's get moving."

He led Reven across the empty market to the Laughing Boar, through the thin layer of snow that had already blanketed the village. He tugged Reven's reins to quicken his pace. He then tethered the grey gelding to the railing and took the bundled-up bearskin.

As he stepped inside, the heat and noise hit him immediately. He pushed his way through the crowd; the air was stuffy with smoke and spilled beer—he couldn't wait to get out. Dodging several waitresses carrying large mugs of sloshing beer, he eventually made it to the long bar.

Marielle, the broad-shouldered blond woman standing behind it, kept an eye on the lively crowd as she washed glasses.

"Hello, Bryn! What are you still doing here?" she asked, flopping her cloth down on the bar. "It's so late. And this weather's not going to get any better!"

"Hi, Marielle," Bryn replied. "Well, I was waiting for a customer who paid a deposit on this bearskin, but he didn't come back."

"Trustworthy as ever," she told him, smiling.

"Can I leave the bearskin with you? It could be one of your guests, and he might ask after me. If he does, could you give this to him if he gives you ten guilders for it? And you can keep one guilder as commission."

Marielle laughed. "You think I'd accept money from you? Who's the one who takes care of my ponies if they've been out in the snow too long? Or when Ramny's been lazy, who's always emptying the stale water in the trough? Forget it! One hand washes the other, as they say. I'm glad to return a favor for once. Besides, how could I refuse Gerald's apprentice," she said with a wink Bryn did not quite understand.

"Thank you ..." he said, embarrassed by her praise. He lifted the large skin bundled up with twine up onto the bar.

"What did he look like?" Marielle asked, stowing it behind the counter.

"I can't say for sure, but he was tall, and he was armed. Maybe he's one of the guards? Guarding the traveling merchants? I remember he wore a dark cloak—but I suppose many of them wear one of those."

"I'll do my best to finish this business for you, Bryn. Not to worry." As Bryn moved toward the exit, she asked, "Are you sure you want to go out there again?" They say it's getting worse by the minute. All my rooms are now occupied, but I don't mind if you sleep in the taproom tonight. At least it's warm there. You may have to wait some time before you can lie down though. Or at least until most of the guests are in bed."

Bryn thought about it, eyeing the raucous crowd. The prospect of waiting for hours for the last drunkards to leave only to sleep on the floor made his decision pretty easy. He'd sooner sleep in his bed tonight. Besides, he knew Gerald would worry if he didn't come

home. "Thanks for the offer, Marielle, but you know, there's nothing like sleeping in your own bed. And this little bit of snow is nothing to an apprentice hunter!" He smiled.

"All right then," she replied, unknotting her brows. "Have a safe journey, take care out there, and give Gerald my regards. Tell him to come and see me again sometime! Ok?"

Bryn nodded his agreement and stepped outside. The village was covered in thick layers of snow, and the cold winds were forcing it into drifts. Bryn ran over to Reven and untied him. The daylight was all but gone, but the blizzard was getting worse. He pulled his woolen cloak tight around him and cursed himself for being so careless. He leaped into the saddle, shouting to Reven, "We have to go now—and go fast!"

Reven took off and, soon, the village was far behind them and Bryn could see the darkening forest ahead. He yelled to Reven to keep going as fast as he could, though Bryn was sure he already understood.

A DANGEROUS WAY HOME

Bryn and Reven labored through the ever-increasing snowdrifts. The tops of the Arell Mountains were no longer visible, and the path was almost impossible to follow. Even so, the old gelding trotted toward the cabin, looking forward to his warm stable and a feed of oats. Having lost his bearings in the blinding snow, Bryn could only rely on Reven to get him home safely. In his mind, he could see the outline of the log cabin in the distance. He imagined the glow of the candlelight coming through the front window and the faint, flickering golden shadows from the fire.

Damned blizzard! He thought again about how stupid he'd been to leave the market so late. But the prospect of earning twenty guilders this close to winter was too tempting, and besides, he didn't want anyone to accuse him of stealing.

Despite his predicament, his thoughts kept drifting back to Drena—how lovely she was and why he hadn't spoken to her before. Now, he had to wait until next spring. And Zeffi wasn't at all enthusiastic about his interest in Drena. Bryn sighed. *Who knows if she will even come back?*

His thoughts then turned to Gerald. How was he going to explain why he sold some of their best fur skins at such low prices? He couldn't tell him that the fur wholesalers from Gerundfeld and Toronham had preyed on his state of mind after discovering Drena had left. Even the ten guilders for the bearskin was a low price. They'd still have those ten if the stranger failed to pay the rest, but Bryn also knew Gerald would not touch it until it was clear who owned it. In any case, Gerald would want to know why he didn't bring more guilders back today. Had he forgotten how rare good furs had become?

Bryn knew this only too well. In the last months, they'd seen less and less game in the forest; even in the foothills of the Arell Mountains, there were fewer animals. Neither Gerald nor anyone else could explain it. Somehow, the animals were disappearing.

The gelding stumbled and jolted Bryn out of his anxious thoughts. Only now did he notice how cold he was. His hands felt numb. He was almost unable to hold the harness and

couldn't feel his feet at all. It was so dark he could hardly see Reven's head. The snow that whipped his face also drenched his cloak and the clothes underneath, and the icy gusts of wind were making it hard to stay on his horse.

Bryn started to come to his senses and looked around. Impenetrable darkness surrounded him and made him tremble more than the cold. He tried to suppress the panic rising inside him, but the forest around him made it seem like it was getting darker and darker.

Where am I? He hadn't asked himself that question for years. He and Gerald knew the valley well. They'd traveled through it hundreds of times and were experienced trackers known for their sense of direction. But this night was different. Bryn felt as if *something* was stopping him from returning home. Not only did the wind and cold conspire against him, but his courage also seemed to have deserted him.

Bryn tried to shake off his nervousness and fear. How could he be lost? After all, he was the apprentice of the greatest hunter in the Arell Mountains. A bit of darkness and cold couldn't harm him. He pulled Reven to a stop, got off, and started jumping up and down and clapping his wet hands to regain some feeling. Then he whooped and hollered as loud as he could, hoping the noise would scare off any danger that might be lurking in the darkness.

Bryn tried to orient himself. *Where the hell am I?* He went over everything he'd learned from years of hunting with Gerald. He knew how to pinpoint his location by the stars, but they were hiding behind the clouds. He knew how to study the mountain tops and the moss on trees to work out the direction of the wind, but the peaks were no longer recognizable, and the moss was now buried under a thick layer of ice. Nothing gave him any information about where he was.

Impenetrable darkness surrounded him. *I'm alone out here.* Bryn felt sick at the thought. He wheeled around in all directions, his muscles straining, trying to recognize something. Then he stopped and tried to listen for any sound, look for any movement. But all he heard was the wind slipping through the leaves of the tall, shadowed forest.

The ancient forest of the Arell Valley was the largest closed-canopy forest in the known world. He and Gerald would often spend days, sometimes weeks, out there, hunting. To Bryn, it had always seemed endless. The upper limit of the forest was near the top of the mountains.

From there, the steep, barren peaks were even more impossible to get to than a trek through the wood itself. Bryn's only hope was Reven. The old gelding knew the way home. For many years, he had been making the journey from the market back to his stable behind the cabin. The faithful animal could do it; he was sure of that. Bryn heaved his foot into the stirrup and reached for the reins to swing himself into the saddle, throwing a final, darting glance around him. As he turned to mount Reven, he thought he saw something red out of the corner of his eye.

What was that? Something glowing? Like two embers—red, like the fresh blood from a slain boar. Helplessness and panic welled up in him as he strained his eyes against the darkness. *Something is not right.* Never had he seen anything like this in the valley. *Or did I only imagine it?*

Despite the cold, he began to sweat. He pulled his hunting knife from the leather sheath at his side. He felt the weight of it in his hand and turned for a closer look at the spot where he thought he'd seen the apparition. Nothing there.

"Did you see anything, old fella?" he asked, patting the horse's neck. "Come on then, take me home!"

Reven scraped his hoof across the frozen ground as if he couldn't wait to return to his stable. As Bryn tried to mount, he heard a blood-curdling whinny. The horse reared up and leaped forward, throwing Bryn to the ground. Reven was a calm, placid creature, but something had made him crazy with fear, and he broke into gallop.

Bryn, his foot still caught in the stirrup, was dragged along, over every bump, at break-neck speed. With the reins still in his hand, he pulled himself up, out of the way of the frozen, rock-hard ground. But his back had been severely beaten, and he wasn't sure how

long he could hang onto the side of the animal like this. The ground had shredded some of his clothing, which flapped in the wind. He felt the cold, wet snow penetrate every part of his body. Reven raced through the darkness. Bryn never knew the old horse could gallop at such a speed.

Bryn clawed at the leather reins with numb fingers—he was slipping. Again, his back slammed into the ground. He couldn't hold on any longer, and he could see Reven was still panic-stricken and not likely to settle. Bryn heaved himself up once more and twisted his foot out of the stirrup, his frozen hands letting go of the reins. He tumbled forward over the ground and came to rest with his face buried deep in the snow. He looked up, wiping the snow from his eyes in time to see his only hope of getting home vanish.

Reven disappeared into the night.

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