

WOLF'S BARD

By Adele Treskillard

CHAPTER ONE

I took my sword from Grandma's withered hands. In the lantern-lit tent before me, I heard my younger cousins still cavorting.

"And if I'm killed, Grandma, keep a close eye and don't let the spirits get into me."

"Oh, I won't. I wouldn't!" she whispered, voice dry and quavery. The very idea. I *knew* it grossed her out.

"And, um, bury me with my brown boots, so I can't get bloody-footed on the journey west."

"Tiwy! You're making me cry."

Time to lighten the mood.

I swung the blade about in the night air and beheaded several illusionary foes, sticking my tongue out the side of my mouth and grinning. "And don't let the animals eat me. Either."

Grandma's eyes grew big and her face crinkled. "You rogue!"

"My last words to my esteemed sister are that she must marry Cnaef, for he is the best man I know – and tell Grandpa that getting all the girls to look at me killed me. Farewell, and don't fret when I'm gone. For I will always land on the side of mischief."

Stifling a sob, Grandma clutched my shoulder and laid her aged head onto my chest. Her hair shone like silver in the light of the full moon.

I took up and kissed her bony hand and then wrapped her in my

arms. The smoky scent of roast deer and rosemary filled my nostrils. After a moment, I resolutely turned about and strode around our fire, over the pile of wood, and down the hill towards the center of the camp. The lights ahead glittered lamp-like in the darkness and bitter wind whipped my face.

If I could win the Sword Contest of the Gwëres, I knew I'd be looked on as a full Gwëre. And girls would finally see past my swarthy to behold a hero.

And, more importantly—of course—I could free my second cousin, a Thirl who was slave to the King, the Miihtern of Gwëres. Getting the sword that killed all the Thirl Kings would be nice, too. I might just break it for kicks.

Letting out a deep breath of frosty air, I wandered onto the main path. Thousands of white tents surrounded me, for many had come for the contest this year. People sat around their fires singing and laughing. Few noted my passing.

Up ahead loomed the big green tent to which I'd been ordered to report. In the light of the torches burning about it, I made out heavy, black designs sewn onto the outside, around the rim of its roof and framing the doorway. They depicted Gwëre heroes trampling unarmed and naked enemies who sported War-Hair, or in Thirl, 'gruad-gwildoz'. The previous inhabitants of Kyrnow.

Some *rotten* way to display history.

I, however, am not the slightest *bit* a defenseless Thirl. When I win this and stand on the Hill of Victory at dawn, that fact shall occur to their rather unenlightened minds.

I bit my lip, drew in a breath, put my hand on the door-flap—then I pulled it aside and ushered myself within.

Brightness filled my eyes and heat stifled me. The amount of Gwëres inside nearly burst the tent's seams. It reeked of sweat. I was the last of my group to arrive. I caught sight of Cnaef and shoved through to join him. Right ahead of us, another door led out into the fighting area beyond.

Cnaef whirled to meet me, face flushed and green eyes bright. His

red hair stood out on every side from the shearing I'd given it yesterday. He mouthed something I couldn't hear over the hubbub.

Placing himself beside my ear, Cnaef roared lustily into it. "Tiwyr! Why the hókk cantchu show up on time? We had to *wait* for you! We might not make the cut!"

I grinned and fisted Cnaef in the shoulder. He staggered and fell backwards into Nistan.

Shouting a curse, Nistan spun and glared at us. His light-colored brows daggered downwards. He punched Cnaef back to me.

Cnaef whipped around and howled at Nistan, mouth a circle of rage.

Sneering, Nistan turned his handsome countenance away and continued conversation with his oh-so Gwëre friends. Likely he was discussing the scores of female hearts he had tinkered with. Or how many more beauties would fall in line for him after he won the Sword Contest.

I puckered my face sourly and averted my gaze to the beaten grass below. Being around Nistan twisted my innards because we looked like twins. So despicable that he resembled me. The joke was, that if I changed my hair color and got blue eyes, I could steal every girl who loved him in the twelve Búresk villages.

I didn't want to do that, though. If I could just have *one* of his girls...

In front of me the crowd slowly filtered through identification by the regional chiefs and the Inspector. The Miihtern's Warchief, Uasond, stood by watching all. As the warriors were approved, they walked out the other door to the fighting arena.

"Catch!" Cnaef said, flipping my heavy vambraces at me. He threw my metal-spiked gauntlets in my face.

"Thank you," I howled back, leering. "Guess what? I am going to duke Nistan in these."

Ka-bam! That would be fun.

I looked round just in time to see Nistan and his friends disappearing through the door. Too late to treat him to my fist. I

trotted after Cnaef and stared at Uasond. The man had huge arms and ring-mail armor. His blond hair stood up from his head in resined spikes and his blue eyes glittered coldly.

Only twice had I seen Uasond before. Never this close. It was said that he was the murderer of countless men, chief thief of wives to feed the Miihtern's insatiable appetite. Therefore, he had likely been the demise of my Thirl father. And likely he knew where my parents were buried.

Maybe I'll just konk him on the head as I go by...

Our group vanished out the tent's door. The old Búresk chief beckoned and I followed Cnaef to stand before the tall Inspector. He fixed his blue eyes irately on me and darted a glance to my chief. Such a fine Gwëre he was, he couldn't even stand straight; his Gwërehood must have weighed down on his soul unmercifully.

I flexed my gauntlets and wondered if hitting the Warchief would get me tortured or not. They'd execute me, for sure.

"I'm Cnaef, this is Tiwyr," Cnaef shouted, pointing to me. "We're both two and twenty, and we're from the Gwaed clan in Búresk. We trained for eight years with the sword and two with the longbow."

The Búresk chief swept his eyes over us and nodded to the Inspector. "Pass. These two look for a warband. They'd make good warriors."

"Wait," the Inspector said, leaning forward. He narrowed his eyes at me. "This one is, um, Thirl? We don't allow Thirl men to compete. Surely you heard the rules this—"

Letting loose a cry of strangled wrath, I socked him in the face. He flew backwards out the door with a gasp.

I screamed downwards. "I am a *Gwëre!* Say that again and I'll rip off your head! Your *head!*"

The Inspector crawled back into the tent cross-eyed, his face a mask of pain. Uasond was shouting with laughter and my chief's mouth hung wide open.

"How *dare* you." The Inspector wobbled to his feet. He glowered hatefully at me.

With a moan, Cnaef covered his face to hide sudden tears.
Shivering twitches afflicted his back and arms.

I... just... did it. No more chances of survival, man. Prepare for the torture. Hókk-awa, did I *do it*.

It's so sad. I didn't even get the right one.

"Hókk!" Uasond squinted with laughter. "That was so good! I never saw a more deuce blow!"

I gazed back into Uasond's eyes, sweating terror. My hands shook like my grandpa's antler dice.

"You're... Gwëre?" Uasond said, convulsing helplessly. "You're Gwëre? Hókk-awa! I say you pass! Get the hókk into the contest and I'll keep my wounded swéir in check."

I grabbed Cnaef and tore through the door of the tent, forbearing to deal a parting blow to my new friend. Lucky Uasond. Next time, I might not be so merciful.

Cold air enfolded me and chilled off my prolific sweat. Blinking, I thrust through to the edge of the chattering crowd with Cnaef close behind.

An overgrown stone wall closed us in and before us stretched a broad torch-lit area for the coming duels. My boots sank into luxurious moss. Thirty-two ox hides lay staked onto the ground, each ringed by a light ditch. I could almost see myself standing on one, sword up and ready.

"Such an opportunity," I murmured to Cnaef. "I'll win all seven fights. Even if I can't stand by morning."

Cnaef blew out his breath in a white cloud of distaste. "Funny, cause that's not happening to *me*. I'll surrender before accruing damage, and you should too, Tiwyr."

"To impress my sis, though, you must suffer at least one wound."

My friend snickered and drew his sword. He laid its edge against his arm, bright eyes laughing. "I can do it now, if you want, and skip out of here as is. I'll just go kick the wall down, or smack the Inspector and dash through the tent."

"No. I'd rather you get Uasond this time."

He tried to throw me down. I howled and ducked away with a punch, skipping backwards into the throng. Uasond walked by a stone's throw away and circled to stand before us all. The ring-mail covering his armor gleamed like fire in the torchlight.

Silence fell over the crowd. An energy of anticipation pulsed through our veins.

"Welcome," Uasond declared, "to the Sword Contest of the Gwëres! If you've come this far, congratulations! You're on track for breathtaking opportunities. Those who make it to the top will have their dreams come true."

I smirked back at him, knowing I'd be the happy fellow.

"Each of you," Uasond shouted, "must remember to wait your turn tonight. Say you're a bit wounded. You may leave, but if you do, you won't get back in. There are guards at the exit now and you will not be re-admitted. Understood?"

Cnaef rolled his eyes and bit his lip.

"Losers who throw tantrums will be barred from re-entry for three years. So take your lumps like a man and step down. We don't care if you only made a *simple*, simple mistake and you could've won. You didn't! Learn your stuff better and come back next year!"

I shifted uncomfortably, gripping my sword. I didn't *want* to come back next year, and anyway, my case was unique; they might not let me in again. And who could beat me? Very few, probably. I was better than Nistan himself, which said a lot.

Plus, I'd trained for eight years... ages and ages, more like.

"You are disqualified," Uasond expounded, stepping onto an ox hide, "if you set both feet outside the ring. One foot is considered *running away*. In your fighting, anything goes. No rules, period. The fight is over when the other man is senseless, surrendered, dead or outside the ring. Winners will remain on their ox-hide, and losers go stand to the left. Come forward, and take your places!"

Cnaef and I rushed out onto the ox hides with a hundred men behind us. We grinned as our ways parted. Each hide found two occupants and those not included in the first set of combats fell back to

watch.

I got a man as tall as myself whom I'd never laid eyes on before. A scowl split his ugly face. He held his sword out at the ready and snarled loudly.

"Begin!" Uasond shouted. "Shyness kills!"

A burst of energy roared through my head. I knew precisely what to do to the fool.

He seized the initiative and lifted his blade high for an over-hew, opening his mouth in a yell.

As he did so I leaped in on the right and slammed his sword's flat with my edge, spinning him off to the left side. Laughing delightedly, I kicked him from behind and keeled him down. I leaped forward onto him. Poking him in the back of his neck with my sword's point, I listened to him scream his rage into the dusty ox hide.

"Quickness counts." I booted him outside the ring. "Sorry, try again next year. And be... um, trickier. I saw your sword coming a mile away."

I gazed around at the other fights. Nistan was flopping on the ground like a fish beside me, getting a sword-pommeling from a near-giant. The giant straddled him like some idiot. Madly struggling, Nistan brought up both knees and — and —

I blew out a breath and looked round for Cnaef. That giant was finished.

Seven hides to my left, Cnaef and Bloúrkr stood conversing while Cnaef's sword rested against Bloúrkr's neck. They howled with laughter and Bloúrkr pressed a finger to his lips, lifting his brow dramatically. His muscular form shimmered with ring-sewn armor. Since Bloúrkr's father was chief of the Búresk, he had everything, and knew everything too. Everything funny, that is.

The daft loons should've fought someone other than themselves.

Withdrawing his sword, Cnaef bowed and gestured for Bloúrkr to exit.

After a moment or so, the fights had finished. We the winners grouped together and walked to the right end of the enclosure, where

we bided our time as the next round played out.

“Not wounded yet,” Cnaef said, dancing a circle around me. “Did you know what Bloúrkr said? Last year, two of those who got to the last few fights disappeared, and the rest of the fellows ended up in the Sklise warband. The guy who won wasn’t in the contest at all.”

I furrowed my forehead. “That’s, um, impossible.”

“No but it *is* possible,” Cnaef insisted. “I’ll tell you what I saw last year when you were sick. There were eight men left, and they evacuated everyone else and brought in half the Míihtern’s warband. Who knows *what* happened.”

“True as daylight, Cnaef. You believe Bloúrkr every time.”

Cnaef huffed. “He’d know.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, if you say so.”

Out we walked to meet the winners of the last round. We sauntered in and Uasond assigned each of us places. I curled my lip at the blood sprinkled over my hide and wondered who my opponent had wounded and how he’d done it.

My foe’s blue eyes fixed on me coldly and his bloody sword swiveled my direction. A pure Gwëre, from the curly top of his blond head to the toe of his ragged boot. His armor consisted of mere gauntlets and vambraces, so we were pretty even on that score.

I’ll just spank him like the last guy. That’ll teach him to stab people.

He charged me. Uasond hadn’t even called *start* yet.

I stepped smoothly away and brought my sword down over his, sweeping it aside and tearing my blade over his arms. He wheeled away with a yelp and struck at me from the right. I halted his blow, moved forward and spun to the side. I slammed my arm into his neck and pushed him in a backward flip over my leg.

“I am Tiwyr!” I shouted, pinning his sword under my boot and threatening his face with my blade. “I am a Gwëre! Thrash me who can, ‘cause I am a *man!*”

He cursed loudly and released his sword, fine face red. “Let me up, son of a hókk!”

Snatching away his sword, I allowed him to rise. I ushered him outside the ring and then gave it back to him. Off he strode blowing huge breaths of frosty air.

I turned to watch the combats still in progress. Nistan was fighting Cnaef two ox-hides away.

Cnaef, the idiot! Not *Nistan!*

I howled my frustration to the stars and looked on in terror. Nistan had an edge on Cnaef, because Cnaef could never remember—at least, not when excited about anything—to meet hard blows softly. As a consequence, his strokes flew off to the side under Nistan's tricky sword. Which left him wide open. Which Nistan had taken advantage of twice already. Blood simmered out of a puncture in Cnaef's leg and a gash on his shoulder.

How *could* Nistan?

Face flushed and ruddy as his hair, Cnaef jerked his blade twice against Nistan's and tried to spin him backwards. Nistan gave way and whipped his blade down forward over Cnaef's. He thrust at my friend's unarmored chest.

The tip pressed in and began to sink through Cnaef's leather sark.

I screamed. I leaped off the ox-hide and swam through the air, blind with fear. Cnaef's voice rang out in agony and panic.

If he kills Cnaef, I'll snap Nistan's wretched neck!

Cnaef tumbled back with a shout, barely avoiding a skewering. He flung his sword down and ducked away from Nistan's blade. "No, I surrender, I don't want to die!"

Nistan let the sword-point hover before Cnaef's face. "Be careful *Rua'dri*, or we'll beat you the same way we smashed Tiwyr up. You'd better hang out a bit less with that Thirl girl, too. Unless she's your slave?"

Shaking with rage, I halted behind Nistan. If his voice was a little nicer, it might've sounded like a vulture's. Because he loved picking my life dry.

"No," Cnaef whispered. He darted a glance to me. "She's my best friend, like Tiwyr is."

Pressing the tip of his sword between Cnaef's lips, Nistan swiftly delivered a cut to both sides of his mouth. "Say that again?"

Cnaef wept and put his hands over his mouth. On his chest, his wound had already soaked his sark in blood. I had to act *now*, or he would bleed to death.

Extending my sword, I poked Nistan in the back. "Nistan. Leave Cnaef alone or I'm going to kill you."

Nistan wheeled to see me, slow and stupid with shock. His mouth fell open. For the first time ever his eyes betrayed fear.

Cnaef snatched up his sword.

"Run, Cnaef," I barked. "Go have the blood staunched. Hurry!"

Wavering, Cnaef met my eyes one last time and then fled. I withdrew my sword-point and circled onto Nistan's ox-hide.

"So, the little Thirl-man is going to kill me," Nistan sneered. "Me. Haha. Or am I going to flay him alive and leave him to rot?"

I spat towards his face. "What're you blabbering about? I'm obviously bigger than you. And stronger! I intended to show mercy to your sorry hide. But now... I think I'll teach you a lesson *never* to be forgotten."

Nistan's overpoweringly Gwëre features crinkled in scorn. Swinging his sword down in an over-hew, he cleaved the ox-hide a second after I had whirled behind him. I attempted to kick him over, but he about faced and nearly cut my legs out from under me.

Before he could accomplish this feat, I whipped my blade down and brought his to a halt. Feigning artlessness, I pushed against it hard.

With overconfidence he brought his sword up, aiming for my upper half. I came along for the ride—but harder, and *faster*. To revenge my best friend's latest scrape, I spun his blade and thrust mine over it, straight at his smug mouth.

Possibly, he'd have some trouble kissing girls after this...

Nistan's blue eyes bulged. He spun his face to the right.

My sword's heavy tip stabbed into his neck, right beneath his jaw. I screamed in shock and jerked my sword backwards. Blood spilled

out down the side of his throat, bubbling from the wide wound.

With a roar of hate, Nistan raised his blade.

Heart in mouth, I threw the flat of my sword against his arms and shoved him to the side before he could strike my head.

Oh, Anmwynt, I've just killed him! I've *really* done it now!

Nistan choked and twisted about, face contorting. He thrust at me. As I turned his blow aside, he came in with his pommel to smash it into my head. I lifted my hilt up and half-caught him by our cross-guards as he delivered the blow. Sparks danced before my eyes. With a shout I abandoned my sword, seized his sword's handle between his hands and twisted it straight out of his grip. Grabbing him by the shoulder, I clamped my gauntlet over the wound.

Nistan's fair Gwëre hands went to his neck as though he were trying to strangle himself. Blood frothed beneath our fingers, pumping voluminously. He burst into a gurgling scream.

"No!" I shouted. "I'm sorry!"

My opponent's blue eyes dilated and slipped shut. With a gasping moan he ripped out of my grasp and tumbled to my feet.

I bit my tongue in horror. I should never've thrust for his mouth. But I hadn't meant to *kill him!*

Reaching down, I turned over his body; he breathed not. His eyes held venom and his lips were curled in a last sneer.

Never... before... had I slain another person. Even someone as arrogant and overbearing as Nistan. Now I couldn't go back to my Búresk village. The girls would literally pull my hair out.

"I just killed a man!" I shrieked, coming to my senses. "A *man!* Help, Uasond! Help!"

Heart pounding, I gazed into the crowd of spectators beyond the ox-hides. It wouldn't be long before Nistan's friends noticed. If only Cnaef were here! If only Nistan hadn't been so cruel.

While my third opponent lay reddening my ox-hide, the winners of the second bout paired off and began fighting on fifteen of the thirty-two hides. Uasond strode over, eyes narrowed.

"Good job," he grunted, gripping Nistan's face and inspecting the

wound. "You got him right where it counts. But the swéir doesn't have so great of armor, does he? Not much to pinch."

I chewed my lip. "He died so fast! What happens to me now?"

"Nothing," Uasond grinned. "Can you please carry him off to the side?"

"But, but... I'll be outlawed."

"No," Uasond explained, "this is a Sword-Contest. Hear me, no rules."

I gathered Nistan's body into my arms. Blood smeared over my chest, arms and neck. Me, his butcher. I staggered under his weight out of the fighting area after Uasond.

Dumping his corpse against the mossy wall on the right, I began to quake. I could not take my eyes off his vivid face. He looked like me, just lying there dead, about to rot. Every bit of it was my fault. If I'd been less vengeful, he'd still be alive.

"Just leave him here?" I demanded. "Shouldn't I go tell his family?"

"If you wish to stop competing, go ahead." Uasond leered and stared me in the eye. "However, if I were in your boots, I'd get back onto my ox-hide. There's rewards ahead for the winner."

Hair prickling, I stalked back to the fighting area. I felt no comfort. When you kill someone, there are bound to be huge repercussions, whether they come through the law of blood-vengeance or not.

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