

# **Sunset Over Lievnos**

**Prequel Story**

Chapters 1 - 3

Version 1.0a

Tyson Villeneuve & Erika Schulz

[www.sunsetoverlievnos.com](http://www.sunsetoverlievnos.com)

Map of Western Lievnos



## 1. Yelik Strose

Yelik Strose shivered in the late autumn air. Blanketed by the night he stood quietly outside the door of a modest hunting cabin. Inside was the woman he loved, the woman he had hoped to marry one day. At this moment however, she was inside the cabin in the company of another man. Yelik suspected an affair. A thought which devastated and enraged him in equal parts. A confrontation was inevitable but Yelik drew the darkness closer around himself and took a moment to reflect on how this was all wrong, and so completely different from how he had imagined his birthday would end.

\*\*\*

Yelik awoke early in the morning filled with great joy. Guests were already arriving as the sun rose, having traveled from the South for the annual Harvest Celebration between two of the greatest families in Lievnos, the Lorshyles and the Strose. It was particularly special to Yelik this year since it was also his seventeenth birthday which would mean he would now be allowed to choose a wife.

Yelik had known for months that he would choose Bremma Folliser, the daughter of a wealthy farmer, to be his wife. His parents had been angry when he had broached the subject of marriage to her. They felt that a Strose son should never consider such a bride of low rank, but Yelik didn't care. As a second son, it was his opinion that he should be able to marry whoever he wished, regardless of station. He was determined that the only reason he would marry was for love. Eventually Yelik won everyone over and for the most part the idea was accepted, but he couldn't help noticing constant disappointment from some, especially his father. Despite this he held his ground and with all the pride he could muster he maintained that it was his life and she was who would make him happy.

It was a day to remember. A jousting tournament was held in the afternoon which was an exciting distraction as Yelik waited impatiently for Bremma to arrive. Yelik wanted nothing more than to spend his birthday with her. She did finally join him just before the evening feast and her presence made everything complete. Yelik had spent days planning exactly how he would propose to her but at some point during the festivities they were separated and he was swept away into conversation with other guests. When he at last managed to extricate himself he went in search of her. After asking around and being unable to find her in the castle's Great Hall he went outside hoping that she would be there. After half an hour of searching he climbed to the surrounding battlement for a better look only to see Bremma leaving the castle grounds on foot with another man.

She hadn't mention to him that she would have to leave early and Yelik knew nothing about the man she was with. In fact, he was supposed to be the one to escort her home at the end of the night. There was no indication that she was being forcibly removed, that Yelik could see. He questioned himself that maybe it wasn't her, but even in the dark of night and even after ingesting many spirits there was no mistaking her. He thought to shout but it was too late. They left through the gates. He sprinted down from the battlements after them and his thoughts went from concern to accusation and finally to despair. He felt angry that she didn't tell him she was leaving, even just to say goodnight. He was going to be her protector for the rest of their lives and he couldn't do that if she was wandering away without even telling him. He was even more concerned about who she was with.

Did she have another lover? She would humiliate Yelik with a scandalous affair. He already had to defend being with her to nearly everyone. He didn't really care what anyone said about them being together but he had not considered what would happen if *she* was the one who left *him*. He had always assumed that she would want to be with him as much as he

wanted to be with her. It scared him. He would be harassed by people telling him how wrong he was and other 'I told you so' comments and it would be embarrassing beyond belief. He would have to hide away in his room for weeks and most likely never live it down. It would be horrible to be rejected by a peasant girl and he felt foolish for not being more careful. He had to find out if that was what was going on and if it was as bad as he thought, he needed to ensure nobody else found out. Maybe he could save face if he was the one to break it off. He was glad now that he wasn't able to call out to her. He might find out now what kind of person she really was.

He quietly followed Bremma and her companion and his hopes that she merely stepped out for a walk were dashed when they mounted a horse together and headed out on the main road. Yelik hurried to the stable. At that time of night there should have been boys to help him but they were not at their post. He took a quick glance around the corner and saw them huddled behind the stable drinking wine while no one was paying attention. He decided to saddle his own horse quickly and headed after Bremma and the man she was with.

Under bright moonlight they were easy to follow even while staying back a long distance. After a short ride they left the town and turned east off the manicured road, entering a forested area that ran beside it. Yelik took pains to stay to the shadows and keep his horse calm and silent. His mind was still racing and he began to imagine his confrontation with Bremma. He still clung to a small hope that perhaps this was not as it seemed, but there had been no indications of anything but her willing participation.

To Yelik's surprise the couple approached at his family's small hunting cabin and went inside. The cabin was built from local spruce and situated near a small stream. It was mainly used by the Strose family and friends for hunting weekends. It was only a single level but housed enough bedrooms to sleep ten people which made it a quaint getaway from the pressures of court life. Yelik had fond memories of time spent there with his father, brother, and their close friends, and he knew the area well.

Yelik slowed his horse and waited until the couple had dismounted and entered the building. Yelik dismounted at the edge of the clearing and slowly crept closer to the door. Yelik was shaking and beads of sweat trickled down his face. His legs began to feel weak underneath him. He crouched in the shadows for several minutes before a faint sliver of light began shining through the small crack at the bottom of the door. He heard the shuffling of feet but no words were being exchanged. In the dark he waited and then he heard a whimper which he was sure came from Bremma. Was it pleasure or pain? Scanning around him for any kind of weapon he realized the stupidity of leaving the castle without one. His eyes darted around and in the cold moonlight he spotted a nearby woodpile and a worn hatchet. He reached over and grabbed the hatchet before quietly cracking the door very slightly. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim fire light spilling through and then Yelik saw the unthinkable.

Bremma was half naked and pinned to the top of a table while the stranger writhed on top of her. She moaned again and turned her face in his direction so he could see it. Her expression was one of great sadness. Tears were rolling from her eyes. She was in trouble after all. It was obvious she was in distress. Yelik heard the sound of the man's mouth kissing Bremma's skin and he felt primitive rage rise within him. He forgot any fear or doubt that he had. His instinct to protect her drove him forward and he pushed through the door. He quickly strode across the room and lifted the hatchet above his head. With all his strength he brought it down towards the man that pressed himself upon his love. Then, at the last moment, the man turned his head and met Yelik's gaze. The fire light came behind the stranger and he was mostly in shadow but in that small instant Yelik thought he saw a look of recognition on the man's startled face. Yelik tried to pull his swing but it was too late. The hatchet came down and buried itself into the stranger's skull.

"Yelik!", Bremma screamed as blood sprayed across her face and chest. Her eyes were wide and she was frozen in place as Yelik pushed the man's twitching form off of her and onto the floor.

"Yelik. Wha ... what have you done?! Why are you here?" Bremma's words dissolved quickly into choking sobs as she scampered off the table and tried to cover her bloody nakedness.

"I'm here to save you Bremma," he said. His emotions were dull in the aftermath of his action.

"I'm sorry Yelik! I didn't mean for this to happen," Bremma whispered through her sobs. "I didn't want to come here, but I was so afraid to say no." She buried her face in her hands and wept, slowly crumbling to the floor. "It was easier this way. The things he said he would do... I was too scared to stop him!"

Yelik stared at her with confusion for a moment. Then he went to the body to take a closer look at the man's face. Yelik rolled the body over and recognized the man easily despite the blood covering him. The man he had just killed was Errond Lorshyle, eldest son of King Odyma, heir to the throne of Lievnos. Yelik staggered back and collapsed to his knees under the weight of what he had just done. He braced himself against the table as the ramifications of his actions sank in. Not only had he taken a life, a thing he had never thought himself capable of, but he had taken the life of the second most powerful man in the realm, his elder brother's best friend, and his family's greatest ally.

"What are we going to do?" Yelik breathed into the air.

He looked over at Bremma. She was still sobbing but mechanically wiping the blood from her face and chest and pulling her clothes back on. His mind darted from thought to thought, unable to maintain focus on any one idea for longer than a second or two. He was breathing heavily and could only think of doing one thing; he had to get himself and Bremma back to the castle. Yelik stumbled over to Bremma and yanked her to her feet.

"Bremma. Bremma!" Screaming he shook her forcefully. She was weak like a rag doll. She was no longer crying and clearly in shock. He was in such a state of shock himself that he couldn't even feel pity for the woman he loved. His only thoughts were of survival.

Yelik left her to get his horse ready and came back to find Bremma standing in the dark. The small fire had burnt down to a few embers in the fireplace. He put his arm around her to steady her and guided her outside to his mount. It was a struggle but he was finally able to climb up behind her. Then he kicked the steed into a dead run. There was only one person Yelik could think to seek out for help; his older brother Vorin. He needed to get back home.

"Vorin ... we have to see Vorin," Yelik repeated this to himself. "Vorin will know what to do."

Yelik pushed the horse as hard as he could until his legs were cramped and his arms could barely hold on to Bremma. When they finally reached the castle all three souls were drooping and drenched with sweat. Barely able to move, Yelik dragged himself and Bremma through the now quiet castle, down corridors and dark passages with a familiarity honed over his lifetime. Once they reached Vorin's room, Yelik knocked insistently and nervously waited.

After a few moments, and a continuous tapping from Yelik, Vorin opened the door.

"Yelik. What's going on?" Vorin leaned on the door frame, sleep still in his eyes.

"Vorin, I don't know what to do. You have to help us," Yelik said as he gasped for air.

Vorin's blue eyes widened visibly as he looked down on his younger brother's state. Yelik scratched nervously at his hair, and tried to smooth his disheveled clothing under his brother's gaze. Shaking, he clutched Bremma's hand and licked his dry lips. Even though he had just awoken, Vorin was the picture of strength and intelligence. His classic features formed into a look that reminded Yelik so much of their father. Then Vorin looked at Bremma. Her crumpled clothing. Her haunted and weary eyes. She clung to Yelik like he was a lifeline, and he clung to her with the same feverous need.

“Bremma.” Vorin whispered. Then he looked at Yelik directly. “Oh no...dammit...you weren't supposed to find out.”

Vorin's statement hit Yelik like a slap in the face. Comprehension slowly dawned on him. Vorin had known about Errond and Bremma. Vorin began pushing the two young people into his room while scanning the halls. He followed them in and then closed the door behind them.

“Yelik. Did you see Errond? What happened?” The concern and suspicion was now evident in Vorin's voice when light began blooming from a table lamp. He confronted the couple. “Answer me Yelik. What's going on?”

Yelik gulped down a lump in his throat. “I followed them,” he said as his eyes began tearing up. “Did you know, Vorin? Did you know they were together?”

“Yelik, you don't understand. You know how Errond is. He saw Bremma and pressured me into arranging it. I told him I wouldn't do it but he would not be reasoned with. I have never seen him that angry. He was going to have his way no matter what. I went to warn Bremma and I told her about Errond. She...” Vorin made a pleading gesture.

“I told him I would meet with Errond,” Bremma interrupted. “but that was all.” Bremma looked angrily at Vorin, but then she grasped Yelik and pleadingly searched his face for understanding. “He's the Prince, and it didn't make sense to try and stop him. I didn't know what else to do ... I did what I thought was right.” Tears began falling down her cheeks, and she angrily wiped them away. “I thought it was safer for everyone. I thought if I just went through with what he wanted, you wouldn't find out. We could just move forward and it would be like it never happened. I don't know what would have happened if I said no, but Errond could have caused a lot of trouble.” Tears began falling from her eyes again. “I didn't know what else to do...I did what I thought was right.”

“Oh...” Yelik hung his head. Still looking at the floor, his eyes started swelling with his own tears as he said, “I didn't know...I saw them together. I followed them to the cabin. I saw them. Errond was hurting Bremma.”

As Yelik spoke Vorin shuffled away and sat back in an upholstered chair and ran his hands across his mouth.

“I'm so sorry Yelik. Bremma too. This is a mess. I will talk to Errond in the morning. He was supposed to take good care of you. I'll make sure that he leaves you alone from now on.”

Yelik began sobbing. “You don't understand Vorin! I followed them. He was hurting Bremma. I followed them and he was hurting Bremma...so...” Yelik's voice raised with hysteria and shame.

Bremma embraced Yelik and held him like a child. She whispered to him and stroked his hair.

“What happened Yelik?” Vorin stood and took a step towards him.

Yelik separated himself reluctantly from Bremma's arms and faced his brother.

“Errond is dead...I killed him.” Yelik hung his head and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.”

“That's...why...why would you say a thing like that, Yelik?” Vorin asked in a strained voice, fists clenched. “Tell me the truth. Don't screw around with me.”

“He was hurting Bremma!” Yelik shouted, backing away. “Bremma and he were...and I saw...I just charged in to help her...” Yelik kept talking as he rapidly told his side of the story, unable to stop the torrent once it had started.

Vorin stood there listening to every word and when Yelik was finished Vorin sat down once again and the room filled with silence. After a few moments Vorin spoke.

“Does anyone else know? Did anyone see you?” Vorin asked calmly.

Yelik shook his head, no.

“Is Errond still at the cabin?” Vorin asked.

He nodded, yes.

“Yelik, this question is very important, did Errond see your face? Did he recognize you?”

Yelik reflected on the brief instant that Errond had turned to him. “I think so, it was only for a second, no, less than a second, but he did look at me.”

Vorin lowered his head. Yelik felt horrible for bringing Vorin into this, but Vorin was his only hope. After a moment Vorin took a deep breath, turned to him again and said, “We have to get to the cabin and clean up this mess. The body has to be hidden. We have to do this now, before Sir Engorman finds out that the Prince is missing. Engorman has Hess with him, so we’re going to have to be careful.”

Yelik was terrified of Sir Daroph Engorman’s massive pet beast, Hess. Most people were and for good reason. An image of the creature flashed in his mind. The creature stood as high as his shoulders and had striped markings with dark striped fur across its face. He pictured the muscular creature running towards him with its teeth bared and it gave him shivers. It obeyed the Lorshyle’s Captain of the Guard and was rumored to be a remarkable tracker. It was only then that Yelik realized that in his panic he had done nothing to cover his tracks.

Yelik tried to listen as intently as possible while Vorin began to rattle off instructions. Moving briskly around the room Vorin gave them both a change of traveling clothes from his own wardrobe and they began to dress. Yelik felt a small sense of relief as Vorin took control.

Together the three left Vorin’s room, and quietly made their way back to the stable where they secured three fresh horses. Vorin disappeared for several minutes and when he returned he was carrying a couple of bulging sacks. He said very little during this time, except when it was necessary to give orders.

“What are those for?” Yelik asked.

“You’ll see. Now let’s get going,” Vorin replied.

As they were about to leave the castle Yelik turned to Vorin. “Thank you”, he stated simply.

Vorin’s eyes softened slightly. “You are my brother and I love you. You know I would help you no matter what trouble you get in. I always have and I always will.”

Yelik helped Bremma into the saddle and as he did so he said to her softly, “Everything will be okay.” He even managed a weak smile which Bremma did not return, but more calm than she had been all night she nodded and squeezed Yelik’s hand. As they left the castle he reflected on what he had just said. A voice deep inside him whispered, *nothing will ever be ok again.*

## **2. Vorin Strose**

Vorin had made the trip to the hunting cabin many times in his life, but this time it seemed to take an eternity to reach it. Although he put on a brave front for his brother who counted on him, Vorin’s mind was bursting with fear and uncertainty. Vorin was constantly looking over his shoulder expecting to see Sir Daroph Engorman come charging up the road behind them at any moment. The moon was bright which made the first part of the trip bearable. For the second leg, they turned off of the main road and into the forest on a trail that led to the cabin. The dense trees hid the moon’s light and engulfed them in darkness and Vorin’s fear intensified. With every step he was plagued by more worry and every sound of breaking twigs or blowing leaves became the stalking beast Hess.

All three conspirators were silent during the ride. Vorin suspected the others were lost in their own thoughts and fears like he was. At one point Yelik, in a strained voice, tried to start a conversation by telling Bremma about a tale their father told them when they were children.

He listened as Yelik explained how children who wandered away from their families went missing in the woods. Vorin had always thought it was a just a silly story meant to scare misbehaving children but he didn’t find it very funny at the moment. Bremma just wrapped her

cloak closer about her and Vorin discouraged any further chit chat for fear of being found in the dark by their sound of their voices.

Vorin's anxiety reached a peak when they finally arrived at the cabin, anticipating what he would find. After dismounting he lead Yelik towards the open door. Bremma chose to stay with the horses as a look-out although Vorin suspected she did not want to enter the cabin again and he didn't blame her for it. Inside the dark room Vorin took a moment to build his courage to light a fire knowing that the light would reveal a scene he did not want to see. Yelik remained just inside the door, refusing to step into the darkness.

Vorin gathered kindling and put it in the fireplace. He struck his flint directing sparks at his small arrangement and it wasn't long before the fireplace came to life. Slowly, he turned around to see the lifeless corpse of his closest friend sprawled on the floor by the table. There was a large pool of blood under Errond and there was already a foul odour in the air.

Vorin paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. Errond was no saint but even so the two had been good friends for nearly his entire life. Errond was heir to the throne and Vorin himself was in line to lead the Strose family. They often talked of the future. A future where they helmed the rule of the land. Their bond continued the long-lasting relationship between their families. Indeed the Strose were the closest allies to the leaders of Lievnos which had benefited Vorin's family for his entire life. The Lorshyle's had long ago given power to the Strose to keep peace and order in the north-western regions of Lievnos, a responsibility Vorin and Yelik's father Christoph took very seriously. Vorin took great interest in politics and studied with some of the best scholars. He spent a great deal of his time in council meetings or reviewing policies in preparation for a time when he would succeed his father.

In recent years Vorin had learned that Lievnos walked a fine line between order and chaos. Lievnos was not a uniformly bountiful land and some ruling families were very envious of prospering provinces. Yet for all the autonomy King Odyma allowed individual provinces, the one thing he would not tolerate was war among the families and he would intervene immediately to maintain the status quo.

The Lorshyle aristocracy was very powerful, and not to be underestimated. Odyma had a large army under his command, complete with trained creatures and dangerous mercenaries. The entire family was cunning and trained in the arts of diplomacy and war from a young age. As rulers they were absolute and very few provinces had ever tried to revolt. Errond would probably have followed his father's leadership in similar style, and Vorin had not expected anything to change in Lievnos when he took the throne. With Errond now dead, Vorin realized the throne would pass to the second in line, Errond's brother Emmer. This thought troubled him greatly. Vorin had never liked Emmer, and he was sure the feeling was mutual. Emmer was angry, volatile, and fought constantly with his family. He seemed to agree with very little they did, believing the Lorshyles were too lenient on the Vassals and people of Lievnos. Emmer perceived any compassion or compromise as weakness. He knew now that the future of the Strose and the future of Lievnos would be dramatically different from the one he had envisioned.

Looking upon the face of his friend awakened a deep sadness within Vorin but fulfilling his desire to grieve would have to wait. They had very little time before Sir Engorman awakened and went looking for his charge. Vorin knew the morning was creeping inexorably closer with every minute.

This disaster had fallen squarely on Vorin's shoulders and the weight of it almost bent him over. Yet, he would never give his brother up. Vorin had to make sure that once Errond was discovered missing Yelik would not become a suspect in the disappearance. If anyone came looking for answers Vorin would do whatever was necessary to protect his family. As close as the families were they would certainly face the wrath of Odyma should they be found responsible for Errond's death.

Vorin came out of his reverie and looked at his young brother standing just inside the room. Vorin felt the ache of guilt. He shouldn't have given in to Errond no matter what the

consequences were and he shouldn't have let Bremma take responsibility for this situation. It was a great burden and she shouldn't have to bear it alone. He knew in his heart that what Errond wanted was wrong and he should have stood up to him. But he didn't. Now Yelik was paying the price. He promised himself he would not let Yelik pay for his mistake.

Vorin came to a decision about what to do next. "There is just too much blood. We will never get it all out of the floorboards. We have to burn the cabin down."

Yelik sucked in his breath in surprise. "But if we set it aflame everyone for miles will see the smoke and come running!"

"That's a risk we have to take, Yelik. It's the middle of the night so no one will notice for hours and by that time we will be well away from here. We have to wrap up the body first. We're taking it with us."

"What? Why don't we just burn it with the cabin? What are we going to do with the body?" Yelik protested.

"Yelik, you know of the Lady Sedel?" Vorin asked.

"She's the old woman that's always with the king, right?" Yelik answered.

"Yes, and she's very powerful. Errond once told me she has the ability to see visions and even re-live the last moments of someone's life. All she needs is some of the remains in order to do it. If she gets ahold of this body she may be able to find out that you killed him. He did see you before he died. Lady Sedel would recognize you if she saw you. I don't know exactly how it works, but we can't take the risk."

Yelik dropped his head. The complexity of the situation was clearly sinking in and Yelik's face was beginning to show defeat and despair where there had once been a glimmer of hope.

"Yelik, we'll figure this out. Now help me with those sacks on my horse," Vorin said as he walked past his brother out into the night air.

As they unpacked the horse Vorin turned to Bremma. "Bremma, do you recall meeting Sir Engorman tonight? Did you speak with him at all?"

Bremma turned to him and thought for a moment. "No Vorin.", she said in a low voice. "I saw him with Errond during the party, but I was never introduced. I don't think he noticed me at all ... and when you introduced me to Errond, Sir Engorman was not with him." She had answered him calmly but Vorin noticed the stranglehold she maintained on her horse's reins.

"What are you thinking Vorin?" Yelik asked.

"I'm still working it all out," he said. Vorin scratched his head as a plan began to form in his mind. When he introduced Bremma to Errond he had no idea it would go this far, that Errond would demand to be with her. He knew Engorman would track down every lead and that would eventually lead to Bremma. Hess would smell Errond on her and he would know she was guilty. He had to figure out a way to get Bremma away from this.

"Errond's horse is still tied up over there," Bremma said, pointing. "We should do something with it as well."

Vorin was surprised that Bremma was thinking so clearly. She was trying her best and it showed.

Bremma had been a surprise to Vorin from the moment he had met her. She was relatively a nobody. The only daughter of a landed farmer by the name of Duma Folliser. He had impressed Vorin's father with his management skills after doubling the profits on his land in just 5 years, which drew the attention of the Strose patriarch. Vorin and Yelik had both accompanied their father on a tour of the agricultural estate where they first met Bremma. She was an only child and her mother had died of illness. She was striking to look at with very pale skin and long dark brown hair, the contrast of which was accentuated by bright blue eyes. Even though she was already 18 she came across with a childlike naivete, but sometimes she would say something that Vorin thought was very insightful. It was an intriguing mix, and Vorin's brother had been completely enchanted.

Yelik himself lead a sheltered life, which Vorin and his mother were guilty of perpetuating. Growing up, Yelik showed very little interest in politics or soldiering and they protected him from a father who had very little patience or interest in that kind of son. Yelik ended up spending his time in the stables where Vorin watched him become a strong horseman. As he grew he also became a bit of a ladies man at court, enjoying the company of beautiful women. After that first meeting Vorin had toyed with the idea of courting Bremma himself, but he knew there was never a possibility she could be the wife of a lord. Vorin would need to find a much more advantageous match with the daughter from another political family. He needed someone who would rule alongside him and bear him strong children. Yelik showed no such considerations, and Vorin was sure that with Bremma, it was love at first sight.

Finding Errond's horse was good news. He wasn't sure up to this point how he was going to evade Hess but now he had a plan. Vorin went back into the cabin and removed Errond's bloodied shirt. He returned to the horse and tied it to the underside of the saddle so that it touched the ground. He intended to set the horse free once they got back to the main road. The horse would instinctually return home and create a scent trail that Hess would surely follow. He knew the horse would never make it home but it would hopefully buy them time to hide their real trail.

"How are we going to explain all of this?" Yelik asked as he waved his hand at the cabin.

Vorin repositioned himself so he was facing both Yelik and Bremma. In a stern voice he said, "We don't know anything about anything. Both of you have to remember this, you know nothing about Errond or where he is. Do you understand?" He pointed at both of them in turn to accentuate his point. They both nodded silently. The more he thought about the situation the more his options narrowed until at last he knew what he had to do.

"Yelik help me wrap up the body, it has to be wrapped tight and cleanly." Vorin grabbed the sack from Yelik and headed back to the cabin. Once inside he opened it and started pulling out rope and heavy cloth. Yelik followed him inside. The two lifted the body out of the pool of blood and Vorin began cleaning it. He wrapped the head wound tightly and then moved the body onto the cloth. Vorin grabbed the bag he had brought and pulled out various canisters of powder, dried leaves, and dried flower petals.

"What are you going to do with those?" Yelik asked.

"These are very strong herbs and spices. We're going to cover the body with them and wrap it up. They might be strong enough to stop Hess from being able to track Errond's scent."

Yelik helped his brother wrap Errond's body in several more layers. Once that was done to Vorin's satisfaction, the two carried the heavy package outside and laid it gently on the porch.

Next, Vorin and Yelik tied the body of Errond across the back of Yelik's horse with blankets to disguise its bulk. They were almost ready to leave the cabin behind.

"We still have one last thing to do," Vorin said.

While Bremma continued her watch from outside, Vorin and Yelik went inside and grabbed whatever fabric they could pull off the windows and out from the sleeping quarters. They placed them around the blood-soaked floor and then began throwing chairs, shelves, and other burnable items on top, creating a large pile in the middle of the room. Taking a burning log from the fireplace, Vorin placed it on the fabric. Fire started to slowly build. They watched and waited to make sure it would catch. As soon as Vorin was satisfied the fire would continue to grow, the pair turned and left. All three waited only a few moments more from a safe distance but the fire was growing very large and none of them doubted its success. Bremma in particular seemed to take strength as the cabin began to blaze.

Yelik and Bremma mounted up together and turned their backs away from the cabin which was now fully engulfed in flame. Vorin mounted too and started down the path from which they came with Errond's horse and the horse carrying Errond's body in tow.

"Where are we going, Vorin? What's going to happen now?" Bremma asked as they re-entered the dense forest.

Vorin didn't turn around, but spoke over his shoulder. "We need to hide you in a safe place, and we need to dispose of this body. We are close to Doryma territory. My good friend Hoyce lives near the western border of Olerhann. I trust him, he'll help us, I know it." Vorin had been thinking about this all night. He needed an ally. Someone he could trust to help him hide the two most damning pieces of evidence from this night. The body of Errond and the traceable witness, Bremma. They both had to disappear.

"Are you saying I can't stay with Yelik? Why can't I hide at the castle? Yelik, don't make me go alone." Her voice was getting higher and higher with every syllable. She was panicking.

Yelik reached over and grabbed her hand soothingly. "Vorin does she really ...?" His voice trailed off as Vorin stopped his horse and turned around. Vorin couldn't exactly see the others under the dark canopy of forest, Yelik was but a dark outline, so he gave them his most serious tone.

"Stop being children you two. Bremma cannot hide at the castle. Its the first place they will look, and then the Strose will be suspected as well. For this plan to work you will have to leave the province. Yelik and I will have our hands full just acting like we know nothing at all!" Vorin softened his tone a little. "I'm sorry Bremma, but you will have to stay hidden for a while. I don't know how long..."

Bremma wept quietly into her cloak, and Vorin could have sworn he saw tears glinting on Yelik's cheeks as well but neither one protested again.

Vorin started moving forward again. They reached the main road and Vorin untied Errond's horse and set it southward towards its home in Loatharic.

"We're going to have to risk taking the open road for a short distance. We can't leave directly from here or someone may be able to follow our tracks." He kicked his horse and galloped off southward.

"Keep up," Vorin shouted back and the three of them raced through the moonlit night.

### **3. Bremma Folliser**

Bremma felt sick to her stomach. All her happiness had been drained away and replaced by a hollow nausea. Her muscles were beginning to ache from the tension in her arms and legs as she fought to keep herself from falling from the horse as the trio raced along the main road away from the blazing cabin. It was supposed to be an escape, yet it felt like she was heading straight towards her doom. If she somehow managed to survive the night, she could envision nothing but dungeon confinement where her existence would be forgotten. Death seemed preferable to her at that moment. She thought it would be easier to run straight to Sir Engorman, to whom she would proclaim her guilt and pay the ultimate price between the jaws of the giant, dagger-toothed beast. Her sorrow drove this vision of such a dramatic end but she knew in her heart that she didn't have the nerve to do such a thing. In the small place where her last shred of happiness lived she knew she couldn't do that to the man she loved. She wanted nothing more than to run off and hide, taking Yelik with her. She would do anything to be with him.

They rode for what seemed like forever but eventually turned off the Great Road and back into the trees. It was darker here and she worried about losing sight of Vorin. Ahead of her, through the trees she could see his strong back. He was at least ten years older than her and he had the training and confidence born from a proud and powerful family. He was like Yelik in many ways. He was what she expected Yelik to grow into. Both brothers were handsome with sandy blond hair. Kissed by the coastal sun and wind where they grew up, they were both expert riders, fine dressers, and had the charisma you would expect from aristocracy. It was no wonder their family was chosen to rule.

Yet Bremma knew how different they were too. She turned her head to look at Yelik and she could see exhaustion in his face. He was an expert rider but he didn't have Vorin's stamina and it showed. At times it looked like he might break down and cry. Yelik was a sensitive boy but that was part of what drew her to him. She had fallen for his romantic and flirtatious nature. He was witty, playful and a bit of a loner, like she was. When they had started courting, Bremma could hardly believe it. She had never imagined, even in her fantasies, that a Strose son would remember her name let alone proclaim undying love to her.

She reflected on how her situation had become the complete opposite of what it was supposed to be. Only hours ago she was celebrating Yelik's Birthday and she had been so happy she thought she might explode from it. The puzzle pieces of her future had all fallen into place. She was going to be a lady and she would be married to her true love and create the family she had always wanted. Growing up without a mother had given her a strong desire to be one herself and her children would be safe under her husband's lordly name. 'Perfect' was the only way she could describe it.

That all began to change the moment she met Prince Errond. That simple introduction set into motion a chain of events that destroyed all of her dreams. She was sure she experienced more pain and suffering in the short hours of that night than most might in their entire lifetime. Now she was running through a dark wood, going to a place she had never been, to be left all alone. She feared for herself, for Yelik and even for her father. She knew that he would worry about her, or worse yet, pay a price for her actions. Fear was the one of the emotions she had in abundance and it ate away at her.

She replayed her decision to go with Errond over and over in her mind. She went over every part looking for a different way she could have handled it. Even now she couldn't imagine doing anything differently. She knew the rumors, everyone did. Errond Lorshyle took risks, drank, and enjoyed the company of women. There were countless stories about the things he did for a good time but most disturbing was what happened when he didn't get his way.

When Vorin had come to her and warned her that he had taken a liking to her she already knew about the rumors of disappearances, murders, and even fires that followed after the Prince when he took a liking to a woman. Of course, it wasn't all bad. There were many tales of the gregarious and generous Prince, and many women would love the opportunity to be with him, if even for a night. The real trouble came when you denied his advances.

With all that in mind she had made the decision to agree with whatever Errond proposed, with fear for herself, her father, and for her future with Yelik. There might be some women in powerful positions who could say no to Errond, but not her. She was born into a low class family and refusing the heir of Lievnos could only mean bad things. She hated the idea of it, but it was the safest choice. She would meet with Errond. She would suffer the indignities of one night to protect her family, the Strose family, and most of all, Yelik. She agreed to it and told Vorin that she would meet with the Prince if he promised to make sure that Yelik would never find out.

She realized that there was no way to predict the things that happened. It was as if fate had wanted her to go through this, and she struggled to find meaning in the events. She found none.

A dim glow peaking through the trees up ahead brought Bremma out of her thoughts. The three emerged from the forest and stepped on to grassy plains that were dotted with lonely oaks. They had been riding in silence, the only sound that of the horses hooves thundering on the ground and their heavy panting as they worked hard to maintain the pace Vorin had set.

Yelik rode up beside Vorin and asked, "How much further do we have to go?"

"We crossed the border into Olehann somewhere in the forest. It won't be too much longer before we get help."

"Do you think Hoyce will really help us?" Yelik asked at Bremma's ear, working the reins on either side of her.

Bremma had no idea who this Hoyce person was, but she was glad to have Yelik close to her. She was comforted as she leaned back against his chest and felt his heart beating strongly. She pulled her cloak more closely about her and just listened as the brothers discussed Hoyce Doryma.

"Hoyce and I have been friends since we were kids, you know that. We've helped each other out of tight situations before. Hoyce is smart and doesn't get worked up easily. Plus he has military training and has fought in battles, he will be able to handle something like this," Vorin responded.

"Just because he can handle it doesn't mean we should trust him. How do we know that Hoyce will keep Bremma safe?"

"Yelik, there is nothing I can say to convince you. You will just have to trust him, because you trust me. That will have to be enough." There was clearly annoyance in his voice now. "I know Hoyce will help us. I would trust him with my life." Vorin kicked his horse and outpaced Yelik, cutting the conversation off.

Yelik caught up and they continued riding at a faster pace. Bremma knew that very shortly her old life would be over. Vorin had been clear that if she was ever captured by the Lorshyle's she would most likely be tortured and executed. She was honest enough with herself to recognize that she would never be able to keep Yelik's involvement a secret for long. She didn't have a high tolerance for pain and torture terrified her. They soon encountered farmed land and noticed the odd flock of white sheep asleep on the hillsides. Exhaustion began overtaking her. Yelik held her up with an arm around her waist.

She couldn't keep herself from slipping into brief moments of unconsciousness. In a half-dream state she envisioned them riding up to Hoyce's manor only to find it surrounded by soldiers. They had walked into a trap and would be caught! Suddenly her body was jolted and she awoke gasping for air. It took a moment of comforting whispers from Yelik before she realized they were in no danger. They had stopped. Yelik pointed at a hill top nearby and the moderately large estate nestled there.

Vorin guided them under a large tree and told them to wait while he rode up to the house. He said he would return shortly and that they should wait quietly for him. He left pack horse carrying the body of Errond with Yelik and rode off towards the manor.

Both Yelik and Bremma dismounted and secured the horses. Yelik stood nervously fidgeting with his belt while watching closely for any sign of Vorin's return.

"Yelik?" Bremma said quietly as she sat down beside him. Her legs had no more strength after all the riding.

"HmMMM?" He murmured crouching down beside her, never taking his eyes away from the house.

"Yelik ... do you think we will ever be together again?"

His faced grimaced at her question. With a sigh he sat down, put his arm around her and drew her close.

"You know I would never leave you if I had a choice, right? I just can't think of what else to do. Vorin is right you know. I have to be back home by dawn. My father can protect me if I feign ignorance at Errond's disappearance. It will be suspicious that you are not there, but I can make up a story. If they questioned you, and things got out of hand..." Yelik held her tighter, "I don't think I would be able to control myself. It's going to cause enough trouble for my father just explaining how the crown prince disappeared from the Strose castle. King Odyma is going to be furious. I can't imagine what else is going to happen. Maybe war."

Yelik trailed off, and Bremma clutched at his arms in terror. Why had all of this happened to her? She was a nobody, a nothing, certainly not a reason to start a war. Yet here she was,

trapped in an impossible situation and very likely at the center of a political firestorm that threatened to destroy decades of peace.

Bremma didn't think she had any tears left, and she was slightly surprised when they began to flow down her cheeks. She sobbed in Yelik's arms as they sat under the tree in the moonlight until she once again drifted to sleep.