

# Of Warriors and Prophets

A short story by Kara Kreter

Avilee sighed heavily as she limped her way down the corridor. The Queen's reception in honor of their little band had run late into the night. Everyone wanted to shake the hands of the heroes of the Realm, to touch the legends of "Davit's Quest," as they were calling it now. As though glory could ever rub off on those who hadn't paid their way in blood and tears.

The Queen had been exultant, had even hinted at future plans for them, but as for Avilee, she was just tired. And relieved that now she could go home, curl up with a cup of warm soup, and finally begin the process of unpacking and putting away all the painful memories. Even as drained as she felt, she knew she wouldn't sleep, but at least she could finally grieve.

She was so distracted by her thoughts that even the instincts that came from living in near-constant peril for the last 12 months didn't save her when a shadow peeled off the wall and moved to stand behind her. His voice, when it came, startled her and she whirled around.

"Avilee."

"Davit," Avilee's voice was flat.

"You aren't what I thought." he was still, save an involuntary twitch of his pointer finger as he spoke. She likely wouldn't have even noticed if she had been looking at his face.

"I'm not what I thought I was either. So sorry to have disappointed you." Avilee turned to go, her legs stiff as sticks beneath her as her emotions warred with her desire for dignity.

"Avilee." His voice was quiet but full.

"What could you have to say to me?" She paused, but her answer was a challenge.

"I..."

She kept walking.

"I---admire you."

"What?!" This time she turned back, her voice quiet but hard.

"You told me, that day, that you were just along for the ride. I mocked you, then."

Avilee closed her eyes against that painful memory. Until that moment, she'd felt a part of their group, part of something real, an adventure, a legend. It certainly wasn't the first time she'd been written off, but it had been the most brutal.

"It was, perhaps, a flippant answer. But I was welcome before that," her voice was low.

"I know," he said. "There we were, the best, the strongest, the brightest--and then there was you-- seemingly average middle-aged you. No special skills, no obvious talents, no experience. I couldn't figure out why the Queen had sent you. You weren't even physically strong enough to keep pace with us."

Avilee let out a puff of air, "and what a burden for you, upon whose shoulders already rested the responsibility for saving our people." She dropped heavily onto a bench that lined the wall near her, her irritation spent.

His eyes searched hers, "you never complained, even after they began to treat you differently, even when I assigned you the most demeaning tasks at camp. Even when I mocked and ignored you. The others, they paid the price for that, didn't they? Why didn't you tell me about the Blessings from the beginning?"

Her eyes quirked ever so slightly, "I tried, in my own way, but if you wouldn't believe the Queen, then why would you believe me?"

His head dropped. Every death was a poorly healed scar, and there were too many of them not to feel the regret acutely. Their mission had succeeded--but not, he thought, because of his leadership.

"Her Majesty did try," his eyes looked off into the distance as he spoke. "She said, "this task is different, the rules are old and perilous, you are walking a path that only The Blessed can see." She told me that you walked with the Bearer, and so you would know things that no one else could. That I should rely on you." He shook his head, "I thought The Blessed were a myth. That you-- small, clumsy, slow you-- were a fraud."

Avilee braced herself against the sting of his words. She'd had a lot of time to think during the long, exhausting ride home after their bittersweet victory. She'd decided then that she needed to let all the hurt go, so she might as well start now. "You find the Queen to be one who is easily taken in?" she answered gently.

"No," his laugh was self-mocking, "I was the dupe this time."

Avilee bit the inside of her lip, "Perhaps one more Blessing, Davit, if you will allow it."

Davit, the hero of a nation, the champion of the people, strong and brave, sank to his knees with a faint choking sound.

"Davit, leader of the strike forces of the Queen and carrier of her burden for the Kingdom." Her voice became more and more resonant as she spoke, as though pouring in from somewhere else.

"Davit. The darkness wounded you, it took things that cannot be returned and seemed to leave only grief in their place." Avilee's voice became soothing and kind, sweeter than a mother crooning her baby to sleep. "You are a loyal and honorable warrior. You lead with self-sacrifice and integrity and you have borne the souls of the lost in your heart."

Her voice nestled into his being, gently and relentlessly prying open the poorly healed wounds that gnawed bitterly at his soul. Davit gasped and leaned against Avilee's legs, helpless against both sound and sensation as she spoke. "But they gave their lives willingly, and in holding onto your guilt, you shame their sacrifice. Now you must learn to be grateful for all they were, and all they gave."

“You have carried this burden long enough. It’s time to start laying it down before the All-Bearer.” Avilee’s eyes were almost glowing in the dim light around them as she marked the holy sign on his feverish brow with her cold fingers. How had he failed to see the power in her voice and her hands for so long?

He whimpered, an involuntary sound that shamed him.

“Davit.” Avilee crouched down next to him, supporting him with her arms. “Davit, look at me.” Her voice was back to its ordinary, soft-spoken tone.

He lolled his head and looked up heavily.

Her eyes were compassionate and bright with unspent tears, “Davit, I forgive you. You erred because you cared so much about protecting and saving our people. I know that. But we must find peace. Will you forgive me too?”

“For what? For what should I forgive you when I’m the one who killed them?!” He was too hoarse to shout, but his voice was piercing anyway.

“For not pushing harder to save them, for allowing you to shut me up when I knew what was right. If you had been in my shoes you would have fought to tell the truth until you were gagged and tied.”

He closed his eyes and sighed, “and how will we find peace after their pain? Silence after their screams?”

Avilee’s voice whispered against his hair, “like this. One act of forgiveness at a time. Tonight you forgive me, tomorrow yourself. Eventually, even the enemy who hurt us will be no match for your healing. And mine.”

At first there was only the sound of ragged breaths. “I...forgive you,” Davit’s voice when he finally spoke came out as a raw whisper, but it was filled with truth. As they sat in the silence, a fire raged then quieted in their hearts leaving a sensation of cool relief in its path. Their breath stilled and neither of them moved, unwilling to let go of the first sense of solace they’d felt in months.

Avilee thought about her discarded plans for the night, and decided this was better. For sometimes, in the quiet aftermath of souls healing together, brotherhood is born.