

**Blade Runner**  
**K. D. Wentworth**

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I, Hallah Iron-Thighs, eldest daughter of Manilla Big-Fist, hereby proclaim I will take no more contracts with professional blades. Everything about the breed sets my teeth on edge, the way they're always mooning around the One-Handed Virgin, posturing and making calf's eyes at the serving lad just to keep in practice, running their best lines with one another, and generally making a nuisance of themselves. In my opinion, they ought to be driven out of the kingdom altogether, but the eight unmarried princesses currently in residence are fond of the breed, and so they hang about, hoping to one day get past the portcullis and ply their trade. Even their designation, blade, is an offense, sounding as though they have trained, as have I and my sisters-in-arms, to sell the services of their swords, a time-honored profession, when nothing is further from the truth.

My partner, Gerta, and I had just made it back from a tough run across the mountains to the Kingdom of Damery, which lies adjacent to our own Alowey, fair land of really exceptional milk goats and beautifully tooled salt cellars. We'd had a profitable, though difficult trip, delivering a choice brace of priests to a rundown monastery just beyond Damery's principal castle. They have a chronic shortage of priests there, something to do with the king blaming God when the crops fail and, of course, the weather is always just dreadful in Damery.

As usual, Gerta and I had been attacked by bandits when we crossed the pass. Bandits, being such awful sods, are always worried about the state of their immortal souls and simply desperate to unburden themselves with a priest. Gerta, who hails from across the channel, is inclined to cut a truly repentant bandit a bit of slack and give him a word with one of our blades gratis. Me, I say if the little bleeders want a priest so bad, they should buy one of their own like everyone else. This go-round my sword, Esmeralda, left three of them lying gutted at the bottom of the nearest chasm whilst the other two scampered up the nearest granite cliff and headed for the peaks.

I'd broken three nails defending our profits and the priests' integrity, and lost one of my nails in the bargain, the one with the magical inscription that protects me from crow's-feet, so by the time we reached the One-Handed Virgin, I was in a really foul mood. The serving lad, Barth, had enough sense to bring me a foaming tankard without being asked and then to refill it off at regular intervals. I like that in a boy.

I was just sizing him up—those limpid eyes, blue as a mountain lake, that abundance of crinkly black hair, and all the other fine ways in which the little rascal had really filled out over the last year, thinking he might be capable of warming a girl's pillow now—when someone plunked down several more brimming tankards in front of Gerta and me, then slid into the opposite chair.

He was slim, but well built, dark in the way the princesses favored, but reeked of crushed violets, a cheap scent and therefore not a promising sign. Also he was a bit long in the tooth for our discriminating young ladies, but several of them are just kinky enough to want to get it done with a bloke old enough to be their father, so I supposed he might still have a chance at working them. Gerta took in the fancy clothes, then grinned broadly, the ale blurring her already not-discriminating palate. I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair, propping one mud-encrusted boot up on the table. My mail clinked merrily. "Yeah?"

The blade cleared his throat and tugged an elaborately embroidered red and green sleeve just a fraction straighter. His mouth was wide and generous, the sort our girls down at the castle might even call voluptuous. "I've been asking a few questions of the other patrons of this fine establishment, and everyone says you two ladies really know your way around."

"You bet your little pink toes we do!" Gerta slapped the table and cackled heartily.

He gave her a pained smile, then met my gaze with guileless brown eyes. "I need to get into the castle."

"You and every other blade for a hundred miles, sonny boy," I said.

He blushed, which was a nice trick. Even seasoned philanderers can rarely manage that. "No, no, you have it all wrong," he said and leaned closer across the table, his face sincere. "This is a truly noble cause, one well worth fighting for."

I laced my fingers across my sword belt. "Yeah, that's what they all say."

"Show us the color of your gold!" Gerta said too loudly. The noise level in the One-Harred Virgin dropped precipitously as everyone turned to stare.

"Shut-up!" I said to her under my breath, then shot out my hand to stop the blade from untying his purse. I gripped his wrist with my sword hand hard enough to hurt. "Not here, you idiot!"

His skin was warm beneath my fingers, the black body hairs nice and springy, and for a moment I forgot to let go. He looked away, blushing again, and I found myself charmed. I released his wrist. "Sorry."

Gerta shoved back her chair and it fell over with a crack. "Out-side!" she said merrily and staggered toward the door. I retrieved Esmeralda, and threw a handful of coppers down for drinks.

Barth scooped them up and gave me a smoldering, regretful look. I pinched his downy cheek with my free hand. "Later, you little devil."

Outside, the sun was just setting and the air was cool enough to help clear my head. Our potential client was glancing nervously back at the One-Handed Virgin, his dark brows knitted together in a most appealing way. Wondering if he had to practice that, or it just came naturally, I took his arm and hustled him down the street. "So where's the fire, sweetcakes?"

He looked up at me and cleared his throat. "My name is Reginaldo and I am an old-well acquainted acquaintance of the queen."

Gerta, who was in the process of buckling on her scabbard, stopped to poke him in the ribs with her elbow. "Did you and her Royal Highness get it on in Damery before she married our Good King Bentley? I hear she was a real speed-ball in her younger days!"

He raised his chin. "Do not speak of her so. She is the most beautiful woman in all the world, and I revere that brief time we spent together."

Gerta snorted. "Better not let our eight young unmarrieds hear you say that. They're not ready for nostalgia."

He struck a noble pose. "I am not here to see the crown princesses, lovely though they may be. My business is with Her Majesty, the Queen."

My hand flew to the pommel of my sword and curled around the comforting cold steel. I smelled a rat. "Are you crazy? Everyone knows girls will be girls, but queens are supposed to settle down, and our king takes his husbandly duties very seriously."

He dropped to his knees in the street before me and raised folded hands in supplication. "Please, name your price! I have to see the queen, and I'll pay anything!"

I grabbed a handful of his shirt and hauled him to his feet. "Stop that!"

He threw his arms around my armored chest. "I'll die if I don't get into the palace before noon tomorrow. I'll do anything, even-" He pressed his cheek to my hauberk so that his voice was muffled. "-marry you!"

"Marry me?" I shoved him away so hard, he stumbled and fell on his backside. "That's disgusting, you little sewer rat. Nobody marries a blade!"

"I can cook," he said abjectly from the ground, "at least I think I could learn, and I could massage your feet and soap your back." He looked up with tears in his tragic brown eyes. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"You stay away from my back, you little weasel!" I kicked dirt in his face and went for my sword, but Gerta caught my arm.

Her mouth was twisted in a grim smile. "Don't waste your anger on this trash." She thumped me on the shoulder. "Come on, I'll buy you another drink."

We left him scrambling to his knees, beating the thick road dust from his beautifully tailored breeches.

Early the next morning, I became foggily aware that someone was singing "A Blade Went A-Courtin' " in my ear. Despite the polished quality of the performance, the sound stabbed deep into my brain. I had apparently imbibed far too freely the night before and had a dim memory of pulling the serving lad Barth down on my lap, fondling him quite thoroughly, ordering drinks for everyone, then drawing Esmeralda for the sighs of admiration she always invoked.

The singer reached the chorus and lifted his voice. Pain threatened to split my head in two and I flailed out. "Stop that, you little turd!"

The song never flagged. "-went a-courtin' and he did ride, oh, yes!"

I cracked my eyes open. Gerta's pale blond head was pillowed upon her arms on an ale-soaked table, and she was snoring in a way that indicated waking would not occur for some time yet. Beyond her, the blade, Reginaldo, was perched on a stool, watching me while he sang. I gritted my teeth. "If you don't stop that caterwauling, I'll rip your lips off!"

He smiled. "I bet you say that to all the boys."

I buried my head in my arms and groaned.

"We have unfinished business," he said crisply, "and little time. I have received a desperate communiqué from the queen, bidding me appear discreetly at the castle to address an unresolved personal matter."

I snorted. "Dream on, buster."

"And, as I now hold your note for a considerable amount of gold, while you, on the other hand, are quite without funds, it does seem as though we should come to some sort of accommodation."

I groped for my purse and found it flatter than a ten year old virgin's bosom. The receipts from our last venture, and therefore the source for the purchase of our supplies for the next, were gone. Another groan escaped me. I had an exceedingly hazy memory of wagering the lot on how long I could kiss the serving lad without coming up for air. He had proved disappointingly

uncooperative.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "You cheated!"

He waved a deprecating hand. "Well, young Barth has no wish to remain a poor serving forever, giving it away free when he could have royalty, adventure, and glamour, and I did offer to give him a few pointers-"

"Yeah, yeah." I buried my face in my hands.

Reginaldo slid off his stool. "As to our bargain."

"We have no bargain!" The words escaped me with a force that made my head pound. I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Oh, but we do," and I could hear the slimy smile in his voice. "You owe me a large sum and if you cannot satisfy your debt in some fashion, I shall foreclose upon your assets."

I opened my eyes. "I don't have any-" My gaze followed his to the gleaming sword and scabbard hanging over the back of my chair. "Not Esmeralda! You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" His smile was poisonously charming. "Now, as to getting inside the castle, I don't want to hear any of the usual bilge about climbing up through the necessary facilities. I know how you muscle-bound types think..."

Since the latrine tower had been ruled out, Gerta and I sobered ourselves up with a liberal sousing of cold water, and then resorted to our next-best tactic for running blades into castles-subterfuge. It's quite one thing to fight your way in, hacking guards to bits and losing essential bits of yourself along the way. It's quite another to dress appropriately and saunter with the rest of the lackeys. Castles require a fearful amount of goods and services throughout a normal day, and clever runners use their heads, instead of their swords, whenever possible.

Reginaldo crossed his arms and scowled. "But I don't see why I should herd this filthy, stinking pig!"

"Her name is Betina," I said crossly. "It's obvious that, as the shortest in our party, you must appear the youngest, who in most families does all the-" I elbowed Gerta in the ribs. "-grunt work!" We dissolved into fits of helpless giggles.

Reginaldo jerked on his newly acquired peasant girl smock and turned away, his cheeks smoldering red. Clean-shaven and with a smudged kerchief tied jauntily about his head, he could pass for a maiden, if one didn't look too closely at that telltale professionally seductive

pout.

Then Gerta and I strapped our swords to our backs and tugged on loose homespun shirts over our mail. With the addition of a bit of healthy grime, we made hulking swineherds. I turned to Reginaldo. "Mind you take care of that pig; it belongs to my second cousin's mother-in-law and she's very attached to it."

"I can just imagine." Reginaldo flexed the hazel switch that had been provided along with the winsome Betina.

We headed for the castle's town gate and joined the stream of peasants carrying barrels of grain and salted fish and tallow and the hundred other commodities destined for the castle's larders. The guard, picking his teeth, nodded at the pig. "For His Majesty's cooking class?"

Reginaldo ducked his head in apparent agreement.

"Then you'd better step lively there, dearie." The guard scratched his left armpit and looked thoughtful. "King Bentley don't brook no tardiness with His ingredients." He threw back his head and guffawed.

Reginaldo, in reply, only switched the pig, which squealed and darted through the gate into the first courtyard. Gerta and I sprinted after them, barely able to keep the two in sight. The Betina, unaccustomed to brutality, was having none of it, and had availed herself of the first escape route available, a winding alley that led down and back into the lower kitchens.

"Hell's bells!" Gerta threw me a worried, bloodshot glance over her shoulder. I just gritted my teeth and followed, mail links jingling like a whole legion of soldiers. We rounded the corner, frightening a flock of pigeons, then skidded to a halt.

"Oh, there you are," said a petulant voice. "But I thought I ordered mutton." Our revered sovereign, King Bentley the Culinary, stood behind a butchers block, hatchet in hand, where he had evidently just decapitated a startled looking lamb. A whole swarm of noticeably pale courtiers and ladies-in-waiting were spread out before him, pressing perfumed handkerchiefs to their noses and taking half-hearted notes.

Reginaldo's mouth worked, but no sound emerged. Betina eyed him nervously, so I snatched the switch out of his hand and shoved him aside. "That you did, Your Majesty. This here pig is for tomorrow's demonstration, something about Braised Ham Ratatouille, the head chef said."

"Gracious!" His Majesty threw up his bejeweled hands. "Never touch the stuff! Who's been mucking about with the class curriculum again?" He tapped his toe on the cobblestones. "Confess! Now, out with it. Confess!"

A shamefaced dandy clad in crimson velvet raised his hand, then sank abjectly to his knees.

"I thought so!" The King crossed his arms, still holding the hatchet, which dripped gore down the front of his royal robes. "Bread and water for you the rest of the week, Lord Dunningham, and not a single bite of candied eel for dessert!" He waved his hand. "Guards, him away!"

A brief look of relief shot across Lord Dunningham's pinched visage and he fairly threw wretchedly skinny person into the arms of the guards.

"As for you three disgusting, grubby peasants," the King continued, "take that unfortunate beast to the slaughterhouse. I suppose we can make use of it next week, once we reach the chapter on cinnamon-mustard chitlings." Someone whimpered in the audience and King Bentley's eyes narrowed.

"Yes, Your Majesty." I hastily touched my cap and nudged Gerta to do the same. "We'll be on our way then."

"See that you are." The King sniffed and turned back to what seemed to be his class. "Now as I was saying, the lamb must be marinated for twenty minutes in sour milk and rosemary and-

Reginaldo reached for the hazel stick. Betina, the poor porker, uttered a tremendous squawk and thundered off in the opposite direction. I broke the damned stick over my knee and followed.

Betina led us a merry chase through a series of courtyards and gardens, both kitchen and formal. Reginaldo lost his kerchief somewhere along the way and I was developing an impressive bruise where Esmeralda was thumping into my chain-mailed back at every step. We lost Gerta at one particularly tight turn by the chapel, and so finally it was just the panting blade and myself who cornered our borrowed porker in the happy confluence of the castle alehouse and chaplains quarters.

Panting, I waved Reginaldo back. "If you stampede that pig again, I'll return you to the swineherd in her place. I doubt she'd notice the difference!"

Reginaldo leaned weakly against the warped boards of the alehouse. "Quit making excuses. I have to get to the Queen."

"You!" a female voice said frostily from the entrance to the courtyard. "We thought so! We had word that a person of your description had been seen scampering through His Majesty's cooking class."

Reginaldo and I whirled to face Her Majesty, Queen Anna Conda II, former Princess of Damery, and notorious connoisseur of blades in her wild youth. "Beloved!" he exclaimed.

I fell to one knee on the cobblestones and bowed my head. "Your Majesty."

"We had expected better of you, Hallah." Her tone was crisp. "While it's no secret that you've run a blade or two in for the princesses from time to time, you've always shown a fair amount of taste, for someone who spends all her time in apparel that must positively chafe your skin off your-" She rolled her eyes. "You know."

Indeed I did and had to resist the urge to rub that nagging rawness just behind my breastplate. "This little rat insists he has business with your Majesty." I glanced up sideways at Reginaldo who was now doing an uncomfortable little prance. "If he's lying, just say the word and I'll be glad to run him through with Esmeralda."

Reginaldo darted forward. "Now, Annie-"

"Don't you 'now, Annie' me, you little snake!" She pulled off a slipper and shagged it at him, hitting him dead square in the middle of the forehead. He staggered back, the imprint of her heel clearly visible. "I've waited for years, years, do you hear me, for you to come and take this misbegotten thing back!" She fished in the pocket of her voluminous gown, then held up an ornate silver spoon.

He had the grace to look discomfited. "I always meant to come back and check in on you, really I did, but I've been ever so busy. If it wasn't riding with the Princess of Feldenstein one day, it was peeling grapes for the little sister of the King of Makberg, or being absolutely forced to take tea and crumpets with Her Majesty of Nunpoor, you know how she is about being neglected-"

"Excuses, excuses!" Queen Anna Conda wrenched at her remaining shoe and stood bareheaded, her head thrown back, ready to let the second slipper fly. "Do you know what it's been like these years, bearing princess after princess, with never a single prince to soothe the old ball-and-chain's itch for a son, and having to watch poor Bentley turn into cooking maniac? The entire kingdom is in disarray because he cares more about sauces and meringue than he does about borders!"

A single tear trickled down her still handsome cheek. "And he has no taste, not so much as a smidgen." She turned away. "Do you know he invented a strawberry-lemon Yorkshire pudding last week? It was-" Her shoulders heaved. "-ghastly."

Reginaldo edged forward and examined the spoon in her trembling hand. "I did tell you to use it sparingly, my love." His voice was gently reproachful.

"But I thought if using it a bit was helpful, using it a bit more would be even better." Her words were strained. "At first, right after we were married, I only laid it out once a week, but then, more, just as you said, but then-" She broke off and stared down at her clenched hands. "He"



began to notice me, when he came to my bed, began to really like me, and it was so nice, I thought a bit more couldn't hurt."

Reginaldo traced the spoon with one finger. "And now?"

"And now, he won't eat without it, says everything tastes flat unless he has his one, his special spoon." She glanced at the courtyard door. "He'll be calling for it soon, you know, almost time for luncheon."

"Then I must take my leave," Reginaldo said simply.

"Wait!" She dabbed at her eyes. "I think I understand about the obsessive cooking; you say the spoon's magic would enhance all his natural passions, but why so many daughters? Why have we never once had a son?"

Reginaldo caught her hand and pressed his lips to it, his dark eyes twinkling. "Ah, but that was your passion, was it not, my love, producing all those dulcet little doves through whom you could relive the wild and wonderful days of your own youth?"

She snatched her hand away. "Certainly not!"

"My mistake," he said smoothly, then held his own hand out. "The Sacred Spoon of Nunpoor, your Majesty?"

With a sob, she thrust the gleaming implement at him and turned away.

"I say, sir, unhand that spoon!" A voice rang out through the enclosed space, followed closely by the portly bulk of King Bentley the Culinary. The spoon slipped through Reginaldo's startled fingers and clattered upon the cobblestones.

"Bentie, darling!" The Queen reached out to him.

"What a pleasant surprise! I take it the Sour Lamb Supreme is safely in the oven then?"

"I should say not! Who can cook with all this commotion going on?" The King swooped down and plucked up the spoon, then thrust it inside his robes. He turned to his wife, his mustache trembling with fury. "I won't have it, do you hear? It's not bad enough that we have blades skulking about here day and night, when the princesses ought to be thinking about improving their custard recipes and honing their white sauces." He whirled upon Reginaldo. "But now, you're giving one of the wretched creatures my spoon, the one that whispers special recipes in my ear round the clock so I may braise what no man has ever braised before!"

I stepped forward and set myself between Reginaldo and the King, for no reason I could name, except the habits of a lifetime die exceedingly hard. "Shouldn't that be 'no one'?"

The King bristled. "And what business is it of yours, swineherd?"

"None at all, Your Royal Highness." I held up my empty hands and backed away, still shielding Reginaldo. "Hey, you want to eat out of one of the Thousand Cursed Spoons of Nunpoor, that's no business of mine."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Cursed?"

I shook my head, then gazed around. "You haven't seen my pig, have you, your Worship? I could swear I heard it squealing nearby."

"Never mind the blasted pig!" He sidled closer. "What's this about a curse?"

"Nothing, really." I motioned to Reginaldo to stay behind me. "It's just that I used to delude myself that I was a good farmer, feeding hogs to Nunpoor, and I saw these cursed spoons lying all over the place. The way I hear it, use one long enough and it makes your privates shrivel up and fall off. No one with any sense will even pick one up. That's why everyone in Nunpoor eats with their fingers." I cupped my hands to my mouth and called, "Pig, pig, pig, pig, sooooo-ey!"

"Stop that!" His face went fish-belly pale as he groped beneath his robes for the offending implement, then stared at it as though it were a viper about to strike.

"Bentie, dear," the Queen began, "I swear I was just thinking of your welfare."

"I-see." He thrust the spoon at me. "Here, peasant, get rid of the vile thing! I never want to see it again!"

I edged away, hands behind my back. "Not me! I'm too fond of my private parts."

"Then you!" he cried and slapped it into Reginaldo's limp hand. "Take it away at once!" Reginaldo stared at it mutely. "Look lively, now! I want that thing out of the castle!"

Reginaldo gazed up at the Queen, whose eyes were bright with unshed tears. "It was a glorious spoon," she said, "but now its day is past. We must think of the future."

The blade bowed his head. "By your command," he said simply, then swept out of the courtyard.

"You, swineherd!" The King pointed after the blade. "See that he leaves the castle, or I'll have your head!"

"My goodness, Bentie," the Queen purred, "you are feeling forceful this morning."

"As a matter of fact," he said, sweeping his arm around her waist and pulling her against his chest, "I feel quite frisky."

"But what about the Sour Lamb Supreme?" she asked. "Shouldn't we check on it-you know before?"

"Damn the lamb!" He buried his face in her neck.

I caught up with Reginaldo and we hurried back out past the blacksmith's shed and the chandlery, the fleece storehouse and the cattle pens. There was no sign of Gerta and I was getting worried.

Reginaldo gave the spoon a final glance, then thrust it into his purse. His lips were curled into a most knowing smile.

"How did you come by that thing anyway?" I shook my head. "And why did you give it to the Queen? Aren't Sacred Spoons worth quite a bit of gold?"

He threw back his head and laughed out loud as we passed through the town gate out into the sunshine, and then leaned back against the stone wall beside the moat, giggling and snorting until the tears ran down his face and he had to beat upon his thigh with his fist.

I stared at him angrily. "I don't understand."

He shook his head, almost too weak with hilarity to speak. "There is-no such thing as-the Sacred Spoon-of Nunpoor."

I narrowed my eyes. "What?"

He pulled the spoon out of his purse, then buffed it on his breeches. "I made the whole thing up to impress her."

I picked Reginaldo up by his collar and hefted him out into the middle of moat, where he sank into the scummy green water with a most satisfying splash and sank, spoon and all.

Gerta didn't emerge from the castle for five days, and ever after displayed a distressing lack of interest for strawberry-garlic crumpets, extremely difficult to satisfy out on the trail. Despite repeated inquiries, we never recovered the poor pig, Betina, who reputedly ended up as the following Wednesday's lesson, Ham Dumplings Ala Mode.

The blade, Reginaldo, eventually floundered to the opposite bank of the moat, where a passing milkmaid reportedly took pity upon him and fetched him home to nurse. The last I

heard, they were married, had three sly-eyed brats, and he wasn't so pretty anymore, having on forty pounds around the middle, the result of good plain food and toting about all those shovels of manure. Couldn't have happened to a nicer bloke, as they say.

As for me and Esmeralda, we've given up blade-running altogether. I know they say there's no real harm in it, just a bit of fun to amuse princesses and upper class daughters, who will settle down eventually and raise families of their own, but I just don't have the stomach for it anymore.

I mean, what's the world coming to when you can't even trust a damned spoon?