

The Sword of the North

by

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“DERRAN. DERRAN! WHERE IN THE GODS' NAME'S ARE YOU?”

Derran shot his little sister an apologetic look. Swamped in blankets she just smiled and nodded back.

“BY THE BLAZES OF HELL BOY YOU BEST SHOW YOURSELF THIS SECOND.”

Derran put down the book he had been reading from and slipped from his sister's room. A short jog later and he stepped around a corner right in front of his father just as the man was about to release another thunderous bellow.

His father almost stepped back in shock at Derran's appearance but instead he lashed out with his hand catching his son with a backhand across the lip that split the skin and forced Derran to catch himself on the wall. Despite the pain Derran refused to cry out.

“Do you know where I've been today?” Gerand Fowl asked.

Derran thought of a number of answers, all of which would earn him a black eye so instead decided to adopt his usual silent reproachful look.

“I've been at the docks at Land's End overseeing the shipment of our latest iron stock. Earning this family's income,” Gerand's voice was rising again. “What did I tell you to do in my absence?”

Derran tried to ignore the fact that his father stank of alcohol and cheap perfume and answered the question without a hint of emotion. “You said I should continue learning my figures in your absence, sir.”

“And yet, upon my return our steward tells me you have been in the yard practising sword play with the soldiers all day.”

Derran had noticed the family steward, Orin Syù, standing ten feet behind his father but had chosen to ignore the petty little man with his annoying bulging eyes and huge nose with its latticework of broken veins. “Yes sir.” Derran answered truthfully and braced for the blow. To his surprise it didn't come.

“Son, you need to learn these things.” Gerand said, putting his hand on his son's shoulder and turning him so they were both headed towards the study. “When you turn eighteen I'll be expecting you to help me run the family businesses. Knowing your figures to help me with the books is an important part of that.”

Derran knew his father never touched the books, he left it up to the steward, but Derran also knew that reminding his father of that would flare his anger once again. With some careful manoeuvring Derran could get out of the situation without another beating.

“But father, at eighteen you were squire for Sir Kark Byfield. You spent your youth in battles and entering tourneys, earning your Knighthood.”

Gerand was nodding in recollection. “True, true, but my father never taught me figures, it's why I have to rely so on Orin. There may be time for swordplay but only after your studies are complete. It's for the best son,” They had stopped outside the study and Gerand opened the door. “I'll have dinner sent to you when it's ready. Make sure you complete all the exercises set out for you and show your work to Orin when it's complete. Now I've a terrible headache and I'm going to lie down for a while.” With that Gerand Fowl turned and walked away, talking to the steward as they went, leaving Derran standing in the door to the study almost unscathed, though he could still

taste blood from his split lip.

Inside the study Derran found all the work set out for him had already been completed. Underneath the books was a small, inconspicuous note in his little brother's handwriting. It said; 'Don't make it look too obvious'.

After a quick parry Derran dodged out of range of his opponent for a split second before darting back in. He brushed aside the on-coming parry and brought his sword up in what would have been a deadly arc. The blunted tourney sword made a satisfying 'clang' noise as it connected with the guard's chest plate. The guard, a man in his late twenties with a proud scar running down his left cheek, shook his head and made an annoyed grunt, he then shook Derran's hand with a muttered compliment at the boy's form and left towards the bath house.

At fifteen years old Derran was already an accomplished swordsman and had beaten every soldier under his father's command, although he admitted it was not a large garrison. At just ten years old his little brother, Keelin, was showing the same aptitude for swordplay, although at that age he lacked the brawn needed to best larger opponents. Both boys had inherited their father's skill and balance with a sword in hand along with many of his features, including his size, although Derran was shaping up to be taller with a little less bulk. Both boys had also inherited their mother's jet black hair and steel grey eyes. Leesa, however, had inherited nothing from their father. She looked like a smaller version of their mother with her fine, delicate features and a smile that could light up the room.

Leesa had also been born two months early and had been plagued by sickness ever since. Recently she had been in very poor health and Derran had taken to reading to her on a daily basis. Despite being only eight years old and always sick Leesa always smiled and laughed at the right places in the stories, in fact she was always in a cheerful mood when Derran visited and loved any story he picked to read. It was a pleasant change from reading to Keelin who always wanted his older brother to read stories of buccaneers and good natured bandits stealing from the rich and giving to poor, despite the fact that Keelin was already far better with his words than Derran.

None of the other soldiers were willing to take Derran's challenge that day and Keelin was busy at his studies so Derran retired to his room and ordered a hot bath to be drawn. After bathing he ordered a light lunch of bread with butter and bacon and two eggs, then he settled into his chair and started to read a book titled 'Jacob's study of Mine Management'.

Derran awoke with a start as his door opened and his lunch was brought in. The servant carrying his lunch was called Helena, a petite girl of seventeen years with stunning blue eyes and a wicked grin. She placed Derran's lunch next to him then busied herself tidying the bed and turning over the pillows while Derran walked over to the doorway and locked the door. She was in his arms almost before he had turned around.

"I brought your refreshment m'lord." Helena purred and then kissed him with a desperate passion.

Derran returned the kiss before pulling away just a little. "You always refresh me, Helena," he said and then carried her to the bed without another word. Derran was under no false impressions that she was as in-experienced at bed play as he, but he made up for it with passion and, as always, she seemed to enjoy it.

The seasons changed quickly in the East and all too soon autumn changed to winter. Derran's sixteenth birthing day passed even quicker. It was a dull affair, Keelin brought his ever present youthful enthusiasm but Leesa had been too ill to leave her bed. In an act that seemed beyond strange to Derran, his father had gifted him with a sword. It was not a very pretty weapon, it lacked any decoration, even the family crest, but it was well balanced and had a good, sharp edge.

"All men should have their own sword," his father had said, "even those that won't be using it."

It was in the first weeks of winter, just after the nights became longer than the days when Derran received a summons to his father's personal study. In his entire life Derran had only seen his father's study twice. Once when Leesa had been born and the midwife had ordered all the men in the house into the study until it was finished, and once when he and Keelin were younger and they stole their father's key and snuck in. They had taken such a beating when he caught them. Now Derran was being summoned. His father wanted him there, it was unnerving to say the least.

When he arrived he found the door ajar, light spilled from the room into the darkened corridor. Derran knocked, waited a few moments until his father answered and then stepped inside, shutting the door behind him.

Gerand was sat alone in the large elaborate study with a half empty bottle of whiskey next to his grand chair. He was staring into the fire with savage intensity despite the fact that the weather rarely got cold enough to need a fire as far south as they were.

Derran stopped by his father's chair and waited, back straight and to attention. His father didn't seem to notice, he just took another big mouthful from the whiskey glass beside him. Derran waited for a few seconds and then cleared his throat.

"You sent for me, sir."

"Hmm? Oh yes."

Gerand Fowl looked tired as he turned towards his son. He put down his glass and pushed himself up from his chair. Derran could tell he was drunk from the shaky way he stood, never mind the stink of alcohol on the man. He had no doubt been drinking for many hours, Derran thought to himself as he waited for his father to speak again. The wait went on for some time.

"I've sent a request to the Inquisition. For us to visited by one of their Arbiters."

Derran felt his face twist into a look of pure shock, his jaw dropped and his eyes widened. "Why on earth would you want an Arbiter here, father?"

"It's for your sister. I've come to believe her illnesses are not... natural." Derran couldn't believe what his father was saying. It had to be some sort of sick joke. His father continued heedless. "It's not like the Inquisition to ignore such a request, so..."

"What are you saying, father? Are you telling me you've requested some witch hunter to investigate your own daughter?" Derran wasn't shouting, he never shouted, but his voice had taken a deadly serious tone.

"Son, she's been speaking in tongues. And, she knows things. Things she shouldn't know. Things she couldn't know. I fear she may be cursed, or even worse, possessed."

"What could she know that could convince you she's possessed?"

"She knows I've been... uh, transgressing."

"Everyone from here to Land's End knows about your whores, father."

Gerand's hand lashed out and struck Derran on the cheek. It was a powerful blow that should have knocked the boy to the floor but Derran's body didn't move an inch. The cold stare he turned on his father a second later, however, made Gerand stumble backwards a step.

Derran's voice was as cold as his stare; his grey eyes bore a hole into his father. "She's a sick eight year old girl with a fever, father. She needs medicine and time, not some witch hunter from Sarth!"

"The request has already been sent, son. If there's nothing wrong with her the Arbiter will leave, but if there is something, they'll know what to do to make her better. It's for the best, son."

Derran had to restrain himself from hitting the man. Instead he turned on his heel and strode from the room knowing there was nothing he could do now to stop the Arbiter's arrival.

The following two weeks passed much too quickly for Derran. He spent a lot of time with Leesa, keeping her company and reassuring her. She knew the Arbiter was coming despite everyone being under strict orders not to talk about it and Derran was not going to lie to his little sister for the sake of their father. The rest of his time Derran spent in the practice yard with the soldiers, or with

Keelin. Their father was absent for most of the time; either at Land's End or in his personal study with the steward, so the boys were left unsupervised most of the time. They enjoyed the freedom as much as they could given the circumstances.

Then the Arbiter arrived. He drifted into the grounds like a fog on the wind, no one noticed him arrive but suddenly he was there and everyone was keeping their distance out of either fear or respect or both. The Arbiter was a tall, skinny man, his hair was long, brown and unkempt, his face looked gaunt and his eyes were hollow. He wore simple brown leather britches, a tunic of the same make and a long brown over-coat. By each hip the Arbiter had a short sword buckled and holy symbols dangled from all over his person. No one had told him who the Lord of the Manor was and in his current garb Gerand looked more like a travelling merchant, having just returned from one of his trips to Land's End. Despite this the Arbiter approached Derran's father.

"My name is Arbiter Prin," the man's voice was deep and full of menace. "I will need use of a room that will be kept completely private save from any that I directly request the presence of. I will need interviews with all of your family members and also all the house staff. I will start the interviews in one hour. Show me the way to the room."

Derran had never seen his father truly cowed in his life, even when a prince had stayed with them for a week Gerand had maintained his air of command. Now he stumbled out an acceptance and led the way for this witch hunter as if the Lord was a mere servant. Derran couldn't say why but it angered him. He watched until the Arbiter had left and until the courtyard had cleared of people and then released his breath, he hadn't even been aware he was holding it. With a quick glance to make sure no one was watching Derran slipped away search of Helena.

By the time he had searched almost the entire grounds worry had given way to suspicion. Throwing caution to the wind, Derran decided to ask the Manor's head chef regarding Helena's whereabouts.

"She disappeared two nights ago, young sir. I wondered 'bout it m'self so I asked the steward."

"And?" Derran was feeling impatient, it was unlike him. He didn't like the anxious pit that had formed in his stomach.

"Steward said the Lordship 'ad stopped her employment. Had her escorted from the Manor, middle of the night. I checked with Sergeant Bowen, to make sure she was a'right, he was on duty that night. He said he saw her escorted by one of the patrol men that run tween here and Land's End."

"So she was taken to Land's End?"

"Couldn't say, young Lordship." Derran took his leave of the chef and went in search of Sergeant Bowen. He already knew there was only one reason his father would send the serving girl away the way he did.

Bowen was no more helpful. Derran discovered that Helena had been escorted west, away from Land's End, the nearest city in that direction was Towermarsh but Derran already knew she wouldn't be there, his father would have sent her much farther away and the only people who would know where were his father and the steward. Derran retired to his room feeling impotent at his powerlessness to find Helena. His only option left was to wait for her to write to him. An unpleasant thought struck him; he didn't even know if Helena knew how to write, somehow he doubted she did.

The Arbiter's interviews continued over the next two days. Keelin was called in twice early on; Derran went to talk to him after each time. He thought his younger brother was holding up well despite his obvious fear of the Arbiter. He'd put on a mask of bravado and tell Derran all the questions he'd been asked and all his answers, almost repeating the interview word for word. Derran noticed there were very few questions about Leesa.

Most of the house staff had been interviewed and all of Derran's family save himself and Leesa, his father had been called three times before Derran's summons came. He took his time answering, he even played with the idea of wearing steel to try to intimidate the man but he knew he

was no match for an Arbiter, he knew they had magic. He found himself at the door to the room assigned to the Arbiter and entered, slipping in with his usual silence.

The Arbiter was sat watching the door as if he had known Derran was there. The room had been almost stripped bare. All that remained of the once lavish furniture was the polished desk, now set in the dead centre of the room and a single chair on the far side of the desk, occupied by the Arbiter. A single large copy of the Arbiter's holy symbol; a shield with a sun set at the top and a single ray of light hitting a sword planted in the ground below, had been painted on the wall to the left of Derran, he was unsure of its purpose. There was no seat for Derran to use. He knew it was an interrogation technique designed to put the culprit on edge, unfortunately it was working. Derran positioned himself in front of the desk and stood watching the Arbiter. The moment seemed to stretch out forever as the two stared at each other.

"Derran Fowl," the Arbiter said. It was not a question so Derran did not respond.

"Sixteen years old. Oldest child of Gerand Fowl and Freia Shadowmoon," the Arbiter produced a small book from one of his pockets and opened it to a specific page, there was a pen inside the book which he promptly took and made a note on the page. "Your father requested the presence of the Inquisition here. Did you know that?"

"Yes," Derran answered in a flat voice, never dropping the Arbiter's gaze.

"Do you know why?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe your sister to be possessed or cursed?"

"No." After every answer Derran gave the Arbiter made a note in his book.

"How would you describe your father?"

"Strong."

"Your mother?"

"Quiet."

"Your brother?"

"Young."

"Does your father ever beat you?" The Arbiter's voice was beginning to grate on Derran's nerves. It was a cold voice, loud and deep, full of the possibility of violence.

"Yes."

"Do you deserve it?"

"Probably."

"Does he ever beat your mother?"

"Not that I know of."

"Does he ever beat your sister?"

"No."

"You're certain." Derran didn't answer the Arbiter's question, just continued to stare at him. The Arbiter made another note.

"Has any of your family ever held conference with a witch or a person posing as a fortune teller?"

"No."

"You sound very certain. Do you know the whereabouts of all your family all the time?"

Derran's eyes narrowed; whatever game the Arbiter was playing he believed he had the upper hand. "Not as far as I know," Derran corrected himself. "If you're investigating my little sister why have you only asked one question about her?"

At this the Arbiter leaned forward just a little; there was a hint of a smile on his lips. "You don't understand the way this works, Derran Fowl. I'm to investigate your entire family."

Derran felt the muscles in his jaw tense. "Listen to me, witch hunter. There is nothing wrong with my sister; she's just a scared eight year old girl with health problems. There is nothing wrong with my family, we just have a stupid, superstitious father who gets drunk and makes bad decisions.

We...”

“You hate him.” The Arbiter cut Derran off with his cold, emotionless voice.

“What?”

“Do you hate your father?”

Derran faltered and for the first time dropped his gaze from the Arbiter. He couldn't say why but he felt compelled to answer with the truth.

“No.”

The Arbiter made a final note in his book and closed it. “You can leave.”

Derran almost opened his mouth to say more but thought better of it. He turned and walked through the door, not relaxing an inch until it was shut behind him. He felt drained, beyond tired and made straight for his room, collapsing on his bed when he got there. He barely managed to undress before sleep claimed him.

Derran woke to the sound of screaming, it was his mother's voice. It was night outside, the fire in his hearth had died down casting the room in an eerie red glow, just enough light to see. Another scream and Derran's mind snapped into focus. His mother's shrieks were coming from the courtyard in front of the house, there were other voices shouting as well.

Derran sprang from his bed and made for the door, only taking time to pull on a pair of trousers. Then he was making for the courtyard at a run. As he threw open the main doors to the courtyard he was blasted by cold wind on his bare chest. His eyes took in the scene in front of him in an instant. His mind, however, took time to comprehend the sight.

Derran's mother was knelt, not twenty paces in front, a burly guardsmen held her by the shoulders. She had tears coursing down her face and was screaming at her husband. Gerand Fowl stood next to her, paying her no notice, he was saying something Derran couldn't make out from his position. Keelin was a few paces to the right, struggling against the bear hug of another grim-faced guard, too small to break free. For the first time Derran could remember Keelin had tears streaming from his eyes. There were others as well, all staring towards the centre of the courtyard. Then Derran saw why.

A pyre had been built in the centre of the courtyard, a single stake protruded from the middle of the pyre and Leesa was tied to the stake. Even from where Derran stood, at least a hundred paces away, he could tell Leesa's face was a mask of pure terror. Arbiter Prin stood by the pyre with an unlit torch in his right hand; he was saying something to Leesa.

Derran started forwards but as soon as he drew level with his father the man turned and grabbed Derran by both shoulders.

“You can't interfere, son. He'll take you too.” Gerand's eyes were wide and fever bright but from fear or madness Derran couldn't tell.

Derran struggled against his father's grip but it held like steel. “You brought this witch hunter here, father. What did you think would happen? Now let me go. I have to stop this!” Derran screamed at his father.

“You can't.”

“That's Leesa he's about to murder. YOUR DAUGHTER!”

“**AND NOW, I WILL CLEANSE THIS UNHOLY BODY WITH FIRE.**” The Arbiter's voice rang with an unnatural volume over the courtyard and the torch in his hand burst into flames. The Arbiter held the torch to the bottom of the pyre and the wood began to catch alight, slow at first but the flames soon warmed to their grisly task.

The courtyard seemed to burst into commotion. Some people were shouting, some were making holy symbols in the air with their fingers as if to ward off evil, some turned away, unwilling to watch but no one was doing anything to stop it. Derran looked up once more into his father's eyes. There were tears there but no action, he was going to let this murder happen.

“DERRAN. STOP THEM!” It was Keelin's voice sounding over the commotion.

Something snapped inside. Derran took hold of his father's sword and drew it up and out, slicing a shallow cut across his father's arm, forcing him to release his grip. Then he spun around and was sprinting towards the pyre and the Arbiter, he would stop this travesty now, the Arbiter's magic be damned.

Derran felt a sharp pain in the back of his head. The sword slipped from his grasp and his legs stopped pumping. Darkness claimed him before his body even hit the ground.

The room was dark, lit only by the fire in the hearth. Derran struggled to remember why that was important. Then it hit him, 'Leesa'. He threw back the covers and leapt from the bed only to collapse on the floor as a wave of vertigo washed over him, a moment later he found himself throwing up in the bedpan. Derran realised there was a bandage around his head, reaching up he found a large dressing applied to the back of his skull. He realised he had no idea how long he'd been unconscious, he'd received head injuries before and knew they could take a long time to recover from. Pulling himself to his feet Derran stumbled over to the window and pulled back the curtains.

It was dark outside, the courtyard lit by the lanterns hung from the house. The only person in the courtyard was a guard making his nightly patrol of the grounds. There was no crowd of people, no Arbiter and no pyre. Then he saw the blackened ground. The remains of the pyre had been cleaned away but the ground beneath still bore the signs of Leesa's murder, lit by the light from a lantern.

Derran collapsed back down onto the floor. He felt like throwing up again. His little sister was dead and his father was as responsible for it as the man who had lit the fire. Everyone who had watched and not tried to stop it held equal responsibility. He sat there for a long time, fighting waves of rage and despair, before taking any action.

Dressing in his riding leathers, Derran buckled his plain longsword to his belt and placed changes of clothing and all the money he had in his saddle bags. Then he slipped from his room and went to find his little brother.

Keelin wasn't asleep, Derran noticed as soon as he entered the room. The ten year old was sat in his bed watching Derran, he looked far older than his ten years, dark bags ringed his bloodshot eyes and his mouth had a sad tilt to it. Derran crossed the room and sat on the foot of the bed, placing his saddlebags on the floor. For a long time neither brother spoke.

"How long have I been out?" Derran asked.

"A day. Father threw a rock at you. It was a good shot. Mother patched you up after they dragged her inside. He has her under guard even now. They weren't sure you'd wake up."

"And you?"

"I knew you'd wake up."

"That wasn't what I meant." Derran didn't need his little brother to answer; he could see it in his face, in his eyes. Keelin had seen the whole thing; he'd watched them burn his little sister alive. Their father hadn't even thought to have him taken inside with their mother. There was a haunted look about Keelin's face. Just ten years old and his childhood innocence stolen from him.

After a while Derran spoke again. "I'm sorry Keelin, I..."

"Not your fault," Keelin cut his brother off. "You leaving?"

Derran knew his little brother well enough to hear the real question. "I can't take you with me." The look on his brother's face almost changed his mind. Almost.

"You going after the Arbiter?"

Derran shook his head. "I'd loose. I've heard talk in the barracks of an old sword master in the hills far north of here. I'm going to find him, see if there's anything he can teach me."

Keelin looked as if he was about to ask if he could go with Derran but thought better of it. "I'll look after mother."

Then it seemed there was nothing left to say. Derran sat for a while staring into the flames of the hearth then picked up his saddlebags and exited via his little brother's bedroom window, scaling down the building as he'd done countless times before, and landing in the courtyard below. He made straight for the stables making sure he stayed in the shadows.

The stable boy on duty was asleep in an empty stall and, despite the soft whinnying of the horses as Derran entered, the boy stayed asleep. Derran saddled his grey mare, a quiet beast as swift as she was beautiful, Derran had named her Steel. Now he led Steel out of the stables and towards the front gate. He may have been sneaking off in the middle of the night but he was going to do it in plain sight.

The guard who approached Derran at the gate was Sergeant Bowen. He was one who had sat by and watched with the rest of them.

"Glad to see you're up and well, Lordship but I can't let you leave without your father's say so."

"Open the gate, Sergeant."

"I can't do that, young sir." Bowen began to turn to signal the other guardsmen at the gate.

Derran fixed the man with a stare. "Sergeant, I am leaving. If any man stands in my way or raises a shout I will cut them down." Derran bit off each of the last three words.

Fear shot through the Sergeant. Derran was serious and it showed in his eyes, and Bowen was well aware Derran had the skill to follow through with his threat. After a few moments Sergeant Bowen turned and gave the signal to open the gate.

Despite the hammering of his heart in his chest Derran urged Steel through the gate at a slow walk. He didn't glance around, didn't look back, and as soon as he was through the gate he put his heels to the mare beneath him and was gone.



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