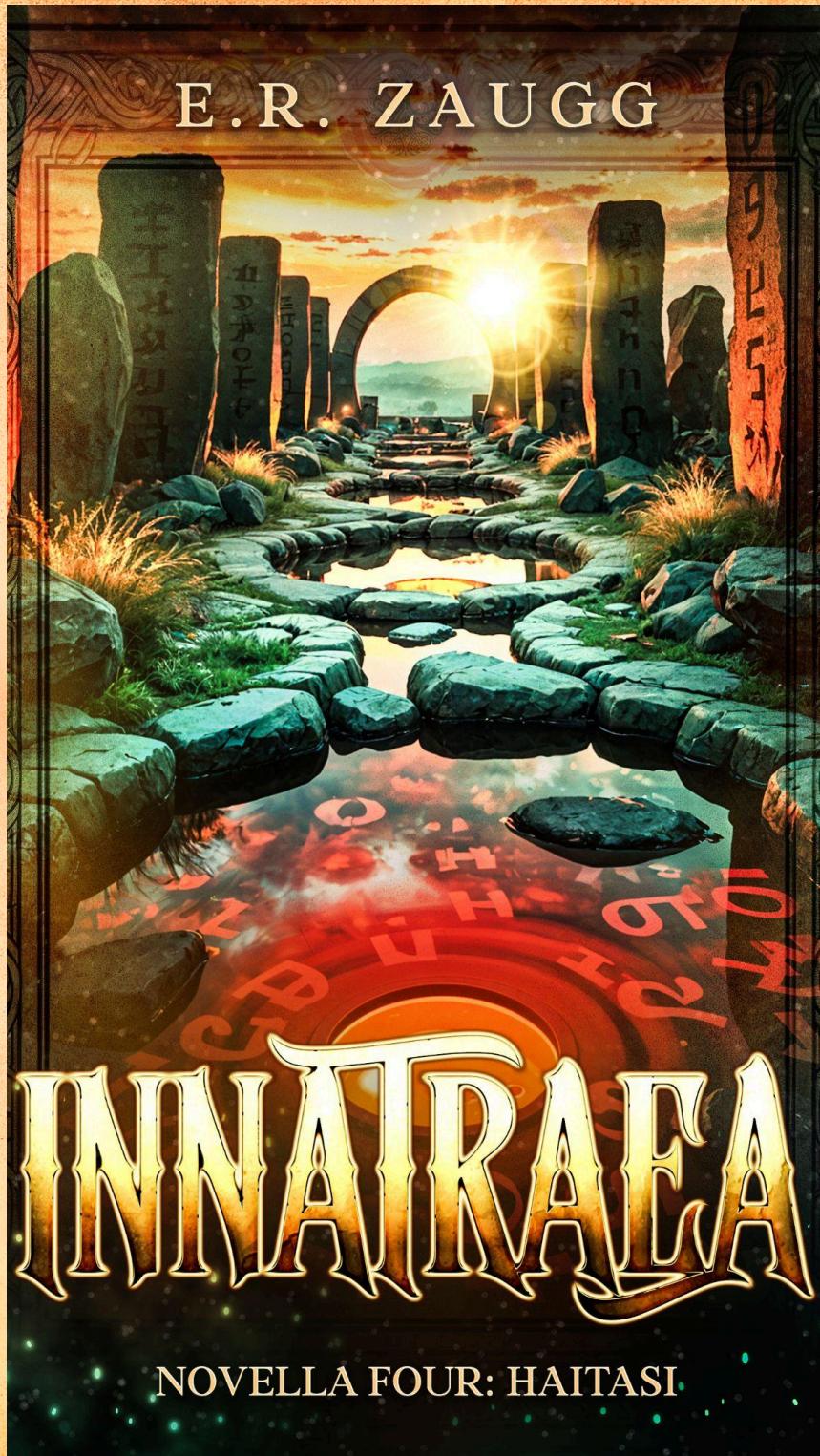


E.R. ZAUGG



Innatraea

Novella Four: Haitasi



E.R. Zaugg





*"Amen inch'its' amenadzhvary
khaghaghut'yun gtneln e.*

*Of all things, finding peace is the
hardest."*

-Sophenen Saying



Prologue:

Verjin Paterazm (The Last War)

"Amen inch'its' amenadzhvary khaghaghut'yun gtneln e.

Of all things, finding peace is the hardest."

-Sophenen Saying

Decades ago...

Jonathan was still holding Emrys's hand when the body went cold.

He should have let go sooner. The camp needed him—reports to file, men to debrief, the endless machinery of war that ground forward whether you were ready or not.

Somewhere beyond the tent flaps, Gertrude was waiting. But Emrys had been nineteen. He'd had freckles across his nose and laughed like a startled bird, and he'd enlisted the same week as Phyli and Gareth and Dai, the four boys from Mynydd who'd walked into the recruiting tent together with their chests puffed out and their mothers' tears still wet on their cheeks.



Three of them were dead now. Gareth had been first—an Aedonian lance through the throat at Cefn Glas. Dai had lasted two more months before fever took him, shaking and calling for his sister in a voice that got smaller and smaller until it stopped. And now Emrys, gut-wound gone septic, dying by inches while Jonathan sat beside him and pretended there was something left to do.

Phyliп was delivering the count. That's what soldiers did. You delivered the count, and you kept your voice steady, and you didn't think about the fact that you'd promised a friend's mother you'd look after her boy.

Jonathan let go of the cold hand. Closed the boy's eyes with fingers that had done this too many times to tremble anymore.

Whispered the old words—*Bydded iddynt ddod o hyd i heddwch yn y Byd Nesaf*, may they find peace in the Next World—and meant them the way you mean a prayer you've said so often it's worn smooth as river stone.

He stepped out into the cold.

The wind on the Sea of Grass had no mercy. With nothing but flat plains for leagues in every direction, it gained strength over distances a man couldn't walk in a lifetime, scouring everything in its path until only the stubborn remained. *Mae'r gwynt yn greulon i'r rhai sydd ar goll*. The wind is cruel to those who are lost.

Jonathan was lost. He'd known it for months now, the way you know a wound is infected before the fever comes—a wrongness beneath the skin, spreading slowly, impossible to ignore. Something in him had gone shallow. Roots exposed to winter winds, waiting to be torn up. He'd fought in seven campaigns. He'd buried friends in four kingdoms.



He'd learned to sleep through the noise of battle and wake at the whisper of a knife being drawn, and somewhere along the way he'd stopped being able to remember what peace felt like.

The ring in his pocket pressed against his thigh like a question he wasn't sure he deserved to ask.

He'd bought it three weeks ago from a Zimsway trader—blue lapis veins through gold, the kind of craftsmanship that made you understand why Rinowhn jewelry cost more. The trader had looked at Jonathan's weathered face and calloused hands and asked, without judgment, "She's worth leaving the war for?"

"She's worth everything," Jonathan had said, and meant it in a way that frightened him.

Phyliп was waiting outside Emrys's tent, pale and rigid, his jaw set in that particular way young soldiers learned when they were trying not to feel anything. He couldn't be more than twenty himself. The last of the Mynydd boys, and Jonathan could see the knowledge of it in his eyes—the awareness that he was the only one left, that the others had gone ahead to whatever waited beyond, that he'd have to go home someday and face their families alone.

Jonathan put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "He's with Rhiannon now. She'll look after his soul."

"Yes ser." Phyliп's voice cracked on the second word. "Thank you, ser."

"Go help Master Tegid with the supply wagons. A soldier needs a task."



He watched Phyliп disappear into the throng of the camp—a sprawling coalition that had seemed impossible a year ago and now felt as natural as breathing. Cathyoran soldiers in their leather and steel moved between the hide lodges of the l'okanew, where warriors sharpened obsidian blades and spoke in low voices around smoking fires. Beyond them, the Ta'al horse lines stretched toward the horizon, their mounts decorated with feathers and painted symbols. The Shal'ifar drilled nearby, bull whips cracking in unison, spears flashing through precise formations while others loosed arrows at distant targets without breaking stride. Their movements were synchronized, fluid, beautiful in a way that made Cathyoran soldiers stop and stare.

Strange bedfellows, all of them. Their king had sent Jonathan's company to assist the Rinowhn against Aedonian expansion—a marriage of convenience that had somehow become something more. The l'okanew were fierce and proud, their humor sharp as their weapons, their respect hard-won but absolute once given. The Ta'al were formal and precise, their matriarchs commanding with a quiet authority that reminded Jonathan of the women warriors in Trefn Cyflawnder.

They'd learned to fight together because the alternative was dying separately. It wasn't friendship, exactly. It was something stranger and stronger—the bond of people who'd bled into the same ground.

Jonathan made his way toward the Cathyoran section, nodding to soldiers he passed, accepting salutes with the automatic grace of long practice. Deitrich's forge blazed against the grey sky, the clang of hammer on steel ringing out like a heartbeat. The big blacksmith had set up his operation at the edge of camp, close enough to serve but far enough that the smoke didn't bother the Rinowhn, who preferred their fires for cooking and ceremony rather than metalwork.



"—and I told him, if your blade breaks that easily, perhaps you should carry a cooking spoon instead!"

Laughter erupted from the apprentices clustered around the forge. Deitrich stood at the center of it, massive and sweat-streaked, his hammer resting against his shoulder like it weighed nothing. He caught sight of Jonathan and grinned—the grin of a man who'd known him since they were both young and stupid and convinced they'd live forever.

"Ah! There he is! The great Commander Al'Shane, come to grace us with his presence!"

"I didn't come for your mockery, old friend." But Jonathan was almost smiling. That was the thing about Deitrich. The man could make you smile even when your hands still felt cold from holding a dead boy's fingers.

"Then you came to the wrong forge." Deitrich set down his hammer and wiped his hands on his leather apron. His eyes were sharp despite the easy humor, reading Jonathan's face the way a tracker read signs. They'd grown up in the same village, enlisted on the same day, and survived the same battles. Jonathan had been there when Deitrich buried his brother. Some bonds went deeper than words.

"What's on your mind? You look like a man wrestling with destiny."

Jonathan glanced around. The apprentices were focused on their work, but sound carried in a camp. He stepped closer and pulled the ring from his pocket.



Deitrich's expression softened. The mockery fell away, replaced by something genuine and warm. "Ah. So it's like that."

"It's like that."

"When?"

"Today." Jonathan turned the ring in his fingers, watching the way the lapis caught the firelight. "Maybe now. I've taken my pension. Signed the papers this morning. It's done."

"She said yes to the farm?"

"She doesn't know yet." Jonathan's throat tightened. "What if she doesn't want—"

He stopped. The words felt too large, too dangerous to say aloud.

What if she doesn't want me? What if I'm not enough? What if I've forgotten how to be anything but a soldier?

He started again, quieter. "I'm tired, Deitrich. I'm so tired. I held Emrys's hand while he died—he was nineteen, and deserved a better fate—" His voice cracked. He pressed on. "I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to wake up wondering who died in the night. I don't want to write anymore letters, explaining why a mother's son isn't coming home." He looked up at his friend. "I want to grow old with Gertrude. I want to forget what blood smells like. Is that so much to ask?"

Deitrich was quiet for a long moment. Then he reached out and gripped Jonathan's shoulders with hands that could bend iron.



"My friend," he said, and his voice had lost all its mockery. "You've given enough. More than enough. If you've found someone worth leaving the war for, then leave the war." He squeezed once, hard enough to bruise. "Go tell her. Stop standing here talking to an old blacksmith when your future is waiting in the medical tent."

"What if she says no?"

"Then you'll survive. But you won't know until you ask." Deitrich released him and picked up his hammer. "*Mae'n bryd siarad â thynged.*" It's time to speak with fate.

Jonathan tucked the ring back into his pocket. His heart was pounding like he was riding into battle—which, in a way, he was. The most important battle of his life, and he had no strategy, no reinforcements, nothing but a ring and a question and the desperate hope that love was enough.

He walked toward the medical tent.



The Aedonian officer had called her a whore.

That was his first mistake. His second was assuming that being twice her size meant anything at all.

Scatha walked through the camp with her hand pressed against her side and blood seeping between her fingers, grinning like a wolf who'd just eaten well. The wound hurt—a lucky slash that had gotten through before she'd found his rhythm—but pain meant you were alive. That you'd survived something. Pain meant you were still here, still fighting, still breathing in a world that wanted to kill you.

The officer was currently in the prisoner medical tent, nursing a shattered knee that would never heal right and a new understanding of what Trefn Cyfiawnder steel looked like up close. The whole thing had taken less than two minutes.

Cymysg, she'd called him, right before her blade found his leg. Mongrel dog. The kind of insult you used when someone wasn't worth real words.

She'd stripped off her armor as she walked—it was slowing her down, and besides, she'd never much cared for modesty. The Cathyoran soldiers had long since stopped staring. The Rinowhn warriors watched with something closer to respect; the Ta'al in particular seemed to appreciate a woman who didn't pretend to be anything other than what she was.



What she was: Trefn Cyfiawnder. The Order of Justice. Bonded to a Great Dryad since her sixteenth year, when the ancient Sacred Folk had looked into her soul and found something worth keeping. She could feel her Dryad now, distant but present, a warmth at the back of her mind like sunlight through leaves. Something like concern flickered through the bond—not words, never words, just the feeling of being seen and worried over.

She passed a group of Ta'al Shal'ifar returning from a drill, bull whips coiled at their hips, their movements still synchronized even in rest. One of them caught her eye and nodded—Kalani, a woman about her age with ritual scarring on her cheeks and a smile that promised trouble. They'd sparred twice, both matches ending in draws that left them bruised and laughing. Scatha liked the Ta'al. They understood that a woman's body was made for more than bearing children.

"Heard you danced with an Aedonian," Kalani called in her accented common tongue.

"Stepped on his toes a bit."

"That's blood on your side."

"His blade got ideas above its station." Scatha shrugged, then winced as the movement pulled at the wound. "I corrected them."

Kalani laughed—a sharp sound, like a hawk's cry. "Get that looked at, Trefn Cyfiawnder. The war needs you alive."



The medical tent loomed ahead, canvas walls snapping in the endless wind. Scatha didn't particularly want to go inside—she'd spent enough time in field hospitals to know that even the smallest wound could turn deadly if you ignored it—but she'd pushed her luck far enough for one evening. Her Dryad's presence flickered with something that felt like insistence, and she sighed.

Scatha pushed through the flap and was immediately hit by the smell of herbs and old sweat and something copper-sharp underneath. The tent was crowded—wounded soldiers on cots, healers moving between them like dancers in a complicated pattern. She spotted a young woman threatening a soldier with his bedpan and grinned. That one had spirit.

And there, folding sheets in the corner with hands that moved like they'd done this a hundred thousand times before, was Gertrude.

Scatha had been watching Gertrude for weeks now. Not suspiciously—though the woman was odd, no denying that. She never seemed to tire, and seemed to know everything about healing and medicine, though she claimed to be in her thirties. There was something behind her eyes, a weight that didn't match her unlined face. Scatha had lived long enough to recognize someone carrying deep sadness, even if she couldn't explain how she knew.

And the way Gertrude looked at that Cathyoran commander, Jonathan, when she thought no one was watching? That was a woman in love. In love and terrified of it, which Scatha understood better than most.

"Ho, friend Gertrude!" She let her voice boom across the tent, pushing through the pain with practiced ease. "It appears I am in need of your care again!"



Gertrude looked up, and something flickered across her face—recognition, resignation, perhaps a hint of fondness buried deep. "Scatha. What have you done this time?"

"There was an Aedonian officer who needed an education in manners." Scatha dropped onto a cot, not bothering to hide the wince. "Called me a whore. I corrected him."

"And the blood?"

"His blade got in one good cut before I broke his knee." She grinned up at Gertrude, who was already pulling out her kit. "You should see him. He won't be calling anyone a whore again."

"You should show more caution." Gertrude pressed a bandage against the wound. "Even Trefn Cyfiawnder can bleed to death."

"Where's the fun in caution?" Scatha's grin widened. "Besides, pride's a cruel mistress. I had to show the *Cymysg* what our steel looks like."

Gertrude's mouth twitched—almost a smile, but not quite. "Hold still. This is going to hurt."

"Everything hurts. That's how you know you're alive."

The needle bit into her flesh, and Scatha gripped the edge of the cot and let herself feel it. Her Dryad's presence wrapped around her like a warm blanket, dulling the sharpest edges. She watched Gertrude work—those steady hands, that focused expression.

"You're good at this," Scatha said.

"I've had practice."



"How much practice? You move like someone who's stitched a thousand wounds."

Something shuttered behind Gertrude's eyes. "More than a thousand."

"How many wars have you seen, Gertrude?"

"Enough to know they're all the same." Gertrude's voice was flat, carefully controlled. "Different flags. Different reasons. Same blood."

Scatha wanted to push further—there was a mystery here, and she'd never been good at leaving mysteries alone—but the tent flap opened, and she saw Gertrude's whole body change.

Jonathan stood in the entrance, his face pale and determined, his hand in his pocket.

Ah, Scatha thought. So it's today.

She'd seen the ring. She'd seen the way he looked at Gertrude—the same way Gertrude looked at him when she thought no one was watching. Two people dancing around each other like moths around a flame, both of them afraid of getting burned.

"I need to speak with you," Jonathan said. His voice was steady, but Scatha could hear the tremor underneath.

"I'm too busy," Gertrude said. "Can it wait?"

"Please, Gertrude." He said her name like a prayer.

Scatha grinned. "Don't mind me. I've got nowhere to be."



Gertrude shot her a look that promised retribution, but she straightened anyway, wiping her hands on her apron. "Fine. But you'll have to follow me on my rounds."

He took a breath. Squared his shoulders.

And dropped to one knee.

Scatha threw her head back and laughed, ignoring the pull at her stitches. "Ha! Looks like he's pledging more than his sword!"

The tent erupted—hoots and cheers and stamping feet. But Scatha was watching Gertrude's face. Watching the fear and the want and the terrible weight of something heavy warring behind her eyes.

She's going to say yes, Scatha thought. And it's going to cost her everything.

She didn't know why she was so certain. Just an old familiar feeling, one that she'd learned to trust.



Five hundred and twelve years.

The number pressed against Gertrude's chest like a stone as she knelt beside the supply crates, folding sheets.

Five hundred and twelve years of dressing wounds and burying friends. She'd stopped keeping track of the faces somewhere around the third century—it hurt less that way, reducing lives to numbers instead of names—but the numbers themselves had become a weight she couldn't set down.

Thirty-one people she'd loved, lost in this war alone.

Her twin sister Crilla would have understood. Crilla, who had become one of the greatest Weavers on Innatraea, who had power enough to shake the ground—she would have known what to say about loving mortals when you weren't mortal yourself. But Crilla was far away, and Gertrude was here, and nobody had ever been able to explain why Crilla had become what she was while Gertrude had simply... stopped aging.

Not a Weaver. Not anything with a name. Just a woman who aged so slowly that mortal lifetimes passed like seasons, her body refusing to keep pace with the world around her.

She'd buried so many people. Watched so many generations grow old and grey and fade while she stayed nearly the same—a few more lines around her eyes across a century, a strand or two of grey across decades, changes so glacial that no one who knew her for a single lifetime would ever notice. She'd never married. Never let herself get that close. Every time she felt herself wanting to stay, wanting to build something, she'd packed her things and moved on before anyone could notice that the years weren't touching her the way they should.



Until Jonathan.

The field hospital stretched around her, a maze of cots and curtains and the particular smell of too many wounded bodies pressed into too small a space. Supplies were dwindling—they always were, this late in a campaign—and the wounded were restless, and the dying were quiet in that way she'd learned to recognize across five centuries of watching death do its work.

Josephine was threatening a soldier with his bedpan. Emilia lectured another about his bandages. Young. Both of them were so young. Gertrude could remember when she'd been that young—barely—the memories faded and sepia-toned like paintings left too long in the sun.

Five hundred and twelve years.

She'd tried to count them all, once. The people she'd lost. She'd started a list in a journal, names and dates and the way they died, thinking it would help her remember them as people instead of numbers. She'd filled twelve pages before she had to stop, her hands shaking too badly to write.

There had been Aldric, her first love, who'd died in a farming accident when she was still young enough to believe she was mortal too. She'd waited for grief to kill her, and it hadn't, and that was when she'd started to understand. There had been friends who noticed she wasn't aging and demanded answers she didn't have. There had been the towns she'd fled before suspicion turned to accusation, the lives she'd built and abandoned, the names she'd worn and shed like old clothes.

And there had been so many others—faces blurring together across centuries, names she had to work to remember, each one a small erosion of something she couldn't name.



What's the point of living forever if everyone you love turns to dust?

And now there was Jonathan.

She'd let him kiss her last week. A moment of weakness, of wanting. They'd been walking back from the supply depot at dusk, and he'd said something that made her laugh—really laugh, the kind that surprised her—and she'd looked at his weathered face and his tired eyes and thought: *this one. This one I want to keep.*

So when he'd stopped walking and cupped her face in his calloused hands, she hadn't pulled away. She'd let him kiss her, soft and tentative, like he was afraid she might shatter. And for one perfect moment, she'd forgotten everything—the centuries behind her, the centuries ahead, the burial she'd eventually have to perform.

Then reality had crashed back in, and she'd made an excuse and fled, and spent the rest of the night sitting alone in her tent, pressing her hands against her chest like she could hold her heart still.

She knew better. She *knew* better. You didn't fall in love when you were going to watch them age and wither and die while you barely changed at all. You didn't let someone kiss you when you knew—*knew*—that you'd be standing over their grave in sixty years, looking almost exactly as you did now, with nothing to show for your love but another name to add to the list.

But oh, she wanted him.



She wanted his laugh, rare and surprised, like he'd forgotten he knew how. She wanted his hands, rough from decades of swordwork, gentle when they touched her face. She wanted mornings where she woke up beside him and evenings where they sat together in silence and the thousand small intimacies of a life shared.

She wanted to stop being alone.

Five hundred and twelve years alone.

The tent flap burst open, and Scatha's voice boomed across the chaos: "Ho, friend Gertrude! It appears I am in need of your care again!"

Gertrude looked up, resignation and reluctant fondness warring in her chest. Scatha was shedding what remained of her armor, dropping onto a cot with a grin that didn't quite hide the pain.

"Scatha. What have you done this time?"

"There was an Aedonian officer who needed an education in manners." Scatha dropped onto the cot, not bothering to hide the wince. "Called me a whore. I corrected him."

"And the blood?"

"His blade got in one good cut before I broke his knee." The grin widened. "You should see him. He won't be calling anyone a whore again."

Gertrude pulled out her kit and pressed a bandage against the wound, perhaps harder than necessary. "You should show more caution. Even Trefn Cyfiawnder can bleed to death."



"Where's the fun in caution?" Scatha's eyes were sharp despite the easy humor. "Besides, pride's a cruel mistress. Had to show the *Cymysg* what our steel looks like."

Gertrude's mouth twitched—almost a smile, but not quite. "Hold still. This is going to hurt."

"Everything hurts. That's how you know you're alive."

She threaded her needle and began stitching, letting the familiar rhythm calm her racing thoughts. Scatha was watching her with that knowing look again.

"You're good at this," Scatha said.

"I've had practice."

"How much practice? You move like someone who's stitched a thousand wounds."

Try a hundred thousand. "More than a thousand."

"How many wars have you seen, Gertrude?"

Gertrude kept her eyes on her needle. "Enough to know they're all the same. Different flags. Different reasons. Same blood."

The tent flap opened again, and she felt him before she saw him.

Jonathan stood in the entrance, his face pale and set, his hand in his pocket. The wind had tangled his hair and reddened his cheeks, and he looked terrified in a way that had nothing to do with battle. His eyes found hers across the chaos of the tent, and everything else faded—the moans of the wounded, Scatha's knowing grin, the smell of blood and herbs.



No, she thought. Not now. I'm not ready.

She would never be ready.

That was the terrible truth she'd been running from since he first kissed her. There was no amount of preparation that could make this bearable. She was either going to love him and lose him, or refuse to love him and lose him anyway.

"I need to speak with you," he said. "Something important."

"I'm too busy." Her voice came out steadier than she felt. "Can it wait?"

"Please, Gertrude." He said her name like it cost him something. Like it was a prayer he wasn't sure would be answered.

"Don't mind me," Scatha said. "I've got nowhere to be."

Gertrude shot her a look, but she was already straightening, wiping her hands on her apron, moving toward him like a compass needle finding north. "Fine. But you'll have to follow me on my rounds."

He took a breath. Rolled his shoulders. Squared his stance the way she'd seen him do before a battle.

Then he dropped to one knee.

No. Her hand flew to her mouth. Not here. Not now. Don't make me choose.

Because she knew what she would choose. That was the terrifying part. Five hundred and twelve years of watching people die, of building walls around her heart, of swearing she would never do this—and one tired soldier with sad eyes and gentle hands had walked right through every defense she had.



"Looks like he's pledging more than his sword!" Scatha's voice cut through the sudden silence, followed by her laugh.

The tent erupted—cheers and hoots and stamping feet, wounded soldiers propping themselves up to see, healers abandoning their tasks to watch.

Gertrude couldn't hear any of it. The noise had become a distant roar, meaningless, like waves crashing on a shore miles away. All she could see was Jonathan. All she could feel was her heart slamming against her ribs, too fast, too loud.

I'll bury you, she thought. I'll watch you grow old while I stay nearly the same. I'll hold your hand while you die, and I'll have to walk away from your grave and keep living, and it will break me. It will break me in ways I don't know how to survive.

"I told you," she whispered. "I can't be a soldier's wife."

"I know." His hand trembled as he pulled the ring from his pocket—blue lapis veins through gold, Rinowhn craftsmanship. Beautiful. She wondered if he'd known, when he bought it, that the Rinowhn believed lapis guided souls to the next world. "I took my pension. It's done. We can leave together, buy that farm we talked about, live somewhere the war can't find us."

"You would give up everything—"



"Gertrude." His eyes held hers, steady and certain despite the trembling of his hands. "I held a boy's hand today while he died. He was nineteen. I said the words for his soul and I thought: I can't do this anymore. I can't keep living for the next battle when there's a woman I want to live for." He lifted the ring. "That Sophenen saying you told me—of all things, finding peace is the hardest. I found mine. It's you. Say yes."

The word rose in her throat, and she swallowed it.

Say no. Protect yourself. Walk away before this destroys you.

But she was so tired of walking away.

Five hundred and twelve years alone. Five hundred and twelve years of watching from the edges of other people's lives, never letting herself want too much, never letting herself stay too long. She'd outlived everyone she'd ever loved, except her sister, and survived, and sometimes she wondered if surviving was really so different from dying slowly.

What if she stopped? What if she let herself have this one thing, this one man, this one love—knowing it would end, knowing she'd bury him, knowing the grief would be unimaginable?

What if the grief was worth it?

She looked at Jonathan, kneeling before her with his heart in his hands. She thought about the farm they'd talked about, half-joking, late at night when the camp was quiet. A farmhouse. An orchard. A life where no one died under her hands.



She thought about waking up beside him. Growing old with him, even if her aging would be imperceptible beside his.

Watching him grey and wrinkle and slow, loving every version of him, holding him at the end.

She thought about the grave she'd eventually dig. The words she'd eventually say. The long walk away, alone again, as always.

And she thought: yes.

"Yes," she said.

She held out her hand, and he slid the ring onto her finger, and she watched the way the lapis caught the light—blue as the sky, blue as the sea, blue as the centuries stretching out behind her and ahead.

She closed her eyes. Wrapped her hands around his neck. Kissed him the way she'd wanted to kiss him since that first night, fierce and desperate, pouring everything she couldn't say into the press of her lips.

"Hope he's as fierce as Trefn Cyfiawnder steel, Gertrude!" Scatha howled from her cot.

Gertrude ignored them all.

For this one moment, she let herself forget—the centuries behind her, the burial she'd eventually perform, the truth she'd have to tell him someday about why she'd barely aged in decades while his hair went grey and his hands grew weak.



For now, there was only his mouth. His warmth. His choice.

And hers.

Their last war, ending.

Their first peace, beginning.

She had no idea how to tell him she was going to watch him die. But she had time. She had time to find the words, time to prepare him, time to love him so thoroughly that when the end came, he would know—really know—that he had been someone's everything.

For however long they had, she was going to make it count.

