



*Arato's Tale*

*Kim Fielding*



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# **MATO'S TALE**

by Kim Fielding

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Happy reading!

Mato's Tale

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Chapter One

As he moved a cloth slowly over the tabletop, Mato allowed himself to sink into a midafternoon torpor. His eyes were unfocused, his thoughts sleepy and slow. He'd wiped that table clean thousands of times over the years, and he'd undoubtedly wipe it thousands of times again. He knew every nick and groove in the wood, just as he knew every stone in Chorna, the village where he lived. If he ever went blind, he'd hardly be hindered at all; he could picture all the details with perfect clarity.

A quiet bit of singing drifted

out from the kitchen, the words indistinct, followed by a burst of laughter. Mato smiled. His mother had been laughing often these days, as if to make up for years of sorrow.

“Ain’t seemly, her carrying on with him like that,” grumbled one of the old men seated at the back of the room. They settled themselves there every morning when the tavern opened and remained until their wives dragged them home for supper. They drank watered ale and argued over endless games of Geese and Foxes. They were as much a fixture in the



inn as the tables and chairs, as Mato.

Mato stuffed the cloth into his green apron. “She’s happy.”

“He’s too young for her.”

“So?” Mato shrugged. “She’s certainly old enough to make her own decisions. You’re just jealous.”

The old man frowned and mumbled something, while his friends laughed and patted his shoulders. Mato wandered to the next table, which was still sticky from lunch. As he cleaned it, he planned. After sweeping the floor and washing tankards, he might

have enough time to sit outside for a while before supper, enjoying the afternoon sun in the main square.

In the kitchen, his mother laughed again.

It was true that Stipo was years younger than Mama. In fact, when he'd appeared at the tavern two months earlier with his lira hanging by a strap from his shoulder and his bow tucked in a back pocket, Mato had flirted with him a little. But Stipo had soon made it clear that his interest lay elsewhere. He owned nothing but his instrument and the ragged clothing on his back, and old war wounds

gave him a limp and a scarred smile. But he played passably well and sang even better, and he brought a sparkle to Mama's eyes that Mato had never seen before. She'd been a widow far too long—she deserved some joy and companionship. Mato hadn't minded when Stipo decided to stick around.

Companionship. Mato thought of his own narrow bed in his room above the tavern. It had been a long time since he'd shared it with anyone. When he was younger, a few men in Chorna had joined him. But one by one, each had settled down with a husband or wife. They

still came to the tavern to drink, but at the end of the evening they left and Mato was again alone.

*Stop being maudlin,* he scolded himself. *Your life's not so terrible as that.*

The tables were clean enough. He tucked the towel away and started for the corner where he kept the broom. But before he got there, a commotion arose outside—shouts and excited conversation rushing in through the open front door. Abandoning his plans to sweep, Mato leaned outside to look.

The square was filling fast, as

people arrived from all directions. They stood in clumps, chattering away, craning their heads to the south. A young girl tried to dart by, but Mato gently caught her arm. "What's going on?" he asked.

Her face was flushed and her hair wild. "Soldiers! They gots horses and fancy clothes! And some of 'em are Wedey!" She pulled out of his grip and ran away.

Few travelers came this way. Chorna was neither on a main road nor on the way to any destinations of note. As for soldiers, well, even during the war with Wedeyta, most of the action had taken place far

away. The sons and daughters of Chorna had fallen in battles far from home—including Mato's father and brother. And anyway, the war had ended long ago, and a strong alliance was now growing between Wedeyta and Kozar. There seemed little reason for soldiers from either country to be visiting Chorna.

Mato heard the clip-clop of hooves echoing off the town's stone structures and noted that the horses didn't sound hurried. A moment later, Mama and Stipo crowded near him in the doorway. They smelled of spices, and Stipo had a

flour smudge on one cheek. “Is there some occasion?” he asked.

“Not that I know of,” Mato replied. He was saved from further questions when the horses entered the square. The crowd hushed and parted before them.

There were four steeds, each stepping proudly. They weren't the sturdy, blocky beasts the farmers around Chorna used to plow their fields and pull their carts. Mato didn't know much about horses, but he could tell these were elegant. Regal, almost.

Three men and a woman sat astride the horses. Two of the men

wore billowy white trousers below cobalt-and-scarlet Kozari uniform jackets resplendent with braids and ribbons. The other man and the woman were dressed more soberly in tight black trousers and sparsely adorned navy cloaks. They all looked relaxed and happy, which was a relief.

One of the Kozari men leaned close to the Wedey woman and said something. As he pointed at the tavern, her gaze followed. Mato and his mother exchanged bewildered looks, and Mato had to resist pressing back against the wall as the horses neared.



“Hello,” said one of the Kozari soldiers in a friendly tone. His hair was more gray than brown, but he sat very straight in the saddle. “Are you Mato the innkeeper?”

Mato felt his cheeks burn. Every eye in Chorna was aimed at him. “Um, yes.”

“Excellent! These Wedey visitors have come with a message for you.”

“For... for me, sir?”

“For you. Now, Captain Hiwot”—he waved at the woman—“speaks little of our tongue, but Corporal Desto is quite adept.”

Corporal Desto was tall and muscular, with straight black hair tied back in a leather cord. His skin was far browner than Mato's would ever be, even if Mato spent the rest of his life in the sun; and his eyes were darker still. For a hard-looking man, he had soft eyes, deep and wary like a forest animal's. He wasn't beautiful, yet something about him drew Mato's gaze and made his heart race.

"I am honored to meet you," said Corporal Desto in a heavy accent that sounded almost musical. He smiled, revealing slightly crooked but very white teeth.

“Um, welcome to Chorna. A message?”

Mato’s mother grunted and stepped forward. “Forgive my son, who’s forgotten I taught him any manners. Please. Join us inside.”

She was right—whatever these Wedey had to say to him probably didn’t require the entire town as audience. But Mato vibrated impatiently as the visitors dismounted and unfastened their bags, as arrangements were made to care for the horses, as Mama evicted the complaining old men from the tavern and showed the visitors to a table. The inn, which

was undoubtedly plain by anyone's standards, looked downright shabby in comparison to the Kozari soldiers' finery.

Kozari custom called for food and drink before business. Mato didn't want to be rude, but he wasn't happy about having to wait while their guests ate. Mama served them wine instead of ale—an astonishing show of generosity—and everyone was too polite to complain about the stew. The quality of the tavern's cuisine had improved somewhat since Stipo arrived, but Mato knew it was still more filling than tasty. Stipo played

his lira and sang softly during the meal.

At long last they cleared the dishes away and Mama poured more wine. She and Mato joined the soldiers, pulling another table and chairs close so there was room enough for all. Stipo hesitated, but Mama motioned him to sit with them.

Corporal Desto rummaged in a large leather bag and pulled out something flat and square, wrapped in thick gold silk. He carefully opened the fabric to reveal an envelope, and from that he withdrew a large piece of paper.

He set the paper on the table in front of Mato. “It is in Wedey. Would you like me to translate?”

Mato hesitantly touched the paper, which was thick and soft, like finely cured leather. The script was so ornate, with its flourishes and curls, that he wasn’t sure he could have read it even in Kozari. “Yes, please.”

Desto rearranged the paper so he could see it better. He cleared his throat. “*To the, er, esteemed Mato, innkeeper of Chorna, and his most honored mother.*” He looked up apologetically. “That is not exact. My Kozari is not

perfect.”

“Seems fine so far,” Mato said, which earned him a small smile.

“I will try my best. This writing is very... formal. *We owe you deepest gratitude for the kindness and assistance you rendered to our son, Prince Berhanu, and to—*”

“*Prince Berhanu?*” Mato exclaimed.

“Yes, of course. He is the younger son of our King Tafari. You did not know this?”

Mato shook his head. Eight months earlier, a handsome and

mysterious man named Volos Perun had appeared in town. He'd clearly been worried about something, but it took him several days before he confided in Mato, admitting that he'd come to Chorna to rescue someone from rogue members of the Kozari military. For some reason, Mato had trusted him. And so did Mato's mother, who'd drugged the military men's ale. Volos had killed all eight of them and achieved the rescue—although he was very nearly killed in the process. Mato and his mother had helped nurse Volos and the rescued man back to health. Volos said the man's name



was Berhanu and that he was on an important mission, but had given no more explanation than that.

“They gave us a lot of money when they left here,” Mato said. “But I didn’t truly know who either of them were.”

The older Kozari soldier had remained quiet, but now he tapped the table. “Prince Berhanu was on his way to meet with our queen when he was kidnapped. After he left Chorna, he continued his journey. He brokered the alliance between our nations.”

Mato, Mama, and Stipo sighed in unison. Although the

battles between Wedeyta and Kozar had ended years ago, the potential for war had remained on the horizon like a dark storm cloud. Now true peace had arrived; the skies were clear and blue.

“May I continue?” Desto asked politely.

Mato’s mother nodded at him.

*“...rendered to our son, Prince Berhanu, and to his beloved, Marquis Volos Perun.”*

Mato grinned. He *knew* there had been something simmering between those two. “Beloved, huh?”

“They will be married soon,”

Desto replied, looking pleased about it. He resumed reading. *“The entire nation of Wedeyta owes you for allowing our son to complete his work so that a great alliance could be formed. You saved the lives of Prince Berhanu and Marquis Volos, and you saved countless other lives as well. We can never repay such a great debt. Please accept our heartfelt appreciation and this token of our feelings. Also know that you will forever be considered heroes by the Wedey people and friends of the Wedey royal family. Yours eternally—* Er, it concludes with

many titles and King Tafari's personal signature."

Mato was too astounded to respond, and even Mama appeared at a loss for words. A thank you letter from a king!

But Desto wasn't finished. He said something in Wedey to Captain Hiwot, who nodded and smiled. Then it was her turn to pull something from her travel bag: a wooden chest about the size of a loaf of bread. It was ornately carved and gilded and inset with what appeared to be real jewels. She placed the box next to the letter.

"A gift from our king," Desto

explained. “Please, open it.”

Mama took the initiative, but her hands shook a little as she carefully pried open the top. She gasped when she saw the contents, and so did Mato; inside the box was a fortune in gold coins and priceless jewelry. Even without counting, Mato knew he could buy most of Chorna with the contents of that box, should he desire to.

“We can’t accept this,” Mama said, sounding shocked. “We simply helped two men in need, and they already paid us very well.”

Desto translated for Hiwot and listened as she answered. Then

he smiled at Mama. “What would you give to a person who saved your son’s life?”

“Anything. Everything.” She glanced at Mato. “That person would own my heart.”

“Exactly! And now you own our king’s. He wishes to do whatever he can for you. He will be very disappointed if you refuse his gift.”

After considering for several moments, Mama nodded. She closed the lid and did not push the chest away. Her actions seemed to please all four soldiers. Stipo, who’d gone very pale and wide-

eyed, gave her shoulder a quick squeeze.

“I have one more message,” Desto said. “This one is for Mato. I believe it is written in Kozari.” This time, the envelope was smaller. And despite the high-quality paper, the handwriting wasn’t fancy at all—in fact, it was decidedly clumsy, with several corrected mistakes and lots of inkblots. Mato glanced at the signature first and wasn’t surprised to discover it was from Volos.

He decided to read the letter aloud. The soldiers possibly already knew the contents and his

mother would find out soon enough anyway.

*Dear Mato,*

*I am sorry I can't use big words. I don't know how to spell them. I'm not good with words anyway. But I did want to thank you for helping us. If not for you, Berhanu would have died. I would have died too, and there would have been war. I owe you everything. If I can ever do you a favor—no matter how large—please let me. I would be honored.*

*Please thank your mother for us also. She is very brave and she's raised a good son.*



*Also, I want to invite you to come visit. Berhanu and I will be married in a few weeks. Please be our guest for the ceremony. I think maybe you might have fun doing a little travel. I know Berhanu wants to thank you too, and apologize for acting like an ungrateful ass to you. Believe it or not, he can be quite civilized.*

*I hope we see you. And I send you best wishes.*

*Volos*

For a moment or two after Mato finished reading, nobody said anything. Then Desto cleared his throat. “My companions are

continuing on to Felekna for some meetings. But I have been charged with accompanying you to the castle in Khonai, if you accept the invitation.”

Mato had never been farther than a half-day’s journey from Chorna. He dreamed of adventure but never truly believed he’d experience it. He was only an innkeeper, in a town so small his tavern didn’t even have a name.

He looked at Desto, who was waiting expectantly. “I... I can’t. There’s the inn, you see, and I—”

“Can he have some time to consider it?” Mama interrupted.

She glared at Mato, daring him to protest.

The gray-haired Kozari soldier answered. "It's late for travel today. Perhaps we could spend the night here and ask for an answer in the morning. Have you rooms to let?"

"Not exactly," Mama said. "So few people travel through here. But Mato owns a house across the square. It belonged to his father's parents, but now it's empty. It's not fancy, but we can make up some beds for you and I think you'll be comfortable."

Desto smiled at her. "We

have all slept on bare ground many times. I am sure we will be much more comfortable in Mato's house.”

So that much was settled, at least, although Mato's head whirled. His boring afternoon had suddenly turned extraordinary. And now, it seemed, he had a decision to make.

## Chapter Two

Mama and Stipo safely tucked away the box of treasure and the

letters, then opened the tavern door. They were soon busy serving the crush of curious townspeople, as nearly the whole population of Chorna squeezed into the modest space.

Mato hurried across the square. Nobody had slept in his grandparents' house since Volos and Berhanu, so everything was dusty. Mato didn't have time for more than a cursory cleaning, but he found fresh linens for four beds, filled some water jugs, and laid out clean towels. Hardly a palace, he mused, but better than bare ground.

By the time he returned to the

tavern, the soldiers were deep in conversation with townspeople. Some version of their mission to Chorna must have been told during Mato's absence, because he was greeted by a roar of welcome from his neighbors and by a bewildering bevy of handshakes and backslaps. *Our hero*, everyone kept calling him. It was deeply embarrassing.

The tavern did a livelier business that night than ever before. Finally Mama had to shoo everyone out. She sagged with exhaustion, yet a bright contentment shone in her face. The soldiers had been treated to many rounds of ale and were

more than a little merry. Stipo shepherded all but Desto to their lodging.

Desto remained alone at a table, watching Mato clean up. Mama wished them both good night before leaving for her comfortable little house two streets away. Mato had grown up there, but when he reached adulthood he'd wanted more privacy. His grandparents' house was too large for one man, so he had moved into the room over the tavern. The sloping roof didn't allow him to stand upright near the edges, but he didn't mind.

Mato carried an armload of

tankards into the kitchen. He'd wash them in the morning. When he returned for more, he discovered Desto with his head propped on one hand and a small grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Aren't you tired?” Mato asked. “You've had a long day.”

“But very interesting.”

Mato's day had been interesting too, to say the least. And he was exhausted. Still, he pulled out a chair at Desto's table and sat opposite him. “How do you speak Kozari so well?”

Desto winced slightly. “I was born very near the border. Wedey,



Kozari, I heard both every day. Until the war.”

“Of course,” Mato said with a sigh. He wondered if there was a single life in either country that had remained unscarred by the conflict.

“I was a boy when the war started,” Desto said. “My parents used to pray it would be over by the time I was old enough to become a soldier. But it was not.” He slurred his words slightly and his accent was especially thick. He was quite drunk, Mato realized. And perhaps he was sharing a tale he would have kept to himself if he were sober. But his soft eyes were so full of

pain that Mato hadn't the heart to stop him.

“I must be a little younger than you, then,” Mato said. “I never had to serve.”

“But your family members did.”

“My father. My brother. They died.”

Another wince, as if someone had poked Desto with something sharp. “I am sorry. I, too, lost.... Well, everyone lost.”

Mato nodded.

Desto's tankard was empty, but he stared into it as if wishing more ale would appear. “At first, I

was a foot soldier. I was very bad at it. I never learned to use a sword well, and I was hopeless with a bow. I would certainly not have lasted long, but one day my captain discovered I spoke Kozari. Before I knew it, I had been transferred. I was... I was in Intelligence. I translated captured documents.” He closed his eyes and kept them shut as he continued. “I translated for captured Kozari soldiers as well, when my superiors wished to question them. Their methods were not gentle.”

Mato’s heart lurched. He’d heard stories about how his

countrymen and -women were tortured. His mother had a friend named Anka, a tall lady who kept a flock of sheep just outside town. Her right arm was withered and useless due to Wedey soldiers' treatment when she had been a prisoner of war.

“Volos Perun is badly scarred,” Mato said.

Desto opened his eyes. “I know. We spar together sometimes.”

“I’m no expert, but I don’t think they’re all battle scars.”

After a brief pause, Desto nodded. “He was captured by the

Juganin during the war.” The same military group that had later kidnapped Prince Berhanu. Even Kozari feared them. “They kept him nearly a year. He never talks about it, but... it was worse than the third hell, I think. He was able to escape and rescue several other prisoners as well. Even before he came for our prince, he was a hero.”

“So the Juganin tortured him and later... well, I saw what they did to Prince Berhanu. And the war was long over by then. Nobody was blameless, Desto. Nobody was innocent.” His mother had told him that many times, especially when he

was young and feeling hatred for those who'd killed his family.

“You were.”

“Only by accident. If I'd been born a little earlier or if the war had lasted just a little longer....”

Desto startled Mato by lurching to his feet. Mato stood too, unsure how to react. But then Desto staggered around the table and gathered Mato in a tight embrace. He dragged his stubbled cheek against Mato's smooth one before pressing his lips to the tender spot just beneath Mato's ear. He smelled of ale and sweat and horses and dust, none of which dampened

Mato's immediate physical reaction to the contact.

“Let me feel you,” Desto moaned. He said something in Wedey, then switched to Kozari. “Please. Just for tonight.”

Mato wasn't averse to casual sex. It was all he'd ever had, in fact. And the gods knew there had been many times when neither Mato nor his partner had been sober. And sweet heavens, Desto felt *good* against him!

But Mato gently extricated himself from Desto's grip. “I'm sorry. I can't.”

Desto nodded, but his eyes

were sadder than ever.

Mato caught Desto's upper arm. "Come up to my bed and sleep."

"Just sleep?"

"Just that."

"With you?"

Mato relented a bit. "Well, that probably would be more comfortable than sleeping on the floor. Come on."

The stairway was steep and narrow. Mato let Desto go first and watched as he gripped the railing hard. Sometimes they paused for a moment while Desto leaned against the wall. When they reached Mato's



room, Desto stood in the center and looked blearily around, swaying as if he were aboard a ship. “It is nice.”

Mato snorted. “It’s warm and dry. Here, let me help you with your boots.” It was a good thing he offered, because Desto seemed unlikely to manage the laces himself. Still fully clad, cloak and all, Desto lay down on Mato’s mattress. He was only slightly shorter than Mato, which meant his heels hung over the edge slightly, just as Mato’s did if he didn’t crook his legs. But Desto was wider through the shoulders and seemed to

take up a lot of space.

“You’ll have to scoot over,”  
Mato said.

Desto grinned up at him.  
“Will you come with me to  
Khonai?”

“You want my company so  
badly?”

“If you do not go, I will have  
to go to Felekna with the others. I  
will have to attend meetings.  
Endless, horrible meetings. Please  
do not do that to me.”

“Ah. That’s why you tried to  
seduce me. So you could avoid  
Felekna.”

“You are much more

interesting than meetings.” Desto yawned widely. “You have hair the color of butter and the texture of a cotton tuft. You have eyes like summer sky. And your ass....” He mumbled something in Wedey and then began to snore.

Mato doused the lantern. Even in the darkness, he knew when to lean down near his bed to avoid the low ceiling. He pushed Desto closer to the wall—with considerable difficulty—before climbing into bed, fully dressed except for shoes. He curled his body around Desto’s, which felt wonderful. But soon enough he fell

asleep as well.

\*\*\*\*

Mato woke just as the sun's first rays shone through the window. His arm was trapped under Desto and had gone completely numb, yet Mato remained where he was for some time, simply enjoying the warmth and solidity of the body against his. Soon he heard pots clattering in the kitchen below, and he remembered that he hadn't finished cleaning up the night before. He sighed, slowly and carefully worked his way out of

bed, and stretched. He shook his arm to chase away the prickly sensation of the blood resuming its course. He rarely needed to shave, but he finger-combed the worst snarls from his hair as he wandered down the stairs.

His mother barely glanced at him as she set a large kettle on the fire. “You wore that shirt last night.”

“It’s clean enough. I’ll wash up before we open.”

She made one of her small disapproving noises, which made him smile. “Go fetch me a bucket of water,” she said. “The floor needs

mopping.”

He did as she ordered, taking the big wooden bucket and filling it from the well in the little yard behind the tavern. A few clouds dotted the sky, but it looked as though the weather would be fine. Birds sang. Carts rattled and merchants called as they set up their stands in the main square. It was a market day, which always increased business at the tavern.

He lugged the bucket into the kitchen. Stipo had appeared and was chopping onions. He wiped away tears with the back of his hand but gave Mato a cheery good

morning. Mama was scrubbing bowls at the sink. “Don’t bother setting the fire in the main room,” she said. “It will be warm enough today without it.”

“All right.” Mato stood there—still holding the bucket—and watched her work. “You don’t have to do that, you know.”

She looked at him over her shoulder. “Oh? You think nobody will need clean dishes today?”

“Mama, you don’t have to do any of this. You’ve just been given a fortune. You’re a wealthy woman.”

She set down the bowl,

wiped her hands on her embroidered apron, and walked over to him. She rolled her eyes and took the bucket away from him, then set it on the floor. She clasped his forearms and looked up at him silently for a moment.

“What would I do with myself if I didn’t work, Mato? I’m not old enough to want to spend my days in a rocking chair. And where would the townspeople gather to drink and eat?”

“I... I don’t....”

“My family has run this tavern for more generations than anyone can remember. I like being



an innkeeper. I always have. I know there's nothing special about this place, but it's my home, and it's where I want to be. Now, *you*, on the other hand....”

He blinked at her. “Me?”

“When you were a boy, you used to make up such wild stories! Do you remember? You'd pretend to conquer dragons or fight pirates.” She smiled suddenly, very brightly. “I remember once you spent weeks running around the tavern and yard, claiming you were going to rescue a prince!”

“I did?”

“I wouldn't make that up. I

used to fear that the war would steal your chance for adventure. But the fighting ended, thank the gods, and still you stayed in Chorna.”

Although he'd always felt a longing to see more than his village, he'd never felt sorry for himself. He had a good life. “Adventure came to me instead. Remember?”

“Yes, and you helped with that prince after all.” She gave his arms a squeeze. “Go with him, Mato. Go attend a prince's wedding in a foreign country.”

“But I can't.” He swallowed. “There's the tavern and—”

“I have Stipo to help. If I

need another pair of hands, I'll hire someone. Anka's younger daughter just found out she's pregnant. She'd be eager to earn a little extra coin."

"Mama—"

She let him go and made a shooing motion. "Go. Leave the nest."

It was a good metaphor because his heart felt as fluttery as a fledgling. He bent down to kiss the top of her head. "I love you, Mama."

## Chapter Three

Although he looked somewhat hungover, Desto beamed like the sun when he learned he'd be escorting Mato to Khonia. "No meetings!" he crowed. He repeated it in Wedey to Captain Hiwot, who shook her head fondly.

And then a dizzying number of arrangements needed to be made. When Mato admitted that he wasn't at all experienced at riding, Desto announced that they could walk to the nearest city—a day's journey—and take a carriage from there. He sent his horse to Felekna with

Captain Hiwot and the two Kozari soldiers, who departed by midmorning.

Mato had to choose what to pack. He'd never made such decisions before, and he dithered until Desto clomped up the stairs, grabbed a few items of Mato's clothing, and stuffed them in a leather bag. "If you need anything else, you can buy it. You are rich now, remember?"

"I guess I'm going to need something fancy for the wedding." It was probably rude to attend a royal ceremony in an innkeeper's plain brown trousers and white shirt.

“I will help you when we arrive.” Desto cocked his head slightly and licked his lips. “Er, I seem to remember last night...”

“We just slept.”

“I know. Why? Am I not... do I not interest you? If so, please tell me now. We will still be friends. But I do not wish to embarrass myself further.”

Warmth spread through Mato's body. “I'm interested. Very. But I'd rather you were in a state to remember me in the morning.”

Desto smiled. “I suspect you will be very memorable.”

Mato didn't want to make a

scene as he left. The constant stream of curious townspeople all morning had been bad enough. So when he was ready to go, he stood awkwardly in the yard behind the inn, his bag slung over his shoulders.

Stipo gave him a hearty handshake. "I've been all over, but never to a prince's party," he said, his crooked smile wide. "You'll tell me about it when you get back and I'll make up a song. *Mato Dances with Wedey Royalty*. It'll be very popular."

"*Mato Makes an Ass of Himself*, more likely."

Stipo shrugged. “That’d be popular too.”

Mama didn’t cry. She handed Mato a heavy purse and warned him to tuck it away somewhere safe. “Be careful, rabbit.” She hadn’t used that endearment since he was very young. “But not too careful. Be happy. Come back to me with a thousand stories.”

He kissed her head. “I will.”

There was no way to avoid people as he and Desto stepped out of the yard and onto the street. They ended up with a following as if they were leading the harvest parade. Small children danced around their



legs, while older people shouted questions and advice. A few people asked to come along, and Mato turned them down as politely as he could.

He was relieved when they reached the edge of the village and their retinue melted away.

There might have been a better way to spend an afternoon than walking in the sunshine next to a handsome and fascinating man, with coins jingling in one's purse and the promise of adventure ahead. But Mato doubted it.

Desto spoke about his mothers—one was a potter and the

other a scribe—and his sisters. Then he gleefully shared the palace gossip about Volos and Berhanu. “We thought they hated each other, but then... they proved us wrong, right in the fountain your queen sent us. Now they are as fierce in their love as two dragons, and as tender as doves.”

“I’m glad. I had the sense that Volos needed... well, needed.”

“As do we all,” Desto muttered indistinctly. Then he added, more loudly, “Are you footsore?”

“I’m used to being on my feet all day.”

“But it is different on the road, is it not?”

“It’s better on the road, actually.” Several days of dry weather meant the track was slightly soft with dust.

They passed scattered houses and a few tiny hamlets along the way, but most of the scenery was of lush fields between shady stands of trees. They sat beside a small stream and ate the lunch Mato’s mother had packed. Silvery little fish darted between the mossy stones, and a crawfish trundled along the bottom. It was strange. Mato had never been so far from

other people, and yet with Desto sitting companionably beside him, he felt far less alone than he had in Chorna.

He chewed on a hunk of springy bread. “What are Wedey weddings like?”

“When I got mar—” Desto stopped abruptly. “They are usually simple. But I suspect a royal wedding is not. I have never attended one before.” He smiled weakly.

Mato swallowed carefully. “Are you married?”

Desto’s jaw worked for a moment before he answered. “Not

now.”

“Oh. What—”

“He died. His name was Ekene and he died. Not from the war—he survived the war very well. It was only an ordinary fever.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was years ago,” Desto said, shaking his head.

Mato remembered a conversation he’d overheard between his mother and another village woman. “If you’d lost a limb, you wouldn’t say, ‘Oh, it was years ago.’ Some wounds never heal.”

Desto grunted, stood, and brushed the crumbs from his trousers. “We must go or it will be very late when we reach the city.”

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The city overwhelmed Mato even while they were still on the outskirts. Their quiet little road had merged with several larger ones, and a constant stream of horses, wagons, and pedestrians flowed around them—most of the traffic heading in the same direction as Mato and Desto. People stared openly at Desto’s Wedey uniform,

and several of them asked what he was doing in Kozar. He didn't seem to mind. But Mato squirmed under the scrutiny of so many strangers.

When they entered the city proper, just as dusk was falling, Mato grew even more unsettled. Everything was so *loud*—the many voices, the wheels clattering over cobbles, the bustle of shopkeepers putting away their wares. Nothing was familiar, not even the smells that assaulted him at every step. Desto seemed to know exactly where he was going, but after only a few turns, Mato's sense of direction failed him. Feeling overwhelmed,

he pressed so close to Desto's side that their feet bumped and they nearly fell.

“We are almost there,” Desto said gently.

“Some adventurer I make.”

Desto clasped his arm briefly. “It is your first time here?”

“It's my first time anywhere.”

“Everyone has a first time, Mato. Except those who are too afraid to try.”

With that proclamation, Desto sped his steps. He led them around a few more corners and into an especially wide street, a vibrant area lined with inns. “In the



morning, we can hire a public carriage here,” he explained. “But for tonight, I think a meal, a bath, and a good bed are in order.”

That sounded like an excellent plan.

Without discussing what influenced his choice, Desto took them to a tavern that boasted a large sign showing a creature with a lion’s body and an eagle’s head. Gold lettering announced *The Gryphon*. The building itself was wide and tall, with brightly colored wooden trim attached to the stone walls, and overflowing flower boxes at every window.

Mato was intimidated as soon as he entered. He could have tucked his entire tavern into one corner of the enormous public room. The floorboards gleamed and the walls were hung with rich tapestries. Several huge and elaborate candelabras hung from the high ceiling, casting a warm flickering light over everything. “The seats have cushions!” he exclaimed, and then blushed and hunched his shoulders.

“Very welcome after a day on horseback, I assure you. Come.”

They sat near the back, at a small table decorated with painted

birds. A pretty young woman in a richly embroidered dress came to serve them. She didn't seem surprised to find a Wedey soldier visiting her inn. "Just drinks, or food as well?" she asked them.

"Both," Desto answered. "And your best room for the night."

"Of course." She hurried away.

Despite the number of people in the room, the space was uncrowded and the conversations relatively muted. Many of the other customers wore travel attire, and they were far better dressed than Mato. Some of the patrons wore

clothing that would have put Chorna's festival wear to shame.

It was strange to be sitting and waiting to be served in someone else's inn.

Their server returned quickly, balancing two heaping plates and two metal tankards. She set them on the table, along with cutlery and a small loaf of bread. "We'll ready your room while you're eating."

"Excellent," said Desto. "We would like to bathe as well."

"I'll have hot water and soap brought for you."

The meal consisted of a large chunk of roasted meat, juicy and

pink, a mixture of highly spiced vegetables, and thick noodles. Mato ate in silence.

“Are you enjoying your meal?” Desto asked after a while.

“It’s delicious.” It was—even the ale was very good.

“You do not sound happy about that.”

“It’s just... you must come to inns like this all the time.”

With a warm smile, Desto caught one of Mato’s hands. “But not one of them has a proprietor half as charming as the innkeeper of Chorna.”

Mato couldn’t help but smile

back.

Their room was on the topmost floor. “There’s a nice view of the city during the day,” said the youth who led them there. He seemed apologetic that there was little to see in the darkness. Honestly, Mato didn’t care. He was exhausted, his belly was full, and the only temptations he felt at the moment were Desto and the oversized bed piled high with quilts and pillows. But the boy took his time showing off the room’s other attractions: twin washbasins brimming with steaming, lightly scented water; a large fireplace,

unnneeded on this warm evening; a large bowl of fresh fruit. Only after Desto handed the boy a few coins and nearly pushed him out the door were they left alone. Desto shut and bolted the door firmly.

After a quick glance at Mato, Desto strode across the room. He bent and unlaced his boots, setting them neatly against the wall. He hung his cloak on a hook and then quickly and efficiently stripped off every thread of his clothing.

Mato stared shamelessly; Desto was magnificent. His heavy muscles rolled smoothly beneath his dark skin. His shoulders were

broad, his hips and waist narrow, his ass round. Short black hair formed an inverted triangle on his chest and an inviting line down his belly. And although his cock wasn't especially long, it was nicely plump, the reddish crown visible because he was circumcised. Mato had *heard* of cut cocks—had even seen drawings of them in books—but had never seen one in real life.

The corner of Desto's mouth was quirked, but he didn't otherwise react to the scrutiny. He untied the leather band, allowing his hair to fan out across his shoulders like a black silk curtain.



Then he picked up a small towel, dipped it in a washbasin, and began to cleanse his face.

Mato watched the water droplets slide down Desto's neck and into the hair on his chest.

Desto took his time, slowly wiping his arms, his torso. He saved his groin for last, and by then his feigned disinterest in Mato's stare was proved a lie because his cock hardened and a delicious flush spread from his upper body to his face.

Finally he set the towel on the washstand and looked at Mato. "Did you notice? I drank only one

ale over dinner.”

“I noticed.”

“I am perfectly sober. In the morning, I will remember every detail of this evening with crystal clarity.”

Mato laughed and began to undress. He felt a little shy. Unlike Desto, he was pale and rather gangly. His body hair was sparse and almost as light as his skin. But Desto didn't look disappointed as Mato revealed more of himself. In fact, his flush deepened and he licked his lips.

And then there they were—both naked, both erect—facing one

another a little awkwardly. “I think —” Mato began.

“Let me—” said Desto at the same time.

They both stopped and laughed. Then Desto took a step forward and grabbed Mato’s hand. “Let me wash you.”

“I can wash myself.”

“Of course you can. But would it not be more fun if I did it for you?” He cocked an eyebrow. “I can help you with those hard to reach places.”

Mato snorted and spread his arms. “I’m all yours.”

Desto took his job seriously

and didn't hurry. He began with Mato's back, starting at his neck and working his way down. He took particular care with Mato's ass—so much care that Mato's knees felt wobbly and he had to clench his hands into fists to keep from stroking himself.

When he moved to Mato's front, Desto's eyes were wide and as glossy as obsidian. "You are...." He uttered a string of words in Wedey, then chuckled deeply. "You are like an exotic bird."

"Exotic? I'm the most ordinary person in the world."

"Nothing ordinary about you."

I knew that even before I met you, when I heard what you did for Volos and the prince. But now that I have *seen* you... well, you surpass my expectations.”

“I’m just an innkeeper from Chorna.”

“An innkeeper from Chorna is quite exotic to a soldier from Khonai. And you... you would be extraordinary anywhere.”

As if that settled the argument, Desto reached up with a fresh cloth and washed Mato’s face. Although his movements were as gentle as a parent’s, there was nothing paternal about the look on

his face. He took his time over Mato's chest and belly. When he got to Mato's groin, he gave up any pretense of trying to get him clean; he wrapped the damp cloth around Mato's aching dick and gave a few long, slow strokes.

“Oh gods,” Mato moaned, reaching for Desto's shoulder to keep himself from collapsing.

Still moving his hand, Desto pressed against Mato's body. “Your gods and ours are very much the same, I understand. I think they all favor me tonight.”

Mato thought the gods must be favoring them both.

Mato and Desto somehow managed to stumble their way to the bed without separating, and they fell together with their limbs entwined. Mato greedily seized a double handful of Desto's ass, which felt as magnificent as it looked, and dove in for a deep and toe-curling kiss.

They pulled apart only so they could gasp for breath, but Mato's heart beat a frantic rhythm as Desto stroked his flanks, flexed their groins together, and dragged his whiskery cheek across the sensitive skin of Mato's neck.

Mato's rapidly whirling mind

could hardly catch a thought—and hardly wanted to, with the sensations that flooded every bit of his body. But still he remembered something. Something important. With a tremendous effort of will, he pushed Desto off onto the mattress.

Desto blinked at him. “I am... Did I hurt you?”

“No. Gods, no. But I need...” Mato swallowed, trying hard to marshal his words. “Remember when we talked about Volos today?”

“Of course.”

“And I said I could tell he needed... someone. Something



real.”

Desto nodded gravely. “Yes.”

Mato dropped his voice to a whisper. “I think I need that too.” Yes, by all the gods, he did. He hadn’t realized it until this moment.

With a tender stroke of Mato’s cheek, Desto gave a shaky laugh. “I do as well.”

“Can we....” Mato’s heart was stuck in his throat, making it difficult to speak. “We’ve known each other only one day. But I wonder....”

“Yes. Yes, I wonder as well. And I hope. Gods, Mato, I *hope*.”

Hardly a lifetime

commitment. And even if they proved compatible, some formidable obstacles remained, not the least of which was living in different countries. But right now, tonight, hope was more precious than any treasure. Mato would not let hope slip away.

He didn't respond with words. Instead, he rolled on top of Desto and began to kiss him everywhere he could reach. Desto returned the favor, and they squirmed and wriggled and rubbed together, narrowly missing several falls off the mattress. What they lacked in finesse they made up for

in enthusiasm. Desto felt perfect to Mato however he was situated—under him, over him, in him, around him.

At a very late hour, they finally collapsed in a sweaty, boneless, exhausted tangle.

“We shall require a very large breakfast,” Desto said in a raspy voice. Mato’s throat was slightly sore too. They’d been a little loud; it was a miracle nobody had come to complain.

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to move in the morning.”

“We will not have to move far—our carriage will be close by.

And we have nothing to do for the next three days but sit.”

“Good. Then we can sleep in the carriage. And at night....”

“At night we shall get our exercise.” Desto made a manly if unsuccessful attempt to reach Mato’s ass. He sighed and patted a hipbone instead. “Good night, my Mato.”

Mato was still smiling when he fell asleep.

## Chapter Four

Mato had never before ridden in a carriage. It turned out to be less exciting than he'd anticipated. For one thing, even though Desto hired the poshest vehicle, it still rattled and shook and bounced over the roads. The seats felt like stone after a while, Mato's long legs were cramped, and even when he managed to fall asleep, he was abruptly jostled awake in short order. After a few hours, the pastoral scenery became tedious.

The towns they passed through might have been interesting, but Mato couldn't help but notice

beggars in rags, some of them skinny children with gray skin and vacant eyes. Nobody in Chorno was wealthy—well, nobody but his mother, now—but everyone had adequate clothing and shelter, and nobody starved. He closed his eyes to the beggars, feeling mean and guilty.

Desto's company, however, was wonderful. They leaned against each other, sharing stories, creating their own private jokes. But they had to share the carriage with other passengers, so they kept their hands to themselves.

At night, as soon as they were

safely inside their hired room, they made up for the day's abstinence with enthusiasm and vigor.

While the travel was uncomfortable and the nights amazing, the periods in between made Mato want to shrink into himself. The carriages stopped a few times daily so the passengers could empty their bladders and fill their bellies, usually at busy, dumpy little wayside inns. Everyone stared. Sometimes strangers approached with bold questions about why Desto was in Kozar and what Mato was doing with him. The questions were fueled by simple

curiosity, not malice, but Mato squirmed under all the unfamiliar gazes.

Worse, though, were the taverns where they spent the night. They were all nicer by far than Mato's, but that wasn't the problem—it was the customers. He hated the way they watched him. He hated not seeing a single familiar face among them—except Desto's, of course—and knowing that everyone and everything he was acquainted with was days away.

Desto must have sensed his unease, because he sat close and didn't linger at their meal.



“This is ridiculous,” Mato groaned as they stepped into their room on the third night. “You’re not even from Kozar, but you’re perfectly comfortable, while I’m a quivering mess. Some hero.”

“I am perfectly comfortable because I have spent most of my life traveling. After a while, one inn seems much like the next, no matter the city or country.” He smiled. “Except a certain tavern in Chorna, of course.”

“But—”

“You are a very courageous man, Mato.”

“Ha.” Mato sat on the bed to

untie his laces. Gods, he was so angry with himself. He'd spent all these years daydreaming of adventure, but when faced with nothing more frightening than a prosaic carriage trip, he fell apart.

Desto waited until Mato flung his boots away before sitting beside him, making the mattress dip. "Are you intending to return to Chorna in the morning?"

"What? No! Of course not!" Mato frowned at him. Was Desto suddenly eager to be rid of him?

But Desto smiled and took his hand. "Good. I thought not. You know, all my commanding officers

were hard. Some of them were... cruel. But a few of them were wise. And one of the wise ones once told me that bravery is not a lack of fear. Bravery is acting *despite* fear.”

Mato sighed. “But I’m not at war, Desto. This fear is stupid.”

“Perhaps.” Desto shrugged. “Me? I am terrified of snakes. Even small ones that could not possibly harm me.”

“Snakes? Really?”

Desto shuddered. “Yes. Once during the war the enemy was close, and I was hiding in a thicket. I saw a little green and yellow snake and ran yelling from my

cover. I was very nearly killed.”

It was Mato's turn to shudder as he imagined Desto lying in a field, bleeding to death from a Kozari weapon.

“Now,” Desto said after a few moments. “We have established that you are brave, exotic, *and* memorable. But I believe we still need to determine how agile you are.”

Laughing, Mato did his best to demonstrate. He was, in fact, quite agile, and it turned out that Desto was as well. They made love until neither of them was capable of further movement.

When Mato awoke, morning sunlight was bathing the room in gold. Desto sat propped by pillows, looking down at him with soft eyes and a soft smile. "I keep fearing I have only dreamed you," Desto whispered.

Suddenly, all of Mato's doubts seemed much less significant.

They left the inn quite late, catching the day's last ride to the border. Desto explained that when they reached Wedeyta, they would need to switch carriages. The alliance was so new that arrangements were not yet in place

for a single carrier to serve both countries. “But I expect it will happen very soon. Traffic and trade between us have become very busy.”

Mato was glad of that, believing that it was more difficult to fall back into war with people you saw every day and who you relied on to sell you goods or to buy yours.

But his final day in Kozar was especially uncomfortable because the other passengers—all eight of them—were Wedey. Kozari tended to stare openly and ask straightforward questions, but

Wedey looked at him from the corner of their eyes and didn't say a word. He would have preferred to know what was on their minds. Their silence led him to imagine the worst. Even when they did speak quietly to each other, Mato couldn't understand a word. He knew that with Desto there they weren't gossiping about him, but nonetheless, not knowing what they said bothered him.

Soon after they were on their way, fog settled over the countryside, shrouding everything in the distance. The road began a gradual incline. The carriage

stopped twice, and in both places, the travelers' inns were newly erected and still unpainted. "See?" Desto said. "Now that the road has become busy, there is more business here. I wager that soon entire villages will arise." That made them both smile, because currently there was little but wasteland and the burned foundations of buildings destroyed during the war.

Just as the sky began to darken, the carriage slowed and then rattled to a stop. The driver opened the door, and the passengers emerged slowly, stretching their



limbs as they were freed. Mato was the last one out.

The terrain here was rocky, and the road passed between steep embankments. Wedey and Kozari soldiers stood on either side of a wooden barrier, looking bored, chatting with each other in a confusing mixture of the two languages. The Kozari side boasted an inn, larger and older than the ones they'd recently passed, its yard crowded with carriages. People wearing colorful Kozari clothing or drabber Wedey attire—or combinations of both—lazily milled about in the mist, seemingly

eager to move their legs after a long journey.

“Where are the Wedey carriages?” Mato asked.

“We have to cross the border and walk over the hill. Only for a few minutes. Another inn is there.” Desto flashed a smile. “It is slightly superior to this one, but also more expensive. In the morning, we can hire a carriage. We will have nice views tomorrow as we cross the mountains.”

Mato had never seen a mountain.

For a long time, Mato and Desto stood in the road. The world

was muffled and distant.

Finally, Desto settled a hand on Mato's shoulder. "Where would you like to sleep tonight, my love?" he asked gently.

A truth settled in Mato's heart as suddenly as a beam of sunlight breaking through a cloud. Kozar, Wedeyta, the highest heaven, or the third hell—it didn't matter where he slept as long as Desto was at his side. He pictured them dancing at a royal wedding, tromping through foreign cities, serving thirsty patrons at a small nameless inn. Each of these images tempted him. Each of them felt real.

He shifted his bag more comfortably on his shoulders and grasped Desto's hand. "Let's sleep in Wedeyta tonight."

Hand in hand, both of them grinning like lunatics, they walked toward the border.