

A MOTHER'S LOVE

by

A.R.R. Ash

Nyrrine sat opposite her father, Mneres, in the residence above their apothecary. Upon the cracked, lopsided tabletop between them, like an unwanted guest that imposed upon the comfort and privacy of their family, lay a notice that had been pinned to the door of their shop.

“Baba...” Nyrrine started for the third time, though her father had yet to speak, and she had no notion what she intended to say. The meager dawnfare of an egg and root vegetables sat heavy in her stomach, and the scent of the food still lingered in the small room.

The notice, written in black ink with curling, immaculate lettering and stamped with the lord’s sigil—a pentagram within a hexagon within a circle within a square—announced that she had been selected to bear Lord Azos a child, and she was to present herself to his tower by evening the following day.

Over the years, no less than three other women from Nyrrine’s village alone had received a similar notice informing them that they had been selected as a wife for Lord Azos. Nyrrine’s own friend, Xenia, had even been made a lady of the demesne, to which Nyrrine had experienced a mingling of jealousy and happiness. Yet neither Nyrrine nor Xenia’s own family had spoken to

A Mother's Love

her again since her betrothal, despite her mother and father's many visits to the lord's tower. However, they claimed to have witnessed their daughter waving to them from a balcony and had received letters from her, a fact about which they were particularly proud because she could neither read nor write before taking up residence with the lord.

The food in her stomach seemed to gain extra weight, as if she had swallowed rocks, and Nyrrine thought through her own emotions before responding to her father. Part of her was flattered at the thought of the lord wanting her as the mother to his child, particularly because he had multiple wives from whom to choose. She was also terrified at the fact that none of the women's families had had any communication with them since their nuptials, other than the odd letter or view from afar.

Her father spoke into her lingering silence, "We can flee. It is not time enough to put a goodly distance between us and there, but, perhaps, we could reach Olynia and disappear among the wilderness."

Nyrrine's chest swelled in love at the knowledge that her father was willing to abandon everything they had for her. Yet she had the notion that she should be the one arguing to run. How many fathers, or mothers, would have welcomed the prestige, let alone seized the opportunity for advancement, in having a daughter bear the lord's child? "Baba, where could we go? He would surely find us."

"He can readily choose another." The hesitancy in his tone belied the statement.

Nyrrine wrinkled her nose. "He found all the men who'd raided our village. One had made it as far as Limnopolis, yet he was returned in a fortnight, his tortured body left in the middle of the village."

A.R.R. Ash

Nyrrine certainly felt the sinking weight of fear in her belly and in the pounding of her heart against her chest. Yet she knew excitement as well. Becoming the mother to Lord Azos's child would surely elevate her standing and, by extension, that of her father. Too, she had to admit a certain vanity at the thought of being chosen.

“It’ll be all right, Baba. Besides, we don’t have a choice.”