

A pregnant woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue dress and a crown of green leaves, stands in a forest. She is looking upwards with a serene expression. The background is a bright, golden light source, possibly a sunset or sunrise, filtering through the trees. The overall mood is ethereal and magical.

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THE
CODES
OF
BINDING

THIRD PLACE WINNER
BAEN FANTASY ADVENTURE AWARD 2021

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THE CODES OF BINDING

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*For Sharon, my darling wife and greatest love
in this earthly realm. Our hearts are bound
together by our promises and our King, and I
would never have it any other way.*

I love you.

THIS WAS CERTAINLY NOT the life Athria had imagined in her youth, she thought wryly. She tried again to lift the bucket of slop, planting her feet and making sure of her balance. It budged, leaving her with the arduous task of carrying the load from the back step to the pig pen.

She gripped both hands tightly around the handle at her side and half-walked, half-waddled across the yard, silently thanking the late-summer breeze and afternoon shade for making the trip more bearable. She didn't have the connection with nature that she used to, but the comfort of its presence was never far on a farm so close to the untamed wilds.

Athria's arms burned from the awkward angle and the weight, and she might have made it to the fence if it wasn't for the unexpected wave of cramping. She winced and doubled over to set the bucket down as lightly as possible before placing a hand on her very pregnant stomach. Another contraction, perhaps brought on by the exertion.

The child squirmed uncomfortably, as space was limited inside at nearly nine months. She wished she could reach out and calm the tiny mind, but she could only speak in gentle tones.

THE CODES OF BINDING

“Hush now, little one,” she said, in between puffs of breath. “You will be here soon, and then I can finally feed the pigs without needing a rest.”

Athria laughed gently as she remembered the last time she felt this stretched and heavy. It had been the dead of winter, and Voster was shoring up the holes in the old ruin that eventually became their farmhouse. She thought her first baby was coming with each successive contraction, and he came running back from his work to check on her almost every few minutes.

Now, three years later, the grain harvest loomed in just a few days, and Voster’s hands were so full with preparations that she couldn’t allow upkeep of the house and livestock to fall onto his shoulders. She often wondered in frustration why she had abandoned her upbringing just to work so hard for so little, but it never took her long to remember the answer.

A small voice cried from the henhouse. Athria turned to see her daughter, a spritely tuft of a girl with wavy flaxen hair, come tumbling out of the coop dragging a small basket. In her hurry, the toddler almost forgot to latch the door. “Mama, Mama!”

Athria’s aches shifted to her hips as she pushed herself upright in time to catch the top-heavy three-year-old. The poor girl breathed hard, panicked about something. “What is the matter, Niena?” The name recalled to mind the nymphs, ancient spirits of the woods, and so far Niena lived up to it as almost a force of nature herself.

“Jumped on me,” Niena said, scared tears in her eyes.

“A chicken jumped on you?” Athria repeated in a hushed tone. She kissed her daughter’s wet cheek before setting her down again. “Oh pixie, it was just as afraid of you as you were of it. Did it hurt you?”

Niena sniffled and shook her head. She looked down in shame at the woven basket still clutched in her tiny hands.

C. JONAH ABBOTT

Athria followed her daughter's gaze and saw the golden hue of yolk mingled with broken eggshells. "There, there, do not worry about it. We have more eggs than we can use anyway—and besides, I could use your help with something else."

Niena's eyes brightened at the suggestion. She was at the age when she wanted to do it all even though most things were out of her reach. "Not scary?" she asked with a little trepidation.

"No," Athria laughed. "It just smells bad. With your little brother in the way, this slop is too heavy for me to dump over the fence." She didn't expect Niena to be of much actual help, but it was important to involve her and set the precedent.

The three-year-old scrunched up her nose at the stench but made her way over to grip the edge of the bucket. "Mama?" she asked before they could pick it up.

"Yes?"

Niena looked up with her inquisitive green eyes that could rarely be refused. "How you . . . know it's a boy?" she asked in halting words, gesturing at her mother's belly.

Athria smiled sadly and ran her fingers through Niena's hair, lingering at the side of her head where a thin scar along the top of her ear peeked through her tousled locks. "A feeling, I suppose. It is hard to explain. I knew what you were before you were born, too."

"Really?"

She nodded patiently. "Now then, lift!"

The lowest section of the fence loomed only yards away, where a tree trunk stood in for a fencepost, but Niena's tottering help made it slow going. Once there, Athria lodged the bucket against the tree and adjusted her grip. The pigs crowded around with bated breath as she tipped it over into the trough on the other side.

Another contraction seized her stomach and she doubled over at the last moment, knocking the bucket into the pen. It landed in the dirt

THE CODES OF BINDING

and spilled the offal everywhere except its intended destination. The pigs, startled for only a second, didn't mind that the food missed their plate and began to feast anyway.

Athria panted and waited for the pressure to subside.

"Okay, Mama?" Niena said, worried. "Okay?"

Athria swallowed. "Yes, pixie," she fibbed. "Or I will be." That contraction had not been long after the last one. She determined to take her work a little easier; Voster would have a fit if he saw her lifting anything that heavy.

She stood and took stock of her surroundings. It wasn't worth going after the empty bucket until the hogs finished their meal, but luckily the slop hadn't splattered backward onto her. Even so, her breeches felt wet . . .

Athria sucked in a breath when she realized what that meant. "Come now, we have to hurry," Athria said, leading Niena back toward the house.

"Hurry?" Niena asked, puzzled but still bobbing along as fast as her stubby legs could carry her.

"The baby is coming," Athria said in a solemn tone. "I need you to go out to the barn, find your father, and bring him back right away."

Niena's huge eyes widened even further. "By myself?"

Athria leaned against the back doorpost, closing her eyes and breathing deeper in an attempt to relax. "Yes, Niena. You know the way. There is nothing to be scared of."

"Promise?"

Athria opened her eyes and laughed at the little earnest face frowning back at her. What she wouldn't give to know the thoughts running through that head of golden hair. "Yes, pixie, no chickens will jump on you. Now go quickly, please."

Niena tore off toward the fields on the western edge of the woods, leaving her basket of broken eggs behind.

C. JONAH ABBOTT

Athria sighed and ran through her mental list of preparations. No doubt Voster would insist, like last time, that he go out on horseback and fetch a doctor. And that meant she would have to talk him down because they could not avoid the inevitable questions if someone else were present for the birth.

Athria moved quickly, not knowing how much time she might have. She stoked the coals and hung a pot of water to boil, fetched some old blankets from the cupboard, and made sure Voster hadn't finished off the alcohol that she might need as a disinfectant.

Another contraction racked her as soon as she sat down on the changed bed. They were coming faster now, and this one was far more intense. Her son could be here within hours, or still a whole day away like Niena had been. She hoped it would be over more quickly this time.

She leaned to look out the window for a distraction. She couldn't see Voster or Niena coming up the path just yet, but she smiled at the evening sun shining through the leaves that were just beginning to change colors. It wasn't as breathtaking as the vast mountain views of her birthplace, where it often seemed she was on the edge of the world, but she surprised herself by preferring this. She and Voster worked hard to make this ruined tower livable again, and now she would always be near to things green and growing.

She lay back on the bed and her eyes came to rest on the dyed leather-bound book resting on the mantelpiece. It, too, was green, though faded from the ages it had survived. She smiled fondly at it like it was an old friend. Everything good in her life now, her home, her children . . . she would never have even met Voster if it hadn't been for those wrinkled pages, and she was glad to have them with her now.



THE CODES OF BINDING

IT WAS EARLY MORNING in the D'harnin enclave, and although Tynathria would normally have risen with the rest of the court at dawn, a strange pall had settled across the valley. Everything felt muffled as if by two feet of wet snow, but only a few dry inches covered the ground. So it surprised Tynathria not to wake to the pre-market hustle and bustle of the agora as always, but instead she heard the sound of a hoarse call for help below her window.

"Is anyone here?" a man cried in a strange accent. "There has to be! Winds take you, he's dying!"

He was a burly blond fellow wearing simple garb stitched of skins and furs, stumbling around the town square in weary confusion and unable to see the myriad of buildings surrounding him.

Another figure lay slumped across the man's shoulders, either a corpse or unconscious, caked with blood. Judging by the familiar blue color and fine weave of the figure's tunic, it was one of the enclave guard, the Protectors.

Tynathria raised an eyebrow, impressed. An outsider had never turned up in Por'monir before, let alone on the doorstep of the Hall of Meeting. The wardcasters with their misdirection and illusion spells were supposed to make sure of that. She quickly straightened her dark hair and cinched on a more formal set of clothes than her simple nightgown. Throwing a long wool-lined coat over it all, she rushed out of her chamber.

She could hear dueling voices rising from the other end of the longhouse, growing louder as she descended the elaborately carved staircase. One was unmistakably the irate tone of her father, Wirvanen Falir. As the elected leader of Por'monir's largest family and therefore arbiter of the enclave, he would be incensed by the lapse in security. Surely he might yield to the ancient Codes of Entreaty, however, if only for one of his people's Protectors.

Perhaps much of mankind had turned savage in the eons since the Union dissolved, but the D'harnir could not afford to abandon their own kind so easily.

Before she could cross the Hall of Meeting and attempt to calm her father's temper, a firm grip on her upper arm drew her aside. Startled, she shrank back

C. JONAH ABBOTT

and realized it was only her elder brother, Shilvand. “What is going on?” she whispered, cutting straight to the point.

Shilvand shook his head in discouragement. “I would stay clear if I were you. You might be safer trapped between a pair of manticores.”

“I could hear the carnage from upstairs. Does this have anything to do with the human on our doorstep?”

Shilvand explained. A patriarch of the lesser Junir family, Druinor, was begging Wirvanen to lift the ward and speak with the foreigner. Tynathria recalled that the elder’s grandson had not returned from a border patrol two nights prior, giving more than a reasonable chance that the dying D’harn was one of their own. “You can see why they are both on edge.”

She could. Druinor could not be blamed for eschewing all but a thin veneer of respect, believing his grandson was just outside and close to death. The only question was why her father would even think of standing in his way.

“... Safety?!” exclaimed Druinor, veins bulging at his temples. “Do not speak to me of safety as you condemn one of our own to death by cowardly inaction!”

Tynathria winced. Now that her father’s character had been called into question, he would never back down.

“Your grandson swore to protect Por’monir with his life!” Wirvanen’s salt-and-pepper hairline seemed to bristle like a stormcloud above his stern face. “If that human sees everything we have built for ourselves, do you not think he will return to his people and proclaim our city as ripe for plunder?”

Druinor couldn’t quickly respond to that, as the annals of their ancestors proved Wirvanen’s caution justified. A human hunting party had stumbled upon the enclave back in the early days of their exile, and taken word back to their leaders in Celwaith Tor. The D’harnir had never been able to stand alone against the warring strength of man, even by magic, and had been forced to move farther north into the frozen wastes or risk obliteration.

Wirvanen stood from his presiding bench and raised an accusatory finger. “If we imprison the man unjustly, others will come searching. And that is

THE CODES OF BINDING

assuming he does not overpower us and escape with a grudge. No, Druinor, we would have to kill him, and that is a moral crime I will not consider if it is avoidable. It would make us no better than they are."

Tynathria decided she had seen more than enough. If her father's excuses would restrain him yet again from doing the right thing, she would have to get involved. Shrugging off the well-intentioned protests of her brother, she walked with wide confident strides past the central fire pit and towards the raised dais. "Then I am afraid you have already failed on that count, Father."

The retort Druinor intended to deliver died before it reached his tongue, and he gratefully regarded the young woman standing before them.

Shilvand held back at a distance, likely not wanting to seem complicit in his sister's open defiance.

"Tynathria," Wirvanen said, eyes narrowed in warning. "This is none of your concern."

"It is as much my concern as anyone else's in Por'monir," she said, knowing he could not refute it. "Our markets outside have not opened today, and everyone cowers in their homes in fear. A young D'harn lies on the threshold of eternal night, and you would sacrifice him on the altar of safety? I daresay only the most dark-hearted of men would be so callous."

"Enough," Wirvanen said through gritted teeth, making quite clear his disapproval without losing his composure again. "I was elected arbiter to protect the enclave from all threats that could destroy us."

Tynathria shook her head, tired of the charade of morality. She felt like the only person left in the enclave who still wanted to follow the old ways, or at least among her family. "You were elected to interpret the Mishenna. As written in the Codes of Entreaty, anyone who stands aside when they could have prevented a death is just as responsible as if they had dealt the blow. If you do not intervene, then I must."

"You will do no such thing!" Wirvanen ordered.

C. JONAH ABBOTT

She cut off any further discussion by quickly bowing to Druinor, half to show him some semblance of courtly manners and half to underline her father's lack of them. "Elder Druinor, you should send for the healers."

She noticed Shilvand following after her, so she quickly slipped past the guards. They knew better than to interfere without a direct order, and her father would think twice before having them restrain her. The heavy engraved wooden door groaned open, and she slipped out into the freezing wind, the hem of her overcoat blowing around her ankles.

Tynathria's heart shuddered when she saw the blond man down in the snow, attempting to resuscitate the wounded D'harn. Pushing the human aside to kneel in his stead, she placed a hand across the soldier's bloodied face and the other over his heart. She could feel a slight presence—the gift of life was still with him, but not for long.

"Who—where did you come from?" the blond man blurted through his beard, having just seen Tynathria seemingly appear from thin air.

She ignored the man's startled question and began to speak an incantation, focusing inward. She knew only the most rudimentary of healing spells, but they would have to do.

As her energy supported the soldier's weary cells and sustained their functions, her consciousness began to mingle with his unconscious mind. The more she poured herself out for him, the deeper the trance went until she felt like she knew and lived his entire life with him.

This was Tollan, grandson of Druinor and pride of the poorest family in the enclave. He yearned to join the Protectors from a young age, and he fought and worked the hardest of his peers to achieve that position of honor. But yesterday, he had been ambushed on patrol by a garish of crimson clawcrens that pecked and tore at his flesh until he conjured a magical ward to find shelter. His memory went dark after that, his wounds overtaking him.

Tynathria didn't know how long she knelt in the snow, whispering the same words in the ancient tongue again and again. It could have been minutes, hours, or even days; but when she thought her life energy could not hold out

THE CODES OF BINDING

any longer and she might fade into the eternal night with Tollan, her burden began to ease. Other more powerful influences joined her own; the healers had arrived with Druinor.

With one last gentle blessing to Tollan's heart and lungs, she opened her tired eyes. She couldn't see at first in the comfortingly warm morning sun, and she felt drained enough to sleep for a week. But when her eyes adjusted, a surge of adrenaline and rage pushed Tynathria back to her feet.

The burly blond outsider dressed in furs took a step backwards, surrounded by Shilvand and several of the Protectors. Their loyalty to Wirvanen had not been shaken by these events, but surely her brother knew better. In his youth, Shilvand studied the Codes almost as much as Tynathria, but the lessons now seemed to have left him valuing the mere image of goodness over true morality.

Wirvanen himself stood by the entrance to the longhouse, an impatient glower plastered on his face while the Protectors forced the outsider to the ground before him. The man did not resist beyond the initial surprise of being apprehended, and he fell to his knees with a grunt as the D'harnir restrained his arms behind his back and confiscated his bow and arrows.

"No! Father, stop!" Tynathria shouted in alarm. She rushed to position herself between her father and the bearded stranger, almost slipping in the snow from weariness. All eyes turned to her. "What has this man done to us but returned one of our own? What crime has he committed?"

Wirvanen motioned for the healers to carry their charge inside where the heat of the fire would aid their magic. "The threat he poses to our entire community is too great," he said, his words carrying a grim weight. "In light of your actions, Daughter, we must hold him until we determine the best path forward."

The outsider spoke up. "It's all right! I understand," he said firmly, but peaceably. "If the histories I found are true, my forbears have been responsible for terrible atrocities against elves in the past."

C. JONAH ABBOTT

“Elves? Is that what your kind calls us now?” Wirvanen regarded the man with derision. “Are your ‘histories’ mere exaggerations in bedtime stories and campfire fables? Ignorance ever breeds violence in men.”

“You’re right, I misspoke,” the outsider continued, so quiet his words were hard to hear against the wind. He sighed and stared at the ground, the silence weighing heavy between them. “You’re D’harnir, masters of magic and speech, forced from your ancestral lands. The truth is, I’d rather live as a captive among you than be free elsewhere.”

“Indeed?” Wirvanen narrowed his eyes but addressed the man with a measure more respect than before. “I suppose there is no way to prove you are not a spy, but you have piqued my curiosity. Tell us how you know so much about us, and what brings you to this forsaken wasteland.”

The outsider looked up, not at Wirvanen but at Tynathria, perhaps hoping for sympathetic encouragement. She gave him a gentle smile and he answered the question. “My name is Voster Cresthaven. I’m a blacksmith by trade, down in Drüstania, but I often do my own hunting to cut down on leather costs. This past summer, I found a tumbled-down old tower on the edge of Spinewood Forest, you know, east of Ensedale?”

Tynathria hadn’t heard of the town, but she nodded anyway.

Voster attempted to reach for his leather satchel, but his captors wouldn’t let him move. “If you’ll allow me,” he suggested.

Wirvanen nodded, and Shilvand allowed the man one arm’s freedom. He produced a well-bound book from his bag, the covers dyed green and still in good repair despite the obvious age. “I found this there.”

Tynathria took it from him and began paging through it, with her father looking over her shoulder. The interior was handwritten, on thick parchment that had to be hundreds of years old. It was in part a sporadic journal, with dates accompanying each entry months and sometimes years removed from each other. Flipping to the back, there was a scrawled collection of familiar sayings and proverbs, many of them variations from the D’harna Codes of Binding. “What is this?” she asked Voster, raising a curious eyebrow.

THE CODES OF BINDING

He cleared his throat. "Near as I can tell, miss, it's a record of how my kind and yours fell out with each other. Gave me a direction to start looking for you, if you take my meaning."

Tynathria caught her father frowning at that, perhaps wondering if Voster had told anyone else of his search.

"And the rest, well," Voster continued, "I guess the writer was trying to reconstruct one or two of your holy books."

Shilvand spoke up, annoyed by the diversion. "Get to the part where you found us. Does anyone else know you came here?"

Voster hesitated and answered carefully. "All my sister knows is that I'm hunting elk in the wilds. I came across your soldier all torn up and from there I tracked his steps back this way. Easy if you know what to look for."

Before they could ask him any more questions, an exuberant sound issued from the great hall, and the white-haired figure of Druinor burst from the door with the widest smile on his face. "Tollan will survive! The Mishenna has provided!"

Tynathria's face lit up with joy, and she received the elder in a warm embrace that felt just like her own late grandfather's. She knew the man far better now through her sharing of minds with Tollan, and she understood that he did not often show affection except on rare occasions.

Druinor kissed her warmly on both cheeks and thanked her profusely for keeping Tollan alive long enough to save his life. "We will be ever in your debt," he said with tears in his eyes.

"I could have done nothing were it not for this man," Tynathria said pointedly, gesturing to Voster.

"And I will not forget it!" Druinor said in loud gratitude. He knelt before the outsider to give him the same two kisses. "I do not care who you are or where you came from, but you saved the life of my grandson and that is all I need to know. I shall even invoke the trials of winnowing on your behalf!"

C. JONAH ABBOTT

Tynathria put a hand to her open mouth, even as her father sucked air through his teeth in a hiss. “On behalf of a human?” he exclaimed. “It has never been done!”

“Nevertheless, I am doing it now.” Druinor stood again and gave Wirvanen a severe look. “You will find that there is nothing in the Codes preventing it.”

“Then you have one week to organize the trials. I will have no part in it.” Wirvanen stormed away, leaving his guards to decide whether or not to release their captive. They did so but remained close by just in case.

“What just happened?” Voster asked, rubbing his arms where they had been gripped by the guards.

Tynathria reached down and helped him to his feet. “The grandfather of the D’harn you saved bestowed on you a great honor. You are to be tested and, perhaps, offered a place in his family. Let’s get you inside.”

Voster looked away then back at Tynathria several times. “Wait, hold on. Inside where?”

Tynathria reached out with a whispered word of the ancients and guided Voster’s eyes, giving him the fleeting ability to see beyond the magical veil just as she could.

He looked around in disbelief at the town that had seemingly materialized around him; the gilded snow-covered rooftops shone in the morning sun, and the enormous palatial longhouse loomed over him. He was, however, mindful enough to close his gaping mouth after only a few seconds.

“Welcome to Por’monir,” Tynathria laughed. “I promise we are nicer than we first appear.”



ATHRIA SHOOK HERSELF FROM her reverie when she heard the joyful noises of her daughter coming up the path. Niena bounced along on Voster’s shoulders, laughing with exhilaration at the unexpectedly brisk

THE CODES OF BINDING

ride. His stern and focused face betrayed worry for his wife that he did not wish to show to Niena.

Athria smiled and pushed herself back to her aching feet, intending to meet them at the threshold and soothe Voster's overcautious mind. But before she could get there, the door burst open and Voster enveloped her in his warm embrace.

"What's the matter? Are you all right?" he asked in his sweet country drawl that she adored. Voster's blond hair and beard had begun to turn gray at the edges, but in almost every way he was still the same handsome, smelly man she met on the Hall of Meeting's doorstep years ago. "Is the baby all right?" he asked more deliberately.

Athria leaned into him, resting her face on his shoulder as another contraction came and went. "Yes, love. My water broke while we were tending chores, that is all."

"Then we haven't much time to lose," Voster said, kissing her forehead and motioning for her to lay back down as he grabbed his satchel. "If I leave for Ensdale now, I should be back with a doctor before—"

Athria shook her head. "We talked about this, Voster. The risk is too great." She looked out the window again, spying her daughter sitting in the grass where Voster left her. The girl played with her corn husk doll in the rapidly waning light. "Do you remember Niena when she was born? The doctor will know we are not human."

Voster sighed and frowned, the kind of frown that accompanied a deep ache in one's soul. "He could save your life."

"You would lose all three of us then, not just me," Athria whispered, pleading with him. "And my people would again be sought out and murdered like they once were. Would you barter our children away for my sake?"

Voster turned away and leaned on the mantel. After a pause, he choked out an answer. "No."

C. JONAH ABBOTT

She went over and wrapped her arms around his chest from behind, the scent of his hard-working sweat filling her nostrils. “You were all I needed to bring Niena into the world, and you are all I need now.”

Voster nodded and held one of her hands to his heart. “Just promise me you’ll use magic if you need to.”

Athria swallowed. She had been afraid this would come up. “Voster . . . I have not tried since we left the enclave. It could be more dangerous for me to use magic without practice than if I did nothing, and I would be breaking our word to my father.”

“Your father never cared about us!” Voster exclaimed, shrugging out of her arms and turning to face her. “He was blinded by arrogance, just as my people were when Haron Geled wrote that book.” He glanced at the mantelpiece where the green tome sat.

Athria picked it up and opened it to the back, reminding him. “You know these, Voster. You knew them well enough to pass your trials. The Codes of Binding reserve the highest of penalties for those who break their promises.”

Voster took the book and set it aside, instead placing a tender hand on his wife’s round belly. “Even if breaking a promise saves the life of our baby?”

Without warning, the entire house shuddered, dust raining down from the slats in the roof as if something heavy landed on it. The pigs began to squeal and stampede in their pen, and the sound of their trampling hooves nearly drowned out Niena’s terrified scream.

Athria’s blood ran cold. A yowling roar split the darkening sky, forcing her to clamp her hands to her ears. Some arcane property of the inhuman sound grated at her soul. The flap of large, leathery wings confirmed her worst fears; it was no mere chicken that scared Niena this time.

THE CODES OF BINDING

Behind her, Voster loosed his sword from its mount with a clatter and burst out the front door. Heart pounding and ears still ringing, Athria stumbled outside behind him with a single objective on her mind.

She spied their daughter immediately, having tripped and fallen in the grass a few yards away. Athria quickly gathered her up and turned to run back indoors, but instead stopped dead in her tracks and gasped at the scene on the other side of the house.

Several pigs lay dead in a mess of gore, disemboweled. Standing amid the bloody pen was a gruesome creature, taller than a man when on all fours and covered in slick mottled fur, except for the leathery wings sprouting from its back and the stinger in place of a tail. Most disturbing was the human-like face bent down on a long maned neck, using impossibly sharp teeth to rip violently at one of the dead pigs.

The manticore had chosen to attack the farmhouse just as the sun's light vanished from the clearing, but its eyes glinted with an inner light as it spotted Voster brandishing his blade.

"Get inside!" Voster shouted at his wife, before vaulting over the fence post and facing down the monster.

She wanted to say so many things, but nothing came to mind in the moment. Covering Niena's eyes while she carried her, Athria forced herself to run and not look back. She didn't think she had such speed in her while in labor, but adrenaline took over.

She slammed the door behind them and rushed Niena to the storeroom, the only place in the house that was entirely walled by stone with no windows. Niena sobbed uncontrollably, shaking with fright and clutching at Athria's neck. She stroked her daughter's flaxen hair in an attempt at comfort, all the while listening to the sounds on the other side of the wall and wondering with each passing moment if her husband survived.

A fully-grown male manticore would rarely come this far out of the deep forest, as they were solitary hunters and very territorial. That

C. JONAH ABBOTT

meant Voster was likely tangling with the larger and more dangerous female; between the teeth, claws, wings, and venom-filled tail spike he didn't have much chance of winning the fight.

A thought entered Athria's mind just as the most painful and intense contraction yet seized her lower body. She cried out through clenched teeth. Maybe Voster had been right. All of them would die tonight if she didn't resort to magic—promises or not.

But she couldn't break faith with her people and way of life. But perhaps, she realized with a fleeting thought toward her past, they had already broken faith with her.



“DID YOU, VOSTER CRESTHAVEN, pledge your heart in secret to my daughter, Tynathria Falir?”

There was scarcely a pause before the answer came. “Yes, I have.”

The crowd murmured, and the family elders whispered among themselves behind Wirvanen on the dais. It was high summer and the heat was stifling in the great hall, especially with so many visitors crammed in to watch the proceedings.

Tynathria worried that Voster sounded too proud or rebellious, though secretly his straightforward and brazen manner defending their love pleased her. She squeezed his hand adoringly.

Wirvanen addressed her next, his dark brow as seemingly cold and harsh as ever but his eyes painting a different picture. He had been shaken to his core by the revelation of his daughter's union, but Tynathria could tell he desperately refrained from showing it. “And you, daughter, did you accept and . . . give your vows without consulting your family?”

Tynathria placed a protective hand over her stomach, where the presence of her daughter's life intensified with each passing day. The bump was just barely visible, the reason for the assembly's emergency session today. Tynathria

THE CODES OF BINDING

and Voster had known and considered the consequences of cultivating a life together without the blessing of her father, but she hadn't expected to be made such a public spectacle.

"Yes, Father," she said, attempting to sound more quiet and respectful than she felt. Over the six months since Voster passed his trials, Wirvanen and others constantly attempted to reinterpret the Mishenna to exclude the man from daily life among their people. Unfortunately, too many in Por'monir seemed to agree with the arbiter's decisions. "I have committed myself gladly to him. I love him."

Wirvanen did not immediately respond, appearing to struggle with the words. "You have all heard their admission," Wirvanen finally called to the people, his voice strained and tight in his throat. "If they believe their community should have no part in their union, then they should have no part in the community."

Tynathria's heart twisted inside her chest, and Voster held her just a little closer. She wanted their union to be the beginning of a new era for men and elves, a symbol and reminder of how the two peoples had once fulfilled and complemented each other. But nothing that simple could undo centuries of hurt.

Wirvanen's brow softened, and for a second he became the father she remembered playing with as a child, just older, more weary, and scared. But the vision faded immediately once he spoke again. "For the safety and well-being of Por'monir, I must banish this man from among us. If you love him as you say, I ask you to leave the enclave with him," he said, resolute.

So that was it. No discussion, and no input from the elders. By asking her to leave, Tynathria's father had washed his hands of the matter and placed the burden of the decision on her. It would be her choice to depart from Por'monir, not his.

Shilvand stood in outrage from the front row as the crowd suddenly became much more animated. "Banishment? You cannot do that to her—she is family, our flesh and blood!"

C. JONAH ABBOTT

Wirvanen held a hand up to reclaim some sense of order in the hall. The noise died down a little, but tense voices still rippled throughout the room. "I am not casting her out, but her self-proclaimed husband is another matter. The entire enclave has been on edge for six months since Voster's arrival, and he is no longer welcome.

"Since Tynathria has irrevocably committed herself to this man, better that they find their place elsewhere in the world. Their presence will only divide us."

"Find their place?" an elder repeated as loud as he could from his seat among the other leaders. It was Druinor. "When is the last time you've left the settlement yourself? Do you know how dangerous it is out in the wilds? Because Tollan certainly does."

Wirvanen looked on as the elders began to bicker among themselves, challenging Druinor's evident bias and understanding of the situation. All would remember that Voster was only among the D'harnir because he saved Tollan from certain death, but Tynathria wasn't sure how much that would help their cause.

Druinor had lost much respect among the people for sponsoring Voster's trials, but still he retained his family position as an elder. Tynathria deeply respected him for holding to the ideals of Mishenna in the face of pressure, but ideals meant little if no one else agreed to them in practice. The enclave as a whole was generally uncomfortable with the idea of a human in their midst, if not outright malicious.

There was little use in trying to convince the entire enclave, Tynathria realized. She loved Voster, and that was all that mattered; they would be far happier building a new life on their own than trying to fit in where they weren't wanted.

"We accept!" she shouted out over the argument. The hall went quiet enough that a stray cough sounded like a smithy's hammer. She took solace in the fact that she had shocked one of her father's arguments into silence, one last time.

THE CODES OF BINDING

She looked at Voster, whose eyebrows lifted in surprise. She kissed him in assurance that she was in her right mind, and he smiled.

“We accept,” he confirmed.

Wirvanen nodded slowly, tears forming in his eyes that refused to fall. Perhaps he had thought that by banishing Tynathria’s new love, she might choose the comfort of home over the dangerous wilderness. But she would never break the oath she swore to Voster that night—only the eternal night could sever it.

Tynathria realized that she pitied her father. He did love her in his own way, just not according to the Codes of Binding. He might never know selfless, sacrificial love like what she and Voster had together. “Then so shall it be,” Wirvanen said, his voice chilling and quiet. “You may never again return to this city.”

Tynathria swore before the assembly that she would live out the rest of her days as a human, to protect her true people. She promised she would not speak in the ancient tongue, precluding her from using magic, and she would no longer act or dress in ways that might betray her unique heritage to others. She and Voster readily agreed to all of it.

The only thing that gave her pause was the shearing. One of her kin came forward with a curved dagger, which he raised to the side of her head. No healers came to numb the pain. She felt the heat of her blood run down as the blade carved away the points of her ears, replaced immediately by a tight bandage like a headband. It felt sacrilegious, like denying the physical and spiritual truth of her body—and in a way, she supposed she had. But as long as Voster loved her, she would suffer a thousand cuts to be with him.



WITH A DEEP THUNDEROUS crack, the stone wall crumbled and split open. Athria instinctively held Niena underneath her, hoping to protect

C. JONAH ABBOTT

both her children but terrified to be crushed at any moment by the falling stonework.

When the rubble settled and death still hadn't come, Athria opened her eyes and listened. Niena sobbed rightfully into one ear, but the other caught the enraged soul-splitting roar of the beast outside. She couldn't hear Voster, but they had to get moving.

She stood, her hips protesting, and gasped when she saw the storeroom wall had fallen away from the house in pieces. Voster's reinforcing beams and sturdy shelves prevented the worst of the rubble from coming down on top of them, but now they were exposed to the elements—and the manticore's claws.

She spied the creature, haphazardly flapping its wings and stumbling around in a confused stupor. A bucket was lodged firmly over its head.

The bucket, Athria realized with a start, had been the one she left in the pig pen earlier. *Oh, resourceful Voster!* He must have slipped it over the manticore's face at the last instant, causing it to ram the farmhouse wall in blind frustration. She could see Voster now too, using his sword to haul himself back to his feet. He looked shaken but none the worse for wear.

With a spiteful snarl, the manticore managed to hook a pair of claws around its makeshift blinders and rip them off. Its eyes glowed with a feral light, and it wasted no time searching for the prey that had eluded it the first time. It bared its dagger-like teeth at Voster, and its muscles tensed to pounce.

"NO!" Athria screamed and reflexively reached out.

Everything else faded away, and time crawled to a standstill. The creature stopped its advance and stared at her in captivated bewilderment.

Athria had struggled against her father for a lifetime because he chose to value mere words over what truly mattered. He became so

THE CODES OF BINDING

wrapped up in the interpretation of the Codes that he forgot why they were written. She would not make the same mistake. A forced promise would not keep her from protecting her husband, daughter, or the son which squirmed inside her.

She stepped through the crumbled wall of her house, leaving Niena hidden inside, and uttered the forbidden ancient tongue. Her hands stretched out towards the beast, funneling every ounce of her energy into the manticore's mind. It was alien to her, a mind that worked in ways so different from her own that she risked breaking it by merely holding its attention.

The beast had lived completely alone, striking out even at others of its own kind—no, *her* own kind—if they came too close. Athria's earlier suspicion proved correct, and she realized the territorial barriers of the manticore's mind had crumbled to her magic spell. The creature became receptive to her, for they were both mothers.

A large egg grew inside the manticore's belly, and her nature bound her to search out a protected place to lay it. The feeling of a mother's desperation washed over Athria multiple times, and she was no longer able to determine if the feeling was her own or the creature's. They understood one another deeply, just like it had been with Tollan all those years ago.

Athria recalled to mind a variant of this incantation, something she knew could be done but had never attempted. It was a trick the wardcasters sometimes used if their illusions weren't enough to turn an intruder away. The manticore was intelligent, more so than she would have ever expected, but perhaps not intelligent enough to prevent the placing of a thought, the seed of a distraction.

There is nothing for you here, Athria pressed, altering the slur of the ancient words to make her subject more suggestive. *You must go deeper into the woods if you want your egg to be safe until it is found.*

C. JONAH ABBOTT

She sensed a vague agreement from the manticore, almost as if she considered the idea to be her own. Athria began to back out of the trance she had created, slowly lowering the effects of the spell while reinforcing the seeded intention. The creature's wings flapped as it prepared to turn back into the depths of the forest.

The moment their minds broke contact, Athria knew she had eased up too soon.

The manticore whirled, staring with malice in her glowing eyes. The predator's muscles rippled. Now, she saw the woman before her not as a prey but as a *competitor* for the best nesting site.

The words Athria said to Niena not an hour before echoed unbidden in her thoughts. *Oh, pixie, it was just as afraid of you as you were of it.*

Athria's mind grasped haphazardly for another spell, but the creature's sudden roar was like a nail in her skull. She fell to the ground and convulsed, straining against the oppressive sound and unable to think or respond.

Her son thrashed his legs inside her, understanding through his mother's shuddering pain that something had gone terribly wrong.

For a moment, Athria thought she heard Voster calling out over the din, trying to divert attention from her. But it was no use.

The manticore's poisoned tail spike found its target in the right side of Athria's chest, piercing through skin, ribs, and organs and into the dirt beneath her. Without a pause, the manticore ripped the spike out again, the deed finished.

She tried to gasp but could barely breathe. She knew she should be hurting immensely, but she couldn't feel pain. She wanted to get to safety, but her limbs wouldn't move.

She stared upwards past the trees at the dusky night, blinking furiously. The ground around her had become warm and wet, but it wasn't raining.

A sword clattered down next to her.

THE CODES OF BINDING

Voster came into her field of vision—strong, wondrous Voster. He knelt beside her, looking down at her wounds in horror. They must be worse than she thought. “Wh-where . . . ?” she whispered, trying to muster up enough breath to speak.

“It’s gone, Athria,” he said. “It flew off, after . . .” he trailed off sadly and took her hand, looking into her eyes if only to avoid looking down. Tears welled in his eyes.

Her last command had still worked. The beast was gone.

She mouthed one last incantation, using what little breath she had left to touch Voster’s mind gently. Despite her lack of energy and his inability to use magic, the unity of their selves came easily. She had almost forgotten what it was like to see this much of her husband’s being. It reminded her of the night they first bonded, and showed her tangibly how much deeper she loved him after these three years together.

Voster gave a start, internally questioning her mental presence.

Yes, love, I am here. If she couldn’t speak, this would do well enough.
Where is Niena?

“She’s inside, I think,” Voster said, not realizing that he only had to think, and she would know what he wanted to say.

Good, she replied. She should not see me like this. How bad?

“You’re . . . you’re bleeding everywhere. It went clean through.”

The baby.

Voster cautiously examined her, biting the back of his hand to stifle his gag reflex. He was trying so desperately to be strong for her. “I think . . . I think he’s all right.”

Then we have little time. You have to deliver our son.

He nodded, not comprehending what that meant.

Your knife.

Athria didn’t know her husband could go any paler, but he did. *It is okay, Voster. I am dying. You have to do this.*

C. JONAH ABBOTT

She pressed on, thinking she might fade away at any moment. *You have to take him and Niena to your sister in Celwaith Tor, the one you used to tell me about. Surely someone in the city will know a wet nurse.* Guilt suddenly overcame her with the knowledge that Voster would not be able to bring in the harvest he had earned and cultivated this year.

He reached down and pulled a small, sharp whittling blade from his belt. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

She smiled at him. *You always have, my love.*

Athria closed her eyes and gathered as much breath with her good lung as possible, then whispered a word to maintain consciousness and dull her senses. She helped Voster through the procedure as best she could, but her knowledge was limited. In the end, she didn’t even feel the incision—whether from magic or loss of blood, she wasn’t sure.

Voster cradled the infant for her to see. Her son was slick with dark blood, and already discovering his lungs in the way only a newborn could. Athria looked with adoration on his round face and thought that he might have his father’s nose.

But his beautiful pointed ears, those were from his mother.

“Did you ever decide on a name?” Voster asked her, removing his tattered work shirt and swaddling the child in it.

She did. *Tollan*, she thought to him with a measure of pride.

Voster laughed, and he finally couldn’t hold back the tears anymore. Tears of joy mingled with tears of sorrow. “A fitting name.”

Athria only had seconds left; she could feel it. The gift of life, the magic of her soul, was fading. *Tell . . . tell Niena I love her.*

“I will, every day,” he said, hugging the wailing Tollan to his bare skin. He gripped her hand with the desperation of knowing he would never see her again in this life. She could sense him struggling to find the right words, then settling for the only ones that mattered. “I love you, Tynathria.”

Those words were perfect.

THE CODES OF BINDING

Our hearts . . . are bound together, Voster, she thought to him as she drifted into the eternal night. Our . . . love . . . will endure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C. JONAH ABBOTT is a writer, artist, and the founder of Anointed Colony Media, a small publishing house dedicated to reclaiming entertainment for Christ and His Kingdom. His first short story, "The Codes of Binding," was second runner-up for the Baen Fantasy Adventure Award in 2021. When not daydreaming of Narnia and Star Wars, he lives with his lovely wife, Sharon, and her irascible feline, Shadow, in Greeley, Colorado. Thankfully, their dog, Winston, likes him well enough.

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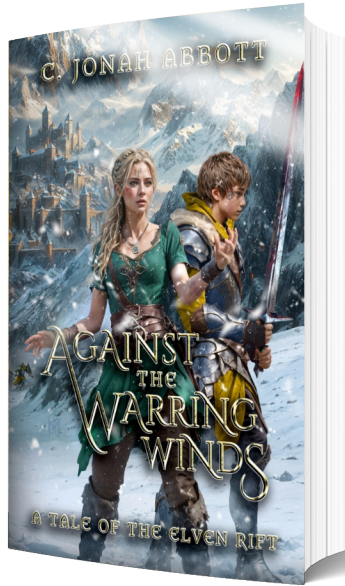
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