



Chapter 5
Give a Knight a Quest,
Change His Life Forever

- Reading Sample -

Wilhelm only woke up when someone sat down on the edge of his bed and gently touched his shoulder.

He had his sword pulled and at the intruder's throat in a heartbeat and before he was even half awake. Of that at least, his father would have been proud.

"Thank God," Li Lan's voice said. The prince was sitting at the edge of his bed, looking prim and composed and beautiful, completely ignoring the sword at his throat. "You really should be more alert to intruders in your bedchamber. Any assassin could have killed you in your sleep."

"What are you doing here?!" His words came out a weird mix, between a shout and a whisper, and at the same moment, he registered the cool draft against his chest. He dropped his sword like a hot potato and pulled up his blanket instead. Thank God he wasn't sleeping completely naked like he did on board the Havelland but had instead

kept on his long underpants. It still left him so inappropriately exposed that he was struggling to string together a coherent thought. At least Li Lan appeared to be fully robed, as far as he could tell in the dim light coming in through the window and from beneath the door. Also, the prince didn't seem overly concerned by Wilhelm's barely dressed state, which made it more disturbing, considering how self-conscious the Tô-Genji were concerning their modesty.

"I am about to do something very stupid. And ... I have come to ask for your help," Li Lan said, explaining nothing.

Oh, thank God. So, this wasn't some sort of romantic visit after all. And where had that ridiculous thought come from? Li Lan wasn't an Alaviva princess. Of course he had a reason of grave importance to be here.

"What...?" He started to ask but stopped himself. He took a moment to take a deep breath and arrange his blanket a little more securely around his chest, trying to force his sleep-addled mind into action. "What are you talking about? What kind of stupid are we talking about?"

Li Lan had a sharp tongue and wit, but so far, he hadn't struck him as the adventurous type. However, right now, he sounded very much like a young hero, embarking on a valiant but foolhardy quest.

"I will set the Medina prisoner free and try to flee the fortress with him."

He heard the words, but he had to run them through his mind a couple of times to make sure they were really what Li Lan had said. This was so much worse than anything he could have imagined. The obvious question was 'Why?', but before he could ask, Li Lan continued speaking.

"We could try to steal horses and escape into the countryside, but there is no one who would help us and nowhere we could hide, so we would surely be caught

sooner or later. We have no way of getting off-planet as neither of us can fly a spaceship. But you can."

With his mind desperately trying to scramble after Li Lan's words, it took him several seconds to understand the implication.

"You are asking me to help you?" That was what Li Lan had started with. The enormity crashed down on him like a ton of bricks. This wasn't a simple, honourable quest to slay a dragon. Helping Li Lan would mean betraying the trust of his father, betraying his House, Li Lan's House, jeopardising the negotiations of House Grebenstein with House Tô-Genji, sacrificing any future he had.

Looking at Li Lan, he found the graveness of the situation reflected in the other's face. His words weren't lightly spoken, and he was only too aware of how much he was asking.

Li Lan lowered his gaze to his hands, which were holding on tightly to the hem of his sleeves. "I am sorry I have to ask this of you, but there is no one else I can ask. I have no other friends."

His words pierced Wilhelm's heart as true as a well-aimed arrow. How terrible to be among your own and still utterly alone. "But why? Why do you need to do this?"

"Because my father is a monster more cruel than even I expected. I had hoped he would exchange the Medina for prisoners of our House or grant him a quick execution. But my father wants to have him tortured to death. He has ordered me to find a justification within our traditions that would allow him to do so, when there is none." Li Lan was keeping his voice low, but it was simmering with deeply held rage. Not pain, not suffering. Rage. Primal, incandescent rage, raw and true, utterly unbefitting of a Tô-Genji and yet, so very Li Lan. "It is wrong. I will not do this. I have done so many things I knew were wrong, telling myself I had no other choice, going along with what

everyone else was doing. But this? This I won't do. I must draw a line. I would rather die than become something I will have to hate."

He was trying to do the right thing. Of the reasons Li Lan had listed, this one was utterly relatable. He was a noble knight of House Grebenstein, after all. The importance of honour and justice had been drummed into his head from the moment he had learned to walk.

But was this a just cause? One worth risking everything for?

"How do you know that Medina doesn't deserve the death your father decreed?"

"Because we are at war and he is fighting for his House, the same way my brother fights for ours. Because he is funny and kind. Why else would he speak to me as an equal, more so than any of my own family, when by all rights he should have nothing but contempt for an enemy who puts him on display in a cage like a rabid animal?"

"Beg your pardon? You spoke to him?"

Li Lan had the good graces to look flustered. "Yes? Someone had to bring him food that first night. Hospitality demanded it. And ... apart from you, he is the only interesting thing that has happened here in years."

Wilhelm couldn't help a little chuckle. This sounded much more like the Li Lan he had come to know and like during his stay on Qufu. Not gravely serious, or simmering with barely suppressed rage, but slightly indecent and quietly rebellious.

Encouraged, Li Lan continued. "He laughed at my jokes. Like you do. How can I help my father arrange such a gruesome death for Saïd when we could be friends?"

So, this was a just cause.

Which left only one possible answer to Li Lan's plea, but it took him a second to say the words.

"I will help you."

- End of reading sample -