

Chapter One

Water squelched between the fingers of Red's glove as she pounded on the door.

The wet wood seemed to give under her attack, and she eased back a step, cursing under her breath. Best not to be too fierce, seeing as how she was begging shelter for the night.

Her feet squished in her boots as she stepped back. Some water from the roof of the small hut dripped under her cloak, and down her neck. She cursed again as the wet chill rolled down her spine under her armor.

Impatient, she raised her gloved fist and pounded again.

Rain fell in sheets around her, obscuring the cleared area around the hut. She cursed the rain, cursed the night and the cold. She glanced back over her shoulder at Bethral, who was holding the horses, her hood pressed down against her head by the weight of the water.

Red was certain that they'd never been this wet, cold and filthy. The horses's heads were hanging, poor tired beasts, their legs and bellies caked in muck. Beast was favoring his hind leg, and Red feared he'd strained it bad. They needed shelter, needed it now. Only the faint trace of wood smoke had brought them here. There was no other sign of shelter for miles.

She turned back to the door, raising her gloved fist to pound on it again when the door was pulled back, scraping against the dirt of the floor. A wave of blessed heat and the smell of food and fire pressed against her cold face. The hot air was thick with the scent of stew and spices she didn't know. Her mouth watered.

A figure blocked the door, a big man. Red tilted her head to look into brown eyes flecked with gold, glaring at her, questioning, and full of something she knew only too well.

Pain.

She swallowed hard and her stomach clenched. “Shelter,” she croaked, her throat raw. “We ask shelter for the night.”

“We?” A deep voice rumbled softly, and the door swung open wider, as the man peered over her shoulder and out into the rain. A fire crackled on a hearth behind him and the fragrance of his dinner filled her nostrils.

“My friend and I and our horses.” She swallowed her pride and anger, for asking did not come easy. “We offer peace and honor the household.”

The man snorted softly, as if at a jest. “Such as it is.” He gave her a long look, then nodded once. “Bide.” The door closed.

She snarled, letting her rage bubble up. But she backed away and squelched over to where Bethral stood patiently in the rain. Her sword sister looked out from under her hood and raised an eyebrow.

“The man said to ‘bide’.” She took the reins of her horse. “Not sure, but I hope that it means-”

The door creaked open, and the man came out, wrapped in a cloak and carrying a small lantern. He pulled the door closed behind him. “Come.”

Red took the lead, tugging on the reins to get her horse moving. Beast let his neck stretch out to its full extent before he heaved a sigh and lifted his feet out of the mud to follow. Bethral waited a pace or two before following with her horse.

The man led them around the hut, passed an old stone well and into the night. She peered ahead, surprised to see a large stone structure appear in the darkness. He moved carefully to open an enormous wood door, sliding it off to one side. She led her horse into the dark barn, far enough to allow Bethral to bring Steel in as well.

They stood there, dripping, and gaped. The man lit three other lanterns that hung from posts. The building was huge, with box stalls lining both sides of the wide aisle. The place smelled dusty, and disused.

A rustling noise from one of the boxes and a small white goat stuck its head out from one of the boxes, blinking sleepily in the soft light. It bleated softly, as if asking a question.

“Visitors.” The man’s voice rumbled. “Go back to sleep.”

The white head pulled back.

“I’ve never seen the like,” Red spoke in the echoing darkness as she took off her dripping cloak. “It’s huge.”

“From the days when this was a rich and foolish man’s breeding farm.” The man pulled back his hood and hung his lantern on one of the hooks. “The fool is gone, the barn remains.”

“And you?” Red asked. In the light of the lanterns, she got her first good look at the man. A good strong face, handsome even, but etched with lines of sorrow. Dark brown curls, with traces of silver, and those brown eyes, flecked with gold.

“And me,” he replied, not really answering her question. He gazed at her with tired eyes. Not so old as she’d thought he was, but his pain was.

“I go by Red Gloves.” Red said.

His eyes flicked to her gloves, but thankfully he made no comment.

“My friend is Bethral” Red said

Bethral pulled off her hood, and gave the man a nod. His eyes flickered over her blonde hair and blue eyes.

“Our thanks for-” Red continued.

He waved off her words. “See to your animals. Make free with what you find, for I keep no horses. Down that way is a foaling room. There’s a small hearth there for heat. I’ll bring you wood and such as I can spare.”

“Again, our...” Her voice trailed off as he flipped his hood up and left the building, leaving them standing there. She glared at the door. “Rude pig.”

“We’ve shelter.” Bethral said quietly as if that excused the man. She removed her own cloak and moved further down the aisle. “There’s water and buckets.”

“Let’s get at it then.” Red tied Beast and Steel off. “You water them, and check Beast for me. I’ll get the gear.” She pulled off her sodden cloak, and tossed it on a hook to dry.

“Twelve, everything is soaked. What do you wager the food is wet and mucked, eh?”

Bethral nodded absently as she pulled two buckets from the trough. The horses stirred, straining as she placed the water down in front. “Easy,” she crooned as they drank.

Well, no point in talking now that Bethral was focused on the beasts. Red grumbled under her breath as she pulled the sopping saddlebags off Steel. She grunted as she took the full weight, and lugged them to a nearby bench. Next Beast, who stomped his front foot as the weight was removed, but never pulled his head out of the bucket.

Bethral was stroking them as they drank and then reached to feel between Steel's forelegs and chest. "They need walked out." She kept a hand on Beast's as she knelt to check his leg. "There's no swelling. We'll know more in the morning."

Red grunted as she pulled the saddle off of Beast. "The cloaks didn't protect much." She placed the saddle on a rack nearby. "Leather will have to be worked in the morning."

Bethral removed Steel's saddle, and racked it as well. The bridles too, leaving the horses with their halters.

Red untied Beast, who threw his head toward the trough. She pulled his head down, and started to walk him down the long aisle. "Stop that, Beast. You'll cramp up for sure and then where will I be? In a goat barn in the middle of nowhere, with strange goat herders and naught for aid."

Bethral snorted a laugh as she followed, leading Steel, and for a while there was no sound but hooves on beaten earth as they walked the horses down the wide aisle.

After a few minutes, Red handed off the lead to Bethral, and went in search of what she could find. Her voice echoed the length of the barn. "There's straw."

"Fresh?"

"Well, dry at least." Red answered.

Bethral kept the horses moving down the aisle, and turned them just out of the light.

"Grain?"

"No, we'll have to use our own. Clean rags, and some bottles and jars I can't tell what they are."

"Smell them."

“I’m not sticking my nose in those, thanks kindly.” Red strode back into the aisle. “They cool yet?”

Bethral patted Beast on his chest, moving her hand down between his legs. “No.”

Red nodded, giving the wet gloves on her hands a tug to tighten their fit. “I’ll fork down the straw and hay, and get the grain ready.” She turned slightly, towards the ladder to the loft, only to pause at the base of the ladder. “You still have that molasses in your bag?”

Bethral gave her a look as she turned the horses again. Red shrugged. “Aye, I know, I said you were spoiling them too much with the sweet grain.” She pulled herself into the loft. “They’ve earned it, wading through the muck and mire of that bog for two days.”

“True enough.” Bethral’s voice floated up to her. “But whose fault was it that we were lost in the muck and mire to begin with?”

Red bit back a scathing retort and gripped the handle of the pitchfork she found there. The wet leather of her gloves munched against the wood; and she snarled again, and set to work. First the horses, then themselves. Once she was dry and food in her belly, Bethral could complain all she wanted.

And would.

Red attacked the straw, flinging it down into the boxes below her. She made quick work of the task of the bedding and getting the grain ready. Normally Beast would fidget if he smelled grain and molasses, but he continued to walk with Bethral calm as you please as Red made up the feed buckets.

“They’re tired and hot.” Bethral said quietly. “A bit longer and I can let them eat.”

Red nodded. "I'll see if I can find that foaling room." She moved down the wide aisle, in the faint light of the lantern.

Sure enough, a door to the side opened into what could almost be another barn, it was so big. An open stall at one end, with a wide barn door, and two bunks at the other, with a small hearth for heat. It was stale inside, as if none had entered here in some time. But there was a lantern inside the door, and Red took it up and returned to Bethral's side.

"It's there as he said, with a small hearth and bunks. I'll drag down our gear." She lit the lantern.

"Go. Get a fire started and get yourself dry." Bethral said softly. "I'll take care of the horses."

Red gave her a grateful glance, and took up a bucket of water from the trough. It would be cold, but enough to get clean of the muck.

It took a moment to lay a fire, and it started to crackle at once. Red pushed the door shut to let the heat start to build in the room, and placed the water close enough to warm. There was a small copper pot that she usually used to make kavage; she found it in their packs and filled it. It sat by the fire, reflecting the light happily, a touch of the familiar in an unfamiliar place.

Her leathers came off easy but the linen padding underneath had to be peeled from her skin. Her nose crinkled as she got a good whiff. She stank.

She fumbled about in her saddlebag and pulled out her tunic and trousers, and a spare set of gloves. Slightly damp, but clean. She also found the soap.

With the heat on her skin, she plunged her gloved hands into the bucket and started to work up a lather. It would feel so good to get some part of her clean and dry. Washing with the

gloves on was something she was used to. Better than the alternative, that was certain. She'd dry them well, and oil them in the morning. Wouldn't do to lose her extra pair. Too damn hard to replace.

She heard Bethral's voice, and knew the man was back. She listened, then snorted softly. Her sword-sister was using the same voice she'd use to calm a shy horse. She'd seen it too, in those brown eyes with gold flecks, seen the man's grief. Knowing her sword sister. . .

"I'm called Josiah." Red heard him say through the door.

Red grinned. Frightened animals and people, all trusted Bethral in a moment of hearing that voice. She chuckled, missing Bethral's next words.

When the door banged open, she looked around in surprise.

Josiah banged through the door without a thought, his arms full of wood. But he froze there, mouth open, eyes drinking in the sight.

She'd turned to look at the door, her face a question, her long brown hair hanging straight behind her, past her shoulders. The light of the fire danced over her burnished skin, for she stood naked as the day of her birth, except for the red gloves on her hands, and the bar of soap she held.

Muscular and strong, with a few scars here and there. A warrior's body but that only added to her loveliness.

Her look was not astonishment or fear or embarrassment, as he would expect. Rather her brown eyes sparkled with life as she took in his shock. After the pause lengthened to the point of pain, she arched an eyebrow at him, and planted one gloved hand on her hip. Her breasts swayed, the birthmark beneath her right breast a sharp, dark brown contrast to her skin.

Josiah sucked in a breath and backed away, dropping the wood. He thought he stammered an apology, but he wasn't sure he was using actual words. He pulled the door shut, then stared at the closed door. Still seeing her in his mind's eye. Her breasts. Her birthmark.

A sound drew his attention and he turned to see the tall blonde staring at him oddly, down by the horses. He moved her way, walking quickly, clearing his throat. "I interrupted her. At her bath. I'm sor--"

Her expression stopped him cold. With a frown and a swift lunge, she was between him and the foaling room, pulling her sword. "Was she wearing her gloves?"

Josiah gaped at her in astonishment.

"Quick, man," Bethral pushed him back toward the outside door, her focus down the corridor, as if fearing attack. "Did she have her gloves on?"

Chapter Two

“What?” Josiah repeated, his confusion growing by the moment.

“Was she wearing gloves?” The blonde was focused on the aisle and the door, her voice tense, her stance protective.

The image flashed before his eyes again, of the naked warrior in the fire light. Something stirred in his groin, something he’d thought long dead. The soap glistening on her slick skin, the suds between the fingers of her. . .

“Yes.” Josiah said, clearing his throat to speak. “Yes, she was.”

“Oh.” Bethral’s tension melted away. She sheathed her sword and stepped back to the horses.

Josiah watched her, puzzled. “She was naked,” he explained. “I burst in on her.”

“So?” Bethral didn’t even bother to look at him. She just shrugged. “Red won’t care.”

Josiah frowned, glancing back toward the door. She certainly hadn’t appeared offended. She’d almost seemed. . .interested. Standing there, not moving, except that sardonic eyebrow raised in a question. And the dagger-star birthmark beneath her breast.

He swallowed hard.

The rattle of feed buckets pulled him back. The horses were eager as Bethral put the grain before them. She reached for a cloth then, and started rubbing the horses’s legs down as they chomped on the feed, murmuring to them softly.

Vaughan

Dagger-Star

“I’ve food to share, some stew and biscuits.” Josiah offered. “I’ll bring it out. To make amends.”

Bethral glanced over, her blue eyes warm. “There’s no amends needed,” she spoke softly, the sound easing some of the tension from Josiah’s shoulders. “But hot food would be welcome indeed.”

Josiah nodded, grabbed up his cloak and headed back into the dark.

“Rude pig.”

Bethral looked up from her task, to see Red standing in the aisle, glaring through the open barn door at the rain outside. Or at Josiah’s figure disappearing into the mists.

“What was wrong with the man?” Red grumped. “Certain sure, there’s nothing wrong with me. A few scars maybe, but I’m decent looking.”

Bethral snorted softly. Red had managed a quick wash and was dressed in her spare tunic and trousers, a dagger at her belt, a fresh pair of dry gloves on her hands. Good. That would put her in a better mood. “Not so rude that he fails to give shelter to two strange women bearing weapons, when he has none.” Bethral turned back to rubbing her horses’s legs dry. “Perhaps he prefers his own sex.”

Red glared out the door and growled something under her breath.

“He offered to share his supper in an apology.” Bethral added.

Red gave her a quick look. “Food?” She quirked an eyebrow at Bethral. “Well then. Maybe I can forgive his actions.”

Bethral chuckled.

Red grabbed up a dry cloth. “I’ll finish this. The bags are wet clear through, but I pulled out your spares and put them by the fire. Go and change. I’ll get them watered and bedded for the night.”

Bethral straightened with effort. “I’ll do that.” She paused for a moment. “Red, you need to warn him. About—”

Red gave her a stubborn look. “I left them on, didn’t I? We’ll not be here long enough to—”

Bethral held up her hand to stop the familiar argument. “I’m too tired to argue.” She turned to go, aware that Red was muttering under her breath, but too tired to care. The surge of energy she’d felt before was gone, leaving exhaustion in its wake. It was all she could do to walk to the foaling room.

The birthing stall was large, but what drew her was the small fire by the two bunks. True to her word, Red had set out her clothes to warm.

Bethral heaved a sigh of relief as the warmth of the fire wrapped around her body. She was cold and ached in every joint. It took the last of her strength to lift her arms and remove her chain shirt. She sighed deeply as the weight came off her shoulders.

She’d heard of elven chain that was half the weight of human make. Said to be as rare as elves themselves. Bethral shook her head. Might as well wish it was magic armor while she was at it.

She sat then, to pull off her boots, and peel off her heavy leather trous. Muck and grit had gotten under every layer as she undressed, so she took her bucket and moved away from the fire to splash as she much as she wished. The feel of the water on her skin revived her a bit.

Once dressed, she started in on the saddle bags. Red joined her once the horses were bedded, and they sorted out the few possessions they shared. Everything was wet, from their clothes to the provisions.

“The dried meat is fine, but the beans are wet.” Bethral set those items aside.

“We’ll need to clean everything tomorrow.” Red grumbled softly, pulling out a pack of spare bow strings.

“And oil the armor and blades before rust sets in.” Bethral agreed.

Red lifted her head at the sound of the barn door opening and closing, and footsteps headed their way. The soft tap at the door made her give Bethral an amused glance. Bethral returned it. Apparently their host had learned his lesson.

Bethral opened the door to find Josiah laden with a cloth parcel and a covered pot. He went to the fire, and uncovered the stew. A tantalizing aroma filled the room, and Bethral took a deep breath.

“What is that scent?” Red asked, sniffing the air.

Josiah gave her an odd glance. “Marjoram.”

“Don’t know that spice,” Red said. “Smells good.”

Red plopped down on one of the bunks and Josiah gestured to Bethral to take the other. He sat before the fire, and unwrapped the bundle and started to dish out the stew.

“I don’t have three bowls,” he handed Red a full mug and a spoon.

Red dug in, not waiting a moment. Bethral accepted her mug with a smile. Josiah handed them each a biscuit, and for the moment they all three ate in silence. Josiah had emptied his bowl and was refilling Red's mug when he spoke. "You are not from here."

Bethral gave the man a long look over her mug. Smarter than he looked then.

Red shrugged. "Never said we were."

"What gave it away?" Bethral asked, curious. They'd worked on their language skills for some time.

Josiah shrugged. "A faint accent. And that you've not seen marjoram used in stew before. It's fairly common in Palins." His eyes slid over to Red, and then he looked back at Bethral. "And other things."

"We're from Soccia." Red held out her mug for more. "Not much work for two mercenaries in a land fat with peace."

Josiah's face darkened. "There's no peace here."

Red nodded, never noticing his dark look as she dug into her second helping. "Should be able to find work then."

Bethral stifled a sigh. There were times. . .

They continued eating in silence. Bethral sensed that Josiah had something on his mind, but she didn't really feel like encouraging him to talk. The warmth and the food made her sleepy, and all she cared was that there was a bed beneath her. They'd sleep warm, dry and safe and she was grateful.

Finally, after they'd scraped the pot empty, Red set down her mug and sighed. "Any more and I will burst. My thanks, Josiah."

“Mine as well,” Bethral added.

Josiah gathered the dishes into his bundle. “I’ll leave you to sleep then. There’s blankets in the trunk, and you’ve enough wood.” He stood and cleared his throat. “I’d ask. . .were you wounded? I saw a mark under your breast and--”

Bethral mentally rolled her eyes. The goat-herder wasn’t being very subtle. But then she caught Red’s eyes shifting slightly, and knew full well her sword-sister was up to something. . .

Red Gloves considered the man before her, then reached for the bottom of her tunic. “Twelve, no.” She stood and slowly pulled the material up, watching as his eyes followed the cloth edge. She lifted it just to just below her breasts, making sure that a bit of curve was revealed. “A birthmark, nothing more.”

The poor man stood as if pole-axed, standing there, staring.

She studied him through half-closed eyes. Oh he was interested, which pleased her. There was desire there, that was certain. Something else as well. . .how long had he been alone? Not healthy to repress a body that way.

Well, he was about to get his itch well and truly scratched. Red lowered her tunic, making sure her dagger handle was free, but she didn’t bother tucking her tunic in to her trous.

Josiah seemed to come back to himself. He opened his mouth as if to talk, but Red made a point of stretching, and yawned until her jaw cracked. No sense letting the man talk, after all.

Josiah hesitated, then spoke. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you like. Your horses look in need of some rest. I can provide breakfast, but my supplies will not stretch far.”

“We have some beans that need cooking,” Bethral lifted the sack.

“Let me have them, and I will set them to soak,” Josiah offered.

“Gladly.” Bethral smiled, handed him the beans. “Goodnight, Josiah. Our thanks again for the shelter and the food.”

Red gestured toward the door. “I’ll walk with you, Josiah, and check the horses.” She tried not to sound too smug.

Josiah gave her a questioning look, but headed for the door. Red followed behind, and pulled the door firmly closed behind them. She caught a brief glimpse of her sword-sister as the door closed.

Bethral was rolling her eyes as they left.

Red smirked at her. Some men just need to have the obvious made plain, that was all.

She turned and followed Josiah down the aisle of the barn, as the big man blew out the lanterns in the aisle, leaving only the light from the one he carried. The light caught in the glints of silver in Josiah’s dark curls. One minute she thought his hair black, the next a dark brown. She wondered whether it curled around his—

They paused by the horses, and Josiah raised the lantern, showing that the beasts were well and fast asleep. He turned toward, and looked down into her eyes. “I can leave this with you, if you need—”

Red reached out and caught a handful of his tunic in her gloved hand. Slowly, deliberately, she pulled him closer. There was a puzzled look in those pained eyes, as if uncertain as to her intent.

She smiled slightly as she captured his mouth.

He tasted salty. Or was it sweet? There was a subtle spice to the warmth of his lips.

She felt him move away, and so pressed him back against the stable wall using the entire length of her body. His body was taut, tense, but she concentrated on the kiss. He opened his mouth under hers, probably in protest, but she just explored further.

A thrill swept through her when she felt him relax into the kiss. His heat was delicious and she hungered. Even through the layers of clothing, she felt his body respond to her.

Her free hand moved up to thread her gloved fingers through his hair. She shifted her weight slightly, and raised her leg up along his, eager for more. Releasing her grip on his tunic, she stroked down to fumble at the waist of his trous. Josiah groaned into her mouth as she searched for--

Strong hands on her waist lifted her, and set her way from him with a 'thud'.

Five goats heads emerged between the slats of the stall, to blink at them in the light.

Red stood, gasping, staring at the man who looked flustered and grim. "I am not fit, Lady."

Her eyes went down to his crotch. He'd seemed--

"Not fit for a relationship," Josiah said.

"Who said anything about a relationship?"

Bethral raised an eyebrow when Red stalked back into the birthing room, and closed the door with a slam. Red's trysts were usually a little longer than--

Vaughan

Dagger-Star

She got a good look at Red's face and decided not to ask any questions.

"Watches?" Bethral asked.

Red's anger faded as quick as it had come. She took a deep breath and shook her head.

"Not sure it's necessary." She shrugged ruefully. "Not sure I could stay awake."

Bethral gave a short nod, then dragged the heavy blanket trunk in front of the door.

"That should give us some warning."

Red had her weapons on the floor within reach. She checked the fire, then crawled between her blankets. "I doubt a small army bursting through would wake me. I am that tired."

Bethral grunted her agreement, arranged her weapons, and crawled into her bunk. A simple straw mattress, but it felt like the finest down. The blankets warmed quickly, and she felt her muscles finally ease. They'd traveled hard and been lost in that mire for so long, she wasn't even sure of the days. "That's the last time I follow you into a bog, Red."

The only answer was a soft snore.

Bethral closed her eyes, and let sleep enfold her.

Josiah ducked his head as he entered his hut, pushed the door closed, and drew a deep breath.

The room hadn't changed. Just big enough for his needs, with a table, chair and bed. The herbs he had drying in the rafters stirred in the cold air he'd let in the door.

The largest thing in the room was the old stone hearth. The fire he set there didn't come

Vaughan

Dagger-Star

close to filling it, but it was enough to warm the small hut.

Josiah sighed, and set his burden down on the table.

It couldn't be true of course. They were mercenaries, women warriors out of Soccia. But there it was, below her right breast, the dagger-star birthmark. Clear as day and sharp as a blade.

She'd kissed him.

A tingle passed over his skin at the memory. She'd pressed up against him, and he could still feel her body, her warmth, her mouth. Five years it has been, five long years, since he'd held a woman.

No, that wasn't right. He'd never held a woman like her in his arms before. No shy reluctance, no hesitation. Just a warm and very willing woman in his arms, making it very clear what she wanted. She was no lady of the court, full of deceit and treachery, hiding her plans behind words of love.

He looked at the bundle in his hands without really seeing it. It wasn't a dream. He'd eaten with them, the dishes in the bundle proof they were real.

That and the fact that his pot was empty.

He set about washing the dishes, and took care of the few chores that needed doing. But his hands moved on their own, with no real help from him. His mind was too filled with the possibilities.

His groin stirred, and Josiah drew a deep breath, trying to suppress that urge. No, he needed to concentrate on the other possibility.

Red Gloves bore the birthmark of the Chosen of Plains.

His fire banked, the beans set to soak, Josiah stripped down and crawled beneath the wool blankets of his own bed. He lay there, breathing, as the bed warmed around him. He stared up at the thatch of his roof, lost in thought.

After all this time, after all the pain, could this be? Could revenge be that close?

He lay there for a long time as the fire died to coals, his heart filled with a strange mix of hope and fear. In the morning, he'd make some breakfast and talk to the women. Try to learn more, try to explain—

A soft bleat broke through his thoughts.

Josiah's gaze shifted to focus on the small white goat by the bed. She danced closer, and butted her head against his shoulder.

“Did I wake you, Snowdrop?” Josiah asked softly. He reached out and scratched her between the ears. She leaned into the scratch. The others bleated softly, coming from the shadows. The two largest settled down by his bed, tucking themselves close. The little white one stamped her foot, as the other small ones leapt up on his bed.

“All right, all right.” Josiah shifted to lay on his side, as the goats tucked themselves in along his legs and back. The small white one was quick to claim the spot in front of his chest.

Surrounded by the familiar warmth of their bodies, Josiah yawned and curled his arm around the white one. He closed his eyes with a sigh.

In the morning, he'd talk to them. Learn and explain. . .

In the morning, he'd . . .

In the morning. . .

Dawn found Red in need of the necessary.

She grumbled, and left the shelter of the blankets slowly, trying to leave the heat within, for she had every intention of crawling back into them. The fire had died down - only a few coals remained. She took the time to add some tinder. She'd add more wood when she got back.

She grabbed her dagger, and went to the door. What Bethral had moved with ease the night before took her a minute more to move from the door. Red cursed slightly as she swung the door open. She walked down the aisle of the barn, pleased to see the horses sleeping in their stalls.

The morning light let her see the goats in the far pen, five from the look of things. She liked goat, if it was well cooked. She yawned, and opened the smaller door to go outside. The darkness outside was thick, silent and cool. The rain had stopped, and it looked to be a clear sky above. She grunted as she spotted the small house and made her way to it.

It was when she emerged, with the sun just a hint of pink to the east that she finally got a good look at her surroundings. She paused, her bare feet on the wet grass, and looked about in shock. The barn, it was big. Very big, and. . .

Red stood in the light of a silent dawn, really looking as the light spread to reveal the barn, the bricks that bore the marks of weapons and the scorches of fire. It was amazing the thing still stood solid, from the blackened walls.

Stunned, she looked further, at the fields around her, at the skeletons of burnt trees reaching for the sky, at ruined foundations where buildings once stood.

It wasn't a farm. It was a battlefield.