

Song of Winds Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: A year after the epilogue

Hagen

Hagen paused, leaning back to better look up at the imposing building rising above him. The turrets at the royal castle in Sunniva seemed higher than normal, somehow. It made no sense, really. He'd been coming to the castle semi-regularly for the last year, so he should be used to it by now.

With a sigh, he trudged forward, feeling none of the enthusiasm his friends seemed to imagine came with a royal summons. Hagen knew many of his contemporaries at the Academy of Song were wild with envy at the fact that Hagen periodically received a personal invitation from King Herleif. He knew he should be flattered by the young king's attempts to connect with him. But his usual reaction on receiving a message from the castle was closer to dread.

Hagen was expected, and the guard at the castle's entrance waved him through. He made his way down the corridor to the smallest of the king's public audience chambers. That was where King Herleif usually met him. The place bustled with activity, many servants darting past or pausing for a quick gossip. Hagen hadn't been a visitor to the castle during the years when King Herleif had been absent and presumed dead. But he understood that the castle had been a much happier and busier place in the year since the king had reappeared to claim his birthright.

Not that Hagen would describe the current mood as happy, he reflected. His eyes followed a pair of servants whose heads were bent together, and a frown creased his forehead. The air was thick with some tension he couldn't identify. What had created such a buzz among all the castle's inhabitants? Was there something happening that he didn't know about? Was today's summons not merely a social matter after all? Hagen tensed internally, humming to himself in an almost unconscious sound. He didn't actually sing, but he reached reassuringly for the magic that teemed just below the surface of Sunniva's fertile ground. Not that he anticipated danger in the king's own castle, but it didn't hurt to be prepared.

Hagen had just reached the audience chamber, lifting one hand to push open the door, when the king's personal steward bustled past. Catching sight of the young visitor, he paused.

"Hagen, isn't it? The chamber's empty, lad. No audiences today."

Hagen lowered his hand, confused. "I received a summons yesterday," he said. "His Majesty invited me to attend at this time."

"Ah." The steward looked pained. "My apologies, young master. All His Majesty's appointments have been suspended for the moment, but clearly no one notified you. I doubt he'll see you today."

A commanding voice called the steward's name, and both men turned. King Herleif himself was striding down the corridor, leaving a wake of expectant, hovering servants.

"Your Majesty?" The steward's eyebrows rose in a question, but the king shook his head.

“No, no, they say it may be hours yet. But I couldn’t pace that room any longer, I had to stretch my legs. I came to ask if—oh, Hagen!” The king noticed his visitor for the first time. “What brings you here?”

“Your summons, Your Majesty,” said Hagen, bowing. “But I understand the timing isn’t convenient.”

“Blast it, I forgot,” said the king. “I’m sorry, Hagen, that’s no way to treat your valuable time.”

“Not at all,” Hagen said quickly. “It’s no trouble, I was just about to return to the academy.”

“Yes,” the steward cut in. “I was just informing the young man that—”

“Come to think of it, Hagen, if you’re willing to stay and have our discussion now, I could use the distraction,” King Herleif said frankly. “Walk with me. I can’t bear to stand still.”

Perplexed, Hagen followed his sovereign back down the corridor, his curiosity a welcome change from the discomfort he usually felt in his king’s presence. Hagen had often wished he could be more obliging and share King Herleif’s apparent view that the joint murder of their fathers by the same giant on the same day, some seven years previously, should be a bonding event. But for Hagen, the king only served as a reminder of what he’d lost.

On some level he understood that King Herleif felt responsibility for the death of Hagen’s father, and showed an interest in him in recognition of it. Although Hagen didn’t blame the king for what happened, he could understand the other man’s perspective. For that reason, he tried not to let his discomfort show when responding to these invitations. But the contact brought him no pleasure.

He wished he could move past his own father’s sudden, violent death as successfully as King Herleif appeared to have done. But the truth was, Hagen was still consumed by anger and grief whenever he thought of his murdered parent. And the more he’d learned in his studies at the Academy of Song—the more his prowess in magic grew—the less he could make his peace with the past. It was as though having more power now made his powerlessness on that long ago occasion harder to bear.

Not to mention spending time with the king brought back his embarrassed horror over having attempted to kill the king with his own hands some year and a half previously. King Herleif had been a giant bear at the time, and given Hagen had shared the kingdom’s general view that the bear in question had been the one to kill both of their fathers and Herleif himself, the king was very forgiving of Hagen’s attempt on his life.

But it still made Hagen wince to remember it.

King Herleif led them up a staircase, nodding distractedly to the many people who bowed at his passing.

“I… I trust all is well, Your Majesty?” Hagen asked uncertainly. He peered up at his sovereign, who was barreling down the corridor at a pace that was quite alarming for such a large, muscled man. He didn’t even seem aware of the way people were scattering out of his way.

The king looked down at his companion, seeming surprised to be reminded of Hagen’s presence.

“I hope so,” he said, his brow lined with an anxiety Hagen had never seen there before. The king was usually very collected in public, the picture of stoic solidity. He seemed to come out of himself enough to see Hagen’s bewilderment, and he let out a breath.

“It seems the gossip mill hasn’t reached every corner of the castle yet. It’s not supposed to be spoken of until it’s all over, but you can’t keep these things quiet in a castle.” He gave a grim smile. “It would take a feat of greater magic than you could find even in the Academy of Song, no doubt.”

Hagen just stared back at him, still completely lost, and the king gave his head a little shake.

“It’s Queen Adrienne’s time,” he said. “The baby is coming.”

Hagen drew in a breath, wondering how he could have been so obtuse as not to guess. “Right now?”

The king nodded, his fingers drumming rapidly on the hilt of the sword strapped to his side.

“And they won’t let me anywhere near her, of course,” he said, disgruntled. “To be perfectly frank with you, it’s killing me. It’s been hours, and they’re still telling me nothing. I’m about ready to run mad.” He glanced down at Hagen with a dry smile. “Well, you probably have some idea what I’m talking about. When you’re used to power—magic in your case, in mine the crown and, well, the size of me—being powerless is always uncomfortable.”

Hagen said nothing, taken aback at how closely these words matched his own thoughts of moments before.

“Being powerless to protect someone you love from harm—possibly life-threatening harm—is, simply put, beyond what flesh and blood can stand.”

“Life-threatening?” Hagen repeated quickly, sympathy rising in him for the agitated young king.

“Childbirth always carries its risks,” said Herleif gravely. “And in our case…” He ran a hand through his pale, already disheveled hair. “Well, look at me. And you’ve seen Adrienne. I’m enormous, and she’s petite. If the baby takes after me…well, I can’t help fearing it will be more than her body can handle.”

“I’m sure Her Majesty will be fine,” said Hagen, trying to sound confident. “No doubt she has the best physicians attending her. And all the assistance magic can provide.”

The king nodded. “Of course. And her mother is with her, which will provide some comfort, I’m sure. But I wish I could be in the room.”

Hagen said nothing, although privately he thought that in his current state, the king might be more hindrance than help. It was endearing, honestly, to see the strong, unflappable king so anxious over his wife’s health. Clearly the couple’s love hadn’t waned once exposed to the rigorous trial that was royal life.

“But enough about all that,” said Herleif firmly. “I need distraction. And I asked you here to see how you’re doing, not to talk about my own family. How are your studies progressing? You only have your senior apprentice year remaining, is that right?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Hagen. He should be used to it by now, but he always felt surprised by how well the king remembered mundane details of his life.

“Have you been assigned an apprenticeship yet?” King Herleif pressed.

Hagen hesitated. “I’ve been offered one.”

That caught the king’s attention. “You’re thinking of refusing it? Are you uncertain about finishing your studies and becoming a fully qualified singer?”

“No, not at all,” said Hagen quickly. “I definitely want to attain my rank. And the apprenticeship I was offered is prestigious. But...the instructor who has most closely mentored me doesn’t think I should take it.”

“Why not?”

Hagen didn’t answer at once. He thought about his mentor’s words, regarding Hagen’s complicated attitude toward his own magic, and how his bitterness had begun to choke his potential. The man had said that he would love nothing better than to keep Hagen and his burgeoning abilities at the Frossian Academy of Song, but that he feared the outcome if Hagen continued to increase in skill without dealing with whatever rankled inside. Apparently, he thought Hagen needed a fresh start.

Of course Hagen didn’t say any of this to his sovereign.

“He thinks I would benefit from the chance to experience a new environment and learn a different culture’s approach to harnessing magic,” he said, truthfully if incompletely. “He’s found me an opportunity for an apprenticeship in the royal castle in Vallen.”

The king looked surprised at this mention of the capital city of the neighboring kingdom of Vadolis, and Hagen hurried on.

“He doesn’t mean that I should leave Frossenland forever, of course. Their academy and ours are seeking to start a sort of magical exchange program, to share techniques and promote cooperation.”

“Ah yes, I remember hearing about that proposal,” said Herleif, nodding. “I thought it sounded like a good idea. If I’d known you were interested, I would have recommended you for consideration.”

“That’s kind of you, Your Majesty,” said Hagen, uncomfortable at the unmerited favor. “But I’m not even sure I am interested, honestly. It’s my mentor who suggested that it might be—”

“Your Majesty!” A servant was sprinting up the corridor toward them, and the urgent excitement in his voice caught the king’s full attention at once.

“Yes, I’m here, what is it?” King Herleif demanded, his enormous frame taut.

The servant reached them, bowing low even as he continued to pant from his exertion. “Your Majesty, it is my great honor to inform you that you have a son.”

“A son!” King Herleif’s face lit up like a child receiving a gift, his voice choked and tight.

“That’s right, Your Majesty,” the servant said. “A healthy baby boy.” He permitted himself a grin. “I was stationed ready to receive the message at the earliest opportunity and bring it to you, and from what I heard when the nursemaid opened the door, the child has very healthy lungs.”

“A son,” King Herleif repeated, seeming too dazed to take in much of the servant’s speech. Suddenly his face shifted, his gaze once again sharp as he turned to the messenger. “And Adrienne?”

The servant bowed again. “I’ve been informed that the queen is in excellent shape, Your Majesty. A smooth delivery.”

“This is the very best news.” The king seemed overcome, looking half inclined to seize the messenger in a bear hug.

“Congratulations, Your Majesty,” said Hagen, not wanting to intrude into the moment, but feeling it would be odd to say nothing.

The king nodded absently, his attention still mainly on the messenger. “I will go to her at once.”

“Actually, Your Majesty,” the servant interjected, “I was told to inform you that the queen is resting, and not available for visitors.”

“I’m not a visitor,” King Herleif said shortly. “I’m her husband. They kept me out of the room while she was delivering, but I’ll be hanged if they keep me out now.”

“But, Your Maj—”

The servant cut himself off as the king made to stride past him, but they were interrupted by another arrival. This servant was a young woman, and she looked very flustered.

“What is it?” the king demanded, apparently recognizing her. Fear had entered his tone. “Is it the queen? Is all well?”

“Yes, she and the baby are well,” the girl said quickly. “But there’s a bit of a commotion. She asked for you, Your Majesty, and the midwife said no visitors, and she, well, she didn’t like that.”

King Herleif let out a low chuckle. “We are of one mind, it seems.”

“She and the midwife are still arguing,” the servant girl went on nervously. “But one of the others sent me to find you. The queen is threatening to sing the door down if the midwife doesn’t stop blocking it, and the nurses are concerned that would be dangerous for her in her current state of ___”

“I’m coming,” said the king, sounding like he wasn’t sure whether to be amused or alarmed by his wife’s battle with her carers. Understandably, Hagen’s presence was forgotten entirely as the trio hurried off down the corridor, the servants trotting to keep up with the huge king’s powerful strides.

Hagen stayed behind, of course, giving his head a little shake. Had he really just witnessed that scene? It was an auspicious moment for the nation, the birth of the future king. He was conscious of the privilege of being present. But he was also keen to return to the less charged environment of his own home. Unheeded by anyone, he slipped out of the castle and back toward his rooms at the academy.

Peripheral as he’d been to the events, Hagen found the incident playing on his mind a great deal in the days that followed. He remembered the raw emotion the king had shown on the one occasion they’d spoken openly about their fathers’ deaths, shortly after King Herleif ascended the throne. He found himself comparing that moment to the look on the king’s face when he’d learned that his wife had delivered a son.

Hagen knew King Herleif hadn’t taken the murder of his father lightly. Nor had he forgotten it—Hagen knew better than anyone that it was impossible ever to forget such a loss. And yet, somehow, King Herleif had found a way to move forward with his life. And not a half-hearted, stunted life. A rich life full of joy and promise. It still felt like an unattainable goal to Hagen, but for the first time in a long time he found, deep inside him, a desire to try.

By the time the royal baby was christened, Hagen had made his decision. He didn’t attempt to communicate directly with the king. He could send him a letter at a future date, in recognition of the interest King Herleif had shown in his life. But Hagen didn’t imagine for a moment that the king had space in his mind for any personal affairs beyond those of his own family at present.

When the castle gates were opened for the grand announcement, two weeks after the birth, Hagen joined the crowd that thronged beneath the balcony. He cheered along with the rest when the

king and queen appeared above, Queen Adrienne's delicate, almost elven features glowing as she clutched her infant son against her. King Herleif's arm enveloped his wife and child, the gesture communicating a strength Hagen envied. The king looked like he could—and unhesitatingly would—protect his little family from any danger the world could conjure.

Frossenland had endured some difficult years since the sudden death of King Eerikki. And although the last year had been one of healing and growth, the pain of that time was still felt. This child represented a fresh start not only for King Herleif and Queen Adrienne, but for the kingdom.

The crowd fell silent at the trumpet fanfare, only to erupt once again in cheers when the herald announced the infant as His Royal Highness Prince Eerikki of Frossenland. Hagen saw tears shed around him, and his own heart was full.

He loved his kingdom, but he was coming to see his mentor's point. He would bring no light to the home he loved if his every move was tainted by bitterness. Just like the royals, just like the kingdom, he needed something new to begin. He hoisted his rucksack on his shoulder, feeling a hint of the type of peace he hadn't known in a long time.

He'd made the right decision. A new life awaited him in Vallen, and he wouldn't waste the chance to start again.

Look out for more about Hagen in Song of Vines, the sixth and final book in The Singer Tales.