

The Arrival



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A tale from Turaset

Bette sat forward in her saddle and urged her mount faster. A trilling wail—something small, perhaps a bird—sounded faintly from the distant scrub. The heath whipped by in faded grays and purples, while above, rough-edged storm clouds stretched from one side of the sky to the next.

“Hai,” she called, spurring the gelding. She hoped to make Harald’s place before the thin drizzle turned heavy. It wasn’t often she left her trading business to visit her man, but when she did, she raced to him and to the promise of full nights. “Hai!”

The horse pounded harder, trampling fescue and wort-weed.

When she arrived and into that night, Harald’s strong arms pulled her close. The metal tang from his forge lingered on his skin, and now her skin. With the sounds of pleasure filling their ears, Bette was again whole and happy.

After, with a wild-man gleam in his eyes, he pushed up two-armed above her. “It’s a fine day when you turn up.”

Bette wriggled deeper into the blankets and pushed her hair back toward the braid it had escaped. The bed was warm, no denying, and she brimmed. Words weren’t needed, not with Harald.

“How’s it doing you’ve time to visit?”

He lived in Cross Flats, a burg of twenty, maybe fewer. It was a good place to get a horse shod, and a good place to rest, before hauling the cart to the prairie towns with her trading partner Mona. Trading kept them fed, but any fool could do it. Trading roots and herbs? That didn’t make Bette special. But Harald, he was another matter. From the first time they’d met, he completed her. Through his lingering looks and gentle words, Harald made Bette feel wanted.

She breathed in the sweaty man-scent of him, filled her lungs with it. “For you, Harald, I make time.”

He chuckled and ran his finger between her small breasts and down to her stomach. “More than time, dearie. You make happiness itself, my dark and mysterious Bette.”

Harald was the only one who said such things. She held quiet with a smile playing on her lips. She twined her fingers into his shaggy mane. “In truth, it’s the sickness that made time. Mona’s waiting it out in Springville. We’ve roots and spices and no one to trade with. Not many, it’s slow. Soon they’ll feel better.”

People fell sick every year. This year was a bit worse. Some believed rats carried the malady, but Mona said otherwise. Mona said the sickness was a curse from digestive spirits turned evil.

Now Harald’s tongue trailed along Bette’s body. She sighed in pleasure, and he mumbled from somewhere below, “Boss lady eased up, did she?”

“Mona and me, we’re partners. We share it all even.” Bette pushed him off, rolled out and got up. She went to the window and threw the shutters wide. There was an odor in the house, nothing too bothersome, just a slight hint of something from Harald’s clothes on the floor. Night air would help. Outside, a small creature rustled near the barn. She turned back to the bed. “You get a week, love. Then I’m off with Mona to the prairie towns.”

In the flickering candlelight of his little bedroom, Harald’s smile was dear. It was a soft thing, half-formed, falling down the side of his face like he tried to keep his happiness inside, but some spilled out anyway. It warmed her, that he gave so much of himself and took her visits on her terms, not his.

He came to her and wrapped a quilt around her bare shoulders. “I’ll take the week.”



The odor grew stronger in Harald’s hut, and now, with the smell of forge smoke washed off, she knew it came from him. The smell

seeped from his pores. By the third day a rash had started across Harald's cheeks. Bette put a soup on the fire. "Keep covered. Here. Eat."

He grumbled and waved at the window, at the bright light streaming in. She pulled the shutters and kept her breathing shallow. "You're shaking," she said, pulling his quilt up. She was too, but her trembling came from fear. Harald couldn't be sick. She crawled next to him. "Rest on me. You mustn't fall from this. Harald, do you hear me?"

Bette was certain she wouldn't take sick. She and Mona had travelled wide, through towns rife with pox, yet stayed hale. They'd taken herbs to appease the digestive spirits.

The house grew fetid, and Bette took to sleeping apart from Harald. His breathing came as a pitiful, rattling sound. Her voice choked as she spooned gruel to his lips. "You *mustn't* die. Who would insult the horses? Come, Harald. Eat."

On the seventh day she woke past daybreak to a hut too quiet. Dread overtook her, a sinking weight cold and gray. It filled her with gripping nothingness. She pushed out from under the blankets on the cook-room floor and stole to the bedroom.

She watched from the doorway, waiting for Harald's chest to rise. A howling wind whipped through her mind, and a cry tore forth from the gale of her formless thoughts. "No! You gave me my strength! No, Harald, no! You mustn't—you haven't—I need you! Why did I never tell you?"

His chest did not rise. No sound, no cough, no rattle. She rushed to him and shook his shoulders. She waited for the smallest sign, a gurgle, a burp.

Harald was cold.

Bette fell to the ground, moaning and wracked. "I loved you. How could you die?" She grabbed at his quilt and ripped her nails along it.

It was a harrowing day of keening disbelief before Bette dragged herself out of the hut to rifle through Harald's smithy. He had a pick and a shovel among his other tools. He'd inscribed his initials into

both, and as she wrapped her hands on the hafts, she felt his hands, warm and firm around her own.

The first pitch into the soil was the hardest and she cried out again and crumpled to the ground. There, the baying wind called her weak. The sky spit upon her. Bette sat in the mud, her shawl falling and her hair straggling.

She pushed up at last, in rain now heavy, and stabbed the ground again. Each strike, there by the barn on Harald's land; each shovelful stood in strange testament to the place he'd wrought, the life he'd built, the fullness he'd given her. She dug deeper, but a proper grave was impossible. And so, when her shoulders ached and her skirt had grown filthy, when her shawl had long been discarded and lost, the beginnings of a burial site lay before her. It would have to do.

Bette stumbled back into the hut. The smell, a sickly gluey scent, pushed against her. She lugged the sheet, upon which Harald's body lay, toward the barn. She broke further as the one human being who had completed her fell into a hole in the ground.

After the final shovelful of soil went back onto his body, she slumped into the hut. Coughing, Bette heated a bowl of soup.



Mona threw her gaze to the moor stretching out to the horizon. Bette should have returned days ago. The understanding was Bette would never leave for more than a week, and it had been two.

The townsfolk, those not pocked with rash, were buying herbs at last. They wanted gingerroot more than the others. It warded off queasiness. Goods sold; that was the final underscore.

Mona hadn't taken ill, she never did. She knew enough of herbals to keep herself well in the worst of times. No, she thought, standing to her full six feet and giving her chest a thump, she'd never take the sick. "Turmeric," she called. "Ginger! Settles the gut."

A few women ambled over. They said this ailment was the worst they'd seen. Disquieted, Mona cast her eyes up and down the cluttered dirt streets of Springville. No men strode about. A few women, but

not many. Odd. Two weeks was long enough for a germ to pass, yet the village stood empty. And Bette hadn't returned.

Mona packed up the cart and started west, between hither and yon toward Harald's hut. A day's ride on horseback but two by cart. As she approached his place on the evening of the following day, her heart sank. No smoke billowed from his forge. The shutters had been pulled tight, and even the animals—including Bette's horse—seemed absent, save a few rats scuttling near the feed.

Mounded dirt next to the barn filled Mona with unease, presaging a dreadful spirit within, a miasma. She knocked.

After a long, heavy minute, Bette's voice came. "Sick house."

Mona's stomach lurched. She'd hoped—had told herself—the mound was nothing, that a horse had fallen, or perhaps a hound. "Harald took the sick?"

Bette's voice came weak through the door. "You'll get it Mona. Go."

"Let me in. It won't take me."

There was no sound, and Mona slumped against the door. Did Bette stand inside? Or had she perhaps fallen? For all Mona knew, Bette may well have crawled away, into Harald's bed, lost to the world. "Bette," she cried over her shoulder. "Let me in."

"You'll catch death." The voice came in a croaking stutter.

Mona took a long breath against the thought of sprightly Bette falling ill. "I've been in town," she said, "and I've seen all comers. My health is good, as strong as ever. Bette. I have need of you. Open up!"

There was no noise, no answer. Nothing but a lonely howl from some animal on the moor. Mona whacked the door with all her might, pounding it against its frame.

The latch lifted, and Bette's triangle face appeared through the crack.

Mona gasped despite her best effort. Bette was horribly pocked. Her eyes swollen and red, it was a wonder she could see. Her hair hung in strings, masses of it gone.

What manner of evil was this? Mona pushed the door wide and strode in. She gagged at the smell and threw the windows open. A

quick glance told her all—the blanket on the floor was Bette’s bed, and the cook-room had not been cleaned in days. Flies crawled about a pot. Mona forced cheer into her voice. “You’re eating. See? You’re not too bad.”

But Bette huddled in the corner, a slip of an already-slight woman. Shaking wracked her. It seemed to Mona, holding herself away from her friend’s stench, that a sheen formed at Bette’s hairline. Mona said, “Lie down. I’ll make soup.”



Mona nursed Bette but she slipped further into plague. In those moments, when Bette wouldn’t talk and didn’t eat, Mona abandoned her bravado and went outside to dissolve into a weeping mass. She sobbed in fear that she, too, would fall. She might die, and rot, with no one to find her as she’d found Bette. No one to bury her, as Bette had buried Harald. As she would certainly bury Bette. Beating her breast, Mona put herself under a lens, scrutinized every speck within for symptoms... and as often as not convinced herself she’d taken it.

Yet the grief was a blessing of sorts, for after the heaving sobs she found fortitude to return again and wipe her friend’s face, her body; undress her and wash her garments, then clothe her dry and warm.

Repeatedly, she strewed sage and rosemary around Bette’s bed.

In those first days Mona asked how, if someone as full of the world’s own life as Bette could take the plague, how could she, Mona, ward it off?

She ate more herbs.

It was true enough she’d seen ailing friends and strangers alike, but never as sickly as this. None who could not stand, nor lift an arm unaided. Mona stirred the porridge, coughed from the fire, and thought again she’d taken ill.

Bette muttered from behind, from the straw pallet on the floor. “My man ... he was so cold.”

Mona turned and went to Bette's side. She stroked the hair from her forehead. "What is that? What?" It didn't matter what Bette might say. She was speaking.

"So cold."

"There, there," Mona said.

"Ground ... so hard."

It hurt to hear; no possible understanding of the words brought comfort to Mona. Her voice catching on her breath, she said, "I must check the cart. Sleep. Find strength."

She held herself tightly until she was outside. Daylight had faded into a bare whisper. Mona cast her gaze wide but there was nothing, and loneliness pierced her. Loneliness for a trading partner near death.

The colors on the western horizon, where the last bit of light held, were more gray than gold. She turned from it and shooed rats from the cart. She pulled the cover more firmly over the roots, fixing the corners with twine before checking the horses for fresh fodder and hay.

That night, as she changed the bedding and covered Bette again, in the now-routine of each day's end, Bette roused and looked up. Mona sat back, astonished at Bette's lucid eyes.

"I welcomed the illness," Bette said. "It muted my grief."

And then, as easily as Bette had slipped into that moment of coherence, she slipped away again, her eyes rolling back. Shaken, Mona tucked the blanket around her.

One evening, when Mona knew she had not fallen ill and her friend was, at last, on the mend, Bette whispered, "As much as he and I loved, that very length is the stretch of my pain. Mona. It needs to be said. The words must be given voice. I loved him."

Silent tears fell on Mona's cheeks.

Bette's rash faded, the pocks leaving a map of cratered scars across the bridge of her nose and down to her chin and neck. She would never again be the unblemished beauty she had been; the beauty Mona had never found the time to tell her she was. Still, Bette's color returned, and she put on a few pounds. Some weeks later, in the middle of a meal, Bette said, "Harald was the best man I have ever

known. When it comes those we love, there is no place for mystery. He was a very good man.”

Mona paused from chewing a piece of rabbit stew. She studied Bette’s face, and found it lay at peace. “That he was.”

Bette said, “It’s wrong to leave him here, with no company. He should not be forgotten.”

Mona wondered if that, in the end, was the bit that had convinced her friend to recover. “He does not want you bound, Bette. From places wide, you brought the world to him. He wants you going wide, still.”

Bette poked at her stew listlessly.

“He would never want you chained to some hut.” The words felt hollow, for how could Mona possibly know Harald’s wishes? And yet, it felt true enough. In death one should be freed. One would surely grant freedom to those they left. “Perhaps through knowing him, through honoring the life he lived, we can take Harald with us.”

Bette looked up. “We could take his tools. We could gift them to another smith.”

Mona smiled, for sitting before her was the Bette she knew. A brightness had returned to her, the vim that had been missing now filled her face. It was the spark; the life.

Harald’s tools. “Yes. I think Harald would like that.”

Bette grew hale, and they prepared to leave. Mona said, “We must make the prairie towns before the snows. They need our roots and herbs for winter.”

And so, they boarded up the hut and lay a wreath upon Harald’s grave. They roped his horses to their own and piled his tools, covered with his quilt, onto their cart. They shooed away what vermin they found, worried not about the stragglers, and headed toward the prairie towns.

THE END