

CHAPTER 4: HARDENING ONE'S RESOLVE

"You can't be serious, Jenn!" The astonished master answered. "I'm no jeweller, I don't know how to forge a bracelet!"

The apprentice sighed. She already thought it was a lost cause, but the look on Bhal's face clearly did not make her hope any greater.

The smith grumbled. "What got that into your little head?"

"I...made a difficult promise."

His look became more judgmental. "Never make promises you can't fulfil. There'll be only disappointment".

They stopped talking, focusing on what the master was showing to his student.

"Remember, always take your time. The object is not going to be shaped out of nowhere in one blow. And the material is not that flexible. It can still break. Then, you gotta do everything all over again." He marked his words by working the piece he was holding between his tongs, which was meant to become the blade of a short sword. Each strike of the hammer flattened the thickness a bit more, slowly but surely making it thinner and thinner.

"You see? That's how it's done!"

Jenn was listening, but she seemed a bit lost in her thoughts.

"Hey! Come back to earth, silly!"

"Sorry, Bhal!" She snapped back.

He handed the hammer to her. She was now able to hold it with only one hand, contrary to two years ago. She followed his instructions, taking her time to shape the blade. He intervened at one point.

"Careful. Don't make the core become too thin in some places and too thick in others. The trick is to have it stay regular."

"But isn't a blade meant to be thicker in the middle and thinner on the edges?"

"That's the next part: When it's thin enough, focus on the edges with the hammer. The final shape will start to show."

"I don't have a lot of time, though. It's cooling down."

"Don't worry about that. You have a furnace, you can make your piece hot again with it. Just don't leave it alone, okay?"

While she kept on hitting the metal, he went to the entrance of the cave the forge was built around; where the materials he had were stored. He didn't use a lot of the one he was looking for, therefore he did not remember if he had any left, and if so where it was among all the iron and silver.

Oh, it's here. Gotcha, as he picked up a little bar of slightly lighter silver. He used this specific alloy for a few decorations here and there for particular work, therefore he tended to forget where he had had it stored. He returned to the anvil, where the girl was still practising. A few minutes passed by. She then stopped hitting with the hammer to take care of the sweat which was beginning to enter her eyes.

"Do you know why most smiths don't make jewels?" He asked, following his favourite teaching pattern.

Jenn knew the deal. She had to think about it by herself and give a relevant enough answer, so Bhal would give a more thorough explanation to her.

"They have stones in them, right? And we don't work those?" She attempted.

"Well, that's one of the reasons. There is another important one. How is the hammer you're holding?"

Jenn inspected the tool. For a long time, under several different angles. Pushing a bit too far in the reflexion process, she strengthened her grasp on the handle and frowned her eyebrows, bringing the poor inanimate object closer to her. Her master was finding the situation quite funny, so he didn't bother stopping her.

She sighed. "I don't know how it is! What is that question for?"

"Answer, maybe it'll help."

"Ehr, it's square?"

He laughed, showing his off-white teeth. Not the one word he was hoping for. Jenn, however, took it for a mockery and almost got into a huff, her cheeks blushing.

"It's big," the smith finally managed to articulate. "The issue with most jewels is that they are small. They are made to be worn on horns, wrists, or fingers for example. What do you think you'd do to one with that big piece of metal?"

Jenn's eyes widened. "Oh, yeah...maybe I'll try not to repair one with the hammer." As a result, she looked discouraged. "I shouldn't have made such a promise, right? But...Lyla looked so sad and lonely. I couldn't leave her like that..."

"Lyla?"

"Yeah. She is the daughter of the weaver, Mister Valfellon."

Bhal scratched his head between his horns. He did not know most of the villagers very well outside of several very regular customers. And the weavers were not among them.

"Doesn't matter who," he finally said. "What did the jewel look like, girl?"

She described the bracelet to him. It was made of several flat disks of silver alternating with little spheres of the same metal. A thin but solid hemp rope tied everything together in a nice assembly. Jenn also added that it had been worn by a few generations in the Valfellon family before being passed to Lyla by Estias.

The smith battled an eyelid. "That's definitely out of our reach. I can't make disks that small. "However", he raced, "we can try something else." He revealed the bar he had been hiding behind his back during the whole conversation. "We can make a bracelet out of this."

The dragoness tilted her head, puzzled. "But you just said we couldn't make jewels..."

"Quiet!" He grumbled. "Aside from teaching you how to make one, I'm also helping. Would you listen to me and not ask questions?"

She swallowed, remembering who the teacher was – and who asked questions - and stood still, waiting for him to continue.

"I'm not an expert in jewellery. But a twisted piece of silver may make a fine bracelet if we do it right."

He put the bar into the furnace. "We have some time now, until it's hot enough to glow. Why not take a break?"

The apprentice couldn't agree more. She was sweating under her small apron. They went outside and headed towards the shore of gravel. Bhal picked up a small stone, weighed it, and satisfied by his choice, threw it almost horizontally on the surface. The curvy shape bounced a few times before finally sinking.

"I haven't explained annealing to you yet, right?" As he was picking up another one. Jenn did not answer directly. She entered the water until the level reached her knees, and washed her muzzle with her hands. "Is it like quench hardening, but different?" She then ventured, unsure of what he was waiting for this time.

Although he showed no expression, he was quite pleased. Jenn was starting to figure things out on her own more and more, sometimes quicker than he originally thought. Or maybe it was just luck this time.

"A bit," he answered. "I told you quench hardening makes metals like iron or steel keep a few properties they have at high temperature by quickly cooling them down. It's both harder, tougher, and still a bit flexible. We don't know exactly why, but it works this way. Annealing is like hardening at the beginning, but instead of forcing a metal to cool down, you let it cool down."

The apprentice, feeling a bit cleaner, sat next to him. She absent-mindedly watched her master keep on skipping stones, drinking his words. As he took a pause in his dialogue, she took the lead, curious. "But is annealing helping here? What's the point of talking about it if it only has drawbacks when compared to quench hardening?"

"That's why I only mentioned iron or steel, silly," he chuckled. "Annealing doesn't have the same effect on every metal. Silver and copper, for example, like this process. You can still work them at ambient temperature. And THAT, is what we are looking for here."

"If the metal cools down slowly for annealing, it will be long before we can work it, though," Jenn noted.

Bhal smirked. "Ah, silver. It helps you jump a few steps. No need to let it cool down, you can do like if you wanted to quench iron. It's not the same metal. You can still work it, but you have to be gentle. As I said, it isn't red-hot or quenched iron. With the big hammer, you can break it."

"It's too big anyway."

He nodded to the remark. After a certain time, they stretched and went back to the forge. The silver bar was starting to glow. Bhal took it and flattened it a bit so it ended up looking like a long, five millimetre thick and two centimetre wide sheet of metal.

After heating it up again, he quenched the emerging object in the water barrel. Cooled down from the few minutes into the liquid, the sheet was now roughly at room temperature. Jenn carried it to the anvil. Bhal had brought with him several cylinders of wood and a hammer which looked too small, even for her.

"Remember the size of your friend's arm?"

Based on her memory of the encounter, Jenn chose the third one. With her master behind her back providing helpful tips when needed, she began using the wood as a mold for the overall shape of the bracelet. With gentle blows, the silver sheet slowly turned, slithering more and more around the irregular surface of its guide. It eventually reached the point where it had turned three times around the wood. The smith cut what was left, leaving the core of the bracelet finished.

"Master, may I use the iron clamp? I want to trace a few lines with the stylus of the surface, but it won't stop moving unless I have something to hold it steady."

He approved.

They went to the table where the clamp was resting, under the flickering light of a lantern. After squeezing the wood and the silver into it, Jenn picked up a stylus designed for adding precise details on metallic surfaces and worked on the material, taking her time to figure out if she was heading into the right direction with her lines.

It was tiring, even more than the other steps of the crafting, as this part was delicate and tricky. And she was already exhausted by all the effort she had done during the day...

"Hey, girl, wake up," a voice said in the dark.

Jenn woke up, opening her eyelids with difficulty. She felt a warm remaining pressure on her right cheek, and an object in her hand. She began to emerge from her dizziness and realized where she was.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked, a big yawn revealing a forked tongue arching back inside her mouth.

"I think so. You were so focused I tried not to disturb you... 'til I didn't hear any sound at all coming from the table," Bhal replied. "You should get going, though. Twilight's here."

Jenn quickly turned her attention towards the outside of the building. In the clearing, she could not see any shadow coming from the trees, and the brightness was quickly falling down.

She began panicking and instinctively swore. "It's already night! Father is going to kill me!"

"Why would he do something like that?"

"Well, hum...he doesn't know where I am right now."

"What do you mean?" He said, puzzled at first. Then, as she was looking on the side, embarrassed like if she was hiding something, he figured.

"Are your parents okay with you being a smith apprentice?" He grumbled.

Her silence gave it away. Her muzzle pointing down even more.

"They...aren't."

"Do they EVEN know you are my apprentice?"

"No."

He put his hand on his muzzle, massaging his nose bridge as he sighed.

"You gotta tell them. I don't want to be responsible for what you've done."

She crossed her arms, this time looking annoyed. "That's why I didn't ask them. My father won't agree with that. I know him!"

"It doesn't matter whether he agrees or not. Your parents are your parents. I can't force them to accept YOUR choice."

He turned and walked to the little house.

"Wait!" said the dragoness, worried. "Can I just not tell them? I'm sure I can find an excuse for tonight."

He turned his head, disappointment filling his eyes.

"Don't even think about coming back for now. As long as your parents are not on your side, I won't be either. It's all on you, girl."

The door slammed loudly before Jenn. As usual, when Bhal had had enough, the discussion was over. Period.

So that's it, she thought, saddened. She began to run towards her home in the growing night, under the judging rustling of the trees.

Alice and Jonas were eating a simple dinner. A bit of rice, a few potatoes and tomatoes, and bread accompanying fresh cheese coming from a neighbouring farmer. It was silent, with good reason. Their daughter was not back home yet. Her mother was looking worried, all the contrary of her companion, who was not liking this behaviour at all.

"I hope she will come back soon," Alice said, finally breaking the wearisome silence.

"Well, looking at how late it is already, I don't know if she'll bother anyway. Doesn't change a thing for me," her husband answered, bitter.

At this exact moment, they heard quick steps on the stairs before the entrance door. A second later, a few knocks were made following a well-known pattern for the couple. Jenn then shyly entered, her breath still short from the effort accumulated throughout the day.

"Mother, Father, I apologize for being late," she said, instantly trying to make up for her fault.

But the harm was already done.

"That's not an excuse, young lady," Alice answered, hiding her relief behind an expression of disappointment. "We didn't know where you were. Did you even think about us?"

"Oh, I think she didn't," Jonas added, not even looking at her.

Jenn reviewed all the excuses she had tried to imagine on the fly as she was coming back to the house, but she quickly realized it was pointless. Besides, Bhal had been clear. He would not take her back as his apprentice as long as she wouldn't have told her parents the truth. *I can't hide it anymore.*

"There is a reason why I was late tonight. And for a few other times too, lately."

She looked at her parents. They were attentive, but their judging expressions and quick tail movements were not helping her to feel confident about her admission.

"We are listening, daughter," Alice encouraged her.

Jenn tightened her fists and frowned her eyebrows, trying to give her talk some weight.

"I was late because I was working at the forge with Bhal. He accepted to take me as his apprentice, so I can become a smith."

Whatever it sounded like, it sure had an impact. Her parents look completely flabbergasted by her explanation. It was so unexpected they could not answer back right away, giving Jenn confidence to keep on going.

"I was crafting a bracelet today, but I fell asleep. Bhal noticed I hadn't told you about it when I was about to leave, so he told me not to come back unless you would agree with me becoming a smith."

Alice's expression softened. "Why didn't you talk about this earlier, sweetheart?"

"I was afraid you would disagree."

"Well, we need to talk a bit more about it, your father and I, but..."

"No," interrupted Jonas.

Both dragonesses looked surprised by his intervention. He quickly followed, his calm voice and closed eyes showing his resolve.

"You're not becoming a smith, Jenn. You were raised as a farmer, and a farmer you'll be."

"But I'm good at it, father," Jenn replied, trying to argue and defend her opinion. "Bhal said I could definitely become..."

"SHUT UP!" He yelled, smashing his fist on the table.

His daughter blank, stunned by his violent reaction.

"There's no 'Bhal', or whatever his name is...", he said, mastering his anger with difficulty. "You think you can choose what you wanna be like you change clothes? Life's not that easy. It's NEVER that easy."

He showed the table, where a few legumes and staples had spread under the strength of his blow. Jenn realized there were only two plates. "You gotta learn, Jenn, that you need to eat. Like everyone down there. If you don't, you starve. If you wanna eat, you gotta work for it. And tonight, you didn't. You preferred to play with metal instead. Go outside and think about it for a bit. There's no dinner for you."

It took a bit of time for Jenn to swallow his words. Was not it the harsh reality? Was not she meant to be a farmer and grow plants to live and help others to live her whole life? Maybe it was right, after all. Trying to become something else might not work after all. Then, what would she be left with?

As she turned and grabbed the handle of the door to go outside, bitterness overcame sadness. Revolted by the unfairness of the situation, as she had worked so hard to get there, she raised her head towards her angry father. With desperation in her voice, she talked one last time. "I knew it. That you wouldn't agree. You've always been like that. There's only what you do which counts, right? So I knew that you would stand against me, whatever I might do to prove you wrong."

She paused, but he did not answer. He probably thought the matter was dealt with, as usual in these situations. As tears silently rolled on her light-blue scales, she closed the door and sat between the chairs whimpering.

She did not pay too much attention at first, but she noticed a heated debate had begun almost immediately after she had left the room. As the volume raised, she unintentionally focused on the arguments.

"While I agree she deserved a sanction and should have talked to us about it sooner, I don't understand why you reacted so harshly against her," Alice said, getting angry.

"You said it yourself! She didn't help us at the farm like it was planned. And we'd agreed on teaching her she's got to work with us to deserve her meal."

"Don't try to deviate from the subject, Jonas. You didn't even give her a chance to show her motivation about becoming a smith. How can she justify her choice if we don't even let her talk?"

"There's no need for talk here. We've raised her to become a farmer, not a smith. You too think people are given a choice?"

"Please, enough with this argument. Why wouldn't she have the right to choose what she wants to be?"

"Because people almost never have it! You think everyone can become whatever they want? That life is as simple as this? Jenn's still a kid, who thinks she knows everything about life. But what happened when she'd realize she's not meant to be spending her day hitting the metal? It'll be too late..."

The debate suddenly ended as abruptly as it had started. Jenn heard a loud slap, quickly followed by the sound of a displaced table and a chair being knocked down. Worried, she got up on her paws and looked through the window next to her.

Her father was laying on the ground, his hand on his left cheek. She had never seen him so surprised. By hitting the table, both plates had fallen and broken on the ground, scattering their content around.

A few meters away, Alice was standing, her right arm arching forward. She had visibly hit him with the intent of hurting. Her breathing was slow and tense, but her eyes were only filled with pain.

"Go outside and apologize to your daughter," she said, having trouble to talk clearly.

"But..."

"I don't care what you think. Just do it. You can still fix what you've done."

He looked down, not knowing what to do, like his little girl not so long ago.

"Alice, I'm...I'm sorry. I had forgotten...", he tried to articulate.

"Shut up," she interrupted. She turned around, showing her back to her husband. "If you had thought a bit more, you would never have talked like that to her. You would never have talked like that to me. You didn't remember what I had been through."

She paused. Jonas waited for her to continue.

"I wasn't given a choice either. Or so I thought. And I was fine with it. But the moment I realized I could have stood up to my family, it was already too late. And I paid the price for it." Her neck rotated. She was crying. "We always have the right to choose what we want to be, Jonas. Now, pick yourself up and go talk to Jenn."

He got up, using the edge of the table as a support.

"What about you, sweetheart?"

"I don't want to talk to you. For now, this is not repairable. Take care of what can be and leave me alone."

She walked through the living room and entered the right side of the house, closing the door behind her. Jenn went back to watching her father. Jonas put his hands on his temples, trying to digest all that had just happened.

After some time spent thinking, he picked up his pipe and tobacco, signalling the observer he was going to exit the room. She hid by sitting down under the window. She heard the door creaking under the push of the adult.

The Common stood at the wooden handrail under the inclined roof supported by little pillars and lit the herb inside the pipe. Jenn did not move. She could hear the breath of her father, along with the chants of the wheat spikes under the wind. They stayed like this for a while.

"Why?" He said, eventually breaking the silence.

She did not answer, still angry and sad.

"Listen, Jenn, I'm sorry for what I just told you. I was...too quick and didn't give you the opportunity to explain yourself. Now you can, why don't you use it?"

"Why would I? I feel like it is pointless talking now."

The farmer sighed. *One reaps what one sows...*

He felt a pressure on the handrail. Her daughter was a few meters away, leaning on the wood in the same stance as his. In the dark, he could see her muzzle pointing upwards.

"Dad?"

He hummed in response, showing he was paying attention.

"What do you think about the stars?"

He took his time thinking about the question, chewing on the tip of his pipe.

"They are shiny? People use them to orientate? I don't know, they don't really speak to me."

"To me neither. But only these ones don't."

"You mean, there are...others?"

Jenn chuckled at her thought. This was sounding so bad.

"Yes. When Mom' took me to the smithy a few years ago, Bhal was crafting something." She added, letting the words flow like the river on the gravel. "Each time he was landing a blow, I could see sparks going around. They looked like little red stars appearing out of nowhere. I could have spent all day of the day watching him. Mom' even called me several times, but I didn't react at all."

She took a break, trying to see what his reaction was. Jonas was not moving. His crossed arms resting on the wood and the pipe stuck between his lips, he was looking pensive, which encouraged her to keep on talking.

"I don't want you to try to understand it," she said, unsure of what to add. "I have a hard time figuring this out myself. It's just...I like it. I like working the metal, shaping objects out of it. I mean, I still like working in the fields or the garden with you, but...I like forging more."

"Forging and farming are not quite the same, though," he argued.

"I don't think so. They are similar."

"How?"

"You grow vegetables out of the earth, I grow objects out of the metal, no?"

"Except metal is pulled from the earth, it's not grown."

"Don't you pull vegetables out of the earth too?" She insisted.

"Fair point. Maybe you should become a metal farmer instead, you'd have the best of both worlds," he tried to joke.

Jenn smiled. Usually, his attempts would fall flat and he would have made a sulky expression for the rest of the day.

"When did you start exactly?" He followed, intrigued.

Jenn mentally counted, uncertain. "Six months? Close to it, that's sure. Bhal had me fill his entire kiln. He wanted to make me give up, but that didn't really work."

"What's a kiln?"

"Oh, sorry. It's a little tower you use to burn wood and make charcoal out of it."

"You had to fill a tower with wood?"

Jenn nodded, then she realized he probably could not see her doing that. "It took me all the afternoons of the week. I only stopped when it was raining."

Jonas blew another trail of smoke. The grey arabesques danced under the light of the stars for a while, then dispersed in the freshness of the night. The teenager shivered. It was getting cold, and Jenn had not been able to change clothes since she had come back.

"Well," Jonas said, "seems your mother was right after all. I should have let you talk."

"You haven't said you would agree yet." Jenn reminded him, still sad and bitter, albeit feeling better.

"Alright, alright. I give up before your will, hornhead."

She stood immobilized. She could not believe it.

"Dad' ..., " she tried to articulate.

"Don't go all huggy on me, okay?" He interrupted. "You still gotta work here. The farm's not going to run on its own, and daddy's getting old." He turned towards her. "I'll talk with your master to settle times where you work the metal, and when you work the earth. There will be no discussion about this, understood?"

She quickly nodded. Happiness outshining the stars could be seen in her eyes.

"Oh, one last thing," Jonas added, before unexpectedly throwing something at her. She managed to grab it instinctively, and also because her father had aimed quite well. Jenn inspected the object. It was a potato.

"But...I still didn't earn my dinner tonight, right?"

"No. But I'm still your father. I wasn't going to let you starve." He stopped before closing the door, this time going back inside. "I would have given it to you anyway."

Jenn was alone anew. But she felt relieved. She had been granted her wish. She lost herself in the sight of the fields, thinking about all the great works she was going to craft. Until a muffled growl brought her back to reality.

Ah, yeah, I haven't eaten since noon, she remembered, amused. She then proceeded to devour the poor vegetable.