

The Festival

(When Darius meets Christine)

Rough/Unedited copy

“Watch out!” Darius yelled. He jumped off the old oak stump he sat on. The dignitaries for the summer festival were about to arrive in Anikari and he had been waiting to see them enter the capital city of the Realm. Kelln should have been by the wall to meet him half an hour ago. *Late as usual.*

“Get out of the way, girl!” The king’s messenger raced down the king’s highway towards the North gate.

The simply dressed blonde girl spun around, lost her balance, and began to fall. Darius reached his long arms toward her. He pulled her to the side of the road and they fell onto the trampled ground. Two baskets flew into the air scattering their contents into the long grass.

The large black horse, sliding around the last turn, splattered them with mud that had not dried from last night’s early summer rain. A small crowd gathered around.

Darius asked the frightened girl if she was able to get up.

"I'm all right." Her voice shook and she gave a weak smile. She tried to stand up, but grimaced with pain as she stepped on her right ankle.

"Are you sure?" asked Darius. "Where do you live?"

The girl hesitated for a minute then cast her eyes downward as if embarrassed. "Down there." She pointed down a small road that went out into the farmlands surrounding the northwest area of Anikari. "I was bringing fresh fruit to my uncle. He is setting up a cart for the festival."

“Stupid girl!” yelled someone close by as the crowd moved to disperse. “Outsiders should stay where they belong...outside the city!”

Darius flashed his grey eyes at the man. He looked at the girl. He should have noticed by her clothes; the plain white top with a long brown wool skirt, but her sparkling green eyes had kept him riveted.

“I’m fine.” The girl repeated, wiping some dirt from her skirt in an apparent attempt to keep from being embarrassed.

"Can you stand on it?" asked an approaching farmer.

"I think so." She tried to take a few steps, but winced every time her right foot hit the ground.

"Why don't you help her home young man?" said the farmer to Darius, "I'll take her fruit to the festival for her."

Darius blushed, "Well...I.."

The farmer gave him a hard look.

"Sure...why not?" Darius pictured his father's face if he ever found out that he walked down a road into the farmlands. It almost made him laugh.

They began walking and she leaned in toward him favoring her hurt leg. Under her slight build he felt her muscles toned and strong. He breathed in her scent, a mixture of a flowered soap among the fresh dirt.

"Thank you for helping me. I'm sure it's just a sprain." She tried to smile, and then added, "My name is Christine."

"Darius." He couldn't help but smile back at her. He glanced down at her from the corner of his eyes. She pulled her blonde hair back from her tanned face. The tan marked her as a farmer as much as her clothes. Darius glanced over and tried to judge her age. It was difficult with her leaning against him, but he judged her just a year or so less than his seventeen years.

"Sorry you got yourself all dirty," said Christine, looking at the side of Darius' tailored black suede pants. They were tucked into shiny boots.

"Well I'm not quite as dirty as you are." As soon as he said it, he hit himself inside for speaking before thinking. He always got tongue tied around girls.

Christine started laughing and Darius found his embarrassment fading. The mud had splattered across both of them from head to foot.

Wait until I tell Kel about this.

He breathed the morning air deep into his lungs and enjoyed the peaceful walk down the narrow dirt road. Tall oaks and maples lined the road, their large leaves swaying in the morning breeze. They helped to block the harsher winds that came later in the summer from the vegetable gardens in the fields beyond. Darius couldn't help admiring all of the open land.

"You don't get out here much do you?" Christine asked.

“No. It’s so quiet out here. Not like in the city.” The city always had some manner of noise rumbling through. People yelling, drunken men brawling, the city guards choreographed steps, or young children running around the cobblestone streets. Here, the grass and dirt seemed to absorb the sounds. In the distance he could hear song birds extending their sound through the countryside.

Darius studied the houses as they passed them. The mismatched boards and thatched roofs seemed so crude and unrefined to his city taught eyes. A few had small porches. They were small, but well taken care of.

“There’s my house,” Christine pointed after they had walked for a while.

Darius studied the structure with surprise. Larger than the other ones they had passed it would still be considered trivial in Anikari. The brown thatched roof hung down low and thick, covering the tops of the windows which ran along the side of the house. A light tan color covered the outside walls. The front had a small porch with yellow flowers in pots to the side of the white door. Thinking of his own spacious house made of stone made him feel uncomfortable.

Christine's mother came running out to see what was wrong. She had her dark blond hair up, wore an apron, and carried a bowl. Darius stepped into the background as she hugged Christine. Christine proceeded to tell her mother what had happened. He didn’t know how she would react to him.

She seemed to sense his hesitancy and motioned him over.

“Thank you for helping Christine. You probably don’t get out here often.”

Darius started to say he had to go, when a large, tan, muscled farmer walked up. The man stood sturdy and firm in front of Darius and Christine.

“Well, what happened here?” He asked Christine, but glanced with a suspicious frown at Darius.

After hearing the story, Christine’s father grinned. “I’m Stefen Anderssn and this is my wife Caroline.” His large smile matched his firm handshake. “Thanks much young man. Most boys wouldn’t have helped her.”

Darius stumbled across his words in embarrassment. “Well. Sir. You’re welcome.”

“Why don’t you stay for lunch?”

“My father...Uh...you know. I should get back.”

Stefen smiled in understanding and shook his hand as Darius turned to go.

“Darius?” Christine asked after he had trotted a few steps. “I’m having a birthday party in a few days...um... You want to come?”

Her parents eyed her with surprise and concern, but didn’t say anything out loud.

Darius’ stomach seemed to turn upside down. He blushed and couldn’t think of what to say as he looked at her. Those eyes again! The green made such a complimentary impact to her tanned face.

“Of course if you’re already busy...” Christine’s mother gave him an out. Darius knew his father wouldn’t approve, but before he thought any more, he blurted out he would come, and turned and ran off.

“Late morning...day after tomorrow.” Christine shouted after him.

Darius San Williams ran back toward the city gates. The approaching throngs of people preparing for the upcoming Festival of Summer seemed to fade into the background. Before helping Christine, he had been watching the first dignitaries from Mar, Sur, Belor, and Denir, the four other principal cities in the Realm, ride into the capital city of Anikari. They were dressed in their finest and most colorful tunics, capes, and hats, which seemed quite silly and foolish to Darius. The colors identified their cities of origin; Sur in gray, Denir in blue, and Belor in Red. Of course, even though Mar’s color was yellow, they wore the fashion of multicolored clothes which they were famous for. He vowed he would never have to dress in such a ridiculous way.

Darius slowed back down as he came through the gates, watching for a few minutes as he regained his breath. A minor mayor came by in a colorful carriage, pulled by six dark horses.

“Forest View!” announced a guard. Darius had already recognized the green and black flag. Darius bowed in respect as the mayor rode past. The mayor looked surprised but saluted him back. Darius smiled at himself and leaned back against the side of a gray stone building. He heard his father’s voice in his mind reminding him to always treat the nobles with respect, because you never knew when you might need their help. Darius thought about what he had done earlier in going outside the city and frowned when he realized what his father would say. *If he ever found out!*

“What’s the matter with you?” yelled a voice through the crowds. A medium size boy six inches shorter than Darius’s almost six foot height, came strolling up.

“Kelln!” waved Darius, “What do you mean?”

“You had a scowl on your face.”

“Oh that,” he frowned again, “I was thinking my father wouldn’t have approved of what I just did.”

“Really?” Kelln sounded excited as he took his hat off and shook out his red curls. “Do tell me.” His brown eyes opened wide with anticipation.

Darius retold what had happened between him and Christine.

“What was she wearing?” Kelln interrupted. “Is she tall? Is she an outsider?”

“Kel,” Darius jumped in between the questions. “Stop asking so many questions. I just met her.”

Kelln looked hurt.

“And don’t call them outsiders.” Darius got serious. “That was generations ago. They are farmers now who work hard to grow our food.”

Kelln opened his mouth as if to rebuttal, then closed it again. After a few seconds he laughed and slapped Darius on the back.

“I haven’t been out to the farms since the time we almost got caught taking apples from the old farmer who was chasing us!” Kelln smiled and his eyes got big. “Sounds fun.”

“Well at least I didn’t have farmers chasing me this time!”

“No I guess not!” Kelln sighed, “Just a farmer’s daughter.”

“Hey it’s not like that.” Darius’ cheeks flushed. He punched his best friend in the arm. Kelln feigned hurt and hit him back and took off running down the cobblestone streets. Kelln El’Han had been his best friend since he could remember. They were the same age and had met at the academy when they were younger. More often than not, Kelln’s antics would get them in trouble, but the friendship had lasted through many narrow escapes.

Darius chased him all the way to Kelln’s house. It was smaller than his, but he liked the high wooden eaves better than his stone home. They grabbed a loaf of fresh baked bread from the kitchen and talked about what they would do during the summer, now that academy exams were complete.

They had one more full year until they were finished with their schooling, then they would be able to choose what they wanted to do for a trade. Of course, Darius’ father was sure to try to talk his son into politics, while Kelln would follow his father into sword making.

Two days later Darius snuck off to Christine's party. His father, away as usual, would never know, and his mom was out shopping with the seamstress for satin and lace to make a dress for an upcoming ball.

"Darius!" Christine waved him over. "This is my cousin Karel Theisn, my younger brother Jain, and my little sister Emily."

Jain seemed a few years younger than Christine, and Emily was a miniature version of Christine but about 6 years younger.

He smiled, but felt awkward as he realized he had overdressed for the occasion. He should have remembered it wasn't a city party. His dark pants, high-collared blue jacket and leather boots made him stick out among the simple country clothes the others wore. Christine's clothes were so simple, yet the yellow cotton dress seemed to absorb the sunlight and hugged her body in all the right places. Darius couldn't stop his heart from pounding.

Christine introduced him to Anya Johanssn, Thomas Mortenssn, and a few of her other friends. Anya kept staring at him while winding her fingers through her hair and smiling. Darius blushed and followed Christine. *Why am I so nervous around girls?*

As the party went on Darius became more relaxed. There was no pretension around this group; unlike the many city parties he attended. No pretending you were something you were not. They played simple games, didn't worry about being so proper, and just had fun. He had been to birthday parties in his part of the city that were so boring and stale he had to pretend to be sick in order to get away.

The simplicity of the food surprised him also. Here, chilled punch, a few simple cakes, and candies seemed to be adequate food for the guests. He guessed Christine's mother had baked them also.

Darius hung back a little as everyone else left. He hadn't had much time to visit with Christine by himself.

"I have extra tickets to the festival opening. Do you want to go?" he blurted out.

Christine's green eyes opened wide, "Yes...well...let me ask my mom," she stammered with excitement. Her long hair swirled around and trailed behind her as she ran off.

"Only if you can take Emily and Jain with you." Christine's mother, Caroline, said as she walked with Christine back up to where Darius stood. It became apparent to him they did not trust him. He didn't blame them.

Spending an afternoon with Jain and Emily tagging along was not Darius' first choice, but he realized he wasn't going to go alone with Christine so he relented.

Christine's father gave them a ride down the dirt road in the back of his cart. Dust blew around them in a lazy breeze as the wheels of the cart and the hooves of the horses kicked up the loose dirt. Darius had never ridden in anything but a carriage before, besides riding his own horse. He tried to be careful about how he sat so his clothes wouldn't get too dirty. If they did, his mother would wonder what was going on. There had been plenty of times with Kelln that he had come home filthy from head to toe and his mother had lectured him about the price of his clothes.

Christine's father dropped them off at the main road leading back into the north gate of the city. Darius led them on foot through the large stone arch that contained the northern gate.

"It's so beautiful!" Emily said as they entered the bustling city.

The city shone with brilliant lights lighting the dusk of day as if it were noon. Paper and glass lanterns hung on the corners and eaves of every building. The aromas of warm food and sweetcakes had them breathing in deeply at every vendor. Crowds of people gathered around entertainers in colorful clothing. Jain, who was a few years younger than Christine, tried to ask Darius all sorts of questions but stopped as they couldn't hear themselves above all of the laughing and talking on the crowded city streets. City guards in royal purple capes were everywhere carrying their bows and swords. Their reputation for order kept most of the crowds honest and under control. City workers kept the streets clean. The festival, the biggest one of the year was a time for the king to show the rest of the world the greatness of the Realm and her capital city, Anikari.

"Look!" Emily pointed.

"Emily! Don't point!" Christine scolded as she turned in the direction her sister stared. A group of smaller darker men with tattoos on their faces were walking towards them.

"They are from the eastern kingdoms across the Blue Sea," Darius said. "People come from every city in the Realm and most neighboring kingdoms for this celebration. I even saw a group of elves from down south in Elvyn last year"

"I hear it's the biggest in the world," Jain said.

"I think you're right." Darius slapped Jain on the back. "Just don't get lost in the crowds, "You may end up in some foreign king's service."

Jain gulped. Emily looked frightened. Darius and Christine laughed.

They continued pushing towards the large arena up ahead. The crowds became thick with language, colors, and scents that were foreign to the farmers. The ancient structure loomed above all of the colored tents, shops, and souvenir wagons lining the road.

A noise grabbed their attention down a side street. They watched the guards chasing a man who had slung a large bag over his shoulder. Thieves seemed to take advantage of the crowds and see what they could get away with.

“I want to go to the top,” pointed Jain as they entered the stadium under one of its stone arches.

“That’s right where we are going” smiled Darius. He remembered as a little boy running with Kelln to the highest seat. Kelln would pretend to be the king greeting his guests as the stadium filled. The memory brought a smile to his face. Today Kelln had to help his dad at the forge so he was not where he wanted to be.

“Sur...Mar...Belor....Denir...Anikari...” The announcer stated as each city’s leaders came into the center of the stadium. Each wore their traditional local clothes and colors while musicians played their music. The crowds cheered them on.

“Each of these cities used to be their own kingdom until the Realm was formed after the dark times.” Darius instructed. “Anikari, the great king enlightened them all and brought peace and prosperity to the land.”

Christine laughed.

“What?” Darius frowned

“You act like we don’t know this?”

“Well...I...um....” Darius stuttered.

“Darius, you don’t think the way a lot of city men do or you wouldn’t have helped me that first day. But we farmers or “outsiders”, as we are sometimes called, are not all uneducated and poor. Our parents teach us.

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t know if you knew...”

“Well, we do!” Jain said, “More than a lot of city people.”

“Jain!” snapped Christine.

“Well it’s true.” Jain muttered.

Darius opened his mouth to speak but at that moment the announcement of the King's procession had everyone standing up and cheering.

The four of them watched the King enter. Four of the most beautiful, white Cremelino horses pulled the King's carriage. Their careful steps kicked up only a whisper of dust. Christine gasped at the size of the carriage. With an artistic mix of gold and cherry wood carved together, Darius knew it was the largest and most ornate carriage the farmers had ever seen.

"The horses are from White Island...off the coast of Mar." said Darius. He remembered about the lecturing and stopped. "I'm sorry."

"No. No. Keep going." Christine's eyes were round with delight. "I've heard they are magical."

"Well, Cremelino horses are bred to be intelligent and to bond to one rider in a lifetime. They are bred on White Island. These haven't been ridden yet."

"They are so beautiful," said Christine.

Darius watched her delight and thought the same thing of her.

The King stepped out of the carriage, climbed a few steps up onto a podium, smiled and waved, raising the din even higher than before. His dark chin length hair and short goatee, went along with the newest custom. A crown of gold interlaced with rare jewels adorned his head. He was not a large man, but was fit and carried himself with a slight arrogance.

Edward DarSan Montere had become king after his father, Charles, had died twelve years before. Edward was born to him late in life. Outside of a small skirmish with the Kingdom of Arc in his 3rd year, Edward, had kept peace throughout the land, following in the footsteps of his father.

King Edward had no heirs. A concern to some, but an opportunity waiting to happen for others. His wife and only daughter had died during an outbreak of a foreign-brought plague more than three years earlier. Darius knew from his father that the king had become quite demanding since then and had signaled no desire to marry again or to produce an heir to the Throne of Power.

Darius noticed his father standing one step to the right and one step behind the king. His clothes were immaculate and his smile perfect. Darius' expression soured. He almost pointed out his father to Christine, but he didn't want it to seem like bragging.

Because I'm not!

“I can’t see from here,” complained Emily.

“Everyone will sit down in a moment” Darius smiled remembering how less than a few years earlier he had the same complaint. Now at six feet tall he had no problem seeing over most of the crowd.

The show began with stories told of the Black Forest and the magic of the emperors that had defeated its evil monsters. They told of the power of the Realm and its formation through King Anikari. The famed storytellers from Mar along with a traveling group of magicians made scenes appear before their eyes as they used their illusionist magic to weave the tales. A true wizard had not been found in the Realm since the time of King Edwards great grandfather but minor magics were still inherited and taught to a few. Gildan to the south and the eastern kingdoms across the Blue Sea were said to still have quite a few active wizards, but they stayed to themselves these days.

Other entertainers walked around the perimeter of the crowd, stopping in front of groups of gawkers to perform. People would throw copper or even silver pennies to them to express their appreciation.

“Ooh. I love the jugglers!” squealed Christine to Darius’ delight.

Darius smiled at her obvious child-like enthusiasm.

“And the acrobats,” added Emily.

“That’s what I’m going to be.” Jain pointed to the sword masters performing. “I’m going to be down there someday.”

As the opening celebration of the festival ended, they pushed their way through the crowds. A tall young man shoved Christine aside with his strong arms. She had to grab onto Darius to keep from falling.

“How did *you* people get in there?” he sneered, looking over at Darius. “Oh. Special privileges I see.”

“Sean,” Darius sneered, “it’s none of your business.”

Sean San Ghant ran his hand over his short-cropped blonde hair, looked at Darius, and thought for a second, “Hmmm. Maybe your father doesn’t know then...”

“Like I said Sean, mind your own business.” Darius pulled Christine, Jain and Emily away.

Darius started to apologize, when Jain said to him, "Our family has lived here as long as anyone in the city and we work hard every day."

Christine saved Darius further embarrassment by saying, "Jain, someday the laws will change. You know Darius can't do anything about it. So stop bugging him!"

"Thanks for taking us here tonight," smiled Christine. She tried to change the subject. "We've never been to the opening celebration. How did you get the tickets?"

Darius groaned inside, knowing who he was would have to be brought up at some point, it might as well be then.

"My father is one of the King's ...uh...councilors."

"Oh" said Christine with certain surprise, "Which one?"

"Richard," he said softly and tried not to look at her.

Anger blazed through Jain's eyes, and then he ran up ahead.

"Richard San Williams, the senior councilor?" Christine said as she stopped walking, "Why didn't you tell us that?"

"I...I don't know," stumbled Darius, not wanting to get into it. He hoped she wouldn't be mad at him. "I guess it never came up." His father had been one of the staunch supporters of keeping the farmers outside the city. Richard directed most of the economic affairs of the Realm for the king and was second in power to King Edward, himself.

Awkward silence followed the rest of the way to Christine's house.

"Does he mind I am your...your friend?"

"He doesn't know yet," Darius said. He knew it was only a matter of time before he did though.

Christine's parents came out to ask about the festival. Waving her hands around, Emily told them in detail everything that had happened. Jain walked off in silence.

Darius excused himself and started walking back home. He could hear Emily teasing Christine about him. He just smiled and turned down the dirt road leading back to the city. It had been a fun day and he didn't care what his father thought. When he graduated from the academy he would enlist and become a leader in the army and work to protect everyone in the Realm.

