

The Bound Man

LIGHT DAPPLED through the trees in the family courtyard, painting shadows on the paving stones. Li Reiko knelt by her son to look at his scraped knee.

“I just scratched it.” Nawi squirmed under her hands.

“Maybe Mama will show you her armor after she heals it.” Her daughter, Aya, leaned over her shoulder trying to understand the healing.

Nawi stopped wiggling. “Really?”

Reiko shot her daughter a look. But her little boy’s dark eyes were upturned and shining with excitement. She smiled. “Really.” What did tradition matter? “Now let me heal your knee.”

He held his leg out for her, bloodstained knee showing through his trousers. She laid her hand on the shallow wound.

“Ow.”

Reiko shook her head. “Shush.” She closed her eyes and rose in the dark space behind them.

In her mind’s eye, Reiko took her time with the ritual, knowing it took less outside time than it appeared. In a heartbeat, green fire flared out to the walls of her mind. She let herself dissolve into it as she focused on healing her son.

When the wound closed beneath her hand, she rose back to the surface of her mind. “There.” She tousled Nawi’s hair. “That wasn’t so bad was it?”

“It tickled.” He wrinkled his nose. “Will you show me your armor now?”

Mary Robinette Kowal

She sighed. She should not encourage his interest in the martial arts. “Watch.”

Pulling the smooth black surface out of the ether, she manifested her armor. It sheathed her like silence in the night. Aya watched with anticipation for the day when she earned her own armor. Nawi’s face—his face cut Reiko’s heart like a new blade. Sharp yearning for something he would never have filled his face.

“Can I see your sword?”

She let her armor vanish into thought. “No.” Reiko brushed his hair from his eyes. “It’s my turn to hide, right?”

HALLDÓR TWISTED in his saddle, trying to ease the kinks out of his back. When the questing party reached the Parliament, he would be able to remove the weight hanging between his shoulders.

With each step his horse took across the moss-covered lava field, the strange blade bumped against his spine, reminding him that he carried a legend on his back. None of the runes or entrails he had read before their quest had foretold the ease with which they fulfilled the first part of the prophecy. They had found the Chooser of the Slain’s narrow blade wrapped in linen, buried beneath an abandoned elf-house. In that dark room, the sword’s hard silvery metal—longer than any of their bronze swords—had seemed to shine with the light of the moon.

Lárus pulled his horse alongside Halldór. “Will the ladies be waiting for us, do you think?”

Halldór laughed. “Maybe for you, my lord, but not for me.”

“Nonsense. Women love the warrior-priest. ‘Strong and sensitive.’” He snorted through his mustache. “Just comb your hair so you don’t look like a straw man.”

A horse screamed behind them. Halldór turned, expecting to see its leg in one of the thousands of holes between the rocks. He caught his breath. Armed men swarmed from the gullies between the rocks, hacking at the riders. Bandits.

The Bound Man

Halldór spun his horse to help Lárus and the others fight off the bandits.

Lárus shouted. “Protect the sword.”

Halldór cursed at the Duke’s command and turned his horse from the fight, driving it as fast as he could across the rocks. Behind him, men cried out as they fought to protect his escape. His horse twisted as it galloped along the narrow paths between stones. It stopped abruptly, avoiding a chasm. Halldór turned to look back.

Scant lengths ahead of the bandits, Lárus rode, slumped in his saddle. Blood stained his cloak. The other men hung behind Lárus, protecting the Duke as long as possible.

Behind them, the bandits closed the remaining distance across the lava fields.

Halldór kicked his horse’s side, driving it around the chasm. His horse stumbled sickeningly beneath him. Its leg snapped between rocks. Halldór kicked himself free of the saddle as the horse screamed. As he rolled clear, the rocky ground slammed the sword into his back. His face passed over the edge of the chasm. Breathless, he pushed back from the drop.

As he scrambled to his feet, Lárus thundered up. Without wasting a beat, Lárus flung himself from the saddle and tossed Halldór the reins. “Get the Sword to Parliament!”

Halldór grabbed the reins, swinging himself into the saddle. The weight of the artifact on his back gave him no comfort. What did it matter, that they had found the sword, if they died returning it to the Parliament? “We have to use the sword!”

Lárus’s right arm hung limply by his side, but he faced the bandits. “Go!”

Halldór yanked the sword free of its wrappings. For the first time in six thousand years, the light of the sun fell on the silvery blade bringing fire to its length. It vibrated in his hands.

The first bandit reached Lárus and forced him back.

Halldór chanted the runes of power, which would call the Chooser of the Slain.

Time stopped.



REIKO HID from her children, blending into the shadows of the courtyard with more urgency than she felt in combat. To do less would insult them.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Nawi spun away from the tree and sprinted past her hiding place. Aya turned more slowly and studied the courtyard. Reiko smiled as her daughter sniffed the air, looking for tracks. Her son crashed through the bushes, kicking leaves with each footstep.

She stifled the urge to shake her head at Nawi’s appalling technique, as another branch cracked under his foot. She would have to speak with his tutor to find out what the woman was teaching him. He might be a boy, but that was no reason to neglect his education.

Aya found Reiko’s initial footprints and tracked them, away from where she hid. Watching her daughter carefully, Reiko slid from her hiding place and walked across the courtyard to the fountain. This was a rule with her children; to make up for the size difference, she could not run.

She paced closer to the sparkling water, using its babble to cover her sounds. Nawi shouted, “Have you found her?”

“No, silly!” Aya shook her head and stopped. She put her tiny hands on her hips, staring at the ground. “Her tracks stop here.”

She and her daughter were the same distance from the fountain, but on opposite sides of it. If Aya were paying attention, she would realize her mother had doubled back in her tracks and jumped from fountain to the paving stones encircling the grassy center of the courtyard. Reiko had time to take three more steps before Aya turned.

As her daughter turned, Reiko felt more than heard her son reach for her. She let herself fall forward, using gravity to drop beneath his hands. She rolled on her shoulder, somersaulting, then launched to her feet again as Aya ran toward her.

Nawi grabbed for her again. With a child on each side, Reiko danced and dodged her way closer to the fountain. She twisted from their grasp,

The Bound Man

laughing with them each time they missed her. Their giggles echoed through the courtyard.

The world tipped sideways and vibrated. Reiko stumbled as pain ripped through her spine. Nawi's hand clapped against her side.

Through the pounding in her head, she heard his voice shrill with joy. "I got her!"

Fire exploded in her eyes and the courtyard vanished from her sight.

TIME BEGAN AGAIN.

The sword in Halldór's hands thrummed with life. Fire from the sunset seemed to engulf the sword and rent the air. With a keening cry, the air opened and a form dropped through, silhouetted against a haze of fire. Horses and men screamed in terror.

When the fire died away, a woman stood between Halldór and the bandits.

Halldór's heart sank. Where was the Chooser of the Slain? Where was the warrior the sword was supposed to call?

A bandit snarled a laughing oath and rushed toward them. The others followed him with their weapons raised.

The woman snatched the sword from Halldór's hands. In that brief moment, when he stared at her wild face, he realized he had succeeded in calling Li Reiko, the Chooser of the Slain.

Then she turned. The air around her rippled with a heat haze as armor, dark as night, materialized around her body. He watched her dance with deadly grace, bending and twisting from the bandits' blows. Without seeming thought, with movement as precise as ritual, she danced with death as her partner. Her sword slid through the bodies of the bandits.

Halldór dropped to his knees giving thanks to the gods for sending her. He watched the point of her sword trace a line like the path of entrails on the church floor. The line of blood led to the next moment, the next, and the next—as if each man's death was predestined.

Then she turned her sword on him.