



LOVE

for the

ALIEN

PRIMAL

ATHENA STORM

**LOVE FOR THE ALIEN
PRIMAL**

ATHENA STORM

ATHENAVerse PRESS

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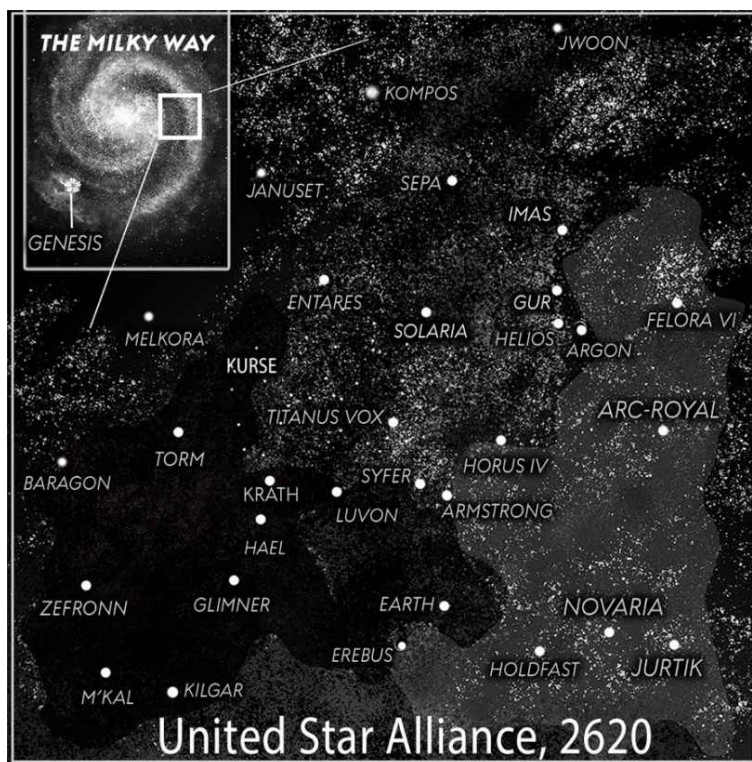
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THE ATHENAVERSE STAR CHART



MIRIK

“Who wants to say the blessing?” I ask hopefully.

It’s a silly question. The blank faces give me my answer. It’s me. It’s always me.

Old habits die hard, I suppose, and the head of the household is always expected to do the honors. Change is hard for some. And though I have made some headway here, this is something that won’t budge.

“You, my lord,” Yvirir says encouragingly. He’s right, of course. He always is. We bow our heads in unison, hands clasped.

“Look upon us, Krodo, Shaper of All Things. We thank you for the gifts we have, the gifts we have yet to receive and the gifts we overlook. Always in your name.” The words rattle off my tongue easily, but they are disconnected, automatic.

Opening my eyes, Yvirir smiles at me once more before we begin to pass the communal bowls of food around the table.

It has been over a year since I insisted that we, as a household, take our main meals together. Up until then, I had dined, as was traditional, in the ornate dining room of my ancestral family home, Monteluke Hall. Soaring ceilings and ornate crystal-fed lights looked down upon the massive table as I, the only diner, ate in silence.

More and more, I came to dread these lonely evenings. They took on a certain absurdity. The last of my line, I am the Hall’s remaining steward, assisted by a small but loyal set of

Drokan servants. There are ten of us in all. But only one ate in the dining room.

I came to loathe dinner time. During the day, when I was busy with the upkeep of the Hall and the surrounding moors, it was easy to forget how isolated my family had become. How singular I had become.

But the evenings hammered it home. Whenever I passed the large kitchen, I could hear the happy voices of the servants at supper, communing with each other over the day's events. My isolation was inescapable.

Until I decided to change it. Despite Yvrir's staunch protests about tradition and honor, I banned myself from the dining room, installing myself in the kitchen at the appointed dinner hour.

The servants, with no choice but to obey, have largely accepted this new practice of their eccentric master. That is, with certain concessions. I must sit at the head of the table, and I must recite the nightly prayer.

For the sake of company, I am willing to do these things. Yvrir, I can tell, has never quite adjusted, but his loyalty demands he hide it.

A bubble of conversation can be heard at the other end of the table. As usual, it's between the two young Drokans who serve as the groundskeepers and general maintenance men. They are impulsive and can be sloppy in their work. But around these parts, workers are hard to find.

"What's that, Kurkis? What are you talking about?" I ask.

Instantly, Kurkis' body stiffens somewhat. He thought he was in a private conversation, but now I've gone and asked him to share with the whole table. It is my prerogative as master, after all. Still, it does pain me that the lines between nobility and servant class are so deeply ingrained.

"Oh, uh...not much, sir. Just that there are rumors of more raids...sir," he replies stiffly. His fellow worker, Hibron, looks squarely at his food. Both are slight and lithe, with tan colored skin and, as fitting their station, few body tattoos.

“Where? Near here?”

“Not quite, sir. But closer than before. Not much was taken, or so I hear.”

“Keep an eye on it, Kirkus. We don’t want them getting close,” I reply. Rumors of raids have become more commonplace lately. The terrain surrounding Monteluke Hall is difficult, though. This fact gives me some comfort.

Though beautiful in the warmer months with the fragrant *jinari* flowers in full bloom, the moors are uneven and full of hidden dangers like sucking sands and razor-sharp rocks. The soft tall grasses can fool the uninitiated and have done so many times in the past. It’s what has kept the Hall largely free of marauders.

The times, however, are becoming more and more dangerous. Conflicts over the crystals needed for essential fuel and the intense swings in the weather have put everyone on edge. Even us out here in the middle of nowhere.

“Yes, sir. I will, sir,” Kirkus replies and looks down at his food but not before shooting Hibrion a look.

The meal continues in silence for several more minutes. As we near the end, Yvrir catches my eye.

“Forgive me for addressing business at the table, sir, but I’m afraid I must,” he says in his silky voice. Yvrir, in all the years I’ve known him, has never raised his voice. His quiet dignity and confidence smooth over any situation.

“Of course, Yvrir. I am all ears,” I reply.

The skin around his dark gray eyes crinkles slightly before he answers. I do not know how old he is, but he was serving my late father, so there are some years on him. Still, his dark olive skin seems ageless even as I feel myself grow older.

“The raids are not the only thing we must consider,” Yvrir begins. “There is another storm approaching. Surely you have felt the disturbance?”

I don’t want to admit it, but I have. For the last few days, the air has been charged, as if infused with an unseen power. It

has only increased, even as I tried to ignore it.

“I have.”

“I fear it will be severe, sir. We must be ready for that possibility.” Tactfully, he leaves out the part that doesn’t need to be said. Another storm will likely damage the Hall. Again.

More and more, we have had to come to terms with what the changing climate is doing to the old place. And more and more, I have to face the very real fact that she is slowly losing the battle.

“We will be, Yvrir. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.”

I stand, causing everyone else to follow suit. Muttering my good nights, I leave the room. I head to my bedroom, the last place still occupied in that part of the manor. All the servants sleep in another wing.

My footsteps echo off the lonely walls. I feel, yet again, the fizz of the impending storm in the air.

It infuses my thoughts as I get ready for bed. Tonight, I know, will be a restless night.

LYKA

“**O**ne more step...” I tell myself, even as my calves burn with exertion. Bowing my head, I push my leg forward. Finally, thrillingly, I stand at the top of the huge hill.

Walking up this thing felt like an eternity. My lungs heave, sending out puffs of steam. Though the air is bitter cold and my fingers are practically numb, I can feel the pool of sweat at the bottom of my spine. Soon, it will cool, sending me into a torrent of shivers.

I need to find shelter. And soon. Not only due to the cold but because nightfall will soon be here.

The moors are not a forgiving place. Even during the day, they are treacherous. At night, however, they are downright ferocious.

My hopes are high, though, for one good reason. In the distance, I see my destination. Splayed out at the bottom of the hill are the decrepit walls of Monteluke Hall. Even now, as she stands depleted and rotting, there is a certain grandeur about her. What once made her beautiful can still be seen in the crumbling walls and desiccated turrets.

The true irony is that I *need* her to be this way. I need her to be as run-down and dilapidated as she appears. That way, I have a chance of finding what I seek.

Resting for a moment to let the agony in my calves die down, I consult the raggedy parchment that serves as my map. Tyril’s scrawl is almost unreadable but so far, he has been

right. He drew this from the memory of a scouting mission he did years ago, and I marvel at his recall.

It should have been him on this mission, but his wife is in labor, and so he was required to stay back at the camp. I didn't mind. I am happy to have been tapped.

Our settlement is dying. Lack of food and resources, combined with the threat of illness, has forced us to get creative. We can no longer stay where we are. Raids and the climate changes are becoming all too frequent.

That's when the prospect of Monteluke Hall was brought before the Council, our ad-hoc governmental body consisting of all the able-bodied humans of the settlement. Tyril had heard the rumors that the Hall had a secret and long unused entrance which could serve as a temporary shelter.

So, here I am. Staring at what was once a formidable dwelling, owned by an ancient Drokan family of noble blood.

From the looks of it, either the blood has run out or the nobility has long fled. The walls are worn down, as if eroded by rain. One turret has completely collapsed in on itself, and the moor grasses are overgrown, grabbing at the outer walls with abandon.

If that entrance is there, it will be the perfect place for us all to hide. At least until we figure out what to do next.

Shoving the map into my pocket, I blow on my fingers once more and start the trek down the hill. Here, the challenge is not letting the steep drop pull me into a rolling fall. I walk with my heels jamming into the soft earth, my arms out at my sides. My heavy pack bounces off my shoulders and I can't wait to shed that thing.

It feels odd to be alone after being surrounded by people every waking minute of the day. Even sleeping, we share space, huddled together in our sleeping rolls for warmth. Our days are filled with the necessities for survival – finding food, shoring up what little shelter we have and caring for the sick and elderly.

Lately, though, the task has become almost unbearable. We have to find somewhere else to go, or we will surely face extinction.

I am halfway down the hill when I feel the first drops of rain. “No, no, no.”

The wind picks up, too, as if not wanting to be left out. Strands of my irritatingly long red hair fly into my face. No matter how tightly I braid it, it always flies loose.

Tucking it behind my ear, I pick up my pace. The grasses reach my knees, and I have to remind myself to look down occasionally. If it's not the weather above that's threatening to kill me, the ground below could have a turn, too.

On this trek so far, I've managed to skirt one sucking sand pit, avoid the razor jags of a hill face and keep out of the deepest mud. I can only hope the rest of the walk to Monteluke Hall is uneventful.

The manor is built in a large square, with turrets at all four corners rendered in crumbling wood against slate-gray stone. I am approaching the back of the house, and a quick glance upwards reveals that no one is guarding the place. At least, not from this angle. My approach is unseen.

The base of the walls are completely hidden from sight, buried deep in the fur of the wild grasses. They look almost demonic as they scale the crumbling stones. I will have to walk carefully along the perimeter if I'm going to find this entrance.

Of course, there's always the possibility that Tyril has it wrong. He has never actually seen it but he insisted, in that booming voice of his, that it was there just waiting to be found.

I can only hope it's there. The storm is fast approaching, and I won't make it back to the settlement in time. Being out here in the elements is not an option.

Finally, I've reached the bottom of the hill. My legs thank me for the somewhat even ground. Adjusting my pack, I set my sights on the corner of the manor closest to me. Tyril was

fuzzy on exactly where the entrance might be, so I'll just have to feel along the walls until I find it.

If I find it.

"I can make it," I encourage myself.

A blast of icy wind tears at my face, loosening my hair once again. Gritting my teeth, I start walking, watching as the manor gets closer and closer.

MIRIK

Every ounce of my self-control is being used up right now. The dust and mold from the books and manuscripts is causing my skin to itch terribly but I know if I scratch at it, things will only get worse.

On the huge table before me lay stacks of what I've been able to salvage so far. Behind me is a growing pile of things that are far too damaged to be saved. The pile behind exceeds the pile in front, something that makes me unbelievably sad.

Wiping my forehead with my arm, I squint at the light streaming into the library window. The glass is in desperate need of a cleaning and repair but so is just about everything around here. That's not going to happen any time soon. Dust motes twirl in the air, unseated by all the upheaval.

I've been in here all morning trying to salvage what I can from my ancestor's extensive book and manuscript collection. The library is part of the west wing of the Hall, the wing that is crumbling the fastest and will soon be shut off from the main part of the house.

It's tragic but necessary at this point. The wing faces into the headwinds of the moors and receives the brunt of any storms, so the walls have eroded past the point of repair. Already the windows are hanging crooked in their sills and the mortar is falling out in large chunks.

Mold and fungus has begun to bloom along the walls, slowly eating away at the books stored here for centuries.

At one time, they were loved and treasured. Now, I can only keep what's likely to survive in a few trunks dedicated for that purpose.

When I began this morning, I tried to be respectful, handling everything with care. Now, as my skin burns with irritation, and my lungs feel like they are spongy with mold, I have abandoned my caution. I toss the most damaged books behind me, valuing speed.

At this point, it's all about survival of the fittest.

The sun's light is starting to weaken, and the electricity in the air is increasing. The storm will be here in a matter of hours. I have to hurry up. The books I am saving need to be crated and hauled out of here. The rest will be resigned to this abandoned room.

Once I finish in here, we will lock the doors. I will have to resign myself to saving what I can of the rest of the Hall. This wing is beyond redemption.

You keep telling yourself that, but what about what's already happened? The voice inside my head asks a valid but anguish-inducing question. The truth is painful: I haven't been able to save other parts of the Hall. Not as much as I'd like or as much as I tell myself.

Plonk. Swish.

Another book, its animal hide binding cracked and torn, leaves my hands and lands with a resigned thud. How my ancestors would turn in their graves if they saw how cavalier I am being right now.

I have no choice. First, it was the outbuildings. They were always on the rickety side but the Hall had been bleeding money for years. My great-grandfather had been far too proud to admit it, even to himself. The resulting neglect, combined with the natural effects of weather, had damned them to demolition.

My father also did his best to hide the truth from himself, patching what he could and ignoring the rest.

It was only when my parents died and I assumed the deceptively grand title of caretaker that I saw the terrifying scope of the damage.

One whole wall was leaning in so dangerously, the roof to the servant's quarters was collapsing in on itself like a fan. My first order of business was to vacate those quarters, reassigning the remaining servants to the lesser bedrooms of the more-intact eastern wing.

Next came some of the service rooms. Decades of leaky pipes and shoddy patches had doomed many work areas unusable. They were quickly stripped of whatever was useful and sealed up.

The east and south wings are now largely what's left as living and working space. All of us have crowded into them, repurposing as we go. But they, too, are endangered. With each new storm, the Hall incurs more damage.

Always in the back of my mind is just how much longer she can hold on. How much longer any of us can hold on.

But if there are raids and gangs of marauders scouring the countryside, our options are few in terms of relocating. Besides, no one is exactly sympathetic to a Drokan nobleman of a dying fortune.

And so we stay put, biding our time until... I'm not even sure at this point. With each new day, I try to keep my hopes high. With each new day, it becomes harder to do so.

Plonk. Swish.

Another book on the pile.

A soft knock interrupts my gloomy thoughts. By now, the sun has completely disappeared from the window, replaced by an ominous gray nothingness.

"Yes?" I call.

The heavy door opens, small flecks of mold peppering its edges. Yvrir's head appears around it.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. But the storm will be here soon. We must shut up this room. I can send the boys in to

help you load what can be saved if you like?”

Good old Yvrir. Always thinking ahead.

“No, that’s all right. I will be able to get them in the crates quickly. Have them come by to pick them up.”

“Very good, sir. Where shall they take them?”

It’s a good question. I have no idea. The options are few.

“My room, I suppose. We can pile them in the corner.”

“With the other items?”

I sigh. The detritus of my family is slowly piling up in a dark corner of my bedchamber.

“Yes, Yvrir. With the other items.”

“Yes, sir.” His head disappears, and the door closes.

I’m left to pack what remains of the books.

LYKA

At first, all I feel is the rain pelting off my skin. It's cold and unpleasant, but I expected that. Seconds later, however, I'm feeling something else entirely.

Burning. "What the—" Looking down at a small patch of skin above my left elbow, I'm shocked to see the skin pucker and blister as it comes into contact with the raindrops.

There's acid in the rain! It falls around me, making an unnerving hissing sound as it meets the ground, the grass, and me.

For months, rumors had swirled that the weather was starting to turn, that the elements we had all relied upon for so long as sustainers of life were now suddenly enemies. Things to be avoided.

"Now, even the water from the sky can hurt us?" I angrily gripe. It seems incredulous, but it's undeniably true.

My need for shelter has suddenly become much more pressing. Where the rain hits my clothing, I don't feel anything. But the places it touches my bare skin are zinging with pain. Even my hair is starting to hurt.

By now, I've reached the walls of the manor itself. Well, not quite. There's a barrier of tall grasses between myself and the actual stone, but it's as close as I'm going to get right now.

The ruined turret looms above me, jagged wood from its capped roof hanging over the edge like broken teeth. I try not to linger underneath for very long.

Tyril had no idea where the entrance might be, but he was adamant it existed. He's always had a big mouth, and yes, he likes to exaggerate sometimes. Still, I pray to whatever god might be listening that he's right about this.

Tramping down the grass as best as I can, I hug the perimeter of the house, looking carefully for any sign of an opening or doorway. Hell, I'd settle for an alcove at this point. Anything to get out of this stinging rain.

It's easy to see now why the stone walls are so pock-marked and disheveled. How long has the rain been like this? Over time, it must be eating away at the very stones.

I try to move quickly but with care so as not to miss anything. My backpack is heavier than ever as it soaks up the rain. My clothes are becoming drenched, and my skin is burning where the fabric soaks through.

Adding to my woes is the temperature. It's freezing out here, and I'm starting to shiver.

"Please, Tyril. Please be right. Please let it not be just one of your stories..." I murmur repeatedly to myself, willing it to be true.

If it isn't, I will be in serious trouble.

I'm halfway down the length of the manor by now, heading from the west wall to the north. This whole section of the house appears to be in terrible shape, and there are no signs of any recent activity or repair.

So far, my search has turned up nothing but worn gray stone furred by grass. Occasionally, hardy lichen and moss cling to the walls, but that is the only sign of life. Aside from me, of course.

The flame of hope within me is starting to flicker and fade into despair. My thoughts are only bent on two things: stopping the burning from this horrible rain, and finding shelter. The finding shelter part will certainly help with the other.

Still, all I see is a never-ending expanse of gray stone, shockingly mundane in its sameness. Nothing stands out. Not

one crack, shadow, fissure or...

Wait. I see something about three quarters of the way toward the north corner. Here, the stone wall has fallen away, and there's a distinct divot or dark area curtained behind the grass. It's hard to make out any details. Nothing else has been promising so far, so I part the grasses with my hands and stride forward.

Instantly, the rain stops falling on my head. I'm in a dark alcove of some kind. The opening is much deeper than it looked at first. Allowing my eyes to adjust to the gloom, I start to make out a shape.

Yes! There it is, unmistakable. A wooden slat door painted a shade of green that is long faded and chipped. The door is tiny. I have to stoop to get near it as it's cut into the stone foundation itself.

A rusted door pull hangs off the door. I have to blow on my hands several times to get feeling back into them before I have enough strength to pull the ring towards me.

It won't budge at first, but my adrenaline is pumping. With one last pull, the door creaks open. The smell of earth and dust of times long gone by hits my nostrils, but I don't care.

Wriggling into the small opening, I head inside, pushing the door shut behind me.

The rain and wind are shut out. They feel like they are now a world away. A sense of triumph runs through me, but I tell myself not to get too excited. I don't know where I am yet.

The ceiling of the room is low. Curved brick arches fan out like catacombs around me. The room appears to have been a work room of some kind, like a food preparation area or a place where herbs were prepared and dried. It isn't large, cut up as it is by the small areas under each archway.

Stuff litters the place. An old table, some broken chairs, a stray plate or two. As my eyes adjust to the dark, I slowly take an inventory. A tall cupboard leaning awkwardly in one corner is stocked with crystal-fed rifles. It's a terrific find save for the fact that I can't seem to find an ounce of ammunition.

The whole thing is a goldmine, relatively speaking. Even better, I'm out of that horrible storm which, even with the thick walls around me, seems to be worsening outside.

No, I'm quite content to make camp for the night here. A small fire in the grate soon livens up the place, and I'm able to rinse off my burning skin.

Looking around, I take stock.

"It'll do," I tell myself. It has to.

MIRIK

The dawn breaks a milky gray. I stare blearily out of my bedroom windows, squinting through the weak light that is losing its battle with the fog and mist.

The storm has stopped, but its aftermath is palpable. So much rain fell overnight, I thought we would be washed away. Now, the rain has ceased, and the wind has died down, but the damage is apparent.

From what I can see, there are downed trees and pools of water in the indentations of the moors. Mist rises from those, mingling with the low-hanging fog. A band of light is layered on top, making a confusing cake of weather.

Shrugging on my clothes, I splash water on my face and make my way to the kitchen. Standing, I eat a breakfast consisting of a fiber cake and weak tea. The servants go about their business but even they, like the weather, seem subdued, pushing against the layer of fog and mist.

Yvrir approaches. “Do you wish me to accompany you, sir?”

“No, thank you, Yvrir. I’ll make the rounds and return with a list of the most pressing repairs.”

I know it’s not efficient to inspect the house this way, but I can’t bear looking at all the damage from the storm in someone’s company. I’d much rather go it alone.

“Understood, sir,” he says quietly, returning to his morning duties.

I pull on my boots and outer coat. It chafes against my wings, but it's the only one I now own, having sold off most of the family clothes some months back. Gulping the last of my tea, I hand my cup to the long-suffering cook, Eska, and leave out the back kitchen door.

Immediately, my nose is assaulted by an odd smell. Rather than the usual blanket smell of fresh after-rain, I smell... burning. Like the world has been charred. Bending down, I look at the ground. Blades of tall grass look pock-marked, as if eaten away by an odd insect. Except it would take millions of insects to do this on such a huge scale in such a short period of time.

The ground, too, looks dented, the rain pelting little divots upon landing. That's when I connect it all. The rain that fell last night in massive amounts was acidic. No wonder the walls are so worn down.

Worry slices through my gut as I turn to face the house. But just before I do, I spot something moving on one of the faraway hills. It stands several leagues away, but I distinctly see something shift in the small band of visibility between the low-lying clouds and the sun.

Actually, I see several *somethings*. The movement of people and perhaps service animals. There are too many to be a traveling peddler or small group of nomads.

Another slice of worry piles on top of the first.

Those are raiders. Possibly scoping out their next target.

I can't think about that now, I think protectively, turning my back on the hill. We are a small group of Drokan all alone out here. Gone are the days where the Hall was protected by armed guards.

But I must focus on what I *can* do, which is to fix the worst of any damage that might have happened overnight. Shutting the door firmly on one worry, I am able to put all my attention on the other.

I start with the east wall, the area where the house is strongest. I breathe a small sigh of relief. Here, the damage is

minimal. The stones have absorbed a lot of the dreadful rain that has fallen, but everything is still much the same.

Still, I can't get too confident. Taking slow, methodical steps, I walk along the length of the wall and turn at the corner to head along the south wall. It is much the same. There is light damage from the rain and pools of the acrid stuff lingering nearby, but it is still standing.

It's when I turn to explore the north and west walls that I see the worst of it. These walls face into most weather patterns, so it's not surprising. But I'm dismayed to see just how awful it is this time.

A large tree is down near the wall but missed crashing into it by mere inches. The turret that was already on its last legs has completely disintegrated, and its roof beams and slats are littered along the perimeter.

More concerning than that are the large stones that have dropped from the widow's walk above. The mortar has simply dissolved, causing the stones to tumble. It's hard to tell how stable the walls may now be, but I warrant they are becoming weaker by the day.

A profound sadness wells up within me, and I want to run back to the part of the house that still looks as it was. But that is the coward's way out, and I must finish the inspection.

Along the west wall, the grass is the tallest. Receiving the most water, and the least maintenance, will have that effect.

As I complete my square, I notice something odd. Most of the grass has been bent down in a uniform pattern along the entire moor surrounding the house. As if curtsying to a great monarch, the rain has pushed it all down in one direction.

Here, however, there is something different. Here, the grass is bent in several different directions. As if someone or something cut through it. I look closer at the wall as I walk.

It becomes even more pronounced as I approach the middle of the west wall. A small alcove, dark and almost invisible, appears.

To my surprise, I see a door. Was that always there? How could I have missed such a thing?

Ducking down, I grasp the ring of a small green door and pull. Surprisingly, it opens easily, only furthering my suspicion that someone has recently been here.

I have to bend almost in half to enter the space. Dust and the smell of fresh smoke welcome me.

Someone was here. Someone might *still* be here.

My boot crunches on the gritty bare floor as I turn to look around.

I don't complete my turn. There, pointed at my face, is a long rifle. Something I haven't seen in a long time. Holding it is a pair of small hands. Human hands.

Above them sits a pair of extraordinary blue eyes. They glitter at me angrily.

"Don't move," a voice says.

I freeze.

LYKA

The long rifle isn't loaded, but he doesn't need to know that. He also doesn't need to know how damn terrified I am to be discovered. Barely made it one day in this place!

Pretend you are in charge.

My shoulders are tense, and every part of me is on high alert, but I'm determined to be the one in control here. This privileged Drokan will not take me down that easily.

"Don't move," I bark, holding the rifle steadily at his chest. If only I could have found some ammunition. I just have to hope he doesn't call my bluff.

Slowly, he raises both his hands in supplication. His body language, though, tells another story. I can see, even under his heavy coat, that he's tensing up, readying for something.

"Who are you? How did you find this place?" he asks. His voice is deep and rich, accented slightly. He's high born and well educated, that's for sure. Not exactly running in my social circles.

"Doesn't matter. This is my spot now. Clearly, it's been abandoned so that means it's up for grabs," I spit. Let's see if he argues with *that* logic.

"That's up for interpretation," he shoots right back. I say nothing. He decides to change tactics. "Look, my name is Mirik. I'm the owner of this place and I'd like to know why

you are here and, most importantly, when you are leaving. I don't have to be nice about this but I'm choosing to be."

I can't gauge how much he really means all this, but I'm determined not to give any ground.

"You're the owner? Some job you're doing. This place is a mess." My arms start to ache from holding up the gun, but I refuse to lower it.

He winces slightly at my words. Clearly, it's a sore spot with him.

"I need you to leave. *Now.*"

I adjust my stance and re-center the gun. "Really? And how will that work, exactly?"

"I can have you arrested right now. I have guards standing by." His eyes, a deep maroon color, stay steady on my face. I can't tell if he's bluffing. No one is here with him so even if he did summon guards, they would take several moments to arrive.

Moments I can use to escape.

"Do you, now? Somehow, I doubt that."

Let's see what he does with that.

"And I doubt that gun is actually loaded," he retorts.

Dammit.

A tense silence blooms between us. A stand-off of sorts. Then, very slowly, I lower the gun. I can still use it as a cudgel, but holding it up seems pointless now. Now it's my turn to change tactics.

"Thought so," he says, but there is no trace of malice in his voice. More of an affirmation. There's something about this Drokan that confuses me. He does not seem like a brute. Or a bully. But then, what is he, exactly?

"Tell me your name and why you are here," he repeats.

The gun lowers to my side, but I keep a firm grip on it. Finally, I speak. "My name is Lyka. I am part of a group of

humans that are in desperate need of shelter and supplies. Where we are now is becoming dangerous and untenable.”

It all spills out and I wonder if I’ve said too much. Well, it’s too late now.

What he does next surprises me. His eyes drift away, and a flash of pain crosses his angular face, the copper skin glowing in the dim light. It’s a look of understanding, comprehension.

Opening his mouth, he speaks again. “How many are there?”

“About twenty-five of us. About to be twenty-six. Some elders, some very young. Most of us are in the middle. Strong, though. And resourceful.”

“And you’ve been sent out to...?”

“To seek out new shelter and supplies. We are in a bad way.”

Alarm bells are ringing in my head. Why am I telling this Drokan – this man that just threatened to arrest me – all these things? He could use this information against me. They are my weaknesses.

“That is a common refrain nowadays,” he says with a heavy note of finality. His eyes find mine once more. “I will make you a deal. Come work for me. In my household. I can’t pay much, but I will pay you what I can. You will have room and board. You will *earn* what you can, and that can be sent to your people.”

I’m shocked but manage to voice the obvious question. “And then what?”

“You earn enough to help your people, and then you can see about finding them a new home.”

He stops, waiting for a response.

Of all the things I expected today, this wasn’t one of them. It will mean regular meals and a comfortable bed. It will mean I can be legitimate for once. No longer scrounging on the fringes, happy for any scraps I can pass along to my people.

But is it a trap? Could he simply arrest me once I agree? What will happen then?

Carefully, I weigh everything in my head. Five days from now, Tiril is to come looking for me if I have not returned or sent a message back. In those five days, I can start earning. I can pass along what wages and supplies I have to him and tell him of our prospects.

If this Drokan is true to his word, I stand to benefit. My *people* stand to benefit.

The risks are there, but my gut tells me to put my faith in this plan. I just hope I don't live to regret it.

The Drokan called Mirik is still waiting for my reply. He stands still as a stone.

“All right. I will work for you. I hope you are a Drokan of your word.”

He bows slightly, his long neck graceful and practiced.

“I am. Thank you.”

I gather my belongings and snuff out the embers of the crude fire I made to stay warm overnight.

Moments later, we both emerge from the door to the outside. My new life – as surprising as it is – is about to begin.

MIRIK

We leave the abandoned wing in silence, shutting the door securely behind us. I'm grateful for the silence because I'm trying to work through the maelstrom of voices in my head.

Why did I propose this deal to this human? This trespasser? It breaks all convention. I should have her arrested, but instead I'm offering her a job?

It defies belief. The only reason I can get away with it is because on some strange level, I'm still the one in charge around here.

Her story is a familiar one. Lack of food, shelter and the impending dangers of desperate people and the ever-changing weather are not foreign to me. In fact, I live with them every day. That is the single most compelling reason I did what I did. I could not abandon her or have her thrown in jail. Something about doing that felt deeply wrong.

But now I have the very real problem of providing for her. There is barely enough money in the coffers as it is. How will I possibly afford another servant? Let alone the cost of feeding her.

None of it makes any sense and yet here we are, walking through the grass, avoiding the ponds of acidic rainwater to get back to the kitchen door. Lyka follows close behind, a heavy bag slung over her shoulder.

Is it something else though?

That one question breaks through the noise swirling in my mind. Sure, I felt her pain and anguish about the suffering of her people. That part feels familiar. But there's something else at play here. What is it?

It's her, isn't it? Something about those eyes...

This voice I cut off before it has a chance to say anything further. Lyka is a scavenger, one thin line away from being a petty thief. I can't go around losing my head simply because her eyes fascinate me.

Besides, I have plenty of other things to worry about. The immediate one being how the other servants will take to their newest staff member.

When we step inside the kitchen I ask the junior chamber maid, Idra, to gather everyone together. I want to introduce Lyka once and only once.

Idra gives Lyka a once over, looking at her curiously as humans are not commonly found here. She then rushes off to gather everyone.

Yvrir appears from his pantry office. A small ripple of shock momentarily mars his placid features, but he quickly masks it.

"And who do we have here, sir? I don't believe we were expecting visitors," he says, his voice smooth as silk.

"Yvrir, this is Lyka. I...encountered her when I was inspecting the house. She is in need of work, and I thought we could find something for her here. Will that be acceptable to you?"

Without hesitation, Yvrir answers. "Of course, sir. I am happy to find her useful employment. Welcome, Lyka," he says, giving a small bow. Lyka nods in reply, her eyes downcast.

"Yvrir is the head of the household under me," I explain. "He has been with my family since I can remember."

"An honor, sir," he says.

Soon, Idra returns, and the rest of the servants straggle in. Eska and Brin, the main chefs, enter with their hair concealed beneath dun-colored headscarves. They are dewy-faced from preparing a meat dish.

Next come the loud footsteps of Kirkus and Hibrion, their brows wet with sweat from cleaning up the main entrance which had been covered in debris from the storm. Shortly behind them comes Trekis, his signature sloping gait echoing off the walls. He is the old handyman about the place, barking orders at the younger staff for as long as I can remember.

His wife, and chief maid of the Hall, enters from another doorway. Creska has hard features, and her old bones immediately settle onto one of the high stools near the worktable.

Lastly comes Jemry, the junior valet. He is always late to any proceeding, and I'm never sure why, but he comes sliding in as if from an urgent errand. Finally, we are all assembled.

"Everyone, I want you to meet our newest staff member," I say, gesturing to Lyka who stands with an unreadable expression near me. "She will be assisting with cleaning and other duties as assigned. I trust you will keep her busy."

There's a tense silence before some of the male Drokan utter a few 'hellos' and 'welcomes' in her direction.

Then, Creska speaks. Well, barks is a better way to put it. She has never had a delicate voice.

"What's she going to be doing here, eh? Polishing silver we no longer have?" Her tone is a mixture, both malicious and seeking comedic effect. I don't find any of it funny, and her insubordination is truly appalling.

I am about to admonish her when Yvrir steps in. "Lyka is here to provide honest labor. From the looks of her, she is strong and capable. I'm sure, Creska, we can find useful tasks for her. Perhaps tasks you have not been able to complete in a while. Like say, cleaning the carpets of the main hall?"

Yvrir's smooth suggestion makes Creska redden and go silent. He has managed to shame her and give Lyka a task in

one fell swoop. Just one of the reasons he's been in my family for years.

“A good suggestion, Yvrir. Thank you. Now, I'm off to complete my inspection. Idra, please get Lyka settled in the new servant's quarters, and then get her to work. I will see you all at dinner.”

With that, I end the impromptu meeting. With a few grumbles and unintelligible mumblings, everyone gets back to work.

As I prepare to return to my inspection of the house, I catch Lyka's eye as she exits with Idra to head to the servant's sleeping area. There's a quick flash of gratitude in her eyes. I nod back, and she disappears, her bag obscuring her.

Those eyes are hard to forget. Or ignore. There's that voice again.

My mind will stay that distracted for the rest of the day.

LYKA

“The buckets are in the cupboard under the stairs,” Idra says, gesturing to the low-slung cupboard concealed by a door painted to look exactly like the clapboards around it.

“All right,” I reply, trying to sound upbeat. Everything I’ve said so far to this truculent girl has been cheery. As if, with each word I say, I’m hoping to crack through her tough exterior.

I’m not trying to be friends with her, but the cold shoulder treatment I’ve received since Mirik’s little pep talk isn’t how I want to spend my days. If only she’d open up just a little...

Unfortunately, she’s not the only one. Everyone here at the Hall has been stand-offish and, in some cases, downright rude and hostile. The old maid, Creska, comes to mind. No matter how long I end up staying here, I’d like to at least make some headway with these people.

Being the freak is never a great feeling.

Idra says nothing to my cheery reply, instead choosing to snort derisively.

So much for that.

Pulling open the cupboard, I grab the ancient wood bucket and rags. Everything smells like it needs a good wash, as if the act of scrubbing the floor with these items will actually make things dirtier, not cleaner. But who am I to question?

Idra shows me where the work sink is in the kitchen. To my chagrin, it used to be crystal powered but has since been re-tooled to be attached to a manual pump.

“There’s no money,” Idra answers my unspoken question, shrugging as she watches me crank the huge handle. Just to fill the bucket is a workout. I hope scrubbing floors isn’t a daily chore.

Finally, I’m on my knees scrubbing the main foyer – a huge expanse of heavy stones set in an intricate pattern. At one time, I suspect, it wowed visitors as they entered the house for the first time.

The work here is certainly hard. I’m no stranger to hard work, but this repetitive scrubbing and bending has my back hurting within an hour. But it will be worth it. I can already see that.

The food is not fancy, but there is more of it than where I’ve come from. By stashing a part of my portion away, I will be able to gather a fair amount of it by the time Tyril comes to find me.

That’s not all. There are plenty of other items I can squirrel away that will be useful to us. From what I’ve seen of the house so far, there are things that I can hoard in my little room that won’t be missed by anyone.

To be clear, I’m not stealing. I draw the line there. All I’m doing is taking what’s no longer being used and putting it to another use. Pieces of fabric, broken utensils, chipped plates, food that’s fallen on the floor.

All things that might be thrown away here, even in the decaying splendor of Monteluke Hall, will be treasures to my fellow humans. Already, the pocket of the threadbare apron they’ve given to me to work in hangs heavy on me, as I’ve filled my pockets.

“How long have you worked here, Idra?” I ask as I scrub, mainly as a way of killing time. The tedious work of scrubbing floors has me bored out of my mind.

“Dunno,” is the only answer she cares to give. In my mind, I wave the white flag of surrender. There’s no way to get through to her. It’ll happen on its own time, but I no longer have the energy for this.

So far, only Mirik and Yvrir have shown me any kindness. Mirik, in offering me the job in the first place, and Yvrir, with his kind eyes and slow smile. Clearly, he is the smartest and most noble of the group. The other Drokans are nothing more than lowly peasants who have somehow lucked themselves into a job.

I know I shouldn’t think such things, but I can’t help it. I would like to think that, if situations were reversed, we humans would welcome these Drokans rather than shun them.

The scrubbing continues. Slowly, I work my way from one side of the huge room to the other. In short order, my knees begin to ache, and the muscles in my shoulders and back feel like they are turning into ropes.

My hands are now pruned and cold from the filthy water, but I don’t complain. I catch Idra glimpsing at me from time to time from her own bucket and rag. Like she’s waiting for me to gripe. Waiting for a reason to say I’m weak and should not be here. I refuse to give her that satisfaction.

Untold hours later, we scrub our last square of floor. With creaking backs, we stand back up and haul our buckets to the back door where we heave the gray water outside. It’s a relief just to be able to stand upright, unfurling my spine.

As we head back in, I catch a glimpse of Mirik. He stands facing the far corner of the manor, his eyes clouded. From even this far away, I can tell his body language is of someone that stands against great odds.

He’s a fascinating creature. At first glance, he’s quite fearsome. Bold features, dark, penetrating eyes and the carriage of a true Drokans noble. Were I to encounter him in a dark alley, I’d be terrified.

But getting to know him better has only softened his edges. It’s clear he is a generous man with a deep soul. Why else

would he offer me an out?

What's saddest of all is that he's fighting a losing battle. There's no way he can push back against what's happening to the Hall. Between the rain, the shortages and the impending raids, the Hall is doomed. I am only here to milk it for all I can before I need to move on.

But Mirik seems to harbor a conviction that it can be saved. I have to admire it, even as I pity it.

"You gotta come in," Idra barks, shaking me from my thoughts.

"Sorry," I mumble, joining her as we go back inside.

MIRIK

C *link. Scrape. Thud.*

These are the only sounds presiding over dinner. Occasionally, there's a gulp of a drink or an over-enthusiastic chewing noise, but those are the only things adding to the soundtrack.

Things are tense, to say the least. Not that these dinners were ever what I would call relaxed. Still, things are much worse tonight.

The only new variable is Lyka's presence. She sits at the very end of the table, almost hugging the corner. Compared to the Drokans around her, she practically disappears. Plus, despite her fiery temperament and flaming red hair, she is keeping a low profile, hunching over her bowl of stew.

She says nothing, but then again, no one else speaks, either. Just the maddening scrape of eating.

Finally, I can't stand it any longer. The sound of Trekis' jaw moving up and down like an old farm animal is burrowing into my brain. Even though he is stationed halfway down the table, his chewing can still be heard.

Laying down my fork, I look down the length of the table. Everyone is bent over their plates, concentrating on the food in front of them. It feels choreographed, as if they had decided beforehand to maintain a stony silence.

“Kirkus. Did you see anything unusual today?”

My voice rings out. I even see Idra jump a little. Kirkus freezes, his fork halfway between his mouth and his plate. Quickly, he shoots a look to Hibrion as if seeking permission. Too many moments later, he responds.

“I did, sir. A small band over the north ridge. Quite far off but still visible.”

“Do you think they saw you?”

“No, sir. I do not.”

“Were they moving or scouting? Could you tell?”

Kirkus shoots another look at Hibrion. Why does he need encouragement to speak to me? It’s maddening.

“I believe they were moving on, sir.” Kirkus sets his jaw, and I can tell that’s all he’s going to say. Any further pressing on my part is only going to lead to variations of the same.

“If I may be so bold, sir,” Yvrir pipes in. “It’s likely the Hall, from that vantage point, may not look so appealing. I hate to be the one to say it, sir, but if the Hall looks abandoned, it may be less of a target.”

I hate that Yvrir’s words sting me as much as they do. Still, he’s right. If the Hall looks empty and abandoned, it’s less likely to be a target. Hopefully, it looks like it’s already been plundered, and they will move on.

How far my pride has fallen...

“You may be right about that, Yvrir. Thank you for that.”

I decide it may be better to eat in silence after all. That’s what everyone would prefer anyway. For a few moments, I stay completely still, watching as everyone returns to their meals. Just as I pick up my fork once more, I catch movement from Lyka.

She looks up and locks eyes directly with me. The stare she gives me seems to convey a sense of understanding, of a shared feeling of mutual pain. Even if she doesn’t mean it that way, I am grateful for the effort.

Can it be that this human who has only been here a day has more compassion than these servants who have lived with me for years?

The thought is shocking and worrying. I resume eating, my thoughts whirling.

Ten minutes later, the last scrap of food is eaten. Brin gestures with her meaty hands for our plates to be stacked and handed to her. We all obey, passing them down in the neat fashion we have perfected over these months of eating together as a group.

I stand, and the others take it as their cue to be excused. Brin disappears to the washing station at the back of the kitchen, Eska following.

Creska lumbers slowly up to the servant's quarters, muttering something about how much her back is hurting as she goes, though no one is really listening.

The men, meanwhile, retreat to the back door. Trekis, I know, is hankering for his nightly pipe, a foul-smelling thing that will surely bring raiders to our door if nothing else.

The younger men trail him, eager to gossip and rough-house. Kirkus and Hibrion are the alphas, with Jemry doing his level-best to be accepted. I don't know much about the servant politics that pervade this place, but I am aware that inside servants are always treated with some level of derision by the outside servants.

Something about being weak, or some other kind of nonsense. I am truly glad I don't know their true opinions regarding me and my noble status.

Yvir stands, pushes his chair in and exits promptly to his office, eager for his nightcap that I know he takes every night.

Soon, only Lyka and myself remain. Lyka, simply because she doesn't have a routine yet or a duty to perform. Me, because I don't want to retreat to my lonely rooms just yet. There, I know, my thoughts will only overtake me.

"How was your first day?" I ask.

“Fine, I suppose. If you like scrubbing floors, it was great.”

“I never promised you a glamorous job,” I begin.

“And I didn’t expect one. But I am always one to answer a question honestly.”

Her eyes flash at me, and I back down. I have to respect that.

“Fair.”

Then an idea occurs to me. An idea that might raise eyebrows but since I am the master here, I don’t much care.

“How much of the Hall did you see today?”

Lyka blinks a few times at this change of subject. “I’m very familiar with the foyer floor and where the buckets are kept, but that’s about it.”

I laugh. No one has ever really spoken to me this way before. There’s an ease and an irreverence that I might not tolerate in others, but in her I find it quite refreshing.

“Seems like a tour is in order, then,” I say.

Lyka looks around for a moment to see if anyone else heard. She knows what this might mean. Then, as if making a decision, she nods.

“Seems like it.”

“Follow me, then.”

Let the tour begin.

LYKA

Something tells me that the master of the house giving a tour to the lowest servant on his payroll isn't a common occurrence around here.

I do my best to act like it's no big deal and follow Mirik as he leaves the large kitchen area and exits out a side door that funnels into the Great Hall.

This is the part I'm familiar with. After all, I spent most of my day here, albeit I was looking squarely at the ground most of the time.

This time, however, Mirik encourages me to look up. The foyer is a large open space, reaching up two levels. A gallery on the second floor is visible, the doors of which lead to many rooms, no doubt.

Beyond the gallery there are large frescoes, obscured in the dim light. They all lead to one thing: a magnificent oculus skylight, its glass now opaque with darkness.

"Each fresco represents one of Krodo's powers," Mirik tells me. I take in what I can of the fuzzy shapes. Something about fire, another about crystals, it's hard to discern. Mirik seems to read my mind.

"They are in need of a clean and repair, so you might not see many of the details. My ancestors commissioned them hundreds of years ago. At the time, they were considered the most exquisite pieces of art in the region."

I have nothing to say to this, as I've never really been exposed to anything like it before. But it sure seems impressive. I make what I hope looks like an impressed face and move on.

"This way," Mirik gestures, leading me up the sweeping staircase that loops up from the floor, its width diminishing as it reaches the gallery. Our steps echo eerily off the walls.

"These are mainly bedrooms, long since unused," Mirik explains. "But here, come see this." He leads me into a hallway that juts away from the gallery banister and shoots off in another direction. I've already lost the lay-out I thought I understood from looking at the Hall from outside.

We enter a long gallery. Its purpose is completely lost on me, but Mirik's body language seems to change as we enter it. Something here fills him with pride...and a deep sadness. In a moment, I see exactly why.

The walls are lined with uniformly sized portraits, each hanging in ridiculously overwrought frames. Taking up a crystal lantern and igniting it, the figures portrayed on each canvas loom into view.

Instantly, I see where his pride comes from. Each painting depicts an austere looking Drokan in fancy dress, marking their time in history. Each one bears an uncanny resemblance to Mirik, from the copper skin to the deep-set eyes.

Mirik's family.

And he's the last one left.

"This is your family?" I ask.

"It is. I am the last of the line."

We slow our steps, and Mirik holds up the lantern close to each one. Starched collars, flouncy dresses, elaborate headpieces unfold before me. I can see the progression of their growing wings, so slow to develop until a few generations before.

By the time we reach the last pair of portraits, the wings are much more pronounced in the male figure. He is turned

slightly in the frame as if to show them off. The resemblance to Mirik is more pronounced than ever.

“My parents,” Mirik sighs, stopping altogether and looking at the portraits with great concentration.

“I can see that. You look like a perfect blend of the two of them.”

Mirik looks at me with alarm for a second but then covers it instantly. “Yes, I suppose I do.”

The father is stern, his face clouded in power and nobility. From him, Mirik inherited the strong jaw, the sculpted nose.

The mother fascinates me. She is rendered in soft colors, oranges and yellows. Though she has a delicate face, and it's obvious Mirik got her eyes and ear shape, there is something strong about her. Something formidable.

“My father was not easy on me growing up,” Mirik says. “But you didn't want to cross my mother.”

Now it's my turn to laugh. I can believe it.

After another moment, Mirik moves on and we reach the very end of the gallery. A large part of this area is dedicated to various weapons – all ornate and jewel-encrusted.

“These are the ceremonial swords and crests. Not useful in battle but the last of what's valuable around here,” Mirik says, a note of disdain in his voice.

“Yeah, they wouldn't help much in a fight, I can see that,” I reply. Although I bet they'd fetch a pretty penny on the open market. This last comment I keep to myself.

“We should head back,” says Mirik. I nod, and we start the long walk back along the gallery, his ancestors glaring down at me in the dark.

“What about you? What's your story?”

Not this, would be the short answer. I've never seen anything like what Mirik grew up around. What I experienced was more akin to living in the gutter than having my portrait painted and a mother clad in pure silk.

But I don't like going there, so I have to choose my words carefully.

"I come from a place far away that may or may not still exist," I say as quickly as possible.

"And your family? Are they back at the settlement?"

This is one question I especially don't want to answer. How to explain a domineering ogre of a father and a mother who barely knew I was alive? I've worked too long and too hard to become a survivor in spite of my terrible childhood. One of the perks of doing so is that I can choose when or if I talk about it.

Tonight is not one of those times.

"No. They are not," I reply, hoping my tone implies that this line of questioning is most definitely closed.

"Ah, I see," Mirik says. To my relief, he lets the subject drop, and we continue the rest of the way in silence.

Soon enough, we are back in the kitchen. Mirik bids me goodnight and drifts off to his own quarters, leaving me to wander up to my tiny, plain room.

As I pull my tired body up the stairs, I wonder what just happened. Does Mirik show everyone these rare treasures or am I special?

I'm grateful my body is so tired because otherwise, my brain might be working on that question all night.

MIRIK

The next few days feel blissfully normal. Boring, even. Consecutive days of dry, clear weather allow the pools of acidic rain to burn off and the grasses to repair themselves.

There are no new reports of raiders on the horizon, though I keep up my nightly questions to Kirkus. With a lot of manpower, we manage to shore up the parts of the Hall that sustained the most damage in the last storm.

At the back of my mind is the constant reminder to close up the door to the abandoned part of the manor where Lyka first gained entrance. But as we are tied up with more pressing matters, it keeps getting ignored.

I'll get to it soon, I keep telling myself. I'm confident I will.

In the meantime, I'm just glad to find a modicum of routine to my days. Early in the mornings, I wake, wash, dress, and eat a simple breakfast. Then I tackle the business of trying to save the Hall while doing my best to preserve and protect what is in most immediate danger.

My staff continues their work – cleaning, cooking, haggling the local farmers and butchers for supplies that seem to do nothing but increase in price, and repairing what they can.

The only aberration to all this is Lyka. Despite being punctual and doing every duty assigned to her, she has yet to gain the trust of the others. Yvriir always treats her with a

fatherly respect, but he makes no efforts to befriend her. I don't expect him to. That has always been his role here.

But the others could try harder. I see them shun her at meals, ignore her questions, turn their backs to her. I am loath to get involved as that might upset the delicate balance of the servant class that I am not privy to and don't wish to unsettle.

Lyka, it seems, takes it all in stride. She never objects or talks back. She seems to absorb the cold shoulders and the grunted one-syllable responses as her due, and she simply keeps working.

It's also not lost on me how much I find myself seeking her out or glancing at her when she is near. It's like a reflex I cannot stop. I tell myself to stop, repeatedly throughout each day.

Still, whenever she is near, my eyes are drawn to her. Something about the way she moves, the way she bites her lip when she is concentrating, the quiet power she exerts whenever someone is rude to her. It all fascinates me. Perhaps I haven't been around humans enough.

Or perhaps there's just something about her...

This morning, I'm glad to be alone, away from the petty servant dramas and Lyka's distracting eyes. Sitting in my study, I am trying to tally the monthly expenses. That, in itself, is a gargantuan task that usually leaves me very depressed.

The climate woes and the lack of supplies has only made everything, from meat to soap, skyrocket. The income we generate from our lands dwindles every year, creating a rapidly impossible situation.

Two large pieces of paper sit out before me on the desk that has been in my family for generations. When I took over the Hall, I discovered my father's initials carved into one of the drawers. A teenaged scrawl made in a moment of youthful rebellion.

I feel the weight of his absence as I try to find ever more creative ways of saving this place. I'm running out of ideas and options. Soon, we'll have to sell off more land. Or let go

of some of the servants. One of those ideas is much more painful than the other.

A soft knock is heard at my door.

“Come in,” I call, sitting back in my chair in the first stages of defeat.

Yvrir appears, his face placid as always.

“Pardon the intrusion, sir, but I’ve come with those ledgers you requested,” he says, bringing in three large account books. My feeling of despair grows.

“Thank you, Yvrir.”

Placing down the books at the edge of the desk, Yvrir pauses. Something in my tone has alarmed him. I have to be careful about that. Yvrir sees and hears *everything*.

“Something bothering you, sir?”

My hand runs over my face. “Oh, the usual, Yvrir. Trying to make something out of an ever increasing nothing. Any thoughts?”

Yvrir’s face grows grave. “Ah, yes. I understand. An age-old problem.”

We both know he’s lying. This did not happen a few generations ago. Yet, here we are.

For a moment, neither of us speak, both our minds working over the matter. Finally, Yvrir speaks once more. “Perhaps, sir, if it would help, I could take less of my daily rations? It won’t help much at first, but over time, you might save a little.”

I do not deserve this man. His generosity is awe inspiring.

“I thank you for the offer, Yvrir, but I could never ask for such a thing. There will be no rationing for you.”

Yvrir starts to protest but sees the look on my face and stops. His tone has changed when he speaks again. “I wonder, sir, if I might bring something to your attention?”

“Of course, Yvrir. What is it?”

“This may be nothing more than a case of misplaced or lost items, but I have noticed lately that some of our more valuable items in the house have disappeared.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, nothing of much consequence. A vase here, a plate there. But enough for me to notice.”

“Do you have any suspicions about who may be behind it?”

Yvirir looks downcast as he replies. “None, sir. Like I said, it might be just a matter of misplacement, and I will find things soon – somewhere I didn’t expect.”

I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It feels like one more impossible problem.

“Perhaps.”

Yvirir, ever the diplomat, senses the change in me and excuses himself. I try to return to my work but my mind is scattered.

A change of scenery or perhaps some fresh air might help, so I drop my pen and leave my office.

As I turn to close my study door, I catch movement from the corner of my eye. The hall is empty except for a rustle of skirts at the very end where it bends in a sharp corner. Walking towards it, I reach the end of the straightaway and see Lyka’s back fly down a set of stairs.

It’s strange to see her in such a hurry, and I wonder what could be making her move like that.

It’s nothing. Leave it be.

The voice is strong. It’s a command.

For once, I decide to heed it. Turning in the opposite direction, I head for the outer door.

LYKA

By the time the third day of my new job rolls around, I'm starting to feel that I have a better understanding of how the place works. My body rises at the same early hour each morning, and I have quickly learned the intricacies of everyone's routines when it comes to sharing spaces like the washing area and the bathrooms.

I'm doing my best to stay out of the way and in everyone's favor as much as possible. I've picked up whatever duties no one wants, and I do them well. No one lacks for anything or questions the quality of my work.

In short, I'm a model servant. Quiet, diligent and trustworthy.

Still, no one breaks their silence. No one warms up to me. I am only spoken to when absolutely necessary and with the least number of words or effort possible. I move about them like a ghost. A ghost with a rag and a mop.

Though lonely, I've realized there is a perk to this. A very big one. By being ignored and shunted to the fringes, I can come and go as I please without anyone paying much attention. My movements are hardly noticed at all.

And for someone who is slowly building a horde of items, food and other necessities for a rag-tag bunch of humans that so desperately need it, this is the perfect cover. If no one cares about where I am or what I touch, they can hardly care if some things go missing here and there.

I've tried to be discreet. I've even tried to limit what I take to only a few items at a time. But there is so much here – even in this decrepit place – that no one seems to miss and that we could use.

The stash in the crawlspace behind my bed is becoming fuller by the day. In just two days' time, I plan to haul it down to the abandoned area of the house where Tyril should be waiting for me. There, I can explain to him the change in plans. Once he sees what I've been able to gather, I have no doubt he'll agree this is a good deal – at least for the time being.

I'm back at the cupboard under the stairs again, pulling the door open and grabbing my mop and bucket. Scrubbing is a large part of my duties. Though I despise it, I'm willing to do it just to stay on everyone's good side.

The thought of the growing stash in my room sustains me, even while my back muscles ache and strain.

“Ah, Miss Lyka. There you are,” Yvrir's silky voice gives me a fright. I didn't even hear him approach.

“Oh! Sorry, sir. I didn't see you there,” I say, giving him a smile.

“I apologize for frightening you like that,” he says with a small gallant bow.

“Oh, not at all. I was just in my own world, I suppose.”

He smiles back at me, but it feels forced. Not like his usual warm self.

“Are you busy? Would you like to take a break?”

I wonder, for a moment, if this is a test. To see how loyal and hard-working I really am. I decide to play it safe.

“Busy enough, but I was just off to scrub the front steps. Idra told me they need doing,” I reply, still gathering my supplies. I won't have him thinking I'm eager to sit down, even though I am.

“Why don't you take a moment and sit with me? I have something to ask you about,” Yvrir says, and from his tone I

gather that it's not optional.

"Yes, of course.... sir," I stammer as I put down my bucket and mop and follow him into the kitchen area where the long dining table stands. He gestures for me to sit. I obey, and he takes a chair facing me, folding his long-fingered hands on top of each other.

"This is a delicate matter, but one I don't wish to belabor," he begins. Instantly I feel like I've done something wrong, that someone has spied me taking something. Or worse, they've discovered my whole stash.

My heart begins to race, and my hands grow clammy. I hide them under the table, balling them in my apron.

"I understand," I reply.

His gaze is steady as he speaks. "There have been some items lately that have, at least as far as I can tell, gone missing. Small things but concerning all the same."

It takes everything in my power to keep my face absolutely still.

"What kind of things?" It's a miracle I am able to spit out this question without completely giving myself away.

"Nothing of great value but enough to notice. A vase in the east room, a small letter opener from my study, a bottle of wine from the cellar," he says, counting the items on his hand.

A small sigh escapes me. I know, for a fact, that I have taken none of these things. They would be far too obvious. Besides, what would my people need with a letter opener, anyway?

Yvir cocks his head slightly to the side as he beholds me. "You haven't, by any chance, seen these items, have you?"

"No, sir. I haven't. But I will surely keep an eye out for them. I will report it right away, directly to you, sir."

He blinks slowly as I speak, no doubt gauging my every move. A second later, he speaks again.

“Thank you, Lyka. I knew I could count on you. Stealing is not something I take lightly Neither does the master. I know you are new to this region and perhaps not familiar with Drokan customs, but the punishment for something like that is...severe.”

“Such as what, sir?”

“Dismemberment of the fingers. Or tongue. Along with a stay in prison,” he says without the slightest hint of hesitation.

Severe, indeed.

“I would not invite that, sir. Not at all. Like I said, I will be on the lookout, sir.”

He scrutinizes me for a long second before standing up. I jump to my feet as well.

“Very good. Thank you for your time. You may return to work.”

“Thank you, sir,” I say, hastily, making a swift exit back to the cupboard under the stairs.

The rest of the day is a blur as I scrub the front steps and wring out the mop. The man I thought was so kind and welcoming showed me something today. That I need to be more careful going forward and stay well out of his way.

Perhaps Yvrir isn't so kind after all.

MIRIK

If the last few days were calm, the ones after are the complete opposite. Today, especially, feels exceptionally long, each hour dragging. Many times today, I've glanced at the clock only to be astounded that mere minutes have passed when I was certain it had been hours.

Making matters worse are the dwindling stores of food and supplies. Twice a week, agents and messengers arrive from the more populated regions bringing us fruit, vegetables, meat and other items.

Increasingly, their haul has been growing smaller and smaller while the prices only rise. When questioned, they simply shrug. They like telling us that is the new normal, that no one has been spared.

This week, our deliveries, however meager, have been accompanied by something else: news. And not the kind that eases my mind at all.

Each delivery has brought with it news, delivered in hush and insistent tones, that raids are becoming almost a daily occurrence in the surrounding villages and settlements, that they are becoming bolder and more destructive.

Worse still, the weather is worsening. Already, the atmosphere is starting to ramp up that feeling of energy in the air; another storm is quickly approaching. We've barely made a dent in the repairs we have so far. Another storm may take out what's hanging on by a mere thread.

As predicted, my sleep is the first thing to go. Thinking about creative ways to solve our troubles and the enormity of the problems before me has meant that insomnia has been a recurring problem. Not even wearing myself out during the day with physical labor has helped.

Tonight, however, I am giving in. It's not my nature to take potions or medications to help me sleep, but the effects of not sleeping are taking their toll. I am short-tempered with everyone. My eyes feel like they have grit in them, and my body moves slowly and sluggishly.

After another largely silent meal, I haul my tired limbs to my bedchamber. Unlike everyone else in the house, my chamber is isolated, being a part of the wing reserved only for nobles.

However, as the Hall has deteriorated over the years, we've taken over the smaller bedrooms closer and closer to where the high-born have slept for centuries. I believe Lyka's tiny room is only down the hall, hidden by a corner.

Once my door is closed, I slough off my clothes, not bothering to hang them or even drape them over a chair. At this moment, I do not care. Brin has, as is her nightly custom, left me a tray of spirits and water. The fire is burning low, and dark shadows kick and wheel along the walls.

I cross to the cupboard that stands near my bed. Inside are items that haven't been used in a long time. There haven't been many balls, fancy dinners or any other functions to attend in a long time, so my button stays, medals and other items of fancy dress sit idle within.

Reaching in, I extend my arm all the way to the back of the cupboard and close my hands around a familiar shape. The glass feels cool and slightly dusty against my skin.

Pulling it out, I give it a vigorous shake and watch the cloudy liquid inside the glass bottle spin into a whirlpool shape.

It is made from an ancient recipe, concocted long ago by the family's apothecaries. I haven't used it in some time. Still,

when I pull the stopper from its top, the smell that emanates is familiar. The potion is still active.

I mix a few drops into my spirit glass, watching as the amber liquor absorbs the clear liquid. Throwing it back in one swallow, I feel a comforting warmth spread throughout my chest and throat. Within a few minutes, I know, I will be fast asleep. I waste no time in getting into my bed and settling my head upon the pillow.

Sleep, I hope, will soon come to visit

“Gah!” I bolt upright, frozen both in terror and by the soaking I’ve just received from a pitcher of icy cold water.

“I’m so sorry! But I had to do something!”

My eyes adjust to see a figure hovering near me. A small, human figure with long red hair cascading down both shoulders. She wears a simple white nightshirt...and not much else.

Clutched in both her hands is my washing jug, now empty of its contents. They have been flung onto me, but I cannot seem to figure out why.

Until I smell the smoke. In the moonlight spilling through my windows, I see the scorch marks on the footboard of my bed and view the charred remains of my bedsheet. Moments ago, I’m quickly realizing, my bed was on fire!

Now it’s out, thanks to this trembling human. I can tell in the darkness that she’s freezing, but she’s not saying anything about it.

“How did...” I trail off, trying to put it all together.

“I couldn’t sleep and as I was tossing and turning, I thought I smelled smoke. Peeking out my door, I saw it trailing out from under your door. I had to think fast so –” She indicates the jug in her hands. “I used *this*.”

My mind is racing. How did a fire start in my room? Was it an accident? If not, who could have done such a thing and most frightening of all, *why*? The fog of the sleeping draught has clouded my ability to think, to reason.

“Thank you. I...just thank you.”

We stand near each other for a moment, sharing our disbelief. That’s when I really see how cold she is. “You are freezing. Do you – ?” I stammer, trying to offer her a blanket or something, but everything smells of smoke.

“No, I will return to my room. Thank you. I’m just glad you are all right.”

“I am, as well. I can’t thank you enough.”

She places the jug in my hands. “It was nothing. You would have done the same for me.”

Then, with a shy good night, she leaves my room, her steps silent as she goes.

I abandon trying to clean up the mess. Instead, I move to the room next door. It is musty but will suit my needs for the night.

Settling into the new bed after ensuring my door is locked, it is some time before sleep returns.

As I lie there, wondering what possibly could have just happened, I keep getting distracted by an alarming thought.

Lyka’s body under that nightshirt is all I seem to be thinking about...

LYKA

I'm glad to climb back under my covers which, although scratchy and rough, are warm. The air is crisp and chilly, and I didn't expect to be slinging cold water in the middle of the night.

Now that my body is warming up, I can give over my energies to all the thoughts that demand my immediate attention.

The thought that pushes ahead of the others is trying to figure out *how* all this happened in the first place. Lying very still and letting the warmth creep over me, I replay the night's events in my mind.

After dinner, I went to bed, pulling off my dusty work clothes and putting on the cast-off man's nightshirt that is my sleeping attire. Sometime after that, I got under my covers and went to sleep.

It couldn't have been more than a few hours later when I had a strange, shapeless dream. It consisted of meandering colors floating aimlessly about a white room. Throughout it all, I smelled something that increased in intensity the more I stared at the colors. Smoke.

I had awoken with a start, the colors in my dream scattering. That's when I realized I hadn't been dreaming about one thing. There really was the smell of smoke in my room. For a panicked second, I thought my room had been set on fire, and I leaped out of bed searching for flames.

Finding none, I searched farther. Upon opening my door, I saw the smoke sneaking with long fingers out from what I could only assume was Mirik's door. The room was separated from the servant's, and the distance, and finer furnishings at that end of the hall, told me as much.

With no plan in mind, I slipped down the hallway. I saw no one along the way, and no one else seemed to be running to Mirik's aid. Throwing away all rules of civility, I opened his door and saw flames licking up his bed curtains and blankets.

That's when I saw the jug, already filled with water. I only hoped Mirik had not succumbed to smoke inhalation.

"But how did it happen?" I muse. "Was it an accident?" Had Mirik been careless with a lantern or a cigar or pipe? I hadn't known him to be a smoker, so it didn't add up.

What happened next made even less sense. But rather than bewilderment, I felt other things much more acutely.

It was the way Mirik, after his initial shock, stared at me. His eyes, hooded in darkness, washed over my trembling body with an unabashed lust. It lingered far longer than it should have, but then he came to his senses and replaced his mask of master and noble.

But I had seen it. I had taken it in. And now, under the warmth of my blanket, I have to admit to myself: *I liked it*. I enjoyed the way he looked at me, his eyes roaming over my curves and valleys.

"What does any of it mean?" I groan.

It was a momentary thing, a vestige of his smoke-induced sleep, perhaps. A dream that hadn't quite left him. I was merely the first thing he saw.

My brain won't let it go, but it also can't find another explanation, so I shelve it. Besides, I have other things to worry about. If that fire was something other than accidental, should I be worried? Should Mirik?

Who would try to kill him and why? Will I be next?

These are also impossible questions. They will not be solved from the confines of my tiny room with my small cot and itchy blanket. I try to find a comfortable position and get back to sleep, perhaps even back to my shapeless dream minus the smoke. But it's proving elusive.

And then it hits me. "Tomorrow marks the fifth day..."

I realize this with a shock. I knew it was coming but still, the fire has put me into a state of nervousness. Tomorrow, Tiril will be here, waiting for me in the abandoned part of the Hall. He will expect me to meet him there, to bring news. And, of course, to bring everything I've managed to scrounge up along with me.

Which presents a whole new challenge. A mental inventory of the items stored just behind my head tells me what I have back there is quite substantial. Hard to carry in one load. Certainly easy to spot and not easy to explain away should I be spotted.

I need to find a way to excuse myself from my duties in the middle of the day, return to my room, gather up all the supplies and transport them to the abandoned area of the Hall.

Through frequent spy trips I have discovered there is an inner access to the rooms. I am grateful for that. It's a lot easier to sneak within the Hall than to sneak outside and around the perimeter. Still, it's a long journey within parts of the house long since closed off. To be found there by any of the staff would immediately raise suspicion.

And I must do this in one journey. Multiple trips would only leave me open to discovery. I must find a way to get there fast with a huge amount of stuff in my arms.

Ideas present themselves in my mind, but I quickly abandon each one as either too improbable or too dangerous.

The night is almost gone by the time I settle upon something and finally find a comfortable spot on my pillow. If I'm lucky, I can still get a few hours of sleep before my day of drudgery begins again.

I'm happy to give myself over to it. What a long, strange day.

Just as my eyes close one last time, I see the shapes of my dream begin to gather once more. This time, however, they are more distinctly shaped, coalescing into a form of some kind.

My body is warm beneath the blanket, and my mind finally gives itself permission to rest. The shapes of my dream form into one pleasing thing that I have no power to deny: the image of Mirik.

MIRIK

I wake earlier than the others and move back to my room to survey the damage and remove the sheets. For reasons that are murky to me, but compelling nonetheless, I strip the bed and hide the charred and still damp bedclothes.

It seems unthinkable, the idea that someone on my staff tried to harm me. Still, if this is the case, I don't want them to know it disturbed me in any way. I want them to get discouraged by my nonchalance. I will act as if nothing happened. Make them wonder if they chose the wrong room or worry they were spotted in the act.

Either way, I am choosing to put this disturbing incident firmly in the past.

Stuffing the sheets into an old trunk, I glance up and out of the window. Everything near the Hall looks the same. In fact, it looks like it is shaping up to be a fine and sunny day with little to no breeze.

Beyond my immediate surroundings, however, is a different story. A low band of purple sky, like a long bruise, has settled itself on the far horizon. Behind it float menacing clouds, their blue-black billows alive with lightning and rain.

I know the wind will not be kind. It will not blow them in another direction, missing us. They are heading here. Over the course of the day, possibly sooner, that band will overtake the pleasant sun. Another storm is approaching. This feeling of powerlessness I have been nursing for weeks only deepens.

Breakfast is largely silent. No one mentions anything strange happening the night before, and I don't bring it up. Nor do I spy any strange looks from anyone. If someone did try to harm me last night, they are showing no signs of it.

I proceed with my day, determined to make it normal even if everything within me feels off-balance, akimbo.

Hiding in my study certainly helps. It is much easier to keep the pantomime that everything is fine when I do not have to be around anyone.

By the afternoon, however, I am forced to leave my study to retrieve some more ledgers for my continued fruitless task of trying to balance the books. As I close the door behind me, I once again catch a flash of movement down the hall. To my chagrin, I notice that it is, once again, Lyka. Why is she here?

A chilling feeling settles into my gut. "Could Lyka have been responsible for the fire last night?" I ask myself.

Surely there is no better alibi for an attempted murder than pretending to be the one who saves the victim?

That makes no sense, my rational brain chimes in.

I don't want to think about the implications if that might be true. So I don't. Instead, I decide to abandon my task, knowing I was never going to resolve it anyway. In its place, I choose to follow Lyka.

She is swift on her feet, and I have to move quickly and silently just to keep up, careful to still keep enough distance so I am not discovered.

Immediately it becomes clear that not everything is as it should be. First, she is wildly out of the area where she belongs. The halls she is taking have been closed off for months, if not years. Why is she here? Shouldn't she be working elsewhere? And what is she pulling along behind her?

She may be moving fast but not as fast as she could. Tied to some strips of cloth is a large basket. The basket has seen better days, with one side of the weaving frayed and spilling out in all directions.

Heaped into the basket are what appear to be many items covered in a stained piece of muslin. Lyka pulls this homemade contraption along with her, clearing a trail in the dust and grit of the long-abandoned hallways.

Where is she headed? Some of these halls haven't been entered in ages.

As I follow her, the feeling that she is responsible for the fire starts to abate. It is shortly followed by another emotion entirely: anger and betrayal.

We walk in our strange convoy for several more minutes, and then it dawns on me where she is going. The abandoned wing. The place where we first met. She's going to enter it from the inside entrance.

Not that it matters. I failed to seal up either the outside or inside entrance. I had completely forgotten the inside even *possessed* an entrance. Lyka, however, knows it's there. She moves with purpose, as if she knows exactly where she is going. The basket bumps and jostles behind, swinging wildly as she takes a sharp turn.

If memory serves, she's almost there. Why is she returning to something so abandoned? I gave her a job, didn't I? A second chance? This is how she repays me?

A door scrapes open. I have to keep my distance to prevent being seen, so I stay behind a corner. Lyka's harsh whisper echoes off the crumbling walls. Why is she talking?

The thought hits me in a rush. She's not alone! And from what I can tell, she sounds surprised. Angry, even.

I can no longer keep hidden. My anger is too great.

In about two strides, I come out from behind the corner and step into the small work room that has been abandoned for so long.

What I see there astounds and enrages me.

Lyka's back is to me as I stare at a large group of humans. There seem to be more than twenty in all, but I can't be sure.

What is obvious is that they are ragged. Some are visibly sick, many are elderly. All are gaunt, dressed in rags, some leaning on others for support. They look at me with horror and despair.

For a second, I am too stunned to speak. When I find my voice, it bellows out. “What is the meaning of this? Leave here at once!”

Lyka pivots so fast, her hair brushes my chest.

“How dare you? Have you no feelings? You have *no idea* what’s going on out there, do you?”

Her fury stuns me into silence.

LYKA

I really thought I had pulled it off. Pulling that stupid makeshift basket with me through what seemed like miles of corridors, ducking in and out of doorways. I *really* thought I had made it.

The plan was to meet Tyril and maybe the one or two other scouts that may have accompanied him, give them the supplies, and make sure they were comfortable for a while before they set back out to the settlement, and I return to my duties.

The whole thing was only supposed to take an hour at the most. Instead, I'm slammed between two surprises, both completely unpleasant.

First, when I entered the room after spending some time finding the entrance from the inside of the Hall, I was shocked to see more people than I was expecting. It was not just Tyril and the other two young bucks that came with him but the *entire* settlement. All the children, the elders, and everything they could carry on their backs.

Too many pairs of eyes, drawn by hunger and exhaustion, looked to me, waiting for deliverance. A wave of overwhelming despair rose up within me. How am I suddenly in charge of all these people?

Tyril looks at me with an expression both triumphant and sheepish. I do not mince my words.

“What are you *all* doing here? It was only supposed to be you, Tyril!” My whispering sounds strident, manic even.

Before he answers, Tyril looks around him as if surveying the people standing nearby. “It was too dangerous. We couldn’t leave them there. There was a vote and everyone agreed this journey, no matter how dangerous, was better than a certain death.”

The faces of the others, faces I know so well, nod in sad resignation. The journey must have been brutal, especially for the handful of old and sick elders. They would not have attempted it if this hadn’t been their only avenue. My anger dies on the vine.

Suddenly, a booming voice behind me sinks all my hopes that I had eluded detection. From behind a corner comes Mirik, his face laced with anger and betrayal. For one split second, I understand his feelings. I, too, have been betrayed in a way.

But when he speaks, all my understanding drains away. He has crossed a line.

“What is the meaning of this? Leave here at once!”

Fury, bottled up and contained until now, billows out of me like bile. I spin to face him, my hair whipping. My eyes spit fire.

“How dare you? Have you no feelings? You have *no idea* what’s going on out there, do you?”

A buzzing silence fills the room. Nervous glances are exchanged. The humans, having escaped heaven knows what out there, tense up in anticipation of another fight altogether.

Mirik, tall and menacing, stops for a moment, his brutal demeanor cracking. Still, he doesn’t let go so easily.

“I cannot house all these people! I can barely keep my own fed...”

“You are a fool, Mirik! Have you not seen with your own eyes what is going on out there? You can’t just shut down your senses like you shut down this Hall!”

I am so angry I can barely see straight.

He bristles. “What do you know of it?”

“I know *nothing* of what you’ve gone through. As you don’t know anything about me. But you can’t ignore that the rumors of the Great Burn cannot be denied. That violence lurks near and is getting closer. How can you turn your backs on fellow creatures?”

I have stepped towards him, and our rage fills what little space is left between us. Though surprised by this change of plan, I do not intend to back down. Not when these poor wretches have come so far.

Something in my words winnows into Mirik’s brain. He stops and looks beyond me at the humans standing behind me. His eyes travel from face to face, noting the scars, the dripping eyes, the fatigue written there.

A long exhalation escapes him, taking the fight with it. His gaze returns to me. “I understand your predicament. I do not appreciate being duped –”

I step closer, ready to interrupt. His glare stops me.

“However, I will allow everyone to stay here. In these rooms. They are *not* to leave them. If I provide this shelter, can we agree to those terms? I am not to see, hear or smell anyone near any other part of the house. Is that clear?”

He does have a heart, I think, a warm glow of relief filling my chest and belly.

I look to Tyril who gives one singular nod of agreement.

“Agreed. No one will enter any other part of the Hall. Your servants will have no idea we are here.”

Turning to the others, I scan the group, securing nods of agreement from everyone. Many are ready to drop from exhaustion, so they are only too happy to agree to any conditions.

“Glad we could come to an understanding,” Mirik says, starting to turn away. The tension has subsided, replaced by an awkward silence. I feel the pull between my two worlds: that of the human refugees and the one filled with my debt to this sympathetic Drokan.

“Settle your people and return to work,” Mirik throws over his shoulder.

“Yes.... sir,” I reply, doing my best to show my gratitude through respect.

Mirik starts to leave as I direct Tyril to open the basket I have brought. Now that there is an understanding in place, everyone starts to settle in, preparing sleeping areas and generally unpacking whatever they’ve managed to carry over the moors.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch one of the elders, a solitary woman called Berwyq, moving to one of the darkest corners of the room. She is swaddled in many layers, no doubt all the clothes she owns. Her hair is covered in a ragged scarf, but her eyes, glittering dark orbs, beam out.

As Mirik reaches the exit, she fixes him in a stare. For a moment, I feel as though an invisible beam connects the two, that’s how intently she looks at him.

He feels it too, pausing mid-step. There’s a brief pause before she blinks, and the beam shatters.

Shaking his head, he leaves. My eyes turn from him to Berwyq. This time, she is staring straight at me.

LYKA

Maintaining normalcy after the arrival of everyone has been a task of monumental proportions. I am convinced that my secrets are written in bold ink all over my face. Whenever someone on Mirik's staff speaks to me, which, thankfully, is a rare occurrence, I startle, my body trembling.

I'm certain it says 'guilty of harboring humans' in my expression, but the disdain everyone feels for me already acts as a kind of mask. No one ever takes enough time to really look at me.

For once, this feels like an actual perk of the job.

I do my best to keep doing every duty just as I did before. Speaking as little as possible, I move through my days keeping as low a profile as I can.

Today, when the most mundane tasks come my way, I am grateful for it. Given the opportunity to scrub floors – a monotonous and repetitive task – my body can be occupied while my mind can work on what's worrying me the most.

The list is long. From worrying about the impending storms and danger to the Hall itself to the more pressing problem: how to care for a settlement's worth of humans hidden in the bowels of a crumbling manor house?

I know Tyril can keep them alive. The shelter of the house is infinitely better than where they were before but without a constant source of supplies, they cannot last long there.

The food supply is limited and with each passing day, we run the risk of discovery. They will be discovered by accident or carelessness. Given that I am on the other side of the Hall most of the time, I might not be able to intervene in time.

Mirik, so far, has kept up his end of the bargain. He says nothing. In fact, his brooding glower has become commonplace at the dinner table. Our communal meals are now as grim as ever. No one speaks after grace is said. Even that is given with a defeated and lonely air.

Since our showdown in the musty room, I have kept my distance from Mirik. He, in turn, is keeping his distance from all of us. He spends his days locked in his study or roaming the grounds, trying to shore up the most salvageable parts of the outer walls that he can.

The water is cold and gritty when I plunge my rags into it. I'm back in the main foyer. There really seems to be no point in scrubbing this floor again since no one visits or uses this area, but I've been ordered to do it, so I do.

Idra is nowhere to be found and though the floor spools out before me in all its never-ending vastness, I am glad to be alone.

I've learned from the last time. Saving one rag from the bunch, I lay it down for my knees to rest on – a vast improvement over the last time I worked these floors.

Within minutes, my body is working from muscle memory: dunk, wring, shake, scrub, roll over, repeat. Over and over again, in neat squares moving out in a methodical pattern across the floor until I come to the end. Once there, I shift downward and cross the floor the opposite way, careful never to overlap my work.

A satisfying sheen shows the progress of my work, and I allow my mind to roam free. Unfortunately, it keeps catching on all my worries. It presents no solutions.

“Am I interrupting?”

The smooth voice startles me, and I give out a little shriek. I didn't realize how far away I had let myself drift.

“Oh! Sorry, sir! I didn’t hear you, sir. And no, not at all, sir. You are not interrupting.... sir,” I blunder, looking up at Yvrir’s smooth, seemingly ageless face.

He gives a smile, but it feels disconnected. A surface smile.

I sit back on my haunches, rolling my shoulders a little to release my sore muscles. Yvrir steps away from me, his eyes gliding over my still slick floor.

“You are working very hard, I see,” he says.

“I’m trying, sir.”

Lowering his eyes to meet mine, he seems to stare right through me. I feel a strange chill race up my spine.

“I’m sure you are. I have come to speak to you about a grave matter, I’m afraid.”

The chill becomes sharper. Have the humans been discovered?

“You recall our earlier chat about items going missing?”

I try to keep my face from changing. I do remember that conversation. And I remember I was blameless for those thefts. My shoulders relax, just a little.

“I do, sir. Have they been located?”

His face grows grave. “They have not. Worse still, more items have disappeared. We are facing a very real dilemma.”

It’s an odd choice of words. My confusion shows. Yvrir breaks his gaze and looks up towards the gallery and the giant oculus above, as if lost in memory.

“There are only a few people living here now but in the old days, Monteluke Hall was bustling with life. Parties and games, witty conversation, and the richest, most delightful guests.”

What is he going on about? I force my eyebrows into a more neutral position.

“But that has all changed. Our new young master has done what he can, but the Hall is in a precarious position. The loss of any of its precious artifacts gravely concerns me. This Hall has been my life and my vocation.”

I nod, dumbly. I wish he would get to the point.

“I do not wish to accuse anyone of crimes they did not commit, but sometimes I am left with no choice.”

He stops talking, and the meaning of his words catches at my brain.

“I’m not sure I understand, sir.”

“These thefts only started occurring since your arrival, Lyka,” he begins, giving me another icy smile. “So you can imagine how I might have made assumptions.”

My courage catches up to me. “Sir, if you think I am responsible for these missing items –”

Yvrir raises his hands in the air as if holding me back. “Now, now. Not at all. Just that I must tell you that you, like the others, are under my eye. I will keep a close watch on you from now on. Please understand it is merely to protect what I love most – this Hall.”

The words themselves are menacing enough, but it is what he *isn't* saying that gets under my skin. I recall what he told me about punishments for stealing. Would they do that to someone who was innocent? Would it matter?

“Yes, sir. Understood, sir,” I stammer.

“Very good.”

And with that, he turns and leaves but not without walking squarely through my freshly washed floor. It feels purposeful, like a period at the end of a very horrible sentence.

I am left to ponder his words and the very real problem before me: how do I get back to the humans below if I’m being watched?

MIRIK

Strangely, it's the stillness that has me concerned. For days now, the energy in the air has been building. Everything I touch feels like there is an invisible layer on it, a stratum of something not quite tangible but unmistakably there.

Sometimes, when I touch something, I receive a small shock. After several of these in a day, I'm wary of touching anything, especially fabric or linen. It's maddening, but there is nothing I can do to stop it.

Today, however, the energy is gone, almost like it has been sucked out of the atmosphere altogether. I first noticed it when I awoke and went to get dressed. The shock I anticipated didn't happen. Did the storm blow away? Were we spared this time?

Wandering over to my bedroom window, I'm disappointed to discover we have not been spared. In fact, something worse might even be coming our way.

Though the energy is gone, I see the reason why. Clouds of the angriest purple and blue color are building in the sky. The energy is gone because it is needed to sustain such clouds. Like a massive inhalation, the sky is now getting ready to exhale. We are directly in its path.

The Hall has been secured as much as possible. Kirkus, Hirbon and Trekis have been working non-stop to shore up crumbling walls and board up loose windows. There is not much more we can do there.

Which means I must dive back into the remaining family treasures to see if anything else needs to be secured or moved. It's a job that should have been completed a long time ago, but the drudgery of it, not to mention the feelings it evokes, has made me procrastinate time and time again.

Having made my uneasy peace with the library, this time I head to the old weapons room. Many of the useful weapons have already been removed in case of raids, but the ceremonial ones and ones simply too old or in need of repair have been left in their cases or boxes.

The room is situated in the west wing, just beyond the border of what has been cut off from daily use. Though it sits just beyond that border, the minute I enter the room, I feel the chill and dust from months of emptiness.

Strange how quickly spaces lose vitality when no one spends any time in them. The air is chilled, and there is a pall in the air.

A long workbench is attached to one wall of the medium sized room. On the wall are suspended various tools for repair and maintenance. Many have been plundered for use elsewhere, their shapes still visible in the dust. Still others hang where they are, patiently waiting.

Two tall cupboards stand nearby. When I closed this wing months ago, I took a quick mental inventory of their contents. Ceremonial scepters, staffs and even some antiquated crystal rifles were stacked neatly inside.

Opening them now, I am shocked to see how empty the cupboards have become. Did I order them to be emptied? I don't recall doing so. Were they needed for something? Racking my brain, I come up with no plausible answer.

What about the humans hidden deep below?

I want to push this thought away as soon as I have it, but it has barbs and stays in the forefront, insisting that I confront it.

Could Lyka have been here and taken the weapons? Did she think no one would notice?

Slamming the cupboard doors shut, I leave the room in search of Yvrir. Everything that happens in this house, with the noted exception of the humans, happens under his watch. If the weapons had been removed on his order, he would tell me at once.

Yvrir is where I expect him to be, taking an inventory in the pantries of the latest delivery. A quick glance tells me it is smaller than our last order, a fact I am becoming all too ready to expect.

Looking up from his work, he stands immediately at attention, ready to assist me. Reliable as always.

“Yes, sir? You look concerned about something if I may be so bold to point out. What can I help you with?”

“There seem to be a number of weapons missing from the cupboards. Have they been relocated?”

Yvrir’s face grows worried. Once again, the specter of Lyka and her basket looms over me.

“This is most distressing to hear, sir. I wish I could give you the reassurance that they were under my care, but I’m afraid this is the first I’m hearing of it. I want to apologize for my negligence, sir.”

I shake my head. “This is not on you, Yvrir. You cannot be everywhere at once.”

“Indeed, sir. Still, I feel like I have failed you.”

“In what way?”

Yvrir sighs, something I have no recollection of him ever doing before. “I have noticed,” he begins, choosing his words carefully. “That, of late, many items in this house have gone missing. It started out innocently enough – a spoon here, a plate there. But now, I find that other, much more valuable items cannot be located.”

A flame of anger ignites within me.

“Do you have any suspicions as to what is happening?” I keep my voice even.

Yvrir gives me a pained look, as if the admission causes him physical pain.

“I do, sir. But you might not like what I have to say.”

“Say it, Yvrir.”

He looks down then back up before answering. “These events started when Lyka was brought on staff, sir. That is my only suspicion.”

His words land heavily on me, only because I have made that connection also. Yvrir continues. “Of late, she has been seen moving in hallways or using doors long ago closed off, sir. I did not comment at first because there are many reasons why she should use those passageways, but now I have my doubts.”

Now it is my turn to pause before I respond. I need the moment to collect myself. The anger in me has now erupted into something else. How could she betray me like this?

“Thank you, Yvrir. I shall take it from here.”

Yvrir bows his head. “Very good, sir.”

Swiftly, I leave Yvrir in search of Lyka, my words already forming in my head.

She has to go. They *all* have to go. Now. This instant.

LYKA

“Are you asking me to leave?” I ask incredulously, unable to fathom what Mirik is saying. All I know is that in the last few minutes, my whole world has turned upside down.

He had approached me as I was preparing the laundry kettles, a sweaty and time-consuming job that I had been given almost gleefully by Idra. She is very vocal about how much she detests this job.

Immediately, I could tell something was wrong. The kind look in his eye was gone, replaced by a searing anger. At first I was frightened. Mirik is a large Drokan with an imposing bearing.

After hearing him speak, however, my fear is gone – replaced by fury.

“I am! You have taken advantage of me long enough. First, I find you trespassing. Instead of prosecution, I offer you sanctuary, a job, even! Then, you bring your entire settlement to my door, and I *allow* them to stay.”

“And now?”

“Now, I find you have betrayed me a third time. You have stolen from me. Taken what is most valuable to me.”

With lightning speed, I take an inventory of what I have taken. A scrap here, a crumb there. With each petty theft, I weighed its significance. The worth. Some items I did not take, the calculation leaving it far too valuable.

One could argue that what I have done is morally and ethically wrong on all fronts. Or, one could argue that what I took were things that would be thrown away or burned without anyone's notice.

Decidedly, I took only what would not have been missed. This makes Mirik's accusations so much more hurtful.

"Broken cups? Moldy pieces of fabric? These are the items you find most valuable?" I spit at him, refusing to give ground.

A momentary confusion crosses his face, but he doubles down against it. "No. Of course I wouldn't miss those things. I am speaking of weapons, vases, pieces of my family's history!"

Something clicks in my head with a thundering weight. The words of Yvrir. His threats and his thinly veiled accusations. Someone has been stealing valuable items, but it was not me. However, the petty thefts I have committed are being painted with the same brush.

Every villain needs a scapegoat. It is quickly dawning on me that I must be that scapegoat. Does that make Yvrir the villain? Or Mirik? Does it matter?

I take one step closer to Mirik. From here, I can see his chest moving up and down as he breathes; angry, quick breaths. "If you think I would do that to you, you don't know me at all. Besides, what good would a vase do me here? I can't sell it. I don't have any flowers to put in it. You are more foolish than you realize when you speak to me like this."

I know I've crossed a line, but I no longer care. Mirik has chosen to let his mind be poisoned by Yvrir and cast me as the perpetrator. I may be a lot of things, but a liar is not something I will accept easily.

Mirik has been stunned into a type of apoplexy from my words. I take the opportunity to leave his company forever. If I can make it down to the abandoned rooms, I can barricade both sides, sealing him off.

There's no way I will allow my people to be thrown out now. Not when the sky is about to burst with another

devastating storm.

Dropping everything in my hands, I break into a sprint, zig-zagging the complicated route down to the abandoned wing. If Mirik follows me, I don't notice. There's even a moment where I find myself enjoying the journey. This is the first time I've done it without fearing discovery.

Moments later, I throw myself into the room where I'm greeted by startled eyes. Everyone has settled in as well as they can. Hammocks and sleeping areas are clearly laid out, as are cooking and bathing areas. It's starting to look like an indoor village.

"Quick! Barricade all exits!" I command. Tyril and the younger folk jump up and lug heavy furniture in front of both the inside and outside doors. Within minutes, we have effectively sealed ourselves in.

That done, Tyril approaches me, a question on his face. "Don't ask," I say, finally allowing my adrenaline to dissipate. He backs away, smart enough to know not to pry further.

My timing was perfect. Though muffled by the stone foundation walls, I can hear the storm starting outside. Booms of thunder and the drum of rain can be heard. The outside world sounds angry, full of fire and brimstone.

I grow upset thinking Mirik was about to throw innocent people out into something like this. Perhaps I was wrong about him. He tricked me into thinking there was a Drokan out there with a compassionate heart. How wrong I was.

For several hours, the storm rages. I try to make myself useful, and take my mind off what has happened, by helping tend to the elders and babies of the group. They have made a nursery of sorts in one corner and a sick bay in another.

I flit back and forth between them, bringing water and blankets to whomever needs it. Doing so helps calm me down and stay focused.

Until the banging starts. Unlike what's going on with the storm, this sounds different. More alarming still, it's not coming from the outside but rather the inside exit to the rest of

the Hall. Someone – or someones – is outside, demanding to be let in.

Tyril and I gather near the barricade, firm in our agreement not to move it. The banging becomes harsher, more frenetic.

“Please! Let me in! I beg you! No harm will come to you! Please!”

The voice sounds familiar, but the tone is entirely new. It’s Mirik calling out to us, but his voice is tinged with abject terror. Would someone who wants to kick us out speak that way?

“I think we should move the barrier,” I whisper to Tyril. His eyes go wide, and he shakes his head vigorously.

“Are you mad? We can’t do that!”

“Please! I beg you!” Mirik calls.

“He sounds like he needs help, Tyril. I can’t ignore it.”

“But –”

“I will take responsibility for whatever comes next.”

Tyril shakes his head once more, his disagreement firm. But he doesn’t fight me. Together, we move the barricade just a few inches. Mirik’s face, covered in sweat and blood, appears.

“Please. Let me in. They’ve attacked me.”

MIRIK

It all happened so fast. Even now, in this brief moment of peace, I still haven't quite put it all together. Leaning back against the wall, I try to catch my breath and replay the last hour in my head.

After losing Lyka to the serpentine hallways of the Hall, I had retreated to my study, determined to get my wits together before finding a way to evict everyone from underneath. As much as I wanted those thieving, deceitful humans gone, I knew I needed a clear head if I was to be successful.

My study was the only place where I felt I could get any traction on my frantic thoughts. There, I was less likely to be disturbed or distracted.

In less than twenty minutes, my sanctuary was breached. A heavy thumping fist shocked me out of my reverie. The door practically vibrated with the noise. Yanking it open, I saw Kirkus standing there, a strange triumphant smile on his face. He was flanked by Hibron and Trekis. Jemry and Yvrir took up the rear. All of them wore the same expression.

More alarming still were the weapons clutched in their hands. Weapons I instantly realized were the ones missing from the weapons room cabinets. A dull, sick feeling settled deep into my guts.

"What's the meaning of this? Are we under attack?" I asked.

"Only if you choose to be," Kirkus snarled. Whatever was happening, he was clearly enjoying it.

Yvrir stepped forward. The others parted to admit him. It was clear he was, as always, in charge.

“Mirik, we have come here to inform you that Monteluke Hall is no longer under your jurisdiction. You have squandered your family’s fortune, and we, its loyal caretakers, have unilaterally decided you should no longer be in charge. We are taking over.”

At first, I wanted to laugh at this absurd statement, but the weapons in their hands and the looks on their faces told me this was very serious.

“How dare you? I am the rightful owner and heir to the Hall. This is my ancestral home!”

“And you have brought it to ruin. You are categorically *unfit*.” Yvrir had been waiting a long time to say those words. He looked almost ecstatic as they rolled out of his mouth.

Words were not going to settle this matter. I was outnumbered and without a weapon. I had to think fast. Escape was my only option.

My mind worked furiously to map out a plan. If I could draw them inside, it would limit the amount of room they had to use their weapons. They were long and thin, after all. The window behind my desk would be my only means of escape.

“This is outrageous!” I yelled, stepping backwards further into my study. As predicted, the mob of former servants moved forward, squeezing in through the doorway. They looked hungry, ready for a fight.

I will give it to them.

Yvrir wanted a fight of his own. “What’s outrageous is your cavalier treatment of this sacred place! Bringing in a filthy human among our ranks! Allowing everything to rot!” As he spoke, he stepped to the side and gave a brief nod to his henchmen.

In my periphery, I saw Hibron take a swing with the large ceremonial club he carried. It was too obvious, and I easily ducked it.

Kirkus, however, was a much better and more agile fighter. He held a quarterstaff, and he swung it expertly at my knees like a scythe. It connected, and a shooting pain sprinted up my shin bones. Since I was already bent over to avoid Hibron's swing, I used that momentum and low stature to wheel myself backwards and behind my huge desk.

At least now I had somewhere to shelter. But the attack was on.

"You think you're so fancy, don't ya?" Trekis growled. He held a spiked mace and was poking it around the desk and into the area where I crouched. Some of the barbs touched me, coming away with shards of my skin. I refused to register the pain.

The window was within reach, but I'd have to make a leap for it. Trekis was still bent over, trying to poke me out of hiding. He was my best bet.

His wrist hovered into view, the hand gripped around the mace. In a flash, I grabbed it, pulling Trekis sharply to the floor. Using that momentum, I vaulted myself upwards while he crashed into the ground.

Springing upward, I hurled myself at the window. Everyone had been thrown off by my sudden movement, but Kirkus and Hibron quickly recovered. Pain bloomed across my back and shoulders as they struck me with their weapons. But I would not stop.

Tucking my head, I rammed right into the window. I felt it give and then break, sending shards of glass everywhere.

Then, I was tumbling, over and over as I fell the two flights to the ground below. The tall grass cushioned my fall somewhat, but for a terrifying moment, I felt I may have broken my neck. I had not. I only had the wind knocked out of me.

Already, the storm was starting to rage. I had to get back inside. If I did not, I'd die out here.

You might die inside, too. I had to decide the better of both deaths. Inside it would be.

Lying on my back, I took a second to recover my wits. The faces of Yvrir and Jemry appeared over the sill. Closing my eyes quickly, I pretended to be dead. Seconds later, I opened them again and was relieved to find their heads had retreated.

Ignoring all the pain in my upper body, I got to my feet, running low and fast along the edge of the walls until I came to the back kitchen door.

Pulling it open, I was relieved to see no one there. They must be out pillaging my family's belongings.

From there, I ran, snaking along the dusty corridors, flinging myself round corners until finally I arrived at the door to the abandoned rooms.

My despair became complete when I met the resistance of the barricade. Terror welled up within me, the pain of my injuries blazing and inescapable combining to make me a broken man.

“Please. Please let me in...”

Any second now, Yvrir could discover me. Then it would be all over. I had no doubt in my mind they would kill me. It was written in their faces.

Then, by some miracle, the barricade shifted. Lyka's bright eyes met mine. Then, showing mercy, she let me in. Falling inside, the barricade was rebuilt, and I collapsed on the floor.

So, here I sit, briefly alive. But only for the moment.

The eyes of these humans are just as unkind as the Drokans above.

Did I escape one murderous group only to be locked in with another?

LYKA

Mirik is in pain, both physically and emotionally. I watch him carefully as he leans against the wall. Slowly, his legs go out from under him, and he slides down until he hits the floor. Staring straight ahead, his eyes are glassy.

Blood runs from wounds on his shoulders and behind his ears. Small cuts and abrasions mar his face as if he had a run-in with a window. Shock, despair and fear sit heavy on his handsome features.

As angry as I have been with him in the past, I do not wish this on him. Something terrible has happened.

The time, however, for finding out precisely what will have to wait. Right now, I have a rebellion of my own on my hands.

Upon seeing the Drokan falling into the room, everyone got to their feet. Everyone is concerned. And everyone has the same thought: he needs to go.

Tyrl was the one to voice it. "He can't stay here. He has to go." He stood sentinel over the defeated Drokan as if to protect him from a sudden outburst. If Mirik heard him, he did not react.

"Where is he going to go?" I ask.

"Outside. Let him out into the storm. See how he likes it!" The voice belongs to Bilby, an older man who is known for

being outspoken. Usually, he is easy to ignore. Not today, though.

A chorus of agreement bolsters Bilby's threat. They want this Drokan gone.

"But this is his house. He has shown us kindness in letting us stay here," I say, trying to keep my voice calm.

"We owe him nothing! He had abandoned this part! It was trash to him. As long as he is here, he is a danger to us!" It's Bilby again, gaining traction with the crowd. Tyril stands united with them.

"This may all be true, but it was his largess that allowed me to stay in the first place. Allowed me to gather what supplies I could. And he has allowed us to stay. If we throw him out, we are no better than the Drokan we seek to escape."

There's a pause while the group mulls this over. We may be a poor bunch, but I know we have a deep-rooted sense of fairness and decency. Those are the traits I appeal to now.

"He could turn us over to those Drokans! He's a liability," Tyril counters.

"Does this look like a man who is going to go back to the ones that assaulted him? See reason!" I am starting to lose my composure. I take a deep breath, trying to keep it together.

The truth is, they are all right. Their arguments are sound. Were it not for his earlier kindnesses towards me, I might have advocated for the same.

But something in me cannot bear the thought of turning him out. To leave him to the scorching rain and brutal winds. Or to the Drokans who wish to club him to death. I could not live with myself if I allowed such a thing to happen.

There is something about him worth saving....

Everyone is silent, looking inward. We are at a stand-off. The safety of the few over the safety of many.

"Let him stay," says a voice. It sounds rusty, ill-used, like a door long shut being opened. It belongs to Berwyq. All heads turn in her direction as she emerges from her shadowy corner.

By the looks of her, she has just awoken. Her hair flings itself out in all directions, her clothes are crooked. But her eyes are steady and sure.

“What did you say?” Tyril asks, a note of derision in his voice.

“You heard me, young ‘un. I said, *let him stay.*” Her eyes are piercing, and I am glad I am not on their receiving end.

“And why should we do that? What is the sense in that?” Tyril has turned now to use his height as a means of intimidating the crooked old woman, but she does not back down. Bilby and those that rallied around him step closer to Tyril, a united front. To this, Berwyq seems unfazed.

“The sense,” she replies, her voice dripping with condescension as she were speaking to a small child. “Is that we are better than the Drokan. We treat others decently. Like him or not, he gave us shelter. We can spare his life. The gods are watching.”

Whether it is her stare or her words, I cannot tell, but a shiver runs up my spine. Others around me also shake for a moment. I was not the only one to feel the impact.

I sense a change in the air. Hesitation. A morality check. Along with it, I sense opportunity. I take it.

“Berwyq is right. We do not have much in this life. Nothing much at all. But we do have our standards. If we throw this man to the elements, we erode our very souls.”

Several looks are exchanged. Finally, someone speaks. It is Mirik.

“I promise no harm to you. I am vastly outnumbered and injured. I cannot harm anyone.”

All eyes now move to Mirik who has raised his head. Blood still pours freely from several wounds, and he looks to be in pain. My heart clenches at the sight.

“You stake your life on this promise?” Tyril asks.

“I do. That is all I have now.”

Berwyq has not moved from her position. Bilby wavers, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Tyril speaks again. “Lyka, I hold you personally responsible should anything go wrong.”

“It won’t,” I say, mostly confident that much will remain true.

With that, Berwyq turns on her heel and ambles back to her corner. Bilby and Tyril exchange one more look and then huff in another direction.

A truce, of sorts, has been reached. I can only hope I don’t live to regret brokering it. That done, I lean down to examine Mirik. Something has to be done to patch up our newest member.

MIRIK

Being reluctantly accepted into the human group is a jarring experience. Not to mention the fact that my body is worn and beaten. From the stinging surface cuts to my bruised innards, I feel wrung out. The fall from the window was not kind to my rib cage, and it aches.

The part of me that has sustained the most damage is my sense of self. From master of Monteluke Hall to a disgraced and pursued fugitive from my own mutinous servants. I could understand why the humans wanted no part of me. It stung, but it made sense.

The cold viciousness of Yvrir's insurrection against me guts me to my core. I try to cauterize the feeling, deny it from invading my thoughts and emotions. Instead, I must focus on my new life.

A life of a singular, disgraced Drokan among humans. I am very aware of the scrutiny on me, and that I must not misstep or create one whiff of suspicion against me. The young male with a long, black top-knot – the one they call Tyril – has his eye on me. And he has followers, it seems.

Only Lyka and the strange, disheveled woman seem to have any regard for me. I must keep quiet and prove myself useful.

Lyka attends to my wounds. She cannot do much but clean them and dress them with the cleanest muslin she can find, but I appreciate the effort.

Stranger still is the flush of heat I experience when she bends near me. She smells of fresh air, which is odd given that we live practically underground now, cut off from the outside. I am keenly aware of her body as she hovers near, applying tincture to my wounds.

As she dresses a gash on my shoulder, I ask her for advice through gritted teeth. “How can I prove myself to your people? How can I make them trust me?”

She pauses to think of a response. Then, her eyes still trained on my shoulder, she answers very quietly. “Help us get settled. If you know any secrets about this place, now is the time to reveal them.”

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to read my mental map of Monteluke Hall. My whole life is wrapped up in this place. From when I ran through its hallways, my nanny running ragged behind me, to my teenage dalliances in the lesser-used rooms with girls I had falsely fallen in love with, to becoming a young man and eventually master. Every hallway, cranny and hiding space was familiar territory to me once. It is time to recall those memories.

Lyka’s advice is sound. Perhaps I can go from pariah to accepted member of society if I can remember something useful.

Looking around, the humans have already begun to make a settlement of sorts. There are clearly staked out areas designated for sleeping and cooking, but they are crude. Raggedy fabric tied in bulky knots from the low beams act as hammocks.

Overtured boxes and crates form food preparation and cooking areas. The hearth still works, I am happy to say, giving smoke a place to escape.

Clean, fresh water will be a problem soon. I note the buckets set in two corners: one for waste and one for fresh. With this many people, about twenty in all, it won’t last long.

Lyka brings me a small cup of this water. It tastes surprisingly sweet. I take advantage of the few moments of

rest, thanking Lyka for her kindness.

She smiles shyly, rolling up some unused muslin as she speaks. “It was nothing. I was glad to do it.” In the gray-filtered light, I think I can see some color on her cheeks. The blushing stands out perfectly against her thick, red hair.

“Will Tyril let me approach him? I want to show you all something.” I am taking a gamble. My memories about this part of the Hall are fuzzy at best, but if I’m right, there might be something worth showing the humans. Something that will make all the difference.

“Let me accompany you. That will help, I think.”

Our eyes hold for just a moment too long before I reply. “I think it will, too.”

We find Tyril breaking up some wood for the fire. He has located some old crates too damaged for any real use beyond kindling and is breaking them with an ax that has seen better days.

“Tyril, may I interrupt?” I say, keeping my hands at my side and my body language neutral. I do not want to anger him.

“Depends. Why?”

“I think there may be more to offer everyone here beyond these rooms.”

Tyril stops swinging his ax and looks, for the moment, intrigued. “Do you? And why have you been hiding that kind of information till now?”

My answer is simple. “I only just remembered it. It’s been years since I really used this part of the house.”

Tyril snorts derisively. “Must be nice.”

I try to squelch the feeling of annoyance that flares up within me. I am not used to outright rudeness.

“How about we see what he means?” Lyka asks, smoothing over the tension.

Tyril places the ax down very gently, brushing his hands against his worn pants. “All right. Show us, then.”

Now is the real test. Do I remember where it is?

I approach the hearth, where a small fire now glows. A few humans crouch nearby, tending to it. A pot of stew simmers in a battered pot. I try to ignore the smell. I didn’t know how hungry I was until just now. I only hope I can earn my food after this.

The hearth loops up in a large rock wall. It stands several feet into the room, a large corner of stone jutting out at its side. I bend low, examining the mortar between the stones. At first, I see nothing, and my heart sinks. Have I recalled it all wrong?

Then, running my fingers over the surface, I feel it give. Some of the mortar flakes away. It has been crudely sealed shut but after some pulling, I am able to dislodge a stone. Tyril, who wears an expression of dubious apathy, now shifts into curiosity. I try to ignore him.

Reaching into the cavity beneath, I feel a well-worn wooden handle. With some effort, I push it down, creating an almighty grinding sound. Stone on stone. Everyone starts, gritting their teeth against the noise.

The stone of the wall shifts inward. Seconds later, I stand back to reveal a doorway. Beyond the threshold, it is as dark as a grave.

I’ve done it. I’ve found the hidden catacombs that lace their way through the foundation of Monteluke Hall.

Built centuries ago, the tunnels move here and there and were used as an ancient and secret trade route.

Instantly, Tyril and Lyka are beside me, each clutching lanterns.

We head inside the small, dark passage, stone walls surrounding us. Only a few feet in, we smell something at the exact same time. It’s unmistakable.

“Fresh water,” I say.

Tyril gives me a look of new-found respect.

Maybe I've earned my place after all.

LYKA

The discovery of the tunnels and fresh water has completely changed our fate. For several moments, I can't quite believe it. Neither, it appears, can Tyril. He walks through the tunnels, his mouth hanging open.

We discover not one but two fresh streams burbling quietly through the massive rock that must serve as the original foundation of the Hall. Countless rooms and alcoves meander from the main tunnel itself, creating opportunities for storage, work rooms, private sleeping areas and much more.

Slowly, all the humans wander into its depths, the same expression of wonder on their faces.

Mirik has given us riches beyond our wildest imaginings. In one reveal, he has gone from pariah to hero. Those that tried to condemn him now hover near, murmuring apologies. Mirik accepts them graciously.

We are well and truly saved. The only thing we lack is sunlight, but no one would complain just yet about that.

After the initial shock has worn off, those that are able-bodied enough to do so begin to reestablish our settlement in the more spacious areas of the tunnel. Mirik jumps in willingly, moving large amounts of supplies in one trip. His bulk and size are immensely helpful.

Soon, we become a team. He carries and hauls while I coordinate and assist. Within a few hours, all that need sleeping areas have one. Families are given private areas; the elders are situated nearest the streams of water.

The tunnel and everything that surrounds it feels more and more like home. More so than that, there's a feeling in the air that I haven't experienced in a long time. I imagine not many of my fellow humans have.

Hope – mixed with joy. Smiles abound. I hear women humming, men moving with a lightness in their step. In one moment, our little band has transformed. We owe much to Mirik.

Several hours go by. The air has become suffused with a meaty cooking smell, and I realize with a start just how hungry I am. Standing near Mirik, I hear his own stomach growl.

“I think,” I say, putting down the heavy box I had been carrying. “We have earned our supper. What do you say?”

Mirik gives me a look of gratitude. “I thought we'd never eat. Yes, please.”

We head back to the original set of rooms. The hearth will still need to be the central cooking area as it does exhaust outside, but that's all right with me. For it is here that the smell is the strongest.

My mouth waters as we approach. The cook, a middle-aged woman named Urtka, welcomes us warmly. “Please! Sit. You must be famished. We can't have you be a minute longer!”

Mirik smiles shyly. Going from outcast to celebrity in a matter of hours is a dizzying thing. We both sit on upturned crates as Urtka buzzes around us.

She pushes crude bowls of stew into our hands. We have no utensils, but that is not a problem since we are also given hunks of heavy bread to use instead.

It might be the best meal I've ever eaten. Flavorful and hot, suffused into the chewy hunks of bread which fill my mouth. Mirik and I largely eat in a happy silence, too hungry for conversation.

After a few minutes, we have largely polished off the meal. Urtka, having received our between-bites-of-stew

compliments, has drifted off to the washing station in the tunnel, carrying a stack of plates.

It is the first time in a while that Mirik and I are alone. He gives me a look before speaking. “That was delicious. I was not expecting something so good.”

“I agree. She has outdone herself.”

“Mind if I interrupt?”

With a start, I swing my head around to see Berwyq standing there. I never heard her approach. Judging from Mirik’s face, he didn’t, either.

What is she doing here? I am never rude to her, but there is something about her that has always put me on edge. Like she’s seeing things that no one else can see.

“Give me your hands,” she orders, not waiting for either of us to give permission for her to interrupt.

We both acquiesce, slowly unfolding our somewhat dirty hands to her. She takes them both into her own, holding them side by side, palms up. Mirik’s hand is huge. Mine, much smaller, is crisscrossed with scars, the biggest one running diagonally like a river. I’ve had it since I was young and prefer to forget the incident that led to it.

Berwyq appraises our palms for far longer than is naturally comfortable. My eyes find Mirik’s, and he gives me a bemused face. He is far more patient than I.

Finally, the old woman speaks. “You both have strong lifelines. Strong ambitions. Limitless possibilities. *If* you allow them to happen.”

Neither of us respond. I have no idea what any of this means.

“Love will be yours. If you are brave enough to seek it. I see...” She grabs at our hands again, and she’s surprisingly quick. “I see... fated mates will be in your lives.”

Fated mates? I have heard ancient stories of people finding each other in the most unlikely of places and circumstances

and fighting all odds to be together. The legends say that their union is blessed by the gods.

A very romantic idea, to be sure, but nothing I can take stock in. Judging from Mirik's expression, he feels the same. We pull our hands away.

"You must have courage. Or your fated mate will slip away."

She stops talking, leaving me with a host of questions I do not ask out loud. Who is this fated mate? With all I have to do lately, how will I possibly find him? How will I know he is the one?

The questions are maddening and pointless. I let them die in my throat.

Berwyq gives us both one final look and retreats, saying nothing more. Mirik stands, stretching out his back.

"We should...get back to work," he says. Something unsaid hangs between us, but I don't pry.

"Yes, yes we should," I stutter, gathering our bowls. We leave the fire behind and re-enter the tunnel, seeking out our next tasks.

The predictions of the old lady echo in my mind, but I dismiss them. My hand is scarred and broken from a childhood accident. How could it possibly reveal anything?

With that dismissed, I return to our work. It seems much more useful than worrying about silly attempts at fortune telling.

MIRIK

The words of the old woman won't leave my mind. Even while my body hauls and pulls, stacks and sorts, my mind is absorbed by what she said. It was always my understanding that the entire myth of fated mates was limited to Drokan beliefs, but the elderly human woman seemed convinced it was real.

Moreover, she is convinced it is something I will find in my own life. Which must mean that I survive whatever happens next. The Great Burn seems more likely than ever. The Drokans who have taken over my house want me dead. Currently, I am a prisoner of this underground settlement.

But if I am to find my fated mate, that must mean I live through all this. Where is she, though? Do I find her soon? Or years from now?

Or is she right here?

I want to build an internal wall around that question. To answer it would mean to confront some awkward truths: Lyka is the only person I find myself thinking about. She is attractive, confident, a natural leader.

I *admire* her. I do not love her. She is not my fated mate.

So be it.

How I wish I could return to my library now. Read those ancient pages from the Drokan sages about fated mates. Perhaps it would leave me with more questions. Perhaps it

would help. I'll never know. All I can do is stay present, stay open. Allow my fated mate to find me.

But why did the old woman bring it up now?

Another thorny question. Another one I know will not be answered.

The stew has given me new life. Though my body is still stiff and sore, I am feeling more energized than before – buoyed by the settlement taking shape. The humans have warmed up to me, many stopping their work to touch me on the arm and thank me. In their eyes I see a genuine gratitude, a new-found connection.

Lyka and I fall back into a rhythm. We work well together. The small glances I shoot in her direction are merely to check on her, make sure she's not tiring, not needing something. That is all.

Is it?

It most certainly is. I refuse to entertain anything else.

I've lost track of time. Being without natural light blurs the line between night and day. Those two words swiftly cease to mean anything at all. Hours bleed into one another with no discernible difference. On my trips back into the original rooms, I am dimly aware that the storm outside continues to rage.

A small part of me still worries about the state of the Hall, but now it is accompanied by an odd sensation of detachment. I can no longer worry about the Hall itself. Yvrir has decided I should not. That I could not. I feel a weight has lifted and immediately feel guilty for no longer worrying about my ancient home.

As before, it is Lyka who tells me that we should take another break. Even though I am responsible for finding these tunnels and bringing the settlement so many new riches, I do not feel I have earned the right to call my own breaks.

“We've done more than enough for the day. Let's rest,” she says, gravitating towards a large drinking station near the entrance of the tunnel. I can't help but notice that her hair is

askew, her braid having come undone over the course of the day. A small smudge of dirt streaks across her cheek.

My hand reaches up to wipe it away. I stop it just in time. She gives me an odd look.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine.” I laugh, uneasily. “Just stretching out my sore arms.”

“Indeed. Tyril has promised a hot bathing station. I do hope it is up and running soon. I could use a hot bath.”

Something zings through me at her words, and I’m glad for the low lighting of the tunnel. The thought of Lyka’s lithe body soaking in hot, steamy water ignites a flame within me. I look away, pretending to work out a knot in my neck.

“Uh, yes. That does sound nice,” I reply lamely.

The station consists of some broken chairs and smooth, flat-topped rocks that have been arranged around a shallow edge of the stream that is closest to the tunnel entrance. A collection of metal and ceramic cups is stacked neatly on a small central table.

Selecting a cup each, we dip them into the cool, burbling water. Just drinking it gives me hope. It tastes like purest snow, filtered over countless stones, warmed by a thousand days of sun, cooled by a thousand nights.

The Great Burn may be upon us, but this water could be a sign that we may survive beyond it. This water has traveled far, from places less affected than the moors. Perhaps our planet isn’t quite so doomed.

The water slakes my thirst and raises my spirits.

Perhaps it makes me bold as well. I turn to Lyka. The smudge is still there. It makes her look unbearably attractive.

“Care for a tour?” I ask, putting my cup down. I feel energized again. Rejuvenated, even.

Lyka, who is still drinking, looks at me archly over the rim of her cup. “This is becoming a habit.”

I say nothing. She smiles.

“Another tour? Will this one be like before?”

I laugh. “Hardly. No portraits or dusty artifacts down here.”

“Well. The tunnels are impressive enough. And they seem to go on forever. I should very much welcome a tour.”

I feel a pinch of sadness at the loss of what truly belongs to me: my family’s belongings. Yvirir may have an argument to say I’ve lost the right to take care of Monteluke Hall, but he has no claim to my mother’s portrait. To the last image of my father.

Lyka hears none of these thoughts but gives me a concerned look.

“Mirik?”

Smiling, I shake my head. “Let’s begin our tour.”

We start our walk.

LYKA

Though we probably shouldn't take them, we each 'borrow' a crystal torch to further explore the tunnels. Crystal energy is at a premium down here but if we discover something even more valuable, we will be thanked for our efforts.

That's the way I'm choosing to justify it, anyway.

Very soon, we've left the section of tunnels that has already been explored and enter a whole new area. The walls are closer together here as the tunnel snakes and tapers. Mirik has to stoop through much of it.

"How far does it go?" I ask over my shoulder. My voice pops and echoes against the stone.

"I don't really know. When I was a child – which was the last time I was permitted down here – I could only explore some of it. My nanny became very annoyed when I ran off."

I stop walking and give him a mischievous look. "Which, I imagine, you did often?"

Mirik laughs to himself, recalling a memory. "I suppose I did, yes."

I return the laugh and keep walking. Though it seems improbable, the ease I feel around Mirik in these last few hours has grown. How easily we worked together, how effortless it was to find the best method for building the settlement. I have never known that kind of connection before.

Suddenly, the tunnel splinters. We have come to a crossroads of sorts. Swinging my torch in either direction gives me little information. Both spool off into near-total darkness.

“Right or left?” I ask. Mirik does the same motion with his torch and then merely shrugs.

“Left? I’m sorry I cannot be more helpful.”

“Do not apologize. It is more fun this way.”

I catch his eye in the ribbon of light cast by my torch. It shines with curiosity and an almost child-like glee at our adventure. The moment between us feels tangible, like I could pluck it out of the air between us.

But I don't want to. I want to keep looking at him.

With effort, I break the moment and head into the left tunnel. Almost immediately, I notice something new. The walls here are even closer than before, and they shimmer with an inner glow. Like they have been suffused with barely concealed light. It is breathtaking and eerie all at once.

“Are you all right?” I ask, noting how small the passage has become.

Mirik’s steps are now shuffles as he has to bend very low to proceed.

“Yes. I think so. I’ll let you know if I become stuck.”

I laugh again. “I hope not. That will be very awkward indeed.”

We proceed for several minutes, the tunnel seemingly endless. Mirik seems surprised. “I never knew it was this vast,” he comments.

Then, the velvet black pierced by my beam of light seems to expand. Gone are the cloying walls of the tunnel. Gone is the shimmer. Mirik fans out behind me, grateful for the room to move more freely.

A massive cavern has opened up before us. Shining my beam upwards reveals no ceiling. If there is one, and I’m

willing to bet there is, it is far beyond my torch's reach.

“Lyka...look,” Mirik says, a tone of awe in his voice.

Slashing my beam downwards, I follow his own. Then, I gasp. Before us both is something wondrous.

An underwater lake. The shore is only a few steps away, the surface still as glass. Like the ceiling, it seems to go on forever, no end or edges in sight. Shining my light upon it, the water reflects a majestic purple color as if the very water itself were royalty.

We stand for several moments in reverent silence. The space seems to demand it. An overarching feeling of calm takes me over. My breathing slows. I can't be sure, but I have the distinct feeling that even my heartbeat slows, a soothing rhythm infusing throughout my whole body.

“I...never knew something like this could exist,” Mirik whispers.

“It's breathtaking,” I reply.

Slowly, we walk to the surface. It does not move. Leaning down, I half expect to touch a hard surface but when my hand makes contact, the water ripples and shimmers. It feels strangely warm, like bathwater. I long to dive into its depths.

“Should we....?” Mirik asks, gesturing vaguely to continue exploring. I nod dumbly, only too eager to join him.

Traversing along the water's edge, I am alarmed to find that it seems endless. There are no changes in elevation, terrain or feature. It is merely a continuation of an infinite shoreline. Until, abruptly, the ground erupts.

A protrusion of shimmering rock explodes out from the sameness, almost like a wrinkle in perfectly flat fabric. Jagged, crude steps snake upwards to what appears to be a plateau several feet off the ground.

Mirik and I once again exchange looks and then, like children, scamper up the steps to the top.

From there, the view is even more spectacular. We can weakly see the outline of the lake itself, a thin boundary far off

in the distance. The water remains still.

Neither of us want to leave. Setting down my torch, I sit at the edge of the plateau, my feet dangling. Mirik does the same, his gaze stretching out over the lake.

“It is so peaceful here,” I say.

Mirik murmurs in agreement. “Unlike anything I have ever felt.” He pauses, considers his words and resumes. “If the Great Burn is, in fact, a reality, I hope I am here when it arrives.”

“I do, too.”

Both of us live in our fear and worry for a moment. Many moments. Too many. I feel the pull of responsibility at me and know that we should soon be leaving. The others will be looking for us.

I stand up and bend to retrieve my torch. As I do, however, I lose my balance, toppling headfirst. Panic instantly rises in me as I am convinced I am going to fall into the lake.

Strong arms catch me.

“Oh my! Careful, there!”

My panic subsides, replaced by embarrassment and a feeling of levity. I start laughing, safe in Mirik’s arms. He laughs too, glad to see I am free from harm.

Our eyes connect once more. Then, like the receding ripples of the water below, the laughter dies as our faces move closer and closer together.

The kiss is, like the lake, unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

MIRIK

There is something magical about this place. When we first encountered it, I felt a calm that I had never yet experienced. Now, with Lyka in my arms, I feel a desire and a drive that I did not think possible.

Lyka is like the lake: magical and surprising. I want to explore every part of her, discover all her secrets. Our kiss, a spontaneous move on both our parts, deepens and intensifies, our mouths and tongues moving and meeting with deep hunger.

All at once, I feel two things. The first is the thrill of the new. The exploration yet to come, the release yet to be. But along with that, there is a feeling of familiarity, of comfort, of coming home.

How can such two different feelings co-exist? Am I under a spell? If so, who is casting it? Is Lyka feeling this, too?

Lyka tastes of fresh water and summer air, and her hair smells of possibility. Her body folds into mine, a perfect fit. My hands run over the crude fabric of her clothing, its harshness in stark contrast to her soft skin which I gleefully discover as I encounter the small of her back.

Once I touch her skin, I can no longer go back. Pushing it upwards, the fabric bunches at her shoulders. Hastily, she pulls back from our kiss, raises her arms and pulls the shirt over her head.

Small but perfectly shaped breasts are my reward. Her skin, a magnetic shade of alabaster, glows in the eerie light of

the lake. My desire grows, my skin becoming hot and my cock growing hard and rigid.

Lyka's arms encircle me once more, returning to our fevered kisses. I caress her back, her shoulders, then, with infinite care, slide both hands downward until I alight upon the hill of her breasts. Under my palms, her nipples are hard and sensitive. Lyka groans in pleasure as I circle my hands over them, my touch light.

Then, flipping my hands, I cup both breasts, squeezing them. Lyka responds by leaning into me even more, her desire animal-like, hungry.

Small fingers claw at my stomach and chest. Without words, Lyka tells me to take off my own shirt. Breaking our feverish kissing once more, I comply. My shirt lands silently on the gritty surface of the hilly plateau. We return to kissing. The only sound in the wide, cavernous space is our accelerated breathing.

Our bodies grow hot, and I slide my hands away from her breasts to move around her back once more, cupping her entire body. Once I know she is safely in my arms, I scoop her upwards and off the ground, bringing her legs towards me.

She knows what I'm trying to do and gives a moan of consent. Laying her down on the ground, her hair splays out in all directions, a fiery halo that only inflames me.

I begin to kiss her neck, the warmth and smell of her skin heady and intense. Her fingers lace upward into my skull, my horns, pulling and scratching.

Traveling down her body, I kiss my way south, stopping to admire the pond of her neck, the valley between her breasts, the rise of each. Raising my head, I give her a single, penetrating look. She nods. Using both hands, I yank her loose-fitting pants off her slender hips, tossing them aside.

Her fully naked body is glorious. And ready. In the velvet dark, she opens her legs to me, a sly smile on her lips.

I return to my journey, letting my tongue be the scout. Tracing the terrain of her skin, I move down over her taut

abdomen, past the divot of her bellybutton and finally, to the treasure of her pussy.

Hesitating only a moment, I then dive downward, my tongue plumbing her depths. A gasp rings out from her, pinging off the distant cavern walls. She is wet.

Reaching up, I grasp both breasts as my tongue begins to caress and lick her, attuned to her moans and gasps. Within seconds, I realize what sends her into the deepest moans. I repeat it, quickening the pace. She matches me, moving her hips in rhythm, her fingers pulling at my horns.

She tastes of sweet morning dew and sunshine. I can feel her passion rising. I know that any minute I will send her to the sweetest of places. Our rhythm increases. She pulls at me harder and harder, her legs wide open until...

“Oh! I’m cumming...” Her words echo beautifully off the walls, replicating her orgasm many times. Her back arches, and she disappears for a moment into the purest oblivion. My desire only rises at being the cause of such a journey.

Moments later, her back touches the ground once more. She sits up, a smile of deep satisfaction on her face.

“Is there more?” Her voice is low, silky.

“Of course.”

Hooking both my thumbs over my pants, I quickly remove them. My cock is only too happy to be free. She grasps it with two hands, sending a paroxysm through me. With calculated, slow strokes, she works at me. My eyes close as guttural noises emanate from my throat.

If she were to keep going, I would cum right then and there. Never have I felt such desire.

She senses it, however, and stops. She knows what she wants. I am but her servant.

Placing both her hands on my hips, she pulls me forward, lying herself back down on the ground.

“I want you,” she says simply. Her words alone send a shiver down me. Opening her legs once more, I straddle her,

our eyes connecting. After a moment, I gently guide myself home, her slickness greeting me all the way to the hilt.

We both hum in unison. Then, when I am fully inside her, she laces her legs around my back, just under my wings, and begins to rock her hips. Soon, she is setting a rhythm I am only too happy to maintain.

Together, we come together and apart, each thrust building upon the last. I can already feel the tidal wave of pleasure building up, adding to the inevitable explosion.

Our eyes stay connected, a line almost tangibly drawn between us.

The thrusting increases. The feeling deep within me grows. I can feel oblivion approaching. How long can I hold on?

“Cum for me,” she says. A natural leader, as always.

At that moment, I do.

“Ah!”

There is a sudden rush of magnificent release, gutting me in the best possible way. I am no longer here. I am no longer anywhere. My whole body and mind, for one glorious moment, hold nothing more than pure pleasure.

Seconds later, we crash back down to the ground, our bodies heaving. Our desire – for the moment – is spent.

The lake, witness to our union, continues to remain silent.

LYKA

It takes several moments for my breathing to slow and reset into a normal rhythm. Though my mind is spinning, my body stubbornly refuses to be hurried. It only adds to my panic. Does this underground lake truly have magical powers? Is that why I feel so powerless?

Eventually, my limbs start to grow cold. The grit of the plateau digs into the skin of my back, and I realize my whole body is covered in a fine coating of sweat and dust.

The thought of putting clothes on right away almost repulses me. I will go mad if I do. Slowly, I sit up, letting my dizzy mind and body reunite. The drop from the plateau to the water below is about a story high.

Peering over the edge, I try to discern how deep the water goes. It is impossible to tell. The placid surface is almost opaque, it is so still.

A calculation rips through my brain. Put on my clothes and suffer from the itchy dirt trapped on my skin or tumble into the water below to get clean first. There could be creatures – depraved and hungry – living in its depths. Or the water could be as shallow as a bathtub, and I'll break my neck on impact.

Mirik stays still beside me, his naked body inert. He may be asleep. I look at him only from my periphery, unable to face him.

What just happened was a momentary weakness. A joint expression of fear, anxiety and release, nothing else. This lake holds a strange power over both of us, that much is clear.

Make a decision.

I've lost my bearings. I've even lost track about what I'm supposed to be deciding. Staring back into the water helps me focus. To jump or not to jump?

Squeezing my eyes shut, I let gravity make the decision for me. In slow motion, I tumble forward. First my hair, then my head, then my shoulders, then the rest of me, tumbling down, down, down. Either to pure pleasure or pain.

I land with a splash. The warm water envelops and embraces me. It is utterly dark. Strangely, I am not afraid. It feels oddly familiar, a return to my primordial self.

One second later, I break the surface, my wet hair plastered down my neck and back. The water itself feels like it is infused with something soothing. My dirty and tired skin is rejuvenated, scrubbed clean.

I allow myself the pleasure of lying on my back, the water sliding off my chest. It is incredibly peaceful...until there is a huge splash to my left.

With a gasp, I flip forward and catch Mirik surfacing. He, too, looks energized, newly awake.

"I couldn't let you go in alone," he says, somewhat sheepishly.

"No, I suppose not," I say, confused at the change between us. Only moments ago, we shared an intense passion. Now, an awkward tension rests between us, so potent that not even these magical waters can wash it away.

"It is incredible. This water. I wonder what makes it this way," Mirik remarks. He is paddling, his chiseled muscles moving deftly in the water.

"I don't know. I've never experienced anything like this before." I'm not sure what I mean by this. Am I referring to our lovemaking or this lake? Even I don't know the answer.

We move in our own orbits for several minutes before reality settles back in, adding another layer on top of this new-found uneasiness.

Almost at the exact same time, we speak the same words. “We should get back.”

A halting laugh escapes us both as we head towards the shore. I pull ahead, wishing to be in front as we ascend the outcropping to retrieve our clothes. I’d rather have Mirik look at my backside than the other way round.

Scrambling back up to the top, I quickly find my clothes and slip them on. Another mystery: by the time I’ve grabbed them, my skin is completely dry, and it feels soft and newly scrubbed. These waters have incredible powers, to be sure.

Mirik dresses quickly, and we take hold of our torches and descend to the shoreline. I’ve lost track of how long we have been gone and hope the others have not noticed our absence. My thoughts are far too jumbled to concoct a fabrication right now.

With one last look, I turn from the lake and head back into the cramped tunnel. It still shimmers but, compared to the lake, it has lost its initial appeal.

Mirik follows and we return in silence, each lost in our own thoughts. When we come upon the area where the main tunnel splits into two directions, I briefly ponder exploring the tunnel that heads off to the right.

If a magical lake is found inside one tunnel, what could possibly be waiting in the other?

Already been gone too long...

The voice of reason sings out in my head and this time, I obey it. Soon enough, we have returned to the main area of the tunnel. It is just as we have left it. A few of my fellow humans are still moving about, but there is a sense that the majority are now asleep.

I still can’t tell what time of day it is. Or night, for that matter. It seems I will have to establish a new clock for myself, as will all of us. Without the sun’s punctuality, we will forge our own timeline.

If anyone has noticed our absence, they do not say it. We reach a bank of alcoves reserved for sleeping. Two are for

women, two for men. The smaller areas have been cordoned off for married couples or families.

Mirik has been designated to sleep in the main men's quarters. I am to go to the women's.

We reach the women's sleeping area first. Mirik pauses and gives me a look as if waiting for a signal. I do not know what to say or do.

Instead, we nod briefly at each other, a stilted good night. Then, without a word, he turns and continues to the other sleeping area.

My cot welcomes me, and I try to luxuriate in the feeling of my newly clean skin.

But my dalliance with Mirik haunts me. What have I done showing such weakness? What does it all mean?

MIRIK

When I heard the splash, I panicked. For a moment, I thought Lyka had fallen into the lake. She had been lying next to me only the moment before, and now she was gone.

“Lyka?”

Up until then, I had been in a strange sleep state. Not quite under but completely relaxed. A feeling I had not experienced in some time.

The splash tore through my tranquility. I snapped to a sitting position, only to find all was well.

It turns out there is reason to worry, after all. Something has changed. After what had been the most connected, ground-shattering union I had ever experienced with someone, I feel a distinct shift.

We had been so open with each other, baring our bodies and our inner-most desires only moments ago. Now, we close ourselves off, shut off even the most basic communication. Before she leapt to the water below, Lyka barely looked in my direction.

What has changed?

I thought that jumping after her would re-connect us, mend whatever invisible rift had opened between us. It did not.

The water feels incredible – silky, invigorating. My bruises and cuts feel soothed and salved.

But the invisible line that tethered us has snapped. With it gone, I feel cut loose, adrift. Like I allowed myself a monumental lapse of judgment. Permitted my body to be taken over by a spell.

I do not think Lyka cast it. In fact, I think she is a fellow victim. We both showed weakness, gave in to our basest desires.

Now, we are paying for it. Now, we float side by side in the waters, awkward and isolated.

As good as the water feels, Lyka's furtive glances unnerve me. I stay silent.

"I think it's time for us to return," Lyka suggests, and I agree quickly. She charges ahead, and though my baser instincts want to watch her magnificent wet body bound up to where our clothing lies in piles, I force them to look away.

It was weakness that led me to temptation. I will not succumb to it again. Lyka, it seems, is also determined to make this choice. Her mouth is drawn in a tight line, her shoulders slightly hunched. Her body language could not be clearer.

Strangely, the water has completely dried by the time I retrieve my clothes. Even as my brain retreats to its earlier thorny thoughts and unanswerable questions, my body enjoys this clean, fresh feeling. How I wish I could unite the two.

We walk back in silence. I take the rear, stooping low to make my way through the passage that leads to the main tunnel.

The vastness of this underground highway awes and humbles me. Never did I imagine it was so extensive. Were my ancestors solely responsible for it? Does it connect to other regions? Who else is still aware it exists?

These questions, unlike the ones concerning Lyka, give me strength. They also give me purpose, I am glad to discover.

We encounter very few humans upon our return and soon reach the sleeping quarters. With an awkward goodbye, we

part ways. It is now obvious that whatever existed between us was fleeting. A fool could see that.

The men's quarters are dim except for one feeble crystal lamp. The low hum of sleeping bodies underscores my walk to the cot designated for me. It is slightly larger than the others, a gracious accommodation for my size.

Had I not been responsible for discovering the tunnels, I doubt I would have been shown such a courtesy.

I lie atop it, not bothering with the thin blanket. Since bathing in the lake, my body feels soothed, perfectly warm.

On my back, my head resting in the crook of my bent arm, I stare upwards. The ceiling of the alcove loses itself in the darkness, allowing me the illusion of a midnight-black night sky. Using my imagination, I draw constellations upon it, allowing my mind to relax.

Weakness can paralyze a man. Or it can galvanize him. I am choosing the latter. Above where I currently lie, my ancestral home has been taken over by ungrateful thieves. Yvirir poses himself an honorable man, but he is nothing more than a fraud and a liar.

Monteluke Hall has, for generations, been held by the noble blood of my forefathers. I allowed myself to be overtaken – first by force, then by injury, next by fear, and finally, by temptation.

A bumbling, embarrassing journey, but I will not surrender. I will rise up beyond this.

“What of Lyka?” I murmur.

She feels the same. I can feel it. She has her own demons to face and to fight. Survival for both of us is on the line, albeit on different paths.

The curtain of sleep is near. I can feel it. I am grateful for it. An honest day's labor has been done, my body has been battered and bruised. I have earned my rest.

You will find a fated mate...

Berwyq's words try to pierce my new-found resolve. For a few moments, I let them linger in my mind's eye, like dust motes. Then, just as quickly, I bat them away, confident I know my path.

I am the rightful master of Monteluke Hall. As soon as the time is right, I will use all the advantages of these tunnels, as well as my rejuvenated strength, to take back what is mine.

My debt to the humans has been more than paid.

Eyes growing heavy, I let my arm drop, feeling the vital blood flow into my muscles. The brief memory of Lyka's skin floats past. Turning to my side, I dismiss this, too.

Weakness took me once. It will not take me again.

There is far too much at stake.

LYKA

The lack of light is the only thing that seems strange as the next days play out. That and the fact that, for the first time in recent memory, I and my fellow humans have not had to scratch and scrimp for each moment of each day.

When we were living outside, every day was a battle of survival. The elements could sweep us away, drown us, burn us as we slept.

Or, raiders could descend upon us. Take what little we had, kill the vulnerable, attack the weak. Each day was a test against unknown forces.

Here, a fascinating normalcy has dropped into place. No longer do I spend minutes, sometimes hours, raking my eyes across the sky trying to predict if I had enough time to scout or forage beyond the settlement's borders.

Here, the weather is always the same. Darkness has become a constant. The only time I have any idea of the outside world is when I venture to the small, grimy window near the outside door of the Hall.

Most of my time, however, is spent in the tunnels.

By now, we have a fully functioning community. Sleeping quarters are comfortable and even decorated, in some instances. Washing areas, laundry facilities, tool and weapon forges have been built. Some of the settlement has even started up games of *Inkra*, a game involving shells and crudely made cards.

To have leisure time was almost unthinkable a few days ago. Now, our tired bodies and minds indulge in it. But there are signs of trouble ahead.

Fresh water is plentiful. We have been strict about keeping the fresh water separate from waste and gray water. Though our medicine woman is well versed, her supplies are limited. An outbreak of any sickness would be devastating.

It is our food supply that worries me. Though Bilby made a breakthrough in growing some tasty mushrooms in one of the damper tunnels, we cannot live on fungi alone.

Our dried meat is starting to dwindle, as are our stores of fruit and berries. Something will have to happen soon if we are to keep from starving.

My days are busy. Weaving baskets or hammocks, digging wastewater trenches and generally advising on the layout of the underground settlement have kept me occupied from dawn to dusk. Or what I perceive to be dawn and dusk, though those words are losing less meaning by the hour.

Mirik and I orbit each other like distant stars. The men keep him busy. His bulk and strength are ideal for the messier and more labor-intensive projects, so he often disappears with Tyril and the younger men of the settlement.

Only a few furtive glances have been exchanged. Each one has left me more confused than the last. I do my best not to initiate them, but when I see him return after a long day's labor, his body glistening with sweat and grit, my eyes slide over, unbidden.

They drink in his angles, his glorious physique. Instantly, my body warms in ways that must be obvious to others. I want to run and hide in shame. Why does he have this effect on me?

I cannot tell if he feels the same. There have been moments where I have turned only to find him looking at me, an unreadable expression on his face. Just as quickly, he would look away, a hood of shame or embarrassment marring his handsome features.

We have exchanged nothing more. No words, no communication of any kind, unless the glances count. When I am busy, my mind can put these thoughts to the side, shunted to a dusty corner.

But I can only do that for so long. At night, my mind plays tricks on me. No matter how hard I work, how much I sweat or how much I push myself to my physical limits, I cannot tire myself out enough to put my brain to rest.

I have come to dread the time when I should welcome sleep the most. But it is precisely at that time, when everyone around me lies in sweet repose, that I lie awake, unable to escape my dark and dreadful desires.

It is then that images of my dalliance with Mirik float above me. They invade me. My body yearns for him. Aches for his touch, his breath, his warmth.

Sometimes, my wicked brain tricks me into thinking his arms are around me, his kisses still rain down upon my neck. The look of desire in his eyes seems pleading and real.

It is all cruel fantasy. Unattainable and dangerous. "If he wanted me," I've asked myself several times out loud. "Wouldn't he say so?" Wouldn't he grab me, bring me back to the magical lake and ravish me once more?

Or if I truly wanted him, wouldn't I make it known to him?

It's an impossible feeling, and one I cannot bear. Tossing and turning, my nights become nightmares, and my mornings increasingly become harder and harder to face.

If I do sleep, it is short and plagued with dizzying dreams. I wake up with gritty eyes and aching muscles. The rest that my body so desperately needs has been denied.

The humans of Monteluke Hall *must* survive whatever comes next. More and more, I am convinced the Great Burn is upon us. There are Drokans above that would wish for our death. Our food supplies are dwindling.

"I cannot distract myself with girlish fantasy and pointless dreams," I chastise myself. Mirik knows this and works each day, as do I, to ensure our survival.

Survival is my sole focus. Or rather, it should be. Each morning, I realign these values, hoping they will stick. Each night, my desires shake and test that resolve.

“No more,” I admonish myself, after another dreadful night.

Today, I just know, it will stick. Today I will find my footing.

MIRIK

“**W**hat are you trying to show me, Tyril? Or rather, what am I *not* being shown here?” I am trying to keep the imperiousness out of my voice as I know it irks him. But I do not understand what I meant to be seeing.

“It’s the food stores. Or rather, what’s left of them,” Tyril explains, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

“I thought this was just one of the storage areas. That there were two more.”

Tyril gives me a look of exasperation as if I should already understand the situation. It is plain I do not. In a resigned tone, he speaks. “There *were*. But we consolidated everything.”

“So that means...”

“This is all that is left.”

Now I understand. *Now* I see why he looks so defeated. We are running dangerously low on food.

We have already rationed back. Everyone is eating less. I can hear the rumbling stomachs, sense the irritability. Already, the ebullient feelings that charged the settlement when the tunnels were found have faded.

The need for food has eclipsed all that. And if we don’t do something soon, we are likely to experience more than just hunger and poor manners. People will start doing foolish things.

“We will have to go outside. There is no other option,” I say definitively. Bluntly.

Tyril sighs and hangs his head. He knows this to be true as well. “When?”

“How much food do we have left?”

“One day at most.”

“We leave tonight, then.”

I turn and leave Tyril standing at the almost-bare storage hold and return to my cot. If my abrupt departure shocked Tyril, I do not register it. Nor do I care.

For Tyril, leaving the safety of the settlement is dangerous – possibly deadly. For me, it is a cause for celebration.

At last, I can put my plan into action. The opportunity has finally arrived. I do not see our leaving as a danger but rather a deliverance.

When we venture out, I will leave the humans behind, sneak around the side of the house and enter the Hall from the kitchen. There, I will launch my attack. If I can take out Yvrir, the others will crumble. I am certain of this.

Having this plan in place invigorates me even as I prepare to leave. My wounds have largely healed, and I have been given a set of clothes created from a number of human garments that more or less fit my Drokan frame. I feel more than ready to take on the mutineers living up above.

Into those pockets I pack my crude tools and weapons – a dagger, a pick, and a small waterskin.

When the time comes, I assemble with the others chosen for the hunting party in the room where it all began. The green door remains shut, even as the barricade leading to the inside of the Hall stands firm. It has not been moved since I arrived.

The hunting party consists of only the strongest and fastest of the group. Tyril, of course, a young man called Hitro, myself and Lyka. Upon seeing her, my stomach flips. Though I have done my best to squelch these feelings, they arrive like

a sickness. Our eyes connect for a fleeting second before sliding away.

She haunts my dreams. My nights are tortured by the thought of her smell, her skin, her moans. I push them all away, ashamed of my needs.

“We stay close. Game will likely be hard to find, and we need to have all eyes in all directions. Is that clear?” Tyril is wise, but being instructed by him gets under my skin. I am not used to taking orders.

Everyone nods, strapping various hunting equipment and weapons to their backs and shoulders. Lyka’s hair is braided tight to her head. The severeness of it makes her eyes flash even more brightly.

Look away, dammit.

I do, forcing myself to examine my dagger instead.

A small group of elders and curious children have gathered to see us off. Some are nervous. Others are impatient that we should leave and bring back food.

A quiver of guilt races through me as Tyril nears the green door, preparing to open it. The small window has become so occluded by grasses, it is impossible to see the conditions outside. Only by opening the door will we know for sure.

I am going to abandon these good people as soon as their backs are turned.

It is a necessary evil of my plan. I cannot ask them to come with me. I cannot offer my services in their hunt. Taking back my home is my mission and mine alone. I can only hope they will, in the end, understand.

“Are we all ready?” Tyril asks, his hand on the door pull. A hushed but persuasive round of agreement emanates from the group.

“May Krodo watch over us,” I say in a low voice.

One look from Tyril before he pulls the door open. One look before our innocence is lost entirely.

As soon as the door opens, we rush out, not wanting to risk the others inside. In a flash, we stand outside, the door slammed behind us.

Then, we see what hell we have stepped into.

Gone is the sky. It is replaced by a raging blanket of orange. Onyx clouds mar its surface, raining down precipitation that instantly burns my skin. The others feel it too, gasping and shrinking against the stones of the wall.

The air is putrid, suffused with sulfur. In mere seconds, my lungs feel heavy, as if laden with wet muslin. All around us, the grass has turned an eerie black, burned and beaten into an agonizing death. Even the stones of the wall are spongy, rotted away by the acid rain.

The Great Burn is upon us. It rages and reels, altering our world forever.

All at once, I realize what it all means. I realize that taking back my Hall means nothing. It is already lost. It is not worth the fight.

I can only hope now to live.

“Back inside!” Tyril screams, his voice straining with pain.

We hurry back, open the door and rush back inside. Shocked faces greet us there.

Food or not, this place is our only chance of survival.

LYKA

No matter how much I want to look away, I can't. The colors are alien and terrifying. A saturation of shades in deadly tones. Nothing is as it should be. The rain that sears my skin is worse than before. If I stay out here much longer, my skin will surely melt off.

Everywhere I look, the vegetation has disintegrated. Anything living out here must surely be dead. A sob of sadness erupts from deep within me as I realize that all the trees, flowers, grasses, birds, and animals left out here, without the blessed protection of Monteluke Hall, have perished horribly and painfully.

My entire world is dying.

The Great Burn is here.

Running back inside is a relief, in some ways, but the nightmare doesn't leave. It is etched onto the surface of my brain.

And as I scour the scalding rain from my skin, another reality sets in. Being outside is a certain and near immediate death. Had we stayed outside, our lungs would have collapsed, our skin would have burned, and we would have succumbed within minutes.

Inside, we are safe. We have water and shelter.

But we are not safe from death.

Here, death will be much, much slower.

We have no food. Without it, we will die.

“The Great Burn is here,” Tyril tells the few folks who remain in the initial room. “There is no possibility of going outside. We need to gather everyone.”

Hitro races off, no doubt eager to put his horror behind him in the form of feeling useful. I hear his voice echo off the tunnel walls as he summons everyone to the main room.

For the first time in days, I look at Mirik. I do not look away. Neither does he. We share a look of such sadness and pain. A shared grief at the death of our home.

“What’s going on?” Bilby asks, his apron streaked with dirt.

Oh yes. The mushrooms. Perhaps we can survive for a while on those...

Tyril speaks. I am grateful he has taken the leadership role. I do not have the stamina at present.

“I am sorry to inform you all that the Great Burn is here. We saw it with our own eyes.”

A collective gasp and murmur of horror reverberates around the twenty gathered souls.

“Our world is now these tunnels and this room. We must acknowledge that now.”

I hear the sounds of sniffing and crying. Others, like me, grieve for a world they will never again see. Or feel. Or smell.

“What about food?” the voice of an elder cries out.

“We are hungry!” This is the voice of a small child.

Tyril raises his hands to calm the group. “We must ration further. There may be ways to find food sources underground. Bilby has already made progress.”

Some of the younger children make gagging sounds. The mushrooms are – even I have to admit – an acquired taste. Chewy and with a taste like dirt, they are hardly a welcome meal.

“Everyone will receive one more ration of the remaining food. It will be based on need and health status.”

More grumbling. A painstaking system had been developed to provide food for everyone based on age, infirmity, whether they were contributing to the settlement and other factors. It was never a perfect system, but one we were forced to adopt. I fear now it will be our undoing.

“Why do I get less than *she* does?” Wespra cries. An older woman with a big mouth, she always finds something to complain about. Her withered finger points to Nivkin, a younger, quieter woman who has two young children.

“I do more than you,” Nivkin says simply. “And I give most to my kids.”

This answer does nothing but infuriate Wespra. A verbal fight breaks out which only lights the flame of hidden resentments and skirmishes that have been simmering until this moment.

Shouts are heard and insults are flung. People get dangerously close to each other with anger in their eyes.

The settlement is unraveling. I understand why, but at this crucial moment we need to come together more than ever, not tear each other apart.

Tyrl gives me a look of desperation. He knows he’s lost them and can’t get them back. His look of pleading cannot be ignored.

“People! We mustn’t do this! We must try to calm down!” I yell, trying my best to turn the tide. It is pointless. I remain unheard.

“We can explore the tunnels. We can see where else they go. We can find more food to grow.” My voice sounds tinny and thin. Uninspiring.

They pay me no heed. All of these ideas *could* work. But clearer heads are needed to put them into action. Clearer heads and full bellies. I feel the hollow cavern of my own stomach, the weakness in my limbs, but I try to keep above it.

Mirik is nodding. He is my lone supporter. Even Tyril looks lost, defeated. Children start screaming and crying, begging hands pulling at their mother's legs. The elders bleat and moan, acting like children themselves.

I feel I might lose my mind completely.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound causes every single voice to go absolutely silent. Angry eyes become scared ones. Necks turn in the direction of the sound. Instantly, my eyes and ears train upon it.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I know where it's coming from. If I thought our situation was dire before, it has become much, much worse.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Vibrations course along the floor under my feet. The banging is intensifying. It will not go away.

It is not the Great Burn. It is something possibly far worse.

My eyes find Mirik's. His stare is unmistakable and resigned. If he feels fear, he does not show it. Right now, he comprehends the danger as acutely as I do.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I break my stare with Mirik and look to the barricade that blocks the inside entrance to the Hall. The one that was sealed the day Mirik joined us.

The banging is causing the barricade to shimmy and shake.

Yvrir has found us.

And he wants in.

MIRIK

I should have anticipated Yvrir would eventually find us. After all, it was I who had been slowly cutting off sections of Monteluke Hall to keep it alive. Like a plant that needs trimming to grow back, I always thought that if I trimmed it enough, we would find a way to grow once more.

Yvrir thought I had failed, but now he sees why I did what I had to do. Now he sees why only certain parts of the Hall can still be inhabitable.

The Great Burn is wreaking havoc outside. In all probability, the Hall above has become unlivable, and Yvrir is becoming desperate. He would have known about the tunnels and the lower rooms. He would have sensed they would be safe havens.

What he could not have known is that I – and these brave humans – are already here and blocking his path.

Now he knows. And I have no intention of ceding this part of the Hall to him.

The banging is growing. I hear a muffled command and then the sound of an ax or sharp-sided instrument being used to hack into the barrier of wood and furniture we have placed over the entrance.

We have the advantage, though. Unless they heard the shouts of the angry humans, they do not know we are here. Perhaps they believe it is just a barrier placed when this part of the Hall was shut down.

If they enter this space thinking it is empty, we can catch them off-guard. We can – if I may allow myself this fantasy – ensure they never have another traitorous thought.

They are dangerous, however. It will serve me well to not underestimate them. Kirkus and Hibron especially can be brutish fighters. Though Tyril, Lyka and I can be formidable, we will have to be careful.

We need to move.

After exchanging a charged look with Lyka, I decide to take the initiative. Rising to my full height, I position myself between the soon-to-be-compromised barricade and the cluster of frightened humans.

In a low but commanding voice I speak. “Everyone but the hunters must evacuate to the tunnels. Gather what you can of value. Head to the storage alcoves and keep quiet. Keep lights to a minimum, and do not move until someone comes to find you. Is that understood?”

My reward for this little speech is a sea of terrorized faces and blank eyes. I did not get through to them. I do not want to raise my voice, but they need to hear me!

“Do as Mirik says. We will keep these raiders off. But you must go. *Now!*” Lyka says, her powerful demeanor and confidence infusing the area around her.

Berwyq is the first to comply. “We must listen to them. They know the way to save us,” she says, turning and walking as fast as her slow legs will carry her into the dark tunnels.

As if in a trance, the others follow. A handful of elders, some helping each other, begin to move. Following along are young mothers and the children. Some are carried and some follow closely behind, their faces drawn and scared.

Gone are the pangs of hunger. A new hunger has overtaken them – the hunger to survive.

The banging at the barricade has turned to sawing. Yvrir is changing tactics. He has seen how many layers there are to break, and he is trying to be methodical.

Good. That gives us the luxury of time.

Soon, the group has dwindled to the essential few: Tyril, Hitro and Lyka. Unlike the others, their faces do not look frightened. Quite the opposite. Tyril's eyes gleam with an almost animalistic fervor. Hitro's jaw is set with determination. Lyka is ready for a fight. She stares at the barricade as if her stare alone could keep the Drokans at bay.

"What weapons do we have?" I ask.

Tyril's swagger wavers slightly. "Not much."

He gestures for us to follow him across the room. Lyka gives one last look to the barricade where the sawing continues and then joins us.

In a dark, unused corner are a pile of tools. All can be used as weapons, but not many are effective. Almost all of them require the user to be within a few feet of their target. Some rakes, a few rusted hoes, and scythes. A pick and some clubs.

There are more weapons than fighters, but we need something that gives us the safety of distance while being lethal.

We need guns.

"What happened to the hunting rifles?" I have become demanding. I no longer care about the power dynamics. Tyril seems to sense that I know what's on the other side of that barricade, and he has temporarily ceded leadership to me.

"There," he says, pointing to the darkest part of the corner. Leaning up against the damp wall are four rifles. They are ancient, rusted and possibly obsolete.

"Where's the ammunition?"

Tyril merely hangs his head.

There is no ammunition.

"These are useless, then. We'll have to get creative."

The sawing sound has stopped. Its absence causes our heads to turn in unison towards the barricade. Have they given

up? A slice of fear breaks through my armor. When I knew where they were, I could plan. Silence gives nothing away.

Several seconds tick by. Each one feels like a year. I doubt anyone breathes.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The banging resumes, but this time it is louder and more powerful. They are using a ram of some kind. The barricade bucks and shudders with each impact.

We are losing time rapidly.

Darting my eyes to the gardening tools, I feel despair. Those weapons are no match for Yvrir and his goons.

“We need ammunition. Those guns have to work.”

Tyrl looks lost. He has no answer.

Lyka, however, does.

“I think I know! Hitro, Tryil – fortify the barricade. Hold them off as long as you can. When it is about to break, retreat into the tunnels. Mirik and I will meet you there. Mirik – grab the guns.”

“What – ?”

“Just grab them and follow me.”

She disappears. I look toward the remaining fighters before following her. If Lyka has a plan, I’m prepared to follow it.

LYKA

I only hope I am not about to make a fool of myself. Not because I would be embarrassed but because by doing so, I might have cost us all our lives.

Mirik is right. We need ammunition. The rifles need crystal to be operational. Our supplies, like our food, are very low.

At least, that's what I thought.

Sprinting through the tunnels, with Mirik's heavy footsteps behind me, I can only hope my feeling is the right one. The dull metallic clink of the rifles cradled in Mirik's arms accompanies me as I race past the elders, mothers and children who are busying themselves in gathering essential items before hiding in the storage areas.

They look up in alarm as I race past, but I give them a wide smile. "Do not worry! All is well!" I call out, as jolly as I can.

It sounds false and wooden, and I'm not even sure I believe it. No matter. I have to give them hope. I have to give *myself* hope.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Mirik says behind me, his words punctuated by his quick steps.

"Perhaps..." I reply over my shoulder. My legs pump faster.

Soon, we are far past the most settled areas of the tunnels. The walls are closing in, the passages narrowing. Reaching the

area where the tunnel splits, I make a quick pivot to the left, heading into the low tunnel that will eventually spill out into the huge cavern.

The magical lake. Even from this distance, I feel its pull. The calm of its strange, purplish waters. What happened there was life changing. Or could have been, had either of us allowed it.

Those thoughts are not needed now...

I do not need the lake's waters. Nor do I need to be calm. I need what is nestled in the walls of the tunnel itself.

When Mirik demanded ammunition, something dropped into me. An idea so fully-formed, I am ashamed I did not see it before.

The strange shimmer of those walls, found nowhere else in the entire system. What caused it? Could it be what I think it is?

Skidding around the corner from the main section, I enter the tiny space. The walls and ceiling surround me, cradling just overhead. Mirik stoops and shuffles next to me, laying the rifles on the ground.

“Quick! I need two torches,” I say. Mirik complies, reaching into his pockets and flicking on two torches. As expected, the walls shimmer and shine under their light.

With my dagger's point, I select a small portion of the wall and begin scraping at it frenetically, trying to budge some of the material loose.

“What are you –?”

“Just wait,” I reply through gritted teeth.

The sound of metal on stone is horrendous, but I ignore it. Sticking the point into a small crevice, I form a fist and bang it against the handle. With a crack, a piece of rock falls to my feet.

I return my dagger to its sheath and pick up the rock. It glows in my hands. Strangely, now that it is free from the wall, it feels softer, as if it will crumble with the slightest pressure.

For a moment, I wait for something to happen. Dumbly, I stare at the mass in my hands.

“Lyka, are you waiting for something to happen?” Mirik asks with an undercurrent of urgency in his voice.

“Uhhh. No. Just –”

The thought drops in a moment later, and I almost slap my own forehead at my stupidity. The tiny, shimmering lights of the rock are currently inert. I have to do something to ignite them.

“Break one of the torches by throwing it on the ground,” I tell Mirik.

“But –”

“Just do it!”

Wearing an expression of distrust, Mirik does what I ask. In the cramped space, he raises his hand as high as it will go and dashes the torch to the ground. As he does, I time my own throw to collide the rock with the contents of the torch.

A second later there is a flash of intense light and momentous sound. Mirik and I recoil in pain. Ears ringing, I ignore the sensation, only too happy to share my discovery.

“The walls, Mirik! They are infused with crystal! We have ammunition in the very walls!”

He looks at me then with a mixture of amazement and wonder, and likely some lingering pain from the minor explosion.

“I...well done!”

“We have no time to waste. Gather as much as you possibly can!”

Like demons possessed, we set to work. I use my dagger while Mirik uses his own. Within a minute, we have chipped away several large chunks of rock, all laced with crystal energy.

“Break them down as small as you can, and I’ll load the guns,” I order, taking as much of the shiny dust I can. I pour it

into the rusted ammunition compartments of the rifles, trying to eke out enough for each weapon.

It is laborious work, and sweat pours down my face and neck. I can feel my skin become grimy with dust, my hands sandy and wretched. We do not stop, however. Our movements become automatic, rapid-fire.

Soon, we have dusted crystal powder loaded into all of the guns. We gather the remaining dust and rocks into our pockets for extra ammunition.

“Quick! We must get back!” I say, running out of the tunnel with two of the rifles. Mirik nods, his face a mask of dark dust. In some parts, it sparkles with leftover crystal. I marvel for the briefest moment at how beautiful he is.

We sprint back to the main room. As we approach, I hear the sound of splintering wood and men’s yelling voices. Two I recognize to be human. The rest belong to Drokans.

Yvrir and those imbecilic servants have breached the barricade. Wood splinters and chunks of furniture litter the space.

Tyrl and Hitro have retreated as far as they can with their garden weapons raised. They turn gratefully when we arrive.

“Here. Take these instead,” I say, offering them each a gun. Mirik hands me my own, and our brave quartet lines up to face the intruding Drokans.

The last gasp of the barricade shatters and falls. Heavy boots and maniacal faces follow.

The fight has begun.

MIRIK

From the moment it begins, I know we are in for a brutal fight. The Great Burn has clearly brought out the animal in Yvrir and his men. As the wood falls away and they burst forth into the room, I can see it in their faces.

No longer do they resemble Drokans. Gone is Yvrir's mask of gentility. He is manic, driven mad by the elements threatening him from every side.

A small part of me feels pity at the loss of his soul. Most of me cannot find the energy to care. Yvrir made his choices, as did I, and now he can pay for them.

Gripping my newly loaded rifle, it flashes into my awareness how Lyka has astounded me once again with her agile mind. But there is no time to focus on that now, and instead, I get ready to face the intruders.

They burst forth, kicking inward. By now, they know we are there. Any element of surprise we may have had has long disappeared.

Kirkus arrives first, his toothy mouth spread wide in a repellant grin.

“Yvrir! We have a pest problem!”

He is screeching, even as he levels his gun in my direction. Something tells me he's been waiting a long time to do something like this. As if all the times I called on him at the table, made him break from his little, shallow world have all come to this.

A shot blasts from his gun, hot and lethal but off-target. I duck. It shatters the stone wall behind me, sending shards of rock into my shoulders and back. As I bend down, I am able to shoot in his direction, but he anticipates this, and it glances wide.

Lyka and Jemry are hacking at each other with abandon. Jemry has not been given a gun, as he was never trustworthy with weapons. Instead, he holds a crude club. He swings it wildly.

Lyka is able to rebuff him with the butt of her rifle, even striking him in the knees until he crumples. She immediately turns to assist Tyril.

Tyril is fighting two at once. Hirbon and Trekis are slowly cornering Tyril, enjoying a little game of prey and predator as they keep their guns trained on him. Tyril has his own weapon aimed at them, but they know they outnumber him and are determined to enjoy themselves first.

They have not accounted for Lyka. She swings her gun at them, firing a warning shot above Trekis' head. A beam shakes loose, raining plaster and debris over him. He chokes and splutters, but it is merely a distraction.

Yvrir has taken up the rear. I do not begin to speculate where the Drokan women have ended up. My guess is that they are either dead or will be arriving shortly to join in the fight.

With a look of pure hatred, Yvrir walks towards me, his gun aimed at my chest. I quickly calculate the distance between where I currently stand and the tunnel entrance. It would be a short sprint but dangerous to show my exposed flank.

“Fire at will!” Yvrir hollers, as if his minions needed any encouragement. As his head turns to make the call, I take the opportunity to dash to the tunnel entrance.

Shots ring out everywhere, ensuring the annihilation of the room.

“Run to the tunnels!” I bellow, seeing the obscured forms of the humans follow behind me.

Retreat is not ideal, but they have more sophisticated weapons. If the women join them, we will not be able to stop the slaughter.

Better we lure them inside, get them lost and formulate a plan. No one knows these tunnels better than Lyka and I do at this moment. I cannot believe Yvrir knows them well. It has been decades since he has been here. This is a clear advantage.

Smoke and dust from the shots has given us brief cover. As they move inside, Lyka, Tyril and Hitro find me near the first water station. Everyone is breathing hard and covered in plaster. Small cuts form rivers of blood on arms, foreheads and cheeks. No one complains.

“What do we do?” Lyka asks.

“We have to separate them from Yvrir. They are mindless without him. If we can do that, we may have a chance of shutting them down.”

Tyril nods. “How?”

“Yvrir always travels in the rear. Get his men to follow you, and I will lure Yvrir down the right tunnel. Lyka, take them down the left. Do whatever it takes to paralyze them. We will meet back here when it is done.”

I don't have to say it. We will not show mercy. With the Great Burn raging outside, this is no time to show pity or compassion. Yvrir would surely show us none.

“I can do that,” Lyka says, her eyes flashing as she formulates her plan. “Does everyone have their guns and ammunition?”

Everyone checks quickly and nods. We are ready. From the noise at the entrance of the tunnel, it sounds as though Yvrir and his men are not far behind. I can only hope and pray the elders and women stay put in the storage areas. If they were to appear now, it would be disastrous.

“Come with me,” Lyka orders, and Tyril and Hitro instantly run ahead. They begin to whoop and holler, creating enough noise to wake the dead. It is bound to bring Kirkus and the others towards them.

I spy an outcropping of rock. From there, I have a clear vantage point of the main tunnel. Once the men clear into the left tunnel, I will make my move. When Yvrir comes into view, I’ll taunt him to follow. Knowing his bloated ego, I know he will have no ability to resist.

Just as I begin to move to my hiding spot, I catch Lyka’s eye once more. She is walking backwards, unabashedly looking in my direction.

She is saying goodbye...

My heart wrenches at the sight. I try not to show it.

The tunnel obscures most of her face. Except those eyes, seared into my mind, my body, my soul.

I can only hope I will see her again in this life.

The yelling of Yvrir’s men creeps closer.

LYKA

Mirik embraced my scrap of an idea when I ran to the tunnels for ammunition. Which means I must embrace his idea of drawing off Yvrir away from the rest of his men.

Both ideas are rash, possibly deadly. In the case of mine, it worked. We have firepower. But what if Mirik's idea only succeeds in getting him killed? Or me? Or all of us?

You have to trust him...

Tyrl and Hitro have run ahead. They grasp the idea because they have none of their own to offer. Or maybe because they have less to lose.

I'm running away from Mirik when I feel an urge so strong, I cannot resist it. Turning around to face him one more time, I keep running but backwards.

It can't be helped. I *need* to see him once more. To fill my eyes and brain and heart one more time with a view of him. Whatever may have happened between us, whatever *never* happened between us – either out of fear, stubbornness or just because the need to survive took over – I do not regret being with him.

In fact, I regret pushing all the feelings I have for him out of the way. Now, I acutely feel the hollow reality that I may never see him again.

The gap between us widens as I run away, even as my eyes do their damndest to close the distance. The angle of his head,

the spark of his eyes, the strength coming off him – I want to bottle it all up, save it forever.

“They are coming!” Tyril screams, his voice faraway. I have waited too long. Breaking our glance, I face forward once more and keep running.

Blazing past the open area, I follow Tyril and Hitro who have set up a half wall of sorts behind which they hide. I signal for them to keep low while I lure Kirkus, Hibron and Jemry. There is no sign of Trekis, but then I recall he was injured back in the main room. Perhaps he has been smart enough to stay put.

The three young Drokans are approaching. As Mirik suspected, Yvrir is several steps behind them. I will have only a few seconds of opportunity to separate the two groups. I know Mirik will take his chance when he sees it.

The approaching trio walk in a tight formation, their eyes sliding in awe over the tunnel walls. Like all of us, they had no idea this entire world existed under the crumbling Hall.

Time to put the riskiest part of my plan into action: the bluff.

“Tyril! Where did Mirik go?” I yell, with the most theatrical bluster I can generate.

From behind his barrier, Tyril hollers back. “Off to the right. I think he’s hurt.”

“I’ll go to him, then,” I reply.

“No! Hitro needs you. He’s dying! Quick! This way!”

Our little exchange is meant to give our whole game away – with a few fibs sprinkled in just to get them confused.

It’s a gamble but if Yvrir wants to take down Mirik, he’ll go right. Kirkus is such a thug it’s unlikely he’d miss a chance to take out a helpless, injured human.

There’s a small alcove cut into the tunnel wall right where the tunnel veers to the left. Tyril and Hitro hide just a few feet further down. Ducking into the alcove, I wait for the Drokans to turn their footsteps right and pass me.

My breathing halts. I do not want to reveal myself until the very last possible second.

“Jemry, you can take out the injured one. Surely you won’t mess that one up!” Kirkus guffaws, ribbing the young valet. Hibron chuckles and snorts, eager to be Kirkus’ groveling sidekick.

A moment later, I spy Yvrir. He halts at the precise spot where the two tunnels turn away from each other. I know he has heard our cries. Will he take the bait?

He pauses and considers. He’s no fool. Separating from his group leaves him vulnerable. But his quarry is so nearby. And, in his mind, injured. An easy kill.

The mathematics are in his favor. Take out his former Drokan master, return to the group and conquer the pitiful humans.

The sly smile that curls his face tells me my answer. He’s going to take the bait.

Giving one last glance to the right, Yvrir squares his body and heads to the left. I send a lightning prayer to Krodo to watch over Mirik.

And myself. I could use some divinity right about now.

With Yvrir out of the picture, we can surround the three unsuspecting Drokans. Just as Kirkus nears the half wall behind which Tyril and Hitro cower, I step out from my alcove.

Kirkus and Hibron are laughing once more, using Jemry as their punchline. Their weapons hang slack at their sides. They have no idea they are surrounded.

Until Tyril pops up from behind his wall and unleashes his weapon. A resounding boom reverberates off the walls. Hibron staggers back, his eyes wide. A grotesque gurgling rattle erupts from his throat. His back is to me until he falls, almost in slow motion, to the ground.

That’s when I see the massive hole where his chest used to be.

Upon impact, he lies still and thankfully, the gurgling stops. Hibrion will not be laughing anymore.

The loss of his friend has inflamed Kirkus. With a primal yell, he flips his weapon into action and begins firing at the wall that shields Tyril and Hitro. Razor sharp projectiles hiss about the room from the rapidly shattering wall, and the sound is deafening.

Jemry stands, paralyzed, his eyes hollow and staring at Hibrion's corpse.

I make my move and take a shot. The kick-back is harsh on the ancient weapon, and it makes my shot imprecise. All I manage to do is graze Kirkus' shoulder.

With wild eyes, he wheels around to face me, his shoulder darkening with blood. If he feels any pain, he does not show it.

"You! We all knew you were trouble! The moment that you arrived!" Kirkus is screaming like a madman.

Tyril and Hitro take the opportunity to come out of hiding. Kirkus is aiming at me. I see the shot ring out towards me.

I have the distinct feeling that this might be it. That my luck and my skill and all the things I have yet to do in this life will go unfulfilled. All in the blink of an eye, I have these thoughts – pure and clear as raindrops.

Pain blooms somewhere near my neck. At first, it feels like a pinprick but quickly erupts into something much more. The pain is so intense, it almost obliterates my thoughts.

But it's not my time yet. That honor belongs to Kirkus. Tyril has taken his own shot, and it rips through Kirkus' neck and face. He falls near my feet, causing me to stagger back.

Seconds later, only Jemry remains. His face is pale, his hands raised in supplication.

Before I can process my next thought, another shot rings out. Jemry gives a small shriek of pain and surprise before he, too, crumples into the dust of the tunnel. I look up in surprise.

The shooter is Hitro. He gives us both a shrug while lowering his weapon.

“Couldn’t take the risk,” is all he says.

I feel a momentary pang of guilt at his demise but no more.
I must see how Mirik is faring.

MIRIK

Lyka expertly pulls off her part of the plan. Playing right into their weaknesses, she manages to separate Yvrir from his foot soldiers. Now it's up to me to finish him off.

He does not see me for some time. From behind my shadow of rock, I watch him approach with slow, methodical steps. It may be that he doesn't entirely trust Lyka's words or that he feels fear. Either way, he is walking right where I need him.

For a moment, I look carefully at his face. A face I have known and trusted since my earliest days. Aside from my mother, father and nanny, Yvrir was someone to whom I could run to with a question. Seek solitude in his office or refuge in his calm demeanor.

Yvrir was an uncle to me. Or so I thought.

His face has become lined over the years, his shoulders slightly more stooped. Still, he manages to remain rather ageless and, up until a few days ago, peerless in his regard for me.

How acutely I feel his betrayal now that I've set up a trap to kill him. Putting him down feels less like a triumph than a necessity, like executing a beloved animal when it becomes sick.

But he cannot live while I do. He cannot slaughter these good humans and destroy my legacy – whatever might be left of it.

He has progressed past my hiding spot when I step out.

“Yvrir,” I say, commanding him to turn.

If he is startled, he hides it well. The same way he has hidden much of his inner feelings all these years.

“Mirik. Seems to me you are in better shape than I was led to believe.”

“Be careful who you trust.”

My rifle lies cradled in my forearm, near enough for quick action but not quite menacing. Yvrir holds his weapon, a smaller but rather lethal looking pistol, aimed directly at me.

Yvrir smiles slightly at my observation. “A lesson it took you far too long to learn. What a weak, weak Drokan you are, Mirik. How disappointing you are.”

I cock my head to the side. “Disappointing? To whom?”

Yvrir’s face, heavily shaded in the gloomy space, crimps in annoyance. “To whom? To noble Drokan! To your family! To yourself and most especially to me.”

He is raving. “I don’t owe you a thing, Yvrir. You are a servant.”

“A servant with more pride in his blood than you will ever have. It was bestowed upon you at birth, and you frittered it away. I should have known, really. Your mother and father were weak. Spineless. *Useless.*”

The venom of his words is meant to provoke me. He wants to cause me to do something foolish. I refuse to take this bait. If my calculations are correct, I may only have one real shot left in my gun. I cannot afford to waste it on a wild shot.

“They showed you nothing but kindness and loyalty. Something you feign very well but do not actually possess,” I counter, keeping my voice even.

“They did no such thing. They frittered away one of the last great houses of this region. Your inheritance was a crumbling ruin that you willfully and painstakingly let die all these years. You merely picked up where they left off.”

Another barb. It stings, but I refuse to rise to it. Off in the distance, I hear the pounding of gunfire and resist the urge to run towards it. I have to trust that Lyka has everything under control. That she is safe and alive and well and...

If anything happened to her...

Yvrir is still taunting me.

“You were never a man of action. Your only thought was to run away, close things off, take the road well-traveled. And then, you invite scum into your parent’s house. You take pity on a common human thief. What would your parents say if they were to see you now?”

“They would see my kindness and compassion.”

“Wrong! They would see nothing but weakness. And now, instead of eradicating the *infestation* of humans into the tunnels of this great house, you have cohabitated with them. Lived side by side with them. No doubt *bedded* the harlot!”

White hot anger floods my brain. Up until then, I could swat them away as mere nuisances. That last remark, however, sends me over the edge.

Lyka, I now know with a certainty I had previously chosen to ignore, is meant for me. Perhaps she always has been, and it is only now that I can see it.

Our union was no accident. It was ordained. Yvrir cannot disparage it. I will not allow it.

“You lie!”

With a yell, I flip the gun up from my forearm into firing position. Yvrir flinches, readying his own weapon.

Just before triggers are pressed, I register a flicker of movement in Yvrir’s eyes. Something has caught his eye behind me. Against all my better instincts, I turn my head to see. In that instance, Yvrir fires. A second later, I also fire.

Our shots are on target. I’m vaguely aware of the kaleidoscope of gore that erupts from Yvrir’s abdomen as my shot blows outward. He will be dead before he hits the ground.

But his weapon, although lower in power, also has damage to inflict. A thousand daggers enter my chest all at once, tearing and biting at the vital flesh. The impact spins me in the direction I was already looking before the shot was fired.

That's when I see what Yvrir had seen.

Lyka's beautiful face. Lined with anguish and love. Screaming my name. I can feel my legs accordion beneath me, taking me to the ground.

Pain floods my body, but wonder fills my brain.

Lyka is running towards me, her arms outstretched, her hair streaming. Her ropes of red, red hair.

My vision is going black. It won't be long now. A calm voice in my head poses a simple question.

All that anguish. Is it for me?

I surrender to the dark.

LYKA

Relief floods through me as I near the entrance to the area where Yvrir and Mirik are facing off. I can't tell what is going on in Mirik's mind, but his body language suggests he is in control, deflecting Yvrir's insults and taunts.

Yvrir has completely transformed. Gone is the calm mien, the smooth as silk exterior. It galls me to think I was grateful for his shows of kindness when Mirik first brought me aboard. The entire time I worked at the Hall, his outward shell concealed the ugliness of his true self underneath.

When I near the entrance to the space, Yvrir is hurling words at Mirik in an obvious bait to get Mirik to do something irrational.

“.... instead of eradicating the *infestation* of humans into the tunnels of this great house, you have cohabitated with them. Lived side by side with them. No doubt *bedded* the harlot!”

Though I am hearing this *in medias res*, I know to whom he is referring. Mirik does, too, and that is what breaks through his calm armor.

“You lie!” Mirik bellows, readying his gun.

That's when I see my folly. By entering so brashly, I've given myself away. Yvrir's eyes have spotted me, causing Mirik to momentarily hesitate.

Yvrir wastes no time, shooting a hair before Mirik. From where I stand, I see Mirik's magnificent body absorb the blast.

“No!” I shriek, hurling myself forward.

A second shot rips into Yvrir, and he crumples instantly. Already in my mind he has become irrelevant, shunted to the darkest corners of my attention. My only thought is Mirik.

Skidding to a halt near where Mirik lies, I drop to my knees to inspect the injury. It is dire. Blood flows freely from a gaping wound in his chest. I need the medicine woman. I need the ability to turn back time. I need a miracle.

My hands flutter over his body, wary of hurting him further but not wanting to let him go. It is all so clear now. Mirik is my fated mate. He always was, and I let my antiquated notions and irrational fears stand in the way of seeing it.

How is it possible to love someone so much and lose them at the same moment? Why give me the gift of a fated mate only to immediately snatch it away?

Sobbing uncontrollably, I grab Mirik’s hand, whispering over and over. “Please, Mirik. Don’t leave me. Please...” Mirik’s eyes have become glassy and are rolled back. He is growing pale.

“Please....please...”

“Gahhhhh...”

An unholy sound reaches my ears. It does not belong to Mirik but to Yvrir. Yet another devastating blow. A miracle has occurred but to the wrong person. Somehow, beyond all odds, Yvrir is still alive.

Not only that, despite his injury, he is still bent on my destruction. Half crawling, half lurching, he has dragged himself into a sitting position, his gun aimed at me. A crazed look of a man with nothing more to lose infuses his eyes.

“You...are...to...be...destroyed...” His words are demonic, terrifying and I believe him. He is certainly going to die soon, but he will take me down with him unless I can disarm him.

Yvrir's finger twitches over the trigger. With one more touch, it will fire. Springing from my haunches, I dive straight at the Drokan, my fingers splayed like talons.

This catches him off guard, and the shot fires into the cavern ceiling, unleashing some rocks that rain all about us.

My hands scratch and tear at Yvrir's once placid face. Despite the hole in his chest, he somehow finds the strength to fight back, punching upwards into my solar plexus. Raking at his face is the only way I can find to stop myself from being hurled away from him. If I let him go, he'll find his way back to his gun.

We tussle like wild animals, scratching, biting. He refuses to be overpowered. I can feel my injured shoulder tear and grind, the blood flowing freely. I do not know how much longer I can fight this demon.

That's when I see it. A small pond hugging the corner of the small cavern. I cannot tell how deep it is, but it might just be enough.

Digging my feet beneath me, I manage to slide our still entwined fighting bodies closer and closer to the pond's lip. Yvrir cannot see it, as he is hell bent on repeatedly punching at my stomach and chest.

After one more push, we reach the edge. With one great heave, I arch my back to create as much distance as his grasping hands will allow. In doing so, I can wedge my hand under his neck and flip his face to the side.

He has no idea where he is. When I plunge his face into the water from the side, water floods his open mouth.

Sputtering and coughing, I feel his body buck and jump, trying to find precious air. I double down and push even harder. His whole face is submerged now and by straightening my arm, I am able to keep it under.

The bucking intensifies for several tortuous seconds before it starts to slow. If the gun blast didn't kill him, the pond certainly will. I will make sure of that.

Yvrir's dying is achingly slow. Under my bare hands, I feel his life force finally dwindle and cease. The body beneath me eventually goes silent.

My body exhausted and injured, I stand on wobbly feet looking for any signs that Yvrir may have once again cheated death.

Nothing moves.

The pain in my shoulder is surging, along with an existential pain in my heart. With unsteady steps, I clamber back to Mirik's side, taking his hand in mine.

He cannot be dead. There is no future for me without him. I know that now.

"Please, please...."

Tears fall freely from my eyes as I pray to whichever god may be listening.

MIRIK

“Just a few more steps,” Lyka says encouragingly.

“That is easier to say than to do,” I reply, gritting my teeth. My steps are slow and ponderous, but it is a miracle I am upright at all. So miraculous, in fact, that the humans of the settlement often touch my arm as I pass them. As if by doing so, they will receive some of the ‘luck’ that saved me.

Luck had nothing to do with it. It was a combination of many factors. Lyka’s quick thinking, despite her own injury and pain. Berwyq’s ministrations. The tireless work of the medicine woman. It is thanks to these things that I pulled through.

In her quieter moments, however, Lyka says it’s more than that. That I was not ready to meet Krodo in the flesh. That I had unfinished business here. That she and I had so much more to accomplish.

And so, I chose to live.

For myself, I don’t quite know what to think. I recall the pain of Yvrir’s shot. The look on his face when I returned fire. The anguish on Lyka’s face and the sadness that I may never see her again.

Then...it all goes black. The next thing I knew, I was looking into the weeping, ecstatic faces of my nurses. I had been in a coma for several days, my chest bound, someone sitting bedside at all hours.

From what I hear, Lyka took most of the shifts, only leaving my side when forced to by a threatening Berwyq.

“It is worth it, I promise,” Lyka says now, squeezing my hand. This is the longest I have walked since waking up, and I feel the fatigue flowing through me. Yet, I also feel an exhilaration, too. It seems I have finally turned a corner, and there may be more to my life than lying in a bed most of the day.

I want to return to the Mirik of before.

With many exceptions, of course. Life, as we all know it, can never be what it was.

Upon waking, Lyka told me what had occurred. The humans had defeated the mutinous Drokans, killing the men and scaring off the women. Whether they perished in the Great Burn or made their escape elsewhere, I do not know.

While Lyka sat at my bedside, Tyril and Hitro and others had been busy, determined to find food sources underground. The tunnels would be our saving grace, if we could find enough sustenance.

The two men had trekked deep into the tunnel system, meticulously mapping their journey. Soon, they found more underground lakes and even some fertile soils that grew more than just Bilby’s loathsome mushrooms.

Better still, the tunnels erupted into other regions where, through a system of barter and labor trade, Tyril and Hitro were able to bring much needed food and supplies back to the main settlement.

We were saved. In fact, we were thriving.

It is here, now, that I am taking my halting steps forward, at the newest edge of the tunnel system. Lyka has promised me I am close to the end. I am glad of it. I do not want to disappoint her, but I will need to rest soon. Several weeks more are needed before I can return to my old energy.

“One...more...step,” Lyka says, pulling me up a small incline. The tunnel itself has ended, a large opening like an

oculus peering out to the world beyond. It will be the first time I have seen daylight in weeks.

The last step almost knocks the wind out of me but with Lyka's sparkling eyes, I find the motivation to do it. My reward is two-fold: Lyka gives me a wide smile, and the view is...unlike anything I expected.

Gone are the grasses and the rolling hills. Gone is anything I recognize. At first, it is shocking. Bombastic, even. I cannot comprehend it.

Lyka senses my distress and steps closer, taking my hand once more.

"The Great Burn has altered the landscapes beyond anyone's predictions. The moors are gone. Replaced by this," she says, sweeping her hand outward.

"Desert," I breathe. As I continue to stare, I see the ghosts of the hills I once knew. Instead of grass and trees, they are now home to sand and craggy rocks. The Great Burn has altered the entire landscape.

"It's like this all over. New regions are being determined. It will never be the same." Lyka looks down sadly for a moment before composing herself and looking back at me, resignation in her eyes. "But life will go on. It has to."

A ribbon of many emotions spool through my injured chest. Sadness at the destruction, pain at losing Monteluke Hall which is now nothing more than a ruined hulk of stones, frustration at my own futility and finally.... hope.

I could let the darker emotions carry me under, cause me to rave and yell like Yvrir once did. Or I can choose another path. I could choose to live in this new world.

Taking both of Lyka's hands in mine, I know my choice. We are fated mates. Berwyq knew it long before we did, but she could not reveal it. Only we could embrace it as truth.

Now that I have, I can face anything. Monteluke Hall may be no more. The moors may have disintegrated into sand and dust, but Lyka's smile, her hair, her eyes, her love signify life for me.

Life for us both.

“Lyka. Life *will* go on. The only way I know how. With you at my side. I cannot kneel at your feet, but I ask you now, with all my heart – will you be my fated mate? Will you marry me?”

The tears are cascading from her eyes as she smiles and nods, unable to contain her joy.

“Yes, my Mirik. Always.”

I take her into my arms, the buttery light of the sun I have not seen draping itself over the reddish sands of the rolling desert hills. The sandy moors. What was once my home, now will be again.

A new life will begin here, stronger than before.

LYKA

The timing is perfect. At the crossroads where afternoon meets evening, Mirik and I proclaim our vows to one another.

We stand at the top of a tall sand dune that falls gently to a small valley below. There in that valley, nestled along a small river that weaves its way through, lies the new settlement. It houses the brave humans that struggled for so long to have a home to call their own.

Despite the sandy environment and its brutal birth, we have called our new home Wellspring.

Now simply a cluster of simple houses and work areas, everyone is hopeful that Wellspring will grow and thrive. Already, new couples have formed. New babies have joined the growing population. Progress is inevitable.

Mirik and I are next in the line of couples making their union official. While we are by no means the last, we are certainly the most unique.

A Drokan and a human. Fated mates. From all angles, our love story is compelling and draws out every inhabitant of Wellspring. It is the wedding of the season.

The excitement surrounding us is thrilling, but it is not what fuels me. That belongs solely to Mirik.

His recovery is almost complete, though it took months. He has largely healed, and his youthful body and energy have returned. Only a glaring scar that sunbursts across his chest

serves as a reminder of what we went through. Of the cost of change.

Berwyq believes it will fade in time, but I do not think either of us mind. For us, the scar is a tangible symbol of what we were willing to lose in order to be together.

Besides, Mirik is not the only one with scars to bear. I have my own, now on display in my asymmetrical shift wedding dress. A raised line of pink and cream, it traverses across the top of my shoulder ending at the top of my arm. I find it beautiful – a mark of remembrance.

“You look incredible,” Mirik whispers as our ceremony begins. I return his compliment with a wink.

Mirik wears flowing linen garments, his wings on display. Our new life in the desert has changed the very clothes we wear, and his copper skin has grown even darker in the hot desert sun.

Tyrl stands between us, proudly officiating. Berwyq will bless us, overlaying our heads with ancient herbs and flowers in a ritual of unity. The rest of the humans will chant and cheer, content to see Wellspring’s leaders married at last.

For we are truly leaders now. Our actions in the tunnels have earned us that right, and we are consulted on everything in the running of Wellspring. From farming to planning, government to schooling, Mirik and I are involved.

It is strange to go from the fringes to a place of power. We have both resolved to keep our feet on the ground – to always remember where we came from and what we have lost. If we go astray, our scars will serve as reminders.

“Uniting as one, that is why we gather here today...” Tyrl begins, his sonorous voice booming over the crowd.

I barely hear the rest. My eyes drink in my groom. The deep pools of his eyes, the nobility of his horns. Our hands rest in each other’s, our gazes meant for no other.

Berwyq blesses us. The heady scent of desert flowers and prayer oils fills my nose, and I become almost dizzy with it. Mirik keeps me standing.

Finally, the moment I have waited for most arrives. “Seal this union with a kiss and may all your lives remain infused with love,” Tyril intones.

Our kiss is met with cheers and ululations. Flowers are strewn and feet are stamped. Mirik’s lips are soft, and I try not to let my head get lost in thoughts of our wedding night.

Stay present.

Immediately, the celebration begins. A feast has been laid out at the bottom of the dune. Simple tents with white muslin floating in the breeze cover us as we drink, eat and sing songs.

Everywhere we look, we are greeted with happy faces. Mirik’s hand is constantly being shaken. I receive kisses on both cheeks so many times, I lose track of where I am.

Mirik is there to save me. His hand finds mine, and we weave to the large space reserved for dancing.

At his signal, the musicians, a rag-tag group holding home-made instruments, begin a soulful wedding song. I hear sighs of recognition from the elders. A song of good times gone.

I lose myself in Mirik’s arms as we sway to the song. The happiness of the humans around me gives me hope, gives me a reason to thrive. But it is Mirik that will feed my soul and my heart.

With him, my life will be rich and full. Fuller than I ever thought possible.

When the dance ends, the feasting begins, and all ceremony drops away. Now, only the revelry matters. Even the most staid elder among us seems to let their guard down and enjoy themselves. Drink and food are plentiful, and I cannot recall a happier day.

Until, of course, Mirik whispers in my ear. We are resting from another round of dancing, draped over the small table where the remains of our dinner are littered.

“I have made a special request to the musicians,” he says, a mischievous look on his face.

“Oh?”

“An old folk song that I believe you humans get very excited about.”

I kiss his hand, winking. “And what will that achieve, do you think?”

“Simple. A distraction. You and I will be able to sneak away.”

I kiss his hand again.

The song that has been playing ends, followed by a small lull before the strains of the next song begins. As soon as it does, a wail erupts from the assembled guests, and everyone rushes the floor.

Mirik is brilliant.

With a blinding smile, he grabs my hand and takes advantage of the situation, running with me away from the table.

We skirt around the main tent and down through Wellspring until we come to the end of the settlement. Though the Hall has been demolished, the entrance to the tunnels has been enshrined and protected by stone gates.

The tunnels are still an incredible source to Wellspring. They provide our water, some farming, protection and storage. What they lack in sunlight, they give in almost everything else.

It is into the tunnels that Mirik leads me, his hand in mine.

Weaving through them, now so familiar, I sense the shimmer of the small passage before I see it.

Stooping low, Mirik pulls me, his eagerness rising.

I know where we are headed. The magical lake awaits us...

LYKA

Mirik walks backwards, his eyes never leaving mine. I feel the short train of my dress trailing in the shiny grit of the tunnel floor, but he ensures that I do not trip.

Suddenly, the tunnel opens out into the cavern where the lake, calm as ever, sits waiting. We have returned to where it all began, and I feel its alluring pull even as I feel the tug of Mirik's hand.

"I've made a few minor adjustments," Mirik says, his voice thrumming with excitement. I have no idea what he means, but I'm eager to find out.

Tracing our way along the shoreline, we reach the uneven steps that lead up to the plateau.

"Mind your step," Mirik instructs. Twisting the hem of my train around my wrist, I safely tuck it by my hip and begin to climb. I have a feeling something awaits me at the top.

What I find there is better than I could have imagined. A palette of sorts lies on the ground, covered in furs, blankets and sumptuous pillows. Where before we abandoned our bodies to the dust and dirt, Mirik has provided a soft, welcoming space.

Candles and crystal lanterns border the bed, as well as a carafe of sweet-smelling wine, gleaming fruit and two goblets.

"It's perfect," I gasp.

"No. It is not. You are."

Mirik approaches me, putting his strong hands on the top of my arms. With his thumb, he caresses the scar along my shoulder, his gaze lovingly taking it in. Then, with one delicate movement, he bends forward and kisses the length of it, giving tiny, loving kisses. Shivers echo through me.

Once he reaches the end of the scar, he changes direction and kisses me fully on the mouth. His tongue is warm, tasting of red wine. Eagerly, I kiss him back, feeling my body warming and surrendering.

My hands spread wide over his torso, feeling the hills and valleys of the muscles just beneath his linen shirt. The rise and fall of his breathing now becomes more rapid.

Though the air in the cavern is chilled, our bodies are not. Heat rises between us as our desire grows.

Mirik wastes no more time. Reaching behind me, he tugs at the simple mechanism that keeps my shift dress together. In one movement, I feel a rush of air tickle my back as the fabric falls away.

I wear nothing underneath, a scandalous surprise I had been saving since I dressed for the ceremony itself. Mirik's eyes widen with appreciation. Somewhere near my stomach, I can feel his cock rise as well. Truly worth it.

He goes to kiss me again, but I push him back. If we are to unite in this sacred place, we must be equals in all things. With one flick of my head, he understands and undresses slowly and deliberately, letting my eyes drink him in.

Soon, we stand naked facing each other, our magnificent and scarred bodies ready to become one. Our past has given us the foundation, our present will unite us, and our future will be ours to make.

I step forward once more and kiss him, our skin now brushing. At the exact same moment, we shiver in anticipation. Our kiss ends, but our eyes continue to drink each other in.

Taking my hand, Mirik leads me to the platform bed and invites me to lie upon it. Every motion is gentle, his touches

soft.

The bed is luxury itself. Warm and supple, I lie back, enjoying the velvet sensation against my skin. I can feel my desire rising, a wetness down below.

Mirik lies beside me, his scar standing in stark relief against his shiny skin. I caress it, feeling its ridges. In return, he kisses me once more, his hand drifting down my neck and onto my breast. The warmth of his palm only adds to my desire.

Our kissing quickens as the need grows. My nipple is hard under his fingers, and I feel shots of pleasure that cause me to moan and hum.

Mirik's hard member brushes against my side. With one hand, I grasp it gently, causing Mirik to gasp. I love giving him pleasure.

Slowly, I stroke him, even as our kissing continues. In turn, he lets his hand trail from my breast downward, past my stomach and to the wetness that is waiting for him. When he reaches inside, it is my turn to gasp.

“Oh...hmmmmmm.”

It feels divine.

For many moments, we pleasure each other, our mouths hungry, our hands busy. It only adds to the real moment of connection that we both seek, that we both need.

“Please,” I murmur, unable to stand it any longer. I need him inside me. I need to feel our union is complete.

With a growl, Mirik complies, flipping to hover over me, the tent of his body heat surrounding me.

Reaching upwards, I pull his wings towards me, signaling my readiness.

A thrill connects us as our eyes lock. A moment later, Mirik slides his cock inside, sealing us as one. My eyes break the stare only to roll upwards. It feels like heaven.

Pausing for a moment, Mirik then begins to thrust. He goes slowly at first but quickly heightens his movements. I wrap my legs around him, pulling him deeper and deeper inside me.

The feeling is intense; building up like a tower within, ready to find its peak. I close my eyes, pull Mirik even more within me, feel his hips move and gyrate. There's going to be a moment, very soon, where we won't be able to hold out anymore. It's about to be here and...

“Oh!”

“Ah!”

Our exclamations of release bounce off the cavern walls. The magical lake acts as a witness to our communion.

Moments pass and we stay in a state of purest joy before reality settles back upon us.

Mirik collapses slowly upon me as our breathing slows. I feel his heart through his chest.

“I love you,” he whispers.

“And I, you,” I reply.

We lie like this until I feel another pull. Something unexpected.

Tapping Mirik on the shoulder, he gives me a quizzical look.

“Jump with me,” I say, extricating myself from under him.

He barely has time to register what I mean when I hurl myself off the plateau edge. As before, the purple waters, so warm and welcoming, surround my newly married body like an embrace.

A second later, Mirik splashes next to me, his laughter echoing.

“Come here!” he bellows, lacing his arms around me.

We laugh and float and kiss under the canopy of this magical place. Our place. A place of discovery.

Life, as we now know it, is just beginning.

The End.

To read a slice of life between Lyka and Mirik join my newsletter here: <https://www.subscribepage.com/AthenaStorm>

PREVIEW

Love is a precious commodity in the Athenaverse, and it transcends human or alien. Check out the planet Kiphia, where the alien rules fall in love with their human servants and must breach not just a different culture, but class as well.

Nanny for the Alien King

By Athena Storm and Tara Starr

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KRAVATH

I stare at the three children in front of me as they tumble around on the throne room floor.

Can I see any resemblance to Balak in their young faces? I catch just a glimpse of my dead brother's nose here, his chin there. I barely knew his wife, so whatever features might belong to her are lost on me.

The one thing I'm certain of is that the male's pale blue skin will eventually deepen to Balak's royal indigo.

One of the triplets lets out a squawk as another one sits on her face. The high-pitched noise is surprisingly loud and echoes around the high ceiling of the throne room. I wince.

Balak and I weren't close, but family is family. I know it's my responsibility to care for his toddlers now that he's gone, even if I have no idea what to do with these little monsters. I don't even know their names.

"My King?"

I lift my head. My chief financial advisor is standing at the double-doored entrance. He raises an eyebrow as he takes in the rambunctious playing of my new charges.

"Yes, Larim? What is it?"

"King Kravath, your council meeting? It began a few minutes ago."

I curse and stand up abruptly. It isn't like me to forget my responsibilities.

I glare at the triplets. Having to deal with them has distracted me from my duties, which is a problem.

No sooner have I thought this that the problem gets worse.

A shattering wail bursts through the air of the throne room. One of the little females has the other one's ear between her fingers and is pulling—hard. The little male child begins laughing hysterically and poking his siblings.

“Enough!” I bellow, striding over to them. This only makes the upset one cry harder. Instinctively, I pick her up, so that her sister can no longer yank at her ear.

Unfortunately, that means I now have a screaming child in my arms.

I hold her out in front of me and try to jiggle her, as I have a vague memory of seeing my mother do the same with my youngest brother. Rather than being calmed, the child yells even louder, which I can't help but think is quite a feat for such tiny lungs.

For no reason that I can see, the other two triplets decide to join in.

Now, all three toddlers are howling fit to call down the Divine Ones, and I feel ridiculous. A king should not appear so stupid, bested by a mere child two years of age. I tuck the girl under one arm and use the other to beckon to a page standing near the dais.

“You! Come take this!”

The page scurries forward and hesitantly accepts his sobbing burden. Clearly, he has no more idea what to do than I. I am unbothered by this.

He is an attendant and I am a king, with royal responsibilities. Better that this page, rather than I, waste time attempting to figure out how to soothe a young one.

Larim and I exit the throne room, the sounds of distressed triplets following us down the hallway. We're both grimacing.

“My King, may I offer a suggestion?” asks my advisor, tentatively.

“Please do,” I reply. “My brother seems to have made no plans for the care of his offspring. Of course, it was right for me to bring them here, but none of my staff has experience with children.”

“Well, I’m sure the former Prince of the Second Isle could not have anticipated the accident that claimed him and his lovely wife,” says Larim, in a diplomatic tone. “I imagine he did not think it necessary to make plans for the chance his children should become orphans.”

“My brother was foolish not to prepare for any and all possibilities. Your suggestion, Larim?” I’m impatient. I don’t need the man to hedge around.

“Ah—I would take this opportunity to remind my Lord that it would be prudent for you to take a wife.”

I glare at my advisor, and he nearly trips over his feet.

“I don’t want a wife or need one right now,” I say, firmly.

“But my King, you need to ensure you have an heir,” persists Larim, more bravely than I’d have thought. “And a wife could care for Prince Balak’s children.”

“Procuring a wife would be more trouble than it’s worth,” I retort, letting my irritation show. “I’d have to select an appropriate female, formally court her, and arrange a royal wedding as well as the Queen’s coronation. That does nothing to solve my current dilemma with Balak’s brats.”

“An heir though, King Kravath...”

“I have enough annoyances dealing with the ridiculous fact that my libertine of a younger brother is inheriting governance over Second Isle.” I stop in the middle of the hall and turn to my advisor. “There is plenty of time for me to wed and bed a female, Larim. I am in the prime of life, I do not need an heir anytime soon.”

“You did just say your brother was foolish not to prepare for all contingencies,” Larim points out.

I ignore that and resume walking.

“What I need is a dedicated caretaker for the children,” I say, ending the discussion regarding an heir. I’m sick of my entire council pestering me on that front. “That’s the answer. I’ll find and pay a female to keep the triplets content and out of my way.”

“My King, where would you find such a female?” Larim looks puzzled and a little scandalized, which regrettably I cannot blame him for.

He doesn’t need to tell me that no Kiphian woman works. The only paths open to them are as wives, priestesses, or sacred warrior maidens—not servants, even for the ruler of the Ocean Kingdom.

“The human quarter.” I permit myself a smirk of satisfaction at my neat solution. “All the humans work. Most of them are poor enough that they have to. So, it’s merely a question of finding the right one for this job.”

LIARA

I close the door on the last of the kids with a smile. It was a long day, but a pleasant one.

Tonn is getting good at reading whole sentences, and little Marie can finally count to ten with confidence. It's hard to teach children from such a wide age range, but today at least, it was rewarding.

"Ouch!" I stumble as I suddenly feel a sharp pain in the sole of my bare foot. I catch myself on the side of my worn table and look down. There's one of the tungsten alloy blocks that Adri so loves to play with. Its edges are rounded, but stepping down hard on it hurts anyway.

I groan. I guess this block is my reminder to clean up before I do anything else. We have tidying time at the end of the day, but something always gets missed. Several somethings, actually.

I'm on my hands and knees trying to sweep up the sand that always gets tracked into my little shack when there's a loud knock. I sit up, confused. Sometimes the little ones forget things, but they would never rap on my door so forcefully.

"Yes?" I open the door a crack, peering around it. This part of the human quarter is safer than others, but there's still trouble sometimes.

"Is this the home of Liara Zavier?"

"Who's asking?" I push the door a little wider, and to my surprise I see a Kiphian soldier standing on the other side.

“His sovereign majesty King Kravath, exalted ruler of the Ocean Kingdom, requires your presence,” intones the Kiphian. I now recognize that he’s wearing a royal uniform.

“Um, there must be a mistake,” I tell him, confused and a little nervous. “Why would the King want to see me?”

“There is no mistake.” The Kiphian rudely pushes my door open all the way and folds his arms. “Do not keep his sovereign majesty waiting, human.”

Two other soldiers are at the first one’s shoulder. They all look stern and impatient.

“Oh, uh, okay. Let me put on some shoes, please?”

The first soldier gives a curt nod. I gulp and grope behind the door for my shoes. My confusion is threatening to become panic. Humans are of zero interest to regular Kiphians, let alone to the royal family, who’s ignored us from day one. I can’t think of a single reason why the King would demand to see me, which makes this kind of scary.

Truth be told, there are some humans on Kiphia who probably spend their entire lives without interacting with the natives. That’s the degree to which the two races are separated.

Twenty-five years ago, as the war between the Alliance and Coalition began to get even more brutal, our colony ship departed from Erebus. The colonists had come from all over the Interstellar Human Confederation. My dad had come from Novaria and my mom had come from Titanus Vox. They had met on the journey and by the time the colony ship had settled down on Kiphia, they had fallen in love.

The Kiphians had invited the humans to come create a base of operations on Kiphia. The various kingdoms had felt that it would cement Kiphia, on the edges of the League of Non Aligned Races and on the boundaries of the Frontier as a hub for interstellar commerce.

And there was some, to be sure. But the economic boom didn’t take hold the way the colony planners had hoped. The war focused the eyes of the galaxy away from the Frontier. The brutality of the battle of Horus IV shocked most sapient

races into digging in and spending their resources protecting their core systems before venturing out.

And so, the humans on Kiphia sought to build out a life. The Kiphians had hoped at first the humans would herald economic growth. But when nothing happened, they began to impose a new order. One that called for separate societies.

And so, here I am, wrapped in curiosity as to why I'm dealing with a Kiphian at all.

Have I done something wrong? I wrack my memory as I shove my feet into my boots, shoving away the stupid thought that I wish I had fancier clothes for a royal audience. It doesn't matter what I look like, especially if I don't know why I'm being summoned.

Perhaps the King has confused me with someone else? I run a makeshift half-school half-daycare for the kids of human colonists. There can't be anything troublemaking about that.

There isn't another Liara on Kiphia that I know of though, and after what happened back on Earth, I'm not even sure there's another Xavier in existence anymore.

"I'm ready to go," I say, pushing away that last thought too. Now is definitely not the time to wallow in bad memories.

The soldiers escort me to a very shiny hover-carriage. I've seen them, usually from afar, but getting to go in one is all new to me. My mouth falls open at the lusciously outfitted interior. Is that fur on the seats?

As soon as I'm inside, the vessel launches into motion. It glides through the streets faster than any Lork could ever walk. The gigantic turtle-esque creatures are the only forms of transit I've seen since the colonists got here, so I can't help but glue my face to the window and watch everything whizz by.

"Wow," I sigh, as we leave the city streets to head up towards the palace, which sits on the highest hill. The view to my right is incredible. Cerulean ocean sparkles underneath the late afternoon sun, and the pinkish-orange sands of this planet glimmer like they're made up of precious gemstones.

All too quickly, the ride ends. One of the soldiers yanks the door open and hustles me out. I want to turn around and take in the view, but I'm already being shepherded into the palace.

While I wish I were still outside, this inside is pretty impressive too. As I'm bustled down a series of hallways, I catch sight of statues made from precious metal, silken curtains, and ceilings of exquisite inlay. I'm even taken through a hallway made entirely of glass, tinged the same salmon as the beaches of Kiphia.

The soldiers and I come to a halt with a jolt, and they push open two massive doors. Before I've even caught my breath, we're entering an impressive throne room.

"Presenting the human Liara Zavier, as requested, most illustrious King," says the soldier, bowing deeply. I wonder if it's part of the job to use as many fancy words to refer to the King as possible. Then I realize that everyone around me is bowing, and quickly drop into an awkward curtsy.

"Rise," says a deep, rich voice.

I lift my head and see a Kiphian male sitting on the tall throne. This must be King Kravath. He's beyond striking, the skin over his powerful muscles an intense saturated gold, with dark blue tattoos curving beneath his shirt.

My face heats up as I realize I'm staring.

"I've received information that you are the best with children, among all the human women." The King sounds almost bored. I don't know if I'm supposed to respond or not, but I give it a try.

"That is difficult to verify, your majesty." I incline my head. "However, I do run the only school for human young ones."

"I'm aware," drawls King Kravath, "but you are to do that no longer. Your new purpose is to tend these three."

With a gesture, the King waves forward a young Kiphian male struggling to manage a trio of Kiphian toddlers. One of them is trying to bite him.

“Excuse me?” I find myself saying, shock and anger warring in my throat. “Are you trying to offer me a job?”

“No,” says the King with an arrogant laugh. “This is not an offer. It is a command. These brats are your problem now.”

KRAVATH

I keep my tone curt, so as not to give away how startled I am by the human woman's beauty. The moment she entered my throne room, I couldn't look away from her. I caught one tantalizing glimpse of brilliant green eyes before she dropped into a shaky curtsy, and I was mesmerized.

Now she stands before me, those gorgeous eyes blazing. I should be displeased by her lack of deference, but instead, a surge of desire stirs in me for the first time in a long while. I can't stop myself from gazing at her, noting the way her dark hair cascades in curls over her shoulders. The way her worn clothing clings to her lush curves.

"Excuse me?" She's speaking, and I straighten at the insolence in her voice. "Are you trying to offer me a job?"

"No." I laugh at the idea that this human of no consequence has a choice in the matter. She may be beautiful, but she's still a nobody. "This is not an offer. It is a command. These brats are your problem now."

"Ah. Well, unfortunately, your majesty, I refuse." The human crosses her arms. Her face is calm but there's temper in her voice. "My students need me. There's no one else to take care of them. With all the kingdom's resources at your disposal, great King, I imagine you can easily find someone else to take care of whoever these children are."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. How dare this female question me! No, not simply question me—flat out turn down

a command from her King. Rage flares in my chest, chasing away the shreds of desire.

“You do not get to refuse,” I say, through gritted teeth. “I am your King. You humans may have your own land, but that land was given to you by me and lies within my Kingdom. You will follow my orders like any other subject of mine!”

“Humans may be your subjects but we’re not your slaves,” she snaps back, her composure cracking. “Do you make a habit of ripping people from their lives on a whim, King Kravath?”

My name on her lips sends a shiver down my back. It almost feels like the blunt spikes of my spine are tingling, but I dismiss that as nonsense. I must be so angry that I’m losing my senses.

“You should be honored to serve me,” I roar. “You don’t know who these children are? They are the offspring of my late brother, Prince Balak of the Second Isle. I am putting royal blood in your care! Your former activities are nothing compared to this prestigious responsibility.”

“For you to say so, you must never have had the joy of children who put their trust and affection in you,” says the woman, her tone cool once more. “My students rely on me and are dear to me. Royal or not, I have no attachment to the children you suggest I tend to.”

“I could destroy your simple school.” I follow the woman’s lead and replace the fire in my voice with ice. “I could do any number of things to make you do as I wish. Yet all I will say is this: you will serve as caretaker to my brother’s triplets, and that’s final. I will pay you handsomely.”

She opens her mouth to spout more brazen defiance, I am sure, but I cut her off. I’m not finished.

“Moreover, if you keep arguing with me, you’ll see no less than a week in the dungeons for your trouble. Do I make myself clear?”

By my last word, fury has made my voice so loud it booms throughout the throne room. For a moment, I am pleased by

the flash of fear I see on the human's face. Then, a familiar wailing begins.

I look down and see that all three of my brother's brood are sobbing. The page is crouched down among them, frantically trying to shush them. It seems his efforts only make them cry harder.

I jerk up, ready to direct further wrath at the woman who has indirectly caused this irritation. Yet, the words die on my lips.

She's staring at the miserable triplets, a strange look in her eyes. Her face is pale, and her lips are pursed. I'm not sure what to make of her expression, so I wait.

"You scared them," she murmurs. "They can tell you're angry."

"If I am angry, then it is your insolence that has caused it." I cross my arms forbiddingly. "Human, I have already spent too much time on you. The nursery, or the dungeon. Make your choice."

I see the woman's fists clench at her sides. I prepare myself to dispatch her to the dungeons, but find a strange resistance deep in my chest.

Could I send this strangely compelling female to languish in a stone prison? I am a warrior, a leader who does whatever he must, but somehow the image of her cold and alone in the dark gives me pause.

Luckily, my will is not put to the test.

"Fine," says the human. "I will be your nieces and nephew's nanny—on one condition."

"And what is that?" I growl, danger underlying my question.

"I want you to send someone to my house and get a few of my things." She stands tall and proud. I'm unwillingly reminded that she is remarkably attractive. "If you're going to unceremoniously force a new living situation and job on me,

the least you can do is get some of the things I wasn't given time to pack."

I bristle at the idea that anything from her human hovel would be necessary when she'll have access to much of what the palace offers. However, I don't want to continue this confrontation.

Already, I'll have to command my pages to never repeat what they've just seen. I don't want it getting out that I've let this woman get away with blatant disrespect.

"Consider it done." I wave my hand, demonstrating that such a foolish request is beneath me. Without waiting to hear any more from this stunning, infuriating female, I stalk down the dais and head for the door.

I've secured a caretaker for the triplets. I should be pleased with that success, yet somehow, I'm even more frustrated than before.

LIARA

I turn and watch the ruler of the Ocean Kingdom storm away. Both his powerful shoulders and the pointed ridges of his spine strain against the fabric of his shirt. The spine continues, rising out of his collar and up the back of his shining head. Locks of beautiful dark blue hair cascade down.

His colored head, which I would like to throw something at.

Kravath—who deserves no title as far as I'm concerned—is the most arrogant, imperious, entitled person I've ever met. Everything he just said made me so angry I could barely see.

He thinks that what he wants is the only thing that should matter! How does that make for a good, fair ruler?

Fuming, I turn back around to stare at the three sobbing Kiphian toddlers. The attendant previously in charge of them has fled, as have all of the others in the room. I'm alone with a trio of alien children who I know nothing about.

What in the hell am I supposed to do now?

I remember the one trying to bite the Kiphian wrangling them all and sigh. I wonder if these royal triplets have been raised as badly as Kravath clearly was. Grudgingly, I take a step towards them. Then, I really, truly look at the little ones and feel my heart soften.

The pale green child is crying so hard, sobs are becoming hiccups. All three of them are holding onto each other, like

they've got no one else in the world. I guess, given Kravath's behavior, they don't.

"You can't be that different from human children, can you?" I croon, keeping my voice low and pleasant as I approach. "I can't tell how old you are as easily, but we'll figure that out together, won't we?"

I sit on the floor an arm's reach away from the triplets. I note that only one, the pale blue child, has the line of nubby points that will grow into a spine. A little boy, then, and the other two with smooth backs are little girls.

"Hello there," I wave, slow and friendly. "I'm Liara."

The trio's weeping slows, but doesn't stop. They gaze at me with distrust, even as they gasp for breath in between sobs.

"A star came down and went ker-splash," I say in a singsong, beginning the first little rhyme I think of. "And all the little children laughed! The pond went bright and then went dark. But suddenly, they heard a bark!"

The triplets are mostly hiccuping now, their faces still wet but with no new tears flowing.

"From the water bounced a dog, his coat as bright as moonlit fog," I continue. The youngsters begin to inch towards me. "The children clapped and reached right out, and stroked their new friend on his snout. A fallen star become a pup, to always love and cheer them up!"

"Pup," says the lavender little female. "Pup pup pup pup."

"Oh! You like that word?" I smile and try to figure out if she's old enough to be verbal. If she were a human child, her size would suggest yes. Since she's Kiphian, I simply can't tell.

"Pup." She nods, staring at me.

"You don't have dogs here on Kiphia," I say, since talking seems to calm them. "But other animals can have pups, too."

The little girl cocks her head at me. Then, as though listening to an inner signal, she clambers into my lap. At once,

the other two are doing the same. They are not small, and suddenly I have a pile of wriggling toddlers all over me.

“Okay, okay,” I laugh. “Hold on, let me help you.”

I arrange the triplets as best I can, so everyone feels like they’re being held. The lavender girl’s head is practically in my armpit, but that’ll have to do for now.

“There we are.” I use the sleeve of my shirt to clean the tears and snot off my new friends’ faces. Turns out, Kiphian kids have as many boogers as human ones. That shouldn’t be oddly comforting, but it is.

“Now, can you tell me your names?” I ask, hoping they can. I’d guess they’re just under two years old, but the Kiphians are bigger than humans, so they could be younger.

All three regard me with big eyes.

“I’ll go first,” I say. I introduced myself once, but they probably didn’t hear it over their crying. “My name is Liara. What’s yours?”

“Lee-ra,” repeats the pale green child, her voice sudden and startlingly clear.

“Li-a-ra,” I say again, more slowly. “How about your name?”

“Velli.” The little girl wiggles on my knee. “My name Velli.”

“Velli! What a beautiful name!” I’m thrilled, already excited to not have to think of them as the ‘green one’ or the ‘blue one’ anymore. “Hello, Velli!”

“Parik,” proclaims the boy. “Parik.” He pokes himself in the chest, and I smother a laugh.

“Well, hello to you too, Parik.” I smile at him. “Another wonderful name!”

“I am Reena,” announces the third child, tucked under my arm. I’m startled by her complete sentence, in comparison to the other two. Is this a personality thing, or are Kiphian children a lot more complicated than I realized?

“Nice to meet you, Reena. You have a very pretty name, too.” I squeeze all three of them. “I’m so happy to learn all of your names!”

The triplets nestle into me, their small bodies soft and warm. Almost against my will, I’m utterly charmed. They settled down remarkably fast and are clearly hungry for affection.

I wonder silently what happened to their parents. Kravath said they were the children of his late brother, but nothing more than that. Did he even know their names?

I let out a soft sigh. I trust that someone else will take care of my students back in the human quarter. For now, I have to do my best for these little people. It’s not their fault they were stuck with King Kravath the Brutish and Rude.

A voice in my head says he might be a brute, but there’s something else about him... Something compelling. I try to ignore it, but I can’t shake that first image of him, sitting on the throne.

Magnetic. Intriguing.

Trouble.

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