



# TWO KINGS

HUNGRY HEART  
BOOK #3

LAURA S. FOX

**Two Kings**  
**Hungry Heart #3**

**By**

**Laura S. Fox**

*To Dave,  
My endless gratitude  
For making it possible for me  
To create such an epic story,  
With equally epic characters,  
Laura S. Fox*

*To Laura,  
Your talent is a gift to me  
I love these characters and their love for one another  
And their love for their world.  
Dave Kemp*

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M/M Romance

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This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

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## Chapter One – Welcome to The Quiet Woods

The nights became balmy than ever as they approached The Quiet Woods, but Toru could tell Varg sniffed something in the air that changed while the desert surrendered to make room for the lush vegetation announcing that they were getting near their destination. While he decided to heed Duril's advice and keep to himself just how much he wanted Claw to join them after they left The Quiet Woods, it didn't mean that he didn't use all the time left to convince the bearshifter that their tightknit group was all he needed, and maybe even a little something on top of that.

Right now, though, as the full moon rose over the crowns of trees they could spot in the distance, he chose to join Varg for one of his sleepless nights. The wolf inside his friend had a special place in his heart for the celestial body above, and Toru sat quietly by Varg's side.

Varg's body was covered by his wolf coat, and he looked majestic as he stood there, in the moonlight. The night's air left small droplets of early dew in the wolf's fur, and now and then, Varg twitched his body briefly to shake them from his coat, while preserving the heat inside.

"We're close," Toru said, breaking the silence. "To Claw's home."

"Indeed," Varg continued. "Ready for a run, kitty?" he asked and leaped from the small hill on which he had been perched until now.

It wasn't really a question, but an invitation. Toru shifted and followed, enjoying the sound of their ragged breathing in the night air, as they rushed through the tall grass with one destination in mind as it seemed.

They gave playful chase until they reached the first line of tall trees, the darkness of their bark and leaves broken only by the silver lining cast on their crowns by the gentle moon above. As Claw had explained to them, the transition between the desert and The Quiet Woods stretched over quite a bit of land, so they weren't really there yet.

Unlike he and Varg who felt restless under a full moon, Duril and Claw were at their improvised camp, sleeping soundly. There were questions on his mind, and Toru suspected that Varg had a few of his own.

"I got you," he shouted victoriously when he stopped a breath away from his companion.

"It was a race, kitty. You were supposed to be faster than me not catch me," the wolfshifter taunted him.

Toru shifted back into his human and sat on the grass, all the while taking in the tall trees in front of them. "Do you think The Quiet Woods are as beautiful as Claw says?" he blurted out.

Varg chuckled. Unlike him, he preferred his wolf's coat tonight. "It sounds to me like you're hoping for sour grapes."

“Sour grapes? Eww, no way I’d eat any kind of grapes, let alone the sour kind.”

Varg laughed wholeheartedly this time. “What I mean is that maybe you wish, only a little, that Claw’s woods are not as enticing as they used to be.”

“It would mean that he could join us without halfhearted feelings,” Toru replied promptly. “I mean, I don’t want him to have any regrets and such.”

“Then you’re sure he will join us.” Varg paused for a moment and breathed in the sweet, rich scent of the forest. “Is that it?”

“I’m more and more convinced. And I think he likes you too much to abandon us,” Toru said. “I mean, not abandon,” he tried to take it back, “but you know, leave us... without him.”

“You don’t have to worry so much, kitty,” Varg offered and scooted closer to bump into Toru’s shoulder playfully. “Claw is an adventurer at heart. He speaks fondly of the place of his birth because he’s also a creature of the earth beneath our feet. But just as we all enjoy a little reprieve from the madness we’re fighting against every once in a while, he longs for this place where he can dig his toes in and know it to be home.”

“You mean that he enjoys adventure way too much to decide to stay here and live like an old man?”

Varg burst into laughter. “I believe that Claw is as far as he could be from an old man. My hips surely know that,” he added with a tinge of mirth.

Toru snickered and sank both hands into Varg’s rich coat. He let their noses touch and nuzzled his against the wolfshifter’s damp one. “That was quite the surprise. I didn’t know you’d let anyone-”

Varg growled. “What do you mean by anyone, kitty?”

“All right, not anyone, but you know, that you... you know.” Toru didn’t want to say it for the simple reason that he didn’t want Varg to feel uncomfortable.

“I suppose I do,” Varg replied, clearly amused. “I know why I’m not sleeping tonight, but why aren’t you?” he asked, changing tack and steering the conversation into the direction Toru had hoped for ever since he had followed the wolfshifter into the night.

“My head is just too full of thoughts,” Toru admitted. “It’s not just Claw and our adventures. I feel... my heart is too full at times.”

“Is it your head or your heart, kitty? You should pick one.”

Toru sighed deeply and his shoulders slumped. “Do you really believe it, Varg? Do you think that I’m destined to do these things, whatever they are?”

“I do.” The response delivered to him was short and to the point. There didn’t appear to be any shred of doubt in Varg’s heart.

“But why me? I’m just a tigershifter like any other tigershifter.”

Varg nuzzled his cheek gently with that wet nose, making Toru sneeze. They both laughed.

“You’re not like any other tigershifter, Toru,” Varg pointed out. “Elidias confirmed it, if there was any need to do so. And I cannot believe that you would see yourself as anything less than the king of the world.”

Toru looked down, feeling embarrassed by so much praise and trust. “I don’t want to be the king of the world, to wear a crown and listen to people complain about their crops.”

To his surprise, Varg shifted into his human and took him by the shoulders. His body was warm and pleasant as the dawn was getting closer and the temperature dropped. “You’re not that kind of king. You’re the kind that saves the world, not one made to sit on a throne. Yet, I speak nothing but the truth I believe in my heart when I say that this world will raise you statues and invite you to sit at the helm, once you defeat this evil you have been fighting for so long.”

“We have been fighting,” Toru hurried to correct him. “I’d probably be nothing but bones scattered over the naked ground somewhere if it weren’t for you and Duril. And Claw, now.”

Varg squeezed him hard in his embrace. “Your heart is so big, Toru. I assure you; you have all our love, and Claw’s, too, even if he still yearns for the place of his birth. We’re almost there. But I’m telling you, give the bear several days of salmon and trout easily caught, and plenty of honey to fill his belly, and by the end of a single week, he’ll be begging us not to leave without him, out of his mind with boredom already.”

Toru grinned as he imagined the mighty bear on his knees pleading to be taken along. That satisfied him greatly, and his heart filled with happiness. With that in mind, his eyelids began to droop and he yawned loudly.

Varg ruffled his hair and kissed him on the forehead. “So like a kitty to want to go to sleep just as the day is breaking, and everyone else is up and about. Let’s go back to our friends so that you can catch a bit of shuteye before we start for The Quiet Woods, a place like no other on the face of our world, if we’re to take Claw’s words at face value.”

“We should. He wouldn’t lie to us,” Toru said simply.

“It’s true,” Varg admitted. “Just like his heart.”

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“And did I tell you about these little birdhouses that Shearah made from fallen branches all year long?” Claw continued to tell them about The Quiet Woods as the majestic trees rose in the distance.

Shearah was, Duril remembered as the bearshifter had told them, the name of the witch that lived there. She had to be at least as old as Agatha, and it made him wonder why some places had witches like that. Thinking about it, it couldn't have been a mere coincidence that Agatha had lived in Whitekeep all her life. When that place had turned to dust, they had taken her, along with the survivors of Whitekeep, to Fairside, and that would be her seat of knowledge and power for a long time if nothing happened to hurt that place.

Duril strove to chase that frightening thought from his mind. Nothing would happen to Fairside, or Agatha, Rory, Zul, Onyx, and the surviving members of Varg's pack. Together, they had chased away the evil that had lain there, beneath the crust of the earth, waiting to pull good people under. Whatever that entity was, it appeared to prefer the depths of the soil, hiding where the sun never shone. That was all they knew, along with whatever bits of legend he had managed to gather from Elidias's library and the old man's words of wisdom.

“It appears that I have at least succeeded in boring our healer out of his wits,” Claw remarked and laughed.

“You haven't,” Duril protested right away. “I was wondering what makes witches pick certain places over others. Like how Agatha chose Whitekeep, and Shearah chose The Quiet Woods.”

“Maybe they just like the quiet,” Toru offered his take on things, very matter-of-factly.

Varg laughed, joined by Claw shortly thereafter.

The young tiger pouted right away. “It must be true,” he defended his point of view.

“It must, indeed,” Duril hurried to his aid, “because witches need to go about making their potions in great silence, as I can attest.”

“Are you a witch, too?” Claw teased him.

“No, but potion making is not the kind of business one conducts on a busy street corner.” Duril wasn't bothered in the least by being called a witch, and, on the contrary, he felt a little proud. Not that he had magic of any kind, but the most recent events in his life had given him plenty to think about how his abilities were more than he knew. Like how the gift given to him by Lady Amethyst allowed him to speak to the trees or even wood that had been cut down long ago. That was a bit of magic, right there.

“It seems to me that our healer is letting himself fall prey to a little melancholy these days,” Claw teased him playfully again.



Duril shook his head. Toru was now chasing Varg around, so he was Claw's only companion for the moment and the sole audience for his stories of The Quiet Woods.

"I wouldn't call it melancholy," he replied and smiled. "Times of pleasant rest like we have now just allow me a little bit more time to spend with my own thoughts. Of course, that doesn't mean that I should daydream while you're talking to me."

Claw patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about that. You just tell me about what's on your mind if it's something you can share."

"I can, and with much gladness," Duril said. "We've been chasing this evil around or so it seems. Whitekeep fell, and we turned Vilemoor into Fairside once more. The house of merchants in Shroudharbor is no more, and it felt like the evil was banished from that place, as well."

"Yes, nothing but victory after victory have you and your friends left in your wake," Claw confirmed.

"And your wake. Let's not forget how much you fought, too, and how you came to us and helped us even though your fate or heart didn't command you to do it."

"The best choice I've ever made in my life, sweet Duril," Claw said.

Duril felt his cheeks getting a bit warm from that casually thrown compliment. Claw was good at that, he had noticed. He was stronger than they were, but there was a gentle part of him, and a worldly one that Duril believed would come in handy for all of them if they were to travel together.

"Yet, these are all good things. So, what is the one thing that won't allow your mind to rest and your heart to enjoy simply looking at those two youngsters fooling around?" Claw pointed at Toru and Varg who were at a fair distance ahead of them and appeared to be engaged in a race of some sort.

"Varg might have something against being called a youngster," he pointed out.

"He cannot deny that I'm his senior," Claw retorted, but with good humor. "Come on, healer, what's bothering you so much that you cannot listen to my boring stories about Shearah's ugly birdhouses?"

"Ugly? I thought they were just tiny." Duril stared at Claw and blinked a few times.

"Ah, so I see that you were paying attention to my storytelling, after all."

"I was," Duril replied and grinned. "So, why were they so ugly?"

"Nah, you're not making me forget that you have something to say," Claw warned.

Duril sighed. “All right. After all, you caught me letting my mind wander to all of these things. Well, I don’t know if I should dismiss it as a silly worry or not, but I fear that the evil we keep chasing around might just choose to return to the places we thought we saved from it.”

“You shouldn’t worry about that much. Don’t you think that all the people you left behind have become stronger for it? The Grand Chief would surely find a proper punishment, and of the orcish type, for anyone who dares to think otherwise.”

“I have to say,” Duril admitted, “that I wasn’t worrying as much about Zukh Kalegh as about the people we left behind in Fairside and Shroudharbor.”

Claw squeezed his shoulder in sympathy. “I cannot give you words of wisdom as I fear that they would sound as cheerful as bells, but just as hollow. But I can tell you that you, and Varg, and Toru are doing more for this world than anyone else. Rulers with scepters of gold and silver in their hands, armies that call men to arms from all over Eawirith, wise men perusing old texts in libraries everywhere, none of them can say that they’re doing more than you to rid the world of evil.”

“Do you say that I should be content with doing the best we can?” Duril asked and looked into Claw’s dark eyes.

“Content? Even if I said that, your lot looks to me like it’s anything but content,” Claw said with a low chuckle. “The path leads forward, Duril. Our past tugs at our hearts with its gentle whispers, and sometime needy whines, but heroes are made to walk the earth and reach its end, wherever that may be.”

Duril patted Claw’s hand resting on his shoulder. “And you were saying that you wouldn’t offer me words of wisdom. It appears to me that you did just that now.”

“If I can ever be of help, then I am,” Claw offered simply.

“Then stay with us,” Duril said suddenly. He looked away. He had talked to Toru about not pestering Claw with such things, and there he was, letting his mouth get the better of him.

“Did Toru put you up to ask?” Claw laughed, and Duril felt his hearing teased by the low inflections of that laugh.

“Actually, no. I apologize, Claw. I shouldn’t ask something that I know is for you to decide.”

“Don’t ever hesitate to ask,” Claw replied. “Even if my answer may not always be the one you hope for, just knowing that you cared enough to ask is enough for me.”

“We’re getting closer,” Duril pointed out. “The Quiet Woods are in our reach.”

The sight of the majestic trees in the distance had been with them for a while now. Claw raised his nose and inhaled deeply. “Nothing like the smell of home,” he said and his gaze drifted to drink in the sight of the place he called home.

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Varg could barely keep Toru from prancing around like a young colt. The first thing he had noticed ever since entering The Quiet Woods was how pleasant the air felt. The wind seemed to have settled, and something about the silence of the forest was an invitation for sleep.

Not that it was something that happened to everyone, he thought as he grabbed Toru by the shoulders.

“Where is all that salmon? I’ll even take that honey now, I’m that hungry,” Toru said quickly.

Claw and Duril were following them, not very far away.

“So, what do you all say?” Claw shouted so that the entire group could hear him.

“I’ve never seen a forest as quiet, yet as alive as this one,” Varg confirmed. He stared as a red bug climbed a tree, seemingly there with a purpose in mind. If one looked closer, it was easy to tell that the forest was teeming with life.

And the silence was not actually silence. The humming of a gentle river beckoned them from not that far away. A tiny bird insistently called for its mate from the crown of a tall oak overhead. The trees were nothing like Varg had ever seen, not that he hadn’t seen oaks or forests, but because trees of so many kinds lived there together like nowhere else. Squirrels could find hearty meals in the acorns peppering the soil, but the orange elongated fruits hanging low here and there should have belonged somewhere else.

Varg picked one up and threw it at Claw who caught it deftly. “Are you going to teach us how to eat these?” he challenged.

Claw took a bite out of the meaty pulp. The crunchy sound made Varg’s belly growl. “It’s easy,” the bear replied. “You just eat it.”

Satisfied with that answer, and thirsty after their long walk, Varg picked one for himself. He groaned in delight as his mouth was invaded by flavor. “You should try one, Toru,” he suggested and handed the young tiger half of his fruit.

“I want salmon, not fruit,” Toru said petulantly. “If I don’t get one soon, I guess I’ll have to climb a tree and get myself some eggs from one of these ugly birdhouses.”

“You shouldn’t let Shearah know what you think of her handiwork,” Claw warned.

“Who’s Shearah? Did she make these ugly things?” Toru asked.

Varg examined the birdhouses. They were mainly made of little branches sticking out everywhere. They could hardly be called birdhouses, but there was something about them that told the one seeing them that they were, indeed, that. He had suspected the birds were young and trying to build nests for the first time, but, apparently, the resident witch of The Quiet Woods was the one responsible for those unattractive little piles of branches.

“Someone really didn’t pay any attention to me while I talked about my place of origin,” Claw remarked airily.

“I did,” Toru shot back. “When you talked about salmon, and I don’t see any.”

“Just follow me, kitty,” Claw suggested and waved for Toru to join him.

The young tiger didn’t wait to be told a second time and rushed after Claw toward the river. Varg fell in line with Duril. “Does this place feel a little bit magical to you, or is it just me?” he asked directly.

The light filtered through the crown of leaves above them, casting fairytale dots on the ground. The dust they caught glittered with colorful bugs, and everywhere they looked, not one sign of decay was in sight. It felt like a blessed place, and Varg now understood why Claw was so in love with it.

“It’s not just you,” Duril confirmed. “Let me ask a question.” He placed his palm on one of the trees.

Varg watched his companion as he listened closely. It still filled his heart with wonder to witness Duril do that. His gentle face filled with a new light, and his eyes shone brighter. The healer could believe all he wanted that he had no magic. It seemed that magic lived inside him, whether he was aware of it or not.

Duril leaned closer to the tree and his eyebrows knitted together. A sudden gust of wind made the bugs flutter and scatter away from the rays of light. Varg tensed and was about to ask Duril what he was hearing, when someone attacked him from behind and made him tumble and fall face first.

He broke his fall by placing both hands in front of him. “Kitty!” he growled. Strong paws were pinning him to the ground and it sounded like Toru was munching on something.

“You should try the salmon here, Varg,” Toru said after he swallowed, sighing deeply in satisfaction.

“You are wet and have me on the ground. How am I supposed to try it?” Varg asked.

To make matters worse, Toru shook his coat and made droplets of water spray everywhere. His happy laughter chased away the unnatural tension from before. Varg blinked as the bugs danced in the rays of light once more.

“You try it by catching it yourself. Catch me if you can!”

Varg shifted into his wolf’s coat and raced Toru to the river. The water was cold and invigorating, and they splashed around in it to their heart’s content, while silver bodies of fish jumped into the air at a bend where the river dipped abruptly and made the waters run faster.

He had meant every word about the place being magical. All the colors here were like nowhere else he had ever traveled. Not that he hadn’t seen rivers before, or fish, or bugs of all colors. It was just that all the tones and hues were richer, fuller, and his eyes were quickly growing accustomed to them. It was an easy place to fall in love with, and those who were blessed to call it home were bound to come back, pulled by their heartstrings and helpless to resist.

Toru, it seemed, didn’t overthink things like he was doing right now. He was just taking everything in, laughing and frolicking in the water, while chasing fish to satisfy his hunger. At this point, however, Varg believed that the young tiger was more in it for the sake of play than catching fish to fill his belly.

Claw in his bear shape swam toward them. “How do you like it?” he asked.

“It’s a place like no other I’ve ever seen,” Varg replied honestly.

Claw nodded. “Welcome to The Quiet Woods, puppy.”

Varg wanted to reply, but just then, Toru chose to climb on his back and push him under. He struggled playfully, trying to grab a hold on the golden fur and give the kitty a good serving of his own medicine.

Deep in the water, the surroundings were no less magical. Varg kept his eyes wide open, marveling at the life teeming beneath, silver, red, and black-bodied fish hiding in large underwater bushes, chasing each other around. The soil on the bottom was smooth like silk and Varg touched it with one paw so that he could push himself back to the surface.

For a moment, it felt like he was sinking, the smooth soil opening under his paw and covering it gently. Varg jerked as an unnatural sensation that he was suddenly trapped flooded him. His paw freed from whatever that was right away, and he looked, dreading to find something that wasn’t supposed to be in such a charmed place.

A small black shrub emerged from the soil, and then quickly turned into an underwater creature, scurrying away, probably more scared of Varg than he of it. He shook his head and pushed himself up to reach the surface. After so much time fighting evil everywhere they went, it appeared that he was becoming easily alarmed.

To his surprise, he wasn’t close to the surface when he was grabbed and pulled out of the river by two strong arms. He stared into Claw’s eyes, which were searching his face with something akin to alarm.

“Are you going to put me down already, flea bag?”

Claw laughed. “I thought you weren’t coming back up, but it looks like you’re just the same mutt. Did you find one of the beautiful river nymphs down below?”

“What nymph? It was just a little shrub-fish that wanted to shake hands with me. And I wasn’t down there that long, was I?”

Claw answered him with a grin. “Maybe not for you, but we were missing you up here already.”

Unlike the rest of them who would eat raw fish just as happily as not, Duril was already getting busy with a fire and impaling fish on sticks that he then leaned toward the flames just enough so that they didn’t get charred but were cooked well. They were a bunch of animals compared to the gentle healer. That reminded Varg that he wanted to ask a question.

Claw put him down but not without squeezing him in his arms once more, and Varg walked over to Duril. Seeing how he was busy, Toru turned his attention toward Claw and jumped on his back. The bearshifter didn’t hesitate to pull the youngster into the water with him, for a little more playful fun.

Varg sat by Duril’s side and watched him as he prepared the fish. “When you touched the tree, Duril, was it just my imagination or did you look worried for a moment?”

The healer stopped and looked at him. “Worried? Well, maybe a little. But I think I’ve gotten so used to seeing evil everywhere, ready to pounce on us, that I find it hard to let my guard down.”

“Same here. Don’t tell those two,” he gestured with his chin toward Toru and Claw who were raising hell and probably scaring all the fish away, “but I got scared by a shrub-fish.”

“What’s a shrub-fish?” Duril asked.

“I don’t know if that is its real name, but I stepped on one, and I swear, hand on heart, that it felt like it was about to pull me under.”

Duril chuckled and then stopped. “So sorry. I shouldn’t laugh, not when I’m ready to jump at the fall of a leaf as it seems.”

Varg pondered for a moment. “What did you hear when you listened to the wood? What did it say to you?”

Duril sighed. “Nothing. Absolutely not a sound. I either don’t speak the language of The Quiet Woods, or I no longer have the gift.”

Varg took the healer’s hand and stared at the symbols on the back, caressing them tenderly. “I find it hard to believe that Lady Amethyst would have given a gift destined to expire.”

“Magic is often beyond our understanding,” Duril said. “Who’s to say that we’re not too far from Fairside for it to work? I’m grateful for having had it, even if only for a little while. Or maybe I need to spend a more time here so that the trees learn that I’m a friend.”

Friend, the wind whispered. Varg blinked and looked around. “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“It sounded like a voice,” Varg said.

They both looked around, and aside from their rambunctious companions playing in the river, it appeared that no one else was there.

“I don’t hear the woods talking to me, and now you’re the one hearing voices,” Duril remarked with a small smile.

Varg chuckled. “It must have been my imagination.” He stole a look around, but the fleeting moment of unease was already gone.

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Duril wasn’t the kind to keep secrets, and it didn’t seem like he was doing anything like that. There was something he wasn’t telling Varg, but it didn’t appear to have any special significance. They were strangers to this place, and it might take a while to welcome them with open arms. Maybe he would ask Claw about the magic of the place, and what it stood for.

The moment he had touched the bark and listened closely came back to him like a pesky fly. It wasn’t anything he could put into words but a feeling of unrest growing from a dark seed inside his soul.

He had approached the tree with hope and expectation. But, as his hand rested on the rough surface, no magic happened. There had been no trembling underneath his fingers, no hum of life rising to meet the heat of his hand.

What scared him was that lack of anything, as if there was no life underneath the bark to begin with.

Duril shook his head. He was thinking too much; the magic of talking to trees had been lent to him, not given to have forever. And when had he ever been beguiled before by the thought that he would be so special as to wield magic?

“If you want to have a broiled fish, too, come and eat,” he called to Toru and Claw who emerged from the water laughing and chasing each other.

Such worries were nothing but a flaw of his own heart. Around them, The Quiet Woods were beautiful, welcoming them into their open arms, even if only one of them was their son.





## Chapter Two – Secret Voices

“I must say that I now understand why you yearned so much to come back here,” Varg confessed to Claw as they lay side by side under the naked sky. “It’s easy to call it paradise. To think that the Great Barren is only beyond these trees.”

Claw chuckled and pulled him close. They were speaking quietly between themselves while Toru and Duril slept in a tight embrace by the embers of the fire.

“It seems to me that you’re forgetting that we walked for days and nights on end to reach here from Zukh Kalegh.”

“I believe that it must be the sweetness of the waters here that can make one forget about all the trials and tribulations that ever happened to them.”

“Elders used to say that the waters of The Quiet Woods can heal both body and soul. As a cub, I thought they were just proud of the beauty of our forest. I had to get away from it to really think of it just as they said.”

“You were blessed to be born and raised in such a place. No wonder you’re who you are today. Roots grow the strongest here, don’t they?”

Claw fell silent for a moment. Varg waited for him to say something, but it appeared that the bearshifter was in a world of his own even though their hands were linked together.

“Is there something on your mind?” he asked.

“We’re only at the outskirts of the forest, far from its heart, but I was expecting us to meet at least a few people already, shifters or humans.”

“They don’t have settlements all over the place if I remember what you told me correctly,” Varg reminded him.

Duril had said that he couldn’t hear the forest speaking. He himself was getting scared of little river creatures. And now Claw worried that he hadn’t seen anyone, strangers or the people he used to know. Centuries had passed since Claw had last set foot in The Quiet Woods, which meant that many of those people might not even be alive. Shapeshifters lived long lives, but humans didn’t. If one or more of the latter had a special place in Claw’s heart, Varg knew that it wouldn’t serve to dwell on their memory. Maybe their descendants were still around, but would they recall old stories about a bearshifter that had once left for a life of adventure?

“Is the forest the same as you remember it?” he asked when Claw remained silent.

“Even more beautiful, puppy, much more than in the dreams I had while walking the long, dark corridors of that godforsaken labyrinth.”

“Then it could be that humans and shifters alike just changed the places where they like to dwell. Don’t tell me you remember each corner. It’s a forest, it grows and changes year to year, let alone century to century.”

“Yes, any forest does that,” Claw acquiesced. “But what if I told you that here, nothing seems to have changed?”

Varg waited for Claw to say that what he was saying was a joke, but the bearshifter remained silent, waiting for a reply. “Nothing? Do you really mean it? Your eyes must be playing tricks on you, old bear.”

“Ah, you must be right,” Claw said like he was waiting for someone to contradict him and those unsettling thoughts.

“You know, while I didn’t pay a lot of attention to your stories before, how about you tell me about The Quiet Woods as you remember them?”

“But we’re here. I can just as well show you.”

“All right, but don’t let Duril know that I gave in to the temptation. We’re supposed to sleep at night.”

“He didn’t really mean it, I’m sure,” Claw hurried to reassure him. “We’re the kind to haunt the night, not the other way around.”

“Without a doubt,” Varg admitted. “So, what are you going to show me, big bear?”

Claw stood and offered his hand. “Allow me to surprise you.”

Varg didn’t mind a midnight stroll in the bearshifter’s company. And his curiosity about the place was growing stronger with each passing moment. What could have made it possible for such a beautiful place to exist on the face of the world? There had to be an explanation and Varg expected it to be a wondrous one.

They walked side by side, along the riverside. Claw remained silent for quite a while, so Varg decided to follow his example and not disturb the quiet of the night.

“You’re probably wondering why these are called The Quiet Woods,” the bearshifter started after he had perched on a small cliff jutting out from the bank and sat over the running waters below.

“Yes, I am,” Varg admitted. “It’s quite a strange thing, but Duril couldn’t use his gift on the trees here. They remained silent to his inquiries. Or maybe, since we are here, in these woods, it shouldn’t be so strange. After all, if the trees choose not to talk, it must be because they’re part of this magical place.”

“The forest doesn’t talk to just anyone,” Claw said. “But it surprises me that your gentle healer wasn’t able to get it to strike up a conversation.” A bubble of laughter lay right beneath those words, so Varg chuckled.

“Hey, he was quite disappointed,” he said. “Duril is strong and kind, but he’s at fault for not seeing himself for what he truly is. Thus, he fears that he must have lost the gift granted to him by Lady Amethyst of Fairside.”

Claw lay on his belly and let one hand drop into the river, caressing its gentle waves as they passed. “I don’t believe he should fear that. Are you ready for the fairytale of The Quiet Woods?”

“Never been readier. But wait, a fairytale? Should I trust that what you’re telling me is a true story or only one meant for children at bedtime?”

“The Quiet Woods are a place where fairytales are born and come true.”

“When you put it like that, I have no other choice but to believe you. Please, don’t mind me. I’d very much like to hear about the beginnings of this magical forest.”

To prove his determination to be a quiet listener, Varg sat by Claw’s side, his eyes drawn to the movement of the bearshifter’s fingers in the river water. That tender caress looked like the beginning of a good fairytale.

“Once upon a time,” Claw began, “in this place, the desert stood king. Zukh Kalegh was yet to be born from mud and blood, and only the wind traveled here. The nights were frigid, and the days were scorching hot. Nothing grew here, not even the seldom shrub or desert rats. But, as I said, the wind moved over these vast lands, and its soul and spirit was, the elders say, no one other than Shearah herself.”

“The witch making those tiny birdhouses?” Varg asked. “But I thought she was just an old witch happening by.”

“Shearah is an old name. The witch just happened to be named after the mistress of the wind that saw this patch of land and dreamed of turning it into the forest you see today. Or so they said. As children, we always suspected that the old witch was actually the real Shearah. But she herself denied such things as nothing but nonsense.”

“She may still be alive. Old witches tend to be the closest thing to immortal there is. Demophios would have been jealous.”

“By the state of her birdhouses, I tend to believe that the old sack of bones is still around. I’m just wondering why she didn’t bother to make her presence known so far.”

“She must be very old. Do you really expect her to come rushing to see you?” Varg joked, although he, as much as Claw, sensed something not quite right about the forest the big bear loved so much.

Before, whenever his instincts, honed by battle and a life of adventure, sharpened suddenly to let him know of incoming danger, Varg had always listened to them. Nonetheless, he was unfamiliar with this slight restlessness that seemed to simmer under the surface. He had sensed it in Duril when the healer had talked about the forest not answering his voice, and when he had dove into the river and witnessed the beauty underneath. Now, he could feel it in the bearshifter, too, and yet he was still at odds with whether he should let his instincts guide him on the right path or wait and see where things would go just by sitting by and watching idly.

“I guess you have a point, puppy. We’ll see when she decides to make an appearance, because she will,” the bearshifter said with conviction. “Now, back to the story. The wind spirit Shearah, according to what the eldest among us said, decided that all the seeds she gathered from places all over the continent should have a home here. It was, as it seemed, quite an ambitious thing to attempt, even for someone as magical as she was.”

“I’ve noticed that plants and trees and shrubs that shouldn’t be found sharing the same patch of land together live here in perfect harmony.” Varg caught a leaf that fell from a nearby tree and settled playfully on his head. “And the voices of the birds all form part of the same melody.”

Claw chuckled softly. “If one were to look at you, puppy, they would have trouble imagining the gentle soul you hide underneath.”

“I just have eyes,” Varg replied but leaned into Claw’s shoulder. “Tell me more about the wind spirit Shearah.”

“Most of us never saw or heard her,” Claw continued, “but there were some really old shifters who claimed to have been around when the forest began to grow from the many seeds she brought from all over the world.”

“Some shifters live very long lives, but are we talking centuries? Millennia?” Varg asked.

“At some point, you no longer care about counting the years you’ve lived on earth,” Claw said. “We didn’t really think they were speaking the truth, not because we thought those elders wanted to fool us in some way, but because for them the time seemed to have a life of its own and changed as they saw fit.”

“What kind of shifters were they?” Varg inquired. “Bears, like you?”

Claw shook his head. “No, they were eagles, so old that they no longer flew and the feathers in their wings were long gone.”

“A forest for eagles? It doesn’t sound like a place they would choose for their nests.”

Claw gestured with one arm to the west. “The Quiet Woods spread over vast tracts of land, so far that humans would need weeks on foot to travel them from one side to the other. At the edge of

these lands, the earth gives way to lakes and marshes, and cliffs and rocks jut out of them. That is where eagleshifters used to live.”

“Did you go there? As a cub or a young bear in search of adventures?”

The teasing was not only for show. Varg enjoyed having such talks with the bear. He could sense the power growing inside Claw ever since they set foot in this magical place. Briefly, he wondered whether they should stop asking the bearshifter to join them on their adventures. Nothing could truly compete with his place of birth.

“Sure thing I went there. We were young, and like all youngsters, we wanted to prove ourselves by doing the craziest and most daring things. For bears, traveling high and low in search of the tastiest honey and sweetest river springs was one of them. Not that our own elders didn’t warn us not to go that far.”

“Why would they warn you? I thought bravery was in your blood,” Varg teased Claw a little more.

“It wasn’t a matter of courage, but one of respect that our elders wanted to make us aware of. You see, they knew that the old eagleshifters needed their peace and quiet in their many years. They didn’t want us to go there and disturb them. Of course, when we were nothing but cubs, they told us scary stories to prevent us from going there. Not that it worked, obviously.”

“You keep saying ‘we’. Do you happen to have siblings, Claw?”

“Not of the same mother and father, but there were other bears I used to know.” Claw fell quiet for a moment. “Especially two of them. One, we called him Beast,” he said and laughed for a moment.

“Was he that scary?”

“More like he had the most horrendous table manners. If I think about it, we never called him anything else, and we didn’t even know his real name. I’m not sure he even knew it. He was capable of swallowing a basket of fish without chewing, and liked to scare old ladies and children by painting his muzzle with raspberry juice so that he looked more frightening.”

“He sounds like a swell guy,” Varg said and laughed as well.

“He surely was.” Claw sighed and then cleared his throat. “The other companion of mine was Willow.”

“That’s quite a strange name for a bearshifter.”

“Not for this one. His parents must have known how he would turn out. Well, in all truth, he did come from a noble family, so maybe it was expected of him to become as graceful as he did. Unlike Beast who was the bulkiest, roundest bear I’ve ever seen, Willow was tall and thin by bear

standards. And of course, he was continuously appalled by how much Beast could eat. Still, he preferred our company to anyone else's, despite what his parents thought."

"So, you three were quite the merry group of bears."

"Indeed, and as soon as we heard about a place where we were forbidden to travel, we set out on a new trip. It took us a few days to reach the edge and meet the eagleshifters, but we had the forest on our side and all the food we could eat. It was quite an adventure. But maybe I'll tell you more about Willow and Beast another time."

"Not maybe, you really have to tell me more about your friends," Varg said right away. He wanted to learn as much as he could about Claw, and these stories of his childhood were part of who the handsome bear was.

"Will do, puppy, will do. Now, let me tell you that as brave as we believed ourselves to be, we got a little scared when we finally reached the cliffs where the eagleshifters lived. We had never seen marshes before, and Beast wanted to take a mud bath as soon as we got there. Because of his hefty behind, he sank in them and almost took us with him. But the eagleshifters made an appearance and pulled us out."

"I knew you must have been a very naughty cub, but I'm glad to hear that there was one even naughtier than you."

"I'm hurt you think that I'm not the naughtiest," Claw retorted but chuckled with good humor. "The eagleshifters got us to a safe place at the foot of their cliffs and told us about Shearah. They were glad to see us, even though you wouldn't have been able to tell by how upset they were at first because they had to pull us out of the marshes. Still, I think that our parents were wrong. Those eagleshifters were happy to have visitors and ears to listen to their tales from times so long-forgotten."

"What did they tell you about the wind spirit?"

"They told us stories about a young girl who liked to play and had big dreams. For her, the unforgiving desert was a place of death, where nothing grew, so she took it upon herself to change it into a forest that would stretch so far that it would cover everything until it met the sea on all sides."

"That sounds terribly ambitious," Varg commented. "Did she want to turn the entire world into a paradise like here?"

"It might have been her dream for Eawirith. At least the eagles said as much. But she was a young spirit and didn't realize what it would take to carry out such a task. She was fast and she could travel everywhere, gathering seeds and bringing them to this place she had chosen as the birthplace of her new world."

“If that was her dream, we know for sure that she hasn’t succeeded in seeing it come true.”

“Indeed. One thing she didn’t understand was that she was spending her soul and power freely for the new seeds to grow in such an inhospitable soil.”

“Did she start losing her power at some point?” Varg asked.

“Yes, that is exactly what happened. But even as she realized that she was no longer as powerful as before, she didn’t stop. And, according to the eagleshifters we talked to, she didn’t mind it, either. Her dream was much more important, so she just continued. Along with the forest that grew, new bugs and creatures began to appear and dwell inside it. Shearah was such a wondrous spirit that she could even make springs come from the earth and turn into rivers.”

“Rivers with the tastiest fish you can find in all Eawirith,” Varg pointed out.

“Yes, nothing but the best for the world Shearah was imagining. However, her powers began to wane day after day. It got harder and harder for her to bring new seeds and grow them into amazing trees and houses for the creatures needing shelter. Until one day, she realized that she was bound to the earth and could no longer rise and fly.”

Varg somehow knew that this fairytale wouldn’t have the usual happy ending. “What happened to her?”

“The eagleshifters said that they found her lying on the ground, sleeping soundly. They tried to wake her up, but she couldn’t be stirred from her slumber. So they took her deep, deep into the forest that she loved so much and placed her inside the hollow trunk of an old oak. They did so because she used to tell them that it was the only place where she could close her eyes and sleep. The tree had been half-dead for a while, no one knew why, but once Shearah was inside it, new bark grew and hid her within. The eagleshifters said that the oak tree spoke to them and told them that now Shearah was finally finding her rest.”

“And the forest remained as she made it,” Varg concluded. “The grandiose plans of turning the entire Eawirith into a beautiful forest must have halted then.”

“That is what happened,” Claw confirmed. “In her memory, many girls, humans and shifters alike, have been named Shearah ever since. In that way, even our old witch was named after her.”

“What do you think, Claw? Could the witch you’re talking about be the spirit wind?”

Claw shook his head. “Our elders used to say that Shearah lives in all of us, so it would be both right and wrong to say that the old witch was her. You seem much interested in her, so we will do our best to find her since she might still be around.”

“Call me silly, but I believe I heard the wind whisper to me. It might have been nothing but my imagination.”

Claw didn't seem in the slightest inclined to believe that. "What did it tell you?"

"Do you really think that I heard it?"

"Yes. There is nothing and no one more revered here than the wind because it was part of what made Shearah who and what she was."

"It only said one word," Varg replied. "Actually, it felt like it just repeated one word, Duril said."

"What was the word?" Claw insisted, clearly more and more interested.

"Friend. That was what it said. Friend," Varg offered, repeating the word, in the hope that he would hear the wind again and get confirmation that it hadn't been only his imagination playing tricks on his ears.

It appeared that Claw wished for the same thing as he did too and tensed, waiting for a sign. But the forest remained quiet, with all its hidden secrets tucked in for the night.

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Toru sniffed, aware of a new scent, but wasn't eager to open his eyes. He held Duril tightly in his arms and no one and nothing would convince him to give up on the pleasant feeling of staying curled all around his friend and lover.

Something tickled his nostrils and he barely kept in a sneeze. Carefully, he withdrew the arm he had stuck under Duril's head and was thankful when the healer shifted in his sleep but didn't wake up. He rubbed his nose to chase away that annoying sensation, and that was when he saw the culprit.

Right in front of his nose, a lightning bug was flapping its tiny wings, letting out a barely audible hum. Toru scrunched up his nose and then sniffed again. So the bug had tried to get into one of his nostrils and that had woken him up. But that scent, what was it? He inhaled the fresh night air, trying to figure out what the smell was.

Something like roasted walnuts was the first thing that came to his mind, followed quickly by an even more pleasant smell, like sandalwood. It didn't seem to be good to eat, so Toru waved his hand to push away the lightning bug, determined to go back to sleep. He lay on one side and tried to sneak his arm back under Duril's head, but something landed on his ear.

Forgetting about how he was supposed to be silent, he smacked his ear. Then he froze, but much to his surprise, Duril only stirred in his sleep without waking up. Toru got to his feet and looked around for the pesky bug. It had to be that it had crawled into his ear.

"Come and face me if you dare," he growled under his breath. Duril would find it so funny that he wanted to fight a bug.



The lightning bug appeared again. Toru threw one hand out fast, intending only to move the air about. The tiny creature appeared to have plenty of life in it, and if Toru hadn't managed to squash it when he had smacked his ear, it meant that it was fast, too.

For a moment, he thought that he had chased it away, but the following moment, the bug chose to land directly on the tip of his nose.

"Cut it out," Toru moaned and brought both hands to his face.

The bug moved only a little and then climbed on his forehead, getting into his hair, and tickling him. Toru pushed his hands through his hair in an attempt to get rid of the bug. It looked like the small critter had other things planned because the next thing he knew, Toru felt it crawl down his back.

The bug flew out from under his shirt and landed back on his nose.

"Do you want to play?" Toru growled again and tried to smack the pesky thing.

He grunted, this time in pain, as his open palm smacked directly into his nose.

"Toru, what are you doing?" Duril called sleepily.

"Nothing," Toru said quickly, embarrassed to have been surprised while trying to exact revenge on a lightning bug.

"You sounded like you were in pain." The healer sounded like he was waking up completely.

"It's nothing, nothing," Toru hurried to say. "It was just..."

He looked around for any traces of the lightning bug, but while the night air was filled with the sounds of all kinds of critters, none of them nearby appeared to glow in the dark.

"Then come back to sleep," Duril said, seeing how he didn't add anything to finish his sentence.

Toru stared into the dark, searching for signs of the critter, but the lightning bug seemed satisfied with having managed to wake him up and now was anywhere else but there. He lay by Duril's side and embraced him, but he perked up his ears, hoping for the tiniest sound.

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Duril knew he was falling in love with The Quiet Woods and even faster than he had expected. Anything one could want was there, within reach. A hungry person only needed to stretch out a hand for one of the many low hanging fruits. It was summer, and maybe that explained why food was so plentiful, but somehow Duril couldn't imagine the forest sleeping under a blanket of snow. Or maybe it was magical even in winter? He wished they could stay and see it like that, too.

He had gone on a morning run to collect herbs and, much to his surprise, Toru had decided to join him instead of running around with Claw and Varg.

“Are you sure you won’t get bored? All I’m doing is collecting herbs. There are so many here, and I’m not sure I should gather so much. I’ll probably need a new bag only for them.”

“I won’t get bored,” Toru said with conviction. “I just wanted to ask you, Duril. Do you think that this forest is, you know,” he dropped his voice to a low whisper, “alive?”

Alive, the wind echoed, and Duril stopped just as he was trying to pick the crown of a flower he knew worked wonders for colds and other ailments. “Did you hear that, Toru?”

The tigershifter was sitting upright, his entire body tensed. “It said,” he pronounced the words slowly, “alive.”

“It is alive,” Duril said, his surprise doubled by an overwhelming feeling of joy. “Yesterday, Varg thought he heard something, too, and now we both heard it.”

“Is it the forest? Is it trying to speak to us?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Maybe we should just ask it,” Toru suggested. “Forest,” he said, mustering, as it seemed, all the seriousness he was capable of, “are you trying to speak to us?”

Us, the wind whispered.

“Did you hear that?” Toru asked excitedly.

“Yes, quite clearly, but it doesn’t appear to be giving us any clues about what it wants from us. Maybe it’s not the forest, but the wind?” Duril wondered.

Wind? The mysterious voice mimicked, including the question mark at the end.

Toru frowned and crossed his arms over the chest. “It sounds like it just wants to play.”

Play, the response came right away.

“Like a child who learns from mimicking grownups,” Duril murmured.

“It sounds to me like a naughty creature,” Toru insisted.

They both waited for the forest or the wind to mimic Toru’s last word, but this time, nothing happened.

“Whatever secrets this forest holds, I think it will show them to us, at the right moment,” Duril offered when he noticed how miffed Toru looked. “We only need to be patient.”

“Yes, patient, not like the lightning bug that kept me awake last night,” Toru said.

“A lightning bug?” Duril felt laughter bubble in his chest as he remembered how he had woken up only to witness Toru fighting some invisible enemy. “Was that who you were fighting last night?”

“It’s surely a magical bug,” Toru said back, clearly embarrassed by having been caught at such childish play. “It hit my nose.”

“Hard enough to bleed?” Duril teased.

“No.”

“Then I’m not sure how magical it could be.”

“Say that as much as you like. Next time, it might be you who gets punched in the nose by a lightning bug. And then, I won’t believe you, either.”

Duril hugged Toru and kissed his cheek. “I tease you because I love you. Please, don’t get upset.”

That seemed to be enough to soothe any hurt pride. Toru smiled and kissed Duril on the lips. “Then you can tease me some more.”

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“Are you still looking for signs of the old witch?” Varg asked as he noticed Claw crouched on the ground and staring at something that only he could see.

“I keep wondering,” Claw started. “Do you recall how I told you that the forest hasn’t changed at all, although I’ve been gone for centuries?”

“Yes, and I also recall myself telling you that your eyes might not be telling you the truth.”

“Well, I set out to find anything that could tell me more of the truth about what happened here.”

The way Claw said those words made Varg’s ears perk up in attention. “Do you believe something happened here? Something foul, perhaps?”

Claw stood. “I don’t know. It’s just too strange to find it all as if it hasn’t moved or changed for such a long time.”

“What were you looking at?” Varg asked, curious about what the bearshifter might have discovered.

“This place,” Claw said, “by nightfall, yesterday, was covered with dead leaves.”

“This place, right here?” Varg asked.

“Yes. Do you notice any dead leaves now?”

Varg shook his head. Then, he followed Claw's eyes to the crown of trees above them. One leaf fell and landed on his head. Its touch felt familiar like the hand of an old friend. "Are you sure, Claw? Maybe you saw another tree shedding its leaves," he said and picked the leaf out of his hair to look at it. "There are so many that look exactly the same."

"I wish that were true. Then I'd know that I came back to the forest I knew as a child."

"Don't tell me you feel like it has become a stranger to you. If it helps any, I get a strange sense of familiarity, and I've never been here."

"It's the same welcoming forest, indeed," Claw replied, "but I'm talking about its soul. I know that it might sound strange to you, but I feel like it's holding back. Like it's protecting itself."

"Nothing you say could sound strange to me. Don't forget what kind of adventurer you're talking to," Varg joked. "We've seen the strangest things."

Claw nodded. "Then maybe we should get ready for even stranger ones."

### Chapter Three – Not Dead, Not Yet Alive

“Maybe that is something we should share with Duril and Toru,” Varg suggested as he walked behind Claw. “The dead leaves that are no longer where they are supposed to be, the voices in the wind... If there is something strange going on, I bet the fur on my back that those two will want to be a part of it.”

“That’s why you’re called adventurers above all,” Claw replied with a chuckle. “Nothing keeps you in one place for long, does it? And I thought The Quiet Woods would make you believe in having a longer rest before facing your next challenge.”

“Are you trying to tease me, flea bag? Just admit it already. You want to know what’s going on, and it’s eating at you as much as the adventure bug might get to me, as you say.”

“It’s true,” Claw confirmed without seeming bothered for a moment that Varg was calling him out on it. “My home is... prey to something, and I’d very much like to learn what. Whether it is a labor of malice at work, or something benign, it doesn’t matter. I still want to discover why The Quiet Woods seems so stuck in time that nothing changes from one day to the next.”

*Time*, the wind whispered, and Claw and Varg stopped at the same time.

“Did you hear that?” Varg asked softly, his entire skin prickling with apprehension.

“Yes, I did. Let’s get to our companions and share what we’ve found so far. As ambivalent as I might feel about what’s going on, it’s a mystery worthy of being unraveled.”

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Toru stood once he noticed Varg and Claw approaching. “Have you two been out in the woods all night?” he demanded to know, while his inquisitive eyes moved from one to the other. “Doing naughty things?”

Varg laughed and grabbed him fast in a tight hug. Claw just moved past them, with an all-knowing smirk on his face. “What’s cooking?” the bear asked and sniffed the aromas rising in the morning air from Duril’s pot.

“You’ll know once I start serving breakfast,” Duril replied and offered the bear a cup of jasmine tea. “It’s so hard to imagine now that, not long ago, I had to strive to put together a meal from our meager food reserves. Here, the only conundrum one faces is what to choose from so many foods readily available. You were born in a blessed place, Claw,” he added while looking around, his gentle eyes filled with wonder.

“Are you already giving the bear food?” Toru complained right away. “While I’m starving?”

“You can have tea, as well, but you said ‘no’ when I offered it to you,” Duril said promptly.

Toru scrunched up his nose. “Tea isn’t food.”

“So there’s a reason to stop complaining. Claw, as you can see, is enjoying his cup.”

Toru pondered for a moment. They were all so grownup around him. “Fill one for me, too, then,” he said.

Duril obliged right away and gave him a cup of steaming liquid. Toru smiled when he felt the healer’s lips on his temple. Maybe it was a bit true that he was spoiled, but he couldn’t help it; he just enjoyed it too much.

“It’s ready now, so come eat.”

They sat around the campfire and accepted the food with eager hands. Toru was dying to know about Claw’s and Varg’s nightly adventures, but he didn’t want to sound too immature by nagging them with questions. So, he waited patiently while everyone ate. Everything Duril cooked was so tasty, even when it had herbs and vegetables Toru didn’t normally care for. The part of him that was human liked it even so, although maybe his tiger would never let his tongue touch anything without meat in it.

“Claw has noticed a few things that don’t seem to be quite right,” Varg began.

“What things?” Duril asked. “About the forest?”

Toru was suddenly all eyes and ears. The lightning bugs around here were a strange bunch, itching for a fight, so he wasn’t so surprised to hear others thought that some bizarre things were afoot.

“Yes. It is a beautiful and magical place, don’t get me wrong, but there is also something eerie about it.” Claw paused for a moment.

“Tell them about the dead leaves,” Varg urged him.

“Dead leaves?” Toru asked. “What about lightning bugs?”

“What about them?” Varg looked at him with questioning eyes. “Have you noticed something strange, Toru?”

“Just the one. It tried to sneak into my nose. And my ear.”

Varg laughed, making him pout right away. “Maybe it was a loving bug. It fell in love with you so it wanted to kiss your nose and ear. But seeing how they’re so big, it just fell in them.”

Toru touched his ears, then his nose, self-consciously. “They’re not that big,” he protested, feeling a bit wary of being the owner of some abnormal body parts.

Varg ruffled his hair. “Don’t worry, kitty. It’s not that they’re big; but maybe the bug was really tiny. Was it tiny?”

“Any tinier than it was, and you would no longer see it,” Toru confirmed, happy that his nose and ears were normal.

Varg kissed his ear with a loud smack, making a small shiver of pleasure course down his back. When he turned to say something, Varg kissed his nose, too. “And they’re so kissable,” the wolfshifter said, making Toru forget all about being upset over tiny bugs wanting to get under his skin, one way or another.

“If you two are finished fooling around, maybe we could continue talking about important things,” Claw scolded them, but in a playful voice that contradicted the severity of his words.

Nonetheless, Toru and Varg stopped their little byplay and sat side by side, ready to hear what the bear had to say.

“About the dead leaves, what did you want to say?” Duril asked, bringing them all back to the thread of conversation that had started right after they finished their meal.

Claw scratched one ear and looked down for a moment, as if he were trying to decipher some important details in the cracks in the ground, dried by the fire Duril had used for cooking only earlier. “The forest doesn’t change,” he started. “Trees shed their leaves, and by nightfall, you’ll see the ground covered in them here and there. Yet, once the morning is here, you won’t see any dead leaves where they had been before.”

“You two were up all night,” Toru intervened. “Did you see the leaves rising from the ground and going back on the branches?” He would have loved to see something as magical as that.

“No, we cannot say that we did. And it was only this morning, as we came back, that the thought struck me as odd. Varg wonders if this old bag of fleas is all right here,” Claw said and patted his temple, “but he cannot deny that there are no dead leaves anywhere you look.”

“I agree with you, and don’t make me the villain,” Varg retorted and smacked his fist against Claw’s shoulder. The bear pretended to be hurt and made a move like he was about to fall on one side, but regained his balance right away.

“I wouldn’t dare, but I cannot help but tease you now and then,” Claw replied.

“Do you tease Varg because you love him?” Toru asked. “Duril teases me because he loves me,” he added with emphasis.

Claw threw Varg a look loaded with significance and smiled. “That must be it. Kitty, why do you keep fishing for things concerning me and puppy here? Wouldn’t you rather fish for fish?”

Toru felt like it was a good moment to show that he could be a grownup, too, wise like them. He puffed out his chest. “Anyone can fish for fish. I want to fish for something else, too.”

Everyone burst into laughter, much to his dismay. Wasn’t that a grownup thing to say?

“Then fish to your heart’s content, but later. Now, I feel like we should talk about this,” Varg interrupted the collective laugh. “Dead leaves are buds on the branches at dawn, and I hear the wind speaking--”

“Duril and I also hear the wind speaking!” Toru exclaimed, amazed by that revelation. “What does it say to you?”

“First, it happened when I was talking to Duril, and it just repeated a word he said,” Varg replied, pointing at Duril.

“I didn’t hear it that time,” the healer intervened. “But I heard it this morning while I was gathering herbs with Toru.”

“What did you two hear?” Claw asked, his eyes wide with curiosity. “It appears that we are all hearing it!”

“Like you said, it just kept on repeating a word we said here and there. But I cannot help but think that it is not by accident that the wind chooses the words it says. Should we remind ourselves of what words we heard it say?” Duril suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea at all,” Varg confirmed. “So, the first time, I heard it say the word *friend*.”

*Friend*, the wind repeated right away.

“Did we all hear that?” Claw asked. He raised his head, his nostrils flaring, while trying to catch something that his other senses couldn’t.

“As a whisper, but clear as the blue sky above us,” Varg confirmed.

Toru and Duril agreed without hesitation. A new sense of excitement rose inside them. Toru could feel it, in each and every one of them, the scent of an adventure announcing itself like a promise that for some time now they must have been waiting for.

“All right, what was the next word the wind said to you?” Duril asked.

“The only other word I heard was *time*.”

They all waited, but the wind chose to remain mute this time around.

“How come it doesn’t say anything now?” Toru asked, a bit unnerved by the silence.

“I don’t know,” Claw replied for all of them. “Now, what did you and Duril hear it say?”



Toru scratched his head. “I don’t remember that well, but I think it repeated the word *alive*.”

*Alive*, the wind echoed.

“The order has to be important,” Duril said. “I was taken by surprise, but I know that it also repeated the words *wind* and *play*.”

They waited again, but nothing happened.

“Hmm, are we maybe forgetting something?” Claw wondered. “These words seem to have an essential meaning that we should be able to put together once we get them right.”

“I know!” Toru exclaimed, after racking his mind for the recent memories of that morning. “It said *us*.”

*Us*, the wind repeated dutifully.

“*Wind*,” Duril said with conviction. “No, that isn’t quite right. *Wind*?”

*Wind*? The wind’s reply didn’t hesitate to let itself be heard. And, with it, a swish came, as what no longer could be called a breeze wrapped itself around the trees and made everyone’s shirts billow and fall back for a moment.

“We must be on the right path,” Varg said. “So, what was the next word?”

“*Play*,” Duril replied quickly.

*Play*, the wind confirmed.

“That is all we heard it say,” the healer added. “Nothing else.”

“Then that leaves us with the last word Claw and I heard,” Varg said. “*Time*,” he stated, and right away, the wind followed suit.

*Time*.

“We have the right succession of words, it seems,” Duril commented. “But what could their significance be?”

“Let’s just say them all,” Claw suggested. “And I have a hunch we should let puppy do it. After all, he was the one to hear the wind, before the rest of us.”

“It might have been nothing but happenstance,” Varg said courteously. “Why shouldn’t it be you, who is part of this forest and were born here?”

“Mutt, just say the words.” Somehow, Toru felt that Claw was right. Varg had heard the wind first, and it seemed natural that he should be the one to summon whatever creature was hiding behind that secret voice in the wind.

“All right, if you all insist.” Varg stood and looked around. He appeared lost in thought for a moment, and Toru wondered what he could be thinking about. “*Friend. Alive. Us. Wind? Play. Time.*”

They tensed, necks stretched, ears perked up, for the wind to speak again, but for a few moments, everything was still. Unnaturally so, Toru noticed, as no sound could be heard, not even a bug flapping its wings.

Until it did, and it was, indeed, the flapping of tiny wings belonging to no one else but his foe from the previous night.

“You!” Toru exclaimed, narrowing his eyes. “You’re the one who wanted to get inside my nose! Are you the one talking to us?”

The lightning bug flew around his head and then landed on his hair. Toru made a move to brush it out of the strands, but Duril stopped him. “Toru, I think your little friend wants us to follow it.”

“Follow it where? It’s just tickling my head.”

“From where I stand, it looks to me like it’s trying to pull you by the hair to get you moving.”

Toru stared at the faces of his other companions and read the same thing in their eyes. They all seemed to agree. “All right,” he said, “but it’s not my friend, just a pesky little creature.”

The bug hummed and circled his head, then bumped against his nose.

“Just look at it, itching for a fight,” Toru complained. “Look, it’s landing on my nose!”

Duril moved closer. “Wind spirit,” he said gently, “guide us where you wish to take us.”

The lightning bug seemed keener on listening to Duril’s gentle words and it flew away from Toru’s nose. They all stood and followed the bug that stopped now and then, as if to wait for them on a path toward the unknown.

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Toru walked in front, side by side with Duril, while Varg and Claw followed closely behind. Varg’s head was teeming with thoughts, not all of them carrying the shape of coherence, something that seemed a reason for both exhilaration and subtle fear that moved under them like a river current. It hadn’t been out of mere courtesy that he had offered Claw to speak the magical words the wind seemed to know. That sense of wrongness was with him, although it didn’t appear enough

to make his gut instincts kick in and take over. Unsettling was the first word that came to mind if he were to describe what was going on inside him.

He turned the words of the wind in his head, over and over. *Friend?* Could it be that the wind spirit considered them friends, or was it offering its friendship to them? *Alive.* Was the forest alive, or did it want to be? What was the meaning of the falling leaves? Were they back on the branches at the break of dawn, as Toru imagined?

*Us* was the simplest word of them all, and yet, it seemed to Varg that it had to be the one with the most significance. It could mean the forest as a whole.

*Are you struggling to become alive and you could use a friend?* Varg asked with the voice of his mind, but unsurprisingly, no reply came.

What was the point of the question mark after the word *wind*? The wind spirit created the forest, so why would it be, above all, put under that veil of doubt thrown over it by that sudden abrupt rise at the end?

And then came the word *play*, and Varg couldn't figure out why it was there because it felt like it shouldn't be part of the magical incantation that had finally summoned their guide to an unknown place ahead of them. It suggested the nature of a child, and what had a child to do with anything happening to a forest that had been around for centuries, if not longer?

*Time.* That was the last word, and Varg couldn't explain it, but somehow it made the most sense to him, as if they were there right on time to witness something that, while remaining beyond their comprehension for now, had to be important.

"I'm not jealous that the forest chose to reply to your call, not mine," Claw interrupted his train of thought with a friendly nudge.

"The forest? All I did was make some tiny bug appear," Varg returned in kind. "And, according to Toru, that bug is no stranger to our kitty."

"You're not the kind to accept compliments with ease, are you?" Claw commented. "I might have to fight you until you admit how amazing you are."

Varg chuckled. "Compliment me on my strength and abilities on the battlefield, and I'll graciously receive every word. But magical, or a speaker to the spirits, that I am not."

Claw gestured for him to look ahead. "It looks to me like you might be wrong about that."

Varg stopped for a moment. So far, as strange and a keeper of secrets as it appeared, the forest had been a place of wonder. Yet, nothing could have prepared him for what now lay in front of him.

Lightning bugs of all colors played in the crown of an old oak. Moss grew on the ancient bark on all sides, as if the tree turned its face from the sun on purpose. Yet, streams of translucent green crossed the trunk from its roots up to the highest of its branches and back again, life flowing from it and feeding straight into the ground.

“Are we at the heart of The Quiet Woods?” he asked, as he remembered the tale Claw had told him only the night before.

“We might well be,” Claw confirmed as he stood there, watching the old oak in wonder.

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Duril was at a loss for words. They had been through a lot lately, and yet he had encountered nothing like the scene in front of his eyes until now. If a reason for the word ‘magic’ had to exist, it could well be whatever they were seeing right now. Magic manifested in the world in many ways, but somehow, Duril felt that he was witness, along with the others, to something truly wondrous. The colors of the bugs and leaves were so bright his eyes couldn’t rest in one place for long without beginning to sting. Whatever the old oak stood for, it had to be extremely powerful.

An impulse from within nudged him to move forward and place his hand on the bark. It was so warm under his touch, and that revelation halted his decision to have another go at using his gift from Lady Amethyst. Only for a moment, though, because the warmth under his fingertips spread along his arm and filled him with reassurance. “Who are you?” he whispered, and the symbols on the back of his hand glowed radiantly. That had never happened before.

“Duril,” Varg whispered in alarm.

He couldn’t understand the cause for the apprehension apparent in the tone of those words. He was allowed no time to ponder it as Toru turned toward him, his eyes widened in shock, and then rushed to him.

“Duril! What’s going on?”

The tigershifter grabbed his shoulder and tried to pull him away, and it was only then Duril realized that his feet were planted firmly in the ground, and his entire body was as tough and rigid as the trunk of a tree, although on the inside, he could feel life flowing from the center of his heart down to his toes, fingers, and even the crown of his head.

He tried to move his head to get a good look at Toru and assure him that everything was all right, but he couldn’t move. Fluid like a river on the inside, but made of bark on the outside. Toru’s face appeared in front of him, and it was easy to see that the young tiger was prey to great agitation. Duril looked into his eyes, hoping that he could convey the same assurance to his lover that he found in the roots growing from his feet and burying themselves deep into the heart of the earth.

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“Claw, what’s happening?” Toru shouted after another desperate attempt to pull Duril away. The healer had the same warmth in his eyes he knew well, and it felt as if he was trying to speak, but his mouth didn’t move, or any other part of him for that matter.

And he was turning into something else before their very eyes. The tree moved to keep him captive, soft tendrils of newborn branches wrapping around Duril’s hand and wrist, aiming to reach higher, growing thicker with each passing moment.

Toru tried to shake his friend and lover, hugged him and used all his strength to lift him from the ground, but it seemed that his body had taken root so deep that it was impossible to move him from his place.

Varg and Claw hurried to help him, prey to the same frenzy, but all their efforts were in vain. Toru gave up and smacked his fists against the bark of the old oak. “Let Duril go free, now!”

Claw grabbed him and pulled him back. “Toru, stop!”

He struggled against the other’s hold, but the bear was superior in might, and he was finally dragged away. Even if Claw was stronger, Toru’s fight managed to topple them over together, making them fall on the grass.

*Friend well*, someone whispered, and Toru stopped his struggling to look up. The lightning bug hovered above him. “What do you know?” He lashed at the bug, trying to swat it with one open palm, but it was Varg who caught his arm this time.

“Toru, stop.”

He recognized the authority in Varg’s voice for what it was. Care and a hint of worry, but Toru could tell by now that the wolfshifter was considering possibilities in his mind, those that usually stemmed from the wise part of him that wasn’t from his nature as a warrior, but that of a pack leader.

“What’s going on with Duril?” he asked in a much softer voice now. “Is he turning into a tree? Because he knows how to talk to them?”

Varg helped him to his feet and then did the same for Claw. The three of them stood and looked at Duril, as frozen in place as he was. Toru couldn’t say what made him think that the healer looked nothing like a statue. If anything, he looked as alive as he always did, only that he seemed to have been caught in a moment in time, time that had been brought to a halt by a mysterious and invisible hand.

“Your little friend here,” Varg pointed vaguely at the place where the lightning bug had hovered only earlier, “tells us that Duril is fine. My gut tells me that we should believe it, as tiny as it might be.”

“It’s not my friend,” Toru protested, but right then, the bug flew in from his left side and bumped against his temple.

*Friends*, the voice in the wind whispered, but this time with just a slight tinge of exasperation.

“I don’t believe in bugs,” he said stubbornly but didn’t try to swat the lightning bug away as before.

“It doesn’t look like we have much choice,” Varg pointed out. “We need to find a way to talk to it. And I think what we need the most is patience and to find the right words our friend can recognize and use.”

Patience wasn’t his strongest suit, Toru thought and crossed his arms. Why did these adventures have to show him all his weaknesses he didn’t like at all?

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Duril could hear what Toru, Varg, and Claw were saying only a few feet away from him, and he wished so much that he still had a voice to tell them that they had nothing to be afraid of. Why he knew that to be true was beyond the realm of comprehension, but it still was the truth, and it was something he sensed with his entire being.

*Your gift is strong*, a voice whispered, right into his mind.

*You talk*, Duril thought since he couldn’t move his lips or let his throat form any sounds.

*I do.*

Even though the voice came from the old oak as he could clearly sense it was doing, in his mind, it didn’t appear keen on giving him any of the information he needed to discover. It appeared he needed to coax the words out of the magical being trapped in there.

*Who are you?*

*I lost my name a long time ago. I don’t remember.*

*What are you?* Duril knew somehow that was a more important question than the first.

*Not dead, not yet alive.*

Alive. But to him, the forest seemed as alive as it could be. Varg and Claw had seemed to differ when they talked that very morning about the strange things happening there, at The Quiet Woods.

*Life courses through you. I can feel it*, he replied. *This entire place is alive because of you.*

*But it cannot age. The life you see comes back, ebb and flow. Why is this happening?*

Duril pondered over this, following the words carefully. *I'm a stranger here. I was hoping you could tell me more.*

*I don't know much. Each new day promises, but by nightfall, when everyone sleeps, it's back again. It's tiring, but I cannot stop. I must keep trying.*

The spirit in the old oak had no memories, it seemed, except for the arduous labor of creating everything over and over again.

*I tried to talk to you. But the trees were silent.*

*They're too young to know how to do so.*

For him, they looked like a fully grown forest, but nothing surprised him anymore.

*My friends are working themselves mad because I don't move, he pointed out as gently as he could.*

*I'm not the one keeping you, if that's what you're asking. The only thing I control is this. Ebb and flow... ebb and flow...*

Even though the voice he could hear was young, the tiredness he'd noticed earlier saturated each inflection.

*It has to be because your gift is so strong. I don't think I've ever met someone like you, but I don't meet many people.*

Duril wanted to laugh at the joke. The young voice had taken a turn that suggested it was capable of humor.

*This place is called The Quiet Woods. Does that tell you anything?*

*The Quiet Woods? That's a beautiful name. But why are they so quiet? Is it because of the young trees I'm making?*

Duril wished he had an answer to that. *I must be here because I can help.*

*I could use some help. And a friend.*

*Is that little lightning bug part of you? Or a friend?*

*It's someone who comes and goes. I know that I should know it, but I forget. There are so many trees, and birds, and bugs, and blades of grass that need to be born again. Why cannot I keep them alive? Is there something wrong with me?*

The voice sounded anxious, unsure, and like it belonged to a child.

*I don't think so. Maybe there is something keeping you from reaching your full power and keeping the forest alive for more than one day.*

*I do feel that may be correct. But it's a part of me, I think, inside this body of wood.*

Duril wished he could see inside the tree and offer help, but he was there, outside, and he couldn't even begin to fathom how such a thing would be possible. It was wondrous enough that he could talk to the heart of a forest as magical as the one around them.

*Would you like to look?* The voice asked, now eager to get help.

*Of course I would, but how?*

*Leave that to me.*

Duril felt his hand moving, the one resting against the old bark. But no, it wasn't moving, it was sinking, and his entire body was pulled through the bark. He tentatively moved his fingers and then his entire hand, realizing that he once again had control over them. His body sank into the body of the tree and, all of a sudden, he found himself in complete darkness.

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"No! Duril!" Toru exclaimed, but it was too late. The old oak was pulling the healer inside it and its bark then closed behind him, making it seem as if Duril had never even been there.

He stopped, bewildered, and didn't even attempt to slam his fists against the trunk. "Why is this forest so mean?" he shouted.

*Friend well*, the lightning bug bumped against his forehead. Toru turned all his frustration on it. "You," he hissed. "You got us into trouble!"

Claw and Varg seemed as dumbfounded by Duril's disappearance as he was. Varg moved suddenly, and his palm swished dangerously close to Toru's face, making him take a step back. Only then, he realized the wolfshifter had done that with a clever aim in mind. From Varg's closed fist, he could hear a buzzing sound.

"You got it!" Toru exclaimed. "Are you going to teach it how to talk to us?"

"More like I intend to ask it a few questions," Varg said with determination. "Now, tiny bug, tell us? Where is our friend? And say more than that he is well this time."

The bug buzzed a little more, but it appeared that struggling to get out of Varg's hold was taking a toll on its power.

"Maybe we should give it a few more words to help it," Claw suggested. "Can Duril talk to the oak?"



*Oak talk.*

That was a bit of a relief, Toru thought. Trees were supposed to be Duril's friends.

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He blinked hard, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness, but without any source of light, no matter how weak, it appeared impossible to see anything. Something was swarming at his feet, and a sensation of unpleasant unease gripped him suddenly. Tiny teeth began to bite his ankle, and Duril let out a loud and clear shout of pained surprise.

## Chapter Four – The Life Inside

Duril shivered, a tad disgusted by the tiny bugs that walked all over his feet and were climbing up his calves now. He liked to think he had always understood nature, and nothing of it could frighten him, at least not at the deep level he was currently experiencing, a strange unease holding his heart in its grip. Some part of his mind told him to keep his cool and focus on his breathing, all the while avoiding brusque movements and causing a shift in the activity of the bugs and possibly other tiny creatures roaming the ground at his feet.

At least the teeth he had felt earlier were gone now, and all that remained was the unsettling sensation of being crawled over by those invisible critters.

*I am here*, he thought, hoping for whoever the soul of the old oak was to respond in kind. “I am here,” he said out loud.

“Touch me,” a voice whispered, and Duril recognized it for the same one which spoke to him before, only now it was clear and easy to hear, not just the phantom of a thought.

“How? Where are you?” Duril asked.

“Everywhere.”

For a moment, he waited, expecting more than just that strange answer, and when none came, he stretched out his arm, waving it in a large arc until his fingers touched the inside of the bark. “Is this you?” he asked.

Right under his fingertips, something was growing. He tentatively moved his hand, and the soft tendrils wrapping around his fingers reminded him of the bodies of new plants, growing in spring.

“I am,” the reply followed, and it appeared that there was no place in particular where the voice came from, but, indeed, everywhere around.

“I don’t mean to sound too forward, but can you tell me what these creatures frolicking all over my legs are?”

“They’re visitors,” the voice replied. “I wasn’t the one to invite them.”

Duril pondered for a moment. “Are you sure? You are the maker of all the life that grows here, in this forest. And you told me you forget things. Could it be that you forgot that you were the one who invited them here?”

“It could be,” the voice replied, after a short moment of hesitation, just like a forgetful person struggling to put bits and pieces of memory together. “But I like only beautiful beings. Why would I turn to these ugly things?” There was wonder in the voice now, like it was unfathomable to bring

to the forest creatures such as the ones crawling over Duril's feet, sending shivers of disgust through him now and then.

"They are alive," Duril said, taking his time to make sense of what the voice was telling him and all the little incongruities around him that only led to confusion. "You love all life, don't you?"

"The life of the forest, yes," the voice admitted, suddenly invigorated.

Not only The Quiet Woods were young, but the soul behind them, too. Just like a child, the voice hung on Duril's every word, hoping to find reason and a sense of safety.

Duril decided to take a chance. "We heard about an old witch living here. Shearah is her name. Do you happen to know her?"

The voice remained silent for some time before replying. "I don't know her." Unlike before, when the voice had sounded eager and honest, it now held shadows like there was something it needed to hide.

"But the name... it tells you something, doesn't it?" Duril insisted, trying to put as much gentleness into his tone as he could muster.

"No. It's just a name," the voice hurriedly replied. "Do you want me to show you more?"

"I do, but how? And is there nothing you can do about these critters trying to climb up my legs?" Duril shook one foot and then the other, in an effort to get rid of the unpleasant sensations.

"They don't like the light. Just follow me," the voice urged him.

Duril was about to ask how he was supposed to do that when the dark split in front of him like an old shell, and sudden light flooded the inside of the tree. He brought one hand up to shield his eyes, as they shied away from that assault.

"Come, come," the voice urged him. "Forget about the dark and ugly creatures."

Duril was, in a way, more than happy to do so, but he couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling that he was getting further from the truth by listening to the voice and walking away. "But--" he started.

"Come, come, I can only hold the sun like this for so long," the voice said, the urgency in it increasing tenfold.

Duril listened. His steps, heavy at first, became light, as soon as he stepped out of the bark. For a moment, he turned, expecting to see his companions somewhere around, but wherever he was now, it had to be a different place from where he had left Toru, Varg, and Claw.

It looked like a greenhouse of sorts, with tiny pots and big ones housing plants of various kinds. He tipped his head back and saw no glass ceiling, although he half-expected it. The light, that

incredible white light, poured from above like a cascade and, luckily, his eyes were already adjusted to it enough so that he could look around and take in that amazing place.

As far as his eyes could see, stretched rows and rows of pots filled with plants of various sizes and kinds. Not one was like the next, and even without asking, Duril realized that he found himself inside the most beautiful and outstanding collection of fruits of the earth he had ever imagined.

Now, he understood how food could be so plentiful in The Quiet Woods. Orange trees in blossom, no higher than his knee, swayed in a gentle breeze, while by their side, others with needle-like leaves covered by a protective wax, stood tall, an early sign of the pride they would exude once they reached adulthood.

Grass with fat blades, full of earthy juice, sprouted from the soil inside the pots, teeming with life. Duril stopped for a moment and listened. Without a doubt, there was a murmur coming from all the plants and trees growing around. As much as he perked up his ears, he couldn't make out any words whatsoever, and it all sounded like the kind of gibberish a baby would use as language.

The voice inside the tree hadn't lied about them being so very young. No wonder he hadn't been able to talk to them; they probably shied away from strangers, but not here, where their creator walked side by side with a newcomer they no longer had reason to fear.

"This is all your creation, isn't it?" he asked, as he leaned forward and observed the crown of a yellow flower on which tiny bees, the tiniest he had ever seen, crawled.

"Yes," the voice replied with pride. "Would you like a bit of nectar?"

"Sure," Duril accepted. "But how would you--" He stopped as a small wax cup was raised into the air by the swarm of little bees and brought to his lips. With no longer a choice to make, he opened his mouth and let the sweet liquid caress his tongue. "Thank you," he said, and the swarm descended, taking the wax cup with them. "This is a beautiful, magical place," he added. "Is this where you grow all the trees and plants?"

"And bugs and bees," the voice replied. "Would you like to see where I make the rivers and fish?"

"I'd love to," Duril said, invigorated by the tasty nectar he'd been given earlier. "Do you truly make everything by yourself? With no help whatsoever?"

"No help," the voice said.

Duril only then realized there had been something bugging him ever since they had entered The Quiet Woods. "But what about people? And shapeshifters?"

"People? You're the first people I've seen in a very long time," the voice replied.

Duril frowned. Where could everyone have gone? “What do you mean by a very long time?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I forget. I play with my friends, and then I forget what time it is. And it’s night again, and I fall asleep. In the morning, everyone is gone, and I have to make them anew.”

*Play. Time.* Duril recalled the words being part of the magic incantation that must have summoned the tiny lighting bug that had guided them to the old oak. “Your little friend who brought us here, it appeared after we said certain words,” he began.

“It’s not my friend,” the voice insisted. “Just someone who comes and goes.”

“Did you create your friend?”

“No,” the voice replied, sounding guarded and a bit frightened this time. “It came out of nowhere.”

“But how--” Duril tried to insist.

“To the river, let’s get to the river, and play with the fish!” The voice was louder now, excited, and Duril decided to keep silent just a little more so that he could learn as much as possible about the place.

He followed the path through the pots of plants and trees, all the while focusing his sense of hearing, in hope that he might catch something helpful in the murmurs around them. As much as he did so, however, no sense rose from the myriad of whispers accompanying him like gentle friends.

But what about the old oak? Duril tried to look over his shoulder.

“No, don’t look back,” the voice warned him, anxious and frightened.

“Why not?” he questioned but stopped in mid-movement.

“Because there’s nothing there, no life. Just look ahead, ahead,” the voice urged him. “No looking back!”

Duril felt tempted to ignore the plea, but again, he was too curious about what the voice of the forest wanted to show him. Somehow, it felt like his duty to follow it and only then offer his help, as little as that would be.

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Toru held Varg’s wrists and leaned over so that no word from the lighting bug would go unheard. “Talk some more,” he ordered, his frustration growing. “You’re a stupid bug!” he yelled.

Claw took hold of his right arm and tried to pull him away. “I don’t think we can convince it to talk by yelling at it.”

“It’s a sneaky little--” Toru forced himself to stop under Claw’s stern stare. “I bet that if Varg opens his palm, it’ll just fly away and leave us in the dark.”

*Dark. Oak. Dark.*

“I don’t think that will happen,” Varg said but still opened his palm cautiously. The lighting bug lay belly up and struggled, its miniscule legs rowing through the air to no avail.

Curious and appeased momentarily, Toru stretched one finger and allowed the creature to capture it between its legs. Slowly, he maneuvered his hand so that the lighting bug could crawl back onto Varg’s open palm, this time balancing itself on its own.

Toru observed it with keen eyes. “How can you talk?”

A short buzz followed. *Talk. Talk.*

“It looks like your little friend is happy that you can hear it and wants to talk some more,” Claw suggested.

Toru nodded and pursed his lips in thought. It seemed that the bug didn’t know a lot of words, which meant that he needed to teach it a few. Varg and Claw both were holding their breath as they watched him and the lighting bug.

“Is it dark inside the oak?” Toru asked the first thing that came to mind. He wanted to berate himself that very moment. “It should be, it’s not like there could be light inside,” he murmured.

*Oak. Dark. Light.* The tiny critter buzzed happily.

Toru grinned. It looked like he was better at this than he had thought. “Is it both light and dark?”

The bug flung open its wings, but only to flutter them a little and then fold them down carefully.

*Dark. Light. Dark. Light.*

For a moment, Toru scratched his head. What could the lighting bug mean by that? “First it’s dark, then it’s light?”

The bug did nothing but to repeat the same succession of words from before, but this time, with a lot more emphasis, like it was expecting Toru to understand and it was getting frustrated at not obtaining what it wanted.

“What could that mean?” He straightened up and looked questioningly at Varg, then at Claw.

Claw caressed his beard and his eyelids dropped as he appeared to look inside for an answer. “I think that everything this little thing here is trying to tell us must be very simple.”

“Like when talking to a child,” Varg contributed his own point of view. “It cannot be something too difficult. So, we can safely assume that it’s telling us that there is dark first, then light.”

“Duril must be traveling to a different place than this,” Claw intervened. “Another forest... maybe the heart of it.”

*Forest heart*, the bug suddenly said or thought, because it felt to Toru like it was speaking directly to their minds, in a language they could understand.

“The forest heart? And there is both dark and light in there?” Toru asked.

The bug continued to confirm excitedly. *Forest heart. Dark. Light.*

“Well, it appears that we’re getting somewhere,” Claw said out loud. “We now know that Duril is getting acquainted with the heart of the forest, and since he knows how to talk to trees, I think there is no better of us we could have sent in for talking to what makes The Quiet Woods move.”

Toru threw a glance around. The wind was just a breeze, but it was growing stronger. “Do forests move?” he asked and stretched out one arm, pointing somewhere behind Varg.

Either his eyes were playing tricks on him or a dark part of the forest, too far from them to be seen clearly, seemed to be on the move.

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The wind blew harder, Varg noticed just as Toru asked what seemed to be an innocuous question. His gut instinct, the one thing that had kept him and others alive in trying times, made his hackles rise even before he turned to look at what Toru was pointing at.

His entire body became taut with apprehension, and his hand moved to the pommel of his sword without his conscious mind ordering it to go there. The bug flew away from his hand, as if it was as aware of danger as he was.

At a great distance from them, the darkness of the forest appeared to be on the move. Varg blinked a couple of times as Claw and Toru fell in line with him, low growls rising from their throats, their inner beasts already responding to the menace slinking through the trees, waiting to strike.

“What is it?” Toru asked, and by the change in his voice Varg could tell that his friend had already turned into his tiger shape.

Varg frowned, as his eyes fought to make sense of the shapes coming out of the wood. He pulled his sword from its scabbard and held it out before him. A ray of light fell and bounced off something that could only be a shiny smooth surface. A word climbed up his throat in an instant.

“Vrannes!”

His war cry was followed by Claw’s roar. Toru was ahead of them, leaping forward, his tiger body taut and ready for battle. Varg growled and broke into a sprint, his weapon ready. Claw ran by his side, turning into his bear in mid-flight, both his companions faster than him.

But Varg knew that an armed human could be as deadly to those creatures as a shapeshifter in beast form. He rushed in, using his sword as a spear, and sending it over his friends’ heads, and cutting clean through a large branch thick with teeth and claws just threatening to descend on Toru’s head.

An inhuman howl was the result, and like creatures bred by nightmares, an army of Vrannes came out of the forest, out into the light. Only seeing them, even from afar, was enough to bring back the fear and hopelessness so many had experienced during the war. Varg clenched his hand tightly on the hilt of his sword, reining in the wretchedness pooling in his belly at the sight of those enemies.

“Don’t let them touch you with their mouths and tongues!” he yelled at Toru and Claw.

Should he have known that he would meet such terrible foes again in his lifetime, he would have told his companions more about what it meant to fight them. The large branches of the Vrannes stretched menacingly, teeth and claws reaching for anyone they could get at, but it was that disgusting mouth in the middle of their trunk-like bodies that served as their biggest weapon, something many humans and shapeshifters alike had come to learn.

A single touch of the tongue that lolled out was enough to feel like the sting of a thousand bees. A bite was usually lethal, more so for humans who didn’t have the strength and protection shapeshifters had, but Varg had known brothers and sisters who had fallen prey to the army of Vrannes that had once risen to terrorize the north and the human settlements as far as they could walk.

That time, it had been their good fortune to have the witch Agatha by their side to tell them what to do. But now they were three against what looked like a large group of Vrannes, and there was no wise witch to help them win the battle.

Varg fought against the dark mire descending upon his mind. During those war times, he couldn’t have said what about confronting such despicable creatures made everyone experience strong feelings of despair and hopelessness. It had to be an uncanny ability the Vrannes wielded, to make fear of their appearance grow roots hard like rock inside the souls of anyone who went against them.

He shook his head and bellowed as he rushed ahead, even faster now than both Toru and Claw. They yelled something at him as he went past, but the blood was now pounding in his ears, and all he could see in front of his eyes was a curtain of red.



A slash of the sword, and one branch, the first to try and reach him, fell to the ground. The sounds of battle from times long past rustled the blades of grass and the few fallen leaves, creating a whirlwind that brought with it a fog. Forced to take one step back, Varg staggered for a moment and brought his free arm high to shield his eyes.

Then, as if guided by a hand made for miracles, the wind died down.

“What is going on?” Claw whispered to his right.

“The trees froze!” Toru shouted, and Varg dropped his arm and looked ahead.

Indeed, the army of Vrannes he had been ready to slash through only moments before seemed nothing but a copse of trees with blackened trunks, but trees nonetheless.

Disoriented, Varg looked around. The branch he had slashed through lay on the ground, lifeless. There was no trace of claws and teeth glinting menacingly in the sun like before. Dead leaves hung from it, and it looked like good timber one would use to feed a fire.

“They were Vrannes,” he said, unsure of his own words. “Did you see them, too?” he asked and turned toward Claw.

“With my own two eyes. They looked ready for battle,” the bearshifter confirmed. Both he and Toru changed into their humans and appeared as flabbergasted by the whole thing as he was.

Toru walked hesitantly toward one of the frozen trees and sniffed it. Then he sneezed, and the tree in front of him moved an inch. Varg blinked. Were they all prey to some strange magic at work here? “Did you see--”

Claw was already by the side of the tree, poking its bark. “These trees are something,” he muttered under his breath, “but I just don’t know what yet.”

There was uncertainty in the bearshifter’s voice, precisely mirroring the one in his own mind, Varg thought. Reluctantly, he sheathed his blade and walked closer, as well. “Is it possible our eyes are playing tricks on us?”

“One foolish shifter is understandable,” Claw joked. “Even two if they had a little bit too much mulberry wine. But three, I don’t think that’s possible.”

“What made the trees move?” Toru questioned. “If they’re not Vrannes... what are they? Moving trees?”

*Trees. All trees.*

The lighting bug seemed to have made its way back to them. It landed on Toru’s shoulder, as he seemed to prefer the tiger above everyone else, and much to Varg’s relief, the youngster didn’t

brush it away like before. Instead, the golden eyes filled with curiosity as they set on the tiny critter.

“They’re all trees?” Toru asked. “Is that what you’re trying to say, Lighty?”

*Lighty*, the bug said excitedly.

“I think it likes that you gave it a nickname,” Claw said with a short chuckle. “Well, Lighty, it looks like something in this forest is messing with us. Care to tell us more?”

*All trees.*

“We got that,” Claw replied. “But we’ve seen our fair share of trees in our lifetime, and the type that moves around with claws and teeth is not what we’re keen to meet, here, at The Quiet Woods, or otherwise.”

*Claws. Teeth. Not.*

Claw grimaced as if he was not at all convinced by the tiny bug’s denial. “But we saw them with our own eyes. They were right there.” He pointed at the frozen trees. Or maybe, Varg thought, it was wrong to believe they were frozen, as, in a tree-like way, they were very much like any other trees, and alive.

Well, that was a bit questionable. “Is there any life inside these things?” he asked and knocked on the bark.

Maybe it was just his imagination again, but the deep wrinkles inside the surface appeared to rearrange themselves for a moment. And right after, something smacked him upside the head, making him jump into the air. Without thinking twice, Varg pulled his blade out again. “Who’s playing the fool around here?” he bellowed.

But behind him, there was no one. He threw a suspicious look at Toru and Claw, but his companions appeared to be just as startled as he was.

Toru pointed above, at a hanging branch. “The tree hit you,” he explained. “Like this,” he added as he gestured to show what had just happened.

Varg set his jaw hard and lifted his sword.

The lighting bug flew right in his face. *No. Friend.*

“Friend? These trees are no friends,” Varg spat. “And what do you know?”

*Forest heart. All trees.*

Varg grumbled in discontent but put his sword away. “I don’t know why I’m trusting a little thing like you.”

“Because it must be part of the forest heart, too,” Toru said, looking a bit surprised at Varg as if he was just realizing he had spoken out loud.

The little insect buzzed around Toru and landed for a moment on the crown of his head. The young tiger had to be right about that. Varg sighed and crossed his arms. “Do the trees in this forest think that it’s somehow funny to change into Vrannes and scare us to death? Do they like to play?”

*Play. All trees. Play.*

“Yeah, I can see that,” Varg commented wryly. “Everyone around here seems so bent on playing, but this is how you end up a branch short,” he added and threw a pointed look at the tree that he must have attacked only earlier.

The tree surprised them all as it brought two large branches in front of itself and crossed them, as if it was trying to mimic Varg’s stance. To check if that was true, Varg moved his arms to the sides, and the tree did the same. “Indeed, someone is trying to play the fool,” he said and laughed.

“At least, they’re not Vrannes,” Claw pointed out.

“Still, we all know what we saw just earlier,” Varg intervened.

“They had claws,” Toru jumped into the conversation, “and then, they hadn’t.”

“Even if they’re not Vrannes, which we can’t be entirely sure of,” Claw said, “we must still be cautious.”

Although that was good advice, it was given only half-heartedly, and Varg knew why. These playful trees that could smack you in jest and fool around couldn’t be the nightmarish creatures growing in the marshes of Knaeus. They were far from those places, and unless history wanted to repeat itself by un-rooting the Vrannes from their homes once more and releasing them upon the unsuspecting world, there had to be a different explanation for why these trees were moving as if a different life than that of their forest siblings ran under their bark.

“They seem like good trees,” Toru offered and, without fear, he touched the tree that kept mimicking Varg’s every gesture. The tree moved one branch and placed it over Toru’s hand. “See?” The young tiger looked at Varg and Claw with shining eyes. “They must be Duril’s friends. Hey, do you know where he is? He is half an orc, but don’t let his little tusks fool you. He’s really gentle and really handsome, and he can heal you with just a word.”

“Lover’s talk,” Claw commented with a knowing smirk and threw one arm over Toru’s shoulders. “First of all, it would help if we could find out how to make our newfound friends talk.”

*Talk. Talk. Lighty. Talk.*

“Are you the one who is able to make our words travel back and forth, Lighty?” Claw asked. “That should come in handy, especially if you know the language of the trees.”

To make that clear, the lightning bug flew from Toru’s head to the tree and landed on one of its many branches. They all watched it.

“But how are we going to make them talk if not even Lighty can do that unless there are words it can pick up from us?” Toru asked the most practical question of all.

“Claw, it’s quite clear by now that this forest is not like the one you left behind,” Varg started as he turned toward the bearshifter. “But is there anything you remember from your time here that could help us?”

Claw shrugged and his smile faltered. “Nothing like this ever happened while I was here. The Quiet Woods might have been silent, as silent as a forest can be, but they were never as mysterious as this. I mean, what I remember mostly is just my shenanigans with Beast and Willow.”

*Beast!* The lightning bug took them by surprise with its excited tiny squeal. Its small body couldn’t manage more than that, but it began to move frantically, up and down the branch. *Beast! Beast!* It kept on repeating, trying to get their attention.

“Beast? What do you mean?” Claw asked, his eyebrows furrowed. “Could it be that you know who I’m talking about?” The bearshifter grunted as the tree suddenly poked him in the belly with one well aimed branch.

Varg pursed his lips not to laugh as he looked at his dear friend and companion. Few things could ruin the bearshifter’s composure, and it was just hilarious to watch his eyes going all wide in surprise at the audacity of that foolish tree.

Claw rubbed his belly and took one wary step backward. “Beast, is that you?” Just as fast as he had pulled back, he moved forward and suddenly embraced the tree trunk, struggling to pull it up by its roots, but to no avail.

“Isn’t Beast a bearshifter?” Toru asked. “How can this tree be your friend?”

Claw laughed as the tree wrapped its branches tightly around and lifted him off the ground like he weighed nothing whatsoever. Varg stared in disbelief and traded a glance with Toru. The tiger was just as surprised as he was.

“How is that possible?” Toru asked and pointed at the scene in front of them. “Claw is as heavy as a mountain!”

“Put me down, fool!” Claw demanded, but he was laughing. “Now I know you’re Beast because there’s no one else that could hike me off the ground like this!”

The tree made a show of shaking him and only after, put him down. It rested its branches on Claw’s shoulders.

*Friends. Friends.* The lighting bug chanted, happy to help as it seemed.

Varg laughed, not really believing his eyes, but having no choice but to do so. “So this is the mighty Beast. I really hope I didn’t cut your arm, but it’s your own fault for rushing at me looking like a Vranne bent on sucking my blood.”

The tree moved one branch and caught one of Varg’s little fingers. It looked like a caress, but then it pulled hard and viciously, making Varg howl in pained surprise. Then it let go off him, just as fast.

Varg caught his finger and began to rub it vigorously. “Ouch! Was that for what I did to you earlier? What a prankster! I think you broke it!” He made a show of letting his finger dangle like it no longer had any life left in it. The tree leaned forward, and Varg took advantage and ran his finger right into one of the long wrinkles set into the bark, making it lean back in surprise. “Got you!” he exclaimed with glee.

“If Beast is here, could it be that Willow is also around?” Claw asked.

*Around.*

Varg turned his head to follow after the buzzing of the bug and watched it land on the long branch of a tall slender tree.

## Chapter Five – A Journey Through the Heart

With each blink of his eyes, the forest around him changed. Duril stopped for a moment to admire the silver leaves of a tree like no other he had ever seen in his life. During the short time he closed his eyes to inhale the fresh pine-like scent, it appeared that the tree had changed into something else. Its leaves were now golden and majestic, and they smelled like summer, but Duril quickly noticed the burnt tips, a sign that autumn was near.

As far as he knew, it should still be summer, but he was in no ordinary place, and nothing of what he saw here was like anywhere else.

“Here, can you see it?” the voice asked. “Have a sip.”

Duril crouched and looked at the tiny spring flowing from a smooth rock that reached as high as his hip. He ran his hand through the water, then cupped his palm and brought it to his lips. It tasted heavenly and new energy coursed through him once more. “It’s delicious,” he said.

He turned his head to see where the spring was heading and noticed a pool formed not very far away, almost under his feet. Cautiously, he walked toward the precipice and looked down. The tiny spring became a waterfall, and foam formed at the foot of its falling, making small droplets of water rise and reflect a tiny rainbow right above his head.

“So beautiful,” he whispered as he took in his surroundings.

“I only like beautiful things,” the voice insisted. “Come, I want to show you more.”

Duril followed the voice down a steep slope that brought him to the pool he had seen from above, and from there, along a river that flowed quietly. The noise of the waterfall was already muffled, as if he had traveled for miles already. The forest around him was no longer a greenhouse; plants and trees and bushes sprouted everywhere, and as Duril walked on, they blossomed, then their flowers turned into fruits, and now, when he looked closely, the fruits began to hang low on the boughs. Without reaching for one, he knew they had to be delicious, but he felt satiated after having that nectar made by the tiny bees and that handful of water.

“And this is where I grow the fish,” the voice said as they arrived at a natural dam creating a small pond, protecting it from the river currents.

“Everything is amazing,” Duril said. “And you do all these things by yourself?”

“Yes, all alone,” the voice replied, and a tinge of anxiety could be heard again. “But I’m no longer alone. You’re with me.”

“You told me you play with your friends and end up forgetting the time. Why do you say you’re alone?”

“I’m not alone; I’m with you,” the voice insisted.

“Were you lonely before?” Duril asked, bent on getting some answers, regardless of the reluctance his host manifested in what seemed to be a measure of protection.

“Let’s play!”

One large fish broke the smooth surface of the water, splashing droplets everywhere. Duril expressed his amazement by letting out a small shout. It was obvious that his host kept things hidden, for reasons that he was intent to reveal.

“It must be a lot of work to create so many beautiful things by yourself,” he said after the fish landed back into the pond, and the water closed above it, resuming its mirror-like appearance.

“It is. But it’s what I love to do the most,” the voice replied.

Duril sat on a patch of moss covering a large rock and stretched his legs.

“Are you tired already? But I’ve shown you so little!”

“I’m not tired, but I want to ask you a few things.”

The voice remained silent for a bit. “Ask me,” it said, but just like a child told to stop playing, it sounded miffed and annoyed.

“Do you only like beautiful things?” Duril began.

“Yes. Only beautiful things. Forests are beautiful, trees are beautiful. And fish, too. And fruits, and oh, all the flowers. Have you seen the flowers?” the voice sounded increasingly excited.

“Yes, I did. But what do you think of me?”

“Of you?”

“Yes. See, I don’t have half an arm,” Duril pointed out.

“It didn’t grow yet, right?” the voice asked, seemingly puzzled by that statement.

“No. I just don’t have it anymore. I had it once, but I lost it during a war from a long time ago.”

“War?” The voice didn’t appear to understand the meaning of that word. “What is war?”

“Something horrible, wrong, and ugly,” Duril said.

“Then I don’t want to hear anything else about it,” the voice replied. “Let’s talk only about beautiful things. Like the fish, the bees, and the flowers.”

Duril pondered for a moment. “Do you ever feel hurt?”

“What is hurt? Is it another ugly thing?”

“It’s not always like that,” Duril explained. “Some hurt is needed because it helps you grow.”

“Grow? Like a tree? Or a bush? Or a flower?”

“Yes, like that,” Duril replied.

“But they don’t hurt,” the voice said, slightly confused. “They’re happy while they grow. I watch over them, all of them.”

“Yet, for a tree to grow big and strong, it must lose its leaves, and some branches might weaken and die. What does the tree do when that happen? Doesn’t it get rid of the dead leaves and branches so that it can grow stronger?”

“No!” The voice was petulant now. “They never hurt because I don’t let them!”

Duril had a hunch now that the voice knew a little more than it was willing to let on. It recoiled from learning new things, and Duril wanted to understand why that was. There was a history here waiting to be uncovered, and he couldn’t wait to delve into the secret that held the forest in that magical state like a possessive mother.

“They are your children, aren’t they?” he asked out loud.

“Every one,” the voice said with pride.

“How about the visitors? The ones inside the oak?”

“They’re not mine,” the voice denied quickly.

“Can you tell me more about the old oak?” Duril decided to change tack for now. Whatever secrets the voice was keeping, they had to be about those tiny creepy crawlers. Whenever he tried to guide the conversation toward that particular topic, the voice became wary, and like a child who must have done something wrong, it was trying to hide it, whatever that thing was.

“The old oak is my home when I’m sleepy,” the voice said promptly, a bit relieved that it didn’t have to explain more about those creatures it considered ugly and unwanted visitors.

“But isn’t it dark inside? You love the light,” Duril pointed out.

“I do, but the old oak keeps me safe, and everyone else.”

“I see,” Duril said thoughtfully. “But how did the old oak come to be? It isn’t you who made it, is it?”

“No,” the voice replied. “I don’t know who made the old oak, just that it is there, and it always protects me when I go to sleep at night.”



Duril fell silent. He looked around some more. Everything was beautiful indeed, but, he realized that very moment, an undercurrent of staleness appeared to be creeping in, marring the beauty in places. A fish jumped out of the pond and fell in the grass. Duril expected it to twitch and fight for its life, but it became still the next moment, only its tiny mouth opening and closing. He walked to it and picked it up gently to put it back into the water.

“Leave it,” the voice ordered, somewhat sharply. “If they don’t want to stay and play, I don’t want them, either.”

“But it’s dying,” Duril said, trying to reason with his mercurial host. “Don’t you want it to live?”

“I’ll make others. Just leave it there.”

Duril stared at the fish in his palm. It wasn’t a big one, barely a youngster. “No,” he said. “I’ll put it back.” He was about to do exactly that, when tough roots sprouted from the ground and made him stumble and fall. The fish slipped out of his hand and, when Duril looked up, he couldn’t see it anymore.

With a wince, he grabbed his knee and rubbed it after getting to his feet. “Why did you do that? It wasn’t very nice,” he chided the voice.

“You made me do it,” the voice accused. “You shouldn’t put dead fish in the pond.”

Duril wanted to argue that the fish wasn’t yet dead, but as the strangeness of the situation dictated, he doubted that he would get anywhere by arguing with his unseen host. “What do you want to show me next?” he asked.

“Now, I want us to play,” the voice declared, no longer upset or annoyed, but cheerful and content.

“What do you want us to play? What games do you like most?” Duril asked, more and more curious about finding a way to the true heart of the voice. By now, he had a slight idea that, for reasons unknown, the voice was trying to hide its true nature, and that was where this new quest commanded him to go.

“I like making things and have others guess,” the voice replied. “Do you want to play with me?”

“I do,” Duril agreed.

“But you promise not to play with dead fish, yes?” the voice insisted, that tinge of anxiety once again strong in it.

“I promise,” Duril replied.

Whatever the voice was, he doubted it was malevolent in any way, but still, he sensed that he should be careful. His few days with Zukh Kalegh had helped him discover a different side of himself, a side that was attuned to dangers in a way that he hadn’t been accustomed to before.

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Toru felt curious and excited like he hadn't been in a while as he took in the various trees that had to have souls in them and stopped in front of the one called Willow. For some reason, that tree seemed to look at everyone from above, like he was some sort of king. "Are you a king?" he asked directly.

Claw guffawed at his assumption. "Willow and Beast used to be my best friends while I was roaming The Quiet Woods as a cub and even later. Willow's no king. He might pretend to be one, though, putting on airs and holding his nose high."

Toru snickered when the tall tree extended a branch and smacked Claw over one ear, not as hard as Beast was capable of, from what he had seen, but still in warning.

"Are you trapped inside?" he asked the tree, even though he was pretty sure that he wouldn't get a direct answer.

*Alive. Not. Trapped.* Lighty was still dutifully filling its role of trying to talk to them where the trees couldn't.

"This is so complicated," Toru complained. "Should we just say every word we know so that Lighty can tell us what happened here? Are Willow and Beast treeshifters?" he asked.

Claw shook his head. "They're genuine bags of fleas just as much as myself. How they came to turn into trees is beyond me. I guess they got up to some really naughty things while I was away."

The tree Claw had told them had to be Beast moved slowly and crouched while using one branch to gesture at them to follow his example.

"I suppose we should try to find out more," Claw concluded. "Let's just sit here, in a circle, and pretend to be wise."

Toru had a feeling that Claw didn't have to pretend to be wise at all. However, that could be a learning experience for him, and it mattered to be all eyes and ears. Along with Beast and Willow, a few other trees crouched in the same manner, forming half a circle. The rest of it was completed when Toru, Varg, and Claw sat across from them.

"Somehow, the way I see it," Claw began, "you people decided that it would be fun to turn into trees." The bearshifter waited until Willow waved a branch in a sign of denial. Claw sighed from the depths of his soul. "I was really hoping it would be something silly like that, but it looks as if we didn't get up this morning to be lucky. So, if that's not it, is it a curse?"

They all waited, Toru leaning forward so he wouldn't miss a thing. "If it's some dark evil threatening you by coming out of the ground, I'll deal with it," he said proudly. The trees didn't move, and he waited in vain for Lighty to confirm his suspicions. Seeing how everywhere they

went, they ended up fighting the same evil in one shape or another, he wouldn't be too surprised to learn of something like that.

*No evil.*

Not only him, but also Varg and Claw turned their heads toward the tiny lighting bug.

"But they are ugly trees now instead of bears," Toru pointed out, trying to make sense of what was happening. Beast pushed his forehead with the tip of a branch, making him fall on his back. "Hey," he protested, "you're mean!"

Claw helped him back to his place. "I don't think what's happening here has to do with the thing we've been fighting against until now. At least, these folks don't think so. That doesn't mean that they have never been wrong before."

Claw's assumption earned him a smack from Beast, which made Toru laugh out loud. It looked like the wise bear wasn't spared such treatment, either. In a way, Toru was starting to like Beast a lot.

"All right, I'm not sure I deserved that," Claw said wryly. "But come on, people, you're not telling us anything. And who's also here? Is Shearah with you?"

*Shearah.* Lighty landed on Toru's shoulder.

"So it is. The old witch might help us," Claw said with conviction. "But which one are you, Shearah? Lighty, aren't you going to help us?" The bear began touching every tree in the circle. "Is this you?"

*Shearah Shearah Shearah Shearah,* Lighty repeated without stopping for a breath.

It was Varg who seemed to know a little more about what made the tiny bug react like that. "Claw, I think you're looking at it the wrong way." He opened his palm and Lighty flew to it. "I think your old witch is right here."

Toru watched the tiny bug flapping its wings in contentment. "Wow, you're not only an old witch, you're a tiny witch!" Everyone laughed at his words. "What? It's true," he defended himself.

"Well, that gets us somewhere indeed," Claw said and leaned over to Varg to stare at Lighty who was now revealed to be Shearah, the old witch. "Ah, if only you could tell us about everything that happened here, Shearah."

"I can tell you." The new sonorous voice still came from the little bug, but it was no longer just a soft whisper.

"Wow," Toru said with unbridled surprise. "You can talk now? Without having to hear us saying all kinds of words?"

“I can, indeed. All I needed was for someone to call me by my real name,” Shearah said.

“So you didn’t like it that I called you Lighty,” Toru said, somewhat miffed to discover that. “I’ve never named anyone or anything before.”

Shearah laughed and flew back to him. “I was happy you gave me a name, young tiger. It brought you near the truth, and I’m honored to have been the first to receive a name from you.”

That made him feel better about it all, so he smiled, happy with himself and the tiny bug who was, in fact, a tiny witch.

“Well, are you going to keep us waiting, Shearah?” Claw asked, showing as much impatience as Toru did sometimes, which made him grin. After all, the bearshifter was not always as calm and measured as he liked people to believe. Right now, all of them wanted to learn about the forest and what had happened.

“I’m going to tell you everything I know, but I must warn you that I don’t know the whole truth, only what I’ve learned by what I witnessed.”

“We’re all eyes and ears,” Claw insisted. “Now, tell us, how come you got turned into a bug, and my friends into trees? And why did they look like Vrannes, for a moment, there? And when did all this start happening?”

Varg chuckled and placed a hand on Claw’s shoulder, as if in an effort to slow him down. “Maybe if we let Shearah tell us everything, we might hear the story of it all.”

“It’s not an easy to understand story, so gather round, my friends. And Claw, it’s good to see you again, after such a long time,” Shearah said. “I thought we’d never have the happiness to have you back among us, adventurer.” The last word she said with a hint of a smile in her voice.

“But here I am, so don’t keep us waiting,” Claw urged her to talk. “What happened to The Quiet Woods?”

“Is it the evil we fought in Shroudharbor? Or the one that almost killed all the orcs?” Toru questioned. It was his turn to be impatient, and he wanted to learn for sure whether they would have to fight the same enemy or if there was something else at work here.

“You people have some incredible stories to tell, isn’t it so?” Shearah said. “But hear ours, first. As far as I’m aware, and seeing how much of an old witch I am, I don’t know of any evil that has caused our downfall. Only the usual faltering of one’s heart.”

“That sounds mysterious enough,” Varg said. “How about you tell us everything?”

“There’s nothing I want more,” Shearah agreed. “To say that I’ll start in the beginning would be wrong, so I’ll just tell you the things I remember, the way I remember them. You’ll take from them what you will, but know that my heart only speaks the truth.”

“Just don’t keep us waiting,” Claw moaned, and Toru snickered. Yeah, the bearshifter could be as impatient as a child when it concerned something he wanted to know about.

“It all started, as far as my memory serves, some decades ago. The wind spirit Shearah, as you know, Claw, was sleeping her restful sleep inside the old oak we were at earlier.”

“The one that dragged Duril inside,” Toru said accusingly.

“He’s unharmed, I assure you. The old oak was the protector of these lands long before there was such a thing as The Quiet Woods.”

“But how?” Claw wondered out loud. “I thought the wind spirit created the forest out of the seeds and saplings she brought and nothing but the desert lay here. How could an old oak be out here, in the desert?”

“And yet, it was. One of the wonders of this old world we live in,” Shearah explained. “The eagleshifters who took Shearah to her resting place inside the oak knew of it, and they had been around before The Quiet Woods came into existence. But you know that story, Claw, don’t you? You and your willful friends couldn’t be convinced to spend one day without giving your parents something to grieve about.”

“They did tell us about the wind spirit, and how she had to rest one day. Also, they told us about how they took her there, in that hour of need. But not for one moment did I think that the old oak was here before the forest was created.”

“It was,” Shearah said with conviction. She had chosen to rest on Toru’s shoulder, and that made him feel important since all eyes were on him. “It was among its branches that the wind spirit Shearah got caught one day. She thought it to be lonely, out in the desert, all by itself, so, at first, she just played and brought a few oak saplings from other places, to keep him company. Only they couldn’t grow, because the soil was so unforgiving, nothing but sand that got too hot in the day, and too cold in the night.”

“What did she do then?” Toru asked.

“She started to think, unwilling for one moment to leave the old oak by itself out there in the desert. The oak tried to tell her that it was old and just a vestige of a world long gone, but she was stubborn in her ways, and so she discovered how to make water spring from the ground and turn sand into black rich soil in which the saplings could grow.”

“Such astonishing tales of our beginnings, and you never thought it was a good idea to share them with us before,” Claw said, a bit slighted for being overlooked.

“You left us at a young age. Your friends, Beast and Willow, learned of these things when the time came.”

Claw looked away, his eyes filled with regret. Toru felt the need to touch him and reassure him that he hadn't lost anything, but he thought that it might not be entirely true.

“I see. There's a price to pay for being an adventurer, then,” Claw half-joked.

“Everything happens for a reason, just as you came back to us now, when we need you the most. And rest assured, we're not ones to keep you from following your heart. We know that adventure is what makes it grow,” Shearah added.

Toru examined the trees around, wondering if they understood what the old witch was saying in their name, too. By how they stood unmoving and solemn, he thought that they did.

“But let us go back to what I must tell you about what happened to our forest.” Shearah stopped for a moment like an old person struggling to put together memories of times long past. “The wind spirit, as you know, Claw, never finished her work of turning the entirety of Eawirith into a paradise, as her ambitions were too high and didn't take into account the fact that for beauty to exist, some ugliness has to be in the world, too.”

“Ugliness?” Toru scrunched up his nose. “Why would anyone want that?”

Shearah laughed. “We need it, young tiger, because it's part of us, as well.”

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Varg was all eyes and ears, just like his companions, while his mind worked at putting the pieces of the puzzle together so that he could understand what was happening. He believed the old witch when she said that she could only tell them what she remembered, as history never belonged to a single individual. It was just too bad that she was the only one who could talk for now, as he bet that all the trees sitting around them had their own bits and pieces to offer.

The single soothing thought was that it didn't appear that the evil they had confronted in the past was, at least this time, the culprit for whatever happened to the forest Claw held so dear. A single look at his friend and companion, and he was now aware how much the bearshifter valued his place of birth. Not that he hadn't thought as much before, but now, seeing his eyes full of uncertainty and hope at the same time, only strengthened that belief.

Whatever was at work at The Quiet Woods, the old witch Shearah was right. They must have traveled there for a reason, and it couldn't be only chance for them to have arrived when they had.

Shearah continued her story. “It was always a sore point between she and I. I kept telling her that we must have a bit of ugliness in our lives, too, that it was just a part of us.”

“Was it because of that you kept on making those ugly birdhouses?” Claw asked.

For a moment, Varg held his breath, expecting Shearah to berate Claw for judging her work so cruelly. But the old witch laughed. “I’ve always done my best with those, just so you know. But yes, in a way, I do believe that I rebelled against her and her idea of perfection that seemed so doomed to fail.”

“Is it because of that she lost her powers?” Toru asked, with the curiosity of a child. “That she needed to rest inside the old oak who grabbed Duril?”

Varg chuckled and pulled Toru into a hug. “Everything you hear or say ends up with you back at him, isn’t it?”

“How could it not?” Toru retorted, and that earned him a kiss on the temple.

“Of course, how could it not? Shearah, please, put our boy’s mind at ease and tell him again how the old oak has no intention of stealing his favorite man.”

“Young tiger, your friend is safe. Shearah would never hurt anyone. Everything that’s happening around us is the result of her good intentions. As we speak, he follows a journey through her heart that might give him, and us, the answer to whatever is happening around us.”

“But it is a strange curse, isn’t it?” Varg asked. “Claw has noticed how the forest never changes... and that no real growth happens.”

“Indeed. Let me return to the story of how it all happened, or at least what I ended up learning about it.”

“Can you talk to the wind spirit who sleeps inside the oak?” Toru asked. “Even though she’s asleep?”

“She doesn’t want to talk to me,” the old witch explained. “She knows that she wouldn’t like what I have to say.”

“Ah, so she did do something wrong!” Toru exclaimed. He didn’t appear too pleased by his own conclusion, so Varg squeezed his shoulder in sympathy.

“Let’s hear the witch and everything she has to say, and then we will figure out what is to be done. What do you say?”

Toru agreed with a curt nod. Always ready for action, he didn’t appear in the slightest willing to wait for too long before doing something that would bring back his precious Duril. Varg knew the reason, but impatience was not very helpful under the present circumstances. They had to listen to the old witch’s story first and draw their own conclusions.

“So, what happened those decades ago?” he asked.

Shearah remained silent for a few moments, and then she started again. “Shearah had been sleeping for centuries and centuries when it happened, the change that brought our beloved forest to the state you see it in today. She was considered by everyone to be mostly a legend, and only the fact that The Quiet Woods continued to exist at the edge of such an overwhelming desert made them continue to believe.

“Because of her being asleep, the forest lived its normal life, day in and day out, as she had ordered things to be. There was no intervening hand from the outside, nor many visitors. After all, to get here, visitors had to cross Zukh Kalegh if they came from the other side of Eawirith, from the sea. The Scarlet Peaks don’t hold many people, and the hermits living there have no impulse to travel here.”

“But there is also the other side, to the east, where many human settlements lay on the way to Scercendusa,” Varg pointed out, remembering what Claw had told him about his travels as a young man.

“Yes, indeed, and that is the only peaceful road that leads here,” Shearah agreed. “But what use would people used to the beating hearts of big cities have for a forest as quiet as ours? The very few that came here complained that they feared they had lost their sense of hearing after spending only a couple of days among us,” Shearah explained.

“And what happened those decades ago? Did you suddenly receive an unexpected visit?” Varg questioned.

“You can say that. You see, master wolf, the wind rarely causes trouble in these parts. It knows that part of its soul lies here, among us. But a scent of burning rose one day from the far west, and with it, the wind brought the strangest saplings we have ever seen.”

“Saplings?” Varg raised an eyebrow. He threw a questioning look at the trees around them, all gathered there in the hope, most probably, that they would be able to release them from that unnatural prison.

“Yes. As it happens each time a new seed or creature arrives here, I took some of them to the old oak. It is one of our old beliefs that if anything new coming to our forest is capable of taking root in the shadow of the oak where Shearah sleeps, then its fate belongs with us.”

“So, did the saplings take root? And what was so strange about them?” Varg continued to ask.

“They looked to be half plants, half creatures. They had small teeth and claws lining their soft bodies.”

“Vrannes,” Varg murmured.

“Yes, Vrannes,” Shearah confirmed. “They came here, brought by the wind.”



“That must have happened during the war we waged against Knaeus and its bloodthirsty trees,” Varg commented.

“We know nothing about a war,” Shearah said. “But for us, it looked like the saplings were looking for a home, and as we did with any creature or seed ending up here, we wanted to make the forest into their home, as well.”

“And did the saplings grow and eat everyone?” Toru asked.

“No, nothing like that happened. They were hardy creatures but found it difficult to take root. Still, in the shadow of the old oak, they began to thrive. They didn’t eat anyone, but one day, the wind spirit inside the hollow trunk, rose to life again.”

“How was that possible?” Varg asked.

“The new life growing around the trunk of her sleeping place called for her. The saplings needed her care.”

“And what did she do?”

“She came,” Shearah said, “with a gust of wind.” For a moment, she stopped. “And then, frightened by the way they looked, she tried to trample them into the ground.”

## Chapter Six – Halves of a Whole

“But how could she trample the saplings? Does she have feet?” Toru asked, more and more curious about the wind spirit.

“No, but she has power, and even though she holds no evil in her heart, she can get scared. You see, Toru,” the old witch explained, “Shearah will be forever young.”

“She doesn’t get old? Not even a day?” Toru continued to question. “Maybe that’s why she cannot stand the falling leaves.”

“You are very clever for your years, young tiger,” Shearah praised him, while the others present murmured in agreement. Toru puffed out his chest. “The wind spirit has her faults, all of them coming from her good, yet inexperienced, heart. She tried to climb a peak that is no one’s to climb, and that’s why she had to find shelter inside the old oak when she became too tired.”

“Would she have died if the eagleshifters hadn’t taken her to her place of rest?” Varg was the one to ask a question as well, this time.

“Spirits don’t truly die, but it would have been terrible for her not to have a place from which she could come back to life when someone needed her,” the old witch continued to explain. “As powerful as she is, she still needs the protection of the old oak. There, her soul continues to thrive, even in her sleep.”

“So, the eagleshifters did a good thing,” Toru concluded. “Did she succeed in killing the ugly saplings?” He looked around. There was no need for an answer to that particular question. If Claw’s old friends were trees, and those trees could turn into Vrannes, something of those saplings must have lived on, some way or the other.

“She only managed to hurt them,” Shearah said. “But as I told you, they are hardy creatures, these Vrannes you’re talking about.”

“They didn’t die,” Varg continued her thought. “But what happened next?”

“The hurt saplings began to crawl along the ground. I was witness to their plight and hurried to Shearah to ask her why she would be so cruel toward creatures that needed her so much. She didn’t want to hear me. She kept telling me that they were ugly and disgusting, and that they shouldn’t be here. To my shame, I must admit that I didn’t contradict her at the time. These saplings growing into young trees were indeed a horrendous sight. But being the old witch that I am, I could tell that they weren’t evil.”

“But Vrannes are evil,” Toru insisted. “They took Duril’s arm and killed a lot of people!”

“About that, I am only hearing now,” Shearah said. “And still, why would my old heart tell me that they’re not?”

“Maybe you’re wrong sometimes,” Toru pointed out. “Cannot old witches be wrong?”

Shearah laughed. “I wish I could tell you ‘no’, but let us continue with what happened, and I will let you be the judge of what’s right and what’s wrong after I finish.” She paused for a moment, struggling to remember. “The saplings, or what had grown of them to that point, crawled through the forest. They were scaring everyone with their horrendous appearance. They were small, so only when you got close to them could you see them for what they were, but that didn’t make the fear of those who stumbled upon them any less.”

“Did they start to crawl on people and turn them into trees?” Toru asked. “Because they’re evil?”

Shearah flew into his ear, making him shake his head. “You’re never going to hear the end of what I want to tell you if you keep on interrupting me, young tiger,” she scolded him, but Toru could tell from her voice that she liked him.

“You can talk,” he said, full of importance. The old witch liked him the best, for sure, or else she wouldn’t have chosen to sit on his shoulder. And she even asked him for permission to continue her story, which meant that she had great faith in his judgement.

“Now that I have your blessing,” Shearah said with a small, pointed laugh, “let me see what I can still remember from those times. I shouldn’t have trouble remembering, as something happened like no other here, at The Quiet Woods.” Her voice dropped to a mysterious whisper, and everyone craned their neck to hear her better. Toru suspected that the old witch liked the attention as much as he did.

“What happened?” Varg asked impatiently.

“The forest started dying,” Shearah said with a sigh. “It didn’t seem like it was anything unusual, at first. Dry branches, fallen leaves, they’re all part of the life of a forest, here as anywhere else on the face of our world, but they began to multiply.” Toru shivered a little. The old witch surely knew how to tell a story that would put fear into anyone listening. “The forest, for the first time since its inception, began to die.”

“What did the wind spirit do then?” Varg asked. The others must have been all eyes and ears, although Toru couldn’t tell by looking at those trees if they had such things. They had to, or otherwise, they wouldn’t have been able to communicate with them, or recognize Claw as their old-time mate. Claw leaned back, looking focused and tense. The bearshifter was certainly the most affected by these stories about his dear forest. All of this had happened while he was away, and Toru suspected that Claw, by how tight he kept his fists, wished he would have been there, protecting the place of his birth and his friends.

But who was the enemy? Toru found it hard to understand. If the Vranne saplings weren’t evil, who had tried to kill the forest back then when the wind spirit bound to be a child forever had

decided they didn't deserve to live? He scratched his head vigorously as his mind didn't appear to be of any help on the matter.

"Shearah was devastated," the old witch continued. "She would work relentlessly, day and night, using her powers to revive the dying trunks, whispering new lives into the fish gasping for air on the river banks. We all wanted to help her, but what was happening was beyond our powers. And people started to perish, as well," she added, and her voice lowered in anguish. "Shearah couldn't bring them back to life, so all the humans here started fleeing the forest, afraid that it was cursed."

"They must have carried that news with them wherever they traveled," Varg said. "Has anyone come here since that time?"

"You're our first visitors in a very long time. Indeed, the humans learned to stay clear of a forest where their kind died so easily."

"But the shapeshifters remained," Varg pointed out. "How did Shearah succeed in making the forest look like it is now? We know that it goes through a rebirth each dawn, but how is that different from the time when she struggled to revive every tree and creature of the forest?"

"It is different," the old witch replied. "No matter how much effort Shearah put into keeping The Quiet Woods alive, her work came undone, sometimes under her very eyes."

"It must have been a painful experience," Varg said. "To watch her own creations perish, no matter how much she struggled."

"Yes, and every day, she grew more tired," Shearah continued. "Her spirit has always been so strong, but even I could tell that it was waning under that burden."

"What was happening with the ugly saplings?" Toru interjected. "Or the shapeshifters? Beast and Willow?" Claw might have wanted to ask the same things, but he kept silent.

"My memory is failing me," the old witch said with a deep, heartfelt sigh. "I do remember some things, but they're like pieces of a canvas that, as much as I try, I fail to piece together into a whole. At the end of a day like many during which Shearah did her best to revive the dying forest, she collapsed under a tree."

Toru only then realized that he had yet to imagine what the wind spirit looked like. "But is this Shearah like a little girl, with arms and feet?"

"Are you asking me if she has a material body?" the old witch asked. "If that's the case, I'm afraid that my answer will disappoint you. Shearah has a face, but it is one made of mist."

"Then how did the old eagleshifters carry her to her place of rest when she finished creating The Quiet Woods the first time?"

“Only those touched by magic can handle spirits,” the old witch explained. “The eagleshifters have it. And it has to be the old kind of magic, born from the cauldron of the world, nothing less.”

“Did they come again when Shearah fell?” Varg questioned. “Since only they can do it.”

The old witch paused and said nothing for a few moments. “As astonishing as it may sound, it was I who carried Shearah back to her old oak.”

“So do you have the old kind of magic?” Toru asked. That old witch was really something. Agatha from Whitekeep might even get a little jealous of her. But what if Agatha also had old magic? She was a cheapskate not to let them know about it, if that was the case.

“I wasn’t aware of it until that time, and even now I’m not sure that I do. The only thing I remember is cupping my palms and catching her sleeping shape in them. I hadn’t meant anything by that at the time except for offering a little comfort, as useless as that might have been. To my surprise, I lifted Shearah from the ground and I could carry her. The only thought I had was to take her to the only place I knew that could heal her.”

Another pause followed, and they all remained silent while pondering over the strange happenings from decades before.

“And after that?” Toru asked impatiently, seeing how none of the others said anything.

“This is where my memory gets shaky. I remember clearly how I placed the wind spirit inside the hollow trunk of the old oak. But then, I must have fallen asleep because nothing of what came next has a place in my mind. When I opened my eyes again, I was in this tiny body and had to learn how to be a lightning bug.”

“So, it happened the next morning?” Toru continued his questions.

“That, I don’t know for sure. I could have been asleep for a day or more, although it didn’t feel like a lot. But I knew that something must have happened because, all of a sudden, the forest was no longer dying around us.”

“But you were a bug. How did you realize that?”

Shearah laughed softly. “How, indeed. First of all, I was enthralled that I could fly, but I had to see my reflection in the waters of the river to understand what I had become. And, right away, I decided to search for the wind spirit and ask her about the forest, if she wasn’t already asleep for centuries to come.”

“Did you find her? At the old oak?” Toru asked.

“Yes, I did. I tried to speak, and only then I came to the appalling realization that I could no longer use my tongue. All that came from my mouth was a buzzing sound. And a bit of an annoying one, on top of that.”

“Yeah, your buzzing is really annoying,” Toru confirmed.

“Toru, let Shearah finish,” Varg warned him, but he grinned, a sign that he found that amusing, despite his words sounding like a rebuke.

The old witch didn’t wait to be told twice. “I wasn’t one to give up, so I flew in front of her face, and she was curious about me. But I could tell her eyes were not like they used to be.”

“What kind of eyes does a wind spirit have?” Toru was curious to know.

“They’re like a stormy sky sometimes, sometimes golden like summer, but other times, they can be blue like a cloudless day,” the old witch explained. “No matter their color, they were always so full of life, and now they weren’t. They were dull, and everything about her was fading.”

“That must have been terrible,” Varg murmured. “What did you do?”

“I wanted to learn about everything that had happened while I was asleep. But I had no means to ask, and Shearah seemed blind to whatever I was trying to convey through my flapping of wings and annoying buzzing sounds. So, I followed her into the body of the old oak, in search of answers. And there, I saw the most astonishing thing.”

“What astonishing thing?” Toru asked right away.

“The inside of the old oak was covered in Vranne saplings,” Shearah said. “They were many, crawling everywhere. At first, I didn’t know what they were, and I got scared, so I flew out of the trunk, desperate for shelter. But then, curiosity got the better of me, and I went back. And I saw Shearah taking each of them and blowing over it, to give it life.”

Toru looked around, confused. “Did she turn The Quiet Woods into a forest of Vranne? Because that’s not at all what they look like.”

“Not exactly. Imagine my surprise when I saw that the saplings were turning, one by one, into new trees and plants and creatures of all kinds. She was making all of it from those saplings she had shunned in the past with so much vigor and disdain.”

“That might explain a thing or two,” Varg confirmed what Toru was also thinking.

“So that’s how the shapeshifters became trees?”

“That must have been it,” the old witch offered. “During all these long years I’ve tried to find an explanation for it, I didn’t find any other answer. The thing is, this new forest Shearah was creating was also bound to fail. At first, I didn’t understand what was happening. I woke up the next day

and I was so happy to see that the forest was back, even though it was not the same as it had been when my body was just an old sack of bones. Only little by little, I began to see that nothing really changed from one day to the next, and that throughout the day, the forest was growing dimmer, losing the life it had been created for.”

“But we didn’t really see that happening. Except for, of course, the things that never change.”

“Shearah has gotten a bit better at it, with each passing day. So the illusion held, and I got nowhere near making her understand me.”

“But if the forest dies to be reborn every night,” Varg said slowly, “what will happen once the sun sets?” He stole a look around.

“As I told you, Shearah made it so that the forest didn’t really die anymore. It is just... dimming. As for the creatures, small or large, they just fall into a deep sleep.”

“How come you’re awake at night, then, troubling people who want to sleep?” Toru asked.

“I’m an old witch, Toru. So, I found a way to stay awake. I had to understand everything.”

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“Which one do you believe is the most beautiful?” the voice questioned, and Duril took in the several bushes in front of him. One had tiny white flowers which had to be examined from up close for the person gazing upon them to understand their star-like shapes. A second had blue flowers, made of large voluptuous petals, hanging their heads low, under the heftiness of their fragile bodies. A third didn’t have any flowers, but seemed to have sprouted leaves in a myriad shades of green. It looked like a miniature miracle, and Duril delighted in it with unhidden wonder.

“They are all beautiful, and it is hard to make a choice,” he replied.

“Choose one, choose one, choose one,” the voice pleaded impatiently, like a child.

“All right. Since I’m so hard-pressed, I’d say that this one is the most beautiful,” Duril said, pointing at the third bush, the one without flowers.

A gust of wind rustled his clothes, and Duril witnessed in disbelief as the first two bushes lit and burned in just a few moments. “Did you... destroy them?” he asked, not yet sure if his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him, or if all of this was just a manipulation of his senses. “Why?”

“I don’t need them if they’re not beautiful enough,” the voice said hurriedly.

“But I thought you said something about not wanting to hurt them.”

“I didn’t hurt them,” the voice countered. Then it stopped for a mere moment. “They weren’t yet alive, but they will be. Only the most beautiful must remain.”

Duril wanted to argue against that view of things. “They are all your children,” he said, hoping that he didn’t sound too harsh or as an opponent to a spirit so mercurial in its dealings.

“Until they become, they’re not,” the voice argued in turn. “Let me show you more.”

“Will you destroy more of your creations while we play this game?” To him, it didn’t appear to be a game at all. He was trying to put pieces and pieces together, to understand the voice and why it did what it did.

“I’m telling you; they’re not yet alive,” the voice insisted.

“Do you play this game by yourself?” Duril questioned, without giving his permission to be shown more. He had a hunch that if he let himself be carried away by what was happening around him, he would never get to the bottom of the things that seemed to be truly important.

“I do. Every day. But it’s more fun when there’s someone else.”

“And how do you choose, which will live and which will die?”

There was listlessness in the voice as it spoke next. “I choose only the most beautiful.” Silence followed, and Duril was about to suggest that they should try to do something else, when he heard it speak again. “I don’t want to play anymore. You don’t like my games,” the voice was accusing and petulant, like a child that didn’t get their way.

Duril looked above. The sun’s journey through the day was way past its midpoint, which meant that there would be only several hours until evening set in. He wondered what his friends were doing. They were probably worried about him, especially Toru.

The voice sounded loud and clear, and close to his ear. “Why are you sad? Nobody is ever sad here.”

“I’m thinking about my friends.”

“But your friends don’t have beautiful trees and rivers like me,” the voice argued. “Don’t you like it here?”

“It is very beautiful here, indeed, but I love my friends.”

“I will give you something they cannot give you,” the voice said. “And then, you won’t want to go back.”

Duril knew that he had to choose his words carefully as he opened his mouth. “Do you spend your days only here? Don’t you ever go back to the forest, where your children live?”

“I’m too busy here, too busy,” the voice insisted. “A lightning bug comes...”



“The one that visits now and then? The one you don’t recognize as having made yourself?” Duril asked.

“Yes, and I know all is fine out there. If anything was happening to the trees, and the flowers, and the rivers, and the bees, I would know because then the bug would not come back.”

Now, he was curious about how that worked, and what it meant, but his attention was pulled away when he sensed something tickling the skin stretched on his stub of an arm. “What are you doing?” he croaked, as his strength poured out of him like water from a broken dam. He folded to the ground, incapable of holding himself upright on two feet.

“I’m making you beautiful,” the voice said.

Duril lay on the ground and eyed his stub with unease.

“Just wait here, I need to get something.”

It wasn’t like he could have moved, even if he wanted. He waited there, his eyes seeing nothing but blades of grass and tiny bugs crawling on them.

It wasn’t long until he sensed the wind moving across his body. And then, as he turned his head just enough so that he could see what was going on, a gasp left his lips. “What is going on?” he asked.

He could clearly see small saplings, dark like dirt, crawling on his stub. And they had tiny teeth and they bit into the flesh, strangely enough, without causing any pain. Next thing he knew, tiny branches began to sprout from the only part remaining of his missing limb.

“They’re good at this,” the voice explained. “To give life where I cannot.”

“Listen to me,” Duril said, “I don’t want to be turned into a tree.”

“But you’re not going to be,” the voice explained. “I’m only giving you the arm you said you don’t have.”

Duril wanted to argue more, but his eyelids grew heavy, and he couldn’t keep his eyes open.

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“Then we must stay awake, too, and see the same things you have, old witch,” Toru said right away. Varg hooked one arm over his shoulders and looked at the young tiger who was always so ready to jump into the heat of the action. He loved nothing more than to tease him a little, but every word Toru said was true. The night before, he had roamed the forest side by side with Claw, so how come they hadn’t noticed the things Shearah was talking about? The dimming of The Quiet Woods, as the old witch called it, must have been too subtle for their eyes.

Or maybe, he thought, as he took in the council of trees around them, trees that weren't trees, but people trapped inside bodies that didn't belong to them, they needed to be at the right place, at the right time.

“What happens to them once the sun sets?” He gestured toward Claw's friends, too silent to be able to offer him an answer themselves.

The old witch flew to his ear. “They return to their real selves, but only partially.” Her words were a whisper, a sign that she didn't want the others to hear her. But that was a truth Claw was entitled to know.

He turned his head a smidge. “And shouldn't everyone know about it?” he asked but kept his voice low.

“They don't know, and it's always painful,” Shearah whispered in his ear again. “They forget about it all the next day. For them, this is the life they've known ever since the wind spirit got mad at the Vranne saplings.”

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Duril woke up startled, as if something had stirred him from his sleep. He moved with some difficulty, and tentatively stretched out his arm. A chilling sensation shot through him when he sensed something different about himself. He looked, and, indeed, something was different. The missing arm... was there.

And the sun was setting in the distance, casting its last rays over the miraculous garden created by his mysterious host. “Are you still here?” he asked in a raspy voice.

“I am. I was waiting for you to wake up. Now hurry, we must reach the old oak so that we can sleep.”

For now, there was nothing else he could do but to go along with what the voice wanted from him. More answers were needed. He moved his new arm cautiously, expecting it to fall or disappear like mist. It had to be nothing else but a mirage, one destined to fool him, and he didn't want to think that the one behind the voice inviting him here could be capable of such cruelty.

Without a doubt, it wanted him to be happy, but that without asking him for a moment if that was what happiness meant to him. “I didn't want you to give me an arm,” he said as he hurried on the way back to the old oak.

The voice urging him to follow was filled with a sense of urgency, and he somehow believed that it wouldn't be a good thing at all if nightfall caught them there, out in the open. He couldn't fathom why that would be so, since the night before, together with his friends, he had slept under the naked sky.

Maybe the entity wanted him to learn something of its nature, after all. Maybe it was not wanting to be caught outside the safety of the old trunk once the sun set. And some of the answers he was seeking had to become apparent soon.

He cast one last glance over his shoulder at the unique greenhouse created by his host, the garden that held all those incredible plants, bushes, trees, and whatnot. The leaves were turned toward the ground, and it could be a trick of the fading light, but they appeared to change their colors to something as dark as tar.

“In here, in here,” the voice called for him impatiently.

He snuck inside and felt the trunk closing behind him as soon as he managed to get in. The dark was impenetrable, and he couldn't see a thing. “What is going on? Why did we have to hurry?” he asked.

“Hush, they're going to hear us,” the voice shushed him.

“Who?” he whispered, hoping that his voice was low enough not to be berated again. Patience was a virtue, as he well knew it, but at the same time, he wanted to find out what was going on.

“The visitors.”

“The ones you foisted upon my arm?” Duril insisted.

“Aren't you sleepy? We should go to sleep,” the voice anxiously suggested.

Duril knew that sleep was the last thing on his mind right now. “No, not yet. Tell me who the visitors are. Tell me how they managed to make my arm whole. Tell me,” he continued, hoping that if he pressed enough, the entity would finally offer him the answers.

“I don't know,” the voice replied, but it was clear as day that it was lying. “I just know that they can. I'm sleepy now, too tired. Let's talk again tomorrow.”

“Hey, you can't just leave,” Duril insisted, but his words were met by silence.

That couldn't be it. Toru must be worried that he wasn't coming back, and Duril felt a bit unnerved. He moved his arm, the new one, still unused to it. What could it be? And he didn't intend on getting used to it, either. He had made up his mind, and he wouldn't change it. Something of how his mysterious host made it happen caused him to feel a deep sense of restlessness inside his soul. He believed it wasn't right.

For lack of anything else to do, he crouched and felt around on the ground for the tiny creatures he now suspected to be the same saplings he had seen crawling on his arm earlier. He even suspected something about them; despite being nothing but miniatures of those dreadful trees they had fought in the war, he recognized them.

It could be that because of those frightful memories he had recoiled from having his arm made whole by them. He brushed his fingers through the detritus under his feet, hoping that he would catch at least one and see what he could do with it.

Tiny teeth didn't hesitate to scratch his skin and he cupped his hand sneakily around one. He stood abruptly and brought it close to his face, in an effort to see through the dark surrounding him.

"You won't get any answers from them. They're too young."

Surprised by the sound of that voice, Duril dropped the sapling. By how he could hear it scurry away, he could tell it had to be frightened by being picked up like that. "Who are you?" he asked, although he had an inkling of the answer, despite his initial surprise. It wasn't the young voice from before, but one old and wise.

"You know already, healer," the voice said. "But I'll tell you anyway. I'm Amarant, the old oak, the name everyone around here knows me by."

"The old oak?" Duril asked.

"Indeed. And I've been a protector of Shearah, the wind spirit you've talked to all day, for many centuries."

"Then you must know about these tiny Vrannes, don't you?" Duril decided to ask directly.

"Yes, I do. They're the other half," the oak said enigmatically.

"What do you mean?" Duril asked.

"It takes two halves to make a whole, healer," the answer came. "And you have met them both."

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Toru didn't want to think about what would befall these newfound friends once the sun set for the night. Varg's face had tensed as the old witch whispered something in his ear, so it couldn't be anything good. He carefully eyed the trees that were probably waiting just like them for the dusk to settle.

It happened before his very eyes. At first, the trees stretched, like their branches had just begun to grow all of a sudden, and they became taller for a while, casting long shadows on the ground before them.

But, as Toru took in their transformation, as much in awe as his companions, he realized that they weren't growing any new branches, nor were they just becoming bigger.

They were turning into what had to be their real selves, because they were not trees anymore. A tall, hirsute man, rounder around his girth than anyone Toru had ever seen, rushed toward Claw and toppled him.

“Beast!” the bearshifter exclaimed, while struggling to turn the tables on his so-called attacker.

Toru smiled. So now he would get to meet Claw’s friends for real. Why had he worried so much? Maybe talking to old witches for too long did that to people.

## Chapter Seven – What It Takes to Make a Whole

Duril blinked a few times, hoping that the deep dark inside the trunk of the old oak would disperse a little if he only focused enough. Yet, even his eyes, that could usually see just fine when there wasn't enough light, couldn't bring up shapes and colors of any kind. "Amarant," he asked hesitantly, "I don't wish to sound ungrateful, but could you let at least a shred of light inside?"

"Would that I could," the old oak replied. "These tiny things can only thrive in the deepest dark, and it is my ancient duty to offer them the best of comforts so that they can live."

"What ties you to them?" Duril had given up some time ago on pursuing a straightforward line of thinking when conversing with magical creatures and witches. Toru was surely right about one thing; you'd only get a headache from trying to get a clear and direct answer from them. Amarant seemed not to be much different from Agatha or Elidias or Demophios. They spoke a language with roots in the mists of time, hence the need to listen to them closely and make sense of their words while using your wits and every bit of knowledge you had.

"Ah, they come from the oldest soil in Eawirith," Amarant replied. "As ancient as my weary soul," he added with a chuckle.

Self-irony didn't seem beneath this magical tree, Duril mused. "Why would your soul be weary?" he asked. The questions he had about Vrannes had to wait for a bit. First, he needed to get to know his host a bit better.

"I watch her every day making the same mistakes. She forgets them, doesn't even see them as mistakes, and thus, there is no growth," Amarant replied, and the weariness he had spoken so lightly of moments earlier could be heard creeping into his voice.

"Has the forest stopped growing?" Duril continued. "Why?"

"It died," Amarant said, and his words sounded like he was surprised that Duril hadn't understood already what was going on. At the risk of disappointing the old oak, Duril needed to dig deeper.

"But why? Why are these saplings here?" he questioned.

"They were pushed, made to fly away to safety. And they were brought here by the wind," Amarant said.

Duril pondered over his next question. "The wind, you say... Shearah herself?"

"Oh, no, she was as surprised by their coming as the rest of us." Duril didn't interrupt Amarant to ask who he meant by 'us'. "You see, she's a wind spirit, but she's not the wind itself. She cannot be. We're all part of something much bigger than us, something whole."

Duril nodded, mostly to confirm that to himself. His understanding of nature had assured him of that truth for a while now. “Do you know what drove the Vranne saplings here?”

“The war, of course,” Amarant replied. “When you lost your arm.”

Duril felt a small, brief pain squeezing the arm he wasn’t supposed to have. With his good hand, he grabbed the forearm and held it for a while, in hope that the hurt would go away.

“She’s well intended,” Amarant explained. “But don’t get used to your new arm. It isn’t even really there.”

Duril was of a mind to argue, pointing out that the pain he felt made it seem like it was real, but held his tongue instead. To get to the bottom of things, he needed to be patient. “I won’t get used to it. I’ve been at peace with myself over losing it for a long time now.”

“Then you won’t mind if I do this,” Amarant said.

The pain in his forearm grew sharper, and then, as if by magic, it disappeared. Duril quickly realized that his hand grasped nothing but air. The sound of things falling to the ground and scurrying away let him know that whatever had maintained the illusion of his missing arm was no longer there. “She uses the saplings to create... new life?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes, you can say that she does,” Amarant replied. “But what kind of life would it be if you had to pretend to be something you’re not all the time?”

“Not a good one, for sure,” Duril said. “I’m sorry, I don’t think you really expected an answer from me.”

“I did,” Amarant said directly. “The most obvious truths are the ones easily neglected, overlooked, or ignored completely. Shearah doesn’t wish to see her own mistakes, and that is why The Quiet Woods rise to life and die again and again with each passing of night and day.”

“But I didn’t see it die,” Duril disagreed. “Some strange things might be happening, but the forest looks alive and well.”

“She’s putting all her soul into it, for sure,” Amarant admitted. “That is why the untrained eye cannot see that the forest is not truly there, not anymore.”

“My friends are there, out in the forest,” Duril said, with a growing sense of alarm. “What will happen to them?”

“Do not fear for them, healer,” Amarant advised. “You’re all here for a reason, I believe. What were you asking me? Oh, yes, about the saplings. They were running away from the war.”

Duril didn’t question for a moment how Amarant’s line of reasoning seemed to work, but it appeared that, as he had already guessed, the role of the Vranne saplings was essential to whatever

was happening right now to The Quiet Woods. “But why would they run away from the war? The Vrannes were the ones who were attacking,” he explained. “How can they be the victims in all this?”

“They were,” Amarant contradicted him, “nothing but unwitting tools of a higher will.”

Duril remembered well how unexplainable at the time it seemed that the forest of Knaeus would rise and be on the move when the Vrannes hadn’t been known as eager to forget about their birthing place and aim to rule the world. The old oak might know more about that, so he was all eyes and ears. “A higher will? What do you mean by that? Or better said, who?”

“We do not know its name, but it is an evil so deep, so powerful, that we fear that it might take over the world unless we stop it,” Amarant replied.

The old oak didn’t sugarcoat the truth for sure, and he also seemed more inclined than other magical beings to offer clear answers. What Duril had feared the most came true with Amarant’s last words.

“Then it must be the same thing we’ve been fighting since Whitekeep,” Duril said, just as direct as his conversation partner.

“That is something I don’t know,” Amarant replied. “But once the dark power manifested inside the earth, creatures of all kinds stepped on it unknowingly every day, and it started to accumulate, bringing more and more power to itself. It took hold of the Vrannes, so they sent their young to find safety.”

“The saplings, you mean,” Duril murmured. “And did they find the safety they were looking for? Here, at The Quiet Woods?”

“That is a very interesting question,” Amarant said and fell quiet for a while.

Duril could distinctly hear the tiny saplings roaming over the floor. “Interesting how? Can’t you give me an answer?”

“I can try,” Amarant replied. “The question is, healer, what are you going to do with the truth?”

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“They look like they are real,” Toru whispered quietly to his shoulder, where he knew the old witch was still perched. “What did you mean about that sad thing you said?”

Shearah buzzed into his ear. “I can tell you, but what about seeing for yourself?”

“Don’t be like Agatha,” Toru said. “She was annoying like that. Tell me so that I know what to expect and am prepared.”



“I’m not sure anyone is ever prepared for this kind of thing,” Shearah said in all seriousness.

“What kind of thing? What do you mean?” Toru asked, more and more curious about what was happening around him.

A deep sigh followed. “To watch the ones you love die. Over and over again.”

Toru stopped, not knowing what to say. “Die? How? They seem so alive. And they were alive before, too, when they were trees.”

“That is true, yes, but what kind of life is it when each day is new and you don’t grow or remember what brought you where you are today?”

Toru scratched his ear. “You’re talking like that old witch Agatha again,” he accused.

Claw was happy to find his companions alive and well, and he was rolling on the ground with Beast, the hairy shapeshifter with the biggest girth Toru had ever seen. Varg seemed caught up in the joyous reunion, too, and for a moment, Toru longed to be there with them.

Yet, it seemed his mission was a much more important one. He needed to find out from Shearah what was going on so that he could intervene and save everyone. His chest swelled with pride only thinking of that. Yes, the orphan cub who used to only care for the next day had a real purpose now, and powerful people like Varg and Claw, and even that big hairy man, depended on him. Of that, he was quite certain.

“The wind spirit is trying to save the forest every day,” Shearah reminded him. “But that doesn’t mean that she’s going about it the right way. That’s why what she creates never lasts.”

“But didn’t you say that she’s getting better every day?” Toru pointed out.

“I did, but a wrong is still a wrong, no matter how good you are at hiding it.”

Toru sighed. He still couldn’t understand. “What should I do?” he asked. “Can I stop your wind spirit from doing the wrong thing?”

“Maybe when the right moment comes,” the witch replied.

Toru bristled a bit at that. “What do you mean by maybe? I’ll do it,” he said with determination.

“I don’t doubt the good in your heart,” the old witch said. “But are you strong enough to follow through with what truly has to be done?”

Toru pursed his lips. “I am strong,” he insisted. “Stop doubting me.”

Shearah flew from one of his shoulders to the other. “Then I will tell you.”

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It was quite the sight to watch that reunion of friends, Varg thought as he looked at Claw and Beast fooling around on the ground. Then he turned, curious to see if all the others were transforming into their real selves in the same manner. Unlike Beast who seemed to be a bundle of energy and was willing to spend it all in overcoming Claw, the others moved a lot more slowly, coming into their bodies like into old coats that didn't quite feel familiar after having been abandoned for a while.

Shearah had told them that the same thing happened every night, so that unfamiliarity shouldn't be there. On the other hand, the witch had also mentioned that they always forgot, too, so that had to be it.

For now, he was only a witness. A tall man, moving gracefully toward him, drew his eye right away.

"You must be Willow," Varg said courteously. Indeed, Claw's other close friend seemed of a different breed than the rest, not only because of his height, but also because of his graceful, loose-limbed elegance. His hair was dark, the color of a brown bear's coat, and it fell in waves on his shoulders, but it wasn't unkempt or shaggy; instead, it appeared to be made of spun silk, and his almond shaped eyes glowed in the dark like embers. His face was angular, unlike the kind to be seen in most that went around in the coat of a shapeshifter. And his lips were arched in a Cupid's bow, enticing and more attractive than Varg cared to admit at the moment.

For a moment or so, Varg just gawked at him, without saying another word.

"Yes, I am Willow," the bearshifter said and put one hand on Varg's shoulder. Then, he leaned in and kissed his cheek.

Varg cleared his throat, slightly taken aback by that familiar gesture. Not that it was in any way unpleasant, just surprising. Willow drew back and stared him in the eye. "You're Claw's new friend," he said.

"And you're his old friend," Varg said in reply.

Willow laughed and looked away in a coy manner. He and Beast couldn't have been more at odds, as far as appearance and personality were concerned. Beast was all over Claw, holding him down and tickling the mighty bear until Claw's laughter turned into a roar.

"We're glad you're here," Willow said, following Varg's eyes, as it seemed. "Beast knows nothing of manners. Please, forgive him."

"He has you to compensate for that," Varg noted. "It must be why the two of you are such great friends, right?"

“Friends, of course,” Willow said, with just a small tinge of something indefinable in his voice. “What brings you here?” he asked, changing tack and pulling Varg’s attention away from Beast’s shenanigans.

“We joined Claw for a trip here,” Varg explained, not knowing how much he should divulge, and if not, seeing how these shapeshifters were not all fully themselves, that wasn’t what he was supposed to do. Shearah the witch should have told them more about what to expect.

“He wanted to come home?” Willow asked. “We surely thought he was lost to us. The alluring mistress called adventure has had him in her grasp for so long already.”

“Well, that mistress as you call her can be fickle at times,” Varg said. “Claw realized he missed these woods for quite a while. We were happy that he invited us to see this wonderful place.”

“Wonderful,” Willow echoed, but his voice was wistful all of a sudden.

“What happened to you?” Varg asked directly. It wasn’t like him to dally when a challenge presented itself. “How come you’ve become trees?”

“That is Shearah’s work,” Willow replied calmly. “The wind spirit, I mean.”

“Not the witch,” Varg supplied right away.

“Yes,” Willow agreed. “Shearah keeps us all alive.”

“But how did it happen? Do you remember anything?”

“Not a lot. Wait, what were you asking me?” Willow asked, confusion creeping into his voice.

“I was asking--” Varg stopped mid-sentence.

Beast’s play seemed to be getting a little bit too serious. It looked like Claw was choking as his longtime friend was trying to strangle him. Varg didn’t hesitate for a moment and shifted, as a curtain of black and red descended over his eyes, making the wolf inside him howl. The next moment, he was on Beast’s back, sinking his fangs into his flesh.

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“Toru, stop them!” Shearah urged him.

All of a sudden, Varg had shifted and attacked Beast, Claw’s friend, under their very eyes. Toru didn’t wait to be told twice. He moved into his tiger form and rushed to the rescue. He knocked Varg off Beast and rolled over the ground with him. “Varg,” he growled, “stop it!”

But his friend was acting like he was possessed and just growled back like an animal, no words coming out of his throat. Toru pinned him down with his paws and stared into Varg's eyes. They were bloodshot and not as fierce as usual, but with a touch of madness in them.

"Varg," he continued to call for his friend, "Varg!"

Slowly, the fight seemed to drain from the strong body under him and, at last, Varg went limp and turned into his human. He seemed confused about what had just happened. Toru licked his face.

"Hey, kitty, what are you doing?" Varg asked. "I appreciate the thought, but there are a few too many people watching."

"You went a bit mad for a moment or so," Toru growled at him and used his weight to continue to hold Varg down.

"Mad? How so?" Varg asked.

Not far from them, Beast was rubbing the back of his neck and mumbling something. Claw crouched by Varg's side. He ruffled the wolfshifter's hair. "So protective, puppy," he said in his sonorous voice. "He just thought that Beast was trying to hurt me," he explained to Toru. "He doesn't know what kind of fool I call an old friend," he added and threw a pointed look over his shoulder at Beast.

The other bearshifter was grinning at them. "You almost broke my hide," he said, and it was clear that he was talking to Varg. "All that for a little fooling around."

Varg groaned. "Kitty, get away from me. It looks like I need to grovel for forgiveness."

Toru tapped his tail against the ground a few times. He wasn't entirely convinced that he wanted to let go just yet. If Varg felt protective of Claw, now he felt protective of Varg, and he couldn't just let his companion go when there was still a chance that he could get into a rumble with that hairy bearshifter.

A tall, graceful man was busy examining Beast's so-called wound. "You're fine," he said and patted Beast on the back.

The others that had transformed were murmuring among themselves, but kept apart, like they felt the need to keep a certain distance between them and the group Toru, Varg, Claw, and his close friends were making. To him, it appeared as if they were afraid.

But what did they have to be afraid of? Toru looked over at them for a moment. They huddled together, and their eyes were dull. Unlike Claw's friends, who seemed to be themselves completely, they were like youngsters thrown into an unknown world. They had to be shapeshifters, too. Shearah had told them that humans didn't survive there.

Varg grabbed him by the fur at the sides of his neck, shook him with affection and then pushed him away so that he could get to his feet. Toru shifted into his human, too, and looked for Shearah with his eyes. The witch needed to answer more questions, because it wasn't like Varg to rush in like that unless he knew that there was some danger he had to avert.

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There had to be something strange going on, Varg thought as he brushed some blades of grass from his clothes. He would have sworn that Beast was on the point of suffocating Claw to death, but now he felt rather foolish for acting in such a heedless fashion. That wasn't like him, to be so mistaken. Maybe it was because he didn't know these people, and as much as Claw was familiar with them, it didn't mean that he was the same.

He walked over to Beast and offered him one hand to help him get off the ground. "I apologize for attacking you." The bearshifter grinned at him and caught his forearm. Varg pulled his weight back so that he could counterbalance Beast's hefty frame. To his surprise, the bearshifter didn't budge; instead, he pulled suddenly and flipped Varg over, making him land on his back with a loud groan.

"Here, at The Quiet Woods," Beast said, looming over him, "we don't do apologies. We solve it all like bears."

Varg laughed and groaned again at the pain in his spine. Beast put one arm under his back and one under his knees and pulled him up like he was some kind of princess. He guffawed like a naughty schoolboy and began throwing him up and catching him, all the while having a good laugh on his account.

"Claw," Varg shouted, "get your crazy friend off me!"

"I can't do a thing," the traitorous bearshifter shouted back, "he really likes you!"

To his relief, Beast finally put him down. Then, just like Willow, he kissed his cheek, but not pleasantly like the gentle bearshifter, but loudly with much slobbering over his face. Varg wiped his cheek and laughed. "You're a crazy one," he said.

Beast patted him on the back so hard in what was supposedly a friendly gesture that it forced him to take a big step forward.

Claw opened his arms. "These are my friends, indeed. Willow, come here and give me a kiss, beautiful."

Varg watched as the other bearshifter walked over to Claw and kissed him on both cheeks. He couldn't hold in a twinge of jealousy at the sight. Who knew that there could be bearshifters of such astonishing beauty in the world? Varg found himself wondering how Willow must look in his beast form. He had to be just as graceful, but Varg couldn't conjure the image in his mind.

That meant that he would have to see it to believe it. That reminded him of the conversation he had been having with Willow just before attacking Beast.

“Hey, do you people remember how you got turned into trees?” That was Toru, always ready to ask the most uncomfortable questions while others were trying to find a way to ask them in the gentlest manner possible.

But he wanted to know the answer to that question, as well, especially since the other shapeshifters around seemed not at all keen to act cheerful at the sight of their happy reunion.

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Toru watched Beast and Willow closely, taking in their confused faces. They didn’t appear to understand what he was talking about. Varg crossed his arms over his chest, waiting, just like him, for an answer. Claw seemed interested, as well, and he was all eyes and ears.

“What do you mean, trees?” Willow asked. “We’re not trees; we’re bears.”

“But you were trees like one moment ago,” Toru insisted.

“Not a moment, but before the dark fell, you were trees,” Varg confirmed, coming to his aid.

“Are your new friends pulling some kind of trick on us?” Beast asked Claw.

The bearshifter shook his head. “I wish that was what was going on, but no. You and the rest,” he pointed at the others huddling in the dark at a fair distance from them, “were trees, as Varg here says. Don’t you remember the way you rushed to us like a pack of Vrannes bent on bloodletting?”

“Vrannes? Bloodletting? What are you talking about?” Beast asked. He grabbed his chest for a moment. “I’ll have to sit down,” he said all of a sudden. Willow helped him, and Beast crossed his legs and then his arms. He watched them all with keen eyes. “Well, Claw, what is it?”

Toru liked his direct manner. But where was Shearah? The old witch hadn’t intervened so far, and it was a good moment for her to say something. It was clear that Beast and the others knew of her, by how they behaved when they were trees.

Only they weren’t trees anymore, and they appeared to have turned quite forgetful, which was unnerving, to say the least. All this magic was not for him and, inwardly, he had to admit that he needed the help of an old witch like Shearah.

“I’m here,” she said as she landed on his shoulder, as if she knew that she was needed.

“Well, it looks like they don’t remember they were trees,” Toru pointed out. “Do they know who you are?”

“They should, but my appearance doesn’t help,” Shearah said. “You see, young tiger, as you can easily observe, I’m the only one that didn’t revert to her true self, as far as a physical body is concerned.”

“That is quite strange, isn’t it?” Toru gave voice to the thoughts in his head. “Why do you stay the same?”

“So that I can remember,” Shearah replied.

“Tell them, then,” Toru encouraged her. “Tell them how they are trees one moment, and the next, they turn into shapeshifters.”

“I will tell them. But I have done that every night for such a long time. By the time they come to acknowledge what I say as the truth, they are dead only to be reborn again, and in daytime, I go at it again, until night falls.”

Toru pursed his lips. It wasn’t like they had a lot of time on their hands then. The shapeshifters around them began to murmur, and although their voices weren’t loud, they were like a continuous buzzing in his ears, keeping him from thinking clearly. “Quiet!” he ordered, and the murmuring died down. “Shearah here doesn’t have the time to explain it to you again, although she’s done that for years. We’ll have to do something different this time.”

“I know what you have to do,” Shearah said. “And I’m glad that you are here. The old oak told me.”

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“I will do my best to do the right thing,” Duril answered Amarant’s question.

“Will it be enough? Your best?”

The loaded question made Duril stop for a moment. “I can only hope that it is,” he replied. “There is no guarantee except my word.”

“I can see that there’s no evil in your heart, healer. That is not what troubles me, but the kindness you carry with you.”

“What do you mean? How can kindness be a bad thing?”

“It’s not, but that doesn’t mean that it might not serve you in the way you require when needed. If you wish to stop Shearah from trying to revive the forest by using her little prisoners--”

“Prisoners? Do you mean, these tiny Vrannes?” Duril asked. He couldn’t quite wrap his head around seeing them as anything else but weapons of destruction and mayhem, as he had known the Vrannes that had descended from Knaeus those decades ago to engulf the world in despair.

“Yes. You see, she doesn’t allow them to leave this place. They’re here for her and to do her bidding. You see, at first, when they came, she tried to hurt them. And she did,” Amarant added after a small pause.

“So, you’re saying that they tried to escape?” Duril asked.

“They’re young, and the only thing they know is the need to survive,” the old oak explained. “They don’t know any better.”

“I still don’t understand why the forest began to die,” Duril made an attempt to bring Amarant back to the question he was most ardently interested in of all.

“Because of the rupture in its soul,” Amarant said pointedly. “You see, Shearah has always been true to herself. To create life, to protect it. But she broke her own vows when she hurt the Vrannes. They weren’t dead, nor a pest, to be gotten rid of.”

“I cannot say I understand that. For all she knew, they could have come here to destroy the forest.”

“Any young mind might think that, for sure. But there is something else at work, isn’t there, healer? Did Shearah stop for a moment to consider why these newcomers were here? After all, she’d always been the one to bring new life from all over the face of Eawirith in her effort to make it into a paradise like no other. But, you see, she’d only pick the most beautiful of the creatures and seeds she found along the way. There was no room for ugliness in her world. What do you think of that?” Amarant asked.

Duril recognized a challenge for what it was. The question was well-founded. “The other half came to The Quiet Woods. Is this what you’re trying to say?”

“Don’t ask me for more than I can give you,” Amarant chided him, but by the tone of his voice, he was pleased with Duril’s thoughts on the matter.

“But there is conflict,” Duril continued, emboldened by Amarant’s quiet agreement. “The whole cannot become one as intended until this conflict is resolved. So, the real question is how to solve it, right?”

“You’re close to the truth. And now, do you have what it takes to follow through?” Amarant challenged him.

“I believe I do. I hail from Whitekeep and Zukh Kalegh, too,” Duril said proudly. “I’m human, but I’m an orc, too, as I have discovered. If someone like me who lived a life not knowing who he truly was can find himself, I believe that a time of healing for The Quiet Woods is nigh. Am I wrong?”

“Don’t ask for confirmation, proud orc,” Amarant said and laughed.



“So, tell me,” Duril said eagerly. “What is that I have to do?”

“You’ll have to kill me.”

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A silence as thick as the darkest night fell over the entire group. Varg watched each and every one. He could read fear in those dull eyes, something deep and wide that wasn’t going to be easy to overcome with soothing words. After a brief exchange with Toru, he knew that his friend and lover thought the same thing. During the last few months of roaming the world together, the young tiger had grown into a new degree of patience and even wisdom, and that was what Varg read in his beautiful golden eyes that very moment.

“This is not something I can tell you with an easy heart,” Shearah continued. “It will sound so unnatural, and yet, it is the only way, as I have come to admit it to myself over the years. So far, we’ve been left out here to our own devices with no possibility that we could carry out the old oak’s wish.”

“Just what is this wish you’re talking about?” Varg asked, a bit impatiently and ignoring Toru’s silent warning.

“It is a wish that requires only the strongest to carry it out,” Shearah said calmly. “The moon is yet above our heads, gently gazing down on us.”

Varg looked up. The moon had always been a close friend. Its calling was in his blood, and for a moment, he felt that it was lending him its power. His blood surged with newly found strength. What could it be?

“We’re strong enough. Just tell us,” Toru said while Varg was lost in thought, looking at the moon.

“Once they begin to turn into trees again,” Shearah said in a quiet voice, “you’ll have to take everyone to the old oak.”

“We’ll do that,” Varg agreed.

“And then, you’ll have to kill them all.”

## Chapter Eight – I Will Take Your Breath Away

A moment of silence embraced the group, but the next, it coiled around them in a fierce grip. Shouts exploded from dozens of chests, everyone talking at the same time.

“Who are you?” Beast bellowed. “Whom does this little voice belong to?”

Toru hadn't quite expected the bearshifter to hear the conversation between him and the witch, but in all honesty, he was as bewildered by her words as everyone else. “How can you ask such a thing, old witch?” he hissed and tried to shake his shoulder free of the tiny bug, now feeling like a fool for having listened to her.

“Listen to me, Toru,” Shearah implored. “I wish there was another way.”

The bodies of shapeshifters thrashed in the dark like the waves of a stormy sea. Some cried out, others demanded explanations, and in that ruckus, Toru noticed something, or better said, someone standing proudly in the light of the moon, his black silhouette against the sky, bigger than life.

It was Claw, watching over his friends, not saying a word, not budging a muscle. Toru couldn't fathom what could be going through the bearshifter's head. Why wasn't he mad? Why wasn't he yelling and shouting and demanding for things to be explained?

“Claw,” he called desperately for him, “Claw! Get this witch away from me!” He was running around now, with Shearah buzzing after him, the sounds she was making the echoes of desperate pleas, and he didn't want to hear a word of them.

Varg was busy trying to keep the shapeshifters in some kind of order, shouting words that were meant to be soothing and commanding at the same time. But it was a lost cause, and no one, but no one, wanted to hear any more of the witch's strange words.

A powerful roar made all the noises die down. Only then, Toru realized that Claw had turned into his bear and stood perched on a small cliff, higher than everyone else. “Listen, brothers and sisters,” he boomed, his voice more sonorous and deep in his bear than in his human. “I've come a long way to be here with my friends. And I have found strangeness in our forest, and you, here, turned into trees. And not just any trees, but of a foul kind, with a bad reputation to precede them.”

Everyone was quiet, and Toru stopped, as well. Shearah landed on his shoulder again, and he swatted her away, but, like any old witch, she was a tough one to get rid of. She buzzed and returned stubbornly, bent on staying there, despite all his protestations. He needed to listen to what Claw had to say in this unfathomable situation. He was a wise bear; he would know what to think about it all and decide that Shearah, the old witch, was crazy, and that there had to be another way, one that didn't involve hurting close friends of the one he, Varg, and Duril had come to name one of their own.

“You don’t remember your days before today,” Claw continued.

“We do,” Beast replied. “The days here are always the same, traveler.” He spat the last word like it was something he didn’t want to hold in his mouth for long. Toru felt that the bearshifter was unjust toward Claw, and yet he couldn’t blame him, not entirely, for feeling the way he felt. “And we are happy with the way things are.”

All of his life, Toru had been a traveler. He had been an adventurer in his own right, someone without roots. Today, he carried his roots with him, which meant that he could continue his ways without hurting anyone. All who he held dear were traveling and adventuring with him. But it wasn’t the same for Beast and Willow and everyone else. They had reasons to be upset with Claw for leaving them behind and forgetting about them for centuries.

“So, if you recall your days as being nothing but the same one after the other, doesn’t even that feel strange to you? Even here, in The Quiet Woods, things happen. I remember that when I was here, each day we got up to a different kind of mischief.” There was warmth in Claw’s voice. He surely wanted to get through to his old friends, but to what end?

Could it be that he really believed the old witch was telling the truth? That there was no other way but that abominable solution that Toru couldn’t even want to wrap his head around for a moment.

During times like this, what would Duril think? Toru wished with all his heart that his friend and lover was there, by his side. What would he do with a terrible choice such as the one Shearah foisted upon them, like a gnarled hand reaching from the dark?

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“I… don’t believe I heard you correctly,” Duril said after a short moment of silence and hesitation. “What could you possibly mean--”

“It is as simple as it fell on your ears, healer,” Amarant replied, his voice as serene and at peace as before.

“You are an ancient creature. You do not die,” Duril pointed out, while his mind began to search frantically for answers. Maybe he was dreaming or hallucinating. At The Quiet Woods, nothing was as it should have been. Who could tell if he wasn’t possessed by a terrible spirit at the moment, prying his mind open to suggest a thing that was unbearable and inapprehensible at the same time?

“I never said that it would be easy. Quite the opposite,” Amarant reminded him.

“But without you, wouldn’t Shearah be left without protection? Wouldn’t the entire forest die?”

“It died already. How can it live like this, in such a state? As much as my old bark has been witness to vicissitudes of all kinds throughout the millennia, it doesn’t mean that my heart should be forced to bear it forever. Don’t you agree?”

Duril pondered. What could he say to a thing as astonishing as this? He wasn't, for sure, prepared to do what he was being told to do. All his boasting from before seemed full of empty air. He rested his hand on the inside of the trunk, feeling the stories that had been written there by colonies of ants and other creatures that had called the ancient body of wood their home, generation after generation.

"What kind of world would there be without you?" he asked, remembering how they had lost Demophios out there in the desert, and how Toru had felt abandoned once again.

"We all have our purpose to fulfill," Amarant replied, and this time, Duril read pity in his words, as well. "Yours now comes to a crossroads. Will you do as I ask?"

"What happens if I refuse?" Duril asked.

"Nothing. And that's the worst thing that can happen in anyone's life."

The cryptic words reached him in a way nothing had before. Amarant was telling him a cautionary tale; having no growth, no higher calling, no goal, was, in a way, like death.

"I believe I understand," he said softly.

Will my hand tremble? Will my will falter?

"I'm glad that you do. You are as wise as you are kind. And do not worry about this old body that's lived long enough as it is. Old roots die to make way for young offspring to sprout and lift their heads toward the sun."

Was it truly the right thing? A part of his mind told him that he should wait, that he should think about it a little more, but the other, the one connected with the heart and the gut, told him that it wouldn't help anyone to dwell on things he couldn't change.

Yet, the same part revolted and wanted to be heard. "I need you to tell me one thing, Amarant," Duril said. "What will happen to Shearah after you die?"

"She'll die with me, as well. The forest must be left to live on its own if it can."

If it can. The words resounded in Duril's ear, ominous and full of dark promises and hidden dangers. Before Shearah, there had been no forest there, no trees, no wonderful fruits and flowers, no sparkly rivers full of fish. Without her, could this part of the world survive? It was Claw's home, and others', and it didn't feel right. He still wept at night for Whitekeep and its smoking ruins, the last impression of the place living in his memories.

"She should know," he said.

"Know what? That I'll be gone and she, as well?" Amarant asked, slightly surprised by his words.

“Yes. This place belongs to her. She made it. Wouldn’t it be the right thing to let her know of your decision? She trusts you.”

The old trunk trembled under Duril’s fingers. In a way, it felt as if he held the ancient creature’s heart in his hand. It didn’t mean that he understood it completely. For a long time, Amarant must have thought here, in the dark, of a solution to the terrible situation that had gripped The Quiet Woods in its claws.

“Shearah?” he called loudly when the old oak remained silent. “Wake up, Shearah.”

“She won’t agree,” Amarant said reproachfully. “She would rather just wake up every day and start everything over, only to make the same mistakes again. This chain must be broken.”

Duril went with his heart and gut. “I know you must be right. I respect your old years and wisdom. But maybe after growing stale in this place for so long, you need a fresh pair of eyes to look at this. Why not just talk to her? She can hear you, can’t she?”

“She knows what I think already,” Amarant said. “And for this reason, I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that she cannot simply agree to my solution. She has turned a deaf ear to it for years now. And in the morning, she forgets again.”

It was her life’s work, this forest. Duril understood the wind spirit in her denial of Amarant’s ultimate solution. Why would she give up something she had built since she stumbled upon this place? It was her heart, and no matter what ancient creatures said and believed, there was another side of the coin that they didn’t seem capable of seeing or understanding for that matter.

“I want to hear her, too. I want to hear the two of you talk about it,” he insisted. “This cannot be the end. Why would you even wish for death?”

“Because it is what serves the higher purpose,” Amarant explained. He no longer seemed surprised by his insistence that the wind spirit should be awakened and asked to tell her story, too.

“There must be more to this higher purpose you’re talking about than the killing of a forest that is still home to so many creatures and trees.”

“They’re not truly alive. They live the lives of bugs, as short as from dawn till dusk,” Amarant argued.

“Yet, still, there must be another way. You cannot decide for her. Let’s hear her out,” Duril insisted. “Shearah, Shearah, wake up!”

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Varg understood a little bit more of what was making his hackles rise now that the truth was out in the open. What craziness was that old witch spouting? And what could Claw mean by talking

to his old friends like that? Wasn't he afraid of the terrible thing Shearah was asking them to do? He couldn't see himself raising his hand to kill another shapeshifter. It was a mortal sin, the kind you could never come back from. It ensured that clans of shapeshifters didn't wage wars against each other, and it was part of what made the fabric of the world what it was, with its rules and order for peace.

And now, an old witch in a magical forest wanted to push them into that, as if it didn't require them to give up their hearts. He growled loudly and turned into his wolf. Without effort, he climbed the cliff on which Claw stood. "You cannot be serious about listening to that old witch," he told him under his breath. "No way in hell or heaven will I be a willing part of this."

Claw didn't turn to face him. "Look at them. They no longer know who they are. But to answer your concerns, I don't intend to listen to the old witch, no matter what her intentions might be. What I want to say to everyone is this." His voice rose over the mist of the forest at night once more. "Brothers and sisters, I know you've always called this place your own, but now I'm asking you, no, I'm pleading with you. Leave it behind. Come with me and let's find another."

So that was what Claw planned. He was a true leader of his people, ready to offer them a way out of the fate of forgetfulness that circumstances independent of their will had carved for The Quiet Woods.

"What foolish things are you saying?" Beast asked. "Our lives are here. Why would we leave and join you on some adventure that might end up with our hides skinned from our backs and stretched to dry in the sun?"

"You've lived in peace, quiet, and happiness, here. I'm not willing to be the one to uproot you from your place of birth, as much as you are. But can't you see? You live your days as trees, stuck in time, not quite alive, not quite yourselves. And then you turn into your own, but only for mere hours."

"You're only ranting whatever mad thoughts cross your mind," Beast argued some more. "How can we even believe you? You're nothing but a stranger."

"Can't you hear what the old witch is saying about what needs to be done for you to be freed from your fate?"

"Our fate is fine," Willow intervened. It appeared that the others were more than willing to let these two be the spokespersons of their wishes and thoughts. Varg couldn't say that he had anything to argue against that.

"What old witch?" Beast asked. "There's some odd bug whispering crazy things in your ear. Your mind must be in pieces from all that adventuring, Claw. Admit it that you no longer have a heart, because you decided to leave it behind. Just because you cannot find it, don't ask us to do the same. You're not welcome here anymore. Leave."

At that, Willow placed a placating hand on his friend's shoulder. "Claw must think he's doing the right thing, asking us to leave our beloved forest behind the way he did. You're correct about him not realizing that his mind and heart are not together in the same place anymore. But let's not judge him too harshly. What is he saying? That we are trees and that we forget who we are? How about just proving him wrong and letting him stay with us until dawn so that he can see that we're not turning into whatever he believes we turn into. And if he still doesn't want to see the truth, then we will just tie him to a tree and let him stare at us, alive and well, in our old hides, until he cannot deny the truth anymore."

Varg liked Willow. He liked him more and more, but the most gut-wrenching thing was that Willow was wrong, as well as everyone else there, at The Quiet Woods.

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Toru listened closely to Claw's words. "He's right. If everyone leaves this cursed place, they'll be fine, right?" he asked Shearah, forgetting that he wasn't supposed to trust her anymore.

"They cannot leave. Their roots are here. And how are they going to do that once they turn into trees again?" the old witch said.

"But they're not trees now," Toru argued. "They have legs, and I bet that they can run fast."

Just as he said that, one of the shapeshifters standing at a fair distance from them, fell to the ground. Everyone stopped talking and stared at him on the ground. The young shapeshifter growled and writhed on the cold earth, shifting into his bear from time to time, only to revert to his human, and then the source of his predicament became clear.

Instead of arms, he began sprouting branches, gnarled and dark.

"What's going on? What's happening to him?" voices called from all sides.

"He's turning into a tree!" Toru shouted at the top of his lungs. What better way for these people to realize the dark magic or whatever it was at work than to see it with their own eyes?

But if they all turned into trees, then how were they going to leave The Quiet Woods? Toru had seen the trees moving and they couldn't be too fast. Also, his knowledge of the things here so far told him that they couldn't leave the forest if they were trees. If the Vrannes keeping them in that state were so deeply connected to this place, how could they allow anyone to leave?

Such thoughts only hurt his head, and while he struggled to make sense of them all, more and more shapeshifters began falling to the ground and sprouting branches and roots, while letting out agonizing sounds. Toru covered his ears for a moment, and by the next, he was already ashamed of his cowardice. This wasn't the time for him to shy away from the challenges fate threw at him. He saw Beast swinging his arm, the new one that was no longer a human's or a bear's, but a long dark branch and hurried to him, without knowing what he was supposed to do to help.

“Old witch,” he called out, “what should I do?”

“Cut his arm completely off, and it won’t grow again,” Shearah told him.

“Like I’d do something as horrible as that!” he shouted back.

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“Why would you wake me from my sleep?” the wind spirit’s sleepy voice could be heard. “There is so much I must do, so many things. Are you going to do them for me?”

It seemed like someone was the irritated kind when roused from her sleep, Duril noted, but there were much more pressing matters that he needed to work on. “Shearah, I know who you are,” he said directly. “Amarant told me about you.”

“The old one?” The wind spirit seemed baffled. “But he only talks to me…” her voice trailed off, full of uncertainty.

“He chose to talk to me, as well,” Duril explained in a placating tone. “He said something happened here, and that you have worked tirelessly every day ever since.”

“I do work a lot, but nothing ever happened. I don’t know why he’s saying that.” Now the wind spirit sounded defensive, and fear was creeping into her voice.

“Please, don’t deny it. I can hear in your voice that you are hiding something,” Duril insisted. He would never have behaved like that, pressuring someone into admitting a thing they were afraid of, but he had no choice. Amarant was determined on a horrible solution, while Shearah was stuck in time, with nowhere to go, and no freedom to be alive and allow the forest to be truly alive either.

“I’m not…” her voice faltered.

“I know about the Vranne saplings. I understand why you would be shocked by their appearance. I was in a war and went against them with other people,” Duril explained.

“What is a Vranne?” Shearah asked.

Duril reined in his own feelings and rummaged on the ground for one of the tiny creatures. He grabbed hold of one and held it in his palm. “This is a Vranne. It is young and needs your help.”

“No!” Shearah shouted petulantly. “They’re just ugly creatures! They should be grateful I let them live!”

“You wouldn’t kill them even if you could,” Duril insisted. “I trust you are a kind being, Shearah.”

At least the wind spirit didn’t deny that Shearah was her name. The more she accepted, the more trust in finding the right solution with her grew inside Duril’s heart. She was life, she was a force



of nature; for sure, she wouldn't let her precious forest die. It went against everything Duril had ever learned about the world. Amarant was an ancient being like Demophios; for them, life and death didn't hang in the same balance as for the rest of the world. There was no evil in the old oak, as there was none in the ancient serpent Toru had grown to like after a while.

But their way of thinking was ancient, too, and it was time for a new branch to grow out of that ancient wisdom.

"Amarant tells me that your work comes undone overnight. That you need to start over with each dawn."

"That's not true," Shearah denied hurriedly. "It's just what I do. I bring new seeds here--"

"When was the last time you did that?" Duril asked. "Amarant, tell her."

"I will, healer. To what good, I fail to understand, but I've been here for so long that I can indulge you in this delay only so that you are convinced of the justice of my solution."

"My old oak," Shearah asked in a whisper, "why do you speak to a mere mortal like this one? Don't you belong to me?"

"This mere mortal, as you call him," Amarant said calmly, "can talk to trees. He has the old gift and speaks the language. It is my duty never to ignore someone versed in this power."

"But--" Shearah tried to argue.

"He knows already everything you keep forgetting at the break of dawn." Now, he sounded a bit sad and weary. "I told him. He must kill me so that the world can live on. You cannot hold on to it, hoping for the best, when you don't change anything."

"You're mean," Shearah reacted like a petulant child. "Why are you mean to me? You love this forest, just like I do! What will happen to it if you go away? And he cannot kill you, anyway!"

Duril understood the plea in the wind spirit's voice. Shearah couldn't accept what Amarant presented as a solution, and she also knew what it would mean for the rest of the forest, and, without a doubt, even herself. But those were all things he already knew, and he needed to steer the conversation in the direction of identifying another way of solving the conundrum. The chain had to be broken, without a doubt, but it didn't mean that it had to be on Amarant's terms, even if he faced his own demise with a peaceful heart.

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They were running out of time, that much was clear. Varg watched as one after the other the shapeshifters fell to the ground, only to writhe there in what looked like excruciating pain as they turned into the hard, dark bodies of Vrannes. Claw was growling, asking them to follow him,

confused cries of help rose from one chest or another, and Toru seemed as helpless as he was, trying to make sense of the old witch's words to no avail, turning this way and that, unsure where to start or what to do to help those in need.

Varg raised his eyes to the sky above. Was there a full moon again? His wolf wanted to be let out and howl, and so he let him, and when his voice rose over the din of pain and confusion, a moment of silence followed, deep as the night.

The silver light of the celestial body cast soft shadows everywhere, seeming so peaceful and at odds with what appeared to be going on. Varg jumped on the high cliff again. Some believed that the full moon made wolves go mad, but he knew better than that. The moon made each wolfshifter understand his or her true power. "Follow me," he growled, and he knew, that very moment, what needed to be done.

When the course of life was turned inside out, it needed to return to its point of origin. From Claw's tales, he knew of one thing for certain, and that was the forest, with all its beings in it, had such a place where they could go to search for answers.

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What was Varg talking about now? How could anyone follow him anywhere? Toru wondered. Yes, the trees could move, but not very much, right? The old witch kept spouting her ominous words, and Claw was in pain over seeing his brothers and sisters turning into something they should have never been able to turn into. And now Varg seemed to be coming up with strange ideas, too. Wouldn't they follow Claw instead if they could? Why trust a stranger?

"Toru," Varg called for him. "We'll take them to the old oak. Come, be quick. The night is halfway over."

Toru smiled when he finally understood what his companion meant for them to do. Without hesitating for a moment, he grabbed one of the shapeshifters already turned into a tree and hiked him on his back. He steadied him with one hand and reached for another he could carry under one arm.

Claw was the only one who didn't appear to understand what Varg meant to do. "What are you thinking?" he growled at the wolfshifter.

"That old oak holds Shearah inside him, doesn't he?" Varg argued. "We must take everyone there and ask for advice. And Duril is inside the oak, safe, if what the old witch tells us is true, and he might be able to help us. Don't you believe that everything that has happened since we arrived here has happened for a reason?"

Claw hesitated, and Toru waited, his arms full, to see where the conversation between the two would go.

“Help me make a raft,” the bearshifter eventually said.

Toru put the two trees he had intended to carry down on the ground. “We need some pliant branches,” he said out loud to no one in particular.

With Claw and Varg in their beast coats, it fell on him to work quickly. To his surprise, the old witch began to guide him and help him find what he needed. He was a warrior, ready to fight, but there he was, crafting a makeshift raft to carry all those trees. Not that he minded; since the start of this adventure, it appeared that he needed more skills than how to bring enemies down through the power of claws and fangs alone.

The tiny bug containing the spirit of the old witch moved about, leaving traces of gold in the air. As Toru pulled away flexible branches from the trees, the witch wove them, creating the thing Varg needed. At least she was helping, and Toru knew that there was no time to waste.

Varg and Claw waited for the improvised yoke to be placed over their necks, and Toru made quick work of carrying the trees that seemed unmoving and unfeeling onto the raft.

They were heading toward the old oak. That was where Duril must already be waiting for him. Like Varg, the healer was wise. If there was something they could do about the ailing shapeshifters, maybe he knew what it was.

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“I do not intend to kill Amarant,” Duril explained, trying to sound as placating as possible. “He did ask me to do that astonishing thing, and I wanted to hear what you have to say about it, too.”

“You’re a stranger! You should have never come here!” Shearah’s voice grew more and more agitated.

“I’m on your side,” Duril made another attempt to convince the wind spirit. “I’m a healer. How could I possibly hurt someone, especially in good conscience? Amarant says that he believes this to be the only solution, but I think he’s mistaken.” He addressed a silent apology to the ancient oak, but he somehow knew that Amarant was above petty resentment. Now, what he needed to achieve was to convince Shearah to think of a different solution.

And he knew what it was. With outstanding clarity, he saw it clearly, right in front of his eyes. Amarant was talking about split wholes, but he didn’t see the simplest way of getting out of this situation.

“Shearah, you must embrace what you also think is ugly and undeserving to live.” He picked a few more Vrannes up from the floor, as many as he could handle with just one hand. He lifted them up, cooing gently so they wouldn’t be scared. No matter what his memories of the war were, these young saplings were not to blame. And even those that had given them life had been under

a dark spell to uproot themselves and wage that war upon the north. He was sure of that much, that much was true. "Please," he added in a whisper. "Give them true life."

The Vrannes were knocked out of his hand by a sudden gust of wind. The creatures scurried away, frightened by that unexpected attack.

"No!" Shearah said harshly. "I can never accept such things becoming part of my beautiful forest! I should have chased them away, destroyed them!"

"But you couldn't," Duril insisted. "Can't you see that there is no other way? I don't want to do as Amaranth says, but what if, one day, someone walks into this forest and has no qualms about doing what he's asking? What are you going to do then?"

"No! No! No!" Shearah's voice grew more agitated, and with it, the wind from before appeared again, as if out of nowhere. "Don't speak to me anymore or I will take your breath away!"

Duril fell to his knees and choked, as the powerful wind made him stumble. He tried to protect his mouth and nose, but he couldn't breathe anymore. Above him, the ceiling made from Amaranth's body blew wide open.

## Chapter Nine – Between Earth and Moon

Duril fought against the need to breathe. He had a feeling that if he did as little as try to inhale that wild wind, he would choke for sure. A sensation of dizziness wrapped itself around his head, and he groaned as he fell to the ground. The earth under his cheek was not cold, as he had expected, but warm, pulsing with life. No longer capable of resisting his body's need of air, he opened his mouth and felt something entering it right away. He no longer had the power to thrash about and fight the sudden attack, but soon the burning sensation in his chest caused by lack of air began to fade away. His entire body was hiked up and dragged toward the wall of wood, throwing him against it.

He braced for his body to be crushed against the hard substance, but instead of that, he began sinking into the trunk of the old oak, becoming one with it.

And he began breathing freely as he was now pulled upward, dozens of little creatures moving through his blood, pushing him up, up, up.

Duril wanted to gasp when he found himself, or this thing he had turned into, at the crown of the old oak. That must be where he was because he could now look out over the forest, see everything from up there, suspended between earth and the moon above like a being that was no longer himself.

“What is happening?” he asked, but his voice was no longer his, either.

“I never thought I'd live to see the day,” someone commented, and Duril realized that it was the same voice as his, but belonging to the old oak.

“What day?” he asked and looked down, expecting to feel faint. It didn't happen. “I am... you?” he asked tentatively. “What happened?” Shearah's wrath and wild wind felt like nothing but a breeze through his branches.

“The gift is strong in you. Stronger than in every other talker to the trees I've ever met,” Amarant said.

“Have you met many?” Duril asked, too baffled by what was going on.

“A few,” Amarant admitted. “I don't travel much.”

Duril grunted instead of responding for the moment. “Is this the best time to throw in a joke, Amarant? One minute I was suffocating, dropping to the ground, and now... I'm an ancient tree?”

“Don't flatter yourself,” Amarant warned him. “You're just borrowing my old trunk for a little while.”

“That's a relief to hear,” Duril admitted. “But what is going on? Where is Shearah?”

“She’s throwing a tantrum down below,” Amarant explained. “That’s not the most important thing right now. You caught us all in a conundrum, healer.”

“How did I do that?” Duril half-expected his real body to return and fall to the ground where he would be crushed and die. It wasn’t pleasant feeling that kind of expectation.

“I told you to kill me, and you didn’t listen,” Amarant said, but his voice wasn’t in the least reproachful. “The little Vrannes heard your plight and rushed to the rescue, which is the most astonishing thing I have seen in at least the last century.”

“The blink of an eye for someone like you,” Duril commented.

To his surprise, Amarant let out a guttural sound that could be taken as a laugh. “Indeed.”

“What are you saying, that the Vrannes did something?” he asked. Before his eyes if he still had those, the forest lay in perfect stillness. With the force of the wind caused by Shearah inside the body of the old oak, that seemed so odd that Duril couldn’t even dream of understanding it.

“Yes. Do you believe that each creature has a role on the face of the earth?” Amarant asked.

Duril doubted the moment was right for having such a highly philosophical conversation, but his experience with ancient beings and whatnot so far convinced him that it wasn’t his place to doubt that such things were needed. “Yes,” he replied without a moment of hesitation.

“And each of them has traits that make them powerful in their own right?”

“I think so.”

“The most powerful trait of the Vrannes is the will to live,” Amarant explained.

“They’re hardy creatures, you say. And I believe you, but I saw them fighting, and maybe their powers to kill and destroy are also great.”

“We shouldn’t talk about what was forcefully borrowed and set upon them,” Amarant said, a bit impatiently.

That was quite strange. An ancient creature being impatient. It made Duril want to laugh, or maybe it was the rarefied air up here that was making him lose his mind a little. He was still expecting to be pulled down from there and thrown to the ground like a useless thing.

“The Vrannes helped you become one with me, much to my surprise. Not that I didn’t know that it was possible, but a particular combination of circumstances had to happen for that to occur,” Amarant explained. “And yes, this sensation you are experiencing, of instability down inside your core, is justified. They’re young, and their power might not hold.”

“Do you mean that at any moment I might find myself thrown from up here and crashing down into the ground?” Duril asked, not in the least at ease after learning about the reality behind his temporary transformation.

“Yes.” It seemed that Amarant wasn’t the kind to sugarcoat the truth.

“Then let’s not dally,” Duril suggested. “What needs to be done now? Please, don’t tell me that I have to kill you. I’m still against it.”

“Now we have to wait,” Amarant replied promptly.

“Wait?” Duril asked, more and more bewildered by what was happening to him. “What for?”

“That I don’t know. It’s a new situation for me, as well.”

“I’m glad that you can be so calm. You’re not the one who has to worry about falling from the top of the oldest tree in the forest.”

“In the world,” Amarant corrected him.

“I believe I understand Toru well now,” Duril said with a sigh. “You wise, magical creatures can be so annoying at times.”

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Toru ran forward and turned back. Because Varg and Claw were pulling the raft with the trees, after having loaded it with everyone, he had been left with nothing to do but run around uselessly. He tried to push from behind, but that was no help. The raft just shook, and a couple of trees fell from it, so he had to load them back on again. Varg and Claw weren’t too happy with his impatience, either, so all that left him to do was going forward and coming back without a clear aim.

“Kitty, stop running around, you’re making me dizzy,” Varg said with a grunt.

“Why can’t I join you and pull the raft?” Toru asked.

“Because no one is left to tie you to it,” Claw explained. “And before you ask, there’s a reason why you’re not in puppy’s place or mine. You’re not a beast of burden.”

Toru puffed out his chest. “That I’m not,” he admitted. “But I need to help you.”

Claw grunted, just like Varg earlier. It couldn’t be easy to pull all that load after them, no matter how strong they were. “You can try talking to that witch on your shoulder and ask her how much longer until we reach the old oak.”

“Old witch,” Toru said magnanimously, “how long until we reach the old oak?”

“Not very long,” Shearah replied promptly. “You are so lucky you have the power of the moon on your side. Especially you, master wolf.”

Varg seemed less than happy at her words. “Are you trying to tell me that I’m no match for the flea bag beside me? When this adventure is all said and done, I’ll have a word with you, old witch.”

“Claw is part of this place. It’s enough for him to sink his feet in this old soil, and he’s tenfold more powerful than any bearshifter from any other place. But you, master wolf, your power comes from the moon above us. It is an astonishing thing, but yet it has happened.”

“What astonishing thing?” Toru questioned, wanting to understand what the witch kept yapping about. “Claw and Varg are both powerful.”

“They shouldn’t have been able to move their shapeshifter friends from their place like they’re doing now. Even if it is with great effort that they do it, it is still something that should have never been possible,” the old witch explained.

“Why not?” Toru asked.

“Because the wind spirit Shearah is a possessive mother. Ever since the change happened, she hasn’t allowed anyone to leave.”

“It’s not like they could move a lot, with them being trees and all that,” Toru observed for everyone with ears to hear and minds to understand.

“That’s only a part of it,” Shearah explained. “If anyone had wanted to follow Claw after hearing his plea, they wouldn’t have been able to do it. She would have started a wind so powerful that nothing would be able to move out of her grasp.”

“Good thing she doesn’t know what’s happening over here,” Toru said. “She might start her mighty wind, right?”

“You kept us listening to you and made our work easier,” Varg commented. “I can see the old oak in the distance.”

It was true. The crown of the old oak was unmistakable, even in the dark. It stood higher than any other tree in the forest. Toru rushed to it, impatient to talk to Duril who could have it worse than them, being trapped in there against his will. “Duril, Duril,” he shouted as he got closer.

He stopped in front of the old bark and turned into his human to touch it with his fingers. “Are you in there?” he asked anxiously and put his ear to the scratchy surface. A faint sound came from inside and he pressed his ear harder against the trunk. “Old witch,” he asked, “what is this?”

The bug buzzed around. “She must be awake!” she said in an excited voice. “If only I could talk to her--”



The witch's words were cut short so abruptly that Toru wondered if she had suddenly lost her voice. But no, that wasn't it. The tiny bug was still buzzing, but she seemed trapped in a swirl of wind made to her size. Even if Toru couldn't feel the wind, he could see it in the small fragments of leaves and dirt caught in the spiral of disturbed air. He tried to reach for her, but it seemed like the wind was of a mind to pull the tiny witch away from him.

Toru was a bit upset at the witch for trying to convince them that they should kill Claw's friends, but maybe she was just old and ditzzy and that explained everything. If that was the case he should forgive her, which surely was something only someone wise would do, and with it came the need to save her from that nasty wind.

He jumped as high as he could, trying to catch the small body, but it looked like the wind was playing a game of push and pull because it only swirled higher and out of reach. Toru growled and looked intently to see where the wind was coming from. Whatever it came from, it stuck close to the old oak, which meant that it could be coming from inside. Determined not to lose, Toru turned into his tiger and sank his claws into the bark. His entire body tensed and he pushed himself upward, up the tree. From time to time, he stopped and used his paw to reach for the thin swirl of wind in which the tiny witch was now trapped.

What worried him more was that the witch was no longer buzzing and her bug body now looked inert, only moved in a circle by the power of wind.

Down below, Varg and Claw were shouting something at him, and when he looked, only then did he realize that he was now so high that the voices of his friends were no longer able to reach him clearly enough to have meaning.

One thing at a time, he decided and reached for Shearah again only for his paw to catch nothing but air. The wind pulled her higher, forcing him to do the same. It was like it was playing with him, this naughty wind, and that only made him want even more to overcome it and snatch the witch from its grasp.

So he climbed higher and higher, ignoring his friend's pleas for now, completely intent on proving better than this strange wind. When he reached the crown, he had to stop. The old oak had most of his branches up here, and as dead as it looked to the world, it still seemed strong. It was harder to climb now, since the branches were more tightly woven together and squeezing himself through them was a challenge.

"Just you wait," he said as he tried to keep up with the wind.

"Toru," someone distinctly called for him.

He stopped. "Who's calling?" he asked. He didn't recognize the voice.

"It's me, Duril," the voice said.

“You don’t sound like Duril,” Toru argued. Then he reconsidered. He was wise now, so Duril could sound like someone else because they were inside a magical forest.

“That’s because I’m one with Amarant for now,” the voice explained.

“Who’s Amarant?” he questioned.

“This old oak,” the voice replied.

Yes, that was an explanation any wise person would accept, Toru decided. “Where are you?” he asked hurriedly. “Why can’t I see you?”

“I’m the oak, Toru,” Duril explained, but not all patronizing like how Varg was sometimes to annoy him.

Toru took a moment to embrace the branch right in front of him. “I’m so glad you’re here,” he said. “But you’re not going to remain an old oak, right?” he asked anxiously right away.

“I won’t, Amarant says. More importantly, I might not be able to be one with him for long,” Duril said. “And Toru, consider that I just hugged you back. I cannot move a limb.”

“And you have so many of them,” Toru remarked.

“I’m truly sorry,” Duril offered profusely. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”

Toru felt all warm and happy inside. So he wasn’t the only one missing the other, and that was great. “There’s a naughty wind that just snatched the old witch from me,” he explained.

“That is Shearah, the wind spirit,” Duril said. “She must be, I think. Amarant tells me that only you can hear me, so here is what is happening.”

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“What is kitty doing right now?” Claw asked.

Varg wished he had an answer for that. But Toru rarely did something without a reason, except maybe when he wanted to fool around, but this was certainly not one of those occasions. “I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “But he must have heard something. Maybe Duril, trapped as he still might be inside the body of this old oak, spoke to him.”

“We need all the help we can get. You were the one to come up with this idea, so now that we’re here, can you tell me what you think of all this?”

Varg was proud whenever Claw appreciated him, even if the bearshifter wasn’t effusive about it. “Your friends, they must have been turned into what we see them as now right here. Shearah, the

wind spirit, is here, or so the other Shearah told us. She must know of a way to turn them back the way they were.”

“I don’t mean to argue against that,” Claw said, “but it appears that we have hit a wall for now.” He turned into his human and knocked against the bark.

“What are you doing?” Varg asked, but followed his example.

“It’s only polite to knock when you want to find out if someone is home,” Claw explained.

“And if no one answers?” Varg brought his ear near the bark and listened closely.

“Then maybe that’s the moment you decide to break down the door,” Claw said promptly.

Varg stopped and took a long look at his friend. Under the silver light of the moon, he looked not one tiny bit in the mood to joke. “Do you mean that we should tear open the belly of this old tree?” he asked, not quite believing that Claw was serious about such a thing.

“Just that,” Claw confirmed. “Soon, it will be dawn, and who knows if we are still going to be us?”

“Do you believe that the magic that makes the forest be born again with each morning will affect us?”

“There’s no way of telling. It’s not our first night here, but why risk it?”

Varg bumped his shoulder into his friend’s chest. “Come on, Claw, you can admit it to me. You don’t want to wait another day and night to try and save your friends, right? Your heart just cannot take it.”

“You caught me there, puppy,” Claw admitted. “Now,” he said, “are you ready to help me?” He shifted and slashed with his powerful claws through the bark, chipping away at the trunk underneath.

“Is this the best way?” Varg questioned.

“Do you happen to see an axe around here?”

Varg had to admit that his friend was right. “That’s true. But will the old oak forgive us for attacking him like this?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. Whatever happens here, I want Beast and Willow and everyone else back. That wind spirit better come to her senses now.”

Varg couldn’t argue against such a thing. Just looking at the raft loaded with the unmoving bodies of so many of Claw’s friends, he understood. If it meant ripping his fangs and claws apart to save

his own, he would do it, wouldn't he? He sank his fangs into a lightly colored portion of the trunk revealed by Claw and bit out a good chunk only to pull it free and make a dent.

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“So those little ugly trees turned you into this old oak?” Toru asked after Duril had given him a short explanation. Suddenly the trunk shook under him. He sank his claws as deeply as he could into the wood. “What’s going on?”

Duril remained silent for a moment, then he said in an alarmed voice, “It appears that our friends suddenly decided to reach inside this old body to save the shapeshifters of The Quiet Woods.”

“But how? By taking it down?”

“Amarant says that such a little thing wouldn’t make him fall but they might scare Shearah, the wind spirit, not the witch.”

“So let her be a little scared. Have you seen how she took the old witch away? She looked like she wasn’t even breathing. I don’t know that for sure,” Toru corrected himself, “but she wasn’t buzzing or saying annoying things anymore.”

“Hurry down and convince them to stop shaking the old oak, though,” Duril said hurriedly. “It might scare more than just the wind spirit.”

“Who else?”

“The young Vrannes,” Duril explained. “And now, as little as their minds allow them to think, they are striving to keep me up here for a purpose I have yet to figure out.”

Toru pondered for a moment. “If they shake the trunk too much, will that cause you to fall? But I can catch you,” he promised.

Just as he said that, a gust of wind blasted from above the crown of the old tree, and he lost his balance. What a thing to say, to promise that he would be the one to catch Duril, when it was him falling, scrabbling at the air with all his paws helplessly, while the moon above him grew smaller and smaller.

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“No, Toru!” Duril exclaimed as he sensed more than watched Toru falling. “No!” he shouted again, and something inside him changed like a wave.

He was now moving downward fast, as dozens of ant-like creatures fretted under his skin or so it felt. Within the blink of an eye, he reached Toru and he wished with all his heart to catch him.

New branches sprang out of him, or Amarant's body, making a cradle that broke Toru's descent. Duril let out a breath and then he sensed his body stumbling forward, landing on soft grass. Right away, Toru crashed against his chest, knocking the air out of him. "Toru," he barely whispered with a grunt.

A giant tongue licked his entire face in one go.

"What are you two doing down there?" Claw chided them from above.

Toru finally rolled away, allowing him to catch his breath. Duril felt his body, not quite believing that he was, once more, himself. Something moved in the pocket of his pants and he reached inside. He removed a Vranne sapling that quickly scurried away and hid inside his sleeve. As single-handed as he was, he couldn't reach for it. "Hey," he cooed, "you don't have to be afraid."

"What's that?" Varg came closer, too. He helped Duril to his feet and then fished the Vranne sapling out of his sleeve. "Look at that," he said with a frown on his face.

"Don't hurt it," Duril warned. "I believe this little thing and his siblings just helped Toru and I survive a very nasty fall."

"Was it because we started digging into this old trunk?" Claw asked.

Duril took in his friends' worried faces. "You gave us quite the shake, but it wasn't you." He tried to stare above, into the dark. "No, it was something much more powerful than the two of you."

"Now, sweet Duril," Varg teased him, "you know that I take such things to heart. Don't you, Claw?"

The wolfshifter's words died on his lips, however, as a gust of wind descended upon them and grabbed hold of their entire group.

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Varg barely had time to finish what he meant to say as a joke before they were all picked up from the ground as if they weighed as little as a couple of twigs and thrown into the air. They were inside a spiral of sorts, a swirl of wind, and he had to stifle his need to gulp mouthfuls of air. He cupped his hands in front of his nose and mouth, creating enough space for him to breathe reasonably easily.

He could see his friends being thrown about in the same way as he was, but it looked like his gesture hadn't been lost on them. They were all cupping their faces so that they could breathe, while exchanging bewildered glances between them.

It had to be the wind spirit. She was a mercurial being, that one, so Varg waited, his eyes fixing on a single point, the glint of the full moon in Claw's right eye, so that he didn't go all dizzy from spiraling about.

It appeared that they didn't have to wait long. They were first lifted up toward the sky until they reached the highest of the branches in the old oak's crown, and then they were pulled over an invisible threshold, only to suffer through the reverse motion.

Now they were falling instead of soaring, and Varg had to tense his entire body to the extreme to stop his belly from doing something funny. A loud groan was pushed out of him when he finally landed, the sounds he made echoed by similar grunts and yells of surprise and pain from his companions.

It took him a few moments to push himself up. The wind was gone, just like that, and looking up, he saw the starry sky and one slice of the moon, partially obscured by the old body of the oak that was keeping her from presenting fully to the ones below.

The old witch was right about his being fortunate for having the power of the moon by his side this fateful night. Somewhere deep within the crimson folds of his heart, he knew it to be true. This night, something of gigantic proportions would take place at The Quiet Woods, and he was all the better prepared.

"There are tiny creatures everywhere!" Toru said in wonder.

Varg, too, could feel something squirming about at his feet, but seeing how they had just landed there, it hadn't been the first thing on his mind.

"They're Vranne saplings," Duril explained. "Please, try not to step on them."

"They are the things the wind spirit used to infuse life into my brothers and sisters?" Claw asked.

They had stories to tell, and Duril, as well. The healer had been here, inside the old oak, for an entire day and half a night, and it appeared that he had learned some important things.

"She's not bad," Duril said in a slightly anxious voice. "She's just... very young."

"She killed the old witch!" Toru said stubbornly.

"Old witches don't die so easily," Varg reminded him.

"This one is tiny," Toru replied in the same way. "Didn't you see how this evil wind spirit grabbed her? And where is she now?"

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Duril held the Vranne sapling that had snuck inside his sleeve earlier. “If only you could talk, little one,” he said in a compassionate voice.

If he listened closely, the sapling did let out some noises, but they could be interpreted as nothing but unintelligible coos. They were babies, he realized, and in a gesture of affection he brought the sapling close to his cheek. “Friends,” he said, “we are here to save both the forest and these saplings. We only have to make Shearah understand that she needs to help them grow.”

“I won’t do that!” The wind spirit’s petulant voice surprised them all.

“Who spoke?” Varg asked. “Is that you, wind spirit?”

“I’m the soul of this forest, and I will not let you take it away from me.” Blasts of wind pushed them until their backs were flush against the old trunk, making them gasp in their sudden need for air.

Duril held on to the sapling with all his might, bringing his hand to his chest to protect it. He could sense more of them climbing up his legs, most probably in search of a shelter. If he could, he would welcome them all, so he was happy when he realized that they were getting under his clothes, walking all over his body.

He couldn’t tell if the others were in the same situation as he was, because the wind was too powerful for him to even move as little as his head. But, as he stood there, pressed against Amarant’s old body, he could tell that there were sounds coming from somewhere behind him. Was the ancient being bent on doing something to save them? According to Amarant, he couldn’t do much, but stranger things had happened before. The sounds grew louder, and to Duril, they sounded like dozens of tiny claws and teeth digging into wood. Before he could think of the meaning of what he was hearing, he sensed the hard wall of wood behind him giving way, and suddenly, he sprawled on his back, outside Amarant, again capable of staring at the full moon above without any hindrance.

“What is going on?” he heard Toru yelling, and he struggled to turn his head to see what the young tiger was pointing at.

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Varg felt all his hair standing on end at the pained growl that left Claw’s throat. He hurried after his friend as the bearshifter rushed to the bodies of his brothers and sisters.

Or what was left of them. The trees they had struggled to carry there, fighting with every muscle and sinew, were now nothing but empty trunks that, at a simple touch of Claw’s hand, began turning into dust.

The wailing that followed could make the earth and moon above cry along. Varg took Claw by the shoulders to pull him away, but the bearshifter howled again and shook him off, so powerfully that he was pushed two feet away and made to stumble. Toru caught him in time and straightened him.

Claw couldn't be reasoned with, nor talked to. "They're dead, they're dead," he repeated in a pained whisper, his large hands, those hands Varg knew to be so gentle and warm, filled with dust, squashing it like that alone would be enough to help put the life that had been taken back where it belonged.

Varg threw his head back and howled at the moon. He howled and howled, the sounds leaving his throat deadening even Claw's pained growls, Duril's soft pleas, and Toru's anxious questions. He kept his eyes on the celestial body above, asking her for mercy and guidance.

He looked at it without blinking, his entire soul an arrow jutting out of him and aiming for the moon. And as his eyes became blurry and the moon began to change its shape, he realized that what he was seeing wasn't some trick caused by his tears. Large wings, dark as the night, moved slowly, and they were growing bigger and bigger, as they flew near.

"Eagleshifters," he murmured, knowing he was right because the moon was sending her messengers to them.

Toru seemed oblivious of their approaching visitors and appeared to be fighting an invisible enemy. "I don't like you! You're an evil wind spirit! You're not kind! You're bad! You're a witch!"

The young tiger must have meant that last word as an insult, and its recipient must have known it, too, because another blast of wind coming seemingly out of nowhere knocked him off his feet, sending him sprawling on his back.

Varg hurried to help him up. "Toru, I believe we're getting help," he said and gestured above.

Three large eagleshifters landed nearby, their heavy wings swishing softly as they folded. "Shearah," one of them said in a hoarse, authoritative voice that brooked no contradiction, "we are here to take you home."



## Chapter Ten – Ancient Magic

Varg looked at the three eagleshifters who turned into their human shapes under their very eyes. They were old indeed, dressed in tattered clothes, but looking no less noble as they rested against their gnarly wooden canes. The one in front who had spoken earlier appeared to be their leader. Varg took a knee and gestured for Toru to do the same. The young tiger seemed to be in awe at the apparition and followed his example without saying a word. Duril joined them, and only Claw remained with his back turned to them, too lost in his grief to care.

“Travelers,” the old eagleshifter said. “What brings you here, to this old place?”

Varg wondered briefly how old The Quiet Woods were, but at the same time, he thought that maybe the moon messenger didn’t mean the forest but the place as it used to be since the beginning of time. “We joined our friend,” he replied, “on his road home. We found this forest in quite a strange state.” He wasn’t entirely sure how much the eagleshifters knew of what had happened lately at The Quiet Woods, or about them.

“We are Silverlight,” the eagleshifter spoke again. He said the name as if it belonged to all three of them, and Varg didn’t question it. “We see that, without our guidance, Shearah lost her way once more.”

“Can you help us?” Toru asked in an anxious voice.

Behind them, Claw’s wails were turning into a long pain-laden murmur with no beginning and no end.

“Help you? Why would you need help?” Silverlight asked, and his words were echoed by the other two eagleshifters.

“Our friend,” Toru pointed out, “he lost many of his loved ones.”

“Loved ones come and go,” Silverlight replied. His voice seemed devoid of any emotion known to man. He could be as old as the world, if the wrinkles etched deep into the papery fabric of his face were anything to judge by.

“But not like this,” Toru said passionately. “They... just died. Without a fight, without saying one last word. Such death isn’t fair!”

“We cannot bring back the dead,” Silverlight continued in the same emotionless voice.

Varg wondered if his instincts weren’t finally playing tricks on him. The moon above them, round and pale, told him that the eagleshifters were her messengers. How could they be so cold and unfeeling to their plight?

“What can you do?” Toru spat, his young voice filled with hurt.

“We’re here to take Shearah where she belongs. Amarant is no longer able to contain her. She’s too strong.”

Too strong? What could that possibly mean? But Shearah was a wind spirit, forever young, wasn’t she? Varg decided that he had kept silent long enough. “The moon sent you,” he raised his voice to make it powerful enough to get his point across. “If you are here only to contain Shearah for destroying the forest she herself made and the creatures inhabiting it, then your purpose is way beneath your power.”

“How do you dare to speak like that to us?” Silverlight leaned over his cane and stared Varg down. His eyes were bottomless silver pits, and Varg lost his bearings for a moment as he stared back.

“You don’t know who we are. How long have you been asleep?” Varg questioned without moving his eyes away from the wrinkled face and frightening eyes.

Silverlight straightened up and for a few moments, he turned his head slightly, consulting with his brothers in a language that sounded as old as Eawirith, of which Varg knew no word.

“We know who you are. You’re far from your path, travelers,” Silverlight insisted.

“We have no set path before us,” Duril intervened. “We only know that we must be here now, on this road, for our friends. And Claw is one of us now, too.”

The healer was speaking words he believed also. Varg didn’t have to look at Toru to know that the young tiger thought the same.

“You lack guidance,” Silverlight concluded. “It is not our place to give it.”

“We don’t want it, anyway,” Toru said petulantly. “We just want you to give that wind spirit a good spanking and have her make Claw’s friends alive again.”

Silverlight appeared slightly taken aback by Toru’s brash words. “We are keepers of the ancient magic. Shearah, as a wind spirit, is part of it, too.”

“So, can’t she take a beating for being so naughty?” Toru asked.

Varg caught his friend’s wrist. “Silverlight,” he said loudly again, “our friend is in pain over the loss of his friends. And it all seemed to have happened at a whim of the one you claim as being part of you. What use is your ancient magic if you cannot undo her work?”

Duril came to their aid once more. “She only has to understand that the Vranes are creatures that need to be nurtured and cared for, just as the rest of the forest does. Amarant agrees,” he pointed out decisively, displaying as much force of will as the rest of their group.

“Amarant,” Silverlight said the name of the old oak tree slowly. “We haven’t spoken to him in centuries.”

“He spoke to me,” Duril continued. “And Shearah is too wild to listen to him. He’s right. How can she care only for what is beautiful and reject all that doesn’t please her eye? Is ancient magic so dull and narrow-minded?”

Varg would have given Duril a standing ovation for his words. As the one who had spoken to the old oak, he was the most equipped of them to get the eagleshifters to see their point of view.

“Dull? Narrow-minded?” Silverlight appeared to take each of those words as a personal offense. As personal as that could be, seeing how he was the voice of three heads, not one. “The Quiet Woods shouldn’t have existed.”

Varg was baffled to hear such words. “Did you allow Shearah to play with life?” he asked and stood, no longer willing to kneel in front of such obtuse power.

“From this playing with life, as you call it, master wolf,” Silverlight said pointedly, “your world emerged.”

“Let’s say that it is so,” Varg continued. Claw’s murmurs of grief still reached them, and a part of him wanted to damn the eagleshifters and rush to his side so that he could offer solace and comfort. “That doesn’t make it less your responsibility to care for it and see to its wellbeing forever and ever until the end of time.”

Silverlight fell silent again and consulted with his brothers, just like before. “Your tongue is sharp, master wolf. And yet, the task of saving the world falls on your friend’s shoulders, not ours.” With that, the eagleshifter turned toward Toru and gave him a pointed look.

The young tiger jumped to his feet. “Ha! And that means you get to sleep and laze around all day? If you don’t want to help us, we’ll find a way. Take your evil witch with you and leave already!”

It wasn’t exactly what Varg hoped to achieve since the moon above had sent these messengers, but their senseless ways convinced him that Toru might be right.

“Don’t call me an evil witch,” Shearah finally spoke.

Varg wondered why she had been so silent until now. Like a child, she must have hidden for a while.

“Evil, evil, evil,” Toru repeated with passion. “Can’t you see what you did? Claw’s friends are nothing but sawdust because you’re stubborn and mean!”

“I’m not!”

“Shearah,” Silverlight said sternly. “It is your doing.”

Varg observed the wrinkled faces with as much attention as he could give them under the silver light of the moon.

“I don’t like ugly things. And look what they did to Amarant.”

Only then, they all turned toward the old oak; save for Claw, still lost in his own misery. Duril let out a gasp of surprise at the sight. The old oak was leaning on one side, and there was a gaping rent in its trunk. That must have happened when the Vrannes had chosen to release them from inside the ancient body simply by biting into the wood. Without a doubt, the tiny creatures had saved them from the terrible fate of being suffocated at Shearah’s whim.

But at what cost! The ancient tree had looked as good as dead before, but now it looked like an old man who couldn’t continue to live any longer. The crown that had been so high above that it was hard to see without tipping your head back all the way, now was touching the ground with several of its branches. And the majestic tree looked as if it had shrunk in on itself, nothing but a shadow of what it had been before.

“They did it to save us,” Duril said. “Shearah, it is because of you that the forest is dying every night. And doesn’t your heart bleed, not even a little, at this sight?” The healer moved out of the way, to allow an unhindered view of what remained of the trees that had once been the shapeshifters inhabiting The Quiet Woods. The gesture seemed unnecessary with the wind spirit most probably being able to see everything anyway, but it did appear to make the right impression on the eagleshifters.

Once more, they held counsel in low voices. “Shearah, how is it we find Amarant in this condition?”

The wind spirit’s voice became anxious at the accusation. “It’s not because of me, it’s them! Them!”

“Amarant wouldn’t fall because of little teeth digging into his old trunk. There must have been a grander power to bring him low like this.”

Varg pondered. Did they truly mean that? Was it because of the wind spirit that Amarant, an ancient creature that had lived through millennia, was now dying?

“No, no, it’s not my fault!” Shearah pleaded.

“You killed the old witch, too,” Toru joined the chorus of accusers.

“I didn’t kill her!” Shearah protested some more. “Why are you all so mean? All I’ve ever wanted was to create beauty. How can that not be a good thing?”

“At the cost of sacrificing Amarant who always cared for you, despite your childish ways?” Silverlight continued to chastise her.

“I hate you all!” A swish of wind followed and the eagleshifters all turned into their bird forms, soaring into the air.

“What is going on?” Toru asked, his arms stretched toward the sky, as if he was trying to catch either the wind or the eagleshifters flying away.

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Duril took in the situation with wide eyes. It was all going very wrong, and there was something nagging him at the back of his mind, trying to get him to think. It took him a couple of moments to realize that the tiny Vranne hidden inside his sleeve was scratching his skin as if it was trying to get his attention. He opened his palm wide, wishing for the creature to climb on to it, which it did.

“What should we do?” he asked in a whisper. He could tell that his friends were at a loss. Toru was impatiently trying to catch the wind, by jumping up and down, while Varg stood there, in the moonlight, his fists clenched tightly at his sides. Claw’s mourning continued, creating an eerie music that combined with the soft breeze shaking the leaves of trees. They were falling, more and more with each passing moment, and it hit Duril right in his chest as the thought crossed his mind. The forest was starting to die again, but now there would be no other morning, with Shearah struggling to revive it again. Dawn would not come again over The Quiet Woods.

“I need wings,” he cried out, not entirely sure what made him say such an astonishing thing.

But as soon as he said the words, it was as if magic coursed through him. Up and down his good arm, Vranne began to run amok, yet quickly Duril realized that they were doing something. He cried out in surprise as he stretched his arm and, instead of its human shape, it now took the form of a wing made from an intricate web of twigs. For good measure, he moved his arm up and down a few times. The air dislodged by it raised a small wind that pushed him upward, making his feet lift from the ground for a few moments.

The same thing happened to his other side, but here, where his arm wasn’t whole, the Vranne appeared to have a hard time repeating their feat. A smaller wing sprouted from his shoulder eventually, and when Duril moved both arms, he realized that he would have to compensate for the difference in length through skillful balancing.

“Duril, what are you doing?” Toru asked. “You’re flying!” he replied to his own question. “You really are!”

“I must go after them,” Duril said with determination. “I cannot allow them to leave us like this.”

Toru embraced him briefly, even as he was floating above the ground. “Don’t let them get away,” he said, and Duril couldn’t stop thinking that Toru had grown up a lot during their latest adventures. In the golden eyes, he read trust and confidence, and it was all he needed so that he would soar high into the sky, as the shapes of the eagles were still visible as black shadows against the pale face of the moon.

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Toru took Varg's hand. "Duril is flying, did you see him?" he asked.

"The moon," Varg whispered, "she never lied to me."

The wolfshifter was angry; that much Toru understood. But why at the moon? He couldn't understand. "Can you talk to her?" he asked and wondered if his question wasn't too naïve.

"She talked to me," Varg replied and his head dropped, chin against his chest.

"Young tiger," someone whispered, and they both looked around.

Toru recognized it. It had been the way Duril sounded while being one with the old oak. "Amarant?" he asked hesitantly. "Are you not dead yet?"

"Not yet," Amarant replied. "Come closer."

Toru grabbed Varg and pulled him along. Whatever it was that made his friend so sad and mad, maybe this old being had an answer for it. If he was anything like Demophios, he had to know things that are hidden to most living beings, things that hailed from a past lost in the darkness of time, just like the moon.

"Who did this to you? Was it Shearah, the evil wind spirit, or the Vrannes?" he asked as he knelt by the fallen crown.

"My old heart is failing. It's no one's fault," Amarant said.

"That cannot be true. You just pretend to be so tough and understanding because you've lived for thousands of years," Toru retorted. "I've known someone just like you. He was very annoying and now he's lost in the desert," he added.

"Nothing is lost forever, and no one," Amarant said in a gentle voice. "But I'm not important. You must look inside my trunk. There's someone there who needs your help."

Toru didn't hesitate. As Amarant's gentle voice guided him, he put his hand inside one of the long crevices splitting the trunk and immediately felt a tiny body. He cradled it gently in his palm and brought it out. "It's the old witch!" he exclaimed. "She's not dead, right?"

"No, she's not dead yet," Amarant confirmed. "All of my power, I want her to have it."

Toru scratched his head. "How do we do that?"

"Will she be powerful enough to bring back the dead?" Varg asked, speaking for the first time since Duril had soared into the air, bent on following the eagleshifters on their path toward the moon.

“She doesn’t need to,” Amarant said enigmatically.

“Ah, ah,” Toru complained, “you all act the same. Demophios said things like that, too. But Claw’s friends are all dead! Don’t they need to be revived? Will she do it? But she’s so tiny,” he said as he held the bug in which the other Shearah was trapped with as much care as he could muster. His hand was just so rough and clumsy.

“Master wolf, bring us one of the Vranes. They’re everywhere on the ground. You only need to catch one and bring it to me.”

Varg moved right away. Maybe ancient creatures like Demophios and Amarant were annoying more often than not, but they always meant well. Toru felt hope swelling inside his chest, bringing a couple of tears to his eyes. He wiped them away and sniffled.

“You can cry, young tiger,” Amarant said in the same soft voice. “There’s time for new magic, now that you are here, walking through the world and following your destiny.”

Toru shook his head stubbornly. He couldn’t even explain why he was crying. But as he held that puny creature in his palm, his heart went out to the old witch. Yes, she was a bit not all there, but she had tried to help them, and Toru didn’t want to lose her. She and Agatha would be great friends if they ever met.

One of his tears, like a drop of silver, fell on the tiny body. Toru’s eyes grew wide as he noticed the old witch twitching one of her crooked insect legs. “She’s moving! Did you see that?”

Varg was back, holding a Vranne by one of its branches like he was bringing a naughty child to heel.

Amarant began speaking right away. “Give Shearah to your friend, Toru. The Vranne will know what to do.”

He trusted the ancient oak, but he still hesitated before letting Shearah drop onto Varg’s palm. The wolfshifter put the Vranne beside the bug’s body.

“Now, master wolf,” Amarant instructed gently, “raise your arm and present your offering to the moon.”

Toru wondered if Varg would do it. He was angry at the moon for not talking to him or whatever the reason was. So he felt relieved when Varg complied with Amarant’s request and his body stretched taut to lift his palm as close to the sky as he could.

A soft ray, spun of gentle silver, cast its light over Varg’s palm. And Toru witnessed, wide-eyed and bewildered, as under that benevolent radiance, the small Vranne embraced the bug, its minute branches turning into tender tendrils, wrapping them around the body that belonged for now to an old witch that maybe could bring back the dead.

The light of the moon enshrouded them both, and from Varg's palm, they soared into the air, a spiral beam that sent silver sparks flying. Then, it suddenly died, and Toru was about to ask the ancient oak what was going on, when he noticed someone on the ground.

Varg was the one who offered a hand to help that person to their feet. Toru couldn't believe his eyes. "You're not an old witch! You're a young witch!"

Silver bells followed, sounding at his words. "I'm as surprised as you are, Toru," she said.

Her hair was long and silver, and her face was round just like the moon. Her eyes were so big, they seemed to take up most of her face, but she wasn't strange or ugly. She was just different from anyone Toru had ever seen in his life.

"Young or old," he said, "you have to bring back everyone."

Shearah – it was her – looked around. "The power of the Vrannes is amazing," she said.

"Did they turn the trees into sawdust?" Toru asked.

She shook her head and walked closer to where Claw sat, curled inside himself with grief. "No. But it was necessary because now everyone will receive the lives they were meant to live."

She carefully picked up a Vranne sapling, blew over it, her breath a beam of silver light, and then placed it on the ground. The sapling appeared to have been eagerly waiting for that purpose to be given to it for a long time because it tumbled over itself as it hurried toward the pile of dust in front of Claw, making all manner of strange sounds much resembling those of an excited baby finally given a favorite toy.

Toru watched in fascination as the sapling threw itself into the big pile of dust, burrowing into it for a moment. Soon, something stirred and then emerged from it. No, it wasn't something, but someone, Toru quickly realized. And he even recognized that someone.

Beast let out a victorious howl and ran to Claw, who had gotten to his feet, as bewildered by everything as the rest of them were.

"Is it you, is it really you?" Claw asked in a tremulous voice.

Beast pulled him into a powerful hug. "In the flesh," he said. "I was dreaming that I was a tree. And then you all," he said as he waved at Toru and Varg, "came to rouse me from a long, strange sleep. But I wasn't dreaming, was I?"

Toru nodded with importance. "We made a young witch out of an old one with tiny legs and a bug body. And she gave you life."



While they were talking, Shearah went on with her work. A smile spread across her face as she gently selected Vranne after Vranne and blew over them. Just like earlier, the saplings ran into the pile of dust.

The next to come to life was Willow, and Toru observed with mounting joy as he also ran into Claw's arms. "We will never doubt you again, my friend, never again," he promised.

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Varg watched as the young witch revived, one after the other, all the shapeshifters. His role in it was done, he realized, but maybe not entirely. He knelt by the crown of the ancient oak. "Are you truly dying?" he asked.

"My life has always had a purpose," Amarant explained, his voice devoid of any regret.

"May I tell you what I think has happened all these years?"

Amarant chuckled softly. "Why don't you enlighten me, master wolf?"

"Since you'll fall quickly into the habit of talking in tongues so that we don't understand what you mean, I will. All these years, as the wind spirit went about her work, resisting what you were advising her to do, you gradually gave your power to the saplings. Am I right?"

"You might know even more than I do," Amarant said. "I was not aware of doing so until tonight. I knew that I had to die to let them go free as Shearah kept them all prisoners inside me so that she could do her work."

"Did you sense your power waning?"

"I did. I wasn't aware I was giving my power to them, but I should have known. After all, as she neglected them, I tried to nourish them with my dried-up sap."

"It appears that it was enough, after all," Varg said. He rested his back against the old trunk.

"Not quite enough. I needed more to give them the life they yearned to have. Or, better said, to help Shearah grow into what she was meant to be."

"What did you need?" Varg inquired.

"You," Amarant replied simply. "And your friends, the talker to the trees, and the valiant young tiger. You're one loved by the moon, and as much as my branches used to stretch toward the sky, I've never quite managed to catch her eye. I suppose an old oak like me wouldn't be able to, anyway," he added.

"You're selling yourself a little short, don't you think?" Varg replied with a snort.

“Wolfshifters are her favorites. For so long I’ve waited for one to walk into The Quiet Woods without even knowing what I was waiting for.”

“You’re not just flattering me, are you? And I thought she deserted me.”

“Not at all. We’re all beings of the world. We’re thrown into it, we grow, and we fade. But it is the things that bring us together that matter the most. Just like you and your friends.”

Varg couldn’t find a word to contradict the old oak with. “Ancient magic. Ancient wisdom. Thank you for everything, Amaranant.”

“I should be the one to thank you. Because of you, I accomplished my purpose.”

“What was your purpose? If you don’t mind my asking,” Varg said. “To make the forest be itself again?”

“Not quite. To make it live on its own. Independent. Shearah created something beautiful, indeed, but she didn’t know how to let go. That stunted its growth, and it would have happened even without the Vrannes coming here.”

“So, are you trying to say that it’s all for the best that the eagleshifters took her away?”

“That is their purpose,” Amaranant confirmed. “When they brought her to me, those many years ago, for her to find rest, I accepted because I knew that her soul was still needed here. She’s been my friend since the day she came here.”

Varg looked over at the happy faces of the shapeshifters as they returned to life. Toru was happy to be pulled into a hug by Claw who was, again, introducing him, to everyone. “Can I ask you something else?”

“Ask away, master wolf. My strength is waning, and I might not have long.”

“Why is the witch also called Shearah? Is she part of the wind spirit?”

Amarant remained silent for a while, and Varg wondered if he hadn’t already lost him to the eternal darkness.

“You could say that,” the ancient oak agreed. “As she journeyed throughout the world, happy to bring new seeds and new creatures here, Shearah left traces of herself hanging from my branches. I collected them all and cherished them, until one day, I had enough to make someone out of them.”

“That is quite the story. So, in a way, even though she is now gone, she is still here, right?” Varg asked.

“Yes. What we create, what we give to the world, will always carry a part of us, forever.”

“Words to live by,” Varg admitted. “Where are the eagleshifters taking Shearah now?”

“Where she belongs, the place from where she came,” Amarant explained. “Go celebrate your friends’ new lives, master wolf. I need my rest.”

“Can’t the witch use her power and Vranne saplings to keep you alive, as well?” Varg asked. “There seem to be so many of them, and they have you to thank for not getting destroyed during all these years.”

This time, the silence that followed stretched long enough for him to understand that the old oak could no longer hear him.

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A tremendous sight appeared before his eyes, as he flew, following the eagleshifters as closely as possible. The dark green of tree crowns was replaced by marshes and cliffs jutting out of them like hands reaching for the sky. Duril had to adjust the movement of his wings more often than not, to compensate for the unpredictable currents in the air and avoid losing height. He trusted the Vranne saplings that had given him wings, but it was up to him to be able to fly.

The eagleshifters didn’t appear to notice him. Eventually, they stopped on the top of one of the cliffs and held counsel between them, their heads leaning in, forming a tight circle. Duril managed to land on a small patch of smooth stone, close enough for him to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“She is asleep now,” one of them said.

Since they all referred to themselves as Silverlight together, Duril doubted they were even distinct creatures.

“So let her sleep. The forest needs to live and die by its own design,” another added.

“We left Amarant there,” a third intervened. “Is it wise to have ancient magic left exposed to the whims of those who don’t know how to handle it?”

So the ancient oak held the same kind of magic as the eagleshifters. It all made sense, Duril thought. After all, Amarant had been chosen as a temporary place of rest for the wind spirit.

“Wise or not, we have our purpose to fulfill,” the first spoke again. “And protecting a dying tree is not it.”

“The Quiet Woods will disappear without Shearah there,” the second said.

“There are other forces at work. Our mistress’s favorite was there,” the third made his opinion known.

“The wolf,” the first confirmed. “If needed, Amarant will know what to do.”

They were talking about Varg, Duril realized. But were they really sure that The Quiet Woods would perish now without their maker? He wanted to believe otherwise.

“I am still concerned about the ancient magic we left to chance when we abandoned Amarant,” the second insisted.

“No one would know what to do with it, even if they knew that it existed,” the first said. “It is not our main concern.”

“But the travelers have come to The Quiet Woods,” the second continued. “If they are there, the evil within--”

“The evil within cannot access our ancient magic. It doesn’t know how.”

Duril felt a slight frisson at hearing the eagleshifters talking about the faceless enemy they had clashed with repeatedly without being able to claim that they were any closer to defeating it than they had been at the beginning of their journey.

“And do not speak its name casually,” the first Silverlight scolded the second. “I shouldn’t have to remind you of such a thing.”

“Forgive me, brother,” the second hurried to say. “Still, about the ancient magic--”

Duril’s foot chose to slip from the edge he was perched on at that very moment.

“Who is there?” the first eagleshifter asked loudly. “Show yourself.”

There seemed no point in remaining silent or trying to hide. Duril used his wings to lift himself into the air so that he could face the eagleshifters. “It’s me, Duril of Whitekeep,” he said, somewhat timidly.

The three eagleshifters traded glances. “The talker to the trees. How do you come to have wings?” the third of them asked.

“He could be the answer,” the second said animatedly.

“We will see about that,” the first Silverlight added in a stern voice.

## Chapter Eleven – New Power

The first Silverlight pointed his cane at Duril's wings. "Explain," he said in a stern voice.

"I asked for wings, and they came," Duril said simply.

"Who are they?" the Silverlight asked in an impatient tone. It was a bit difficult to understand how such ancient beings could manifest impatience, but Duril didn't dwell on that aspect of the situation.

"The Vrannes," he replied. "But please do not hurt them. They mean no harm," he added quickly, in fear of repercussions. He had yet to understand what those could be, but he didn't find himself too trustful of the Silverlight.

"They once were the right hand of evil," the second Silverlight said. He was the one Duril deemed as the only one who seemed to have a semblance of a heart.

"They were," Duril admitted without a second thought. When dealing with such beings, he didn't think it wise to lie. Still, he was determined to defend the saplings and state his point of view in front of the eagleshifters. "And now, they are a force for good."

"That is not for you to decide, oros," the first Silverlight said the last word with a tinge of disdain.

"Oros? What is that?" Duril asked.

"It is the name we give to those able to talk to trees," the second Silverlight offered right away. Duril's good opinion of him became stronger. If there was one of the three eagleshifters that could be swayed to see his side of the story, it had to be him. Although the three ancient beings looked exactly the same, upon closer inspection, Duril noticed that each of them had a thin thread wrapped around the wrist of the right hand. For the first Silverlight, the color of the thread was blue. The second one caressed his thread, which was a rich red. And finally, the third, the one who spoke little, wore a green thread.

"So you've met many oros?" Duril continued. As long as he could convince the eagleshifters that he was worthy of talking to, he had a chance to do what he had come for: finding a way to keep The Quiet Woods alive, even with Shearah, the wind spirit, removed from the place she herself had created.

"A few," the first Silverlight said shortly. "Why are you here?"

"I need you to teach me how to keep The Quiet Woods alive," Duril said. His wings folded and the many Vrannes that had made them hung onto his clothes, creating a strange, living and breathing, armor.

“That is not something we know. And even if we did, why would we share it with you?” the first Silverlight tapped his cane on the ground.

“Because it would be our duty,” the third Silverlight intervened. “We are keepers of life.”

“We are keepers of ancient magic,” the first Silverlight insisted, turning his head, just a smidge, to throw a pointed look at his companion and brother.

“Ask your questions,” the third Silverlight said, ignoring his leader – Duril considered that the first Silverlight was used to being the one in charge.

“Claw’s friends are dead. Can we bring them back to life? And if yes, how?”

The third Silverlight straightened up, and he appeared to sniff the air for a while. “They are alive.”

Even his companions turned toward him in surprise. Duril wondered how much they shared and how much they kept to themselves, these eagleshifters that presented to the world as one. All of a sudden, he was made privy to a world beyond the usual human understanding. “Truly alive?” he asked, his heart full of hope.

“Ancient magic,” the third Silverlight said, “has always been hard at work in that corner of the world. And now there’s new magic, too.”

“I know that I insist, and I must beg you to forgive me,” Duril said, “but what kind of life are we talking about? Can they walk, talk, laugh, the way they used to? Or are they now part of the forest, as they enrich the soil from which it grows?”

The third Silverlight chuckled. “You know that life can mean so many things, oros. Your heart, however, might be larger than your wisdom.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Duril asked.

The second Silverlight intervened. “Not at all. You wouldn’t be able to talk to trees otherwise.”

“Brothers,” the first Silverlight said sternly, “why are we wasting our precious time with this oros?”

“If he is here, he is here for a reason,” the second Silverlight insisted. He appeared emboldened by his other brother’s intervention in the conversation and was now speaking his mind.

“And what reason would that be except for his own foolishness?” the first Silverlight demanded to know in that same haughty manner.

“We are putting Shearah to sleep for good, are we not?” the third Silverlight asked and he turned toward his brothers, waiting for their answer.

“She has worked herself to the last breath of wind,” the second Silverlight said quietly. “She deserves to rest.”

Duril was a bit surprised. He thought the eagleshifters had taken Shearah with them as punishment. But from the second Silverlight’s soft voice, he understood that it was not because of that they had intervened. These eagleshifters held the wind spirit dear in their hearts.

“Something must be done,” the second Silverlight said, with increased energy infusing his voice. “We do not leave ancient magic behind like that.”

“You are too keen on saving that old tree,” the first Silverlight said. “Amarant cannot be removed from his place. Its roots run deep into the ground, beyond anyone’s power to tear it away from there.”

“I doubt we can save him,” the second Silverlight said, his voice sad and low. “But we can do something. We should.”

“And what is that something? Brother, your heart, just like the one beating in this oros’s chest here, is bigger than your head.”

“There is a way, of course,” the third Silverlight chimed in. His voice was level and assured. “We must give this oros what is needed.”

The first Silverlight tapped his cane against the ground again. “Oros,” he addressed Duril, “wait while we talk about this matter.”

He then turned toward his brothers and began talking in that ancient language that made no sense. Duril waited patiently. The Vrannes hanging on to him were keeping him warm. At this height, with thin winds blowing like a heavy breeze, any mortal being was bound to feel at least a little chilly.

“We have decided,” the first Silverlight said and faced him. “Pray that you are strong enough.”

Duril didn’t have the time to ask what for, because the eagleshifter raised his gnarled hand and cupped his cheek. From his eyes, pits without end, silver threads grew and Duril felt a short intense pain as they pierced his eyes. For a moment, he lost his ability to breathe, but right away, he sensed something new and powerful growing inside him. He watched tiny sparks of silver dancing the length of his whole arm, making the Vrannes squeal and move away. As soon as they reached his fingers, they faded away.

An overwhelming sense of happiness flooded him. He knelt in front of the Silverlight, his head bowed. “Thank you,” he said in reverence. What for, he didn’t even know, but it was inside him now, and it was settling in like it was already part of his body.

“He’s not even asking what it is,” the third Silverlight said with a chuckle. “Indeed, his heart is much bigger than his mind.”

“But his mind is big enough to understand it,” the second Silverlight rushed to his defense.

“Rise, oros,” the first Silverlight said. “And fly back to your friends. They are waiting, and the road is long.”

The trio shifted and large wings shadowed the moon as they stretched.

“Wait,” Duril called. “What is this that you gave me?”

“You’ll hear the wind when it talks to you, oros,” the third Silverlight said, his voice growing thinner and thinner as the eagleshifters flew away.

Duril stood there in awe as he watched them becoming smaller and smaller against the full moon. If he watched long enough, he could see something like an undulating wave of silver cradled between the three eagleshifters that carried it who knew where. “Do you know what he was talking about?” he asked the saplings that now began forming wings like before.

The saplings squealed happily. It could be that they only cooed like babies, and whatever they said made no sense, or there was a chance that they were actually offering Duril answers to his questions. What kind of oros was he if he didn’t even understand baby trees? He wanted to laugh a little at himself.

His heart was light like a feather, as he soared into the air. Everyone was alive, according to the Silverlight, and that meant that his friends, old and new, were ready to throw a little party. Toru would never forgive him if he was late to it.

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“Do you think those eagleshifters are mean or not?” Toru asked, jumping from one foot to the other, impatient as he always felt while waiting for Duril to come back. The young witch Shearah had breathed life into everyone, so there wasn’t any need for Duril to go against those eagleshifters and convince them not to let the forest die. Toru was pretty certain that was exactly what Duril wanted to ask those old beings.

“Duril will be fine,” Varg assured him and took him by the shoulders to stop him from fidgeting.

“But are you really sure? He’s already been gone for a while,” he said. He didn’t like it when he became so impatient, but he wanted to have the healer by his side already. Everyone around was so happy, cheering and laughing, and only he stood there, all by himself.

Varg squeezed the back of his neck like he knew what he was thinking. “You know I might think a little ill of you if you so openly favor Duril over me.”



Toru looked away guiltily, but then faced Varg and kissed him. "Maybe a little," he admitted, "but only because he's weaker than us and you are so strong."

The wolfshifter laughed wholeheartedly. "Don't let him hear you say that. He might get a bit angry with you."

"Duril, angry?" Toru scoffed. And with him, of all people?

Varg caressed his hair and kissed his forehead, then his cheeks. "I, too, feel the need to protect him because he's not a shifter, like us, but hasn't he already proved himself many times?"

Toru pondered for a little while. "That's true," he admitted, "but what if he gets too strong and then he doesn't need us anymore?"

"I really don't believe that you should worry about such a thing," Varg pointed out. "And look, you can already ask him yourself if he'd even consider leaving us, ever in his life."

Toru felt his face splitting into an ear to ear grin as Varg took his shoulders and guided him to watch as Duril flew back to the ground and his wings fell, dozens of saplings scurrying along his body and then to the ground. He rushed to the healer and took him into his arms. "You wouldn't believe it, Duril," he began all excitedly, "but the old witch turned into a young witch, and then she began blowing life into the saplings, and then they made everyone alive!"

Duril snickered as Toru held him close. "These Vrannes are truly amazing. And the Silverlight told me that everyone was alive again. I could barely wait to come back and see it with my own eyes."

"Didn't you barely wait to come back to me?" Toru asked, fishing for affirmation, like usual.

He knew that Duril didn't mind it, how insistent he was. The healer patted his head. "Of course. That goes without saying. But because it means so much to you, I'll say it. I thought of you and how impatient you must be for me to come back. And I was happy to think that you wouldn't even join the party without me here."

Toru was more than pleased with that answer and nuzzled Duril's cheek. "I wouldn't even have eaten without you here."

"What better proof of affection could I ask for?" Duril said with a small chuckle. "If you're willing to ignore food for my sake, I can only be honored."

"Are you hungry?" Toru asked.

"After all these adventures? Without a doubt," Duril confirmed. "But first, let me thank Amarant for all the help he has given us."

Toru held Duril's hand, unsure if he was supposed to tell him or not. Varg would agree that even if it hurt, Duril had to hear it. "The old oak is already dead," he said quietly. "Varg talked to him until earlier. And then he stopped talking altogether."

Duril nodded thoughtfully. "What did he say? Did Varg share it with you?"

Toru looked for the wolfshifter, wondering if he had already joined the others, but Varg was only a few feet away, waiting patiently for him to finish his reunion with Duril. He gestured for him happily to come over, and Varg grinned at him. Duril laughed as the wolfshifter grabbed him and threw him into the air a few times, making him laugh even harder. He would know the next time to do the same.

"Varg, is it true?" Duril asked as soon as his feet were back on the ground. "We no longer have Amarant with us?"

Varg sighed and nodded. "He had slowly transferred his power to the saplings all those long years when Shearah didn't want to hear a word from him about what she truly had to do with them."

"There was, indeed, a special relationship between him and them," Duril confirmed. "I know both of you are hungry by now and want to join the others, but I'd like to go and sit for a while with him."

"We're coming with you," Toru said with determination and linked his hand with Duril's.

Varg took the healer by the shoulders, to confirm that he was also joining them. "Always together," he said solemnly.

And even if everyone else was laughing and enjoying their new lives, Toru knew that Varg was right to think like that. They had an important mission ahead of them. Together.

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Varg knelt by the side of prone oak, his hands linked in his lap. Duril followed his example, and Toru didn't wait long to do the same. The young tiger was the first to place his hands on the fallen tree and let out a deep sigh. "Amarant," he said, "you are as annoying as Demophios. Just when people start to like you, you choose to go all silent. At least, you are still here, while Demophios got lost in the desert."

Varg couldn't keep in a low chuckle. "I thought we were here to pay our homage to Amarant, not to scold him for leaving us."

Duril brushed his hand slowly over the wrinkled trunk. "The Silverlight say that his roots run so deep into the earth that no one, ever, would be able to remove Amarant from his place."

"But he's fallen down here," Toru argued. "How can his roots be still inside the earth?"

Varg traded a short look with his companions. “Maybe that is something we should look into,” he suggested.

Toru stood up right away and offered his hand to Duril. “Let’s see the old oak’s roots. Could it be that he’s still alive?”

There was hope in Toru’s voice, and Varg would have been lying to himself if he denied that he didn’t hope the same thing. It seemed like such a loss, to have the old oak leave them forever while he had guarded life and the good in the world for so long. Destiny could be a harsh master, and Varg wanted to think that while purpose made people follow its thin red thread, it didn’t mean that they had less power over how they shaped their own lives.

They walked along the fallen trunk until they reached the place where his roots were supposed to show. They gasped in unison when they saw it. Any tree as broken as Amarant was should have exposed its roots, but that wasn’t the case with the ancient tree. The tops of the roots were visible, it was true, but they still extended into the ground, and they could feed the old oak’s body just as well as they had done to date. They stretched like tendrils from the trunk into the soil underneath, and they were gnarled and dark. In places, the protective layer that kept the sap safe from the fury of the elements or tiny creatures feeding in the rich soil must have burst, because at a closer look, Varg easily saw the softer flesh beneath.

“The roots are still buried in the ground,” Toru said out loud. “Maybe Amarant is just injured, and because of that he got tired and fell asleep.”

Varg raised his eyes to the full moon above. What a beautiful night! His heart grew fonder at the sight; the mistress of his kin shone brightly and her silver light made even the fall of the ancient oak part of a fairytale that could only conclude with a happy end. He had never been one to let himself fall prey to exaggerated sentiment, but tonight, there was a tender feeling growing inside his chest that Varg couldn’t and didn’t want to ignore.

He caressed the injured roots and addressed a prayer to the moon. “If it’s in your power, mistress,” he said softly, “allow this old body to live once more. He has already served the world, not once holding back anything for himself. He even gave his life to the Vrannes so that they could keep the forest alive.”

“What was that?” Toru asked in an excited voice.

Varg looked where Toru was pointing and saw nothing at first. But from under his fingers, silver drops appeared, running briefly over the exposed roots, and then sinking inside them as if absorbed.

“Varg is a healer of trees,” Toru concluded. “And Duril talks to them. Duril, ask Amarant if he’s still here. Maybe Varg can bring him back to life.”

Varg looked at the moon again. “Thank you, mistress, for granting me this great power.” He focused on the droplets flowing from his fingers, watching the old roots absorb them thirstily.

“Will you have to keep doing this for long?” Toru asked, always the curious one.

“Maybe we need something more than the power of the moon,” Duril offered. “The Silverlight, I haven’t gotten the chance to tell you yet, they granted me an astonishing power, that of being able to hear the wind.”

“Then ask the wind if we need to do something more,” Toru encouraged him.

Duril placed his hand on a gnarled root that appeared more damaged than the rest. “It is the first time I’m trying to do this, but let’s hope I’ll succeed. Can you give us guidance, gentle wind?” he asked timidly.

A soft breeze rustled the hair on their heads.

“What is the wind saying?” Toru asked.

“Hush, Toru, let Duril hear it speak first,” Varg intervened.

The healer had a focused expression on his face, and he seemed to have a bit of trouble making sense of whatever the wind was telling him. Toru kept silent and waited with bated breath, as well.

“It seems that we must bring the Vrannes here,” Duril eventually said.

“Did the wind really talk to you?” Toru asked.

“In a way. Just like with the trees, I am a faithful listener and cannot ask too many questions. Shearah is a daughter of the wind, and the wind himself says that for too long, the Vrannes have been imprisoned and forced to live a life that wasn’t theirs to live.”

“It sounds to me like the wind was apologizing,” Varg pointed out.

“A bit too late,” Toru added and crossed his arms. “Do we have to pick up some of those little trees and bring them here?”

“I don’t think there is any need for that,” Duril said.

Varg looked around and noticed how the ground was now covered by a carpet of Vranne saplings. It felt as if the tiny creatures had heard their conversation and rushed to their call, to fulfill their purpose. Only then, he did realize a thing that should have struck them as odd from the start. “The Vrannes never grew,” he said. “They remained as saplings all this time, while Shearah used them to revive the forest again and again.”

“Indeed,” Duril said and laughed as the Vrannes began climbing on his legs.

So strange, Varg thought, to welcome these things as their allies. It was true that their appearance as saplings was not as fear-inducing as that of the adults of their species. The Vrannes appeared to know what to do because just like the drops of silver pouring from Varg's fingers, they began to run along the twisted roots.

Varg half-expected them to start eating the dead tree. But was Amarant truly dead if his roots still ran deep into the heart of the earth? As usual, they had more questions than answers, but that had never stopped them before.

"Look at them," Toru said excitedly.

The Vrannes curled some of their branches alongside the roots, wrapping around them, and then balancing there with difficulty like toddlers still learning how to walk. As they did that, their soft branches changed color and soon no one could tell where their branches ended and Amarant's roots began.

"I think they're beginning to grow from it," Toru added. "Like they've found their home."

His young voice expressed the same wonder Varg felt. He was certain Duril thought the same, as he watched the healer caressing the roots slowly, helping each Vranne to find a place.

"Do you think there's enough room for all of them?" Toru asked anxiously. "There are just so many."

No one had to come up with an answer for the young tigershifter, as some of the Vrannes began to dig into the earth, bringing forth more of the roots of the old oak. They didn't need to be given a place to thrive as they seemed to know instinctively what they had to do to survive.

"They are indeed hardy creatures, with a strong will to live," Duril said. His voice was light and tender. "It must be because of everything that they have survived for so long, while being used as tools for keeping the forest alive by the wind spirit."

"Will they revive Amarant?" Toru asked.

"I think it is more like they are giving him a new life through them," Duril explained.

Varg nodded. Duril's words were wise.

"The wind tells me something else," the healer added after a short time during which they watched the Vrannes using the roots to shape them into a foundation for their lives.

"What?" Varg was just as curious as Toru. Duril was by no means weaker than they were, but even stronger in different ways. Who else could brag about being able to talk to trees, and now the wind? Not many people or shifters or any other species; Varg was sure of it.

"Toru, you must lend your power to the new life, too," Duril explained.

“Me, too?” Toru questioned but he seemed quite delighted that his help was also needed.

“You are the source of new magic, the wind says,” the healer replied.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Toru said, somewhat surprised and unsure of this revelation.

Varg patted him on the back to encourage him. “If the wind says so, and Duril heard him, then you must be magical, too, kitty.”

“I must be,” Toru said and nodded with self-importance. Still, when he stretched his hand to touch the roots, he was shy and hesitant.

Varg grinned and took his wrist to help him plant his hand firmly on one of the exposed roots. Right away, viscous liquid, red and golden like lava, sprang from underneath Toru’s palm. “Look at that, Varg, Duril!” the young shifter exclaimed. “I am magic!”

“Just as I thought,” Varg added just to tease him a little.

The silver from his hand, the golden lava from Toru’s fingers, and the Vrannes summoned by Duril; all ran along the twisted roots. They watched together in silence as the threads merged, the soft tendrils of the Vrannes’ branches brought to life by the new magic.

And then, they started growing, reaching toward the sky, spreading along the length of the fallen trunk, their branches stretching and taking shape under their very eyes. They looked just as Varg remembered them from that bloody war, but their scary appearance no longer brought the fear of all that was holy upon him. He knew them to be different, and he held no doubt of this in his heart.

“New magic is amazing,” Toru concluded. “They are so strong now.”

No one said a thing about the way they seemed to be made of the same fabric as nightmares. Varg felt as if he knew them, all of these trees that looked ready to go to war, but instead had served for so long keeping alive a forest where they weren’t even welcome.

The silver from his fingers slowed to a trickle, and he noticed how Toru was shaking his hand to see if any of that strange lava still poured from it. No new Vrannes hurried to the tree.

“I believe, my friends,” Varg said loudly, “that our work here is done. Don’t you think?”

They all took a step back. Varg took his companions by the hand and watched the new life beaming in front of them. The gentle light of the moon made the shiny teeth and claws of the grownup Vrannes glint, but not for one moment did it make him think of the ruthless enemy they had had to fight to the death decades ago.

“There you are,” a sonorous voice interrupted their awe.

Varg turned to see Claw, his eyes all shiny and happy, rushing toward them. The bearshifter hurried to them and first, he embraced Varg hard to the point of almost squeezing the breath out of him. Then, he took Duril in his arms and kissed both his cheeks. He left for Toru last, but he not only embraced and kissed him, but he helped him onto his back until the tigershifter rested on his shoulders.

“We are all waiting for you. Many people have many thanks to address, and they even want to express their gratitude in more substantial ways,” Claw told them.

“By that, do you mean meat?” Toru asked promptly.

“Yes, kitty. Our hunters have been hard at work for the last hour or so. And not only meat, but the best raspberry sauce you’ve ever had with deer.”

“I don’t mind if you eat that,” Toru offered generously. “Let me have the meat.”

Claw laughed and made a playful pirouette with Toru on his shoulders, making the young tiger laugh and pretend to lose his balance by swinging his arms wildly. He stopped for a moment and looked at the new patch of forest grown from the roots of the old oak. “So they are the Vrannes,” he said respectfully.

“Yes,” Duril replied. “We believe that they are now giving Amarant a new life by growing from his source of life.”

Claw nodded. “Shearah used some of them to bring my friends back to life. I want to let them know that their sacrifice was not in vain.”

“Sacrifice may not be the right word,” Duril said. He took a long look at the fallen trunk and the Vrannes standing high and proud before them. “They were meant to give life, in various forms and shapes. I think that is one thing that we didn’t know about them.”

“It only means that there is something new to learn every day,” Claw said. “I was lucky to have you with me. If I had come back here on my own, I wouldn’t have been able to bring my friends back to life.”

“Was it luck or destiny, my friend?” Varg asked him and patted him on the back.

Claw hooked one large arm over his shoulders, making him stagger under its weight, but only for a moment and playfully. “If my destiny was to meet you, then it is that I favor. Now come. I know a few people who can barely wait to sink their teeth into some juicy steak and resist doing so only because the guests of honor are late to the table.”

“We’re the guests of honor, right?” Toru asked immediately for explanation.

“Do you really have to ask, kitty? Of course you are. And Duril, were my old eyes playing tricks on me or were you flying not so long ago?”

“I did,” the healer confirmed, “but it was only for a little while. Don’t ask me for a repeat performance. It was the Vrannes that made it possible, they helped me tap into the secret of a great new power.”

“I suppose it isn’t flying,” Claw continued as they started walking toward the place where the revived population of The Quiet Woods were waiting for them with open arms.

“No, it is something much more powerful than that,” Duril said promptly.

“What could be more powerful than flying?” Claw asked playfully.

“I’m now capable of talking to the wind,” Duril explained.

“To the wind spirit Shearah, you mean?”

Duril sighed. “The eagleshifters said she needed to rest. So no, not to her, but to the entity from which she was made.”

“That does sound powerful,” Claw admitted. “Now, my friends, are you ready to be honored as you should?”

“Yes,” Toru replied gleefully for all of them. “Especially with a lot of meat.”



## Chapter Twelve – Happy Celebrations

Toru stared wide-eyed at the transformation that part of the forest had gone through during the time since Shearah, the young witch, had inspired new life into the dwellers of the place. From seemingly out of nowhere, fires surrounded by spikes stabbed into meat had appeared, and at one side, someone was fiddling with a large pot, tasting from it time and again. Toru looked a bit closer, as the silhouette seemed familiar, and when the cook turned, he recognized Willow right away.

“Toru,” he said happily, “care to taste the raspberry sauce? I think it still needs a bit of mint.”

Toru made a face that told Willow everything he needed to know about what he thought of that combination of leaves and fruits. The bearshifter laughed and Toru snickered, too, his ears tickled by that sound. It was so strange to think that so little time ago, this living, breathing, handsome man had been reduced to nothing but a handful of dust. He had to admit to himself that it was a pleasure to look at Willow. Toru couldn’t remember seeing someone so tall and yet moving with such elegance and grace. Even now, as he leaned over the pot in which his terrible concoction boiled, he did so delicately, bringing his lips to the long ladle like he was tasting the ambrosia of kings and gods from a silver spoon.

“I’ll taste it,” someone offered from Toru’s left.

He grinned as he saw Beast. If there was someone who could offer any kind of competition when it came to eating, that bearshifter had to be at the top of the list. Toru was looking forward to measuring the power of his belly against Claw’s childhood friend. Only when Beast stood by Willow’s side did he realize that the two were of almost the same height. Because Beast was wonderfully round, he seemed shorter, but otherwise, he was in the same league as Willow.

None of them compared to Claw, though. Even among the bearshifters, he stood so tall, so majestic, that he deserved to be their king. As Toru looked at him among his kin and other dwellers of the forest, he wondered briefly why the bearshifter had chosen to leave his place of birth. As an adventurer, he understood why, but Claw looked so at home that he couldn’t stop thinking that he belonged here. Varg was there, too, Claw holding him by the shoulders, and Toru smiled as he remembered how well the two fit together.

“It is the most wonderful sauce you’ve ever made,” Beast concluded and embraced Willow, lifting him off the ground.

“Put me down, you clown,” Willow scolded him and even wagged the ladle at him playfully.

“You wouldn’t dare hit me with that,” Beast provoked him.

“Try me.”

“I’m doing that right now.”

Toru snickered as Willow promptly hit Beast on the forehead with the ladle. A splash of red sauce began pouring down his nose, and Beast just stuck his tongue out and caught the drops. He smacked his lips in delight but put Willow down, who immediately rinsed his ladle in a nearby pot filled with clean water.

Beast found his next victim in Toru. He first patted him on the back, hard enough to almost make him take a step forward. Toru dug his heels hard into the soil to stop Beast from having his way since it was all a matter of proving himself to Claw's friends. His resistance didn't stop Beast from hugging him and lifting him off the ground, the same as he had done with Willow. "What do you think of us, Toru?" Beast asked as he twirled him around like they were a bunch of kids playing.

Toru didn't find it unpleasant so he played along, hanging from the bearshifter's thick neck with both arms. "Are we going to eat yet? I'll tell you what I think after that," he said as Beast put him down, satisfied that Toru hadn't berated him like his friend had. "I always judge people by how good the meat they serve is."

"Only the prime cuts for our heroes," Beast declared and began pulling Toru away.

"I want to beat you in an eating contest," Toru stated while walking side by side with Beast.

"You do?" Beast seemed surprised. "You have no idea who you're going against, boy."

"Boy?" Toru looked stricken. "I'm a hero and I'm also magical."

Beast laughed and patted him on the back. "And also a boy who thinks he can eat like a man."

Toru grinned. He didn't mind the challenge, and the victory would be all the sweeter when he would prove Beast wrong.

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There was so much happiness around them that Varg found it difficult to believe what had happened only hours ago. The night was not yet over, and The Quiet Woods were a different place. This was the kind of thing Duril would have to write down in his tome in that small neat handwriting of his.

Claw pulled him aside after allowing the numerous dwellers of the forest to come and offer their gratitude and words of praise for his and his friends' feat. Varg felt his neck starting to cramp from nodding and bowing politely so many times. Back in Whitekeep, he had been used to being a part of the town's politics when the need arose, and the mayor had convinced him one too many times to preside over happy get-togethers, but even for someone as versed as he was in talking to others, the situation was starting to become a bit tiresome.

He couldn't and wouldn't complain, of course. These people could enjoy their new lives because of Toru, Duril, and him. Varg hadn't ever been one for false modesty and he wouldn't start now.

So, he was a bit curious about what the big bear was up to when Claw saved him from the grateful crowd.

“What is it, flea bag?” Varg asked as soon as they were hidden from view by the trunk of a large tree. It was almost unfathomable to believe that a tree big enough to hide Claw existed, but here, in The Quiet Woods, everything was possible, it seemed.

Claw flicked his ear playfully and then pulled him into a warm hug. “Everybody keeps telling you ‘thank you’, forgetting that I should be the first to do that.”

Varg patted him on the back. “I’m happy we did what we did. We succeeded because of the magic that lives inside Toru, his kind heart, and his courage. And because Duril is such a great speaker to the trees, and now to the wind.”

“Aren’t you forgetting someone?” Claw caressed his hair in a tender gesture that made Varg shiver a little at how pleasant it felt. “Someone with a heart as big as the moon?”

Varg smiled. “I’m not forgetting.” He made a little show of pretending to punch Claw in his hard belly. “I saved you, flea bag.” To be at the receiving end of so much tenderness was new in a way for Varg. He didn’t know what to do with it, nor how to behave.

Claw moved him to rest his back against the tree and caressed his jawline. “Don’t you dare hide behind poorly chosen words, puppy.”

As grating as that nickname had felt at first, now Varg was happy with it. Compared to Claw, his impressive stature no longer appeared so impressive. It should have irked him to no end, but that wasn’t the case. Yes, under that sweet caress, he could rub his head against the rough hand and pretend to be a bit of a puppy still.

There was nothing sweet in how Claw kissed him. No, not one bit, because the kiss was ravenous, demanding, and Varg’s body responded enthusiastically. Claw was hard and hot against him, pressing him more and more, and making the blood rush to his groin.

“Don’t we have a celebration to attend?” he asked breathlessly when Claw allowed him to breathe at last.

“Unfortunately,” Claw admitted and quite shamelessly reached for Varg’s crotch. “Good, I won’t be the only one who’s going to pray for all this to end so that we can finally be where we want.”

“Aren’t you a sneaky one?” Varg scolded him and grabbed one of his ears. “I was fine and dandy before you put your hairy paws all over me.”

“Oh, you were fine and dandy?” Claw pursed his lips and wiggled his eyebrows in playful disbelief. “All the more reason for me to remedy the situation, then.”

Varg elbowed his friend in the ribs, not too hard, but not too easy either. “You are sneaky, indeed.” He stopped for a moment and then pulled Claw to him. “We’re tied together, you know that, right?”

Claw nodded solemnly. Varg was longing for him to say the words, to say that he would join them and walk the world until they found the root of the evil threatening Eawirith. Maybe he was trying to fool himself a little and make himself believe that it was only for the higher good that he wanted Claw to be part of their tribe, their pack. But that wouldn’t be the whole truth, as he was well aware of. He wanted Claw for himself, selfishly, without taking a break to look around and see that the bearshifter was at home, there, in the heart of the forest, surrounded by his kin, his people, his longtime friends. Was he so petty as to demand Claw to leave behind what mattered to him most in the world? The fight they were engaged in wasn’t Claw’s to fight. And Varg wanted to believe that he was strong and just enough to admit it and move on.

Claw couldn’t know what he was thinking. He wasn’t allowed to, either, despite what Varg wanted desperately to ask of him. “You’ve seen me at my best, Varg,” he said in a voice that was now devoid of all the playfulness from before. “And you’ve seen me at my worst, a broken man, incapable of protecting his own people like he should. You’ve seen more of me than anyone else I know.”

Varg nodded. Claw was about to add something more, but at that moment a strong bellow coming from the improvised camp interrupted them. “Varg! Claw! Where are you? I’m going to beat Beast at eating deer steak!” Toru shouted at them, although he couldn’t possibly see them, as hidden as they were behind that large tree. “And I’m not going to cheat and have any sauce!”

Claw laughed and shook his head. “We’ll talk some more. Now, we have the solemn duty of choosing a winner between these two fiends.”

Varg joined him and wrapped one arm around Claw’s waist. “Who do you bet on? Your friend Beast?”

“It is a tough choice, indeed,” Claw admitted. “I’ve come to know your Toru, too, and that kitty can eat anyone I know under the table when he puts his mind to it. But he’s going against the pride of The Quiet Woods, you know? And people here know a thing or two about eating until they drop.”

“Sounds like a real feast,” Varg said with a grin. “Let’s leave them to their naughty ways, and we’ll just eat like normal people.”

“Speak for yourself, puppy. After going hungry for centuries in that prison you saved me from, now I’m ready to eat a whole deer.”

Varg couldn’t argue with that. “Will you take a bet on that, too?”

“I will, why not?”

They both laughed as they headed over to Toru who waved happily at them as soon as he saw them.

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The heat from the fire made their cheeks look ablaze. In the throng of unfamiliar faces, Duril read all that he needed to know. Everyone was happy to have been rescued from that terrible fate. He had yet to understand some of the things that had happened, and he knew that he had the right person to ask. While Toru and Beast began ripping the roasted meat from giant bones with unhidden delight, as the entire audience erupted into encouragements, cheers, and shouted wagers, he stepped a bit back and sat by Shearah's side on the stump of an old tree. She had taken a small leaf and placed a small cup of what looked like soup on it and she was watching the happy reunion with eyes full of hope.

"I see that you decided to let Toru and Beast have all the meat," he said as he gestured at what looked like a meager meal compared to the feast taking place only feet away from them.

Shearah laughed, her laughter like silver bells that caressed the ear. "I cannot eat any meat. I'm made that way," she explained.

"You were made from fragments of wind," Duril said. "Do you mind my sitting here with you?"

"How could I mind? I must admit that of everyone I know only Willow might be able to pretend that he has the same perfect manners that you do, master healer."

Duril laughed at the compliment, a bit embarrassed. "I don't know how much of a master I am."

"You healed an entire forest," Shearah said and gestured all around. "What else should I call you?"

"Duril is fine," he offered.

Shearah laughed. "So modest. You want to ask me something, don't you?"

"Yes. What gave me away?"

"That would be my secret," Shearah replied in a coquettish manner that was in an accord with her appearance as a young woman. "Tell me, what is it that you want to know, Duril?"

Duril hesitated for a moment. Maybe Shearah the witch didn't know what had happened to Shearah the wind spirit. However, asking about her wouldn't hurt anyone. "The eagleshifters took Shearah with them," he started. "But will she be fine?"

Shearah examined his face with her large luminous eyes. "You worry about someone who, as unwittingly as she did, almost brought this place to ruin."

"Her heart was in the right place."

“And her head in the wrong one,” Shearah added. “Mind and heart should be in accord, don’t you think?”

Duril nodded. That was something that reminded him of the words the eagleshifters had said, about how his heart was bigger than his wisdom.

“You don’t have to worry about her,” the witch said. “And before you find my words harsh, know that I’ve always loved her, and I always will. Sometimes, we cannot bring ourselves to agree with everything the people we love do, don’t you think so? But we continue to love them anyway.”

Duril pondered those words. He couldn’t think of one situation in which he would consider himself on the other side of the fence from those he loved.

Shearah patted his shoulder. “It’s all right. You don’t have to think too much about my words. Amarant might be partly to blame. Some of his old bark must have rubbed off on me. I’m a lot older than I look. Roots are bitter sometimes.”

“But fruits are sweet,” Duril added. “You,” he slowed down to choose the right words, “you are a bit angry at her, aren’t you?”

The witch nodded and her smile was sad. “I know they did the right thing, the eagleshifters, by taking her away. But that doesn’t mean that I won’t miss her, most of all people. They,” she gestured at the feast from which laughter and songs could be heard, “won’t remember her the way I always will.”

Duril took her hand and held it. “It must be the bravest thing to remember the people dearest to you, even if they’re not by your side anymore.”

Shearah wiped a tear discreetly. She laughed, a bit embarrassed at being seen in such a vulnerable state. “Is it brave to shed tears like a child with a scraped knee?”

Duril tightened his hold and made her look into his eyes. “It is,” he said with determination. “Because you don’t ever let go, and that’s the most important thing. And what you do, your mark on the world, continues and keeps their memory alive while you get nothing in return to ease your pain.”

Shearah smiled fondly. She blinked a few times to chase away the tears. “You lifted a burden off my heart, oros. It looks to me that you can heal more than forests and wounds of the flesh.”

“I’m honored by your words,” Duril said.

“Don’t you want to join them?” Shearah said, gesturing at the others with her chin.

“I’ll sit with you a little more. And you still didn’t tell me where the eagleshifters took Shearah.”

“Ah, that’s supposed to be a secret, but I can tell it to you. Come closer,” the witch said and gestured for him to lend his ear. “It’s the place where the wind gets born,” she whispered.

Duril felt her small hand pressing against his chest for a moment. When she pulled away, he noticed a silver flower on his leather vest, but then it disappeared and a small burning sensation on his skin in the exact same spot startled him. “What was that?” he asked.

Shearah smiled all-knowingly. “Didn’t you find the Silverlight a bit annoying?”

Duril looked around as if it was possible that the three eagleshifters might appear from the woods and chide them for behaving like a pair of gossiping schoolchildren. “Maybe a little,” he confessed.

“I bet they didn’t tell you how to ask the wind about what you need to know.”

“I think I managed to figure it out when the Vrannes found their home over Amarant’s roots,” Duril explained. He had not yet confessed to his friends, but it had been a feat to understand the wind at the time. For all that the Silverlight told him about how he could speak to the wind, he feared that he was guessing more than actually hearing and understanding it when it chose to speak to him.

“You’ll hear it loud and clear now,” Shearah said. “You’ll see the flower on your chest later.” Duril touched the place where the symbol had been, but nothing felt different now that the burning sensation was gone.

“You gave me something. Like Lady Amethyst in Fairside.”

Shearah nodded. “Now you’re a full-fledged speaker to the wind, too, talker to the trees.”

“Thank you. That’s an amazing gift. Can you tell me more stories about this place? I’d rather not be present when Toru and Beast start fighting all that roasted deer when it threatens to climb up their throat the way it went down.”

Shearah laughed. “Why? Aren’t you a master healer?”

“Yes, but I know Toru. He’ll be embarrassed, and I will treat him later when there’s no one else around to see how much he likes to be babied.”

“You are one very considerate friend. But you’re more than that, aren’t you?” Shearah searched his face, looking for something.

They had no reason to hide from anyone who and what they were. He nodded and smiled. “They are the most important people in the world to me right now, and I will never leave them,” he said solemnly.

As if Toru was capable of hearing him where he stood, he suddenly jumped to his feet from his place and began waving at him. “Duril, Duril,” he shouted, “I won, I won! Come kiss me!”

Shearah laughed gently. "There is no doubt," she said. "Go kiss your champion, master healer. He looks like he cannot stand a second without you by his side."

Duril stood and bowed slightly. "It was a pleasure to get to know you and the rest of The Quiet Woods, Shearah. You are worthy of her name."

She waved at him, encouraging him to hurry to the feast, and her luminous eyes no longer appeared as hurt as they had earlier that night. Maybe there was a bit of truth to be found in that, too. Words could heal and reach deeper than any poultice or bitter concoction meant to mend a wound.

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They had slept well into the afternoon, and Toru shifted from one side to the other a couple of times until he decided that he couldn't sleep a wink longer. He noticed that he was the last one to get up and looked over at the small clearing in which people were already busy preparing lunch or a late breakfast. Duril was among them, as well as Varg who seemed engaged in private conversation with Claw, as they sat in a circle with some of the other dwellers of the forest.

Cautiously, he sniffed his armpit and made a face. If he wanted Duril to kiss him properly, he needed to take a bath. He rose quietly and made for the river without making a fuss so that no one else would notice him before he made himself presentable enough for his friends' company.

The cold water of the river made him shiver at first, but he quickly found the sensation turning pleasurable as the last fragments of sleep were chased from his eyes. He made all sorts of sounds as he cleaned his face and his body, his very few clothes abandoned on the bank of the river.

Just as he was about to get out, he heard something. Someone was having fun, he thought, as hushed whispers and laughter that seemed difficult to contain reached his ears. Curious about who it was, he waded through the water until the river turned, hiding the next bend behind a curtain of thick rushes.

Toru rested his arm on a low hanging branch while leaning forward. His eyes grew wide when he saw who it was, but that didn't stop him from continuing to watch, anyway. Beast and Willow were there, close to the shore, in a part of the river where the water ran low, just as naked as he was, and they seemed to be having, indeed, a lot of fun. Beast's hairy paws were caressing Willow down his back, finding an intimate hold on a pair of perfectly shaped buttocks.

Toru felt his manhood stir at the sight. Willow threw his head back, causing his long hair to fall away from his shoulders and allowing Beast to nuzzle his neck. But then, to his surprise, after the two shifters shared a passionate kiss, it was Beast who turned and allowed Willow to caress his back and then take him from behind.

That made him think of how he had seen Varg being possessed in the same way by Claw and made to cry out in pleasure. Ever since that time, he had wanted that, to find a strong body under him



and make its owner bend and abandon himself to him. But no, not just anybody, Toru thought, but his friend and lover who always seemed so in control, so strong and collected.

The branch breaking in his fist took him by surprise. The sound also startled the two lovers who turned their heads in his direction. He waved at them, knowing that running away wouldn't do him any good.

Willow laughed, to his relief. "Toru," he said and there was a naughty glint in his eyes that reminded him of Claw. "What are you doing over there, you little peeper?"

Toru let his eyes slide to Beast for a moment, but the other bear just smirked at him. All the while, the two didn't pull away from each other. Willow even continued to move his hips slightly, going in and out of his lover and making Beast push his butt higher to allow him easy access.

"Sorry," he offered but didn't move away. It felt like so long since he had made love and the lower part of his body seemed to have a mind of its own, springing up at seeing two wonderful people going at it.

Willow grinned and his all-knowing smirk told Toru that whatever his body felt, it was quite obvious. He looked down to see his manhood peeking out from underneath the water.

"I believe something needs a bit of attention," Willow commented while eyeing him shamelessly.

Toru felt his want grow at the provocation.

Willow's eyes lit up. "And it looks like you're about to receive it," he added.

Toru had been so engrossed with the scene in front of his eyes that his ears must have failed him. A strong hand squeezed his shoulder, taking him by surprise. "What are you doing, kitty? Are you trying to steal my friends?"

Claw's sonorous voice made him turn his head fast. He wanted to protest but other strong arms wrapped around him from behind. Varg nuzzled his ear. "You were gone a bit too long. Duril started to miss you."

Toru's eyes grew wide when he saw that the healer was there with them. "Is the food ready?" he mumbled.

"Didn't you eat your fill last night?" Varg scolded him playfully. Then, without shame, he reached for Toru's manhood, running a finger up and down its sturdy length. "It looks like if we leave you unattended, you have no qualms about searching for love in other places."

"I wasn't," he protested, but only feebly because Varg wrapped one hand around Toru's hardness and began stroking it.

“Don’t scold our hero,” Willow said. “And why don’t you all step out of that shadow and come here, into the sun, where we can look at you properly?”

Toru had no problem with that but only if Varg let him breathe a little. And Claw, who leaned over and stole a kiss from him. He watched in a daze as the bearshifter walked forward and then splashed water toward Willow and Beast. Willow laughed, but Beast growled. “If you’re not here to make love, too, go away,” Beast warned them, but his tone wasn’t entirely serious, either.

“Can we do it?” he whispered. “With them watching?”

Varg chuckled in his ear while continuing to stroke him. “We’re watching them and they don’t seem to mind. Look at Beast, bending over so nicely for Willow.” The wolfshifter’s whisper was hot in his ear, pouring sweet dark honey in his veins.

“And he looks so strong, too,” he expressed his wonder.

Duril laughed and moved to face him. The healer cupped his cheek with his hand and kissed him. “I heard Varg saying something about how you don’t think I’m strong.”

“That’s not true,” Toru denied, but his words came out strangled as Varg increased the pace of his strokes.

Duril shook his head in mirth. “I don’t mind, but maybe you want someone stronger?”

He wasn’t allowed to say a word because Duril caught his lips in another searing kiss. Toru wanted to tell him that no, he didn’t want anyone else, but that would have been a lie, and there were no lies between them.

They didn’t have to push him any further. He understood as much, Duril expected him to do something, Varg just continued to tease him, now moving his hand slower.

“I want to have Varg,” he murmured when Duril finally allowed him to breathe.

Both his friends chuckled. “Then why don’t you do something about that?” the wolfshifter prodded him.

“But what about Duril?” Toru whispered.

“Hmm,” Varg purred in his ear, “how about allowing him to have a little bit of fun, as well?”

“What do you mean?” Toru asked.

“Just look.”

Toru followed Varg’s gesture and then he noticed Claw looking at them with hunger in his eyes. “Do you want him, Duril?” he asked, his voice deep and low. “Do you want the big strong bear?”

“Only if you let me,” Duril said softly and caressed his face. “No other way.”

“Then go and make him love you,” Toru said. Only days before, he would have never dreamed of thinking such a thing, let alone saying it.

They all wanted Claw with them, Toru realized. Even if the bear looked like he was a king among his people, even if this was his home and maybe, just maybe, he was tired of adventuring. No one was ever tired of that, he argued in his mind. And Duril, sweet Duril, could surely convince him to come along.

“Are you really sure?” Duril asked him.

Toru looked into the warm eyes he knew and loved so much. He was the one to plant his lips firmly on the other’s. “Yes. Show him what he’s going to miss if he doesn’t come with us.”

“Sneaky,” Varg purred in his ear.

“Duril can do it,” Toru replied.

The healer laughed and moved away, walking toward Claw with purpose. Willow and Beast had resumed their lovemaking like it was a natural thing, and Toru’s hungry eyes were filled with the sight of their passion. Soon, he didn’t know where to look. Duril took Claw by the hand and kissed him, while the bearshifter began to caress his chest and belly, going lower.

But that wasn’t the most maddening thing. Varg dragged him into the light and moved to stand in the same way Beast stood as the stocky bear presented his butt to Willow. Toru’s whole attention was trained on the wolfshifter’s arched back and his strong buttocks.

With newfound courage, he grabbed the two mounds of hard flesh and pushed them apart. That earned him a short, hitched breath from Varg right away, as well as a whistle of admiration from Willow.

He used his fingers to enter the enticing hole presenting itself, and the appreciative moan coming from his lover assured him that he was on the right path. As much as he had enjoyed watching Claw possessing Varg with a lover’s passion, he worried a little that he might fall short.

But not for long. Varg looked at him over his shoulder, enticing him, his dark eyes glowing with heat. “Do you think you have what it takes, kitty?” he challenged him. “Or do you need some help?”

“I don’t need any help,” Toru replied and pushed suddenly inside that strong body, startling a small, surprised yelp from Varg.

The wolfshifter should know better than to provoke him like that, he thought with a smile, as his manhood twitched happily inside that warm, strong body.



## Chapter Thirteen – Choices

Maybe he should have known better than to provoke his fierce kitty, Varg thought, as his breath caught in his chest. It was true that on very rare occasions he found himself in this sort of position, but it didn't mean that he believed it to be less pleasurable. Only lately, with Claw, he had rediscovered that part of himself, and Toru wanting him like this brought a surprising warmth to the center of his chest, and also tiny shivers of desire climbing up his spine and making him tremble all over.

Claw was an attentive lover, while also strong and demanding. However, his touch was tender, gentle, and slow, and he offered the finesse that came with a life of having participated in such encounters on many occasions. In complete contrast to all that stood Toru, who was volcanic, torrid, and sweet, all at the same time. While the hot appendage in his behind moved with relentless desire, Varg was happy to feel Toru glued to him and hear him whisper tender words of love.

"I thought you would only allow Claw to do this to you," Toru said while his breathing became deeper and labored. "I thought I was someone too young for you."

"Too young? I'd say, if the thing you're spearing me through with is any indication, that you're as far as you can be from that. You're a man, kitty, no matter how much I tease you," Varg replied.

Toru wrapped his arms around Varg's chest, holding on tightly. "Do you know how many times I've dreamed of having you like this?"

"Then maybe you should have approached me sooner." Varg was deeply moved by how easy it was for Toru to admit such things. They were so close to one another all of the time, it was unfair to allow unnecessary obstacles between them.

"I love Duril, and I love you," Toru admitted. "And I know that Claw loves you, too, and because of that, I love him, too. Is it really all right? For me, to want all of you?"

Varg laughed as much as he was able to while Toru was increasing the rhythm of his hips, moving in and out of him with the grace that defined him as a young tigershifter. "You're one of a kind, Toru. You are destined for great things. Having more than just one lover feels like a small reward for everything you're giving to your destiny."

Toru let out a small gasp. So far, he had seemed determined to keep his breathing steady and his passion bridled, but Varg's words appeared to reach him and give him just the inspiration needed to make him move faster and faster. Varg realized at that very moment he had come to love that sweet surrender, and it was even more precious because it came from Toru. He had always admired Toru's manhood, thick and long and apt for lovemaking, but now that he was experiencing it firsthand, he understood that he would demand this pleasure from his lover again and again.

He shouted as he spilled himself into the river waters. Not far from them, Beast was growling his own release, mumbling words of praise to his lover. Willow's back was covered by a sheen of sweat that made his skin glisten in the sun. Varg shuddered as the last ebbs of pleasure coursed through him. Too bad he couldn't become hard again so fast because watching Willow pinning Beast down so firmly was making all his senses tingle.

Toru slowed down. "You got your pleasure, mutt?" he teased Varg.

"Don't you dare laugh at me, kitty," Varg growled. "I'd say you were too good, but maybe I'll keep my mouth shut seeing how full of yourself you already are."

Toru snickered. He caressed Varg's belly and brushed his hand over his spent manhood. "You are full of me, though."

"I cannot believe what a brat you can be," Varg declared but he didn't mind it when Toru began to move inside him once more. "And I bet you would have had no trouble spilling your seed already if it were Duril instead of me."

"That's not true," Toru denied right away. "I like you just as much. But I just want to tease you more, because you always do that to me."

There was no point in denying it; Varg had to agree. Nonetheless, now he wished that Toru would just start moving faster and give him pleasure again. His own manhood was jutting up proudly, a sign that he didn't need as much time as he thought to be up for the challenge.

Toru seemed bent on showing him that he meant every word he said. His movements became ampler, and each time Varg sensed him plunging deep inside, he shivered and moaned in ecstasy.

"That's music to our ears," Claw called from the side. "I don't remember if I ever made you moan like that. Toru is making me feel jealous."

The bearshifter held Duril in his arms from behind, and they appeared to be still in a sort of a courtship phase, because the healer was averting his eyes and blushing while Claw was whispering something to him now.

"I'd let Toru take you, too, just so that you can see that no one can resist him, but I plan on making sure that he cannot move a limb after we're done here," Varg replied in the same teasing tone.

To his surprise, Toru let out a small gasp. "Do you think I could take the big strong bear?"

It was so delightful to hear innocent wonder in the young shifter's voice even after so much lovemaking. Varg had never doubted that Toru must have had plenty of lovers before them, and the innocence and joy of his companion, friend and lover touched him in ways that other things could not.

“I think you could take over the world if you put your mind to it, let alone that flea bag,” Varg said.

“I cannot believe he is still yapping his mouth when he should get busy moaning his pleasure while getting impaled by that glorious thing,” Claw commented. “Duril, what do you say we make sure Varg doesn’t have the gall to talk back?”

“How should we do that?” Duril asked.

Varg was quite sure that he didn’t particularly like the way Claw smirked while taking Duril by the shoulder and guiding him toward them.

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Duril didn’t think he would ever feel embarrassed again in his life, not after traveling with Varg and Toru, and he believed that their lovemaking was already adventurous and exciting as it was. However, the hushed words whispered in his ear by Claw did nothing for his nerves. His own manhood was stiff, a clear sign that even if he believed the naughty bearshifter’s suggestions to be a touch too daring, even for them, he was still very aroused although it seemed nothing to the naughty bearshifter.

He wondered if Varg would be all right with it. After all, they were going to demand a lot from him, strong, valiant shifter though he was. Duril couldn’t quite wrap his head around asking such a man to assume a submissive position, even if it was for pleasure. Nonetheless, Claw seemed to have no such qualms, so Duril went along.

His eyes grew wide when Claw grabbed his member and looked him in the eyes. “Has Varg ever offered to pleasure you like this, Duril?”

The hand on his manhood was rough and firm but pleasant. Duril lost his ability to speak for a couple of moments. The only thing that registered was how excruciatingly slow the movement up and down his shaft was. He would soon lose his mind over the not-so-veiled question on Claw’s tongue.

He didn’t have time to answer because Varg took his member from Claw’s hand and guided it to his lips.

“Varg is very good at that,” Toru said, his breathing deep and uneven. Duril had always admired the young tigershifter’s staying power, and he could tell that Varg was already enjoying it to the extreme.

All the ability to think was taken away from him by Varg’s hot tongue moving from the base of his shaft to the tip. Claw held him close, grounding him with his strong hands on his shoulders, so Duril tilted his head back and let out a soft moan of pure pleasure. “What about you?” he whispered.

“You three have been together for so long. It’s a sight for sore eyes to see you all together, enjoying yourselves like this,” Claw replied.

Duril didn’t know if the fresh air of The Quiet Woods was to blame, but he immediately felt a naughty part of him coming out to play. He too grabbed Claw’s manhood, darker and thicker than any he had seen in his life. “Maybe Varg would like to taste you, too,” he said softly.

Varg laughed and grabbed Claw’s member, as well. “Now, all I ask of you is to stay still because between you two and Toru, any wrong move and I’m going to lose my footing.”

Duril bit his lower lip and tried to keep his gasps of pleasure in, afraid that he might make those present change their opinion of him. But he couldn’t help watching Varg move between him and Claw, pleasuring them with his tongue and mouth.

It was more than he could hope for, yet he knew that Varg wanted the same thing, to keep Claw with them, and demonstrate that the bearshifter, too, could be part of the group.

“Have you ever witnessed a naughtier group of people?” Willow’s playful voice teased them from afar. “We’ll leave you to your pleasures,” he added, and Duril could tell, without looking, that the two bearshifters were getting out of the water and going about their business.

That left them alone, there in the moving waters of the river, and Duril felt a deeper sense of bonding with his lovers than ever before. Claw held him by the waist now and time and again, he nuzzled his neck and stole a lingering kiss.

“Isn’t Duril the sweetest?” Toru asked proudly.

Duril raised his eyes to meet Toru’s. He had half worried that the young tiger might get jealous of seeing him in another man’s arms, but Toru had grown a lot more trusting. Duril was thankful, but he needed to express his gratitude for it just as much. He reached for Toru and pulled him into a kiss. Varg wrapped his mouth around his manhood at that very moment, and he could no longer keep his ecstasy from bursting down the wolfshifter’s throat.

He continued to kiss Toru as the rush of his passion faded, feeling the other tense and shiver.

“I will give Varg my seed, too,” Toru whispered as he let go of Duril’s mouth.

“All of you should give me your seed,” Varg challenged them in a ragged voice.

Duril looked down, amazed by seeing Claw’s dark organ disappearing between Varg’s lips over and over. He caught hold of Claw’s chest and squeezed a nipple hard, eliciting a soft hiss from the bearshifter’s lips. Soon, they were all filling the sweet air with a mix of soft moans, groans, and loud shouts.

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Toru lay on the grass, wonderfully spent and happy. He had yet to bother to put any clothes on, and, truth be told, he didn't even think that he wanted to wear any ever again. This forest had to be magical indeed if someone as strong as Varg could take three men and turn them into quivering messes so easily.

"What are you grinning about, kitty?" Varg teased his nose with the long stem of a flower.

Toru brushed it away and sneezed. "You took all three of us," he said. "But you're so strong."

Varg rolled on top of him. "And? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're heavy," Toru complained, but in all truth, he didn't mind it at all. Varg's skin was hot from the sun and pleasant on his. "I didn't know you could be like that, too."

"Why act so surprised? After all, you told me how much you wanted me. And it's not like before you and Claw, I'd never been with others like that."

Toru looked into Varg's dark eyes. "You had? But how could they leave you once they knew?"

It was Varg's turn to be surprised. "Once they knew what?"

"That you can give them everything," Toru said. How could Varg not see it, the value of his gift?

Varg sighed and let his head rest in the crook of Toru's shoulder. "I suppose that it wasn't their destiny to see it. I must have been waiting for you all along."

"So, you do believe in destiny?" Toru asked. He had so many questions, still.

"I do because mine is for me to be with you and Duril."

"And Claw? Don't you believe that he is meant to be with us, too?"

Claw and Duril were also sunbathing, not far from them. After their lovemaking in the river, they had all been so satisfied that they chose to nap right there, by the riverside. However, they seemed to be asleep, so chances were that they couldn't overhear their conversation.

"I do, but it is his choice, after all," Varg said. "I've hinted about his coming with us, but I don't want to pressure him."

"Will we leave soon?" Toru asked. At times, he preferred to believe less in destiny if it meant only fighting evil in one place or another. Right now, as he lay there with Varg's delicious weight on top of him, the sun in the sky casting its warm rays over them, the forest around them a heaven for creatures of all sizes, he wanted to believe that the world was a safe place and not in need of saving, as every dark, ancient prophecy pointed out to him.

“Would you like to spend more time here, getting fat and making love from dawn till dusk?” Varg teased him.

Toru knew the answer to that one, the correct one, but he still bristled. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting that.”

Varg straightened up enough so they could look each other in the eyes. “No, there’s not,” he said quietly. “But do you really think, Toru, that if we close our eyes and pretend not to see, the evil we’re fighting would just go away? Maybe we don’t need to leave this place. But what if, one day, the evil reaches here? The Vranne saplings came here brought by the wind. They weren’t even evil, and yet, because of them, the wind spirit Shearah almost killed the forest.”

“Don’t talk like Elidias and Agatha, or even that old oak Amarant,” Toru protested. “If you want to teach me something important, how about you just say it?”

Varg caressed his cheek until the tigershifter seemed appeased. “I will. The evil that lurks under the surface, no one can tell when it will choose to come to light. And even those with no dark intentions in their souls can fall prey to it. It is our duty to follow you on the road to defeating it and purging the world of it. I know that the burden may feel like too much at times. That is why you have us. We will always be with you, Toru, and we will walk with you to the end of the world and beyond if that’s needed. Never doubt us. But never doubt yourself either.”

Toru blinked a couple of times to stop the itching sensation at the inner corners of his eyes. “I am strong,” he said slowly.

Varg continued to caress him. “I know. Why did you think I bent for you so easily? I don’t do it for just anyone.”

Toru felt his chest swelling with pride. “Then that means that you believe in me?”

“Should I offer my ass again just so that you believe me when I say it?” Varg asked. “You know me better than that, kitty.”

Toru wrapped his arms around Varg and sighed in contentment. “I know you. And Duril, too. For you I’d go anywhere and fight any evil.”

“That’s good to know, kitty, that’s good to know.” Varg’s words floated to him as if from a far distance as sleep took him in its gentle arms.

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They were sharing a meal, and Claw had chosen to sit by his side. Varg nodded at him and scooted over to make enough room. Meals were a very social thing here, at The Quiet Woods, and they reminded Varg of his pack. It wasn’t an easy feeling, to remember them, the way they had been, his brothers and sisters. He had a new tribe now, the traveling kind, but he still thought of them.

“I heard what you told Toru,” Claw said in a serious voice. “You are a wise one, Varg.”

“Thank you. But why so serious? You’re among your people,” Varg said and gestured around. “I feel like I’m monopolizing you when everyone else would like to spend more time with you.” He had noticed a few envious looks thrown their way especially from the young shifters of the forest. Claw had a commanding presence and good looks. Varg would bet the fur on his back that a lot of those present hoped to have a chance with the handsome bear. Clearly, he, along with Duril and Toru, were the only ones stopping them from making a move.

“I am, but when I say that I heard what you told Toru, I’m not talking only about how you encouraged him to embrace his destiny.”

“Ah,” Varg murmured noncommittally. He waited for Claw to continue. He had said the truth about not wanting to pressure the bearshifter into tagging along. They only had a world of pain and suffering to offer. Or maybe they had to offer a lot more than just that, but the most important question was whether what hung in the balance was enough to justify the bad.

“You want me with you.”

“Yes,” Varg replied. “But you belong here.” He gestured around, at the many happy faces that surrounded them. “I understand if you choose to stay. You’ve been without them for so long, and they are so thrilled that you are here. Willow and Beast, and not only them, they missed you.”

“Yes, I know that. I talked to them at length last night. And even though Willow threatened to make me swallow a panhandle, and Beast growled something I didn’t quite understand, in the end, they understood.”

Varg held his breath for a moment. “They understood what?”

Claw let out a fake groan. “Puppy, I swear. I wish you had made a little more of a show about how much you want me to come with you. So far, you’ve only made a case for the friends I have here, as if I didn’t have friends in you, Toru, and Duril, too.”

Varg grinned and put down his plate. He used both arms to pull Claw into a rough hug. “Are you saying that you’re coming with us?”

“It’s not every day I’m offered the chance to play a part in saving the world. Even if it’s going to be a small contribution, I don’t mind having the bragging rights,” Claw said and hugged him back. “And the people here, they won’t go anywhere, I know them.”

“Who knows?” Varg said and laughed. “One day, you chose to leave it all behind in favor of a life of adventure.”

“Yes, but there’s no one else like me,” Claw pointed out. “Especially here, at The Quiet Woods. I can be quite boisterous and loud. Not quiet at all.” He wiggled his eyebrows comically.

Varg shook his head and chuckled. "I'm sure that's enough to make you unfit for your place of birth. And I still don't understand this thing about them being quiet. Everyone here is pretty loud. And boisterous, just like you," he teased the bearshifter.

"That might be something you'll have to ask them about. Only I won't let you because I don't want you to seduce any other shifters around. One representative for one place on the map, I'd say. I'm the one from The Quiet Woods."

"And Shroudharbor," Varg reminded him. "Let's not forget that's where we picked you up, flea bag."

"And oh, how happy I am that you did. But I'm serious about you not spending too much time around here, as some might just be bent on stealing you."

Varg quirked an eyebrow and then looked around. "I think you've got it all wrong, flea bag. These people all want you as their partner. They must believe that you are on the path to become their king."

Claw snorted. "You can be so blind at times. I heard them whispering about you. Some rather unsettling things, even."

"Unsettling? Such as?"

Claw leaned in and whispered in his ear. "Such as some young fillies talking about how they wouldn't mind your strong seed in their wombs."

Varg gulped and looked around. A group of young female shifters were whispering among themselves and, when his eyes came to rest on them, they stopped their chatter and burst into laughter.

"Oh, I see," he said slowly. "I'm afraid I would be a terrible disappointment, then."

Claw chuckled. "You don't know how determined the shifter tribes can be around here."

"But they're not wolves," Varg tried to argue.

"No, but trust me, that hasn't stopped them before."

"Really? But I thought no one visited here."

Claw squeezed the back of his neck and laughed. "You are so easy to tease. But don't worry. If anyone makes an attempt on your innocence, I'll be sure to keep them away. After all, you belong to me."

Varg grunted and took a long sip from his wine cup. "Thank goodness for that."

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Duril allowed Toru to examine the silver flower on the side of his chest. The tigershifter traced the shape with his fingers, without saying anything. “Are you going to be able to talk to other things? Maybe like the water? Or the mountains?” Toru asked in an excited voice.

“I don’t know. At this point, I don’t dare even think I can foresee what’s going to happen in the near future. Do you realize, Toru, that after we left Whitekeep, we all turned into our better selves? Never before would I have thought I’d become a speaker to the trees, let alone the wind.”

“That will come in handy, I bet. I mean, the wind can carry whispers to us from all over the world.”

Duril nodded. “I didn’t even think of that, but you’re right. That means that we might not have to feel left in the dark when things happen beyond our reach.”

“It’s like having messengers everywhere that can let us know when the evil we’re chasing appears.”

“Are you eager for another battle?”

Toru fell pensive for a while. “It’s manifesting all over the place, right? And we beat it every time, at Fairside, and Shroudharbor, and The Great Barren. But it’s not like it has disappeared. We just chased it away. What do you think that means, Duril? What if I never get to grab it by its tail, or whatever it has that it can be grabbed by?”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Duril offered his honest opinion. “If this is your destiny, and I believe it is, then that means that you will have to confront it face to face at some point. It is possible that each time you defeated it in all of those places, even at Whitekeep, when you went against those rocs, you cornered it, made it flee to other places. The world is not endless. Sooner or later, this evil you’re going up against will end up with no place left to run to.”

“You might be right,” Toru admitted. “Only that it is not only I who defeated it, but you, too. And Varg. And now, Claw, as well.”

“Yes, we have quite the tribe,” Duril said. “And Varg is so happy that Claw has decided to come with us.”

“Yes, so happy that it makes me think that he might like Claw more than us,” Toru confessed in a quiet voice while his eyes darted around to see if there were any eavesdroppers about.

“What makes you think that?” Duril knew better than to contradict Toru directly.

“You know, they are always teasing each other. Whoever Varg teases the most must be his favorite.”

“Just don’t let Varg hear you talk like that. You might end up having to fight him with a stick. As for teasing, he might then tease you so much that you’d regret that you opened your mouth.”

Toru seemed to consider his words. “I guess you’re right. I won’t say a thing. And I’ll have fun when Varg teases Claw and gets teased back.”

“That’s a very good plan,” Duril agreed. “Now let’s go and meet Shearah. She told me there was something she wanted to share with all of us.”

“Is it about where we’re going to head next?” Toru asked. “Does she know where we have to go?”

“No, not exactly, but she knows more about what lies north and south of here, and we will have to make a choice.”

“I see,” Toru agreed. “You don’t even have to talk to the wind so much, Duril, see? Shearah is already like a tiny messenger that can tell you about other places.”

“I guess she is, but let’s not call her tiny to her face. I have a feeling that she wasn’t particularly fond of being turned into a bug.”

Toru snickered. “But she was a bug. Even a cute bug, and if I tell her that, she might like it.”

“Try it at your own risk,” Duril advised him, but a small smile was tugging at his lips already.

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Toru was glad to meet Varg and Claw on their way to see Shearah. Every witch on the face of Eawirith seemed to prefer seclusion, and the one from The Quiet Woods was no different. They had to walk through a good part of the forest to reach her house, made inside the trunk of an old tree. Toru wanted to draw the others’ attention to that particular detail and say something about how the wind spirit couldn’t be gone forever from those parts, but then he remembered that the young witch was somehow a part of that, too.

Shearah sat on an overgrown root and was stirring a pot, all witch-like. Unlike Agatha who made only foul concoctions that smelled like a wild beast’s behind, the witch of The Quiet Woods appeared to have better sense when it came to her creations. From her pot, a pleasant herbal smell wafted to them, and Toru scrunched up his nose. As much as that thing didn’t smell like the weird parts of just as strange animals, he still didn’t want to try it.

“Come closer, travelers,” Shearah said lively. “I was just making tea. Would you like a cup?”

“Only if it’s necessary for you to tell us where we should go from here,” Toru said promptly.

Everyone laughed. Shearah joined them and shook her head. “No, it’s not necessary, and I won’t bother you with boiled leaves, fearless tiger.”

Duril graciously accepted a cup, and Varg and Claw did the same. Toru sat on the ground, his feet crossed with his arms around his knees and looked at Shearah. It was so strange to see her, all flesh and bones, and it was still a tough thing for Toru to wrap his head around the fact that she was so young. Was she less wise than Agatha because of that?

“I wish I could tell you what your next destination should be,” Shearah began. “But all I can tell you is what I know about the places you will find when you travel from here.”

“So, the choice is, ultimately, ours,” Varg pointed out.

“Yes,” Shearah confirmed. “I don’t believe that there’s a wrong or correct choice. This world belongs to you to explore and make it yours, so I’m only here to offer you my knowledge.”

“Tell us about these places,” Toru encouraged her. “We will be the ones to choose.” With so many friends by his side, he felt stronger and more confident about whatever would follow.

Shearah then began. “To the north, if you keep to the long road until it’s not a road anymore, you will find the Scarlet Peaks.”

“That place with the hermit?” Varg asked. “Claw knows a few things about it.”

“Everyone here knows,” Shearah confirmed. “And that hermit might have some important answers, as long as you ask the right questions.”

“How do we know what the right questions are?” Toru asked.

“That I cannot tell you. It is very cold there. You, shifters, won’t have trouble climbing the steep roads that will take you to the top, where the hermit lives. But Duril, you might have to get warmer clothes,” Shearah said.

“I am also an orc,” Duril replied. “My kin thrives in the cold nights of The Great Barren. I don’t believe that is a concern.”

“Very well. If you feel you already have questions to ask, you might as well go there first. However, I must warn you that the road is treacherous, and you might encounter many strange beasts along the way.”

“We’re not afraid of fighting,” Toru said again. “What other places could we go to from here?”

“There’s only one other that is as important. Scercendusa, the heart of Eawirith.”

Toru nodded as he heard the name of the place. “Is there a king living there? With a crown and a throne?”

“Eawirith is not an empire or a kingdom, but you will find plenty of people that like to believe Scercendusa is a seat of power. And there’s a man there, indeed, who rules over the place, and to whom many choose to go and ask difficult questions.”

“So, there are two old men who can answer our questions,” Toru said promptly.

“Yes,” Shearah confirmed. “This is your choice.”



## Chapter Fourteen – Dangers of Different Kinds

Toru pondered while looking at his traveling companions, one by one. Although the thick coat on his back protected him from the cold, he had grown up in the jungle and preferred it. Also, Shearah had said that Duril might suffer if they were to take the path to the Scarlet Peaks and he didn't like that idea at all. As much as he was curious about what a hermit stranded on the tallest peak of the tallest mountain in Eawirith – as the young witch told them – could do all day long to fill his hours, he wasn't keen on battling strange beasts along the way. Plus, since so many people could already say they had been there and seen the hermit, it felt to Toru like there was only one choice.

“We'll go to Scercendusa,” he said, bringing his hands together and linking his fingers.

“Spoken like a true leader,” Varg commended him and patted him on the back.

Toru felt a bit guilty. “Do you want to go see the hermit? But I think they will have many marvelous foods in Scercendusa, right?”

Varg caught his right ear and tugged at it slightly. “That's not the most important thing that should be on our minds.”

“It's one of them, and it's my destiny anyway,” Toru replied petulantly. “And my destiny is to eat many tasty foods, or else it's someone else's destiny.”

“Fair enough,” Varg admitted. “Now, it wouldn't hurt to hear a little more about Scercendusa. Shearah, what can you tell us about the place? I've only heard of it, and it looks like Claw is the only one of us who got somewhat close to it, without ever visiting.”

“You might think that going to the heart of the world would spare you from a great amount of danger,” Shearah said. “Danger can play dress up wearing many different garments.” Her gravelly voice made Toru perk up his ears. By how the others leaned slightly forward, he could tell that they were also all eyes and ears, eager to hear the young witch tell them about that – for now – mysterious place.

“We are made for it,” Claw said and closed his fist. “Regardless of how it may present itself, I'd say that our unsullied hearts will see through its deceit.”

Toru smiled. It was good to have allies, and Claw's words went straight to his heart.

“That is your foundation, the goodness in your souls,” Shearah said and tipped her head slightly in confirmation. “Yet, the unlikely nature of the evil you've confronted so far makes me believe that it can use guile and treachery to hide deep within the very souls of men.”

Toru groaned. “If I didn't know you were a witch, I would be so mad at you right now, Lighty.”

They all guffawed like children at his reprimand. Even Shearah joined them. “It was nice of you to give me a name.”

“While you were a tiny bug,” Toru hurried to add. Duril tapped his hand in warning, but he lived for a good challenge.

Shearah’s big luminous eyes flashed at him, but she laughed gently. “I should have known you would be the kind to tease whenever you had the chance. But why would you be mad at me, Toru?”

“Because you talk so complicated,” Toru pointed out. “Why don’t you say what clothes you think the evil will dress in so that we can recognize it and strike it where it stands?”

“If it were so simple, you would be back home by now, telling the stories of your adventures. And that’s not just my witch talk,” Shearah explained. “Duril told me at great length about your travels and what you’ve had to go against so far. I cannot pretend that I am as wise as the witch from Whitekeep, Agatha, or the librarian from Shroudharbor, Elidias, but I will try to prepare you for your travels to Scercendusa as much as I can.”

“Our decision is made,” Duril said. “We all stand by Toru’s decision to travel to Scercendusa, so it would help us a great deal if you told us what you know of the place.”

Shearah nodded and closed her eyes, searching her memories. “Eawirith is a far and wide place. From coast to coast, you will encounter places inhabited by hardworking people, blessed by the weather, as well as harsh winters in the north, where the look in men’s and women’s eyes is as dark as the clouded sky above. And you will also find large stretches of land on which nothing grows.”

“Like the Great Barren,” Duril said. “It’s not true that nothing grows there, though.”

Shearah didn’t mind the interruption. “There are worse places than the desert of Zukh Kalegh.”

“Worse than that?” Toru expressed his wonder at her words. “What could be worse than having to eat snake stew all day long?”

“Maybe having nothing to eat whatsoever,” Varg intervened.

Toru scrunched up his nose. “I think that would be bad, indeed.”

All eyes turned toward Shearah, encouraging her silently to continue. She obliged right away. “As I was saying, Eawirith is a large place. So for someone to claim that one city is above the entire continent would be farfetched, hollow. People everywhere, however, always feel the need for something to hold all things together, even the threads of their destiny. Even more so that, perhaps.” She paused for a moment, and they waited patiently. “Scercendusa is an old and new place, and many believe it is the past of Eawirith, its present, and its future, all in one. Anyone

who wants to carve for themselves a life like no other would be wise to travel there and see all the wonders of the world brought together under the gentle hand of the city's domestikos."

"Domestikos?" Toru asked.

"The local ruler," Shearah explained.

"The old man who could answer our questions?" Toru inquired further.

"Yes," Shearah confirmed. "To say that Scercendusa is the heart of an empire would be wrong because that would mean that the man sitting at its highest peak of power should be called an emperor or a king. Scercendusa's domestikos would be the first to contradict you if you addressed him in such a fashion."

"But there are places all over the world where men and women assume the roles of kings and queens," Duril said.

The healer must have learned of such places while toiling inside Elidias's monumental library, bent over old texts and straining his eyes. Toru had only heard fairytales of royal beings and always thought of them as creatures from distant lands that he would never meet face to face. This domestikos Shearah was talking about appeared to be the kind of man who would fit that role perfectly, no matter what the young witch said. Toru felt rightfully curious about the place and its ruler, and his thirst for adventure was growing fiercer by the moment.

"That is seen as self-indulgent and nothing more," Shearah said.

"Seen by who?" Toru asked. "The domestikos of Scercendusa?"

Shearah confirmed with a nod of the head. "He might strike you at first glance as a humble and pious man, but do not let his appearance fool you. At the heart of the world, he rules with a fist of iron, maybe cleverly draped in velvet, but as strong and unforgiving as you might expect from someone who's dealt ruthlessly with anyone believing themselves powerful enough to conquer the fortress."

"Have the kings and queens of the world tried to conquer Scercendusa?" Toru asked.

"Indeed they have. The glory of the entirety of Eawirith can be admired in the majestic halls of the palace where the domestikos lives, in the streets paved with polished golden rocks, in the many prestigious works displayed in the libraries of the city, or the paintings hanging on the walls of the richest people's houses. I could speak of Scercendusa for hours, and I would barely scratch the surface of the tales there are to tell."

"Do you think the evil we've been fighting chose to hide there next?" Toru asked, convinced that he couldn't be the only one to wonder about it.

“It would be a good place for something capable of such malice to do so,” Shearah said, confirming his suspicions. “That doesn’t mean, of course, that it is the truth. You’ve followed your heart so far, and it hasn’t lied to you.”

Toru wasn’t sure if it was his heart wanting for them to travel to Scercendusa or just his curiosity. All the places he had traveled to so far were mostly hamlets and small towns. Shroudharbor had been the most grandiose he had seen, and if the heart of Eawirith was a lot more impressive than that, he needed to see it.

“We can always go to see the hermit at the Scarlet Peaks later, can’t we?” he asked.

“If time is on your side, without a doubt,” Shearah said. “However, all choices belong to you, and I cannot put myself in your shoes so that I can tell you what to do. I’m merely your guide at this point of your journey, and I’m honored by it, nonetheless.”

Toru traded a glance with Duril. The healer nodded and took his hand. It could be that he wasn’t the only one eager to see the many beauties of Scercendusa and to meet the domestikos ruling it with an iron fist, as the young witch said.

“How come you know so many things about that place?” Varg asked.

“I’m made from fragments of the wind, remember?” Shearah offered them a congenial smile. “Even if I stay here at The Quiet Woods, every traveler down to the tiniest speck of dust, speaks into my ear.”

“Duril can understand what the wind says, too,” Toru said with self-importance and let go of Duril’s hand only so that he could sneak one arm around his shoulders.

“I know that very well,” Shearah said with a sly smile.

“She helped me on that path,” Duril explained and touched his chest where Toru had seen the silver flower.

“I know, but still, someone has to say it,” Toru insisted.

“Will we be able to meet the domestikos?” Varg asked a much more sensible question. “It’s fair to assume that he must meet many people every day.”

“That much is true,” Shearah confirmed. “I’m afraid, however, that I don’t have any advice on how you could gain entrance to see him. People from all over Eawirith seek an audience with him, and it is nothing unusual for many of them to wait for months until they end up being received.”

“Months?” Toru pursed his lips and frowned. “Does the hermit at the Scarlet Peaks also have many people trying to get to him and ask him questions?”

“I doubt it,” Shearah replied. “After all, the road there is challenging and dangerous.”

“But you said that Scercendusa is also dangerous in other ways.”

“Indeed. It doesn’t mean that people wouldn’t back down from one kind of danger and hurry into the arms of another.”

Toru scratched his head. “Ah, that’s so hard to understand.”

“We will have to gain an audience with him one way or another.” Varg crossed his arms and nodded thoughtfully. “As any city of the magnitude deemed worthy to be called the heart of the world, it must have an army of well-off citizens that might have a quest or two for people like us.”

“That is good thinking, master wolf,” Shearah agreed. “On the upside, you won’t be seen as peculiar the moment you set foot there. With so many people traveling there from all corners of Eawirith, you won’t draw any unnecessary attention to yourselves.”

“Is it important to be as inconspicuous as possible?” Duril inquired.

“Without a doubt. The evil you’re telling me about manifests in various ways. Surely, learning of your presence, if it is there, it will have time to lay traps and try to catch you when you’re the least aware.”

“And usually, being ordinary in a place like that means that we can move without eliciting unwanted attention from the city’s guardians,” Claw said.

“What do you mean by that?” Toru asked, curious of the bearshifter’s words. “Are the guardians bad people?”

“They’re in charge of protecting the domestikos down to their lowest ranks,” Shearah explained. “The ruler of the city is often at the receiving end of attempts on his life. The guardians’ most important role is to be vigilant and keep such unfortunate happenings away from their esteemed commander.”

“The domestikos is also the guardians’ commander?” Toru asked.

“He is the head of the administration, the commander of both the guardians and the troops stationed outside the city walls, and the holder of absolute truth. Any belief in anything but what he allows the people to place their trust in is squashed in its infancy.”

“He sounds like a tyrant,” Duril commented.

“People believe in him. The momentary prosperity of the city is the work of his hands.”

“How old is he?” Toru asked.

“Past his prime, but nowhere near a grave,” Shearah offered. “They say his wit is as sharp as a blade, and that his eyes, although clouded by age, can still see well enough for him to shoot down a gray-headed albatross in mid-air with his bow.”

“He seems to be an extraordinary man, indeed,” Varg said. “We should be wise to tread lightly, without a doubt. I don’t believe that walking in there and telling everyone who cares to listen that we are on a quest to save the world would endear us to him.”

“Nothing is truer than that,” Shearah agreed.

“What’s his name?” Toru asked.

“Ewart Kona, but you would be wise to address him as Enlightened One,” Shearah replied.

“A notch better than Your Majesty or Your Highness,” Varg commented dryly.

Shearah laughed. “You might have a point, master wolf. Don’t forget, however, that the domestikos has every reason to demand to be addressed in such a fashion. He has saved Scercendusa on numerous occasions, and he has been in power for the last fifty years.”

“Fifty years? He must be very old.”

“That, again, is something that you had better not say to his face,” Shearah advised. “He doesn’t consider himself a frail man, and he prefers simple dress and the quiet of his personal chapel when the matters of the city don’t require his presence.”

“I will see this old man,” Toru decided. “And he will answer all our questions.” Only then, he realized that he didn’t precisely know what those were. He would have to ask Duril, Varg, and Claw later. The call of the road was slowly taking root in his heart again.

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“Shearah recommends us to be cautious,” Varg began after their meeting with the young witch of The Quiet Woods. “It would be wise if we decided on what our plan is once we get there.”

He had noticed Toru stealing glances at him with questions in his eyes. The tigershifter had chosen their next destination, but it appeared that he didn’t know what to do with all the things Shearah had told them.

“That’s true,” Claw said with a short nod. “We must be prepared for the maddening crowds on the streets of Scercendusa.”

“How do we prepare? Should we fight them?” Toru asked. “I can fight anyone.”

“That would surely land us in the able hands of the guardians,” Claw replied. “When I speak about maddening crowds, I don’t mean only those that go about their business in a place deemed as the heart of the world. Many will move in shadows and greet us with sugar on their tongues.”

Varg had seen his fair share of would-be nobles in his travels. Without a doubt, he could barely imagine a city built on ambitions and arousing the envy of everyone across the continent. It was an idea that he didn’t want to express out loud; no matter how equipped they had so far seemed to be for a life of adventures, it was hard to tell if they would be able to move through the meandering intentions of a place like Scercendusa with the same ease. Toru was right to prefer enemies that went straight at him, not bothering for a moment with schemes and hidden intentions.

“I believe that there are many places where we will be able to search for answers,” Duril joined the conversation. “Scercendusa abounds in libraries where precious tomes are kept; Shearah told us as much.”

“But what should our questions be?” Toru asked. “Even if we get to meet the old man, what do we ask him?”

“One thing we should inquire about,” Varg began, “is anything that he might know of the destiny you are to fulfill, Toru. We know that another tiger, in another time, must have saved the world from evil. Learning from what he did to succeed in his quest would be very helpful. Also, the nature of the evil we’ve been going against for so long still eludes us. Since Scercendusa is as old as Eawirith, as some people say, we might find knowledge there that would help us.”

He knew that Toru couldn’t be bothered too much with complicated matters, but the rest of them were there, by his side, to carefully pull the thread out of the tangled mess of destiny and hand it to him so that he could do the work he was ordained to do.

“We must be very clever and humble about it,” Claw said. “Shearah knows why she stresses the importance of caution. We fought the toughest beasts of Zukh Kalegh and shifter murderers, and yet, I tell you, my friends, that we are not very well equipped to face what waits for us in Scercendusa. What would the ruler of the world, as humble as he might pretend to be, think about having a contender to his power?”

“I’m not looking to overthrow him,” Toru said. “I just need to find the evil if it’s there and defeat it.”

Things were that simple for someone pure like Toru. Varg knew, however, why Claw insisted on taking steps to assure their success. The bearshifter had been trapped in the labyrinth under the house of merchants in Shroudharbor for centuries after falling prey to the machinations of people who didn’t care to confront others fairly. He also had to know a lot about sugarcoated tongues and whatnot. Varg wanted to listen more to what he had to say.

“Even if we tell him that you have no ambition to overthrow him, it might not sit well with him,” Claw explained. “Ewart Kona has the experience of a lifetime by his side, but not for one moment, should you believe that it has made him wise beyond the limitations and liabilities of any human being.”

“What is Claw saying?” Toru asked Varg directly.

“The domestikos is used to having absolute power over a city that is as absolute as a city on the face of the world can be. That is the kind of power that corrupts even the strongest spirits. Shearah tells us that he is wise, but also cunning. He offers those who meet him a gentle smile and a kind word, but there is also blood on his hands.”

“We have blood on our hands, too,” Toru intervened. “Does it make us bad people?”

“No, it doesn’t. We fought to save ourselves and others. But there are conflicts, and then other conflicts. Not all justify a bloodbath,” Varg continued. “Shearah was right to believe that it would take her days and nights to tell us everything she knew about Scercendusa and its ruler. One thing is clear, the way I see it. We must play the old man’s game so that he knows we follow the same rules. It’s our best shot at making him believe that we’re not interested in taking over his ephemeral power.”

“How do we do that?” Toru asked, craning his neck to look into Varg’s eyes as they walked through the forest. “I don’t know how to talk to people who sit on thrones.”

“I doubt he sits on a throne, given the way he likes to make people believe in his humility and piety.”

Claw agreed with a low grunt. “That is a very dangerous man, someone who believes that the truth and all that is just are his heaven-given right.”

“But why?” Toru insisted. “He sees to his destiny, and we should see to ours. And we have yet to learn whether he is a bad or a good man.”

Varg knew Toru was right. But it was the duplicity of humans Shearah had tried to warn them about by telling them what she knew of the place and its domestikos. Without a doubt, Ewart Kona wanted nothing but the best for Scercendusa. His love for a city that had stood the tests of time and continues to do so while offering help and solace to people everywhere, as well as an ideal to which they could reach with their hands and grab, had to be unrivaled. Other domestikoi before him had enjoyed shorter, more tumultuous reigns, and while the city endured, their names had not. It was unlikely that a man who had been threatened, poisoned, speared and held at a blade’s mercy would be too ingratiating with a group of strangers claiming to be the ones come to save the world from an evil with no name. From there to considering that they only wanted to grab the seat of power from underneath him was a pebble’s throw.



“I should have chosen to go to the Scarlet Peaks,” Toru said, without a doubt considering Varg’s silence some sort of accusation. “Can I take it back?”

Varg grabbed him by one shoulder and squeezed hard enough for the young tiger to understand that they were all by his side. “Should we back down from a challenge, only because we’ve never met the same danger before? That’s not like you, kitty.”

“No, it’s not. But Scercendusa sounds like a horrible place,” Toru argued. “I bet they put poison in their tea at sunrise.”

They all laughed at that.

“I doubt they do such a thing. Aren’t we getting a bit too scared in the face of what we imagine of the place? We have yet to arrive there and see this domestikos with our own eyes. He could be a nice old man who won’t mind telling us a thing or two about the history of the world, a history he must know a lot better than many other people on the face of Eawirith.” Varg smiled as he saw Toru’s face lightening.

“You’re right, Varg,” he admitted. “We should face this challenge and see if there is at least any good food in Scercendusa.”

“A noble quest, indeed,” Varg admitted.

Duril and Claw joined in. “It wouldn’t be a place worth talking about if they didn’t have at least some cakes of renown,” the bearshifter said.

“And I’ll have some smoked meat with us that I’ll keep for you just in case we find ourselves going hungry,” Duril added.

That appeared enough to convince Toru that his first choice was indeed, the right one. Still, Varg couldn’t hide himself from worry, not entirely. They had faced throngs of orcs in the Great Barren, armies of darkness at Fairside, and the malice of the evil spirits in Shroudharbor. And yet, the sweet tongues of those experienced in weaving the destinies of many made him believe that the toughest challenge lay before them.

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By now, they should have been used to taking their farewells. Duril somehow doubted that it would ever be something he would become good at, and he didn’t think that only of himself, but also of his companions. However, the most difficult burden lay on Claw’s shoulders, as the bearshifter had to say goodbye to the friends he had just regained from the hands of an unbearable fate.

“We know what you’re here for,” Willow said as soon as they approached the encampment they had put together only the day before.

Claw walked slowly to meet his childhood friend, leaving Toru, Varg, and Duril a bit behind. He had already told them that he had to be the one to deal with their parting, and it looked like the proud bearshifter wasn't hesitating to march forward and meet challenges of his own. "You do? Where is Beast?"

"Having a little nap for the pleasure of his belly," Willow replied and smiled. "Don't you fret about him. Now tell us why you'd have us worried about you again."

Claw sighed and rubbed his furrowed eyebrows. Now, he was standing face to face with Willow, and Duril, just like the others, waited a few feet apart, not wanting to intrude on a conversation that wouldn't be easy, not even for someone as fearless as Claw.

"The Quiet Woods have a new beginning," Claw began.

"Indeed they have, thanks to you," Willow countered and crossed his arms. "With all due respect to your friends, what makes you think that we'd be willing to let you go after you forgot about us for so long?"

"I never forgot you," Claw replied.

Duril was watching the two speakers, his heart going out to both. To have such friends who cared that you were planning to leave them behind, it wasn't something easy to deal with.

"But this is my path now," the bearshifter continued.

"I knew you would say something like that," Willow admitted. "From a young age, you were a wanderer, more so than anyone else growing up here."

"So you understand," Claw said with a small smile.

"Not quite." Willow stared at him long and hard, and then looked at their group. "Although I must say that I understand some of it. We cannot compete with the likes of your new friends, can we?"

"It is nothing like that," Duril began speaking before he could help himself. "We want to thank you for your hospitality, but Claw belongs to us, too. And he will come back to you one day."

"As soon as we defeat the evil that wants to eat up the world," Toru rushed to the rescue in his own way. "Then, we'll come here to eat steak and even some of that sauce you make."

Willow laughed gently and shook his head. Then, he suddenly flicked Claw's nose in a playful manner. "You didn't dare to come here alone and face our begging and tears, did you?"

Claw responded with a grin of his own. "I knew you'd be too proud to cry and go on a bended knee to ask me to stay."

“Maybe he is, but I’m not.” Beast surprised everyone by barreling out of the hut behind them and rushing toward Claw. Seemingly effortlessly, he pushed Claw to the ground and straddled him, ready to fight. The bearshifter offered no opposition and laughed instead of fighting back. Beast growled, low in his throat.

“That is nothing like begging or crying,” Claw pointed out. “Wrestling me to the ground might help you a little, but I still plan on going, Beast.”

“It’s that old call, isn’t it? That voice in your ear telling you that you must be destined for greater things than just living a happy worry-free life here at The Quiet Woods,” Beast said and didn’t let go of Claw.

“Claw is not conceited,” Duril protested.

Varg put a hand on his shoulder. “Allow his friends to make fun of him a little. Just look at them, smirking at how good they got us, making us fall for their little show.”

Willow and Beast exchanged a glance and then burst into laughter. “It was worth it, seeing how guilty you all looked about taking Claw from us.” Willow helped Beast to his feet, and then Claw. “We know him too well to ask him to stay if he got it in his head that he must go. That didn’t go that well when he headed to that awful place with merchants. But we have a different feeling about your lot.”

“What do you mean by that?” Toru inquired, looking ready to battle Willow for Claw.

It was Duril’s turn to hold the feisty tigershifter back, just as Varg had done with him earlier. “I believe that he is saying that he can trust us.”

“Yes, we trust you to bring this fur ball back to us, once you don’t need him anymore.”

“We’re always going to need him,” Toru spoke his mind without giving it a second thought.

Willow’s clever eyes roamed over them. “You are welcome to come back with him. We have enough room for everyone, so you don’t have to worry about that. Especially since he and Varg seemed joined at the hip.”

Everyone laughed at that. Duril observed how Varg traded a soft look, full of unspoken words, with Claw. Yes, they must have all seen it by now, the way those two looked at each other, and his friends, who had known him for so long, couldn’t miss it.

“We only ask that when you do bring him back, he’s not patched up too badly,” Beast chimed in. “He pretends he’s a tough one, but he complains and moans just to be babied.”

“He does?” Toru didn’t hide his wonder at that.

Beast grinned. “Yeah, but he hasn’t shown you that face yet, has he? That’s like him, first get under your skin, and only after that, show you what he’s truly made of.”

“I don’t believe that,” Toru said in an outraged tone. “Claw is strong and he never cries.”

Duril wrapped his arm around his friend. “I wasn’t going to tell you this, but I think Beast and Willow are just trying to tease us a little.”

“They are?” Toru didn’t seem ready to accept it.

Willow walked over to him and surprised him by kissing him on both cheeks. “A little. Take good care of our friend, Toru. I will never forgive you if you don’t.”

Toru puffed out his chest. “Leave it to me. He’ll get back to you fatter than he left.”

That was as good a promise as any. Duril was willing to bet that Willow took it at its true value, as well.

## Chapter Fifteen – His Ambition

They were traveling southward again, and the scent of the wind was changing. Duril was thankful for the silver flower imprinted on his skin by Shearah's small magical hand. It was a thrilling experience to hear what the wind said, here and there, but it wasn't something he could completely share with his companions. For a while, as they were still in The Quiet Woods, he had thought this new ability of his might make him somewhat selfish, but Shearah had been quick to assure him that maybe it just made him a little foolish. Throughout his life, he had had very few things he considered his own. As a child, he had only known the lack of them and never an abundance. And now, here he was, a plethora of friends by his side, and in charge of particular kinds of magic, like nothing his kin had ever dreamed of. Duril didn't dare to think of himself as unique, although Toru faithfully assured him that, more than anything, he was one of a kind, and for that reason and not only for it, he was much loved.

Claw suggested that they should not make it a leisurely trip to Scercendusa. There were many hamlets and even quaint little towns stretching along the path to the heart of the world, and Toru often demanded that they stop for a while only so they could sample the foods offered by each of them.

Duril believed that there was a certain wisdom in the way Claw urged them to march on. Could it be that Shearah had shared with him something that she hadn't wanted to tell all of them? Taking advantage of a moment when Toru was chasing Varg around and they were laughing and teasing each other, he fell in line beside the bearshifter.

"Can I ask you something?"

Claw looked sideways at him and he looked a little guilty. That was enough to strike Duril as odd. A short nod encouraged him to go ahead with his question.

"Why do we have to hurry so much to get to Scercendusa?"

Claw threw him another strange look, but then he sighed. "Let's say that I doubt you would believe me if I told you that there's no time to waste."

"We all know that. Still, a little break here and there couldn't hurt. After all, even shapeshifters can get tired," Duril pointed out.

"True. And shapeshifters might also get hunted a little."

"Hunted?" The notion seemed somewhat farfetched, and Duril didn't quite know what to think.

"By whom?"

He waited, as Claw munched on his lower lip, and the look in his eyes turned a bit mischievous. “The honest answer to that question requires that I confess to certain troubles from my younger years.”

“Ah, I see,” Duril said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “What kind of troubles?”

Claw pulled at one ear and winced. “It’s been centuries since, but I used to play pranks on the people in these lands.”

“I thought you didn’t get as far as Scercendusa,” Duril recalled.

“That’s true, but the more distance we travel, the safer the fur on my back will be,” Claw explained. “You see, when I was little more than just a cub who was supposed to know better, I was the playful kind.”

“I don’t believe that has changed an awful lot,” Duril pointed out.

“Thank you for thinking that, Duril, but in all honesty, I did things that didn’t endear the people in these parts to me and my lot much.”

“What could you have possibly done to warrant such sentiments? And it’s been three hundred years. I somehow doubt humans can hold grudges that last such a long time, I mean, when it’s over a prank, no matter how upsetting.”

“A prank, it was supposed to be,” Claw said. “But maybe there’s something I can teach you about humans, Duril. They’re not a forgiving or forgetting kind.”

“I’d say that it’s more about what they choose not to forgive or forget,” Duril argued. “You surely have all of my attention now. What did you do that you fear they might still remember? You do realize that the grudge must have been passed from generation to generation for quite a long time to still be alive today.”

“That’s something I’m not keen on discovering whether it is true or not. I suppose I should shed some light on my transgressions before you dismiss my worries as unfounded.”

“Please, go ahead. It looks like we have quite a long road ahead of us, which means that we should, indeed, pass the time with some stories.”

“Oh, I assure you, this is quite the story. You see,” Claw began, “the people from all the hamlets and towns between The Quiet Woods and the heart of the continent like to come together and celebrate each coming of a new fall with an amazing feast.”

“In Whitekeep, people were keener on celebrating the coming of each spring. After the terrible winters there, it was always a sign that we survived yet another year when the bad weather was finally gone, and we could hear the first birds searching for worms in the thawed earth.”

“These lands are abundant in foods of all kinds, and these are people of the harvest,” Claw said. “When fall comes, it is a sign for them to give one last push and prepare for winter, so they can rest. It was during one of these festivals that I decided to play a terrible prank on the inhabitants of these parts.”

“Did you eat all the food?” Duril asked.

Claw gave him a guilty look. “If it were only that. I bathed in their wine barrel.”

Duril frowned for a moment. “I suppose that was unpleasant, but it was just one wine barrel, right?”

Claw shook his head. “It was the wine barrel,” he emphasized each word.

“What do you mean?”

“You see, the people here have these very strange ideas that the best wine is obtained by throwing all the grapes into a giant oak barrel built in the middle of the place the festival is held. Then everyone gets together to squash the grapes until they’re turned into the primer for the wine they serve here.”

“What exactly did you do?”

Claw rubbed the back of his head. “I wanted to be a part of that, too. Without anyone from The Quiet Woods knowing, I snuck through the crowds and had a dandy time squashing the grapes just like everyone else. Only I was young and very impatient, and quite disappointed when I learned that we would all have to wait until the wine became, well, wine. So, that night, I went to the barrel, climbed inside, and began drinking the sweet potation therein until I couldn’t tell foot from hand. I shifted into my bear and swam around, in a state of pure beatific bliss. At one point, I even fell asleep, floating in the barrel. And, in the morning, when people came--”

“They found a bear in their wine,” Duril concluded for him.

“I had a pounding headache when I woke up.”

“From drinking so much wine.”

“Partially. I was tied up and pounded by villagers armed with canes and whatnot. They gave me a proper beating, I tell you.”

“That sounds a bit harsh.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Claw said with a self-deprecating snort. “For these people, that wine is sacred. I had committed a sacrilege in their eyes and paid for it, too.”

“But if you paid for it, why would they still hold a grudge?”

“Well, apparently, one of the people held in high regard among them attempted to drink from the wine in which I bathed. A hair from my fur stuck in his throat.”

“Did he die?” Duril asked.

“No. But he was their most beloved minstrel. His voice was forever compromised. What he was left with was an uncanny ability to make up slandering songs about shifters. Others sang them, of course. These songs might have lived long enough in the hearts and memories of people. I do not dare to verify if that’s true.”

“So, how did it go from slandering songs to shifters being chased?”

“Apparently, the songs were powerful enough to incense the righteousness of local fame and fortune seekers. They made a vow to chase down shifters and bring their heads back to the place where the original deed was done.”

Duril shivered. “Did they succeed? I mean, how many shifters--”

“None, as far as I know. Shifters are not easy to hunt down, and the people here are farmers and merchants, not warriors. But you can understand why I didn’t care to visit the place again after they finally let me go. So, if you happen to see me refuse a certain vintage here and there, don’t ask why.”

“I won’t,” Duril promised. “Well, if that is the case, how long do we have until we reach Scercendusa?”

“By tomorrow if we don’t sleep tonight. But I won’t suggest that,” Claw hurried to add. “Once we get to the most glorious city of the empire, we will need to find a place to put our heads down, as sleeping in the street is frowned upon there.”

“I can always offer my services as a healer,” Duril suggested.

“That will come in handy, without a doubt. The rest of us can offer our strong backs. There’s always work in Scercendusa, people say. I doubt it will take us long to find something to do.”

Duril nodded thoughtfully. Claw’s little run-in with the local justice reminded him that they should never take for granted the generosity or benevolence of those who cared to share them. Usually, humans were mistrustful of strangers, and they wouldn’t hesitate to condemn them, whether they were at fault or not. Claw’s being chased down and brutalized for a mishap like that seemed awfully blown out of proportion. Duril decided that they would be more careful from here on out.

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Since Shearah had warned them about not showing their shifter natures, Toru felt a bit restless as they approached their next destination. At night, especially, he enjoyed shifting into his fur and



enjoying the freedom that came with it, being able to roam the fields and forests to his heart's content. The scenery had changed around them a lot, and Varg had explained to him that the cultivated fields and the forbidden forests were part of the influence the city had over the neighboring lands. Scercendusa needed grains, animal pelts, salt, iron, and a human workforce to function, among many other things. For that reason, all the surrounding towns, villages, and hamlets fed the city.

"But what does the city give them?" Toru asked.

"I assume that the people are rewarded in kind for their contribution," Varg said. "There is plenty of coin to go around, I've heard."

They had stopped very little along the way, so that kind of information must have been gathered before by Varg as the wolfshifter had taken short trips through these towns and villages.

"And what do they do with the coin?" Toru asked. "They seem to have everything they need right here." He gestured, opening his arms as wide as he could manage.

"Not everything people need can be seen with the naked eye," Varg explained further. "The city protects them. When others came to take Scercendusa by storm, the city stood strong and protected these vassal lands, as well."

"But those others," Toru argued, "they came because they hoped to get to all the riches of the city, right?"

Varg agreed with a nod.

"Then, maybe they would have been left alone if Scercendusa wasn't close to them."

"Maybe," Varg admitted. "There is truth in what you say, Toru. Also, the purity of your heart."

Toru threw his companion a suspicious look. "Is that your way of telling me I'm silly?"

Varg shook his head. "Merely naïve, but not even that. You see, Toru, when people want more than what they can have, they are called greedy. The people living here, working to fuel Scercendusa with goods and bodies, they're not to blame. But some of them only dream of getting there, to the seat of power, and become someone."

"Someone like who? Aren't they someone already? Since they are born?"

Varg patted Toru on the shoulder. "I'm sure you will never change, Toru, but still, I will tell you. Never change. It is not a lack of character on your part that you cannot see what makes these people want to leave their lands and head over to the gilded promises of Scercendusa. That must be why I have a hard time explaining it to you. Let me try to put things another way. What's your biggest ambition in life?"

“To be with you, Duril, and Claw. And to eat a lot of good food,” Toru replied promptly.

“That’s commendable of you, but many people living here, close to the heart of the world, would call you a man who lacks ambition.”

“I’m not a man. I’m a shifter.” Toru puffed out his chest.

“That might explain why you don’t seek silly rewards. For me, it was always to protect my pack and the lands that took us in.”

Toru felt slightly embarrassed. Varg spoke of valiant things, while he only thought of having a full belly and being with the ones he loved. It seemed that the wolfshifter guessed what crossed his mind, because he took him by the shoulders, pulling him into a half-hug. “Others are different from us. Do you remember Shroudharbor and what drove those merchants to madness?”

“All those beautiful jewels they took from the bodies of the people they killed,” Toru replied right away. “But they were stained with blood, and they were just greedy.”

“Not everyone would go to those extremes,” Varg continued. “They might just want a better house, better clothes, and to have more than their neighbors. While they would be happy with less, they are blind to it.”

Toru pondered for a while. “Is Scercendusa built on nothing but greed, then? People who want more just go there, and that’s what happens? But that means that it might not be that different from Shroudharbor. The domestikos might be just as bad as those merchants.”

“There are good things about the place, too. Duril visited Elidias’s library in Shroudharbor and learned many things about your destiny. Some beautiful things like the ones Shearah told us about being housed in Scercendusa, works of art and not only, they might not have ever existed without it.”

“Ah, this is hard to understand,” Toru complained. “Is Scercendusa a good or a bad place?”

“That remains for us to decide for ourselves, I believe.” Varg guided him by the shoulders. “And we will learn about it and think with our own heads.”

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Varg understood why Toru would have a hard time understanding what motivated humans to build a place like Scercendusa. Before they met, Varg would have said to anyone else asking that the world was just built that way, and that there will always be people who want more. Questioning why it was so doesn’t help anyone understand the nature of the world. Right now, however, under Toru’s scrutinizing eyes and candid questions, he realized that it was natural and wise to question it.

What would the domestikos of Scercendusa think of their dilemma? Varg expected Ewart Kona to be nothing less than the embodiment of everything the heart of the world, the gilded city, represented. If there was one man he could ask about it, it had to be the domestikos. What would he believe of tales of destiny that put the heavy burden of saving the world on the shoulders of a young tigershifter? Varg suspected that he might get a good laugh in the face. After all, Ewart Kona was a man who dealt swiftly with enemies, and for all his piety, Varg suspected that he didn't quite believe in heaven or hell.

Shifters lived and died by simple rules, unlike the ever changing moods of humans. Even in Whitekeep, Varg had seen the face of ambition, even if it manifested in petty ways. There were always neighbors who wanted to have more, and some who tried to get a bigger slice of the pie. But all those faults of human nature did not impede the town from living the way it always had.

Now that he thought about it, things hadn't always been so fine and set in stone. Varg only needed to look at Duril and remember how he had been judged unfairly and even abused by those who didn't believe that someone like him, a half-human, half-orc, deserved a place among them. Duril hadn't been the only one at the receiving end of the cruelty of people with such narrow minds.

"What are you thinking about?" Toru asked, probably bothered by Varg's prolonged silence.

"Nothing in particular." Varg didn't want to share his own dilemmas with Toru. His pure mind would surely have a hard time comprehending the duality of humans. Even he had to remind himself that there were also kind-hearted humans like Rory, Agatha, and Elidias, as well as Moony and his parents. For all those good people, they needed to soldier on and decipher the mystery of Toru's destiny and what it took to save the world.

"How big is Scercendusa? Bigger than Shroudharbor?" Toru asked.

"Without a doubt bigger than that. Shearah told us a few things about it, and she insisted that she couldn't really tell us everything. I'd say that Shroudharbor would fit into just one neighborhood in Scercendusa."

Toru knitted his eyebrows, trying to paint an image of the place in his mind before they got there. Varg had been doing the same ever since they left The Quiet Woods behind them, so he couldn't hold him at fault.

"And how many neighborhoods as big as Shroudharbor would there be?" Toru continued asking his questions.

"Many dozens," Varg offered a vague reply. He didn't know the answer to that, either.

Toru's eyes grew wide. "I cannot imagine a place like that."

"If it comforts you, neither can I," Varg offered. "All the more reason for us to keep our minds open for what awaits us there."

“Are you sure that we need to keep our shapeshifter natures a secret? In a place as big as that, I suppose that they have seen shifters before,” Toru said.

“I won’t say that you don’t have a point, but shifters might not be too keen on visiting a place as restrictive as that. I, for one, never heard of a shifter who had traveled and stayed in Scercendusa, but I’m only one shifter, and the city is home to many thousands of people if not more.”

Toru seemed lost in thought for several moments. “You know what I think, Varg? I think that we will find shifters in Scercendusa. We only need to search for them very carefully. If the guardians of the city don’t like shifters changing into their true forms, they probably stay hidden.”

“I think you make an excellent point,” Varg admitted. “As much as the city is a symbol for law and order, that doesn’t mean that some shifters didn’t find a way to live there. I don’t know what kind of shifters they would be, since most of our kin prefer forests and open lands where they can roam and hunt, but there could be some who adapted to city life, without a doubt. I’m glad you told me your thoughts on this. I’ll keep them in mind once we get there.”

Toru smiled with pride. “I am using my head,” he said and pointed at his temple.

“Of course, you are. I’ve never doubted it,” Varg added and ruffled Toru’s hair. “Let’s get to Scercendusa first, and we will seek out other shifters. If they are there, that would be good for us.”

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Duril noticed that Toru slowed down, whispered something to Varg, and then fell behind. Claw must have seen the same thing because he said as Toru walked toward them, “I’d better see what Varg is getting up to. Something about the way he’s throwing those looks over his shoulder tells me that he might have some naughty secrets to share.”

Duril was grateful for Claw’s knowing of how to be tactful about whatever lay heavy on Toru’s mind. He just nodded at him in acquiescence and settled his gaze on the young tigershifter. Toru took his hand and walked by his side in silence for a while. Attuned as he was to his partner’s way of thinking by now, Duril didn’t say a word and waited patiently for Toru to be the first to speak.

“What are your ambitions, Duril?” Toru suddenly asked, breaking the silence.

“Ambitions? I like to think that I’m not guilty of having something like that,” Duril tried to make light of the question. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. People say that it’s good to have ambitions.”

“But what do you think?” Toru demanded to know.

Duril pondered over his next reply. Whatever had brought this on, it had to be important enough for Toru to be troubled, so he needed to pay it proper attention and consideration, as well. “I think that there are good ambitions and bad ambitions. I mean, I’ve never considered myself as someone

who was ambitious, but I did dream of owning my own shop where I could sell my potions. Some may call that an ambition, too.”

“So, dreams can be ambitions?” Toru asked.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“But what makes good ambitions different from bad ambitions?” Toru inquired further.

Again, Duril took his time to offer a reply that was honest and easy to understand at the same time. “I think it has to do with how they affect other people. If your ambitions can only be reached at the cost of other people’s misery, they must be bad. But if they don’t hurt anyone, or even more, they bring happiness to others, I believe that they should be called good.”

“Your ambition of owning your own potion store was good,” Toru said.

“I like to believe so, yes.”

“It was good,” Toru insisted, as if he wanted to eliminate any doubt from Duril’s mind.

Duril was thankful for it. “Why are we talking about ambitions? What’s on your mind?” he asked.

Toru breathed a deep, heartfelt sigh. “This place we’re heading to, Scercendusa, is a place where people have many ambitions.”

“Yes, you can certainly say that. It is a magnificent place, called the heart of the world. There must be some truth to that name. Some people may go there to become rich, others to seek fame, and many probably are there just in search of a better life.”

“What about the domestikos of Scercendusa? What is his ambition?”

“That is a very good question, Toru. We have yet to meet him, so we cannot know for sure what he’s thinking. People say both good and bad things about him. He has always protected the city, and Scercendusa has become a more orderly place under his rule. Because he doesn’t appear to take any interest in the usual vices humans fall prey to, people say he is a holy ruler, as well.”

“Enlightened,” Toru remembered.

“Yes. There has to be some truth behind why people hold him in such high esteem. That he secured happiness for Scercendusa through means that might not be seen as holy, may be a different matter. I know that it is difficult to decide whether Ewart Kona is a good or a bad man, but that is why we must meet him and see for ourselves.”

“From what Shearah told us, I think that his ambition is to see the city prosper,” Toru said, seemingly choosing his words carefully.

“Yes.”

“And he doesn’t keep from spilling blood if that’s what it takes. Such as when the city was attacked.”

“That is true.”

“Then maybe his choices were all justified, don’t you think? When we fought the evil in Shroudharbor, or Vilemoor, or The Great Barren, we didn’t stop. Especially the last time.” Toru threw Duril a questioning look. “We had to fight against all those orcs. And we had to spill their blood.”

“I doubt that any of the orcs of Zukh Kalegh would find fault with what you did. It was a battle to the death, the kind they understand. It is their way of living, and they wouldn’t have hesitated in your stead, either. I did spill some orc blood myself, when Yarag asserted his rule over those who had tried to poison him.”

That appeared to make Toru feel relieved. “That’s true. Could it be that the domestikos of Scercendusa did the same against the enemies of the city?”

“It could be. We have yet to acquire knowledge of Ewart Kona’s dealings.”

“The place has a lot of history, doesn’t it?” Toru asked. “Then maybe we can learn about his deeds from all those precious tomes stored in their libraries. I mean, you can learn. I don’t know how to read.”

“Would you like me to teach you?” Duril asked. “It’s not very hard. And you’re very smart.”

Toru smiled sheepishly and gratefully. “All right, but if it gets too hard, and I cannot understand, don’t tell Claw and Varg.”

“Of course not. It will be our secret. But just so you know, Toru, they would never judge you.”

Toru puffed out his chest. “I know that. But I want to see the look on Varg’s face when I read something in front of him and take him by surprise.”

“When you put it like that, I have nothing against it,” Duril said with a big smile on his face.

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“Toru doesn’t think himself very well-prepared for whatever Scercendusa has in store for us.” Varg spoke the words that he suspected reflected what was going through Claw’s head, as well.

“I doubt any of us is,” Claw pointed out.

“True,” Varg admitted. “I’ve never paid attention to politics before, and it’s not like there was much of that at Whitekeep. We had a mayor and a few families pulling the strings, so to speak. They were decent people. In a place as harsh as that, there’s not much choice to be otherwise. Tighten the screw too much, and people would just pack up and leave in search of a place that’s kinder to them.”

“Scercendusa is not a small town in the north,” Claw commented. “I understand your worries completely, my friend. I had a taste of those merchants’ cunning ways, and of betrayal, too, but I cannot say that it makes me any better suited for conducting our affairs once we get to Scercendusa.”

Varg sighed. “Does that mean that it will all fall on me?”

Claw grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him vigorously. “You won’t be alone. You don’t have to worry. I knew that you would come to me with these doubts at some point. Toru is too young and pure-hearted to make tough decisions if the situation requires it.”

Varg confirmed the same with a grunt.

“And Duril is too kind. Even presented with what would be the most practical choice, if it involves hurting some people, he might not be willing to agree to it very easily.”

“We’re going to meet people of many kinds,” Varg said. “They will be just as sly as the merchants from Shroudharbor when you first met them.”

“Even moreso. Those merchants ruled a small part of the world, as we have learned clearly from our travels. But the domestikos of Scercendusa, he is a true ruler. He is someone we would do better not to fear, but to believe capable of any sort of ruthlessness.”

Varg nodded. He was content that Claw confirmed what he also thought. “There is a chance he might be on our side once he learns of the purpose of our visit. And he’ll have to learn of it eventually, I believe. Keeping secrets from him might not sit well with him. Not to mention, he has power on his side, power we might need to use if the evil comes to Scercendusa with us.”

“If it’s not already there,” Claw added. “I agree with you. Ewart Kona could be an important ally. As valiant as all of you are --”

“Don’t forget to include yourself among the valiant,” Varg interrupted. “I hope you don’t plan on ditching us so that you can protect your hide,” he joked.

“I wouldn’t dream of that. Well, as I was saying, as courageous as we four might be, in case there are large populations of people that must be moved in order to be protected, it might be a lot more than we can handle.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Sure, there is a chance that the evil won’t follow us to Scercendusa, but it doesn’t look like it has wanted to leave us alone on our path forward so far. It is best if we are at least prepared in our hearts and minds to confront it, if not otherwise.”

“Spoken like a true pack leader. I’m slightly envious of you, puppy,” Claw admitted with affection in his voice.

“Why is that?”

“Your kin likes togetherness. Bears not so much. Beast and Willow get along, but they’re partners; they’re together. And The Quiet Woods is a special place. Somehow, I always knew that I’d follow the call of the road by myself. Now, I’m happy that I have all of you by my side. Or, better said, that you accepted me and allowed me to come along.”

Varg moved one arm to take Claw by the waist. “If you hadn’t said you’d come on your own accord, I would have dragged you with me.”

“That so?” Claw challenged him.

“Yes,” Varg replied in kind and planted a hard kiss on Claw’s lips.

They were in this together, for better or worse. And if fate demanded that they face unfathomable dangers, they would still do their best.



## Chapter Sixteen – The Dregs of Scercendusa

Toru ran in front of them and stopped at the top of the hill, breathless and filled with excitement. They had smelled the scent of smoke and seen a dark fog rising in the distance for a while now. “What is it?” Duril called from behind. “What are you seeing, Toru?”

For a few moments, he remained silent, unable to explain what lay in front of his eyes. Right above the ground, as far as his eyes could see, holes dug in the dirt appeared to be responsible for steam rising everywhere, blocking the view of what lay behind the strange field. Between the holes, Toru noticed, tiny shacks with sloped roofs spattered the soot-coated land. From the openings in the ground, people dark and small like ants as they seemed at that distance, emerged in lines, performed a task difficult to observe, and returned in the same orderly fashion to the gaps from which they came.

His companions finally reached him, and just like him, stood in stunned silence.

“Is this Scercendusa?” Toru asked, wondering briefly whether they had somehow taken the wrong turn during their journey and ended up at a different destination than the desired one.

“It must be,” Claw replied, although Toru could tell from his hesitant voice that he wasn’t sure that was the truth, either. “The largest road leads here.”

“Everyone we met along the way said the same thing,” Duril added. “It would be unfathomable to think that we’re not where we are supposed to be.”

Toru let his eyes roam over the vast land stretching in front of their eyes. “It looks nothing like Shearah told us. Where is the magnificent city?”

“Over there,” Varg replied and stretched out his right arm, pointing at something upward and in the distance.

Only then, Toru saw it. Above the ash and dark fog, as if it emerged from a pit dug inside the ground, but floating in mid-air, rose a citadel with white walls, peppered in places with small dark eyes.

“Cannon mouths,” Claw said, as if he could read Toru’s mind. “The city must prevail.”

“The city must prevail,” Duril repeated slowly. “Is that their credo?”

“Just as good, it could be,” Claw replied.

“But if the city is over there,” Toru intervened, “what is all this?” He gestured at the ant tribe at their feet.

“How about we ask?” Varg suggested and patted his shoulder.

Toru nodded and followed without another word. How could the citadel keep its walls so white while there was so much soot down here? Maybe the wind carried it all away from it, and that meant that Scercendusa must have had its location chosen by a blessed hand.

Not so blessed seemed to be the ants toiling all over the place. Whatever it was that they did, it looked like hard work.

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Duril sensed the tension coiling in the shoulders of his companions, and he also felt a burden weighing him down, as they descended the slope. From the top of the hill, all they could see was the teeming people hard at work, but now, as they approached, they could make out individual faces. No one looked up or seemed bothered by the strangers walking among them. Probably, many people came to Scercendusa and crossed this soot-filled place, so their presence was neither surprising, nor unwanted.

He took his time to examine the locals. They all wore clothes of a hard to describe color. They could have been gray or white at one point, but the slag caught on the fabric turned everything into dark ash. If one didn't look closely enough, they might think that the people were one with the land through which they drudged.

One thing surprised him at a closer look. Some of the human shapes marching from the pits in the ground, balancing on their shoulders baskets filled with dark matter, looked very small. Duril recoiled a bit when he realized that they were children, some as young as five years old if his assumptions were correct.

A stout woman with her face completely obscured by the dark powder that covered everything stopped in front of them. She gave them a long look, then she spoke, "Why are you passing through here?" Her voice was raspy, as if her lungs were stuffed with the dust floating in the air.

They all stopped. "Where should we pass through?" Toru asked.

The young tigershifter crossed his arms. Duril touched him lightly. "A good day to you, kind people," he said and tipped the brim of an imaginary hat. "We're trying to get to Scercendusa."

She dropped the burden on her shoulders and stretched her back. Her face twisted in slight pain but then smoothed out in relief as Duril could clearly hear the bones in her spine popping. "You should go round." She gestured to emphasize her words. "Is this your first time traveling here?"

"Yes," Duril confirmed, hoping that none of his companions minded that he had snatched the role of group leader on this particular occasion.

The woman nodded thoughtfully. "No one told you how to get there?"

In all truth, they had been a bit too excited at being so close to ask for additional directions. “No,” he confirmed.

“You can go through there, or there,” the woman said and gestured with her arm to the left and to the right in large arcs. “You don’t go through right here.”

“But the city is just over there,” Toru said and pointed at the citadel rising in the distance, above the dark haze.

The woman didn’t even bother to turn and look. Her face looked like she was wearing a dark mask, but one growing from her own face, never able to slip. “That’s where it is, yes,” she agreed. “But going through here would only take you to the base of the wall. You can’t go through into the city there.”

Her manner of speech was slow, like she wasn’t used to speaking so many words.

“We could climb the walls,” Toru affirmed with pride.

The woman’s soot mask cracked a bit, showing the still light skin underneath. It took Duril a few moments to realize that she was smiling. Her teeth were blackened, too; she lived on that soot, it seemed, and it had already become a part of her. “Are you good at falling, too, then?” she asked and let out a hoarse laugh.

“Why do you ask that?” Toru demanded to know.

“The guards marching on the walls,” she pointed behind her without turning, “they’ll push you off with their spears if you get that far. Can you imagine how it feels to have all of your bones cracked in many places?”

Toru recoiled a bit, as the woman leaned in. “Not very good,” he said.

“Right. Although no one has ever survived a fall like that long enough to say how it did feel,” she said.

She was smiling again, a shrewd, slightly manic smile.

“We were wondering why we were the only ones trying to pass through here,” Duril offered to return the conversation to the real point of interest. “So, we should just go around?”

“How long will it take us if we do as you say?” Toru asked.

“Take you where?” the woman inquired. She stretched her back again and craned her neck, making it pop with a frightening sound.

“To Scercendusa,” Toru said slowly.

It didn't take a mind reader or even someone who knew Toru to realize that the young tigershifter considered the woman a bit not all there.

"The lines are long and wide," the woman explained. "On both sides," she added as she opened her arms in a broad gesture. "They lead to the gates."

"There are lines to get into the city?" This time, it was Varg's turn to ask a question.

"Yes. What did you think? That you were the only ones who want to get in there?" She made a small motion with her chin over her shoulder, while her eyes remained trained on them. Then she let out the same raspy laugh as before.

"How long will we have to wait?" Toru asked.

"That depends on how many others are waiting," the woman replied. "I've heard of people waiting for up to one week to enter. But no one has waited less than three days, as far as I know."

"Are there any other ways to get into Scercendusa?" Varg asked.

Duril wanted to intervene and say that a week wasn't that long, seeing how far they had traveled, but Varg was right to ask. After all, they had an important quest to pursue.

"That depends," the woman echoed her own words from before. "Are you, perhaps, a group of wealthy merchants?" She stared them down, hands on her hips, and smiled. The obvious answer was painted all over her soot covered face. She already knew they were nothing like that.

Toru, in the pureness of his heart, took the question at face value. "No, we are not merchants."

"Then are you, perhaps, lords and kings from a distant realm?" she continued.

"No, we are not that, either."

The woman laughed in their faces. "Then, you'll wait in line. This is the fate of those who are neither wealthy merchants, nor highborn. Still, you're a head over us," she said, and her smile faltered, "the dregs of Scercendusa."

"How are you the dregs?" Toru asked. "What are you doing here?"

The woman slightly kicked the bucket she had dropped earlier from her shoulders with the tip of one toe. Her shoe was scuffed and repaired in so many places that it was impossible to tell any longer what shape it was supposed to have.

"What does it look like? We fuel the fire," she replied.

"What fire? With what?"

No one could stop Toru from asking his questions once he was bent on finding answers. Also, no one wanted to, and Duril could tell that Varg and Claw were just as interested in understanding what that place was.

“The fire that keeps burning,” the woman replied. “That makes the homes of Scercendusa warm in winter and burns under their pots while they prepare their four-course meals that will be served on golden plates.” The last words were uttered with a tinge of spite.

“Do they have four-course meals?” Toru asked, much interested in what went on in the kitchens of Scercendusa.

“The poorest of them must endure that, of course,” the woman replied, slightly vexed. “The highest minds governing the city are thought to dine on twenty different dishes every evening before the bells toll.”

“Twenty?” Toru sounded as aghast at the mention of such great waste as the rest of them. “Do they have really tiny plates, then?”

The woman smacked a gloved hand against Toru’s chest. “I like this one,” she declared.

To say that she wore gloves would have been a stretch. Duril observed the darkened strips of cloth rolled around the woman’s hands. It was difficult to tell her age. While her stature and confidence spoke of someone who should have been around forty, something of her attitude told him that he might be wrong.

“We should introduce ourselves,” he said. “I am Duril from Whitekeep, and I travel with Toru, Varg, and Claw. Except for Claw, we’re all from the same place.”

She examined them with curious eyes and clucked her tongue. “I’ve never heard of a place called Whitekeep. And where is this handsome fellow from?” She had to tip her head back to look at Claw.

“I’m Claw of The Quiet Woods,” the bearshifter said with pride. “And who might you be?”

“Well, I might be,” she said and wiped her hands on the sides of her long dress made from coarse fabric, as if that could help clean them and she seemed to forget that they were covered anyway, “Rosalind of The Dregs.” She even made a small curtsy and grinned through her mask of dark ash.

“Is this place really called that?” Varg asked.

“It’s fitting, don’t you think?” Rosalind replied. “And you should be thankful you’re here, at the outskirts. Hell, I’m thankful for it. You can still breathe some real air.” She lifted her nose and inhaled deeply. “The folks back there,” she gestured behind her, “those who take care of all the waste, they’re a different breed, I’m telling you.”

She was talking animatedly now and seemed pleased to have someone to chat with.

“Rosalind,” a stern voice called from the side. “Get back to work!”

They all turned toward the owner of the voice and saw a man dressed just as drably as Rosalind, with a large basket on his shoulders.

Rosalind sighed and grabbed her basket, hiking it up with ease. Even Toru looked at her in wonder. That thing had to be quite hefty and seeing a woman manipulating it as easily as that was a sight to behold. “Go take your place in line, travelers. And when you taste that juniper berry sauce they’re famous for up there, think of the fire Rosalind of The Dregs keeps fueled for their cooks to make it.”

“Wait,” Toru called after her, but she was truly fast on her feet and probably no longer able to hear them. “She was just talking to us,” he told the man who had interrupted their conversation.

“She must be working,” the man said curtly. “Like I must.”

“We took advantage of your wife’s kindness so that we could learn about how to get into Scercendusa,” Duril explained.

“Rosalind is not my wife,” the man shot at him. “She’s my youngest and laziest.”

He didn’t spare another word and walked away with his weighty basket on his shoulders, his steps heavy on the ground, marked by purpose and determination.

“She’s his daughter?” Toru asked, mirroring Duril’s surprise. “But he doesn’t seem that old. I thought she was an old witch.”

“Good thing you didn’t tell her that,” Varg said. “That girl, I believe, has a bit of a bite in her. Now, we should just go and take our place in line, like Rosalind said, right?”

They all agreed in murmurs. So far, what they saw of Scercendusa didn’t match the excitement they had felt on their road there.

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“How far does it stretch?” Claw held Toru on his shoulders, and the tigershifter was staring into the distance with a frown on his face, one hand shielding his eyes.

Per Rosalind’s advice, they had left The Dregs behind them. It had taken them little effort to discover one of the long lines of people waiting to gain entrance into Scercendusa. Varg knew that Rosalind must have been slightly optimistic about how long it took folks to get into the magnificent city. Apparently, the beating heart of the world didn’t warm to strangers too quickly.

“As far as my eyes can see,” Toru confirmed what Varg already knew. “It will take us weeks or more,” he added dejectedly. “We’ve barely moved one step since we got here.”

Under other circumstances, Varg would have made a joke about Toru’s impatience, but he didn’t have it in him at the moment. At least, while they were traveling, their bodies were put to good use, and their minds didn’t have the time to turn over the importance of their quest. The people around them seemed resigned with the prospect of spending days in their traveling clothes, just waiting and waiting.

“Do you happen to know how long must we spend here before we’re accepted into the city?” Duril asked a man sitting proudly on his horse, dressed in clothes that signified his position in the world. Apparently, his ringed fingers and the golden thread adorning his coat weren’t enough to put him above the crowd waiting at the gates of Scercendusa.

The man glanced down at Duril with a bored look. “However long it takes,” he said in a voice that matched his expression.

“Have you ever been to Scercendusa before?” Duril asked, untroubled by the man’s unfriendly manners.

“Yes, of course,” the man replied haughtily and turned his head away to let the other know that he wasn’t willing to continue the conversation.

Varg touched Duril’s shoulder slightly. If he managed to get the man to look into his eyes, he could make him spill whatever he knew. “Esteemed duke,” he said in a sugary voice, “if you would care to tell us--”

“Marquis,” the man said and turned his head back. “Marquis Decottieri.”

More like a country squire, by how fake those rings looked from up close, Varg thought, but his goal was achieved. The man looked at him with interest and a pleased smile. Varg held his gaze. “My apologies for mistaking your station,” he said courteously. As he slightly bowed, he didn’t break his hold on the man’s stare. “Could you tell us how long it usually takes to be admitted into the city?”

“Not everyone is admitted into the city,” Decottieri replied. “The guardians don’t let just anyone in,” he added, leering at them from the height of his horse.

“I don’t doubt that you have visited before. That is why we are asking you,” Varg said in the same ingratiating manner, “and not anyone else.”

“Very well,” Decottieri agreed. “What is it that you want to ask me? Oh, how long will it take until we reach the gates? Well, it could be up to three weeks. It appears that all the good-for-nothings of the world have suddenly decided that they deserve to be welcomed into the city.” He enunciated the last word as if there was no other city on the face of Eawirith, except for Scercendusa.

“Three weeks?” Toru shifted from one foot to another. “That’s too long.”

“Yes,” Decottieri said without pulling his eyes away from Varg, “especially if you’re going to be told to go back the way you came. I heard lately that the guardians are enforcing new rules. Unless the business you have inside the city is deemed worthy of its interest and wellbeing, you will be told to go back.”

“What business do you happen to have in Scercendusa, esteemed sir?” Varg asked.

“I have the talents of a scholar,” Decottieri said with emphasis and hooked his thumbs onto his belt. His horse snorted, making him readjust his position and grab the reins fast.

“A scholar,” Varg said with deference. “Scercendusa has the vastest libraries in the whole empire.”

“There is no place that has more books,” Decottieri confirmed. “I am sure they are in need of scholars like they need water.”

“Don’t they have enough water?” Toru intervened. Varg pinched the back of his left hand surreptitiously. The young tigershifter understood the warning and pulled back.

“Scercendusa,” Decottieri declaimed in a nasal voice, “is the only place in the world where water pours from golden faucets in the street. The water here is so sweet that it can fill your belly before you taste one of the hundreds of dishes they are known for.”

“Like the juniper berry sauce?” Toru asked and then threw a guilty look at Varg.

Varg could only observe his companion from the corner of one eye.

“That sauce is for paupers,” Decottieri said. “If you are someone in Scercendusa, you do not eat juniper berry sauce. You eat fish eyes in butter, and creamy fondue wrapped in gold foil.”

Varg was quick to catch Toru’s hand, before the hungry tiger could say anything about not wanting to taste any gold in his food or not being particularly fond of fish eyes, whether in butter or not. It was quite obvious to him that Decottieri was just recounting stories told to him by someone else. And it was rather doubtful that he had ever been in Scercendusa. Everything he had wanted to hear from the country squire, he had gotten already.

“Thank you for granting us your knowledge of Scercendusa,” Varg said and took another slight bow. He blinked, and Decottieri did the same. The pompous country squire seemed slightly confused about why he had stooped so low to talk to a group of travelers in dusty clothes. He turned his face away with an arrogant scoff and didn’t offer a reply.

Toru hovered near Varg’s ear. “I could punch him in the nose just to see,” he said.

Varg bit his lip not to laugh. “To see what?” he whispered back.



“If his blood is as blue as he pretends, or if he’s just a buffoon.”

Varg covered his mouth so that he could laugh at Toru’s suggestion. “I’d say we both know the truth already. Now, let’s talk for a bit, friends.”

Duril and Claw drew close, as well.

“It is quite dreadful to wait, don’t you think?” They all agreed with nods of their heads.

“But what are our choices?” Duril asked. “Through The Dregs, it’s simply not possible. And we don’t want to take the city by storm, do we?”

“We could,” Toru offered.

Of them all, waiting was probably the worst for him to endure. Varg understood the tigershifter. Their quest wasn’t about twiddling their thumbs while waiting to be accepted into a city that might not want them to begin with.

“The city is vaster and grander than anything else we’ve ever seen in our lives,” Varg pointed out. “If we try to cut our way through the guards, it is possible that a lot of people might get hurt in the process. That is not what we want. And do you believe that we would endear ourselves to Ewart Kona if we caused a ruckus in his city? Not only might he not want to see us, but he would probably consider us enemies. No, the path to the heart of the empire, as people call Scercendusa, must be one of diplomatic pursuit.”

“But what is our business in Scercendusa? That ugly man,” Toru said and pointed vaguely in the direction of Decottieri’s horse, “said that we might be forced to go back if the guards judge that our quest is not good enough.”

“Then we should probably get really good at lying,” Varg suggested. “We could always tell the guards that we are in possession of some sensitive information that concerns the wellbeing of the beautiful city he is in charge of.”

“And just as easily, he might order his loyal guardians to torture us until he gets the truth out of us,” Claw said.

“Like we would let ourselves be caught like that,” Toru said with a snort. “And what kind of man gives orders for their guests to be tortured?”

“The kind that rules over a city like no other in the world and might see conspiracies and attempts on his life at every turn,” Duril intervened with an opinion of his own.

“Do we know that’s what the domestikos really is like?” Toru asked a reasonable question.

“We don’t,” Varg confirmed. “Let’s just wait and see for ourselves if we can gain admission to the city just like anyone else.”

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It hadn't been three weeks, like that ugly man had said, but after eight days of walking at a snail's pace to reach the western gates to the city, Toru was willing to swear he would chase his own tail only so that he didn't succumb to utter boredom. Of course, he couldn't even shift, and that meant that even chasing his own tail was out of the question.

Their story was, supposedly, simple and direct. Varg had managed to pilfer Decottieri's so-called recommendations for a scholar's role at one of Scercendusa's many libraries. Duril would play the role of a scholar, and they were his trusted guards. While they weren't dressed according to the healer's imagined station, they belonged to the retinue of a wealthy family. Duril, the scholar who wanted to be accepted in the city, was the valued progeny of this family, and they had been hard-pressed to accept that their beloved son wanted to seek his fame and fortune at the very heart of the empire.

However, due to how much they cared for him, they had decided to give him three companions that could prove their mettle, should he be discovered for who he truly was. The reason behind their drab clothes was clear, given those circumstances. They pretended to be poor so that no one tried to steal from them, or worse, make away with the precious son of the Decottieri family.

Claw was the malicious force behind their plan. So that the real Decottieri didn't protest against their theft, he had managed to put some rather peculiar herbs in the man's dinner, and for several days now, he had been the victim of some rather un-marquis like belching. The man was rather vexed by the whole thing and tried to always maintain his decorum, sitting stiffly in the saddle of his horse, but the more he attempted to avoid letting out any discourteous sounds, the louder his belching later became.

"But what if the guardians know that the Decottieri family is not wealthy whatsoever?" Even Toru had noticed how fake the man's jewelry was.

"That's not very worrisome," Claw replied. "It doesn't matter if the family is wealthy or not. Actually, if they pretend to be but send their son in such a sorry state," he pointed at Duril's dusty clothes, "that only goes to prove that they cannot pretend very well. On the other hand, Decottieri's certifications appear to be quite solid. With Duril's talent for letters, I like to believe that our acceptance into the city will be a breeze."

Toru nodded. They were all so wise, but he could tell that their plan was a bit thin in places. There was a possibility that the guardians wouldn't believe their story at all; or that they really didn't need yet another scholar. Most probably, Scercendusa had plenty of them and didn't need the son of a not so wealthy family to fill an opening.

Whatever the future held, it was right in front of them. He walked behind Duril, with Varg behind him, and then Claw.

From up close, the gates looked immense. The walls he had seen from The Dregs out in the distance were even taller and seemed to kiss the sky. Toru experienced a burning desire to climb them and see how high they went. How would someone sitting on the top of those walls feel? Without a doubt, like someone who owned the world and held it in his pocket. Did the domestikos ever walk along those walls to feel the power of his position and revel in it?

There were at least twenty men dressed in heavy armor at the gate, but Varg whispered something to him about how there might be plenty that they couldn't see.

Duril presented the papers dutifully. Decottieri had been overcome by a bout of runny bowels, apparently, on the last leg of the wait, so he wasn't anywhere near where he could shout at the injustice being done to him that very moment. Still, Toru could feel his shoulders tense in anticipation.

"And who are they?" A man in simple dark dress who looked nothing like a guardian and was sitting behind a large wooden desk, asked.

"They are the guards sent with me for my protection," Duril explained.

"Three guards?"

"They are strong," Duril hurried to say.

The man looked the healer up and down like there was some vague suspicion forming in his mind that he couldn't quite place. "They did their duty. They brought you here. Now dismiss them. Anything you need, protection included, will be provided within these walls."

The man's words fell on his ears like a hammer. Duril was just as surprised. "But--" he began to argue.

"Next," the man said and two guardians appeared and pushed them back, while Duril was taken by another and guided toward the other side.

Toru made a movement as if he was about to shout for his lover, and Duril looked over his shoulder. Varg took his arm. "We'll find another way," he whispered.

"But Duril--" he mumbled under his breath.

"He can play a scholar's role without a problem. And look at it this way. We now have someone on the inside."

Toru didn't like being separated yet again from Duril, but he understood Varg and his words. He looked up at the high walls. He was starting to dislike the white citadel already. What right had it to swallow his Duril like that? People were flowing toward the gates around them like a tide, getting ready to present their papers and ask to be accepted into the city.

“Did you lose your turn?” An arrogant voice chided them from behind.

They all turned to see Decottieri looking worse for wear and hanging onto the reins of his horse like a lifeless doll. Still, he had it in him to be just as haughty and obnoxious as before.

“We weren’t allowed in,” Varg explained.

“Of course. Not everyone is allowed,” Decottieri commented. “Now, make way for me.”

They stepped out of the way, and Decottieri urged his horse forward through the waves of people heading in the same direction.

Claw hooked his arms over their shoulders and began pushing them to walk away. “My good friends, now is as good a time as any to make ourselves scarce. I would wager the fur on my back that the officials at the gate will have a confusing time with a second Decottieri asking to be allowed into the city within such a short time.”

“Won’t that put Duril in danger?” Toru asked, worry already choking him.

“He was the one with his papers in order. In their place, Decottieri will only find some cabbage leaves, which means that he’s an impostor. If he dares to shout too much, the guardians might choose to throw him in the dungeons, and something tells me he doesn’t have the stomach for it,” Claw said with a grin.

“Make way, dammit,” Decottieri’s voice rose over the crowd.

They turned to see him guiding his horse away and to the side, while holding his belly. Claw had to be right, Toru decided to believe. But still, his heart went to Duril. He was all alone in that big city. What was he thinking right now?

## Chapter Seventeen – Separated

Varg watched the walls in the distance over his shoulder, his mind full of thoughts of different kinds. During his life's adventures, he had never seen anything quite like it. They were part of the crowd taking the road back, having been refused entry into the city. He could only assume that the guards on the other flank were just as busy and followed the same rules, so the direct way into Scercendusa was not something to consider.

"Hey, hey," someone called from behind, "friends!"

They stopped and turned, only to see Decottieri rushing toward them on his horse. His face was pale, and there was a wild look in his eyes. They all waited patiently until the country squire was close to them.

"I lost my papers," Decottieri complained. "You've been close by. Did you happen to see the thief who took them?"

"We didn't see anything," Varg said. "You don't seem very well." Even though they had been the ones to play that dirty trick on the pompous man, that didn't mean that he didn't feel guilty for employing such methods to get one of them inside.

"That's not important right now," Decottieri said while holding a hand over his stomach. "My papers are important. And they're nowhere to be found," he whined.

Varg held out a hand when Decottieri leaned to one side, and helped him get down from his horse. "We have some remedy for bellyaches just like the ones you seem to suffer from."

Toru and Claw were looking intently at him, probably wondering what he was doing. He stared back at them, and then took a small bag of herbs Duril had given him not too long ago. "Let's get you sorted out first," he told Decottieri.

Toru walked close behind him as he pulled the country squire to the side of the road. "What's happening?" he whispered.

"We should at least put him back on his feet," Varg replied quickly.

It looked like Claw didn't need any explanation and he was already busy making a fire to prepare a tea.

"But he's so obnoxious," Toru argued while Claw helped Decottieri to sit by the small fire.

"Even if we did what the situation demanded of us, that doesn't mean that we should be satisfied with it." Toru didn't appear to understand very well, so Varg continued, "You wouldn't like to suffer from stomachaches like that, right?"

“No. But my belly never hurts.”

“He’s not a shifter like us. See, Claw is already getting him to drink that tea. It will help him get back on his feet.”

Indeed, Decottieri was accepting the small cup from Claw’s hands and drinking slowly. “What will I do now?” he said mostly to himself. “My family expects me to become an important scholar.”

Varg could tell Toru was fretting a bit by now. They hadn’t thought about what it meant to take advantage of the pompous man for their own gain, but that was now what they needed to think about.

“Is it possible to have your papers redone? Those schools you attended, they could give you new certifications, right?” Claw asked. Varg noticed the bearshifter frowning. Just like him, he knew that what they had done could be justified as necessary, but it still didn’t make it right.

“It will take months,” Decottieri said dejectedly. “But yes, they can give me new papers.”

That meant that Decottieri still had a chance to be admitted at one of the many libraries of Scercendusa in the future. Right now, what they could do to correct a little of what they had done to him was to heal his aching belly.

“Do you write very beautifully?” Toru asked all of a sudden.

Decottieri appeared considerably less obnoxious than before, now that he was taking the way back, just like them. He just nodded and took another sip of the concoction Claw had prepared for him. His face looked less flushed and now there was even some color returning to his cheeks.

“Can you show me?” Toru asked again.

“How? I don’t have anything to write on,” Decottieri said.

Toru picked a small twig up from the ground and handed it to him. The country squire took it and looked at it, then at Toru, asking with his eyes what was expected of him.

“Write here, in the dirt,” Toru said.

“Ah,” Decottieri said. He rubbed his belly a little. “Thank you for the remedy, good people. I already feel a little bit better. What would you like me to write?”

Toru pondered for a bit. “How do you write ‘tiger’?”

Decottieri said nothing, but he began to trace the letters in the dirt with his improvised pen. Toru leaned in to see. “There, like this,” he said and pulled back to admire his handiwork.

“You write very beautifully,” Toru decided.

“I’ve spent ten years studying beautiful letters,” Decottieri said with self-importance. “I should write very beautifully. My parents spent a small fortune to pay private tutors. They will be very disappointed now.”

Toru shifted in his place again. Varg put a hand on his shoulder. “But you will try again?”

“I will,” Decottieri said with determination. “And I’ll hire a physician to travel with me the next time. Alas, that is life. I’ll be on my way now. Thank you again for your help.”

“So quickly?” Varg asked. “Are you sure you can ride?”

“My family takes care of horses.” Decottieri stopped for a moment, realizing his mistake. “I mean, my domain has many horses. I was born riding one, as they say.”

That had to be a lie, but Varg didn’t bother saying anything. “What’s the name of the place you’re from?”

“Rebulia, but why are you asking?” Decottieri seemed guarded and now in a hurry to leave.

“We’re just curious people,” Varg replied.

“Well, I would stay and chat, but I have many things I must do,” the country squire said hurriedly. “I’ll bid you farewell now.”

There was nothing they could do to stop him, so they only stood there and watched the dust raised by the hooves of his horse as he rode away.

“Why did you ask him where he’s from?” Toru spoke as soon as Decottieri was out of their sight.

“Because we will have to send some compensation one day for the unwitting help he provided us with,” Varg explained.

Toru looked down and seemed troubled. It wasn’t like him to frown a lot, but that was happening to him right now. “We did a bad thing when we stole his papers, right?”

“It wasn’t good,” Varg confirmed. “But sometimes we need to do things that are like that, so that we can do better ones.”

Claw scratched his head. “Puppy, you just served me a lesson in humility. I didn’t know the poor man would have such a sensitive stomach. I should have been less generous with that bellyache inducing herb.”

“We all agreed to the plan,” Varg said. “No reason for you to beat yourself up over it. One day, however, we should send our apologies to Rebulia. Along with a lavish gift, provided that we can afford one.”

“Will the guards let him inside the city once he comes back with the new papers?” Toru asked.

“The world is far and wide. There might be plenty of Decottieri’s all over the place. And as long as Scercendusa needs new scholars, seeing how beautiful his letters are, he will be welcome.”

“That’s good to know,” Claw confirmed. “But now, what are we going to do? Do any of you have a plan? Or should we start thinking of one together?”

“I say we should climb the walls,” Toru was the first to speak. “We can beat the guards and then get into the city. But it’s not a very good plan, because there are many guards, and the domestikos might just start hating us if we get inside by force.”

“Indeed. This place is a fortress,” Varg said. “Even if we climbed the walls and beat the guards we happen to find in our path, there will still be the matter of being received by Ewart Kona and asking him for advice. The road of fighting, as much as it is familiar to all of us, is not the one we should take this time.”

“Should we wait at the other line? Maybe the guards there will let us in,” Toru said with something akin to hope in his voice.

“That’s doubtful. And I don’t think any of us is ready to pull another trick on someone like Decottieri anytime soon,” Varg said, taking in his companions, first Toru, then Claw.

There was no need for verbal confirmation. Quite obviously, neither of them was keen on another bad deed, even if the end justified the means.

“That leaves us with getting to know the lay of the land better, right?” Claw suggested.

“What does that mean?” Toru asked.

“It means, I think,” Varg said, “that we should go back to The Dregs, and see if there is any way for us to get in through there.”

“But that girl Rosalind said that it’s not possible,” Toru pointed out.

“It’s true, but maybe Rosalind doesn’t know all the ins and outs of that place. First of all, the fuel they gather there to send to the city, it needs to get carried there, right?” Varg looked at Claw, and he immediately saw the bearshifter’s eyes light up with the realization of what Varg was implying.

“There must be at least one way to move between Scercendusa and them. A tunnel or something similar through which wagons of coal are sent inside and then return empty,” Claw said.

Toru seemed quite impressed with Claw’s conclusions. “But how do we know where to find that tunnel?”

Claw grinned at them. “We’re all strong lads here, aren’t we?”



“Yes, we are.” Toru crossed his arms to prove that he was very proud to be that.

“Then maybe those people at The Dregs could use our help with hauling coal.”

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Duril felt in a daze as he passed through the gates and found himself out in the streets of the city. At first, he needed to shield his eyes from the dazzling light, allowing them to grow accustomed to everything around him. It took him a few moments to realize that it was because of how white the walls rising left and right were that the light seemed so unusually bright. But the walls soon gave way to the hustle and bustle of the city, with its myriad of colors.

He didn't know where to look at first. Having been separated so abruptly from his friends, he had had little time to even consider what was happening to him. A man in a long white robe, adorned in front by what looked like a sophisticated symbol hurried toward him as the guard pushed him from behind.

“You must be Decottieri,” he said in a high pitched voice and slapped his hands together, only to rub them in satisfaction. “I was told to expect a new scribe any day now. Come, come,” he said and gestured for Duril to follow him.

The guard didn't pay him any mind as he bade him farewell and returned to his work. Duril turned all his attention to the man who was supposed to be his employer. He had to hurry to catch up with him. The man half-turned toward him to make sure Duril was following. He had to be in his mid-fifties, and everything about him pointed to a life lived with no suffering or lack of anything the body needed. He was filling the robe, leaving little room for it to flap around his heavy set frame, and his bald head was as shiny as an egg.

“Hurry, hurry, Decottieri. I'm Master Granius, and you'll address me as such. You are already late.”

Duril didn't comment and almost broke into a sprint to close the distance between them. Around them, people of all colors, stations, and sizes, talked, walked, sold, bought, and haggled, as the road was lined with multihued stalls where wares were on display. He murmured apology after apology as he crashed into a few people while he struggled to keep up with Master Granius.

To his relief, they didn't have to walk for a long time, because Granius stopped in front of a large wooden door that immediately allowed them access to the inside of a considerably cooler building. It didn't take him long to realize that he must have arrived at one of the many libraries of Scercendusa. The experience he had imagined the first time he would step inside such a place was nothing like the underwhelming feeling washing over him right now.

The library consisted of a main room stuffed with shelves up to the ceiling, on which old tomes were stacked high, and there were at least two doors, one to the right, and one to the left, leading

to other rooms in the building, but Duril had to admit inwardly that the place had not even a tenth of the vastness of the library in Shroudharbor.

“You carry very little luggage,” Master Granius noted out loud. “This will be your room.” He opened the door to the left and gestured for Duril to follow quickly. The passage was narrow and there were only two doors. One led to one room, as austere as the type that could be seen in places of faith, Duril noticed right away. It contained a bed that was barely adequate for one person, a table, a chair, and a small dresser. “And there, you’ll find the lavatory,” Granius added, pointing at the other door, but without bothering to present it to Duril as he had done with the bedroom. “I’ll bring you your clothes right away. Wash. And be careful of ink stains while working. Washing those off is expensive, and the cost will be deducted from your salary.”

It didn’t appear that his employer cared about whether he had any protests or comments regarding that, so Duril naturally kept silent and just followed his instructions without a word.

“You talk very little. That’s good,” Granius said. “I don’t need a chatterbox to waste time that could be much better put to good use by working.”

“What will my work entail?” Duril asked his first question.

Granius straightened up, pushing out his generous belly. His face was smooth for someone his age, but his jowls hung low, which gave away the true number of years resting on his shoulders. “We document every transaction taking place at the Somergan Market. Be aware of sneaky vendors, Decottieri. They always try to pinch a coin here and there. To imagine that they would even dare to think that they could steal from Scercendusa.”

Duril didn’t let his disappointment show. This wasn’t a library, but a bureaucratic office where day in and day out, scribes like him had to jot down every coin that changed hands. Would Decottieri have been disappointed when he realized what his work in Scercendusa was all about? Somehow, Duril doubted it. That man seemed enchanted only by the thought that he would be allowed into the city. Duril felt guilty for stealing his papers, and thought that maybe being stuck in a stuffy office with dozens of tomes waiting to be filled with numbers was proper punishment for his part in preventing the real Decottieri from taking charge of his promised scribe position.

The Somergan Market had to be the one right outside. Duril wondered briefly what working hours they kept. If he just got stuck indoors with nothing to do but fill the pages of those tomes with the transactions taking place at the market, he would not be of any help with Toru’s quest. There was also the matter of having been separated from the rest, and a pang of loneliness surprised Duril while his eyes traveled across the austere room. They had been separated before, but here, in this place that teemed with so many strangers just outside, that feeling was all the more intense.

“Do you have any more questions?” Granius didn’t wait for him to say whether he did or didn’t. “Good. Use the lavatory. Change into your working clothes, and meet me in the main room.”

Duril didn't add anything. Whatever steps he needed to take next, he would have to consider them carefully.

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"How are we going to do this?" Toru asked. "Should we search for Rosalind and ask her if she thinks that they'll have us? Or should we ask someone else?" He wasn't very happy about going back to The Dregs, not when he knew that Duril was all alone in that big unforgiving city. What was he doing right now? Toru truly hoped that Varg and Claw were right, and no one would suspect Duril of not being who he said he was.

"We'll just ask the first living soul we meet. I think we'll find work before sundown," Claw replied. "I don't suspect the work down here to be coveted by many."

Unlike the city that was guarded to keep anyone from entering without having any serious work to do, The Dregs were open to anyone who cared to walk onto the soot-filled ground. Claw hurried toward the first man they saw. "Good man, do you happen to know who we should talk to about finding some work?"

"What kind of work?" The man stared at Claw openly, and then at Toru and Varg who were standing a few steps away.

"The kind you do," Claw replied.

The man continued to stare without blinking for a few long moments. "You don't know what you want." With that, he walked away, ignoring them and without even throwing them one more look.

"That was odd," Claw said.

Toru couldn't agree more. "Do you think that only certain people are allowed to work here?"

Claw seemed to be as befuddled as him. "I wouldn't have thought that, seeing what kind of work they do around here. But maybe that man was just not in the mood to talk to us."

Toru somehow doubted that was the reason. He could tell that Claw didn't believe it, either. They walked in silence and stopped by the edge of one of the large pits – much larger than he had first thought it would be, now that he could take a close look at it. A stair cut directly into the wall of the pit wound round and round, deeper and deeper, and they watched as a line of people climbed upward, the heavy baskets on their shoulders making their walk a struggle.

Varg caught Claw's arm. "Let me try this time."

Toru knew something about the way Varg could look so hard into someone's eyes that he could read what was in there. He had seen it at work, and then when Varg had looked at him and smiled,

his pupils had shrunk and Toru could breathe again, although he hadn't realized that he wasn't breathing anymore.

Claw didn't protest and even made a courteous gesture for Varg to do as he wished. Varg walked over to an old woman who was so bent at the waist by the burden on her shoulders that her eyes were fixed on the ground she walked on.

"Can you tell us where we should ask for work?"

The woman stopped and looked upward at Varg. She remained like that for a while. "You cannot ask for work here. You are either born into it, given to it, or you're just a stranger."

"What do you mean by that?" Varg insisted.

"We don't take strangers. This is our clan," the woman said. "The Dregs of Scercendusa."

Toru understood less and less. He looked at Claw to see if his confusion was shared by his other traveling companion, and he could tell the bearshifter was as troubled as he was. So it wasn't only the place that was called that, but a clan? What did it mean, born into it, or given to it?

"How does one become one of your clan?" Varg asked.

"What don't you understand? You were not born here. Did they give you to The Dregs? They didn't," the woman continued, prey to increasing agitation. "You don't belong here."

She walked past them, mumbling something. It seemed that not even Varg's gift to get the truth out of anyone was enough to convince the people there that they wanted to work just like them. Not that Toru really wanted that, but it was the only way to find the tunnel to the city, and he didn't want to miss his chance to get reunited with Duril as soon as possible.

That meant that it was his turn to try and get what they needed. With confidence, he went to the next person climbing out of the pit. "You," he said loudly, "who's in charge here? Who's the head of your clan?" They needed to speak to someone who knew and could tell them more than just a few words that didn't make any sense.

"People of Whitekeep," someone called to them, and then Toru noticed Rosalind hurrying toward them. "And The Quiet Woods," she added, looking at Claw, and grinning broadly.

"Rosalind," Toru acknowledged her right away. "We want to work here, and everyone says we cannot."

Neither Varg, nor Claw, stopped him from taking the lead, so he could just assume that it was all right for him to do so.

Rosalind put down her heavy basket, placed her hands on her hips, and then began laughing. “Work here? Has the rest of the world ended, and there’s no other place you’d rather be? Why would you want such a thing?”

“Because--” Toru stopped and bit his tongue. He was about to tell the truth about their reasons, and now he didn’t know how to continue what he was saying.

Varg hurried to the rescue. “We weren’t allowed into Scercendusa yet. So, until our services are needed there, we thought about spending our time putting ourselves to work instead of waiting.”

Rosalind looked at them with curiosity. “There was another one with you. That man with the pretty eyes.”

Toru puffed out his chest. “Duril,” he said. “He’s mine.”

Rosalind chuckled at that. “I could tell by how you only looked at him all the time. Where is he now? He must have gone inside,” she concluded for herself.

Rosalind was pretty quick-witted for someone her age, Toru thought with admiration. “Yes, he’s already there. But they didn’t need us, too, and now we’re separated.”

“I wish I could help you, but you don’t just walk into The Dregs and start working. That’s not how it’s done. There are only two kinds of people that work here. The ones born into it, and the ones given by the city.”

“We heard that from an old lady,” Toru said, eager to hear proper explanations. “But what does that mean?”

Rosalind nodded patiently. It looked like she really liked to chat about the place, and Toru hoped that her father wouldn’t appear to stop her again. “The Dregs are a clan,” she began. “Everyone who is born here is bound to the place. That’s what The Dregs do. But if it all depended on how many children we could have, the city would have a real problem on its hands and quickly.”

“There wouldn’t be enough hands, right?” Varg interjected.

She confirmed with a short nod and adjusted a dirty strap on her hand. “Yes, that’s it. So, the city must make sure that there are enough hands. So, anyone who commits a crime in Scercendusa, and their crime is not bad enough to warrant execution, is sent down here to work.”

Toru was surprised to hear such a thing. “Everyone’s a criminal, here?”

Rosalind laughed. “No, Toru of Whitekeep.” He was grateful to Varg for including him as one of them. “No one’s really a criminal, if you’re asking me.”

“But you just said--” Toru began, confused by her words.

“In Scercendusa,” she explained, “if you’re a murderer, a thief, a kidnapper, a forger, or you do anything that warrants a stay in prison, you either become short of a head or you rot in the dungeons there. But if you do any of the little things, the pinched coin here or there, talking things you shouldn’t talk, or commit an act that’s not pleasing to the ears of the people in power, that’s when you get sent to The Dregs.”

“But it’s not like anyone cannot just walk away from here,” Toru pointed out. They had walked in and out of there without anyone asking them the slightest thing about their whereabouts.

“You can,” Rosalind said and pushed one finger against his chest. “But we cannot breathe out there.” She made a vague gesture that stood for what she meant as the rest of the world outside The Dregs. “We were made to live and die here.” It was just a simple statement of fact, not bitter, nor inconsolable.

“But what about those sent here from Scercendusa?” Varg questioned. “They’re not of your kind.”

“No, they’re not. But they’re first sent to take care of the waste, and either their noses and chests get used to the air here, or they perish.” That was also said in an even voice, as if Rosalind didn’t feel anything about the lives of those that ended there. “If they grow into it, they become as the rest of us.”

“How are they sent to take care of the waste? Do they go through those large gates?”

“No one goes out of the city through those gates without having their papers in order and the permission of the powers that be,” Rosalind explained.

It looked like getting inside the city was hard enough, but people weren’t even allowed to leave as they pleased? That was something that Toru didn’t like the sound of at all. Now, it seemed like Duril was as good as trapped inside that horrible place. Did they really need to talk to the domestikos? He regretted more and more that he hadn’t chosen to take the path to The Scarlet Peaks. Fighting beasts along the way and struggling against the cold seemed a lot easier to handle than going against the white fortress in the distance. He clenched his fists. “Why do you accept living like this?”

That appeared to take Rosalind by surprise. She licked her chapped lips and remained silent. “It doesn’t matter whether we accept it or not,” she said. “The only choice is between life and death. I walk over there,” she said and pointed toward the edge of The Dregs, toward the open plains and forests from which Toru and his friends had come, “and my chest won’t take it. I’d be on the ground, writhing and dying, within the blink of an eye.”

They didn’t say anything, even after Rosalind stopped speaking. Toru felt guilty about even asking her that question.

“So, you see,” she eventually said, “it’s no use wondering how it would be to walk freely on the other side.” Like before, she kept her back to Scercendusa, while her eyes moved to the vastness of the rest of the world.

“Are there many people thrown here from Scercendusa?” Varg inquired.

“It depends on what counts as many for you,” Rosalind replied, tearing her eyes away from the freedom lying beyond The Dregs and looking at them again. “Thousands go through every day. Not everyone survives a day hauling waste. Not many,” she added quietly. “Just don’t ask me what many means for me.”

They didn’t. Toru hated the helplessness and dread growing inside him. He didn’t know these people. He didn’t know those that were sent to haul waste, or what they did to deserve such a fate. But he knew that they deserved better than that. “What an ugly, hateful place,” he said through his teeth. At Rosalind’s baffled look, he added, “I’m talking about Scercendusa, not The Dregs.”

She smiled at him. “Do you people want to get inside the city still?”

“We do,” Varg said. “Is there anything you could tell us that will help us? Is there some way to get inside?”

They could trust Rosalind. If Varg thought so, and he had the power to look inside people’s souls through their eyes, it had to be the truth.

Rosalind shook her head. “Not that I know of. Many, many years ago, before I wasn’t even a spark in my father’s eye, and he wasn’t in his father’s either, not for a lot of generations, some people tried. Their bones are deep inside this earth,” she said, and now, a note of bitterness snuck into her voice.

It couldn’t be true. Toru didn’t want to think that would be the answer, because it would mean that he wouldn’t be able to see Duril again, not for a long time, and also that they were stuck there, and that couldn’t be the answer, either.

He moved toward the fortress in the distance, his feet not even listening to anything he wanted to tell them. No, he didn’t want to tell them to stop. The domestikos of Scercendusa had to tell him the truth about another tiger who had saved the world once if he knew about it. He would have to let Toru come inside his palace, and he would have to let him talk to him, and then, he would let him and Duril leave that place.

“Toru, what are you doing?” Varg asked, but Toru heard his voice as something coming from far away.

Once more, the scent that had left him alone for a while now, tickled his nostrils. Toru could sense only it and nothing more. His ears caught faint shouts of surprise as he leapt through the air, and

touched the ground, first with his front paws, then with the hind ones. He leapt, and then leapt again.



## Chapter Eighteen – Bad Apples, Good Apples

Toru didn't look left or right. His paws barely touched the ground, as he could only think of the scent now seated deep inside his nose, dragging him toward a destination he knew nothing of. At the same time, he knew he couldn't ignore it even if he wanted to. Hurry, hurry, the scent seemed to tell him, and he did, with every bone, sinew and muscle in his body.

The white wall in the distance loomed larger and larger as his tiger leaped over the mining pits, people, and baskets of coal altogether. Soon, soon, he would reach the foot of the wall, and he would climb it. At the top of it, he would find his answers; he would learn about why this scent wanted him to follow, and maybe put an end to the constant hunger inside his heart.

The miners from The Dregs shouted unintelligible things at him as he flew past them. It couldn't be called running, not anymore. Toru no longer felt the ground, and if he suddenly sprouted wings, he wouldn't wonder why.

He stopped abruptly, though, when he finally reached a large ditch that appeared to go around the fortress, separating it from The Dregs. The water that flowed through it seemed black with soot and could just as well be tar if it wasn't so fluid. After a moment of hesitation, he jumped into the water and began swimming to the other side.

Angry shouts followed him even as he cut through the water, but now, they no longer seemed to come from behind but from above. Could it be that the guards had been alerted already? But they were at the top of the wall, and Toru doubted they could see so far down.

He reached the other side and turned into his human. The wall seemed to have jutting stones here and there, so it was better to climb the wall that way.

"Who might you be, stranger?" someone called from his left in a ragged whisper, causing him to turn his head.

Then he had to look down, at someone who barely measured three feet. If it was a man or a child, he couldn't say, black as tar, with shining eyes the only thing visible on his face.

"You don't need to know that," Toru replied, eager to climb. He placed one hand on one of the protruding stones.

"Do you want to climb?" the stranger asked. "Come, come, follow Beanstalk."

"Beanstalk? Is that your name?"

The stranger wheezed in what sounded almost like human laughter. "None more fitting, don't you think?"

Toru sensed his nostrils flaring, pushing him to climb and follow the scent, but at the same time, he was curious about Beanstalk. Something dropped by his side, and he jumped just in time to avoid it. Then, he located the source of angry shouts as he looked up. From the cannon mouths, heads appeared from time to time, and then, round heavy stones were plunging down onto his head.

“Come, come,” Beanstalk urged him, and this time, Toru no longer hesitated to follow his strange guide.

Beanstalk appeared quite adept at avoiding the stones raining down on their heads, and Toru grunted when one hit him in the shoulder, driving him to his knees for a moment. A dark hand grabbed him and soon he was pulled inside a long tunnel. His eyes readily adapted to the darkness and he could make out the shape of the wet stones from which the walls had been erected.

“How did they know I was starting to climb?” Toru asked. “How did you?”

Beanstalk laughed again. “I’ve been here for the last forty years, and I’ve never seen a more foolish attempt at climbing the walls of Scercendusa.”

Forty years. That meant Beanstalk wasn’t a child. He was fast on his short legs, and Toru had to sprint to keep up with him. “Where are we going?” he asked.

“To see if you’d be a good fit,” Beanstalk replied.

Toru recalled what Rosalind told them about the kind of people who worked at The Dregs. Beanstalk had to be one of the people in charge of the waste. And that meant there was only one place his guide was planning on taking him to. “I’m not going to work with you, hauling waste,” Toru said. “I’ll go back and try my luck again.”

Beanstalk hurried back to him and caught his arm, or better said, hung onto it. “Like we’d waste you on waste.” He laughed at his own turn of phrase. “No, no, you’re a tiger,” he said with delight. “You’re going to climb, up, up, up.”

Toru wanted nothing else. He, too, wanted to climb, as high up as he could, until he reached the domestikos of Scercendusa and forced him to spill all his secrets. Then, he realized. “How do you know I’m a tiger?”

It was possible that Beanstalk had seen him swimming through the ditch in his tiger shape, but how did Beanstalk know about tigers? If he’d been there, at The Dregs, for forty years, and they didn’t allow shapeshifters in Scercendusa—

“Look around,” Beanstalk encouraged him, and then Toru began staring at the walls. He started in surprise. Here and there, tiger fur patterns lined the walls of the long tunnel they were walking through.

“What is this place?” he murmured, mostly to himself.

“A place for truth,” Beanstalk said in a conspiratorial voice. “A place for truth speakers and truth seekers. A place for tigers.”

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Varg caught Claw’s arm, guided by nothing else but his gut instinct. “Don’t,” he whispered, sensing that his friend wanted to shapeshift and follow Toru. As surprised as he was by Toru’s actions, he had known the young tiger long enough to understand that he must have had his reasons to act so rashly.

Now, they had a more pressing matter to solve. Around them, the miners pulled into tighter and tighter circles. Sure, they could shift and overpower them, but where would they go after that? After Toru? The chances were that they would be chased, and what they had to do right now was to make sure the miners didn’t follow Toru or alert the guards on the walls somehow. Varg had trusted his instincts all his life, and now they were telling him that it was safer for them to remain in human form.

“That was a tiger,” someone called out from the crowd.

From the looks on their faces, he could tell that they weren’t angry, and not even scared. That in itself was enough to give Varg a very strong reason to go with his gut. “How do you know what a tiger is?” he asked.

It was Rosalind who walked forward from the crowd. “We just know, and that’s all we’re going to tell you, Varg of Whitekeep,” the young woman said.

“Fair enough,” Varg said while holding Claw’s wrist. He could tell that the bearshifter was still undecided as to whether they should just shift and be out of there or not, either following Toru or finding a way to escape from The Dregs.

“How is he a tiger?” someone else from the crowd asked.

“He just is,” Varg replied calmly.

“But tigers don’t exist,” Rosalind said slowly. She was moving her head, eyeing her fellow miners in search of their confirmation. That didn’t take long to happen, as murmurs of agreement could be heard from everywhere.

“You just saw one,” Varg pointed out, his voice even and gentle. The scholars of Scercendusa, if no one else, had to know tigers did exist, so the fact that these people thought such a thing was difficult to fathom.

“Yes, we saw,” Rosalind agreed. “But where does he come from? He’s not from the same place as you,” she added pointedly.

Varg nodded. Claw tensed by his side, but only for a moment, and then made a small sign for Varg to release his hand. “He’s not,” Varg admitted. “He traveled to us, and then we’ve traveled together ever since.”

“Are you tigers, too?” someone else asked.

“No,” Varg replied, and then he nodded at Claw. He sensed that he needed to gain these people’s trust, and the best way to do that was to be honest to some degree. They both shifted at the same time.

A gasp of surprise traveled through the crowd like a wave through the unchanging sea. Rosalind took a few steps back, and the tight circle from before loosened, people stumbling backward and clumsily bumping into each other, as they struggled to get as far as they could from Varg and Claw.

“Don’t be scared. We’ve always been the allies of good people everywhere,” Varg began. “And I see that you are good people here.”

“How do you know that?” Rosalind was still the only one who remained close to where he and Claw stood. “We’re The Dregs, fit for hauling coal from cradle to grave. What makes us good?”

Varg had an inkling that these people must have been told only that they were no good all their lives. They lived so close to the beating heart of the world, and they were the blood that filled the heart, helping it beat, yet, they didn’t know half of what they were worth.

Maybe some did, Varg thought, as he took in Rosalind’s unflinching gaze. “You keep the fire burning,” he said. “Lesser people wouldn’t spend their life here, toiling day after day, year after year, only so that can exist.” He pointed at the white fortress in the distance.

Other murmurs welcomed his words. Varg wondered if there were no guards around whatsoever. These people were so convinced of their role that they didn’t question it at all. Except now, they were beginning to wonder about it, at least a little.

And it all had to do with the sudden appearance of a tiger in their midst. “What do you know of tigers?”

“They saved the world once,” another voice from the crowd rose over the others still in awe at the presence of a wolfshifter and a bearshifter right there, among them. “And they’ll do it again.”

The Dregs of Scercendusa were not exactly the place where Varg would have expected to hear about Toru’s noble quest. They had all thought that the truth about that lay only between the pages

of dusty tomes or inside the minds of rulers, such as the domestikos at the helm of the white fortress. They seemed to be quite wrong.

“And they’ll burn that to the ground,” Rosalind pointed with her chin toward the city in the distance, “releasing us from our bonds.”

Varg exchanged a look with Claw. This was one of the most astonishing turns of their quest so far. “Is it something your myths and stories talk about?”

“They are not myths, and they are not stories,” Rosalind said stubbornly.

The crowd parted, allowing one of the miners to walk through. The man, Varg recognized him when he drew close enough, was Rosalind’s father. He angrily pulled at Rosalind’s arm. “What are you doing here, child?” he scolded her in a raised voice.

Rosalind attempted to break free from her father’s hold, but to no avail. “We just saw a tiger, father,” she said in an angry voice. “He was right here, and then he dashed to the city. Soon, we’ll watch it burn, and then we’ll be free.”

Varg couldn’t fathom how such a thing would happen, but he wasn’t the kind to disregard ancient history, even if it wasn’t written on yellowed pages. It lived in the hearts and minds of those around him. It had to stand for something of the utmost importance.

“Tell us more about what you know. We’ve come here in search of knowledge,” he said.

Rosalind’s father was still trying to pull the girl away with him.

“Let me go,” she protested, and a few miners gathered around them, shouting as well and trying to convince the man to release her. “We’re about to become free, can’t you see?”

“All I see is a couple of imposters. I’ve seen their lot before,” Rosalind’s father said. “So what if they’re shapeshifters? They cannot bring down the city. That’s a lie. And if they came here, to incense your silly minds and hearts, I don’t want to be part of it. I won’t let my child be part of that, either. The rest of you may go burn in the hell of your own making, but my own flesh and blood will be spared.”

“Father, no, I want to stay with the others,” Rosalind complained and fought a little more. “We’re not all old and hopeless like you.”

Upon closer inspection, Varg noticed that, indeed, the ones gathered there were mostly young people. Now that he knew that Rosalind was a young woman, despite her soot-covered face, he could tell a thing like that.

“We’re not yet hopeless,” voices called out from the crowd.

Rosalind's father was overcome and dragged away, although he tried to fight them and still reach for his daughter. Varg understood his worry, yet he knew that Rosalind wasn't wrong to hope. How much of that hope Toru would be able to fulfill wasn't something he could tell. Nonetheless, now that they were there, and the myths of these people in rags were telling them something that, as surprising as it sounded, had to contain at least a seed of truth.

They weren't there by a whim of fate. They were there because they wanted to learn about Toru's quest and what it demanded of them.

Rosalind straightened her clothes, as if there was something she could do to make them appear less stained by the ashes covering everything. Varg understood that as well. It was part of how she was, in her uniqueness among those faces that all seemed the same until someone got to know them better.

"Tell us more about the tigers that saved the world," he urged Rosalind.

Rosalind looked up at the sky that must have seemed so unforgiving to the people living there. Sun and rain had to be their closest friends, or else, the day in and day out toiling was bound to take a toll on their sanity. "We know," she began in a voice that brooked no contradiction, "that there have been cities like Scercendusa before, consumed by greed and built on lust for power." The words coming out of her mouth seemed toneless, as if she was reciting something that had been passed to her and not experienced firsthand. "And they bred and bred so much evil inside that draining them of their squalor of the soul was not enough."

Varg could tell that Claw was listening as attentively as he was. The miners around them appeared to lose some of their shyness, and they came closer to touch their fur. The youngest were especially brave. They hadn't had all of the innocence and trust removed from them by a life spent enduring hardships of all kinds.

"The higher the cities rose, the lower their surroundings sank," Rosalind continued. "And people like us, people of The Dregs," – at the sound of their tribal name, more murmurs of assent traveled to and fro through the crowd – "were overcome and sank lower and lower until they were buried under the filth coming from these bloody cities."

"And it was then that the tiger came?" Varg asked. "Or was it more than one?"

Rosalind shook her head. "There is always just one. But there were many cities and many tigers throughout the history of the world."

"How do you know all of this?" Varg asked.

Rosalind pointed at the white fortress. "Because these cities always rise over the same piece of land."

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Duril stared at the mountain of documents spread on the giant oak table before him. “Are these the transactions for a week?” He didn’t want to appear untrained for what his work entailed, but the chances were that Decottieri wouldn’t have known about it, either.

“Just for yesterday,” Granius replied and accompanied his words with a malevolent smile. “And they are now all yours. Make sure to add them up in the correct order. I don’t appreciate my scribes using correction paste, so don’t make mistakes. Now, I’m off. I have important business to attend to.”

By the way he patted his large belly, Duril had an idea about what that important business entailed. He nodded and sat at the desk, to show his intention to do as he was told. Granius left without addressing another word to him, while humming a happy tune. Duril waited patiently until his employer had been gone for some time, busying himself with writing down some of the transactions in the large tome indicated for him. At least he wouldn’t ruin Decottieri’s reputation by not writing down a single letter, as his supposed job entailed.

However, after some time passed, and Duril considered that Granius had to be seated at a table in front of delicious dishes, prepared to stuff his generous belly, he tiptoed to the door and listened intently. The sounds of the market were muffled by the heavy door, but no one was on the other side, ready to catch him in the act of leaving his post.

Duril hurried as he opened and closed the door. At first, he would walk around and get the lay of the land. In all honesty, he hadn’t expected to find himself all alone in the large city. And now, the bright light and all the colors of the stalls hit him with the same force as before.

He walked over to one of the vendors who proudly presented his wares to the passers-by. The apples he sold were of a deep red color, and Duril’s grumbling belly reminded him that unlike his master, he wouldn’t have lunch soon, if at all.

“Good afternoon, my good man,” he said in his most charming voice, “do you happen to know where I can find a library around here?”

The vendor examined him with curious eyes. Then, he stared openly at Duril’s missing arm. “How did you lose it?” he asked rudely.

“An accident when I was very young,” Duril replied promptly. “I would like to know about a library.”

“There are many here. Which one?” the man asked and waved both hands to chase away some flies.

At a closer look, Duril noticed how the apples were damaged here and there, but the vendor took obvious care to turn them in such a way that their best sides faced a possible buyer. His inquisitive look didn’t go unnoticed.

“Are you looking to buy something, or do you just want to waste my time?”

Duril pulled back cautiously. “Forgive me,” he said courteously and moved to another stall.

The colors everywhere were vivid, and everyone was shouting happily, but Duril couldn’t help notice the harsh look in the eyes of most vendors. They were looking left and right, always on the lookout for a customer. There were plenty of those, but they seemed to be quite pretentious and not very willing to buy. After Duril left the apple stall, someone approached it and picked up one of the apples, quickly pointing out all its faults. The woman handed the apple back to the vendor. “This one has worms,” she said, without doing anything to conceal her disgust.

The vendor said something under his breath at her retreating back. The woman threw some nasty words of her own to him over her shoulder. All this time, Duril watched the scene and wondered about the so-called beauty of the city. Maybe he was rash in his judgment. A few bad apples didn’t tell the whole truth about Scercendusa.

“Are you hungry, stranger? Would you like an apple?”

Duril looked around a bit disoriented, not realizing for a few long moments where the voice had come from.

“Here, here, look up here.”

He did as he was told, and only then noticed someone hanging from a stack of wooden boxes, peering down at him. The line of stalls stopped there, and that had to be the area where the vendors kept the wares they didn’t have on display. The one calling out to him looked small enough to be a child, but the lines wrinkling the corners of his eyes gave away that he had to be an adult. He was lying on top of the stack of boxes on his belly and held one arm stretched down, holding an apple. “Take it, take it,” he encouraged Duril. “But do it quickly.”

Duril didn’t comment on what could be the reason for that and grabbed the apple.

“Go round that way and meet me in the back.”

Duril nodded at the whispered words and hid the apple in his pocket. Whoever this was, he had to be of a different mind than most vendors there. Yet, somehow, Duril doubted the apple he had been given came from the stranger’s own supply.

He went around the line of stacked boxes and turned the corner. His small benefactor jumped down and now Duril had to look down for their eyes to meet. The stranger was dressed in a grey overall that seemed enough to cover him from his shoulders down to his ankles. He didn’t wear anything else, and he had no shoes. A look at the twig-like arms jutting out of his overall were enough to convince Duril that maybe the small man needed that apple more than he did. A mop of dark hair stood perched high on his head, in a very strange fashion, but his eyes were kind, and the rest of his eccentric appearance was easy to forget once he met his gaze.



“I’m Apple Pie,” he declared and hooked his thumbs into the straps of his overall. “But you can call me Pie, for short.”

“Hello. I’m Du—Decottieri,” Duril avoided a close brush with exposure.

“Dudecottieri?” Pie asked, measuring him up and down with clever eyes. “That’s quite the name.”

“No, no, it’s just Decottieri,” Duril said quickly. “Thank you for the apple.”

“You’re new here,” Pie pointed out the obvious. “You work for Master Granius, don’t you?”

“How do you know that?” Duril asked.

Pie crossed his arms over his chest and bounced on the heels of his feet. “Ink stains,” he said and gestured with his chin.

Duril gaped at the blot of ink right in the middle of his shirt. He had been told the expense for washing it would come out of his wages. It took him a moment to remind himself that he wasn’t there to fill up tomes with every transaction happening at the Somergan Market.

“Your master is having a long lunch. Any longer than that, and it should be called dinner. Or maybe a lunch-dinner? Or lunner, for short?” Pie began chatting and scratched his chin in an obvious effort to decide something. “Come with me, and I’ll take care of your ink stain.”

“Wait,” Duril called out. “I am really grateful for the apple, but I should get back to work.” As much as he liked Pie and appreciated being told that his master would be gone for a long time, he didn’t want to waste any precious time following strangers around, as good-natured as they appeared to be.

“I know that’s not your real name,” Pie said shortly, stopping Duril in his tracks. “I don’t know what your real name is,” he added and leaned forward, taking a suspicious sniff of Duril’s clothes, “but I know you’re not who you say you are.”

How could that be possible? If Decottieri had lied and he had been in Scercendusa before, it was possible that he had made friends, as difficult as such a thing was to imagine. So, Duril stood there, completely baffled, and with no actual plan.

“Don’t worry.” Pie patted him on the belly, as that was as high as he could reach. “I don’t intend to tell on you to the guards. But you need to tell me why you smell of tiger.”

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Toru didn’t question what Beanstalk was saying. A short gesture from his guide convinced him that it would be futile to ask any more questions, as intrigued as he was by his companion’s words. What did he mean, a place for tigers? Right there, under the white city? Deep in the ground? Toru crunched up his nose. He didn’t at all like being underground, and he doubted that other tigers

would like it very much, either. Still, all that gibberish Beanstalk had told him didn't matter as long as he reached a place where he could climb the walls and enter the city, only to follow the scent that had pulled him there.

A scent, he realized, as his nostrils flared, that came from somewhere there, in the underground. It had to be underground because it was dark and he had sensed that they were descending from the point where Beanstalk had urged him to follow.

The yellow light at the end of the dark corridor they were moving through seemed unreal as his pupils adapted, but it was there, and they were walking toward it. As far as Toru knew, outside it was still the middle of the day, but here, time seemed to have a different flow and meaning. He continued to follow Beanstalk without saying a word. If there were answers to be found here, he would find them.

The corridor ended in a large round room, and Toru soon realized what the source of the yellow light was. Right in the middle, a tall forge rose, and creatures as small as Beanstalk moved around it, murmuring among themselves and throwing something into the mouth of the fire. They moved in a circle and seemed to have a rhythm of their own that Toru didn't question. If anything, he felt like an intruder.

Only his nose wasn't lying, and he could tell that the scent, now overpowering for his nose, came right from that forge.

"Hey, it is you who called me!" he shouted without thinking twice and pointed right at the forge as if it were a creature itself. "That's the scent," he added, addressing no one in particular and everyone present all at once. "The scent that called me."

The procession around the forge stopped, and pairs and pairs of curious eyes turned toward them.

"It's him," Beanstalk announced. "It's the tiger. He came!"

At that exclamation, the circle broke and, soon, Toru found himself surrounded by those small people who stopped only inches from him, putting out their hands, but hesitating to touch him, while talking all at the same time in excited voices. Strangely enough, Toru couldn't understand a word, and it took him a bit of time to realize that they were talking in a language of their own.

"Finally here, finally here," Beanstalk chanted, soon to be joined by an entire chorus.

"I'm here to enter the city because--" Toru stopped and narrowed his eyes. "Wait a minute. You're the ones who made the scent! You called me to you!"

"Yes, we did, we did," Beanstalk said excitedly. "We had to make you come."

Rightfully or not, Toru felt cheated and confused. "But I was supposed to be on a quest to vanquish that evil," he said. "Not to come here because you wanted me to."

“The evil, yes, the evil,” Beanstalk said. It appeared that he was the one chosen to talk in the name of all those present. “It has grown and grown, day after day, and we couldn’t call for you. We’re bound to the city, we cannot leave it, so we needed to call for you the ancient way.”

Toru pointed at the forge rising tall and hot as hell in the middle of the room. “What’s the ancient way? This thing?”

Beanstalk waved like details such as that weren’t important. “We still grow it in the dark. We just had to build something that would be strong enough to bring you here.”

“What are you growing in the dark?” Toru asked.

One of the others rummaged around on the nearby wall and then brought something with him. He opened his palm, and Toru marveled at the sight. Right in front of his eyes, a flower like no other bloomed. It had dark and orange petals, and if he looked close enough, he could see the pattern of a tiger’s fur. “What’s this?” he asked, half-lost for words.

“It is the tiger flower,” Beanstalk explained. “But you must go up, up, up.” He pointed at the ceiling, and only then did Toru notice that the smoke rising from the forge was pulled upward by a large chimney at the end of which he could see a patch of blue sky.

“Aren’t guards up there?” he asked. “You could just be trying to send me into a trap.”

“If we wanted that, we could have just let those manning the cannon mouths throw rocks at you.”

Toru hesitated. If Duril were there, he would know how to ask questions in that courteous way of his. Or if Varg were present, he would stare into those bead-like eyes gazing at him with hope from all sides, and he would be able to tell what they were truly thinking.

But he was alone, and he neither had Duril’s nice manners, nor Varg’s mysterious power of convincing anyone to surrender their secrets. So, he dug his heels in and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not going anywhere until you tell me who you are and why you called me here, when I could just be having steak and sleep all day.”

Silence followed his words, and then, the group began talking among themselves in that strange language again. They seemed surprised and confused by what he was saying. It was Beanstalk who called for order and then turned toward him. “You’re young compared to the other tigers. But you’re the last. And that means, you are our last hope, as well.”

## Chapter Nineteen – A Place for Tigers

Toru sat on the ground, his legs folded under him, placing his palms on his knees, all the while keeping his strange hosts under his keen eyes. As much as he tried looking impressive, the words said before by Beanstalk kept ringing in his ears. He was too young, and he was the last. These strange little people had an important task ahead, that of explaining to him everything he had to know about this place.

No one seemed willing to talk to him, so he decided to take the lead and begin finding things out. “Who are you?” he asked.

Beanstalk appeared keen on appeasing his companions who were whispering in confused and slightly angry voices among themselves, but, at his question, he straightened up, in a futile effort to stand tall. “We’re the truth keepers... and you seem to know nothing about us. Didn’t your parents tell you about us?”

Toru schooled his face into an expression that hopefully gave nothing away. “No. They never told me anything about little people keeping fires and burning weird plants just to make me travel half a world.”

“Why would you need to travel half a world?” Beanstalk inquired. “Your house’s seat of power may be hidden from view, but it is not that far.”

Toru wavered in his decision to keep his origins a secret. Was it all right to tell Beanstalk and the others who called themselves truth keepers, where he truly came from? But that would be a mighty difficult task since he didn’t know the truth himself. At times, Toru liked to watch the leaves ripped from branches by a powerful wind and wonder where they would land once the wind tired of playing with them. It was like that for him. He was a leaf ripped from a branch, taken by destiny or mere whimsy, toward one destination or another, never the same.

“He should have known about us, about this place,” one from the larger group commented.

“He should have, indeed,” Beanstalk agreed, “but when was the last time you saw a tiger, Midnight?”

Toru couldn’t see why the other speaker was called Midnight. Among these tiny people with dark skin, he was the fairest, and even the mop of hair on his head was as white as snow, contrasting with his dirty clothes and considerably darker complexion. Indeed, these truth seekers seemed to have a cutting sense of humor.

“Decades, if not more,” Midnight agreed, and when he nodded, the mop of white hair on his head shook in acknowledgement.

“Let’s not look the gift bug in the mouth,” Beanstalk concluded.

“Gift bug? I think you meant a gift horse,” Toru corrected him.

Beanstalk snorted as if Toru hadn’t the slightest idea what he was talking about. “Do you see any of us capable of riding horses? The most we could aspire to would be a bug. Bug-riding, yes, we do that sometimes.”

Toru looked around and shivered in disgust. “What kind of bugs do you have around here?”

Beanstalk laughed hoarsely and then waved as if he had just told a joke that Toru didn’t understand. The others didn’t look half-amused, and they continued to stare at him, half in distrust, and half in hope. Toru didn’t know just yet what to make of their attitude toward him.

“He doesn’t know why he’s here,” Midnight said pointedly.

“I know,” Toru protested.

“He knows.” Beanstalk hurried to his defense. “It’s the same old quest,” he added and moved a twig-like arm in a half circle.

“I have to fight the evil and destroy it,” Toru stated, now emboldened by the trust Beanstalk placed in him. “Is it here, in Scercendusa? Is it the domestikos?”

“Ewart Kona is not so powerful. He’s nothing but a human,” Beanstalk explained.

“A human who hunts our kind and sends us to haul waste,” Midnight pointed out.

“Why would he hunt you?” Toru had a hard time wrapping his head around why anyone would find these little people a menace of any kind.

“Some humans just don’t like the sound of truth,” Midnight replied.

“Or the stench of tiger,” Beanstalk supplied right away.

Toru sniffed himself immediately and then shook his head. “I don’t stink,” he protested. “Duril forces me to wash every day.” Just saying his lover’s name made his heart jolt painfully for a moment. If these truth keepers, or truth seekers, or whatever they were, were telling the truth, that meant that Duril was caught in a very dangerous place right now.

“To us, you don’t stink,” Beanstalk explained. “You smell very nice,” he added courteously. “But humans like Ewart Kona understand nothing of the old history. They think tigers have no better purpose in life than to usurp their pointless power.”

“So, is the domestikos my enemy?” Toru asked. “But I have so many questions for him.”

“What questions?” Beanstalk stared at him like he had just said that the sun rose at dusk, and the moon at dawn.

“About--” he started. “I don’t come from any seat of power,” he said. There was no point in keeping the truth from these people. “I don’t have any parents, and I was raised an orphan in a place with many other children. Once I was old enough, I began the roam Eawirith in search of good steak and soft beds.” Not that he minded sleeping under the naked sky, if need be, but he usually preferred clean bedding and a more comfortable surface to stretch out on and have a good sleep. Of course, if Duril was by his side, he could sleep anywhere, but that wasn’t something he was yet willing to share with Beanstalk and the rest.

His confession was followed by a short silence, and then everyone in the room began talking animatedly in that strange language at the same time.

Beanstalk was the only one who didn’t take part in their baffled conversation. “Quiet,” he called out, when his brethren showed no sign that they would take a break anytime soon. When the ruckus finally died down, he began scratching his head while throwing Toru sympathetic looks. “Well, I suppose that explains your foolish attempt to climb the walls.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Midnight protested. “He might not even be the one we’ve been waiting for.”

“He’s a tiger,” Beanstalk said promptly. “That means that he’s here with a purpose. Plus, haven’t you heard him? He knows very well that he needs to fight the evil. What better proof do you need?”

“Maybe I need,” Midnight said pointedly, “for him to be from the house of Olliandran and to know precisely why he’s here and what he must do.”

Midnight’s attitude was starting to annoy him. Toru stood to his feet so that he could tower over the little people with his height. At this point, the last thing on his mind was to be careful of their feelings. “I know enough,” he said pointedly. “You’re just a bunch of waste-haulers who do nothing all day but gardening and forging. And if I felt the call of your tiger flowers, then isn’t that enough? I’m not here to sit around with you and smell them some more. Just tell me how to climb and I’ll teach the domestikos a lesson he’ll never forget!”

A moment of silence followed his angry tirade, and then they all started laughing. Not exactly at him, but not with him, either. They were a bunch of weird little people, and maybe it was a good idea to tell them that, too.

Beanstalk spoke first. “Tigers always have fire in them. That’s why their flower burns so bright.” He gestured at the giant forge to give weight to his words. “Sit down, Toru. We owe you an apology. And since no tiger has come for so many years, we should have surmised that something might have happened to the house of Olliandran.”

“We don’t know if anything has happened to our lords and masters,” Midnight contradicted him.

Plenty of the others began to shout at him to shut up.

“No other tiger has come to your call?” Toru asked, his ears perked up.

“No,” Beanstalk said simply.

“But there are other tigers in the world. I’ve seen a few myself.”

“Only one from the house of Olliandran would be able to discern the scent of the tiger flower. It is not for just anyone,” Beanstalk explained.

“He could be an imposter still,” Midnight continued to defend his position.

“No, he couldn’t,” Beanstalk said in a tone that brooked no contradiction. “He must be the last of the house of Olliandran.”

“Do you mean I’m your lord and master?” Toru asked, a bit confused. Until moments ago, he had been no one but an orphan tigershifter. Now, he was hearing the most astonishing things.

“Yes,” Beanstalk said, his eyes shining. “That’s what you are, young tiger.”

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Duril stared at Pie in disbelief, but then he caught himself. “These clothes were given to me by Master Granius,” he said. “I have no idea what you mean that I smell of tiger. It makes no sense.”

Pie pranced around him, sniffing him like a playful puppy. Duril shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to dodge the strange assault. “It’s on your skin,” Apple Pie said with satisfaction. “I can tell because I have a very well-trained nose.” To make his point, he touched his nose and looked at Duril for some kind of confirmation.

“You’re wrong,” Duril insisted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Pie seemed about to say something, when he suddenly tensed, perked up and seemed to be listening to something that Duril couldn’t hear. “Quick,” he told Duril, “we need to hide.”

There was no time for protests because Pie just grabbed his arm and dragged him behind the tall stack of wooden boxes on which he had perched earlier. Pie whispered something under his breath and made a small gesture with his right hand. Duril stared in utter astonishment while a curtain descended between them and the dusty alley, made of seemingly nothing but thin air. He would have thought there was nothing concealing them from view if it hadn’t been for the slight reflections of light that lent the wondrous thing the appearance of sunrays melting in water. He was about to ask Pie about it when a group of guards, dressed in black armor, appeared, rounding the corner. Their grim faces made Duril’s words die in his throat. They appeared to be looking for something, or better said, someone, and when Pie grabbed his hand and squeezed it, he couldn’t help thinking that they were in danger. One of the guards stopped right beside them and looked

through the curtain, but Duril could tell he couldn't see them as his piercing dark eyes moved on further without stopping.

"We lost the scent," he growled in a harsh voice. "There's no one here."

Duril felt a slight tremor climbing up his arm, and only then did he realize that the one shivering in fear was Pie. He was staring right at the guard, his eyes wide and glassy, so Duril squeezed his hand to reassure him, without really knowing why he needed comfort. If they were caught, whatever their misdeed was, they wouldn't stand a chance against the heavily armed guards. Duril was not exactly a fighter, and Pie was as small and helpless as a child.

Maybe not that helpless, Duril thought while holding his breath. The guard was walking away now, unaware that he had failed in his quest. But what scent were they talking about? And why was Pie so afraid of them? There was one possibility, that without knowing what he was doing, he had ended up in cahoots with a tiny criminal, but instinct told Duril that the guards had to be the bad people here.

Instinct. It was sort of a strange thing, but it appeared that he had developed one lately.

Once the guards disappeared from view, Pie sighed heavily and let go of Duril's hand. Duril shook it discreetly to make the blood go flowing back into it.

"You have magic," he told Pie, still amazed by what he had seen earlier.

"Among us, we just call it a skill," Pie responded and crossed his arms over his chest, in an effort to look confident in his abilities.

"There are more people like you?" Duril asked. He fought the urge to crouch so that he could look Pie in the eye.

His question earned him a quirked eyebrow and a glare. "Do you mean, short like me?" Pie asked, narrowing his eyes.

"No, not at all," Duril protested. "Others with magic."

"Skill," Pie contradicted him.

"As you say," Duril hurried to agree.

Pie stared at him a little longer and then he burst into laughter. "How did you get into Scercendusa, Decottieri? Or should I call you Not-Decottieri?"

The 'not' thing reminded Duril of his orc tribe and his and his companions' adventures in the desert.



“Maybe an abbreviation like ND would work, or otherwise, your name would sound like a mouthful each time one of us wants to address you—but ND sounds too much like ‘end’ and there’s nothing like end about you, more like a beginning--”

“Just call me Duril.” He didn’t know why he trusted the little fellow after all, but someone with magic was hard to fool.

Pie’s face split with an ear to ear grin. “I knew you’d come around. And I know you have magic, too.” He pointed at the symbols imprinted by Lady Amethyst on the back of Duril’s hand.

“Can I call it a skill, too?” Duril asked.

“No, you cannot,” Pie said promptly. “What’s your magic about?”

Duril put his hand on his hip and, this time, he stared down his newfound companion. “I need to ask you some questions first.” It wasn’t like him to be so straightforward, and not with people he had just met, but Pie’s strange magic or skill or whatever he wanted to call it, the guards searching for them, coupled with the fact that Pie could smell Toru on him, warranted that he get some answers first.

To his surprise, Pie didn’t protest at his directness. “Go ahead, ask me.” He gestured with his hand like a king granting an audience to a pauper, but Duril was starting to guess that those antics were part of Pie’s personality and nothing else.

“Why would you ask me how I got to Scercendusa?”

“Because to arrive somewhere, you need to leave from somewhere,” Pie traced an invisible line through the air with one pointy fingernail as if that was enough to capture the essence of Duril’s journey, a journey that had been anything but a straight uneventful path.

“If you just want to make fun of me, I must be on my way,” Duril said, but Pie immediately rushed to stop him.

“Forgive me,” he said quickly. “I was just thinking you were too good a person for a nasty city like this one.”

Duril stopped. He had no intention to walk away, but at the same time, he needed Pie to treat things seriously. Anyone able to smell Toru on him was good to know. “Nasty? Why is it nasty?”

Pie looked around and pursed his lips. “I have lunch ready. Come with me, and then ask me the important questions.”

Duril was about to protest that he had no time for lunch, but right at that moment, his belly growled. “All right,” he said, “but I do need to be back at Master Granius’ place before he comes back.”

“You will be,” Pie assured him.

He didn't move, though, and Duril wondered why, but the next thing he knew, Pie snapped his fingers and the dusty alley disappeared, along with the wooden boxes and the sounds of Somergan Market.

Instead of all that, he found himself in a room with a low ceiling, illuminated by the sun outside through narrow windows that allowed streaks of gold to paint the floor with their vague silhouettes. In one corner, in front of a cooktop, someone of the same stature as Pie was getting busy with a boiling pot.

"I brought someone to lunch."

The cook didn't appear to hear them or notice their presence in any way, so Pie walked closer to him and yelled into his ear. "I said, I brought someone to lunch, Moth!"

Moth, who actually looked nothing like the creature he was named after, turned toward Pie and then promptly slapped him on the forehead with a ladle. "You don't have to yell. I heard you the first time." The cook was very thin, even by the standards of the type of people he and Pie belonged to, and his overall was white and splashed with stains of various colors that had to come from the food he was cooking. His hair was ginger red, and the look in his eyes was kind as he turned toward Duril. His face was very drawn, and the skin was creased so much that it made him look very old, but Duril wouldn't have ventured to estimate an age for him, since both he and Pie were such peculiar human beings, if that was what they could be called.

"I'll set up the table right away, visitor," Moth said primly. With studied movements, he shut down the cooktop and then disappeared through a side door, to re-emerge from there wearing a new white overall with no stains on it.

Duril observed his surroundings, trying not to gawk too much. "Thank you for having me," he said politely. The pot gave off an appetizing smell that made his belly rumble with glee in anticipation of the treat. "I apologize," he said and placed his hand over his stomach to make it behave.

Moth watched him intently, his eyes on his hand to the point that Duril began to feel slightly uncomfortable. "Magic," Moth concluded after his keen inspection, and Duril let out a breath. The fact that he only had one arm didn't appear peculiar to many people here, in Scercendusa. Save for the merchant selling bad apples, not even Master Granius had questioned him about it.

"We'll talk about it once we have our bellies full," Pie recommended.

"About what?" Duril asked, suddenly wary of the circumstances by which he had happened to be there, in that low-ceiling kitchen.

"About tigers," Pie said cheerfully.

"Tigers?" Moth asked and his nostrils flared. "Tigers," he repeated, this time as if he was just realizing something, and with a tinge of relief and hope.

“It took you a while. It’s not enough that you don’t have ears; you don’t have a nose, either,” Pie said airily.

“Let me just grab that ladle,” Moth threatened, and Pie quickly snatched up the offensive kitchen implement and hid it behind his back.

“Where am I?” Duril interrupted their little squabble. While his hosts were busy exchanging light insults, the kind that would only leave hearts and souls intact when spoken between lifelong friends, he had stolen furtive looks around.

The walls on three sides, including the one with the cooktop, were lined with shelves on which small jars, vials, and flasks of various shapes were lined up neatly, one after another. What made him wonder about the place he found himself in the most were the vibrant colors that appeared to fill all those vessels. A pleasant hum, tickling the ear, filled the air, and Duril was yet to decipher where it was coming from. Another astonishing fact was the presence of only one door, the one through which Moth had disappeared earlier to change his clothes, which meant there was a lack of a door through which he and Pie had come in—

But, of course, they hadn’t arrived there by walking over the threshold of the kitchen. All the more, he needed to know. “What is this place?” he asked another question.

Moth and Pie both eyed him carefully.

“He’s a good man,” Pie said first.

“He smells of tiger,” Moth added.

Duril remained silent. Were they expecting him to contradict them?

“You’re not the tiger,” Moth continued and pointed a long finger at him. “Where is he?”

Duril clamped his mouth shut. As much as he liked the little room, and Moth and Pie both, he didn’t know them, and there was a possibility that he was walking into a trap with his eyes closed.

“Let’s eat,” Pie suggested and sat at a round table in a corner, while gesturing for Duril to do the same.

Moth nodded eagerly and began moving about the kitchen with practiced ease, gathering plates from a cupboard, forks from a drawer, and then a small vase from one of the shelves. He arranged the table in an orderly fashion, and then placed the vase in the middle. Duril stared somewhat suspiciously at the empty vase, but then Moth blew gently over it and before his very eyes, a few flowers materialized, swaying slightly as they dipped gently and nodded their heads. Duril stared, wide-eyed, at the flowers in tones of orange and black. A sweet smell traveled to his nose, and his heart filled with longing.

“What are these flowers called?”

“Haven’t you ever seen one like them?” Moth inquired. “They are tiger flowers.”

“Tiger flowers?” Could that be why his heart filled with longing at their smell and sight? He had last seen Toru that morning, and as much as he knew they would be forced apart for some time, he couldn’t quite explain why he already missed him so much.

“He smells of tiger, but he doesn’t know anything,” Moth pointed out.

Pie nodded in agreement. “Let’s eat, let’s eat, while the stew is still hot.”

Duril felt a hunger pang twisting his belly. “I will ask you some questions afterward,” he said.

“And we’ll ask you questions, too,” Pie added.

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Varg and Claw accepted Rosalind’s invitation to join her and the others at a place where a fire burned in the middle of a clear space, used for preparing food, as it was the lunch hour. They could both tell that the people were curious about them, touching them in passing, observing them with questioning eyes, and overall, seeming not knowing what to believe of their presence there.

Throughout his life, Varg had learned to value patience, and accepted the food offered on a tin plate. It was just black bread and beans, but both he and Claw could use a bit of nourishment, seeing how they were far from any hunting grounds, and access to the city had been denied to them.

Rosalind spoke in low voices with a few of the people who seemed older and wiser than the rest. Varg perked up his ears, as even in human shape he had quite good hearing. Claw’s nostrils flared, as the bearshifter took in their surroundings. They had been accepted here, but it was not like they had stopped being strangers. A trial of sorts was bound to happen, and Varg waited for it, without missing a bite as he started in on his food.

“Tell us about your tiger,” Rosalind said. It appeared that the people had decided that she should be their mouthpiece.

“His name is Toru,” Varg began. “We’ve been traveling with him since winter left the northlands.”

“From your place, Whitekeep?” Rosalind asked. “It must be far away as we’ve never heard of it.”

“We haven’t heard of many places,” one of the older people corrected her.

Rosalind nodded and cast her eyes down for a moment. It was easy to see that she was proud of being given such an important task, that of speaking to the strangers who walked with a tiger,

someone who could be the same as the one mentioned by their old stories or not. Therefore, for her, each step was one taken with much consideration.

“After Toru appeared in Whitekeep, things began to happen, things not so easy to explain. Our town was assaulted and destroyed, and we followed Toru from there to Vilemoor.” Varg stopped for effect. There lay the power of the storyteller; eyes and ears, all for him, ready to absorb each word that left his tongue. “Vilemoor turned into Fairside.”

Rosalind exchanged glances with her fellow people. It was clear as day that they had never heard of Vilemoor or Fairside either.

“If that place turned,” Rosalind began hesitantly, “did it do so for the better? Fairside has a nicer ring to it than Vilemoor, if I may say.”

Varg nodded solemnly. “You can say that again. The place had been overrun by evil, and Toru fought it back, bringing peace once more to those lands. A young pup rules over there now; his name is Lord Onyx, but don’t ever let his size fool you. His heart is as big as mine.” He quieted down. “But we lost Whitekeep,” he said and fought back the tears coming to his eyes. “Not all of it; we saved a few. Too few. We brought them to Fairside, and then we traveled on.”

“Where did you go next?” Rosalind asked, her eyes as big as saucers now.

“We arrived in Shroudharbor in spring,” Varg continued.

“I have heard of Shroudharbor,” one of the elders said. “It is a place by the sea, far, far away. They have the most beautiful pearls there, taken from the sea,” he added reverently.

“Not taken from the sea, unfortunately,” Claw intervened.

“But where from then?” Rosalind asked. Everyone was now drinking in each word they said.

Claw made an invisible circle with his finger over his belly. “I had a pearl as big as my fist right here, inside me.” A sound of awe traveled through those present. “This big pup here, together with another friend, they took it out. And boy, was I happy to see a living soul after roaming the labyrinths under the house of merchants for centuries.”

“Were you locked in there?” a young miner asked. “What for?”

“For the fault of knowing too much. And asking too many questions.” Claw showed his teeth in a smile, making the youngster pull back, slightly intimidated. Claw laughed wholeheartedly to put his mind at ease.

“We’ll tell you our stories at length when we have the time,” Varg interrupted them. “Toru fought evil there and freed the people from the merchants keeping them there to kill them and harvest the precious stones they sold right from their bodies.”

Rosalind shivered in fear combined with disgust. “Did he kill the merchants?”

“We don’t know if creatures like them ever truly die. But for all that is worth, we believe that Toru, with a little help from us, did save Shroudharbor, and now it is a better place.”

“Was it the same evil?”

“The one fueling the merchants’ greed? It could be. But it was the spirit of a little girl once done wrong and left alone in the world that kept the place like that and then freed it once we...” Varg trailed off, remembering Duril. “A friend of ours reminded her of why love is still important in the world.”

“Not Toru, another friend?” Rosalind asked.

“Yes, another friend, and before you ask, he’s not a tiger. He’s an amazing healer, a speaker to the trees, and a speaker to the wind.” Another collective gasp of admiration moved those present and filled Varg’s heart with pride. “We almost lost him to Zukh Kalegh.”

“Zukh Kalegh? The Great Barren?” Rosalind and many of those present knew about the desert.

“More like the orc tribe living there and calling it home.”

“Bloodthirsty orcs,” one of the elders said in a trembling voice. “How did you escape from them? How did your friend?”

Varg hesitated for a moment, but a small sign from Claw convinced him that there was no point in keeping things hidden. “He’s half-orc.”

“Half-orc?” Rosalind exclaimed. “How is he a healer then?”

Varg smiled. “You’ve met him already.”

Rosalind’s eyes grew wide. “Duril? The one with the kind eyes? I couldn’t tell, although his lower teeth... I just didn’t want to comment on them.”

“An orc has been here?” one of the elders asked, his voice high-pitched in fear.

“A half-orc,” Rosalind said with self-importance. “And he looks more like a human than an orc. Did he survive the horde? But how?”

“His sire’s blood helped him,” Claw explained. “And now we can say that we have a horde of friends there, in the desert.”

“I wouldn’t bet much on that,” another elder said. “We’ve known them as nothing else but creatures that burn everything to the ground and drink the blood of innocents from the skulls of their enemies.”

It was hard to argue with that. “They were almost killed to the last one by the evil Toru has been hunting down since Whitekeep,” Varg said.

“And I wouldn’t have shed a tear if that were the case,” the elder continued, set in his ways.

“Would you rather have this evil become stronger with thousands and thousands of orc souls?” Varg asked.

Rosalind was moving her head, staring at Varg, then at Claw, then at her tribespeople. “Does it feed on souls? We only know that it breeds greed and greed breeds violence. And in the end, violence consumes everything until the tiger comes and destroys Scercendusa.”

Varg didn’t know what to say. “That is what your history says. But maybe Toru is here to write new history.”

“Maybe he’s not the one,” one elder commented. “Maybe we have the wrong tiger.”

“But how could he be the wrong tiger?” Rosalind asked anxiously.

“The tigers before him never traveled with other shapeshifters,” the elder pointed out. “They didn’t keep company with orcs. And they never traveled from half a world away, from places we’ve never heard about in our lives.”

## Chapter Twenty – A One of a Kind Tiger

Toru looked around at all the unknown faces of the truth keepers, his mind filled with confusing thoughts. “So, I come from this house of tigers you talked about? What was the name again?”

“Olliandran,” Beanstalk supplied right away. “The proudest tiger house in all Eawirith.”

He had never heard the name, but still, his chest filled with pride. Throughout his life, he had been used to his condition, that of an orphan, a drifter, one without much to give, but without much to ask, either. And now, he was learning that he came from a line of tigers like no other in the entire world. “What are they like? The ones from the house of Olliandran?” he asked. “They must be very brave, right?”

Beanstalk smiled so fondly that his entire face changed. The light from the big forge made his face look as red as a tomato, but there was also a sort of light coming from within his tiny person that shone right through his eyes. “Yes, the bravest. The one before you, Pyre, yes, such a long time ago, oh, he truly breathed fire.”

“Pyre?” Toru swallowed hard. “Was he... my father?”

Beanstalk looked at him thoughtfully. “Tigershifters live long lives, indeed, but I don’t see Pyre in you. After he vanquished the evil, he retreated back to his seat of power, and as per his and your house’s wishes, we never saw him again or heard from him.” He walked closer to Toru and grabbed a strand of his hair, examining it at length. Midnight moved in, as well, gestured to come over by Beanstalk. “Midnight, do you see what I see?”

Toru let out a yelp as Midnight unceremoniously picked one hair and pulled it off.

“It’s white,” Midnight commented while holding the hair up for everyone else to see it.

A murmur of surprise moved like water through those present.

Toru leaned forward and stared, too. “Am I turning white? I’m not that old.”

Beanstalk laughed and hiccupped. “No, you’re not turning white. But,” he added with emphasis, “this means that either your mother or your father is by no means the same as the others before.”

“What do you mean?”

“The house of Olliandran must search for mates far and wide, but there are rules that must be obeyed. One of them is that the mate chosen must have flawless fur, nothing but orange and black, not a speck of a different color.”

“I’m not flawless,” Toru commented with regret that he didn’t hide too well.



“Indeed,” Midnight commented and turned toward the others, seeking their support. Only a few murmured in agreement.

“Why do you hate me?” Toru asked Midnight directly.

The truth keeper seemed taken aback by his assumption. “I don’t hate you. But purity is a trait of the house of Olliandran, and you’re not pure.”

He knew as much. He had been called names, all kinds, throughout his life, but never had it hurt as much as it did when Midnight said what he was saying to him right now.

“Not in that sense,” Beanstalk confirmed. “But--”

“But you don’t look a gift bug in the mouth, right?” Toru said with bitterness he didn’t conceal at all.

“You’re our tiger,” Beanstalk said. “We don’t care about those rules of pure blood.”

“Speak for yourself,” Midnight interrupted him. “Beanstalk, this is too important to give it into the hands of someone who’s not--”

Much to Toru’s surprise, Beanstalk gestured and made a whip of fire materialize from thin air. With a flick of the wrist, he sent the whip right across Midnight’s face, so fast that the air vibrated for some time after. Midnight caught his cheek, as surprised as Toru by the sudden act of violence, especially from someone who appeared to be nothing but kind-hearted.

“Go look into the fire,” Beanstalk ordered Midnight. “Repeat the creed until there are no tears left in you.”

Toru stared, utterly baffled, as Midnight just nodded, his eyes cast down, and obeyed without a word. He sat, legs crossed in front of the forge, and began swaying his body gently. *To the earth and the moon, the tide and the flow, the stars above, and the souls below, we beg you, our master, come and release us, as we speak the truth, and the truth speaks us.*

Midnight’s chant turned into a lulling murmur as he began to repeat the same words over and over.

“Maybe he didn’t mean it,” Toru said softly. While it did not look like a very severe punishment, the finality of Beanstalk’s words when telling Midnight that he should sit there until he had no tears left to cry made him pity the truth keeper.

“Don’t mind him. Midnight knows how important our mission is. And there’s a reason why I’m above everyone else down here. To keep everyone in line, while our wait is long, and our hearts grow soft.”

Midnight hunched his shoulders and trembled softly while continuing his sing-song declamation. Toru could only see his back, but he couldn’t repress the feeling that Midnight was suffering

because of him. Not so long ago, he wouldn't have cared, but Duril had taught him along the way why it was important to be kind. So, his feet moved of their own accord until he reached the punished truth keeper. He crouched by his side and pulling at his sleeve, turned it into a handkerchief of sorts, he began wiping away Midnight's tears.

Midnight started at the touch and stared at him, wide-eyed. Toru could read truthful repentance in his eyes so, without another word, he stood to his feet and then offered Midnight his hand. "Take it," he said.

"Let him complete his punishment," Beanstalk said.

"No. I'm your lord and master," Toru said. "I say he doesn't get punished. I order you to take my hand," he added, addressing to Midnight this time.

His hand was taken shyly, but he squeezed the other's hand in his bigger one and helped Midnight to his feet. Everyone was looking at him without saying a word. "What?" he asked, unnerved by that silence. "Aren't tigers supposed to be kind?"

"Not really," Beanstalk replied promptly. "You're the first of this kind of kind."

"Well, I'm a one of a kind tiger," Toru replied in the same fashion. "That's why."

Beanstalk seemed to hesitate before talking again. "Fine, Midnight is off the hook this time. But it's going to fall on him to prepare you for the trip up, up, up."

"I will be honored," Midnight said eagerly.

"Why do I need to be prepared? I am ready to climb and punish the domestikos."

"Your mission is not that easy, young tiger."

"But he is the one who needs to get punished, isn't he?" Toru insisted.

Midnight was already pulling at his sleeve, his attitude from before quickly forgotten. "I will make your skin shine golden, and no human eye will be able to see you."

"I'll be invisible?" Toru asked, excited at the possibility.

"We will be able to see you," Beanstalk corrected him. "There are a few of us up there."

"Really? What are they doing there?"

Beanstalk shrugged like it wasn't important. "They chip away, they chip away."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Toru asked, more and more curious about what the others were all about.

“They steal and eavesdrop, they break and gossip.”

“That’s not very honorable,” Toru said, scrunching up his nose.

“The fortress is very powerful,” Beanstalk said, putting up his index finger, ready for lecturing. “We might be this small, but we do our part while waiting for the tiger.”

“And how is it going?” Toru questioned. “This sabotaging thing?”

Beanstalk sighed from the depths of his tiny chest. “It keeps us busy.”

Toru decided not to press it further. Whatever these tiny criminals were up to, they were on his side, and since he didn’t have his friends with him, he could use some allies, no matter how strange they seemed. On top of it all, Duril was up there somewhere, caught in the belly of the city, and it occurred to him that he could ask Beanstalk to use his acquaintances up there to help him find the healer. “Are there really many of you up there? Do you think they could find someone if you asked them to?”

“The domestikos is not hard to find, but it is difficult to get close to him. His palace is a fortress within a fortress,” Beanstalk explained.

“I wasn’t talking about him. I was talking about someone else.”

“Who?” Beanstalk asked, examining him with curious eyes. “You haven’t yet been to the city, so how could you know someone already in there?”

“My friend Duril got in. He’s very smart and he writes very neatly,” Toru said. “The guards accepted him, but they sent the rest of us back.”

“I see, I see,” Beanstalk said with a thoughtful nod. “Is he a very close friend?”

“The closest,” Toru said, wondering if it was all right to tell the truth keepers about it all, about how much love there was between him and Duril, and Varg, and Claw. They had been expecting a lone tiger, someone capable of taking down a city on his own, and what they got was a different type altogether.

“He’ll smell of you, then,” Beanstalk concluded. “That means that the other Sakka up there will quickly find him.”

“Sakka?”

“That’s the name of our kind,” Beanstalk explained. “We didn’t tell you about it, right? So many things happening, so many things. Yes, that’s our name. When you see a Sakka--”

“It’s like you’ve seen them all?” Toru asked.

Beanstalk laughed wholeheartedly. It was difficult to imagine someone like that being capable of conjuring whips of fire out of thin air and exacting punishment on his brethren. “We’re very different, as you can see. We may look like we’re all doing the same things, but that’s not the case.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. You’re all keepers of truth, right? So that means that they will recognize me.”

“Yes, you are right about that. But don’t let them hug you too much. We’re big huggers, we. But tigers usually don’t let us hug them.”

Toru shook his head. Beanstalk’s ramblings were making his head ache. That said, he was a lot like Agatha, Elidias, and Shearah. “Are you a witch, too?”

“A witch?” Beanstalk’s large grin was splitting his face in two. “Nothing like that. Have you met a witch before?”

Toru puffed out his chest. “A few. And they talk strangely like you do sometimes.”

“Let’s not dally,” Beanstalk said suddenly, ignoring his words. Probably he didn’t like being told that he spoke like a witch. Toru didn’t intend to press the matter any further than that. And in all truth, Sakka didn’t appear as keen on weird talking as witches. “Midnight, start preparing Toru.”

Midnight seemed much pleased with the prospect and in quite a suspicious way. Toru let himself dragged away to a different underground room, which he quickly identified as a bathroom. There were mats on the floor, and a beautiful bath carved in white marble in the middle. The scent from before, the one that had made him travel so far, permeated the air, soothing the senses. He felt his body going slowly lax, as the warmth and the smell of tiger flowers began lulling him into a cocoon of safety. The most astonishing thing, however, was how tiger flowers floated through the air, without falling to the floor.

“Let’s get you in there,” Midnight suggested, pointing at the bath, from which steam rose.

Toru shrugged, not questioning whatever Sakka wanted to do with him, and began shedding his clothes. He climbed into the bath, and Midnight stood perched on the edge. He caught flowers from the air, rubbed them between his palms and then placed his hands on Toru’s shoulders and began massaging the crushed flowers into his skin.

“Is this what the preparation means?” Toru asked, enjoying the thorough job Midnight did. “I don’t see why Beanstalk would think it would be a punishment.”

Midnight laughed. “Thank you for what you did, young tiger. You set my heart true and on the right path again with just one gesture. You must be the one to save us.”

Toru remained quiet. When he had been forced to defend his position and his quest, he hadn't doubted it for a moment, but now that everyone had such expectations of him, he didn't know what to say or do. What if he wasn't the one they were expecting? What if it just happened that he was a tiger, like the others before him?

Midnight continued to crush flowers between his palms and then rub them into his skin. "This task is long and arduous. I need to make sure that you cannot be seen by those who shouldn't see you."

"It sounds more like a punishment to me, not you," Toru commented.

"Are you uncomfortable in any way?" Midnight asked and dipped his hand into the water for a moment. "Don't you like it this hot? Would you rather have it colder?"

"No, the water is not the problem. But I thought that I would start to climb soon. And I'm not used to so much comfort," Toru admitted.

"But I thought you were in search of it," Midnight pointed out. "All the tigers of your house like to be prepared at length. They are a royal house, after all. It is befitting of their station to be given all the consideration and care we can offer."

"What if I'm not from that house, after all?" Toru blurted out and regretted it right away.

Midnight's hands paused on his shoulders. "That's not true," he said with conviction. "Is it because of what I said before? I was just blind--"

"It's not because of you," Toru hurried to put his mind at ease. "But it's like I'm nothing like them."

"That's not true. You are everything like them. Well, maybe you are not as demanding and pompous as some of them. Especially the lady tigers," Midnight said and laughed. "They can be quite the taskmasters."

"Lady tigers? Do you mean there weren't only male tigers who completed the quest before?"

"No. Once in a while, a female tiger will appear. Because they are educated to fulfill the quest from an early age, and because their somewhat weaker bodies need to be honed in preparation for the challenges ahead, they grow up to be more demanding than their male counterparts. Their lives are never easy."

"Do you think any of them could have been my mom?" Toru asked quietly.

Midnight began to wash his hair and rub more of crushed petals into it, as well. "That would be difficult to tell. And it has been quite a long time since we have had a female tiger among us."

"Do all the tigers from the house of Olliandran have to fulfill the quest?"

“Only when needed,” Midnight explained. “So, there could be many generations that prepare their young for it but without any need for them to march into battle.”

“What do they do once they realize that they won’t be called?” Toru asked.

“They start preparing the following generation. It is their noble task.”

“But don’t they have regrets? Do they just sit there, in their seat of power, lazing around all day?”

Midnight laughed. “There is no more diligent house in the world than Olliandran. I doubt lazing around is anywhere near what they do day by day.”

“Do you know where it is? This place where I must be coming from?”

Midnight considered for a while. “The place is hidden. The secret is not entrusted to anyone, not even to us Sakka.”

“Why is it like that? Why do they hide?”

“Their quest is essential for the survival of the world. Should they be discovered...” Midnight trailed off.

“But I didn’t come to you from there,” Toru pointed out. “I came from faraway lands.”

“That’s true,” Midnight admitted.

“So, what do you think happened to them? Something must have happened, right?”

“I don’t know,” Midnight said quickly.

“I understand that you cannot know, but maybe... can you guess?”

“I’d rather not,” Midnight replied. “Don’t worry about that right now. You have your quest laid in front of you, young tiger. Allow me to soothe your worries.”

Toru allowed Midnight to push him under the water and kept his eyes open to stare at the golden reflections. A story of tigers began to play in front of them, like one of those puppet theatres he enjoyed so much when he had been little.

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Now that the meal was concluded, Duril waited patiently for Moth and Pie to finish washing the dishes and put them back in their cupboards so that he could start asking his questions. Finally, the two hosts sat back down at the table and looked intently at him. Pie linked his fingers and used them to support his chin, while Moth leaned forward and stared at him. Duril was beginning to suspect that Moth couldn’t see very well, and what some people might consider rude in his behavior was related to that and not some fault of character.

“Let us tell you about us,” Pie began while Moth continued to examine him with avid curiosity. “We are part of Sakka, the truth keepers here, in Scercendusa.”

“What is the truth you’re keeping?” Duril asked.

“A very important one. But we offered you something about us. Now, it’s your turn to tell us about you.”

“All right,” Duril admitted. After eating that filling lunch, both his spirit and body felt invigorated. His eyes fell again on the flowers in the vase.

“Do you know a tiger?” Pie began.

Moth turned his head toward his friend and scoffed. “Is this your question? You’re wasting a perfectly good question on something redundant. He obviously knows a tiger because he smells like one.”

“I know a tiger,” Duril replied, interrupting their little to and fro. “His name is Toru.” The moment he looked at those flowers, he found it impossible to lie.

“Toru,” Pie said with reverence. “What a beautiful name for a tiger,” he commented. “Have we ever had another by that name, Moth?” Moth shook his head, and Pie nodded with pride. “Moth has the memory of an elephant,” he praised his friend, but then laughed shortly. “With a memory like that, you’d think that we’d call him Elephant, or at least Phant, but you see, his ears are just so bad.” He laughed again, although Duril didn’t exactly understand what the source of his amusement was.

“Why do you care about tigers so much?” Duril asked.

“Is it his turn to ask another question already?” Moth demanded to know.

Pie nodded. “Yes. Make some tea. This is going to take a while.”

“There’s no need,” Duril said politely. “The meal was very satisfactory. I’m very grateful for your hospitality.”

“But tea makes tongues loose,” Pie argued. “Moth, make some tea.”

Moth was up and about without being told a third time. However, Duril could tell that he was all ears, attentive to their conversation, despite whatever Pie was saying about his hearing.

“I thought it was wine that made tongues loose,” Duril offered his take.

“You’ve never tasted our tea,” Pie pointed out.

“Does it have alcohol in it?” Duril asked, a bit surprised. These two didn’t appear to be the kind that would indulge in drinking spirits.

Pie laughed and patted his belly. “No, something better. It soothes the weary soul, our tea. Yes, it does.”

Duril was starting to think that anyone’s soul could become weary if too much time was spent in the company of those two. But in a good way, if that made any sense, and he wasn’t keen on finding any right now.

“So, what were you asking? Ah, why do we like tigers so much?”

Duril wasn’t completely sure that was his question verbatim.

“We like them,” Pie continued, “because they always save the world. The evil never dies, but it can be pushed back, and that is where the tigers of Olliandran come into play.”

“The evil? So is it here, in Scercendusa?”

“At the root of all the mortal sins and the reason why we need tigers to save the world,” Pie supplied very promptly.

Duril wasn’t entirely sure they were talking about the same thing. “Would you please tell me more?”

“No, because it is not your turn,” Pie reminded him.

Moth came back to the table with a tray on which three steaming cups lay. “Where did you meet Toru?”

“He came to Whitekeep, the place where I used to live before traveling with him and our other companions.”

“Whitekeep?” Pie and Moth exchanged a glance. “That’s very far away, indeed. What could Toru be doing so far from home?”

“Home? Do you know where Toru’s home is?”

Pie and Moth seemed to have lost track of whose turn it was to ask questions. “But of course. He belongs to the house of Olliandran, and they don’t live awfully far from here. Their seat of power is hidden from view, but they must live there because they can travel fast to here from there.”

“To Scercendusa, you mean?” Duril found all those details astonishing, to say the least.

“Now it’s called Scercendusa, but it has carried many names across the millennia. It’s always the same, always.” Pie shook his head. “The greed grows larger and larger in the hearts of humans



until the evil grabs a hold of them and doesn't want to let go. And then the tiger comes and sets the world right on its head. That's how it goes. But only tigers from the house of Olliandran are meant for the quest."

"Could it be that Toru is not of that house?" Duril asked. "As far as I know, he is an orphan."

Much to his surprise, Moth and Pie gasped in disbelief. "An orphan?" Moth stared at him, blinking, as if he couldn't understand the concept. "But the Olliandran cubs are taught from an early age how to handle peril and how to stand in the face of danger, unflinching. What could Toru have learned if he's an orphan?"

Duril considered his following words carefully. "All I know is that Toru has traveled the world so far, guided by a special scent that only he could detect."

"Do you mean, this scent?" Moth picked one flower from the vase and stuck it under Duril's nose.

"I wouldn't know. Only he could smell it," Duril pointed out the obvious.

Pie suddenly grabbed his shirt and pulled it toward his face. He sniffed loudly. "My nose doesn't lie. Moth, smell this."

"Didn't you say I didn't have a nose?" Moth mumbled morosely but obeyed anyway.

Duril allowed them their strange inspection. "Do you think that Toru smells like an Olliandran tiger?" he questioned.

"There is not one shadow of a doubt," Pie declared. "But an orphan? How came that to pass?" He let go of Duril's shirt and placed his chin in his palm, drumming his fingers against his cheek. "In all truth, he should have been here for a while, and our brethren below have kept the forge going for some time now, but still... An orphan?" It was as if Pie just couldn't wrap his head around that.

"His parents must have passed," Duril suggested. "Could it be that he was entrusted to the orphanage where he grew up?"

"An Olliandran? In an orphanage?" Moth shook his head repeatedly like he couldn't fathom such a thing. "It is impossible. Even if Toru's parents did pass away, the house is not made up only of two people by far. Those next in line would have cared for him, and so on, and so forth."

"Those next in line for what?"

"The head of the house. Toru should have been cared for by his relatives."

"What if none were alive when that happened?" Duril asked.

Moth and Pie looked at each other. "Tigershifters are resilient, moreso than many other species, and especially the house of Olliandran. It is impossible for them to die to the last one."

“Can’t you travel to this seat of power you are talking about?” Duril asked. “If the house is still standing, it will all be made clear soon enough, right?”

Pie pursed his lips. “One doesn’t simply travel to pay the house of Olliandran a courtesy visit. It is hidden from view for a reason.”

“So you don’t know how to find it.”

Pie shook his head. “We’re not allowed to know, so we don’t. The quest of saving the world is too important. The tigers of the house of Olliandran have always been adamant about never being followed.”

“And ruthless when their wish was disobeyed.”

Duril shivered slightly. Toru was brave and the greatest warrior the world had ever seen, but ruthlessness was not among his traits. “Maybe Toru is just not the one,” he said.

“If he’s not, what is he doing here? What’s his purpose? Other than having followed the scent of tiger flowers.” Pie examined him with curious eyes.

Duril sighed. “We’ve fought an evil as resilient as the sun and the moon from Whitekeep to here. He wanted to travel here in search of answers. We hope that the domestikos would be able to give them to him.”

“The domestikos?” Pie and Moth exclaimed at the same time.

“He must be in possession of great knowledge. There is no other place with as many libraries as Scercendusa,” Duril explained. “So far, we’ve only had fragments of myth to guide us. What we know is that the evil is far from vanquished. So we must soldier on.”

“Why do you keep saying ‘we’?”

Duril blushed. “I mean, it’s Toru’s quest, of course. Forgive my slip of the tongue. The rest of us just tagged along because... Because we love him,” he explained.

“The rest of you? Are there others like you with Toru?”

“No, not like me.” Duril didn’t know what they meant by that precisely. “There is also Varg, who’s a wolfshifter, and Claw, who’s a bearshifter.”

Pie seemed astonished by these revelations. “An orphan cub,” he began slowly, “a wolfshifter, a bearshifter, and a clever magic wielder...”

That was supposed to be him. Duril felt a small twinge of pride and shifted in his chair, awaiting Pie’s conclusions on the matter.

“Nothing adds up,” he exclaimed and threw his arms to the sides.

“What do you mean?” Duril asked.

“History tells us that it should all happen the same way, every time,” Pie explained. “Otherwise, how does it serve us?” It appeared as if he was talking mostly to himself.

“So, is it true that there has been another tiger before? Just like Toru?” Duril asked.

“Obviously, not like your Toru,” Pie replied. “And tigers. There have been tigers, not just one.”

Duril leaned back in his chair, surprised by that new tidbit. “What an incredible tale.”

“It’s not a tale. It’s history. Every few millennia, the world gets sick, so sick. It starts here, in this place. It poisons everything as the greed grows and grows, until it recognizes no lord or master.”

“And is that happening right now? Here?” Duril asked. “But Toru fought this evil far away from these lands.”

Pie fell quiet, so Moth stepped in. “Which doesn’t make any sense at all. The tigers know that the heart of evil beats here, and they need to tear it out of the chest of this cursed city.”

“How do they do that?” Duril asked, a slight chill making his hand tremble.

“They destroy it, of course,” came the prompt reply from Pie.

“Destroy it? But first, they drive the people away from it, don’t they?”

Duril received a look from Pie that told him pretty much that he was nothing but a lunatic.

“No, they are part of the evil that makes the city.”

“How could that be? Even the children? There must be children here, in Scercendusa, aren’t there?”

“Yes,” Pie replied. “But the evil must be destroyed.”

“Why with a sacrifice like this?” Duril realized too late that he was shouting. “And I’m not talking only about the children. There must be plenty of other innocents. Not everyone is bad.”

Pie shifted in his chair and looked at his friend for support. Moth shrugged his shoulders as if he couldn’t understand what Duril wanted, either.

“If Toru is the tiger you were waiting for, he is not going to destroy the city only to eliminate the evil from the world at the price of innocent lives,” Duril said with determination, making his hand into a fist.

“But he must,” Pie argued. “That is his destiny. A destiny fulfilled by generations and generations before him.”

“No.” Duril shook his head stubbornly. “Toru is not ruthless. He is kind.”

“A kind tiger?” Pie and Moth exchanged another loaded look. “What kind of tiger is a kind tiger?”

“A one of a kind,” Duril blurted out in frustration.

Pie and Moth appeared to consider his words very carefully. “Then he might not be from the house of Olliandran, after all,” Pie said.

“And still come here, drawn by the scent of tiger flowers?” Moth asked. “It is highly unlikely, don’t you think?”

“According to his friend the magic wielder here, when the chance to destroy the evil comes, he will not do it. Because of the kindness of his heart.”

Duril blinked a few times. “Toru will find a way. I’m telling you. He won’t leave things like that. He will vanquish the evil, but he will do it on his own terms. And why do you keep saying that the tigers before destroyed the evil? It looks like it revives anyway.”

Pie and Moth lifted their heads and stared at him, completely baffled. “That’s certainly one way to look at things,” Pie admitted, while his friend nodded in agreement.

## Chapter Twenty-One – New Friends, New Plans

They could both sense the tension in the air coming from their unwilling hosts. Varg stood to his feet and made a small gesture with his chin for Claw to follow his example. “We are thankful for the food,” he said and brought his hands together in a gesture of gratitude. “But we must find a way to get inside the city and help our friends, and dallying here is of no use to us.”

Rosalind was the first to get up. A mixture of emotions played across on her face. She appeared regretful, yet furious. “Why are all of you people like this?” she asked accusingly, looking around at her fellow tribesmen. “Who would have thought that, in our lifetime, we’d get the chance to see the miracle happen? And is this how we welcome those closest to the fire?” She gestured pointedly at Varg and Claw.

“You’re young, and you don’t know anything,” one of the elders, the same who had spoken before, intervened. “Nothing and no one gave you the right to judge us. And what do you think will happen to the rest of us, once the tiger burns down Scercendusa? We’ll become nothing but ash, dragged by the winds to the sea and the mountains, and who knows where else.”

“So let us become that,” Rosalind said passionately while clasping her hands together. “Anything is better than the life we are burdened with right now. There is nothing for us here, day after day. We just trudge and toil, drawing ever closer to our deaths.”

“It is still living,” the elder contradicted her, raising his voice. “You’re too green to understand.”

“Green. We don’t even know what that color looks like,” Rosalind spat, filled with fury.

Varg considered it an opportune moment to intervene. “Do not fight your kind for us, Rosalind. We’re only here in passing. And most of you don’t even think that our Toru is the same tiger you’ve been waiting for here, at the gates of Scercendusa for these many years. We apologize because we don’t appear capable of putting your hearts at ease. We don’t know, either, if Toru is like the ones that appear in your old history or not.”

“He must be,” Rosalind replied, and her face seemed darker, if that was possible underneath all that soot. “He’s a tiger, and he came to Scercendusa.”

“But not alone,” the elder reminded her. “He came with the likes of them,” he gestured at Varg and Claw, “and even with an orc!”

“Duril is only half-orc,” Varg argued, “and I’d say that his humanity is much greater than I’ve seen in full humans.”

“We don’t care about such things,” the elder said, barely paying Varg any attention, as if he couldn’t even stand the sight of him.

“With all due respect, if that’s the case, then we will be on our way. We need to gain entrance to the city, and that will not happen if we sit here talking to you endlessly about things we disagree on.”

Varg could tell from the corner of one eye that Claw was staring at him with unhidden admiration. He had been told plenty of times before that he had a way with words, and he didn’t mind the compliments. After all, that particular ability had helped him on more than one occasion. And now, it was one of those times when quickness of tongue proved more useful than the edge of a blade and the courage to wield it.

Claw linked one hand with his and nodded as a sign that their time there should be cut short. Varg turned on his heel. “For all that it’s worth, it was nice meeting you, Rosalind. And the rest of you,” he threw over his shoulder, “no matter what you may think of us.”

Claw walked by his side as they hurried toward the edge of The Dregs. The air there was so heavy with ash that it made even their hardy chests fill with much more difficulty than usual. It had to be true that the ones who lived there their entire lives couldn’t breathe out in the open.

“That was quite the speech you gave, puppy,” Claw commended him as soon as they were out of earshot, and none of the people of The Dregs could overhear them.

“It was the only thing I could do to achieve an even break from them. They are set in their ways, and I don’t blame them. There’s a lot of history buried in these places.”

“Apparently, not deeply enough. Should we believe that this is the house of the evil Toru has been hunting ever since he met you?” Claw’s question had been on Varg’s mind since he had heard the stories told by Rosalind.

“It is one possibility. And if it is, it means that we must be close to the last leg of our journey, and that, of course, Toru needs us more than ever.”

“We surely haven’t traveled all this way to let kitty have all the fun by defeating that evil single-handedly, right?” Claw joked good-naturedly.

Varg nodded. They had been walking fast and now they were almost out of The Dregs. The air was starting to clear, and there were no more miners around them. He filled his chest with the better air and let his breathing normalize. “That’s right, and you know it, flea bag. But we must figure out a way to get into Scercendusa, right? It doesn’t look like going through The Dregs will be an option for us.”

“I gathered that much,” Claw agreed. “Not only do the people around here not hold us close to their hearts, but this air is killing our lungs.”

“I thought so, too,” Varg agreed. “So, there may be some truth in the tale that they cannot breathe normal air, right?”

Claw's nod was accompanied by a grim frown. "This story proves to be a lot more complicated than we first thought, doesn't it? I've been with you only for a portion of the road, but still, I should have expected somehow for things to become complicated like this."

"No point in beating yourself up over it. We're lost at sea, as a figure of speech would describe our current situation. But if it is here that Toru will find his final battle against the evil that has infiltrated our world with the sole purpose of destroying it, so be it. Our goal remains the same. We must enter Scercendusa and find Duril and Toru."

"We don't even know if Toru got inside, but at least we know that our healer friend is in there," Claw commented. "Nonetheless, I'm with you, puppy." The bearshifter tilted his head back and looked at the azure sky above. "It's so difficult to fathom that only moments ago, we looked at this sky and saw it grey and unyielding."

Varg half-turned to give the smoky haze covering The Dregs another look. "Yes, it is a different world in there. It may be hard to believe, but that's how things stand."

"To think that there are people living like that, trapped."

"It was like this for a while for you, wasn't it?" Varg said, watching Claw's face. He could read there all the things the bearshifter wasn't saying out loud.

Claw nodded. "Yes," he said quietly, "but I never lost hope, even as I moved along those endless corridors with no way out in sight. I knew that someday, I would see the light and the sky again. These people have no hope; they have lost it. They just exist."

Varg patted his friend's shoulder. "Let's not dwell on the things we cannot change. It is not up to us to bring an end to their misery, and we don't even know if our good intentions wouldn't fall flat on their faces. If there is something we can do for them, we won't hesitate. That's the promise I'm making to you right now."

"I'll keep you to that." Indeed, under that rough exterior, beat a heart of gold, and Varg understood well what Claw was thinking about. He pitied those people at The Dregs and hoped that there was something that could be done for them. Varg never threw words into the wind; his promise was as real as the love he carried in his heart for all his friends.

"Now, we need to focus on how to enter the city. Let's try the other gates. We wouldn't want the guards to become suspicious of us if they see us for a second time."

"There's a lot of people pouring through those gates day after day," Claw thought out loud.

"Yes, but I have a feeling that we aren't the kind that's easy to forget."

"That much is true," Claw admitted. "Do you have a plan, puppy?"

“Not as of this moment. I need to think, but while I do that, it would be a good idea to take our place among those that are waiting to get inside the city.”

“It’s a plan as good as any, but it might have us wait a bit too long, don’t you think? In the meantime, who knows how many things could happen?”

“I completely agree with you, Claw, but what else can we do at the moment? We need to put these melons,” he gestured toward his head, “to good use.”

“I have an idea,” Claw announced. “It might not work, but it’s worth a try. Now, tell me, when all these strangers are looking at us, what do you think they see?”

“Two very hairy men?” Varg asked with a broad smile.

Claw flexed his right arm. “They see brawn, puppy. And brawn can be used for many things, some more unsavory than others. What do you say we begin offering our services to the highest bidder? The queue is rather long, and I bet that some people are getting rather bored while waiting.”

“What do you have in mind?” Varg asked.

Claw grinned and then winked at him. “I believe it would be a good idea to offer these bored people some well-deserved entertainment.”

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“I need to go back to Master Granius’ house,” Duril said as he got up from the table. He wasn’t very keen on returning to those stacks of papers, but it was the closest thing he had in terms of shelter and a job that was supposed to guarantee some sort of livelihood, too.

“I will take you there,” Pie assured him. “And don’t worry about those documents. They’re as good as done.”

“How? I barely put pen on paper, and I’m not a very fast scribe,” Duril explained. “Ah, is it your skill that’s going to be at work now?”

“No, not quite,” Pie said, but then he grabbed Duril’s hand and blew air over his fingers. “Now, you can even doze off, and those piles and piles of papers will tally up themselves.”

“And you still won’t call it magic,” Duril pointed out. “I’m happy that I’ve gotten to know you, but how am I going to help Toru?”

“The scent is very strong,” Pie explained. “By now, he must have gotten to the source.”

“What is the source?” Duril asked. “Is it this vase?” He pointed at the beautiful flowers trembling inside their container of water, although the air in the room was perfectly still.



“No, no, those are just flowers in a vase,” Moth intervened. “Our brethren wait for Toru. They pluck the flowers and throw them into the big fire, so that’s where he’s going to go.”

“He wasn’t allowed into the city. How do you think he’ll be able to get inside?” Duril questioned.

“It’s not very hard, but it’s not easy, either. Toru must be the one, and if he’s the one, he’s going to find the source,” Pie added with plenty of conviction. “What will happen then is up to him, but our kind will gain entrance into the city for him.”

“Then do you know how I can reunite with him? Can you point me to where I must go?”

Pie and Moth traded a glance. “The place is secret. We cannot do that.”

“Don’t you trust me?” Duril asked, a bit surprised.

“It’s not like that. We could be followed, and then, our kind could be destroyed for good. The tiger can see about the quest himself, but... forgive us for wanting to survive.”

“That’s understandable,” Duril said quickly. “When I was with you earlier, Pie, those guards, they were searching for you, weren’t they?”

Pie nodded. “They are always out hunting us. But we will try to find a way so that you can reach Toru. And we would like to see him, too.” His face lit up with tenderness as he said those words. Duril understood him completely. These people didn’t even know Toru, and they already loved him.

There was another reason why he wanted them all to meet Toru. They were speaking of a bloody history during which Toru’s ancestors had burned the same place to the ground over and over. Duril knew very well that Toru would never agree to that sort of sacrifice, and for him to find a way to vanquish the evil that wanted to take over the world, all the help in the world was needed. Duril liked to believe that he would be a part of that, as well, and he didn’t doubt, for one moment, that Pie and Moth felt the same, whether they spoke for all Sakka or not.

“How do the guards know about you? Or is it because you steal apples that they want to catch you?” he asked.

Pie made a very guilty face. “I don’t only steal apples,” he blurted out. Then, he seemed to remember something. “The guards hunt us because Ewart Kona is a very sly, very dangerous man. He isn’t supposed to know about us. But domestikos after domestikos, they have gotten closer and closer to the truth. And rumor has it,” Pie dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “that the domestikoi of Scercendusa began to take a vow, many centuries ago, that their city would not fail as its predecessors have. That they would be the force that would stop the tiger from destroying it.”

Duril felt a short unpleasant chill travel down his spine at those words. “Toru thought the domestikos would answer the questions he needs to find answers for. Now, it seems as if he is walking straight into a trap. I need to warn him.”

“Don’t worry, he will be warned,” Pie assured him. “His only way to get into the city is with the help of Sakka, and that means that he will know the truth about the domestikos before he sets foot in Scercendusa.”

Duril hesitated for a bit before asking his next question. “Toru is amazing,” he said slowly. “I’ve never met someone as brave as he is. But he is just one. How is he supposed to take on the entire city? It seems enormous, and all I’ve seen of it is just a small part. Does he only need to kill the domestikos?” His last words were filled with anxiety; according to what he knew, the domestikos was an old man, even if he was one who still sat upright in the saddle. Toru wouldn’t kill someone like that.

“Killing the domestikos is not that important,” Pie said. “I mean, he is a bad man, and the world would be better if Toru got rid of Ewart Kona, but Toru needs him so that he can learn where the evil lies. That’s his purpose, not dealing with a mere mortal like the domestikos.”

“Why is the domestikos hiding the evil? Is that what he does?” Duril asked.

“You could say that,” Pie replied. “It is the guarantee of his power on this earth. We do not know what the evil promised him and those before him. We do not know if it speaks to the domestikos. Ewart Kona keeps an open house, but a closed heart. And there are places, deep inside his palace, where no one is allowed to go but him.”

Duril pondered for a bit. “We’ve always called it the evil, because we don’t know if it has a name. But you know of it and have known for a very long time. Is there a name associated with it?”

Pie looked at Moth, and Moth looked at Pie. “If we tell you its name,” Moth began, “then you will be bound by fate to face it. That is why we don’t speak its name in front of others.”

“I think I’m beyond that,” Duril said simply. “I’ve gone against it before while by Toru’s side.”

Moth still seemed to waver, uncertain if he should say aloud the name of the entity that had, so far, dragged them across the world. Eventually, he leaned closer and gestured for Duril to bend low enough so that they were at the same level. “Hekastfet,” Moth whispered so quietly that Duril almost thought he missed it.

He nodded solemnly. “Do you believe Toru will know its name, as well?”

“He doesn’t need to as long as he vanquishes it, but if he asks, Sakka that are taking care of him will surely tell him.”

Duril repeated the abhorred name in his mind a few times.

“Don’t ever speak its name,” Pie warned him. “Everyone who hears it will share the same fate. And not everyone is destined to survive meeting it face to face.”

“Toru, like his ancestors, is destined to destroy it,” Duril pointed out.

“Yes, yes, he is,” Pie agreed. “And you must be, as well, since you’ve survived this far. But do not let others share your fate, as there’s no guarantee that they are meant to live another day after facing the darkest evil of all time.”

Duril thought of Varg and Claw. They had to be just like him, destined to survive, but he understood the warning in what Pie and Moth told him. Far from him to get anyone else involved, as the impending doom announced by Sakka and their ancient history was enough to send icy chills down his back.

“What are we going to do next?” he asked. He had announced his desire to go back to Master Granius’ house, but that wasn’t his destiny. Only that, right now, he didn’t know what his destiny had in store for him.

“We’ll meet you tomorrow at lunch hour, when your master is, once more, filling his belly with the best food in Scercendusa.”

“He doesn’t seem to be a noble. Does he truly get to eat the best food in Scercendusa?” Duril expressed his wonder out loud.

“There are many things in Scercendusa that are not quite as they seem,” Pie said in a secretive voice.

“Do you mean Master Granius is a noble, after all?” Duril asked.

“No, nothing like that,” Pie said and waved dismissively. “But there are places where greed is rewarded, and that’s what your master plays at.”

“In other words,” Moth intervened, “every day, he goes to a different place where they serve food and offers his challenge. If he eats more than all the patrons being served at that hour, he doesn’t have to pay a dime.”

“And do many owners of such places accept this challenge?”

“More than you would think.” Pie hooked his thumbs under the straps of his overalls. “Apparently, it attracts more customers to have an eat-it-all like that capable of gobbling down all sorts of foods without regurgitating a single bite.”

Duril couldn’t suppress a disgusted expression. “I don’t know what to think about such behavior.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s what will help you ditch your work around noon every day so that we can plan on helping our tiger succeed,” Pie said. “Your master spends hours at lunch, and not always in a single place.”

“He doesn’t get sick at all?” Duril asked, still finding it difficult to wrap his head around something like that. “It seems like a bad habit that will get the best of him some day.”

“That’s for Master Granius to worry about, don’t you think? And try as you might, you wouldn’t be able to convince him to give up his habits. Like many people here, he has only one mistress, and that’s greed.”

“Not everyone in Scercendusa is like that,” Duril protested, although he couldn’t say that he knew anyone in Scercendusa whatsoever. Still, he didn’t believe it possible for the city to contain only people like Granius. Such a thing seemed unfathomable, or maybe he didn’t know a lot about the world and cities that seem to stretch their towers as high as the sky.

“That may be so, that may be so,” Pie chanted and grabbed his arm. “Now let’s take you back so that you can work on your chores.”

Duril didn’t have time to say goodbye to Moth before the small kitchen disappeared and the next thing he knew, he found himself inside the stuffy room, at the desk, with piles of papers in front of him. He blinked a few times in disbelief and looked around for any sign of Pie, only to be met by nothing but silence.

It wasn’t possible that he had fallen asleep and imagined the whole thing, was it? He touched one of the piles and gasped in surprise. The papers arranged themselves neatly in front of him, seemingly of their own volition, and his hand, guided by an invisible force, danced over the tome, writing effortlessly, in small, neat letters, everything they contained.

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The story danced as if on a carousel, displaying pictures in front of him, stills from different lives, and Toru lay there, completely mesmerized. He didn’t feel the water, as a warm weight that wasn’t holding him down, but was only cradling him gently, helping him relax. He watched a tiger sitting on top of a black fortress in fascination, and as each moment passed, the tiger grew bigger, and the black fortress crumbled under his majestic paws, while the expression in his eyes remained unmoved. It was a big tiger, too, the biggest he had ever seen in his life, and he felt breathless.

Another picture followed and this one presented a tiger with his maw open wide, spitting fire from the depths of his throat. An old city with tall towers beautifully decorated with intricate stone lace was melting under that breath of fire, turned into nothing but a molten mass that would never be mistaken for the beautiful construction that had soared into the air only moments before.

The picture changed again, and this time, Toru started at the sight. The tiger in it was walking down a long corridor, and on all sides, blood was pouring down the walls. On taking a closer look, Toru realized that the tiger was walking over bones and skulls, crushing them under his paws, while his eyes burned red, filled with bloodlust.

With a gasp, Toru forced himself back to the surface. "I saw things," he told Midnight.

The Sakka just nodded solemnly. "During preparation, it is possible to see the deeds of your ancestors."

"But," Toru said and looked at his own hands emerging from under the water, now gleaming gold, "there was so much death and destruction."

"That is your fate," Midnight said. "Hekastfet cannot be eliminated otherwise."

"Hekastfet?"

"I keep forgetting that you didn't receive the same education as the other tigers before you," Midnight said apologetically. "It is the name of the entity you must vanquish. It lives in the heart of Scercendusa now, plaguing the mind and dreams of the domestikos."

"Is Ewart Kona nothing but its victim, then?" Toru asked, feeling pity for the old domestikos.

"Do not make the mistake of having mercy on him. He is a tool, a powerful one, but he has molded himself willingly into the most useful tool he can be. Ewart Kona comes from a long line of domestikoi, and he believes his destiny is to keep the tiger away from Scercendusa by any means necessary."

"I don't understand most of what you're saying," Toru mumbled, feeling inadequate to fulfill his so-called destiny. Would he be able to walk on dead people like that, spit fire to melt towers, and crush an entire world under his paws?

Midnight caressed his hair and continued to wash it with vigor. "You followed the scent here. We do not doubt you are the one. Even if you didn't receive the same education as the others before you, it must be in your blood. When you meet Hekastfet, you will know what to do."

"Destroy it? And bring down Scercendusa, just like that? Just like the others did... before me?"

Midnight sighed. "You are different, and that is the truth, Toru. You are kind, and you didn't let me go blind by looking into the fire--"

"You would have gone blind?" Toru exclaimed. "I thought... I don't think I like Beanstalk very much now."

“Even if Beanstalk had taken pity on me, I wouldn’t have had the courage to abandon the sacred fire once it claimed me,” Midnight said. “And he would have tried to stop me. Only by then it would have been too late.”

Toru didn’t pretend he understood why Sakka were so intense in their convictions. Everything was new to him, and now he was all the more grateful that he had had the idea of saving Midnight from such a horrible fate. “Is Beanstalk always so hard on the rest of you?”

“Only once a century,” Midnight explained. “He is the kindest master we’ve ever had. Master is not even the correct word to use to describe him. He just cares about the quest more than everyone else. And he’s right.”

“Wait, do you mean that there were other masters before Beanstalk?”

“A few. Some got caught. Beanstalk risks the most, by going in and out.”

“What do you mean, caught? By whom?”

“By the guards. The domestikos has never been keen on our kind. We’re hard to destroy, but there are ways.” Midnight fell silent, under the weight of that knowledge. Toru felt guilty for taking so long to get there. “But let’s not talk about all that. I believe you are ready. Under the light of the moon, and the kiss of the sun, only the true believers will see you.”

Toru got out of the bath and realized that he didn’t need a towel. His entire skin was covered with a thin layer of gold and he moved through the air, feeling no breeze, no discomfort or cold of any kind. “What do I have to do next?” he asked.

Midnight took his hand. “Now, you are ready to climb. All those dark-hearted guards won’t see you. You must reach Ewart Kona’s palace. In there, you need to find the room where Hekastfet lies in wait.”

“And then I destroy it,” Toru said with determination.

“It’s going to put up a fight. And the fight will be long and arduous.”

“But I will destroy it,” Toru insisted. “I don’t have to destroy the city.”

“You will have to,” Midnight contradicted him. “Hekastfet will pour out and infiltrate through everywhere, and everyone you see will become an enemy.”

“Even you?”

“No, not us. We were chosen,” Midnight said. “Remember, Toru, no one in Scercendusa is your friend.”

“I have Duril there. He’s there, and he’s my friend. More than a friend.”

“Then, he’ll see you, and you’ll see him,” Midnight said. “If there’s no evil in his heart, none whatsoever, he’ll live.”

Toru wasn’t convinced he liked any of what he was hearing, but he trusted himself. If Duril was there, and he was, Toru wouldn’t destroy the city, not while it contained the one he loved the most hidden deep in its heart. Midnight could be wrong, and Toru knew he wasn’t anything like those tigers before him. For starters, he didn’t breathe fire, and he didn’t have paws as large as a castle, descending from the sky to crush everything into dust.

“I’m ready to climb,” he said.

Midnight hurried to the door and held it open for him. Toru walked through it and found himself face to face with all the Sakka. They appeared to be waiting for him, now that they no longer had to feed the fire and create the scent that had brought him here. A soft gasp of awe moved through them, and Beanstalk walked in front of them. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked Toru up and down. “A glorious sight for our tired eyes, young tiger, that’s what you are. Let us help you get to the surface.” Beanstalk gestured for him to follow, and he did.

The others followed at a distance, and Toru could hear that they were commenting on his looks. Of course, he couldn’t understand a single word, but that didn’t keep him from getting what they meant in a way that he couldn’t explain.

Soon enough, they stopped in front of what looked like a tall chimney. Inside it, Toru observed steps carved in the stone. “Through here,” Beanstalk said. “You are saving us. We won’t see you again, so just let me... us,” he added, choking back tears, “give you a hug.”

Toru wasn’t expecting such an outpouring of emotion from Beanstalk, but accepted the hug without another word. The rest of them followed, their thin arms claspng him briefly.

“Why do you say that you won’t see me again?”

“Because the tiger always leaves after,” Beanstalk explained. “Our role here is done.”

Toru moved into the chimney and put one hand and one foot on the steps carved in the wall. “You’re wrong about one thing, Beanstalk. I don’t know about your role and whatnot, but when I make friends, I make a promise that I’ll come back to see them again, even if it takes me a lifetime.”

Beanstalk let out a small, surprised sound. “Are we your friends?”

Toru smiled as he took the first step and hooked his hand on a different step. “Of course you are. No one before has ever given me a nicer bath.”

He started climbing without another look back.

## Chapter Twenty-Two – Every Beating Heart

That must have been some sort of magical bath, Toru thought as he climbed higher and higher, while the patch of sky above him grew larger and larger. It was as if he only needed to look at that fragment of blue above and it gave him the power he needed to climb, which he did without looking back once. He felt more powerful than ever, and it had to be linked to the experience he had just had with the Sakka. So many things he didn't know, so many about his past, and yet, he believed now in his fate more than at any time before. He was no longer like the leaves torn from the branches and carried by the wind wherever the whims of destiny decided. He now had a purpose, a noble one, even if something inside him told him that he wouldn't do all those horrible things the other tigers before him had done. He wasn't like any other tiger. He hadn't been born and raised in a place with teachers, and unfathomable luxuries, and... parents of his own.

No, he was Toru, a tiger like no other, who carried the dust of the road with him, and a will to vanquish the evil the way he chose to. No one else in the world was allowed to tell him what to do.

Hekastfet, he whispered in his mind. That was a name he would never forget. He could still recall, in vivid colors and feelings, the pain Varg had suffered at losing most of his pack, and how Duril had wept at the destruction of Whitekeep, even if so many people had been mean to him there. They had saved a few, like Rory and the old witch Agatha, but had they always done their best? The question tormented him now and then, tempering some of the naiveté he had indulged in before when he had had no friends, no one to love, and no one to fight for.

Toru could feel a sweet breeze on his face. The air above was stirred by a small breeze. He wondered briefly how high he was already. From the distance, he had observed Scercendusa, marveled at its white walls rising as high as the sky. Soon, he would be there, at the top of the world, and he would look down and see everyone small as if they didn't matter.

But they did. Of that simple thing, Toru was certain. He would defeat the evil that had taken Varg's pack away from the valiant wolfshifter and avenge Duril's tears, as well as all the people of Whitekeep that hadn't deserved to meet a horrible end. And not only them. Behind him, sitting on his shoulders without being a burden, stood all the victims of Hekastfet, every beating heart that was forced to stop beating because of that evil. He whispered the name under his breath, trying it out on his tongue. He would look the evil in the face and let it know everything it deserved to meet its end for, all its bad deeds.

Armed with that righteous fury, Toru pushed himself up. The sky opened wide above him, and he found himself on a high wall, from which he could see far beyond The Dregs, over plains of green to the mountains in the distance. The sight took his breath away for a moment. After the darkness in which the Sakka carried out their noble duty, all that brightness was blinding. His eyes adjusted quickly, and he avidly began to observe his surroundings.



Guards were patrolling the wall, but at a leisurely pace, like they didn't expect an attack at all. That had to be the pride and arrogance of a city like Scercendusa, distilled and instilled into its servants, as well. Toru tiptoed behind a group of guards, resisting the temptation to knock one's helmet off just to see them jumping, all startled, not knowing where the enemy was.

He kept himself from doing that. He wasn't there to play, and the importance of his duty strengthened in his mind. It was true what the Sakka had told him about being invisible to those with dark hearts, which meant that he could listen in without being noticed. He walked right behind the group, hoping they would say something that would be of use to him.

The guards were silent, much to his dismay, but, for the moment, he didn't know what other path to take. His goal was to reach Ewart Kona's palace. It should be hard to miss, and it had to be a tall building.

The group stopped in front of another. The guards exchanged a few words with the newcomers. It appeared that they were being replaced in their duty. Toru decided to stick with the relieved group who, now that they no longer had to patrol the walls, appeared a lot more lively. By what they were saying, they were heading over to a local inn for a pint and a slice of pie. Toru wondered briefly if he could snatch some from the table without being noticed. Seeing how he was invisible to them, it should be a walk in the park, but something kept him from putting his plan in motion. The Sakka had told him that he wouldn't be seen by these blackened souls, but if he stole something, that meant that he wouldn't be so pure, either, and what if that led to him being no longer invisible to the others?

It was enough to make him stave off his hunger for the moment. There would be a time for pies later. And Duril could make him the most delicious food once he was done with this quest of saving everyone from the hands of the evil these people didn't even know existed.

The most challenging part of his disguise was that he had to step out of the way whenever people walked toward him. Since they couldn't see him, they couldn't be impressed by his stature, either, so they tried to walk right through him, instead of around him. Eventually, he decided to walk in the shadow of the biggest fellow of the guards, and this way, he didn't have to dodge the other folk that happened to be roaming the streets at that hour.

It took Toru some time to realize that he hadn't needed to descend as many stairs as he had climbed to get there, in that open square that appeared to connect with dozens of streets that ran from it like streams down a mountain. They were still quite high up, which made him wonder how Scercendusa was built, and why when Duril had passed through, no stairs of any kind had been in view.

His curiosity would be satisfied soon enough. He followed the guards closely, in the hope they would say something about where he could find Ewart Kona's palace. It had to be an impressive place, and one not easy to miss, he imagined. The guards stopped at the end of one of the many

streets, and only then did Toru realize that they ran down quite abruptly, and the people teeming on the next level already seemed little from there.

He stopped and considered his options. Forced to jump to one side so that the flow of human beings didn't end up bottlenecking behind him, he realized that he had gone about this the wrong way. Cautious not to get in the path of the other city folk, he climbed on a bench and looked around.

When he saw it, he understood that there was only one explanation why he had missed it in the first place. As busy as he had been not being noticed, he had kept his eyes only in front of him, without lifting them up once.

Stairs of granite that seemed to run to infinity allowed those courageous enough to undertake the trip and access a majestic construction that stood even higher than the walls and towers of Scercendusa. Its highest peak seemed to pierce the sky, and Toru had to admit to himself that he had never seen such a grandiose sight in his life. The Sakka must have known that his path up the hidden ladder would take him close to the home of Scercendusa's domestikos.

At first glance, the palace where the ruler of the city resided appeared to cover the sky. One had to tip his or her head back quite awkwardly at an uncomfortable angle to understand the greatness of the building. As impressive as its height and width were, the façade appeared to aim for the completely opposite effect. While the walls and towers were of a stark white, painted like pure columns against the clear summer sky, the palace was carved from dark grey granite, carrying with it a solemn air that the other buildings around it didn't share. It also stood alone, perched at the top of the stairs. From that vantage point, it appeared to float above the city, an ominous presence dominating and ruling it. Toru didn't need anyone to tell him that he had found Ewart Kona's home.

The Sakka had told him that gaining access to the palace would be easy, as the domestikos liked to appear a kind ruler in the eyes and minds of his subjects. It was for that reason that the rulers of Scercendusa had preferred the titles of domestikoi instead of that of kings. They were servants of the city, of the people living within its walls, and therefore their power was lent to them by the heart and soul of Scercendusa.

It sounded quite untrue to Toru's ears, that story of kind rulers. The angles of the palace were cut sharp, and the many towers were pointing toward the sky like spears. A frightened stare at the building could easily transform it into a monster with many limbs, armed to the teeth, ready to exact punishment on the unknowing people living at its feet.

He jumped off the bench and headed toward the flight of stairs. To make his trip shorter, he quickly shifted and began to eat up the climb with grace and ease. It was easy to notice, even from the corner of one eye, that there were few people willing to take the demanding path to the top only so that they could see the palace from up close.

The sun was merciless at that hour. Toru felt his tongue turning as dry as sandpaper in his mouth, as he climbed and climbed. Beanstalk and Midnight hadn't told him if the others could hear him, as his breathing was getting heavier. By how the sparse climbers didn't appear to pay him any attention when he flew past them, he could tell that he was, indeed, invisible to them, and that they couldn't hear him, either.

The solemnity of the palace standing proud at the top of the climb seemed to have an effect on its visitors even before they could reach their destination. Their clothes were dark and ran from their shoulders to their feet like shapeless aprons, as if any speck of uncovered skin was considered an offense to the powers that be. Toru observed briefly the veils wrapped around their heads that barely allowed them to breathe, and how even their hands were obscured from view by long sleeves and gloves.

Were such clothes mandatory for those who dared to visit the ruler of the city? Toru had never been to a place as grand as Scercendusa, but so far, he couldn't say that he liked what he saw.

His quest wasn't to figure out why men and women swathed themselves in layers and layers of clothing only so that they could get a glimpse of the domestikos. No, his purpose was to get inside the palace, and sneak inside the room where Hekastfet was held in high esteem by a human who didn't understand the foolishness of his actions.

Guards in black armor stood at the tall doors that allowed visitors to enter the palace. They were wide open at this hour, and the people moved silently over the polished floors, easily being swallowed by the dark maw reaching out to them from the inside.

Toru took a deep breath and proceeded to examine the guards. They were taller than many other humans he had encountered in his life, and they could even rival shapeshifters. Toru had to wonder if they weren't humans, after all, and began sniffing around. No, there was no scent of shifters to worry about, so eventually, he decided to walk inside and follow the example of all the others who were there to see Ewart Kona.

The tall doors opened into a large room, at the end of which stood an altar. Toru moved quickly, ignoring the others who advanced across the floor at the same pace they had used to get there. Everything had the air of a procession, and the light from the candles burning lent the entire room a sinister appeal.

He shifted back into his human shape and climbed the few stairs to the altar in the blink of an eye. Curious of what he was about to see, he leaned over the altar.

Only then he realized that it wasn't an altar as he had imagined. No, it was a small fountain, buried inside tight tall walls, and petals swirled around in the water. The sight made Toru frown. He recognized those colors; after all, he had just seen the likes of them only earlier today. What was a fountain strewn with petals of tiger flowers doing at the heart of Ewart Kona's palace?

He did not allow his mind to wonder at that oddity too long. Firm steps came quickly at him from behind the altar. When Toru raised his eyes to see who was there, daring to make noise, when everyone else was silent, he realized that he was looking at the man he had been searching for. There was no doubt in his mind.

Ewart Kona appeared tall in dark garments that echoed the style of dress of those coming there in search of an audience. He held his hands hidden under a fold of the long robe that ran from his shoulders to the floor. Toru couldn't determine whether he also wore gloves, but it was clear that he kept his face bare, unlike the others.

His face was creased with wrinkles, but he still had plenty of gray hair on his head. Toru was quite surprised at that full head of hair. Ewart Kona had thick eyebrows that knit together as his dark intelligent eyes observed the newcomers. His thin colorless lips were curled into a benevolent smile that, at a closer look, didn't reach his eyes. Not that his eyes were malevolent; no, they were just searching as if he expected something to be gleaned from scrutinizing the people who walked in there, hoping for something that was as intangible as it was impossible. Toru could only guess what those humans were after; by their prostrate demeanor as soon as they were inside, he assumed that they sought salvation. He doubted that Ewart Kona was capable of giving them that.

"Come closer, good people," the domestikos urged those already inside. His hands hovered over the tiny fountain, and Toru found himself taking a few steps back. A keen sense of danger told him that it wasn't wise of him to stay so close to Ewart Kona. Slowly, he moved backward until he reached one of the tall colonnades and hid behind a column. From there, he only peeked out so that he could watch what would come next. Beanstalk would probably tell him that he was silly to stay out of sight like that when he was as good as invisible.

Ewart Kona dipped his hands into the small fountain and then raised them, gesturing for people to come near. No, he didn't cover his hands, either. One of the people stepped forward and began speaking in a subdued voice. Toru had to strain his hearing to catch what was said. The petitioner was a woman whose only child was suffering from a fever that hadn't gone down for days now. The domestikos listened patiently and, when the woman finished, he took her gloved hands into his and pressed them together for a moment. "I will send my personal physician to your house by tonight. I wish your son the best of health and a long life."

The woman thanked him profusely and walked backward while making feverish bows. Ewart Kona raised a hand in blessing and smiled, the same smile as before. Toru forgot to stay completely obscured from view and, for a moment, when the domestikos looked over, he appeared to be looking straight at him. Toru withdrew into the shadow of the colonnade, his heart beating wildly. It was impossible for Ewart Kona to see him, right?

The next person was a man who had a quarrel with a neighbor about a shared property. Ewart Kona promised him that an expert from the palace would arrive later to settle the situation and enforce the law.

It went like that for a while, and Toru could feel himself becoming restless. Anything the petitioners came up with, the domestikos appeared to have the solution for at his fingertips. From time to time, Ewart Kona dipped his hands in the fountain water and held his subjects' hands. They all left, thanking him profusely.

If he was such a great ruler, how come so few people came to see him? Toru let his mind turn the possibilities on all sides while Ewart Kona ministered to his petitioners. He moved around, chasing the shadows at each corner, eager to scout the place and find its weaknesses. What the domestikos did to ensure that his subjects loved him was of little to no interest to him.

There were two doors leading out of the main room, and Toru was itching to see where they lead. The belly of the palace had to be enormous if he were to take into account the outside appearance of the majestic building. Still, while Ewart Kona let his agile eyes roam around, he couldn't just disappear through one of the doors. In the solemn atmosphere surrounding the domestikos' reception of his subjects, surely a door opening and closing was bound to draw attention.

Toru scratched his head and then decided that it would be a good idea to go round the fountain and see where the domestikos had emerged from earlier. It didn't seem like he had used either of the two doors, which could only mean that there was a third. Much to his dismay, the walls behind Ewart Kona were smooth as marble, and there was no sign of a door. He moved his hands over the even surface, in search of a secret lever that would take him to a passage leading inside the palace.

The sparse crowd continued to grow thinner, and Toru realized that the day of receiving guests was getting closer to its end for the domestikos. That meant that his wait was also getting close to its end, so he stopped his searching, determined to wait for Ewart Kona to move through the secret entrance. He wouldn't know that he had someone following him closely.

The guards closed the doors behind the last visitors with a loud screech. Toru tensed as he waited for the domestikos to move away from the fountain. The room was veiled in silence like a blanket.

He stared at Ewart Kona's back as he dried his hands by swinging them a few times.

"I am glad to finally see you here," the domestikos began without turning, "Toru."

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Varg took a tumble and then propelled himself back to his feet, just as Claw rolled toward him with a growl. The crowd broke into a roar of awe and surprise. So far, Claw's plan had worked like a charm. Their fame was bound to reach the gates, just as news of all sorts always traveled. Sure thing, they had drawn quite the crowd in the meantime, and they were getting a bit frayed around the edges, but he only had to remind himself that Toru must be facing real dangers right now, and the thought gave him renewed strength to dodge Claw's ruthless, even if feigned, attacks.

The crowd suddenly parted, and a group of guards shoved through the sea of people. “Fighting is not allowed outside the gates,” the head of the guard bellowed, walking toward them with a spear in his hand.

Varg immediately put his hands up, and Claw did the same. The guard must have expected resistance from them, because he swung the spear indecisively for a few moments. “You two,” he barked, “where are you from?”

Claw had warned him that their plan might not work as planned to the letter, and there was a chance that they would be thrown in a dungeon, somewhere, but Varg had told him that waiting to go through the gates like everyone else, with a slim chance of being allowed inside, was not a possible route for them.

“We’re from an old place called Whitekeep,” Varg said, counting on the guard’s ignorance. “We’re a breed of warriors. There’s nothing else we know to do but fight.”

The guard observed him with suspicious eyes and began circling them like he needed to evaluate their strength and their value. Varg was counting on it, after Claw had explained the plan to him. Now, it all hung by a thread and on the guard’s willingness to offer them a chance of proving their claims in one of the many fighting pits Scercendusa was known for. Even if Claw had never been there, his knowledge of the place came from travelers of long times past supplemented well by what Shearah had shared with them.

“Any hidden wounds? Diseases?” the guard asked, while poking them with the tip of his spear.

Varg tensed, ready to snap the guard’s head off if he insisted too much with that spear. “We’re healthy like oxen,” he said. “We’ve been through many battles, but we’ve also been lucky so far. Not counting a few scratches here and there,” he added for good measure.

The guard didn’t appear to appreciate his sense of humor too much. He knocked Varg on the back of the head with a hand wrapped in chainmail, not too hard, but as if to draw the attention of an animal that still needed taming.

“You two are coming with us,” the guard decided and gestured at his subordinates who quickly surrounded them and tied their arms behind their backs with thick rope.

He turned his head just enough to notice Claw’s satisfied grin. They were tied up, but all appeared to be going according to their plans.

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“Was this what you had in mind?” Varg asked and walked over to one of the tall, grated openings that served as windows. The sun was still high in the sky, which meant that dusk was yet to come.

They had been thrown into an enclosure that looked half like a prison cell, and half like a place for keeping animals before slaughter. Varg thought that it was something in-between the two by the unpleasant smell of urine that wafted to them from the corners. He couldn't quite reach the grates so that he could stare outside, so he looked at Claw and gestured with his chin. "Do you think you could lift me up?"

Claw didn't hesitate for a moment, and Varg laughed as he was invited to climb on the broad shoulders and was then lifted through the air like he weighed nothing. "Let me know what you see, and I'll tell you if it's what I had in mind or not."

Varg peered through the grates. "Well, it looks like an old arena. Do you think we're going to be tonight's entertainment?"

"Or food for tonight's entertainment. Take your pick," Claw replied. "Can you see anyone?"

"Not right now. The place looks as good as deserted." The words died on his tongue as a sound like hooves hitting against closed gates echoed from one side. Varg held on to the grate with the strength of his arms so he could get as close as possible. His eyes searched for the source of the noise, and it didn't take him long to find it. "I think I might take both picks," he said grimly, as a small herd of hoofed creatures rushed into the arena, making the yellow dust rise.

"I had a hunch you might say that," Claw replied in the same fashion. "Tell me what you see."

"For starters, I see some really ugly animals," Varg began. "I cannot say that I've seen their like before. There's one tough horn growing right above their maws, and they really have teeth." There was a possibility that the frightening looking creatures ate nothing but grass, but that thought was dashed from his mind, when one of them, overcome by a sudden fit of rage, turned toward one of the other beasts and sank its teeth in the side of its neck. "And it looks like they have no qualms about eating each other when hungry."

"How many are there?"

Varg counted six. "Six, no, five," he replied. "One is down, and it doesn't look like it's going to get up. Definitely not." The other beasts joined the initial attacker, and they were now tearing the weakest of them to bits. The blood soaked the yellow dust covering the arena, and when the herd finished its ghastly meal, nothing but bones, fur and brown stains were left on the ground.

"The good news is," he told Claw, "that for now, they appear to be fed."

Claw helped him down. Then, they looked at each other, both strategizing, without a doubt. "A staged carnage," the bearshifter said slowly.

"You think?" Varg asked with a snort. "But it's not like we haven't been in this kind of situation before. We fought the orcs of Zukh Kalegh."

“Indeed,” Claw agreed. “But these strange cows you saw out there are not what worries me.”

“What worries you?” Varg asked bluntly.

Claw leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. “A traveler once told me about what a staged carnage looked like in Scercendusa. Everyone at the inn at that moment stared at him wide-eyed as he told us about this kind of entertainment. I thought he was making things up, or at least some of them. You see, dear friend, a city like this has the means to gather wild beasts from all over the world. And, in exchange for a pittance, the crowds of Scercendusa can enjoy watching a fight to the death, as wild beasts are thrown into the pit in waves.”

Varg nodded. He thought as much. The sight of those bloodthirsty creatures was enough to send the fear of all that was holy into any man. Good thing they weren’t simple men; they were shapeshifters, but they couldn’t use all their powers without putting themselves at an even greater risk. And it was always a good idea to know beforehand what to wait for.

“And who’s the winner? The wild beasts that last the longest in the arena?” he asked.

“We need to make sure that those mighty beasts are us, and not some other creatures,” Claw confirmed.

Varg stretched, yawned, and then slid down the wall until he was in a seated position. “Then taking a nap would serve us just right.”

“Good thinking,” Claw agreed. He sat down by his side and wrapped one arm around his shoulders. “Sleep tight, puppy, and don’t let any of them crawling bugs around bite you. We should save every drop of blood and patch of skin for what awaits us.”

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Master Granius stumbled into the old building a while after Duril was back at his desk, as if he had never left it to go on such a strange adventure; travelling without moving and meeting strange people who knew about Toru’s secret quest.

His master and employer appeared to have imbibed strong spirits as well as enormous amounts of food, and while he wasn’t squeamish by nature, Duril had to scrunch up his nose at the overpowering smell coming from Granius. His robe was stained in front, and it looked like he hadn’t bothered with table manners at all while indulging in his long lunch.

“Hard at work, Decottieri?” Granius asked, slurring his words.

“I am almost finished,” Duril replied. He opened the tome in front of the other man, but didn’t push it close to the edge of the desk, for fear Granius might get sick all over his work. The man leaned over the scribbled pages and pretended to examine them closely.



“Great work on your first day. It looks like you’re a fast scribe. Make sure to keep it up. And tomorrow, I’ll find more things to keep you busy.” Granius swayed on his feet, and Duril worried about his balance for a moment.

However, his worries appeared to be unfounded because Granius found his footing with surprising nimbleness and headed to his quarters without saying as much as ‘see you later’. After the door closed behind him, Duril soon heard the unmistakable sounds of snoring and he was all the more grateful for Pie’s invitation to lunch. It seemed that his employer couldn’t care less if he got any food throughout the entire day of work.

He sighed and closed the thick tome. Thanks to Pie’s little gift, he had been quick to finish his work. But what about tomorrow?

He’d worry about that tomorrow. Until then, he had the entire place to himself and would be able to search in every corner, at least for as long as Master Granius’ roaring snores shook the walls of the old building.

## Chapter Twenty-Three – Towers of Gold and Towers of Stone

Toru remained silent and didn't move one muscle, while taking in Ewart Kona. The domestikos smiled, but it was not the assessing smile from before, but one full of warmth. He opened his arms wide. "I see that you are surprised I have noticed you. How could I not? The true king has finally set foot in Scercendusa."

"True king?" Toru asked, forgetting himself for a moment. To cover his blunder, he narrowed his eyes and stared into Ewart Kona's dark ones. "Can you really see me? It's not possible. The ones with dark hearts cannot see me."

The domestikos' fond smile turned into an amused one, tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Then that must mean I'm not in possession of such a heart."

Toru blinked a few times. He felt so silly for having snuck around, imagining that he was invisible to everyone, especially the domestikos. He moved to one side, only to see if Ewart Kona was capable of following him with his eyes, and not just trying to fool him. The domestikos continued to look at him, while his good-natured smile never left his face.

Was this the dangerous man he was supposed to eliminate if he stood between him and fulfilling his purpose? Could the Sakka be wrong? But how could they be? For millennia, the same thing had happened over and over. The domestikoi of the city were well aware that their kingdom was not to last.

And yet, this domestikos, this man who had to be hiding Hekastfet somewhere inside the cavernous belly of this grand building he called his palace, he appeared to have no trouble seeing him.

"Toru," Ewart Kona said in a patient, paternal voice, "I have been waiting for you for a very long time."

Toru bristled at those words. He didn't like it when someone pretended to care for him, let alone a suspicious man like the domestikos who, for all he knew, committed atrocities from dawn till dusk without ever losing that pleasant smile on his face. "If you've been waiting for me for so long, how come you've never come to look for me?"

Ewart Kona chuckled and took a step toward him, without showing one sign of fear. "But I have been looking for you, my boy. I have been looking my entire life. Ever since the fall of Nelsikkar, every domestikos of Scercendusa has been searching for the one true king."

"I've never heard of a Nelsikkar. It sounds like a made-up name. You're lying," Toru accused pointedly.

Ewart Kona's expression turned into one of deep concern and sympathy. There was something fascinating in how he appeared to go from one human emotion to another, like they were all well-

fitting clothes. Toru remained on guard. One impulse told him that he only had to take three steps to reach the domestikos, grab him by the throat, and force him to spill the truth about where he kept Hekastfet, the true idol he was worshipping, and another told him to hold back. If he killed Ewart Kona before finding out where Hekastfet was, the chances were that he might never find the evil determined to rule the world.

So, the clever part of him, the one that had grown ever since he had set foot in Whitekeep, forbade him from taking violent action against the domestikos, as good-natured as he appeared to be. No, Toru would be clever, too, and sneaky, and he might be able to convince the domestikos to take him to Hekastfet of his own accord. Varg, Duril, and Claw would be so proud of him. And he really didn't want to kill this old man who appeared to behave more like a grandparent toward his people than a true ruler.

"I deeply apologize," Ewart Kona said and pressed his palms together at chest level while tipping his head forward. "I should have realized that it was impossible for you to have ever heard of Nelsikkar. And it's not a Nelsikkar," he emphasized, "because that place is unique in the entire world. Was," he added the last word after a short pause accompanied by a pained frown.

Toru felt his ears twitching. It was a bit silly, because he wasn't even in his tiger shape. "What is Nelsikkar?" he asked.

"The place of your birth," Ewart Kona said simply.

"Ha!" Toru crossed his arms over his chest. "I wasn't born in such a place. I was born..." The words died on his lips. While he had been taken care of in that orphanage, that didn't mean that he had been born there.

"Toru," the domestikos said a bit more firmly this time, "there are many things you don't know about your origins. And how could you? For so long, we've all feared that you were taken from us by a neglectful hand."

Toru couldn't make sense of half of what the domestikos was saying. "I grew up in an orphanage," he said through his teeth.

Ewart Kona frowned again, and this time, Toru could read pity and renewed concern in his eyes. "That explains many things. Nelsikkar, Toru, is the realm ruled by the house of Olliandran. Was. I keep forgetting." He made a small gesture with one hand, as if he was a tired old man, and too much was asked of him.

"I don't think I'm one of those tigers," Toru countered. "They--" He stopped himself in time. Why would he share his doubts about his predecessors with the ruler of Scercendusa? It had to be that warm smile that somehow even creased the folds of skin at the corners of the man's eyes deeper each time he looked at Toru.

“You’ve come here, Toru,” Ewart Kona declared and opened his arms wide. “You are here to write history.”

“Does that mean you will show me where you keep Hekastfet so I can kill it?” Toru asked, his eyes wide. It looked like the domestikos knew everything.

A look of confusion spread on the domestikos’ face. “Hekastfet?” he asked slowly. “What do you mean by this name? Or who?”

Toru pursed his lips. His tongue was a bit too loose for what he needed to do here, in the heart of the city. “Stop lying,” he said petulantly. “You know what that is.”

Ewart Kona pressed his hands over his chest in an apologetic gesture. “Should I gather that those imps that keep on stealing wares and playing pranks on the city guards have already tried to draw you into their foolishness?”

Toru had an idea about who those imps had to be but held his mouth shut, at least this one time. “Nobody told me that,” he said quickly. “I came here because I have to do something.”

“Of course,” Ewart Kona agreed. “To take your throne, as promised.”

Toru pursed his lips hard. “What throne?”

Ewart Kona linked his hands together, hiding them in the folds of his long robe. “I will tell you a bit of history now, Toru, and I hope I can be brief enough so that you don’t become bored.” He waited for him to agree.

“Go ahead, then,” Toru said reluctantly. This wasn’t going according to plan at all. He hadn’t expected Ewart Kona to be this pleasant and understanding old man who seemed to know a lot more than even the Sakka knew.

“Nelsikkar fell to the conflict for power that erupted when some of your people, yes, Toru, your people, decided to mingle with the likes of those from the North.”

“What do you mean by that?” Toru squinted as something like an image flashed through his mind. Something white like pure snow, and a home with kindled fire under a huge stove. He frowned and chased that image away.

“Nelsikkar is where the Olliandran lived since the beginning of time. But someone, somehow, made the mistake of trusting those from the North.”

“What are those from the North?” Toru asked.

Ewart Kona sighed like there was so much being asked of him that he didn’t know how to handle. “An abomination.”

Toru grimaced. "Like trees that have mouths and claws?"

Ewart Kona quirked an eyebrow in bafflement. "No, no, just tigers that have lost their way and the shine of their purity."

It all sounded like a tale so far, Toru decided. "Just tell me what you want to tell me already."

"Very well." The domestikos smiled his fond, trustworthy smile. "I promised, after all, that I wouldn't wear you out with boring history. Nelsikkar, as your predecessors had always known it, is no more. There is nothing left but ashes and memories there. The Northerners started a war that resulted in there being no survivors. No, I am mistaken. There was one survivor. You."

Toru huffed. "I told you. I don't think I'm one of those tigers. But I must avenge the people who died at Whitekeep, and Varg's pack, and Onyx's mom and dad, and--"

Ewart Kona stopped him. "For a long time, we'd thought you were nothing but a myth, something that our yearning minds and souls decided to create for the sake of purpose. But, Toru, I see your mother's eyes in yours."

As much as he had promised himself not to believe whatever lies Ewart Kona planned on telling to him, despite his benevolent appearance, Toru couldn't help asking in a small voice, "My mother?"

"Yes," Ewart Kona said and nodded. "But I see that you cannot bring yourself to trust me. After all, that is very understandable. You've been blown about like a leaf torn by the wind for so long."

Toru stared at the domestikos. Was it possible that the ruler of Scercendusa could read his mind?

"It is better that I show you," Ewart Kona continued. "Now, please, follow me. And I assure you that this evil you are talking about is not here. If I could lead you to it so that you could fulfill your purpose, I wouldn't hesitate to do so. After all, you are my true king."

With those words, the domestikos turned and walked with purpose toward the door on the left. Toru debated for a moment whether it was, indeed, a good idea to follow this hard to fathom man. But, in the end, curiosity got the better of him, and he found himself matching Ewart Kona's steps with his.

The door led to a long corridor lit by torches on both sides. Even though there were windows several feet apart from one another, they weren't enough to let the daylight in.

"Our ancestors decided, for some reason, to build the palace quite high," the domestikos commented as if he could, indeed, read what was on his mind. "It is troublesome, as petitioners always have such a hard time climbing up here. But it is tradition, and here, in Scercendusa, we value nothing more highly than the old customs that turned what was once a small village into the

proud city we all know now. Therefore, having too many windows would be a real hazard. Harsh winds could end up toppling the towers and turning them to dust.”

Toru didn't know what to do with an explanation like that. It could be true, for all he knew. With curious eyes, he took in his surroundings, while musing over the strangeness of everything that was happening here at the palace. Ewart Kona did not appear to be how the Sakka had described him, and Shearah's words came to his mind. The young witch thought that the domestikos of Scercendusa was a complicated man, with hidden ambitions, but had she ever said that he was a bad man? Toru couldn't recall anything like that as he forced the memories to come back to him. A part of him wanted to believe Ewart Kona because, if everything he said was true, it meant that Toru didn't have to resort to bloodshed and destruction.

And if Hekastfet was hidden inside the palace, it could be it was doing so without the knowledge or agreement of the domestikos. Toru would find it, anyway, and maybe Ewart Kona could even help him in that quest as he seemed so keen on liking him, despite Toru's having done nothing to earn that kind of sympathy from a man who ruled over a city with hundreds of thousands of souls.

With that decision in mind, he felt his chest getting lighter. Ewart Kona could see him, and he had tiger flowers in the water fountain he used to bless the people who sought his advice and guidance in life. Maybe he wasn't a bad man. Maybe he was a good man.

However, as he remembered what Beanstalk and Midnight had told him about the history of the place, and the visions of what other tigers before him had done, his steps began to slow down.

Ewart Kona sensed his hesitation right away and turned toward him without stopping. “I will answer all your questions, Toru, to the best of my abilities. But now, please, come. After I show you your mother's portrait, we will have dinner together. I can tell that you are famished.”

Toru sensed some of his earlier lightness of step returning with the promise of food. Didn't they say that they had the most astonishing dishes in Scercendusa? Since Ewart Kona was the most influential person in the entire city, his dinners had to be fairytale worthy. Toru couldn't wait to see what the domestikos would serve him.

Finally, they reached another hallway, a smaller one. Here, Toru noticed right away that the walls were adorned with paintings, some of them very old, by how weathered the frames looked and the chipped paint here and there. He paid them little attention, feeling slightly dizzy at the multitude of eyes staring at him from all those old depictions of people belonging to times long past.

“There she is,” Ewart Kona said with satisfaction as he stopped in front of a life-size painting representing a tall majestic woman dressed in a sumptuous orange dress with streaks of black.

Toru followed the domestikos' example and stared at the painting.

“Her Noble Spirit, Raine of Olliandran,” the domestikos introduced the stranger on the wall.

Toru stared closely, trying to see if there were any reasons to consider that unknown woman his mother. Her hair was a fiery red, which surprised him. He would have thought that all tigershifters had golden hair, like his. But her eyes, he noticed, her eyes were burning gold, and Toru knew how he looked from the reflections he had caught in the water of rivers and lakes, and very rarely, the shiny objects called mirrors.

Indeed, the eyes staring back at him from the painting appeared familiar. He knew them, he had looked into them before, but only because he had been staring at himself. But that had to be only some uncanny resemblance, he thought.

It was hard to ignore how his heart throbbed with yearning at the sight of her, but Toru pushed back with all his strength. It had to be just his hope, his deeply hidden hope, that one day, he would know the ones who had decided to abandon him. The familiar hatred returned. He turned his back to the painting. "That's not my mom," he declared.

"Toru," Ewart Kona said affectionately and touched his arm, "if she's not, how do I know your name?"

Toru was slightly surprised at finding the domestikos standing so close to him. He was a tall, intimidating man through nothing but his stature, seeing how forthcoming and pleasant he aimed to be. Toru searched the man's eyes for signs of deceit and found none. "What do you mean?" he mumbled.

"You see," Ewart Kona continued in a sympathetic voice, "your mother chose your name. Although Nelsikkar burned to the ground, word of you reached us. And you are Raine's son."

The domestikos seemed quite adamant about that, so Toru decided not to contradict him too much for the moment. He shrugged. "I'm hungry," he said.

Ewart Kona laughed and gestured for him to follow. "Then let's not dally. We will have time to share old history later. Now, the true king deserves a true feast."

"What do you mean by true king?" Toru asked. "Aren't you the king of Scercendusa?"

"I'm not a king," the domestikos protested, all good-naturedly. "Do you know what domestikos means in our old texts?"

"No," Toru admitted.

"It means servant, and that is what I am. A servant to the city, waiting for the king. And that is you, Toru. Come now. On a full belly, maybe you will be keener to listen to me."

Toru threw one last look at the portrait. Raine's eyes looked back at him, and for a while, he couldn't shake the feeling that she was following him as he walked behind Ewart Kona.

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Maybe Toru had no idea what the domestikos meant by true king, but he surely understood what true feast stood for. Never in his life had he ever tasted so many different dishes. And what an astonishing custom, he thought, as he took in the servants roaming around with increased wariness. Apparently, they liked to give you a limited time for enjoying your meal here, in Scercendusa.

Only he and Ewart Kona were seated at a long table, but after they took a few bites of their meal, a servant was quick to steal the plate and replace it with something new. Toru growled when one young maid tried to snatch a half-eaten mutton chop from him. She yelped and quickly bowed. The domestikos dismissed her with a flick of the wrist, and Toru finally managed to finish his mutton chop. From that moment on, the servants no longer grabbed the plates from his side of the table until he was finished with each course.

The room in which they dined was well-aired and the many candles standing inside candelabras attached to the walls compensated for the lack of natural light. Toru wasn't entirely sure why they were having dinner, when it could be called a late lunch. The patch of sky he could see through a small open window was still clear and not yet tainted by dusk. In all truth, he didn't quite know how far or close they were to evening.

He could play Ewart Kona's game for a while, whatever it was. And by that, he meant that he only intended to wait until the night fell. After that, he would start roaming the hallways in search of the true purpose of his quest. Even after the domestikos had taken him to see that old portrait, he still didn't understand all that talk about a true king and why he was supposed to be that.

Slowly, he was getting his fill, so he sighed contently while patting his belly with one hand. The domestikos eyed him with a smile from the other end of the table. "Should I gather that the meal was to your liking?"

"I've never seen so many different dishes," Toru admitted with enthusiasm. If only his friends were there to taste them, too. The thought saddened him a little. On impulse, he almost opened his mouth to ask Ewart Kona to search for Duril, Varg, and Claw and bring them there, but the caution he had started to cultivate for a while now prevented him from doing so. What would Varg do if he were here with him? Probably, he would try to find out as many things as possible.

He pushed his plate away, and the domestikos nodded and stood. "Come with me, Toru. There are many other things I have to show you."

The more the old man showed him around, the more tired he'd become, for sure. In the meantime, Toru was free to discover more about the domestikos' game and would explore the palace later, when everyone was asleep.

He followed Ewart Kona to a large room, at the end of which a tall throne stood atop a dais. It reminded him of the throne from Vilemoor, but much larger. Something akin to an unpleasant



frisson flashed over his skin for a moment. Toru examined his surroundings carefully. As much as the domestikos appeared to play the welcoming host, it didn't mean that he should ignore any possible danger. Hekastfet, if the Sakka weren't wrong, had to be present here, inside the castle, and that meant that it could be watching right now.

He raised his eyes and observed the heads of the colonnades. Mystical creatures like Toru had never seen before appeared to support the ceiling on their shoulders, a strenuous task if the grimaces on their faces meant anything.

"Since you weren't raised at Nelsikkar," the domestikos explained, "it is only natural that you are not at all familiar with your purpose."

"My purpose is to rid the world of Hekastfet," Toru said passionately, clenching his hands into fists.

"You've mentioned this name several times, but you still haven't told me who this enemy of yours is," Ewart Kona commented, his voice a tad disconcerted.

Toru found it hard to believe that the domestikos didn't know about the evil lurking in the heart of the city. But, on the other hand, he sounded like he really had no idea about Hekastfet. Ewart Kona seemed to be a kind man, so there was a possibility that he either had been fooled by that evil entity, or he just didn't know about it.

"It's living here," Toru said with conviction. "This is where it gets its power."

Ewart Kona touched his elbow. "Without my knowledge? I like to believe that my tireless work of taking care of the city is not in vain."

Toru turned the domestikos' words over in his head. Was it possible that Ewart Kona was just another victim of the deceit the evil was capable of? But the Sakka couldn't be so wrong, could they? They lived in darkness, waiting for the tiger, which meant that they couldn't quite know what was happening above. As much as Toru wanted to believe his own justifications, he couldn't quite bring himself to do so.

"Then show me your palace," Toru said. "It won't hesitate to attack me once it sees me."

That earned him a startled look from his host. "Attack you? This is the safest place for you in all of Eawirith, Toru. Everybody here loves you."

"I don't know everybody here," Toru pointed out. "I don't know anybody."

"Not yet," Ewart Kona offered in an affectionate voice. He took Toru's elbow and guided him toward the throne. "Once you do, you will know why you were meant to be the king. But now, let's try this for size."

Toru only understood what the domestikos meant by that when they reached the foot of the dais. Ewart Kona encouraged him with the same fond smile he appeared to have reserved for him, so he took the few steps up to the throne and stopped in front of it.

“Go ahead,” Ewart Kona insisted, “sit on your throne, my king.”

Toru scratched his head and pulled at his ear. At this point, he only seemed to be indulging an old man and his whims, so what was the harm in that? He sat on the large throne that appeared strangely comfortable for how hard the granite it was built from had to be. He placed his hands on the curved arms and looked ahead.

Ewart Kona seemed genuinely ecstatic. He clasped his hands together and his smile grew larger and fonder. “You were made for it, Toru.”

“I’m not sure,” Toru replied. He stood and walked down the steps to reach the domestikos. “And why do you keep saying that I’m the king? Why isn’t a human the king?”

“Because that is the tradition,” Ewart Kona explained. “Our history teaches us that for Scercendusa to become the greatest place in all Eawirith, a tiger must sit on its throne.”

“So, there were other tigers before me who sat on this throne?” Toru stared over his shoulder at the royal seat.

“Of course,” Ewart Kona replied with unhidden enthusiasm. “Scercendusa is ready to enter its golden age since you have arrived.”

Toru had no idea about what a golden age was and what the domestikos was going on and on about.

“It is prophesized in all the old texts,” Ewart Kona continued. “But I believe this has been enough excitement for one day. Shall I show you to your quarters?”

Toru was happy at the prospect. After all, he needed to be alone so that he could start roaming the palace. It was clear as day that Ewart Kona could see him, despite the disguise provided by the magical bath the Sakka had given him. Also, at the table, all the servants were well aware of his presence. He looked at his arm and was baffled to notice that the sheen of gold from before was gone. He frowned and tried to find an explanation that would make sense. The people coming to see the domestikos as petitioners hadn’t been aware of him, which meant that at some point, his disguise had worn off.

“This city waits for your wise guidance,” Ewart Kona said as he took Toru back to the main corridor. He stopped for a moment in front of one of the windows and beckoned for Toru to join him. “Do you see, Toru? The entirety of Scercendusa at your feet.”

He indulged the old man and looked through the window at the expanse of human hive. From up there, he could clearly see that tall towers jutted from the myriad of buildings here and there. Some were almost black and appeared to be cut from a hard stone, while others glinted golden in the setting sun. "Why are there so many towers?" he asked without thinking.

"Towers of gold and towers of stone," Ewart Kona said with pride. "The pillars of our city. The golden towers are for the merchants that keep the flow of goods and trade moving. And the ones made of stone are for our workers, the ones who toil from dawn till dusk for the good of the city."

"I don't like merchants very much," Toru said and then stopped for a moment. "I don't mean that. I really hate them."

Ewart Kona appeared to be taken aback by his sudden outburst. "Why would you hate merchants, my king?"

"They are evil. In Shroudharbor--" Toru stopped. Maybe he wasn't supposed to talk so much.

"I've heard a most astonishing tale, indeed," Ewart Kona said. "The house of merchants crumbled to the ground. That's what I heard," he added.

Toru threw the domestikos a look of utter disbelief. "How could you have heard of it? It's such a long way from here to there."

"And people travel everywhere, and they carry tales with them," Ewart Kona assured him with a kind smile. "That was how I heard your name mentioned for the first time in many, many years."

It all made sense, but as he remembered what it took for him and his friends to cross the merciless desert, Toru began feeling a bit doubtful. What kind of people undertook such perilous travels?

"Have there been people coming here across the desert?" he asked.

"Do you mean, the Great Barren? I don't think so. The place is very dangerous nowadays. But there are other ways to reach Scercendusa from the other coast," Ewart Kona explained.

That made sense. And people could also travel by sea, and it wasn't like the Great Barren stretched over Eawirith north to south. Toru felt a bit foolish for assuming that crossing the desert was the only way to get to the heart of the continent.

"The merchants there were evil," Toru said and crossed his arms over the chest. "They deserved what came to them."

"Without a doubt," Ewart Kona hurried to agree. "But the merchants here, Toru, they are a different breed. Once you get to know the bright minds of Scercendusa, your heart and mind will be a lot more at ease. I understand that you've gone through some amazing adventures so far. Would you mind indulging me?"

“I should rest,” Toru said. He couldn’t help the feeling that instead of his being the one to uncover the secrets the domestikos held, he was the one being searched for details that he wasn’t supposed to share in the first place.

“Of course. Do you happen to like reading, my king?” Ewart Kona asked.

Toru frowned. He had learned all the letters, but so far, as much as he desired to have such knowledge, he could barely decipher simple texts. “No. I prefer adventuring,” he offered a cutting reply.

Ewart Kona laughed. “I see. There is nothing wrong with that. And the eggheads here can surely use a change of pace.”

“There seems to be only you here,” Toru said. The hallway was deserted, as much of the palace seemed to be. The only other living beings he had seen since being discovered by the domestikos had been the servants serving dinner.

“Yes. It is my designated residence while I’m waiting for the king to arrive. But there are councils that I consult with regularly or whenever needed. The city is a lot larger than this place, my king.”

Toru pursed his lips. Ewart Kona shifted from gentle familiarity when he spoke his name to formal obedience, depending on what he intended to tell him. It felt like it wasn’t entirely sincere. “Please just call me by my name,” he insisted. “I’m no king.”

“Not yet. But it’s all right, it’s been a long day for you, I suppose. Let’s see you to your room. I hope everything will be to your liking.”

Toru followed the domestikos again. A shadow seemed to move across the hallway for a moment, and the same unpleasant shiver from before ran up and down his spine. He looked back but saw nothing. Still, his gut instinct was putting him on guard. He examined the back of the domestikos’ head as they walked across the hallway. Ewart Kona was surely a mysterious man. And Toru planned on finding out everything there was to know about completing his quest.

## Chapter Twenty-Four – People and Beasts

A bell tolled loudly somewhere outside, rousing them from their stupor. Claw murmured something under his breath that had to be less than pleasant, while Varg was quicker to open his eyes and realize that something was happening. He nudged his friend in the ribs, first just a bit, then more forcefully when the bearshifter didn't show any sign that he intended to wake up.

“Puppy, you better have a good reason for bruising my side.”

“Can you hear that? Something must be underway,” Varg said.

Claw finally opened his eyes and made a bit of a show by putting his fingers into his ears and releasing them with a pop. “I guess that’s our call for battle.”

“Why use a bell?” Varg asked. “It’s like they’re getting ready for a funeral.”

“That might be. Only those whose blood is to be shed in the arena tonight might not be considered deserving of even that.”

Varg pushed himself to his feet. Claw helped him up to look through the grated window without a word. His breath caught in his chest when he took in the place he had observed only hours earlier. The sun was descending across the blue canvas above, but it still cast shadows of orange and red over the arena.

Unlike before, when the place had appeared deserted, it was now teeming with life. The seats were heavy with people who seemed bent on watching a bloodthirsty show by the way they yelled and threw their fists in the air.

Varg wondered briefly why it hadn't been the ruckus from the crowds rousing them from their sleep, but then he saw a giant bell he hadn't noticed before. It hung in the middle of the arena, and it was a humongous thing. Slender men with dark skin, nude save for a loincloth draped around each one's midsection, were pulling at a heavy rope, making the bell swing back and forth and cry its sepulchral song.

“I think it’s safe to say that this evening’s entertainment is not far from starting,” he told Claw.

“That means we will be called soon.”

“Called?”

“More like thrown in there,” Claw admitted. “Do you know what I think, Varg?”

“I'd like to.”

“Our purpose was to get into the city. It’s not like we’re on payroll here, right?”

“I believe that I’m liking where you’re going with your plan more and more. But, assuming that we can run--”

The door to their cell opened abruptly and four guards walked through it. They were heavily armored and carried spears, which they pointed at Claw and Varg right away. Varg traded a glance with his friend and partner. It appeared that they needed to bide their time to go for that grand exit they were seeking.

Without putting up a fight, they followed when one of the guards gestured for them to move. It looked like they were heading for at least one confrontation with the likes of those animals they had seen earlier.

They walked side by side, until they reached a narrow corridor. Varg let Claw take the lead, and it took him a moment more to realize that they had been pushed into a room full of people. They all looked miserable, dressed in drab clothes, some of them tightly holding a knife or a small spear.

The guards walked out and closed the door after them.

“What is this?” Varg asked of no one in particular. Then, when he saw that save for a few wary glances thrown his way, no one intended to pay them any mind, he grabbed one of the men close to them by his elbow. “Who are you, people?”

The man didn’t bother to shake off his touch, but looked at Varg’s hand like he was surprised that it was there. “We’re the doomed,” he said, “and so are you if you’re here.”

Claw appeared to be just as disconcerted as he was by the display of human frailty in front of their eyes. Varg realized without even trying, that the people there weren’t just poorly dressed and as good as unarmed. They seemed sick, underfed and, a couple of them, even close to dying.

“But the arena,” he started. “I thought it was a place for fights.”

“It is,” the man replied. “But first, the beasts need to be fed.”

Varg looked at Claw again. The bearshifter leaned near so that he could whisper in Varg’s ear without letting the others clearly hear what they were talking about. “I feel a bit insulted, puppy. Do we look like food?”

“Same here,” Varg whispered back. “And I thought we proved our mettle too well with that show we put on outside the gates to end up here.”

“Some beasts like food that’s still alive and kicking,” the man from before interrupted them. They must not have done that great a job of concealing their conversation.

“Still, we’re fighters,” Claw argued.

The man gave him a cursory look. Then, he shook his head. "It doesn't matter. The crowds are here to see the beasts feeding."

"Aren't they afraid that they might end up with some really powerful beasts on their hands?" Varg questioned.

"When the beasts are too full to move, then the fighters come in," the man explained. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"No, we're strangers to this place," Varg confirmed.

The man nodded again. "The fighters are part of the domestikos' guard. They get the glory, and they have the pleasure of cutting down overfed beasts while the crowds go wild."

"You seem like you know a lot about what goes on here," Varg pointed out. "Do I gather that you've been in this situation before and lived to tell the tale?"

That earned him a hoarse laugh from the man. "No, this is the first time I'm food for the beasts. But I was out there," he pointed through the door opposite to that through which Varg and Claw had been pushed inside. From behind it, the noise of the crowd could be heard, and the bell bellowed louder. "Countless times."

Varg wasn't sure he understood what the man meant. "You watched?" he asked.

The man spat at his feet and coughed for a while. "I watched. Like everyone else. I suppose it's everyone's turn, sooner or later. In my case, it looks like it's sooner. And so in your case too." He struggled to laugh again, but this time a bout of coughing shook his entire body until it made him double over and collapse on the ground. Varg hurried to help him, but the man pushed his hand away. "Don't bother. Let them feast on my corpse. That means I won't have to suffer."

Varg pulled Claw aside. "Does this look like something we've seen before?"

"The weak, the ill, and the dying," Claw said and nodded slowly. "Two places so far away from one another, and yet, here we are, witnessing similar customs, or at least there is some resemblance. I am willing to bet the fur off my back that Scercendusa is not known for its many cemeteries, either."

"So, what are we going to do?" Varg asked. "This is not exactly the kind of welcome I prefer."

"Me neither." Claw looked around. "There's not much we can do for these people, but... what do you say we ruin the show a little?"

"I'm all for it." Varg considered for a while, and then still helped the collapsed man up, only to aid him in finding a more comfortable sitting position. "Are there many arenas like this one in Scercendusa?" he asked him.

“This is a small one,” the man told him. “But they have many beasts, and they make a good living, because people growing old and falling sick are sent to the asylums here.”

That gave them a slight idea about where they were, but Varg insisted. “How close are we to the center of the city?”

The man threw him a look as if he couldn’t understand the question. Eventually, his dry lips moved. “Why? Do you plan on visiting the domestikos’ palace?” He tried to laugh again, but the dry cough that attacked him decided otherwise.

“As a matter of fact, we wouldn’t mind that,” Varg said.

“His palace is close to the walls, not in the center,” the man explained. “He likes to look over the entire city on one side, but to keep an eye on The Dregs, on the other. Our domestikos is the kind who doesn’t mind a bit of ash in his quail soup.” All those explanations seemed to amuse him to no end.

Varg was intrigued. Claw seemed keen on listening to every word, as well. They had come here quite unprepared, but they were notorious for their ability to figure things out quickly. “Is it a long way from here?” he asked.

“Just follow the walls to the north. You’ll get there,” the man replied. “Too bad you won’t get to do so. You two look big and strong, but there are too many famished beasts. Just too damn many.”

Varg didn’t torture the poor man with more talking. He just patted him on the shoulder and moved close to Claw again. “At least, we got something,” he said. “Once we’re through with this barbaric place, all we need to do is to see where the walls take us.”

“That sounds like the perfect plan,” Claw agreed. “But first, we need to get ready, right?”

“Yes.”

Claw nodded and puffed out his chest. Then, he shouted, “Listen here, everyone!”

The men turned to look at him.

“That door will open,” he pointed at the one through which they could hear the roar of the impatient crowd. “You all step back and let the two of us go first.”

“Are you that keen to die? Too bad since you two look strong and young compared to our lot,” the man said.

“It’s not like they can escape. Maybe they just want to get it over with quickly. That will let us enjoy the moments we still have for a little while longer. I, for one, want that,” another said.



Murmurs of agreement could be heard from all corners of the room. What made Varg wonder about these people the most was how resigned they all appeared to be to their fate. He didn't know how to ask about the reasons for such a thing.

"How come you're not scared?" Claw asked in his stead. "Behind that door, you will be met by bloodthirsty beasts that will devour you alive."

"Ah," the same man said. "You weren't given the mercy potion, were you?"

"What mercy potion?"

The man waved like it wasn't a thing he could easily explain. "It dulls the senses and brings peace to the mind."

"Is that why you look like you're one moment away from collapsing? Does this potion make you fall asleep?"

"Not quite. There's something unsettling about looking death in the face, isn't there?" the man murmured softly.

"Maybe it's not going to be today," Varg offered.

"There's little comfort in that."

"Maybe it's not going to be tomorrow, either."

This time, the man looked up at him. There was uncertainty in his watery eyes, as if he couldn't decide whether Varg was telling him an unfathomable truth or if he was losing his mind.

The sound of inhuman growls made them all fall silent. Then, the door rattled on its hinges and opened in front of them.

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Duril moved around cautiously so as not to wake his employer, but judging by the way Granius snored so loudly, his precautions weren't necessary. However, it took him a while to get used to moving about without taking extra care, and any sound that could be interpreted as his master waking up set him on edge.

He didn't know what he should search for. The building only served for keeping records of the transactions taking place at the market right outside, so the chances of finding anything that could help him with his quest were small.

Still, he thought as he examined the shelves, one thing he wouldn't mind having was a map of Scercendusa. Then he could go outside and see if he was any good at orienting himself, using his common sense and, of course, the kind of help only a good map could give him.

Pie and Moth wanted him to meet them the next day, but Duril didn't think he would be able to sleep without worrying through the night, at least not until he had done some scouting around. The Sakka were so mysterious, and it was their role to be like that, but Duril truly wanted to find something that would allow him to be helpful one way or another.

He searched the shelves without wasting time, and then his eyes fell on the wall behind them. There it was, he thought with satisfaction and moved closer. By the looks of it, indeed, it was a map of the city, so Duril removed the thumbtacks keeping it in place with extra care, as the paper on which the map had been drawn appeared to be quite fragile. He had a hunch that Granius wouldn't miss the map, even in the unlikely event he squeezed his large frame through the rows of shelves to reach the wall.

He took the precious map to the desk and examined it carefully. After some time had passed in minute inspection, he could tell where Granius' office was located, and that would help him travel through the city at nightfall. Of course, it would be best for him to memorize as much of the map as he could, since he didn't believe that a stranger with a map roaming through Scercendusa at midnight would make the guards in charge of protecting the city feel too kindly toward him.

However, he did need to take the map with him, so he rolled it carefully and put it inside his satchel. Thus armed, he decided that he was as prepared as he ever would be to explore Scercendusa on his own.

Where was Toru right now? Together with Varg and Claw, they had been left behind, and it looked like the guards of Scercendusa weren't keen on letting everybody in. If anything, they were highly selective, and Duril was relieved that at least his writing skills had been deemed good enough to grant him access to the citadel.

However, he knew that his friends were highly resourceful and that they would find a way to get into the city themselves. Still, Duril couldn't quite suppress the intense feeling of longing he experienced the moment he thought of Toru's beautiful golden eyes, Varg's mischievous grin, and Claw's powerful arms. They couldn't have been brought together only as a whim of fate.

Scercendusa was, without a doubt, the vastest human settlement he had ever set foot in. And even for well-traveled people, like Varg and Claw, the place had to be overwhelming in its immensity.

How would they find each other again? Duril decided that he had no time to feel pity for himself nor for how lonely he felt at the moment. He clutched his satchel tightly and walked through the front door, taking care to make as little noise as possible.

The balmy air of evening caressed his face the moment he set foot outside. Scercendusa had been built in a blessed place, weather-wise at least. For a few moments, Duril inhaled deeply and enjoyed the smell of spices wafting from the tardiest merchants still packing up their wares for the night.

What he needed to find, he was sure of it, had to be the domestikos' palace. According to the map he had hidden in his satchel, the building was located close to the northern walls, which made it possible for the ruler of the city to look out over The Dregs whenever he wanted. Duril puzzled over the oddity of that choice for the location of such an important official building. Didn't the domestikos want to feast his eyes upon the most beautiful parts of his city? Indeed, Ewart Kona had to be quite a peculiar man, and Shearah, as much as she had wanted to help them, hadn't been able to tell them a lot about the man in charge of the city.

The Sakka were convinced Ewart Kona was manipulated by evil. Hekastfet, Duril remembered and stopped himself in time from murmuring it aloud under his breath. He didn't fear as much for himself as he did for others, innocents that would be exposed to that evil by the mere accident of hearing its name.

Maybe this was where their adventure would reach its end. Duril allowed himself a small sigh. They hadn't truly talked about what would follow after, but he hoped that he would continue to live with Toru, Varg, and Claw.

A life of settling down and leading pleasant predictable days one after the other didn't sound so bad. That thought put a spring in his step, and he began walking away from Granius' office, heading straight into the maze of streets. He was lucky that he could see well in the dark, which meant that he wouldn't draw unnecessary attention to himself by needing a candle or stumbling upon roaming guards by accident.

In the evening, Scercendusa filled with a new type of life. The working people now migrated from the places where they had toiled since morning or where they sold their wares, to the many inns, beerhouses, and taverns that seemed to be numerous in the area of the city Duril traveled through now.

He hadn't had anything to eat since lunch, but he didn't feel any hunger. However, the sight of all those people enjoying a drink with friends, as well as a warm meal, made his yearning from before return, this time with a craving for cold beer and some good food.

There would be time to enjoy all that once they defeated the evil whose roots grew from this place. But it couldn't mean absolute destruction; that would be a terrible pity, Duril thought, and Toru would be against it, anyway. These people would continue to have their pints and enjoy their roasted chicken long after Toru was done punishing the evil bent on destroying the world.

Duril steeled his heart and belly at the sight of the wondrous dishes carried on trays by deft innkeepers and their helpers and brought to tables filled with hungry and joyous customers. Toru would like to taste everything, without a doubt. And for once, although they weren't together right now, Duril agreed. There was no place like Scercendusa, and even if just for the sake of all those marvelous foods and the people who enjoyed them, it needed to be saved.

His steps became hurried. If Granius woke up in the middle of the night and wanted him to fill the tomes with transactions he imagined in his sleep and he couldn't find him, it would not bode well for his employment in the man's office. Duril doubted that it was possible for his master and employer to rouse from his sleep except for emptying his bladder, and that meant that he was safe. But he didn't want to take any unnecessary risks.

All he wanted was to find the shortest way he could reach Ewart Kona's palace. In case Toru and the others had managed to get inside the city, it was there that they would go. If the domestikos harbored the evil within his very walls, it would be easy for Toru to find it.

Only it might not be so easy to defeat it, and Toru would need all his friends by his side. Not that Duril didn't have all the faith he was capable of that the young tigershifter would prevail in the direst of circumstances, but he wanted to protect him if he could, even if there was very little that he could do.

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Toru stretched out on the fluffy bed and the need to doze off grew strong in him. His bones were getting heavy, and his muscles were getting so relaxed, not to mention that his overstuffed belly wanted him to take a good nap. Maybe he could do it only a little. His eyelids drooped and he couldn't stop a satisfied smile from spreading across his face. It had been some time since he had felt so pleased with a meal. Not that he didn't love whatever Duril cooked, or that he didn't remember all the effort the people at The Quiet Woods had put into their farewell feast, but Scercendusa was truly an astonishing place when it came to food.

He was about to doze off when a sound, something cavernous and menacing, made his eyes snap open. His ears perked up in search of the clear source of that unpleasant noise. It was as if the din was drifting around inside the room, filling it. Without a doubt, it appeared to be a song of sorts, one sung under the breath of a murmuring choir.

Was there some kind of procession going on? At that hour? It was true that it was only evening, and maybe not everyone around the palace was already asleep, but wasn't it inconsiderate toward guests to have a bunch of monks or whatever those people were mumbling their strange hymn in the hallway while others tried to sleep?

Toru pursed his lips in annoyance for a moment, but then he reconsidered. After all, he didn't intend to sleep too long anyway, as he needed to search the palace for any signs of Hekastfet. Since Ewart Kona seemed so completely oblivious to the menace that he was harboring under his roof, it was his duty to get to work, and fast.

With that decision in mind, he swung himself over the edge of the bed and got to his feet. Too bad that his golden protection was no more. He would have been able to walk past those mumbling monks or whatever they were in the hallway without drawing unwanted attention to himself.

The noise only became louder as he walked to the door of his bedchamber. He pressed his ear to the wood and listened closely. There was something about the mumbling that sparked his memory. The chant was familiar and in a way that roused unpleasant feelings that began to roil in his gut. Where had he heard that wailing before? It was a frightening melody, but also one that seemed to belong to frightened souls that were trying to save themselves.

There was one way to find out what it was about. Toru opened the door and stepped into the hallway. To his right, marching toward the end of the hallway, a cohort of dark figures could be seen. They had their backs turned to him, so he couldn't see their faces, but their dark clothes roused his memory again.

Toru set his jaw hard. He knew where he had heard that wailing song before, and where he had seen those figures. He shifted into his tiger so that his paws made no sound on the polished floor and began stalking the procession from the shadows. While the hallway was lit by torches here and there, Toru changed sides frequently, chasing the cones of shadow that concealed his presence.

Those figures looked just the same as the merchants from Shroudharbor, and it had been right before they'd died that Toru had heard the same chant. It was safe to think that the strange procession would lead him to Hekastfet, as they had to be bred by that evil and were brought into the world by it.

He remembered very well how Blayves, the head of the merchants in Shroudharbor, had been dragged away by Geruf, his loyal servant. While, at the time, they had all thought that the danger had been eliminated by destroying the shroud, it looked like the same kind of evil had emerged here, in the heart of Scercendusa.

And Ewart Kona still wanted him to believe that he didn't know a thing about such horrendous things taking place in his palace? Toru supposed there was a chance that the domestikos was deep in his dreams at that hour and didn't even begin to suspect that there were creatures beyond his human understanding roaming the hallways of the ancient palace.

He would see how involved the domestikos was with these phantoms from another place, but it would have to wait. Right now, Toru was convinced that the strange procession would take him right to Hekastfet, which had been his purpose all along.

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Varg and Claw rushed into the arena.

“Six heads!” Varg bellowed. “Three for me, and three for you, my friend!”

The horrible creatures they were facing now were the same they had observed before, and Varg thought grimly that the ones in charge of the arena had had time to replace the dead beast that had

been devoured by its brethren. An endless supply of bloodthirsty wild animals that couldn't be tamed didn't sound like a good thing.

Tonight, he and Claw would make sure that the creatures, no matter how hungry, would be left to rot in the dust, while the ones supposed to end up in their bellies would live another day. But tomorrow might not bring change, and although they had spoken words of encouragement to those men, it was not like they could turn the entirety of Scercendusa into ashes on their own. To save everyone, it would take a lot more, or at least, a different type of person.

Varg thought briefly of Toru, as one of the hooved animals noticed his presence and began barreling toward him in a fit of rage. He didn't have a sword and he couldn't shift into his wolf, but that didn't mean that he was defenseless. Even more, he had very clear ideas about how to execute a real attack on those mindless animals. He waited for the creature to get close and tensed his entire body. Then, he jumped out of the way at the last minute. The crowd erupted into enthusiastic cheers when the beast couldn't stop and smashed into the wall behind the wolfshifter, making the planks of wood rattle.

If the real wall had been nothing more than that, the crowds would have been in peril of being trampled and killed by the murderous beasts, but Varg had noticed that the wood planks were just for show; most likely they were used for protecting the stone behind them from blood stains, nicks and scratches.

The beast growled and fell on one side, but got back on its feet with little effort, angered by the failure of its earlier attack. Varg was counting on its rage, and was keeping track of the other beasts surrounding them.

Claw was as quick thinking as he was strong, and at that moment he was pitting two beasts against one another, baiting them by placing himself in the middle. When the hooved animals rushed toward him from afar, ending up smacking their heads together, the crowd cheered more.

It was easy to sway the hearts of many, and also difficult to keep their fickle feelings for more than a moment. Varg grinned at Claw when their eyes met briefly. These people had come to be entertained, and that was what they would get.

This wasn't going to be an easy task, it seemed, he thought as he observed how the two beasts that had fallen at Claw's feet were getting up already. At least, three of them were weakened, but that still left them with three others that were eager to trample them, making them one with the dust of the arena.

And those three were careening toward them, throwing the sand into the air with their hooves while blood flowed from their maddened eyes. He didn't need to look at Claw to know what they had to do. They moved backward until their backs were at the wall. Then they jumped away to let the mindless beasts crash into the hard stone.

This time, one of them remained on the ground, and the other five rushed to tear it apart. It appeared that the crowds were more than pleased with the bloody display before their eyes. Varg clenched his fists. Sometimes, people like that were worthy of punishment, too. Without a doubt, they would have cheered and shouted deliriously if the ones in the arena had been the frail men he and Claw had met inside the holding pen. Only those men would have fallen as easy prey to the strong beasts, with no choice but to let themselves be devoured.

“Do they look fully fed already?” Claw shouted at him.

The sound of growling and teeth breaking through bones was the only one they could hear from the beasts gathered round their fallen sibling.

“I don’t think it’s that easy to feed these creatures until they’re full,” Varg replied.

A horn bellowed suddenly, and the crowds went silent. Everyone turned their heads and began whispering.

“Ah, it looks like we have displeased some fellows,” Varg said.

“You could say that,” Claw agreed, as a group of about a dozen guards in full armor marched into the arena.

Varg looked around in search of the fastest escape route. While they could put all their effort into defeating the guards, news of what was happening in the arena at the moment was bound to pour into the streets of Scercendusa. They didn’t have the time to indulge in taking on half the city once the situation spiraled into an orgy of destruction.

“Do you see what I see?” he asked Claw.

The bearshifter was already running toward one of the many doors carved into the circling wall. What had that sick man said? Too many beasts... famished and ready to feast on human flesh. Varg followed his friend’s example and moved to the first door that must be keeping another batch of hungry animals inside.

Tonight, the famous champions of the arena would truly have the chance to prove their worth against fair, hungry opponents.

## Chapter Twenty-Five – Scercendusa Burning

The guards were shouting, the beasts were growling, and the crowd was cheering, all those sounds woven together to create a rhythm of pounding blood and anger. Claw jumped out of the way, as soon as he released the beasts kept behind the wooden doors, and Varg followed his partner with his eyes for just a moment, as he noticed a group of guards rushing toward him from the left. Without hesitation, he jumped as high as he could and his hands caught the edge of the wall, and then, there was an unstoppable force pushing him up, and he didn't need to look to know who it was. The next moment, he was up in the tribunes, pushing people out of his way, dashing through the crowd. Without a backward glance, he knew that Claw followed.

Hands jutted out from the crowd to touch him or grab at him, but he swatted them away, raising yells of confusion in his wake. He wasn't some hero, not for such people, but who could truly explain to them what they were, why it was wrong, and how they should mend their ways? For all his life, he had believed that he fought for good. Now, the only good he could see existed in his closest friends. The people of Scercendusa were a cruel tribe, even crueler than the orc tribes roaming the Great Barren, if they reveled so much in the death of their kin under the hooves and in the maws of bloodthirsty beasts.

The guards tried to follow them, but the unleashed beasts attacked them from all sides. Their cries of terror made Varg stop, but Claw barreled into his back from behind. "They're doomed by their own designs," the bearshifter told him in a grim voice. Then, louder, he shouted, "All of you who want to live, run for your lives!"

Not even Claw's powerful voice could rise easily over the uproar, so only a handful of those around them understood what they were being urged to do. That was all for the better, it seemed, because several people broke from the crowded tribunes and began running toward the gates that served as both entrance and exit from the arena. A few followed them at first, then a rising wave of confusion rose. As words passed from mouth to ear, the wave turned slowly into a tide, and it began to accelerate, the cheering turning into a wail, as someone stepped on another human being in their effort to get out of the death trap that the arena was quickly becoming.

One of the beasts jerked its head toward the tribunes, Varg saw when he risked a look behind him. Enticed by a new, less dangerous target, the animal broke from the herd and began careening toward the area where the people were pouring out of the place. The walls were only made of wood there, so the beast burst through, sending splinters everywhere.

"We should get out of here," Claw bellowed at him over the yelling of the crowd, now terrorized by the impending doom swarming at their feet.

"No need to tell me that," Varg shouted back. It was getting harder and harder to cut through the people trying to save their lives, and Varg had to do his best and beyond to not crush anyone by mistake.



But the scared men and women began to form a wall of bodies packed tightly together and Varg, even as he towered over them through his sheer height, realized that getting to the upper edge of the tribunes had become impossible.

“Shift, Varg!” Claw roared, his sonorous voice barely cutting through the screaming.

Varg tensed for a moment. They didn’t want to attract that sort of attention, did they? But it seemed like there was no other way, so the following moment, the crowd around him screamed for a different reason. Maybe they didn’t see that kind of thing in Scercendusa, but the time for choices was long gone now. He jumped over them, the scared people trying to get out of his way.

In just a few leaps, he was where he needed to be, and he looked down. Once more, he was pushed from behind, and then his paws crashed into the ground, while the force of the fall coursed through his weathered body with a wave of pain that soon receded.

“No time to dally,” Claw growled at him.

Out in the street, the passers-by were starting to understand that something unfathomable was taking place at the arena, and most of them had already crowded together, avid for a new type of entertainment. They were insane to choose to stay there, Varg thought, but this wasn’t the kind of situation where he could call people to reason through wit and well-crafted speech.

Moreover, he was in his wolf’s hide, which immediately drew attention to him. The denizens gathered to witness what was happening began shouting and pointing at him and Claw with raised hands.

“To the wall!” Claw cried out, and Varg didn’t question him. If they were to get out of there and lose the curious crowds, it was their best choice. And following the wall, they would get to the domestikos’ palace, which was the place they needed to be.

More and more inhabitants were alerted that something was going on, and with them, more guards appeared.

Varg rushed to the nearest stairs leading to the top of the wall, with Claw on his tail. Two guards tried to stop them, and they pushed them aside, avoiding the sharp tips of their spears at the last moment. The guards rolled down the stairs, grunting and yelling.

“We planned to pass through the city as unnoticed as possible,” Varg told Claw as they ran side by side.

“That plan flew out of the window, puppy, the moment we saw those beasts.”

They reached the top of the wall and stopped for a moment. Most of the guards were down in the streets now, trying to calm the people, which meant that for the moment they were no longer the hunted, at least not for every living soul sworn to protect the city.

And, indeed, the guards had more pressing matters on their hands. A couple of beasts had rushed into the street from the arena. Claw and Varg looked down for a moment. The guards seemed adept at slashing through the throats of those wild animals with their weapons, and soon, their blood was pouring down the small square stones paving the main road in the area, seeping through the cracks.

“They’re dealing with them,” Claw said surely. “What we need to worry about are our own hides, puppy.”

“Yes,” Varg agreed. “Let’s make ourselves scarce before they realize they have a wolf and a bear in their midst. They’ll finish those wild beasts soon enough.”

Varg had barely said those words, when a loud crashing sound made their heads snap up. Not too far away, one of the buildings that appeared to serve most probably as an asylum like the ones the frail man from before had told them about, was spitting smoke into the sky.

“What could be happening?” Varg murmured.

A band of men carrying torches broke into the street from the same building and clashed with the guards that were barely finished killing the escaped beasts from the arena.

“I’m afraid we cannot afford to sit around and figure it out,” Claw replied.

The wail from the arena and its surroundings seemed to spread like wildfire. Varg rushed alongside Claw, while his eyes took in the chaos as smoke began to rise here and there.

“Did we do this?” he asked the question aloud, although he had wanted to keep it to himself.

“Is the spark guilty of the fire?” Claw asked back, as they ran along the wall. “Or is it the one who gathered the dry grass and built it into a pyre waiting to be lit?”

Varg fell silent. “There are fires everywhere.”

“We might have arrived here at a most inauspicious moment,” Claw said. “But we’re not known for picking the best moments, now, are we?”

“You can say that again,” Varg agreed. “Toward the domestikos’ palace, then. But what if Toru is not there?”

“We need to start looking for him somewhere in this haystack,” Claw replied.

Varg thought the same. From their vantage on the wall, they could see Scercendusa in the twilight as a field of rooftops and towers, now ablaze here and there.

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As he walked toward his destination, Duril observed how people were growing scarcer and scarcer, most probably enticed by the promise of a comfortable bed and a good night's sleep. If everything went well, and Toru defeated the evil that had tortured so many for so long, they would be able to enjoy more nights like this, without ever knowing that a hero of the people was in their midst.

But first, he needed to reach the domestikos' palace so that he could learn where he should search for his friends once they got inside the city. At best, tonight would be only a scouting trip that would help him learn the lay of the land. He wondered if Pie and Moth would learn by tomorrow whether Toru was already there. They were part of that mysterious tribe that treasured the truth that Toru was destined for great things.

That didn't mean that Toru would destroy Scercendusa as the Sakka thought. Duril knew that the choice would be difficult, and that Toru would need a good friend by his side to support his decisions.

His nostrils twitched as he sensed something in the air. According to the map, he was getting closer and closer to the domestikos' palace. It had been quite a trip so far, and he still had plenty of ground to cover, but his feet never tired as he thought of Toru and the important quest he carried on his shoulders.

The evening air brought with it a whiff of smoke. Duril wondered about it. It was still summer and the people of Scercendusa didn't need to burn wood to be warm in their homes, right? Had a fire broken out somewhere? A place like this magnificent city had to have civil servants in charge of handling any such potential disaster. Fires were probably commonplace here.

Still, the way that smoke smelled made him feel something akin to restlessness right in the pit of his stomach. Duril hurried as he walked down the street, leaving the taverns and beerhouses behind with their cheerful patrons and blithesome lights. The few people who were still out at that hour seemed to feel the same as he did, as they began murmuring among themselves and turning their heads.

It wasn't possible to see over the buildings and observe the place that had to be burning, not from the street, so Duril slunk along the wall and began walking up the stairs that led to the top of it. Once there, he looked into the distance, and his heart caught in his throat.

There were fires to the south, here and there, and more were springing up.

"It's burning!" someone cried out from below. "Scercendusa is burning!"

Duril grabbed the edge of the parapet to steady himself. He was so caught up in the sight of those fires bursting into life everywhere that he missed the cadence of armored feet approaching.

"Citizen," someone growled at him, "get back to your place."

Duril started and took in the guard that had spoken to him, but he found himself looking at his back, as the man seemed busy heading elsewhere.

Something was going on. Something that, for some reason, was poised to engulf all of Scercendusa. Duril ducked and chose the darker part of the wall and began walking slowly while crouched. More guards rushed by him but paid him no mind, in their hurry to comply with the orders they must have received.

The domestikos' palace was situated close to the walls, according to the map he had taken from Granius' accounting house. That meant that if he just kept on walking, he would get there. If the entire city was thrown into chaos, how would Toru find his way and complete his quest?

And what was the source of that chaos? Duril hurried, as much as he could, given that he still needed to keep himself low to avoid being seen by the alerted guards.

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The procession stopped in front of two large doors that opened to allow those strange monks to step inside. Toru didn't remember if he had seen those doors before, but it was just as possible that he had been walked to his door by the domestikos as they came from the opposite direction. He wasn't sure; the palace seemed a labyrinth of corridors and rooms that all looked the same, so it was difficult to tell which way he had come and where he was going.

Good thing that he could see in the dark so well. He moved silently behind the monks and walked inside. The doors closed behind him, making no noise whatsoever.

It looked like the throne room, Toru realized, the one where Ewart Kona had taken him and encouraged him to sit on the seat of power to see how it felt. But what was the procession doing there? And at that hour?

He waited in the shadows until the dark figures all knelt on the floor and stopped their frightening hymn. From behind the throne, someone emerged, and Toru tensed when he saw that it was Ewart Kona standing tall before that strange audience.

"My friends," the domestikos said in a voice that didn't appear to belong to him, as it was deep and cavernous and nothing like Ewart Kona's pleasant speech, "we finally have our enemy where we want him."

Toru perked up his ears. Was he the enemy? He tensed, ready to pounce at the first sign of aggression.

One of the dark figures kneeling on the floor stood. He pushed back his hood, and Toru frowned as he saw who it was. *Blayves*, he thought. Of course, when the house of merchants had crumbled down, Blayves had escaped. Toru couldn't say he was surprised to see that evil merchant here. *Evil begets evil*, he told himself and waited, although he wanted to jump over everyone, reach that

murderer of men, women, and children, and leave him without breath. He still needed to understand what role the domestikos played in all this. Right now, he didn't sound like himself, which meant that he might very well be possessed.

"Where is he?" Blayves hissed. He didn't appear as subservient as the other dark figures kneeling there. "I want to feast on his blood."

"Patience," Ewart Kona barked. "He's but a fool, and I cannot understand how a powerful being like yourself couldn't destroy him. Do I need to do everything myself?"

Blayves didn't cower under the reprimand. "He may be that, but his powers are greater than any I've seen in all his ancestors before him."

Toru's ears twitched. In a few pounces, he could reach Ewart Kona and leave him breathless, but he wasn't sure yet that was the only way. Duril, in his kindness, would advise him to wait and not hurry to pass judgement; if Ewart Kona was possessed, it wasn't his fault, and killing him would be a mistake. Varg, in his wisdom, would tell him to assess the situation and increase his chances of success without spilling blood unnecessarily. And Claw, in his experience, would probably tell him to pay attention and learn all he could about those sneaky merchants, or monks, or whatever they were.

So, he waited, more and more curious about what lay inside the mind of the evil creature that was probably inhabiting Ewart Kona's human body now.

"Or maybe," the evil spoke through the domestikos' mouth, "your power wanes while your belief shakes."

"How can you even say such a thing?" Blayves shouted. "We have no home now!" He gestured at the prone figures behind him. "I was forced to remake all my brethren from my own flesh and blood."

Toru recoiled in disgust as Blayves shook off the long robe, displaying nothing but bones on which strips of skin and flesh hung like moss from a macabre tree.

"I," Blayves continued, the words spat out of his mouth like poison, "even destroyed my humble servant, my most loyal companion, so that you can have this again!"

"Your servant was not meant for immortality," Ewart Kona said placidly. "To cry over such a thing is beneath you, Blayves. And you gave up on that place too soon. I come from sea, and what is it that Scercendusa doesn't have? Hmm?" He waited, as if he expected the undead merchant to answer.

"Your power has grown and grown over the last few millennia," Blayves said. "And what do I get for being your loyal servant? You called me here, where I suffocate without my pearls!"

“You lost your pearls because you were weak and unprepared!”

Toru forced himself not to look away, as the domestikos slashed the air with one hand, and through a magic of some kind, sent Blayves’ head rolling across the floor. One of the dark figures hurried to capture it and place it back on the disgusting body’s neck.

“Now, you are here to serve me and take your revenge,” Ewart Kona continued as if he hadn’t decapitated his subordinate just moments earlier.

“And how will I do that?” Blayves barked at him.

“You are so useless and stupid that you cannot even sense him?” Ewart Kona smiled, and Toru felt a chill coursing down his spine. That smile wasn’t any different from the one he had seen earlier on the domestikos’ face. Was he so easy to fool, after all? “Step out of the shadows, Toru,” he said, and this time, he used the voice from before, not the cavernous tone he had been using in this room.

There was no reason for him to stay hidden, it seemed. He wasn’t afraid, so he walked forward, while everyone turned their heads to look at him. It was no surprise to see their faceless heads again. “Are you Hekastfet?” he asked the domestikos directly.

Ewart Kona laughed. “Your eyes tell you the truth, young tiger. I’m the domestikos of Scercendusa, and I go by the name Ewart Kona.”

Toru set his jaw hard. “You’re not fooling me again. I’m here to destroy you!”

“Destroy me? And how will you do that?” the domestikos taunted him.

Toru growled and leaped toward him. He crashed against the tall throne, as Ewart Kona disappeared from right under his eyes and paws. Confused for a moment, he turned to search for him. Now, the domestikos was standing to the left, a few good feet from him. “Nice circus trick,” he said. “I can chase you all night if need be.”

“You can chase me for an eternity, but, lucky you, I don’t have the patience for that. Seize him,” he ordered the others.

The dark figures all rose at the same time. Blayves snarled, showing every one of his teeth, and rushed toward him. Toru only had to leap out of the way, but the undead merchants soon clustered around him, circling him faster and faster. He slashed through them, but it felt as if he was cutting through nothing but air with his long powerful claws.

First, he felt one hind leg being cut from under him. He tried to shake off whatever it was that was climbing up his leg, but it had the consistency of fabric, one tougher than anything else he had felt in his life. The same happened to his hind leg, and soon, he couldn’t use half of his body. Realizing the danger, he shifted back into his human, and that made that shroud prison drop to the floor.

“Now!” Ewart Kona bellowed.

Toru turned toward him, determined to strangle the evil out of him. But, right that moment, a piercing pain shooting through the side of his neck stopped him dead in his tracks. He put one hand up and found the hilt of a dagger buried in his neck.

“Finally.” Blayves’ ugly grin was the last thing he saw as darkness took him in the shape of a shroud covering his eyes and his entire body along with them.

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“To the palace, to the palace!” someone shouted.

Duril risked one look below and saw how people were pouring out of the houses and into the street, alerted by the smell of smoke and the patrolling guards that seemed bent on stopping them from fleeing.

“Back into your homes!” the guards bellowed, as they tried to keep the crowds at bay.

“So that you can set fire to us like rats?”

Duril didn’t wait to see what followed. The city was suddenly gripped by a strange fever, but he had no time to lose. He felt it in his bones that, with the danger that traveled through the city like rapid waters through rocks on a steep mountain, came another, and this one was like a shard of ice next to his heart.

He forgot about being cautious. Just like the rest of the crowds below, he knew that he needed to rush to the domestikos’ palace to seek answers at least, if not salvation.

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“Look, Claw,” Varg said as he ran and ran along the wall. “More of the city is burning now.”

“I can see that,” Claw confirmed. “Let’s just keep running!”

Their bodies were stretched to the limit. They were resilient creatures, but the smoke rising was filling their lungs, crowding the clean air out. Varg couldn’t understand what was going on, and it was safe to bet that Claw didn’t, either.

Tall towers grouped together rose in the distance.

“That has to be the palace!” he shouted and pushed himself to run faster, ignoring the burning in his chest.

Claw followed him closely. “We’re getting there, puppy. Call me a fool, but I sense that Toru is close.”

Varg was happy he wasn't the only one to believe such a thing. His gut and heart were telling him the same, but he had discounted them as being nothing but his desire to reach his beloved friend.

Crowds of people were gathered at the foot of giant stairs leading to the palace, he noticed as less and less distance was between that place and them. And rows and rows of guards were pushing the mob back, although from the top of the wall it appeared to be a push and pull game in which thousands were involved.

"Climb on my back, puppy!" Claw shouted at him.

"I can leap over them," Varg replied.

"Just do as I say!"

He didn't protest further and jumped on Claw's back, digging his claws into the thick fur.

"And now, hold on tight!" Claw ordered.

Varg barely had time to follow this command, because Claw rose on his hind legs and roared so loudly that both the hysterical mob and the guards stopped their push and pull.

"Monster!" someone from the crowd shouted, and right away, cries of despair erupted from everywhere.

Varg understood that something was going on, because Claw's shadow over the crowd grew larger, and he himself found that he was high in the air. Was Claw growing? The bearshifter leaped effortlessly over the rows of guards and flew up the stairs, eating the remaining distance between them and the top as if it was nothing.

"Flea bag," he said while struggling to keep himself on his friend's furry back, "are my eyes playing tricks on me, or have you suddenly turned into ten bears?"

"Just a trick I learned," Claw replied. "Enjoy it while it lasts, 'cause it's not going to last long now."

Varg didn't have the time to ask why that was, because Claw shrank under him just as they reached the top. The bearshifter collapsed on the flat ground, and Varg rolled away from him. Claw looked like he could use a bit of rest, so he hurried to his side and licked his ears.

"Well, it's not like I don't appreciate the thought," Claw said drily, "but can you save that for later? I believe we need to get inside the palace."

Varg shifted into his human and offered Claw his hand when he did the same. "Do you think we should knock?" he asked as he turned to face the tall, closed gates.



“And wake people up? Nah, it’s more polite to just sneak inside and look for our friend without disturbing others’ sleep.”

Varg got the humor. He doubted, however, that anyone in Scercendusa would be sleeping tonight. Behind them, the city was burning.

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Toru couldn’t move his arms or legs, and not even open his mouth, as every little patch of him was covered by that dark shroud. However, he could hear what was going on around him, so he focused on the single sense he could still use.

“And outside?” he heard Blayves asking.

His body was being moved, as far as he could tell.

“I don’t need the city anymore or its souls now,” Ewart Kona replied.

“But why? If another tiger comes--”

Ewart Kona, or whoever was inhabiting his body, let out a hoarse laugh. “This is the last tiger. My reign finally begins from now until forever.”

Blayves joined him with laughter of his own. “Indeed, what a brilliant plan! To destroy Nelsikkar so that no one would ever contest you again, master!”

“Now, there is only one small problem left to address,” Ewart Kona said.

“What problem?” Blayves inquired eagerly. Toru was just as eager to learn what it was, as well.

“Those pesky little rats,” the domestikos said with disgust. “They always seem to slip through my fingers, no matter how many I destroy.”

“Haven’t you dealt with them yet?” Blayves asked in a haughty tone.

“Do you enjoy having that ugly head on your shoulders?” Ewart Kona asked in reply.

Blayves kept silent, so Toru understood his unspoken answer.

“That is a good job for you to prove your fealty,” Ewart Kona said. “Use your monsters. You know that I will only allow one servant to spend eternity with me.”

“Yes, master,” Blayves said in a whiny voice. “I’ll see to it. But maybe after the city burns to the ground? They hide in the sewers, don’t they?”

They had to be talking about the Sakka, Toru realized. His heart sank. He had no idea how to free himself from the shroud keeping him completely motionless, and the chances were that it would

take him a while to figure out how to get out of it. That much time wasn't something that the city, or the Sakka had at their disposal. He needed to be out of that strange prison, and fast.

Just as he thought that, the tension around his upper arms appeared to fade, and Toru twitched his shoulders, realizing happily that he was no longer held snugly by the thing. In a matter of moments, his entire body was released, and he jumped to his feet the moment he was free.

He stared around him. He was in a windowless room, and only torches burning on the walls allowed those inside to see to walk around without tripping at every step. The strips of fabric that had kept him in place turned into the army of faceless undead merchants behind Blayves he had dealt with before.

Without thinking, he rushed toward the head of the merchants, but Ewart Kona lifted one arm and Toru crashed into it. The force of the blow sent him sprawling back. He growled and jumped to his feet again.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the domestikos advised him in a voice dripping with false benevolence. "You see this room, Toru? It is a special room. It is where you will die so I can live forever."

Toru stopped his attack to assess his surroundings. Yes, he could tell it was a strange room, but when had he ever been stopped by something as trifling as that before? "I have no intention of dying, Hekastfet," he said. "I'm here to stop you, and I will, forever."

"I would indulge you in your fruitless attempts, but after so many millennia of battling your kind, it has all become somewhat tiresome. Forgive an old soul for not wanting to play games with someone as young as you."

Toru sneered. "You don't have a soul. And don't underestimate me. I'm here to put an end to you."

Ewart Kona waved at Blayves. "What are you waiting for? Go, do as I told you to."

Blayves gave a quick nod and slid over the floor with all the others following. Toru watched, his eyebrows furrowed, curious to see the door they would leave through, but it didn't look like there was any door. They disappeared through the walls as if they were thin air.

"Do you see the power of my magic, Toru?" the domestikos asked. "Without me, there would be nothing like it. I could even use it to turn you into my loyal servant."

"As if," Toru said with a snarl. "You just promised Blayves that."

"It doesn't mean I intend to do so. He's irksome and disgusting to look at. But the last of the Olliandran, on the other hand, would remind me each day of my eternity of my sweet victory."

"Don't you ever dare," Toru hissed. He shifted into his tiger and pounced on the domestikos.

As before, Ewart Kona disappeared and appeared in another place. “Are you determined to be this tedious?”

Toru reconsidered his strategy. If there was a way to vanquish Hekastfet, or Ewart Kona, whoever that was, it had to be other than a direct attack. “Answer me one thing,” he said.

“Will you stop attacking me if I do?”

“Yes.”

“Then go ahead.”

“Are you Hekastfet possessing Ewart Kona? What did you do with the old man?”

The domestikos laughed. “That would be two things, but I’m in a generous mood today. Ewart Kona doesn’t exist, tiger. No domestikos of Scercendusa ever truly lived. They have always been me, and I them.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six – The Truth Inside You

Ewart Kona's revelation stopped Toru only for a moment. "So, you've always hidden behind the appearance of a human?"

The domestikos moved soundlessly over the floor and sat on a long bench made of stone. His old face seemed so at peace in the light of the torches on the walls that it could have fooled anyone. "To explain my nature to you would be to explain the universe to the smallest maggot crawling on the face of the world. It would be completely fruitless."

"Try me," Toru said, setting his chin up in defiance. All the while, his eyes were adjusting and taking in his surroundings. Hekastfet could talk all he wanted, drunk on his power as he was, but that didn't mean that Toru would just sit idly about. Before, generations and generations of tigers had destroyed this evil in front of him, or had at least chased it away. He had heard quite clearly from Blayves' mouth that his powers were greater than the powers of those who came before him, and he didn't see why the head of the merchants would lie about such a thing.

It was all the same to him. He had no ancestors to worry about or learn from. They were nothing but mist and didn't even have the persistence of an old memory. For him, they were as good as no one, and everyone he had never met in his life.

"Well, if you insist," Ewart Kona said and placed his hands in his lap in what could have been interpreted as a pious gesture if it hadn't been for the look of evil glee in his eyes. "You see, Toru, Nelsikkar with its house of Olliandran, was a thorn in my side for a long time, but little by little, I got closer and closer and discovered where my enemy lay in wait. It was so easy to destroy them all, it wasn't even very rewarding when I think about it now." He threw his head back and a gurgle of strange laughter left his mouth. "Unlike the house of Olliandran, I've only grown smarter over the millennia. I used to believe I only needed to grow and grow, when what I truly needed was to transform."

"To take the body of some old man," Toru spat in disgust. "Is that all your so-called power can do?"

His insult seemed to have hit home, as Ewart Kona stopped laughing to take a better look at him. "Not just this old man," he said cheerfully, "but many others before him."

"But if you're here, how come you were also in Whitekeep, and Fairside, and Shroudharbor?"

"Ah, you see, foolish tiger, that is why you cannot understand my nature, no matter how you may try. I can be everywhere." He opened his arms wide in a gesture of grandeur.

Toru followed the lines of the walls, the shadows thrown by the torches on their dark surfaces. It was a place like a tomb, but he wasn't scared. Ewart Kona, or Hekastfet, or whatever name he liked to go by, might believe that it was ideal for him to have his mortal enemy right here, but that

was just the thing Toru wanted. They were facing each other, and they were caught in the same tight space, which meant that only one of them would walk out alive at the end of it all. Toru very much intended to be the one to do so; he had his friends and lovers to meet again, and as exquisite as the foods served at the domestikos' table had been, he wanted very much to try all the incredible dishes Scercendusa had to offer. Such was his optimism regarding his chance of success once he went against this old, demented evil.

"You cannot be too strong if you're everywhere at the same time," Toru said.

"You're very wrong about that." Ewart Kona rose from the bench and began pacing the floor in the same soundless manner. It was as if his physical body didn't touch the ground.

Toru frowned at that realization. Surreptitiously, he moved close to one of the walls and grabbed a torch from its place. Ewart Kona had his back to him and didn't flinch when Toru threw the torch toward him. The image of the domestikos flickered and turned into smoke. A thin trail of it rose from the torch now lying on the floor.

The domestikos materialized again, this time close to Toru. "It took you long enough to realize it. I'm everywhere and nowhere, tiger. Do you still believe that you can defeat me?"

"You're here for a reason," Toru said slowly. "You need this city."

Ewart Kona laughed and disappeared only to reappear moved to Toru's left. "Not anymore. You know, I'm actually quite grateful that you came to me. It helps exceedingly that I didn't have to hunt you down all over Eawirith. Yes, you are the one helping me become the most powerful I've ever been. How does that make you feel?"

Toru had learned a lot during his travels with his friends. Hekastfet must have thought him a foolish tiger, but that wasn't what he was. Now that he knew he was only dealing with some projection and not the real incarnation of the evil the domestikos of Scercendusa represented, there was no point in entertaining this ghost.

He began walking along the walls, his eyes and fingers ever searching for signs of something that could help him find a way out.

"Don't waste your time," Ewart Kona said. "This will be your tomb."

Toru paid him no mind. Walls were nothing but polished stone, put together by talented builders. And all those stones had to be held together like that by mortar. His fingers rested at the line between two stones. He slowly probed the small space in between, the softer material, even if there was so little of it.

"What are you doing?" the domestikos asked.

Toru continued to ignore him. Blayves couldn't have spoken in vain when he named him the most powerful of the tigers. He moved backward, enough so that he could gain the momentum he needed and rushed into the wall, one shoulder first. The stones shifted slightly under the force of the blow.

“Are you willing to break your bones in a fruitless attempt to break free from your fate? And I was sure you would die slowly of starvation.”

Toru no longer cared what the shadow of the domestikos wanted to tell him. He had grown stronger during the time that had poured past between his entering into Whitekeep and now. Another blow, and the sound of falling sand could be heard, another sign that while he was not yet there, soon the wall would give way under his strength.

“I can conjure new walls to capture you,” Ewart Kona said. “And I don't need to put much effort into it.”

This time, when Toru hit the wall, the stones seemed to rearrange themselves, becoming stronger and tougher. It wasn't enough to discourage him, though. Of course, Hekastfet would try to make it so that he lost hope, but that only gave him more reason to think. If it was so easy for the domestikos to create walls, and he was nothing but a phantasm, didn't that mean that everything he created was the same?

Toru stopped his assault on the wall and crossed his arms. The more he looked at the wall, the more impenetrable it seemed, which meant that whatever dark magic the domestikos was weaving, it could seep into his mind and infect it, as well. The choice was clear. Instead of staring helplessly at the wall in front of him, he searched for clues useful for achieving his escape everywhere around.

Suddenly, his eyes fell on the skin of his forearms. There were still traces of gold from the bath Midnight had given him, a bath that felt like it had been a long time ago. Toru rubbed his fingers over the marks and when he lifted his hand, a small trail of golden smoke rose from them.

Guided by nothing but instinct, he moved toward the wall and put his hand against its smooth surface. The trail of gold floated for a moment and then began moving along the wall as if it had a mind of its own. Toru watched in fascination as what looked like runic inscriptions from an ancient time appeared on the stones.

“No!” Ewart Kona said abruptly. “Touch those stones again, and you'll be dead in moments.”

Toru smirked. Like he could believe anything his immortal enemy said. The gift the Sakka had given him was still there, and now was the right time to use it. He couldn't explain why or how, but his heart was telling him to go on. So, he placed both his hands on a pair of runes, and the inscriptions floated from the wall, lifted into the air and then combined. Emboldened by his success, Toru began touching more and more pairs. Sometimes, he failed, and then he went on to touch two others. Again, and again.

Ewart Kona materialized in front of him, trying to obscure the wall from his view. Toru waved impatiently, making the phantasm disintegrate for a few moments, enough for him to continue his work. The symbols floated together in the air, forming a circle that began to swirl as soon as there were no more runic inscriptions left on the wall for him to touch. They moved faster and faster, and Toru watched, his heart filled with hope, while Ewart Kona continued to try to stop him to no avail.

“You cannot do this! Stop it! You shouldn’t have their protection anymore!”

Toru was certain the domestikos was talking about the Sakka.

“You’ll only find another wall beyond this one,” Ewart Kona said, “and another one, and another one.”

“Let there be walls. They won’t stop me,” Toru told him.

The symbols above their heads ceased their dance suddenly and joined together. The ray of light bursting from their joining was so bright that any ordinary human would have had to close his eyes so that he didn’t go blind. But Toru was no ordinary human, and he didn’t close his eyes. He just watched as the ray of light turned into a giant hammer made from liquid flame. Toru didn’t hesitate for a moment. He grabbed it instead. It felt light, yet powerful, in his hands. He walked toward the wall and raised the hammer, breaking the stones under the force of his swing. They didn’t turn into gravel and dust, as could be expected, but into mist the color of tar.

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The large gates gave in at the first push. Varg traded a glance with Claw, who shrugged and gestured to him with his chin. Behind them, the clamor from the guards trying to keep the maddened crowds at bay seemed like a faraway noise.

“I’d say we should hurry before we have the entire city as company,” Claw suggested, and Varg couldn’t agree more.

The large hallway opening before them looked like the maw of a strange animal, dark and humid.

“Do you smell that?” Claw asked and sniffed the air.

“What?” Varg knew that his sense of smell was unparalleled in the world of humans, but Claw was one who beat him when it came to that.

“There’s a smell of death,” Claw replied.

Varg inhaled as deeply as he could. Indeed, a fetid scent drifted to them, and it had to come from the depths of that wide open maw. “What do you think this is?” he whispered his question.

“Call me names and slap me silly, puppy, but I think I know this smell.”

“How so?” Varg asked. He hadn’t even finished his question when all the hairs on his back stood on end, and a sense of danger coursed through him.

Claw must have sensed the same thing, because he let his muzzle drop and growled menacingly. “It’s those damned merchants,” the bearshifter threw at him and pounced into the deep dark before them.

Varg didn’t wait for any other sign and lunged after Claw.

Before them, the dark hallway began to move and wail.

“Damned shifters!” a cavernous voice bellowed.

Something flew through the air, like the black sails of a ship careening toward them at incredible speed.

“We meet again, Master Blayves,” Claw said cheerfully.

Banshee screaming bled their ears, and Varg shook his head in an effort to regain his hearing. The confusion lasted for but a moment, and the next he was jumping toward the moving darkness. His eyes couldn’t make out what it was, but Claw’s shout of recognition told him everything he needed to know. They were going against the same evil they had encountered in Shroudharbor, the same evil that had tortured souls and killed many. The taste of impending revenge was sweet on his tongue, and he growled with the power of his entire pack.

Now nearer than before, the darkness moved, circling them, and Varg understood quickly that it was a flurry of robes that reminded him of the merchants without faces from Shroudharbor. They were running around him and Claw, faster and faster, making it impossible for them to see shapes or get to them with their claws and fangs.

“I didn’t forget about you, traitorous beast,” Blayves shouted. “You’ll finally meet your end here.”

“I don’t think so,” Claw replied. “Now, tell us, where can we find your master, once we defeat you?”

Varg admired Claw’s boldness, but it didn’t stop him from trying to make sense of the confusion of dark garments moving in closer and closer circles around them, ready to form a noose.

“My master is everywhere,” Blayves cried out. “Soon, you’ll be nothing but crumbling bones.”

“I thought I asked you a question,” Claw said.

Varg only had enough time to look up and shout to his friend, “Claw, watch out!”

From above, Blayves, or whatever that apparition was, descended like a dropped rock. Claw moved swiftly, and the merchant’s attire crashed into the floor, only to swirl and rise back to its



feet. Varg could only tell that the garment hid the head of the house of merchants because of the voice coming out of it. Otherwise, it was impossible to see anything within it. Just as well, it could be a ghost animating it.

“My master,” Blayves growled, “is dealing with your foolish friend right now, choking him to death!”

Varg whispered before thinking, “Toru.”

“I doubt our friend would let himself be choked to death so easily. I believe that it is probably the other way around,” Claw said without abandoning his tense stance.

Just like him, Varg was working hard at keeping his wits about himself. The noose finally formed, and from everywhere, the garments pulled tightly around them, squeezing them. Without wasting any time, Varg bared his fangs and began using them to pull at the dark fabric. From the sound of ripping he could hear, Claw was doing the same. The surprising thing wasn't that they were tearing through the merchants' clothes as if they were nothing. No, they didn't find themselves tearing fabric with their fangs and claws, but flesh, putrid flesh that began falling at their feet.

Varg felt dizzy as the stench reached his nose. He shook his head again, in an effort to get rid of the sensation, but it was so powerful and his nose was too sensitive, so the only thing that came to mind to save himself was to shift into his human.

Claw seemed prey to the same difficulty and he shifted at the same time.

“Attack them!” Blayves ordered.

Under their horrified eyes, the putrid flesh rose from the floor and covered them. Varg batted at it with his arms as the disgusting stuff went over his face, entering his mouth and nose. The sounds Claw was making tore his soul apart, but that only made his horror turn into anger.

He tensed his entire body and willed himself to be what he had always been meant to be. If Claw had a trick up his sleeve, who was to say he didn't have one of his own?

His powerful howl resonated against the walls, and the putrefying flesh of dead merchants was torn from his body, splintering into bits that crashed against the stony surface in a rain of disgusting sounds. He couldn't stop howling at this point as he turned toward Claw whose body had been overcome by that horrifying enemy. His wolf tore through each piece, spitting it out and uncovering his friend beneath.

On his back, he could feel the hand of darkness gripping him and trying to pull him back. He didn't stop his efforts, bent on freeing Claw, but the wraiths were at them again. There were so many, and they crawled over the bearshifter's face, leaving nothing but an eye that stared at Varg in pain.

“I’m not losing you!” Varg growled and tore through the horrid flesh, crushing it between his teeth and spitting the venom out with each bite.

He felt Claw’s grip on his front right leg but ignored it. He knew what it meant, but he could just as easily pretend that he didn’t understand it. The wraiths encircled him, and now dozens of teeth were sinking into his hide, trying to get a piece of him. He was biting their flesh, so they were biting back. But they knew nothing of who he was and who they were going against.

One of his hind legs was bitten to the bone, and the sharp pain stopped him for a moment. He ground his teeth and continued his battle, through growls and curses. Claw’s grip on his front leg was weakening, so he redoubled his efforts.

He felt the hot breath right next to his ear a moment too late. A searing sting on the side of his neck drew a dark veil over his eyes. *No*, his mind screamed, as the inside of his mouth was overwhelmed by the same horrid stench and dying flesh.

He fell on his back, pulled down by forces beyond him, but as he did so, his eyes rolled to the ceiling, suddenly bright in that deep darkness. Bright? How could it be bright? It was night outside.

Yet, still, the ceiling looked as if it had caught on fire, and something descended from that powerful light so fast that if he had blinked, he wouldn’t have had the time to see it. It looked like a hand born of fire and it sped toward him. He closed his eyes and felt something hot crawling all over him. It only lasted for the blink of an eye, and the next thing he knew, he no longer felt anything.

Varg brought one hand up in front of his eyes. He was somehow back in his human form, although he couldn’t recall having shifted. Above him, the bright light flickered as if it was trying to tell him something.

No, he should be the one to open his mouth. “Thank you,” he whispered. He only had to turn his head to see Claw close to him, his entire body free of those horrible attackers.

The bearshifter smiled at him. “Friend of yours?” He pointed at the ceiling, or better said, the light.

Around them, the darkness receded. Varg couldn’t tell if the dead merchants had disappeared completely or not, but, for the moment, he was just glad to be alive and also thankful that Claw was in one piece, as well.

The light imploded, taking them by surprise, shaping itself into a small ball. They stared at it, astonished, as much because they were still alive, as because of what was taking place in front of their eyes. The ball expanded, elongated, and suddenly, two appendages burst from it. Varg looked closely. Did those look like feet? Small feet, like a child’s, and they were soon wrapped in scuffed shoes.

The ball dropped onto its feet and struggled for balance for a moment. Varg extended one arm to catch it, and the shape made a small pirouette, eventually getting its bearings. Before they knew it, it finally formed itself into something that looked like a young child.

“I’ll be damned,” Claw whispered, echoing the same thing that crossed Varg’s mind at that moment. “Saved by a cub, of all things.”

The shape of light wasn’t so bright anymore, and it was now dusting the back of its pants with eagerness. Varg and Claw both gawked at their savior. Not quite a child, Varg realized, but some sort of dwarf. “Who are you?” he asked.

Their savior cleared his throat. “Master wolf, master bear, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Midnight, one of the Sakka, and his lordship Toru’s humble servant.”

“Midnight? Quite the name,” Claw commented. “Wait, his lordship? Toru? What company have we been keeping, puppy?”

Varg was just as flabbergasted by the whole thing as Claw was.

Midnight seemed to have remembered something because he suddenly lifted his head. For a few moments, he appeared to listen to something only his ears could catch. That allowed Varg the time necessary to examine their unlikely hero. Midnight stood barely three or four feet tall, and he wore the clothes of a street urchin. His face seemed the kind one sees at fairs, grimacing and going from pain to excitement at the drop of a hat for the entertainment of children. Yet, whatever had just happened was no amusement or fair trick.

“You must hurry,” Midnight said suddenly. “His lordship needs you.”

“Where is he?” Varg asked. “A bit of guidance would help at this point.”

Midnight pressed his palms together in front of his chest. “He’s here. But this is all I can do to help you. Please forgive me.”

“You just saved us from a gruesome fate. I’d say there’s no need to apologize. But before we rush to Toru’s help, can you tell us who you are? Who are the Sakka?”

“Truth keepers,” Midnight said mysteriously.

“How did you know we were here and in danger?” Claw added a question of his own.

“The truth inside you guides us,” Midnight added. “Please, hurry. Toru is fighting Hekastfet.”

The time for questions was over, and Varg didn’t want to prolong it, although so many new ideas were starting to swirl inside his head. Claw exchanged a short glance with him. They were of the same mind, and they needed to be on the run if what Midnight said was true.

And Hekastfet was a name to inspire fear, Varg thought. Something of how his heart sank upon hearing it told him as much. Midnight waved his arm and a path glowed through the dark, composed of magical inscriptions.

“This way, master wolf,” Midnight said. “Toru is running out of time.”

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Duril observed with fearful eyes how people rolled onto the streets from their homes, while the fires spread everywhere. He no longer had to worry about the guards noticing him, especially since he was now running with the tide. There were so many people out in the streets that the guards’ attention was on them, and a lot of them poured through the feeble barricade the guards had tried to make, as water would through a dam about to break.

“To the domestikos’ palace!” they yelled, and that gave Duril the right idea about the place everyone was trying to reach.

“Save us, save us,” the crowds chanted, and Duril’s heart squeezed while beating like a hammer against the inside of his chest. The smoke was rising dark and thick, making the falling night even darker and thicker.

Here and there, someone was trampled and screamed. Duril could only be thankful for his decision to walk on the walls instead of the streets. But the smoke was getting in his eyes, too, making them water. He stumbled and fell to one knee, but got up quickly and continued running. What he was doing right now made little sense, but he knew in his heart that it was right. While his mind was telling him that maybe his friends weren’t even inside Scercendusa, his heart told him that they must be near. The Sakka were sure Toru would find his way inside, guided by them. And even if he was the only one inside now, Duril still needed to hurry to his rescue.

Maybe it was a bit ludicrous to believe that he would be a savior for Toru when he was so strong and amazing, but Duril knew, deep inside his soul, that the young tiger needed him. For that, he needed to continue running, even with his chest burning, and his eyes watering from the smoke. He could barely see, and only the sensation of his feet touching the ground guided him down the path he had to walk.

To his left, in the streets, the people were yelling and fighting the guards. Small brawls erupted everywhere, and it appeared that some were lost by those in charge of protecting the city. Everyone wanted to reach the domestikos’ palace, and that was where Duril needed to go, too.

His chest had other plans, however. Duril doubled over and fell to his knees. Was he that weak, after all? This couldn’t be the end, not like this, and not when Toru needed him.

The crowd below bellowed, frightened by something, but Duril couldn't push himself back to his feet to see what it was. He fell, face down, and his fingers scrabbled at the smooth stones of the wall helplessly.

Then, a breeze blew over his face, and the smoke parted for a moment, allowing him to breathe freely. Was he losing himself now? Had it all been in vain? The smoke came back, flooding his chest and making him cough, but the breeze returned, while the horrified yells in the street continued.

"Healer, wake up," a voice called to him, as the smoke was waved out of his eyes.

It took him great effort to look at the speaker. Duril lost his voice when he saw a pair of smooth, enormous eyes located to the sides of what had to be the head of a gigantic insect. Then, he looked farther up, to the antennas with their myriad tiny spikes. His awe soared as his eyes met something even more astonishing. Far above him rose a pair of the most beautiful butterfly wings he had ever seen in his life. There was blue, and red, and yellow, and purple, and gold, and Duril could only wonder how those colors could be so vibrant and how he could see them so plainly when there was darkness everywhere.

"I know I'm beautiful," the butterfly spoke, "but there's no time for pleasantries. Hop on my back, now."

Duril was frozen in place, not knowing what to say or do.

"I'm Moth, don't you recognize me?" the butterfly asked. "Now, healer."

Duril pushed himself up and struggled to climb on the huge soft body. The small hairs on the butterfly's back felt as thick as blades of grass. Duril grabbed a handful tightly to keep himself in place. "Moth?" he succeeded in eventually asking.

"The one and only," the butterfly replied. "Now hold on, we're going to fly to the domestikos' palace."

Duril wasn't interested in asking any more questions. Below him, the streets grew smaller, with the crying crowds and warmongering guards shrinking away. Even the tall wall grew thinner, and Duril closed his eyes, overcome by a slight dizziness.

"I believe this is not the first time flying for you," Moth said in a half-amused, half-scolding voice.

"Is Toru here? At the domestikos' palace?" Duril asked and forgot about looking down.

"Yes. We got word from our brethren. He's going against Hekastfet, as we speak, and he needs all your help."

Duril didn't question how Moth knew such a thing. The Sakka truly were amazing. And in the distance, he saw the tall towers of a citadel. That meant that his ride on Moth's back would be shorter than he had thought.

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Toru felt his muscles stretching to the point they threatened to break his bones, but he still lifted the huge hammer above his head to break through the walls still rising in front of him.

"Don't you see," Hekastfet's false voice boasted, "your strength is nothing compared to mine."

"All I see is that you have spent a lot of time playing the builder," Toru joked even as his entire body screamed at him to take a break. "I'm going to get out of here, and you'll be destroyed forever."

"Maybe so, maybe so," Hekastfet whispered with unhidden glee, "but what about the people outside? They're all dying out there."

Toru ground his teeth and continued his work. If this evil cared so much about trying to discourage him, it meant that he had a chance.

"Ah, maybe you don't care about the people," Hekastfet said softly, in a paternal voice, "as none of your ancestors did. But your friends are out there now, trying to get to you. What do you say, tiger? Don't you care about them, either?"

This time, Toru stopped as the hammer fell on the wall. "You destroyed the city before," he hissed. "Not tigers."

"Ah, finally, someone recognizes my thirst for destruction. Of course, the Olliandran tigers were always blamed for it, but they didn't realize they hadn't caused the disappearance of this place, either. Should they have thought it through more carefully? Stopped their useless fight against me? I don't see why. It's been quite entertaining if I take a moment to think about it. My revenge will be so sweet now. Your friends will die by fire, along with all the rotten souls of Scercendusa."

Toru didn't even recognize his voice as his own, as he growled and raised the hammer. The weapon of flames went through the shadow of Hekastfet, cutting it in half.

Simultaneously, a gash split the floor and revealed beneath it a stair circling down.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven – The Inescapable Shackles of Destiny

Toru looked down the stair, his eyes straining to see in the dark, despite how it wasn't usually any trouble for him to do so. However, the dark was so deep and thick that not even his tiger eyes were able to cut through it. He rested the hammer on his shoulder, but as soon as he did that, the weapon of fire disappeared, leaving behind nothing, not even a trail of smoke. Toru shrugged. It had probably served its purpose, and now it all depended on him and his strength to deal with the slippery stair and the darkness that lay at its foot.

Without a trace of hesitation, he began descending, careful of where he placed his foot for each step. His latest adventures had taught him that a bit of caution was a sign of wisdom, not cowardice. His feet slipped slightly more than once, taxing his sense of balance, but he didn't lose his bearing. Down and down, the stair went.

As he descended, a heavy scent grew thicker in the air. Toru sniffed and his nostrils flared. That smell reminded him of something he had known before. At first, he couldn't recall where or what, but, slowly, the memory crept up to the surface of his mind. It had been inside that tall room of the shroud in Shroudharbor, and the pestilence that came with the nefarious deeds of the merchants had been there, as well.

It didn't matter. He had promised himself quite a long time ago that he would avenge Whitekeep and Varg's pack and all the others that had perished or been tortured at the whims of the evil calling himself Hekastfet. He walked down the stair, shielding his nose and opening his eyes as wide as he could so that no enemy could take him by surprise.

"Toru," a cavernous voice boomed from the impenetrable dark, making chills run down his spine.

He jerked around in response and, suddenly, he sensed the stair disappearing from underneath his feet, and he was falling. To right himself in his free fall, he struggled, swinging all his limbs about, and when he landed, it was on his paws, which was quite strange since he didn't recall shifting of his own volition.

The air changed, not a lessening of the scent of pestilence, but its direction. It was no longer stale, and it felt like a breeze, so he followed it, since his eyes were of no help to him.

"Toru," the same voice from before called out, and it was now more distinct, although he couldn't tell if it belonged to a man or a woman. It was probably Hekastfet, trying to play his last disgusting games before being woven into the fabric of oblivion. Toru didn't yet know how he would do it, but that carried no importance. He felt in his blood that he was there to destroy the evil draining the city of its life once and for all.

"Show yourself already," Toru demanded.

The darkness heeded his demand. It ripped like a page in front of his eyes, and now he found himself in a gigantic room filled with light. It appeared to come from all the walls, and not from a single point, and how could it be as bright as if it was day when that place had to be deep inside the belly of the domestikos' palace and outside the night still reigned?

“Toru,” the voice called out and this time, he could tell that it belonged to a woman. “My son,” she added tenderly.

Toru looked around. After the thick darkness, it took his eyes a few moments to adapt to the absolute light. “I’m no one’s son. Show your true face, Hekastfet, if you dare.”

Someone tore themselves from the walls of light, and Toru froze when he saw the woman in the painting Ewart Kona had showed him only hours ago. She was smiling and held one arm toward him, in a plea of sorts.

Toru growled and let his muzzle drop, assessing the situation. “Who are you?”

“How can you ask such a thing? We are all here, your family,” she replied.

The walls began catching life and turning into an entire court of well-dressed people, all holding their heads high. Their hair was golden, and their eyes the same, and anyone looking at them would have been able to tell that they belonged to the same bloodline.

Toru searched with his eyes. They could easily be related to him, but he wasn’t about to fall prey to this trickery. Hekastfet could have conjured the phantasms surrounding him. They were moving softly about, their beautiful garments adorned with threads of gold and precious stones sweeping the floor.

Toru didn’t move, but prepared to pounce at any sign of aggression from that lot. “You’re nothing but a bunch of ghosts,” he told them, staring them in their serene faces.

Raine stepped forward, her red hair a cascade down her white shoulders. “We are ghosts, but we found peace here, Toru.”

She tried to move closer, but Toru lifted one paw and tried to cut through her. Raine let out a small sound of surprise but then she laughed, while stepping out of the way with incredible ease. “You always liked to play. You didn’t shift into your human, not even when it was bedtime and we needed to put you to sleep.”

“You’re a liar. You’re Hekastfet,” Toru accused.

“Hekastfet? What name is that?” Raine’s smooth forehead wrinkled in confusion. “I’ve never heard it before.”

“It’s what you are,” Toru insisted.

“We should prove it otherwise to you then.” Raine turned on her heel and opened her arms. The court of golden heads seemed to understand her request. In the blink of an eye, they all shifted at the same time, and Toru found himself surrounded not by the courtiers of some noble king or queen, but by his own kin.

His heart throbbed at the sight. All those golden eyes pulled at him, asking without words for something he couldn’t easily define.

“You see?” Raine said.



He only recognized her by her eyes. Her red hair was gone, replaced by a coat of golden and charcoal stripes, just like the others'. He pursed his lips at the oddity, but who could ever say they had seen a tiger with a reddish coat?

There was still something there, irking him to no end. Incapable of saying what it was, he continued to look into the faces of the tigers surrounding him. "Why don't you speak?" he found himself asking under those unnerving stares.

"They would if they could," Raine said. "So many years have passed, decades, and centuries, and even more beyond. They have lost their voices."

"Someone took their voices from them, you mean to say," Toru contradicted her.

"It's not fair to say that, and all we want to offer you is peace," Raine said.

"You have nothing to offer," Toru growled. "You could have done something while you were still alive. You chose not to."

He was taking a sort of gamble, but he needed to provoke Hekastfet into showing his true face.

"Do you mean that I should have done something about your father?" the ghost asked.

His father. Of course, Toru thought. There was white hair in his coat, the Sakka had said, and that meant that his father must have had some hand in it. No matter how much he looked around, none of these golden tigers seemed to have the same peculiarity. Unless, of course, his ghost had been summoned there, as well, and wasn't so easy to spot.

"Yes," he said. Lying was bad, but not when it was as important as this.

Raine appeared to remain thoughtful for some time. She examined him slowly with her inquisitive eyes, and under that scrutiny, a faint memory began to assert itself. Toru shook his head and looked away from her. All his life, he had only remembered the orphanage from his childhood, and all the headaches he had given to the people there. He also remembered a dark cage, where he was kept when he refused to shift back into his human to allow the caretakers to bathe him for the night. At least, there had to be some truth in what that ghost was saying. As a child, he had been attached to his tiger a lot more than to his human. And he had been attached to that cage, too, because as much as those humans thought of it as a punishment to inflict upon him, the dark never bothered him, and being there meant that he could be on his own, alone to dream and plot his life's adventures.

Raine knew nothing of all that. Toru tried to push the mere idea that this apparition in front of him was the one who had carried him inside her womb out of his mind. It had to be one of the tricks Hekastfet was trying to play on him.

"Your father chose to leave us," the ghost said with a faint, knowing smile.

"He must have had his reasons," Toru said with determination. "What I see here is nothing but a tribe of shifters who gave up."

"Is that what you make of us?" Raine asked, her voice raised.

“You’re here, locked in like animals. And you’re saying this is the peace you want for me, as well?”

“You don’t know the whole truth about your ancestors,” Raine said gently and moved again as if to get closer to him.

And, as before, Toru stepped out of the way. “They fought and won. But not your lot.” He shook his head in disgust to make those present understand what he truly thought of them. “You cannot be the champions I heard about.”

“And who told you about them? That low kin of critters who think themselves important, when they’re nothing but a scourge upon this world?”

“They’re braver than all of you,” Toru said loudly. All the tigers in the room were staring at him in silence. Their eyes seemed to be accusing him of something, something he didn’t care to understand. This charade needed to come to an end. Toru growled and moved purposefully toward the group of tigers. “You say that you’re my family? I’ve never known you. Where is your home now? Your power? You’re nothing but souls trapped in a nightmare. But I don’t think you’re even that. You are all nothing but an illusion.”

He walked toward them and they parted before him, allowing him to pass.

“Stay with us, Toru,” Raine called after him. Something in her pleading voice made him stop.

But suddenly, something else, the low rumble of thunder made him look in front of him. The room of light narrowed into a corridor made of white walls the color of ice. Toru blinked for a moment. He recognized that passage of mirrors from his dreams.

“Follow me, Toru,” someone else spoke, in a low pleasant voice.

He stared ahead, and then he saw the one who had been by his side in his dreams.

A majestic tiger stood at the end of the passage, his image reflected in the glassy mirrors around him. His coat was striped like any other tiger’s, but there was no gold in his fur.

No, he was pure white.

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Varg and Claw found themselves running down the engraved path, encouraged by Midnight, who called himself a Sakka, whatever that meant. He couldn’t stop and try to make sense of the engravings, as there was no time. “What do you think all of this means?” he asked his companion. “Have you ever seen anything like it in your travels?”

“I can’t say that I have,” Claw confirmed his suspicion that they were witnessing something that wasn’t often seen by the ordinary eye. But what about Toru and his destiny could be deemed as ordinary?

The path turned sharply around a corner and, in their haste, they had to stop short so that they didn’t suddenly crash into a wall.

“That was close,” Claw said cheerfully. “In case I find myself in no position to tell you later, thank you for earlier, pup. I was as good as gone.”

Varg knew what Claw wasn't explicitly telling him in words. Their quest was nowhere near complete, and dangers lurked ahead, like the one they had just lived through. Without help, they could have been defeated before proving their worth and loyalty to Toru. Varg didn't dwell on that thought. They were still alive, and that counted for something. In the big picture painted by destiny, their roles still had many tasks to fulfill before they were finished.

The long path seemed to go on forever, and he could hear Claw's rapid breathing, as they ran as fast as their legs could carry them. That ended abruptly, and this time, they had no chance to keep themselves from falling down what seemed like a slippery slope. Darkness lay beneath them, and they rolled down like wheels flying free on the side of a mountain, until they ended up in a heap on the floor.

Varg was thankful for landing on top of Claw, but the bearshifter immediately teased him by groaning exaggeratedly.

“Hey, do you smell that?” Varg asked.

Claw moved and sniffed the air. “It's our old friends again. I guess Midnight only bought us some time.”

Any other people, even warriors with victories under their belts, would have felt a tinge of fear at that realization. They had gone against the ghost merchants of Shroudharbor only a little while earlier, and they had risked certain death. Nonetheless, they were ready for a new confrontation.

“No time to rest,” he warned Claw, and they plunged ahead into the darkness together.

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Toru hesitated, half-way between the ghost of his mother, and that of his father, whom he believed the white tiger to be for sure. He had heard of their kind, but he had never seen one before in his entire life, not even in the lands of the north.

“Pain and suffering are our ways,” the white tiger said. “Come, Toru. Don't listen to her. A mother only wants to cuddle her child forever, but that cannot be. You were born to become a warrior, the strongest to have ever lived.”

“He's lying to you,” Raine said harshly. “He is the one you fear lies within me and your family. All we want is for you to be happy. Isn't that the same thing you want?”

Toru turned his head away from her after looking at her for a few moments.

“The easy path is not for us,” the white tiger continued.

“Maybe it is for us, you snowborn,” Raine hissed at him. “Aneros, step back.”

Toru was plenty sure he didn't like her. And she hadn't appeared in his dreams like this white tiger had. Not that he had a clear recollection of him, not like this, but more as a faded memory, but his

gut didn't lie. Without hesitating for another moment, he leaped toward the tiger whom he believed to be his sire.

Raine's scream of despair, sharp and unexpected, made all the hairs on his back stand on end. He was about to turn toward her when Aneros shouted at him, "Don't look back, Toru!" There was a clamor rising behind him, that entire tribe of tigers on the move, but in his heart, there was no fear. The white tiger didn't move from where he stood, he just stood still, waiting for him.

One last leap, and he was by Aneros' side. The mirrored walls closed behind him, and he heard the sickening sound of bones and flesh crashing against them on the other side. This time, he looked, but he was met only by his own reflection and that of his father.

"You did well, Toru," Aneros said to him in a warm voice.

Toru was about to say more, to ask something, his heart too full of the realization that he was standing right at his father's side, when all his senses alerted him of another presence, right behind them. As he turned to face this new danger, the passageway of ice disappeared.

"And you did well to bring him to me," Ewart Kona said as he stood tall in the middle of what appeared to be an altar room. The pedestal erected in the middle was carved from black marble, and on the side facing him Toru saw chains ending in shackles.

"You again," Toru hissed. "Are you going to fight me now, or are you just going to keep on playing hide and seek?"

"Why fight me when you can fight your sire?" The domestikos wore a pleased smile, and to anyone unaware of the foul nature of his true soul, he would seem just a plain old man welcoming a stranger in his home.

Toru barely had time to leap to one side. Aneros growled as he missed his mark, but turned toward him once more. So, it was just another game. Toru growled as well and lowered his muzzle, weighing his next move. The white tiger was bigger than any other of his kind Toru had seen in his life, but the warm feeling from before was now replaced by anger.

Ewart Kona moved around them. "How long have I waited for this moment, to see you two going head-to-head."

"This isn't real," Toru said. "You can't fool me so easily, Hekastfet."

"I assure you that when your sire's claws cut through your skin, making you bleed, you'll change your mind."

Aneros, or his image conjured by Hekastfet's evil power, lunged at him, and Toru didn't sidestep. If everyone here was a phantasm, he would deal with them swiftly. The white tiger's body crashed into his, and he felt the sharp pain of his hide being cut through. So, this was a more dangerous game, after all.

Ewart Kona laughed and grabbed one of the chains hanging by the side of the marble altar. "These are waiting for you, Toru, the inescapable shackles of destiny."

“I will strangle you with them. I just need to fight your minion, now.”

“My minion? Did you hear that, Aneros? Why don’t you put your son in his place, as he so richly deserves, hmm?”

The domestikos loved his charades, it seemed. But Toru was still locked into a battle embrace with the phantasm of his father, although he doubted everything, even whether the name or the apparition was real in some way. The other’s claws continued to rake into his hide, making the pain increase. He was able to move his head enough so that his teeth could sink into a strong shoulder, and they cut to the bone. Aneros staggered, and it loosened his grip on Toru enough for him to disentangle himself from his attacker’s clutches. The brief reprieve ended just as quickly, and Aneros lunged at him again. Droplets of blood fell on the floor, heavy as rain.

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The air was better here, at this height, as he rode on Moth’s back. Duril took in a mouthful of air, his entire body thankful for it. He risked a look down, but the smoke was getting thicker, and the people below weren’t easy to see with the naked eye anymore. “What will happen to them?” he whispered.

He looked around, and it was enough to show him that the entire city seemed to be engulfed by the same madness.

“The city will die,” Moth said as if it was a thing of no consequence.

Duril was of a mind to argue, but he was well aware that there was no time for that. First, he needed to get to Toru. However, he chose to say it out loud anyway. “Toru won’t allow that.”

Moth began his descent as they arrived at the tall citadel. “You have a kind heart, healer, but this city doesn’t. You’ll see that there is no other choice. For Hekastfet to be defeated, Scercendusa must perish along with him.”

“He has never truly perished,” Duril reminded him, but dismounted from his strange ride and hopped to the ground. Down a long flight of stairs to his right, guards were fighting people, trying to keep them away from the domestikos’ palace. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Hurry inside,” Moth urged him. “Toru needs you now, more than ever.”

Duril began walking toward the tall gates. But he stopped for a moment and turned toward Moth. “Can you at least save the children? They did nothing wrong. You can take them on your back, like you did with me just now.”

Moth’s wings fluttered, and only then Duril noticed that the edges were frayed, and that the colors were waning. “It isn’t my place to do that, healer. This city is cursed and doomed.”

“But they--” Duril stopped himself. Maybe he was asking for the impossible. “Never mind. Toru will save everyone,” he said and clenched his fist.

“I will try,” Moth called out after him.

Duril didn't believe the Sakka to be cold-hearted, and this was the proof. He tried to say something, address some thanks, but Moth was already flying away, his frayed wings leaving a trail of small bits of color flowing behind him.

They all needed to do their part. Duril steeled himself and rushed inside, only to be met by a thick darkness such as he had never witnessed for as far back as he could remember. And the air was ripe with a scent that made his stomach clench and lurch.

He stopped for a moment and tried to make sense of his surroundings. Then, he saw it, a path of light in the darkness.

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Shapes and beings moved around them, mumbling incoherently. Varg and Claw were back to back, prepared to fight. One of their enemies broke ranks and dashed toward them, but Varg was ready. He knocked the thing away, and by the sounds he could hear, Claw was doing the same. More followed, each attack more vicious and in greater numbers.

"How are you doing there, puppy?" Claw yelled.

"Earning my keep," Varg yelled back. "These damned merchants never learn."

There had to be a secret to defeating them, Varg understood that much. His eyes, now growing more accustomed even to that deep dark, began searching around for a clue to what that secret might be. Then, he saw it. Something on a wall to his right, a small pulsing inscription made of light, like the path that had guided them there. "There," he pointed it out to Claw while they were pushing away their assailants. "Let's move over there."

They continued to fight back to back, rotating slowly so that they could reach that place. Once they were near the wall, Varg slammed a paw against the inscription, and the runic symbols rose, joined, lengthened and turned into a long sword of light. Varg shifted into his human and grabbed it. Now this was more like it. This was a good way to face the wraiths flying around them like a pack of winged monsters bent on drawing blood.

"Nice weapon you got there," Claw shouted at him, as he continued to fight, fang and claw, with their attackers.

"Let me set it to work," Varg said. He lifted the sword of light over his head, holding the hilt with both hands. When it descended, a wailing cry followed, and one of the shapes encircling them began writhing on the floor.

"It looks like it works just swell," Claw said with glee. "How about you take care of that flank while I'm doing my job of tiring the ones coming through here?"

It sounded like the kind of plan Varg liked.

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"How does it feel to go against your own father?" Ewart Kona taunted him.

“This isn’t my father,” Toru growled while he moved against the white tiger again.

“How couldn’t he be that? You must have seen him before. At least, in your dreams.”

Toru’s belief shook for a moment. Was the domestikos with the soul of Hekastfet right? How could he know about his dreams? It didn’t matter. What mattered was to split that apparition in two and throw it at Hekastfet’s feet, and then deal with the evil like he needed to.

“I am your father, Toru,” Aneros hissed at him. “I guided you here. You know the truth.”

They clashed again, and Toru felt warm blood pouring down his forehead now. “If you were my true father, you’d fight against Hekastfet alongside me.”

They pushed against each other again. Their bodies were bloodied, and their sides heaved as they breathed. Their blood was pouring onto the floor, and Toru’s attention was stolen for a moment, by how some of those rich red rivulets were flowing toward the altar. By its side, Ewart Kona stood tall, an ominous presence.

He had no time to assess what changed. Aneros caught him by the throat, digging his long fangs into his neck.

*Help me*, Toru heard Aneros’ voice right in his mind.

Was that his real father? Was he possessed and made to fight against him?

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Duril hurried down the long path and yelped when he almost crashed into a wall right as the symbols turned a corner. He slowed down only enough so that he could see where the path led. And the next thing he knew, his feet slipped on something and he fell down a slippery slope.

When he got to his feet, he was amazed by what his eyes saw. There was a hefty sword made of light moving through the air of its own volition, cutting through something he couldn’t see but could smell and feel.

“Look who’s late to the feast,” a joyous voice welcomed him.

“Claw, is that you?” Duril called out. “Is Varg with you?”

“Yes, but let’s leave the pleasantries for later. We have the bunch from Shroudharbor to get rid of.”

Duril wasn’t armed, but the shapes moving across the floor and lunging at Claw and Varg didn’t seem to be interested in him. So, he slunk along the wall that he could feel with his hand, until he found himself by his friends’ side.

Claw was breathing hard, and Duril could tell, even without looking that he had to be bleeding heavily. Without a moment’s hesitation, he reached for his pouch and took a vial from it. Claw yelped when Duril grabbed his right hind leg and poured the contents of the vial over the wound. “Puppy, your friend here is trying to finish me off before these beasts have a chance to!”

“I’m just giving you more power to fight with,” Duril scolded him. “You need it. Varg, are you hurt?”

“I’m good,” Varg shouted at him. “There are just so damned many of them.”

Duril assessed the situation quickly. By the light of the sword Varg was wielding, he could see a lot more. He noticed the way the wraiths were advancing toward them in a line. “I have an idea,” he shouted over the clamor of the fighting. “Use the sword like a scythe, Varg, and reap them like a harvest.”

Varg didn’t question his advice for a moment. He lowered his sword and swung it like he would a tool for harvesting ripe grain. Suddenly, they had more room around them. With grace and determination, Varg continued to swing the sword and cut down the wraiths just as Duril had told him to.

Claw, emboldened by their new victory, lunged into the fight again, finishing off those that still moved after Varg cut through them. Duril stood behind the fighters, but yelled warnings to his friends each time one of the wraiths tried to attack them from their blind sides.

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“We’re quite the unit,” Varg said with satisfaction once all the wraiths appeared to be motionless and lifeless on the floor. “Thank you for pointing me in the right direction, Duril. We should make you chief strategist from now on.”

“And thank you for patching up my leg, even though it hurt like hell,” Claw said. He, too, had shifted into his human, and they now followed the path of runic inscriptions down a long hallway.

“I’m so happy to see you two. Let’s hurry to help Toru,” Duril replied.

“How did you even know to come here?” Varg asked. “You know what? Never mind. We have our kitty to worry about.”

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*Help me*, Aneros’ voice was again in his head.

“How?” Toru asked and pushed against the white tiger.

No sound came from Aneros, imagined or otherwise, so Toru moved closer, and this time he was the one to sink his fangs into the other’s neck and taste blood.

*Shackle me to the altar*, the voice in his mind spoke again.

“Aneros, I thought you would be stronger than this,” Ewart Kona taunted his ally. “My altar is waiting for new blood.”

Toru eased his bite and pulled away. Then, he turned into his human.

“What? Do you believe that you stand a chance against your sire as a puny human?” Ewart Kona sneered in the same manner, this time addressing him.



Toru focused all his attention on the white tiger. This time, Aneros' attack was just a feint, and he caught him.

"What are you doing?" Ewart Kona asked, unsure of what was happening.

Toru pulled Aneros' heavy body toward the altar.

"Aneros, you useless tiger," Ewart Kona hissed. "Fight!"

Toru realized that the white tiger was shifting as he slammed his body against the altar. Instead of bloodied fur, he now saw something else, or better said, someone else. A handsome man with long white hair now lay across the smooth surface, his face marred by cuts, but his eyes burned golden.

"Now, Toru, shackle me," he whispered.

Toru grabbed one of the shackles and secured it on one of the man's wrists.

"Quickly," Aneros whispered, and the pain was clear in his voice.

"Don't tarnish my altar with your filthy blood!" Ewart Kona bellowed.

Toru felt the phantasm trying to stop him, but that was a terrible miscalculation on Hekastfet's part. His immaterial body could do nothing.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight – The Servant and the Weaver

Toru fastened the last shackle to Aneros' wrist and stepped back. Ewart Kona, or the ghost impersonating him, was wailing and bemoaning the soiling of his altar, while Toru took a long look at his work. Aneros was dripping blood from numerous cuts and everywhere it fell on the altar, it appeared that the black marble was absorbing it as if it was nothing but a sponge.

“You useless tiger!” Ewart Kona shouted at the shackled Aneros. “There was only one thing you needed to do for me.”

“Not even the shadows you summoned are willing to listen to you, Hekastfet,” Toru said loudly. He didn't know what he needed to do now, but something of the evil entity's plan was coming unraveled.

“A shadow?” Ewart Kona shrieked. He was hovering in the air, right above the altar. “No, tiger, this is your father.”

Toru stared at the shackled shape on the altar, and his resolve shook for a moment. Aneros looked at him with those eyes made of pure gold. His long white hair poured down the sides, brushing the floor. Toru couldn't remember seeing anyone of such astonishing beauty.

“It is all right, Toru,” Aneros said with difficulty. “You did the right thing. Now Hekastfet won't be able to finish his ritual, and the world will be saved once more.”

Toru frowned and words rolled out of his mouth without his being able to stop them. “Are you really my father?” His voice sounded weak and vulnerable, like he couldn't remember ever hearing it.

“He is, of course, he is,” Ewart Kona barked and flew through the air to come face-to-face with him. “Aren't you a kind tiger?” he hissed at him, but almost immediately it seemed that Hekastfet living inside him understood that it served him nothing to scream and curse like that. “So, Toru,” he said in a more insinuating voice, “you don't care about your father. That makes you more alike me.”

Toru stared at the phantasm, dumbstruck. “I'm nothing like you.”

“Can you really say that while you have your father shackled to my altar, bleeding to death?”

Toru clenched his fists. “What must I do to rid the world of this venom?” His question was directed at Aneros, although his eyes never left Ewart Kona.

“You must do the right thing, my son,” Aneros said gently. “See this shadow trying so hard to play tricks on you?” He gestured with his chin toward the domestikos.

“Yes,” Toru replied, his voice caught in his throat, now full of thorns smeared with poison. “Are you my father? Not a creature or another phantasm conjured by Hekastfet?” He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to hear another confirmation from the mouth of that astonishing man or not. A part of him wanted to hear him say ‘yes’, but he feared that it would be a lie, one that he wouldn’t know what to do with. Despite how Aneros had called him his son, he wanted more than those gentle words. A lot more. A world of more.

“I am your servant, above all,” Aneros said instead. “Destiny is yours to make and I am here only to help you spin its thread. Listen to me, Toru. No matter what you feel about what I am about to tell you to do, there is one thing you must know. I love you more than I love life, more than I ever loved your mother, and more than my own blood.” For a moment, Aneros stopped, momentarily overcome as if an invisible hand was trying to choke him. “You must kill this old body, Toru.”

Toru took a step back without even intending to do so. Ewart Kona rejoiced in a noisy manner. He clapped and rubbed his hands together. “Yes, yes,” he hissed in delight, “it is true, Toru. He is your father, thus you cannot kill him!”

Toru growled and slashed through the air with one arm, making Ewart Kona disappear and reappear again. It was futile to chase that ghost, so the only thing he could do was to listen to Aneros or that impersonation of the man who was supposed to be his father. He took a step slowly toward the altar, studying Aneros carefully. Something of that face was, indeed, familiar. Toru realized that was the case because he could see his own face in him.

Did he have the resolute belief that by raising his hand to strike this phantasm he wasn’t going to end up killing his real father?

“Don’t hesitate, Toru,” Aneros urged him. “Don’t listen to Hekastfet. He’s only trying to weaken your determination. I’m still strong now, so it might be difficult, but to destroy Hekastfet’s altar, there is no other way. Look up,” he added.

Toru tipped his head back. From the high ceiling, a spear of fire hung, its tip pointing directly at Aneros’ chest. He turned his eyes to face his sire. “Is there no other way?” he asked. “But you must... I need you to tell me so many things,” he almost yelled in frustration.

“There is no time, my child,” Aneros said in the same soft-spoken manner. “My life is forfeit, anyway. But you can make the difference by being the one to cut me loose from this world. Not only will it serve you in your quest to defeat Hekastfet, but you will show mercy toward me.”

The domestikos was conspicuously silent, so Toru looked around, only to see that he had been left alone with Aneros. His father seemed to understand the question he didn’t ask. “He left to gather reinforcements. Don’t let evil overcome this world, Toru. Do what you were meant to. Grab the spear, thrust it into my heart. And then, run as fast as you can.”

Toru brushed one hand against his cheek and stared at it for a moment in surprise. It wasn't blood on his face, but something else.

"Don't cry, my child," Aneros said tenderly. "Once you are free of the burden of your quest, search for Nelsikkar. It was destroyed, but it continued living. I know it in my heart, just as I've always known that you must be out there in the world, laughing, playing, making friends, and growing to be the most powerful tiger to have ever walked the face of Eawirith."

Toru wiped his cheeks, hesitation growing inside his heart. If he could believe that Aneros was just a shadow made to move and walk and talk, he would be able to do what was necessary. But if the man, the tigershifter lying in front of him was indeed who he seemed to be, he shouldn't believe a word he said, should he?

Aneros was telling him the truth, the biggest truth he had ever heard in his life. And that meant that if he did what he was told, he would only—

"Toru, look at me!" Aneros' voice was sharper. "There is no time. I had the chance to hold you in my arms, you, a grown man, and even if you may consider that nothing but a small mercy, for me it means so much more than that. It means that my destiny was kind. Now hurry," he added with urgency.

The spear of fire hung above them like an omen. Toru blinked a couple of times and reached for it, but his fingers went through it and he pulled his hand back with a barely contained grunt. He ground his teeth and reached for it again.

"This is what you must do," Aneros reminded him, but this time his hand met nothing but fiery heat that seared the skin, making sharp pain blossom down his arm. "Don't pity me, Toru!"

"Who's pitying you, old man?" Toru bristled, but tears were streaming down his cheeks like never before, not even when he was a child and he had used to think the entire injustice in the world was aimed at him, whether it was a whip on his back or a cutting word.

"You are," Aneros said, gently again. "The human in you has always been strong."

"I am a tiger," Toru said petulantly.

"Of course, you are," Aneros added. "Understand that there is no other way. Don't let Hekastfet win."

"He wins anyway," Toru revolted. What right did that thing have to pull him apart from his father right after they had been reunited?

"I live through you, remember this," Aneros said. "Your heart is strong. Reach for the spear, Toru."

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“What do you think?” Duril whispered as he looked around for signs that would lead them on the right path. For a while now, they hadn’t seen anything remotely similar to those runic inscriptions and it felt as if they were just swimming in the dark. “Could it be this way? Or that way?”

Varg sniffed the air noisily. They only felt each other, the dark too deep for them to see anything clearly. Claw was walking in front, Duril in the middle, and Varg at the tail of their little group. Only snorts and small jabs had met his protests that he shouldn’t be treated as the frail one of their group. That alone had made him smile for a moment. He would get them for this later, without fail.

“Puppy, your nose is no match for mine,” Claw teased the wolfshifter. “I can smell trouble ahead.”

At that, Varg scoffed and tsked. “For that, you don’t even need a nose at all, flea bag. This place is rotten deep into its soul. Hey, did you hear that?”

Duril strained his ears, but he knew he would be no match for his friends. Still, after a few moments, his hearing picked up something, a loud thump hammering somewhere in a cadence that made it seem unnatural. “I think I do,” he replied to Varg’s question, surprised at his ability to detect that faint sound.

“It’s like a beating heart,” Claw said. “Do you good people reckon that it might be the foul thing keeping this cursed place together?”

“What we reckon doesn’t matter much right now,” Varg offered. “We must find Toru. Kitty must be keeping all the fun to himself right now, but you know him. Soon, he’ll get bored and lonely. Let’s not let that happen to him.”

Duril couldn’t agree more. Varg was joking, but he did that only so that he could ease everyone’s fears. Toru needed them, and that thought alone was enough to make them pick up the pace and follow the strange sound into the darkness.

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They were rushing toward an unknown destination, but Varg couldn’t let go of the nagging feeling that they shouldn’t forget about what lay behind them, either. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing to attention, and that was the sort of sign he knew he shouldn’t ignore. In his life, he had counted on those preternatural signs more than once, and doing so had saved his hide more than one time.

Now, what he needed to do was to keep his ears perked up, and his eyes peeled, as little as that served in this darkness. He felt as if they were walking through an emptiness so soul-wrenching he feared that they would fall prey to it at any moment now.

That was a foreign feeling. It had to be a curse of sorts, dark magic, as Varg was certain that it didn't come from inside them. Someone was hurling it at them, in the hope that they would break. That someone should know better, Varg thought and let out a dry chuckle.

“What is it, puppy? Something funny?” Claw teased him.

“Whatever we must go against is already here,” Varg said calmly, certain that both Claw and Duril could feel the same thing that he did.

He had barely said the words than a gust of wind made them take a sudden step forward and sway on their feet, hitting them from their backs like a blow. Varg caught Duril.

“I'm fine,” the healer assured him. “What was that?”

“I wish I could tell you,” Varg replied. “Let's be on guard. Soon, we'll go head to head with whatever has been following us here.”

“I think we must leave that for later. There's something on the ground,” Claw said. “I think it's a hole... And there's a stair going down. Here goes nothing.”

The bearshifter must have taken said stair, because Varg was certain that he was no longer walking in front. “Duril?” he asked tentatively.

“I'm going after Claw,” Duril replied with determination.

That meant there was just one way forward, down that mysterious stair.

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The ground was soft in a way that made Duril feel something roiling in his gut. He couldn't get rid of the sickening feeling as he walked forward, trying to keep up with Claw. Varg was behind him, and that was their comfort. They had each other. All this time, the gust of wind continued to buffet them from behind. It acted as a guide of sorts, but whether there was a malevolent force behind it or a benevolent one, he couldn't tell. By the tension he felt from both Varg and Claw, he could only surmise that it was the former. At this point, however, it was all they could depend on to find them a path into the darkness. Without a doubt, something lay at its end, and they needed to get there.

The gust of wind blew sharply again, taking them by surprise. Claw mumbled something that could easily be interpreted as a curse, and Varg stood still, while Duril stumbled and fell forward. The wolfshifter caught him deftly and returned him to his upright position.

“Now that's what I call more than a little breeze,” Claw joked.

He was barely finished saying that when another blast of moving air hit them so hard that it sent them all tumbling forward like dry weeds across the desert. That strange feeling only intensified

when they were lifted off the ground and sent hurling down another hole. Duril cried out in surprise, and his reaction was matched by similar yelps from Varg and Claw.

There was suddenly light and their descent stopped abruptly. It took Duril a few good seconds to realize that he was suspended from the top of the ceiling in a tall room, and that his companions were tied alongside him. He first craned his neck painfully, as he was squashed between the hard bodies of his friends and looked upward.

Indeed, they were hanging from a tall ceiling, as if they were nothing but puppets on a string, that is if someone would enjoy puppet theatre with all the inanimate protagonists held together like that. There was nothing inanimate about them, though, and Duril was swinging his legs, just as Varg and Claw did.

“What is this? Can you see anything below?” Varg growled.

That was quite an impossible thing to do. The strange vines or ties holding them like that didn't allow them to turn their heads enough to look down properly. Claw grunted and tried to free himself, but to no avail.

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A crashing sound from above interrupted Toru's efforts to grab the spear. He watched in disbelief as something dropped from the ceiling and hung far above his head. It took him little to realize what, or better said, who he was seeing. His friends, all three of them, hung from a long thick vine, and they were kicking and hollering, completely helpless.

“Duril, Varg, Claw!” he shouted.

The thrashing of the bodies above intensified. “That you, Toru?” Varg yelled.

“Toru, thank heavens,” Duril followed.

“Mind getting us down, kitty?” Claw added.

Toru stepped away from his bound father. Aneros' face was white now and part of his life had already seeped into the altar, but he was still alive. Why did he have to kill him if Hekastfet was already doing that to him? He couldn't and wouldn't understand. No, he would save him, he decided that very moment.

But first, he needed to free his friends from that strange rope holding them suspended right over the altar. Toru began searching with his eyes for some way to climb the walls and get close, but everywhere he looked there was nothing that could be used.

A sinister laughter interrupted his search. “What do you say of my plan now, tiger?” Ewart Kona hissed.

Toru narrowed his eyes. It didn't take long for Hekastfet to come into view. "Let them down from there, or you will pay," he growled.

"And what exactly will you use to make me do as you say?" The domestikos laughed again. Hanging from the ceiling, Duril, Varg, and Claw were shouting all at the same time. Toru couldn't make sense of every word, but he knew that they were encouraging him one way or the other.

He focused all of his attention. His mind and body were one, and while the world became a swirl around him, a cacophony of sounds and colors, he understood what he needed to do. He jumped on the edge of the altar, making sure not to trample Aneros in the process, and balanced himself nimbly for a moment. Then, as he tensed every muscle in his body, he jumped up and grabbed the spear, not by its tip, as he had struggled to do before, but by its other end.

Letting out a shout of triumph, he held the spear above his head.

"What were you saying, stupid evil?" he taunted Hekastfet.

"Are you willing to kill your father?" Ewart Kona hissed at him. "Go anywhere near him with that thing, and I'll make sure your friends become nothing but a smear of blood on these walls." To make good on his threat, through powers not visible to the naked eye, Hekastfet made the rope on which Claw, Varg, and Duril hung swing back and forth, dangerously close to the opposite ends of the room.

Toru clenched his hand on the spear, feeling a searing pain as he did so. But that pain was clean and clearing, and with one lunge, he threw the weapon, cutting through the rope holding his friends. All three cried out as they took a tumble from that height, but Toru was ready, running toward them. There was no need for all that extra worry, it seemed. Claw shifted in mid-air and provided his big body as a huge pillow on which Varg and Duril crashed with grunts and yelps.

"How did you do that?" Ewart Kona wailed. "You cannot!"

Toru grinned as he turned to face the phantasm that was still trying to play tricks on him. He was no silly tiger to allow himself to be fooled by such a trickster. "Are you all right?" he shouted at his friends, ignoring Hekastfet completely.

The phantasm turned restless. He seemed to be trying to move through Toru, disappearing and appearing at his left, then at his right.

"Toru," someone called in a raspy voice, and it took him a few moments to realize that the faint voice came from the altar. "The spear, take it."

Caught up as he had been in saving his friends, he had paid no attention to where his weapon had landed. He saw it in a corner, but it no longer seemed to be made of light and fire. It was now made of steel, by its appearance, and it looked like it had just been forged by a blacksmith, the iron still hot and red.



“Hurry,” Aneros pleaded with him. “It is the only way to get rid of the evil that has been plaguing our world for millennia.”

Claw, Varg, and Duril struggled to their feet, and it was the wolfshifter who hurried to bring him the spear. However, the moment Varg put his hand on the weapon, he withdrew it with a surprised growl. Duril was by his side, catching his hand. It was blistering red, and it looked painful, so Toru quickly realized that no one else but him could wield that magical spear.

That didn’t make it any easier for him to approach his friends and stretch his hand toward the glowing red weapon.

“Toru, watch out,” Varg warned him.

“It’s all right,” he assured his friend. “It’s for me to wield. You’re still the most powerful wolf I’ve ever met.”

He took the spear and held it in his hand. The searing pain was no more. All he could feel was a slight warmth and nothing else.

“Hurry, Toru,” Aneros pleaded with him again.

“Will you kill your father?” Hekastfet asked, moving from one corner of the room to the other in the blink of an eye.

“Your father?” Duril asked. “Toru, what is this person saying?”

“This person,” Toru said through his teeth and swung the spear, “is the evil that destroyed Whitekeep and has tortured the world for thousands of years.”

An inhuman growl made his hair stand on end, before he realized that it came from Varg. The wolfshifter barreled toward the phantasm, without knowing that it was futile. All his anger was now unleashed, unbound.

“You won’t win,” Ewart Kona barked.

Just as these words were said, the room filled with a wailing cry that sucked all the air out of it. Toru saw the shadows of those merchants he had learned in Shroudharbor to be nothing but tools for the evil that stood before him, taunting him. His hand on the spear, he began slashing through the air, cutting through those bodies animated by an unnatural life. One by one, the shadows fell to the ground.

He couldn’t breathe, but the fear that realization brought didn’t last long. If it was his destiny to defeat this scourge with the last breath he had in him, let it be so. Varg, Duril, and Claw were not as strong as he was, it seemed, since they were writhing on the ground, struggling for air. That meant that his time was short to do the right thing.

A strong desire grew inside his heart, one that was unfamiliar and yet overwhelming. He threw his head back and opened his arms wide while a growl that seemed to come from the depths of the earth traveled through him.

And then, one of the most astonishing things he had ever witnessed in his life happened. The walls came crumbling down, and through their ruins fresh ghosts poured inside, but these didn't carry despair and loss of hope with them. They were made of fire and gold, and they all rushed toward Toru, his body absorbing them as if they were the air he needed, the strength he'd been missing without knowing.

The spear in his hand caught fire again, turning into the light it had been before. Toru swung it again, and this time, when he cut through the merchants, they turned into dust and disappeared before hitting the floor.

Another wail rose, and this time, it came from the ghost of Ewart Kona. Toru knew real pain when he heard it, but he steeled himself against it. It was the pain of his enemy, an enemy so foul that it deserved everything that would be coming to it.

"Toru," Duril whispered.

The air could be breathed again, and his friends were coming to their senses.

"I'm here," he said.

"You're... made of light," the healer whispered, the wonder in his eyes so clear that Toru didn't doubt for a moment that it had to be the truth.

"Toru," Aneros called for him again. "You must do this. Hekastfet is only weakened, not destroyed."

Toru walked toward the altar and stopped, looking at his sire's face from above.

"They came to help," Aneros said with reverence. "I can see them all in your eyes."

"Who?" Toru asked.

"Your mother and her kin," Aneros replied. "They did what was right."

Toru didn't feel a lot different, except for a new found strength that seemed to ignite his blood.

"Now, please, do it," Aneros reminded him of why he was there.

Toru could hear his friends coming near him.

"You have been with my son for a long time," Aneros continued, as his tired eyes moved from one to the next. "You tell him that he's doing the right thing, and that he doesn't have to hesitate."

“What is that Toru must do?” Varg asked. “And are you his father?”

“That I am. I have been entrapped here for many years, and not only me. Toru’s kin, all of it, as well.”

“Toru,” Duril said gently and touched his shoulder. “I can see your father in you.”

“He must kill me,” Aneros interrupted them.

“But why?” Duril asked.

“We have very little time. Hekastfet lost some of his power when you destroyed his minions, but if Toru doesn’t destroy this altar and the ritual that goes with it for good by killing me, Hekastfet will just be reborn and the same cycle of destruction and pain will begin once more.”

All his friends were silent.

“I cannot do this,” Toru said as he raised the spear above Aneros’ chest. “This cannot be how I defeat Hekastfet.”

“My child,” Aneros said tenderly, “you must fulfill your destiny. Don’t you want to save the world?”

“I want to save you,” Toru said, and this time, he let all his tears flow freely down his cheeks. “I don’t care about the world. Everyone’s a stranger.”

“That’s not true. Your friends are here,” Aneros said.

“There must be another way,” Duril intervened. “You cannot ask such a thing of your son, when he has just found you.”

Aneros closed his eyes for a moment. “My power is waning. Now is the right time. I was not living before anyway, not for many, many years. Help Toru do what is right.”

Varg was the first to put his hand over Toru’s. “Your pain is ours, friend,” he said.

Toru looked into the wolfshifter’s eyes and read love and compassion in them.

“I’ll kill you all!” The threat, bellowed in a cavernous voice, came from the ceiling. They all looked up to see Blayves descending upon them, now made of nothing but bones, a gaping skull, and a tattered robe that somehow held everything together. “You’re not going to defeat my master so easily!”

The disgusting apparition landed on Aneros’ chest and sank the bones of his fingers into him. Aneros gasped and jolted, arching his back.

“Toru,” Aneros pleaded again.

Toru smacked Blayves' skull, making it roll down to the ground, but the body continued to do its bidding without even hesitating for a moment. Now, those bones were digging into the white tiger's chest, making red blossom everywhere.

Toru tried to pry them away, but his hand only came back bloodied. Varg was, again, the one to understand. He took hold of Toru's hand, the one holding the spear, and Duril and Claw did the same.

"This is all our doing," Varg assured him. "It is the only way we can save his soul."

Toru knew it was the truth, and that it was right, but he still couldn't stop the howl breaking free from his chest, as his arm descended, supported by all the others. He closed his eyes as the spear moved through flesh and bone, the sickening sound of a body being ripped through by a deadly thing the only thing he could hear.

The room shook and Toru felt himself thrown to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. When he looked at the altar, Aneros' body was dissolving into it, and for a little while, there seemed to be a struggle between the light that he was turning into, and the mire of dark that the altar represented.

Then, he remembered what Aneros had told him. They had to run. He barely opened his mouth to say something when Varg and Claw grabbed him, each by one arm and dragged him with them, with Duril on their tail.

The last thing he saw before a sudden darkness took him was the sight of the ceiling crashing down over the remains of his father.

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Varg looked at the grim faces of his friends. They were outside the palace, the entire city burning around them. They placed Toru's body on the smooth tiles and knelt by his side. They were supposed to take him to safety, but where was that, anyway?

He looked around, searching for a way out.

Duril jumped to his feet, taking him by surprise. He began waving his arms, trying to get the attention of something in the sky. Varg looked up to see. A giant butterfly was descending, moving through the smoke as if through a sea of fog. At the moment, Varg didn't know whether his mind was conjuring dreams of salvation, or if it was, indeed, a butterfly bigger than a flock of wild geese, landing by their side.

"Moth, Toru is hurt," Duril shouted desperately. "We don't know how or where, but he's like this." He gestured at the tigershifter's unconscious form.

"Get him on my back," the one called Moth said.

They didn't question the suggestion and immediately moved Toru to the soft back of the butterfly.

"All of you, get on, too," Moth spoke again.

"Can you carry us all? Just take Toru to safety," Varg said.

"Don't ever underestimate the power of the Sakka," Moth said.

"So, you're friends with Midnight?"

"We're all one and the same," Moth replied. "We share our power. Now get on my back before the smoke gets to you. You must have all your wits about you so that you don't fall and can keep Toru secure during our flight."

Varg didn't question Moth anymore. He helped Duril up, and then Claw. They all kept one hand on Toru and one hand on the back of the giant butterfly as they soared into the air.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine – The End of a World

The first thing Toru sensed was warmth engulfing his hand, and it took him several long moments to realize that someone was holding it. Then, the scent of herbs, stronger than anything else, stronger than the one of ashes that his nose soon caught, overwhelmed him with its kindness. He wanted to call out for Duril, whom he recognized without even looking at him, but his throat and tongue didn't listen to him. His entire body felt as if it was immobilized, and an overpowering feeling of helplessness washed over him. His mind struggled to remember, and it all came rushing back to him. The fight against Hekastfet, his father, his mother, his kin.

“We need to wet his lips with something,” he heard someone saying. It wasn't difficult to figure out that it was Varg talking, his deep, sonorous voice having a soothing effect on his troubled spirit.

“I lost my water pouch,” Duril replied in a forlorn voice.

“Then we can help him in another way,” Claw suggested. “Duril, I believe you should be the one to do it. I have a feeling that our kitty might not be so keen on our beards scratching his lovely face.”

“What do you mean? Do what?” Duril asked.

“Go ahead and kiss him before we land,” Claw replied. “And don't be shy. We've seen a lot more of you two busy with one another than just kissing.”

Toru could read the tension in his friends' voices, as if they were struggling to hide something. It probably had to do with how he lay there, lifeless and unmoving. But what was Claw saying about landing somewhere?

Another sense, as keen as the earlier one, made him realize something. They were moving in a strange fashion. With Duril's kiss, pressed shyly against his lips, a breeze caressed his face. It felt as if they were in mid-air. His mind drifted again.

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“The entire city is burning,” Varg commented while looking down. In all honesty, he was a bit nervous about this flying thing, and tried to hide it by taking note of everything surrounding them. Indeed, the city that they had seen very little of seemed to be engulfed in an inferno of blasting flames.

“Toru would have wanted to save everyone,” Duril said in a pained voice. “Aren't we letting him down by doing nothing?”

“There isn't a lot for us to do right now,” Claw admitted grimly. “And first, we need to get him to safety. He doesn't look so peachy.”

Varg knew that Claw, just like him, was trying to keep everyone's fears at bay by using light words. After the amazing battle inside the belly of the domestikos' palace, Toru's golden skin had turned into an ashen gray, and Varg felt a jolt of fear each time he looked at him. The young tiger seemed lost to the world. Only the mere idea that they had traveled all this way across the world, and loved each other, only for them to end up split apart by the whims of fate, seemed so profoundly unjust that it made his heart ache until his entire body and mind threatened to surrender, too.

He pulled his eyes away from his fallen lover. "Moth," he called out, "how long until we reach safety?"

"Not very long," the strange, kind creature replied. "My wings will hold."

Varg looked at the flapping wings and a small shiver of unease crept down his spine. It seemed like Moth had taken the brunt of the many licks of flame not quite reaching them, but still leaping wildly below. His wings were frayed and they were moving slowly, with great effort. Varg hoped they weren't too heavy and that their friend would be able to carry them where they needed to get so they could save Toru.

"Look over there," Moth told them, and Varg had to shield his eyes from a sudden light radiating from a point somewhere on the wall. "The Sakka are waiting, all of them. We're taking Toru there."

Claw surprised him by suddenly grabbing him when Moth began a rapid descent, diving toward the wall.

"What is it?" Varg asked, startled and unnerved as he was already by everything that had transpired over the past hours.

Claw's wide eyes stared at him out of a face as white as wax. "Say what you may, puppy, but I don't believe this sack of bones was made for flying."

Varg grinned despite the grimness of the situation and wrapped one arm around his companion's waist to support him. "Now, now, it won't be long until we land. And then, you can puke your belly inside out. Just keep it in until then," he joked.

To everyone's relief, the giant butterfly finally hovered in a circle and then put them all down on the top of the wall. Varg was surprised to see a large group of little creatures he soon identified as a bunch of people no taller than ten-year-olds, if not younger children. However, by how noisily they surrounded them and hurried to take Toru's body from them, they were nothing like little pups, and their mission seemed to be the only thing that mattered. They quite unceremoniously pushed Duril, Varg, and Claw out of the way so they could reach Toru, lift his body on their shoulders and carry him down from Moth's back.

“Do you think they’re happy to see us?” Varg asked.

“I know a couple of them,” Duril replied. “I mean, I know someone named Pie, besides Moth.”

“And we met Midnight,” Claw said. “He did quite a number on those disgusting merchants from Shroudharbor.”

Varg waited while the Sakka took Toru with them and then followed, along with his friends.

“Quick, quick,” someone who seemed to be their leader urged them. “That means you, as well, friends of our lord and master.”

The leader was barely a few feet tall, and at first glance, looked like a street urchin. But he was directing and commanding everyone with the hubris of an army general.

The entire procession moved down a long winding stair that appeared to be made from vines. Varg had to place each step carefully, the vines smelled fresh as if they had just grown. That strange stair taking them down inside the wall couldn’t have been there for a long time. Indeed, it seemed that the powers of these Sakka were astonishing.

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It was a long and arduous way down, but Duril considered that it was a small price to pay, seeing how the Sakka appeared to be the only ones competent to help Toru in this dire situation. He hated being helpless, but at least he hoped that his presence would be soothing for the young tiger the moment he woke up. And if the Sakka needed any assistance, he would be there to help in any way he could. The only thing needed was for them to say the word, and nothing else. For the sake of everything that was worth saving in the world, Duril hoped with all his heart that Toru would open his lovely eyes again and ask again for a kiss, in that adorable petulant voice of his.

“Put him there, put him there,” the leader of the group demanded impatiently.

A single bed lay in the middle of a large room that had curved walls as if it was a dome. The bed was large and dressed in silk sheets the color of gold, and Duril took in every detail without saying a word. Toru was hiked up onto the bed, and the entire army of Sakka began mumbling among themselves, each one finding his place and mission. Duril watched as they began moving in rows, grabbing pots of water, herbs of different kinds, and those flowers he had seen before. The tiger flowers.

The Sakka started to rub Toru’s body with their concoctions which apparently were made from nothing but herbs and water. Duril leaned over them to watch closely without realizing he was doing so.

“Friends of our lord and master,” the leader spoke. “Come and tell us about how Hekastfet was defeated this time. We need to record it all in our history book.”



Duril hesitated. Varg and Claw tensed, as well. It looked like neither of them wanted to move from Toru's side either.

"Come, come. He's in good hands, the best hands," the leader said. "You will do nothing here but breathe in his air."

That seemed to be enough to convince them all to move and follow the little man. Duril wondered briefly where Pie was, but there were so many Sakka there, and all bent on their mission, that it was a difficult thing to identify one in the sea of heads.

They followed the leader of the Sakka into another room, a considerably smaller one. Varg and Claw leaned awkwardly against one of the walls. Their presence and height was usually enough to dominate any room, but in this case, they looked like giants trapped in a dwarf's house. Even Duril had to admit that it wasn't easy for him to stand comfortably.

The Sakka climbed a chair behind a desk and grabbed a long goose feather that must have been sharpened for the sake of serving as a writing instrument. Duril admired the intricate design of the ink bottle, something flowery patterned in gold.

"Well," the Sakka began, "let me hear it."

"Now, wait a little," Varg intervened, "we don't even know who you are."

"I'm Beanstalk," the Sakka replied as if he couldn't believe that such a thing wasn't obvious already. "I lead the Sakka. Any other questions before we start?"

"Yes, we have a lot of bloody questions," Varg replied in a determined voice.

That appeared to give Beanstalk pause for a moment. Then, his expression turned into a patient smile and he leaned back in his desk chair. "Very well, ask your questions."

"Is Toru going to be fine?" he asked, at the same time as Duril.

"That's what I'd like to know, as well," Claw added in an aggressive voice.

"He fought a battle like no other, a battle for Eawirith," Beanstalk said patiently. He appeared to hesitate for a moment. "Never before has a tiger needed our help in such an endeavor. Nor has one ever come with friends."

"You talk like those people out in The Dregs," Varg said. "They also showed no trust in us because things were happening differently than what they knew from old tales."

"Not tales, history," Beanstalk pointed out. "It is quite unusual," he muttered those last words to himself. "Nonetheless, we are prepared. We will pull Toru out of his stupor, worry not."

Duril decided to speak up. “How could we not worry? There is no wound, no reason for him to be in such a state. We were all there, and none of us shares his condition. I’m a healer --” he started.

Beanstalk put one hand up. “We know.” He spoke for all the Sakka, it seemed. “But the wound he suffered is not one of the body. So, tell me now, what happened?”

Duril traded glances with Varg, and came to a decision as to who would be their mouthpiece. Varg towered, his impressive height casting a long shadow across the narrow room. “Then his wound might be one of the soul. To defeat Hekastfet, he had to kill his sire.”

“His father?” Beanstalk seemed taken aback by that information. “What does Toru’s father have to do with any of this?”

Varg set his feet wide apart and looked down at the Sakka. Beanstalk didn’t appear the least bit intimidated. Duril understood his friend; Toru lay there, silent and unmoving, while these little people worked busily around him, apparently knowing what to do to bring him back to life. They all shared the same concern. What if they didn’t succeed?

Duril sighed and pushed that dark thought away. So far, the Sakka had helped them, and showing a lack of trust in them could end up insulting them. Only Beanstalk contradicted him by speaking right away. “Master wolf, it’s an astonishing new tale Toru is weaving. We must know everything. We were born to help the tiger restore peace and order in the world. But never before have we met someone like Toru, and we have been serving the house of Olliandran for millennia.”

“We don’t know what this house you’re talking about is. And we don’t know if your friends are capable of curing our friend,” Varg said, emphasizing every word.

Beanstalk seemed to consider. “They will try their best. And we took a vow, master wolf. We will die trying, and we’re not the dying kind.”

That much Duril believed. This ancient tribe charged with helping the tiger fulfill his destiny was their best bet at the moment since they, Toru’s friends, felt so helpless right now.

Varg seemed to have decided to share the truth with the leader of the Sakka. “We found ourselves trapped by Hekastfet as we rushed to Toru’s aid. The evil intended to use us as leverage and force Toru’s hand. It didn’t work.”

Beanstalk nodded thoughtfully and then he dipped his goose feather in the ink. Duril wasn’t in the least surprised to see his hand moving across the page with incredible speed. After all, he had taken advantage of the same type of magic when Pie had sent him back to Granius and his tedious work.

“Hekastfet had a physical body,” Claw pointed out. “An old man with a beard, quite an imposing one.”

Beanstalk seemed well aware of what that meant. “So, he had taken over the domestikos’ body. We have suspected that was the case for quite some time, and now we know for sure. What happened then? What did you see?”

“We were inside a room with a strange altar,” Varg explained. “Later we learned that it was Toru’s father shackled to the altar. He was the one who asked Toru to end his life. It appears that his sacrifice was what brought the end of Hekastfet, or at least that is what we hope.” He stopped and waited.

Beanstalk appeared to ponder. “Hekastfet must have built the altar since the confrontation with the tiger before Toru. It is not unusual that he chose to nestle inside the domestikos’ palace and create this abomination.”

“Can we truly tell if Toru succeeded in his quest?” Claw asked.

“We no longer feel the evil,” Beanstalk replied. “It appears to have disappeared, but in such a manner as never before.”

“What do you mean?” Varg inquired.

Beanstalk rose from his chair and began pacing the room. “Outside, the city is still burning.”

“Yes, we saw some of it,” Varg said. “I know that Toru will suffer from a broken heart once he hears that the city was destroyed. We should be out there, chasing away the fires.”

Beanstalk put his hands behind his back and looked at the floor, lost deeply in his own thoughts. “Scercendusa always dies with the evil that helped it spawn.”

“That cannot be the truth,” Duril protested. “There must be many good people in the city, and even those that might not always do the right thing, they cannot be bad enough to deserve such a fate.”

“And how about the people in The Dregs? Are they going to die now? All of them?” Claw asked, his voice filled with unhidden hurt.

Duril had known the bearshifter as someone determined at times, easygoing at times, but not as emotional as he could hear him being right now. Something about the fate of those poor people serving Scercendusa outside its majestic walls must have struck a nerve in him. Duril understood. Something of their harsh demeanor and sense of duty reminded him of a few people from Whitekeep, the ones who never wasted time with useless gossip. If they could be helped –

“Toru might be lying on that bed, unfit to tell you what he thinks, but we are here in his stead,” he said as he clenched his hand into a fist. “And he would want us to go out there and save as many lives as we can.”

“Why would you do that?” Beanstalk asked.

Duril sensed his frustration growing. “Varg, Claw, should we go? At least, I believe we are leaving Toru in good hands.”

Not that his heart didn’t tear at the thought of leaving Toru there, but there were other important things at stake. The city was burning, yes, but even fires could be put out, couldn’t they?

Beanstalk was about to say something when someone walked into the room after a short knock. “What is it?” he asked.

Duril recognized Moth from the first time they had met. His face was covered in soot and he looked like he needed to rest for three days straight, but his eyes told a different story. “I listened in,” he admitted. “I would like to go out there and help them.”

“To what end? Don’t we all know our history?” Beanstalk asked.

“Our history,” Moth said forcefully, “is being rewritten. Yes, Toru is like no one else. Yes, he came here with friends. And yes, he wouldn’t want the city to perish.”

Someone else emerged from behind Moth, another Sakka that Duril didn’t know by face. However, he saw the glint of recognition in Varg’s eyes.

“Midnight,” the wolf asked out loud, “will you help us, too?”

Midnight nodded solemnly. “In the short time Toru spent with us, I came to know him a little. He wouldn’t want to leave destruction in his wake. We must at least try.”

Beanstalk threw his arms into the air. “How can we ignore everything we’ve learned over millennia?”

“Those are old things. Now it’s time for us to learn of new things.”

Duril was sure the Sakka named Midnight couldn’t have put it better. And trying to save some of the people was better than staying there, waiting for Toru to recover when that could take who knew how long. Toru wouldn’t have wanted them to sit idly by when there were lives to save.

“We should get going. Do you know of safe places where we can bring the people? And where are there water sources?”

“That is something I’m in charge of knowing,” someone else interjected into their conversation.

Duril recognized Pie right away. The Sakka had his hands in the pockets of his overalls and looked like a street child ready to raise havoc, but his intentions were noble through and through.

“All right,” Beanstalk admitted with a grumble. “Take others with you, anyone that can be spared from the noblest task of all.” He looked at everyone sharply. “We will take care of Toru while you

see about others, out there.” While he didn’t appear to believe in the rightness of their cause, he didn’t stand in the way, either.

And Duril believed that they could use all the help they could get to save Scercendusa from its fate. Nothing was set in stone, he thought to himself.

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He was in a warm place, filled with light. At first, he didn’t recognize it, but little by little, it began to come back to him. With a smile, he jumped from his cradle and landed on the floor on all paws. Toru looked around the large room that was his own, although his mother also slept there. He stole a cautious glance at her. The red hair which had been the first thing he had seen when opening his eyes upon the world cascaded over the pillows, and the way her chest rose and fell let him know she was deeply asleep.

Toru made sure not to make a sound as he crept toward the large doors. He stopped in front of them, his tail swinging to and fro, as he debated about the best way to open them without waking half the palace. While he could jump on the handle and push it down, his clumsiness would end up rousing Raine from her well-deserved slumber. The night before, he had wailed over a growing fang, and she had stayed up with him throughout the ordeal. It was better to let her sleep.

As much as he disliked it, there was only one way to sneak outside with no one else noticing. He grunted under his breath, the sounds he was making like soft whines in his ear, but soon, he was standing on two feet, although he was swaying to ensure his balance.

What was so good about having this kind of body, anyway? It was not as fast and nimble as a tiger’s. Yet, his parents kept on insisting that he needed to govern his human just as well as he made use of his tiger’s body.

Toru grabbed the handle and dragged it down. Despite his best efforts, it made some noise, but when he stole another glance at his mother’s sleeping form, nothing had changed. The sounds were only loud in his own ears. He snuck outside, still swaying on his feet, just the same as he had seen other children his age doing. Only that they didn’t have a mighty tiger inside to turn into when trying to get by as a human became too rough.

Carefully, he closed the door behind him, and from that point on, the world was his. Toru didn’t hesitate to change out of the smooth human skin that offered so little protection against the cold or bruises when you fell like his wonderful soft coat did. He was a tiger, and mother and father had to understand that.

Now that he was out of the bedroom he shared with his doting mother, freedom was waiting for him. He rushed toward the balcony at the end of the hallway. As he had learned quickly, a big apple tree bent its branches to the left side of it, and that was the quickest and best ladder he had found so that he could reach the garden, where all the wonderful things happened.

Out on the balcony, he jumped on the railing and sniffed the air. Someone, somewhere, was cooking a big steak. Toru gulped at the thought of that juicy piece of meat, searing on the grill. He didn't mind eating it raw, but something of how humans did it just made it impossible to resist.

He clucked his tongue in an effort to stop the drooling. Father always said that it was wrong to steal, but when you were really hungry, was it that bad?

For a moment, he looked over the landscape opening in front of him. One day, he would know all those fields and hills by heart. Mother was very strict about never going too far. But one day, he would go even further than that, even up those mountains in the distance. That was where father came from. He didn't quite understand what that meant. When had he come and why? But those mountains looked like they could be conquered, although Toru had to admit that he wasn't that fond of the cold. The only memory he had of those places far away was of a single snowflake landing on his nose, and him sneezing. His mother said that his father had taken him there once to show him to his people. That must have been a long, long time ago, because Toru didn't remember anything beyond that cold snowflake landing on his nose.

He jumped into the apple tree, the branch dipping under his paws, and quite dangerously, but he was quick and soon he was dashing from one branch to the next, until he reached the ground. The last leap was always quite a feat, but Toru knew that he was growing fast. That was what mother said, that there were no other children of his age who grew from one day to the next like he did. That single thing made his heart fill with pride, and he could forgive mother and father for not letting him play as much as he wanted, and trying to quench his thirst for adventure.

Now, he was in the garden, and all he had to do was follow the scent of that delicious steak. Sometimes, he didn't even need to steal. The people around the castle knew him well, and they were happy to feed him. They also often told him that mother and father shouldn't learn of it, while sneaking him another tasty morsel that made his mouth drool and his tongue hang out. They didn't need to say another word. His lips were sealed.

The scent led him close to the wall at the back of the garden. Toru stopped before it and his tail began tapping the ground as he pondered over what to do next. The wall was tall here, so tall that he couldn't just pounce over it or even reach the top. Curiosity about what lay beyond that wall gnawed at him, but father always said that he was too young to climb it. Of course, that only infuriated him further, because there should be no walls standing in the way of his adventuring. His dreams were always filled with sights of distant lands, and new friends, and plenty of steak. How could mother and father not understand that only climbing the wall and exploring the world outside would make him happy? That and being scratched behind the ears.

Maybe if he looked at the wall long enough, he would find its weakness. Now, after he did stare a lot, he could see there was a stone jutting out and he could reach it if he lunged toward it the right way. Without a moment of hesitation, Toru tensed his entire body and jumped. His front right paw

caught the jutting stone, but he felt awkward about how the rest of him remained hanging in the air. Forced to go back to the ground, he only felt frustration.

Wait, he thought, those stones jutting from the wall, they could be used better... if he used his human, his clumsy heavy human. Toru thought really hard about it. Shifting didn't come so easy to him, not when it came to becoming human, or so he had heard his parents saying. The tiger was strong in him, they also said.

But this wall needed him to use his human, too, and as little as he liked to balance on only two feet instead of four, he was willing to try. From his height, he reached the jutting stone with one clammy hand. It was, indeed, more suitable for grabbing the stones and pulling himself up. He let out a small cry of triumph when he managed to pull himself up and grab another stone sticking out of the wall, this time with his left hand.

Up and up, he could go like this until the wall ended, and the world of adventuring outside would start. So, without looking down, he aimed for the next stone, then the next. It felt like he had been climbing for a long time. That was when he risked a look down. His heart grew small. His tiger never feared heights, but all of a sudden he was overly conscious of his clammy hands that could slip from these stones...

One of those, the one on which he had rested his left foot for the time being, gave way, and he cried out in distress. At the same moment, his right hand began to slip, and Toru barely had time to realize that he was falling. He closed his eyes tightly and called for his tiger, but shifting that way didn't come so fast to him either.

He tensed in anticipation of crashing against the ground, but his fall was broken suddenly.

"What do we have here?" His father's deep voice made him open his eyes.

He was in one piece, and nothing hurt. Toru giggled.

Father frowned, looking down at him. He was so tall. He could probably climb the wall or even jump over it when he was in his tiger's skin. Toru liked nothing and no one better in the whole world than seeing his father's tiger. He was so majestic and so different! He was a white tiger, and everyone saying that said so with admiration. There weren't many like him, or maybe there, at the edge of the mountains, there were. Toru didn't really know.

"Where were you going, little climber?" His father asked and laughed, bouncing him in his arms, and making him giggle more.

"Up," Toru explained. Father was only stern about his climbing habits when mother was around. When they were by themselves, like now, he never scolded him.

"And why would you want that?"

Toru licked his lips. “Steak,” he explained while scrunching his nose. It was more difficult to discern the good smells when he was human.

“We had steak yesterday,” his father reminded him.

“I can eat steak every day,” Toru said.

His father hiked him up on his shoulders and lifted them both up to the top of the wall with ease. From there, Toru could see an entire different landscape, one with marshes and small fires. In the distance, thunder rolled and lightning blazed through the sky.

“What’s there?” he asked.

“A different world than ours.”

Toru leaned forward, making his parent hurry to catch him. “Why is it burning?”

“It’s on its last leg. It’s ending,” his father explained.

“Ending? But why?”

“You’ll understand when you’re older. There are evil worlds on the face of Eawirith. It is our duty to destroy them.”

“Duty?” Toru questioned. “Can’t we just let them be?”

“If we did, they’d taint and tarnish the rest of the places, where good people live.”

“Is everyone evil there?” Toru asked, after some consideration.

His father didn’t answer. Maybe he hadn’t heard the question. “No, maybe not everyone,” he said quietly at last.



## Chapter Thirty – Raging Fire

What was that thing people said about best intentions? Duril had half his face covered by an old rag that Midnight had handed him to protect himself against the thick smoke, and still he was nearly overcome by the acrid smell of burnt wood and more filling his lungs and leaving less and less room for breathable air to get in.

They were barely out into the streets of Scercendusa, and the dimensions of the catastrophe engulfing the city appeared to overwhelm their minds. Duril had to fight his first impulse to run back to the haven offered by the Sakka deep within the walls. He was well aware that such temptations were human and normal, but he had made a decision, together with Varg and Claw, and going back only meant letting down Toru and his desire to save the city, or at least what remained of it.

Destruction lay everywhere he looked. Looked was no more than a manner of describing his actions. The smoke was dark and thick. It was impossible to say whether the day had arrived already, or the night still embraced the city in its indifferent arms.

“Varg, Claw,” he called out in desperation.

“We’re right here.” Varg’s reassuring voice came from much closer than he had initially thought would be possible.

Along with it, a warm hand on his shoulder assured him that he wasn’t alone in that sea of smoke and ashes. “What should we do?” Duril asked, not truly hoping for an answer. Their valiant decision seemed so ill-conceived given what they were going against.

His mind took him to dark places, despite his determination to honor Toru and his wishes. His duty toward people, which he had always sensed to be his reason to exist, was also at odds with what he felt right now. What could be the reason for it?

Somewhere, deep inside his mind, a foggy memory was striving to emerge and take over. The memory was born from pain, that much he could tell, and the state of fear gripping his soul didn’t allow him to move forward and decide whether it would be a good idea to let it break free from the prison cell in which it had dwelled until now, or suppress it and move forward.

“Duril, what is it?” Varg asked him, while the grip of his hand increased.

Duril shook his head. He couldn’t see any better for it, but the least he could do was reject the bad memory trying to take him over.

Claw was by his side, as well. “We must discover where the fire comes from first.”

“There’s more than one fire,” Duril stated what he believed to be the most obvious thing for them to bear in mind. “There are thousands,” he whispered.

“Then we should get to work and start putting them out,” Varg suggested. “One fire we quench means one fire less.”

Of such fine stuff were their hearts made.

“We’re here to help,” the Sakka that had chosen to come with them confirmed. Moth, Midnight, and Pie had enlisted the help of at least a dozen others, who hadn’t been difficult to convince once they had heard it was Toru’s desire to save the city. The change that came with the young tiger coursed through the Sakka, just like it did through the entire place. And everywhere he went.

“The fires come from underneath,” Midnight explained. “Pie, you should get us inside that house, the first on the left. Once we understand how the fires begin, we’ll be fitter and wiser about how to put them out.”

“What about your old history? Did it ever say something about the fires?” Duril asked. He didn’t stop to wonder how it was possible for the Sakka to still see clearly through all the smoke and identify the shape of anything around them, let alone houses and other buildings.

“Fire and blood,” Moth murmured. “It usually happens quickly, and it was the sign of victory, the first we always saw.”

“How did you survive? Each time this thing happened?” Duril asked, to keep his mind from slipping into that dark place that seemed so keen on bothering him now when he was most needed.

“We buried ourselves underground and went to sleep,” Pie explained.

Claw began to push with his shoulder against what had to be the door to the house. The sound of groaning wood under the assault sounded like a wail in Duril’s ears. What could it be made of to resist someone as powerful as Claw? The bearshifter sounded strained as he gained momentum and barreled into the door with a loud crashing sound.

“And let it all happen again,” Varg remarked. He sounded displeased, and Duril had an inkling about what was eating at the generous wolf’s heart. Yes, just like him, he truly believed that it would not be much better if everything was left to fate, only because the old history had been written that way. The Sakka obeyed nothing else but the implacable rules of destiny in which they appeared to believe blindly.

This time, destiny would suffer irreparable changes. Duril knew in his heart that it would be the last time that evil would try to take over the world and pick it apart. Toru must have defeated Hekastfet. His sole act of bravery went against everything he believed in when he had sealed his father’s fate as the only way to chase the evil out of Scercendusa and off the face of Eawirith.

But had the evil been vanquished? Duril wanted it to be so, but while he trusted Toru’s strength and big heart, he wasn’t entirely convinced that Hekastfet would relinquish his hold on the world as easily as that.

His mind was a nest of contradictions, and Duril wanted nothing more than to put it at ease. He murmured a short encouragement to himself.

“Did you say something?” Varg asked and leaned toward him while they stepped behind Claw to enter the house in flames.

Duril shook his head, although he had no idea if Varg could see his denial.

“There,” Midnight said, and they all followed the direction of his voice.

They had to be close to the hearth that served as the center of the house and the place where all the cooking was done. The smell of grilled meats and boiled vegetables must have been permanently absorbed into the stone walls, never to be washed away completely.

“Let’s make some light,” Midnight added.

Duril no longer asked himself where the power of the Sakka was coming from. They were living through the most astonishing tale not only of their lives, but of anyone else’s. He longed for a time when he would be able to sit down and write in the big tome Elidias had given him. He was eager to record all of the adventures that had transpired lately. With Toru’s help, those might be the last of such magnitude he would have to write.

The hearth was illuminated by Midnight who seemed to release pure light directly from his chest. That single patch of light in the sea of dark smoke seemed taken from another world. At the bottom of the hearth, they could all see the flames rising and licking the walls, bent on devouring everything in their path.

“What feeds them?” Claw asked.

Pie moved closer and knelt by the side of the hearth. For several long moments, he remained unmoving save for his nose that scrunched up and sniffed a few times. “It is the same fire that brings Scercendusa to life every day.”

“What do you mean? The fire that the people make for their cooking and such?” Duril demanded to know.

“Fire is not made in Scercendusa,” Pie explained in a teacher’s voice. “Fire comes when it’s needed.”

That reminded Duril of something and he turned toward Varg. In the light made by Midnight, they could see each other’s faces, covered in dark soot. “Fire,” he said slowly.

Varg appeared to remember the same thing he did. “The fire that fuels the city,” he confirmed.

“Wait, that reminds me--” Claw began. “Oh, damn, are you trying to tell me that The Dregs are doing this?”

“The Dregs?” Moth asked. “Ah, that would make sense... but those people must be dead by now.”

“Why would they be dead?” Varg questioned, as surprised as Duril was by that supposition.

“Is it something from your old history?” Claw asked.

“Indeed it is. When the battle between good and evil is finished, there is no more need for Scercendusa. A gust of wind will rise,” Pie said in a sing-song voice, “and will first wash over The Dregs. The people there will perish, as their hardened bodies are not able to breathe the sweet fresh air it brings with it. Then, Scercendusa will fall.”

Varg rubbed his forehead. “What sort of sense does that make? I understand that the people from The Dregs cannot breathe freely in air that is not made of soot and ashes, but why would this happen to the city?”

“Our history tells it like this,” Pie said solemnly. “We are not ones to question it.”

“I thought you sought the truth,” Varg reminded him. It was their understanding that the Sakka defined themselves as such, seekers and holders of the truth. “This is your truth,” he said and pointed at the flames rising high in the hearth. “Can you quench this fire?”

Pie shook his head slowly. “This fire, no. It courses like a river beneath the city. It is nothing but pure lava there. Try as we might, I don’t believe we will be able to make it go away.”

“Are you telling me that the fires burning all over the city, taking lives along with them, are just like this one? Fed by the fire from within?” Varg asked the same question that was on Duril’s mind. Claw let out a grunt that said everything about what the bearshifter believed, as well.

Duril stared at the flames. They were beautiful, shades of yellow and red, and yet so dangerous. This couldn’t be as far as they would come. No, as long as their bodies moved and their minds worked, they would give nothing less than their best.

“Let’s go stop the fire at its source,” Claw said. “We will only be useless here.”

They all nodded in silent agreement, their eyes glued to the unrelenting flames burning brightly, throwing sharp shadows against the walls in the abandoned room.

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The hardest things to ignore were the wails and cries of pain that fell upon their ears at every step they took. Varg had one arm wrapped around Duril’s shoulders and the other entwined with Claw’s stronger one. The Sakka were walking rapidly in front, guiding them back to the wall and beyond. He could only hope that their suppositions were correct. Was it fair to abandon these people in their hour of need to chase the only guess they had?

But if they were right, they would be able to quench all the fires at once. They would save many. “Moth, where did you take those children Duril asked you to save?”

“They’re up on the walls,” Moth said. “I could not take them any farther. The smoke in The Dregs is even thicker than here, and taking them over that vast land would have been a feat with the likely outcome of saving but a few.”

An idea began to take shape in Varg’s mind. “Do you believe that the people would be safe up upon the walls? Just like the children?”

“For a while. But as we know from our old history--” Moth started.

“Which is being rewritten,” Pie reminded him. “We cannot know a thing at the moment. You are our lord’s close friends and companions, and we are indebted to you. We will do everything that is asked of us.”

“They’re suffering,” Claw said in a deeply pained voice. “We must do something.”

“We are,” Pie reminded them. “If there’s a key for quenching the fires burning everywhere in the city, it must be in The Dregs, and that is where we’re heading. Not much else for us to do.”

“I cannot accept it!”

Duril’s abrupt cry took them all by surprise.

The healer appeared to be prey to a state of extreme agitation. “They can be saved, they can!”

Varg wasn’t prepared for Duril breaking free from his gentle hold and making a run for it, deep into the smoke. “Duril,” he called out. “Duril, where are you? Where are you going?”

His nostrils flared. Normally, he could pick Duril’s scent out of a thousand, but the smoke was thick and overpowering, and his nose couldn’t bear for him to breathe the air in deeply.

“Follow me,” Claw said.

“There is no time,” Pie intervened. “We should put out the fires!”

“We cannot abandon our friend!” Varg shouted as he rushed after Claw. What a blessing it was to have the bearshifter with them. His keen sense of smell was bound to help them in this desperate situation. Varg couldn’t even consider thinking of going back to Toru without Duril, who was now lost in the smoke, just like the rest of the people wailing around them.

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Toru was aware of people moving around him. He couldn't open his eyes, and he didn't care about doing so, anyway. A scent he knew tickled his nostrils and he sniffed, trying to make it part of what he could remember. The dream from before called out to him once more.

"What is this?" Toru asked.

His father held a beautiful flower in his hand. It reminded Toru of his own coat, bright and beautiful, in orange and black.

"Can I eat it?" He opened his mouth wide and leaned over, but his father pulled him back gently.

"No, it is not to be eaten. It is called the tiger flower."

"So, it's like me? Is it a baby?" Toru asked.

His father laughed softly and patted his head. "No, it is not like you. It is meant for you to draw your strength and dreams from."

"How so? Should I eat it to become stronger?" Toru was proud of always being praised for being so strong for his young age, but he believed he could be even stronger than he was. He was yet to be as big and strong as father, and that meant that there was a lot of growing he still needed to do.

"No. But you can smell it."

Toru accepted he had to keep his mouth shut as the crown of the flower tipped toward his nose. He inhaled deeply; maybe that was how a tiger became stronger, because of the flower and its powers. A bit of pollen landed on the tip of his nose and he sneezed.

His father laughed. "My Toru," he said with affection, "never doing things by half."

Was there another way to do things? Toru didn't care even if there was. "Am I stronger now?"

"You're very young, son," his father said gently. "But one day, when you'll think yourself lost or weak or without a purpose, the scent of this flower will remind you of who you are."

"I'm never weak," Toru declared. "And I'm careful not to become lost. I always come back home. Mother shouldn't be concerned."

"It is her right to be concerned," his father explained. "That is what mothers do. They worry."

"But I'm always coming back," Toru insisted. "She shouldn't cry."

His father didn't say anything for a moment. "When did you see her cry?"

Toru shrugged. He couldn't quite remember, but he had felt quite funny at the time, like there was something unpleasant in his belly from eating something bad. And then, his nose had started to itch, and his eyes to water, and he hadn't liked it at all. Scared of it, he had run and hidden his face

in the folds of his mom's skirt, and she had grabbed him in her arms and kissed his nose and laughed. And then, he had forgotten all about it until now.

Father might feel troubled just like him and have his belly hurt, too, if he knew.

"I didn't," he lied. Lying to your parents was bad, but Toru believed that he was doing the right thing now. "But she shouldn't cry."

He took pleasure in how his father kissed his forehead. "Come now. It's time for dinner. I'm sure your mother told the cooks to make something you'll love."

"Like steak?"

"Something like that, yes," his father confirmed, much to his delight.

Why would anyone have to cry when there was delicious steak, and a backyard garden, and an entire world out there? Toru wanted to forget all about the time when he had seen his mother cry. The scent of the tiger flower was pleasant, too.

But underneath it, Toru couldn't escape another, the smell of ashes brought by the wind. It had to be from that dying world his father had told him about just days before.

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Duril could feel his heart beating wildly in his chest. He stumbled and fell for a moment, then he pushed himself up to his feet and continued running. If anyone asked, he didn't know where he was running to and why. But he knew one thing, and that was that salvation wouldn't come from someone else. He had to save himself and others.

Someone gripped the floating sleeve of his shirt, the one on the side with the missing limb that must have come undone during his run. "Take him, take him," a voice urged him from that sea of black fog.

A greater tug at his sleeve and he realized that someone was hanging on to him. He turned and reached for that person with his good arm, and caught a hand. A small one, and with it, came the rest of that person, a child who cried and climbed into Duril's hold.

"Come with me," he urged the voice behind the child, belonging to a woman, as far as he could tell. "You must come with me. Everyone should."

"Duril, what are you doing?"

Through the fog of his troubled mind, he had great difficulty telling who that voice belonged to. It was familiar, though.

“Don’t run away like that.” It was Varg, he realized, as a bit of that rush of longing over his mind lifted. “What are you doing?” Varg repeated the question.

“We must save everyone,” Duril pleaded. “Look, they are so many.”

“Then, we should guide them out of here,” Varg said. “But we must also reach The Dregs and stop this madness. The fire comes from there, do you remember?”

He remembered something, but he wasn’t entirely sure what it was. The only thing he felt he must do if it cost him his life was to hold that boy hanging around his arm and afraid to let go, close to him and protect him from all evil and anyone who tried to hurt him.

“The smoke is getting thicker,” Claw announced while starting to cough. “We need to get out of here.”

Duril remained standing, people gathered around him and waiting. Varg took him by the shoulders. If he could only explain to his friend what was inside his heart, it wouldn’t feel so heavy, like a rock inside his chest.

“Let’s guide everyone up the walls,” Claw suggested. “Moth, is it too much to ask to have you take as many as you can and get them up there?”

“I’ll do my best,” the Sakka promised.

“It’s not enough,” Duril heard himself saying. “How can it be enough?”

Around them, people were falling to the ground, coughing. They didn’t have the strength of a wolf, the resilience of an orc, or the power of a bear. They were helpless, and Duril believed himself to be just as much so because his desperation continued to grow. Even if he couldn’t see them, he could hear them, and that was enough to rip his heart apart in thousands of little pieces.

“We’ll save as many as we can,” Varg said, still holding him. That hand, squeezing his shoulder, seemed to be the only thing preventing him from coming completely unraveled. “I’ll drag them up that wall myself if it is what I must do. I’ll drag them until my heart stops beating.”

Claw let out a frightening roar, and only then Duril realized that Claw must have turned into his other form. The people let out cries of fear, even though they probably couldn’t see the majestic beast among them.

“Get as many as you can on my back,” Claw commanded. “You do the same, Varg. Yes, we have no time. Yes, we’re going against the worst odds here. But we will do this until there’s no life left inside us, as you said, my friend.”



*Toru, if fate lets us do one last thing for you, let it be this,* Duril thought as he began helping people get on his friends' backs, all the while not letting go of that boy. He didn't have to worry; the child didn't show any signs of wanting to let go, either.

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Was it a kind of madness that drove them? Varg couldn't tell. Any sign of a mind free of that should have guided them toward their own safety first, all the while keeping their thoughts on how to limit the loss of lives on the streets of Scercendusa.

But all those plans had gone down the drain when he had sensed the great distress in Duril's heart. The healer hadn't said a lot, but his cry for help in the name of many, had convinced him beyond any shadow of a doubt.

*Toru, I hope the Sakka will take care of you if we never return from this.* The surety in his heart told the whole truth. Saddled with at least a dozen people, Varg began climbing the stairs on the side of the wall, running and thinking of nothing but how to leave those saved on the top of the wall and go back for others.

"Send word for everyone who can still run, walk or crawl, to come to the wall!" His shout was addressed to no one in particular, and everyone, at the same time. It was the only way to save as many as he could.

Claw, stronger and faster, was on his way back from delivering his first load of passengers.

"How is it up there?" he fired the question.

"The sweetest air you'll ever breathe," his friend assured him while hurrying back.

Duril trudged at a much slower pace behind him. But Varg knew that any plea for Duril to let himself be carried would fall on deaf ears. No, what he needed to do was to save as many people as possible.

Up and up, down and down. Varg lost count of the many times he came and went. Claw was right; on the top of the wall, one could breathe, even if they only allowed themselves this luxury for moments at a time. They needed those moments, they needed that air in their lungs so they could climb down again and carry other people.

When the crowd at the foot of those stairs thinned, they began searching for more survivors, grabbing them where they stood or had fallen, despite their natural cries of distress.

One thing he hadn't done. He hadn't looked down on that wall on the other side. Moth flew incessantly up and down. The rest of the Sakka that were with them had devised a system of ropes that carried people up in a continuous line. Everyone was helping, but was it enough?

“Did you find any other survivors?” Varg shouted at Claw as they almost clashed. They were both running to and fro, searching for signs of life, but they were growing scarcer and scarcer.

“Not here, not anymore. I’ll run around, see if there are people buried under rubble,” Claw replied in a grim voice.

Varg stopped for a moment. “Did you look? Out there, over The Dregs?”

“We can only do one thing at a time. The fires are still raging,” the bearshifter confirmed his own suspicions.

The last words had barely left Claw’s lips when a horrendous thunder-like sound came from above. The ground shook under their feet.

“What is going on?” Varg bellowed.

His heart faltered as he looked up. Through the smoke above his head, heavy rocks began to fall, pushed by unknown forces, like an avalanche. Varg lost his footing, and a sharp pain traveled through his skull. As he was falling, and the world tilted, the last thing he saw was the expression of unadulterated fear in Claw’s eyes as he was rushing toward him.

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No one was saying a word. Toru shifted in his high chair. Usually, dinners were a lot more fun than this. But this time, he was only sharing the meal with mother and father, and they looked serious, like when Toru did something they didn’t like, and they scolded him.

He had done nothing to put such expressions on their faces. Nonetheless, he ate quietly, making sure not to break the silence by chewing too loudly. It was difficult to enjoy the grilled meat like that. If it were up to him, he would gobble everything down.

Dinner concluded without anyone talking much. Toru felt relieved to get out of his chair and scamper off, but once he was behind the large doors, something convinced him to stay, something like curiosity. If mother and father were mad at him, probably they would talk about it once they were alone.

He had left the doors slightly ajar, so all he had to do was stay there and listen intently.

“Have you gotten any word from your people?” his mother asked.

His father’s people lived out there, in the mountains, where it was always cold.

“Not since three moons ago.”

“That’s a long time not to hear a word,” his mother insisted.

“Indeed. I sent a messenger, and we must hear from him any day now.”

“The skies are burning. We will need allies.”

“I am working on it.” His father sounded angry. But why would he be angry at mother? Toru clenched his little fist. He loved father, but he also loved mother. He didn’t want them to fight. At least, they weren’t fighting because of him.

“What went wrong?” his mother asked again. “I thought the evil was vanquished.”

“For the last thousand years, yes.”

“So? We should just send someone.”

His father remained silent for a while. “You know who it is that we are supposed to send. It’s too early. He’s too young... only a child. Do I really need to point these things out to you?”

“Someone else,” his mother said, weighing hard on each word.

“I understand. I will go.”

“No.”

“Woman,” his father let out in frustration, “who do you expect me to send? In his stead? It is my duty.”

“We’re a tribe. We’re strong.”

“What is it that you’re asking, Raine?” his father asked again, his voice pained.

“All of us train for this, in one way or another. Don’t say another word. I know we can’t compare to Toru’s strength.”

Toru felt his heart swelling in his chest. Mother and father agreed that he was the strongest. And yet, he still couldn’t climb that high wall at the back of the palace.

“But should we just wait for the evil to reach us? We should go forth and quash it where it stands, in the heart of the gilded city.”

“Do you truly believe it is wise to do so? You said it yourself, we need allies.”

“Then, what do you propose we do? Wait here? For Hekastfet to strike?”

“Don’t speak its name!”

Toru covered in fear behind the door at the sound of his father’s angry voice. What is that name? Hekastfet? What did it mean? Why shouldn’t mother say it? Was it like a curse?

“Aneros, you need to see. Not taking any measures is as bad as if we left the gates open for that thing to crawl inside and infect us all. We must protect the people. And Toru, above all.”

“We do,” his father agreed. “I will go to Scercendusa, nonetheless. No, do not try to stop me.”

“I don’t intend to. But I will come with you, and our hundred strongest. We might not be the chosen tiger, but we are strong together. And now, don’t you be the one trying to stop me.”

“What are we going to do about the rest? About Toru?”

“We will hide them. I was hoping for your people to come here and take them.”

“We must wait for a little while longer for the messenger to arrive.”

Toru walked backward, moving silently over the polished floors. Mother and father wanted to send him away, to that land of snow and white. But he didn’t know that place; it wasn’t home. And after saying that he was the strongest, why were they so willing to leave him behind?

He snuck out and headed for the stables. No one would search for him in that smelly place, for sure. It was easy to get inside, as the evening was setting in, and the servants had almost all gone to bed.

He couldn’t remember when he had fallen asleep. But the sound of snorting horses woke him up. There was someone there, a stranger. Toru peeked from where he had hidden, and saw a man in black dismounting a horse. He had his back to him, so it was impossible to see his face, but there was a foul smell coming from him.

Toru barely kept from losing his earlier meal, that overpowering the odor was.

“You’re here,” someone said, and Toru recognized his father’s voice. “What is happening there?”

The stranger turned on his heel, and Toru gasped. There was no flesh on the man’s face, nothing but clean bone beneath. However, his father didn’t seem surprised by the man’s appearance.

Toru blinked and then he saw that the man now had a face as he bowed to Toru’s father. The horrible smell was gone, too. Maybe he had just been dreaming.

“Sire, your family is well. They send their good wishes.”

“That is wonderful news. Come with me. There is another important mission I have lined up for you.”

The stranger followed Toru’s father out of the stables. Just before walking out, he threw a glance around. Toru moved deeper into the shadow, but he could swear that, for a moment, the man had seen him, and just like that, his mask of flesh slipped one more time.



## Chapter Thirty-One – You Make Your Destiny

There was a flurry of activity everywhere he looked. People were getting ready to leave, just as mother had said, and with them, she along with father would go, too. Toru had asked cautiously about the trip they were getting ready for, making sure that he didn't get caught up in a lie and then forced to admit that he had eavesdropped on his parents' conversation. There was an unusual pain in his chest as he watched everyone doing their best to pack and prepare for the upcoming travels.

His mother had been clear that he would not come along. Toru didn't understand. If there was some enemy that had to be vanquished, he should be there, too. Weren't they saying that he was strong? Since he was so strong, he had to go with them, but his mother had already scolded him over insisting too much on something that he already knew the answer for.

Other preparations were also underway, but quieter. Toru had heard father talk to that stranger, someone who had come from the mountains. Although he had checked on the stranger time and time again, he had never once caught glimpse again of that horrible face without any flesh on it. Still, he saw the same thing in his dreams, and not only one time, he had roused mother from her sleep with his cries. Every time, he had been ashamed of having cried like a baby. No wonder mother and father didn't want to take him with them since he was such a crybaby over bad dreams that weren't real. That was what his father always told him, that bad dreams are nothing but bad dreams, and that they didn't mean anything. To convince him, his father showed him the sun out the window, and the apple tree in the garden, and the little children playing in the street. Everything was there, in its usual place, and he had nothing to worry about.

He must have imagined that man having no face and that horrible smell. Not just once, he had gotten closer to him, trying to catch him by surprise and for him to reveal that fleshless face, but each time, he had seen nothing but an ordinary man, between ages, who appeared to be at father's beck and call.

Toru snuck inside the kitchen, urged by hunger. Because of all the upheaval, no one kept regular hours for eating, not even his parents. But, as he knew how to get to food, no matter where he was, it wasn't such a big problem for him.

The kitchen was empty at the moment, the women in charge of cooking taking a break for washing their sweat from hard labor and going back to their homes. That made it the perfect moment for him to sneak inside. Toru looked around and walked on the tip of his toes. It was better to be in human form to reach the high table on which some cookies lay in a bowl, much to his delight. He grabbed one and stuffed it in his mouth, then he reached for another. He would first eat enough to calm his growling belly and then put some in his pockets to have them for later. When mother asked him if he was hungry, he would say yes and get some more food, too, without her ever suspecting that he had eaten plenty before.

He chewed on the cookie, wanting to make the sweet taste last longer.

“Is it customary here, at Nelsikkar, to steal food?”

The voice coming from a shadowy corner of the big kitchen made him stop. By how it sounded, it belonged to an old man. His nostrils flared. His human didn't have a strong sense of smell, and that was why he had missed that someone was in there.

“I'm Toru. I can eat all the food here,” he said, decided that he wouldn't let a stranger stop him from filling his belly with cookies, if that was what he wanted.

“Toru,” the stranger said. “Aneros' and Raine's son.”

Who was this man who dared to speak his parents' names so casually like he knew them?

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Come closer, Toru. I haven't seen you since you were born.”

Toru grabbed a couple of cookies and put them in the pocket of his vest. No matter what the stranger thought, it was his right to eat everything he could find unguarded. He walked over to the corner, and noticed an old man sitting on a bench flush against the wall. The stranger had a thick cane and he was resting both his hands on it. There was something about him that Toru couldn't understand. Although he had asked for him to come closer, the stranger wasn't looking at him.

“I'm here,” he said.

The stranger moved his head in his direction, but his eyes were still looking somewhere over Toru's head. “I'm glad to hear that you have grown up a lot during the last years. Any moment now, and you'll be as tall as your father, I heard.”

That made Toru's chest fill with pride, but he couldn't accept a lie, no matter how flattering. The old man seemed kind, and he had a long beard that rested over a modest garment that seemed to be made from a single sheet of dark fabric that hung loose to the ground. Over the robe, he wore something like a coat that appeared to be made from thick, stiff material. As footwear, he had a pair of coarse shoes, nothing like the ones from supple smooth leather Toru wore.

“Can't you see me?” he asked. “I barely reach father's shoulder,” he lied.

The old man laughed. “I can't see you, Toru. I'm blind.”

Toru frowned. Blind people couldn't see. “But you said that you haven't seen me since I was born.”

“My eyes hadn't yet given up on me completely by that time,” the old man explained.

Toru nodded thoughtfully and put his hand in his pocket, his fingers gripping the cookies. He took one and brought it close to the old man's hands. He took one of them and placed the cookie in the stranger's palm. "Here," he said. "Mother says I shouldn't eat cookies before dinner."

The old man laughed again and began munching on the cookie. He ate slowly, as he seemed to have only a few teeth left. "It is a delicious cookie," he said.

"Who are you?" Toru asked again.

"My name is Torgar. I hail from the mountains."

"From where father came?"

"Yes."

Toru looked the man up and down. His clothes were darker, thicker, and heavier than what was usually worn in Nelsikkar. It had to be because of the cold weather they had there. "A man came from there a few days ago. Did you come with him?"

"No," Torgar replied. "I have been traveling lately, and I've wanted to come here for a while now."

"Everybody's going somewhere," Toru explained. Maybe Torgar had expected to be welcomed properly and spend a few quiet days here, but there was no chance of that with everyone up and packing.

"As expected."

"Why did you come here? Did you talk to father?"

"Only in passing. He was happy to see me, which makes this old man happy, too."

Toru didn't know what else to ask the stranger, but he seemed so calm that Toru wanted to spend some more time in his company.

"Sit by my side, Toru," Torgar encouraged him.

He took a place by the man's right.

"Your parents love you very much. Always remember that," Torgar said.

"They say I'm strong, but they don't want to take me with them, to beat--" He stopped in time, before revealing more than he should.

Torgar rested his hands on the cane, leaning forward. He was looking somewhere in front of him, only that now Toru understood that he had to be more absorbed with something he remembered or could only see with the eyes of his mind. Toru didn't quite get it how someone's mind had eyes, but he had heard people saying that, so it had to be true.



“There is a war raging,” Torgar said with a weary sigh. “Anyone with half a head should run and hide. Released upon this world and vengeful, that is what it is.”

Toru didn’t quite understand what Torgar was saying. “Tigers are strong,” he argued. “Mother and father will win the war.”

Torgar remained silent.

“They will,” Toru insisted.

“It would be better for them to run and hide like everyone else,” Torgar replied.

“Tigers aren’t cowards,” Toru said again.

“No, they’re not,” Torgar admitted. “It’s counting on it, it is.”

Again that it that Toru didn’t know what to make of. “What will happen? Are you one of those people who can tell destiny?”

“No, I’m not,” Torgar said. “And I don’t believe in destiny beyond duty.”

“What does that mean?” Toru leaned toward the old man.

One of Torgar’s hands let go of the cane to take him by the shoulders. “It means that the stars are allowed to draw your duty for you, but how you come to accomplish it, that is up to you.”

Toru liked that. It meant that he had freedom. Maybe he didn’t have to listen to boring lessons and learn how to stay still. Maybe he could do his duty by running around as fast as he could and eating delicious steak.

“Can I eat a lot of meat and still do my duty?” he asked, just to be sure.

“Of course,” Torgar replied and laughed.

That was an answer that pleased him much. Toru felt like he could trust the old man with everything. After a moment of hesitation, he decided to ask. “Do you think people can see things that aren’t there? Like imagine them, but as if they see them with their own eyes? And realize later that they are mistaken?”

Torgar seemed to ponder his answer this time. “Was it something you saw, Toru? What did you see?”

“I thought I saw a scary thing,” he admitted in a low voice. For reasons unknown, he didn’t want anyone to overhear him while talking about that strange thing he believed he had seen.

“What scary thing? Have you told your parents?”

“No. They’re very busy. And they would say that it isn’t real.” Maybe no grown-up would believe him, and he had said too much.

However, Torgar’s hand on his shoulder was assuring and warm. “You can say it to me. I promise I will think about it.”

Toru twiddled his thumbs. “This man that came from the mountains,” he began.

“Yes. What about him?”

“Do you know him?”

“I know his name. Your father told me that he’s still here, ready to guide you and the others on the path toward the mountains.” Torgar waited for him to speak again. “What is bothering you about this man, Toru?”

“I saw him at the stables, the night he arrived.” Toru knew that he would have to choose his words carefully if he wanted Torgar to believe him or at least explain why he had seen that. “He didn’t know I was hiding there,” he added, letting his voice drop to a whisper. “And he turned... and he had no face.”

“No face?” Torgar asked.

“There was no flesh.” Toru caught his own cheeks into his palms. “Nothing but clean bone underneath. Like he was dead. And for a long time.” He had learned something about how worms devoured the flesh once someone died from one of his tutors. He had been scared of that, too, but tigers weren’t cowards. That was why he didn’t tell his parents anything about the things that scared him and came to him in his dreams to scare him even more. He was strong and growing stronger.

“Did you notice anything else about him?” Torgar asked.

“Do you believe me?” Toru turned to look at the man to search for signs that it was true that Torgar did believe him.

“You are a very gifted tiger, Toru,” the old man said. “I would never disregard anything you say, no matter on what grounds.”

Toru nodded. “There was also a very bad smell coming from him. I saw a dead horse once. It smelled bad like that.”

Torgar seemed lost in thought. “Did he see you, hiding in the stables?”

“I don’t think so. And I must have thought I saw that he had no face. When father came to talk to him, he had a normal face, like everyone else. And the bad smell was gone. I just... imagined it, right?”

Torgar squeezed his shoulder. “It is possible. Maybe you ate a bit too much before going to the stables?”

Toru nodded. That could be it. Mother said that going to bed on a full stomach could give him bad dreams. Now that this old man also thought that he had imagined that, he was free to feel more at ease.

“I will walk you to the mountains, too,” Torgar said. “What do you say about the two of us traveling together? Would you like that? I can tell you so many stories from your father’s childhood.”

“I would like that,” Toru confirmed. That was another thing he hadn’t told anyone, that he was scared about traveling to the mountains without his parents. While he knew some of the maids and servants, as well as other nobles that would go with them, being without mother and father was too new to him. But now he had Torgar. Even if he was an old man, he seemed strong in other ways, and he hadn’t laughed about Toru imagining things such as men without faces.

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Duril hurried to the place where he had seen Varg falling. Around him, hell had broken loose. An unseen force was battering against the walls, sending stones everywhere. People were crying out in pain and fear, while some portions of the walls were coming down. Clutching the boy on his arm with everything he had, he tried to cut a path toward his fallen friend. He had been the one to tell them to stop and save everyone. He had been the one to keep them there, when they could have gone to stop the fires in The Dregs.

An overwhelming feeling of guilt engulfed his mind, as he jumped over fallen people and rubble. Where had his mind been? How could he ignore the most important thing to do, the most practical to stop that madness?

And now, the walls were coming down on them, with the force of a thousand thunders. Around them, something akin to a storm broke loose. Those people he had struggled to move to the walls were now falling from the top, crashing against the ground with terrible cries and the sound of bones breaking and bodies colliding with what lay below.

The boy held him by the neck with both his hands. He was a brave little man, not crying, not letting out a sound at the hell around them. But he kept his face buried in the crook of Duril’s neck, and it was better that he didn’t see anything of what was happening.

“Varg! Varg!” he called out, his eyes on his friend who lay there on the ground, motionless, as if the life had been knocked out of him.

Claw was there already, leaning over Varg’s prone body and lifting him to hike him up in his arms. Only then, Duril saw the gash on Varg’s temple, oozing blood.

“Let’s take him into one of these houses,” Claw shouted at him.

Even without looking, Claw knew he was there. The bearshifter's keen sense of smell helped him in many dire situations. Now was one of them. Duril's heart bled at the cries of despair around him, but he was, indeed, helpless, in face of that invisible force tearing the walls apart.

He arrived at Claw's side just in time. The bearshifter turned suddenly and shielded them all, and then he let out a pained grunt. "Go, go, go," he urged Duril. "No time to waste!"

They disappeared in one of the houses lining the main street in the nick of time. A wailing wind made the door jump off its hinges when Duril pulled it to let all of them in. Still, even without a door to shut out the world outside, they were sheltered. Not the same thing could be said about the thousands lying in the street, some of them still moving. For a moment, Duril took in the magnitude of the disaster, his heart threatening to pull itself out of his chest.

They could only do so much. They could only save... what kind of saviors were they? Not much of any kind, he thought bitterly. The boy on his arm squeezed him tightly.

"What on heaven and earth is happening?" Claw mumbled while he checked Varg's injury.

Duril shook his head. Maybe there was little he could do, but that didn't mean that he should give up on that little bit only because there wasn't more in his power. He gestured for Claw to take the child from him and murmured words of encouragement to the little one so that he could kneel by Varg's side and check his head wound. Right away, he tore the hem of his shirt to create a bandage of sorts. He didn't even have water to clean the wound.

"Do you think Toru is all right?" he asked in a meek voice.

"He's protected by those magic urchins."

"We mind being called that."

At Moth's voice, Duril raised his head and saw him and Pie stepping inside the house.

"Toru is protected," Pie explained. "But we don't think there is much we can do about the rest."

"Is this the destruction described in your history books?" Claw asked, his voice a tightly wound string.

"There is nothing we can do to stop it," Moth explained. "We're here to protect you, as friends of our lord and master."

"And the rest must die," Claw said in an icy voice.

"Must, no," Pie said and shook his head. "It is just destiny."

"Can Toru stop this?" Duril asked. He took Varg's hand in his. It was so cold.

“No tiger before him did anything like that,” Moth replied. “The truth is, we don’t know.”

Duril pursed his lips and turned his full attention back to his injured companion. Claw rested a hand on his shoulder. “Then, maybe, the history needs to be rewritten, as we’ve already said.”

“Toru rests after the fight with Hekastfet. Our brethren are doing our best for him to come back to his senses. And he will,” Moth said.

“What if it’s too late?” Duril asked. “What if he wakes up... to all this destruction?”

*What if we’re not here anymore? What if we leave him all alone?*

“He’s a tiger. He carries worlds within himself,” Pie said.

“What does that mean?” Duril asked.

“The power to destroy and create,” Pie added. It felt as if he was reciting words he didn’t know the meaning of himself.

“Entire worlds?” Duril asked.

He didn’t get to learn the answer. The roof over their heads suddenly blew away as if grabbed and thrown away by an invisible hand.

And a rain of stones descended upon their heads.

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“Are you asleep, my child?”

Toru blinked at the sound of mother’s voice. He looked at her, and he received a warm smile. She wasn’t mad that he wasn’t yet sleeping at that hour. Raine took him into her arms and cooed into his ear words that made little sense. However, her breath was ticklish and he found himself laughing. There were so many games they played together.

“Your father and I will be away for a while. You will go see your father’s family in the mountains.”

He hid his face against her shoulder. “But it’s cold up there. Why can’t I come with you where you’re going?”

“It is not a place for a child,” his mother said gently.

“Because of the war?”

“What do you know of wars?”

“People were talking,” he lied.

“There is no war.” Why was she lying to him? “But it is dangerous.”

“I’m strong,” Toru argued. “I can bite really hard.”

“I know. Your father showed me the marks you left on his hand the other day.”

“I was just playing,” Toru said defensively. “I didn’t know it would hurt him.”

“Don’t worry. Your father heals fast. Toru, listen to me carefully. You will be in good hands with your father’s people.”

“Why do I need to be in good hands? Why can’t I just wait for you here to return?” He didn’t want to sound like a spoiled child, but he didn’t want to let go of his mother, either.

“It will be a very interesting trip. You will have a lot of fun with the other children. You will see.”

All those things didn’t answer any of his many questions. Mother was hiding something, and he could tell. “When will you come back?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“But you will come back,” Toru insisted.

“Yes.” Her answer came a moment too late to sound sincere.

Toru wanted to cry, but he wasn’t a baby anymore. “I like Torgar,” he said instead. “I want to travel with him.”

“Torgar cannot see,” his mother said. “And he’s old, so he needs to rest so that he can undertake such a long trip.”

“He’s from the mountains. He’s very strong, even if he’s blind,” Toru argued. “He can sleep all he wants in the carriage I saw some people preparing for me.” He knew that as his father’s and mother’s son, he would have a good carriage.

“Won’t you have more fun with children your age? Spending time with an old man can be quite boring.”

“He promised me that he would tell me many stories from father’s childhood,” Toru explained. His mother wanted what was best for him, but he knew he wouldn’t be bored if he traveled with Torgar, and not only because the old man would tell him stories about his father from the times when he had been a child. Torgar hadn’t dismissed him when he had told him about seeing that messenger’s face, or better said, the lack of it. Even if it was only his imagination, Torgar hadn’t thought for a moment to scold him or make him feel embarrassed because of it.

“If that is what you wish, I will not tell you no. But make sure that you ask him first. Torgar might not be too happy to travel with a child as rambunctious as you are.”

“I can be very good. I could read until we get there.” He knew some letters, and most of his studying was conducted by his tutors in speech form. He was a fast learner, they said, catching most of what he was hearing.

“Then you might become a scholar,” his mother said with a smile.

“I’m going to be a warrior, like father,” he replied, raising one fist in the air.

“I’m sure you will be,” his mother said and kissed his cheek.

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He wiped his tears quickly when he heard someone climbing into the carriage. As much as he had wanted to show mother and father that he was strong and not a crybaby, he hadn’t been able to help it when they had said goodbye. Other children had cried, as well, and he wasn’t alone, but he was still mad at himself for not being able to keep the tears at bay.

“Am I alone in here?” Torgar asked in a playful voice.

“No, I am here.” Toru hopped from the big pillows that formed a comfortable sitting area and hurried to help the old man find his way.

Torgar took his hand and let himself be guided. “Do you know what I did just before leaving?”

“No, how could I know?” Toru asked, excited to learn more.

“I stole some candy.” Torgar put his other hand in his pocket and offered Toru a handful of brightly colored candy.

At first, Toru grabbed as many as he could in one fist, but then he realized that he was greedy, so he only picked three. Maybe Torgar didn’t mind if he got stuck with the green ones. Toru didn’t like them that much.

“Ah, we’re moving already,” Torgar said as he sat on the pillows. “Come here, Toru, and put your head in my lap. I’m going to tell you a story.”

He listened to the story intently, but the swinging of the carriage and the gentle rhythm of Torgar’s words soon lulled him to sleep.

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Toru woke up late, or so it seemed. It was night outside, as he saw right away when he looked out the window of the carriage. He was alone, and they had stopped, probably to save the horses' breath for the long road. Still, he had slept so much that he wasn't sleepy anymore.

So, he snuck out, making sure to be as silent as a mouse. Torgar was probably somewhere around, and if he was, Toru planned on giving the old man a little fright, only to see how he would react. Most probably, he wouldn't get mad. Torgar looked like the kind of man who wouldn't get frightened easily.

The sound of words caught in his ear, carried by the wind. He shifted into his tiger and perked his ears to understand where the noise was coming from. Everyone else seemed to be sleeping, so he was curious about the only other people who didn't care for sleep at that hour. The moon was as big as a pie and cast a gentle light over their little camp.

He made sure not to make a sound while he followed the cues offered to him by the wind. He had to walk some distance from the camp, which made him wonder if there were really people from the camp talking, or some strangers. Either way, he needed to listen in and decide for himself if it was of any interest to them, whatever they were saying.

His steps took him to a small clearing where a fire burned. He hid behind a bush and only peeked from there at the two people talking.

"How can you say that you don't remember me?" That was the messenger with no face. Only that now, he had a face, and he didn't smell bad, either.

"I know everyone in Niverborg," Torgar replied. The old man was the only other person there. "And I don't remember you."

"You're an old man, and you've been away too long," the messenger argued. He sounded like he was trying to hide something. It made Toru wonder what that could be.

"You certainly made sure that I would not be able to ask Aneros' of your whereabouts."

"Aneros? Do you address your lord by his first name? I didn't know you were so high up the ranks, old man," the messenger hissed.

Toru scrunched up his nose. Even if the messenger didn't appear to be a part of a nightmare, he wasn't a nice person. He was looking down on Torgar and didn't speak to him politely.

"When I arrived at Nelsikkar, it was not a problem for me to meet him," Torgar replied, ignoring the other's tone. "But as soon as I tried to get in a word with him, all of a sudden he was always busy, and it was you to bar the way every time."

"Me? You're an old blind fool," the messenger hissed again.



“You wanted to meet me here tonight, to tell me something. What is it that you want to tell me?” Torgar said. He moved his head in the direction where Toru was hiding. He almost made Toru think that he could see him.

“You’re an old man. In a few days’ time, we’ll get close to the pass of Winterhelm. It would be better if the lord’s son traveled with more able-bodied adults, not you. The pass is treacherous. A lot of things can happen.”

“You’re asking how I can tell that I don’t know you from Niverborg,” Torgar said, suddenly changing the subject. “You don’t smell like someone from the Itrusk tribe.”

“Your eyes are gone, so you think your nose got better?” the messenger hissed again. “By the way you insisted on trying to get close to the lord during these last days, I’d say your behavior is that of a spy.”

Torgar didn’t appear surprised by the accusation. “I believe you are the spy. Somebody saw your true face.”

“Who? Was it someone as blind as you?”

“No. Someone with good eyes, the kind that can see inside one’s soul.”

“And? What is my true face supposed to look like?”

“You no longer have one.” Torgar’s words cut through the air like a sharp blade.

Toru started upon hearing that. But Torgar had said that it wasn’t true!

“Your parlor tricks might amuse a bored lady or two, spellweaver. But they have no place here,” the messenger said. “Be careful, old man. I don’t intend to jeopardize my mission for the sake of someone like you.”

Suddenly, the messenger pulled a long blade from underneath his cape and moved so fast that Toru didn’t have time even to scream. The blade was buried inside Torgar’s chest.

“Run, child, run,” Torgar yelled, his hands on the blade, struggling to pull it out of his chest. He mumbled something under his breath, and the blade came out.

Toru was ready to pounce, but the blade cut through the air again and this time made the messenger’s head fly from his shoulders and land somewhere in the dark behind him.

He hurried to Torgar’s side. The old man was holding his chest. “Toru, I told you to run.” His voice was growing weak.

“Where?” he asked as his tears fell freely. “I don’t want to run. I must bring someone! You’re hurt!”

“He’s coming back. I only closed his evil eyes for a moment. You were right, Toru, about the messenger. I tried to warn your father... I have no more time left. You’re destined to great things, beloved child. You make your destiny. Remember this. But run now and forget. Forget until the moment comes to remember.”

The old man made a gesture through the air and touched his forehead.

Toru cried. “I don’t want to leave you,” he keened.

“Quick, now, Toru. Don’t let it be in vain. Run into the night. The morning will always be there for you, on the other side.”

The sound of cracking bones alerted him that the messenger Torgar should have killed earlier was coming back to life.

“You’ll be strong enough one day,” Torgar said and caressed his head. “Live to become that, for all of us.”

Cavernous laughter made Toru’s hair stand on end. Torgar whispered some stranger words again and rose from the ground in an unnatural manner. He put himself between that spawn of evil and Toru.

“Now, run, child, run,” Torgar said.

And Toru did. When he looked back, he saw Torgar’s body splitting into a million pieces, flying everywhere.

He ran as fast as he could.

## Chapter Thirty-Two – And Darkness Came Again

The scent of ashes was the first thing his addled mind recognized, as he was slowly coming back to his senses. His head was pounding, and there was a buzzing in his ears that he didn't recognize as anything he had heard before. Something about it all felt unnatural, like he was in a strange place where he knew no one and nothing.

Varg tried to push himself up, but there was something heavy on his chest, and he couldn't move at first. He couldn't even open his eyes, as his eyelids seemed kept shut by some invisible matter. With a groan that sounded foreign to his own ears, he managed to free one arm and brought his hand to his face. He sputtered as he tried to open his mouth to speak, as some of the same stuff that kept his eyes shut was weighing on his lips, as well.

Using sheer power of will, he straightened up, releasing himself. Using both hands, he pushed away the debris from his eyes, but when he finally opened them, he wished he hadn't.

Ashes were flowing gently all around him, but they were the only things still moving. Shapes lay on the ground, along with rubble, all covered in whitish soot, like dirty snow.

"No," Varg croaked when the realization of what he was seeing finally caught up with his mind.

The shapes lying around him were people. Still were, he hoped, as he thrashed to free his body completely from the wreckage. First, he leaned over the one closest to him. He brushed away the debris until he found a face underneath. "Duril," he called out, his heart in his throat.

There was no answer, and the gentleness that relaxed his friend's features scared him. Varg continued to brush the soot away with frantic movements. Duril was still holding that small boy in his arm, but the child was as motionless as his protector.

A sound between a growl and a cry emerged from his throat. Like a famished animal bent on finding the smallest trace of food, he began to search through the rubble for the slightest sign of life.

Claw's large unmoving shape was easy to find, but just like Duril, he no longer seemed to be among the living. Varg let out all the anguish and anger threatening to engulf his mind like a fire until his throat couldn't take it anymore. How could it be that he was the only one to remain alive? Was it his curse? What gods had he angered to deserve this?

Suddenly, a movement to his right stopped his torrent of wallowing and wailing.

"Master wolf," a voice called to him. "You're alive!"

Relief flooded him, but only for a moment. "They're dead, they're all dead," he accused, while a veil of crimson red descended over his eyes.

Moth and Pie hurried to his side and helped him to his feet, which would have been laughable in any other time and under any other sky. He tried to push them away, but his body was weakened beyond any trace of recognition and he swayed on his feet. The two valiant Sakka hurried to hold him steady.

“What happened?” he asked. “Why are they like this? Is everyone--” he choked.

“I’m afraid so,” Moth said quietly. “But you are alive. It is a miracle!”

Varg trembled from the effort of trying to keep himself up on two feet in the face of the feeling of helplessness washing over him at the sight of the destruction surrounding them. “A miracle? To be alive when everyone else is dead?”

“Master wolf,” Moth said soothingly, “life is a miracle. We have yet to hear from our brethren. Toru must still be asleep. Don’t you want to come with us and see him?”

“Face him?” Varg staggered as his vision blurred. “And tell him that... Duril and Claw are no more?”

“Would you have him remain without any of you?” Pie asked. “If he’s still asleep... he might need someone close to help him come back among the living.”

“The living,” Varg spat. Bitter tears fell from his eyes, washing away some of the soot on his cheeks. “Nobody’s alive. Not anymore. And you knew it. You knew it was going to happen and you didn’t stop it.” It didn’t matter that the Sakka didn’t know how to stop that kind of destruction, not to him, not at that very moment.

“Master wolf,” Moth called him again while holding his elbow. “Your pain is great. We know it. We’ve lived it time and again, with each fall of Scercendusa. Don’t you think we care for this city?”

“If you do, why have you never done anything to change its destiny?”

That appeared to make both Sakka stop and ponder. “It isn’t in our power to challenge destiny,” Pie said quietly, most probably in unspoken accord with his brother.

“Let me be,” Varg growled. “I cannot face Toru and tell him the people he loves are dead.”

He shook off the Sakka’s touch and began walking. Where to, he didn’t know, but he couldn’t bear to sit there and wallow in misery.

“Maybe Toru can help,” Moth suggested.

He turned on his heel, but too fast, and he staggered again. “How can he help?”

“We don’t know,” Pie admitted. “But he’s not like the other tigers before him. He’s... kinder.”

“Take me to him then.” As much as it pained him even merely to think of how he would go to his close friend and have to tell him about the others... A thought crossed his mind. “We cannot leave them here,” he said, pointing at the shapes on the ground.

“We’ll take them with us,” Pie promised.

Varg was about to ask how they were going to undertake such a feat, but Moth transformed into the butterfly he had seen before. His wings were covered in soot and they moved tiredly as they swung back and forth, but it had to be, indeed, their only way of carrying the bodies of his friends to the place where Toru was still resting.

He just nodded and proceeded to take each of them and load them on Moth’s back, starting with Claw, who was the heaviest. He groaned under the weight, but pushed himself to the limit to finish the task. Was this how humans usually felt? He had counted on his wolf powers all his life, and he couldn’t imagine how it would be without them. Maybe his powers had been taken away from him, and that was also part of his punishment.

Duril had to be taken along with the boy, and Varg thought that the healer wouldn’t have had it any other way. He knelt and wept once his task was over, not from pain or exertion, but because his chest felt so hollow that he could only fill it up with tears. Pie touched his shoulder. “Not all is lost, master wolf,” he said gently. “We must accept that we don’t know everything. Toru gave us hope.”

To him, Pie’s words made little sense, but hope was something he could understand. Yes, hope was the only thing that mattered.

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Toru was running through the woods. It was so dark, but his eyes were good, they led him where he needed to be. He didn’t know where that place was, but it could only be ahead. Somewhere, morning waited for him, and that single thought kept his hopes up while he ran.

He stopped at the edge of a precipice just in time. He looked down, only to see that below lay an abyss without end. His paws pushed against the crumbling dust and he walked backward, away from it.

It was still night. It was still hopeless. Toru couldn’t remember anything, not before this night or ever, and the thought frightened him. But he knew that morning had to come.

“Toru,” someone called for him.

He knew the voice, but he didn’t know where from. But it was familiar, and all that he needed right now was that friendly voice to guide him out of the darkness. The voice belonged to a man, but Toru couldn’t put a face to it, nor a name.

“I couldn’t save them. I am so sorry,” the voice continued.

“Where are you?” Toru cried out. “I can’t see you!”

Something touched his shoulder and he started. His entire body shook, and he closed his eyes in fear.

When he opened them, he was staring at Varg. Varg, who was a shapeshifter Toru knew. “Why are you crying?” he asked when he saw the distress on his friend’s face.

Varg didn’t say a word and closed his eyes. He looked ashamed, and Toru couldn’t imagine a reason in the entire world why the wolfshifter would ever feel like that or even cry for that matter.

“Where is everybody?” he asked. The words died on his lips. Could it be that Varg was crying... But no, because it just couldn’t be. “Duril,” he whispered. “Claw.”

Varg shook his head without opening his eyes. Toru frowned and tried to get up, but then, like a hook grabbing him from behind, something held him and dragged him down, through the bed on which he was lying.

And darkness came again.

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“What’s happening?” Varg asked. He grabbed Toru by the shoulders and shook him. For a moment, he had been there, with them, and the next, he had fallen back on the pillows as if an unnatural, unseen hand had cut a string, and he seemed gone.

He turned toward the Sakka, who stood all around the bed on which Toru lay, now without showing any sign of being awake. Their stunned silence was enough to make him understand what they weren’t capable of saying. “What is happening?” he bellowed.

“We don’t know,” Beanstalk whispered, speaking for everyone else.

Varg grabbed Toru again and shook him. “How can you people let this happen?” he growled. “Isn’t he here under your protection?”

The Sakka began whispering among themselves. They were shaking their heads, frowning, letting out small cries of distress. Varg wanted to hate them for being so useless, but how was he any better?

Toru was their hope, and the determination in his mind began taking the shape of his heart. “Bring me your books, everything you have. There must be something in them to bring Toru back.”

“Are you a scholar, master wolf?” Beanstalk inquired.

“I don’t need to be one to find what we should all be looking for.”

“What is that?”

“A way to life,” Varg replied, his eyes never leaving Toru’s sleeping face.

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Toru shifted by instinct. All his paws landed on a cold floor, and he blinked in the new darkness, trying to get his bearings.

“Did you truly think that you could defeat me so easily, tiger?” a voice hissed from the dark.

Toru turned brusquely, hoping to catch a glimpse of his opponent. Shadows rose all around him, closing in like a noose. He growled menacingly. “This time, I will make sure you stay dead,” Toru said.

“And how are you going to do that if you cannot see me?” the voice taunted him again.

“You’re hiding your face because you’re too ugly,” Toru said in return.

“They were right, your parents, you know.”

Toru’s ears twitched at the mention of his family. “About what?” he asked, the curiosity he felt getting the better of him.

“About your being but a child. Without their guidance, you didn’t amount to much, did you?” Hekastfet let out a cavernous laugh that seemed to come from all the shadows surrounding Toru. “You’re still just as wet behind your ears as if you were only a little child.”

Toru didn’t say anything. This creature, whatever Hekastfet was, thought he could rile him up just like that. It was impossible. He remembered everything now about his parents, and while they might not have been by his side for too long, they had taught him the most important thing of all. He wouldn’t give Hekastfet the satisfaction of knowing that. Being silent now was the mature thing to do.

“So, now you are here, in my clutches,” Hekastfet continued, seeing how his ruse didn’t lead to anything.

“Where is here?” Toru asked.

“Do you really have to ask?”

The dark room disappeared, and Toru realized that they were now in a forest, one almost just as dark. But the smells of fresh earth and uprooted plants warned him of the change.

“Do you remember now? It was the night you ran away from me, like a scared child.”

Toru did remember, bits and pieces at first, but then, more and more. He had been so frightened after seeing Torgar getting turned into nothing by the whim of no one else but this creature trying to scare him now, too.

But Hekastfet was wrong. He was no longer that scared child that had run through the forest, without knowing where he was going or even what or whom he was running from.

“Face me,” he growled. “Stop hiding behind phantasms and make-believe.”

“Why should I face you when I can pluck at your mind slowly and enjoy your suffering?”

Toru lay on the ground, under a tree, feigned a yawn and rested his muzzle on his front paws. “At least keep silent while I take a nap.”

He felt the swish of air around him, but he didn’t bother opening his eyes. If Hekastfet’s plan was to scare him, it was for the best not to give that evil being any satisfaction, not even the slightest. Sometimes, during his childhood, it had often been his way of chasing away the bad dreams and the darkness. All he had to do was to close his eyes and keep them like that while thinking of beautiful things, and the nightmares would go away.

This time around, just the same, all he needed was to conjure thoughts of those he loved. Duril, Varg, Claw. And his parents, even though they had been turned into ghosts.

“No one you know is alive anymore,” Hekastfet hissed while circling him, his voice a suite of echoes that poked at Toru’s hearing like a swarm of angry bees.

“You’re lying,” Toru said matter-of-factly. He wasn’t going to let himself be influenced by this ghost or made a fool of.

“The city is destroyed. Your mother and father are long gone since I have no more use for them. And your friends are buried under the rubble. They gave their last breath believing that they were helping you. Where were you while they did that?”

Toru searched his mind for any signs that what he was hearing was real. He knew Hekastfet was lying, but still, there was a nagging feeling that he was missing an important fact.

“Duril. Varg. Claw. All dead,” Hekastfet recited in a sing-song voice. “Do you remember their names? Or you just don’t care about those you pretend to save, like all the tigers before you?”

“Don’t say their names,” Toru hissed at him. “You don’t have the right.”

Hekastfet laughed haughtily. “The right? You are mistaken, tiger. I have every right to do as I please because I have power. Complete. Absolute.”

“You’re nothing but evil. No wonder no one likes you. It’s because you’re so bad and mean,” Toru replied.



“Why would I need anyone to like me? When I have everything?”

Toru pondered over what to say next. He thought about his friends. What would they tell him to do right now? “Do you really have everything?” he asked, just realizing that there were ways to outwit Hekastfet, who believed himself so clever. “It looks to me like you don’t even have a body. So, you must have very little.”

“Open your eyes and look at me if that’s what you think.”

Toru did so and stared into the face of the old domestikos. “That’s not your real body,” he retorted. “Just pretending to be human doesn’t make you human.”

“Very well.” The semblance of the domestikos faded into the mist of the forest. Then, a flood of dark matter, thick like tar, began pouring toward him.

Toru didn’t flinch as the strange river flew to where he was lying on the ground. But he did get up on all his paws and stared at the thing cautiously. “You’re a stain,” he said.

A shape emerged from the flow of tar, not human, but tall and menacing. “You’re truly trying my patience, Toru.”

“It’s not my fault that you don’t care about facing me and fighting me. You’re afraid to lose.”

“These childish tricks won’t work on me.”

Toru let himself flop back on the ground and yawned. If they didn’t work, how come Hekastfet was starting to sound so impatient? There was something there, a thread he needed to catch and pull at until the veil of deceit woven by this evil being became unraveled.

“Let’s talk about your friends. I suppose that you don’t care about your parents since they abandoned you as a child.”

That last statement caused a sting right to his heart, but Toru ignored it. He wouldn’t be a fool and fall prey to such a ploy. “I won’t talk to you about them, or anyone else. Unless you intend to fight me, let me sleep.” He even risked turning his head and lying with his back to Hekastfet, as if he couldn’t care less what that disgusting thing intended to do.

If Hekastfet could destroy him, he would have done it by now. Varg in his wisdom would tell him that. It was quite evident that it wasn’t in Hekastfet’s power to do so. No, the evil needed something from Toru to achieve its purpose, and Toru didn’t plan on giving it, no matter what it was.

“Don’t you care that they’re dead?”

“They’re not dead. You just want to make me believe that.”

“You don’t have to take my word for it. Look.”

Toru would have to blame his curiosity for turning and opening his eyes again. He frowned as he recognized the room presented in front of his eyes as if it lay behind a glass. It was the room in which he had wakened up what felt like moments ago. With that image, a rush of memories crossed his mind. Varg shaking him, telling him something about...

No, it couldn't be true. "Varg is right there," he pointed at the wolfshifter who had just entered the room with his arms full of tomes. "You said he was dead. Are you showing me proof that you're lying?"

"He won't be alive for long. You see, Toru, even if you win against me, what kind of world will you sacrifice yourself for? One that doesn't care about you and has never cared? Must I really remind you how your life was before?"

"Before what?" Toru hoped Hekastfet was well aware of the warning in his voice.

"Before you were given this so-called purpose of taking me down. You know very well that if you ever leave this place, you won't have a home to return to. No friends. Nothing."

Toru was about to comment about the misplaced arrogance Hekastfet was displaying, when he noticed some of the Sakka fretting about some people lying on a bed flush against one of the walls. He looked closely, and only then realized that he was looking at the unmoving bodies of Duril and Claw, and that of a small child who rested on top of the healer's chest. The Sakka were touching them and talking among themselves, but the grim looks on their faces made his assurance falter.

"What did you do to them?" he growled.

"It makes you angry, doesn't it?" Hekastfet said with delight. "A fire burns inside you, Toru. Why don't you let it out? Why don't you live up to it?"

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Varg was turning the pages quickly, his eyes red and stinging from the ashes and debris, but with no luxury of time to waste on rest. Pie was by his side and handed him a clean handkerchief so he could wipe his face. When he met Pie's gesture with a blank stare, the Sakka simply took it upon himself to do it for him, and Varg didn't push him away.

What he needed to find out had to be among those pages. Without knowing exactly where his determination and assurance of that truth came from, Varg pushed on, going through the tome in front of him until finally, something caught his eye.

"What does it say here?" he asked. It was one of those true legends of tigers who had been in charge of saving the world a long time before Toru. "About madness?"

Pie frowned and turned toward Beanstalk who was standing with his arms full of tomes only a couple of feet away.

“Some said something about seemingly experiencing a loss of self during those fights with Hekastfet,” Beanstalk explained. “We don’t know what it meant. Sometimes, the tigers came from battle, after the city was razed to the ground, and asked us about their loved ones.”

“What did they ask?”

“They seemed convinced that everyone they cared about was dead. As if the entire Olliandran tribe was gone.”

Varg frowned and gestured impatiently for another tome. Was there a pattern he should care about? While helping the mayor of Whitekeep, he had been called to offer his counsel on complicated matters when the truth didn’t appear as set in stone as it should have been to allow those in charge to make life and death decisions.

Now, he knew where to look, so the next tome he grabbed, he just opened to the end and looked over the pages. “You say that it happened sometimes, but it feels to me like too much of a coincidence to have tiger after tiger say the same thing.”

“I don’t see how you believe that they said the same thing.” Beanstalk hovered behind him, eventually climbing on Pie’s back so that he could lean over the pages and see what Varg was talking about.

Varg turned. “Why did the tigers destroy Scercendusa every time? And why in such... bloody fashion?” he asked after a short moment of hesitation.

“We believe it was because it was necessary to destroy Hekastfet for good,” Beanstalk explained.

“That is not what happened. They didn’t destroy him for good. He just came back over and over again.”

Beanstalk remained silent. “I cannot truly argue with you, master wolf,” he admitted. “But it was necessary to destroy Scercendusa so that it can be reborn anew.”

Varg shook his head, more and more convinced that the Sakka had gotten it all wrong. “Did you have to take care of the tigers like you do now with Toru, every time?”

“Yes,” Beanstalk replied.

“And when did the destruction of the city begin? Before or after their slumber?”

“After,” Beanstalk again confirmed Varg’s nagging suspicion.

“They all talked about their loss of self as they called it after the city was nothing but dust, isn’t that true?” Varg continued his inquiry.

“Yes.”

“Did they recall why they destroyed the city?”

“They always said the same thing. That they had to make sure that no trace of the evil was left in the world.”

Varg leaned back into the chair and pondered, while bumping a fist slightly against his chin. “I believe that something else happened.” He got to his feet brusquely and headed over to where Toru was lying, without any other sign of being alive than the barely there but steady rise and fall of his chest. “I need to get to him somehow.”

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Toru fell prey to agitation, as it became more and more obvious that Duril and Claw weren't moving at all, just like that small child. Despite his determination not to believe a lying word coming from Hekastfet, he couldn't remain undisturbed as he witnessed what was happening in that other world, locked away from him by means that escaped his understanding.

“Do you see what I mean, Toru? You will have nothing to return to, even if you defeat me.”

“None of this is real,” he growled.

“You woke up for a moment, do you remember? And the wolf, your friend, told you how he killed the others.”

Toru's growl turned into a booming roar. He lunged at the shape Hekastfet had assumed, but the dark matter parted before him, and his claws and fangs met nothing but air.

“Not that you can defeat me. Without your parents' guidance, you grew up to be nothing but a useless tiger,” Hekastfet taunted him mercilessly.

“Fight me!” Toru roared louder. “Fight me, and I will destroy you for good!”

“You're powerless.” Hekastfet laughed, leaving him enraged at himself.

As he dashed through the air, trying to cut down his enemy, Toru knew that his anger was getting the better of him, and that it had to be another way, but he just couldn't stop. He wanted nothing else but for Hekastfet to present him with an available neck to sink his fangs in and bite until there was no more life left, no matter of what kind.

“Just look at them,” Hekastfet continued his cruel taunting. “Lying there, void of life. They're nothing but corpses, and they are so because the wolf killed them.”

“Varg would never do such a thing,” Toru growled. “He would never hurt them. He would never hurt me.”

“It is in my power to play with anyone’s mind. It is true that he resisted more than expected,” Hekastfet said. “But once he was in my clutches, he saw the others as his enemies.”

“Varg would never fall for your trickery!” Toru stopped to catch his breath. It didn’t matter if it took him an eternity. He was here to fight, and fight he would.

“Even tigers’ minds are easy to play with,” Hekastfet cooed in false assurance. “Your tribe is weak, Toru.”

“They’re not! They’re the strongest in the world!”

“They guided you directly to me. Don’t you recall? Your own mother.”

“No, mother loves me!” Toru bellowed.

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Varg watched as Toru thrashed in his sleep now. He took him by the shoulders and pulled him close and held him tightly against his chest. “Toru,” he called out gently, “please, wake up. None of what you might imagine now is true. You don’t have to destroy the city. You don’t have to kill anyone.”

“I found something,” Pie announced and hurried to his side with a tome in his arms. “The tigers... some thought they dreamed all that destruction that followed. But here, look.”

Varg held Toru close, reluctant to let go of him and read where Pie was pointing, a paragraph about how one of the tigers’ close ones had entered the dream of destruction and saw it happening before it actually did.

He took Toru’s palm and used his small knife to make a small cut and then he brought it to his lips and drank from it.

For a moment, he thought he was losing his bearings completely, but that wasn’t it. No, he was falling, down and down, without means of seeing where and how.

Then, his feet met solid ground, and he had to struggle to maintain his balance himself so that he didn’t fall flat on his nose. Around him, a dark forest rose. In the middle of it, Toru was fighting an invisible enemy.

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“Toru! Toru!”

Someone was calling for him, so Toru stopped his futile fight.

“What is he doing here?” Hekastfet bellowed.

Toru felt his heart leaping in his chest with happiness at the sight of his friend. “Varg!” He ran to him, eager to hear him more and touch him.

Varg caught him in his arms. “Toru, I’m here to take you home.”

Toru turned toward the image of that room that was still there. Varg was no longer in it, because he was here. But Duril and Claw and that child looked just as motionless as before. He blinked a few times. Shouldn’t the veil of deceit tear by now?

“Are they…” he began asking.

Varg’s eyes filled with pain. Toru’s confidence wavered. This wasn’t Hekastfet lying to him. It was his close friend and lover, the one he would entrust his whole life to, and Varg didn’t lie. He never lied.

“That can’t be.” He began walking backward, shaking his head. No, it had to be just another phantasm concocted by Hekastfet and nothing else. “You’re not real,” he threw at Varg, who tried to follow him. “Stay away from me. It is all a lie.”

“It’s not a lie,” Varg insisted.

“It really isn’t,” Hekastfet confirmed, only making Toru’s belief in how it was all just a trick to fool him stronger.

“Who is talking?” Varg asked.

“That would be your immortal enemy, wolf,” Hekastfet said. “Your lot thought to better me, but here I am, stronger than ever.”

“I’m here,” Varg said simply. “I shouldn’t be, right? It is a miracle.”

“A miracle?” Hekastfet sputtered. “It matters not. Toru believes you’re just an image I conjured… and he’s right.”

Toru swung his head to and fro. He didn’t know what to believe anymore. He wanted to think Varg was there. He looked like Varg and smelled like Varg, but that didn’t mean that he truly was his friend. But if Hekastfet wasn’t lying about him, what else did he tell the truth about?

His eyes were pulled incessantly to that image with his friends lying unmoving on those linen sheets that only made them look paler. And the agitation all the Sakka seemed to be prey to wasn’t helping him decide what was true and what wasn’t, either.

*Believe that morning always comes, Toru.*

Those words from long ago resurfaced in his mind like a dry log in front of a drowning man.



## Chapter Thirty-Three – Your Heart Is Whole

He focused on that single thing, the gentle voice in his mind belonging to the old man who had seen through the enemy's deceit that one time, even without eyes to see. There had to be something real even in that nightmare, and he only had to find it. If Torgar's voice was there, inside his mind, it meant that there were forces at play acting in his favor, even if Hekastfet had conjured that dark forest from memories they shared.

That time, Hekastfet hadn't been able to defeat him, even as a little boy with no knowledge of wars and real evil. And now that stain of tar believed that he would be able to do so now, when he was big and strong?

"You have no power," Toru said out loud. "You use tricks such as summoning a ghost of my friend, so that I would believe you."

"Yes, yes, it is a ghost, and not your friend," Hekastfet hurried to confirm. "You are all alone, Toru, and not one single soul in the world cares about you. Why should you fight for them?"

Toru frowned as he started to think hard. If Hekastfet didn't deny that Varg was a ghost he fabricated, didn't it mean the opposite was true? But if he admitted that, wasn't he putting Varg in danger?

He decided to keep silent and continue to focus on the memory from that time long ago. If Torgar's voice was there, it had to be for a reason, something seeking to create a thread between him and a world that mattered.

"Who are you fighting for, Toru?" Hekastfet continued to taunt him. "For people who don't want you among them? For them, you are nothing but a beast. Remember the place where you grew up after I killed both your parents and destroyed their tribes."

"Stop telling him your lies. Do not believe what he says, Toru," Varg called from his place.

"Keep your mouth shut, or I'll shut it for you, and it will be forever," Hekastfet barked at the wolfshifter.

Hurt could be different, Toru knew. There was pain when he hurt a paw or when he had to endure hunger, but there was another kind, the kind that threatened to engulf him whole, without letting him breathe.

*Torgar, he called out in his mind, please help me.*

No one would ever know how he cried for help, no one but Torgar, and he was long dead. Toru fought the dark spirit moving like an eel inside his mind. Even if Torgar couldn't be present, it didn't mean that he couldn't help him. After all that had happened since he had entered Whitekeep, believing something like that was possible.



*Young tiger.*

The voice in his mind was gentle and quiet. Toru kept his eyes closed only so that he didn't end up losing it.

*Young tiger.*

It was another voice, but Toru recognized it. *Is that you, Demophios, the wise snake?*

*You're calling me wise now.* The voice even laughed.

Another, more sonorous and ancient, joined them. *Young tiger.*

It sounded like a means to address him and focus his mind.

*I am Amaranth, if you remember me.*

*I do,* Toru confirmed.

*Just listen to us. Do not let Hekastfet get to you in any way. We can protect you since you opened your heart to us.* That was Demophios, advising him as he had used to.

"I can see that you intend to ignore me," Hekastfet hissed. "I will destroy your friend right here, in front of you. I have no qualms in sending him to the pits of hell."

"Are you forgetting that he's just one of your ugly creations?" Toru decided to tell that evil being a thing or two.

*Toru, pay him no mind,* Demophios advised sternly.

*He's just very annoying,* Toru pointed out. *He's just trying to fool me, with one of his many ghosts. But I know better. That phantasm is not Varg. Is it?*

The silence that followed his question didn't bode well. Toru felt his confidence wavering. *Is it Varg? Is it truly him? Demophios?*

*We cannot lie to you.* That was Torgar speaking.

*Unfortunately,* Demophios added.

*The young tiger's heart is whole,* Amaranth intervened. *And we don't fear the truth. Yes, Toru, that is your friend. He came for you through the blasted veil of darkness Hekastfet threw over your eyes.*

Toru didn't listen further. His eyes snapped open and he hurried toward Varg. He shifted into his human and hugged him tightly. "I know it's you," he said, his eyes and heart filled with happiness.

“Finally,” Hekastfet shouted, “I have you where I wanted!”

Toru didn't have time to do anything, as the tar Hekastfet was made of lunged at Varg and covered him head to toes, pulling him away. “No, Varg,” he cried out, but the shape of his friend was overcome quickly and turned into a pile of bones at his feet.

“Do you see my power now?”

Toru growled and attacked blindly, even though he was no longer in his tiger form.

“You are a weakling. The human in you is underfed and weak,” Hekastfet taunted him. “You've never liked your human, have you, Toru? Then become who you were always meant to be. A savage beast.”

The insult rippled through him like a pebble thrown into a lake. “Savage beast?” he roared. “I'll show you how much of a savage beast I can be. Show your face, and I'll destroy you.”

“Very well,” Hekastfet said with satisfaction. “What do you say about this face?”

Toru stopped with his fists raised just as a vision of his mother materialized in front of him.

“Toru, my child, come to my bosom,” she said in a sugary voice.

Toru steeled himself and cut through the vision, making it disappear. “Mother was always tough, not one to cuddle me too much,” he said through his teeth.

Hekastfet moved its dark matter over the ground, away from Toru's path, and grew into Aneros' majestic shape next. “Are you going to go against your father, like a savage beast, Toru?”

“Stop playing this stupid game,” Toru bellowed. “I know you can take any face you want, but that will not convince me that you're any of them.”

“But you do miss them, Toru,” Hekastfet cooed in a false soothing voice. “You miss them, and you would do anything to have them by your side again. How about him?”

Toru stopped abruptly as Hekastfet turned into Duril, sweet sweet Duril, looking at him with loving eyes. “Get out of my face,” he growled, but his resolve was shaking now.

*Don't look at him,* Demophios advised sternly from the back of his mind.

*You know he isn't real,* Torgar added.

*You're wiser than this,* Amaranth came to his aid, as well.

But the pull to look into Duril's eyes, even if they didn't truly belong to him, was too great. He turned his head and stood there, mesmerized.

“I missed you, Toru,” Duril said softly. “Didn’t you miss me?”

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Varg fought against soft branches coiled around his body, pulling him down. It felt as if he were underground, but when fighting an evil like Hekastfet, who knew what was what? He needed to shed these restraints and pull himself up to the surface once more, so that he could be there for Toru and help him resist whatever temptations, of the sweetest or the most bitter kind, Hekastfet was trying to place in his path.

*Master wolf*, a voice called for him from the darkness.

*Who’s there?* His question lingered in his mind, just like the voice. He could swear he knew it somehow, but he couldn’t tell how or from where.

*Demophios*, the voice replied, this time more sternly. *Toru needs your help, now more than ever.*

*As you can see, I’m a bit tied up right now.*

*A good joke, given the circumstances. I will help you pull yourself up, but you must make an effort.*

The ancient snake had a sense of humor, as strange as that was. *I’m putting in quite the effort already, if I must say. How about a little less encouragement by mouth, and a little more magic to help me out of this predicament?*

The branches began to loosen their hold, and Varg felt his body becoming lighter. However, he instinctively knew that he had to be in control so he tensed his muscles, concentrating his entire attention on being in charge. *Thanks for the help.*

*That was Amaranth, not me.*

*You two are together? I suppose that there’s nothing for me to fear then.*

*If only.*

*You are ancient powerful beings*, Varg pointed out, a little bit uneasy by that denial coming from Demophios. He didn’t wonder how the wise snake had managed to come from the depths of the desert, and it wasn’t the right moment to ask.

*And you are the tough spirit that refused to bend to Hekastfet’s will.*

The third voice belonged to someone he didn’t recognize. *And you are?* He asked, determined to know all his allies well, given the importance of his quest.

*You don’t know me, and yet you do*, the third voice replied in an enigmatic fashion.

*While I appreciate all the help you intend to give me, I'd rather you keep your riddles to yourself for the time being. Later, I'd be more than happy to indulge you.*

*Master wolf, you are, indeed, wise. Very well. The name of my manifestation in the world is Torgar. What we need from you is the marvel that your mere presence here is.*

*What do you need me to do?* Varg replied with another question while he was getting hold of himself more and more. Whatever magic those three were wielding, without a doubt, it was quite powerful, and he only needed to give himself a push.

*Convince Toru that he mustn't believe what Hekastfet is showing him as being true. As we speak, he has fallen under a spell.* Demophios appeared to be the most talkative of the three ancient beings, but Varg was aware that it had to be Amaranth's strength behind pushing away the branches from his body, freeing him.

*A spell? Tell me more so that I can succeed.*

*He made the mistake of opening his eyes and taking in the phantasm well prepared for him by Hekastfet.* Demophios explained everything in an even tone, as if the fate of the world didn't hang in the balance. *Pull him away from that ghost, and he will become free. Then, he will defeat Hekastfet forever.*

*Without destroying Scercendusa,* Varg insisted. He had fought so hard to save a few, and his heart bled just as much at the thought of all those bodies, lifeless in the streets, awaiting no other fate than to rot under the sun that would surely rise.

*Yes.*

*Any other useful advice for me?* Varg asked.

*Use both your wisdom and your heart, master wolf,* Torgar said. *Remind Toru of the morning waiting for him on the other side. That is the most important thing, no matter what his heart might tell him right now, ensnared as it is in the web of lies and deceit created by Hekastfet.*

Varg didn't ask anything else. If Toru's fate rested upon his shoulders, then he would rise to the occasion and hold it, no matter how heavy, until the order of the world was restored.

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"Is this a dream?" Toru asked. He searched his lover's face for any signs of injuries. "He told me you died."

"Who told you that?" Duril asked and his smile filled a world and became its sun.

“I don’t remember,” Toru admitted, and he didn’t care who had. Whoever it had been, they had to be liars. Duril was alive and well, smiling at him with both his mouth and his eyes. And he was opening his arm, ready to welcome him after their time apart.

“Come to me. You’ve been away too long. We’ll live forever, happy and by ourselves.”

“What about the others?” Toru asked.

“Who are you talking about?” Duril’s face frowned in thought. “There is no one but us in the entire world. We’re together, Toru. And no one can pull us apart like they tried to do.”

“Who did?” Toru didn’t remember much, and his mind was like a restless bird, trying to get out of its cage.

“A mean wolf. And a mean bear.” Duril sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, as if he was tired.

“Some savage beasts?” Toru asked. He disliked savage beasts and he wasn’t one of them.

“Yes, you can call them that. Now, come into my embrace, and I’ll show you a world like you’ve never seen before.”

Toru took a step forward, the biggest part of him pulling him toward his beloved companion. But there was still one, a small patch of heart that pulled him back, for no reason. Duril’s eyes were filled with love, like usual, and they were calling for him, so why was he hesitating? He stretched out one hand to touch Duril.

“Watch out, Toru!” Someone shouted, and soon Toru found himself tumbling down to the ground.

Whoever had just pushed him away from Duril was heavy and hairy. Toru fought against his hold, decided that no one would ever stand between him and his sweet lover ever again.

“Toru, it’s me, stop fighting!”

Toru pushed against his attacker with so much force that he managed to send him flying through the air. This intruder needed to be put in his place and for good, just so that Toru could get back to Duril and the world he had promised him. To finish things fast, he needed to be in his tiger’s skin, so he shifted without a second thought.

His attacker looked like a human, so it should be easy to defeat him. Toru lunged toward him.

“Kitty,” the human growled, and then shifted under his very eyes.

Toru roared at the sight. “Mean wolf,” he growled and barred his fangs.

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Varg hadn't expected it to be easy, but to be called a mean wolf by Toru was a bit too much. That, and of course, how the young tiger attacked him, all naked claws and fangs, obviously bent on hurting him. He dashed out of the way, not wanting to be at the receiving end of those sharp things, and he was thankful for his wolf that, despite his age, could still dodge an attack like that.

"You're a mean wolf and you took Duril away from me," Toru growled.

"How did I do such a thing?" Varg asked, while he continued to evade Toru's vicious attacks.

"You tried to tear us apart," Toru bellowed at him.

He seemed incensed by things that were not clear, so Varg decided that it would serve first to discover what that frenzied attack was all about. "Duril is not here, Toru."

"Don't speak his name or mine so easily, you savage beast!"

"Savage beast? You're behaving like one, for sure."

It seemed to be the wrong thing to say to a maddened tiger. Toru grazed his hide this time around, and Varg felt pain blossoming where the sharp claws had cut through his otherwise thick skin. "What's the matter with you? Don't you know who I am?"

"You're a savage beast who wants to keep Duril away from me," Toru continued to shout and chase him.

That had to be a lie that Hekastfet was telling him. Varg felt more determined than ever to destroy the veil of deceit the evil was casting over Toru's eyes. "I'm Varg. Don't you remember my name?"

"I don't care about the names of beasts," Toru growled.

So, somehow, Hekastfet had managed to hide Toru's memories of Varg, and probably, not only. Sometimes, the strategy of tough love was necessary, so Varg decided not to run anymore. He stopped and faced Toru abruptly, so they ended up tangled together in a strange embrace.

Toru moved his head wildly, determined to hurt him, but Varg had seen all the tricks already. He dodged swiftly and caught hold of one of Toru's ears, biting it bloody until he made the tiger howl in pain.

He let him go and took several steps back. "Does it hurt?" he asked, taunting for effect.

"It does, you vile beast," Toru complained.

While taking away his memories, Hekastfet must have left Toru as simple as a child, if his behavior and manner of speech were any indications. That was something Varg could use, and he very much intended to do so. "Then summon your healer, have him tend to your wounds."

Toru was trying to get rid of the pain in his ear by licking his paw and then running it over the bite, but Varg knew for a fact that even a strong shapeshifter would feel the pain after an attack like that. It was the same thing he used on the youngsters of his pack when he wanted to teach them a lesson and have them hurt for a bit so they would remember the lesson even much later in life. They always healed well and fast, but the memory of that sharp pain remained, along with a lesson learned.

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What was that savage beast saying? That he needed to ask Duril to heal him? It had to be a magical savage beast, because Toru, who knew that he never needed healers, still felt the pain, and it didn't want to go away. Still, a kiss from his sweet Duril had to be enough to put him back on his feet and launch another attack against that vile being.

"Duril, Duril," he called out, "I'm hurt." He would show that mean wolf how much he and Duril cared for each other. The wolf probably didn't have anyone, and that was why he was so mean.

"You must kill the wolf," Duril said.

Toru frowned and stared at the healer. His eyes didn't look luminous and kind, as they always did.

"Do you love me?" Duril continued, his gaze intense and scary.

"I do," Toru replied.

"Then stop crying over a little bite and destroy our enemy. Can't you see that he's trying to tear us apart again?"

The mean wolf could attack him at any moment once more, and Toru didn't want to feel the same pain again. "You're a healer," he insisted. "You can heal me."

Duril crossed his arm over his chest. "You're a tigershifter. Do you really expect me to believe that my potions and herbs are better than your natural ability to heal? I have yet to hear something sillier than that."

Toru didn't like that at all. Duril didn't want to heal him, and he was in pain. How could he be so cruel? And how could Toru tell him that the pain in his ear didn't want to go away? Suddenly, he felt in the mood to whine. "But it really hurts," he complained stubbornly.

"Heal yourself. You know you can," Duril pointed out.

"Why are you so mean?" Toru complained.

"Because he's not who you think he is," the wolf said as he approached. "Hekastfet is trying to play tricks on your mind, Toru. Don't believe this phantasm. He's not our Duril."

“Our? Duril is mine!” Toru rubbed at his ear helplessly. “Duril, heal me and show the mean wolf that you love me!”

“I would like to see that, as well,” the wolf said.

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Varg was well aware that the ruse he had concocted wouldn't last long. Toru's healing power would soon start to manifest, and then he would be disarmed. However, Toru's lack of patience served them under the circumstances. Without a doubt, Hekastfet must have thought that he would render Toru powerless if he attacked his mind and soul in that despicable manner, but couldn't foresee the consequences of those actions.

“I don't believe that you two even love each other,” he continued, trying to keep his voice steady despite the race against time threatening to overcome his intentions of waking Toru up from the deceit orchestrated by Hekastfet. “I will back out if this phantasm kisses you like Duril does.”

“Duril, kiss me. Let's show the wolf,” Toru implored.

The ghost threw Varg a mean look, filled with hatred, but smiled as it walked toward the young tiger and pressed a kiss on his cheek.

Toru started as soon as the ghost moved away. Varg could see it for what it was, just a shimmering picture of Duril, without substance. It wasn't the same for Toru, without a doubt.

However, the tiger seemed startled by something and began to pull away from the ghost. “Your lips are cold and you smell bad,” he complained.

“You're just imagining that. How can you say such mean words to me?” the phantasm insisted.

“Toru, you've just seen this ghost for what it is. It's not Duril.”

“Where is Duril? Where is he?” Toru asked and began to pace, while trying to keep as far from the phantasm as he could.

That wasn't a question Varg had expected, and he should have. He cursed under his breath and his heart filled with sorrow, as he let his head hang low.

The ghost let out a shriek that slowly turned into laughter. “Your Duril is nowhere,” it hissed. “He's dead. Just ask the wolf. He knows.”

Toru turned toward Varg and implored him with worried eyes. Varg knew he could just go ahead and lie, but what truths were ever built on such shaky foundations? He shook his head. “I'm sorry, Toru. I couldn't protect him. And Claw. And all the others. I failed.”

The ghost shrieked in delight some more. “Do you hear him, stupid tiger? Everyone's dead!”



Toru let out a distressed growl and turned away. Before Varg could stop him, he broke into a run through the dark forest.

Varg started after him, and the ghost followed with its banshee cries.

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They were following him. They were there, almost ready to catch him, and he had to run and run and run. Duril was dead, and everyone else. The wolf had said as much, and he didn't seem to lie, although Toru didn't always know when people told the truth, and when they lied. But he knew, he somehow knew, that it was real. There was nothing else for him to do but run.

"Toru!" someone called loudly from behind.

He didn't look. The world was nothing but a mean, hard place and no one was left to care for him.

"Please, wait for me!" the same voice called.

It belonged to the mean wolf, but he didn't sound mean, although he had bitten Toru's ear so badly. No, he wouldn't let himself be fooled again, after his Duril had turned out to be nothing but a lie.

Along with the wolf, the shadows followed, as well. Before him, a night without end opened. Toru wanted to go beyond it, to save what remained to be saved from his heart.

*You have no one left, the shadows whispered in his ear. Why not stop running? We could be your friends.*

"No, leave me alone," he cried out.

"I'll never leave you alone," the wolf replied instead.

The ghosts were only talking to him, it seemed, and the wolf couldn't hear them. But Toru was fearful of him, too, so it didn't matter that there was that kind of misunderstanding.

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He shouted as loudly as he could, and ran as fast as his legs allowed him, but Varg knew that it wasn't going to be enough, not if he wanted to protect Toru, the only one he had left in the world. Even if the Sakka believed that Toru could reverse all this tragedy somehow, for Varg it didn't matter. To him, Toru could be nothing but himself, not a hero, not a savior of worlds, and he would still matter. He would matter more than anything.

A sharp pain in his right side took him by surprise. What, he couldn't even run after a young tiger now without his body giving up on him? He ground his teeth and pushed himself to run faster, but the pain was harsher now, and only then did he realize that it was something coming from outside

causing it. In his current state of mind, he didn't care about anything else save for catching up with Toru, and he hadn't realized, for a moment, that he was being attacked.

The ghosts that had given chase the moment Toru had broken into his run weren't just shadows, apparently. They had sharp claws that went through Varg's side, and soon others joined the attack, as well.

He stumbled and forced himself up again. There was no time for him to waste fighting against these creatures, he might not even be able to win. But pushing through the pain became harder and harder, fresh new wounds opening in his flanks and other parts of his body.

A bite through his right hind leg slowed his run to a crawl. Calling out for Toru was all he could do, and it was something he did with tears in his eyes.

The tiger slowed and stopped. He looked back, and their eyes met while the ghosts overcame Varg with their hundreds of sharp teeth and claws.

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He should keep on running, but something in the plea voiced by the wolf made him stop. Those ugly shadows were all over him, biting and clawing him, and Toru felt remorse at not stopping sooner. Even if he was a mean wolf, he didn't deserve that fate. And he was a tiger; he wasn't a coward, and his parents hadn't raised him to be a coward, either.

His tipped his head back, then he let out a roar and rushed toward the fallen wolf. He slashed and dashed through the shadows and they began falling at his feet, quickly turning into dark puddles. He hovered and stared at the badly beaten wolf. "Are you alive?" he asked, his voice trembling.

The wolf opened his eyes. "I am. Thanks to you, Toru."

"Why are you following me? I don't need you."

"But I need you," the wolf replied. "You're the only one I have left."

"But I don't know you."

The wolf's eyelids fluttered. "It doesn't matter if you don't remember me. Just sit here with me for a while."

Toru shifted into his human because he wanted to ease the wolf's pain by touching his head. Even if he was not a healer, someone had once told him that showing others that you cared about their pain was sometimes enough. Who that someone was, he didn't remember.

The wolf keened softly while Toru caressed his head, scratching him between the ears.

“You’re a shifter, right?” Toru asked. “Can’t you heal yourself?” He recalled how just earlier he hadn’t been able to heal his ear bitten by the wolf, but he didn’t want to bring it up.

“I think I lost some of my powers, if not all. I was supposed to catch you, you know?”

“I’m very fast,” Toru assured him. “No one catches me.”

“It looks like it,” the wolf admitted. “Where were you running?”

That was a difficult question. Toru didn’t know very well how to reply. “I don’t like it here.” He was whining, and tigers didn’t whine, but this wolf looked like he wouldn’t scold him or say anything even if he did. “I want...”

Why was it so hard to put everything into words? Maybe he still had a lot to learn.

“Don’t strain yourself if you cannot say it. I’m glad, Toru.”

“You are? But you are so badly hurt.”

“Your caress is enough for me. I’m glad because I see that you’re strong, and that your heart is whole.”

“What does that mean?” Could it be that the wolf was feverish and said words that made no sense? Sometimes, hurt people did that. Even shifters, it seemed.

“You’ll be all right,” the wolf assured him. “That is what it means.”

Toru leaned over the wolf and tried to hold his eyelids up with his fingers. It didn’t work. The wolf was fading, and Toru found himself dismayed and unsettled by it. For no known reason, he pulled the wolf into his arms and began crying.

“Don’t cry, kitty,” the wolf said softly.

“I’m not,” Toru protested. “Why would I cry for you? I don’t even know you.”

“That makes it worth all the more, that you cry for me even if you believe I’m a stranger.”

“Don’t leave,” Toru heard himself pleading.

“You’ll be all right,” the wolf repeated his words from before. “There will always be a new morning, waiting for you on the other side.”

“Morning?”

The wolf made less and less sense, and Toru didn’t understand. He didn’t understand anything, save for wanting this mean wolf to stay with him.

“Yes. Something a wise man told me to tell you. Although, I don’t know if he’s a man. His name is Torgar. And maybe you don’t remember them, but Demophios and Amaranth both want you to remember the same.”

Toru shook his head. The wolf went limp in his arms, and then Toru burst into tears.

He cried and cried until his eyes hurt, clutching the inert body he was holding tightly. He opened them, trying to stave off the tears that wouldn’t stop falling, and then he realized why his eyes were hurting.

Above his head, a new day broke, and the rays of the sun cast their light over him. He looked up, to defy the celestial body in the sky, and then, he remembered everything.

“Varg!” he shouted, shaking the wolf.

He ran his hands over the wolf’s body, his heart in his throat. He couldn’t be dead, no, he just couldn’t.

“Kitty, stop tickling me already.”

The happiness that washed over him was more than all the pain from before.

## Chapter Thirty-Four – The Names of Beasts

“You’re not dead!” Toru shouted happily, shaking Varg a bit too energetically. “Are you still hurt?” he asked, finally realizing that he was being too rough and letting go of his friend.

Varg stopped him by grabbing his arm. His smile was as big as the sun above. “Kitty, I think I’ve never been better in my life.”

“Are you telling the truth?” Toru felt the need to verify that. So, he began feeling Varg’s body, turning him this way and that, and examining him from all angles.

Varg laughed while letting himself be abused like that.

“But I saw those things ripping into you,” Toru explained.

“The pain I felt was like no other I’ve ever had the bad luck to suffer in my life. Toru, I truly thought that I was done for. But you saved me.”

That, in itself, was a mystery to Toru. “I don’t think I saved you,” he said, feeling puzzled and a little lost. “I was too late to destroy the ghosts that attacked you. And you... died while I held you.”

Varg offered him a shrug and a heart-felt sigh. “If I knew all the inner workings of the magical world you’re part of, kitty, I’d be a much wiser man. I believe you saved me by feeling sad over my demise, even though you didn’t recognize me. Although that hurt,” the wolf said, touching his chest, “might still be with me. I thought I was a lot less forgettable than that.”

It took Toru all of two moments to realize that Varg was joking about his imaginary heartache. He jumped on him, and they tumbled together, rolling around in what now looked like a green field, spattered with wild flowers. Behind them, the forest rose, but it no longer looked menacing and cold like it had before.

He kissed Varg hard on the lips, to show him that he was anything other than forgettable. “I’m sorry, Varg.”

“What?” Varg grinned. “What did you say? Oh, our almighty tiger just admitted that he was wrong... Oh, kitty,” he added right away, changing tack, “you were so brave, and not only with your claws and fangs, although they’re pretty sharp and my hide still feels where you showed me just how sharp they are. Forgive an old fool for trying to pull a joke or two on you. I’m just so happy.”

Toru let his head rest on Varg’s chest, cuddling against his large body. “Varg,” he asked in a hesitant voice, “what happened to the others?”

Varg caressed his hair gently. “When I left them to pass through and come to you, they no longer seemed to be alive.” Toru started up, but Varg pressed him down, holding him. “Yet, from what

I've read in the chronicles kept by the Sakka, I believe that you are the tiger who finally defeated Hekastfet for good."

Toru curled up against Varg's chest tightly. "But if anyone's dead," he whispered, trying hard to fight the tears welling up in his eyes, "what good am I?"

"I don't think they're dead," Varg said firmly.

"How?" Toru asked and raised his head, searching avidly for signs in the weathered face that the wolfshifter was telling the truth.

"You see, I was never a scholar or anything like that, but I've enjoyed reading texts since I was very young. And what I found in the chronicles I just told you about makes me think that you woke up from a bad dream, through sheer force of will alone, Toru. That bad dream was a veil thrown over everyone... and if I'm right, our friends must be alive and well. You didn't allow the nightmare to take over and destroy the city and everyone in it."

Toru's heart leaped at Varg's words. But could they dare to hope? Varg didn't have the habit of lying, all the more about something like this, but...

Varg stopped his train of thought by flicking a finger against his forehead. "Aren't you the bravest tiger that has ever lived, Toru?"

"I am," Toru replied with determination.

"Then take my hand. Let's see with our own eyes."

Toru got to his feet, his heart full of hope and happiness again. He offered Varg his hand to help him stand, as well. "Hekastfet is no more," he said, sure of every word leaving his mouth now.

"It's my belief that you destroyed that scourge forever. According to the texts I read, brought to me by the Sakka, it appears that your predecessors, Toru, had always been fooled into believing that no one they loved and cared about was still alive, caught in a net of lies spun by Hekastfet. Unable to shake that horrible nightmare, they turned into destroyers, hence diminishing the value of their fight. They defeated Hekastfet each time, but each time they destroyed the city as well."

"Like savage beasts," Toru murmured.

"Like that, yes, I believe," Varg agreed. "It wasn't their fault. Hekastfet reached inside their hearts and made them lose all hope. But the same thing didn't happen to you. You didn't lose your heart."

"And I didn't change into a savage beast, either," Toru added.

"Yes. You are kind, Toru. You are like your father and those before you, but you also have something more."

“Not something. Someone,” Toru corrected his friend. “Someones,” he added. “Let’s find them all.” He couldn’t allow doubt to nag at him by dallying.

Varg wrapped his hand around his tightly. “I want just the same. Now, the question is, how do we get out of here?”

Toru closed his eyes and squeezed them tightly. Those wise beings who had been by his side, in those trying times, must know the answer. *Torgar, Demophios, Amaranth, help me leave this place.*

*We don’t have to. Just open your eyes, Toru.*

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Varg couldn’t say when it all happened, because it did so in less than the blink of an eye. They were no longer at the edge of the forest from Toru’s dream, but inside the room with the Sakka and their friends. The strangest part was that they all seemed to be sleeping profoundly, the Sakka spread around the room, as if they had fallen asleep on their feet.

“What is going on?” Toru asked. “Are they asleep?”

“Maybe they need a bit of shaking up,” Varg suggested. Not one to dally on dark thoughts, he immediately walked over to where Duril was lying with the little boy hanging on his arm and with Claw by his side, and he shook him gently.

He leaned over and the faint sign of breathing assured him that at least the healer was still alive. Moving one hand just below Claw’s nose, he was pleased to find out that Duril wasn’t the only one still among the living.

“What are they doing?” Toru asked and snuck beside him. Without using Varg’s delicate approach, he grabbed Duril by the shoulders and shook him. “Wake up, Duril! I beat Hekastfet, and he’s never going to bother the world ever again!”

“How about you kiss him? that might wake him up in a more pleasant way,” Varg suggested.

He meant it as half a joke, but Toru took it at face value and quickly put his lips on Duril’s. The following moment, Duril gasped and opened his eyes. “Toru, is that really you?” he whispered in a cracked voice.

“It is me,” Toru assured him and pulled him close.

“Wait, there’s someone here we don’t want to crush,” Duril said, pointing at the child resting on his chest.

Toru moved more delicately about so that he could still continue to hug Duril and then touched the little boy’s forehead gently. The child immediately began to stir and blinked slowly.

Varg let out a sign of relief. “Seeing how you woke Duril up, it’s my turn to shake some sense into a mighty sleepy bear.” He moved so that he could reach Claw, but when he touched his shoulder, his wrist was quickly grabbed, making him yelp in surprise.

Claw grinned ear to ear as his eyes opened. “Puppy!” he exclaimed happily. “What on earth did we drink last night? I had the strangest...” His words trailed off as he pushed himself up and looked around. “...dream.”

“It wasn’t a dream, but Toru made everything right,” Varg said proudly.

Claw scratched his head, still prey to a state of puzzlement that Varg understood completely.

“It wasn’t just me,” Toru contradicted him. “It was Varg and I who put an end to Hekastfet.”

Duril’s eyes darted between them, filled with wonder. “You two must have the most astonishing tales to tell.”

“That goes without saying,” Varg said with a huge smile. “Welcome back among us, Duril.”

Only then, the healer seemed to begin understanding what had happened. His eyes moved over the room at the still sleeping Sakka. “It almost killed us all, didn’t it?” he asked in a pensive voice.

“I hope I don’t have to kiss everyone to make them wake up,” Toru interrupted the somber moment in his usual way.

Claw laughed. “Don’t worry, kitty. I’ll take care of your lips by rubbing them with mine.”

Toru glared. “How is that going to help?”

“It’s going to help me,” Claw offered matter-of-factly. “I love you, tiny tiger.”

Toru puffed out his chest with an expression of disbelief on his face. “Who are you calling tiny?”

Claw laughed like a naughty kid. “Let’s see how you compare to me.” He jumped to his feet and grabbed Toru under his arm.

Varg expected some tumbling and rolling on the floor to start, but Claw, instead of teasing Toru any longer, pulled him into a fierce kiss. Toru struggled only for a moment and then quickly melted into it, his body leaning against Claw’s.

He took it upon himself, since the others were busy, Toru and Claw kissing each other silly and Duril soothing the little boy who was starting to become very confused by all the ruckus around him and the absence of his mother, to see what the Sakka were doing, still sleeping like that.



He found Beanstalk, fallen under a table. Without worrying that his actions might end up being frowned upon in the fiercest of ways, he grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him up into the air, shaking him.

It didn't take Beanstalk long to open his eyes, although he was as puzzled as the others had been when doing so for the first time. "Master wolf," he exclaimed. "And is that... Toru? And everyone?"

Varg plopped Beanstalk down on the table. "It looks like the quest is over, master of all Sakka. Toru destroyed Hekastfet for good."

"He did?" Beanstalk looked around, at the still sleeping Sakka. "But the city... has it been destroyed?"

That was something Varg very much wanted to see with his own eyes. He shook his head, however, sure in his heart as he had been very few times. "Toru didn't play the evil's game. He tore the nightmare into pieces and faced the dawn again, with a pure heart."

He offered Beanstalk his arm. "Climb on me. We'll walk outside together, and we will see if Scercendusa is still there. Knowing Toru's heart like I do, I put all my faith in the belief that it's there still, standing proud. We might just have to wake up a lot of people from their slumber. And, without a doubt, some repairs are probably in order."

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To say that he couldn't yet find his balance on his own two feet was to say little. Duril wavered and Toru quickly held him by the waist. It took him a little while to realize that the boy was swinging from his arm, thus making him lose his equilibrium now and then. In addition, he was astonished by everything he saw around him.

"We should go find his mother," he suggested and raised his arm to show Toru who he referred to by that.

"We will find everyone," Toru said. "We will wake them up, and they will find their homes again."

"If it was all a dream... is the city the same as it was before?" Duril asked.

"We should go out and see," Toru suggested.

Around them, all the Sakka were getting to their feet. As flabbergasted as he had been until only a short time earlier, they were talking among themselves, shaking their heads, letting out short gasps of wonder, and laughing happily.

The Sakka had a special way of communicating among themselves, and if one whispered in his immediate fellow's ear something at one corner of the room, his words traveled to the opposite

corner in the blink of an eye. Duril was well aware of that and put it all down to the amazing magic they were made of. He would definitely want to learn more about them and write it in his large tome—

“My bag, the tome,” he said. “They’re lost, aren’t they?”

“I’ll search for them for you,” Toru assured him.

Duril nodded and kissed Toru’s cheek, making him squirm in delight. “Thank you for saving all of us, Toru. You surpassed your ancestors.”

“So, am I the best tiger of all time?” Toru asked, a glint of mischief in his golden eyes.

“You are, and I’ll make sure to write it all down in my tome, as soon as I get my hands on it.”

Toru nodded solemnly and took him by the shoulders. They followed everyone outside, expecting both the best and the worst.

It was neither, in a way, he realized as soon as his eyes adjusted to the strong light of the sun. People, those he had seen fallen in the streets what felt like only moments ago, were awakening back to life, stirring gently. That was the biggest relief.

What wasn’t that much cause for the same was the state of the city, as far as its buildings were concerned. Signs of the fire that had burned throughout Scercendusa could still be seen, although only as smudges of ash and blackened walls. The destruction had happened, but it hadn’t taken the souls of the city along with it.

When Duril turned to take in what lay behind them, he remained breathless for a moment. “The walls!” No longer capable of uttering the words to express his astonishment, he just turned toward Toru, who was staring at the same thing he did. Even the little boy on his arm stilled, only hanging there, without playing anymore.

The tall white walls of Scercendusa were nothing but piles of rubble, as far as eyes could see.

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Toru didn’t know what to think. Most people, he could tell, were coming back to life. But something must have taken down the walls of the city because only ruins remained of them.

He let go of Duril so that he could break into a run and reach the top of the rubble. Once there, he took in the magnitude of the destruction. Before his eyes, the vast sprawl of the Dregs opened.

It was a marsh like no other Toru had seen in his life, made of dark tar and unnatural shapes. It took his eyes moments to realize that those shapes were the contorted bodies of people that must have been caught under the tar.

Was that the work of Hekastfet, still? Without any regard for his wellbeing, he rushed toward the Dregs.

He stopped at the first pile that looked like it was made from human bodies. His hands were frantic as he pushed away the dark slime covering a face. The eyes were closed, and the tar was caked in the nostrils, so Toru did the only thing that crossed his mind. He grabbed the human's nose between two fingers and pushed the mud out. Then, he removed the body from the pile and set it to the side. It belonged to a man that could just as well be old as young. Toru shook him, hoping for a sign of life that didn't take long to appear. The man coughed and rolled to one side. More mud came from his mouth, but he was alive, and that was all that mattered to Toru.

"What is going on down there?" Varg called to him from the top of the rubble that the majestic walls of Scercendusa had been reduced to.

"People are here," Toru shouted. "Still alive. Come help me!"

Without waiting for Varg's answer, he continued his work by dragging another shape from the pile. As it had worked for the first human, he did the same to this one, a woman, as far as he could tell. As soon as her nose was cleared, she opened her mouth and let the mud out.

Varg was already by his side. "There are so many," the wolf said.

Not that Toru didn't know that. He knew it very well, and in his mind, the thought of not being able to save all took shape before he could stop it.

"We need more hands here!" Varg shouted at the others that had climbed to the top of the rubble to see what was going on. "It cannot be too soon!"

Duril and Claw followed right away, and the Sakka were like a tiny swarm at their heels.

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There was still much saving to do, and Duril began following Toru's example as soon as he fell in line with his friends. Claw decided to rush through the marsh and bring them new patients from the further corners, while they worked on those who were the closest.

"We must ask for help," Pie said, somewhere from his left.

Duril didn't waste the time to turn and talk to him. "Then, someone should go and ask the city dwellers for help."

"Will they help? Some of them have already started shouting in the streets about some sabotage put in the works by the Dregs to kill them all."

"They don't know what happened," Duril realized that very moment and voiced his discovery out loud. "They don't even know that they have been saved from certain death."

“Toru must come with us and convince them,” Pie said.

“Do you really think you can tear him away from his noble task?”

“He must. He is the true ruler of this city, our king.”

If there was anyone who could make the dwellers of Scercendusa see the truth, it had to be Toru. Duril agreed. “Then I’ll tell him that, but please, take care of this little one, Pie. I don’t want to believe that I was too late for her.”

“Leave her to me,” Pie said right away.

Duril walked over to Toru and squeezed his shoulder. “Toru,” he said gently, “we need a lot more people to take care of everyone. The Dregs are far and wide, and there are many souls to save.”

Toru set his jaw hard. “I know,” he said.

“The way to do it best is to get the people from Scercendusa to help.”

“Will they do it?” Toru asked, his eyes full of hope.

“You must tell them what you did. They will believe in you.”

Toru nodded and began walking toward the pile of rubble with determined steps. Duril hurried after him. The doubt in some hearts could go against Toru’s pure one, and that meant that a bit of support couldn’t hurt.

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Toru took in the city at his feet. They were all moving about now, brought to life as fast as they had been put to death, but there was grumbling, and shouting, and quarrels starting everywhere. “People of Scercendusa,” he called loudly.

His voice carried even over all that noise. Even to his ears, it sounded like it belonged to someone better than he had been before.

People stopped what they were doing and looked at him.

“We need your help to save the people from the Dregs,” he continued.

“Who are you?” someone shouted at him. “You’re not our domestikos.”

“Your domestikos was nothing but a shell, and evil lived inside him,” Toru replied.

“Why should we believe you? We don’t know you,” another woman hissed at him.

“We’ll never help the Dregs!” another voice rose from the crowd. “They did this to us! They destroyed our city!”

The anger in that man’s voice spread like fire through the others.

“That is not true,” Toru said in turn, and his voice, once more, rose over the ruckus. “For centuries, they have done nothing but fuel the fires in your homes, the ones you used to cook and get warm. And what did they get in return?”

“They got to live,” someone else shouted the answer. “Don’t believe in this stranger, people! Where is our domestikos?”

Murmurs began to float over the crowd. Toru was about to say more, when he realized that all heads were turning toward the domestikos’ palace, still half-standing. From where he stood, even his good tiger eyes couldn’t see much, but it was obvious that there was someone there, right in front of the ruined building.

Duril squeezed his hand. “What is that over there, Toru?” he asked.

Toru frowned. “I think that’s Hekastfet, raising his ugly head again.”

He didn’t have to call for help. Moth landed by his side, in his butterfly shape, making the people that noticed him gasp in disbelief. Toru climbed on his back and helped Duril to join him. “I thought I destroyed him,” he murmured under his breath.

Duril embraced him tightly. “This must be his last attempt to destroy the city. He has to be weak, if he has decided to make the masses fall for his tricks one last time.”

Toru nodded. “Let’s put an end to him, once and for all.”

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Duril didn’t look down as they flew over the crowd and landed at the top of the stairs before the fallen palace of the domestikos. Indeed, an old man was there, in tattered clothes, his arms lifted in the air, as if in supplication, or in an attempt to have the world listen.

He increased his grip on Toru’s waist. “We won’t be fooled,” he said.

Toru jumped from Moth’s back and landed on his feet in front of the old man. “Hekastfet,” he hissed. “Are you here for your final moment?”

“What name do you call me by, young tiger?” the domestikos asked.

Duril understood, by the way the old man addressed Toru, that the two of them must have met before.

“I am Ewart Kona, the ruler of this city.” He turned toward the crowd that had started to climb the stairs. “My city. You destroyed it.”

Toru wasted not a moment. He now had one hand wrapped around the old man’s throat and lifted him in the air, making him flail his arms and legs helplessly. Shouts of anger could be heard from the dwellers of the city. Some of them, despite the distance they were at, must have seen what was going on.

“Show your true face, Hekastfet,” Toru growled. “Show these people who has been ruling them.”

The old man wheezed and struggled. If he hadn’t known Toru and his heart any better, Duril would have believed him to be nothing but a frail human at the hands of an unjustly powerful enemy.

It all had to be a game of sorts, a dangerous one on top of everything else. Duril looked over his shoulder at the approaching crowds. “Toru, let him be!” he shouted.

Toru stared at him in disbelief.

“He wants you to destroy the shell he’s been using in front of everyone so that he can tarnish your good name forever,” he explained right away.

Toru dropped the old man, who fell like a sack of potatoes at his feet.

“This is a beast!” The domestikos, or the evil pretending to be him, said as he pointed at Toru, while dragging himself backward over the slabs of marble forming the floor in front of the palace.

His voice was strangely strong for someone who had been almost choked to death just moments earlier. It carried too well to the people climbing the stairs like a mad crowd, bent on reaching their goal.

“I was wrong to trust you, to welcome you into my home,” the domestikos continued, his eyes wild.

Duril had never thought himself to be a very good judge of people, but he could swear that those eyes weren’t scared. No, they were a mirror of cunning thoughts, and he understood, beyond any doubt, that Hekastfet was still living inside that shell, somehow.

It also meant that he was desperate and now trying everything he could think of to survive.

Toru growled and went after him again. Duril found himself moving at a speed he didn’t possess to stop the young tiger from grabbing the domestikos again.

“Don’t you want to kill me, savage beast? Come and destroy me. It’s the only thing your lot’s good for.”

Toru shook off Duril and grabbed the domestikos by the throat again. Duril hung from his arm, shaking him. “Toru, no. He hopes to destroy the city with the last remnants of his power. Look at him. I don’t think there’s much of it left.”

Toru held the domestikos as if he were a toy being held by a child. It would so easy for him to squeeze just a little bit harder and be done with that thing, as Duril couldn’t think of it as a real human being, now that he knew what it was. But Toru’s arm was trembling in barely restrained anger, and Duril was well aware that he needed to intervene somehow.

He turned toward the people climbing the stairs. “You do not know the true face of your domestikos,” he shouted, as loudly as he could.

But his voice wasn’t like Toru’s, able to carry over crowds and a city in ruins. Yet, despite that, he began to hear his words being echoed throughout. It took him only moments to realize that the Sakka had come to his aid. The tiny helpers were spread throughout the crowd, and they were acting as carriers of his message. Duril found a new kind of courage growing inside his heart.

“Evil has lurked underneath the city for centuries,” he continued. “And it found a home inside the domestikoi who ruled over Scercendusa through the years.”

A stone flew through the air, right by his temple. Duril froze for a moment, but then he started shouting louder. “The evil is almost destroyed. You’ll all be witness. Toru,” he turned toward the young tiger, “let him be. Let him show his true face.”

Toru seemed transfixed, unable to move, as he held that old man’s fate in his hands. For the crowd, it was an old man, the one in charge of their city and wellbeing, but Duril knew the truth. It would only take a little to expose the face of that evil, and Toru was the one to do it.

Yet, Toru didn’t seem keen on letting go again.

“Look at his eyes,” Duril cried out, “you’ll see the truth in them.”

The old man dropped to the ground and began shouting as if he were being bitten by a thousand snakes. “The tiger, the tiger, he wants to kill me, good people! Take him away from me!”

A few men had reached the top of the stairs and rushed toward Toru.

“Yes, he’s a beast!” The mock domestikos continued.

“His name is Toru!” Duril shouted, to cover the lies with truth.

“Scercendusa doesn’t believe in the names of beasts!”

The domestikos’ words turned into a chant on the lips of the city dwellers. The ones that had already arrived tried to attack Toru, and Duril’s heart faltered for a moment. Moth batted his wings and send Toru’s attackers flying backwards, into the others rushing up.

Was that Hekastfet's plan? To force Toru to defend himself and hurt the inhabitants of Scercendusa?

He watched in unhidden fright as stones flew through Moth's wings, making holes that let the rays of sun shine through. The Sakka were now standing between them and the crowd.

That seemed to give Hekastfet a new life, because the old shell stood from the ground and ran toward Toru, his hands turning into claws, his head growing larger and transforming into multiple tentacles.

"Moth, get down, now," Duril shouted at the Sakka who was valiantly protecting them.

It was that moment or never. As the crowd ran up, Hekastfet had already turned into a hideous monster. The first people stopped, confused and scared, causing others, who were following closely behind, to crash into them.

Toru shifted into his tiger and slashed through one of the tentacles trying to wrap around his neck. He used his fangs and claws to cut them off one by one, but black tar began pouring from them, flooding the ground.

Duril realized the danger, and not a moment too soon. That dark blood of evil was moving toward the stairs. Hekastfet wanted to infect humans, if he couldn't fight himself.

The healer began shouting at the people to move back, but they were doing that already, and it wasn't fast enough. The black blood of Hekastfet had a life of its own, moving with astonishing speed toward the crowd.

And then, a new miracle happened. A wall rose between the wave of tar and the stairs, and Duril stood there, not quite believing his eyes, as he realized that the Sakka had closed in, climbing one of top of the other, standing close together to form that barricade.

Hekastfet's essence clashed against the wall and receded like an angry tide. It struggled to overcome the barrier, but each time, it was losing its power. The creature Toru was fighting dropped to the ground, lifeless. The young tiger continued to slash through it, until all that remained of it was nothing but pieces of dirty cloth.

All the while, the Sakka's wall continued to absorb the darkness, until nothing remained. Duril hurried to stop Toru and show him.

Before them, their tiny helpers were covered in black tar, from head to toes.



## Chapter Thirty-Five – A Time for Victory

Toru watched in undisguised horror as the tar, or whatever it was that remained of Hekastfet, covered the Sakka up to their eyeballs, if not higher. He rushed toward them, unsure of how to help, but willing to, nonetheless. One of the Sakka – he couldn't tell one from the other, seeing how they had turned all black – sneezed loudly, and brought with it a wave of relief that traveled through the entire wall made of tiny bodies.

“Are you all right?” he asked loudly and reached one hand out to touch the Sakka closest to him.

“Never been better,” the Sakka said cheerfully, and Toru only then realized that it was Beanstalk, the leader of the group. “But don't touch us, Toru. This is filth, and we are the only ones who know how to wash it off properly. It wouldn't serve to have you walk around with black hands, not after you secured the victory against Hekastfet once and for all.”

“Are you sure I did?” Toru asked.

The Sakka didn't have a chance to reply, as loud cheers drowned out their conversation. Toru stood tall, and only then realized that the crowd of the people of Scercendusa had finally understood who the hero was and who the evil. Something hit him in the chest with soft touch, making him flinch for a moment, only to sigh in relief upon seeing that it was a flower, wilted with stains of unhealthy grey on its petals. Still, he smiled and waved at the people, who broke into another bout of happy cheers.

“Do you really believe they know what happened here?” he asked with half a mouth while stealing a glance out of the corner of his eye at Beanstalk.

“The Sakka who remained a bit behind are already hard at work making them see the truth,” Beanstalk replied promptly.

Duril bumped into him from behind, happy as he seemed to see it all finally over. “Toru,” the healer said breathlessly, “we need to hurry to the Dregs.”

This time, when Toru shouted his demand again, the crowd followed him in droves over the walls and into the outskirts of the city.

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Varg was aware of nothing but the muddy earth in front of him opening to release victim after victim from its clutches. Sweat was pouring down his forehead freely, and he could feel every muscle in his body stretched to the point of breaking, as he wasted not a moment to find new survivors and carry them out of harm's way.

What could Toru and Duril be doing? What was taking them so long? His mind knew, or at least, could conjure up a reason or two, but he couldn't allow that to fog his determination to save

everyone. Even if they took forever to come back, he would continue his work. Claw was as hard at the task at hand as he was, and that at least brought him a bit of solace. Otherwise, only some of the tiny Sakka were there with them.

He dragged another woman from the mound of mud in front of him and moved quickly to clear her nostrils from the obstruction interfering with her ability to breathe freely. She gasped and, to his surprise, opened her eyes and stared at him with a clear gaze. "Varg of Whitekeep," she said, "what are you doing?"

"Rosalind?" he asked in disbelief. The thought had crossed his mind that she might be somewhere, buried underneath the mud, but he hadn't had the luxury of searching for her at the expense of other lives. "Is it truly you?"

"As I see you and I breathe--" she stopped abruptly. Varg helped her to her feet, and Rosalind looked around, her eyes wide and startled. "The end came," she whispered. "Why am I still alive?"

"Not only you," Varg hurried to assure her. "It's not the end, Rosalind. It wasn't truly meant to be."

Her confusion only grew as she turned and turned, and finally her eyes rested on the ruins of the walls in the distance. "But the city!" she exclaimed and stretched one arm toward it. "The walls have fallen!"

"Indeed they have," Varg said. "We must save your fellow workers and people, Rosalind. They're all buried under this mud. And then, when everyone is safe, you're going to hear the whole truth."

Rosalind was not like some damsel in distress, and she needed no convincing. She immediately pushed up her sleeves, displaying forearms still caked in mud. "Then I must help you, Varg of Whitekeep. Why aren't more people here to help already?"

"Toru and Duril went to convince the people of Scercendusa to come and help, but they haven't returned yet."

"The people of Scercendusa?" Rosalind asked with obvious scorn in her voice. "When they get down here to help there'll be a cold day in hell. My people, the ones you must have saved already, where are they?"

"They were in worse shape than you, for sure. We put them there," Varg pointed at the foot of the walls in ruin, "so that they can breathe and come back to their senses."

"Such a lazy bunch," Rosalind commented and shook her head. "Come with me, and I'll show you how you put the Dregs of Scercendusa to work."

Varg wanted to stay where he was and dig for a few more people, but Rosalind was fast on her feet, and if she could enlist the help of many, their work would be faster, and fewer people would be at risk.

As soon as they reached the saved people aligned neatly one by the other's side, Rosalind proceeded in the most unceremonious way, to grab each of them and slap them hard in the face. That gave Varg pause, and he was about to stop her, when the man Rosalind was seriously molesting in that manner, blinked and looked at her. Just as unceremonious as she was, he pushed her away, but Rosalind didn't seem to mind. "There are people buried everywhere in that field," she said and pointed at the large cemetery in the making behind them.

The man appeared to understand right away what was needed of him and started toward the mounds of mud.

"You'll have to push the mud out of their noses," Varg shouted after him, while Rosalind continued with her own way of rousing her people from their stupor.

She must have a not-so-heavy hand, Varg decided and didn't follow her example. However, the people she brought back to life were quick on their feet to go and save their own, so he followed them to organize them and show them where more victims were buried.

Just as he was busy shouting instructions, a ruckus rose just behind him. He turned, alarmed and worried that more bad things were coming their way.

"Varg!" Toru shouted and waved at him, while leading a large crowd that had to be the people of Scercendusa. "We brought help!"

"About time, kitty," Varg shouted and waved back, as relief like no other washed through him.

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Duril had gathered the little ones separately from the adults, although he knew that the tough life in the Dregs was the same for everybody and they had grown to be much stronger than other children their age. However, since their strength was not enough to help with pulling the others from the mounds of dirt and mud, they had been given some leeway and now they were enjoying Duril's treatment of helping them wash and get dressed in clean clothes.

Maybe the part about enjoying it wasn't that true, in the sense that the children seemed awkward in their new clothes, and even expressed wonder at seeing each others' faces, now completely clean of any traces of mud or soot.

"I want to thank you," someone said from his right, and he turned to see a woman in her early twenties holding a child in her arms.

He quickly recognized the little boy. "I did very little. You don't have to thank me," he said. "Toru is the one who saved everyone."

"Even so," the woman insisted while propping the child on her hip. "He would have been so scared, finding himself alone. But he wasn't. Here is where we live, in Scercendusa," she added and offered him a small piece of paper on which something was scribbled in an unsure hand. "We don't have much, but our door is open for you and your friends, any time you want."

Duril nodded and carefully folded the paper and placed it inside his shirt pocket.

"I heard you were looking for a large leather bag, with a big book in it, and some nice smelling herbs," she said. "My husband has it and brought it home. Now, you will really have to pay us a visit."

Duril smiled. "Without a doubt."

"I'll help you wash the children," the woman added and put her own down. She whispered something to him, and he valiantly rushed to where the large barrels of water had been deposited earlier, to return with a small bucket filled with water. "We are all going to help."

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Toru was so lost in thought that he missed the sound of approaching footsteps. The hand landing on his shoulder startled him out of his reverie. They were now housed in the palace that used to belong to the domestikos, after much debate between the inhabitants of the city. While there were other beautiful homes and villas in the city, they were more or less in various states of disrepair. The palace was the only one to escape unscathed for the most part, and the traces of the battles that had taken place inside had been quickly removed by hardworking hands.

His bedroom was lavish and could hold four people, at least, so he thought.

Varg shook him playfully. "What were you thinking about just now? An entire army of Hekastfets could have snuck up behind you."

Toru rolled onto his back and stared at the wolfshifter, his eyes at half-mast. "I knew it was you."

Varg stood by the bed and crossed his arms over his chest, while laughing loudly. "Nah, you didn't. You would be itching for a fight now if you did."

Toru stretched on the bed, enjoying both its size and fluffiness. While he was used to sleeping under the naked sky with nothing but a rock to serve him as a pillow, he couldn't deny that these royal comforts were much to his liking. Maybe Varg thought he would be in the mood for a bit of roughhousing, but in all honesty, he was too tired for that, and that said something about the toll the battles of the last days had taken on him.

“How many people do you think this bed could hold?” he asked Varg directly.

The wolfshifter took that as an invitation and sat on the bed. Toru pulled at his elbow to make him lie down by his side. Varg let out a small sigh of contentment as he stretched, making some of his joints pop loudly.

“Do you have a bed as good as this?” Toru asked his second question, without waiting to get an answer to the first.

“Not as good as this, no,” Varg said.

Toru frowned. “Don’t tell me the people of Scercendusa didn’t think of treating you to the best rooms in this place.”

Varg laughed and pulled playfully at Toru’s ear. “The only reason why my bed is not as good as this one, is because it doesn’t have you in it.”

Toru took a moment to understand what Varg meant by that and then smiled broadly. “You can come sleep in my bed. And Duril, too, of course. And Claw. Where are they, by the way?”

“Duril went to fetch his bag and all his treasures.”

“Someone found it?”

“Yes. And Duril felt obliged to visit that family anyway, because of the little one that stayed with him all the time, while the world around us fell apart.”

Toru nodded solemnly. “And Claw?”

“He wasn’t in the mood yet to rest, seeing how he slept through what he said it was the most interesting part. It looks like he has a knack for building things, and he’s helping out.”

Toru scrunched up his nose and pondered for a bit. “Does that make us the laziest?”

Varg roared with laughter and then quickly brought an arm around Toru’s shoulders to pull him down to his chest. “I’d say we did a great job defeating Hekastfet, so we deserve the rest.”

Varg’s words made sense. Toru felt less guilty as he stretched languorously across Varg’s chest. His actions weren’t missed by the other, and soon, he could hear Varg’s breathing growing thicker and labored with want.

Knowing very well what he was up to, he threw one leg over Varg’s thigh and pushed against his groin. A small hiss let him know that he was on the right path to get what he wanted.

“I love it when you’re the one asking for it,” Varg breathed out.

“What? I’m not asking for anything,” Toru protested and tried to move his leg away.

However, Varg appeared to have a different idea and deftly caught Toru's leg, forcing it down on his crotch with unhidden intent. Then, he put his strong hands on Toru's arms and made him roll on his back.

He could have shown some opposition, just to make it last longer, but Toru felt too relaxed and happy to fool around like that. And, after all the fighting and pain he had endured, he truly thought he was entitled to a bit of fun.

"What do you want me to do to you?" Varg asked, and his dark eyes started burning.

"I don't know," Toru said, feeling a bit coy.

Varg leaned over and traced a wet path along Toru's neck with his tongue, making him shiver. "I could lick you all over."

Toru's shivering grew stronger. He had a few ideas about what places he would like to have licked by Varg, but he didn't want to say them out loud. "Do what you like," he whispered.

"You might come to regret those words, kitty," Varg said and laughter rumbled in his chest.

Toru strongly disagreed but he didn't want to ruin any surprise Varg had in store for him.

So, he didn't protest at all as he was, once more, made to turn on his belly. Varg made quick work of tugging off Toru's pants and shirt. To be naked and feel those silky sheets directly on his skin, now clean of the exertions of battle, felt like heaven.

He inhaled sharply as Varg began moving his deft tongue along his spine. It awoke small pleasures along the way, and made his skin all prickly with beyond heavenly sensations.

Varg stopped for a moment, right on the small on his back, and began drawing circles there, slowly and deliberately. Toru gasped and moaned, as the anticipation grew. When he was about to beg, Varg finally moved lower. His tongue felt firm and strong, yet soft, as it went to tease the cleft and push slightly deeper.

Toru stretched his arms and legs, and bucked his hips just a smidge higher, so that he could get more of this most enjoyable treatment. Varg had to know exactly what he was doing, because he lay comfortably between Toru's legs and proceeded to delight himself with the feast in front of him. That was just what it felt like.

He sighed and squirmed when Varg parted the mounds of his butt further and got more access to the part of Toru that now quivered while expecting its assailant to move on to more definite actions.

But the wolfshifter proved, once more, that he could be sneaky when he wanted. He teased the entrance with just the tip of his tongue, making it feel like it was not enough.

Toru struggled to push his behind higher so that Varg would have no choice but to delight him with the full length of his tongue. That wasn't in the cards, or so it seemed, because Varg held him down and only licked around.

"More, please," Toru pleaded.

"I thought you said that I should do as I please," Varg reminded him. "Admit it, kitty, you are at my mercy now, and nothing is going to change that."

"Stop teasing me," Toru moaned.

"Do you wish for a way out of your predicament?" Varg asked, all slyly and not so easy to be trusted.

"I do," Toru admitted while he struggled a bit more to make Varg properly lick his entrance.

"Then, you will have to do the unthinkable, kitty. You will have to ask for what you want. Clearly and nicely."

"Put your tongue there," Toru demanded impatiently.

"Where?" Varg asked, feigning complete innocence.

"Put it on my asshole," Toru obeyed the damned teaser.

"And now add 'please'," Varg advised.

Toru bit his lower lip while Varg teetered so close to the entrance and flicked his tongue about. "Please, lick my asshole, Varg," he begged.

"See? You know how to be a good boy," Varg bit playfully on his ass. "You know, like a puppy."

"I'll never be a puppy," Toru swore.

Further protests died on his lips as Varg made good on his promise and delved right into the center of his body's pleasure map. Toru clenched the sheets in his fists and threw his head back, while bucking his hips up only as much as Varg allowed while holding him in a fierce grip. The strength with which he was kept down was a sharp contrast to how gently Varg moved his tongue around and went in, alternating between those moves.

Varg even went further down and licked Toru underneath his ball sac, making him experience new sensations. The wolfshifter moved between different points of interest, and very soon, Toru was begging for something that he couldn't even voice properly.

Fortunately, it seemed that the wolfshifter was done teasing him, and soon replaced his marvelous tongue with something of much greater magnitude. Toru accepted the stretch as his body was ready.

“You are so good, Toru,” Varg praised him. “And you have a beautiful, beautiful ass.”

Toru grinned and reveled in the compliment, as Varg used his gentle strength to descend inside him and give him a full taste of his long strong manhood. Toru wouldn't admit outside these pleasurable moments just how much he enjoyed having his body ravished in such a manner, but for now, he could be honest. Giving the wolf, who was an amazing lover, too many reasons to feel full of himself wasn't good.

Only that, for the moment, he could allow himself all the moaning and thrashing and cursing he could muster, while Varg penetrated his body slowly. Once he was perfectly sheathed inside him, Varg let out a breath of contentment of his own. That was a language both of them understood and used.

And then, without being told more, Varg began to move and helped Toru up on all fours, so that their lovemaking could get as vigorous as they both wanted. After all the teasing from earlier, Toru was prepped and ready for more, and he didn't hesitate to ask for it at the top of his lungs.

“Kitty, you're making me mad for you,” Varg growled.

The wolf sank his teeth into the back of Toru's neck, holding him down, while his hips moved fast and hard. Toru loved being held in place but had a feeling that it would be even more pleasurable for Varg if he put up a little bit of a fight. He squirmed to make his intentions known, and Varg only bit him harder.

Toru was used to pain, but this one was of the almost unbearable kind, because it was as delicious as it was hurting. He didn't even have to keep his self-healing skills in check, as it looked as if Varg knew exactly how and what to do to prolong the sensation without letting it become too painful.

That only increased the feelings blossoming from inside him, while Varg rode him at a faster and faster pace. Toru loved the loss of control and how Varg knew how to make him submit even if only for these moments of delight without boundaries.

Varg took hold of Toru's manhood and used his fist to pump it, up and down, up and down, all along its length, and even used the thumb to tease the head and the little slit. Toru groaned and reached back with one arm so that he could slap Varg's ass.

The wolfshifter stopped for a moment. “Who's in charge here, kitty?” he growled in his ear after letting go of his neck.

“I am,” Toru said as naturally as it came to him. “Go deeper and harder.”



“I should punish you,” Varg growled again, “but you’ve been good to me with this delicious ass of yours. It’s time for me to give you your reward.”

Toru didn’t have to worry about another bite from that point forward. As Varg held him tightly with one arm and rubbed his manhood with the other hand, all the while not forgetting to move hard and fast in and out of Toru’s ass, their pleasure only growing. It reached its peak and turned into fireworks, like the kind Toru had only seen once in his life, the excitement never forgotten.

Varg only let him go after a few good minutes. He kissed the back of Toru’s neck and licked it, bringing with it that, small burst of satiated pleasure. Toru understood that Varg was also healing him, after their strong lovemaking session. Even if it wasn’t needed, it was much appreciated.

“You know, kitty, I didn’t get to lick your entire body as I promised.”

Toru laughed. “Maybe save some for another time. If you did it now, I would probably just fall asleep.”

“Are you insulting me?” Varg asked in an incredulous voice. “I’ll accept the challenge.”

“I’m not insulting you. It would feel too good,” Toru explained.

Varg nuzzled the side of his neck. “Yes, and feeling good can mean many different things. Do you want to feel more of them with me?”

“All of them,” Toru assured him. “Hey, you still didn’t answer my question.”

“What was it again?”

“How many people would fit in this bed?”

“Ah,” Varg replied. “Do you mean to take all of us with you into your bed?”

“Of course. I don’t like sleeping alone.”

“Then I’m sure we can bring an extra bed in here and put them close together, just in case this one’s not enough. And don’t worry, I’m sure Claw and Duril aren’t too keen on sleeping alone, either, if what I’ve learned of them since we’ve all been together is true.”

“I’m glad,” Toru whispered and closed his eyes.

The last thing he thought before sleep took him was how soft Varg’s lips could be while kissing his forehead.

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Duril stepped into Toru’s quarters, followed closely by Claw. They had run their errands, grabbed some food, and cleaned their bodies of the dust of the streets of Scercendusa, and now were ready

to meet their friends again. To their surprise, which they both had expressed, Toru missed joining them at dinner. It was odd, since it wasn't like the tiger to skip a meal, especially since the grateful inhabitants of the city spared nothing to spoil them with the best cuts of meat and whatnot. Important food supplies and stores hadn't been affected by the fire and the destruction that followed, much to everyone's relief, but Duril still felt a tad guilty while feasting on the amazing foods they knew how to prepare there. On more than one occasion, he had been assured by the people serving them that they could eat to their hearts' content.

Now, he was very curious as to why he hadn't seen Toru at dinner and hoped it wasn't something serious keeping the tiger away from a delicious meal. To his relief, he found Toru sleeping soundly in Varg's arms.

The wolfshifter was as much gone to the world as the young tiger was, and Duril stopped and began to tiptoe so as not to disturb their sleep. Claw put a heavy hand on his shoulder and whispered, "What do you think these two have been up to until now? Enough to make them go out like a light?"

"I don't quite dare to assume," Duril whispered back.

"I hope they had fun," Claw said. "It is the moment of victory, and they worked the hardest of us all."

Duril nodded in understanding. "Maybe we should let them sleep through the night."

"I have a feeling that your desire might not meet their needs. They both missed dinner."

"Indeed," Duril agreed. "I was quite surprised, too, but the people at the palace said that it would be better not to disturb our champions."

"And yet, something tells me that they are both hungry enough to chew on each other's ears. If we don't wake them up now and help them get something to eat, they might start that," Claw suggested in a playful tone.

"They would hardly be satisfied with that," Duril pointed out, his chest beginning to shake with laughter.

"That wouldn't be the biggest danger," Claw continued. "No, the biggest danger would be for them to go from ear chewing to other delights of the flesh, none of which to include eating. I'd say that if we don't make the effort to wake them up now, they might become famished and drive themselves to exhaustion, all the while being quite happy with themselves. And each other."

"Well, Claw, I'd say you make a fine point," Duril said and smiled. "Should we wake them up then?"

"At least, let us try. They won't forgive us if we don't."

With that, Claw moved slowly toward the bed and leaned over the sleeping lovers. Then, being the naughty bear that he was, he shouted all of a sudden, “To the walls! Enemy at the gate!”

Toru and Varg jolted out of their sleep and scrambled quickly to their feet, finding themselves in the middle of the room, that Duril couldn’t help laughing.

“What enemy?” Toru asked, while rubbing his eyes. “Where is it? Who is it?”

Varg was quicker to come to his senses. “I’m afraid our two friends here, Toru, thought how interesting it would be for them to pull a prank on us.”

“A prank?” Toru looked around, and then he saw Duril. “Duril!” he exclaimed.

“And now, you will see that the both of us have been forgotten,” Claw commented and hooked one arm over Varg’s shoulders.

Duril couldn’t exactly complain as Toru wrapped his arms around him and held him tightly. “Did you find your tome? Was anything missing from your bag?”

“No, surprisingly so, nothing was damaged, and seeing the way half the city was in flames, I suppose that it’s indeed nothing short of a miracle.”

“The tome, your herbs, everything?” Toru continued to fire questions at him. “I promised I would find it for you, but I didn’t.”

Duril caressed Toru’s cheek. “I could have sent word to Elidias in Shroudharbor. Maybe he has another tome stashed away. And the herbs can be replaced. Don’t worry about the little things, Toru. You’ve done the entire world an amazing good.”

“I thought I had defeated Hekastfet,” Toru said. “But then it came back again. Who’s to say that all of it is gone?”

“You did more than your ancestors, Toru. You truly defeated the evil hiding its wrongdoings in this city and threatening to take over the world,” Duril said. “As for knowing for sure, ah, if only we could ask someone wise like Demophios or Amaranth about it. They might know.”

Toru made a strange face, like a kid who didn’t know exactly how to put into words what was crossing his mind. “We heard their voices,” he eventually said. “When Varg and I were on the other side.”

“We heard them indeed,” Varg confirmed, making Duril turn toward him. “And besides them, another voice, as well.”

“Who was the third voice?” Duril asked.

“It belonged to someone who goes by the name of Torgar. He was sure Toru remembered him.”

“Yes, I did, and I do,” Toru agreed. “He saved me when I was little.”

“Do you remember things you couldn’t before?” Duril felt compelled to ask.

“So many of them,” Toru replied. “My parents...”

They all kept their silence while Toru’s voice trailed off.

“You don’t have to talk about it right now,” Duril hurried to assure him.

“But I will, soon,” Toru said. “Their spirits are here, and I believe that I should honor them.”

“We all will,” Duril said and took his hand.

Toru embraced him and then began sniffing him. He moved slowly downward and sniffed his shirt. “You smell of smoked meat!” he exclaimed. “Where did you get it?”

Duril was quite certain that his shirt was clean, but he had worn it at dinner, which meant that Toru’s fine nose, trained to detect the slightest smidge of food scent, could even list the entire menu that had been served earlier.

“We had dinner. Everyone was adamant about not disturbing the two of you, so we didn’t dare.”

Toru made a long face. “But I’m so hungry right now! Are there any forests around Scercendusa? Should we go hunting? Me and Varg?”

“I don’t think you should do anything as radical as that. I asked about directions to the pantry, and I even have the key. You and Varg won’t go hungry,” Duril explained.

That brought a sigh of relief from Toru. Varg, as stoic as he usually was, did the same, much to Claw’s amusement, who began laughing.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Claw asked out loud. “Let’s lead our champions to the pantry and let them feast on some smoked meat!”

## Chapter Thirty-Six – They Stood Like a Wall

Duril woke up, as if someone had just called for him. It took him long moments to realize where he was. Carefully, he touched the sheets and quickly found an arm. As his eyes could see in the dark, he noticed that Varg and Claw were sleeping side by side and snoring loudly, enough to wake people from their deepest slumber. Only they could sleep through that. Duril shook his head in mirth.

But where was Toru? Duril looked around and decided that the young tiger was nowhere in that room. Moving quietly so as not to wake the sleeping shifters, as much as that would have been a challenge, he slunk out of the lavish bedroom, determined to find Toru.

The hallways were quiet, and there was peace adding to that silence, as Duril could feel it. Indeed, Toru had defeated the evil plaguing the city and the world. There was a difference in the air they were breathing, even. Duril recalled entering the city only a few days prior. Now it felt as if everything had happened a lifetime ago. Even if the dark shadow of Hekastfet hadn't been visible, Duril could tell that the world had changed for the better.

It was all due to the valiant heart of a certain young tiger, one he was searching for right now. Maybe he didn't have Claw's keen sense of smell, but he believed himself to be good at finding his dear lover.

It wasn't long until he noticed him at the end of the hallway, out on a balcony overlooking the city. Duril stopped for a moment, wondering whether Toru had come here on his own to celebrate his victory in silence. When one's heart was full, it could take some solitude to stop it from overflowing.

But Toru turned at that very moment. "Duril," he called softly. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

Encouraged by the fact that he had been discovered, Duril walked toward his friend. "I woke up, and you weren't there. What are you doing here, all by yourself?"

"I was just thinking." Toru jumped on the rail, with his usual grace, and stood there, perched on the edge, looking down. "My parents were here, in some way. I know my father gave his life, as unnatural as it might have been, so that I could push forward and defeat Hekastfet. And my mother, along with her kin, thought she could help me, too, in her own way. But they're not really here, are they?"

Duril weighed his response carefully. "I don't believe so," he admitted with a sigh. "They might have been ghosts shackled by Hekastfet, so that he could use them against you. I believe that backfired quite spectacularly. You won."

"I remember many things now," Toru continued. He tensed and hunched his shoulders in response to inner turmoil.

Duril moved closer and placed a tentative hand between the young tiger's shoulder blades. Some of the tension began to fade, so he started to move his palm over the knotted back muscles slowly. A slow sigh from Toru let him know that he was doing a good thing. "What's on your mind, Toru?"

"I want to see that place again."

"What place are you talking about?" Duril asked patiently, although he had an inkling what it could be.

"It's called Nelsikkar, and it is where I was born. But the Sakka say that it might be gone. And no one knows where it really is."

"Maybe you should ask Demophios. He knows everything."

"His voice is silent now. I don't hear it anymore. I guess he, Amaranth, and Torgar, are confined to that other place, the one from which I came back with Varg. I think I'm on my own."

"No, not on your own," Duril reminded him. "Please, get down from there. I want to hug you, and I don't want to risk toppling us over."

Toru obeyed the gentle demand, jumping down and standing by Duril's side. He pressed his forehead against Duril's shoulder and let a heavy sigh emerge from the depths of his soul. "I should be happy. Hekastfet is no more, and I should now be enjoying our victory with you, and Varg, and Claw."

Duril continued to caress Toru's shoulders, drawing invisible circles to soothe the tension away. "I understand how you feel, Toru. You now know that you came from a certain place and you even remember your parents. That is not something you can or should ignore. It is a great thing that you eliminated Hekastfet from this world. But if your heart still yearns for something, listen to it."

"I don't know where to start. Or what I want," Toru complained.

That only made Duril hug him tightly. "I believe I can help you with that. You just said it. You want to find Nelsikkar."

"Not only Nelsikkar. There is also the place where my father came from. Niverborg. It is somewhere in the mountains. That's why his fur had white in it, not golden, like mine."

"Do you remember about that story Claw told us? About the Scarlet Peaks? The tales say that there is a wise man living at the top, in perfect solitude. But he might have answers, and we should search for him first, if we don't know where to start."

"Does Claw know how to find that old man?" Toru asked and pulled back a little.

Duril could read curiosity and hope in the beautiful golden eyes. "The Scarlet Peaks lie north of The Quiet Woods. If there is anyone who can guide us through those mountains, I believe it would

be him. There are also his many friends in The Quiet Woods, and Shearah. We can travel back there and see what they know as far as stories and whatnot. We have a place to start. Also, you said something about your father's people living in the mountains? I have seen maps of Eawirith while going through Elidias' books, and The Scarlet Peaks are the highest and widest mountain range in the world. Could it be that your father was born and lived there for a part of his life?"

"I remember how Torgar was supposed to travel with me to Niverborg. And there was a place, a pass, called Winterhelm. We could ask people at The Quiet Woods if they know of such a place."

"Yes, without a doubt." Duril kissed Toru softly. "Now, should we go back to bed?"

"I'd like that," Toru confirmed and took Duril by the shoulders.

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For some time, while standing out on that balcony, Toru had let himself be gripped by a sense of loneliness against which he had decided not to fight. But Duril had come and pulled him away from those thoughts that were both appealing and threatening to engulf him whole. Throughout his life, he had believed that he couldn't be hurt, because for that to happen, it would take something he didn't have to be attacked. Yet, it wasn't true, he had that place, locked inside of him, under lock and key, behind heavy bars, and now it was bursting his heart wide open.

He remembered his parents now. He could see them if he did as little as close his eyes. They were his, and he was theirs. Nothing and no one could take that away from him, ever again. No shroud of ignorance could ever descend over his eyes again.

His heart had felt like ice before Duril stepped out on the balcony to join him in his night musings. But now, that part of him was warm again. He nuzzled Duril's neck and ear as they walked back into the cozy bedroom.

Duril giggled softly. "You're not in the mood to sleep, are you?"

"No. Are you sleepy?"

"While you're trying to devour my ear like that? No, nothing could be further from my mind than sleep."

Toru pushed Duril toward the bed, while laughing in his ear. "Wait." He stopped upon seeing how sprawled out on the bed Varg and Claw were. Taking advantage of the fact that they were alone in that huge thing, they had taken over. "There's no room here."

Duril seemed as puzzled as he was. "I suppose we could just use the floor."

"Yes," Toru said slowly, "but I don't want that. I will push them to their side of the bed."

"How are you going to do that without waking them up?"

Duril's question was very much justified, so Toru leaned over Varg and examined him for a while. The wolfshifter was so gone to the world that Toru doubted anything would wake him up. He even pinched his cheek to see if there was any chance of that, while Duril protested his methods in a whisper.

Now convinced that he wouldn't have any trouble moving his friend around, despite his large size, he proceeded to grab him by one arm and pull him until he managed to roll Varg on top of Claw. Very satisfied with his results, he pulled at Claw's legs so that Varg could lie there as comfortably as possible. To make sure that was the case, he patted the bear's large belly a couple of times. It was firm, but provided enough cushioning, so Varg would sleep well.

Proud of his handiwork, he turned toward Duril with a huge smile. "What do you say? We have plenty of the bed to ourselves now."

The healer looked at their friends, stacked like pans, and then back at him. He didn't seem entirely convinced. "I hope they don't wake up with cramps in their muscles."

"If they do, it's their fault for trying to take over the bed. And I say that we've slept in worse conditions on our road here."

"Without a doubt," Duril agreed.

Toru didn't want to wait a moment longer. He grabbed Duril in his arms and lifted him off the floor. The healer laughed and ran his hand through his hair. Toru wasn't in the least concerned when he plopped Duril down on his back as they climbed into the large bed together.

"I missed you very much," he confessed once he had Duril half-naked under him.

Although the warm eyes confirmed that the feeling was mutual, Duril spoke the words, as well. "And I missed you, too, even more."

That was the only proof he required. He caught Duril's lips and licked his cute fangs. His actions were met with a lot more force than he expected. Duril was firm as he wrapped his arm around him and pulled him close. Shy Duril was what made Toru tick, but this slightly more aggressive version was turning him into a savage. He could no longer control his desire, and got rid of the rest of the clothes they both still had on. The only way was forward and when he finally found himself seated deep inside Duril's body, he moaned in pleasure.

Duril's nails dug deep into his back, urging him to move.

"It feels so good inside you," Toru whispered. "I like it the best when we're like this, together."

Duril kissed him fiercely. "And I like it when you talk less and go harder at it."

"Harder?" Toru asked.



Duril nodded. “Yes. I saw that you don’t hold back when you’re with Varg. You can do just the same with me.”

“You won’t mind?”

“Mind? I sincerely believe that I would like it very much.”

Toru checked Duril’s eyes for a brief moment to see if that was the whole truth. What he found there was much to his liking. So, he took hold of Duril’s hips and pulled him close, down on his shaft. Duril let out a loud moan and then, with a horrified expression, slapped one hand over his mouth.

“Am I too hard?” Toru asked.

“No, not at all,” Duril whispered. “I guess I was surprised by my own body’s reaction.”

“How does it feel?” Toru didn’t move and began caressing Duril’s manhood, which stood proud right in front of him. He began to rub up and down, which only made his lover squirm in newly found pleasure.

“You fill me so good, Toru,” Duril said, and by how he barely managed to get the words out, Toru could tell that he was being completely honest.

“But if I move--”

“Just do it,” Duril ordered. Then, more softly, “please.”

There was nothing soft, however, in the way he held Toru by the shoulders, forcing him to move. Their rapid breaths mingled, as Toru obliged and began pushing himself inside Duril with all his strength. Right away, Duril made his approval known through soft moans and groans that grew in intensity and urgency with every movement of his hips.

Encouraged by his lover’s body and sweet voice, Toru let go of all his pent-up desire. He now moved fast and pulled Duril to him, impaling him onto his manhood over and over, while his body shook in pleasure. At that moment, they were one, and they were happy. And Toru knew that he would never be alone again.

He was coming closer to an early release, but that moment, a very amused voice interrupted them while they were climbing toward the peak. “I can see that you two love sneaking about a bit too much.”

Toru remained implanted in Duril’s body and turned his head to give Varg as much of a reproachful look as he could, given the circumstances. “Duril and I were just in the middle of proving how much we missed each other.”

“I’m sure you were,” Varg said promptly and moved closer, clearly bent on doing something nefarious.

Toru gathered Duril possessively in his arms and lay on top of him, convinced that he truly didn’t want to share him, not just yet, not before he had his fill first. Duril wrapped his legs around him, seemingly in as much of a possessive mood as he was.

But Varg seemed to be completely impervious to their clear signs of wanting to be left alone with their pleasurable activities. Toru grunted when the wolf landed his heavy palm on his right butt cheek. However, the following moment, he was bucking his hips slightly up to meet Varg’s hand. The wolfshifter really knew what he was doing because now he was moving his hand lower, to caress the heavy sac and even lower. By the way Duril moaned softly, Toru could only imagine that Varg was caressing his backside, as well.

“I can see that you filled Duril properly. I wouldn’t expect less of you. But you can’t expect me to sit idly by while you go at it like this. You know, the bed shakes an awful lot.”

“It does?” Toru did a few tentative swings of his hips, making Duril bite his bottom lip and whisper a soft curse as he did so. Indeed, the bed moved with them, even if barely.

“I’d say,” Varg suggested, “that we should find out if the furniture in here is as sturdy as it should be for a palatial chamber.” Varg moved closer and caressed Toru’s hip. “Would that be all right with the two of you? I can always just sit on the side and watch or go outside and take care of myself. You two are quite the sight.”

There was no way they would want something like that. Toru at least knew he wouldn’t want to leave Varg out of it. Why go outside, when there was so much pleasure to be had while splitting it into three?

“No, don’t go. Duril, what do you think?”

“The only thing I regret is that I can’t see a lot,” Duril replied. “I’d love for Varg to join us.”

The wolfshifter chuckled and leaned over Toru’s shoulder to give Duril a kiss. “Toru, you will be feeling as full as Duril soon.”

He didn’t protest as Varg positioned himself behind him and began to press against the hole of his ass. In a strange enough way, he was already prepared for it. From the moment Varg had intruded on their little tryst, the thought of enjoying both his lovers at the same time had been in the forefront of his mind.

Right at that very moment, Varg obliged him without even realizing that he was doing it. Toru moved his hips slowly so that he could adjust his rhythm and sink into Duril with one thrust, and then impale himself on Varg’s shaft with the following buck of his hips.

“It is like you were meant to make love like this, between us,” Varg whispered with wonder in his voice. “Kitty, you have no idea how happy you are making me right now. I can hear Duril’s sweet voice and feel your amazing backside doing things to my manhood that I didn’t believe possible.”

“Is four a crowd, or can I join?”

Claw’s deep voice made them all turn their faces toward him.

Toru shivered with a new type of pleasure. The only way for Claw to join in was to thrust himself into Varg, and that meant that the wolfshifter would feel the same thing he was feeling right now. That sense of closeness and one of the strongest desires he had made a small grunt of acquiescence escape his lips. “Can Claw join us?” he asked in a trembling whisper as he moved faster without even realizing it. Duril’s soft moans turned into urgent encouragements.

“Easy, kitty,” Varg urged him to slow down while caressing his chest. “We might be done before Claw even has a chance to join us. Don’t you think that might be a bit too cruel?”

Toru reined in his impulse to just go faster and reach his peak. Varg was right. One of the most tremendous pleasures to feel was when something like that was postponed, all the while teetering on the edge of that blissful sensation. So, he obeyed Varg’s demand and decreased the pace of his hips. The small sigh of relief from Duril confirmed that this was mostly done better when things were taken slowly.

“Claw, will you go behind Varg? I want to feel when you go inside him,” Toru said in a breathless whisper.

“That is exactly what I had in mind,” Claw confirmed.

The hitched hiss escaping from Varg’s lips let him know that the bearshifter was already doing it. Then, the wolfshifter relaxed for a few moments as he was given the opportunity to breathe. Toru knew how deceptive it could be, but it didn’t make what followed any less pleasurable. Varg wrapped his arms tightly around his chest and began to move, helping him fall into the same rhythm, along with him.

Duril was now thrashing and quivering as Toru moved faster and faster. He felt the entire weight of the wolfshifter being propelled against him, only to gather like a pool of desire at the small of his back and lower. Half his body was on fire, the sensation of fullness inside his ass matched only by his manhood being wrapped in the fiery heat that was Duril’s body.

“Claw, have you always been so awfully big?” Varg whispered, barely getting the words out.

“I might just be growing larger and larger as I enjoy being part of you,” the bear replied.

It wasn’t his usual voice, the one used for joking and pulling the other’s leg. No, this time, Claw’s voice was deep and sensual, and Toru felt his ears twitching, wanting more of that sound. Varg

caught one of them between his lips and began lapping at it slowly. At the same time, Claw was starting to grunt, and the low reverberation of the sounds he was making turned Toru's mind into a pleasant jelly.

The strong bear's voice mingled with Duril's soft pleas and Varg's urgent moans. Then, he realized that he was not a slouch in making strange sounds, either. No, it was his voice that rose above the others', asking them to go faster and deeper. Varg slammed hard into him, half forced to do so by Claw's impressive weight pressing into him, half by his own volition. Toru couldn't remember if Varg had ever been inside him so deeply and fully. It was a different kind of making love, one that took them all the more higher, like they had never been before in their lives.

Was it possible to feel so completely loved? If it hadn't been happening to him right now, he would have denied it all, not because he didn't have complete love for his companions, but because he had no idea that different beings could be pulled so close together, to the point that they made an even greater whole.

It was happening to him, and not only. It was also happening to Varg, Claw, and Duril. The healer sank his nails into Toru's shoulder and began to cry out. A ripple went through them, as Duril began releasing all of his desire. Toru watched in fascinated wonder as Duril's manhood appeared capable of going on forever, firing rope after rope of semen that spread all over his chest.

That was enough for him to make him realize that he was not capable of withholding himself any longer. He moved deep and hard into Duril, the healer's satiated body welcoming him without the tightness around his manhood loosening. Just as it had just happened with Duril, he was pouring all of himself inside his lover for a time that felt like it would never end.

"Kitty, damn heavens and earth," Varg cursed through tight lips.

Toru could barely feel how Varg's fingers dug deep into his hips, holding him steady, although he still wanted to move just a little bit more and meet Duril's warm body a few more times.

Varg's growls were low and sensual and desperate as he did the same to Toru. It was beyond any earthly pleasure to experience how the wolf's hard shaft was pulsing inside him, releasing wave after wave of seed and filling him up to the brim.

It took a bit for Toru to realize that Varg was still keening softly even as his manhood slowed down. Then he knew that Claw must have been pulled into the same madness of love as the rest of them. Soon, besides their mingled soft moans, only the bearshifter's shouts of victory could be heard.

When they all dropped together on the bed, there was no one left unsatisfied.

"Now I understand," Varg said in a ragged whisper after a while.

"What?" Duril asked.

“I understand why Toru wanted to know if this bed could hold all of us.”

“It looks like it did. They make sturdy things here, in Scercendusa,” Claw pointed out.

The words had barely left the bear’s lips when an ominous cracking sound made all of them freeze, and, at the drop of a hat, they all felt the bed under them giving way. The four legs on which it stood must have broken at the same time, because their fall was sudden but even.

They all let out a small sound of surprise, and then they started laughing.

“This will be a bit hard to explain,” Varg commented. “I mean, these nice people offered us bedrooms, but we decided to pile up together as if we were still stranded in a cave somewhere.”

“I will apologize,” Toru promised.

“No need to. Maybe you don’t know, but you have a master carpenter among you,” Claw said. “First thing in the morning, I’ll go borrow a hammer and some nails, and I’ll make sure that the bed is as good as new. It wouldn’t do to become notorious for breaking things, not after we saved the city. Oh, my apologies, after Toru saved the city.”

“You all helped me,” Toru said. “I’m sure that I wouldn’t have been able to do it all without you. All of you. And that is why I must ask you to join me on another adventure. That is, if you wouldn’t rather forget about the road and settle somewhere you like.” He said the last words quickly, unsure of whether everyone in the room would be as enticed by the idea as he was. No matter what great friends they were, they were all released from their bond after putting their lives on the line like that.

“Do you really have to ask?” Varg said and wrapped one arm around his shoulders to pull him close and kiss his temple. “I’d go with you anywhere. Don’t you forget, you, Duril and Claw are my pack now. I’m bound to you.”

“What will this adventure be about?” Claw asked.

It was only fair to be honest to them. “I want to find the place where I came from. The place where I was born. It is called Nelsikkar, and chances are it doesn’t exist anymore, but I have faith. And I will need your help, Claw, because we will travel back to The Quiet Woods, and from there to The Scarlet Peaks. If you want to remain at your friends’ side--”

“Not if I can help you find your place of birth,” Claw said promptly. “And as much as I love everyone at The Quiet Woods, I’m already too used to being with you lot. You’re my lovers and my friends. Just don’t let Beast and Willow know that I’d rather be adventuring with you. I’ll never be the same with them as I am with you. You’re my other family.”

“That’s very good to hear,” Toru said and reached for Claw with one hand to give him a squeeze.

“What is that you want to do at The Scarlet Peaks?” Claw asked.

“You told us about that old sage who lives there,” Varg reminded him. “You want to ask him about Nelsikkar, don’t you, Toru?”

“Yes. The Sakka don’t know where Nelsikkar used to be located. It could be very far away. Demophios doesn’t talk to me anymore, although I don’t remember anything about offending him. I guess he’s trapped in that other world.”

“I think the same, too,” Varg confirmed. “But we’re not helpless. Do you know how to take us to The Scarlet Peaks, Claw?”

“Yes, I know the road there. But we can, indeed, stop by The Quiet Woods and gather some supplies. The path through the mountains is treacherous, and we might have to go hungry for a long time if we don’t bring food with us. And we must be careful about eating snow, too. Mostly it’s harmless, and we don’t get sick like humans anyway, but there are all kinds of rumors. Such as that it might make you mad.”

“I don’t want to eat snow instead of meat,” Toru said, with all the conviction he could muster.

“I said it mostly for the sake of our thirst. There are rivers crossing the mountains, but we should bring water with us, too. And a lot of warm clothes. I believe that I will have to put my tribe at The Quiet Woods to some serious work,” Claw said.

“We will help. And we will repay them, whatever it is that they want in return,” Duril said. “It will be good to talk to Shearah some more. Maybe she has some good advice to give us.”

“Of course,” Claw confirmed. “If that old sage truly exists, we will find him. Before that, it would be for the better if you asked the Sakka about everything they know, Toru.”

“I will, but I thought I should allow them a bit of a break. They were so brave,” Toru said.

“They stood like a wall,” Duril added. “I have never seen a more valiant group of people.”

“And they’re tiny,” Claw said with a chuckle. “Yes, I would say that they are able to be of invaluable help. They were a sight, all black from head to toes.”

“You should have seen them, taking the brunt of all that remained of that evil,” Duril added. “I thought they would be done for.”

“Then that is something that I will do as soon as we wake up in the morning,” Toru said. “Who wants to come with me? I’m not that much of a scholar and searching through all their texts sound very boring. I wouldn’t even know where to search, to begin with.”

“I will come,” Duril said.

“And I will be busy repairing the bed we just broke,” Claw reminded them all.

“That leaves me where?” Varg asked.

“You will start your apprenticeship as a carpenter,” Claw suggested right away. “I might need the help, and I’d love to lord over you a little bit.”

“I’m sure you would,” Varg commented dryly. “But doesn’t anyone else besides me think that this bed feels a lot more comfortable like this, without legs, and close to the floor?”

“It doesn’t matter what we think,” Claw replied, completely unfazed. “We are well-behaved shifters. We are not going to leave a bad impression on these people.”

“I don’t really think that would be possible, not after Toru made sure Hekastfet was destroyed and their city liberated from evil,” Duril pointed out.

“Don’t ruin my chance of putting Varg to work under me,” Claw joked. He grunted as, most probably, the wolfshifter hit him in the ribs more than just playfully. “You two go see the little scholars. They might know a lot but they wouldn’t keep so many texts unless there’s a chance they might forget something.”

Toru agreed wholeheartedly. He truly hoped that the Sakka had some answers, if not about Nelsikkar, at least about a smaller place, like Winterhelm. And he was glad that he would have Duril with him, not only because the healer knew how to read and did so well, but because he was always such a great support for him.

The Sakka were tiny and brave, and they had, indeed, stood like a wall before Hekastfet so that the evil didn’t poison the city again. In their books and tomes, something about Nelsikkar, Niverborg, or Winterhelm had to exist, of that he was convinced.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven – A Path to Nowhere

Toru and Duril walked through the narrow streets, carefully keeping close to the walls. “Do you see anyone?” Toru whispered. After leaving the palace, they had thought it would be an easy trip to the place where the Sakka resided. The tiny helpers still preferred their hiding places at the foot of the ruined walls, and they weren’t hard to find.

However, as soon as they had put one foot outside the palace, people everywhere wanted to touch them and talk to them. At first, Toru had been patient, and Duril had been courteous, answering their questions and accepting various gifts, but their attention soon became overwhelming. For that reason, Toru had invoked urgent chores that needed attending to and had withdrawn back into the palace, with Duril in tow.

The second attempt to leave the palace had involved much more dangerous actions. In his tiger form, and with Duril on his back, Toru had found a way to get out of the place without any curious eyes seeing them. Descending the wall had been a perilous adventure, so Toru was all the more grateful for Duril’s bravery. Once they found their feet touching solid ground, they had opted for the labyrinth of narrow pathways that crossed the city and could lead them to their destination.

Fortunately for them, these streets were not as populated. Duril had brought some long capes to hide underneath, so they hadn’t been recognized so far.

“I think we’re safe,” Duril whispered after observing the quiet streets up and down. It helped that it was late in the afternoon, and everyone was taking a nap. Toru would have been in favor of such a thing as well, but in the end, he had to admit that Duril was right and that hour was the most favorable for going to meet the Sakka.

“What will the Sakka do?” Toru wondered out loud, as they continued their hurried walk.

“What do you mean?” Duril asked.

“Their purpose was to take care of the tigers, but now--” He stopped abruptly. It was hard to say that there were no tigers, and he was the last of his kind. There were other tigers across the world, without a doubt, because he had seen them with his own two eyes, but they weren’t his kin.

“Their purpose is not lost. It will just turn into something else. I’m sure of it,” Duril said. “And we can just ask them. Scercendusa needs their guidance and wisdom. Now that they’re no longer pariahs and must hide from view.”

Toru just nodded. He had so many things to ask the Sakka. Would they be able to give him the answers he was seeking? He wasn’t entirely sure, but it was worth a try. Seeing how he had nothing to begin with, any little thing they knew would be helpful.

That and traveling to the Scarlet Peaks. “I’m so glad Claw wants to stay with us.”



“I am, too,” Duril confirmed. “He has a special bond with Varg.”

“Varg has quite a strange pack,” Toru said. “A tiger, a bear, and the most handsome half-human, half-orc.”

“You always want to make me blush,” Duril scolded him with affection in his voice and eyes. “But I suppose that there aren’t many half-human, half-orc people you’ve met, so it must be easy to be the most handsome of all.”

Toru bit his lower lip in frustration. How come he hadn’t realized that he hadn’t actually seen any other people like Duril? He wasn’t allowed the time needed to apologize, because Duril kissed his cheek quickly. “I’m glad you think that,” the healer said. “Now let’s find the Sakka. I’m sure they must be busy tidying up their headquarters, but I believe they will have time for us.”

Toru nodded and began walking faster. Evening would be quickly upon them if they dallied for too long, and evening meant dinner at the palace, the kind he hadn’t gotten to enjoy the day before. What Claw and Duril had told him about that meal was enough to make his mouth water.

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They found the Sakka where they expected them to be, hidden in that place at the foot of the walls, even though the tall construction was no more. Here and there, the Sakka’s quarters no longer had roofs, and indeed, a good number of them was already hard at work making the necessary repairs.

As soon as they were noticed, one of the many tiny workers hurried through a door and a moment later Beanstalk emerged, his arms wide open. “My lord,” he said, his eyes bright and his hands covered in white dust. “You should have sent word that you were coming. We are not fit to welcome you.”

Toru surprised Beanstalk by taking him into his arms and giving him a hug. “I’m not like the rest of the tigers you took care of in the past, Bean.”

“Yes, indeed,” Beanstalk agreed, slightly dizzy and holding onto his cap when Toru finally put him down. “I keep forgetting that. But you are still our lord and master.”

“And as your lord and master,” Toru said in an emphatic tone, “I command you to enjoy a bit of rest. Do you all need to continue to live here, in hiding? I’m sure there is enough room at the palace or elsewhere for you to call home. Somewhere a lot more comfortable.”

Beanstalk nodded pensively and let his hand wander over the scratched wall to his right for a few moments. “This has been our home for millenia. The city rebuilt on top of us, time and again. And all these long years and centuries that we’ve spent waiting have left their mark on us. I don’t think any of the Sakka would want to live elsewhere.”

“At least, you should consider some windows and a few proper doors,” Toru suggested. “I’m the kind that likes it best when sleeping under the naked sky, but that’s me.”

Beanstalk laughed. “I’m glad to hear that we have a master that’s not as fussy as his predecessors.”

That simple mention made Toru remember why he was there in the first place. “I have questions to ask,” he announced.

Beanstalk gestured for him and Duril to follow him into a small room, well-aired and lit through a large vent in the ceiling. It took Toru some time to realize that the vent was actually a hole through the wall that had been there before and for centuries. Otherwise, the room was clean and cozy. Toru noticed that large pillows were placed on the floor, and there were fluffy rugs, no one like the others. He wasn’t the type to comment on how the Sakka chose to decorate their rooms and sat on a big pillow, at Beanstalk’s invitation.

It seemed like their host had noticed the question in their eyes, even if they didn’t say anything. “The spoils of our fight for survival,” Beanstalk commented cheerfully. “We usually stole only what we needed, and some of us decided that we needed some pillows to go with this room.”

“The people are going to give you everything you need, now that you are out in the open,” Duril said.

Toru nodded, as he completely agreed with the healer. “You don’t have to hide anymore.”

Beanstalk waved. “We’ll find ways to help that will warrant honest payment. I can’t truly speak for Pie. He might continue to steal an apple here and there. Old habits die hard.” He climbed a wooden ladder that he positioned in front of a bookshelf that stretched upward so high that Toru had to crane his neck to see its top.

“I visited Elidias in Shroudharbor,” Duril explained. “I spent days in his library. Yet, I couldn’t find anything about what Toru would like to find out now.”

Toru only then realized that he hadn’t said what he was there for. “I need to find about Nelsikkar, Bean,” he added right away.

“I knew you’d come to ask about it. Now that you have memories about your grand origins, you want to find it. Am I correct?” Bean turned on the ladder, making the ancient thing tremble its rickety old bones for a moment.

“Yes,” Toru confirmed. “Are you sure you don’t want some help with that? I could reach the higher shelves.”

“But you don’t know what to look for,” Beanstalk pointed out. “I do. Where was it now?” he wondered, but it was evident that he was talking mostly to himself. “Ah, there it is.” He grabbed a dusty tome with both hands and balanced it by leaning back.

Toru couldn't wait anymore. He had practiced patience during the last days, but it was hardly an easy thing for him to wait longer than he could bear. He jumped to his feet and caught Beanstalk, along with his tome, bringing them both down. Aware that his actions might put off the head of the Sakka, he was as ceremonious as he could muster while planting Beanstalk in his chair at the tall desk.

The Sakka, however, seemed completely undisturbed. "This," he said while caressing the worn cover of the tome and then blowing the dust off, "is the book of places."

Toru nodded as if he could really understand what that meant. Those places had to include Nelsikkar, too. Did the book say anything on how to get there? It would definitely help a lot with their future quest. An emotion he didn't recognize gripped his heart. It wasn't precisely happiness as he had known that feeling in the past. This had sharp edges that hurt, too; but it wasn't sadness, either, as it was sweet in a dull way that moved like a wave through him. He scrunched up his nose, as prickly tiny thorns irritated his eyes.

He sneezed, blowing off the remaining dust on the tome cover in one go.

Beanstalk laughed. "Bless you," he said and opened the large book.

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During their time together, Duril had come to know Toru well, and at that very moment, he could tell that the young tiger could barely contain his curiosity blended with a different kind of emotion. It was an important moment, so Duril got up from the comfortable pillow on which he had sat until then and walked over to his friend. He linked his hand with Toru's and held it, while he leaned over, just as curious as his lover about the Sakka's ancient tome and the wealth of knowledge it contained.

Beanstalk opened the book, turning the pages with the utmost care. His hands were wrinkled and carried the signs of time in more ways than one, and, for a moment, Duril wondered how many things the Sakka knew and how much they still remembered, seeing how they had lived for so long.

"It is for this reason that we keep everything written down," Beanstalk said as if he could read his mind. "Together, we, the Sakka, know everything. But take only one of us, separate him from the rest, and the only thing you will get will be nothing but a sliver of the truth."

Duril didn't question how it was possible for Beanstalk to understand so much without even hearing what others wanted to say. He had gotten used to this sort of magic ever since he had walked the world by Toru's side.

"Is it a compendium of all the places in Eawirith?" he asked politely.

“Not quite,” Beanstalk said. “That would have been a much larger work than this one. Nobody would be able to lift it off a shelf. No shelf would be able to hold it. No, this is a book about hidden places.”

Duril didn’t want to behave in a more excited manner than Toru. Hidden places? Were they many? By the size of the tome, without a doubt.

Beanstalk turned the pages slowly. Duril craned his neck, trying to read the small neat letters. Quickly, he realized that the symbols used to make words made no sense to him. They belonged to a language he had never seen written in his life. He doubted he would understand it even if he heard it spoken. It had to be the language of the Sakka, as ancient as they were.

“We had to protect our knowledge,” Beanstalk explained. “We couldn’t allow our writings to fall into the wrong hands.”

“Will you teach your language to others now?” Duril asked.

“We will try. Maybe we’ll find a few scholars curious enough about our writings to make the attempt,” Beanstalk said. “But we will be rewriting everything in the languages spoken all over the world. That should give us several centuries to keep ourselves busy.”

Duril nodded. It looked like no one had to worry about the Sakka remaining without a purpose.

“We will also have to write about how Toru defeated Hekastfet so that it remains known for all the generations to come,” Beanstalk continued. “But first, let us tend to the task at hand. I will read to you about Nelsikkar. Young scholar,” he addressed Duril, “stack some pillows and take a seat by the desk. Some of the things I’ll tell you are better kept in black and white so that you can revisit them later.”

“Are you going to tell us about how to get to Nelsikkar?” Toru asked.

“I will tell you everything we know,” Beanstalk explained patiently. “We’re bound to this place, we always have been. What we know of Nelsikkar comes from the tigers who have come here for millennia. But they couldn’t tell us more than they were allowed. The place where Nelsikkar stood has always been a well-kept secret.”

“Only that Hekastfet found it, right?” Toru asked with pain in his voice. “He found it and destroyed it.”

Beanstalk appeared to be lost in thought. “He needed to lure the Olliandran from their place. Did he ever truly find it? We cannot know for sure.”

“A lot of people left at the same time as me, I remember,” Toru said. “My parents and the nobles left for Scercendusa, and the children and everyone who wasn’t a fighter left for Niverborg. But I

don't know if other people stayed behind. I don't know much." Toru clenched his fists in frustration.

Duril caressed his arm. "You were a child, Toru." The young tiger had told him some of the things he remembered of his childhood. Nelsikkar, as it lived in Toru's memories, seemed to have been a blessed place. Even if they only found ruins and scattered remnants of lives once lived, they would still search for it. It was a call deeper than blood, the call of home. It meant family, bonds, memories, and everything that made someone who they were. Duril understood it, as much as part of his life had been lived while he was shunned by others. He remembered Whitekeep and would always do so.

"Let's see," Beanstalk said and placed a finger on top of a page. "Nelsikkar, the home of Olliandran. House of Tigers, Heart of the World."

"Heart of the World?" Toru asked. "Why is it called that?"

"A most gracious name for a place revered," Beanstalk explained.

Duril had plenty of questions of his own, and this one time decided not to keep silent. "The tigers saved the world time and again. Why weren't they celebrated? In history texts, in songs and fairytales?"

"The world was reborn anew each time," Beanstalk explained. "A part of it, the one tainted by Hekastfet. The evil had never conquered all, as much as it spread its tendrils of darkness as far and wide as it could. The ones who would have remembered died; the rest of them, they never knew."

"A well-kept secret," Duril murmured under his breath. "Such a strange thing."

"In Nelsikkar, they must have kept a different history to remember. It was thought wise for no one to know where the tigers came from."

"I have another question," Toru intervened. "My father was from Niverborg. And he came to live in Nelsikkar. So he and his people must have known how to get there somehow."

Beanstalk nodded. "Indeed, you are right, my lord."

"Don't call me that," Toru said and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Just call me by my name."

"As you wish." Beanstalk inclined his head in a courteous manner.

"Do you know where Niverborg is?" Duril asked what he thought to be the next most sensible question.

Beanstalk looked over his shoulder at the bookshelves. "Niverborg was never one of the hidden places," he said thoughtfully. "Only that we haven't heard from there in a very long time. From

the bits and pieces brought to us by travelers from all over the world, we thought it to have been destroyed.”

“By Hekastfet?”

“We could not be sure, but yes. We are bound to this place, as I told you, and that means that we don’t see with our own eyes what happens beyond the outskirts of Scercendusa. Still, we have our means to find out. We listen to the earth and the wind.”

Those last words reminded Duril of Shearah. In a way, he felt bonded to everyone they had met along the way, and that was especially true about the mystical beings they had encountered. He wanted to ask Beanstalk if he knew of her, but this wasn’t about the things he desired, but about Toru’s need to find a way toward his place of origin.

“About Nelsikkar,” Toru reminded the Sakka.

“Of course.” Beanstalk leaned over the tome and placed his finger at the top of the page again. “Nelsikkar,” he began reciting, “has grown on blessed grounds. Here, people say, waters are the sweetest, and trees carry fruit, regardless of season.”

“I remember that,” Toru interrupted. “There were so many trees everywhere. And they had fruit, even in winter. Although, winters in Nelsikkar were always mild.”

“Could it be a place located more to the south?” Duril wondered.

“Tigers like heat. Not all of them,” Beanstalk said.

“There are also my father’s people who live--” Toru stopped for a moment. “Who lived in the mountains. I like fair weather, but I’m not scared of cold.”

“That must be your father’s blood, running through your veins,” Beanstalk said, while nodding thoughtfully. “Nelsikkar,” he continued, “is said to rise between two arms of the same river that split and come together again further up toward the forests.”

“What forests?” Toru asked. “Does it say there? And who wrote about it?”

“We all did,” Beanstalk explained. “Whatever one of us found out, we came here to write down.”

It was an astonishing fact in itself that the Sakka could all have the same neat writing. It had to be because of the common consciousness they seemed to share. Duril was curious about it all, but even more about what the ancient tome could tell them about the place Toru had come from. “Are there any detailed maps of Eawirith, here in the city?” he asked.

“There are,” Beanstalk replied. “We’ve also searched for such places where a river would split in two and then reunite. We haven’t found it, at least not drawn on a map. But we will supply you

with everything you need so that you can see it for yourself. Your keen eyes might discover clues where we've failed before."

Duril doubted there was anything ever treated lightly by these tiny beings with memories of millennia and noble tasks hanging on their shoulders. However, it was ever worth looking at things with a fresh pair of eyes or more. Maybe they could read a map in a different way.

Beanstalk continued to read from his tome. "Olliandran's seat of power is, therefore, isolated from the world. Only tigers belonging to the tribe can cross the rapid waters of the river."

"What is the river called?" Duril inquired.

"One arm is called Jade, the other Gold," Beanstalk explained. He looked the page up and down, and then his gaze turned inward. A frown deepened between his eyes. "I don't see the name of the river anywhere. And I don't remember it, either." He appeared slightly confused by that discovery.

"Is it possible that no one ever told you its name?" Duril offered an explanation.

Beanstalk shook his head in denial. "That is hardly possible... could it be that whoever learned about it didn't write it down?" The last words were mostly said to himself. He continued to shake his head, this time in undisguised frustration.

Such an oversight seemed unusual for any of the Sakka. Duril leaned over and stared at the page, even if he didn't understand the language and couldn't tell if something was amiss or not. Still, something caught his eye when Beanstalk turned the page again. The back of the page was covered in the same neat writing, but Duril quickly realized that something was, indeed, amiss.

And it wasn't something that had anything to do with understanding the language used. Duril put his finger at the bottom of the page. "Is this sentence unfinished?" The following page started with a new paragraph.

Beanstalk's eyes quickly followed his pointing finger. "You're right, master healer. But that means--" He stopped and moved his finger along the page, close to the interior edge. "There is no page missing. And I recognize most of the knowledge written in here. Most of it I can recall in my sleep. But this..." he followed again the unfinished paragraph. "This is the most unusual. Someone must have wiped a line of writing. The last on the page."

"Who could have done it?" Duril asked.

Toru nodded, too. "I'd like to know, as well."

"Whoever did wipe the line did so with magic," Beanstalk murmured as he moved his face close to the page as if he was talking to it. "This is no usual wipe. The ink was returned back to the bottle," he added with a hint of surprise in his voice.

“Is such magic in the power of the Sakka?” Toru asked.

“No, and we all know each other. Someone must have come in here, without our knowledge.” Beanstalk now looked disturbed.

“Could it have been Hekastfet?” Toru intervened again.

“Yes, it could have. He only grew smarter and more cunning with each millennia,” Beanstalk explained. “And that must be how he could reach Nelsikkar.”

“The man without a face,” Toru exclaimed. “There was someone like that when I was forced to leave the place, along with the other people of my tribe. When mother and father left to wage war against Hekastfet.”

Beanstalk was stunned. He leaned back in his chair, with a bewildered expression on his face. “We failed you, my lord,” he whispered.

“It wasn’t you,” Toru said in a calming voice. Duril was prouder and prouder of him. The young tiger was proving not only brave and fearless, but also wise, as more and more things happened and he made happen. “And he didn’t succeed. Not completely. If there is something of Nelsikkar that still remains, I will find it. But you were saying something about how only tigers could cross the river. I remember merchants and other people coming. How did they cross the river? And didn’t they know the location of Nelsikkar? Maybe the information is written elsewhere, if not in your tome. Who knows? Maybe there’s a merchant somewhere who remembers how to get there.”

Duril could tell that Toru was getting more and more excited about the possibility. He had to admit that it was an idea that couldn’t be overlooked.

“There were people allowed to come into Nelsikkar, yes,” Beanstalk confirmed. “But I’m sure they all said the same thing...” He let his words fade, as he began to look through the text. “Oh, yes, this is where it is. It says here: Going into Nelsikkar is like following a path to nowhere. Merchants and other people who visited Olliandran’s majestic seat of power all say the same thing. That after they are marked with the sign of the powerful tribe, they embark on a journey like no other. They travel by boat, but they don’t cross a river. They describe it as if they had been traveling through a thick fog. They also say that there are tigershifters guarding these crossing points, and only with them at their posts they can get to the other side. Yet, when they arrive, the weather is the fairest they have ever witnessed, and the fog is no more.”

“That messenger of Hekastfet, he must have known how to fool those guardians,” Toru said in a whisper. “Do you believe that there are traces of Hekastfet still left in the world, Bean? That some of his acolytes might still be out there?”

“Evil never disappears completely from the world.” Beanstalk sounded wise as he pronounced those words. “But what came of Hekastfet is no more.”



“That’s too bad,” Toru said with a frustrated huff. “I would have chased them down to the last one. What else is said there about this path to nowhere?”

“These are the accounts taken from travelers that we, the Sakka, met throughout centuries. There were long periods of time when there was peace that we didn’t hear of Nelsikkar at all. So, it wasn’t that unusual. Until after the last tiger before Toru came, and no matter how much we searched for any signs that the place was still there, we couldn’t find any. Until Toru came to Scercendusa, we didn’t know for sure whether all this quiet was the result of Hekastfet being inactive or because no one could come from there anymore. We’ve lived through uncertain times.”

“But what about my parents? Did they fight here?”

Beanstalk considered his next words carefully. “We felt their presence, yes. But we weren’t witnesses to what happened. Hekastfet must have used trickery to enslave them. We didn’t have a bond with them, like we do with Toru.”

“They walked into a trap,” Toru said slowly. “What else can you tell us from the pages you have on Nelsikkar?”

“The population of tigers can be numbered in several thousands,” Beanstalk continued to read. “They are a proud tribe and noble. Conflicts are settled through a ceremonial fight. No one is ever killed during these confrontations, and the defeated must pay his or her respects to the champion. There are many other wonderful things that are peculiar and pertain only to this place, such as an incredible display of cured meat recipes that only the people working in the kitchens at the palace know how to make.”

“That’s good to hear,” Toru said and nodded. “I knew all my hunger for meat had to come from somewhere.”

Duril began scribbling down all the important details Beanstalk gave them. They would surely serve them later in their quest to find Nelsikkar.

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Toru couldn’t say that he was too happy with what they had learned from the Sakka. Beanstalk wanted to help them, yes, but it looked like not even he, with all his knowledge, could direct them to a clear path that would lead them to Nelsikkar.

“What do you make of it, Duril? About this path to nowhere? Could it be that my parents’ palace and my place of birth are not even on the face of this world?”

“It did cross my mind for a while, but I don’t think that’s true. And there are two possibilities that I’m seeing,” Duril replied. “If Nelsikkar is still alive and thriving, then that means that there are tigers there. If we get close, they must feel you, or you them.”

“I’ve traveled to many places,” Toru pointed out. “What if I stumbled upon it by accident, and I didn’t even know it?”

“I don’t think that’s possible. I think you would have known it in your heart, despite your mind not remembering it.”

“But if there are tigers there, who’s leading them? What are they doing? Do they even know I exist?”

“Allow me to explain what my thoughts are. The fog, the path to nowhere, these are things that must have been sustained by the tigers. They are the ones protecting the place. So, if it’s still there, and there are tigers living in Nelsikkar still, that’s ideal. Why they don’t know you or remember you, that’s a mystery waiting to be solved. The other possibility is that,” Duril stopped and sighed for a moment, “it was, indeed, destroyed. Maybe the tigers from your tribe scattered all over the world. And no one is there to keep the fog up.”

“Which means,” Toru concluded, “that we should at least find ruins and things like that, right?”

“That’s what I’m thinking, yes,” Duril confirmed. “Either way, we must find it. And Toru, know this, even if you find the place in ruins, it doesn’t mean that your tribe is no more. From what you told me, the messenger of Hekastfet was after you. Maybe the others just continued their trip and found a new home in Niverborg, with your father’s people.”

“So, we must reach Niverborg, after all.”

“Beanstalk helped me transcribe the pages describing Niverborg and its location. I’d say that it’s a good thing that we’re heading for The Scarlet Peaks anyway. Niverborg is on the other side of the mountain.”

“I would like to see the hermit first. He can tell us the fastest way to Niverborg, too, don’t you think?”

“We will do just as you wish, Toru. It is your quest, and we’re coming with you because we believe in you. I would love to meet your father’s people.”

“If they are still there,” Toru said and let his eyes wander over the streets of the city he had saved, but to which he still remained a stranger. A new hunger was born in his heart, a hunger for a home.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight – The Call of Home

They would soon be gone from this place, as well. Toru could hardly believe that it had all come to an end. The fight had been long and had taken its toll on all of them, but the truth was that they had emerged victorious. It still felt like only yesterday that all the other things had happened, such as the attack on Whitekeep, battling the ghosts in Vilemoor, or going against the merchants and the enchanted shroud in Shroudharbor. He didn't have a tome to write in like Duril had, and he didn't know how to paint those signs on the page, yet all that history was inside him, in his mind and soul, and he could recall it just by closing his eyes.

His feet dangling above the city below, the breeze rushing through his hair, all made him feel like he truly sat on top of the world. Without asking to be a ruler of people, without even dreaming of ever becoming the hero of such places, there he was, and it was because of him that an evil like Hekastfet had been driven from the world.

It had all been written in his blood, even before he had been born, if he were to believe everything the Sakka had told him from their old books. Just as all the tigers before him, who had come here to Scercendusa to confront Hekastfet, his fate had been written for him.

Up to a point. That was the thing that mesmerized Toru the most. He was different from all his ancestors and the ones that had come before him. He was like them, he had come from the same place, from the same line of shapeshifters, a line of royal blood, as he had been told, yet his story was different.

He had never gone to battle alone. No, he had been surrounded by friends, accompanied by them, and they had all fought by his side, even when the odds were stacked against them. That made his adventure one of a kind, and Toru was confident, beyond any trace of a doubt, that his friends thought just the same. Varg, with his penchant for leading, with his brave heart and quick wit, had often seen through the lies and deceit that the enemy had tried to ensnare them with. And Claw, a friend who had joined them later, had rushed to their aid without asking for anything in return; always one with a good word or a joke to help them along their path without ever forgetting that they were meant to walk it.

And, although he thought of him last at the moment, the one who came first in his heart, Duril, with his soul of gold, with his kind way of being, the healer, the one to soothe all wounds, he had come into this just as selflessly, and Toru knew that he loved him for it more than he would ever be able to love anyone else. As much as he loved Varg, it was a love born out of respect and recognition of a fellow shapeshifter. And he cared for Claw, too, and loved him, as well; the bearshifter was like an older brother, who always had his back.

Not the same he could say about Duril. His love for the healer was like no other. It was as if his body and soul had been missing bits and pieces, and they became whole only when they touched each other. Toru sighed as he looked into the distance. There was an entire world out there, beyond

the horizon, beyond Scercendusa, beyond his battles against Hekastfet. And he would, once more, step into that world and follow a different call.

The call of home. He understood it now, all the better because of what he had remembered about his childhood and his parents. Beanstalk and none of the Sakka had been able to tell him more than he already knew about Raine and Aneros, his mother and his father, the ones who had brought him into this world and cared for him as much as they had been able to. They had been snatched from him, and despite not knowing that for the greater part of his life, the knowledge by itself was enough to press against his heart with a dull knife. He found himself incapable of bleeding for them, in the same way that he would bleed for his friends and lovers now, but the pain was still there.

He closed his eyes to recall all that he had seen of his parents here, at the domestikos' palace. He could still see them in his mind if he tried hard enough. Especially his father, who had sacrificed himself, even if he had been nothing but an enslaved ghost. His spirit had gone to Toru, no matter in what state Aneros had found himself.

“Mother, father,” he said softly while the winds of Scercendusa caressed his face, “I will find Nelsikkar. I will find your home. My home.”

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Varg observed Toru from afar. As of late, he had noticed the young tiger's propensity to seek solitude, and he knew that such a thing demanded respect from the rest of them. Winning against the worst evil of all time had turned the tigershifter into a more mature version of himself. To watch him grow under his very eyes meant a lot to Varg. So many generations of wolves had done the same before; he remembered them, each and every one. His pack was still alive, even if many of them had vanished. They had been revenged. For that reason, Varg had lit a few candles at the chapel inside the palace, a structure meant to welcome all people and shifters. He had asked the Sakka, and they had confirmed that no matter what anyone believed in, they would be welcome there.

Duril wrapped his arm around Varg's waist. “He has been doing that a lot lately,” the healer pointed out. “What do you think?”

“He's growing up,” Varg offered his precise thoughts on the matter. “He's pondering over the last events, for sure. And over the implication of his parents in these affairs.”

“Knowing what we told you about Nelsikkar and what the Sakka gave us, do you reckon that our itinerary is worth pursuing?”

Varg nodded. “Traveling through the mountains is not going to be easy, but I believe that what we will discover will be worth it.”

“I’ve seen snow in my life and encountered plenty of harsh weather, but I must admit that I’m not sure how we can prepare properly for what awaits us on our path to The Scarlet Peaks.”

“You are, indeed, at the greatest disadvantage,” Varg said. “We all have our coats.”

“And I have orc blood. The nights in the desert can be freezing,” Duril reminded him.

“Of course. Far be it from me to consider you some weakling,” Varg said with a smile.

Duril moved slightly away from him. “We should get ready for the first leg of our trip. We will travel to The Quiet Woods. I suppose that Claw is already over the moon. He will get to see his friends again.”

“That he is. And also scared that Beast and Willow might try to keep him there.” Varg laughed and shook his head. “I’m not scared, though. I know that Claw will remain by our side, and I’m also a very convincing man.”

“Yes, you are that,” Duril agreed. “Should we leave Toru to his own thoughts for a while?”

“Not for too long, but yes. He is the one who needs to put order in his feelings about Hekastfet, his parents, and everything that has happened lately.”

“Do you believe that some part of Toru’s parents is still here? He also told me that he had seen numerous nobles from his tribe accompanying his mother.”

“The soul is never lost,” Varg offered. “It is for this reason that I don’t believe that Toru’s parents are gone forever.”

“If only they could have told us where Nelsikkar is.”

“If only, yes. Yet, don’t tell me, master healer,” Varg joked, “that you’re afraid of a new adventure, and you just want to sit down and write in your big book while sipping on tea and caring naught for anything else.”

“The picture you’re painting sounds tempting, I must admit. But I don’t mind going through some more adventures first. There are many reasons for me to think so; let’s not forget that my tome has many empty pages, and I expect to go through some new and exciting adventures again, if only to have more to write down.”

“It sounds like a plan, then,” Varg said and patted Duril’s shoulder. “Just make sure to pack as much as possible of Toru’s favorites. It will help him get his mind off things.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I barely got one word out of my mouth, and the kitchen threw itself in a frenzy. I feel quite guilty, but, on the other hand, everyone’s so grateful and much in need of finding a way to offer their thanks that I didn’t have the heart to curb their enthusiasm.”

“I’ll leave you to it, while I take a short trip outside to say goodbye to a few people.”

“Do that. They’ll all see us out, but it is always a thing of the heart to say that in person to those we have touched during our stay here.”

Varg knew precisely what Duril meant by that. Everywhere they had gone on their adventures, they had encountered many people, and they were the richer for it. He had a particular person in mind he wanted to see and have a few words with before they left the place for good.

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He could hardly believe how much the Dregs had changed. Gone was the unbreathable air and the pits in the ground. People were working on making narrow streets and paths to allow for hauling the carts of coal faster and with less effort. The pits were being enlarged and ladders and scaffolds were installed to make the job of the people working there a lot easier.

There was a brand new administration’s building in place, as well. It was just a shack for now, but by the stacks of materials already brought and left inside the courtyard, Varg could tell that it would be a place to offer the same comfort as similar buildings inside the city.

He stopped briefly to look at the ruins of the walls. Those would have to go, as well. New walls might be raised in their place, but they wouldn’t go as high, and they wouldn’t split the place in two like before.

“Varg of Whitekeep,” someone called to him.

Varg stared, utterly flabbergasted, at the young woman rushing toward him after walking out of the administrative building, dressed in a neat blue dress with many pockets that looked half like someone with work to do would wear, and half quite coquettish.

“I’m Rosalind,” the woman explained and grinned ear to ear, showing white regular teeth.

There was no sign of soot on her clothes and skin, and her sinewy arms still showed from under the short sleeves of the dress, but were now adorned with a few colorful bracelets.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Varg said and smiled broadly. “What did you do with good ol’ Rosalind? I remember her face to be as dark as sin.”

Rosalind laughed in good humor. “She’s still in here.” She patted her chest with pride. “Only now she has to battle stacks of papers and whatnot. I didn’t know that running a place to make it all better would require so much work.”

“You know how to read and write,” Varg remarked. “I didn’t know they were letting you learn such things out here, in the Dregs.”

“They didn’t, but some of us learned anyway,” Rosalind said. “And now, although I’m not too good at it, such skills are coming in handy. They wanted to send people from the city,” she gestured at Scercendusa with her chin, “but I stepped up and took the job. I think it’s better for everyone.”

“You don’t trust them?” Varg asked. He didn’t have to use too many words.

Rosalind knew that, as well. “There are plenty of good people among them, with good intentions. But for centuries, we toiled out here, in these fields. This time, we will receive the respect we deserve. And that’s what matters. The work will continue to be hard and demanding. Only that the gracious people of Scercendusa are now welcome here, if they want to work side by side with us.”

“Are there many of them willing to get their hands dirty?” Varg asked.

“I have yet to receive an application,” Rosalind said and laughed. “But it doesn’t matter. We’re allowed inside the city now. And we can breathe clean air. I still cannot believe that it is possible. Yet, it is happening to me, so how can I deny it? Toru is quite the tiger.”

“He is. And it is all possible because, finally, the evil was destroyed completely.” Varg took a moment and look around some more. “I came to say goodbye.”

Rosalind nodded. “I thought you’d say that. If I’m not too forward, then, can I give you a hug, Varg of Whitekeep?”

Varg opened his arms. “You don’t have to ask.”

Rosalind threw herself into his arms and held him tightly for a moment. “Thank you for giving all of us hope again. We didn’t think there would be a day like this.”

Varg patted her back. “You deserve it. Enjoy your new life, Rosalind. You and your people.”

“We surely will. Now we have a tomorrow to look forward to. And hard work.” She let him go. “Which reminds me, I need to go back to it.”

“Farewell,” Varg said. He could tell Rosalind was not the kind for long goodbyes. And he wasn’t, either.

He followed her with his eyes until she entered the building. At the top of the stairs, she turned toward him and waved happily. Varg waved back. There was so much good they had done. They had every reason to be proud of it.

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Duril was not in the least surprised when Toru hugged him from behind while he was putting his bag in order. “Are you ready? At dawn, we leave.”

“You know, the people here,” Toru began after letting go of him, “they’re quite strange. They keep telling me that I should be their king. But I don’t want to be a king.”

“You are one, in your heart,” Duril said. “Is it bothering you? And what is it, exactly? That they are asking, or that you feel compelled to tell them no for other reasons?”

Toru shook his head. “No. I just don’t know this place. I’m glad that I could help them regain their freedom, but they’re just strangers. Maybe I’m not meant to be anyone’s king.”

“You are mine,” Duril said. “And I believe that you are the rightful heir of Nelsikkar.”

“Am I the king of the people there, if they still exist?”

“You would be. But no one is forcing you to be something you don’t want to be.” Duril caressed Toru’s cheek briefly. “What do you truly feel about this new adventure and searching for Nelsikkar?”

Toru seemed to ponder for a bit, catching his bottom lip between his teeth and munching on it quite vigorously. “At times, I feel like I can barely wait to get there. I know I’m excited. But at night, when I dream, I also feel dread about what I may find.”

“Have you dreamed of your father lately?” Duril knew about the dreams from the past that Toru hadn’t been quite able to make any sense of. Now, he was aware that he had been dreaming of his father, trying to offer him guidance through that world of shadows and ghosts.

“No. And I wish he would come to my dreams again. I’m sure he would have no trouble accepting being anyone’s king. He would know how to rule people, and what to tell them when they needed advice.”

“You will learn, too, if it is something you want. And if you do, I don’t believe that you should worry too much. After all, you were born to it. Your parents are of royal blood. Did you hear Beanstalk? The Heart of the World. I think there wouldn’t be anyone else more suitable than you to run such a place as its rightful leader.”

Toru seemed pleased with what Duril was telling him, but his head still appeared to be a nest of questions. “Then, I should first find Nelsikkar. I mean, we will find it, for sure.”

Duril nodded in encouragement. “It is what we must do. But first, we’ll enjoy our travels back to The Quiet Woods.”

“It’s very nice there,” Toru said. “And Shearah is there, too.”

“I think she’ll know a lot of things that will help us on our path to The Scarlet Peaks. And about the hermit, too.”

“Claw is the one who knows quite a lot about it. I should talk to him some more.”



“You’ll find him in his quarters. You know, that bedroom with an undamaged bed.”

Toru laughed. Duril smiled to himself. How much he enjoyed that sound. It had to be true what they said about thinking of your loved one and loving every bit of them, regardless of whether it was some insignificant thing or not.

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Toru felt encouraged by Duril’s words. If there was a place where he would be the king, it had to be Nelsikkar. Scercendusa was such a big place. As much as the people here wanted to offer him the crown on a velvet pillow, he couldn’t accept it. He had even asked them about the crown and kings, since he had only known of the domestikos, and they had said something about breaking the chain of rulers who had wanted nothing but the worst for the place. As for the crown, they had sincerely admitted that they would have to make one, and it would take many months to make it perfect.

Toru hoped they would find the right person among them to rule them wisely. He couldn’t stay here. His heart was somewhere else and he couldn’t resist the new call of home he had started to feel inside.

The door to Claw’s quarters opened before he had time to knock. The bearshifter welcomed him with open arms. “Look who’s visiting! The most beloved tiger in the world.”

Toru smiled at the compliment. “I don’t know about that.”

Claw planted a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Don’t you ever doubt it, kitty. That’s what you are. Why did you come? Do you want to talk to me about something? I’m almost finished with my preparations.”

“I wanted to ask you more about The Scarlet Peaks and that hermit. I want to know what to ask him. What if he doesn’t like my questions and asks me to come back another time?”

Claw wrapped a protective arm around his shoulders and pulled him into the room so that they both could sit and rest. “I have never known someone to have met the hermit. Sure, a lot of people talked about him, and some even pretended to have been there, at the tallest peak, where the hermit’s house is, but I always doubted that they were speaking the truth.”

“Then how do we know that he’s not anything but an invention of those who like to tell stories?”

“You are asking a very good question,” Claw agreed. “You see, while I was listening to all those stories, I started to understand the difference between a well-crafted lie and the truth. I won’t tell you more about such things since they’re not easy to explain, but I can tell you the grains of truth I learned about in due time, while listening to the stories of travelers from all corners of the world.”

“I’m listening,” Toru said and put both hands on his knees, to show just how determined he was to do so.

“For instance,” Claw began, “there was this merchant, very, very old. He was so old that he had to hold his eyebrows up with one hand so that he could see while eating. He didn’t even know his own age. Some people said that he was more than one hundred years old. While the other merchants were bragging about their adventures, when the name of The Scarlet Peaks came up, he interrupted his eating and shouted at those young men that they didn’t know the first thing about The Scarlet Peaks and the hermit living there.”

“Had he been there? Was that why he knew more than them?” Toru asked.

“Yes, he had been there. During his young years, and the other merchants had to challenge him to tell his story. I was all eyes and ears, too, curious as I was at that age. It took the others several pints of beer and a hefty meal to convince the old merchant to tell his story. And when he did, he said the most astonishing things.”

Toru felt the familiar bubble of excitement growing inside his chest. “What things? Oh, I want to know so much!”

“Just as I was, at the time,” Claw said. “He began by saying that he had wanted to find a pass through the mountains so that he would discover a shorter way to reach the places on the other side. As motivated by the prospect of making a lot of gold as he was, his determination led him closer and closer to the peak.”

“Where the hermit lives?”

“Yes. He climbed and climbed, fighting cold and hunger, and in a stroke of good fortune in a blizzard, he saw a light in the distance. He hurried toward it, but it seemed as if the light was moving away from him, like a mirage. At one point, he fell in the snow, and when he opened his eyes, he was inside a home, with blankets piled on top of him. In a stone hearth, a warm fire was burning.”

“He was at the hermit’s house!” Toru exclaimed.

Claw nodded. “Yes. And the hermit was tending to him, while chiding him in a strange language. Somehow, though, the merchant understood it, and that wasn’t the most astonishing thing of all. No, you see, the hermit was not exactly human.”

“What was he?” Toru demanded to know.

“He was part tree, part animal, and part human. He was moving on two legs, and he had hands he used just like we would, but the skin on his face was made of bark and two large ears grew on top of his head. Most of his body was covered in fur and he had claws, but he wore clothes.”

“What did the merchant do?”

“He was curious by nature, so he began asking all sorts of questions. He wanted to know what the hermit was, how he lived there, and whether there was a path that would lead him to the other side.”

“Did the hermit answer his questions?”

“No. He appeared to be quite annoyed that a stranger he had happened to save from the blizzard had the nerve to be so inquisitive. But he did ask the merchant what his most important wish was because he was able to grant him a wish and only one.”

“What did the merchant ask for?” Toru felt what Claw did about the fact that the old merchant was telling the truth, unlike the others.

“He thought a long time about it. The hermit didn’t bother him. He continued to bring him hot tea and food without asking him to leave. And the merchant knew that he had stumbled upon a treasure of some kind and that he would be a fool to let it slip from his hands like that. So, he wanted to make sure that he asked for the right thing.”

“What a wonder that the hermit didn’t mind having a stranger over. What was he doing all this time while the merchant was thinking about his wish?”

“He was busy writing most of the time, and he had a lot of work to do, bringing wood inside to stoke the fire, searching for roots and hunting so that he could make food. As you can see, the hermit didn’t have a spare moment to worry about the stranger under his roof, although he cared for him and his needs all the same.”

“The merchant must have thought of something eventually, right?” Toru asked.

“Yes. It must have been days and nights, and he was feeling better when he realized that there was one thing he desired. In his quest for riches, time was always of the essence, and for that reason he wanted to learn of a new pass through the mountains. But what if he had time, as much as he wanted?”

“Did he ask the hermit for time?”

“In a way, yes. He asked the hermit to give him immortality.”

“And did the hermit give him such a thing?” Toru inquired, more and more avid to learn the end of the story.

“The hermit told him he shouldn’t ask for something that would bring upon him misery and misfortune. But he did tell him that he would give him something that would be as close to that as

possible. He gave him a long life, one that wouldn't be matched by any other living human, no matter how far and wide he roamed the world."

"That's why he was so old," Toru said, as the realization dawned on him.

"Yes. Once he made his wish, he felt a sudden sleep grabbing him in its irresistible arms. When he woke up again, he was out in the snow, and the hermit's house was no longer there. He found himself stronger and ready to face the elements again, so he started walking down the other side of the mountain. For a long time, he thought that he must have dreamed everything, until one day, he realized that he had celebrated ninety years on the face of the world, and yet he felt as sharp and green as a thirty-years-old. And everyone around him was dying, and yet, he continued living."

"How old was he?"

"The others wanted to know, too. And he told them that after the first three hundred years, he stopped counting. He could be as old as one thousand years, and he told everyone that he was quite fed up with living for so long. In all truth, he had been wrong to ask for immortality. The hermit had shown him that he didn't even want a long life, let alone to live forever."

"So, if we get to the hermit, I will have to be sure that I'm making the right wish, correct?" Toru asked.

"Yes. I do believe that old merchant told the truth. What is your wish?"

"To find Nelsikkar. No, to find... home," Toru said after he pondered for a bit. "Would that be the right way to say it?"

Claw nodded. "We will find the hermit. Maybe he will be more interested in talking with our lot than with a merchant motivated by nothing but greed."

Toru hopped from the bed. "Thank you, Claw. I want to find the place of my birth, and I wanted to know more about this hermit."

"I will always help you in any way I can," Claw promised. "And if I remember other things, I will tell them to you right away. I'm almost finished packing for the road. Are you?"

"No, and I must hurry."

Now he had the knowledge he sought. And he could barely wait to be on the road again.

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The entire city had come out to see them off. The lack of noise was strange after all the shouts and cheers that had accompanied them on their way as they had left Scercendusa. But Toru felt free, as if a huge rock had been taken off his chest. He knew the road, and what it stood for.

“How do you feel?” he asked the rest. “Did you want to stay some more in Scercendusa and enjoy their fluffy beds and pillows?”

A collective protest rose from three different chests.

“We’re made for the road, kitty, and the road is made for us,” Claw said.

“I didn’t want to linger there for another moment,” Varg added. “I don’t think I’m the kind made for a city such as this one. So many people in one place.” He shook his head. “There’s always room for trouble.”

“I’m sure they’ll find a better way now,” Duril intervened. “And as much as I love libraries, I like it best when we are making our own history. I had enough time to write everything down in my tome. Now, my fingers are itching for a new adventure, one worthy of adding to everything else in this.” He patted his bag with clear intentions.

They were all in an accord, and Toru was happy about it. “Then we must find a path to nowhere. At the end of it, we’ll find a new home.”

Everyone agreed noisily. Varg patted him on the back, while Claw grabbed him by the shoulders and kissed his forehead. Duril snuck his hand in his.

A new adventure. A new home. For him, an old one, but it would be born anew since he would arrive there in the company of friends and people he loved and who had been with him through thick and thin, fire and blood.

**THE END OF HUNGRY HEART BOOK THREE (TWO KINGS)**