Kythala's Journey

Moondance

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ENGLISH

in

The Department of English

State University of New York

New Paltz, New York 12561

December 2024

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of the Master of English degree
in Creative Writing
at the State University of New York at New Paltz

I

The City of Breley, for as long as Essandra could remember, was a center of trade and travel. On the same street that you could purchase Silverscale chainmail from Dorgnar's Emporium, you could turn a corner and enjoy the finest Cuisine from her homeland —with an Elven twist. She could see it from her bedroom, *La Perle de Lumière.* It was in that treetop diner that the man whose arms, now around her waist, had first taken her hand. As she looked upon his sleeping face through the screen of her hair, she mused at the eternal bronziness of his skin. A phenomenon her human mind always struggled to grasp.

Vulmar was his name, and the Wood Elf had lived within Breley for nearly three decades before she had even come to Breley's docks. He had the heaviest eyes when he slept, and in truth, at times he resembled more a dreaming Owlbear than the Wood Elf she loved. As she turned to take a closer look, she heard a pot knocked over from inside her kitchen. Jolted from intimacy, Vulmar's arm flopped down with a heavy sigh. Essandra had secured her sword when the sounds of cast iron on hardwood rang once more. She knew better than any that no thief would be so bold as to rob *her* house during the day and no assassin would be this sloppy. As the rattling of kitchenware was silenced, Essandra was certain that this was neither burglar nor cutthroat; rather, her daughter, who had snuck out of the house without permission. Essandra's face twisted into a scowl. The hilt of her blade slammed into the wall beside her, jolting Vulmar' out of bed.

"Kythala Nerikian Jowenys! Have you lost your fucking mind?!"

She took her blade in one hand and wrapped a blanket around herself with the other. Vulmar's eyes opened slowly, a hand brushing the crust from between his lids.

"Honey, must you scream? It's barely even sunup,"

He was answered with a slap of her sheathed blade against his thigh. He rose out of bed as quickly as his body was able.

"Okay, okay. Just go easy on her,"

Essandra looked back towards him, her eyes burning to the point that he feared she might have started to grow scales. Fortunately, her dread gaze was interrupted by the sound of scurrying feet across the wood. Vulmar's nose expelled a lofty sigh as he rose, taking his robe from atop a hook by their nightstand. He would have offered Essandra hers as well, but at that moment she had already cleared through the door. Vulmar folded the robe on his arm, just in case. They could see the kitchen window still thrown open, curtains swaying with the breeze. Several pots remained thrown over the floor.

"She gets this from ***you***, you know,"

Vulmar hadn't time to respond before she was storming down the hallway to their daughter's room at the other side of their home. Kythala's room was larger than theirs, decorated with candles and small dolls. In its center, between the tree that made up the base for their home, lay her bed. The furs upon which were tightly pulled over the "sleeping" form. Essandra stood at the foot of the bed for a bit, her arms crossed, and the inverted longsword tapping impatiently against her body. Vulmar approached carefully. He cleared his throat and attempted to offer his wife her robe once more, only to be met with a severe glare. Vulmar turned his gaze towards the bed.

"Kythala, my dear, your feet are about as light as a hoof and half as balanced. Where were you?"

The fur-covered mass remained still, the covers rising and falling with each breath.

"Kythala, hon—" Essandra's hand snatched the bedsheets, yanking them out from atop their "sleeping" daughter.

The half-elf underneath was a fair one, with skin tanned like Vulmar's and hair as black as Essandra's. Kythala had inherited the pointed ears of her father, and the sharp bone structure of

her mother. Though she attempted to look as if she were in her mid-dream, the poor child hadn't the time to change out of her street clothes.

"Oh, uh, yeah, I was just chasing a crow from the windowsill. I was making breakfast and—" Vulmar at least honored the attempt. His daughter had the right idea, but never quite managed to nail the execution. He could see she had what she'd at least thought was a grand excuse, however. . .

. . . Her lie was interrupted by her mother's voice.

"Do you think me a fool, young lady?"

"First, we catch you inside the Honeyed Badger, and now this! You were out with that *Dock-Rat* weren't—"

"I TOLD YOU NOT TO CALL HIM THAT!"

Vulmar rested his chin on his hand. He had known better than to interrupt when the shouting match began– if he did, they would simply turn on him. Resolving to sit against the foot of Kythala's bed and hold his tongue, he thought— *Well, that is without a doubt her daughter.*

"Don't you raise your voice at me, little girl,"

"Stop judging my friends!"

"Your *friends?* You've known them for barely a month! Maela and Haris are your friends!"

"Maela is starting the Academy next week and Haris still has a crush on me– I told you this and I don't like Haris."

"Oh? And what's so wrong with Haris? Who *do* you like? A boy who has five years on you and half as much status?" Essandra said in disgust. Essandra was many things, but a hypocrite was not one of them. Kythala knew her mother could care less about Zekh's heritage as a Drow, even if others in the city were not as open minded- It was solely to blame on Zekh's adoptive father and his "rivalry" with the city guard.

Kythala knew better than to point out how her own choice in husband would have been seen as an affront in her mother's homeland. As such, Kythala offered her mother the only appropriate rebuttal to her jab. Silence.

"I know you may think you're in love, but you're young. You don't know what you want." Essandra's voice softened.

"Mom. Stop. Please. You don't get it."

Silence fell upon the room once more. The two looked towards each other for a moment and then turned to Vulmar. His eyes darted between the two women as his mind wandered between this week's special at the bar and what they would be having for breakfast. He knew this scenario could only end in ways he could count on one hand. However, if he did not get involved, he would wind up spending some time sleeping at the Inn.

"Kythala, I know these people are your friends. But you are still grounded – you should know better than—",

"But the reason why I am grounded is total *bullshit!"*

"Watch…Your…Mouth. You are on thin ice, young lady!" Vulmar cautioned, an immediate flush of color growing on Essandra's face.

"Oh? What are you going to do? Ground me for another week? Whatever. It was so hard sneaking out the first time"

Vulmar brought his fingers to the bridge of his nose in thought. *She still hasn't learned to hold her cards, or her tongue, for that matter.*

There was nothing he could do to quell the storm now. Essandra's voice booming through the crackling of Kythala's "smart" mouth. Vulmar standing in silence, pushed to the side as per usual. After a few more moments of bickering, Essandra stormed off and Kythala pulled her sheets

overhead. Vulmar gave her a pat and kissed her head through the blanket. Closing the door behind him, he made his way back to the kitchen.

II

He stood in the kitchen alone for nearly ten minutes. Time to start the fire and at least attempt to bring the two together for breakfast. Essandra was never very good in the kitchen, and Kythala would likely be secluded in her room until the food was ready. At least he had plenty of grain, and only a handful of spices were knocked over in his daughter's failed attempt at re-entering their home, as the scent of clove entered his nose, he knew neither of the two could refuse his cooking.

While this morning they wouldn't admit it, the two shared more than they knew. They even enjoyed this morning's meal the *exact* same way. Quail eggs, extra onion— half a minute away from burnt. As Vulmar finished cutting slices, the first set of feet came to join him. His wife, now robed and disarmed, sat at the table across from the stove. Vulmar said nothing, focusing entirely on striking flint in preparation for the meal.

Three. . . Two. . . One. . .

Essandra tapped at the table. "Do you think I was too hard on her?" *What am I saying? Of course, I wasn't.*

. . . Right on que.

He elected not to answer, his lips quivering in an attempt to hide his growing grin.

"Your card face is shit too. It's where she gets that from." Essandra's face barely concealing her amusement.

She'd only receive another stifled laugh. His eyes looked up at her for just a moment before they rolled mischievously back towards his preparations.

Vulmar said nothing and instead approached with an empty glass and a pitcher filled with pomegranate juice. He waited beside her almost as he had on the night they first met, offering her a cold drink, and meeting her eyes with that damned smile.

"I think you were fair. But I don't think I need to tell you that telling her who *not* to like isn't going to work,"

Essandra's eyes remained on the glass. Waiting until he had finished pouring before taking it to her lips.

"You don't get it; I've had run-ins with the LeRoix's before. Even if this apple did fall far from the tree, it still has the same seeds,"

Her tone was rather grave, only Vulmar's grin widened. He was fighting back a laugh, and she knew it.

"What's so funny? I'm serious!"

"It's just. This reminds me of a story my grandmother told me. Have you ever heard the tale of the Summer Lady, Ainouel, and the Night Lord Vraxxis?" Vulmar asked through his smile. He paused, moving back towards the kitchen, and churned the spices in his pestle.

She turned her head. Since meeting Vulmar, she had heard many stories. This one was not one of them.

"Ainouel? Night Lord? Like Night Lord Masdearii?"

Vulmar's laughter could have uprooted their home.

"Not Quite, Masdearii coined the term 'Night Lord' in honor of this story. He fancies himself much more— important— than he really is. In truth, the origin of the title is not from the lands of the Wraithwood. The Night Lord, Vraxxis, was the only son of Selune, Goddess of the Moon. Ainouel, the Summer Lady, was an Eladrin. One of the most beautiful in all the Seelie Courts, the only one to ever refuse the God Aurelion, Emperor of the Sun,"

Essandra had heard of the Goddess Selune, as any who entered the city of Breley would have. As such, she had also heard tales of Aurelion, both as a wrathful avenger and a deliverer of justice.

"I'm assuming Soliana also 'borrowed' from this story when choosing her title?"

"Mmm. Maybe? The lands of Nythransera have existed for nearly as long as our written history. It is likely that her title is closer to that of Legend than that of Masdearii, however, I cannot be sure. Regardless, this situation reminds me of that story entirely,"

Silence ensued and she rolled her eyes hard enough that they may have tugged out her brain. He always was a lover of his own dramatics.

"Well? Are you going to tell me or not?"

Vulmar placed the pan down, his smile threatening to split his face if it grew any wider.

"I thought you'd never ask. Don't go anywhere, 'cause it is a long one,"

As he spoke, she thought that if she did not love him so, she would have separated his grinning head from his body long ago. Yet, with her arms crossed, eyes focused, her favorite drink in hand. . . She could only muster one thought—*You're lucky I love you, pretty boy.*

"Aurelion, God of the Sun, is one of the Seelie Court's chief deities. Aurelion is believed to be the first God, created alongside Selune, to govern over the four seasons and the realm of Faerie. As you know, all Elves trace their lineage back to our Fae ancestors. And as such, I, and even your daughter, are connected to the courts—"

III

Kythala stepped lightly trying to go unnoticed by her parents. The shame of being caught fresh on her mind. She was just as unsuccessful as earlier thanks to each being fully awake; both Essandra and Vulmar had exceptional auditory capabilities. One had honed this ability pursuing hardened criminals, while the other serving drunkards and drifters. The Half-Elf's head hung low as she settled into the seat across from her mother; each sneaking a glance toward the other right before they'd turn away. Amused, Vulmar was unable to contain his chuckle; to which two pairs of squinted eyes responded. He was quick to divvy up the breakfast, lest he become the anvil for both hammers; in silence Kythala slowly picked up her fork and knife.

Breakfast continued with neither of the house's women speaking to the other. The Patriarch distracted himself by cleaning up the dishes that had foiled his daughter's skullduggery. He was not happy, of course; as any father would be at the prospect of their young daughter roaming the streets at night without his knowledge. However, as the romantic of the pair, Vulmar knew that such things were unavoidable, and fought the urge to put these pans away somewhere lower on the countertop. Kythala was only a few years from adulthood and had always been a rather independent child. From the moment she could form a thought, she was running off on her own and bringing back flowers with a thousand and one questions. Vulmar considered Breley quite safe, and with her parentage as the *Lioness's* daughter, there were few foolish enough to impede upon her burgeoning freedom. His thoughts were cut short by the heavy hand of his wife who couldn't help but slam the counter as she stood. This was not residual rage, but simply a by-product of her strength.

"Well, my shift is starting soon. I should probably get ready, Sergeant Bertholdt is likely itching for relief."

Essandra moved with feline grace, steps carrying a rhythm which could best be described as prowling. A mixture of poise and power that did well to reinforce her moniker. She stalked over to her husband, placing a tender kiss upon his cheek before giving his hair a slight twirl between her fingers. She lovingly whispered something into his sharp ears that reddened his cheeks and caused their daughter's eyes to roll. Kythala's head quickly turned down when her mother turned to face her. Essandra went to place a hand on her daughter's shoulder, yet stopped when she noticed Kythala tense up. Balling her fist for a moment, she brought it back down to her side in defeat, adjusting her robe awkwardly and leaving to prepare for her shift.

Inside Vulmar's head a countdown once more begun. *Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Si—*

Then it came, a few counts early but still the ice breaker he'd been expecting.

"I'm sorry, Dad,"

It made Vulmar laugh once more, and his daughter grew red in her face and widened her eyes.

"What is so funny?!"

"Nothing; I'm just waiting for you to explain yourself. —You like this boy, don't you?"

The deafening silence in the house was not the norm. The woman Vulmar had fallen in love with had a talent for filling the room with her voice. He could still recall the first words she'd shouted to him when she had stumbled into his Inn with a group of her fellow guards. *"Oy, Pretty Boy! A round of your finest for me and the lads here!"* Though she didn't drink too often these days, it was always nostalgic to recall the rather 'wild' recruit she was then to the disciplined Lieutenant she is now. He remembered the girlish twinkle in her eyes when he kissed her hand, before the entire regiment, after delivering her ordered libations. It was that same twinkling that

their daughter now tried to hide, and like his beloved Essandra had noted earlier; both he and Kythala were quite shit at cards.

"I— I'm just hanging out with him, dad!"

"Mhm. Me and your mother used to 'just hang out' all the time."

Kythala pretended to gag, which only confirmed his suspicions and provoked another hearty laugh. Though she was cupping her forehead to hide her embarrassment about the tales which led up to her conception, she was smiling, which made Vulmar feel relieved. Both the women were stubborn, and Vulmar's greatest joy as father and husband was ensuring they always smiled before walking out that door. Never liking to be idle, he continued drying the dishes and cups, even as he and his daughter bantered.

"Can you *not*, Dad? That's gross! We haven't even kissed yet!"

"Yet?"

"Dad! STOP!"

Her face looked as though you could boil eggs on it, another feature she had inherited from Essandra. They both possessed expressive eyes and animated faces, so their emotions were always obvious; both were quick to blush and expressed nervousness with fluttering eyelids. As the last cup was placed inside the cupboard, the bittersweet entirety of Vulmar's focus was placed upon Kythala. She had relaxed and began to slightly sway while she ate. Still the little girl he had raised at heart even if she was soon to be a lady.

"What were you talking to mom about?"

"Oh, I was telling her a story from my homeland,"

"Which one?!"

It made him proud that she was still interested in his old stories, and he explained the tale to his daughter in the same playful tone. Her eyes widened with interest, and a smile was finally granted to him without any form of shame or embarrassment.

"The Tale of Lady Ainouel and Night Lord Vraxxis. It's not exactly a bedtime story. It's a story with a lesson," Vulmar responded.

There was the clinking of iron as Essandra left their bedroom. The pauldrons of her guard uniform were wide and engraved with specks of gold, signifying her rank and status. Vulmar whistled, and Essandra rolled her eyes as she marched proudly past them. Once out the door, she smiled to herself at his boyish love for her. Kythala watched as her mother left their house. Vulmar knew Kythala had much to learn about her over-protective mother's reasoning, but not just yet, she was but a girl. Vulmar turned to his Half-Elf daughter and smiled.

"I'll tell you about it another day. I promise. Now go get ready, today's a big day."

IV

Kythala wouldn't have long, and she knew it. Essandra had been timing her trips to the market to make sure she went and came right back. It wasn't a coincidence that she bumped into Captain Dansbury as well. While she may not have been as fast as Zekh, she was convinced she was smarter. Even the trained hounds of her mother did not know the city as she did, but maybe her

mother was right. Having fallen for the youngest LeRoix, she thought he may have indeed started influencing her. *You're only young once, right Dad?*

She did her best to compose her nerves and make her way through the market stalls as naturally as she could. She greeted Ghorza and her husband who commented on "a certain glow on her face" but seemed unsuspicious. Though in her defense, it was Ghorza who first caught Kythala in the lap of the "*Leroix-Boy.*"

"Just make sure 'e don't go stickin' his knife in yer sheathe, wouldn't want *The Lioness of Breley* loppin' 'is head off, would ya'?"

Despite the delicate features of her face, Ghorza's Orcish strength was clear as the heavy-green hand ruffled Kythala's hair and pulled the young half-elf in for a tight hug.

Kythala appreciated Ghorza's affection, but she wished there could just be one day where her mother's reputation wasn't brought up in conversation. There wasn't a single denizen within the city's walls who did not recognize her when introduced. If those gold-hued eyes of hers hadn't been what enraptured her Zekh so, she would have wished them any other color. She had always preferred the vibrant greens of her father's eyes, anyway. When the kind Orc and her *Mok'Rag*, or "Husband" (though the actual translation from Orcish to human roughly translates to "*Side Arm")* were done teasing her she could focus again on finding a way to escape the watchful eyes of the city's guard.

As she made her way down the busy collection of streets and stalls, she noticed a small split like alleyway between the *Anvil Heart's* and *The Fantasia*, that was the same alleyway old Singebeard used to sneak his card-mate's out of when his wives returned from their nightly escapades.

It was perfect.

If there was one thing Zekh joked about her that was true, it was her lack of patience. She recalled that her father further confirmed this observation when he told her earlier in the morning, "*Don't tell your mother I said this, but if you took your time climbing through the window, you may have gotten away with it."*

She had wanted to turn and respond, but before she could her dad's hand came gently atop her head. He stroked her hair before her eyes and pulled them down like a curtain.

"You never rush a shooting star."

For Kythala, it was a mixed bag of emotions. While she appreciated the advice of her father when it came to her impulsivity, she felt challenged when it came from Zekh. Taking the time to plan things and skulking around was his thing and she was never one to follow someone else's example. No, if Kythala did anything, she'd do it her way.

The advice given to her only half-internalized as for the most part, Kythala saw her mistake lied within her hesitation, not within her inability to ever hatch a proper plan. So, as her eyes peered down the space between houses, she knew if there was going to be a moment to make a break for it; it would be right here and now.

Kythala peered over her shoulder to check if her shadow-guard was still upon her; whether or not they knew why, Essandra ensured each guard knew her daughter's face. While it was nice when she was younger and could easily run to any guard who would help tie her hair or take her home when she got lost, in her current years it had become a shackle. As a young woman those helpful "aunts" and "uncles" she had relied on as a girl were more like watchdogs than anything else. She was sure the two who loomed by the corner were not there by happenstance. *Had*

Essandra already informed half the guard that she was grounded, or were these two following prior orders to keep a close eye on her due to her current circle of friends?

Regardless, she only had a short window. Pretending to find something upon the ground she kept an eye on the pair's greaves through the crowd. She'd wait for a moment where the crowd grew numerous. The one-kneed stance she took shifted to one that more resembled a beast on the prowl than anything else. Once the crowed swelled enough to obscure their boots from her sight, she knew they'd be unable to keep their eyes on her. Her eyes were sharper than most, a trait she had inherited from her father and honed by observing the mannerisms of her mother's hounds. She had also learned much by watching the LeRoix's constantly pick-pocket one another to "stay in practice." Once she was sure her two shadows could no longer distinguish her from other citizens, their boots barely visible from the shuffling legs of Breley's citizens, she sprang. Bounding like the wind down the alleyway and sprinting as far as she could from the main streets.

She knew the streets well, even from the alleys. If Droorag's stall was at her back due west, then the docks would only be about half a mile south. It would get a bit risky when she had to cross the main streets once more to change direction unless she was going to take the rooftops. Her expertise as an acrobat was still nowhere near Liddrey's, but what she lacked in skill she easily compensated for with natural ability. Besides, this time she didn't need to worry about being stealthy, all she had to do was make good time and not land on her face. There was little time to debate, instead Kythala took a moment to thank the Gods her mother believed her reason for wanting an Academy outfit with pants as opposed to a dress. Her escape would be near impossible in that frilly eye sore the Academy called a uniform. Once the alley's exit was near, she'd slow her pace, turn toward the stone wall and make her way up, scurrying the building brick-by-brick until she was standing atop its roof.

Breley was beautiful; it always had been, yet to see it from this vantage point really put the city's luster into perspective. Smoking chimneys and gulls dotted the horizon, and the sounds and smells of the city made it unique. Even from where she stood, she could make out the silhouettes of the market squares. As she turned toward the south-wind to get a better view of the docks she noticed a formation of ships. A few were moored to the dock along Breley's piers, while one grand vessel had unfurled its sails, making its way toward the oceans once more. There, tucked away somewhere along the docks would be her target; likely fiddling with his knife or enduring a lecture from one of his older siblings. If she was lucky, he'd be somewhere out in the open, and she'd be able to get the drop on him for a change.

As Kythala scanned the docks for Zekh, she recalled the night they first met. Feeling particularly rebellious, she had snuck into the *Honeyed Badger* to finally taste their "Thursday Special Ale". She had barely managed to take a sip before the bitter liquid came spurting out her nose. Even now she still wondered how anyone managed to drink such a thing. In between her coughing fit, he appeared, giving her a tap upon the shoulder.

"You plan on drinking that, or did you come here to spurt it all over the table?".

Even if some of her other friends thought it a bit rude, she found it charming. Who was he, only a few years her senior; to be lecturing her on how she enjoyed—or detested her drink?

The shouting from beneath her snapped her from the daydream. She had been conditioned to assume that the guards were always keeping an eye on her. Even if they hadn't known she was currently under "house arrest," the Breley Guard were never happy to see anyone lingering on the rooftops. It was not that it was illegal, but the sight of their commander's daughter so high from the ground was unacceptable. If she were to fall, they would never hear the end of it. Kythala took

a moment to wonder if they'd be so quick to act if it had been another standing on the building's edge, and then made her move.

The Guard were well trained, but she had the advantage. The higher ground making it easy to discern which way they'd follow based on the streets and the crowd below. She realized her best chance of losing them would be to make a slight detour to force them to follow through the main square. She hadn't had time to consider whether this was the best course of action, which only made her more committed to her plan. As one of the guards demanded she get down, she bolted. Making a sharp turn toward the side, catching as much momentum as she could from a standing start. Effortlessly she leaped across the roof toward the next building.

It was a dodgy jump, and if not for her long limbs she was sure she would have "eaten" the brick. As tenacious as she was it wouldn't be the same if she had to continue her escape with a bleeding face; nor would she want Zekh to see her shambling out with a bloodied visage. He would have never let her hear the end of it, especially if he was the only one there to patch her face up. For a LeRoix he was a bit softer, which was a point of contention for his siblings. While his adopted siblings embraced their ruffian reputations, Zekh seemed determined on retaining his amiable side; perhaps that was why he was "the favorite." It was one thing to be a clever thief, or good with a knife; but to remain affable while the city seemed to turn its back on you? That took resolve. *Perhaps that's why she liked him so much.*

Her wandering mind caused her to misstep, and during her next jump she found herself clinging onto a few loose stones. *Focus, Kythala*. She had put a decent amount of distance between herself and the Guards, but if she remained dangling off the edge, it would not remain so. *Perhaps I should train with my mother after all.* Kythala realized that she had innate endurance, sure; but her actual athleticism was another thing. Something Zekh and his siblings had pointed out to her.

As much as she wanted bragging rights for pulling this off, she needed to remain focused on running. Another slip like that and her planned escapades were done for. The main square was only a block or two away, and as long as she kept sight of the ships and her mind off fantasy, she could navigate while running.

As expected, the rooftops were working in her favor. The busy streets were not as easy to navigate as the rooftops were. Yet the advantage she enjoyed did not provide the gap between timings that she had hoped for. She had overestimated how quick she was while simultaneously underestimating her pursuer's ability to slip between the crowd. She had to move faster, turning her mind off entirely to favor raw speed over calculated jumps.

Unsurprisingly, her next jump was not so lucky. Between the excitement of being so close to the city's center and the thrill of telling Zekh of the chase, she slipped. Unable to grab onto the next roof's ledge in time; she plummeted down. Fortunately, her fall was aligned with scaffolding, and instead of landing face first on concrete Kythala tumbled onto a firm layer of fabric. The thud of her impact caused the pair beneath her to look up as she rolled down and landed upon her feet. Adrenaline did well to lessen the pain, but the initial limp did not bode well for how this was going to feel later. Like a crazed alley cat, she forced herself to laugh through the pain before she was again rushing forward.

While she lost the rooftops, she now could use the crowd to her advantage. She needed to catch her breath anyway and chose to take the time she gained to rest between a pair of stalls. Luckily for her, with the markets at their peak few gave her any attention other than a side glance. Her moment of respite was interrupted by a gruff set of voices ordering people to move. She was not the first, nor would she be the last; young adult to be scurrying away from the guard. As long as there was no trail of blood most of the shopkeepers paid her no notice.

When her lungs finally stopped aching, Kythala was on the move again. Bursting between the crowd and over the stall closest to an adjacent alleyway—both her distinctive hair and the swearing of a dwarven man that Kythala pushed out of her way clued the guards to her position. She was close enough to the docks to smell the salt lingering along the coast, but still had at least one more block to traverse before she could slip into the LeRoix's hideout. If she could make it to the hatch, she was in the clear. Her resolve was there, but it was becoming harder for her to keep top speed. The pain from her fall was winning against her inner drive. What had started as a powerful dash was degrading into a forced jog. If she did not make it soon, her legs would surrender to her body's limits.

She needn't hear their voices to know they were closing in; the heavy sounds of greaves were ones she knew all too well. It was almost comedic how similar the steps of the guards sounded to one another. She mused that the chain links of their armor overpowered the individuality of their bodies and ensured that even the most unique of personas was concealed by the layers of steel that bound them. She took only a moment to place her hand against the walls to steady herself when the familiar feeling of a gloved hand came to her shoulder. It spun her around, and even with her exasperated eyes she instantly recognized the man before her.

Sir Vuulgirf, and his partner Sir Jezebel, had been two of the first guards Kythala met in her youth. Two of Essandra's closest friends. Kind souls who never really had the initiative or desire to advance their rank in the guard. Each was just as capable as Essandra with a blade, but Vuulgirf was committed to a quiet married life, and Jezebel entertained thoughts of transferring to the Army. Breley had not seen wartime in many years, and as such recruitment and deployment for Breley's Soldiers had all but vanished. Sure, reserves existed, but for the most part the Guard had absorbed the military of Breley.

"Are you out of your mind, Kythala?!" Vuulgrif began.

There it was. As if the boots weren't similar enough, they even *spoke* in the same tones. "Why in Pelor's name are you running along the rooftops like a brigand?"

Kythala said nothing, and instead took the opportunity to catch her breath. Jezebel, who was never as adept on her feet as she was with her blade, finally caught up to them and looked her over with a mix of concern and disappointment. Kythala's eyes lowered toward the ground as she began contemplating what excuses to give. Regardless of what they knew already, it would only be a matter of time before they informed Essandra of what she had been up to. Kythala was told by her father to go to the first day of school and come straight home. Based on her current location it was not going to take her mother long to figure out what she had been up to.

"I—I was just practicing Uncle Grif. They dismissed us early and I got bored! It's not like my Mom would let me come train with you guys!"

It was a lie, and a terrible one at that. Essandra had often asked her to come and spend time in the barracks. It was well known that Essandra herself had begun her training when she was Kythala's age. While Jezebel seemed to relax, almost as if she believed the con; Vuulgirf wasn't as easily duped. While his hand relaxed on her shoulder and allowed her to stand freely once more, Kythala hadn't the energy or space to try to escape. He sighed. The final confirmation that her deception had not been believed. Her shame was interrupted when a series of musical notes broke into the air.

Lyres were a common instrument in Breley, as many of the best bards preferred them as their "weapon" of choice. There was one such composer whom Kythala had come to know well, as she was Zekh's oldest sister. Elone was a talented woman who Kythala admired. Like Kythala, Elone was also of mixed parentage, the creation of a rather brave human named Logan and an

infamous brigand called “Orbul the Tusk.” Logan had vanished shortly after Elone was born, and Orbul believed the child too weak to remain within the tribe. She was abandoned along Breley’s shores, and quickly adopted by Targact LeRoix. Kythala thought her mother a fool; as not only had Elone grown into a large and robust individual, whose physical abilities were only surpassed by her musical talents.

The melodious tune had entranced the pair before either guard knew what was happening. Jezebel quickly found her eyes growing heavy. Kythala began to hum and covered her ears, knowing that in this state it would take about half the effort to lull herself to sleep as Elone would need for the guards. She scrutinized the bewildered expression on Vuulgrif's face and wasn’t entirely sure if he was enraged by the situation or totally impressed by her dumb luck. His closing eyes dispelled any clear answer, as the guard fell onto his face in slumber.

Elone gave Kythala a kick when her song was done. This gesture informed her, in as kind a way as possible, that it was safe for her to unplug her ears while silently judging her for being caught in the first place.

“And why is the Princess being accosted by her extended family down my alleyway? You get sticky-fingers from spending time with the Favorite or something?”

All the LeRoix children called her “Princess,” and Kythala hated it. They knew she was not royalty but would make a game of seeing how many pleasantries and formal greetings the half-elf could stand before she would explode. The only nickname that angered her more than “Princess” was when they would call her “Cub.”

Kythala raised a finger, still needing to catch her breath, and then straightened up. Elone affected a formal bow, her mouth curling into a smirk before flinging her instrument back over her

shoulder. Kythala hadn't the breath to banter with her just yet, but once she caught it, she responded with a bit of a sneer.

"I was *just* about to give them the slip! I knew Zekh should be around, so I was hoping to sneak up on him for a change. I had that under control, you know!" Kythala maintained.

Elone raised a brow as Kythala very clearly did *not* have it under control. It was not in Elone's nature to belabor a point, and she merely chortled and gave Kythala a soft slap upside her head.

"Come on, if you want to catch your lover-boy, we'll have to move quick. Pa's got him running all sorts of errands today. Here, you can lean on me while you get your senses back."

Kythala tried not to look back at the two who pursued her. She didn't feel bad, but also didn't feel any animosity toward them either. They were only following her mother's orders; and luckily for them they had run into Elone and not Ibsida or Zoljin. Ibsida would have likely opted for a more "direct" method of putting them out, while Zoljin could have turned them into frogs as quickly as tried to hit them over the head with his staff. Kythala was amazed with how each of Zekh's siblings dealt with conflict. She likened their methods to the different parts of the Breley Essandra so desperately tried to keep her from. Though neither Ibsida or Zoliin were exactly fond of her just yet; and would have let her be captured if not for Zekh, Targact, the head of the LeRoix's was surprisingly fond of her. Regardless, of the many adopted brothers and sisters Zekh had, Elone was one of her favorites; and the only one who understood what it was like for Kythala to possess both human blood, and blood from one of Breley's many other races.

Kythala leaned her head against the Elone's shoulder with a slight yawn as she accepted the latter's invitation for support. It was draining enough to be chased by the guard; but to also be beguiled by Elone's lullabies left the half-elf very drowsy. She knew when she was able to walk a little, and was in Zekh's company, she'd likely wake up. Neither did anything to cease her anxiety.

Vulmar was going to hear an earful if Essandra made it home before Kythala did, for Kythala knew even Vulmar could not save her should her mother know she skipped her first day of class. Elone chatted away about some of the recent dock gossip and let Kythala know how Zekh was fairing.

"Mogg be merciful; will you just *marry* him already? You already loom over him like his damned wife."

Kythala instinctively slapped Elone in the arm—which felt very much like striking a wall. It rattled her knuckles a bit and left a warm sensation upon her palm. Elone seemed entirely unphased. To Elone, Kythala's strikes at best felt like paddings from a kitten. Kythala's only victory was being able to glimpse one of the few moments of "girlishness" the half-orc ever displayed.

The market stalls by the docks were rancid, but it was an aroma Kythala was getting used to. The first time Zekh had brought her down to the docks the scent was nauseating, but over the span of many visits it had become almost welcoming. The overpowering piscine smell was almost like the smell of herbs which greeted her whenever she returned home. Where most would tum their noses away when lingering on the Docks, Kythala found solace. Knowing that somewhere amidst the sea-breeze and fog; her Zekh was wandering. Furthermore, even if they weren't entirely trusting of her yet; Kythala found each of the LeRoix's intriguing. Sure, they lacked Zekh's charming mannerisms and open mindedness when it came to her lineage, but each were rather complicated beings. None of the LeRoix's were related by blood; even their current head was adopted by an older LeRoix years before. As Zekh put it, the LeRoix name has been passed between adopted son and daughter for generations; the last LeRoix to actually be born to the name had passed long before Targact ever made his home amongst them.

Zekh told the best stories; a skill she began to attribute to Elves as a whole because of the way both Zekh and her father ensnared her with their words. It wasn't just their shared ability to perfectly recall detail; but how each managed to weave a tale in such a way that felt as though the words manifested places and people into reality. It was more than just the retelling of tales when they spoke, but rather a reliving of past events. Kythala wondered why neither had ever tried their hand at becoming a bard. For Zekh, Elone explained it was his lack of rhythm, (although Kythala disagreed.) While with Vulmar the claim was that he and instruments had simply never gotten along.

As the pair approached the edge of the docks, Elone swiftly pulled Kythala back. Before Kythala was able to allege that she knew where the dock ended and had spent plenty of time learning which boards were loose the half-orc gave her a flick. With a subtle directional gesture from Elone's chin, Kythala turned and saw her desired object. Skin, a mix of absent color and purple hues, created a shade of gray Kythala swore could never be replicated. His hair was worn over his shoulder, shaved on one side and pulled into a loose braid on the other. Elone pulled her in and gave her a whispered command "Stand behind Menkin's stall, and count to thirty. Once you do, I want you to slink on over; Try not to run, eh Princess?" To which Kythala received another light slap on the back of her skull to snap her out of her daydreaming. Elone made her way over, and Kythala started counting.

One… Two… Three—

Elone made her way up to Zekh, giving her brother a proper strike to his arm. To which the Drow jolted for a moment. He turned with a half-pleased look of shock on his face. For the

LeRoix's it was never certain who was hitting you, but it was certainly a relief when they realized it was a sibling.

Seven… Eight… Nine—

Zekh responded with a proper hug, revealing the soft interior he so desperately tried to conceal as one of Targact's children. Some of his siblings said there was no place for that softness in their line of work; but Targact always insisted it was something he should hold onto.

Twelve…Thirteen… Fourteen—

If there was one thing Kythala was powerless against; it was his smirk. Crooked, and yet perfect. Sure, Zekh *could* smile normally if he wanted to, but the mischievous effect of his twisted grin was more compelling. Perhaps it was that juxtaposition between what his siblings wanted of him versus what he was naturally. As if the moment he curled both corners of his mouth into the proper position he'd be conceding defeat and reveal the "soft-hearted fool" they claimed he was.

Seventeen… Eighteen… Nineteen—

Elone was skilled at what she did, and while she was not the most adept pickpocket or liar; she was good at using her physical attributes to compensate for that. As she maneuvered Zekh's

back towards the stalls his concerned expression indicated he was suspicious. Yet Elone was not one to back talk. When she asked you to do something you had one chance to do so. If you didn't, she'd "persuade" you with her fist. Zekh was much more cunning than his sister, but nowhere near as good a fighter. So, he relented; and allowed her to lead him onward from the docks.

Twenty-One... Twenty-Two… Twenty-Three—

As a member of this trio, it was fun to watch from the third seat. Elone was clearly doing her best to keep Zekh's eyes forward, while Zekh's wisdom cautioned him that something else was afoot. Each time he attempted to scan his surroundings, Elone would give him a nudge. Kythala could only guess what they were saying but knew enough about the inner workings of the LeRoix's to know that if Elone was talking, others were listening.

Twenty-Five... Twenty-Six... Twenty-Seven—

They had moved a little further than Kythala anticipated, so she had to make up time with quickened steps. Did Elone want her to move in on thirty, or be there by thirty? She wasn't sure. She had been spending too much time observing them to remember, and at this distance, if she were to work with either instruction, she'd need to be swift. She did her best to tread lightly against the wooden floorboards, but the waterlogged wood of the docks was still awkward for her to walk upon.

Twenty-Eight... Twenty-Nine… Thirty!

She was so near, and neither had turned around to notice her; so, as she closed the distance the finger that caught her forehead was totally unexpected. It made her scrunch her eyes, believing she had succeeded in catching Zekh by surprise. It was clear when she opened her eyes that it was the opposite which had become true. Her eyes scanned him rapidly and fell upon the mirrored lid of the stopwatch he kept on his person. How long had he been using it to track her progress? He had tricked both Elone and Kythala into thinking he was unaware. With lips fixed into that wicked smirk; he removed his finger from the crown of Kythala's head.

"Not bad, Princess; but your steps are still too heavy. Besides, Elone here never talks this much without giving an order. You're both still terrible at planning."

He may have outsmarted them; but Elone's fist to his gut was not something he could outmaneuver. The impact of which modified the rather confident stance he had in that moment and sent him doubling-over.

"Yeah? You see that one coming, little brother?" Elone said as she ruffled his locks. Turning toward Kythala she said,

"You did well. Even I heard you rushing, but if he didn't have that blasted locket me' thinks you would'a had him. Well done, Princess."

Kythala's reward was another slap on the arm; even when she wished to be gentle the half-orc still couldn't quite gauge her strength. Nevertheless, the gesture was understood, but already Kythala could feel the sting of the impact.

"Well, get up lover-boy; I don't think she has all day,"

Zekh was still hunched over, and Kythala gave him a tender pat on the back of his head. She held out her hand, and he took it firmly. Kythala helped him to stand and dusted off his shoulders. Even though the air barely filled his lungs; his stupid grin was still frozen on his lips. It made Kythala laugh; he was the type to smile even if a dragon was blowing fire in his face; and that was yet another one of her favorite things about him.

When he finally got settled, his eyes fell quick upon her. Intense. The glance gave rise to the color of Kythala's cheeks even before his hands rested on her shoulders. He told her she looked tired and asked if she was alright. Not what she was hoping he would say at that moment; as she had tried so hard to keep her hair as it was set when she left her house, but it was sweet, so she resolved to let him off the hook this time.

"I'm great! Gave some guards the slip. You should have seen me on the rooftops! I'm getting good at acrobatics. I'll be able to outrun even you one of these days,"

He gave her a clap and nodded his head sarcastically.

"I'm sure you will, Princess,"

The underlying lack of confidence was intentional; and Kythala decided to borrow one from Elone's book and give him as fierce a punch as she could muster. It barely seemed to faze him. Strangely, that made her smile.

V

Zekh was born off the shores of Breley, between Underdark, the Drow ancestral home, and the surface world. Years ago, the under-class of the Drow Empire rebelled and moved their home to the Wraithwood. Since that time, both have lived in civil war and have never known peace. The Ancient Matriarchy still reigns over the Underdark, unchallenged, while those who followed

Masdearii's rebellion now call the Wraithwood home. The Drow who live in the Wood are governed by a loose Oligarchy, while Masedearii, the self-appointed "Night Lord", controls the military forces. While the Oligarchy claims to be the ruling power, many who are privy to inner sanctum understand that this is but a front.

The tribal commanders were chosen solely by Masdearii, and they remained blindly loyal to him. Some lesser tribes of Drow saw this rebellion as a chance to carve their own path, owing no allegiance to the Empire or Masdearii's coo. Those Drow quickly found themselves mistaken. Without the protection of either the Empire or Masdearii's legions, many quickly found themselves scurrying back to either side. Despite this, some clans did form independent villages and enjoyed some success for a while; but most were eventually absorbed by insurgents from either of the two dominant cultures of the Drow. Zekh's was one such faction; a nameless band of Drow who existed in relative peace along the borders. Yet, with their growing prosperity, both the Empire and Masdearii began to require allegiance; and when refuted, began to threaten absorption. Where the village had survived with intellect and honest commerce, the time came that Masdearii lost his patience, and what he could not win with promise or tribute, he decided to take by force.

What remains of this village is an assemblage of burnt houses and ruins; its inhabitants put to the sword by marauders when the village leaders, even in the face of total annihilation, would not bow. Zekh, one of the village's youngest, was smuggled out by a member of the armed forces Breley had sent to aid their resistance. In the face of certain defeat, the leaders begged the guards to save whatever children they could; but when Zekh was brought to Breley, few wished to adopt a Drow. Believing them to be ill-omens and cutthroats by nature; Zekh was abandoned. He left the city orphanage when he was but a boy. During a failed attempt at stealing fruit and bread to feed himself, Targact found him. The LeRoix elder took pity on the poor boy and after paying off his debts, took him under his wing.

Zekh has lived with the LeRoix's ever since, and when he came of age and was asked to take on an odd job or request, he never refused. Quickly, he learned that he was endowed with the "skills" his adopted family held most dear. A charming and cunning lad, able to talk his way out of most situations, while also not too shabby with a blade. Quickly he made a name for himself both in and out of the LeRoix family.

With his burgeoning skills and personable nature, it is not hard to understand why his adoptive relatives all refer to him as the "Favorite." Understandably, many assume when old Targact finally steps down, it will be Zekh who will assume the role of head of the LeRoix family. Albeit there are some within the circle who wonder if he has the stomach for some of the crueler aspects of running such a family. While he has shown capabilities as a smooth-talking thief on more than one occasion, for better or for worse, those closest to him know that when it comes to making the more ruthless decisions; he freezes. Alas, Zekh was lacking the cut-throat nature many associate with his lineage.

In actuality, the LeRoix's prefer peace, and whenever possible prefer to achieve their goals through more diplomatic methods. However, Targact did not earn his reputation through the same means as Zekh. No, for a Goblin to have gotten where he is in a city such as Breley; he needed to be feared as much, if not more, than he was respected. Rumors claim Old Targact once fed a dissenter to a pack of wild boar; while others allege that One-Armed-Torvald lost his sword arm when he was caught helping himself to a heftier portion than Targact consented. Most notable however was when Targact encountered the Lioness herself; and although he lost, he succeeded in distracting the Guards of Breley long enough for his crew to escape with stolen goods. Afterwards, he even managed to bribe his way out of any serious sentences with a few called-in-favors.

Some believed many of these claims were circulated by Targact himself; while others say they were eyewitnesses to the goblin's nefarious deeds. Regardless, the LeRoix's have a fearsome reputation that gave them an unchallenged seat at the top of Breley's criminal society and "unofficial" control over the city's shipping ports. With so much to lose, it was understandable that the family continue to worry if Zekh could prove capable.

Truth be told, Zekh LeRoix had no desire to assume the mantle. Sure, he knew he owed Targact and his family everything, but those closest to him also knew that there was not a single part of him that lusts for power. He had no restless ambitions of becoming a Crime-Lord, nor any grand intention of forging his own path of blood and bone. No, for Zekh the greatest joy one could ever possess was the love of a family—and he already has a surplus of that with the LeRoix's. He had all he'd ever wanted; that was until the moment he laid eyes on that half-elf girl choking on mead at the bar.

Zekh wanted to win the heart of Kythala, the wandering daughter of the Lioness. Not for power, or sport; but because he found her enchanting. When asked how such a sight could woo him, he likened the way the mead was blown out of her nose to that of whales exhaling seafoam along the shore. A comparison he still endures mockery for to this very day. From that exact moment, he was smitten with Kythala and made it his mission to earn her love, one day at a time.

VI

Essandra was an exemplary guard, even for Breley's standards. She had earned her reputation long before she set foot upon its shores, having previously traveled with a band of sellswords with an international reputation. Most were guardships and caravan escorts who found themselves

instrumentally involved in a political uprising against an oppressive regime. Hailed as heroines and heroes for their noble handling of events, Essandra did not need much in terms of a resume to be granted recruit status. As expected, climbing the ranks was just as easy for her as slaying dragons.

Essandra, however, was not a simple wanderer. Unbeknownst to her unit, she had been born to a noble family in a neighboring country. Her Nerikian bloodline could be traced back to the lands of Ostrea. Her nation was predominantly a human land which had managed to remain neutral to the neighboring realms political misfortunes. Most territories along Ostrea's border were highly xenophobic, especially towards humans of other nations. Some ascribed this to the land's grim history while others accredited it to an instinctive avoidance of the unknown. Regardless, the Nerikian House was a mixed bag and welcomed strangers with open arms into their lands.

Essandra was the eldest child and only daughter of the Nerikian's. For most of her life Essandra was raised in a sheltered castle. As a woman, she was expected to embrace the traditional roles of mother and wife. Seeing the battlefield was never an option her father willingly entertained. Despite his best attempts at laying a path and having her walk it, Essandra had other plans. She would obediently finish her general studies and etiquette lessons early so that she could train with the soldiers. Despite her father's well-known disapproval, her uncle insisted that even if she was to be a "wife" and nothing more; it was never imprudent to learn how to wield a blade. Though the King of the Nerikian's never openly agreed, all who knew him realized he could never deny his daughter. Essandra was begrudgingly allowed to train. Yet as much as she longed for the day when her father would look out over into the courtyard and acknowledge her prowess as a warrior, that day never came.

It was as if he actively avoided the courtyard. Even his soldiers began to wonder why the King withdrew from overseeing the battle training or attending the sparring contests in his honor. It was Essandra's mother, Lady Nerikian, who would now preside over such events. She provided the encouraging attentiveness Essandra longed for. Even so, it never replaced her desire to prove to her father that she was as capable upon the battlefield as her brothers. The support of her mother motivated her to continue striving for excellence, while her desire to prove her military worth to her father fueled her love of battle.

Essandra breezed through her studies in the monasteries and libraries and when completed, her uncle began advanced training in swordplay and concentrated studies in tactics and battle maneuvers. She played games like Ur, Mehan and Chess. Spending long hours studying the strategies of ancient Commanders and foreign Generals. Essandra grasped the intricacy of battle as easily as a proper Lady used their fork. She knew she was at a crossroads and what had started out as a simple adolescent act of rebellion had become her life's purpose. Promise of battlefields and the thrill of sparring were the moments she looked forward to most in life, and the place where the pressures of nobility and the suffocating ballrooms of Ostrean dinners melted away.

When the King's untimely death occurred, despite their differences, Essandra deeply mourned his passing. A plague had gripped the kingdom, and unfortunately because of his advanced age, King Nerikian was more susceptible. Although it was with great sadness, Essandra realized she was now free to pursue her military career fully. She received her mother's full blessing to enlist; as a few of her brothers had already become integrally involved in the court and politics, and all had already taken a wife. With the lineage secure, Essandra was free to live her life as a soldier and not a political pawn or a neighboring lord's trophy.

Unfortunately, the life of a soldier turned out to be less exciting than she had imagined. During peacetime, she spent more days than she had wished attending meetings as a representative of the Nerikian military or as the ambassador for one of her brothers. Despite her fierce reputation and tactical expertise, many nobles still viewed her as a prize to be won and a way of solidifying a connection with the Nerikian fortune. This was the coup de grace; Essandra realized that no matter how capable she was, that as a woman with royal lineage she would never be perceived as more than a dowry. Accordingly, one night, under the cover of a waning moon, she ran away. Leaving the Nerikian palace behind, as well as the lands of Ostrea; in search of a path of her own.

Such is how she joined the international band of sellswords. A motley, nameless bunch who saw no job as too cheap as long as they were paid. Unquestionably, it was dangerous; work but that was what Essandra had wished for all her life. Barely into her twenties, she had already clashed blades with the mightiest Orcs and the most nefarious bandits one could imagine.

VII

The Trio made their way throughout the docks with haste; for one of them was "on the lam." Unsurprisingly, Kythala was less concerned by the magically induced "assault" on her mother's two guards than being caught breaking curfew. Guards could be silenced with a few coins or a sudden sleight of hand, an enraged mother could not. Yet Kythala was determined to walk the pair to the next stop of their daily rounds and then to make her way back home. She believed she had time to make it there before Vulmar would grow concerned or Essandra would return from work. Even if Essandra left early to ensure the Half-Elf did not slip away, if Kythala left for her home now she would still beat her mother there. Vulmar wouldn't "rat", and as a result, Kythala

would do nothing to jeopardize his credibility. She had never let him down when he trusted her to honor their arrangement. Furthermore, Kythala knew that if she lost her overseer's benevolence, she'd have no allies at all.

Elone, sensing the tension between the two lovers, cleared her throat. “You know, you cheated before. Just always have to win, don’t you Zekh?”

The Dark-Elf observed Kythala from the corner of his eye, while his adoptive sister, a few feet in the lead, purposefully avoided the conflict she had started. No one liked being a third, especially when it involved family. Zekh was quite proud of himself for not being fooled by their ploy. He fiddled with his pocket-watch, passing it back and forth between his fingers. A dexterous display as the ticking device seemed to synchronize with each passing step.

“Elone isn’t really one for small talk. Once she said more than two sentences to me without dragging me off or walking away; I had a feeling my dear sister was trying to get one over on me. As for you, Princess. . . .” His hand finding her shoulder, while the other flourishingly gesturing to his half-orc sister.

Zekh tensed his body, expecting another shot to his arm or gut, but his elder sister decided instead to distance herself from the pair. Kythala tried to hide her frustration, but her inherited curse of an expressive face ruined any chance of doing so.

“If you keep giving me pointers on such things eventually, I’ll be an even better ‘Dock Hand’ then you! If that’s your intention?”

She tried her best to look serious as a part of her did believe what she said. Zekh however did not take the statement seriously. He ruffled her hair, scarcely able to contain his amusement at such a proposition.

"Sure, just don't let the Lioness learn of your intentions."

And with that the two of them grew quiet, touching a nerve neither of them had been able to overcome just yet. Kythala stopped walking and turned to see the position of the sun and, luckily, it had not set yet.

"Speaking of— I still am technically grounded, so, —as much as I'd love to continue telling you how I'll be the next head of the LeRoix's, I should get going."

The Half-Elf turned and gave a hastened wave, before running off away from the pair. Zekh stood there, a bit confused; though before he could consider what had just occurred Elone was by his side and gave him a firm slap on his shoulder.

"Yep, it was definitely something you said."

VIII

Kythala had made it home just in time. Essandra was still not back from her shift, and Vulmar had just begun to leave for his when the Half-Elf dashed inside. He was impressed. Kythala had been able to both manage her time and get home before her mother.

He was relieved that he would not have to worry about either of them incurring the Lionesses' wrath. Vulmar asked her where she had been, knowing the answer already. Nevertheless, he gave Kythala the chance to divulge as much of her 'date' as possible. She of course elected not to reveal she had opted not to attend orientation at the Academy. Vulmar couldn't help but feel a loss for Essandra. Such things are the like Kythala should be speaking to her mother about, and he could recall a time when the pair was much closer.

“Well, you’ve certainly got some more spring in your step now.”

There was mischief on his face. Vulmar carefully balanced his delight in his daughter’s happiness with his role as her father. Kythala blushed, fidgeting in her seat.

“I’m sure it doesn’t help with your hoof-feet, my dear.”

“Oh, haha! Real funny, Dad.”

Kythala pouted. Flicking her eyelids to the wall as the flush grew in her cheeks.

“He’s. . . Sweet, in his own way. I know he likes me.”

“How couldn’t he like you, my dear?” Vulmar added as he moved about. Ever busy, like a hummingbird. Kythala’s warm gaze watching her dad tidy things up before he headed off to work.

“He’d be a fool if he didn’t. . . Now, what are you going to tell your mother?”

“I just went to the market for a bit after school. I was back here but half an hour after my. . . curfew.”

“Clever girl. . . and how did I react?”

“With all the sternness of a disciplinarian. Truly, you would have made her proud.”

Vulmar, with a squint which portrayed his pride, and amusement, at her wit shook his head as he walked over to plant a kiss on her forehead. He left shortly after, and thoroughly enjoyed pestering and teasing the young girl about her crush and whatever intimacies she disclosed, within fatherly reason. He advised her never to repeat the part about being chased by

the Guard or subsequently being put to sleep by Elone. Vulmar then told her what ingredients were available if she felt like fixing herself dinner before he left.

Kythala liked having the house to herself. Her parents schedule meant she'd likely never be able to have people over without her mother knowing. If she wasn't under house arrest, she may have been able to have some of her friends from the Academy over. That was not going to be the case after the morning's events. It felt like ages since she and Maela spoke. Kythala had intended to do that today. Unfortunately, remedial lessons were not her interest. Her recent after school escapades had taken precedence over her studies, and though Kythala had always possessed an innate talent with magic, her papers on theory and implementation had grown "subpar" by her instructors' standards. Furthermore, she hadn't so much as tried to manifest flame upon a wick since she had begun spending time on the docks, and Kythala didn't wish to face the embarrassment of how behind she had fallen in technique.

Kythala decided that it may be wise to at least attempt some simpler incantations while she had the house to herself. Tomorrow would be the first actual day of classes, and she was already sure she'd be put on the spot. The Academy did not like absenteeism, and as such made it a point to discourage it as much as possible. If not for Kythala's heritage, it was likely she would not have gotten in at all. Her grades, while high in prior studies, were offset by that recent dip in attendance.

It wasn't like the people she wished to see most were at the Academy, after all. . .

Kythala began to gather some candles from about the house. They were common enough. She'd have some left over from last year's supplies, and if she ran out, she could always grab a few from Vulmar's draw. He liked to keep them on hand for birthdays and anniversaries. It made sense to her. Her dad was always sentimental, elven remembering was his ability to never miss a

date of significance. Often, she would hear Maela and Haris speak of the wrath which visited their houses when their fathers forgot to bring home flowers on the anniversaries of their weddings. Even Zekh recalled a time his adoptive father blew his chance with a woman when he too had forgotten to commemorate the year the pair being together. Kythala had never witnessed Vulmar make such a mistake, though perhaps *one* time Essandra did. To err is *human*, after all.

With the first candle set upon the floor of her bedroom, Kythala moved back. While there was no risk of burning her house down that did not mean she wanted to be standing directly atop what she was about to ignite. She had already set her shoes on fire, and once, nearly burned the hair off another student's head when they were working in tandem. The nature of magic was not that it could suddenly burst without restraint, but that the slightest deviation in thought when an incantation was laid may cause the flame to sprout somewhere unintended.

Even now, she can hear the words of Professor Saphielle running through her mind. As she steadied her breath, she conjured up the image of her instructor in her mind. It was as though she were reliving the very moment as she felt as though she had been transported right into the classroom.

"*Magic can be thought of much like painting. When an artist brings their brush to the canvas, they direct the stroke with their hands. Color follows a defined path guided by both the brush and the hand of the artist. . . Magic is an attempt to do so without the hand which guided the brush."*

Kythala could feel her hands relaxing. When she performed magic, she knew she walked a fine line. The balance between being relaxed enough to manifest what she wanted had to always be kept in check with her control over those manifestations. Her mind, still attempting to center itself, refreshed her understanding of that concept with her instructor's words once more.

". . .The only assurance on whether the brush would remain within the lines are the thoughts which guide it. To imagine the brush in your own hand would cause it to do so. When the "brush" is replaced with flames or gusts of wind, intent must be clear, which is precisely why more destructive or elaborate spells were kept regulated in the lands of Breley. Only the most practiced of Wizards ever were permitted to use their craft beyond the mundane doings of lightning campfires. . . Follow my teachings earnestly, and you too can be one such Wizard."

It took most wizards years to hone their craft to one which not only could provide the more elaborate of effects, but to gain enough credence for those who enforce the laws of Breley to permit one to do so. This skewed the practice of magic toward those who lived the longest lives. There were cases of human mages reaching the threshold for what the judges would consider an able practitioner, but by those times often the aspiring magician would only have limited years to practice before their bodies gave out. Most assumed magic was not taxing on the body- and most were wrong. To be within the top reaches of magic one needn't not only hone their minds, but their bodies. To channel a storm through one's hands meant mana needed to travel through their very arms, and only through years of conditioning could one hope to achieve such a feat without destroying their ability to utilize said arm in the process.

Kythala had an edge, thanks to Vulmar's heritage. If she was honest about it, it made her a bit lazy. She always had innate talent with magics, and most of the adept spells which her class struggled with came to her easily. When Kythala was a girl, she had grand fantasies of using her powers to fight off dragons alongside her mother, but Essandra had assured her from a young age that all those fire-breathing beasts had been slain, and now, all that they had to fear now were poachers. Having no desire to make a career out of protecting Breley's farmers her desire to further her studies were ending, rapidly. Essandra had thought this a pragmatic approach, giving

her daughter more than her grandfather had ever given her- but to the young child, it meant that a dream had been killed before it ever even blossomed.

This train of thought meant that not a single spark appeared at the candle before her. She fell back with a sigh, letting her arms slap to the side the way Essandra had taught her. This wasn't exactly a tumble, but she had drilled that motion down to the point that it became a second instinct. With a few stray strands over her face Kythala was about to spend the rest of her evening staring at the ceiling when the sound of rivets caught her ear. The lock to her door came undone with a click and, almost as if she had manifested from Kythala's lingering thought, Essandra was home. Kythala never had a good way of gauging her mood during that first entrance. Her helmet, fashioned into the visage of a roaring lion around the actual visor and faceplate, ensured any of Essandra's facial features was protected; and obscured.

Kythala sat up, wanting to go and shut her door as she watched Essandra's face become visible. From the corner of her door, Kythala could peek and only reveal the top half of her head. Watching while Essandra took her plated fingers to her nose and pinched the bridge. Something had happened, an instinct warning Kythala as she pulled her head back behind the door when her mother turned.

This was Essandra's routine. She'd arrive home, greet Vulmar if he was on an off day, and then depart into her room to remove her armor. When Kythala was a girl, she'd enjoy playing the part of her squire, putting on the armor Essandra took off but in her older years Kythala felt the want to do this less and less. Besides, Essandra was perfectly capable of getting the straps off on her own. A further gauge to how the day went would be how heavily the plates hit the floor when Essandra removed them, and with the first heavy thud Kythala knew it was a

rough day. Essandra usually started with her boots, but on the days Essandra began with her breastplate Kythala knew something, or more accurately, someone had drawn her ire.

Her head finally clicked with the possibility. *No, there was no way that they had made it back to report to Essandra after the event at the docks.* Unless Essandra herself had found them herself. Kythala doubted she would change her route just to catch her daughter in the act. No, her mother would take the direct approach. She was two bodies short given Essandra would likely demand apologies, so Kythala was safe to assume whatever had happened was not concerning her. Tensions still high, Kythala began to make her way toward her bed. If she pretended to be napping maybe, then Essandra wouldn't be as likely to disturb her.

All she had to do was get back here without making a sound. A shame she never stopped to take her boots off when she got home. One step. Two steps. Creak. Three steps. Fo-

Just as Vulmar said. Hoof-footed. In her attempt to mimic the curved patterns she watched Zekh take, she had kicked one of the loose candles over, causing it to tip and land atop the silver platter where the candle she had attempted to practice on lay. This caused said candle to topple, hitting the rim of the platter and producing a pattering *twang* while it landed back down on the floor. It was not a grand raucous, but given her mother's hearing, it was enough. Like clockwork, a booming voice, albeit concerned instead of enraged, yelled from down the hall.

"Kythala?!"

There she stopped, on the edge of her next step, while her green eyes turned to look towards the hallway. Essandra's head appearing from the doorframe of her room and her eyes locking with her daughter's. The two stared at one another for a single awkward second before

Essandra moved back into her room to finish getting changed. Great, Kythala thought, knowing now there was no point pretending to be asleep. Before she'd need to be beckoned, Kythala was making her way down the hall. She took her seat at the dinner table where she'd known tonight's "council meeting" would be held. Regardless of whether she had done more to invoke Essandra's ire, she'd know her mother would attempt to reconcile what happened this morning. Plus, she'd want to hear all about Kythala's first day.

Kythala thought she could use this to her advantage. The more she kept Essandra talking about other matters, the better a story she could weave. Kythala's mind was jumping through memories of quirks teachers and fellow students displayed to compile a believable fib. Perhaps if she mimicked her father's candor well enough, Essandra would be so captivated by her words that she'd not dig too deeply into them. *Yes. That was a good plan*. Make the day as dramatic as possible to try to get a laugh or two from Essandra and then scurry back to bed before she asks too many questions. Kythala pulled out the chair, sat down at the table, and waited.

Essandra appeared as if from the wall itself. It annoyed Kythala somewhat that her mother, despite having a couple extra pounds of muscle, was so much lighter on her feet than she was. Often people assumed humans could never match the grace of elves, but Kythala had inherited one of her father's unique fatal flaws- clumsiness. At least once a month she or Vulmar would fall or break a glass knocking something over in the kitchen, and it didn't add up to Kythala. Sure, she had heard her mother roar, but not once had she ever seen her misstep. Perhaps it was all that time running around in plate that made her footsteps so light. Her mind imaging Essandra starting down at her feet and carefully lining up her toes with her heels when she was walking through town and laughed under her breath.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, just thinking about school.”

A pause, Essandra pulling out her chair across from Kythala. Settling in with a raised brow.

“Oh? Something happened?”

“Yeah. Miss Faelynn again. She wouldn’t stop talking and that made one of the girls get distracted. She caused Miss Faelynn’s desk plant to catch fire.”

“Hmm. I’m sure that caused quite the stir.”

“You don’t even know! She’s had that for five years, apparently. It’s from her homeland.”

“Do you know what kind it was? Maybe we can find another one for her.”

“Oh, uhhh. . . I think it was Ainouel’s Tears. You only really find those in the-”

“In the Sommner lands. Yes. Quite a pretty flower, I hear they bloom for only a week, when summer turns to fall.”

“Yep! Then they close for another year.”

“Well, you must have had a rather eventful day. How was the rest of it, not too exciting I hope?”

“No. Nothing can really top a teacher’s desk nearly catching fire.”

“Well, Miss Faelynn is a great teacher. At least you’re in capable hands. . .”

"Mhmm! She got us right back on-"

". . . I don't know many teachers who can maintain Simulacrums from that distance."

Kythala stopped. Her eyes dilated with the same glint as a deer glimpsing a wolf through the trees. What did she mean? Her mind raced to try to figure out what was being said and counter it before Essandra cut that notion right down.

"Miss Faelynn is on an expedition. I learned of that this afternoon when I went to bring you lunch. A peace treaty, of sorts- Imagine my surprise then when the headmaster explained that you were not in school today."

Kythala's face began to flush. She couldn't even look at Essandra while she stuttered, trying to formulate something to respond with when her mother's breath cut through her prattling.

"Kythala. Don't lie to me. You went to the dock today, didn't you? Look. You're nearly a woman now, and I understand sneaking off is inevitable. Not attending to your studies, however, is something I cannot stress the foolishness of."

Essandra leaned forward. Trying to look Kythala in the eyes, even though the latter remained with her gaze plastered to the ground. There was a pause. Essandra's mind running thorough the possibilities when a chill touched her back.

Deja vu.

Essandra rose. Moving from sitting across from her to the chair at her right. She turned the face of her daughter up to see her.

“If you’re going to go skirting around your punishment, please at least do it after school from now on. It cannot be stressed. . .”

“Mom. . .”

“. . .how much your hoof-feet can benefit from a few spells.”

“Mom!”

The two laughed. Kythala’s hand giving Essandra’s arm a pat. If only Vulmar was here to see it.

“You’re not mad?”

“No, I’m decently mad. That won’t change anything, though. You got an earful this morning, and yet you were still defiant. I’m more concerned at this moment. Besides, I’d be lying if I acted as though you inherited all your oppositionist tendencies from your father. I never skipped out on my training, however. That’s a rule you’re going to inherit. It would be a shame if I began volunteering as security at the academy, wouldn’t it?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would, and you know it. Though then perhaps I can finally meet this Zekh personally. Maybe help him pick out some flowers for when he picks you up.”