

ZARZAR: THE BANISHED GOD

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Wietske Blijenberg

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To Mum & Dad, thank you for everything.
I love you.

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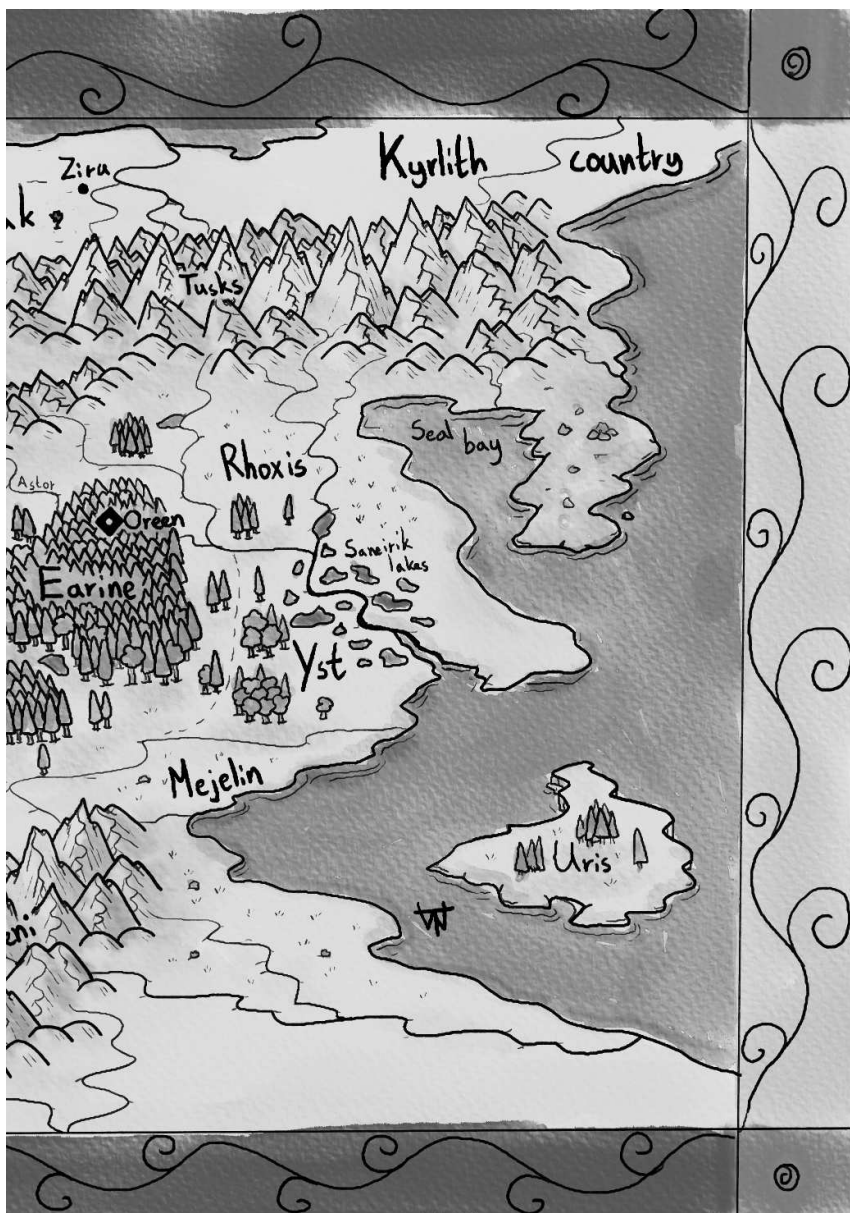
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Map of the Deithi Territories



As found in the archives of King Litas



PRONUNCIATION OF CERTAIN WORDS AND NAMES

People

Abén: /abɛn/
Alke: /ɔlkə/
Arphica (Ayce) : /ɑrfika/
Asca: /ɑska/
Asiriline (Assie) : /ɑsi:rilɪn/
Ast: /ɑst/
Caeran: /kɑɪrən/
Centric: /sɛntrɪk/
Ciursal: /kjɪrsəl/
Daevi: /dɑvi/
Duitho: /dyiθo/
Dysha: /dɪʃa/
Elgia: /ɛlxija/
Elion: /eliʝən/
Elyani: /eljani/
Figgi: /fɪgi/
Fira: /fira/
Fridei: /frideɪ/
Giqar: /xikɔ/
Giria: /giriʝa/ or /xiriʝa/
Githorille (Githo) : /giθorilə/
Heiavi: /heɪjavi/
Hiuvi: /hiʝyvi/ or /hiʝuvi/
Illa: /ɪla/
Inan: /inən/
Iptalia (Ippy) : /ɪptalia/
Ivaera: /ivɛ:ra/
Ivah: /aɪvɑ/
Jagemir: /jæxəmir/
Jicin: /dʒɪsɪn/
Kaelix: /kɑilɪks/

Kimp: /kɪmp/
Kiulo (Kiu) : /kijylo/ or /kɹylo/
Linnith: /lɪnɪð/
Litas: /lɪtəs/
Markí: /mɑrki/
Meo-lai: /meo-lɹi/
Merr: /mɛr/
Minnea: /mɪneja/
Miro: /miro/ or /mɹiro/
Naraska: /narɑska/
Navida: /navida/
Oripha: /o:rifa/
Oyro: /ɔɪro/
Phae: /feɪ/
Queros: /kwɛərɔs/
Rahkin: /ra:kin/ or /ra:kɪn/
Raki: /ra:ki/
Ríxill (Thannearíxill) : /rɪksɪl/ (/θɑniarɪksɪl/)
Roduna: /rodyna/
Saothir: /saoθɪr/
Saraxai (Rax) : /sarɑksɑi/ (/rɑks/)
Seaz (cat) : /sejɑz/
Taeri: /tɑɪri/
Thorán: /θorɑn/ or /θoræn/
Torean: /toreʔɑn/
Tsuka: /tsyka/
Urix: /yrɪks/
Uthei: /yθe:/
Veanna: /veɑna/
Wythari: /ʊɪθari/
Xaeth: /ksɑɪtʔ/
Xinthopher (Xintho): /ksɪntɔfəʌ/
Yankta: /jɑŋkta/
Yarina: /jarina/
Yemin: /jemɪn/
Zarando (Zarzar): /zarɑndo/ or /zɑrɑndo/

Places

Alancula: /alɑŋkylɑ/

Bal: /bɑl/

Bavinko: /bavɪŋko/

Crythille: /kriθɪl/

Earine: /ɪərɪn/ or /ɪəri:n/

Foh: /fɔʔ/

Fyasri: /fɪjasri/

Hopwotch: /hɔpwoʧ/

Isríth: /isrɪθ/

Lithrier: /liθri:r/

Maelinor: /ma:linor/ or /ma:linɔr/

Maweni: /maʋe:ni/

Mejelin: /mejəlɪn/

Mir: /mir/

Oreen: /ori:n/ or /ɔri:n/

Rhoxis: /ʁɔksɪs/

Rikans: /rikɑns/

Santak: /sɑntɑk/

Sefian: /sefi:ɑn/

Tijor: /tidʒɔr/ or /tijɔr/

Uris: /yris/

Vandira: /vɑndira/

Wuisthuria: /visðuria/ or /visðyria/

Yst: /ist/

Yswillin: /ɪsʊɪɪn/ or /isʊɪɪn/

Ziru: /ziru/

Words

Aestoli (aest, aesting, aests, stoli) (curse word): /ɑɪstoli/
Afelwryn (plant) : /afəlvryn/
Antheruvalik (plant) : /ɑnθɛryvalɪk/
Asiala maniu'lamin, firain b'isiuli (saying) : /asiala manijɣlamɪn, firain bʔisiuli/
Asthura (plant) : /ɑstyra/
Atke (tree) : /ɑtkə/
Banbonei (plant) : /bɑnbone/
Barowil (plant) : /barowɪl/
Bénrel (warm drink) : /bɛnrɛl/ or /bɪnrɛl/
Biél (curse word) : /biʔɛl/
Biqqek (animal) : /bikʊɛk/
Biual (biu) (curse word) : /bjɯəl/
Bonei (warm drink) : /bone/
Cinklewran (animal) : /kɪŋkəlvran/
Cythai (plant) : /siθaɪ/
Daethyre (plant) : /deɪθɪr/ or /daiθɪr/
Dasath (creature) : /dasɑð/
Deithi (creature) : /diʝeθi/ or /de:θi/
Denní (plant) : /dɛni/
Dorrak (tree) : /dɔrɑk/
Efraik (animal) : /ɛfrɑɪk/
Erilai (plant) : /erilɑi/
Erl (insult, curse word) : /ɛrl/
Fierin (creature) : /fjɪrɪn/
Frihte (animal) : /frɪʔtə/
Greniin (fruit) : /grɛnɪn/
Haizell (plant) : /haʔizɛl/
Iari (bug) : /ijari/
Imyntrex (animal) : /imɪntrɛks/ or /imɪntrɛks/
Ista (plant) : /ɪsta/ or /ista/

Ithaeni (plant) : /iθaɪni/
Juhro moth (animal) : /ju:ro mɒθ/
Ksairing (curse word) : /kseɪrɪŋ/
Ksaiti ruonn (insult) : /ksaɪti ryɔn/
Ksat (curse word) : /ksaɪt/
Kyrlith (creature) : /kɪrliθ/ or /kɪrlɪθ/
Loith (curse word) : /lɔɪð/
Meah (plant) : /mejaʔ/
Merrik (animal) : /mɛrɪk/
Orsia (animal) : /ɔrsija/
Qimlith (plant) : /kvɪmlɪθ/
Qitling (animal) : /kʊɪtlɪŋ/
Raestir (folk) : /rɑɪstɪr/
Raks (curse word) : /rɑks/
Rehes (curse word) : /reʔəs/
Rivensyll (plant) : /rɪvənsɪl/
Rostel (animal) : /rɔstɔl/
Ruonn (insult) : /ryɔn/
Ryorilla (plant) : /rɪjɔ:rɪla/
Saiti (insult) : /saɪti/
Santrak (mushroom) : /sɑntræk/
Sylix (animal) : /sɪlɪks/
Talini (plant) : /talɪni/
Tamukon (plant) : /tamykɔn/
Thustal (month) : /ðʊstəl/
Turak (fruit) : /tʏræk/ or /turæk/
Ucoti (animal) : /ykɔti/
Uliam (star) : /ylɪjɑm/ or /ulɪjɑm/
Xaecillia (plant) : /ksaɪsɪlɪja/
Xailea (plant) : /ksaɪleja/
Xentharres (plant) : /ksɛnθarəs/
Yiusal (animal) : /jɪjysəl/ or /jy:səl/
Zeimith (tree) : /zɛɪmɪθ/

CHAPTER ONE



Home

So far, the worst part about being locked up was the cold. A persistent, numbing cold that seeped through the floor and clawed at his bones. It was all Zarando could think about when he was awake, and all that filled his dreams at night.

Well, night — he could only assume it was night when sleep carried him away from this desolate place. In reality, he had no way to tell.

The door at the far end of the hall creaked open, and a ray of light seeped into the cell, casting strange shadows on the floor. Zarando stiffened as he recognised the footsteps resounding through the hallway. Him again. Hadn't he gloated enough? Hadn't he...

Tears pricked behind his eyes, and he furiously wiped them away. Ksairing — terrified at the sound of footsteps? How deep he had fallen.

Yet, he scooted even further against the wall — a miserable attempt to blend in. Maybe if he couldn't find Zarando, he would leave, convinced that Zarando had finally evaporated. Maybe it would get him out of today's session.

The light danced towards him, illuminating his dusty surroundings. The heap of straw he called a bed. The rancid hole where he did his business. The stone floor

that he hated so much. His own arms, which were pale, trembling, scarred.

The footsteps came to a halt in front of his cell. He didn't look up to see who had come to visit him. He didn't need to; the face that grinned down at him from the other side of the bars was always the same. Sadistic eyes, cheeks covered in scars. Their mother's nose.

Xaeth.

At first it had surprised him, when the blinding light had cleared up and he hadn't been met with a glaring Centric, nor with an assortment of guards ready to drag him to the Under. But when his eyes had found Xaeth's, glittering with anticipation, he had understood.

Something had been horribly wrong.

The stench had hit him immediately after. Ashes, blood, fear, intermingling in a sick imitation of the stench that had clung to Bavinko that day. The memory had forced him to his knees, and he had dry-heaved until he was out of breath.

The entire time, Xaeth had watched him, revelling in his misery.

He hadn't been able to defend himself when Xaeth had apprehended him, dragged him through ravaged hallways towards his cell. It wouldn't have mattered much if he had. He could sense the Kyrilith from here: hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. The Deithi had fallen. Earine had fallen. Oreen was ruined. All of King Thorán's efforts had been undone, and who knew if the nature gods would care enough to save them again?

"Ready for your daily dose of entertainment?" Xaeth always tried to provoke him, but Zarando refused to grant him the pleasure. Most days, he didn't even spare him a glance. He was forced to see that despicable face enough in his nightmares.

The cell door opened, and a force locked around his arms, yanking him into the hallway. Xaeth used magic like it grew on trees nowadays. It made Zarando's blood run cold — even Kyrilith had to deal with mana depletion and mana regeneration, half-Kyrilith like Xaeth probably

even more so. Especially since Xaeth currently couldn't rely on his Deithi half to regenerate mana — they had destroyed the Gift, that much was evident.

The conclusion was simple. Just like Ciursal had been using Daevi, Xaeth was using Deithi as a mana source. The Kyrilth had reverted to being leeches, and just like with Daevi, he couldn't do anything about it.

He couldn't do anything about it.

As Xaeth's magic dragged him through the hallways and down the stairs, the stench of blood grew thicker, the lingering fear of previous visitors clawing at his clothes. Zarando closed his eyes. He'd detested this place ever since he'd learned of its existence, back when Taeri and he were young. Even though at the time, the place hadn't been used in decades, it had held an anguish that had brought Zarando to tears.

He'd grown up since then. Done a lot of torturing himself — mainly because of his job. Nevertheless, every time he visited a place like this, he regressed to being that terrified boy, and it took all he had to keep his tears in.

Oh, how great it was to be home.

Miro peeked out from under the wagon's bonnet. The road was quiet; the thick snow that crisped underneath the wheels had repelled most travellers. Miro, too, would rather be curled up with a nice cup of bénrel. But here they were instead, steadily approaching Lithrier, the heart of Maelinor. Lithrier, the city they had hoped to never visit again.

They clenched their hands around the edge of the wagon, their knuckles turning white. It felt so stupid to return to Maelinor after having barely escaped with their life, after having gone through so many ordeals simply to be able to leave. But since it might be their only chance of finding Zarzar again, they had no choice, had they?

With a grimace, they gazed at the frozen river that curled alongside them. Silly Zarzar.

"Don't go looking for me," he had said, right before vanishing into a blinding white light. Miro huffed,

leaning back into the cosy wagon. In his dreams. Zarzar was their friend now, and it was kind of stupid of him not to realise what that meant. They'd walk through fire for Zarzar. And clearly, Miro wasn't the only one; Both Jags and Markí hadn't even debated coming to find Zarzar.

'That big idiot needs me more than he realises', Markí had proudly proclaimed, and Miro wholeheartedly agreed.

Even Queros had joined, his face surly, his flask in his hand. Miro still didn't dare to look him in the eye half the time, but that'd pass, right? Ultimately, he was just a different flavour of Jags, and they'd befriended Jags easily.

To Miro's delight, Torean had joined the team as well. The last thing they wanted was to endanger him, but man, their heart had burned at the thought of leaving him behind. He was just such a sweetheart, you know? With his pastries and his golden smile — oh, they could gush endlessly about him.

They shot Tor a glance — he was asleep next to Markí, his legs curled to his chest, his cheek resting on his hands. A slight snore escaped his mouth but stopped abruptly as Markí nudged his shoulder. Such a sweetheart.

The wagon creaked, and Jags appeared next to Miro. He'd been sitting in the front, next to Queros. "We're almost there."

"Yeah." Miro sighed. They'd already recognised the farmer's fields that surrounded Lithrier. "Gonna be fun."

Jags stared at them in silence, his eyes muttering a thousand words. Miro conjured a smile.

"It's okay. I'm fine."

"You know I hate that." Jags turned away. "Don't say you're fine when you're not."

Miro sighed again. "Yeah. I know. It's just — we don't have to talk about it, you know? I'm okay not talking about it."

Jags hummed, wriggling the point of his dagger underneath his fingernail to dislodge a clump of dirt. Miro always found it mesmerising to watch: his practised

actions, the ease with which he handled the blade.

“Will *you* be fine?” they asked after a while. Jags had as many reasons as Miro to hate going back to Lithrier. Jags had wanted to leave as much as Miro had.

Jags stopped for a moment, then shrugged and continued. “Probably. I did miss my friends there.”

Furrowing their eyebrows, Miro watched as Jags’ dagger twisted and turned. Jags didn’t have any friends in the Fighting Pit. Nobody had friends in the Fighting Pit. The Pit knew two rules: either kill or be killed. And maybe this was just a peculiarity of Miro, but they usually didn’t befriend people who tried to kill them.

The wagon slowed down until it came to a halt. It wobbled as Queros jumped off, and a few moments later the bonnet of the wagon swished aside to reveal his face. His eyes stood tired, as if he hadn’t slept properly in days.

No, Miro knew he hadn’t slept properly in days. Because whenever they’d jolt awake at night, panting from another nightmare about Bavinko, or Ciursal, or anything horrible, Queros was there with them. He’d invite them to sit next to him, talking about stars and constellations until the nightmares had faded, and Miro could go back to sleep. And in the morning, when Miro awoke again, Queros would still be sitting there, staring at the sky.

“We’re almost there,” Queros said, his voice low. “Miro. Are you sure you want to accompany us into the city?”

Miro nodded. Yes. Even if the idea of getting captured by Elion’s bounty hunters twisted their stomach, they wanted to help, prove themselves useful. They *were* useful; they knew this city better than anyone here, except for Jags. And in the worst case, they could serve as a distraction.

“Right.” Queros kicked the heels of his boots against the side of the wagon, raining clumps of snow on the road. When he was satisfied, he climbed in. “Time to put on your disguise, then.”

Merr, the guard, had sewed a disguise for them — a

traditional Maelinori street performer costume, including bells and face paint. Nobody would expect the former Heir Apparent to walk around the city as a street performer, and the face paint would help hide Miro's features. They only hoped nobody would ask them to do a trick.

Quietly, they changed into their costume. The trousers had had to be adjusted twice — at first, Merr had tailored them to accentuate the hips, as most street performers did, but that had caused Miro to feel so dysphoric that they hadn't been able to look at themselves in the mirror. Merr had overcompensated by making them way too baggy the second time, to the point Markí couldn't look at them without giggling. But now, they were perfect — roomy, but not overly so, and covered in golden frills and sequins. Blue and black ribbons draped down from their top, swirling whenever they moved.

When they'd dressed themselves, Queros painted their face blue, with golden cheeks and black lips.

"You look great." He nodded at himself. "That'll do. Jagemir?"

Jags looked up, and as if having received a telepathic order, he climbed to the front of the wagon. Miro shivered and rubbed their bare shoulders. Was it too late to get out and wait for them here?

The wagon jolted forward, the snow crunching underneath its wheels. Miro's stomach cramped, and they licked their lips. Their hand found Tor's, but their mind refused to be soothed by his presence. This was it. After years of evading Elion, they'd enter the very city he resided in. And if anyone recognised them, Miro would become the latest victim of Elion's reign.

If there was a god, they better pray to it now.

CHAPTER TWO



Visits from the past

So far, the street performer's disguise held up. The guards at the gate didn't even spare Miro a second look, too engulfed in their conversation. Something about, er, gardening? One of them was adamant the other should move their flame-leaved ista inside during cold season. They were right — flame-leaved ista couldn't survive freezing temperatures, which was why they didn't occur naturally in Maelinor. In fact, it was a miracle that the guard's plant had survived the first snow of the season.

As the wagon rattled through the gate and onto the high street, Miro slunk further back under the bonnet, looking out through a small gap in the canvas. A child yelled, pointing at them with a big smile on their face, but their smile immediately vanished when an adult approached them, whispering quick words while shooting a disapproving glance at the wagon. Other passers-by reacted similarly, whispering and scowling as they drove past.

It shouldn't have surprised Miro as much as it did. After all, they were clearly from Yswillin, and Maelinori weren't big on Yswillin nowadays. Maelinori weren't big on any of the neighbouring countries, for that matter. King Elion loved spreading rumours about the neighbouring countries, sowing seeds of distrust and hate, so that he could easily convince the people to take

up arms might he feel like it.

As they travelled further into the city, the hostility of the people increased — the whispers became jeers, and the children flung grit and foul-smelling stuff at them. The wagon shook as a particularly big object smashed against the canvas, and Miro flinched, hunching over as if that could make them disappear.

Tor scooted closer to them until their legs touched. His face was pale, his jaw clenched.

“I didn’t know Maelinori hated us so,” he whispered. “What did we ever do to them?”

“Nothing.” Miro clutched their scarred hand. “It’s the king. He —”

They hadn’t told Tor about Elion yet, and they should. It was just —

Torean gently took their hand, traced their scars with his thumb. “I know. You don’t — it’s fine.”

With a sigh, Miro nestled their head on Tor’s shoulder. Torean briefly stiffened before raising his free hand, brushing his fingers through Miro’s hair.

Miro closed their eyes. He smelled nice. Of pastries, even though he hadn’t baked in weeks — the last time he had baked, was probably for the inauguration of General Wythari and Lady Elgia. How did he manage to smell so sweet, still?

They shifted slightly, inconspicuously checking if their herb sachet was still in their pocket. It’d be mortifying if they reeked of rotten tamukon or something while Torean was over here smelling like dreams and sunshine. Last time they’d smelled like rotten tamukon — one of their experiments had exploded on them — they’d ended up hiding in their room for weeks, if only to avoid Elion’s sneers and off-hand comments. And yeah, Torean was too much of a sweetheart to sneer at Miro, but better be safe than sorry, you know?

Turning their head slightly, they sniffed their shoulder. Smelled like xailea with a hint of cythai — good.

“Did you just smell yourself?” Markí, who sat opposite them, laughed. “Why’d you do that?”

Miro's cheeks flushed. "Just to check."

"Check what? If your herb blend is still fresh enough? Don't worry, I changed it this morning."

Their eyes wide, Miro stared at Markí. "What?"

"I changed it for you!" Markí flashed them a grin. "Thought you'd appreciate it. They were getting a bit stale."

"What?" Miro repeated, their mind struggling to get a hold of something more profound. "You... What?"

"What, what, ginger cat... I just told you, didn't I? Are you hard of — oh."

Markí's gaze had wandered from Miro's face to the side of their head, and instinctively Miro covered their ear. Too late, though; Markí had already noticed.

"What happened to your ear?" Markí's voice had become soft. "Is that okay to ask?"

Limpfrogs. They usually were so careful to keep their hair over their ear, but Tor's gentle brushing must've uncovered it and all.

They shrugged, struggling to appear casual. "Burned it."

Elion had. It had been an accident, or at least in Miro's version of the story. Miro had been experimenting with dangerous substances, and Elion simply hadn't been aware of how harmful they could be. He'd probably assumed they were merely mildly irritating, or just hot, and stuff. Elion hadn't meant to hurt them. Not like that.

Markí narrowed their eyes. "Ah, yes. You just randomly burned your ear of all places, and now it's... this horrid thing. No offence, you look great otherwise. It's just a bit... oddly shaped, I'd say."

"Yeah." When the wound had been fresh, it had barely looked like an ear. It'd healed quite nicely, to be honest. "I was handling chemicals."

Although that didn't seem to satisfy Markí, they finally got the hint and dropped the subject. Instead, they turned their head and put their ear to the bonnet of the wagon.

"The noise has changed. I bet we're almost here."

Miro smiled. "Yeah. I think you're right."

The Pit bore an unmistakable smell — metallic, sour, rotten. On bad days, it wafted out onto the streets, tainting whoever ventured near. You got used to it, at some point — Miro had spent countless of afternoons in the Pit, looking after wounded fighters, and had never been too bothered by the stank. But right now, after just having savoured Tor's sweet smell, it hit Miro like a falling boulder. It dug its way into their nostrils, down their throat until their stomach churned with nausea. They were near the Pit, alright.

Only a few moments later, the wagon screeched to a halt. Miro pulled the bonnet aside, blinking against the cloud of smoke and bodily odours that drifted into the wagon.

"We're here." Jags stood on the street next to the wagon, his eyes fixed on the dark building before them. It'd become even filthier since Miro had last been here — a greenish sludge seeped from the crevices between the stones, and graffiti covered every possible surface. Water dripped from the roof, forming a murky puddle in front of the door. The sign in front of the entrance had long been broken, but the text on it remained clearly visible.

The Fighting Pit.

They had arrived.

Miro made sure to walk beside Jags as he led them into the Fighting Pit. No matter what Jags said, these halls held too much darkness for him to face alone. They had to be there for him — even if they wanted nothing more than to disappear.

Jags glanced at Miro before veering slightly closer to them. The action held a soothing familiarity; they'd done this hundreds of times, together.

Hurried footsteps sounded, and a moment later Torean appeared next to them, his hand finding Miro's.

"This place is spooky," he whispered. "Are you sure we're allowed to be here?"

Miro squeezed his hand. "Yes. Completely sure."

"It's just — it looks abandoned, and haunted. Who'd

live here?”

It did look abandoned. Cracks spread across the floor, and parts of the ceiling had caved in, leaving piles of rubbish in the hallway. The walls were overgrown with riven-syll, immersing the building in a purplish glow. Pa had always said that was intentional: if people didn't get the creeps from the eerie light, they'd get them from the legends about riven-syll — supposedly it only grew where people had died.

And people had died in the Pit, alright.

When Miro was younger, they'd always wondered why the Pit still existed in this day and age. It struck them as inhumane, an arena where you'd watch people fight until one of them couldn't stand anymore. It *was* inhumane, and they wished their dads had been able to shut it down completely, but they had passed away before they'd made any concrete progress with the Pit. And Elion? He loved to make the place flourish.

And that was exactly why the Pit still existed in this day and age. Too many people found the misery entertaining. Too few generations of monarchs wanted it closed. Maybe Miro would've been able to make the difference, but foolishly, they'd believed Elion cared as much as them.

They rubbed their arms. They'd forgotten just how chilly these hallways were — a moist kind of chilly that dug underneath your clothes, until the only thing that could warm you up again was a steaming cup of b  nrel.

They'd descended to deep underneath Lithrier when Jags slowed his pace. Not far from them, a partially open door revealed a warmly lit room from which chatter and laughter drifted into the hallway. That room was the happiest place in this entire building, if you'd ask Miro. In that room, they'd first met Jags. It had been years and years ago, when Miro's dads had just started their attempts to close the Pit. Miro had grown bored of the endless meetings with the Keeper of the Pit, so they'd sneaked away to explore. It'd been fun at first, but soon the eeriness of the place got to them, and when they had stumbled upon the warmly lit room, they'd been close to

crying.

They didn't quite remember what had happened when they entered the room. They only remembered being petrified as countless of bloody, tired faces scowled down at them. And then there was Jags, the only one who wasn't scowling. Jags, bleeding from a wound beneath his lip, who'd taken Miro by the hand and brought them straight back to their parents without uttering a single word.

Miro still considered that the experience that had sparked their interest in becoming a healer. Basically, they owed it all to Jags.

They found Jags' hand and squeezed gently. They owed it all to Jags, and they'd stay with him even if it'd cost them their life. Together, they could brave the past. And they'd find Zarzar, and everything would be alright again. They just needed to get through this one tricky bit.

Miro took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

Zarando tossed and turned — his head throbbed from exhaustion, but no matter how he twisted himself, his aching limbs kept him from falling asleep. With a groan, he hugged his knees to his body. He'd never admit it out loud, but Xaeth's daily dose of 'entertainment' was starting to wear him down. Each day, he caught himself craving Miro's medicine *bénrel* a bit more. Each day, he fantasised about the sweet relief it'd bring him. Just one sip would be enough — one sip, and he'd be able to sleep, get this bial headache to vanish.

But the medicine wasn't here, and that was just as well. He didn't need the temptation. He'd love to claim that he wouldn't be tempted anyway, but in truth, he didn't trust himself with it. Better that it wasn't here at all — once had been plenty.

"Psst!"

He opened an eye. Who was that? It didn't sound like Xaeth at all.

"Psst," the voice said again. Zarando opened his other eye, sitting up to have a look at the hallway.

Nobody was there.

“Psst,” the voice said for the third time, and finally Zarando spotted a silhouette pressed against the wall. They hadn’t brought a torch, unlike Xaeth usually did, which meant that this must be a friend. Odd — he hadn’t realised he still had friends in Earine. Friends who were able to visit him in prison, nonetheless.

“Who’s there?” he croaked. With a bit of effort, he got to his feet and stepped closer to the bars. Although his eyes had long adjusted to the darkness, he couldn’t quite make out the person’s face.

The person snapped their fingers and spoke a word, upon which a soft glow spread from their palm, illuminating their face. Zarando gasped, clutching the bars with both hands.

Giria. His sister.

A fresh cut lined her nose from her forehead to her cheek, and one of her eyes was puffy and black. Zarando stretched out a hand to touch her face, but he couldn’t reach her.

Giria dimmed the light until her face was cloaked in shadows again.

“I don’t have much time,” she whispered. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m here. I’m trying to take care of it. But Xaeth — ” Her voice broke, and her hand flitted up to touch her face before she curled it into a fist.

Zarando clenched his jaw. How dare Xaeth hurt his own sister?

“Why?”

Giria shook her head. “I remind him of her. He’s mad at everyone nowadays. It can’t be helped.”

Of course it could be helped. He could help. He’d break out of prison and get her away from here. He’d help her start over somewhere safe, somewhere far from the abuse. He —

He sunk to his knees, tears dripping down his neck. Ksat. If only he’d been a better person before. If he’d been a better person before, and rescued his half-brother and sister before Xaeth went mad, he’d have prevented this all, and everything would be great, and Giria —

Giria stepped forward and knelt in front of Zarando,

gently taking his hands. She smiled at him, her eyes — that were exactly like their mother's eyes — filled with warmth.

“Don't worry. I will take care of it.”

She pressed a kiss on his knuckles, and before Zarando could thank her, say something, say anything at all, she'd melted back into the shadows. He hugged his knees to his body, desperate to preserve her warmth, but the cold had already clawed it away.

And so, he cried again, but this time there was no one to console him.

CHAPTER THREE



Not quite bénrel

The common room hadn't changed much since Miro had last been there. The gigantic wooden table had been moved closer to the kitchen area, a couple more stains had appeared on the carpet, and a sharp, slightly salty aroma now fought to mask the bodily odours. But just like the first time they'd entered the room, they were greeted by nothing but scowls and bloody, tired faces.

Miro resisted the urge to tug at their shirt. Every time they raised their arms it rode up just a little higher than they deemed comfortable. On top of that, an itch was stuck underneath the layer of face paint, travelling from their jaw to their forehead and back — always out of reach. And their bells — they drew too much attention. Why did they ever think coming here would be a good idea? At any moment, one of these people could recognise them, and there would be no goats — firmly. They should've stayed with the wagon, like Markí.

They licked their lips, shoving aside the thoughts about Elion and whatever he might do might he get his hands on Miro. It was fine. It would be fine. They weren't alone.

As if reading their thoughts, Jags' shoulder brushed theirs, and Tor's hand cramped around Miro's, his face pale as if he'd eaten too many ryorilla seeds.

Miro frowned. He hadn't, right? He'd be ill for days.

No — he wouldn't.

Jags' eyes flicked around the room, passing over each of the faces before he frowned and shook his head.

"She isn't here."

Miro's stomach sank. She wasn't here. But what would they do without her? She was the only one they knew who could possibly know where Zarzar had gone.

Queros scratched his nose. "Anyone here you recognise? Anyone who might know where she is?"

'It's the Pit. If she isn't here, she is probably dead.' Miro's subconsciousness told them, but they bit their lip and kept it to themselves. Sowing panic would be everything but helpful right now.

Jags shoved his hands into his pocket, nodding at someone in a bright blue dress.

"Him. Yankta."

Upon hearing his name, Yankta looked up, a soft grin on his face. No — that wasn't a grin, that was a scar.

"Jagemir? Is that you?" Yankta's voice was hoarse. "Haven't seen you in ages. I thought you left with that, who was it again? Wait, I know their name. Didn't they turn out to be a traitor? It was all the talk. Does that make you a traitor too, or?"

Jags' fingers curled into fists, his knuckles rapidly turning white. Miro stepped closer to him, quietly urging Jags to leave it. It wasn't important right now.

"I'm here for Oripa." Jags kept his voice carefully neutral. "Where is she?"

Yankta shrugged, swirling his drink before taking a sip. "The mountains be flat if I know. What do you need her for?"

"None of your business." Jags' eyes narrowed, and he turned to Queros. "It's time to go."

'It's getting dangerous here,' is what he meant. The people of the Pit could turn on you at any moment — according to Jags, at least. Thankfully, Miro themselves had never witnessed it. They might have, if Jags hadn't returned them to their parents that day, but from that very first moment, Jags had taken it upon himself to protect Miro. That included getting them out of places before the

situation grew dire. So if Jags said it was time to leave, they should.

But Queros only frowned. "Isn't there anyone else we could ask?" He'd raised his voice before any of them could stop him. "Hey. Anyone here know Oripa?"

Countless of eyes weighed them down, and Miro shrunk until they couldn't be bigger than a qitling. No. No, no no. They couldn't — they shouldn't be doing this.

But after a moment, the eyes returned to their drinks, and nothing had happened. Miro let out a sigh and relaxed their grip on Tor's hand — they'd been squeezing his bones out.

"Who actually is that?" Yankta set his glass on the counter and wiped his mouth. "This funny little performer here. Why did you bring them? You join a circus?"

Tor's hand clamped theirs. Miro's mind ran, straining to keep their feet from doing the same as Yankta slowly approached them. Bravery. Calm. One misstep, and they'd be in Elion's hands.

"Just a friend of mine." Jags stood right in front of Yankta, his face a dark warning. "Keep your hands off of them."

Yankta glanced past Jags. "But they're pretty," he whined. "Street performers do anything for coin, no? They won't mind, no?"

"I would mind." Torean glared at Yankta, his cheeks flushed. "They're mine."

Miro's heartbeat echoed in their ears, their skin glowing. Two thoughts crossed their mind at once, colliding in full force.

'Did he just call me mine? I love him.'

'Yankta is going to kill us. We need to run.'

Confused, Miro's feet remained frozen.

Yankta chuckled, directing his attention to Tor. "Ah, you're feisty. So you're partners, eh? You're cute too. Maybe I'll take the both of you. Eight sound like a good deal? Probably more than you earn in a day, no?"

A clink sounded as Queros drew his sword. What a

terrible idea. If they'd fight Yankta, the entire Pit would be after them. They needed to —

It was too late. The room had become quiet, all eyes on Queros' sword. Someone in the back corner yelled a profanity, and chairs clattered to the floor as people rose to their feet.

Bile rose in Miro's throat. "We need to leave," they whispered.

"Do you?" The corner of Yankta's mouth twitched. "But didn't you hear what I said? I'll give you coin."

"No thank you." Miro could barely hear their own voice. "I'd just like to leave."

Yankta attempted to step past Jags, but Jags wouldn't let him. "Watch it."

"Calm down. Don't touch me. You're not one of us, remember? Not anymore."

Jags didn't let go of Yankta.

A woman close to Yankta drew a weapon — a menacing mix between a spear and a sword. "Are these people bothering you, Smirk?"

Yankta looked at her, a pitiful expression on his face. "Yes. They won't let me touch the pretty people."

Someone pushed — no, pulled — Miro towards the door. Tor. Queros appeared next to them. "Run," he said, needlessly.

Miro ran.

They had barely entered the hallway when someone grabbed their wrist, turned them around and shoved them against the wall. There was Yankta, his face way too close, his eyes a fervent glint. Miro yelped, tugging at their arm to free themselves, but to no avail. The fingers of Yankta's free hand trailed over Miro's shoulder, then their stomach, while Miro squirmed desperately to just — *please* — get away.

Then Jags kicked the guy.

It wasn't as clean of a kick as normally — no, his *anger* clearly shone through. It was visible in the tension of his leg, the way his foot collided with Yankta's face. Jags was furious.

They had to get him out of here, before he'd go feral.

Even before Yankta's body hit the ground, Miro was pulling Jags away, hurtling him through the hallways, towards the surface. With every step, their bells jingled cheerfully — they tore them off, flung them against the wall.

They had made it halfway to the entrance when a weary voice sounded.

“What did you do this time, Darkeyes?”

Miro stumbled when Jags changed direction and dragged them into a side passage, where an old, scarred lady stood. As she moved her head, the light reflected in the countless pieces of jewellery she wore — just like Zarzar.

“Oripha,” Jags greeted her. The lady smiled.

“Haven't changed one bit, have you? Stirring up trouble since before you could walk. Don't worry, I'll get ya out of it. Follow me.”

Oripha guided them through a maze of narrow passageways, taking twists and turns until the footsteps of their pursuers had faded completely. Despite the quiet, Miro couldn't help but keep glancing back, expecting to find Yankta creeping after them, ready to jump them. But, thank the mountains, nothing happened.

They exited the Pit via a rusty back door Miro hadn't even known existed until now — it was hidden in an abandoned alley littered with rubbish, walled off on one side and covered in overgrowth on the other. Oripha advised them to leave their wagon at the main entrance for the time being, but Jags shook his head at that, disappearing to return a moment later with Markí and the wagon.

Grumbling something about his stubbornness and how Jags was exactly like his mother, Oripha led them to her house — a tiny house close to the Fighting Pit, standing proudly in the middle of the street, despite it being nothing more than a few wooden planks nailed together, about to collapse with the faintest gust of wind.

Lithrier had a lot of houses like that — the wars with Crythille had forced the country folk to flock to the

cities, which were overflowing as it was. And with no regulations in place, people took it upon themselves to build a home wherever they found a suitable spot. Despite the efforts of countless of monarchs, no solution had been found as of yet — at least that's what Miro had been taught.

When they were young, Elion had always proclaimed that he would solve the housing problem were he to become king. He wanted to solve all kinds of problems — he'd make the countryside safe again, and he'd create a flourishing economy, and he'd improve the schools... He had so many wonderful dreams, it made Miro feel like their positions should've been switched. That Elion was supposed to be Heir Apparent, not Miro.

Maybe that was why they didn't have second thoughts about giving up their title. Maybe that's why they'd been so easily convinced.

With a sigh, they followed the others into Oripha's house. The door creaked in its hinges, and a loose piece of paint swirled past Miro as they closed it behind them. They stepped straight into the living room, a square room littered with trinkets and tapestries. After taking a moment to consider, Miro decided to find a seat on the rug in the centre of the room — sitting on the floor grounded them, and the rug looked deliciously cosy.

Oripha made them all a cup of something — not quite bénrel but something close to it — before taking a seat by the fireplace and igniting her pipe. She took a few puffs before focusing her gaze on Jags, who stood near the door, his hands in his pockets.

“Darkeyes. Haven't heard much of you since you became an assassin.” Her chair squeaked as she leaned back. “What made you return to the Pit?”

Jags didn't even blink. “You're a Deithi.”

“Straight to the point, as always.” Oripha laughed, revealing a few gaping holes where teeth should be. “I always liked that about you.”

Miro glanced at Tor and Markí, who sat huddled together on the couch, their eyes still wide from being chased down by the Pit members. Maybe they should've

sat next to Tor — for comfort, you know?

Oripha took another puff. “So what about me being a Deithi?”

“We met another Deithi. He’s a friend. He disappeared. Jumped, I think,” Jags said.

“Jumped? With the light and everything, you mean?” Oripha shook her head. “He could be anywhere, then.”

Miro frowned. “No. No, he’s — ” How could they explain this properly? “He said something before he left. That the queen — he killed the queen, and he said that they were going to take him. That *must* mean something.”

They had mulled it over again and again since Zarzar had vanished, unable to shake off the desperation clinging to his words.

Don’t go looking for me. I loved meeting you. Thanks.

It bore all the weight of a final goodbye — but Miro refused to treat it as such. Someone had taken Zarzar, and they would not stand for it. Oripha *had* to know something.

Oripha stared at them for a moment. Miro pulled their knees to their chest, acutely aware of the ribbons that draped from their top, the sequins that shimmered whenever they moved. Oripha must think they looked ridiculous.

“Killed the queen, you say?” Oripha chuckled. “Serves her right, she was a bitch. Poor King Litas made a bad choice with that one. But I’m sorry. If he killed her, and they got him — ”

She took a dramatic drag of her pipe. Her eyes closed briefly as she sighed, shook her head.

“He’s dead. Or at least he will be, before you can ever get to him.”

The next time footsteps sounded, Zarando couldn’t stop a trickle of hope from bubbling up his stomach. Hope that Giria had returned, that today was the day she’d fulfil her promise and get him out of here. That he’d be saved.

But when the footsteps halted in front of his cell, only Xaeth grinned down at him.

"I brought a present for you," he informed Zarando. One of his hands was hiding something behind his back. "I'm sure you'll love it."

Zarando glared at him. It was the only form of resistance he had left. Quiet defiance, denying Xaeth the pleasure of seeing him break. It was pitiful, really, but if he didn't cling to it, he might go mad. And if he went mad, all Giria's efforts would be for nothing. He couldn't let that happen — he respected her too much for that.

Xaeth stepped closer to the bars separating him from Zarando. Zarando had half the mind to get up and gauge his eyes out — but Xaeth would certainly manage to gloat about it in a twisted way, and he hated Xaeth's gloating.

"Not coming to play?" Xaeth chuckled. "That's okay. Soon enough, you'll be a lot happier to see me."

A shiver travelled down Zarando's spine — talk about ominous promises.

Xaeth waited for a moment longer before sighing and pulling his arm out from behind his back. Zarando squinted. What was he holding? Some kind of bottle? Poison? Sure, just add that to the list of torture. He —

Realisation poked through his stomach, and he suppressed a heave, bile burning his throat. No. Xaeth wouldn't — he wouldn't do that to him. He wouldn't go *that* far.

He clenched his fists, so forcefully that his nails, sharp from not being cut for weeks, pierced his skin. Truth is, Xaeth absolutely would. He despised Zarando, and he'd been nothing but cruel so far.

Xaeth's face twisted into a bone-chilling smile as he unscrewed the bottle cap, causing Zarando to gag again — he couldn't stand the way the delicious smell curled into his nostrils, his mouth watering at the thought of taking a sip.

Gently, Xaeth placed the bottle in the cell — it fit just between the bars. "I'm sure you know what this is. You'll enjoy it. And remember — you only have to call

if you want more.”

Xaeth left. Zarando stared at the bottle with nothing less than contempt. He did know what it was — medicine bénrel. And whatever Xaeth may think of him, he wouldn’t be tempted to drink it. Not in a million days. Once had been plenty.

His nails dug deeper into his skin, blood trickling down to his wrist. And yet, his nails dug deeper — maybe if he dug deep enough, he’d find the strength to resist. He needed to — he was stronger than this. Once had been plenty. If he could just lock that into his mind as an irrefutable fact, he would be fine.

You’re stronger than this, Zarzar. You’re stronger than this.

Not that he believed it. He’d never been that strong. In the end, he always messed up. Why would this time be any different?

CHAPTER FOUR



A pond with lily pads

“No.” Queros took a step forward, his face dark. He radiated a kind of determination Miro hadn’t seen in a while — not since that day in the palace’s gardens, when Jags had told them he’d get them out of Lithrier. “He’s *not* dead. Now tell me where he is.”

Oripha’s gaze shifted to Queros. “Ya better watch your tone — you’re talking to a Pit veteran here. If you weren’t Darkeyes’ friends, you’d be dead right now.”

“Great to know.” Queros crossed his arms. “Now do you know where he is?”

“They must’ve pulled him to Tijor. But I tell you, he’s dead. Executed, or to be executed.”

“How do we get to Tijor?” Queros asked.

Oripha laughed again. “You really want to risk your lives for nothing, then? Even you, Darkeyes? Are you all mad?”

Jags crossed his arms. “He’s a friend. You know what that means to me.”

“I know, I know.” She waved with her pipe. “I shouldn’t be surprised about *you*. Got that from your Mum, I reckon. But all these other idiots? They’ll never stand a chance.”

Queros’ hand found his sword, but this time he had the sense not to draw it. “How do we get to Tijor?” he repeated, his voice tense.

Oripha threw her hands up. “Calm down, calm down. I’ll tell you.” She took another puff of her pipe, leaning back even further. “Since most of you are human, you won’t get there jumping. You’ll need to go through the Under. It’ll be tough. You’ll need a guide, or you’ll never make it out alive. Luckily, you have me.”

Miro’s stomach cramped. The Under. Was that where Underlings came from? Those scary-looking smoke beings that had almost killed them back in Yswillin?

Oripha sighed, her expression a thousand times wearier than moments before. Her eyes lingered on one of the trinkets on the mantel — a tiny wooden statue of a fox with horns, painted a radiant blue.

“You’ll have to go through the Under,” she muttered, more to herself than the people around her. “It’s how I came here too — was lucky enough to find the door to this world. It’s not too far from here. You’ll need masks, though — diving equipment.”

Jags tilted his head. “What do you want in return?”

“Can’t an old hag help her friend’s son and his friends?” Oripha laughed, but her eyes remained dull. “No, you’re right. I do want something. I need to find a soul.”

“A soul?” Miro couldn’t help themselves. So the Under connected this place and wherever Zarzar might be, and now it had souls too? Was it a kind of afterlife? If they remembered correctly, the Raestir believed the afterlife was a place in the sky from where you could watch and guide your kin. Was that kind of what the Under was — but then underneath the world?

Oripha’s eyes focused on Miro, her gaze as intense as Jags’. “A soul. My partner’s soul. She got stuck after they threw her down there. And since there’s no mana in the Under, souls can’t go to the afterlife from there. I need to catch her soul, bring her out.”

Miro blinked. So the Under *wasn’t* a kind of afterlife — at least not as far as the Deithi were concerned. But then what was it? So far, it sounded nothing but horrid.

They curled one of the ribbons of their costume around their finger, watching it twirl back to its original

position as they released it. Oripha's stare weighed down on them, fizzling out any questions that arose in Miro's brain. For a moment, they imagined themselves back in the classroom, next to an Elion who snickered at everything Miro said.

"Scuse me. I don't think everyone knows what the Under is." Markí placed their mug on an end table and folded their legs underneath them. "Can you explain for those who don't? Not me, if you're wondering."

Miro's brain gasped for air as the weight of Oripha's gaze shifted to Markí. She hummed and took another drag of her pipe.

"Right. Imagine a pond. Got it? A pond, with lily pads. The lily pads each have their own spot in the water, touching occasionally, maybe even overlapping, but always separate. It's a gigantic pond — more of an ocean, I reckon. Then the lily pads are like the worlds, and the ocean is the Under."

Miro took a sip of their drink, swirling the liquid until it created a tiny whirlpool. That sounded a lot prettier than they'd imagined. And if the worlds were like lily pads, would there be gigantic cosmic frogs that jumped from world to world, causing earthquakes? Or maybe giant fish lived in the Under, eating at the lily stems. Would there be cosmic fruits as well? They'd certainly like some right now. It'd been ages since they'd eaten.

As if on cue, their stomach grumbled, and their cheeks flushed. Oripha chuckled.

"Well said — it's time for dinner. Let me make you something. In the meantime, you should consider my offer: I'll lead you through the Under, if you help me find my partner's soul. Or you do the smart thing and walk away now. Your friend is likely dead anyway, and if you die in the Under, your soul will never make it to the afterlife — unless I feel like taking it with me as well. Think about it."

Her pipe sizzled as she extinguished it. Miro stared at their mug — the whirlpool had vanished, replaced by a morphed reflection of Miro's forehead. Funny how Oripha assumed they needed a moment to consider.

Didn't she understand? Zarzar had vanished. And the only reason any of them were in this room right now, was to save him. A few grim words wouldn't change their minds about that.

Miro piled another helping of baked potatoes onto their plate. Oripa had prepared a typical Maelinori dish that they hadn't had since leaving Lithrier, and man had they missed it. But Yswillin didn't import the Maelinori vegetables crucial to the dish, not via the official trade routes nor via the lone merchants. Yswilline lone merchants didn't like trading with Maelinor anyway — an understandable sentiment, considering how Maelinori treated Yswilline.

Of course, Jags would gladly get the vegetables for Miro — whenever Miro got particularly homesick, Jags would propose to trek to Maelinor for them — but Miro preferred he stay with them. Without Jags, they'd feel even worse.

Torean's fork clattered on his plate, and he wrinkled his nose. "This tastes like metal. Does anyone else taste metal?"

Miro took another bite, chewing carefully. No, just tasted like potatoes flavoured with a healthy dose of xentharres. "I just taste the flavour."

"And is that flavour metal by any chance?" Queros put his fork down. "I taste it too. Maybe it's the cutlery."

Markí laughed. "The cutlery isn't even made of metal, weirdo. It's this spice Maelinori use. A lot of Yswilline, and Crythillei, have a gene that makes it taste like metal." They stuffed another bite in their mouth. "Quite tasty, or so I find."

"So do you eat swords too, or...?" Miro chuckled. Markí's words did sound familiar, somewhere — xentharres turning to blood in the mouth of any enemy? They'd always thought that was just a tall tale one of the previous monarchs had spread to keep nationalism up.

"Never tried one, actually. Let me just..." Markí leaned backward and rummaged under the table. A moment later, they held up a dagger. As if they were

performing a show, they made eye contact with everyone, wiggling their eyebrows mysteriously, before sticking out their tongue and licking the blade.

They furrowed their brows, smacked their lips, took a sip of their drink and swirled it around in their mouth. Then, they nodded.

“I might actually start doing that, yeah. Eat the swords of my enemies. It doesn’t taste too bad, and I think it would terrify the rehes out of them.”

Miro laughed. Refreshing, how Markí still had the energy to joke. They were such a fun person to hang out with — their shenanigans made the air so much lighter, the mood so much breezier. With Markí around, they could relax.

Markí winked at them, as if they’d read Miro’s thoughts. Immediately, Tor shifted a bit closer to Miro, until his shoulder brushed theirs. Heat rose to Miro’s cheeks, and their gaze drifted to their plate. Torean was so cute. So frogging cute.

They took another bite, closing their eyes to let the rich deliciousness seep into every sense of their being. For a moment, they allowed themselves to pretend that they didn’t have to travel through the Under, that Zarzar was safe and sound with them. That everything was just as it should be — you know?

But when they opened their eyes and looked around the table, reality crashed back down on them. Zarzar wasn’t here. He wasn’t safe. And if they didn’t make it through the Under in time, he might never be.

That first bottle of medicine, Zarando smashed. Just to be sure that he wouldn’t be tempted in his darkest moments. That he wouldn’t succumb.

Afterwards, he had rocked on his heels for ages, debating whether or not he should use one of the scattered fragments to slit his wrists and be done with this all. But whenever he’d pick up a shard, his hands started shaking so violently that it clattered right back to the floor. It was because of that biual hope Giria had planted — a corner of his mind was convinced he could get out,

and he couldn't be the one to take that from himself.

When Xaeth saw the shards, he had simply smiled — as if the entire thing was eternally amusing to him. It probably was — about everything Zarando did, was amusing to Xaeth. His screams, his tears. His indifference. And, above all, Zarando's pain.

After that day's 'daily dose of entertainment', the shards had been gone, another bottle standing in their place. Zarando, too beat up to deal with it, had simply ignored it at first. He didn't need the medicine. Wouldn't think of drinking it.

His nightmares, however, showed otherwise. Nightmares of being surrounded by darkness, his windpipe packed with stones so large he couldn't breathe. He'd lie there for ages, wheezing and gasping as his ribs cracked one by one, and just as he thought he'd die, a gulp of the medicine would fill his mouth and dissolve all the discomfort. And the darkness would disappear, replaced by Xaeth's grinning face, demanding he kill everyone he cared about, everyone he even remotely liked. And everyone's disapproving faces would appear, whispering at him about how much of a failure he was. How pathetic he was.

That was when he'd jolt awake, disoriented, panting, his palms ravaged. And the bottle would taunt him from the other side of his cell — he'd turn his back to it and go back to sleep, but the nightmares were relentless.

About halfway through the night, he tried to smash the bottle again — but Xaeth had used a sturdier one this time, and even when he flung it at the ground with all his might, it would stay frustratingly intact.

Thus, he chucked it out of his cell, watched as it rolled down the hallway, out of sight.

Again, Xaeth had simply smiled at that, picked up the bottle during their trip to the 'daily entertainment' chamber, and put it next to Zarando as he made him writhe and scream in agony. The only thing that stopped Zarando from reaching for the bottle then, was the presence of Xaeth — he'd die before he'd grant Xaeth the pleasure of seeing him break.

That night he dreamed of the medicine again, soothing all his aches and numbing him to Xaeth's torture — a state of eternal bliss. Not only did he not feel pain, he'd forgotten what pain *was*. Even his most harrowing memories wouldn't hurt anymore — Daevi dying. Taeri.

And for the first time, he truly longed for the medicine. But he clenched his fists, tore open his palms, and resisted the call.

This time, when Xaeth discovered that the bottle in the corner of Zarando's cell was still closed, he looked less amused, and it was Zarando's turn to grin. Knowing that Xaeth detested his resistance revitalised him — the longer he'd hold out, the more frustrated Xaeth would grow. Finally, *he* had the power — and he'd use it.

Zarando didn't even glance at the bottle during that day's 'entertainment' session. Denying Xaeth was a better medicine than the bottle could ever offer.

He shouldn't have been that obvious about it.

One more night, Xaeth placed the bottle in his cell, and one more night, Zarando resisted it. That morning, Zarando laughed openly at Xaeth — but Xaeth simply smiled back, an ominous smile that sent a shiver down Zarando's spine, made his blood run cold.

Zarando didn't smile anymore as Xaeth brought him to the entertainment chamber. He didn't smile as Xaeth made him writhe and scream in agony. He didn't smile as Xaeth finally stopped, as Xaeth popped the bottle of medicine open, as Xaeth put it to Zarando's mouth.

He didn't smile as Xaeth forced the liquid down his throat, as the pain seeped away, replaced by the blissful intoxication his dreams had promised. He didn't smile as his body soaked up more and more, his mind having lost all control. He didn't smile — in fact, his face was wet with tears, his palms dripping with blood.

And then, when Xaeth stepped back, a triumphant grin on his face, Zarando finally smiled. He cackled — he just couldn't help it. He didn't control his body anymore. The medicine did, and the medicine made him feel great.

CHAPTER FIVE



Guess we'll both die <3

Oripha needed a few days to prepare everything for their journey, days Miro spent holed up inside in fear someone would recognise them. They didn't mind it, to be honest — they kept themselves busy preparing potions, cooking, and cleaning Oripha's house. Oripha greatly appreciated the latter, and it was the least Miro could do for her, seeing how much she was willing to do for them.

It was mighty fascinating as well, cleaning Oripha's house. Everywhere they went, they caught glimpses of Oripha's life — Crythille artworks next to tapestries woven in traditional Mir fashion; seeds of plants they didn't recognise, stones that scattered colourful patterns when the light hit them just right. Hand-painted fans and cloudy bottles of which the label had long faded.

And in the evening, when they gathered around the fireplace sipping that not-quite-bénrel drink — tea, Oripha said — they'd ask her about the trinkets, and she'd tell their stories. The wooden fox on the mantel turned out to be a gift from her partner, a symbol of protection called the imyntrex. A bouquet of dried flowers reminded her of a trip to Crythille, where she'd helped a Field Deithi save a village. The rostel shell was from when she'd found one injured on the streets of Lithrier, and had cared for it until its final days. And —

maybe the cutest thing in the house — the drawing of a goat had been made by Jags when he was younger.

Miro had been especially fascinated by a pendant depicting two intertwined plants — they'd always been a sucker for plant symbolism. And it was beautifully made, the flowers' details so amazingly clear — the craftsman must've been an expert. Sadly, Oripha hadn't been able to explain the meaning behind the necklace — Jags' mum had given it to her, and she'd never bothered asking for an explanation.

Jags wore it now, even though he'd never been a fan of necklaces. They got in the way, according to him. But, man, how could he not wear it? It was all he had of her — most of her other possessions had been lost in the fire that had destroyed their house.

Miro squinted at the glass vials they'd arranged on the kitchen table. They still hadn't quite figured out how effective potions would be in the Under — Oripha had compared being in the Under to being underwater, and if the Under truly behaved like a liquid, projectile potions would be no good. The vials might not break properly, or the potion might diffuse instead of splash on the target.

So, they'd have to rely on drinkable potions — like healing potions. They'd been planning to take a bunch of those anyway — apparently, wounds in the Under sucked mana, so healing potions would be vital.

They turned to the stove and lifted a softly bubbling pan from the fire, sneezing as wafts of erilai steamed in their face. Apart from a variety of healing potions, Miro had decided to brew a few combat potions as well. Healing might be important, but it'd be better if they didn't suffer injuries to begin with. Not only in the Under, but also in Zarzar's world.

Currently, they were working on a fire potion, but they'd also decided on a few explosion potions and a poison vial for their blow-darts. Ever since Assie's assassination, they'd practised with darts — Jags had even said they were getting good.

Carefully, they poured their fire potion in one of the

vials, the steam instantly clouding the glass. They'd hoped to have enough for a few vials, but erilai — one of the main ingredients — was quite expensive out of season, and even between the five of them, they didn't have that much money.

They found the cap and screwed it on the vial. Hopefully, at least one of their combat potions worked on the Underlings — apparently the Under was crawling with them. And the only thing Miro knew about Underlings, was that they'd been safe from them near the trees. And that they didn't need mana to survive, if they lived in the Under.

They frowned. Would Underlings even be alive, if they didn't need mana to survive? As they'd understood it, all creatures needed mana to live. But if Underlings weren't alive, would normal potions affect them at all? Maybe they needed to make a specific mana-holding potion to hurt them. But how would they even start? They couldn't feel mana, so they didn't know if things had mana.

Sighing, they leaned their hands on the tabletop. Everything was so confusing and new — they felt like a child stumbling about, bumping into furniture with every step. A child, experimenting with their Pa's equipment, Elion hovering over their shoulder and bursting into laughter whenever anything went wrong.

'Of course *you* can't do it,' he'd often said. 'You're so dumb.'

As if they weren't aware that they'd never be as amazing of a scientist as Pa. As if they weren't aware that they were just Miro, just the kid imitating their parents, their dreams nothing more than adorable fairy tales. They'd never discover something groundbreaking like Pa.

But that was alright, wasn't it? This was just a hobby. They didn't have to be amazing at it — just good enough to help others.

With a sigh, Miro placed the vial next to the other completed potions. Only five vials left.

* * *

A knock on the door, and Torean entered the kitchen. For a moment, he lingered in the doorway, fiddling with the hem of his shirt — but when Miro grinned at him, his stance relaxed, and he approached them with a smile on his face.

“Oripha says she’s ready. She...” His eyes darted to the arrangement of vials. “Do you need help?”

Miro lifted a pan from the furnace and poured some of its contents in an empty vial. “No, I’m almost done, don’t worry. Oripha is ready, you said?”

“Yeah.” Tor nodded, his eyes following Miro’s movements as they filled another vial. “Yeah.”

Miro filled the remaining three vials, the liquid quietly sloshing as they poured. There. Done. Now they only had to clean this mess up, and they’d be ready as well.

As they moved the dirty dishes to the sink, they glanced at Tor — he was still watching them, his hands fiddling with the hem of his shirt again. Clearly, he had something on his mind, and Miro wanted nothing more than to be there for him. They just — how did you get someone to talk to you? Pressing clearly wasn’t the right move; last time they tried that tactic, they’d almost lost a friend.

So they simply continued their business, patiently waiting for Torean to take the lead. They had just finished cleaning the pans when Tor spoke up.

“I’m scared, Mi.”

Miro put the pans in the cupboard and turned around, their eyes meeting his. They were wide, his face pale. Poor Tor.

With one step they’d bridged the distance between them and grabbed Tor’s hands.

“That’s okay, Tor. I’m scared too. Those Underlings —” They shuddered. “They’re scary, man.”

Torean frowned and shook his head. “No — I’m not scared for myself. I’m scared for you.”

“Why?” Miro’s gaze dug into his, trying to unravel whatever he was thinking, clinging to his hands as not to jump to conclusions. Tor averted his eyes, sighing.

“It’s just — I’m not trying to be mean. The opposite, really. It’s just...” He sighed again. Nausea bubbled up in Miro’s stomach, and Tor’s hands threatened to slip from their grip. Please don’t —

“You’re not a fighter.”

There it was. Torean had said it. After all they’d gone through, Tor didn’t believe in them. Didn’t believe they could fend for themselves. When would people stop doing that? They weren’t *that* stupid.

“I’m not.” Their gaze stuck to their feet. They’d spilled a drop of cythai extract on their sock — a speck of purple they’d never wash out. “Doesn’t mean I can’t fight, though. I fought Ciursal as well, didn’t I?”

“And you almost died doing that. Mi, seriously, I care about you so much — I would break apart if something happened to you.” Tor’s voice was rising, his hands flailing to hold on to Miro’s.

Miro swallowed the lump in their throat. “And I if something happened to you. But I *trust* you.”

“You can trust me. *I* am not seizing every opportunity to walk straight into danger. If it were up to me, we’d be safe.”

“So you want me to avoid taking any risks? You want me to lock myself in a box while my friends need me? Just so that you don’t have to be scared of breaking apart?” Tears welled up in Miro’s eyes, and they yanked their hands from Tor’s grip to wipe them away. “I care about you too. I don’t want you to be hurt either. But even if it’s dangerous, I’d rather have you here with me than stowed away in a box. I’d rather face the danger together.”

“Ah, yes.” Torean crossed his arms. “So you want us *both* to die. In my version, at least one of us stays alive.”

Miro’s eyes drifted up to his face, their brain churning to find any words. Where was the sweet, kind, understanding Tor they knew? Why would he *say* this?

“How — What — How do you think I’d feel if you died, and I was here, unable to do anything about it? How — How do you think I’d *feel*?” Their voice broke, a crust of tears on their cheeks. “I’d be heartbroken. If

you were in danger, I'd want to be there — to save you, you know? I don't want you to be alone. I don't want you to be in danger alone."

It was Tor's turn to look at their socks. When he spoke again, his voice had turned soft.

"I don't want to be in danger at all. I'm only going because you're going. If you stayed home, I'd stay home, and we'd both be safe."

"You don't mean that." Air. Miro needed air. Torean wanted them to stay home? No. No, no, no. Zarzar *needed* them. He might die if they couldn't get to him in time. "You can't mean that. Jags is going. Zarzar is in trouble. I can't not go — I can't not go, Tor."

"Then I guess we'll both die. If that's what you want." Tor's gaze wandered up again, his eyes so cold they pierced Miro's chest. Miro's heart deflated, puddled at the bottom of their feet. Their lungs had squeezed empty, and they grabbed the edge of the table, gasping as the room spun around them.

No. No, no no. Torean couldn't mean this. This wasn't Tor. Tor would never be cruel.

But when they looked up again, desperate for some form of comfort from Tor, he'd already left.

CHAPTER SIX



Mountains of sorrow

The horse's hooves pounded the ground as she pulled the wagon over the winding road. Around them, hills rose into foothills and into mountains — they were rapidly nearing the Rikans, the mountain range that formed the border between Maelinor and Crythille.

Miro leaned their chin on their knee, watching the landscape pass by. Every time they rattled over a bump in the road, they feared they'd fall off — they'd decided to keep Jags and Queros company on the driver's seat, but it was barely wide enough for the three of them. However, they couldn't bear to sit under the bonnet — every time they looked at Tor, a heavy weighed sank down their chest, compressing their stomach until they might throw up. And every time their eyes met his, his words resounded in their head.

'We'll both die. If that's what you want.'

They dug their fingers into the fabric of their trousers. Why didn't Tor understand? They wanted to save Zarzar — they'd go mad if they simply sat back and waited for others to do it. Their help might make the difference between success and failure.

A tear left an icy trail on their cheek as the wind chased it towards their ear. Miro roughly wiped it away. Torean didn't even *have* to accompany them. He *chose* to come. And Miro respected that decision — even if it

meant they might lose him. Torean was a *person* — not something to stow away in a glass case and only look at.

“Want to talk about it?” Jag’s gaze was fixed on the road ahead of them as he guided the horse through a bent.

Miro shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Jags shot them a glance. “He just wants to keep you safe.”

“Isn’t that easier to do while I’m with him?”

“I’d say so, yes.”

The wagon rattled over a particularly rocky part of the road, and Miro shifted in their seat to stop their teeth from clattering — it didn’t work. They’d have to leave the wagon behind soon — at least if they needed to go deeper into the mountains. Oripha hadn’t told them where exactly the ‘door’ to the Under was, but it made sense for it to be deep in the mountains, far away from any people. Otherwise, someone would have found it at some point, right? And if the news got out about it, Elion would have exploited it.

Miro scratched their neck. Maybe he wouldn’t have been able to exploit it anyway. A place filled with a mysterious substance and dangerous creatures — what use was that to Elion?

Pa, on the other hand, would’ve been so excited about this all. Pa and Dad both. They’d have captured an Underling by now, done proper experiments on it. Come to think of it, why hadn’t Miro done that? Kinda stupid of them.

“Torean is a good lad.” Queros leaned forward to look past Jags. Apparently, he had been eavesdropping on their conversation — which admittedly wasn’t difficult, given their proximity to him. Miro shot a glance at the bonnet of the wagon. Would Tor be listening as well?

“Try to put yourself in his shoes,” Queros continued. “He has recently lost his parents, his family. His home. You and Ivah are about the only people he has left. And you’re planning to walk head-first into danger? Imagine how terrified he must be.”