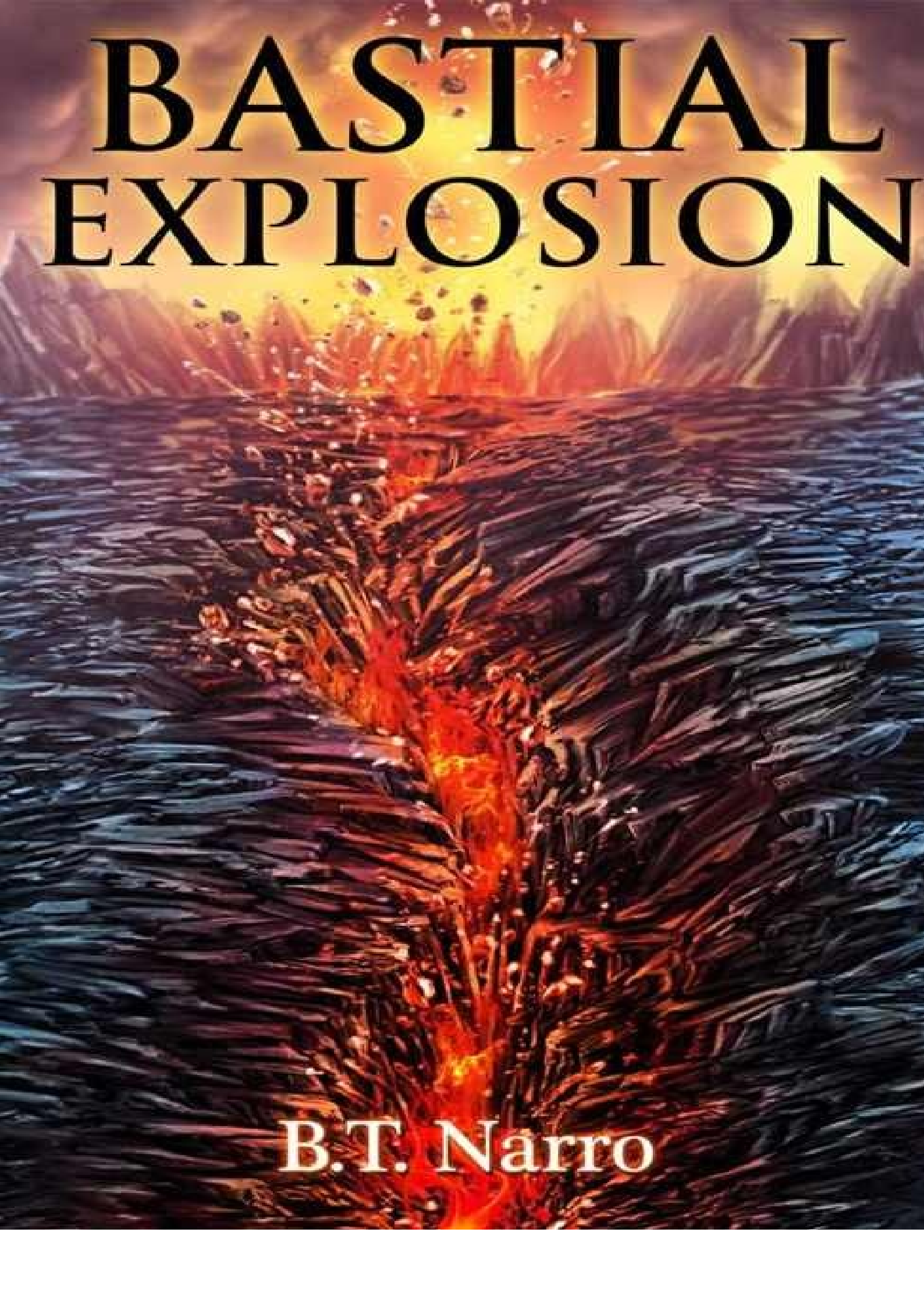


BASTIAL EXPLOSION

The background of the cover is a high-contrast, fiery landscape. A central path of bright orange and red lava flows from the bottom towards a glowing, yellow-orange horizon. The surrounding terrain is dark, jagged, and appears to be made of cooled lava or volcanic rock, with sharp peaks and deep crevices. The overall atmosphere is one of intense heat and destruction.

B.T. Narro

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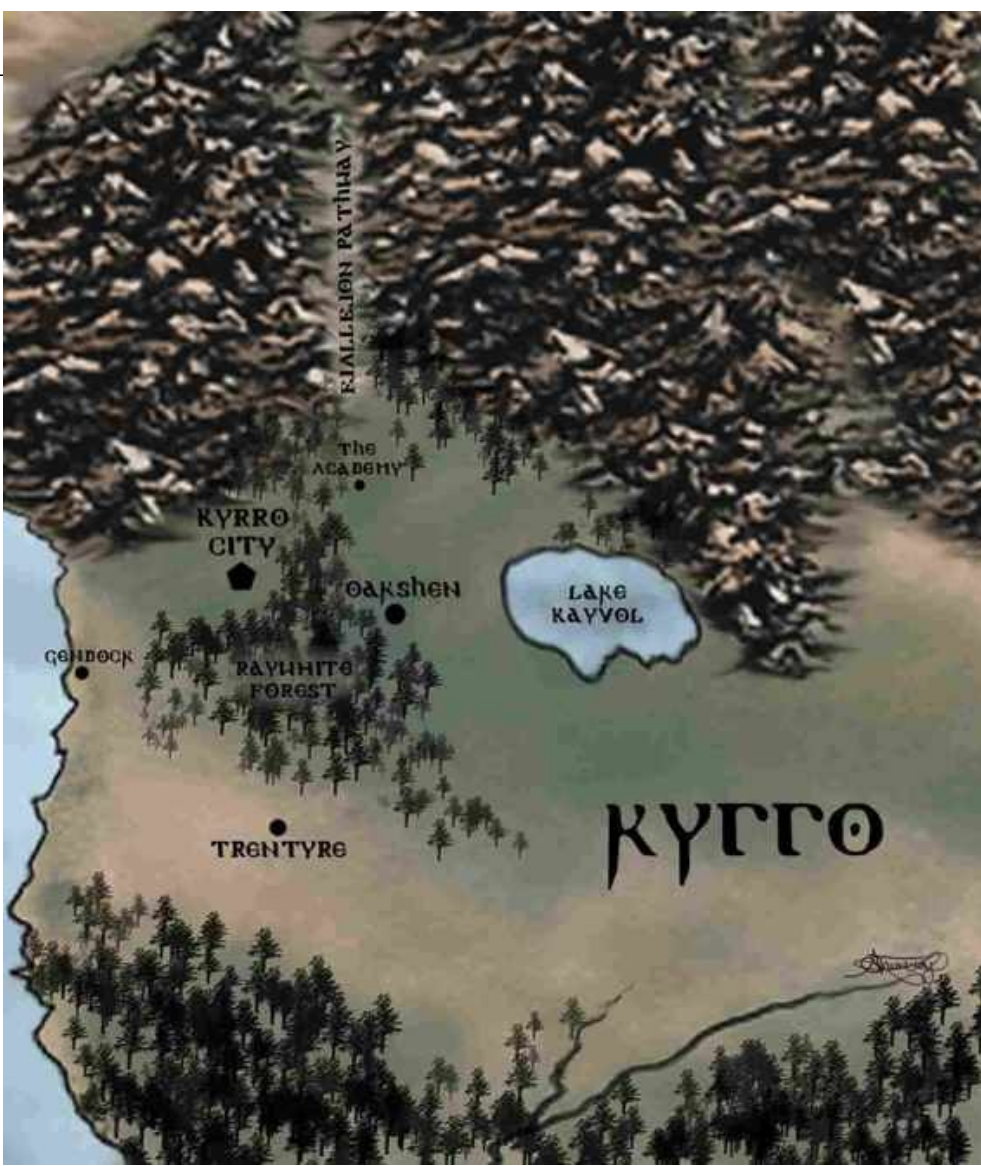
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Chapter 1:

ZETI

“What’s Doe going to do to us?” Zeti asked, finding difficulty moving when she knew each step was bringing her closer to her punishment.

Paramar was unnervingly silent, his yellow eyes stuck to the path ahead as they walked through the cavernous abandoned Slugari colony. Being the leader of the Slugari search team, Paramar had been regarded as the most important Krepp of their entire Kreppen army.

But everything was different now. They’d finally found the Slugari’s home...and they’d let the majority of the delicious creatures slip through their claws.

While known for his reticence, Paramar always at least had answered Zeti’s questions. Yet, he wouldn’t even look at her now, his lizard-face so steady and set it was as if it would crack before shifting into a different expression.

Finally, he grumbled, “How should I know?”

“You know Doe better than I do,” Zeti argued.

She was somewhat fearful Paramar was going to reprimand her. But she would’ve welcomed it just to know that he was still the same Krepp as he’d been before they’d failed to follow orders...before they’d let thousands of Slugari escape.

“You speak as if I’ve failed like this before!” Paramar thundered. Zeti could hear it in his tone now—a dangerous anger was festering.

Maybe Doe will be too afraid of Paramar to punish us, she thought.

The stupidity of the idea almost made her spit. Doe had never shown fear before. It was a common belief that he was incapable.

A Krepp who Zeti didn’t recognize ran up to them. “Doe’s waiting on the other side,” he said, looking over their shoulders. “Where are the Slugari? Doe sent me to help you bring them to him, but all I see are half-eaten corpses. Did you let them—?”

With startling speed, Paramar grabbed the Krepp by the neck and tossed him aside. The motion was so fluid it was like Paramar was discarding a rock, possibly even a pebble.

“Shut your mouth,” Paramar said and then spat, his saliva finding the Krepp’s tumbling body.

When the Krepp’s somersaults came to a halt, he jumped to his feet and drew his sword.

Paramar calmly pointed his own weapon.

Neither moved.

Zeti stepped back to clear some room.

“Come on, then.” Paramar used a claw to motion the other Krepp toward him.

The challenger lowered his sword, his gaze falling with it.

Smart Krepp, Zeti almost muttered aloud.

She stayed an extra step from Paramar the rest of the way through the Slugari colony, hesitant to say anything else. Anger radiated from him, unintelligible grumbles slipping from his long, lipless mouth. At one point, Zeti could even hear his sharp teeth grinding together.

Eventually, the cavernous tunnels twisted into the widest opening yet. Zeti saw that all the Krepp had gathered in this vast room, some dipping their heads into a massive lake for a drink.

Zeti had no idea how the Slugari had gotten water down into their underground colony. But when her eyes found Doe, her curiosity switched back to dread at the punishment that awaited.

Doe was among a cluster of high-ranking Krepps. Zeti saw one of them point to her and Paramar then Doe began the arduous task of turning his enormous body to face them.

It was earlier that day that Zeti had seen her first Slugari—besides Doe or Haemon. And now looking at Doe once more, she couldn't fathom how he or Haemon used to be just like the delicious creatures she'd recently eaten.

Not only did he used to look like them, he lived with them, followed their orders. He came up no higher than my knees at one point in his life.

But now he towered over her, his slug-like body stretching twice as far as it was tall.

Doe growled at the sight of her and Paramar. "Why aren't there any Slugari with you?" His voice was rougher than a sack of rocks dragged across the dirt.

Zeti lowered her gaze, thankful she had Paramar to speak for her—he was the one in charge anyway. There was a good chance her punishment wouldn't be as severe as his.

But Paramar gave no reply. He simply stared.

What can he say? Zeti began to wonder. While she didn't know, she figured anything would be better than silence.

Doe's overstuffed Slugari face twisted in anger.

He's just figured out we let the Slugari get away.

Doe lifted one of his grotesque claws to point. "I told you to get to the perimeter first!" he shouted. "I said it! Get to the perimeter and then circle back! Why didn't you listen?"

"No one could've followed that order." Paramar's voice was thick with aggression, though he remained quiet for now. "Don't give me an impossible order and then scold me for not following it."

A burst of nervous murmurs pulsed through the hundreds of Krepps now watching.

"Paramar..." Zeti started to reach out but stopped herself. He certainly already knew not to talk back to their oversized Slugari leader. Everyone knew that. A reminder from her only would amplify Paramar's anger.

Doe was surprisingly calm, though. He simply slithered forward and said, "You're no longer chief." His diminutive arm came up to point. "And for disobeying me when it mattered most, your claws will be yanked."

What? No, that's too cruel! Zeti grabbed her own claws, tugging on one to see how it felt. Pain bit her hard.

"Lay down your sword and bring your hand over here," Doe commanded.

Paramar drew his sword...but to Zeti's surprise, it was not to lay it down. He pointed it at the leader.

"You want my claws? Then come here and take them from me."

The nervous murmurs burst into a clamor. Half the Krepps drew their swords, and those with bows aimed an arrow at Paramar. Zeti clenched her teeth and placed her claw on Paramar's hand in a feeble attempt to lower his weapon for him.

He shoved her with his forearm. "Get away from me, Zeti."

"Don't do this," she urged.

"I already have."

He was right. The fight had been initiated.

Paramar used his weapon to gesture at the other Krepps now circling him. "It's time for a new leader. We need one who knows what we want and how to get it."

He paused, and Zeti noticed many Krepps sharing glances. While some might've agreed, none had the courage to lower their weapons. Paramar was now a traitor. Siding with him would bring the same fate. Zeti took a step back from him.

Doe began to laugh, a menacing cackle that echoed throughout the cavern. His usually beady eyes

doubled in size, nearly protruding from the folds of dirty brown blubber around them.

~~“And what would the new leader’s first order be?” Doe asked with a sneer.~~

Paramar stood tall, puffing out his chest. “Kyrro needs to fall. Then we can focus on the Sluga they’re protecting.”

“How interesting. I have the same plan. But the difference between you and me is that I didn’t just let thousands of Slugari get away.” Doe paused to curl his head around his body, glancing at the Krepps behind him and waiting for them to nod back.

Turning to Paramar, Doe’s expression no longer held anything but anger. “Because unlike you, I’m not controlled by an urge to feed. I would never let thousands of Slugari escape simply because I couldn’t control myself. You’re infinitely weaker. The tribe would fall under your leadership just as easily as you would in battle.”

“Then fight me and prove it.”

Doe’s long mouth bent into a smile.

Everyone took that as their cue to move away from the two of them, including Zeti. She silently cursed Paramar, knowing there was nothing she could do to stop this. He’d just gotten himself killed.

Paramar’s speed was startling for his size as he dashed at Doe with his sword low and ready.

Doe’s claws glowed for just a blink before an explosion of light burst from them. Zeti only saw the fireball after Paramar had dodged it by rolling out of the way.

Paramar regained his speed and leapt at the enormous Slugari, his sword now over his head as he soared.

Doe let out a beastly roar before Paramar reached him, and Zeti felt a blast of hot wind strike her entire body with such force that it knocked her off her feet and sent her rolling.

She noticed Paramar was now at least ten yards from Doe, scrambling to regain his footing. Before he made it upright, there was another burst of light, another fireball—this one striking him.

Paramar’s sword came loose as he tumbled. Screaming, he slipped trying to get up and tried to drag his tripping body toward his weapon.

Another fireball came from Doe’s claws, again striking Paramar.

The weakened Krepp was slow to move this time, completely dazed. He tried to push himself up only to fall flat on his stomach.

“Would you like me to finish him?” A Krepp came toward Doe—it was Keenu!

What are you doing? Zeti wanted to scream at him. The chief of the Kreppen scouts was friendly with Paramar. How could he offer to kill Paramar with such indifference?

“No,” Doe answered with a scowl. “Zeti will do it.”

To her horror, Doe turned his body to face her. She couldn’t breathe in that moment, violently sucking in air to no effect.

“You *were* going to prove your loyalty by killing your traitorous brother,” Doe said. “But he escaped. So now you’ll kill this traitor.”

She managed to take in a quick breath as she glanced at Paramar. His eyes were locked to hers as he came toward her. He staggered, barely catching himself as he started to fall.

Closer he came, refusing to look anywhere but right back at her. Everyone was silent. She could feel their gazes.

“Do it,” Doe commanded.

She drew her arrow. Her hands were shaking.

If Paramar still had his sword, he could’ve reached her with it by the time she was ready to shoot. Instead, he extended his claw peacefully and fell to a knee in pain.

“Come here,” he muttered, powerless to trudge forward any farther.

She did, helping him to his feet.

Unable to keep his head up, he let down his neck to rest his forehead on the thin black hair atop her head. She could feel his sweat.

“You fear what other Krepps want,” he whispered. “That’s the weakness I found in you when we first fought.”

He kissed her forehead—a sign of goodbye. Then he stepped back, extending his arms from his sides to show he was ready.

“Goodbye, Paramar,” Zeti muttered. Then she wiped away the tears clouding her vision and aimed at his heart.

Chapter 2:

EFFIE

When Effie found Reela still at the pig farm, disappointment wrapped around her heart, the extra weight now causing it to sink toward her stomach. She couldn't believe it. Reela was even in the same position as before, sitting alongside the fence with her head resting against it, an empty look in her eyes.

Effie took in a deep breath, put on a smile, and forced herself to try a joke. "You like the smell of something?"

Reela turned to show Effie the tears running down her cheeks, her mouth dead flat.

"Oh, Reela." Suddenly Effie felt tears forming in her own eyes. She still hadn't gotten used to seeing her friend cry. "I'm so sorry."

Reela nodded forgivingly, then turned back to the pigs.

It had been ten days since Vithos had been killed—stranded in the Slugari colony with hundreds of Krepps blocking his only exit. No one had seen him die, but Effie knew better than to hope he could've made it out of there alive. Since then, Reela's mood had gotten worse each day.

Effie desperately wanted to see some of Reela's old smile, even expected it once they'd returned to the Academy. But they'd gotten back hours ago, and Reela hadn't even bothered to move after plopping herself down along the fence of the pig farm.

The sun was setting, night quickly approaching. Effie's worry for Reela now trumped her sadness for the loss of Vithos. Her friend barely had eaten anything during their trip back from the Slugari colony.

Effie had never known Reela to be thin throughout her life, not that she was heavy, either. But she had lost a lot of weight recently, and her pale skin looked to have lost some color. Even her green eyes, usually vibrant with joy, had become dull. They were red and splotchy, as if stained by blood.

Effie came behind Reela and thought to run her hand down Reela's light brown hair to comfort her. But then she remembered how particular her psychic friend was about people touching her hair. The few times Effie'd tried when they were younger, Reela had snapped at her like an animal being rubbed the wrong way.

"Why stay with the pigs?" Effie asked.

Reela lifted her hand to the fence. "Pigs don't show emotion through their faces like we do. But they can tell they're very sensitive creatures."

Effie would've mentioned that her question wasn't answered, but she was content just to hear Reela speak—a rarity on its own these days.

Reela took a slow breath as her fingers gripped the fence harder. "The farmer told me the two pigs in front of us are brother and sister. I've been interested in how they interact with each other. They realize there's a connection between them. Pigs are smarter than people know."

Effie studied the animals. They were sniffing the ground in curiosity, lifting their noses to touch every so often. She would've thought their interaction was purely coincidental if it hadn't been for Reela. But now that she had the psychic's insight into the situation, Effie found it adorable.

"So you find it comforting to watch them?" she asked, still unsure what this had to do with losing Vithos.

Reela stood, turning to face Effie. From her serious glance, Effie could feel that her childhood

friend was about to tell her something important.

“Eff, I can’t keep this to myself any longer.”

Reela’s tone made Effie take a step forward. “What is it?”

“Vithos wasn’t the same to me as he was to you.”

It felt so strange speaking about Vithos in the past tense when Effie still could picture his smile so easily.

He was always smiling, just like Reela.

“You had romantic feelings for him?” Effie assumed. It was a thought she’d already had.

Reela’s face showed a hint of a smile. “When did you come to that belief?” Her tone said it all—

Effie couldn’t have been more wrong.

Reela continued. “I’m locked on Cleve.” She put her hand on Effie’s shoulder. “You know that.”

“I thought you might’ve fallen for the Elf,” Effie admitted.

Finally, Reela let out a true smile, both ends of her puffy lips bending upward. “No. Vithos was my brother—my half brother.”

Has the depression caused Reela to lose her mind? “Reela, what’s with you?” Effie asked. “He’s a half Elf. You’re not...your ears aren’t...” Effie tried to picture Reela’s ears but couldn’t do it.

Have I ever seen them? A chill ran down Effie’s spine that only got stronger when Reela lowered her head, giving Effie a knowing look from the tops of her eyes.

Suddenly it struck her—the reason Reela never let anyone near her hair. It was covering her ears. Reela claimed she never knew her father. Lies. All of it lies.

Anger overwhelmed Effie. She gritted her teeth. “You’re half Elf?” For some reason she knew not to shout this information, though it took all of her strength not to.

Reela nodded with a relieved grin.

“Why keep this from me? We tell each other everything.” *At least I thought we did.*

“It wasn’t my decision. My family made me keep it a secret for my own safety.” Reela balled her fist. “But now that I’ve proven my loyalty to Kyrro. I don’t see why I need to keep hiding it. The King would never exile me now.” Reela’s head sank, her eyes sliding to the ground. “I’ve already lost both my brothers and Cleve. I don’t see why this side of me has to be lost as well.”

“Both brothers?” Effie was confused. *Who else could there be besides Vithos?* But then she gasped as it came to her. “Do you mean the Elf who left with Cleve? He’s your brother as well?”

Reela nodded, taking in a deep breath that seemed to provide great satisfaction.

Effie felt the opposite. She was wound up tighter than a ball of string, feeling betrayed that Reela hadn’t trusted her with this information before now.

Before she knew what to ask, the deafening Redfield stadium bell was struck.

Ding!

One ring, Effie counted.

Ding!

Two rings.

Effie grabbed Reela’s hands as she waited to hear if the third would come. *Please no, we’ve just gotten back.*

Two rings meant their presence was required at Redfield. But more than two...Effie wasn’t ready for battle, didn’t even want to think about it. She wondered if she ever would be comfortable with the idea.

Seconds passed in silence.

Reela seemed to be the first one between them to breathe again. Effie let out a breath next.

“I’ll explain the whole thing later,” Reela told her.

Effie nodded and they walked to Redfield. She began to wonder how well she really knew her

closest friend.

~~But when Reela extended her hand for Effie to hold, she knew it was a silly thought. Reela was st~~
Reela.

Chapter 3:

ZOKE

Zoke stood next to Marie Fyremore in the center of Redfield as thousands of young Humans sat along the rows of wooden benches. Most of them didn't even hide their stares. With open mouths and confused chatter, it was clear many still didn't know Zoke was an ally.

That was the point of this introduction, Marie had told him, following with, "And to inform everyone about our new Slugari allies as well."

But with Vithos gone, Zoke wasn't sure who his allies were anymore.

Marie was the oldest Human Zoke had seen yet, her papery skin ruffled with wrinkles. Still, there was strength to her. Perhaps it was the way she stood, or the arrogance in her smile, but Zoke didn't find himself questioning why the other Humans would listen to her. From the wand on her belt, Zoke knew she was a mage even before she'd introduced herself as the head mage of the Academy and acting headmaster until Terren returned.

Once everyone was seated, Marie raised her arms and waited for silence before speaking.

"Rain is coming, so let's make this as brief as we can." Her voice carried well. It seemed to catch everyone's attention, even though there was nothing fearsome about it—like Doe or Haemon's voice.

Zoke certainly didn't miss them. But he couldn't escape the feeling he would see them again.

"Terren has returned," Marie continued. "But he's meeting with King Welson Kimard in Kyrro City to share this good news that I'm about to tell you: The Slugari have agreed to ally with us again. Tenred and the Krepps."

A startling noise erupted from the stadium. It was a thunderous sound that came at Zoke from all directions as he stood in the center. He couldn't figure out what caused it at first until he looked closely at the Humans' hands. They were slapping their palms together, all of them.

He tried to remember if he'd read anything about this behavior, but nothing came to mind. He figured it was some sort of agreement to the news being favorable.

"Some of you have already met Zoke." Marie gestured toward him. "Unlike the other Krepps, he has allied with us and already killed enemies on our behalf, including his own kind. You'll be seeing him around the Academy. His skill with the sword is exceptional, so he'll be joining the Group One warriors for battle training. Welcome him as you would anyone else."

Hot frustration started burning within Zoke's chest. Why was this woman making such an effort to make sure he was accepted? It made him look weak, like he needed her help or had even requested it.

Someone ahead of them stood, his pale hand raised toward the darkening sky. It was a Human mage in the first row of benches.

Marie pointed at him. "Yes?"

"Sawdar Shayper, of the Group One warriors." The young man's voice was low with pride, his shoulders wide with muscle as he stood with his arms folded.

"No introduction is needed," Marie said with a smile.

The man continued with the same proud tone. "My question is this: When this Krepp came through the Academy weeks ago, an Elf was with him. The Elf performed the most powerful psyche I've ever witnessed, but where is he now? Shouldn't he be here...isn't he our ally as well?"

Voices of agreement fluttered from the crowd. Marie showed one eye to Zoke before turning back to Sawdar.

“I’m sorry to say that he fell during battle,” she said.

~~A blast of noise came from the crowd, a mixture of indiscernible sounds of shock.~~

“What happened?” Sawdar’s tone was demanding.

Anyone who spoke like that to Doe would be punished with fire. Zoke looked to Marie to see what she would do, but she simply looked back at Zoke in silence, a blank expression on her face. Then she turned to answer Sawdar.

“That’s all Terren told me,” she said. “He can give a statement when he returns.”

“Wasn’t the Krepp there?” Sawdar pointed his blunt finger at Zoke.

It made Zoke want to bite it off.

“And we were told a group of first years went as well,” Sawdar continued. “If they’re here, and the rest of us are here as well, it seems pointless to return to Redfield later for the news from Terren. Why not have them tell us?” He looked behind him.

At first Zoke thought it was to search for Effie, Steffen, Reela, and Alex—those who’d returned with him to the Academy, who also knew what happened to Vithos. But then Zoke realized that Sawdar was searching for the support of the crowd.

He’d found it. Most were nodding at that point, some even slapping their hands together again.

The Humans’ curiosity about Vithos disgusted Zoke. *Why would they want to know how he died? Do they want to blame someone for losing such a powerful ally?* By their harsh stares, it seemed they’d already chosen Zoke.

“What do you want to hear, Humans?” Zoke shouted above the noise. The crowd began to quiet. “That he sacrificed himself to save the rest of us? That we and the Slugari would’ve been killed if it wasn’t for him? Because that’s what happened. And now he’s dead. And we’re not.”

It had gone so quiet, Zoke could hear his voice echoing around the stadium.

“How did that happen?” Sawdar shouted. “The Elf was so powerful. How could he have been killed while no one else was?”

“We needed time to escape and collapse the tunnel behind us—” Zoke stopped himself, unsure what he was explaining this to the crowd.

Why do they need the details?

But the silence of the stadium was burning like an open oven door begging to be shut. It only worsened as they waited for him to continue.

Refraining from spitting at them, Zoke spoke once again. “He got stranded on the other side of the tunnel. We couldn’t go back for him.”

Voices of anger and confusion assaulted him. The worst were those coming from behind. But no matter how he turned, he couldn’t face them all at once.

“You must’ve been able to do something!” Sawdar screamed.

With fury bringing a flood of saliva to his mouth, Zoke spat at the Human. It was quite a distance for the frothy liquid to soar, but Zoke had spat farther in his life.

It caught Sawdar in the chest, and the anger of the crowd dimmed, replaced by gasps.

The Human looked down at his blemished shirt and muttered something Zoke had no hope of hearing over his own shouting. “There was nothing we could do, Human!”

Then Zoke felt Marie touching his shoulder, as if wishing to restrain him. Reflexively, he twisted and roared at her so she’d back away.

This caused aggression to burst through the crowd, everyone jumping from the benches and pointing their clawless fingers at him.

He spat indiscriminately into the crowd, then stormed out of the stadium before he did something he would regret.

Chapter 4:

STEFFEN

The rain was unrelenting by the time Steffen got to the eastern wall.

Standing only ten feet tall, the Academy walls didn't provide a breathtaking view, but Steffen didn't care in that moment. He wasn't there for any reason other than to console Zoke.

Climbing up the ramp now, Steffen wondered what he was going to say to the Krepp.

Steffen had followed Zoke from the stadium, remaining silent as he trailed behind. When Zoke climbed the ramp to the wall, Steffen was worried he planned to jump off. The tough Krepp had taken two fireballs and survived, so he probably could jump from such a height unscathed. *And then I would leave the Academy, never to return.* This was Steffen's true worry in that moment. He'd been waiting for an incident to drive the Krepp away for good.

Thankfully, Steffen found Zoke leaning against the parapets, looking out at the crowns of hills in the distance.

"I'm sorry for what happened," Steffen said. Then he immediately regretted his words. The apology had slipped out.

Zoke followed with exactly what Steffen expected him to. "I'm sick of you Humans apologizing for everything."

Steffen stepped back, worried Zoke would spit at him. But no saliva came.

He fleetingly considered apologizing for apologizing but quickly realized how ridiculous that would be.

Zoke spoke their language so well that it was easy to forget how different he really was from them.

"Come back to the house with me," Steffen said.

"Why?" Zoke didn't take his eyes off the hills.

"Surely even a tough-skinned Krepp can grow weary of the freezing rain?"

A flash of lightning bathed everything in white. Booming thunder followed. It was so loud Steffen jumped.

But the Krepp didn't move. "Vithos got cold easily," he muttered. "It's probably the same with you Humans, but it takes a lot more to make us Krepps cold."

The rain splattered against Zoke's scalp, causing his small tuft of black hair to dance wildly. The setting sun was obscured by clouds, though Zoke's yellow eyes were still bright.

Steffen fought off a shiver, wondering if the shirtless Krepp was just pretending not to be cold. "Don't worry about the others in the Academy," Steffen said. "They'll accept you soon enough."

"I don't care about their acceptance," Zoke muttered. "Only their ability to kill."

Steffen let out a loud discouraged breath. He hadn't anticipated how difficult it would be just to get the Krepp inside, and his patience was dwindling quicker than the heat of the disappearing sun.

Zoke had never been friendly. But after Vithos had died, he'd become aggressively rude, as if *trying* to make others dislike him. It was becoming difficult not to. Though Steffen still was determined to get the old Zoke back—the Zoke who shot arrows with him while revealing insights into Krepp culture.

On the way back from the Slugari colony, Steffen had coaxed Zoke into such discussions as he had on the way there—but not without the Krepp insulting Humans every chance he got.

"So you're going to stay out here all night? That's a stupid idea." Steffen could hear the ang

coming out now. He was about to apologize for it but then remembered that Zoke couldn't hand apologies.

It made Steffen even more frustrated. *What's so wrong about apologizing?*

"Why are you even here?" Zoke asked, still refusing to look at Steffen.

That was all he could handle.

"Because, you stubborn idiot, I care about you!" Steffen wasn't screaming, at least he refrained from that, though he hadn't heard himself this angry in years. "I'm trying to make you feel better. Now come back to the house with me or I'll wrestle you off this wall and drag you there!" Now he was shouting.

Zoke spun quickly, his head tilted from confusion.

The only thing keeping Steffen from shivering was his boiling rage.

Suddenly, Zoke's long, lipless mouth bent into a smile—the first Steffen had seen since they'd lost Vithos.

"You'll wrestle me off this wall and drag me all the way to your house?" Zoke looked as if he was about to laugh.

But Steffen was so exasperated, Zoke's amusement only made his anger worsen. "Yes!" he shouted. "Do you want to see?" He knew how foolish his words were, as he couldn't even knock Zoke off his feet, but he didn't care.

Muscles bulged from beneath the Krepp's hard skin, Steffen noticing as he strategized how to transport a creature twice his weight to his campus house.

Zoke let out a laugh that sounded closer to a series of grunts. He dramatically lifted his palms in front of his lizard-like face. "No, *please* don't do it," Zoke said with heavy sarcasm. "I'll come with you. *Please* don't hurt me." He laughed again as he crossed by Steffen to start down the ramp. "Silent Human."

Steffen felt all the anger drain from his body, leaving him weary and shivering.

I think I got lucky with that one.

Steffen expected to find Effie and Reela sitting at the kitchen table when he came in. But his head jumped when he saw Gabby there with them.

She leapt from her seat with a smile and opened her mouth to speak...but then Zoke followed Steffen inside and fear struck Gabby's face. She tripped over her own feet, then quickly picked herself up and staggered backward until she ran into a wall.

Effie and Reela burst into laughter.

"Don't worry, Gabby," Steffen told her. "He's harmless."

"I wouldn't say harmless," Zoke added, seemingly entertained by Gabby's reaction.

"It speaks our language!" she announced stupidly.

"He, not it," Steffen corrected.

"Oh, sorry," Gabby said a little sheepishly.

"This one is younger, yes?" Zoke asked Steffen.

He nodded. "She's Effie's younger sister by three years."

Gabby found some courage, now approaching hesitantly. "So strong," she muttered, half talking to herself. She strained her neck forward for a closer look and then gasped. "And with such yellow eyes!"

Zoke caught Steffen's attention with a confused glance. "Why is she talking about me like I'm not here? Is this some Human custom?"

"No, it's just rude," Reela answered with a grin.

"Rude..." The word came from Zoke's mouth as if he'd never said it before. "I think I remember what rude is, and I welcome it. I like this one." He turned toward Gabby with a twisted smile.

gesturing at her with his black claw. “Your name is Gabby?”

~~She twitched as she nodded, hesitantly reaching out her hand. “And what’s your name?” she asked~~
in a near whisper.

Zoke extended both hands, claws pointed up. Then he shook them by the wrist.

Steffen put his hand over his face at the sight of it. *We still haven’t told him that’s not how we shake hands.*

Gabby retracted her hand, lifting it to scratch her head in confusion.

“You don’t want to shake?” Zoke asked, still waggling his hands.

Effie and Reela were both holding in laughter.

“I’m confused,” Gabby said, looking up to meet Steffen’s eyes.

Suddenly it struck him how much he’d missed her. With everything that had happened, Gabby hadn’t been in the forefront of his thoughts. But now, as her dark, deep-set eyes found him, he could feel his emotions becoming unhinged.

Ignoring them as best he could for now, Steffen said, “Zoke, there’s something we’ve been forgetting to tell you.”

“What?” Zoke finally held his hands still.

“We don’t shake hands like that,” Steffen replied. “We do this.” He took the Krepp’s scaly hand careful to avoid his sharp claws, and guided it into his for a handshake.

Touching seemed to make Zoke uncomfortable, for he pulled his hand away quickly.

“But if that’s how you shake hands, then what does this mean?” Zoke began to shake them as he had before.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Steffen explained. “It was a misunderstanding that we found funny.”

Zoke quickly stopped, his mouth flat. “I’m being teased?”

Steffen looked to Effie and Reela for help.

“Yes,” Effie answered to Steffen’s surprise. “And it was his idea not to tell you.” She pointed at Steffen accusingly.

“It was not!” Steffen made sure to yell quickly, fear running hot through his body as he stepped away from Zoke’s vicious yellow eyes.

“Effie…” Reela giggled out her name.

“I’m joking, Zoke.” Effie hopped over to him, emphatically reaching her hand out for a handshake. Steffen couldn’t help but notice that she looked so small then, standing in front of the thick-chested Krepp.

It wasn’t just that Effie was short, but she was thin as well. This was easy for Steffen to forget. The little mage exuded quite the presence.

“We all tease each other sometimes,” Effie said. “Not to offend one another, just for fun, and sometimes as a sign of affection. It’s how we welcome people—um, Krepps as well, I guess. Welcome, Zoke. Now shake my hand properly.”

Zoke nodded to show he understood, taking Effie’s hand with a violent shake.

“Too hard!” Effie complained, pulling back her hand and rubbing it.

Zoke seemed frustrated, his eyes narrowing. “I don’t understand the point of this!”

“I don’t know how to explain it,” Effie said, looking to Reela behind her.

Reela approached. “Here, maybe some psyche will help.” She extended her hand.

But Zoke wouldn’t reach for it. His face twisted and he shied away as if her touch would burn him. “I don’t want psyche used on me.”

Reela rolled her eyes but maintained a smile. “Stop being a coward.”

Zoke grumbled, stepping forward with his chest out.

So it’s as easy as that. Steffen made a mental note to insult the Krepp’s pride the next time he

needed him to do something. *Reela is always quick to understand people...and Krepps too, apparently.*

~~They took each other's hands. With their fingers clasped around one another's palms, neither of them moved. Zoke was short for a Krepp, about Steffen's height. So Reela was nearly as tall as Zoke was.~~

She looked deeply into his eyes. Steffen had seen this expression enough to know that she was using his psyche.

Soon their hands were maneuvering up and down in a calm shake.

There was something eerie about it to Steffen, as if he were watching someone sleepwalking. A Human was quiet, and Zoke wore an expression Steffen hadn't seen before—complete indifference—although while being touched by a Human, something that usually would've prompted a stream of saliva.

As soon as Reela let go of the Krepp's hand, Gabby stepped toward Zoke with a wide grin.

"Me next."

Zoke's eyes didn't seem to want to shift to her as they began shaking hands, remaining on Reela instead for a breath. Then life came back into his face, his scowl returning as he reluctantly shook Gabby's hand.

"Now for another custom. Sit with us and have a drink," Effie told Zoke, gesturing toward the table where a jug of sakal and some glasses awaited. "Reela has some surprising news to share."

Gabby stomped her foot. "First I want to say something!"

She waited for everyone's eyes to be on her before continuing.

"When all of you left with Terren weeks ago, no one wrote to me." Approaching Steffen, she nearly had her folded arms pressed against his belt when she stopped. "You especially should've told me you were leaving for so long!"

Being about Effie's height, Gabby was more than a whole head shorter than Steffen. Straining her neck to meet his eyes, she jabbed him in the chest with her finger. "I came to visit when I didn't hear from anyone," she said, her voice softening. "Do you know how scary it was to find the house empty with no idea as to what happened or even who to ask?"

"We had to leave quickly," Effie tried to explain. "We didn't have time to write a letter."

Gabby ignored her, not taking her eyes off Steffen. "I finally found a teacher who knew you left with Terren, though she wasn't sure when you were coming back. I visited every other day! A four-mile walk from Oakshen, eight miles both ways! I never knew when you would come—"

Steffen interrupted Gabby by leaning down and pressing his lips against hers, figuring it was the most logical way of expressing everything he was feeling—sorrow for not being able to tell her he had left, remorse for not knowing that he'd felt this way about her until now.

It crossed his mind that a kiss wasn't supposed to be logical. But the act was other things as well as too many things for him to figure out in that moment.

As their lips met, she froze, and then her arms came around his neck and her lips danced, taking his whole mouth into rhythm with hers.

"Before you make this any more uncomfortable for us," Effie said plainly, "there's still something you all need to know about Reela."

Gabby held Steffen's cheek as they parted, showing him a warm smile. Even being wet from the rain, his stomach and chest felt hot.

Reela cleared her throat to get their attention. When they turned, Steffen found himself gasping in unison with Gabby.

"Bastial stars, your ears!" he yelled.

Reela had unclipped one already, reaching in to unclip the other from her hair. They were pointed at the top...like Elf ears, but not as pronounced. And they were smaller, close to the size of Human ears.

Steffen didn't understand what he was looking at. "How did your ears change like that?" He w

rudely pointing and slowly lowered his arm when he realized he was doing it.

“Change?” Reela tilted her head. “They’ve always been like this. You just haven’t seen them.”

That’s when Steffen knew this was some sort of joke. He laughed. “That’s funny. You tricked me. He came closer to inspect them. “They look so real. How’d you do that?”

Gabby seemed to understand now, laughing as well. “Oh, I get it. But Steffen’s right. They do look real.”

Reela folded her arms, sharing what seemed to be an annoyed look with Effie. “They’re real. I’m half Elf. Vithos was my half brother.”

“Reela, stop making jokes,” Steffen grunted out, starting to wonder why she and Effie were putting such an effort into this. It wasn’t even funny, especially now that she’d brought Vithos into it.

“It’s true,” Zoke added. “She shared an Elven father with Vithos.”

“He knew?” Effie blurted in anger.

Suddenly the truth hit Steffen like a punch to the gut. His whole body stiffened, and he put his hand on his head as he felt himself teetering.

“What...I...my Bastial stars...Reela, why’d you keep this from us?” Steffen asked.

Gabby turned to him. “Wait, they’re serious?”

Reela and Effie nodded.

Then all was silent except the sound of Gabby sucking in air dramatically.

While the storm raged outside, they spent the next few hours drinking sakal and listening to Reela share the history of her Elven half brothers.

“Rek and Vithos were separated when they were two years old,” she explained. “They’d lived in Merejic with the Elves. But an army of Krepps led by two monstrous Slugari attacked. My father was the Elven leader. During the assault, it was clear they were going to lose, so my father tied his young sons, Rek and Vithos, to the backs of wolves trained from years of psyche to run south to Kyrro if such an assault were to happen. But the one carrying Vithos was killed before it could escape, and he was taken.”

Effie interrupted, “So you do know who your father is?”

Reela nodded apologetically. “I’ve known since I was old enough to understand. That’s how I know all of this. He managed to survive and came to Kyrro searching for Rek. Eventually he met my mother and told her this story. I’d never met him, that part is true. But it’s because he died, not because my mother doesn’t know who he is.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Effie said.

“It’s fine,” Reela answered. “I never knew him. Anyway, he didn’t know my mother was pregnant with me when he left Kyrro to rescue Vithos from the Krepps. With my mother’s money, he hired a woman skilled in the art of stealth to go with him. They were trapped by the Krepps and my father was killed by the Slugari leaders—Doe and Haemon are their names.” Reela’s gaze became locked to the table. “I’m sure we’ll meet them at some point during this war. Rek says their magic is the strongest in the world, though he doesn’t know how. Neither does he know why they’re so large when every other Slugari stands no taller than our waists.”

“How big are they?” Effie asked.

Zoke answered. “Taller than me and perhaps ten feet long.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Steffen realized aloud. “They were your leaders when you were with the Krepps.”

“Their size and power comes from years of eating something they call eppil plants,” Zoke said.

“That’s what Vithos told me.”

As interested as Steffen was in the story, he kept finding his focus being drawn to Gabby. She was seated next to him with her hand in his. Her thumb sensuously slid along the top of his, making the

hairs on his arm stand on end.

“Was this woman who went with your father killed, too?” Effie asked.

“No,” Reela said. “She made it back and told my mother what happened. Besides how sorry she was, I didn’t know anything else about her except her name...” Reela’s mouth dropped open as memory struck her. “My Bastial stars...I haven’t thought about it in years. I think her name was Quessa—” Reela stopped herself in the middle of mouthing the last name. “Wait, could it really be that?”

“Why does that matter?” Effie asked, placing her hand on Reela’s arm.

“It’s her last name that matters,” Reela said. “I just wanted to be sure before I said it. And now I am. Her name was Quessa Polken.”

“Like Cleve Polken?” Steffen slipped his hand from Gabby’s to avoid distraction. “She’s related to Cleve?”

“She must be,” Reela said. “I wonder if he knows what happened to her.”

“What do you mean?” Steffen asked.

Reela shook her head. “My mother doesn’t know what happened to her after she came back from the Krepp encampment to deliver the news of my father’s death. My mother was worried that Quessa went back at a later point to try to retrieve Vithos and was killed. She told me that Quessa was distraught about failing at her task—something she’d apparently never done before.” Reela sighed. “I miss Cleve and Vithos...and Rek as well.”

Effie stood and came behind her to squeeze Reela’s shoulders, nestling her head against her friend’s cheek. When it was done, Effie leaned down for a closer look at Reela’s ears.

“They’re so pretty, Reela.”

She looked away with a somewhat embarrassed smile. “Thank you. I’ve wanted to let them show my whole life. And now the thought of keeping them hidden with both my brothers gone is too painful to endure.”

Effie said, “I still don’t completely understand why you had to keep your ears hidden.”

“King Welson exiled Rek because his power with psyche was too strong and he’d learned some of the King’s secrets,” Reela said. “If he’d found out I was related to Rek, he most likely would’ve exiled me as well. But I’ve proven my allegiance to Kyrro by now, I’m sure.”

A silence followed. Being unable to picture Rek, for Steffen had never met him, his thoughts turned to Vithos instead. It was easy to imagine the smile usually brightening the Elf’s face.

“Does this mean I can touch your shiny hair now?” Effie’s tone was playfully excited.

Reela let out a flattered giggle. “As much as you’d like, Eff.”

Zoke stood. “I’m very tired,” he said bluntly.

If it were anyone else, Steffen would’ve thought it was rude. But he’d learned to accept the Krepp differences without judgment.

“That’s fine, Zoke,” Reela answered for everyone. “Until tomorrow.”

Zoke just stood there, glancing at them uncomfortably. “I’m not sure where to rest,” he said, keeping his eyes lowered as if expecting them to point to the floor beneath the black claws on his feet.

“Cleve’s room, across from Steffen’s.” Reela stood and waved him over. “I’ll show you.”

Gabby stood as well. “I think I’m ready for bed, too.”

“You’re sleeping with me, you know,” Effie said.

Steffen felt his heart sink, noticing Gabby’s shoulders had drooped as well.

“I was going to stay with Steffen,” she said meekly.

Effie folded her arms in a motherly posture. “Don’t you think it’s a little too soon for that?”

Steffen’s eyes fell to the table in embarrassment. *Is this conversation really happening?*

His suspicion unfortunately was confirmed when Gabby replied, “We’ve known each other on

whole lives. No, it's not too soon."

Suddenly he didn't care anymore whether she was sleeping in his bed. "It's alright, Gabby," he blurted. "Stay with Effie tonight."

Gabby's head spun to him, hurt evident in her eyes.

She's taking this to mean I don't want her in my bed at all, he realized. His arms swung around to squeeze her to him.

"I just mean it's better not to argue with Effie," he whispered. "I'm not going anywhere. Don't worry."

A surge of pain ran through his jaw before his mind could grasp that she'd head-butted him.

"Bastial hell!" Gabby yelled, holding the top of her head.

Steffen was nursing his chin. "What was that?" he asked.

"I was trying to be romantic." Gabby was grimacing as she rubbed her head. "Like the way you kissed me so suddenly. I wanted to do the same. Bastial hell, that hurt! You moved your head above mine right as I swung my head upward!" Her tone was accusatory.

A dull ache spread through his lower jaw. "That was all your fault," he accused, expecting her to agree.

"It was somewhat your fault as well," she argued back. Her other hand came up to her head as she rubbed it with both hands now.

"Not in the least!"

"I see you two are going to be quite the couple," Effie said sarcastically.

Chapter 5:

EFFIE

Effie found it interesting how familiar it was to share a bed with her sister, even though everything had changed since they'd last done so. Gabby had slept in her bed the first night Effie'd moved into campus housing. But Effie had battled other people and Krepps since then. She'd also come to discover that the feeling of being unable to breathe came from anxiety and not a physical malady, making her relax somewhat now that she knew she wouldn't suffocate during the attacks.

Unfortunately, this didn't mean she was cured. All the same physical symptoms were there. In fact, as Gabby squirmed to get comfortable beside her, Effie's chest was tightening.

Recently, this breathlessness made her feel like her lungs were frozen. The air had grown colder with the changing season, so when she breathed hard, searching for the satisfaction of a deep breath, there was an icy burn that filled her chest instead of relief.

Too much was on her mind—she knew this was the reason, her biggest worry being whether Reela would get over losing Vithos.

Reela finally seemed herself again tonight, but that doesn't mean she'll be the same in the morning.

"Why aren't your eyes closed?" Gabby asked. "Aren't you tired?"

Why does she care?

Then Effie realized what it was.

She sat up to give her sister a glare. She knew the moonlight coming in through the window was barely enough to illuminate her face.

"Stop waiting for me to fall asleep," Effie ordered. "You're not sneaking out of here to visit Steffen."

"That's not why I asked," Gabby lied, flipping to face the other way.

In the morning, Gabby asked if she could use the bathhouse before she left. Effie didn't see the harm. There were no showers in Oakshen, where her family was from. Access to the aqueducts was one of the treats of living in the Academy.

"Yes, but you need to go home right after because Father will be worried," Effie said. *And the last thing Steffen needs is you sticking around and distracting him.*

Gabby reluctantly agreed with a grunt that Effie was quite familiar with by now.

Effie had taken a shower yesterday when she got back from the long trip home from the Slugan colony. And now, not even the threat of war could ruin her appetite for a hot meal from the dining hall. Her body was overdue for one.

Effie gave her sister her towel and left the room. Gabby followed, holding the towel out in front of her to inspect it.

"Thanks," she muttered. "It actually looks clean—" She interrupted herself to scream. Zoke had startled her, ending up in the hallway just in front of Gabby when she'd lowered the towel.

Like Effie, her younger sister had a bad habit of becoming furious when startled. She lashed out at the Krepp, pounding her fist into his chest and cursing him.

A scowl formed on Zoke's face, and he shoved her hard. Gabby bounced off the wall, falling to her knees, tears immediately moistening her eyes. She jumped up and hid behind Effie like a scared puppy.

For a frightful moment, Effie couldn't tell if Zoke had intentions of coming after Gabby. He stared at her, his yellow eyes menacing.

Steffen and Reela bolted out of their rooms.

"What was that?" Steffen asked.

Effie wasn't sure how to explain it, but something needed to be said. "Zoke startled Gabby, so she hit him. Then he shoved her into the wall."

"Zoke!" Reela scolded. "Apologize to Gabby."

"Why does everything require an apology?" Zoke muttered, a mix between frustration and confusion making his mouth twist.

"Not everything," Reela explained. "But many things, so you'd better get used to it."

Effie gulped as she watched her friend point at the Krepp in a chastising manner. Zoke easily could draw the knife on his belt. Effie even expected it to happen. *Why else would he come into the hall equipped with it unless he meant to use it?*

But to her surprise, Zoke grumbled, "Sorry."

Gabby came around Effie. "I'm sorry, too."

Zoke's entire face twisted to match his mouth. "Why are you also apologizing? I don't understand."

"Because I'm sorry as well, just like you," Gabby said.

Zoke shook his head and muttered something in Kreppen, turning his back on them to walk to the front of the house where his dirty bag rested against a table. He squatted down and stuffed stale bread into his mouth, his sharp teeth crunching into it loudly. The sound reminded Effie of a dog chewing on a bone.

"Don't eat that," Steffen said. "It's old. Get some fresh food from the dining hall."

The Krepp continued chewing loudly, crumbs spewing as he spoke. "But I have nothing to trade."

Effie sighed. She knew it was going to take some effort to get used to Zoke being in the school, but she didn't imagine it would be this hard.

"You don't need to trade anything," she said. "Come with me and I'll explain everything as we walk there."

"There will be food for me?" Zoke was skeptical.

"Yes." Effie started toward the door, but Zoke didn't budge.

From down the hall, Reela said, "I'm going back to bed. It's still early."

"I am as well," Steffen added. "I haven't slept in a bed in too long."

Effie couldn't help but notice her sister following Steffen into his room, but she was too hungry and busy with Zoke to worry about it.

"Are you coming?" Effie tried to wave the Krepp forward.

"Are you certain they'll feed me?" Zoke clearly didn't believe her. "Even though I have nothing to offer?"

"You fight for us now. That means you eat with us as well. It's a long walk and I'm starving." She could hear herself getting frustrated with him. "Come on!" It felt like she was trying to get a stubborn dog to leave a meal behind.

Zoke pocketed the remaining bread and followed Effie out the door.

On the way there, it immediately became apparent that everyone who saw Zoke was going to stare. It made Effie remember something she'd been meaning to tell him.

"Make sure you don't spit anymore."

He looked at her as if he was about to spit.

Effie took one step away from him and continued. "I know you don't want to hear this, but you should also apologize to that warrior you spat on in Redfield stadium. You're going to be in his group."

“Didn’t you hear what he said about us?” Zoke was dumbfounded. “He made it seem like I could’ve saved Vithos.” Zoke made the motion to spit but stopped himself, swallowing it instead and making an ugly face. “I don’t like it here,” he muttered.

“I miss him too,” Effie said softly.

Zoke let down his head and nodded.

I miss Cleve as well, Effie thought, wondering what he might be doing in Goldram at that very moment.

They didn’t speak again until they reached the dining hall.

Zoke stopped in the doorway, looked around the vast dining quarters with wide eyes, and murmured, “It’s so big.”

Effie glanced around, trying to imagine what the room looked like from Zoke’s point of view. Long rectangular tables with a bench on either side were crowded by students. Teachers were eating as well, though they generally kept to their own tables. Zoke had told Effie of the market at his old encampment where thousands of Krepps gathered to trade with one another. *It must be strange to see so many Humans fed without trading anything in return.*

She spotted Marie Fyremore sitting at a full table of staff. Marie caught her gaze and waved. Effie smiled and waved back. She’d missed the old woman more than she’d known.

“Yes, it’s big,” Effie agreed with Zoke, heading toward the short queue of students waiting for the food.

She grabbed two plates from the pile, handing one to Zoke. She got two forks and two knives as well but decided to wait before giving Zoke his silverware. The Krepp had never used such utensils before.

Another explanation, she realized. *I wonder how many I’ll have to give during the course of this meal.*

The students in line in front of them didn’t seem to notice that a Krepp was behind them, for sure they would’ve turned and stared. Effie was thankful Zoke was remaining quiet. The sound of his deep voice was sure to identify his race to anyone within earshot. And then there was his accent—like his words were being ground together in his stomach before being belched through his throat. Still, it was five times better than Vithos’ accent.

She let out a sigh as she felt sorrow building. *And he was learning common tongue so fast, but for what? Just to be killed?* It was just too tragic.

Eggs and potatoes were being served for breakfast. The woman behind the counter kept her eyes lowered when she filled Zoke’s plate, soon noticing the claws on his hand. Then her gaze jumped to his face and a gasp escaped from her lips as she took a step back.

Zoke ignored it, feigning disinterest in her and the many Humans who were staring now.

“Let’s find a table,” Effie said, feeling uncomfortable. It reminded her of dreams she’d had of walking through the campus completely naked, searching for her clothes as everyone gawked.

“What do you mean, ‘find’?” Zoke asked. “There are tables everywhere.”

“It’s just an expression. It means let’s look for a good place to sit.”

“What makes a place good?”

Somewhere with as few people as possible. But Effie found a spot before she figured out how she wanted to answer him. “Over here,” she said.

There were four students clustered around one end of the table, so Effie sat on the other end. When Zoke put down his plate and sat in front of her, Effie realized he’d already been eating on the way, using his claws to scoop the runny eggs into his mouth. The other students at the table got up to move, not bothering to hide their disgust as they glared at Zoke.

But the Krepp didn’t seem to notice. His head hovered over his plate as he ripped open the potato

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