

Small Tale of a Lost Owl

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Chapter 1

Flight

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The howl of the wind was all the short girl heard, the cloudless sky enveloping her in nearly all directions. The ocean of green sea, illuminated by moon and starlight, stretched beneath her as far as her eye could see, up to the point until the sea itself was swallowed up by the horizon. A contradiction to her, as if the world only existed around where she is present, all things go away as soon as she goes far enough. She knew the land was curved and the illusion of the horizon swallowing up the ground was one only of her experience, but still, it was a contradiction to her.

Her wings ached, her clothes clung tightly to her body as to, among other things, prevent any undue drag on her frame as she flew, and she had flown for hours. Her stomach rumbled and occasionally when she blinked she would open her eyes to the ground being closer to her than it was a second ago, her ability to maintain the flight had already reached its limit long ago. Landing, if her judgement was right, would by this point be safe, the border that she had crossed had been passed perhaps two hours ago. While not deep into the nation of Esivan she was nonetheless inside, not too close the border as to rise terrible suspicion, not too deep as to be too close to the noble magicians.

The clothes she wore resembled that of the nobles, specifically those who used magic rather than the warriors, sleek cloth and silk and deeply rich in color. At a glance a man could mistake her as one, even up close a fool would still not be privy to her disguise. No, she did not have an emblem signifying her family, she was not a noble but neither did she relegate herself to the clothes of a hedge mage, that of baggy and loose fitting robes, although their names were respected. Not among nobles, though.

For a moment the girl's world disappeared, in less than a moment it revealed itself once again. The land covered by forest, nearly entirely flat if not for the waves and undulations of the trees and their leaves that grew on

it, this time the girl decided that each moment she spent gliding in the sky is a moment closer to her breaking her own neck by an accidental fall. She tilted her wings slightly downward and accepted the pull of gravity, and she slowly made her way down.

The trees weren't too dense, neither were they sparse, so she gave careful attention to choosing a spot to land. Finding a tiny clearing, barely large enough to accept her entry, and opening her eyes wide as to least mimic the state of alertness and of being awake, positioned her body so to glide through the wind while slowing down her descent. Her wings opened themselves wide, their span from outer-most feather to outer-most, was half times longer than the rest of her body, and although her size is small anyone that stood below her would certainly for a moment feel fear.

Nearly without a sound she landed, her feet heavy and thudding more than she would've preferred. Not for fear of being heard, but because the sound didn't befit her status as an owl.

Her talons, sharp and edged, were planted firmly on the ground now, her height crouched, her face close to her knees, she gave a second to focus all her of her mind on hearing the sounds of the forest. Breathing, light tapping, the sound of the wind, all these things were naked to her. None were unfamiliar, she had heard them all before, but not a single one belonged to a man. With the knowledge of her being alone she stood up, revealing her full, unimpressive height. Her brown, speckled with black feathers, false-horns of feather resting on top of her scalp, her skin pale and her eyes enchanting in their iridescent orange. For arms she had wings, upon the top of them where hands would be four talon like fingers, no cloth was upon them as it would be too much trouble to fasten to place.

Her clothes was of brown and black, within them hid many pockets, and despite how she looked to have had nothing she held a great quantity of items on her person. A tight collar of black hugged her neck, the continuation of her doublet, nearly dyed completely brown if not for the frills of black that adorn their edges, mainly upon the top of the collar and some on her shoulders. A hose of solid black that terminated just after her knees, as they only covered the skin, and passed the knee it was scaled and resembling that of a bird's own feet.

The night was still young. Although the moon had passed her zenith it was not yet at the point where the common laborers would be at work, and armed with the knowledge of some locations of tiny outskirts villages the owl walked with purpose, she knew her precise location, the cardinal directions, and most importantly, completely unable to keep her eyes open. It wasn't for the villages she walked, it was to find a nice hole for her to sleep in, as despite the fire in her heart that demanded her to continue, her flesh was

unwilling to obey. She trotted, found not a hole but a robust oak tree to climb and sleep on, and after determining she could not climb it, decided to give up and rest under the cover of its canopy.

For a second she listened to the songs of the crickets, vividly felt the waves of air that carried their melody, and just as quickly closed her eyes only to open them again. In front of her wasn't the sight of grass and dirt, what little grew under the shade of the great tree, but her own knife that she had cleverly hid away within a pocket behind her back, and the speckled eyes of a girl similar in size to herself. She stared, looked at the knife, looked around to see if anyone else was present, dared not to breath as she spoke.

"A strange set of circumstance I've been awoken to, perhaps not unjustified given the nature of our meeting." The speckled eyes didn't blink, the face they were set on didn't twitch, but behind a flicker of some dark object swayed behind her. Her head was adorned two round ears, dark brown in color similar to her hair, the owl knew the features were that of a mouse girl. The owl gave a nervous smile, intentional in its every movement, and kept her eye in line with that of the mouse's. They shared a moment of staring.

"A dangerous circumstance, that's for sure. I'll be quick, I don't see the sign of the covenant on you, neither have I seen your face before. So, you are either an outsider heila, a lost resident, but certainly a fool." The mouse girl took half a step back and lowered the knife, upturned her nose and continued to speak, "hopefully not a big enough idiot to run away. If you have an identification then show me it, if not then I must take you to the guardians. Do not test me."

The owl nodded and moved her line of sight towards the pocket she hid the tiny emblem that showed her status as one of the accepted, of belonging to the covenant of this foreign land. Without it this entire flight would've been a near suicide. She twitched, but before she could move the mouse opened her mouth, "too fast. Slow down." So she nodded, and slowly slid her winged hand closer to the inside of her thigh. Her clothes were padded, in areas where she kept items not at all padded, it gave the image of her being slightly thicker than she truly was and allowed her to hide things within them without rousing suspicion. One of those pockets, close to her groin, was kept the covenant.

Giving a soft nervous chuckle the owl dropped her smile and retrieved the small circular coin and displayed it between two fingers, a face showing itself to the mouse girl. "It's precious, a more delicate place to hide it is better than somewhere more obvious. The knife you hold, not as valuable." She extended her hand slowly towards the mouse girl as to give it to her, but the mouse didn't move.

"Drop it." A twitch from the Owl's eye, but nonetheless she complied.

She gave it a light toss so that it would land closer to the girl, and then slowly lowered her hand. Only then did the mouse move, bending her knees and retrieving the coin with her free hand. She straightened herself out and continued to stare at the owl, clutching the coin within her palm. "An owl from the Vakarian Province? You'd be roughly... fifteen years old, mana user, first generation resident. Kuiva." The mouse tossed the coin back to the owl and with a deft catch and a return of it to the pocket, the owl responded.

"As sure as the sun rising in the morning over the horizon, and as welcome as a pint of ale to a table. My identity known, and although my heart bottomless in her depth, and my wrath quick to soften, I would still ask that you give back Unelma, my blade of unforgotten dreams." The owl stayed in her place, releasing a quick sigh of relief over her proof being accepted. The mouse girl, respectively, stayed within her own spot, still looking down on the owl, although her nose not as upturned. She lifted an eyebrow.

"It's a magical item, at a moment I can feel it. I won't question its origins, which are unfamiliar to me through the sensation of the manic script alone, but I have to ask that you'd let me keep it for a while longer. For my own safety, I mean. I believe in your residence but, you're alone. Without a master, without a man, sleeping under a tree, in the middle of the forest. You, a heila. Suspicion is natural, right?" The mouse didn't wait for an answer as she hid it within a pouch tied to her belt, and extended a hand to the owl. The owl in turn furrowed her brows but gave her hand, and she felt a pull as she was brought up off the ground and into a standing position.

Her hand released she patted away the dirt off of her butt and once again looked around, her face turning neutral, and spoke, "I'll play game, although slighted by your insistence on suspicion. And if it'd pleasing to your will, entertain me, may I ask your name?"

The mouse sighed through her nose and beckoned Kuiva to follow her, heading towards an unknown direction that Kuiva had no recollection of any settlement existing in. "Pepper, named after my speckled eyes. The name Speckled was taken already by someone else, you see."

"A proper name nonetheless, it's very nice to meet you, Pepper. My name you've already gathered, the coin that held it displaying more than what my title betrays, but proper first meetings should start with proper introductions." Pepper looked straight ahead as Kuiva talked, the owl hastening her groggy steps to keep in pace with the mouse, "I'm Kuiva, descendant of the Eternal Moonlight, apprentice magician within a selection of differing, but intimately related schools. None of it is particularly war orientated, I would not roam so free if it were otherwise."

"Hmm. Sounds nice, on a side note mine is mainly within illusion," Pepper monotoned, a slight glance given towards the direction of the owl.

Kuiva made a small snap of her spine, correcting any imperfections within her posture, rapid fear showed in her face but as quickly as it appeared she softened and raised her wings, a soft smile appearing on her face.

"Your enlightening words is engraved into my forehead, Pepper. Please be reassured, I am submissive to your will, enchanted or not." Pepper glanced once again, her tail giving a slight sway, like the slithering of a snake it waved from the base to the tip and as if none such event happened, they remained steady in their gaits. Silence took them, Kuiva, looking at any direction other than Pepper as she took deep but silent breaths.

"You say you are of, what, the Eternal Moonlight tribe? I've not seen your kind before. Where do you come from?" Pepper gave only slight intonations to her voice, not missed by Kuiva who quickly perked up and returned her smile, before turning her gaze down and fiddling with her talon fingers.

"Yes," Kuiva paused, "although our members are few. One, to be precise, only me. I was picked up within the northern mountains and kept, a novelty I was taken, a novelty I remain, the magic of my race boundless in its intricacy and too complex for mortal men to learn, and neither I gifted in its manipulation."

"Really? It's rare for a magus to adopt a heila, even out of curiosity, let alone a foreign one. You're very fortunate, consider yourself blessed."

"Fortune works in mysterious ways, I can only be glad that I yet live and can continue my odd journey through what means available to me." Kuiva said with a nod as she relaxed her posture and lowered her hands. "I have my complaints but it would not be right of me to speak them, and I am glad to have met you and not instead the taste of blade against my flesh while I slept. Would you bestow on to me knowledge of where we are headed?"

"An outpost of my own tribe. You've not told me why you're alone."

"All words relate to the circumstance, thin or thick the line of reason, strong or weak the connections they may be, from a single source they originate and from that source it'll end. If my knowledge of the circumstance of my plight would please you in knowing, to you then I will say them, this as it relates to me I know the full details of." Kuiva closed her eyes, as if trying to recollect memories she slowed her pace. "Small I may be, my history common, the story of why I'm here doesn't befit my status for it is very long, and although it may be impudent of me to ask for you to wait, it's been a long while since I've slept well or ate. Would it be acceptable to ask that we wait for my retelling after I've gotten something to eat?"

"Yes, I'd agree. But, Kuiva," Pepper stopped and looked at Kuiva, her face keeping its familiar neutrality. She let out a sigh, looked around, looked above at the sky and took note of the breaking of the dawn as the richly colored night gave way to soft blues of morning. She returned her gaze to

the owl, "Your knife is not the only thing I took. Your coin, the covenant, show it to me. Let me explain to you your circumstance."

The owl blinked, turned her head in wonder, and reached towards her inner thigh and deftly retracted the coin from it. She gulped and gave a smile and responded, "I-If there's something I'm missing, I, uh," Pepper extended her hand and without finishing her sentence the owl meekly gave the mouse the coin. Palming the small metal Pepper turned and beckoned once again for Kuiva to follow, neither speaking as they passed tree to tree.

Kuiva felt eternity as they walked together, thoughts running through her mind of what Pepper could've meant by her words. Too many things, all too scary, her control over her fidgeting and nervous ticks overflowing through her fingers as she played with them. She didn't dare to look over at the mouse, whose back seemed to grow bigger the longer the silence stayed.

"We're here. Come in, I'll introduce you to my friends, some food will be prepared and a place for you to sleep as well. My story will be short, and after I'd like to hear yours."

Kuiva lifted her down-turned eyes, the presence of people something she was already aware of as she heard them long before she could see them. To the side of her stood a log house, from the color of the wood not an old construction. It was simple and as she looked around there were four more like it, differing only in size and length. The land was mostly flat, a few slopes were present here and there between the buildings. A well, too, was there, close to the center but not perfectly there.

"T-Thank you, i-it's more than I d-deserve." Kuiva looked towards Pepper, who had already reached the entrance, and gave her a slight nod as she made her way inside. The door was open, and the interior near completely dark, but the presence of a candle was visible to her, so was that of various goods and bags laid across tables and the floor. She didn't need much light to see either way, so either night or day, light or not, she could make her way around without any disturbance.

"Please sit down and wait for me." Pepper's parting words as she closed the door, near complete darkness engulfing the owl as she sat down on a chair opposite to the door. Sturdily built but not made for any aesthetes eyes it was only a slight upgrade to the floor, and the table much the same as the chair was built for function rather than appearance, or comfort. Kuiva gathered her mind together and waited for Pepper's return, of what Pepper will say next, of how much she really knows about Kuiva, but most importantly cooling her nerves so that her stutter would leave her. Cool headed evaluation and analysis of the situation was essential to her now.

Roughly ten minutes had passed and Kuiva had gotten back a good amount of her resolve, her wings on the table, or rather the hand portion of

them were, her eyes closed and her mind still. She placed all of her attention on hearing for anything outside, but despite her intensely developed hearing she could hear nothing but the faintest whisper from far away, suddenly stopping as she heard the footsteps of several people. One sounded like it belonged to Pepper, another heavier, another lighter.

She opened her eyes just as they reached the door, and was greeted by the sight of three mouse eared girls. One taller, hair of jet black, one of brown belonging to Pepper, and one blonde. Pepper's clothes were similar to the blonde's, a brown tunic and tan pants, a belt with various pouches on it, the jet black one wore something like a gambeson of solid blue, towards the edges giving way to white as if she was wearing an undercoat beneath. She, like the others, wore pants, but hers were a dark brown instead.

Without a word all three entered the room, the black haired one sitting next to Kuiva, both of them occupying one side of the table. To the right sat the blonde haired one, and to the opposite of Kuiva with the door to her back sat Pepper. Everyone seated, Pepper began to speak, her elbows being placed on the table as she propped her chin up with the back of one hand, "Kuiva, the light colored one is Ash, the darker one Mars. They know your name, no need for introduction."

Kuiva nodded, "I'm grateful for the introduction, and apologize for making you spend precious time in coming to see me, especially so early in the morning." Kuiva lightly bowed her head, her wings on her lap.

"Mhm. Let's get straight to the heart of this," Pepper responded as she placed a coin on the table, embellished with a design of multiple four petaled flowers. Its color silver, barely an inch in diameter, the sign of the covenant and inscribed within it magical script that represented the heila it belonged to. Contained only rudimentary information of the owner, along with an image of her face, passed along through the coin and into the mind of whoever can read it. "Whose coin does this belong to?"

Kuiva looked around at the faces of the three mouses, her brows raised in confusion she answered, "of course, I can't know without touching it."

"Yes, if you were a magician. That is, if you knew magic. The coin you gave to me, who did it belong to?"

Kuiva paused, neutrality completely dying its ever corner. Seconds passed, Pepper tapped a finger on the table, her impatience over Kuiva's delay in answering manifesting itself, but Kuiva finally did respond. "Me."

"You'd expect that, right? You must know your weight well enough to know you were lighter, not just your knife was taken by me. Did you think I didn't check every square inch of your clothes? If it didn't disturb your sleep I would've checked much, uh, deeper, than you might've been comfortable with."

Her face still neutral, Kuiva shifted in her chair, her hand reaching towards the base of the chair, but she stopped herself and returned her hands to her lap. "I see."

"Yes. Again, whose coin did you have on you?"

Kuiva didn't blink, neither did she breath, not a part of her was moved, not a muscle was twitched, as she stared at Pepper. Neither removed their gaze, but Pepper would blink where Kuiva didn't. "I need your help." Kuiva broke the silence, her voice nearly cracking.

"Yes. To be clear, the coin you had was mine, I swapped your coin for my own, as a test to see if even the most basic identification was correct. Why would you lie about being a magician? If I, for example, were to get one forged I would make it as true to life as possible. Why? Why would you lie about that? Are you stupid?"

Kuiva blinked, and within a moment she shifted her position so that she was facing more towards Mars. She slowly lifted up her hands, Mars who was sitting next to her suddenly moving her own hands to her side, to the knife she had sheathed and on her belt. Once Kuiva's hands were chest level she met them, and retrieved a smooth round stick from somewhere in her feathers, thin and about as long as her finger. She lifted it and showed it to everyone in the room, to their confusion, and then they all watched as Kuiva brought her other hand if to take the stick from her fingers, blocking the view of the stick from the others for a moment, and grabbed the stick.

She opened up the grasping hand and revealed that the stick has disappeared. She looked across at each of the mouses faces, confusion was etched into Pepper's face but it took Mars a moment longer for her own confusion to deepen. Ash, by herself, only felt something was wrong, although she knew the stick was gone. Kuiva shifted her torso so that she was completely facing Mars, and locking her eyes with her she revealed the stick again, and then raised it up again so as to present the stick to her directly.

Wordlessly she continued, shifting her torso back to a neutral position on the chair as she made the stick vanish and reappear as if by magic. Three times she made it vanish, and by the third time she placed it on the table and rolled it towards Pepper. Pepper picked up the stick, inspected it, and then placed it down, and sat in thought for a couple of moments.

"Alright. I didn't see you manipulate magic, so then what's happening? Is this related to your bloodline?" Pepper looked at Kuiva, her face questioning, and her tone softening.

Kuiva sat in silence, not answering, her face never having revealed any emotion throughout her act. She opened her mouth, and then closed it. She blinked, looked down at her lap, and then lifted her face up once again at Pepper. "No. It's not magic, not in the sense that I'm casting unseen spells,

without any mana. You've said you will tell me my circumstance, and then I may tell my own perspective, then I will speak and abide by your word. Truthfully I can lie here, pretend it is a magic only I can use, as I am the last of my kind. No one can tell me otherwise. I know multitudes more of these kinds of tricks, and if this country's customs were different I would lie here and now. Fortune has looked down on me and given me only you. I mean no ill will, of course. May I tell?"

Pepper looked in astonishment, her face changing from confusion to deeper confusion, lighter tones and then deeper ones, until she looked to have given up thinking and nodded. "Sure, tell us."

"Thank you. Yeah, I'm not a resident of Esivan. I come from Ihm, the land to the west, although even there I am but a traveler. Yeah, as I said to you before I'm no longer with tribe, but not because of death was I made to endure solitude, my eyes instead determined my fate, my soul too damned me. We owls are blessed mages, our memories perfect and our minds astute, o-our bodies gifted in our ability to manipulate the unknown. Our souls, too, blessed with mana, although never as much as any other race. Within my kind there was passed on a legend, a foretelling of a child born with suns for eyes, the breath of g-great spirits filling her, a vessel made to know and understand all forms of the great art, of magic. She would render oceans dry, mountains would flatten themselves before her step, the earth would be bountiful to her will, rains she could call, famines she could bring.

"Her hair of brown, her horns of black, her stature short. I can recite to you word for word, image by image, movement by movement, as it was told to me, as it was told to my parents by their own, by every generation since the beginning of the legend. Our memories perfect. Y-Yeah, so I was born in this. My eye, glowing orange as if made up of suns. My hair, brown. My horns, black. My stature, well, a chick I was, we're all born small, but nonetheless there the legend was born. I had no mana. I can know no magic. Never before had an owl been born like I. So I was cast off.

"At the age of ten, not even for men would I be an adult, I was told to fend for myself. They gave me supplies, food, clothes, they pitied me and even recited to me every tome they knew, the eldest of the eldest teaching me personally how to manipulate what I can't even touch. They gave me a way to disguise myself, a charm to give me the appearance of a human, they told me, 'our flesh we had given you, our art you had been raised in, but we can not raise in you a perfect soul. Elsewhere, perhaps you will find something. We will not ask that you return to us.' So I went to Ihm, the closest country to my village. If my disguise would be broken, I would die upon my first meeting of men. You know, there's no heila there, they are hated there.

"I'm clever, I'll admit it. I deceive, that's my profession. I knew how to live without the help of men. I am not a god, nor a beast, I can not live without others, I can't bear being alone. I was scared, enraged, driven near mad by the solitude, and out of envy of the magic I was deprived of I began to devise my own. I showed you a taste of it here, simple vanishments they may be. Simple flicks of my finger, they really are. I won't recite to you the every step of my journey, although I certainly can, but how many years do you wish to sit here with me on this?"

"I made a living off of my deceptions, I entertained drunkards by playing the part of a wandering noble, although small and young. I was on a trip to perfect my magic, I would say, they would buy. In exchange for showing them some of elementary spells, not teaching them, would they give me food and perhaps coin in exchange? Magic wasn't well known to the common laborers, not like in Esivan, so of course they would give in exchange for mere displays. Years passed. My charm broke. Forced to make my way out, I made my way here. A lot of my wealth is gone now.

"I guess I don't know as much as I should about this nation, I know enough to pass by, I thought. That's my story. My life is in your hands, I beg that you see pity in me and help, please."

The owl, finished with her speech, looked at Pepper, Ash, and Mars, respectively in turn, and bowed her head. The three mouse girls in response looked at each other, as if trying to communicate with their eyes alone, before Pepper spoke up and spoke her mind. "I expected a sob story, we all have one, and to be frank none of your past history will change our opinion on how to handle you. Unfortunately the reality is we are under the constraints of what is practical, and there are purely practical reasons why we shouldn't try to help. Not that there's no avenues for helping you even within these restraints.

"You're tiny, and with what I know about birds very weak. That's a negative. You claim to know magical tomes, but can't actualize it. That's a steep positive. You claim to have perfect memory, and are clever too. Those two, of course positive. Can you substantiate on these claims?" Pepper formally listed off her reasonings and thinking, looking at Kuiva's bowed head as she spoke.

"As it pertains to my practical ability I'm assured of my usefulness, although I may not be strong of arms I have quite the endurance. As my flesh was built for flying, and the great energy it takes to maintain myself in flight for hours on end are something my body is easily capable of maintaining, provided I have the food necessary to refuel myself. Field work, foraging, hunting, I have some experience and knowledge on all these things. As it pertains to magic, and my memory, those are a bit harder to prove, but still

easy nonetheless.”

”Your physical ability isn’t needed here, although it’s helpful.” Pepper nodded, sighing as she leaned back on her chair and looked up at the ceiling of the log cabin. She stayed silent, occasionally frowning and unfrowning her brows as she thought out the problem of Kuiva’s presence. Before she could arrive at her conclusion Mars spoke up.

”Ho-” Coughing, she blocked her mouth with a hand, a bit of blush forming on her face as she cleared her throat, ”sorry. Uh, how’d you make that stick vanish without using magic?”

Kuiva looked over at Pepper and beckoned her to roll the stick over, Pepper obliging and flicked the stick over to the other side of the table. Kuiva patiently waited for the stick to make its way across, and once it was at reach she picked it up and moved her hands and her body closer to Mars, showing her each trick in the order that she did them. She showed her hands not only to Mars but everyone around the table, where she hid the stick when she made it vanish, and finally when she was done presenting gave the stick to Mars. All of this without saying a word, without a change in expression, her hands not twitching nor any sign of her betraying any anxiety.

Mars’ previously stoic but curious attitude gave way to astonishment and self-ridicule as she had watched Kuiva’s displays, but before she could be taught further by Kuiva, Pepper once again began to speak. ”Thanks for showing us the trick, Kuiva, but there’s still the matter of Kuiva proving herself not to be lying to us about her intellectual abilities. Mars, contain yourself.”

”Sorry,” Mars mumbled as she looked at and inspected the stick, glancing as Pepper and Kuiva as she gave sole attention to whatever magic could be hidden within the stick itself.

”Kuiva, let’s go with this. Let’s have you eat with us, we’ll give you a place to sleep, and in the process we’ll establish whether your words have validity or not. I don’t think you’re stupid enough to lie to us about this when you’re already in this deep.” Pepper once again sighed as she lifted herself off the chair, stretching her back and straightening out her arms in preparation for the work that laid ahead of her. ”Ash, come with me. Mars, get to know Kuiva if you’d like. Kuiva, breakfast will be prepared for you, wait at the table for us.”

”Alright,” Mars replied as she gave the stick back to Kuiva, who in turn nodded her assent. She retrieved the stick back and gave her up turned hand to Mars.

”I’ll teach you the tricks more fully. If you may indulge me, and if touching me is not displeasing, would you allow me to manipulate your hands? Verbal instructions can be hard to understand.” Kuiva nearly whispered the words,

her voice soft and without power. Mars gave a light smirk as she placed her hand on top of the bird's wing-hand thing.

"Why do you have to ask me like that? I'm not a noble, you won't get anything from me no matter how you butter me up." Mars replied with her own voice softened, the smirk still on her face as Kuiva moved the digits of her finger in order to replicate the tricks she had shown her. For a while the two stayed silent, Mars trying her best to memorize each trick and understanding the general thinking that each trick was based on.

"Birds tweet, dogs bark, mice squeak, owls hoot. I speak, in my language, in the manner I am use to. So do you, although we share a common tongue, although you a mouse and I an owl. To get to the point, I speak the way I do because it's in my nature to. Although, yes, within context I will speak different, as I do not want to displease you... I do not mean to condescend." Kuiva looked up with upturned eyes to Mars, shame showing herself through a slight blush.

"I don't take offense to explanations. You know, there's something about you I find endearing, and although I should take greater caution against you, I don't. Maybe it's your small size, or your big eyes, or how you present yourself with civility and politeness. I'll let you in on a secret, Kuiva, you're not in great danger. Pepper has a soft-heart, and as the designated leader of our little group she has the final say on how you're going to be treated. Be a good girl, follow the rules, and don't lie and she'll try to make sure you're kept safe, I'd wager." Mars spoke, removing her hands from Kuiva's own, the stick in her grasp as she played around with it in her fingers.

She flicked the stick from and out of view, mimicking the movements she was taught to an acceptable level of skill.

"How would she keep my safe, Mars?" Kuiva asked as she watched Mars manipulate the stick within her hand, correcting her when the stick was visible to an outsider's perspective. Mars learned the movements faster than Kuiva had expected, it was clear to her that the mouse had a solid background of experience in handling small objects in her hand.

Mars looked at Kuiva, naturally looking down on her as even while sitting the difference between their heights was obvious. She being the largest of the mice it wasn't an exaggeration to say she stood a head taller than the small bird, but her height wasn't abnormal for her kind. She stood only half a head taller than the rest, the height isn't too significant, but her height wasn't her only physical advantage. Although difficult to tell, underneath her gambeson was a well toned physique, lean muscle mostly as she couldn't afford to keep any fat on her.

Mars stopped her movement for a moment as she entered in thought, her eyes moving upwards towards the ceiling as if to mimick the actions of

Pepper's own contemplations, and once she had gathered all her thoughts together she gave a nod and looked back towards Kuiva. "There are three classes of heila within Esivan, the Trusted, the Accepted, and the Wanting. Pepper is one of the Trusted, I one of the Accepted, the rest of my kin here part of the Wanting. All of these classes belong to a greater Family, a collection of related or friendly heila. If a Family shows itself to be disreputable, unable to abide by the their agreement to the mages, then they're exterminated. They're all killed. Got all that?"

"Word for word, Mars, although I already know much of it. Please continue." Kuiva straightened out her back as she listened to Mars' explanation.

"A pledge towards a foreigner is rare, and normally a heila born in Esivan is by default given the class of the Wanting. Getting a foreigner acknowledged by the Esivan nobles requires one of the rank of the Accepted, at minimum. If the foreigner were to misbehave, the punishment of the crime will be extended to the Accepted as well, so not only does the greater family lose merit in the eyes of the magus, the accepted is held directly responsible for their actions. If one of the Trusted pledges for a foreigner, the story is slightly different. If a foreigner betrays the trust of the Trusted, the Trusted is punished, but not as severely. Perhaps she'll lose an ear or two, maybe a tail. Not her life, but the Family won't inherit her guilt. Understand what I'm getting at?"

"I think so. Is it possible that Pepper would be magnanimous enough to pledge for me?" Kuiva tightened her little fists, only serving to hide them within her feathers, as her eyes glowed as if her hope directly fueled the fire of her eyes.

Mars gave a sardonic smile, shrugged and went back to playing with the stick, responding, "depends on her. Butter up to her, not me, the pledge system isn't just used for taking in lost heila. Each one are given a certain amount by right of birth, as some trust needs to be established before a relationship between an individual heila and the magus can truly blossom. Save up enough, by doing things requested or by being acknowledged through other means, and they'll grant you rewards. That's all I'll say."

"I'm delighted that you've decided to impart your wisdom on me, Mars, I thank you sincerely. I hope your forethought will one day bear fruit."

"Don't mention it. And thank you, I hope so, too." Mars smiled as she looked at the stick, held between her index finger and thumb she inspected it as if it were a crystal.

"May I ask you about your Family?"

"Sure."

"Thank you. Are there particular names Families call each other by? Is there a hierarchy even between Families?" Kuiva leaned back on her chair as she asked, her voice picking up some strength as she spoke.

"Asphodel is what we go by. It's a flower, one chosen by our founding mother to remind us of the end that desires can meet. Hierarchies exist, but they're not formalized, and are prone to changing. Generally the more honor and merit you have the more respected you are, but pure functionality is also respected. Not that those two things are distinct."

"Esivan likes flowers, I see. Or is this just a coincidence within your family? And are families founded by founding mothers, as in she is your common ancestor?" Kuiva's eyes gave a glimmer of a sparkle, almost lighting up the room with her eyes alone.

"It's not required but flowers are normally picked up for Family names. And no, a founding mother isn't a common ancestor. When a Family gets too large, typically to around the range of housing a thousand heila, they're broken apart into groups of fifty or a hundred, sometimes less. Those with the greatest honor, rather than the most merit, are chosen to lead each division. Although yes, her blood does run in many of our own, mine as well. Might not show given my dark hair and eyes, Ash's is more typical of what our Family looks like."

"How can you be certain of that? It's not like we heila interbreed between ourselves, we're only female to begin with. How many generations has your Family lasted?"

"Four generations. Do you not know? The Trusted are overwhelmingly the ones who pass on their blood, the rest of us do not. To compensate, they have plenty of children, us mice especially being easily capable of making up for those who don't breed. From the fifty only five were among the Trusted, so we all trace back our lineage to either one or three of them. It's pretty easy to keep track of our genealogies, that magus do it for us more or less."

"Fascinating. Hypothetically, how would Families treat those who don't share their own blood?" Kuiva squirmed slightly, the question popping up in her mind suddenly. The reality of the situation was slowly seeping through her.

"Families have no regulations on how they govern themselves internally, only that we abide by the covenant. Accepting in members from different Families isn't common, but neither is it rare. In your case, given that you're an entirely different kind of heila, you'd be the first in our history. You'll have to figure things out yourself." Mars lowered the stick, her long inspection coming to an end. She looked over at Kuiva and gave it back to her. "Satisfied your curiosity? Thank you for teaching me your tricks. I hope the information I gave you was appropriate compensation."

Small shock flickered in Kuiva's eyes, she shaking her head as she put away the small stick into her wing, "Yes! Yes, I mean, yes, uh, thank you for indulging me. I feel I've asked questions too personal to justify themselves

within a first meeting. Forgive my impoliteness.”

Mars nodded and gave a smile, changing the conversation to something more light hearted as they both bid their time. As Kuiva learned throughout the small talk, that the small hamlet or outpost she was taken to was one for hunting, and the log cabin they currently resided in used to store various goods and necessities. One cabin was for sleeping in, and held multiple beds including an extra for any visitors, and another for a kitchen. The buildings weren't originally made for hunters, as otherwise it would've been two cabins instead four. Mars didn't mention its original purpose.

As they spoke the door to their cabin was opened, a new face revealing itself behind it. A light haired freckled girl, her hair similar to Ash's and her eyes a soft brown, and upon seeing both Mars and the owl within the building she spoke. "Food's done. Come."

Mars wordlessly got up and followed after the freckled girl, Kuiva waited a moment and did the same. Leaving the cabin they walked across the treeless area between buildings and arrived to one with a smoking chimney, the door closed but the fragrance of food wafting from it. It didn't smell particularly fragrant, rather it smelled more like fried fats than it did of herbs and spices, but it was still much more that Kuiva had expected. A piece of bread would've been enough for her, although she definitely did need more.

They all without speaking entered the building, the sight of a fire, next to it cast iron pans and similarly made cooking utensils. Pepper was sitting on a chair next to a table, a ceramic plate with meat, from the smell from some sort of pig, and a pile of flat white flakes. Kuiva hasn't encountered this kind of food before, if it is food, but from her memory she could recall an Esivan style tuber magically engineered for its hardness and robust nutritional value. No one outside of Esivan knows how to cultivate it.

The table was long, taking up one side of the wall to the entrance way, although the cabin itself wasn't large so it wasn't of a great size. Six chairs were next to it, the one closest to the fire was where Pepper sat. Next to her the seat was empty, but to the seat next to it sat a new mouse girl Kuiva hasn't met yet. Her eyes shared a similar color to the freckled girl, of a soft brown, and she was the first to greet the newcomers.

"Oho, is this the harpy you were talking about, Pepper?" The brown-haired one said, ignoring both Mars and freckles as she gave her attention to Kuiva. She looked back at Pepper as if to ask for a response.

"You know the answer as well as I do, Choco. Kuiva, this is Choco. And sit on the chair nearest to the entrance, Kuiva." Pepper picked up a fork and pointed with it at Kuiva's seat, not looking at Choco as she responded. Kuiva gave a curt nod and found her seat, not a great distance from where

she was standing. Ash had already sat next to her, Mars made her way next to Pepper.

"She's exotic, isn't she? What are those horns for?" Choco, the name of the brown-haired one, gleefully smiled and stated as she set her eyes on Kuiva once again.

"Nice to meet you, Choco, I presume. Yes, if our timeline hasn't intermingled with another and I transported to a new and foreign one, then I am most likely the harpy Pepper has spoken of."

"What?" Choco blankly said, a smile still on her face.

"I am the new harpy. And the horns are cosmetic, they're made of feathers." Kuiva nodded and gave a light smile.

"Cool!" Choco exclaimed, then leaned closer to Mars, still locking eyes with Kuiva, and whispered, "Is she sober?"

"Probably very tired, Choco." Mars didn't whisper back.

Pepper gave both of them a stare, then turned her back and faced another mouse girl near the fire. "Bitten, what's taking so long?"

"Ah! Sorry, Pepper, I was, uh, just lost in thought." A voice replied, the face of the voice Kuiva couldn't see as her back was turned. Her hair was a perfect black, her hair barely reaching her neck much like the rest of the mice, and her height on the shorter side. She almost didn't notice her, her presence in the room was thin. She was probably the one responsible for cooking in the group, Kuiva thought. Bitten, the black-haired mouse, turned around and carried with her two plates with foods the same as what Pepper had on her plate.

Silently Bitten walked and placed the plates in front of each member of the table, and then finally sat down. Pepper nodded and Choco picked up her fork and seemed to wait. Kuiva didn't move. "Kuiva, we don't normally eat meat, but since you're here it's good for us to eat with a bit less restraint. I'm not sure where or what your faith resides in, but we of the Asphodel Family devout servants of Pele, whom is herself child of Apleistas, Father of Esivan, and we give thanks before every meal. If it is wrong of you to participate with us, or if you wish to say your own prayer, then please say so." Pepper spoke up, her voice formal and her eyes sincere.

"My faith is scattered and unfocused, the unfortunate mire of agnosticism is my burden." Kuiva responded, her back straightening, a bit of a quiver forming in her voice. "If it's unacceptable of me to join you in giving thanks despite my unbelief, then I'll keep my silence. If not then I'd like to join."

"There's no evil in admitting that, but your participation won't be required, or possible, as you don't know our prayers. Now, Mars, Choco, Bitten, Ash." Pepper closed her eyes and in unison they began a small chant.

"Apliestas, Father of knowledge, we thank you for your guidance, and

although we be small we thank you for the insights and wisdom you've bestowed on us. To Pele we also give thanks, to your servant and child, and to her we thank for giving us our flesh, so that we could find pleasure in living, and for allowing us to know her love and for teaching us daily the necessity of diligence. Allow us to humbly partake in this meal in mindfulness of what we may have been without." Done with their ritual the girls opened their eyes, and in the case her mouth too, as they began to eat. Kuiva waited for everyone else to have taken a bite before she even picked up her own fork.

Kuiva ate quickly. Very quickly, the fork launching from the plate to her mouth in quick succession, her barely chewing as she ate. It wasn't messy, rather it looked more like a performance art than it did someone stuffing his face with food, and without Kuiva's noticing everyone on the table had given her their sole attention. Within a minute the food had been eaten, chewing her last bites of meal Kuiva looked around and realized the spectacle she made herself to be, and grew ashamed as her cheeks blushed.

She chewed rapidly as she looked at each of the mice, some of them leaning back to look, others leaning forward as to look past another one. Pepper smiled, and before anyone could speak the sound of Mars's laughter echoed throughout the cabin.

Kuiva swallowed as soon as she could and quickly tried to gather up an apology, "Sorry! I, uh, I get very, very hungry after long travels, it seems that along with being given the curse of small size, the gods found it funny to also burden me with the duty of sustaining my flesh with the hunger of three grown men. And it's been a very long journey here!"

Mars continued her laughter as Ash pushed her own plate towards Kuiva, her brows raised in worry and a small, gentle and dainty voice leaving her throat as she spoke, "if you were that hungry then I'd feel relief in helping, from the moment I saw you I saw the face of someone who's been without meat for many months. If I'm not mistaken then I recall that harpies require an unusual amount of food in order to live, if it is true then I wouldn't want to starve a guest."

Kuiva stared dumbfounded as she looked at the previously mute girl. Mars covered her mouth and Choco spoke her own opinion, "Ash, we are not poor, we could afford to feed Kuiva more, can't we?" Looking over to Pepper for agreement she waited for a response, one that came soon and with a giggle from the purple-speckled eyed girl nodded.

"It is like Ash to notice the plight of others despite giving only a glance, huh? Bitten, how much flake do we have?" Pepper looked over to the black haired girl and asked.

"Nearly a bag, Pepper. I-It's our week's supply, Pepper." Bitten responded quickly, glancing at Pepper as she responded, but mostly looking at

her food.

"We'll have to enter the city in order to convey Kuiva's presence to the counsel anyway, we can restock there. Now how much do you eat a day, Kuiva?" Pepper's smile still lingered on her face as she looked over to the starving owl, who in turn tried to make herself smaller than she already was.

"Roughly the daily portion of three working men." Kuiva said as she mimicked Bitten's own attitude, looked down as her cheeks flushed an even deeper shade of red.

"Oh. You weren't exaggerating? That'd be... about five of pounds of flake." She grasped her chin as she thought, finally calculating the amount of flake Kuiva would need need to eat per day. She looked at Kuiva and squinted her eyes, "how can your body even contain that much food? Where does it go?"

"The intricacies of the body are something too complex to lightly speak about here, but it's mostly used up in flights and in maintaining my body temperature. My temperature is one you'd expect on one with a very high fever, among other things."

"Well, that doesn't matter much. Do you prefer to eat it all in one sitting or throughout the day?" Pepper poked a flake and plopped it in her mouth, chewing as she waited for Kuiva's answer.

"In a single sitting, as if it isn't an abuse of your hospitality and despite your gracious, uncalled for kindness, I would also like a, uh, bed. Or a spot to sleep in. Judging by the positions of the stars when I had woken up I had only slept two hours."

"It's not, and I expected to provide as much anyway. Tomorrow we'll get to work on verifying what you know, along with other things. You don't particularly smell so I won't force you to wash yourself either. Bitten, please." Pepper casually stated, looking at Bitten for acknowledgement. With a nod from the black-haired mouse the small group of girls continued to eat, Kuiva politely pushing back Ash's plate and thanking her for the offer as she waited silently for more, while the rest continued discussing their plans for the day. Kuiva played very close attention to every detail.

Chapter 2

Dance

Chapter 2:

The sun had set, the fracturing of its body turning to that of the stars, and once again it collected itself and returned to its former glory. In fewer words, the sun had set and the night has left, and the girls once again awoke to begin the day anew. Kuiva was within a cabin, on a bed of her own slowly wiping the sleep from her eyes, watching as the girls dressed themselves, some dressing themselves from a previous state of complete nakedness, which she took note with some level of perplexity.

Pepper sat with Mars as they, in a low voice, spoke about what to expect within the city. Kuiva heard all of it, and both Pepper and Mars knew it, they instead didn't want to upset the morning quiet that some of the other mice enjoyed. Ash tidied up the beds and Speckles polished arrow heads and blades, inspecting the equipment as she usually does each morning. Bitten sat down on her bed, yawning and occasionally stretching, trying to break the grogginess out of her body. Kuiva rarely saw something like this, only in distant memories, although crystal clear to her, did she see her own parents do something similar to them all.

Roughly ten minutes had passed and everyone but Speckled and Bitten were outside of the cabin. Kuiva was pat down, smelled, and groomed by several of the girls, sometimes twice, as they spoke to her what manners she should keep in mind and maintain. All the mice already knew her worth, as she yesterday sat and spoke about her knowledge of spells and the occasional retelling of stories of her travels. It didn't take long for her to eat, she maintained the same flow of rapidly consuming her food, so the majority of the day was spent on talking. Pepper was the only one to sit with her throughout the entire time.

Pepper knew she would be wanted, by someone if not her. And she definitely wanted her for her own Family. So she promised Kuiva to take her

in herself, and teach her the ways of her species, and how to navigate the world with her lens. But first she had to be accepted, and to do that they would need to have her meet one of the magus, and by the Family itself. Each city would be regulated by at least one, the city they were heading towards being no exception.

Mars dragged Ash by her hand and moved towards a cabin that smelled of blood and very slightly of rot. A few more minutes passed, Kuiva splitting her attention from nodding at Pepper's constant explanations and figuring out what Mars was doing. The question was answered as Mars left the cabin, pelts to the side of her, a large tan backpack strapped to her.

Kuiva nodded along with Pepper as Mars and Ash made their way towards them, Ash herself not carrying much more than a finely decorated bag which she carried close to her chest.

"Everything is set. You guys ready? Or has Kuiva not gotten enough earfuls?" Mars asked, her hands holding the straps of her backpack as she walked. Ash looked noncommittal.

"We can talk on the way. You guys have everything? The meat, the two deer pelts, the five rabbit pelts?" Pepper asked.

"Yes, yes, and yes." Mars nodded three times, one for each yes, and then looked Pepper. Neither spoke for a few moments, until Pepper herself nodded, turned around, and then walked into the forest. Mars and Ash followed along, so Kuiva followed suite.

The path was barely marked, a light compaction in the dirt being all it was. Kuiva had truthfully missed it, as although her memory was perfect she didn't have a pristine ability to intuit salient information. Some information was simply lost since she could never make the proper connections, although now that she knows what to look for she's already figured out where other paths are. She hasn't gotten the opportunity to get an aerial view of the place so for now the information she does has is what she has to work with.

"How far away is the city?" Kuiva asked as the question suddenly popped into her head.

"About a three hours walk."

Kuiva stopped her pace at hearing this. "Three hours? Forgive me for my feebleness but my feet are taloned, and like a bird of all the lesser species I am not suited for bipedal travel."

Ash and Pepper stopped at this but Mars continued her steady gait, not offering up a sound or a glance as she continued to walk straight forward. Ash looked at Pepper for an answer, who in turn turned around and faced Kuiva. "Didn't you say yesterday that you would walk between towns multiple times a week?"

"I left it ambiguous over whether I walked, ran, or even swam, I merely

traveled between towns. I would walk to a place no one would be able to see and take flight.”

”And you can’t fly now since you don’t know where we’re going. How fast do you fly?”

”Two or three leagues an hour.”

”That’s nearly jogging speed. How good is your eyesight? No, never mind. I don’t know how the magus would deal with harpies so I won’t ask you fly ahead of us, as you might be killed. How much do you weigh?”

”About fifty to sixty pounds, depending on the delicate circumstance.” Kuiva, after realizing she had been standing still and holding back both mice, although Mars was a decent way ahead of them by this point, started walking. ”If it’s not impolite, may I ask why?”

”You know what is polite, don’t you? Did you forget?” Pepper scrutinized the girl, waiting for Kuiva to catch up to where she stood before walking side to side with her.

”To be more than polite is never impolite in itself! No, as per your words, hierarchy and seniority define the language used between heila, and always remember that between you and men and women they are generally above us. You are-”

Before Kuiva could continue Pepper cut her sentence with an uplifted hand, nodding as they continued to walk. ”I get it. I was wondering if it was possible to carry you all the way there. I could carry you myself for an hour, as I’m bigger and stronger than Ash I would be the one to do it. How long can you walk for?”

Kuiva smiled brightly as she raised her wing and patted Pepper on the back, Pepper raising an eyebrow at the action. ”Haha! Rest your concerns here, as for two hours is my limit, and an hour of my weight surely someone of your beauty and grace would be able to handle with envious ease!”

Pepper didn’t respond, a bit of shock formed in her face, and a blush before she turned her gaze away. Kuiva guessed she was weak to compliments, however sincere. Or perhaps it was a difference in culture. ”Did I say something bad?” Kuiva lowered her voice and raised her pitch.

Pepper didn’t respond. The three girls walks in silence for a long while as they caught up to Mars, who upon seeing them didn’t bother to greet them or ask questions. Her breathing was controlled and her gait almost artistic in its motion, her steps lighter than they were typically despite the greater weight she carried. Ash made her place besides Mars and Pepper behind Kuiva, who herself was still not ahead of the tall girl. To try to fix the botched atmosphere Kuiva tried to make small talk with Mars.

”How much weight are you carrying, Mars?” Kuiva walked alongside Mars, increasing her pace in order to do so.

Mars didn't respond, although she did glance at Kuiva, and then at Ash, who was to the right of her, who in her stead answered.

"She can't speak, she's focusing on breathing. I'd say she has roughly, uh, between a hundred and a hundred-fifty pounds on her." Ash sized up Mars as she gave out her estimation, which Mars herself nodded at.

Kuiva blinked, then blinked again. An owl rarely blinks. "What? Is she a warrior? What?"

Mars nodded.

"I thought you knew that?" Ash turned her head slightly, puzzled before she gave the sky a glance and spoke again, "mice are born into a specific caste. Common ones, like me, have no designated name. Warriors are usually darker in hair and eye color and taller, and magicians who have purple eyes. It's extremely rare for a mouse to be born with purely purple eyes, it's more typically like Pepper's."

"O-Oh. I see. That's certainly interesting." Kuiva mumbled.

"Yep." Ash said and continued to walk forward as the conversation ended. Kuiva no longer felt there was any more opportunities to speak, as Mars was too busy not collapsing under the weight of her luggage and Pepper still embarrassed and walking in the back. Ash was perfectly content to be quiet, after half an hour of silent walking she began humming a song that Kuiva never heard of to pass the time.

Half an hour became an hour, and an hour became two, by that time Kuiva had already reached her limit. Her talons ached, her knees were buckling under her and although she wasn't out of breath each step would send a jolt of pain through her. Signs of stress was already building up and everyone had already noticed, so when Kuiva stopped everyone but Mars also stopped. As per the agreement, Pepper offered Kuiva her back and she climbed on it.

"Do you know any breathing techniques as well? Although I shouldn't doubt you, carrying someone of my size despite not being much larger than me, I being not much smaller than you, would be tiring." Kuiva, although she said her concern, still without shame climbed on her back and wrapped her wings around Pepper's neck. Pepper shrugged, but the shrug was muffled by Kuiva's weight.

"I've done worse things and survived." Pepper responded, not looking at Kuiva, whose face was right beside her at this point. Kuiva noted there still was a trace of a blush left on her face, growing deeper as she continued to stare at the poor mouse. Not meaning to be rude she looked ahead and let her weight be carried, trying her best to stabilize herself on Pepper's hands.

The three girls continued and once again caught up with Mars, Pepper not breathing much more deeply even despite the initially quickened pace. Kuiva guessed that she could probably maintain the pace for an hour, although

she isn't entirely aware how good Pepper's endurance was. Feeling slightly restless over potentially insulting or disturbing Pepper she decided to offer an apology to the gallant mouse.

"I'm sorry if my comment earlier disturbed you." Kuiva whispered, loud enough for Pepper to hear but low enough that she was relatively certain no one else heard.

Pepper gave the girl a look and replied, "complimenting someone's looks is generally taken as a sign of attraction. You're an outsider so I'll overlook it, but here we take those things seriously. Thank you for the compliments but don't throw them around casually. You weren't serious, were you?" Pepper whispered back with a voice slightly louder than what the owl whispered with.

"I was sincere. We're both girls, what's the point of taking it so seriously?" Kuiva asked, her expression quizzical.

"Certainly we are both girls but that kind of thinking is dangerous! Not all of us can control our desires, be mindful of that, idiot. What did I say about how you should handle yourself around men?" Pepper no longer whispered as she spoke in a harsh tone.

"'Do not make eye contact, do not touch, do not speak unless spoken to, be curt but courteous and polite' is what you said. Does it not also apply to human women too?" Pepper said, a bit taken aback by Pepper's behavior.

"To an extent, but not as much caution as you should take with men. It's a literally death sentence for you to, to put it bluntly, sleep with one. Heila only give birth to girls, what would you think would happen if we were to take every man for ourselves? Death for everyone. So, you are not to interact with them, not even be friends. Do you get the picture?"

"I don't see how it relates to complimenting your looks as being wrong."

"We heila still desire love, so then, tell me, owl, what would you do if you had no access to men, but still wanted to be loved?" Pepper gave Kuiva a glare, maintaining the eye contact for a couple of seconds, before finally looking ahead. Kuiva didn't get it.

Half an hour passed, the scenery still filled with trees endless, as if the forest would go on forever. Kuiva wondered whether they were lost, taking the rhythm of Pepper's now heavier breathing and forming her thoughts around its beats. An idea struck her as she finally figured out what Pepper meant by wanting to be loved, and she nearly toppled herself off of the poor weary mouse.

"Ah! I get it! You mean love between girls!" Kuiva nearly shouted but was loud enough for Pepper's ears to ring, a low growl forming in her throat as she looked at the dumb owl.

"Yes, love between girls is what I meant, doofus. You don't have to yell."

Pepper nearly spat it out as she continued marching forward.

"Oh my. O-Oh, I didn't mean it that way at all. I'm sorry, Pepper." Kuiva mumbled as she sank into Pepper's shoulders, trying to hide away from Pepper, and hide her growing blush too.

"I know. Drop it."

So they did.

Until Kuiva opened her mouth up once again. "Is there anyone like that in your Family?"

"It's the same in all Families. It's not recognized by Magus but it's allowed." Pepper, after a moment of contemplation, responded.

"What do they even do?" Kuiva continued her questioning.

"None of ours, or your, business."

"I see." Deflated, Kuiva ceased her questioning, just as she saw light at the end of her vision, the light of open skies and the vague details of some faraway buildings. Stones of grey, clean and pristine, a field of some plant growing and offering itself as a buffer between the forest and the city. Despite Kuiva's keen eyesight, far surpassing whatever a man can claim to hold, she couldn't see anyone between the forest and the city. Neither guards, or a gate, so Kuiva concluded she was seeing a mere wall and nothing else.

Holding their tongues the girls walked, until the edge of the forest met the fields, and Pepper stopped, her breath a bit heavy, and asked Kuiva to get off her. The distance they had to walk now wasn't great, Kuiva thought, so she abided and placed her sore talons on the dirt and clenched her teeth to deal with the pain. With some walking it'll leave her, but she knew the following days were going to be not very pleasant for her feet.

The mood was already more or less ruined by Kuiva's talking, so the walk was without a word. Kuiva instead gave attention to the fields, upon which two species of plants were growing. Both were like ferns, belonging to species she hasn't seen growing from the ground, so her sight beyond wasn't hampered by their growth. She could see a river, some boats moving from it and the people that traveled on it. All men, or women, not a single ear or tail she could find on them. That wasn't surprising to her, Esivan accepts heila but they aren't treated as equals.

Past the fields, next to the walls and heading towards what looked like a gate, passed by a single building within which Kuiva could hear the foot steps of men inside, and the occasional group of people hauling either nothing at all or wheel barrows filled with various goods and pulled by what looked like an oversized, muscular dog. Kuiva has seen stranger things so she didn't pay it mind as they finally reached the gate, guarded by two men in plate armor. Their faces visible, their eyes clear, a bored expression plastered over their faces.

The one nearest to us gave us a glance, waited for us to all stand in front of him, even Mars stopping in order to wait, and then began to speak.

”Coins.”

Not much for a speaker. Pepper nodded, took out her coin and retrieved the coins from everyone else but Kuiva as well, then handed it over gently to the guard. Careful to not make physical contact she deftly transferred the content of her palm into the man’s large hands. He sniffed, touched each coin with a finger once, and then spoke again. ”You didn’t give me the coin of the harpy. What are you plotting? Never seen a bird like her, either.”

”No deceptions, Sir. She is a foreigner, one who managed to fly her way to our residence. I’ve brought her in for questioning and hoped, if the magus permit, to be taken into our Family.” Pepper straightened out her posture and gave out her reasonings, not drawing out her explanation or being too sparse with the details. The guard huffed and gave the mouse back her coins, not bothering to make sure he makes no physical contact with her, and watched as she jumped when his glove slightly scraped against a finger.

”The Asphodel family will pay for any crimes she commits ten-fold. You know the rules. Watch yourself, bird.” Losing interest the guard relayed his last thoughts as he waved the girls in. With a thank you from Pepper the rest of the group wordlessly went in, Kuiva herself trying to make herself as small as possible while she huddled close to Pepper. Pepper didn’t mind, almost hugging the bird closer to her so she wouldn’t get lost within the strangely unpopulated streets.

Once again, none spoke, Kuiva simply followed along with them to wherever destination they were heading towards. The city wasn’t empty, there was a steady but sparse stream of humans and the occasional heila, girls who look like wolves and other mice forming the majority of those here, the streets looked pristine and the houses vibrant in color. Each building made of stone or brick, and the color scheme if it ever left greys or whites would predominantly feature deep and rich blues and scarcely any reds. Kuiva guessed it was regulations that governed what colors buildings could be painted with.

It wasn’t like any other city Kuiva had visited before. The biggest difference, although not the only one, was how few people there were, no matter where she looked not a single crowd formed. The paths were all paved with stones, odd mosaics being formed by their arrangements. The buildings rarely larger than two stories, built as if they were stacked on top of each other in a slightly repetitive fashion. There were buildings with people inside, what looked like bars, but none full. She had heard that Esivan was a nation in decline, but she didn’t think it was in this way.

The group went deeper into the city until they finally reached their destination, a two-story building that didn’t look any different from any other.

Pepper took out a key from one of her pouches and entered it into a keyhole, turned it and then opened the door. She walked in first, followed by Mars, then ash, then Kuiva, whom herself was taking in as much detail as she can of the interior. The flooring was of some dark wood, furniture like couches and tables were surrounded a fireplace on the left side of the wall. A carpet, striped red and white, was laid in front of the fireplace.

Rather than the interior of a company's headquarters it looked like a house. Except there was no tables for eating on, although there was a small bookshelf near which a table and chair was near, and neither was there a kitchen. A staircase near the back of the room indicated that, just like there was two stories as seen from outside, there was two stories accessible within the building.

"Is this headquarters? Where is everyone?" Kuiva, her curiosity being neglected for too long, finally broke the spell that blind them all to silence. Pepper opened a door for, one closest to the exterior door, and behind it was revealed a stair case of stone going downward. Mars wordlessly walked down, each step being accompanied by a sharp exhale of air by the over encumbered mouse. Pepper sniffed and turned to Kuiva.

"More or less, there are unofficial ones in other smaller villages but those are for only convenience. It's empty since there's only two mice that stay here, the first is Justo, our current leader, and the second is Tylsa, her advisor. Their rooms are upstairs, downstairs is a storage area. Come." Pepper, once Mars had reached far enough down the stairs, went down without any further words. Ash followed closely behind her and so did Kuiva, and they all waited for Mars to finally reach the bottom of the staircase.

Mars quickly, faster than she had moved since the weight had been placed on her, moved over to a table and rapidly took off the backpack, and rather than placing it on the table placed it on the floor. The floor itself was stone, similar in color to the pavement found in the paths outside, and was cold in the way characteristic of basements. Mars exhaled a massive breath of air and collapsed on to a chair, her chest rising and falling rapidly as her skin turned pink and sweat started to pour from her like a faucet.

"Mars? Are you okay? Is she okay?" Kuiva asked as she looked around the room, and upon seeing Ash's dismissive hand waving decided she probably is alright. Not knowing what else to do she waited awkwardly as she watched Pepper struggle to pick up the back-bag and place it on the table. The owl went over and tried to help, and with some support from Kuiva the three girls managed their task. Ash's own bag was already on the table, its contents still a mystery to Kuiva, but it looked like everything was ready to be unpacked.

"What now? How long can the meat stay in there without rotting, or it is prepared in some way?" Kuiva continued her questioning, looking over at

Mars as the sound of her ragged breathing was echoing throughout the room.

"Now we get Justo, or Tylsa. One of them is probably upstairs. Come with me, Kuiva. Ash, unpack everything, and tend to Mars if she needs anything." Pepper ordered the girls as she went back upstairs, Kuiva following her close behind.

As has been consistent throughout the journey, the two remained silent. The sound of Mar's ragged breathing disappeared as the door to the basement was closed, and Kuiva was once again given sight of the first floor of the building. Kuiva took the time to take in the room from slightly different perspective, taking in every detail as they stepped towards the staircase that lead to the second floor.

The steps were slightly creaky, the stairs made of wood instead of stone like the ones that lead down into the basement, although it wasn't to the point of being dilapidated. The more Kuiva looked the more it felt like the home of a particularly wealthy family rather than one of a heila Family.

Reaching the top Kuiva took in the sights of the new floor, similar in size to the first one except there was no door that lead to a basement. To compensate for the extra space, it seemed that the owners decided to cover nearly every inch of the area with bookshelves, save for one small area where two bunk beds were located on. Kuiva was surprised she could even see bunk beds, as that would imply they left some room for walking.

Pepper walked along the open space that lead to the bunk beds, and looked behind a bookshelf without fully revealing her own body. As if noticing something her ears perked up and a smile, almost forced, appeared on her face. Kuiva made her way beside her to see what she was looking at, and to her surprise a dark mouse was found with her head laying on a table, her head pointing the opposite direction to where we were standing. The table was placed next to a tall window, not directly facing it but just far enough where the table didn't meet the window's edge.

A closed book was next to her face, so Kuiva assumed that either the mouse was extraordinarily polite and closed the book before sleeping, or she was not sleeping and was simply biding her time. Either situation was bizarre, although the latter more reasonable to her.

"Miss Tylsa? You awake?" Pepper softly called out to the girl and waited for an answer. One eventually came, after a three seconds of waiting, as the dark mouse lifted her head off the table and the two girls a look. Her eyes of pure, shining purple, her skin nearly as pale as a petal from a lily, her hair fluffier than the most. Her eyes were deep-set, among the most deep that Kuiva has seen in her life, although she hasn't given it much attention before. Tylsa looked at the owl.

For a moment Kuiva felt fear, as if the illusion of day had been pulled

from her and the eternal starless night revealed itself to her from behind the curtains, but just as the moment had flashed in her mind so did it in a moment pass. Tylsa sniffed, looked at Kuiva for a few seconds, and then finally looked at Pepper. "Who's she?"

"Kuiva, uh, someone I'd like to enter the Family." Pepper, with some trepidation, answered.

"Never seen a heila of her species before. She's not a hawk and neither is she a chicken, her feathers too elaborate for the latter and her height pitiful if she were the former." Tylsa looked away and towards her book, not opening it but as if to speak to it. A few seconds of pause formed itself as she went into thought, and then she spoke again, "her eyes are large and the feathers like horns on her head are reminiscent of a horned owl. She looks thin, as if she hasn't eaten in a while, and her clothes are dirty as if they hadn't been washed in days. Not to speak of the design itself, as if she wanted to mock a noble's own apparel. You want her in the Family? For what reason?"

"I believe her to have a gift of eidetic memory, is the main reason why I'd like her to join. She knows some peculiar mundane tricks that mimic the ways of magic as well, and she has many tomes of magical knowledge and arguments in her head. Even if the tomes aren't functional, which I haven't verified, the novelty of the positions are worth having around." Pepper reported her thinking, some of it Kuiva herself hasn't heard yet. Regardless, Kuiva stood up straight as her appraisal was stated.

"Since it's you, Pepper, I'll assume you've thought up a way to verify the first claim." Tylsa responded, not bothering to finish her thoughts as she looked around the room, or whatever amount of room she could see as the bookshelves were blocking most of her sight of it.

"Correct. I had recite word per word an entire book she had only read through once, or rather rapidly skimmed through as she didn't seem to read a single word itself but only looked at the page." Pepper didn't relent in her tone as she continued to answer Tylsa.

"That's unbelievable." Tylsa stated as she got off her chair, her height not more than Pepper's own, her clothes more like dark colored pajamas. She made her way towards the opposite side of the room, not much more than fifteen feet away, and picked out a book seemingly at random, a large thick one that required both of her hands to carry. She placed it on the table and beckoned the owl to come with her finger.

Without speaking Kuiva nodded and delicately made her way to the book, and looked at Tylsa for instructions. Tylsa looked blankly at Kuiva, as if she were trying to drill holes through her skull. Seeing that no instructions were given, she opened the book gently with one of her talon-fingers and rapidly flipped through each page, only given herself enough time to see a

clear image of the page before she flipped to another one.

Roughly two minutes passed, the near thousand pages that the book covered stored into her mind. She hadn't read a single word of it, so she didn't know what it was about. She closed the book and waited for instructions again.

Tylsa picked up the book and opened it up to a random page, moving it so Kuiva couldn't see it. "Turn around."

To be safe, she asked Kuiva to turn around, so she did. "Good. Page 859, Paragraph two. What does it say?"

"Spread the pastry dough into a proper and respectable square, and then cut it into a dozen equal pieces of rectangles and then lay them out on a sheet. Poke small holes in the pastry so that it won't rise aggressively in the oven, and then transfer them into the oven and take them out when they've acquired some flakey-gold dust. Cut them in half horizontally and then spread chocolate cream on one side of it, then place the other side on it. This is the method of baking a chocolate sandwich." Kuiva monotoned away, moving her eyes as if following along words in a book inside her own head.

"Page 173, describe to me the image." Tylsa continued her questioning.

"A loaf of bread with oats spread on top of it, cut in half and next to a small plate of butter. According to the caption the bread is made of flake. There's no mention of the herb name on the page or the next one either." Kuiva scrunched up her face as she tried to discern the contents of the image. "I believe the book had a layered image, and by memory I can't access that layer."

"Good enough. Either you do have eidetic memory or you have an exceptionally keen memory, either way makes no difference." Tylsa closed the book and went back to the now empty slot where the cookbook had been taken from, placed it back, and then made her way towards the two girls once again. "Has she been acknowledged by Magus Nuori yet?"

Pepper shook her head, "No, She has not. We went here first in order to drop off our goods first, and then we'd like to establish an appointment with Magus Nuori afterwards. With your permission, and acknowledgement, of course."

"I need to know more about her before that. Better to hear from her own mouth and from her own flesh than from a second-hand source, especially since she's here. You're dismissed, Pepper." Tylsa bluntly stated as she sat down back on her chair, picking up the previously closed book that had originally been on the table before the girls' arrival.

Pepper blinked. Then she nodded, and gave a curtsy, before silently heading back downstairs. Kuiva, sensing that she wasn't dismissed, stayed

in place, and apparently it was the right choice as she wasn't told to follow Pepper by either of the mice.

Chapter 3

Relegation

Chapter 3:

Tylsa had Kuiva sit on the bottom bed of the bunk bed and in order for Kuiva to tell her, with her own mouth, her story and motivations in coming here, how she managed to cross the border, and whether there were others who had crossed with her. Hours flew by as they talked about the tiniest details imaginable, Tylsa demanding full explanations for every point of the story that had even the slightest chance of being a mere fabrication.

Those hours were spent in that, and by the time when dinner was customary to have Tylsa led Kuiva to some sort of restaurant near the center of the city, and although Kuiva would wince with each step Tylsa gave her no mind. Either she didn't notice or didn't care, either way Kuiva didn't let out any complaints as she was led into the restaurant, her talons finding more relief on the wooden flooring of the building than she found within the stone paved streets.

The smell of herbs, bread, and fried fats filled Kuiva's nostrils. The room wasn't packed by any means, but there were multiple groups of heila, and in one table a family of humans, eating various familiar yet exotic looking foods. Kuiva saw the sign in front of the store, and it had read "Mouse Perfect", along with a small image of a waitress with mouse ears and a tray held in one hand. Kuiva held her questions to herself as she walked into the restaurant, letting herself be guided to the back by Tylsa.

They both sat down on a table in the corner, only two chairs were present, two chairs positioned against their own respective walls.

Tylsa let out a long breath as she relaxed into her own chair, closing her eyes and rubbing away whatever tiredness has managed to possess her. Kuiva, on her part, tried her best not to look out of place, looking straight at the table whenever she wasn't catching glances of the mouse that relaxed next to her. The chatter of the heila, and the chatting of the humans, was enough

for her to get her mind off of her previous circumstance.

It was tedious, and Tylsa was intensely sharp, demanding, and precise in her interrogation. The owl felt like she had learned just as much about herself as she did convey to Tylsa, an odd experience all around.

"Welcome back, Tylsa. Who's this?" Another mouse dressed like a maid came appeared as if out of nowhere, startling Kuiva as she straightened out her posture and lifted her eyes to the maid. The maid, seeing that Kuiva was startled, gave a soft smile and a small curtsy.

"A portion of today's stew for me and the girl, along with five servings of hashbrowns for her. Water." Tylsa didn't open her eyes as she replied. "She's a possible new recruit, not official yet but I'm keen on having her. She's owl."

"An owl? I've never heard of an owl heila before, she's pretty unique isn't she! It's a pleasure to meet you, miss owl." The maid almost beamed with happiness, whether it was fake or not Kuiva couldn't tell, but she nodded at her greeting and gave a small smile of her own. The maid got even happier over her response.

"She's cute! I'll tell the chef about your order now." Her final words as she left, after giving a full curtsy, and walked away to the door near the back of the restaurant.

Kuiva kept her smile as she looked off the maid. Whatever would keep the awkwardness of Tylsa's silence at bay from her conscience.

The silence stretched. one of the diners finished their meal and were now idly chatting. Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed by, Kuiva really didn't know. The maid came and left periodically, checking up on each table with her seemingly endless gaiety. But whatever amount of time passed was enough time for the preparation of their meals, as the maid left the door, this time with a tray covered with pristine white dishes, a plate of bread, along with an obscene amount of hashbrown. Kuiva didn't know what that was, but she was eager to try, as the smell alone made her salivate.

"Here you are! Eat your fill, miss owl, you look a bit... thin. You'll be in gentler hands with us." With her permanent smile the maid placed each dish on the table, before leaving, and finally Tylsa opened her eyes. She blinked, then picked up the spoon that was next to the bowl of stew.

Kuiva followed her as they both began to eat, whatever was in the stew Kuiva could only recognize the meat and a single orange vegetable. Some sort of bird, and carrots. The rest, the herbs, the various other vegetables, she had no clue.

"Do you know what the Asphodel family specializes in?" Tylsa said between spoonfuls. She stopped eating, instead looking at the bird.

"I've not been graced with the knowledge of such a thing." Kuiva's reply

was quick as she rapidly chewed and gulped the contents of her mouth.

"Gastronomy. This is our restaurant, there's another one on the other side of the city."

Kuiva nodded, putting down her spoon within the bowl as she waited for Tylsa to continue speaking. Rather than that, Tylsa brought another spoonful of some white tuber in her mouth, chewing at her leisure pace and looking to have forgotten she had spoken to begin with. Seeing that, Kuiva picked up the spoon and also brought another spoonful into her own mouth.

"What's the point of our existence? To make food? To serve the magus? To beg for scraps as we toil away in ceaseless work? Or is such a question pointless, the joy of the task is what we should preoccupy ourselves in finding?"

Kuiva choked, then coughed, until she could respond with a dumb, "what?"

"Our function, regardless of the answer, is to fulfill the wishes of the magus. If we don't, someone else will. If someone else can't, then our existence is an absurdity. We aren't special. Are you special, Kuiva?"

"Some would say yes, yes." Kuiva placed down her spoon once again as she gave her attention to Tylsa. Wherever she was leading, she felt it was important.

"Certainly. Some would say I'm special, but I'm not unique in my knowledge or my gifts. According to your own history, you are special. Unique. You will be joining in what isn't unique. Absurd, right?"

"... The gods are known for their humor?"

"Under the eye of the gods we are comparatively little. Their plans for us aren't knowable, not in the present. Work in order to feed yourself, feed yourself in order to work. Find joy in that, there's not much else we can do. You were a traveling magician, now you're not. You didn't know anyone, not really, you will soon in time with us. Live, die, meet oblivion, meet the unknown. Small bird, you'll figure out what you're missing then, hopefully you'll find your purpose here in the now. You will join us, I pray, but I do not expect you to be a slave for us."

Tylsa took another mouthful of her food, and chewed. "Work for the answers. You are a slave for that purpose, not for mortal flesh."

Kuiva blinked. She nodded, not knowing what else to say, and also took another bite.