

TRIAL BY FIRE

by ellerean

written for Light of Creation: A Tellius Big Bang

Chapter 1: Winter

If we both survive this war, let's start a wyvern courier service. We'll make a lot of loot. —Haar

The storm was descending quickly. The house at the edge of the woods was often isolating, but the ideal location to gather firewood. Its tangled trees and hidden caves were favored by wyvern besides, the primary reason her father had chosen to build there.

There was no official trail, rather a path worn down by decades of footfall. Jill hunched against the cold, burrowing into the collar of her long coat. As she followed the trail, she instinctively glanced toward the nearby cave. She could see little past the trees in the growing dark, but knew her wyvern was tucked deep inside—far enough from the cold, but close enough to keep watch over its rider's home.

Jill's bootprints joined those of decades past, the same makeshift trail her father had followed. Though she'd lived on her own there for three seasons already, there was still a strangeness to taking the journey alone. It had felt much longer as a child, scampering beside her father. Now, she guided herself, gathering as many branches as she could along the path. Though she carried the small axe at her hip, there was little

time to chop anything. It rapidly grew darker and colder as daylight and time were lost.

But the branches were fine enough for one night, and the wood good for burning. Jill couldn't see the trail past the towering pile in her arms, praying there were no surprises on the careful walk back. A wind whistled past, and she forced her stinging eyes open. Despite the thick gloves, her fingers had lost all feeling. "I don't remember Daein being this cold," she murmured, the words falling silently as snow.

The first flakes began to fall as the house came into sight. There was a biting chill of winter when she eased the door open, shivering against the wind that came in with her. She dropped the pile of branches beside the hearth, then quickly got to work. Still in coat and gloves, she snapped the branches in half, her hands burning as they regained feeling. *It would be nice to have some help*, she thought, not for the first time, as she peeled off her gloves to strike the flint.

She sighed in welcomed relief as the fire burst to life. She draped her coat over her father's customary chair and sat down, back to the fire. The seat offered the best view of the house. Like most things post-war, it was smaller than she remembered. The main room served as living space and kitchen; to her left, corner shelves were packed with all variety of kitchen tools and supplies. The wooden table with four chairs sat near the hearth, and her father's desk near the front door. To her right, two plain doors for private rooms, the one to her bedroom crooked on its hinges. She hadn't figured out how to fix it.

Her evening plans were to wait for the fire to burn down, then retire to bed. They *hadn't* included someone knocking at the door. She sat up straighter, waiting, listening for either another knock or the crunch of snowy footsteps retreating. She

wished her lance wasn't so far away, abandoned in the corner of her bedroom. The wood-chopping axe still hung at her hip, though, which could be used in a pinch.

Another knock, and she reached for the chopping axe when her visitor spoke. "Jill, are you home? It's Zihark."

"Zihark!" She scrambled for the door, throwing open the latch. A rush of cold air greeted her, accompanied by Zihark. He looked comical in a long coat and knit hat, both a frost-blue that blended with the background. The right side of his coat was misshapen where a scabbard was poorly concealed underneath. The cold, dry air made the ends of his hair stand at static-fused attention. "I heard rumors of a courier service," he said, shoving both hands into his pockets. "I don't imagine you'd know something about that?"

Jill rolled her eyes. "Come inside," she said, stepping aside.

Zihark removed his coat and hat, shaking out his hair. Jill threw a few more branches onto the hearth. "What brings you here?" she asked, returning to her chair. "No one should be out in this weather."

"I was visiting an old friend nearby. I thought it might snow, but I never expected this." He sat across from her.

"You've been gone too long if this was a surprise!"

They shared stories of travel. Zihark wandered between countries to aid old allies, and Jill took to the skies carrying cargo. They'd both noticed it was increasingly complicated to travel in and out of Daein. Even via sky, there were several checkpoints between Talrega and her sources in Begnion. Her last trip had taken so

long that the fresh vegetables were nearly spoiled, but people had tried their hardest to preserve them in their cold cellars.

“I think they’re suspicious about how often I’m crossing the border,” Jill said. “But they don’t realize we can’t farm in this weather.”

“It’s been an especially difficult winter, too.” Zihark rubbed his jaw in thought. “But I’ve noticed it, too. I came here through Gallia, even though the route was longer. But it was easier.”

Jill sighed. “No one thinks about the common people in a war. They shouldn’t have to suffer the sins of one man.”

They fell silent. Zihark fed the fire another branch, which popped and sizzled. Jill waited until he brushed off his hands, returning to his chair, before speaking again.

“Do you really have a friend nearby, or were you checking on me?”

He smirked. “Both can be true, can’t they?”

They had kept in touch well enough after the war. She wrote letters to the friends she’d made, though correspondence was slow across country borders. Jill had settled back home immediately, so they all knew where to send their letters. Zihark had something of a permanent address, but with all his traveling, Jill wondered how often he was there receive the mail.

“I presume your business partner isn’t home,” Zihark said, glancing at her father’s bedroom. The door was slightly ajar.

“This isn’t his home,” she replied. “Just... a place to sleep.”

“Then he should get good use out of it.”

Jill couldn't help but laugh. "I hope you'll use the room tonight. You can't go back out there!"

"Normally I would try to refuse, but in this case, I must agree."

Jill was pleased to not spend the cold night alone. Her father's old quilt required little but a good shaking-out, dispelling any dust or mites that may have buried there.

Zihark claimed exhaustion after a long trip, insisting on retiring early. Though the storm had blocked the sunlight for hours, so there was no telling if it was early or not. With Zihark settled and the bedroom door closed, Jill returned to the dying fire. She had been distracted with preparations for the coming storm, but now Zihark's concern for her absent business partner piqued her own. The house was far from Haar's permanent residence, but she didn't know where else he would be, stranded somewhere in the elements.

She and Haar had returned to Talrega, tended her father's grave, and cleaned out the house that miraculously still stood. They hadn't had many personal belongings, and what little they'd owned was scavenged in the war. At least the furniture remained intact, and the squatters didn't seem to have used the bedrooms. Some clothes still hung in her wardrobe, and she cringed at the thought of someone rummaging through them.

They had made good enough plans for the courier service, at first. They fell into transport naturally, carrying supplies for Daein's restoration. She'd offered her father's room to Haar if he wanted it, and he'd spent a few nights there at first. But recently, the bed was mostly empty. His only visible belongings were a razor on the bedside table and an axe propped in the corner. She didn't even think he had a change of clothes there, as neither had wanted to open the wardrobe. But gradually, he'd stopped staying the night. Then, he wouldn't show for meals. His sporadic

appearances were unscheduled; she knew not where he slept at night, and often went days without seeing him in Talrega at all.

But she had plenty of work to keep busy. Her wyvern loved carrying cargo, saddled with parcels for delivery. But as the seasons passed, Begnion occupation made it more difficult. More checkpoints were hastily set up, more soldiers hovering around their homes. She'd been doing well enough on her own, but that hadn't been the plan. She needed him to keep his promise.

Zihark remained a few days, as the land was buried under snow. But they both enjoyed the company, so neither complained. Zihark trudged through the woods to help gather firewood, and made an enviable stew with whatever food they could scavenge. The village appreciated it as well, having another set of hands to gather food and supplies. He made friends with them all, talking to her neighbors more than she had in the months since the war. In the evenings, they made tea and sat at the table, warmed by the fire and Zihark's now-famous stews.

But it was a comfort that couldn't last. Zihark hadn't said it aloud, but he was visibly restless as the snows began to melt. He would sit outside long after sunset, staring off toward Nevassa. It was during breakfast one morning, over boiled eggs and bread from a neighbor, that Jill finally released him. "I know you have places to be," she said. "I'm fine on my own, and Haar should be home soon." She didn't know why she added the latter part, and Zihark raised a brow in disbelief.

"*Home*, is it?" Jill flushed, but didn't correct herself. "While I know you're a capable woman, I'm not sure I believe that second part. But I should be moving along, anyway. There are"—he paused—"rumors."

Jill frowned. “Of what?”

Zihark leaned over as he reached for the bread. “It’s the real reason I’m in Daein. Begnion has been... you know.”

Jill nodded.

He lowered his voice. “There are people we can trust in Nevassa. If the rumors are true, we could use some more good soldiers.”

Jill stared over his shoulder, at her father’s desk, empty of the stacks of papers she remembered. From outside sounded hammering and people shouting to one another. She thought of the cemetery over the hill, with its small gravestones, now hidden beneath the snow. She thought of her wyvern in its cave, and the nest it had built there.

“Talrega needs me,” she replied. “These people need help.”

Zihark nodded. “I understand.”

But later, as he strapped on his sword and buttoned his coat, his expression said otherwise.

Father, I...

She seldom knew what to say. Sometimes just sitting at the gravestone was enough, same as when she’d wordlessly climbed into his bed as a child. The simple word— *Father*—held everything, which other words couldn’t encompass: loneliness,

sadness, regret, fused into a feeling only expressed in a single sob as she knelt at his grave.

Gravestones were amazingly fragile. They were merely hewn rock, left to the elements to eat away at the etched names and dates. *Shiharam Fizzart* was still legible, not yet worn down by wind and snow. It sat amongst a row of similarly-sized markers, all bearing names of men and women she'd known, people who had seemed so grown-up when she ran barefoot through the camp. Jill traced the letters of her father's name with a finger, cleaning off some unseen dirt and ice.

She stared at the sky, blinking away unshed tears. There was little color to speak of that day, no break of cloud and sky in the endless gray. The air was still, a silence known only to snowfall, though it hadn't snowed in days. In the distance, her wyvern was circling the mountain peak, the only spot of color across the shades of gray.

Once, she and Haar had met at the cemetery, in weather better suited for flowers. She smiled at the memory now: He'd brought a small plant, something that hadn't flowered yet, holding it in both hands like an offering. He had no sense of flowers, but knew too well this basic task of maintaining a gravesite. They had no tools suitable for planting, so used their hands to dig the hole for its fledgling roots. She had forgotten the details until that moment—Haar on his knees, dirt in his hair from when he pushed it off his face, the scowl when the plant wouldn't stand straight.

Jill couldn't remember its the exact location, buried in the snow now. She started to dig near the gravestone. The gloves hindered her progress; despite them, her hands were chilled. More and more of her father's gravestone was revealed until she reached the frozen ground at the bottom. It was just a layer of dirt, but—

There it was, that sad little plant, not entirely dead. Its leaves were gone for winter, but it seemed to unfold from the snowy depths. She touched its naked branches, though her fingers were too cold to feel anything.

The tears burst, pouring down her cheeks, disappearing into the collar of her coat. She wiped her face but it was no use, with the snow-damp gloves, doing little but freezing her face even more. Her vision blurred as she watched her wyvern, circling that distant peak, too far to hear her cries. She hated that it, too, was alone, willing its black companion to appear. But it disappeared in and out of clouds, always emerging alone, a speck against the endless gray.

Sir Haar,

I hope all is well. You haven't been here in a while, so I was getting worried. Winter came early, but Talrega was ready with all the work we did a few months ago. Even though it's cold, some people are still outside doing repairs. The house is fine, and I'm staying warm. Beastie is happy in that big cave we found, but I think she misses her friend.

Zibark came to visit as he was passing through. It was nice to have the company.

Jill paused. She moved to dab the quill in the inkpot, but changed her mind. She read over the letter, then set down the quill. A blotch of ink dripped onto the corner of the letter, a fine waste of expensive ink.

"This is stupid," she mumbled. She balled the paper, which crumpled easily in both hands. It was cheap paper that held ink poorly, something picked up from a traveling

vendor. The black letters bled through the underside of the sheet, a swirling mess of ink and crumpled paper.

It was strange to use her father's desk, not because it was his, but because she properly fit at it now. No longer did her feet swing in the chair. *This was my father's view*, she thought, looking down at the inkpot and quill, at the cheap paper stacked in the corner. The quiet sounds of winter surrounded her, with the crackling hearth and the soft *thump* of footsteps in the snow outside. She was so distracted by the desk itself that she hadn't noticed those footsteps were approaching her door until it rattled. She startled out of a reverie. The door was latched closed, but any polite company would've knocked first. She rose slowly, balling the rejected letter tighter in her hands.

Finally, there was a knock. "Jill? Are you in there?"

She hadn't realized how tightly her jaw was clenched until it eased at the sound of his voice. "By the goddess," she muttered, throwing the door open. "Where have you *been*?!"

Haar rubbed his jaw, failing to stifle a yawn. The armor was a surprise—he'd rarely worn it since the war's end—and she wanted to ask where he'd been, or how far he had traveled. But he wasn't meeting her eye, staring past her into the house itself. Even when he spoke, he spoke to the desk rather than her. "Mind if I come in? It's a bit cold out here."

Jill stepped aside, allowing a wide berth. As he passed, she caught a hint of whiskey, sharp on his breath. He blinked slowly, the fine lines around his eyes pronounced. If she didn't know better, she'd think he hadn't slept recently.

She glanced outside before closing the door. "Where's your beastie?"

“Having a nice, long nap, I hope.” His gaze fell to her hand. “What’s that?”

She clenched her fist, having forgotten about the balled letter. Her palm began to sweat; she squeezed the paper tighter, willing it to disappear. “Nothing,” she replied, walking briskly toward the hearth.

“Did you mean to attack an intruder with a ball of paper? What is it?”

“I said nothing!” Jill flicked it into the fire, where it immediately caught and disintegrated. *Thank the goddess for cheap paper*, she thought. “You didn’t answer my question,” she said.

Haar frowned in reply.

“Forget it.” She shook her head. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” He pushed a hand through his hair. “Just tired. Can we talk later?” He didn’t wait for an answer before turning for her father’s room, but paused at the hearth. He stared into the fire, like he searched for some hidden secret, before disappearing into the bedroom.

“Incredible,” Jill muttered. “Welcome back.”

Haar slept through the next morning; she left bread and ham on the table for when he woke. He hadn’t bothered to close the bedroom door all the way, so she felt no guilt peeking in. He lay sprawled on the bed, the quilt partially covering his torso and one leg. His armor was thrown on the floor, and he slept in the padded underlayer. At least he’d had the good sense to remove his boots. They lay haphazard at the foot of the bed, as if kicked off in a hurry.

Jill bundled in her coat to head outside, where there was already a bustle of morning activity. Vendors were opening their doors, and the sounds of sawing and chopping echoed down the street. She waved to distant neighbors, too far to stop and chat. Besides, they were busy beginning their days as well, breath puffed in clouds and often carrying heavy parcels. Jill turned up her collar and turned for the woods.

It was a rare sunny day, so her wyvern was curled beneath a canopy of trees. It was awake, watching Jill as she approached. “Good morning, beastie,” she said, scratching its jaw. Haar’s mount was close by, full and properly asleep in a patch of sunlight. “And you, too,” she said, patting its neck. “It’s nice to have a friend here, isn’t it?”

It didn’t take long to find Haar’s pack, still hanging from the saddle. The bag likely contained only a change of clothes and some provisions for the ride. The leather bag was soft, the straps visibly newer, with a cheap metal buckle. Her wyvern lifted its head, watching with interest, as Jill threw the pack over her shoulder. She spied an axe partially concealed by one massive black foot, which she left alone.

She expected to see Haar at every turn—hoped, perhaps—but it was a quiet walk back, with only the receding rattle of one snoring wyvern. When she returned home, the food she’d left out was gone. Her father’s door stood wide open, the bed vacant, the quilt folded neatly at the bottom. The armor remained in its unorganized heap, but the boots were gone. Jill dropped the saddlebag on the bed and went back outside.

The courier service had a reliable stream of clients, especially those heading up the rebuilding. Autumn had been successful enough, but winter hit hard and jobs had plummeted. Not only for her, but for all of Talrega—she started being more lenient with payments, accepting food and items she could barter elsewhere. But as winter

progressed and border security got tighter, it was increasingly harder to fend for herself.

Not to say she didn't try, walking town each day to offer her services. Often, her wyvern flew overhead, trying to seal deals in its own way. It was slow and unsteady work. Jill knew she missed out on potential jobs, not having a proper storefront and no coverage when traveling longer distances. Over time, she limited the runs to Talrega and neighboring towns. Now, she walked the streets, greeting neighbors and admiring their handiwork. She chatted with the local farmer, who wouldn't have a shipment for several weeks. She visited the blacksmith, who had nothing new yet; he promised to call on her later. She plastered on a smile and told them it was fine, that she would be ready when they were. After stopping by the usual spots, she turned back. She passed her house, passed the old path into the woods, and walked up the hill toward the cemetery.

She wasn't alone. Haar stood at her father's grave, head lowered, back of his hair mussed from sleep. It was rumored he could sleep while standing, but that wasn't the case now: he fidgeted like he didn't know what to do, crossing his arms only to uncross them again, shifting from foot to foot, exhaling loudly in cold puffs of air.

It shouldn't have been a surprise that he sensed her, but he *knew*, in the slow way he looked over his shoulder, the unblinking, one-eyed stare. When he turned back to the grave, Jill wasn't certain it was an invitation. She took the risk anyway, one step at a time through the muddy, melting snow, until standing at his side. He didn't move, but didn't step away, either. She took it as a good sign. His hand was limp at his side; she reached out tentatively, then hurriedly shoved her hands into her coat pockets.

"I was in Begnion," Haar said. When Jill didn't reply, he added, "I went to see if anything was left."

She paused before asking, “Of what?” But she knew the answer.

“The barracks are demolished. There’s not even a home to return to. Be glad this one is still standing.”

They stared at the gravestone to avoid looking at each other. “Why would you do that by yourself?” she asked. “I would’ve gone with you.”

“For what? To visit the ruins of your father’s heritage? You don’t need to see that.” He stared down the row of graves, each the same size, bearing the name of a fellow soldier, a comrade, a friend. “I just need to rest.”

If the rumors are true, we could use some more good soldiers.

“I hope we can,” she replied.

“What do you mean by that?”

Jill rested her head on his shoulder. She stared at her father’s name on the stone, unnatural, *impossible*, the thought of him lying beneath their feet unfathomable. She traced over each letter again and again until they no longer made sense.

Chapter 2: Spring

Spring didn't come to the north like it did elsewhere. It meant less snow, and only two layers of clothes. It meant the return of songbirds that bristled in light snowfall. It meant wyverns emerging from caves more often, admiring the budding of trees. It meant blue skies, sometimes, and waterproof boots that slogged through the muddy remnants of snow.

And it meant rain. So much rain.

The weather didn't bother her wyvern much, but it hated the weatherproofing for the cargo. The oil-slick hides were heavy, but it kept the crates relatively dry during transport. Jill couldn't say the same for herself. She hated flying with something on her head, preferring visibility over rain protection. Most of the season was spent with damp hair stuck to her neck and arms. The harder the rain, though, the nicer the tips. People were more grateful when she landed in town resembling a drowned animal, pushing back soaked hair while she unloaded the goods. The recipients would help, too, despite her insisting they didn't have to.

At home, the fire roared in the hearth, and at least one damp pair of clothes was draped over a chair at all times. When Haar visited, he often forgot which was the designated drying chair, which was persistently damp even when it didn't hold her travel clothes. This evening, though, Jill sat alone with the crackling fire and hot tea. There wasn't another job lined up for several days.

But she didn't mind the occasional off day, as she often spent them with her wyvern. She spent a little extra money on a new saddle and harness (throwing in some free cargo transport), and waited for a clear afternoon to replace them. It was a day after a string of rainstorms, infused with the scent of pine. The beast was intrigued by the

smell of new leather, nosing at the new harness while Jill affixed the straps. She laughed when the wyvern nudged her shoulder.

“I can’t work if you keep bothering me,” she said, scratching its chin.

But her wyvern kept craning toward the village, sniffing the air. Despite the cleansing rain, it sensed something off, and it made her uneasy. They had a clear view of their makeshift path and she saw no visitors, heard no footfall nor idle chatter. Others weren’t barred from the woods, and would often make time for a stroll as the weather grew warmer. But no common resident would make her wyvern stand at attention like it was now.

“What is it?” she whispered, holding on to a strap. She leaned against its side, which felt much too warm through her layers. Her wyvern snorted, pointing out the visitor who now came into view—a soldier, in too-familiar Begnion red. Jill grit her teeth, stroking her wyvern’s side to steady it. The soldier stepped cautiously over the narrow path, pushing aside wayward branches and trampling over decades of footsteps that didn’t belong to him. Songbirds scattered out of nearby trees, a cacophony of disgruntled chirps.

“Ah, there you are!” The soldier raised an arm in greeting. “Ms. Fizzart?”

Jill didn’t return the wave. “Can I help you with something?”

The wyvern snorted again.

The helmet obstructed most of his face, like a child in his father’s gear. His smile was strained, like he wasn’t used to the gesture. “We’ve been trying to find you,” he said. “You haven’t completed your vendor paperwork.” When she didn’t answer, he

continued. “As you know, all vendors are required to complete the necessary paperwork to conduct business in Daein.”

Her cheeks warmed, but she fought to keep her voice even. “What business is that?”

He eyed the wyvern, who stared back steadily. “T-The”—he coughed, then cleared his throat—“You’ve been accepting payment for transporting cargo, correct?”

Despite the oversize helmet, she could see his eyes flick back and forth between her and the beast. The wyvern lowered his head, a subtle shift, but just enough that the soldier took a small step backward.

“I can’t say that I have,” she replied.

“Now, Ms. Fizzart.” He tried to smile again, but it was strained. “There’s no need to be hostile. It’s a very simple process, and we really do need all vendors to be registered.”

“But I’m not a vendor.”

His voice rose. “We both know that’s—”

The last threads of militant composure unraveled at the deafening beat of wings overhead, which shook the treetops and dispersed any remaining songbirds. Haar could’ve landed anywhere in the woods, but chose that specific spot right in front of the soldier, like a bull’s-eye from above. They took a fine time landing, too, with wings unfurled to full span, a black cloud of scales obstructing the sunlight. The wyvern roared, and the soldier vaulted backward as the beast slowly landed.

Jill waited for her ears to stop ringing before turning back to her visitor. “Can I help you with anything else?”

He was brushing unseen dirt off his arms, and startled at her voice. It was like he'd forgotten she was there. "We'll be in touch," he replied. They watched his clumsy retreat, branches smacking the soldier's face and legs as he tried to follow a path he didn't understand.

"What was that all about?"

Jill shielded her eyes. She was still unused to Haar on the saddle without armor, wearing his civilian clothing. His hair was mussed from the dramatic descent, sticking in all directions. She doubted he noticed.

"They don't know how to mind their own business," Jill said.

"That's Begnion for you." Haar shrugged. "Want to take a ride?"

"Now?" Her wyvern nosed a heap of worn leather, pieces of the old harness she hadn't cleaned up yet.

"Do you want to be here when that guy changes his mind, or take a different way home?"

"I'm not dressed for riding," she said, examining her flimsy pants and worn boots.

Haar jerked his head. "Then come up here."

"*With* you?"

"Better than flying in those shoes, isn't it?"

She stared at her boots, which were decent enough for trekking through the woods, but the laces weren't secure enough for flying on her own. Perhaps the boots would hit a lucky Begnion soldier on the way down, but she couldn't take the chance that

they wouldn't. She glanced at Haar's wyvern, who was lowering to accept another passenger—perhaps grudgingly, she thought—then back at her boots. Resigned, she tightened the laces, then double-knotted them for good measure.

“That's the spirit,” Haar said, extending a hand to help her up.

The back of the saddle wasn't entirely foreign, but it had been a good number of years since she'd rode passenger. Jill wrapped an arm around his waist, pressed against his back in the saddle made for one. She felt the wyvern's rough scales through the fabric of her pants, and prayed they wouldn't tear on the trip.

Though she felt the shift of Haar's shoulder as he readied the reins, heard the “*Hyah!*” to urge the beast skyward, she wasn't prepared for the sudden ascent. It was different having no control over the wyvern, no sense of how quickly or how high they would go. She held on tighter as the trees shrank beneath them. She wasn't familiar with his beast as much as her own, and had little sense of its feelings. Haar and his beastie had a strange relationship; they reflected each another in a way, a bantering she didn't understand. He didn't speak using words, only small gestures in his hands and legs. He tapped the wyvern's side with a foot, seemingly meaningless, but when they turned away from the glaring sun, she understood it to be their own language.



haksart

He took the long way home. They flew through a cloud, damp and refreshing; she breathed in the open air and the sweat-dried scent of Haar's shirt. He clasped her forearm, and she propped her chin on his shoulder.

They drifted southward, where spring was more evident. The treetops burst with greens and pinks, and gardens were beginning to bloom. She never grew tired of this vantage point, how the homes and people resembled toys, as if a tree could be plucked like a flower. The wind whipped at her hair and stung her cheeks. Her flimsy pants flapped wildly, creeping toward her knees, exposing her calves to the sunlight.

When they circled around, Jill wished he'd turned the other way—perhaps he hadn't realized, or was more focused on not losing his passenger to pay attention to the landscape. But she couldn't ignore that looming mountainside, and the floodgates holding back the churning river.

When they'd first come home, her wyvern would drift toward an overlook near the gates, the indent in the mountainside easy to spot. It took several days to guide it

home, long treks up a narrow path, calling for her mourning beastie. But its memorial was no different than her own. She'd visited the cemetery nearly every day, the disbelief growing until her heart couldn't contain it. It wasn't like she never saw the floodgates during cargo runs, but had trained herself to ignore it. Haar, it seemed, had not done the same. She couldn't tell if beast or rider saw it first; his wyvern exuded a confused sort of sadness, and she stroked its side. They hung suspended, at a distance, as if fearing to get too close.

She nudged Haar with her chin. "Hey, thanks," she said. "You came at the right time back there."

The distraction had little effect. Haar stared at the mountainside, lost in his own memories. She studied the side of his face from her perch, his good eye glazed over, his jaw clenched. It was a long while before he snapped out of it, jerking the reins to turn around. "What do they want, anyway?" he asked.

Jill scrambled to remember what she'd said. She recalled only Haar's distant look, the memories—

"Begnion," he prompted.

"Right." She sighed. "They want to get their hands in everything. I don't like it."

"That's what occupation *is*, Jill."

"I know that! I'm not stupid." She rested back on his shoulder. "But I'm afraid they'll keep coming around."

He squeezed her forearm again, then started the journey home. She watched the passing landscape, the river leading down from the floodgates, then the main road into Talrega proper. At the far end was her house, at the edge of the wood; then the

hill, with the plateau of the cemetery. She narrowed in on her father's grave, a pinprick from afar.

Haar steered toward the house, the only home she'd ever known. Even after landing in the back, they didn't move right away. Jill's arms were still around his waist; Haar grasped her wrist. The wyvern moved first, lying down so they could disembark. Finally, she let go. She eased her arm out of his grip, then swung a leg over the saddle. The wind still rushed in her ears. There was a lingering weightlessness after coming down from flight, an impossibility that her feet touched the ground. It seemed impossible that her boots now squelched in the damp earth, that she moved so slowly over solid ground.

"Sometimes I think about what your father would do," Haar said from his perch. "But Daein's a different place now. I don't really know."

She leaned back against the house. "I think about that too," she replied. "My father did what was right for his family, so I'll do the same."

"Even if it means going against your values?"

Jill chewed her bottom lip. "I'm... not sure. I'm not as strong as my father was."

"Don't say that. Don't sell yourself short."

Jill was getting cold. Her feet sank into the damp ground, and she could feel its chill through the soles of her boots. "Well, what about you? You're in this, too."

"I... I made a promise to your father." He paused, glancing around the side of the house. She'd neither heard nor seen anyone, but he lowered his voice regardless. She strained to hear. "You know how I feel about Begnion. I've got no issue knocking some heads if I have to, especially if it means protecting you."

Jill took a sudden interest in the hem of her sleeve, threading it through her fingers.

“Thanks, Captain.”

“C’mon, Jill. It’s not like that anymore. We’re in this together, right?”

It was different coming from Haar, more solidifying. When she looked up, she realized he’d never dismounted. The reins were still wrapped around a fist, his wyvern impatiently pawing the ground. “Are you coming in?” she asked.

“Not yet. You go on without me.”

She waited until he was skyward again, mildly envious. He didn’t look back when he flew toward the woods, picking up his previous trail before the unplanned detour. He receded slowly, a black spec across the expanse of sky. She waited until she could no longer see him before going around to the front.

As she turned the corner, an envelope was wedged in the doorjamb. She seethed at first, thinking it from that soldier, but was surprised to find a letter instead. She hadn’t received one in so long. As she wedged it out of the doorjamb, Zihark’s handwriting was instantly recognizable. Of all her friends, his was the worst, its jagged letters cramped together. She went inside before tearing open the envelope, sitting at her father’s desk to read.

Jill,

Greetings, old friend! This might come as a surprise, but I’m still in Daein. I had planned to remain for a bit, but this winter was one of our worst. It’s a long many months to stay in one place, that’s for sure. But I’m pleased it’s beginning to thaw. There might even be something green outside my window.

I hoped to visit you again, but won't have a chance for a while. I pray this letter finds you in time. I've been thinking about what we discussed before I left, and hope you have been thinking about it, too. I've made many friends in my time here, and we would love to have you visit us. They're like-minded people, and we'd all get along splendidly. If I know you, you've been working hard without a break. You could use the time away!

I do plan to travel once the snows thaw, so I will come say hello when I have the chance.

All the best,

Zihark

The letter was exceptionally vague, a false cheerfulness. If even these friendly words had been intercepted, that blasted soldier or one of his friends would have delivered it himself with accompanying questions.

She folded the letter along its creases, sliding it back into the envelope. She left it on the corner of the desk. She didn't want to hide it in a drawer yet, wanting to read it again later. It lay near the edge, hidden in plain sight. She wondered if it looked suspicious that she hadn't filed it away.

This is silly, she thought. It's just a friendly letter.

She shook her head and went back outside.

It appeared to be any other normal evening. People were shuttering up businesses and coming in from the fields, the black smoke of chimneys evidence of evening meals underway. It brought the scent of meats and vegetables, of stews and roasts. And the soldiers—she couldn't tell if there were more than usual, or if she was over-conscious

of them. Begnion red, splattered like blood up and down the street. They moved amongst the residents like they, too, belonged there, with swords and lances at the ready. When one turned in her direction, she turned to gather firewood from the pile.

She wondered when Zihark would pass through again.

Talrega had hoped their neighbors would return once winter passed, then it was by mid-spring. But when summer came, many homes were still in half-demolished shambles. Their vacancies were fueled more by rumor than concrete news: who was thought to have perished in war; who had settled south permanently. Few of the missing had contacted anyone at all. Still, those who had returned rebuilt as much as they could. Some of the vacant homes with easier repairs were completed, and gardens planted either in expectation or in memory. It was an attempt to convince the occupying soldiers that their neighbors would return, but as time passed, it became less convincing. Begnion began to claim the vacancies as their property, moving in their own soldiery. Talrega's real residents avoided those homes in silent protest.

Jill had been rattled enough by her one confrontation to remain as inconspicuous as possible. She didn't carry large orders all at once, and often delivered smaller, local parcels by foot in nondescript packaging. When she did fly, it was early morning or after nightfall, before or after the daily rush. She kept a small amount of coin on her, no more than any other resident would have. Her wyvern kept the rest affixed to its saddle, its cave a better hiding spot than the house.

Zihark wrote often, but never with a forwarding address. Even if he had, she wasn't sure how she would reply. The uncertainty of his plans hung over everything. She distracted herself by tending to the cemetery more frequently. Not only her father's

gravesite, but all of them—their comrades, those who rested in this so-called backwater village. She tilled the soil and planted new flowers. She found peace in pulling weeds, in smoothing the soil. There were older graves in the back, stones with illegible carvings or whose names had rubbed off. She imagined they were Talrega residents long passed, or people too poor to afford a real gravestone. She cleaned these, too, scrubbing them clean of old dirt and bird droppings. It was a good distraction, something meaningful between cargo runs. The Begnion soldiers never visited the cemetery, so her time there became an odd sort of refuge.

She'd hardly touched her lance since the Mad King's War ended, but now carried it on cargo runs. There were an increased number of jobs outside Talrega, and some still into Begnion proper. She felt safer with the lance. She considered wearing the armor, too, but doubted it still fit. The thick pants and padded shirt were fine enough for cargo transport, but offered little protection if someone did pick a fight.

Jill spoke in hushed voices with other vendors, those who couldn't conceal their business status as well. She conspired with the local farmers, visiting them in the fields far from prying ears. They were proper registered vendors; a Begnion representative visited weekly for a share of their profits. She arranged a drop-off routine with them, introducing them to her wyvern and showing where they could bring their crates at night undetected. They left their shipments in the cave, where her wyvern stood guard, then stopped by the house to let her know. Sometimes they would knock, but more often they slipped a packing list under the door. They all learned Begnion's movements: when the watch changed for the night, and when her customers could stop by for a seemingly casual hello. In the morning, she would transport the goods Begnion didn't know existed.

Haar worked, sometimes. More often than not, he'd nap in the woods alongside his wyvern. She grew weary of yelling at him to wake up; it was easier to move the cargo herself. She'd grown strong enough in the war to carry a crate of produce or tools on her own. Her wyvern was used to the routine, lowering its head for the harness, adjusting the weight of the cargo as it readied for flight. When they took off from the cave, she never knew if it disturbed Haar's nap. She wouldn't look back to check.

Regardless, she yearned to talk with him. About what, she wasn't sure. There was never a good time, anyway—either she was busy with shipments, or he was napping, and they were rarely home at the same time. When they did intersect for supper, at least he offered to prepare the meal. He was decent at the hearth, too, even if it was often a different variation of stew. Jill sat at the table, thinking of Zihark's letters that accumulated on the desk. It wasn't possible that Haar didn't notice them every time he passed. In a way, she *wanted* him to notice, to pry into their contents. But he never asked. He stirred the pot while she stared at a blank manifest.

“Haar?”

He tilted his head, but it was side with the bad eye, leaving her staring at the black void of the eyepatch. He was preoccupied with the food either way, sprinkling something she couldn't see into the pot. “Yeah?”

She hadn't planned what to say next. There were occupying soldiers living amongst them, and a stack of vague letters hidden in plain sight. She chose her words carefully, unsure what she was asking. “Do you think Daein will revolt?”

He chose two bowls off the shelf. He ladled the stew, chunks of meat with potato and onion. A steamy fog billowed around his face. “Who would lead it?”

He set the bowls on the table before sitting across from her. She didn't like the scrutiny in his eye, the steady way he watched her. "Well..." She paused. "I guess you're our highest-ranking officer."

He scoffed. "There's no rank. The platoon is gone."

Jill stirred her stew, releasing a cloud of steam.

"And not you," he added.

She ignored the jab. "Then what happens?"

"Now?" Haar took a bite before answering. He chewed slowly, buying time. Then he shrugged. "Either some nobody starts an uprising, or Daein gets absorbed into Begnion. It won't stay like *this*, that's for sure."

When Jill finally ate, the stew was warm, flavorful. The onions gave it a nice touch. The farmer had slipped in some extras with his last shipment. She wanted to drop the topic, wanted to enjoy the meal, maybe compliment him on it. But she'd already breached it, had to *know*, needed to pick at that seemingly indifferent brain. "Then it was all for nothing," she said.

Haar frowned. "What was?"

"If Daein is just a part of Begnion, what was the point of leaving? My father died for nothing."

She regretted it immediately. The silence fell heavy, and they stopped eating. Jill's eyes watered, convincing herself it was from the steam. Haar set down his spoon.

"It was *not* for nothing," he said quietly. "We had a good life here."

“We can have a good life again.”

Haar leaned back, arms crossed. “Jill, what are you getting at?”

“I’m not really sure.” She sighed. “I’m sorry, I... I didn’t mean it. I loved living here.”

“I know.” He picked up his spoon again. “Let’s just eat. Don’t waste a good meal with talk like that.”

Once she acknowledged it, she saw it everywhere, in every town. There were fewer residents in the streets and more soldiers. They kept guard at village borders, and talked with nervous vendors. When Jill landed at the outskirts of a town, they bombarded her immediately. She kept a tight fist on her manifests, and tighter still on the cargo itself.

“I’m delivering to a friend,” she explained, every time. It was a weak excuse, but enough to allow her passage, for the time being.

She didn’t deliver to Nevassa often, but when she came one afternoon with a mail delivery, saw the extent of what she’d feared. She slowly flew circles over the city, for as long as the occupying soldiers would allow—not that there was anywhere to land, with its cramped, dirty streets. Many of the residences had been left to ruin, with no hope of salvaging. Tents were set up in the squares, temporary homes that had become permanent. She wasn’t sure where to find the recipients of her deliveries, or if their homes were still standing. When she finally found a spot outside the city proper, the only area wide enough to land without disturbance, a Begnion soldier greeted her before they even touched down.

“State your business!” he shouted. With impeccable posture and lance in hand, the soldiery in the capital was clearly better trained than those in the countryside.

Jill disembarked, bringing her own lance. She patted the bulking sack of mail that hung at her wyvern’s side. “Mail delivery,” she said. “I’ve been instructed to deliver to”—she checked the manifest—“Lieutenant Alder.”

The soldier’s lance was too at the ready for her liking, and she tightened her grip on her own. It was difficult to untie the mail sack one-handed, but she didn’t like the way he scrutinized her or her wyvern. He stepped close enough that she smelled his breath, sour like he hadn’t eaten. When the mail sack came free, he moved to grab it, but Jill was faster—she threw the sack over her shoulder, taking a quick step back in the process.

“Thank you,” the soldier said, closing the gap again. “I’ll take it from here.”

Jill twisted from his extended hand, her lance standing between them. “Are you Lieutenant Alder?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I’ll make sure he receives it.”

She felt her wyvern’s reaction before she heard it, that low rumble in its throat. Jill pressed back against its side to wedge the mail bag between them. The soldier stood too close, toe-to-toe; Jill pressed back farther, the crush of letters stabbing into her back.

“My instruction is to deliver it directly,” she said, watching the curl of the wyvern’s tail from her peripheral vision.

“The instruction has changed,” he said, and grabbed at her hand.

The two moved at once, Jill and her beast; Jill ducked as a tail whipped around, landing square across the soldier's back. He sank to his knees, lance clattered to the ground, which Jill kicked out of reach. She leaped to the side, pointing her own lance, regretting the move even as she did it. This Captain Alder would certainly hear of this, and others up the chain of command. But she didn't move, even when he stared up at her, teeth grit and hands clenched into fists.

"Who do you think you are?" he asked, rising back to his feet. The lance followed him, aimed for his throat.

She considered answering truthfully, but it would likely backfire later, against both her and Haar. Instead, she stopped pointing the lance at his face. She stood it upright instead, the same position he'd greeted her with. "I'm simply delivering the mail," she replied. "Now, if you'll lead me to Lieutenant Alder." She scratched her wyvern's neck before following the soldier through the gates.

It would've been easier to let him have the mail. Not only so she could return home faster, but so she could avoid seeing Nevassa up close. The streets were crowded, and her escort walked so fast that it was hard to keep up. Vendors hawked their wares, and she wove around outstretched arms pleading for alms. Everything was so *noisy*, with the cries of the homeless, with shouting from all directions. Her boots crunched over broken glass, spoiled food, and who knew what else. She didn't look too closely at the alleyways, trying only to follow her guide through whatever haphazard route he was leading her. Even the military quarters seemed abandoned when they reached them, though at least it was a complete building with a functioning door. He made her wait outside, which was just as well. She wasn't sure what she'd do in a room full of Begnion soldiers.

Jill leaned against the building, tapping her lance on the cobblestone. It was taking too long; they couldn't have forgotten her. More likely, they left her waiting intentionally. It was starting to grow dark, but little changed around her. Vendors still pleaded for customers, and the homeless wrapped in rags still cried out for spare change. She squeezed her eyes shut, but it did nothing to block the cacophony of distress. Finally, the door to the military quarters opened.

“You’re still here?”

It was a man she didn't recognize, but his decorated armor held obvious rank.

“Lieutenant Alder?”

He eyed her up—too long for her liking—and then noticed the mail sack. “You have something for me?”

She didn't want to give him the mail. There was no way he would deliver it; he didn't seem the kind to care for frivolous correspondence. But she showed him the manifest, confirming his name as the recipient. He nodded, visibly bored.

“If you prefer,” she said, “I could deliver the mail myself.”

“No need.” He took the sack from her outstretched hand. “I have people who will handle it.” He didn't say *thank you* as he turned back, slamming the door behind him.

It was a long walk back to the gates, a maze of battered homes and tight alleys. People eyed her warily, an unknown carrying a lance. *I'm one of you*, she wanted to say, to every one of them. She wished she'd left the weapon with her wyvern. She tried to make eye contact with some of them, seeing each of them as *people*, imagining their familiar and those they lost. But they looked away, huddled into themselves or

shuttering their homes. “It won’t stay like this,” she whispered, remembering Haar’s words, praying to whichever goddess would listen that it was true.

The armor was stored in the back of her wardrobe. She knew it would no longer fit, but lay the pieces out to examine them. They were comically small for a soldier, pitted with scars. She tried to wedge on a bootguard, but it stopped before the heel. The armor had been a gift from her father. She didn’t know who had made it, probably an armorer in Talrega, but she didn’t know of one. Local vendors were wary when she asked around; even the blacksmith claimed he didn’t know. But he offered to do the upgrade himself, as long as she came by after nightfall. Jill visited the shop one night long after hours, softly knocking on the back door with a clanking burlap sack over her shoulder.

The blacksmith was rough around the edges, but warmly welcomed her in. They’d conducted enough business before, with the countless tools and supplies Talrega and its neighbors needed. “I’ll admit, I didn’t know your father,” he said. “But stories go around.”

She bit her lip. “I’m sorry—”

He waved her off, taking the heavy sack. “The real stories,” he said, lowering his voice. “I never believed those old rumors from General Petrine.”

He didn’t ask why she needed the armor, and she didn’t offer. She stood still as possible in the hot back room as he took measurements, the ritual oddly familiar —

shoulder span, shin length, foot size—as he scratched down her numbers. He would be in touch, he said, leading her back to the door. She mourned leaving the armor behind.

It was late enough that the Begnion guard was light, only a few scattered soldiers keeping a sleepy watch. She stared straight ahead as she walked down the main road, avoiding their curious looks. She'd done fine enough sneaking past them the last few weeks, but as she approached the house, saw her luck had run out. The threshold stood wide open, blocked by a red-clad soldier. She couldn't tell if it was the same one from the forest that day. They all looked alike.

As she drew closer, an indistinguishable exchange was heard from inside. Haar must be in, then, though he hadn't been there when she'd left. A few familiar words stood out—*paperwork, Daein, shipments*—and as she came up behind the soldier, saw a sheaf of papers in his hands.

“Can I help you with something?” Jill asked.

The soldier whipped around. She waited for the inevitable question—*What are you doing out?*—but instead, he grinned. “Just the person I was looking for! We know you’ve been very busy, so I brought your vendor paperwork to fill out.”

“For what?”

“By the goddess,” Haar said from inside. “Leave the damned paperwork and get out of here!”

The soldier looked back and forth from inside the house, then outside, then inside again. Jill couldn't see past him, but he stared at some unseen spot inside. After a

lengthy internal debate, he set the papers on the firewood pile. “You must return the paperwork imminently,” he said. “It is a requirement of Daein administration.”

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Jill said evenly, “get away from my house.”

The soldier paused. He took one last look inside, as if waiting for confirmation, but Jill had said all that was to be said. He walked away briskly, wiping sweating palms on his trousers. Jill glared at his receding back, in case he decided to turn around, but he didn’t. She snatched the stack of papers and stormed inside, slamming the door behind her.

She stopped short, nearly dropping the papers in alarm. “*Haar!*”

He stood with his arms crossed, threadbare pants low on his hips, no shirt. The soldier must have made some kind of racket to wake him; his eyepatch was missing, revealing a scarred mass beneath unkempt hair. A single candle was lit, casting dark and flickering shadows across the dim room.

Haar scratched the back of his head, then frowned. He rubbed the corner of his missing eye, where the eyepatch should’ve been. “Oh. Sorry.”

“That’s not...” she shook her head. “I don’t care about *that*. But I think you scared him away.”

“That honor was all you.” He jerked his chin toward the papers. “What’s all that, anyway?”

She didn’t answer as she handed them over. Haar noisily flipped through the stack, frowning more deeply with each sheet. He grunted, dropping them on the table with a *thud* without finishing. “Are they kidding? Why’re they bothering you with this?”

She stared at the vendor papers, at the dim pool of candlelight.

“Jill?”

It was unfair to him, the anger roiling in her chest. She grasped a handful of papers, crumpling them in a fist. “*Me?* I thought we were in this together.”

“What—”

“What are you even doing? I’m sneaking around just to make a living!”

Haar shook his head. “They came asking for you. I’m not even—”

“Whose fault is that?” She shook the papers at him, dangerously close to the flame, and he took a step back. “Don’t you see what’s going on out there? Don’t you care about Daein?!”

Haar rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand. “Jill, please. I don’t want to fight with you.”

“You don’t want to do *anything!*” She tossed the papers to the table, seeing the blunder too late—Haar lurched for the candle, but wasn’t fast enough; the slight flame caught the edge of the papers. They were entranced by the rapidly curling pages, which scattered black ash. The fire quickly spread from page to page and Haar moved first, blowing out the candle and grabbing a towel off the hearth. The air smelled of smoke as he smothered the flame, casting them in darkness. Jill’s eyes watered, from the smoke and from something she didn’t want to admit, her eyes adjusting to see the scorched remnants of vendor paperwork. Haar sat down, raking both hands through his hair.

“Forget it,” Jill spat.

Haar did nothing when she stormed to the bedroom, not that she looked back. She slammed the door and leaned back against it, swiping tears from her cheeks. She angrily tore out her hair clasp, massaging the headache from the crown of her head. It made little difference, with her pulse pounding in her temples.

The floor creaked in the main room, slow footsteps in an indistinct direction. Their bedroom doors sat side-by-side, so it was impossible to know where he stopped. But there had been no knock on her door, no call of her name. There's been no creak of hinges, either, no noise at all save the last of her whimpering tears. She lay a hand over her heart, willing it to calm. She stood there so long, her breathing so loud in the silence, that her eyes fully adjusted to the dark. The room seemed drab, impersonal, lonely in the night. She waited a beat, then opened the door.

The main room was cast in frigid silence. The remaining charred paper was in the hearth, fuel for the morning's fire. There would be bits of scattered ash on the table for a while, but in the dark, she couldn't see it.

Haar's bedroom door stood open. It was a strange kind of relief that he was there, the anger diminishing as she watched him sleep—sprawled on his back atop the quilt, one arm and one leg dangled off the edge. The eyepatch lay on the bedside table, and a pile of cloth on the floor nearby. She presumed it was his shirt.

“Captain?”

Jill barely heard her own whisper, both wanting him to wake but not wanting to disturb. He didn't stir, didn't move at all. She crept closer, hoping the floorboards wouldn't creak. They didn't.

She stood at the foot of the bed, staring at his few belongings on the bedside table. The outline of the wardrobe was barely visible in the corner. They'd changed virtually

nothing in the room, preserved like a shrine. She's never considered his feelings about sleeping in that bed, using that same old quilt. She delicately touched the corner of the quilt, tracing the intricate pattern in the stitching. It had been a gift long ago, her father had said; she couldn't remember a time that it wasn't there. Haar's leg twitched in sleep and she pulled her hand back, like it burned.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, then turned to leave.

She paused at the threshold. Maybe she'd heard something, a whisper of her name on a wind, or a creak of the bed as he shifted. She didn't want to look, convinced it was in her head, but still, she hesitated. After a prolonged silence, she crept back to her own room.

They didn't outright avoid each other, but Jill spent more time away from home when he might be there. She moved quietly when he slept during the day, rather than try to wake him. When he wasn't there, he would be gone days at a time, and she stopped expecting him for meals again. But they communicated in other ways, in silent apologies. Jill would leave out food before her morning runs, which would sometimes be gone when she returned later. Haar would leave scraps of paper in its place, bearing a name and address, which she quickly learned were potential customers.

Some of Haar's contacts had come through, however he had found them. They were always outside Talrega, in remote locations where Begnion hadn't infiltrated yet. She showed up at an address, and there was a crate awaiting pickup. More often than not, she refused coin as payment. They bartered instead, and completed no official paperwork. She memorized the names and addresses, then burned the notes in the hearth before leaving.

Before long, it was too hot to travel, the sun-beaten streets nearly empty by midday. Jill was glad to shuck off some layers, flying in a sleeveless shirt after the morning's deliveries. She looked forward to being home, to unloading the bundle of payments—a bolt of red cloth she was tempted to keep, rather than trade; a sack of oats that would last a month's worth of breakfasts; a small bag of flint. Her wyvern flew slower in the rising temperature, but she didn't mind the more casual speed. The sun was high and hot, and there was a sheen of sweat on her skin. Summer was a few precious months, a brief reprieve between cold and colder. She patted her wyvern's neck as it flew toward its cave, landing easily in its shade.

It would be an easy afternoon, she thought, as she followed the path back home. Her back sweat under the bolt of cloth, which was strapped over a shoulder; the oats were starting to feel heavy, and she shifted them from one arm to the other. The house was a welcomed sight when it came into view.

Haar was often absent in the afternoon, so it was a surprise to see him at the table when she walked in. He ate the breakfast she'd left out; the cheese was gone, and half the loaf of bread remained. He worked at a crust of bread, bending it back and forth in his hands. As she drew closer, she saw why—beside a growing pile of bread fragments lay a sheaf of crisp, neat papers. She didn't have to ask where they'd come from.

Haar tore off a piece of crust, adding it to the pile. She wasn't sure if he was eating it, or was just ripping it into smaller and smaller pieces. She set down the bag of oats. She unfastened the bolt of fabric, her back damp where it had rested. But the sweat felt cold as she sat across from him, staring at the stack of papers. It was visibly thicker than the last.

“I made up some very creative reasons why they shouldn’t search the house,” Haar said.

Jill surveyed the room, as if expecting something to look different, sullied by the mere idea of Begnion’s presence. She hated the idea of them in the house, their boots clomping over the floors her father had laid himself. She fidgeted with the bag of flint on her wrist, untying and retying the leather closure.

“Did you see anyone on the way back?” Haar asked.

She shook her head.

“That’s a surprise. I thought for sure they’d be waiting for you.” He studied the pile of bread crusts, as if noticing it for the first time. Finally, he popped one into his mouth; Jill was distantly pleased that he was actually eating it. “They’re going to shut it down, Jill.”

There were still flecks of charred dust on the table, remnants of the last stack of paperwork that she couldn’t get out of the grooves. She stared at the papers: neat, crisp, new. Expensive paper.

Jill suddenly pushed back, chair legs scraping loudly. She strode for the door without a word, throwing it open. The air outside was stuffy, assaulting her with its heavy, damp heat.

“Jill?” Haar called out. “What are you doing?”

She grabbed a single log off the firewood pile. They wouldn’t need a big fire, and she wouldn’t waste good firewood on Begnion, anyway. A single log was enough, and a small piece of flint. She left the door open as she made for the hearth, ignoring Haar’s curious stare. She hadn’t lit a fire in days so it was empty, the ashes cleaned out. She

dropped the log into the hearth, then retrieved a piece of flint from the bag. Her palms were sweating; it took some effort to strike it. Finally, the fire roared to life, too hot with the sweltering heat from outside. She swiped the top sheet off the vendor paperwork, balling it in her fists. It took some effort to crumple to her satisfaction, stiffer than her usual writing paper. It bit at her palms and she balled it tighter, smaller.

Haar stood from the table. “Jill...”

It was a straight shot into the fire, where the ball immediately caught and blackened. It disintegrated into a satisfying pile of ash.

“They’ll hang you for this,” Haar said.

“Are you joining me or not?”

He looked to the papers, then to the fire. Jill was unreasonably calm, tapping impatient fingers on her thigh. Then, he smirked. He picked up the next sheet between thumb and forefinger, as if sullied. It crumpled loudly in both fists, packed tightly, then he tossed it into the hearth. The rich paper slowly melted under the heat.

They took turns with the stack, cheeks flushed, pitching one crumpled ball after another. The fire sparked, and the paper caught quickly, disintegrating into black ash. Jill was distantly aware of the open front door, aware that they could be caught at any time, but she laughed. She laughed, too, when Haar joined in, so unused to the sound, coughing from either its disuse or the growing smoke.

One sheet remained, the last page of a contract, a line for a signature. A vow to occupied Daein, a percentage of profits. Haar slid it toward her. Jill swiped the sheet, twisting and mangling it before tossing it to its final resting place.

They leaned back against the table, side by side. It hadn't been excruciating labor but they breathed heavier, the air hot and thick. They watched the final remnants singe and disintegrate. Without the added fuel of paper, the fire was dying out quickly.

"I'm sorry," Haar said.

"For what?"

"I should've said that sooner. When you"—he paused—"When you called me a lazy good-for-nothing."

She watched the fire, or what was left of it. The hearth was filled with ash, the single piece of wood charred and broken. "I never used those words."

"You might as well. I deserved it." They faced her father's bedroom, with its neatly-made bed, the untouched wardrobe. "This is stupid to say to *you*, of all people. But it's hard being here sometimes."

She didn't have to ask what he meant, staring at the corner of that same old quilt through the open door. "That's not stupid," she said.

"It is. You lost more than I did." Haar crossed his arms. "I know it's a lousy excuse."

"Maybe you're right," she said. "But it's not a competition."

Jill moved toward the shelves. She unfolded a small towel, wiping sweat off her hands and face. She studied the items there, more for distraction than interest—cooking tools; bowls; containers of various sizes. Common things, most of them new, replaced after the war.

“I miss him so much, Haar. I miss him every day.” Her voice cracked. It was an effort to turn around and look at him, confronting the too-familiar pain of his expression. Haar never cried—at least, she’d never seen it—but there was a depth she didn’t want to understand, the same as the sting behind her own eyes. “But I know he’d want me to keep living my life.” She tried to smile. “That goes for you, too.”

Haar gave her no chance to react before closing the space between them, pulling her into a hug. She didn’t try to move, didn’t protest when he guided her head to his shoulder. She thought of all the countless words he could’ve said instead, any combination of acknowledgement or understanding, but couldn’t imagine him uttering any of them. But they would’ve made just as much sense as *this*, she thought, returning the hug, the mutual grief, the wordless agreement. The history of the house hung over them, a fleeting life in a foreign country that became home.

She closed her eyes, wanting to feel only the steady beat of his heart. Not the emotions. Not the sorrows of the past, nor the looming sense of dread. Only his heartbeat, as he rested his chin on her head, as she clung to him tighter.

Chapter 3: Autumn

The onions were missing.

The crates were always in the same location, along the wall of the wyvern cave. The farmer had stopped by the house the previous evening, confirming their delivery. Jill hadn't brought the manifest with her that morning, because the deliveries were light, and to familiar locations—one crate of tools from the blacksmith, and one crate of onions from the farmer. The tools were present and accounted for. She circled her wyvern, who watched her movements, offering no help. It wasn't possible that the farmer had dragged the crate in deeper; it was dark back there even in daylight. She sniffed at the air, as if trying to detect them, but smelled only the cold damp of the cave itself.

It didn't seem possible that he'd dropped it somewhere else, less likely that someone would steal it. Her wyvern kept a solid guard, alert even as it slept. But there were no onions.

I'll deal with it later, she thought, dragging the other crate from the wall. Her wyvern preferred to carry heavier shipments first, anyway, not that they had a choice. Jill looped the strap of the harness twice around the saddle, then thrice around the crate of tools, fastening the clasp and pulling tight. Her wyvern waited, unmoving, patient for the ritual's end.

"Let's go, beastie," she said, hoisting onto the saddle. "Unless you know where the onions are?" It offered no response, only staring wistfully at the dawning sky through the mouth of the cave.

Progress was slower when they carried tools, but neither minded the leisurely flight. Autumn hadn't truly started yet—the woods still clung to shades of green—but the

weather was starting to cool. She coaxed her wyvern westward, and once it understood their destination, she sat back and let it take over. The early morning flight was streaked with the orange glow of sunrise, and peppered with other flyers. They often kept their distance to avoid collision, but she waved to them passing. Sometimes, they waved back.

The new village was easy to spot from above. They'd created something of a main road since she'd last visited, laying down stone and measuring plots for new houses. Many of them had walls, some now with roofs; the echo of hammers and saws reached into the sky. Jill landed easily at the end of the road, emitting a cloud of dust in the new construction. It was an easy delivery, one they had done before: the foreman greeted her, helped unload the crate, and paid generously. It was one of few places that offered real coin. She had stopped trying to refuse the money and accepted it graciously, tucking it into three different pouches concealed in different places. Truthfully, she didn't mind the extra money. The blacksmith had been working long nights on her armor, often in the dark to avoid prying Begnion eyes, and she wanted to thank him properly.

This far west, they would stop at the river on the way home. There was a spot common to riders, tucked in the woods where foot travelers were rare. It was a little out of the way, but it was one of the few places where the river was wide and deep enough for a wyvern to fully submerge itself. Once they were airborne and steering off-course, her beast picked up speed as it recognized their destination. "I guess it's been a while, huh?" she said with a laugh, the wind whipping at her fringe. She shielded her eyes against the sun, flying deeper over the forest. Here, the skies were more populated, riders guiding their mounts to their favorite spots along the winding river. Jill's preferred location was farther out, one her father had shared years priors,

that was worth the extra travel time. Her wyvern knew the entrance amongst endless treetops, twisting through the dense foliage.

The shore was studded with beasts and riders, some bathing in the waters, others napping or chatting up other visitors. Jill began their slow descent, but couldn't land in the exact spot she'd planned—in her favorite spot, a black mound of a beast dozed, with its black-clad rider surprisingly *not* doing the same. Haar stood at the water, bare feet submerged. His black boots were tossed aside in the grass. Jill's wyvern huffed in annoyance, but then settled beside its sleeping companion.

Jill dismounted, adjusting the hem of her shirt. "What are you doing here at this hour?" she asked.

"What does it look like?" Haar replied, jerking his head toward his beast.

It was a long way home for a nap, but then saw the real reason: beside his wyvern lay a mess of harnesses, too many for only a saddle. She examined the pile, but had recognized it at once: they were the same straps and buckles on her own wyvern, the same equipment she used to carry cargo. Haar's wyvern seemed to grunt in its supposed sleep, either skeptical or insulted.

"You're working?"

"A man's gotta eat."

Jill examined a buckle, as if looking for a defect. It wasn't like he'd never *worked*, but she'd never seen it in action, and wasn't even sure how he'd rigged the harness. When Haar approached, there was a whiff of something distinct and familiar. Vegetal, even. She scrunched her nose. The scent was out of place along the riverbank, but—

"You took the onions," she said suddenly.

Haar shrugged, like it was obvious.

Jill gathered handfuls of the empty harness straps. She hadn't put the pieces together earlier, because there was no crate in sight. "You already delivered them? How did you know where to go?"

"You told me where the manifest is."

"I didn't think you were paying attention!" She released the harness, looking from Haar to the wyvern and back. Haar smirked, and she would swear his wyvern did the same. "Well... thank you."

"No need for that. We're partners, right?"

Jill's wyvern had been patient enough, but now clawed anxiously at its restraints. It gave her a good excuse to turn away, working quickly to unclasp and unknot the array of straps and buckles. She had hardly removed the saddle before it lunged for the water, kicking up dust. The beast visibly shivered in the cold water, but that didn't stop it from sinking deeper into the river. It shook its head, stretching its long neck out of the water.

Jill was envious, longing to join in. But she wasn't so bold to bathe now, even if the beast would shield her from prying eyes. Instead, she removed her boots and sat near the water. Though she knew it would be cold, it was still a shock to dip her feet in. The water was murky, and she couldn't see her toes when she wiggled them. Haar set down beside her.

They watched the wyvern bathe, stretching its wings. It dunked beneath the water, disappearing only a moment before shooting back up to spray water everywhere. It splashed Jill's legs, and she wiped them dry with a sleeve. Despite the serenity of the

woods, and the camaraderie up and down the river, it was a false joy. She couldn't stop thinking of the world beyond that semi-secret spot, littered with uncertainty. Jill hugged her knees, staring at the ground between her bare feet.

"What is it?" Haar asked, as if sensing the sudden shift.

She thought of Nevassa and its crowded streets, and of the new village Begnion hadn't noticed yet. She thought of vendor papers, and the farmer's produce. She thought of the blacksmith, and ached for her armor, suddenly cold and exposed without it.

"I don't know what to do," she said.

She remembered the heft of a lance, and the one-handed grip as she clutched a saddle. She remembered her father sitting behind her, demonstrating how to pull the reins, laying her small hand on a wyvern flank to sense its emotions.

"You know the answer to that," Haar replied. "You do what's right."

The water rippled with the slow unfurling of wings. Her wyvern took flight, rising above the trees to make slow circles over the woods. It would return after drying off, but in the meantime, basked in the dawning light.

"Was there anything else to deliver today?" Haar asked.

"No, I took care of the other one."

Haar stood, brushing dirt off the seat of his pants. "Then if you don't mind, I'll be taking a nap."

Jill watched the gentle lap of water, inching closer to her bare toes as wyverns dipped in and out of the river. She kept an ear out for her own beast, but it would be a while before it would return. It had always liked this spot, exploring the familiar woods and watching the other wyverns that flew past. For the moment, it was free, unbound from rider and obligation.

She peered over her shoulder. Haar was stretched out on his back, using his wyvern's tail as a pillow. The beast breathed steadily, a slow rise and fall with each breath. Haar shifted, scuffing a heel against the ground, but didn't wake.

Jill collected her boots before standing up. Though it was near impossible to wake him, she still crept over quietly. She'd always been surprised that he was a quiet sleeper, though it wouldn't have been easy to steal naps if he snored. Eyes closed, mouth slightly ajar, he rubbed his nose and stifled a yawn. *Can you yawn when you're asleep?* she thought.

She sat at his side, a respectable distance away. He swatted a wayward strand of hair that fell over his eyepatch. She remembered the story of that accident, the "rookie mistake" he called it. She'd helped her father with the medicine, the peppermint salve strong in her memory.

"I'm going to do it," she whispered. "I don't know what it means, but I know I have to go." She waited like he might answer. When he didn't—not that she'd expected it—she rested back on her hands. The grass was soft, plush under her palms. It was not yet autumn-brittle, fed by the river and perpetual shade. She grazed a hand over it, then plucked one at random. She twisted it around her finger, then tied it into a knot. She marveled at its strength, how it could withstand pressure from both ends and not break. She pulled the knot tighter, smaller, until the blade finally snapped. Tough, yet fragile; withstanding countless footfalls, yet brittle under too much pressure. Haar

slept soundlessly, her wyvern soared somewhere overhead, and for the moment, she had nowhere else to be. Resigned, she lay on the grass, facing away from him.

Jill curled on her side, head rested on folded arms, with a sideways view of the river. A wyvern was creeping into the water, hesitant of the cold. Across the river, its rider leaned against a tree, reading a book. Jill's eyes drifted closed, which heightened her other senses—the soft grass beneath her hip, the low whine of a wyvern's snore. She thought she heard her own wyvern from above, its cry mixed with the others in leisurely flight.

Haar fidgeted, another scuff of his heel. It was remarkably easy to feign sleep, she thought, pretending not to notice when he shifted onto his side. The wyvern shifted, too, a flick of the tail, a slight breeze that ruffled her hair. She was envious of his ability to nap at that moment, undisturbed. She opened her eyes, watching the skies over the river, wondering if Begnion knew of this exact spot in this remote part of the woods.

She rolled onto her back. She was startled to see Haar looking back at her, more so that he toyed with the ends of her ponytail. He withdrew his hand slowly, unbothered that she'd noticed.

"It got long," he said. "It was tickling my nose."

Jill smiled. "Sorry."

She folded her hands on her stomach, watching the sky. There was an occasional flash of bright green in the gaps between leaves, a wyvern who remained close to its owner. Haar fell back into undisturbed sleep, and she lay nearby, for as long as it would last.

They developed a good routine. Jill took the local jobs, keeping to her early-morning schedule. Haar took the longer runs, often into Crimea and Begnion itself, away for days at a time. When work was slow, Jill coaxed her wyvern to take solo fights to keep active. It wasn't unusual to see it circling overhead midday, not only in the distant mountains but also closer to the village. The residents loved watching it fly, and she took small pride in the occupied soldiers who followed its path it skeptically.

Their customers arrived later and later into the night with shipments, the path to the woods well-worn by now. Jill had grown used to staying up long after nightfall, in case someone came by. It had become her duty by default; if Haar was there, no amount of gentle knocking on the door would wake him. But she didn't mind the nights, often sitting at her father's desk with the manifest, burning a lone candle. When a knock did sound, she was at the door immediately, taking information and promising next-day delivery.

When the blacksmith and his apprentice arrived one evening with a crate, rather than leaving it at the assigned drop-off spot, Jill knew why without asking. The armor was better packed than the burlap sack it had arrived in, the crate nailed shut with straw sticking out from its corners.

"We took the back way," he whispered, when Jill glanced down the street. "Come on, let's bring it in before they notice."

She pointed them to the bedroom, where they set the crate at the foot of the bed. They spoke in hushed whispers, Jill slipping the blacksmith a heavy bag of coin. The apprentice kept watch and declared the coast clear before they were gone, like they'd never been there. She spent a long while staring at the crate: the planks of wood

nailed together, the bits of straw at its corners. Though the armor hadn't been gone for long, she felt better having it home. But she wasn't ready to open it yet. *There's still time*, she told herself.

During the day, she'd grown fond of chopping firewood. She had a favorite stump in the woods where she'd split logs, her wyvern keeping watch from its cave. The chopping axe sat easily on her hip as she gathered the wood, carrying it to the stockpile. She was stacking the wood in neat rows when she heard the trill of a familiar laugh. She didn't have to look to know it was Zihark.

He was still a distance away, talking to someone down the road. She'd both anticipated and dreaded his arrival, not knowing when he would show up. He'd never provided a timeframe. But as the days progressed, then the weeks, she had been waiting. Busying herself with the mundane tasks of the day-to-day.

She brushed off her hands and studied the exterior of her house. She hadn't done much with it, she realized then. The stone could use a good scrubbing, and a fence would be nice. She imagined a fence with a gate, a chair on a porch, a simple life of receiving visitors. Or a storefront connected to the house, running a business during daylight hours.

"Hey, Jill!"

She acted surprised to see him. Zihark gave her a hug, like this was a casual visit. She invited him inside, like they were merely catching up. She shouldn't have looked down the street when she opened the door—a Begnion soldier stared at her, watching as Zihark disappeared inside. She wondered if Zihark had spoken to him, sweet-talking his way out of suspicion. She didn't want to know.

Jill set down the chopping axe, propped against the wall in its usual spot. She offered him something to eat, which he politely declined. They sat across from each other at the table, Jill in her usual chair, and Zihark in her father's that had become Haar's.

"I wanted to write," she said, "but I never knew where you would be."

"That's all right. I would've been surprised if it found me." He leaned in. Jill, too, leaned closer, so close that Zihark could whisper in her ear. "I can't stay here long," he said. "Are you coming?"

It had been nearly a year. The occupation, the sneaking around and keeping secrets. A year of back door connections, of bartering, of trying to make a home. A *home*, something permanent, not moving from country to country and barracks to barracks.

"Why can't they leave us alone?" Jill's voice cracked.

"Because we lost. But I didn't tell you the best part. Why we need you." Zihark leaned back, but kept his voice low. "We have a job, if you're willing to take it."

"Doing what?"

A smile crept over his lips. "There's an heir."

Her eyes widened. *He's lying*, she thought, but his grin said otherwise. Talrega was a long way to travel for a joke, a months-long buildup for a bit of perverse humor. Despite herself, she laughed. "That's impossible."

"It's not." Zihark leaned in again. "I've met him. We have allies, Jill."

Zihark declined to stay in the house, claiming friends in town he could stay with. Jill didn't doubt it, with all the people he'd met during his last visit. But he stressed the urgency of their departure; they were meeting others in Nevassa before traveling onward.

"Onward to where?" she asked, but Zihark wouldn't say.

When Haar returned from a days-long journey to Begnion, she couldn't muster the strength to tell him. But with Zihark in town, it was no secret. Haar saw him in the streets, talking to whoever would listen, sharing bits of food and laughter. Never gossip, keeping the good stuff for himself. *An heir*, she thought, as she went about her day, doing those daily mundane tasks to keep appearances.

It was late one evening that she finally cracked open the crate. The armor was nestled in hay, packed like any other of the blacksmith's shipments. It was flashy, she thought, sturdier than before. Its metallic pink surface shone even in the dim of night. When she fitted on a hip guard, tying the strap around her thigh, it felt like she'd never taken it off. The breastplate was snug, but allowed for smooth rotation. When she sat on the bed, pulling a shinguard over her leg, Haar walked past her open door.

She froze. He leaned against the doorframe, watching with mild interest. She hadn't acknowledged him, and he hadn't said anything. She hesitated, then continued to dress. She wiggled on a bootguard, aligning it straight over her foot. She stood, tugged on a glove, then the pieces that fit over them. She tightened her ponytail. There was nothing else to put on. Nothing else to adjust. She finally turned to face him.

Haar surveyed her, a slow sweep from head to foot and back. She instinctively straightened, like she'd been called for inspection—a new recruit seeking approval, a silent prayer that everything was to standard. She stared straight ahead when he advanced. She was taller now, nearly matched in height, but the rest was familiar: how he circled slowly, standing too long in one spot before moving to the next. There was a nudge on her shoulder plate, testing its attachment to the breastplate. She held her breath when he swept her ponytail over her shoulder, examining the back. A hand on her hip, a tug at the belt. When he came around the other side, his stoicism betrayed nothing. They stared at each other unflinching, eye to eye. Then, he nodded.

She let out a breath. “Thanks, Captain.”

Haar smirked, but didn't reply otherwise.

“You should come,” she added.

His expression shifted, a reflection of her own muddled emotion: doubt, anxiety, twisting fear. Back and forth in indecision, in acceptance. The tension in his jaw, a stinging behind her eyes. Jill clenched and unclenched her fists, the creak of new leather loud in the silence.



“Someone has to stay,” he replied. “We can’t both disappear.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but stopped. Suddenly he seemed too close, the bedroom too small. But she didn’t break eye contact, she *wouldn’t*, willing things to change, to be in a world where she didn’t go alone. It was bad enough that she’d abandoned her platoon. That she’d left him, left her *father*, for her own selfish glory. But if she hadn’t disobeyed orders, then—

“I have a run to Crimea tomorrow.”

The spell was broken. They were not in the barracks; they were in her bedroom, with Haar in loose-fitting pants and a shirt overdue for mending. Her armor felt heavy.

“Can’t it wait?” Jill unclenched her fists, hating how small her voice sounded.

“Not really.” Haar scratched the back of his head. “I should’ve left two days ago.”

“Haar!”

She jerked away, but he didn’t move when she started to undress. He watched her loosen the straps, familiar with the ritual her father had taught her, perhaps taught him as well. Hand guard first, then elbow, freeing the arm to slide off a glove. One, then the other. She held the breastplate while loosening a strap, balancing it one-handed lest it fall.

Haar reached out to catch the shoulder piece. “Here,” he said.

“I can do it myself,” she snapped.

“Don’t you think I know that?”

He held both shoulders as she ducked out of them, eyes averted as she shimmed out of the breastplate. Then a bootguard, leaving him to stand there holding the shoulders, watching. Ankle, knee, shin, stretching her legs as they released. She took the shoulders from Haar without looking at him, then stacked everything neatly in the wardrobe. There was no way to conceal it, though she tried to drape the clothes deliberately. Most of the hems were too short, the trousers from before the war, many of them too small now. Metallic pink glinted from the wardrobe's gaping mouth, hidden only when she closed the doors. She hesitated, holding firm to the iron handles.

Haar broke the silence. "Don't do this," he said.

"Do what?"

"Don't get emotional on me." He spoke to the floor, then to the wardrobe, anywhere but to her. "Just... visit your father before you leave, all right?"

Jill frowned. "Don't *say* that and tell me not to get emotional!"

She refused to meet his eye, not even when he rested a hand on her unburdened shoulder. His grip was strong, an unspoken command, a direct order to face him. She defiantly stared at the wardrobe's iron handles, swiping the corner of her eye with a fist. When she finally looked up, Haar closed his mouth, like he'd intended to say something else. There was a flash of something she couldn't read, gone before she could register it. Pride? Concern? Affection? She wanted him to spill all of it, to unburden something that she felt, too.

But it would hold her back, so she willed him to keep it in. She *would* fight; she would liberate Daein. She stood straighter, stared unflinching into his eye. His smile was barely perceptible, but it was *there*, before he released her.

Jill didn't object when he turned to leave. Haar didn't look back when he closed the door. She continued to stand at attention, watching the latch. The ghost of his hand lingered on her shoulder. She stared, unmoving, until the sensation faded.

The night was black as pitch, the sliver of moon offering little light. Jill wished, not for the first time, that her wyvern could read her thoughts. It would be nice to have a companion, one she didn't have to talk to. But it slept in its own home, like she should be doing, resting for an imminent flight of indeterminate length. The upward trek felt steeper in the dark. Her eyes adjusted gradually, the gravestones coming into focus as she approached. The scant moonlight reflected off them, sitting in neat, orderly rows.

She knelt on the hard-packed ground. The cemetery was the same as it always was, her heart heavy with the same disbelief. She welcomed the cool, night air in her lungs. It cleansed her, as she hoped it cleansed her father. She folded her hands in her lap.

"I have to go," she whispered. Her vision blurred with stubborn tears. The midnight silence felt sacred; she wouldn't sully it with grief. Hands trembling, jaw clenched, cheeks wet despite her efforts. The tears flowed, falling soundlessly to the grave beneath her.

And then—peace, flooding her body, enveloped in a seemingly impossible warmth. *Father*. She closed her eyes. A radiance in his smile, a joy reserved for his only child. *Pride*, she thought, and also fear, but a different fear than she'd known: of fatherhood, of watching her grow, and then grown.

When she opened her eyes, her vision had cleared. The sky itself seemed brighter, though there were no visible stars. But the name on the headstone

sharpened: *FIZZART*, a reminder of all that was, and all that had been. The surrounding flora was a sudden burst of color, the grass under her knees, the flowers they'd planted around the stone. The flowers would die on the first frost, but she'd return to plant more. Every year, over and over again, until they no longer could.

Jill rose, brushing dirt off her knees. The peaceful warmth had faded, replaced with a different kind of heat: *fire*, deep in her core. She trembled with it, gritting her teeth. She squared her shoulders, pounding a fist to her heart in salute.

"I have to go," she repeated, breaking the sacred silence.

Jill woke before dawn. The sun hadn't pierced the darkness yet, and birds hadn't started their morning song. But she lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. She was miraculously alert after only three hours' sleep.

She made the bed meticulously, tucking the quilt into neat, crisp corners. She pulled on jeans and a turtleneck, then tied her hair back into a ponytail. She opened the wardrobe, its interior shining with that metallic pink glint. She removed the pieces one at a time, spreading them out on the floor. She inspected them like they needed to be inspected, as if she didn't already know that everything was accounted for. She put them on in the same order as always. She tightened her belt. She twisted side to side, stretched one arm across her body, then the other. She breathed in deep, then let it out slowly. She quietly opened the bedroom door.

The main room smelled of dying embers, like it had been burned recently, though there was nothing in the hearth that she could see. She glanced around, instantly spotting the anomalies from only hours prior: An axe and a loaf of bread on the table.

The missing manifest from her father's desk. The open door to Haar's bedroom, which had been closed when she'd returned during the night.

She hovered outside the room first, listening first before she dared to look. Though Haar was a quiet sleeper, it was a different sort of quiet, one of vacancy rather than peaceful sleep. So she knew, even as she held the doorframe, before sneaking a look inside—he wasn't there. The bed was made, with those same crisp, neat corners. The bedside table held his razor, but the eyepatch and the axe were gone.

Stepping inside felt intrusive. She wasn't sure when the room had stopped being *Father's* and started being *Haar's*. The air itself was different, imbued with someone who was not her, but not unfamiliar. She inhaled that scent, dark and woodsy, a hint of whiskey and wyvern. It was too concentrated, like he was there beside her, and she looked around like he might be. Instead, she saw the wardrobe.

It was a twin of her own, with the same double doors, the same blocky, nondescript design. She approached it slowly, like someone would be watching, but the silence in the house was too solitary. Too personal. She knew she was alone when she grasped the iron handles, but still waited. They had never discussed the wardrobe. They'd returned to a house years prior that somehow still stood, ravaged by squatters. She hadn't wanted to know. Now, she tugged at the handles, the hinges moving soundlessly as the doors opened.

A new scent assaulted her, one she hadn't recalled in so many years, embedded in the clothes that hung before her. There weren't many—this tomb wasn't sacred to squatters—but there was the gray shirt her father had worn for training, and the white formal dress with the yellowing collar. One pair of pants, messily folded at the bottom. There were no shoes.

Jill grabbed handfuls of the gray shirt, pressing it to her face. She breathed in the outdoors, a tinge of metal, the dank of a wyvern den. She recalled the woods behind the house, climbing over his wyvern, watching him chop wood. It was not a memory, but real, like *he* was the one who would arrive that day, and she would follow any given command.

There were other clothes in the wardrobe as well, pieces that didn't recall the same memories. She pressed the gray shirtsleeve to her cheek as she examined the rest, but there was no mistaking their owner—Haar's shirts and a couple pairs of pants, hanging on the right side. He'd left a wide space between, as if waiting for someone to come back and use it.

She wouldn't touch Haar's clothing, but studied it, memorizing it. It was a strange thing to want to remember, how they hung in the wardrobe on borrowed hangers. There was no anger, only a kind of fondness, imagining him carefully pushing her father's clothes aside to create just enough unobtrusive space for his own.

There were no tears when she closed the wardrobe, sealing in the scent that would eventually fade. She didn't look back when she left the bedroom, leaving the door wide open as she found it.

The sun was beginning to rise, casting the main room in a dim haze. The house didn't face the rising sun, so it was a gradual waking, but enough to see the table itself in fuller light. She studied it curiously—the loaf of bread and the axe, which hadn't been there before. The axe was too small to be Haar's. Nor was it the one for firewood, which leaned against the wall in its usual place. This axe was relatively new, its blade clean and sharp. She stared, perplexed, then noticed the folded scrap of paper tucked under the handle.

Jill paused. She didn't see his handwriting often, but knew immediately who'd scrawled her name on the front. She sat down, staring at the cream-colored note. She took a sudden interest in the loaf of bread. It wasn't fresh; the crust flaked when she tore into it. She'd been so consumed with everything else that she hadn't planned something to eat before departure. She ripped off a piece, grateful that someone had.

It was a long while before she picked up the note. It was a simple piece of paper from off the desk, folded over once. She turned it over in her hand, the shadow of black ink showing through the back. It was another long moment before she managed to open it.

Thought you could use a real weapon.

—Haar

Jill read it again. Then again. She read it until the letters no longer made sense. She refolded the note, tracing the simple characters of her name with her thumb. She folded the note into quarters, then stood up. It was a struggle to reach her pants pocket past the armor, but she managed to tuck it deep so it wouldn't escape.

The handle of the axe was textured, a solid grip in her hand. It was lighter than she imagined, easy as the wood-chopping axe she'd grown used to. She swiped the air in front of her, testing its weight. It was a good weapon. Sturdy.

A knock broke the silence, a slight disturbance in the air, but magnified in the stillness. She thought it might rattle the walls, vibrate the floor beneath her feet. She feared waking Haar, but then remembered: *someone has to stay*. She waited for the air to

settle. In its place was the pounding of her blood, the echoed sound of her heartbeat. There wouldn't another knock, but she knew Zihark waited on the other side, patient. The Begnion guard would be waking, all of Talrega would be waking, and her wyvern would be alert and ready.

Jill tightened her grip on the axe, then turned to open the door.

Text © talrega.com
Art © haksart and kittyalyst
2024