# ON THE WAY TO AMBRUCK

# DICK QUIXLEY

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Anon Edition

#### Foreword

This novella is the second work I've penned for the folks over at the KBG, the first being Salvi's Search for the Universe. Broadly, this story is about a man trying to get somewhere, but you can reasonably assume that there is a kobold mixed up in there somewhere, I assure you.

If for some reason you want to reach out to me, you can reach me at: GriffTheGregarious@airmail.cc and you might get a reply in two months if you're lucky.

Anyway, hope you like it.

—Dick Quixley

## On the Way to Ambruck

AMPSA RAKED HIS fINGERS through his wet hair. He grimaced. His fingers got caught in the tangles and he yanked them free with some pain. His hair had gotten quite long lately.

He stared at the dwindling lump of soap in his hand with marked concern. His travels had reduced it to nothing more than a thin lump in the shape of a scallop's shell. He used what he had left on his hands sparingly and set the rest down on the bank of the stream.

He dunked his head into the stream and felt the bracing chill prickle his neck and scalp. The stream was rich with fresh snowmelt from the Aggatean Mountains, still cold despite the season as the ghost of winter still held the child of spring.

He shook his head like a shaggy dog and stepped onto the bank of the stream. The bark and dirt clung to his wet feet as he stepped toward a pile of discarded clothes. He toweled himself off as his cold skin glowed in the open air, mercifully free of all the sweat and dirt that he had been collecting. It was unfortunate that he needed to slip on his old dirty clothes, but even he wasn't prissy enough to burden his pack and coinpurse with extra sets of clothes.

He retrieved his scabbard and belt and fastened it around his waist. It was one-handed, easy to carry, and effective. He drew it with the soft, breathy voice of his fur-lined scabbard. He examined his face in the gleam of the blade and saw his own two greyblue eyes staring back at him. They were the eyes of the Northernfolk, from Kolkevk to Yyinjar, and beyond.

His features were as sharp as the blade itself, his tilted eyes always giving him a look of intensity that he rarely ever actually felt. He tugged at his dark brown beard. He wasn't so desperate to use the blade to shave—yet. *'Till the city.* He told himself. *'Till the city.*..

The elegant moustache, however, would stay.

Sampsa slid his sword back into its scabbard. With a tap and a click as it fit snugly into the lacquered wood. He bundled up the firewood he had collected and headed back to his camp. It would be dark soon, and he needed enough to last the night.

The vegetation was still recovering from the long winter and offered little impedance as Sampsa made his way through the shady lanes of the drowsy forest. The vernal buds added scratches of green to the layers of brown, pushing through the blankets of dead and dried leaves to catch the sun.

He filled his lungs with the telluric scent and felt the cold pleasantly numbing his nostrils on the way down. There was a lot to appreciate within that sylvan cocktail, but Sampsa appreciated it most not for what it contained, but for what it did *not*. Shit was the first thing that came to mind, then smoke, and then the smell of hundreds of men packed shoulder-to-shoulder who hadn't one iota the respect for soap *he* possessed. Then there were the tanneries, the butcheries, and the dyer's shops, as well as the animals—it was impossible to forget the animals. All that together, baking under the hot Summer sun surrounded by walls

that trap the stench as much as they do the heat—that was what the air here was lacking, and he loved it.

Even so, as fresh sweat beaded down his forehead, he wished to be back in the city.

His camp was atop a grassy hillock some ways off the main road, not too close to be seen from the road, but not too far to lose his way. It was, perhaps, the grounds of some ancient hill-fort, so ancient that all that remained was an unnatural slope and flatness to the soil. It was an ideal spot, and perfectly elevated to keep water from pooling underneath his tent too.

Only a thin wisp of smoke rose from the firepit, twirling and dancing before vanishing not even two spans above the bed of ash. Sampsa cursed himself for spending so much time at the stream. He walked towards the fire, grumbling as he prepared to rekindle it—and there, from the corner of his eye, at the entrance of his tent, something moved.

He froze, jumped back, and dropped the wood with a raucous clatter. It was a snake—no, it wasn't a snake, it was something larger. It was the tail of something, sticking out from between the tent-flaps. The sound of the wood had shocked the creature too. It went rigid and the tail slipped inside as it spun and poked its head out from the tent, first surprised, then horrified as Sampsa seized its wrist pulled it out of the tent.

The creature—a kobold, Sampsa now recognized—danced and scampered on toes that couldn't quite reached the ground as he lifted it by the arm. Sampsa's blade was already cocked behind his shoulder.

"Waitwaitwait!" The kobold cried.

"Thief!"

"Nonono, not thief!" She shook her free hand in aggressive surrender. She—as evidenced by her unmistakeably feminine, though somewhat throaty, voice.

"Shut up! Shut up, you little skink!"

"Not thief!"

"I drag you out of my tent and you have the gall to tell me you're not a thief?! I should strike you just for that!" He pulsed his grip on the hilt of his blade.

"No, no, no, really! Not thief! Look, Taggy-legs! Have nothing!" She patted her rough dress in an attempt to show how empty it was.

Sampsa frowned, he kept his sword in his palm as he patted her down angrily. She winced as his pommel bumped against her body, but could only dance like a fish dangling from a lure. He couldn't feel anything unusual, not even a piece of folded paper. Unless there were hidden pockets inside, which he doubted considering its quality, she was telling the truth. The kobold looked hopeful.

"Just because you didn't have anything on you yet doesn't mean you weren't going to steal anything!"

"No, no, never going to steal!"

"Oh yeah?! What were you doing in my tent then, huh?!"

"Was—!" She started, but snapped her mouth shut like a trap. He eyes followed the edge of the blade as Samspa menaced her with it.

He stared her down and her neck retreated into her shoulders. He felt her thin, bony arm in his palm and stared at her remorseful eyes. He could pick her up and spin her in the air by it if he wanted to. He felt like he could break the bones with one hand. He knew she was unarmed.

An annoyed sigh steamed from his reluctant grimace. He let her down slowly and deliberately so she knew he was doing her a favor. She rubbed her wrist.

"Stay there. If you try to run I'll show you why I carry thing thing around."

He tilted the sword at her and the light glinting off the blade made her blink.

"Won't run! Will stay right here! Taggy-legs would definitely catch! Definitely! So won't run!" She nodded obsequiously

She appeared to be referring to the difference in lengths between their legs, though he hadn't the faintest idea what *taggy* meant. He had to give it to her, she wasn't stupid enough to try anything stupid.

He ducked inside of his tent and kept his ear sharp on the outside. Everything looked just the way he had left it. He opened his haversack and thumbed through the papers inside just to be safe. Every document was accounted for and the seals authentic.

He wouldn't put it past some fraudster to try and hire a kobold to surreptitiously replace one of his documents with a counterfeit, but he was relieved to find that that wasn't the case.

Sampsa emerged from the tent and stared down the waisthigh creature. He slid his weapon back into its scabbard and the breathy sound seemed to mirror the kobold's own sigh of relief. It clicked in place. He crossed his arms.

"You're lucky I caught you before you could steal anything. If you come around here again I won't be so forgiving. Understand?"

The kobold kneaded her fingers awkwardly and scratched her

clawed toes in the dirt.

"What are you doing? Get lost!" He shot his finger past the horizon.

"Really not trying to steal anything..."

"Why are you...?" Sampsa felt a surge of panic flash through him. He grabbed his hilt again. "Are you here to distract me while your friends surround me?!"

His eyes scanned the trees, the grass, the bushes, everything. Every rustling thicket branch hid a spear, every branch a bow and arrow. For the first time he felt the cold air as it ran down his spine and seeped out as cold sweat.

"No!" The kobold jumped in front of him and put her hands on Sampsa's hand which was wrapped around the hilt of his blade.

He barely controlled the instinct to smash the pommel into her face. In fact, the blade had already moved. It clicked again as he jerked it back into his scabbard. He shoved her aside and moved with a bent-knee stance, casting his eyes everywhere.

"Let explain!"

"Shut up!"

"No weapons, see?" She flashed her small, scaly palms.

"Yeah, *you're* not armed, it's your *friends* who are armed, isn't it?"

"No! No friends! Listen, Taggy-legs! Listen!" She ran in front of him and held out her hands as if she were trying to topple over an invisible wall.

Sampsa stopped, "I told you to get out of here, but you're still here! This is obviously some kind of ambush!"

"Not ambush!"

She looked around awkwardly, trying to find her words, then pointed at herself emphatically.

"Got lost! Got lost and was seeing camp, but there was no one in the camp, so looked inside the tent, but there was no one inside the tent, then Taggy-legs comes and pulls this one out of tent and is thinking this one a thief!"

"Of course I'd assume you're a thief! If you're so innocent, why are you still standing here?"

"Still lost!"

Sampsa paused. It was aggravatingly logical. He let his hand fall free from the hilt, but only after scanning the horizon one more time. He looked at the kobold, his suspicion readily apparent from his expression.

"If you're lost, then tell me where you're going."

"Ambruck!" She answered without hesitation.

Ambruck was only the biggest city in all of Kolkevk, apparently so big even kobolds knew about it. If anyone was going to lie, that would be the first name to pop into their heads. But he had to admit, it was also a common destination.

"Why?"

She fingered her chin and narrowed her eyes, "Uhh... Negotiations."

She said 'negotiations' like it was some ancient word of power.

"What kind of negotiations?"

"Can't tell!" She waved her hands.

"Of course you can't..." Sampsa tapped his foot and scratched his beard. Gods, it was itchy, "Who are you meeting in Ambruck?"

"Koss, and... Koss and Lambert!" She nodded definitely.

They were normal enough names, though the pause made him suspicious. He was about to call her out on it when the thought suddenly struck him.

"What, you mean the Koch and Lambert Company?"

"Yes!" Her eyes lit up with excitement. "Taggy-legs knows them?"

"Everyone knows them. What I want to know is what business you could possibly with them. They're merchants, not..."

He gestured vaguely at the air. He couldn't really think of any profession which dealt with kobolds on a regular basis, so he just let it hang awkwardly.

"Can't tell!"

"Right..."

What a thing to lie about. Sampsa was inclined to believe her just because of how unbelievable it was. Who would believe some kobold was going to 'negotiate' with the largest trading company this side of the river Kharn?

"You'll leave if I give you directions, right?"
"Yes."

He pointed. "Head that way until you reach the road. Head left and keep going straight until you reach the fork. Take the second path from the left and keep going straight until you reach an old bridge in the forest. Walk over it and take the path on the right. From there, keep going straight until you're out of the forest and continue on the main road. Once the road turns to pavement it should be impossible for you to get lost. It's about five days of walking from here. You got all that?"

She counted her fingers for some reason, "That way, left, second path, then bridge, then right, then straight..." She nodded.

She muttered the mantra to herself and turned away. She stopped for one second to turn and wave in thanks, then continued on her way. Sampsa watched her until the rows of trees hid her from sight. He looked back at the fire. It wasn't even smoking anymore.

Sampsa rubbed his eyes. His pack weighed heavily on his shoulders. He shifted his haversack onto the other shoulder. The moist air made him feel like he was crying and the overcast sky only exacerbated his drowsiness. He hardly slept last night. He had spent the whole night with his sword by his side and his heart in his stomach. His chest had beat so fast he probably lost some time off his life.

Whenever he had felt merciful sleep coming over him, some twig would snap and he would shoot up in a panic, gripping his sword as his heart prepared him for the kobold ambush that never came. Adrenaline saturated his bloodstream and it took an eternity for his body to calm down and drift off to sleep, only for his ears to pick up something else minutes later. It was terrible.

He focused on the path, but his eyes were already unconsciously scanning the forest for somewhere good to sleep. As it was still several good days away from his destination, it was difficult to motivate himself to carry on.

He glanced at the sun. It wasn't even past noon. He couldn't justify stopping just yet, not even to himself. He eyed a tree of the side of the path, its bark smooth and its trunk curved. The ground around it was flat and clear. The roots smoothed away from the trunk like someone had pressed the back of a spoon into

a lump of clay. He could not justify stopping for the day, but a midday nap couldn't hurt.

He stepped up the small shelf of dirt and set his things beside the tree. He lied back with a depressurizing breath. His back slotted into the curved trunk and valleyed roots like they were made for him and him alone. The roots pushed his shoulders together and held him snugly. It was comfortable—too comfortable. He couldn't resist it. The dream time was calling him, and he hadn't the strength to ignore the call. He sank into the living cradle and melted into sleep.

"Hello..."

"Wha—wh-what—?!" Sampsa shot upright, arms flailing, "Who—?"

He looked around, then let his gaze fall a little lower. There was a kobold there. The same kobold from last night.

"W-what are you doing here?" He snatched the sword by his side, "Come to try and rob me again, have you?"

She stepped back and showed her hands. "No, not thief."

"You're following me."

"Following!?" She actually sounded indignant, "Following the directions Taggy-legs gave me, not following Taggy-legs!"

Sampsa paused, "Oh... Right..."

He supposed she was correct, but there was something about her that made him feel like he shouldn't believe her. He pulled the sword close to his chest, but felt he had lost some of the right to look threatening with it.

"Still—why are you sneaking up one me?"

"Sorry for waking, only wanted to say hello. If wanted to steal anything, wouldn't have been waking Taggy-legs, no?"

He wasn't sure what game he was playing, but he was sure he was losing, and to a waist-high reptile no less (though they were both eye-level at the moment.)

He was forced to consider her differently when she stood at head height. Her scales were a rusty brown and her eyes were dull red. Her wide eyes and angular face looked permanently curious. They regarded the world keenly, tilting towards every source of stimulus. Every bird and rustling tree deserved her undivided attention, but for now, she was staring at him.

"Taggy-legs is going to Ambruck too?" She tilted her head.

"No—" He could say he was going to Yezech, or Talmbrut, or something, but oh, what was the point, "Well, yes..."

Her eyes lit up. "Travel together?" Her gesturing finger bounced between her chest and his.

Sampsa rose to his feet, "Why, so you can slit my throat as I sleep and steal all my things?"

She blinked, surprised, and obviously taken aback by the violent accusation. It was too genuine to fake. She tapped her skull.

"Mind goes very dark places, Taggy-legs... Taggy-legs travels alone, or... Taggy-legs not like me?" She seemed to be referring to kobolds as a whole rather than just herself.

Although she hadn't actually done anything wrong, she was directly responsible for his lack of sleep. Some part of him blamed her for it, but no, he did not actually dislike her. That was not to imply that he *liked* her either. He was simply indifferent.

Sampsa grumbled, "I'd rather be wrong than dead."

"That is true!" She nodded, seeming to appreciate the new perspective, "But thinking that way, it is very tiring, yes?"

Sampsa rubbed his eyes in spite of himself, "Why would you

want to follow me?"

"Taggy-legs is with sword."

"Right..." He jangled the sword on his belt and felt its nimble weight, "That's... Fair enough, I suppose."

"Safer in groups, and more company always good."

Some part of him felt like he was making a mistake, but that was probably the same part of that had kept him awake until sunrise on account of this utterly innocuous creature. He leaned down and threw his pack over his shoulder.

"If you're really so inclined, I won't stop you from following me." He started walking, "—Just stop calling me Taggy-legs."

"Taggy-legs has name then?"

"It's Sampsa."

"Sampsa!"

She skipped ahead and stopped in front of him, extending her hand. It took Sampsa a moment to realize she meant to shake hands. He leaned down, took her hand awkwardly, and gave it a shake. Her hand was small, cold, and smooth like river stones.

"Neren!"

The peculiarity of the situation gave him pause, "...Didn't know kobolds shook hands."

Neren shook her head in good-nature. "Kobolds don't. Humans do!"

"You, uh... Speak with humans often?"

There was a moment of sudden reflection within him. What was he doing here? Engaging in a casual conversation with a cold-blooded reptile? He considered the bizarre path his life had taken in the few seconds it took her to reply.

"Often...?" She mimicked the word and grasped its meaning,

"Very often."

"Well, your grasp of the Northern tongue is impressive." ... For a kobold, he chose to omit.

"Thank you very much! Neren was the best with human tongues, so they sent Neren to *negotiate*." Again, with the arcane reverence around the word.

"Uh-huh..." He really didn't know where to go from there, so he let the conversation die out—or so he tried.

"Sampsa has favorite word?"

"A favorite word...?"

"Yes!"

"I don't know..." He tried to think of one, but quickly gave up, "Words are just words, okay? I just use them. I don't really have a 'favorite' one."

"Other humans have one!"

"Do you always ask people for a favorite word?"

She nodded, "Neren remembers all of them."

Sampsa was curious now, at least a little bit, "Really? What were they?"

She held her hands in front of her face and began to tick down her fingers. She proceeded to recite several euphemisms for the female genitalia, as well as the male genitalia, and another several for intercourse in general. When she reached the last of her eight fingers she started ticking them back up. Suddenly, Sampsa had a very clear image of the kinds of humans Neren was running into.

She continued to recite various expletives until Sampsa started to regret asking. She lifted another finger and called out, 'family' and then 'home', which were heartening to hear after so much profanity. He was surprised to hear her start reciting words from

other tongues as well and only barely recognized the language itself.

"You speak Iskandish?"

"Ivvish ishka li' sol iivashi?" She studied the vacant, and obliquely neutered look on Sampsa's face, "Some!" She laughed and went back to counting fingers.

There was 'Gold', 'Money', and 'Women' somewhere in there, mixed in with various words like, 'Lily', and 'Wisteria' which were the most interesting by far. She continued to count down her fingers until she had gone back and forth at least five times. The lack of cloying words like 'Peace', or 'Love', or 'Happiness' must have meant that she didn't run into many women, Sampsa smirked.

"...Cunt." She closed her last standing finger and looked up with an expression of finality.

Of course it would end like that, "You must have met quite a few humans."

"Very often!" She reminded him, "So, Sampsa has favorite word?"

It was even more awkward now, but he felt obligated at this point. He scratched his chin and stared at the swaying tops overhead.

"Prophylaxis." He decided.

"Prophylaxis...?" She struggled around the pronunciation, which gave Sampsa some joy. He'd like to see any of her other favorite words compete with *that* one.

"What does prophylaxis mean?"

"Well, it's a medical term." He flapped his hand dismissively, "It means some kind of action taken to prevent a disease ahead of time, like bathing. It's always best to take action before a problem even appears."

"Makes sense for Sampsa!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" He peered at her through the side of a slitted eye. She showed her palms.

"Sampsa always worrying about the worst; always trying to stop bad things from happening." Always—she said, as if she hadn't known him for less then a day.

"Paranoid—that's the word you're trying to use. You're calling me paranoid."

"Is that so?" Neren tilted her head.

"Yes, and it pays to be *paranoid* in my line of work, alright?"

"What line of work?"

Sampsa chewed his lip, "Alright, it's my fault for bringing it up, but I'm not going to discuss my employment with someone I've talked to for less then an hour, as well as someone who I'm still not entirely convinced *isn't* a thief."

She stared at him, curious.

"It's not whatever you're thinking, okay? It's nothing interesting. It's just best if people don't know about it. There's no reason for strangers to know, so I don't tell them. It's that simple."

"Sampsa paranoid again?"

"Yes, *Sampsa* is being paranoid again." He sighed sarcastically and shook his head, "What's *your* favorite word?" He changed the subject.

Neren fingered her chin, eyes in her skull as she searched for the thought, "Favorite." She decided.

"Your favorite word is favorite?"

She nodded.

There was something admirable in such a simplistic answer, "Alright... Fair enough." He shrugged in a non-committal, *everyone's entitled-to-their-opinion*, sort of way.

The two let the conversation die out. They walked side-by-side in silence down the shady woodland path. The sun still hid behind the haze of clouds, but he could tell it was still around midday. He yawned.

Right, he hadn't gotten any sleep last night. For a while there he had forgotten.

He yawned again. His mouth hinged open like an angry snake. Hot tears leaked from his two pinched eyes. He felt like some of his soul just escaped when he closed his mouth again. Filling his lungs just made him want to yawn again. It was an endless cycle.

"Sampsa tired?" Neren tilted her head.

"What—" He yawned before he could finish saying, 'what gave it away?' He wiped his eyes. He was starting to become uncomfortably aware of the weight of his own head.

"Need to rest?"

"That was what I was trying to do until you woke me up, guess the adrenaline kept me going for another half-hour." He smeared his hands all over his face.

"Sorry."

He could force himself to keep going if he really needed to, but what was the point. He looked along the side of the road through watery eyes and ducked off at the first patch of dirt he could find.

He let his pack slide off his shoulders and thump against the dirt. He let his back slide down the trunk of the tree. It wasn't nearly as comfortable as the first one, it didn't hug him like some long-lost lover, but it would have him. He settled in with a breath

and saw Neren standing in front of him.

He was so focused on sleep that he had completely forgotten she was there. She stared at him curiously with those big, rusty eyes. He hugged his sword to his chest, wondering if he should sleep at all. She could still be trying to rob him, but...

This was a good opportunity to test her. He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep, and—

The conifers slept beneath sheets of grey. The forest's sound like gentle breath resonated through the boughs and in the crackling lungs of a million fallen leaves. The moist air did not fall, but flutter to the ground, enough to be felt on the bare flesh and only just. The pale disk in the sky suffused the scene with an otherworldly incandescence.

Thin droplets swam in the atmosphere. They mingled with the wind as the trees scraped their old fingers of wood through the drifting clouds. The mist clung to the bright spring leaves and caught their friends from the air to frolic and play on the wonder in bloom. They gathered and glistened, and bid their sleepy landing farewell as they slid down the spine. The leaf bowed to them as they clung on the razored tip and jumped down. The leaf waved after them, sad to see them go, and they fell, landing from leaf to leaf, and finally splashed.

Sampsa's eye twitched. He inhaled sharply. He wiped at his cheek and his eyes fluttered open. He stared at the moisture on his fingers and looked up. It was raining. He breathed the cool, moist air and straightened. His sword fell in his lap. He wondered why he had slept with his sword on his chest, and then he remem-

bered.

He lunged for his pack and threw open the top of his haversack. Everything was in place. He let out a sigh of relief. But he couldn't see the kobold anywhere. He leaned back, glimpsed something in his peripheral, and turned.

Two rusty eyes were staring at him. Sampsa fell back and let out an embarrassing sound. Neren tilted her head curiously, her chin resting on her fists and her elbows resting on her knees.

"W-what are you doing?"

"Watching Sampsa sleep."

Sampsa's gaze flitted to the side, as if someone would be standing there to come rescue him from whatever this was. No one was coming to save him.

"Well stop it. It's freaking me out."

Neren leaned back like an old plank and sat down. She still watched him, but with less intensity than before. Sampsa scratched his head, uncomfortable and obscurely violated.

"How long was I asleep?"

Neren tapped her chin, then raised both hands above her head. She pointed, and adjusted the angles between her arms until she was satisfied. At first Sampsa assumed she was mimicking the hands of a clock, and then he realized that one finger was pointing directly at the sun, pale as it was. She was mimicking the movement of the sun. From the looks of it, it had been a little over an hour.

"Please don't tell me you were staring at me that whole time." She adjusted her hands and smiled. So she had only been staring at him for thirty minutes. Great.

"Do...?" He ventured, second-guessing himself before com-

mitting to involve himself with the strange creature even further, "Do you have some kind of obsession with humans or something?"

Neren shrugged, an expression that seemed to say, *maybe yes*, *maybe no, but either way, I don't have the vocabulary to properly describe it.* Sampsa understood. He too had many feelings like that.

"Humans are interesting." She nodded, and continued

"Many interesting things."

She opened her arms and took in the grey vistas around her, as well as the forest and far beyond. Her hands were outstretched as if to catch the dew which fell from heaven. She stared into the misty distance.

"Are kobolds interesting?" He blurted out, and she twitched. He felt a pang of guilt after pulling her from her trance.

She considered it, "If Neren was not one."

"Are all kobolds like you?" He asked even though he was confident he already knew the answer by now.

She laughed, "Not at all! Neren is weird." She took pride in that fact.

He was surprised to find that something with so many sharp teeth could look so vibrant. There was something about her expressions, he noticed. She was smiling brightly, but there was a layer of stiffness beneath it. Originally he had dismissed it as perfidy, but now...

He realized what it was. It wasn't her natural reaction, it was something she learned from humans, it was an act she was putting on and it was something she was doing for him, a human.

Sampsa pointed at his cheeks and stretched them into a toothy

smile that did not carry over to his eyes.

"Your smile—it's not natural, is it?"

An almost imperceptible widening of the eyes and a twitch of the neck—it seems surprise was an expression they shared.

"Sampsa noticed?"

He nodded, "At first I assumed you were trying to deceive me with fake smiles, but you don't have an actual, 'real' smile, do you?"

"For kobolds... Something like this...!" She angled her head down and tilted her head slightly, eyes locked on his. True enough, he didn't recognize it. It was more curious than cheerful, but the light in her eyes was still there.

"Humans like this—" She raised her lips and curled the corners of her mouth. There was some lifting of the brows, and it was subtle, but it was lacking. That was why it felt off, Sampsa decide; her reptillian brows simply weren't as expressive as human's were.

"Humans not understand and always misunderstand until Neren practiced lots and lots." She pointed at her cheeks.

"...What's surprise look like?"

She leaned back, eyes wide, and it wasn't entirely convincing, though he doubted he could fake shock much better. She let her face relax, and smiled.

"Both are same."

Sampsa scratched his beard, "What about anger?"

She pinned back her shoulders back. Her eyes narrowed into two fiery semi-circles as her lips peeled back and revealed several sharp teeth. Her lips began to twitch, not out of seething rage, but the strain of maintaining the expression. She relaxed.

"Human anger...?" He ventured, "What's kobold anger look

like."

Neren's maw split open, every tooth bared and ready to bite, her tongue slithering like an angry eel. Her slitted pupils shrunk as her eyes went wide, staring in two directions without the slightest glimmer of sapience behind them.

Heavens above, it was utterly, utterly, horrifying. Sampsa leaned back from the pressure. His hand tapped his hip unconsciously readying itself to draw the sword that wasn't there. Being head-height with the creature didn't help either. He could easily imagine two creatures like her menacing each other with the expression shortly before mauling one another.

She closed her mouth and studied the expression on his face. She looked away, embarrassed, and it was unclear whether she was mimicking human embarrassment or wearing it genuinely.

"It's a good thing you practiced. If you had that look on your face when we first met I probably would've used my sword."

Neren laughed and idly scratched her claw into the patch of dirt beside her, not quite meeting Sampsa's eyes. That was enough of asking her for expressions.

He leaned back. He felt the bark against his spine. He was comfortable, he realized, and watching the misting rain roll through the forest from beneath the tree, it made his dry island feel ever more peaceful. The air hissed softly.

What time was it again? He looked up just in time for another fat drop of rain to slide down the leaves and pelt him in the face. He smeared his finger across his eyelid. He didn't need to look; whatever time it was, it was time for lunch.

Neren watched Sampsa dig through his pack and pull out something wrapped in white cloth. He peeled away the corners. The scent of dried meat and fruits wafted from the parcel his hands. He chewed on the meat and glanced at Neren. She was staring at him, but betrayed nothing beyond that.

His chewing slowed. He glanced at his food, and he glanced at her. There wasn't enough room in her clothes to carry much of anything. She didn't have any supplies with her either. Whatever she was carrying, it wasn't much.

"You didn't bring any food?"

"Neren ate lots before leaving!" She reassured him.

Sampsa hummed, "Sorry for eating in front of you then."

He chewed on some dried fruit. The liquid in his mouth revitalized the shriveled morsel and coated his tongue in its sticky juice. It was sweet, and also salty.

Neren just sat there, patiently waiting for him to finish as she stared with those big, rusty eyes. She didn't mean anything by it, but it made Sampsa feel guilty all the same. It sucked some of the flavor out of his mouth, and yet, all the food he held suddenly felt all the more precious. He agonized over it until the strain went from his brain and into his tensing muscles.

He grabbed one of the strips of meat and held it out. He didn't want to look at it. If he did he might realize what he'd done. The fragrant strip attracted Neren's eyes like lodestones. It shimmered slightly. It wasn't any old piece of smoked meat, it was glazed with honey and spices. Her plying jaw revealed a glimpse of teeth.

She showed her palms, "Thank you, but if Neren eats now, is only getting more hungry later! Not eating is best."

After all that anguish, he didn't know how to feel about being refused. Part of him had expected her to snatch it out of his hands

and devour it like a starving beast, but...

"You sure?"

She closed her eyes and nodded. Sampsa shrugged for her loss and whisked it back, wafting the lingering smell through the air.

Neren's hand shot out before Sampsa could return the succulent strip of meat to the cloth atop his lap. She just held it there. She didn't say anything. Her eyes were still shut. If he wanted to give it to her in spite of her fasting, she wasn't going to stop him.

Sampsa dropped it into her palm and watched her slender, scaly fingers close around the piece of jerky. Neren reeled in her arm and smelled the slightly sticky strip. She licked it, and if there were any misgivings left inside her, they dried up like water on the desert floor. She sunk her teeth into the meat and chewed.

Her face was, well...

Sampsa didn't want to use the word 'orgasmic' but the other words just weren't coming to mind—what with her drooling like that. Her eyes were entirely focused within. He felt like he could snap his fingers in front of her face and she wouldn't notice until she swallowed. There was a look of longing in her eyes as it went down her throat.

She coughed and cleared her throat, "Sampsa eats this all the time?"

"Well, I'm pretty particular about my food." He threw one of the pieces of meat into his mouth and savored it—not as profoundly as Neren, but he savored it nonetheless.

"Sampsa is..." She licked her fingers, "Rich?"

"I've got enough." Sampsa smirked, and instantly felt like he had made a mistake. What was he doing, bragging about his wealth to some kobold he hardly knew? Even if she was harmless what if she went and told her friends, 'Hey, I met this REALLY rich human on the way to Ambruck.'

What if she *did* do that? What if she *still* was trying to rob him? Whatever the case, it didn't matter anymore, and it was too late to stop it now. He was caught up in it. He was *bragging*.

"It's not like I've got kids, or a wife, and my housing's paid for—" Paid for. He left it at that, "—So there's not much left for me to spend it on apart from clothes and food... And baths." He added with a hint of wistfulness.

"Clothes?" She glanced down.

"What?" Sampsa threw out his arms and flashed his plain coat, "It's not like I'm going to wear my best outfits into the wilderness where they'll get all ruined. They're at home. And besides, wearing expensive clothes out here is an *excellent* way to get yourself robbed."

Neren laughed, "Neren never said that about Sampsa's clothes!" She bounced her finger between them again, "Better than Neren's!" "Guessing they don't have many tailors where you're from."

"Not very. Not as important." She tugged at her simple dress, "This is from human lands. Kobolds usually wear... Leather and...?" Her hands twirled in an attempt to spur the word to her lips. She gave up, irritated at herself.

"...Not what humans use."

Sampsa reached out and pinched her dress. It was wool—that much was obvious. The texture was somewhat obscured by the dirt and oil, but it was rough and *economical*. It was too thin to be from Northern sheep; it was from somewhere further South. It also smelled, *pretty bad*. Neren's gaze flitted from Sampsa's fingers to his studious face.

"Is this from Breek...?" Sampsa rubbed his chin.

"Maybe!" Neren replied, then thought about it, "Have heard the name before..."

Sampsa packed up his food and stood, "There's an important trading route used by the Breeks that runs by the Mazerif. That's where you're from right?"

He slung his pack over his shoulder and Neren stood to follow him.

"Mazerif is what humans call Mil'ik'ik, yes?"

Sampsa quirked an eyebrow, "How should I know? You're the scaly one."

"Right...!" Neren scratched the back of her head, "Humans always come up from river, clothes like..." She popped her hands open in an attempt to describe some floral burst pattern, "Ships like..." She swung her arms up from her hips in an attempt to mimic the shape of a Breekian hull and bow, but the gesture ended up looking rather phallic instead.

Sampsa nodded, "That's the Mazerif. Those are the Breeks alright."

"Sampsa can tell from touching Neren's clothes?"

"The cloth is too thin to be from the North, and the wool isn't high-quality enough to make it worth worth transporting longdistances. Breek's the only place that made sense."

"Very interesting...! Sampsa is smart human."

Considering it came from a waist-high reptile, Sampsa was surprised to find that the compliment made him puff out his chest a little bit,

"You're not too bad yourself." He felt the misting rain on his face as he stepped from underneath the tree and onto the path.

Truthfully he had no idea how her intelligence compared to other kobolds, considering she was the first he had ever met, but from what he had heard about them, he felt like it was safe to assume she was above average.

She smiled in the human way, and somehow it seemed more genuine than before, "So Sampsa is... Tailor?" She followed after him and shivered from the rain.

He barked a laugh, "No, but that's a good guess."

"Knight...?"

"No soldier, no mercenary, no woodward or reeve or even idiot with a sword, just straight to knight, huh?" He smirked.

Neren looked like she would blush if she could, but seemed to be committing the other words to memory, "Not look like soldier, or mercenary... Or idiot..."

What she meant was, he was too clean and too articulate to be a soldier or a mercenary, considering the sources of all of her *favorite words*.

"Knights don't travel alone in the forest, they're too *important* for that. They travel with their entourages and ride horses and have *other people* carrying their things." He adjusted his pack.

"So Sampsa is...?" She tilted her head.

"It's really not that interesting."

She looked curious—very, very curious. He could see the restraint shimmering in her eyes as she sealed her lips. It really wasn't that interesting, but now he felt as if he couldn't tell her simply because it couldn't live up to whatever she was thinking of. He kept walking.

"This is a good spot." Sampsa laid down his pack.

Neren looked around, as if trying to figure out for herself just what made this spot so much better than all the other ones they had passed by.

The setting sun peaked from behind the clouds to cast its golden light upon the spriggy field and hard-packed clearing. Sampsa sat down and felt the weight of his body vanish from his tired legs. He leaned back and sighed, the relief soon giving way to soreness.

He still needed to make a fire. He still needed to set up his tent. That second realization hit him the hardest. He laid back and spread out his arms. It felt good to close his eyes. Too good. He rolled over and groaned. Everything was drained. The hour of sleep he sneaked in was what got him this far, but now he felt like something washed up on shore. Something squishy and smelly washed up on shore.

"Neren..." He yawned.

She straightened at the sound of her name; it was the first him Sampsa had called her with it. Sampsa watched her scaly feet circle around his body and stop. She squatted down and tilted her head, bending to *his* level for once.

"If you gather firewood for me, I'll tell you what I do for a living."

Neren blinked, then smiled, "Need not bargain; needing only to ask, but now Sampsa has given his word." She stood and skipped away.

Sampsa breathed steadily. He really should set up his tent, but it felt like someone was pulling his eyelids shut. He blinked, and felt someone tapping his nose. He groaned and swatted the hand away, but it kept poking him.

"Neren...!" He moaned, "At least let me sleep until you get back..."

"Already sleep!"

Sampsa opened his eyes and saw the crimson sky shimmering in his bleary eyes.

What...?

He sat up and stretched. Dew covered his woolen cloak like glassy beads. What was he supposed to be doing? Right—the fire. He wiped the moisture from his eyes.

"Did you—?"

An impressive stack of firewood sat beside him. It was like she was preparing him for a ceremonial cremation.

"You did..."

Neren looked proud of herself as Sampsa examined the firewood. It was a little damp, but it was to be expected after the rain. He reached into his pack and produced a small oaken box.

A ribbon of steel and a fist of pyrite sat atop a bed of shavings and punkwood. The beeswax seal around the lid helped keep it dry even in the damp mountain weather, but that was only if he kept it shut. A pinch of tinder was enough. It snapped shut.

He sprinkled the tinder on the flattest piece of wood he could find in Neren's pile and struck the pyrite with a spray of sparks. The glowing sparks danced vibrant in the dimming light. Neren watched the spray, mesmerized as he struck again, and again, and again. "Neren wants to try!"

Sampsa looked at the tools in his two hands as if trying to understand the appeal.

"If you want." He dropped them into her hands.

She smacked them together, but all they produced was sound. She smacked them together again and stared in wonder as a small spark erupted, only to flutter and die moments after it was born. It did not birth fire. It did not even land on the tinder, but she *was* proud of it.

"You'll get more sparks if you aim for an edge. Like *there*." He pointed at the pyrite.

Neren brought the steel down on the edge, bashing it rather than striking it, but there were some sparks. She adjusted her aim, and brought it down. She cracked her knuckle against the rock. It made an unpleasant noise on impact as her body tensed. She dropped the rock and steel and stuck her knuckle into her mouth, sucking on it with an injured expression.

"Uhm... You okay?"

Neren nodded with her finger in her mouth, a little bead of moisture leaking from her eyes despite her best efforts. Sampsa picked up the stone and steel.

"Well... That can happen." Neren reached out before he could lift the steel to the pile of tinder, "What, you want to try again?"

She nodded and popped her finger out of her mouth. There was a small mark on her scales, "Is okay now."

If he left the tinder out in the moist air much longer it might become too damp to light, but...

"Here."

When Neren reached out to take them Sampsa gripped her

wrists and secured his hands behind hers. She looked at him, curious. He pulled her closer and made her stand in front.

"Do it like this—" He moved her hands and struck the stone with another spray of sparks. He repeated the motion.

She tried to mimic it, but it was mostly Sampsa in control. Her hands were cold, smooth, and delicate—yet there was some sinuous strength beneath them. Spray after spray rained atop the pile of tinder until finally, one caught. The defiant ember glowed brightly, quickly fading. Sampsa cupped his hands around the feeble light and blew over Neren's shoulder.

Neren watched the light grow, nesting in its bed of tinder like a molten egg. He sprinkled some thin bark atop the ember and it caught light. Neren watched. She ducked underneath Sampsa's arm and stared at it from the other side.

"Never seen fire that way!"

"You've never used firestones before? What do you use to start your fires then?" Sampsa leaned some twigs over the licking flame.

"Use stick like this!" She twirled an imaginary stick between her two palms, "Stick and..." She struggled, "Mushroom!"

"Uh-huh..."

He had no clue how rolling a stick like it was a ball of dough was supposed to create fire, and neither did he know how the mushroom came into it, but he doubted she was lying. Still, he would stick to his method.

The fire grew from twig, to stick, and from stick to branch. Sampsa dropped a fallen log onto the blaze with a spray of embers, thousands of the little lights spun and twirled before vanishing the night air.

Neren sat by the fire, hands out and eyes closed. Content. Sampsa sat down in the island of light and did the same, inspired by Neren's simple expression. The fire danced on her face, skipping and glinting ever so softly across her scales. It was not unpleasant—travelling with companions. Neren opened her rusty eyes and stared at him. He knew what that face meant.

"It's really not that interesting..." Sampsa looked away, shy for some reason.

She narrowed he eyes, smiling.

Sampsa sighed, "I'm a scribe."

"Scribe is...?" She made an expression like it really was on the tip of her tongue, "Is...!"

"It means it's my job to write down what people say, or copy books, but I don't do much of that."

"Write!" She threw up her hands, "Yes, scribe is human who writes!" She seemed utterly vindicated, but not as proud as she would have been had she guessed it from the start.

"Why is Sampsa afraid to say Sampsa is scribe?"

Sampsa threw back his head, "What reason *isn't* there? When you're the scribe for someone so important, you're always *there* in important meetings, and when you're always *there*, people start thinking, 'If I can get close to this guy, I'll be able to get closer to his Lord!' They're always after something, always trying to get me to blurt out some crucial detail as if it wouldn't end with my head." He slit his hand across his throat.

"The worst are the thieves. They think just because I'm the scribe I've got to be carrying something important that they could sell to some merchant or lord willing to pay for information, but the real problem is they're right! Even the utterly

mundane letters are dangerous! Some of the crafty whoresons have learned how to extract the wax seals off of the letters and put them onto other letters! I've seen the forgeries, they're damn convincing! Do you have any idea how powerful just one lump of wax can be in the wrong hands? There was an incident in Wensit where some thieves were able to forge a pardon from execution before the city could bring their friend to the gallows. If something like that happened because of *me* it would mean more than my head!"

Sampsa sighed, weary for more than sleep. Still—it felt good to get that off of his chest, even if he *was* still worried it would come back to bite him in the ass somehow. He stared into the fire.

"Understand why Sampsa is paranoid...! Harder than Neren thought!"

Sampsa flinched at the touch on his back. Somehow Neren had snuck up beside him and was rubbing his back. He looked at her, surprised more than anything. She retracted her hand and an apologetic look flashed across her face. Well, kobolds were probably *communal* creatures.

"Neren wants to see Sampsa write!"

"What... Right now?"

She nodded vigorously. Sampsa looked at the dark a few shades of blue away from black. Well, he was no stranger to writing in poor lighting. He reached for his pack.

"Never seen anyone so interested in seeing me *write* something. Is it really that interesting?"

"Yes!" Neren nodded again, "Never seen human writing."

Sampsa pulled out a small wooden box and a piece of vellum. It was a scrap piece, cut from a larger deed, but it was still worth more than what he was going to use it for. He set out his quill, ink, pounce pot, and knife, then flattened the piece of vellum across the lid of his writing set.

Neren watched the blank page with intent. There was no wasted movement, no stopping as his arm flowed across the page. Neren stared at his arm, awed by the supple grace with which it moved. The letters appears one-by-one, and then he was done.

He stuck the quill into the inkwell with a show of finality. He sprinkled some sandarac powder across the letters to help the ink dry. It wasn't necessary, but he felt he might as well give her the full show. He waited a few second, then shook the pounce off the page and handed it to Neren.

"Here."

She grabbed the scrap with both hands and stared at the writing under the light of the fire, "Pretty! What does writing say?"

"Neren. It's your name. N-E-R-E-N." At least, that was how he assumed it would be spelled.

Here eyes widened. She stared at the page in wonder as if her soul were somewhere in those scratches of ink. She smiled from the depths of her conscious, something between her human-smile and her kobold smile.

"So pretty!" She didn't look like she would ever tear her eyes from the page.

Sampsa watched her, and infected by her innocent smile, he was smiling too. She was so happy with something so simple, and it spoiled his smile.

"Neren, may I see that?"

She twitched at the sound of her name. She glanced at the paper and handed it back to Sampsa, trusting him with something precious. He spread it across the lid and took his knife. He scraped the vellum and the first stroke of the 'N' vanished from the page.

"Ah—!" Neren reached out, and stopped herself. She tucked her hands to her chest, staring at the page and at Sampsa in quiet betrayal.

He wasn't expecting that look to be so painful, but he continued to scrape away the letters until the page was blank again, "Close your eyes, alright?"

Neren stared with glassy eyes, and turned around. Sampsa flexed his fingers. He hadn't spent an entire year at one of the Southern God's monasteries without learning a thing or two.

He lifted the quill and let it fly, shifting seamlessly from sweeping curve to flawless line as the quill scratched an inconsistent harmony amidst the crackle of the flames.

"Neren."

She turned around. He held the page and offered her a gentle smile. She took it, and stared in awe, turning it to examine it from different angles as if to double check that the page was actually flat. The letters seemed to jump from and sink into the page simultaneously. Tasteful curlicues accentuated each letter. It was a fine work of calligraphy, but he began to fear it was too courtly for her comprehension.

Neren beamed, "Beau...?" She second-guessed herself, but she was right, "Neren did not know Neren's name is so beautiful."

"Glad you like it. You can keep it by the way."

"What Sampsa look like?" She asked excitedly.

He froze, the ink bottle already halfway inside the writing case, "You want to know how to write my name?"

"Yes!"

"Well, I'm all out of scrap parchment..."

"Write here!"

"On your parchment? Are you sure?"

She nodded emphatically. Sampsa shrugged. He supposed any great piece needed to be signed. He turned other Neren's name and scratched his name into the back, not as elegantly as hers, but not rough enough to do it an injustice either.

"S-A-M-P-S-A" He called out as he handed the page back.

"Very pretty!"

He chuckled, "I'm a man, call it 'handsome."

"Oh...!" She nodded knowingly, "Sampsa's name is very handsome!"

Sampsa yawned and the tiredness came with the dreadful realization that his tent still wasn't set up. He packed away his tools in actuality and stood. Neren stashed the paper beneath her sash and watched him go.

"I'm going to sleep."

"So soon?" Neren looked at the horizon. The sky had only just turned its final shade of black, "Too soon! Enjoy the fire." She baked her scales with another contented look.

"I'm not sure if you noticed, but I didn't get any sleep last night."

"No sleep...?"

"None."

She crossed her arms, disappointed, but understanding, "Okay! Nik'il'a."

"Nik'il'a to you too." He waved her off. He had no idea what that meant, but Neren seemed to find it amusing.

Setting up the tent wasn't difficult. It was as simple as suspending a rope from a tree and draping canvas over it; Sampsa was just in the mood to complain. Neren watched from the fire and he felt a little forlorn. He wondered why he had even bothered to make a fire if he wasn't going to use it. Force of habit, he supposed. He wasn't even in the mood to eat.

Sampsa stomped a metal spike into the ground and noticed Neren was missing. She appeared from the darkness and stepped into the ring of light to drop a stone into the fire. A cloud of spark erupted from the bed of glowing embers. She threw another rock into it, and then another.

Throwing things into the fire just to see the sparks...? It was childish, but endearing.

He finished setting up his tent and threw his things inside. He was about to crawl inside when he heard something strange, something like rustling, scratching, and the tumbling of dirt. Was it a wild boar...?

He focused his eyes on the darkness. His muscles tensed, hand tapping his hip for his sword. He saw the shadowy figure, and sighed, feeling like an idiot for ever getting his guard up. It was Neren, on her hands and knees, digging in the dirt.

"What are you doing ...?"

"Ah—?" Neren glanced at Sampsa, "Making bed for sleeping." 'As opposed to the other kinds of beds' He mused. She raked her claws through the dirt and chucked it behind her. She dug until the pit was almost as big as her and as deep as Sampsa's hand. She stood, slapped the dirt from her hands, and walked over to the fire.

She grabbed a stick and poked at the embers, brushing them

aside to reveal the smooth stones she had thrown in some time ago. They steamed in the cool air as she coaxed them to the edge of the fire and then picked them up. Sampsa could not believe she could do that without burning herself, but when he looked closer, he found she was actually suspending it by the tips of her claws. The stones were dropped into the pit one-by-one and buried with dirt. There wasn't anything childish about it...

"How long will that keep you warm?"

"Mmm..." She tapped her chin, "Enough..."

She stepped into the depression and curled up into a ball. She yawned, teeth bared, and closed her eyes as she hugged her tail. How, Sampsa wondered, had she managed to go to bed before him? He stepped inside his tent, wrapped himself in wool, and closed his eyes.

Sampsa opened his eyes to darkness and pelting rain. The forest roared and hissed. The rain bounced off his canvas tent like the head of a drum. He moaned and rolled over, half-dazed. He shivered as chilly air sucked into his sheets. There was enough light to give the shadows form, and nothing more.

The wind was light—his sluggish brain calculated—it was nothing worth worrying about. Nothing that would threaten to blow his tent away, and nothing that would threaten his sleep. The thick canvas sluffed off the water, but still, it would absorb some. He would need to dry it out tomorrow, and if it was still raining, he would be forced to carry it with him, heavy and full of water.

His eyes fluttered, nearly shutting, and opened. Neren was out

there. He rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling. She was out in this rain, sleeping in a muddy ditch.

She had made it this far with only that dress on her back, she couldn't be a stranger to sleeping in harsh conditions. She was so confident when she made that nest in the dirt too.

The warm blankets pulled him down, growing heavier and heavier as his twisting lips played out his confliction.

Sampsa threw off the sheets and shrank in the cold. He already regretted it. He stumbled to his feet, breath misting in the cold air. It wasn't quite freezing, but it must feel like it in the rain. He pulled up his hood and stuck his head out in the rain.

The roaring water changed its pitch as his ears entered the open, higher and angrier and without the thrumming beat of the canvas tent above his head. The moon was still bright even through the thick clouds—enough to see, at least.

The rain beat against his back and his feet squelched in the mud. The ashes of the fire were cratered and pocked like the surface of the moon (he had seen it through an alchemist's telescope once.) He threw another log on top of the steaming bed to shield it from the rain, but had little confidence that the embers would survive until morning.

He pulled his hood tight and jogged through the mud, and almost tripped over her body in the darkness. She laid in her ditch, looking like a stillbirth. He kneeled in the dirt.

"Neren..." He shook her shoulder, "Neren... Neren...!"

Her shoulder was so cold. So, so cold. It sapped his heat like the stones in winter. That any life could be rushing underneath her skin was unthinkable, and had she been human, he would have assumed her dead.

"Neren...! Your name is going to get wet if you stay out in this rain..."

Her silhouette shifted. Her eyes may have been open, but it was too dark to tell. Her arm was limp and hardly resisted him as he pulled her out of the ditch and onto her feet. She stood and walked like molasses flowed. She tried to trip, but Sampsa kept her up until they reached the tent. He pushed her inside. Water dripped from her soaked shirt. Sampsa pinched the soggy piece of parchment out of her waistband and threw it into the dry corner.

Water was getting *everywhere*. he realized he hadn't really thought this through. Even at her size, the tent wasn't big enough to simply stash her in the corner. It was getting all over his blanket. It would make his feet soggy while he slept. Oh, it was *awful*. He bemoaned the difficult path his conscience had led him down.

He pulled the knot on her sash and pulled the dress over her head—it wasn't like he would be able to see what was underneath anyway. It spewed water like a sponge and sagged in his arms. He threw it outside where it collapsed in a soggy heap. It was as wet as it could get already, a little more wouldn't hurt it.

She swayed slightly, and he caught her. He unbuttoned his hood and toweled her off with it. It wasn't totally soaked, and it wasn't totally dry either, so it was no great loss. He threw it in the corner and hoped it wouldn't get things too damp as Neren collapsed on top of the blanket.

Sampsa sighed and crawled under the sheets with some effort considering the weight on top of it. He pulled the blanket over his shoulder and rolled onto his side, making a point to look away. He felt the water on his feet. The heat he had spent the entire night building up was gone.

He shivered and bent his knees to dodge the wet spots. He felt like he was back to his bed-wetting days. He closed his eyes and hoped he still had enough leftover exhaustion to fall asleep without much trouble. He spied the parchment on the ground. He slipped it under his pack and pressed it flat.

The tent glowed with morning light. Sampsa groaned and stirred. He tried to wipe the crust from his eyes only to find that his arm would not move. He shuddered as hot breath came trickling down his neck. There was a weight on his chest. He didn't move. He didn't breathe. He only stared at the ceiling. At some point during the night, Neren must have ended up underneath the blanket and now she clung to his chest.

He didn't know what he was supposed to do. He didn't know how he was supposed to feel. He was mostly just confused. This close, she smelled rather unpleasant, rather *feral*. It wasn't like regular body odor, it was something else...

Well—it probably *was* body odor, it just wasn't *human* body odor. The smell had probably soaked into his sheets too. Her breath trickled down his neck again. Her chest rose and fell against his, as placid the summer sea. She was alive, and that was something he could be thankful for.

He sighed. What was he to do?

Carefully, he started to extract his arm. He tried to avoid thinking about how naked she was as his knuckles brushed against her bare—and surprisingly tender—skin. He pulled it free. It hung in the chilly air, and some part of him begged him to put it back in and go back to sleep. He started to slide his body free. Neren's

arm dragged across his chest, then flopped to the ground. She hadn't woken up, and he was free. He tip-toed over Neren's tail and brushed the tent flaps aside.

Mist shrouded the valley. He could feel the moisture in the air and up his nose as it glowed golden in the light of the rising sun. If the fog was any thicker he would have been able to swim into the sky. He could hardly see the firepit from where he was standing.

He lifted the log from last night and poked at the soggy ash. Beneath the surface the ash grew powdery again. Hidden amidst that powder, he found a clutch of burning embers. It wasn't much, but it was enough to burn the moisture off of some twigs. He blew, and coughed as some of the ash flew back into his throat.

The embers flared back to life and soon he had gathered a respectable blaze. He set the soggier wood next to the fire to dry and sat back, appreciating the atmosphere. The sun was beginning to bake off the fog.

He went off for a brisk morning piss and thought about eating, but he wasn't ready to brave the tent with the sleeping—and incredibly naked—kobold in it just yet.

He noticed her dress sitting in the mud and sighed again. He guessed if he ever wanted her to become *not* naked, he would need to deal with that. He picked it up the soggy mess like draped it across a log with a splat. He put it next to the fire. It would help with the moisture, but he couldn't do anything about the smell. If he was lucky, the smoke would mask it.

He sighed once again. It was becoming a habit, but there wasn't much else to do—not unless he wanted to wake Neren up, which he *didn't*. He stared into the fire and listened to it

crackle.

Neren peeked her head out from the tent flaps, and their eyes met. Sampsa stared at her, and she stared at him, a peculiar expression on her face, softer than the wide-eyed and curious expression he was accustomed to seeing. She stepped out of the tent and Sampsa whipped his head away.

"Your clothes are right there." He shot his thumb over his shoulder, "They should be decently dry by now."

He wasn't looking, but he could hear her approaching footsteps. Something like fear rose in him as she approached, something that drained away as he heard her wriggle into the dress from behind. He flinched at her touch.

"Sampsa is very kind." Neren took her hand from his shoulder.
"Beats sleeping in the rain..."

"Yes, very!" She smiled, "Humans are very warm."

Sampsa ventured a look at the kobold. The clothes were baggy without the sash at her waist. He looked away.

"Would you have been fine on your own? I don't know anything about your kind, but sleeping in those conditions would kill a human..."

"Neren would survive, but Neren likes sleeping with Sampsa more."

It seemed that she still was still lacking the *subtleties* of the Northern tongue.

"I wouldn't have let you sleep outside if I knew it was going to rain like that."

Neren nodded, "Did not know then, but Neren knows now. Sampsa is kind human."

This was getting too awkward for his tastes. He busied himself

by poking the fire.

"Was Sampsa's sleep good?" Neren tilted her head with an airy smile, "Neren did not keep Sampsa awake again?"

'Again...?' How did she know that?

"No, you were fine. You didn't disturb me at all." She did smell though, "The only time I woke up was when I went out to get you."

Neren sat by the fire and warmed herself, "Good!"

"...Neren?"

"Sampsa?"

"What did you mean when you said Nik'il'a?"

Neren seemed flattered, and also amused that he had remembered such a thing, "It is saying to deceive the jaws of the dreameater, Yaiyai. Yaiyai is to be always searching for dreams to be eating, but long ago won bet against Nik'il'a, who is clever; always running and hiding from Yaiyai. To call Nik'il'a by name makes Yaiyai believe Nik'il'a is near, and Yaiyai goes to be looking for Nik'il'a and leaves other dreams alone." Her eyes were so gentle, "How was Sampsa's dreams?"

"I didn't dream of anything. Does that mean he ate them?" Sampsa grinned.

"No. Means Sampsa forgot!" She poked him in the sides, causing him to wriggle, "Always dreaming, sometimes remembering. Always dreaming, even when walking; always walking in the dream of the Dreamer who is dreaming us. Yaiyai eats true dreams—dreams of the dreamer—and leaves bad dreams, leaves dream shit."

Sampsa burst out laughing. The knowing smile on Neren's face only made it worse. She knew what she did, even if that was

how the story actually went.

"They're called nightmares where I'm from." The curious tilt of Neren's head urged him to continue, "They say they're caused by travelling demons who rest on top of your chest while you're sleeping."

"Why?"

"Why...? Well, they're demons; they like to torture people. That's what they do. Why does Yaiyai eat dreams? It's the same thing."

"Yaiyai eats dreams because Yaiyai is hungry!" Neren laughed.

Sampsa didn't know how to feel after getting trounced by such a simple argument, "Well, it's not *purely* to torture people, I suppose. One story says that the sleep demons were created by some Wood Hag to punish the son of the ancients and all his offspring for breaking the well of eternity. Another says they were created by Hild to keep humans from travelling too deeply into the world of dreams and entering the realms of the gods by mistake. They're just stories though..." He scratched his beard, "So, where did Yaiyai come from?"

"Yaiyai was dreamed by the Dreamer, everything was dreamed by the Dreamer. Dreamer's dreams are same as other dreams, some good, some bad. Yaiyai comes from *bad* dream."

"But if Yaiyai is the source of all bad dreams, who gave the dreamer the bad dream that created Yaiyai?"

Neren looked inwards and considered it profoundly. He worried he had overstepped himself, stepped on her beliefs, but she came out of her head with a sharpness to her eyes, "Humans have gods, yes? Who created the human gods?"

"They were born from the all-mother and the eye of the sun—

or so the stories go." He made sure to add, "Humans from the South believe something different."

"Who created who created the gods?"

He knew where she was going with this, it was something he himself had considered, "It's unknowable, really."

She nodded, "The Dreamer was born in the middle of none. The Dreamed dreamed the world and lives in the center. Who dreamed the Dreamer? Who dreamed the Dreamer's *nightmares?* It is unknowable too, but Neren thinks the dreamer dreamed the gods also."

"Well—" The conversation sure had gotten away from him, "Did *you* dream of anything last night?"

"Neren dreamed of sitting in the sun, sitting on top of the mountains, but the mountains were warm..." She remembered fondly, then looked down at her dress. She stood up, pulled at it, and glanced around nervously.

"If you're looking for the piece of parchment with your name on it, it's still in the tent. It was wet, so I stuck it underneath my pack so it wouldn't get wrinkled while it dried out."

Neren's eyes overflowed with relief and gratitude, and something else he couldn't quite place. No matter how long he stared into her eyes, he just couldn't find the word for what he saw in them. He found himself fascinated by their color, like two rubies socketed into two spheres of polished stone. They sparkled with intelligence—familiar, and yet unfamiliar.

He caught himself and stared at the tent, "I'll go get it for you. Needed to get my pack anyway."

Sampsa came back and handed it to her along with her sash, which she accepted with a nod and a smile. The fog had receded

and the liquid air settled into the ground. He set down his pack and reached inside. Neren stared at him as he pulled out the meat, saying nothing, but the memory of its flavor clear in her eyes and turgid lips.

"Sorry... I only packed enough for myself. I wasn't exactly anticipating travelling with someone else when I set out."

"It is okay!" Neren showed her palms, "Neren does not need to eat; body only thinks it does."

"Yeah, you did warn me about that... Sorry, I shouldn't have given it to you."

"Taggy-legs does not need to apologise!" She actually sounded upset, "Sampsa's food is worth the hunger. Sampsa does not need to apologise for being kind."

There she was, making him feel awkward again. He wasn't *really* that nice, was he? Well—maybe he was, but only to the people who deserved it, even if they weren't humans.

"Still, I'll buy you something once we get to Ambruck." He ate quickly, mostly out of guilt than any sense of urgency.

"Sampsa will show Neren around Ambruck?" She straightened in excitement.

"Sure, why not?" He spoke around his food and washed it down with some water, "If you thought that meat was good, there's this excellent shop off the mainway. The chef there is an old cook for the royal court, so it is quite literally fit for a king. Though—it might be better if you didn't eat it. It'll make it impossible to eat 'normal' food again." He tipped a piece of glazed jerky at her before tossing it into his mouth.

Neren placed her hands on her cheeks and laughed, swaying so lightly. She kept laughing until it looked like she would double over, not from laughter, but the feelings inside her.

"...What?"

"Neren is very lucky! Not only travelling together, but arriving together!"

"Yeah..." He stared off, "And to think I almost hit you with my sword."

"Other humans would!"

He had no doubt about that, and the thoughts invaded his head. He imagined Neren throwing up her hands and screaming in desperation as his—someone's—sword came down, splitting her open, dying, gurgling, and whimpering and—heavens above...

The visions slipped out of his brain, slithered down his spine, and with a revolting slap, hit his stomach. He shuddered. He banished the thought from his head, banished it to oblivion and thought of better things, but the feeling lingered.

"Anyway—we'll never get there if we sit around here all day." He packed up his things and slung them over my shoulder, "You used it too, so you need to help me pack up my tent."

Neren saluted rigidly—another thing she must have picked up from the soldiers who passed by the Mazerif.

"—And when Tekki was to be looking, was looking at Meke instead and was hit with sack thrown from above. Hit Tekki hard and Tekki's eyes cross different ways now, so now Tekki can be looking at females and be working at once!" Neren laughed.

Sampsa breathed in a rhythmic way that could be called laughter. Neren walked ahead of him, skipping and filled with energy

as she craned her neck to look at every fluttering insect that came her way.

He was jealous. It must be nice to travel with nothing but the clothes on your back. As he had feared, his tent had taken on water, and despite his best efforts to wring it out, it was about twice as heavy as it ought to be.

Sampsa stopped. He stared at the sun, which was quite the challenge through the thick canopy overhead. It was barely, just *barely* low enough. Neren slowed and stopped, wondering why the footsteps behind her had disappeared.

"Should we stop for today?"

Neren looked at the sun, and came back, somewhat smug, "Neren is in a small hurry, but can stop if Sampsa needs."

"You're in a hurry?"

"Neren must negotiate." She reminded him.

"Huh... Guess you really weren't lying about that."

He considered pushing on for another hour or two, but as soon as the thought manifested itself, his legs came back with a resounding *no*.

"Well... I've travelled this path before. We passed the road to Aijag not long ago, so we're still on schedule. Pushing ourselves any harder just means we'll arrive before noon instead of after it. It's actually better to arrive after noon, trust me. If we show up before the street markets close we'll need to dodge all kind of carts and animals and there will be people everywhere. Plus, the dust they kick up will get all over you and that's no way to show up to any negotiation."

Neren shrugged accommodatingly, pretending to be swayed by the logic of argument instead of the obvious fact that he simply didn't want to walk any more.

His argument was so good he even convinced himself. He marched into the forest without an ounce of guilt and dropped his pack on the first clearing he could find. He sat down and started massaging the knots out of his thighs.

"Sorry, but could you help gather firewood again?" He asked, and got no response. He looked behind and saw her patting at her stomach, absorbed wholly in whatever she was doing.

"...Neren?"

She looked at him, "Sampsa let Neren borrow knife?"

He grabbed his belt knife and handed it to her, "Sure, but what do you need it for?"

She tapped her chin in search of the word, "*Gathering*." She decided, "Plenty of day, best not to waste." She examined the knife's edge. The small carving knife looked more like a dagger in her small hands.

"Just don't wear it down too much." He went back to massaging his legs.

"Neren will be back!" She assured him and disappeared into the forest.

It just occurred to him that he had no idea what she was going to be gathering. There weren't any berries out yet. He supposed she was looking for some kind of mushroom? He considered it with an utter lack of anything else to do while he rested his legs.

He supposed he ought to start gathering firewood. The forest welcomed him with its scent of earth and rotting leaves as he walked through the lanes of roots of crunching leaves. The wood was still moist from last night's rain, but it was not beyond salvage. He filled the cradle of his arms with as much wood as he

could carry. When the pile started to fall and he could no longer pick them back up, he knew he had enough.

The fire crackled and danced, filling the growing bed of embers. Sampsa sat and stared. There was no sense in making it any bigger, but he threw another piece onto the fire anyway. He watched the flames lapping at the smooth wood. He beat a tune into his thighs and would have sung if not for the slightest chance of Neren hearing him.

He started collecting stones and set the around the fire until they formed a wide ring. The sky hadn't changed much since the last time he checked. He dove into his pack and started reading the assorted letters stashed inside. They weren't very interesting. He set up his tent and contemplated the musty smell. Hopefully some fresh air would do it some good.

He threw another piece of wood into the fire just to watch it disappear and sighed. It seems Neren really was serious about not wasting any daylight. He smelled himself and blew out his lips. He was pretty sure there was a stream somewhere around here.

He ventured into the forest, clutching his precious soap as he searched for the river. He headed downhill, hoping it would lead him to water, and though he saw some runnels in the dirt where the rains had carved little canyons on their way down, they only led to a fetid pool.

It was muddy around, and stepping carefully to avoid it, he noticed something in the mud. It was Neren's toes. He looked around, but saw no other sign of her.

"Neren?" He called out, "Ne—"

"Taggy-legs, quiet!"

Sampsa's head whipped side to side, then drifted up. He star-

tled at the two rusty eyes staring down at him. Neren clung to a branch, her claws deep in the wood. He recognized his knife instantly, though she had bound it quite heavily to the end of a long stick. She shooed him off.

"Okay... Guess I'll leave you to it then..." He felt a little awkward, "By the way, what you're doing is called *'hunting'* not gathering."

Neren smiled, but not so warmly that it would invite him to stick around. He waved coolly and walked off, and promptly stepped in some mud. He shook his foot and mucked the ground before clearing his throat.

"I'll be at the stream." He didn't look at Neren's face, so he didn't know what kind of expression she was making.

He found the stream—it wasn't very difficult, it was only a couple hundred paces from where he had found Neren—and started to undress. He unfastened his hood and unbuttoned his doublet, followed by the leggings, and finally his sweat-stained, once-white underclothes. The chilly air tickled him in all his vulnerable places. He felt like a snake that had just shed its skin. He was so covered with oil and dead skin he would swear you could scrape the back of a knife down his leg and make a candle out of whatever slough came off.

The stream burbled, shimmering like crystal ice as it wound through the valley. He stood on the edge amidst the bobbing reeds and jumped in. There was no point dipping your toes in; it wasn't going to get any warmer.

It punched the air out of his lungs and made him suck it back in. Every muscle in the body contracted. His heart stopped beating, at least for one tick, and he sank to the bottom. He erupted from the surface like an ancient geyser and groaned like a dying elk between rapid breaths. He kicked his legs and flailed his arms just to get something moving, and then he was fine. If you couldn't plunge into near-freezing water, you weren't a true Northerner.

He waded to the shore and rubbed some soap into his palm. He lathered his body and dug his untrimmed nails into the filth that clung to his skin. Simply scratching his scalp was bliss. He threw his head back and shut his eyes. Rivulets of blessed suds ran down his face. His long hair floated like a jellyfish underwater. He shook his head. A halo of pale soapy water fumed from his hair and floated downstream.

His head broke the surface and threw it back. Water sailed in a glistering arc and wiped his eyes. Neren stared at him. He jumped back in shock and covered himself.

"W-weren't you hunting?"

Sampsa waded over to the reeds. Mercifully, they were tall enough to cover his lower half.

She tilted her head, "Why Sampsa say at river if did not want Neren to come?"

"That was..." He waved his hand, "That was in case something happened and you needed to find me."

Neren studied his face, and Sampsa watched her eyes drift down to consider the rest of his body. She was looking at it—
really looking at it. She was curious. This was the first time she had seen him without the clothes. It might even be the first time she's seen any human without clothes on.

"Is something wrong with Sampsa's body...?"

"W-what?" He glanced down, "What are you talking about?" "Why hide?"

This whole conversation was going to give him a headache, "Because most humans find it embarrassing to be seen naked by someone they're not intending to sleep with." *female* someones, he wanted to specify, but chose to avoid that particular issue entirely.

She looked confused, "But Sampsa and Neren—"

"And by sleep with I mean *fuck*." Sampsa rubbed his face, "I know you know what fuck means. *Sleep with* is the polite way to say *fuck*, okay? I know we slept, *'together'* but we didn't *fuck*."

Neren started laughing and Sampsa flushed, "...I take it you kobolds don't see anything wrong with being naked?"

She shrugged, "Why is it embarrassing?"

"I don't know...!" He threw out his hands which landed with a splash, "We wear clothes for everything, except when we're *sleeping with* someone—also saunas—but mostly sleeping with someone, so being seen naked is... I guess it's like implying you want to sleep with the person who's seeing you naked...? I don't know, it just *is*, alright?"

Her eyes lit up with understanding, "So humans being naked is like when kobold's 'sword' comes out when it should not?"

The fact that she didn't use one of the some-dozen words she knew for that particular organ was heartening, "Well, yes, it's like that..."

"So humans have the problem all the time because it's always out!" She laughed.

Heaven's above, she must have seen it—and as shriveled as it was too. He didn't know why he thought of that, but if he was going to be forced to expose himself he would at least prefer to show off *everything* he's got.

"It's... Not exactly like that..." He wanted to stop having this conversation about five minutes ago, "When that happens to humans, not even the sauna would be safe..."

Neren grabbed her toes and rolled back laughing, "Yes, yes!" She nodded and sprang to her feet, "Neren will leave Sampsa and Sampsa's 'sword'."

In the cold water, he felt his flushed skin glowing like a sunburn. True to her word, Neren spun around and strode away, and watching her back, he had the inkling that he was forgetting something important. It came to him like a punch in the nose.

"Neren...!" He called, "Come back. Please."

She turned, curious.

"Please take a bath. You smell really, *really* bad. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to be rude, but you really do smell."

She leaned back, physically repulsed by the idea, "Eh...?" She smelled herself, and made an expression like she could see where Sampsa was coming from, but didn't think it was worth worrying over, "Water is too cold... Neren does not know how Sampsa can be swimming without freezing."

"If we're going to be sharing the same tent I'm not going to put up with smelling you the entire night."

Neren tilted her head, "Sampsa and Neren are sharing tent?" "Sure... Why not?" He had said that, hadn't he?

"The tent's not that big, but you're not that big either, plus you didn't wake me up when you were there last time, so unless you prefer sleeping outside, I'll let you stay in the tent."

"Sampsa will be wearing clothes?" She gave a rehearsed, human smirk.

"Come on, Neren!" Sampsa moaned, "If you're going to say

things like that I'm going to take back my offer."

"Sorry, sorry!" She surrendered playfully.

"Yes—we will be sleeping together, and we will not be *sleeping together*." He surprised himself by chuckling, "And I'll only give you that offer if you agree to take a bath."

"Still too cold!"

"There's a fire at the camp; you can warm up once you're done."

She shook her palms, "Sampsa, Neren is not human! Neren falls in mountain water and Neren is dying. Too cold; Neren's body will freeze and drown."

Sampsa crossed his arms and completely forgot he was naked, "Would you be fine standing on the edge and splashing it onto yourself...? If you fall in I can get you out."

She shook her head, "Water is colder than sleeping outside..."

"Can't you please just bear with it? I'll give you another piece of jerky...?"

"Neren is not an animal that tricks for food." She rolled her eyes.

"Okay, sorry..." He supposed she wasn't indeed, "It's just I have a thing about *smells* and would really appreciate it if you washed yourself, at least once. There's heated baths in Ambruck, which I'd recommend taking before going off to your *'negotiations'*. I'll even pay for one, but right now you *really* need to take a bath."

"It is..." She caught the word, "Impossible. Neren cannot wash if arm cannot move." She sighed reluctantly, "But Neren can sit if Sampsa wants to wash."

"That's fine." Sampsa said, only then realizing what he had

offered.

Neren walked towards the water's edge and begrudgingly undid her sash. Sampsa averted his eyes as she slipped out of her dress and kicked it off to the side.

"Hard to wash without looking." She said impatiently.

Sampsa glanced up, and was relieved to see her back turned. Her scales were red like clay, vibrant around her shoulders, arms, and back, while pale and soft as they approached her belly and thighs. There was an almost animalistic litheness to her, no comfort or sumptuousness, no hint of modern trappings present in her body as his eyes traced the line from shoulder, to back, to wriggling tail.

It was familiar, and it was foreign. Her shoulder-blades poked subtly from the skin in her back, her sinuous muscles tangled around rigid bones. The more he looked, the more familiarity he could find. He rubbed the last of the soap into his palms and she cringed in anticipation.

He hesitated, and grabbed her shoulders. She squawked and folded as if she had been burned. Her muscles were tense, but she did not fight him as he pulled her back up. He kneaded the soap into her shoulders and ran his hands along her slender arms. She felt so thin, so delicate. Colors played across her scales as the soap shimmered in the sunlight.

He ventured up to her neck—felt how vulnerable it was—and let his hands slide down to her chest. There was nothing there worth worrying about, but even so, it tickled some part of him he had to ignore. His fingers slid down her ribs one-by-one and settled on her belly. He had felt it before, felt it the night before, that same soft, smooth, and clammy skin.

Neren writhed and squirmed, letting out noises of intense discomfort. He felt like he shouldn't, but he ventured to the base of her tail and ran his hands along her outer thighs. That was far enough. He hadn't the heart to go any deeper. He grabbed her tail and pulled his fist down its length.

He supposed this was going to be the hard part, for her at least. He cupped his hands and threw the water onto her back. Her horns came back and almost gored him as she barked and tensed. He wasn't going to stop halfway. He threw more water on her, and more, and more. Her eyes fluttered.

"I'm almost done." Sampsa assured her, but she could only moan quietly.

He rubbed her back until her scales squeaked, up and down, up and down. His hand stopped on her hind end and felt his chest swell and surge. It bade him to squeeze her, squeeze her tightly and force her into his mercy. Memorize the shape of her skin. Feel her flesh-to-flesh. Yes, do it now!

The feeling vanished as soon as it had appeared, leaving behind nothing but icy bewilderment. If it was not for the cold water, Sampsa was certain the urge would have appeared blow as well. He let go of her and felt the emptiness he held.

"You're all clean."

Neren moaned something and leaned back into Sampsa's arms. He caught her and eased her down gently onto the rock. He glimpsed her front and sent his gaze elsewhere. She was slow and lethargic, just like she had been last night. He made sure she wasn't looking and existed the water. He wiped himself down and slithered into his underclothes. He threw his doublet across her body and dried what parts of her he could.

"You really can't move, can you?"

"Nn..." She ventured, "Not very..."

"Sorry for making you do this..." He wiped her face and took the opportunity to feel the rough texture of her horns.

"When Neren is dry, Neren may forgive you." She smelled her arm before letting it flop to the ground, "Neren smells like Sampsa now."

He finished drying her off, "Can you move now?"

"Carry me." She lifted her hands into the air.

"You can move, can't you?"

"Can move, but Neren does not want to." She said stubbornly, "Is Sampsa too weak to carry little kobold?"

Sampsa cracked his knuckles and smirked, "Weak... You know, I might be the scribe, but I'm good friends with the quartermaster, and he isn't friends with anyone who can't hoist a full barrel of wine over their heads."

She's seen his muscles, she should know he wasn't lying, but still, he had something to prove. He scooped her off the ground and brought her into his chest. She was light, but not as light as he had expected. The overcoat covered anything dangerous as he cradled her in one arm. Perhaps he should have put his belt on before picking her up, but he was committed now.

Neren's head was just below his as she craned and tilted her curious gaze at everything she could find, examining the world with glowing eyes. Sampsa narrowly dodged one of her horns as it came close to striking him in the cheek. She flattened her palm and leveled the height between their heads.

"World is smaller from here." She smiled.

"How about this-?" He lifted her over his head and was

treated to an excited squeal.

"Neren tallest kobold now!" She laughed, then swayed, "Too tall, too tall, Taggy-legs!" She tapped his hand and came back to his chest giggling.

"Why do you call me Taggy-legs anyway?"

"Taggy is stick..." She considered how to explain the concept, "Mountain water dangerous, but useful for keeping foods cool and keeping from rot. Taggy is stick with hook to be taking things from stream without need for touching. Stick is long like human legs and flat end like human foot for grabbing. Taggy-legs is kobold name for human."

Her voice was full and rich from this distance, "So all humans are Taggy-legs?"

"Sampsa can be the only Taggy-legs if Sampsa wants."

"I'll stick with Sampsa, but thanks for the offer." He smirked, "There's another thing I've been wondering about..."

"Yes, Taggy-legs?"

Sampsa shook his head with bitter amusement and continued, "Why do you always call yourself Neren instead of referring to yourself *normally?*"

"Habit from my tongue, and I like my name."

He looked at her. She looked at him. He cleared his throat, "I-I see..." It was jarring to say the least.

"Neren thinks it weird that humans try and use their names as little as they can. Neren thinks names are important and should be used as much."

He nodded in agreement without really knowing what he was agreeing to. The camp was as he remembered it—except it wasn't. He glanced at the fuzzy thing on the ground next to the fire and

glanced back at Neren, "Did you...?"

"Hunting...?" She nodded.

Sampsa set her by the fire where she baked, still wrapped in his doublet—more like a blanket on someone her size. He threw more wood on the fire and examined the furry thing Neren caught. It wasn't any creature he recognized, but his knowledge of woodland creatures was admittedly lacking. It was vaguely rodent-like, and very furry.

"You want to eat this...?"

"Let Neren warm first..." She drooled in bliss, reaching for the fire as if she were performing a religious rite.

Sampsa lifted her dress, "Can you put this back on now? I'd like to have my shirt back."

She stood and threw the doublet off. Sampsa averted his eyes as she slipped into her dress and caught her right as she tightened the sash. She smiled.

Sampsa watched while Neren skinned the creature and flayed it open. The ribcage cracked opened and revealed all its viscera and gelatinous organs. Sampsa's appetite drained away faster than the creature's blood. She squeezed the joints and popped them apart, carving the creature into bits.

Each piece was skewered and set beside the fire to sizzle and drain. The smell was intoxicating. The skin blistered and hissed, dripping fat into the fire which smoked on the embers. Even some of Sampsa's appetite was lured back, though he had no intention of eating the forest rat. Neren spun the skewers and tended the fire. It was simple joy just to watch her work.

Neren decided they were done and picked one up. She blew on the meat and sank her teeth into it. Somehow, she managed to avoid burning her tongue and chewed happily.

"Here!" She held out one of the skewers.

"Oh, no!" Sampsa held out his hands, "I couldn't... I've already got all the food I need, and you're the one who caught it. Eat all you want."

"Return for Sampsa's meat." She insisted.

"Really..."

She urged the stick at him.

"Okay, *fine*. I'll eat *some* of it." He grabbed the roasted meat and looked for the most *meat-like* portion. He blew on it, and bit into it.

It tasted *off*. Not off as in it had gone bad; it was off in the entirely opposite direction. It was too *fresh*. He didn't know much about butchery, but he knew all the meat he had eaten had been left to age in some slaughterhouse for a few days at least before he ate it. This tasted like iron, and it was so tough he could only assume the meat was still in the first stages of rigor mortis. He swallowed it anyway.

"Really, I think you'll enjoy this more than me." He handed it back.

Neren nodded, "Yes, Sampsa is *particular* about food. Neren forgot!"

She sunk her teeth into the meat for another throatful. As if she could notice something like *toughness* and *tenderness* with those teeth. The sun started to set as she devoured the last of the creature. She picked up the organs she had left on the ground, and at the sight of Sampsa's utterly horrified expression, decided to put them back down. She licked her fingers though.

Sampsa stared into the horizon and filled his lungs with the

smell of the forest, the fire, and his freshly bathed travelling companions before letting it all out in one wistful sigh, so pointed that it begged someone to ask—

"What Sampsa sighing about?"

"It's just, I never though I'd end up sitting around a campfire talking to a kobold like this."

"Why kobold?" She tilted her head, "Sitting, talking to friend, yes?"

"Yes, you're right..." Sampsa nodded, "You are a friend before you're a kobold, but it's still... Perhaps it's because you've seen more humans than I've seen kobolds, but..."

"We are not so different... Why act like we are?"

"Well..." He tried to think.

Neren stood in front of him, head height as he sat. She grabbed his hand and spread her small palms into his, "Hands and fingers."

"Yes, we do both have those, but you've got one less finger than I do."

"One is not important!" She smiled, and her utterly blissful disregard for his logic made him inclined to agree, "Two arms, two legs, one body..." She squeezed his arms.

"What about the tail?"

"Tail is not important either!"

Sampsa chuckled, "Oh, it isn't? I see, I see..."

"One mouth." Neren smiled, gripping both sides of his jaw, "One nose, two eyes..." She stared into his grey-blue pools, and he stared into her smoldering embers.

He snatched her, pulled her in like she was a fly he the spider. Her eyes widened. He squeezed her, squeezed her and pushed his face into her neck to drink the sweet scent of rosewater soap. Swelling and surging, each quickening breath pushed him further and further until he felt like his chest would burst. Neren's head fell back and she threw her arms over his shoulders.

He dragged his tongue across her neck and dove in as if he meant to devour his little fly. There was an emptiness in him, an emptiness that had not existed even minutes before, but now consumed him totally. Her touch filled him, his body, his head, his chest, it filled them all. It flowed with each pulsing squeeze he gave her body and her essence fizzed in his blood.

He clawed at her dress, dragging it up until his hands could slip inside. He caressed her body, he kneaded anything soft and traced her tail. The pause to slip her dress over her head was endless agony, and when he dove back in he was twice as sweet, twice as passionate as he ever had been.

Neren laid back, letting Sampsa cover her svelte body with kisses and passion-thick saliva. His buttons popped open one-by-one. He shuddered and shivered as her chilly hands spread across his chest and traveled down. One finger slipped beneath his belt, then two. He bucked in painful anticipation and hissed, inhaling sharply. Her touch was electric, frying his brain to gibbering idiocy as she dug in his pants, and mercifully, finally, it jumped free. It ached in the open air.

He grabbed her head. She grabbed his. He plunged into her fathomless eyes and planted another kiss on her thin, reptillian lips. His hands traveled down, from her head, to her neck, then her shoulders and to her stomach before settling on her slender waist. It was so slender; so, so slender.

Their flesh joined, bodies drenched in the gloaming light.

Their lives were laid bare. Two lights lost in the endless sea of eternity tangled for one point in time and space to find solace in each other's embrace. Two souls united and two fates intertwined, living the passion elected for them from the first point which begat the world and time.

Neren's back arched and her claws dug runnels in the dirt. Sampsa's sweat dripped and rolled down her bare chest as the whole world congealed into one moment. Each breath smelled of stardust, each thrust the crackling birth of a new star. In those everlasting minutes, not one word was uttered, not one sound to break the spell of embers and shifting trees beneath the soft moans of the two lovers. There was nothing to say that their bodies had not already said.

Life swelled beneath the flesh, nursing the white-hot ball of pleasure building below Sampsa's stomach. It grew larger and larger until it burst with a guttural cry. The throbbing wracked his whole body. It reached his face with an uncontrollable twitch as the brain blasting surge left his body pulse by molten pulse. Neren convulsed beneath like an orphan in the cold, except she was burning hot. She writhed, mouth agape, eyes in her head.

Sampsa collapsed on top of Neren, his arms weak, his vision haloed with light, both of them just one living, breathing mass. He rolled onto his side, and the two souls disentangled as life's nectar leaked from her flower.

He stared up at the boundless sky and as the fleeting glow fled his body, realized what he had done. Shame, guilt, and disbelief all mingled with the afterglow, and as he looked at Neren, he realized he did not care. What did it matter if some would call her a beast? He was a beast too. It was in an old text he had read, a philosopher who claimed men were no different from the animals. He had not believed him, not until now—not until he had felt every sense seized by that primordial force as old as life itself. He knew it now. His body was a vessel, a man-shaped container to move that ghost from pleasure to pleasure, and now his vessel was full.

Neren draped her arm across his chest and he took her into his. It was unthinkable that he could have been so rough to such a small body.

"I... I'm sorry..." He was sorry, but he didn't regret it, "I'm sorry for doing that all of a sudden. I'm not sure what came over me..." Her intoxicating visage had come over him.

She laid her head on his chest, "If Neren did not want it, Neren would have let Sampsa know..." She traced her claw across his skin, then laughed.

"Hmm...?" Sampsa looked at her.

"Neren is thinking, for all Sampsa's sorryness, and kindness, and shyness, Sampsa is still full of fire." She rubbed him affectionately.

"You're as much to blame as me..." He kissed her forehead and smiled.

"Neren was not expecting Sampsa to pounce her. Neren did not expect human to pounce on kobold." She traced her thumb around his ear—an alien appendage to her smooth skull, "Neren must ask, why did Sampsa want to fuck Neren?"

"If I knew myself, I would tell you... but when you looked into my eyes, all I knew was that I wanted you."

"What does Sampsa like...?"

Trying to pick words that fit something his body knew was

almost impossible, "Your eyes... You slenderness... You are so genuine in everything you say and do... You are headstrong, you are playful, and you are exactly what you seem. All I've ever known are humans who put on masks, humans who hide who they really are, but you..." He didn't need to say more.

"Neren likes... Sampsa's muscles and Sampsa's hairy head!" She raked her fingers through his shaggy brown hair.

"Just my muscles and hair?"

She smiled, "Sampsa's words are sweeter than honey, and Sampsa's mind is sharp. Sampsa is sharpest human, and Neren likes Sampsa's sword too."

"Which sword are we talking about?" He smirked.

"Both...?" Neren cooed, winding a sinuous finger down his stomach.

The thought that it would go any lower gave him a flash of heat, but she stopped just below his navel and pinched at the narrow trail of hair there.

"I didn't hurt you, did I...? I wasn't really thinking when I..."

"Sampsa's sword is bigger, but..." She leaned into his ear, "Humans do not, but Neren sometimes lays eggs, and Sampsa's sword is not as big as Neren's eggs." Her breath burned his ear, "Neren's eggs hurt, but Samspa's sword does not."

Sampsa grabbed her rear and squeezed. He slipped a finger underneath her tail and traced the crease, pulling her in again.

"Sampsa is so fiery!" She pushed him back, "Sampsa is too fiery for Neren, but it is Neren's fault for lighting it again."

Sampsa cleared his throat and swallowed his libido along with his viscid spit. His body still remembered the taste of her flesh. It wanted to indulge itself in her again, devour her totally this time. Forcing it down was like forcing down the lid of a pot boiling in the middle of a bonfire. He held it with all his weight and the pot began to simmer. Though it was painful, he managed to contain it with his trousers.

"Should we—"

"Hold me." Neren held out her arms.

Sampsa took her into his chest without hesitation. His heat poured into hers. The stars were bright in the crisp mountain air. The night's wind could not blow away the warmth between them. Neren pointed at the sky, at the twinkling stars hanging in the vault of heaven.

"What do humans call...?"

"We call them stars."

"Stars..." She nodded, her horn rubbing against his skin, "The outer black is where all forgotten dreams forgotten by the dreamer go, but stars are dreams too bright to forget totally. Tonight... Neren thinks Neren and Sampsa made a new star." She nuzzled him with a trance of humor.

He squeezed her again, "Hmm... Stars are the tears of the sun, or so our stories go. They say the sun wept when his love must leave him to vanish back into the darkness, but hung his tears in the sky so that she may find him even when he is gone. The stars are directions, and just as sailors use them to find their way on the sea, the gods use them to travel the heavens."

"That dream..." She pointed at the brightest star, "That is the dream of Kaiyat, spirit who made kobolds from stones and bones. Kaiyat thought his stones and bones would be beating Ayk'ark's children who he made from clay and pink fruits from the prickly-bush."

"Humans...?" It seemed logical.

"Yes... Kaiyat thought stones and bones were strong, but clay can bend and never break. Kaiyat lost and was being forced to send his children underground while Ayk'ark's children of clay played in the sun, and in playing became hard..."

"What happened after the humans hardened?"

"Ayk'ark stole the bones from Kaiyat's children to make them stronger, and Kaiyat stole the clay to make his children softer. Evenly matched, there was much dying, and after much fighting Ayk'ark saw no end in the fighting and called Kaiyat to make an offer. Ayk'ark wanted to split the world in two, Ayk'ark above, and Kaiyat below. But having lived in the darkness, Kaiyat did not want Ayk'ark's bargain and turned away. Ayk'ark stabbed Kaiyat in the back and Kaiyat died casting curses on Ayk'ark and his children while Kaiyat's children ran underground to be hiding for time of revenge."

"...That's it?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't speak too kindly of humans..."

"It is excuse to hate humans, but stories are stories, and it is Neren's dream that more humans and more kobolds learn that stories are stories and let who cannot forget the stories remember that kobolds have human clay and humans have kobold bones." Neren kissed Sampsa's neck.

"Your clay is beautiful, Neren..." He returned her kiss, "So, is there a story for every star in the sky?"

Neren laughed, "There are many stories, but Neren can only know so many." She pointed out the places of stars, their meanings and purpose, and continued on as the sky spun around them into the midnight hours.

Sampsa woke with the familiar weight on his chest. He stared at the subtle light which leaked through the canvas in silent lucidity. Once again, he was forced to consider the strange reality he found himself in. He cherished the sound of her breath and the faint rush of her blood, simply laying there and feeling her near. He did not want to wake her, and he did not want to move either; he only waited. The tent grew muggy from the heat of the sun.

"...Neren, you're awake aren't you."

"Neren is awake." She laughed gently and popped out of the sheets.

"How long?" Sampsa kissed her forehead.

"Before Sampsa, Neren thinks."

"Well..." He straightened, "It's gotten pretty late, so I'm sorry, but you're going to need to let go of me at some point."

Neren smiled. Her hands slid off with parting affection as the blanket slid off of her body. She stood and stretched, showing her sinuous and slender body before bending to pick up her dress. Sampsa stared and realized he was attracted to her—not attracted to some capability of hers to satisfy a bestial impulse, but *attracted* to her, tail, scale, and all.

"Neren... Am I weird...?"

She peered from the corner of her eye before throwing her dress over her head, "Yes, Sampsa is weird."

"The other humans you met. Would they have... You know...?"

"Neren thinks most humans would if Neren offered, but most humans would not treat Neren like Sampsa does." "So they would just use you..."

He wanted to give her another hug to show her that that wasn't the case with him, but she was too far. He could understand it too. They might try to hide it, but he would wager most men could be tempted.

"Neren would not sleep with Sampsa if he was that way."

"Do you find me attractive?"

She looked at him, turned her bright beautiful eyes on him, and sighed, "Yes, Sampsa is good looking."

"Have you... ever found any other humans attractive?"

"Sampsa will get kicked if he keeps asking stupid questions."

"Sorry..." He scratched his beard, "It's just... I don't know, people like me aren't supposed to have sex with anything other than humans, you know?"

"No."

"People like me!" He spread his hands, "Sure I'm not *part* of a royal family, but my home is inside a mansion and my whole job revolves around talking to and listening to people who are! What would they think if—!"

"Sampsa pounces on Neren and acts like it is Neren who made things hard. Neren was not asking to be pounced." She crossed her arms.

"This isn't about you at all! I'm not saying you did anything wrong. This is about me, okay?"

"Then why ask Neren questions Neren cannot be answering?"

"That's not what I'm talking about, Neren! It's just... I don't think I'm a degenerate, but a few days ago I would have thought anyone who fucked a kobold was just that! And now it's... I don't know! I didn't want to fuck you when I first met you, but now I

do, okay?"

Sampsa breathed and felt electric, "I'm sorry, but right now I want to fuck you so bad it's *physically painful*. I want to fuck an incredibly clever kobold named Neren and I don't care that you're not human, but everyone else is just like me from two days ago!"

"Why is Sampsa acting like he is to be yelling about his kobold fucking to everyone?"

"I shouldn't *need* to hide it, Neren! There's nothing wrong with it, but... It—it's just made my life so complicated all of a sudden...!"

"Again it is Neren's fault?!"

"That's not what I'm saying! It's—!"

Sampsa's words cut off with a grunt as Neren pounded her fist into the top of his skull. He rubbed the spot she had clonked him and stared in betrayal.

"Neren let Sampsa have her and Sampsa is complaining. Neren does not care what other humans think, and Neren does not care what other kobolds think. Neren cares what Neren thinks, and Sampsa should care what Sampsa thinks."

Sampsa blinked, and smiled, "...I thought you said you were going to kick me, not pound my head in."

"Sampsa not deserving Neren's claws just yet." She hugged his head and rubbed the spot tenderly, "Sampsa likes to be worrying, but Sampsa should not be letting his worry make him unhappy."

He felt like he was going to cry, and was suddenly filled with an overpowering desire to *not cry*. He managed to keep it inside, but his throat felt sore and he was certain his face was red when she let go. Looking at her face, he was suddenly embarrassed. He looked away, and felt a strange gravity slap him in the side of the head. Curious, he felt at his hair and twisted the thing between his fingers. It took him a second to realize what it was.

"You... braided my hair?"

Neren nodded happily, "Neren sees lots of Northernfolks wearing braids, so Neren was thinking braids would be looking good on Sampsa."

"Well, do they?"

"Neren thinks so!"

Sampsa laughed, "I'm surprised you know how to tie braids, considering you don't have any hair. When did you do it?"

"Neren had hard time sleeping, so Neren tied Sampsa's hair to be passing the time. Sampsa sleeps well, sleeps like Hek'tic the sleeper." She fiddled with the braids.

Sampsa smiled.

"Now—Neren must be..." She tapped her chin, "Sampsa does not like words the soldiers use, so how would Sampsa be saying, *'shit*?"

He choked on the verbal whiplash, "Well the polite thing to do would be to never mention it at all, but if you *must*, you should say you need to 'relieve yourself'."

"Neren must relieve herself." She said with a hint of amusement and disappeared through the tent flaps.

The tent felt twice as hollow as usual. His breath was deep and full of resolve. The scent of her was still in the air, and he did not mind it so much. His braids dangled as he dressed himself.

The morning air was not as crisp the way he liked it. It was somewhere between dewy and dry where the sun had not yet burned off the moisture of the night but instead caused it to hover in the air as a sticky haze. At least it hadn't rained any more.

The fire with his beautiful circle of stones was not worth restarting; they had wasted enough time already. He looked around restlessly. He was pumped full of energy, and he knew what the source of that energy was. He would prefer to channel it into something more productive than lust, but if Neren tempted him too much, he would certainly use it imprudently.

There wasn't much to do but wait until she got back. It had taken only one night, but already he was dependant on Neren's help to pack up his tent. Though, while she was gone, he decided to take advantage of it. He undid his trousers. The fire let out a disapproving hiss as he relived himself into the pit and heard something split the silence.

He heard a shout—a yelp—some cry in pain, quickly silenced and far reaching. His hand shot to his hip and his heart sank into his stomach.

"Neren?!" He shouted into the uncaring forest.

He sprinted in the direction of the noise. His heart beat fast. The gleaming sword cast patterned light across the trunks of trees as he raced through the woods. His grip pulsed on the hilt; He couldn't even remember drawing it.

"Neren?!"

The tangled roots threatened to trip him. He skidded down a loamy slope and only barely kept his feet under him as his arms wheeled to steady his balance. He heard the sounds of a struggle, and snarling and grunting, and horrible squeals above rustling and thrashing.

He saw her, and felt like he could face down an entire calvary charge with nothing but the blade in his hands. Neren bit and clawed desperately as the beast thrashed her in its jaws. It was something—he didn't know—something four-legged and covered in matted fur, vaguely canine in shape. He didn't know what it was; he didn't care.

His feet could not move as he wanted them to, no matter how hard he pushed, they carried on his slow, agonizing, dead-set sprint. He watched it shake Neren in its jaws. He saw her blood dripping. She tried to gouge its eyes, she tried to bite its face off, but it was too large, and too feral. The struggle had rubbed the ground behind Neren's back bare.

Sampsa's sword came down. The beast's hide was thick. It glanced off with a spray of dark-brown hair and chipped into the dirt. The beast didn't even stop to consider him. He kicked it, kicked it twice, shouting some wordless utterance, but it refused to let her go. He pulled his sword back. He gritted his teeth. Every ounce of strength he had and didn't know he had surged through his chest and exploded through his arms in one desperate thrust.

The blade bit into the beasts flesh. It shuddered from the impact and let out an injured whimper. It dropped Neren and started loping away. Sampsa watched the beast limp for an instant and turned his attention to Neren. She laid on her back, breathing and croaking like she had just come up from drowning. Her wrists covered her eyes. Blood oozed from the puncture wounds in her leg. His knuckles went white around the hilt of his sword.

He bellowed like a mortuary bell and broke into a mad sprint.

The beast limped away, fast, but not fast enough. He drove the blade into its back. It squealed and he drank its sounds with demented pleasure. He stabbed it again, and again, and again as red gashes stained its hide. It stumbled and collapsed on its side, whimpering pitifully as its chest quivered with stuttered, dying breaths. Its blood-stained jaws snapped impotently. He kicked it. He listened to the little squeak it added its death rattle, and it made him feel good. He drove his blade into its neck, and he would have done it again if not for the reality that came crashing in—the reality cold enough to freeze his rage solid.

"Neren...!" He came rushing back.

He grabbed her shoulder, "Neren, it's dead now. I killed it, Neren..." There were too many things careening about his skull, "How bad are you hurt?"

Neren sucked air and clenched her teeth, "Hurt enough to hurt."

If the pain was as bad as he thought it was, she was hiding it well. She looked more annoyed than she did distraught—disappointed in fate rather than cursing it. Sampsa pulled back her dress to get a better look at the wound. The blood stuck to the fabric. There were six puncture wounds in her thigh, four above and two below. The foremost two were the deepest and the pooling blood made gauging their depth difficult.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" He asked.

"Only leg...!" Her breathing was rigid and deliberate.

"Okay... Okay... Hold on..." He had read medical texts before. He should know what to do, "Hold your hands here—" He moved her hands to he thigh.

"It might hurt, but... You need to squeeze it to stop the blood-

loss."

Neren nodded and squeezed around the wounds as blood stained her fingers. Pain surged through her eyes as Sampsa lifted her off the ground, but she kept pressure on the wound until they reached camp. He set her down and rushed into his tent. What was next... What was next...

He dug through his pack and pulled out his waterskin. He had to wash the wound, but the text he had read had been adamant on boiling the water first. There was clattering as Sampsa upturned his pack and dug for the shallow pan at the bottom. Outside, trails of blood rolled down Neren's fingers and thigh. Did he even have enough time to boil it?

"Neren, are you okay? Do you think you can last until I boil some water?"

"Neren is fine."

He bit his lip. The firepit stank of ammonia. He cursed himself for being so stupid as he upturned each doused ember from the ash. Fortunately he had not managed to extinguish all of them. His hands shook. He blew, but his breath was uneven. It was agony to rekindle it as Neren bled out by his side.

The pit burned with life. He threw an armful of sticks onto the fire and set the pan on top. He didn't have time to make it perfect, he only needed heat. He poured the water into the pan an shook the empty waterskin.

"Wait there, Neren!" He ran off.

It wasn't enough water, but now at least he could do two things at once. If he was lucky, it would be boiling before he came back. He sprinted toward the stream. Skidding to a stop, he threw his skin into the water. It filled slowly and gave him too much time to think.

"I'm back—!" Sampsa shouted, "Are you okay?"

"Neren is as okay as last time Sampsa asked."

"Okay..." He sloshed his bulging waterskin in front of Neren, "I'm going to clean out the wound, so take your hands away."

He examined the wounds again. The blood had started to harden, growing dark and thick. There were thin fibers of wool stuck to the inside of her wound—fibers from her dress no doubt. Neren winced as he poured the freezing water into her wound. The blood mixed with the water, spinning in striated patterns like marble as it leaked down her leg to soak into the dirt.

Her leg shook, her teeth were clenched. He washed it until the waterskin was empty and the wound was as red as he could get it. He looked at the metal pan. The water boiled angrily inside. What was he supposed to do with it?

He pulled it out of the fire and burned the tip of his finger as he tapped the rim of the pan. He didn't understand. He couldn't pour this on her wound, it would just add a burn to her injuries, but what else could he trust?

It steamed. He wrapped his hands with his hood and lifted the pan. He sloshed it around, let it cool only a bit, and poured it onto the would. Neren let out a gurgle of pain and thrashed in shock.

"Why—?!" Her hands shot to her thigh.

"I'm sorry! This is what the medical texts I've read said to do! It's supposed to purify the wound, keep it from becoming afflicted! It's... Prophylaxis!"

"Human medicine... Human medicine..." She repeated like a

spell, "Neren will trust Sampsa's prophylaxis..."

He twitched from the pressure, "It's clean now, so we need to..."

Wasn't he supposed to apply some kind of salve? What were the recipes? He strained his thoughts and pushed through the fog. There was something about egg-whites and honey, something about copper, wine, and fat, but he didn't have any of that. But—there was something he remembered, something that called for urine, soot, and... No that was absurd; he wasn't going to use *that*. There was nothing he could do but wrap it up.

"Hold on...!" He tore strips off his hood and started to dress the wound. It was the cleanest article of clothing he had.

"Is this okay?" He passed the cloth from hand to hand, over and under her leg, "It's not too tight is it? It's not hurting you?" "It is fine." Neren laid back.

He tied it off and watched anxiously, but the blood did not appear—at least not in the quantities he had expected. It seemed her body had already done most of the work, especially with him taking as long as he had, and as Neren looked at him, he was forced to accept it wasn't as grievous as he had assumed it was. He felt a little silly for getting so worked up, but who could blame him.

"I'm... I'm sorry for letting this happen to you..."

Neren sighed, "Sampsa has nothing to apologise for... If Sampsa was not here Neren would be hurting worse. Neren is thankful for Sampsa to be rescuing her." She smiled warmly.

He still felt responsible, but she was okay, and that was all that mattered to him. He showed her a smile as well, but he didn't really feel it. Then—

"Wait, wait! You shouldn't stand up!"

Neren ignored him and she struggled to her feet. She made it upright, put some weight on the leg, and... Surprisingly, seemed fine, until she gave a suffering smile and fell back down.

"Hurts little bit. Hurts not bad though..." She walked on her knees and started scrutinizing the spare firewood piled there by the fire.

It was obvious what she was looking for, "You're not serious! You think you can still travel in that condition?"

"Is not bad..." Neren assured him.

She seemed satisfied with the stick she found and levered herself off the ground. Sampsa stared in disbelief as he watched her limp in circles with the staff.

"At least rest for one day!"

"Neren's negotiations are too important to be wasting time. Neren is glad for Sampsa's worry, but Neren is fine."

"...You're serious?"

She nodded firmly, resolute in her stance, "Neren is serious."

Sampsa shook his head. He hated it, but he could not deny her when she looked at him like that? She was not as weak. She was strong, and she was proud, and she was perhaps sturdier than he gave her credit for.

"Are you sure you can keep going?" Sampsa asked for what must have been the fifth time he was sure.

"Neren can keep going, but Neren must rest." She limped to the side of the narrow trail and sat on some roots.

He was actually shocked to see her taking time to rest after

ignoring him him for so long. She must be near her limit now, but he must admit, he was astonished at her pace. She leaned back at stared at the lights which trickled through the shifting leaves. Subtle spasms ran through her legs. She was more exhausted than she was letting on.

"...How does it feel?"

"Neren is used to the hurt."

"We can—"

"How far is Ambruck?"

He swallowed his concern, "We passed the old bridge, so we're about two days away, but... It might be three at this pace."

Her lip twisted at the news.

"Neren..." He couldn't believe he was going to ask this, "Neren, are you determined to keep going no matter what I say?"

"Is really not as bad as Sampsa thinks." She rubbed her leg, "Neren can keep going, so Neren needs to keep going."

He sighed, "Would you like me to carry you?"

She tilted her head, but she seemed happy, "Sampsa is strong, but Sampsa is already carrying his things."

"Well... It's not like I'll be able to carry you all the way to Ambruck, but you're light enough. You can rest while I'm carrying you and I can rest while you're walking. We might make pace that way, and the sooner we get to Ambruck the sooner we can get a proper physiker to treat your leg."

"Leg will heal by then!"

Though she seemed confident, he wasn't so sure, "Still..."

Neren held out her arms with an inviting smile. He picked her up and pulled her into his chest. She wrapped her arms around his neck and got comfortable with the walking stick across her chest. They locked eyes. Their faces were so close.

"Would you mind if I kissed you?"

"So that is the real reason Sampsa wanted to be carrying Neren!" She laughed and exposed her neck, "Sampsa may kiss, but Sampsa will need to wait until Neren's leg is better before he can do more."

"I wouldn't do it *here!*" He cried in his defense, and Neren's smug expression doubted that wholeheartedly.

Sampsa kissed her on the neck. She seemed to like it there. He came out, and she pulled him back in. What was he to do but cover her with even more kisses? Neren wriggled in his embrace and threw her head back as Sampsa came up for air. She traced little circles into his chest.

"Maybe is good Neren hurt her leg... Now Neren gets to be carried all the way to Ambruck!" She laid her head into his body.

"I told you I can't carry you *all* the way there." He surprised her with another kiss, "I'll try my best though."

Neren bounced in Sampsa's arm as he travelled the winding path down the mountains. The dominating evergreens and conifers gave way to deciduous birches, alders, hazels, and hornbeams. Their leaves glowed green with the joy of spring.

The air was richer at the base of the mountain. It sang the same melody, but changed pitch ever so slightly. It was subtle, but he could tell, especially when he was breathing as much as he was now.

He held something precious. If he had been carrying anything else, he would have dropped it by now. Now he ha something to prove. He swapped her over to his other arm.

"What is Ambruck like?"

"Hmm..." Sampsa didn't need to think long, "It's crowded. It's loud. It smells really bad. You need to travel with a handful of coppers in your purse so you can tip the local beggars or else they won't sweep the horseshit out of your path when you cross the road. And though it's not my responsibility, I've have to look over the city's ledger of deaths from time to time, and I know for a fact at least eight gong-farmers have died from fumes while cleaning out the city's cesspits."

He could think of more things, but he felt he shouldn't—but no, he needed to let it out, "Plus! If you look like you've got any money on you'll be attacked the moment you enter the market by the street urchins the peddlers pay to harass people in the hopes they'll buy some useless rocks."

Neren laughed at his impassioned loathing, "Why Sampsa live in Ambruck if Sampsa hates it so much?"

"Well it's either that or live out here in the country, which..." He squinted over the scenic trail, "...Is a great place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there."

"What is it Sampsa is liking about Ambruck then?"

"You take the good with the bad. They've got hot baths, good food, and there's alehouses for every day of the year, and..." He made a look like he was about to share a dirty little secret, "If you've got money and connections, you can get away from all the great unwashed."

"And Sampsa has money and connections?"

"I've got more money than I need, Neren!" He bounced her and boasted, "When we get to Ambruck, I'll have my tailor make a new dress for you! It's not like you can go to an important negotiation dressed like *that*, especially now that it's got holes in it."

"Sampsa does not need to..." She smiled, and though she seemed serious, she also did not seem as if she was against the idea either, "If Sampsa wants to do something for Neren..."

"Hmm...? What is it?"

"Neren would like it if Sampsa showed her how to write."

He paused for a second, "Really...?"

"Was Neren asking too much?"

"No, no, it's just surprising is all. If you want to learn to read and write, you've asked the right person, I suppose!" He chuckled, "I'm not against it, but are you sure? It won't be easy, and it's no fun—a lot of rote memorization, lot of ink stains, and a lot of hunching over desks."

"Is it harder than learning Northern tongue?"

"No... I suppose it's not." He admitted with a smirk, "You'll have no problem with it, I'm sure. I've got to ask though, why do you want to learn to write?"

"Neren can be talking to Sampsa because Neren learned the Northern tongue, but when Neren was learning, Neren was asked why. Neren learns because Neren knows it will be useful, but Neren does not know what it will be useful for."

Learning for the sake of learning! All the memories he had of tutoring the sons of merchants and noblemen came rushing back—those haughty ingrates, always with their incessant questions of, 'why do I need to know this?' 'Why does this matter?' It was refreshing to meet another autodidact in such an unexpected way. Maybe if her brain wasn't as big, he would have been able to carry her longer, he amused himself.

"Sorry, but my arms are about to fall off." He set her down, and

she stumbled, forgetting how tender her injured leg was.

She caught herself with her stick and managed to stop before she fell into the dirt, "Sampsa went far!"

He puffed his chest out, "I could carry you the whole way there if it weren't for this pack. You could ride my shoulders."

"Would be nice! But Neren likes Sampsa's tent too." She gave a good-natured laugh.

Neren limped ahead. Her pace was slow, but steady. Sampsa followed behind. As he watched her every step, he found himself unconsciously testing the strength in his arms. How long, he wondered, until he could carry her again.

After some time he surprised her from behind and lifted her into the air, her legs still pumping for two strides before she fell into his chest. He could not go as far as he had last time, and when he let her down, the distance had shrunk as well. He picked her up two more times before his arms were reduced to burning ropes filled with knots. She couldn't get much further after that either. Every step seemed to vibrate his entire body.

"Neren... I don't think we're going to make it much further today. If you push yourself any harder it'll just come back to bite you tomorrow."

Neren leaned on her stick, "Yes, yes... Sampsa is right..." She huffed, and tripped backwards halfway through sitting down.

He sat down as well—and only realized his mistake as the rush of relief shot through his tired legs. He didn't want to get up, but he needed to. The journey to uprightedness was an arduous one, but he stood tall.

"Come on, Neren... You can rest once the tent is up." Sampsa walked to her side, where she sat stubbornly. He pulled her to her feet and felt his arm begging for mercy. She stumbled ahead, and only some dozen strides from the road, Sampsa stopped.

"Normally I don't camp next to the roads because of bandits, but..." He let his pack slip off his shoulders and felt light enough to fly into the sky.

Neren sat down again, and he hadn't the heart to ask for her help. He set up the tent alone while Neren rested her leg. She kept rubbing the spot.

"How is it ...?"

"Hurts..." She admitted, "But Neren is fine."

"Hold on, let me check the bandages."

He kneeled by her side and undid the knot atop the shroud of cloth. The bandages peeled away like a second layer of skin, thick and sticky with dried blood. Red rings rimmed the angry wounds, but what had she expected, pushing herself like that. Neren cringed. Cold water trickled down her leg and thigh as Sampsa washed away the old blood and sweat.

"These need to be washed..." He plucked away the bandages with two dainty fingers and dropped them somewhere,

"But... I think we did well today. I think we might make it to Ambruck in time." He patted her leg with a smile.

Neren smiled back, but it faded faster than it should have. She stared at something far in the distance. He felt so helpless. He dug into his pack and the noise drew her attention.

"Here." He handed her another piece of sticky jerky.

She looked at the meat, then at him, and her ephemeral smile graced him once again. She took it and ate it gratefully.

"And Sampsa is always eating like this in Ambruck?" She

spoke with the half-chewed meat still thick in her mouth.

He looked away with a wry smile. It seems there were still some things she needed to learn beyond just the language.

"I promised you, didn't I? The first thing—! Well, actually the *second* thing, after we get you washed up in into some fine clothes, but anyway—! The second or third thing we're doing when we get to Ambruck is going to my old friend and getting you a good meal."

She leaned back, "Neren wants to be rushing more for Sampsa's promise than Neren's negotiations!" Her fingers slotted between her toes and she rocked slightly.

He rewrapped her injury with tender care. He wanted to smother her, pull her into his body and squeeze all the love out of her, but he couldn't bring himself to be that selfish.

"There—" He tugged the knot tight, "You should rest in the tent. I'll take care of everything out here. You should focus on recuperating."

Neren nodded and crawled into the tent.

"Nik'il'a." Sampsa called behind her.

She smiled and disappeared behind the flaps. Sampsa sighed. He let his shoulders droop and his back bend. Everything felt daunting, but he would need to make fire and find some water before he could clean her bandages—unless he wanted to start tearing apart his hosen for new ones.

The sun hung irritatingly high in the sky, enough to change color, but still an hour or two away from the horizon. There was no chance the night would come to relieve him of his duty. Neren stirred and moaned in the dark.

"Sorry... Did I wake you...?" Sampsa whispered as he wriggled into the sheets.

Neren nodded silently and breathed deep. He pulled the sheets over his shoulder and rolled next to Neren. She fit into his arms nicely. Had he ever found her scales strange? No—they were perfect.

He laid there, eyes open wide in the dark, staring over her horns and her head. The sound of the forest, the smell of the damp. The thing living and breathing beside him. It did not feel right for things to be so peaceful. The knowledge of her injured leg knocked on the back of his skull, but still—it was peaceful.

"Nn..." Neren moaned and pushed him off, "Sampsa is too hot..."

His eyes stared in pause. He felt the emptiness that she left behind like a phantom limb, "...I thought you liked the warmth."

"Not too much..."

It seemed for a moment that she would say more, but she just didn't have the energy. He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling that he could reach, but still seemed lost beyond an infinite black. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep past his noisy thoughts.

The morning came in an instant. He blinked hard and felt the sand sealing his eyes crack open. It felt as if something was sloshing around his head. He wouldn't have believed he had slept at all if not for all the missing time. His arms creaked like an old cellar

door that had been sealed with rust and dust for a hundred years. His clay had dried, but his bones were still strong.

"Neren, are you awake?" He whispered to the ball beside him.

"Neren is awake." It answered back.

"How did you sleep?"

"Not good..."

"Yeah, that makes two of us..." Sampsa rubbed his face, "It wasn't because I woke you up last night, was it...?"

"Sampsa is always with his worrying." She said it as if she had known him for years and not days, "Neren did not sleep good because Neren needed two nights and not one."

"I feel you there..."

Sitting upright was thoroughly unpleasant, mostly because it carried with it the implication that standing upright was soon to follow. He rubbed the sand from his eyes and flopped to his knees. The moist air outside was certainly to blame for the crust stuck to his eyelashes.

He yawned loudly and felt the cool air breathing on his skin. White cloth flapped from the branch ahead—not as white as it would have been when it was new, but still *clean*. He wound the bandages around his fist and poked his head into the tent.

"Neren, I'm going to change your bandages again."

"So soon...?" She rolled over and stretched like a cat.

"The Summa Medicina says to change the bandages twice a day, *'So long as the wound continues to weep.'*" He quoted.

She laid back in resignation. Sampsa pulled the sheets back and peeled away her bandages, and weeping they were. The bandages were not wet with blood, but a thin pinkish fluid—drainage, he thought it was called. It was odd, seeing so deep into her leg with-

out any blood. It was just wet, skinless flesh. The wound was still swollen and red. He wrapped it tight and he was happy to not need to look at it anymore.

"Are you feeling up to walking?"

"Two days, yes?"

"Two, *good* days." He corrected, "Are you up for two more *good* days?"

For only a second, a hint of doubt flashed in her eyes, "Yes, Neren is good to be walking. Is Sampsa good to be carrying?"

He flexed his arms and felt them ache. He wished he could boast, but... "I'm going to be honest, Neren. I don't think I'll be able to carry you like I did yesterday."

She sucked in air and let her shoulders fall, "If we are to be taking three days, Neren can accept it..."

"Hey, don't make that face, Neren. We haven't even started walking yet. We might still make it in two."

It felt safe to encourage her after he had sufficiently lowered her expectations. Personally, he doubted they would make it in two, but he didn't want her to know that just yet.

Neren laid flat as he packed away his things. She laid still even as he pulled the blanket off her chest and folded it neatly.

"...Are you sure you don't want to take the day to rest?"

She flapped her hand, "Neren is waiting for Sampsa to be done. There is no point to be wasting energy."

He swallowed his words. Even as the tent came down around her, she stayed on her back. She stared at the sky, lost in some daydream until Sampsa shocked her out of it. She looked down to see the walking stick thrown across her chest.

"Come on, we're not going to make it in two days if you sit

around all day, and if you wanted to sit around all day, you should have said something before I put the tent up."

"Okay, Taggy-legs, okay."

She folded upright and jabbed the stick into the ground. Sampsa bit his lip as she levered herself up, leg twitching. She looked proud, but he stared at her soberly.

"Are you sure you're okay to walk?"

Her eyes turned serious, "Neren is sure."

It was strange seeing such a small creature so resolute, but if she wanted to do it, who was he to stop her? He slung the pack over his shoulder and walked ahead. Neren hobbled behind him. He stopped, and she hobbled past, casing an ephemeral look his way before he disappeared behind her back.

Sampsa watched her. He observed every unsteady step and every heave of her chest. His hands twitched with every step. That painful twitch she tried to hide every time the stick came down, those haggard shoulders; he could do something about it.

His arms protested as he picked her up. She felt twice as heavy as she had yesterday, but he didn't care. She settled into his arms, and seemed all too thankful for it. He wanted to hear her quips, hear her joke about how they had only just stared and she was already in his arms.

He didn't say anything, and neither did she. Already, he could feel his arms burning. He quickened his pace. If his arms were going to give out, he could push his legs before then.

The trees passed, row after row, every step much like another on their way down the mountain. It was too much. He held her as long as he could, but he just couldn't do it anymore. She slid through his arms like a wet sack and landed on her hands and feet.

Her face tightened in pain, but she hid it otherwise.

"I-I'm sorry, Neren..." He said, his hands still shaking, "My arms are too tired; it just kind of snuck up on me."

"Neren is fine..."

She limped ahead and the sun rolled through the heavens.

It would not be three days; it would be four days at this pace. He hated his aches, his pains. He hated his weakness, and he hated whatever fate had sent that slavering beast their way. The stick carried more and more of her weight with each labored step. He picked her up when she was exhausted, but could never carry her for long.

They passed another stream and he filled his waterskin. Neren rested against an old willow as Sampsa raked the cold water through his salty, sweaty hair and then they were off again.

Sampsa considered dropping his pack, just leaving everything behind and carrying Neren instead, but that would mean two, three, maybe even four nights exposed to the cold early spring nights, and what if it rained again? He remembered, quite an afterthought, that the letters he carried in his haversack were rather important too. He couldn't just leave them, but he had them more or less memorized.

Could he say they were lost? No—that would be worse then telling them he had outright destroyed them. He concocted some tale of a midnight raid where his only recourse had been to cast the letters into the flames lest they fall into the wrong hands, but the tale grew more convoluted by the second and he was soon forced to face reality. It wouldn't work, and now Neren hung

from her walking stick like a wet shirt.

Sampsa put his hand on her shoulder, "We should stop for today."

She huffed and nodded.

They—Sampsa—set up camp not far from the road. The spot was clear. It had obviously been used to camp before, and that worried him. The remnants of a fire pit still sat in the clearing, though there was no ash in it. As nervous as it made him, it was a convenience he couldn't ignore.

He hoisted his tent over a square of packed dirt and it fit the space perfectly. Perhaps he himself had camped here once, many years ago. He turned and looked at Neren. She looked like a wrung-out rag, her lips parted as if they had not the strength to seal themselves.

He grabbed her leg and pulled it straight. Neren sucked air as he peeled away the sopping bandages. He pulled his own heart into his stomach with them. They were thick with drainage and sticky with discharge. Veins of white streaked the wound and swam beneath pools of hazy liquid. Sampsa cleaned them out as best he could, but he could not wash away the insidious veins pulsing inside.

"How is Neren's leg ...?"

There was an edge to her voice; she was asking something she already knew.

"It's... It's not good..." He swallowed, "I'm... Not an expert on this or anything, but it's probably afflicted. It's only going to get worse from here."

She laid back and sighed in resignation, "So we are to be waiting..."

"On the contrary—" He rubbed her leg, as if it would help, "The sooner we get to Ambruck, the better. The woods are no place to have an afflicted leg, and the medicine in Ambruck is the best around."

"Neren will try." She blinked, eyes vacant as her mind worked to understand this new reality.

"I'm sorry... If I washed out the wound earlier, maybe...!" Why had he listened to that book? Why had he waited all that time just to pour boiling water on her leg?

He felt his chest tighten. He wanted to hear her say it was okay, hear her say that she did not blame him, but no words passed her scaly lips. She only stared at the sky as if the drifting clouds could lift away her burdens.

He changed her bandages. It was the beast's spit—that must have done it. Or maybe it was her filthy clothes. Some of the fibers had been stuck in her wound—fibers from the same shirt he had left overnight in the mud and heavens know where else. He should have washed it immediately.

He grit his teeth and felt his aching arms tense. He wished to be there again to drive his blade into that beast's belly once more. His only solace was the thought of it rotting, stinking, and purifying out in the open sun. He imagined its bones as they were picked clean by the carrion eaters. Maybe it was a female beast. Maybe it had children. He hoped they starved.

He carried Neren into the tent and set her down gently. He hated that he could barely manage even that. She looked at him, and he looked at her. He gave her his tenderest smile, and she looked like she believed him. Her slender fingers slipped between his and parted with lingering affection.

The outside air stank of tranquility. The radiant sun and fluffy white clouds mocked him as they drifted carefree above his head. The soiled bandages hung between his fingers.

"Neren..." He shook her shoulder, "Neren...!"

She moaned, her tongue limp in her cheek. Her eyes twitched and her fingers curled weakly. Her body hardly resisted as he shook her. How had it come to this—waking up to find her so limp and lifeless. She was cold, but she was also hot. He didn't know what to do. She wasn't human. He didn't know if he should warm her up or cool her down. Panic rose from the pit of his stomach and coiled around his spine. He didn't know. He just didn't know.

"Neren, talk to me!"

"Ah is thu mirk...?"

Her eyes were elsewhere as they flitted in confusion, but at least there was still life inside of her. His hands moved to her shoulder, then to her side, to her chest, her forehead, and hung there. Hovering his arms around her like a fool was all he could do.

"I'll get you some water!"

He dug through his things and put the carved-bone spout between her pointed teeth. The water trickled into her mouth and her throat pulsated to take it down. Her throat bulged. Vomit spewed from her sideways mouth with a sicking gurgle. It was not forceful, it was weak. Even her throat could not muster the strength.

She hacked and heaved on her own vomit. Sampsa flipped her onto her stomach in a flash of panic. The rest of her stomach dribbled out of her mouth. He patted her back to help it out. He was so *fucking* useless.

"Whu..." She let out an acrid belch, "Whu ik..."

"Neren, can you hear me!? Neren, I'm right here! It's Sampsa!"

"Sampsa... Neren hurts..."

Trying to speak and trying to breath was too much for her.

"I'm sorry...!" He rolled her onto her back, "I'm sorry, Neren! Sampsa is here, okay? You're going to be okay!"

He could see the fear in her eyes amidst the confusion. The haze in her head was clearing, but how could he be happy when he knew what she was waking up to?

"Taggy-legs is here, Neren...! Taggy-legs is here..."

"Water..."

He hesitated, then let it trickle into the corner of her mouth once again. She tried her best to swallow it. It went down hard.

"Are you too hot? Too cold?"

"Hot..."

He moved to pull the sheets off of her, but something came back to him. Wasn't it good to be hot while fighting off an affliction? He had also heard that it was necessary to cool someone with fever down but, what was her fever? She was warmer than normal, but she was not as hot as any human fever.

He kept the sheets on. He didn't know why, he simply trusted his instincts, even though by now he knew he shouldn't.

The look in her eyes broke his heart. He loved her, he realized. He had been running from it and it finally caught up with him. He could not dismiss it as mere perversion or sexual gratification. If he was only here to satisfy his flesh, she would not make him feel this way. It felt like the world would end with her, and he

with it.

Neren's crawling fingers found his hand. She squeezed gently, but it was the most strength she could muster. His soothing thumb rode the valleys of her knuckles. The fear in her eyes faded, but did not completely disappear.

"I'm going to change your bandages again."

He was getting disgustingly good at it. The sticky wrappings revealed the sickly flesh beneath. The whiteness spread to the surrounding skin as yellow colonies flourished in the moist red flesh beneath.

He washed it again. He didn't think about it much. He ignored the fact that it had turned this way despite all his attempts to clean it. Even if it could not wash the sickness away, he could at least keep the wound from swimming in its own rancid discharge. It smelled like rot. The vomit in the corner stank too.

He wrapped it up tight, the clean bandages hiding what lied beneath like an ornate tomb. He rolled up his doublet and slid it beneath her head, doing anything he could do to ease her pains. Her eyes fluttered, and she lapsed back into sleep.

Sampsa stared into the crackling fire. Neren's bandages boiled inside. The raging liquid drew his focus. He fixed on the water as it jumped and lapped at the edges of his pan. Tainted ribbons of white and yellow swam in the vessel, clear and viscose.

He plucked them out and let them drip and cool before wringing them out. The nasty film clung to his hands. He hung them from a tree. A raven lighted on a branch of the neighboring tree. It stared at Sampsa with its onyx eyes. He scowled at it and it flew

away. A single feather fluttered to the ground. He threw it into the fire.

He ducked his head and slipped into the tent. He sat beside Neren and let the minutes pass. All he could do was sit there and watch her wither away. There was something inside of him, some driving urge that told him to pick her up and leave everything behind. It assured him it could make it, but he knew the truth.

They couldn't travel like this. He couldn't travel like this. Even without all his burdens, how could he expect to carry her for two, maybe three days as she's on the verge of death? The first night outside would kill her, he was certain of that, but then again, would she die if she stayed??

It was either sit here and watch her die, or risk killing her himself. His bravado assured him he could do it, carry her all the way there. He felt the fire inside, but it would certainly break his body. He stroked her small head.

"Cold..."

He jerked to attention, "You're cold?"

It was slight, almost imperceptible, but Neren nodded.

"Hold on—!"

Sampsa rushed out of the tent flaps and she suffered the chill wind it let inside. He returned some time later cradling a stone swaddled in cloth. He slid it under the sheets and she wrapped her arms around it like the most precious thing under the stars.

"Do you need anything else...?"

"Water..."

He shook his waterskin and drew his lips into a regretful line. He gave her the few drops that remained, but it couldn't have been enough. Her tongue scraped along the backs of her teeth. "I'll go get some more." He stroked her brow. Her eye turned to stare, "Will you be alright on your own...?"

She rolled her eyes away, and through the languidness, he could see something bitter and sarcastic flitting through them. He yearned to hear her banter again. It was an awful reminder that she was still inside that rag-doll before him.

He ambled the forest, his waterskin flaccid in his fist. He did not know where the stream was, but he knew there had to be one. It felt good to be doing something, to have some goal in mind, something he could actually *do* to help, but as time stretched on, the terrible anxiety crept in. He saw himself standing before her lifeless body in his mind, the waterskin hitting the floor just before his knees did. It made him want to vomit.

Beneath the sound of the shifting trees and the voices of the forest he could hear a brook babbling in the distance. He followed the noise. Rocks slid around his feet as he skidded down the slopes and turns of the mountain valley. The steam was clear and ran smoothly. There were no signs of stagnation or animal droppings that he could find.

He filled his water skin and put it to his lips. He swallowed until it made him sick and filled it until it looked ready to burst. He needed all of it, and he couldn't be wasting it on himself.

The sun hung high in the sky. He couldn't decide if he welcomed the passage of time or feared it. Was she one step closer to recovery, or one step closer to death? He didn't know, but already his heart was telling him to expect the worst. Maybe it would hurt less that way.

"I've got the water, Neren..."

He looked at her and felt his throat sore. It wouldn't hurt less;

it would hurt worse than anything he could ever imagine.

"Are you awake...?"

Neren was still on her side, still in the same position she had held when he left. He fell to his knees. His hands probed madly for her veins and a wave of relief washed over him. He felt it, the faint rush of her blood, the life still living beneath. Her eyes peeled opened and stared.

"Can you drink?"

Her mouth opened like a rusty hinge. He slipped his hand behind her head and tilted it up. She drank it as best she could. The texts claimed it was necessary to replace the liquids that the body excretes, except...

He only just realized, but He was almost certain she didn't sweat. Once again, his knowledge went straight into the midden, but thinking about it, he suddenly realized something. He felt at her crotch, but found nothing. She had not urinated since last night.

That was bad. That was *very* bad. He knocked his skull. It was—it was called urine retention. He remembered now. It was in something he had read. It warned that some afflictions could cause the urinary tract to swell shut and eventually cause the bladder to burst if not taken care of.

"Neren, do you need to relieve yourself? Do you feel like a... Like a pressure or a pain in your lower belly?"

He didn't know if that was what it would feel like; it was just a guess. Her jaw twitched and her eye rolled lazily, but she did not answer one way or the other. It didn't matter, he was going to do it anyway. Not urinating was not normal.

He retrieved his pan from outside and slid it underneath the

sheets. Her body's only resistance was gravity as he rolled her onto her side and struggled to bend her legs over the pan. When he lifted up her dress he noticed the pale red circles on her belly. He wished he hadn't seen them.

To be frankly honest, he had little knowledge of women's functions down there, human or otherwise, but he positioned her the best he could. Nothing was coming out. He held her knees to her stomach.

"It's okay Neren..." He assured her, "You need to..."

Her eyes pinched shut, but still, nothing. He rubbed circles into her stomach and tapped the spot above the pubic bone as she strained. It came out, weak, then strong. He looked away, his expression tight as he raped her dignity. When it stopped, he looked back. It was too much—far too much for her small body to be holding, but he felt good. At least this time, he had done something right. Perhaps it was his imagination, but she looked better too.

He carried the pan outside and walked some distance away. It was an odd thing, standing there with a pan full of his lover's urine. He swirled it around. Apparently trained physikers could tell exactly what ails someone simply by examining their urine. It was pinkish and slightly murky. He had no idea what that meant, but it wasn't normal.

It flew from the pan in a sickly, sparking wave and soaked into the ground. Between the pus, discharge, and urine, he didn't think he could bring himself to use his pan for its intended purpose anymore. It rained that night. It beat against the tent as Sampsa stared into the darkness, The tent flaps raged against the whipping winds and the heavy stones which held them down. Cold air slipped past the flaps and caressed his reddening cheeks. He wanted to lift his sheets to let it in and carry away his sweat, but he was not that stupid.

Two stones separated him from Neren, both still warm from the fire. Listening to the rain, he knew had done something right again. He had chosen to do nothing. If he had listened to his machismo and left everything behind he would have died in that rain alongside Neren.

Her gentle breath was the focus. He wanted to fill his arms and he didn't know if he should leave her be, or love her while he still had the chance. In the privacy of the night, he started to cry. His fingers crawled beneath the sheets and found her hand. He held it tight, and it squeezed back. In that moment, it took everything he had to keep from breaking down.

He searched his thoughts, traveled down every alley and avenue of his mind as he looked for something useful. Some herb, some recipe, some treatment, anything. He laid awake as the rain vanished and the morning sun began to rise.

The next day passed in a haze of melancholia. He cleaned her wound, changed her bandages, and tended to her excretions. There was time. There was too much time. He heated some water from the river and wiped her down with warm water. She did not sweat, but her skin was dirty from the sheets and humid

air. It was good to clean her skin and he checked her for bedsores. Her scales were paler than before. It was just another thing that he tried not to think about.

He searched the forests. It was too early for most herbs to grow, and even if they had, he doubted he would recognize them. He just needed to be doing something.

There were willows near the river—good for pain, as he recalled. He stripped the bark and stuffed it in his haversack. He looked up, and spied something curious. The memory was too faint to recall without seeing, but the clubbed leaves of mottled white and green clustered along the banks came back to him with a spark of memory.

They were fender's wort, and if his memories could be trusted, were used to treat sunken spirits. The memory came with a cynical sneer. If they were supposed to treat melancholy, he would need more than the few fistfuls he could see. Still, he collected them.

There was nothing to brew them in but his filthy pan. He scoured it with ashes and water and rubbed until he wore a hole in the cloth. He didn't like the color the cloth came away with.

He watched the willow bark and fender's wort boil and turn the liquid an off-putting green, especially considering what the pan held before. He was pretty sure you were supposed to boil it for for some time. His mother would have been better at this than he.

The concoction smelled like sawdust and dirt. Small wonder, considering where it came from. He let it cool and took a drink. It smelled a lot worse than it tasted, but it left behind an acerbic aftertaste. He wouldn't drink it for fun; he could say that much.

"Neren, can you drink...?" He tilted her head forwards.

"Yeu..."

"This is supposed to help with the pain..."

He poured it into her mouth and she gulped it down, then started to fight it.

"You need to drink more or else it won't work."

She did her best, but could only get half down. Sampsa stared at the remains. He downed the rest himself. It went down strange with nothing in his stomach to help soften it. He looked past her.

"Neren... When you get better, would you like to live at my home?"

Her tired eyes rolled to his, but he could not bring himself to meet that gaze. Breath did not come easy to her. Her chest heaved with the struggle to stay alive.

"There's room... You wouldn't be bothering me... My whole day is spent in front of my desk, so some company would be nice... It's possible I could even convince my Lord to take you on as my assistant!"

He laughed in spite of himself, but the weight came crashing back down on his shoulders. He didn't know why he was asking her this. It felt like he was just setting himself up for an even greater fall, but if not now, when?

"I was really looking forward to showing you around Ambruck... It's really not as bad as I made it sound, so..." He swallowed, "Neren... If you die here, I'll never get to teach you how to write... I'll never get to show you my home... It's a mansion, you'll definitely be impressed! It's not my mansion, but it's still my home..."

There was remorse in her eyes.

His jaw trembled, "If you die here, I'll never forgive you, you hear...?!" He choked, "How could you... How could you come into my life and leave just like that... It's going to ruin me..."

It was a terrible thing to say to her, but it was true. His eyes hurt. He probably looked like a wreck, but he felt like a wreck. It was stupid, falling in love with someone he had only met days ago. He was stupid. Neren stared at him, then her eye rolled away.

"Sssss..." She hissed, testing the way it felt on her tongue, "Sorry..."

"Don't waste your energy apologising!" He snapped, "I'm not worth it..."

Her eyes flicked back to his. Her jaw worked and her finger crooked beneath the sheets. Sampsa leaned in.

Neren loves you...

It was hot enough to burn his ear and hurt enough to knock him away. He stared at her as pain ruined his face. He had to look away.

"Don't say that..." He straightened, "You're only making it worse..."

Mud stained Sampsa's legs. His braids were matted together after four days. His doublet was marred with holes. The snagging branches tore at his clothing with every expedition into the forest. Dead branches littered the forest floor and there was no shortage of firewood. He hoisted a fallen branch taller than himself and swung it at a tree to break it into smaller pieces.

It bounced off. He felt the force resonating painfully through his fingers. He swung again, and again, and again. He grit his teeth. It fought him. His hands turned red and the unyielding branch fell from his hands. He let out a furious roar and fell to his knees. He clenched his fists, speckled with torn flesh, and shouted until his breath ran out.

He rose. He gathered the fallen wood around and left the branch behind. The camp was lifeless. The wood fell into a clattering pile and Sampsa sat down hard.

He unsheathed his blade. It felt heavy, it felt powerful, and it was terrifying. Its edge still shone, and in the gleam, he caught his reflection. He tilted the blade away. It was meant to take life, and that was it. It felt different.

He wondered to himself: Was it because now he knew how precious life truly was...? Or was it because he feared he would eventually turn it on himself.

He put it away. Now was not the time.

The fire crackled. He pulled the last of his food out from his haversack. Three strips of jerky and some dried berries were all that remained. He had not packed enough food for this many days in the forest. After three days without food he had expected them to tempt him like water in the desert, but he felt nothing.

He boiled some water, prepared some more willow tea, and slid the dried meat into his mouth. Even as he chewed, he had no desire to swallow it. He tore through it as best he could and spat the masticated ball of meat into the water.

"Neren..." He brushed aside the tent flaps, "I've brought something for you to eat."

She seemed to be asleep. He shook her gently, "Neren, you need to eat something or you'll never get better."

She let out a crackling moan and opened her eyes. They studied

him, and they studied the pan with worry. The very thought of eating was revolting.

"You need to eat... You body needs food now more than ever and it's already been five days since your last good meal." He was supposed to be in Ambruck three days ago.

She seemed to understand. Sampsa pulled her into his lap and put her back against has stomach. At least in this position she wouldn't choke on it. She opened her mouth. He scooped some of the strange meat stew into her mouth and poured it inside.

Her whole body tensed. Her tongue swam in the liquid and her eyes fluttered. He tilted her head back and felt it flex and spasm. If they can't eat, they die. All the books had said that. He wondered if it was the not eating that killed them, or simply that the ones who were too weak to eat were doomed to die. It went down and she breathed hard.

"Good job...!" He allowed himself a weak smile.

She looked exhausted already, but one spoonful wasn't enough. The second went down easier than the first, like she had discovered some technique, but by the fifth she it had wracked her whole body. She coughed. He put the pan down.

"Five spoonfuls... That's good, Neren!" He said, strangely optimistic, "You can finish the rest once you've had some rest."

He laid her out and set her head upon his makeshift pillow. Her eyes fluttered, but he could feel her heart beating fast. For some reason, he started to sing. In these woods, deep and profound never a love like yours have I found And though we are apart I forever feel you in my heart

As I stand atop this mountain vale whose beauty all but yours it does pale I catch the wind as it flows from sea to sea And yet it blows only for me

I feel your ghostly hand upon my cheek as the river bends from creek to creek In every tree and bounding deer I know that somehow you are here.

It was a cloying poem, derivative and disposable, one Sampsa himself had mocked for its apparent dedication to adequacy, but now he found himself between those hackneyed words. It was not as if he could do any better—not at the moment at least. He kissed Neren's forehead and his eyes turned from iron to steel. He lied down beside her. He had a lot of sleep to catch up on.

He was out of food. He had no choice. It didn't matter if she was getting better, if they waited here, they would starve. They were so close, and he was certain he could make it. If not in two days, maybe four. He would carry her all the way. He sat by the fire and threw out everything unnecessary. He pulled apart the tent and stared sadly as the morning sun cut into Neren's eyes.

It didn't need to be this big. It just needed to cover them. He plunged his belt knife into the thick canvas and sawed it in half. Some willow tea cooled in the shade of an old tree. He poured it down Neren's throat and threw the pan away. It clanged against the tree with a resounding gong.

"I'm going to carry you, Neren." He pulled his pants tight, "Do you think you can handle being carried?"

"Neren... Thinks..." She moaned and flopped her cadaverous arm to cover her eyes. She gurgled as if she were about to vomit, but kept it down with a wet belch.

Everything was ready. He lifted her off the sheets to his vertiginous height. Her eyes bulged and her head swayed, and Sampsa narrowly dodged her vomit. It was a waste of willow tea, but it was good to see her body had taken in all the food he gave her.

"I'm sorry, but you need to bear it..."

She let her head fall limp into the cradle of his arms. He tongue lolled and brushed his arm. His pack was light, and so was Neren. She was worryingly light, or maybe he was worryingly strong. Five days starved, he felt like he could walk through walls and force the trees to step from his path.

He ran from the camp, half-expecting to be pulled back in by its evil gravity, but he hit the path again. It seemed another life since he last felt its telluric thump beneath his feet.

He focused on his breath as he walked the forest path. Neren grew heavy in his arms. Without her arms around his neck, keeping her balanced took twice as much effort. Even with his seemingly bottomless strength, he was forced to set her down on the softest field of grass he could find. He rubbed his arms and caught his breath.

He sat down and dropped his back against an accommodating tree. He looked at his pack, and wondered why he hadn't thought of it until now. It was so much smaller now.

He strapped it to his front. It bound his arms uncomfortably and rested just below his chin. It looked ridiculous, but it freed his back.

Getting Neren onto his back was an endeavor, but when he rose, he felt as fleet as a forest hare. He wanted to run, but he even this would wear him down sooner or later.

He put her down. He picked her up. He put her down again. He picked her up again. His arms burned like fire. His back was a line of raw nerves. He could taste the exhaustion in his dry, dry throat. Even his breath stung as he fumed like a chimney.

"Sampsa can stop..." Neren whispered into his ear.

He didn't have the breath to respond. His grip on her thighs must have bruised them by now. He carried on as if he was possessed. Each tree was a goal and each goal begat another goal. Even he started to wonder where his strength was coming from. He felt like he could keep walking until he dropped dead.

He set her down and felt the fatigue hit him like a ton of bricks. He collapsed beside Neren and wheezed so desperately Neren began to fear he would stop breathing entirely. He growled and hacked a ball of phlegm into the grass.

"Two days..." He huffed, caressing her cheek, "We'll make it there in two more days, so just wait a little longer."

He looked into her smoldering eyes. Yes, he loved her, and she loved him. To know it from just a look was a blessed thing. He could keep going. He had to keep going. But for now, he needed to rest. His eyes rolled shut and he tortured them back open. He

had to check her wounds.

The wounds were covered with hard caps of red, yellow and white. The glistening scabs were patterned like her scales and puckered like his knuckles. His hands could hardly summon the grip to tie the bandages.

He dragged the sheets from his pack and wrapped them around. They laid in the dirt under the open sky, the sun still baking the lands below. If it rained, it rained. He would deal with it then.

He wrapped his tired arms around her and held her tight. She needed her rest, but he needed her. Her hand brushed his arm before it fell away and he lapsed into sleep.

The next day came and went like a storm. Neren hung from his neck as he marched mindlessly ahead. Each time he pushed himself he found a new well of strength hidden within his battered body, but now he feared that well was almost empty. His arms felt like someone else's—foreign bodies sewn to his arms that obeyed him not by thought but by order.

When it was time to stop, he wondered how much he had left in him. He had kept pace. He could even see the edge of the forest from the rocky crag he decided to stop on. They were only one more day away, but it was one more day of *that*. He would make it, even if it broke him.

"Neren is thirsty..."

Sampsa heard her from behind. He dug into his pack for his waterskin and it dropped it to the stones as he turned. Neren's eyes met his, a weakly warm smile across her angular face. She sat upright, trembling from the effort, but strong. Tears filled his eyes. He threw his arms around her.

"You're getting better...!"

Neren's head stuck over his shoulder, her skin taut as he squeezed her tight. She returned the embrace as best she could.

"Neren is getting a little better..." She struggled to move her mouth between his shoulder and chin, "Everything is still hurting, but Neren is getting better."

It was okay to kiss her now, wasn't it?

The walls of the city were bright and blinding white in the afternoon sun. It had been freshly whitewashed just last week, the city walls near the manor at least. The gates were tall and impenetrable, made of enough wrought iron to crush a boulder if the call to close was given... and for some reason someone had put a boulder underneath it.

The guard standing there shuffled his feet. The newly washed walls and shining manor made him squint, and he wasn't just imagining that it made him hotter too. Even in the spring, his thick uniform and shining metal helmet were uncomfortable. He held in his hand a spear, long and ornate, more symbolic than anything. He hadn't once needed to use the thing.

He yawned wide and squinted on the horizon. It wasn't the sun this time, he saw something. He saw two figures hobbling down the paved road, looking all rags and tatters. One wasn't human. The other one was armed—though the creature (kobold, he recalled) was walking on a staff. That could be a weapon.

He gripped his spear. They were walking right for him. Their pace was so slow it gave him ample time to imagine how he would disarm the human and kick the creature aside—though he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Stop—!" He held out his hand, his spear still suggestive and not yet threatening, "This is the entrance to the manor of Lord Gunduin Harcourt, if you are looking to enter the city the gate—"

"Shove it, Turolt. I'm surprised you're even here to see us instead of smoking your pipe in the guardhouse as always."

Turolt straightened as if he had just been sucker punched. Then he leaned in and narrowed his eyes. His jaw dropped.

"Sampsa?!"

He could see it now. Beneath the caked-on dirt, the haggard face and the horribly unkempt facial hair, he could see Sampsa's sharp nose, high cheeks, and that unmistakable tilt to his brows. He looked him up and down as if seeing him for the first time.

"You look like shit..."

"I feel like shit."

"You look like ten pounds of shit in a five pound bag."

"I smell like ten pounds of shit in a five pound bag."

The two shared a smirk in a way that only two men could.

"What in the world happened to you...?" Turolt stepped to catch Sampsa, who looked ready to fall at any moment, but the creature made him hesitate, "Khm... We were about ready to put together a search party for you."

"I'll tell you later." Sampsa huffed and sat down.

The creature was looking around as if it had never seen a city before, and now that it was up close, he was baffled that he could have ever seen it as a threat. It wasn't that it was waist-high, it was that it looked ready to keel over at any second.

"Who is ...?"

"This is Neren. She's my..." He gave her an apologetic look for

what he was about to do "She's my friend."

"Can she...?"

"Neren speaks the Northern tongue."

Turolt's brow raised. He looked her over again, then back to Sampa.

"Must be some story..."

"Since you're here, could you make yourself useful and fetch the physician and someone to carry me to my room. I feel like I'm actually going to die."

Turolt assumed Sampsa was just being dramatic, but he was suddenly not so sure, "Uh... I'll go do that... Then..."

Sampsa raised his arm and waved him off before collapsing on his back and sprawling out flat. Turolt jogged off. He glaned behind him and saw the little creature stroking Sampsa's head tenderly. Now he was *really* curious.

Sampsa closed the old door behind him. Walking into his office felt like stepping into an old life. Neren looked up and down the shelves and gawked at the rows upon rows of scrolls and books that lined the walls. The room was dim and glowed with the scant moonlight which trickled in from the windows.

"I told you the medicine here was the best."

He was still floating, head high on whatever concoction they have given him to take away the pain and fatigue. Sampsa could see now what they had to throw out the manor's old physician after the man got a habit o drinking the stuff on his own. If Sampsa had a feel-good potion next to him at all times, he wondered if he could resist its allure.

"Neren is not disagreeing!"

Her eyes examined every corner of the room, not only because it was new and interesting, but because it was Sampsa's room. He watched with gentle joy as she opened up the drawers and fiddled with everything inside.

She still needed a stick to walk, but she was a far cry from the moribund creature he had known only a day ago. Getting her treated had taken some effort. He had almost forgotten that talking to kobolds wasn't normal, but he had no shortage of reminders now. It was like she had been cursed with some spell straight out of the sagas that pulled every neck towards hers.

Her medicine had come out of his pay, obviously, and after spending so long convincing everyone that she was harmless he wanted to show them that *he's* the one they should we worried about, but...

All things considered, he was happy.

Neren took the parchment with their names on it and held it between her claws. He had almost forgotten about that. She set it on his writing desk, That was its new home now.

She stood before the velvet drapes. She threw them open and soaked the room in blue light. She stood in the moonbeams and turned. Sampsa watched in awe as her scales caught the light of the full moon. She dropped her clothes to the floor. Sampsa's hanging jaw smoothed into an adoring smirk.

"You don't need to seduce me. I've already fallen for you..."

She swayed as he approached him, his eyes darting over her naked body, more intoxicating than any potion they could ever give him.

"Shouldn't we...? I—I mean, your leg—!"

His words cut off as Neren jumped to throw her arms around his neck. She pulled him down and bent him over. She whispered into his ear.

"If Sampsa does not want Neren to be moving and hurting herself, maybe Sampsa should hold Neren down."

He grabbed her waist and threw her onto the bed. He pinned her hands to the sheets and drowned her with kisses. She wriggled and laughed at the tickle of his lips. His arms still ached, but there wasn't any force on heaven or Earth that could stop him now.

"Iloveyousomuch..." Sampsa hurried between kisses.

## Epilogue

HIS IS SO TIGHT..." Neren moaned, her arms stiff outstretched like an anatomical study.

"Well unfortunately if you want to live in a city full of humans, you're going to need to dress like this all the time."

"Neren sees other humans with looser clothes."

"They're—" Sampsa made a face as he wrestled with her cufflinks, "—Not representing the House of Harcourt wherever they go, but *we* are. If you want any hope of Lord Harcourt letting you in, you'll wear it like a second skin."

"Neren knows." She rolled her eyes.

Sampsa patted her shoulder, "If this all goes over well I'll get you something that fits a little better. This was a rush job after all, but still, I think it came out pretty good."

He spun her to face the mirror. She stared as if meeting a stranger, but when she moved her arms and legs, it was obvious it was really her looking back. The red of her quilted vest went well with her scales, but the yellow trim and white sleeves helped it from being overpowering.

She spun around, and examined herself from every angle. His tailor had done an excellent job. The pants weren't as intricate as the shirt, but they were by far the most impressive, if only because of the skill required to make pants that fit around her bent legs

and tail.

It was his choice to make her dress masculine, and he thought it suited her. She looked handsome rather than beautiful, but he liked her that way, he realized. He couldn't imagine her in a dress, and fitting such a straight and lithe creature into something designed to fit *curves* just didn't seem appropriate (though that was not to imply that she did not have them where they counted.) Then again, maybe he just didn't like the idea of anyone but himself thinking of her as a woman.

Sampsa stood beside her, his stately coat far more striking, and far more expensive. His was brocaded with floral patterns, his collar and sleeves stuffed with fine lace. It was good to see himself in the mirror again, clean and proper. His golden braids were capped with colored stones. His face was smooth too—Neren had convinced him to get rid of the moustache. He puffed up, and almost forgot how nervous he was.

"Okay, we don't want to keep him waiting." He pushed her away from her reflection, "You remember what you're supposed to say, right."

"Neren remembers."

"And drop that 'Neren this, Neren that' thing. I know you like your name, but if you're going to be my assistant, saying things like that might end up giving the wrong impression."

"I understand, Sampsa."

She tried to look aloof, but he knew her well enough by not to tell that she was just as nervous as him. They walked down the halls of smooth plaster and stained wood. There were no bare walls. If not occupied by windows and fine drapes, they displayed paintings, expensive vases, or ceremonial weapons.

"Straighten your back..." Sampsa whispered.

He was well aware how well the echoing halls could carry voices. She straightened and tried to look dignified, and shockingly, she did.

"Fingers...!"

She clasped them behind her back as they came to the gilded door at the end of the hall. Some servants scuttled by, eyes wide and curious as they stared at the courtly kobold in their midst. Sampsa rapped on the door with but one pristine knuckle; anything more would be indecorous.

"Come in." Came the voice from behind the door.

Sampsa pushed open the doors and Neren straightened like she had even straightened before. He supposed if she could sweat, she would be doing it right about now.

He recognized the room too well. He was the scribe after all. The small chair in the corner was his in all but name, but today he was going to be sitting on the down-stuffed, purple, velvet-lined, and patterned-in-leaves couch. Lord Harcourt was there and—oh heavens above, his *wife* was here too. Neren walked behind Sampsa just enough to obscure her from view.

"Good afternoon, Lord Harcourt." Sampsa bowed courteously, "Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice."

The Lord chortled, "Yes, it's not often you call *me* for a meeting."

His deep voice always had a lippy smack to it like he had a little bit of cake in his mouth at all times. He was, first and foremost, a man of furs. There were furs on the walls, the floor, his neck, boots, and cuffs, and even the ceiling. Even his own chin was covered in a blanket of his own, homegrown fur. And if was a little plump, it was because he insisted on eating everything he hunted.

"Yessir, you're quite right!" Sampsa humored him and clapped his hands, "I'm afraid to take too much of your time, so I'll get to the point."

He stepped aside and left Neren exposed.

"This is..."

"My name is Neren, sir..." Neren took her hand to her waist and stretched out her other arm behind her like a bird in flight as she ducked into a deep bow.

"Oh...!" Gunduin wrung his hands and smiled, "I heard we had a strange guest, but I suppose I haven't been putting enough stock into the manor rumors lately."

His wife raised her chin and stared down, but Gunduin walked forward with a smile. His wife gasped silently as he crouched down and extended his hand.

"How are you, little creature?" He shook Neren's hand with a crushing grip, "Well aren't you all dressed up! How are you liking my humble abode? Is it very fine, yes?"

Sampsa held his breath. It was fortunate that Gunduin was so amiable, but Sampsa didn't like how he was treating her like an animal.

"Your mansion is nothing short of incredible, your Lordship. There is nothing so splendid in all my homelands. I'm humbled and honored beyond words that you would share your roof with me." Neren recited.

Hearing that from her mouth made Sampsa shudder, even if he had been the one to teach it to her. Gunduin considered her for a second time. "Hmph..." He puffed up, "You are not my guest, you are my scribe's. Nonetheless, you are welcome here." He turned to Sampsa, "I don't suppose you've requested this meeting just to introduce me to your new friend."

"Absolutely not, your Lordship." Sampsa swallowed, "It's rather unusual, but I'm here to request that you allow her to work here as my assistant."

"Assistant?" He glanced at Neren, "I don't suppose she can write, can she?"

"Nnno sir... But as you can see, her grasp of the Northern tongue is quite impressive, and there are many things other than writing that I need help with."

"You never mentioned needing an assistant before leaving for Yejlevik. What changed between now and then?"

"Ah, you see, all that travel made me realize how tired I really was, hence my tardiness—which I'm terribly sorry about milord."

Gunduin's hand got lost in his beard as he stroked it pensively.

"If money is an issue, you may take her pay out of mine, and I've no objections to sharing the same quarters with her. I would simply be grateful for some of the effort off my back."

"She ...?"

"Uhm... Yes milord, Neren is female." Sampsa tried his best to keep from sweating, but he sincerely hoped Gunduin wasn't thinking anything strange that the two of them had *definitely* already done.

"I suppose you do keep busy, but what I don't understand is why you never made any sort complaint until you suddenly show up with this lizard." "She's very capable, I assure you—"

Gunduin silenced him with his palm, "If you are really so desperate for an assistant, why not ask one of the hall boys?"

"Your Lordship, a mere hall boy is not fit to be my assistant! It would be like teaching a fencepost to ballroom dance."

"Sampsa, I simply find it hard to believe that my own servants could be less qualified than this squamous vagabond. Can this creature really be trusted?"

"Your lordship—!"

"With all due respect, your Lordship, humans are more dangerous to you and your den than kobolds are." Neren lifted her chest.

The silence could choke an elephant. Gunduin's wife turned her nose, but Gunduin's belly started to shake. He laughed a deep laugh and shook his head.

"I suppose you are right, little creature! Not once has a kobold tried to poison me or put a knife in my back, but those *humans*" He sneered jokingly, "*They're* the ones you've got to keep your eye on. But Sampsa, why are you so set on this one being your assistant."

"Your lordship, she's a great friend..." It was an understatement, but it was also the sum total and entirety, "She also knows some other languages, and..."

He looked to Neren and she nodded.

"In the caves near the Mazerif where her kin lives, the kobolds there have uncovered some rich gold veins running through the mountain. She was originally going to go to the Koch and Lambert Company with this information, but..."

"What?!"

"After she told me the nature of her business with them, I managed to talk her out of it, seeing as the Koch and Lambert Company are..."

"Bloody leeches who suck all the bullion out of whatever country they infest." If he were not so regal, he would have spat, "No respect for the crown, no respect for his vassals. All they respect is coin and spice."

"—You took the words right out of my mouth, sir."

"Why didn't you inform me from the start?"

"It is Neren's homeland, and Neren does not want to see it raped and pillaged for its riches." Neren crossed her arms indecorously, "Neren trusts Sampsa, and Sampsa trusts Gunduin, so Neren will trust Gunduin."

"That's Lord Harcourt, skink." The wife sneered.

Neren ignored her, "Neren hopes for relationships between humans and kobolds, but gold is dangerous, and gold can bring together..."

"Achem... It's not guaranteed that the kobolds will part with their gold, but if you want any chance of making a deal with them, someone like Neren who can speak both languages and knows their culture is absolutely invaluable."

"So you've given up on assistant and want me to take her on as a diplomat, eh?" His sly teeth appeared through his thick moustache and beard.

"I would still appreciate it if you made her my assistant..." There was no way to put it that wouldn't come off as awkward, but it needed to be said.

"Okay, okay. You've made your case. It's quite unprecedented, but congratulations, you've got an assistant." Sampsa's eyes lit up.

"Dear...! You don't mean to let this creature live here...? Give them an abode in the city and take them as a diplomat to get the gold. What use are they as an assistant *scribe*?"

"Feh...!" He waved his hand, "What's wrong with her? She wears that vest better than most of my valets."

Gunduin smiled at her, and Neren smiled back. Sampsa drew his lips into a line. His wife only tsked and looked away.

Gunduin clapped his hand on Sampsa's shoulder with a welcoming smile, but quickly whispered into his ear, 'This why I don't let her run things when I'm away. It's written all over your faces that your friend wouldn't even tell us what she thought of the weather if we didn't do what you wanted. I'll play things your way, just don't disappoint me, alright?'

He came out of Sampsa's ear and slapped his shoulder again as if finishing a spell to seal the words between them. Sampsa felt transparent, but he had Neren now, and that was all that mattered.

He wanted to grab Neren and run out of the room to celebrate, but he knew there was a nightmare of preparations to be done. Not because they had gained a new assistant, but because he had come out and said that four letter word: *gold*.

Sampsa stared at the sheet before him. His had refused to move, the callous on his middle finger extra-thick after so many days at the job. Writing drafts, stenography, sending letters. It was all because he just *had* to open his mouth about that gold business.

It was possible he could have convinced him without mention-

ing it, especially considering the Lord and Neren haven been getting along strangely well recently. He was certain she wouldn't, but if Gunduin somehow stole her from him, he would *actually* kill him and then himself.

The letters were all blending together. Words didn't look like words, just wavy lines of ink with no meaning beyond their horrible, horrible shapes. The letter F started to look like someone ready to dive head first while sporting an enormous erection. He smirked at the thought, and then hated himself for it.

Heavens above, how had getting an assistant *increased* his workload?

The latch clicked and the door creaked. Neren stepped inside and the sight of her so smart and proud blew the dark clouds away in an instant. It didn't matter that she was bringing him *more* work. He could work as hard as ten men as long as she was here, but...

"Here is Sampsa's new ink." She set down a new pot, "Here is letters from the Leifias, Storenton, and Phlemming families."

"Ah... Thank you Neren."

They looked so daunting atop all the others. This was all the groundwork for hopefully setting up a viable trading route with the kobold dens in the Aggatean mountains. There were transportation companies, smelting companies, goldsmiths and jewelers, the mints, other noble families, and so many middlemen there were middlemen between other middlemen. It was a mess, and so much of it had to go through *him*.

Neren turned to leave. He grabbed her tail and she straightened. She turned with a smile and he reeled her back in. She was easy to kiss when he was sitting. He went deeper and picked her up. She giggled in the cradle of his arms and pushed his head back like she was holding up a rolling boulder.

"Did Sampsa make Neren his assistant because he was wanting sex, or because he was wanting Neren's help?"

"Would it make you angry if I said it was both?" He grabbed her hand and kissed her scaly wrist.

"No, it makes Sampsa honest."

"The problem with these clothes is it's so much harder to get you out of them..." He joked as his hand traveled up her sleeve.

"Shouldn't Sampsa be working?"

"There's nothing wrong with taking a little break, is there...?"

Neren smiled, but jumped out of his arms. She landed like a cat and swung her tail at him. Sampsa felt the frustration building up below his belt.

"Neren has slept with Sampsa enough to know that they are not *little breaks*." She smirked, and Sampsa felt a little pride at the fact, "Finish your work and Neren will save Sampsa the trouble of taking her clothes off."

"Yes ma'am..." He said, bitter and amused.

At least he had something to look forward to. He would let his frustration simmer some more. He would show her what happens when she teased him too much. Maybe she would learn her lesson. He hoped she didn't.

Sampsa swatted her on the backside, "Well, better get out of here then. I've been writing so long I'm not sure I could keep my eyes off of you even if you nailed my ears to the chair."

Neren laughed and bounced ahead, "Do your best, Taggy-legs." She said and walked out of the room

Sampsa sat down and laced his fingers behind his head. It

almost felt *unfair*, being this happy, but he was selfish, and he wanted it all to himself.

Neren walked down the busy city streets. She drew eyes as usual, but she was used to it, even since before she came to the human city. Still, the looks in their eyes was different from what she was used to before. Its was mostly looks of confusion and curiosity instead of suspicious and wary. It was incredible what fine clothes and a family crest could do. Even someone like her could be their superior.

All the things Sampsa had told here about the city were more or less true. It smelled, and it was dirty. She thought he had been exaggerating, and coming from the caves, she couldn't imagine that it could be much worse, but it was. Still, she liked it here.

The warm, scented baths, the food, *Sampsa*. There was so much to like. She missed her home, but it was with some chagrin that she admitted to herself that she just couldn't imagine living there anymore.

Her dress was fine, finer than any of the humans around her. It was an odd thing, being above so many humans. She had to frequently remind herself just how fortunate she was. Sampsa always thought she was weird when she insisted on their walks through the forest, but she needed to be reminded of those times.

The beggars on the street watched her with awe. Most of the people had heard the rumors by now, but there were still some that were ignorant. She drew some kindness, and she drew some animosity. It was nothing strange, and as more and more people grew to like her, and more and more grew to dislike her, Am-

bruck had become her home.

She passed the sweet shoppe and the kind old human there waved at Neren. She broke the proud lace behind her back to wave in reply and immediately knitted her fingers back together.

Sampsa always said it, so she hardly had the chance to, but she had never expected to end up with a human, let alone living in a mansion and bearing noble colors. The beggars vanished from her sight. She was too fortunate.

The streets grew wider and the market square opened before her. The large building on the corner stood tall and imposing, its iron gates strong enough to push back anything short of an invasion. The man standing there recognized her and swung it open with the fearsome scream of rusty hinges.

She stepped inside, into the office, and down the stairs. The two kobolds there looked at her as if they did not recognize her species. She did not blame them. Though they wore their finest dress adorned with precious metals and stones, they could not compare to hers.

"Ak'u yiik?"

"Mek'i." She nodded, "Mek'i."

"This is highly unprecedented..." Gunduin nursed some wine as he reclined, "It's not technically against the canon, but that's probably because no one thought to make a rule against it."

"Yes, my Lord. I'm aware..." Sampsa wrung his hands, "It doesn't need to be a public matter, but this is important to me."

Gunduin tightened his lips and straightened, "Still, marrying a kobold is... Well it's not *normal* and I'm afraid if word of this

got out it just simply wouldn't reflect well upon the house."

"My Lord, you know Neren almost as well as I!"

"Uhm... Well, yes, I had not anticipated that she would make such a good drinking friend, especially since she only needs a third as much drink as all the others!" He chortled, "There's nothing *wrong* with her, it's just..."

Sampsa sighed, "I know it's strange, but I'm just tired of living like we are when we're not. There doesn't need to be a feast, or dances, or maypoles and banners, just us and the shaman."

"I'd imagine you would have a harder time convincing the shaman than you would me, my dear boy."

"Yes..." He admitted, "That's the second step... Still—I'd at least like your permission first."

"Well..." Gunduin scratched his beard, "Thanks to you two we've been exporting gold coins faster than Yyinjar, and the people are almost *used* to seeing kobolds wandering the streets... And your wi—" He realized he had almost said *wife*, "And Neren has proven herself loyal to us..."

"Forgive me, Lord, but *loyal* is an understatement. She's the pillar of all kobold-human relations in Kolkevk."

"Right, right..." He snapped his fingers to spur some memory, "What was that thing she was working on...?"

"The... Summa Koboldicum...?" The name still made him wretch for Neren's sense of humor, but she was dead-set on it, "It's a collection of kobold folk tales and traditions we're co-authoring, as well as a translation guide."

"How is that going, by the way?" Gunduin sipped.

"It's fine." Sampsa gave a tight smile, "But your Lordship, I'd wish to remain on the topic at hand...?"

Gunduin thought hard on it, and seemed to grow sick of thinking, "Feh—! Do as you wish, Sampsa."

"Thank you, My Lord!" He bowed.

"When I think about it, I shudder to think of how much money you've brought this house by sticking your dick into a reptile." He swirled his wine and chuckled. His wife was not in the room.

"I would not put it as vulgar as that, but you are correct, my Lord." Sampsa smirked in spite of himself.

"Perhaps I haven't compensated you enough..." He downed the rest of his wine and wiped the stain from his beard.

"My Lord, I'm already the wealthiest scribe in all of Kolkevk if not the world! Approving our marriage is all the compensation I need."

"Still... You're hardly my scribe anymore after you were forced to handle that whole Mazerif affair." Gunduin sank into thought for only a second, "How would you like to be knighted?"

Sampsa's eyes bulged, "Excuse me, my Lord?"

"You heard me. How would you like to be knighted under my name? Strictly for the title of course. Scribes aren't often known for their martial prowess. You'll be unlanded too, but that's no different from how you are now."

"You are aware that you're offering to raise the scribe who 'put his dick into a reptile' to a seat of nobility?"

"Well when you put it like that—"

"I would be honored for you to take me as your vassal!" Sampsa bowed.

"Good!"

Gunduin clapped once and left the room. Sampsa felt as if a

whirlwind had just passed through. He supposed there would be a ceremony, but he had simply not expected to leave to leave this room a nobleman.

The shaman's face could have been carved from stone. When Sampsa went after marriage, he had not expected needing to spent an entire week studying religious canons before he could convince anyone that kobolds indeed have souls and should therefore fall under the ecclesiastical laws. The only reason he had a chance was because of his newfound nobility.

Neren walked into the shrine, her dress flowing behind her. Sampsa watched her, but in the almost empty room, he couldn't shake the feeling like weddings were supposed to be more *unforgettable*. She was beautiful, but she was always beautiful. No matter. He knew what he was in for when he decided to marry a kobold.

She walked in, not really certain of what she was doing and her expression detached in a sort of *I'm only doing this because it's what you want* way. She stepped up to the altar to the goddess of love and stood beside Sampsa.

"Do you have your wedding bands?" The Shaman asked begrudgingly.

"Yes, your holiness."

Sampsa showed the tiny hoop held around his tight packed fingers. Neren showed hers in turn, holding the massive hoop in her hand. Two snakes of gold coiled around to bite their tails, gold from Neren's own homelands.

"Join hands." The shaman demanded.

Sampsa grabbed Neren's hand, and she his. It was a little awkward with the jewelry in the way, but they made it work.

"You may now swap the bands."

Sampsa pushed his onto Neren's wrist. She pushed hers onto his. This was supposed to be done simultaneously with both parties actually wearing the wedding bands, but what could he do when their sizes were so different.

"You're married now." The Shaman clapped his book shut, stuffed it under his armpit, and walked out with a clatter of beads and ornamental bone.

Sampsa looked a little upset, but it wasn't enough to spoil his mood. He looked at his wife and smiled. Neren lifted her diaphanous dress and played at its weightlessness.

"Neren does not understand why Sampsa needs another person to tell him that Neren is his."

"Sorry, but that's just how humans are." He rubbed her head and she rubbed the small of his back.

"How do kobolds tell each other that they're theirs forever?"

"Like this—" She jumped up, planted her legs on his thighs, and kissed him like there was no tomorrow.