

“From what I’ve seen, it leads me to believe the man is smuggling runaway gilla.” Said Devric. “He’s unconcerned about me knowing or else he would have not led me that way. He wanted me to know.”

Ingriss took a bite of the fruit he’d brought back. She gave a sly grin. “He knew that he wanted to get into your breeches. But if what you say is true, then why did he not make an offer to ferry us away from here?”

“Two things we must consider. Low-gilla do not trust us easily, then he must consider the risk of transporting two pleasure gilla since a more substantial amount of resources would be spent in finding us.”

“Yes, that makes sense.” She drummed her knee. “Do you think he will help, truly?”

“No, at least not in a way that’ll put him out in the open. I asked him to make a stew for a few dozen and he readily agreed, that’s good enough. It will be my way to get near the work gilla.”

Ingriss sat up, swinging her legs off the bed with difficulty. Her left hand shook, but quickly hid it down by her side. “You need to bring them a plan. Saying that you want to free them will not be enough.”

He looked to the dock and focused on the sound of the water beneath. “Running on land would eventually see us caught, and I don’t want to hide for the rest of my life. Those work gilla have been building the ship since

the beginning. They know how it operates. We'll take the sky-ship and go as far away as we can during the first night of Brydnosmai when everyone is distracted. Hopefully, the Fyrrluens will still be away and there'll be little chance of bloodshed."

"Many things could go wrong no matter how small they seem, but the Fyrrluens are your most significant loose thread. If they come back early, well... there's nothing we can do about that other than pray to the Gods. Very well, brother." She breathed out. "If this is your course... Remember to mention me. Even then, they might not take you seriously. Do not become angry. Be calm with them."

Late afternoon came and Devric just finished wrapping fresh bandages around his sister's head when his Ingriss's face lit up. "Master Lyren!" she said.

Devric turned to see Lyren's bright, smiling face at the flap.

"Oh my dear, it saddens me to see one who possesses such a gorgeous visage in a sorry state."

She couldn't help but smile.

"You look gaunt and bone white. Here." He held a large pot by a thick rope handle and placed it on the dock so he could reach into his large canvas satchel. He produced a small wooden bowl and a ladle.

He opened the lid of the pot and a savory smell of roasted chicken filled the tent. He scooped out some of the stew and poured it into a bowl. Again, he reached into the bag, brought out a spoon.

"Here you are, potatoes, onions and chicken broth with parsley."

Ingriss accepted it with as much grace as she could muster. "Thank you, Master."

"You're welcome."

He turned to Devric. "You're a strapping young man." He winked.

"Come help me with this pot and as the Gnostics say: we'll feed those poor hungry souls."

Outside, Devric was about to walk on, pot in hand, when Lyren placed a palm on his chest. Looking down, he saw a letter between the innkeeper's fingers. "From our mutual friend."

"Our mutual friend?"

He took the unmarked letter and opened it. It was from Marcus Corret. When Devric sent his letter, he didn't expect a response, at least not so soon. It would be too dangerous otherwise, or so he thought. So, Lyren was also an agent of the hidden eye? That was surprising. He read the letter.

*Devric, what happened to your sister is a disgrace, but I urge you to refrain from action. The information you provide is much too important to the eye. I will do what I can to make sure your sister continues to have the same opportunity for freedom.*

He blinked. How could he let it be? Every time he thought of Selucia, he wanted to stick a knife in her gut and do worse to Dylan. How did it come to this? To thoughts of torture and murder? His hand trembled. His mind raced. *Damn you Corret. Who do you think you are? Does he think I'm That same gilla who came crying to him after committing a murder? Hoping that the great man himself could wash it all away?*

He crushed the paper and tossed it into the water.

"You want to continue with this, I take it? Taking the sky-ship?"

Devric's eyes widened. "How do you—"

Lyren put a finger on Devric's lips. "If you're not standing down like Corret wants, then your obvious option is to escape with the sky-ship. Else why converse with the work gilla?"

"I'm so obvious, Master?"

Lyren tapped Devric's chest and continued to whisper. "Don't sell yourself short. Corret would not have chosen you if you were not clever.

For example, I bet you've figured out that I help low-gilla and know why I cannot help you and your sister in the same way."

"But I can't figure out why you're risking everything. It can't be just because you witnessed a martial Breaking."

"Do you think it's fair when a pickpocket is caught, chooses gillary over jail or exile and ends up spending thirty to forty years in that position? That's if their owner doesn't kill them for poor work, or bloodline them for being too good. Many can never get out and move on with their lives and if they can it's too late, Kymbri has closed the steam valve and Gilla Affairs, who were supposed to open it again, has only made it worse. "

Devric breathed out slowly. "Is it really that bad?"

"Yes, but when it comes to numbers- on the continent, it's worse, much worse, and that pales in comparison to the Blue Isles. Forget about bureaucracy, beyond our shores it's a house of predators snarling at each other while the fawns wait to be devoured."

He never suspected that Lyren's countenance could grow such a dark cloud around it. Devric could only swallow the lump in his throat as a response.

"You wanted my conviction and you have it."

"I think I understand. Yes. Well, I know I can't turn back now just because the lord on the mountain said to." He made his voice even lower.

"Master, how did you get involved with Corret?"

"Hm, I was still a gilla when he contacted me. Wanted me to trade him information about the household I belonged to."

"Sounds like him. He used me to extract information from the clients I'd see."

He chuckled. "Is that the reason you slept with me?"

"You know it's a reason, Master. One of many."

Lyren laughed. "You're so gallant."

Devric winked at him. He had to admit, he truly liked the man, especially now, knowing that he was on their side and willing to help. If they made it through this, he hoped for a regular male partner like Lyren.

On the other side of the dock, the guards were putting the work gilla in the cages. Lyren approached while Devric stood back with the pot, waiting patiently as the innkeeper explained his purpose to the guards.

Lyren had a sterling reputation in town and would give discounts for food and drink to the guards, so of course they were not hostile. In fact, they were beyond pleasant when he told them there were free meals much better than the gruel these wretches were getting, waiting for them at his restaurant.

They drew lots on who would have to stay and watch the gilla. The burden fell to two who became crestfallen, brightened when Lyren produced a bottle of mil-milis, a mead mixed with wheat. He then gave the two remaining guards a taste of the pot which would serve as another distraction yet he Enhanced It further by engaged them in conversation.

Devric filled each bowl before placing them down in front of the bars. The work gilla stood their ground and stared at him. It was hard not to pinch his nose. The smell of these men was pungent, old sweat mixed with piss from the buckets sitting in the corner. Knowing what he knew now, Devric found their whispered insults about his manhood and threats to forfeit his life somewhat hollow. He took a hard look at their tattoos. These men, and one woman perhaps? Were truly Skaldan. Their tattoos were different in depiction and placement, but were of the same style. Sea serpents, running wolves, cranes, predator birds, great bears along with images of their gods such as the short hammer and old one eye made up the bulk of these markings.

The big man, who his sister called Eyvindr, stood out. Despite being taller and broader than the others with brilliant blonde hair, what truly

drew one's attention was a large runaway brand above his right eye, a circle with a U shaped line. Both ears had pieces chopped off. The guards recently cut the man's left earlobe, and it looked raw and possibly infected. He sat, staring at Devric with bright green eyes.

Devric gulped, for the man had an intimidating nature that overpowered the spoken threats from the others. A wave of cowardice washed over him, making him want to turn heel and run back to his tent. Then came the thought of his sister's bloody head. Of her throwing a book she loved on the ground because she could no longer discern the meaning of the words. Of her shaking hand and fluttering eyelid.

"Eyvindr? Your name's Eyvindr?" Most low-gilla were given ridiculous names, supposedly to help strip away their former lives. These work gilla had only numbers engraved on their collar tags. It must have been a shock to hear their actual name from the mouth of a stranger. If it was, then they showed no sign of it. Instead, another man jumped to his feet in a fury, but kept it to a whisper. "How do you know that name, thrall-born?"

He was much darker than most of them and had straight black hair. Obviously a Vinlander, the land that the Skaldan's established across the sea over five hundred years ago. Over time, they had merged cultures with the surrounding natives.

"My sister told me how she helped you."

Eyvindr tapped the Vinlander on the thigh. The immense man made signs with his fingers. The Vinlander then sighed and looked over at Devric and whispered, "I'm Ravison. The leader of my *denge* wants to know what happened with your sister the other day."

Denge, that spoke volumes. A denge was a band of warriors made up of fifty people. His sister used to tell mythic stories of Skaldan dengens. Were these Skaldans from one denge? The Fyrrluens liked to cut corners, yes, but this was beyond dangerous. Still, if true, and they are a denge, then it

would help his cause.

"Master Dylan... Dylan, he hurt her badly. Permanently." He breathed out slow, calming the nerves and giving a moment to gather his thoughts.

"Pleasure gilla earn their freedom through the generosity of their renters, now Ingriss will not have that option."

After whispering and signing to his fellows in the cage, Ravison responded, "And? Why're you talking to us?"

"We all want to be free of this."

"Don't compare us to you. We've nothing in common, thrall-born."

"Fair, but I know you want it and if I can provide a way of escape, then I believe you'll take it."

Eyvindr signed.

"How do you plan to accomplish this thrall-born?" Asked Ravison.

"Brydnosmai is in two days. You'll have fewer guards watching and many more wanting to join the festivities. I'll make sure there are less, then I'll arm you with guns." He almost cringed at saying the last part, for he had no idea how he'd provide that. "Since you built the sky-ship and know how it works, we'll snatch it from them when they are not looking."

There was a long silence, but after another series of signs from Eyvindr, Ravison responded to his leader, "Have you gone soft?" But when Eyvindr gave him a chilling look, he gave a frustrating growl and looked at Devric again, taking his full measure.

"Thrall-born. If you can do what you say, then we will take advantage of that."

It was good enough, and he nodded, serving the rest of the stew before taking the bowls and placing them in the bag. There were no more insults, just intense glances. He looked over his shoulder and saw that Lyren was making the guards laugh. They caught each other's eye.

"My friends, I must leave you. I've a lot of work to do before Brydnosmai

and I hope you'll stop by during the festivities."

The guards bid them farewell and returned their attention back to the work gilla.

"Well? How did it go?" asked Lyren.

"They agreed to take advantage of it."

"Hm, that could mean a lot of things, but they will act and you cannot do this without them. If it benefits you, good, if not..." He shrugged. "You won't be alive to regret it."