

(Maireda chiseled face get that in somewhere)

Muturu was going to die today. He checked his pocket watch for the hundredth time and waited for the minute dial to move, but it hung forever before snapping forward another minute closer to death. Ten minutes to go, but he couldn't think of that now. Muturu had arranged to die at his favourite place in the world, a cove along a rugged coastline of cliffs. The cove itself was a maze of rocks and hidden beaches. An-Scarath Castle looked over the cove, a ruin, but the remains of its keep stood strong against what the sea and the wind had thrown at it. Muturu had to be strong now, his death was inevitable.

He made his way down the steep but well-trodden path onto the rocks. He'd come here for years as a child and as a smuggler. The former was dangerous for him and his family, even if he could escape his employers knew where his family lived. 'No, this is the best way,' thought Muturu as he clambered over the rocks. He savoured their rough texture, the small works in the rock pools and the breath of the sea. Muturu jumped onto a small beach and undid his boots, he'd played on this beach as a child and now the warm sand hugged his feet like a mother holding her child for the last time. Kneeling before the sea Muturu splashed it onto his face before praying to the Spirit Liru for the protection of his family. Footsteps crunched in the sand behind him, Muturu's breath stopped. He dared not look behind him. Instead, he looked out into the sea at eternity. The barrel of a gun rested on the back of Muturu's head and before he knew it his life was over.

"You're uncles dead."

Maireda collapsed against the house's wall and sank to the floor, grief choking any words she had. Mama sat like a statue by the stove. Letter clutched in her hand. Tears began to trickle from Maireda's eyes and she stifled a sob, she had to be like mama. 'Cenna don't cry, I can't cry.'

"How...what..made him die?" Maireda's emotions betrayed her as she opened her mouth, grief unable to choke her any longer.

Mama slowly lifted the letter, biting her lip and shaking before taking a deep breath.

"Shot, another smuggler."

Maireda tossed and turned that night, trying to find peace in the storm of sorrow that raged inside her. Exhaustion led her from the pain into a dream that took her back six years ago, to the last time she saw her uncle.

Maireda loved the sea in summer. The rhythmic waves calmed her heart as they lapped against the maze of uneven rocks on the shore, creating a miniature landscape of ravines, rock pools and other wonders. She had been climbing and jumping through the landscape for an hour when she found a swirling pool. Its water clear rose and fell as if it were breathing. It teemed with seaweed and small creatures, a miniature world that mesmerized Maireda.

Her feet ached, protesting against her shoes. They were simple leather things, made by her uncle last year just for her visit. Her feet had grown, but her uncle was too tied up in his business to make her a pair for this year. Maireda cared little as she removed them and sunk her feet and legs into the cool water. It gently played with her legs, moving them this way and that. Maireda squeaked as the water rose to her knees and touched the bottom of her dress, but she knew it was only playing. Her uncle had always told her to be careful around the rocks but Maireda rarely listened. She didn't think the sea Spirit, Liru, would harm her, even though she was a girl. She'd left offerings for Liru with uncle and the Spirit had taken them with the waves. Maireda looked behind her for her uncle. He usually watched her from the grassy slopes, but today he was absent. The pool played with her legs again and encouraged her not to worry.

Maireda leaned back and took a deep breath of the seaweed smell emitting from the pool. Gulls squawked overhead. When Maireda was at home far away from the sea and she heard a lost gull, it was her little reminder of this paradise.

She spotted a rowboat coming to shore, and she sprung out of the water. Maireda pulled on her shoes and turned to shout for her uncle, but he was already making his way across the shingles to the small beach among the rocks. Two men were with him, shabby and downtrodden but identical. They weren't like Fairgu and Sheshu from last year; they were fun and played with Maireda. These new men didn't speak, let alone play. Maireda might be afraid of nothing, but these twins frightened her a little.

Maireda jumped onto the small beach from an overhanging rock, they ignored her and uncle only spared her a glance. He was tall and portly, perfect to cuddle with. His red

hair and beard were thinning, and his face showed age. Maireda couldn't imagine her uncle getting any older, nor did she want to. She expected him to smile at her or mess up her hair, but he stood like a statue watching the incoming boat. Maireda glared at the two men standing by her uncle. They had done this to him, but she would make her uncle happy again.

The boat was overflowing with boxes and men, the man at the prow turned Maireda cold despite the summer heat. He was imposing and lifeless whilst his black clothing drained the colour around him. His face twisted by scars, creating a grotesque monster with one ice-blue eye. The eye looked at Maireda but she swiftly dodged its piercing gaze and looked at the ground. Without realizing she had grabbed her uncle's arm.

"It's okay, little one," he smiled down at her, filling Maireda with loving warmth and a morsel of bravery.

The boat slid onto the sand and the men, along with the twins, heaved the long boxes onto the sand. The strange man seemed to glide from the boat like a storm cloud, banishing colour wherever he went. Maireda hid behind her uncle.

"A child Muturu," the man asked, his voice quiet and cold. "Is she a witch?"

"No, of course not Olcu. She's my niece."

Olcu's eye stared at Maireda for a moment. With effort, she met his gaze from behind her uncle but it hollowed out her soul leaving nothing but fear. One of the men handed her uncle a crowbar and he pried open one of the boxes. Guns, loads of them. From big long rifles to pistols and even the things that go boom! She guessed the rest of the boxes were the same, she'd seen guns before but never this many.

'The whole village back home could get one and we could have a big play battle,' Maireda thought.

She liked playing warriors, she was always the leader, of course. Like her ancestors who had been queens, in Maireda's play wars she made sure not too loose like they did. Uncle finished inspecting them. He signalled for the men to take them, instead, they looked to Olcu who nodded. Maireda counted ten boxes with twenty sullen faced men carrying them up the shore. It had been fun before, the men would make Maireda laugh

or let her play with the guns. Now even the sun hid behind a cloud. Olcu went up the shore with his men and the sun tentatively peaked out again.

Maireda smiled up at her uncle, expecting him to smile back at her but he looked off into the sea, still sad. Maireda's heart sank, maybe she couldn't fix him. He finally looked down at her, a weak smile on his face that couldn't hide the sadness beneath.

Hauling herself up a ruined wall, Maireda finally made it to the top of An-Scarath castle. Built on a hill overlooking the sea, it had suffered under the weight of time as only half of the square keep stood strong. Maireda dangled her legs off the edge. The sea stretched on forever from this height, dancing and sparkling as it played with the sun and clouds. Maireda thought back to the myths mama had taught her. The castle had been home to the famous warrior Conma, trainer of many fine warriors. She imagined herself as one, a core sword in hand and a set of shining Nifeyd scales.

"Maireda!" Uncle shouted.

Her heart jumped and she scampered down. Maireda expected smiling disapproval. Instead, her uncle sat among the rubble and weeds of the courtyard looking at the ground.

"I've told you not to go up there."

Maireda bit her lip and twisted her hands together.

"Look, there's something I have to tell you." He came close to Maireda and came down to her height. "Things are changing. For me, for you, for what I do here. There won't be a next year Maireda."

Loss pierced through her heart. Her favourite place in the world, her favourite person, she'd never see them again. Maireda cried with her head in her hands until her uncle separated them.

"It won't be forever, a few years perhaps. I love you Maireda, I don't want it to be like this but I have no choice."

He led Maireda out of the castle, but she stopped for one last look at the sea. In its vastness, Maireda saw the happiest times of her life. Her eyes lingered, never wanting to leave this place or those memories behind.

A bird pecked on Maireda's window, waking her up. She untangled herself and sorted her gown, almost forgetting the news. Shafts of morning light full of dancing dust scattered across her room. Sorrow maintained a tight grip on Maireda's senses, the world seemed grey and empty. Mama stood at the door, once a proud strong woman, now a hollow ghost. Maireda's heart jumped to her throat at the sight. Every morning mama had woken her up and greeted her with a smile, but not today. Mama was a rock that could never break, or so Maireda thought. Mama was weak now and could be weak again.

"I'm sorry mama,"

Maireda gasped as mama hugged her and began to cry with her.

"It's okay Mai, every Cenn is weak sometimes."

They sat down for a silent breakfast of porridge sitting at "the table". It was laughable large for their cottage and apart from its curved sides and legs rather plain but worn by countless feasts in the castle it once lived in. Maireda traced her hands over the scratches, stains and dents, imaging the feasts the table had seen. Her family owned it when they were queens in the days of Maireda's great grandmother. Maireda closed her eyes, she sat at the table dressed as a warrior queen surrounded by her clan. A beacon of strength to her people and to herself in the present. Maireda's eyes opened and were immediately drawn to the sword on the wall with its old worn scabbard and handle. The guard still shone vigorously as the light danced on it as if the metal itself was moving within the material that constrained it.

Mama caught Maireda's gaze and nodded to her daughter.

"Really?" Maireda asked, stunned at being able to hold it for once. Scyan was the sword's name. Made of unbreakable core steel from a Clada-Elimach tree centuries ago.

Taking the sword from its hooks Maireda gripped the loose leather bands of the sword's handle with a hand and a half. She could almost feel it come alive in her hand but the wooden scabbard constrained Scyan's spirit. Scyan wanted to be drawn, but Maireda winced at the memory of when she almost did. As majestic as the blade was it had a geas, whoever it pointed at it would die. Even in its prison, Maireda felt that Scyan wanted to move. So she moved with it, imagining she was one of her ancestors wielding it in battle. Then there was a knock on the door.

Maireda's vivid imagination gave way to the dull reality her sadness had created, lifeless and foggy. Scyan seemed to die in her hands as it turned into a mere chunk of metal weighing her down, she opened her eyes and gingerly placed it back on the wall.

"Answer the door Mai," Mama said through a weak smile.

Speaking to her friends was a blur. There was a fight due with the neighbouring village, Maireda had been ready with her makeshift armour and a weapon made from a wheel spoke.

"Are you well, Mai?" One of her friends asked.

Deep down she wanted to say no but she knew she had to help them, to lead them and to be their queen for the day.

She was too tall for her mirror these days, but she was strong from working the estate's fields and playing with wooden swords. Maireda tied her blond hair into braids but her legs gave way and she fell onto the stool in front of the mirror. How can I just go out and fight like nothing's happened? She wondered to herself. They were right, tiredness had weighed down her blue eyes and to her shame. Maireda took a deep ragged breath and wiped her nose. She had to be strong, she had to endure, she had to do something.

Straightening her back Maireda saw a glimpse of a queen in her reflection, ready to lead. She might not have a queendom but she had her friends. The thought strengthened Maireda's pride and banished some of her sorrow. She would be the queen her friends expected, no matter what.

There were ten of them by the time they gathered at the old grove, making nervous jokes and jests with each other, but Maireda felt that there was a wall of dark ice around her. It

blocked her from her friends. The grove was a broken circle of trees with gnarled branches grasping out for brethren cut down long ago. A large broad tree still sat in the centre, asleep ever since its world changed. Maireda shivered but focused on the coming fight. She saw victory in the stream down the grassy hill and to the right of the grove. The twins, Marda and Mardu, would join her in the flanking manoeuvre. Armed with two metal spokes from a cart, as Maireda had requested a few days ago.

Their enemies had arrived by the time the trio were out of sight. They moved through the knee-deep in the stream as small fish rushed past their bare legs or into Mardu's trousers. Maireda heard them exchange insults up in the grove with increasing intensity, each insult felt like the ticking arm of a clock ready to explode in anger and violence. Maireda and Marda came up the hill behind the enemy as the fight began, but Mardu was slow as he rang out his trousers. Maireda danced on her feet, anxious to attack.

"Come on!" Maireda hissed at Mardu.

The clash was an orchestra of thuds, shouts and insults. The enemy had five extra warriors who were closing in on her friend's flanks. Taking a deep breath, Maireda and the twins snuck behind the enemy's line and started swinging. The first one Maireda knocked out with a yelp as she bashed the enemies head. It was satisfying, the thud, the vibrations down the metal and the pain. The glory was the real prize.

Maireda cracked another one's ribs, sending her to the ground before the rest of the enemies started taking notice. The enemies were armed with sticks, still thinking the conflict was simply a game. One swung overhead at Maireda, but his stick shattered on her spoke as she blocked. She smashed the end into his face, sending him to the ground with a face full of blood. Maireda backed off as most of the enemy's centre pivoted to face her, allowing her friends to smack a few in the back. Idiots, thought Maireda. Another came at Maireda with a sharpened stick, driving her away from the fight with swift jabs and surprising skill.

Maireda frantically blocked the jabs as they became more and more of a blur, inching closer and closer until one glanced off her shoulder, bouncing off Maireda's makeshift armour. The shock of actually being hit melted the wall of ice that had obscured her mind. Her mind transported her into history, Maireda a queen wielding Scyan and her opponent a peasant with a pike. Another jab came in, Maireda caught it with her left hand and smashed the improvised spear to pieces with the spoke. The game of fighting

was gone and Mairida's imagination immersed her in a real battle. She forced the enemy down onto her knees. Before driving the sharp end of the spoke into the girl's neck. She fell sideways, the spoke embedded in her neck. Mairida staggered away from the lifeless body. The rage deserted her, everyone had stopped to watch her, friend and enemy all horrified.