

MURDER MOUNTAIN

Chapter 2: Altitude Sickness

Colin wasn't sure whether Kiri wanted him to follow her or not. He was used to it being them against the world, remembered that time at the beach, when everything was still raw and it hurt to even *look* at anyone else, but then he told her he trusted her, and she said the same thing back. He watched her retreating form for a moment, could swear he almost saw the edge of her tattoo peeking up toward her neck. Ever since he got the letter, everything had been weird. Confusing.

They'd get through it. They got past Locksley, they could get past whatever *this* was.

Following Kiri was almost automatic it seemed, as they went back toward the village, Theo trailing behind them, face fixed in that same grim position the whole way. Colin wasn't entirely convinced he could move it if he wanted to. The man didn't seem to have any problem following Kiri, though, and made no attempt to point her in any particular direction.

Kiri marched forward with purposeful steps, her mind swirling.

So maybe she hadn't made the best impression. Maybe she should've been a little easier on Colin since being here was obviously difficult. But he was an *ass* and his Uncle Jim was obviously a piece of shit who jumped to conclusions about monsters and had *terrible* plans. So maybe Kiri didn't give a fucking rat's ass about how she was coming off right now.

"He said you'd give us the details," she said over her shoulder at Theo. The village slowly grew in the distance. "Whenever you're ready."

Theo stopped walking, and, after a moment or two, tilted his head slightly to the side "That he did." he said. Then, he continued walking.

A minute or two later, he stopped again, "What kinds of details were you interested in? I suppose there's... a lot. Not all of it interesting."

Kiri turned back to face him the second time she heard his footsteps stop.

"All of it. Details on the victims, when they were taken, how long it took people to realize each of them were missing, how their homes were found -- how *you* figured out how to track it when there was apparently no signs of anything suspicious -- anything and everything you can think of. We've been in fights before underprepared. People die. Let's try to avoid that."

Theo nodded, "Okay. The first victim was Eleanor Miller. Lost her husband a few years ago. He was ill. She mostly kept to herself, drunk a lot, known by a lot of the younger ones in the village for shouting at anyone that comes too close to her house. A bit of a recluse. Took..." he paused for a moment, features twitching ever so slightly, "a week before anyone thought to check on her. She was just gone. Bed unmade, slippers on the floor beside her. There was an open window, which is how we're thinking it got in."

He'd stopped again by now, it seemed as if he was incapable of walking and talking at the same time, although he'd given it a fair shot, "Second victim. Lisa Dunnestock. Younger woman, lost her wife about a month before she went missing herself. Worked at The Dented Shield when she could. Was a lovely lass before she lost Hannah, but grief'll do that to a person I suppose. House was just as she left it when she left for work, assuming she got nabbed on her way back" he tilted his head slightly, grey clouds rolled past up above, "Heard a terrible scream that night." he glanced back at Kiri, "But sometimes you do round here."

He moved on quickly "The two lads that disappeared...just awful that was. Never knew their pa, the mother was killed- died, really, not too long ago." something that could've been a frown, "Accident. They were living Jim, actually," this time his glance was directed at Colin, "he was pretty lonely since, well. You know. Took 'em in seeing as he had the room. Ran off into the woods one day and never came back. Awful business. Just awful."

He fixed Kiri with a look, "That enough for you?"

Kiri's eyebrows drew together as he spoke. "How big was this monster?"

"Big."

"When you were following it, how'd it move?"

Not quite a frown, "Like a spider" A pause, "Then it took off flying."

"And there was no trace of it at Eleanor Miller's house -- nothing knocked over or broken, no scratch marks on the wood?"

Another pause, longer this time, "...No."

Kiri pressed her lips together, looking at Theo. Then her gaze finally fell on Colin. "A 'big' monster, covered in claws and wings, intelligent enough to figure out who in the community is vulnerable and won't be missed, managed to open a bedroom window, fit itself through, grab someone --" Kiri stopped, looking back at Theo.

"Jim said it took people a *week* to realize the boys were missing. But he took them in. How did he not realize they were gone?"

1Theo cocked his head, "Sounds like a question for Jim. Busy man though, might've got mixed up."

Kiri watched Theo for a long moment. Then, "Why don't you go back and ask him. Make sure we get all the details right. We'll wait."

He looked back to the hut, "Long walk back." a breath, then, "Don't know how I feel about leaving the two of you alone."

"We'll be fine," Kiri said, unyielding. "Won't move from this spot. It's important we know all the facts if we're gonna get this monster."

Something seemed to click, and then Theo's shoulders slumped, "All right. I'll go ask him." he eyed the pair of them, "don't move." before walking off.

Kiri waited until he was far enough away. Then she looked at Colin and said, "Come on." Then she started heading back towards town.

Colin frowned, watching her. On the one hand, Kiri was already mad at him, as far as she was concerned he didn't have a leg to stand on. On the other... "Kiri... Theo said to wait here."

"Then go ahead and wait," she snapped back over her shoulder. Fine, Kiri thought. She was used to getting things done herself, anyway.

He stood there for a moment, then, quietly, "Fuck." and he took off after her.

"Do you know where you're going?" He called, jogging a little to catch up.

"Homes of Eleanor Miller, Lisa Dunnstock, and Uncle Jim."

"Of course," Colin said, under his breath, then, looking around, "I, err, do you know where those are?"

"We'll figure it out. Start with Jim. You know where his house is?"

The lock clicking in the door, the smell of smoke - "I... I'm not..." he swallowed, "Maybe?"

"Something's not right. Either they're too stubborn and narrow-minded to figure this out, or they're hiding something from us. Either way they're not going to be any help." Kiri glanced back at Colin. "And you can't tell me any of this feels right to you."

Colin shook his head. Ran a hand through his hair. Gripped his arm tight. "I don't know." he said, "I don't..." another head shake, "I think we should go and wait for Theo. I don't like this. My uncle... he knows what he's doing." he looked up at Kiri, "Please. Can we just..." he grit his teeth, frustrated, "Fuck."

Kiri finally stopped to turn and fully face Colin. "Look... we're *missing* something here. And I get that he's your family but I don't like him and I don't trust him." Kiri paused, holding his gaze. "I came out here for *you* Colin. Because you asked me to. But... I need to know you have my back, too." She looked at the dot in the distance that was Theo's retreating figure. Then back to her partner. "I need you to trust me."

She was right. Of course she was *fucking* right. Fuck. Of course he fucking trusted her, of *course* he did, because what else was there? But this... it was his uncle, he couldn't just... "He saved my life Kiri. He's not a bad person. He doesn't want to hurt us, to hurt *you*."

Kiri let out a short breath. "I'm not saying he does, just — does any of this feel *right*? Everything they've told us so far, it sits ok with you?"

"I don't know, Kiri. I don't. They know things we don't. I just..." He gripped Nessie, tight, he hadn't even realised he'd taken the old bow off his back, "He taught me everything. I'm nothing that he didn't make me into, and—" he frowned. The mere *thought* of going against his uncle was... he couldn't describe it. Just knew that his stomach was tight, his skin was too hot, but also too cold and *fuck*, why couldn't it just be simple? Nothing was ever fucking *simple*.

Kiri stared at him for a long moment. Took in the way he gripped his bow tight. Saw the torn look in his eyes. She sighed.

"Wait here for Theo. Or go back to the carriage." There was no bite to her words. Just something small and soft and almost sad. "Whatever you have with your family, with *Jim*... you're not ready for this. It's ok." Kiri paused, like she had more to say. Then she closed her mouth and turned away.

"I'll handle it," she said as she continued her walk towards the village.

He watched her go. Looked back towards where Theo had now disappeared. Something small and aching squirmed in his chest. Kiri felt like she couldn't rely on him, and that... fuck.

"Kiri wait!" He yelled, taking off after her, "you don't know where anything is, and people won't trust you on your own, I-I can help." he paused, "I can't... I can't promise anything with my uncle, but if you think something's up, then...." he huffed, "I've got your back."

Kiri froze at the sound of Colin's voice, unable to stop the surge of anticipation in her stomach. Nervousness and *hope* and --

And then they were a team again.

Some weight that Kiri hadn't known was lodged in her throat lifted. There was the beginnings of a smile growing on her face that she fought to control. Instead she just gave a short nod to Colin then turned to start walking again with brisk steps.

"We'll have to be quick. Won't have much time before they find us."

Colin cast an eye over the familiar-but-not landscape, frowning as he brushed the cobwebs off the mental maps he'd formed in childhood. Lots of things were either new or had faded with time, but the roads were the same - trodden too many times during too many games of chase or hide and seek or *whatever* to ever really be forgotten.

He caught up to Kiri, before nodding in a direction only slightly offset from the way she'd been headed, "Last I remember it was that way."

Kiri course-corrected in response. She glanced at Colin out of the corner of her eye as they walked, the sound of their footsteps the only sound between them. She wanted to ask him about his Uncle Jim -- why he thought they'd be met with anger and hostility, why he kept grabbing his arm...

But... that he was doing this much already was a lot for him. And it wasn't in Kiri's nature to pry. So instead she continued on, trying to focus on the job at hand.

Before long, they arrived in front of one of the stone houses, and Colin stopped. He'd never been here before, at least not *here-here*, like this. But at the same time, it felt like he was *always* here, at least on one level. Details were hard, but... he looked at Kiri, "It didn't used to be like this. They rebuilt it - never been in this one." he gave his head a shake, before stepping tentatively toward the door and pressing down on the iron handle.

It was red hot. He snatched his hand away, expecting pain, but then - nothing. It was fine. He exhaled firmly, tried it again.

It didn't budge.

"It's locked, we need to find another way in," he said. It felt like speaking around a mouthful of cotton wool. Didn't want to think about how it sounded.

Kiri's eyes traced the outline of the house, taking it in. Of course it wouldn't be as easy as using the front door. The alternative would get her into trouble -- with Jim, the people they were supposed to be helping, with *Finlay*...

Wasn't going to stop Kiri, though.

"Come on," she said, pulling out a dagger. She began to walk around the house, looking for a window that would be out of sight of the town -- probably best to not let anyone see a stranger breaking into someone's house.

Kiri stopped when she saw a window at the back of the house. A bit small, but Kiri was confident she could fit through. It was high though. She'd need a boost.

"Over here," she said to Colin. "Help me up."

Colin blinked, "Right," he said, before positioning himself under the window, fingers interlaced for her to step on, "Ready?" he asked.

Kiri walked forward, placing her foot in Colin's hands and then she was up. After they were balanced, Kiri set to work at wedging the knife under the window pane, trying to jimmy the lock open.

And then after a few tries, she felt the latch give. There was a spark of satisfaction in Kiri's chest. Putting the dagger away, she lifted the window as high as it would go.

"Ok, up on three. One... two... three."

On the count of three, Colin boosted Kiri up toward the window, watching to make sure she grabbed on okay.

Kiri vaulted through the window, using her arms to push up and then curling her torso through so she did a short flip to land on her feet.

"Go to the back door," she called up to the window for Colin. "I'll let you in."

Colin nodded, before realising she probably wouldn't be able to hear him and adding an, "Okay.", moving round to wait by the door.

Kiri let out a breath, trying to relieve the tension in her chest that'd been subtly building. She glanced around at the room she'd landed in -- the kitchen -- feeling every bit an intruder. She

knew that the feeling was only because it was *Colin's* uncle, who he clearly had unresolved issues with. Maybe this was a mistake... but then, she supposed she'd already managed to piss them off anyhow.

Another breath.

Then Kiri forced herself into motion. She headed through the house, winding her way through a door, an open-space dining room of sorts, and then found the backdoor. She flipped the lock and pulled the handle.

It swung open easily, some kind of auto locking mechanism to ensure people didn't get trapped inside, and Colin blinked as Kiri reappeared barely a minute after squeezing in through the window, "Good job," he meant it, but his smile was tight as he peered past her into the house. He was gonna have to go in, wasn't he? "Spot anything interesting so far?" he asked instead.

Kiri shook her head, stepping to the side to clear the way for him to enter. "Move quick, as little disturbance as possible. You pick something up, put it back where you found it. Door gets opened, make sure to close it again." She took in his expression. "Hey," she said, softer. "In and out."

Colin nodded, hesitated a moment, then stepped inside, heart pounding.

It was different to what he remembered, but also the same. Taller than it was wide, the ground floor seemed to be mostly one room, the dining/living area seemed to be where they were stood now, a kitchen visible off to the side with a huge stone hearth and pots and pans for cooking. Upstairs, presumably, were the bedrooms. Colin took a deep breath, steeling himself as he figured out where to start. By the hearth maybe, or the stack of papers on the rickety wooden table. The whole room looked very... bare. Not like two children had been living there. But that could mean anything. Jim had always been meticulous, his own childhood had never been allowed to leave a footprint, except, well...

He shook his head. He'd closed the door behind him after coming inside, but he'd been careful not to let it shut completely, and a grey sliver of daylight still crept past the frame. He moved over to the papers, the most obvious sign of life, and carefully began to flick through them.

Kiri glanced around. "I'm going to look for the boys' room," she said before turning to head up the stairs. "Keep an ear open, and call if you find something."

Colin nodded, "Alright." he said, before continuing to flick through papers.

The stairs, like most other structural features of the house, were stone, and at the top, three wooden doors, no locks, crowded a small landing area. Upon initial inspection, the one on the

left appeared to be the master bedroom, the middle one held a pair of twin beds, and the one on the right a single twin bed and a general look like no one had set foot in there for a while.

Kiri looked into the room with the two beds, knowing it was where she should start. But...

She glanced back at the master bedroom. She pressed her lips together into a thin line. Then she stepped through the door, into what she assumed to be Jim's room.

Something fluttered to the floor as Kiri stepped into the room - a blank piece of parchment presumably placed as a rudimentary deterrent against intrusion. The room itself was as sparse and utilitarian as the rest of the house, but here and there, the odd sign of life had managed to creep in - the pattern on the quilt was worn and faded, a scuffed floorboard by the chest of drawers where the piece of furniture had clearly been dragged, a single shelf opposite the bed with five well loved books, paperbacks, all of them falling apart. Also on the shelf was an ornate wooden box, tangled atop it was a shimmer of something gold.

At the movement, Kiri's hand immediately went to the hilt of her sword -- then she realized it was just a piece of paper. She looked down at it on the ground.

Cautious. Paranoid. Secretive. He kept up this alert system even though he lived alone, since the boys were gone and their mother was dead.

Killed. Theo had said she was killed before he corrected himself.

Kiri took in the room before quickly moving to his shelf to inspect it. She'd have to be on the lookout for any more traps he'd set in place.

The books didn't seem to be anything particularly spectacular. One was a guidebook to the local area, 'A Rambler's Guide to Fallcliff Valley', another seemed to be a herbalist's guide. The other three were, perhaps predictably, about vampires.

What from across the room had looked to be a mere shimmer of gold was now, very apparently, a chain strung with a locket and a pair of plain looking wedding bands. All three were in good condition, although the locket was well worn around the clasp and hinge, a dull grey metal showing through the gold plating. The box was small and locked, but didn't appear to be trapped. Something rattled inside it were it to be disturbed.

Kiri frowned down at the locked box. She was curious as to what was in it, but knew she wouldn't be able to open it without leaving a permanent trace of her sleuthing. It was likely something sentimental, anyway. She picked up the locket and opened it to look inside before putting everything back in its place and going over to inspect the chest.

The locket wasn't anything special - two tiny sketches, one in each door of a man and a woman. The details weren't particularly clear, but they'd been drawn happy, both of them smiling at each other across the hinge.

The chest of drawers wasn't anything special in and of itself. The bottom two drawers were empty, and the top two just seemed to contain clothes - worn, but looked after, holes darned with matching thread and patches of similar colours. Underneath it however, were faint arch shaped scuffs, like it had been dragged many times and not always carefully.

Predictably, after looking around and making sure there weren't going to be any more little traps, Kiri grabbed hold of the chest and pulled.

The heavy chest groaned as Kiri pulled, but underneath, there was a loose flagstone, small enough to lift easily.

Downstairs, Colin paused at the sound. He wasn't sure why he'd gone to the papers. Maybe because it seemed like the sensible thing to do, but his uncle's writing was tiny and scrawling, and the few more official looking documents were written with loops and fancy looking embellishments that were absolutely not actual words as far as Colin was concerned. With a frustrated huff, he arranged the stack back how he'd found it.

Whatever Kiri was up to in the boys room sounded promising however, and *heavy*. Maybe she needed a hand? He paused momentarily at the bottom of the stairs. Heat rose. But that wasn't important, and he started to make his way upstairs.

Kiri let out a breath, straightening back up and flexing her fingers after moving the chest. She walked around to see what'd been revealed.

And to her great satisfaction, there was the loose stone. Kiri knelt to lift it and see what lay underneath.

A thick, leather bound journal lay in the small crevice, less a book, more a collection of loose papers shoved between a front and back cover and tied together with a cord.

Meanwhile, Colin had made his way to the top of the stairs. He frowned as he poked his head into the boys' room, finding it empty. He backed out, not wanting to spend too long in there. He looked around, before noticing the slip of paper that had fluttered to the floor outside what, if the layout was the same (which so far it had been, more or less), would've been the master bedroom.

He wasn't allowed in there.

Why had Kiri-? He should go in and help. Fuck. He made no move toward the door, instead, remaining outside, indecisive.

Kiri's quick fingers began unwrapping the cord, opening to a random page. At the sound of footsteps her eyes flicked up to see Colin in the doorway, before going right back down to the page.

"Anything interesting?" She asked as her eyes scanned it.

The writing in the book was densely packed, frenzied almost, and difficult to parse. At first glance it was apparent that it was notational - dates, names, small asides like 'met with C on outskirts, going where?' and 'cave too close, T trying mines'.

"I, err," Colin's tongue felt like it was two sizes too big as he watched Kiri in his uncle's room. On his uncle's floor. Looking through his uncle's journal. "Nothing important - you can't be in here though. This is my uncle's room, no one's allowed in here."

"Yeah, I'd hate to break any rules," she murmured, only half paying attention. Her eyebrows drew together as she looked down at the journal. It was a log of some sort. It seemed like he led the gang of local monster hunters, so if it was to track their hunts or something then that would make sense... but why go through so much trouble hiding it? Kiri flipped to the last page that had writing on it.

Winter 24, Morn - all set for tonight, Rs gone to see Leeches, won't know what hit em

Eve - success, mines good spot.

Winter 26 - A sent letter, not long now

Winter 32 - Confirmation received, going ahead.

Almost done.

It stopped halfway down the page, about a week ago.

Downstairs, there was a bang, and Colin near enough jumped out of his skin, "Shit!" he hissed, straining to hear, "There's someone downstairs."

Quickly, he picked up the piece of paper from the floor, slotting it carefully back into the door the way Jim had it, before turning to Kiri, "We need to move, quick."

Kiri's head snapped up. Adrenaline shot through her. Snapping the book closed, she put the stone back in place, keeping hold of the journal.

"Help me move it back," she whispered in a rush. And together as quietly as they could they lifted the chest to place it back where it'd been against the wall. Kiri pushed the journal at Colin's chest. "Go, under the bed."

Colin nodded, grabbing the journal tight and skooting under the bed within seconds.

Downstairs, voices.

"You had one *fucking* job Theo, dunno why I let you lot do anything." heavy boots, slapping the stone staircase, "Don't act like you're not in here, I'm not a goddess-damned *idiot!*"

Kiri looked at the closed door. Then back at the bed, where Colin was hidden from view. Her jaw clenched. Then she took a breath and walked back towards the door. Her fingers wrapped around the handle and turned. The door swung open. The paper went fluttering back to the floor.

Jim rounded the top of the stairs, eyes wild, a vein popping in his forehead, then his eyes fell on Kiri. For a moment, he was surprised, features slackening slightly but then his lips curled back and a row of yellow crooked teeth leered down at her, "What the fuck, " he stepped closer, panting heavily and dousing her with a strong whiff of garlic, "are you *doing*," closer still, enough for Kiri to see spittle forming at the corner of his rancid mouth, "in my HOUSE!"

Kiri stood her ground, keeping her expression flat -- a skill trained into her from her own family. "Hoods investigation," she said with an even voice. And then, because he already hated the Hoods so why the fuck not, "Standard procedure."

He faltered for a moment, then drew himself up, towering over her, "'S breaking and entering's what it is. I don't know about where you're from, but round here that's a *crime*." he hissed.

"Then I apologize for the misunderstanding." She looked at Theo behind Jim's bulk, then back to Jim. "Have the orphans and widows in town been informed that they may be at risk?"

Theo remained as impassive as ever, whilst Jim spat back a hissed, "yes."

Behind him, Theo finally piped up, "The two of you were staying put. Where's Colin?"

Expecting this question, Kiri let her expression darken a bit. "Hopefully back at the carriage, if he doesn't have the *stomach* for this job." She refocused on Jim, mind scrambling for a reason to get them out of the house. "I'm ready to see where the monster was tracked to."

The two shared a look, before Jim's expression instantly relaxed, and he let out a loud scoff, "Ha, the lad always was a coward," he grinned at Kiri, but the expression didn't reach his eyes, "I suppose we did have a deal." he nodded to Theo, "Let's go."

Something in Kiri's chest relaxed though she fought to keep her face neutral. She gave a short nod. She'd have to trust Colin to... what? Follow behind? Figure out a way to meet up later? They'd been in trickier situations. They could handle this. She just needed to get these two out of the house.

Jim's bulk took up the entire doorway. She looked at the two men expectantly.

"Lead the way."

Under the bed, Colin gripped the journal with sweaty palms, barely able to listen to the exchange taking place mere metres away from his hiding place. What was Kiri *thinking*? Why wasn't she hiding too? Did she have a plan, or just a death wish?

He flinched at the sound of his uncle's rage. It only lasted a moment before Kiri managed to calm him down, but it only *ever* lasted a moment. They weren't meant to be here, and Kiri might've took the piss earlier, but she didn't know his uncle. Smoke - an echo of an echo. The last time he'd found one of them snooping around in his room, it'd been Angus - and his thumb had never healed quite right.

But then his uncle was laughing, and Colin could breathe again.

He didn't want to think about how badly that could've gone. Could still go. His uncle got mad sometimes, it was just a fact of life, and it was alright if you knew how to avoid setting him off, but Kiri didn't, and now their footsteps were retreating back down the stairs and out the front door.

The lock clicked, and then Kiri was on her own. *Shit.*