

Chapter 04 – Hagborn

Ljotr had watched from afar at the Grove. She sat and watched the Companion make slow steps across the cleared field to their makeshift gravesite for the Hymnist from the nearby forest. She kept herself low and out of sight, but her eyes were always on the man. Occasionally, those large eyes would dart to the side to check on where Argi stood. She wanted to make sure he was okay, to keep watch over the situation. She didn't trust the Vestry and hadn't since her mother left.

And so, she kept a close eye on the man. She was sure there was a cold side there. She had seen the dark side of the Vestry, the cruel and uncaring few who would rather toss out the needy than take care of them. She knew others saw them as heroes, as legends. But she was half Kyorai. Her mother was born of the Mists, and when she was older, she returned to them. It had been said to her as clear as day.

"How long until she turns into a Hag?" A Vestrian barked at her father. He wore the starburst of the Vestry on a silver disc around his neck. It was worn openly, in clear view for all to see, "How long until she is preying on our children?"

He wasn't alone. Others of the township felt the same. Standing behind the man, they echoed his sentiment, a low rumble of fear building towards a crescendo.

"She's just a girl. She hasn't done anything," Her father spoke, pressing her back behind him, shielding the young Ljotr from the crowd. "If you just took the time to..."

"To what? Do you wish to appeal to us again about Kyorai culture? About our misunderstanding?" The Vestrian howled, "Her mother turned into a Hag in our very streets. We watched her skin age and tear, those devil's hands of hers tearing at the ground. We saw it happen. We saw her cast aside the young man. Her claws could have ripped him asunder had it not been for our town's Protectors."

"She would have never," Her father protested.

"As her Kyorai self, I believe you – but all Kyorai turn as they age. Whose to say the half-breed is any different?"

"You don't know anything. You're making judgments on half-truths and superstitions."

"We saw it, Smith, with our own eyes. The Mists will return. They always do. And you are blind to the fact that your little beastling is a danger to the town,"

"Ljotr," Argi's voice broke her from the memory. Her eyes snapped to one side to catch him standing nearby, rubbing his hands in the chill air to warm them. He wasn't looking at her or speaking towards her, but he knew her well enough. "Just going to keep watching?"

She didn't say anything for a moment before giving a quiet raspy, "Yes."

Argi nodded to himself, "Look, I know your past – and I get it, really. But look at this man. Does he look like a hateful person?"

Ljotr's eyes drifted back to Ronen. He had barely made it to the graveside. Before her memory, she had seen him on his knees, but by now, he was prostrate. She could see him curled against himself, broken. He was mourning but not in silent stoicism. She could see his chest heave and his body twist as he wept, though she couldn't hear him because of the rain. It was clear to her. She had wept before. Her father tried to stay strong for her, but she had seen him like this late some nights. Her eyes twisted back to Argi, her voice soft but with a clear judgment, "Even villains mourn their loved ones."

"That's cruel, Ljotr."

"So are they."

Argi nodded. "You think all of them are like that?"

She didn't, but she didn't want to give one the chance to prove her worst fears right.

"Seriously, consider talking to him. He only wants to thank you," The carpenter said with a bit of a shrug before turning away from his hiding spot. "I believe he's genuine."

"Maybe he's acting."

Argi sighed. "I don't think so. I mean," He tapped his foot on the dirt, "He can barely talk about the woman. He seems devastated. I honestly am not sure he can think straight still. He has moments of clarity, but..."

"Yeah, losing someone is horrible." Ljotr hissed at Argi a bit, "I know that. I still don't trust him."

"I get it," He said with a small sigh, "I'm going to step out of the rain for a bit. Are you okay here? You aren't..."

"I'm fine," She replied somewhat coldly before realizing her tone. "Sorry, Argi. I'm okay. The rain doesn't bother me."

"I know. Just feels cold to me. Can't imagine you aren't cold." He spoke as he walked off a bit, "I'll be back in a while."

She glanced across to him and watched him walk to a nearby shed for some cover from the rain. Part of her was distracted for a moment. He was always kind and always looking out for her. He wanted her to be comfortable. For a fleeting second, she thought that maybe he had been trying to coax her out – to somewhere dry with him. But her mind was set on keeping an eye on the Companion.

Her watch was not a challenging one at this point. Ronen's grief was apparent, but after a time, he seemed to find strength. He rose back up gently and moved to kneel next to the disturbed dirt of the grave. She watched him sit there and speak, unable to hear what he was saying. He wiped tears from his eye and reached to put a bare hand on the dirt. She could see him take a breath, and for just a single moment, as the rain slowed, there was a calm silence. She could hear a tune on the wind, a song in his voice. She expected a hymn of the Vestry, a final suitable goodbye to a fellow follower of the doctrine. But as the words hit the air, a mournful dirge that rumbled forth into the grove in a moment of perceived isolation, she recognized them.

*"Hear me, hear me oh ancestors,
I mourn a fallen love,
As a grief-stricken shell,
In naught but despair."*

He did not sing in the common tongue but in the old language – the same tongue her mother sang to her as a child. She could see his hand set on the grave as he continued. The rain had returned, and for the time, she couldn't hear him clearly again. But she remembered the song sung by her mother – when she was scared at night.

*"Hear me, Hear me oh Ancestors,
My daughter is young,
She is new to this world
And she knows all great fears.
But she is growing swift,
Her eyes are bright like moons.
Let them chase away the dark,
And guide her safe to morn.
Hear me, hear me oh ancestors.
Protect this, my little light,
Here in her time of fright."*

Ljotr shook her head and found herself pushing back a tear – mixed somewhere between anger and sadness. He was a member of the very organization who threatened her, who would have burned her mother alive, and he dared to sing her songs in her tongue.

Before she realized it, she was on her feet and marching into the Grove, with a harsh word on the tip of her tongue. She didn't know what her plan was exactly, but she knew that was not going to stand. As she grew closer, she heard the final lines.

*"Take my Hrafnhildr,
Shepherd to well-earned rest."*

The Forester couldn't help herself. She let out a scratched growl, "How dare you, Vestrian! That tongue, that song is not yours to sing." Ronen didn't look up fast enough to suit her. He kept his gaze

down at the grave, away from her. “You treat us like monsters and then use our songs for your magic? After we...”

Ljotr stopped in her tracks as the Companion looked up. His face was stained with tears, red and broken. He had all but shrank into that grave himself, it seemed, wanting little but a moment with this lost partner. But it wasn't her actions that made her recoil and stop. Her face sank slightly, and she stepped back and away from him for a moment.

The gray of his eyes had burned away with a vibrant green. His iris sparked with the energy of red and orange that floated like autumn leaves away from his gaze. Below his hand, the dirt of the grave had sprung to life. Grass and flowers sprang from under his palm, spreading almost like fire or water as they washed across the bold, wet earth. For that moment, they shared a look – their eyes locked, and Ljotr saw a broken man who could no longer hold back any of the emotion. She could see him gnashing his teeth, trying desperately to keep himself from losing himself in the grief. And she realized that he might have succeeded had she not rushed him with accusing tones. Her words, for whatever reason, had hurt him.

She saw him struggle as tears welled, and his voice let out a soft “I'm sorry” between closed teeth. It wasn't just to her. It was to the woman resting below, “I'm so sorry.” He cried. He all but howled the words before repeating them much more quietly. “I'm so sorry.”

And as he lost control of emotions and fell into a deep and unyielding weeping, so to did the magic he had been weaving. The grove erupted into a verdant field of flowers, each bloom sizzling with magical energy. Moonlight pierced the rainclouds above and fell on the grove, refusing to obey the rules of nature, and lighting the grove. The blooms of the flowers followed the beams of moonlight. Flickering lights rose around them, drifting up and towards the stars. But the rain continued to fall, soon turning into a silent and steady snowfall. It was impossible. All seasons had met in the Grove, the very world unsure of what time it should have been as the Companion mourned. She wasn't sure what to do.

“My mother spoke that language,” Ljotr said softly, falling to her knees in front of Ronen. “Sang that lullaby – or one like it... and I lost her.” She swallowed and gave a quick addition, “I didn't mean to lash out....”

Ronen seemed to hear her. For a moment, just a moment, things seemed to calm down. Though, nothing went back to normal. “I'm sorry. Hra...” He paused, taking a breath, “Shiri... liked this style of magic....” He finally seemed to look at her and see her – not just to look through her or be oblivious to his surroundings, “You're Kyorai?”

The question took her aback somewhat. The Companion didn't sound upset or even surprised. There was a warmth in his voice, a calm that she couldn't help but latch on to, despite the occasional break in his voice itself, remnants of his earlier lament causing him to sniffle and crack from time to time. She gave a quick shake of her head, a bit of nerve dragging out her words, “Half... a hagborn,”

She couldn't get the word out of her throat before he spoke. His eyes flickered, the sparks of autumn dissipating as he seemed to regain some control of his faculties. “I'm sorry to have offended you. The Kyorai are masters of Old Magic and my....”

“Well, I see you two finally met,” Argi’s voice cut the conversation as he arrived – dragged over by the small explosion of magical flora that had erupted throughout the Grove and its surroundings. “I take it you’re both well?”

Ronen gave a quick nod, “Not nearly, but moving that way,” He responded as his eyes recognized that Argi’s arrival and tone meant this was, “Ljotr, then?” He spoke with a prudent move of his arm towards her.

She and Argi both nodded.

The Companion adjusted, climbing back to his knees for a moment before bowing before her. “I am in your debt, Ljotr. From my understanding, you saved my life. You’ve given me a chance to finish what we had started,” He spoke of his mission with Shiri. “Words cannot express my thanks.”

She was confused, taken aback, unsure how to respond. She was still angry but disarmed, cautious but curious. “I just did what anyone would do...”

“No, you did much more.”