

Chapter 05 – Eaves

Long days and a soft rain had passed since the event at the Grove. Ronen found himself healing nicely, helped along by the medicinal herbs brought in by Ljotr and the caring company of Argidr – as well as some light tasks around the workshop.

As he healed and grew more comfortable in his body once more, Ronen knew that his time with the village was ending. He had a mission to complete. They did not need him interrupting their lives more than they had. One afternoon, the workshop fell silent. Argidr had left to deliver a piece to one of the townsfolk, and Ronen was left alone to gather his things together.

“You’re leaving? Already?” A voice spoke to him, and he could barely make it out. It was quiet, whispered, almost as if the wind had carried it from far away. The Companion did not look up from his task but instead asked.

“I won’t leave without saying goodbye,” The man said with a sigh.

Ljotr was still nervous about speaking with the Companion much more than she had to, but after their encounter in the Grove, she was more curious than anything else. While a couple of visits, few had been without Argi nearby, and few had dwelled on much more than getting cursory information from and about him. She knew little of the outside world, and he seemed to have a wealth of knowledge. She was still nervous around him, unwilling to branch out and pursue the knowledge she desperately sought. She was not ready for much more conversation than that, though.

The words caught Ljotr’s ears as she passed by the workshop, looking for Argi to check-in. She had by that time realized that he was not home, off on some errand that she could not possibly have tracked him too swiftly. But those leaf-shaped ears twitched at the sound of a conversation. She sat down a loose bundle of wood carvings taken from various trees in the surrounding forest, samples for the carpenter in deciding what wood she would need to mark to have brought into him next.

She squinted a bit, leaning forward to listen, curious as to who in the town might also have been speaking to the Vestry representative. She knew a few had been interested in such a meeting, but Argidr had made it clear that the man was wounded and in mourning, and visitors were not welcome yet. Of course, the present company was excluded; but apparently, she was mistaken. Another person was there, but she didn’t recognize the voice. She braced herself against the carpenter’s worktable where the small bundle had fallen open, twisting her head to put an ear towards the nearby room where the wounded companion had been staying.

She focused in listening for any words she could make out. It took her a moment to find a steady position. It was a place that gave her excellent coverage but would be swift to fall back to if she needed to appear as if she was still just dropping off the wood. She took a quiet breath and waited for the conversation to continue.

"And where will you go?" The faint voice seemed to linger in the air as Ronen paused his work. He held the amulet of his order in his hand, taking a moment to stare down at it before looking back through the room. For a split second, he thought he could see someone, and then that someone was gone.

"I'll keep to my mission," He replied with a shake of his head.

"How could you possibly complete it?"

"I don't know," Ronen replied. His voice had lowered slightly, lingering on the phrase as it parsed in his mind.

"You aren't a Kindling,"

"I know."

"Without her, how are you going to light a Pyre?"

"I don't know."

"You might have found another Kindling,"

"No. Don't even suggest it." Ronen grew defensive quickly, twisting around the shadowed reaches of the room he inhabited, the darkness seeming to shift away from him slightly as he rebuffed the idea. "I won't drag them into this."

"Them?" The voice almost laughed, though, in its quiet way, it sounded more akin to a chortle, "You only need the one."

"One isn't coming without the other."

"And how did that work for you and Shiri?"

That statement had crossed the line. "I take your point," the Companion spoke with a pointed finger hanging just in front of the darkened corner of the room. "But I'm still mourning her, so let's not be cruel."

"I'm sorry, but you need a Kindling. Grief keeps us from thinking straight. For the first time in ages, you must face fears alone. And you aren't well equipped to do so. Can you be sure you are thinking straight?"

"I know I'm not."

"So, bring the Kindling."

"No. I'm not forcing them to split up or to join me on this," He turned away from the shade and back to his work, just long enough to adjust one or two things in his pack. "Besides, you saw how Ljotr responded to me in the first place. Someone in the Vestry clearly did something to her," A noise in the next room interrupted the statement. His eyes drifted back to the shaded corner, the shadows having slinked away at the sound nearby. Instinctively, his hand gripped his sword hilt, but after a second, his fingers unfurled, and he walked towards the doorway into the hall that led between the workshop and the carpenter's main living area. His eyes settled on the workshop, and he moved in that direction. "Well met, friend," He called out somewhat softly into the other room.

The statement had been misread by Ljotr, as the Companion planned. She was unaware how easily people would feel they were caught out if someone addressed them as if they had been seen – and so she rose from behind the bench where her samples of wood had collapsed a moment ago. “Good afternoon, Companion,” Her voice crackled and strained to leave her throat as she stood dusting herself off. “I was dropping off some cuttings...”

“Don’t explain yourself,” Ronen replied, holding up a hand. “I’m the visitor.”

“I mean, I’m a visitor too,” Ljotr spoke with a bit of a shrug.

Ronen let out a single laugh, “I’m sure. It worked when I told the Ancess the same thing.”

“I don’t follow?”

The Companion waved a hand dismissively, “Youth think they’re discrete. They never are, and we never were either.”

She seemed to catch on to his hint and let out a long, nervous, “Ah,” Almost hissing from her form. She brushed a hand back through her hair. Her hand was covered with a glove, hand-stitched fingers added to give enough length to hide her extra-long digits. She gave a quiet, “Obvious, hm?”

“Very,” He said with a nod, “For those of us romantics, it is endearing that you’re so bad at hiding it.” He gave a shake of his head, “Anyway, I’ll be out of your hairs soon, and you can get back to doing whatever it is you two do alone.”

“It’s nothing like that. I don’t think Argi thinks like that.”

The Companion paused and gave a soft nod, “Ah. But you want him to?” The young woman’s face was naturally pale, but a deep blush filled her cheeks fast enough to make one almost forget that. She didn’t know how to handle the statement, and Ronen waved his hands, “I’m sorry, that was uncouth. My father was a foul-mouthed artisan, not unlike Argi’s. I’ve never been able to shake his sense of humor. Or his openness. Not that I’d want to, just – would have fit your view of Vestrian’s better.”

“I’d rather you didn’t fit my view,” She replied coldly, shaking her head.

He paused and nodded. “I don’t know what happened to you to make you hate us. Though, I’m sure it’s justified.” He took a deep breath, “There are a great many so-called Vestrian’s consumed by the corrupting influence of power and perceived position. If you ever wish to talk about it, I would be willing to do so.”

She paused for a moment and watched him. “No, thank you. You’re the second I’ve met, but the only one who didn’t immediately judge me a monster.”

Ronen stopped in his tracks and turned towards her. “A monster? There is nothing further from the truth. You’ve proven yourself to be a selfless soul. Despite hating people like you, you made sure I was safe. You gave up your lifestyle to let me recover. I can only assume this was a place of rest for you until I came along and stole it.”

“I’m a good monster then. When the Mists come, I’ll transform – though. So I am still a monster.”

The Companion moved towards the bench and leaned against it to face her, careful not to put too much pressure on his still-healing wound. "What gave you that idea?"

"My mother,"

"She told you that?" His voice was confused, raised, and surprised as he put a hand on the table.

"No," She shook her head. "The night the Mists came to my home town. She was turned into a hag. She attacked the people, tore apart guards with her...." She looked down at her hands, "Why am I telling you this?" She said as she pushed off from the table and shook her head, "Now you know the truth, though. Going to protect the people from me, Knight Protector? Isn't that what Hymnists and Companions do?"

The Companion sat in shocked silence for a moment, "Knight Protector? No, Ljotr, we don't use that term. We don't hunt or murder people. You've done nothing wrong. I don't believe for a second your mother killed anyone."

"She did. They all saw it. We saw it."

"Saw what?"

"She tore him apart, and when the guards approached, she ran into the mists. They couldn't follow her but wounded her as she fled – a hulking, monstrous hag."

Ronen gave a slight nod of his head and then put a hand on the tabletop closer to her. "I'm sorry, Ljotr. I don't want to push you to talk about all of this. I think it is too fast and would be too hard. But..."

"But?"

"But... the Mist is a corrupting force. It takes our darkest desires and twists them into reality, but only if you give into them. You won't change because of the Mists. I've walked them a hundred times, and here I am. Shiri would have said the same." He smiled at her, "You are not a monster, and you are not destined to become one."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I don't have an answer for that. It is the truth. You can choose to believe me because you trust me. Or, if you don't. There is only one way to know – you must walk the Mists. But I hope you'll have a chance to learn to trust me long before that becomes an option."

She gave a nod. "You really believe that?"

"I've met a lot of Kyorai. I've never seen one forced into a transformation. At least not like you describe."

"But my mother?"

"I'm not sure," He sighed, "But if you're willing – after my mission is finished – I'll return and would be happy to walk with you as you search for what happened?"

"So, you are leaving?"

“Dropped eaves, did we?”

She shrugged and gave a polite nod. “Well, it is hard not to with these,” She ran her hand back to flip her ear.

He took a breath, “Yes. I’ve got a mission to complete. So, I’ll talk to Argi about leaving soon. Be on my way in the next day or two.”

“And you needed a Kindling? Or something like that? A person, I think.”

“No. I’m not taking anyone from here. There are Vestrians along the way. I’ll find someone to help me. I’m sure.”

The young woman nodded, and the two stood in stark silence for a long moment. “I understand. Good luck.” He gave her a thankful nod at the statement. “One more question?”

“Of course.”

“Who was the woman you were talking to?”

Ronen gave a bit of an awkward smile, “Honestly?” He questioned, even responding for a moment before finally taking a long breath, “I do not know. And,” He added, “Had you not asked, I’d still have assumed she was part of my imagination.”