

Just a couple of miles in the distance was my destination; the bustling town of Tiox. ^{I had been} Three years and a few months ~~had gone by~~ since I decided to stay there. ^{redundant} It was the middle of mid-fall, indicated by the colorful leaves decorating the trees and the ground next to the road. My dappled grey horse, Freda, snorted as a slight breeze passed by us.

"Ah, it's such a nice day, isn't it?" I muttered to her, then tugged my cloak around my arms. ^{I think this might be a fragment} "Even if it's a bit chilly."

Since early yesterday morning, I had been travelling back from Three Willows. ^{British spelling} Teresa and Walker had gotten married just a few days ago, ^{and} so I was there for their wedding. It was a lot of fun, a lot more fun than I thought it would have been; the previous time I was at a wedding, I was a child and didn't find it very enjoyable. ^{Teresa} Teresa during her wedding was the happiest I had ever seen her, ^{she} who almost never stopped smiling the entire day.

I ^{myself} myself was also generally happy. At first, I was worried that staying in Tiox would only result in disaster. After all, the war had just started then, and the rebels wanted me dead. ^{constantly} Constantly, I had been on the lookout for anyone suspicious, losing nights of sleep over it, and ^{I felt} feeling paranoid that maybe they would find out about my daughter, Reyna, and use her against me. ^{However, a little less than} Though, not even a year in, I came to realize that since staying in one place, ^{had come} no one came after me. It was no secret that I was hanging around in the southeastern area of Zyoth to anyone at that point; everyone who recognized me as the

Silver-Haired Killer had an idea of where I lived. ^{my} Fear slowly turned into wondering if they were just biding their time, ^{to} then wonder turned into confidence that if the rebels attempted something, I would be able to handle it. Tiox had become a safe place for me.

On the outskirts of ~~the~~ town were the beginnings of a soldier base. Some builders, carpenters, and architects had been working on it for just a couple of months now. Since the war broke out, there had only been a couple of major battles, but when the new minister was elected, her first actions were to have at least one major soldier base in every area. [^] I felt sorry for the current minister; she seemed to be disliked, despite having the majority vote, because she was spending government money ^{to up} upping Zyoth's defense against the rebels, causing the economy to drop within the recent years. [^] Of course, you weren't affected if you worked in some military type job because you were the defense the minister was trying to improve, but the average person didn't get so lucky.

~~As for the war right now,~~ from what I knew, the minister's cabinet was working on a treaty, but naturally, it was tricky to get the rebellion to agree. [^] Both Zyoth and Pelandor had become somewhat split countries over the past couple years as well; there was a splotch between the border where most of the rebellion gathered, while northern Pelandor and southern Zyoth held their ground in favor of the minister. It made travelling dangerous for a lot of people, which also had a hand in damaging the economy, ^{to} and could also have been a factor of why no rebels had come for me yet. ^{have been a reason}

run-on

run-on

run-on

of the war right now

run-on

British spelling

It was late afternoon by the time I arrived. After dropping Freda off at the stable, I headed towards my house, carrying the load I had packed for my trip. It was ^{she} ~~that~~ small cabin on the other side of the creek I had felt so drawn to a few years ago. ^{no hyphen} ~~re-do~~ ^{but} and once that was finished, I had myself a quaint little home. [^] Oftentimes, there would be a few stray cats hanging around, and it was probably my fault because I would sometimes give them food. [^] Even now, as I unlocked my door, a small black cat ran ~~himself~~ through my legs.

“Hello,” I muttered to him and gave him a pat on the head before going inside. As I shut the door, I heard a begging ~~meow~~ *‘Must be hungry...but I don’t have any food right now. The market will be open for a couple more hours; I’m sure I can get in a shopping trip. Besides, I have a meal to prepare tonight.’*

After unpacking, I headed back out and went straight to the town square, where the market was packed with people. [^] Tiox had almost doubled in size since I moved here, and before long [^] it would ~~most likely~~ go from a large town to a small city. Pushing through the crowd and ignoring the salesmen begging me to buy their products, I came across a large, strange wooden structure in the middle, blocking a lot of the way. It consisted of a lot of thick, wooden planks tied to each other in various manners, creating mostly cube shapes of different sizes; a part of me thought it was the beginnings of a building, but it lacked a foundation. A few people stood underneath it, staring up at it and pointing around while talking amongst each other. *‘Wonder what that’s all about...’*

By the time I finished grocery shopping, the structures had expanded slightly, ~~both getting taller and wider.~~ ^ At the top, some people were tying the thick wooden planks together. It didn't look very safe to be on the top at all, but they seemed to be managing fine. One of the people gave a thumbs up to the group of people below, so I watched as a young woman climbed up and tossed herself acrobatically between different planks. To my surprise, the structure didn't move. ^ A few people around me applauded. I would have as well if my arms weren't full of groceries.

"Hey, Lyza!"

Turning my head to my left, I could see Tulus pushing through the crowd, clad in his guard uniform. His appearance had not changed much in the past three years, as he kept up with the same hair and beard. However, since becoming the guard captain, it was noticeable that he had been working on his physical appearance. The slight gut he had when I first ~~ever~~ arrived in Tiox ~~disappeared.~~ ^ Despite turning thirty-six two months ago, he didn't look that much older than when I first met him as a mercenary captain.

"Ah, thank the gods, you're back!" He ran up to me, relief written all over his face. ^ "I was worried you wouldn't return in time."

"...Well, I'm here. What's going on?"

"This," he motioned to the structure, "is why I'm glad you're here. There's-"

"Captain!" ^ Another guard called out a couple buildings away.

Tulius immediately rolled his eyes and let out a groan. "It's been like this since *yesterday*. Can you swing by later? I'll be off soon...hopefully. Nellie is already home, I believe."

"Yeah, sure." I adjusted the groceries in my arms. "I can come by after taking this home."

~~STET~~ "Thanks." ~~STET~~ Again, the other guard called for Tulius, who gave me a forced smile before heading away.

After a last look at the structure, I went back home, put away the groceries, and headed to Tulius' house. The sun was beginning to set by now and the temperature had started to drop. *I hope I'm back home in time...I don't want to keep him waiting.'*

Upon knocking on the door, I could hear footsteps running through the house. "One moment!" Nellie's voice rang out. ~~Following~~ ^{followed} was a door slam, then complete silence. Over the past few years, Nellie and I had somehow become decent friends. We really weren't all that similar, but because of my frequent business with Tulius, I saw a lot of the Cariolian woman. At first, I only ~~ever~~ felt guilty around her because of the past Tulius and I shared and what had resulted from it. ^{run-on} It even strained my interactions with her at times. ~~Yet~~ ^{run-on} somehow, I got past it, and even though I would never stop feeling sorry for Nellie, who didn't know anything about what happened as far as I was aware, we got along fine.

After a few seconds, the door opened, Nellie peeking around the other side. Her dark hair was falling out of its usually neat braid, and her face was tinted red. "Oh, Lyza!" ~~She~~ immediately greeted, her lilted accent coming out more than usual. "Hello! Come in!"

"...Hi." I gave her a concerned look. "Is...uh...is everything okay?"

She leaned against the door as she stepped to the side. "Yes, everything's fine. I'm just having...child issues. What brings you here?"

As I stepped inside, I replied, "Tulius wanted to see me when he got off. I just got back a couple hours ago and it seems a lot has changed in the short time I was gone."

Nellie closed the door. "Oh my, yes. Yes, it has. Poor Tulius has been running around since yesterday with ~~little~~ ^{few} breaks, working from sun up to sun down because of what's going on in the town square." Her eyes suddenly darted down the hall visible from where we were standing. "Reyna! I told you to wash your hands! I did not hear the pump creaking!"

Following her scolding was another door slam. I couldn't help but chuckle. "Child issues, indeed."

Nellie pinched the bridge of her nose and let out an exasperated breath. "Some days, she's an angel. Today's not one of those days. Anyway," she sat down on the small sofa next to the fireplace, where a small fire was going. "There's a circus performing tomorrow, to which Tulius had no idea about until two days ago."

*don't use same description
in one sentence*

"...Oh. I can imagine that wasn't too pretty." I sat down on the other side of the sofa.

"Hah. I think that's an understatement." A soft squeak then echoed through the house. She leaned her head back. "Finally. She did it."

"That pump is pretty noisy," I commented.

"I know. Tullius wants to get it fixed. But that's how I know Reyna actually washes her hands, so I'm a bit hesitant right now."

"Fair enough."

Down the hall, a door cracked open, and I could see a tiny pair of eyes peeking out. Slowly, Reyna slinked out, all the while staring at Nellie.

"Let me smell them," Nellie said quietly, but the authority in her voice was strong.

Reyna huffed as she dragged her feet, sticking out her hands in the process. Nellie grabbed them, and after a sniff, let her go. "Thank you."

The red-headed child slumped herself over the sofa, face down, and her silver-lined curls flopped all around in the process. So far, I had managed to keep it a secret that I was Reyna's biological mother, and with her being four now, I knew it would only get more difficult. With what felt like each passing day, she only looked more and more like her father, to the point where I often heard people mutter amongst themselves about it. Nevertheless, I was determined to keep it to myself.

Reyna then reached over without moving her head and patted my arm. "Hi, Lyza," she spoke through her muffled position.

"Hi, Reyna."

She turned her head and looked at me, her hair covering her face. "How are the stray cats?" This was her usual question whenever she saw me.

With an amused huff, I responded, "They're fine. They meow all the time."

With a toothy smile, she imitated a cat's meow, then immediately began to giggle.

"Just like that," I said with a smirk.

She pushed herself up and sat properly. ^ Nellie straightened out Reyna's hair as she spoke. ^ "Anyway, I'm sure you'll hear a lot more from Tulus about it, but from what I understand, there was a lack of communication between the mayor's office and the guardhouse. He wasn't too thrilled to find out so late about it, to say the least."

Suddenly, Reyna perked up and shot herself off the sofa, running to the door. ^ "Papa's home!"

Knitting my brows together, I glanced the door, then at Nellie. ^ "Uh..."

She held up a finger. ^ "Three, two, one..." Upon her pointing at the door, it opened. As Reyna had claimed, Tulus stepped through.

"Okay, *how?*" ^ I asked. ^ "I didn't hear anyone coming and there's no window facing that way."

"I don't know," Nellie admitted. ^ "This has been a recent development. ^ She just knows if it's him or me coming to the door before we've even reached it ourselves."

Tulus laughed. ^ "She did it again?"

"Yes."

"Ah, that's my girl!" Tulus picked up his daughter and swung her around a bit. "How did you know?"

"You have loud steps," Reyna said while laughing.

Tulus stopped and stared at her. ^ "You finally gave us an answer." He set Reyna down and pointed at Nellie. ^ "Hah! I was right! It *was* the footsteps."

“Okay, okay, you’re right,” Nellie muttered begrudgingly.

Curiously, I glanced between the two of them. [^] “What was the other option?”

“Magic,” Nellie responded. “I was convinced that’s what it was. [^] But clearly, it’s just that she has *really* good hearing. This would be easier if that temple could just find that document...”

“Document?”

“Mhm. A while ago, Tulus and I received a notice that we were missing some documentation after the adoption. Some vital documentation, at that. It’s about her biological background, such as what kind of health things to look out for or, ugh, even her actual birthday.” Nellie pointed at Reyna. “So, we wrote to the temple she was brought from, and they informed us the paper we’re looking for was missing and that they would have to find it. If we had that, I would have known better than to guess magic was the reason.” She eyeballed Tulus as she said that, not bothering to hide the annoyance in her voice.

Briefly, I recalled the day after I gave birth; I knew exactly what document Nellie was referring to, as I remembered the doctor asking me all sorts of questions about my family history and such. *‘I definitely thought they would have that. But they don’t. When they do, will that give me away – no, stop worrying. It doesn’t do you any good. If they haven’t suspected it by now, a paper that doesn’t include my identity won’t do anything.’* “You still don’t know her birthday?” *‘...And why did I ask that? That sounded so incredulous.’*

“No. [^] We think it has to be at the end of mid-winter, but that’s all we got.”

It's the twenty-fifth of mid-winter, actually. But I'm not going to say that and explain how I know.' "Ah. Well, I hope that gets sorted out."

Nellie rested her head on her hand. "Me too."

I need to change the subject.' "So," I turned to face Tulus, "why did you want to see me?"

"Oh, right." He sat down in the chair across from the sofa. "Okay, so, that colossal structure or whatever in the town square is part of this circus deal that's going on tomorrow."

"So I've heard."

"We were talking about it before you got home," Nellie piped in.

"Great. Then you know what's going on." Tulus leaned back and pushed his hair out of his face. "I would really appreciate it if you could help out tomorrow starting around noon. I've been told that people are travelling here from the small neighboring villages to see this circus and to expect a large crowd."

"You want me on guard duty," I said blankly.

"...I wasn't going to say it like that. I was going for keeping the thieves at bay."

"That sounds like guard duty."

He gave me a look. "Fine." Call it whatever you want. Either way, can you please help? I'm at my wits end trying to get everything covered, convincing guards who had taken the day off to work or finding mercenaries who were just passing through."

"Tulus," I interrupted, "calm down. I'll be there."

As he let out a sigh of relief, he smiled. "Gods bless you, Lyza."

“Around noon, right?”

“Yes. In the town square. The circus is supposed to start in the early afternoon, but I fear it may get crowded before then.”

“What’s this whole circus deal, anyway?” I asked, watching as Reyna climbed into Tullius’ lap. “It sounds like it was sudden.”

Tullius scoffed. “Sudden. Yeah, that’s a good way to put it. Well, they arrived two days ago in the evening. The ringleader comes up to me and asks me all sorts of questions before I finally get to ~~even~~ ask him why he’s here. As it turns out, the mayor had them come to ‘lift people’s spirits,’ or something.” He rolled his eyes. “The war isn’t that bad right now, but he’s treating it like it’s the end of the world. What happened was his secretary was supposed to let me know *two months ago*, but she apparently forgot. Since yesterday morning, I’ve been running around doing all sorts of last-minute preparation. It’s been lots of fun.”

“I feel bad for the secretary,” Nellie mumbled.

“Why?” Asked Tullius.

“Because you did not hold back on the poor girl. Even the mayor’s daughter was shocked to hear what you had to say. I had to stop hemming her clothes just to go calm you down.”

“Ooh,” I muttered. “You went full captain on her, didn’t you?”

With a nod, Nellie replied, “Oh, he did. His face was as red as his hair.”

“Well, she should have remembered something that important,” he defended.

“Perhaps, but you were harsh.”

“Um, was there anything else?” I asked in a hurried manner, noticing that it was almost dark outside.

“No, that was it,” Tulus responded.

“Alright. ^ I should be going ^ it’s getting dark ^” ^ I stood up and started heading towards ^ the door.

“Got somewhere to be?”

Smiling sheepishly, I muttered, “It’s suppertime and I’m getting hungry.”

Nellie chuckled ^ “Say hello to Kai for me.”

My face began to heat up as I said goodbye before heading back to my house. *I was cutting it close there. Hope he’s not waiting on me...*

Fortunately, I was home in time. As quickly as I could manage after lighting candles to light up the dark house, I ran into my kitchen and began to prepare a meal consisting of pheasant and various vegetables. While the pheasant was cooking on the wood stove and I was chopping up some carrots, my front door slowly creaked open. *He’s here!*

Turning around and leaning against the counter, I waited with a grin, seeing the lean figure of exactly who I was expecting to come through the door; Kai. He was a man only older than me by a month and ^ hailed from northeastern Brexil, a cold, arid region far from the Slythe Mountains. His light brown skin glowed in the candlelight, which brought out his grey eyes. As usual, his dark curly hair was tied into a bun to show off ^ the shaved sides and ^ his half-elf ears, which he claimed to be a rarity where he was from. We had met just over a year ago after he moved

to Tiox, and for the past four or five months, we saw a lot of each other.

"I thought you told me you'd have an entire meal for me when you got back," Kai muttered playfully as he walked closer to me.

"Hey, I'm making you food," I shot back. ^ "Be grateful."

"Oh, I am, I am." He slung off his cloak and hung it over a dining chair along with his knapsack. ^ "I trust your trip went well?"

"Oh, yes, quite," I responded, imitating his light accent by bringing out the consonants, specifically the 'T'.

"Stick to your own accent."

I stuck my tongue out at him and returned to cutting the carrots. ^ "Anyway, I did intend ~~on~~ to finish cooking before your arrival, but Tulus wanted to talk to me."

"Ah, my biggest fan," Kai said dryly. "What did he want?"

I understood Kai's irritation; for some reason, Tulus did *not* like Kai. ^ Perhaps it was Kai's past as a government transporter, or as Tulus called it, smuggler, or maybe it was that I sometimes passed off jobs so I could be around Kai instead. Either way, Tulus didn't bother to hide his distaste for him. ^ "He just had a job for me tomorrow, that's all."

Kai came up behind me and rested his head on my shoulder, hugging me from behind. ^ "For that circus deal, I take it?"

"Mhm. I'm on guard duty, basically. ^ Nellie said hello, by the way."

"Exciting. And hello to Nellie as well. Did you need any help cooking?"

"No, I'm almost done, but thanks."

"Okay." He reached forward and threw a carrot slice into his mouth.

"Hey! No touching!"

He laughed softly. "I'll just be eating it later," he muttered as his hands ran up my sides.

Playfully, I smacked one of his hands away. "Careful, I've got a knife."

"Ooh, scandalous." He finally pulled away, swiftly popping his hand on my butt.

Quickly, I turned around and pointed the knife at him. "Sit down, mister."

With a pout, he did as he was told. After cutting up the rest of the vegetables and throwing them into the same pan as the pheasant, I sat down across from Kai. "So, how was the hunt this evening?"

"Bountiful. I feel bad for the butchers that have to, you know...butcher all that. It was a lot."

"Ah, well, at least there's lots to go around."

"That's for sure." He grinned at me. "How was your friend's wedding?"

"It was fun. I had a good time. Oh, she wants to meet you. Would *not* shut up about it."

"Gasp." You *do* tell others about me." He put a hand to his chest and mocked surprise. "I was convinced you would act just as secretive there as you do here."

Rolling my eyes, I stood up and tended to the pheasant. "There are no secrets between me and Teresa." Despite how close Kai and I had become recently, I was

hesitant to be officially involved with him. Most of it had to do with what happened with Dover; I was paranoid of something similar ~~happening~~ ^{would happen} again. I didn't want to move nearly as quickly as I did with him. The other ~~part of me~~ ^{reason} was that I didn't feel entirely ready to become involved with someone, knowing what my past was and being unsure if Kai would be able to handle it. He had a vague idea that something had happened to me, though I never divulged any details to him. Fortunately, he was a patient man and never rushed me into anything, even if it frustrated him that I was rarely affectionate in public.

"I know, I know. I'm just happy you tell at least one person about us. One step closer to being more open about it."

Instead of responding, I focused my attention on finishing cooking. When I set his plate in front of him, he grabbed my wrist gently. "Lyza, come on. I know we've only really been seeing each other for four-ish months, but—"

"You know my thoughts on it. Let me figure it out on my own." After retracting my hand from his grasp, I sat down with my own plate.

"And I am all for that, really, I am. I just...people talk, you know? They ask a lot of questions. I want to be able to just tell them about it."

"Let them talk. I'm used to it."

Sighing, Kai dropped the topic. We ate our meals and the rest of the night went as it usually did.