

BORN FROM BONE



RUDE AWAKENING

K.W. KOCH

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Born from Bone – Book One

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1. Two Moons

Pain consumed him. Each heartbeat slammed like a hammer behind his eyes. It was all the boy could do to breathe. His body ached. Tears slowly escaped his closed eyelids, and rolled down his nose. He lay there in misery for what felt like an eternity.

He pried open his eyes, his vision blurred. His stomach roiled, and bile surged from his mouth, coating the ground beneath him. Unable to lift his head, he lay in his mess. The stench was overpowering. The fresh acidic odor assaulted him with every breath. Existing was all the boy could do. Soon he slipped mercifully out of consciousness again.

When Finnán woke next, the headache had receded enough that he could think. He rolled onto his back escaping the smell of the vomit-covered ground. Finnán took a shallow ragged breath. The cold of the air nipping at his skin, telling him night had fallen.

He willed his eyes to open, blinking until the stars sharpened overhead... and revealed two moons. They were identical in size. One was bright white, the other was much darker—grey, as if covered in the ash of lives long forgotten.

Confusion washed over him, the stress of the moment building pressure in his chest. His mind raced, trying to explain what was going on.

That's when he smelled it. Something wrong. Something rotting. Slowly he turned his head.

A shape lay nearby faintly painted in rays of moonlight that pierced the trees. A body. What skin remained clung to the bone, mottled and torn. A second form lay behind it, the lower half missing. Then a third. Then six.

He was surrounded by the dead.

He squeezed his eyes tight. He became lightheaded and his heart threatened to pound its way out of his chest. His adolescent body betrayed him, trembling violently as he gathered himself to do the one thing that would help.

“Mother?” he called out to the night with a prayer...

After a pregnant moment, her trembling voice broke the terrible silence.

“Finnán ...”

“I am...”

“...here, child.”

Relief washed over his body like a warm spring wind.

He broke.

Tears flowed in a river as he crawled to the sound of her voice. He crawled on his stomach over bones and gore. His forearms and knees scraped on small jagged rocks, leaving trails of blood and torn flesh.

He was exhausted when he reached her. She lay next to the lower half of a body—its entrails spread in a grotesque line leading to her head. He lay his head on her stomach and sobbed as she stroked his hair.

Too feeble to do more, they clung to each other tightly... and they slept.



At dawn, Ethlinn awoke again, shivering from the cold of the night. It took a few moments for her to cut through the fog in her mind. *That had to be a bad dream, didn't it?*

Then...it hit her all at once.

In a moment she went from slowly waking, to fearful and alert. Her heart pounded and her senses exploded. She held her breath as she took account.

She listened intently, barely breathing through tightly clenched teeth, fearful even the slightest noise would betray them. All she heard were morning birds.

The weight of Finnán lying on her stomach was a fragile relief. The pungent smell of the dead...was not.

Ethlinn slowly turned her head from side to side checking to see if they were in immediate danger.

She saw the bodies of several men, and one woman. Flies buzzed about each corpse, giving them a hazy, flitting aura. Some had dark skin, some light. All dead, all ravaged by scavengers. Her tension eased slightly, though she knew they were alone only for the moment.

Above them loomed a massive stone archway, taller than the palisades of a great city and wide enough for three teams of ox to pass side by side. Its very presence pressed down upon her a burden too heavy to ignore.

She couldn't see a single seam in the stonework, as if it were carved directly from the side of a mountain. The only evidence it hadn't risen from the earth itself was a series of repeating glyphs, worn but defiant against time itself.

She gently stroked Finnán's hair and watched him sleep. The waves of his auburn hair shone in the morning sun.

He's so peaceful right now...I'll have to bring him back to this nightmare at some point, but not just right now.

When he awoke, she cupped his cheek looking into his eyes. "Finnán, son. If you can walk, we must go... It's not safe here. Animals will come soon."

Finnán slowly nodded his head. They both rose and looked around.

"Mother, last night when I looked at the sky, there were two moons... Where... are we?" His voice trembled, the words barely escaping the sob that lodged in his throat.

Ethlinn shook her head and wrapped an arm around Finnán, kissing the top of his head. "I know not, child...the very air smells wrong. This is a place of death. Let us away."

Finnán looked up at her and nodded. He gritted his teeth and wiped the tears beginning to form in his eyes.

She looked to the east and pointed. “We will venture uphill to that clearing and see what we can.”

They turned together and started trudging up the hill. They had gone no more than a few hundred paces when the very air began to buzz.

They froze in their tracks and turned to look behind them from where the sound came from.

Just as they turned, the space in the middle of the stone archway flashed. A rainbow of vibrant colors erupted for a moment—so bright in the light of day they had to look away.

When the light receded, a new body lay under the arch. The figure tried to rise, groaned, vomited, and then slumped back down to the ground.

Ethlinn and Finnán looked at each other with eyes wide. “Stay here, son,” Ethlinn commanded.

She took a deep breath to steady herself and made her way to the figure. She knelt beside him and held the back of her hand close to his lips. His breath was weak, but hot against her hand. A sharp breath escaped her lips, her shoulders sagged a little and she let her chin fall to her chest, closing her eyes. *He’s alive at least...will he stay that way?*

She rolled him from side to side, looking for any bleeding, broken bones, or bruising. Other than the torment she knew he was experiencing from the journey here, he seemed healthy. *Very healthy indeed.*

He was no Celt. His skin was the color of a stag’s hide in autumn. He wore a loincloth and had leather sandals, but not much other clothing to speak of.

His tan skin was taut against his lean frame, every muscle and sinew pressed against it. He bore many scars, some ragged, torn with animalistic violence; others clean and straight, the mark of a blade.

At his sides were weapons. On one side, a spear taller than he was, tipped with a stone black as night—though it sparkled in the sunlight. On his other side

was a weapon shaped like a sword, made of wood and embedded with rows of those stones to form a jagged blade.

This was a warrior, surely, but even warriors died easily here. We must get him away from the carrion. He must come with us.

She stood, turned toward Finnán and waved him over. He came loping down the hill, skidding to a halt next to her.

“Grab his sword and help me. We need to get him away from here.” Finnán’s eyes grew larger and his brows rose in concern.

“It will be fine, son. He will be too weak to do anything and we have his weapons. If he’s a problem, I will handle it.”

She grabbed the spear in one hand and grabbed his wrist in her other, Finnán mirroring her.

They strained with every uphill step, locked in a herculean battle against gravity and their own exhaustion. They dragged him over roots and around bushes, stumbling and straining throughout the morning.

The man would moan from time to time, but for the most part, was unresponsive.

“Almost there, son. See that fallen tree just there?” Ethlinn gestured another twenty yards up the hill. “We can lay him behind it so we are hidden from the arch.”

Perspiration dripped from her forehead and soaked her body. Her fiery red hair clung like vines to her face and neck. She was thankful the braided portion kept it from strangling her.

Finnán fared no better, huffing with every step. When they made it uphill from the massive tree, they laid the warrior down and collapsed beside him.

“What is he, mother? I’ve never seen a man that looked like him,” Finnán wheezed. “I am certain I don’t know, child.”

Ethlinn wiped her brow. “I’ve never seen a man of his color.”

After a while Ethlinn rose, peering over the log down below at the graveyard beneath the archway. “Finnán , take the sword and stay put. I’ll be back in a while.”

She looked him in the eye. “Keep a watch on the archway and see if anything comes. I’ll be close so just yell if you need me.”

Taking the spear Ethlinn looked around at the countryside. It seemed so familiar and yet not. There were pine and oak around her, but the craggy mountaintops that loomed to the east were nothing like she had ever seen at home.

Ethlinn headed uphill towards the clearing. By the time she reached it, the sun was at its apex and beating down on her. The steady breeze tumbling down the mountainside helped to keep her reasonably comfortable.

Breathing hard, she turned downhill to see what she could. The mountain range stretched to the north and south, endless.

I feel so small right now.

Ethlinn sat. She had never been this high above the world before, nor had she seen the land stretched out so far. There was—so much land.

It should have been beautiful. But it wasn’t home.

Ethlinn bowed her head, tears leaking down her lashes, and said a silent prayer.

This isn’t home, and I don’t know if we will ever see it again. So... we must make a home.

She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath, soaking in her new reality. *We need water, shelter, food...*

Then, Ethlinn stood.

I need to get back.



Ethlinn headed south, keeping the mountain peaks on her left. It wasn't long before she heard it—and soon after, smelled it... *Water!*

Her brain screamed in excitement as she came to a small brook and knelt beside it. She drank deeply.

Thankfully, her waterskin was around her neck when she arrived in this new world. She pulled the wooden stopper from the mouth of the cowskin bag and dunked it into the stream. She secured the skin's sling over her shoulder.

Thirst quenched, she mentally marked the location of the stream and made her way back to camp.

She found Finnán crouched next to the man at the fallen tree. The stranger hadn't moved; she didn't expect him to for another day if he was anything like them.

Finnán took the water skin and drank greedily, keeping his eyes on the arch. "I've seen naught but scavengers, mother. Nothing that could tear a man in two."

There they sat watching the smaller beasts pick and pull at the flesh and bits of the dead.

"We should go further away from the arch, ma. I don't like it here, watching those people get eaten," Finnán's boyish eyes pleaded with his mother.

Ethlinn stared at the archway and the bodies for a moment, gathering her thoughts. "I don't like it either, son," She looked down at the man. "Maybe we will, once this fellow wakes up?"

She frowned, looking back at the arch. "But what if someone else gets... brought here?" She appraised her son's worried look. Shaking her head, she made up her mind.

"We can't leave someone to die down there, son. That's not how your father raised you." She sat down with her back against the fallen tree. Pulling Finnán to her and holding him.

“Your da always used to say that the right thing to do is rarely the easy thing to do.” She kissed the top of his head. “We aren’t the first to show up here this way... and I don’t suspect we’ll be the last either.”

“No. We stay. And we help those that can’t help themselves.”



Ethlinn cupped her hand under the warrior’s head, and with Finnán’s help drizzled water past his lips. He swallowed reflexively but was no closer to waking.

“Do you have your sling, Finnán?” Ethlinn queried.

“Yes, mother, just here in my pocket,” He eagerly replied.

“Good... good son. I need you to keep an eye around us for birds or critters so that you can make a meal for us. Can you do that for me?”

Finnán’s eyes widened and he got a serious look on his face. “Yes, Mother! I’ve seen a few of the birds flitting around the trees near us. I’ll have our dinner before the sun goes down, I promise!”

Ethlinn smiled. *A busy mind had no time to worry.*

“I’m going to work on getting a fire started. Stay in sight and come back at the first sign of trouble.”

Finnán nodded, eyes already searching for rocks as he worked his way toward a good spot to hunt.

She started collecting twigs and small branches and making piles near the log, taking her time to pull her dagger out and scrape some of the pitch from the fallen pine.

The sticky globs of amber and dried needles would prove to be priceless for firebuilding. She had learned that as a young girl.

As she worked, she darted occasional glances to the archway, to where Finnán was hunting, and to the surrounding woods

The hillside was quiet, save for the chirps and chitters of the birds and small wildlife nearby. A steady breeze was flowing downhill. It brought a reprieve from the odor of the archway with it.

Overhead the screech of an unfamiliar bird made her skin crawl. She scanned the skies until she was satisfied it was only a hawk.

She wasn't usually so skittish. All her life she had felt attuned with nature and swore she could hear trouble coming a mile away. Here, though, she was out of place. What kept her on edge was she didn't know what she didn't know.

It was nearly dusk when Finnán whistled at her. He was bright-eyed holding what looked like a raccoon except it was a deep brownish red.

The moment hit her hard. *Sometimes he looks just like his father.*

The way the dying light danced on his auburn hair made him look older than the thirteen year old boy he still was.

He came sprinting back, his mouth peeled ear to ear in a grin obviously proud of what he'd accomplished. "Look at this, ma! It will feed us for days surely!" He beamed

"Look here, I hit it square in the head. It came tumbling down from the trees, dead as you can be."

Ethlinn smiled wide and chuckled softly. "A mighty impressive feat if I must say. Your da would be proud!"

She appraised the animal. Its body was as long and half again as her forearm, fattened by a good life. This was a promising start. She was proud of Finnán.

She straightened, smiling as she lifted her gaze from the kill. When she looked back up at him, though, the look on his face made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

She noticed suddenly—the birds weren't chirping anymore. Ethlinn watched Finnán's pride turn to fear in the flutter of a feather. Her heartbeat

quickened, and she followed his gaze towards the arch ever so slowly.

There, amongst the bones and bodies, were massive midnight-black shapes. They were unmistakable to Ethlinn.

Wolves.

Her heart lept in her chest.

“Down, son. Don’t let them see you.” She whispered as she grabbed his arm and pulled him below the outline of the log.

She peered just over the log, making sure she wasn’t easily visible, and scanned the area. Four. Six. Seven. Seven of them. Wolves sure as she was sitting there.

Damn the luck.

She looked down at Finnán, his hands trembling where they lay on the log as he watched the pack feed. “T’will be alright, son. They don’t know we are here yet.”

She stroked his hair, and kissed him on the cheek. A tear ran down his face which he wiped away quickly. “They should be occupied with what’s down there. We will wait for the ‘morrow to light a fire and cook what you killed.”

And perhaps the stranger will wake before they return. We could surely use him.

The pair sat and watched the pack until shadows consumed them.

2.Shadows

“I want you to try and get some rest. I’ll wake you if I need you,” Ethlinn said as she caressed her son’s face. “Lie down. Keep the sword next to you if it makes you feel safer. I’ll keep the spear.”

Finnán opened his mouth to argue, then swallowed the retort. “Yes, Mother.” He lay down with his back against the log.

Ethlinn settled in for a long night. *I can get some rest come daylight if the pack has left.*

As the night wore on, and the twin moons rose over the treeline, they cast walking shadows along the forest floor.

Her heart ached at the unfamiliar sight of two moons. *What have I done to deserve this, and where have you taken me?* She thought as she cast her fury and anguish at the heavens. Tears leaked from her eyes without permission collecting dust and dirt along the way down her cheeks.

What is to become of us?

Occasionally one of the pack would howl as they meandered off from the bodies. One sounded as if it were a mile to the north, another half a mile away to the southwest.

Ethlinn’s skin crawled when a long guttural howl rang out in the night, only a few hundred yards east and uphill—near where she had found the stream.

She became worried when the voices to the north and south returned the call. *What if they pick up my scent?*

She wasn’t ready to wake Finnán just yet, but she remained on high alert for the next several hours.

Just before dawn, she heard a branch break fifty yards away. The light was starting to eat away at the shadows, and she could see well enough to know there was something there. She noticed a low branch moving, confirming her fears.

She gripped the spear tightly and continued scanning her surroundings.

We won’t be alone tomorrow night.



Ethlinn was relieved when daylight fully arrived, and it was clear that they were alone on the mountainside for as far as she could see.

She checked downhill where the arch loomed and could see no sign of the wolves. There was a host of black birds and small rodents picking at the corpses.

Finnán and the warrior started to stir as the daylight caressed their faces. Ethlinn gently shook Finnán and said, “Son, wake up. I need you with me now. The stranger is waking.”

Finnán was groggy. The stress of the last days was more than his developing body could take while pumping energy into him to grow.

Mercifully, he had slept deeply despite the fear of the pack prowling around, though he still cradled the sword handle to his chest. He looked up into his mother's eyes, stared blankly for a moment before his brain aligned—and he remembered where he was, what their situation was.

He schooled his face in determination and focus and brought himself to a seated position leaning against the log.

Next to Ethlinn, the warrior started to stir. He moaned and mumbled in a language that was unfamiliar to both mother and son.

Ethlinn laid a hand on the man's arm and gently rubbed it to soothe him and make him feel safe. His eyelids cracked open just enough to reveal dark brown eyes, only to shut again as he squinted at the morning sun.

Finnán jumped to the man's head and held his hand over the man's eyes to shade them, knowing the pain he was likely going through.

Ethlinn held her waterskin to the man's lips and lifted it slightly so it would dribble the cool water. He parted his cracked lips and drank eagerly. Gingerly he grabbed the neck of the skin and tilted it further until he was nearly gasping between swallows.

The newcomer seemed very grateful for the water. He forced his brown eyes slowly to open again—Finnán's small hand shielded him from the morning light.

When he finally spoke, the tone of his voice told Ethlinn that he was asking questions, but his words made no sense. She did her best to project compassion and concern.

Turning to her son, she said, “Finnán love, let’s get a fire going so we can have a meal. I’m sure our new friend is just as hungry as us.”

Finnán did as his mother bid him and started building a fire. He carved out a place uphill from the log, flattened it, and began building a small fire from the twigs, sticks and branches that his mother had collected the day before.

Then he broke a few larger branches off the log to make a spit.

It’s a good thing that the thing he killed is so big. It should feed us all today. I’ll send him hunting again tonight and tomorrow.

While Finnán worked on the fire, Ethlinn focused on the man. He had drunk the waterskin dry, and she would need to go refill it, but she couldn’t leave him alone just yet.

She needed him to understand.

So she pressed her palm to her chest and said, “Ethlinn...” Then she gestured to him and raised her eyebrows in question.

He looked at her with confusion. She repeated the process several times before his face lit up and he pointed at her, saying “ETH-lin”.

She shook her head in the affirmative and smiled. Then he placed his palm against his chest and said, “EETS-kwah-tl.”

Ethlinn had to practice a few times before she got a smile from the man. “EETS-kwah-tl.”

He shook his head excitedly, spoke in that language she did not understand, and rambled for a bit.

She shook her head but kept a soft face. “I don’t understand, I’m sorry...”

Itzcoatl pointed to the ground, and then the sky and raised his eyebrows in question. Ethlinn understood the question, but still didn't know the answer.

She shook her head no and gave an apologetic grimace. She pointed to herself and Finnán , and then the arch.

Their new companion's eyes grew larger as he showed understanding.

No one knew where they were.



Ethlinn built a fire and fashioned a spit while Finnán skinned the raccoon-like creature. Meanwhile Itzcoatl gathered his weapons and explored the area.

It wasn't long before the juices of the meal were sizzling on the fire, a delicious smell wafting through the air.

Itzcoatl had ranged a circle of around a hundred yards from camp when he whistled. It sounded like a bird's song but louder, catching Ethlinn and Finnán 's attention.

He knelt on the ground in the vicinity of where Ethlinn had seen movement that very morning.

He pointed his fingers at his eyes, then the ground and made a claw with his fist. "Tracks, with claws...predator."

Ethlinn's face grew grim at his confirmation. She nodded and calmly waved him over.

She repeated the claw sign, pointed down to the archway, and then held her hands out and tapped each of her fingers until she had counted seven. "Seven of them, down there."

She mimed eating and pointed at the archway and the bodies again, making a claw with her hand. "Feeding..."

Then she counted to three with her hand, made a claw, and swept her hand from the spot he found the sign back to where she heard the wolf uphill from them. “Three curved above us.”

Itzcoatl’s face became serious as he followed along with the basics of what Ethlinn was trying to communicate.

Ethlinn carved a chunk of meat off of the spit and handed it to Itzcoatl, then one to Finnán , and finally took one herself.

The group sat and ate in silence save for the sounds of appreciation each made as they ate their first meal in days.

By the time they had picked the bones clean, it was nearly mid-day.

“Finnán , we need to go up to the stream and refill the skin. With that pack around I don’t want to separate anymore.”

She looked at the dark-skinned newcomer. “We need to keep Itzcoatl with us, we are safer together. I’d like to build a perimeter around camp, and we need more food. We will go get the water first and perhaps you can hunt on the way.”

Ethlinn then signed her intent of gathering water to Itzcoatl, and he shook his head in understanding. The ease at which Itzcoatl understood her intent made him a valuable ally. *It’s as if he’s used to communicating like that.*

The group stood and ventured out of camp, following Ethlinn’s lead.

Their trip was uneventful. Having filled the waterskin and their bellies, they took their time returning to camp.

Finnán kept his eyes on the trees. Demonstrating his prowess with the sling, he took two large black birds similar to crows. They now dangled from his shoulder by a string Ethlinn made from a strip of her tunic.

Ethlinn collected a few chert stones she could use to knap into tools like axes and knives. She had often seen her father do the same when a blacksmith was too far.

Itzcoatl kept his attention on their surroundings, taking it upon himself to act as guard for the pair—often ranging away from the group to check they weren't being followed.

Ethlinn was shocked by how quietly he moved. There was a predator-like danger to his smooth movements. She was thankful he had turned out to be friendly.

The unlikely tribe seemed to be adopting their roles rather seamlessly.

It was late afternoon when they returned to their log-and-firepit camp. Ethlinn hung the waterskin from a branch on the log and laid her stones on top of it. Finnán began collecting fuel for another fire, not having to range far from the log to get what he needed.

Ethlinn borrowed Itzcoatl's spear, using it and hand signs communicated a need for a perimeter of spikes to keep the wolves out of camp.

It took some doing, but he eventually understood and ranged from camp, returning with several fist-size branches as tall as he was.

Ethlinn emphatically clapped and smiled, showing her appreciation. Itzcoatl responded with a knowing smile and bounded away again with the grace of a stag—his steps making nary a sound.

She took one of the pieces of chert she had knapped into a reasonable edge and began chipping away at the end of one of the branch poles, refining it to a point.

Itzcoatl left again and again throughout the afternoon, returning with more branch poles. He only stopped to eat the meal of crow breast and then moved off again to keep the supply coming.

Meanwhile, Ethlinn worked diligently to hone points on the poles and Finnán roasted the birds over a freshly built fire.

Ethlinn had eight of the poles sharpened by the time Itzcoatl came back with the last batch for the evening. The work was exhausting with such

rudimentary tools. Blisters were starting to form by the time she called it quits for the night.

There wouldn't be time to dig them in and make the perimeter, but at least they had something they could defend themselves with if the wolfpack came back.

The bronze-skinned man had worked tirelessly throughout the afternoon to give them a boundary, but night had come too soon and they wouldn't get the spikes in place until tomorrow.

If they lived to see the morning.



The trio decided to stay awake for a few hours before anyone went to sleep. They were rewarded for that decision as it wasn't long before they picked up faint sounds on the mountainside above their camp, and more down by the archway.

They stayed quiet, listened, and smelled the wind to see what their senses could tell them. Nothing came to them except faint sounds from time to time as the breeze shifted around them and carried them to camp.

Suddenly, Itzcoatl held his finger against his lips. "Quiet." Then he held his hand to his ears. "Listen." The sounds on the hill had started to creep closer and closer until they were no more than a hundred yards to the east. Faint tendrils of their odor started drifting into camp.

It was clear the pack was close.

A howl reverberated from the archway, sending chills up Ethlinn's spine. It was echoed by two others in the same area, and then two more just east of camp. Her skin crawled.

They're back. I knew they'd come back.

She grabbed one of the spiked poles and resumed her perch on the log, waiting for them to close in. She gave Finnán's leg a squeeze to reassure him as

he nervously twisted the pole into the ground.

Another half an hour passed as the night grew still again, though there was no peace with the quiet. The stillness became deafening as even the insects fell silent.

They're coming...

She lamented the fear that flashed in her son's eyes when she checked on him again. Then a change came over his boyish features that made him a vision of his father. His hands became still, and his breathing steadied.

She watched as he stuffed the fear down and replaced it with a deathly serious visage. A deep pride welled in her chest, along with a fury she'd not felt before.

It was only a few more minutes when the moons' light betrayed one of the hunters a mere thirty yards to the south. Itzcoatl stood and grabbed a burning branch from the fire.

He spoke calmly but firmly in his language.

Though she could not understand his words, she was sure that he was negotiating with the beast, assuring it that they were not the meal it sought. To no avail, though, the beast bared its teeth and issued a low growl that carried straight to her soul.

Whether it saw them as a meal or a threat, it was there for them. Of that, there was no doubt.

More bestial voices joined in with a chorus of growls, yips, and howls as they closed in. When they were within a few yards, Itzcoatl let loose an inhuman howl of rage.

He threw his branch amongst a group of four wolves and followed it with his spear, hitting one of the beasts in the side, pinning it to the ground.

The man was a blur following the branch and spear with that odd-looking sword of his. The wolves scattered momentarily, but encircled him.

Ethlinn and Finnán let loose their own cries of desperation, fear, and anger. They threw burning branches at a group of three that had gathered downhill from the log. The mother and son pair leapt atop the log, gaining a strategic advantage from which to defend themselves.

With Itzcoatl engaged up the hill with half of their pack, the remaining three did not hesitate to engage. Lips curled and teeth bared, they came.

They leapt and gnashed at the air where ankles had been, wary of the spikes that the defenders wielded. Finnán lunged with the pole and was met with success, catching one of the jet-black forms in the hind quarter. The effort threw him off balance, and he tumbled to the ground amongst the remaining two predators.

Ethlinn's mind turned to red, and all conscious thought left her. A primal rage overwhelmed her, and she exploded forward. Taking one of the forms behind the shoulder with her spike, she ended its capability to threaten her son. The creature yelped and grew quiet, its legs still twitching.

The remaining figure had pounced the moment Finnán landed, though, and had clamped down on his forearm, eliciting a cry from the boy.

Ethlinn let loose another scream. She jerked the dagger from her belt and buried it in the hindquarter of the animal. The wolf spun, throwing the dagger from her grasp, causing it to skip across the ground in the light of the moons.

The animal buried its teeth into her leg and shook, rending flesh and causing her to cry out. It lunged at her, forcing her to the ground.

She could feel the slaver drip from its mouth as she held it at bay by the throat. Her arms trembled, and her fingers fought to keep purchase on the furry flesh.

The beast's lips peeled back to reveal rows of flesh-rending teeth. Its jaws inched closer—she was losing the battle of wills.

Just when she thought she would fail, and feel the ivory blades sink into her throat... the animal yelped, flinched, and went limp. She felt the warmth of

blood and slick ooze of entrails wash over her chest and down her neck.

Finnán had opened the animal's stomach with her dagger.

As they rolled the animal off her, they heard another soul-curdling cry from Itzcoatl. At that same moment the sky erupted into a rainbow of colors that lit the world as if it were midday.

Ethlinn and Finnán's eyes met as the sky was still full of the display, framing his no longer youthful face in a vibrant rainbow of color. They both knew what it meant.

Ethlinn was relieved to see Itzcoatl was safe when she stood. The remaining wolf had sprinted past them and to the north.

Whoever just landed at the arch, they aren't safe down there.

Itzcoatl jogged back to camp, grabbed her by the shoulders, and looked her in the eyes. Then he pointed to the arch. "You stay, I'll go." He grabbed another branch from the fire and started to head off.

"No," she said and shook her head firmly. "We stay together." The latter was said more for Finnán than Itzcoatl, but they both nodded in grim affirmation.

It took the better part of the dark to get the newcomer to camp. Itzcoatl and Finnán dragged the man, while Ethlinn carried the torch and the spear. They had no further issues with the wolfpack that night, thankfully.

In addition to being weakened from the portal, the man had several wounds actively bleeding from his body. There were plenty of wounds to heal that night.

Ethlinn dug into her healing bag and took a few herbs out, grinding them into a poultice in her hands as best she could without proper tools. She bound the group's wounds and treated them with a poultice.

She looked down at the face of the newcomer. *He will be of no use for some time, but judging from his appearance he will be a valuable addition to our...little*

tribe.

Ethlinn had heard tales that were associated with the man's horned helm and shield from an uncle who traded in Massalia. The Vikings were fierce warriors of renown.

Now she just had to keep him alive.

3. The Safe Place

Ethlinn rose to the first rays of the morning and the crackle of the campfire. The scent of meat roasting on the coals drifted through the air, mingling with pine and the damp sod beneath her. She blinked against the light and pulled the fur tighter around her shoulders as the fog of sleep cleared from her mind.

Her gaze drifted to the ground under the archway, no longer littered with the dead as it was in the first days.

Their bodies were gone, buried as soon as the first arrivals were healthy enough to do the work, their graves made a solemn boundary to the south end of camp—each marked with a stone.

Where bones once rotted in the sun, a cleared patch of earth stood ready to receive the newcomers.

Ethlinn and the others had decided to move the campsite close to the archway to ensure no one would be at risk of being eaten before help could arrive. As each new arrival recovered, the workforce to protect and support the group of survivors grew.

She looked to the campfire where Finnán was roasting a hank of Rudbroc on a stick for breakfast. *He's certainly become adept at trapping those things. I wonder if he could feed this village himself.* She chuckled inwardly as motherly pride welled up in her.

Ethlinn sat and let the calm of the morning wash over her. It was a far cry from constant terror they had been in during those first days. At the east and west ends of camp survivors stood with stone-tipped spears. They all shared the watch duties and at last there were enough people to get real rest.

“When you are done burning that rodent, perhaps your mother could have a nibble eh?” She taunted the boy.

No, not boy. Young man. He's earned that.

Finnán crinkled his nose at her and took a large bite out of the shoulder meat. He chewed with an open mouth, breathing out plumes of hot steam between bites as he tried to keep from burning his mouth.

“Tastes fine to me, ma! But mebbe not to your tastes, I’ll just eat this one and you can have a go yourself when you’re awake?”

“There’s another quarter in the bag next to you!” He said, pointing toward where she sat and winking.

Ethlinn croaked a guffaw in her morning voice and then gave him the innocent look that used to melt his father. Her eyes got as large as saucers and her bottom lip stuck out just a touch.

“You wouldn’t leave your dear old ma to starve on this mornin’ would you? Fine young man suchas you.”

The boy rolled his eyes hard enough they nearly got stuck in his head. “Thas cheating ma... Was for you anyhow. I’ve been up a while now.” He took to his feet and brought the skewer to where she sat.

She took it gratefully and with all the love she felt for him gave him a motherly kiss on his forehead.

“You’re a good one son. Proud o’ you.”

Finnán smiled proudly and lingered in the simple joy of her praise before marching off to begin the shenanigans of the day.

Wherever that may take him, Ethlinn wasn’t sure, but she was glad to see his spirit.

She sat back against the lean-to that served as their temporary home soaking in the quiet of the morning. The rich smells of the roasted meat washed over her, warming her soul. As she savored the last bites of her morning meal, the old Iberian healer, Sabella, shuffled by.

Greeting her with a mostly toothy smile, the silver haired apothecary said, “You eat... you come... Yes?” she asked in chopped words. “Yes, yes. Soon!”

Ethlinn replied, her smile reaching her eyes. She and Sabella had discovered some similarities in their native tongues and had bonded over their common love for healing.

Sabella had shown a great interest in Ethlinn when she discovered that Ethlinn had brewed the moonblossom tea the newcomers drank to help speed their recovery.

Ethlinn polished off the shoulder meat and tossed the remains in the clay stew pot for bone broth. She joined Sabella at the location of the structure that would be the apothecary—and their shared home.

She started helping the woman weave the wattle walls together, pulling from the huge pile of green pine boughs stripped of their needles. The work was tedious, but the payoff was having a wind tight shelter when the winter came.

The decision to work and live together came naturally given their shared skillset and how easily they got on. It took them until nearly nightfall to finish. In the end, Ethlinn was covered in pitch from fingertip to shoulder, but the framed house now had finely weaved walls.

In the days that followed the roof structure was built, wattled and covered with bark from the many large pines that lay all over the hillside. Finnán had shown his worth gathering the pine boughs and bark they had needed for the work.

Despite his youthful energy, when nightfall came and he had slurped down his evening meal it was common to find him asleep inside their new home early.

The boy was thankful when Ethlinn and Sablea joined him to gather the mud and grass for the daub. It was torturous work, and they were all stiff with soreness by the time they finished coating the exterior and interior of their home with the mixture.

While they stood there taking in their accomplishment, Ethlinn looked around at the camp around them. Dwellings were popping up just like theirs and the timbre walls were starting to spread across the hillside.

She marveled at the unifying power that surviving had over the motley crew of people that had arrived through the gate.

Finnán was the first of the three into their new home that night and started working on a fire to warm their home. Ethlinn saw the light flicker against the walls through the front door where she was standing. They acted as a beacon calling her home.

Yes, home. I think it can be, can't it?

She barred the door from the inside, and for the first time in a month she knew she didn't have to rely upon anyone else to guarantee her son's safety while they slept. Not that it had been a concern of late... but there was a power in that surety and it felt good to her.

As she drifted off to sleep that night, a chorus of howls rose in the distance. It was nowhere close, some miles off at best. No cause for concern, but it was a reminder that the slice they had carved out of this world was small, and danger was never far away.



The next morning Ethlinn and Finnán sat by the campfire as they cooked their breakfast. The camp was already bustling by the time they got up, so worn from their efforts to finish their home.

Thorstein—the Viking—was sipping at a broth in silence. He looked like he had been dragged through the mud twice and hung to dry.

“Thorstein...” Ethlinn called.

When he dragged his gaze her way she continued. “Honey Wine—taste is sweet.” Her eyes twinkled with mockery at his current state.

“I said go slow. You didn't... hmmm?” One rogue eyebrow rose in silent judgment.

Thorstein let his gaze fall unfocused to the ground, seemingly slow to absorb her words. He slowly bounced his head up and down in affirmation.

“Yup...” he belched, “don’t care.” His voice was gravelly and ragged.

He blew his nose on the ground, coughed up a glob of phlegm, and went back to sipping the broth. He looked back up at her with an impish half grin.

“Worth it... Much work, no fun.”

He wiped the broth off his beard with the back of his hand, suckled it off, and smiled bigger.

“Need more.”

Ethlinn clucked her tongue at him with a smirk and mockingly chastised him as a mother would. She shook her head and went back to minding her porridge. The warmth of the fire felt good against her hands, not that she had known cold last night, it was just a simple pleasure.

Odd how quickly some joys can return.

As she sat she heard footsteps approaching from behind her, rhythmic, confident... Lucius, the Roman. She turned her head and nodded in greeting, he returned it every movement structured and regal. “Break fast?” she asked, tilting her head toward the fire.

He sat down on the stump next to hers, legs wide and hands on knees. “Yes... have ate.” His lips barely turned up at the edges in his version of a smile.

He waved a hand toward her almost finished porridge on the fire. “When done, go out?” He gestured towards the in progress walls of the camp. “Must farm. Need roots, herbs, food for winter.”

She choked back a grimace. She was exhausted, and had planned to take a day to rest before starting another project, but he was right. They did not know when the snow would come, but this high up, they had to come in earnest when they did.

Her father told her stories of finding the remains of a village that had run out of food during a blight that had taken all their crops. The bones had marks on them where those that lived had survived on those who had died.

She took a breath to mentally brace herself and nodded. “Yes, food, then search. Bring many? Can carry more back.”

She bit her lip as a thought hit her. She furrowed her brows. “Where to keep?”

The Roman nodded stoically. “Have... a plan. Dig in... ground. Is cold. Will keep.” He stood promptly, adjusting his tunic.

“I go... get five?” He held up his hand with all fingers to confirm what he was thinking as far as the size of their party.

She took her time finishing her meal and emotionally prepared to not relax today.



When she had finished eating she shuffled back to their house to grab her herb bag and to tell Finnán where she was going.

He was nowhere to be found though. *He must be off goofing with Akin. Those boys are never far apart I swear.* She chuckled inside her head. *Oh well, they will stay close. I'll tell Sabella where I'm going and she will let him know.*

She and Sabella ran into each other at the doorway, one coming and one going. Ethlinn smiled, “Sabella! I go to find herbs, roots, for keeping. I will be gone all day. Tell Finnán ? Keep him close.” Sabella smiled, a secret tucked in the glimmer of her eye. She winked, “Have good trip!”

Something in the back of her mind caught the glimmer. It flickered at the edge of her thoughts for a moment, and then it was gone and she was off.

As she came around the corner of the longhouse being erected in the center of the camp she saw Lucius standing with Itzcoatl. Aisha joined them, the sun glancing off her golden skin and she joined the circle. Itzcoatl, Doran—the Saxon— and Lucius each carried spears.

She took another step around the corner, and there were Akin and Finnán . They were a tangled mess on the ground, Finnán had the taller boy pinned and

was sitting on his chest tapping on his forehead as they both giggled uncontrollably.

Akin saw Ethlinn first and pointed, Finnán vaulted off his friend wheeling in midair to face his mother. His face was twisted in a cross between a sheepish grin and mild concern.

“Ma!” he said, wiping the dirt off his knees.

“We were just foolin’! We will be serious if you let us come, we want to learn. Please?”

Akin slowly stood, a hopeful look in his eyes. “Father say you say yes or no.”

The boys simultaneously pleaded with their eyes.

She grew serious. “If I say yes, you will be about your manners and do as I say when I say. Yes?”

Finnán nodded vigorously and Akin joined in shortly. She turned to Akin, “Go tell your da.” The tall dark—skinned boy loped off and was back in a few heartbeats.

I suppose I'd be excited to get out of this camp and explore were I them. Many new things, and just the first young boys to get to see it.

She mused as they gathered their things and began their journey.

The day away from camp was almost like a dream. The sun was shining and the breeze kept them cool enough to be comfortable when they were moving.

At one point Finnán had ranged nearly a hundred yards away while they scoured a shadowy meadow. He excitedly jumped up and down, hollering, then sprinted back to her, breathless with excitement.

“Ma! Isn’t this garlic?” He held out the white bulb not much bigger than her thumb.

She took it in her hand, crushing it between her fingers, and the sharp scent took her back— to the first stew she cooked for her husband.

“Hah! I suppose it is then, garlic or close enough. That will make the meals all the better, and more. Go now and get as much as you can find! We can replant that by the camp.”

In the early afternoon they had found a creek that washed out into almost a marshlike area. It was covered in mushrooms. Ethlinn had taken a seat on the ground to give her feet a rest and have a drink from the waterskin.

At the edge of the creek, Doran was sifting through the soil, slipping whatever he found into his bag. He had been a blacksmith in the old world.

I'll have to ask him what he found on the way back, if he can make steel our lives would be so much the better.

The boys, having been of great use so far, were now splashing in the water and being boys.

They look so happy... I hope that they can be happy forever. I wish they could stay boys forever... Not have to worry about the bigger things in life.

Her mind drifted back to her old life.

My love, my husband... Would that you were here with me in this moment. To see him like this. To see this new world. What could we be here...?

She sighed.

She caught sight of Lucius and he and Aisha harvested mushrooms from the marsh. It had been hard to miss the furtive glances they shared all afternoon. Never both at the same time. Not yet at least.

I wonder if he can let loose his rigid Romannes in this new world. Become something different, something more? That's what this is for us... a chance to be... new. To be reborn...

Itzcoatl drifted out from behind a tree and into her vision beyond the two mushroom hunters. He made a right angle with his elbow on his hand bringing the other hand down to touch his other elbow.

“It’s getting late,” He signaled.

“We should go.”

She understood. Itzcoatl, though not a man of many words, was ever vigilant and they trusted each other. Mutual survival in the face of mortal danger has a way of doing that to folks.

It was well past dusk when they walked back through the perimeter of the camp. Lucius gathered most of the bags in his arms, so he could store them temporarily in his home. The root cellar would be a week in the making.

Ethlinn took the rest with her to hang and dry on her herb rack. The boys said their farewell at the campfire after tossing jests back and forth with Thorstein, who had obviously been working on a fresh jug of honey wine.

He saluted her jug in hand with a wet and careless grin, upended the jug and poured its contents down his maw.

She just shook her head and headed home. After she tucked the herb bags away inside the abode, she came back out to look at the fullness of the twin moons.

She was still in awe of how large and vibrant they always were. There were times in the old world where the moon was as big as this, seemingly close enough to touch. The ash moon had started to drift away from the ember moon but both hung heavy and close in the sky.

As she stood there appreciating the view a wave of relaxation washed over her. Behind her she heard Finnán laughing at something ridiculous Thorstein had said.

Probably something horrible and gross. She mentally rolled her eyes.

Could this be enough?...Enough of a life?...

She let herself believe, if only for tonight, that this could be enough.

4. Universal Law

Ethlinn stirred the special concoction she and Sabella had dreamed up. Ginger root and wild root to give it a bite, honey sweetened it and Lucius' berrywine warmed the cheeks. The smells wafting off the wrought iron pot meant that she had frequent visitors throughout the day at the firepit in the center of the great hall.

Thorstein "happened" to pass by several times, sneaking a steaming ladle for his cup along the way. He was actually working — delivering pine boughs, firewood, and other tasks he could have given one of the younger men. But he didn't.

She chuckled as he walked off this last time.

Not that he doesn't have the right idea about it. She smirked to herself and ladled a portion into her "testing cup". After letting it cool, she took a sip. *If that doesn't warm your belly, nothing will.*

As the afternoon wore on, people started drifting in with parts of the feast that they had prepared. Akin and his father brought an entire great stag quarter that they had buried under coals for two days. Aisha had prepared a smoked root stew, and Callista a bounty of greens drizzled with bone broth and honey.

Others brought acorn cakes, honeyed nuts, or roasted apples. Thorstein of course had made another batch of honey wine, just in case there wasn't enough of what Ethlinn and Sabella were making. As he said, "Would be terrible if we have no drink..."

The mood around camp was jovial for the most part. Even the typically stoic Lucius had been caught sneaking a ladle of "Harvest Wine" as they began calling Ethlinn and Sabella's creation. The camp had grown to forty-three people in the short few months since she and her son arrived, the latest group of four arrived just last week and were still acclimating to their new reality.

They had received a total of forty-nine through the portal, and a group of five had decided to leave their camp and make their own way.

Itzcoatl had discovered their corpses a few weeks later, the wolves had found them before they could establish a camp.

One fellow passed on just a few days after arriving. He had lived a very long and good life according to Lucius, and was not afraid when his time came. He was just too old to recover from the toll the portal took on a body.

The great hall was starting to fill up, and Ethlinn was thankful for the large pot for her harvest wine as quickly as it was being drunk. Itzcoatl arrived at the doorway at that moment carrying a wooden block in one hand, in the other he carried a small stick.

He let out a high-pitched cry and started beating the block with the stick. From the block a hollow rhythmic sound came, a beat almost like skin drums but with a different timbre.

He was wearing many necklaces made of beads, and had painted his face with ash. A line down his nose spread to outline his cheeks. Another down the center of his chin reached to the bottom of his lip.

His voice sent a rhythmic chant into the air that made Ethlinn's heart dance in her chest. She smiled and laughed with joy. Itzcoatl danced his way up the center aisle of the longhall, continuing to chant as he passed Ethlinn.

Thorstein appeared at the door next, with a skin drum in his hand. He was joined by Chibueze - Akin's father, also holding a skin drum. They joined the rhythm of Itzcoatl's beat, adding syncopation as they felt it. Chibueze began a parallel chant in a higher range that carried like a melody to Itzcoatl's harmony. Both were in their native languages, and were obviously not coordinated but just heartfelt.

The gathered camp members were overtaken with the moment and a chorus of joyful noises went up to the heavens. Thorstein drug Ethlinn from her cauldron and swung her in circles. Sabella stood on a table top and added her soul to the mix with a wailing tune that carried where Chibueze fell out of the chorus. Lucius didn't contribute but to his credit had an ear to ear grin as he toasted anyone that came in range.

The fever pitch hit a crescendo just as the wine went to Ethlinn's head, her cheeks warm and fuzzy and her inhibitions melting away. The raucous died down as voices dropped out and folks went back to the well for more drink. Chibueze and Thorstein kept the rhythm alive for just a while longer but let it recede to barely be heard over the din of chatter and the occasional laugh. The stillness on the downhill side of the impromptu song felt like a siren's call to Ethlinn, and memories of standing 'round the fire with her ma and da flooded her soul. Without realizing her lips parted, a tune from her childhood was already rising in the air from her. A thread of her old life, fragile...yet strong.

It was a mournful lament that was empowered by her velvety voice. The lyrics - which most could not understand - were the words of a lover lost at sea and the undying connection of the one left at home. The emotion that poured out of her though, was mirrored by every face in the hall as it grew deathly silent save for the soft drumming and her soul pouring out in words.

What the gathered mass heard was the loss of what was. The friends, and loved ones, the dreams and hopes. All that was, and the truth that it would never die in their hearts, and yet would never be again. When the last sultry note spilled from her mouth it was followed by a tear, which she proudly wiped and threw back a cup of the harvest wine.

She had no reason for shame though, there was not a dry eye in the house.

After a moment of silence, Lucius stood on a bench and gathered the attention of all. "We come from many places. Many...lives. Now gone, and never to return. There is no shame in what you feel for the old world...But, also it is right, and just... To have joy for what we have built. Let us join on the harvest, and remember, and look forward. Let us tell the stories, and sing the songs that keep our past in the present, and be free to dream of the future.

He looked around at the faces staring back at him. "I see those that I would have crossed swords with in the old world, that I now share meal and mead with. I see those, I did not know existed, that I now know and call friend. What was in the old world, has died. What came through the rift now lives. This unlikely

family...is born of the rift that tossed us together, and for the chaos that it brought I am thankful to have ended up here with you.

A raucous cheer went up, cups were smashed together and wine splashed all over. Finnán stood, tipsy yet well put together. “We are born of the rift, we are... RIFTBORN!” He shouted the last at the top of his lungs, and threw back his cup. The chant “RIFTBORN” grew, and the drums took up the call. Dancing erupted in the aisles again, and hearty slaps on the back were shared with anyone that came across Thorstein, to the dismay and upset cup of some.

Sabella pounded her cup on the table, and after a while the quiet grew again. “In the old world, I was a wife, and a mother. I was a healer, and I was a teacher...” Her eyes grew distant. “My only child...my daughter...she died when she got sick after strangers came through my village. I became a healer so that I would know how to keep life, and not be powerless. As my years went by, I had no more children. I did not have the heart for it, yet...I mourned for it.” Her gaze drifted to where Finnán was leaning against Thorstein, and then to where Ethlinn stood. “I was childless, and now I have a daughter and a grandson. My husband passed three summers past, and I was alone. I had no family, and now...” She swept the hall with her hand. “I have you. I did not ask to be brought here, but I would thank whatever force that brought me.” Cheers echoed, bodies swayed, more than one head laid back down on the table.. Until another cup pounded.

This time Thorstein stood, beard dripping with wine Finnán still leaning against him like a post. “I was drifting on my ship, the last of us alive. We had raided along the isle of broken coasts, and been met with a force thrice what we were. Four of us made it back to the ship, the other three died from their wounds inside the first week. I would not have been long to follow them... and then I woke up here with a demon in my head. So I truly am Riftborn.” Another round of cheers went up. He quieted them, and then said solemnly. “What was, is dead. What comes is life.”



The festivities lasted well into the night, many stories and many more songs were shared. Itzcoatl had to be carried back to his house by Lucius and Finnán — who had acquitted himself quite well for how much harvest wine he had. Sabella had hung in to the very end, but finally called it quits and hobble-shuffled her way back to their home. She slapped the hand of a well intentioned Akin who offered to escort her home safely. “I been drinkin’ since your father’s father was still a pup, child. I know which of the two roads i see to take home.” She promptly walked into the edge of the doorway with the most dignity Ethlinn had ever seen of a drunk.

Aisha was still twirling on table tops to a tune in her head when the last of the harvest wine and honey wine filled cups. Ethlinn took joy in watching they way Lucius and she danced around each other’s orbits so to speak, without crossing the line of showing overt interest. She brought him a drink and begged him to tell a story of war, and he nearly fell over a table while walking. His eyes had been watching her skirts twirl as she glided from table top to table top. Ethlinn did not miss the hint of a pout on her Aisha’s face when Lucius left toting the unconscious Itzcoatl with Finnán .

Ethlinn now sat staring at the dancing flames of the fire, soaking in the last moments of what had been an amazing night. She was the last of the Riftborn left in the hall now, and only because she didn’t want the night to end just yet. One of the newcomers, a young man named Wulfric from near the Thames in the old world, had volunteered to see Aisha back to her home safely — she had nearly fallen from a table. They had left a few minutes earlier, Aisha leaning heavily on the young man — Wulfric.

Ethlinn finally stood, and poured the last of her cup on the fire, setting the cup on the table near her. She gathered herself for the short, but somewhat perilous tonight at least, journey home. She had just stepped through the door when Finnán came sprinting up to her, his eyes wide with fear. “Ma! Come quickly...It’s Aisha. She’s been hurt.”

Ethlinn shook her head to clear the fog, and trotted unsteadily after her son. When they came around the corner to Aisha’s home, Thorstein and Lucius were

beating a man senseless while he cowered on the ground.

“Here now! What’s this?” She yelled as she ran. She grabbed Thorstein by the arm and tried to pull him away. He spun toward quickly frightening her. His face was made of stone until they connected eye to eye. He tilted his head as he swallowed the rage, took a breath and said. “Rape. This one, will die.” He turned to Lucius who was still savagely beating the man. “Lucius, enough. We will tie him up, and deal with him tomorrow. Let us see to Aisha for now.”

Lucius looked up, a dangerous wildness in his eyes that threatened violence for anyone. He stood still for a moment locked in a battle of wills. Whether that was his versus Thorstein’s, or the contending aspects of his character only Lucius could say. He turned and spit on the wretched creature that once was Wulfic. “You tie him. I’ll prepare for the morrow.” He turned to Wulfric again. “I’ll strip the skin from you animal.”

Thorstein grabbed Wulfric by the ankle and viciously dragged him outside the perimeter of the camp to a nearby pine tree. He bound him to the tree with a length of vine-rope. Before he left he urinated on the unconscious man to add further insult to his existence. Such was the disdain that Thorstein had for the wretch and what he did.



The next morning the camp rose slowly as one would expect after a grand night such as they had. While most of the camp slept a select few met at the hall. Thorstein, Ethlinn, Lucius, Chibueze, Doran the blacksmith and Sabella gathered around the fire early in the morning.

“She fought him off as best she could. Much of the work on his face was done by her, though he gave her quite a beating himself. It was fortunate that Itzcoatl’s house is so close to hers, Lucius and Finnán were finishing off the last of his secret stash of honey wine when they heard the commotion.” Thorstein said, catching up the members of the group that had just been woken.

He turned to look at Lucius, and then back at each of the others seated at the table. “We beat him bloody in the moment, and I’m not sorry for it.” He looked

back at Lucius. “Lucius and I agree that the animal must die.”

Chibueze solemnly nodded his head. “If we do not protect our people, we are no more than animals ourselves...But we are also animals if we just kill him.” Lucius’ face turned red, and he slapped the table. “Lucius friend...” Chibueze held his hands up in placation. “I’m not saying he shouldn’t die. I’m saying that we can’t be the only ones that decide this.” He paused to let the thought simmer. “We should hold a council with all of the camp, and decide together... If we are to be a community, we must establish how we do things. We must make law, else the law will be made by those who can take by power.”

Lucius stood, “Then get them up. I’m going to check on Aisha.”

Ethlinn put a gentle hand on his arm. “Sabella is with her...” before she could get anything else out, he replied. “And so will I be.” He pivoted, and marched out the door of the great hall.



Lucias’s head throbbed—from the drink, and the rage. He was unaccustomed to feeling this out of control, discipline had been an essential part of his life. He paced back and forth in front of the steps to the Great Hall for a few minutes as he tried to get his emotions under control. He shook out his hands at his sides, wiped his face, and took a deep breath— and started walking towards Aisha’s home.

He passed several people on his way to her home, but kept his eyes straight ahead avoiding any contact or an implied invite to conversation. He knew that his emotions were not in check, and anything he said right now would likely not be helpful.

As he approached the front door to Aisha’s home he took one last deep breath and knocked. The voice From inside was Sabella’s ancient gravelly reply. He slowly opened the door and crept into the small home, he saw Aisha asleep on her bed and next to her sat Sabella who rocked gently back and forth in her seat humming a soft tune.

“How is she?” He whispered, not looking at Sabella but keeping his eyes on Aisha. “She will be okay, Lucius. He knocked her unconscious, and broke one of her ribs. she will have some nasty bruises, and her right eye will be swollen shut for some time... Also there's something you should know. She says you stopped him before it was too late.”

Lucius drew a shuddering breath, And blew it out along with the emotion that was behind it. “She tore a chunk out of his neck with her mouth, he's lucky to have knocked her out— she would have killed him.” He turned to face Sabella, the eye contact was almost too much to bear even for one like Lucius. Through gritted teeth he said, “I thought that I had lost her,”

“and she's not even mine.”

“I don't even know if she feels the same way...”

“but I know I would die for her...”

“And I'm ready to kill for her. If Ethlinn hadn't showed up last night I would have, and I don't care what the community would have said about it”.

Sabella nodded. “I'm sure nobody would have judged you at that moment, but for your soul I'm glad you didn't. You are a man of honor, and I think no matter how just it would be, it would be a cancer on your soul... The rift gave us an opportunity to start over, to take a look at how we lived in the Old World. if you look around none of us were noble, were rich, were important... we are the ones who were stepped on. We are the ones who knew injustice, and we have an opportunity to rewrite how the world works. I know the power it must have taken From you to stay your hand last night.” Lucius stared blankly at the ground while he listened, “This has nothing to do with me,” He turned to look at Aisha. “I just want her to be okay.”

Sabella watched him with a knowing look, “She will son, Just give her time.”

Lucius nodded, “I know...” he looked at Aisha And then back to Sabella. “I should go, I don't want to wake her.”

Sabella slowly stood, “ No child, you should stay. In any case I’ve been here all night, and I need to go get a meal and some rest. she will sleep for the better part of the next couple days. When she wakes, I’m sure she would appreciate it being your face she saw.”

Lucius hesitantly agreed, and sat down in Sabella’s place.” I’ve mixed a draught That should ease her pain and help her to sleep while she heals. It’s just their In that container on the shelf, A good pinch of it in water and boiled for a few minutes when she wakes up. You can do that for me?”

Lucius solemnly nodded, “ Yes I can do that.” Sabella patted his arm, “Sit, rest.”

Sat and watched as Sabella, and tried to make sense of everything. He focused on controlling what he could, and letting go of what he couldn’t. *I just can’t imagine that they would let him breathe another day After this. She says that we can remake this world, if I could choose... I would choose this has no place in our world.*

It wasn’t long after Sabella left That Aisha started to stir, Lucas stood, went to her bedside and kneeled. “I’m here Aisha, how are you feeling, can I get you anything?”

Her eyes focused on him sleepily, the gentle beginnings of a smile crept upon her face and then she winced. “ Everything hurts, but Sabella says I’ll be ok. Is there something I can drink, I’m very thirsty?”

Lucius softly stroked her hair as he looked into her eyes,

“Yes of course, Sabella left me a draught to help you sleep and to ease your pain would you like that?”

She gently nodded “ Yes... please”

He stood and grabbed the container off of the shelf and put the pot onto the fire to warm the water. He took two pinches of the herbal mix and sprinkled it in, and then went back to kneel by her bedside. “ I’m glad you’re okay... “ He trailed off, staring into her eyes.

“You’re a fool Lucius”...

His mind spun, confusion overwhelmed him.

His face must have been an odd mix of emotions, terror, shame... He was not prepared for the response Though, she smiled gently and despite the bruises and one eye swollen shut her good eye had a twinkle.

“ If you don’t know by now how I feel about you, you may just be the biggest fool I’ve ever met Lucius”

If his face was a mixture of emotions before, now only one dominated as the blood drained from his head.

“ You...”

“...you were...”

“...awake for that? You...heard everything?”

She reached up with her good arm and cupped his face, gently stroking with her thumb. “I did...and I’m glad I did.” She stared fiercely into his eyes. “ I was getting tired of waiting for you to say something.”

“ Sabella says there’s not much left of him. that you and Thorstein beat him bloody.” the softness of her face left and for an instant there was a razor sharp hardness. “Good”. Lucius battled the conflicting emotions desperate to remain impassive. “ I would have killed him if Ethelinn hadn’t stopped Torsten and I. I don’t know if that’s what you would have wanted, if that would have honored you... I was so mad, so ashamed for failing you.” He looked down and shook his head. “ this isn’t about me though.”.

She grabbed him by the chin pulling his head up so that he looked her in the eyes. “ You didn’t fail me, you were there when I needed you. You put a stop to it, ...thank you.” She teared up, took it down, forcing control. Her hardened again, “

“I want him dead Lucius. I don’t want to ever look on his face again.“

Lucius's gaze grew stone cold. “ We are gathering the Riftborn this afternoon at the great hall, there is to be a community decision. Everyone I've talked to so far is of the same mind... If they choose wrong...do you want me to decide for them?”

“To me, this is your choice alone.”

Aisha Softly nodded in acknowledgment, her gaze growing distant. Then she refocused on him and looked him in the eyes With a fierceness. “ No... I won't risk losing you for that.” Her face turned to stone again, “ but when they do decide right... I want you to be the one that does it. I want you to feed him the offending member. I want you to tell him it's from me.”

He turned to grab the draught from the pot. Looking over his shoulder he said.

He stirred the draught, watching the fingers of steam rise from it.

“As you wish”



Lucius eased the door closed, careful not to wake Aisha. Aiken had agreed to take over for Lucius and watch over her while the gathering of the Riftborn decided the fate of Wulfric.

He lingered in the doorway, grounded by the visit. Relief pulsed through him— she was alive, and she cared for him. That sharpened his purpose. Whatever judgment Wulfric faced, Lucius would see it through—she counted on him to.

Lucius turned towards the Great Hall, set his shoulders square, and marched on with purpose.

As he rounded the corner a steady stream of Rift born met his path. Eyes drifted his way—some curious, some solemn—and he could feel the questions behind them.

As he joined the throng of people headed into the hall, a few encouraging back slaps and nods of support were sent his way. No one dared speak, but the message was clear— “we are behind you.”

At the central firepit Chibueze was conferring with Calista. When he saw Lucius he broke away and intercepted him.” ...How is she friend?”

“Sabella gave her something for the pain, and to help her sleep. She's doing okay right now, but I suspect it will hurt more before it hurts less. They were able to set the arm before it was a problem. I'm just thankful that Ethlinn was still awake.”

Chibueze nodded, “ Good good, let her sleep. It is good that she has you. Where I come from some tribes don't care. Evil men get away with whatever they want.”

“Yes, well... I suppose today we'll find out if this is one of those places.” Lucius stated flatly.

Chibueze looked intently at Lucius. “ And what will my friend do if they decide that he should not be killed?”

“Will you accept a lesser punishment?”

“Or will you take matters into your own hands?”

Lucius looked beyond Chibueze, unwilling to let his face betray him. “If it were up to me, I would gut him right now... But I asked Aisha what she wanted.”

Chibueze's eyebrows elevated at that” and.. what did she say?”

Lucius turned and looked hard into his eyes “She wants him dead.”

“She wants me to be the one to do it.” He exhaled hard. “But she also wants me to honor the decision of the community.”

“... and I will.”

Lucius pivoted sharply on the balls of his feet and marched powerfully up the steps of the Great Hall.

He was ready to speak— not just as a man serving justice, but as the voice of the woman he now knew he loved.



When Lucius entered the Great Hall, all eyes turned toward him and a deathly silence fell over the room. Riftborn continued to filter in, but the idle chatter had vanished. He stood frozen for a pregnant moment, taking in the faces that stared back.

His eyes landed on Thorstein, who had held a space for him and was now beckoning him over.

Lucius set his jaw, squared his shoulders, and marched with soldierly precision through the center aisle, past the central firepit, and sat solemnly at Thorstein's side. The large man placed a rugged hand on Lucius' shoulder and gave it two firm squeezes. No words were needed.

As they waited for the last of the Riftborn to arrive, quiet murmurs spread through the room. Ethlinn counted heads and nodded—everyone able to come was there. A subtle tension followed, as Chibueze, Aflan, Thorstein, Sabella, and others exchanged glances that silently asked: *Who's going to speak?*

Before anyone else could move, Lucius stood.

He walked to the front of the hall. There was no head table, only an empty space—and Lucius filled it. He turned to face the gathered Riftborn and took a centering breath. Interlocking his fingers in front of him, he raised his chin and met their eyes.

“We have no law.” His voice broke the silence and filled the room with a commanding presence.

We are but a fledgling people—named only last night.
There are no lords, no chiefs, no emperors here.”

He paused, scanning the crowd until his gaze met Sabella's.

"Last night, a wise woman told me that we've left those titles behind. That we now have the chance to build the world not as it was—but as it should be."

"While most of us slept off the harvest feast, giddy and red-faced, a man named Wulfric betrayed the trust of this community. He offered to escort one of our own, Aisha, to her home. Once there, he threw her to the ground and attempted to force himself on her."

Lucius' voice darkened.

"She lies in her bed right now with a broken arm, broken ribs, and one eye swollen shut. She cannot see out of it."

He scanned the firelit room, letting the words sink in.

"This was not a mistake...

...This was not a misunderstanding...

This was evil."

"He knocked her unconscious with a blow to the head—hard enough to end a life. He's lucky she didn't kill him. She bit a chunk out of his neck. I was next door and heard the commotion. Thorstein and I converged and gave him a beating he won't soon forget. If Ethlinn hadn't stopped me... I would have ended him right then."

He let the weight of it settle.

"But I didn't. Because something in me said this could not be decided by one man. Not even me. We are either a people—or we are just survivors."

"And so I ask: *Are we just, or are we savage?*"

"I've spent most of today with Aisha. I asked her what she wanted. And she told me to tell you this—she wants him dead. And she wants me to do it. She wants him to know who's sending him to hell."

Silence.

Then a voice from near the center of the room:

“Please, son. Stay where you are. You are the man who should lead this conversation.” —Sabella’s voice was solemn and steady.

Another voice—Callista this time:

“You said *attempted*. Does that mean he didn’t succeed?”

“That’s correct,” Lucius replied. “Both Sabella and Aisha confirmed it.”

Then Verlin, a man in his thirties, spoke:

“I think I speak for all of us when I say we stand with you and condemn this act. But this is a final judgment. Life and death. We should discuss whether his failure changes the consequence.”

A low murmur swelled throughout the Hall as the Riftborn began debating—soft at first, then rising into a storm of uncertainty.

Lucius waited, then raised a hand slightly. The hall calmed.

“If you please... I agree. A life should not be taken lightly. But I ask you to consider this: if he had entered your home intending to kill you and failed, would you hesitate to call it attempted murder?”

“Where I come from, intent is enough. The wound you meant to cause still matters, even if it missed. I believe the same is true for justice.”

He took a breath, measuring the room.

“I stand before you and ask that we make a decision today, that this kind of savagery does not belong in our society. I ask that you sentence that monster to death, and that you empower me to carry out the sentence, as Aisha wishes.”

He locked eyes, one soul at a time.

“Is there anyone who would dissent, or who disagrees with the consequence the aggrieved is asking for?”

No one stood, no one moved, no one spoke. And then one did.

Thorstein stood:

“Rape shall be punished by death, the method devised by the aggrieved or their families.”

Every hand in the room pounded the tables.

Lucius exhaled, the weight of the world shedding from his shoulders.



The next morning at dawn every soul able was present at the old pine where the wretch was tied, shivering, beaten and bloody.

His eyes were empty and broken.

Lucius stood before him.

At first he said nothing. Just stared at the man who had shattered so much innocence in a single moment— of the newborn community, and of newborn love. Then with voice cold and flat, he spoke.

“Aisha sends her regards.”

Wulfric cowered.

Lucius drew his blade.

And the Riftborn watched justice take its first breath.

5. Life from Death

Ethlinn had spent several days gently prodding Aisha to join her for a morning walk before everyone was up. So when Aisha showed up at her door the evening prior to accept, it brought her quiet joy.

In the time since the harvest feast, the palisades of the camp had grown to envelop the budding settlement finally providing a surety of safety from the predators of the mountain. Daily patrols expanded their presence and signs of wolves or other larger animals were harder and harder to find near home.

They had burned much of the ground, and used garlic wards to set a nasty smelling perimeter for several hundred yards around camp just to keep the more inquisitive of them away. Save for an acre just outside the gate which had been tilled and prepped for a garden area come spring, you couldn't throw a rock and hit a tree or plant.

Ethlinn enjoyed her early morning walks outside of camp. She had never lived in an enclosed settlement before, and it made her skin itch sometimes not being able to see what was around them. The daily escape helped to center her mind and relieve some of the discomfort. She was happy for the protection, especially after the first days, but the need for freedom to move was still important to her.

"I'm really glad you joined me today." She beamed at Aisha. They approached the gate and waved good morning to the newcomer that stood watch. "Hello Simon! Safe for us to go out and about for a bit?" Simon had arrived a few months prior and was really starting to find his place. A shepherd by trade, he had to find a new way to contribute and the young man had found the martial life to be to his suiting. Lucius was glad for a new recruit to add to the watch rotation, and Thorstein had been mentoring him and a few others with sword and board. Simon had become a favorite in a short time with his easy smile and quick joking tongue.

“Nothing all night Medicus.” He smiled. Ethlinn climbed the stairs to the rampart where Simon stood. “Here I brought you some tea to warm you up.” Simon took the cup gladly, the steam rising through the air shifted its course when Simon inhaled deeply to smell the bouquet awaiting him. “Mmmm...i’ll never complain about something warm in my belly of a morning. Thank ye much Medicus.”

“Simon, please just call me Ethlinn. Unless you want me to start calling you Watchman.” She said mischievously. Simon chuckled softly. “You keep bringing me warm drinks in the morning and I’ll call you whatever you please Missus.” Simon winked and raised the cup in salute. He blew the steam off and took a careful sip. “Oh that’s good it is. Thanks again, and enjoy the walk.”

Simon flashed a warm smile to Aisha. “Good to see you out and about this morning Aisha. Do listen for my holler just in case, but I suspect you’ll have a peaceful stroll like any day.” The edges of Aisha’s mouth raised just enough to return the kindness, and there may even have been a twinkling of joy in her eyes at the watchman’s candor. “Thank you Simon, we will see you soon.”

They strolled quietly for a time, just taking in the morning air and the first rays of sun until Ethlinn broke the reverie. “It really is good to see you out, Aisha. It takes time to deal with all the things that have happened, but this is a big step and I think you should be proud of yourself. Aisha kept her gaze ahead and didn’t reply for a time and Ethlinn was content to let her take her time. When they came to the field that had been tilled in preparation for the next season, Aisha took her shoes off and promptly twisted her feet as deep into the dirt as she could.

“I used to love to do this in my father’s fields. The feeling of the dirt between your toes, so cold and moist. There’s just something...calming to it. I would stand there for such a long time, that Baba would call me his scarecrow.” The women softly chuckled together. Ethlinn’s warm smile reached her eyes as she imagined this golden skinned beauty once a silly child playing in her father’s field. “I imagine you were an adorable scarecrow.”

Aisha's eyes grew distant, though the smile did not leave her face. "So... much has changed. I don't know where or what I'm supposed to be. That fool beating me senseless has only made things worse..." She shook her head, tears escaping down her cheeks. She turned to Ethlinn. "Baba worked that field all my life. He was gone all day until sundown. He would eat dinner with us, tell a couple stories by the fire, and then off to sleep he would go. One night, he didn't come back..." Tears flowed down her cheeks now. "We thought it was him when we heard a horse on the road to the house. Mama knew something was wrong when she heard more horses. Then we heard men laughing... Mama hid me in the cellar under the house."

She shook her head, wiped the tears and knelt down to grab a handful of dirt. Talking to the ground she said, "I had to listen to what those men did, and when they were gone I buried my parents. I was only thirteen."

Ethlinn took a shuddering breath. "That's too much to ask of a little girl."

"I'm used to the evil of the world..." Aisha shook her head and casually threw the dirt as she stood. Looking Ethlinn in the eyes she said, "I was a fool and let myself be careless. To assume that it could be different here, that evil wouldn't exist and we could live free and happy."

"Evil will always exist Aisha, we are all born with a choice in how we live. It's how we react to evil that makes us who we are. Do we tolerate it, do we encourage it...or...do we crush it?" The wind gained a bit of a bite as she said the last, causing both women to shiver. "I think we answered what kind of community we are going to be on that count." Ethlinn grabbed Aisha's hand, "Come, I've caught a chill. Let's go stand by the fire for a while."



By the time the women had sidled up to the fire to warm themselves, The camp had started to come back to life. They had stood by the fire for only a few moments, when a familiar feeling filled the air with a buzz of electricity. Aisha and Ethlinn turned and looked at each other, eyebrows raised, and then as one pivoted towards the arch. The inner area of the archway exploded into a rainbow

of vibrant colors expanding from a central point. As the women watched, several forms seemed to shimmer into existence on the ground.

They were all prone as to be expected — no one escaped “rift sickness” as the Riftborn had come to call it the days-long agony that everyone endured upon arriving. More and more newcomers arrived with each explosion of light as the months passed. They were typically housed in the great hall while they recovered, but there were plans to build a recovery house next to Ethlinn and Sabella’s home come the spring.

Ethlinn turned to two Riftborn who were standing next to them as the rift opened. “You two, would you please go gather as many as are awake right now and bring litters? We are going to have to get these folks into the great hall before they get too cold.

Later that night, when they had the newcomers settled into their bunks around the central fireplace of the great hall, Ethlinn finally took a moment to breathe and to survey the incoming batch.

So many new faces had arrived since she and Finan awoke underneath that archway. This time was different, though, and she was very concerned for one newcomer in particular. She stood over top of a young woman in her mid-twenties, hair so blonde it was nearly white. With a gentle face and soft hands. She was likely the daughter of somebody important. What made her unique, though, was the shape of her belly, it was swollen, large and round... So round that she looked like she was ready to burst. Ethlinn knew the rigors of rift sickness, and she also knew just how dangerous it was for a woman to give birth.

She dabbed the young woman’s forehead with a weight-wet cloth and sighed deeply. She was deeply worried for the young mother. She had checked her for bleeding, and watched the strength of her breathing consistently.

She lay her hand across the curve of the woman’s belly to check again. A flutter. Then nothing. Then...there! A good little kick. The little one letting her know they were still there brought relief. She let go of a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. But then... *Wait, that kick shouldn’t be there this far on.*

Her gaze drifted across the room, where her eyes were caught by Sabella's, who was tending to her own patient. Sabella asked, "How is she?"

Ethlinn replied, "She's about like everyone else... except that she's not." Ethlinn closed her eyes in surrender, shook her head, took a very deep breath in, and exhaled to fight away the tears.

Sabella stood, wiping her hands on her blouse. She walked over to her young friend, never taking her eyes off of her face, grabbed her two hands in hers, and tried to comfort her. "Ethlinn... I know what's on your mind, what's weighing on you. I need you to know that you're not in this alone." Ethlinn drew in a shuddering breath, and exhaled strongly.

"I know Sabella, it doesn't make it any easier...I...hope you know what I mean." So Sabella nodded. "I do, I understand completely. but that's not what we're going to focus on right now, we're a long way from having to make that decision. for now we're going to focus on getting her through the rift sickness and getting her as healthy as possible so that when she's ready her body can deliver that beautiful little soul inside of her... And we will see her running around camp Chasing that little thing threatening to beat him or her within an inch of their life for something silly."

Ethlinn wiped her face and nodded. "I hope Sabella, I truly do. It would be so unfair if that's not how it went." The young mother groaned, turned and vomited onto the floor. The familiar smell, noxious and acidic, hit them at once.

Sabella didn't flinch, she just met Ethlinn's eyes. "Here we go." She said.



Finnán looked around the empty newcomer's lodge and considered the experience that he and his mother had compared to the experience that these newest rift born will have. *I'm glad they'll be safe when they wake up, I'm glad they won't have to crawl over bones, I'm glad they won't have to fight wolves.*

He dropped the two blankets and canteen that he was carrying Onto one of the bunks, Stoked the fire one more time for good measure until the coals

glowed bright orange and the flames roared and crackled. *Let them sleep warm...* He thought with mirth in his soul.

He exited the lodge and strode briskly towards the center of camp. When he arrived at the entrance to the Great Hall he found Aiken, Chibweze, and several others waiting at the door.

Finnán snuck up on his buddy Akin, and slapped him on the back of the head, ducking to circle around him as he turned. Akin, having learned some of Finnán 's tricks, threw his leg behind him and tripped Finn so that he fell onto the hard wooden landing at the steps. Both boys burst out laughing until they nearly cried.

“ How did you know?” Finnán finally got out between snorts and giggles.

It took some time before Aiken could get his giggles under control. He was holding his sides bent over gasping for breath between laughs. “ you can only play that trick on someone so many times before they figure out how to catch you. I've been waiting for weeks for you to try that again you fool!”

Aiken's father, Chibweze, raised an eyebrow in mock judgment as he watched the two young men make fools of themselves. He leveraged himself from his leaning position against the doorway to stand and cluck his teeth.” you are both lucky you didn't kill yourselves falling down those stairs.” He turned to Finnán , “Aiken is right, you've played that trick too many times!” He chuckled, and turned when motion from the Great Hall caught his attention. “Come you two, I think our new family is ready.”

Finnán popped up and joined Chibweze at the doorway coming face to face with his mother leading the group of newcomers. “Finnán , they are ready for you. Alac here can understand most of what we are saying and will help. He's from across the narrow sea and traded with our kind frequently.”

She turned to the grey haired man standing behind her and gestured him forward. “Alac, this is my son Finnán . He, Chibweze and his son Aiken will take you to the newcomer lodge and get you all set up.”

Finnán smiled and held his hand out in greeting. “Glad to see you young man, the lodge has been nice... but I think that young lady in there is going to want privacy soon.” Alac said as he took his hand firmly.

Finnán turned to Ethlinn with concern drawn over his face, “How is she?” She was on everyone’s mind in camp. There had been death’s coming through the portal before, it was hard on a body. Ethlinn’s face didn’t give away her true thoughts. “We are going to see soon. That’s why we need to move these folks now.”

Finnán nodded, turned and led the group away from the great hall. There were twenty one of them, not counting the young mother in the great hall, this was the largest single group that had ever come through the rift. The groups had been getting bigger on average, but no single rift opening had been more than nine before. *It’s a good thing we stocked away so much food for the winter, but we are going to have to do more work before the snows fully come if we are going to keep up.*

Finnán and the newcomers poured through the door to the lodge that would be their temporary home while they settled in. “Alac, will you do your best to help direct the others while I talk? Chibweze and Aiken know the drill, use your hands to show what I’m saying for those that don’t know the common tongue just yet.” Finnán smiled warmly to show hospitality.

He turned to the group and tapped his chest, “Finnán ...” pointing to Chibweze, Aiken, and Alac, they all did the same going around the room, “Moira...Veltaz...Ginny...Thomas...”. He smiled again, and said “We...are family. We are Riftborn. Welcome Home.”

He walked to the fire in the center of the lodge where the flames were still glowing. He pointed, and said “Fire”. Then he pointed at Moira. She stared at him for a second, the prompt not sinking in yet. He repeated his end of the ritual, and then back to Moira. A light went on behind her eyes and she pronounced “Pyr!”. Finnán clapped softly and gave an approving grin. He pointed at Thomas and repeated the ritual, this time the queue was understood. “Aysh”. After a few renditions of that routine, he pointed again at the fire. “Fire”

he said and then gestured to the group. “Fire” he said again, using his hands to draw the word out of the newcomers. One by one they trickled in with the first word in their forever language...”Fire”.

Finnán spent the next couple of hours with the group going around the room and parts of camp teaching them some of the basic words they would need to know. This routine was starting to become regular and everyone in the camp participated and helped, knowing what a shock it was to start over like that in a new place...and a new language. It was like being a baby again. For some, that was very tough to swallow.

As they toured the camp, Finnán didn’t fail to see the runners going to and from the great hall. Neither was it hard to miss the wails of pain that pressed through the walls and into the souls of everyone in camp. The young woman might be new to this world, but she was definitely not alone in her distress.

Finnán looked to the great hall, and then back at his group. “Come let’s go get some supper and tuck in for the night. Chibweze, Akin and I will be staying with you for the first few days.”



The young mother’s screams had faded, and the cries of the baby boy she had delivered took over. Now there was blood, too much.

Ethlinn worked feverishly to stop the flow while Sabella cared for the infant. Ethlinn looked at the mother’s face, what was once red with exertion was now pale white and her lips turning blue.

Sabella brought the child to his mother, laying him on her chest. He latched to her breast for a moment, but her eyes were growing ever more unfocused.

“You stay right here, you hear me?” Ethlinn pleaded in hushed tones as she stroked the young woman’s hair. “The hardest part is over, just fight a little longer so we can get you healthy.”

The woman turned her head. It took everything she had.

“I...am Bella...”She breathed shallowly...”He...is...Gaylin...” Her eyes captured Ethlinn’s, wild...afraid...urgent. “...Of House Draegari...Son of Johan...”

Her head fell back against the pillow, she drew her hand up to her son, barely able...touching his chest.

Her head lolled to the side again, eyes in Ethlinn’s direction. “Tell him...” A tear ran down his face and she slumped. Life left her eyes, and she was still.

Ethlinn continued to stroke Bella’s and the tears fell unbidden. Sabella kept the infant stable on his mothers chest, and they allowed the silence to overtake them. The only sounds were the soft sounds from the baby, and the breathing of the two healers. The drastic change between the past day and a half of young Bella’s cries of pain, and the silence was stunning. The two women sat there, not moving, for as long as they could. Not wanting to enter what came next... the admission that she had died...the reality that this little boy was an orphan...and the acknowledgement that they had failed her.

Neither was ready for that.



It had been more than a half hour since the last cries of childbirth, and the village would be growing concerned. Sabella had swaddled the infant while holding him, gently rocking and humming. Ethlinn lay at her side on a cot she had drawn next to her.

It was no surprise when the doors to the great hall opened and Lucius walked in. He had taken on the role of administrator of the village and would be there for whatever the Riftborn needed... but it was a surprise when Aisha followed him.

Lucius and Aisha approached slowly, reverently. Lucius looked from the mother, to Sabella and the baby. Lucius’ face stoic he said gently, “ I will have the tenders begin bringing milk for the child. You two have done enough for the

night, I will find someone who will care for it for now...We can decide what is to become of him tomorrow.”

Aisha looked up at Lucius and something visceral, something unspoken passed between them in that moment. Her eyes fierce and pleading, his ponderous and then something else. It took only a heartbeat...but it was decided. He nodded, she softly kissed his cheek and walked over to Sabella. “It seems we have already decided what is to become of him.”

Ethlinn looked to Lucius, eyes red, haggard and exhausted. Emotionally, physically spent. “His name is Gaylin, please honor her in keeping that...I could not. I could not think of two better than you to do this thing.”

Aisha cradled the infant and joined Lucius who peered at his new life, soaking it in with the visible emotion of a statue. Then he smiled, wrapped his arm around Aisha, and they turned for the door.

They left as quiet and reverently as they came. Lucius asked one of the watches to stand guard at the door and look over the two women who had given all they had to save two lives, and succeeded once. They were not to be disturbed.



Thorstein was sitting on the steps of the great hall when Ethlinn opened the door the next morning. “If you will sit with me for a minute, I will have a cup of tea coming for you just the way you like it. Then, I thought that perhaps you could use a walk and some fresh air.” Thorstein said, looking up at Ethlinn.

Ethlinn just nodded vacantly, sat down, wrapped her arms around his and lay her head on his shoulder. They sat there for twenty minutes not saying a word. Just, being... And then Finnán arrived with two cups of tea. He handed the cups to each of the pair, kissed his mother on the forehead and slipped away.

Ethlinn sipped from her cup and let the fragrance, the taste, and the heat seep into her soul. Combined with the morning rays, she felt the first vestiges of

life returning to her. She looked at Thorstein. "You aren't drinking your tea." She said, her voice still haunted, but making an effort to engage.

He smiled at her and kissed her on the cheek. "Never had a taste for the stuff, you can have it when you're done with that one if you like."

"No," she said. Slowly standing. "Let's take it to Simon. He loves when I bring him tea on my morning walks." Thorstein stood to join her and they slowly strolled to the front gate. He looked at her, "We don't have to talk about anything, or we can talk about everything...But...I just want you to know that we are all proud of you...that...I am proud of you. You saved a life." He placed a hand on her shoulder and they walked to the gate in silence.

As they neared the gate, Ethlinn's face grew a bit brighter. "Good morning Simon! I have something for you."

Simon smiled, "Hey now there, i'll take that for sure now... and a good mornin' to you too! Thorstein, sir! How are ye this fine mornin'?" Thorstein smiled reservedly as they climbed the steps to the rampart to stand next to young Simon. "It's just Thorstein, Simon... and I'm well. You joining me tomorrow?"

Simon took the cup from Ethlinn, blew the steam off the top and took a cautious sip. "Aye and that's as good as always Missus. You're me favorite part of the mornin' you are." Turning to Thorstein, yessir I will...Er... yeah i sure will Thorstein!" He said, straightening his back a bit at the last. "I might even put you on your back for once." He winked with a devilish look.

"You just might at that...someday." Thorstein winked back.

Just then motion across the opening caught all of their attention. Then the sound reached them. A rolling thunder that grew with intensity and time wore on. A herd of Great Stag's were passing through, right in front of the gate. The trio turned and watched in awe. No one had ever seen such a herd of the magnificent beasts in one place before.

The snow swept plains between them and the treeline where the herd was emerging quickly filled up as they seemed to be headed directly for the front

gate. Nearly two hundred yards from the camp perimeter the herd veered sharply to the right as one.

Then a new sound filled the air, a rushing of wind and a thump. In a flash directly in front of them a massive beast appeared out of nowhere to land upon one of the stags. It was nothing like anyone had ever seen before. Twice the size of the great stags it dwarfed its prey which could feed a family for a month. It had the appearance of a Lion with powerful haunches and a great tail that lashed back and forth in a feline manner as it ravished its prey. The paws were odd though, and seemed to have less claws and more like talons. Which fit in with the rest of the animal.

Its sprouting from its front quarter were massive feathered wings, and the head was that of an eagle. It pecked at the massive prey it held captive and tore the stomach open and pulled with it the stomach and intestines, gulping them down and then taking off again. The wing beat so powerful that the snow around it whipped up into a maelstrom. It let out a piercing screech that hurt the trio's ears and could be heard throughout camp.

They turned at once to look at each other with awestruck looks as if to say "You saw that too right?" Then all at once, Simon's eyes turned to the sky and he dropped his cup of tea and reached to draw his sword. Thorstein reacted by grabbing Ethlinn and throwing her to the wooden surface of the rampart and shielding her with his body. Simon's tortured cries filled the air, and a wet spray covered them both.

It all happened so fast that there wasn't time to digest what was going on. Thorstein whispered into her ear. "Stay still..." and he jumped back up drawing his sword and scanning the air around them. "Quick, to the great hall with you." He grabbed her by the hand and yanked her to her feet.



Thorstein watched the skies for another hour or so in case the great beasts came back. The loss of his young friend was starting to sink in and he felt the need to be alone just then so he stayed on the rampart and watched the

remainders of the great herd disappear in separate directions...broken up by the attack of the great winged beasts.

How do I protect these people from great eagles that can come out of nowhere?
He pondered laboriously. *Lucius and I will have to increase the watches, and scouting parties will have to have more protection...*

He gnawed on the problem for another hour, avoiding moving off the rampart and back into camp where he would have to deal with what just happened. His stomach growled at him finally, forcing the decision. He turned to mount the stairway when a glint on the rampart caught his eye.

It was a crystal, and it was a deep emerald green. The color seemed to whirl around inside of it as if it was almost alive and at times he could swear there was almost a glow to it. It seemed that his young friend had dropped it when the beast took him.

Just when it starts to feel like home, this place reminds us that we are new here. He shook his head, jiggling the crystal in his palm thoughtlessly.

I should go check on Ethlinn.

In that moment, the crystal warmed just a touch though Thorstein wouldn't notice it.

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K.W. Koch grew up with a love for epic tales, ancient myths, and timeless heroes.

His writing blends a passion for storytelling with the grit of survival, exploring what it means to be human when the world is stripped to its bones.

When he's not building new worlds, he can be found wandering the woods, spending time with his family, or dreaming up the next great adventure.

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