

ALL IS LANTERN LIGHT

by

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“There is a pixie nesting in the ingot shed.”

Hogarth acknowledges my statement with a distracted rumble. His breath sends the mud brown whiskers around his singed short beard fluttering. Kahlar throws her mallet to the ground. It gouges a six inch deep scar into the dirt floor of the smithy.

“Kraggan’s beard, I hate pixies”

“Really? Considering how ugly you are I didn’t think you’d ever seen one.”

Kahlar blushes and a smile pulls at the wide line of her lips. She glances my way under her needle like lashes above the wide curves of her cheeks. Her droopy eyelid is nearly shut with her amusement. I smile back. Until I catch Hogarth’s uncomfortable glance towards his wife, Buwkin. Even after seven months, I keep forgetting I’m not supposed to be nice to their daughter.

Hogarth stretches the tight muscles in his arms like a mountain waking with small earthquakes. First the joints of his fingers, roughened and black from years of metal work, then wrists with a crack. Twisting his forearms to elbows, he finally extends his arms completely. I’ve seen him crush emeralds in his bare hands with the same methodical grace.

When he stands, he glances once again towards his daughter before walking to see the small dagger I am shaping. When I am seated, we can look each other in the eye - my green and gold of life and sun to Hogarth’s ash gray and mud brown. But I never forget he is a Kobold Master Smith and I am only his apprentice. I look down in deference. Down to my pale long fingers barely smudged from metal work, eyes tracing the red line of a healing cut.

“Huhf, you are sloppy with the blade folds boy, too quick. I would not even use it for a dinner knife.”

I can feel the rumble of his voice in my diaphragm. He drops the knife back on the work table and slaps my shoulder lightly. My eyes sting from the force as he shuffles away to check on his daughter’s work.

I stare at the dagger running my eyes over every line. I can’t tell if the comment was a compliment or if I had failed again.

“There must be easier ways to do this,” I whisper under my breath in my own tongue.

Two hours later I’ve decided it was a compliment and start to polish the knife.

Kahlar finds me on the rock ledge that overlooks Drathk cavern just before midnight. The lines of the ancient stronghold are blurred with the dimming of lanterns that mark evening hours. At night there is not enough light to see the stalactite riddled cavern walls. Still, I can pick out the winding narrow streets flowing like dark rivers between the small round homes, every stone block carved in perfect precision to match its neighbor.

I’m flushed with wine, my personal reward for having finally made an acceptable dagger. But it is not that reason that pulses my heart faster. This is the first time Hogarth’s dark haired daughter has ever sought me out.

I’ve forgotten every cracking syllable of the Kobold language as she sits on the rock next to me. It shifts under her weight though she barely reaches my shoulder as if the power in her has a physical presence. Tongue tangled, I hand her the wine skin without words. My bare arm brushes against her skin. It is warm and so much softer than you would think it could be, roughened and mottled as it is. So very much softer and warmer than I had ever thought. I feel the forge’s heat emanating from her and it pulses in me with the bellows rhythmic breaths.

She takes the skin but hesitates before putting the bottle to her lips, flicking her hair back from her face. Blacker than the night, her hair competes with veins of coal for brilliant glory. It took me weeks to notice the violet hints in her brown eyes. But then, when I first came I could not distinguish one darkness from another, one brown rock from its tan mate. Time in this underground night has taught me the subtlety of minute variation and to appreciate the Kobold for their harsh glory.

Wine is not a custom or a like in her culture, but she has learned a few things about the world I came from during the months I have been a pupil under her father. She has endeavored to be a friend at least while I shared her father’s forge. She takes a sip of liquid that tastes of the vineyard near my home, of ice frosted grapes and fiery sun. Kahlar tilts her head like a noblewoman trying to down gutrot spirits before having another go just to prove she can. As she hands back the skin, the spout still moist from her lips, she speaks to me haltingly in my own language. “Today you did very good, Surrey.”

They are words which do not exist in Kobold. No wonder she formed them in my tongue. The surprise of it all rips through me. I throw back my head and laugh.

It is the mornings when I find Drathk the hardest. The darkness of rock presses on me so that I do not know even if my eyes are open. Madness rises through my throat in a fury. Sunlight and wind, I feel like I would give my soul for a taste of sunlight and wind.

Aiden, I usually think of Aiden to calm myself again. I picture him as I last saw him, blond hair more golden than the sun and eyes the blue of Falusha's river. One foot with his characteristic soft leather knee-high boot propped on a granite rock as if he set one foot on a dais. Soft leggings muddied from the hunt cling to his thighs before disappearing under a tunic the color of the sky and a brown leather vest. He always wears the belt too loose so it tilts low over his waist as if the sword were an ornamental after thought. Deceptive, my Aiden, he learned to hide his desires and abilities from everyone but me. In my memories, the smile of shared secrets on his lips warms my heart despite the depth of thousands of feet of rock. The longed for green of living trees behind him blur in my mind next to that look.

Oh Aiden, my blood brother whom I would do anything for. Even though I was his dark haired opposite in looks and temperament, we had been matched in skills from the time we were boys. More than that. Whatever his bidding or desire, I would see it done. It was for him that I was here. However long it took. Whatever the price.

Normally, I thought of Aiden to bring reason again. But not this morning. In the darkness left by a manufactured dawn of lanterns and fires, I see Kahlar's image. I toss back blankets as rough as burlap and scramble to find my boots. She is always the first at the smithy, alone while she starts the forge for her father.

Kahlar is no apprentice. She earned her rights to a Master Metalworker years before under the tutelage of Hogarth. Now she works alongside him while her mother ensures the fire stays lit, they both stay fed. Delicate tracery flows along metals goblets and blades as if Kahlar has found a way to capture the spirit of the wind and bind it into metal. Watching her hands, nearly twice the size of my own, craft such gentle curves enamored me for hours when I had first come and only been allowed to watch and learn.

This morning she instructs me to clean up my work space without needing to consult with her father.

“No more. You will no longer be making daggers. Now you will learn to truly craft.”

Cooly authoritative, I still make her laugh twice before Hogarth arrives. “I asked the pixie to curse you, but she said it was hopeless as you could never be made uglier.”

Hogarth’s footsteps stop stifled giggles. We are both only business when he pauses to survey his smithy at the door. I stand and wait, hands clasped before me, heart trembling again. Today the real work would begin. Today I would begin to learn the art of sword making.

The taste of her is water filtered through the mineral of rocks. The scent of her fills me: the fire of the forge, bitterness of metals, acid grit of diamonds, and the darkness of the deepest earth. She moans under me and I push deeper into the dark.

Three months, it has taken three more months of study, three months of the wooing of early mornings and unarranged meetings at night under not-stars to finally win this. Three months of forgetting. We had sat shoulder to shoulder until it had not been odd, leaned into each other as she gave me bitter sloogen spirits my head and stomach spinning, and then finally a tentative touch only a week ago. A fleeting trace of her high brow, her hand gentle against my jaw. The next night a kiss of sloogen soaked lips, every night after closer to this.

This cave so deep within the maze of earth holds secrecy in its private folds. I bite her rounded nipple thrilling to feel her moan resonate low in my belly. Her voice vibrates me as I rock her. She grabs my back remembering to be gentle when it is almost too late. Hands sliding down from the swells of her breasts and over the warm texture of her belly, her legs heaving in turn against my sides until all I know is the feel of her and the darkness of the earth.

Hogarth picks up my latest attempt. He holds the length of the sword to his eye. There is no comment, no chastisement nor dreaded praise. Instead, he simply chucks my sword back into the metal works to be melted down.

I do not think I have ever failed so completely. It is as if he has given up hope on me. I wonder what I am doing here.

In the corner, Kahlar snickers. I catch her glance and try to suppress a smile before her father sees. But there is no need to worry. He is so disappointed he has left us alone to our work.

“I could make it for you, the sword. You only have to ask.”

I kiss along her bare shoulder blade too weary to answer in other ways for a moment. She hums her appreciation knowing I love the feel of her voice in my body. Not even a month of this and we have learned each other well. I am so far from satiated.

She turns and stops me from taking a mouthful of her.

“It is why you are here, isn’t it? A sword for your friend.” I nod not denying it.

“Then ask me. I will make it for you. You will never be able to. Ask me and then you can go back to your sun and . . . trees.”

I laugh at how she says ‘trehs’ her breath lost to the vowels, even though the truth of her words smart. Sword making has been completely beyond my ability. I have never not succeeded in anything. I have never failed Aiden.

“Will you come with me?”

“What, up there?” She turns to me surprised to honesty. “Why would I want to go up there?”

I pull back as I realize it has never occurred to her even once. “You . . . you could be with me. We would be together.”

She snorts and rolls back over. “I know enough of your land, of the slender pale women who can do so little, of open skies. No, I do not think I would like it there.”

My heart is thudding. “I could stay here.”

She turns and gives me a long look. “There is no place for you here.”

“But we”

She shakes her head, sweaty strands of hair twining around my arm. “I am marrying Thosto in a month.”

I sit back drawing my knees to my chest taking her, this, in. Anger rises through the astonishment.

“But Thosto . . . his skin oozes. He can barely cut an emerald without crushing it. He is hideous. You hate him!” The words fall out of me without thought. When I stop, I see the same look in her eye she has when the metal won’t flow for her, when it resists with a will of its own. That same gleam and I realize I have never really understood her at all. I have never really comprehended any of it, of the Kobold.

The silence of deep rock stretches between us.

“You are the worse apprentice that has ever shared my forge. Your hands cannot mold tallow. You are my greatest failing.”

Hogarth’s embrace nearly smothers me. The words I’ve been preparing for the last few days flee. I mumble, “It is no less than you deserve.”

It is a weak insult but the best I can manage as I gasp around the lump lodged in my throat. Hogarth’s grin spreads slowly until he is beaming. The words grow on him until he laughs aloud, taking in my feeble return with affection. I realize its power grows from the strength of his. It is more fitting than the multitude of curses I’ve been pondering in the quiet hours of his forge.

The morning after Kahlar told me of her betrothal the months of futile swordmaking lessons congealed. I woke with sureness in my hand. I made my first sword over the next two days. Hogarth began teaching me the spells and how to bind them to the blade on the third.

There is no difference in Drathk night and day. All is lantern light. I worked long hours, sleeping by the forge. Buwkin became my second mother ensuring I ate and my burns were treated. I did not see Kahlar even when she worked in the smithy as well. I saw Aiden. I saw the light.

Hogarth turns and hands me the slender package. It is the last sword I made under his tutelage, our best. It is a Kingmaker as assuredly as one had not been seen in over a hundred years. That one had been made by Hogarth’s grandfather. Even wrapped in cloth and oiled leather the sword is faery light and burns with intoxicating cold, stirring the heart.

“It is the poorest blade ever made in Drathk. It will bring blight across your land and a fate worse than death to the one who wields it.”

We are both grinning, hands joined on our greatest work. I nod, unable to speak and brush a rebellious tear with my wrist. I see Hogarth do the same, scratching his beard after as if there had been no moisture on his cheek at all. For one moment as I bend to pick up my pack, I scan the darkness yearning to see Kahlar. But she is not there. I know she is not and would not come this close to the surface where there is a faint light in the air, a smell other than minerals. I imagine her sharpening rocks to hurl at her soon to be husband. Unconsciously, I smile.

One final wave to Hogarth, memorizing him standing in lantern light before the darker yawning cave mouth leading to Drathk. I turn my back and walk upwards toward the light with the fervent hope that he didn’t etch his curse into the blade of Aiden’s sword.