

Untitled

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Nighttime covered two people walking through the cold, Marr night. The snow had not melted yet and the smaller of the two kept lagging behind, the larger pulling it forward. The smaller, a young Vulpid girl, didn't have shoes and the snow hurt her feet. Her mother had to keep them moving, the moon would rise in a few hours and she had to get back before then. The Vulpid girl started crying asking, "Why do we have to go?"

Her mother picked her up and let her daughter sit in a cradle in her hands. She sniffed, and said, "I told you, we need...", she stopped stopped for a second to compose herself, "we need to see someone."

"Who?" the daughter said quietly, tired from waking late at night.

The mother put her child's head against hers and said, "You'll see honey..." In a few minutes the girl slept a fitful dreamless sleep. They traveled the last mile with the girl asleep wrapped inside her mother's cloak.

A light snow began falling as they approach the lord's keep. She walked up to the stone fortress looking for a door and after walking completely around to the opposite side she found a pair of plank doors framed by an arch. She slowly put the girl down, trying not to wake her, and wrapped the blanket she wore tighter. Taking one last look, she kissed her daughter on her cheek and pulled the door bell. She walked away into the lightly falling snow.

The door opened and an Ursid guard looked to see the young Vulpid girl sitting up and looking around. The footprints by the door had only a light dusting of snow, whoever left the girl did it only a few minutes ago. She looked at the guard and whimpered, "I want my mom."

"Great merciful Gahn," the guard whispered and leaned down to pick up the girl who'd begun crying. "Shh," he never knew what to tell the one's this old. The girl's dress had the color of dried blood, a Bordé's dress.

He took her inside and sat her in a chair by a fire. The child began to cry louder and sputtered, "I want my mom! When will she come back?"

He knew lying hurt them more in the long run and said, "Sorry, she can't come back." The girl began to cry so loud that she woke a Porcid kitchen wench who came out to see.

"Get her to stop bawling," the rotund wench told the guard.

"I'll try to. Her mother left her just just a few minutes ago," the Ursid said and cradle the girl in his arms. He rocked her slightly and stroked her head saying, "Shh, you woke up someone." She stopped crying except for a quiet whimper.

"Finally! And keep her quiet. Good night!" the Porcid ranted as she walked back to the room,, "I hate it when those Bordé sluts keep them until too old..."

The girl whimpered and sucked her thumb as he put her back on the chair. "Such a good girl. So can you tell me your name?"

The Vulpid looked at the hall leading to the door, then up at him and said quickly,

“Susanne.”

The guard kneeled do to the girl's level said, “Alright, Susanne, Call me Bruce.”

“Bruce,” Susanne said between sobs, trying the name.

He smiled and said, “You live here now, okay?”

Susanne nodded and croaked, “okay.”

Susanne didn't like the kitchen especially Nell. Nell seem to have always treated her bad and dear Gahn she stank. Susanne tried to bathe regularly. Everyone in the kitchen did, Duke Andago's orders. Nell, somehow, weaseled out of it, or maybe she just didn't use soap. Susanne didn't care what but in that heat she reeked.

Plus, Gahn didn't make a day like this to waste in a hot, windowless room. The land around the keep had several green hills, not too high, and with wildflowers. Susanne loved these hills, they reminded her of when as a little girl she'd play games with Marybelle, Duke Andago's daughter. Marybelle found a hollow hill once, with thick stone walls and, once they cleared them, windows six feet deep and an entrance in the back that twisted though several long halls before opening into big room in the middle. They spent several summers playing there, but Susanne hadn't gone in years. Not since Marybelle snubbed her and started spending all her time with her older sister, Deirdre. Susanne headed there now, just to see what it looked like now.

It looked the same. She smiled and ran up to the windows and looked in, not that she could see anything in the darkness inside. Excited she went around to the back and ran inside, almost giddy. *If Nell saw me act like this*, Susanne thought, *she'd smack my head for not not acting my age!* Susanne didn't care, how should a seventeen year old act? She heard stories about Nell playing cruel jokes on the previous Duke's guards. In the middle, she stood on the ledge looking out across the large flat field across from it. The flowers had not bloomed yet, but then Marr had just begun and the flowers didn't even bud until almost Pril.

A thought crossed Susanne's mind, out here alone no one would bother her. She sat on the ledge and brought her skirt to her knees. Nell never let Susanne...spend time with herself. Not that Susanne had to, she just got frustrated never having any release. She thought about one of the younger guards; the only other Vulpid on the Duke's staff, and nearly Susanne age. She flirted relentlessly, knowing he had orders not to have any relations with her, sexual or otherwise.

Susanne's breathing quickened as she neared climax and she let herself go, crying out into the small room. She slumped back, relieved, and rested her head on the ledge. She needed a man and wanted a boyfriend. Someone to spend time with, maybe even have children with some day. The men at home had orders from their captain or incentive from Bruce's hands not to touch her. She couldn't go into Andoplas, the town nearest the keep, to meet anyone, it took an hour to get there.

The inside of the little fort felt nice and Susanne unexpectedly slept in the cool air.

She awoke just after sunset and the weather had turned cold and wet. She ran, following the way back home in the increasingly pouring rain. She reached the door out of breath and soaked. She tried to creep in, but the door stuck and she had to force it open. The door finally opened when Nell yanked it open, not surprised to see the Vixen stagger in.

“Where in the Seven Hells did you go?” Nell said and slapped the back of Susanne's head.

“I went out to,” Susanne didn't want to mention the hill, “see...uh...”

“I don't really care to hear your excuses,” she grabbed Susanne's ear. Susanne let out a long groaning scream as Nell dragged her toward the kitchen, “you missed making dinner, you missed serving dinner, so you,” she tugged hard on the ear, Susanne yelped, “will clean dinner.” Nell let Susanne go at a sink filled with luminim dishes. Susanne rubbed her ear and Nell put her finger in her face and said, “And no back talk” through her teeth.

Susanne wanted to knock her out but resisted. Nell couldn't kick her out, a Bordé orphan had a few benefits, but Duke Andago could and would for that. She picked up a plate and scrubbed it with a rough cloth. They used too much lard today and the plates had a waxy coating which took hard scrubbing to remove. After an half an hour of grumbling and working on the silver-white metal plates someone put their hand on Susanne's shoulder. Startled she screamed and spun around to see Bruce laughing at her.

“Stop doing that! Jeshua Christos you scared me!” Susanne yelled and threw the wet rag at him.

“You should have seen yourself,” he said then mocked her, “Jeshua Christos you scared me!” Bruce had left the guard after breaking a leg. He still worked for the Duke as a cook.

“Gahn damn,” she complained then started to scrub another plate.

“Susanne,” Bruce said, seriously now, “where did you go today?”

“Bruce!” Susanne tossed the towel into the water, splashing it.

“Seriously, where did you go?” Bruce said with an almost angry look on his face.

“I...” Susanne didn't want to tell him, but she knew he wouldn't stop asking like Nell. She sighed picking up the rag again, “I went out to that hill we used to play in.”

Bruce looked hard at Susanne, he could always tell if she lied. Finally he said suspiciously, “Alright. I just worry about you, Cub.”

Susanne slammed down a plate, nearly bending it, shouting, “Don't call me that!”

“What, 'Cub'?” Bruce asked, surprised.

“Yes!” Susanne complained.

“Why not? I've always called you that,” now Bruce seemed perplexed.

Susanne put the cloth down, nearly grinding into the stone sink and growled between her teeth, “Maybe because I don't like it anymore.”

“What you don't like it? Since when?” Bruce asked quizzically.

“Since I turned seventeen,” Susanne said sullenly.

“Oh, I see now!” Bruce put his hands on Susanne's shoulder and rubbed them slightly, “Susanne, someday you'll have a child of your own and understand—“

“No,” she shouted, backing away from Bruce, “I won't, not at this rate.”

“What? Oh, the thing with that guard...” Bruce snapped his fingers searching for his name.

“Nom,” she growled.

“Nom, right, you and him wouldn't work out.” Bruce explained again. Susanne rolled her eyes.

“I want to find out for myself! Can't you see that!” in her anger Susanne began crying, “I've never seen any other Vulpids my age, until he came and now you won't even let me talk to him.”

“You can meet someone else,” Bruce tried to defuse Susanne.

“No...I can't...you won't anyone else...” Susanne sobbed slumping against the wall and sliding down to place her knees under her chin.

“Girl,” Bruce sat next to her and put his arm around her, “I don't want you to get hurt — we don't — but at your age it happens too easily.”

“I've grown up, your 'Cub' turned into a woman,” Susanne said leaning her head on Bruce's chest.

“I know you've grown up, and become a beautiful woman, but you still need to grow up more,” Bruce stroked her hair consoling her, “we can't have you with a Cub of your own yet. Why don't you go off to bed, you look like Hell,” Susanne laughed, “I'll finish washing those dishes.”

Susanne sniffed and smiled saying, “Okay.”

“Alright, go on, I'll finish up,” Bruce said and unwrapped his arm.

Susanne stood and began walking away but stopped and turned, “Do you think someday I could talk with Nom some?”

Bruce almost said 'no' but instead grinned saying, “Maybe. Go on, dry off and get some sleep.”

“Okay,” Susanne giggled and ran off happy of even a chance with Nom. She ran to a bath room and quickly stripped down. She grabbed one of the terry towel she really couldn't use and dried. Folding the towel back, she snickered at the idea of her red-orange fur on a towel that probably should only have a lion's straw colored. She dressed back into her damp dress and went to the room she shared with the rest of the kitchen servants. Nell glared as Susanne nonchalantly walked past smiling to her bed in the women's room.

The night turned cold and Susanne slept restlessly because her still damp fur wicked away the heat. As she lay awake, shivering, she listened to Bruce and Nell gossip as he tried to light a fire.

“And another thing, you should not do that girl's work,” Nell began in her most grating, nagging tone, “I know you finished those dishes for her and she walked in all smug-like grinning at me with her 'Bruce can get me out of anything' look.”

“She got upset. I think we need to start thinking about letting her see men,” Bruce said distractedly. Susanne could hear him striking flint to steel.

“I should say so! She bit me the other day,” Nell agreed, if you could it that.

“What does her biting you have to do with letting her see men?” Bruce asked trying to keep a straight face; someone needed to bite Nell. Susanne sniggered, the day before Nell tried slapping her and met open teeth. Susanne's teeth still hurt, but Nell hadn't struck her since, from the front anyway.

“She needs to get laid,” Nell said with finality, “then she won't get as mean.”

“Susanne does not need to 'get laid',” Bruce blew on the fire for a second, “but I agree that if she had a...relationship with a man she'd seem a little nicer.”

“I still think she needs a little time alone with a man,” Nell reiterated, “what about that one soldier, Nort?”

“Nom, no,” Bruce said quickly.

“Why not? She seems to like him,” Nell actually pleading for Susanne scared her.

“Let's just say, he doesn't bat on her team,” Bruce said using one of his archaic sayings.

“What do you mean, 'not on her team'?” she mocked. Susanne could imagine her greasy hair moving as she jerked her head from side-to-side as she said “on her team”.

“Gay, and not in the jolly sense,” Bruce said bluntly. Susanne's heart turned colder than her wet fur.

“What? Oh, that does make sense,” Nell said, “he does seem overly fond of Seminov.”

“I heard from the Captain. Hell of a fighter, just not a lady's man,” Bruce chuckled, “I haven't the heart to tell her.”

“I'd feel sorry for her too. She's got her hopes up then you dashing them,” Nell said, “Oh well, 'to each his own' I guess...”

Susanne didn't listen anymore instead she thought about what Nell said. Maybe she didn't need a long term boyfriend. Really, all the relationship she wanted, for now, consisted of the physical. A boyfriend meant she had to pamper him then worry if he cheated on her. *All I want*, Susanne contemplated, *I can find at a Bordé*. The thought felt sour in her stomach, but right elsewhere. *On Satur I'll say I need to go to town and get some seeds, but I'll go to the Bordé instead*. Susanne grinned in the darkness then dozed off.