Interloper

Captive Oturan

By Lichard Nixon

Based in the world of Faian

 “Come on Neah! We are not far!” The Kerk’s voice rang out far off, as an otterfolk stirred from his study. Draped in a bright purple robe, Neah’s head arose and stared out across the forest. She smiles seeing the bright and plump face of her brother of her adoptive family peeking out from a distance, also dressed in bright purple robes. His face was not covered as hers was, marching over and quickly gathering their things.

 The two were scribes of their clan, but they were not from Kerkia although a far walk from the orange forest they were coming to study and a vast coast of intense marshlands laid her brother’s homeland. She smiled and got up from her seat, dusting herself off but never letting go of the book she was carrying and keeping a hardy study over. Closing it and setting it down carefully, she went over to help her brother load up their sacks of writing utensils and empty papers which would soon be filled with all manner of lore.

 “Oh, don’t overextend yourself Isaiah. We aren’t there just yet, ya know.”

 “Aye, while true, I’d prefer we didn’t waste such time with idle talk! Every day we aren’t there getting those samples for our ancestor, the more likely father will reconsider us going out into the world! Gods, last thing I need is being coped up with those wretches back in the hall!”

 “Oh don’t be like that either.” Neah smiled, helping load into their small cart pulled by a annoyed looking donkey “Those are all brothers, sisters, nieces—”

 Neah was cut off as Isaiah finished her thoughts, having heard the spiel before “cousins, nephews, and a few aunts an’ uncles. I know. Every blasted creature on that island is a Tendrov.”

 “Then stop worrying, even if we don’t get what the ancestor wanted, we’ll still have plenty of time to impress on all of them back in the hall at least. The fact we got chosen to be out here is a blessing in itself.” Neah sounded excited, humming a hymn to herself she had learned from the clan who had adopted her as the two scribes continued, and Neah reflected on her life.

 She felt blessed in many strange ways, even if she started from a cursed beginning. She was born in Reidland, a Ratik state for which she along with many of her people had iron clasped about their neck, a symbol of their ‘eternal gratitude’ for servile abuse to the ratfolk masters. She remembered of Reidland only two things, the first being sold by her first master to a forestry where she was meant to chop and carve wood for boats for the remainder of her life and being caught by her second master trying to read. She was at first to be harshly punished, but a visting creature to Reidland had stopped it, a cloaked and overly dressed Kerk who she was at first frightened of. She knew of the undead through tales of the north, of how the shadow worshippers up in that land would raise the dead and commune with spirits, but the being who would buy her from her second master and bring her back to its clan living on an isle in Gurchland made her rethink those old tales. It revealed to herself only briefly as a Lich of the Kycer, from a land called Kerkia.

 Beneath those old and fat robes of cloth and behind the scarf mask it wore stared back with skeletal and dark eyes, aflame with a pale blue light. She was frightened of him at first, fearing the worst of what he intended to do to her. Yet, instead he was kind (although a bit cold), fed her and sought to question her. She had been genuine in wanting to learn to read and write, just as the Ratik did in their spare time, but she and her people were long forbidden from it in Reidland. The lich had scoffed at such things and had begun to help her to read on their journey. When they came to the little isle off the coast of Gurchland, she was met by people she had no idea even existed. They were not Beastfolk, their skin had no fur, their eyes retreated into their head, they had no claws, or tails, or really anything. Yet, as they met her and the Lich, they spoke in a language she did not understand at first and was introduced to her new adoptive family in an odd way.

 These Kerks were not native to Gurchland, they were a clan from a great peninsula called Kerkia and they had traveled with the Lich who fled that land to settle amongst the Ratik who took them in. They were known to her as the Tendrovs, which she could only guess meant ‘Tender’ or ‘Rope-Tender’ in their language. She was shocked by them in many ways, living beneath a strange stone city in small huts and who all gathered in a great hall to greet the Lich and her. It was there she met her adoptive father, the patriarch of the clan who would come to care for her, and on the day of her induction into the clan, he had personally removed the iron clasp around her neck. She spent her time learning to read and write, and when old enough her father introduced her to the Scribe Hall, a great building of books and scrolls where strange robed Kerks and others lived for the singular purpose of cataloging all information.

 She learned much of her clan, and came to learn their customs, language, and various opinions through her time researching and talking with her adoptive brother Isaiah. Isaiah was not well liked, born to the 3rd brood of the clan, who were deemed to be too burdensome for a family of Kerks to bare. It still somewhat amazed her that the entire family was of just one generation, with other ‘aligned clans’ spread around the island either feuding with one another or bothering the local Ratik governor. She had no qualms with becoming a scribe, since she already had been so studious and her adoptive mother being quite pushy on the matter. The Kerks were loud and violent, but they had an emotional and softer side she found charming. They never treated her like a lesser, and never failed in showing interest in her concerns. It would have been off putting had they not been so honest as to why the Lich had saved her and inducted her into his home. It clear she was luckier for having been more interested in books and the care of information, and she kept to that specialization quite well.

 Now they were in Forestwatch, as vassal of Wargland. The ancestor had tasked them with a special commission to go to the Fearum marches to collect samples from the forest of eternal fall. It had been a long-standing fascination, but near generations of struggling to build up a relationship with Wargland’s king and Forestwatch’s chieftains was a difficult affair. Gurchland was after all a part of the Confederacy, and Wargland’s constant humiliation of the Great Horde’s successor states made the Warglanders ever suspicious of strange Kerks and supposed friends of the Great Horde to have such a sudden interest in the eternal southern blight. The mission had been simple, to collect samples from the trees and find an accurate history to copy and bring back to the scribe hall. The lands of the Autumn Reich were isolated for a reason, for a magical barrier of eternal fall would rot and poison any food or drink of those not approved who wander beyond its borders.

 Neah nearly chuckled about all of her and Isaiah’s misadventures in the country of Forestwatch. They had begun their journey poorly when she and Isaiah were accosted by Reidland goons in the port they were leaving, they had been temporarily captured by overly cautious Wargland knights, and they were nearly arrested again when Isaiah had gotten into a brawl with an overly rude Fearum. Isaiah was not exactly a good warrior, if being one at all, but Kerks had little mind for their own lives, and he was no exception. They were now near the last major village which led up to a fort which overlooked a choke point between two small cliffs which led to the sight of the great orange forest. Isaiah had found the road which led to that place, and as they traveled onward, there was considerable excitement.

 The two arrived in a small village called Reyrum, a Fearum farming community whose tribe provided food to a fortress not far off. The two did not stay long, getting strange looks from the locals. She did not know the language of the Fearum very well, but Isaiah apparently did. He spoke at length with one of the warriors, who coldly pointed to a southern dirt path which led them upward. She and Isaiah were too excited to stop and rest, pushing their faithful donkey pulling their cart full of valuable supplies up towards a distant fort. On a hill, the two stopped, mesmerized by what they saw before time.

 A massive and great number of autumn trees thickly lined together which looked old and withered. The bright and colorful reds, oranges, and browns of leaves constantly fell from their height and onto the ground, ominously begging for it to be painted. There were no birds which sang from the heights of the vast forest, and no animal was seen leaving or entering. In all directions the two looked left and right and could see the forest was like a line, cutting into the land in an uncanny way. Neah did not fear this, as her brother felt no fear at all. They just wanted to know more and shouldering their packs full of gear for their studies, continued onward with wide smiles.

 The two camped for their first two days in the Fearum fort, coming to know one of the local captains who was aware of their presence. He was a fount of information as much as warnings, telling the two he would have felt less stressed if they stayed in the fort itself. However, Neah felt insistent, arguing they would perform their duties better closer to the forest. Soon enough, the two were setting up a camp at the very edge of the great orange line of trees, kept safe by two bored and younger guards who camped with them. Neah had set up her and Isaiah’s tent as the two guards cautiously made their own within a small circle. They were within sight of the fortress as Neah could see her bigger brother at the edge of the forest.

 Neah went over and saw Isaiah holding a loaf of bread, and slowly inserted it past the tree line little by little. Before their eyes, the loaf began to grow mold and crumble suddenly and quickly until it was dry. The foul smell coming from it was also rather sudden as Isaiah looked at the now rotted loaf with some amazement.

 “I didn’t think it would be that quick.” Isaiah admitted, looking out at the forest with curious amazement. “To think, this is all magic! Such auras are not, should not, be possible! I believe it took but a few moments, maybe a second or two. Look at this, Neah. The loaf is wet to the touch. So oddly specific. Hard to believe a people live beyond this barrier.”

 Neah nodded, although not to the same excitement as her brother. She touched the bread and frowned “I suppose were lucky pa isn’t here, or he’d have beaten us both for wasting bread.”

 “Well, so long as you don’t tell him, I won’t.” Isaiah cringed “Though we can’t do our studies without knowing. Let us begin.”

 Neah nodded and both returned to their camp, opening a box from their cart, and picking up some glass vials and flasks. Several them had liquids in them, such as fresh water, sea water, rum, milk, several kinds of juices, and a pure alcohol. Some were completely empty as the two went back towards the base of the tree line to make their observations. Isaiah did the honors as he waited for Neah to sit down and open her book, writing down quickly a list of each container. The scribes and their oddities drew the interest of the two bored guards who came over to watch all of this unfold.

 “Alright, try the water first.”

 Isaiah slowly began to thrust the vial full of fresh water into the forest line and the water immediately began to turn brownish. “The clearness has become brown, Neah. I’d say I see some splotches of something, a fizz of some poison I think.” Isaiah opened the bottle and took a whiff of it, retching quickly “Smells—” he coughed “Eck! Smells like undead flesh been out in the sun for too long! You remember Uncle Two? Exactly like that.”

 One of the Fearum guards raised an eyebrow. The two were speaking in his language and asked “You speak Fearum? Surprised you aren’t speaking your own language, Kerkian or whatever.”

 “Uncle ‘Two’?” The other guard asked. Neah turned and smiled, explaining to the best of her ability “Oh, tis rude for Kerks to speak their own language in front of strangers. Aye, his name is Two. He was made into a guard of the Gurchland Kycer, but it was kinda botched.”

 The two guards stared at her, wanting to ask more questions, but figured in silence it was perhaps best to not dwell on it. Neah wrote down what she had heard as she looked around and yelled “Isaiah! Wait, that isn’t—”

 Isaiah was drinking the rotting water, clearly not enjoying it. One of the guards arose alarm and rushed to find some strong drink. “You idiot!” He yelled in anger “It’s poison, don’t you—” The guard stopped in his tracks when Isaiah seemed almost fine before suddenly puking on the ground. He wretched himself up suddenly and yelled back “I am no idiot, beastfolk! No need for such insults!” The offended Kerk’s sudden anger turned back to a softness as Neah came over, and began harshly speaking to him “Oh what were you thinking, Isaiah!”

 “I mean, we gotta know everything. Yup, it was definitely poison.” He commented. Neah couldn’t help but give a friendly sigh and pat his shoulder as the Kerk sat down and recovered. The guard came over, almost in disbelief “How are you alive? Or not passed out. Poisoned water from that land usually is potent.” The weaselfolk guard did not know Kerks very well. So all this was new to him. The Kerk responded specifically to Neah “I’d say it tasted normal almost, but as soon as it touched my tongue then it felt like I was chewing on something rotten! Poison I’d say is a higher level, but far from the highest I think.”

 Neah huffed “Well, tell me next time before you do these things. We can do taste tests more carefully. I’d like to not return to the scribe hall by myself.” Neah felt worried, but Isaiah smiled back “The clan and this information is all that matters, Neah. You know that. Besides, pa would be proud if we both perish doing everything in our power to make sure every scrap of information is in the ancestor’s hands.” Neah could hardly forget and cringed, but ultimately nodded before returning to her duties. The two Fearum guards kept watch, almost amused as the two continued their experiments.

 The sea water had acted strangely, as if the poison that was created was nullified instantly by the salt content. The milk became a strange, fluffy white substance which tasted strangely good if not far too sour for their tastes. The rum had dulled, and like the salt water, also became nullified at first. However, after a few minutes Isaiah felt sick again when he did his taste test and had to suddenly puke again. The two weaselfolk guards looked amazed, almost jaw dropping as the two scribes casually did all of this. Isaiah and his robes looked like a mess, before finally smiling widely when their last test was upon them.

 Neah got up and went towards the forest as her companion drank water like a mad man while she collected samples. The leaves were always falling from above, landing and suddenly turning to dirt within minutes of reaching the ground. However, this was not so for leaves inside the forest. She took out a couple special vials the ancestor lich had given her, and scoped up some of the leaves and put it into the flask. The leaves looked like normal fall leaves, but she suspected that without a magical power keeping the aura of these leaves in their original color, they would turn to dirt within minutes. She was about to return to her companions until she looked up and some something curious amongst the bright colored woodlands.

 It was a tangle of roots she had not noticed before, covering something like an egg. She heard some sudden and loud snaps as the wood began to slowly move. Her eyes went wide when she realized the roots were moving and she fell over backwards onto her tail as she backed away slowly.

 The guards and Isaiah stopped what they had been doing, the guards quickly drawing weapons although not going towards the forest. The roots stopped as they revealed some manner of burrow beneath the trees which held a long dead corpse. It was a Beastfolk corpse, she knew that, but it was dry and mummified as it fell from the roots as if crushed beneath it. There was a silence as the cadaver fell into the leaves and disappeared below the surface as if it had been dropped into water. A moment later, in dramatic fashion, a Fearum bursted out of the leaves in sudden fashion.

 Neah was taken aback by the sight, not to see some rotting corpse, but to see a strange Fearum dressed not in colors or garb she knew the Fearum behind her had been privy to. He wore loose and colorful clothes of orange and dark red, a flowing cape behind him with puffy and noble tunic hidden behind an ornate breastplate. The being head was adorned with a feathered and wide hat and on his belt, he wielded a beautiful sword which curved in a swivel. It twirled as if in a courtesy before giving a humble and dramatic bow.

 “Hmmm, whom’st do I find wandering here today?” It asked as it lifted itself up to see two fearful Fearum guards shaking as they held out spears at him, a confused Kerk in a great purple robe, and a otterfolk in a same dress who edged herself away from him.

 “Oh by the circle.” One of the guards exclaimed, although it would be the last words he would utter. The stranger flicked his wrist at him, and roots came up suddenly from the ground and wrapped around him. The Fearum screamed in horror as the roots quickly crushed him and with some nasty snaps of bone became silent and was pulled beneath the ground. “It’s a Prince! Run!” The other guards screamed at the two before throwing his spear down and running for his life. He did not get very far either, as the Prince spoke aloud as if in a mocking tone.

 “Oh come young warrior, no need for cowardice, hmm? Wind, fetch him for me.” He proclaimed as a sudden and harsh gust of wind was felt from behind Neah as the guard who was running towards the fort was wrenched towards the Prince. He swaggered over to the guard and lifted his paw upward, and the Fearum guard was lifted into the air, screaming and weeping. Neah watched as he kept being lifted into the air, further and further up until he began to come downward and spattered on her tent with a sickening crunch. He Prince had kept up a smile as he approached Neah, but soon found Isaiah standing in his way. Neah’s heart pounded in terror, but for her Kerkian brother, the Kerk looked on without fear as much as anger as he drew his family’s favored weapon, a falchion, from beneath his robes and outstretched it at the Lich.

 “We have no quarrel!” The Kerk exclaimed. Thoughts ran through Neah’s mind as she got up and spoke in a fearful tone “Isaiah, we need to get back to the fort.” She was begging her brother to let this murderous creature be, but the Prince stopped in his tracks and his smiled faded to a confused look. That confusion soon turned to a confident smirk.

 “A Kerk, on this side of the forest? Now, that truly is a rare and discomforting sight. A scribe I take it for your cloth, I must ask before I do something you will so deeply regret, what brings you to the border of the Fall Father’s domain? Or well, my domain.”

 “We are here for study, that is all.” Neah answered, and Isaiah nodded in agreement. The Prince began to circle the two, looking on at his handiwork on the two unfortunate guards the two had been accompanied by.

 “My, my. Study is but a stone throw’s away from scouting. The Leadership must be surely desperate to seek Forestwatch’s aid.”

 “We are not Illuminated, aye.” Isaiah responded. The Prince didn’t seem to be off guard, pretending to yawn before again conversing in a mockingly bored tone. “Oh? Truly? Ohh, I think I know now. You are one of the Gurchland clans, refugees I believe. The Great Horde I take it sent you?”

 “No.”

 “Hmph, maybe it was someone less important, perhaps some curious low-grade wretch—” The Prince was about to continue before Isaiah’s eyes lit up with fury and approached and swiped at the Prince, but his arm was caught by the eccentric creature who smiled gleefully at him “Touchy, and quite a good answer to my question. A lich of your own clan I take it?” The Prince threw Isaiah down and knocked him the ground as Neah came over. The Kerk was not deterred, as the Prince took out his blade and put it into the ground, leaning upon it.

 Isaiah was forced to calm down as Neah held him and spoke in whispers to him “Isaiah, listen! He is trying to get you to act, he’s toying with you. Just try to be calm, and don’t listen to him! It’s like back in that village, with that bully, calm yourself. Please.” Isaiah breathed heavily as his hand twitched. Kerks like him knew they could not control their emotions very well, and such insults were to be taken as personal grudges. The two looked up at the Prince who seemed to stand there like a statue as Neah got in front of her brother “Please, we mean no harm, we are but scribes.”

 “Oh, my dear, I am afraid we have so little time. The fort behind me will see what is going on, and it’s sentry will give warning, but anything Forestwatch allows is a threat to the Fall Father’s plan in some far flung way. I am afraid, you two will not be returning home anytime soon.” His eyes came upon Isaiah, whose anger returned. Ignoring Neah who tried to grab onto him, he knew what the Prince had met and rushed for his Falchion and charged the Prince again. Isaiah, perhaps not seeing things clearly, rushed straight into the open sword of the Prince whose blade pushed out his other side. Yet, Isaiah continued to push on despite the pain he felt. In a desperate move, he brought his own blade down on the Weaselfolk’s face and pushed it deep into his head, but a shiver of final horror came over him when this did not faze him. Neah held her mouth closed, pushing back tears as Isaiah’s body fell from the Prince’s sword. The falchion imbedded into the Weaselfolk’s face stuck out of him as the dark creature grabbed the handle and pulled it out of him in a casual movement, as if he had been inconvenienced more than anything else. He let the small blade tumble into the grass beneath him before turning his full attention to Neah. The Otterfolk attempted to escape, running as fast as she could in her dense purple robes up towards the fort whose alarm only then began to sound. Yet, hope was quickly lost when she felt something wrap around her legs and tail, pulling her towards the forest. Vines and branches wrapped around her painfully, as Neah screamed for help.

 The Prince walked beside her as she was dragged into the forest further, the creature ever mocking and cruel.

 “My little friend, you should be a bit more joyous. We are going back to my land, a land of paradise where the rot shall never end! Well, perhaps not so good for you, but do not worry. An Oturan of a pagan Kerkian family, and a well-read scribe at that. You will make a fine gift for my kin back in the homeland.” Neah was not listening, grabbing onto dirt as she was pulled into the leaves as the Prince disappeared beyond the woodland of orange hued and cursed bark. By the time the soldiers appeared at the border, they dared not pursue, with the captain of the fort hoping to the circle which ruled all things that Neah’s life would be at least mercifully short.

 Darkness for a moment overtook Neah when she disappeared into the leaves of the cursed forest, but pain and a sudden hunger overtook her as her sight slowly returned. She awoke suddenly, and found it was nighttime and she was laid against a tree. She tried to struggle, only to find her paws were clasped with shackle, the same having been done to her feet. She began to panic and move about, especially when she noticed a bright flame not far off. She shifted about uncomfortably the jingle of chain was not the only thing which frightened her as much as knowing that as she moved, she felt dried leaves and heart their crunching all around.

 She knew full well she was in the Autumn Reich.

 Her struggling was not unnoticed before she heard a harsh word spoken from nearby. Two strangely dressed Fearum approached, dressed in armor more fit for far western men who began to yell at her. One of these weaselfolk approached, one in a bright orange gambeson. He had yelled at her as she struggled, coming over to begin kicking and punching her. She continued to resist as the other guard began to laugh, quite amused by the whole ordeal. Neah felt the gruff of her neck being hoisted up and found herself being dragged along again towards the campfire. Weak and hurting, she kept still as she was pushed towards a group of strangers gathered around the campfire, kept in the shadow of a large wagon. The wagon’s warg was resting nearby, but her eyes set upon another two Fearum who were being quite friendly with one another.

 The Prince and a well-dressed and noble looking Fearum whose face looked sleek and chummy, although another beast was close to him and rested his back at the side of the wagon. Her attention came to the Prince who had a mug in his hands and came over with a wide smile and slapped Neah’s ears and shook her, speaking in some language.

 Then, rather slowly, she began to understand them.

 “Can you hear me, little creature? Hmmm? Ah, there we go, so much better!”

 Neah pulled her head away and got a grip of the situation, looking around quite fearfully. The Prince came up to the other, richer beast, speaking with a friendliness which made her worried for the creature’s safety at first. However, it became quite clear, this beast was more genuinely the creature’s friend.

 “You see, my dear descendent. Tis but the rarest and strangest gift I can give. A truly learned creature from the court of the fleeing Kycer, a time before the Kerks worshipped the pretty lights of candles and lanterns. Rayk! Get this creature up and into a comforting position! Tonight is yet another night to celebrate!”

 The beast by the cart revealed himself, much to Neah’s surprise, a large and intimidating otterfolk like herself, although his fur was sleeker and gray. He came over, taking Neah and forcing her to sit near the edge of the campfire, his roughness made her dare not resist. He stood over her, folding his paws. He had a stranger garb than the Prince and his protégé, as Neah could see it as. His armor was light, he had no helm, but he did wear what looks to be the remains of noose wrapped tightly around his neck which dangled below him. His cloak was sharp and etched with finery, lined with gold with the symbol of two wolves circling a great tree. He did not look happy, and she could only imagine why. The Autumn Reich extended into the Couslandic marshes; her adoptive father once spoke of it.

 “Oh, don’t be so rough on her Rayk, we haven’t even had our fun yet.” Neah’s attention turned with anger towards the creature who spoke, the younger and groomed noble who seemed to be enjoying the Prince’s company. Rayk spoke back with fair warning “My Prince, my lord. We should not dwell this close to the border. We should be done with whatever had come here to do.”

 Neah was confused. ‘Come here to do? Do what?’ Her mind raced with possibilities, but the Prince grunted with amusement. “Do not worry, good knight. We are here because I know it is safe. Besides, as I told my kinsman, I had a gift I wanted to give him for his birth season. A gift of course I do hope he likes, right Ulrich?” The noble nodded and swaggered forward to Neah, picking up her chin and rather suddenly inserting his clawed thumb between her chief, wrenching her mouth around. She struggled, resisting the discomfort before snarling at him. He stepped away and smiled “A bit wild, for sure. I would have preferred one of those savages from the traitor tribes.”

 “Sadly, such a thing is not possible I am afraid. For none are to even my liking.” The conversation made Neah’s stomach wrench as the two chuckled. She had known arrogance before, Ratik were known for it. To see it coming from these corrupt and vile weaselfolk made her full of worry and stress, but she dared not move. The Prince pinched his nose, and spoke in a mockingly sorrowful voice.

 “Oh dear me, I nearly forgot. How can we call ourselves civilized without even introducing ourselves! My dear­–“ He began as he came closer and gave a familiar humble bow as he took off his feathered hat before rising once again to speak with a circus authority, a showman giving her a spiel before the first act.

 “I am Anduyiun Shetmeiser, Anduyiun the Golden, Anduyiun the Bulwark! I am a Prince of the Autumn Reich, the first and last of any good civilization in this wretched continent. A scion of the true Fearum, and beloved ancestor to my dear kinsmen. Such as my great, great, great, great, great, great grandson Ulrich Shetmeiser, heir to the currently small barony of Fuller’s Field. Which my dear boy will one day be greater than even the palaces of the mighty Fall Father! However, this will be something for the future. For now, my kinsmen will just have suffice with the meek offerings his Prince can provide.” There was almost a snicker, forced as it was, from the Prince’s mouth. Ulric smirked and folded his paws “I suppose, and I am truly grateful. Though, this thing remains still a bit too wild.”

 The Prince nodded in agreement “Perhaps she will be less rebellious and more willing to listen after something fine to eat.”

 Anduyiun went to the cart and pulled out from a sack an apple and came over. Neah was a bit hungry, but the reasoning for this rather sudden act of kindness became more apparent as the Prince laid the apple into her paws. In an instant, the apple became mushy and rotted away so suddenly, she dropped it in surprise. She looked up in anger at her tormenters who all except Rayk was snickering with amusement. “Oh dear, that might be a slight problem. I forget sometimes, wanderers need my blessing to even eat.”

 Ulric snapped at Rayk, harshly make a demand of him “Go do something useful, grab one of the iron clasps from the cart.” Neah’s eyes widened in fear at those words, and wordlessly the otterfolk knight went to do his task. Ulric and the Prince came forward, the two looking down at her with a dark intent. Neah finally spoke up, angry as she was, and upset enough to beg the two to stop. “Please, I beg of you, me and Isaiah, we were scribes! From Gurchland! We meant no ha–“ Neah felt a harsh slap across the face from Ulric as she sniffed and slowly began to cry, again begging despite the bleeding from her face “We aren’t you blasted enemies! Please, I am useless to you!”

 “No beast is truly useless.” Anduyiun replied with a sly tone “Just because you view yourself as such doesn’t mean we cannot find some manner of entertainment. You are not the first wandering beast to come near the forest. Sometimes its escaped slaves, sometimes it is orcish scouts. Even had a few goblins wander down from the mountain. The traitor Fearum, now they are our most entertaining prize, but you my dear? You are a rarity, and you should be quite proud of it.”

 Neah then saw Rayk approach with what she feared the most, an iron grasping collar. They were of the Ratik design, they did not fit fully around the neck, leaving a small opening at the throat. Yet, once the collar was slapped on, it was meant to be permanent. She remembered wearing a smaller one, it was heavy and miserable to wear, and now it was coming for her neck again. Her fear got the Prince’s attention, tormenting her further “Ah, you must have been in such an iron grasp yourself at one point to have such an fearing eye upon it. Do not worry, my dear. This one isn’t coming off.”

 “I refuse!” She blurted out, angry and afraid “Just kill me then! I won’t return to that, just kill me as you killed my brother! No!” The panic in her voice softened into a paralyzing fear when the smiling face of the Prince began to bend his knees down to her level, his cold and uncanny face retained it’s smirking smile, unmoving as it was. When he spoke, she swore his mouth was not even moving, making her more terrified.

 “Oh, if I had to kill you, my dear, it wouldn’t be as quick as the Kerk’s. You will come with us regardless, but you’ll die by not my paw. By the Fall Father’s unintended paw. It’ll begin with stomach pains, a weakness, and then as desperation. You’ll perish, perhaps in your sleep as drop you off at some farmstead on our way back home. Yet, that is only the beginning of our adventure, my dear. You see, I’ll return to find you, and I’ll raise your corpse to be the servant you were going to be meant to be already, although ten times more obedient and unable to protest. You’ll be a puppet upon invisible strings, and when or if we get bored of you, I’ll probably just ask your rotting remainder to go to some crypt to await my arrival so we may journey together. In that darkness, waiting for me and some future kin, you’ll reflect to this moment and wonder one simple thing. Was it worth it?”

 Neah’s lips trembled in terror of him, the ever-smiling horror before her she knew meant his words. She knew about necromancery enough for her to fear what he said. To think herself trapped, still feeling every invisible pain as a prisoner trapped in her own body mortified her. She looked at her tormenter, and knew no matter what she said, she would again be in someone else’s thrall. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to calm down and spoke in a defeated tone.

 “I–“ She tried to begin, but her voice failed partly. She began again “I’ll serve, my lord.” She sniffed. The Prince arose and his smile grew wider “See, such things are much easier this way. Not that anything else can be expected of such meek and weak peoples.” She didn’t react to the comment, her eyes becoming waterfalls as she heard Rayk behind her. It was swift and painless, but she could feel the cold metal wrap around her neck and with a loud snap the collar was put into place. She wept in defeat as her tormenter had one final show to break her down.

 “I say we have a drink to celebrate another fine trophy coming into the care of my good kinsman! A cheer for the Shetmiesers, and a cheer for the Reich!” The Fearum around her lifted bottles and jugs, but the mug which Anduyiun raised up went far past his face. The Fearum’s face began to melt away within the blink of an eye, revealing what he truly was beneath. A mummified and moving corpse, skeletal as it was, with a huge gash at the side of his face where Isaiah had struck. The Prince poured what remained of his contents into that hole, which flowed down into his decayed clothes. Anger came over her, and a fury of a brother lost shadowed her sorrow. Yet, she kneeled, doing nothing, too afraid and tired to do nothing but watch as her tormenters were in the throes of victory.

 It was the early afternoon as the group was moving along the barely visible path obscured by the vast quantities of dry and colorful leaves. Neah kept her head down, walking close to the wagon being pulled by a warg and two of the soldiers behind her. The Prince and Ulric were at the far front, talking casually and with friendly abandon. Rayk was beside her, effectively her watcher. She was no longer in her purple robes of a scribe, feeling almost demonstrably humiliated as those robes were now held in her paws folded up. She now wore an orange tunic and a commoner’s pants, and although the Fearum had removed the shackles from her arms, they had decided to keep it so on her legs. Yet, the iron clasp around her neck was oppressive as she remembered it, and she did not get much sleep let alone eat very much when she awoke.

 The group was traveling as she turned to Rayk who didn’t seem all that bothered. She looked him up and down, and he seemed to take notice.

 “Yes?”

 Neah blinked and didn’t answer and instead looked down at the ground again. There was a grunt from the companion next to her, as thoughts raced in her head. She felt powerless as much as she felt anger. She turned her attention to Rayk again, trying to figure him out. Was he an ally? An enemy? He had not joined the others in tormenting her, but she wasn’t sure he would be kindred spirit. In fact, she was kind of furious at him, it was his paw after all that brought the terrible cursed shackle about her neck. He cringed and slowly began to look at her with annoyance.

 “Are you going to stare at me the entire way, or are you going to say something?” He asked. His voice was silent, and Neah took the hint and spoke lowly although she sneered angrily at him.

 “No need to be troubled by me. Not like I wanted to be here to start with.”

 “Well if that were true, you’d have stayed wherever you came from.” Rayk scoffed. The two kept silent for a bit as they traveled on. The trees were not as thick as she imagined them to be in this mainland country, it was even a bit flatter than she envisioned the realm of the Autumn Reich to be as. She looked about, not able to admire the strangeness or uniqueness of this blighted land, for all the terrible things she had faced since coming here. Her eyes turned to a passing village, noticing fences simple homes beyond. They were not like the Fearum homes she had seen during her travels in Forestwatch, they were bigger with straw roofs. The structures look almost Kerkian, although even that was a ‘eh’ at best. She wanted to describe it as perhaps human, but the only clue to that were descriptions of Curdan cities during her studies on western history. Neah saw farmers scurrying about, harvesting produce which she found kind of strange and instinctively had to ask about it.

 “Isn’t it a bit too early to be harvesting? It’s still summer.”

 “Hmm?” Rayk gave her a curious and confused look, and she tried to explain. “I mean, the farmers over there, aren’t they harvesting a bit too early?”

 “I wouldn’t know. I am not a farmer.”

 Rayk had not known it, but he was in for a trouble he had no preparation for. Neah spoke in length, partly to ask questions and partly to keep her own sanity. “I mean, this is a land of eternal fall, right? How do you folk grow things in that kind of environment?”

 “I don’t know.”

 “I mean, that must cause all manner of troubles, like a dietary problem. I had read of a dietary crisis in the campaign of Parius, a Rosari lieutenant from the Imperial War of Religion. He said that a lack of meat caused a sickness amongst his soldiers, so do the folk here have a sickness as well because of a lack of meat?”

 “What? No. I don’t know.”

 “I mean, then how do they feed animals then and–“

 Rayk shushed her and nudged her a bit harshly, giving a sharp pain to her shoulder. She thought he was trying to shut her up, but he was looking ahead. She looked as well, seeing Ulric had looked behind them to see what the commotion was. He returned his gaze to the front as Rayk whispered back to Neah is a harsh term “I don’t know and I don’t care. Just do as they say and it’ll all be fine.”

 “How can you say that.” Neah scolded him. “That monster up there murdered my brother and now is taking me as some slave to gods know where.”

 “You aren’t special in that case.” Rayk coldly replied. Neah had a realization when he said this. The Fearum were not known to go outside their borders, so it was strange a Prince of the Reich would take such sudden interest in a small camp on the border of it. The Fearum after all didn’t need much in terms of forts and defenses, they had a magical forest which made logistics an impossibility. Yet, as she thought of it, she couldn’t help but begin to ask. “I mean, what specific way?”

 “Do I need to spell it out for you?” Rayk rolled his eyes at first, but a firm “Yes, actually.” Got his annoyed attention. He grunted at her “What is your deal!? Do you need to know everything?”

 Neah looked at him sadly as she held her old clothes close to her, having to realize this beast likely did not understand. She did, in fact, had to know everything. It was her profession she had gone to fulfill for her adopted clan. “Apologies, erm, Ryem.”

 “Rayk.” Rayk corrected

 “Rayk. I am sorry. Force of habit I suppose.”

 “Well remove it then.” The otter said annoyed. Neah looked him over again, and Rayk was again very quick to notice. He stared at her with intimidation, hoping she would just leave him alone for the remainder of the trip. Yet she asked a question she had been meaning to ask since she saw him “That noose on your neck. What exactly is it?”

 “A noose.”

 “But, why though?”

 Rayk sighed “For a very stupid mistake I did years ago.”

 “Well, what was it? Your well-armed, and you are otterfolk like me. Yet you wear that as I wear this.” She gripped the iron collar on her neck. Rayk frowned, but he sighed and spoke in a low tone “If I explain it to you, can you promise me not to speak till we get to the castle?”

 “I’m sorry, I can’t make that kind of promise.”

 “What. Why.”

 “Well, as my father told me. Promises are binding like contracts or curses; I can’t make a promise based on vague words. It must be specific.”

 Rayk blinked and pursed his lips before speaking a new deal to her “Okay. If I tell you, can you be silent for five minutes till we reach the castle?”

 “Which cas–“

 “Are you doing this on purpose!?”

 “I mean, no. I know what you are saying, I just can’t make that kind of deal. It has to be specific, ya know.”

 “No. I don’t know.” Rayk grew more frustrated “Fine. If it will get you to be silent for five minutes while on this road going to our next destination.” Rayk gave a sigh and spoke a question of his own “Please, I’d rather not see something terrible as we reach there, don’t do whatever you are doing now to Ulric or around his family. They aren’t as tolerating as I am.”

 “I can, ummm, try.” Neah sighed. Rayk looked forward to make sure his master was not looking behind him before speaking to her, explaining the mystery to the noose around his neck.

 “I was born east of here, in the marshes. My father was a fisher, my mother a cook to a garrison of soldiers. Mother didn’t cook the way one of the soldiers liked, so they beat her till she no longer had a nose. I was angry, so I found the soldier and beat on him, and overpowered him. Others forced me off him, and they dragged me to the magistrate. Normally, a lash or two is the punishment for beating on a soldier. Problem was, I didn’t account for my status in the Reich. My parents had iron clasped about their necks, and so did I. The Higvar overseeing my trial called for my execution. On the day I was to be hanged, we were visited by a Prince of the empire, I don’t remember who. It’s the one who rules my homeland is all I know. As I was choking and the rope cutting into my ears and neck, he had me cut down when he offered me to join the Knights of the Noose after hearing I beat a soldier quiet badly. So, now I am that.”

 “So are you an actual knight, or a slave?” Neah asked naively. Rayk shrugged “I suppose both. My order’s barracks reminded me of my parent’s former barracks, although the beds were bigger. I trained in a courtyard and lived there till my order got a commission for a bodyguard for him.” Rayk motioned to Ulric ahead of them “Now, I am here.”

 Neah blinked and was about to ask another question, but Rayk stopped her by putting his paw to her mouth “I answered one question, you were lucky I got two. Now be silent. We will get there faster if those two don’t notice you. You’ll be blessed they forget you even exist.”

 Niah remained silent, the group continued as she slowed and looked up into the sky as she saw a huge shadowy patch ahead of them. Far up into the sky was a massive branch, bigger and higher up than any tree she had ever seen. It was massive, its branches reaching far up into the sky as if it were some far off mountain. Her jaw dropped, and Rayk could tell she was going to ask all manner of questions about that as well. He sighed and nudged her along as the group continued onward. Soon, after much of the day marching, the sight of a great cliffside castle came into sight.

 The castle Neah was beholding was much larger than she expected. It was massive in scale, almost too large in some cases. The castle sat on top of a large, steep hill which overlooked a village beneath it. Yet, from the way the group was coming in, they approached a large wall and gate on top of a cliff overlooking a people below them. A small stone walls, littered with autumn leaves had the occasional guard upon it, who overlooked an upward canyon in the village side of the castle which acted as a ‘main gate’. As the iron doors opened for the coming group, guards of the Reich parted way and even bowed to the Prince and his noble scion, who were welcomed as they came into sight. Neah’s heart dropped just as the gates closed behind her, further entrenching her imprisonment.

 The courtyard of this castle had a strange feel to it, as if she were walking into an ancient and hollow ruin of sorts. The fall leaves continued to pour down in small stride all about her, and the continued boots crunching the autumn debris remained in the same tune within the castle as it was outside of it. Neah felt uneasy, even intentionally getting close to the only somewhat friendly face in this land, although Rayk didn’t seem to be as helpful as he nudged her to continue marching on. The Prince stopped and gave a dramatic smelling of the air in the mockery of life itself, the undead creature outstretching his arms and shouldering his cape.

 “A warm and fine day! A good day to return to the seat of future empires.” Neah mentally scoffed at this, keeping her words to herself. The castle came into view itself, a palace of stone which arose out of a cliffside hill, surrounded by walls. It looked astonishing to Neah, it was Curdan in style, she could recognize the stone turrets which acted as the corners of the noble’s home. Yet, the domed roof was certainly different, and the orange paint upon wood was somewhat predictable for a national color. Yet, the design was still Curdan, even though the race of men was on the opposite side of Kevica.

 She wanted to ask ‘why’ and ‘how’. Yet, as she was pushed further towards this castle, she was snapped back to the reality she found herself in.

 Passing down into the main hall leading towards the court, Neah was at long last relieved to feel soft and warm carpet beneath her feet rather than the crunching of leaves. As the cart was abandoned outside, the guards and retinue of the Prince pushed on into the halls, as Neah looked behind her to see the castle’s doors closing. She looked around at the hall, its metal candle holders, the etched and gray stone, and the paintings. It was the painting which at first drew her eye, soft and delicate things full of excessive realism. Neah felt almost uncomfortable looking at them, knowing full well they removed the blemishes and uglier features, but to see these as Weaselfolk somewhat amazed her. To the Kerks, such paintings looked ugly, even though she kinda liked the careful strokes. Her mind wandered again, but her attention turned downwards towards the other unfortunates of the castle.

 Staring back at her is a Beastfolk of similar age to herself, but it was a hedgehog. He had a slightly bent back, with spikes reaching across much of his back which were exposed. His clothes were simple and tied across his waste and neck, with only his pants being somewhat normal. She had heard of the Higvar but had never seen one before. They were a people of the Autumn Reich, a race given unto the ancient Fearum to exploit. Around the Higvar’s neck was an iron clasp much like her own, but his was clearly much thicker and dug into his neck where spikes had used to be. He was carrying a mop and wooden bucket, cleaning as apart of a crew of others which included two other Weaselfolk of similar wear. They were both female, and both had the iron clasps about their necks as well, but Neah could only guess why.

 The group made quite an entrance into the main and wide court, dimly lit and somewhat empty. There were not many in terms of courtiers, the windows were high up, and the distance between the dim sources of light gave a more depressing tone. The Prince made himself at home, guiding himself to a figure who arose to greet him from his throne, a Weaselfolk garbed in a lesser noble’s dress, whose diadem was faded, and whom didn’t look very happy as much as frustrated.

 “Baron Albrich, my dearest kinsman. I have gre–“ began the Prince, but the lord held up his paw, as if expecting this. He looked at Neah as she was brought forward by the guards towards the middle of the court. The Prince raised an eyebrow to Albrich, who pointed to Neah. “This is the reason you left on one your escapades? Anduyiun, my ancestor and chief. I had implored you not to do this again, did you think me joking when I said no more ‘gifts’?”

 “Oh, but you misunderstand. This one isn’t for you, it is for your dear boy and heir.” The Prince’s smile never faded even when chastised. Ulrich swaggered on over, dismissing the guards who had kept close to Neah. The Weaselfolk snapped the purple robes from Neah’s arms, presenting it to his father. “A prize, to be certain, father. An educated one I believe at that, our ancestor truly is a bringer of gif–“

 Yet, Neah saw something different from the noble, and came down, his mouth dropping and looked at Neah with mortal fear. He grew angry, his dark gaze returning to his son who stormed up to him “Are you a fool or an idiot!” He yelled. The court gave a stunned silence as Albrich marched up and practically tore the scribe’s robes from his paws, looking a little shocked.

 “Do you know what this is!?”

 “Yes, father. It was this beas–“ Ulrich got a harsh paw slapped across his face, claws digging in as he staggered back in shock.

 “This is Kerkian garb, you fools! Do you know what you have done!? The Kerks would go to war for just one of their own, and you stole one of their scribes, clasped an iron about its neck, and dare bring it to my doorstep!? The Kerks wouldn’t care a damn bit if they sent a hundred thousand or two hundred thousand screaming, mad creature across the border to punish us! The Fall Father himself demanded of us all to return those we stole! Have any you no shame or thought? You brought a reason for the Kerks to go to war with us if they ever find out!”

 Anduyiun raised his paw and Albrich somewhat calmed as he listened to the dark creature speak. His voice was quite soft as Neah already knew what he was likely going to say.

 “It is true, my dear descendant. This creature is a scribe, but from the wrong tribe you may think of. This creature swears to pagan gods, the old Kerkian faith. In fact, why don’t you tell us where you are from.”

 Neah gulped as the others looked at her, looking small as Albrich didn’t seem to calm. When Neah did not answer, the Prince stepped closer menacingly before speaking. “Gurchland. Gurchland, my lord.”

 “Gurchland.” Albrich thought it over, his thoughts racing as he spoke his own question. “You. Your name.”

 “Neah. Neah Tendrov.”

 “Tendrov.” Albrich’s anger returned as he gripped his head and muttered to himself, going back to his throne, throwing the robes to the ground. Neah went over and picked them up, watching as the baron sat down and motioned the Prince and his son to come forward. Neah could not pick up fully what they were saying, but they were loud enough to pick up on some of their harsh words spoken between each other.

 “The fact you two attacked scribes is bad enough, Illuminated or not. I told you two, these little raids into the north is not sanctioned by the Fall Father, and he warned me already. Now, you bring further trouble here.”

 “If you wish father, I could dispose of it if it bothers you so much.”

 “A bit late for that, the action is what mattered. However, you are right, since you and your others ‘gifts’ seem to bore you, I will be taking this one as well.”

 “Father, this is a gift from my ancestor to me, I don’t think you have the right–“

 “Okay, then I will make this simple for you. If you do not allow this, I will disinherit you and give the title to whatever bastard your mother is currently raising, and then it can be your choice. I already had been thin with these foolish escapades and excesses, now I am going to put a stop to it. My ancestor, please, for the love your family. Remain at some post, and no more of these trips. Not till I pass at least.”

 “As you wish, my descendent.”

 The two left and Albrich continued to sit on his throne. Rayk came up to him, and he scowled at him harshly as he bowed his head. “You and your bleeding order. I tell you to do one thing and you do the opposite. Did I not order you to keep Ulrich out of these little ‘adventures’ with him?”

 “I couldn’t stop him, my lord.” Rayk’s paws retreated behind his cloak and slavishly looked down, the noose lightly outstretched. Albrich pinched his nose and growled “Get out, and I do not wish to see you again till tomorrow where we will discuss what you can and cannot do.” Rayk did as bidded and went away. Neah felt a pinch of sorrow for this, because her fellow Otterfolk was right, what exactly could he do? She remembered Isaiah stabbing the Prince in his face, and it had not phased him. Neah felt a cold grip of armor on her soldiers as one of the guards did a silent bidding of his lord, forcing Neah down a corridor. She found herself going down and down into darkness.

 Neah did not know how much time had passed as she was left in utter darkness. All she knew, very briefly, was a guard using a torch to guide her down there and lock her inside a small cell. The guard had removed the iron shackles from her legs, only to replace it with a larger one connected to only one, which was attached to the wall. Neah sat down and felt some hay and felt something wet and immediately retracted her paw. Ever since, in some privacy, she began cry and weep. She could now at long last remember Isaiah and wonder if her adopted family knew where she was. She wanted nothing more than to see that overly clothed and skeletal face once again appearing and ferrying her off. She sniffed and was stirred when a light began to approach.

 Albrich Shetmiser walked down the stone stairs and lit one of the torches near her cell and began to unlock the door. Neah arose slowly, keeping her scribe’s robes close which she had not stopped holding. The Albrich began to speak in a strange language.

 “Haben Sie schon einmal von dem Schlagerspiel unter uns gehört?“

 Neah looked at him confused and blinked, everyone since coming here had been speaking Kerkian, and she then realized suddenly that she could only been able to understand them due to the Prince’s spell craft. Albrich however already seemed to understand first, speaking in a very heavy accent dialect she could understand.

 “You speak Kerkian then?”

 She nodded, but the noble looked rather annoyed and huffed “You’re not an equal so long as iron is clasped about the neck, Otterfolk. Coming from the Confederacy, I had hoped you realized that.”

 “I am, sorry.” Neah said weakly “I had lied.”

 Albrich raised an eyebrow as she explained “I am from Reidland, I was born there. I was taken to an island in Gurchland by the Tendrovs. I should know better, but I’ve lived so long freely there, I don’t know much of the old Ratik customs.”

 Albrich pursed his lips and shook his head “No need for that Kerkian honesty, you are from Gurchland.”

 “I mean, not re–“

 “You will only speak when spoken too, or I’ll leave you down here to starve.”

 Neah silenced herself at once. It reminded her a bit too much of that fateful day when she was caught reading. She frowned as Albrich explained “You’ll speak of me and anyone here with proper reverence. We will not pretend we are saving you from yourself as the Ratik do. You are a servant of the Autumn Reich, and my slave. You’ll speak to me with the respect you’d have shown a Ratik back from Gurchland or any of those Royal Clans.”

 “Yes, sir.” Neah responded. Albrich smiled and then nodded, letting down his torch near one of the walls of the Cell. Dimly lit, his face was harder to make out, but Neah supposed it didn’t matter much. As was Ratik tradition, any beast who wore the iron clasp was immediately lesser, a creature needing commands. She hated it then as she did now, how immediate it was to go from freedom to slavery with a single, cruel crack of the collar.

 “You and this Kerk, what were you doing near the forest?” Albrich asked. Neah perked up and looked surprised. “You know what happened then?”

 “From what my Prince tells me. Even showed me the large hole in his skull where that Kerk had struck him.”

 Neah frowned and looked uncomfortable, although the Baron didn’t seem to care much. “Answer me.” He demanded.

 “We were gathering samples and doing data for the clan back home, it is what the ancestor wanted.”

 “Ancestor? You mean Lich?”

 “Both.”

 “You could have just said yes, and in fact, as your master I demand you answer me with ‘yes’ and ‘no’ from now on.”

 Neah blinked and didn’t seem to understand. Albrich waited for her speak, and she did.

 “Yes.”

 “Good, did the Lich tell you about the reasons for this?”

 “No.”

 “Did Forestwatch have allow your clan to do these ‘tests’?”

 “Yes.”

 “What was the reason.”

 Neah paused before speaking, trying not to. “N-no.”

 “Are you denying me.”

 “No.”

 “Then tell me.”

 “No.”

 Albrich paused and cringed before realizing something. He gave out a very loud sigh and spoke “How young were you when the Kerks adopted you?”

 “Ye–no–Y” Neah tried to say, but the Weaselfolk held up his paw to motion her to stop and in a frustrated tone spoke up “As your master, when I said to answer me in ‘yes’ or ‘no’, I did not say to only answer me in those two words. You are lucky I know Kerkian quirks.”

 “I’m sorry, my lord.” Neah sighed “I can’t help it.”

 “You’ll try then, or I’ll have my overseer lash it out of you.” Albrich replied rather coldly. Neah truly couldn’t help it, when someone spoke words demanding to be taken, it had been respectful to speak as commanded. She remembered trying to speak to one of her adoptive sisters, asking her to quiet. She never spoke to Neah again, even when asked why. It took her brothers to explain to her that she had not set a time or manner to continue speaking, and that her adoptive sister was being respectful by holding onto that demand. It took time to get used to but being around Kerks for most of her life till now had made it the new norm for her. Yet, even when traveling across Wargland, she was still the most agreeable creature compared to Isaiah, as she was somewhat self-aware.

 Yet, speaking in fear to Albrich, she was growing more aware of her quirks.

 “Let us start over. Do you know why this lich sent you?”

 “I don’t know, sir. We were only told to do tests and write on what we saw. Collect samples. We were only looking for information.”

 Albrich continued to question Neah, but it was fruitless. Neah truly knew nothing, and although Albrich became more frustrated, Neah had not. Albrich stopped and once finding out all he needed to know, he came to a conclusion of his own making.

 “Hard to say your Lich’s intentions were genuine, though with Kerks, it’s truly hard to tell. I will tell you this, Otterfolk. I honestly do not know what to do with you. I cannot release you, because my Ancestor killed a Kerk and that clan would likely send a force to bother us or cause God knows how much trouble. You’ll likely return to that clan, tell them the truth, and I’ll be left explaining to the Fall Father why a small army of Kerks are raiding our northern border. I already have more servants than I honestly need, I don’t even have a bleeding room to give you.”

 “Sir, letting me go will not trouble you, I can swear it.” Neah said in partial desperation, although Albrich’s cold eyes made her quickly silence herself. The Weaselfolk shook his head in disappointment “I trust you would be more passive, but not the Kerks. I fought off their raids during one of their incursions into the Reich. I know how dedicated they can be. I’ve studied more than I would ever need to know about that race, and frankly I don’t know if pagan Kerks are much better than Illuminated ones.”

 “Then what do you plan to do to me?”

 “That depends on you. My first thought is to despose of you and be done with it, not that my son would miss you.” Neah felt unease and backed away from Albrich, although he scoffed at it. “Oh don’t act surprised. It’s simply policy. Your kind, and any other outsiders for that matter, shouldn’t even be here.”

 “My lord, I don’t want to die.”

 “I am sorry, but that isn’t up to you anymore.”

 Neah thought and spoke up, blurting out through a soft cry “My lord, I swore to him to not cause trouble! I promise, I’ll keep my word with you as well!” Neah felt a shiver of fear, although it was just as likely she was feeling horrific and sudden stress. Neah kept backing away and slipped, crashing to the ground as the chain around her ankle rattled. She couldn’t stop weeping, her face flushing red as she begged “My lord, I don’t want to die! I don’t want to–“

 Albrich’s cold and annoyed voice spoke louder “Oh be silent, and stand up.” Neah couldn’t as she sniffed and tried to calm herself, and the Weaselfolk angrily approached and forced her up. Neah was a true mess, her eyes teary and her clothes dirtied. Snot rolled out of her nose, and Albrich gave her a disgusted look.

 “You swore to him to not cause trouble?” Albrich asked, and then had a thought. He took out a canteen from his belt and passed it to a bit more softly to Neah who cautiously took it and drank it. Albrich looked like he was waiting for something as Neah kept drinking until the canteen was empty. It was a fruity drink it seemed as Albrich seemed almost annoyed. “I see, you gained my Ancestor’s blessing. Otherwise, you’d be dead by now.” Neah frowned and gave Albrich back his drinking container, although he snapped it out of her paws in annoyance.

 “Alright, I’ll allow you to live and serve me, but only if you don’t cause me any headaches or troubles. I hear a peep out of you, the lash will not await you, but a soldier in the forest and a shallow grave. I will give you that much. I’ll have my chief servant find some manner of room for you, though do not expect much.”

 Neah resisted weeping further and kept her voice down, speaking in an ill manner “Thank you, sir.”

 “At least you are improving on that, Neah Tendrov. You will be instructed in the Reich’s language. I hope your time as a scribe will make you learn our language quickly. You will stay here tonight, and my chief servant will tend to you in the morning. And Neah–“

 Neah listened, trying to hold onto some dignity as she held up her head. Albrich spoke with a harshness to his voice “I will give you only one warning. One. You will not speak to my Ancestor again, nor seek him out. Even if he speaks to you and bothers you, just obey him no matter what it is. Do that, and you shall not have trouble.”

 Neah nodded as Albrich left and closed the cell door behind him, but had thankfully at least left the torches to keep her cell lit. The Fearum Baron’s feet could be heard as it climbed out of the dark dungeon as Neah sat down and began to lay her head. Confused, broken, and devoid of further anguish, now all she could think of was how tired she was. She closed her eyes and went to sleep on her purple robes and dreamed of home.

 Neah awoke the next morning being tapped on the head, coming awake to find a Weaselfolk of bright clothes staring back at her, with sacks in his eyes. He looked intimidating, he was strong looking and one of his eyes was covered by an eyepatch. His face looked scared and old, his dress was a mixture of a torn gambeson, with four rings on his fingers of various varieties. Neah’s eyes came to his waist, a sword and whip laying upon his belt, along with a dangling set of manacles and two iron clasps locked by padlocks to his belt. It was obvious to Neah of whom she was looking at, Albrich’s marshal or some manner of slave overseer. From his appearance alone, she could only imagine what manner of harsh words he would speak, as his ugly and old form bent down to her and gripped her arm to get her up.

 Although that grip was oddly gentle.

 “You are Otterfolk servant, yes?” He spoke, his accent was thicker, but Neah was surprised to hear him speaking Kerkian.

 “Y-yes? I am.” Neah allowed herself to be helped to her feat, the Weaselfolk jailer softly brushed the grime and dirt from her clothes “Ah! Good then, Albrich says you are big wheels, high point.”

 Neah blinked at the nonsense, and seeing her stone face, the jailer shrugged “Know only little Kerkian, not speak very well. I am Baruc, chief servant of big hall.”

 “Oh.” Neah responded, although not very relieved. Baruc bent down and began to fiddle with the lock on Neah’s shackle, opening it but not getting up just yet. Neah looked down, seeing him inspect something on her leg, shaking his head “Chafing, very bad. Will need patching.”

 Neah allowed the Weaselfolk jailor, or servant, or whatever he was to do his work. She had no knowledge of Curdan customs and titles, let alone ones made in the mockery of them. The Fearum took out some scraps from the side and wrapped it around Neah’s leg, feeling a slight sting. Her foot moved, her instinct was to kick him, but her leg was forced downward as if the Fearum had already known. He arose and smiled widely “Death brings many corals to big wheel, highly improbable, good as new.”

 Neah cringed, and again as if reading her mind already, the Weaselfolk gave a dramatic frown and shook his head “Better you learn our language, quicker and milk poppy.”

 The Weaselfolk bidded her to follow and she did, exiting the dark dungeon and carrying her purple robes with her as she went. In a manner she could barely understand, the Weaselfolk began to give her a tour of the palace. Neah began to visit the dining areas, the kitchens, servant quarters, stables, study, and all manner of things she expected to find in a stone castle. This strange and jovial jailor gave her a bad feeling, having heard such jovialness from the Prince who brought her here. However, this beast’s jovialness did not seem fake, and in fact seemed genuine.

 “Baron Albrich tells me you must be up at sunrise each morning to receive daily tasks. As servant of the castle, you will be expected to keep the walls cleans, including all the leaves from the Great Tree which fall on all of us. The Shetmeisers looked to live not in the lap of luxury, but in the mockery of it. Their castle was huge as Neah’s feet began to hurt as she walked behind Baruc at a brisk pace. A lot of the castle felt empty, with the occasional guard wandering the hall. She somewhat wondered by Albrich had been so hesitant to allow her to stay, his palace was large enough. She returned her attention again to Baruc who was now just rambling.

 “–turally, you’ll be expected to make sure to make up for any lost time during the off hours of the night. Floors an’ doors get cluttered with the stuff. Bah, last time I had been doing that, took me an entire week to clean out the stuff! Even tempted to ask for help from the chief!”

 “Sir.” Neah began to ask. Baruc turned to her, and put his paws to the side. Neah felt a slight tinge of fear, but something had been bothering her.

 “Sir, you speak Kerkian as well?”

 “Barely.” Baruc huffed and shook his head “Lived in Marshreich, in big Higvar city. Father was jailer there, so was I. Learned Kerkian from merchants coming out of southern Kerkia. Needed to often talk to merchants from there, Kerks get rowdy if they see something they don’t like. Learned hard way about keeping them prisoner.”

 Neah understood, something her father had told her. Kerks were emotional creatures and when it came to extreme stress or imprisonment, most could not handle it well. They needed to fight something, they could not take commands of others seriously, and so she was told the Kerks would bash their heads against the walls till they perished. It was gruesome and slow fate, and those who survived did not come out right. Apparently on the Tendrov uncles had suffered this when some Fuus had tried to kidnap him, he escaped and became half mad. He passed away when she was young, but she could remember his screams and his brothers trying to calm him.

 “Oh. I’m surprised. I thought the Illuminated, you know, hated–“ Neah was looking at Baruc’s belt, and specifically the metal clasps. Baruc understood somewhat. “Oh, you aren’t Illuminated? Well, good. I think, never heard of a non-adopted before. Baron Albrich has business deals with the Sea Kerks coming out of Alganwall, who bring Resank goods. Kerks know and see them, sometimes there is fight, but once they are eating their Redfaust, they be less themselves.”

 “Redfaust?” Neah asked, something which caught Baruc off guard.

 “You are adopted in a Kerk clan, yes?”

 “I am.”

 “You do not know what it is?”

 Neah shook her head as Baruc seemed almost confused. “Well, is red plant. Kerks grow it, they chew it and it makes them calmer. Only plant they can eat without throwing up. Tried it once, wasn’t very good.”

 The two continued as they were now making their somewhat downwards and then out of the castle where Baruc continued to give Neah a tour. Neah was somewhat baffled by the Weaselfolk, his grim looking features and rough voice gave way for a softness. He explained what was to be expected of her, and what she was meant to do during her time, and she listened as best she could. Yet, as he did, she was afraid to ask for clarification. The two were upon the walls, looking down at a small wooden village and the greater environment around them. The land which had somewhat amazed her now looked less mystical, an endless array of leaves fell from trees and landed softly upon the ground, the wind blowing them like waves across the surface.

 As Baruc finished his duties, he began to become more quiet and began to bring her back inside to another section of the castle. Neah began to ask questions of another subject “The Illuminated Kerks, do you know much about them?”

 “Eh? Not really. Just small things here and there. Never needed to speak it in so long.”

 “What are they like?”

 “Kerks. Hard to say. Always angry or icy, very blunt. Do not like us, don’t like anyone really, especially themselves. If it wasn’t for the Fall Father, we’d be their thralls as much as that those dogs and water dogs are. Erm–“ Baruc quickly apologized “I shouldn’t call you water dog, tis just a slip of the tongue.”

 “Dogs?” Neah ignored such a slur, it didn’t very much bother her much to Baruc’s relief.

 “Called Gnolls I thinks, not like normal dogs. Some kinda Beastfolk, not sure which. Big creatures. Oturan live in marshlands, smaller beasts.”

 Neah knew truly very little about Kerkia other than what her adoptive father spoke of them. He had told her and others they were pagans who defied the will of their gods and would one day be punished for abandoning them. The Mountain Gods would come out of middle Kevica and destroy them, as the Kycer priest had once told her. Her family disliked them but never thought much of them. She knew her family came from there, but they never spoke much of it, so she always assumed it was just a mess of kingdoms as was the Great Horde. She hanged on Baruc’s words as he spoke of these peoples.

 “The Illuminated Kerks, border this land?”

 “Yes, kinda of. Their thrall nations do.”

 “Thrall nations?”

 “Vassals or something, do their bidding.”

 “I didn’t think Illuminated has thralls.”

 “I mean they–“ Baruc stopped and gave a weird look to Neah who was giving him a confused look. Remembering something important, he sighed “Oh, right. You are raised by Kerks, yes?”

 Neah nodded as Baruc carefully explained “Then disregard what I said up till I had mentioned thrall nations. They are vassals which border us, Duhmland and Cousland. They do the Kerks’ bidding. I need to remember I suppose words are more meaningful to you.”

 Neah sighed “It’s more of a force of habit. I’ve been surrounded by Tendrovs for a long time. I guess I kind of forgot not all meanings are so literal.”

 “Understandable.” Baruc smiled. The two soon entered a part of the castle that Neah was not all that familiar with, entering a large stone room. It was shaped like a bell, with the far side of the room being an altar which led into some manner office door in the farther back. Neah knew it was some manner of shrine, but not one she had ever known. Shrines were groves run by old and conservative druids and their students or were high above in some hill where high robed priests made sacrifices of grain, fish, or books. An altar was laid before a small podium, which caught Neah’s eye. It depicted a mustelid figure with raised paws in a T shape, and all around him others were rising. The far-off office door opened, and a figure stepped out. The Weaselfolk who came to greet them was old and well-studied, his robes were white and orange. In his paws he had a large tome, and a strange cone hat was on his brow. Yet, oddly, his clothes were old and unwashed, and seemed to almost be falling apart. The priest came forward, speaking in his own language to Baruc, before looking at Neah.

 Baruc and this priest discussed some details as Neah stood and listened, not understanding them. Eventually the priest pinched his brow, looking unhappy before Baruc spoke to her with a happy tone “Listen and study with our resident priest, Neah Tendrov. Until you learn our language. I told him to patient with you, but I suspect you will be fast learner.”

 “I understand, sir.” Neah nodded. The priest beckoned her into the office, as Neah began to her studies.

 Neah was indeed a quick learner, although her constant questioning and detailed note taking made the priest go from relieved to annoyed. Neah couldn’t help herself, as the priest would learn, and had to shoo her to her bed. Neah spent a week or so in the priest’s care, doing nothing else than study the Fearum language to learn, and ultimately master it. She may have been sleeping on a makeshift cot near the priest’s bed, but she was quickly returning to old habits which had once been encouraged in her. ‘If you aren’t sleeping, you are writing. If you aren’t eating, you are reading. If you aren’t relieving yourself, you are confirming.’ Her grandmaster and her adoptive father drilled that into her head.

 Neah wasn’t exactly not familiar with the Fearum language, as she had to learn a lot of it during her travels in Forestwatch. However, the dialect they used there was a mix of Ratik, whereas the Autumn Reich’s language was less natural. It was a mix of a lot of languages, Curdan, some Kerkian, bits of Rosari, and she swore she was finding Kobold and Dwarven wording. Yet, not a single bit of it was Ratik, as if all the normal syllables were purged and replaced with random bits and pieces from other languages. She could understand the hatred of the Ratik, but not enough to justify such a petty thing.

 Yet, as she read and kept her mind busy, each time she went to eat or scratched an itch at her neck, she began immediately saddened to feel the cold metal. Neah found it ironic, that for a people who had done everything to remove the taint of the Great Horde from themselves, the old Ratik tradition of collaring their slaves remained ever present. These iron clasps were not traditional shackles, but rather permanent reminders of servitude. Reading and learning kept her mind off the iron clasp, and of the memory of Isaiah.

 Neah learned the language, and once she did, she would come to feel nostalgia for her studies under the priest as she began what she could only call ‘The Unending Weeks of Misery’.

 “Cooks need the kitchens cleaned by midafternoon, the lord had visitors.”

 “Cooks need help in the kitchens, hurry along now.”

 “Our lord’s good Missus needs a handmaiden, as her usual has gotten sick. You’ll be doing it today, Neah.”

 “Windows need to be cleaned in the chapel.”

 “Floors need to be cleaned.”

 “Walls need to be cleaned.”

 “Court needs cleaning.”

 “Clean.”

 “Clean!”

 Neah spent the next three weeks in what she could only describe a pit of madness. She had not fondly remembered her younger days in a lumbering camp, helping with menial work. Now she was doing it constantly, from dawn to dusk. Baruc had been helpful, getting her up to speed on every small duty needed, but he was demanding and needed her to learn pretty much everything there needed to know about service. Neah had never bothered to know how one brushes one’s fur, but her brief time with Albrich’s missus taught her the valuable lesson of careful strokes. Baruc had given her a ‘room’ if one could really call it that, unfurling a bedsheet into some closet. Cramp and uncomfortable, Neah found her old scribe robes to be bulky enough to act as a pillow at least. Baruc had originally offered to make room in one of the dungeon cells for her, but after her brief time there, the closet felt more like home.

 Yet, in all her misery, Neah could say the loneliness was the worst aspect.

 Only Baruc spoke to her, and she avoided the gaze of others whenever possible. She had learned to read and listen to their language, but she was not perfect in it.

 Neah was now scrubbing one of the older floors in a poorly used part of the castle and noticed some strangers farther off. Baruc had told her that her tasks would be long and hard, but he would be lenient with her if she kept to her duties. Neah did so, partly out of fear of losing the growing friendship of a beast who hadn’t tormented or threatened her. She dunks a soft cloth into a bucket of murky looking water and continued to scrub and clean. The figures who had been further off approached, where she recognized them as fellow servants of the castle.

 Or more accurately, fellow slaves.

 There were four of them in total, moving as a small team as they approached Neah as they cleaned. One was a Higvar, Hedgehogfolk she had seen before. He had a youthful look and smiled at her when he approached. Neah had no clue if she should smile back but paused briefly to give him a look over. Two were female Fearum, who looked much more miserable and saddened then Neah was. Finally, there was an older Otterfolk like herself, an older creature she didn’t see much of. He looked mad and upset, and huffed out a complaint.

 “I swear by the circle, we are going to be doing this stupid foolery forever! Can’t that puffed up clown tell ancestor or that fallen deadbeat to stop those leaves from falling into the castle for a few damned moments!”

 The Higvar gasped and spoke in a concerned tone. “Opan! Please, keep it down! What if the lord hears?”

 “I hope that wretched son of a night mum hears me, at least then he’d put me out of my misery sooner, Hegwer.”

 The Higvar sighed as the Otterfolk, Opan as Neah could only guess, gave her a dark look. Neah could only blink as he sneered “Well? Get back to work, quicker we get this done, the quicker Baruc will allow us to return to whence we came and rest.”

 “He’ll return us to where we came from?” Neah asked, and the Otterfolk growled. “Yes, to our rooms. What do you think I meant?”

 Neah sighed and realized her mistake and admitted “Back home.”

 “Are you stu–“

 “Oh bugger off, Opan.” Hegwer interjected. The Higvar nudged him, which almost surprised him. “You folk are all servants here, no need to be hostile.”

 Opan grumbled and returned to his tasks as Hegwer introduced himelf. “Name’s Hegwer, erm, whomever ya are. Baruc never introduced us to you.”

 “I didn’t ask for your name, but good to meet you Hegwer.” Neah confused Hegwer and turned the heads of the others, as her voice didn’t seem passive aggressive. As Neah looked around, she cursed herself under her breath and explained the best she could “I am sorry, my clan doesn’t usually ask for greetings. I forget it’s not common. The name’s Neah Tendrov.”

 Hegwer smiled and shrugged “It’s okay, Neah.”

 “Tendrov? What kind of Otterfolk clan is that?” Opan asked.

 “It isn’t, its Kerkian.”

 Opan gave her a disbelieving stare. “Kerkian? You aren’t Kerkian.”

 “I know that, I was adopted into the clan when I was young.” Neah’s informative nature was about to continue as she worked. “I mean, it’s not every day the clan just goes and take younger folk into their clan. You see, adoption is–“
 “I know what adoption is.”

 “If you did, why do you sound so confused?”

 “Because it’s the bleeding Kerks. Why adopt an Otterfolk at all?”

 Neah was again about to answer, but Opan continued to mumble and rant to himself as he moved away from the group, sweeping up leaves in an angry fashion. The two Fearum ladies near them had been silent, being slow as they took down a curtain of one of the windows and began to shake it. Hegwer apologized for all of his companions to Neah who felt more awkward since their coming, longing for some peace of mind of lonesomeness.

 “Opan doesn’t mean to be unkind, mam. He is just angry. This is Gari and Velosai, they were here before I was.”

 Neah looked at the two who didn’t turn to greet her. Hegwer and Neah scrubbed together as the group moved about. Neah had struggled to do such hard work, but the group was helpful.

 “Oh, don’t brush up and down like that, do it in a swirling motion like this.”

 Neah watched as Hegwer showed off his techniques, although something began to itch in the back of her mind. She looked at the two Fearum, and her eyes turned to their necks. Much like her’s and Hegwer’s, their necks also were clasped in iron, and so was Opan’s. She asked rather bluntly. “Are all of us here ‘gifts’ from that lich to his descendent?”

 The group stopped and a silence came over them, as Velosai spoke up first, the older of the Fearum women. “Aye.” She answered sadly. She explained, speaking a low and uncomfortable tone. “I was tending to my father’s farmstead near the forests themselves, the Reichers never crossed into Forestwatch, so Pa and Ma never really thought we were in danger. Anduyiun attacked us in the night, turned my mother into a pile of scraps and brittle bones, and buried my father alive with magic.” Anger seethed in her voice from a long-repressed memory “Cruel creature took me back as a plaything for Ulric. I was the first of several gifts.”

 Gari interrupted partly, telling her story “They caught me when I was traveling the border with my uncle. Anduyiun came in the form of some Ratik bard, and tricked us to go near the blight. Ulric. He–“ She didn’t finished the sentence, shaking her head before continuing. “I think when I came, that is when Albrich began taking us away from him. Bad influence he calls it.”

 Hegwer nodded “Anduyiun and Ulric bought me off my grandfather when we were out in the Marshreich. Won me in a gambling game of some kind. He cheated, of course. Ulric didn’t like me enough and decided I wasn’t worth his time. Albrich and Baruc are nice to me though.”

 Neah turned to Opan who seemed almost ashamed, seething as he spat “I wasn’t even near the bleeding forest, I was in my home in Pendland! I was nice and happy of getting my freedom from my previous master in Kolfugar, and next thing I know that bearded prick sells me to Anduyiun so Ulric could have ‘something exotic’ to be his servant.”

 Neah had to think on what Opan said, which gave her pause “You were previously a slave before as well?”

 Opan shrugged “I was, parents got into some serious debt when I was younger, so they sold me to their debtor who so happened to be a Dwarven merchant from Kolfugar. Had a stone collar around my neck, but I worked well and was very, very close to buying my freedom. Had my whole life planned out from there, to go home and get my peasant parents out of debt and start a blacksmithing business near the Great Bay. Now? I am stuck here, forever effectively. Doing these stupid menial tasks for a bunch of moronic Weaselfolk who pretend to be Curdans.”

 “Why were you captured?” Neah asked, although it annoyed him. Opan briefly stopped what he was doing, clearly remembering something which made him angry.

 “Ulric wanted some beast to entertain him. So when putting on a jester’s costume and making bad jokes didn’t work, he decided to show off how well he could hit and kick. That was years ago, thankfully. Though Albrich and his bleeding castle isn’t much better.” Opan returned to his work as Neah’s ears dropped at the information. She could only guess what Ulric had intended to do to her.

 The five servants continued their work, talking as they got more comfortable. Hegwer was perhaps the happiest of them. It somewhat made Neah smile as Hegwer spoke in length on mundane things. The group began to open a bit more, as Neah asked questions and hanged on their answers. Velosai spoke a lot about Wargland, a strange and powerful country. It was a successor state to the Great Horde, founded by a relative of the Great Warlord of some considerable note, though the two Fearum women argued about his name. Velosai said he was some mundane creature, but Gari became defensive. Gari claimed that the great founder was a mighty, god-like warrior whose eyes burned with hellish fire and whose tail was said to be made of magic. Opan spoke more of his home country of Pendland, one of the more powerful states along the Great Bay, only shadowed by the mighty Otterfolk city state of Bayland. He spoke of a history he had learned, of a Pout War by the UDH into Pendland many years ago, where they enslaved all of the Otterfolk instead of massacring them as was Dwarven war customs. He spoke how despite such a history, Pendland learned much from the dwarves, and that his own home was often visited by a Kobold from an enclave along the coast. It confused Neah somewhat, but her constant questioning kept them busy.

 Then rather suddenly, they heard yelps and shouts as Neah and the group turned their head to two small orange figures running down the hall. They were Fearum children, their bright and big eyes and small bodies rushed over the stone. The two happy youngsters rushed past them, Neah noticed they had fine garb, richly made. Velosai was the only one who didn’t look as they went past, ignoring the group as they played chase.

 “Who are they?”

 “My children.” Velosai said, a sadness and regret in her voice. None would speak to Neah what she had meant by this, although Neah could only guess, and such an implication turned the once well speaking group to continue their work in silence.

 Another two weeks had passed since then, as Neah found herself being escorted by Baruc towards another room. Baruc was silent, but he was smiling as he had noticed her changing. Neah had been in a bout of depression since she had arrived at the castle, but the grim looking Fearum seemed to notice her being calmer than she usually was. Neah herself could only shrug at such things, as the days went on with a mundane normalcy. Neah awoke with the pounding on the door to her small ‘room’, if one could call it that, and line up with the others as Baruc gave each of them their daily assignments. Baruc had intended her to learn more than to just clean, showing her to the kitchens and instructing her on basic tasks which Neah found to be egregiously tedious. Neah knew how to keep her own fur clean and combed but learning how Fearum nobility did it sounded like some manner of science. The lady of the castle had not taken a liking to her, but she was at least an acceptable replacement should the need arise for a handmaiden.

 Today however was special as Baruc showed her towards the western side of the castle. “Now, pay attention Neah. There is something my lord requires, and I think your talents I think will be appropriate.”

 Neah and Baruc walked towards a distant door, opening it to reveal a small but cozy office. Neah stepped in, and her jaw began to open with some amazement. The office was like a tower, with two layers of bookshelves, with an upper layer full to the brim with old, dusty tomes. The middle of the office held an old desk, cluttered with papers and materials, with a chair lazily put into the back. Two couches were built into the room which allowed a guest or two to sit while they spoke to the Baron in the privacy of his personal library, as Baruc nudged Neah forward. Neah was given a feather brush as Baruc smiled. “The baron’s personal office, Neah. I kind of thought you’d like it.”

 Neah was a bit speechless as Baruc snapped her back to reality. He tapped his foot to the ground, which Neah learned was a sign she needed to turn to him and be at attention. Baruc spoke kindly “Albrich was going to have some guests over from one of the local villages, and the office hasn’t been used in over a month sadly. So little happens ya see. Baron wants to make a very good impression, so all that dust needs to come down. Spiderwebs too. Quicker, the better.”

 “Oh.” Neah frowned a bit. In her hope, she wanted to read all those strange looking tomes. Baruc had already guessed it and nodded at her “Once you are done, I’ll come and get you. If you finish early, I’m certain Albrich won’t mind a peak at some of these old journals an’ such.”

 “Yes, sir.” Neah paused before giving the chief servant a puzzling look “H-he won’t mind, will he?”

 “Most of these books are on old history, not that anyone really reads it.”

 Neah frowned to this and turned her attention to the books. She said nothing, but what Baruc had mentioned had felt harmed to her. Had her grandmaster been in the room, the old Kerk would have grabbed Baruc by his throat and launched him out a nearby window. Information was meant to be studied and learned, all of it, no matter what it was. Work went into writing history, not letting it rot away on shelves. Baruc could quickly tell something was wrong but dared not ask. As much as Neah was learning things she didn’t want to know, so was Baruc. Even knowing some things about the Kerks, Neah often fumbled in her words and her beliefs certainly matched the tediousness of the Kerks. That tediousness coming from a Otterfolk had caught him constantly off guard. So wisely, he just nodded.

 “I’ll come back soonish to check in on ya. This little meeting isn’t till the sun starts going down past the trees. Either I or Hegwer will be bringing you your supper.”

 Neah understood and soon enough she was left alone in the room as the door closed behind her. Looking over all the books gave her pause, as she climbed over the desk to the first sets of books.

 Neah felt disgust as she rubbed her paw over one of the covers, seeing dust coming off it. She read the title ‘Annual Reports for the Fall Season’. The title made her curious, considering the entire region was in a perpetual state of fall, and her mind raced with questions. ‘Do they have seasons, perhaps not traditional seasons, but time hasn’t stopped here has it?’, ‘What do they grow in the Reich? Do they have more than just lettuce and pumpkin?’, ‘I’ve seen meat in the kitchens, how do they have it when the entire ground floor is dried leaves?’. Neah snapped herself out of it and got to work, cleaning off the dust and carefully cleansing the book’s covers with a rag.

 It didn’t take her as long as she thought as she finished the first bookshelf, reading book covers. The bookshelf she was cleaning laid in the very back of the office, but it had the most mundane legal documents she had the displeasure of learning. Three entire tomes of horrific girth laid on the bottom all titled ‘The Winter-White Dispute’, three volumes Neah was curious about but dared not try to even lift. Tomes of taxes going back a decade, several misplaced scrolls on unfinished edicts, and a volume of trade agreements stretching across the Autumn Reich.

 Neah didn’t like politics, she loved history, but she knew one of her sisters would have loved nothing more than to delve into all this mundane work. She began working all around, circling as she cleaned and wiped. Then she saw something which had not only caught her eyes but widened it. It was like a gift of sorts, her paws immediately reaching for one of the books, and exclaimed in amazement.

 “They have Erodux Rex’s third volume on the Great Warlord’s biography!?”

 Erodux Rex would be a name not many knew, a Ratfolk druidic monk who lived during the time of the Great Warlord and former shadow shaman. Like many Ratik, he crossed the sea when the Great Horde conquered all northern Kevica, and he wrote over fifty volumes of its history, although most would call his writings dull and pointlessly descriptive. Neah flipped the pages of the book to a random one in the middle and smiled as she read the words of the dull historian out loud.

 ‘–amped near Alysha, an elvish community of fifty-two. It had three bakers, one blacksmith, one blacksmith’s apprentice, one weaver, thirty farmers, ten youths, four travelers, and two innkeepers. The Great Warlord destroyed Alysha at dawn, so any further information on Alysha was lost, and too my best guess it had herded sheep. The Great Warlord had sent twenty warriors, led by Captain Vumerux, into the community. The Great Warlord mentioned to me that he had sent Vumerux because he was skilled and experienced from destroying the communities of Burysha, Curnyar’var, Neur’var, Armeiu’var, Amon–‘

 The dryness of the tome Neah had learned was controversial, as Erodux droned on and on about such details. Some say that his two last tomes were just counting the accomplishments of the Great Warlord to finish up a single sentence, a fact she had refuted when she and Isaiah had studied the work in length. Yet, the earlier tomes were lost, his more amateurish work, and the 3rd rare historical record was now in her paw. She continued to read and read, taking herself back to the Scribe Hall, where she and Isaiah would read from dawn till dusk. She and the other scribes came to really despise the grandiose claims of other historians they read, and she and Isaiah had once read the more well-known works of Jurnox Ragust, whose work mystified the Great Horde. Neah scanned the bookshelves, finding the ever common ‘Histories of the Great Horde’ by Jurnox and scoffed. Jurnox was a laughable read, it constantly made absurd claims of aggression by non-Ratik and felt more like a book of justifications. Neah remembered when Isaiah invited her to a group who read the book aloud, laughing and joking about the poor sourcing and that not the priests would burn the book in sacrifice to the Forest Gods.

 She fondly remembered her first days in that scribe hall well, like being dropped into boiling water and simmering into a mundane set of skills and rituals. She had not known she had such an eye for the details as the other Scribes did. Her focus returned to the book, making mental notes, and reading to herself, lost in the words. She formulated the knowledge she learned from what she knew. Jurnox would always mention Captain Vumerux as a passive and weak-willed captain, yet from what she read, such a captain had a greater and harsher record of violence and raids. She was even somewhat shocked to learn that the Great Warlord had even punished some of his soldiers for being too genocidal when the Ratik first arrived on Kevica, but later records showed a change of heart for the worse on that. She read deeper into the tome, looking for an answer to that, but a sudden jiggling of the door’s handle on the office made her suddenly jump to attention.

 Walking into the room was the Lady Shetmieser, her orange and red dress was matched with finery of her blouse and a fur lined collar, a delicate cape and old rings spoke volumes of her wealth. She had a cold look, even when she acted quite surprised to see Neah looking over the book in her husband’s office, and Neah instinctively and quickly closed it.

 Yet, following her, two small heads poked out between the sides of her, the bastard youngsters who seemed quite simple minded and spoke with a kindness “Oh, hello.”

 “Neah.” Lady Shetmieser spoke with concern. Neah quickly came to the front of the desk, and nodded to her, speaking in a sudden desperation “Oh, forgive me Lady Shetmieser! I—well—you see—” Neah’s words failed her, but the Fearum lady held up her paw to get her to stop before giving a deep sigh.

 Neah knew her little despite having seen her the most since she came to the castle. She had ended up only briefly doing the work of a handmaiden, although her inexperienced did show quite considerably. It was not surprise that the lady of the castle knew Neah, however, and seemed to tolerate her inability to speak. Neah calmed down and explained “Baruc sent me to clean the office, mam. I didn’t mean to, well, I didn’t think anyone would be here. I’m sorry, I’ll—”

 “What were ya reading about?” One of the youngsters asked, and the other quickly chimed in as the two came to the front. “You can read?”

 “I see, well, I’ll have to ask you to shoo for now, Neah. Baruc and my husband will have just have to use the court to do their business in. I have paws full as it is with these two and—” Lady Shetmieser began, but Neah spoke to the youngsters to quickly inform them.

 “Oh. Yes, I can read. I was reading the third volume of one of my favorite historians!” Neah sounded excited, and Lady Shetmieser felt almost insulted to be ignored. Yet, Neah frowned and turned her attention to the noble woman, apologizing “Oh, sorry mam. I was just so excited to see the third book of Erodux Rex, the Ratik historian. I had hoped that there was time before I was caught reading. I—” Neah stopped herself and frowned even harder. Lady Shetmieser smiled a bit “Kerkian honesty I presume.”

 “Y-yes, mam.”

 “What is a Erod-ux Rex?” One of the youngsters asked. Neah perked up again and spoke in a jovial tone. She returned behind the desk and opened the book, beckoning the two youngsters to her. Lady Shetmieser didn’t speak, curious as to what the servant had in mind. She was aware Neah was an adopted creature of a Kerkian clan, and thus it was expected for Neah to read and write. Kerkians valued their written word deeply, but she was somewhat impressed on the enthusiasm and obliviousness Neah performed as she charmed the two youngsters who climbed onto the desk table and listened intently to Neah’s explanations.

 “This is the third great book of over seventy the Great Warlord’s biography, he was Ratik druid from what is now the Land of Ice and Snow, thought hard to say if he was from what is now Hegwig or Drod-Burrow. You can see in the margins here at the beginning, there is a peculiar drawing of a horned wolf. Horned wolves are said to be a symbol of several old Beastfolk tribes there, primarily amongst the Hedgehogfolk and Harefolk. I believe it’s a Harefolk symbol, because of the way it is drawn with a white fur, which is a symbol of an ancient Harefolk tribe that used to live there. Now, Erodux Rex was a druid, although not always, having begun his career as a Shadow Shaman. He traveled in the retinue of the Great Warlord most of his life, and although his writings are dry to most, they are much more telling.”

 The youngsters blinked, as Neah looked between them as they flanked her. “Oh. Can you two read?”

 “That is what granny came here to help us with.” One said with a huff to his voice. “But it sounds so boring!”

 “Ulwitch!” Lady Shetmieser spoke more seriously, and the youngster quickly silenced himself. He apologized, and Neah smiled “I know that feeling well. When my father, Patriarch Tendrov, sat me down to learn how to read Kerkian, I was constantly trying to wiggle away too. Though, once you learn how to read, you won’t need others to help you. Look over there, see that book? The red leather cover. That’s a book on your family history.”

 “How do ya know?”

 “Well, because it reads ‘Shetmieser Family History’ for starters.” Neah smiled, as the two youngsters smiled back. Lady Shetmieser interrupted and beckoned the two over to her “Now, you two, why don’t you ask the cooks to bring a platter of cheeses and meats to the office and grab yourselves some sweets. It’s going to be a long day teaching you two, but no need to do so on an empty stomach.” The two raced away, leaving Neah alone with Lady Shetmieser. Once gone, the noble woman turned her full attention to Neah, who expected the worst. Instead, Lady Shetmieser asked a rather simple question.

 “Neah, I must ask, how well read are you?”

 “Oh. Well, besides reading Kerkian, I can read Ratik, Wildar, Elvish, Orcish, and some Curdan. Of course, I can also speak and read Fearum now of course. I’ve read fifteen of Erodux’s volumes, and a half. I’ve read The Shadowed Pilgrimage, as a part of my studies into Wildar historiography and poetry, though honestly it was duller than most. Oh, I read Jornux’s historical books, thought I’d hate to even call that overly wordy foolery a historical work. I’ve read some Nor Curdan missives and trade agreements, and before I left was starting to read one of my Scribe Hall’s favorites, the Elvish and Orcish Accounts of Gurchland, which is why I had to learn elvish and orcish in the first place. The scribe hall always said it preferred to record interviews in a native language. Though, I prefer the Kerkian edits, and—” Lady Shetmieser held up her paw again and Neah stopped. Both cringed for different but understandable reasons as Lady Shetmieser nodded.

 “I see. I am not well versed in Kerkian customs, but you do sound quite well read enough. Neah, have you taught anyone before?”

 “Kind of.”

 “Well, define ‘kind of’?”

 “Kind of’ is a word used to describe a mix between yes and no, being a nuanced answer and—”

 “Neah.” The Weaselfolk spoke firmly, and Neah again cursed herself mentally. She apologized “Sorry, mam.”

 “You have taught others before?”

 “Yes. Though I don’t think I was very good. My grandmaster sent me and my brother, Isaiah, to help teach some newer imitates how to read Ratik. I mean, they learned, but I got the impression they didn’t like how we taught them.”

 “In what way?”

 “My Grandmaster told me we were too soft.” Neah shrugged.

 Lady Shetmieser nodded. Knowing the Kerks by their legends and troubled rumors she had heard from Albrich and Baruc, anything less than a beating was considered ‘soft’ for the Kerks. It kind of made Lady Shetmieser suspicious of Neah in some degree, for a meekish creature didn’t seem at all used to abuse.

 “Neah, I am going to ask you to stay here. I want you to help tutor my grandchildren, for they will certainly need it.” Neah felt a shiver run down her spine when she heard Lady Shetmieser speak these words, looking shocked and being speechless. Neah began to smile and slowly nod, especially at the prospect of being away from menial work and getting at least back into her element. “Y-yes. Yes! Thank you, I—”

 “No need for thanking, Neah. There is nothing official till I speak to my husband on these matters. It is normally a priest or parent who does such tasks as this, but our priest as you have come to know is recluse, and I grow tired. I’ve already raised many Kits, and my son’s lacking interest in responsibility now sees me raising them in his stead. We can begin by you helping and we will hammer the details later. Get those books, the ones of the top shelves just above you, and finish up whatever Baruc had you doing.”

 Neah nodded and smiled, feeling at long last after a terrible month of horrific luck and terror, she was now on the rise again.

 It had been three long days since that meeting with Lady Shetmieser as Neah put her paw into the ground and slowly extracted dirt from the ground. It was warm day, but hardly a sunny one. Baruc had her assigned to a gardening duty today, with Hegwer and Opan teaching her the ropes. Neah had anxiety to say the least, partly due to not knowing how Albrich would react to Lady Shetmieser suggesting her sudden promotion to tutor, or if Lady Shetmieser had somehow forgotten. Hegwer had been helping her learn how to do some trimming in the garden, although it was a form of gardening that was utterly alien to her.

 Outside in the main garden, the paths of stone and waters of the fountain were swarmed with the fall leaves which endlessly fell. The ground was orange and red, with bushes and shrubberies being dry and almost leafless. The whole thing gave an ugly and ruined vibe to it, but the Fearum seemed more than intent to pretend it was normal. Neah had discovered she had no talent for gardening, but Hegwer did, even though he would never claim he was amazing at it. Neah cut some of the dry branches, making the old and withered branches seem ever quainter looking.

 Neah looked around her at the hollow garden and learned another important facet.

 There was an emptiness, more so than just her surroundings.

 She was learning names and peoples, yet she felt like she was lost still. The garden was rarely visited by the castle’s residents, not even it’s guards really peaked or showed interest in the place. Eternal fall also meant a sameness which simply never ended, and although Neah had thought it to be a perfect paradise when she was a Scribe, always plastered in her books and writings, the beautiful orange glow of the Autumn Reich felt oppressive. Every day the leaves fell from the sky, and every day the Fearum dealt with this fact. Opan was not far off, complaining as he was, sweeping away leaves from the cobblestone paths which could easily be buried beneath the fall. Everyday these leaves would return, and everyday Opan or Hegwer were out and about constantly removing the leaves to make the castle garden look at least presentable and clean. Nothing was clean in the Autumn Reich, even the rich and wealthy amongst all of them lived in a poverty of their own environment.

 Neah remembered something, something fond which her adoptive father had once told her.

 ‘Winters come and go, but spring arrives all the same. Even in lands of eternal snow and eternal summer, warm and cold breezes break away the monotony’. Neah smiled at this memory, knowing that she had at least something to look forward to. Now all she could think about was the future. Maybe to perhaps write home to her clan, tell them she was at least alright. Maybe get her adoptive father to negotiate a ransom.

 “You.”

 Neah’s eyes widened and she slowly turned her head, seeing Ulric behind her in his full royal regalia. An ornate bronze royal collar of rings encompassed both of his shoulders, his boots were of fine silk, and a feathered cap upon his brow. His cape was held on his person by a golden chain, and although for a Fearum he looked quite dashing, Neah could only see an ugly, dark looking face staring back at her. Neah slowly arose to meet him and felt a shiver of fear for him.

 Ulric approached, growling lowly “Are you a servant or a slave, water dog? You bend your head to your betters.” He snapped. Neah nearly had forgotten the old custom; slaves of the Ratik bent their heads to their masters to show their iron clasps. Neah was silent and did as ordered as Ulric grunted in a dissatisfied tone.

 “You wretched thing.” He grunted, relaxing a bit as he circled about. He looked at the shrubberies Neah had been cutting, and scoffed “Utterly trashy work, really. If Baruc wasn’t such a soft, stupid thing a real chief servant would have had you lashed. Or worse.”

 Neah kept still, but some thought swirled in her head. Ulric had not done much to her since she arrived, likely due to his father making it very clear she was Albrich’s property now, not his. It was strange he would approach her now of all times. The more Ulric spoke, the clearer it became that his intentions were full of angst and fury. With a hint of snobbish superiority which was far above his actual grasp.

 “Mother tells me you are going to be my offspring’s tutor. That since I am apparently incapable of teaching them even basic lessons, that you will just have to suffice. Not that they are deserving of any form of education anyway considering whom their mother is. Hmph.” Ulric grunted as he put his paws to his hips. “You know, when we were getting back to the castle, I had been thinking what I would do you, since you were my gift. Father took my other gifts, my jester, and my servant. Now he takes you. Not even sure what I would have done. Maybe see if you could cook, not that I suspect a lesser creature capable of it. Maybe I’d have you write a book about my deeds, something much more worthwhile.”

 Neah didn’t speak, even though she had a lot to say. She kept her mouth closed but cringed heavily when he mentioned his ‘deeds’. That sentence alone deserved mockery, and for the sake of her life she kept her mouth shut.

 Yet, this wasn’t too last.

 “Well, speak!?” Neah had her chin forced upward by Ulric’s paw, he stared with hatred into her eyes as Neah did again as bided, but with a much clearer anger in her voice. “About what, sir?”

 Ulric had to think on it, but he let go by pushing her lightly away from him and huffed “You know, you savage from beyond the tree line are quite ungrateful. You come from mud huts and mud pools, while we live in stone and brick, and– “

 “That just isn’t true.” Neah blurted out. Neah quickly realized her mistake as Ulric pulled her up by the collar of her shirt and pushed her down to the ground. It hurt, but she quickly arose and bent her head. It was clear to Neah that Ulric was trying to play a game of overreaction, a game she knew all too well with bored taskmasters back in Reidland. Ulric spoke darkly to her “Speak against me again slave, and you’ll be spending the next year in shackles, and I don’t care what Baruc says. I am the prince and heir to this land. My ancestor loves me, and I love him. I am a scion of the Shetmiesers, and lest you forget–“ Ulric rubbed his paw across the iron clasp of Neah’s neck, putting a small claw mark on it which Neah could hear as he pushed into the metal. Neah flinched at the sound it made, and when Ulric was done his voice changed.

 It was growing softer, and Neah grow more concerned.

 “Slave, I am no barbarous Ratik, we are not cruel and sadistic, which is why I have a gift for you. Just as you are a stolen gift from me, I have a special surprise I wanted to show you.” Neah raised her head and the world paused. She had not noticed, but Ulric had her scribe clothes hidden to the back side of his cloak which he unfurled. The purple fabric was thick yet worn, being misused as Neah’s pillow. Neah didn’t speak, hoping to her gods that Ulric would just throw it into the bushes or stomp it.

 “A dress made for a barbarian, but with some aid, it becomes much more presentable! Here, let me do a few improvements.” Ulric brought out a knife from his belt, this large and imposing thing. He brought the knife close to the ancient robe, as Neah spoke up.

 “P-please! Please don’t.” Neah tried to go grasp her purple robe, but Ulric pulled it away in a mocking way.

 “Oh, don’t be so stupid, slave. Not like you were using it properly, anyway, using it as a pillow in that ‘room’ Baruc had given you. You aren’t going to use it, so let me just make a few little adjustments so that it had less weight to it, eh!”

 Ulric cut into the robe’s upper sleeve lightly and began moving down. Neah tried to again grab it as Ulric had his fun. Neah’s desperate cries became more and more drastic.

 “Please! My lord! Ulric! No! Please!” Neah’s voice began to carry weight and became louder. Opan and Hegwer, who were far enough to not notice at first, soon noticed now. Hegwer disappeared, putting down his rake and ran to find Baruc. Opan froze, unsure what to even do, his eyes shifted to some of the guards on the walls, looking down half amused. Ulric pranced around, cutting piece by piece of Neah’s scribe robes, small and large parts falling from it. Ulric was bigger and stronger than Neah by a margin, but not big or strong enough to not avoid the Oturan grabbing onto her last vestige of her clan and pulling hard on it. Neah was shocked by Ulric’s strength, as he mocked her quite openly.

 “Come on now! You gotta pull harder than that, sea gulper!” The slur didn’t really hurt Neah as much as the knife being stabbed into the purple robe, Neah’s mind went blank as her eyes began to water, and she tried to keep her robes from further damage. Yet, she knew it was far too late, the robes were gone, and she was holding but the remains of it in her paw. Her sadness and anguish sparked an anger she had never felt before till now. Ulric was smiling quite widely, and his sadistic pleasure in bullying her seemed almost playful.

 Then Ulric said something. Something which caught Neah’s attention during their intense back and forth.

 “My ancestor would be so disappointed, did that black eyed wretch you traveled with have more spirit than you?” Neah stopped, and a ringing came into her ears. A soundless and terrible bit of brief rage as she remembered him. She would not let Ulric get away with defiling his name as well, and she would certainly not want his spirit thinking less of her for not defending him. Reason was thrown away, and in a desperate way she took her paw and charged up to Ulric and struck him across his face with her paw.

 It was a blur, her paw connected almost perfectly with Ulric’s face as he let go of the robes and Neah had the last vestiges in her paw, and as she awoke from the black haze of anger, she was rudely brought back into reality as Ulric screamed out in fury, backing away and touching his face. “What have you done! Owe! Ahh! Fall Father’s Bullocks!” Neah had found herself sitting, her paw wrapped around what remained of her scribe’s robes and looking up in horrible fear at Ulric. Her paw’s claws had cut deeply into Ulric’s face, from his round ears to his lips was the deep run scratches where she had struck him. She realized what had happened, even as she tried to think of some means out of it, but things went far too fast.

 “I-I am sorry. I didn’t–“ Neah whimpered

 “Guards! Help!” Ulric backed away, the noble and experienced Prince staggered as if he had received a terrible, mortal wound. The guards rushed down almost immediately, and as they were doing so, Baruc and Hegwer were rushing out. Ulric called out “Keep her still! You dare strike me!” Ulric reached for his dagger as the guards somewhat obeyed. Baruc got a good look at Ulric’s face as he rushed past him and came up to Neah, far from angry as much as concerned. Baruc could see a small creature, holding destroyed cloth in her paws tightly to her chest. The guards held Neah’s shoulders as Ulric growled “You! Baruc! You are supposed to keep these stupid things tame and docile, look at what she did! It’s your fault!”

 Baruc’s attentioned turned to Ulric, his normally concerned and happy voice became much more serious to a point which gave Neah anxiety, speaking in anger.

 “I got a lot I want to say to you, Ulric Shetmieser. Give me that!” Baruc slapped the knife from Ulric’s paw and didn’t bother to pick it up. “You got a great deal of nerve, ya know that!?”

 “You can’t talk to me this way! I’ll tell the Prince and–“

 “Go ahead, tell the Prince, get me killed while you’re at it! Then you can tell your father and mother all about that little adventure and see how long before you get disowned! If you were my own boy– “

 “He isn’t your boy, Baruc.” Neah turned to the new figure approaching, and she felt a need to back away in fear. Albrich Shetmieser came over swiftly to his son, touching the soft spots on Ulric’s face and looking with concern. His face twisted in anger when he turned to Neah, who tried to stammer out some manner of apology. “M-my lord. Pl-please, I didn’t–“

 “Take this thing to the dungeon at once.” Albrich ordered, and his guards obeyed. Neah continued to speak in partial madness, passing Hegwer and Opan who looked on with concern and personal anguish at the inability to do anything. There was an argument brewing behind her, and all that seemed to matter to Neah was what was in her paws. The guards struggled to grab and carry her further into the castle, as Neah continued to speak in hollow tones, no longer able to be heard by the creatures she was trying to beg to.

 “I–I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it. P-please. I–I–I–“ Neah’s teary eyes began to flow like a river, and her paws softened. Falling to the floor was the last pieces of a purple robe, carelessly blown to the side of a great stone hall, slowly being consumed by the incoming autumn leaves.