

“... L’sandra?”

The redhead blinked, snapping to attention as Pazamu’s tusk-heavy voice cut through the aftershock of fog still clinging to her thoughts. She glanced back to see the shaman, Luka and the crew of volunteers he had rounded from the Cloudwood camp staring at her expectantly. Lisandra brushed back the falling hair from her hair comb and offered an apologetic smile.

“... Sorry, it’s just up this way...”

The price of Ekossigan’s madness hung heavily on the ghost speaker as she continued to lead the group towards what was left of Gallo’s School For Boys. Her fingers still ached from her frantic assault of wood and vine; her stomach still heavy with the horror of children screaming and deafening cracks of splitting wood still rattled in her head. It was easier to smile and pretend all would be well when the children were around. Seven, she had counted, as she had led them back to camp. Only seven. She wondered how many had been left behind, mangled amongst the wreckage. Now every step into the deeper woods eroded her resolve.

Her thoughts stopped drifting when a warm shoulder came to nudge hers and Luka fell into step beside her at the front of the group.

“How you holdin’ up, Ly?” he murmured. She could see his worried frown peeking out beneath the oilskin of his hood.

“... I’m holdin’,” Lisandra murmured back softly, her refined veneer falling by the wayside. She was grateful for the repeated nudge of his shoulder as they walked. It was better than drifting, “Mostly in an upward direction. Better off than a lotta other folk tonight.”

She saw him give a sombre nod from the corner of her eye, “... how bad is it up ahead?”

The oracle’s brows knit together as she willed back the lump in her throat.

“Three of the dormitories fell from the tree before we cut the bastard responsible down. He locked all the boys inside,” she murmured, “I don’t even know how many bodies are left to recover.”

“You know we can handle this for ya, right?” his hand reached for her shoulder, gently squeezing it like it made the words have more weight, “Ya don’t have to be back here Ly. I know it’s not easy, with the... the spook stuff and all.”

“That’s precisely why I have to be here, Luka,” her response was swift, and sombre, “No one else can hear them anymore.”

Lisandra moved ahead, pushing through to the clearing ahead that opened up to the enormous tree that dwarfed the forest around it. It would have been a magnificent view, if it weren’t for the splintered wreckage of the fallen dorms and strewn bodies. The air here was dense with death. She could feel, taste it almost in the air.

Taking a moment, she collected her thoughts, dragging them into line to regain composure, and turning to the group as they entered in after her. Every face formed a grim expression as they surveyed the scene behind her at the edge of the torchlight. She didn't have to instruct them, or announce the arrival. She simply exchanged a sober nod with the Shaman and he began directing the crew to work.

"Got a few loose ends to tie up in the school," she cupped Luka's horrified face between her hands with a sympathetic frown, "You be right down here?"

The half-elf nodded absently before he tore his eyes away from the scene and looked at her.

"It's... strange, seein' ya like this, Ly. You're so... calm," he scoffed, a little off-kilter.

Lisandra released him and shook her head, her expression like stone, "No, Luka... I'm *furious*. You've just never seen me this angry before."

His green eyes searched hers for a few moments before a look of resignation sank in and he nodded. His gaze shifted over her shoulder and hardened, "... and ya said you killed the sick bastard that did this?"

"Yes."

The half-elf nodded again before he muttered back, "Good."

Lisandra watched her brother head off towards Pazamu and the volunteers before quietly making her accent. The spiraling staircase still held remnants of Azrabey's defence, fey corpses fallen from the platforms above littering her journey upwards. The Seen of the Unseen held back a hoard of lesser fey, and she couldn't even break down a door. The inadequacy tasted ashen on her tongue as she shoved a corpse aside with her boot.

*'No one else was able to open those dormitories, either...'* Xambria's quiet presence reminded her. The soul's presence in her mind had been quiet and observing from the background for most of the day. No doubt to give the medium whatever space she could. The reminder was true, but it didn't help stem the grief as she crested onto the landing proper.

*Gallo's School for Boys.*

It's seemed a sick joke, perhaps even one purposefully chosen by the deranged fey. No longer a school, and more of a gallows. Lisandra's lip curled in disdain as she kicked a gremlin corpse aside with a measure of force, knocking another wretched body over the side of the platform before she entered the foyer.

"This shouldn't have fookin' happened," she seethed, unsheathing her rapier as she checked the rafters for any slinking gremlins. "How many kids need to be taken, broken an' murdered before people decide enough is enough?"

She felt Xambria stir, but the presence remained silent as she continued her search throughout the playroom and out onto the exterior walkways. The bridges where the dorms once stood clattered in the wind, hanging limply to point the way to the wreckage below. The oracle passed them with a grim expression. The door to the sleeping quarters hung open, still ripe with the stench of rot. Carrion had moved in to have their fill, though she wondered how the birds could stand it as she covered her buried nose in the crook of her elbow and continued on.

With the coast seemingly clear, she sheathed her rapier and, for the first time since setting foot up here, she took in the view from the boughs of the enormous tree. Over the dark canopy of the cloudwood she could see the distant pinpricks of light of Flint proper. The Nettles sat dark and gloomy between the two, with the only dots of activity Dale's post at Cauldron Hill.

Ekossigan may have been deranged, but the oracle had the sinking feeling his rants about the *thing* gestating within the Hill was not simply the haunting delusions of a rogue fey. She *had* heard the screams. The memory sent a shiver up her spine and Lisandra shrank a little deeper into her dress coat. When she had fallen to the catwalk, lost to slumber, it was the Hill she dreamed of. The howling of thousands of voices woven in a tangled chorus that chilled her blood. Cauldron Hill gave birth to something dark and hungry, as if the land itself sprouted deformed limbs and ripped itself free to feast on the city... and when she woke, as she pulled herself together and got to her feet, it was Nevard's words that haunted her.

'Cauldron hill is not safe. Twice we will be deceived into thinking it safe to return, but we must avoid the place and avoid being tricked.'

*Until the darkness passes.*

Lisandra had the sinking suspicion she and her fellows would be walking right on into that darkness, and the very thought had icy claws of anxiety tearing at her stomach. Deranged, Ekossigan may have been, but much to the oracle's chagrin, she did not take him for a liar.

'*There is nothing you can do about that problem right now,*' Xambria chided, her presence becoming more notable as she inched out of her retreated state. '*Save angsting over the Hill for the morning. You came here for a purpose, Lisandra.*'

With a heavy sigh, the oracle ran her hands over her face, as if to wipe away the thoughts, and turned her back to the night lights of Flint.

"You're right... I'll go see Dale tomorrow. I s'pose if anyone in the city has insight into the Hill in MacBannin's wake, it's him."

This time she made her way into the small office no one had the presence of mind to check on their first visit. Ella in the state she was in, was likely to not have collecting paperwork on the mind, and there was one piece in particular that Lisandra felt important to find.

The desk itself had been split open; it's splintered top torn apart by sharp little claws in lieu of unlocking the door beneath. Carefully she picked through its contents with Xambria's presence curiously at her shoulder watching on.

A crudely bound folder of parchment showed records of financial transactions for the school. The earliest entries were looking grim.

*'It looks as though they only had enough to run the school a few more months,' Xambria commented. 'I suppose that will go a little further now, at least... if the gremlins didn't take their coffers.'*

"That is not exactly the most silver of linen's, Xambria," the medium frowned, and tucked the folder into her satchel.

*'No... no I suppose it isn't.'*

The second batch of parchment took the breath from her lungs, and she wandered over to sit on the headmaster's bed as she slowly read through the list of names. Enrollment details for all the boys in the school. 31 names listed, each with birthdates. All under the age of 8, except for *Herrit Ward*. Age 12. No parents on record with a last name like that. She was a Ward, once. It hadn't been so long that she had forgotten the meaning.

"They deserve better than to end up without a home," she murmured softly, "Seven mouths to feed, bodies to cloth and keep warm in the coming months. That no cheap ask, and Otis is already just trying to survive. How do I make this work?"

*They left it underneath.*

The oracle glanced up, nothing Xambria's presence over by the desk still. "Left what?"

It took the incorporeal woman's gaze to glance up from what she was looking at with a quizzical edge to her, "... are you talking to me?"

"Didn't ye say somethin'?"

Xambria's ghostly face frowned and shook her head.

Lisandra paused and turned her awareness to the space around her. Another spirit perhaps? There was more than enough death here to have them still linger.

"... Hello?" she called out softly, though it felt a little silly when the only active spiritual force she could sense was her mental companions. "What did ye say?"

There wasn't any answer for a time. The room hung silently, the air stale and tainted with the stench of death. Xambria watched her closely with a worried frown as Lisandra opened her senses to the room.

The wind was whistling through the boughs of the school, and the wood creaked softly. Long, soft and eerie in a way that made think of breathing. As the tree groaned amongst the wind again, she heard a whisper of a voice between the cracks.

*Beneath the bed.*

His gaze shifted to Xambria, still watching her intently.

"Did you hear that?" she asked the spectre. Xambria hesitantly shook her head again.

Lisandra got to her feet, bundling the papers into her satchel with the others.

"Either I'm going insane, or..."

She grasped the edge of the flimsy wooden cot bed and turned it up on it's side. The stench of rot hit her forcefully enough to cover her face and blink back tears as she peered down at the treasure trove beneath made of half-gnawed squirrels, mouldy food and *many* pieces of fine jewelry, coins and other small valuables. She stared for a few moments in disbelief, before quickly conjuring an unseen servant to help.

"Move the food and corpses into the corner of the room," she ordered, pointing to the pile before she reached down behind the bed to retrieve the headmasters pillow and began emptying the feather contents onto the floor.

*'How did you know that was under there?'* Xambria scowled, though mostly at the less desirable contents of the pile as it began floating slowly over into the far corner of the office as instructed.

"No idea," Lisandra shook out the last of the down, adding the pure chaos of the room, and tugged the blanket over the to begin cleaning off the goods. "Anonymous tip, apparently."

Xambria watched her pick out pieces of jewelry and coins from the mound of mess and polish them as clean as she could on the worn blanket before placing them inside the empty pillow case.

*'That is kind of disgusting...'*

"Xambria, ye delved into crypts an' old things full of dead stuff for a livin'. This can't be that gross," she retorted, not looking up from her work. "Besides, it's less disgusting' than seven kids going cold an' hungry."

The presence went silent, but remained watchful as she continued to fill the case. When the last coin was placed, and the most offensive decay removed, she dismissed the servant and found a clean square of blanket to wipe her hands clean on with a grimace.

Lisandra was more than happy to shuffle back toward the doorway to get a breath of fresh air as she peered into the makeshift sack. There had to be about a thousand gold's worth of valuables in there.

"That should keep them goin' for a while longer, at least..." she breathed a sigh of relief and tied up the case. "... alright, let's go check how they're doing on the ground."

She was ready to leave the grim scene behind her, even though the one below was worse. There was still work to do, and it was getting later by the minute. With a soft murmur, she raised her hand in an unconscious gesture, calling on the aid of the spirits here in the clearing to guide her to the ground. Stepping from the edge of the catwalk, her form became light and as she thought of the ground, her body drifted that way. The levitation ended as her feet touched the ground, and the many invisible hands that gripped her form retreated. With a silent sense of gratitude, she tucked the pillow case under her arm and went to find Pazamu and Luka.

The pair were hard at work, still carefully extracting bodies and wrapping them in blankets in a row to the side. She didn't linger too long on the lineup, but waited patiently for Luka to finish carefully wrapping his current charge before calling him over. His arms and hands were smudged with blood lit by the light of her badge. He grimaced a wordless apology as he caught her staring and wiped his hands on the seat of his pants that were covered in mud.

"All done up top?" he asked, distracting her from the macabre scene.

She nodded and indicated to the bulging pillowcase under her arm.

"I found some valuables the assholes responsible aren't gonna need anymore," she explained, "It will help take care of the new boys. I'll leave it with Otis. Take it to his guy and get a good price for anything not already fluid, yeah?"

Luka's brow raised, and he gave her a knowing nod, "Alright. Yeah, I can see to it."

She nodded back and let him return to the work. Turning her back to the wreckages, Lisandra began to make her way back towards the edge of the clearing, passing the precession of wrapped children as she went. It was hard to pretend it wasn't there. She wondered which boys on this list in her satchel were the ones laid out here in the grass. She... needed to know. She couldn't let them fade into obscurity and become nothing but sad memories in the minds of seven survivors.

Swearing to herself, she turned on her heel and headed back to the wreckage.

"Pazamu!"

The shaman looked up from his work as she approached.

"Lay the rest of the children out without coverings," she instructed, quickly shrugging out of her

"They are... a bit of a mess, L'sandra," he warned gruffly, frowning down on her.

"I need their faces visible," she reiterated, the sternness in her voice was more stealing her own nerves than demanding his compliance, but it had the same effect. "You can finish tending to them once I am done. I only need to interrupt this once."

The orc inclined his head and relayed instructions to the other men. Rolling up the sleeves of her blouse, Lisandra fell in line with Luka to assist. Neither of them spoke, though she often felt his eyes on her as she carefully picked through the broken wood and cleared the way to another body to be carried. Then another... and another. Eventually all the children were laid out and Pazamu summoned a small font of water into the depression of a broken crate and the workers began to wash up.

Lisandra joined them, washing the blood from her hands, though smudges still ruined the creamy silk of her shirt.

"Luka, I need one more favour," she implored. The pair looked wearily at each other before he nodded and gestured for her to lead the way.

Kneeling down at the first body in the line up, she pulled open her satchel to retrieve an ink pen and the enrollment sheet to hand up to her brother.

"With any luck, I'll start mentioning names. I need you to mark each one on the page for me," she instructed, "I won't be able to focus on both."

The medium didn't wait for him to reply, she simply closed her eyes, sat at the feet of a boy that looked no older than seven or eight. Her focus shifted, her breathing slowed and she sought out that place inbetween where she could speak to them. Unknown to her, a few of the men nearby watched nervously as her eyes frosted over like dim glass.

Lisandra's vision gave way to a hazy scene of the clearing, and the same small boy sat in the grass, not far from the line up of bodies, crying.

"Hello..." she greeted him softly, lifting a hand to wave. Her body mimicked the movement in a delayed and sluggish fashion. "What is your name, little one?"

The spirit stared at her, confused, but when he realized she could see him, he was suddenly right in front of her looking up with terrified eyes.

"I'm Jerrin! Jerrin Boyd," he replied with urgency, "You can see me!"

Lisandra's head nodded softly, "I can see you Jerrin Boyd. I am... so sorry I couldn't stop you all from falling."

Her chest was tight, but she forced back the tears that prickled hotly in the corners of her eyes and focused on keeping her breath steady.

"I need your help, Jerrin," she continued, feeling the cold touch of the boys fingers on hers as he stared up at her, "Your friends here in the clearing, your carers... can you tell me all of their names?"

The boy's spirit looked at the hazy line up bodies and sniffled, wiping his face as if he were still alive, and still had wet tears to stem. "I can try, miss..."

Lisandra took her time as Jerrin made out the boys identities, mumbling back name after name to her brother. It was a terrible request, but the boy did his best... and she consoled herself on not having to ask as much of the children back at camp.

"... and that one is Kas," the little spirit finished glumly, identifying the final body.

"Thank you..." Lisandra reached out for his hand, feeling her voice hitch a little in her throat. It felt more like a cool draft between her fingers than a hand. She could feel her time in between was near an end, "Is there anything that I can do for you in return Jerrin?"

The spirit slumped and frowned, thinking hard before he met her gaze, "Tell Perry it was me who took his wooden soldier. I put it in the bottle tree so he didn't find it. Tell him I'm sorry I lied when he asked me if I seen it, kay?"

"Okay."

The tears finally fell from Lisandra's eyes. She felt them, hot on her cheeks as she nodded and the spirit faded. She slumped in the mud, feeling the physical exhaustion rush back into her. The world solidified. The wind cooled her wet cheeks. Luka knelt down, clutching the parchment in one hand and placing his other on her shoulder as he leaned in.

"Ly... that's enough for one night. You're gonna drop if you keep pushing yourself," he murmured, conscious of the small audience that watched from over by the closest broken dorm.

"Don't worry..." she assured him, wiping her eyes briefly with the heel of her palm, "I'm done. Did you get the names?"

The worried frown deepened on his face, but he nodded and handed her back the list.

"Thanks," she sniffled and busied herself with pretending to glance it over before tucking back away. The medium accepted his help to her feet and she waved over to the shaman.



"I have all I need," she inclined her head slightly, in a gesture of gratitude, "I... I shall leave you to finish tending to the boys."

Her cheeks felt a little flush at the eyes of the workers on her. She couldn't read their faces in the shifting torchlight, and was more than happy to turn on her heel for a final time and make her way back towards the camp as soon as Pazamu signalled her off with a wave of his large hand.

"Be careful, Ly," she heard her brother's worried words behind her, "Plenty of dead critters here. Plenty not dead, I bet, too."

Lisandra drew her rapier and entered the treeline.

Damned be any fey that crossed her path tonight.