

"Bounty Hunter"

2-2-2

He slid his sword from his sheath and listened. Silence pounded his ears and the darkness of evening blindfolded him. Finally Duskani drew away from the entrance of the cave and slipped back towards his hostage, Mikalo.

"Anything?" whispered Mikalo. Duskani shook his head and sat down, his back against the cave wall.

Mikalo looked around the cave. The hard ground beneath them was tightly compacted dirt and little pebbles were scattered across the floor. The entire room was littered with the silhouettes of ominous shapes that were indefinable in the darkness and a musty smell hugged the air.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"It's an abandoned cave. It probably belonged to a spider or maybe a millipede. I found it two years ago and have been using it when I'm in the area over night."

"This place is a lot different than home."

Duskani didn't say anything. He looked at the entrance of the cave again, clutching the handle of his weapon. A wind blew in through the opening and a single beam of moonlight momentarily lit up the safe-haven. Duskani's gray-green hair blew about his pale eyes and face and the corners of his tunic were pulled by the breeze.

Mikalo squirmed uncomfortably. He winced as his skin met the sharp edge of a stone. Finding a position that didn't hurt his transparent wings, he leaned back against his part of the cave wall, directly across from Duskani.

Somewhere between moonlight and sunrise, Mikalo fell asleep and he found himself back in the meadow with Alidy. But then he was awake again and being pulled to his feet by his captor.

Duskani undid the ropes around Mikalo's feet but left his hands tied. Together they walked out of the cave into the filtered sunlight of the dark forest floor. There seemed to be very little activity in the area, but Mikalo had to remind himself that this was a more dangerous place than the meadow. Surely no one would come out in the open here. They walked for an hour, climbing over roots protruding from the ground and weaving in and out of grass blades.

"Who approaches?" said a gruff voice from behind a nearby mushroom.

"Duskani, Bounty Hunter for the King. I bring a prisoner."

"Pass," the voice told them.

Duskani walked forward with Mikalo trailing behind. They had only gone a few steps when the same voice told them to stop again.

"Why isn't your prisoner tied up?" he demanded, referring to the lack of rope around Mikalo's neck and shoulders and chains that would keep him from flying away.

"He won't be trouble," said Duskani.

"All prisoners must be tied up. You don't want to risk him getting away, do you?"

"He won't be trouble," said Duskani again.

Mikalo could just barely see the Borglum that was interrogating them behind the large mushroom and he could hear the gruffing of the second.

After a few moments of what sounded like bickering between the two, the first said again, "Pass."

“Check-point,” Duskani explained simply and without being asked when they were out of ear shot. “You never know what kind of trouble makers come this way.”

“Am I a trouble maker?” Mikalo asked, his light blue eyes and pointed ears stood ready to receive an answer.

“A lot has changed, Mikalo,” said Duskani briefly.

“Including the definition of a trouble maker?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“It’s hard or you just don’t want to?” said Mikalo bitterly.

“How could you understand?” shouted Duskani. “How could you understand the life I’ve had to live for the past four years while you’ve been off enjoying yourself?”

“You chose that life!”

Mikalo was seething but Duskani had gone suddenly quiet.

“I *had* no choice,” said Duskani softly.

Silence was their companion for the rest of the day. Nothing eventful happened and neither one said anything to the other. Duskani’s manner remained dark all day but after a time, Mikalo’s returned to normal and his thoughts to the long, gold hair and dark eyes of Alidy.

When evening finally crossed their path, a small town came into view. The blue lights of the town lit up the gloaming.

“There’s an Inn here that we’ll stay at,” said Duskani. Mikalo didn’t respond but continued walking.

The Inn was at the base of a tree and the door was a small slat of swinging wood several inches from the ground. Duskani grabbed Mikalo’s bound hands and the two of them flew to the small platform in front of the entrance. The blue veins in Mikalo’s wings lit up as the blood

rushed through them. Too long had he not been able to use his wings – even a few short days had had a terrible effect on them.

The Inn wasn't crowded but most of the seats in the dining area were taken. Duskani walked over to the counter and grabbed two empty stools. Mikalo climbed up onto his and sat still.

The faerie girl behind the counter had a pretty face but her manner was rough. Her hair was matted and Mikalo noted the intricate tattoos that were embedded onto her arms and shoulders, similar to those the Borglums had.

"Duskani," said the girl, "back again?"

"Can we have some drinks, Blyss?"

"I thought you kept your bounties outside?" she said, glancing at Mikalo.

"Drinks?" he said again.

Blyss busied herself with their drinks and Duskani stared at the wooden countertop.

As Mikalo finished the last few warm drops of his drink, three Borglums walked in through the door. Faerie Inns were usually safe from unwanted intruders but the King had worked hard to appease the Borglums he had hired to enforce his rules and had ordered that ladders be put in front of every elevated door.

The Borglums sat down on the other side of Duskani. One of them clumsily tripped over the leg of Duskani's stool. He face-planted the ground but was back up in a flash with his mace at the ready. Grabbing Duskani by the collar he shouted, "You'll be sorry for that one!"

But Duskani's sword was already unsheathed and the tip was touching the leather on the Borglum's jacket.

"You want to play rough?" whispered the Borglum into Duskani's ear with an evil grin.

Before either one could make a fatal move, one of the other Borglum's grabbed his companion and pulled him away.

"Don't you know who that is?" he said in a hushed voice. "That's Duskani, the Bounty Hunter. You'd be fool to match off with him."

Shuffling and grumbling, the three Borglums went to find a more favorable place to drink. Duskani returned to his stool and the room quieted down, though faint murmurs and curious eyes still found their way to Mikalo and his subjugator.

"Can we have a room, Blyss?"

"Sure. The room near the west limb is open, would you like that one?"

"Fine," said Duskani, taking the small key from Blyss and moving towards the stairs at the far end of the room.

The room Blyss had described was not spacious, but large enough for the two to stay the night comfortably. There was only one bed, and Duskani immediately opted for the floor. Mikalo sat down on the plushy mattress and shot a quick look out the window before Duskani shut the tinted glass and locked it.

Mikalo pulled his feet together and Duskani bound them in rope.

"This isn't the normal way to the palace," Mikalo observed, straining his eyes to see through the dark window.

"I always change my routes to avoid aided escape attempts."

"Got this all figured out then," Mikalo said, restraining the bitterness in his tone.

Duskani finished knotting the rope and then moved to his corner of the room without replying.

“Duskani,” Mikalo said sternly, “in two days you’ll hand me over to be executed for rioting against our tyrannous king and his thugs. Let’s get this out of the way.”

Duskani remained silent.

“You broke her heart,” Mikalo said quietly.

“That’s why I left.”

“No,” Mikalo said, exhaustedly, “You broke her heart when you left. How could you leave her like that? How could you leave *me* like that?”

Duskani said nothing.

“It was this side of four years ago that we were all best friends: you, me, Alidy, and Adeline. You were like my brother, my best friend; since we were kids, that’s always the way it was.”

“But all that changed when she died,” Duskani said gruffly, and Mikalo could hear the sob lodged in his throat.

“It’s not your fault,” Mikalo said.

Duskani snorted in disbelief.

“I was the one who suggest we throw stones at it.”

“But I didn’t stop you and neither did she, and neither did Alidy. If one of us is to blame then we’re all to blame.”

“And when he grabbed her I couldn’t save her,” Duskani said, shaking violently with tears.

“Who were you to fight a forest troll?” Mikalo pressed. “You were just a boy! He was bigger than you – bigger than all of us!”

Duskani was on his hands and knees on the floor, tears pouring from his eyes, his green hair hanging in front of his face.

“She’s dead, Mikalo! She’s gone! She’s all I ever loved about the meadow and she’s gone! I could have saved her! I have fought trolls since then! Why couldn’t I save her then?”

Mikalo fell to the floor; limbs still bound, and crawled over to Duskani.

“How can Alidy ever forgive me for killing her sister? How can you ever forgive me for killing your friend? And what about everyone else she knew? How could I ever face them again? I had to leave! I had to get away!”

“But now you’re imprisoning those people you thought you could never face again! You’re sending them to the gallows!”

“I’m doing my job!”

“You’ve tried so hard to get away from it all that you’ve lost yourself completely. You don’t even know who you are anymore, I bet.”

Duskani grew stiff and the sobbing stopped.

“I know who I am.”

“Then I guess I don’t,” said Mikalo. “Because the Duskani I knew fought for what was right and not just for what paid. The Duskani I knew wouldn’t hurt the people that Adeline loved.”

“I’m just doing-”

“No,” Mikalo said, cutting him off. “No Duskani. You can’t compromise your values; not ever. And you can’t assume that forgiveness is impossible to reach. We were young and stupid. Now we know. Alidy is ready to forgive you, she has always been... and so have I.”

Mikalo crawled back across the floor and grappled his way onto the bed. He laid there for quite some time and Duskani never moved from his collapsed state on the floor.

Finally, Mikalo drifted off to sleep. For a few sunlit moments, he was back in the meadow. He and Duskani, much younger, were racing across the tops of the grass. Alidy and Adeline joined them and the four of them laughed their way to the stream. Alidy smiled at Mikalo, her brown eyes flashing; Adeline and Duskani splashed water at their companions.

Then the forest troll appeared just down the stream. Alidy grabbed Mikalo's arm and she tried to pull him into the grass, out of sight, and into safety, but Duskani suggested they throw stones at it. It didn't take much to convince Adeline and she flew up into the air with him. Alidy and Mikalo followed.

The troll didn't like the rocks and he began swatting at them but they were too high for him. Adeline's crystal-clear laugh rang through the air as she dropped another pebble on the troll's head followed by her petrified scream as he grabbed the tip of her foot. He pulled her easily to the ground. Duskani dove after her. He beat the troll; poking his eyes. He pulled his ears. He shouted and screamed and tugged at Adeline, but the troll would not let go. The troll held on to her tighter and squeezed, swatting Duskani away like a fly.

Finally, Adeline's screams died down and she lay limp in his hand. Alidy and Mikalo dropped the sticks they had been beating the troll with but Duskani did not. Mikalo grabbed Alidy as she fainted to the ground and Duskani's tormented cries of anger and despair continued to shatter the air.

But then the air was silent and Mikalo realized that it was the stillness of his room in the Inn. Sitting up, he noticed Duskani by the window, sword drawn and pointed ears cocked.

“The King will have my head if I fail to return you,” he whispered quietly. “And likely as not, someone else will come to get you anyway.”

Mikalo didn't move. Duskani turned away from the window and approached him. Kneeling before him, Duskani lifted his sword to Mikalo's hands. Swiftly, he cut the bonds from his captive's hands and feet.

“You can come back with me,” Mikalo said, standing up. “You don't have to go back to the King. Join the rebellion. Fight for your own freedom – we could use your skill and wit!”

Duskani sighed heavily. In the growing light of the early morning, Mikalo could see the wrinkled lines on his friend's face, but he could also see the youth returned to his eyes.

“I have sent good men to their death – it is time I go to mine.”

“Don't go,” Mikalo whimpered.

“I can't live with this pain anymore. I built up a fortress to keep it out and in one night you have torn it down completely. I can't keep living without Adeline; nor can I with the guilt of what I have done for the past four years – what I did that day...”

“But we forgive you,” said Mikalo, pleadingly. “It's in the past. Adeline would not want you to die.”

“But the pain,” said Duskani desperately, clutching his chest. “How can I live with the pain? How have you been able to go on living so happily?”

“With forgiveness, Duskani.”

Mikalo bowed his head. Walking to the window, he unlocked it and pushed it open. A rush of cold, morning air ran through the room. Mikalo motioned Duskani to follow him and the two slipped through the small window as though they were young boys again. Their wings beat against the breeze and they flew to the top of the tree.

Perching on a single branch they looked out over the valley, the forest, and the mountain on the far side where King Nimrod boasted his castle.

The wind tugged at their clothes and hair and the sight stripped them of their breath.

Clutching his friend's arm, Mikalo said quietly, "Come back and join us. Fight for this. Fight for our meadow. Fight for the beautiful memory of our beautiful Adeline. And you will find joy. Even when your heart is breaking, with forgiveness, there is joy in pain."