

Lam sat in her tent, just a small canvas thing with a woolen blanket on the floor and her pack for a pillow. She could hear the others outside, talking, laughing, and carrying on about the women from Ardvale Falls, a small hamlet the cohort had marched through earlier that day. She frowned, pulled her polishing kit from her storage ring, and got to work on her boots. Lieutenant Vas had given her two demerits earlier for the scuffs on the leather.

She grimaced in anger and embarrassment at the memory. Of course, she knew the boots needed polish, but they'd been marching for days, and there were plenty of soldiers with boots in far worse shape. "Why do we even have to do this? How much would it cost for a few enchantments to keep this leather looking nice?" she muttered, angrily smearing the red-brown polish into the leather. She knew the answer; the same reason they had to carry packs when most everyone had dimensional containers—character.

Hadn't Captain Trov-dak gone on and on about it when she'd addressed the recruit cohort? A soldier who cares for their gear appreciates their gear. A soldier who carries their equipment on their back knows the worth of that equipment. She'd heard similar things from her father when she was young. He wouldn't buy her a book about Evi ap'Sheni, the Blue Deep assassin, but he let her work for a week in the family store to earn the money herself. What had his lesson been? If she earned it, she'd appreciate it. Her father would have fit right in with the Legion.

"Ah, father, I didn't think I'd miss you so soon," she sighed, setting the boot down to dry before buffing. Had she really run away? The thought came to her out of nowhere. Had she really broken her father's heart and abandoned the family business? For what? To play at swords and spears with a bunch of crude, loud, sex-starved adolescents?

As if to punctuate the thought, she heard Fol guffaw and shout, "Ancestors be true! She was asking for it!"

Lam bit her lip, wanting to shout something equally rude in defense of the unnamed woman, but knew better than to stir that hornet's nest. She picked up her tin of polish, spitting a little too vehemently into it. She worked the saliva around with her rag until she had a good amount of dark, oily stain to smear on the second boot. She was just setting the finished product beside the other to dry when she heard footsteps outside her tent. "Recruit Lam!" It was Sergeant Gonda. Lam felt her stomach start to churn with butterflies at the sound of his voice. The huge Vodkin never had a pleasant word on his tongue.

She quickly leaned forward and threw the tent flap wide. "Yes, sir?"

"Get your boots on and walk with me." He didn't wait; he just turned and started lumbering away. Lam jerked her boots onto her feet, wishing she'd had time to buff the polish. The damp leather would attract dust and dirt, and she'd have to start over. She scrambled after Gonda and the men sitting around the cookpot, members of her own squad, laughed as she almost tripped over her long, gangly legs; she'd grown a lot in the last few years and was still awkward with her body. She caught up to the sergeant and walked a pace behind and to his left as he trudged down the central row of the cohort's encampment.

"Recruit Lam, I'm going to have a talk with you that I reserve for a few individuals from every enlistment cohort."

"Yes, sir." Lam had a feeling this was a bad thing, and she didn't know what a proper response was, so she went with the old standby.

"I can see you're struggling to fit in. I reviewed your enlistment interview, and I think it might be wise to reconsider your decision. The Legion isn't the place for a runaway Ghelli. It's something of a miracle you've been here for more than a month and haven't gotten seriously injured, killed, or worse, ravaged by one of the men."

Lam's mouth fell open at the sergeant's words. She wasn't sure if she should be thankful that he was concerned or angry that he expected so little from her. "Thank you for your concern, Sergeant . . ."

"I'm not concerned about you, recruit!" he barked, cutting her off. "I don't want to lose good men dealing with a tribunal when you bring forth accusations!" He stopped, turned, and regarded her, frowning through the yellowed tusks that hung over his furry chin. "I'm giving you a choice: discharge with no dishonor or transfer to the Beneset Steppes garrison. You've got until first duty to make a decision."

"B-Beneset Steppes, sir?" She'd heard of the place, the great plains north of the Empire, where raiders and roving bands of primitive monster tribes were a constant threat.

"That's right. Do the smart thing, young lady. Go home." His dark, black eyes narrowed, and he shook his head slightly. "I hope you can see I'm trying to help you." With that, he turned and stomped away, his heavy, enormous boots thudding on the freshly raked dirt. He called over his shoulder, "Dismissed."

As despair gripped her heart, Lam listlessly walked back to her tent. She barely lifted her feet, no longer able to muster any concern for the dirt caking the damp leather of her boots. When she reached her squad's cookfire, most were sitting around eating. No one offered her any. No one called out, asking if things were all right. She was sure she heard whispers and snickers, though. They were always teasing her—she was too light. Her bones were hollow. Why would a pretty girl with fragile wings want to wear the Legion uniform? It didn't help that she was the only female on the squad. It didn't help that she'd never seen another Ghelli in the cohort.

She slumped down onto her woolen blanket and closed the flap of her tent. What had she been thinking? She dug through her thin, tarnished storage ring and pulled out the Farscribe book she shared with her parents. She'd written one note in it, the night she ran away, trying to explain herself, trying to convey her need for adventure and accomplishment. They'd never responded, and a glance confirmed it was still true. Lam knew her mother would have, but there was no way her father would allow it. His pride was too wounded, and, in their family, his word was law. Lam was quite sure, as far as he was concerned, she was dead.

If she went home at that moment, if she returned, wings tucked low in shame, begging for forgiveness, he'd let her stay. He'd punish her for years, though, and her miserable, simple existence from before would be twice as bad. Still, wasn't Sergeant Gonda right? She *wasn't* fitting in. She'd never felt so alone as she did in that moment.

When she'd fled home, at least she'd had her dreams and hopes to sustain her. At least she'd carried some pride in her chest, thinking of the famous Ghelli heroes she'd read so many tales about. The Legion wasn't what she'd expected, though. They had more than enough conscripts and volunteers; a tall, scrawny Ghelli wasn't of much value. Gonda had proven that by offering her a discharge, a release from her oath.

She lay in bed, listening to the murmured conversations and laughter around her, wallowing in her despair. It was palpable, that hopelessness. She could feel it settling over her like a blanket, and her mind listlessly cast about for some way out. If the Legion didn't want her, why would she stay? At least her mother would be happy to see her. At least she had some friends back in Twilight Home. What would they say, though? She hadn't said goodbye to a single person. They'd resent her for that. They'd mock her when she wasn't listening.

Pools of tears overflowed from her eyes, soaking into her hair as they ran from the corners. She lay still, shivering, almost physically ill from the sadness overwhelming her, and the only thought that seemed to give her any comfort was a whisper of cold air tickling her ears and threatening to constrict her throat with its icy promise, "Just give up." She was lying still, contemplating those three words, wondering the best course of action to make them a reality, when they came for her.

A shadow fell over the tan material of her tent, and Lam wondered what it was; had someone moved one of the watch lamps? But then her tent rustled and collapsed on her, and a heavy hand pressed the material against her face, gagging her as other strong hands grabbed her ankles and wrists. She thrashed, but it was like they said; she was skinny and weak compared to the Shadeni and Ardeni recruits, and there had to be at least three of them holding her down, pinned under her collapsed tent. She tried to scream, tried to think of a spell she could employ, but panic washed over her as the first heavy blow crunched into her unprotected stomach.

She jerked and pulled but couldn't move, and the punch knocked the wind from her lungs. Lam tried to scream, but the heavy hand pressing her head into the ground just jammed more of the tent's fabric between her teeth as she opened her jaws. More blows rained down. Whoever was behind them, whoever was delivering the beating, knew better than to break any bones. They knew better than to use any weapons that might leave a distinctive mark. Big, heavy impacts rocked her, smashing into her stomach, her chest, her thighs, even her groin, and Lam couldn't manage to pull in a breath, let alone formulate any sort of defense.

As a different sort of blackness closed in on her vision, as her panicked mind began to shut down, the pain of the impacts seemed to fade, and she felt herself pulling inward, away from the torment of her body, hiding in the depths of her mind with a memory that seemed strange and out of place. She saw a man, big and brooding, with short dark hair and golden, honey-brown eyes. He had a strong, sharp nose, and somehow, he looked at her and nodded, his eyes full of fiery anger. "What are you doing, *hermana*? You're not someone who gives up. Eat the pain. Eat the despair. Chew it up and turn it into rage. This won't kill you. You're tougher than that!"

Lam's mouth, pressed so hard that her lips split and she could taste the blood seeping through the tent's fabric, tried to form a single word, and she didn't know where it came from. "Victor," she mumbled, but only she could have understood the sound as distinct from the grunts and whimpers she'd been making. She didn't know who he was but wondered if the Roots were talking to her. Had they sent her an ancestor to stir her spirit? Chew up the pain? Chew up the despair? Turn it into rage? Suddenly, something snapped in her mind, and she saw her plight from a new perspective.

Why *shouldn't* she be angry? Why *wasn't* she? Her parents shouldn't have disowned her. That wasn't her fault. She'd written them a letter. She'd promised to remember her kin when she found fame and fortune! Why hadn't they believed in her? Why had her father disowned her rather than honoring her desire and boasting about his daughter's bravery? Were his own ends so crucial that he'd treat his only child as a means of achieving them?

Why were none of her squadmates looking out for her? Why were they picking on her for being weaker? Shouldn't they protect and nurture her strength? Wouldn't she be stronger with them by her side and at her back? Why was the dirty, rot-infested command structure condoning her release, threatening her with a dangerous post on the edge of nowhere to get her to leave? Wouldn't the Legion do better if they found her strengths and brought those forth? Was any of that her fault? Was it her fault she had big dreams but no training? Was it her fault she'd grown tall and thin but hadn't had the chance to build muscle to fill out her frame?

As she endured the beating and ran through the litany of wrongs done to her, Lam noticed something strange; the blows, though just as heavy, just as measured, weren't bothering her anymore. She was breathing through her nose as she tensed her abdomen, absorbing the hits. A fierce, bloody smile spread beneath the crushing grip of her assailant, and she felt something else—an angry, smoldering heat at the center of her chest. They wanted to beat her into submission, but she wouldn't submit. She'd take the beating. She'd take the pain, the despair, the loneliness, and she'd chew it up.

When the punches and kicks or whatever they were raining down on her finally stopped and the hand pulled away from her face, Lam lay still. As several booted feet walked away into the night, she breathed deeply through her nose and cataloged the pain, letting her mind mentally take stock of the aches. They hadn't broken any ribs. They hadn't even hit her in the face. Her stomach ached. Her thighs and groin were swollen with contusions, and she knew she'd struggle to stand, let alone march, in the morning, but, again, nothing was broken.

Her wrists were sore from where they'd been squeezed through the tent's fabric, but she slowly lifted her arms, wincing at the sharp pains in her elbows and shoulders. She brought her hands to her chest, tenderly pressing on her breasts and sternum, wincing with the agony of bruised, aching flesh and bone. She had a minor healing potion in her storage ring, and she was tempted to drink it down, but another part of her, the angry part, sitting in the warm glow of the fiery rage deep in her core, wanted them to see the evidence of their crime in the morning. She wanted them to see what they'd done, and she wanted them to realize it hadn't worked.

She closed her eyes and, still lying under the fabric of her collapsed tent, she tried to make herself sleep. She pictured the Beneset Steppes, and suddenly, the idea of being sent there didn't seem so bad. Maybe the men and women garrisoned out there would be different. Maybe they'd recognize her potential and treat her as a fellow soldier despite her inexperience. Something about the idea felt right. She wasn't sure if it was the anger destroying her sadness and despair, but she suddenly felt like she *wanted* to go there. Like the next step in her journey lay in that direction. It almost felt like the person she was supposed to be would be waiting for her if she just started down that path.

When the horns blew the morning wake-up call, announcing the first duty, Lam opened her eyes to see that the fabric of her tent was no longer black with night. She could make out faint, gray light through its coarse material. With wincing and shuddering gasps of pain, she wormed her way out of it. When she emerged on hands and knees, she could hear others moving around the circle of her squad's tents. She could hear whispers and curses, but none came over. No one asked what was wrong. It wasn't a surprise, but it still stung knowing they'd either been aware or active participants in the beating. Lam bit down on that sadness. She chewed it up and found that warm glow of anger.

When she struggled to her feet, barefoot in the dirt, her boots tangled in the tent behind her, she leaned over and coughed until a long string of bloody drool hung from her lips. She wiped the bloody saliva with the back of her hand, smearing it across her chin, and looked around the camp with bloodshot, furious eyes. Not one of her squadmates would meet her gaze. “Cowards,” she grunted, then leaned forward and spat another wad of bloody phlegm.

She’d just turned to try to dig her boots, blanket, and pack out of her tent when heavy footsteps crunched on the gravel-strewn dirt behind her. She heard her squadmates clamber to their feet and get quiet, so she knew it was the sergeant. He stopped behind her and cleared his throat, so Lam turned and offered him a salute, slower than was appropriate but faster than she could move without pain.

“Recruit,” he grunted. He eyed her up and down but didn’t ask about her bruised and bloodied condition. Lam wasn’t surprised. “Have you made your decision? We have a supply wagon leaving for Gelica in a few hours.”

Lam narrowed her white-blond eyebrows and trained her bloodshot, bright green eyes on his, staring at him for several long seconds. When he blinked, she said, “I’ll go to the Beneset Steppes, sir. Thank you for the opportunity.”

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“I believe she’s doing well,” Dar grunted, distracting Victor from his worry.

“What’s it like for her?” he asked, glancing away from Lam’s still, pale face to his mentor.

“The crucible will use memories from her mind to test her. It may change some minor details, but the overall goal of the ritual is to create an intelligent enchantment that will attempt to break her spirit in various ways. It’s up to her to retain her focus and find her way back to herself. If she succumbs, well, she won’t.”

“Dammit,” Victor groaned, hating the idea that he couldn’t help her more than just holding her hand and urging her “be strong” and “keep fighting.” He’d been doing so for what felt like an hour already. “If it seems like she isn’t going to make it, can we stop this? Yeah, I know I should’ve asked that before we started.”

“If she fails, we may be able to rescue a vestige of her spirit, but it might be less cruel to simply free the shard in her body, allowing her to pass on,” Dar replied, and Victor stewed on that for a minute. He was distracted from his concern again when Dar chuckled and said, “She surprises me!”

“How?” Not for the first time, Victor was annoyed by Dar’s ability to see so much more than he could.

“I wove your rage into many of the crucible’s trials, thinking it would be another barrier, but she seems to be using it more often as a lever to break out of my other traps—despair, and fear, mostly. Take heart in that, boy. With glory, inspiration, and hope mixed in, I believe she’ll find the breadcrumbs she needs to find her way.”

“Fuck yeah, sister,” Victor said, squeezing Lam’s slender hand again, willing his words to reach her. “You got this. Show them what you’re made of! Show them all!”