

The March to the Stone Yard

Kaysar groaned and arched her back, the stone cracking and grinding together. The Calcite Disease had started in her chest, a rough cough that had evolved into nights when she could barely breathe. She could still see, but a haze at the edge of her vision suggested her eyes were starting to turn to stone. She could still speak, though her tusks were already taking on a stony quality like granite. Her patchy, snow-white hair was tied back into a ponytail that Kaysar was unable to remove. Her hands were so stiff that she couldn't bend the fingers anymore, the last remaining soft flesh a darker grey than the stone forming across her body. Despite that, Kaysar still knew the small that grasped for her fingers.

"What can I do?" Mira pleaded, tears in her eyes. "There has to be something Mayza can do!"

"Mira," Kaysar forced a smile and ran her hand along Mira's hair. The silky, blonde strands reminded her of golden sunlight and the deep green of her eyes resembled the leafy boughs of trees. Mira was everything Kaysar loved about the Above in more ways than one. "I've already had one miracle for a lifetime...and you were enough."

"I can't bear to see you suffer like this." Mira shook her head and started to cry. "Please, tell me what I can do?"

"You can stay by my side," Kaysar said. "And you can be strong for me, my sweet Miracle."

"It's not fair," Mira cursed, wiping her eyes. "Just sitting here and doing nothing while you —"

A sob caught in Mira's throat and she broke down, hugging her mother. Kaysar felt the weight faintly, but it didn't hurt to have her daughter so close. The thought of telling Mira occurred to her again.

No, Kaysar urged herself. Who would that help now? It would have been wiser for me to tell him when she was younger. When we were both...well, so it goes.

"Mira," Kaysar croaked, feeling the need to say something. "I love you with all my heart."

"I've been a curse for you," Mira shook her head. "I am nothing but a mark of shame."

"You are not," Kaysar said, firmer. "You are my daughter. Half-troll or not, you are my child. And I wouldn't trade you for anything in the world."

“How will I endure without you?” Mira asked. “Mayza can’t take me in and none of the other trolls will adopt me.”

“You will find a way,” Kaysar said. “My sweet Miracle...you survived as long as you did by no will other than your own. You can survive without me. Your heart will be heavy, but you will find a way to carry the load.”

“I only wish I were as strong as you.”

“You’re stronger than you know,” Kaysar whispered. She wanted to tell Mira the truth, but she knew the consequences that would come from that. She was losing so much already.

“Mayza is here,” Mira said, squeezing her mother’s hand.

“With poppy and worm root,” the elder troll said, sitting close to Kaysar’s side. Mayza’s long limbs were graced by lichen and fungus growing among the warts across her shoulders. The ancient troll had brass rings in her lower lip between her tusks and her white hair hung around her face like coils of rope. Mayza walked with the ornamented staff of her station, though she leaned on it more for support these days. Mira would normally stay out of Mayza’s way when there was healing to be done, but it would take too much effort to tear her away. Dutifully, Kaysar ate the herbs provided. It tasted sour and foul, but it eased her breathing. Calcification was a slow and painful death, but Mayza was kind to help make the passage to the Halls of her Forbearers easier. She wouldn’t die in battle, but Mayza ensured the doors to that place would be open to Kaysar.

“You have less of a fever today,” Mayza said, putting her hand on Kaysar’s forehead.

“Or the stone hides it well,” Kaysar said, mirthlessly. “Mira, give us a moment...”

“Mom...”

“Please?” Kaysar asked. Mira frowned, but nodded and rose. She walked out of their tent, but Kaysar knew she wouldn’t be far.

<<You worry about her?>> Mayza asked, switching to the older, guttural sounds of Elder Troll.

<<What mother wouldn’t?>> Kaysar said.

<<All parents must leave their children.>>

<<That's small comfort to the parents leaving a child behind. Forgive me, Mayza, the pain dulls my manners. Tell me: will you watch over her?>>

<<As much as my position allows,>> Mayza said. <<Make no mistake, I would adopt her in a breath if I could. But I must not take clanmates to my care. Even if I could, you would only prolong the pain of leaving her alone even longer. I will protect her as much as I am allowed. You have my word: she will always have a place to sleep.>>

<<Even if it is only at your doorstep?>>

<<Your manners may have dulled, but your temper is sharp as ever.>>

<<Forgive me, Mayza.>>

<<Always,>> the elder troll's gentle hand touched Kaysar's brow. Mayza clicked her tongue twice against her teeth and Mira came in, appearing by the door. Kaysar's vision was blurry and she knew it wouldn't be long now.

"Help me up," Kaysar said. "If I cannot meet our ancestors fallen in battle, then I shall meet them with my head held high."

Mira and Mayza worked together, gently lifting Kaysar from her cot and supporting her as she stood. Her legs were already hard as stone on the inside and her torso was starting to firm up, locking her ribs and shoulders into place. This would have been a time for magnificent last words or great speeches about conquering death, but Kaysar knew she only had breath for something small yet infinitely valuable.

"I love you, my Miracle..."

The last words that she would utter were met with silence as Kaysar's vision faded to black and her ears turned to stone.

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Mira wept for a week at her mother's feet, barely eating or drinking while she kept vigil. She slept curled on the floor of their tent and stayed out of the way when other trolls would come to pay their respects. Mayza presided over the mourning period, making sure Mira ate and drank something each day while managing Kaysar's final affairs. There were only a handful of troll mourners who came into the house and fewer who would give Mira much more than a sympathetic nod. If she were a true troll, with troll family and bonds with the rest of the clan,

maybe she would have grieved with others. Alone, Mira bore the weight of her loss and grieved with the passion of a thousand trolls. When it came time, Mayza stepped in and set a hand on Mira's shoulder.

"She is ready to go to her rest. We must find others to help bring her to the Stone Yard."

"No, we don't." Mira shifted her weight under Kaysar and strained. The statue of her mother tilted onto her back and Mira was able to lift the weight with some difficulty.

"Mira," Mayza chided. "You need not carry her alone."

"She carried me alone," Mira grunted, adjusting the weight across her shoulders. "I owe her that much."

Mayza would have said more, but the girl was stubborn, even for a troll. Mayza walked behind Mira, motioning the clan members aside as the girl carried her mother's weight. A few trolls bowed their heads in respect, but more crossed their arms across their chests in disgust. One even went so far as to spit on the ground as Mira passed by. Mira turned her head to find the offender, but was stopped from attacking by Mayza's staff.

"Do not soil her death with violence," Mayza urged in a harsh whisper. "You wished to carry her and that responsibility is yours, but that includes all responsibilities! If you cannot control your emotions, you should not burden yourself with something so important."

"But he—!"

"I will deal with him shortly!" Mayza said, giving a pointed look to the offender. "Do not ruin your mother's last rites with a boorish response to a hateful act."

Mira swallowed her anger, tamping it down with a mallet of grief and marched on, lifting her mother higher on her shoulders. She was half the troll in the eyes of the rest of the clan, so Mira would do the work of ten trolls in honoring her mother. Mayza walked steadily behind her, the rattling of her staff ornaments and heavy footsteps keeping time with Mira's steady march.

Onward they marched, out of the troll camps and into the Outerlands. The other clans paused their work and watched the quiet procession. Fires were lit as they passed out of respect to the tuckra and the clan more than to the individual dead. Beyond the reach of their fires, Mira continued to carry her mother's remains. Mayza followed, noting when Mira began to struggle.

She didn't interfere, only offering a hand to steady the load when Mira's footing slipped on a rock. Mira panted and lowered herself to one knee, but didn't set the statue down.

"You asked for this," Mayza reminded her. "Do not let your mother fall now. The Stone Yard needs her as a guardian."

"It's a lot to carry."

"Loss often is. Will you let it crush you? Or will you carry it?"

"What if I can't?" Mira asked, her voice wavering. "What if the loss is too much?"

"Let love lighten the load," Mayza said. "Your mother loved you, Mira. If you continue to treat yourself as her burden, then you only add weight that you must carry. What was hers is yours. Accept that love and you will be able to carry on."

Mayza waited while Mira collected her breath. The pause lasted a long time, the sounds of the Outerlands marking time. A harpy flew overhead, circling the Under and watching the funeral with some interest. When the harpy circled a third time, Mira silently pressed up off the ground and kept marching.

The Stone Yard wasn't far and Mira was able to carry her mother the rest of the way without stopping. When she found an open spot, she set her mother down carefully, feet first, and stood her upright. Mira fell to her knees, dripping with sweat and panting. She looked up at her mother again, tears and sweat mixing together. Mayza stood beside and spoke in Elder Troll, offering all the proper rites and prayers that would be required at a funeral. After a while, Mayza offered Mira a half-empty water bottle. Mira shook her head and turned away.

"You do no good starving yourself to death."

"I'm already dead."

"You are not," Mayza said firmly. She turned back to camp, the beaded decorations on her staff rattling together. "There's only room out here for one statue. Now come, be with your clan kin while you grieve."

<<I am no one's clan kin...>>

The Elder Troll nearly made Mayza drop her staff. Mira didn't look up from the ground. "I knew you and Mom only spoke that so I wouldn't overhear your conversations. But I've always been good at languages...better than my mom thought when she taught me."

“We never could keep secrets from you, I suppose,” Mayza said.

“I’ll die here alone. It’s just a matter of time. I belong to the clan now.”

“Until you can free yourself, yes.”

“It’s a stupid law.”

“It’s a troll law.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s not stupid.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Mayza sighed. “Mira, I wish I could offer you salvation, but I cannot and will not lie to you.”

“Not even if I ask nicely?”

“Especially not if you ask nicely.”

Mira stayed kneeling for a few moments before rising up on shaky legs. She took a deep breath and held her head high. She looked over the Stone Yard and Mayza noticed her head inclining up towards the high ceiling of the great cavern of the Under. “I have to go to the Above.”

“Mira...”

“It’s my only chance to find my father.”

“Seven billion humans and you think you’ll run into your father by chance?”

“It’d have to be someone in Hedgefield.”

“That’s still too many people to find one amongst the mobs. You know nothing about him.”

“Blanc LaBelle can help.”

Mayza tensed suddenly. The older troll had been around long enough to meet LaBelle and she had heard stories of his exploits beyond their meetings. Mira was bold enough to even speak his name aloud. It would be enough to send some trolls into a blind rage out of fear. If she had even considered going to find LaBelle, Mira would know the risk. One look told Mayza that the half-troll girl was deadly serious.

“I know I can’t talk you out of it,” Mayza said. “But you should be sure that you want to go down this path. Your mother saw great things in the Above, but she also told us of dangers: Oak Hand will seek you out and humans will fear you. You are, like me and your mother, a monster that they have an instinct to fear. Even if they will not kill you, you risk exposing the Under.”

“The humans are all wearing masks in the Above,” Mira said. “This is my only chance.”

Mayza sighed and took a few steps forward. She wrapped Mira up in a big hug and squeezed the girl tightly. When Mira pulled away, Mayza took a cloth mask out of her bag and held it out to Mira. “Start by heading Downtown. The Valiant Apartment Complex is there. Once you find it, follow the sword.”

“What about the clan?”

“I’ll tell them you ran off before I could stop you. It’s a believable lie.”

“I thought you wouldn’t lie?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” Mayza grinned. “I might have it in me to lie for you.”

“Thank you.”

“If you find LaBelle, I hope he can bring you home.”

Mira smiled brighter than Mayza had seen in months before the half-troll rushed off into the dark. If she knew about LaBelle, Mayza knew she was serious. She only hoped that Mira was prepared. With a quiet sigh, Mayza turned and started the long walk back to the Coppertooth Camp, ready to feign whatever ignorance could be believable.

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Mira skulked through the darkness. The Under had been her home for many years, never venturing further than the Magi city or the very edge of the Outerlands. When she was younger, her mother would lead her around and point out Under Doors. There were less popular exits, though they were less glamorous. When Mira’s mother brought Mira to the Stone Yard to visit her grandparents’ remains, she had pointed out an opening that eventually opened to the sewers and a manhole in an isolated cul-de-sac. When she knew the Stone Yard Under Door would be close, she decided to carry her mother alone and escape.

Pulling her raincoat tighter around her shoulders, Mira pulled the hood up to keep the foul-smelling air away from her. She’d been planning her escape for days and squirrled away what money her mother had kept from her adventures in the Above, strange metal coins and marked paper. She could probably survive for a little while without support, but she needed to save the money to pay LaBelle. Mira tried to remember every story her mother had told her: sidewalks, buses, streets, police officers, Oak Hand, and a thousand other words that had no meaning in the

Under. Mira felt a sense of excitement through this final connection with her mother, both of them seeking the world of the Above despite the dangers.

The manhole had a set of ladder rungs fixed into the concrete sides of the sewer tunnel. Mira climbed up and pressed her shoulder against the metal plate. It resisted, but the weight of the disk was nothing compared to the strength it took to carry her mother's remains. She was able to lift the manhole cover and push it far enough out of the way to let her slip through. The pandemic forced people to stay inside and the streets were empty. There were a few trees that lined the suburb with low fences to keep out neighbors.

Mira climbed out of the manhole and slid the cover back into place. When she felt she wasn't discovered, she walked over to the sidewalk. Her mother had explained the rules of the Under, staying on the small strips of concrete rather than the big ones. It was rude to approach a house uninvited, even if "come on in!" was declared on a mat or a door sign. It was smarter to avoid talking with people until she had some real experiences, but Mira felt she could navigate well enough to survive for a day. As she had planned her adventure, Mira realized that so many of her mother's stories were actually lessons. Perhaps she had meant to prepare Mira for the Above this whole time.

A large, metal frame with blue edges was at the end of the street, a small shelter with a bench and a schedule. Mira walked into the bus stop and looked around, consulting the map. She didn't recognize any of the stops, but she was able to find a stop marked for "Downtown". An automated machine gave her a bus pass, but it cut into her paper money stores with a sting that felt like a broken bone. She sat on the bench, gripping her new bus pass as if some invisible stranger would take it from her. Cars rushed by, shocking Mira with their speed and the casualness of the drivers. After waiting for a while, the Downtown Bus approached and Mira stepped onto it at the back door.

Staying invisible was a skill Mira had taught herself when she was younger. Once she got on the bus, she sat down and settled in. She gripped the seat in front of her when the bus moved forward, but folded in on herself to keep hidden. The smaller she could be, the less likely people would bother with her. It was a lesson she had learned through the trolls, but stories of the Oak Hand made her realize it was an important skill for her in the Above.

Everyone in the Under knew someone who knew someone who was taken captive by the Oak Hand. It didn't matter if you were a centaur in the Fae Queen's court or a goblin from a pack of two; the Oak Hand took prisoners when Underfolk wandered too far up to the Above. Mira recalled hearing stories whispered around the clan fire. Bodies washed up more often than true survivors, but they always had trophies removed: the remains of a fairy with its wings torn off, an elf corpse with the ears missing, and even a minotaur's body had been dumped in the sewer with its head removed. Any survivors were violent and broken. Even if there was a rescue, it often came too late for them to keep both their lives and their sanity. Some said they were lucky to keep one; others felt they were luckier to lose both. There was no end to the Oak Hand's cruelty.

The bus lurched around a street corner, knocking Mira's forehead against the glass. She grimaced and rubbed the sore spot a little before risking a look at the other people on the bus. A sea of masked faces made Mira calmer about being on the surface, but the anonymity made telling who was a threat more difficult. This was always something her mother had tried to teach her, but never to this degree. Trolls were honest about their intentions, but humans required a bit more tact to understand. One man made Mira feel off. He was a potbellied man with thinning, grey hair and a windbreaker. She looked away briefly, but he was still staring when she glanced back.

Don't look directly at him! Mira cursed herself. *Idiot! Use what's around you...*

A mirror by the door gave her a decent view of the man behind her and she was able to see another figure near the front of the bus looking towards him in her periphery. Mira tried to convince herself that she was jumping at shadows, but didn't miss when the men nodded at each other. The man in the front moved a few seats towards her, slowly closing the gap and trapping her between him and his friend.

Frantic, Mira pressed the stop button. It would endanger all of the Under if she led them right to LaBelle and she didn't want to get taken in the first hour of her freedom. Once she hopped off the bus, she barely had time to curse herself before the pair got off at her stop. Mira used a crosswalk and the busy intersection to buy more time. She crossed an empty parking lot and headed to a small cluster of stores. Most businesses were closed, but a grocery store was still

open to the public. It wouldn't be especially crowded, but she would have more cover inside the building than running around outside in hopes of finding refuge. Maybe there was someone in there who could help.

Mira rushed through the entrance, turning sharply before the Oak Hand agents could catch up with her. She urged herself not to run too fast or attract too much attention. Hiding behind a shelf, Mira watched the Oak Hand agents come in and linger by the doors, one at the entrance and one at the exit. She was outnumbered and in a strange land, but Mira refused to be taken so easily. She couldn't change her circumstances, so she had to find an ally.

The grocery store was filled to the brim with more food than Mira had seen in her life and most people were keeping to themselves. A family of three caught her eye, but she couldn't endanger a mother and child. An older man walked by her, but she didn't know if the old timer would be of much use if it came to a fight. The boy stacking soup cans was an option. He was about her age and seemed trustworthy. At the very least, she could gauge how useful it would be to ask a human for help.

While she was desperate, Mira was suddenly afraid to approach this young man. Her mother had struck up friendships with humans, but meeting one for the first time felt surreal. Trolls hated humans as a rule and to willingly approach one felt like running through fire. Yet, Mira was only half-troll. This would be her first time speaking to a human, but also her first real connection to a part of her ancestry she'd never been able to explore. This would mean more than stories told by her mother. This was real. Finally, Mira gathered her courage and approached the shelf stocker.

"Excuse me?" Mira asked. "Could you come clean up Aisle 16?"