

Sami Stoddard

Untitled so far...

Lazarus:

The early morning mist is cool on my skin as the autumn leaves crunch under my leather boots and the pink light of the dawn replaces the darkness of night. I place each step carefully as Rowan and I leave our small hunting cache to investigate the distressed wailing we heard while hunting. Now we don't hear anything which sets me even further on edge. I look over towards Rowan as she approaches a tall oak tree with a few low hanging branches, and she motions for me to come over. I oblige and she, using me as a human ladder, boosts herself up in order to climb the tree. I flinch as she digs her hooved feet into my shoulder.

"Sorry" She whispers down. Once in the tree she lowers an arm and holds out a hand to pull me up. I shake my head vehemently at her. She glares down at me with her glacier blue eyes.

"Laz," She hisses, giving me a sour look, "You have to get over your fear of heights at some point."

"Sure- at some point- just not today." I reply with a smirk. She rolls her eyes at me, leaping higher into the tree.

"You're putting yourself in a vulnerable position. You have no coverage."

"I'm not getting in that tree" I say pointedly.

"Fine. Get yourself spotted by the fire-breathers and get us killed."

"Drakes are never this far west. Calm down, I'll be careful.

"Ugh... How did I get settled with you for my bonded partner." She snaps sarcastically.

“Because we’re best friends and some of the only decent hunters in our tribe.” I reply grinning.

“True.” she smirks, as she climbs higher into the tree.

She jumps from tree to tree completely agile as we travel west for a while. Then, when I stop, so does she. She must smell it too. I glance upward at her as she begins to climb down, jumping to the ground the last fifteen-or-so feet. We stealthily begin walking toward the overtly pungent smell of blood. As we approach, we draw up to a clearing and peer around a large tree from either side. In a heap on the ground, some sort of figure is crumpled up and covered in its own blood. When I begin to approach it, I feel a hard tug on my wrist. I look back and Rowan is looking at me with wide eyes, letting me know she doesn’t think this is a smart move. I shake her off and continue to move towards the unmoving creature- but now with more caution. From about five yards away, I realize the figure has silver tattoos and green, moss-like horns and scales covering its body. I know I should turn around, but the smell of its blood mixed with fresh mint compels me forward. Approaching it I realize I am right. It’s a male Fae. I bend down to see if he’s still alive. Putting my head to his bloodied chest, I feel a faint, but persistent heart beat against my ear. I raise my head, keeping my hand on his weakening pulse as I motion to Rowan to come closer, she reluctantly begins to approach, keeping her eyes fixed on our surroundings.

“What have you found?” she asks softly.

“See for yourself.” I reply motioning to the silver tattoos and green horns on his head. Her eyes flicker toward the figure.

“What is a Fae doing this far west?” Her eyes scan the area around us suspiciously.

“I don’t know, but he’s been mutilated pretty bad. He’ll die if we don’t get him to safety.”

“Safety? A Fae would never do the same for one of us- in fact I’m sure they would happily finish the job.” she replies scowling.

“So, what? Are we going to stoop to their level?”

“From the look on your face, I would say ‘no’.” She sighs. “Well, where are we going to take him? If we move him much farther, or too quickly, he’ll bleed out.”

“Mount Lyra isn’t far, there are all sorts of remedies that might be able help heal him there.” I reply, beginning to wash and dress his wounds with some of the water, sea salt, and little bandaging I have in my bag. As I pour salt water across his back wounds, his body tenses, then relaxes but he doesn't wake.

“Mount Lyra? We can’t take him to a safe house. If we take him there his attackers could follow us. Then, not only will we be ambushed, we’ll have revealed one of the most sacred Zilzilian secrets, putting our entire kind at risk.” Rowan lectures as I see the fire flaring in her eyes.

“Listen,” I begin, “I know this is a really dangerous, shitty plan, but we don’t have time to debate this. I can feel his heartbeat growing weaker by the minute and, if we don’t get him somewhere soon, he’ll die. I don’t want that on my hands. I’m going to take him there with or without you. I’m sure if his attackers were still near, not only would we have found him completely dead, but we would have been attacked by now as well. I mean, seriously, Rowan, we’re standing out here, completely vulnerable, we’d be easy targets if people wanted to attack

us right now. If it would make you feel better, you can defend us while I carry him, but we have to move.”

“Fine, but I’m going ahead of you so we don’t get lost.” She snarls.

I slowly lift the Fae into my arms trying to carefully avoid his wounds. As we set out North around Mount Verde toward Lyra, Rowan has her bow drawn and is looking in every direction at once. I look down, gazing at the boy in my arms. His entire body is beat to hell and I can’t tell if his hair is naturally red or just stained with blood. He can’t be much younger than I am but, in my arms, he looks so small. His green scales and horns cause his face’s pale complexion to look sickly. His silver and golden tattoos, the ones not covered in blood, wrap his upper torso in swirls stretching up to his neck where freckles take over, scattered along his face, mostly across his nose.

After nearly four hours of walking in the now early-afternoon heat, Rowan never dropping her guard and I barely looking away from the boy’s face, we reach the safe house- a magically protected cave in the base of Mount Lyra. Rowan, ahead of us by about forty yards, turns to look back at me and lowers her bow. I jog towards her, quickly catching up, and set the boy as gently as I can against a log near the base of the wall in front of us. Rowan and I nick our hands with her dagger and join them together as we look at each other and begin to speak together to the creators of our land,

“Combining our blood with our bonded partner, we plead with you, oh Great Ones, to hear us and aid us in our need for safety.”

As we finish, the wall of Lyra shakily opens to a small stone room with several beds, a stove, and a number of cabinets filled with food, medicines, and supplies. I lift the boy and the three of us enter the room, Rowan, shutting the wall behind us.

As Rowan begins lighting candles and torches, I set the boy on the bed closest to the cabinets and begin to rifle through them looking for Mirkwood- a medicine Mom used countless times to treat my wounds after training too hard with Rowan. I find shavegrass remedy along with some chokecherry infused bandaging that should help with his pain. I gently move him onto his stomach, and begin to work diligently, unwrapping the subpar bandaging job I did before, and clean and apply the medicine to his major injuries- most of which are on his back.

As I begin to apply the shavegrass, Rowan washes the blood from the rest of his skin. After treating the gashes around his missing wing and bandaging the remaining one as best as possible, I gently roll him back to his side to clean and dress the gashes on his face and the shallow stab wounds to his gut.

Having cleaned him up the best we could, we leave him alone to rest for a bit- going over to a small table and begin to play cards we found in one of the cabinets.

After nearly two hours Rowan gets bored of the indoors, (and losing at cards), and goes back outside to “recharge”. I’m surprised she even remained inside for this long. Since we were children she could never be in an inclosed space for too long, often sleeping outside in trees, even at home, to the dismay of her mother.

I walk toward the boy to check on him again, he seems to be in a deep sleep, so I don’t try to wake him. I move a chair next to his bed, sit down, and begin to read aloud from a book I pulled from one of the cabinets, before slowly drifting off to sleep myself.

I awake suddenly to a loud pounding shaking the walls. I quickly cross the room to the doorway and look out the spyer hole. I see the very top of a light blonde's head and open the wall as Rowan scurries in with several animals hanging from her side. The sky now dark and Rowan's furious glare lets me know I slept too long.

"I've been knocking on the door for twenty minutes! What the hell were you doing?" Her shouts as her cheeks flush and eyes turn fiery. she got very close to my face.

"I'm sorry Row, I was reading and fell asleep." I say, backing away quickly.

"I was gone and you fell asleep with an enemy two feet from you?"

"He's in a lot worse shape than me- I think I could take him if it came to it." I joke trying to lighten the mood.

"It's not funny. What if it had been a ploy, and we were watched, and after I left you were ambushed? You need to be more careful." She says angrily.

"I'm sorry Row, I didn't mean to fall asleep, I just drifted off."

"You should be sorry," Rowan grinds her teeth. "I found some squash and shot two birds while you were lounging about, I guess *I'll* make dinner while we wait for *him* to wake up." She glares at the boy.

"Thank you for going hunting," I reply with a grin I know she can't stay mad at. "How about I make soup while you rest, and I'll wake you when it's ready, deal?"

"Fine, but I'm only suffering through your shitty cooking because I'm so fucking exhausted from doing everything else." She replies coolly, sauntering over to the bed closest to

the wall's opening and immediately collapses on it. I grin at her lovingly. She's the best not-sister, sister, I could have ended up with.

Starting the stove with one of the torches I place the birds Rowan shot in a tub of water to loosen their feathers. After they are sufficiently soaked in the heated water, I walk towards the table, and begin to pluck and clean them. By the time I'm finished with the first, I can hear the soft, but heavy, breathing, telling me Rowan is getting some well-deserved rest.

Oybek:

When I awake the first thing is the sharp agony that consumes my entire body. The pain stings reminding me of the burns I got hiding from my mother, in the kitchens, as a child. My arms and legs feel like they're being burned off and my back is so bad to the point where my wings are numb.

I slowly open my eyes and try to assess my location. I'm in an unfamiliar, dim, stone room with torches lining the walls. I see a blurry sort of tan figure with a mop of black curls that I don't recognise. The figure is about five yards away with its back to me and I try to call out to it but that only sharpens my pain. I make a strained gasp of sorts and can feel the bile raising from my stomach, causing a burning sensation in my throat. He slowly turns around looking past me for the source of noise and then searches the room with his honey colored eyes finally resting on me.

The boy rushes over to me. "I wasn't expecting you to regain consciousness til sometime tomorrow!" he says pleased.

"Wwwhere-" words fail me.

“Shhh it’s okay. You don’t need to talk,” he whispers tilting my head up and supporting my naked torso with his arms, “You should just rest and conserve your energy in order to heal faster. Dinner will be ready shortly- just try to get some sleep for until then.” With that he gently lowers me back to the bed and I drift off again into a deep sleep thinking of those honey colored eyes.

I feel a soft tugging on my shoulder, I flutter my eyelids open and am staring straight into those breathtaking eyes.

“Hey,” He says with the sweetest smile upon his light pink lips only marred with a thin scar along the left side. “You can keep sleeping if you want, but if you’re hungry, the food’s ready, I could bring you some so you don’t even have to try to get up. And, after you eat, we should redress your wounds again.”

All I can muster is a slight nod.

“Okay,” He says, helping me sit up. “I’ll get you some. By the way, I’m Laz, short for Lazarus.”

“Bek,” I breathe, “short for Oybek.”

“Nice to meet you Bek.” And he scurries back to the stove area quickly returning with a wooden bowl of steaming brown liquid.

“Can you lift your arms at all?”

I try in vain, my vision goes black in pain.

“It’s okay- I’ll help you. Just give me a moment to wake Rowan.” He murmurs softly, setting the bowl next to me.

He crosses the small room to another bed and begins to rouse another figure. They must have awakened as he abandons his efforts and crosses the room again in a few strides back to the stove.

This is the first time I've really been able to take in my surroundings. I notice the stone walls have no openings. I then look back to my protector, the boy must be at least a foot taller than me and his build is strong and powerful. My eyes linger on his heavily muscled arms when I notice his tattoos which are symbolic of the Zilzilian culture. Terrified I begin to try and stand so that I can get away but it is no use as I immediately collapse from the pain.

"He just fell." I hear a dead-pan female voice comment. My captor turns and rushes back to me trying to help me stand and support all my weight.

"Are you okay?" he asks with seemingly genuine concern. "What's going on? Are you in pain? Do you need more medicine?" He looks past me, I assume toward the girl on the other bed. "Rowan, look for more sweetgrass or chokecherry... I think that will help with his pain enough for him to speak."

"What am I, your maid? I don't fetch things for you." She snaps back.

"I'm sorry. Rowan- dearest love of my life without whom I would parish will you please look for more sweetgrass?" He asks, obviously annoyed as he attempts to lift me back into the bed.

"Much better Laz! Yes I will." The girl, Rowan, states. She's obviously very pleased as she strides to the cabinets, pulls out several bottles, and briskly walks back toward us.

The girl looks quite different from the boy. She's significantly paler with blondish brown hair braided against her scalp with feathers intertwined. She has dark antler-like horns protruding

from her temples and freckles scattering her nose. Her cheekbones are sharp and she has the most intensely blue eyes I have ever seen.

The girl turns toward the stove and begins to spoon some of the liquid into a bowl. The boy gently turns me on my stomach. I must have severely damaged my wings to feel the piercing pain that I do; the pain only sharpening as he applies medicines to it.

“It’s okay,” he whispers softly as I tense, “I’m almost done.”

Several minutes pass and, after undressing and reapplying bandages to my wounds, he pulls me back to a sitting position, and the sharp pain fades to a dull ache.

“How do you feel now?” He asks, gazing into my eyes with his beautiful golden ones.

“B-b-better.” I croak, sounding very unlike my usually articulate self. “W-where am I? What happened to me?”

“You’re in a safe place in order to heal. We’re not really sure what happened to you- we found your body in the forest just south of Mount Verde.”

“Why are *you* helping *me*?”

“We’re helping you because you were in trouble, and we weren’t going to leave you to die.”

“Speak for yourself.” Rowan chimes in from a table in the corner.

“Why would a Zilzila help anyone?” I ask, turning my attention to her.

“Because, unlike your people we respect all living things, even if the living things we save are assholes who would...”

“Rowan!” The boy snaps at her then turns back to me, “Just because you’ve heard whatever stories about our people doesn’t mean they’re actually true. We are, for the most part,”

his eyes flash daggers at Rowan, “A very caring people. I swear, by the Great Ones, we won’t hurt you.”

I’m skeptical but he did swear by the Great Ones and I don’t really have a choice when I’m in this condition.

“Okay.” I say shakily. Laz flashes me a grin and looks over his shoulder at Rowan who, after rolling her eyes, turns back to the book she’s reading over her bowl.

“Are you hungry? You must be- you’ve been out cold for almost a full day.” he asks and answers his own question.

“Yeah, but I don’t know if I can keep anything down, let alone feed myself right now.”

“That’s okay- I’ll feed you. And if you get sick, we’ll clean you up and get more medicine out of the cabinet.” He says all cheery, with almost a childlike optimism.

“Okay,” and I can’t help but return his grin, “Thank you.”

“Of course!” He raises the spoon to my lips and the warm liquid trickles down my raw throat.

I sip the soup slowly and try to breathe through the pain. Laz doesn’t ask me anything else while I eat allowing me to conserve my energy. Rowan heads back over to her bed and rolls over. When I’m finished with the soup Laz helps me back to a somewhat comfortable lying position.

“So Bek... you really don’t remember how you got like this?”

“No, the last thing I remember is speaking with my mother in her chambers. We were discussing a trip I needed to make to the neighboring Kingdom.”

“Okay.”

“We were drinking honeydew and she was telling me how the fire breathers would serve as my protective guard.” I recall.

“Protective guard? Why do you need a protective guard?” He questions.

“Because I’m of the Fae noble family” I say, as if it is the most obvious thing in the world.

“Part of the noble family?” Laz’s expression hardens.

“Yes. My mother wanted me to be protected by the Drakes, she thought it was the safest option as fire breathers only serve those with royal Fae blood. She wanted to ensure my safety as I traveled due to the closeness of the Zilzilan territory to my journeys route.”

“Protect *you* from us?” Rowan roars crossing the room in a few strides. “You’re the ones who killed off over half of our species sport.” Her face turns redder and redder as she shouts. “You’re the ones who banished us off to a ridiculously small territory that has wards that hold us in so we can’t go anywhere. You’re the ones who stole our land and culture from us. You’re the reason we must have safe hoses when we go hunting so we don’t get murdered for trying to feed our families.” She fumes. She turns her attention to Laz, “*He’s* part of the Royal Family,” she spits.

Laz sits very still looking down, his eyebrows furrowed in thought. “What’s your title in the royal court and how old are you?” He asks in a detached manner.

“Prince of the Fae. 17.” I say, suddenly feel shameful over my heritage.

Laz turns back to Rowan, “There he’s two years younger than us and a prince- not a soldier. That means he had no part in the war- as he was only five. Furthermore, we both know

the Queen is the only one with any power in that dictatorship. So can we take a breath and stop yelling? We don't want the whole world to know we're here."

"Yeah... sorry." Rowan replies avoiding eye contact with both of us. This seems to satisfy Laz and he sits back in his chair next to my bed and looks up as Rowan sinks down onto the end of my bed.

"I'm sorry," Rowan breaths so quietly I almost don't hear her. "My father was killed during the battle of Mount Verde, the other soldiers present on our side told us he was killed by the Drakes at the orders of the Fae Queen. I know it's not *your* fault I just have a hard time giving other Fae the benefit of the doubt. I'm sorry for my outburst."

"There's absolutely no need to apologise. *I'm sorry* she did that to you and your people. My mother can be quite cruel when it comes to the prosperity of our kingdom." I reply, my eyes beginning to fill with tears. "You should have seen her reaction when I told her I wouldn't marry in order to form an alliance with our neighboring kingdom."

"Why not? Isn't that sort of one of the rules of royalty- you don't get to choose who you marry?" Laz asks skeptically.

"Normally, yes- but this was more of a punishment for her catching me kissing my manservant." I tell them, eyeing Laz's reaction closely.

"That's ridiculous! I didn't think people still had a problem with queerness, even in the Fae community." Laz fumes.

"Most people don't care, but my mother most definitely does. She's been hostile with me for two months and only began warming up to me as she began to plan my journey."

“Wait... so she was very upset with you and only got over it when she planned your journey in which you almost died?” Rowan asks pointedly.

“I suppose so,”

“And Drakes *only* listen to Fae of royal blood?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Do you think your mother could have told them to attack you?”

“I don’t know, I hadn’t thought of that.” I reply as my brain begins to whirl faster and faster along with hundreds of thoughts about my mother. “I mean if she didn’t, how did I end up alone and injured?”

“What do you want to do?” Laz asks as he stares into my eyes.

“After I heal, do you think we could go back to the Zilzilan territory? And do you think you could get them to help us?”

“Yes. No question they’d help. Why? What are we going to do?”

“Isn’t it obvious Laz?” Rowan asks, catching my eye.

I look both of my new allies over, “We’re gonna start a war.”