

Chapter 1: Flight From the Forest

Ashlyn's history, from birth until her fateful moment fleeing from her home to an uncertain future.

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Rael was born in the night of the 15th Sun of the First Umbral Moon, in a small village deep within the Golmore Jungle. It was an uneventful birth, on an uneventful night, and none could tell looking at the squalling babe how many lives they would shape in the days to come. Their childhood was largely uneventful; like all Ravan there was no way to tell if Rael was to be a man or a woman.

Yet the young kit somehow knew in their heart that their place was to be the village, doing all they could to learn the ways of the older Ravan females. Rael found a happiness in mimicking those actions that could not be explained, one that persisted even as they grew older. They grew their dark brown hair out long, eventually pulling it back into a ponytail, and a sharp contrast to their lighter skin. In the right light, they could almost be mistaken for a tanned Veena.

Yet all childhoods end, and many dreams are soured by the intrusion of cruel reality. For Rael, this reality was puberty. The changes began shortly after they turned twelve and tore the idyllic dream of their life apart.

The changes were expected, of course. This was the age that the males would soon be separated from the females, with the newest batch of young males taken into the forests by their elders to be taught the ways of the warder. But for Rael, the changes destroyed them. Their nethers shifted as they kept growing, and something unexpected appeared there, something unwanted.

While other girls began to develop and grow into feminine curves, Rael found their own beginning to form define muscles. It was wrong and they knew it, somewhere deep inside almost screaming at the way their own body had betrayed them. And not one of the older women of the village seemed to understand. Despite all Rael's pleading that this was not who they were, the adults seemed quite happy to see the kit growing into the body of a strong, healthy male. Confusion, they said, yet that they did so without malice meant little. Rael's nights grew terrible and short, their pillows soaked by helpless tears as the day of the elder males' return approached.

Until the day did come. Rael did everything they could to hide when the men came to the village for the yearly mating, but there were only so many places in such a small place. And it was not as if they were the first kit to try to hide from leaving their home behind, Rael's reasons were just very different.

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When an older Viera, it was impossible to say how much older, found them he did try to be comforting.

But his words were spoken to soothe the wrong fears.

Staring up at the far darker skinned man, with his white hair clipped short to prevent anyone using it

against him in a fight, Rael saw only the pain of a future wished for utterly denied. They tried to fight,

but at all of twelve it was child's play for the trained warrior to pluck them from their hiding place. They kicked and yelled to be let go, that their place was village, but it fell on ears as deaf to the reason

as the women had been. And the time of comforting words didn't last.

They were hoisted up by the older male that had found them and carried to the edge of the village where the males who had come of age had been assembled. After a small ceremony, the details of which Rael had never bothered to learn, certain of their role in life being elsewhere, their elders led

them away into the jungle. Rael could stop themselves, looking back with tears in their eyes as their

home vanished into the trees.

One of their escorts, the same male who'd found them hiding, tried to cheer them up. They'd be back in

a year, he said, to help with the mating. Rael's reply was a flood of silent tears, the pain they felt too

deep to give words. They had tried to explain, and no one had listened, no one had even tried to understand.

The small caravan's arrival at the training camp went all but unnoticed to the distraught Ravan, and

they barely heard their assignment to a squad. They just stood in place in the small drill area, tears still

streaming down their cheeks, until a sympathetic soul took them by a hand and guided them to the little

nest that would be theirs to sleep in.

They tried to imagine the future ahead of them now, growing older in a body that wasn't right. No happiness found them in that place. Yet creeping into their dreams at the end of their tears, there came

different visions. Ones where their body changed to grow into what they had always imagined for themselves, where they could be known as what they knew they were. Where they could be a

mother.

Their training began at dawn. Rael was taken out of the camp with their squad and set to learning patrol routes, but they couldn't focus on it at all. Despite the skill of their trainers, and the scolding that soon began to be heaped upon them for their distraction, none of it could penetrate the wish for their desperate dream to come true.

It didn't take long for those dreams to overcome fear. If there was to be even a shred of happiness to their life, Rael decided, it couldn't be here. Less than a moon after being brought to the camp, they slipped away in the night. Once out of the camp and past the obvious watchers, they put the conditioning the camp had forced upon them to good use. Voices called out in pursuit, but they didn't care. Not even that running away like this would cause them to be banished forever from the village. All they wanted was the chance to be happy.

Perhaps they were faster than the guards. Perhaps those guards could not stray too far from their posts

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or saw no need to do so. In the end, it mattered little. After a night spent trudging through the jungle, the first rays of sunlight revealed a break in the treeline. Yet what awaited the feeling kit only filled them with dread. Stepping out from the trees, they found themselves met by a seemingly endless expanse of sand.

They had never seen such a thing, only knowing the word desert from stories. Their training hadn't advanced nearly far enough to help them here, and what lay ahead was only the promise of a slow and painful death. Yet to return to Golmore, to their people would just be accepting a sentence to death by ilms. At best, they'd be accepted back to continue their life as a male, and that would be no life at all.

Swallowing hard, Rael made their choice.

By the time night fell they were light-headed from exhaustion, and nearly delirious from lack of water.

Their movements had grown steadily more sluggish as the bells passed, searching desperately for water, or simple shelter from the scorching sun. And with night came a deeper cold than they'd ever experienced.

They collapsed a few bells later, shivering under the light of the moon, and utterly lost. They couldn't have found their way back to the jungle even if they'd had the energy to try, and there was no water left in their body for tears. They felt their breaths growing lighter, what was left of their reserves slipping away in a futile attempt to keep them warm.

Much of the rest of that night was a blur to the youngling, but they remembered a few things with perfect clarity. A figure in the distance, bursting into a sprint towards them. The feeling of large arms embracing them, and words in a strange tongue that they didn't understand. Water at their lips, fresh and cool, and a sudden banishment of the cold.

When they next awoke, Rael found themselves under a blanket beside a small fire. The rasp in their throat was gone, and as they stirred they saw a great figure sitting across the fire from them.

Something

small sizzled above the flames, the scent delicious to the starving teenager.

“You awake.” The figure spoke softly, leaning forward across the fire. His fur was a dark blue, almost indigo, with long white hair swept back around his face like a mane. They stared at him, wide-eyed and confused whilst he considered them. “What your name?”

“R-rael,” they replied. The words were rough and clearly unused – this man knew only some of their tongue, not more.

“Rael.” The huge man nodded. “Where you from?”

“Atoel,” the kit replied after a moment. For a moment they hoped that the man wouldn’t know the place. If he did, he could return them to it, and the life they had been willing to die to escape. “My forest name is Rael Atoel.”

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The man brought one huge paw to his chest. "I am Hrvoje Verasch. Why you here, Rael?"

"I have no home to return to," they replied, looking to one side, where they thought the jungle might be. Hrvoje's face scrunched up, a motion similar enough to a Ravan's for them to recognize as concern.

"Golmore in trouble?"

They had never heard that name, but it was clear what it meant to refer to. They shook their head. "I... my village says I am a boy. They sent me to protect the lands like the rest, but they're wrong. That's not what I am."

Hrvoje made a comforting sound, and it was as if a wall crumbled between them. Words poured from Rael's lips, turning steadily shakier as tears began to fall. They told their rescuer everything. How they had been misunderstood so completely, how they knew they were a girl yet their body hadn't agreed. They laid a hand on their chest, flat like a stripped tree, and through sheets of tears told him of how they'd run from the life that would have slowly killed them.

It went like that for a long time, and the waterskin was almost empty before Hrvoje held up one of his great paws in a comforting gesture.

"You girl with no home." He brought his other paw to his chin, worrying at the fur, then nodded decisively. Rael's heart shrank. He was going to take them back, they could tell. All of this would have been for nothi- "Then you my daughter, if you wish."

The Viera's world stopped, their heart skipping more than just a single beat.

"You," they began. "You accept I am a girl? You'll help me?"

"That what being father means," Hrvoje smiled. "More than just blood. Father is choice."

The simple words sounded impossible to Rael, but something in them struck the remains of their dreams and didn't let go. Hrvoje moved around the fire, picking up the cooked stick of meat and

offering it to them. "Here, daughter."

She took it shakily, almost unable to see through the sudden tears. It was the best thing she'd ever tasted. After she was done, she looked up at Hrvoje. "Thank you, father."

"Course," he replied. "I teach you my words. You help learn yours better, yes?"

"Yes," she whispered, pulling herself a little closer to him. For the first time in moons, Rael felt something like safety. She'd never believed she would feel that again after her unwelcome changes began. One paw ran gently across her head, the weight comforting. Moments later, she was asleep

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In the days that followed, they traveled slowly across the desert towards Dalmasca, Hrvoje setting a deliberately slower pace to allow the young girl to start to recover. It would strain his supplies, but he knew the desert well, and how to plumb its hidden supplies of much-needed water.

They traveled in small bursts, between the heat of noonday sun and icy cold of deep night, and all the while they learned more of each other's language and selves. Hrvoje told Rael of his homeland, a faraway place called Bozja, and of his race; the Hrothgar. He asked her if she wished a new name on that first dawn, accepting when she couldn't think of one, but making sure she knew she could decide when she wished.

When she asked, he told her about the Viera who'd taught him their tongue. Ukina Hyskaris had been a highly skilled conjurer, who later in life had taken the name Cherry Petal. The two had traveled together for some time, and he had learnt the basics of her language from her.

Every time she fell asleep Rael feared that this was all a dream, and that she'd wake up in the jungle again, surrounded by those who couldn't understand her. Yet every time she woke, her father was still there. He explained in still halting Ravan that they would go to Rabanastre.

There was an alchemist he knew there, who might be able to help his charge. They would learn each other's tongues properly, then return to the road.

A few days later, the walls of Rabanastre loomed out of the desert haze before them, and Hrvoje led her up to the massive gates. It was utterly unlike anything Rael had seen before, who never seen construction beyond the simple dwellings of her old village. A good temporary home, her father said. Plenty of water, good food. And the chance of aid for what ailed her.

Taking her to a small shop, Hrvoje greeted the man behind the counter warmly whilst Rael tried to make sense of him. His skin was tanned, much like her, but he didn't stand nearly as tall as Ravan males did. Nor did he have familiar ears, his short black hair cut around two odd shapes of flesh on either side of his head. He wore a simple white jacket, stained here and there by alchemical

concoctions, and rounded spectacles that almost hid the sharp intelligence in his green eyes.

“This Raminas,” Hrvoje introduced the man, his tone that of one speaking of an old friend. “He Hyur, not Viera like you.”

Now she had a word for him, yet the features were oddly familiar. She remembered descriptions from her elders, of those who tried to enter their sacred forests and subjugate their kind. His people were responsible for how their men had to roam the jungle to protect it. How could he help?

“Who’s the kid, Hrvoje?” He asked. Rael couldn’t understand him, but she knew one of the words that came next. “And why the fuck did you bring a young Viera here?”

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"I found her in the desert, running from the jungle," Hrvoje replied calmly. "She is my daughter now."

The man blinked a few moments, then his eyes widened. "O-oh! She's one of those kinds. I understand, but..." he trailed off, pulling a thin journal from below the counter. "You came to me for help with her," he waved a hand up and down at Rael, and Hrvoje nodded.

"Can you help?" He asked.

Raminas flipped quickly through the journal, eyes intent. "I'm not that familiar with Vieran biology, my old friend. If I try, it could hurt her. She could end up sterile for the rest of her life."

"It's what she wants," Hrvoje replied roughly. "You didn't see her out there, Raminas. She chose death in the desert over staying how she is."

Raminas winced. "Very well. I can try, but I'll need some of her blood and at least a week to modify my potions to take into account the differences between her and a Hyur or Miqu'te." He raised a hand quickly, stalling the immediate question.

"I know that's a long time," he added. "But just because she looks similar doesn't mean she is biologically. Ashlyn would never forgive me if I didn't do this right."

Rael still didn't understand anything that had been said, but the name of the man's wife – not that she knew it was that – drew her attention. She rolled the word in her mind, considering it. Could it be...

"Thank you, old friend!" Hrvoje slapped Raminas' back joyfully. "We will be here for at least a full moon, my Ravan is too rusty to consider traveling with her until we can speak properly." He turned to Rael, crouching down to meet her eyes.

"He help," he told her. "But need blood to do so. Father here, he will not hurt."

Rael nodded immediately, offering an arm. The alchemist took several vials of blood, then vanished into the back of the shop to work on them. Only after he was gone did Rael turn to her father, curiosity in her eyes.

"I heard...it sounded like a name," she said. "What is Ashlyn?"

"Ashlyn his wife," Hrvoje replied, watching her curiously.

"It's a pretty name," Rael said, letting it roll on her tongue. "Could...I be called that, Father?"

"Of course." Hrvoje smiled brilliantly at her. He had given her suggestions on their journey through the desert, but none had fit. The blossoming smile on his daughter's face said everything he needed to

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know. "You now Ashlyn Verasch."

Tears, happy ones this time, formed at the young girl's eyes, and she felt something in her change in that instant. A feeling of contented belonging, unlike anything she could remember even in the idyllic days of her youth. It would not be until much later in her life that she'd recognize it for what it was, but in that moment she didn't need complex words.

This was her name. This was her father. They were family now and forever, and she would give anything to protect that. She reached out, the tears falling freely, and flung her arms around her father.

Hrvoje said nothing, for nothing need be said. He simply wrapped his paws around his new daughter, his Ashlyn, and smiled.