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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 her back, she 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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