

The Dream

Ruby tossed and turned in her sleep, cringing in pain as the medicine continued to flush the poisons from her body. The nurse came to her side regularly, gently patting away the sweat on her fevered forehead, while the Xaela's mind overflowed with dreaming.

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She took in a deep breath and let out a sigh with a smile. The scent of grass and canvas filled her nose, underpinned by the sour smells of goat and horse. The smells of the Steppe. Of home. The sun was swiftly setting, deep orange light cast across the green plains and dancing on the surface of the lake before her. In the waters she could see the reflection of the full moon rising, just as it had on the night of her coming of age. Turning, she expected to see a busy campsite, family and friends cooking over the central fire and brushing down the horses after the day's journey.

The wind whipped through a deserted scene. Tent flaps snapped back and forth, revealing dark and empty interiors. A thin column of smoke rose from an extinguished fire, ashes scattering. Ruby shivered in the sudden cold that followed the sunset. She was alone.

Is this what it had looked like? Her tribe's encampment on that fateful day when they had been wiped out. Her toes curled in the grass as she walked through the camp, the silence filling her and weighing her down. If only she had been here, she thought as she knelt by the burned out fire, the last of the embers dying. It wouldn't have made a difference. What would one more warrior have been against a force strong enough to massacre an entire tribe? Her blood would have been staining the grass along with the others. Tears dropped from her cheeks into the cold ashes. At least she wouldn't have been left in the world alone, to carry the guilt of living when all of her kin had died. She gasped in a breath of the cold air, tears coming thick and fast as she sobbed. The temperature was falling rapidly and the chill seared her lungs. She was one of her tribe's warriors! It had been her duty to protect them, fight for them and die with them, not go chasing her childish dreams halfway around the world. Another frosty breath bit deep into her, and she let out a scream that tore her throat and shook the ground around her.

Suddenly, she was warm. Hot even, her skin prickled as if she had stood too long in the sun. Her horns caught the sound of footsteps behind her and she turned swiftly, rising to her feet. A male Xaela approached her, towering over her as they all did. His face was framed by thick horns that swept down to his chin and scales that cascaded down the sides of his neck and over a broad, tanned chest. Bright blue hair was drawn back into a short ponytail and violet eyes gazed down at her.

"Enkhutuya, my love."

"Maral..." Ruby choked out, taking a step forward, legs shaky as she approached her lost mate. "Is it really you?" She reached out one hand, fingertips landing on his chest and feeling the searing heat within. "Did you live?"

The male Xaela enclosed her hand entirely with one of his own.

"No, Enkhutuya, I did not." The voice he spoke with carried no tone of anger. "I died defending them, and my last thoughts were of you."

"I'm sorry, Maral... I should have been there!" Ruby's mismatched eyes swam with tears again. "I should never have left!"

"Enkhutuya, none of us blame you. I am proud of you for following your heart, even though I missed you every day." He raised a hand and caressed her cheek, fingers stroking the length of her horn. Ruby melted under his touch.

"You don't know how good it is to hear that..." She smiled, closing her eyes.

"Now listen, my love." Maral pulled her into his chest, enclosing her in his embrace. "Nhaama has granted me a return from the great beyond, to join you once again." Ruby frowned and looked up at him.

"What do you mean?"

"The Dusk Mother in her wisdom has chosen to bless you as the last of our tribe. Accept the blessing, my love, and I will be with you once again. And more than that, I will bring you power from the beyond, so that you can protect those you love. You will never have to feel the pain of that loss again." Maral murmured against one of her horns. Ruby's breath caught in her throat.

"You're not angry at me, for having new loves?"

Maral threw his head back and laughed.

"Am I angry at you for living your life? Of course not. I only wish to be with you as well. I will help you protect them." Placing a hand under her chin, he tilted her face up, her white-and-blue gaze meeting his violet eyes. For the first time, she noticed flecks of glowing red in the purple orbs. Had they always been there?

"Accept me, my love. I will give you all the power you need, to protect them forever."

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Stars gleamed down from the sky above. Ruby laid back on her favourite rock just beyond the gates of Idyllshire, gazing up into the clear night sky. Two days on, her body had flushed the last of the poison - now it was just a matter of resting and regaining the aether to make the journey home. Her eyes scanned the heavens for the comforting sight of the moon, but the silver orb was invisible tonight.

Maral had visited her in her dreams every night, and once she had seen his shade on waking. It sounded so improbable and yet... The Dusk Mother often returned Xaela to the world of the living, with new lives, was Ruby going to doubt that she could return them in spirit form? As a guide and source of strength to one of her daughters who had suffered? The guilt burned deep inside her, the guilt of leaving them all, the guilt of burying Maral and the memory of his love deep within her heart, and the guilt for never having loved him back in the same way. She could relieve that guilt, and ensure she had the power to protect Kira and support Ashlyn always. She turned the pale stone over and over in her fingers.

After a moment's hesitation, she focused on the stone and the shade appeared once more. A grey cloaked figure, all features hidden, lit by glistening particles of purple and red. *Like his eyes*, Ruby thought. The shade didn't look like Maral, true, but then how much of a person's form could be projected from the beyond? She wasn't sure, but this shadowy shape seemed a reasonable guess. The hooded head inclined towards her, a motion she read as affectionate.

Enkhutuya... A reassuring voice whispered to her.

"Maral." Ruby peered up, but she could make out no face beneath the hood. "I've decided." As that Hrothgar had told her - she needed to ask for help.

"Please, help me to protect them."

As you wish. The contract is made. Maral's shade vanished and there was a second of nothingness. Ruby gasped as her heart suddenly pounded, veins of black, purple and red flashing over her pale skin momentarily. The weariness of the past few days left her and she clenched her fists, relishing the sensation of strength returned to her muscles. Elated, she got to her feet, clasping the stone and touching her wedding band.

"I'll keep you safe. Always."

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