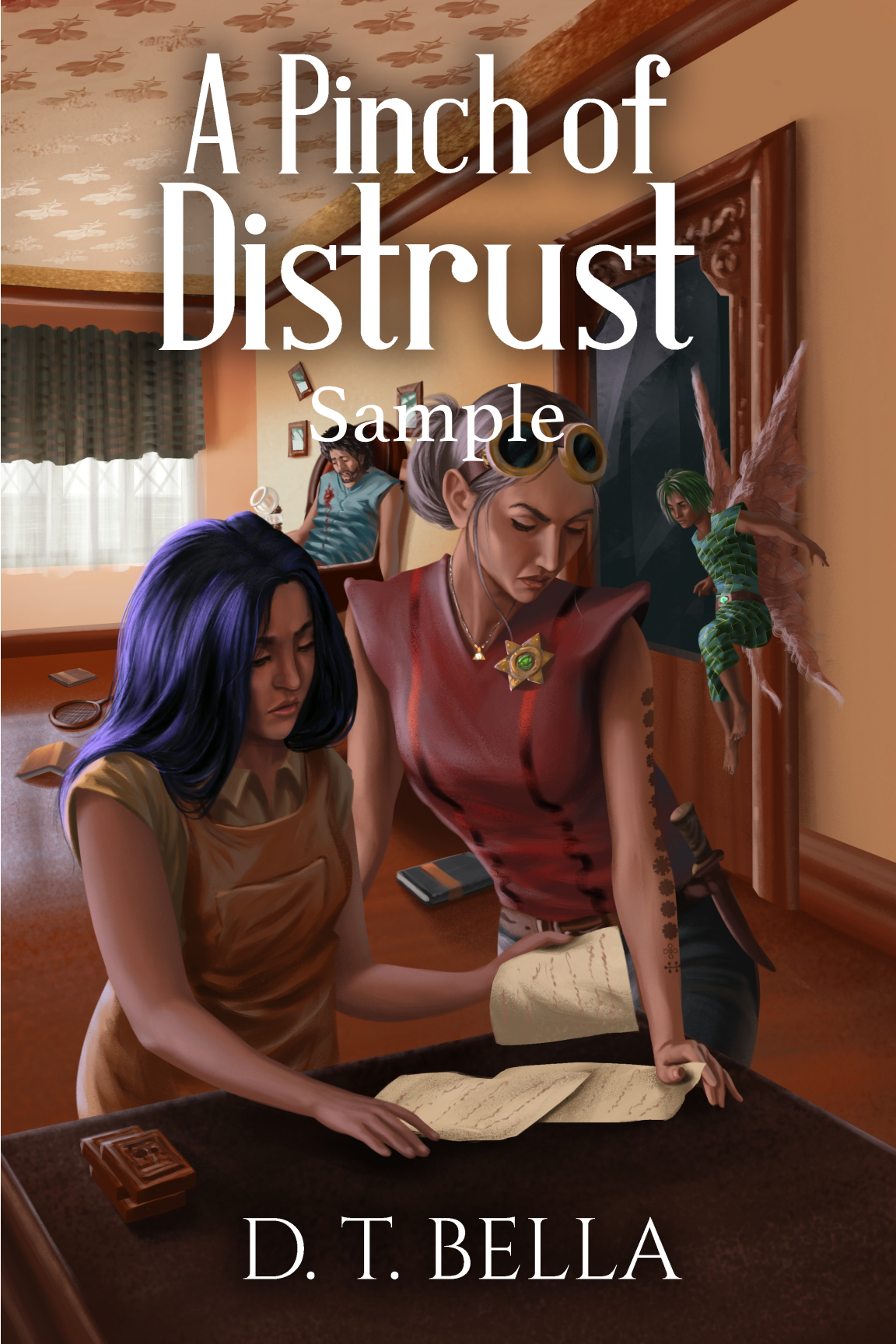


A Pinch of Distrust

Sample



D. T. BELLA

A Pinch of Distrust

Chapter 1

A Disturbing Discovery

Yaetherim blinked, but the sight below him didn't change. That was another fairy lying prone on the shore of Verbore Island. Dead, or at least close to it. Below the body, a growing patch of purple stained the moss. A smear of blood led up from the murky water.

Yaetherim swooped down towards the stricken fairy. Curse words slipped from his lips. The locals had invited him here, to the Isle of Origin, to find peace. So much for that now. He swung his feet down. They slapped against the stones. A grunt escaped him. Not the neatest of landings, but style could wait. Only a hand's width separated him from the bleeding fairy. He examined the prone fairy's injuries. Stab wounds, no mistaking them. They were fresh.

Yaetherim's head whipped around, running over the clearing. To the right, some leaves rustled. Yaetherim's heart raced. Cold sweat broke out on his brow. His arm shot out. Energy crackled along it. A loud snap came from a nearby tree. The branch he'd summoned landed in his fist with a satisfying slap. A second spell sharpened its end into a point.

"Somebody there?" he barked. More rustling greeted his words. Another fairy emerged from the forest between two palm trees. Lizard-like wings, charcoal-black hair, a firekind. She wore the armband of a protector. A dagger dangled from her belt. Its sheath could hide a bloodied blade.

He held his other hand above one of the injured fairy's wounds. This time, the magic drifted out. Just a familiar tingle, starting from the crystal clasped in his belt buckle. Beneath his fingers, a smooth milky-green sochar leaf materialised. Carefully, Yaetherim began wrapping it around the remains of the wounded fairy's wings.

"What are you doing?" demanded the protector. She hovered closer, her hand on her dagger. Her voice shook, but she tried to hide it. No surprise there. Unlike Yaetherim, she probably knew this poor fellow. Yaetherim aimed his makeshift spear at her.

"Tending to his injuries. They're stab wounds. You're the only one here who's armed."

Her eyes widened. A frown creased her brow. Yaetherim shifted to show her his belt.

“Can’t exactly cut him with just a crystal, can I?”

She pointed to the satchel slung over his shoulder. Like most fairy garments, it was woven from leaves and other plant materials.

“Your bag’s big enough for a dagger.”

“Oh, so I’m undoing what you believe I’ve done?” Yaetherim snarked.

“He was lying there, with you standing over him! What did you expect me to think?”

“You were hiding in the trees while I tended to his wounds,” Yaetherim retorted. “What did you expect me to think?”

A dash of annoyance flavoured his words. He did not need this now.

The protector glanced down, then to where the injured fairy’s belt should have been. Slowly, she drew her blade. Yaetherim didn’t take his eyes off it. She held it towards him. The late afternoon sunlight reflected off the unblemished steel. Yaetherim frowned.

“That’s only one side of it.”

She turned the dagger over. No marks stained this side either. Yaetherim tossed his improvised spear aside. The protector landed next to him.

“I am Yaetherim of South Alken Forest. Your elder Paeyelin invited me,” Yaetherim said.

“I am Taegithi of Verbore Island and that is Paetobim,” replied the protector. Yaetherim nodded. Beneath his hand, the leaf finished forming. A faint salty aroma wafted up from it. Yaetherim checked his crystal. Still opaque and full of energy. He moved onto Paetobim’s next largest wound and cast again. A gasp came from behind him, but he didn’t turn around. He sighed.

“Aye, I have scars,” he said, “you can gape at them later.”

“Sorry, I-”

“I’m used to it. Please fetch help. We should get that unclean water off him.”

He’d spoken curtly. They could converse afterwards. Merely drinking unfiltered water was enough to make anyone sick, let alone swimming in it. Just the odour hanging in the humid air turned Yaetherim’s stomach. Even now, an antidote may not aid Paetobim.

“Aye, ah, of course,” Taegithi replied. She took off. Yaetherim watched her go. Despite the clean dagger, suspicion lingered. She had been close by. But

so had he. Yaetherim dismissed his suspicions and finished conjuring the leaf. He turned Paetobim over to tend to the other injuries. The latter's arm flopped out. A crystal rolled out of his right hand, stopping against a nearby rock. Yaetherim ignored it. It wasn't the first spent crystal he'd seen.

Each wound sliced through Paetobim's flesh with no rip or tear. Only the blood showed their location. No blade or crossbow bolt could cut that neat and deep. Yet Yaetherim knew such injuries. He didn't need to check the scars on his own arms. They were just as clean and thin, with no sign of tearing or twisting.

A groan drifted through the air. Paetobim opened his eyes and tried to sit.

"It's all right, Paetobim. You're safe now," Yaetherim said. His tone belied his words.

"Nay... Rychillans in Cerrane..."

"What?"

Yaetherim frowned. His breath caught in his throat. Rychillans were banned from visiting Cerrane. Another moan interrupted his thoughts. He shook his head. Paetobim needed help. The rest could wait. With a few more spells, Yaetherim dressed Paetobim's wounds. A flick of his hands summoned some soft leaves, upon which he rested Paetobim.

Yaetherim stepped over and picked up the crystal Paetobim had dropped. If stood on end, it would reach his knee. Human-sized, much too large for a fairy. Several vertical scratches marred the sides. Such marks only came from Rychillan jewellery. Only a hint of blue remained within it, the shade of a waterkind. A cold sweat crossed Yaetherim's brow. With his hands trembling, he reached into his satchel. He withdrew another crystal. As he held the two side-by-side, his suspicions solidified. Both were identical.

Something touched Yaetherim's shoulder. The crystals fell from his grip. He turned. One arm whipped up. His wings flicked out. A spell shot from his lips. The makeshift spear jumped back into his other hand. He brought it down, aiming it like a dagger.

Another fairy stood behind him. The newcomer held up his hands. Large eyes stared at him over a set of thick, callused fingers. Traits of a groundkind fairy. Not the most useful magic when healing. Perhaps he had just been the next nearest protector. No, that wasn't it. The armband of a protector captain sat on this groundkind's forearm. Again, annoyance seasoned his speech.

"You startled me, Captain Kae-"

"Kaetarpn of Mirost Village, Verbore Island. My apologies. That was not my

intention.”

He'd spoken sincerely. Yaetherim dropped the spear and took a deep breath. His wings relaxed and drooped.

Kaetarpen's eyes flicked over Yaetherim's right shoulder. Yaetherim waited. He counted off the heartbeats in his head. Three, while Kaetarpen stared at the hole in his wing. Then one heartbeat each for the scars on his arms and legs. Seemed correct. That's how long most people took. Kaetarpen's expression shifted.

“That is airship skin on my wing. Had it stitched in place by a Rychillan healer,” Yaetherim explained, “everyone asks.”

Yaetherim leaned over and looked around Kaetarpen. Taegithi had indeed brought help. She and a waterkind tended to Paetobim, while two more protectors stood guard behind them. All four had their wings extended, ready to fly at a heartbeat's notice.

“They attacked his wings this time too,” Yaetherim said.

“Who?”

“The Rychillans Paetobim saw in Cerrane.”

Kaetarpen's eyes widened. He spun on his heel. Firmly and quickly, he issued orders.

“Taegithi, I need you to go back to the village. Gather up all the protectors who aren't on patrol. Bring them to Cerrane, the southeast corner. Inform Paeyelin too.”

Taegithi nodded and departed.

“You said this time?” Kaetarpen asked. Yaetherim picked up the spent waterkind crystals and handed them to Kaetarpen.

“He was holding one of these when I found him.”

Kaetarpen held the crystals side-by-side.

“Where did you get the other?”

“Oato Clearing, South Alken Forest,” Yaetherim replied. “It came with my scars.”

His voice had shaken on that last sentence, even though he'd spoken softly. Kaetarpen glanced over his shoulder. Yaetherim followed his gaze. Beside Paetobim lay an improvised stretcher. Nothing fancy, just palm fronds wrapped around two branches.

“It's all right, sir. We should be able to move him to the village,” said one

protector. Kaetarpen nodded and turned back to Yaetherim.

“You should go with them.”

“Where are you going?”

“To Cerrane.”

Yaetherim tilted his head.

“On your own?”

Kaetarpen couldn't be that stupid. It took a certain measure of intelligence to reach the rank of captain.

“The others are meeting me there,” Kaetarpen replied tersely.

“Will there be archers amongst them?”

“Those who aren't on patrol, aye.”

Yaetherim cracked his knuckles. Each pop got a wince from Kaetarpen. Good, he had his attention. Kaetarpen needed to understand what he'd be facing. Yaetherim held his right arm out, showing the three scars along it.

“Do these look like the work of a blade?”

Kaetarpen leaned forward.

“Not torn... smooth...”

His eyes widened and flicked over to the waterkind crystals. Yaetherim nodded. Memories shot into his mind. A thin jet of liquid, flying towards him. Then pain, blotting out everything else. His wings shuddered and his fingers tensed.

“A dagger made of water?” Kaetarpen asked.

“A focused and directed stream of it. Very narrow. More of a lance than anything,” Yaetherim said, his voice wavering. “Paetobim didn't even get his own weapon out.”

Kaetarpen looked over to the stretcher. He stroked his chin.

“Yaetherim, could you accompany me to Cerrane? Your knowledge of this situation may prove useful.”

Yaetherim's heart started racing. The Rychillans who'd attacked him could still be there. Yes, a chance of finding them was what had brought him here. But this was not what he'd expected. At least he wasn't alone this time.

“You sure we'll meet up with the other protectors first?”

Kaetarpen folded his arms.

“That is what I said,” he replied. He spread his wings and lifted off. After looping round, he hovered and waited. Yaetherim flexed his right wing. Most fairies could just take off without a second thought. He didn’t have that luxury anymore. Each stitch around the patch tugged in a familiar pattern of twinges. A few chafed the wing itself. But all stitches held. That done, Yaetherim tucked the waterkind crystals into his satchel and took flight.

They weaved through the forest, Kaetarpen in the lead. Branches and leaves flicked past. Yet despite the wind chill, sweat formed on Yaetherim’s forehead. This wasn’t about advising any longer. He was flying to Cerrane to intercept those who’d attacked him. They’d escaped last time. This was a chance to rectify that. He thought back over his training as a protector. Spotting and tracking poachers had been a large part of it. He’d need those skills now.

A curt gesture from Kaetarpen caught Yaetherim’s attention. Both fairies pulled up into a hover. Just ahead, the forest almost vanished. Vines and moss covered the remnants of buildings. Not that much still stood. Cerrane hadn’t seen residents for over two centuries.

“That’s Cerrane,” Kaetarpen said, his voice low, “we’ll stay behind the trees. Keep an eye out.”

Yaetherim nodded. His right hand dropped to his belt. It grasped air where he’d once worn a dagger. Kaetarpen gestured and moved off. Yaetherim followed. He kept glancing towards Cerrane. All he got were glimpses of the overgrown buildings. No signs of movement. But several walls still stood. Enough to hide a few humans, be they Rychillan or another race.

“Our patrol path comes through the trees just west of where we stopped,” Kaetarpen said, “then skirts the clearing until it reaches the southern shore.”

“Does it go into the ruins at all?”

“Nay, but Paetobim would’ve checked if he thought something amiss. He’s quite devoted to his duty.”

They reached the edge of the forest and perched on a branch. From here, the former town lay visible before them. A couple of structures still stood somewhat intact. To the southwest, the remains of a stone dock jutted out into the ocean. Again, no sign of movement. But tracking required more than sight alone. Yaetherim sniffed the air. His throat heaved. He coughed.

“Are you all right?” Kaetarpen asked.

“Just the stench of the water. None of that human odour.”

While promising, it was hardly conclusive. Perhaps the breeze had been

blowing the wrong way. Kaetarpen nodded. He glanced towards the ruins.

“We’ll be careful, though. Anything we should know?”

“They were burying something when I came across them,” Yaetherim said.

“What sort of thing?”

“Papers of some form. I can’t recall more. That attack stole a few memories too. They’d dug a hole under a rock.”

He sighed.

“We sent protectors to Oato Clearing two days later, but they found that hiding spot empty.”

A flurry of movement caught his attention. Taegithi emerged from the forest to his right, a dozen fairies behind her. Five carried crossbows, the rest wore daggers on their belts. Yaetherim almost smiled with relief.

After the protectors landed, Kaetarpen stepped forward. While he briefed them, Yaetherim looked back at Cerrane. Something dull-silver dangled off the edge of the dock. Probably steel, yet somehow devoid of rust. No boat, for what that was worth. Paetobim’s attackers could have come ashore elsewhere.

“Finally, if you see anything out of place, speak up,” Kaetarpen finished. Yaetherim cleared his throat and pointed to the dock.

“I have. Either someone’s left that behind, or the Rychillans have forgotten an effective metal preservation treatment.”

Fourteen pairs of eyes looked over. A babble of conversation broke out. Kaetarpen clapped his hands twice. Silence fell.

“Well-spotted. We’ll head that way first,” Kaetarpen said. He turned back to the other protectors.

“Any questions?”

“Sir, you mentioned these Rychillans were using a water lance. What sort of range does that have?” asked an archer. Kaetarpen glanced over at Yaetherim. All eyes fell upon him. He gestured to a half-fallen wall in the middle of the clearing.

“From about there to here.”

A few hands reached down to daggers. One or two fairies mumbled, but no more questions came. Kaetarpen took off, waving for the others to join him. They formed up, flanked by the archers.

“Yaetherim, could you please bring up the rear?” Kaetarpen asked.

“Of course.”

After his preflight checks, Yaetherim joined them. They flew towards the dock, eyes peeled for any signs of movement. About halfway there, a movement amongst the bushes caught their attention. A protector on the right brought her bow up. A small, scaly brown animal skittered out into the daylight. The archer lowered her bow. She let out the breath she'd been holding.

"It's just a lizard," she said, relieved. It scurried along between trodden bracken and broken branches. Yaetherim frowned. Between the damaged plants, not around them, on suspiciously smooth soil and stones. Only a few ancient arrowheads littered the track. Even those lay to the sides.

"That's a path down there," he called. A few of the protectors looked down.

"We'll check that next," Kaetarpen replied from the front.

They reached the dock. Several stone bollards stood along its edge, each covered in moss and lichen. A steel ladder, with two handrails curving over onto a metal plate, dangled over the edge. No fairy would need such a thing.

Yaetherim looked out over the bay. Town buildings on the far shore interrupted the line of the forest. One towered above all others, a terminal for those Rychillan airships. But the rest of Alkentoft blurred into a salad of bricks and corrugated iron. No boats floated in the bay between there and here.

Kaetarpen joined Yaetherim. He glanced out over the water. His eyes narrowed.

"See anything?" he inquired.

"Nay, they must've gone in a hurry. I mean, they left that ladder behind. Chances are they're already back in Alkentoft."

Yaetherim slumped. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His attackers weren't here. They couldn't harm him now. But his chance to catch them had departed along with them. He opened his eyes to find his hands balled into fists. He unclenched them. Kaetarpen turned to the other fairies.

"Spread out," he ordered, "stay in pairs. We're looking for Paetobim's belt and something to identify those Rychillans. Start with that path Yaetherim spotted and work outwards from there. Taegithi, you'll coordinate. Report anything you find to me."

The protectors took to the air. Yaetherim glanced at Kaetarpen.

"We should check those structures that are still standing," suggested the latter. Yaetherim nodded. They flew off and headed towards the ruins. Doubt clawed

at Yaetherim. Unlike Oato Clearing, Cerrane presented plenty of potential hiding spots. A deep breath steadied his nerves. Fifteen fairies were searching this time. That should be enough.

He turned his attention downward. That path ran along what had once been a street. His eyes flicked side to side. Nothing stood out until he reached a sharp bend in the trail. With a flick of his wings, Yaetherim looped around to double-check. He blinked, surprised.

“What is it?” Kaetarpen asked.

“There’s a junction there.”

Two paths diverged through the broken plants, one towards each side of the street. Both ended at relatively undamaged structures. Kaetarpen swooped down and took a closer look. He ordered the nearest pair of protectors to investigate the structure on the right. That done, Kaetarpen veered left, through the hole in that house’s roof. Yaetherim followed him in. The building held less than a clean saucepan. Only a few scorch marks marred the bare wooden walls, and moss dotted the floor. A faint scent of smoke hung in the air. But no aroma of food, so not a cooking fire.

Yet an instinct tugged at Yaetherim’s thoughts, that gut feeling that had served him well. The product of details seen but not noticed. On one occasion, it had led to the capture of a trio of poachers. So he landed for a closer examination. Most of the moss sat in the gaps between floor stones. But two slabs lay encircled, with not a hair’s width left clear. Yaetherim cast a simple movement spell. Just a gentle tug. The minimum needed to dislodge anything unrooted.

But both solid rings of moss jumped up. A flick of Yaetherim’s hand sent them out of the way. He curled his finger, bringing a single piece to him. It had been compressed, mashed in place by fingers. They weren’t dealing with a florakind, then. Or at least, someone who didn’t want to show they were one.

Yaetherim gestured to the stones and looked at Kaetarpen.

“Can you raise those?” he asked. Kaetarpen frowned. He stepped over and crouched down.

“Aye, I can lift it with the dirt below. But my crystal’s running low.”

“Right,” Yaetherim replied. With another spell, he broke a chunk of wood off the door. He levitated it in mid-air.

“Ready.”

Kaetarpen cast his magic and the nearest edge of the stone rose. After a few

heartbeats, the clump of soil lifting it up came into view. As soon as it was high enough, Yaetherim wedged the wood under it. The stone thudded onto the wood. Beneath it, a hole cut through the dirt. Kaetarpen strode over, poking his head under the rock to get a proper look. His wings twitched. After several moments, he spoke. Disbelief dripped from his voice.

“It’s full of human-size crystals. All firekind and waterkind.”

Yaetherim checked the stash. About three dozen crystals lay within. He stepped back, his eyes wide. Such a hoard would fetch a couple of hundred kerlum in Alkentoft, or fill a fairy’s ledger of favours. Yet they just sat there, hidden but unguarded. These Rychillans must be rich, too.

He reached in and pulled out one of the waterkind crystals. Although full, it sent no tingle of energy across his bark-brown skin. It wasn’t his element. He turned the crystal over and scrutinised it. No scratches or spots sullied its surface. Yaetherim returned it.

He and Kaetarpen moved over to the other suspect stone. They raised it the same way. This time, a shallower hole held just a fragment of paper. With a movement spell, Yaetherim brought it to him. He floated it in front of his face. Rough edges showed where it had been torn from the rest of the sheet. It bore a geometric pattern, but not a recognisable one.

“Is that it?”

The words escaped before Yaetherim could stop himself. His fist clenched. Several heartbeats passed before he relaxed his grip. Someone thought this paper worth maiming over. He wanted to know why. That was owed him for all he’d suffered.

“What’s it say?” Kaetarpen asked. Yaetherim held the page up.

“Can you make that out? It’s not Fairic or Rychillan. Druhlashi, maybe?”

Kaetarpen peered at it. He shook his head.

“Nay, their writing’s blocky.”

“Right,” Yaetherim muttered. He handed Kaetarpen the paper. While the latter examined it, Yaetherim inspected the holes. Several somewhat straight lines ran down each side. Shovel marks, so these weren’t the product of groundkind magic. He pursed his lips.

“Speaking of Rychillans, it seems they’ve been coming here for quite a while. Paths like that don’t make themselves. Yet they were only spotted today?”

Kaetarpen frowned. He handed the page back to Yaetherim. A hint of annoyance flavoured his words.

“We’ve been seeing likely signs of trespassers for a while. I suspect that’s why Paeyelin invited you here. Have you noticed anything more?”

“Not here, nay. There’s still that other building.”

Yaetherim lowered the paper onto a spare stone. A simple spell summoned a large leaf through the gap in the roof. Another incantation folded it into an envelope. He tucked the page into it, being careful not to damage it. After all, it was their only clue to his attackers. He placed the envelope in his satchel and secured it.

With that done, they flew over to the other building they’d noticed earlier. One protector emerged from the doorway and stopped about an arm’s length away.

“Sir, I was about to get you. There are letters in here.”

Kaetarpen raised an eyebrow.

“Letters?”

“The remains of them, anyway. You’d better have a look.”

Yaetherim pushed the door open further with a spell. It swung without resistance or squeaking. Once through, he flew around behind it and checked the hinges. He called Kaetarpen over and pointed to the hinges. Just like the ladder on the docks, they bore no blemishes.

“They don’t appear a century or two old, do they?” he asked. Kaetarpen leaned in and frowned.

“Nay. Nor do they have a maker’s mark on them.”

“Nor any signs it’s been removed,” Yaetherim replied. He filed that observation for later and turned his attention to the rest of the building. Unlike the first, only a musty smell filled the air. Patches of sunlight dotted the floor from several small holes in the roof.

A short stool of Rychillan design stood in a corner. Next to it, a mat rested on the ground. Someone had woven it from palm fronds. Some green and freshly picked, others almost completely dry and brown. From a distance, it would resemble a jumble of leaves. A protector nodded to it.

“We had to move that off the fire.”

He punctuated his words with a flick of his thumb. A pile of ash sat near the far wall. Several singed pieces of paper lay atop it. Yaetherim stepped over. Each sheet bore writing, in one of two different sizes. The larger was mostly Rychillan, with Fairic sprinkled amongst it. The smaller scrawl was the opposite. Another protector leaned over the papers, studying them. Kaetarpen

landed beside her and picked up the page on top. It came apart in his fingers. Yaetherim suppressed a sigh of annoyance. This was evidence, they needed it intact.

“Allow me,” he said. He levitated the next letter into his palm. Blotches and stains covered the paper, some still wet.

“Did it rain here this morning?” he asked. The protector nodded. Yaetherim scrutinised the few legible words left.

“Can you read Rychillan?” he asked Kaetarpen.

“Some,” Kaetarpen said, “what’s that word there?”

“Beloved,” Yaetherim replied. That term held a lot of meaning for Rychillans. He turned to the protectors.

“Did you check the rest of those? Are there any names?”

“Nay. One of them already fell apart in my hands.”

With a wave of his fingers, Yaetherim summoned the surviving fragments from the top of the ash. Another few motions laid them out across the floor. Most contained ‘beloved’ amongst the text, in both languages. Kaetarpen had spotted that too. His expression made that clear. Some colour faded from his face.

Yaetherim pursed his lips. Such a cross-species relationship was not a new idea to him. He’d heard of it once or twice, on visits to Alkentoft. But each human stood as tall as five or six fairies. That size difference would bring disquiet to some aspects of courtship, at least for the fairy. A kiss could resemble the last thing a morsel of food saw before being consumed.

Kaetarpen regained his composure a few moments later. He and the protectors stepped from fragment to fragment, examining each. While they did so, Yaetherim turned his attention to the mat. He frowned. Unlike the crystals in the other hut, a lot of effort had gone into hiding these letters. A simple movement spell could have woven the fronds together. But the execution would have required patience. The labour of someone used to waiting.

Yaetherim closed his eyes, thinking over what he’d seen so far. Images flicked through his mind. That steel ladder and the unmarked hinges. Moss and the woven mat. His eyelids snapped open.

“Is that dock outside the only one on this island?” he asked. A protector nodded. A smirk curled Yaetherim’s lips.

“Captain Kaetarpen, is your quartermaster a florakind, by any chance?”

Kaetarpen turned with an eyebrow raised.

“Yaemetan? Aye. Why do you ask?”

Yaetherim gathered his thoughts.

“We know two Rychillans attacked me and Paetobim. If they were using this building for trysts, why would they have letters written in Fairic? Why bother sneaking over here? I doubt it’s more convenient than finding somewhere in Alkentoft. Then there’s the smoke.”

Kaetarpen sniffed the air.

“I can’t smell any smoke.”

“Neither can I,” Yaetherim replied, “not here. But there was in the other building. That must be where the attackers were.”

Kaetarpen nodded.

“Very well,” he said thoughtfully. “Go on.”

Yaetherim pointed to the mat. Kaetarpen peered at it, then fixed Yaetherim with an inquiring gaze.

“Must’ve taken a while to make that,” Yaetherim observed. “It’s not the type of thing one can just smuggle under their clothes. Who else visits here regularly? Aside from your florakind quartermaster who receives deliveries through the only dock on the island.”

“I understand your reasoning, but Yaemetan doesn’t unload alone.”

Yaetherim stroked his chin.

“No, but it’s probably how they met. Either that or he may have gone to Alkentoft to arrange purchases. I presume you patrol the shoreline?”

That question earned him a nod from all three protectors.

“No alarm raised,” he continued confidently, “so nobody spotted any boats. But those Rychillans were here today. Paetobim’s wounds and that ladder prove it.”

His hand shot out. An accusing finger pointed at the letters.

“Perhaps his attackers discovered how the blacksmith was sneaking over here and copied that method.”

One protector frowned. A single word spilled from her lips.

“Blacksmith?”

“Those hinges have no maker’s marks,” Kaetarpen said. Yaetherim nodded.

“Aye, exactly. That violates their guild rules, I believe. Either they wanted to face punishment, or they didn’t want it traced to them. They’re usually

firekinds. Hence the fire to destroy those love letters, and the mat to hide the ash. Unless Yaemetan is a dualkind?"

Kaetarpen shook his head.

"Nay. The only dualkind in our village is Taeperra, Paetobim's sister. She's a teacher of magic."

"Returning to my earlier question," Yaetherim said, "does Yaemetan have the patience to weave a mat like that?"

Kaetarpen's expression darkened. He folded his arms.

"Aye. But he should know better than to have such an affair."

Going by Kaetarpen's tone, Yaemetan would be in for a stern conversation. Kaetarpen glanced over at the papers.

"We need to bring these to Mirost Village."

From his satchel, Yaetherim drew the envelope he had made earlier. With a movement spell, he added the surviving letters to the fragment already in it. After returning it to his bag, he strode out of the building.

While Kaetarpen rounded up the other protectors, Yaetherim flew over to the dock. A quick look around confirmed the path he'd spotted ended here. No other broken branches or crushed leaves led away from it. So, the trespassers had only made the one path. He turned his attention to the ladder. Just as suspected, no signs of a maker's mark marred it.

He looked up as Kaetarpen joined him.

"May I see your dagger?"

He'd asked as though requesting someone to pass the salt at dinner. Kaetarpen handed his weapon over. Yaetherim turned it in his hands. Merely a simple Rychillan-made blade, a design known as a 'stinger'. Nothing fancy, but well-balanced with a maker's mark embossed on the pommel.

"Is this the standard-issue dagger here?" Yaetherim asked.

"Aye. Is there something wrong with it?"

"Nay, not at all. Who produced it?"

"Yaemetan has an arrangement with an armourer in Alkentoft."

Yaetherim handed the stinger back. A smidgen of sarcasm seeped into his voice.

"I'm sure he does."

By now, the rest of the protectors had joined them. Their search had found

nothing else of note. They took flight. Yaetherim followed at the rear of the formation. Before long, familiar aromas drifted through the air. Eggplant, potatoes and nistyr root, none cooked enough to eat yet. Yaetherim's stomach rumbled. It had been an exhausting day.

Ahead, huts nestled amongst the tree branches. Walkways made of rope and wood boards ran between them. Several landing platforms jutted out around the edge, each with two protectors standing guard. Pretty standard for a fairy village. It looked almost identical to his own, on the east side of South Alken Forest. This half-familiarity brought relief to Yaetherim. He'd be safe here, properly safe.

The protectors broke off to the left. Kaetarpen gestured for Yaetherim to follow him. He led him to the right, to a landing platform in the shadow of an overhanging fern. An airkind fairy stood waiting, his face wrinkled by age. Kaetarpen landed and bowed his head towards the elder. Yaetherim did the same. They met the elder's gaze a heartbeat later. Yaetherim took a deep breath, held it for a moment and let it out. Now wasn't the time for anger.

"I am Yaetherim of Riala Village, South Alken Forest."

"I am Paeyelin of Mirosst Village, Verbore Island," replied the elder. After a few brief words, Kaetarpen departed. Paeyelin turned to Yaetherim.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation, Yaetherim. Are you still of mind to do a juko meditation?"

Yaetherim's eyes narrowed. An exercise of reflection and prayer, fairies traditionally did such introspection on their birthday. Undergoing that here may have brought Yaetherim peace. This was the Isle of Origin, after all. That's why Yaetherim's elders had arranged this invitation for him.

"Is that the only reason you invited me here? I mean no disrespect, but Captain Kaetarpen mentioned you've had signs of trespassers."

Despite his words, he'd spoken calmly. Paeyelin glanced over his shoulder towards a hut. Through its door, Yaetherim caught sight of Paetobim. The wounded fairy lay on a bed inside, the sochar leaves over his wounds now stained purple. Paeyelin's voice dripped with worry.

"I had hoped you might provide some acumen to help prevent an incident like this."

"You wanted two berries from the one branch," Yaetherim replied. He folded his arms. A juko contemplation could very well have provided the peace of mind for such insight. But he wouldn't have time for that now. Not with this fresh information about his attackers.

“Well, I came here for answers,” he observed, “but I guess they won’t be coming from within.”

“I understand,” Paeyelin replied. “I-”

“NO!”

Yaetherim’s head snapped over. He’d never heard so much anguish in a single word. That shout had come from Paetobim’s hut. Yaetherim jumped off the landing platform, swooped around, and hovered outside it.

A young fairy, her hair the colour of charred wood, stood over Paetobim. Tears streamed down from her ember-red eyes. Next to the firekind crystal on her belt sat another, groundkind brown. Yaetherim froze. Kaetarpen’s earlier words came to mind.

“The only dualkind in our village is Taeperra, Paetobim’s sister.”

Taeperra’s grief could only mean one thing. Paetobim was dead. This was now a question of murder.

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