

THE QUARRY

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Underside

The room was drowning in the scent of wild flowers. The double bed in the corner was buried in ball gowns and shoes. The balcony door was open to let fresh air in.

‘Will you stop fidgeting?’

Jolie clasped her hands together. Sweat built around the top of her lip. Jolie was standing in front of her vanity mirror brushing her un-kempt hair. Her skin was a sickly white, her cheeks burned with anger and her eyes shone like silver swords. She carefully parted her hair on the side and took unconscious care not to drag the brush across her long pointed ears.

‘Fix your hair,’ her mother ordered. ‘No one will want to look at you if your hair is standing on end like a peacock’s tail.’

‘At least it’s as colorful as one,’ Jolie replied. Indeed her hair was a mass of colours; red, pink, blue, green, purple and silver. No one would call it dull.

Jolie’s mother looked at her for several intense seconds without blinking and turned away towards the door. ‘Wash that out. It looks awful and unfit for a Lord’s daughter.’

Jolie trudged to the bathroom. The citizens of Underside call themselves Undersiders and within the citizens are ranks of family, at the top are the aristocratic elite. They were families

linked directly to the Elders who ruled in the government. These families called themselves the Black Lords and Ladies of the Court. She was a Black Lord's daughter, and daughters of the courts must remain dainty, chaste and weak. And they absolutely could not step outside the city walls. For outside the city walls were the tunnels that led out in to light. Step out in to the light, and any Undersider would burn. Well, that was according to the prophecies of Isaiah, the prophet that led the remaining of Earth's other-world creatures down in to the Centre of the Earth to escape the sun's fatal heat.

Her mother never approved of the tournaments she participated in. She would rather have had Jolie at home learning how to boss the servants around and treat them like flies on toast. Tournaments were the only thing that allowed her to participate in combat, weapons fighting and dragon riding in an acceptable way.

The annual Ball for the family of the court's Lords was being held tomorrow. The court's stuffy dignitaries would all be there including the prospective suitors for Jolie's hand in marriage. At nineteen she was the perfect age for the ritual. Marriage was a dead act of love; it was all about power and position in the court.

Jolie stepped out into the balcony and looked over onto the edge of the city. Far in to the distance, like ridges on a dragon's back, were the walls that kept anyone and anything from accidentally entering the tunnels. If only the world above the ground was possible. If only Jolie could breathe fresh air.

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'You're human,' said Jolie.

Jolie could not believe it. There was a human sitting in front of her, she was taught all her life that humans only existed in myths, tales and legends. Her fingers were itching to touch his face where the skin looked smooth and was brown and orange like terrariums setting over the sea.

'Yes, for the thousandth time in the last two hours I have known you,' Julian replied.

'Well tell me the one thousand and one time,' Jolie couldn't stop staring at this human adolescent that was running sand through his fingers. 'You're extinct.'

Julian cocked an eyebrow, 'Clearly.'

'No. According to the Prophecies, 'All will perish left on the surface.'

'Well how racist of Isaiah to only lead, 'other-world' creatures down here and leave us all to supposedly die.'

Jolie just stared. Awe scratched all over her face.

‘Look, as far as I know humans are real. We live on continents all around the world in peace, ok no that’s a lie, there are wars going on all the time and we kill each other constantly. But, we are definitely not extinct.’ Julian finished by throwing a handful of sand in to the sea.

‘How did you get down here?’ Jolie asked.

‘There was a massive earthquake that raked through my town and now Main Street is in two.’

Without hesitation Jolie demanded, ‘Show me.’

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Jolie walked down the giant stone steps along with twenty other late-teen and early-twenties women. Like birds on show they were looked at, pointed and whispered about as they paraded around the hall. Eligible single men watched them with intense stares. A mass of gentle waves of black hair caught her eye. It was Mark. A court’s son and friend since she was six years old.

Jolie made her way to Mark and said, ‘you clean up good. Dance with me? Otherwise I’d have to dance with those men, their eyes look hungry.’

‘Then don’t dance with me, because I’m starving,’ Mark said.

‘Don’t tease,’ Jolie tugged at his hand and pulled him to the dance floor.

‘Guess what?’ she pronounced as he led them on a slow waltz, ‘I found a human.’

Mark stopped dancing, his eyes wide. ‘Ok. If you say so.’

‘It’s true. I’ll take you to meet him,’ she said.

‘Him?’

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‘Any human that knows about us will be hunted and killed.’ Mark said.

‘They can’t do that. What about the law?’ Jolie demanded. They could not just punish someone who doesn’t even belong in their world.

Mark’s eyes were wide and fearful, ‘That is the law,’ he said. Guardians were law abiders, through and through. The rules are simple.

‘What do you mean? As far as anyone knows humans are legends,’ Jolie said.

Mark took a deep breath, ‘There are Undersiders called Guardians who were sworn to keep the secret of the surface and the human world. I’m one of them.’

Jolie had nothing to say. There were too many thoughts fighting for attention inside her head. Humans existed and now her best friend had just told her there were Undersiders who knew all along.

Finally, a question made itself clear, 'What do Guardians do?'

'We make sure no Undersider make it to the surface and no human makes it down to us,' Mark answered.

'And what if you fail at the border?' Jolie asked.

'Then we hunt them down,' Mark said.

'Julian has to be safe,' Jolie said under her breath. 'Will you protect him?'

The question hung in the air un-answered.

'Jolie I can't break the law. If I do, if I protect Julian, other guardians will not only hunt me down, they will kill anyone else that was involved. They will come after you.'

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Why couldn't Julian just stay put and waited for him to bring him back to the surface? Now it was Mark who was being tracked down. Mark sprinted down the alleyway, blood dripping from his arm to his palm, coating his gun in red slime. The concrete at his feet slick with sweat and sewage seeping from the broken pipe threatened to trip him over. The air around him that was as hot as the inside of a stone oven burned his lungs. The buildings flanking the alley way didn't have any fire escapes, no way to hide if they catch up.

A corner turn was coming up, he couldn't slowdown in time to safely swing around the corner and so his shoulder smashed in to the brick building. A sharp pain reverberated through the joint down his arm. Dammit. He didn't have time for bruised nerves.

Twenty cars were parked haphazardly in a small opening in the alley like dice thrown at random in a square box. A screech echoed behind him. He ran faster towards the nearest car; a blue Toyota with broken windows. He opened the unlocked door and tore open the glove box, in it was a key. He wiped his forehead in relief; his racing heart relaxed the slightest.

He had no idea how to get to Julian's house. He had never been outside the city before and driving to the country was far from foreign, it was otherworldly. Mark knew how to drive a car, he was taught modern technology at a young age so that Guardians can track and blend in the human world. Prosecuting your own kind should be illegal, but that was the law.

'What the hell Julian? I told you to wait for me at the gate!' said Mark.

'I told you! There were guards after me already. They would have caught me if I didn't run,' Julian said.

'Will you two stop arguing? They're almost on to us,' Jolie said.

All three ran towards the cover of the woods just outside Julian's hometown. After Mark surfaced on to the human world Jolie heard rumours among the elite that there was a funeral

being arranged for a young aristocrat, Mark's name was mentioned. The Craft was an ancient magic older Undersiders have forgotten to use whilst the younger generations were never taught. Jolie's grandmother belonged to the last generation who wielded magic. She had taught Jolie everything she knew. It was a secret; no one knew except Mark that Jolie had mastered The Craft. Armed with her powers Jolie set off on to the surface to find Mark and Julian.

Jolie took deep breaths as her legs pumped along the field. She had never been more terrified or exhilarated her whole life. The feeling of breathing in fresh air could only compare to the feeling of being on a dragon's back for the first time as it flew along the underground sea.

Just twenty meters from the first trees of the woods a flap of gigantic wings seared through the air around them, encircling them in a light twister. Above them was a dragon twenty feet tall. Hooded beings, Guardians, were saddling its back with guns pointed at Jolie, Mark and Julian. They were not shooting, their gun only poised to shoot for intimidation. Jolie closed her eyes, whistled and punched the air in front of her with palms open. Another dragon, as big as the other darted from the woods as quick as a flash of light and tackled the dragon above them. The Guardians were knocked to the ground as their dragon was hit so hard it was buried by the crevice it made in the field.

Only a few, the more skilled and advanced Guardians regained their balance in a second and proceeded to run towards Mark, Jolie and Julian.

The quickest, a man six-foot tall lowered his hood, gun raised, reached them first, 'you did a good job, hunting them down little brother. Now be a good boy and hand them over,'

Jolie gasped as she recognized Erik, Mark's brother. She looked over at Mark expecting the same reaction but only a hard stare escaped Mark's face.

'Jolie, I knew you would be the one who would eventually shame my brother in front of the entire Court,' Eric spat.

'Leave her out of it,' Mark said.

Eric turned towards Mark, 'You really should stop wearing your heart on your sleeve. I told you she was trash.'

Mark moved quick as lightning, he charged, slid on the ground and kicked at Eric's knees, a loud crack reverberated throughout the wood and the open field. As Eric fell down, hand still outstretched with a gun in his hand, Mark elbowed the gun out of Eric's hand and in the same motion smashed Eric's nose.

‘Lets go,’ Jolie said as she ran for her dragon that was already in front of them in a kneeling position.

Without hesitation Mark followed Jolie and climbed on the dragon’s back. Julian was hesitant for a second until Mark held out his arm and pulled him on to the giant lizard’s rough back. Jolie was up front, whispering to the dragon under her breath, eyes closed. The dragon flew in to the air, climbing as high as it could go. With one last murmur from Jolie the dragon disappeared from the sky with only a fleeting light left in its wake.

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‘How the hell are we going to survive now?’ Julian asked.

They were on top of a hill somewhere along the Italian coast.

‘Blend in.’ Jolie said, her eyes shining like reflected light from silver metal.

‘We’re going to probably die. You know,’ Mark said. But he too was smiling a small, excited smile.

‘Whatever. We’re out,’ Jolie said.

Julian looked from one elven fairy to the other.

‘You two are insane. There’s nothing special about the human world. Not enough to risk your lives,’ Julian said.

‘Maybe to you. But to us its new territory,’ Jolie said.

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Mark.

Jolie looked at Mark, smiled and threw the rock she had been rolling around her fingertips, at him.

‘Look at your world Julian. The rolling green hills, the boundless oceans and the limitless sky. My dragon is going to love it,’ Jolie said.

‘You know you’re going to have to keep it out of sight during the day, humans will freak-out if they see it,’ said Julian.

Jolie turned to Julian. ‘Of course.’

‘Or she could make a leash and walk with him in to town. That’d be fun.’ Said Mark.

Jolie laughed, a big real laugh from the gut.

‘Bloody fairies,’ Julian said.

‘Badass fairies,’ Mark said.

Jolie said, ‘Half-elves. Thank you. Do you see wings?’