

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Middlewick

by

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The soldier raised his torch and leaned forward, leathers creaking. His eyes were narrow in their examination. The light of his flame sent shadows waltzing through the orchard, twisting and morphing through the brush like dark appendages slithering in retreat of the starlight. Above him, the wind—stiff and unseasonably chilly for early autumn—wrestled through the canopy of leaves and branches, ushering all seven of the corpses into a lazy sway from their nooses.

He lingered for several minutes at the bloodied feet of the old man, hanging heavily from a short oak tree. The glow of the torch's flame darkened the contours of the carcass's frail frame and accentuated its skeletal fragility; between tears in the clothing, the light found liver spots, open sores, jagged veins, and something odd behind the ribbons of fabric fluttering against the cadaver's sunken chest. The soldier craned his neck. Cautiously he lifted a gauntleted hand, squinting through the firelight as he pinched the fabric between two fingers. He brought the torch closer and tilted his head as he gently tugged downward on the loose flap of cloth, following the series of intricate red creases that split the skin of the old man's breast and trailed down the sternum, over the belly, and—

"Harringer," a man barked from the tree line. "Stop undressing the corpses."

The soldier spun, torch extended, splashing light onto the dark path between trees. The newcomer grinned, hands on his hips, his black armor nearly camouflaging him against the shadowy brush. He sashayed forward from behind that smile—two rows of perfect white teeth set against an austere landscape of deep wrinkles and heavy stubble—and took his place beside the young soldier.

Harringer turned back toward the carcass swinging from its rope. "Stretvanger's lost his mind," he said, stretching again to scrutinize the scratches on the old man's torso. "Have you seen what he's done to this fellow?"

The man in dark armor shook his head. "I haven't. And neither should you. Hands off, remember? We're not supposed to touch these things."

"Why not, you figure?"

"Not my area." He chewed his lower lip, looking up thoughtfully at the old body. "Stretvanger wants them to bleed out. We're not to touch them till the big man gives the order, you understand?"

Harringer gave an absent nod, eyes passing over the corpse's moist, milky flesh. "He's carved symbols into this poor man's chest and stomach." He moved the torch to the opposite hand and continued his probing.

"He's drip-drying the blood out of them. Stretvanger was adamant. Wants them dry as raisins."

"That's odd, don't you think? To cut in patterns?"

The newcomer shrugged. "No odder than storming Middlewick and ordering the execution of four farmers, two barmaids, and a midwife without discernible reason or cause."

Harringer followed the trail of cuts down the cadaver's stomach and started yanking at his waistband. "This one wasn't a farmer. He was the florist, I think." He unfastened the drawstring belt with one hand, lowered the shredded pants, and traced the gashes down both gaunt thighs. The noose groaned against the bough.

"For all that's righteous, Harringer, there's a whorehouse in Southfield. Finish your patrol and I'll treat you to a go-around, but for whatever goodness is left in your heart, button the poor farmer's trousers."

"*Florist*," Harringer corrected, hoisting the tattered britches and retying the belt. "You think Stretvanger carved the other bodies too?"

The man hawked a wad of spit into the trees. "Couldn't tell you. That man is a mountain of secrets. It's been four days; we've killed seven people, and he hasn't uttered a word of explanation."

Harringer paused briefly, eyebrows drawn in deep thought. He turned suddenly and sped off farther into the orchard.

"Harrin—" The man in the dark armor shook his head and sighed, then pursued the soldier into the heart of the trees. "Damn it, Harringer, hands off, remember?"

When their footsteps faded and the light from Harringer's torch was only a glimmer through the brush, two children stumbled from the darkness. Dalya and Istanten lingered in the path, listening to the soldiers' voices, measuring their distance. And then, pruning shears tucked into her waistband, Dalya scurried toward the bony old carcass swinging from the oak.

"Keep a lookout," she told Istanten. "I'll get him down." The boy pressed two fingers to his throat and offered a croaky grunt of acknowledgment.

Dalya drew the shears and secured them between her teeth. Ducking under the corpse, she moved to the tree and probed the trunk for handholds. Istanten's eyes bounced between Harringer's faraway flame and Dalya's nimble scurry to the top of the

oak tree, watching as she navigated the branches and shimmied along the bough toward the rope's knotted end.

Down the path, the orchard echoed with the newcomer's husky cackle.

With one arm wrapped around the branch, Dalya grabbed the shears from her mouth and stretched toward the length of rope. She sawed patiently, jerking the blades back and forth, rope swaying and bough creaking under stress of weight and movement. The first strands of fiber popped and frayed under the shears; she persisted, gaining speed as the rope unraveled and the corpse below sagged lopsidedly.

Istanten pressed two fingers to the apple of his throat and emitted a low growl. Dalya froze. A tense gurgle spewed from his lips, and the boy scampered from the road and ducked into the shadows. She heard Harringer's voice, a ways down the path but growing nearer.

"Istanten!" she whispered, holding tight to the branch. The boy offered no answer from the darkness. She growled, gritted her teeth, and continued sawing at the rope. The light of the torch caught the corner of her eye as spears of it pierced the underbrush and splashed out onto the path. She hacked more fiercely, the muscles of her arm igniting, her breath trapped in her throat. The rope tattered under the blade, its grip on the corpse slackening. Harringer's footsteps were close now; she heard the leaves and rocks crunching under his boots, the gentle clink of his buckles as he walked. She fought angrily with the rope, paring strand after strand with the cold steel of the shears, until Harringer's voice rang through the quiet darkness.

"You there," he called, waving his torch.

Dalya turned her head cautiously, squinting through the firelight at the soldier's silhouette. Her heart thrashed against her ribcage. She made to respond but the words never came, and she held silently to the branch for several seconds. Harringer shuffled forward, his left hand resting on his sword hilt. Dalya swallowed hard and steadied her nerves with a deep breath.

The trees were too dense on this side of the path. However, if she dropped from the branch, found her feet, and sprinted for the brush across the way, she and Istanten might disappear before the soldier even considered pursuit. But if she landed wrong—if she lost her balance or twisted an ankle...

She ran through options in her head as Harringer's silhouette approached. Frozen by indecision, she held tight to the branch and watched the soldier grow closer and closer until he neared the base of her tree. Her fist squeezed the shears and her arm strangled the branch. She tensed and prepared to make her leap, but Harringer kept walking. Dalya felt the heat of his torch as he passed nearby, and spotted the small man forty yards down the path as Harringer's light found him in the gloom of the orchard.

"Sir!" the soldier hollered. "You can't be here."

The diminutive man had no answer. He just shook his head absently, hands kneaded in front of him, and stared up at the young woman dangling from her noose. Harringer repeated himself, slightly increasing his pace. The man pointed at the body and smiled sadly. "My wife," he said. Harringer advanced warily and patted the man's shoulder. Gently he ushered him from the orchard and into the darkness.

Dalya expelled a shaky breath. She pried her fingernails from the bough and held to her perch, wind tousling her hair and clothes. The hanging corpse rotated with the

breeze, and the rope gave a dry groan. Istanten wobbled from the brush, waved to Dalya, then pointed at the corpse.

"What is it?" she whispered.

The rope twisted, whined, and gave a final pop, and the body thudded to the earth. The branch shook viciously and tossed Dalya, and she landed hard atop the carcass. Istanten helped her to her feet and allowed her a moment to find her breath before he seized the body by the armpits and dragged it toward the brush.

Dalya tucked the shears into her waistband, swiped the dirt from her clothes, and grabbed the old man's feet. "Careful with his head," she said, and together the children carried the corpse into the trees and toward Middlewick. Neither made a sound as they trundled through the fields; the rush of the river and the squawking of crows were their only company in the middle of the night.

II

Dalya stripped the rags from her grandfather's emaciated body. She ripped a tatter from his shirt, soaked it, and gently scrubbed the dirt from the old man's chest and face. She cleaned the edges of the lacerations that ran down his form—a bizarre series of symbols carved cruelly into his flesh—and then dragged the cold corpse into the front bedroom. The first splashes of sunlight colored the early morning sky as she pulled him into bed and drew the sheets up to his stubbly chin. She planted a quick kiss on his forehead and trudged out to the shack behind the cottage.

There she traded shears for shovel and set off for the woods outside of town—the cluster of trees opposite the orchard. As she strolled through acres of twilight fields, her mind rendered numb from last night's raid, she found herself curiously engaged by her

grandfather's spade. The old man had owned it for decades, but the tool had acted more like ornament than instrument; elaborate hieroglyphs decorated the dark wood of the shaft, spiraling downward until they dead-ended at the base of the ivory head. The head itself was narrow and acutely pointed, finely etched with patterns of flowers and vines.

It was a striking tool, and in her twelve years, Dalya had never seen her grandfather use it.

She found the clearing just as the sun broke over the mountains. After double-checking her measurements—six feet long, four wide—she buried the ivory spade in the dirt and wrenched free the first shovelful of earth from between her feet. She spent the morning ripping into the forest floor, careful not to break any roots or damage the surrounding flora, chipping away at the soil, sinking deeper and deeper into her grandfather's grave.

At noon, she stopped to rest. She scampered from the hole, strands of hair plastered to her forehead, her face and clothes clotted with dirt. Several minutes passed. She basked in the cool woodland breeze, recouping her energy and meditating to the birdsong. The feeling was short-lived.

The pitter-patter of hurried footfalls and the crackling of the underbrush sent her stomach into knots. She lurched to her feet, spade hefted in defense. Pivoting in the churned soil, she scanned the trees for the source of the sound, eyes flickering between shifting shadows and swaying branches.

Istanten tumbled from the bushes. Dalya flinched and teetered backward, catching her balance near the edge of the hole.

The boy hunkered over to find his breath, sucking air in choppy, guttural wheezes.

Dalya stabbed the shovel into the earth and laid a hand on his shoulder. "What is it?"

He glanced up at her, chest heaving, and pointed west toward town. With his other hand, he pressed two fingers against his throat and emitted a low grumble.

She knelt before him, locating his eyes behind the swath of sweat-slicked hair. "Did they find my grandpa?" The boy did not respond. He only huffed and gasped, his shaking finger still leveled toward Middlewick.

Dalya sprang up and leapt into the thicket, branches and vines tugging at her hair and clothes. She stumbled over rocks and roots but maintained a steady balance while racing toward the village, oblivious to her exhaustion and the fire in her lungs, and erupted from the tree line in a flurry of jerky breaths and churning limbs. She vaulted fences and cleared fields, kicking up earth in her wake. Head down, arms pumping, heart thundering, she moved through the streets, evading people, carts, wagons, and packbeasts until she rounded the corner toward her grandfather's cottage.

The road was empty. The cottage was alone and quiet at the head of the street. A flood of relief washed over her like rain. Dalya's legs liquefied beneath her, and the girl collapsed on the cobbles. There she sat—a mess of hair and tears and heavy breathing—measuring the cottage in wondrous and exhausted respite.

Suddenly a shadow fell across the road, so wide and so large she thought the sun might've disappeared behind the clouds. Dalya turned, a ball of anxious pain growing in her belly.

Strevanger loomed over her, an oak of a man swaddled in royal robes. His face was hidden beneath the dark folds of his hood, but his chiseled chin jutted out like a slab

of stone from the edge of a cliff. The baggy garments betrayed the immensity of his form save the belt fastened round his belly; thick and smooth, the glossy leather strap, when stretched to its maximum length, was taller than she was, Dalya figured. Several soldiers—Harringer and his black-armored compatriot among them—were fanned out behind the gargantuan bishop, stiff and stoic in their posture.

He reached down, his body creaking and popping, and wrapped a gentle hand around Dalya's arm. With a tender tug, he lifted her to her feet. "Little girl," he said, a brooding impatience dripping in his voice. "Is your grandfather home?"

Dalya raked a strand of hair from her eyes. The burn of Stretvanger's gaze wilted her confidence, and all she could muster was a shake of her head. When the weak rebuttal failed to break his stare, Dalya pointed with trembling fingers toward the western wood. "He's in the orchard," she squeaked. "Where you left him."

"A clever answer, child, but a wrong one. Your grandfather wandered off last night." His eyes flicked toward the cottage door. "But death makes for a vicious handicap. I suspect he didn't get far." He pinched Dalya's soil-stained sleeve between two fingers and ogled the veins of cakey dirt that streaked across her tunic and trousers. His lips narrowed into a tight grin. "Have you seen him?"

"No, I think—"

Stretvanger nodded toward the cottage. "Might we have a look around, then?"

Dalya stepped warily toward the house, out of the bishop's enormous shadow.

"No."

"Such discourtesy!" he jested, a syrupy chuckle rumbling out from the darkness of his hood. He turned and woofed an order at the throng of soldiers locked in formation.

They percolated toward the cottage; Stretvanger followed, stepping nonchalantly around the small girl in his path.

A flush of angry, panicked heat rose in Dalya's throat. "This..." she started, "this isn't right! What you're doing to these people—what you're doing to *us*—isn't right!"

Stretvanger called a halt. He half-turned, eyeing Dalya from over his shoulder. "Sheep need not be privy to the shepherd's motives. Just rest easy. We're cleansing this country."

The trepidation in her heart boiled over, steaming into ire and lacing her words with bitter rancor. "You're wrong."

The giant shrugged. He mumbled, "Children have no place in politics," and gave a signal to his soldiers. The air hummed with the ring of steel; soldiers crowded the cottage, swords raised and spines rigid as the front door was kicked from its hinges. "Search the wardrobes. Raid the attic. Check the outhouse. The body is *here*, and I want it back."

The militia charged through the doorway.

"Blood!" he hollered at their backs. "The bastard's still bleeding. Look for dark, sour blood."

From the street, Dalya heard the shattering of pottery and the sharp splintering of wood. Arms crossed, sun on his back, Stretvanger watched his men scour the cottage from his spot on the lawn as he rocked unsteadily on his heels.

Droplets of sweat dripped into Dalya's eyes. Numb with fury, she did not blink them away. The salt stung and muddied her vision, but she never lost focus on the lumbering man in the heavy robes overseeing the ravaging of her grandfather's house.

Her house. She listened as they ransacked her vault of memories, the font of her solace—the only place ever worthy of being called her home. And she trembled with rage.

She pried a pointed cobble from the road. Teeth gritted and brow narrowed, she measured Stretvanger's back and, knuckles white around the rock, stalked toward him, eyes locked to the space just inches below his belt—the base of the giant's spine. She moved rapidly, betraying stealth as her footsteps smacked the street, but Stretvanger never turned. When she was within arm's length, Dalya hefted the rock, tightened her grip, and zeroed in on her target.

But before she struck, Harringer lurched through the doorway. His sword was tucked into his scabbard and his fingers were riddled with cuts and splinters. "We found blood on the old man's sheets," he said.

The bishop's lips parted slightly. "Blood?" The word rumbled from the hood like a drumroll. "Yes?"

Harringer did not match gazes with Stretvanger, opting instead to study the ground between the giant's feet. "But there's no body. We looked absolutely everywhere."

Dalya's brow furrowed. She dropped the stone and staggered backward. Stretvanger was silent for several seconds before pivoting on his heel and peering at the child. He tore into her with his cold stare for a few tense moments, his emotions concealed behind the shadows of his hood, before swallowing hard and offering a subtle nod.

"Right," the bishop mumbled, pushing past the girl and hurrying into town.

III

Eventually the last of the soldiers filed out, leaving Dalya mired in a mess of clothes and upturned chests at the foot of her grandfather's empty bed. The sheets, stained dark with dirt, wrapped her like a sordid cocoon. She cried, knees pulled tight against her, and surveyed the wreckage through a mist of tears. She spent several minutes curled there, more than once turning to check the cot for the old man's frail form. The narrow imprint of his body was still embossed in the bed, along with the dried blood and grime, but the corpse was gone, vanished like smoke in a windstorm.

A stray cat screeched off in the distance.

Dalya wiped away her tears with the filthy sheet and staggered to her feet. Shuffling through the clutter, she moved to the window and drew the curtains. Warm spears of sunlight spilled through the pane, catching faint spirals of dust sailing through the bedroom. Numbly she tottered to the cherry chests in the far corner and began straightening the ruffled clothes within. Her mind was still as she worked, the thoughts in her head knotted in a quiet, deadened stasis. She collected her grandfather's things—old notes, a few tarnished rings she had never seen—and filed them precisely into the chests along the walls.

In the opposite corner of the room, beneath a pair of crumpled trousers, Dalya recovered the old man's worn diary. The cover, dark and wrinkled and coarse with age, hung intact by a few weakening strands; the pages lolled out from the spine like a hundred brittle, yellowed tongues, and Dalya caught glimpse, for the first time, of the crude scrawling under the book's craggy jacket. The lettering seemed familiar, like the cuts on the old man's body, but the language was lost to her—random words and symbols sloppily transcribed on each page, overflowing into the margins, through most of the

diary. She found some sketches near the back, doodles of flowers or simple landscapes, but nothing she immediately recognized.

The stray cat shrieked again, from somewhere just beyond the door. The sound of frantic, muffled scratches caught Dalya's ear. She laid the book on the floor beside the chests, cautiously crossed the room, and poked her head into the hallway.

"Hello?" she called.

For a moment, the cottage fell silent. Then the furious mewling started again, from the kitchen at the edge of the hall. She moved warily toward the sound, one careful footstep after the other, until she rounded the corner and stepped onto the cold stone tile of the vacant kitchen. Jagged fragments of decorative plates littered the floor, and the supper table was upturned and shoved against the far wall. The anxious screeching was louder now. Deeper. Human.

Dalya gasped and ran to the larder. Rolling clear the toppled barrels of rice and potatoes, she curled her fingers around the edge of the floorboards and pulled up a square section of paneling. Beneath the floor, in the hole under the larder, sat Istanten; the boy stared up at her with wide, wet eyes, the corpse of her grandfather draped over him.

She grinned. "Are you stuck?" Istanten snarled. He reached up from the bottom of the pit. Dalya grabbed hold of his hand, and together they pried him out from under the weight of the body. He climbed free and, with his sleeve, wiped the remnants of tears from his cheeks. Dalya hovered over the hole for a moment, studying her grandfather's crumpled cadaver.

"Is... is he hurt?" she asked. The boy rolled his eyes and shrugged, raking the hair from his face. Her grandfather was slumped awkwardly, neck crooked and arms twisted in the cramped crater. "I hate to leave him like that, but I think he's safer here than anywhere else."

Istanten grunted his agreement. Dalya slid the paneling back into place and squeezed past Istanten and into the kitchen. "Will you stay and keep watch?"

His eyes darkened and he furiously shook his head.

Dalya nodded. "Fine. But we need to finish the grave. Tonight." She stepped into the hallway and headed for the door.

Istanten grumbled softly and followed her, his footsteps resonant in the empty house.

IV

Dalya tore another shovelful of dirt from the grave, tossing it aside with a shaky grip. Her arms ached. Splintering pain needled through her shins and ankles. Her eyes were swollen and heavy, her body weak and frail under an iron cloak of exhaustion. The late afternoon sun had taken reprieve behind dark clouds, and the woods grew colder around her.

Istanten patrolled the perimeter, teeth chattering, eyelids fluttering against the icy autumn breeze. For hours he eyed the brush for any sound or movement, stalking the tree line with his arms tucked cozily into his tunic.

The children shared no words until nightfall, when Istanten's shoe caught hold of a root. The boy spilled forward, face scraping the dead leaves and pebbles of the forest floor. Untangling his arms from the inside of his shirt, Istanten scrambled to his feet.

Smudges of dirt covered the bags under his eyes, but the moonlight showed agonizing fatigue in the deadness of his pupils, the downward slant of his posture. From the depths of her grandfather's grave, Dalya smiled and leveled a trembling hand toward her companion. Istanten staggered toward her, seized her by the wrist, and hauled her from the hole.

Dalya stabbed the pointed shovel into the unturned earth at the edge of the grave. She embraced Istanten and kissed the boy's dirty cheek. "I owe you everything for helping me," she said, sagging wearily against him. "So go home. Get some sleep."

Istanten pulled away, jabbed a thumb against his throat, and growled sourly.

"It's fine," she reassured him. "We're done here. It's deep enough." She moved to the tree line and sat down, drawing her knees close in defense against the cold.

The boy measured her for several seconds, uttering a low grumble that was almost lost under the wind.

"I'm going to sit for a few minutes," she said, dismissing him with a wave of her hand. "You go on. I'll see you tomorrow."

Istanten shrugged and turned, plodding off into the darkness behind heavy, tired footsteps.

For a long while it was just Dalya, alone with the breeze and the soft rustle of the foliage. She was too uncomfortable to doze, but nevertheless, she rested her eyes and set her head back against the craggy bark of an oak tree, relaxing her limbs and unconsciously rubbing the gooseflesh from her arms. She counted the passing seconds to help steady her mind, delving into the thousands, before the voice interrupted her thoughts.

"It's too damn cold to sleep out here."

Dalya's eyes fired open. She popped to her feet and spun, vision flickering toward every tree, every branch, every shifting shadow. She saw the smile first, immaculately uniform teeth set against the blackness of the woods. As he approached her, he became an outline, then a silhouette, and finally—a mere arm's length away—a thick figure, armored in metal as dark as the sky.

Harringer's friend from the orchard.

"What are you doing here?" she spat, knees trembling beneath her weight.

The soldier stepped past her, armor clinking softly as he moved. He stood silently at the edge of the grave, hands on his hips, and scanned the clearing. After a moment, he took a seat and pushed a windy sigh from his lungs. "Who was he? The old fellow."

Dalya hesitated, frozen, staring wide-eyed at the man's back.

He looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. "The body Stretvanger seeks. Who was he?"

Their gazes intertwined, and they shared a handful of tense heartbeats before Dalya said, "He was my grandpa."

"He was more than *that*, surely, for all the time we've wasted trying to find him." A stiff gust of wind blustered through the clearing. The canopy of leaves shifted above them.

"He was a farmer, I hear."

"A florist," Dalya corrected. "He was the town florist."

The soldier held her in his gaze, studying her in the darkness. "And what else?"

"A traveler."

"Yeah?"

Dalya nodded. "And a carpenter," she said, the onset of tears straining her voice. "He was a storyteller, and a laugher, and an animal lover, and an early riser, and—"

The words caught. Dalya took a deep, shaky breath. "And he was the only parent I've ever known. He was a good man, and he didn't deserve this."

The soldier in dark armor turned away from her again, his legs dangling over the side of the grave. "A good man," he muttered. He spoke toward the hole in the ground, almost to himself. "You'll find, child, as you age, that our realm is not shaded in black and white. It's an ugly, confusing, pallid gray. From where you're standing, it's a place where kind florists are hanged without reason, and criminals wear royal frocks and issue orders to lesser men."

He stood and faced her, his heels at the edge of the grave. "But reality has no time for good and evil," he continued. "It's not invested in your perspective or mine. Reality is concerned only with truth, and your grandfather—the traveling, laughing storyteller—died with a heart full of secrets. And Stretvanger has come to make sure they *stay* secret."

"By hanging him in the orchard and cutting symbols into his body?"

"You'll learn not to question the tall man in the robes. Those symbols are a net, a safety, keeping your grandfather's dark mysteries in the shadows. Where they belong."

Dalya swallowed back the lump in her throat. "How did you find me here?"

"I followed you. After you left the cottage. Hoped you'd lead me to the body."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," she said.

The man flashed his brilliant smile. "I'm sorry too," he said. "Because you know the location of your grandfather's corpse, and that means I have to drag you back to

Stretvanger. And take my word, *that's* not good for anyone involved." He reached for her. "Now come. We're out of time."

Dalya's chest tensed. Her exhaustion drowned in an ocean of frightened ferocity, and in one fluid arc, she drew the ornate shovel from the dirt and swung. The pointed edge scraped across the man's face, rending his flesh and tearing skin from bone. The sound of ivory on skull reverberated through the clearing in a sharp shockwave; the soldier spun sideways and collapsed into the empty grave.

V

Middlewick shimmered like a lantern under the black sky, alight with fire and the screams of the dying. Dozens of militiamen paraded through streets and fields and farmland with torches raised and swords drawn. Desperate pleas and crackling flames permeated the icy night air as Stretvanger's soldiers shattered windows, smashed doorways, and set houses ablaze. Townspeople poured into the streets like rodents, clutching their children and possessions, stumbling confusedly about in charred nightwear.

Stretvanger's voice boomed through the chaos like the call of a war horn drowning the clatter of battle. "They have scars! Look for the scars!" the bishop bellowed as people flooded past him through the road. "Look for the runes and purge their bodies with flames! If they bleed, then they're not dead!"

Dalya sneaked low through the fields, the stench of smoke stinging her eyes. On her hands and knees, she circumvented the town, crawling its perimeter until she found her grandfather's cottage beyond the tall grass. Conjuring the last ounces of energy from her muscles, she dashed toward the house and bolted through the fractured doorway. She

sprang down the hall, collapsed as she entered the kitchen, and sprawled awkwardly amid the cracked dishes. Her legs were cold beneath her, and she did not have the balance to stand; instead she inched her way into the larder, fully prepared to slither from Middlewick, grandfather in tow, if she could not find her feet.

Rolling aside the toppled food barrels, she ripped the loose paneling from the floor and peered down into the hole. The reek of decay burned her nostrils and choked her like a tangle of fishhooks. A violent sob rose in her chest, and Dalya began to shiver.

The hole was empty. Cautious footsteps echoed through the house.

"Istanten?" she called, but there was no answer.

She sifted through the debris on the larder floor, brushing aside shards of plates and splintered spears of tile and wood. Dalya scrabbled through the mess, looking for a knife or fork or a spike of broken dish big enough to slash her way through to the doorway, but she froze mid-search when she spotted the pruning shears in the hallway beyond the kitchen.

Bloodstained, handle to blade.

Torchlight sprayed over the walls, and Harringer—his frame bowing beneath heavy armor—stepped into her vision and darkened the larder doorway. He took a moment to study her in the light, then leaned back into the kitchen and hollered, "I found her! She's in here."

There was muffled chatter from somewhere outside. Harringer offered his hand, but Dalya shuffled backward, closer to the empty hole. "What's happening?" she asked, the words husky and cracked as they slogged past her lips.

"Nothing like I've ever seen," he said. His eyes were round and slick with worry.

"The other six bodies have vanished from the orchard."

"Vanished?"

"Gone. Disappeared."

"And my grandpa?"

Someone screamed outdoors. Harringer's fingers brushed the hilt of his blade. His eyes flicked back to Dalya, and he offered his hand again. "We have to go."

She gawked up at him for several seconds, her breaths hard and uneven. "I don't think I can stand."

Harringer stepped in and scooped her up from the ground. Dalya wrapped her arms around his neck as he backed from the larder and out into the kitchen. The ruins of plates and silverware crunched under the young soldier's boots. Just as they turned into the hallway, Stretvanger planted a mammoth, gnarled hand on Harringer's chestplate.

"Put her down," the giant growled, his head cocked slightly under the roof of the cottage. Bloody smears colored the front of his robes, and a thin trail of crusty crimson dribbled from one ear.

Harringer hesitated. Stretvanger slapped him across the face, sending the soldier reeling back into the kitchen. Dalya spilled from his grip and crashed to the floor as the bishop's titanic form stalked toward her. He plunged a hand into his robes and drew a curved dagger from their folds. His fingers wrapped the hilt like five bony snakes, and he leaned close, spine and knees crackling beneath his frame.

His breath was hot ash upon her face. "Where," he whispered, "is your grandfather?"

She shook her head. "I... I don't—"

Stretvanger lashed out, slicing her cheek with cold steel. Dalya winced, tears beading at the corners of her eyes. "Show me!" he roared, seizing a handful of her clothing and hauling her upward. Harringer watched from the edge of the room, lips parted and colorless, as the bishop held the knife to Dalya's throat.

The girl opened her mouth to speak; she contorted her lips and rolled her tongue, but she found no words.

"I will water your grandfather's flowers with your blood," Stretvanger hissed. "I will level the countryside. I will burn your memory from existence if you don't answer me."

"I—" The knife bit her throat, and Dalya flinched. She met Stretvanger's unbreakable stone stare and saw no pretense in his eyes—no tricks and no insincerity. But there was no malice either. Dalya saw only terror, stark, urgent dread in the giant's wide pupils. "The woods. You'll find a clearing due east from the mill. He's in an open grave."

With his knife hand, Stretvanger pointed to Harringer. "Go," he barked, and the young man scrambled into the hall and through the front doorway, screaming orders to his comrades in the streets.

"Put me down, please?" Dalya murmured.

The bishop surveyed the kitchen, shaking his head, muttering, "No, no, no," through a subtle smile as his eyes probed the walls. He moved into the hallway and

carried her deeper into the cottage, opening various doors along the way. "You're far from exonerated, little girl. This is *your* mess we're cleaning."

He opened the door to the basement; a series of steep stairs delved down into the heavy darkness under the house, like a jagged tongue sprouting from a blackened maw. "I'll be back for you soon," Stretvanger promised. "To chat about the impiety of lies."

All at once, the darkness rushed forward. Dalya smashed against the staircase, ribs snapping, the world whirling as she tumbled into the basement. She smacked the stone floor with a thunderous thud. The doorway at the top of the steps was a narrow line of light, shrinking as Stretvanger closed and barred her exit.

From beyond the walls, she heard the dampened cries of her neighbors as Middlewick burned in the night. She heard the scurry of rats at the corners of the basement. She heard her own hoarse, labored breathing, her own shrill cries of pain as she clawed her way toward her grandfather's workbench, lost somewhere in the darkness.

Reaching up, she probed the bench for a candlestick. She laid it carefully in front of her and fished blindly through the tools for a firesteel. Steel in hand, she pressed the candle to the ground and dragged the striker across the floor. A rain of sparks littered the darkness, and with numb fingers, Dalya scraped it again and again until the candlewick ignited.

She squinted against the brilliance of the little flame. Tendrils of wax drizzled over her knuckles as her eyes adjusted to the light, and after a few seconds, she raised the candle and examined small illuminated pockets of the basement.

The candlelight skimmed every corner—the workbench, the bookshelves, the crates near the stairs. Dalya's exhausted mind nearly glossed over the old, desiccated man leaning against the opposite wall. His features were familiar—the slope of the shoulders, the hairline—but the man was tatty and worn, like someone wearing her grandfather's skin. His eyeballs were veiny white, reflecting the shine of the flame, and his mouth hung slack like a torn piece of clothing. All of his limbs drooped out of socket, and he flinched under her gaze.

Dalya's pulse thudded in her ears.

The creature snarled and staggered forward, pale runic scars running down his chest and thighs. Dalya scooted backward, her breaths choppy and pained. From the darkness stalked six others, all trudging toward her, inhuman sounds spilling from their warped faces.

"Grandpa?" she squeaked.

The candle clattered to the floor.