

NOWHERE AND THE FIRE DEER

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PROLOGUE

Wherever the fire deer go, embers follow.

Leaves charred to ash. Trunks standing like spent matchsticks.

The fire deer burn. Everything. In their path. In their way. In their wake. No matter how beautiful. No matter how much they wished it would not catch fire.

The other animals flee from them. The two-skinned animals try to douse them in water until they drown.

The fire deer must forever run from their pails and rain spells, galloping on the wind, stopping only in attempt to quench their burning thirst. Moist green foliage, sap-bleeding bark, black soil teeming with fungus and slippery earthworms. They inhale them all without bias, breathing them out as cinders and smoke, until they are forced to fly away once more.

The fire deer did not always have to live this way.

The elders with the largest flamed antlers pass down tales of a time heretofore when they could burn freely until they were full. Then, their ancestors would soar the hot air currents to the yawning mouths of the mountains and rest by the shores of the lava lakes therein concealed. As the herd soaked in the only liquid that would not extinguish them, the magma imps would entertain with stories ancient as the earth's blood—magma imps receive very few visitors, and so, can become rather excitable in company—of springwater sprights and feathered serpents and behemoths tall as mountains. So it was that the fire deer of yore would idle away the days, leaving to forage again only when the notion whet their appetites.

In those days, they were even called on for their services. Shamans of the two-skins who petitioned them by way of prayer and sung incantations sent out on the winds.

And they were treated with great awe and respect as they ate away at the ancient shade, leaving behind clear swathes of fertile land for fresh crops. Sometimes they would feast on thick savory tropical leaves, at others on tart prickly evergreens, and other times still, sweet tasting meadows and butterfly wings. But always they exhaled ash and annihilation, so that the new could grow from embers of the old.

Alas, it had not been so since the two-skins had learned to tame magick and at once sought to use it to tame everything else, especially nature.

The youngest fire foals with the brightest glowing spots like to ask to hear the story of the magick tamer who first befriended their kind and the fire deer who burned the foes of the realm with her.

The tamer's name was Nowhere.

CH 1. NOWHERE

That was not her given name.

At birth she had been bequeathed one of the unpronounceable names in the ancient tongue of the DelvKin. Ancient as the place where she was from. The place where the ceilings of bedrock glowed orange. The place where heat was forged.

The magma imps aimed to impress (what fire deer would listen) with tales of the under-ocean volcanoes that the DelvKin dwelled deep beneath. Though the imps themselves conceded that these tales could be just that, as not many of their kind who had been accidentally swept up in the molten undercurrent that led to the subkingdom ever returned.

The inhabitants there below liked to play with or eat, usually both, any creature who was hapless enough to pass by. Indiscriminate in their tastes, they would chew the magma imps like caramelized lank root. That, or trap them in cages of unmelting icicles magicked from the sulfur-rich steam. Jeering as they watched them freeze into lava crystals, lifeless as lumps of coal.

The DelvKin, while they had ancient powers pumping through their boiling blood, were not a race that prized refinement or subtlety, but instead wielded their raw and primal brand of magick like a blunt battleax. Those times they ventured up to the Surface Realms you could hear them coming by the screams of the animals who, through age or some other ailment, were too slow to outrun them. Though they did not like to stay long in the chill of the open air, their visits always left lasting ruin.

The greater the ruin, the greater the boasting.

The fire deer, howbeit, never had much trouble with the DelvKin. Though their herd had eons afore risen above, they were still flame-forged in the same primordial crucible.

Nowhere, like her kin, had ash-colored skin and hair, fine as powder, as if all the impurities had been burned away. She also had the same white, batlike, wings for flying up the shafts of spent

volcanos that, when opened, spanned the length of a felled tree, and struck fear into her foes with the faintest flap. Her veins, however, radiated red, giving them the appearance of rivers of lava as viewed through the cloud of volcanic residue that lingered around the shattered top of a mountain after an eruption—sometimes for weeks—and obscured the ascent of DelvKin reave packs exploring a new entrance to the surface and the fresh hunting grounds it delivered them to.

Many of the beasts thereabouts were without cover, their shelters having been washed away by liquid rock. These were easy prey to catch.

Too easy.

As there was little amusement in a quick kill, the DelvKin would instead fly, just overhead, watching the two-skins scurry across the crisped land—between boiling streams and smoking moss—for the cover of some forest in the distance or cave mouth a mountain away, until they tired themselves out and simply could scurry no more. Then the DelvKin would land and slowly stalk behind their quarry as they crawled away. Until they could crawl away no more. Those with enough endurance to make it to shelter, the DelvKin would descend upon at the last possible moment before they stepped into safety. Those were the most pleasurable prey to slay. Or so Nowhere had been told all her youngling years.

She had seen reaving clans return, eyes ablaze, bodies glistening with red by the light of the lava rivers. Had listened to their boasting with eager ears and rapt attention. That would be her one day. The day. That she had trained for since birth—tussling, grappling, brawling. Tested for since birth—tests of strength, tests of endurance, tests of pain. The day she would join her clan for her first reave.

Nowhere had been made to train more than any other youngling because she had needed more training than any other. She was born substandard, see, or so her mother was keen to mock. Lacking. Imperfect. Weak. But while her muscles may have been weak, her backbone was strong. And so, she also trained harder than any other youngling did.

When the day finally arrived—her age of ascent—Nowhere felt somewhat on edge but excited to prove herself to her mother who she thought the most formidable of all DelvKin.

Her heart soared as she flew up the dried-up throat of the volcano and it coughed her out into the blinding brilliance of the Surface Realm. For a moment, she feared it would continue soaring right up out of her body. But she kept the fear to herself and tried to keep pace with the powerful beat of her mother's wings. Her own ached, for she had never flown more than the length of their communal chamber which, though cavernous in size, could be measured by twenty or so robust wingbeats. Unlike

this vast and, so far, wall-less Surface Realm cavern. The air above was bitter, and she felt her muscles tauten like the leatheriest lank root. But this is what the tests of pain were to prepare her for, and Nowhere knew, from abundant experience, how to endure.

It wasn't long before the reave pack dropped down into the center of a small two-skin settlement. Her kin set fire to it, cheerfully leaving behind chaos and scorched corpses.

But Nowhere had hung back, horrified by what she witnessed; her mother and uncles and aunts and cousins laughing as they burned down everything that these brittle beings had once built up and tore to pieces everyone that had once made their hearts—so effortlessly broken free from their ribcages—whole.

The occasion that she had trained for since birth seemed to be over as suddenly as it had begun, and Nowhere soon found herself struggling to keep pace with her kin—though most were weighed down with a lavishness of reave rewards—as they goaded her (gleefully!) for doing nothing more than standing by, immobile as a crystalized imp.

Upon returning to the refreshing heat of the subkingdom, Nowhere could not stop thinking about what she had witnessed; plucking out of eyeballs to bring back for the younglings to play plonkgnik with, pulling of teeth to try and extract the loudest scream, peeling of both the two-skin's skins from them to later dress up in at the celebratory banquet. Nor could she see her mother in the same way as she had before; cracking open skulls and slurping out the wobbly delicacy inside, loudly snacking on bowls of knuckles, extricating flesh from her teeth with the hair of her two-skin wig.

Heretofore, Nowhere had anticipated these banquets with avidity. These were the times that the quarreling clans would come together to share feast and boasts. There were games and tournaments for merriment rather than training. And her mother would, more often than not, be in jovial spirits. Once she had even complimented Nowhere's plonkgnik skills and given her an extra handful of knuckles for winning.

But now that she had seen what she would never be able to unsee, Nowhere noticed for the first time the carefree cruelty of her brethren as they wore the reaved skins as capes and sucked the creamy core from flayed bones.

After the last carcass had been picked clean and tossed onto the splintered heap, Nowhere snuck back to the surface alone, back to the shadows of the forest that surrounded the settlement they had terrorized but days before.

Broken branches and upended roots marked the way to the devastation. It was abandoned, what ruins remained; mounds of freshly dug dirt amid blackened grass.

But Nowhere was able to easily follow those few who had survived by their wounded scent on the wind and erratic, hurried, tracks. She found them in a clearing beside a trickling stream that sparkled in the chill sunlight, what would have taken many full days for the two-skins to walk to but took Nowhere merely a hundred or so wing beats to fly.

There she watched them try to rebuild.

The two-skin women cleared away the ground cover. Their men cut and carried and shoveled and stacked. There were no petty fights over the biggest dwelling nor barred teeth to claim resources for themselves. Everyone worked. *Together*. Even the two-skin younglings. Even the elders. The wounded—there were many—watched for danger.

But they did not see Nowhere.

She had opened her wings and let the bitter air lift her to the arm of what her mother had called the most unentertaining of all the prey, a dumb and lethargic creature that would not so much move a rooted toe if you attempted to annihilate it. Nowhere would later learn this was called a tree.

“She didn’t know what a tree was?!” interrupted the littlest fire foal.

“No, she did not,” answered the teller. His antlers were so large that they sent flames out two hoof strides in either direction. “Can you suppose why?”

The littlest foal cocked his head in thought. The fire deer elder waited patiently. But another foal, this one already starting to outgrow her spots, could not, “Trees cannot grow without water.”

The teller bowed his great antlers to her. “You speak with knowing.”—(the impatient foal lifted her snout with pride)—“All of the water that flows into the subkingdom of the DelvKin turns to steam instantly. Trees also cannot grow without sunlight,” the elder further explained to the young fire deer (after all, every good story teaches at least one lesson), “and the only light below comes from the lava rivers that would reduce to ashes any root that tried to drink from them. And so, Nowhere did not know what a tree was when she first bid in one...”

There, she wrapped her great wings around her shivering muscles—*“Like a sleeping bat!”* one of the foals chimed in.—and watched until the weak sun set, and the chill became unbearable. *(The coming of night surprised Nowhere because she did not yet know what the sun or moon were, having lived her whole life by the unchanging light of the lava rivers and orange glow of bedrock).* A single feeble fire had been ignited, apparently for burning away the blood in their prey’s flesh before they ate it, but many seemed not to need it for warmth even though the dark had risen. How could these two-skins be stretched out in the open, uncovered and exposed to the raw air?, she wondered.

When the fire glowed low and Nowhere was shivering so violently that she feared she would fall from her perch, she floated back above the dark forest—casting a great black blot on the moonlit canopy below—and soared on icy air and silent wings to the secret cave that led to the subkingdom.

The iron pumping through her veins felt the iron pumping through the veins of the earth as she descended, the beating heart of its molten core drawing her down, deeper and deeper...

Her mother noticed not that Nowhere had gone, nor that she had returned. She was too engrossed in mating with her latest mate. DelvKin we're not shy about mating. As very few unborn survived the heat of the womb, they coupled frequently and fervently.

As she fell asleep to the sound of her mother clawing at her new mate, Nowhere dreamt that she too was building a house with the two-skin tribe, and that they all helped her to build it. Together.

As soon as she woke (her mother still in carnal combat), Nowhere slipped back up above.