



Rock of Discontent

by Marc H. Wyman

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A Gushémal Story

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“It’s beautiful!”

“Goodness gracious,” Flink agreed, “it looks neat!”

In his hands the alreu held a small piece of rock. Shimmering dots pierced the gray, dull surface everywhere, glistening in the soft light of the glowwater bottles in the tunnel. The dots seemed to form a pattern, a pattern that was shifting whenever Flink moved the rock slightly. For a moment, they looked like the picture of the main cave of the alreu kennel, Tieferbau. A minute tick to the left, and there was the image of a mouse stealing cheese from the kitchen. A little more, and Flink could just see the face of his late father, Hastig.

He sighed, suddenly remembering the day when his father died in the shaft collapse.

“Give it to me, Flink!” his companion urged, reaching out for the rock.

Instinctively Flink pulled it back, cradling it close to his chest. “No!”

Ungestum, the other alreu, stared at him. “Why not? It’s beautiful! It’s perfect for the mobile I’ve got in my room, that’ll make it wonderful!”

“Well...” Flink drew the words out very long, feeling the rock in his hands. Almost he could make out the tiny holes through which the ore shone, the dots that made up the pictures. “I... have to think about it. I mean, it’s so good, and I have those... things that...”

His companion snorted. “As good as my mobile? I don’t think so, kid. You know that I’m better with my tools than you’ll ever be, so hand it over.” Ungestum took a step towards his young cousin, reaching out a demanding hand.

Almost did Flink follow the command, then the words sank in. “What do you mean, you’re better with your tools?!” he shouted. “I’ve seen your mobile, it’s... it’s so...”

“Yes?” Ungestum asked quietly. “Do you have anything to say about my work, dear cousin of mine?”

The younger alreu frowned, wondering what he should say. After all, he couldn’t say out loud that he thought the mobile was absolutely ugly, and that this marvelous piece of rock would only be tainted in the contraption. Oh, well, the construction was perfectly good, there was no doubt about that, Ungestum knew his tools, right, sure, yet – did it have to be so ugly? “Errr... not really, cousin,” he finally whispered.

“Oh, well, then not,” Ungestum shrugged, as if he had forgotten the possible slight of his work. “So, Flink, do you want to ruin the rock? Come on, cousin, I can put it to much better use!”

“I –“ Flink started, then forced a smile to his lips. “I will think about it. You know, with something this beautiful I don’t want to make a rash decision.”

He felt his neck muscles tense, but Ungestum only smiled and slapped him on the back. “Then it’s fine. Use that brain of yours, and I’ll have it tomorrow, right?”

Flink smiled brightly, without answering the question. A moment later he excused himself in flowery words, then hastened through the corridor, cradling the rock in his hands. Back home, in his

room, he would study it more closely. Perhaps he would find that angle again when the dots looked just like his father.



“Hello, son,” Sorgend, Flink’s mother, grunted. Not that she was a gruff woman – quite the opposite, in fact – but considering that her son had just entered the kitchen via the trapdoor at the top and fallen on her, there weren’t many other tones of voice she could have chosen from.

He quickly leaped off his mother, scrambled to his customary seat at the table and peeked at the oven. “What are you cooking? Are you fixing something new?”

“Oh, my,” Sorgend sighed while she picked herself off the floor. “It’s just a soup made from vegetables your uncle brought down from the surface. From the fields of that awful human who keeps trying to chase him away.”

Her son nodded earnestly. “He’s a strange kind of person. Sometimes I feel as if humans don’t like people. But then, I think to myself, it’s just that they’re having a bad day. Happens to everyone, doesn’t it? So that’s probably what’s wrong with that farmer.”

“Probably,” Sorgend frowned. She went back to the oven and stirred the soup a bit. “Have you done anything interesting today, son? Or have you just hung around with your useless cousin Ungestum?”

Flink shrugged, all the answer his mother needed. She dropped the spoon next to the pot, then turned to face her son with a worried look in her eyes. “What are you doing here, anyway, son? You’re sixteen years old! You should be out in the main cave, talking to one of the girls there. Flink, at your age, your father had already married me! And you, you’re living with your mother!”

Not again, flashed a thought through Flink’s head, and he nearly said so aloud – but caught himself at the last moment. What he did not prevent was his eyes rolling towards the ceiling (quite of their own accord, as he would swear all kinds of oaths to in front of his mother).

The oaths would hardly have helped, anyway. “*Flink!* Stop that!” Sorgend shouted, enough to make her son instantly sit up straight at the table and fold his hands in his lap. She shook her head furiously, then sighed and sat down at the table opposite from her son. “Boy, I hate talking to you like this,” she said slowly, looking her son deeply in his blue (not rolling but earnest) eyes. “Sometimes I wonder about you. All the time you’re talking about the surface, but you haven’t been there more than once or twice in your life. What happened to your plans? Just before...” She paused, pain blowing across her face like a hurricane for a moment before her looks softened into the worry frowns again, then continued, “You had already packed your bags, Flink! I still remember how you wore your brooch of adulthood, and how you were yearning to see the sun! *Why are you still in the kennel?*”

Flink shrugged, fidgeted on his chair – when a single look from his mother straightened his pose once more.

Sorgend closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, she smiled. “Did you know that Maedel was here yesterday? She just came by to see you – while you were off with Ungestum, as usual –, and it’s a real pity. She wanted to take you to the dance tomorrow night, and you should have seen the look on her face when I had to tell her that you weren’t here. Maybe you could go to her and ask *her?*”

“Mother...” Flink moaned quietly.

“Where is the problem, son?” Sorgend cried. “You like Maedel! You used to spend so much time with her a while ago! And anyway, Flink, you’re just the right kind of man for any girl. You’re small, pale and handsome – the girls are lining up for you, if you would only open your eyes and take a look! I’ve seen Magd’a look at you, goodness gracious, the daughter of the Second Kennel Maintainer! “

“Say, mother –“ Flink started, but was interrupted by Sorgend who sighed and said, “Am I asking so much of you, dear son of mine? You should live your life! It’s a good life! And –“

“Should the soup be boiling like that?” he asked innocently.

Sorgend’s head flew around, saw the soup bubble up over the rim of the pot – and instantaneously she was off to haul the pot off the fire and twirl the spoon vigorously in it. Her son used her momentary distraction to rush off into his own room.



The next morning Flink was on shovel duty. *Tombcave shift*, he always called it. Every adult male was required to spend two days each week helping to maintain and expand the kennel. Tiefertbau was growing ever so quickly – sometimes Flink thought he couldn’t take two steps without a child being underfoot. So new caves had to be added often, and with the growing size, there were so many older caves that needed looking after.

He fully understood the need – goodness gracious, you didn’t want the roof of your cave to fall in on you, did you? But the rules... Was it really necessary that nobody speak, except when absolutely necessary? Oh, sure, everybody says that you ought to talk to the stone in your mind, focus on your work. That’s shovel duty, that’s too important.

What it worked out to was a deadly silence. Just like a tombcave.

Right now, though, he liked the silence. They had to build a new living cave for Kandiert, an alreu who was – rather distantly – related to Flink’s family. His wife, Sonnig, just had had triplets, and they needed a lot of space for the little whirlwinds. Only last week, Flink had nearly stepped on one of them – they were already rushing all over, on all limbs (and occasionally the head), at only five weeks of age. (Actually, when he had tried to avoid hurting the infant, Flink had toppled over a bench, rammed his head into the stone wall. It had taken two days for the swelling to subside.)

But, anyway, he didn’t have to talk. And shoveling dirt out of the way, being busy, that kept his mind off of dire thoughts.

Why was Mother after him like that, all the time? Goodness gracious, yes, he did like Maedel. She was his age, had turned adult last year – girls always were slower than boys, and a good thing it was –, when she had gone on a tour of the surface. The good old wanderlust had grabbed her. Oh, yes, when they were younger, they had spoken so much about the surface. They had been planning to go together. For a while anyway. Then Flink had realized that he would turn adult a year before her, and so they had agreed that he would return to Tieferbau on the day of her ascension to womanhood.

Things hadn't turned out that way, had they? Flink drove his shovel deep into the dry earth ahead of him, twisted it to make more ground come loose. With a pickaxe, it might be easier, but that was dwarven attitude, right? Can't be like a dwarf, gotta be alreu. Sure. Pickaxes. Could use one. Focus on the job. Use a shovel, if you can't have a pickaxe. Focus.

Maedel wanted him to go to the dance? With her?

Goodness gracious! After all this time? She had changed so much on the surface, had grown up... She was a real woman! And he... For a moment all Flink thought about was getting rid of the dirt, shovel it into the cart, push the cart back to the waiting alreu hands behind him and receive an empty one.

He'd spent all the time in his mother's cave, it seemed. And he hadn't changed one bit. He was still a little boy who followed his mother's every command. Well, almost every command. But Maedel... Was there anything he could offer her? What would they talk about in their marriage bed?

Oh, goodness gracious, there's that word again! He shivered. *Marriage!*

"Flink? Maintainer wants to see you!" a voice yelled from further behind.

He whirled about in shock to hear words spoken on tombcave shift – only then did he understand the meaning. *Now what? I worked hard, maintainer can't find fault with that!* But now that, a good chewing-out by Maintainer Ordentlich would surely get his mind off of things!

So it was with some degree of glee that Flink stuck his shovel into the earth ahead of him, then threaded his way through the other workers back down the shaft. Foreman Schnell pointed wordlessly to a cave just off the new shaft.

Flink hastened in there and found the kennel maintainer standing bowed over a table with sheets of paper piled on top of each other. Ordentlich was fat. No way one could state it politely, he just was. On the other hand, you just had to look at him moving to know that there were plenty of hard muscles under the fat, and that he could slam you into the next wall with a single slap. That was no surprise, since the maintainer had spent almost all his life shoveling dirt, hauling carts and working out. Few alreus knew as much about Tieferbau as he did, where each cave was, who lived where, and more importantly how to keep the caves and tunnels stable. On the downside, after all the time on tombcave shift, without speaking, he wasn't used to saying much. Most of the time he just pointed, grunted something incomprehensible, and you had to figure out what he meant.

Now, though, Flink was stunned to see a smile spread on Ordentlich's face when he came in. "There you are, son," he said and straightened his back, stretching his overweight frame with a sigh. "Kandiart will have his home, soon, won't he?"

“Uhm, yes, sir,” was all Flink could think of. This didn’t quite seem as if Ordentlich would reproach him for lagging behind in his work, right? But why else would the maintainer call him over?

The older alreu finished stretching – apparently it took a long time for him to be satisfied with getting all the cramps out of his muscles –, then he said, “Heard there was a dance on tonight. You don’t happen to have a girl to accompany you, do you, son?”

Flink’s mind was about to collapse as terribly as a shaft’s ceiling. “Uhm, no, sir.”

“Magd’a doesn’t either,” the maintainer nodded gravely. “I think she would like to see you by her side tonight. Why don’t you go over to my cave and ask her?”

“Uhm, I... Kandiert’s cave, I mean...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, son. I’ll release you from shovel duty. What am I the maintainer for, if I can’t use it a little?”

Flink hadn’t planned on going to the dance at all. Maedel was bound to be there, wasn’t she? And, besides, his dancing skills were... Well, he couldn’t even count all the female feet he had stepped on in the past couple of years. And he could count *quite* well. “Uhm...” he muttered.

Obviously, Ordentlich took that as confirmation. Flink should really have thought of that. Having relied so little on clear words, grunts were the kind of communication the maintainer was used to.

“So go on, son. Magd’a will be – oh, but get yourself cleaned up first,” he grinned. “You’re a good worker, son, but shovel duty gets you sweated up, and you don’t want to be that when you meet a nice woman. Oh, son, you’re a good one at the shovels. Maybe you could be a maintainer one day!” His eyes gleamed, looking over Flink as if he was already drawing up the papers for his promotion.

“Uhm...”

“And don’t use the glowwater to clean yourself, son,” Ordentlich grinned.

“Uhm, right, I won’t.” For a moment longer, Flink stayed in the cave until he realized that the kennel maintainer had once more leaned over his papers, the plans for the new cave – including the calculations for stability. Apparently, the conversation was over. Rather impolite, Flink found. Then again...

Like a whirlwind he raced out of the cave, happy to have this confrontation behind him. Off he was to find the next pool of water – regular water – to clean himself. Glowwater! Now that was an incident he’d rather forget. For two days, his skin had been glowing, no matter how much he’d tried to wipe the liquid off himself. Goodness gracious, there was a *lot* of magic in that glowwater – like something divine.

“Ooops...” he muttered and skittered to a halt about two tunnel crossings behind the maintainer’s cave.

Just how had Ordentlich learned about that incident? After all, Flink had spent all those two days well hidden in his own room, with Mother keeping every visitor well away. Mother was the only one who knew about this, didn’t she, so...?

“What in the names of the gods is going on here?” Flink set his jaw straight and resolved to find out. Later. First there was the matter of cleaning himself up and facing Magd’a in her home cave. Oh, yes, she was a nice girl. Goodness gracious, was she a nice girl!

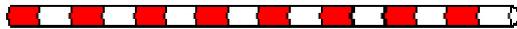
But, well... dancing? In public?

And, anyway, wasn’t she bound to bring up that... that word again?

On the other hand, Maintainer had pretty much *ordered* him to do this, right? Right? Uhm... Sure, and actually, Flink still was on shovel duty, so...

None too happy with himself, he resumed his race down the tunnels, deftly avoiding any other people – until another memory of his conversation with Ordentlich hit him, and he nearly rammmed a wall full-speed.

“*Son*”?!?!?!



Flink’s cheeks were burning from the kiss Magd’a had planted on each side. “You look marvelous!” she had exclaimed when he walked into her family’s living room to pick her up for the dance. And she had bounced off her seat to sling her arms around his neck to kiss him.

As much as he did enjoy that – and that was quite a bit – his eyes had been oh so fully focused on the faces of her parents who were watching them with clasped hands. And Flink was sure that if he had squinted just a little bit he could have read the words *Son-in-law* on their foreheads.

“Goodness gracious!” he muttered.

Magd’a, jumping ahead of him through the tunnel, suddenly stopped and looked at him mischievously. Boy, did she have a wonderful smile. And, boy-oh-boy, did she look great in that black, tight-fitting tunic, or did she? “Something the matter, Flinkie?!” she cried. “Is your jacket crooked?”

And off she was, reaching out to tighten Flink’s jacket – which was very much straight, in all its red-golden gleam, the best clothes he had been able to find in his closet -, and her smile never wavered. “There! It’s just perfect, and... ooooooh...” A frown creased her pretty face. “I forgot something! Oh, my, that’ll be great, it – You just wait here, right, Flinkie?”

She didn’t even wait for an answer as she ran off down the tunnel, back in the direction of her parents’ cave. Flink felt his eyes bulge over, staring intently at the opposite wall, wondering just when he had got himself trapped in this mess.

It took him a minute to realize something else.

“*Flinkie*”?!

Goodness gracious!

Four minutes later – he had kept exact count, wondering if there was some way he could safely sneak back to Mother’s cave and not have any repercussions follow – Magd’a bounced back through the tunnel. “Here, I have it!” she cried, and before Flink could make any evasive motions, she had pinned something to his jacket. Desperately, urgently, he craned his head to make out what that

something was – and it turned out to be a brooch, a silver oval, meticulously worked over with minute tools, a series of stones – simple stones! – worked into it, but... they fitted so perfectly, that... they...

“It’s beautiful!” he exclaimed despite himself.

Magd’a beamed. “You think so? I made it myself, just the day before, you know when Father told me you’d go with me to the dance. Oh, Flinkie!” Suddenly he felt her arms around him once more, her body pressed tightly against his. However had this happened? She hadn’t moved, had she? “Flinkie, my Flinkie, this is the *best* time of my life!”

“Uhm...”

Was it a family trait that these folks just eradicated all his ability to speak? Goodness gracious!



The main cavern of Tieferbau was decked out beautifully. Bowls of glowwater were hung under the ceiling, covered with translucent paint in the most diverse colors. Its light transformed the cavern, making it even more wonderful. The statues carved from the walls – all excellent alreus of passed ages – looked alive, as if they were about to step down from their niches and join the festivities. Red and blue garlands stretched out across the ceiling, and hung from them were a large variety of other objects made from paper: birds – just like those on the surface –, tiny tunnels that had alreus bouncing around in them if there was a gust of air pushing them, and with all the alreus moving about below, there was plenty of air movement –, and oh, so much more that Flink couldn’t possibly spend enough time looking at everything.

Not that he had any time to do much looking towards the ceiling.

Magd’a occupied pretty much every moment he had, dragging him out to the dancefloor, hopping to the rhythm of the musicians on the offside of the cave. “Come on, let’s dance, Flinkie!” she cried, and already he found himself trying his best to move to that rhythm. Oh, he could feel it, resonating deep within himself. If only his feet could hear that resonance! *Step, left, whirl about – oops, whirl her about, not yourself – and, thank the gods, she’s smiling! Grinning, actually. Once more... and, don’t step on her feet, all right, done it.*

There wasn’t much thought about doing anything else, anything as enjoyable as sitting on one of the benches around the walls and just looking at the spectacle. Goodness gracious, did this woman *never* tire? Her feet really *ought* to be tired. His own were, and they hadn’t been stepped on by anybody four or six times already!

“Cousin, you’re here, too?!” a familiar voice interrupted Flink and Magd’a. More by accident than any intent of his, Flink didn’t even malign her toes once more, when he suddenly stopped dancing and gaped at the two alreu next to them.

Ungestum beamed proudly, and Maedel – Maedel! – had slung herself around his right arm, cradling her head on his shoulder. “Hello, Flink,” she said coyly, “a pity you weren’t home yesterday.”

“Yes,” he replied slowly, his eyes flashing from Maedel to Magd’a and back again.

Magd'a held on tightly to Flink – tighter than before, he would have wagered, if that was possible. “Maedel,” she said.

“Magd'a,” the other woman acknowledged.

Did the air just freeze in here? Flink wondered. No, not possible. He was still breathing – more or less, considering that Magd'a was pressing herself so close to his chest. And, besides, the glowwater in the bowls up ahead would have burst its confines and sprayed a mist of ice on them. Not to mention that it was still bright and shining.

He could still have sworn that the temperature in the main cavern just dropped *a lot*.

Ungestum grinned, disengaged his right arm from Maedel's grip and placed his hand around her waist “So, Flink, you've been dragged down here, by the maintainer's daughter, no less. Quite a prize.”

He had no idea, why he did it, but somehow Flink's hand reached out to place his hand on Magd'a's hip. The girl gave a brief, surprised noise, then her own arms tightened the grip around his chest, and he could just feel the deep smile on her face, without even looking. “No, Ungestum, *I* dragged *her* down here. Magd'a is all the prize I ask for, no matter her parents.”

“Right,” his cousin dragged the words out, his hand slipping onto Maedel's hip. Her eyes widened, the smile freezing quite clearly on her face, but she did nothing to remove Ungestum's fingers. Instead she stared straight ahead – incidentally right at Magd'a. “You dragged *her*. No doubt.”

“That's right.”

“Absolutely.”

“Indeed.”

“Oh, Flinkie,” Magd'a moaned, “can we go on dancing. You're *such a good* dancer, any girl in her *right mind* would be happy to be twirled about by you!”

“Oh, really?” Maedel muttered. She quickly removed Ungestum's hand from her hip, placed it properly around her waist, whirled about to face him and smiled, “Well, I have the *best* dancer here in my arms. And the music...” Her gaze shot to meet Ungestum's eyes, as if she realized his presence for the first time, then her look mellowed suddenly, as she whispered to him – very audible to the other couple – “Oh, Ungestum, let's dance. You're *so* good at it.”

The male alreu needed no further incitement. Immediately he picked up the rhythm, started her moving, and off they went to mix with the other couples on the dancefloor. Somehow, mysteriously, they easily stayed in the sight of both Flink and Magd'a.

“Look at them,” Magd'a snarled. “So rough and unhewn. Bad maintenance, my father would say. Let's –“ She caught herself, smoothly put Flink's hands into the proper positions – as well as her own, although they might have been a tad lower than ordinarily –, and smiled graciously at him. “My Flinkie, let us show them what a *good* dance looks like, shall we?”

“Uhm...”

He didn't have time for any more replies for he already felt her tugging on him to finally get his feet moving. Oh, well, if she so desired to have her feet trampled on, who was Flink to disagree?

By the same mysterious way that both dancing couples always stayed in sight of each other for the duration of the entire evening, Magd'a somehow avoided having her feet stepped on. And somehow he felt his own dance seem more fluid – better maintained, one could say. And his eyes always strayed from Magd'a to Maedel and back.



“Are you *ever* going to get out of bed?” Sorgend asked, standing in the doorway of Flink's room.

Her son, all five blankets piled over his head, just groaned. “Not if I can do something about it.”

“Well,” Sorgend frowned, “Maintainer Ordentlich is here, and he says you ought to report for shovel duty.”

“*What?!?*” Suddenly Flink's head shot out from under the blankets, his shock of red hair in utter disarray. “But I'm not on shovel duty for another *three* days!”

His mother shook her head. “He's here, and you know what a maintainer's word means. So you'd better get yourself out of bed and dressed.”

There was no disagreement with that tone of voice, he knew, and after a moment or two's grumbling, Flink did as he was asked. In record time he had slipped on his tan breeches and the linen shirt and was out into the kitchen – where he was shocked to find Ordentlich at the table, his fat frame squeezed onto *Flink's* customary place, sipping at a cup of tea. The very *best* cup Mother owned! Made by Hastig himself! The china was cracked in a place, yes, but there were the intricate pieces of gold Flink's father had welded into it – the gods alone knew how he had managed that, but it was a work of art, and Flink always dreamed about being able to do that, too – and, goodness gracious, only *Flink* himself had ever been allowed to drink from it! And now the maintainer... goodness gracious!

“Uhm, Master Ordentlich,” Flink said, trying to sound his most polite and earnest – despite a rather strong quiver in his voice, not least because he remembered how late it had been when he had escorted Magd'a back to her cave -, “did I miss an order? Most valued Master Maintainer, I thought there was –“

“No need to get yourself into a knot,” Ordentlich said, taking another sip from *Flink's own* cup, made by *his father*. “Oh, Sorgend, this is terrific. The best tea I've had in a very long time. You just have to tell my wife where you got the herbs! It's so good I want it every day.”

“Oh, don't worry, dear friend,” Flink's mother said. “*Dear friend?!?!?*” Sorgend went over to her cupboard and withdrew a small pouch which she handed graciously over to Ordentlich. “My cousin – on my mother's side, mind you – knows just where to find them. There's always a good supply, and I'd be happy to share it with you.”

“Splendid!” Ordentlich exclaimed, pocketing the pouch quickly. “Ah, dear Sorgend, you are a good friend. I look forward to seeing you in our cave at the solstice feast. You *will* come, won't you?”

Sorgend was taken aback for a tiny moment, then the smile was back on her face, reinforced if anything. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world, dear friend. And I would be happy to prepare this tea, if you would like.”

The maintainer smiled, a bit of greed in the smile. “Valued Sorgend, you don’t know how happy *I* would be.”

Now it’s “valued”? And the solstice feast? Goodness gracious, that’s reserved for family members!

Flink’s stormy thoughts suddenly found themselves in the eye of the hurricane when he realized the one key word. *Family?!*

Somehow the kitchen suddenly felt very much closed in, as if the ceiling was about to collapse. All right, the maintainer wouldn’t be sitting quietly at the table if there was any danger of that happening in the next, oh, twenty or thirty years, but still...

“Uhm, Master Maintainer?” Flink said carefully – and felt all his concentrated resolve fall apart when Ordentlich turned to him with a proud smile.

“Of course, son,” he nodded, “you’re eager to get on. And don’t worry, you won’t have to touch the shovels today. I just want to show you all the caves and tell you a little bit about stability. You want to know about maintaining the caves, right?”

Actually, Flink wanted that very much. He had always been wondering about how that was done, and just putting in the odd wooden or stone pillar didn’t do much to understand this. It must be so great to know how to keep the caves stable, and to be responsible for them! Goodness gracious, he really *wanted* that. Fiddling around with the small tools in his room, or picking locks, that was one thing. But the caves! All of Tieferbau? Or just the regions that, say, Ordentlich took care of. That was...

On the other hand, just why was Ordentlich offering that to him? Flink had been a good worker, yes, but he hadn’t shown any special regard for...

Magd’a.

Oh, yes, he’d shown a lot of regard for her last night. Not that the maintainer would know much about it. And not that Flink himself felt all too sure about said regard, not with thoughts of Maedel (with *Ungestum!*) rushing through his head.

And, what was it with this conversation with his mother? What was it with this *family* thing?

“Flink?!” his mother said strictly.

“Uhm...” Flink muttered, then somehow regained his composure – not to mention a straight back, as Mother had taught him – and looked Ordentlich straight in the eye. “Good maintenance is what every alreu needs.”

Ordentlich beamed broadly. “I could have said that!” he exclaimed and quickly finished the tea, not without mentioning its quality once more to Sorgend, before he ushered Flink out of the cave to quickly begin the tour.

Flink had only the time for one short thought before he had to concentrate on the kennel maintainer’s words. *You did say that.*



The tour of the tunnels took more than eight hours. After Ordentlich returned Flink to his mother's cave – not forgetting to slap him vigorously on the back, great reward for his having remembered *every* detail the maintainer had explained –, the young alreu felt as if it would take a couple of weeks before he would feel his legs again. The dancing, then all that walking and climbing throughout Tieferbau...

He forgot his worries when he entered the kitchen. Ungestum was lounging at the table, watched by a mistrusting eye of Sorgend, while another eye was watching one of Kandiert's children toying with a number of kitchen tools. His mother greeted Flink happily, never taking her eyes off either Ungestum or the infant. *All right, when did she get more than two eyes?* Flink wondered in the back of his head. Women – mothers in particular – seemed to manage this feat all too easily.

"Oh, cousin, there you are!" Ungestum said and raised a hand in greeting. "Have you made up your mind?"

"About what?" Flink wondered, clearly disconcerted. Sorgend squinted, watching both men with more than a little mistrust. Flink could just hear her reproach him once his cousin had left, *"What kind of mess has he dragged you into? Flink, sit up straight and answer me!"*

"About the rock! What else could I be talking about!" Ungestum snorted. "The girls? By the gods, who cares about them?"

You, Flink thought direly, remembering the way his cousin had held onto Maedel the night before. Almost as tightly as Flink had clasped Magd'a.

"Oh, the rock," he said nonchalantly – almost happy that it wasn't either of the girls they were discussing. And he'd nearly forgotten about the stone, anyway. The little precious item was stowed away in his room, where he had planned on inspecting it more closely. Perhaps a specific angle could make the shimmering dots look just like Magd'a? Or – he hated himself for the thought – Maedel? "Uhm, no, I haven't decided yet."

"Whyever not?!" Ungestum exclaimed, shooting up from his chair. (Sorgend, by the stove, instinctively picked up her spoon. In past years, she had easily chased Ungestum out of the kitchen with the threat of the spoon, and it was rather difficult for her to realize that he was now adult and might not react quite as well to said threat.)

Flink was taken aback by the sudden fury of his cousin. Fury was rather unknown in Tieferbau, after all. Oh, he'd seen Ordentlich furious when somebody had messed up on shovel duty. But that was a serious affair in itself – goodness gracious, he'd learned *that* in the past eight hours, hadn't he? Maintaining the kennel wasn't the great adventure he'd thought, so very difficult from toying about with his tools – but so very much more satisfying it was! And... Oh, right, Ungestum.

"I haven't had the time, all right?!" Flink cried. "Give me a little more time! It's a precious rock, so it's gotta be used for the right purpose. Maybe *I* will use it!"

"*You?!*" Ungestum laughed heartily, a rough edge to his mirth. "Cousin, you couldn't make a pendant that the ugliest woman would stoop to wear!"

“Oh, really?!” Flink shouted – but before anything else could happen, Sorgend suddenly shot forward, the spoon raised over her nephew, and ordered imperatively, “Get out, Ungestum! I don’t want to see you here again for the next week!”

Ungestum was fully adult, his shoulders wide enough to fill a regular tunnel, but somehow the sight of his aunt so intent did make him follow her orders. And just perhaps he remembered the pain that her spoon had inflicted on him so very often in his boyhood. Whatever the reason, Ungestum shot out of the kitchen at such a speed it was a miracle he neither threw over a chair nor the table.

“Now,” Sorgend said, once her nephew was gone, and turned to her son, “which rock were you talking about?”



The rock lay on the table in the kitchen, its dots shimmering in the light of a glowwater lamp Sorgend had put close to it. The dots connected to form a myriad of images, all in the minds of their beholders, but all with so many implications and memories interweaved that its beauty was beyond any doubt.

“You cannot keep it,” Sorgend sighed. “For one single time, Ungestum is right. It’s too beautiful for your abilities, my son.”

Flink nearly tipped over his cup – his precious cup that Father had made – and spilled the *ao’coc*, a sweet liquid boiled from roots that were grown in the lower levels of the kennel. “Mother?!”

“Oh, you know it’s true.” Sorgend sat on the chair opposite her son. She tapped her fingers carefully on the rock, changing its angle ever so slightly to bring up new images. “You are good, but something like this requires more than you have. Or your departed father had, may the gods let his soul run free.”

“But –“

“And Ungestum would just destroy it.”

Oh, thank the gods, Flink thought, *for a moment I thought my own mother had lost her mind!*

Sorgend shook her head. “Do you know anyone who could do honor to this precious?”

“Uhm, I –“ Flink stopped himself. Somehow he hadn’t even begun to think about this. So much had happened, all the time since he had pulled the rock from the surrounding dirt in the tunnel! Unfortunately his mother’s gaze, so calm yet so insistent, brooked no further delay on his part. “Well,” he finally continued, “there’s... well, Handfertig’s good with metals, and then there’s Huebsch – do you remember, she made first kennel maintainer’s holiday robe, and there were all those pretty sparklestones she’d woven into the robe, that was beautiful, so I could reason that –“

“Yes?” Sorgend asked slowly, after Flink paused suddenly, his forehead deeply furrowed.

Her son pursed his lips, thinking hard and fast how to best continue. After all, it was a difficult task, and there were so many decisions to be made. And he didn’t like decisions! They had such an awful way of sticking with you, hadn’t they?

Eventually he sighed, reached under his vest and withdrew a small brooch. His mother's eyes immediately focused on the object, racing across its small surface to take in every detail – and a sense of satisfaction quickly settled on her face. Flink sighed again, then said, “Uhm, Magd'a, uhm, gave this to me yesterday evening, and it's... Well, she told me she'd made it the day before, and for something so quickly done, it's...” Another sigh, then in rapid fire words, “Well, I just think she could find a really good use for this stone!”

“Magd'a gave this to you?” Sorgend asked, and Flink suddenly felt as if he had made a serious mistake. Particularly when looking at the new gleam in his mother's eyes. The cup in his hands quivered, as if it wanted to remind him that Ordentlich had been permitted to drink from it this morning. From his own cup, and – *Ooops*.

“Uhm, yes, mother.”

Sorgend nodded and leaned back in her chair. “It *is* a beautiful work. Have you ever seen Maedel's works?”

I beg your pardon?! Flink's mind screamed. I thought you wanted me to – why else, and anyway, what?!

His mother smiled quietly, waiting for Flink to think things through.

“There's,” he asked after a few rather long and awkward moments – awkward for him, not Sorgend –, “a choice?”

“Oh, my little firebrand,” Sorgend smiled and reached across the table to hold her son's hands, “what did you think? My son ought to make his own choices, no matter what others think. Isn't that what I always taught you? And, besides, I think it is far too early to consider any gift a bridal present.”

“Uhm.”

“Flink! Full sentences!”

“Yes, mother, of course!” He took a deep sip of the *ao'coc*, praying that it would burn his tongue so much he didn't have to answer. Unfortunately none of the gods was paying any attention. “I *have* seen Maedel's works.” True, although it was a goodly two years ago he had last laid eyes on any of her creations. “She's fairly good with her tools, but she... Well, she likes to work cloth more than metals. It's just something she prefers, while Magd'a, she...” He fingered the brooch in his hands.

For once his mother didn't complain that he didn't finish the sentence. “Is the matter settled then?”

Flink didn't answer immediately. He stowed the brooch under his vest again, then picked up the rock to watch it closely. Goodness gracious, he'd been so longing to do that for more than a day, and he just hadn't found the time for it before! Now, though, his gaze tried to take in every one of the shimmering dots while his fingers slid over the surface, feeling the texture, imprinting it into memory.

His stomach shifted. Odd, that was. He'd eaten well so he couldn't be hungry. And it hadn't been quite *that* much. Besides, it was really cold in the kitchen. Mother must have forgotten to keep the stove burning well, and... He heard the crackle of logs in the stove, burning merrily.

Just his imagination, then, he told himself.

He shivered nonetheless, then he returned the rock to the table.

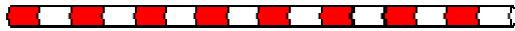
“Son?”

Flink frowned when he realized that it was warm in the kitchen after all. Oh, well, maybe he was starting to catch a cold. Heating in the lower shafts wasn't very good – no wonder, since the ducts had yet to be laid down there –, and he'd been only wearing his vest over his usual clothes. Perhaps he should add a sixth blanket tonight, yes, that was the best idea he'd had in a long time.

He noticed his mother's questioning gaze. “Uhm, I think – I *think* Magd'a would do something great with the stone.”

“Good,” Sorgend smiled. “Now go to bed, son. Your day has been tiring.”

You have no idea! Flink thought as he finished his cup of *ao'coc* and slipped off his chair.



“... for the alreu who honors the craft as well as the earth, he shall live in peace and joy. So Deswellyn has proclaimed when He brought the craft to us.” The Most Holy Priest Vertrauend ended his sermon and smiled at the congregation. “Thus I release you from my overly long and boring speech so you may roam the kennel once again. Beware of the darklings, and honor to Deswellyn!”

Immediately the temple cave burst out into sudden activity as nearly a hundred alreus followed the cleric's suggestion and did their best to rush out the entrance before everybody else. It was a beautiful cave, but every alreu present had already spent many hours investigating every nook and cranny of the temple which was hewn directly from rock. Not that anyone could have told immediately – so meticulously had the cave been crafted that it looked like the interior of a building on the surface, complete with a window that seemed to show a landscape outside. Panels along the walls looked like oak wood until one touched the stony surface. All in all, it was truly a work worthy of Deswellyn, God of Craft and Invention.

“Flinkie?” a female voice asked, halfway to the entrance, and her owner about to be trampled by twenty rather inconsiderate alreus behind her. Only at the latest instance did Magd'a manage to leap out of their way, clambering quickly on top of one of the benches. When the stampede was over – about two heartbeats later, apparently – she looked back to the bench where she had listened to the sermon. And indeed, Flink was still there, oblivious to everything around him.

Oblivious until another alreu woman shook him gently. And produced a snarl on Magd'a's pretty face when she recognized Maedel.

“Huh?” cried Flink with a start when he woke up and saw Maedel grinning at him.

“Deswellyn will be displeased with you,” she said.

“Whatever for?” Flink asked. “I've come to the... Uhm, where is everybody? Shouldn't the priest... I haven't...?” Consternation flushed his face when he saw Maedel nod. “Oh.”

“Oh, indeed!” Magd’a said when she had made her way back to the bench and slid her hand possessively around Flink’s, ignoring Maedel completely. “How could you, Flinkie?! Sleeping during the service to Deswellyn?! It is He – honored be his holy name – who protects our kennel!”

Flink’s eyes once again did double duty flashing from one woman to the other while his mouth underperformed with an uncertain, “Uhm...”

“The priest himself said his sermon was boring,” Maedel commented drily.

Magd’a didn’t look at her when she said, “It doesn’t matter. This is Deswellyn’s temple, and it is he whom we honor not the Most Holy Priest.”

“Uhm,” Flink raised his hand, hoping to defuse the situation (and maybe raise the temperature in the cave; it had mysteriously dropped again once the two girls had come within a yard of each other), “at least I’ve come here, right?”

“Flinkie! You don’t mean...?!”

Maedel chuckled. “Oh, you didn’t know? This is probably the first time in – what? – two years that he’s set foot into a temple. Right since he became an adult and could get out.”

Magd’a’s eyes widened as she stared in utter shock at the male who suddenly wished that he could pass through the stone beneath him, no matter that it would lead him right into the living room of Unnett who had promised him a severe beating (just because Flink had inadvertently destroyed the better part of her glass collection, stumbling into the careful arrangement – such a minor reason, and he had been only eight years old.) Anyway, Magd’a’s stare drove all the – suddenly pleasant – memories from his mind. “Flinkie!”

Apparently, he thought, I didn’t quite manage to defuse this.

“Oh,” Maedel folded her arms before her chest, “you measure an alreu’s faith by how regularly he attends services? Do you?”

“But, Flinkie, I always thought you attended Glaeubig’s temple!” Magd’a still did not spare Maedel a single glance, not that Maedel was worried about it. The twitch in her neck muscles whenever the other woman spoke was proof enough that she heard Maedel’s words. “Don’t you honor our great god Deswellyn?”

“Uhm...” Flink said as eloquently as he was able at the moment.

Maedel chuckled again. “Next she’ll accuse you of being a darkling, Flink. You haven’t taken up the faith of evil Shenaumac recently, have you? Magd’a, you should check the third pocket from Flink’s left on the inside of his vest. There’s a stone icon of Deswellyn. He’s been carrying it since he was seven. And, by the way, his name is Flink, not *Flinkie*.”

Now that was reason enough for Magd’a to dart a deadly glare at the other woman, and for a brief moment Flink feared she would actually inspect his pockets. Of course the icon was still there; it was always somewhere on his person, and to his complete surprise, Maedel still knew *where* he kept it in his various pieces of clothing. (Not that there were many variations he used, but still – it must have been well over two years since they spoke about it.)

No, there was another reason why Flink feared Magd’a would look for the icon. She’d realize right away it had been created by a child – roughly six years old at the time -, and if she would

glance at its back, she would read the words “For Flink from Maedel”. Not exactly something that could improve the maintainer’s daughter’s mood.

Magd’a still stared at Flink for a few seconds – and she reminded him unpleasantly of his mother, whenever she tried to uncover a lie of his. (Well, “tried” was definitely the wrong word. He couldn’t remember a single time he had been able to lie successfully to Mother.)

Before Magd’a could say anything, Flink quickly spoke up, “Say, Maedel, how come *you* attended service here? You’re still at Glaeubig’s, aren’t you?”

“I had my reasons,” she replied with a mischievous grin towards her rival.

“Oh, well,” Flink said, looking around quickly. “Say, if the service is over, can we go now? I mean, we could go to, uhm, Shaft Fourteen. There’s a new contraption in place to make maintenance work easier, and it’s really neat, and I saw it just yesterday with Master Kennel Maintainer, and –“

Maedel’s face instantly darkened while Magd’a’s lit up. “Oh, Flinkie, that’s a wonderful idea! My father told me about it, but I haven’t had time to look it up! Let’s go right away!” Already she grasped his arm, pulled him off the bench. (All right, so he helped a bit. As a matter of fact, he helped so much that he was three steps ahead of the women before they started moving.)

Moments later he burst out of the entrance to the temple, remembering only outside the confines to stop and wait for the others. But then, a voice spoke from above, “Finally, cousin. I thought you were planning to set up shop with that priest.”

Flink whirled about to discover Ungestum perched on a ledge right above the entrance, well away from Deswellyn’s sacred symbol. “Cousin, what are you doing here?”

“Well,” Ungestum grinned as he scampered down from his perch, “I was wondering about the rock, of course!”

“Which rock?” Maedel and Magd’a asked simultaneously. The women stood behind Flink, well apart from each other, but both at exactly the same distance from Flink (which amounted to practically none at all).

A shiver ran down Flink’s spine as he suddenly realized that the impossible had happened. Just when he thought he had gotten out of the mess in the temple cave, he had just run into a worse disaster. *Oh, why hasn’t Ordentlich forgotten to maintain this part of the kennel properly and the ceiling will collapse on me in a heartbeat or two?*

Obviously the kennel maintainer had done his job, and Flink carefully extricated himself from the women – making sure to be more than two steps away from Ungestum, should a headstart become vital. “Uhm, this one,” he said and pulled the rock from his vest.

“You had it *on* you?” Ungestum cried, his eyes riveted to the shimmer of the rock. “Er, smart move, cousin.”

The women also stared at the rock, as fascinated by the dots and their images as everyone else had been. “Are you going to give it to someone else?” Maedel asked with a quiver in her voice – obviously already sketching out in her mind what she could do with the rock.

Ungestum laughed. “Oh, of course he will! Won’t you, cousin?” Confidently he stretched out his hand, fully expecting to receive the rock.

“Uhm, that’s right,” Flink said, wondering how fast he could run. Ungestum had won the dash at last month’s *Feier* festivities, after all. Then, tensing his leg muscles, he held the rock out to Magd’a. “For you, valued daughter of the second kennel maintainer. In the hope that your skills will outshine mine, I give this item to you.”

“To *her*?!” both Maedel and Ungestum shouted in unison.

Magd’a took the rock from Flink’s hand, surprise painted over her face – and slowly replaced by satisfaction.

Well, Flink decided, he might just as well find out more about her reaction at some later point. Quite frankly, neither did he look forward to experiencing Ungestum’s reaction first-hand.

His feet kicked up clouds of dust as he rushed away to safety.



“Mother, I’m home!” Flink announced when he squeezed through the hole in the right wall of the kitchen. The entrance really had gotten rather difficult to master in the last few years; as a child he had never had to worry about his girth. (Without all his running about the kennel, he was sure he would weigh at least twice as much, considering how good his mother’s food was.)

“Mother?”

Nobody answered.

Well, one of Kandiert’s children wailed in the corner, toying with kitchen utensils as before. (No knives, nothing dangerous, Flink quickly noted, and wondered how many miles the triplets’ parents logged each day trying to catch their children again.) But Mother wasn’t here, and –

Oh, right. Deswellyn service. Mother always liked to chat with Holy Priest Glaeubig after the service; sometimes it took her more than two hours before she got home.

He shrugged, walked over to the oven and checked the pots whether anything edible (although cold) could be found in there. Some soup was left over, he found and smacked his lips. The infant in the corner immediately copied him, looking at the adult with great interest.

“Yes, right,” Flink sighed. “You’re Sonnig’s child. Come over here, little one, will you?”

The infant’s grasp of language was not as good as Flink had hoped, so the child stayed right where it was. Flink shook his head, fed the stove with wood and quickly heated up the soup, then filled a bowl. He walked over to the child, carefully fed it with a spoon. He didn’t need to worry about getting soup spilled on him, for the infant made sure to get every drop of soup into its mouth. “Sonnig’s child,” he shook his head.

Then he realized that the child would probably cry once Flink began to eat himself, so he grabbed the infant and placed it outside the cave. Like any alreu child, this one instantly started squirming in his arms and raced off as soon as it had firm ground under its limbs. “Why don’t you pester Unnett?” Flink cried after the child. “I’ve heard she’s got a *great* glass collection!”

Afterwards he filled himself another bowl of soup and proceeded to spoonfeed the most starved person in the world, who needed food much more than one of Sonnig’s children. When the bowl was

empty – and unfortunately, so was the pot –, he dropped both bowls into the cleaning bucket, patted his stomach in satisfaction and went into his room.

And stopped.

The shelves were torn off the wall, the ground littered with the many artifacts he had gathered or made himself. Most were splintered, trampled upon, apparently. His closet was open, all the drawers hanging out at odd angles or thrown onto the floor. Their contents also were spilled over the floor carelessly. The mattress was pulled off his bed, slashed open with a knife, the goose feathers a white cover on the mess on the floor. His blankets, all five, were cut to ribbons. He could tell them apart by the colors, that was the only way he knew that all five had been destroyed.

Flink's very first thought was to blame the mess on Sonnig's infant. You never knew the kinds of disasters alreu children could produce, and they were the only ones who ever destroyed anything.

But the infant could never have done this. Neither could it – probably – have reached the high shelves, nor could it have used a knife so expertly.

No, someone had willfully destroyed Flink's room.

While searching it.

He frowned and took a step into his room. Something crunched under his foot. Instantly he froze, lifted his foot and saw that he had just finished the devastation on his precious collection of glass marbles. Hastig had made them for Flink's tenth birthday, their colors perfectly matched.

And now they were only shards.

Flink frowned. Something flowed through his veins that he did not know. His stomach was about to lurch, his heart was icy cold, and his muscles were tense all over. What was happening to him? Was this some kind of disease?

Or was it that strange emotion wise men told of?

Could it be that he was – angry?

“No,” he said cheerfully and forced a smile on his face. “What am I? A darkling?!” He laughed, then returned to the kitchen to fetch the broom and begin tidying up his place.

The icy cold remained in his heart.



“Do you know how it works?” Magd'a asked excitedly, looking at the wooden contraption built into the ceiling of Shaft Fourteen, with ropes tightly strung across it.

Flink nodded. “Of course I do,” he said confidently and failed to mention that it was because her father Ordentlich had practically hammered it into Flink's skull with his words. He had been astounded to find out that on some occasions Ordentlich could string more than two sentences together. (Actually it must have been dozens. Despite his astounded fascination, he lost count rather quickly.)

“It's a pulley system, basically,” he continued and pointed to the ropes. “The carts are attached to the ropes, and for the workers, they're dangling right behind them. You can lower them so the

worker can easily shovel the ground into them.” He frowned, squinted down the tunnel. They were relatively alone here, for the moment. Only the foreman – Arbeitsam, he thought his name was – was nearby. *Probably watching out for the kennel maintainer’s daughter.* A dire thought passed through his head. *He’d better watch out to keep lazy good-for-nothings away, too.* Flink could swear he had seen Ungestum a little earlier, lurking around the back of the shaft, keeping well away from any of the work. Fortunately his cousin hadn’t noticed him, or there would have been a rather unpleasant conversation about the rock.

His attention quickly returned to the present when he saw movement down the shaft. “See, there’s a cart coming up now. You can see the ropes moving, right?”

Magd’a was squinting as well and eagerly nodded. Right now, the cart was just a pale shadow moving in the twilight, but soon it would become a heavy, massive load – one that a blind man would have trouble not noticing. (At least that was how Flink felt, considering how often he had been one of the alreus shoving the large carts up a shaft.)

“Remember the workers we passed three hundred yards back? They are pulling the ropes, with the wheels taking up most of the weight. It’s a lot easier than pushing the carts yourself”

She smiled. “May Deswellyn bless the constructor of this! Oh, Flinkie,” Magd’a reached out for his hand and pressed it tightly, “you’ll make such a great kennel maintainer one day!”

“Uhm,” he started to reply, then his mind kicked into high gear, and he continued, “Isn’t that a bit rash? I mean, your father is still second maintainer, and I’m sure he’ll make first in no time at all. I’m just a simple alreu who does his bit for the kennel, so –“

All right, so he’d gotten out quite a bit more than just the customary “Uhm...”. It didn’t help him a lot, for Magd’a placed her hand over his lips, effectively shutting him up. “Now, Flinkie,” she reproached him teasingly, “you’re more than a simple alreu. The kennel...” Her hand slipped from his mouth to trace patterns on his chest. “You know it so well, don’t you? Better than most others, I’ll just bet. And if you know Tieferbau’s nooks and crannies so well, who knows how well you can come to know –“

Flink never would learn what Magd’a was alluding to. He noticed the cart coming up suddenly stopping, a groan issuing from the wood above their heads – and above them, further up the shaft, another fully loaded cart was bending down the entire construction. Bending it down, and about to race along the rope downward, right into the two of them.

In an instant he slung his arm around her waist. Her words were cut off abruptly, a surprised – and happy – smile pasted on her face. But it lasted less than a heartbeat when Flink roughly slammed her against the wall, pressed his own body tightly against hers.

“*Flinkie!*” she exclaimed, about to follow up with more words – when the cart thundered by them.

Its metal side cut across Flink’s back, tearing up his vest. A large variety of items fell from the back pockets, scattering over the shaft, rolling and bouncing down the uneven floor. He didn’t care. He knew what was going to happen next, and with both hands he cradled Magd’a’s head against his chest.

For the briefest of moments he wondered why there was quiet. Had he misjudged, had he...?

Then the wood groaned maliciously. The iron hooks that fastened it to the ceiling shivered, under the weight of so many carts along the long line of the pulley system that suddenly were freed, tearing at the ropes, the wood – and the hooks.

A heartbeat later they came loose.

And tore down the ceiling, part rock, part earth.

Whatever it was, it came falling down, right onto Flink, Magd'a and all the unfortunate alreus in Shaft Fourteen. And all that Flink could think about was holding onto Magd'a, keeping her head safe against his chest, protected by his hands that suddenly seemed tiny against the onslaught of earth falling onto them.



“Flink?!”

Ordentlich's face suddenly appeared in the alreu's vision. Hadn't there been darkness just before? Oh, right. The sounds of shovels hadn't been an illusion after all, and then hands had scraped the dirt carefully from the back of his head, laying open the bubble of air around his face. And now...

The kennel maintainer brushed more dirt aside, tears in his eyes. “Flink, you were with – my daughter –“ he stuttered, while freeing Flink.

Magd'a! the thought flashed through his mind, and instinctively he tore at the body right next to him, pushing her up, up into the air.

“My daughter!” Ordentlich cried, clasping his powerful arms around her still figure, dragging her loose from the dry, cold ground. She looked so pale, Flink thought, fighting to help her father. “My –“ Ordentlich's words were cut off by a sob, tears flowing feely across his cheeks.

But the sob was a happy one.

Her chest heaved slightly, ever so slightly – and then she coughed, her eyes flying open and seeing her father, and – “Flinkie?” The words escaped her mouth like a wraith, soft, almost unheard.

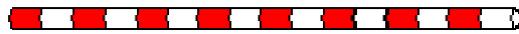
“I'm –“ His own reply was cut off by a cough very similar to her own, as he spat earth from his mouth.

Ordentlich smiled and stroked his daughter's cheek. “He's here, too, dearest and most valued child of mine. Don't you worry, my darling, the Most Holy Priest is on his way, and you'll feel much better soon. Rest now.”

Her eyes focused for a moment on her father's face, saw the smile and responded with one of her own. Then her eyes closed, her hands quivering as they tried to find Flink's. He didn't know what else to do, so he reached out to hold her fingers.

Ordentlich nodded at him, grunted something incomprehensible and slapped him on the back. (Which knocked all the air he had so laboriously breathed out of his lungs. Flink couldn't care less.) A heartbeat later the kennel maintainer was gone, ordering about the work crew with more grunts. As gruff as they may have sounded to everyone else in Shaft Fourteen, Flink would swear for the rest of his life that they were the most joyous sounds Ordentlich ever uttered.

And he himself grunted just as happily as he laid his head down to rest on Magd'a's stomach, feeling it rise beneath him.



The priest Glaeubig's magic had driven the exhaustion and hurt from Flink's body. He hadn't exactly felt as fresh afterwards as if he had woken from a good, long sleep, but a dive into the communal pool on Level Nine had helped a lot. So had seeing Magd'a enjoy the water as much as he did, so very much alive that he felt like shouting and doing flic-flacs all over the wide rock ledge around the pool. Well, feeling like doing something often was the same to Flink as doing it, and Magd'a cheered every flic-flac of his with a loud, encouraging yell.

They stayed by the pool for an hour, talking, chatting, about everything that came to their minds. Everything save the collapse of the shaft.

Eventually Magd'a said she would return to her cave. "I have a little something back there a certain someone gave me yesterday," she smiled. "That someone thought I could put it to good use, you know, Flinkie? I wouldn't want to disappoint him." Then she planted a kiss on his cheeks and sauntered away to dry off and change back into her regular clothes.

Flink unconsciously rubbed his cheek, grinning stupidly while his gaze followed her leaving the poolcave. Once she had vanished from sight, though, it was as if a switch was thrown. The images of Shaft Fourteen's collapse filled his head, the thought of all the people in there, the workers further down the shaft who were surely...

He shook his head vigorously. Ordentlich's men were still working to rescue those trapped in the shaft!

Flink remembered the pressure of the dirt entombing him down there, trapping him, the way his mind had begun to fade...

He was already on his way to change before he realized that he was heading down to help the rescue efforts.



All the recognition Flink got from kennel maintainer Ordentlich was a short grunt and a wave of the hand to assign him a position. After that extensive and elaborate explanation, Ordentlich returned to watching the work with dire eyes.

Well, except for a tiny glint in his eyes about Flink's coming back, despite having been on the brink of death a mere hour ago.

Flink himself quickly got to shoveling. It took him a few minutes of work to realize that he was nowhere near the dangerous areas of the shaft, where another collapse might happen any minute. He could see one of those spots from up here in the tunnel – alreus were busy propping makeshift pillars against the ceiling, and even busier moving dirt out of their way to those trapped below.

The Most Holy Priests Glaebig and Vertrauend leaned against one of the toppled carts, staring down the shaft emptily. Despite the goodly girth of Vertrauend, both men seemed haggard and drawn out. Casting all those blessings, Flink knew, taking care of poor alreus' wounds.

Like Magd'a and me.

With renewed fury he attacked the ground, shoveled bits and pieces of the pulley construction aside – the system that had caused the collapse in the first place. “Deswellyn curse the idiot who invented it!” he muttered, earning a silencing stare from the foreman.

No words. Shovel duty.

Tombcave.

A lithe body slid by him, touching him lightly on the arm. Angrily Flink wanted to shout, but remembered at the last moment that he wasn't allowed to. So he turned a frustrating eye to the other alreu – and gave a start when he recognized Maedel, in a bright one-piece tunic, a shovel in her hand.

What's she doing on shovel duty? the thought flashed through his mind. *Girls don't have to...*

Then he felt her grip tighten around his arm for a brief moment. Her red lips were moving, and it took Flink a heartbeat or two to realize that she was mouthing the question, *Are you all right?*

He smiled instantly, nodded and pointed over to the priests.

Good! her lips said, and he could have sworn that the next word she mouthed was a mischievous *Flinkie*.

He grimaced and pointed heavily at the ground before them. Maedel only smiled when she stuck her shovel into the dirt to join him in the work.

More ground was sent flying out of the way, into a cart that would be shoved the old-fashioned way. Along with it went more of the pulley – wood, rope, iron hooks, nails that had held the contraption together – and all of it only infuriated Flink.

He didn't even pause to notice this very un-alreu emotion coursing through his veins. Too much had happened lately, the destruction of his room, the collapse of the shaft – by all the gods, he had imagined seeing Decirius' messenger of death looming over him, ready to pluck his soul from his body and carry it to the land beyond!

Wood. Broken, useless.

Iron. Bent, marred, useless.

Rope. Torn and frayed, and –

Suddenly he stopped and picked up a piece of rope. The fragment was about a foot long, one of its ends as frayed as all the others, the other... Some strings were loose, as frazzled as you please, obviously torn loose when the weight of the carts proved too much, and the entire intricate pulley system went to meet Decirius.

But the rest of it ended cleanly, the strings severed as if they were *cut by a knife*.

Coldness pervaded Flink's heart. That rope *had* been cut! Cut just so much it wouldn't become apparent right away, and that it would take a few minutes for the weight of the carts to do the rest.

“Sabotage!” he cried in disbelief. There wasn't an alreu who could *do* something like this! Cause the *death* of other alreus?! The highest law of the community called for anyone who killed another

alreu to be banished – and anyway that was such a terrible deed, that... Only a darkling would do this – if they existed.

“Flink!” Maedel hissed. “It’s shovel duty!”

“Shoveling’s over,” he muttered. His fingers closed on the piece of rope with such fury he was sure he would squeeze it apart. “Ordentlich’s gotta know about this.”

“About what?” Maedel asked, fear painted clearly on her face. Never had she seen Flink so... so... much like a *human!* Only they could be so cold, so determined, so...

She would have plenty of time to think of the proper adjective, for Flink was already dashing up the tunnel to see the maintainer. He had no time left to explain anything to Maedel. Someone had sabotaged the pulley. Darkling, dwarven invader, whatever – someone had killed all the workers down there, had nearly killed Magd’a and him.

Kennel maintainer had to be told.



The rock fell from Magd’a’s hands. “No!” she cried, desperately trying to catch it before it hit the ground. Her hands missed, and the rock smashed onto the stone floor of her room, splinters flying from its gray surface.

“Oh, Flinkie, I’m so sorry,” she whispered, wondering what he would say once he learned that she had destroyed that precious rock. He had entrusted it to her, after all, her dear Flinkie had, and now she –

More shimmering metal shone through the new cracks in the rock. And it didn’t look like a deposit of ore anymore, it looked like something was hidden under the stone. Something artificial.

Quickly Magd’a snatched the rock from the floor, brought it to her worktable and used her tiniest hammer to chip off the rocky hide. (Perhaps she should have used the knife next to it. Most Holy Priest Vertrauend had enchanted it that it could easily cut through rock – no, it could also cut through metal, she resolved, the hammer was better.) More metal became visible, almost like silver, but more like... platinum, she realized after a moment.

Platinum? Embedded in a rockface?

Now that was very odd, wasn’t it? How could an artificial item be trapped inside *rock*?

Well, magic could account for that, surely. But who would go to that length? And *why*?

She continued hammering at the object before her – she couldn’t call it a rock anymore, now that she knew there was something else inside. And slowly she came to see what it was inside.

An amulet. Oval, with a rectangular base, made from platinum. In the oval part a strange scene was worked into the metal, one that she couldn’t quite understand. Or was it symbols? She didn’t know.

The rectangular part she could understand at least a little. There was an inscription in it, carved into the metal when it was still hot. But it was *human* writing! Magd’a never had bothered to learn

anything about their writing – she was the kennel maintainer’s daughter, after all, and wasn’t expected to leave for the surface, ever.

“What does it mean?!” she cried in her lonely room, far away from any possible response.

A dark, male voice answered from right behind her, “It says, ‘Shenaumac is the answer’. Not that it will help you, Magd’a. Cousin should have given it to me right away. He might have saved your life...”



The rope seemed to be burning in Flink’s hands. Where was Ordentlich? Why wasn’t he where Flink had last seen the kennel maintainer?

Who could have sabotaged the pulley system? Who could have wanted the deaths of all those alreus down in the shaft?

Not to mention Magd’a and Flink himself! Deswellyn may protect him, but hadn’t he gone through enough lately? Hadn’t it been quite enough that his room had been searched and destroyed in darkling fashion? That he had to decide whom to give the rock, while Ungestum was always nearby, flexing his muscles as if he were about to thrash Flink if he gave the rock to anybody else!

By the gods, Ungestum always sent shivers down his spine. But he was different from everyone else, that was the reason why Flink liked – no, *had* liked – being around him. You never knew what he was going to do, you just couldn’t rely on his being polite all the time, being nice all the time!

And with the rock? Well, Ungestum had turned up the pressure a bit. Unfortunately, that one time Flink was the target, and he still didn’t understand just why Ungestum wanted the rock so very much. It seemed to him that the rock consumed all his thoughts, so much so that...

... he just might search Flink’s room. And not care about destroying all the items gathered there. All for finding the rock.

He stopped dead in his search for Ordentlich. His thoughts were racing like alreu children, without goal, save the next meal, and the escape from adult arms.

Ungestum had wanted Flink to give him the rock. But Flink had given it to Magd’a instead. The rock was gone from Ungestum’s reach, and he must have been angry. No, not just angry, so furious that he – would desire vengeance.

But, *kill* someone? An alreu?!

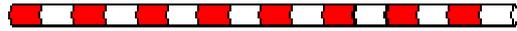
“No, that’s ridiculous.” He shook his head.

Right now the rock was with Magd’a, and she was safe at home, in her room. Oh, her father was around here somewhere, and her mother probably would provide food for the workers, so she was all alone. And of course, there were no doors, so anybody could enter.

Anybody.

Including an alreu who would go to any length to get the rock. *Any* length. Like a darkling.

“Deswellyn bless me!” Flink cried and ran up the shaft.



“Magd’a!” Flink shouted when he rushed through the living room of her home, leaping over a chair to bounce into her room. “Magd’a!”

“Right here,” Ungestum answered.

Flink skittered to a stop, staring at the scene before him. Magd’a lay prone on the ground, blood flowing from a wound to her head. And Ungestum... *Gods!* He gently touched a finger to her wound, blood covering the finger, and then he – put the finger with a grin into his mouth, sucking greedily on it. “Oh, cousin,” he whispered, “have you *ever* tasted the blood of the living? It’s so *good*. Better even than your mother’s soup.”

“How dare you –“ The words smothered in Flink’s throat, dried up, dying. Ungestum grinned. Magd’a’s blood ran from his lips, and he grinned. “Darkling!” Flink coughed.

Ungestum shrugged and smiled. “Right, cousin of mine. It’s not a bad word, you know. Shenaumac is the answer to our perils. His will be done. His might be –“

His grin seemed to pierce the confines of his face as he rose and spread his arms. He wore a linen shirt, died a light brown. It slowly darkened to blue, and black symbols spread all across the linen – and over Ungestum’s skin. The image of a knife burned itself into his forehead, drops of black blood dripping onto the bridge of his nose.

“Shenaumac’s might,” Ungestum continued slowly, his eyes reddened, “be *mine!*”

Cold dread rose in Flink, and he remembered the way he had felt at home, when he had closely studied the rock. It was the same feeling, absolutely the same. And he could even pinpoint where it came from, a platinum amulet around Ungestum’s neck.

It turned dark. The only platinum lines remaining were in the shape of a bloody knife.

Ungestum chuckled darkly. “I am a priest of Shenaumac now, cousin. A most unholy priest. Won’t you kneel down to a cleric as your mother taught you?”

Flink stared at the other alreu, wondering if that could be the same person he had known from birth. He felt the power of the amulet vibrating in his own soul, pulling at it, as if it were hungry for more blood.

“*Kneel!*” Ungestum commanded harshly, all ease suddenly vanished from his face.

“No, I will not,” Flink said hesitatingly, as if the words stuck in his throat. His gaze was drawn to Magd’a, the wound bleeding on her head. She was still breathing, still alive. But with that wound, she would...

Something hot hit his arm.

Flink yelled, shook his arm furiously, trying to shake off the pain. Slowly it receded, but a singed spot remained on his sleeve, as Ungestum said gently, “Did you feel that, cousin? There’s more where that came from. You don’t like pain, do you? No, you never did. So just kneel down and lower your head to me, then there won’t be any more pain. Isn’t that fine, cousin?!”

Like a statue, Ungestum stood in the middle of Magd’a’s room, his face a friendly mask, but the dark brand on his forehead gave him away all too clearly.

“Cousin?” he asked menacingly and flicked his finger. A blood-colored ember shot from the finger, hit Flink’s other arm like a burning arrow. The alreu dropped to the ground, beating at the burning spot furiously with his free hand. “That is good,” Ungestum commented. “You are already on your knees, cousin. Now just bend forward, bend your head to me. And then you will feel no more pain.”

Magd’a moaned softly. Her eyelids fluttered madly, her breath labored.

“You will not die,” Flink decided, ignoring the pain in his arm, “not after I just kept you from it.”

And before Ungestum could fling another magical ember at him, Flink rolled aside, scrambled across the floor under Magd’a’s work table. “Bad move, cousin!” Ungestum yelled. Flink could already see him raising his hands for more shots – and he had no desire to take any more pain. Quickly he rolled backwards and shot both legs at the underside of the table, kicking it over, so its top would provide cover. All of Magd’a’s tools tumbled down, scattering over the floor.

Just in time. A hail of embers flew towards Flink, and all embedded themselves into the wood. Sparks sprayed wide enough that he could see them from behind his cover. Worse, the smell of smoke rapidly reached his nose. These embers must have been more powerful than the first hits, powerful enough to burn the table, and therefore powerful enough to – well, yes, Flink, exactly that, so why don’t you try to stay out of their way, all right, fine, thank you!

Despite his best intentions, Flink couldn’t stay behind the shielding table. He rolled himself up tight, tumbled out from his shield like a bouncing ball – he was very good at that, as Mother had often noted with a sigh when he barely avoided smashing into one or the other obstacle.

After only two feet he suddenly spread himself flat against the floor – just at the right moment, for two more embers rushed through the air, bare inches over his shock of wild red hair.

“What do you say, cousin?” Ungestum yelled happily. “Aren’t they neat? Come on and get burned!”

“Aren’t you strong enough to beat me up?!” Flink cried in all innocence. “I thought that’s what you always said, and I mean, you’re bigger and stronger and smarter, and now you’re a priest, and – goodness gracious! – Ungestum, you’re –“

He fully expected one or more of the embers to flame right into his head. Instead Ungestum laughed harshly. “Oh, that’s a good try. You’re planning something, aren’t you? My little cousin planning to –“ Abruptly he stopped, and his laughter turned mirthful. “What am I saying? That’s absolutely *ludicrous!* My cousin *Flink* trying to *kill* anybody? Oh, *goodness gracious*, you’re on, cousin!”

Flexing his muscles, grinning madly, Ungestum stomped towards Flink, ready to give him the thrashing he so richly deserved. The younger alreu slowly rose, ducking from the expected beating, and Ungestum chuckled again. “I’ve been waiting *so* long for this, cousin.”

Ungestum pulled back both fists to slam them into his victim. The dark platinum amulet danced in the air, on a silver chain. And just when the fists were about to rush forward at full force, Flink suddenly unfolded, and his own hand shot forward. In the hand a knife from Magd’a’s table glistened and glowed with magical force, as the blade sank into Ungestum’s chest, right next to the amulet. The knife slid into the flesh, deep in, cut through a rib easily – then reached the heart. Blood sprayed over Flink, warm, moist, awful.

“*COUSIN!*” Ungestum yelled, any further words cut off by utter pain – and his blood rushing out of his body.

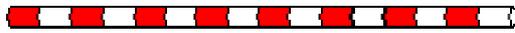
Flink held the knife tightly, even when Ungestum collapsed, the body sliding off the knife. Flink’s hand hung in the air, clasping tightly the knife, its blade dripping with blood.

Just like the dark brand on Ungestum’s forehead.

Terrorized Flink leaped up, dropping the knife and trying to wipe his hand clean on his shirt. It barely worked. And Magd’a moaned again.

An instant later he was by her side, tore his shirt into strips and wound them tightly around her head. Staunch the blood flow, that’s the first thing to do, he knew. Then he rushed to her bed, grabbed a cushion and two blankets with which he proceeded to cover Magd’a, so her head lay on something soft and she would stay warm.

Then there was the second thing he ought to do. Fetch the next priest. Fast.



Shouldn’t people who save somebody else – twice! – be rewarded? Not to mention one who discovered a darkling in the midst of Tieferbau?

That surely would be the kind of questions a human would ask, standing in the main cave, facing a tribunal of judges presided by second kennel maintainer Ordentlich himself. The fat alreu sat on a high chair, prominent members of Tieferbau’s community to both sides of himself, watching Flink with an unreadable mien.

None of those questions were anywhere on Flink’s mind. He knew Magd’a was alive. Perhaps thanks to him, it didn’t really matter. She was alive, that was all he needed to know.

And he knew that Ungestum had died by his own hands. He could still feel the warm blood on his hand, the feeling of the knife sliding into alreu flesh. He had killed an alreu. There was only one judgment he could expect, and he fully deserved it.

“Flink,” Ordentlich slowly began, “the highest of our laws states that no alreu may kill another and stay in the community. We recognize that you acted in the interest of not only an alreu woman in peril, but that of the community, as well. The danger of a darkling among us cannot be underestimated.

“I am afraid it does not matter. You have broken the law, and therefore –“ He stopped himself, bit his lower lip as if his calm was about to break. Then, a moist gleam appearing in his eyes, he continued, “Flink of Tieferbau, you are hereby banished from the kennel for the rest of your life. The notice of this will be distributed to every other kennel of alreu make. Nowhere shall you be welcomed, nowhere shall you be permitted to lay down your head, nowhere may you explore the shafts. Do you understand?”

Flink stared straight ahead. It took him a moment to realize he had been asked a question. “Uhm, yes, Master Maintainer, I do.”

“Then you have one hour to pack your belongings and leave the kennel.” Ordentlich rang a bell he had kept in his lap. The trial was over, and Flink felt as if the same applied to his entire life. Slowly he turned about to head back home. Only it would be home for just one more hour. Then he would never see his mother’s kitchen or his own room again. Never run into the kitchen, bouncing about to ask his mother what was for lunch or dinner or whichever meal it might be. Never eat her marvelous food again.

A frown slid over his face, as he nearly missed a step.

It meant that he would never see his mother again. Not unless Sorgend came to the surface, to meet him, but – he couldn’t very well wait around the entrance to the kennel all his life, could he? And wouldn’t his mother worry all the more about him?

But – never was rather a long time.

“Flink, wait a minute,” a deep voice came from behind, and a fat but well-muscled hand clasped his arm. Maintainer Ordentlich, the calm façade dropped from his face, stood behind him. “I am so sorry, son. You... My daughter is alive because of you, and now we’re... No, *I’m* banishing you from Tieferbau. I tried to dissuade the other judges, but –“

“I have killed an alreu,” Flink said quietly. “I deserve my fate.”

Fire flared in Ordentlich’s eyes. “Deswellyn hear me, you *don’t!* What you deserve is to stay here and lead a happy life, what you deserve is –“

“Master Maintainer?” Flink interrupted him. “Would you please look after my mother? If I knew she is being taken care of, that would make me feel much better on the surface.”

“Yes, of course, I –“

“Thank you.” Carefully Flink extracted himself from the maintainer’s grasp and took up his walk to Mother’s kitchen again, one last time. He would not cry. He would not, could not protest. For once in his life, he would make things easy for his mother, as easy as they could be under these circumstances.



“Where do you think you’re going, idiot?!” Maedel shouted at Flink, right in front of the exit from the kennel. Sunlight was shining on her, outlining her frame as well as that of Magd’a, holding on to the other woman’s arm and sobbing softly. “Flink, you’re gonna turn around right *now*, and we’re going to fight this silly decision! You won over a darkling, a darkling cleric! None of those old fools should stand in our way!”

Flink frowned. “I killed an alreu,” he repeated.

“He wasn’t an alreu anymore!” Maedel said. “Ungestum had given himself to Shenaumac. No alreu does that, so the law does *not* apply. Isn’t that right, Magd’a? Say something!”

She raised her head a little, stared at him with bloodshot eyes. “Oh, Flinkie, please be careful out there, will you? Wear warm –“

“Shut up,” Maedel cut her off. “So, Flink, what’s it going to be?”

He sighed. There was no way he could explain to either of them how he felt, how the memory of the – the deed terrorized him. Perhaps Maedel was right, perhaps there was a way to fight the decision. But Flink couldn't even conceive taking up a fight like that. Goodness gracious, the very thought! An alreu – fighting?!

Maedel grimaced. "If you're so set on being a stupid fool, then by the gods, so am I. Wait outside half an hour, and I'll have my gear ready to go with you."

"You'll –" Flink started to say but was interrupted when Magd'a suddenly raised her head all the way, firing a harsh stare first at Maedel then a soft glance at Flink. "Then I'll come with you, too, Flinkie! You won't be alone, ever, I promise! I'll..."

A cough interrupted her, shaking her body, and Maedel quickly slung her arms around her, kept her from keeling over. "You can't even walk without help, woman! How could you hope to make it on the surface?"

"I... will!" she whispered determinedly.

"Oh, really? And I'm supposed to help you doing that?"

Magd'a steadied herself finally, although her breathing still was heavy. "Yes, that's... right."

"You'd..." Maedel frowned. "You'd accept *my* help?"

The other woman smiled weakly. "For our Flinkie, I will."

And then both their plans went awry when yet another cough ran through Magd'a, stronger than the one before. Her entire body went into a spasm, and Flink rushed to her side to help Maedel lower her gently to the floor.

"She needs a priest," Flink whispered, stroking Magd'a's cheeks.

"I'll get one," Maedel said quietly. "Promise me one thing, fool. Once you've gotten over this stupid idea, come back. For either of us."

"Uhm..."

Maedel raised an eyebrow, and she looked uncomfortably much like his mother.

Whom he would never see again. Unless he did as Maedel asked him to. And then there were these two women who had turned his life upside down in the past few days and...

"I promise I'll come back," he said after a moment. "For both of you." He leaned forward to kiss Magd'a on her cheek – she smiled, as long as the spasms didn't rush through her –, then he kissed Maedel on the cheek.

Maedel smiled and put a finger on his lips. "I'll hold you to that promise. And I'll bet, so will Magd'a. Now get out, your hour's almost up."

Flink nodded, got up and walked out of the kennel's exit. At the threshold, he turned and cast a look back. Both women were watching him, and Maedel quickly turned her head away so he didn't see the tears in her eyes. "I promise," he repeated, too softly for either to hear, then he left Tieferbau and began his time in exile.