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## Uprising

It was an unusually cool night in Tharg. Even though it was well into spring and the sun was touching the western horizon, it was still cool. The waves of the Arinbeth Ocean crashed against the docks in the distance and the last of the lanterns had just been extinguished on Market Lane. A few children pulled a kite through the narrow, barren streets, not caring at all what had just happened a few yards up the hill. Up on Kriball Street.

A terrible fight had erupted in the Tharg Penitentiary. There was blood everywhere. All the prisoners had been herded away from the courtyard and back into their cells, eyes wide at the massacre that had taken place in front of them. Sinewy limbs and clumps of men—*strong* men were littered everywhere. A total of six unlucky, but deserving guards met their demise in the most horrific, vengeful way. And it was all at the hands of a woman.

They beat her, tried to *rape* her, but when it seemed as though her pain could be no greater, that her wounds and defilement could go no deeper, she unleashed a demon inside of her that brought death in seconds. The guards didn't have a chance to realize what was

HUBERT L. MULLINS

happening. The surviving three stood there, dumbfounded at how a woman—a mere *child* of a woman could do what she just did.

And then, as quickly as it started, the killing was over. The woman was finished. She sat on the ground and pulled her legs up to rest her chin. Each guard stared in shock and disbelief as this simple person rocked back and forth, as if nothing had happened—as if everything had been a dream.

One reached out and grabbed a handful of hair and pulled her back. Her face was unmoving—her eyes unaware of pain. The others thought the murderess had vacated, that the one before them was again a simple woman who needed to be beaten, who needed to be raped. They started once more, but before their crime could continue, a loud bell pulled them from their mark. It was over. The headmaster had been called and there would be many questions. Their assault—their misdeed would have to be saved for later.

The first guard grabbed her by the throat and pulled her away from the courtyard and to the south hall that would lead to the first cellblock. Her arms were at her sides and her bare feet glided across the floor. Her unblinking eyes fixed on the ceiling as her back was rubbed raw by the passing granite. The sound of keys jingling alerted her to the approach of her cell.

Tight, ruthless hands grabbed her by the hair and sat her up. A guard who was missing his front teeth smiled and wrapped his fingers around her neck.

“That little act out there is going to cost you, Kersey.” He slammed her head against the bars of her cell to make sure she understood. She didn’t even flinch. “Throw her in,” he told the others.

Two guards grabbed her around the waist and tossed her in like a sack of potatoes. “I’m sure we’ll be back. And soon,” he added, and then spat in her face. Again, she didn’t flinch, nor did she acknowledge

what he said. The door slammed shut and locked, leaving only a pair of chuckling guards who left and paid her no further attention.

Kersey Avonwood lifted herself up and looked around. Her bed sat in the corner, though it was rarely ever used. She preferred the floor. A few slices of bread, an apple, and a jug of water were spread across a tray on the ground, attracting flies. No matter. She wouldn't eat it anyway.

She pulled her silky, black hair from her eyes and wiped the blood from them. That little act *was* going to cost her. She wasn't scared of retribution. She was scared of change. After tonight, things were *certainly* going to change. Whether it would be for the better or not, she didn't know.

Kersey's mind was getting the best of her. It was making her think things and do things that she knew she shouldn't. Tonight had not been the first time they had beaten her. It was the first time they tried to rape her, however. And it was the first time she'd murdered over it. It was the solitude, she reminded herself. She had been out of touch with the world for so long—longer than she'd been in here, in fact.

Her mind snapped away from the outside world and felt her hands were wet and sticky. There was a pool of blood forming in her lap. It was dark, crimson blood. It was *her* blood. Her fingernails were digging long tracks in her forearms. The pain was wonderful. It made her feel alive—renewed. She didn't stop. She *couldn't* stop. She wanted to touch bone, to gnaw the flesh and muscle from the ivory limbs and feel the pain wash over her. That would take away this feeling of dread—of *death*. Maybe it could take away centuries of killing and bloodshed.

"Miss Red?" came an anxious voice from beyond the window. Small pebbles started plinking to the ground below her, as the

HUBERT L. MULLINS

boyish individual outside tried to garner her attention. “Is anybody home?”

“Not now, Avery,” she called through the bars. She couldn’t stand up to look out, nor did she want to. Her burly friend who came by to see her every couple of nights picked a bad time for a visit. His gleeful, dimwitted laughter echoed as he skipped away.

There was a slight movement on her mattress. Something was on the bed, pulling at the blanket. She knew what it was—*who* it was.

She crawled across the floor, leaving bloody handprints on the cold stone and snatched the blanket away, revealing a long-dead squirrel that smelled worse than the rotting food. Its body was mangled and its fur was ripped in places, but its eyes—its eyes were pure and alive. They were unblinking and focused on her every move. It was Ruin, god of the dead, presenting himself, just as he had many times in the past.

The squirrel’s body stretched, as if trying to awaken stiff bones. It sat up and hopped off the bed, limping as if it had limited use of its legs. The eyes never left her.

“Look at you,” it said with an unmoving mouth. The voice of Ruin was calm and steady.

Kersey sat back against the wall, digging fresh cuts into her arm.

“Why are you here, Kersey, at the brutal hands of mortals who don’t know who or what you are?” The squirrel’s head tilted to the side, interested in her answer.

“Why do you keep bothering me?”

“Why do you keep ignoring reason?”

She was silent. Ruin often made a lot of sense after she had time to dwell on it, although she’d never let him know.

“I don’t. You know why I stay. Please leave me.” She clenched her fists and dug her nails into the palms of her hands.

“I know why you *hide*, but I don’t know why you stay. I’m here to amend my offer.” The squirrel crept closer on its broken legs.

“I’ve no need of your offers. I’m content here, as long as I’m absent of your harassment.” This much was true. Even though Ruin made good points, she was here for a reason and had no intentions of leaving. She would stay here as long as time, gods, and mortals would allow her.

“You won’t be content much longer, dear. Mydian now knows you are here.” And in one, short sentence, he said the only thing that could motivate her to leave. Her eyes stung with the promise of tears.

“What? How do you know that?” she demanded.

“There is death wherever Mydian’s servants are, and wherever there is death, there are *my* servants.” The rodent managed a lopsided smile.

“I cannot die,” was all she said, as calm as she could. Kersey had to stay alive. It wasn’t just a rational fear of death—of *dying*. It was so much more than that.

“Oh but you will, my dear,” Ruin reminded. “If you stay here, either Mydian or the mortals will see to that.”

Kersey put her head on her knee and she could feel just how much she was trembling. Fear was such a useless, irritating emotion.

“You’re powerful, Kersey.” The squirrel was almost in her lap. “The long years passed have made you forget this. You are a force to be reckoned with. You are one of the *Ten*. Start acting like it.”

She swatted the advancing squirrel away. “I’ve no need for savagery. I’ve had several lifetimes worth of it.” Blood was still dripping from her fingertips.

“That may be true, but there’s no changing what you are.”

“I’m a person.”

HUBERT L. MULLINS

“Not anymore.”

“Leave!” she screamed. The lanterns down the hallway flickered and went out. All the small sounds of the prison and the crickets outside the window hushed.

Kersey’s attention tore from the squirrel to the hallway as the heavy footfalls of the guards approached. There was no way they could see her from the darkened passage but their faces were completely visible to her dilated eyes. They were smiling.

“Keep mindful of my offer,” Ruin whispered. “I can protect you from Mydian’s wrath.” With that, the squirrel’s head dropped and its body went limp. The eyes that once held a focused life dimmed to the dead black of a corpse.

The guard unlocked the door and stepped into the cell, grinning at just how much blood there was on the floor. Another one stood nearby, hand tensed over his sword.

“C’mon,” the guard next to her said, nudging her in the ribs. “Clive wants to talk with you.”



It was so calm out tonight. Looking through the window, across Hillchapel Cemetery and past deserted streets, he could see the docks at the edge of town. The gentle waves crashed against the Tharg beach, rocking the galleys and schooners from side to side. No one would have ever guessed what had just happened in the prison across the street.

Clive Porter didn’t believe it himself when his aid first told him. He knew Kersey was capable of such a thing, but he didn’t believe she would do it so openly—so blatantly. She had a reputation for doing strange things that should have been impossible for one in captivity. Thinking back on it, she may have been responsible for several other murders.

He didn't want to deal with this. More than that, he didn't want to be the bearer of bad news—awful, horrible news. But it was his job. Clive had worked with her for several years, had been responsible for her rehabilitation and was responsible for her actions. Her actions tonight were a sad testimony of how well her rehabilitation had gone. Why did *he* have to be in charge?

The aging man paced back and forth in Kriball Manor, waiting for the guards to bring her before him. He straightened his tunic and adjusted his tie. He ran tired fingers through his wavy, parted hair. This was probably the best he'd managed to look in quite some time. After all, he'd just arrived from a funeral.

A loud grinding sound tore him from the window. The door to the banquet hall swung open and in walked Bral Simsey, one of the Pen's guards, along with Kersey, shackled at the hands and feet. Bral offered him a smile—an eerie, *'don't worry, we nailed her, boss'* smile.

Clive motioned for Bral to seat her at the long table in the center of Kriball's massive dining hall. The guard pulled the chair out and shoved her down so hard that the water pitcher and glasses on the table rattled. She didn't seem to mind at all.

"Take those off her," Clive ordered, pointing to the shackles on her hands. Bral gave him a questioning look, but did nothing else. "You heard me, Bral, take those off her! And the ones on her feet, too." Again the burly guard was taken aback, but pulled his key ring out, nonetheless. Clive seated himself opposite of the small woman and poured himself a glass of water. Bral finished unlocking her hands and feet and started out, shackles in hand.

"Lock the door, please," Clive called. Bral threw his hand up in the air and pulled it shut. The room was strangely silent, other than the occasional flicker of the wall lanterns.

HUBERT L. MULLINS

Kersey simply sat there, slumped forward with her eyes fixed on the table. Had it not been there, she would have tipped over into the floor. Her silky hair was matted and covering much of her face—a face smeared with far too much blood. Her arms didn't look any better. Each pasty limb was just as coated in thick, crimson ichor.

"Kers," Clive breathed, drumming his fingers on the table. She didn't budge. She remained emotionless, lifeless, and silent. It was her normal behaviour. Kersey was a woman of few words and those that she did speak were often troubled. He was never satisfied with her tone or answers.

Clive moved his chair back and stood, grabbing his glass of water. He walked over to where she was seated, leaned against the table and pulled out his handkerchief and dabbed it in the water. "What did you do to yourself?" he asked, and wiped the blood from her forehead. She sat back, revealing no wounds beneath the red cover.

"I'm fine," she muttered.

"As you always are." He cleaned the blood from her arm and found no wounds there, either. At one time it was strange, but Kersey had a gift for making her cuts and scrapes simply 'vanish'.

"Stop it, I said I'm fine!" She pulled her arms out of his reach and buried them beneath the bloodied, cloth tunic.

"So much blood and not a scratch on you. I would say you are more than fine." He dropped the handkerchief on the table and went back to his seat. Kersey's piercing eyes were gazing at him. Her dark stare was very unsettling, but he didn't feel threatened by it. She had never attempted to hurt him.

"So where have you been all week?" she asked, her face softening a bit. He wanted to smile but couldn't. It was sweet for her to miss him, but his reason for being away was nothing to be happy about.

This wasn't the time to dwell on things, nor was it the time to let her see him grieve.

"I've had . . . family matters to attend to. But I'm back now." Clive forced a smile.

Kersey seemed to lose interest. Her stare resumed at the blank spot on the table, her thin fingers gripping it like piano keys. She was trembling.

"So are you going to tell me what happened out there?" he asked, leaning back.

"The guards beat me and tried to rape me. I defended myself," was all she said. Her eyes flickered up for just a moment.

"Really? That won't be very convincing when I write to six families tonight to let them know their sons were savagely butchered at the hands of a woman not much bigger than a child." Clive hunkered down and tried to snatch her stare.

"Well, it's the truth."

"What are you, Kersey?" he bluntly asked. "Really, what are you?" This had plagued him for far too long and here, at her inevitable end, he wanted to know.

"I'm a person," was her only, simple answer.

"You're more than a person, girl," Clive chuckled. "You're something else. How long have you been a prisoner here, Kers?"

"Fifteen years, four months, and nine days." She didn't hesitate a second.

"And I've been here three years longer. I remember the day you came. Little ole' you tried to steal a couple of peaches from Market Lane in broad daylight. Very unusual."

"I was hungry," she offered.

"Really?" He stood and walked over to the window again. "I don't think I've ever seen you eat. But back to your time served here."

HUBERT L. MULLINS

As I said, I've been here for eighteen years and after three, you came to me." He turned around and pointed at her as he spoke. "And you look today as you did back then. This prison is unkind dearest Kersey, just as you've seen tonight. A person should age twice as fast." He smirked to himself. "I certainly look older than my forty-four years."

"What is your point, Clive?" The hanging lanterns flickered slightly.

"My point . . . Kersey, is that there's too much that I don't know of you. People have sworn to have seen you outside your cell, on many occasions." This one Clive could never figure out.

Six years ago, a woman came to the prison claiming she had just watched Kersey slaughter her husband and then carry his heart away into the darkness. When Clive was awakened and told the news, he ran to the prison and up to Kersey's cell, only to find her sleeping on the floor. There had been several other incidents that were equally as puzzling and unsolved.

"We've talked about this before, Cl—"

"And those same nights you were supposedly out, there were vicious murders . . . cruel murders involving neck and chest lacerations. What do you know of this?"

"Nothing. I've told you this many, *many* times. If I could get out to kill someone, why would I come back?" Her mouth was quivering with each word. Kersey was finally keeping eye contact and Clive was starting to wish she was still staring at the table.

"I have no idea, but I'm sure you have your reasons." He flopped back down and pulled his chair closer. He sat up with his elbows on the table and stared back with a look that rivaled her own.

"Kersey, how many times have we talked in this very room?" She raised an eyebrow. "How many times have I told you stories of my

childhood and of affairs outside the cell?” He tilted his head, waiting for her to come up with the genuine answer.

“Many,” simply put.

“I like you, Kersey,” he admitted. It was the truth. Kersey had always listened to him talk. Anytime his day had been bad, Kersey had listened. And anytime Clive needed her in the past, Kersey had listened. “For once I wished you would have opened up so I could have known who you really were.”

“Why am I here?” she asked, slightly digging her nails into the table.

“Why do you think?” He couldn’t meet her stare any longer.

“What’s going to happen?” She leaned up, the hair finally cleared from her face.

This was the part he had dreaded from the moment those words came to him. *Kersey just killed six men.*

She would listen to him talk no more.

“You’re going to be executed, Kersey.”

“What? Why?” He didn’t like the strength in her voice.

“Why do you think? You butchered six guards!”

“Who tried to *rape* me!” she cried.

“It doesn’t matter, Kersey! Their families aren’t going to care about you. If your blood isn’t splattered all over Windsycle Hill, there will be a riot in the streets.” Clive couldn’t take his eyes off of her. He hated himself for what he just told her but he needed to see her reaction.

But nothing happened. She pulled her hair behind her ears and stared out the window. It was unbroken. She was entranced, just as always. This was her way to escape reality. It was her way of making all the noise in the world vanish. Or so he thought.

“I cannot die,” was her only reply.

HUBERT L. MULLINS

“What are you looking at, Kers?” He followed her gaze outside and saw a few people standing in the narrow road between Kriball Manor and Roseberry Terrace. “There’s nothing out there but Hillchapel Cemetery.”

There was a low thump that resonated beneath him, as if near the cellar. Was there even a cellar under Kriball?

“There was a battle here, long ago on this very spot. Am I right?” Kersey still watched outside, never blinking, never taking her eyes from Hillchapel.

“What are you talking about, Kers?”

—*THUMP.*

The water in the glass and pitcher on the table rippled slightly. *What was that?*

“Here where we are sitting. A hundred men killed a dolgatha, right here.” Dolgathas were large beasts that resembled ogres but had reptilian skin and a long, spiked tail. They were very rare in Southern Corscus, but up north, they were quite abundant.

Clive kept watching the window with her, as if waiting for someone to come through. There were more people outside, lingering near the manor.

“You’re referring to the Tharg Uprising,” he realized. “They kept the dolgatha in the holding cells of the old prison in case a riot ever broke out. It was used to restore order.”

—*THUMP.*

“How do you know they killed it here?” he wondered. “That was almost two-hundred years—”

His words were lost when he felt the floor shift a little beneath his foot. He slid his seat back and looked under the table and noticed a thin fissure running from his chair to Kersey’s. Before he had

time to register it or take a closer look, something more bizarre happened.

A black vine, dotted with crimson leaves and sickly buds of browns and yellows slithered out of the crevice like a snake. Then there was another, and another until finally there was a virtual garden of nasty bulbs and black tendrils. They moved with a grace and intelligence that Clive didn't understand. Each vine pulled to the side, splitting the fissure in the marble floor even further. He looked up to Kersey, who finally decided to look his way.

"I know about it because it's still buried here." She cocked her head to the side and with that, the vines jerked toward the walls, opening up a massive hole in the floor. Pieces of marble and table flew across the room and Clive was forced backwards and out of his seat. He slammed against the ground and shielded his head as splinters of wood and marble rained down on him.

Through clenched eyes, he spotted Kersey, still sitting calmly in her chair, the table now scraps across the room. The vines in the floor parted and suddenly a massive, skeletal arm reached out and grabbed onto the nearby marble.

Another hand surfaced and together they hoisted a colossal beast from the hole. It was indeed a dolgatha. What was left of it, at least. What stood towering over him were the skeletal remains, but that was changing, if only a little.

The vines were wrapping themselves around the enormous creature and with each pass, the dolgatha's body was slightly mended. Its bones creaked and groaned as new tufts of scale and flesh sprouted. A pair of reptilian eyes bulged inside its barren sockets and glared at Clive. It was far from reconstructed, but it looked as if it had been healed enough to hold together. Enough to cause something or someone harm.

HUBERT L. MULLINS

“Kersey, are you doing this?” he called. She was lifeless, as she had been most of the meeting. The dolgatha’s dead eyes stayed with him, but it made no apparent move to hurt him.

“Kersey? Kersey!” he called again.

Clive slipped by the monster, clamping his eyes shut. Its hands were as big as his head. With the dolgatha’s strength, it would have been quite easy to rip him limb from limb.

“Kersey!” he yelled once more to the mesmerized woman as he shook her by the shoulders. He was about to squeeze her, to break her concentration when several of the black vines wrapped around his torso and arms and jerked him back, toward the window.

He fought the enslaving tendrils, squeezing them, trying to break them, but they wouldn’t give. His hand closed around one of the yellowish buds and tightened. It burst open and a brownish-black ichor that smelled of rotting flesh gushed out and ran between his fingers. He fought back the urge to dump this morning’s breakfast. There was a knife in his pocket. His arm found a hole in the vines’ hold and he moved quickly toward his slacks—

—when glass broke behind him and hands reached through to grab him. At first he thought it was help—thought that Bral or Harick had heard the noise but that turned out to be quite wrong. The hand was as decayed as the dolgatha. There were vines swarming all over it, too. The fingernails were dirty and jagged. Suddenly there were several men trying to squeeze through the small window, all with the help of the black vines.

They were all dead men.

Each was dressed in formal clothing that was spilling clumps of dirt. Their eyes were sunken in their heads, those *with* eyes, anyway. Some were so decayed that nothing remained but a featureless skull. These men had all been buried in Hillchapel Cemetery.

The undead dropped through the window and the vines helped them regain their footing. They climbed over Clive, using him as support and leverage to find their way into Kriball Manor. There were a total of nine, and they all turned their attention to Clive, with the dolgatha towering above them in the back.

Kersey finally stood and stared at him. He had a frantic look across his face. His heart was beating so fast. He couldn't remember the last time he was truly this fearful. Kersey approached him and the cluster of undead parted for her to pass. The vines were encircling her head like a crown, her hands like daggers, and her torso like a shield.

"Shhh," she said, bringing her finger to his lips. "I cannot die."

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