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A person with long, light-colored hair stands in the center of a desolate, orange-hued landscape. They are wearing a dark, sleeveless top and dark pants. The background features a hazy, orange sky and several bare, dark trees. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

**THE PRUDENT
ARE PROTECTED
HERE**

EIRIK EIK 5: A VERJA SHORT STORY

THE PRUDENT ARE PROTECTED HERE

THE NIGHT AIR was still and mercifully cool as I nestled between the roots of one of the deepest trees in the Hidden Grove. Hidden was the right word. If the *blif* ever ventured into the grove, which I wasn't entirely sure whether they would or not, they were unlikely to find me, tucked away here. I couldn't feel safer.

And I couldn't be more impressed with myself and the little sanctuary I'd created. It was a decent camp: a makeshift mattress of day-old leaves, packed supplies hanging from the boughs surrounding me, and a green wood fire that sparked and smoked.

I still couldn't believe that I was here. That the Hidden Grove existed. And that I'd found an undetectable way out of Verja. The history Mama had told me in bedtime stories as a child rang true about the existence of the grove, so perhaps the story of how Verja came to be rang true too.

How Raganhar Áki and his people fled their village on fire from Viking raiders and found the Hidden Grove in their hour of need, as though it had risen to meet them. How they had climbed one of the trees and found themselves here in the grove in Verja. But that the grove itself was not habitable so they ventured out to the desert at night to dig and with each child born they dug a

little deeper until the underground citadel became what it is today.

But I failed to see how the grove was any less habitable than a dry, hot, glorified cave. Here at least there was soft grass, cool shade at night, and peace.

We could live here, my kin and I, if only I could find a source of food and water. The remaining alternative was putting to the test the other part of the stories Mama had told: that the trees of the grove led to other worlds. But if it were true, where would I begin? There were just so many of them.

I had ruminated over it. I had sought guidance from my *vater*. And I kept circling back to the most logical conclusion: to make a new life here in the grove. Away from the rules and regulations and oppression of the *blif* and the Gothi. Away from the poverty we were subjected to in Verja. Without risking everything by travelling to the hundreds of worlds through the trees.

Because I'd never slept so well as I did in the Hidden Grove. There was a security I felt here that I didn't feel back home. Perhaps it was the stillness. Of not breathing in the same hot air as thousands of other people. Of the smell of grass and wood instead of sweat and dirt smothered by incense.

I rolled over and nestled into my makeshift mattress. A creak of wood broke through the silence but there was no breeze. It was the first sound I'd heard in days that didn't come from myself.

I bolted upright.

Footsteps, almost indiscernible, were headed for me.

I strained my ears.

Three figures emerged between the trees to my left, shrouded in darkness, mere silhouettes. They were looking right at me.

Before I had a chance to speak or see who they were, they were upon me. One grabbed at my wrists and

pulled them above my head, shoving my hands into the grass and kneeling on them, pinning me down. The second started going through the bags I had hanging from the boughs. The last straddled my torso, his dirty, bruised face glaring down upon me. He planted a heavy fist into my jaw with such ferocity that everything went black for a moment.

I heard a victorious cry from somewhere to my right. The one straddling my torso got up and was followed quickly by the one on my hands.

I looked about in a daze, trying to grasp their figures again in the darkness.

A glint of moonlight caught on something metallic. The one that had ransacked my things was victoriously brandishing the bronze effigy of my *vater*. They turned and ran back the way they'd come.

I staggered to my feet.

"Vater," I called.

Panic rose in my chest. They had taken my *vater* away from me. It was all I had left of him and his ability to watch over me. How could I take care of my kin without him. I needed him.

I dug my heels in and set after them, dashing through the Hidden Grove back towards the desert.

They stopped suddenly and started climbing one of the trees. My stomach lurched.

I hurried after them, reaching the tree when they were already several branches up. The wood was thick and had plenty of places to dig my toes into or grip with the arch of my feet.

Were they going back to their world or to another? What would I find there? The sandy waters of the strand like the world my people came from? Or something even more unimaginable?

Up and up I continued on after them, never losing them but also never really gaining either.

As they reached the uppermost boughs where

the tree split to make a pseudo-platform, I gawked up at them, paused in my climb to see if the stories were true.

Sure enough, as they passed from one side to the other, they simply disappeared, one after another.

I scrambled after them. Again I was the only thing in the grove making a sound.

At the place they had disappeared, I teetered for a moment before stepping tentatively across the bough just as they had. Blinding whiteness filled my vision as though the tree had disappeared entirely, and I was the only thing left in existence. As though I'd entered the hall of Valhalla. But I was no warrior, and this was no noble death.

As my foot came down, connecting with something solid, my sight returned, filled with unchanged tree branches, and I was standing just as I had been previously at the top of the tree. But there were now other sounds - scuffling feet, triumphant whoops, and heavy breath. And the tree was swaying ever so slightly.

They were not going to make a fool out of me.

I hurried down after them.

The grass of this world seemed no different from where I'd just come from, but as I sprinted through the grove a strange sound met my ears. Like the rushing water of a river but more rhythmic. And it was getting closer. Or rather, I was getting closer to it.

One of them turned back, wide eyes glinting. He was smaller, slower than the other two, bounding awkwardly along. He sucked in a breath at the sight of me. His eyes disappeared as he tumbled to the ground. A *thunk* followed.

He scrambled around as I gained on him. His voice cut through the night, calling for his companions. Or at least, that's what it sounded like he was trying to say. I'd never heard words like it before.

He managed to find his feet and scampered after the other two, disappearing at the end of the row of trees.

As I rounded the tree after them, the footfalls and breathing of the thieves became muffled by the sound of the water, but I knew where they were headed: through the tree arch into the world beyond. I followed suit in the darkness, trusting my feet as I navigated for the arch.

Moments later I passed the same point, crossing the threshold of the arch and my vision became further impaired. I felt like I was under attack as water gushed down upon me, chilling me and soaking me to my bones. I rushed around blindly, trying to keep a straight path.

Ahead a light bobbed up and down, flame flickering impossibly through the onslaught of water. It was coming towards me and as it did, its surroundings illuminated: a raggedy young man with a bruised and dirty face was holding a lantern that held the flame. It was the thief who had hit me.

I launched myself forward, intending to collide with him, but my legs were swept out from below me and I crashed hard onto the muddy ground.

The light hovered above as three figures surrounded me. A sharp pain coursed through my side. Another through my arm. They were kicking me and heckling me. Pain after pain after pain, dull and achy, sharp and keen, I felt my body break and bruise and bleed.

I was not going to survive this, I thought, as everything went black.

MY FACE WAS dry and morning light shone in my eyes. My whole body pounded, and it hurt to breathe. I looked about for the young men, in a panic that they might be about to inflict more pain. My body screamed in agony; its brokenness awoken by my sharp movements. I whimpered.

Tentative footsteps splashed in the puddles surrounding me. In my periphery I could see a crowd was gathering. Dirty, weathered olive skin with decaying fabric hung from their very bodies. The people were silently staring. They stood shoulder to shoulder, gripping to one another for safety. None dared approach me - either to come to my aid or to evict me from their world. They seemed wary of touching me, like they too might become like me, as though being attacked were contagious.

The circle broke and a man with a back as stiff as a board stepped forward beyond the crowd. His skin was much lighter and his clothing untattered. His beard was neat and short, unlike those in Verja, and he carried with him a bag made of thick, woven fabric. He twisted his lips at the sight of me and tsked, eyes travelling down the length of my body and back again. He smiled to himself.

Turning away, he spoke to the crowd with a warbling language, but it was clear he'd given instruction. Several people hurried away from the circle the moment he finished and returned with long wooden poles shortly after. They placed the poles either side of the length of my body and started lifting my limbs.

White stars appeared in my eyes as I felt the blood drain from my face and my skin go cold. And then everything turned black once more.

MUSTINESS MET MY nose at the same time as an ache pounded through my body. With every breath another wave of pain tremored down my torso and across my limbs.

The sunlight was fading and candles were being lit.

I tried to roll over to see where I was and who was lighting the candles. I cried out for the pain was so

acute. What was wrong with my body? What had they done to me?

Footsteps came towards me, and a greying beard peered down. It was the man from the crowd who had ordered the people about.

He started speaking in a quick succession of what sounded like different languages, one after another after another. But it was all garbled to me.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

He paused and screwed up his lips again. I could tell he didn’t understand me either.

Placing his hand on his chest, he said what sounded like, “Jaymes Cuth-bhurt.” Was that his name?

He then motioned to my chest.

“Eirik Eik,” I said. “I am Eirik Eik.”

“Eirik?” he asked.

I nodded, wincing. Tears streamed down the sides of my face as I tried to contain the pain. Every movement seemed to cost me.

I wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon. And who knew how long I’d been gone already. What would my kin think? Would they fear I was dead, lost somewhere back in Verja for them to never find me?

He seemed to read my mind. He was looking at my body, pointing to different sections, and saying something, perhaps describing my injuries.

But I needn’t be in this world forever and it didn’t matter what my injuries were. I had Epli. I’d been so protective of it and its wealth that I always kept a supply on me. The rest was hidden behind a false wall back home.

I made to reach for it but realised I was no longer wearing my ochre jumpsuit, but rather a thin layer of bedclothes. Jaymes saw the panic in my eyes and left my side, returning a few moments later with my jumpsuit in hand. I pointed to the leg pocket. He reached in and pulled out a tin box. Opening it, the block of crystalline

Epli that was broken into square fragments shone ruby red in the light. I motioned to my mouth, ignoring the wave of pain that sent more tears trickling down my face.

He held one cube up between finger and thumb and watched the light flicker through it. I motioned again at my mouth, and he obliged, placing the little Epli cube on my tongue.

I could feel him watching me, but I didn't care. Tingling spread across my tongue as the Epli melted with my saliva. I swallowed some of the syrup and the tingling sensation continued down my throat and started to permeate my torso and out towards my limbs, numbing the pain. The aches and pains fizzled away, and I breathed a sigh of relief. It was like a million ants were marching through my body, but it was a whole lot better than the stabbing and aching.

"The Epli, it heals," I said.

I glanced over to him, his eyes looking upon the tin box in awe.

"Epli," I repeated.

He pointed at the box and said, "Epli?"

I nodded.

He put the box down and pointed to himself, then to the box, and then to me. And then he pointed to his mouth and made a gesture for sound. I think he meant that he would nurse me until I was well, but I didn't catch the last part.

I nodded again so he sat down and pulled out a piece of parchment and started drawing a village scene, pointing to things as he went and saying them in his language. I parroted it back and then said it in Verjan, which he then repeated back to me. Every hour or so he would give me another cube of Epli.

THE RAIN CONTINUED to pitter-patter into the night and throughout the days that came. We continued to learn one another's language and slowly learnt about one another too.

His name was Mr Cuthbert and he was a merchant that travelled from world to world, trading goods and services and information. Not many were bold enough to do as he did. Most took the easier route of thievery, as I'd learnt the hard way. I think that's what he said, anyway. It was hard to tell after just a few short days together.

To Mr Cuthbert's surprise, in less days than I could count on my two hands I could stand and walk about with the help of the walls of his little cottage for stability.

It was a one-room dwelling with a central fireplace used for both warmth and cooking, a table and chair, a writing desk, and a kitchen flanking one wall with a small assortment of utensils and crockery hanging from above.

I'd been confined to the only bed, which Mr Cuthbert had kindly given up in preference for the floor. From the bed, a window looked out upon a small grazing plot and garden, tended by a hunched-over old woman called Nan. She tended large beast-like animals called 'koe' according to Nan but 'cow' according to Mr Cuthbert. He assured me they were harmless.

This world, Wader, as he called it, wasn't so far removed from Verja, other than the cold, wet weather. But they cooked their food on flame: bread and broth for breakfast and chicken and root vegetables for supper. The bed was made from hay and the smell of incense often wafted through the windows, which were permanently ajar despite the rain.

I enjoyed the feeling of the rain lightly spraying my face after bouncing off the windowsill. Nothing like that existed in Verja. I would sit in bed with my eyes

closed, soaking up the feeling when Mr Cuthbert was otherwise occupied - like when he would go to speak to Nan - but other than that he rarely left my side.

It was during one of these quiet moments that I thought of Verja and how sad a place it had been to grow up in. How Mama would love it here in Wader. Her skin would never be dry again. It would glow brighter than Nan's. Sure, the people here hadn't seemed particularly friendly when I had arrived, but they hadn't bothered me here in the cottage since.

Mr Cuthbert cleared his throat, breaking my reverie. I wiped the splatter from my face, the movement barely a discomfort to my healing body.

Mr Cuthbert motioned to himself, then made a walking gesture, and then tapped the gold circle around his neck a few times. He called it a watch and it helped him tell what time of day it was. I'd never seen anything like it - not just the mass of gold but something that moved on its own accord. I gazed at the little orb in wonder, it with its tiny little hands ticking about and telling him whether it was morning or afternoon despite the constant cloud that hid the sun.

He picked up his woven bag and left the cottage with a small wave goodbye.

A few hours passed and the rain stopped outside. I started to get restless. Now that I was no longer bedridden or so infirm that I slept half the day away, staying confined to the dank cottage was hard work without Mr Cuthbert for company.

I hobbled the few paces across the cottage, testing my ability to stand without assistance. My legs seemed to manage; the only problem was that I became out of breath easily. If I just took it slowly, I'd be fine. It was time I ventured outside anyway. I slipped the Epli into my pocket for good measure, placing one cube in my mouth as I went.

The street outside the cottage was empty and

silent. Puddles raced to dry before the next onslaught of rain began. The cottage was placed at the end of a row of other identical cottages but there was no sign of movement beyond their windows.

I continued to hobble out into the street, following the line of cottages away from Mr Cuthbert's and round the bend.

It was a modest world, not unlike Verja. The cottages were a little dilapidated, the wood decaying and covered in moss.

The street opened out onto a town square with little shop houses: aged bottles lined the windows or an apothecary, cured sausages hung above the window of the next shop, bread buns were on shelves of the next.

The rain had stopped so where were all the people?

I stared at the sausages and my stomach grumbled. The clouds were turning shades of pink and purple. It must have been close to supper time.

And Mr Cuthbert hadn't left any food behind.

But I had no currency for this world to buy even one bread bun let alone a sausage.

I turned to make back for Mr Cuthbert's cottage in hope that he wouldn't be too far off and perhaps that he'd come with food in hand.

Three raggedy young men were standing by the gap between the last cottage and the apothecary, and one was staring at me with his mouth hanging open. It was the smallest one, with the wide eyes.

I looked about for a place to run and hide as he called out to his friends. I barely made it a few paces before he was on me, pushing my face into the mud once more.

I scrambled about, trying to find purchase on something solid like a rock. I tried throwing punches, but he was pushing my head down at arms-length.

He kept on saying what sounded like 'dead'. Was

he going to kill me? Because I'd lived?

One of them, the lankiest of them with a scar the length of his face, reached into my pockets but I knew they were all empty, all except for the one with the Epli. I thrashed about so that he wouldn't find it, but he was too strong, and he promptly pulled the tin out and eyed it curiously.

He opened the box and showed his friends the contents. Kneeing my shoulders into the ground, they discussed amongst themselves what they thought it was. The one with the box shoved one into my mouth. When I didn't gag, he put one in his own mouth. After a moment his eyes drew wide, and he cupped the side of his face with the scar. It was tingling, I knew it. He could feel it starting to heal.

I cried out, knowing that this was it. That they would never let me leave with the Epli now.

The one on my shoulders smiled a wicked grin and landed a punch square on my nose. I heard a crack that reverberated through my head. Stars filled my eyes. He landed another punch and another.

His weight left my shoulders.

They started kicking me. I heard another crack.

There was yelling from far off. A man's voice. It sounded like indignation. No, a warning.

The young men scampered.

I groaned at the full ache that had returned to my body, at the sharp digging when I breathed.

"Eirik?"

It was Mr Cuthbert.

"Stupid boy," he said. "You flaunted it."

He grabbed my arm and hauled it over his shoulder, carrying my weight all the way back to his cottage.

I HAD A broken nose and several broken ribs. Bruising covered my body leaving little ivory skin unspoiled. Who knew what other injuries lay deeper within me. And without the Epli, recovery would be a long and slow journey.

It had been my overprotection of the Epli that had given me away, or so Mr Cuthbert said. He also said I needed to wise up, to become more street-smart. That in a world like Wader, smarts were what counted. There was too much poverty and not enough governance. Not to say that there was no governance, no, it was just that the governance they had was corrupt and turned a blind eye when it suited itself. So, I would need to be smarter if I were going to survive in this world as I recovered.

Months passed and I slowly grew strong again. All the while Mr Cuthbert and I swapped stories and information, learning one another's language as we went. We took it in turns: one day speaking his language, the next speaking mine. It turned out that his language was not what the locals spoke in Wader. He was from elsewhere. And the Wader language was not the only foreign one that he knew.

"Where I am from is not nearly as interesting as the other worlds I can tell you about," Mr Cuthbert said.

We were speaking my language today. It meant a much smoother, more productive conversation could be had because Mr Cuthbert was a fast learner, an absolute natural with languages.

"Okay, try me," I said.

"There is Victory, with cornfields beyond the distance of sight. Oh, you should be there for their annual harvest festival, they really know how to celebrate! And Androgenes, which I also like to call the mushroom planet. They are utterly obsessed with the things. Both the edible and poisonous varieties. That relationship has been very fruitful for my business. There is Celoso, with its warm sunshine and full-bodied wines. But of course,

you cannot get in there anymore. And then there is the world without a Master. A quaint, overcast, mountainous village, where the locals all keep to themselves."

"What do you mean there's no Master. How is that possible?"

My Cuthbert's eyes glinted.

"Because she left one day and never returned."

"It sounds like a utopia," I said.

"It sounds like the perfect place to take your family," he said.

My kin. What I would give to hear 'Ta laugh again or see Mae spin in a dress or to catch a glimpse of Mama's rare smile. And for them all to be free of the bonds of Verja. To see new life breathed in them. To watch them roam uninhibited, unburdened by poverty or rules and regulations. To take them to this utopia. Because I'd learned that Wader certainly was no place for them.

From my spot on the bed, I gazed out the window at the blur of pitter-pattering rain, which obscured the garden beyond. I imagined it being replaced with rolling hills of misty green mountains.

"How do you know about all this?" I asked, looking back at him at the table, the glow of the fire licking the developing wrinkles on his face.

"It is my job to know. What good would I be to anyone if I did not know where to go to get goods for trading?"

"How do you do it exactly?"

"What, trading? Many years of travel, relationship building with Masters, and negotiating. Plus, it helps that I have a natural knack for knowing what others need even before they do."

"Is that what you've done here? Built a relationship with the Master? The corrupt one?"

"What you have to understand, young Eirik, is that doing business with people you do not like is just

part of the job. Besides, the man is bedridden with illness.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“So instead, you condone their behaviour through your compliance?”

He steeled himself against my clear abhorrence.

“It is for the greater good of the people of this world that I keep the doors of trade open. They benefit from the tobacco and the mushrooms and the medicines and the herbs and spices that I bring with me. If I opposed the Master, he would never let me return to Wader and the people would ultimately suffer. No, it is for the better that I hold my tongue. That is the wisdom I have gained from years travelling from world to world. A wisdom you would do well to learn.”

“To not get involved?”

“To not get involved. Unless it is for the greater good and the outcome is favourable.”

“So it’s for the greater good that there are gangs of thieves in this world who beat up people and steal their goods?”

“How else is the Master supposed to fund his trade with me?”

My jaw dropped open. That wasn’t what I’d been insinuating.

“You’re the reason I’m stuck here?”

“Why do you think I took you in? I felt responsible,” he said simply.

I had thought him someone trustworthy. Someone of good conscience. Someone who was looked upon by the locals as the exemplar of morality and good will.

“Your opinion of me has changed?” he asked.

I returned my gaze to beyond the window.

Although he was at the centre of why I’d been injured, he still felt guilty and took me in. Only decent people did that, right?

I sighed. "No, not really," I said.

"You know one thing that people could really benefit from?" He ploughed on. "That would be for the greater good? Especially people here in Wader who are often too poor to even afford their own apothecary."

"What?"

"Those little healing cubes of yours."

"The Epli? You're telling me you've never come across it before in all your travels?"

He shook his head.

"Every day you woke, and a new cut was healed, a new bruise was dulled, your bones mended in hours instead of weeks," he was on his feet now, eyes alight with the glow of the fire as he stepped towards me. "I have never seen someone heal so fast, so painlessly. It was like magic. That is not the kind of thing you just keep to yourself but make available for all people, everywhere. Can you imagine the lives that will be saved, the loved ones that will be comforted, the succour that will be aided?"

He sat at my bedside and took both of my hands.

"I need to see Verja. I have to see it for myself."

I took my hands back.

"They don't exactly just let anyone walk in, you know. It's heavily guarded. They don't like people leaving and they certainly don't like people entering."

"Do they need to know I have entered?"

He had a point. I'd found a way in and out that was entirely undetectable. Who was to say that he couldn't go back to Verja with me, via the fissure? No one would ever have to know.

"Let's just say that I got you in. What would you do?"

"Well, I would want to see how the Epli was harvested. And I would want to eventually speak with the Master and talk trade terms."

"That would require them finding out that you

had entered Verja.”

“Perhaps if my terms are very attractive, they might overlook it?”

“There is a lot you don’t understand about Verja,” I said.

“Enlighten me.”

So I told him everything I could think of: from the desert with the underground citadel hidden below, to the Gothi secure in his home beyond the gates of Bornholm, to the oppression of my people and how they suffered greatly in order to reap the Epli in the lowermost mines, taking the red rock, grinding it to a powder, and brewing it in order to make the tiny little cubes of crystal. We spoke long into the night, well beyond my turn to speak in the Verjan language.

I grew weary and eventually nodded off some time after the rain had stopped and light was starting to break through the window.

When I awoke the cottage was quiet. Mr Cuthbert was nowhere. His fabric bag was gone and so was my ochre jumpsuit.

I HAD BASICALLY recovered from my injuries and with Mr Cuthbert gone – and unlikely to return by the looks of the empty cottage – there was nothing tying me to Wader. I could certainly never hope in getting my *vater’s* effigy back, and this was certainly not somewhere my kin and I could call home, no more than the Hidden Grove or Verja. But what my time in Wader had proved was that there were other worlds to be explored, other worlds that were habitable, with food, water, and shelter.

I dressed in some of Mr Cuthbert’s more nondescript clothes: a simple pair of greying pants and an undershirt, and left the cottage.

Rounding the bend to the strip of shop houses, I

froze. There was the gang once more, standing outside the apothecary. They were arguing and hadn't noticed me yet. Someone exited the apothecary. It was a middle-aged man, hobbling precariously but with fierce eyes. He yelled at the gang, and they all froze mid-action, one boy's hands holding the scruff of another. The middle-aged man spoke again, and the boys relaxed, stepping away from one another and looking sheepishly at the man.

This had to be the Master of Wader.

He was a sight cleaner than anyone else I'd seen in this world and had more skin on his bones. There was a scar that ran from ear to ear, right across the bridge of his nose and he had a darkness in his eyes. A shining golden chain gleamed from around his neck. Clearly, he was no longer bedridden.

One of the boys saw me and smiled. It was the same from the last two run ins, like he was a magnet to my presence. He got the Master's attention and gesticulated at me, saying something in his local tongue.

The Master's eyes lit up. He barked some orders. One boy nodded and ran into the apothecary.

The other two started to move towards me. I turned and ran but before I'd moved a handful of paces, they were upon me, lifting me from under my arms and carrying me back until I was right before the Master.

The other boy returned, his hands wrapped around my Epli tin. I tried to grab it, but the boys' grip only tightened.

The Master took the tin and opened it, revealing it to be empty. He held it under my nose like a weighing scale.

"Show me where there is more of this and you shall live," he said in the same tongue as Mr Cuthbert's language.

I had confirmed my weakness to him, that I desperately wanted my Epli back. Yet again I had failed. Yet again I had shown my hand. Had I learnt nothing

from my time with Mr Cuthbert? Had his wisdom been wasted on me?

And now I had just one option: agree to show this Master to the Epli, inviting him into Verja. The alternative was to be pummelled again by his goons. Or so it seemed.

Because even if I managed to get loose of their hold, I couldn't outrun them - they had proven that the first time that they were faster than me. Plus, the Master could just command me to stop.

But what if I had gold?

"I will show you," I said in Mr Cuthbert's language to the Master. "But only you."

I held his gaze. The gang members shifted uncomfortably around me. They clearly didn't know this language.

The Master thought for a moment.

"Okay," he said.

He started speaking in his own language again, giving directions to the gang. Their grip loosened on me, and they edged away, retreating into the shadows of the nearby alley.

I lunged forward, wrapping my hand around the gold chain hanging from the Master's neck and in one swift motion whipped it off him and around my own neck. I turned on the spot and sprinted away, down the shop-lined street.

He yelled after me in Mr Cuthbert's language and then in his native tongue. I could just hear the scuffling of shoes, but I rounded another bend and the tree arch came into view.

As I passed through the arch and the trees of the grove appeared before me like towering statues, panic rocked through my body. I had no idea how to get home. All those months ago I had been in such a hurry to catch the gang and get my *vater's* effigy back that I hadn't considered the implication of leaving Verja. Without Mr

Cuthbert here as my guide, I had no way of knowing which tree to climb.

With the gang giving chase, I didn't have time to spare. I skipped ahead a few rows and launched myself at the nearest tree trunk, scampering up until I was hidden from view of the ground. I held my breath and strained my ears as heavy footsteps entered the grove.

Their voices neared as they dashed in after me. I dared not look out from my hiding place, certain that their eyes were directed upwards in search of me. My fingers and shoulders became sore as I gripped silently at the tree bark, willing myself not to move or breathe. Minute after minute passed as pain accumulated in my hands and arms and legs.

It sounded like they were directly below me, congregating, trying to figure out their next steps.

Their footsteps started to shuffle away, their voices dejected and a little afraid. I let my breath out and relaxed my shoulders. Peeking over the edge of the branch where I crouched, I looked down through the mass of leaves to see the backs of their heads bobbing away, back towards the arch.

Something metallic caught my eye.

Down, directly below me lodged between two protruding roots and the trunk of the tree, was my *vater's* bronze effigy.

My jaw dropped and my heart alighted.

Straining my ears to ensure they were really gone, I slipped down from the tree onto the grass. The effigy was completely hidden from view from here.

How was this possible? They had stolen it from me in the Hidden Grove of Verja. Why would they hide it here?

I wracked my brain back to that night. When they assaulted me for the second time, none of them had the effigy with them. But one of them had tripped over on their way out of the grove after the first assault. The

one that had seen me giving chase, the one with the wide eyes. He must have dropped it in his haste.

A smile stretched across my face until it hurt.

I unlodged my *vater's* effigy, turning it over and dusting it off. My *vater* would always be with me, looking over me.

Tucking the effigy under my arm, I turned to face the trees of the grove. Hope rose in me at the prospect of finding that utopia Mr Cuthbert had told me of and one day finding Verja again so that I could take my kin to a better place. That we could make a new home without masters or corruption or oppression. That I could be for them as my *vater* had been for me, always watching over them.