

Lucky Find – Warning: Hard Vore

Mala glanced over her shoulder nervously as she wandered the darkened streets. The little deer's main concern was not that she might run into some predator but that she might be spotted by her fellow prey. A predator would likely assume that she was on some errand and had every right to be in the Nobles' Quadrant, if they bothered to notice her at all. The actual workers in this area, however, all knew each other and would spot at once that she was not where she belonged. Then they would report her to some noble, either out of spite or in hope of some reward. That noble would then check the brand on Mala's left palm and, once it was clear that she was trespassing, the poor deer would either find herself in the noble's belly or stretched out on a butcher's slab.

Given the choice, the young doe would still be safely in the Farmers' Quadrant and preferably tucked into her own bed as well. The last few days, however, had convinced Mala that she did not have a choice in this matter. A particularly poor harvest had resulted in her and her family missing far more meals than was comfortable.

Peering round the corner of a building, Mala spotted the large stone fountain that marked the center of the Nobles' Quadrant. More importantly, she also could see the row of hedges that grew on the far side of it. After checking and double checking that no one else was around, the little doe slipped out from her hiding place and ran towards those bushes. She had only had permission to enter this quadrant a few times in her life, and only to sell the goods her family had grown to the servants that lived here, but she had always been amazed that the berries on these hedges went unpicked.

Reaching into the hedge, Mala grabbed a handful of the sweet red fruit and shoved them into her mouth. After going so long with so little, any food would have tasted wonderful but the fresh overripe berries seemed particularly good. With a little sigh of pleasure, Mala grabbed a second handful and stuffed those in as well, berry juice dribbling down her chin. She wasn't just here to eat her fill, though. Between mouthfuls Mala stuffed several large handfuls into her pockets, not caring that the fruit would be squished or that the juices would stain her clothes. After that, she lifted the hem of her shirt and used that as a hammock to store more berries, still shoveling alternate handfuls into her mouth as well. Her plan was return home with her stomach, pockets, and shirt all packed as full as she could get them.

So engrossed was the little deer in her task that she didn't even notice the soft pad of footsteps growing nearer until they were right behind her. "Hello there." a soft voice whispered.

Mala jolted in alarm and spun round to face the intruder. The wolfess was tall, slender, and possessed a beauty and grace to her movements that was unlike anything Mala had seen before. For a moment she simply stared, transfixed by the way the canine's fur seemed to glow in the moonlight. Then she remembered that, even had she not been trespassing in this quadrant, staring at a carnivore was never good for your survival. She quickly dropped her eyes and stared down at the flagstones. "My ... my lady? I ... I was just doing some gardening."

"So I see." Even the wolf's voice had a kind of grace to it. Each word was precisely stated yet the voice as a whole had a soft almost musical quality to it.

Mala looked down at her berry stained clothes and wondered if the predator had believed her lie. She would have given anything to know what the wolf's expression was right now but forced herself to keep staring at the floor. Hopefully the noblewoman would leave soon and she would be able to make her escape, a little shaken from the experience, but still alive and having found at least a little to fill her tummy with.

Instead the wolf knelt down, bringing herself closer to Mala's height and placed one hand on the deer's shoulder. "And may I ask your name, young gardener?"

"Mala Turnbridge..." The answer was so ingrained that she didn't even consider lying until it was too late. Fortunately she managed to stop herself from adding 'of the Farmers' Quadrant' after it. "S... Servant of the Nobles' Quadrant." she added instead.

"Nice to meet you, Mala. I'm Eraine of the Dartfree House. Not to pry too deeply, I can see you are very busy here, but may I inquire as to the house you serve?"

Despite Mala's best efforts, she could not keep her eyes to the floor any longer. A look of pure panic spread across her face as she stared into the wolf smiling face. She knew the names of the seven houses, of course, everyone did. The problem was that she had no idea which one owned the hedge she had been caught raiding. Not that her story wasn't full of holes enough. Part of her knew that her cover was already blown and that she might as well give in now. The rest of her, however, could all too clearly picture ending up on a butcher's worktop if she answered wrongly. If there was even a chance she could save herself, then she would have to take it.

"Dartfree?" she whimpered. It wasn't a lie. Her family had worked the Dartfree fields for more generations than Mala could count. Not only that, but members of each of the seven houses tended to own property near others of the same house. The fact that Eraine was a member of the Dartfree house, and presumably lived somewhere nearby, might imply that the hedge she had claimed to be tending was also Dartfree property. The moment she said it, however, she knew that she had walked straight into a trap.

"Really? Then it is a little odd to find you working..." She gave Mala's berry stained clothes a pointed look. "... on one of Entador's hedgerows. May I see your paw?"

Mala timidly lifted her right paw to the wolf pretending that her left was still needed to hold her shirt load of berries. She didn't expect such a feeble defense to save her and, indeed, Eraine just laughed. "I meant your left paw, actually. I want to see your brand."

"I ... I'm meant to be here." Mala protested. "I really am." It sounded pathetic, even to her, but she had run out of even semi-believable lies.

"I'm sure you are, dear, but may I see all the same?" Even as she forced the poor girl to admit that she was trespassing, Eraine's voice was gentle and soothing.

"N... no." Mala took a step back and swapped which hand supported her shirt full of berries in order to hide her left hand behind her back. She had never disobeyed a direct request from a noble before, not that farmers like herself often interacted with the ruling classes, but the punishment for doing so couldn't be much worse than for being caught outside her quadrant.

For the first time a flicker of annoyance played across the wolf's face. "Mala, please? I'd like to resolve this without getting the guards involved but I can only do so if you are willing to cooperate with me. You would prefer that, right?"

Mala nodded weakly then held out her left hand to the wolffess. Eraine took it and gently unfolded the young doe's fingers, wiping away the berry stains in order to inspect the ring of scar tissue on Mala's palm.

"That's better," Eraine stated. "but I'm afraid you've made a mistake. This is actually the Nobles'

Quadrant and farmers aren't usually allowed in here.”

“But ... but I can be if I have things to sell, right? I ... I have berries. Doesn't that count?”

“The berries I just watched you picking five minutes ago?” For the first time Eraine's precise dictation seemed to falter a little as she struggled to contain her laughter. “Even if that weren't the case, Mala, farmers are still only allowed in on Market Day and even then are required to have a signed pass.” Mala tried to say something but the wolf held up a hand to interrupt her. “No, please don't try telling me that you have one, or that you've just lost it. How about the truth, little deer? Why are you really out here raiding, Entador's hedges?”

Mala hesitated for a moment, still searching for any lie that might still save her, then she gave in. If nothing else, Eraine seemed sympathetic enough. Perhaps the truth could actually save her? “I ... I was really hungry?” she answered. “I know I'm not allowed here, but nobody else was eating these berries, they just go to waste year after year, and ... and this year has been particularly bad. Some of the harvests were okay, but most had a bad year and it hit our crops worse than most. I ... my family have already used up most of our savings to get by and I figured ... If I could just get one good meal ... it would help everything stretch just a little bit further and ... and ...” she trailed off, tears starting to run down her muzzle.

“It's okay.” Eraine's arms wrapped around the sobbing doe and pulled her into a tight hug. At first Mala simply froze, unsure of how to deal with this breach of every behavior she had come to expect from a noble, then she buried her face in the crook of Eraine's shoulder and started to sob, not caring that the berry juice on her fur and clothing was likely staining garments that cost more than her family's yearly earnings.

“It's okay.” Eraine repeated. “I understand why you came here. If supplies are really that bad then this must have seemed like your only choice. You were just trying to help your family and, thanks to you, they'll now have one less mouth to feed.”

Mala pulled back a little. “What ... what do you mean?” The words had been clear enough but Eraine's friendly tone convinced her that she must have misinterpreted them.

“What it sounds like.” the wolf answered. “I caught you wandering outside your quadrant and so I am claiming you as my prey.”

There was a little patter as Mala's collected bundle of berries fell from her shirt and splattered on the flagstones. For a moment she was too shocked to speak, too shocked to continue crying. She had genuinely believed that Eraine might have been willing to let her go, that she might be able to sneak back to her home and try to forget that this night had ever happened. For a moment she could only stare at the large carnivore in horror.

Eraine noticed that her intended prey was no longer crying and helped brush the wet streaks from the doe's eyes. “That's better now.” she commented. “And don't worry, I'll be sure to send your family a nice bonus once I'm finished with you. Something to make sure that the rest of the year isn't so hard for them. Turnbridge, right?” She straightened up and took Mala's hand.

The wolf grip was light. If she pulled, Mala could probably have broken free but where would she go? If she ran, Eraine could chase after her, and there was little doubt as to who would prove the faster. Even if she made it back to the Farmers' Quadrant it wouldn't save her. Eraine knew her name and had formally claimed her. The wolf wouldn't even need to give chase, she could simply send a couple of guards round to collect her. Even worse, if Mala's family were found to have been

sheltering her then they might all be sent to the butcher's together. With no alternatives worth considering, Mala allowed the wolf to lead her away from the hedges.

Very soon, Mala found herself completely lost. The Nobles' Quadrant was by far the smallest, less than a third the size of even the Craftmen's Quadrant, but Mala had only ever seen a tiny part of it on the few times she had been allowed to enter and they quickly left the areas she knew. She glanced back over her shoulder as the wolf led her onwards, trying to remember the route they had taken. Even though she couldn't think of a scenario where escape would be feasible, it seemed sensible to know her way back home.

Unfortunately, even that was soon denied to her. Unlike the Farmers' Quadrant with its open spaces and scattered buildings, the Nobles' Quadrant was full of tall hedge rows all running at right angles to each other. Apart from occasional glimpses of the grand houses behind those hedges, Mala had very few landmarks to help her and soon lost track of the turns they had made. A thin nervous whine crept from her throat as they passed yet another large building and tears started to trickle down her face.

Eraine stopped at the noise and glanced down at her whimpering companion. "Mala?"

"Please?" The little doe whimpered. "I ... I just want to go home."

The wolf put a comforting paw on Mala's shoulder, then dug through her pockets with her free hand until she produced a pale rectangular block. "Here." she offered. "Maybe this will help."

Mala blinked the tears away, accepted the block, and sniffed at it cautiously. She had been given salt licks before but they were usually reserved for special occasions and she had never had a full one to herself. She stared up at Eraine, uncertain if she was really being given it. "Go on, try it." the wolf insisted.

Tentatively at first, but then with more enthusiasm, Mala started to lick at the mineral block. Eraine watched her for a minute then took the deer's hand again and gently coaxed her forward. This time Mala offered no protests and was too engrossed in her salty treat to pay much mind to where they were going. It was early enough that many of the houses had lamp light still shining through their windows, but late enough that the streets were mostly deserted. A pair of foxes in guard uniforms glanced round as they approached but, on recognizing Eraine as a member of the nobility, both quickly dropped their gaze.

Despite her situation, that made Mala feel a little better. Had she run into those guards before Eraine things might have ended very badly for her. Of course, she was aware that her situation was still pretty bad, but it didn't really feel that way. Whatever happened next had to be better than getting delivered to the nearest butcher's shop.

As they passed the guards, a sudden burst of impudence prompted Mala to stop sucking on her salt lick and stick her tongue out at the nearest fox. It was a silly and childish thing to do, but Mala couldn't resist. She'd never forgive herself if she missed such a rare chance to insult the guards without any risk of comeuppance.

Unfortunately, neither guard seemed to notice her impudent gesture and simply bowed low to Eraine. Annoyed, Mala tried to pretend that they were bowing to her instead. If she had only been lucky enough to be born as one of the nobility then the guards would have had to bow like that whenever she was near.

A little further down the road, Mala's silent speculation about what her life could have been like came to an abrupt end as she spotted someone else coming towards them. From his posture and clothing she could tell at once that the approaching wolf was a member of the nobility. Not that there were many of his species who were not.

Coming to a stop, the male wolf bowed respectfully to Eraine, although the gesture had little in common with the way the guards had done so, and Eraine responded with a polite nod. Mala could tell that there was some complex social ritual taking place but, whatever it was, it was lost on the confused deer.

As far as she was concerned, if you wanted to talk to someone of equal status, you just said 'hi'. If you wanted to talk to someone of higher status, which was usually best avoided altogether, then you stared at the floor and hoped that they spoke to you first. There might be some rules for talking to someone of lower status but Mala had never had the chance to discover that. Maybe there weren't and the higher person could just say whatever they wanted.

"Good evening, Martas." Eraine stated. Her voice was no less warm than when she spoke to Mala, but it had become more formal and slightly less musical. "I had not expected to see you out this late."

Only when Eraine had spoken did the other wolf completely straighten from his bow. "I know, but it is a nice night for a walk." he replied. Now that the formalities had been taken care of, the conversation could continue in more relaxed tones.

"Yes, I'm just returning from my own as it happens."

"So I see, and not alone either?" Mala suddenly felt the newcomer's gaze fall upon her and shrank back. She had hoped that a lowly farm girl would be beneath their notice and that the nobles would just talk to each other. Now that the focus was on her she had no idea how to respond. She wasn't sure if she was allowed to participate in the conversation, expected to, required to, or was just an object that should keep quiet while being spoken about. Shuffling awkwardly, she took a small step back, hoping to retreat from the Martas's intense stare.

"Yes. I found her outside of her quadrant but I'm taking care of it." Eraine replied.

"I bet. If I'd known there was a tasty little morsel like her out here I would scheduled my walk a little sooner." He leaned closer to the deer and licked his lips.

In that moment, Mala forgot everything she had ever been taught about manners and the importance of silent obedience to you superiors. All she knew was that she didn't want that drooling maw coming any closer than it already was. With a fearful squeak, she backed away, using the hem of Eraine's dress to shield herself from the advancing carnivore.

Unfortunately, her retreat did nothing to dissuade the predator, in fact it only made him angry. "Get back here." he snapped. "Stand and present yourself when you are being spoken of."

"No!" It was the second time in both the hour and her entire life that Mala had refused to obey a member of the nobility. A sick feeling of guilt welled up in Mala's stomach, adding to the fear that was already there. She generally thought of herself as quite well behaved and not the kind of person who would disobey nobles. Unfortunately for her, Martas was looking far less amused by her impudence than Eraine had.

Martas let out a low growl but was interrupted by Eraine holding up one hand. "Go easy on her, Martas." the female wolf instructed. "She has been having a hard day."

He gave her a surprised stare. "You can't just allow her to ignore a direct instruction. She shouldn't even be here, let alone ..."

"I'm already dealing with it, Martas." Eraine insisted. Still trying to hide behind the dress, Mala felt the wolf's thick tail curl gently around her waist, both comforting her and putting an additional barrier between her and the angry carnivore. "Don't worry. I'll make sure this doesn't happen again but she is my prey, not yours, and I'll deal with her as I choose."

Martas straightened up looking embarrassed. "Of course, my lady. My apologies."

"None necessary." Eraine assured him. "You have every right to correct a member of another cast when they act out of place. My only point is that, in this case, I'm already taking care of the matter." She smiled politely and inclined her head. "Actually, I really should be getting on with that. My apologies, normally I would invite you over but I would prefer to spend some time alone with my current guest."

"Not at all." Martas bowed again and took a step back. "In any case, I have just started my walk and, if there is one treat out of its place then perhaps there might be others nearby." Despite Mala's best efforts to shrink away behind Eraine's dress, she couldn't help but feel his eyes on her as he licked his lips. Then he glanced back to Eraine and assumed a more dignified expression. "Perhaps some other time, my lady? In any case, I hope you enjoy your meal."

"Thank you, Martas. I shall." She stepped aside to allow him to pass them and, as she did so, gently guided Mala around so that she was always between the trembling deer and her fellow noble. A few last formalities were exchanged between the two before Martas finally left, heading away in the direction they had come.

"I ... I'm sorry." Mala squeaked. She had a horrible feeling that she had embarrassed Eraine in some way, and in front of another noble as well. She shouldn't have tried to hide. She should have just stood still and allowed the wolf to inspect her to his satisfaction, no matter how much he scared her.

"You don't have to apologize either, Mala." Eraine assured her. "Martas can be a bit intimidating to some. He has a good heart but he doesn't like being disobeyed."

"But ... I haven't made any trouble for you, have I? What if he complains that you wouldn't let him punish me?" She wasn't exactly sure who Martas could complain to, it wasn't like the guards could arrest someone like Eraine, but there must be some way for nobles ensure that they all followed the rules.

"He wouldn't do anything like that." Eraine assured. "Like I said, he's actually quite nice once you get used to him. Besides, he's from Entador so there is very little he could do to me even if he wanted. Now come on, we are almost at my home. Aren't you curious to see inside?"

Mala was a little curious to see what the inside of a noble's house looked like as well as looking forward to the chance to sit down and get warm again. Assuming, that was, that she would get the chance to sit down or see much. She couldn't help but wonder at what point Eraine would turn from friendly companion to hungry predator. Still, she thought as she allowed Eraine to lead her towards a nearby gate, she was lucky to have been caught by someone like Eraine instead of Martas.

As Eraine led her through the gate, Mala looked up at the large house in front of them. She had not been paying much attention to the buildings they had passed so far and, to her, they had all looked impossibly grand compared to the shacks and barns of the Farmer's Quadrant. There hadn't seemed much point in comparing one noble's house to another's when they were all infinitely greater than any other building she had ever seen. As Eraine led her through the gate and up the garden path, however, she got the impression that the house ahead was somehow larger and grander than most that they had passed. That, coupled with Eraine's confidence that even other nobles could do very little to harm her, gave Mala the distinct impression that Eraine was actually pretty high up in whatever social order governed the noble class.

Eraine did not have to knock at her own house. The giant oaken doors swung apart the moment the wolf drew near and a pair of goats in servant uniforms bowed low, first to their mistress and then, to Mala's amazement, to her as well. Of all the overwhelming things that had happened this night, that was perhaps the one that caught her most off guard. Eraine's behavior had seemed strange to her at times but Mala didn't have enough experience with the ruling class to know which parts were to be expected or not. She had, however, had plenty of experience with members of the servant cast when they came to buy her family's produce and she had never dreamed that any of them would bow to her, a lowly member of the lowest cast, dressed in thin hemp clothes and clutching a slobbery salt lick.

Eraine smiled and nodded to each of the goats in turn. "Talmos, my guest here is looking a little cold. Please show her to the bathing room and tend to any needs she may have. In the mean time, Sandren, I would like you to prepare something for her to eat and a large mug of keem to help her relax. I'll recieve her in the east chamber once you are finished."

Both goats nodded in response and Mala found herself being led away by the one she guessed must be Talmos. She followed meekly behind him, staring at her surroundings as they walked through the house and occasionally sucking at her salt lick. The soft carpet floors felt wonderful beneath her feet, although she was painfully aware that she was leaving muddy hoof prints with every step she took. Lanterns were set in the walls along every hallway and their stained glass turned the white marble around them into a myriad of different colors. Mala wondered briefly how much it must cost to keep all those fires running nonstop. Probably less than the house itself was worth, even if they were kept burning day and night for hundreds of years. Her own family struggled to find enough fuel to keep their single fire burning on cold nights.

At the end of the hallway, they climbed a flight of stairs, then walked down another hall, then Talmos came to a stop and gestured for her to enter one of the doors. The room inside was not carpeted, and in the center, the bare tiles dipped into a circular indent. "Please wait." Talmos stated. "I will fetch someone to assist you in a moment." His voice had a slightly strained quality to it as he struggled to show respect to a lowly farm girl. With another bow, far more reluctant now that Eraine was out of sight, he closed the door behind him and left Mala alone.

Again, there was no point in running. Even if she had known the way to the Farmers' Quadrant, Eraine could have her dragged back here any time she wanted and the punishment for her actions would likely fall on her family instead. Sitting down on the marble tiles with her legs dangling over the ledge of the indent, Mala turned her attention back to the salt lick she was still clutching. It was almost half gone by now but the flavor still made a nice distraction from having to worry about her future ... or the potential lack of it.

She wasn't alone for long. Only a few minutes after Talmos had left, the door opened again and a fellow deer entered carrying a steaming basin and a bundle of fabric. "My lady? I'll need you to undress before we can start."

Mala almost glanced round before realizing that she was the only one that the woman could be referring to. The other deer was definitely a servant, Mala could tell that from the clothes she wore without any need to see her brand, but she was still not used to being treated this way by those so much higher than herself.

“Um, miss?” The servant gave her a worried look and Mala realized that respectful as the request had been, it was still an instruction from a member of a higher cast. Obeying quickly, she stripped out of her rough shirt and hose, and placed them beside her.

“Thank you, my lady.” The servant girl looked very relieved by Mala's compliance. “I'm Dassina, if you want my name, and will be at your service for as long as is necessary. Although, it would be best if the Lady Dartfree was not kept waiting for too long.” She gestured for Mala to enter the lower area then rummaged through her bundle of fabric for some sweet smelling soap.

“Um ... I'm Mala Turnbridge of ...” Mala gasped as she was interrupted by a splash of warm water over her head. “... of the Farmers' Quadrant.” she finished. It still felt like this was some kind of mistake and, once everyone knew that she was just a lowly farmer their treatment of her would change.

Dassina, however, simply started rubbing the soap into Mala's fur. “Yes my lady.” she responded demurely. “And I'm to be at your service if there is anything I can do for you.”

Mala simply stared at the older girl. She had never dreamed of being in a situation like this. Actually, that wasn't true, the little deer often fantasized about what her life might have been like if she had been born as one of the higher casts instead, but she had never expected to find out. Now that she finally had the chance, she couldn't think of anything to ask Dassina for. “Um, what's keen?” she asked at last.

Dassina looked up from her work. “It's a drink, my lady.” she answered. “It's quite strong and has a very pungent smell.”

“Oh. Is it nice?” she checked.

“I don't know, my lady. I've never actually tasted it myself. From what I've heard I believe it is quite nice though.” She went back to scrubbing, carefully removing every trace of grime from the farm girl's fur.

Eventually, Dassina seemed satisfied that her charge was clean and poured one final wave of water over Mala's head before standing up and starting to towel her dry. Once her fur was dry, Mala reached for her clothing but Dassina quickly stopped her. “Please, miss? You are a guest in the Lady Dartfree's house and should wear something more befitting.” She reached into the bundle she had brought and pulled out a long white robe.

Mala inhaled, then reached out to touch the offered garment. Her eyes widened as her fingers ran across the smooth surface. It was definitely silk and likely worth a small fortune. Before she had finished processing that Dassina was helping her into it. She slipped her arms through the long sleeves and Dassina knelt down to do up the buttons on the front. Then she stepped back and gave Mala a polite nod. “My lady? If you are ready then please follow me. The Lady Dartfree will be waiting for you by now.”

Mala allowed herself to be lead out of the bathing room and back into the maze of corridors. She

was still overwhelmed by all that happened since Eraine caught her raiding the berry bushes. The wolf had told her that she was claimed as prey, but she certainly wasn't being treated the way she expected claimed food to be. She felt more like a fellow noble than a lowly farm girl. A tantalizing, almost forbidden, hope welled up in her chest. It was rare, and almost never spoken of, but it was possible for a member of the prey species to be made an honorary member of the nobility. Of course, that usually only happened if they had performed some great service to their house, saved their master's life, or something like that. Still, it could happen.

Mala glanced around at the marble hallways and colored lanterns wondering what it would be like to walk past them without feeling that she was out of place but able to say that she owned them. To walk through a house like this one and know that everything inside it was hers and that everyone she passed would have to obey her. She wouldn't need to muck around on a muddy farm anymore, people would bring food and anything else she desired straight to her. She would be able to get her entire family out of poverty.

Of course, there was the issue that Eraine had told her that she had been claimed as food, but even that was not as bad as it might have seemed. By stating her own claim over Mala, Eraine had ensured that no other predator could do the same. She'd already defended Mala from one of her fellow nobility by firmly reminding him that Mala belonged to her. If even a noble like Martas couldn't touch her then she would be able to come and go in any part of town, regardless of what the brand on her left palm said, and even the guards wouldn't be able to stop her.

Mala's little fantasy was interrupted when Dassina stopped in front of a large door and knocked politely. "Lady Mala Turnbridge is ready to see you, Lady Dartfree." she stated without opening it.

"Thank you, Dassina. Send her in please." came the reply.

Dassina opened the door and stepped back, gesturing for Mala to enter but making no attempt to follow herself. A little wave of heat rushed out from the room as she did so and Mala shivered, suddenly realizing how cold she was. The stone hallways did not retain the heat well and, beautiful as it was, the thin silk robe was significantly less warm than her usual clothing. Stepping quickly inside, she rubbed her arms to help warm up.

The room was large, with carpets on both the walls and floor, and lit only by a roaring fire in the far wall. Although there was plenty of furniture around the room that would likely have been more comfortable, Eraine was sitting cross-legged on a mat in front of the fireplace surrounded by several bowls. She had also changed her clothes and was wearing only a thin dressing gown.

The door clicked shut behind Mala and Eraine looked up and beamed at her. As Mala obeyed, her sensitive nose started to twitch. Whatever was in those bowls smelled very very good. Her stomach let out a greedy rumble and she could feel her mouth start to water.

"Hello again, Mala." Eraine greeted her. "Did you enjoy your bath?" She gestured for Mala to sit on the mat beside her.

"Oh, yes. Thank you very much." Mala sat down and tried to focus on Eraine, but her eyes kept wandering back to the bowls. A few handfuls of berries were all she had gotten to eat today and she had unfortunately left her salt lick in the pocket of her old clothes, so the presented food looked especially tempting right now. It all appeared vegetarian so it must be intended for her and not Eraine, but she still couldn't start eating without permission.

"And the servants treated you well?" Eraine checked.

The goat who had lead her to the bathing room had been a little awkward with her but she didn't want to get anyone in any trouble and Dassina had seemed nice. "Y... yes?" Mala offered, hoping that would be the end of the conversation and they could move on to dinner. Eraine, however, seemed to be expecting slightly more than that. "Um? Dassina in particular." Mala added. Her stomach gave another rumble, sounding more impatient by the second.

"That's good." Eraine agreed, but the little deer's eyes had already strayed back to the bowls of food. "How about your new clothes? I think they suit you much better than those old farmer rags."

Again Mala pulled her gaze away from the food and back to Eraine. "Yes. It's beautiful." she managed. "Thank you so much. I've never had something as nice as this." She shuffled to sit on her hands as if that was the only way to keep them under control.

Eraine finally decided to take pity on the poor girl. "Well, while you were bathing, I had the servants prepare a late dinner for you." She gestured to the selection of bowls as if Mala might not have noticed them. "Those berries can't have been very filling after all. Please, tuck in."

The moment she was given permission, the little deer grabbed a handful from the nearest bowl and shoved it into her mouth. Mala had never tasted olives before and did not even know what they were called but she instantly fell in love with the rich salty flavor. Swallowing that mouthful, she grabbed a pastry from a different bowl and bit into it. The crunchy exterior seemed to melt away in her mouth revealing a thick cheesy filling. For a minute or so, the young deer was lost in a world of her own, so overwhelmed by the wonderful flavors that she could think of nothing else.

Then she realized just how rude she was being. Even if she had been given permission, she should not be eating like this, and she had yet to offer any word of thanks to the wolf who had provided her with such treats. Swallowing quickly, she burst into apology for her behavior. "I ... I'm sorry, my lady. I didn't mean to ..."

"Shh. That's quite alright, my dear." Eraine reassured. "There's no one else here and I know you must be both hungry and thirsty." From the fireside, she picked up a full tankard and offered it to Mala. "Here. I had this prepared specially for you."

Mala accepted the mug and sniffed at the fluid inside. Assuming that this was the keem she had heard about then Dassina had been correct when she said it was pungent. The drink smelled strongly of a dozen different spices that Mala couldn't begin to place. Still, the salt lick and the olives she had eaten had left Mala's mouth feeling dry so she quickly took a large gulp.

The liquid was warm from having been stored so close to the fire and had a strong bitter taste that was not quite masked by the blend of alcohol and spices. Unaccustomed to both strong alcohol and powerful flavors, Mala choked on the fiery liquid and almost spat the mouthful back out. Keem, it turned out, was not a drink that lived up to her expectations and Mala resolved that, once she was a noble, she would never try it again.

While Mala spluttered over her mug, Eraine poured out a glass of wine for herself and took a measured sip. The little deer's eyes immediately latched onto Eraine's glass, that looked much nicer than keem and she wasted no time pointing it out.

"I'm sorry Mala, but you really need to drink that first." Eraine insisted. "If you are still thirsty once you've finished the whole mug then I might let you have a little of my wine, but for now you will have to stick to your own drink."

Mala frowned. She was usually quite trusting of others, to the point of naivety, but some part of her did feel a little nervous at being told that she had to drink one thing while Eraine drank another. Still, if the Eraine wanted to cause her harm, the wolf had any number of ways she could do so without resorting to poisoning her. It seemed more likely that this was just another difference in their classes. The noble got to drink wine while the farmer was given something bitter and spicy. Or maybe it was a host and guest thing and she was supposed to drink the keem because she was the visitor. Whatever the reasons, she didn't really have much choice in the matter and she certainly wasn't going to make a fuss over an unpleasant tasting drink. With a shrug, Mala took another gulp from the mug and felt the warm liquid slide down her throat and settle in her tummy.

Despite the nasty flavor, keem did have its advantages. The strong alcohol was actually quite nice and Mala felt a pleasant warmth spreading through her body, making her limbs feel less stiff and her head swim slightly. Raising the mug, she began to gulp it down a little faster, still trying not to taste the liquid but enjoying the warmth in her belly and the fuzz that quickly descended over her mind. Maybe keem wasn't so bad after all.

When at last she put down the mug, Mala reached again for the collection of bowls and grabbed something at random to take the taste away. As she chewed that mouthful, she rediscovered how good everything other than the keem tasted. She quickly grabbed a handful of treats from several other bowls, not wanting to miss out on the chance to try anything and chewed hurriedly to make room for the next mouthful.

Eraine smiled to herself, gently sipping her wine as she watched the deer try and fall in love with a dozen different textures and flavors. Eventually, Mala slowed down and her eyes began to droop. Her stomach was already complaining that she had given it more to work on in half an hour than she had in the past week. Nice as it was to finally feel sated, her body knew that it would need some time to process such a large meal before she could stuff any more in and she was already starting to yawn.

"Tired, dear?" Eraine asked.

Mala nodded slowly and Eraine pushed some of the bowls aside to clear a space for the deer to lie down. "Then why not take off your gown and take a nap." Eraine offered.

Mala nodded again and started fiddling with the buttons, struggling in her sleepy state to get them undone. Her fingers just wouldn't quite respond and she was having a hard time even keeping her eyes open to see what she was doing.

"Here." Eraine offered, gently brushing Mala's hands aside and undoing the buttons for her. Bit by bit, Mala's bare fur was revealed as the wolf opened up the front of her gown. While most of her fur was chestnut brown, her throat and belly were a soft creamy color. Had Mala been watching, she might have noticed something worrying in the wolf's expression as her body was slowly revealed, but her eyes were already closed with tiredness and she made only the smallest helpful movements as Eraine removed her gown, then rolled it into a ball and tossed it aside.

"There. Let's get you comfy." Eraine's gentle hands guided Mala to lie face up on the mat with the fire warming her left side and Eraine kneeling to her right. Ever so softly, the wolf's fingers brushed her cheek then moved lower to the deer's neck, pressing just a little harder. Mala sighed in sleepy pleasure as she felt the wolf's fingers gently massaging her, relieving knots and tension that she had never realized existed. Part of her was exhausted and wanted to go straight to sleep, but she had never felt anything quite like what Eraine's touch was doing to her and struggled to keep herself

awake to enjoy it for a little longer.

Soon Eraine's hands drifted lower, reaching the soft curve of Mala's belly then tracing slow circles over her tummy. In her full and drowsy state, the belly rub felt better than anything Mala could have imagined and she let out a long sigh of pure pleasure.

Eraine continued her work for several minutes, massaging Mala's belly and feeling the deer's tender flesh beneath her hands. Then she stopped for a moment, wriggled out of her own gown and placed it, with a lot more care than Mala's, over the back of a nearby armchair. The deer stirred slightly and opened one eye to see why the massage had stopped. Moments later, however, Eraine returned, now completely naked, and knelt down to resume her work. With a happy sigh, Mala closed her eyes again and drifted back to her blissful state.

The massage continued for a few minutes more, then Mala felt Eraine press a little harder into the muscle of her arm. "Can you feel that, Mala?" the wolf asked.

Answering was hard. She didn't want to move at all, let alone muster the energy and concentration to speak. "Yes?" she mumbled at last.

"Does it hurt?" was the next question.

"No."

The pressure increased a little. "Not at all?" Eraine checked.

"No." Mala answered again. She hoped the conversation would stop soon. It was nice that Eraine wanted to make sure she wasn't hurting her but Mala just wanted to sleep.

"That's good." The pressure relented, then Mala felt Eraine start work on her arm, lifting it and gently soothing the muscles beneath her skin. It felt nice, although not as good as the belly rub. Eraine lifted her arm a little higher and Mala felt the canine's lips brush against her hand. Then there was a soft crack and a sharp, hot sensation in one of her fingers.

Mala's eyes blinked open. There was blood on Eraine's chin and more dripping from where her right index finger should have been. Even as she watched, the wolf chewed a couple of times then swallowed before starting to lap up the blood from Mala's hand. A horrified feeling slowly spread through Mala. It should have been an instant reaction but, in her current state, even her emotions seemed sluggish to respond. "What ..." she managed at last.

Eraine ceased lapping at the deer's hand and a concerned expression crossed her face. "That didn't hurt you, did it?" she checked.

The question seemed nonsensical. How could you possibly bite someone's finger off without hurting them, except ... Mala blinked in confusion as she realized that it hadn't hurt. Even now, the place where her missing finger should have been felt strangely hot, and she had been able to feel the scrape of Eraine's tongue with each lick, but there wasn't actually any pain. "No." she admitted.

"Good. Close your eyes then, Mala, and try to relax. It's probably best if you don't watch this part." She went back to licking the open wound.

Mala didn't close her eyes. As much as she would have liked to simply drift into sleep and pretend that she was going to wake up and that Eraine would declare her an honorary noble in the morning

and that the rest of her life would be wonderful, she wasn't able to make herself believe that anymore. "Why?" she protested. "I thought you liked me."

"I do like you, Mala, but I told you before bringing you here that you were to be my prey." Eraine paused mid answer to remove a second finger. This time Mala got to watch the wolf pull her hand into her mouth and see those white teeth clamp down, easily severing the chosen digit from the rest of her hand. It really looked like something that should have hurt but she felt nothing other than warmth and a temporary sensation of sharpness. After swallowing Eraine continued "I'm sorry if you hoped this might end differently but I did give you a bath and a good dinner first and now ..." She ran one hand across Mala's body, stopping to give a little pat over the doe's full tummy. "I'm going to enjoy an equally pleasant meal."

"But ..." Mala's protest was interrupted by Eraine putting the remaining two fingers on her hand between her jaws and removing them both in a single bite. "... my hand ..." Mala whispered. She tried to move it, to wiggle the fingers that were no longer there. Only her thumb responded. "How am I going to work on the farm now?"

In retrospect it was a stupid question, one asked more out of shock than an actual desire to know the answer, but Eraine answered anyway. "You won't have to." she told the trembling deer. "Becoming my dinner is the last service you will ever be required to perform for the House of Dartfree. You won't ever have to work another day. Just lie still, relax, and let me enjoy you." She lifted Mala's arm again and this time it was clear that she was going to put the entire remainder of Mala's hand between her jaws.

"No!" The drowsy feeling was making it difficult to feel react with anything but sleepy acceptance, but Mala was fighting hard against that. "You can't. Let me go! I thought you were bringing me here to help me." She struggled to get back to her feet but Eraine pressed down on her shoulders, pinning her down.

"Lie still." Eraine insisted. "I'm sorry Mala, but this is your role in life. If you'd stayed in your own quadrant you could probably have lived an uneventful life as a farmer but you decided to stray so now you're my dinner. Stop kicking, even if I did let you get up you'd probably fall over again given the amount of keem you just drank."

Mala did stop kicking but only because she was realizing that it wasn't going to help. Eraine was vastly stronger than her and seemed to regard pinning her down as a nuisance more than anything else. "You're horrible." she shouted at the wolf. "I thought you were nice but you were just pretending so you could eat me. Let me go! You don't ..."

Whatever else Mala had been planning to say died in her throat as she heard a little growl from the noble. It was far less loud than her own shouting and didn't even sound that threatening, but something in the tone brought Mala's protests to an instant halt. Looking up, she realized that the wolf was scowling down at her. She didn't think she had seen Eraine frown before that point.

"Mala." The wolfess's voice was still soft, still somewhat musical, but it had an edge to it that had never been present before. "I'm not being horrible to you and I certainly did not fake my kindness to you in order to lure you here. If I truly hadn't cared for your comfort I wouldn't have needed to bring you here at all. I could have just knelt down and started eating outside Entador's hedgerow, regardless of how painful that would have been for you. Instead I brought you here. I made sure you were looked after, gave you food because you were hungry and drugged you so that you wouldn't feel any pain. I don't think I deserve to be insulted when I have gone to such lengths to make you comfortable."

Mala gave a little whine. "You ... you are still going to kill me though," she pointed out. It wasn't easy to argue with the wolf though, especially while under the effects of the keem. She could already feel the warm fuzzy cloud threatening to engulf her mind again, tell her that everything was fine the way it was and to simply drift into a peaceful sleep.

The wolf sighed. "Yes, I am." Her voice was much softer now, almost a whisper and all the anger had vanished as fast as it had arrived. "You knew this was a risk you were taking when you strayed from your quadrant. Anyone could have caught you and done whatever they liked with you. If I had not spotted you then Martas would have only a little later and I don't think I can make you understand how lucky you are that it was me. I guess I could let you go at this point, but it would not be a kind act. The drugs would wear off and you would feel everything I've done so far. I don't want you to go through that." Gently she reached out and stroked Mala's head, brushing the doe's ears back. "Just relax now and I'll make sure that you never feel anything painful ever again."

Mala's ragged breathing slowed a little at Eraine's touch. Closing her eyes, she lay still and enjoyed the sensation of the wolf's fingers against her face. The gentle comfort lasted for several minutes before Eraine withdrew her hand. Knowing what was about to come, Mala lifted her right arm and offered it to the wolf, keeping her eyes closed tight so she would not have to watch what followed.

Eraine made a surprised noise. She had not been expecting this level of cooperation from her food. She smiled as she took hold of Mala's wrist and raised it to her lips. "There, I knew you were a good deer. So polite and well behaved." There was a soft crunch and Mala flinched slightly as she felt the predator's teeth sever clean through her wrist but she quickly relaxed again.

Eraine chewed then swallowed her latest mouthful. "Mmh! You do taste good, Mala. Thank you for becoming my dinner tonight." She leaned forward, this time getting her teeth around the lump of muscle in Mala's forearm. Shluck! Mala felt her arm go limp as the wolf's teeth divided muscle from bone. Gulp! Another piece of her body slid down the predator's esophagus. A low rumble came from Eraine's belly and the wolf laughed. "Hear that? My tummy is starting to digest you. My body is already turning yours into nutrients." The wolf announced. It wasn't a taunt though, so much as a reassurance that Mala's sacrifice was for a good reason.

"But ... but I don't want to be nutrients." Mala protested. "I still want to live. Why did I have to be born as a farmer? Why couldn't I have been a noble like you?" The calm stillness that Eraine's touch had brought was wearing off and she was again starting to think of all the things she would never get to do.

"Ssh. I know it must seem unfair but there are reasons for everything." Eraine assured her. "Carnivores like myself can't survive on leaves and roots like you can. That's why we need herbivores to convert the plants into something we can digest. It's also the reason we have to be in charge. Herbivores don't get to be nobles because then they would never allow anyone to eat them. I'm sorry, I know that isn't what you wanted to hear, but it is the natural order of things." She leaned down to take another bite from her dinner.

Mala thought about that while the wolf removed another chunk from her arm. She'd never realized that there was a reason that the noble class was almost entirely carnivorous. She'd just always assumed that it was simply the way things were. "I ... I'm still scared ..." she admitted.

"That's okay." Eraine replied, swallowing her gory mouthful. "It's natural to feel a little frightened in your situation. The fact that you are facing it and not letting the fear control you is what makes you brave." she explained. "Think of it like this. If the nobles didn't exist then you farmers could

probably get on okay without us but, if it weren't for you, then people like me would have nothing to eat. Most people think the noble class is the most important one because there aren't many of us and we all have large houses and such but, really, you farmers are far more important than I am. Does that make you feel better?"

Mala hesitated. Eraine's perspective was not one that had ever occurred to her before and she had some difficulty wrapping her head around it. "I ... I think so." she answered. The fog was descending over her mind again, making it difficult to think straight but also helping to ease her worries.

"Good. Now do try to relax, Mala. I want you to be as comfortable as possible, and if anything bothers you just say so, but this next bit will be much easier if you hold still." Next moment she felt Eraine's claws run down the length of her tummy. There was still no pain, but she could feel the skin parting on either side of the wolf's sharp nails. It might not hurt, but it didn't feel anything like the previous gentle belly rubs.

There was a soft sensation, as Eraine's muzzle worked its way through the opening and the wolf began to eat. Sharp teeth cut through Mala's internal organs and she heard occasional muffled sounds of pleasure from the hungry carnivore. Mala drifted in and out of consciousness. Whatever was happening to her belly felt weird and unpleasant, but it was hard to feel too concerned about anything right now. If it was important then she could worry about it later.

Another bite tore large chunks of Mala's intestine free and Eraine swallowed with obvious relish. Shoving her muzzle back into the prey, she ripped out another mouthful, loving the soft tenderness of her dinner's flesh. Mala was one of the best meals she had ever had the opportunity to enjoy.

Eraine's feast was interrupted as Mala stirred a little, blinking groggily and staring at the fireplace. "I shouldn't sleep here." she muttered. "People will wonder where I am."

Eraine withdrew her muzzle from the open hole. "Hush Mala." she soothed. "You can sleep wherever you like."

"You're sure it will be okay?" Mala couldn't help but slur the words. Tiredness and the warm fuzz that filled her mind made it impossible to speak clearly. Eraine, however, caught enough to understand her meaning.

"Yes, Mala. Just relax." Mala's right hand was gone so she reached out and took the deer's left instead, touching the scar tissue on the deer's palm and feeling Mala's finger's curl around her own. Once her prey had relaxed again, Eraine pushed her muzzle back into Mala's belly and resumed her meal.

For several minutes, Eraine's reassurances were enough for Mala. She simply relaxed, unsure if she was lying, floating, or flying as the strange sensations in her tummy continued and Eraine's hand held tight to her own. Finally a little moment of clarity broke through the fog in her mind. "I'm dying, aren't I?" she asked.

Briefly, Eraine was tempted to lie. There were plenty of reassuring answers she could give that would likely get the deer to relax again while she finished her meal. Instead she removed her muzzle from the opening and nodded. "Yes. It will be over soon." she stated.

Opening her eyes, Mala looked down at the open hole in her belly and the wolf staring back at her. Surprisingly, the scene was far less horrifying than she would have expected. It was a little

disturbing to see her belly sliced open like that, and Eraine's face was coated in her blood, but it was not the gory nightmare she had been preparing herself for. The opening Eraine had made was actually pretty small and the wolf's dark fur meant that the blood stood out less than Mala had expected. More importantly, the wolf's amber eyes were still compassionate, staring back at her was a calm warmth that instantly eased Mala's concerns.

"I ..." Mala trailed off. She still wanted to go home, but there was no point in saying that aloud. Even if she could find some perfect argument that would persuade Eraine to let her live, it was clearly too late for that. While the wolf had yet to hit anything immediately vital, she had still torn out more than Mala could hope to survive. The young deer could already feel her body shutting down from blood loss. Telling Eraine that she still wanted to live would not save her and would likely make things harder for the predator the wolf. For the first time it occurred to Mala that Eraine had gone to great lengths to make this as gentle as possible for her but that she had done nothing help comfort the wolf. Even though Eraine was just doing what her own role in life required.

"What ... what will happen to me ... after, I mean?" Mala managed. Again she was finding it hard to speak clearly. The words seemed to get all jumbled up in her mouth.

There was a pause. Eraine's eyes never strayed from Mala's but it was clear that the wolf was choosing her answer to that question very carefully. "I don't know." she admitted at last. "I guess you'll have to find that out for yourself."

Mala nodded, or at least tried to nod. Her body didn't seem to be responding properly anymore.

Reaching forward, Eraine's fingers brushed Mala's forehead. "Don't be frightened." she soothed. "This happens to everyone in the end. You won't feel any pain and I'm here for as long as you need me. Just relax and let yourself quietly slip away."

Mala tried again to answer but even speaking was beyond her now. She wanted to tell Eraine that she understood. That she knew this was her place in the world and that she wasn't scared of it any longer. She wanted to thank the wolf for her kind words and comfort but had no way of doing so. As Eraine's fingers gently caressed her head, however, Mala realized that the wolf had understood.

Eraine lay by Mala's side, still stroking the bleeding deer's forehead until Mala's breathing faded away and her heartbeat fluttered out. Then the wolf sat up and went back to her meal.

Dassina knocked on the door then waited patiently. "Come in." At the lady Dartfree's instruction she pushed open the door then bobbed politely in front of her mistress.

"I trust you enjoyed your meal, my lady?" she asked.

The lady of the house was sitting in an armchair at the far end of the room, idly chewing on a deer's thigh bone. "Yes. Thank you, Dassina." She gestured briefly at the mess that lay in front of the fireplace then turned her attentions back to her treat, working to break it open so she could get at the sweet marrow inside.

Dassina managed to keep any sign of distaste from her face. She simply nodded obediently, then crossed the room to kneel by the fireplace. The mat that Mala had been lying on was folded in half, then placed in a bucket Dassina had brought with her. It would take some work to get it clean again but Dassina had plenty of practice at removing bloodstains. On top of it the deer also added a pair of

hooves that her mistress had discarded, then retrieved Mala's gown from when it had been thrown. Folding the gown under one arm and picking up the bucket with her other she turned to leave again.

“Dassina.”

She froze on the spot, then turned to face her mistress again. The wolf was still picking at the bone, her belly slightly swollen from her recent meal. Dassina quickly reminded herself that there was no way her mistress could still be hungry and that it would likely be days before the wolf showed any interest in eating again. “Yes, my lady?” she asked.

“I've been told that some of the farmers in Dartfree's service have had a bad harvest this year, the Turnbridge family in particular. Please send them my condolences, as well as a gift of fifty drekels to help with anything they might need.”

Dassina didn't quite manage to hide her surprise. “Fifty?” she checked.

“Well, she was very tasty.” the lady of the house answered with a smile. “It's not often I get to enjoy such a tender young deer as that.”

Dassina suppressed a shudder. “Of course, my lady.” she answered, then quickly left. Behind her, Eraine stretched out in her armchair, basking in the post meal bliss as her stomach started work on its contents. What a lucky find that had been.