

The Lair

by vaega

She has returned home after being gone for so long. What lays in wait for her?

Returning Home

Chapter 1 of 1

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The silence was unbroken but for a near-silent whoosh of air as she appeared in the consuming darkness. For several moments, she simply stood there, contemplating nothing. She clenched her teeth and fisted her hands in a futile attempt to stave off another bout of a painful spell. Out of the darkness came the lapping of quiet water. The tang of mineral water and wet stone pervaded her senses, and she breathed deeply the smell of lush, full plants packed snugly within their comfort of wild soil. Her hoarse voice spoke one word,

"Kormate."

Instantly, seven tiny blue flames illuminated themselves on the stone floor around her, each to its own corner of the room. Still, not much could be seen of the small chamber she was standing in. The stone floor was warm; she could feel the heat through even the thick leather soles of her dragonhide boots. Gratefully, she shed the heavy dragonhide frock coat. Her longtunic, black silk blouse, and tight dragonhide pants were enough for the comforting warmth of her lair.

Her boot heels clicked across the stone floor as she strode to the knotwork-bedecked archway, leading to a long walkway. As she passed beneath, the celtic knots seemed to glow a deep blue for a second, then vanished as quickly as the seven flames in the anti chamber when she quitted the room. Every three feet, a pair of blue flames whooshed to life on either side of her as she strode past, lighting the path. On either side, the inky black waters rippled slightly in curiosity from the unseen creatures lurking below its depths. A gentle spout of rain showered the woman in its eagerness to see her. Her laughter fluttered around the cavern, magnified by the black depths above and the bottomless waters below. A long, snakelike, horned head resting atop a sinuous neck rose out of the water, and the woman gently scratched its long, tangled beard affectionately. She laughed again as she picked a small piece of waterweed off of one curly horn. The creature's bass coo burbled from its deep throat, rising and falling with each inflection. It rose momentarily in a wailing screech when she was pushed from behind by another nose eager to be scratched. She patted both sea creatures gently and continued on, leaving them to bicker like old grannies in a perfume shop.

Just behind her, a long, feathery scaled body erupted from her left, flowed across the air above the raised walkway for several long minutes, and slid back into the waters with barely a ripple on either side. The tiny blue flames lining the stone walkway leaped, the casting light flickering across the wet scales. Her silver eyes twinkled as she watched others in front of her do the same, each striving to impress her.

At the end of the water guarded walkway, she paused, and again spoke a single word, *"kormate."* Twin iridescent blue and green lights flickered to life, shadowed by the stone dragons holding the lights within their gray chests. She spoke again,

"Irlen jasstin turia jamseen, et Kormate jasstin turia deftik, pona suren."

The twin dragon statues blinked sleepily, and one of them yawned. Both grinned at the newcomer and slowly stretched their gray stone wings before resettling. They

responded in unison, "*Wind to thy wings, and Light to thy path.*"

She walked on, through the softly glowing doorway. At her entrance, the four corners of the large room lit up from inside similar dragon guardians. Burning brightly, the four dragons tilted their heads upwards and let loose a burst of glowing white flames, lighting the lanterns lining the tops of the walls, and flashing along the corners of the domed ceiling and down the huge chain to the huge chandelier in the middle of the room. Their part done, the glow within them died down, but never died out.

In the very centre of the room stood a large, stone table, easily dominating the huge room with a large black steel cauldron atop it, bubbling quietly. Lining the stone walls stood floor-to-ceiling twelve-foot tall ornately carved solid oak shelves. Many held hundreds of books, while others held many different sizes and shapes of potion bottles. At the far end, behind the table, was a wide cupboard. Her grandfather had enchanted the cupboard to provide her with anything she needed upon opening the intricately carved doors. Unfortunately, there were still many things it couldn't give her.

She growled angrily at the Master's current "wish."

"Start teaching," he hissed, his cold bass voice carrying easily across the small study. She hated teaching. Just thinking of all those bickering cubs made her head ache. She never could tolerate the incessant chatter of little cubs and half-grownns. His order made no sense, but it was his will, and she would obey until she expired. She was bound to do so, by the mark upon her inner arm. She was bound to him, by the softly ever-glowing dragon pendent he always wore. A simple reminder to her that he held her life in his hands. Every Other in the Master's Inner Circle had a similar object given freely to the Master; a key to their lives.

Her true life had been left behind long before. Now, all that remained of her was a ghost of a double life. She could neither be fully in one or the other; she was trapped in between. On one hand, she was a simple librarian for a magical bookstore, but on the other hand, she was a deadly draka full of bottomless power yearning to be set free. Yet still nothing but a minion to the Master, despite him naming her his "Dark Lady." She was just another pawn in the grand scheme of his deadly game of war. He didn't care for her any more than his other minions of his Inner Circle. To him, there was only black and white. Nothing in between mattered; nothing in between even existed for him.

Physically, she shook off the annoying memories and paced softly to the double doors to the left. When she was home, they always stood open. Throwing them wide, she sighed exasperatedly as she took in the four months-worth of dust coating everything from her large chaise lounge and accompanying three chairs, to the single plush chair resting in front of the cold eight-foot fireplace. Upon the gray stone walls hung dark, heavy tapestries of years gone by, many of which could be dated back to 15th century Italy, Russia, Germany, Spain, and even India. Her family tapestry was the largest of all, covering almost an entire wall. The small Hindu statue of Shiva in the corner still held remnants of the Arabian sands within her four-armed body.

The most dominant theme in the small hall was the masks. She had collected masks from every era, every different culture she could find. A fanciful beaded and/or feathered mask was the most common man-made materiel object and could be seen around the world. Many collectors of historical artifacts had no idea the true value of what they held. All they cared about was how old the mask was, or where it had been found, or even who had supposedly worn it. Pah. The value of artifacts could never be found by a man or woman digging them up. Humans made their own values for everything, whether it truly had one or not. Of the hundreds of masks adorning her walls, each and every one of them she had acquired separately, and each held a special memory.

Kobenhavn, Denmark, 1403. Her first mask to date, and one that she had kept meticulously clean and cared for. It was a child's mask of solid black hard plastic. It had had three shiny whiskers on either side of the gray nose, but had long ago fallen off, despite her constant care. The two pointed ears rested atop the curious cat face, and the wide slit-pupiled green eyes held an intelligence that had always been completely unfounded, even now. There was nothing special about the cat mask, other than it had been given to her on her 7th birthday by her mother, who had died of the last vestiges of the Black Plague not a year later. Everything she had known and owned had had to be burned. The cat mask was the only thing she had managed to hide away from her father and the servants and save. With it came one of the only happy memories she could recall.

Sarn Meylletyrn, Wales, 1447. The first thing that attracted her to this mask was the huge ibex horns sprouting from the top corners of the dark red mask. The long reptilian snout had two huge tusks protruding upwards from the generously fanged mouth. The mouth itself was slightly open, and a long, forked tongue hung limply half outside the wickedly grinning mouth. This mask was what brought her to the attention of one of the highly eccentric, but very influential men of the area. He became the first lover she had had since her husband died of a wasting sickness in 1431.

Marseille, France, 1463. She attended a Mardi Gras masquerade and attained a beaded and belled mask of muted peacock blues and greens. The sequins around the eyes were solid gold, the sterling silver beads hung from each side like many little tassels. The tiny copper bells hung from fine silver chains and tinkled softly in the breeze with the movement of the wearer. Although not a really happy memory, she had been wearing this mask with a belly dancer's costume when she first met her Master. That had not been her most favorite job in her life. Belly dancing for more than money; she was trying to attract men's attentions.

Kobenhavn, Denmark, 1507. She returned to the home of her family. Not that any of them knew her. By that time, any family members she had known were long dead, buried and probably rotting in their graves. The mask she found in Kobenhavn, or more commonly known as Copenhagen, was the simplest mask in her collection, being only a blank face. The left half of the face was solid gold, but the right half was a black, green, and dark bronze plaid pattern. No other adornments were on the mask but the colors and two shimmering white teardrops just below the eye holes. The uniqueness about this mask, other than that it was the plainest one she had in her collection, was the date inscribed on the inside. Masks like this one, made of simple clay and covered in paper mache, would never last more than a few years. Yet the date on the inside read, *January 1st, 1396.* Another hand had written, *To my everlasting love, I bid thee, farewell.* Not only was it in perfect condition, but it was as old as she was. She laughed at the second inscription, but at the same time, it made her feel like it was from her husband. He had been the only one who truly loved her for who she was, not what she was, or who her family had been. He had cared about her, not her money.

Vladivostok, Russia, 1601. She acquired an entire costume made from peacock feathers for the tail and wings and large eagle feathers for the body, all dyed a spectacular eye-blinding white. The fantastical mask sported two huge ibex horns and a smaller curved horn of an ibex colt, as well as the long beak of a gray heron. Long eagle tail-feathers sprouted from the sides of the mask to form large 'wings,' and continued down the back into a sort of train that ended at her lower back, completely covering her shoulders and back. The sleeves of the white costume held unnaturally long white goose feathers, forming huge wings that hung limply, unless held up by a tiny wire embedded in each cuff. The price of the entire white costume would have been over \$43k, if she had actually bought it.

Panaji, India, 1769. This mask was the most colorful in her collection, barring the beaded Mardi gras mask. The basic color was a dark sky blue, with red face paint circled by white across the cheeks, nose, and eyebrows. This one wasn't as much of a mask as a decorative wall hanging, but it had been used in ancient Indian ceremonies. The hat atop the head looked something like a rounded temple tower, with a screwball and a pointed steeple adorning the top. Connected to the back of the hat/mask was a rounded oval-shaped headdress, with wooden circle toggles dangling from it down the back and sides, covering the wearer's ears. The dark bloodred, the white, and the deep sky blue continued on into the pointed hat and headdress, turning into fantastical patterns of plaids, flowers, whorls, and stripes. Remembering the mask in motion was enough to give her a headache.

Zacatecas, Mexico, 1862. She found an animal mask by the side of the road. Someone had apparently dropped it, either by design to get rid of it, or completely by mistake, misplacing one of the greatest finds ever made. The mask itself wasn't all that great, having only a single glass eye opening, huge, curved animal horns, a coarse, red cloth tongue and a black horse hair headdress. Its snout was very long, with dirty white fangs made of solid ivory. The black base was made from solid oak, and imbibed with a power she hadn't seen in a long time. The unique thing about this mask that made it worthwhile for her, was the power scribed into the dark wood. A curse to any who wore the mask: they became that which the mask represented, a horrible black monster that fed off of human souls, and was bound to do the bidding of the one who placed the mask on the other's face. And one couldn't put the mask on alone. It was much too heavy, and the strings could only be tied in back. Part of the magic of the mask, she presumed. The mask's spirit was also a notorious prankster, not unlike Coyote, in many Native American legends. Only by day, would the wearer be free of the compelling power of the mask. Thankfully, she had felt the insurmountable power quietly coiled beneath the mask's visage and hadn't been foolish enough to try it herself.

Kagoshima, Japan, 1895. This mask was truly only an oriental dragon head, but the special thing about this one was what she could do when she put it on. The green-painted wooden head changed her into a long, sinuous oriental dragon herself, complete with five-taloned feet, white mane and beard, and two-pronged horns. The dog-like snout held ebony fangs which she kept to lethal sharpness. The four thick whiskers floated freely, eerily alive, whether she used the mask or not. The mask had two

small rounded ears, and a burnished gold chest scales. The rest of his scales were an emerald green, and the black eyes reflected the mysterious life within.

Venice, Italy, 1915. This small mask was the only one she had truly bought herself. It covered only the top half of the face, but the magic surrounding it was a good as a concealment charm. As long as she wore the mask, no one could ever find her. The base was soft velvety leather with a small golden thread design around the edges. Three streamers adorned the corners of the mask, one gold, and the other two a deep forest green, perfectly matching the forehead and nose color. The cheeks were black velvet. On the top of the forehead rested a five-feathered diamond encrusted pin. The simple pin held a few downy grayish-brown chick feathers, but underneath that were white-spotted black quail feathers, and behind that were dark iridescent forest green tail feathers. She had bought this small mask for a friend's masquerade ball. She was to go with her then lover. Unfortunately, she found him with another woman, not an hour into the ball. She knew now that he had only asked her to come so he'd have an excuse to come see his true lover. That had been the closest she had ever come to losing control of her power. She never let it happen again.

Côte d'Ivoire, Africa, 1996. The African mask, she received directly from a shaman of one of the many Western Sahara tribes. The wooden mask was a combination of powerful and dangerous animals: two-prong antelope horns, huge Nile crocodile jaws, and wart hog tusks. The head also held huge, pointed ears and a dark, tiger striped pattern across the face. This one of all her masks held a positive power of aversion. It kept evildoers away, specifically sorcerers, and malevolent spirits. The strongest point of power it held was just behind the right eye. Three long burned gashes tore across the back of the head, dangerously close to the dark eye. She didn't know how the claw marks came to be there, nor did she really want to find out just what the mask had protected its last bearer from. Or if he had even survived.

These were by far, only her favorites. She smiled crookedly when she remembered the one mask her Master had given her, the only one she actually used. It was solid white, with three strings on both sides that tied in back, and black see-through silk where the eye sockets were. The lower half of the mask was thinner, curving gently around her face like a hidden caress. The top and bottom of the white skull mask was flat, and there was no mouth in the mask. Every one of her Master's minions in the Inner Circle had an alabaster skull mask, a mask of death. That's all the Inner Circle was. The Master's plague upon the human population.

After six centuries, she was tired of death. It always surrounded her, but never would it touch her. For six hundred years, she had seen humans and animals die around her: plague, sickness, war, age. She was tired, so tired. But sleep was a human interpretation to pass the time. It never affected those like her. And there were Others, like her. Her Master was one of them; he was the emperor of her race. The true emperor. There were others who didn't believe the Master was the True Emperor. They had their own little queen and her petty kingdom. They believed her kind could exist alongside humans, equal. Pah. Her Master had the right of it: humans will always be human, and they will always believe they are the only intelligent races on the planet, or among the stars. Among their myths and legends, the stories tell of sightings or instances where Others have tried to bargain with humans. Look where it got them. They were killed out of hand, labeled monsters; daemons; feared creatures of the night. No. Trying to reconcile with the humans was a waste of time.

A snarl ripped the air as she sighed explosively and gave vent to her feelings on the matter of the human parasites. The fireplace roared to life with a vengeance. The Others had been on earth, living in civilized mountain cities long before the first humans sought caves for shelter from the weather. Others had been comfortably ensconced in their homes, large fireplaces burning merrily way before humans even discovered fire. But because Others, in their natural forms, don't look anything like humans; they were thought to be creatures, dumb beasts to be killed for food.

One of the tapestries moved slightly, catching her eye immediately. But no, it was only a soft breeze coming off the waters. She sighed again. Ranting against the rebel Others and their pet humans did nothing; accomplished nothing. She needed rest after her Master's summoning. She ambled toward the dark tapestry. Every noble Other family had a tapestry similar to this one, passed down from generation to generation, and she was the last of her family. Every year, there were less Others to pass on traditions, histories, life. The dark tapestries held the names of every male, female and cub of each family. When a line died out, the tapestry burned in on itself.

With a sigh at all the Others of her now-dead family, she slipped behind it to the tunnel beyond. The cool breeze was more prevalent in the tunnel itself, gently cooling her anger. She needed a bath. The Master's summons always included "lessons." These "lessons" were the only thing the Master freely admitted to learning from the humans.

When she reached the other tunnel entrance, she sighed once more, happily remembering the last time she was home for any length of time. Her four-poster bed sat invitingly in the corner, covered by black silk screens with embroidered birds-of-prey along the corners. Another cupboard similar to the one in the main room rested on the opposite wall as her desk. Her small desk and soft chair stood next to the bed, papers still strewn on the flat desk, awaiting her attention. But they could wait. She headed across the room, to yet another archway, leading down hand-carved stairs and finally widening out into the largest cavern any human could imagine. She knew her lake was by far one of the smallest any Other owned, but as she lived alone, it worked.

Quickly she shed her clothes, and slipped into the dark warm waters. Floating a while, she mentally went through her meditation exercises in relaxation. After a while, she felt her body relax, and her headache disappeared. She relaxed further, and her form expanded outward, the waters roiling in an effort to make room for her new bulk. Her skin turned black, perfectly mirroring her hair color down to the deep blue highlights and ebony scales rippled down her sides and hardened to bone strength. The back of her skull lengthened as two long horns erupted outward from her head, and one more, much smaller, grew from her forehead and curved back. Her long snout picked up many scents her human form hadn't. She reveled in her natural form. It had been far too long since last she Changed. Even in this form, she couldn't touch the bottom of the lake, it was so deep, but she didn't care. Nothing would mess with an Other.

Languidly, she floated across the lake, resting her mind for a moment. When she felt the difference in the water, she rolled upright and swam to shore, dragging herself out of the water and shaking off the excess water. With a yawn, she stretched gracefully like a cat, her glimmering black wings expanded to the fullest before settling themselves comfortably along her back. Walking further inland, she turned several times before settling peacefully across the stone floor, her long head resting quietly on her paws.

She would report back to her human job in the morning. For now, she would rest.

fine

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feathers: (aka...author's notes)

Any similarities between this short and any other author's universe is not intentional. Anything you don't recognize is mine. I wrote this as sort of an exercise in description for myself.

She is NOT human; she is Other. She may have been born human, but like the cuckoo, Others do not raise their own. They are given as cubs to be raised by humans, humans being the only other intelligent species on the planet.

Translations:

(1) *Kormate:* light

(2) *Irlen jasstin turia jamseen, et Kormate jasstin turia deftik, pona suren.*"Wind to thy wings, Light to thy path, my brothers."

Both translations are copyrighted to me. It is from my own language. If you wish to use it, email or IM me, get to know me, and I MIGHT let you use it. Until that time, don't use it without my permission, I have placed too much effort and time into creating it for it to be used by idiots.

I actually enjoyed writing this small piece, and I hope you had fun reading. Please leave a review, I'd like to hear from you. Tell me what you think. :) Again, thanks for reading!

wind to thy wings,

vaega

~*~

dhe hilfe kadae fela...

~*~