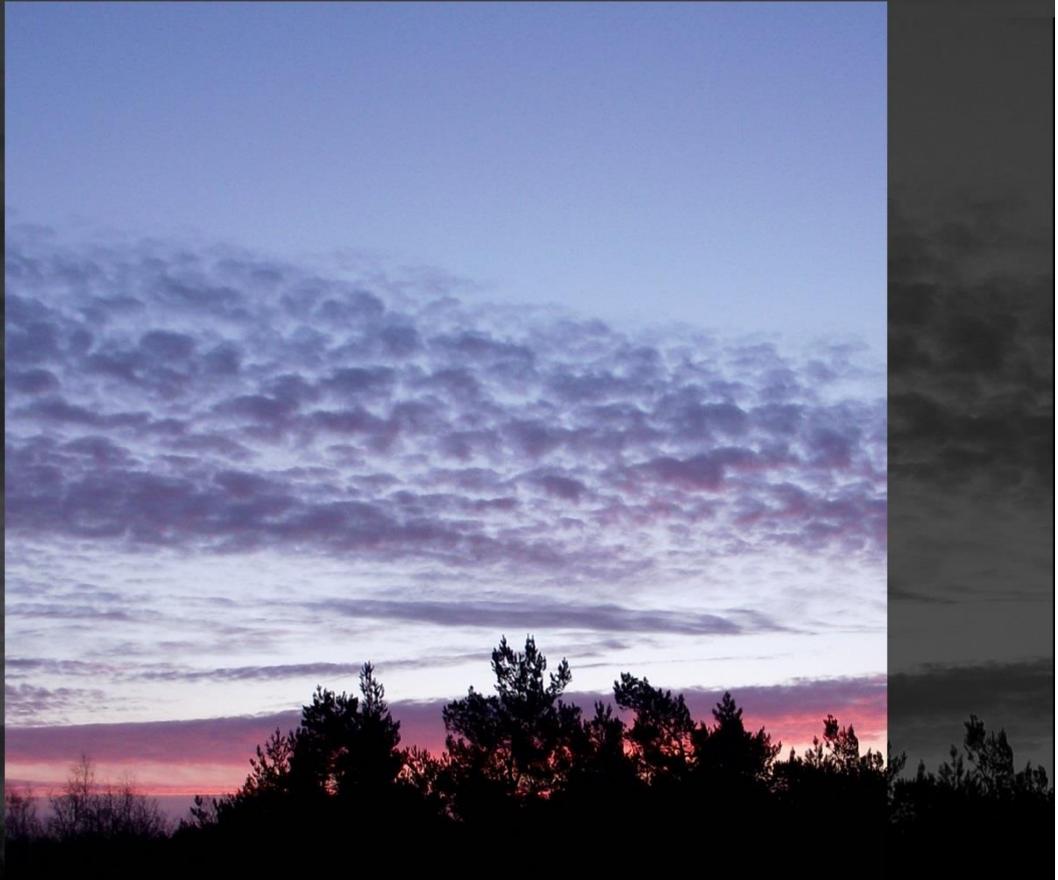


# ALTERNATIVES



**Sophia DeLuna**

## Alternatives

By  
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## Alternatives

A tall, hooded figure was sitting at the table in the far corner of a tavern in a village.

No one knew who she was or where she came from. Until she had spoken, they couldn't even tell if the stranger was male or female. At nightfall, she had entered the village on a huge black stallion. After having brought the horse to the stables, she had rented a room for the night, ordered a mug of cider and had since been sitting there, unmoving, with the mug in her hands.

Curious, Khyra, the barmaid, went over and asked if she could bring her something else.

Other customers were yelling their orders, and the barkeeper shouted at Khyra to stop chatting and get her lazy ass over to the other table.

Khyra wanted to turn around to obey when suddenly her arm was grasped and a deep but unmistakably female voice with a heavy accent said calmly but seriously, "Do not let him treat you like this. You deserve better."

Startled by the sudden touch and amazed at the unusual voice, Khyra looked at the woman whose face was still mostly hidden by the hood and the shadow it cast. Resigned, she said, "What can I do. There's no alternative."

"There is always an alternative," the woman stated and let go of the Khyra's arm.

"Maybe for you," said Khyra with an apologetic smile, and she turned and rushed over to the other table.

#

When all customers were gone, the barkeeper locked the door; and while he was busy counting his takings of the day, ignoring the hooded woman in the corner, Khyra started to clean the tables.

Just as she came to the table of the stranger, the woman finally got up and said silently, "If you want an alternative, meet me at stables at dawn."

Before Khyra could think of a reply, the woman was already on her way upstairs, and Khyra could only stare after her, dumbfounded.

#

When Khyra was finally lying in bed, tired and exhausted, she couldn't stop thinking about the strange woman and her offer. Should she accept the offer? She didn't know the woman; hadn't even seen her face. Though, her voice had certainly made an impression on Khyra. But Khyra had overheard customers talking about the woman and her magnificent but frightening steed. No one had dared to approach either of them. For some reason they seemed to be afraid, saying that an evil aura was surrounding them and that it was certainly better not to get too close to them. After all, who knew – she could be a criminal, perhaps a murderer or 'May the gods help them' she could be a demon of some kind.

Khyra hadn't seen the horse, but she certainly couldn't feel any of that about the woman. She thought she had even heard a touch of gentleness in the stranger's stern voice. By the gods, that voice even sent tingles down Khyra's spine when she was just remembering it. What an amazing voice. However, the voice wasn't the only thing that made Khyra feel differently about the woman than everyone else seemed to feel. For Khyra it had felt as if the woman had been watching her all night. And for some unfathomable reason, this had not made Khyra uncomfortable as it usually would have, but exactly the opposite. Indeed, she had

felt as if the woman was watching *over* her, causing Khyra to feel safer somehow. And strangely, tonight none of the customers had even tried touching her as they normally would have, which was what Khyra probably hated the most about her work. But could she trust her perceptions? Especially since everyone else seemed to think that the woman was evil? Perhaps it had just been accidental that they hadn't paid much attention to Khyra. Perhaps it was just because they had been too occupied speculating about the stranger while casting fearful looks in her direction.

But the stranger had offered her an alternative. And she had said that Khyra deserved better. And even though Khyra didn't know what that alternative would be, she was pondering if she should accept the offer. Khyra had never really liked her work, and she had often wished she were born into a rich family. Recently, she had started fantasizing about a quiet life, without drunken people, where she could take lessons and learn how to read and write and maybe even have a nice partner. Khyra was aware, of course, that this was just a dream, and the stranger's alternative would certainly not be *that* great, but perhaps it would at least be better than the life Khyra was living now. Well, she could at least meet with the stranger and ask her to find out what her alternative entailed.

With that decision, Khyra got up and dressed. Dawn was near and Khyra didn't want to risk missing her chance by oversleeping. Just in case the stranger's offer might entail to leave, Khyra packed a bag with the few precious belongings she possessed. Silently, she went downstairs and left the tavern.

With an anxiously beating heart, Khyra reached the stable. The door was open. Khyra wondered if she should go inside when she heard movement. She jumped aside as she saw a huge shadow exiting the stable. Squinting in the darkness, Khyra recognized that the shadow belonged to a horse and a hooded rider.

The familiar deep voice of the stranger asked, "Are you ready to go?"

Gods! This voice was doing the strangest things to Khyra and she asked nervously, "Where do you want to take me?"

"To a better place," the woman answered.

Khyra hesitated, while the stranger patiently waited for her to make a decision.

Taking a resolute breath, Khyra decided to take the risk. "All right."

The stranger reached down and said, "Then come."

Khyra grasped the woman's arm and was lifted onto the horse and placed in front of the stranger.

As soon as Khyra was sitting safely, the woman spurred the stallion to a walk.

When they reached the end of the village, Khyra just wanted to speak, but the woman laid her arm around Khyra, holding her close, and spurred the horse to a canter.

Khyra clutched the arm of the woman with one hand and her bag with the other while they rode along the dirt path. Khyra had never sat on a horse, and sitting on such a huge one now didn't exactly feel comfortable. However, being held so protectively by the stranger, feeling her warmth and strength, Khyra calmed down quickly; and as the sun started rising, she was beginning to feel the exhaustion and lack of sleep again. She could barely keep her eyes open when they finally slowed down to a comfortable ambling gait.

Minutes later, Khyra was sound asleep, safely held by the strong arm of the stranger.

#

When Khyra awoke, they had just entered a small town. Shortly after, they stopped in front of a weaver's store and the strange woman helped Khyra dismount, while she herself stayed on the horse.

A short, rounded woman came out to greet them.

"Help her find an alternative," the stranger said to the woman.

“I will,” promised the woman; and while the stranger turned the horse and rode away, disappearing in a side-street, the rounded woman introduced herself, “I’m Mhaya, come in, I’m sure you could use something to eat.”

Khyra was still staring at the corner where the stranger had disappeared, and she had to shake herself into action. “Uh... sorry, I’m Khyra. Yes, thank you, I’m quite hungry.”

Mhaya smiled and ushered Khyra through her small store, which also served as her workroom, into a tiny kitchen at the back of the house.

While Khyra sat down, Mhaya filled two mugs with water and placed bread and cheese on the table.

Gratefully, Khyra took a hearty bite off a slice of bread and a sip of water to wash it down.

“Who is she?” Khyra asked.

Mhaya smiled warmly. “I don’t know. We just call her 'The Saint'.”

“Did she bring you here, too?”

“Yes. Two winters ago. She took me to Dharia, who owns the bakery further down the street.”

“So, she is doing this regularly?” Khyra wanted to know.

Mhaya shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I only know of four others she has brought into this town. But it could be that she is taking others to other places. No one really knows anything about her. She only seems to ask people if they want an alternative; then she brings them to someone who will help them. Apart from the absolutely necessary, she doesn’t talk and no one has ever seen her face. I don’t know how she does it, but she also seems to keep track of the people she helped. I haven’t seen her since she brought me to Dharia; but obviously she knew where to find me now.”

Khyra had listened with interest and, blushing, she looked down at the bread in her hand and said, “I want to get to know her. Do you have any idea where I could find her?”

Mhaya shook her head, “Dear, if she wanted that, she’d have told you where to find her. She never told any of us and she never made any attempts to introduce herself. Just leave her be and be prepared to help a stranger she might bring to you once you have established your new life.”

#

Several weeks passed. Mhaya introduced Khyra to the others whom 'The Saint' had given a new life; and Dharia arranged that Thorin, a friend of hers, would teach Khyra how to read and write.

Khyra should have been happy with all her dreams coming true, but for some unfathomable reason a touch of sadness remained as she could not stop thinking about 'The Saint'. Why didn't she show her face? Why did she not want to have anything to do with the people she helped? Did she never feel lonely? Or did she have friends and family somewhere? God, what would she give to hear that voice again ... Frustrated, Khyra turned, yet again, trying to sleep.

Khyra had dreamed of 'The Saint' quite often, though she rarely ever remembered more than a few vague images. This night it was different. The dream was so intense that she awoke in the early hours of dawn, disoriented and with a feeling of urgency. She had to find 'The Saint'.

She dressed in a hurry. Then she went to Mhaya's bedroom and gently shook her awake. “Mhaya? I can't explain it, but I need to find her. I don't know when, but I will be back.”

Sitting up, Mhaya said, “Wait.” Rubbing her eyes, she got up and padded to her closet. She knew exactly whom Khyra was referring to. There hadn't been a day when Khyra had not talked about her wish of finding 'The Saint'. However, Mhaya could see that this was

different; this was not the Khyra who was wondering and yearning. The young woman stood there with determination, worry written on her face, and Mhaya couldn't help but wonder if 'The Saint' might have called her somehow. She took a small chest from the closet and opened it. Grabbing a handful of coins, she said, "Here. Take these. You'll need them."

Khyra took the coins and put them in her pocket. "Thank you, Mhaya! I will pay you back, promise!"

"Don't worry about it. I hope you will find her."

"I hope so, too," said Khyra and left.

She went over to Thorin, knowing that he had a lot of maps. In her dream tonight, she had seen a rocky path with a brook, a forest nearby and a mountain in the distance. She had to wait several minutes before a grumpy Thorin opened the door, his grey hair mussed, the collar of his gown turned inside. "What do you want at this ungodly hour?"

"I need your help, Thorin. It's urgent. Please, let me come in," said Khyra.

Grumbling something unintelligible, the old man opened the door fully and stepped aside to let her in.

"Thank you. I need one of your maps, and I need you to help me find a specific place," Khyra explained.

Grunting, Thorin closed the door and scuffled into his reading room. He lit a lantern, spread out a map on the table and asked, "What place?"

"There was a mountain in the distance, and a forest and a brook nearby," said Khyra.

"You need to be more specific. How far in the distance was the mountain? Was it Mount Kravak?"

"How would I know? It seemed to be pretty far."

"Khyra, on a clear day you can see Mount Kravak from the hill in the east of the town. Still, to reach it you would need to walk at least four days. And between here and Mount Kravak there is mostly forest and there are many brooks," Thorin explained, while he pointed with his bony finger on the map. "Was there a town or village you could describe?"

Khyra tried to recall the images of the dream, when something on the map caught her eye. "What do these red lines mean?" she pointed at an area on the map.

"It is still unexplored land. In former times, it was believed to be Shinzhara land. People still refuse to set foot into this area, even though the Shinzhara are but a myth."

Khyra furrowed her brow, trying to recall what she had heard. "They were supposed to be some kind of demons, weren't they?"

Scratching his beard, Thorin said, "There are many stories about them. Some describe them as demons, yes. Others compare them with sorcerers, either evil or good; and yet others say they were saints. Anyway ... back to your initial question ..."

"I believe I have found the answer. Can I borrow this map?" asked Khyra.

Thorin looked at her questioningly. "You want to enter Shinzhara land?"

Khyra regarded the map. "I don't know if I need to enter it, but for some reason I'm fairly certain that the place I'm searching is somewhere in the vicinity of this area. I hope I will be able to recognize it when I see it."

Thorin straightened himself and said with determination, "I will accompany you."

"Thorin, you ...," Khyra started to protest, but Thorin interrupted her,

"By foot it would take more than two days to get there. We will take horses, so we can get there sometime tomorrow, depending on how fast we ride."

"I can't ride, Thorin."

Thorin grinned, "But I can. I will take your reins. You will just need to hold onto the saddle. And *if* we enter Shinzhara land after all, I will be the first to fill this part of the map. Wait here. I'll get myself ready." Excitedly, he rushed out of the room.

Khyra just gaped after him in puzzlement. She had never seen the old man so enthusiastic.

#

It was an overcast day and they were making good progress as Khyra managed to get used to riding at a canter, at least occasionally. She told Thorin about the dream she had had and that she couldn't help feeling that 'The Saint' needed help somehow.

Thorin didn't think much of taking dreams for real, but he was delighted to be on an adventure in his old age, with a nice young lady for company as a bonus, thus he didn't care if it might just be for the heck of it. And perhaps he would even get to map part of Shinzhara land.

At noon they reached a small village. They took the horses to the stable to be taken care of and went into the tavern to eat and have a rest.

When they departed, the weather had cleared up and the sun was nicely warming their backs while they rode out of the village. When they turned to the east again, Khyra stared into the distance and said dismayed, "This isn't the mountain I have seen in the dream."

"But it is Mount Kravak," said Thorin. "And Shinzhara land starts by the forest to the left over there."

Khyra slumped her shoulders in resignation and sighed, "Well, I guess, we could at least move on and get you your mapping experience." She smiled weakly at the old man.

"I am sorry, Khyra. It just shows again that dreams can't be taken for real. But perhaps you can look at it like this: If the mountain in your dream does not match reality, then 'The Saint' is probably safe and sound," Thorin tried to encourage his young friend.

Khyra shook her head. "No, Thorin. I can feel that she is not 'safe and sound'."

Thorin sighed. It was pointless to argue with a woman over her *feelings*, and even if she was right, there was no way for them to help 'The Saint' if they couldn't find her. So, he tried to focus on finding a way to enter the forest they had reached.

However, the undergrowth to the left of their path was so dense that there was no way for them to get through without hatchets.

About two hours later, they reached the river that marked the end of Shinzhara land. From here they would have to follow the river north-eastwards to search for an entry into the forest.

Thorin led them down into the partly dry riverbed and turned left. He startled when Khyra suddenly cried out,

"This is it! It's the rocky path and the brook I have seen in the dream!"

He looked at her with raised eyebrows and remarked, "Um ... Khyra, this is neither a path nor a brook, it's the river Dhuriah. It's just running low at this time of the year."

Khyra grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, but it is what I have seen. I'm absolutely certain."

"Well, then let's hope we will find the place you saw, too," said Thorin, happy that the mood of his scholar had brightened.

They followed the river for about half an hour. Then the river made a turn to the north and the forest to their right ended and gave a free view to the northeast.

Thorin blinked in astonishment and he was about to ask, when Khyra shouted,

"The mountain! It's the mountain of my dream! We must be close now!"

Shortly after, they spied a cabin on Shinzhara land. Thorin led them out of the riverbed onto the clearing. Before he could even utter a word, Khyra had jumped off her horse and rushed to the person who was lying unmoving on the ground in front of the cabin door, the familiar black stallion next to her snorting nervously.

"Whoa! Easy! I want to help your mistress," Khyra tried to calm the horse.

Thorin racked up their horses, while Khyra kneeled down to look after the person who was unquestionably the one they were calling 'The Saint'.

Khyra was surprised to notice that the female looked like a perfectly beautiful human woman ... until she opened her eyes. Although 'The Saint's' look was slightly unfocused at

first, Khyra gasped in amazement as she looked into unnaturally light blue eyes with slit pupils.

“You found me,” croaked 'The Saint'.

“Yes, finally. What happened? Did you break something?” asked Khyra

“No. I cannot move ... I need medicine,” said 'The Saint'.

“What kind of medicine?” asked Khyra.

“On my belt is a pouch ... with herbs.”

Khyra reached for the cloak of 'The Saint'. Hesitating, she looked at 'The Saint' for approval.

“You may,” said 'The Saint'.

While Khyra opened the cloak and unfastened the pouch from the belt, Thorin came over, introduced himself to 'The Saint' and asked if he could help.

'The Saint' answered, “I am Zhaara. Yes, you can help. Inside house on the table is mug, stick and pitcher. Bring them and get fresh water from river.”

Getting up, Thorin said, “All right. I'll be right back.”

While Thorin entered the cabin, Khyra asked, “Can I help you get more comfortable?”

“That would be nice, yes,” said Zhaara gratefully.

Khyra raised Zhaara into a sitting position and seated herself so that she could hold her. Zhaara sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

When Thorin returned with the water, Zhaara instructed him, “Fill mug half with herbs, then fill up with water.”

When he was done, Zhaara explained, “Now we need to wait till the water is coloured. Much obliged for helping me. I was prepared to join the ancestors on the morrow.”

Khyra squeezed Zhaara and breathed, “I'm so glad we found you in time.”

“I am, as well,” said Zhaara. “You are very unusual. Humans usually are afraid of me and they do not enter taboo land even though they think Shinzhara are myth, and they are not capable to form bond of knowledge. But you knew. You found me. And you are not afraid. You are very unusual.”

“Uh... why would we be afraid of the one we know as 'The Saint'? And it was Khyra who dreamed of you. I just accompanied her,” Thorin admitted.

“But you were not afraid to follow her *'dream'* and enter taboo land, and you changed your mind about *'dreams'* and Shinzhara,” Zhaara explained with a smile.

“Well, it's hard to deny facts which are in front of you,” Thorin said grinning. “So, you are really Shinzhara, yes?”

“No. I am hybrid. My mother was Shinzhara. My father was human. This is why I need medicine. Shinzhara and humans too different,” explained Zhaara and coughed. “It is deteriorating. Soon I will not be able to speak.” She coughed again and continued, “Medicine will be ready when colour of water is rich. Stir, please, and let me see.”

Thorin did as asked and held the mug so that Zhaara could see.

Zhaara closed her eyes and croaked, “Not enough. But give me some. Perhaps it will suffice to delay process.”

Khyra took the mug and held it so that Zhaara could drink.

Zhaara took a few sips but had to stop when she got another coughing bout. Closing her eyes again, she whispered, “Give me more when colour is rich.” Then she fell silent.

Khyra gave the mug back to Thorin and leaned back against the cabin wall, placing Zhaara's head gently against her shoulder. Tenderly stroking a strand of the long, raven hair from Zhaara's face, she started to tell her how grateful she was for her help; how she had helped her make all her dreams come true, but one. She told her how Thorin had started teaching her how to read and write and how much she enjoyed it. She told her of Mhaya and the beautiful fabrics she wove and of Dharia's delicious bread and cakes. And when Zhaara's

breathing became shallower, she even told Zhaara about how much she had missed hearing her voice and how she had longed to get to know her. With tears running down her face, Khyra besought Zhaara to hang on.

When Thorin finally deemed the medicine ready, Khyra helped Zhaara drink it sip by sip.

The sun was already setting, when Zhaara finally stirred and croaked, "Please, take me to bed."

Thorin carefully picked her up, surprised at how little the tall female weighed, while Khyra went ahead and lit the lantern on the night stand.

Placing Zhaara on her bed, Thorin said, "I'll care for the horses," and left the room.

Khyra started to help Zhaara undress when she noticed a tear running down Zhaara's cheek. She stopped and asked gently, "What's wrong?"

"It hurts," Zhaara whispered, and another tear escaped her eye.

"I'm sorry," said Khyra, "Would you rather stay dressed and just lay down?"

"No. Clothes hurt as well," said Zhaara, still whispering.

As carefully as possible, Khyra helped Zhaara undress and lie down, the hybrid whimpering in pain.

Gently, Khyra covered Zhaara with a soft blanket and sat down on the bed. "Is there anything else, I can do for you?"

Zhaara closed her eyes and said quietly, "No. You may leave, if you want. I will manage."

Confused, Khyra said, "I don't want to leave. And I definitely won't leave before you are fit and well again! I just wanted to know if there is anything I could do to make it easier for you."

Blinking in surprise, Zhaara asked, "You are not repulsed, now that you have seen me?"

Khyra gaped at her, aghast. "Why on earth would I be repulsed? You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen!"

Zhaara cast her eyes down. "For Shinzgara I am repulsive."

"I can't imagine what Shinzgara are seeing. Believe me, for a human, you are exceptionally beautiful!" stated Khyra with utter conviction.

Zhaara blushed and couldn't help smiling despite the pain she was still experiencing.

"I would like to touch you, but I don't want to hurt you," said Khyra shyly.

Zhaara looked at Khyra in amazement, her pupils now huge and almost round in the dim light; and, casting her eyes down again, she said bashfully, "On the morrow it will be better."

Both looked up, when they heard Thorin entering the house.

Thorin cast a look into the bedroom and said, "Horses are taken care of. If you need me, I will take a nap on the bench here," he gestured towards the main room.

"Thank you, Thorin," said Khyra.

"You are welcome. Good night, you two."

"Good night," replied Zhaara and Khyra, before he closed the door to the bedroom.

Zhaara offered Khyra to sleep on the bed next to her.

Khyra, however, was too afraid she might hurt Zhaara in her sleep, so she ended up sleeping on the rug beside the bed, cuddled up in a blanket.

#

The next morning, Khyra awoke by a gentle hand caressing her face. Opening her eyes, she looked up into the happily twinkling unusual eyes of Zhaara.

"Mmmh, good morning," Khyra hummed. "How are you doing?"

Zhaara smiled. "Much better."

"Mmmh, good," hummed Khyra and sat up. Now, almost in front of Zhaara's face, she

looked into her eyes and reached out to gently caress her cheek. “You are so beautiful,” she breathed.

Zhaara leaned forward until their lips touched.

They were sharing gentle kisses and caresses until they were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Khyra groaned in frustration, causing Zhaara to chuckle.

Tucking the blanket tightly around her, Zhaara called out, “Come in.”

Khyra sat back on the rug, covering her drawn up knees with the blanket.

Entering the bedroom, Thorin greeted them, “Good morning.” And looking at Zhaara, he asked, “How are you doing?”

“Good morning. I am doing quite wonderfully”, responded Zhaara, a beaming smile on her face.

Pleasantly surprised, Thorin said, “That's wonderful to hear! Say, I haven't seen anything like a kitchen here ...”

“I do not have one. Shinzhara do not need to eat,” explained Zhaara. “Oh, but you will need to. I apologize. I cannot offer you anything,” she said with embarrassment.

“It's not a problem. I still have half a loaf of bread in my bag,” said Khyra. “We can eat that, and later we can ride to the tavern where we have been resting yesterday.”

“All right,” said Thorin. “Are you getting up, too?”

Khyra looked at Zhaara, who smiled and said, “Yes. We will be joining you shortly.”

As soon as Thorin had left the room and closed the door, Khyra grumbled, “I wish I wouldn't need to eat, either.”

Zhaara folded back her blanket and moved her legs to the side of the bed. Leaning down, she caressed Khyra's dark-brown curls and said softly, “We have all time in the world, but you need to stay healthy.”

“So do you,” said Khyra admonishingly, “So, don't you forget to take your medicine again.”

Zhaara cast her eyes down and smiled. “I shall not,” she promised.

They shared another tender kiss, and when Zhaara had finally dressed, they went to join Thorin in the main room.

Thorin was sitting at the table, hunched over the map, drawing details over the red-lined area with his quill.

Intrigued, Zhaara looked at his drawings and said, “Would you like detailed map of taboo-land?”

Surprised, Thorin looked up, “You have one?”

“Of course,” said Zhaara and walked over to a shelf on the other side of the room, while Khyra sat down next to Thorin to have some bread.

When Zhaara returned with a bundle of paper, Thorin put his map aside. His jaw dropped as he looked at the huge map Zhaara enfolded. “By the Gods! Never in my life have I seen such a huge and detailed map! Where did you get this?”

Zhaara tilted her head and smirked. “I made it myself. It is my pastime during cold season when the river is running high.”

“I stand in awe of your talent,” said Thorin gravely. “Your mastery is truly extraordinary.”

Bowing her head, Zhaara said, “Much obliged.” Seating herself adjacent to Thorin, she continued, “Please, keep this map to yourself. It does not include Shinzhara land, but it would not be desirable if many humans were to enter taboo-land. It serves as barrier between human land and Shinzhara land. I will give you map of your area as well, that you may share with whomever you like.”

“I feel honoured to be bestowed with your trust and such precious gifts. No other eyes but mine and Khyra's shall ever see this map. I am profoundly grateful,” said Thorin sincerely.

#

When it was time for Khyra and Thorin to head for the tavern, Zhaara accompanied them. Nearing the village, Zhaara pulled the hood over her head, so its shadow would cover her eyes and part of her face.

“Why are you still doing this?” asked Khyra.

“So humans will not see my eyes,” explained Zhaara.

Khyra made a face. “Well, that much I could guess. But why? I mean, you are with us now, you don't need to be afraid.”

Hesitating, Zhaara stated, “I am not afraid. Shinzhara do not fear humans. But humans fear Shinzhara.”

Khyra eyed her sceptically and said, “But you are not Shinzhara. And in case you haven't noticed, they fear you with the hood as well. However, with or without hood, I don't think anyone will fear you when you are with us.”

“I agree,” said Thorin. “They will certainly stare and they will whisper, but seeing you with us, they will get used to it eventually.”

“And the next time they see me alone, they will attack. No. Thank you,” said Zhaara angrily.

Appalled, Khyra asked, “Have they done that? Did they injure you?”

“Yes, they have done that. As have Shinzhara. Humans have not injured me. I may not be fully Shinzhara but humans cannot injure me. However, I did injure them and that is not something I enjoy doing,” explained Zhaara agitatedly.

Ruefully, Khyra mumbled, “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.”

Reaching over, Zhaara touched Khyra's arm and said softly, “I know. You meant good. I apologize for reacting so harshly. My experiences with humans and Shinzhara have not been particularly pleasant. But you are both different and I am very grateful to have met you both.”

At the tavern, while they were waiting for their meals to arrive, Khyra asked cautiously, “Would you dare showing yourself to Mhaya and the others you helped? I'm sure, that Maya would love to get to know you.”

Zhaara gently covered Khyra's hand with hers and said, “Perhaps.”

#

On their way to Thorin and Khyra's hometown, Zhaara reluctantly agreed to reveal herself to those she had helped; only in privacy, though.

In the evening, Thorin, Zhaara and the six women she had helped were sitting in Thorin's parlour; and to Zhaara's surprise, none of them minded her being a hybrid.

They were happily telling Zhaara about their new lives and in turn Zhaara answered their questions.

At some point Mhaya asked Zhaara, “What would be your alternative, Zhaara?”

Caught off guard, Zhaara averted her gaze and said quietly, “There is no alternative for me.”

The others instantly protested, talking across each other, until Dharia silenced them and asked Zhaara, “Did you help women in other towns, too?”

“Yes,” said Zhaara.

“How many overall?”

Zhaara thought for a moment and said, “34.”

The others murmured in amazement and Dharia asked, “Would you like to get to know

them?"

Hesitantly, Zhaara agreed.

"How would you like living among people with whom you can just be yourself?"

Zhaara cast her eyes down and said truthfully, "I do not know. I cannot imagine this."

"The land opposite the forest of taboo-land would be perfect for a settlement," remarked Thorin excitedly.

"And no one else would want to live there," Khirina, a middle aged woman, commented enthusiastically, and she added, "And my husband certainly won't mind. He's so gentle, that he plants an extra row of cabbages beside the field every year and carries all the caterpillars there so that they may turn into butterflies."

The others laughed and Mhaya noted, "He really is the gentlest man I ever met, Khirina."

"And you won't need to worry about the children. If they grow up knowing you, there will be no problems," assured Khirina.

The women and Thorin enthusiastically exchanged ideas until Khyra noticed that Zhaara had fallen completely silent and was looking quite uneasy.

Gently touching Zhaara's shoulder, Khyra asked, "What's wrong?"

Zhaara took a deep breath and said frustrated, "I do not feel comfortable with this. You are talking about leaving your homes, changing your lives completely. What if I do not like living among people? I told you, I do not know. I have never lived among people where I could 'just be myself'. I grew up in taboo land with only my parents. When my parents joined ancestors, I went to Shinzhara land. I was not welcome there. I left to live among humans. I was not welcome there either, so I went back to house where I grew up. I have lived there ever since. Alone. I know you all mean good. But I feel overwhelmed by so many people suddenly wanting to live with me, and I do not know if I can meet your expectations."

Khyra pulled Zhaara into an embrace and said softly, "You don't need to meet any expectations."

"She is right, Zhaara," said Dharia, "For the moment we are just exchanging ideas. It seems we all like the idea of living together. And perhaps some of the other women you helped would like that, too. But you can't raise a village over night. If our ideas can be realised, then it will take at least a year before we can actually move. That's already some time to get used to the idea of people liking you as you are. If our ideas work out, you can still see and try if this alternative fits you. If it doesn't, that's all right, of course. At least you will have well-meaning neighbours then. That's already a better alternative than you dared to think of, isn't it?"

Zhaara nodded.

"So, don't worry," said Dharia smiling, "You just do whatever feels good for you. We have no expectations. You already helped us make our dreams come true. Now it's our turn to help you to make your dreams come true. And if you have stopped dreaming, we will just need to find out what makes you happy."

"It would make me happy if I could go to bed now," whispered Zhaara.

The others chuckled and Khyra said grinning, "Then come on, I'll make you happy."

Zhaara blushed and followed Khyra while the others were laughing and wishing them a good night.

#

Three years later, Zhaara was standing on the front porch of their new home, leaning on the railing and looking over at the still growing village.

Khyra approached her and gently embraced her from behind. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," agreed Zhaara and turned around. With an intense, loving look, she tenderly caressed Khyra's face and said, "Thank you, for giving me an alternative."

###

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