

## Serenes Forest Scribbles Piece by Garrett Mallory Scott

### No Longer “Human”

He sipped a cold, tall mug of ale while his steel eyes kept the patrons further back than his sword ever could. They had no fear of the coming war here. The talk of the day was the closing of the harbour - occupying Daein soldiers had reported Crimean Army stragglers in the area and would broke no chance of their escape.

Zihark considered his options.

With the harbour closed getting to Gallia was going to be near impossible now. His fruitless journey to try and cross the border had once more been thwarted by his countrymen. Not that he expected it to have worked out anyway.

Even at the farthest end of the only Beorc country favourable to the Laguz he'd found no respite. The black-clad armed men arrived days ago, securing their grip on the last distant reaches of the country. In times of peace perhaps the open attitude of Crimea's King Ramon would've allowed Zihark to make a slow transition to a peaceful life where he may enjoy the company of both races on Tellius. But now Daein had followed him here and once more begun to impose its villainous rule over a people who seemed more than happy to accept their hatred.

Perhaps he should join his fellow countrymen, fight the remnants of the country he'd entered hoping to escape the prejudice in his homeland. Once dealing with this renegade band of mercenaries maybe he'd find a way into higher ranks, perhaps get the opportunity to restore his reputation at home, work from within to make things a better place.

No, he'd never go back. His head pounded as memories of the hunts seared across it like a fresh flame. He gulped down the rest of his mug and went up to the tavern's bar.

“One more please” he asked the keeper, knowing his coin was running low. What mattered it now? He hadn't the ability to pay for passage to the beast kingdom's waters anymore. With Daein now in control here all his hopes of surrendering to the Gallians were dashed. A faint light had risen when they'd conquered the country, an escape south to the beast tribe which no doubt many refuges would be taking. That was where she was from, and they'd always dreamed of living their together...

“Pardon me, buddy. I haven't seen you around town before. You a traveling mercenary?”

Zihark looked up. Surprisingly this wasn't addressed to him as he'd become used to. A young boy with shocking blue hair and a large sword on his back turned to speak with the local vigilante group that Zihark had noticed eyeing him up since his arrival.

“Yes, I suppose you could say that” the boy answered.  
Zihark tuned them out as his next drink arrived with a bang.

“Maybe you should go easy on that, there might be trouble about...”the innkeeper hinted at as Zihark handed him a tip.

“I’ll keep that in mind” the young man said and went back to his table. He watched the boy talk with the vigilante, quite untaken with the proposition. Memories of his own youth once more sparked inside and though he tried to drown them with brew they made a sharp resurgence when the vigilante pulled a blade to hand to the boy.

A Laguzslayer.

Zihark slammed his mug down, spilling some drink. A few nearby guests nervously cast him glances but he didn’t move or even grip his Killing Edge. That damned weapon the boy admired sent chills up his spine. It was the one that had taken the lives of...

He didn’t want to recall, didn’t want to revisit that terrible past. As the boy left without accepting more than the blade the anger in Zihark threatened to take over. He wanted to slay the ignorant youth and show him the cruelties Beorc were so happy to lay upon those they considered sub-humans.

“Damn, lost another one!” one of the vigilantes said to their leader as he returned to their table.

“Naw, that one’s got fire in his eyes. He’ll be back. Someone like that, when they see a sub-human, they understand just what it is we’re fighting to protect.”

The leader’s eyes suddenly fell upon Zihark and they stared at each other across the room.

“...Yessir” the leader said at last, turning back to his mates. “I know a good killer when I see one.”

Zihark gripped his mug harder as he swallowed his anger with the bubbly contents within.

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Daein. Nearly ten years ago...

Clutching his first sword, a mediocre iron stick, the boy swung around to plant it firmly and deeply into the enemy’s flank. Then groaned as it stayed stuck in the tree.

“Master!” Zihark cried as he pulled and pulled to no avail.

“Erg, ugh, come... on!” The blade didn’t budge but with a last tug he felt the added weight of his massive teacher, Moto.

“Woah!” the boy cried and came tumbling down as his weapon popped loose. Zihark looked up, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun, and saw the rough leather-like face of Moto giving him quite the admonishing look.

“You’re putting too much power into your strikes Zihark. You need to make quick, targeted cuts in succession; otherwise your enemy will overwhelm you before you can even land a major blow on him.”

“Yes Moto” Zihark sighed and stood up with his master’s help.

“Come, enough practice for today. You’re doing well but you have far to go.”

They returned to the hut and ate a good lunch. Zihark dreaded what his mother might say; all this time spent with the large hermit man at the edge of town. Only when he told her he was taking up sword crafting had she’d finally been content to let him study.

“I’d still rather you learned something more peaceful, like becoming a farmer” she often complained. Zihark argued what he did helped peace survive in the very unstable country. They weren’t close to Nevassa but they could feel the ripples coming from the capital. A mysterious illness dropping the royal family like flies, panic all over the nation with worries of a Begnion invasion that might return them to their former mother country’s rule, what they needed was a strong leader, someone who could unite them in this time of crisis against enemies at every turn.

“Maybe if you were simply going on sub-human hunts I could understand but no human should ever turn on another, it just isn’t right.” Zihark had left his home after that morning with her parting words on his mind. Odd, why was it they called the Laguz “sub-human”? The taste felt sour in his mouth, and the hunts that went on around while never actually reaching the village always filled him with curiosity. How he’d like to go on one someday, to see what they really were like, those frightful beast people.

“Zihark! Pay attention!” The boy snapped to as Moto once more showed him the proper slashing technique. Though his little blade was short and stubby, not many good-quality weapons around these days, the old man was still convinced he could teach the boy to cut through the air like the wind and dance his way into any battle.

“I don’t see how this can protect me Moto...” Zihark complained while dutifully writing the instructions down.

“If you can learn the movements of your foe you will see his weaknesses and exploit them. Lots of men like to pick up broad swords and swing them around like a big sharp club, but the finer

movements of the Myrmidon allow for precision strikes, critical blows that can fell your enemy without them ever laying hands on you.”

“Only girls become Myrmidons” Zihark complained. This earned him a swift blow to the head.

“Don’t be a fool! I’d trade all the most powerful warriors in Daein for a few well-trained girls, or Myrmidons. My master himself was a Myrmidon, he’s now such a capable swordmaster he can wield blades only the ancient heroes were capable of holding.”

“You mean that crazy guy who lives in the desert?”

Another quick whack and Zihark nearly passed out. Perhaps Moto had a point after all...

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Zihark headed home at the sun began to set. His head hurt and he felt a conflicted sense of place. He always was an outsider in the town, the others never liked to play with him and while he admired Moto and the old man’s nature, the others stayed far from his master, saying something was strange about him. It was true he was the only one who ever spoke up against the sub-human hunts but Zihark simply accepted people were different. Why was that so hard for his friends and family to grasp? He sighed and kicked at the dirt as his house loomed ahead.

He didn’t really want to go home; he felt troubled and had a foreboding sense of his future. Would he ever really fit in anywhere? He wanted to protect his homeland yet also find people he could agree with outside of the normal prejudices of Daein. The poor kid felt it impossible and gave up dreams of standing next to a powerful leader of Daein who might be different than they all were in the past, heck maybe it’d even be a woman!

“Come on, this way!”

Zihark’s perceptive hearing picked up a noise coming from nearby trees. Several young boys he’d tried to be friends with to no avail snuck away into the forest. An odd twinge plucked at his heart. It seemed like they were on a serious journey and a small voice told Zihark this might be a chance to do something worthwhile, if not at least win their favour. He rushed back to the hill near Moto’s house, where he hid his sword, then ran pell-mell after the boys.

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“What the- Zihark?! Don’t scare us like that!” the leader of the bunch said. His name was Homasa and Zihark remembered hearing he was rather tough though a bit forgettable. He was also a Myrmidon. Apart from that though he had little in common with Zihark.

“What are you guys doing?”

“Shh! We’re on a hunt!”

Zihark's heart jumped. Homasa gestured the others to follow. So that's why he'd felt such an odd sense earlier! The opportunity had presented itself and the young swordsman faced the dilemma of whether to continue or not.

"Are you gonna make use of that?" Homasa sharply pointed at Zihark as he hurried alongside. The boy looked at his iron sword.

"...I guess."

Homasa rolled his eyes but didn't shoo him away. They pushed deeper into the forest as night fell. It was getting tough to see...

As the time passed they began to hear voices in the distance, though Zihark saw no light of torches. The sun's glow was fading and they were moving fast. It was hard going but he kept up rather well, impressing himself. Perhaps he was Daein army material after all.

"There!" At Homasa's mark they all dropped and looked down into a small clearing in the woods. About ten people all gathered, quietly discussing unknown matters. What grabbed Zihark's attention the most however was the little details he could see in the small light - They had tails and furry ears! Laguz...

"Sub-humans..." Homasa spat under his breath. The others shifted excitedly except Zihark, who, while uncomfortable, remained focused, desperately reviewing all his master's teachings in the space of a few seconds.

"Keep your eyes on the enemy, give him a small target, and never put your limbs anywhere near his grip. If he's a Laguz he could tear your arm right off!" Moto's echoing voice reassured Zihark and he steadied himself.

"On three, we attack. No survivors." Homasa's eyes came to Zihark.

"You with us?"

Zihark didn't know how to answer. He nodded tensely and Homasa dismissed it with a comment about "covering the rear". The rest of them picked their targets and tightened up like runners of the most important race they ever attempted - one for survival.

"-you sure?" A voice spoke softly.

"Yes, to the east, a place where another Laguz race still dwells. That is where I came from. You may be able to reach-"

The figures below continued to speak but as Homasa began to count - "One... Two..." - one of them, whose back had been to the boys up on the hill, turned around and looked about in the dark. Zihark's heart jumped into his throat.

"Moto?!"

"THREE!!!" Homasa and the boys charged. Zihark sat frozen, watching in horror. The sub-humans scattered except a few who readied their defense. It was too late. Homasa's group slammed into them with force and they fell swiftly.

"Finish them off!" they raced after the few survivors. Zihark rose and ran after Moto, who made haste into the woods. His feet pounded the ground and soon the traces of all the others vanished. Moto lingered just ahead and Zihark, not exactly sure what he would do when he caught up to his master, kept up pace as best he could. They ran further and further, deeper, darker...

Suddenly the sky flew open before him and Zihark froze. Ahead was a sheer cliff and nowhere to run. The boy froze as he saw Moto turn to face him.

"So... you've joined the hunts as well then Zihark? I thought you were better than them."

Zihark brandished his blade and saw the cool gaze of his own eyes staring back. He immediately dropped it to the ground.

"What are you doing?"

"What's going on Moto? Why are you helping the sub-humans? Please, I don't want to fight you."

"There he is!"

Zihark turned to see Homasa appear from the bushes, his own blade, a much more deadly looking weapon, shimmering in the moonlight. A Laguzslayer.

"Come Zihark, we can take the old man. Why have you dropped your blade?"

Zihark hadn't time to respond before Moto drew his sword - the infamous Killing Edge. Homasa noticeably flinched.

"You think this old man can't protect himself? Come on boy. Continue your hunt. Or are you only unafraid of the unarmed innocent?"

"Er... you're a human! Why are you siding with the sub-humans?!" Homasa demanded. Moto sighed and looked at Zihark.

"I thought it wasn't a rare trait for people who care about others, as different as they may be. I guess I was wrong."

Zihark trembled and stood where he was, debating which side was right. Homasa stepped forward.

"Put down your weapon, or I'll be forced to kill you for the good of Daein's people!"

"Ha! Daein doesn't know what it means to have a people, it only wants for elite human pure-bloods to reign while the rest of us suffer. I won't give in."

"Then I've no choice. Ki-hyah!"

Zihark watched the fight with amazement. They spun about, clashed blades, spilled blood. It was quick and merciless, yet all he could think of was how like a dance it seemed. How he wished to be able to move as smoothly, as gracefully as his teacher did. Homasa was good, but he was no match for the bigger man. Soon his Laguzslayer was launched into the air and came dangerously close blade-down into the ground by Zihark. He breathed weakly. He would be no match for either party himself.

"Now run home you pup, before I gut you." Moto growled. Homasa gritted his teeth.

"Zihark! Toss me the sword! Zihark!"

Zihark looked between them. Something in his master's eye told him if he dared make good on Homasa's plea then the boy would die. But if he didn't then what kind of a Daein man was he?

"It's your choice Zihark. I'm done teaching you as of tonight. Unless you see sense and let these punks run home."

A silence filled the air. Suddenly a scream called from the forest beyond and as Moto quickly glanced about and drew back to see Zihark he found the boy had pulled Homasa's blade from the dirt, along with his own.

"So, you will aid them then?" Moto prepared to deliver Homasa's deathblow.

"No." He tossed the Laguzslayer aside and grabbed his own blade, the pitiful iron sword.

"I challenge you Moto. Run Homasa!"

The Daein youth didn't need to be told twice and he vanished out of Zihark's life, for the time present anyways.

The two warriors stood apart, like so many training sessions, except now lethal force was an added ingredient.

“Why are you aiding them Moto? They kill our people and steal from us!”

“Is that what your mother told you?” came his master’s cool reply.

“Come Zihark, the time for words is over, I want to see how much you’ve learned.

Zihark bit his lip but he hadn’t time to protest to Moto when the man charged him.

He expected a clash of steel to shatter the silence, but calm remained as Zihark somehow miraculously dodged the blow.

“Good, light footwork!”

Another attack, Zihark nimbly shifted aside, out of harm’s way. He began to realise the old man was going easy on him. He might have a chance.

“Come then!” Moto flew at him once more, this time Zihark twisted, barely dodging but giving himself time to land not one, but two adept blows.

“Ah!” Moto dropped the Killing Edge as his wounded arms clutched at each other. It was done; Zihark had disarmed him!

“Now Moto, come with me and explain yourself. We will sort this out I promise.” Zihark tossed his iron sword over the cliff, the fight done. He extended this time an empty, welcoming hand to the old man who, completely out of the character Zihark had come to know, smiled warmly and laughed.

“Here they are!”

Suddenly half a dozen of the youths sprang from the trees, surrounding Zihark and Moto.

“Good job Zihark, we’ll handle him now!” the lead boy declared.

“What? Wait-!” Zihark held up his unarmed hands in protest but the boys were charged with a blood lust, their tunics sprayed with murder already. They came at Moto but the large man didn’t even move.

“You think you can take on just any opponent? I’ll show you what a real fight is you snout-nosed whelps!”



Zihark's eyes widened. Like the stories his mother told him as a child, to keep him out of the woods at night, his master reared up tall and proud and, in the glow of the full moon, howled like a beast and began to change...

His fingers became claws, his teeth grew long and sharp, fur sprouted from his body and before the astounded boys and Zihark the man became... a wolf.

"M-Moto?!"

The tailless and earless wolf gave him a look with Moto's fierce eyes. Then, as the boys yelled for its death it lunged at them.

Zihark fell back as they were torn to shreds, the monster leapt about like the animal it was and stained the blue-green grass of night with dark droplets of fading life. The boys fell grievously wounded and Moto, or whatever had been Moto, silenced them forever with its teeth.

Zihark's instinct drew him to the only means of protection nearby - the dropped Killing Edge. He grabbed his master's weapon and pointed its reddened blade at the foe, which froze as the last boy was crushed to a limp doll within its jaws.

The wolf turned and sized up Zihark.

"Do you still wish to give me aid, after what you have seen?" a growly voice spoke.

Zihark looked in fear at the gruesome jaws that addressed him, covered in blood. Then he gazed down at his own chosen weapon, dripping likewise with Homasa's blood. Zihark didn't know what to do, what to think, his whole world had been shattered in this seemingly unending night.

Then, the scream came again.

This time it was frighteningly close, and the owner of it soon appeared. A young girl smashed her way out of the trees, collapsing between Zihark and Moto. Instinctively the boy dove to help her but a howl from Moto paralyzed Zihark. He then saw, as Moto came to her aid, that the girl too was of the beast tribe. A cat Laguz.

"Are you hurt?!" the growly voice asked in alarm. He didn't have time to hear the answer. Another boy came from the bushes and, as he'd been worked up to do, plunged a devilish Laguzslayer into Moto's back.

"AAAAAWWWWOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!"

The wolf howled like a demon, then fell, blood pouring from its hide, eyes looking pleadingly at Zihark before going dark as death fell upon his master.

The cool air blew into Zihark's face as his stomach flipped over. The boy grinned and pulled out the sword with a disgusting noise.

"A wolf! I've never seen one before! They'll give me an award for this!" The boy laughed like a loon and turned to the girl, helpless before him."

"Now little kitty, let's have some fun before I finish you off." The boy's hand evilly hovered to her pants as the girl cried before him, unable to move. But she wasn't the only one present.

"Don't..."

"Huh?" He looked up at Zihark.

"You..."

The boy brandished the Laguzslayer again as the master's pupil approached.

"TOUCH HER!"

This time steel did ring out, but it was from the first blow that disarmed the youth, the second made the same squelching noise that had sounded Moto's death blow. The boy, a look of terror on his face, fell back, letting gravity slide Zihark's blade out of his chest. It wasn't the slashes that Moto had taught him, it was the mad plunge of a youth who has witness the fearsome nature of human beings... and dared to defy it.

The dead boy rolled a little then came to a mute halt. Zihark panted and looked down at the terrified Laguz girl.

"...What are you?" her tiny voice dared ask.

Zihark couldn't answer; he was furious, afraid and above all desperately trying to hold onto a part of him that he still knew to be honest. In that moment, with the life of an innocent spread before him, the young man, unlike so many Daeins and Beorc across the continent, extended once more his true strike towards her - an empty hand.

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They raced east.

"He said it was far beyond the mountains. A land where Laguz and Beorc live together."

These few words drove his feet, kept him running for days when he thought he'd fall. Zihark, the young girl on his back, snuck about through the countryside, moving at night as the moon changed its shape, and made for the legendary place Moto had described to the girl and her

charge, a group of escaped slaves hoping to find peace, somewhere beyond Daein's borders known only as Hatari.

They frequently passed villages and stole, unsure if they were being watched or chased, but kept going as it was their only option. After four days they rested in a cave and had their first real conversation since that night they met.

"I did not know there were wolf Laguz..." Zihark muttered aloud.

"Neither did we. My friends were tigers and cats, and there was even a hawk. But we were told the wolves had gone extinct, like the heron tribe."

Zihark looked at her quizzically.

"You know the bird tribe with the white wings. From Serenes forest, in Begnion."

The boy knew little of the countries outside Daein, let alone what manner of Laguz lived there. He wouldn't even come to know of the dragons until many years had passed.

"They were killed by the Begnion people for assassinating their apostle. I couldn't believe it. They are normally a peaceful group that choose not to fight. Humans once more showing their true colours."

Zihark looked down. The Killing Edge felt heavy at his side and he pulled it from the sheath. Though it wasn't one of the Laguzslayers that had been lying around that night as well, the girl immediately backed away, despite him having treated her wounds and promising her he'd take her to Hatari, if they could find it.

"It's ok, I just want to clean it..."

She relaxed slightly as he pulled a cloth and sword oil taken from his master's body (before shoving it over the cliff to prevent any mutilation from the no-doubt vengeance-fueled townsfolk that would follow) and began to remove the blood coating the blade. It still shone red as he worked but seemed to come clean regardless. He felt her eyes watch him carefully work with the metal, one of his favourite tasks.

"You are beautiful."

He looked in surprise to see her narrow pupils staring at his work.

"I mean... your skill working with that tool, it's magnificent. I used to clean pots and pans, but you make it look like an art, working on your human tools."

Zihark offered a small smile and went back to his efforts.

“Why are you so dedicated to this? Weapons only bring death and pain.”

Zihark went on, letting the answer flow honestly, which felt so good after these past few days of suffering and lies.

“I always wanted to join the army, be someone skilled and untouchable on the field of battle. That is what my master Moto, the wolf, taught me. But I never wanted to kill. Only protect. That’s my goal, to be someone who can come to the aid of those who need it.”

He paused, looking deep into her eyes.

“Whomever that might be.”

She nodded and relaxed, even scooting closer to him.

“I’ve felt so alone my whole life. I was taken from my family and raised to be a servant. They made me clean and work hard, no rest, with beatings though they weren’t bad. I thought I was simply meant to serve humans; that was the role of Laguz they said. Then I met a man, a tiger named Muarim, from my own tribe. He told me we are meant to be equal and that some hu- I mean, Beorc, want to help us and see us as their friends. He hoped to one day see that future where all Laguz and Beorc could live together as such equals. I didn’t think it was possible but one day he helped me escape with a small group, but stayed behind himself. We made our way north, hoping to get to Crimea, a place they said Beorc might help us. But then we met Moto and he told us the wolves still live, and would help us if we could make it to them. He said he left them long ago, seeking to find more Laguz but became trapped in Daein and was forced to disfigure himself to fit in. He was so kind, we really hoped we could... we could...”

She folded her arms over her knees and began to sob. Zihark paused once more in his work and looked at her. It was strange; she seemed, even with tears and red blush colouring her face, very pretty. Someone worth protecting.

“My name is Zihark. Moto was my master. I will finish his work; I will see you to Hatari. I promise.”

She looked at him and sniffed, reaching out a bandaged hand.

“My name is Kitra.”

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The next few days saw them still on the lamb, dodging villages and any Beorc contact, apart from the few times Zihark was forced to go into town to fetch food with the little money he had. Mostly he stole. Luckily his skills aided him in this. If he wasn’t so set on the way of the blade he could’ve made an excellent thief. Kitra healed slowly, and it was tough going.

“I can disguise myself Zihark, then you don’t have to do everything alone.”

“Absolutely not! You’re injured and if they found you out then it’d be all over, no offense.”

She frowned.

“Then I’ll disfigure myself! Like Moto did! Lots of Laguz do it!”

“Kitra, don’t make me worry about you when we’re not together, please. I want to make sure you’re safe while I get you food. You must let me care about- I mean for you. If I think about you hurt I just don’t know what I’ll do! I’ll go crazy!”

She finally gave in, but Zihark noticed an odd twinkle in her eye when he’d told her how he wanted to protect her.

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On the tenth day they came to the mountains.

“It’s a long way up...” Kitra said, shivering with anticipation.

“It’s ok, I can still carry you. Then the desert is just beyond and across that must be Hatari.

“Zihark, what if it’s not there?” her worried eyes gazed into his. He felt an odd sensation in his stomach but shook it off.

“Don’t worry, I may not be much but when I set out to do something I don’t stop until I’ve done it or I’ve died. And I’m still alive aren’t I?”

Before she could comment on his rather morbid humour she once more found herself on his back bouncing gently as he stepped up the jagged slopes.

It was hard going for a few hours and he was forced to stop and rest many times. They came to a small hollow and perched precariously on a ledge as he caught his breath.

“I’m starting to feel better, maybe I can try going myself?” she offered.

“No, not while it’s so dangerous. Maybe on the other side, ok?”

“Ok Zihark” she smiled. Safety felt so close, if uncertain. Who knew what lay ahead, though it was clear what was behind.

“I see black.”

“Eh?”

“Down below, men in black, walking around. There are a lot of them.”

“That’ll be the Daein army. We’re pretty close to Nevassa. Perhaps we might even see it from the top.”

“You don’t think they’re looking for us, do you?”

Zihark smiled and petted her head. It felt oddly enjoyable.

“Even if they were, they wouldn’t think to look for a beast Laguz in the mountains. That’s crow territory, right?”

She smiled. As he lay back to finish his rest he felt the odd touch of a tail slyly wrapping itself behind him.

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The continued for another day until they came to the top. It was severe, the wind whipping at them, the ground crushing Zihark’s feet in his boots. He was hardened by the experience and sleeping on the mountain proved a wicked feat, but they somehow survived.

“So thirsty...” Kitra whispered in his ear. He set her down and took out the water pouch. It was pitifully deflated.

“Here, I can squeeze you out the rest.” He held it to her mouth but she pushed it back.

“What about the desert? How will we find water for the journey after this?”

“Don’t worry little one” he smiled warmly, feeling a bit light-headed. “We’ll find a way, we’ve done amazing up to now. Trust me and it’ll be alright.”

She smiled and opened wide as he wrung the bag between his hands tight. When it hurt too much to push any more out he let go and she swilled the water around happily in her mouth.

Zihark put the bag back then looked as she comically tapped him on the shoulder with her cheeks still puffed full of water.

“Huh?”

Before he could react she was on his lips, forcing water into his mouth. He fell back and coughed, having swallowed it.

“That’s disgusting!” he yelled, coughing even more as she laughed.

“I thought it would be better if you got the water, you are carrying us both.”

“Ya but you could’ve warned me before you... you know...”

An awkward silence fell over them.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that...” she said looking away.

“W-well I didn’t... I mean I didn’t mind...” Zihark stuttered as her gaze came back to his curiously.

“I just... would’ve appreciated a little time to get ready.”

“...Would you like some time now?”

“Eh?” He looked at her. Somehow, subtly, she seemed cute, a little coy perhaps, even under the dirt and bandages. Zihark swallowed.

“Well, uh, yes, I would appreciate that.”

“Good” she grinned.

They sat staring at each other. Zihark shifted into a more comfortable position but couldn’t really seem to find a final resting spot. He leaned back and breathed to clear his airway of the forced water and closed his eyes in focus. His sword pushed against his belt annoyingly and he shook out some irritation. Finally he opened his eyes to see she hadn’t moved, continuing to watch him.

“You know... you look awfully mature like that.”

“Huh? Well... thank you.”

She smiled.

“Are you ready now?”

Zihark blinked. She couldn’t be serious... but...

The ears... the tail... those gorgeous eyes...

Was it so wrong to feel for someone or something that wasn’t what he was? The people below would call it disgusting, even wrong, but she was still a person, a living creature that could love. And what was more “human” than to love another? That’s one thing people prided themselves on, being more peaceful and loving than the sub-human “savages”. Even if they would disagree with another kind of love it wasn’t hurting them.

To hell with people, came Zihark's final thought, they can suffer without the joy of the love I am experiencing right now. I choose to be a Beorc, no longer a "human".

He thought this as her lips once more met his, staying there for a long time...

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At dawn they came to the peak. Kitra finally was able to stand on her own feet and immediately jeopardized the whole mission by jumping up and down in glee.

"WE DID IT!" she called across the land, her voice echoing far beyond. Zihark had to restrain her lest they fall off, a one-way trip straight to Hatari in more than one sense.

"Hehe, sorry. You know, you're really strong, I love the way you hold me..." she winked. Zihark shook his head and planted a kiss on her forehead. She grabbed his face and slammed another on his lips. They were tired, worn, but triumphant.

"Soon we'll be there, home!"

"We?" Zihark asked and her face fell.

"I meant... I thought..."

"Laguz and Beorc... do you think they could ever be that close? I mean... I've heard stories about the Branded..."

Kitra looked away, to the east.

"It does sound like a dream doesn't it? Even if Moto came from there, perhaps it isn't precisely the way he described, or maybe it doesn't exist anymore. Such an idea is hard to fathom."

She looked back at him, suddenly dour as well. Then her face tightened into a determined glare.

"Well why can't it?! I don't care if there's a Hatari or not, I know that there are good people, Beorc and Laguz in this world! And I've found the one that I want to stay with. Even if he... doesn't want to stay with me..."

Zihark's eyes glowed as he met her gaze and it took her aback for a moment. Then he kissed her deeply, their tongues twisting fierce in a blatant disregard for cultural norms.

"He does, and he would follow you to the ends of the world. Even if like they be drowned in the Great Flood and no real Hatari exists. Life would still be full with only you."

She smiled and began to cry. Their love, transgressing bounds that had kept Laguz and Beorc apart for centuries, shone bright even in the new sun of that fateful day. Sadly, as is the fate of



all beautiful things in this world, those who didn't understand sought to prevent this love from blossoming fully in its time. And Zihark cried out as the hand axe slashed his back open.

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Tumbling... smashing... cutting... No sword could've done to Zihark what that mountain did as he plunged down. Yet, though he might have protected himself by spreading his arms and arresting his descent, he held tightly to the thing nestled safely inside his clutch. Kitra screeched as they fell, finally resting in a heap on a ledge below. Zihark shook as she finally pried him off of her and felt at his wounds.

"Zihark? Zihark?!!!"

Above a pair of large wings sliced through the air. Dracoknights.

"Zihark, get up! Please!"

From upon a black wyvern man with a black eyepatch gazed down at the helpless couple.

"Don't harm the Daein, we want only to kill the Lagu- the sub-human." He commanded. Two other Dracoknights swooped down, still wearing the red armour of Begnion. They were involving themselves in yet another escapade to prove worthy to the new proclaimed king of Daein.

"Kitra, run!" Zihark weakly called. She froze until he kicked her right off of him and she made her way back up the mountain. Zihark stood and somehow drew his blade; blood pouring down his back and bringing him dangerously close to collapse.

The black wyvern swooped down as the other two headed after Kitra.

"Let me help you-"

The wyvern bucked back as Zihark swung his sword. With a Killing Edge he was still able to bite, if not quite put up a long fight with the rider, who did not want to hurt him.

"Ugh, this is all some much trouble. What would the commander say? Well, we gotta bring him alive."

The man kicked at the wyvern's sides and flew up over to see the other two cornering the girl. She had transformed into her cat state and uneasily faced against them.

"She's no fighter..." the man realised.

Suddenly he saw the young Daein boy approaching, injured as he was.

“What the hell’s he doing?”

Zihark’s fury pushed him to his limits. He pulled himself up to see Kitra fighting off the two soldiers with little success. Her wounds began to tear open as they cut new ones into her fur, staining it red.

“Kitra!”

She looked at him sadly as he charged and swung at the nearest rider. Taken by surprise, the rider flew backwards, crashing into the mountain and floundering. The other turned and faced off with Zihark.

In a flash Zihark dodged the snapping teeth of the mount and jumped up on the crook of its wing. The rider swung at him with the same axe that had cut his back open but this time Zihark, in the superior position, slashed it aside. He readied for the killing blow but froze as the corner of his eye caught a horrific sight.

The other rider, recovering, drew back a javelin and with a powerful thrust it came right at Zihark. There was no time to dodge.

That same sickening sound that Moto’s body made when the Laguzslayer had been pulled from it was echoed to Zihark, but this time it wasn’t his master’s body that he saw take the lethal blow.

It was his lover’s.

“NOOOOO!!!” Zihark leapt from the wyvern as the two riders prepared more throwing weapons.

“STOP!” the commander cried. The one-eyed man on the black wyvern flew between them and the bloodied lovers.

“Return to Shiharam, tell him we’ve done what we were asked.”

Obediently the two flew off as the man looked at the poor sight before him.

Zihark clutched Kitra in his arms as she transformed one last time to her Beorc-like form.

“Zi-Zihark... you have to run... please!”

“No, no, I won’t leave you!” he cried.

“P-please... as long as you are alive... I... I am happy.”

Her face was dotted with tears, but not her own. Zihark held her close, feeling her breaths slow, her pulse fade. He kissed her and the one-eyed man trembled at the crime he'd committed. He dismounted but respectfully held back until the end.

"I wonder... if there truly is a Hatari... Will you find it for me one day Zihark?" Kitra begged.

"Yes... I promise... I promise..."

"And you'll find someone there you'll really love..."

"No, I won't ever love anyone but you. Kitra, oh Kitra please..."

"Goodbye Zihark... even if it wasn't meant to be, I still... loved you... with all my-"

The one-eyed man had to turn away as the girl went limp in the man's arms. He cried like a child, which he still only was, until today...

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Zihark vomited into the Crimean street. He wiped his mouth and looked in a nearby puddle at his own sad reflection. Ten years. Had it all been so long ago? He'd been but a boy then. Barely surviving when the man whose face he didn't even remember carried him to a station to heal him.

Wracked with guilt and anger he was bound, but the rider said he was merely upset at the sub-human that had "attacked" him, shrouding the truth in a lie. The man ordered Zihark to hide the truth to save his own skin, then departed. Zihark finally gave in, and was released.

He wandered about, training as a mercenary helping Daein people and working his skills with that deadly blade of his master's. But anytime he heard mention of sub-humans he would flee further west, away from the horrid memories of the promises of Hatari and another corpse he had to fling down a cliff to prevent from falling into wretched human hands. He became bitter and detested himself. Soon he could stand Daein no longer and left for Crimea.

The idea Kitra had planted in him, of a place that was working to develop relationships with Laguz suddenly seemed possible. Talk of Laguz, not sub-humans, became more and more and Zihark even dared visit the capital to see if the rumours were true.

Sadly, it was a long ways before any connection with Laguz was possible, even in the only country of Beorc willing to give it a try, and Zihark continued west, towards a faint hope that may lay in Gallia, land of the beast tribes. His efforts were thwarted by the man he'd hoped to restore his homeland to greatness as Ashnard's armies swept into Crimea. Continuing west Zihark ended up in the port town of Toha, the last chance to try and escape the petty Beorc wars he no longer cared for.

Now, with the harbour closed off and Daein fiercely determined to create a barrier between Crimea and Gallia, there was no way to leave. Zihark, frustrated, went back inside the tavern.

As he came to the door it swung open and those vigilantes from before passed by, the leader nearly knocking him over.

“Hey, watch it buddy!”

Zihark’s hand naturally rushed to his sword hilt. He could kill this man quicker than the blink of an eye if he wanted, but what the man said next stopped him.

“Where's the sub-human everyone's screaming about?”

Zihark froze. Down the street figures shoved someone back and forth. His hood had fallen, revealing furry ears.

The vigilante went over to his men and began issuing orders. They all happily drew out their murderous weapons, the kind Zihark hadn’t seen since leaving home. The whole scene began to play out as before. He was right in the throes of watching more innocent Laguz slaughtered, with no one lifting a finger to help.

But then... Was someone helping the Laguz man?

A figure had stepped in and shoved the crowd back. The Laguz turned tail and ran out of sight, taking a legion of Daein soldiers with him. But what confused Zihark the most in the midst of all this chaos was the helper - the same blue-haired boy who’d taken the Laguzslayer.

Zihark walked over to the vigilante leader. How he wanted to slash the man’s throat. But things were beginning to heat up, these were odd times indeed.

“Hey!” Zihark called and the man turned.

“Are there really sub-humans about?”