

Inmates

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Inmates

by [Luna_Tenebris](#)

Summary

This takes place in book 5 of Fablehaven, shortly after Mara, Berrigan, and Seth are captured at obsidian Waste and brought to the prison at living Mirage

Chapter 1

Mara climbed through a nearly vertical tunnel. When Bracken had said the way to Berrigan was quite a climb he had not been joking. Normally a climb like this would be easier. But not right now. Her muscles burned, she had ripped open several of her healing cuts, deep bruises making every move painful. A fracture in her wrist bone only added to the struggle.

It had been about four days since she had been brought this dungeon along with Berrigan, she knew that Seth was here somewhere too, but she was slightly doubtful, Seth had been impaled through the chest last time she had seen him, he had used a potion turn gaseous, but the wizard Mirav had sucked him into a bottle.

Mara was certain the Sphinx had not let Seth lose as a gas in the central dungeon. Though she had met someone else, about a day after she had been brought in, the wall to her cell, had opened up and a boy had come in, he looked around 18. He called himself Bracken, but Mara could tell that he had not been human. Back home as heir to the position of caretaker, Mara had been taught all about people like Bracken, people who looked human but were not. She could usually discern a human avatar. Except for the one time she hadn't. Mara would not let herself think about Gavin, she had worked with him more than once, she had always sensed peculiar energy from him, but his explanation about him being a dragon brother was enough of an explanation she had let it drop. If she didn't want people pressing for her secrets she would not press others for info, so she had not brought it up again. She regretted that decision every day. She should have been more suspicious of everyone. But despite her limited trust in Gavin he had betrayed then horribly.

Mara's ribs nor her ability to trust had never completely healed after Gavin had sent her tumbling over that ledge. "Don't pity yourself, focus on Berrigan," Mara told herself as she continued to climb. During their quest inside the dream stone at Obsidian Waste, they had fought three large mechanical animals, two steel bulls and a bronze lion. The lion had badly injured Berrigan when it had clawed him across the back. Mara had been able to insert the key into it, but when she had inserted the key the lion had fallen apart, Mara had been crushed under the debris, that was where most of her scratches and bruises came from, as well as the fractured bone in her wrist. But none of that would stop her from making sure Berrigan was alright.

Mara froze, was she really doing all of this for a guy she had just barely met? For all, she knew, he could be a traitor. Something in her gut told her that she could trust Berrigan though, he had fought valiantly inside the dream stone and had worked quite well with Mara. Mara also understood him, she had also been put in his shoes, Her home gone, her family murdered. Mara was lucky though, she still had her dad, Berrigan did not. Mara kept climbing, she was too far up to give up now, she slowly turned her head to look down, there was now a least thirty feet drop to the bottom, Mara clung tighter to the stone making her injured wrist throb, she reckoned that she was nearing the top when she saw the end, bursting with hope, she increased her speed but did not lose caution.

Finally, she reached the top, she crawled a few steps and collapsed on to her back, she hurt all over, but she couldn't stop. The sooner she got to Berrigan's cell the sooner she could flop without worrying about running into people. She recalled Bracken's directions perfectly, and Berrigan's cell was eight rooms down from the tunnel she had just climbed.

Not all the cells had distinguishable characteristics some had small signs, or little holes that

peaked into the room. Mara counted carefully. Finally, she came to Berrigan's abode, Mara peaked through a crack in the wall to confirm, there was Berrigan, fast asleep on his cot. His black hair stuck up at odd angles, his dark skin covered in dust. Mara saw that he slept on his side to avoid agitating his scratches. Mara knocked gently on the cell wall to test if he was really asleep, she leaned forward and rapped her knuckles against the wall three times.

Berrigan sat up

"Who is there." He answered suspiciously,

"Berrigan, it's me." Mara answered in a hushed tone. "can I come in?" Mara asked trying to make sure she did not invade his space.

"Mara!" Berrigan exclaimed, he did not mask the surprise and happiness in his voice. "Yes, here just a sec." Berrigan clicked what sounded a lock and a slab of stone swung away from the wall. The stone was a cleverly disguised door. Mara stepped into the threshold. There was Berrigan, but Mara was not out of the woods yet, she needed to make sure that this Berrigan was no shapeshifter or sting-bulb.

"Mind if I ask a few questions? I need to make sure that you are no imposter," they asked in unison to each other.

"You go first." Berrigan offered.

Mara remembered the questions that Laura had asked Berrigan when the narcoblix had left him, and gave those a shot.

"Whats your Jannali's favorite song?" Mara asked

"Moon River," Berrigan replied

"As a child what did you like in your mashed potatoes."

"Little cubes of Spam."

"What is the farthest your Uncle Dural has thrown a spear?"

"I don't have an Uncle Dural," Berrigan affirmed, Mara decided to also add a few questions of her own

"How far under the water did you find me with the key after Vincent dropped it?"

"At least 40 feet, Elise and I had to swim down to help you it was so heavy."

"What weapon did I use to try to break the ice to save Vincent."

Berrigan winced "A hatchet." He responded.

"That's all of mine," Mara responded she was now pretty certain that this was the real Berrigan "My turn to ask questions." Berrigan said, "Where did we find the keyhole that disabled the underwater trap in the dream stone."

"At the end of a shaft that branched off of the main shoot that leads up to the roof of the room," Mara answered

"Who gave you the idea to double back at an intersection that you had seen before in the shifting maze?"

"Kendra, the younger girl." Mara answered.

"Why are you such a mess?"

"The debris from the lion crushed me, I also put up a fight when they encased up in chains, then I had quite a climb to get to you." Berrigan nodded, then he stepped forward and embraced Mara in a tight hug.

"Ow careful," Mara groaned as Berrigan locked her in a crushing hug. Berrigan loosened his grip and Mara wrapped her arms around him, she was careful not to touch his injuries. The two of them just stood there locked in a heartfelt hug. Mara felt her legs starting to give out, but she did not want to let go of Berrigan.

"You're trembling," Berrigan stated with concern, he put his hands on her shoulders and guided her over to his cot that sat in the corner of the room, he gestured to the cot, Mara sat

down. The cot wasn't the comfiest thing ever but it was better than sitting on the floor, Berrigan sat next to her, he gently loped his arm around her shoulder, Mara leaned into Berrigan, she rested her head on his shoulder, she felt herself dozing but she didn't care. Deep down, she knew that she could trust Berrigan. She fell asleep right on that cot with Berrigan, her head resting on his shoulder, still sitting upright.

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A knock on stone startled Mara and Berrigan out of their sleep. A burly man stood at the doorway, he had a thick red beard, and kind eyes, he also wore a friendly smile.

"Bracken told me that there were some new prisoners." The man said. Mara stood up and offered a hand to Berrigan to gratefully accepted.

"Who are you," Berrigan asked defensively

"Just a fellow prisoner, Maddox is the name, Bracken told me that a young woman and a young man had recently been imprisoned here. We don't have newbies often so I came to check things out." He eyed Mara and Berrigan. Mara realized that she was still holding Berrigan's hand.

"You two a couple?" Maddox asked curiously. Berrigan let go of Mara's hand.

"No, how do you know Bracken?" Berrigan asked, Mara liked that he did most of the talking.

"I have been here for quite some time, I was pretty beat up when I first came, Bracken helped me heal," Maddox answered nonchalantly.

"Do you think he is lying?" Berrigan whispered to Mara.

"No he seems like a fellow prisoner, but if he tries to attack us we will know," Mara whispered to him.

"Why are you two here, you both seem a little young to be the Sphinx's worst enemies, but, then again I have met some people who are younger than you and they are the Sphinx's greatest targets"

"Wait you've seen Seth?" Mara asked, assuming that was who Maddox was talking about.

"Well, well, she does speak." Maddox joked "I met Seth a few days ago, how do you guys know him?"

"We were in the same group as him when he was captured, is he ok?" Mara had not expected to see Seth alive.

"Ya, I heard that the Sphinx healed him with the sands of sanctity."

"You're serious." Mara checked.

"Yep, he looked fine when I saw him last," Maddox assured.

"Lucky," Berrigan murmured, putting a hand on his back.

"Are you ok," Mara asked Berrigan tenderly.

"I will be, Bracken has been helping me heal."

"He told me that he was taking care of you, that was the only that prevented me from immediately coming to find you. He offered to heal me as well but I turned him down, I still doubted him. But I can trust him now I guess." Mara confided in Berrigan.

"You get beat up? Maddox asked

"I got clawed in the back by a giant bronze lion," Berrigan informed, Mara didn't answer, not wanting to reveal her weaknesses to a stranger.

"That's rough, It seems like there is more to you two than meets the eye." Maddox acknowledged.

"How did you do the climb up here?" Mara asked Maddox, he was not the most athletic looking guy.

"It's not that hard when you know where the best handholds are, I was just about to ask you the same thing girly, you don't look to swell." Mara made a mental note to ask Bracken about

the right handholds.

"I am resilient," was all Mara said, she never had liked talking much, the more you talked the more of your weaknesses you gave away.

"What's your stories," Maddox asked

"Tragic" Mara and Berrigan answered. Maddox nodded.

"Well, I thought I would stop by and say hello, If you kids ever need anything I'll be around. Thought I recommend you both rest, you two have been through a lot it seems."

"We will," Berrigan assured him,

"Take care of your girl," Maddox advised

"I can take care of myself." Mara countered

"I am sure you can, but just because you can don't mean you have to, look out for each other." and with that Maddox exited. Berrigan shut the door as the burly guy exited. Mara released a breath that she had been holding. Her wrist started to throb again, Mara wrapped her uninjured hand around where the pain was most intense.

"How is your back?" Mara asked Berrigan, he sat down on his cot.

"Eh, it hurts really bad, less than it use to but it still hurts."

"Do you want me to go find Bracken?" Mara asked trying everything she could to ease Berrigan's pain

"No it's ok, you need to recover to, and I bet that climb was hard on your hand"

"What do you mean?"

"I saw your wrist, its all swollen and bruised, I bet you even did the climb with it broken."

"Trust your gut, I am pretty certain it is broken."

"Want me to kiss it better?" Berrigan asked jokingly

"What?" Mara was very confused.

"Didn't your parents ever kiss your injuries better when you were a kid?" Berrigan asked

"No," Mara said, that sounded ridiculous,

"It's like this." Berrigan gently took Mara's injured hand in his and planted a light kiss on her wrist.

"Your adorable, but I see no point in this exercise," Mara responded, Berrigan, smiled, then winced, his hand flying back to his back.

"How bad is it, can I see?" Mara asked with concern Berrigan shifted so that Mara could access his back while he sat in the cot. Mara lifted the back of his torn shirt, it was not a pretty sight, three gnashes ran parallel across his back, each gnash was about 3 inches wide. Mara could not tell how deep the scratches were, but they looked deep. The skin around the scratches was red and inflamed. "They look infected," Mara told him,

"Probably, I doubt that a few thousand-year-old metal lion is the most sanitary thing to be scratched by." Berrigan was trying to joke, but Mara could tell that he was in a lot of pain.

"Do you want me to try to clean it?" Mara asked

"With what?" Berrigan asked, Mara, ripped a piece of fabric of the shirt from one of the few places that were not covered in the dirt of tinged with her blood. Mara took the strip of fabric, she saw a pan of water near the door, she walked over and poured some water onto the fabric. she returned to Berrigan and started to dap the wet piece of fabric over his injuries.

"Whatever you are doing, keep it up," Berrigan purred, Mara continued to clean off Berrigan's injuries, sometimes she would stoke gently over, sometimes to would let the cloth linger on a swollen area providing cool comfort. Berrigan would let her know when she was going well or when she was going to fast. Suddenly there was a knock, it did not come from the door that leads out into the hall of the prison it was the door that leads to the secret passages the same one that Mara and Maddox had come through. Mara pocketed the cloth

and Berrigan pulled his shirt down. Mara cautiously approached the door.

"Who's there." She asked,

"A friend," It was Bracken, Mara used her uninjured hand to unlock the door and pull it open. There stood Bracken still in the tattered clothes he had been wearing when Mara had met him. Mara took a step back as Bracken came in. "I thought I might find you here," he said to Mara, "I went to check on you but, when I came to your cell it was empty." Berrigan rose from the cot and stood next to Mara.

"You are here for a healing session?" Berrigan asked

"I came to check on you, your wounds are quite ugly,"

"I am aware of that," Berrigan responded,

"Have you seen Seth?" Mara asked,

"Yes, he is fine. He is much better off than you two." Bracken answered,

"Most people are better off than us." Berrigan griped,

"Hey, on the bright side, you haven't been trapped here for hundreds of years."

"How have you survived?" Berrigan asked,

"I have my ways," Bracken replied offhandedly

"Teach me your ways," Berrigan playfully begged, Mara was glad that Berrigan's sense of humor was still intact.

"Do you trust me?" Bracken asked

"I trust you enough," Berrigan conceded

"What about you," Bracken asked turning to Mara

"What kind of creature are you?" Mara asked, this was a test, if Bracken told her the truth he would gain her trust, if he lied and said that he was human, she would not believe him.

"I am a unicorn," Bracken answered, Mara remembered what she knew about unicorns, she remembered that they had human avatars, and could work magic and heal while in their human form.

"How can I know?" Mara asked,

"I can read your mind, I can tell truth from lies. I have also been helping Berrigan heal."

"I would prefer to keep my mind to myself, thank you," Mara responded, but at least he had told her.

"Try me, I don't have any huge secrets," Berrigan said stepping toward Bracken, Bracken took Berrigan's hand in his. "Tell me a truth,"

"I am Australian,

"Tell me a lie,"

"I don't like Mara," Berrigan said, Mara almost facepalmed, Bracken smiled, "Tell me the truth," Bracken asked again

"My back hurts," Berrigan said, Bracken nodded,

"Now say anything," Bracken said

"I have a sister,"

"That's a truth," Do it again, Bracken answered

"I like boomerangs,"

"That's a lie," Bracken said, Berrigan nodded "Are you two up for a short walk. There is something I want to show you." Bracken informed them.

"How long of a walk?" Mara asked, she could not do the climb again.

"Don't worry you don't have to do the climb," Bracken assured, he stepped out into the tunnel and gestured for Mara and Berrigan to join him. Berrigan took Mara's uninjured hand in his and pulled her out into the tunnel. Bracken lead the two of them through a series of twists and turns, (Mara was keeping track of every turn) when Bracken lead them into an unlit room

then, he switched a light on, There was multiple arcade consoles, foosball, pinball, tennis, a few treadmills, multiple dartboards, over near one corner of the room was three leather couches and a big flatscreen tv. "Welcome to the prison lounge," Bracken announced.

"No way!" Berrigan exclaimed as he went to check out the Tv. Mara followed him, but plopped down on a couch, while Berrigan opened a mini-fridge in the corner of the room.

"They have drinks here! Do you want a cream soda, Mara?" Berrigan asked,

"Sure," Mara answered, she was quite happy to just sit on something that wasn't hard ground or a flimsy cot, Berrigan brought two small cans of cream soda over and joined Mara on the couch, Bracken came and sat next to them, "Is the soda poisoned?" Mara asked Bracken,

"Nope," Bracken responded as he grabbed a can for himself. Berrigan opened Mara's can of soda for her. (She was having difficulty because of her injured wrist.) "Will you let me take a look at your hand, I promise I won't read your mind," Bracken promised,

"How can you not read my mind," Mara asked warily.

"Because I need your consent in order to see inside your mind, that is a fundamental rule of magic." Mara knew that Bracken spoke the truth, her mom had often told her the same thing, to keep her will strong so no one could manipulate her. Mara gently outstretched her injured hand to Bracken, he took Mara's hand and inspected it from quite a few different angles,

"It's broken, I will try to fix it, but unicorns are better at external injuries. Like cuts, scrapes or giant meal lion wounds. We are not as good at internal bleeding or broken bones." Bracken used the hand that was not holding Mara's to conjure a small globe of light. Mara flinched as he brought the light closer to her skin. The small light felt uncomfortably warm against her skin. Bracken started to murmur in a strange tongue, the small ball of light grew brighter and warmer until it felt like it was burning her skin. Mara yanked her hand away pressing it tightly to her chest.

"Does it feel different?" Bracken asked Mara looked at her hand, it did feel different, the bruising and swelling had indeed gone down, though it felt stronger, Mara could still tell that her wrist was broken though.

"you really are a unicorn aren't you?" Mara stated in amazement.

"I never lied to you," Bracken responded, Mara nodded, she saw Berrigan looking at her with concern but also something else, Mara almost believed she saw love in Berrigan's eyes. Mara had not many people who truly cared for her, back home her family was her parents, Neil, and her little cousin Katy; when she joined their knights there was Trask, he had taken Mara in under his wing after her family had been murdered and her home destroyed. Mara had not met many other knights, then here was Berrigan, a guy who is in her shoes, that cares about her who she just happened to like back. Mara knew that this would probably end in pain, every relationship ended in pain in her experience, anyone she ever loved either died or she ended separated from them. Mara leaned against the couch and closed her eyes, just five minutes of sleep she thought just five minutes.

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"Mara, Mara, Mara are you ok," Berrigan shook Mara's shoulder, Mara had leaned against the couch, closed her eyes and went limp. Berrigan was worried, was she asleep or had she fainted? Berrigan brushed Mara's hair out of her face and checked her pulse, it took a second of feeling around to find that steady beat in the side of her neck.

"She is probably exhausted, let her sleep," Bracken said coming over to stand by Berrigan

"I know, I just worry," Berrigan said

"How long have you guys known each other?" Bracken asked,

"Almost a week," Berrigan said realizing that it was the truth

"Well, as they say, true love waits for no one," Bracken advised,

"No, she is just a friend," Berrigan countered

"If you say so," Bracken said with a knowing smile. Berrigan turned to Mara fast asleep on the couch, her long black hair strewn everywhere, her dark copper skin littered with cuts and bruises with smudges of dirt and dust that covered most of her figure, her shirt that used to be white was now mostly brown with a red hint here and there, every article of clothing on was ripped in someplace, she shivered slightly in her sleep, Berrigan wished he had a blanket to drape over her shoulders.

He really liked Mara, she was strong, capable, fast, smart, beautiful. He wished that she was awake, but he knew that she needed rest, she had a very busy past few days, so had Berrigan, but Berrigan had not been scouring secret passageways and climbing tunnels, Mara had.

"Have you ever played foosball?" Bracken asked Berrigan, trying to change the mood,

"No," Berrigan answered he had heard of foosball but had never played it.

"Well, want to try?"

"Sure," Bracken and Berrigan played the various games for about an hour before Berrigan's back had started to hurt too much. So the guys had sat on the couch seeing what was on the tv. Berrigan's pain refused to let up, so he asked Bracken for a healing session. Berrigan had lifted the back of his shirt to allow Bracken a view of his back.

"It still looks bad, but it is healing, did you clean it?" Bracken asked as he examined Berrigan's injury.

"Mara did earlier," Berrigan explained, Bracken nodded

"She is very shy, isn't she?" Bracken asked

"Who, oh, Mara, from what I get she has had a difficult life. She is a knight of the dawn, you should see her in action she is amazing."

"Are you a knight?" Bracken asked

"No, I was kinda roped into this," Berrigan responded, Bracken conjured his ball of light into his hand and started to do his routine on Berrigan's back, Bracken finished and they just sat in silence for a moment, Berrigan heard Mara stirring in her sleep, Berrigan thought that she might be waking up, then she started to murmur,

"No, I won't leave you,"; "Mom, no!"; "No stop"; It instantly became clear to Berrigan that Mara was having a nightmare.

"Mara, Mara wake up." Berrigan gently shook her shoulder in an attempt to wake her from her dream. Mara jolted awake, breathing hard, dripping in cold sweat.

"Berrigan?" she asked weakly,

"Ya, what do you need, I am here."

"Can you pass me my drink," Berrigan retrieved Mara's cream soda off the table and passed it to her. Berrigan saw that Bracken had stepped back, staying away from the couple. Mara took a few sips of the drink and passed it back off to Berrigan, "Thank you for waking me, I was having a terrible dream."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Berrigan asked,

"No," Mara responded

"Are you ok?" Berrigan asked her with concern, Mara didn't answer Berrigan took a seat next to her and pulled her close, Mara offered no resistance as Berrigan pulled her close, "You feel cold." Berrigan stated, Mara, snuggled into his side. Berrigan turned his head to look behind his back at Bracken and raised an eyebrow in a way to silently ask "Am I doing this right," Bracken gave him a double thumbs up.

Berrigan turned his head forward again. Thankfully, Mara had not noticed, she had buried her face into Berrigan's shoulder, Berrigan turned his head to Bracken again and pantomimed stroking Mara's hair, Bracken gave him a thumbs up again. Berrigan gently stroked Mara's

head, he would start at the apex of her head and work his way down to the base of her neck before returning his hand to the top and repeating the proses. Berrigan felt Mara start to relax, her breathing slowed and she stopped shaking. Berrigan did not need to look back to know that Bracken was giving him a thumbs up.

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Mara awoke snuggled into Berrigan with no idea of how she had ended up like that, she lifted her head from Berrigan's shoulder, he was fast asleep, a rugby game was playing on the tv, Australia vs Canada. Bracken was on the neighboring couch watching the game with fascination, it appeared that he had not noticed Mara's awakening. Mara yawned and stretched, Bracken had torn his eyes away from the tv.

"Your awake?" Bracken asked

"Ya, barley," Mara yawned,

"Do you guys think you can make your own way back?" Bracken asked

"Why do you ask?" Mara challenged

"I heard word that there are some new prisoners, Seth escaped last night right as his rescue crew came to get him. I was going to leave immediately, but I didn't want to ditch you guys."

"What?!" Mara exclaimed, "How did Seth escape?"

"Someone slipped him the translocator and the sands of sanctity, he contacted me about 20 minutes ago." Bracken also told her about how the others had tried to rescue Seth but had ended up captured.

"Go check things out, we can make our way back, I'll inform Berrigan when he wakes.

"Got it, take care, Mara, look after Berrigan." Bracken turned and rushed out the door. Mara turned off the tv and plopped down on a couch. Did that really happen? was Bracken lying for an excuse to ditch them? Suddenly Mara had a bad feeling about this, like that Bracken might not come back.

Mara put her head in her hands. Who had snuck Seth the translocator? How did the society get their hands on the translocator in the first place? It had probably fallen into enemy hands when the team had got captured. But now Seth had it again, he also had the sands of sanctity, that was a spark of hope. Who all got captured of the rescue team, who was on the rescue team? Trask would probably be there, so would Tanu, and if they rescued Warren he would probably be there too, Mara also bet Elise would be there too.

Mara doubted that any of the Sorensens would be there but it was probable, better to assume that everyone was captured than to hang to false hope. She would see if she could access any of their cells later. She heard Berrigan stirring, she looked up from her hands, Berrigan's eyelids fluttered open, he looked to his side and was obviously confused by the absence of Mara, His eyes scanned the room, he saw Mara,

"What's wrong?" He asked, Mara, kicked herself for looking so obvious. Mara explained how the others had been captured and how Seth had escaped. Mara realized with a stab of worry that the only thing stopping the society of the evening star from achieving their goals was a teenage shadow charmer.

Chapter 2

Mara and Berrigan headed back to his cell, Bracken had warned that being gone for too long could raise suspicion. Though Mara doubted him, she and Berrigan were insignificant in the Sphinx's eyes. Mara remembered the way back perfectly, they made it back to Berrigan's cell with no interruptions.

"You are good," Berrigan commented as the couple approached the cell doorway,

"Thanks," Mara responded, not really knowing what to say.

"You were remarkable back there,"

"Oh, that was nothing. It was only a few right turns,"

"No I meant in the dream stone, you were amazing, without you we would have been lost in the maze forever, we also would have probably lost the key when that one room flooded too. You also rode a giant robot bull like a cowgirl. You are remarkable, if I could do things like that, I would brag, a lot." Mara felt the heat rising to her cheeks, none had ever complimented her like that in the all 25 years of her life.

"Don't push yourself down either, you were great back there too, you worked hard, you helped us disable the water trap, you supported me when I tried to save Vincent, you fought bravely, and you are more capable than you think." Mara noticed that Berrigan was blushing now.

"Thanks, Mara," Mara had no idea what to say now, they stood in silence, but, it was a comfortable silence.

"Do you mind if I spend the night with you again? I don't think I can do the descent back to my cell." Mara asked timidly,

"I was just about to ask if you could stay again, you are really nice company," Berrigan said sweetly, Mara was blushing again, she wondered if Berrigan noticed.

"I wonder if Maddox will come around again." Berrigan wondered trying to change the subject.

"He seemed friendly, I bet we have not seen the last of him," Mara responded she didn't mind the turn of the conversation.

"I should have asked Bracken about him," Mara lamented, internally kicking herself for not questioning Bracken about their fellow inmate. Berrigan opened the door to his cell and gestured for Mara to go through first. Mara stepped through the doorway and Berrigan followed, his nightly meal had already been slipped through a slot in the door, the food in the dungeon was horrible, it resembled a salt lick made of hair, veins and raw meat. Mara had not touched any of her meals, she was starting to get hungry, but there was no way she was going to eat prison food, so she had tried to keep herself hydrated. Berrigan was eyeing the food warily.

"Have you actually eaten that?" Mara asked more of a statement than a question,

"You haven't?" Berrigan asked he seemed to be trying to avoid admitting it.

"You totally ate some," Mara stated.

"It was horrible, it is as hard as it looks and about eight times as gross." Berrigan cringed, Mara giggled at his reaction, Berrigan looked stunned, then absolutely starstruck,

"What?" Mara asked genuinely confused at his reaction,

"You have a really beautiful laugh, I like it," Berrigan confessed

"Thanks," Mara was starting to hate how awkward these situations made her feel.

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Mara had slept on the floor that night and against Berrigan's best arguments, Berrigan had gotten the cot. Mara had bundled up the mat that the food had been brought in on and fashioned herself a sort of flat pillow and slept on the floor next to Berrigan's cot, the night had passed quietly and uneventful, so far Mara guessed it was around midnight. She was not sleeping well, though she had never been able to peacefully sleep since her nightmares started after Lost Mesa had fallen. Mara lay on the floor, hands on her chest just staring at the ceiling waiting for her sleep to overtake her but it was not coming, so she just lay there thinking of the others, she was worried about them. Trask was basically family, and she was fond of the others as well. Berrigan started to snore slightly, had he really meant everything he had said earlier, as much as Mara wanted to doubt she had sensed sincerity in his every word, it was amazing, it was so sweet to just hear someone tell her how they felt about her, she had not gotten such a luxury often.

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Berrigan rolled over and opened his eyes. He wished he knew what time of day it was, he would probably ask Mara later, she was good at knowing stuff like that. Berrigan looked over the edge of his cot and saw Mara; she was still fast asleep.

Berrigan sat up and ran his hand through his hair. Was he really stuck like this for the rest of his life, sneaking through dark tunnels and attempting to eat prison food? Berrigan had retained some hope of rescue, but that hope was quickly diminishing, the others had tried to rescue them, but they had gotten captured as well. He had not met any of the other knights that had not been at Obsidian waste. Was there any hope of being rescued or were they going to starve down here, In the dungeon of some manic who was trying to unleash demons and end the world?

Berrigan stretched, a burst of blinding agony ran across his back. He let out a cry pain that startled Mara awake, she jolted upright and was by Berrigan's side faster than he could register.

"Berrigan are you ok? What is wrong?" Mara questioned concern laced into her every word.

"It's my back, just give me a second." Berrigan grimaced, trying to keep control. The pain was lessening but it was still intense, it was blinding, some of the worst yet. Mara gently reached forward and caressed Berrigan's cheek, her hand was cool and soft, Berrigan leaned into her gentle touch. He heard her talking but did not process her words, the pain was starting to subside bit by bit. Berrigan was starting to understand Mara's words,

"Just breathe, deep breaths, there you go," her voice was gentle and reassuring, she was not panicked or rash just calm, her presence was comforting. Berrigan took deep breaths, his chest rising and falling slowly as he regained control of the situation. He still felt Mara's hand pressed into his cheek.

"Are you ok, Berrigan?" She asked, looking him in the eye,

"No,"

"No?" Mara questioned

"No, we are in the dungeon of some manic, the world is about to end, and we are down here stuck, starving, injured and absolutely helpless. We aren't getting out of here, the others are trapped down here too. My family is gone my home is now infested with zombies, and I have no clue what to do now." Berrigan felt tears coming, he had wanted to say that for a while, Mara was silent

"You too huh?" She responded, her voice almost a whisper, Berrigan looked her in the eye, she had tears streaming down her face leaving shining streaks on her dark cheeks, her eyes were mirrors of his grief.

"What happened to yours?" Berrigan asked,

"The Sphinx, a dragon, zombies, and a viviblix made a plan that robbed me of everything, my dad survived but he has never been the same. "I was going to become caretaker of Lost Mesa before it fell," Mara disclosed, Berrigan had heard of Lost Mesa it was a secret preserve like Obsidian Waste, but he had not heard that it had fallen. Berrigan did not want to ask this but he did anyway,

"Does it ever stop hurting?"

"No, you just make room for it," Mara responded, grief deep into her voice. Berrigan's eyes were wide, she knew exactly what he was going through. It was comforting and heartbreaking all at once, she was just like him. Alone, scared, unsure, Berrigan was glad that of all the people in the world to be imprisoned with that he had Mara.

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