

Jillian Moffat

Grey Skies

Grey, dull skies bleached the colour out of the day, the hills dark with ragged rocks and heather. The only brightness in the world was in the banners flapping above the fort, but Sen had turned his back on that colour and was blind to those strips of light battling bravely amidst the clouds. He had been cast out that morning at dawn, exiled into a world of grey, unprotected from the harsh winds of the rise. The air was always calm in the fort, but outside its protection the air was bitter, howling up the hills and through the valleys like a madman screaming in anguish.

It was not the winds Sen feared, nor the rain, though both could kill a man from cold if he was ill-prepared and unprotected. There were worse things out in the wilderness than the elements, things that had made men build their fort with high, strong walls, when no mortal clan called them enemy. It was for this reason that, though exiled, they had let him keep his sword.

He glanced back at the fort, reassured himself of its presence, and continued on. The things didn't attack where the fortress could see them, though they had become bold of late, taking people just out of sight, and from twilight until the very edge of dawn. Sen didn't realise how bold until he walked past a wind-blown grove of trees.

"Revenge," someone whispered, and Sen whirled around.

Nothing was behind him but the trees, whose branches, Sen realised with a sick knot of fear growing in his stomach, nearly blocked the fort from view. The fort would certainly not be able to see his small figure through them.

“We could give you your revenge,” the voice whispered from behind him, “your life back, if you want.”

Sen bolted for the edge of the grove, though he knew the creature behind him could run faster. Fear made him close his eyes as he ran, as if to block out his fate. A great force blasted him, making him stumble and open his eyes. The force came again, making him stagger. It was the wind, bitter and strong out of the grove’s protection. From the grove came laughter, distorted on the wind. They had let him go, were playing with him.

They had time enough to do so. There was only four hours left until the sun went down.

That night Sen built a fire, and sat in front of it so his silhouette could be seen from the fort. The creatures were happy to sit on the other side of the fire, where the fort could not see them. Sen sat with his back resolutely to the fire and the creatures that sat across it, but could not close his ears to their voices.

“They have abandoned you,” they said. “They have cast you out. And for what? Nothing that deserves your slow starvation.”

“We have banquets ready for you,” one of them said. “Let them say what they like about us, we would not let you starve.”

It was true that nothing edible was to be found on the slope, the only food processors in the area belonging to the fort or the creatures. But men from the fort were brought up knowing it was better to starve than to give in to the creatures, and Sen, who had been a soldier before his exile, knew it better than most.

Behind him, Sen could smell roasting meat. His stomach growled, and the creatures giggled. Though his mouth watered, he kept his back to the creatures, and acted as if they were not there. To take their food would be dangerous; to engage them in conversation would be fatal.

One of the creatures yawned. Sen found himself doing likewise, and bit his lip to concentrate his mind.

“Well, I’m off to bed,” the creature said. The others agreed. Sen heard the creatures moving away, but didn’t trust them, keeping his eyes forward despite the silence behind him. With the warmth at his back, it was hard not to drift off into sleep, though Sen knew he mustn’t. He pinched his arms to keep awake, but despite his best efforts found himself drifting off. His head sunk down to his chest.

“That’s an uncomfortable way to sleep, isn’t it?” someone said by his ear. Sen jerked awake, and the creature laughed, the sound fading as it moved away. In a way, Sen was glad they were playing such games with him. The adrenaline rush of the encounter would keep him awake for at least another hour.

He woke with a start, the dull cloud-dispersed sunlight illuminating the ashes of his fire. Groggily, Sen got up and set about cleaning up the fire. The fort would be cross if he managed to complete his Exile-Task, but burnt out the hillside’s sparse foliage. As tough as it was, properly processed it was the staple food of both the fort and the creatures.

Sen’s stomach growled, and he became aware of a dull ache within it. He could not continue wandering the rocky hillsides, not for long. It was time to choose. Either attempt to complete his Exile-Task, after which he would be dead, lost or free to return to the fort; or travel beyond the mountain slope, where it was rumoured other humans lived, and the ground grew food that was ready to eat off the tree it came from. Sen didn’t know whether he believed such tales, and had a suspicion that they had been spread by the creatures to make mischief and breed discontent. So instead of walking down the brown slope, which seemed to go on forever, until it darkened to black and reached the edge of the grey sky, Sen walked across the slope, still away from the fort but not far enough that he would put it out of his reach.

An hour put the fort behind him and to his left. Sen looked at the sky, and frowned. The clouds had darkened, and would give them an early night. Sen increased his pace, ignoring the aching in his legs.

Another hour, and the fort was out of sight around the side of the mountain. Sen collapsed, exhausted, his hands gripping his coat closed against the wind. A few fat water droplets hit his head and shoulders, and he shivered.

“You haven’t given up, have you?” a voice asked. Sen looked up. The creature was a head shorter than Sen, which meant he was young for his race, only a few-hundred years old. They didn’t age, these creatures. They just kept growing. They said the mountain itself was made of the eldest of the creatures, giants sleeping under the rocks and the heather. The creature looked worried as it peered at Sen, and Sen could almost believe the emotion was real. They looked almost human, though they had sharper features, narrower shoulders, and longer limbs. They wore

their hair long and tied up at the back, and wore no hat, though most had a hood on their coat that they put up when travelling. Their voices were lighter than a humans, more clear. It made them seem younger than they were, more innocent. Sen was not fooled.

“No,” Sen said to it, and glared defiantly at that only-just-alien face.

“You don’t want any food, then?”

“No,” Sen told it. The creature sat down and ate its lunch in front of him. Sen’s stomach protested at this torture, and the creature looked pointedly at it.

“There is at least one part of you that doesn’t lie,” it said.

“I don’t want any of your hospitality,” Sen said.

“Who else will take you in?” the creature asked, and Sen automatically looked around in the direction of the fort.

“They kicked you out, didn’t they? How can you convince them to take you back? Begging doesn’t work; I’ve seen the exiled beg. They don’t even throw them scraps.”

“I can complete my Task,” Sen said stubbornly.

“Which is?”

Sen moved like lightning, whipping the explosive device out from underneath his coat and throwing it in the air, covering his eyes as it detonated above his head. The creature cried out in shock, then in pain. Sen stumbled blindly to pull his helmet’s face-shield down. He could feel the soft bite of the metal threads that the soft-bomb had released as they settled on his exposed hands and neck. He cautiously opened his eyes, and breathed a sigh of relief. None had got into his eyes.

The creature had gone beyond cries now, and could only whimper. Its skin had broken out in bright red wheals where the threads had touched it. Sen brushed a few of the threads off his hands. Nobody really knew why the creatures reacted so to iron, but that didn’t stop them taking advantage of it.

“Listen carefully,” Sen said, crouching down to look the pain-crazed creature in the eyes. “My exile-task was to send your kind a message. You have been pushing the boundaries of our system of coexistence, taking people technically within sight of the fort, talking to the food gatherers and other non-exiles, stealing our hunts. Back off, or our truce is over. We’ll bring back the floodlights, and the armed roving parties. We’ll bring back the backburning, and the Iron Clouds.”

Sen took out his dagger, and with it cut off the ponytail of the creature.

“To prove I have relayed my message,” he said, and walked away. He did not have to beware the creature, for the iron would keep it incapacitated for more than a day, yet.

Three hours later, the fort was once more the main presence in Sen’s view. For a moment, the clouds parted over the structure, and Sen threw up a hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

He trudged on, towards a fortress of cold, shining steel.