

**M**oonfall Forest merged into the river — a bubbling mix of foam and clear-running blue. Its spray could be seen for miles, crashing upon rocks as it tumbled over caverns to join the fabled waterfalls of the east. Yune stones were mined here, in the age of Thrunfomar, when war and famine had not yet depleted the planet's resources and civilizations dwelt in peace. Sometimes, their light still warmed the night sky, pure of gold and glittering with a thousand specks of crystal. Sky had held one. It was smooth and round from the lapping of the waves; but she could not discover its magic, so she released it downstream. To this day, she swore the glow from that single stone kept her dreams alive.

She was born on a cool and empty night, when the red wolf howled on the moor and Polaris illuminated the heavens; thus her hair was a bright auburn and her skin shockingly white. That she had entered womanhood was no mystery. Sylphlike and delicate, she was stronger than she appeared; yet her fierceness of spirit left her ostracized and ignored by the clan. Alone with her dreams, she became aware of a purpose beyond the stars and planets and worlds chasing circles around the sun. Someone had made all this. *Someone had made her.*

She dropped to the ground, silver grass tickling her bare feet. She had slipped out of her shoes to feel the crunch between her toes. Buoyed by wind, she threw herself back, waves flying about her head in a sunset of color. The teal of her eyes would mirror the constellations — galaxies within galaxies — while her thoughts took flight alongside fireflies and moon dust.

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She was outside the Safety Circle...*again*. How often had she been warned not to pass the wicket fence? Swattan, invisible predators with a thirst for women and a penchant for blood, roamed the woodlands. By legend, they would shred the skin from human bones, strip by strip, until haunted screams joined the screech of the krayspin who come alive only in darkness.

Sky could not believe that such danger existed. Ognot Forson, Prime of the Grushtun, insisted that they were the last of a dying race. Skrikti would one day be a barren planet if they did not break the cycle of war and brutalization — of both men and land. And Sky wondered...were there other people out there? People like her?

She watched a comet tail catch fire as it streaked across the heavens. And she imagined it striking the closest planet, setting it ablaze with enough light to make the moons seem but dim reflections. Her chosen would come from these far reaches: a flaming planet, the tail of a comet, the shadow behind the brightest star. *So said her dreams*. Not someone she was expected to marry, not someone she already knew — no, he would be different from herself, from the Grushtun.

“*Sky,*” her mother’s voice whispered. She could feel her touch in the wind. *“I had to name you after the sky. It’s so vast and beautiful. In the day, all your dreams will float like the clouds. And at night, they shall sparkle like the stars. No one can take them away from you — no matter where you are.”*

“No matter where I am,” Sky whispered. And she perfected her dream until he was more reality than her own ordinary existence, for all women of marriageable age, without a family of their own, were expected to assume

## Crash on Skrikti/1

the duties of caregiver. Sky assisted Hathwan Proust with the children's reading and writing.

“Ahh!”

A scream tore silence from the night. Sky was sitting now, rushes unable to hide the fire of her hair. In the stillness, a whimper echoed — a soft sob trailing a plea for help.

Sky stepped into her shoes as quickly and quietly as any creature of the night. Someone else had ventured outside the circle and she pictured a swatan with its victim — one of the clan. She couldn't turn back.

Sobs magnified as moonlight parted a clearing of trees. A small box-like area with nothing but grass and a peculiar altar of stone, shimmered in the fog, strangely luminescent and eerily beautiful. A splash of red across the base and a crudely fashioned symbol of branches and twigs hallowed the spot. But for what...*or whom?*

Sky flattened as two figures broke into view — one dragging the other. Grasses parted with the outstretched hands of the woman on the ground and she swallowed a gasp. *Truzy!* Her look was half-wild, her face streaked with blood, her clothes torn. She snatched at dirt but nothing caught hold. *Curse the moon!* It captured the tears on her face, the terror in her eyes, the steady, whimpering falter of her lips.

A man straightened and Sky shrank further into shadows. She knew him too. Janus - lead hathwan and Ognot's' right arm — was a hulking image, muscular and strong. He had claimed no wife and yet every clanswoman longed to be his carida. The most striking of all Grushtun men, he was hand-