



## *Millner*

by Scott Walker

Millner casually inspected the writhing body on the table. Tied to the table by her wrists and ankles, the woman's limbs jerked randomly, and her head rolled back and forth, eyes fluttering. Her simple cloth dress had been slit open from neck to navel, revealing several runes and markings – some drawn, some carved – on her bare chest.

"Burn it with the others."

"But..." the inscriber started, then stopped when he saw Millner's raised eyebrows. The inscriber pointed a stained finger at the woman lying on the table. "I mean, she's still alive, milord."

"And of no use to me in this condition." Even from across the table in the poorly lit room, Millner's impatience was clear.

The inscriber said nothing, began cleaning his stylus and tools. His white smock was smeared brown and black, but the work tables lining the inner walls of the large room were covered in neat piles of papers, rows of styluses, knives and brushes ordered by size, and jars of all shapes containing liquids of different colors. The windowless room was underground, keeping it beyond the reach of the worst of the summer heat, but the smoky residue from the candles and lanterns assaulted Millner's throat every time he went there. That tended to be a lot in the recent weeks.

"Burn it," Miller repeated, then left the room. He was down the hall and halfway up the narrow spiral staircase when the keep's doorman blocked his path.

"Beg your pardon, milord, but Envoy Nikao has arrived. I left him in the waiting chamber outside your council room."

"Ah. Has he?" Millner sighed. "Well, that's perfect. Yes, why shouldn't Nikao show up unannounced? Why shouldn't my day get increfuckingmentally worse by the minute?" The doorman gave a quick nod of his head before retreating back up the stairs.

Nikao would want a report, some sign of progress. Millner had nothing but failures, and there wasn't one sign that the excavation was any closer to its goal. *Fucking great.*

After the way Nikao had acted last time, Millner decided to keep him in the waiting chamber just long enough to strip away the courier's polished veneer. Just long enough to piss



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him off. Millner took his time getting to the waiting room. Even if he had rushed, the great keep was still being repaired and rebuilt. Millner had to take several detours and cross almost the entire keep to reach the waiting chamber.

"Nikao, my sincerest apologies, I was only just told of your arrival. I shall be sure to take up the issue with my doorman." Millner shrugged his shoulders and raised his palms to the ceiling in a gesture of hopelessness. He opened the door to his council room, took a seat at his desk, and began shuffling through the piles of papers in front of him. Nikao entered and remained standing, waiting until the footman had closed the door before speaking.

"No apology is necessary to me, of course, though my lord may have a very different view of the matter. I am, after all, his envoy."

Millner stopped shuffling papers, looked up. Nikao's tone was measured, but Millner saw the flush in his cheeks, the heavy breathing. Nikao was anything but in control of himself. *Sorcery of the Mind, huh? You need to work on controlling your emotions, too, Nikao. You've been away from your precious Peaks too long.*

"Nikao, if I have offended your lord, I trust you will convey my deepest regrets and ask for his forgiveness. Wait. No, that won't suffice. No, this grievance requires a written apology. I'll have one written before you leave. You'll deliver it personally, I trust?"

"Most certainly." Nikao was doing a good job of keeping the strain out of his voice, but his hands trembled as he tried to casually adjust his elaborate robes. "I only ask that it not overly delay me. I'm under strict orders to obtain your report and leave immediately."

Millner looked disappointed. "No need to rush, Nikao. Please, have a seat. I'll have a feast prepared. Of course, I can't offer you the fare you're used to - such short notice, you understand - but certainly you have some leeway in your schedule? This may be the Empty Lands, but even hospitality can be found here."

"You're most kind, however I'm afraid my orders were quite explicit. Obtain an update from you and deliver it immediately."

That wasn't protocol for Nikao's visits. He normally spent a few days, poking his nose around as much as possible, asking inane questions he thought were insightful.

Millner turned down the corners of his mouth. "Well, if you insist. May I offer you something to drink? Some refreshments, perhaps?"

"Just the report, please." Nikao's voice was tight, his words carefully enunciated.





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"Certainly, Nikao, certainly. First, though, I must beg your indulgence. I've been up most of the night, and I skipped breakfast. A little sustenance will sharpen me up, and your report will be the better for it. Please, have a seat."

"I said..." Nikao began, then stopped. Nikao's face relaxed, and his voice took on a lighter tone. "I'm only here to personally collect your report. Which, by the way, I'm still waiting for. Unless, perhaps you have nothing new to report? I rather like short reports; they're much easier to write."

A series of swift, loud knocks at the door stopped Millner from saying what was on the tip of his tongue and which, he was sure, he would have regretted.

"Come in!"

Nikao chuckled, moved to the window overlooking the desolate landscape beyond the keep. The footman entered, bowed.

"Beg your pardon, milord, but you asked to be notified when the excavation team reached the well."

Nikao turned around at this, and Millner took the opportunity to not quite hide a smug expression on his face.

"I believe my progress report just got a lot longer, Nikao. Perhaps you really should have a seat."



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