

The Garden

She should have known buying a house for a bargain on Thurupia V came with a catch.

Yulia had wanted to retire to a nice, peaceful place, as far from the stomping grounds of her old Legion as she could. Thurupia V fit the bill; a lovely inhabitable moon in a remote system as far from the trade lanes as you could get, while still having access to a cold rillnur beer. The real estate agent had raved about it, and the immersion holo was fantastic.

Except it failed to mention one minor detail.

Well, a major one.

Freyja—yes, that Freyja—the Norse goddess in all her glory, lived there.

And Yulia had bought the house right next door. No wonder it had been dirt cheap.

A yowl interrupted her reading in her nice comfortable swing chair, in her lovely, neat back garden. She dove, book in one hand, flicking out her blanket in the other to cover the bluepip flowers in full bloom next to her.

A large silver and black house cat sailed over her fence, fur puffed up. So large, in fact, that she had mistaken him for a lion the first time she'd seen him. He tore through the shrubs, mangled roots and broken branches left in his wake.

His brother followed close on his heels, finishing off the shrubs that had survived. He pounced on his brother and the two went flying in a ball of fur, decimating her pitiful vegetable patch.

A tuft of silver fur drifted through the air and landed on her shoulder as the tom-cats stalked each other through her backyard.

Yulia sighed.

She'd rather thought that her life would be peaceful once she'd retired.

Time to suit up in her old gear and speak to the neighbour.

The door AI looked down its digital nose at her. “My esteemed mistress does not wish to be disturbed. Leave.”

Yulia patted the butt of her precious baby slung over her shoulder. “Now I could use this here high-powered, armour piercing, anti-aerial rifle on you, or you let Freyja know her neighbour’s here, hmm?” She smirked and tapped on a freshly painted section of the door. “I wonder how much more damage it’ll cause than the energy-pistol.”

The AI appeared to be nervous, despite all programming protocols stating that would be impossible.

“Madame is in the kitchen. Do not go anywhere else.”

The door opened with a click and Yulia strolled in with a wave tossed over her shoulder.

Out of perverseness, she called out, “Oi, Freyja. I’m going to check out your library. Maybe do some target practice.”

A now familiar feeling of being picked up and swirled like ice in a glass shot through her.

“I forbid it.”

The sensation stopped abruptly, and only her well-honed reflexes prevented her from smacking her head right into the enormous stove in front of her. One large enough to fit a human whole. She should know.

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A very annoyed Freyja stood glaring at her, arms folded. The vines in her hair trailed down to her arms, the leaves wrapping like braces around her wrists. “You keep forcing your way into my house. I might send you into the sun next time.”

Freyja snapped her fingers and Yulia was flung into a chair at the table, her precious rifle disappearing.

“Your cats keep destroying my garden.”

“The land was theirs long before you got here.”

A vine placed a steaming bowl of sodd before her, the orange and white root vegetables sloshing against chunks of stewed meat. Another vine gave her a spoon and napkin.

“Trying to poison me again? Pity for you, the Kilok Legion makes their elite troops immune.” She dug in.

“Do you think the actions of mere mortals could protect you?” Freyja sat down at her own meal. “Bread?”

“Please.” Yulia inhaled the warm, earthy scent of the crusty, fresh roll. “Is that a hint of ginpur spice?”

“Why yes, I thought I’d try a new recipe.”

Yulia nodded. “I like it. Much better than the last meal you gave me.”

“Well, the poison did rather ruin the recipe.” Freyja shook her head. “Who would have thought julrue root would be so bitter when roasted?”

“About your cats in my garden.”

“This, still?”

“Well, it is my garden. I’d like to have one, and not a torn up wasteland.”

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Freyja's vines removed her empty bowl and dished out a heaped serving of rulliper berry crumble, the red fruit glistening in the honeyed juice.

"This won't work." Yulia pointed her spoon at Freyja, a dollop of cream threatening to fall from it. "A bit of dessert is not going to change my mind. A Kilokian centurion is never swayed by bribery, and such an obvious one at that."

"I am the goddess of love and fertility. You dare accuse me of such low methods?"

"A," Yulia said.

Freyja blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You're 'a' goddess. Not 'the' goddess. I even met one out in the Freelian nebula. Once." She smirked.

Plates rattled, cream droplets flying out from her spoon and the hairs on her arms stood on end as static electricity filled the room. The stove flared, golden flames escaping the door and licking up the walls. Sweat trickled down her face and the air thinned and crackled. The house shook as a gust of power swept through the kitchen, banging the cabinet doors and shaking the table.

"Huh, not even half the power of an energy-canon, which, coincidentally, we used to take out that nebula goddess. She kept ripping up our spaceships. Most inconvenient." She stared out the kitchen window towards her back yard. "Much like your monsters are destroying my garden. What kind of all-powerful goddess has less control over her own cats than a sergeant over a raw recruit?"

"They are my children, not fodder for the front lines."

"They'll make great fodder for my garden beds if you aren't careful."

The kitchen stilled. A knife hovered a millimetre from her right carotid artery.

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Ultramarine body armour rippled up her neck, closing over her face. “You think I fear death? I would embrace the Valkyries flying me to Valhalla.”

“But I would take your soul to Folkvangr. Have you forgotten so soon? You prayed to me in battle. Your soul is mine to reap.”

The goddess and the soldier faced each other.

Until the back door of the kitchen clattered open as an orange-nosed, long whiskered cat poked its face through. With a gentle wave, the knife zipped back into the knife block and the static energy calmed. The big ball of silver and black fur nuzzled against Freyja’s knee, before his brother bounded in, tracking dregs of vegetation that looked suspiciously like her tomato plants and dirt all over the tiles.

The soil she’d bought for her garden beds.

“Keep these terrors on your side of the fence. I need to see what devastation they have wrought this time.” Yulia took her dish to the sink.

She skirted around the two purring behemoths curled up at Freya’s feet, busily grooming each other.

“Don’t think you’ll be skipping out on the bill, either.”

Freyja laughed and a piece of dirt floated from the floor. She curled her hand around it. “Soil is more valuable than artificial numbers.” Turning her hand, she let the soil cascade to the floor. “Begone now. You clutter up my kitchen.”

Before Yulia could even brace herself, the icy cold shards flung her from the house. She landed with a thud on her back porch, her armour protecting her from the impact.

Dusting herself off, Yulia assessed the damage. The cats had all but uprooted the shrubs along her fence, and muddy paw prints marred the pale yellow cushions of her favourite chair. The torn up wreck of her vegetable patch attested to a fierce battle and she

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was also quite sure one beast had used it as a kitty litter this time. She'd have to tear the whole thing up and start from scratch.

She sang as she dug in, her belly full and content. This time she was going to put tripwires between the shrubs and install a net.

The sound of a Kilokian battle song drifted through the air to the other side of the fence, where Freyja stroked the heads of her cats.

"Good kitties. Make sure you keep ripping up her garden." Freyja smiled, her vines settling around her head in the shape of a crown. "I really did choose the perfect owner for that cottage. It was insufferably boring before she arrived. Don't you agree, my little treasures?"