

LEAVING MACHI

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They were going to Amszickle.

It was a terrifying thought, but Matt knew that if he wanted to find Michelle — which he really did — then he and his companions had to go there. If Michelle wasn't in any of the Y lands, then there was no where else she could be. After all, Pamarri's giant bird Chee had taken her away from Machi after Matt had fought the shadow warrior — one of the Nightmares, as everyone in the Y lands called them.

Even though Chee had been injured, he'd apparently had enough strength to fly her over the Y Lands border, into the heart of the Amszickle empire.

Matt had returned to Alex and Lightna and brought with him the map and disguises that Myla had given him. They had been glad that the princess had tried to help them, but Lightna was convinced that Myla could have given them a better map.

After recounting what had happened outside of the My palace, the trio agreed that Michelle had to be in Amszickle. They resolved to leave the following morning.

However, before departing, Matt had wanted to stop in the village of Machi and speak to his girlfriend's parents. They had been doing a search of their own but hadn't had any luck either. He wanted to tell them that he was going to Amszickle to look for her. He wondered what they would say.

King Thomas had tried to dissuade him and his friends from going, but he soon realized that nothing would change their minds.

As they rode into Machi, Matt could see fear still very fresh from the recently attempted Nightmare occupation in the people's eyes. He was just glad that no one in the village had gotten hurt.

As they rode past the markets and street vendors, Matt could see people staring at him and

his companions. Since the duel with the shadow warrior, the citizens of Machi clearly held a better opinion of the blue haired Sy warriors. It wasn't like they hadn't trusted them before, but they

certainly appreciated their protection now more than ever.

A few of them waved to him and Matt wondered if he had just become some sort of idol for

killing Pamarri.

Urging their horses to go faster after waving back, Matt could see the the place where

Michelle and her parents lived. It was small and humble compared to Sy's infrastructure, but Matt had learned to call the place a second home.

He and Michelle had had fun times digging in the dirt as children, chasing her chickens, and even trying to spy on the neighbors. The good memories made him smile.

"Oh, no," he heard Lightna say, "He's smiling to himself again."

"Maybe he's daydreaming," Alex said, grinning.

Matt rolled his eyes but didn't say anything.

Sliding off his horse, he approached the door and knocked three times. He came face-to-face with Michelle's mother much quicker than he anticipated.

She smiled when she saw him and his sister and gave each of them a warm embrace. Alex stood a respectful distance away with the horses, looking somewhat excluded but trying to give them space. He had never really known Michelle very well and he certainly did not know her parents. Both Lightna and Matt had decided that it would be best if he waited outside for them while they broke the news to her parents.

"We'll be quick," Matt said as they entered the home. He saw Michelle's father standing in the corner of the room gazing out the window. He turned his attention towards the visitors when they came in.

"No luck, I take it?" Lightna asked.

The older man shook his head. "No," he said gruffly. Unlike Michelle's mother, he made no attempt to welcome them. Matt was not as close to Michelle's father as he would have wanted, and he knew that the man had always been wary of him. He hadn't seemed particularly excited when Matt had asked to start courting his daughter. But like everyone else, he seemed to have developed a newfound respect for him after the duel.

"Would you like anything to eat?" Michelle's mother asked.

Both of the Sy warriors shook their heads. "No thank you," Lightna responded, "We ate recently."

Matt rubbed his arms. "I wanted to tell you that Lightna and I searched through the other Y lands and looked for Michelle."

Michelle's mother eyes brightened with hope.

Matt sighed. "She wasn't there. None of the warriors of Dy have seen her."

"We went to My, too," Lightna continued, "But she wasn't there, either."

Michelle's father raised an eyebrow at the mention of My but he didn't ask either of them about it. The city of My had recently been occupied by the Amzsicle empire and the Nightmares. Anyone with sense would have wondered why three Sy warriors had been wandering around in enemy territory. Michelle's mother didn't seem to notice.

"Of course she's not there," her father said quietly, breaking into Matt's thoughts "I think none of us want to admit it, but if that bird that took her belonged to a Nightmare, the only place he would take her is to the Nightmare fortress."

Michelle's mother's eyes widened and she glared at her husband.

"Don't say things like that!" she scolded in a low tone.

Matt shook his head. "I refuse to believe that Chee would take her there. My heart tells me that she's still alive. If Michelle was taken to the Nightmare fortress..."

"...She'd be dead," Lightna finished.

None of them spoke for several moments.

Matt thought about what he was going to say next. Would her parents care that he was going to Amszickle? He was about to find out.

"My companions and I have decided to search Amszickle for Michelle. We think that there's a possibility that Chee took her there. He could have brought her to Queen Amber."

"If he took her to the palace, we can sneak in and try to rescue her," Lightna added.

Michelle's parents looked at each other. Her father seemed genuinely surprised and Michelle's mother looked horrified. She clearly wasn't okay with the idea.

"But you could be killed!" she cried. "Amszickle is so big and there's so much we don't know about it. If you two go, we might not ever see you again! I can't let you do that. It would be like losing all of my children all over again."

Matt placed his hands on her shoulders. It was nice that she thought of Lightna and him as her adopted children. After their parents had died, she really had almost become a mother to them.

“But if we want to find Michelle,” he said, “We have to go there.”

Her mother looked at him and then at Lightna. The determination in his voice must have silenced whatever reply she had prepared. Very reluctantly, he saw acceptance of their choice in her eyes.

“Oh, come here you two.” She wrapped them in a tight embrace and Matt wished it lasted longer.

Michelle’s mother made them meals, and wrapped them up in a strange silver covering Matt had never seen before. She insisted that they take something with them for the journey. Matt was worried that she might give them too much food.

After he and his sister said their goodbyes, Matt looked back to see both of Michelle’s parents standing on the stairs leading up to the house. Michelle’s mother was waving.

Lightna mounted her horse, and Alex handed Matt the reins to his. Matt was about ready to get on his animal when he felt Michelle’s father’s hand grip his shoulder firmly.

“Bring her home, Matt,” he whispered. His eyes seemed to bore through Matt and the words felt more like a threat than anything else.

Matt held the man’s gaze and got on his horse.

“I will, sir,” he responded, “I promise.”