

Excerpt from

**Chapter One of StrikeStone: Book III of the Dolvia Saga**

Another soft knock. Laura peered around the door while a shaft of amber light spilled into the room. I switched on a big lamp behind the sofa and crossed to receive my Dolviet cousins. I hoped my Arrivi language skills were not too rusty.

I reached to shake hands. Rufus accepted the Western gesture just as he had accepted the need to wear the Western suit. Rufus was age twenty-eight and light-skinned like his father with an aquiline nose. His energy was centered low, in the abdomen perhaps. When our palms met, a battle scar across the back of his wrist was visible. I was certain there were many more.

“Hiki Rufus,” I said. “Melinga.”

"Melinga. May I present Kyros Rabbe Sudl, a cousin to Karen Osborn." Kyros hesitantly extended his hand to shake. He was perhaps thirty-five, taller and stouter with yellow skin that would turn golden under the savannah sun. I had to assume Kyros had spent his tender years herding cattle with the Southeast Arrivi, too old to have tolerated attendance in Hakulupe Le's classroom. His wife and academy-trained children most likely participated in rice cultivation. This trip through the wormhole, disembarking in Beijing and onto Paris, must have been a wonder to him, once he got past the discomfort of inoculation against disease.

I could not resist having a little fun at Kyros Rabbe Sudl's expense, perhaps because Laura stared with her mouth agape. "Kyros is a woman's name," I said in Arrivi. Kyros only shifted his weight and stared at the floor.

"There was a woman named Kyros," Rufus said. She had been his grandmother. "There was a man named Brian," he added. Rufus had not changed much, and he put no strain on my dormant language skills.

"Laura, would you bring tea?" I asked in French. She controlled her wide-eyed stare and left. I gestured to the long dining table. "Please, won't you have a seat?"

Rufus pulled a chair away from the table so it faced out. He sat with a straight back and hands on his knees spread wide apart. Kyros stood more or less at Rufus's shoulder. Their posture told me everything. "You will return to the flats now," Rufus said without preamble, "and dwell in the fortress of Arim."

"On your word?"

"You have inherited the fortress by Kyle Rula's hand."

"I robbed you of your birthright?"

"Mekucoo don't require a library."

So Rufus had made peace with Kyle Rula before departing. After a moment I offered, "I had forgotten Mekucoo could be so charming."

His brow wrinkled. He had expected resistance, perhaps even a hissy-fit so he could throw me over his shoulder and carry me back to my larger destiny. He glanced around at the apartment's furnishings and exchanged looks with Kyros Rabbe Sudl. "Your riches are Dolvia-derived," he said, using committee-reasoned arguments he brought with him.

"I developed the shipping channels so gouleps prosper."

"Rich women are just a target," Rufus said with Mekucoo succinctness.

I sighed. I had set aside tribal logic, forgetting how numbing and exclusive it could be. I had a life here in Paris, a position and a name, however tainted. Why return to a war-torn desert where women were granted no voice? Where you had to set yourself on fire to be heard.

"Dacupitte sent this." Rufus drew from his pocket a gold bracelet fashioned into acacia leaves placed side-by-side. This was the traditional Arrivi engagement bracelet, to be augmented at the wedding celebration by a similar necklace. Dacupitte was called Pete, the forty-five-year-old father of legions, and my supposed betrothed on Dolvia.

I only chuckled. "Dacupitte assumes much."

"It is seen."

I had never held with tribal prophecy, especially this claim. "A convenient vision," I said. "Offered when Pete's leadership status was uncertain."

"You question second sight?"

"I question everything."

Rufus considered that. After a long moment he said, "How sad for you."