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This collection is dedicated to Dean Wesley Smith, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Fritz Lieber, Barbara Hambly and all the other wonderful writers who've entertained, educated and encouraged me.

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PREFACE

I enjoy writing short stories. The challenge of creating a full storyline with complex characters and new worlds in a short format is pure fun. It's great practice, too, allowing me to learn new skills and then polish them without all the time dedicated to a full novel.

Because of that, I've got a lot of short stories to share. *Shades of the Rainbow* is my first effort at collecting a large number of them in one place for readers to enjoy.

The stories here range from fantasy to mystery to science fiction to romance. The characters are gay, lesbian, nonbinary, old, young, male, female, human and very much not human. You'll find dragons regretting their age, grandfathers raising their very special granddaughters, rape victims, gods, monsters and so much more.

I hope that you like these stories. Some of them stand alone. Some are parts of larger series. Either way, here's my rainbow of stories.

Enjoy!

Meyari McFarland

AUTHOR NOTE: ORANGE THIEF

*M*agic is a joy to write. Especially quiet magic, working behind the scenes to make tiny changes that add up into something momentous. This story came from an image of an orange tree at sunset in the middle of a field mixing with my Unification series where all worlds, magical and non, were smashed together a couple of generations ago. Because the only thing better than quiet magic is many different sorts of magic mixing together unpredictably.

Something shrieked outside.

Garnet froze, one hand on the cutting board, the other on her chef's knife. The onion sat between her hands, rocking gently side to side. Her little kitchen was silent for a moment, stew pot sizzling with chunks of beef and sliced mushrooms covered with the first onion she'd diced. The tomatoes had already been chopped, as had her green chilies and three nice fat jalapeños to up the heat.

She turned and stared out the back window towards her orange tree. It better not be those neighbor twins stealing her oranges again. Every single time they started getting ripe the twins snuck over her fence and stole the good ones before Garnet could get a single one.

Something rustled in the treetop. Garnet heard cursing and a yelp of pain. She glared, slapped the knife down and then jerked the sash on her red-checked gingham apron, the one that matched her most comfortable apron tichel with the absurdly delicate lace on the straps. Damn those kids! It'd be one thing if they stole the oranges to eat but no, they used them in their duct tape and plumbing supply potato cannon. Instead of actual potatoes because apparently ripe oranges made a better 'splat'.

"Get out of my tree, you brats!" Garnet shouted as she threw open the back screen door. "I told you I'd call the cops on you and I will!"

"Ah, help?"

Instead of teenage boy hooting laughter and the scramble of running feet, Garnet got a woman's voice. She carefully walked closer, spotting woman in frilly layers of lace and linen with a tumble of beautiful natural black afro draped over one of the top branches. Her skin was as dark as the bark of the orange tree, all except her cheeks which were bright red.

"Oh-kay," Garnet said. "Let me get my stew off the burner and then I'll be right out with a ladder. How the heck did you end up way up there?"

"Don't ask," the woman groaned.

She sagged over the branch like a cat picked up in the middle who wanted to stay in their spot of sunshine. Garnet blinked, turned

around and hurried back into the kitchen to get the stew safely off the stove. It could wait. Had to.

It took ten minutes to get the ladder, set it up and then help Alinnafe (which she carefully pronounced as Ah-lee-NAY-fay when Garnet asked her name while struggling to get her shawl free from the branches) down the ladder. There was a broom, just a standard kitchen broom with green and white straw bristles, in the tree as well. Garnet stared at it, shrugged, and then tossed it down to Alinnafe who groaned as she caught the thing.

"So really," Garnet said while collapsing her ladder back down, "how did you end up in my tree?"

"Um, I needed an orange," Alinnafe admitted. Her hands twisted around the handle of her broom, knuckles going pale when Garnet stared at her. "Specifically, I needed the highest orange on the tree."

"And you decided to climb a tree while wearing that?" Garnet asked. She jerked her chin at the fluffy lace, many layers of flowing clothes and soft heelless boots Alinnafe wore. "You should have just asked. I'd have pulled one down for you."

It was easier to go ahead and push the ladder back up so that Garnet had access to the top of the tree. Alinnafe seemed to have a particular orange in mind because she did the 'no, not that one, right, right, up, yes there!' thing while Garnet clung to the trunk and stuck one leg out to hook her toes under a different branch for stabilization. Caught the thing without any problems when Garnet tossed it down. And then laughed when Garnet picked six others on her way down though she did keep her top-of-the-tree orange separate from Garnet's juicers.

Alinnafe followed Garnet to the shed, followed her into the house, followed her into the kitchen where she plopped on a stool, still clutching her kitchen broom. Odd but hey, this was a stranger's house. Garnet understood very well that she was intimidating. Most everyone eyed her biceps and backed away when Garnet wore sleeveless shirts. Which she was. Chopping onions and peppers demanded frequent washing if she wasn't going to end up with red eyes and a running nose.

"So what do you need the orange for?" Garnet asked.

Stew meat was just the right level of browned so she pulled that before swiftly chopping the last onion into big chunks that went in with the mushrooms and peppers. Tomatoes could wait a bit. She didn't want them to cook down to paste before the stew was done.

"You'll think I'm crazy," Alinnafe muttered, rubbing the orange between her hands as if polishing it.

"Doubtful," Garnet replied. "Or at least I won't think you're any crazier than I already do. I mean, lace, orange trees? Come on now."

Alinnafe giggled, hiding behind her orange though her beautiful brown eyes sparkled with amusement. She really was lovely, full lips, round face, and hair that made Garnet want to play with it, as inappropriate as that was. Garnet wondered if Alinnafe would purr like the little black kitten she resembled.

"So?" Garnet asked.

"I'm working on a spell," Alinnafe admitted. All the happiness drained out of her eyes. "It's for a bet with some ah, friends of mine."

Garnet stared at her, frowned, and then dumped the meat back into the stew. Whatever sort of spell it was, clearly it wasn't one Alinnafe wanted to be casting. She wouldn't look so sad and upset if it was something good. Or at least something she wanted to cast.

"Who're your friends?" Garnet asked. "Anyone I know?"

"How am I supposed to know if you know them?" Alinnafe asked just acidly enough to get a grin out of Garnet. Better.

"So?"

"Sashi and Hikaru and Ravinder," Alinnafe said. "We're all from the other side of town."

"I know Ravinder," Garnet said. "Is Sashi the one who always wears pink leopard print? Or is that Hikaru? The other's the Goth, right?"

Alinnafe's eyes went wide and she nodded. She looked astonished that anyone would know her friends but it would be odd for Garnet not to know them. Ravinder Lapointe came from one of the richest families in town, one of the ones who'd come through the Convergence with money and power and home intact. Who'd kept their

power through all the upheavals that followed and then quite happily moved into the new magical world with every intent of mastering that, too.

Sashi Raines and Hikaru Coeman were hangers-on, the type who agreed with whatever Ravinder said, even when it was questionable. Or outright illegal. They had power, a good bit of power given that Sashi was half Elf and Hikaru was a dragon. Garnet had no doubt whatsoever that Ravinder was using them for their power. Only question she had was whether or not Sashi and Hikaru realized it. They were both young and gullible enough to miss the obvious as long as Ravinder complimented them.

Looked like at least Ravinder had some magic if he was casting spells now, maybe just pixie dust spells but still spells. Or maybe convincing easily led young people to cast them for him. Garnet wouldn't put it past him. She'd thought he was as powerless as she was but she could be wrong about that. It wasn't as though Garnet had any way to tell. Pure humans had no magic at all.

"What's the spell supposed to do?" Garnet asked. She stirred her stew so that she didn't frown at Alinnafe. Time for beef stock.

"Um, I'm really not supposed to say," Alinnafe murmured. She was staring at the orange when Garnet glanced her way but she still flinched away from Garnet's eyes.

"He's up to trouble again, then," Garnet sighed. "I can't give you the orange then. I won't be party to Ravinder's mean little tricks. The guy's a shmuck. A really pathetic shmuck at that."

That got Alinnafe giggling again though she looked utterly horrified that anyone would refer to Ravinder that way. A little delighted, as well, so maybe Alinnafe wasn't quite in Ravinder's metaphorical clutches yet. Garnet came over and ran a finger over the curve of the orange while staring into Alinnafe's eyes. Blood flushed her cheeks, then her ears, and then went right down her chest under the ruffles of her top.

"Tell me?" Garnet asked, flirted, smiling knowingly because yeah, she really would do that and it was obvious Alinnafe realized it.

"I shouldn't," Alinnafe whispered. She swallowed convulsively at a

second finger joining the first, the two of them flexing and caressing the surface of the orange. "Oh Goddess! Stop that!"

"Still my orange," Garnet said. She grinned. "I can molest it if I want to."

Alinnafe thrust it into Garnet's hands, jumping up and seizing her kitchen broom as if she intended to run right out the door and fly away. Took a quick grab for Garnet to catch her sleeve. The instant she had it Alinnafe froze, eyes wide.

"Seriously, Ravinder's not the sort you want to hang out with, Alinnafe," Garnet said. "He's a user. And an abuser. You're cute and sweet and I'd hate to see him eat you up and spit you out."

Alinnafe stilled, curled inwards, nodded sadly. "I know. I really do. But I have to. It's... important."

Magic sparked along her sleeve, jolting Garnet's fingers free from the fabric. Then Alinnafe ran out of the house, jumped onto her kitchen broom and flew away as if the thing was a traditional broom with a carved wooden handle and sticks for straw. Garnet watched her go, turning the orange over in her hands.

She set it on the counter and then set to work cutting open the other oranges. Juice was good. One of the best things about Garnet's house and the pool of heat magic that dwelled in her backyard was having fresh orange juice when she wanted it. That was part of why the twins annoyed her with their thievery, denying her the juice.

The highest orange that Alinnafe had chosen stayed on her counter, untouched.

Three days later and the orange was still firm, ripe but not heading towards spoiled when it should have been going bad. Outside the grocery store, she spotted Alinnafe trailing along behind Ravinder as he lectured on something. Who knew what? It was probably all bullshit given that Sashi (definitely the goth) and Hikaru (Why? Why would a dragon insist on wearing pink leopard print vests? Why?) were pushing each other and snickering.

Ravinder was wearing pure black, head to toe, but it was silk and satin and he'd carefully draped black silk cords from his fake horn headdress to make them more prominent. As if his resin horns would

ever measure up to what they should be if he actually had non-human blood. Pure ego on his part and as stupid as it could be. Which was about the norm for Ravinder.

To Garnet's surprise, Ravinder froze mid-step when he spotted her. He waved to Alinnafe who flinched and cowered behind him as he pointed towards Garnet and her bag of groceries. She protested, it looked like a mild protest, but Ravinder scowled at her as if she'd mortally insulted him.

Alinnafe gasped apologies, hands extended as if she was afraid she'd be smacked, before she ran over to Garnet's side. Today her layers of linen and lace were shades of blue that were a perfect match for Garnet's simple blue-jean-blue jersey tichel. And the jean jacket that Garnet had tossed on over the sweater her mother had knit last winter during the cold snap and snow in January.

"You really can do better than him," Garnet said before Alinnafe could open her mouth.

"Uh!" Alinnafe huffed. "Are you absolutely sure you won't let me have the orange?"

"Nope, no oranges for Ravinder," Garnet said. She shoved her bags of groceries into the back of her ancient little Beatle. "Pass me that last bag, will you? It's eggs."

Alinnafe stared at her, shoulders hunched and then slumping as she passed the bag over. Her bottom lip stuck out when Garnet straightened up and looked at her. The kicked puppy eyes were spectacular but they only lasted as long as it took for Garnet to reach out and run a thumb over her chin. Wanted to caress that lip but it seemed entirely too personal with Ravinder glaring holes in the back of Alinnafe's head. Or maybe he was glaring them in Garnet's chest. Equal odds given Ravinder.

"Stop that," Alinnafe whispered. Her cheeks went violently red again but she didn't look over her shoulder at Ravinder. Made him glower at them both so good on Alinnafe.

"Better than kissing the pout away," Garnet replied with her best cheesy grin. "That's what I wanted to do."

"Oh Goddess, you are impossible!" Alinnafe shouted. "Do you ever stop flirting?"

"Mmm, sometimes," Garnet said. She laughed at Alinnafe's glare. "But never when I'm faced with such a pretty girl."

The laughter got louder as Alinnafe huffed and stomped away to snap something at Ravinder that rocked him back on his heels. Both Sashi and Hikaru started and backed off as if afraid they were about to be struck. Then Alinnafe stomped away, visibly pissed off if only her cheeks weren't so red.

Sashi and Hikaru followed Alinnafe. They edged around Ravinder then ran after her, Hikaru's tail tucked tight to his body. Ravinder stared at Alinnafe's back. Then he turned to glare death at Garnet. She snorted, tapped a finger to her cheekbone underneath her right eye and then pointed straight at him.

Ravinder's chin went up. His cheeks went pale. Then he slowly and deliberately strolled away. The further he went the faster he strolled until he was power walking in Alinnafe's wake. Garnet shook her head. She really should call Ravinder's mother, see what the shmuck was up to. Couldn't be anything good.

But not now. She had groceries to get home and her ice cream would melt if she didn't hurry.

It took a full seventeen days before Garnet spotted Alinnafe again. The special orange from the top of the tree still looked as fresh as the day she'd picked it for Alinnafe. That was creepy. Seriously creepy. She'd gone out to dinner after her attempt at making wienerschnitzel had gone utterly and completely wrong, certainly not because she was twitchy about the never-rotting orange. She was pretty sure that she knew where she'd gone wrong. The coating had fallen off the veal and burnt in the pan but with a few tweaks to her methodology, next time it should turn out well.

So, coming out of her favorite Fairy restaurant, stomach full of really excellent tofu stir fry with seasonal blossoms and the best honey sauce this side of the Rockies, Garnet had damn near run straight into Alinnafe. They matched again, Garnet in teal and tan tichel with the ties twisted into a crown effect around her head, a

flowing tan dress over comfy black jeans. Alinnafe had three colors faded teal dresses over a tan pair of billowing pants and a black hand-crocheted cardigan that looked like it was made of flowers.

"Sorry," Garnet said as she grabbed Alinnafe's arms to keep her from landing on her ass. "Didn't see you there."

She looked around but nope, no Ravinder, no Sashi and no Hikaru. That was good. Alinnafe glared at her and jerked free, cheeks flushed and eyes hard with a fury that made little sense to Garnet. Unless, of course, it was the magically still perfect orange.

"Hello?" Garnet said hesitantly as the silence stretched.

"Are you going to give me the damned orange or not?" Alinnafe demanded.

"I won't contribute to Ravinder's trouble-making," Garnet replied. "If you're helping him then no. I won't give it to you."

She stepped out of the way so the local werewolf pack could head inside the restaurant, their dozen or so kids all babbling at once as they begged for their favorites to be added to the stir fry. Matriarch of the pack frowned at the way Alinnafe grumbled at her but headed inside without intervening. Thankfully. Garnet was big and strong but not strong enough to take on a mama werewolf with her kids right there.

"Right," Garnet said. She met Alinnafe's eyes. "It's still good, nice and firm and perfect when it should be rotten. Freaking me out, frankly. But I mean it. If you're helping Ravinder, I won't give it to you. If you're not helping him, being sneaky or something to trip the little schmuck up, then fine. You can have it. That's my only criteria though I would like to have a date or four or twenty, too."

Alinnafe threw up her hands and shouted, just a noise, angry and frustrated and embarrassed. Maybe pleased though it was hard to tell. She whirled and stomped off, kitchen broom nowhere to be seen. Odd, that. It was very, very rare to see a witch without her broom even if that broom was a thoroughly non-typical choice. Pixies hovered at roof level and then dove at Alinnafe while laughing. The laughs turned into screams as magic crackled around Alinnafe, driving them away.

Garnet thought about it on her way home. Usually witches and pixies got along like peanut butter and jelly. Odd that Alinnafe had driven them away like that. But it hadn't looked to Garnet as though the magic had been fully under Alinnafe's control. It'd been random, lightning and rain drops falling through cedar bows to snake down the back of your neck when you thought you were safe.

The orange might just be a bigger deal than Garnet had thought. She drove slow, careful, hands shaking a little on the steering wheel. Normally she wouldn't have considered it a big deal, something significant, but as time went on their clothes were closer and closer. Garnet's temper had gotten significantly better over the last couple of weeks to the point where her boss at work had asked, quietly and privately with wide eyes and hands held up to ward off a punch before it could happen, if she'd gone on one of the new mood relaxers the Elves had cooked up.

And instead of hitting, Garnet had laughed, shaken her head and walked away. Her boss had stared at her the rest of the day, only relaxing when Garnet headed home. For that matter, the rabbi had asked whether she was in a new relationship, humming and smirking when she said that no, not at all though there was someone she was flirting with.

"So," Garnet murmured to the orange once she was home in her kitchen again, "you're more than an orange. You tying us together, little magic orange from the top of the tree? That's not a nice thing to do. Seriously. You don't take a person's ability to consent away. It's wrong."

The orange sat there being an orange. No answers there.

Next day, Garnet woke to a house that smelled of orange. It was like she'd bathed in orange juice, had someone put orange scented patches over the vents, filled her house with an entire truck load of oranges. When she went into the kitchen the orange sat there, gleaming, as perfect as it could be. She could have sworn that it was even more perfect than it had been before.

"Shit."

Tracking down which coven Alinnafe belonged to took about an

hour. Garnet ended up calling Deidre, matriarch of the local wolf pack, who knew absolutely everyone and what they were up to. Which, as always, meant listening to a series of kids babbling the exciting news that their little brother had just lost a tooth and the pixie nest out back had brand new baby pixies that bit really, really hard and that they were having pancakes for breakfast and did Garnet think syrup or jam was better on pancakes.

"Sorry about that," Deidre said once she reclaimed the probably sticky phone from her kids. "This is Garnet, right?"

"Yup, that's me," Garnet said. "I need some help. I have to track down Alinnafe Wyndham's coven. I've got a problem that involves her and well, it's a big one."

"Oh, the orange thing," Deidre said. She chuckled as though she'd just heard the best dirty joke ever. "Yeah, I guess you do have a problem. Don't know why you're stringing her on."

"Ah, I'm not?" Garnet said even though yeah, she must be for the smell of orange to increase that much. "She said she needed it for ever-so-lovely Ravinder Lapointe and I won't give it to him."

"I wouldn't either, marrying a man like that," Deidre agreed. "Seriously, that'd be horrific for both of you."

Garnet sat abruptly, legs giving way so that she smacked to the floor of her kitchen with her legs sprawled underneath her. Marriage? What? Marriage!

"Wait," Garnet snapped as Deidre chuckled something about epic mismatches of personality. "What do you mean 'marriage'?"

"She didn't tell you?" Deidre asked. Kids shouted around her, the sound a din that made Garnet's ears ring even when she held the phone away from her head. A moment later the kids ran away again, leaving Deidre and Garnet with a moment of quiet. "Huh. Yeah, it's an old spell. You pick the fruit of a magical tree, the highest one, and then give it to the one you love. Magic of the tree binds the two of you together."

"Fuck."

Garnet managed not to explain any further. She did get the alarming news that Alinnafe's coven was apparently in talks with

Ravinder's family for some sort of arranged marriage so they were very likely over at the Lapointe mansion at this time of the morning. Still took her another ten minutes to get off the phone with Deidre. Then another twenty for her to get properly dressed for a visit to important people, most of that spent on tying her tichel so it didn't look completely haphazard. But then she was in her car, orange safely cradled in a spare knit cap on the passenger's seat.

The front gate opened before Garnet could press the intercom. She stared at it, stared at the huge heavy iron gate as it slid open. It was decorated with iron books embossed with nonsense poetry that was supposed to be Hebrew but pretty clearly was some idiot designer's idea of what traditional Hebrew poetry was supposed to be.

Damn mansion was easily a hundred times the size of Garnet's little house. Huge drafty thing with more window than brick wall, covered in expensive glamor that made it look as though it was marble until you looked closely. The butler opened the door as Garnet got out of her car, bowed to her and then silently led her through more glamor-enhanced hallways to a library that actually was as big as it looked. She wouldn't have bet that all the books actually had writing in them--spines were too new and unbroken for that--but it was a nice enough space, if overly full of annoyed looking witches and Ravinder's relatives.

"Hmph, I see you decided to return my orange," Ravinder said, sauntering towards her.

He was still wearing all black but today it was a tweedy black suit with a black silk shirt and a black lace-covered cravat that was nearly as big as his head. Still had the stupid horn headdress on, bells jingling at the tips of the horns.

"Yours?" Garnet said as she held the orange behind her back. "You never showed up at my house. Never asked to get an orange. Never even tried to climb the damned tree to get it. That was all Alinnafe."

"What?" Vivian Lapointe shot to her feet.

She was as impressive as Ravinder wasn't. Her perfect white pantsuit was the height of fashion with all the right bits of embroidery and silk ribbon on the lapels. Slim, pale skinned and blond

haired, she was rather like staring into the sun as she glared first at Garnet and then at Ravinder who curled in on himself. The bells rang constantly as he trembled in front of her. "You were to collect the orange yourself, Ravinder. That is the key to the magic. You were told this."

"Didn't," Garnet said over Ravinder's spluttering protests and weak gestures of apology at his mother. "Alinnafe tried to get to get it by flying over the top of the tree. She fell off her broom and I kind of rescued her."

"Who picked it?" Meredith Thorsen asked. "That's the important question. Who actually picked the orange? That's the person who holds the magic."

Where Vivian was style and power incarnate, Meredith was as comfortable as a worn out sweater that snuggled around you and perfectly matched your every curve. She wore as many layers as Alinnafe who edged out from behind the other witches with cheeks so red that she might as well have been painted with blood, but her layers were vivid reds, greens and blues while Alinnafe matched Garnet's clothes exactly.

They both had green head scarves, Alinnafe's wrapped in a headband around her beautiful poof of curly hair. Each of them had emerald jackets, sage shirts, brown pants, black boots. They'd even chosen the exact same color of tan belt though Alinnafe's was a sash and Garnet's was a proper leather belt holding her too-loose pants up.

"That'd be me," Garnet said with a little sigh because the anger she should be feeling at this entire mess was missing. Seemed to be inside of Alinnafe's blazing eyes. "Knew it was for a spell. Didn't know what sort of spell and well, she'd already gotten stuck in the tree once. I didn't see a reason for her to get stuck again when I had a ladder and could pick the damn thing myself."

Every one of the witches groaned. Vivian hissed and gestured sharply for Ravinder to take his place behind her chair next to her husband who just shook his head and silently frowned at Ravinder.

"Then the marriage cannot proceed," Meredith sighed. She

shrugged as if it couldn't be helped. "The magic has already gone to Garnet. She is the one who gets to choose who receives it. She is the only one who can give it."

"Hell, I already said I'd give it to Alinnafe," Garnet said because she just couldn't handle the sheer humiliation in Alinnafe's eyes. "Just wouldn't give it to her when I thought it'd go to Ravinder." She turned to Vivian, bobbed her head somewhat politely even though she didn't really mean it. All around her the smell of oranges curled and swirled, filling her nose and her mind with something that she really shouldn't be able to detect, magic-blind as she was. "Sorry, Ms. Lapointe. I just don't agree with your boy's behavior and I won't do anything that enables him to get away with bad behavior. If he'd shown up at my house, asked politely and explained that it was for a marriage gift, well, I'd have given him the ladder to climb myself. He didn't. Apparently he sent Alinnafe to do it and then spent the last few weeks berating her for not having stolen it from me."

Vivian shut her eyes as her jaw worked with enough rage that Garnet fidgeted and backed off a step. "Noted. And understood. He was to do exactly that. Apparently he didn't understand what was needed."

"You don't mean it," Alinnafe said in the murmuring quiet that overrode Ravinder's weak-voiced protests that he hadn't thought it was that necessary. "About me. You don't mean it."

"Sure do," Garnet said.

The witches all turned towards her, disappointment turning into something much more hopeful, sort of wary but still watchful and clear. Even Vivian's scowl turned into an indrawn breath and a bright look between Alinnafe and Garnet. Alinnafe swallowed, hands in fists.

"We're already partially bound, Alinnafe," Garnet said as gently as she could and that was much more gently than it normally would be. "You've gained my temper. I've gained your patience. We're dressing more and more alike every single day. I swear that my entire house smells of oranges and I know it can't. It's the magic of the tree, isn't it? I'm seeing, smelling, the magic as the tree binds us together."

Alinnafe stared at her. She shook and then stared down at her clothes wildly for a moment before gulping and whirling to Meredith who laughed and laughed and laughed, one hand smacking her thigh as if this was the best joke she'd ever heard.

"Well, I suppose that will do, too," Meredith said. "Rather like the idea of binding our coven to a woman more than a man. And I certainly do approve that you're observant instead of atheist, Garnet. It should work, I think."

"Bind the coven?" Garnet asked. She got nothing but cheerful nods from the witches, even Alinnafe, so she turned to Vivian who sighed and rubbed the space between her eyebrows as if fighting a headache.

"Covens need to be bound to specific locations," Vivian explained, mouth twisted as if she'd bitten into one of the sour, unripe oranges from Garnet's tree. "To families, generally. They had a link to a family near the coast but their home was destroyed during the winter, landslide, so they needed a new link. We had planned on centering them here, through Ravinder. This... could work, I suppose."

Which made sense of the whole damned thing. Garnet nodded, turning the orange over in her hands as she stared at Alinnafe who went pale and then red and then pale again. When Garnet held the orange out to her, Alinnafe made another of those little squeaks that made Garnet grin so widely. She laughed and stepped close to pull one of Alinnafe's hands up. Didn't quite put the orange in her hands because damn it, magic tree and covens being grounded or not, consent mattered.

"I meant it," Garnet whispered just to Alinnafe and everyone else could just go jump in the Sound. "I do want to date you. You're beautiful and sweet and I've been looking for you through every window and door I pass. But only if you want it, too. I can give it to someone else if you don't want me?"

"You're such an idiot!" Alinnafe gasped as she snatched the orange out of Garnet's hand. "Of course I want it! I've wanted it ever since you came out of your kitchen ready to beat me up for stealing the silly thing."

She stood on her toes as the room erupted in orange light, the smell of oranges so thick it nearly made Garnet gag. Then her lips were on Garnet's and there wasn't anything other than the smell and taste of Alinnafe's citrus lip balm. The magic hummed around them, warm and loving and just like home, Garnet's home.

Their home.

Garnet laughed as she hugged Alinnafe, laughed as she scooped her up and whirled her around, laughed as Vivian smiled, cold and sure. Meredith cheered. The other witches made magic shower around them while Ravinder protested and then snapped his mouth shut when his father put a hand on his shoulder.

"So," Garnet said once Alinnafe started giggling more like her old self, "what do you think of old-fashioned Jewish weddings? My rabbi is going to insist on one, you know. Magic oranges don't quite work for us."

Alinnafe grinned, waved the orange which she tossed to Meredith, and then nodded. "I think that will be lovely. Especially if you cook something for us. I've been smelling your cooking ever since you picked that orange and I don't think I can wait another day to actually get to eat some of it."

That made Garnet laugh. "Deal. Come on. Let's start planning, little orange thief."

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: FAIRY DRAGON BLUES

*A*nother Unification Story, this time stemming from research into wild wolf packs that showed that Alpha wolves aren't what most Urban Fantasy makes them out to be. They're parents caring for a passel of kids with a huge extended family. So of course I had to have my werewolf pack with dozens of kids, adopted and not, human, were and not.

FAIRY DRAGON BLUES

Soggy leaves squished under Janie's boots. They were slippery enough that Janie set her feet carefully so that she wouldn't land on her ass. Her little sisters, Mimi and Cece, had no such restraint. Mimi giggled as she slipped and slid through the forest towards the back fence. Cece's feet went out from under her and she ended up on her back, feet in the air, eyes wide and bottom lip already starting to pout out.

"Oopsies," Janie said, grinning down at her instead of fussing so that Cece wouldn't immediately decide she was dying and wail. "Slippery."

Cece started giggling instead of crying. "Slippery!"

She waved her arms and then scrambled back to her feet, backside muddy and wet, not that Cece cared all that much. Neither she nor Mimi really minded when their clothes got wet. They just stripped them off and then shifted to wolf form even though Mom had said that they needed to stay clothed for this little expedition.

The back fence was a perpetual work in progress. No surprise given that the pack owned a hundred acres of northwest forest full of ferns, cedar and maple covered with moss. They had a little salmon river that cut through the property and deer

moved freely through the property, more or less managed by the pack.

As far as Janie was concerned the best part of their land was that it was well away from town and they really only had one subdivision on the other side of the land from them. It really felt like they had the whole world to themselves when they were out in the forest.

Up ahead, Mom caught both Cece and Mimi by the waists, hoisting them up for kisses that made the girls laugh and hug her with wet muddy hands. Mom laughed and passed Cece over to Dad who used his magic to dry Cece out. She cooed and curled up in his arms just the way Janie always had when she was little. Nothing was nicer than feeling the heat that always roiled off Dad.

The rest of the pack, or at least the majority of the adults and teens, carried boards and posts, hammers and saws. It shouldn't take too long to fix the fence with all of them working together, unless something had come through and torn down bigger sections than they thought. Always possible if not especially likely.

"It really is slippery," Roger said. "Not used to this sort of wetness at this time of year."

His voice was starting to get deeper as he transitioned. There was fuzz on his chin now and his shoulders were broader. Janie was pretty sure that he'd put on a few more inches soon and then he'd look even more like he should. The witches the next town over had promised that by the time he was done with his transition no one would be able to tell he'd been assigned female at birth.

"We have had way more rain than normal," Janie agreed. "Kind of odd since the cloudbursts haven't hit most of the surrounding area."

Roger looked up, squinting at the sky between the branches overhead. "Think there might be something more going on?"

Janie shrugged. There really wasn't much chance of her knowing if there was. Her gifts were all for shifting and fire, not for rain. They didn't have anyone who was good with rain in the pack. It was probably something that Mom fretted about in her spare time, you know, the five or so minutes between putting Cece and Mimi down to sleep and then having to hurry off to deal with other crises each night.

Certainly wasn't anything that Janie could do about it. Or Roger. Roger was a normal human, no gifts at all other than pissing his idiot of a birth mom off by being who he was instead of who his mom wanted him to be. At least he was safe with the pack. Even Roger's mom wasn't going to go up against a wolf pack to get him back, though she did complain endlessly and misgender him every time they saw each other in town.

It'd be nice to find a way to get Roger's mom to leave him alone. Wasn't likely to happen right away but Janie had overheard Mom and Dad talking about other packs they knew in different parts of the country. They'd find a place for him to move, a pack to live with, and it would be fine. Eventually.

For now she'd just keep an eye on him and let her girlfriend August know if anyone gave Roger trouble. After August's blow-up at Danny at school no one messed with her, not even parents and teachers.

The stream, once they reached it, was a lot higher than expected. It looked nearly like a proper river, banks swollen and water flowing so fast that Mom grabbed Mimi by the back of her shirt and Dad scooped up Cece before she could run straight into the water. Janie came over and tugged on their hair, distracting the girls from struggling free.

"Safe to cross?" Janie asked.

"Doubt it," Mom replied. She manhandled Mimi around until Mimi was draped over her shoulder, legs kicking and arms flailing. "The water's way too high. This isn't right. You two feel any magic?"

Janie blinked and then shrugged. When she shut her eyes there was the feeling of magic all around them. It felt wet and cold, like falling into the Puget Sound in the middle of winter. She gasped and shuddered, her lips and fingers tingling with cold.

"There's something here," Janie said.

"Definitely," Dad agreed. His lips had gone blue and Cece patted his face with her wet little hands, whining. "Not one I know. Animate, I think."

That was a problem. Janie stepped back away from the swollen

stream, rubbing her hands together. She jumped as Mori, her little dragon-runt adopted brother, tugged at her pants. When she picked him up Mori wrapped his tail around her waist and tucked his head under her chin.

"You feel it, too?" Janie asked.

"Dragon magic," Mori said. "Different dragon. Not like me or like Youneda or Fuwa or Louis or any dragon I know."

That rocked Janie back on her heels. She looked at Mom, then Dad. Both of them looked and smelled just as surprised as Janie was. Most of the pack looked the same way, shifting their feet in the wet leaves and eyeing the evergreen shrubs around them.

"How big?" Roger asked Mori. "Little like you? Big like Youneda? In between?"

"Um..."

Mori stopped and stared around them, looking not out into the shrubbery or up towards the sky but down into the stream itself. He flipped his wings a couple of times, and then hesitantly held them out about a foot apart.

"That big," Mori said.

"That's a baby," Janie gasped. "What's a baby doing out here?"

It certainly wasn't unheard of for dragon children to be turned out of the nest. Mori had been pushed out just that way. Though in reality his dam had picked him up by the scruff of the neck, flown over to the house and deposited him firmly in Mom's arms with a few choice words about runts, doomed to die and households full of rejects that had set Mom to cursing and poor Mori to sobbing his heart out.

He was fine now, growing like a weed and delighted by his strange new family that didn't hate him just because he was small for his age.

The point was, though, that the pack was always ready to take in children who needed a place to stay whether it was short term or for the rest of their lives. There was no need to abandon a baby out in the woods when Mom and Dad would have gladly taken it in, no matter how odd or different it was.

"Not a baby," Mori said so firmly that Janie's rapidly rising temper

at whoever had abandoned a child instead of just giving it to the pack subsided. "Grown up but little bitty."

She stared at Mori who ducked his head and hid it under his wing. Mom stared too. Mimi tried to take advantage of her distraction by squirming free but Mom's grip around her waist was firm enough to keep that from happening. Even Dad had a puzzled expression on his face and Uncle Ron muttered under his breath as he set down his stack of lumber so that he could peer into the water, the sky, the shrubbery as if looking for their hidden tiny dragon.

Roger gasped and then nodded as he pointed towards the stream. "It has to be a fairy dragon! I can almost see its outline in the water."

Janie crouched down, Mori slithering around so that he was perched on her back like a backpack. There was something moving in the water, fast and limber, like a snake but not. It was blue, teal and purple with hints of gold flashing when it moved just right.

"Oh yeah," Janie said. She set her fingers at the edge of the water and leaned in closer. "I think I see it. Weird. Never heard of a fairy dragon before."

"Me, neither," Mori said.

He reared up high on Janie's back, wings flaring out wide to keep his balance. Janie gasped as her hand slipped in the wet leaves. Mud, slick mud underneath kept her from stopping her fall. She shouted, pushed backwards with one hand to dislodge Mori, but it was too late.

Janie tumbled into the stream, got caught by the current and dragged under before she had a chance to even gasp for breath.

Ice cold water caught her like the time she'd tried to wrestle with Tom-Tom, the giant's son. It dragged her down, into water that went way too deep for the little stream that Janie had grown up splashing through. There was a huge pond underneath her, bigger than she was, as big as a car, a bus, their three story monster of a house.

She couldn't tell which way was up or down and the cold, cold water stole Janie's ability to sense her family, to feel her father's magic. Even Mori's fire-filled little body disappeared from her magical senses as if she was suddenly a million miles away.

Janie clapped a hand over her mouth, staring around as she realized that she was far away, very far away. The surface of the water was a portal to another world, a pocket dimension, one crafted for the fairy dragon and deadly dangerous to her.

Blue and teal flashed against the indigo background. Golden eyes blinked once, twice, only to flare wide as if in shock.

The fairy dragon slipped away into the water. Janie's lungs heaved. Air, she needed air, there was no air. Everywhere she looked there was nothing but water and indigo darkness that extended forever above, below, and all around her.

Fire started to burn inside of her, just as hot as her desperation. Air, could she boil the water and get air? Was there air in this pocket dimension? How the hell could she get out of here?

All around her the water started to boil, first little bubbles that drifted sideways, and then bigger ones and bigger ones. Janie blinked and then began to swim desperately towards the entrance to the pocket dimension. The bubbles had to be going that way. They wouldn't drift down. Air bubbles only went up, out.

It felt like she could swim forever and never reach the entrance. But she couldn't be that far away from it. There was no way. She'd only just fallen in. Unless the magic of the portal was very strong, Janie couldn't have gone too far.

One of her hands broke the surface, the sudden shock of cold air like a knife after the chill of the water. Janie flailed and kicked twice as hard even as her lungs heaved and the water boiled around her. Her head burst through the surface and Janie gasped.

"Get her!" Mom shouted.

The stream surged around Janie, trying to drag her back down, but magic ropes wrapped around her flailing wrists, clinging tight to her. Janie grabbed onto them and kicked with all her might. Someone shouted 'heave!' and then the ropes hauled hard on Janie. She surged out of the water and onto the shore. Wet leaves filled her mouth, splattered her face.

Janie coughed, crawled further up the shore and into her pack's arms. Mori was right there, sobbing tears of fire and shooting blasts

of steam from his nostrils. Mimi and Cece were both in their wolf forms, ears plastered against their skulls and fur poofed out from fear.

"Oh thank the Goddess," Dad moaned as he brushed leaves off Janie's face, patting her and smoothing too-hot hands over her face. "Thank all the Gods!"

"Daddy," Janie gasped, coughed and then tried not to sob as he hugged her and then Mom hugged both of them. "Dad, I saw the dragon. It's a pocket dimension. I was dragged right in. I don't think it set up any wards to keep people out. It looked surprised that I was there."

He nodded, hugged her again, and then let her go so that Janie could stare into Mom's eyes for a long moment. Even as chilled and rattled as Janie was, she could see that Mom wanted to tear the fairy dragon apart for endangering her.

But that wasn't right. Wolf packs welcomed everyone. If the fairy dragon was building a pocket dimension here there had to be a reason for it. And it wasn't as if the Puget Sound was an inappropriate place for a water-based entity. They sure as heck got enough rain. She grabbed Mom's arm so that she couldn't stand, couldn't immediately try to attack the fairy dragon.

"Mom, what if it's building a nest for its eggs?" Janie asked. "It didn't attack me. Heck, it headed in the same direction as the entrance to the pocket dimension, like it wanted me to follow it."

Mom growled, her arm like steel under Janie's fingers. She kept her grip, kept it as Roger muttered something about attempted murder, kept it as Mimi and Cece whined pitifully. After much too long Mom sighed and nodded. Her arm relaxed and she patted Janie's hand.

"That's about the only explanation I would accept," Mom said.

She helped Janie stand, glared at the stream that had already started to go down. The rain had slowed down overhead, too. They still had droplets hitting them, one smacked Janie right in the corner of her eye, but that was from rain making its way down the leaves, not fresh rain falling from the sky. In seconds the stream was just a

stream, small enough for her to step across. Even Mimi and Cece would have had a hard time getting in trouble in its slender flow.

"It closed the door?" Janie suggested.

"The magic does seem a lot less," Mori murmured. His wings trembled until Janie reached down and petted his head. Then he smiled and wagged his tail. "I think you scared it, Janie."

"I'm not scary," Janie huffed.

"It's little," Mori said, eyes wide and solemn. "Littler than me. Littler than Mimi and Cece. It's probably afraid."

Janie huffed as she struggled to her feet. The fairy dragon sure as hell hadn't seemed small in the pocket dimension. It'd been bigger than the biggest dragon she'd ever seen. Even Youneda, fat old dragon that he was, would have seemed tiny next to it.

It was a struggle getting her feet under her. Her whole body felt like it was made of chunks of ice. Her feet were just about as sensitive and flexible as wood and the bones in her fingers creaked when she tried to make a fist.

"Go easy," Dad said. "You might have a bit of frostbite, baby."

"It was really cold," Janie said, nodding. "Really cold. And big. Dark. Indigo blue."

Mom growled as she strode over to the stream, crouching down where Janie had slipped in. There was a distinct patch of mud where the leaves had been scraped away. Looked to Janie as if they'd been dragged in with her but she didn't remember seeing any leaves in the water on the other side. Maybe they got carried off in the stream?

The water in the stream went from clear enough to see the pebbles on the bottom to indigo blue in one spot about the size of Janie's head. She stumbled over, pulling Mom back from the edge even though the hole was way too small for Mom to fit in it.

"Get out here," Mom snapped at the fairy dragon.

"Mom, you're going to scare it," Janie said. "Come on. I'm okay. Mostly."

A little dragon's head, about the size of Janie's thumb, poked out of the surface of the water. The fairy dragon was blue, that same deep indigo blue, with teal and purple accents. Its eyes truly were gold.

When it blinked it looked so tiny and afraid that Janie's breath caught again. She didn't know what gender the little dragon was but it was so delicate that she had to believe it was female. Most male dragons tended to be burlier for their mating battles.

"Mom, if you hurt her I'm going to yell at you," Janie declared and then snorted at the way the little thing stared up at her.

"You nearly died," Mom said with a glare over her shoulder at Janie.

It wasn't a huff. Or a growl. Or even a snarl. Janie smiled, a little weak and wobbly but the cold still soaked into her bones could explain that if Janie really wanted an explanation. Either way, Mom had seen how tiny the fairy dragon was and how fragile or she would have been a heck of a lot more fierce.

"No, I didn't," Janie said. "I mean, yeah, I was short on breath but I'm pretty sure I would have escaped no matter what. She could have locked me in to drown."

The fairy dragon gasped, coming up out of the water to float on the surface and then come up onto the shore. Her wings were gossamer thin, teal membranes edged with purple and gold, all dripping with water that might be part of its actual body because none of the drops ever fell. She sat back on her haunches and tail, tiny doll-like hands clutched to her breastbone.

"Would not have," the fairy dragon protested in a voice higher and smaller than even a single pixie's. "Should not have fallen in. Showed which way to go. Too big to carry. Stretched the space by entering."

"See?" Janie said, waving a hand that was slowly regaining mobility at the fairy dragon. "She just wants to make a home. We got room. Heck, we could just build a little bridge over the stream and then she'll have a nice cover of the entrance so no one can fall in."

The fairy dragon gasped with delight this time, itsy little ears coming up to satellite straight at Janie. "Will make home safer? Thank you!"

Mom groaned as her chin dropped to her chest. She shook her head and then looked to Dad who'd scooped up the twins, holding them both by the waist so that they wouldn't run over to try to pick

the fairy dragon up. He shrugged and nodded towards Mori who had matched the fairy dragon's crouch, clapping his hands in delight.

"We got the room out here," Janie said. "She'll be safe. As long as we know not to wade through the stream where her entrance is then it'll be fine."

"I can't believe you're taking the dragon's side," Mom sighed. She waved a hand when both Janie and the little dragon opened their mouths to protest. "All right, all right. We'll build a bridge over the stream. You can stay. Just please don't make it rain all the time here. Other areas need the rain, too. And no letting Mori here spend all his time in the pocket dimension. He's a fire dragon, not a water dragon."

"Door is closed to all but my kind now," the fairy dragon said with a delighted flick of her tiny tail and a flutter of her wings. "Can talk but no going in. Thank you. Will make sure forest never goes dry, never goes water-logged."

Mom chuckled at that, offering one finger to the fairy dragon. It put both hands on Mom's finger, leaning in to lick a tiny wet stripe up Mom's finger. Mom laughed for real at that. She waved for the fairy dragon to return to the stream and then stood. The entrance stayed open, a tiny indigo patch in the middle of the stream.

When Mom turned to shoo them all back to the house for a completely different set of tools and supplies than what they'd started with, Janie grinned. She waited as the others gathered up their things and then looked at the little fairy dragon.

"See you later, cutie," Janie said.

"Bye," the fairy dragon replied, blinking her eyes several times and then laughing, her eyes squinting shut and her ears going floppy on the sides of her head, "hottie!"

Janie burst out laughing. She waved. The fairy dragon waved too and then dove into her pocket dimension. Well, scary as that had been, it looked like Janie'd made a new friend. Mimi scampered over and whined until Janie picked her up, wet fur and cold nose notwithstanding. Mimi changed back to a naked human toddler, patting Janie's cheeks.

"Oopsie?" Mimi asked, her bottom lip just barely starting to quiver

as if she'd only now realized that something dangerous might have happened.

Janie grinned. "Yup, oopsie. I fell down and got wet. Better go change clothes, yeah?"

Mimi blinked and then laughed, clapping her hands. "Yeah!"

She squirmed until Janie set her down. Mimi immediately changed back into wolf form and then ran to catch up with Mom and Cece, Uncle Ron and the others. Roger was there to offer a shoulder when Janie's legs weren't quite strong enough to keep the same pace, his slowly broadening face wary until he realized that Janie's smile wasn't just for the twins.

"You're so hopeless," Roger chuckled.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Janie replied. "We're a werewolf pack. What's one more strange person moving in? We've got the room and hey, she seems nice enough, right?"

Roger laughed and shook his head, eyes shining with gratitude and amusement. "Yeah. Now come on. Let's get you clean and warm. You're like ice."

He supported Janie all the way back to the house. Janie let him. After all, wasn't that what family, pack, was all about?

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: STOLEN AWAY

This story is from my Under the Tormal Shadow series. A hundred or so years ago, the Tormal Dragons flooded onto the human continent, killing and eating ninety percent of the population. They were killed, but it was only when other dragons came to fight them. Humanity is recovering. Slowly. This one is darker and comes with warnings of abuse, age differences and war.

1. STONE WALLS

"*T*here's my beautiful boy."

Coby sighed in his sleep as a smile curled his lips at the sound of his lover Rodolf's voice. The old raider's honey-gravel drawl inspired dreams of their last secret visit. Coby had slipped out of the palace, sneaking through the hallways and hiding from servants, guards and family alike, until he made it out into the garden. Tall thorn hedges had hidden them from prying eyes as Rodolf kissed, caressed and loved Coby.

Their precious stolen moments were all that made Coby's life worth living. The crowded court of Kaer was not a kind place. The constant battles against the troll-like Raiven made men cruel enough without his father King Frits playing his games with everyone's hearts and minds. He sighed and shifted in bed ever so slightly, just barely waking when cool callous-rough fingers touched his forehead.

"Sleep deeply and do not wake, little one. I have you."

Magic swept over Coby, dulling his dreams while sending him deeper into darkness than he'd been in ages. He'd learned to sleep lightly during small childhood. His father King Frits had never seen any reason to play mediator among his many legitimate and illegitimate sons so Coby had frequently been bullied for being small,

apparently fragile and heartbreakingly beautiful. Even Eduart's protection as the Heir to the throne hadn't meant a thing when they all went to their beds. One smallish boy being attacked amongst the army of other sons was simply not noticed in Kaer's royal court.

His dreams became choppy things full of cold and fear, riding horseback with bare toes, and tangled long white-blond hair. Rodolf's voice murmured comfortingly to him as he slept. His words were like sunlit brandy poured into a timeworn voice, matching the gentle touch of his heavily calloused hands.

When Coby finally woke it was to a stomach screaming for sustenance. Coby stared around the tiny room, trying to figure out where he was and how he'd gotten there. The air was so cold that it burned his nasal passages. All four walls were blank, rough-hewn stone, dark gray instead of the more familiar red at home. He bit his lip, tasting blood that made his stomach rumble desperately.

Worse than the unfamiliar environment, Coby was completely naked. His night clothes were nowhere to be seen. There were no other clothes for him to wear, either. Several unanticipated bruises announced themselves as Coby edged up out of the blankets to get a better view.

"What?" Coby whispered as he stared around the unfamiliar room in confusion. "Where am I?"

It wasn't a room that could possibly be in the Palace, not even in the basements where the servants stored the food. His brothers had locked Coby into storerooms before and they didn't look like this. Here there was only rough-hewn stone and blocky wood furniture that looked like it had been put together from barely stripped logs. The storerooms had plastered walls and well-planed shelves that gleamed golden in the light from the magic lamps.

The only source of light here was a small fireplace that held a quickly dying fire. The fuel was wood, not coal, which only added to his confusion and growing fear. No one in Kaer burned wood. It was too rare and precious in their little country with its windswept hills and marshy ground.

If the fire burned wood then he had to be a long way from home.

Synvain was equally likely to burn peat over wood. Their forests were all stunted and wrong from the damage inflicted by the Four during the Tormal Wars a generation and a half ago. Even in Petrin's highlands where the Tormal Dragons had done minimal damage, burning wood was rare.

Nothing made sense. There was no reason for anyone to kidnap him. Coby wasn't important. He was certainly attractive. Everyone said so. But he wasn't important enough for ransom. His dreams of Rodolf gave him hope that it wasn't so much a kidnapping as a rescue but there was no proof of that at the moment. With no one else around and nothing besides the bare, rough furnishings of the room, Coby had nothing to go on.

"Hello?" Coby called. "Is anyone out there?"

No one answered his tentative call. Coby drew the top blanket around his body and padded on wincing feet to the door. His toes shivered at the icy chill of the stone floor. It was an effort not to allow the shivers to progress up his body. In all his life he'd never been this cold before.

"Hello?" Coby tried the heavy metal knob. It didn't budge. The door didn't open. Coby bit his lip and then knocked firmly. "Hello! Is anyone there?"

Still no one answered. Coby's shivers moved up from his chilled toes to his knees and fingers. He scurried back to the bed to huddle under the covers where it was marginally warmer. A longer look around the rapidly darkening room showed Coby that unless he wished to burn the small log-legged stool sitting next to his bed there was no more fuel for the fire. Mere moments later the fire guttered out; it left Coby with fading embers and a rapidly growing chill in the room that drove him to hide under the covers.

"Where am I?" Coby whispered as he curled into a ball in an attempt to stay warm.

By the time the door opened nearly an hour later Coby was shaking nonstop from the cold despite pulling the covers over his head to conserve the heat generated by what breath escaped his chattering teeth. He started at the groaning creak of the hinges and froze.

Wild fears of who had kidnapped him and why rampaged through his mind as blood bloomed from Coby's bitten lip. He held his breath as he waited to hear who it was.

"Huh, fire went out," Rodolf's voice said, prompting a huge sigh of relief out of Coby. Only casual surprise could be heard in Rodolf's words.

Coby peeked out of his nest of blankets, staring at his lover in the light from the open door. Rodolf had a new scar on his cheek, fresh and as raw as if he'd been in a battle in the last few days. He walked with his normal limp. The silver speckling his hair at the temples gleamed in the dim light coming from the hallway beyond.

Rodolf set the tray he carried on the stool next to Coby's bed. Whatever he'd brought smelled of thick meaty sauce and salty spices, not that Coby moved out of the blankets to check if it was stew or soup or something more exotic. Rodolf went outside only to return a few moments later with wood and a firebox.

He set kindling and what looked like moss in the fireplace, sending up tiny showers of sparks with his flint and steel. In moments he had a tiny flame that he nurtured into a miniature fire. Rodolf slowly put small sticks and then two nicely sizeable logs onto the fire. The rich smell of pine sap burning filled the room long before the heat reached Coby's cold bed.

"You can stir, you know," Rodolf murmured. "I know you're awake, beautiful boy."

"Wh-where am-m I?" Coby asked without emerging from his cocoon of blankets. His chattering teeth shattered the words into fragments.

"Just south of the Dwarvish territories," Rodolf answered, frowning with concern at Coby. "I stole you away, little one. You're mine now."

"What?" Coby squeaked.

He sat up but the chill had not yet left the room despite the way the fire now blazed. The blankets were warmer than the air so he curled back into a ball under them. Rodolf smiled at him with his rakish smile that dared everything and feared nothing. Coby shivered

for more than just the cold once Rodolf stood and walked to the door. He shut it and locked it, coming back to sit next to Coby on the bed.

"I stole you," Rodolf murmured. His eyes were hot and the word 'stole' shifted from honey smooth to gravel in the middle. "I crept into the palace and found your bed. Spelled you and your brothers and then escaped with you. It was quite a chase. They nearly caught me but I made it to safety in the Forest of Perpetual Rains. We're in my house north of Raven's Roost."

"Why?" Coby whispered. "Father..."

"Only cared that someone had taken what was his," Rodolf said with a snort. He took a bowl from the tray and offered it to Coby. "Eat. We have to talk later about your role here, little one. I certainly won't claim you're my son, no matter how young you are. Only logical choices are slave or clerk. Or maybe clerkish slave. Lord knows my letters suck. Everyone would believe I bought a clerk."

The bowl held thick meaty stew in a sauce that was brown and rich. Coby ate it quickly, following that with tea and bread smeared with berry jelly. Between the food and the fire, and Rodolf's steady presence next to him, Coby's shivers faded away. Once done he looked up at Rodolf, biting his lip nervously.

"Why steal me?" Coby asked. "Father might have been willing to let me leave."

"Hah!" Rodolf's laugh was more an explosion of disgust than humor. "That man only cares that his blood stays close so that no mage can use it against him. No, I offered for you. Formally, with a 'bride' price and everything. He laughed in my face and turned me down, little one. Didn't take that well so I stole you away from him. Old fool doesn't know what he does keeping his children so close to him. Those brothers of yours are going to throw a coup eventually. I didn't want you there when it happens."

"I didn't hear," Coby said. His voice shook on the words. "No one told me."

Rodolf nodded. He kicked off his boots and then stripped down to his skin. When he climbed into bed next to Coby it was as though the sun itself had entered his bed. Coby moaned and pressed close to

Rodolf. It may be as wrong to care so much for a man twice his age plus a bit, but Coby didn't allow himself to care. Rodolf wanted him. No one ever wanted Coby.

He'd spent his whole life in the shadows of his brothers and overbearing father. Coby still didn't know how Rodolf had come to Kaer's royal court but he was forever grateful that he had. The party had been a miserable one for Coby, full of people whispering baseless rumors and his father glaring every time anyone dared to flirt with his sons or daughters.

Rodolf had walked in, calm and confident like no one else at court was. He'd scanned the room, curled his lip at the majority of the attendees and then taken up station at the buffet table. Coby had watched, fascinated, as Rodolf rebuffed every single person who approached him. At least until Coby had slipped to the buffet in hopes of getting some of the fresh meat buns the servants had put out. Then Rodolf's attitude had changed. He'd smiled like Illarion himself and offered to get Coby whatever he wanted from the buffet even though Coby was right there. It had been the start of a secret romance that had given Coby the will to live for the first time in years.

"Missed you," Rodolf whispered. His voice broke on the hitch in the middle of 'missed'.

"I missed you too," Coby murmured back. "You're so warm."

"You're cold," Rodolf chuckled. "Let me warm you up, little one."

"Please," Coby begged, far too aroused just from Rodolf's words and calloused hands ghosting down his side.

Rodolf's touch was tender and reverent until it wasn't. Then he was urgent and demanding, words flowing over Coby like warm water and sunshine. Coby gasped and whimpered, clinging to Rodolf as their passion went to heights that he thought he couldn't bear. It was too much and not enough, pain and pleasure mixed in the best ways. Once Rodolf pressed deep into Coby and let loose a grunting shout Coby let himself go as well.

"My boy," Rodolf murmured into Coby's ear. He was still shaking through the aftershocks of his orgasm. "Mine."

"Yes," Coby sighed. Rodolf's neck smelled of wood fire and sweat

mixed with his particular scent. Coby shivered though he was anything but cold now. "Yours."

They separated, Rodolf cleaning both of them up with gentle hands. The room had warmed enough with the renewed fire that Coby sat and stared around him. He'd asked many times about Rodolf's home and only gotten half-stories and rueful shrugs. If it was all this rough then Coby could understand why Rodolf hadn't wanted to discuss it. Their lives were truly opposite.

Coby put his hand on Rodolf's shoulder, stopping him from pulling his clothes back on. His fingers rested on the long, jagged scar that crossed Rodolf's shoulder and dragged down to his left nipple. Rodolf frowned at him, his lips quirking in a smile as he ran his fingers through Coby's tangled hair.

"Need to get you a brush and comb," Rodolf commented.

"And clothes," Coby agreed. "It's very cold here. I'm not used to it. What happens now?"

Rodolf winced, turning to glare into the fire. "That's up to you, little one. I wanted to marry you but your father made that impossible. I didn't tell my people anything about you. Barely let them see you at all, honestly. The ride here was... hard, Coby. Most of us were injured getting you free."

Coby bit his lip, tugging at Rodolf's shoulder. "Am I free? Father doesn't let go, Rodolf. He won't stop until he gets me back."

"I know." Rodolf nodded, grim and worried despite the possessiveness that radiated off him.

He sighed as he tugged his pants back on, sliding the rough wool fabric over his legs as though it was nothing. Coby waited, blankets pulled around his naked body, as strange anger and fear battered against his heart. As much as he loved Rodolf, something wasn't right here. He didn't know what it was yet but he would find out.

Rodolf turned back to Coby and laughed, bending to press a kiss that melted Coby's bones against his lips. "You look so serious, little one. I always loved that about you. My plan was to claim you as a slave, one that I purchased or stole."

"Rodolf," Coby groaned, "that doesn't make any sense. No one

would allow themselves to be so badly injured for a mere slave. Nor would he expect his men to be injured defending a slave. It's ridiculous."

"For a truly valuable slave?" Rodolf suggested sheepishly. "One with superior training and looks?"

"No."

Rodolf laughed at the flat response. His laughter filled the little stone room, warming it nearly as much as the fire did. Coby shook his head, dragging his fingers through his long blond hair when it tumbled into his face.

"What makes sense?" Rodolf asked as he tugged at one stubborn lock.

"That you went to rescue your lover from an overbearing father," Coby said. Rodolf frowned. "That's what happened. The lie would have to be in my identity and the identity of my father, Rodolf. I'd need a new name, an obviously fake one, and everyone would have to be told that my father will seek revenge. Because he will. That way everyone will be on guard and watching for strangers coming looking for me."

"That... works," Rodolf said thoughtfully. "I ah, haven't told you everything, little one."

"I know," Coby replied, smiling wryly at Rodolf. "It was obvious. What do I need to know right now?"

"You know there's no kingdom here?" Rodolf asked. He smiled at Coby's impatient nod. "Well, just because there's no ruler doesn't mean there aren't any lords. There are. I'm one of about a dozen that protect these lands as best we can. The whole reason I went to Kaer was to try and win allies from the human lands to the south. Didn't work but I met you so it was worth the effort."

Coby blushed brilliantly, smacking Rodolf's elbow. The little he'd heard of the wild lands north of the Forest of Perpetual Rains had been negative. He'd heard that a few people lived here but he had no idea how many. Or how they survived; in weather this cold he was surprised that anyone could live here.

"Will they be upset that I can't give you an heir?" Coby asked.

"They'll be glad," Rodolf snorted. "We don't like hereditary rulers up here. We want the strongest leader, not whoever the leader's wife spawns."

"Then... I have to be strong," Coby whispered, staring into Rodolf's eyes with sudden worry. "I can't be weak. I have to make them believe that you're the strongest one, that I'm helping you be stronger."

2. ICE ROSE

"*I*f you'd just give me some slippers I could walk there myself," Coby chuckled as Rodolf carried him out of the windowless little stone room.

"I like carrying you," Rodolf said, grinning at him.

"Or socks," Coby continued as if Rodolf hadn't spoken. "Socks would suffice. Just something to protect my feet from the floor."

The entire building seemed to be made of the same dark gray stone as his little room. Coby stared around him, surprised that they hadn't added paneling or wall hangings or at least rugs to keep the cold of the floor from filling the rooms. Nothing softened the rough edges of Rodolf's home. Even the heavy beams overhead were rough-hewn logs that had been only partially stripped of bark before use. Strips of graying bark hung down from the rafters like spider webs.

Rodolf strode out of the hallway and into a big open room filled with tables, light and people talking loudly to each other. Dead silence fell as every eye turned towards the two of them. Coby tugged the blanket up around his neck, blushing at all the stares. Nearly a hundred men filled the great room.

"Truus!" Rodolf called to a tall stern woman who looked remarkably like Rodolf. "My Roos needs clothes."

"If you'd done a better job wooing he'd have them," Truus snapped, glaring at Rodolf before curling a lip at Coby. "Not much of a rose."

"No, I wouldn't," Coby said with every bit of the confidence he'd learned to fake at his father's court. "My father would have sent me naked if he'd allowed me to go at all. Which, of course, he didn't."

He ignored the rose comment. Coby had gotten comments about being a little lily, rose, sunflower and everything else that people could come up with since he was a toddler. It would be nice to be compared to something other than flowers sometime.

There were half a dozen men scattered throughout the room, large and rough like Rodolf, with fresh cuts and bruises. They had to be the ones who'd helped Rodolf rescue him. While the rest of the occupants of the room stared at him with derision in their eyes, the wounded men looked merely curious.

"Not much of a father," Truus said, narrowing her eyes even further.

"True."

His bald response was so matter of fact that the derision in Truus' face slid into something confused and then onwards into veiled curiosity. She tossed a dark braid as thick as Coby's wrist over her shoulder, gesturing for them to follow her. Rodolf headed that way only to stumble as Truus glared at him.

"I trust the boy can walk," Truus said.

"Thank you," Coby sighed. "I kept telling him that all I needed was slippers or at least socks but he wouldn't listen."

"I like carrying you," Rodolf protested. "And I didn't want to interrupt Truus while she was cooking."

Coby glared at him. Truus did as well. Rodolf winced and carefully set Coby on his feet. The floor was still biting cold but Coby did his best not to flinch violently. He did shudder and wrap the blanket more firmly around himself but he didn't think anyone could blame him for that.

Standing that way reinforced just how short Coby was compared to Rodolf. The top of his head barely cleared Rodolf's jawline. Rodolf chuckled down at Coby, pride and love radiating off him. Coby smacked his belly before turning to Truus.

"Socks really would be lovely," Coby said. "The floor is very cold to bare feet."

"What did he do, strip you naked and carry you away that way?" Truus asked.

"More or less," Coby said with a wry little shrug. "My father had... ways of tracking me. I'd thought it was something on me but I suppose it made more sense to embed them in my clothes. Easier to renew and less obvious to outsiders."

"Paranoid," Truus muttered while gesturing for Coby to follow her.

"Quite," Coby agreed.

She led him into a big, stunningly warm, kitchen. There were no carpets but Truus tossed a pair of thick socks to Coby and gestured for him to sit on one of the stools. Her staff was all as large as Truus, women with ruddy faces and calloused hands who looked at Coby as if they'd never seen anything like him. Truus went to a huge stack of shelves on the far wall of the kitchen, pulling out baskets to check their contents.

"I suppose you'll want something fine," Truus said.

"Warm preferably," Coby replied. "Maybe multiple layers? I truly never have been anywhere this cold before. Maybe cotton underneath and wool on top?"

For whatever reason, Truus raised an eyebrow at that request. She still brought over a stack of clothing that was entirely too large for Coby. Given how large everyone else was Coby didn't protest. Instead he tugged on the socks and then abandoned his blanket with a sigh and a shiver.

Simple cotton long underwear worked well enough once Coby tightened the laces so much that the fabric bunched around his waist. The rough cotton work shirt that Truus supplied was long enough to reach mid-thigh. The sleeves were ridiculously long but rolling the

cuffs up made it work well enough. She'd provided lovely wool pants that were actually approximately the right size, along with a belt that Coby tugged tight around his waist.

"Oh, this is lovely," Coby said as he held up a cream, black and gray sweater patterned with triangles, diamonds and crosses around the shoulder, hem and cuffs. "Bit big but I am short."

"The Hell happened to your back?" Truus asked so harshly that Coby turned and stared up at her. She was white faced, shaking with horror that her women matched.

"The scars?" Coby asked. Truus nodded once, anger narrowing her eyes to slits. "My father. He's always been a bit harsh about punishment. It's not that bad, really. I never did have any broken bones from the beatings. Some of my brothers fared far worse than I did."

It wasn't quite true. One of his brothers had been beaten worse than Coby but only one. Surviving the beatings had always been a struggle but perhaps here the scars would earn him a little space, if not any respect. As small as Coby was he doubted that any of Rodolf's people would truly respect him, no matter what he did.

The sweater was gloriously warm once Coby pulled it on. It fell to mid-thigh, like the shirt, sleeves flapping inches past the tips of his fingers. Coby laughed as he shoved the sleeves up over the folded cuffs of his new shirt and then tugged his hair clear. Truus silently offered a brush that Coby gladly used. His hair was a hopeless snarl. It took entirely too long to work all the tangles out but eventually the brush slid smoothly through his hair.

"Much better," Coby sighed happily as he braided it back up. "Thank you. I feel much better now."

"You need some shoes," Truus snorted, amused.

"Granted," Coby agreed. "Do you have any that will fit my feet? Maybe something for twelve year old boys?"

All of the women burst into laughter, Truus included. She rummaged through the shelves, eventually returning with a pair of sheepskin slippers that were sturdier than most of Coby's shoes back home. He pulled them on and smiled at how incredibly soft and

warm the fleece was. Coby only realized that he was cooing with delight when the women started snickering at him.

"Ahem, sorry," Coby said. "They're the warmest, most comfortable shoes I've ever worn."

"Slippers," Truus chuckled at him. "Not shoes."

"They're sturdier than most of the shoes I grew up wearing and frankly?" Coby said, allowing himself the mischievous smile that he felt but would never show back home. "If I could, I'd wear nothing else forever."

That got him another burst of laughter. Truus gestured for Coby to follow him out of the kitchen. The women looked as though they were somewhat reassured about him. The expressions ranged from 'cute kid' to 'maybe he's not so bad' so Coby counted that as a win. There, hopefully, would be time in the future to win them over. Getting the women on his side would probably help secure his position here as much as getting the men, if not more. The women appeared to be the ones preparing all the food and supplying all the clothes. They were more vital to his comfort than the men at this point.

He revised that tentative opinion as they emerged into the great room, Coby with his erstwhile blanket over one arm. Rodolf stood at the head of one of the tables. It wasn't set on a dais or more elaborate than any of the others but it was set in the proper position for him to command everyone's attention.

Rodolf had their full attention. Truus held one hand out, palm flat against Coby's chest to keep him from entering the room. It looked as though they'd walked in immediately after someone said something cutting and vicious. In fact, it was much like when his oldest sister Lara tried to goad their father into doing something foolish.

"He's not going back, Fito," Rodolf snarled at a man half a head taller, and nearly twice as wide at the shoulder as Rodolf.

"That useless bit of fluff is going to get us all killed," Fito complained. "All of you came back with injuries. Whoever the little

bastard's father is, he's going to track him down and we'll be the ones to pay the price for it."

"Don't call him that!" Rodolf growled.

"Which?" Coby asked. "Fluff or bastard? Because the bastard one is accurate, you know."

He draped the blanket over Truus' arm, smiling a quick apology at her as he slipped past. As much as walking out into that room felt like walking into his own execution, Coby knew that he couldn't show fear. If you showed fear then they knew that you were weak. If you were weak then you were prey. And pretty prey like Coby got the worst treatment imaginable. Coby wouldn't risk Rodolf's safety by being weak, no matter how afraid he felt or what they tried to do to him.

Fito started, turning to stare as Coby calmly made his way through the benches, tables and chairs towards Rodolf's side. It wasn't as hard to make the journey as it had been when all he had was a blanket. The new clothes, while far too large, at least made it harder to see where his body was inside them. If someone decided to stab him they had a good chance of missing which would give Coby a chance to counterattack and run.

"You don't object to being called fluff?" Fito asked with a little snort of derision.

Coby blinked at him, smiling the serene smile that Eduart always said made him look terrifyingly lethal. "Compared to everyone else here I am a bit of fluff. Seriously, I think a fourteen year old boy could throw me over his shoulder and walk away. You're all so..." Coby waved a hand at Fito. "Tall. I swear that I feel like I'm surrounded by giants."

The startled laughter gave Coby the time to slip around the last table that blocked Coby from Rodolf's head table. He grinned at Coby, pride in his eyes despite the angry lines between his salt-and-pepper eyebrows. Coby nodded at Rodolf the same way he had at that first party, a slow single nod that promised obedience that was undermined by the determined expression in Coby's eyes. Rodolf's

breath caught. His eyes lit up and the lines disappeared as Rodolf's lips twitched as he fought a grin.

The occasions were remarkably similar. Rodolf's inappropriate courtship then had brought on huge quantities of disapproval. Coby's father had been particularly cutting about it. And now, here in Rodolf's home, it was Coby who was the unknown, Coby who needed to prove himself somehow. He doubted that Rodolf's stunning knowledge of ancient magical theory was something that he could replicate. No one here looked as though they'd be interested in Coby's knowledge of ancient military history and philosophy. But he could find something.

Rodolf's people at least seemed to be relatively kind and gentle instead of twisted and vicious like Kaer's royal court.

"My son nearly lost his eye for this?" Fito asked, gesturing at Coby as if he was a massive disappointment.

"He didn't lose his eye," Rodolf snarled back at him. "Harbert went willingly, Fito. You're my closest ally. I wouldn't have been able to escape without your people's assistance. Harbert is fine. He has a fine new scar. The wound healed cleanly and you know it."

"You *said* that this was a military decision!" Fito yelled. "I didn't let my son risk his life for your damned catamite!"

"No, not a catamite," Coby said calmly before Rodolf could do more than snarl and draw in a huge breath. "Not enough piercings."

The nonsequitor made even Fito pause. He stared at Coby as if he was trying to track down where exactly the argument had gone wrong. Coby smiled and shrugged as harmlessly as possible. That didn't seem to help. If anything it made Fito's anger rise again.

"Piercings," Fito said, asked, snarled if Coby was honest.

"Mm-hmm," Coby murmured, drifting closer to the end of Rodolf's table. "Catamites have multiple piercings in their ears, nipples and ah, other places. I don't have any."

"And we're expected to take your word for that?" Fito asked, spitting in Coby's general direction.

"Well, no," Coby said, smirking at Truus who burst out laughing.

"I assumed you'd ask the ladies in the kitchen. They watched me get dressed, you know. Rodolf brought me here stark naked."

A huge map of the world hung on the cold stone wall, centered on the Forest of Perpetual Rains. It gave the map an odd perspective that Coby wasn't used to. He wasn't sure what the boundary lines on the map designated as everyone knew that there weren't any true nations or even lords up here. Rodolf had said that he was the next best thing to a lord, though, so maybe that's what they signified.

Fito turned to Truus who raised her chin and smirked at him just as nastily as anyone back home in Kaer might have. No surprise to Coby, Fito flinched though he hid it well. Truus jerked her chin at Coby, crossing her arms over her chest. It made her bust look nearly as impressive as the muscles in her arms. She looked like a warrior princess sculpture brought to life.

"Not one piercing or tattoo," Truus said. "The boy's not some pampered pet, Lord Fito. It shows."

"How?" Fito demanded, once again glaring at Coby.

"Scars," Truus said, much more quietly, much more gently. "The boy's covered in scars from the nape of his neck down to his ankles. He's been beaten bloody for years. Scars upon scars upon scars."

3. BARN CAT

Shocked silence fell. Coby blushed as eyes turned towards him, most with shock and pity in them. Fito was certainly shocked but his mouth had pinched in and his shoulders hunched with enough anger that Coby wasn't at all surprised that Fito stepped away from his spot at the table to stomp towards Coby.

"No," Coby snapped, glaring over his shoulder at Rodolf.

"He's twice your size!" Rodolf protested.

"So are you," Coby replied, flipping his braid over his shoulder. "That's nothing new."

Their little conversation had slowed Fito to a stop. He stared down at Coby with a perplexed expression, hands still clenched into fists but much less tense and angry than he had been moments before. Coby could understand that. If he truly believed that Coby was nothing more than a bedmate for Rodolf then Coby's refusal to allow Rodolf to defend him would make no sense at all.

It made a great deal of sense to Coby. He had to establish an identity outside of what he had been back home. His studied efforts to appear harmless and inoffensive worked wonderfully to redirect the majority of bad attention in his father's court. He'd never been successful in avoiding his father's beatings or his efforts to 'train'

Coby not to think and act for himself, but no one back home escaped that.

The problem was that Coby's habitually inoffensive demeanor was working against him here. Everyone seemed to be obvious, open warriors. The women in the kitchen looked as capable of defending themselves as the men in the great room. Coby had to show that he was just as competent at self-defense as they were or he and Rodolf would never have a moment's peace.

"You expect me to believe you know how to defend yourself?" Fito snorted.

"Well, of course I do," Coby replied calmly even though his heart had started pounding against his breastbone and his stomach was a tangled knot. "Why wouldn't I? I only met Rodolf six months ago. I've lived my whole life without anyone to defend me."

Fito's lip curled up in a sneer that Coby recognized. He wasn't as confident as he wanted to pretend. Despite the confidence in the watching warriors' eyes that Fito would win, Fito saw something in Coby that he hadn't expected.

It might be the way that Coby waited for him to attack, body half turned away from Fito so that Fito had fewer targets to strike at. Coby didn't know if they practiced the same hand to hand martial arts in this area that they did at home but Fito's core slowly tightened as Coby stiffened the fingers of his left hand in preparation for a nerve strike. At the very least, Fito seemed very aware of the fact that Coby's weight was fully on the balls of his feet, centered between both legs so that he could move in any direction.

Silence slowly fell as neither of them moved. Coby's nervousness shifted into anger that he had to fight yet again. He'd always hated the fights back home, most engineered by his father to set his sons and daughters against each other. This was no different. It was petty posturing and hurt feelings coming out in violence instead of words.

"He doesn't belong here," Fito said over Coby's head as if he was a child instead of a young man.

"Don't fight with him," Coby said, his voice sliding into his coldest

register. "Rodolf might be my lover but that doesn't mean he's the one who will kill you. I will."

"Kill?" Fito barked a laugh, gesturing at Coby. "You? Don't make me laugh. You're no warrior no matter what Rodolf taught you to fake."

"Oh ho, I am so staying out of this one," Rodolf laughed, shocked and amused and so frightened that Coby turned to glare at him instead of keeping his eyes on Fito as was wise.

Rodolf held up both hands, backing off several paces. He ended up with his back pressed against the stone wall, grinning so enthusiastically that Coby sighed at him. The other men at the head table stared first at Rodolf, then at Coby and then again at Rodolf as if they couldn't figure out what in the world was going on.

As Coby huffed, Rodolf's grin turned into a tiny gasp of surprise. That was warning enough for Coby to know that Fito had decided to take his lapse of attention as an opportunity to attack. The hand latched around Coby's braid was expected. Most everyone seemed to think that grabbing his hair was a good way to incapacitate him.

It hurt, certainly, but Coby didn't let that stop him. He wrenched his head around and stabbed his fingers into Rodolf's gut, exactly at the solar plexus. That drove the air from Fito's lungs but he didn't let go of Coby's hair. Fito's grip loosened just enough for Coby to pull several more inches of braid through his fingers.

That gave Coby enough room to hit Fito's shoulder just at the joint while striking downwards on his forearm. The pop of the dislocation was loud in the silence of the great room. Fito's mouth opened for a startled shout, his eyes widening, but no noise came out. Instead, there was another crunch as Coby kicked Fito's knee out from under him, sending him towards the ground. Fito finally let go of Coby's hair as he fell which made it simplicity to smash his nose against Coby's knee.

Blood splattered, fortunately little of it getting on Coby's new clothes. Coby shoved Fito backwards onto his ass and then kicked him in the chest. That toppled Fito onto his back, allowing Coby to

land on his chest, the palm of his hand at the ready to shove the bone fragments in Fito's nose up into his brain.

Around them, men shouted. Coby heard Truus shout something as well but it was Rodolf's delighted chortling that made Coby sigh and turn to glare at him. Rodolf grinned at Coby so proudly that all Coby could do was shake his head and turn back to Fito who stared up at him in pained terror.

"Seriously," Coby sighed. "That man is impossible. I should have killed him when I had the chance. Except not. He's fun to have around."

"You..." Fito gasped, the single word coming out mushy and wrong from the blood and bruising swelling his face.

"You do not have permission to touch me," Coby declared. "I don't care if you like me or respect me but you will swear to keep your hands to yourself or I'll shove the fragments of your nose up into your brain and kill you."

The threat made confusion appear in Fito's rapidly swelling eyes. Coby sighed, glaring down at him. He pushed the palm of his hand against the base of Fito's nose, pushing hard enough to make Fito gasp and squirm with sudden pain. A sharper jab made Fito's whole body jerk as if he almost went into convulsions. Coby rode the full-body jerk out, keeping the pressure on Fito's nose despite the blood and snot staining his palm.

A younger man about Coby's age with a fresh scar right next to his left eye stood. His mouth moved in a silent 'no'. The other men at that table looked equally horrified. Around them silence fell other than Fito's pained gasps and Rodolf's continuing delighted chortles.

"You will swear to keep your damn fool hands to yourself or I will kill you," Coby repeated coldly, angrily. "Now!"

Even Rodolf's chortles died in the face of Coby's cold fury. Fito's panting stopped as well. He held his breath, staring up at Coby for a long moment that seemed to stretch into several minutes. As Coby's brows drew into a frown Fito drew in a deep breath.

"I swear!"

"Hmph," Coby grunted.

He sat back and then gripped Fito's nose, jerking it sharply so that the bone was properly set again. Fito shouted, afraid rather than outraged as Rodolf had been when it happened to him. Coby stood, walked to Rodolf's side and held out one hand imperiously. Rodolf blinked and then laughed half-hysterically as he passed Coby his rough handkerchief.

"Oh, stop laughing," Coby complained as he cleaned the blood and snot off his hand. "You know how much I hate having dirty hands."

The young man who had to be Harbert helped Fito sit up. Fito obviously wasn't going to be standing, not with his knee at that decidedly broken angle so another of his men helped Fito sit on the closest chair. Blood flowed down his face, stained his shirt, but Fito didn't seem to mind that.

All that showed was stunned surprise as Harbert popped his shoulder back into the socket and then roughly bound it in place. Coby curled up on the empty chair that had to be Rodolf's, raising his chin when Rodolf made a little noise of protest.

"That's my chair," Rodolf said.

"You can find another," Coby said without budging at all. He squirmed a little deeper into the chair with a defiant glare at Rodolf that hopefully hid how badly Coby's hands were shaking.

"Should make you sit on my lap," Rodolf grumbled but he was grinning so proudly that most of the other men in the room laughed.

"Should have said he's a barn cat," Fito commented.

Coby straightened up, pointing at him with delight. "Now that's a nickname that I approve of! I'm so sick of being compared to flowers. For all of Illarion's love, if I never get compared to another rose, lily or 'delicate blossom' it will be too soon."

It really was a much better nickname in Coby's opinion. The endless botanical comparisons had always annoyed Coby. He wasn't delicate. No one who lived at his father's court could be delicate and survive. They all had to fight and scheme and occasionally kill to keep from being killed.

Rodolf was probably right that a coup was coming. Or a revolu-

tion. Coby had never worried about the ever-present rumors of people plotting against the throne. Eduart was a good man, as good as he could be within the confines of his position. He was as beloved by the populace as their father wasn't. If a revolution or coup did happen, Coby had been certain that Eduart would be the one placed on the throne.

All of which meant that Coby had spent his entire life being quietly vicious. In public, he played the part of broken bastard prince, only lashing out when someone dared to touch without permission. In private, though, Coby had fought for his life virtually every single day. It had only gotten better after Coby reached his adult height and strength, allowing him to fight off the brothers who used to easily bully and abuse him.

"But I like calling you my little ice rose," Rodolf complained as he dragged another chair over, pushing his men down the table so that there was room for him to sit next to Coby.

"I'm not a rose and you're the one who lives in ice," Coby countered. "I'm much more of a cat. Leave me alone or maybe pet gently when I give you permission and everything is fine. Cross the line and there's problems."

"Very much a barn cat," Fito said, gingerly shaking his head. "Still can't help us with the battles."

"What battles?" Coby asked, perking up. "Against who? When? What weapons? Really, why didn't you tell me there were battles to plan, Rodolf?"

Coby's delight at the thought of battles prompted Truus to howl with laughter. She threw up her hands and retreated to the kitchen with his blanket over her shoulder. The other men at Rodolf's table laughed as well. Their amusement spread as Coby smacked Rodolf's shoulder demandingly. Even Fito seemed to smile though it was hard to tell with all the blood and swelling.

"He's a warrior," Fito groaned.

"Maybe not here," Coby said, shrugging. He wasn't sure Fito could see it. His eyes looked as though they'd swelled nearly shut. "You're all

giants. I'm at a bit of a disadvantage unless you close the gap first, you know. But really, who are you fighting and why? Where?"

Rodolf laughed and pressed a kiss against Coby's lips. His hand caught Coby's squeezing gently under the table where no one could see it. Coby huffed once their lips parted, his cheeks red again. As nice as it was to have the reassurance Coby really didn't want to undermine the fierce façade he'd just created.

"Lots of battles against lots of foes," Rodolf explained. "I actually talked to you about most of them before I brought you here. Your ideas were part of what made me decide that we needed you more than I need you."

"Considering how desperately obvious your fighting technique is," Coby said with a little sniff of disdain that was probably completely transparently false, "you certainly do need me. Really, it's as though none of you have ever studied any martial arts. What do you do? Beat on each other with sticks and swords until one side or the other gets too tired to go on?"

Coby started as the entire great room roared with laughter. Even Fito laughed, nodding a confirmation that made Coby groan. Rodolf laughed with them, eyes wrinkled as he grinned at Coby. Once the laughter died down Coby sighed and looked not at Rodolf but at Harbert and Fito.

"You do," Coby said. The sheer flatness of his tone turned it into a disgusted question.

"Oh yes," Harbert chuckled. "We do. And we lose a lot. Lord Rodolf suggested finding a warrior from the southern countries to help us do better but we didn't expect anyone like you."

"No one ever expects me," Coby sighed. "Fine. You'll have to fill me in on who you fight, why and where but that can wait until we've had something to eat. I'm still hungry."

Apparently Truus had already decided that it was time to eat because she and several of her women appeared bearing huge trays stacked with food. She nodded her approval to Coby. The appearance of food pulled everyone's attention away from Coby. Well, everyone

other than Rodolf. He wrapped an arm around Coby's shoulders, pressing a kiss against his temple.

"Well done, little one," Rodolf whispered. "You're safe now. I have you and I won't let anyone hurt you."

Coby snorted as he poked Rodolf in the ribs. "I'll protect you, not the other way around."

Rodolf grinned. "I expect you will. I expect you will."

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: MOON OF THE SEA

I grew up very poor. It's no surprise that people living at the edge of survival show up frequently in my stories. This one is set in a random world that I've never developed any further. Men fish the daylight seas and women fish the night. Unfortunately for Rida and Badra, there are dangers in the moonlit seas. Lethal ones.

MOON OF THE SEA

"**G**ood catch," Rida grunted as she hauled on the nets.

The moon hung overhead, stained red by the summer fires blazing in the hills. Badra ignored her. Her hands burned from the salt coating the nets sinking into the rope burns and tiny cuts layered over her palms. In front of them fish jumped and splashed, churning the water's surface as they attempted to escape the net's tightening embrace.

She could have sworn that she smelled the fishes' fear, tasted their desperation as the water slipped away from them only to cram them next to their fellows. Scales rubbing against each other, eyes rolling, flippers flailing at the emptiness where water should be; they flailed desperately as they tried to find their way back to the ocean that was their home. Badra blinked and shook her head hard.

Romanticizing the fish they needed to survive was foolish, especially with Rida by her side. Sister or not, Rida was never and would never be her ally by her own choice. Rida frowned at her, eyes quicksilver bright in the darkness of the night. Moon-fishing had never been her favored work. She far preferred the sunlit fish, larger and stronger, caught on rod and reel.

"Badra?"

"Focus," Badra snarled at her. "Don't let the nets slack."

Rida's growl was angry but she hauled against the nets, helping Badra wrestle the slimy, squirming mass of moon fish into the bottom of their boat. Wet, flopping bodies tumbled over Badra's feet. She stood firm while Rida shifted backwards, rocking the boat in her efforts to avoid touching them.

Badra ignored her sister's squeamishness, sorting through the fish as quickly as she could. This was a Coin-fish, beautiful but deadly. Back it went. That was an eel, fast and vicious as it tried to bite Badra. Flipping it back into the water was a relief. Rida finally crouched to help sort. Most of the catch was good, long slim full-moon-spawning silverlings that would dry perfectly under Najat's expert care.

The boat shivered as something large thumped its tail against the hull. Badra froze. Rida gasped, skittering backwards until she ended up on the stern of the boat. The boat shuddered again as the large fish, whatever it was, thumped its tail, disturbing the silverlings so that they flowed off its sides.

"Moon of the Sea!" Rida whispered. "Badra, it's the Moon of the Sea!"

"Hush!" Badra hissed at her.

The silver and gold fish, body large and round like the full moon, rolled its eyes as its gill slits gaped open. It was beautiful, deadly from the long spines decorating its sail-like dorsal fin and projecting from its pectoral fins, but stunningly beautiful. In the light of the bloody moon overhead it seemed to glow.

"We could make hundreds if we sold it," Rida breathed. "We'd pay off the family debts, Badra."

"We're not selling it," Badra snapped at her. "You know the legends as well as I do. You want gold, catch the King of the Sea. You've done it before. You can do it again."

"This is worth more!" Rida half-shouted. "They say its scales will cure disease and its eggs give safe pregnancy. It's worth more than the boat, than the house, than that worthless little woman you call a wife."

Badra glared at Rida. Her sister's hatred for Najat was a battle she

would never win. Still, the only thing keeping her from tipping her sister into the water was the Moon of the Sea and its deadly spines lying between them. The silverlings lay still as if they waited to hear what Badra and Rida would do. The Moon of the Sea rolled its eyes to look at Badra, then at Rida, its dorsal fin rising so that the deadly spines glimmered in the moonlight.

"Moon of the Sea caught under a blood moon on the fifth full moon of the year, Rida," Badra said. "I'll not risk that luck, not for all the money in the world. You want more from life? Find yourself a rich husband or wife. This fish isn't the way to riches, sister. Killing it would be our doom."

"You're a superstitious fool!" Rida shouted.

Her voice echoed across the water. The waves seemed to flinch at the volume of Rida's voice. Overhead, the light wind that had fluttered the sail all night died instantly. At their feet the silverlings jerked as one, convulsively, while the Moon of the Sea gaped its mouth open to expose the dagger-like teeth filling its wide mouth.

"I paid my price for greed before, Rida," Badra murmured. "I won't do it again. My choice cost Mother her life. Father died at the edge of his own blade. No. I won't do this. The fish goes back."

Rida glared. Even in the darkness Badra could see the fury twisting her features into a snarl. Their parents' death had changed everything for them. Once prosperous and happy, their little family had fallen deep into poverty. Badra took that as just. Her choice had led to Mother's death. It was only right that there be consequences.

That had never sat well with Rida. Day and night, all Rida talked of was escaping their current life and finding one where she was rich and powerful. She seemed to think it was her due simply for having been born.

"You never want to take any risks!" Rida snarled, one fist hitting the gunwale hard enough that Badra would have thought it was the Moon of the Sea's tail again. "That was years ago, Badra. You need to let that go so that you don't pass by the opportunities life gives us."

"This isn't an opportunity," Badra said. She scooped water from

the ocean, splashing it over the Moon of the Sea so that it wouldn't die. "It's a threat."

Rida grabbed the truncheon they kept in case of sharks, diving at the Moon of the Sea with it upraised. Badra gasped as she dove to catch her sister's arm. They impacted above the Moon of the Sea, the poison spines mere inches from Badra's shins. She had to curl her toes around the gunwales to keep from being shoved back.

"You are not doing this," Badra hissed into her sister's contorted face. "Stop it now, Rida!"

"I won't let you keep me trapped in this poverty," Rida hissed back. "I won't!"

She struggled against Badra's grip, shoving and twisting desperately. Badra dug in, bending her knees so that she had more leverage against her taller but thinner sister. The Moon of the Sea's dorsal spines brushed against Badra's shins. She gasped but didn't give up her grip on Rida's wrists.

"You're not trapped, you little fool!" Badra shouted. "You have choices. You can make things better. Every time you go out to fish during the day you do!"

"Yet you're the one with a wife and a home," Rida replied, her words nearly reptilian in her fury. "I live there at your suffrage, sister. Everything that is mine is yours. It always has been. And yet you will not reach for a better life for us all!"

The accusation was a familiar one, as baseless now as always. Rida smashed her forehead against Badra's nose, sending showers of painful stars through her head. Badra grunted, slipping backwards as her toes lost their grip. The Moon of the Sea thumped its tail between them, startling Rida so badly that she jerked backwards and collapsed among the silverlings. She kicked, the ball of her foot impacting the Moon of the Sea.

Badra froze as Rida screamed. She scrambled over the Moon of the Sea, pulling her sister back onto the stern. Her foot was already swelling. Blood dripped, black in the moonlight, down the arch of her foot and off her heel into the mass of silverlings. One poison spine trembled in the center of Rida's foot.

"No," Badra breathed.

"Badra, sister," Rida gasped. She curled around her stomach, teeth clenched against the pain.

The moment froze in Badra's mind. She could hear each wave as it slapped against the side of the boat. Distant smoke filled her nose with the scent of fire and ash, mingling with the stink of the silver-lings dying around their feet. Over all of that was the smell of Rida's blood and the taste of copper in Badra's mouth from a split lip she hadn't noticed before.

"No!"

Badra whirled. Dark dangerous spines threatened as she thrust her hands under the Moon of the Sea's belly. It was heavier than she expected. The boat shifted and groaned underneath her feet as Badra hefted the Moon of the Sea up and then flung it over the rail into the water. It splashed, spraying water into Badra's face as it dove back down into the dark depths of the ocean.

"You're... a fool," Rida gasped.

"I can't save you if I have to avoid those damned spines," Badra snapped at her. "Hold still, little sister. This is going to hurt."

Badra pulled off her shirt, wrapping it around her hand to protect herself from the spine. She didn't know what part of the spine was deadly. The tip? Certainly. The shaft? Maybe. Possibly the base. For all she knew the entire damned fish was deadly and the legends were nothing more than stories told to entice people to be foolish enough to catch it.

The fabric of her shirt protected Badra's hand enough that she felt confident about ripping the spine out of Rida's foot. Rida screamed and kicked as it came free. Her eyes rolled back, tremors shaking her body. Then she collapsed limp on the stern of the boat. Badra tossed the spine overboard, wishing for more light so that she could see if Rida's foot was any better.

It wasn't. Badra knew it wasn't. The smell of pus hung in the air. She could see the white oozing from the wound where red-black blood had flowed moments before. Rida's body was far too still.

"No," Badra whispered. "Don't die, Rida. I can't lose you, too."

Badra hauled the anchor up, tossing it into the center of the boat along with the silverlings. They had gone as still as Rida, only an occasional pectoral fin flexing weakly as the fish gasped at air that could never sustain its life. The wind was too still to propel them to shore so Badra set the oars and started paddling.

She put her full weight into each stroke, all but standing as she drove the oars into the water. Badra's arms ached in moments. Her legs burned from the effort. Through it all, Badra kept her eyes on Rida's still body. They'd lost so much over the last few years. There was no way that she would lose Rida as well, even if Rida thought she was an abusive, overbearing fool.

Too soon and not soon enough, the bow of the boat ground into the sand. It jolted Rida's limp body. Her hand fell into the surf, heedless. Badra leaped out to haul the boat up out of the surf, far enough from the water that the turning tide wouldn't steal it away from them.

"Najat!" Badra bellowed. "Najat, call a healer!"

Silence answered her. Badra cursed as she gathered Rida's body up in her arms. The catch could wait until Rida had been tended to. She ran for their little house, curses turning into prayers to the Goddess of the Moon and the God of the Sea.

"Blessed Ones," Badra pleaded as she climbed the steep stairs that led from the sandy beach up onto the bluff holding her family's house. *"Please let my sister live. Please! She's young and foolish and desperate for more but she's not a bad girl. Please. I can't lose her, too!"*

As Badra charged up the last handful of steps Najat opened the door. Her dark hair hung in a thick braid down one shoulder, tied back for the night's sleep. All she wore was a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her short, thick legs were bare to the moon's silver light.

Najat gasped, waving for Badra to hurry inside, as soon as she saw the two of them. Her shawl slid to the floor by the door, forgotten as Najat helped Badra lay Rida in her hammock. In the candle light, Rida's leg looked even worse. The swelling had moved up her foot, turning her ankle and calf blotchy purple and red. The ball of her foot oozed pus constantly.

"What happened?" Najat asked as she grabbed a large bowl and swiftly lanced the ball of Rida's foot.

"We caught a Moon of the Sea," Badra explained. "I wanted to throw it back. Rida wanted to kill and sell it. We fought. Rida took a spine to the foot during the battle."

"Is it gone?" Najat asked. "The fish?"

"Yes," Badra said. "I couldn't row with it in the middle of the boat."

Najat sighed as if disappointed but she nodded that she understood. The stink of Rida's oozing foot was nearly enough to send Badra stumbling back outside into the moonlit night. She stayed by Najat's side instead.

"I need rags," Najat said. "A healer won't be able to help, Badra. There's no healing a wound like this."

"What will help?" Badra asked, desperation beating at her heart like a sailfish fighting the hook and line. "What can we do?"

"Pray," Najat said so grimly that Badra moaned. "She'll live or she'll die, Badra. I can only try to clean the wound out. I can't even tell if you got all of the spine out."

"Let me help," Badra said. "I know where the wound was originally."

Badra's stomach threatened rebellion as she held Rida's foot, carefully squeezing and pulling the swollen flesh until the original puncture wound appeared. Najat gasped and used the kitchen tongs to wiggle the broken tip of the spine out of the base of Rida's foot. Rida jerked when it came free, gasping as if it had been keeping her from breathing properly.

"Nasty," Najat commented as she set the spine aside. "Boil water, Badra. We'll need it to wash this wound clean."

"Water, yes, I can do that," Badra said.

She hurried for the door with their biggest bucket, barely aware of Najat calling after her to make sure to wash her hands. It took three batches of hot water soaked into rags coupled with endless swabbing before the swelling in Rida's foot began to go down. By that point it was dawn and Najat ordered Badra out of the house to take care of the catch.

The silverlings were still there, along with the boat. The tide had come in but for some reason the waves had only washed around the stern of the boat instead of dragging it back into the sea. The silverlings were surprisingly fresh given how long they'd sat in the bottom of the boat. Badra cleaned them and descaled them, filling two baskets with their bodies.

It was more than she'd thought they'd caught but Badra honestly couldn't remember exactly how much they had pulled in anymore. Once that task was done the sun had risen high in the sky. Along the bay Badra saw men putting their boats out to sea to catch the day fish that were their province. She stared out at their boats, something deep inside aching at the thought of their boat staying on the shore while Rida fought for her life in their home above.

"Two baskets of silverlings," Badra said as she opened the door and came inside. "They're on the porch, love. Also caught two parrot fish. Didn't realize it until I was cleaning them."

"Well, at least we have something tasty to eat then."

The dry croak made Badra jerk. Rida smirked as Badra stared at her, jerking her chin at Najat as if to tell Badra to pass the parrot fish over so that Najat could cook them. Her smirk disappeared into a startled gasp as Badra dropped the fish onto the dirt floor, charging over to hug her sister so tightly that Rida wheezed.

"Can't breathe!" Rida whispered.

"You almost died," Badra whispered back, easing her grip enough that Rida could gulp air. "You almost died, Rida."

"I know, I know," Rida replied, patting Badra's back so awkwardly that Badra pulled back and just held her shoulders. A smile flitted over Rida's lips, as shy and sweet as when she'd been a little girl. "I was stupid. My fault."

"No, my fault," Badra said. "I didn't realize you were that frustrated with our life. I'll find you a husband or a wife, Rida. You're of age for it and you'd have your own home that way."

Rida stared at her, mouth gaping like a fish out of water. She made a formless noise that was probably supposed to be a question but it made no sense. Badra grimaced and shrugged. Come what may,

Badra had no intention of allowing her sister to be so miserable anymore.

"Actually, you'll have to wait a while," Najat said from the kitchen stove. She'd dressed in a light shift and billowing skirt while Badra cleaned the fish. "I did call the healer after you went out to tend to the catch, Badra. The healers want to come see Rida. Apparently no one has ever survived a Moon of the Sea spine before. The healer said something about using her blood to isolate a potion that would save others who are afflicted."

Both Badra and Rida stared at her. Badra had, of course, heard of such things before. Old man Fadi often came into town to let the healer take samples of his blood. He'd been bitten as a child by a biviper and survived. Every vial of blood saved hundreds of lives up and down the coast. Each vial also put gold coins in Fadi's pocket.

Najat laughed at their shocked expressions, wagging a finger at Rida. "It will only work if you're alive. The healer wasn't exactly coherent but he said something that made me think your blood will protect people up until the day you die. So don't die anytime soon. I'm getting some vegetables to go with the fish. Badra, sit down before you fall down. Rida, don't you dare try to get up. I'll be right back."

Rida flopped back in her hammock, face pale underneath her dark hair. Badra sat on the stool Najat had used to tend to Rida, rubbing one hand over her face. The palm of her hand was rough as sandpaper, worn by the nets and ropes, by the salt of the sea. Even without looking Badra could tell Rida was afraid. Or maybe it was Badra's overactive imagination again.

She wasn't sure why. Giving a bit of blood every moon or two wasn't anything a woman was unfamiliar with. Rida would get money, all the money she'd always wanted. It would buy her a strong, handsome husband to fish the sunlit sea with or a calm, quiet wife to tend to a home for her. With the money her blood would bring Rida could build a fine house, buy a big boat. All of her dreams were possible now.

"I can't feel my foot," Rida whispered.

"Still swollen," Badra said, glancing over at Rida's bruised, swollen

foot. None of the toes looked black or dead. They just looked like Rida had dropped something on her foot. "When it goes down I'm sure you'll be okay."

"You're mad."

"Scared," Badra admitted.

She stared at the floor between her feet, noticing silverling scales decorating her toes like tiny diamonds dusted across her skin. Rida shifted, her hammock swinging a few inches to each side, as she caught Badra's shoulder. Badra didn't turn until Rida grunted, frustrated, and moved as if to put her injured foot on the floor.

"Scared?" Rida asked, eyes so wide she looked like a child instead of a grown woman.

"It's what you always wanted," Badra said with a little shrug that didn't shift Rida's hand on her shoulder. "Enough money to be free, to have a good house, a good life. No reason to stay here, now. I should be glad for you but... You're my sister. You're all that's left of our family. I guess I keep you too close because of it."

Rida chuckled, lying back in her hammock with a wryly amused smile quirking her lips. "You're still an idiot. I don't want the money for me, Badra. I want it for you so that you can stop working so hard all the time. You never rest. You never take anything for yourself. As much as I dislike Najat, I have to admit that you love her. Every good thing that comes our way goes to her or me. When are you going to take something for yourself?"

Her chuckle turned into a true belly laugh as Badra stared at her. Najat came in carrying carrots and a large white turnip, her eyebrows raised at Rida's humor. Badra shrugged away the unspoken question. She was unwilling to discuss it even with Najat. Honestly, she wasn't sure how to put it into words anyway.

"Go on, help her out," Rida said as she poked Badra in the shoulder. "I'm getting some sleep. I'm exhausted. Damn foot on top of a heavy catch for three days straight has me exhausted."

Badra nodded. She went outside and stared at the hills. The fires had gone out over the night though smoke still rose in places. When she looked at the ocean, it was still and calm, waves shimmering in

the sun. Badra took a deep breath and let it out slow. Her thumb drifted over her pointer finger, catching on callouses and silverling scales.

"It was a good catch," Badra whispered, smiling as she fancied that one especially bright flash of light from the sea was the Moon of the Sea jumping. "A good catch to give back to the Goddess."

She went to the baskets of fish, taking out her knife. The least she could do was prepare the fish for drying while Najat tended to Rida. Tired or not, overworked or not, Badra didn't think that there was a single thing she'd change in her life. It was good enough. Badra didn't need any more.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: VALKYRIE

I love superhero stories. They're so grand and bright and unbelievable. My superhero series, *Eight Factors*, is a darker take on superpowers, both in the way the heroes work and in the way that their powers erupt. Sadly, abuse happens everywhere and so does favoritism that allows that abuse to flourish.

VALKYRIE

"Leave me alone, you jerk!" Maria yelled.

Anthony laughed. His hair floated around his head in a corona of fire. It crackled, giving off only the faintest hints of smoke. His little brother, David, reached out to pull Anthony away by his fire-proofed sleeve but the heat surrounding Anthony's body was apparently too much for him to beat. David snatched his hand back, shaking it before sucking on his fingertips.

"Make me," Anthony drawled. He leaned close enough that Maria cringed away from the heat coming from his hair. He smelled like fire, like hatred, like all the things that Maria had come to hate about the Gifted since her big brother Pablo's Gifts erupted.

He laughed at Maria, reaching to palm her breast. She screamed in fury, jerking back only to go flying as Anthony shoved her. She skidded over the grass, tumbled when she hit the blacktop and then landed on her face next to the bin full of basketballs they'd used earlier for dodge ball. Blood dripped down Maria's upper lip. Her elbows felt like the skin was completely gone.

Anthony laughed. "You can't actually think you're interesting, can you? Come on. You're a no-Gift nobody with an idiot for a brother. No one's interested in you."

His laughter was echoed, hesitantly by other ungifted kids, dismissively by the two instructors who were supposed to monitor the playground. Maria glared at him, something like fury beating inside her chest. She felt like her skin was about to tear from the sheer anger inside her, like the ground under her feet wanted to growl along with her.

Maria pulled herself to her feet, shaking with emotion. She looked at Anthony's sneering face and just... Enough. More than enough. So beyond enough that Maria wished that she had knives to throw at Anthony, guns to fire. A fire extinguisher to put him out and drown him!

"You wouldn't keep harassing me if you didn't like me, you little shit!" Maria screamed.

She grabbed a ball and flung it at Anthony's head. He jerked and fire flared around him. The ball exploded so Maria grabbed another and another, flinging them at him while he cursed at her. All the kids that had clustered around him scattered, the Gifted ones with startled expressions, the ungifted ones with delighted grins. Maria kept flinging balls even though Anthony kept blowing them up. The startled fear on his face was more than worth the scolding she would inevitably get.

"Stop it, you stupid bitch!" Anthony shouted. He crowed as Maria ran out of balls. "You didn't even hit me!"

"Don't call me a bitch!" Maria bellowed.

She grabbed the bin, grateful that it was the rolling wire bin instead of the heavier plastic one they used in the storage room. Maria spun, the bin gripped firmly in her hands. Two spins, then a third as Anthony mouthed 'no' while backing off. Even the teachers looked a little alarmed.

"And leave," Maria grunted on the last spin, "me... alone!"

She let go at just the right moment. The bin flew straight at Anthony. He shouted. Fire flared all around him but the bin didn't melt. Instead it smashed into his chest and face, knocking him flat. Maria glared at him, glared at the teachers who already had disapproving frowns on their faces, and then turned and ran away.

"I hate this," Maria thought as she huddled in a scratchy, uncomfortable hollow in the huge lilac hedge that grew at the back wall of the school yard. *"He's a jerk and he's mean and they always take his side. It's not fair."*

Eight years. She'd dealt with the teacher's blatant favoritism towards Gifted kids for eight years. No matter what Maria did, she was always in the wrong. Anthony with his flashy fire powers was always right. He'd washed out of the training program that Pablo was in, the one that prepared kids to be heroes like the Commander and Major. Despite his Gift, Anthony had failed at everything he was supposed to do, from schoolwork to training to being 'properly socialized'.

This year he'd taken a special interest in Maria. No matter where she went, Anthony followed her. Mother had tried to claim that it was because Anthony liked her. Maria didn't believe it, not even a little bit. It was because he knew that Pablo was doing well in the training program, because Maria had no Gifts (yet) and because her chest had started to develop, too. She'd seen how he stared at her chest as if he wanted to strip her naked.

Maria bit her lip to keep her sobs in. The blood on her lips tasted nasty but it was better than going inside and getting yelled at for 'daring' to hurt a precious Gifted student. She sniffled. The smell of the lilacs was so thick that it made her head swim. Or maybe that was because she'd hit her head as she landed.

Either way, Maria stayed still as she fought her sobs and tears. There were enough bees buzzing around the lilac bushes that abrupt movements would be really dumb. Maybe as dumb as trying to bash Anthony's head in.

"Hey, you okay?"

Maria jerked. She peered through leaves. Corey. He was the other ungifted kid who got harassed all the time, not just by Anthony and the other minor Gifts but also by the teachers. It sort of made sense. Corey's parents were the Commander and the Major and they were both big heroes. He was going to be super-powerful someday. She'd

heard one of the teachers say that he had the potential to have all eight factors when his Gifts woke.

Which only meant that he'd be eight times as bad as Anthony.

"Go. Away," Maria growled at him.

Corey ducked his head, curled his shoulders in. She could still see the grin despite his efforts to hide it. He nonchalantly strolled a little closer as if he was interested in the lilac flowers. When his body blocked the sun it suddenly felt much colder in Maria's little hidey-hole. Still, it made it easier for her to see him so that was more or less okay.

"Seriously, you okay?" Corey asked quietly enough that the other kids rough housing on the grass wouldn't hear him.

He sounded concerned. Maria peered at him, shifting a couple of leaves to get a better look. He looked concerned too despite the huge bruise on his cheek from martial arts training yesterday. She shrugged, letting the leaves go.

"I'm mad," Maria said. "No matter what he does, the teachers take his side. He's a jerk."

"Everyone knows that," Corey snorted.

"I hate him," Maria continued with a little smile because it was nice to have someone finally agree with her about Anthony and his poisonous attitude.

"So does everyone else, even David," Corey said. "He punched Anthony after you ran away. You broke his nose with the ball cart, you know. He lost his flame entirely because of the pain. The teachers were scolding him for it when I came to find you."

Maria snorted, amused. "Good. He deserves it."

Corey nodded thoughtfully. A bee buzzed down to rest on Maria's wrist. It felt as though the coldness shifted and moved underneath her, as if the shadows were somehow alive, but Maria knew that wasn't her. She wiggled her fingers so that the bee would take flight again.

"He's a trigger," Corey murmured.

"What?" Maria asked.

"Anthony," Corey said. "He's a trigger. That's why they don't land

on him. That's why they keep him the school when he really should have been remanded to one of the juvenile delinquent systems. He can't control his Gift but he's so horrible that he triggers other people into developing their Gifts. I heard my mom talking to one of the administrators about it. That's why they keep pairing me and Anthony up. She wants my gifts to erupt as soon as possible."

That... Maria's breath caught. Anthony was *told* who to target. That meant that the teachers didn't interfere with his harassment because they wanted Maria's gifts to erupt, too. Which meant...

She scrambled out of the hedge, staring at Corey. He winced, one hand coming up as if he wanted to wipe the blood off her face. Maria glared at him and both hands went up as he backed off a step.

"You look like hell," Corey said, grinning.

"Just before I threw the balls at him," Maria said, "I felt something. It was like... my body was about to tear apart, like the ground was trying to growl with me."

"Tearing apart makes sense," Corey said with a puzzled frown. He looked over his shoulder, turning back and nodding when he saw that no one was looking in their direction. "My big brother Marty said that it felt like his skin was peeling off when his Gifts erupted. Not so sure about the ground thing. No one can make the ground move that I know of."

"It rained," Maria murmured. "Yesterday it rained really hard. The ground is still wet. And I wished really hard for a fire extinguisher to use on Anthony."

"Ah," Corey said, nodding. "Water, then. The water in the ground, under the blacktop, was responding to you."

Maria nodded slowly. Her elbows hurt. Blood had dripped down her arms, onto her jeans. Her shirt was a disaster. Mud, blood and tears spotted it. But that was what they wanted. That was what the teachers thought had to happen.

Maybe they were right. Pablo had said that everything he'd learned said that Gifts only erupted when the person was in terror for their life. Maria wasn't so sure about that. She'd never been afraid that Anthony would kill her but she had been terrified that he'd rape

her. And she'd been afraid that no one would stop him, help her, save her.

The ground seemed to quiver under Maria's feet as she imagined that. He would. He'd love to rape her even though Maria was only twelve. Anthony was big enough at sixteen that he could overpower her easily. Corey started, staring at the ground and then at her.

"He's a rapist," Maria whispered.

"Anthony?" Corey asked. He shrugged when Maria nodded. "Well, yeah. They'd let him get away with it."

"That's wrong," Maria growled. "They shouldn't allow him to get away with anything."

"No," Corey said slowly and cautiously. His eyes were very wide as he backed away from her. "They shouldn't. But they do."

Maria let the rage and fear wash through her. He would keep trying. Anthony would follow her around, he would grab her. As soon as he got Maria alone in a place where they wouldn't be interrupted he would try to rape her. It was inevitable.

She let herself imagine it, the heat of his fire singing her hair. His hands were always too hot. If he was excited then they'd probably burn Maria's skin. He'd smell like onions and sour breath, looming over her so that he could shove her against a wall, a desk, the floor, hands tearing at her clothes.

"Uh..."

Maria let her eyes drift open. Corey stared up at her as he backed further and further away. She heard teachers yelling in the distance, around the corner of the building, and kids screaming as they ran for the shelters.

Flying. She was flying. A cloud of water droplets like diamonds spun around her. Maria took a deep breath and shuddered. Her skin had that tearing feeling again as if something just under the skin was trying to shrug its way to the surface.

The world lurched as Maria realized that she could see herself through Corey's eyes. Something quick and dark ran behind that vision of herself sheathed in sparkling streams of water but it was gone so fast that Maria couldn't latch onto it. Two of the oldest teach-

ers, the ones with the strongest Gifts, ran around the corner and skidded to a stop.

"Corey, be careful," Mr. Wells called while trying to tug the water out of Maria's mental grip. He flinched and nearly fell when Maria's mind glanced across the surface of his body.

"Uh-huh," Corey said as he kept backing away. "Got that. Got that before you showed up."

"Maria, you need to calm down," Mr. Johnson said. His skin shifted from warm brown to reflective black as he shifted armor to protect himself.

"No," Maria declared. She glared at both of them, highly aware of the excitement thrumming under their worried exteriors. "You want him to rape me. You think that's the best way for my Gifts to erupt. You'll let him rape the other girls, the boys. You'll let him beat people and hurt them. I won't let you keep doing that!"

Corey turned and ran as if he expected Maria to explode at any moment. But there was no reason to explode. She could feel Anthony inside the building, actually not that far away from where she hovered. The clinic was on the other side of the wall to her right.

"It's not strong," Maria thought.

Her water smashed into the wall, finding all the cracks and crevices between the concrete bricks. Mr. Johnson shouted something but his mind was full of excitement, anticipation. Maria glared at him and Mr. Johnson's eyes rolled back behind armored eyelids as he collapsed to the ground. Mr. Wells turned and ran after Corey. His mind screamed that he wasn't going to go up against an emergent 4-Gift in a rage.

"Break!" Maria shouted at the wall.

The water surged and pulled but the wall didn't give way. She could feel people coming for Anthony so she smashed a fist into the wall. Bricks shattered, crumbled, drained away as Maria's water tore the hole wider and wider until she could see Anthony's terrified face. His flames flickered and shimmered like a candle that was almost blown out.

"Rapist!" Maria shouted at him. *"Rapist!"*

Anthony screamed. All his sick little plans of what he'd do to her tumbled out of his mind and into Maria's. She screamed at him again as the water surged through the hole in the wall. It wrapped around his head and neck, cutting off Anthony's hair flames. The flame disappeared then flared bright under her water.

She could hear him screaming 'no' in his head. There were other voices, some physical, some not. None of them mattered. What mattered was keeping Anthony from ever hurting Maria or anyone else ever again. Mother would be upset if Maria killed him but that didn't mean she couldn't stop him in other ways.

"Breathe!" Maria ordered straight into Anthony's head.

He swayed, mouth gaping open as he drew in a lungful of water. She paired that feeling, the feeling of being forced to drown, with all the sick little urges in Anthony's brain. Maria smiled even as she felt someone else's mind clawing at hers.

"Breathe!"

It was simple, so very, very simple. Every time he thought about hurting other kids, raping them or beating them, bullying them, he'd feel as if the air he breathed in was water. Maria burned the connection into Anthony's mind, trying to scar it into him so that no one would ever take it away. They wouldn't 'heal' him, free him to do his terrible things. She wouldn't allow it!

"That's enough!"

A woman's voice made Maria jerk and spin. The Commander stood by the blacktop, Corey cowering behind her. Her expression was grim. The touch of her mind felt equally grim. Maria laughed as her water started slipping out of her grasp and the ground swirled up towards her.

"He won't rape me," Maria gasped. "I won't let him. I won't. I know what he wanted. I saw it. I felt it! I won't let him hurt me or anyone else."

The Commander shifted, the grim glare turning concerned and then appalled as Maria pushed the plans she'd pulled from Anthony's head at her. She heard Anthony cough through the hole in the

wall. He lived. Maria tried to reach out, to force more water down his throat, but her head pounded so bad that she whimpered.

It hurt. Everything hurt now. Her whole body ached and her mind was open to the thoughts and fears of everyone around her. Even Anthony's terror slammed into her mind. He didn't understand why she'd attacked him. He knew that she had but he didn't know why his plans were wrong.

"Rapist!" Maria snarled at him.

"Shh, we'll deal with it," the Commander murmured. "We'll deal with it. He won't hurt anyone ever again, Maria."

"Mom?" Corey asked. "Will she be... okay?"

The word in Corey's pause flitted from 'killed' to 'punished' to 'disciplined' before turning into 'okay'. Feeling the words flutter through Corey's mind over the top of the cold-fast-hardness of his soul made Maria shudder. Everything hurt so very much...

"Please," Maria begged.

Death would be welcome. It hurt so very much and they'd just keep pushing her, driving her. There wouldn't be any rest. She could feel how the Commander wanted to use Maria's gifts for combat purposes.

"Oh, sweetie," the Commander sighed as she scooped Maria up in her arms. "You'd be an asset in the field but that doesn't mean you're destined for it."

"Liar," Maria mumbled into her shoulder. "C'n tell."

"Mm-hmm," the Commander chuckled. "Go to sleep, child. You're just hurting yourself by staying awake."

The Commander's mind pressed against Maria's firmly enough that unconsciousness was inevitable. She still resisted for a moment. Anthony wasn't the worst of them. He was just one of the Gifted who used up those around him. There were more people like him. They were more discreet but they were still there, running the school, running the world.

"Yes," the Commander murmured into Maria's aching mind. *"And the only way to survive is to be careful, sweetie. Don't let them know that you know. Don't let them into your mind. Sleep. Your mind will be too*

chaotic to influence for a few weeks but after that you'll need to be strong and clear. Your path is still yours. You just have to be strong enough to fight them all and take it."

"Not," Maria mumbled. Even her thoughts felt like mumbles. They felt like honey chilled in the refrigerator until it was nearly solid.

"*You will be,*" the Commander replied. "*You have a choice, you see. Either follow, be destroyed... or lead.*"

The Commander's mental voice went dark and triumphant on the word 'lead'. It was full of grim satisfaction, complete conviction and, underneath, the same sort of fury that Maria felt towards Anthony. She'd been there. She'd been exactly where Maria was.

And she'd become the strongest Gifted hero on the planet, the one that everyone looked up to and feared.

Maria smiled at that. She would be strong, fierce. No one was ever going to treat her like that again. Not Anthony or any of the other jerks that thought they owned everything around them. She would be free, no matter what it took.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: A LONE RED TREE

*A*h, one of my darkest stories. This is set in the Mages of Tindiere series, off away from the main storyline. It does link into City of the Dead, in ways that are quite... gruesome. But then this story is rather horrifying on its own. Warnings for abuse, mass murder, parasites and body horror.

A LONE RED TREE

The scent of copper drifted on the air. But no, it wasn't copper. It was blood, thick, sticky blood like the kitchen yard after Mother Tabussum killed a chicken and left the innards in the sun. The smell of death and blood and vomit filled Afya's nose, her mouth, climbed down her throat to tug at the screams, the sobs, that wanted to escape.

She swallowed instead.

Afya stood still, hands clutched to her chest. Midday, hottest time of the day, that was when Mother Tabussum said that the Red Tree would be least likely to attack. It was soaking up the heat, stretching its blade-edged red leaves towards the sky as if they were fingers reaching ever upwards. She curled inwards, hands pressed against her chest, the bruises that Mother Tabussum had left last night after Father had so carefully carried Mother to bed and tucked her in.

Skin like the thinnest parchment, fluttering pulse at her throat and temple too visible; Mother was the only reason that Afya would dare come here.

A second swallow didn't clear the terrible, terrifying smell from her mouth. Her nose still felt as though it was filled with blood, with water, like she was drowning. It was so much like the time that

Mother Tabussum decided that Afya needed her hair washed that Afya swayed, her bare back brushing against the cold adobe wall surrounding the Red Tree's enclosure.

Mother Tabussum had sworn that it was just a hair wash, nothing more, even though she'd held Afya under the water until she nearly drowned. Drowned in the desert, surrounded by sand and cactus, all because Father would never see that Mother Tabussum hated Mother, his first wife, his beloved wife where Mother Tabussum was the second, the afterthought, the one Father had accepted only because tradition said he had to support his brother's widowed wife.

Afya shook her head, trying to chase the anger, the hate, away. It didn't work. Nothing worked. Mother got sicker every day; Father more desperate. Mother Tabussum smiled and smiled and smiled and stirred the soup that Afya had stopped eating after the first time she threw up and there was blood amidst the bile.

Blood. Everything came back to blood and death. It was the worst thing about Father's second marriage. Her little sister Malakah was already gone, disappeared into the Red Tree's enclosure after Mother Tabussum told them stories that the fruit of the tree could heal any wound, cure any illness. Malakah had gasped, run to Father and then cried when he told her not to be silly. She'd escaped in the night, somehow, somehow, despite being too small to open the great door that kept the predators of the night out of the house.

Afya knew Mother Tabussum had told Malakah that night was the best time to take a fruit from the tree.

Just as she'd told Afya that the heat of the day was the best time. Just as she'd sworn to Father that no, she would never have done anything to harm Father's children, hands caressing her heavy belly and the brother's son baby she carried from Afya's dead uncle while death and blood and hate filled her lying, lying eyes like the spear of the Great Hunter Haraldr stabbing into your heart.

Except this was worse still than Mother Tabussum's hate or the Gods turning against Afya or even the sure knowledge that this was Afya's death, too.

This was inescapable. The tree loomed ahead like a skeletal claw

reaching up out of the ground. Its branches twisted, long and lean, against the golden midday sky. No tree should have leaves in the hottest times of year when everything but the sacred bushes outside the temple dropped their leaves and even the cactus buds dried up and blew away but this one did. The Red Tree always had leaves.

Always leaves and always damp sap that smelled like blood as it dripped down the branches, pooling on the ground around its spreading, flexing roots. The fruit on the long twisted branches looked like hearts, lumpy shapes that pulsed just like the pig heart had when they butchered their last pig before the dry season began. Drops of blood-red sap fell occasionally from the fruit, glimmering in the midday sun.

Afya bit her lip, staring at the thing's serrated leaves. They were as long as Afya's hand, exactly the color of fresh-spilled blood while the sap was darker, thicker, the color of blood slowly congealing. Every time the dust-heavy wind stirred the branches the leaves rubbed together making a sound far too much like steel on steel. When Afya closed her eyes she could imagine a great sword battle taking place with her cowering by the gate around the Red Tree's enclosure.

She should run. She should. Mother Tabussum had already sent little Malakah in here to harvest one of the Red Tree's fruits. Malakah hadn't come back. She would never come back.

Tears dampened Afya's cheeks as she studied the sticky red-coated lumps around the base of the tree. One of them had a sword poking up, rusted and ancient enough that the holder had to have died generations ago. Another had a scythe. The handle had dissolved back into dust ages ago. Its blade was still there though it looked like a weathered, pitted shell of rust rather than a blade.

The littlest one still looked like a human and wore little Malakah's apron around its waist.

"Why am I here?" Afya whispered.

She should just run. Mother was dying. Father would die soon enough, as soon as Mother Tabussum had her baby and recovered. Their deaths were written on the wall as clearly as the old blessings and charms that Mother had painted when Afya was a tiny girl. Even

though the wall still showed Inina's cups spilling her blessings over the world and Haraldr's arrows lancing down to kill any that threatened the occupants of the house, Afya knew that the blessings were gone.

Only death remained.

"One step forward," Afya whispered as she put her bare foot down into the sticky red grass, "a chance to fly. One step back, run, run."

She didn't run. Instead she stepped forward again, the Red Tree's sap-blood squishing through her toes. It was cool, so cool, not hot as she'd expected. Even with the full heat of the sun beating down on the Red Tree and its pool of sap, it stayed cool as fresh well water from the heart of town.

"Two steps forward, the Gods cry," Afya said a little more loudly. "Give up your heart, your hope, and die."

And that's what she would do. She didn't want to pluck one of the fruits. Afya was old enough to know that the fruit wouldn't heal Mother. Nothing would heal her. She was dying, dying, already dead even though her heart beat in sickly twitches that barely stirred Mother's blood. Father was sick, too, barely strong enough to tend to Mother.

No, Afya had given up hope when Malakah disappeared. She'd given up her heart when Father consented to marry Mother Tabussum despite all the horrible stories people told about her uncle's death. And now she'd give up her life because the final verse of the old, old song, the one Grandmother had sung when furious at their neighbor who'd stolen their milk, gave a promise that Afya prayed was true.

Not prayers to Inina and Haraldr. No, that made no sense. Inina and Haraldr had betrayed Afya and her family. They hadn't protected them from Mother Tabussum, from the poisonous snake at their throat.

Afya prayed to the Unspoken as she took that third step forward, her skirt hem already damp with chilly blood-sap.

"Three steps, stand still, stand still," Afya said, planting her left foot on one of the Red Tree's pulsing roots. "Let the seed grow, become what you will."

The root under her foot twitched. Afya nearly jerked back and ran as the root curled around her foot, then her ankle and up her calf. She didn't. Stand still. The old song said you had to stay still so Afya stayed still.

More roots pulled free of the ground to wrap around her ankles and calves. They all pulsed, not slow, like the tree's fruit, but fast, so fast. None of them pulsed at the same speed, either. The one on her foot was fast as a kitten's heartbeat. The one on her calf was slower, like Father's chest when he held her close late at night and hummed them both to sleep.

Each root was individual, different. Afya raised her skirt enough to see the roots clinging to her and stared as she realized that each was a separate plant. They weren't part of the Red Tree at all. They were seedlings looking for a home, a place to live away from the Red Tree's roots.

"Oh," Afya breathed, her heart beating faster as she realized that this was better than she'd thought. "I could carry you away, give you fresh ground to sprout in."

She looked back towards the gate that protected the rest of the town from the Red Tree. The mayor had come just yesterday to hum and sigh and call Mother's illness 'the will of the Goddess'. No one at the market had listened as Afya tried to get someone to help stop Mother Tabussum. They'd all looked away, ignored her, ignored little Malakah and now Malakah lay dead under the Red Tree.

"They all share the blame," Afya hissed. "Every single one of them. They knew and they didn't help."

She bent and carefully gathered up the seedlings. They curled around her arms, blood-sap coating Afya's arms and dripping off her elbows, all put the kitten-heart sapling wrapped around her ankle and foot. It was easy to turn and walk out of the gate, to push open the Mayor's door and set one of the saplings safe in the fountain by the door. The sapling, pulsing with a glowing red light, set out new roots that swelled in the water, growing, growing, growing so quickly that Afya slipped outside and hurried, carefully, to the next house.

Then the next, the next, the next after that. She had to go back

and gather up more seedlings twice to make sure that she planted them in every house. By the time she heard screams echoing through the town Afya could hear the saplings humming in the back of her mind. Or maybe it was the kitten-heart sapling growing around her leg, its new roots gently sliding into her flesh to sip at her blood.

"What is going on out there?" Mother Tabussum snapped as she waddled to the door of their house, one hand on her belly, the soup ladle in her other.

"I'm planting seeds," Afya said, holding the four precious seedlings in her hands, cradled to her chest.

Mother Tabussum screamed and stumbled backwards, falling in a meaty thud that Afya ignored. Her feet left lovey red footprints as she walked into the house. The beautiful cool sap coating her skirt, her body, marked the doorway and then the wall.

"No, no, Mother Goddess, Blessed Inina save us," Mother Tabussum prayed while scrambling backwards away from Afya and her beloved seedlings.

"Inina has no place in this house," Afya said, blinking and feeling blood-sap drip down her cheeks like tears. "You drove the Gods out, Mother Tabussum."

Afya walked past, creeping into Mother and Father's bedroom. It was cool, which was good, and dark, which wasn't good, but the roof wasn't strong. Their saplings would grow and break the roof open, just as the mother tree had in her home.

Mother sighed as her sapling settled around her throat, smiling at the gentle coolness of the touch. Father woke, his eyes going wide as Afya settled his sapling around his thigh. He jerked and tried to move only to freeze as Afya put a hand on his thigh.

"You have to stay still, Father," Afya murmured, her remaining seedling cooing encouragingly. "It feels so cool, so very good, when you stay still. You and Mother will be together forever. I made sure of it. Just grow towards the roof, tear it open, and you'll be together forever."

"Oh, Afya," Father whispered.

He looked at Mother whose sapling had spread over her chest

and stomach, down her arms and up around her cheeks. She had a mass of beautiful red roots instead of hair now. Afya thought she was even more beautiful than before, especially as she smiled and opened her blood-red eyes to look at Father.

Rather than fight, Father sighed and wrapped his arms around Mother. His sapling grew quickly, engulfing Father and then twining with Mother's sapling to form a beautiful spiral tree trunk that grew and grew towards the roof.

Afya nodded, turned and left them to grow.

Mother Tabussum had run away. She wasn't in the great room or in the yard. Her scent, salty-thick and full of birth fluids and raw red blood, led out of the yard and into the street. Afya followed Mother Tabussum into the heart of town, to the well dug deep down to where the water waited.

"No, no, no," Mother Tabussum panted as she clutched her rippling belly. "Oh Goddess, please no!"

"There you are," Afya said as she walked up to Mother Tabussum. The screams had died off now, replaced by the sword-clash sound of new red leaves reaching towards the sky. "Thank you, Mother Tabussum. You did a terrible thing but it caused so much beauty and life to be born. Now there's only your baby that needs to be whole."

"No," Mother Tabussum sobbed.

She shook her head, boring clear tears on her cheeks. Salty horrid things those tears, not like proper blood-tears. Afya watched, waited, let her roots dig past the paving stones and down through the earth towards the aquifer below.

It took so little time for Mother Tabussum's baby to be born. Only a couple of hours, practically a blink of Afya's eyes. As soon as it slipped free of Mother Tabussum's body Afya gently set the seedling down near it. Mother Tabussum, hair sweat-soaked and eyes swollen from crying, tried to smack the seedling away.

"Oh no, Mother Tabussum," Afya said. Her voice came out different, powerful and deep instead of high and screechy like a human's. "You can't have the baby. She belongs to me, not you."

"Monster," Mother Tabussum panted. Blood pooled between her legs, growing larger and larger as Mother Tabussum went white.

"I'm not a monster, Mother Tabussum," Afya said. "I didn't kill my husband. I didn't kill my sister-wife, my nieces, my brother-husband. I didn't poison a whole town's minds to get away with my crimes. That's you."

Afya waited until the baby's seedling broke the umbilical cord and then scooped it up and pushed it as far away from her roots as she could reach. A fallen basket was close, a stick too. Afya put the baby-sapling in the basket and then pushed and pushed until the baby was safely outside the range of her roots. It would grow there, grow into a lovely Red Tree to join their village of Red Trees. Then Afya sent her roots up and out of the paving stones to catch Mother Tabussum's ankles, wrists.

"You'll make a lovely first meal, Mother Tabussum," Afya said as Mother Tabussum started to scream. "So kind of you to be dinner for me after all my hard work."

She hummed, roots pulsing as they drank deep. The other trees in the village hummed in response. After a moment the Mother Tree started singing, its branches thrust high in the air in exultant joy. Afya reached up, reached down into the water so far below, and raised her voice in song, too.

*"One step forward, a chance to fly.
One step back, run, run.
Two steps forward, the Gods cry.
Give up your hope, your heart, and die.
Three steps, stand still, stand still.
Let the seed grow, become what you will."*

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: DARKNESS RISES

What if aliens came to Earth before humanity had developed even the most basic levels of technology? What if those aliens were distinctly non-human? What if they considered humans to be easy food? And what if the humans being preyed on decided, after a lifetime of predation, that they had to strike back?

1. NIGHT

*K*ia watched quietly, nibbling on her bottom lip as Chinara took a fresh incense cone and gently set it on the family altar. Her hands didn't shake the way Fola's had when she put the dates on the altar. Chinara's hands were steady. Her voice was calm as she prayed to the Gods to grant them good weather, bountiful harvests and freedom from the Dark. It felt wrong for her to be so calm. She should be angry, like Kia.

Outside, Kia heard the strange echoing sounds of impacts that always came from the Dark's ravine. They were such a normal part of her life that she barely noticed them. Since Mother and Father had been taken by the Dark the sounds seemed louder, more threatening. Kia had tried banging rocks and wood together but nothing made the same hollow booming sound that the Dark's hammering did. It was if they hammered on something completely different from the familiar wood, rock and earth that surrounded Kia.

"Will you set the flame, Kia?" Chinara asked.

"Can I?" Kia asked, surprised. "I thought I wasn't big enough yet."

"It's just the three of us," Chinara sighed, her smile so sad that Fola put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I think it's okay as long as you're careful."

"I'll be very careful!" Kia exclaimed.

She scrambled up from her cushion by the fire, coming over to take the little lamp from Chinara. It was heavier than she expected. The rosy quartz crystal base chilled her fingers and filled both her hands. Fola poured a puddle of oil in the hollowed out center of the base. Kia let her tongue poke out of her lips between the gap where her front tooth had fallen out, concentrating hard as Chinara carefully lit the little puddle of oil for her.

"Just set it on the altar, Kia," Chinara said, "right between the dates and the incense."

"Okay," Kia said.

Kia had to stand on her toes to set the lamp on the altar. She was very careful to make sure that the lamp didn't slosh to the sides, spilling the oil and fire. Chinara smiled as Kia stepped back, resting her hands on Kia's shoulders. Fola patted Kia's shoulder and smiled too but her smile was wobbly and sad, not confident and reassuring.

"Do you know the words?" Chinara asked.

"Uh-uh," Kia said. "Say them for me?"

"Of course," Chinara laughed. "Just repeat after me, okay?"

She took a deep breath as she stared at the lamp for a long moment. Chinara carefully picked up the incense cone and touched the tip of it to the flame, holding it there until it began to smolder. A long thread of smoke curled towards the ceiling of their cave. Kia watched with Chinara and Fola as the smoke built in the dark spot over the altar before slowly flowing like an upside down river towards the smoke hole that led outside.

"Protect and defend us," Chinara said, looking back down at Kia. "Keep us safe so that we may bear the flame to the next generation."

Kia repeated the words along with Fola, her tongue stumbling a little on 'generation' but Chinara didn't seem to mind. She tugged both Fola and Kia back over to the cushions, sitting with Kia in her arms. Her arms were thinner and harder than they had been before Mother and Father went to the Dark. Chinara's belly was flatter, too. It made her hip bones poke into Kia's side but she was warm and that was nice enough that Kia didn't complain.

A wail sounded outside, faint and distant. It sounded so far away that Kia wondered if it was out on the plains instead of in one of the other caves. No one lived on the plains, though, so that didn't make sense. It was too dangerous out there with the Dark and lions and crocodiles and hippos. Chinara's arms went hard and tight around Kia's back, tugging her so close that Kia protested.

"Hush," Chinara whispered.

"Chinara!" Fola hissed. "What do we do? There's no one to defend us now. We're all alone."

"Hush!" Chinara repeated. "We stay quiet. We stay still. We don't go out at night. We'll be fine."

"Should have gone to live with Duna," Fola muttered but she said it very quietly.

Chinara didn't seem to hear her though Kia could feel the way Chinara's body stiffened. They'd already argued about that. In the last three days since the Dark got Mother and Father, Fola and Chinara had argued about it again and again and again. Last time Chinara had screamed at Fola and slapped her. Neither of them had brought it up since.

Kia didn't want to go live with Duna. He was big and strong but his cave was the closest to the plain. He didn't live high up where it was hard for the Dark to climb. It made her scared when Duna looked at Chinara. The look in his eyes was more like when Father had brought in an antelope for dinner than how Father had looked at Mother. Besides, Duna's cave was full of other women, ones he'd convinced that he could protect against everything including the Dark.

"Why do they come?" Kia whispered once Fola had stopped shaking and Chinara's eyes had relaxed around Kia's back. "Why do they take people away, Chinara?"

"I don't know," Chinara whispered back. "I don't think anyone does."

Other wails rose in the night, closer, father away, then one so close that it sounded as though it came from two caves down. Fola gasped and hid her face in Chinara's back. Chinara shivered but she

stayed perfectly still other than the way her arms tightened once more around Kia's back.

A wail came from the cave next to theirs, full of terror and something that Kia had never heard before. It was a sound like teeth grinding or maybe like grain being ground between two flat stones. But it wasn't that. She could tell. The grinding sound was too wet for grain, even fresh gathered grain that hadn't yet dried in the sun.

"Go away," Kia whispered. "Go away!"

The wet grinding sound changed to a burbling sound that reminded Kia of a babbling brook. Another burbling sound answered it, then a third. Fola whimpered high in her throat, backing away from Chinara and Kia until her back was pressed against the back of their cave. Chinara's shaking was so bad that Kia felt like her eyes couldn't focus on the dark patch that was the entrance to their cave.

"No..." Chinara whispered. "Please no!"

She scrambled backwards as a scream sounded right outside of their cave. Kia fell out of her arms, landing on her knees on the cushion. Its woven strands of rush felt harsh under Kia's hands. Kia stood, staring at the dark opening of their cave as another scream sounded outside.

"No," Chinara sobbed. "No!"

Fola's whimpers had changed to a wail of terror that made Kia want to cry but she didn't. It wasn't fear that made her heart feel like a captured butterfly. Anger burned inside of her instead. Kia stomped her foot, stepping off the cushion to stomp again.

"You stop it!" Kia said to the Dark hiding outside the entrance to their cave. "You stop it now!"

The screams stopped. So did the burbling sound. Kia stared at the cave entrance, surprised. A moment passed with only Fola's slowly quieting wails and Chinara's muffled sobs. Then something moved at the entrance.

It wasn't dark. Kia blinked in surprise at the person who crawled into the cave. He, she, Kia couldn't tell which, looked stretched to the point their forearms and shins were as long as Chinara was tall. Their upper arms and thighs were as long as Fola was tall and Kia thought

that the person's fingers stretched as wide as Kia's arms from fingertip to fingertip.

But they weren't dark.

The Dark was grey-white, with skin that looked like a fish's belly instead of the nice warm brown of Kia, Fola and Chinara. Its eyes were as big as Kia's fist and when it opened its mouth there were lots and lots of sharp, sharp teeth stained with blood. It hissed at Kia and then made that burbling-grinding noise again.

"Stop it!" Kia yelled at the Dark.

It hissed, twisting its arms and legs outwards at impossible angles so that its head swung lower and lower until its eyes were on a level with Kia's. When it opened its mouth again Kia stomped her foot hard. The Dark started and skittered back towards the entrance.

"Bad!" Kia shouted, stomping her foot again. "You're bad! Go home! Don't you come back again, you bad person, you!"

Kia grabbed the cushion and flung it at the Dark. It keened and sprang backwards as if the cushion was a deadly weapon like Father's spear had been. Outside, Kia could hear other Dark making frightened keening noises. Behind her, Chinara's sobs had turned into wails that were louder than Fola's had been. It sounded like Fola had passed out but Kia didn't turn to look. Instead she stared at the Dark, stomped her foot and waved her arms the way Mother used to when she chased starlings off of the drying grain.

"Stop it!" Kia yelled with as loud and angry a voice as she could manage.

The Dark turned and ran out of the cave making little barking keens that carried through the night. It was answered by another set, then another, until more than a dozen Dark voices bark-keened in the night, their voices going farther and farther away as they ran from Kia's anger.

"You..."

Kia turned and stared at Chinara. She'd never heard her sister speak with that sort of worshipful awe for anything other than prayers. It frightened Kia to hear that tone of voice directed at her.

The way that Chinara looked at her was worse, as if Kia had suddenly become the oldest, the one who took care of everyone else.

"You saved us," Chinara whispered.

"I got mad," Kia explained. "They're scaring everyone, hurting everyone, taking them away. I got mad. Mother always said I shouldn't get mad. Isn't getting mad bad?"

Chinara laughed and rocked as she hugged Fola who was still passed out. She cried and shook her head no and then yes and then just buried her face in Fola's twists as she sobbed. Kia stared at her sister, unsure what to do now. The Dark were gone but something really important seemed to have changed though Kia didn't know what it was.

2. DAY

*K*ia sighed as she watched the sun come up. The plains slowly shifted from black to gray and then into gold-green-brown patches of grass. Birds began to sing, one trill then another. When Kia sniffed the air the smell of the Dark faded into the scent of dew soaked earth and that smell of dust that promised wind rising later in the morning.

The smell of the Dark's acrid smoke was light in the air this morning. Sometimes the sky would be heavy and brown, filled with the smoke from the Dark's hidden fires. At least Kia assumed that the smoke came from the Dark's fires hidden deep under the earth. Chinara had said that their parents had never seen smoke coming from the ravine until the Dark showed up.

It seemed impossible. The plumes of smoke had spiraled upwards from the ravine her entire life, acrid, dark and choking. She couldn't imagine skies that weren't stained by smoke trails, air that didn't smell of burning thing. At least at this time of year the wind blew the smoke away rather than letting it linger like a blanket over the land.

"Kia."

She turned and raised an eyebrow at Duna. The past ten years

hadn't been kind to Duna. After Kia chased the Dark away most of the women came to live in their cave. He'd tried to force several of the women to stay with him only to be beaten when Kia yelled at him for being mean. Two years ago he'd tried to force Fola to live in his cave and Kia had had to beat him herself. Now Duna walked with a limp and used a staff so that his bad leg didn't give out from under him.

He still chased women though, despite his scars and the way everyone talked about him.

"How long will you guard the nights, Kia?" Duna asked. "You're a woman now. You should be tending a cave, raising babies. Instead you fight like a man and look into the eyes of the Dark each night."

"At least I'm not a ball-scratching coward who hides behind everyone else," Kia replied, raising her chin and her father's spear when Duna edged closer. "I almost killed you once, Duna. Should I finish the job now and leave your body for the Dark to take away?"

He winced, glancing towards the shadows under the berry bushes as if he expected a Dark to crawl out to attack them both. Kia knew that he had no idea what the Dark actually looked like. When she had her knife buried in his thigh Duna had admitted that he'd only ever thrown the youngest and weakest women to the Dark outside his cave, sacrificing them so that he and his other women would survive.

"You wouldn't," Duna grumbled.

"I would," Kia said, spitting towards his feet. She missed but only because he stepped back. "You take and take and take and give nothing back, Duna. You're as bad as the Dark but we have to see your face every day."

That got a real snarl, one that twisted the line of four scratches down his left cheek into something nasty. Kia still didn't know when he'd gotten those scars. It was before she had been born, before Fola could remember and Chinara wouldn't talk about it. Duna glared at her for a long moment before hobbling back towards the ovens where the women would be making breakfast.

Kia watched him go, sighing once he was out of hearing range. She looked over the plain one last time. Nothing looked back. It never did. Once the sky began to shade from black-blue to pink and gold

the Dark ran away to their hidden homes, not to be seen until the dusk when they crept back out to search for unwary people to eat.

"I'm tired," Kia whispered. She leaned on her father's spear, resting her forehead against the smooth wood of the shaft. "I'm so very tired."

It wasn't just the nightly battles to keep the Dark from eating people in her village. That was something that Kia was prepared to deal with for the rest of her life. What exhausted her was the way the others treated her.

Ever since the night she threw her cushion at the Dark, Kia had been treated as if she was somehow different. Chinara catered to Kia's every whim, to the point that Kia was very careful not to mention liking anything or wish for anything. If she gave any sign of enjoying something Chinara would work tirelessly to make sure that Kia got more than she could handle of whatever it was. It didn't matter if it was food, a comfortable mat to sleep on or even a song that she remembered Mother singing back before everything changed.

Fola would barely meet Kia's eyes. Kia had learned within days not to try to touch her sister for fear that Fola would start sobbing. The fear of the Dark was so strong in Fola that she couldn't handle being close to Kia anymore. It made Kia sad but at least she'd been able to encourage Nsia to take Fola into his cave once he'd dug it deeper and expanded it enough to share with someone else. Fola had a baby now, a little girl that she doted over.

"It's better with her there," Kia sighed. "It is. If only Chinara would take a man. She could do with something else to think about."

The grass near the river rustled abruptly. Kia blinked and then shifted her grip on the spear. It was too soon for the lions to come out and none of the antelope every came this close to the caves. They feared the smell of people too much.

Two people emerged from the grass, both with heads held high and spears at the ready. One was a tall man, a bit older than Kia, with burnt umber skin and hair in dreadlocks down to his shoulders. The other was a woman just as tall, maybe the same age as Kia or a year

older. Her hair was shaved short and she moved like a lioness stalking her prey.

"They have a child on guard?" the man commented when he spotted Kia.

"The guards haven't come yet," Kia replied. "There's just me."

Both of them stared at Kia in surprise, exchanging looks before the man waved one hand at Kia's spear. "You guard the night? Alone?"

"I do," Kia said. "None of the others are angry enough to overcome their fear of the Dark. They think it's magic that I can fight them when really I'm just angry that the Dark dare to feed on us."

"I like her," the woman laughed. "Maybe we can stay here for a while, Lusala. It would be nice not to travel all the time."

"Olamide," Lusala sighed. "Their elders may not want more warriors."

"Our 'elders' will do what I say to do," Kia snorted. She grimaced at their surprised expressions. "All our old were taken by the dark ten years ago. There's no one over thirty here anymore."

Lusala started, his grip around his spear tightening as if he expected an attack at any moment. Olamide drew in a deep breath and then whistled, looking around as if seeing the cliff face and their caves for the first time. She studied the area and then looked back towards the ravine where the Dark always retreated in the morning.

"They only come once in a while," Lusala protested. "One or two every year or so. There's never much of a problem with them."

"The Dark come every night," Kia corrected him. "At least five or six, sometimes as many as ten at a time. I can stop seven, sometimes eight. But whenever there are too many or I'm too slow the Dark slip through and take one of the weaker ones. Our people have been dying since my oldest sister was a baby. There used to be a couple hundred of us here. Now there are only a few dozen."

Olamide stayed in place, studying the ravine with an intent expression. Her fingers tightened and loosened on her spear, over and over as her jaw worked. Lusala slowly approached, staring up at the cave entrances. The lower ones were abandoned now, mostly

filled with debris so that the Dark wouldn't hide in them during the day. Only the highest ones were safe enough anymore.

"So many," Lusala murmured. "Why so many?"

"I think they breed here," Kia said, looking towards the ravine that Olamide found so interesting. "Down in the ravine. We don't go there. It's dark all the time, so deep at the bottom that the Dark are safe from the sun. I think they breed and send their warriors out to cull what prey they can. Humans are easy prey. No hooves to kick, no horns to stab with. No fangs or claws to tear their flesh. Terrible sight at night and no sense of smell. We're easy food for their young."

Both Lusala and Olamide stared at Kia with horror on their faces. She shrugged, too tired from last night's battles to soften her words or explain more diplomatically. Normally she wouldn't say it at all but Lusala and Olamide had traveled across the plains in the night. They could probably handle the truth Kia lived with.

"Why don't you leave?" Olamide demanded as she strode over to grip Kia's arm. "Why do your people stay here?"

"You've seen how the rivers are dying?" Kia asked. "The drought that's turning the land to dust elsewhere?"

Olamide winced and nodded.

"We have a spring that isn't going dry," Kia explained sadly. "And grain that grows year round. The antelope come close to eat the green grass and we can hunt them. The berry bushes fill our bellies. There is food and water and shelter here. Why leave when they would just die a slower death somewhere else? After all, I'm here to defend them at night. That's enough for the others."

Both Olamide and Lusala turned away, staring into each other's eyes. Kia wasn't sure if they were siblings or mates. They were from a far enough tribe that Kia didn't recognize the markings on their clothes or the scar patterns on Lusala's cheeks.

"Why not drive the Dark away?" Olamide asked with a jerk of her chin at the ravine's dark depths.

Kia laughed, too tired and worn by the nightly battles to do anything else. She waved for them to follow, trusting that the daytime guards would be arriving soon. The sun was nearly over the horizon

so they should emerge from their caves anytime. Olamida walked by Kia's side, striding with entirely too much energy for Kia. Lusala walked behind them. When she looked back, he was scanning the surroundings as if expecting an attack at any moment.

The ravine sank into the ground much like their cliff rose out of it, a gash in the ground as if some giant had stabbed their spear into the earth and dragged it for a while. It was deep and dark, with sides steep enough that the sun never reached the bottom.

The plumes of smoke spiraled slowly upwards, hiding what lay below as much as the shadows did. At this time of the morning the hammering was quiet. Instead an eerie burbling sound carried up from the ravine; voices of the Dark, drifting up to their ears along with the smoke. Kia stared down into the darkness below, noting automatically the slow moving shapes of Dark tending to their young. They must have taken antelope tonight. None of her tribe had been taken.

"You see them?" Kia asked. "Below?"

"See what?" Olamide asked.

Kia raised one eyebrow before hitting the butt of her spear against a rock at the edge of the cliff. The sound of the impact echoed over the ravine, ricocheting down its sides. Below, the Dark abruptly swarmed towards the well-hidden entrance to their underground cave. Lusala gasped and backed off several paces while Olamide stared down into the ravine, taking in every Dark. She went pale as the sheer number of Dark lurking below became clear.

"How are you not all dead?" Olamide whispered, eyes wide as she turned to stare at Kia.

"They don't take that many at a time," Kia said. "We're coming up on the time when they take more, when more come to the caves to hunt, but it's only when their young are learning to hunt. I think the majority of them live under the earth. Only a few travel above ground. Only a few hunt the creatures that live here. And they're skittish, like a mother antelope who knows the lions are hunting in her area. I can frighten them away most of the time."

"By yourself," Olamide said. "You fight them by yourself. Every night."

"For ten years," Kia agreed. She looked at the two of them and shook her head. The last thing she wanted to talk about was why her people left their defense to a girl who had only just become a woman. "I'm tired and hungry. The Dark are gone for the night. You're welcome to come up to the caves. There's enough food that we can share some with you. I'm sure the others will be interested to hear how the drought is affecting the rest of the world. I'm going to sleep, though."

Olamide stared at Kia for a long moment before nodding. She looked at Lusala who shrugged uncomfortably as if he didn't particularly want to stay but saw no way to refuse the offer. Kia headed back towards the caves, nodding to the guards who'd finally appeared.

"Tonight," Olamide said as Kia led them towards her cave that she shared with Chinara, "you will not guard alone. I will help."

"It would be appreciated," Kia said, smiling even though she didn't expect that Olamide would actually do it. "Thank you."

If she did, that would be good. Kia didn't expect her to actually do it. Or, perhaps, she would come down and try to guard with Kia but it wouldn't work. Once the Dark arrived Olamide would cower or run just like everyone else. No matter what her intentions were, Olamide probably didn't have the anger to overwhelm the instinctive fear the Dark created in human hearts. Hopefully she wouldn't get herself killed trying to help out. Kia already knew that she couldn't protect someone who lost their heads when confronted with a mass of the Dark creeping at them out of the night.

Too many had already died that way for Kia to do more than accept the offer and then leave Olamide to her fate.

3. RIVER

"*W*hat are they doing?" Olamide asked.
"I don't know," Kia replied as she peered into the darkness towards the river. "I can't tell."

Ten years and Olamide had yet to miss a night by Kia's side. They were both twenty-four, old enough that no one asked anymore when they would take a man into their cave so that they could have babies. Lusala had lasted three nights before he admitted, very ashamed of himself, that he could help when it was one or two Dark but once there were more than that he couldn't resist the fear.

That was all right. Lusala had taken Chinara into his new cave. He taught the men and tallest women how to hunt and fight the daylight predators. During the day, Lusala ruled their tribe. He'd dealt with Duna, killing the old man when he tried to take Chinara from him, set rules for how people were to interact and even reached out to other tribes in the area. The caves were full of people now, several hundred with many children on the way.

"It looks like they're moving rocks," Olamide murmured as the sky shifted from star-speckled night towards grey-blue-gold dawn.

"Stacking them alongside the river bank?" Kia agreed hesitantly. "They've never done that before."

The Dark still came at night. Or they had up until several months ago. They had taken four women and one man as the winter dry spell neared its inevitable conclusion, dragging them away into the ravine still screaming with terror. That night there had been over twenty Dark. Both Olamide and Kia had been injured. Kia's left arm still wasn't right, the shoulder painful and stiff after her arm had been violently dislocated trying to rescue a pregnant woman.

Olamide had lost her right eye. It no longer bled or wept pus. Kia checked every morning and night to make sure that Olamide would not die of infection.

But after that night no Dark had come. The first night without an attack had been a relief. The second had been faintly worrisome. By the time a month had passed people talked as though the Dark would never return. Lusala yelled at them to go look over the edge of the ravine whenever he heard them say it.

No one ever did.

The hammering sounds echoed all day and all night now. It sounded to Kia as though the Dark worked desperately to finish something. Her lungs protested the smell of the smoke that billowed up from the ravine. When she was young the plumes had been small, no wider than a toddler's arms could reach. Now they were great, billowing clouds that frequently hid the outlines of the ravine entirely.

Despite the hard work the Dark obviously did, they did not hunt. It made no sense. Kia and Olamide had taken to climbing to the very top of the cliff at night to watch for the faint traces of ghostly movement that marked the Dark skittering through the fields and brush on errands that they could not understand. The Dark always went north, towards the star that never moved in the night sky, towards the bend of the river that slowly looped back and forth across the plain half a day's travel from the caves.

After a month and a half Kia and Olamide had convinced Lusala to enlist a dozen or so of the strongest daytime warriors to guard the night for them. They'd traveled to the river but found nothing other

than a bend of the river that looked as though it was eating its way through the river bank.

They had seen the Dark that night but they hadn't been attacked. Every other day since then Kia and Olamide had made the journey back to the river to try to figure out what the Dark were up to. Only this night had they stayed close enough to see the bend in the river while it was dark. Their perch in a tree wasn't particularly safe with leopards about but it was safer than being on the ground with dozens and dozens of Dark.

As the light rose enough that the leaves around them seemed to change from black to green Kia stared at the Dark. Two worked together to push a big rock into place along the river bank, settling it with dozens of others that they'd moved. The light rose enough that Kia could clearly see baby Dark skittering under their parent's bellies. To her surprise, the babies pushed mud around the big rocks, filling in the cracks as if they were building something.

"Why?" Olamide whispered. "Why are they doing this? We've never seen them build anything. In ten, twenty years they've never built anything at all."

"Not that we could see," Kia agreed. "We can't see into the depths of the ravine. I've always thought that they were building something down there."

She looked back towards the cliff where their tribe would be waking, towards the ravine that held the Dark's shadowed home. As she swept her head back Kia's breath caught. The river would eventually break through the bank, carving until it cut through the slowly collapsing hill that blocked the river from the lower ground at the base of the cliff.

"Olamide," Kia breathed, catching her arm as the last of the dark ran for their home faster than any antelope or cheetah. "The river. It's going to break through."

"Eventually," Olamide agreed. "So?"

"The valley will flood," Kia said, excitement making her shake Olamide's arm. "The ravine will flood. They're making time, time to

move, to find a new place. Maybe they're digging under the cliff. I don't know. But they're trying to hold off the water."

Olamide stood on their branch, pushing aside leaves so that she had a better view of the valley. Kia waited until the Dark were well on the way back to their ravine before scrambling down out of their tree. The river bank had eroded quite a bit last spring. This winter, while the water level was down, the water had undercut the bank until it had collapsed. Now, as the spring rains hung heavy in clouds over the distant mountains, the bank was a narrow margin barely as wide as Olamide was tall.

"It will flood!" Olamide called. She scrambled down and ran to Kia's side. "It will! We'll be free!"

"If we weaken this enough," Kia said as she poked at the bank to find the weakest spot, "the river will do all the work for us. Start levering the big rocks free, Olamide. I'll work on carving a gap. The sooner the river breaks through, the better. We cannot allow the Dark enough time to escape."

"There must be other places where they live," Olamide grunted as she used the haft of her spear to push a bolder out of position. "I never heard of them anywhere else before but they travel all over the plain."

"There were no Dark when my mother and father were young," Kia disagreed. "None. No one had ever heard of them. No legends, no strange deaths. Nothing. A star fell from the sky one night when mother was nine. It burned on the way down, surrounded by fire. Mother said that it landed near the far side of the ravine. It was too hot to approach for a long, long time, all day, but she said that they could hear voices inside the star. They went to sleep that night and in the morning the star was gone. Only a scorched spot was left. A few days after that the first Dark appeared. I don't think they live anywhere else. I think these are the only Dark anywhere. They came from the fallen star and hid in the darkness of the ravine. If we drown them then it will be over!"

Olamide nodded. Kia didn't think that she believed her but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered more than getting the river to cut

through the bank. It was wide and strong here, if slow moving. Father had spoken of losing an uncle to the river's force when he was but a toddler. If they could just get the river to do the work Kia knew that they would succeed.

The sun rose over the plain. Flies began to buzz around Kia and Olamide. She could see crocodiles watching them labor against the earth, mouths gaped open as they allowed the sun to warm them up. None of the crocodiles moved to attack. Kia didn't know what they would do if one did. Neither of them knew the weak spots of a crocodile. They'd spent their lives fighting the Dark.

By mid-morning they had a narrow passageway carved through the Dark's pile of rocks and earth. That made it much easier to use their spears to hack away the grass and then dig at the earth and rocks underneath. It was hard, messy work but excitement continued to burn through Kia, brighter than the anger that had worn down from a bonfire in her childhood to a small lamp now. Olamide slowed, panting as exhaustion wore at her.

"Rest," Kia told her. "I can keep at this."

"You have an injured shoulder," Olamide scolded. "You should rest."

"No, I can't," Kia said. "I can't! This is the first hope I've had in my entire life, Olamide. I can't rest when freedom is so close."

Olamide caught her face in her muddy hands, pressing a quick kiss against Kia's lips. "Then I won't rest either. Just work a bit more slowly for a while. We'll still get there before the sun sets. There's not very far to go before the water does the work for us."

Kia nodded. They worked more slowly after that, conserving their energy for the bigger rocks. The cut from the river through the bank widened, lengthened until Kia could almost taste their victory. It seemed as through the river knew that it was about to be freed. It washed around the opening to their gap, muddy and violent as they pushed mud, earth and rocks out of the water's way.

"Almost," Olamide grunted as she wrestled together with a large rock that blocked the water from flowing through the gap they'd cut. "We're so close!"

"There!" Kia gasped as the rock gave way.

Together they grabbed it, hefting its wet, slippery mass to toss it off to the side. By the time they moved back to the gap the water was flowing through. Kia grabbed her spear and stabbed at the edges of their gap, softening the earth so that the water had an easier time tearing through it. Olamide did the same on the other side of the gap. They grinned at each other as the bank of the river gave way behind them.

"Come to my side!" Kia said. She shivered. The water was flowing so much faster now, eating away at the bank incredibly quickly. "Olamide! Jump!"

"Move!"

Kia backed away, watching as Olamide backed up and then ran, jumping over the new branch of the river as it began to flow towards the ravine like a pride of lionesses in pursuit of prey. She landed hard, gasped as the ground under her feet began to shift and then scrambled towards Kia with a terrified expression on her face.

Her spear fell into the new river and was swept away. Olamide kept scrambling, reaching Kia's side just as the river made a roar louder than a hundred lions roaring at once. They ran for the ancient old tree that had sheltered them during the night. It was so big that Kia was fairly certain that the water wouldn't rip its roots out even if it did climb up the little hill that the tree sat on.

They scrambled into the branches, feet wet and hearts pounding. Neither of them climbed very high. If they had to jump and run further away it would be better if they weren't at the very top of the tree. Olamide pulled Kia into her arms, hugging her from behind while panting and whimpering very quietly.

"It's so fast," Kia murmured. "The water's already halfway home."

"Really?" Olamide asked without lifting her face from Kia's back.

"Just the leading edge but the big wave, the one that almost got you," Kia said, "it's spreading out. Very soon the water will flood the ravine."

Olamide raised her head, tucking her chin on top of Kia's shoulder. Her breath brushed warm and moist against Kia's cheek as if

they were asleep in their cave, curled together on their bed. They watched in silence as the river, released from its banks, tore up shrubs and spread across the plain.

It spread out at first as if it would form a lake around their tree and its little hill but soon the water found the lower part of the valley that headed straight for the ravine. Kia shivered, leaning back into Olamide's arms. The closer the water got to the ravine to faster it seemed to move. Even at this distance Kia could hear the roar of the water.

There was a great flash of light followed by a bang that nearly knocked Kia and Olamide from the tree. It was followed by a rumbling that shook the earth underneath them as if it was marshland being trampled by a herd of water buffalo. Only Olamide's arms around Kia's waist kept her in the tree.

In the distance, the plumes of smoke stopped entirely only to be replaced by a huge cloud that welled up out of the ravine. It spread upwards, growing like a mushroom would with a narrow stalk surmounted by a widening cap that spread across the land.

"We should go home," Olamide whispered as they watched the cloud sweep up into the sky. "What if Lusala is hurt? Or Chinara?"

"Yes," Kia agreed, her heart beating faster for worry for them all. "Yes, we should."

They clambered to the other side of the tree, away from the still flowing torrent of water. It was already past midday. Kia knew that they would not make it home before darkness fell. Even if they ran they wouldn't make it. After the work to move the earth out of the river's way, Kia found that she was too sore to even think about running.

"We will get home when we get home," Kia announced as she stumbled to a walk after just a short distance.

Olamide looked at the river, the steam rising from the ravine to obscure the stalk of the mushroom-shaped cloud, and then nodded. "I'm tired, too."

At first they walked wary for the dangers of the daylight hunters but when a lioness spotted them and ran in terror they decided that

this day was not like any other. Kia took Olamide's hand, holding it as they made their slow way home. Every so often the ground rumbled in another earthquake and something banged from the bottom of the ravine. When that happened, another cloud of steam and smoke would rise up but none of those clouds were as big as the mushroom-shaped cloud.

It had spread out across the sky, becoming a new cloud that rained down ash instead of water. Kia brushed the ash off at first but more fell, making the effort futile. She gave up, letting the ash paint her body as gray as the Dark themselves. Olamide kept trying to brush it off but it just smeared across her cheeks, leaving trails that looked like tears.

Darkness fell when they were more than two thirds of the way home. That slowed their progress but the closer they got to the ravine the more fog there was. It smelled of the smoke that rose from the Dark's ravine but it tasted of fish. By the time they reached the caves Kia felt as though she'd eaten a basket full of fish, all seared and cooked too long over the fire. She wasn't sure that she'd ever get the taste out of her mouth.

"Kia!" Lusala shouted when they walked up the path to the caves. "Olamide! You're alive!"

He rushed over and hugged them both, babbling praises to the gods that Kia had long since stopped believing in. Olamide hugged him back, patting his back. Kia let him hug her but pulled away as quickly as she could, nodding towards the ravine.

"What happened?" Kia asked. "Is everyone all right?"

"We think so," Lusala said far too loudly. "The sound and light knocked us all off our feet. Two women were close to the ravine when it happened. They're covered with burns and babbling. We don't know if they'll live. Most everyone else was inside, avoiding the heat of the day. All of our ears hurt. A couple of people whose caves are closest to the ravine can't hear. I think my ears are bad, too. The ringing won't stop."

"You are loud," Kia agreed, speaking louder so that Lusala would be able to hear her. "We haven't eaten. Is there food to share?"

"Yes, but what happened?" Lusala said, waving for them to follow him to his and Chinara's cave. "Why did the river invade the ravine? Do you think it drowned the Dark? Are we free?"

Kia looked over her shoulder at the ravine. There was nothing to see. The fog was too thick, the night too dark. She shook her head before looking at Olamide who smiled proudly at Kia. Lusala looked between the two of them, expression interested and then fondly dismayed.

"We found out what the Dark were doing," Kia said. "And then we undid what they had built. The river did the rest. I just hope that the Dark don't hurt us even after death. Ghosts of the Dark would be worse than the Dark themselves."

Olamide shuddered, squeezing Kia's hand so hard that it ground her bones together. Lusala flinched. He waved for them to follow, hurrying out of the darkness towards his home as if the sheer thought of ghost Dark was enough to scare him beyond all control.

Kia followed. She truly wasn't that frightened by the thought of ghosts, even ghosts of the Dark. All she really wanted was to wash the ash and mud off, to eat and then to sleep with Olamide's arms wrapped around her. If ghosts came to haunt them then Kia would find a way to chase them away. At least now the Dark wouldn't kill their people. If they were truly lucky Kia and Olamide would be able to sleep at night, hunt during the day and live until they were old and grey-haired. That would be worth any number of ghosts.

4. DARK

"*T*ell us about the Dark," Lusala's great-grandson Anan begged.

He tugged at the fabric wrapped around Kia's hip, dark eyes hopeful. His hair surrounded his head like a cloud, dark and soft. Kia smiled at him as she looked ahead. They hadn't fallen behind the others. She could still see Fola's daughter walking tall and alert at the head of their column. A story shouldn't slow them enough to make them lose track of the others.

"You have to keep walking," Kia told Anan. "No stopping or dragging your feet. I'm too old to carry you. My arms are too tired for giving little boys rides."

"No, I won't!" Anan promised. "Story?"

Kia could hear Olamide's laughter in her head. Ten years since the Dark died under the flooding river, ten years since the land around the caves had been poisoned, and still Kia heard Olamide's spirit in her heart.

So many of them had died before they realized that the land had turned deadly. Kia had lost all her hair, developed burns over her shoulders, face, back and chest from the ash. Olamide had lost all her hair, everywhere. While they had both gotten desperately ill after the

Dark died, only Olamide died. Even as her heart begged for death, Kia's body had stubbornly survived.

The Dark seemed to have all died. By the time they realized that the land was killing them the steam had stopped. There was a glow that illuminated the water filling the ravine, just where the cave of the Dark had been. Even now, ten years later, the land sometimes rumbled as if it was trying to shrug off the Dark the way a zebra shuddered its skin to get rid of biting flies.

"Story?" Anan asked.

"Sorry, little one," Kia said. "Just thinking where to start. So much has changed, you know."

"What changed?" Anan asked as he skipped by her side. He was just the age Kia had been the night the Dark came to their cave.

"Long ago, long before you were born, before I was born," Kia said in a loud enough voice that everyone walking around them could hear her, "our tribe lived in caves. They were good caves, dry even in the worst of the rains and safe high above the lions and hyena. We had lived there for a long, long time. My mother said that her mother's grandmother's great-grandmother had been with the ones who first found the caves."

Anan stared, gasping at how very long that was. Kia chuckled, rubbing her hand over Anan's hair. The tight curls soothed her always-aching hand. That was another thing that changed though not one that Kia would share with little Anan. Her body ached all the time now. She thought that death might have come to curl inside her body, eating away at her much the way it had for Olamide.

"Life was good there," Kia continued. "Our elders lived to be fifty, sixty years. Mother said her mother lived to nearly eighty years old. But then one morning people looked up into the sky and saw something strange. They saw a star fall out of the sky."

Kia limped along with Anan by her side as she told her tribe the story of the Dark's rise and eventual fall. The cliff where their caves had been was far behind them. It couldn't be seen. She hadn't seen the caves in... years? A great many years now. They'd left after the tribe was down to only a few dozen again, following Lusala and

Chinara, then their daughter, then Fola's daughter who was as brave as Fola had been fearful.

Once they left the caves no one looked to Kia as their leader. At first it had rubbed Kia the wrong way. She was used to everyone listening to her, doing as she wanted. But after a year or so it was nice. Yes, the children asked for stories but no one expected Kia's word to weigh more than anyone else's.

"So..." Anan said after Kia described the mushroom cloud and its burning ash, "that's why you have scars on your face? That's why you move slow?"

"It is," Kia said. "The ash was dangerous, just as the Dark were dangerous. The light that came from their ravine was dangerous. Everything about them was dangerous. If you see a star fall from the sky and burn on the ground, you have to be wary. You have to drown the Dark that hide inside of the star, kill them before they build and grow strong. Otherwise they will poison the land and water and make it unsafe for everyone."

Anan nodded, his face as serious as Kia's had been that night thirty years ago. He looked up at Kia with his bottom lip sucked under his teeth, nibbling at it. Kia chuckled. How strange to see herself reflected in another generation when Kia had never borne a child. Olamide would have laughed, too, delighted to see Kia's traits carried to the future.

"How did you protect everyone?" Anan asked. "Why you and not anyone else?"

Kia shrugged. "I got mad, Anan. I got mad and I stayed mad until the Dark were dead and we were free of them. Anger is good sometimes. It makes you strong enough to deal with danger but it can be bad too.

"My scars show what happens when anger takes over. The land shows it too. That's why we travel against the wind, away from the place our ancestors lived and died. If we go far enough we might escape the poison the Dark left behind. Then we can find a new home and build again. We can grow grain and pick berries. We can have caves to keep us safe at night. We can life and grow all together. I

won't see it, you know. I'm too old. But you will. So remember the stories I told, little one. Remember that anger saves and it burns. Don't let anger rule your life."

"I won't!" Anan declared. He flung his arms around Kia's leg, grinned up at him as she stumbled and laughed. "No Dark will ever get me, I promise!"

She smiled and shook her leg free, hiding the pain of rising bruises from his hug. No, she wouldn't see the new land they searched for. That was for the younger ones in their tribe. Kia looked towards Fola's daughter, looked at the other members of their tribe that walked around her. Anger had held her through this life but she thought that maybe it was time to let it go.

"About time," Olamide laughed as the world swirled around Kia, little Anan's startled voice sounding as if it came from very far away. Light swelled, filling Kia. *"I've been waiting for you. We've all been waiting."*

Kia saw her mother and father, Chinara and Lusala and Fola and all the people they'd lost over the years. She laughed and ran straight into Olamide's arms, pain falling away as soon as Olamide hugged her.

"Sorry I'm late," Kia said. *"You know I like to make sure that everyone is safe."*

"No need to worry about that now," Olamide replied. *"They're fine. Come on. We have a feast ready and we've just been waiting for you to show up. It should be wonderful!"*

THE END

**AUTHOR NOTE: BOTTLING THE COLD,
HARD HEART**

I took a class on writing mysteries a while back. It was tough but very well worth the time and money spent. This story was one that came from that class, one of my very rare mysteries. Also one of the first short stories I wrote that has no magical or fantastic elements at all.

Eliza paused just inside the back fence, heart pounding so hard that her head spun and her stomach churned. Her familiar old yard looked so very barren now. Sandra had stripped out the purple and gold irises that had clustered along the west side of the yard like sunlit storm clouds in the spring. Every single blueberry, concord grape and blackberry bush was gone, torn up as though they were worthless. There was no hope of wine this year, sweet and rich from the fruits of the garden Eliza and Grandmother had spent so many years tending.

Her old oak tree, trunk bent and twisted from the lightning strike that had killed half the tree when Eliza was ten, was gone. There wasn't even a hummock or stump left. Sandra must have paid to have the stump dug out and the hole filled in before she covered everything in the yard with purchased blocks of dry-edged sod.

Even the old fence, broad boards that Eliza had once decorated with chalk drawings of suns, stars and moons, was gone. Every single bleached grey slab of wood had been whisked away. In its place was an eight foot tall cold, impersonal chain link fence whose only bit of personality was the green plastic coating over the bare metal. The Chelsey's back yard looked startled at being exposed and old Mr.

Quinn's yard all but glowered, shrubs leaning away from the chain link as if offended by its presence.

Grandmother's house was as unrecognizable. When Eliza moved in at eight, after her parent's deaths, Grandmother had insisted on repainting the house in Eliza's favorite colors. The roof had been covered with new burgundy shingles. Eliza, Grandfather and Grandmother had gleefully painted the siding forest green. The trim had been a rich golden tan. All the doors and window frames had been carefully covered with deep purple paint that made the little rambler look like a grand Painted Lady of the Victorian era.

Not now. The house was white. The shingles were black. Every scrap of color was gone, just like Grandmother's life was gone, like Eliza's life was over. Only Sandra's desires and tastes remained.

Except for Miki, her precious little Cavalier King Charles spaniel. Miki, hopefully, was the last bit of life and color left in the house that had been Eliza's home since her father killed her mother and then himself when she was eight years old. Now she just had to rescue Miki and go to jail for crossing Sandra.

Eliza wished for that old battered fence for more than just nostalgia's sake as she edged carefully across the bricks of grass towards the back door. Anyone passing on the road in front of the house could see her there. With all the greenery gone, Eliza stood out like the sole red rose in a display of pure white lilies.

It hardly mattered that Eliza had parked her car a mile away and walked down the much quieter back lane that only garbage trucks followed to get here when there was no cover at all in the yard. Someone had to notice her, had to call the police soon. But no, Eliza couldn't hear a single car. The afternoon was still and quiet as suited a Tuesday afternoon in the middle of the month. Everyone in the neighborhood was gone, hopefully especially Sandra.

Birds sang next door, a strident Bluejay calling its claim to the neighbor's garden worms, a little chickadee trilling as it hopped along the top of the chain link fence. The chickadee cocked its head at Eliza, taking in her wild hair, shaking hands, pale face. Then it flew away as if afraid to even look into Sandra's yard.

And wasn't that the heart of it all?

This was Sandra's now. The yard stripped of flowers, trees, shrubs, the fresh sod laid down over the clover Grandmother and Eliza had favored, even the bare black paving stones by the back door with one pristine white-painted iron chair sitting by a carefully centered white ironwork table; it all belonged to Sandra when it had been willed to Eliza.

The Bluejay shrilled as it took flight in a clap of wings that startled Eliza back into the chain link fence. It clanged, startling her even worse. Eliza bit her lip against a scream that would turn to tears, to panic, to shaking and crouching by the gate instead of going in to rescue Miki.

"Miki," Eliza whispered. "I have to save Miki."

She pressed her hands to her mouth, shut her eyes. No matter how frightened she was of Sandra, Eliza had to rescue Miki. Grandmother had willed the house and everything in it to Eliza. Sandra had gotten the money, the investments she'd always prized over people and pets, but the house had gone to Eliza so that she'd always have a home for herself and Miki.

Not that the will had stood against Sandra's lawyers.

The hot dry air in the courtroom had sucked all the moisture out of Eliza's mouth. Nothing could dry her eyes. A week after Grandmother's death, just hours after the death certificate had been issued, Sandra had showed up at the house with lawyers, four police cars and a summons.

"I'm challenging the will," Sandra had declared, slapping the summons into Eliza's hand. "You're to vacate the house until it's sorted out."

"But..." Eliza had stared at the summons, stared at the police cars while shrinking into herself, legs shaking. "I... Sandra, why do this? If there was a problem all you had to do was say so."

"Didn't you hear me?" Sandra had snapped, her chin coming up as she glared down her nose at Eliza. "You need to vacate the house. Our court date is on Tuesday. Get on with it."

And that, according to the lawyers and police, had been that. Eliza had been allowed to take underwear, two pairs of pants and three shirts. Her purse had nearly been taken away from her as she walked out the door to the tiny garage where her ancient pickup had waited. But the worst part was that Sandra's lawyers hadn't allowed Eliza to take Miki no matter how hard Eliza protested that Miki was

her dog, not Grandmother's. They begrudged her the right to even feed and water Miki, take her out in the back yard for walks, before the court date.

On Tuesday, Eliza had gone to court, heart in her throat, and watched as Sandra's perfect pair of lawyers with their impeccable suits and hair that could withstand a hurricane had torn Grandmother apart even though she wasn't yet in the grave. Nothing Eliza had said helped. While Eliza cried, protested, tried to convince the judge, Sandra sat, one leg crossed demurely over her knee, hands still on the white wool pencil skirt that had to cost more than Eliza's monthly wages at the convenience store in town.

By the time that horrible day was done, Eliza had three books from Grandmother's library, a small monthly stipend from a locked-tight trust fund, and broken dreams smashed around her feet. As the lawyers put their papers away and the judge retreated back into his somber office, Eliza had wiped her cheeks, stood and went to look up into Sandra's eyes. The contrast between them had been so painfully clear. Sandra's perfect white suit made Eliza's hand-knit sweater and worn jeans look unprofessional, childish, worthless.

"I guess that's it," Eliza had said. "Um, I'll be by tomorrow to pick up Miki and my things."

"No, you won't," Sandra had said, one perfect eyebrow climbing up her forehead. "It's all mine now. You heard the judge."

"But Miki is my dog," Eliza had protested, heart beating faster for entirely different reasons than before. She had always assumed she'd get Miki back. "Sandra, I bought her. I raised her. She was only staying at Grandmother's house because of the yard."

"Everything in the house is mine now," Sandra had replied so coldly that Eliza had stepped back, hands clutched to her chest. "If you couldn't take care of the dog then that's not my problem, Eliza. It's mine along with everything else. You heard the judge."

"He said that I could get my personal items!" Eliza had exclaimed. "My photos and clothes and things."

"As if they're worth anything," Sandra had sniffed. She tossed her

sleek brown hair over one shoulder, looking down her nose at Eliza. "I'll box them up if you insist but you're not setting foot in my house."

Sandra had swept out before Eliza could say another word. The lawyers had glowered, pushing Eliza out of the way. Even the court bailiff had scowled at Eliza, firmly escorting her out of the court room and into the blazing August sunlight.

"She's a cold child," Grandmother had murmured when Eliza was fourteen and learning to bottle wine with Grandmother's help. "I suppose she takes after me and your grandfather. Her mother was a sweet child, so kind and loving, but Sandra has always been her exact opposite. Pity that. I'd hoped she'd turn out more like her parents than me."

"I don't know," Eliza had said while carefully pouring the wine down the funnel into the deep-bellied brown wine bottle. It looked like something from a generation gone past, appropriate for the old-fashioned wines that Grandmother had always brewed. "She was nice to me when she visited last time."

"And she walked away with your brand new quilt, child," Grandmother had said, shaking her head in dismay. "After we spent all that time choosing the fabric and stitching it together."

"Well, that just gives us an excuse to make another, right?" Eliza had said. "Besides, it was her twenty-first birthday. A quilt was a small enough gift, along with the wine you gave her. She'll need it after drinking all that wine, you know. You gave her the too-strong stuff that we can't legally sell. I saw. And I know you. You'll call her in the

morning just to make her deal with the phone ringing through her hangover."

Grandmother had blinked, grinned and then thrown her head back to laugh so loud that the funnel rattled in the neck of the wine bottle. She'd always laughed like that, loud and hard, as though there was too much life inside her to be contained. They'd spent the rest of the day bottling wine, cooking pan fried chicken and mashed potato fritters from the previous night's garlic-spiced mashed potatoes.

Their lives had been quiet. Eliza liked it, liked their quiet little house that had no TV, no video game consoles. Even though Sandra had complained about how boring they were, Eliza enjoyed spending time talking with Grandmother. It had just been the two of them since Grandfather died a bare month after Eliza moved in. Just two days after he'd yelled at Eliza for spilling a bottle of wine and shaken her so badly she'd passed out.

His death had hurt, losing yet another family member so soon after her parents' murder-suicide, but Grandmother hadn't seemed so sad. She'd wiped Eliza's tears, buried Grandfather in a plain pine box, and put a simple stone over his head that just said his name and the dates of his life. There hadn't been any visits to his grave, either, despite Eliza asking.

"The dead are dead, child," Grandmother had said on the anniversary of Grandfather's death. They sat on the back steps, sipping cocoa and watching the neighborhood cats chase mice under the blackberry bushes. "It does no good to focus on them. Focus on yourself. You're young, just nine, but death is something that you'll see again and again."

"Didn't you love him?" Eliza had asked, tears dripping down her cheeks. "You never visit."

"He isn't in that box under the earth, child," Grandmother had replied, one warm brown hand smoothing Eliza's unruly hair. "He never was. He's in my heart. In the pantry, to tell the truth. All those bottles of wine? Well, I made them with him. In the future I'll make them with you. And someday, after I'm gone, you can uncork a bottle and taste the summer that we bottled. You can taste my man's craft,

his care. And maybe someday, when you're old and gray like me, your grandchildren will be able to taste your love carried through the years in the wine."

And that had soothed Eliza's tears even though Grandmother's smile had been a bit odd and vindictive when she said the words 'craft' and 'love'. Her smile had always gone cold when she talked about Grandfather. Still, Grandmother had hugged Eliza, scooped up the empty mugs and then they'd laughed while playing tag in the back yard, scattering both the cats and the hiding mice in their wake.

Even at the end, when her body had wasted away to hanging skin and fragile bones, hair so thin that it looked like strands of embroidery floss draped over Grandmother's skull, Grandmother had still laughed with all the strength she had left. Her smile had been much meaner but Eliza truly thought that Grandmother had a right to be as mean as she wanted with death waiting patiently on the sofa like the visitor who simply wouldn't leave.

The last laugh had been the night before her death, just a month and a half ago. Eliza had helped Grandmother from her hospital wheelchair and settled her into the plush white armchair that Sandra had bought for visits. Sandra, of course, preferred not to sit on the couch with its broken springs, dog hair and dozens of blankets piled like nests. Her chair was to be kept clean, pristine, just for her.

Eliza had enjoyed putting Grandmother in it, vindictively taking pleasure in 'soiling' Sandra's prized chair. Maybe Sandra would stand the next time she visited rather than be tainted by Grandmother's illness, as though old age was contagious. Certainly, Sandra had acted as though Grandmother's impending death would reach out and clutch her throat the one time she'd visited the hospital. She'd only stayed three minutes before checking her phone and walking out without saying goodbye.

Grandmother had snickered as she settled into the expensive white chair, caressing the velvet arms and then patting her lap so that Miki would leap up into her arms, licking her face and spreading bright red dog hair all over the white upholstery.

"Grandmother," Eliza had laughed, one hand over her mouth, the

other over her chest because it hurt so much to see little Miki look large against Grandmother's shrunken frame.

"Oh hush, child," Grandmother had said. "I've missed Miki. And you. The hospital is a horrible place to die. That's why I wanted to come home. Now, I know you wanted to straighten things up, especially in the pantry, but you leave those alone. I've not much time left and I want to spend it with you."

She had caught Eliza's hand, keeping her from venturing into the old fashioned kitchen with its huge pantry full of bottled wine from decades gone past and canned food that really was quite past date. It was an old, old argument between them. Grandmother hated throwing things out, even when she knew that it wasn't edible anymore. Or that it had never been edible like with the oldest bottles of wine that had lurked, dusty and dark, in the very back of the pantry since before Eliza was born.

Eliza was more cautious, worried of eating or, worse, drinking something that might harm them. Some of that old wine had been toxic years before, dosed with dangerous chemicals by Grandfather before he had realized just how deadly they could be. Grandmother had warned Eliza every time she went into the pantry for wine to avoid those bottles, ever since the day Eliza arrived at the house.

They were in the very back, dusty but beautiful in their antique glass with real melted wax sealing the corks. Whenever Eliza ventured into the pantry, she'd stared at those poisoned bottles, trying to plot out a way to dispose of them that wouldn't prompt thousands of questions from the authorities or that wouldn't threaten the wildlife in the area. She never succeeded and apparently neither had Grandmother. Those bottles hadn't moved since the day they'd been set there and the dust built up around their bases showed it.

"Now, I know Sandra will give you trouble after I die," Grandmother had said, her bony hand locked tight around Eliza's wrist. "I'm sorry about that, child. I truly am. But trust me, please. It won't last forever. Bad always comes back to those who put bad into the world and Sandra's done more than her fair share of it. You're sweet

and kind and gentle as a lamb in spring. Good things will come your way as long as you stay strong."

"I'm sure she won't do anything," Eliza had whispered, biting her lip and hesitantly patting Grandmother's wrist. "We're cousins. Neither of us has any family left. Her parents are dead, too. She knows what it's like to be an orphan."

"Hmph!" Grandmother had grunted. "As if that matters to that girl. She barely even got off that phone of hers to identify her parents' bodies. I was there. I saw it. Wouldn't be surprised if that 'break failure' had more to do with wire cutters than with bad roads. Never mind, though. Death's waiting for me, for Sandra, too. Everyone, really, but some of us meet Death sooner than others. But enough of that. Tell me what's happened with Miki and you. How are the blueberries ripening? Will it be a good crop this year? I thought you might make spiced blueberry wine for Christmas."

A car slowly purred by in front of the house. Eliza bit her lip until the scream of terror subsided unvoiced. Something smelled bad but she couldn't tell where the scent came from. It smelled of death, though not yet rot. One of the neighborhood cats must have killed a rat and left it under the neighbor's bushes again.

Even with all the changes to the house, Eliza could see the old home that had sheltered her most of her life. Faint edges of purple traced along the glass in the yard-tall windows on either side of the back door. Sandra's contractor hadn't scraped away the old paint smudges that Grandmother, Grandfather and Eliza had left. It felt like a ghost nudging at Eliza's shoulder, reminding her of everything she'd lost.

"Oh Grandmother," Eliza whispered, her eyes blurring with tears as she stood with her hand on the back doorknob. "I'm so sorry I failed you."

Inside, Miki barked, sharp, desperate. She sounded as though she was in the kitchen, her voice too close and too clear for the living room or tiny bedrooms. Eliza peered through the skinny window and winced. Every single one of the old colorful appliances, olive gas stove from the fifties, sunshine yellow fridge from the seventies and

old chest freezer that had been covered with so many of Eliza's drawings that the color couldn't be seen anymore, had been replaced by brand new stainless steel appliances.

The chopping block counter was gone, too, replaced with marble. Sandra had changed the red earthenware tile floor to black and white stone. Even the walls were white. There wasn't a single spot of color in the whole kitchen, as if Sandra had poured bleach over everything in an effort to disinfect the house of love, life and companionship.

Poor Miki was locked in a dog crate set in the far corner of the kitchen where the garbage bins were kept. Her fur, what little of it Eliza could see through the steel grate, was matted and ragged.

"She better not have kept you in there," Eliza huffed as she tried the spare key she'd managed to keep away from the police and lawyers. It didn't even fit in the lock. "Oh, of course you'd change the locks, you horrible woman! I hate this. I hate you. But I won't let you keep Miki from me, not anymore!"

Eliza tore off her sweater, the one Grandmother had knit years ago before her arthritis worsened. She wrapped the sleeve around her fist and stood there for a moment, heart pounding. She needed to get in. If she was lucky then Sandra wouldn't have wired the house with a security system. But when had Eliza been lucky when it came to Sandra? She'd counted on the key working and obviously that had been a major mistake. The police would come now. She knew it.

Rather than letting fear stop her, Eliza drew back her arm and punched the window with all her strength. The glass broke in a crash that startled Eliza into a shout that set Miki into a frenzy of barking. Miki whined, yipped, patted her paws against the crate's door as if begging Eliza to get her out of the crate, out of the house.

The smell of death was stronger now, especially as Eliza carefully reached through the broken window to unlatch the door. So strong that Eliza stood in the middle of the foreign white kitchen that had replaced her old home like a doppelganger's false smile.

"It smells like Grandmother," Eliza whispered. "Like Grandfather."

She waved a 'hush' command at Miki and blessed the training she'd given Miki for the sudden silence. Eliza crept to the kitchen

door, wider than it used to be with raw fresh white paint on the jamb. In the other room, in her white lounge chair surrounded by sleek black and white furniture, sat Sandra.

Her dark hair wasn't sleek now. It lay in a spider web across the back of the chair, flung about by Sandra's death throes. Sandra's face was twisted, her sleek white yoga pants stained with yellow piss and red vomited wine.

One old brown bottle of tainted wine lay smashed on the floor next to Sandra's chair.

Eliza hurried to Miki's crate, pulling Miki out of it and into her arms. The poor baby smelled as though Sandra had kept her in the crate and not bathed her once in the last month. It didn't matter. Eliza hurried out into the denuded back yard, heart beating as fast as the sounds of the sirens wailing ever closer.

"Bad follows bad," Grandmother whispered in the back of Eliza's mind, patting Eliza's hand as she lay back in bed for the very last time. "Your Grandfather wasn't a good man, child. I knew he would be no good for you, just as he wasn't good for our children, no matter how hard I tried to protect them. Honestly, neither was I with my anger and my rules. And Sandra, well, I think she takes after your Grandfather in too many ways. Doesn't matter now, though. What will be, will be. If I'm right, well, I'll protect you one last time even after my old body fails."

"You did, Grandmother," Eliza whispered as she sat on the hard-edged blocks of sod, Miki in her arms. A police car screeched to a stop in front of the house. The police man shouted as he jumped out of the car, saying something about checking the rear. "You did."

She stared at the blank yard, the sod that looked so very foreign. After the investigation was done, after the lawyers were gone, Eliza would have to tear the sod up. New clover seed should grow quickly. And now, with just her and Miki, maybe Eliza could plant the garden of her dreams with vegetables and a weeping willow in the spot where the oak had stood. She'd paint the house inside and out in all the colors of the rainbow.

After all, Eliza thought as the police came around the corner of

Iridescent

the house, guns pointed in her direction, Grandmother had ensured that Sandra repaired the house and updated all the appliances for her, now hadn't she? All it had taken was some old, old wine and a cold, hard heart.

THE END

**AUTHOR NOTE: CUPBOARD FULL
OF SEEDS**

*M*ouse and Snake is a SF series where global warming won. Sea levels have risen about 250 feet, drowning most major cities and ending the world as we know it. But even after the end of the world, life goes on. Especially for those determined to never, ever be weak and helpless again.

CUPBOARD FULL OF SEEDS

Skye stood in front of the cupboard, legs shaking with exhaustion. The kitchen was silent, still, so dark that shadows enveloped her other than the little puddle of light around Skye's make-shift oil lamp. The counter under the cupboard was bare wood, scarred by decades of use. Skye trailed her fingers across the cut marks crisscrossing its surface. The tips came away dusty except no, that wasn't dust. It was flour from the vegetable pie that Claudine had made last night. She could see an orange mark closer to the sink where Felicia had chopped carrots. One tiny curl of carrot peel peeked out from under the cabinets by her toes, dry already.

Their little common kitchen was never clean, not really, but that was the point, wasn't it? A place for them to share instead of private spaces that isolated them all. They had to do better, do more, than what they'd done before. The world was changing, had changed, would continue to change and there was nothing at all that Skye could do about that. Except help make their little corner of the world better.

Weeks. It had taken weeks to get everything ready. Skye looked over her shoulder at the one window. There wasn't much to see. It

was dark, nighttime, outside. She should go to bed. Sleep. Rest. Get up early tomorrow and start the planting process.

But Skye stood in the kitchen instead, staring at the cupboard full of seeds that would, hopefully, give them the chance to live free forever. Felicia had scoffed at the sheer idea at dinner, poking at her vegetable pie with her fork as if she thought it was nasty.

"You know we're going to have to keep shopping," Felicia had snapped without meeting Skye's eyes. "There's no way that we can grow enough to feed us all."

"I think we can," Skye had protested. "It's not easy but if we keep building beds, keep saving the seeds, we'll build up enough to grow all the food we need and more. Really, it just takes two or three squash to feed an army, Felicia."

"I do not want to spend the entire winter eating nothing but squash," Claudine had huffed. "Bad enough that we're stuck with not much more than carrots to eat right now. Unending squash will drive me straight back to the city."

As if it was that easy to go back. Their little island was cut off from the mainland now. The ocean had risen so much that you needed a boat to get across and it didn't look like the winter would be cold enough that the ocean would freeze. It hadn't frozen in years, since Skye was a little girl.

But if that was what Claudine needed to tell herself to be able to go on, then so be it. Skye just wished that they would listen to her when she said that it would work. Neither of them knew much about growing food. That was Skye's thing. Her mother's gift, her joy, her hobby. A hobby that might now feed all of them, not just Claudine and Felicia and Skye but the others on the island, too.

Skye shook her head and pulled the cabinet doors open. Ranks of jars stood there, each filled with seeds. Beans. Corn, squash, pumpkin, some oats that Skye really didn't think would grow well in their rainy, stormy climate. But the rice would grow. She knew that would work, if Skye's proposed paddy was created. Tomato seeds, tiny little flecks of white in a canning jar the size of her fist. Peppers, dry and tumbled into their bigger jar.

Those she would have to raise in the new greenhouse, probably. Maybe. It depended on how much the temperature rose this summer. But none of those were what Skye needed.

"Onion and garlic," Skye whispered as she carefully rummaged through the jars until she found the tiny black onion seeds she'd traded for. "That's what needs to go in first."

The garlic was simpler, of course. All she needed was a few heads of garlic, broken into individual cloves. The cloves would sprout, grow, become whole new plants if given a chance. But they needed cold weather to grow properly so getting them out right away was important.

Skye nodded at the onion seeds. Those would need flats, time in the greenhouse. She set the jar down, rummaged through the storage drawers until she came up with two big old heads of garlic that were showing green tips poking out of the withered heads. That was perfect. Half her job was already done.

"What are you doing?" Claudine asked from the door. "You can't be getting food in the middle of the night, Skye. We all promised not to sneak meals."

"Not food," Skye said without turning to look, hurt that Claudine would immediately assume that when Skye was the one who'd suggested the rule. "Seeds. I finished the greenhouse. We need to start the onion and garlic. They need the cold weather, what little cold we'll get."

Claudine made a little noise, something like a gasp or a huff. It was quiet enough that Skye couldn't tell what Claudine actually thought. Not that she was ever very good at interpreting either Claudine or Felicia's moods. Things that she thought would make them happy made them frown. Things that made Skye tremble with fear made them laugh. They never made sense to Skye.

Which was fine. Because the seeds made sense. The plants. Growing things for them to eat. That was all perfectly logical and would work once Skye got the plants started. Even if they lost some to pests it wouldn't matter because Skye would make sure that they had enough to survive on.

She stiffened as Claudine slowly walked over and put one hand on Skye's shoulder. The gentle tug was almost enough to knock Skye's knees out from under her. Skye clutched the counter, panted, grimaced as Claudine huffed for real.

"Have you slept?" Claudine asked, one hand curling under Skye's elbow, the other resting against her back. "You missed lunch. And dinner. Did you work on the greenhouse all day?"

"Yes," Skye said. She glared over her shoulder, up in to Claudine's dark eyes that looked like pools of midnight in the dark kitchen. "I had to. We needed it done. The cold weather plants have to be seeded. We needed the greenhouse and neither of you would help. It has to be done. It has to be done now, Claudine. There's no time to wait if we're going to have the plants ready when we need them."

Claudine's eyes widened as Skye lectured her. Her mouth opened and then shut slowly without anything coming out. She looked over her shoulder towards the window, then back at Skye with eyebrows drawn together and mouth pinched so tight that the oil lamp turned the corners of her mouth into cavernous wrinkles.

"You need sleep," Claudine said.

"We need to get the onion seeds ready," Skye insisted. "It won't take that long."

"It's the middle of the night, Skye," Claudine said. Her dark skin seemed paler somehow, as if she was frightened but that didn't make sense. There was nothing to be afraid of right now. "You won't be able to see what you're doing."

"I have my lamp," Skye protested because she could see where this was going even if she didn't understand why Claudine was so blind to what needed to be done. "I can see enough. It needs to be done. We need the onions. The garlic, too. I should go through the potatoes for ones that have sprouted. They should be planted soon too but I don't have their beds ready yet. I can get it tomorrow, though. It won't take too long, just a couple of hours. I'll need to double-dig the beds so that it's soft enough for them to grow, so that we can pile the dirt up as the sprouts break the surface. But that's okay. I can do that. I will do it. We need the food. If we're

careful, determined, we can have enough food for the whole winter."

Claudine swallowed. It was loud, too loud, as if her throat was dry as bone. Skye frowned at Claudine, reaching out to rest tentative fingers against Claudine's chest just below her collarbone. To her surprise Claudine caught her hand and squeezed it hard, holding her hand right there.

"You don't have to do the work by yourself," Claudine said. "You're only fourteen, Skye. We're grown women. We should do most of the work."

"But you wouldn't do it!" Skye protested. She tried to jerk her hand free but the motion of it knocked her knees out from under her, tumbling her towards the ground except that Claudine caught her, eased her down, held her close as Skye clutched the warm burgundy shawl around Claudine's shoulders. "You said that it could wait. It can't wait. It can't, Claudine. You don't understand. We need to have the food so that we don't have to go back there!"

"Fuck," Claudine whispered.

She pulled Skye close, rocking her and petting Skye's hair. It was good. Nice. But a distraction. Skye needed to get the onion seeds into the flats. She needed to tear the garlic heads apart so that she could plant the cloves. And she really should be working on the potato beds, too. There was so much that needed to be done if they were going to be free.

"You're not going back," Claudine said so firmly that it stilled the litany in Skye's mind. "Skye, you're not ever going back there. We promised. Even if Felicia and I go shopping, you're not going back. You'll stay here and we'll come back. You're safe, Skye. You're safe here. I swear, you're safe. You can sleep. You can rest. No one will beat you or rape you because you didn't do enough."

Skye stiffened. It had to be lies. Claudine and Felicia had said that life was different here when they'd saved her, when they'd chased away the men who'd tried to buy Skye for yet another gang bang even though she was covered in bruises, bites and cuts from the last one. The men had laughed, had promised that they'd see Skye again, that

they'd show her how much they missed her. If they went back to the mainland, then the men would know where Skye was. They would follow. Find her. Make it all happen again and again and again.

"We need food," Skye whispered.

"We'll have it," Claudine promised as she rocked and petted and tried to soothe Skye even though this wasn't something that needed soothing.

"You said that we wouldn't," Skye said, shaking. "You didn't want squash."

"Not all squash," Claudine said, cursing under her breath like the one man that Skye had kicked in the balls when he'd pulled a knife on her. "That's what I said. I don't want all squash."

"No, squash and potatoes and tomatoes and corn and beans, lots of beans," Skye said. "We'll have so much. I promise. I know how to make them all grow, I swear I do. We just need to do the work to get them into the soil and we'll have plenty to eat. I just need to get back to planting the onion seeds."

Claudine held onto Skye as she tried to get back up. Her legs weren't working, wouldn't cooperate with her mind's desire to stand, to get to work again. And her fingers seemed determined to cling to Claudine's shawl instead of helping push her up off the floor with its rough wooden floor spotted by bits of carrot that could have been eaten if only it hadn't gone dry and nasty on the floor.

"What's going on?" Felicia asked from the door. "Shit, are you all right, Skye? Did you slip or something?"

"She finished the greenhouse," Claudine said, her voice shaking as Felicia came over wrapped up in a huge old coat made of cheap canvas that had gone from cream to splotched brown and yellow over time. "Skye was getting the onion and garlic ready for planting."

"It's the middle of the night," Felicia gasped. "Skye, you can't work all the time."

A sob caught Skye by surprise, jerking itself out of her throat, her chest, flexing her fingers and kicking her legs because they didn't understand. Why didn't they understand? They had to have food if they were going to be free and if there wasn't any food then they'd be

caught and raped and killed and Skye couldn't go back to that. She couldn't.

No matter what she had to make sure that they had the food they needed to survive. That was why she was there. That was why Claudine and Felicia had taken her away, had brought her to this island that had only women and no men at all, not a single one even if a few of the women had penises but they didn't use them, not like the men back on the mainland. It was safe here but only if they had the food they needed and if Skye wasn't growing food for them then what good was she? Why would they keep Skye around if she didn't keep busy, didn't produce the food that she was supposed to?

"I have to plant the seeds," Skye sobbed. "I have to. You said. You said that I have to work to be allowed to stay. You said. And its time, time to plant the onions so I have to get it done."

"Oh shit," Felicia moaned.

She knelt and hugged both Skye and Claudine who had tears on her cheeks, whose arms shook with some emotion that Skye couldn't figure out. Felicia pressed kisses against Skye's forehead, her hair, her cheek. Not like the men or even like Mother who doled her kisses out when Skye did something that brought them food or money. No, Felicia's kisses seemed sad and angry and determined.

Felicia sat, turning Skye so that she had to meet Felicia's eyes. Where Claudine's eyes were midnight dark, Felicia's were moon-bright, silver instead of pale blue like they were in daylight. Her face was utterly serious, her hands cool and firm on either side of Skye's face. She held Skye still until the sobs stopped, until the tears slowed to a trickle, until Skye's fingers slowly released Claudine's shawl only to curl around Felicia's wrists.

"Do you hear me?" Felicia asked. "Skye? Do you hear me?"

"Yes," Skye whispered. "I hear you. I don't understand, though."

Felicia smiled, a little grim thing that wasn't happy at all. "I know you don't understand, sweetie. That's obvious. I want you to repeat this after me, okay? This is what you have to say anytime you think you have to work all the time."

"Repeat?" Skye asked, even more confused. "Repeat what?"

"I am worth more than my work," Felicia said with slow, distinct words, her lips moving so precisely that Skye could see the words as well as hear them. "Repeat that for me. Skye, I need you to repeat it for me."

"It's not true!" Skye wailed. "It's not! I'm not, not worth, not worth anything if I'm not working. It's not true. It's not. I have to work or you'll send me back and I don't want to go back!"

Felicia's hands were hard against Skye's cheeks. Her face blurred as tears filled Skye's eyes. No matter how hard Skye jerked against Felicia's arms it didn't do any good. She couldn't get free from Felicia's hands, from Claudine's arms around her ribs.

"You are worth so much more than your work, Skye," Felicia said. "You are never going back there. I will shoot you in the head myself rather than let you go back."

Skye stilled, staring at Felicia in awe. "You'd do that for me? Really? Even Mother wouldn't do that for me. She just said I had to work harder."

Felicia's eyes suddenly filled with tears that tumbled down her cheeks when she blinked. She swallowed, not as loudly as Claudine had but still loud, hard, painful. Then she nodded, thumbs rubbing over Felicia's cheekbones. They were rough, with callouses, but so gentle. It was odd how gentle they were, even when they were upset. Angry. Frustrated. Frightened. Skye wasn't sure. She hadn't spent enough time around Claudine and Felicia to be sure what their expressions meant, what their emotions would result in when action finally came.

But the tears looked like truth. The hands against her cheeks, the press of Claudine's body against her back, all of it felt like truth. Skye sniffled and then started crying, too.

"You promise?" Skye begged, unashamed of it. "You promise you'll kill me before you let me be taken?"

"I promise," Felicia responded and if her voice came out too thick then it was okay because her face was angry and proud and sad and determined enough that Skye could believe it.

Skye sagged in Claudine's arms, cried as she hadn't allowed

herself to cry since the first time Mother said that she could earn her place with her body instead of with her labor. No matter what happened she wouldn't have to go back. She was safe. Finally, finally safe. Felicia would take care of her, make sure that no one got to touch Skye again.

"Thank you," Skye cried. "Thank you so much!"

She tugged until Felicia wrapped her arms around Skye and Claudine again. The warmth of their bodies was good, not scary like it was when most people touched her. They would keep Skye safe and she would grow them food and in a year or maybe two there would be enough food for everyone to eat and no one would ever, ever, ever have to go back to the mainland.

Skye would make it happen. She would. Because Felicia and Claudine had saved her so she had to save them, too. Her oil lamp flickered, dimmed as the wick burned down. It didn't matter, not now, not tonight. Skye could sleep, rest, and then tomorrow she would work hard again to save her new mothers so that they'd all be safe forever, together.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: CHILD OF SPRING

*A*nother *Mouse and Snake* story, this time the one that absolutely always makes me cry like a baby. Ben is my grandfather in all the ways that count. That's all I can say without tearing up.

1. SUMMER

*B*en slowly climbed the ladder-like stairs up to his precious garden. He'd cut the winding beds out of the steep rocky hillside twenty years ago with an old pickaxe and shovel, painstakingly reinforcing them with bamboo and lathe that he replaced as needed to make sure they didn't collapse.

South exposure, sheltered by a mass of overgrown grapevine on the west and exuberant blackberry brambles to the east, his vegetables grew well. The rock wall behind each bed reflected the sun's warmth, granting him extra growing time. Not many could say that. It'd fed his family well since that first year.

'Course he had to haul the dirt up every single spring to replace what had washed away. Wasn't any good dirt this high up in the mountains, just sand and gravel and shale that wasn't good for much besides building walls. He hitched his backpack full of still-damp river silt higher on his back, groaning as his back protested.

The work was worth it for the food he grew. Taters grew well in cast-off pine needles but his precious tomatoes, carrots and corn wanted dirt. Anything that'd feed his family was worth the effort, no matter what his fool son-in-law said. That boy wasn't going to last much longer. His daughter was too practical for that lazy bum.

Ben wheezed as he counted thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two. Thirty-three steps. He stood for a long while, waiting for his old heart to stop pounding and the chilly morning air to fill his lungs right. His eyes traced the tiny shoots coming from his onions and garlic beds, the mound of pine needles over the growing potatoes.

A tiny footprint stood in the middle of his asparagus bed.

He froze, blinking at that footprint for the longest time before he realized that it was real. Ben eased the backpack off, careful not to make the plastic lining rustle. Other tiny footprints led towards the blackberry bramble. Not one sat on top of a sprouting plant. He followed their trail, walking along the edge of the retaining wall, only to freeze as he saw a toddler curled up in the warmest spot in his garden, her fluff of kinky black hair matted with blood.

The girl's skin was darker than the earth she'd curled up on, black like the night sky. As he eased closer he saw that her skin was speckled with lights like stars, too. She looked like someone had wrapped the night sky over her body before deciding that pulling the stars down was an abomination.

Bruises marked her little arms and legs, muddying the stars of her skin like clouds across the sky. Her dress, made of an old piece of tarp roughly tied into shape, was torn, ragged on the edges. Ben frowned. Altered or not, the child didn't deserve to be beaten until she ran away to the mountains.

"Hey there," Ben said low and gentle, same as he crooned to the chickens and geese his daughter raised. "Hey there, baby."

The girl started and gasped, head coming up as the darkness fled from her skin as if it was spilled ink draining off the side of the table. Her stars remained, more subdued against her mahogany, oak, ash, pale skin as white as the snow that had covered his garden not too long ago. At the same time her eyes went from black to brown, hazel, green into the palest of pale blues, like the faint color of the water burbling down the waterfall on the other side of the blackberry bramble.

"Well, then," Ben said, crouching down so he wouldn't loom over the girl. "Hello. I'm Ben."

She shook her head 'no' only to gasp quietly and clutch her head. Tears trembled at the corners of her eyes. He could just barely hear her breathy whimpers. As pale as she was now the blood on her matted hair showed clearly. So did the bruises, stark lavender against her pale, sparkly skin.

"Ah, baby," Ben sighed. "I'm an old man. Not gonna hurt you. Just worried about you."

His gentle tone prompted a snuffle and a much more cautious headshake 'no'. Ben chuckled. He stood up, knees and back creaking and popping so loud that the little girl stared at him with her mouth pursed in a little 'o'. When he stretched, rocking side to side, and set off another wave of pops that echoed in this little corner of the garden, she giggled near silently.

"Am too worried," Ben told her. "Gonna sit on the stairs for a bit, baby. Thanks for not walking on the shoots. They're food for my family, come fall."

Ben made his way back to the steep stairs, sitting on the top step with a cautious sigh. It was a bit loose this year. The wide shale slab had flaked away long the edges over the years since he'd placed it, rounding until it didn't wedge securely into place. Probably would be a good idea to go find a new one, haul it back and chip the edges away until it fit perfectly. He ran his fingers along the crumbly edge of the stone. Maybe later, during the summer heat. Too much to do right now.

The valley below hid behind low clouds, tops of the trees poking out in places. The other mountain peaks loomed like islands in a pale ocean that stretched to infinity. This high up the smell of pine mixed with rain not quite falling was gone, replaced by wind and earth and after a few moments the faint smell of the blood marking the girl's head.

She crept over to crouch just outside of arm's reach, skin how tanned as his, the sparkling stars dimmed to something that could almost be mistaken for droplets of water on her arms. He frowned at the way she rubbed at her hands, silently scrubbing as if to make the stars go away.

"Got an apple," Ben said as he pulled it from his pocket. "Not fresh but it's food. Want some?"

Her eyes went wide, hands stilling for a moment. She shook her head 'no', then nodded ever so slightly, then shook 'no' again while sucking on her bottom lip. Ben chuckled and carved a slice off the apple, slowly munching on the grainy sweetness. His bit had a little bruise but it was still good, not rotten. He cut a second one, set it down on the step as far as he could reach without leaning closer to her. It was close enough to her that she could grab it without getting in touching range.

Took Ben slowly eating another slice for the little girl to snatch up the apple slice. She ate it quick and messy, shoving it in her mouth and chewing loudly. Every bite made her wince a little as if her teeth hurt. As bruised as her head looked Ben could easily believe that she had loose teeth. He cut more slices, feeding her three quarters of the apple. She gnawed on the core, too, reducing it to little more than a scrap of white wrapped around the seeds with the stem bit dangling from it.

"Toss it in the heap," Ben said when she paused. "It'll make for nice healthy plants next year."

She blinked and then carefully tucked the apple core into the compost heap, patting it into place with a firm little nod that made her sway and moan. Her skin shifted from brown like Ben's to black as night and then back to a dusky olive that nearly matched the color of the compost, thick with new weeds and pine needles Ben had gathered a week ago.

"Good girl," Ben said. "Got some work to do. You can stay and watch if you like."

That earned him several rapid blinks and the pursed lips again, as if he'd said something completely incomprehensible. Ben groaned as he lifted the backpack full of silt, his knees popping like gunshots as he straightened up. The girl giggled and watched him, quiet and still, as he carefully transferred the precious silt into its new home in the bed where he'd plant squash, beans and corn later in the season.

Good rich soil should help the plants grow. He always had trouble

with the corn, never got more than a handful of ears. The terraced beds weren't wide enough for the corn to pollinate properly. Even with Ben carefully transferring pollen from stem to stem corn just didn't thrive the way it should here. But he got enough and it served as living poles for the beans while the squash grew fast and fruitful underneath them. It worked well enough.

"That's that," Ben sighed once the last of the soil had been transferred and dug in. "Give it a couple of weeks and I'll bring my starts up, plant 'em and see what I get this year."

The little girl had curled up close to the compost heat, leaning into the heat it threw off. Her skin was almost normal colored now, plain old brown with those tiny not-droplets dappling her bruised arms. Ben nodded to her as he closed up the backpack, carefully settling it on his back.

"Gonna go home now," Ben said. "Welcome to follow along. My daughter's not a bad cook. That husband of hers isn't the best, lazy bum that he is, but you're welcome. It's my house, not his. Haven't had any kids around since my daughter grew up. It's kind of lonely."

She shivered, sucking on her bottom lip while scrubbing at her arms again. Ben nod-ded. No surprise the poor thing was worried about her alterations bringing trouble. People could be stupid. Not like the child had chosen it, not at her age.

"My daughter has gills," Ben said. He chuckled at her wide eyes going white-blue again. "Wife had webbing between her fingers. She was a diver, used to swim right down under the ocean to catch us fish. Shark caught her about eight years ago. That's life. Even the boy's modded, jacked into the electronics the rich folk use."

The girl pointed at Ben, one little finger circling as if to hesitantly, shyly, ask what Ben's mods were.

"Don't have any," Ben sighed. "Never could do it. Didn't have the money. Didn't have the time. Too busy growing food and making things for my family. I'm just me. Old man with worn out joints and a garden to tend."

He got a dozen rapid-fire blinks back as she sucked on her bottom lip. Ben chuckled, sighed at the long walk home and then shrugged.

She stared up at him, skin sliding back to the black-night-with-stars that she'd had when he first saw her.

"Welcome to follow if you want," Ben said. "Or not. Your choice, baby."

Ben set off down the stairs, cautiously easing down them sideways, good left foot going first each time. He was a decade past taking them one after the other. He was on step nineteen when the little girl scrambled down the top step to follow him.

2. SUMMER

Ben paused on step ten, panting. His throat burned, every breath tasting of the dry summer heat and the cool mint balm little Spring had put on his lips before they left the house. His chest felt like he had heavy stones sitting on it. Still not better, even though he'd finally stopped coughing. Honestly, he truly shouldn't have come to the garden today but there was weeding and harvesting to be done. Couldn't let Spring handle it by herself, no matter how good she was with the plants.

Spring ran ahead of Ben, giggling as she dashed up the old stone steps. Her empty backpack tossed side to side, dancing with her dreads as they shimmered in rainbow colors that matched the rainbows dancing over her skin. She'd grown so much, blossomed much like the plants in his garden. Talking, laughing, dancing in the rain with Ben's daughter; Spring lived her life with so much joy that it brought smiles to everyone's faces, much less Ben's.

Sweat crept down Ben's neck, forehead, beaded up on his lip. He could smell blackberries over his sweat-stink, ripening along with the grapes that spilled over the edge of his garden beds. Have to pick a bunch of them today, bring them back so his daughter could make

jam or a pie out of them. It wouldn't do to let them go to rot even if Ben's old lungs just didn't want to make the climb today.

"Grandpa Ben!" Spring shouted, her voice echoing down the valley towards the pines that hid their little home from sight. "The taters grew overnight! They're taller than me!"

"Good," Ben called back as he trudged up step eleven, twelve, thirteen. "Supposed to."

"Can I pick berries?" Spring asked.

She appeared at the top of the steps, a handful of blackberries already in her hands. Ben laughed, coughed wet and painful, waved and nodded. Spring squealed happily, her rainbow skin going the same purple as the berries staining her hands.

The last five years had been good to her. Good to all of them, really. No-account son-in-law was still in the house but gaining a daughter, an Altered daughter, had shaken him out of his laziness. He worked hard now, hunting the net for jobs that brought in enough money and goods that their little house was downright comfortable.

That was good. Very good. Ben still worried. Too many people asked about Spring's skin, asked where she'd gotten the mods and how much they cost. Out here, on the edges of New Seattle, few people really cared about the laws regarding modification. Pretty much everyone was modded other than Ben. Modded was normal this day and age.

On the other hand, people cared a hell of a lot about special-grown getting stolen. Kids that'd been grown with special abilities, special looks, were expensive, important. Not necessarily treated well but everyone knew how much they were worth. And how many ran away from the 'parents' that'd had the kids created without any understanding of how to raise them.

Rewards for runaways were high. Not that Spring had run away. Ben was pretty sure she'd been dumped. Either way, Spring was seven, soon to be eight. Perfect time to start the 'training' to be one of the rich people's courtesans back in New Seattle, up in those towers where everything in life could be had for the correct price. Even a

little girl's innocence. Girl like her, with her magical skin, would be worth a lot to some men.

"No," Ben panted as he climbed the last three steps and then sat to pant until he got his breath back. "Not my Spring. Not her."

"What, Grandpa Ben?" Spring asked.

"Just old, baby," Ben replied. "Old lungs don't like these steps anymore."

Spring huffed just like her Mama, hands on her hips and shaking her head slowly side to side. Ben grinned at her. She stomped one little foot that went black as night before coming over to rest her black-berry-stained hand against Ben's wrinkled forehead. He couldn't help but chuckle, catch her wrist and press a kiss on her star-filled skin.

"Grandpa Ben," Spring sighed. "You should have stayed in bed. You're all hot and panting."

"Couldn't," Ben said. "Need to get the weeding done, harvest some blackberries. The tomatoes should be 'bout ready."

"Grandpa Ben!"

He laughed quietly, painfully, as Spring stomped her foot again. This time her whole body went black as night, her resting color. Ben grinned and flapped a hand when Spring pouted at him. She was right, of course. The only place Ben should have gone was bed but no way was he letting his baby girl come all the way up here by herself.

"You stay right there," Spring said in a bossy tone copied direct from her Mama. "I'll pull weeds. You tell me if I do it wrong. And then, maybe, you can help me harvest black-berries and tomatoes."

"All right, baby," Ben said. "Bit of a rest is good after all that fresh air."

Spring huffed at him before flouncing off, minus the flouncy skirt, to pull the baby weeds growing up around the artichokes. The potatoes were next, followed the thicket of onions and garlic. Those would need to be pulled not too far off, once their tops died down and went brown.

She didn't make any mistakes, not that Ben expected she would. Spring had been a dab hand at gardening ever since that very first

day. Before she could even talk, would talk, she'd been a huge aid in the garden. Ben thought sometimes that she had a special connection with the earth even though her skin was covered with stars.

As Spring started humming, Ben turned to look back down at the valley. Heat haze made New Seattle a wavering mirage out past the edge of the forest but he could still see the sky scrapers and arching loops of the far-off Web. The ocean lapped against New Seattle's foundations, threatening to rise even further to flood it under cold gray water the way it had flooded the original city. Way off, across the expanded Pacific Ocean, Ben could see the peaks of the Olympic mountain range, turned into islands when the world warmed and the seas rose.

"It's pretty," Spring murmured as she carried a huge pile of weeds for the compost pile.

"That it is, baby," Ben said.

"What's New Seattle like?" Spring asked.

"Don't rightly know," Ben replied. He smiled as Spring cuddled along his side, her forehead pressed against his neck. "I've only been a few times. Tall buildings made of steel and glass. Too many people in too much a hurry. They didn't like having a poor old man like me visiting. Never saw the point of going back. We get most what we need close to home, after all."

Spring nodded. Her skin darkened by degrees until she was black as night, black as a pit inside a cave that had collapsed. Only the sparkles of her skin let his eyes pick out the gentle curve of her cheek, the pucker of her mouth, the tip of her nose.

"I... dream about it sometimes, I think," Spring whispered. Her hands clenched in Ben's shirt. "There are too many lights and people poking me. Big people, tall and mean and pale, pale, pale."

"What do they do, baby?" Ben asked.

His heart beat faster. She never talked about what she remembered from before. He'd assumed that she didn't remember anything. Two years old, no more than two and a half, why would she remember any-thing?

"I don't know," Spring grumbled, so quiet he could barely hear

her. She frowned, tugging on his shirt. "Needles. I think there were needles. And... angry. There was an angry woman. I think. Maybe? I don't know. The only word I understand in the dreams is 'money'. They say it a lot."

Ben shivered, pulling Spring into his lap to hold her close and rock her little body. She had to have been specially made, special-ly grown for someone rich. But maybe the cost was too high? Or the maintenance, not that Spring had been any trouble at all.

She sighed as she wrapped her arms around his neck. The fluff of her hair, wild as any black person's, rubbed against his cheek and stuck on the stubble he hadn't bothered to shave. When Spring shifted her hair stuck, prompting Spring to squawk and Ben to laugh. He laughed harder as Spring clam-bered out of his lap to smack both hands onto his cheeks.

"You didn't shave, Grandpa Ben!" Spring complained as she squished his cheeks.

He put his hands over hers, still chuck-ling. "No, that I didn't. Too much to do up here in the garden. Let's go check the tomatoes, baby. They were almost ready when I got sick."

"Uh-uh!" Spring said, letting his face go. She thumped her chest, standing up proud. "I'm big enough. I'll go check myself and tell you what I find."

"Well, if you're that big then okay," Ben said.

She glowered at his continuing chuckles but scampered off through the corn, skirting the sprawling mass of acorn squash leaves. Ben rubbed his chest. He really should have stayed in bed today. He should have.

But that damned supervisor from the 'school' down the valley had been round to ask about Spring's supposedly due school fees yesterday, not that any of them had signed her up. The man had stared at Spring and licked his lips like he'd just seen a feast that was just for him. Spring had gone white as paper, white as snow, hiding behind Ben's legs while her Mama and Papa threw the old bastard out.

A month ago little Monty had gone missing while tending his family's garden low-er down on the mountainside. Sheriff had said it

was wild dogs. There hadn't been any blood. No animal prints. Just boot heels dug deep in the clay-hard earth, too smooth and perfect for anyone close to home.

Ben frowned down at the valley, the trees that hid any watchers. He wasn't much, just one old man, but he'd still do his best to keep Spring safe. The girl was only seven. No way would he let her get stolen away to be trained into a whore for the rich and powerful.

"Grandpa Ben?" Spring called.

"Yes, baby?"

She peeked around the corn and squash, smiling when she saw that he was looking her way. "Next year can I grow something just for me?"

"Of course," Ben said even as his worries and fears said that there might not be a next year for his little child of the spring. "Whatever you want, baby. Within reason. I don't think we could grow a tree up here without ruining the terraces."

She squealed and ran over to hug him despite the little red tomatoes in her hands. "Thank you, Grandpa Ben!"

3. FALL

Rain dripped down Ben's nose, clung to his lips. The sky was dark overhead even though his precious garden was usually above the cloud level this time of year. It was cold enough that Ben knew they'd have snow soon. His cane slipped on the wet brown leaves that were all that remained of their harvest of late beans.

Should dig that up, cover the bed with compost and then a nice thick mat of pine needles. There wasn't much time left before winter came and filled the entire garden with snow. They had to get everything they could out before it was too late.

"Careful, Grandpa," Spring said.

She took his elbow, supporting him as they moved to the west end of the garden with its carrot bed, potato heaps and onions. In the last year she'd grow, shot up until she was the same height as Ben. Not as tall as he had been as a young man but as tall as he was now with his aching back, weak knees and cane.

The grape vines had turned scarlet over the last couple of days, painting the far end of the terrace with bloody splashes of color. Spring's fingers shifted red, gold, green to match, sparkles mixing with the raindrops coating her skin.

"I am," Ben promised. "Just a bit slick there. We got the cart ready down below? Should be a lot of carrots and potatoes to harvest today."

"Mm-hmm," Spring murmured. "Everything's ready. You dig them up and I'll run them down. It's too bad that Joaquin didn't show up. He could have made this go twice as fast."

Ben growled as he limped along the path Spring had built last year. Joaquin. That boy was no good. He knew it. Too old to be paying attention to a twelve year old girl, too tall, and much too rich. Had all the latest mods, wore the latest clothes and always tried to give Spring presents that she couldn't accept. Wouldn't, thank goodness for the girl's common sense.

"Don't see how," Ben grumped as he took the shovel Spring offered him. "That boy's full grown, baby. Shouldn't be sniffing around a twelve year old girl like you."

Spring laughed and shrugged. She knelt and dug her fingers into the dark wet soil. Potatoes came out, nice big russets that'd keep for months in their root cellar. Ben sighed, digging deeper, using the shovel as a cane to hold himself up. He missed the days when Spring listened to his every word, believed everything he said. The patter of rain on bare earth, on brown leaves and their wet skin, was loud against the silence as Spring refused to meet his eyes.

"He's not interested in me, Grandpa Ben," Spring said. She carefully piled the potatoes in her plastic-lined backpack. "He wants to get at Papa and his coding. I'm just an easy way to get close. No one's interested in me, not with my skin."

"Oh baby," Ben sighed. He wiped the rain off his face even though it wouldn't do a bit of good, not with more rain coming down steady as the waterfall beyond the grapevine. "You're beautiful, so beautiful. You don't realize how they look at you."

Her cheeks went red, then the rest of her followed, blushing right out to the shorn tips of her hair. Cut that so short it was barely there anymore, right after Joaquin started visiting. Ben wasn't a fool. Neither was Spring. She was young, still, but she knew down deep that men looked at her with lust.

No other reason for the shapeless tops that hid her tiny bust, the pants two sizes too big that she'd never alter to fit no matter how many times her Mama and Ben advised her to. Spring carefully placed one more potato in her backpack, rubbing her hands together to get the dirt off.

She kept on rubbing, staring down at the sparkles that never faded, the red that turned to brown and then night-black so that she looked like the night sky given human form. Spring's eyebrows pulled together as she sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and bit it hard. Ben bent and put his hands over Spring's, stilling the rubbing that had come back about the time she'd had to start wearing a bra.

"Take the taters down, baby," Ben said gently. "Gonna start digging up the next mound. We'll leave the purple ones, cover 'em with a big mound of compost with a pole in the top so we can dig them up later in the winter. They'll make a nice change in the depth of winter with all the snow and rain."

"Good idea, Grandpa Ben," Spring said.

Her skin faded back to companionable brown. Ben smiled and patted her hands again, shooing her off once she shouldered the backpack. His back creaked as Ben shuffled to the next mound of potatoes. Everything seemed as worn out as his aching body. The terraces needed reinforcement, bamboo split-ting and sagging badly.

Ben hadn't had the strength to cut new bamboo, drive it into place, this year. Spring had tried but she just wasn't big enough yet. The girl did try, made Ben's heart hurt sometimes how hard she tried. Next year she'd probably be big enough to take the big mallet and hammer those bamboo stakes into place.

"Hope I get to see it," Ben whispered as a big russet wiggled to the surface on the end of his spade. "My beautiful baby girl, all grown up."

Not quite. Not really, but close. Maybe as close as Ben would ever get. Time marched on and Ben knew he didn't have too much time left. Every day it seemed like he picked up a new ache, a new pain, that made getting around harder.

"Can still work my garden," Ben muttered. He used his cane to

nudge the potato to the side. Bending over wouldn't go well. Ben wasn't sure he'd be able to get back up without help. "Not that old yet."

"Of course you're not that old yet," Spring giggled as she reappeared by Ben's side. "You've got years with this garden yet."

Ben chuckled, relieved that her skin had gone red and green again, backed by a warm brown that echoed his skin tone. Deep black and pure white were both bad, black for pain, white for fear. The warm colors of the earth under their feet was better. It showed his precious girl was happy, content.

"Oh, that's a big one!" Spring exclaimed as she picked up the potato. "This looks like it'll be a great pile, Grandpa Ben."

"Suspect you're right, baby," Ben said. "Let's see what we can get from it. Then we'll have some fun pulling carrots."

"Do you think Mama would let me make a carrot pie?" Spring asked as she dug into the earth pulling up potatoes and setting them into her backpack with an excited ex-pression that set her skin to sunset bright flaming red and gold.

"Maybe," Ben said. "Let's see if we can find some nice big thick ones. Great weather for one."

Digging up the potatoes, pushing the spade deep into the wet earth and then wrestling with it, made Ben pant. Pretty quick, he had to stop as the world wavered. Spring was there, catching his elbows and holding him until his heart stopped pounding against his chest, his head stopped spinning. Her slender arms were strong, so very strong, compared to Ben who felt as fragile as a stalk of bamboo left out in the weather for ten years.

She didn't take the shovel, didn't tell him to sit down even though he really should have. Wet as he was from the rain, sitting on the top step wouldn't get him any wetter, even with the little puddle that had grown in the center of the stone.

"I'm fine, baby," Ben murmured once his vision cleared.

"If you say so, Grandpa Ben," Spring replied. Her skin drifted to sad blues, pale and wan with fear.

"I do," Ben said. "Too tough for some wet earth to do me in. I

hauled every bit of this earth up here. It knows better than to mess with me."

Spring started giggling when he thumped his cane into the dirt, making it thump and squish. His cane slipped a bit, not too bad, not bad enough for her to catch his elbow and support him. They nodded to each other, Spring grinning, Ben's eyes wrinkled up as he tried not to grin right back.

That pile gave up two backpacks worth of potatoes, filling three quarters of their wagon. The carrots had had a great year. Spring pulled out ten that were thicker than her wrist, as long as her forearm. She crowed each time one pulled free of the earth with a sucking sound and a shower of wet dirt that clung to her pants and Ben's shoes.

He harvested two squash that'd hidden under the leaves until the frost scorched them down, smiling at their green and gold striped hulls. More food for the family, hearty and filling when the snows inevitably came.

Ben looked out towards the valley, one squash clutched to his chest, as Spring ran the other down the stairs along with the spade. He couldn't see anything. The rain fell in like a shifting grey veil between his little garden and the rest of the world. He'd always felt safe here, strong. It hurt that his body was making it harder and harder to spend time in this precious place he'd built all those years ago.

"Ready to go home, Grandpa Ben?" Spring asked. She took the squash, hugging it and sucking her bottom lip when he sighed and shook his head 'no.'

"Sometimes I think this is my home, baby," Ben whispered. The rain on his face tasted of salt. "Not sure I'll make it back up here next year."

"You'll make it, Grandpa Ben," Spring said, her eyes filling with tears. She clutched his elbow. "I'll help. What would your garden do without you?"

4. WINTER

The stairs hid under a shroud of snow, locations barely hinted by the shallow dips that showed icy blue against the blanket of white. Tiny snowflakes drifted down around Ben, hard crystals that hit lit miniature hail rather than fluffy miracles of nature's engineering. He wanted to put a hand out of the blankets wrapped around his body but the effort was too much.

The sleigh cradled him safe in his warm cocoon. Spring's harness lay stark against the snow, cushioned straps slowly shading from black to gray as the snow fell to bury them. Not that it would. Spring wouldn't let that happen.

She shoveled the snow at the base of the stairs, cheerfully humming as she flung snow in great rafts left and right. Her sparkling skin, kin to the snow she man-handled, was hidden under a thick coat, knitted hat and pants that were thick enough that their snug fit didn't matter. Every time she glanced over her shoulder her face lightened from deep brown to delighted greens and golds.

"Still too old for her," Ben grumbled at the man leaning against the back of his sleigh.

"Sir," Joaquin groaned. "We've been married for six months."

"Still don't approve of that no-account that married my daughter,"

Ben replied, wiggling his shoulders in the blankets in what he hoped was a grumpy enough fashion to get Joaquin to be quiet.

It didn't work. Joaquin snorted a laugh. "He's been married to her for nearly twenty-five years, sir. And he's one of the most successful programmers in the entire Northwest United States."

Ben grunted, more interested in watching Spring work than arguing with the man who'd somehow won Spring's heart. He knew she loved Joaquin. That was obvious every time she looked at him. Whole new patterns of color had appeared on her skin once Joaquin knelt in the mud at the base of the steps last summer, begging her to consider him as a suitor and to keep him as a friend if she absolutely couldn't think of him that way.

Spring's squeal of delight had echoed across the valley, startling gulls and jays out of the trees and up into the sky. Ben's groan had echoed nearly as widely. He'd protested that day and most every day since, not that he was mean about it. As unworthy as Joaquin was of Spring, she loved him and that was more important than Ben's unwillingness to admit that his baby girl had grown up.

"Almost ready!" Spring called to them as she cleared off the last few steps.

At seventeen, nearly eighteen, Spring stood a good head and a half taller than Ben had ever been even at his youngest. She'd grown so much since that first day in the garden when she had only stared as he worked. Tables had turned. Now it was Ben staring at his baby girl while she worked with so much joy that the whole world seemed to sing with her.

"You could stay down here," Joaquin murmured. He sounded hopeful that Ben would do just that.

"No," Ben grumbled at him. "Both know I'm not likely to make it another year. I'll take any time in my garden that I can get."

Joaquin sighed as Spring skipped down the snowy steps, moving so fast that it looked like her feet didn't touch the ground. She grinned as she ran to their sides, snow glowing on her hat in the dim sunlight like the sparkles on her skin. He pushed at the blankets, trying to work his way free. Their weight was too much. Ben grum-

bled fondly as Spring laughed quietly, pulling the blankets open and then gently, so gently, lifting him in her arms.

"I could carry him," Joaquin offered.

"I got it," Spring said. "Grandpa Ben carried me up the stairs many times. I can do it for him this time."

"Rather climb them myself," Ben said, hearing the pain in his voice and huffing to hide it as best he could. "If your mother wouldn't yell I'd make the attempt."

"Mama might smack you for it," Spring said, snickering as Grandpa Ben sighed as sadly as he could when he was grinning with pride.

The garden was buried, of course. Snow drifted high over the compost heap though it was thinner there than along the line of black, skeletal blackberry vines. Ben nodded approvingly at the tiny drops of ice frozen on the thorns. Come spring there would be new shoots, new long fierce tendrils sheathed in thorns that would have to be wound back into the mass so that they didn't overtake the rest of the garden.

He carefully tottered along the path Spring had cleared for him. The back wall of the garden needed reinforcement. They'd put in new bamboo and lathe last summer, well, Spring and Joaquin had, but the weight of the snow had bulged it out. Ben stopped, rubbing one mitten-decked hand over the bamboo stake that had bowed the worst.

"Ought to put stairs in right here," Ben said to Spring. "Add another level of terracing. Always meant to get to that and never quite did."

"That's a good idea," Spring said, coming over to stand on her tiptoes so that she could peer up the slope, not that there was much to see. "We could put the leafy things up here, maybe something that trails and then put the corn in a bigger block down below. It might actually grow better that way."

Ben nodded, his fingers tingling so badly that he pulled his arm in, rested his hand against his chest. Joaquin came over and joined Spring in checking the wall, focusing more on the bamboo and

lathe as if he could see through it to the ice-dense earth on the other side.

"It would need good drainage," Joaquin commented. "I think that's why this spot has bowed."

Spring nodded, her skin going gold and red, striped with little dots of the fresh green of new birch leaves on a bright spring day. The change made Joaquin blush and duck his head shyly. Ben chuckled. At least the boy knew that Spring was loving him when she turned those colors.

Ben turned away and slowly made his way to the other end of the terrace where the grape vines protected the garden from the little waterfall he'd used for providing water. The dozen or so yards made his legs go wobbly and sparkles danced in front of his eyes. He blinked several times, leaning on the closest bamboo as a headache stabbed through his right eye.

"Grandpa Ben?" Spring asked.

Her voice seemed to come from miles away. Ben's knees gave way, dropping him to the snow. The pain behind his eye radiated out until it throbbed in time with his pulse, trying to batter its way outside of his skull. Spring's blue-white face appeared in the tunnel that was left of Ben's vision, eyes wide and bleached so pale that she looked as though she was made of snow.

"My baby," Ben whispered. "Always so beautiful, so perfect."

He could see Spring's mouth moving, see Joaquin's frightened face behind her. Ben smiled at them, his face moving strangely on the right side. Hauling his left arm up to pat Spring's cheek took all the strength he had.

"Love you, baby," Ben whispered as the tunnel showing him Spring's tears shifted into a shining white expanse that seemed to include everything and everyone he'd ever known, all smiling at him. "Be good for me."



FIVE YEARS. Spring stood on the last step to the garden, Grandpa

Ben's beautiful garden. Five and a half years since he'd died in the snow while Spring sobbed and begged him to keep breathing. Her breath still caught in her throat every time she mounted that last step. The bamboo and lathe that supported the terraces had been replaced last year, old gray wood torn out and new plumbing put behind the bright gold replacement to ensure that it lasted longer.

She still saw Grandpa Ben's handiwork everywhere.

The steps were his work. So were the terraces themselves. Every chisel mark on the stone over their heads was put there by Grandpa Ben. Spring could almost hear him humming tunelessly around the bend in the corner of the terrace hidden from view by the blackberry brambles.

The corner where she'd been found. Spring wished she could remember that first day. Grandpa Ben had told the story so many times that she could imagine it, almost see her tiny form, blood on her hair and bruises over her arms and face. It wasn't the same as actually remembering the first time she'd looked up and seen him smiling down at her so kindly despite the terrible burn scar that had twisted the left side of his face into a threatening mask to everyone else in the world.

Joaquin stood at the base of the stairs, holding their twin daughters hands. As soon as she took the last step he let go and the girls ran up the stairs as if it was a contest to see who got there first. Their mops of curly hair and sparkling skin cascaded with delighted gold and green, red and blue.

"Mama! Mama, look! The potatoes are growing so big!"

"Don't poke them, April. You'll break them. Mama always says to be gentle!"

"I wasn't poking, June. Mama, tell April I wasn't poking!"

Spring smiled at her daughters, arms wrapped securely around their baby brother, only three days old. Five years, three children, and Spring thought she understood better why Grandpa Ben had always said there was nothing more important than feeding your family. His garden, her garden now, fed all of them plus Mama and Papa though they were getting older, slower, eating less as they aged.

The second terrace that Grandpa Ben had recommended just before he died had helped. It added enough room for more crops, different crops. The corn did better now that it had its own place wide enough for a block that let the wind pollinate them properly. Next year, or maybe the year after, when the girls were big enough to watch their little brother crawl about and keep him from hurting himself, Spring thought that she'd dig a new terrace below the lowest one.

Blueberries would be nice. They took a few years to mature, Spring thought as her steps automatically took her to the small corner of the garden by the blackberry bramble. But they would produce good sweet berries that they could freeze or make jelly from. Grandpa Ben had always talked about adding blueberry bushes to the garden somewhere.

"Is it okay?" Joaquin asked over by the compost heap.

"Yes," Spring said.

Tears welled up as the little monument Joaquin and Papa had created lit up at her approach. Grandpa Ben's weathered face blinked twice and then smiled at Spring as if he was still there. He was still there, truthfully, his ashes buried beneath the little granite monument decorated with his name, the dates of his birth and death along with the phrase 'Gone but never forgotten'.

Spring swallowed down a sob as she knelt in front of Grandpa Ben's grave marker, brushing her fingers over the little screen that showed him smiling, laughing, winking at her. April and June ran over, hugging her from behind. Joaquin followed, his steps slow and sad. She didn't even need to look to know that his expression had gone regretful. Joaquin had barely gotten to know Grandpa Ben before he was gone.

"Mama?" June asked, tugging at her sleeve with a hand that had gone fear-lime. "Why are you crying?"

"Oh baby," Spring said. "I just miss my Grandpa Ben, that's all. He found me right here. Here, on this spot. That's why we buried him here. I wish you could have known him."

April and June both whimpered quietly, dismayed to see their

mother cry. Joaquin bent over and kissed Spring's cheek. He tugged the girls away, leaving Spring to sit with their son in the rich black earth by Grandpa Ben's grave.

"I have a son now, Grandpa Ben," Spring whispered. "He's just three days old. Such a beautiful boy. He has your base skin color, rich dark brown, darker than his Papa's. April and June are four now, turned four a month ago. I'm sorry I didn't come up and visit but your grandson made climbing the stairs impossible."

Tears ran down Spring's cheeks, dropping onto the blanket swaddling her new baby boy. She sucked on her bottom lip, caressing his cheek gently, so gently, just like she remembered Grandpa Ben touching her. He opened his eyes and blinked up at Spring, smiling a baby-smile that made her laugh and sob and hold him to her chest.

"We named him after you, Grandpa Ben," Spring whispered, rocking her baby Benjamin and watching Grandpa Ben's recorded face light up with joy. "I love you so much, even now. I think I understand why you worried about me now. I think I understand so much more, Grandpa Ben, so much more."

She dashed the tears away, fighting down grief and joy and love and emotions she couldn't even name. Grandpa Ben. Her baby. The beautiful garden. All of it was so precious.

"I'm thinking of putting in blueberries," Spring said, swallowing until her voice would come out clear. "They'll be good. Good to eat. Good for jams and pies and muffins."

Baby Ben shifted and whimpered in her arms, face screwing up as he started to cry. Spring rocked him gently, gently, her darling little boy, before nodding to Grandpa Ben.

"Gotta go, Grandpa Ben," Spring said. "Love you. I'll be good, promise!"

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: TEA AND KNIVES

The first story I published was in the Matriarchies of Muirin series. It featured Anwyn and her twin brother Cadfael when they were children. This one features a slightly older Cadfael dealing with things he'd much, much rather not have to handle. But if there's one thing you can say about both Anwyn and Cadfael it's that they never back down from a challenge.

TEA AND KNIVES

Cadfael smoothed his vest, tugging it to lay flat over his tummy. He needed to look grown up. Badly. Even though Gavin would be there and he was nineteen, Cadfael really, really needed to look older than he was. Especially given that he was shorter than his friends who were thirteen. He looked more like their little brothers who were nine and ten years old.

The boys' bunk room was quiet, curtains drawn back to expose their neatly made beds and straightened shelves. Aravel's knitted blankets were smooth instead of rumpled as they would have been were he home. Gavin's bunk was so neatly made that Cadfael could have bounced coins off it. And Andros', well, it was neat enough. He was only seven. Cadfael still had a hard time reaching the far side of his bunk to tuck it in properly.

Not that it mattered right now. It was a shame that Aravel wasn't here. He'd have been delighted to go down and entertain guests. Aravel loved everyone and at fifteen, well, he was taller and more mature and he didn't look like a little boy.

Cadfael looked like a little boy. He tugged at his kilt, trying to make it longer than ankle length. Father had said that ankle length was long enough for a thirteen year old boy. Really. Even if Cadfael

had wanted longer. Floor length. So no one could comment on his ankles and make smug little comments about how he was going to grow up to be a looker.

He glared at the mirror. His hair was almost golden in the lantern light, not red the way it should be. Cadfael kept thinking about growing out his bangs so that the curly bangs wouldn't look scraggly across his forehead. Between the boyish haircut, braid hanging down his back, and the narrow too-short kilt Cadfael just didn't look his age.

Which didn't matter.

Except for all the ways it did.

Mother was in bed, giving birth. Ew. Father was with her, trying to help. There was a ship that had just arrived, with another due some-time today. Everyone in the Clan was busy taking care of the goods coming off the ship. No one was available besides Gavin and Cadfael. As much as he hated it.

Someone from the family had to be downstairs, had to bring tea, because the Affrica Clan had sent their oldest daughters to negotiate a brand new treaty.

Gavin couldn't do that alone. Well, he had Great-Uncle Jarmon there to handle the negotiations and paperwork but someone had to handle the social side of things. Great-Uncle Jarmon forgot things like tea. So did Gavin. They would focus entirely on the treaty and they'd forget to feed their guests and that'd make things worse. Impossible. Father said so. Well, Gavin could probably still make a treaty happen if he needed it. That was why Gavin was Great-Uncle Jarmon's heir as head of the men's half the Clan.

They were sure to offend the Affrica if they didn't do something nice to welcome the Affrica. First meetings were important. Father always said so. If Mother hadn't gone into labor then it would be Father going downstairs with her, not Cadfael and Gavin. But there wasn't anyone else to do it.

So Cadfael had to be grown up and strong and not quiver like a little kid even though he was tiny and they were huge and there was

tea and oh, damn it all to the Morrigan's hells, he was going to make a mess of everything!

He collapsed onto his bunk, shaking. The lovely embroidered curtain tempted him. He could pull it, hide behind it, and then no one could see him. In their house, the Dana clan house, no one would realize where he was. Too many places to hide. Except if he was going to hide he should take one of the little closets on the second floor or maybe that cupboard behind the stairs on the first floor near the crew bunks that no one ever used for anything at all.

It was just that he looked so young. Really. That was all. Sure, it was just bringing tea but he looked like a little boy and he knew that Affrica Paili and Affrica Mari would treat him like he was still in short kilts instead of in proper long kilts.

"That's part of the problem," Cadfael huffed as he glared at his lovely new Dana plaid kilt. "It still looks like a boy's kilt, even if it is ankle length. No lace, no ribbons, nothing to make it look like I'm older. And just one petticoat. It's too narrow to be properly fashionable."

Petticoats. Prince Toryn wore six petticoats under his kilt when he went on parade last month. It made his new grown up kilt look so different from a little boy's kilt. It had looked like a bell with Prince Toryn's torso as the handle. He'd been amazing, tall and strong and smiling at everyone as he rode by in his open carriage, waving one hand so gracefully.

That was what Cadfael wanted to look like.

Maybe he could? If he changed things up a little bit?

Caddie bit his lip and then scrambled right back out of his bunk. Seven petticoats, carefully layered over his one stiff one, and then Gavin's old under-kilt made of pale blue Dana cloth because otherwise the kilt would be way too short to cover the simple lace at the hem of his petticoats. Then Caddie's too-long dark blue Dana kilt with the line of lace around the hem for going to church that Father had threatened to hem up so that he wouldn't look like a little boy in his older brother's clothes, tripping on his hem with every step.

"That's better," Cadfael mused as he tugged his vest back into place over the top of the many waistbands. "Much better."

His kilts stuck out almost a whole foot from his ankles. No mistaking him for a little boy now; they declared him older even though he was so short. A quick twist of his braid into a bun and a few pins to hold that in place topped with a pair of blue silk ribbons tied in a big, showy bow topped the ensemble.

Cadfael stared.

With his hair up he looked much older, maybe fourteen or fifteen. Adding earrings to his ears and then three rings to his fingers, all little ones he'd bought with pocket change, made his hands look less childish. The rings weren't expensive but they were shiny and they made his fingers look thinner.

Good.

"Are you coming?" Gavin called from the other room. He stopped, staring, as he saw Cadfael. "Caddie, what are you wearing?"

"I didn't want to look like a little boy," Cadfael said, glaring up at him. "They'll pat my head and call me a cute little thing. I hate it when people do that."

"Well, we don't have time for you to change," Gavin said with a little sigh. "Come on. Cousin Coleen ran up to tell me that they're here. Perfect timing."

They both winced as Mother shouted from her bedroom. No baby wail sounded so their little brother or sister hadn't been born yet. Caddie fled with Gavin, more than happy to avoid everything and anything related to babies and the having thereof. Gavin collected Great-Uncle Jarmon on the stairs, there with his wife Great-Aunt Maeve who was still big and burly and looked at Great-Uncle Jarmon like he was her home port.

"The other ship is here!" Cousin Coleen shouted once they hit the bottom of the stairs. "The sails are torn and it looks like they're taking on water."

"Damn it!" Great-Uncle Jarmon said, pressing his lips together. "When it rains, it floods the streets. Gavin, you go deal with that. I can

handle a first meeting just fine with Maeve. And Caddie. He'll be enough for this."

"You be polite," Gavin said. He gave Cadfael a quick hug, far too quick for Cadfael's shattering nerves, and then ran off, kilts hiked up so high that Cadfael glimpsed his knees.

Okay. All right. Cadfael could do this. He could. There wasn't anyone else to do it, not when there was a damaged ship coming in. And Mother giving birth. And another ship in port. And all hands were working on other things. It would be quick. Of course it would. Great-Uncle Jarmon and Great-Aunt Maeve would explain what was happening and they'd offer the Affrica a bunk for the night and it would be fine.

"Go get the tea, child," Great-Uncle Jarmon said. He smiled kindly enough at Cadfael but his lips were pressed thin like he wanted to hurry out to the dock to see what had happened to their ship.

"Yes, sir," Cadfael said. "Four cups or five? And what blend?"

"Make it the sweet blend," Great-Aunt Maeve said, startling Cadfael. "They like their sweets up in the mountains of Western Aingeal. See if you can wrangle some pastries, too."

Cadfael nodded. There were sweets in the kitchen off the warehouse. He'd go get hot water, the sweet tea and there should be something tasty to eat. If not, well, he'd raid the stores and get some candied fruit.

All of which took a solid ten minutes because, of course, there were no sweets left in the warehouse kitchen. He'd had to run upstairs and raid one the uncle's kitchens for some fresh fruit bread. Someone had eaten all the sweets left in the warehouse kitchen and left the plate behind covered in powdered sugar on the big trestle table. Which let Cadfael get angry which helped with the terror of being the only male there for socializing which was good. Mad was better than crying because he was so afraid.

"I have tea," Cadfael announced as he carefully backed into the conference room to find Affrica Paili and Affrica Mari sitting by themselves, no one else there. Not that he was sure which was which. "Where are Great-Uncle Jarmon and Great-Aunt Maeve?"

"Ah, they had ta go deal with someone injured on t'dock," the taller and burlier of the two women said. She gave Cadfael a rueful little smile. "Somethin' about a bale dropping and taking out a leg."

"Oh," Cadfael said, wincing. "They would need Great-Uncle Jarmon for that. And I suppose if it was silk they'd need Great-Aunt Maeve, too. She's the best at assessing damage to goods. And that silk was contracted, brought in specially for a customer. I'm Dana Cadfael. My mother is Dana Laoise. She'd have been here herself but she went into labor with my youngest sibling just as you were announced. Father's helping her. And Gavin, my oldest brother had to help with the damaged ship."

"At least they sent a pretty bit," the thinner, shorter Affrica said. "Gotta like that, hey, Mari?"

So the thinner one was Paili. Cadfael narrowed his eyes at her, deciding that he didn't like her at all. Not one bit. Mari looked nicer. She blushed brilliantly at Paili's little quip, elbowing her sister as if to make her stop. It didn't work.

"We get some treats with the tea, sweet thing?" Paili asked, reaching out towards Cadfael's cheek.

Cadfael grabbed the knife, sharp for cutting though the fruit embedded in the bread, and swung it up to block Paili's hand. He left a tiny cut across her fingertip, startling her into pulling back and sucking on it. Eyes wide, cheeks a little pale.

Good.

"I'm thirteen," Cadfael said so scathingly that Paili's shoulders hunched inwards and Mari glowered at her sister. "I would have thought that a grown woman would have better sense than to go after a person who was visibly not grown yet."

"Jus' thought you were short," Paili said, waving at Cadfael's clothes.

"Jus' thought you could get a taste even though we're here to negotiate a big deal," Mari snapped. She punched Paili hard enough in the shoulder that she nearly knocked Paili out of her chair. "Ignore her, Cadfael. She's always horny."

"Then she can keep her hands and her comments to herself,"

Cadfael said as he set to work pouring tea, knife in easy grabbing range at all times. "I've no problems sinking the whole deal if she keeps it up. And don't think I can't. I'm the son that gets most of the special treatment in my Clan."

He squared his shoulders and glared Paili down, stomach turning flips because she opened her mouth and then shut it again when he raised an eyebrow. It was so terrifying to glare at a grown woman but she was creepy and he didn't want her touching him so glaring was the next best thing to cutting her hand off if she tried to touch him again.

The funny-sad part was that he wasn't lying. Cadfael was the one boy in the Clan who got the most treats, the best clothes, the finest lace. Everyone pampered him, from the oldest great-aunts and uncles on down to the littlest of his cousins and siblings. It confused him sometimes but Cadfael wasn't going to worry about it now. Not when Paili eyed him again like she was thinking of trying something anyway.

"Fruit bread," Cadfael announced. "It's fresh."

He sliced through the bread, imagining slicing through Paili's wrist. It made for a decisive cut, the blade ripping through the fruit and parting the bread as if it wasn't there. The knife sliced into the wood, too, leaving a clear mark that he'd get in trouble for later. He'd have to sharpen the knife before he returned it.

Mari went pale. Paili swallowed and edged backwards a little, her chair legs screeching on the wood floor of the conference room.

Cadfael made a point to politely pass Mari her slice with both hands, gracing her with a nod of his head. She smiled, nodding back as she took it the same way. Not quite Chinwenduese formal but still quite proper. Especially given that the little plate was not quite as big as the palm of her hand. He passed Paili her slice with one hand, a glare and his free hand on the knife.

Which made her wince and bow a lot more seriously towards him.

Cadfael nodded, sipping his tea before nibbling a bite of his bread. "It's still warm. I meant it that it was fresh."

Paili and Mari exchanged looks and took bites. Both of their eyebrows went up. Mari nodded enthusiastically that she liked it while Paili relaxed a little, leaning back in her chair to study Cadfael with a faint frown.

"All the boys here like you?" Paili asked. "Short and full of temper?"

"The Dana are brawlers and we're all short," Cadfael said as he primly sipped his tea. "All of us. Mother taught me how to gut a woman three times my size when I was six. I know how to break kneecaps, crush windpipes and do the best embroidery in the whole clan. Gavin can lift a bale all by himself. My brother Aravel is at sea, on his way to Chinwendu. He'd be glad to tell you all sorts of stories about people he'd wrestled and won against. And no, I don't mean that sort of wrestling."

The amused look on Paili's face collapsed into a desperately uncomfortable gulp of her tea. At least Mari looked amused. That was good. Even if Paili was horrible, Mari seemed all right. Cadfael faced her, keeping the knife close because who knew what Paili would do?

"I hope you had a pleasant journey here," Cadfael asked, just as Father always did during the opening discussions before trade talk began with visitors. Talking about weather was always safe. Everyone had opinions on the weather, even when it was perfect. "I heard people saying that there were storms over the plains."

"Oh, Blessed Chin, Tahira and Ragna," Mari groaned. She rolled her eyes and bit savagely into her fruit bread only to smile again at how good it tasted. "We got dumped on. So much rain and wind that we had to camp for three days. Storm was a horror."

"Thought we'd never get dry," Paili agreed. "Had to sling hammocks under the carts because the ground was too wet to sleep on."

They both shuddered. So yes, the weather had been terribly bad. So maybe the goods got damaged? Or the horses. Yes, asking about horses, that would be something Father would do.

"I hope your horses were all right," Cadfael said. He eyed Paili as

she leaned on the table, putting his hand on the knife. She sat up straight again. "I think Gwen, my oldest sister, has said that too much wet is bad for them. I'm afraid I've never traveled by horse any farther than the edge of the city."

"Eh, they're all right," Mari said but her grimace said that no, they weren't. "Mite infestation on one of them got away from us. They all really need proper dust baths to get rid of the mites."

"That takes time, doesn't it?" Cadfael asked, honestly curious. "I mean, there'd be eggs on their skin. Feathers?"

"At the base of the feathers, yeah," Paili said with a little sigh. She shook her head. "We need to stay put for at least a week, give the horses plenty of access to dust bowls. Nice dry ones."

Cadfael nodded before pulling out his notepad, the one he used to record things that needed to be done later. "I'll make sure to tell my cousins. At the very least we can send someone over to the stable, pay for extra baths for them. You did come to start a treaty with us after all."

He didn't expect their dumbfounded looks. Mari's jaw was open, her hands slack around her teacup. Paili looked equally startled but she leaned on the table and didn't sit back when he glowered at her.

"Why'd ya be willin' ta do tha'?" Paili asked.

Her accent was much thicker this time. Maybe that was how she showed shock? But her hand came up as if she wanted to touch Cadfael's hair so he grabbed the knife and swung it between them.

The quick move startled Paili into jerking backwards while Mari glared at her sister. She also nodded towards Cadfael, eyes angry even though her lips smiled ruefully. Cadfael set the knife down and felt his hair, sighing as he realized that his big bows had twisted on the top of his head.

"I'd be willing to offer extra dust baths because your horses are your livelihood," Cadfael explained as he retied the bows properly. He'd done it wrong in his rush upstairs. "And the whole point of a treaty between our Clans is to make both sides richer and more powerful. So you losing horses to mites would be bad. I can only

offer. Other people have to approve it but I can't imagine they'd say no."

Cadfael glanced at the door. No sign of Gavin. Or Great-Uncle Jarmon. Or Great-Aunt Maeve. Darn it. He really wanted them to come back. What was he supposed to talk about now? Usually things moved on to treaty matters after weather and animal or ship questions.

"Such a busy day," Cadfael said because what else could he offer now?

"Yer mother gonna be okay?" Mari asked.

"Oh yes, I'm sure she will be," Cadfael said. He flapped a hand at Mari's worried frown. "Doctor Bernice is there, helping. Father's helped her birth all of us. Doctor Bernice said that she was sure it was a single baby instead of twins so it should be relatively easy. Mother's had two sets of twins. I'm one of them."

"How many kids's your mother had?" Paili asked. She shifted in her seat as if she was as uncomfortable with this discussion as Cadfael was.

"This is her ninth baby," Cadfael said. He grinned at the shocked look on both Mari and Paili's faces. "She did have a couple of miscarriages but they were early in the pregnancies so it wasn't too hard on her. Most Dana women have lots of babies. And do pretty well at it."

Probably not a subject that Cadfael should let continue. It would lead to questions about how many Dana there were and how much money they had and that always brought in the Delbhana who thought they were horrible for having so many kids and so much money. So Cadfael shrugged and poured himself a bit more tea. Then more for Mari. And then, with a fierce glower that made Paili sigh, more for her, too.

"I've never heard much about Western Aingeal," Cadfael tried. He didn't quite keep from sounding hopeful but maybe they'd take it as curiosity instead of desperation. "Other than it has mountains. I went on a trip to Nasrin recently. That has mountains too but I've no idea if they're similar."

"Not at all," Paili said immediately. She snorted when Mari looked

at her curiously. "Seriously, not at all. Mountains in Nasrin are shorter. Steep, sure, but they just don't go as high as back home. Maybe half the height. Lots of sheep. Got more wool there than almost anywhere else."

"Except Azar," Cadfael agreed.

"Love heading for home," Mari said as she sipped her tea. "You're riding along on the plains and the mountains are there in the distance, like a smudge of clouds. Then you hit forest, thick, branches curling overhead."

"Some parts are dark as night," Paili agreed with a similarly content expression on her face. "We light lanterns, use a special little one on a pole to light the way for the horses. They don't see too well in the dark."

Mari nodded. "Then you break out the other side of the forest, usually three days later. Sometimes four. The sky's bright blue, bright as your kilt, kiddo. And the mountains are just... there. Big, looming, green and brown and gorgeous. Love that moment. It's always beautiful."

Her expression was thoughtful, happy, much more content than Cadfael had any right to expect with this whole situation. Seriously, where were the others? Someone should have come back here by now.

Cadfael smiled. "I suppose that's a lot like the point when a ship rounds the point off Aingeal Bay and you see the city walls. My twin Anwyn tries to be in the crow's nest every time just so she can see the city sooner."

They grinned, finished their tea. Cadfael did too. All three of them looked at the door. Really, was it that bad? It couldn't have been that much damage. The broken leg wasn't that life-threatening, was it?

Cadfael stood and went to the door. He could hear shouting in the distance, angry and frustrated instead of frightened. Lovely. If people were angry then no one was going to remember that they were here. So be it.

"I guess that negotiations will have to wait," Cadfael said. "I believe

your crew should have gotten guest bunks already. I can show you to where that is, make sure that you have bunks, too."

Mark came over and listened, snorting as she heard the shouting. "Might be a good idea. Tha' doesn' sound so good."

"I'd be just as happy t'wander around," Paili said with a smirk that made Cadfael's hand ache for the knife he'd left on the table. "Aw, come on, sweet thing. Y'can't expect a woman to jus' sit around."

"No, I expect the Dana women to be snappish, prone to breaking jaws at the least provocation and the men to gutting women who try to seduce them," Cadfael said in his best approximation of Father's frostiest tone of voice. "I also expect guests to behave like guests instead of like rapists."

He wasn't sure if it was the tone of voice, the glare or the 'rapist' comment but Paili went painfully pale. Even though her cheeks were dark as the oak tray he'd brought the tea on, she looked white as bone. Whichever it was, Mari looked equally pale when he risked a glance up at her.

Cadfael snorted. "Leave the tray. I'll come back for it. We might as well get you settled. I've no idea when meals will be done. If. Honestly, I'll probably have to make dinner for my family given that Mother's giving birth. Probably still."

"Try not t'cause problems," Mari said, shaking her head as Paili stood and sauntered over.

At least Paili kept her hands firmly behind her back as Cadfael led them through the hallways to the edge of the warehouse. Mostly because he wanted to see if any of the uncles were available to take over. But no, both men and women were running around the warehouse, shouting back and forth. There were stacks of bales off on one side, haphazard enough that Cadfael worried that they'd topple over any second. And the table where the men usually checked things in, doing all the paperwork required, was covered with stuff. Barrels and boxes and stacks of paperwork with no one to process them.

He shook his head. "Well, that answers that. Let's go collect your crew. I'll get some petty cash and see what we can arrange for dinner

for you. By morning it should all be sorted out. Oh, and we should stop by the stable for your horses, too."

Petty cash was easy enough to get. Cadfael made a point of leaving a note explaining how much he'd taken and why. With a pointed little underlined part that he was taking them to the big restaurant up Port Street because what else could he do? They wouldn't fit in any of the little ones that served the dock workers.

He nearly ran away when he opened the door to the guest bunks and found eight tall, burly women staring down at him.

"Back off," Mari said. "He's takin' care of us for dinner."

"Thank the Goddesses for that," the closest woman said. "M'stomach's about empty."

"Just keep her," Cadfael said with a glare over his shoulder at Paili, "away from me. You. Don't flirt with the wait staff. This is the restaurant we take our biggest clients to. I won't have you offending them and losing us our most impressive place to take people."

Paili groaned only to flinch when Cadfael whirled to glare at her. She held up her hands as if to ward him off. Maybe honestly. She did seem a bit spooked. So did the other women when he nodded once and turned back to them.

"You don't need to wash up," Cadfael said. "They're used to Dana. As long as you don't flirt and don't get in fights you'll be fine. One stop at the stables first and we'll be on our way."

He spotted Aunt Kennis limping urgently towards the warehouse once he'd herded the women through the halls to the formal entrance. It was closest to the stable so it made sense. Cadfael gasped and then waved.

"Aunt Kennis!"

His shout startled Paili into backing up but Aunt Kennis stopped, stared and then limped over, leaning heavily on her cane.

"What are you up to, Caddie?" Aunt Kennis asked.

"Well, this is Affrica Mari and her sister Paili, who's a pervert," Cadfael said. He glared at Paili who groaned while her sister and their crew snickered at her dismay. "They're here to negotiate a treaty but with everything that's happening, Mother and the ships and all,

there's no one to negotiate. So. I'm taking them to the stable. Their horses got mite infestations so I thought that we might pay for dust baths."

"Good idea," Aunt Kennis said. She smiled approvingly enough that Cadfael's stomach calmed a bit. "Dinner?"

"I was going to take them up to Randolph's," Cadfael said. "It's big enough for everyone and the food is good. I didn't think anyone would have time for dinner until much later. And it's about time. Especially since they just got in town."

Aunt Kennis nodded as she put a hand on Cadfael's shoulder. Her glare at Paili was vicious enough to strip flesh from bone, making Paili back up a step. He did his best not to obviously lean into her hand but it was so nice to have a grown up there to help with this.

"The boy's thirteen and he's not to be touched," Aunt Kennis said, straight at Paili. "I mean it. Keep your hands and comments to yourself or the deal will be off before it begins."

"I get it," Paili complained. "Fine. No flirting with the sweet thing."

"Call him that again and I'll see if I remember enough knife throwing to cut your throat," Aunt Kennis snapped at her. She jerked her chin at Mari. "Keep her under control."

"Do m'best," Mari said with a tired sigh. "Not sure I'll succeed but I'll try."

Aunt Kennis patted Cadfael's shoulder and then hurried on her way.

So. No escort. No adult. Why had he wanted to look like a grown up again? There was no changing it so Cadfael would just have to deal with it. But once they were fed and back in their bunks he was going to hide in the boy's room and embroider and no one was getting him out again for days. Maybe a week or more.

The dust baths were easy to arrange. Cadfael didn't even have to pay for them ahead of time. He just asked if they would send an invoice to Great-Uncle Jarmon and the stable mistress smiled, nodding her approval of that.

Walking up the street with ten women on his heels was terrifying enough that Cadfael's knees shook and his hands trembled as he

opened the door to Randolph's. But Alaois was at the front counter and he took one look at Cadfael's face. Then he hurried over and held the door for the Affrica, smiling and greeting them warmly enough that Cadfael could breathe again.

"Eleven then," Alaois said once they were all inside. "You'll be paying, Caddie?"

"I'm afraid so," Cadfael said with a tired sigh. "It's been a day of disasters at the Clan House. Dinner is on me. But any alcohol more than one drink per woman is their responsibility. I won't pay for them to get drunk in our Clan House."

The only one to groan at that was Paili and her groan was cut off quickly by three or four elbows thumping into her. Alaois seated them in the rear at one of the big tables that would hold fifteen or more. Cadfael got the head of the table, much to his dismay. At least Paili ended up at the other end, firmly pushed there by Mari who sat next to Cadfael.

He didn't think it was an accident that two of the oldest Affrica crew members ended up seated with Paili. Or that the oldest waiter was assigned to their table. Old Brogan smiled at Cadfael, whistling appreciatively at his petticoat-buoyed kilt and hair pulled up into a bun.

"You're growing up far too fast, Caddie," Old Brogan said once he had all their orders. "It's a shame. I remember when you were just a wee little thing."

"You remember when Mother was a wee little thing," Cadfael said, grinning at him. "Thank you for taking care of us tonight."

"Not a problem at all, Caddie," Old Brogan said. He patted Cadfael's shoulder and then nodded to the others. "You take good care of him. He's the jewel of the Dana, he is."

Cadfael huffed at him, not at all sure that he could be right. Maybe. But only because his temper was so bad that people pampered him. That had to be what it was. Except Paili nodded, eyeing him far too appreciatively.

"Watch out for that one," Old Brogan said immediately.

"I already am," Cadfael said. "Cut her finger once. I've no problem with cutting a great deal more if I have to."

After which dinner was relatively nice. The crew glowered at Paili who subsided into grumbling silence at the other end of the table. Mari told stories of their trips across Aingeal, some of which her crew nodded and agreed with, others that they laughed and rolled their eyes over.

Dinner was delicious. They'd had a choice of hearty lamb stew or roast. At Old Brogan's suggestion they'd all taken the stew. He'd brought out two big tureens of the stew so that they could have seconds and thirds if they wanted. It was rich and hearty with carrots and parsnips cooked just until they gave under your fork. The spices were perfect and the sauce was a nice thick brown one.

With that and thick crusty bread fresh from the oven, slathered with butter, no one looked unhappy. Cadfael did his best to be a proper host. He asked everyone's names and made a point to use them at least twice while talking to each of them. Except Paili, of course. When they asked for stories from him, Cadfael told them about learning to do inventory and his trip to Nasrin.

By the time Old Brogan brought dessert, a gloriously sweet and sticky apple cobbler topped with sugar-coated crumble, Cadfael actually felt almost comfortable with them. Almost. Not quite. It was still strange being the only boy with so many women but Mari seemed quite determined to shield him from anything inappropriate and Paili was at the other end of the table.

"You did right by dinner," Mari said once they'd all had some dessert. Her portion had been three times Cadfael's. "Tha' was amazing."

Cadfael nodded. "It's a wonderful restaurant. Father always recommends it when people ask for a good place to eat close by. We should probably head back, though. I imagine everyone's wondering where you are now."

"An' you," Mari said, smiling at Cadfael.

"And me," he agreed.

He had to add two half-crowns from his pocket change to cover

the bill for the dinner but none of the Affrica saw that. They'd slipped outside to stretch as he paid. Alaois patted Cadfael's shoulder.

"You did good," Alaois said. "I was watching. Most of the staff was. I could tell you were scared because I know you but mostly you just looked very prim and proper. Go on. Get them back to their bunks and go relax. You've earned it."

"Oh, thank goodness." Cadfael sighed. He didn't rub his face the way he wanted to. "This has been so stressful. Thank you for seating us in the back. Old Brogan was wonderful."

"He insisted on serving you," Alaois said with a huge grin and a wag of his eyebrows. "Today he was assigned up front but no, he said you needed someone to keep you safe with all those women."

"I'm embroidering him a new apron," Cadfael decided. "Tell him thank you. Good night!"

It was night when he slipped back out of the restaurant. The sky had gone dark, stars starting to show overhead. The port up the street was still bright, though, so few stars were visible. At least the Affrica followed along behind him less like horses hunting for meat and more like the over-full women they were.

This time he took them in the side entrance closest to the guest bunks. No reason for trekking through the whole warehouse this time. Cadfael made sure Paili didn't get within arm's reach but she didn't seem interested in trying now. Maybe keeping her fed would keep her from trying to seduce him?

Not that it mattered.

"I'm going to go let everyone know you've been fed and settled in," Cadfael told Mari and Paili. "Please don't go wandering about tonight. The hallways in the warehouse are very confusing to outsiders and you might be mistaken for a thief. Plus, well, I'm sure things are going to be very busy all night long with two ships newly in port."

"We'll stay ri' here," Mari promised, one hand on Paili's shoulder as if to keep her from immediately wandering off. "Thank's fyer care, Dana Cadfael. It was appreciated."

"You're welcome," Cadfael said. He bowed properly, a Chinwenduese bow from the waist to a person of higher rank and older age.

"Sleep well. Someone will bring you breakfast tomorrow and let you know when the negotiations start."

Mari nodded as her crew waved goodbye to Cadfael. Then she pushed Paili away. Paili did look over her shoulder at him but only for a second. As soon as he glared at her, Paili whipped back around and went where Mari wanted.

So that was good. Finally.

Cadfael went back to the conference room and cleaned up, wiping up the crumbs, taking the tea goods away so that he could wash them in the downstairs kitchen. Then he returned what was left of the fruit bread to Uncle Athol's kitchen. The warehouse had started to gain a little bit of order when he peeked in but no one looked like they'd be ready for him to explain what he'd done.

Gavin was there, desperately checking in paperwork. Great-Uncle Jarmon was shouting orders along with Great-Aunt Maeve so no, they weren't available either. No help there.

Cadfael climbed the stairs up to the third floor, feet dragging. He sighed outside their door, shaking his head. If Mother was still giving birth then he'd just write everything down and report tomorrow. He was tired.

"Ah, there you are," Father said the instant Cadfael opened the door. He frowned at Cadfael's kilt and hair. "That's a bit old for you, Caddie."

He was slumped on the window seat that Mother had built for him long before Cadfael was born. His apron was spotted with blood but he just looked tired. No crying but then if the baby had been born it probably ate and then went to sleep. Mother had said that newborn babies rarely stayed awake for very long after birth.

"I needed it," Cadfael sighed as he plopped down on the window seat next to Father.

"So what happened?" Father asked. He wrapped an arm around Cadfael's shoulder, gently kissing the top of Cadfael's head. "Especially that you needed to look so mature. You're still a little boy. I'm not ready for you to be grown up yet."

Cadfael laughed, finally giving in and rubbing his eyes. "Neither

am I. But it made a nice way to keep people from bothering me. Do you want the whole thing?"

Father nodded, smiling. He tugged Cadfael closer and oh, that was lovely. No grown up responsibilities. No being stern and fierce. Just Father hugging him and listening to Cadfael talk about his day.

"Well, the first part was something you know," Cadfael said as he waved a hand at Mother and Father's bedroom door. "Mother went into labor just as the Affrica were announced."

"It's a girl, by the way," Father said. He chuckled. "Named her Erlina after your mother's youngest sister."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Cadfael beamed. "Erlina. I bet she's cute. Well. You and Mother weren't available so that meant that Gavin and I had to go down and be sociable."

He squirmed to get more comfortable as he explained his so-difficult afternoon. Father would get everyone else's news later, of course. But for now Cadfael could tell him what happened and relax at last.

Being grown up was nice. Mostly. Cadfael liked being taken seriously. But for now he was happy to go back to being a little boy and let everyone spoil him rotten. Everything else could wait.

For a good long time.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: DAY OF JOY

One of the things I always loved about classic SF stories was the wealth of alien species. Granted, they always seemed to look like humans in rubber suits but the sheer thought of dozens or hundreds of different sorts of aliens delights me. So, when I had an exercise in a class to start a story with thick, rich sensory detail, I reached for those aliens, put them on a space station and pushed go. The Esme Mullane series was the result. So was this short story, which is the first thing I wrote for Emse.

DAY OF JOY

Cymbals clashed as drums made of old bowls, bins and a Saurid's belly sounded. The beat varied between frenetic and so slow that it tempted Eser to curl up and fall asleep. The music bounced off the floor and ceiling, off the walls of the habitats closes to the social area. Eser still wasn't sure why the *Final Oblivion*, stupid name for a space station, was designed like this.

Big open meeting areas but overstuffed with plants and fountains except in very select places. Lots of shiny silver and chrome support struts around the edges of the Void at the center of the station but no goddamned railings to keep people from falling off. Sure, sure, the antigravity system would keep you from going splat. It turned gravity into pretzels along the struts and edges of the thousand and one platforms.

Still creepy as hell having all that open space and nothing at all to keep you from falling right into it.

Eser turned away from the Void, determined, as always, to ignore it. Better off just pretending it wasn't there. Besides, there were way better things to focus on than the stupid design of the *Final Oblivion*.

Like the Day of Joy going on around her. There were flute-like things off in the t'Saoir's tentacles that they used to sing along with

the Nikiphoros hanging from the ceiling. While the Nikiphoros looked like anthropomorphic bats, the t'Saoir were stout little purple penguins with eyestalks and tentacles.

Who were playing music with singing bats the size of a human. Damn but aliens were weird. A good weird, granted, but still weird.

Eser wandered slowly past them, amused at the way the t'Saoir eyestalks pivoted to watch her go. The entire galaxy was convinced that humans were eating machines. Valid, really. There was damn little food out there that humans couldn't eat if they put enough effort into it. But the whole 'will eat anything' had somehow gotten translated into 'will eat people, too' and Eser found that amusing as all hell sometimes.

"Like I'd want to eat purple penguin meat," Eser murmured low enough that no one other than the Nikiphoros should be able to hear it. "Rather have a damned taco."

One habitat away from the human's habitat, just about a quarter mile, the platform narrowed down thirty yards from a football field's width to something more like a too-wide hallway with six story high ceilings. Had to be high to let the Saurids through, especially the long-necked varieties. Eser kind of like them. They didn't mind if you clambered up their tails or legs and rode on their backs. Seemed not to even notice it until you climbed their necks, and then you'd be expected to have a long philosophical discussion about the nature of reality and how consciousness affected quantum physics.

Or something.

Eser never stayed for the whole thing. She had better things to do than let her eyes roll back in her skull so far that she glimpsed her brain.

Not many Saurids around today. There were a good thirty Dancers, no other name had ever been given to the species and they'd never offered, swaying in time together while Yannick Ivanov's son Tovia Vasilyev and his best friend Malak Zahariev had a dance battle while laughing their lungs out.

Good to see. The kids were just at that age when they went from little kids into surly teenagers. Yannick complained about Tovia every

other day or so, grumbling that he was losing his little boy. Rest of the time he bragged about how his Tovia was turning into quite the strong young man.

More power to them both. Eser remained glad that she'd never had kids. Too much work. Fun to watch them dance and laugh, though.

Pretty decent Day of Joy though Eser would have preferred one where there was food and drinks offered to see if anyone could come up with something that humans wouldn't eat. Those were fun. Last time she'd ended up eating all day long and hadn't spent a single penny. Found six new foods that humans officially enjoyed, too, which went into the *Final Oblivion's* records.

She still didn't know what to make of that name. 'Final Oblivion' was a damn depressing name for a vibrant commercial space station filled with two hundred and fifty-two alien species, not including Humanity. Their choice, of course. Wasn't like humans had built the place. It'd have a hell of lots less plants and fountains and a fuckton more places where a human could lurk and watch the crowd without being obvious.

No such luck. Eser slowly strolled between music making groups, swayed along with a wayward Dancer that was three times her height and spindly as an aspen shoot. About as green as one, too. Sensory nodes up top of its head were shaped like leaves as the final insult to Eser's long-dead ideas of what 'life' should look like.

The Dancer moved on, spindly arms fluttering towards the other Dancers in an apparent apology for leaving.

"Yeah, it's fine," Eser said. "I was just looking for food anyway."

That cleared the Dancer right out. Also cleared a nice path through the pack of short and stubby t'Saoir babies that were giggling together by a little fountain with rainbow lights in it. Little young for psychedelic experiences in Eser's opinion but the parents off to the left by the spiky crested Saurid didn't look too upset. Not her problem then.

By the time she'd cleared the music section, she'd almost decided to go straight back home to her tiny cubicle of an apartment in the

human quarters. The prepacked dehydrated food she'd squirreled away wasn't much but it was food.

Then she caught the smell of fried something. Deep fat, that she knew, with hints of nuts and a bit of a corn smell. Bit of a meat smell, too, so Eser sniffed extravagantly at the air and, lo and behold, the hanging bat-like Nikiphoros flew away to a different perch. Sometimes humanity's reputation was truly helpful. Gave her a clear line of sight on a dozen or so little groups of t'Saoir preparing food.

Yeah, that's what she was looking for.

Other t'Saoir scattered, tentacles quivering, as Eser strode that way. She'd be amused by it if she didn't know it was her own damn fault. Shouldn't have explained what calamari was. The whole damn galaxy was already convinced that humans were perpetually ravenous monsters that viewed everything they encountered as potential food.

People included.

At least she wasn't the one who'd gotten in trouble for explaining exactly what cannibalism was and why there had to be laws against it on Earth. Yannick was the one who'd gotten that lecture and more power to him for it. Eser was here to work, not to socialize. If the powers that be back home would just let them create their own kitchens in their habitat she wouldn't bother going out at all.

More than enough work for her to do dealing with all the investigations that went along with a thousand humans light years from home on a space station that frequently made you feel like your mind was being twisted into pretzels. Not a bad place to work or live. Not like the *Stealth Tempest*. That station was so bad that Eser had begged for a new assignment and then paid her own way to be quit if it soon as possible.

Though they did have their own kitchens and food supply on the *Stealth Tempest*. About the only thing to be said in its favor.

"Hey, you guys got a lot of goodies," Eser said as she strolled into the little knot of furiously cooking aliens. "Need a taste-tester?"

"Yes!" the closest t'Saoir exclaimed. "Food that is human-friendly! Eat much. Must compare, decide a victor for the battle."

Eser grinned as three other t'Saoir waved threatening tentacles, claws extended, at it. "Now, it's supposed to be Day of Joy. Dancing and everything. No battles."

She got a full complement of wails, snapping beaks and drumming feet protesting that she'd make them stop. Also got about ten different plates shoved at her, all of them with deep fried foods on them. Eser shrugged, wiggling her fingers as best she could to say 'all right, I surrender to the necessity of battle'. And then sat in the middle of the crowd of t'Saoir with the first of the plates.

All guaranteed to be edible, mostly, so there was no reason not to indulge herself. She had up to date nanites in her bloodstream that would make sure that anything poison was isolated and kept from killing her outright. She'd still get sick but hey, the t'Saoir were pretty good at checking bio-compatibility before shoving food in your face.

Who knew? Some of it might even be delicious. Free food, build relationships, all that crap that Commander Kesha was always rambling on about. She might even be able to count this as chargeable hours if she gave the t'Saoir proper feedback on what was good and what wasn't.

On a day with no work that was a lovely, lovely thing. Eser set to tasting plates of food. Worse ways to spend her day, sure, but the first one was so bitter that she spat it right back out, gagging. The t'Saoir laughed, drumming their feet against the deck as one group of t'Saoir in particular, off to her far right, snapped their beaks and moaned disconsolately.

"Okay, great crust," Eser said between swigs of water proffered by another passing t'Saoir with a judges' banner awkwardly wrapped around its belly. "Nice and crisp. Love the breading, really. Got a good color to it but the... whatever this..." the t'Saoir all laughed as she peered at the thing, "is way too bitter for human taste buds. Small bits of it chopped up and mixed into other more neutral foods would be good though, nice complement, but you'll need to go very small bits to not have it overpower the rest of the food."

The laughter faded as Eser talked. She got goggling stalk-eyes and open beaks by the time she said it'd make a nice complement to

something else. Shouldn't. The t'Saoir of all the races were well acquainted with humanity's love for odd flavors.

Next one was a good piece of meat, a little blue, but nice texture and flavor. Unfortunately, the breading was soggy, no crunch at all which sort of made it like eating meat coated with glue. She passed that one back with a shudder. Third was so damned good that Eser signaled for that team to give her some more after she finished tasting everything. Crisp crust, great al dente veggies of a sort she'd never seen and a really great spicing mix that Eser was going to recommend the t'Saoir use on all deep-fried food from now on.

Probably wouldn't. But she could try. It really was damned good.

The rest were fairly mediocre as far as she was concerned. Yannick and his son showed up about halfway through, each of them taking a set of plates that they tasted things just as seriously as she had. And came to much the same conclusions though Tovia darn near threw up over the bitter thing. He gave it a solid 'not edible at all' while Yannick agreed with Eser.

"Not for young taste buds," Eser decreed. "More sensitive, you know."

The judge moved in with a series of instruments designed for t'Saoir tentacles. Which meant that their part of the judging was over and Eser could take her plate piled high with the terrific veggies. Which she held well away from Tovia. Boy was a bottomless pit.

"Get your own," Eser huffed at him. "This one's mine."

"Uhhhhh, you're so mean," Tovia complained but he took some money, little plastic credit chips, Eser was never going to get used to that. "You could just share."

"Nothing doing," Eser said. "These are mine. Get your own."

Yannick shook his head at Eser but waved Tovia to get two plates of them. So yeah, total win for that team. Good on them. And good for Eser because damn that spice mix was perfect. Just the right bite mixed with a sweet undertone. She could probably eat twice her weight in this stuff.

"You do know what you're eating, don't you?" Yannick asked, smirking at Eser.

"Don't you dare!" Eser snapped. "Keep it shut, you. It's good and I'm not having you mess it up by telling me what it is. It's good. That's all I care. So shut it."

But he kept right on smirking as Tovia came back with two plates piled high. And as he ate. Tovia looked a little freaked out about it. As Eser finished her last bite and passed the tray back to the t'Saoir team leader who danced around her feet in victory, she sighed.

Glared at Yannick.

"What the hell is it?" Eser asked because he was going to be a smug bastard no matter what. She might as well know given that she'd have to put up with him for days on this.

"You know that seaweed that the Takara harvest?" Yannick said.

He started laughing as Eser groaned and then cursed at him. Damn it. Yeah, he was going to be the smuggest bastard to ever smug for months on this one. She'd declared that damn seaweed to be inedible every time she ate it. And sadly, it was freaking popular on the *Final Oblivion* so she'd been forced to eat it a few thousand times now.

"Oh, shut up," Eser grumbled at him.

"I didn't say anything," Yannick replied with his grin of total triumph.

She shoved his shoulder which did just about as much to move him as if she'd shoved at a Saurid. About as big as one, too. Six and a half foot tall, at least three wide. Made her wonder what Tovia's egg donor had been like because the two of them looked nothing alike in build while sharing eerily similar facial features.

"Whatever," Eser said. "I'm off to socialize. You got anything I should watch out for?"

"Last I heard," Yannick said far too seriously for a Day of Joy, "the new Commander was in-bound today. You might be on the lookout for him and his new command staff."

Eser raised an eyebrow. That was news. Probably news he shouldn't have shared. Commander Kesha was as big a bastard as anyone Eser had ever met but he was efficient and effective keeping things under control. Not good at keeping the peace among humans but damn, he was good at dealing with the aliens.

Must have pissed off someone important on his last trip back Earth-side otherwise they'd have left his ass out here forever. Honestly, Eser had thought that he was going to be here forever. Kesha sure as hell didn't look like he wanted to head back Earth-ward.

It'd be interesting to see how the unexpected transition went. Maybe they'd have less work to do with a new Commander. Or maybe she'd just jinxed herself and there'd be a thousand times more work. Sure as hell they'd let a ton of things slide under Kesha but they were all minor rule violations where the rules made no damned sense.

Like the no food in your quarters thing. Stupid. No one in their right mind wanted to deal with Eser before she had something to eat. Or Yannick and his illicit coffee mill in his quarters. Tovia and his game system betting pool. That entire thing the cleaning staff had going on with their knitting circle. Eser still had no idea where they were getting their yarn. She wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

There'd been a thousand little things that she and Yannick let slide by over the last couple of years. She could only hope that the new commander had the common sense to understand that a thousand or so humans crammed into an incompletely renovated habitat with damned few creature comforts tended to break rules to make their lives better.

Hopefully.

Given Eser's luck, not damned likely.

They'd end up with an asshole who was all spit and polish, follow the rules no matter how stupid they were and how badly they fucked everyone up. Question was, who'd put the word in that Kesha needed to be replaced?

Other question was whether or not Eser should interfere. Not knowing who the new commander was, it was hard to know. She did want to find out who it was, why they'd done it, whoever it was. Just wasn't sure what she should do about it, if anything.

Eser meandered along up the walkway, slowly strolling and rubbing her belly in a gesture that all the aliens had taken to mean

'that human isn't hungry anymore'. Really was more a 'damn but my stomach is too full and it hurts' gesture but hey, whatever got the message across. Last thing Eser wanted was aliens darting away from her in terror of being eaten.

Didn't take long for Eser to locate her sometime-girlfriend Tanya, proper name Boreyeva Tatiana Nikolayevna but no one dared actually call her that. She'd decked the last person to use her given name and broken their jaw in three places in the process. Tanya was arguing amiably with Dora, one of Eser's former lovers, over some piece of electronic equipment. Probably medical equipment.

Tanya still had her scrubs on so she'd come straight from her shift to the Day of Joy. Short as Tanya was, she loomed over Dora who made petite people look tall. Dora was covered in grease and little burns but then she was always covered in them. The underside of her nails hadn't been clean in decades.

"Look, I know you need it fixed," Dora was saying, scowling as she did it, "but the damn thing is too broken. I can't fix it. We need replacement parts and Kesha hasn't okayed ordering them."

"How are we supposed to scan for infections if all our scanners are broken?" Tanya half-screamed, half-wailed. "This is ridiculous. Even Doctor Lipina's personal scanner's broken."

"Thought it was just out of calibration," Eser said as she sauntered over to very carefully, very warily wrap an arm around Tanya's shoulders.

"It is," Tanya snapped but she leaned into Eser's side so hey, not as angry as she seemed. Just frustrated which was totally justified. "It's worse than useless. All we've got right now is the station monitors and they're just not good enough for detecting infections as they're getting started."

"Well, I suppose I could go scrounging," Eser offered. "Gotta get it done quick though."

Both Dora and Tanya turned too-bright intense looks on Eser who just hummed and looked around to make sure no one was listening in. And no one was. Sure, there were Dancers just off to the side, swaying to the music only they heard and some Nikiphoros

flying around up near the ceiling like they were hunting for non-existent bugs, but no humans.

"Give," Dora said with a poke to Eser's belly.

"Got it from Yannick that there's a new Commander coming in on the next ship," Eser said. "Should be here tomorrow, maybe sooner. Any time, really."

"Let it not be a stickler," Tanya groaned.

"Let it be someone with the capacity to get a budget allotment approved," Dora countered and then grinned when Eser pointed at her and Tanya rolled her eyes. "That's what we really need. Throw enough money at our habitat and it'd actually work properly for once."

"True," Tanya said. She peered at Eser. "All right. You go find me a scanner or the parts to fix ours and I'll go ask around about this new Commander."

"Agreed," Dora said. "No one better at getting things out of the aliens than you, Eser. Well, other than Kesha and he's no help at all with the computers."

Eser snorted a laugh. That was the truth. Kesha really didn't give a damn how well things worked or how comfortable they were in the human habitat. All he cared was that the aliens thought well of them. Frankly, he'd probably get really annoyed with Eser if she did go do it.

But knowing what they were going up against with the new Commander would be very, very nice.

"All right, deal," Eser said. "You might want to go try the t'Saoir's cooking contest. They did something to that horrible seaweed that turned it not just edible but tasty enough for me to eat two servings."

Netted her two sets of incredulous stares but hey, it was true. And it gave them something yummy to eat. More Tanya than Dora. Sure, Eser was still fond of Dora but Tanya was the one she cared about.

As much as she was allowed to.

"Go on," Tanya said as she shoved the scanner into Eser's hands and then pushed her onwards. "Get to work."

Really weren't too many options of who to ask about spare parts. Sure, there were hundreds of alien species on the station but only a

few of them had tech that was reasonably compatible with humanity's. And only two did any real trading with humans so that they might have scrap scanners that Dora could cannibalize to fix Tanya's medical equipment. That was the t'Saoir and the Nikiphoros.

So Eser wandered on up the way, out past the music and the dancing, through a herd of slowly marching Saurids with horns spiking off their foreheads and noses and to the marketplace. The little ones closest to the human habitat wouldn't have anything useful. They were more for diplomacy and socializing than real commerce. The big marketplace was a habitat that'd been transformed into a gathering place for every species on the station.

Really, there was no knowing if 'commerce' meant the same thing to the other species. Most of them seemed to treat it like a game instead of anything serious. T'Saoir were one of the ones that did take it seriously. But then they took everything seriously, especially cooking.

Eser paused at the entrance, studying the complex network of platforms, ramps and mini-habitats for the various water-, toxic air- and void-breathing species. It looked a lot like the images of neural nets that Tanya had shown her once after they'd had epic good sex, just made of shiny not-steel and white not-plastic. Still, it looked decidedly organic despite what it was made of.

It even shifted around the way neurons did, forming new connections based on what activity was happening on any given day. Which meant that the path she'd followed a couple of weeks ago to get to the t'Saoir's trading site wasn't there. Eser shrugged it off and set off in their general direction, going up, then down, or more accurately northwest then southeast with a slant up and down. Navigating the market could get confusing quick if you didn't remember that it was an inside-out globe.

Took her about half an hour to find a path to the t'Saoir all of whom drummed their tentacles and snapped their beaks as Eser walked up. She grinned at them and thumped a fist against the floor in good faith. Still wasn't sure what the drumming meant other than strong emotions but hey, they liked it so Eser did it, too.

"Got a broken scanner," Eser said, holding it at eyestalk level. "Need to repair it. Got any spare parts that'd be compatible?"

The lead t'Saoir clicked its beak several times, eyestalks rotating as two came up, three went down and four went to either side of Eser's hand. "Is simple technology."

"Granted," Eser said. "Needed though. Humans, soft and squishy, you know."

Eyestalks all around her retracted back into the t'Saoir skulls. They even pulled their tentacles back closer to their bodies as if afraid they were going to hurt Eser. She snorted at that, shaking her head.

"Not worried about you guys," Eser said. "Worried about parasites and infections. That's the sort of thing it's designed to detect. Cancers, too. It's necessary and it's broken. So, you got stuff that can repair it?"

"Simple technology," the lead t'Saoir repeated, shaking its eyestalks side to side like a human might shake her head. "Too simple. Do not have this."

"Great," Eser sighed. She tucked the scanner back into her pocket before waving over her head. "The Nikiphoros in the middle still or did they move? Figure they're the next best bet for this."

Sixteen tentacles pointed squarely westward, near straight across from where they were standing. Eser craned her neck, then crouched down. And yeah, there the Nikiphoros were, perched underneath a platform that'd been adjusted so that some void-breathing aliens could use it. Weird looking with them there. Looked like a giant black pearl with some occasional shimmers of movement inside.

"Okay then," Eser said. "Thanks for the point, guys. Good Day of Joy to you."

She laughed as the t'Saoir threw up their tentacles and then started drumming on the floor again. Their drumming spread to other aliens and pretty quickly the whole damned market was full of aliens singing, dancing, drumming, whistling, clicking, whatever it was they did to make music.

Seriously, Eser really preferred the eating Days of Joys. Always so damned loud when it was a music day.

Getting to a platform where she could talk to the Nikiphoros took another half hour. She ended up on one that was at ninety degrees to them. Weird to see them standing perpendicular instead of dangling from structures overhead. But hey, she probably looked like she was about to slide off the platform to them so it was equally weird for them. Probably.

"Hey guys," Eser said, holding up the scanner. "It's broken. Need to fix it or replace it. Any chance you got something that will work?"

Two of the Nikiphoros reached out with their long bat-wings and snatched it right out of her hand. She glowered at them but they didn't pay a bit of attention to that. Instead they held it in their wings and made little clicking sounds. Then screeches, low enough that Eser could control her wince. Then they passed the thing around, all of them chattering to each other, half the chatter outside of Eser's hearing range.

"Broken," was all the Nikiphoros said when they passed it back to her.

"Yeah, fixable broken or broken-broken?" Because sometimes there was just no point to saying 'yeah, I said that already'.

"Broken-broken," the Nikiphoros said firmly enough that Eser groaned. "Medical equipment, yes?"

"Yup," Eser agreed. She sighed. "And last one we have. Need to order more but that'll take a while. We're not going to be able to go out of the habitat much if we can't scan for parasites, illnesses and the like. You know where I can get an acceptable replacement? You know, other than inviting the Dancers into our habitat which just is not going to happen at all."

The little joke got a wave of delighted bat-faced Nikiphoros grins and silent huffing laughs as they swayed and nodded and grinned at her. Eser grinned back. Weird aliens but she'd always liked them. Almost as much as the fur-babies but hey, fur-babies looked like overgrown Maine Coones so yeah, that was just inevitable.

"Best to ask is Creators," the Nikiphoros said and then laughed even harder when Eser blew a raspberry at him. Her. It. Whatever.

"Yes, good joke. We have. Is not permitted to share but have. Can make one will be permitted to share. Must be trade, though."

"Okay, what you want?" Eser asked.

It wouldn't be money. The Nikiphoros' grasp on commerce was so weak that Eser sometimes wondered if they had a group mind or something. Except no, they just didn't have anything like an economy. Or money. Maybe.

So it'd be something more physical or a favor. Physical was hard given how little Eser had to bargain with. A favor? Might be worse because Eser really didn't want to owe anyone anything if she could help it.

"The human fur-clothes," the Nikiphoros said, poking at Eser's shoulder, one vestigial finger plucking at her sweater, "this. This fabric. Can be made in many shapes, yes?"

"Ah, yeah?" Eser said, blinking at him. "Pretty close to any shape you can imagine. Or we can imagine, really. Ah, well, not me. I don't have that skill. Know those who do, though."

"Is small child, ours," the Nikiphoros said, gesturing with his wings to indicate a real baby, only about a foot long, maybe four-foot wing span. "Sick. Is sad and lonely and needs one to cuddle with. Is possible make cuddle toy out of fur-clothes?"

"It's not only possible it's something we can do easy," Eser said, smiling at him. "Seriously, just ask. We'll do that for the joy of it, not just because of a trade. How big you want it? Look like one of you or something else? Need any special colors? Or special stuffing?"

The mass of Nikiphoros took flight, screeching in delight. The one Eser was talking to stayed put but man, he sure as hell wanted to be flying, too. He looked happy as could be, wings vibrating and ears wiggling wildly.

Took about fifteen minutes for Eser to get a good sketch of what they wanted and get an idea of how big it should be. She left after bumping her fist to the Nikiphoros' wing to seal the trade. It took flight, screeching happily with the others as Eser shook her head and made her way back to the habitat.

Time to go enlist the Stitch'n'Bitch crew.

Like any of them would say no to knitting a cuddle toy for a sick baby.

Two hours later, after finding her meandering path back through the market, going through entirely too many diversions and people asking questions and eating just a little too much fried food for Eser's stomach's happiness, she glared at the Stitch'n'Bitch crew.

Who were less than interested in dropping their current projects even for Eser. Or for Tanya. Granted, Igorek thought Tanya was the worst nurse ever, mostly because she flatly refused to flatter his ego when she did his checkups. And Vitya was knitting a really lovely shawl out of ridiculously expensive imported cashmere but still. You'd think at least Tima and Jora would be in for it. They both loved making toys even if there weren't any kids to give the toys to.

"You can't just waltz up and expect us to give up our projects, Eser," Igorek snapped at her as he aggressively knitted cables into his ugly orange and purple sweater.

"That thing could be a traffic cone and you're telling me you're not willing to take some time off it?" Eser asked. "That's acrylic, Igorek. I don't even have to touch it to know it's acrylic. You hate acrylic yarn."

"...You don't know that," Igorek said, hunching over his knitting as he knitted even louder. Seriously, the needles clacking together sounded a hell of a lot like a machine gun.

"Oh please, it is," Vitya said, tossing his hair. He was the picture-perfect Russian, tall, muscular, with perfect white-blond hair. "I know you're desperate for yarn, Igorek, but really. Either way, I don't see why we would do this for you. If the child needs a toy, it's parents should make it for them. Or buy one."

Eser bit her cheek, counted to three and then shrugged, throwing up her hands. "Fine, you don't want to help a sick baby, you don't want to help. I just thought you'd be into that. I mean, making 'human fur-clothes' toys for sick babies seems like something you guys would like. I guess I'll just go tell the Nikiphoros their baby will go without a cuddle toy while its sick."

She shook her head at them, mock-sadly because the instant she'd mention 'sick baby' the needles had slowed. 'Human fur-clothes'

had gotten twin looks of unholy glee out of Tima and Jora, both of whom grinned like the absolute devils they were. The mention of 'Nikiphoros' made Vitya flinch.

"You are the biggest damned bitch on the station," Igorek snarled at her as he shoved his makeshift needle guards onto the ends of his needles so he wouldn't drop any stitches. Though why he'd make the effort on that monstrosity of a sweater Eser didn't know. "I hope you know that."

"Proud of it, actually," Eser said, just as smug as she could be when she really wasn't sure that they'd be willing to do it. "Did get specs from them on what they'd like. Sort of wanted a mini-Nikiphoros, kinda like a blown-up version of the bat you made a while back Tima. But with ears like the fennec fox you made, Jora. And stuffed with those little beads you use in the pillows, Igorek."

"Ah," Vitya paused and then slowly put his knitting down, "do you know what yarn they wanted it made from?"

"They were off to get it and bring it back to us," Eser said. "Won't come from your stores at all. I think they were going to trade for it from one of the species down round the bottom of the station, down where humans haven't gotten to yet."

All four of them made grabby hands in the air, looking as hungry as an Xr'x parasite without a body. Eser shivered, pushing that whole set of memories way to the back. No way was she going to deal with that mess right now. Day of Joy, broken scanner, Tanya, baby cuddle toy. Not death and blood today.

"Well, if there's going to be new yarn," Igorek said, his voice shaking, "I suppose we can come up with something."

"Mm-hmm," Tima said. "Come on. What do they need for this cuddle toy?"

Eser grinned and settled down to share the sketches and notes she'd made. Took about two seconds before Vitya snatched the pad right out of her hands, copying all the data over to their pads so that they could all coo and hum and compare notes over how to do it.

She eased her pad back out of Vitya's hands and then stepped back as the Nikiphoros arrived carrying bags of yarn, big bags, in

their feet. The bags tumbled down between Eser and the Stitch'n'Bitch crew, one tumbling open to show lovely yarn, grey and gold with hints of green.

Eser stepped even further back because yeah, no way was she getting in the middle of that feeding frenzy. One of the Nikiphoros, the one she'd negotiated with earlier, swept down, landing next to her only to hop awkwardly on one foot as it held out something small.

"Oh hey, the scanner we needed," Eser said. She took it and grinned at the Nikiphoros. "Thanks. That's faster than I expected. You might get more than one cuddle toy out of them. That yarn's right up their alley."

"...Alley?" the Nikiphoros asked, blinking at her as his ears swiveled wildly.

"Heh, means that it's just the sort of thing that they like the most," Eser explained. "This have about the same functions as ours used to?"

The Nikiphoros nodded. "Exactly. Will do as yours did. Is proper."

It bobbed its head, took flight only long enough to circle and land properly upside down from the perches overhead. Eser snorted and shook her head. Well, that was solved. They could sort the whole cuddle toy thing out themselves. And they'd likely be happier without Eser involved with it.

And hey, now they had a new link to a new trade item. Nikiphoros could get yarn that humans could turn into trade goods.

Tanya was curled up next to the fountain, watching the rainbows of light coming off them. She had a tiny baby t'Saoir in her lap, the parents standing nearby with their eyestalks retracted right back down to their skulls. All four of them, parents and baby, were doing that quietly humming and swaying thing t'Saoir did when they were having a psychedelic experience.

"Got you a new scanner," Eser said, passing it over to Tanya who gasped and carefully shifted out from under the baby t'Saoir. "Arranged a deal between the Nikiphoros and the Stitch'n'Bitch crew for it."

Tanya beamed and tackled Eser so hard that she nearly knocked Eser over. Not so hard that Eser dropped the scanner, of course, but

hey, Eser was all for good hugs. And kisses, which she was getting when someone nicked the scanner right out of Eser's hand.

"What's this?" Commander Kesha asked, frowning at the new scanner.

"Tanya's broke," Eser said, nicking it right back from Kesha and passing it to Tanya who hugged the scanner to her chest protectively. "So I arranged a trade deal between the knitters and the Nikiphoros. There's a sick baby Nikiphoros who..." She paused and then snorted a laugh as Kesha's eyes started to glaze over. "Yeah, you know what? Never mind. Just check with the cleaning crew tomorrow sometime. Betcha they'll have new trade goods to records."

"It have greater capabilities than ours?" Commander Kesha asked with that distinctly 'going to take it away and claim it if I can get away with it' look in his eyes. The asshole. "It'll need to be checked."

"Nope," Eser said. She shrugged casually. "Go ask the Nikiphoros. They specifically said it's forbidden for them to give us anything but what we've already gotten. Has the exact same capabilities as our scanner. They did a pretty through check of the thing so I believe them."

Tanya huffed and checked the scanner against herself and then Eser. "Yeah, it's pretty much identical. Nice grip. I like it better than ours. But it's the same tests and result ranges."

She offered it to Kesha who curled his lip and held up a hand to push the scanner away.

"If that's all it is then I don't care," Kesha replied.

He strolled off, rolling side to side in that fat-man walk that always made the aliens relax. Human that fat couldn't be hungry after all. Kesha drummed his fingers against his belly as he walked, making it jiggle.

"Asshole," Eser murmured to Tanya. "Only cares as long as he can take it away and get credit for it. Didn't even bother to ask why you couldn't use a different scanner."

"I know," Tanya agreed. She snorted. "Come on. I'm going to put this in my locker and then we can go have some fun together."

The way she said 'fun' made Eser grin. Yeah, alone time while

everyone else was busy enjoying the day off was a great idea. Made all the roaming around worth it. Eser offered her elbow and grinned as Tanya took it, tucking her hand into Eser's arm.

"I'm all yours," Eser said. "Lead the way."

They headed off through the dancing, singing, gossiping mass of humans and aliens. Not a bad Day of Joy after all, not if Eser managed to get Tanya alone and happy and not exhausted from her shift in the infirmary for once. Maybe even a great day.

Here's hoping that they ended up with a good day tomorrow, too.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: DRAGON RIDER'S SONG

I think everyone's read Dragonriders of Pern. And if they haven't, well, they should. Those stories had a huge impact on me growing up. I loved the idea of humans and dragons living and working together but the telepathy thing didn't quite work for me. So when I decided to write a romance with dragons, I found a very different way for my dragon rider to communicate. Not just with her dragon but also with a pretty girl visiting her mother's estate...

1. GUEST

Amynta strode into her mother, Timo's, home, shedding her helmet and shield with noisy clangs that sent the servants scurrying. Amynta kicked aside her greaves with a sigh of relief that she didn't bother to hide. Breastplate, pauldron and the heavy leather coat that protected her from dragon fire and freezing at altitude went next. She paused at the threshold of the kitchen to unlace her heavy boots so that she could kick them off.

"Oh."

The low musical word startled Amynta enough that she lost her balance and toppled to the red, yellow and blue painted tiles. A sea foam green floor-length stola filled her eyes as she swept her gaze upwards to a delicate burnt umber hand adorned by slender gold rings. The lovely young woman had a pair of laughing golden-brown eyes framed by perfect chestnut curls.

"Ah, hello?" Amynta said as she scrambled back to her feet. "Sorry, I didn't know that Mother, I mean Timo, I mean Senator Timo was hosting guests right now."

She couldn't help but be acutely aware of the differences between Amynta and her mother's beautiful guest. While the gorgeous young woman was immaculately dressed, perfectly coifed with stylish curls,

Amynta now wore only her partially unlaced boots, breast bindings and underwear. After hours in her helmet, Amynta knew that her hair had to be a bird's nest of tangles. Sweat had long since soaked through all the layers of her clothes so Amynta had to be painfully pungent.

Embarrassment made Amynta's cheeks heat. She'd gotten used to stripping as soon as she and Blood Blossom, her dragon, got home to the barracks. It had been automatic to do the same here even though this wasn't the barracks and her mother hated it when Amynta stripped on the way in. For the first time Amynta understood her mother's objections, if only because it would have been nice to have made a better first impression.

"Must you scatter your armor everywhere when you come in?" Timo asked as she stalked over, delicate sandals sounding more like heavy boots with the impact of her heels. She held Amynta's coat in two fingers, extended to arm's reach, as if it might infect her. "The servants don't appreciate cleaning up after you, Amynta. You are a woman grown. I would appreciate if you would attempt to learn how to behave like an adult."

"And you don't appreciate me walking around the house stinking of sweat and dragon fire," Amynta snarled as she snatched the coat out of Timo's fingers. Just like Timo to try to make Amynta look bad in front of someone she might be interested in. "By Blood Blossom's shell, I've heard your thoughts about 'responsible adulthood' a thousand times. Guest?"

Amynta gestured towards the young woman who watched the two of them as though she was at the theatre. Fortunately, she didn't seem upset by Amynta's semi-nudity, Timo's hostility or this round of their never-ending arguments about Amynta's choice of career. If anything, she seemed fascinated.

The foyer carried their words through the house. It opened on the other hallways and rooms and was specifically designed for letting the servants know that someone had arrived. Timo couldn't have picked a better location to let Amynta know that she had not been forgiven. Not that it mattered to Amynta if the entire town knew

that she was still at odds with her powerful mother. Everyone already knew that, from the town mayor on down to the servants who poked their heads into the foyer to frown at Amynta.

"Yes, I have a guest," Timo drawled as she nodded graciously towards her guest. "Her name is Pallas and she's come from the Academy to study the copies of Ferenius' histories in our private library. I presume that you'll never see her again because of it. There are other guests, as well, who are likely to take you for a prostitute if you walk around without clothing."

"More likely they'd take me for a warrior or field slave," Amynta snorted. "No prostitute has ever had my muscles, at least not the female ones."

Pallas tried to smother a shocked giggle behind her hand, eyes gone almost true gold with amusement when Amynta turned to look at her. She didn't seem offended at all by the hostility between Amynta and Timo, thank the Fire Gods. Timo glared at Amynta, eyes so narrow that Amynta would have braced for attack if it was anyone else.

"You are a bit exposed," Pallas commented diplomatically enough that Timo eased back slightly, her shoulders coming down. Her voice was lovely, rich and throaty but with a sort of control that made Amynta wonder wildly for a second what she would sound like if she sang. "Not that I mind but one of the other guests is a vestal virgin."

Amynta's cheeks burned. "Ah. Sorry. I'll just go get cleaned up."

"Finally," Timo sighed. "And if you could manage to remember your etiquette before dinner, it would be even more appreciated. We civilized folk have manners unlike your dragon riding *friends*, you know."

The insinuation that Amynta wasn't as serious about dragon riding as Timo was about her work in the senate made Amynta's teeth clench. It was always this way. No matter what Amynta did, it wasn't good enough. Even when she had tried to follow in her mother's footsteps all Timo had for her was scorn, disapproval and 'lessons' about how far she was from perfection.

Amynta turned and waved one hand at Pallas, signing 'my apolo-

gies for what will follow' the way Blood Blossom often did before tearing into her squealing and kicking dinner. It was pure habit as there was no way Pallas could understand the little gesture. Most dragon riders didn't catch onto those sorts of gestures until they'd been riding for several years.

Before Amynta could turn back to yell at her mother in earnest, Pallas dropped her hand from her mouth and smiled so brightly at Amynta that the anger drained straight out of her. It was a beautiful smile that stretched Pallas' lush lips and wrinkled her eyes up so that it illuminated Pallas from the inside out. Amynta's heart pounded against her breastbone suddenly. She licked her lips, entirely too aware of Timo's fierce glare at them both. A lump settled in her throat as her mouth went dry.

"I'm pleased that I got to meet you, Dragon Rider Amynta," Pallas said. "I hope that you do come to dinner. I'd love to talk to you further."

"Ah, I'll... I'll be there," Amynta said. She swallowed against the nervous, excited lump in her throat. Her throat burned as she tried to push down the nervousness so that she wouldn't embarrass herself in front of Pallas, much less Timo. The nervousness slid all the way down to her stomach, settling there to make her stomach flutter like new hatchling wings fluttering.

2. DINNER

Wine mixed with honeyed dates on Amynta's tongue as she silently listened to the conversation flowing around her. She hadn't expected dinner to be a semi-formal affair. Timo had sent a proper floor-length stola to the baths for Amynta to wear. Amynta had ignored it in favor of a much more comfortable chiton that reached to her knees.

Part of it had been the desire to rebel against Timo's ever-misplaced expectations but a bigger part of Amynta had simply not wanted to wear a stola that made her look like a scarecrow dressed in one of Timo's cast off garments. As simple as Amynta's chiton was, just a piece of fabric twice as long as Amynta's arms stretched out, it draped around her muscular body far more attractively than the too soft, too pale, too womanly stola.

Amynta didn't really care what Timo's other guests thought of her. Most of them probably had already been warned, privately or publicly depending on Timo's temper at the time, that Amynta was anything but a proper daughter of nobility. Really, it had been pure pride that made her choose a garment that looked good on her for the dinner even if it was inappropriate for the gathering.

It wasn't as though Amynta had ever had much of a womanly

figure. Training to ride dragons gave her enough muscle that people frequently mistook her for a man. She just didn't want Pallas to look at her and giggle at how much she looked like a too-old cheap actor playing a woman's role in a stola that had been stuffed with apples to fill it out. Not that Amynta would have padded out the bust of the stola even if she had worn it.

"At least I took the palla," Amynta muttered into her wine cup before tugging the long end of the draped shall so that her right thigh wasn't naked. "I don't look a total idiot."

The rest of the dinner party reclined comfortably on their couches. Amynta did her best not to fidget nervously. She would have preferred eating in the kitchen to this but Timo would have come after her with a whip if she had. Not to mention that Amynta wouldn't have gotten to watch Pallas enchanting the room with her presence and lovely voice.

Pallas had the one farthest from the door, making her the center of attention for the room. Timo had changed into a stola embroidered with so much gold thread that the hem of her stola didn't drape over her feet; it lurched, awkward and stiff in its attempt to impress. Unlike Timo, Pallas wore the same sea-green stola that she had before. She'd added a soft white palla pinned at her left shoulder with a tiny golden dragon in flight but that was all she'd done to prepare for the party.

She held everyone's attention with ease, smiling and laughing as though she was a nightingale turned human for the event. It seemed that everyone thought she was beautiful. Amynta gritted her teeth as two sixty year old male senators took turns trying to come up with poetry that would describe Pallas' eyebrows well enough. Pallas laughed, waved one hand as she accepted their extravagant compliments and then gracefully turned the conversation to a discussion of the latest legislation going through the senate.

Amynta was just glad that she'd been granted a couch close enough to hear what Pallas said. Her unexpected return home most certainly would have justified Timo exiling her to the couches closest to the door where what was left of the food always arrived cold and

the wine was nearly gone before it was poured. That had happened often enough in the past as Timo tried to show Amynta just what she was losing by not following Timo into politics.

No matter how many times Amynta told Timo that she was happy as a dragon rider and miserable dealing with politics, Timo tried to remind Amynta of her place. She should be here, working to rule their country. Amynta was noble. Her duty to family should override duty to country. Joy had no place in the discussion as far as Timo was concerned.

None of the guests paid Amynta any mind but she was more than happy to be ignored. Senators always bored her. The one general who had attended was infantry. They ignored each other entirely rather than snipe at each other's worthlessness in the field of combat. There were two other scholars who had apparently come with Pallas but they looked as uncomfortable at the party as Amynta felt. All they did was eat and drink while nodding at whatever Pallas said.

That was fine. It let her stare at Pallas and simply enjoy Pallas' voice rather than trying to come up with something appropriate to talk about. It had been entirely too long since Amynta had read Ferenius' histories and the only laws she paid attention to were the ones related to dragons. Most of the less flirtatious discussion at dinner had gone straight over Amynta's head.

"Amynta," Pallas said, startling Amynta so badly that she nearly dropped her wine cup. "I've heard that dragon riders sing in battle to encourage their dragons. Is that true?"

"Yes?" Amynta asked.

Pallas giggled at Amynta's blank stare which only made the other guests stare all the harder at Amynta. As the seconds stretched Timo's arch look became a ferocious glare at Amynta's complete lack of self-possession. Amynta cleared her throat and blushed as she smiled shyly at Pallas.

"Ahem. I mean, yes, we do," Amynta finally said. "Dragons communicate in song, you see, so if we want them to understand us then we have to sing too."

"Really?" Pallas breathed, lovely lips parted and eyes darkening

into deep brown with so much delight that the rest of Timo's guests also smiled at Amynta.

"Really."

"Would you... consider singing for us after dinner?" Pallas asked so shyly that it made Amynta's cheeks flare brighter red still. "I would love to hear a dragon rider's song. I have a cousin who trained to ride dragons but he had to stop after his voice changed. It went too deep for him to sing properly."

Amynta glanced at Timo. The one time she'd dared to sing to Blood Blossom during a visit Timo had been so unsettled that she'd ended up screaming at Amynta in public. Granted, this time Blood Blossom had flown back to the barracks so that she didn't have to deal with Timo, but that didn't mean that Timo would approve.

She obviously didn't. Timo glared back at Amynta, lips thin, eyes narrowed with anger that Amynta would dare to disrupt her dinner party in any way, much less one that so clearly highlighted the fact that Amynta hadn't followed her mother's path. In contrast, the other party guests looked curious. Pallas bit her lip when Amynta turned back to her. Amynta's fingers trembled on the edge of her couch as she leaned closer even though several couches lay between them.

"I'd be honored to," Amynta replied.

3. GARDEN

"*Y*ou cannot do this!" Timo hissed at Amynta as the servants cleared the couches and tables.

The other guests had drifted out into the garden following Pallas the ever-shining sun around which they all orbited. This left Amynta alone with her mother. Amynta shifted her feet, toes subconsciously curling down in her sandals in preparation for a physical attack from Timo. Such violence hadn't happened since Amynta grew taller than her mother but the old need to defend herself remained deeply ingrained.

"She's your guest, Mother," Amynta replied quietly so that no one else would hear their argument. "How many times have you told me to be polite to the guests?"

"That's not what this is about," Timo snapped. She raised her chin and smiled stiffly when one of the guests, a senator with an elaborately embroidered palla draped over his ankle-length chiton, glanced their way with worry in his eyes. "You're worse than a bitch in heat," Timo said once the senator was gone. "Pallas is virginal, Amynta. You will keep your hands to yourself."

"I've not so much as touched her," Amynta growled back. "And I won't. I have to be back on patrol in three days, Mother. Pallas already

said that she's leaving tomorrow. There isn't time for anything to develop."

"Good."

Amynta shook her head. Timo strode off into the gardens to entertain her guests with the same determined political smile that spoke of deals to be made and people to be convinced to take Timo's side. It was exactly what had driven Amynta out of the house and into the dragon rider corps. They were far too much alike despite having such wildly different desires and dreams.

Not that it mattered now. Even if Timo had convinced Amynta to abandon Blood Blossom, give up her post among the dragon riders and join her in politics, Amynta was far too tightly tied to the dragon riders to be effective in politics. She would never be an effective senator like her mother.

Amynta joined the others outside, walking slowly along the edges of the small groups of chatting people. Most of them nodded to her, some respectfully, some with disapproval obvious in the set of their shoulders and tightness of their lips. The general snorted and jerked his chin at Timo as if to say he understood totally why Amynta had chosen to be a dragon rider. She shrugged at him, smiling wryly because what was there to say.

The garden was cool, lush with all the plants the servants had cultivated. Pallas had drifted to the fountain, perching on the wide rim as if she truly were a nightingale. In her pale stola she looked like something from a dream rather than anything real. Amynta slowly walked over, her heart beat faster as Pallas smiled in greeting.

"Amynta," Pallas said, her eyes wrinkling around the corners in ways that made her seem older than her apparent years in a smile that barely quirked her lips. "Will you sing for us now?"

"I'll sing for *you*," Amynta said. "The songs are communication, you see, not just entertainment. They're the dragon equivalent of a conversation."

Amynta could see Timo's expression out of the corner of her eye. She looked furious, a disapproving scowl making her face dark and cruel despite the other guests relatively congenial curiosity. Timo's

anger didn't compare against the look in Pallas' eyes. It had been a long time since Amynta felt like a coltish girl who'd never been kissed. Pallas brought it out so easily. All that mattered as Amynta shifted closer to Pallas was the pretty blush that crept over Pallas' dark cheeks as she nodded that she would like that.

"Does it matter what you say?" Pallas asked.

"Of course," Amynta said. "It always matters what you say and who you say it to."

The moon peeked over the garden wall, spilling silvery light over the olive tree in the back by the wall. The ferns by the house seemed to sway in the moonlight despite the lack of wind. It turned Pallas' sea foam stola into spun silver. The hem on Amynta's palla shaded to black under the combined torch and moon light. As the guests quieted, Amynta took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Perhaps they would only have this one night. If so, Amynta decided that she would make the most of the time she had. Timo didn't understand the language of the dragons so Amynta could say whatever she wanted. And right now, all Amynta wanted to do was tell Pallas how beautiful she was and what a joy it was to see her here in Timo's house.

4. SONG

Dragon song was high and thin, sung in registers that most humans struggled to reach. It wasn't pleasant on the ear like true song. Amynta was grateful that she'd eaten lightly, that she'd only drunk one glass of sharp wine. Her throat was clear, allowing her to sing her best.

"Alone in a crowd," Amynta began, "unseen except to disapprove. Blood binds sometimes when it shouldn't. Flight becomes freedom except the ground always calls."

She let her voice start out soft, thoughtful despite the effort it took to reach the high notes of 'flight' and 'freedom'. Around Amynta the other party guests stirred, discomfort on their faces as they edged further away from the painfully high notes.

That was normal. Humans didn't enjoy dragon song even when it was sung by a human throat. It was too high, too alien for comfort. The only one who seemed untroubled was Pallas. She stared up at Amynta with a bright, curious expression. Her golden-brown eyes were like wells of night gently urging Amynta on.

"Family becomes a burden when hatchlings are bound too tightly," Amynta sang.

She allowed all of her frustration with Timo into the long rising

sequence of notes that formed 'burden'. It sounded just like a dragon struggling skyward with a heavy load on its back. Pallas frowned at that, drawing in a startled breath that almost made Amynta believe she understood what the song meant.

"Yet the nest always calls," Amynta continued more thoughtfully.

She looked around the garden she'd known since infancy, allowing 'calls' to stretch so much that it became 'welcomes' then 'shelters' and finally ended it when it became 'buries'. All of the words were right. It just depended on how hard she'd fought with Timo, and on which word/description felt most right at any given moment.

Pallas lifted a hand, moonlight glimmering on tears that gathered in her eyes without falling. Behind her, behind the fountain, Timo's face hovered in the darkness like an angry ghost Amynta looked at Timo, regret filling her.

"Parenthood can be a burden to one who does not desire it," Amynta mused. The thoughtfulness took the song lower, into the register that dragons could barely hear but which felt less painful to human ears. *"It comes and makes its demands even if mothers are not ready. The price is high and the burden long. Some accept that burden and find joy flying with their young. Others cannot."*

Timo's chin went up defiantly as Amynta sang to her, towards her, about her. All Amynta could see was hostility in her eyes. She slashed one thumb across her throat, telling Amynta to stop singing at once. Amynta winced and sighed. Truly, some mothers couldn't accept the choices of their young.

5. CHORUS

*P*allas blinked several times when Amynta winced. She looked sharply over her shoulder, just in time to catch Timo dropping her hand from her throat. Amynta stepped back from Pallas, from the other party guests. She shouldn't have come home today no matter how much she missed this place.

"Adulthood comes when fledglings fly free to make their own nests," Pallas sang in much too low and earthy tones for true dragon song.

Her voice was beautiful, rich and warm like being wrapped in a blanket on a cold winter's night. It was far too low for a dragon to hear but it sounded like heaven in Amynta's ears. How she knew the song was a mystery until Amynta realized that Pallas must have learned from her cousin. Or maybe, Amynta thought as Timo gasped, the cousin was a polite fiction to hide Pallas' past among the dragon riders.

Amynta stared, her heart thumping hard in her chest as Pallas stood to take Amynta's hand. *"Few fledglings successfully make their nest the first attempt."*

"Yet every nest attempted teaches new skills," Pallas laughed. Her fingers were warm and encouraging in Amynta's palm. *"The fledgling*

who stays in the nest will inevitably die. Only by flying free can a fledgling become an adult."

The old saying was one that Blood Blossom had told her over and over since they started working together. It had become something of a private joke between the two of them. Amynta laughed, her knees shaking at hearing that same old advice from an all new quarter.

It felt like her first flight with Blood Blossom, like something new was being built but that was nonsense. Amynta shook her head. She didn't get to have relationships like this. None of her lovers had ever stayed with her, unwilling to compete against Amynta's bond with Blood Blossom. But Pallas didn't look as though she had any problems with the fact that Amynta was a dragon rider. If her smile was anything to judge by, she approved.

"What are you saying?" Timo demanded as she strode around the fountain to pull Amynta away from Pallas. "What is going on? When did you teach her dragon song, Amynta?"

"Amynta didn't teach me dragon song, Senator Timo," Pallas said so sternly that Timo winced visibly. "I knew it already. I've known it for years."

"If you want to know what I said," Amynta huffed as her mother turned to glare at her, "you might consider asking me politely without assuming that I was rude or disobedient towards you. I said nothing improper. Dragon song sounds most hostile when it's most thoughtful and sad."

Timo started, staring up into Amynta's eyes. Amynta could see her turning ideas over in her eyes, quickly flipping between responses that would be appropriate before her guests. Timo's mouth moved but no sound came out at first. After a second, Timo snapped her mouth shut and rubbed the sharp arch of her nose. Amynta stood still, waiting. Interrupting her mother's thoughts never went well for anyone, especially for Amynta.

"What?" Timo murmured so quietly that it was doubtful that Pallas heard it, much less anyone else.

"Just... regret," Amynta replied equally quietly. "I didn't know she

knew dragon song otherwise I would have said something else entirely."

Timo hid a two-second smirk behind an upraised hand, her eyes abruptly amused at Amynta's embarrassment. The smirk disappeared immediately after that as Timo waved her hand at Pallas' angry expression. She bowed her head towards Pallas as if it would make up for her accusations.

"Well, if that's all you're talking about then I suppose I might owe you an apology," Timo said. "Really, dragon song is so unpleasant to listen to that I always assume the worst."

She sauntered off to talk to her fellow senators on the far side of the garden, leaving Pallas and Amynta alone. The other guests followed, some quickly as if relieved to be allowed to escape, others more slowly as if they were curious to see what Amynta and Pallas might do if freed from Timo's disapproving supervision. Shortly, though, Amynta was alone with Pallas by the fountain.

6. PROMISE

"*That one is horrible,*" Pallas sang softly, warmly, far too deeply for a dragon to hear.

"That one had never wanted motherhood," Amynta explained in her own version of a low, deep tone. The uncommon deepness made the dragon song into something strange and absurdly intimate. *"That one wished to lead, to fly into battle, to explore the world. Motherhood killed all those dreams."*

"*Sad,*" Pallas sang.

Her tone changed the single word from a statement of understanding into a question. Amynta shrugged, gently tugging Pallas further away from the other party guests and their political talk. She had her own questions about Pallas and her ability to sing dragon song. Her mother's regrets over Amynta's accidental conception were something that Amynta could never ease so there was no point in spending much time discussing it.

They settled together on a bench under a bower of draped wisteria. The bench wasn't hidden. Timo and the other guests could still see them but at least it was dark enough that their expressions wouldn't be immediately obvious. It was the best that Amynta could do short of hauling Pallas off to the library or her bedroom.

"This one feels sorrow for what was lost between this one and her mother," Amynta explained. She gestured discretely towards Timo and her clique of senators. "That one was never allowed to fly free. That one will never build the nest that was dreamed of. That one will die still trapped in a nest built by that one's parents."

"You're far more compassionate than I would be," Pallas murmured. "Sorry, I can't sing for very long anymore."

"It is hard on the throat," Amynta agreed. "And I've been told that. My dragon frequently complains about my excessive kindness. She says that I would praise an enemy before killing them."

Pallas giggled, wrinkling her nose as if she knew exactly what it was like to have a dragon nagging you about something. Amynta bit her lip and cocked her head so that she could stare more deeply into Pallas' eyes. Some of the older dragon riders claimed that they could always tell when they met someone who had trained with dragons, who had ridden them. She'd never been able to do so before.

"You rode," Amynta whispered. "It wasn't your cousin who trained. It was you."

"Ah...!" Pallas gasped and then stared at her toes, kicking them out from under the hem of her stola like a little girl. She swung her feet as she nodded shyly. "I lied. I hate it when people say that I'm so much better off away from the dragons."

"Ought to punch them," Amynta grumbled. "You must have ridden messenger. As small as you are you wouldn't have weighed them down. They're the wildest fliers I've ever seen."

"I did," Pallas said. Her smile was wicked and sly as she looked up through her lashes. "You're obviously a warrior. I almost forgot what it was like when the warriors would come back, smelling of smoke and clouds, stripping their armor as they stomped towards the baths. It was like... being home again."

Amynta blushed and laughed, rubbing the back of her neck. Even Timo's head snapping up to glare at them didn't diminish the joy making her heart sing like a dragon in flight. Pallas laughed with her.

She sat up and reached out to take Amynta's. As soon as she did so Timo's voice rose, carrying from the other side of the garden like

the sound of a rogue ocean wave crashing against the shore. Of course, her guests followed suit, laughing and talking more loudly in covert disapproval for the forward behavior.

"I think..." Amynta stopped, shaking her head no. *"I think I want to build my own nest. I think I want to fly free but I do not want to fly alone."*

"I would enjoy flying with you," Pallas replied, her tongue flicking out to touch her upper lip for a second just like a dragon scenting the air for lightning. *"That is, if you can keep up with me."*

"I think I would like to try," Amynta said and laughed at the joy in Pallas' beautiful dark eyes.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: GOSSAMER THREADS

*Epic fantasy. When people talk about fantasy that's usually what they mean. But grand deeds and powerful magic doesn't always work for me. Tiny deeds and humble magic is much more my type of thing. So one day, randomly, I decided to mix my sewing with my love of humble magic. This story is the result. While it's companion novel *Crumbling of the Soul* isn't a series (yet) I'm very glad that I wrote this one. It remains one of my favorites.*

GOSSAMER THREADS

The thread slid over Ashanti's fingers, softer than baby's hair, finer than a spider web. It glimmered purple in the light from the window. Dust motes cast tiny rainbows over it or maybe the light striking the edge of the thread set off the rainbows. Ashanti smiled. Hardly mattered.

She smoothed the thread, carefully holding it up so that the strand spun where it hung from her fingertips. A kink formed halfway, the thread forming a loop that Ashanti carefully smoothed, eased, teased into flatness. Better. A kink like that could start a knot and then she'd lose half the thread as she stitched.

As expensive as it was, Ashanti wouldn't risk losing even a finger's breadth of the thread.

The door creaked as Cat pushed his way inside. Ashanti hissed, smacked her free hand against the floor. Cat hissed right back and ran out of the room. She didn't blame Cat for being annoyed. The sewing room had the widest windows in the house, and the best, softest cushions right underneath. It was a perfect place for stretching out to nap in a puddle of golden sunlight. At least if you were a cat.

But Ashanti couldn't risk Cat's fur getting all over the weaving so

Cat was banned from the room until she was done. She'd end up with scratches for sure. Cat never did hold back the claws when he was annoyed and being kept from his favorite napping spot was sure to do it.

She shifted on the low stool, nodded at the thread. Nice and straight now. Perfect.

When she started the project for Lord Alexis, second son of the Riva Clan, Ashanti had cleaned out her sewing room. She'd taken down all the other wall hangings, bright embroidery and delicate cloth too distracting against what Lord Alexis had requested. What he'd supplied. She'd removed the blankets covering the stools, swept and mopped the floors, dusted every square inch of the sewing room so that it was as pristine as the day it was built.

How else was she to weave a new life?

Lady Gwynedd, their Lady of Hope, waited. So did Lord Alexis. Neither of them had the skills to weave the new life they would share so it fell to Ashanti to do it. She'd done it before, helping her brother and his wife find their common ground. And several people in the village. Many other people, too. Once for Lady Jocelyn who'd come from three days travel away with her baby daughter and the old painted image of her departed husband.

She'd needed a life for her and her child, a future that would give them hope, charity, love. That had been a tearful project. Instead of sweeping everything away, Ashanti had brought everything into her sewing room. Fabric and Cat and the little puppy from the kitchen that Kamalani had rescued from being sold as a hunting hound. The pup was hip-high now, Kamalani's constant companion. And Lady Jocelyn's little girl now sang and danced, bring the Gods' joy to the earth.

A good life. It brought joy to both Lady Jocelyn and her daughter when their lives had been riven so badly so Ashanti was satisfied. Perhaps when the girl was older she would come back and Ashanti could weave her a life with a spouse, children, blessings overflowing to all around her. That would be good, too.

None of which was here nor there for the weaving she had to do now.

Ashanti hummed a prayer before threading her needle with the gossamer purple thread. The loom sat ready, a blank length of white silk stretched taut between the bars. Three holes on each side, carefully stitched round with the finest white thread to reinforce the edges against tearing, established the nine quarters of the working.

Love grew from the ground up so Ashanti started with the bottom right corner. Her needle slipped through the warp and weft of the silk, letting her draw the purple thread upwards, upwards, always upwards towards the top of the piece. It was just long enough that the slender purple tip drooped over the top edge of the loom, slipped down over the bottom like a fringe.

Perfect.

Ashanti sang softly as she worked threads as delicate as a breath into the silk. Purple and green, red and gold, blue and grey; the threads slowly filled the plain white fabric with color, life, the sort of joy that grew over time.

Just like a marriage should.

When the sun's light began to fail, her sewing room darkening so that the last thread looked black instead of lustrous blue, Ashanti put her needle down, point carefully slipped into her felt pincushion. Then she draped another blank white piece of silk over the working, bowed, and pressed her hands over her eyebrows to beg the Gods to inspire her for tomorrow's work.

"Is it good?" Lord Alexis asked the instant Ashanti stepped out of her sewing room. "Did anything go wrong?"

He vibrated on his place by the low, round fire, nerves so taut that he looked as pale as the unadorned silk Ashanti had started with despite the golden glow of his skin in daylight. The fire was low, just embers, which was proper for the first night's work. He'd wrinkled his special festival wrap during the day. It no longer hung perfect and smooth from his hips. Long creases ran jagged across his hips. Tiny wrinkles marked his knees. Somehow he'd gotten dirt on the hem, darkening the purple fabric to near black.

On the other side of Ashanti's fire, Lady Gwynedd sat as perfectly clothed as this morning. Well, almost. The tip of her braid, nearly as long as she was tall, was clenched in her hands. Lady Gwynedd's fingers twisted and turned it as she played with the red silk cord binding the end. The red was blood-bright compared to the black of her hair and her skin. She was a puddle of dark in the shadows. She did not meet Ashanti's eyes. Instead she stared into the fire as if certain it must have gone poorly.

"It is begun," Ashanti said, smiling at them both. "The first lines of joy have been woven in. All the colors you gave me blend together beautifully. At this stage it reminds me of the mountains in spring after the first blush of the flowers has passed and the new leaves work to reach their full size. The bits of gold, red and grey bring lovely movement to it. It is rare that I have leave to weave a life so rich in color, in promise. I am honored to weave this life for the two of you."

That, thankfully, seemed to calm Lord Alexis. He smiled brightly, turned to Lady Gwynedd, and then his shoulders curled inwards when she did not smile, meet his eyes or otherwise acknowledge the good news.

Hmm. A difficult weaving then. Ashanti put fresh wood on the fire, small bits of kindling that sparked and flamed at the edges. As they curled into fiery hot embers she added bigger sticks, then one nicely large log that would take at least an hour to burn. More than she would have normally given how empty all of their bellies had to be but this was her duty as the weaver of their life.

"I have used the thread given to me," Ashanti said, following the old, old rituals she'd learned from her mother and grandmother, her aunt and cousins. "What tales do you have to weave in tomorrow?"

She turned to Lady Gwynedd first, not because it was tradition but because she needed more from her. Something was wrong there so more time would be needed to make things right. Lady Gwynedd gestured towards Lord Alexis with the tip of her braid but Ashanti shook her head no. Lord Alexis fidgeted as if more than willing to start the tales though he did stay silent as required.

"I only... had one tale come to mind," Lady Gwynedd said, still without looking at them.

"Please," Ashanti entreated with her eyes, a beaoning hand and a little bow that put smoke into her eyes for a moment.

"It's a butterfly tale." Lady Gwynedd winced at Lord Alexis' bright smile. "Ah. The butterfly and the sparrow, I'm afraid."

"Hmm. Are you the butterfly or the sparrow?"

The question, couched in the least judgmental tone that Ashanti had, still prompted a horrified gasp from Lord Alexis. Lady Gwynedd cringed, eyes locked very firmly on the silk cord tying her braid.

"Butterfly," Lady Gwynedd whispered.

"I see," Ashanti said.

She turned to Lord Alexis whose mouth had dropped open in horror or perhaps in shock. He stared at Lady Gwynedd as though he saw her for the first time. Perhaps he did. They had not truly met or spent any time together before Ashanti began her weaving. This day's work was the first they had spent alone, the first of nine days. She suspected that neither of them had addressed the other directly all day.

"And you, Lord Alexis?" Ashanti asked. "What story do you bring to the weaving?"

"I'm even worse," Lord Alexis admitted with enough embarrassment that Lady Gwynedd looked at him. "I spent the whole day thinking about the old tales my Mam, my great-grandmother, used to tell me when I was a tiny child, long before I chose my gender. Before I was allowed into sarong, honestly."

Ashanti couldn't help a laugh at that. The man was adorable in his earnestness. There might be a chance for this weaving after all, if only she could find a way to balance his openness with her fears.

"Which tales, then?" Ashanti pressed, deliberately waving her hand in front of her face to fan away any shame that might head Lord Alexis' way from her laughter.

"The baby mushroom stories," Lord Alexis groaned, immediately burying his face in his hands.

As well he might for Lady Gwynedd burst into startled laughter and giggles erupted out of Ashanti's mouth. She patted his head as fondly as if he was the toddler still wearing his apron. The baby mushroom stories were all about family and home and hearth, the deepest lessons of making a home and being kind to one's family. As well as laughter and joy and the love of parents who held and cared for you.

"That's one of the better choices I've ever had, Lord Alexis," Ashanti said once her giggles settled into giggles. "Home and love and the desire to belong. Very appropriate. Your story is not inappropriate either, Lady Gwynedd. The Butterfly and the Sparrow is all about change, transformation, growing past the limitations of your childhood into a new form. One that, while different, perhaps fragile, is still beautiful."

"The butterfly dies," Lady Gwynedd protested.

She was startled enough by Ashanti's approval that she looked up, met Ashanti's eyes. Her hands went still on the braid. They had more strength than Ashanti would have expected, with wide knuckles, strong long fingers and nails clipped quite short for a lady of her stature. Now that the fire burned well, Ashanti could see muscles in Lady Gwynedd's arms, powerful ones.

"In some stories, yes," Ashanti agreed. "And in others it is clever and tricks the sparrow into singing. Other stories say that it is poison and the sparrow dies before it can eat the butterfly. There are many versions of the story, many paths it takes. Either way, it is a story of transformation and growth which is truly quite appropriate to the weaving."

She settled back onto her heels, shifting so that she was comfortable for sitting for a long time. There were songs to sing and assignments for tomorrow's weaving to give. Ashanti smiled at the fire and then nodded.

"For tomorrow," she said without meeting either of their eyes as she should, "I require that which is the opposite of you, of your soul. Bring me things to weave that are not you, not your soul or your life

or your plans or your family's vision of you. That is what I will require."

Ashanti bowed to the fire and then held up her hands before they could question the choice. She began to sing the oldest, longest prayer, the one that would last as long as it took for the fire to burn down. Questions would only bring more doubt at this stage. It was her duty to guide them in the weaving until they found a place, a way, that could bring them together in a life of joy.

Lord Alexis joined her, hesitant and untrained, in the singing. His voice was wobbling and awkward but enthusiastic. He was a bit rough on the low notes but it did not look as though he minded sounding as though he'd never sung before. It took nearly half the song before Lady Gwynedd began to pat the edge of the fire pit as if drumming for them. Ashanti smiled.

Progress was progress, no matter how small or slow.



SHARP METALLIC THREADS from Lady Gwynedd. The metal thread was silver and gold and copper, heavy copper and hair-thin gold leaf wrapped around fine cotton thread. The silver was wire, true wire, not thread at all. Another would have thought it impossible to weave with but Ashanti saw potential in the sharp bits of metal. So much could be crafted with them. Solid and heavy for a silk weaving but if handled gently, carefully, it could work quite well.

Dull bits of grey wool so rough that the caught on Ashanti's fingers, gifted from Lord Alexis' hands with a dubious frown and an unspoken apology for how hard it would be to work with. Ashanti laughed gently. Truly, the man had no idea of himself. Rough edges and warmth that clung no matter how cold or wet? He had all but chosen exactly who he was rather than who he wasn't.

But then, Lady Gwynedd had done much the same. She tried to hide her sharp edges and steely heart behind her careful mannerisms and delicate dress but it came out for anyone who looked.

Ashanti wondered how many people had truly looked at her since she chose her gender, her name.

It couldn't be many or they would have suggested a renaming. Perhaps even that Lady Gwynedd might wish to choose a new gender, one closer to her heart.

Not that it was Ashanti's duty to weave that. She had a married life to weave, not a new soul. After this weaving was done, though, Ashanti thought she might ask Lady Gwynedd and Lord Alexis if they'd like little weavings, just small ones, for their inner hearts. Perhaps that might ease them into their new lives.

Today the blanket was back over her window seat. Cat purred in the sunlight, happy to be restored to his proper place. Ashanti had allowed it, encouraged it even. She did not have gossamer threads today, just fine white silk threads for couching and the disparate offerings of Lady Gwynedd and Lord Alexis.

Normally the second day was a quiet one, a day where Ashanti worked silently to weave in the darker, harder elements that always reared up in a marriage. Not today. Today she sang of baby mushrooms meeting caterpillars who wished fiercely to fly. She sang of sparrows who searched the earth for food for the young and hawks who swooped down only to catch the tips of tail feathers in their over-confidence.

The metal threads became outlines of mountains in the background. The grey yarn was easily shaped into clouds and fog. It was quite lovely. Both materials were hard on her fingers, the metal threads drawing first blood to stain the weaving. She left hairs wrapped into the yarn to become part of Lady Gwynedd and Lord Alexis' new life.

For was not she a part of their lives from now on? It was Ashanti who wove them together, Ashanti who sang to them of hope and growth and love coming as you dared to step out from the comfort of your home.

By the time evening came Ashanti's throat ached and her fingers felt quite abused. Appropriate for the day of difficulties. When she emerged from her sewing room with Cat, Lord Alexis smiled brightly

at her, laughter dancing in his eyes. Lady Gwynedd's lips twitched with amusement when Ashanti shook her hands and rubbed her fingertips.

Today Lord Alexis' sarong was so wrinkled Ashanti would have thought he'd worked all day long. But he looked happy, calm, relaxed as he lounged by the fire circle near Lady Gwynedd's feet. Instead of looking to Ashanti, he looked up to Lady Gwynedd as if seeking her opinion on how the days' weaving had gone.

Lady Gwynedd patted his shoulder, dark hand like ebony on the gold of his skin. "I did not expect singing all day."

"Sometimes the hardships are not what we expect," Ashanti said. The embers of the fire were brighter today, bright enough for a short discussion prior to giving them their assignments for tomorrow. "My fingers had more hardship than I think you did in the weaving."

Blood dotted her skirt, legacy of the metal thread, Ashanti's needle. She huffed at Lord Alexis' concerned look, waving away his worry as inappropriate. He ducked his head in an accepting bow but his eyes still looked troubled. Lady Gwynedd seemed to accept the blood as a necessary part of the weaving. Which it was.

"What songs did you think of during this day in the pauses between my story-songs?" Ashanti asked. She deliberately looked at Lord Alexis first, not for fairness' sake but because Lady Gwynedd looked as though she had a dozen answers on her lips and he looked perplexed.

"Ah, none really," Lord Alexis replied with a blush that stained his golden cheeks dark. "I don't... hear music correctly. I'm quite tone deaf and it all sounds the same to me. A chant or a song or even a full valley of people singing together are all one."

"Truly?" Lady Gwynedd asked, not to Ashanti but to Lord Alexis. Her hand settled hesitantly on his shoulder as if she sought to comfort him.

"Oh yes," Lord Alexis said with a wry enough smile that Lady Gwynedd smiled at him. He brightened for the smile, turning to stare up into her eyes, hands wrapped around one knee. "My little sister

says I should never, ever sing because it sounds like someone has choked the cat and fed her an angry frog."

Ashanti didn't even attempt to hold back her laughter. Better, Lady Gwynedd burst into delighted laughter. She put her hands over her mouth to attempt to muffle it, yes, but there was no denying her amusement. The sight of it made Ashanti's heart sing. This was a nonstandard weaving, certainly, but she was glad to see some progress made.

"I am the opposite," Lady Gwynedd said without Ashanti's prompting. "I had a dozen-dozen songs in my mind through the day. Songs from childhood that my blood-father sang as he tended the accounting, songs from my mother as she shaped clay into pots. And songs from, oh, the driver of my carriage when we travel up the pass. He sings to encourage the horses. Their hoof beats make perfect drumming and they seem to climb more happily when he sings for them."

She paused and stiffened at Ashanti's encouraging smile. Lord Alexis leaned into her legs and, much to Ashanti's hidden delight, Lady Gwynedd relaxed once more. Her pat to his shoulder was more sisterly than wifely but then it was still progress over last night's stiffness.

"I like song," Lady Gwynedd finished, her tone awkward, shy, but still happy in her joy of music.

"Both answers are good," Ashanti said. She coughed, rather more deliberately than necessary, and allowed herself a sly grin as she gestured towards the fire. "Perhaps we can have a short evening tonight? I believe I sang enough over the day."

"All day!" Lord Alexis laughed, nodding his approval. "I loved hearing the songs simply because you seemed to be enjoying yourself."

"It was... pleasant," Lady Gwynedd agreed with a shy smile and eyes that danced with amusement in the fading firelight.

"Then tonight I will task you to request presents for the weaving from your family and friends," Ashanti said. "No more than three types, no less than one. I thank you for your patience with my

weaving and pray that I may weave you a future that will bring joy to you and all around you."

They bowed, very properly. Lord Alexis scrambled to get into the proper kneeling position first. Lady Gwynedd bowed from the waist, her back as straight as a sword. Alexis sighed as the two departed, side by side but not hand in hand. It was better today than it had been. She would be interested to see what the next morning brought her.

This evening, however, would bring her honey tea and soothing soup for her throat. It had been a very long time since Ashanti sang that long during a weaving. She was rather out of practice, something she should work on repairing in her own life's weaving.



THE MORNING BROUGHT Ashanti a stiff and formal Lady Gwynedd with fine rose silk cords, a weft of very beautiful brown wool fresh from a lamb, and flax threads that had been dyed in indigo. The sheer formality of those choices, all fiber, all extremely feminine, pointed Ashanti to some of the problems with the weaving so far.

Lady Gwynedd laid them into Ashanti's hands as if she had been lectured all night about proper behavior and the importance of her position. The red around Lady Gwynedd's eyes suggested to Ashanti that yes, she actually had spent the night being lectured. Or perhaps she'd spent it crying after having been lectured at. There was most definitely a problem in her family.

Lord Alexis made a face as he passed over his family's contribution: tiny silver rings adorned with onyx and amber gems, delicately carved bone buttons the size of Ashanti's smallest fingernail and one perfect feather, as white as the snow on the mountain peaks in the middle of winter.

"I tried," Lord Alexis sighed. "I do apologize. I tried to get them to take it seriously."

"I believe they did, Lord Alexis," Ashanti said as she studied the feather. "Interesting choices on both sides, indeed, but quite work-

able. Do please start the fire and tend it while I work. I will ask you of family when I am done, what it means to you and what you want of your own."

The sewing room was warmer again this third day. Ashanti worked with the thread, the wool and rings. She stayed quiet today, listening for the murmur of Lord Alexis and Lady Gwynedd's voices. It took half the morning before they began to talk. Lord Alexis was first, his tone one of frustration, complaint, even though Ashanti could hear fondness in his voice as well.

Lady Gwynedd listened quietly until the sun through the window reached the middle of Ashanti's sewing room. As it began to retreat, Lady Gwynedd murmured, low and angry, so very angry. Her voice rose and fell sharply as if she was in a battle. Lord Alexis' voice was softer, supporting, drawing her out.

He would be a wonderful husband though Ashanti suspected that Lord Alexis' family had different ideas of what 'husband' meant. It was strange how gentle he was compared to the wishes inherent in his family's gifts. Rings with gems for wealth and power. Button carved of bone spoke of fine skills that commanded respect far and wide. And the feather! Well, that was a prayer to the deities that Lord Alexis' weaving take him to the highest levels of society despite his obvious comfort at home with the hearth.

In the same way, Lady Gwynedd's gifts all pointed to a family that expected her to give up her identity, her hopes, her dreams, so that she could support her new family and new husband.

As if Ashanti would weave a future so opposite to their personalities. Truly, sometimes she wondered how people viewed her work. It wasn't magic, reworking a person's soul into something new. It was working with what was there to create a new vision, a new harmony.

Either way, the thread quickly dominated the weaving, securing and protecting Lord Alexis' feather, his buttons and jeweled rings. They formed a lake below the sketched metal mountains and foggy clouds of the second day. As the light faded, Ashanti smiled at the working so far. It would work, most likely. There wasn't as much to do as she'd thought when she was commissioned to do the weaving.

"Beautiful choices," Ashanti said as she came out to find the fire burning brightly, a new fresh log on the embers. "I think this will be one of my most beautiful weavings yet."

"...Truly?" Lady Gwynedd asked with such shock that Ashanti wrinkled her nose and grinned.

"Truly. I expect it will surprise those who have not spent time here for the weaving but you are both quite compatible," Ashanti said. She laughed at Lord Alexis' dropped jaw. "Perhaps it is just that I am a weaver but I see much to commend your lives together. It will be beautiful, I swear to it."

"My parents weaving was very simple," Lord Alexis said, cheeks going quite red. "They said not to expect very much."

"My parents had one that was huge," Lady Gwynedd sighed. "They said that ours would be too small to have true beauty. Nine days was too short in their opinion. Theirs took a full year."

Ashanti raised her eyebrows at that. A year would be far too long unless there were true problems in the weaving. Yes, she saw problems in Lady Gwynedd's family but not to such an extent that a full year was required to weave all the details together.

"That would be quite large," Ashanti allowed. "I have only worked one weaving so large and I am afraid that I have had to amend it three times. I do not believe it is good to be so detailed in a weaving. It is better to leave things open for the future so that the weaving can adapt to the person's life and they can adapt to the weaving."

They sat in silence as the fire crackled. Ashanti let Lord Alexis and Lady Gwynedd ponder that. Seriousness soon faded as Cat stalked in with a half-eaten mouse that he ceremoniously laid at Lord Alexis' knee. While Lady Gwynedd laughed, hands over her mouth to muffle the helpless giggles, Lord Alexis gasped and shuddered, trying to push Cat away even as Cat attempted to feed him.

"Cat," Ashanti sighed as she collected the dead mouse's head and shoulders. "We do not need your addition to the weaving, my friend."

Cat stared at her, tail twitching with annoyance at her interference with his efforts to take care of Lord Alexis.

"I ask of you two colors and one taste," Ashanti said while

carrying the mouse out into her kitchen. It went into the compost heap. She came back with a damp towel for her hands and Lord Alexis.

"A taste?" Lord Alexis asked while gratefully cleansing his hands.

"Yes, one taste," Ashanti said. "Convey it to me however you find appropriate."



A CHUNK of amber the size of Ashanti's thumb sat next to a chili the size of her head. Both were golden, flecked with bits of brown and green. Lady Gwynedd's taste was the tale of swimming in a high mountain lake when she was a little girl, the freshness of snow-fed water so cold that it was like a knife along the spine to dive in and so clear that the stones on the bottom looked inches away despite being dozens of feet below the surface. Lord Alexis taste was a pie his aunt had cooked, thick with brown sugar and spices from the south. Apple and rhubarb and a crust so flakey that Ashanti had allowed herself a whole piece instead of just one bite.

Her supplies brought her fabric in the same golds and greens as the amber and chili, all stitched on with brown thread worked in a feather stitch. The lake became tiny blue seed beads along the edge of the feather. The pie filled in the metallic mountains with rich reds and browns, touches of warm yellow silk that Ashanti had saved for a personal project. Now abandoned because they were perfect for this weaving.

The fifth day was the day of skills, careers that Lady Gwynedd and Lord Alexis saw themselves fulfilling. Ashanti charged them with picking for each other and was not surprised that Lady Gwynedd saw Lord Alexis nurturing children, hearth and home. He laughed and shrugged at the suggestion that evening, allowing that it was something he'd always wanted and never been allowed. For Lady Gwynedd, Lord Alexis saw law and justice, the judgement of right from wrong, the stern battle to maintain society against the inevitable slide away from the true path.

He had held Lady Gwynedd all through her tears at being so highly regarded, eyes sad when he chanced to meet Ashanti's eyes.

Day six brought her to the question of children. Ashanti laughed and laughed at the threads she was given by Lord Alexis' little sisters. Hand-spun, alternating as thick as Cat's tail and hair thin, they were beautiful in their imperfection. Lady Gwynedd's offering was old, threadbare scraps from her swaddling clothes. They were so fragile, so well loved, that Ashanti had to revise her image of Lady Gwynedd's parents.

Not a loveless weaving then, just a very stern one. She made sure to work far more freedom, more hope and laughter, into their weaving. No need to replicate the mistakes of their elders. Lord Alexis and Lady Gwynedd would make many mistakes of their own. It was the way of life.

Day seven and eight brought the tedious work of stitching a border around the weaving prior to removing it from the frame. Ashanti asked for and received carved wooden rods for the top and bottom. Lady Gwynedd provided ones of ironwood, hard and straight, the ends adorned with acorns that promised oak trees in the future. From Lord Alexis she requested stout cotton indigo dyed with his family's prayers. He provided an old, old prayer cloth that had recently been replaced in their family shrine. The prayers were beautiful, resist dyed with a fine hand that Ashanti recognized as her second cousin's work.

Appropriate.

Their final day began before dawn. Ashanti had stayed awake all night, finishing the last bits of stitching. She had applied a backing to hide the knots and threads that were always strewn across the back of a weaving. Lord Alexis and Lady Gwynedd would feel them when they held the working. They would know that their lives were intertwined and knotted together in just the same way. No one else needed to see the inner workings of the weaving, though. It wasn't right to share such intimate things.

As the sun rose on the ninth day, the final day of the weaving, Ashanti carefully carried the weaving out of her sewing room, out

past the round fire pit and Cat's slowly sweeping tail. She walked, slow and solemn out the front door and into the first rays of sunrise.

Lady Gwynedd stood to the left with her parents behind her. They were in fact quite stern but Lady Gwynedd's mother had tears in her eyes. Her other mother's hands were clenched so tightly that her knuckles were pale instead of dark. Two siblings, twins given how close in age they appeared to be, hid behind Lady Gwynedd's skirts. One was dark as Lady Gwynedd, the other as light as her mother. Near-twins, perhaps?

It hardly mattered.

To the right, Lord Alexis stood with one of his little sisters clutching his waist. A second was in his arms, thumb securely thrust into her mouth. His parents, as golden as he, stood with hands on his arms, his shoulders.

They trembled. He didn't.

Ashanti smiled. Good. Lord Alexis had grown during the weaving, as had Lady Gwynedd. She knew that she had woven well but the proof would be in the revealing of the weaving itself. Rather than speak, explain as many weavers did prior to showing their work, Ashanti began to sing the old, old songs of hope, love and marriage. The deities would see that her work was understood and if anyone had questions afterwards, well, Ashanti would explain or not as seemed appropriate to the intimacy of the detail.

When Ashanti unrolled the weaving, holding it up so that all of them could see the mountain scene with its lake and clouds, its sky in all the colors of the rainbow, Lady Gwynedd gasped. Lord Alexis choked on a squeak as high-pitched as the mouse that Cat had caught. Tears welled up in his eyes as he looked at Lady Gwynedd. She stared at the weaving for a long, long moment before turning to Lord Alexis.

"That's us?" Lady Gwynedd asked.

"I... it has to be," Lord Alexis said. He put his little sister down before taking Lady Gwynedd's hand to pull her over to where Ashanti stood with the weaving. "See, this is the lake you talked

about, where you swam as a little girl. And the rings must be the singing you love so much."

"That you think you're so bad at," Lady Gwynedd said and laughed. "Oh, the metallic threads..."

"Your mountains," Lord Alexis said, grinning. "They're covered with fog. My yarn became fog."

"Well, fog is very cozy and you're very comforting," Lady Gwynedd said. Tears trembled in her eyes. "It's so beautiful. I never expected something so beautiful for my weaving."

"Did I weave true?" Ashanti asked, not of Lady Gwynedd and Lord Alexis but of their families who stared and cried and bounced like the children they were.

Lady Gwynedd's mother nodded, one hand cycling as she tried to find words. Her wife answered for her eventually. "Better than we had any reason to expect. Thank you, Weaver Ashanti."

"So very well," Lord Alexis' father agreed. He had no tears but Ashanti could see the molars at the back of his mouth. His smile was that wide. "We had no hope that the weaving would bring them together so well, not when our families are so different."

"You are not as different as you think," Ashanti said. "Take the weaving with joy, Lord Alexis, Lady Gwynedd. If you ever have need of another weaving of any sort, please do consider me."

She laid the weaving over their outstretched hands. Lady Gwynedd's eyes went wide at the weight of it. Lord Ashanti's fingers flexed as he felt the hidden knots. He bowed his head in thanks, swiftly followed by Lady Gwynedd. They turned and, together, showed the working to their families who clustered around them as one larger family instead of two that knew nothing of each other.

By the time the sun was fully over the mountain peaks, they were gone, off to Lord Alexis' home where they would feast and dance and sing for the rest of the day. Ashanti smiled and stretched her hands up towards the sky, wiggling her fingers and then letting her arms flop down to her sides. Cat wound around her ankles, purring.

"Time for breakfast, I think," Ashanti said. She scooped him up and laughed as he rubbed his face against her cheek, demanding and

Iridescent

loving at the same time. "A good start to a new day, Cat. I think we'll have cream."

Ashanti petted Cat's blunt head, smiled, and then walked back into her little house. Cream and eggs cooked soft, a bit of bread and some cheese. A good start to her day indeed.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: SAVING IMANI

*W*riting contemporary romance is something I thought I couldn't do. No magic? No SF? Nothing fantastic at all? Impossible! But then I was challenged to write a contemporary romance and look what happened. Not only have I written this story but I have a half dozen other contemporary romances with more to come. Should teach me to tell myself that I can't do something, shouldn't it?

SAVING IMANI

Haruka shifted on her beach towel. There was sand under her toes, gritty, coating her feet with dust because she had been very careful not to walk at the water's edge. Before Dana left, Haruka would have been willing to walk in the water, to get sand all over herself, just to spend time with Dana. Not now. No reason to put up with her skin reacting or to chance actually touching the clumps of slimy, disgusting seaweed lurking under the water, baking on the shore.

The sun beat down on her head, already scorching her scalp where her hair parted. Her shoulders felt like they were already turning lobster-red. Sweat had beaded her chest, her forehead, long before she'd even gotten to the lake. The office's AC had been broken for months. No one had cared until the heat wave hit, no matter how hard Haruka complained to Julian, her manager. He'd dismissed the entire issue out of hand, patting her shoulder and telling her that she should stay to her files and computers, not concern herself with how the company ran.

As if there was any difference between the two.

The man was annoying as Haruka's father, always assuming that a girl, especially a small girl with Asian features, had nothing substan-

tial to offer to the discussion. That had changed as the heat rose and Julian began to sweat. He'd taken Haruka's offered business card, the one she'd gathered while researching the best commercial AC service companies, and not met her eyes. When the service technician had arrived and said that the parts wouldn't be in until tomorrow, Julian had bowed to Haruka's glare as he always eventually did, sending everyone home or, as Julian put it 'off to have fun at the beach'.

The breeze off the lake was nice enough if Haruka ignored the smell of rot. She splashed a little of her bottled water on her face. That helped though not enough. Nothing was enough when the heat rose over eighty. Most of her coworkers had AC at home. It was too expensive so Haruka had never invested in it. A window unit for her bedroom was definitely going into the budget, even if she only used it a few weeks out of every year. Expensive, yes, but mandatory.

Still, little splashes of water were better than going into the water. Seaweed and fishes and those teenagers over by the dock hooted every time they splashed someone. Given her luck they'd quickly turn to dunking and there was no way that Haruka was going to be the one they chose to half drown.

Why had she come? Really, there was no point to it. She wouldn't risk drowning in that nasty water and she wasn't any cooler sitting in the blazing sun. The last thing Haruka wanted to do was get a suntan. It would go straight to a burn no matter what she did. Every time she'd tried to tan she'd ended up red and blistered.

Still. It was better than going back home to her too-big apartment. Watching the other couples made her heart hurt for what she'd lost, again, but it was so much better than confronting the too-big bed that Dana had insisted on buying only to abandon it when she got a better job in a better town with a much better girlfriend. One who wasn't 'pushy' or 'always flirting with other people' because of course Asian girls couldn't have opinions of their own and everyone knew that if an Asian girl talked, well, obviously that meant she was interested.

Which didn't even touch all the issues that Dana had had with Haruka being bi.

"Really, darling," Dana had said as she threw clothes into her suit-

case, "you knew it was a matter of time. I mean, you're not even really a lesbian so what's the problem? Go to a bar. Pick someone else up. You'll be fine."

As if it was that easy. Haruka glared at the water where a happy teenage couple held hands as they cautiously waded into the water. She was adorable, sweet and petite with a pixie cut that made her face look elfin-fine. And he was obviously a jock of some sort. The muscles and 'I'll protect you' attitude gave that way.

Just what everyone expected and Haruka could never seem to find. Didn't help that she'd rather play the jock's role, be the fierce defender, than the elfish girl's. Everyone judged her on her looks, from her parents on down to her coworkers and boss. Yes, they admired Haruka's drive and competence but they didn't take her seriously until the latest disaster hit and Haruka was the one to formulate a plan, find the correct resources and then marshal everyone into doing the work necessary to solve the problem.

Haruka was a good problem solver but no one would ever let her lead.

Go find another romance. Fine for Dana to say but none of the women at the sole gay bar in town wanted to date a bi girl. All the men Haruka met were either delighted to date an 'exotic' oriental girl or convinced that Haruka was going to bring home another girl so that they could have the threesome of their dreams.

Which. No. Not happening. Ever. On any count. Damn it.

"Herzog!"

Haruka started, jerking around on her beach towel only to get a spray of sand over her feet as Imani Bakalov trotted over with a huge, highly strained smile on her face. Damn her for being a womanizer when she looked that good. All the time. Even when in baggy sweats, not that she was at the moment.

Imani was wearing a swimsuit, wonder of wonders, though it made her look like a professional weight lifter. Two piece, the top barely filled out by Imani's tiny breasts and the bottom one of the boy short versions that, now that Haruka actually looked, probably did a great job keeping her thighs from rubbing as she moved about. Later,

once Haruka got away from this wasteland of sand and seaweed, she'd have to try a pair for herself. Better than her one piece, anyway.

"Imani," Haruka replied with a little nod that Imani should sit down and stop looming. "How many times have I told you to use my first name?"

"No idea," Imani said. She plopped into the sand next to Haruka as her smile started to break into something that looked frightened. "Look, I'm kinda in a spot. Can I, like, put sunscreen on your back? Please? I swear, I wouldn't bug you if I wasn't like, doomed here."

"Who'd you dump?" Haruka asked as she passed Imani her sunscreen, strongest you could get on the market because absolutely nothing else was going to save her from imminent lobster-dom, and pulled her hair over her shoulder so it wouldn't get any more greasy than it had to. She'd already put some on but more would never go awry.

Imani pouted as she poured sunscreen into her palm. "Why'd you assume I dumped someone? Coulda been me getting dumped, ya know."

"I've watched you dump every single girl you've ever dated," Haruka replied. "You were about due. So who is it this time?"

"Mean," Imani grumbled.

Her hand was broad and strong, the palm calloused from the martial arts that Haruka knew Imani did solely because Imani came in and bought a round for the house every time she won a championship. Honestly, Haruka had no idea what sort of martial art Imani actually competed in. She just knew that she did compete. The town's one gay bar was usually quiet when Imani was out of town for one of her matches. And then absolute insanity when she came back.

As good as Imani's hands felt smoothing the sunscreen over Haruka's overheated skin, Haruka didn't shut her eyes to enjoy it. The little old lady a couple of yards away glowered at them, then whispered something that looked scathing to her husband. And, yes, of course, the teenage boys were pointing at the two of them as if getting sunscreen when you were already burning was something of note.

"Who?" Haruka asked again after Imani set to work on her arms.

"Such a meanie," Imani complained. "But fine, ya got me. It was Celeste."

"Scarsi?" Haruka asked. She jerked her arm out of Imani's hands. "Seriously? You dated her and then dumped her? Are you crazy? Last time someone dumped her, she got them evicted from their house, fired from their job and outed them to their family."

Imani snorted, then took Haruka's arm back. "Yeah, I know. Everyone warned me about it. 'S no big deal. I'm already out as I can get. Can't affect m'job, not when it's already in the papers, and I own my house. She's just."

Haruka frowned as Imani ducked her head and then looked around the beach as if terrified that someone was going to come at them at any second. That was so far out of the norm for Imani that it made her stare at their surroundings, too. There didn't seem to be anyone around paying excessive amounts of attention to them but then two women interacting like this did tend to attract attention. It was hard to tell what was 'OMG lesbians!' and what might be Imani's inevitable stalker Celeste.

"Calling you?" Haruka asked.

Imani winced. "Yeah. Calls and letters and emails. Stopped by my house three times the last few hours. Know that friend of hers, Quin, know they're following me around. It's creepy as fuck."

"And you're drawing me into this why, exactly?" Haruka asked as frostily as she could when Imani's thumbs were working all the sore spots loose in her wrist and palm. Seriously, that should be illegal. Doing it in public probably was illegal but it didn't stop Haruka from melting a little bit. Or perhaps a lot bit when Imani started massaging the base of her thumb.

"No one messes with you," Imani said so earnestly that Haruka stared at her. "No, really. Ya gotta know that people are intimidated as fuck of you. Glare at 'em and suddenly they're standing straight, apologizing, just, ya know, behaving themselves. Even when they're drunk off their asses. Figure she'll back off a little if she thinks that you're, maybe, a little, possibly...?"

"Dating you," Haruka completed for Imani with a tired sigh. "This

is what's known as a stupid plan. A very stupid plan. Celeste doesn't respect me. She doesn't respect anyone. And the proper way to handle a stalker is a) call the police who laugh in your face, then b) beat the hell out of Quin and Celeste if they don't back off. Which you can do. I know you can."

"Ya mean, get my ass arrested," Imani grumbled but her cheeks were read and she smiled a tiny little smile that appeared and disappeared in an instant at Haruka's praise. "And lose my endorsements. I mean, I get ya, just push her off. But she's not listening and my lawyer basically said that I don't got a leg to stand on. It's all legal, just ya know, pursuing someone. Creepy though."

Haruka shook her head while scanning not just the sand but also the four little boats out on the lake and the parking lot. No one in the boats appeared to care about them. There were fish to catch and that, incomprehensibly, was better than anything else.

On the other than, there was a very large, very expensive, SUV up in the parking lot and someone was standing next to it with binoculars. Haruka hummed, pulled her cell phone out of her bag and took a picture of the person with the binoculars. She had to pull her hand away from Imani and then get smears of sunscreen all over the screen but zoomed in, yes, that was definitely Quin Echevarria in all her butch glory. Who else would be wearing a leather jacket to the beach on the hottest day of the year?

"Well, you've certainly got Quin watching you," Haruka said as she took another picture, then another, then a third. She smiled as Quin shifted her feet and then jerked the SUV's door open so that she could hide inside. "Which means that yes, Celeste is doing her normal stalking routine. What in the world did you see in her? Everyone knows she's an abusive twit."

As she spoke, Quin revved the engine and the pulled out, wheels squealing as she fled. It was a short-term victory but at least it should give them a little bit of breathing space. Because Haruka knew, already, that this was a 'we'. All Imani had to do was turn those rich brown eyes on Haruka with her mouth dropped open as if Haruka was her savior for chasing Quin away. There was no chance that

Haruka would turn away, not from someone who looked at her like that.

Or who was that honest, that open about everything. If only everyone treated people the same way. Life would be a good bit better if they did. At least Haruka's life would be and that was good enough for her.



IMANI'S HEART SKIPPED A BIT, maybe six, when Haruka turned back to her with that smug little smile that all but shouted 'see, no problem at all'. Damn but the woman looked good when she was solving problems. Lost all that defensiveness, the brittle anger that made Imani feel like the damn bull in the china shop.

Hardest part was not staring at Haruka's chest, the rounded lines of her body under the high-necked professional swimsuit she wore. Stark black with yellow accents going down from shoulder to crotch, the thing was damn near illegal in how good it made Haruka look. 'Course Haruka always looked good, no matter what she wore.

"Can't be that easy," Imani said because otherwise she'd say something stupid about taking Haruka out to dinner and she'd already had enough of that crap for one day.

"Oh, it's certainly not," Haruka agreed. "She'll be back. So will Celeste. So why date her in the first place?"

Imani winced. Figured that Haruka wouldn't let that one go. She fussed with the sunscreen, screwing the cap on and then carefully wiping the sand off it rather than meet Haruka's judgmental eyes. Everyone Imani had ever told had laughed at her, including Celeste.

"Give me that," Haruka said. "You don't have to tell me but it will make it harder to get Celeste to back off if I don't know what the attraction was."

Imani bit her lip, shoulders hunched so much that her neck ached from it. When she did look, Haruka seemed more amused than annoyed. Didn't have that line between her eyes or her lips pressed thin. So that was a bonus. Maybe? Hopefully.

Didn't help with the blush as Imani gulped a deep breath and then fisted her hands on her thighs.

"She made me feel safe," Imani said in one rush. Came out so fast that Imani barely understood what she'd said. "Safe. Protected. She made me feel, ya know, like she'd protect me."

"That's... huh."

Imani groaned. Didn't dare look but as the silence stretched couldn't help but peek and whoa, Haruka's eyes weren't full of laughter. Wasn't annoyed or judgmental or even bored with Imani's lack of will.

No, Haruka looked fierce. She looked like she was about to grab a spear, a sword, maybe a K-bar and go to town on Celeste and Quin. If Imani had thought that Haruka looked good before, she'd had no idea what true beauty could be. Imani swallowed, her heart tripping along so fast that she might have just finished ten rounds with the world champion.

Haruka nodded. "Help me gather my things. We're going out to dinner. I'm buying. You'll come back to my place and then we'll talk. Just talk. We need to figure out how to handle Celeste's behavior but for now, staking a claim to you would probably be a good place to start. Generally, she does back off when her former lovers find someone new."

"Ah, okay?" Imani said, startled when Haruka waved for Imani to get off the beach towel, like, right then. "Got something fancy in mind? Don't have any dresses but I do got some suits I could put on."

"Just pants, a shirt, shoes," Haruka said while shaking out her towel and glaring at the sand that came off it. "Even shorts should be fine. Nothing fancy. I couldn't afford fancy, I'm afraid. My rent's too high for that."

Imani took the blanket, shook it sharp and proper despite the glare from the little old couple baking like bread in their beach chairs. While Imani got rid of the sand, Haruka pulled out a beautiful little burgundy and gold beach dress that transformed her suit into a gorgeous summer outfit, complete with flirty little skirt that showed off just the right about of curvaceous leg.

A quick fold for the towel and they were heading up the beach, Haruka in the lead with her bag and Imani in the rear with the towel. Not what she'd expected when she spotted Haruka alone in the middle of the beach. She'd thought it could be a quick way to get a bit of help. The whole suggestion of 'dating' had been a wild hare of an idea.

"So," Imani said as they reached Haruka's pristine little white Hyundai, "I ran here. Just, ya know, to get away from the house. Been almost six weeks now that she'd been at this and I'm kinda at the end of my rope. Um. Give me a ride home for clothes?"

Haruka shook her head, then nodded. "Get in. We'll talk along the way."



THEY DID NOT, in fact, talk on the way. Imani curled into the seat and stared out the windows as if she expected a car to slam into them at any moment. The sheer level of nervousness told Haruka that maybe this was more than your normal Celeste stalking episode. Every other failed romance she'd watched, always gratefully from the sidelines because Celeste thought bi women were fakers and bi men were rapists and there was no way for a woman with that attitude to be anything other than ugly, had a clear cycle.

Celeste and her lover broke up. There was a period where Celeste called them every name in the book and spammed her Facebook with how horrid her former lover was. Then she'd change her mind, start following them, messaging them, trying to get back together with them. After that, which usually lasted a few days to a few weeks, Celeste would declare them 'dead to me' and she'd start flirting with every woman she could find.

Unless they were bi. Or trans. Or anything other than perfectly white.

Honestly, it was surprising that Celeste had given Imani the time of day given Imani's Czech father and black mother. Beautiful faces didn't always mean beautiful minds, sadly. Or legal behavior.

They rounded the corner into Imani's cul-de-sac. Haruka jammed on the brakes, staring at Imani's house. Someone, Celeste obviously, had spray painted 'bitch' and 'traitor' in six-foot-high red letters across the front of the house. Which was sickening because the house was one of the old Victorians that had been remodeled and repainted to bring it back to its former glory, only in a more tasteful cream, sage green and cobalt blue color scheme.

The mail box, individual for this older cul-de-sack instead of the big group box that Haruka had at her depressingly modern apartment building with its blocky rooms and bland décor Haruka hadn't been able to afford to replace, had been torn up and flung into the center of the lawn. Which had great muddy gouges torn into it from someone doing donuts. Crushed bushes, smashed flower beds, the entire front yard looked as though Celeste had thrown the tantrum of all tantrums.

"Well, this is new," Haruka said. The words came out a little faint from sheer shock.

"Oh fuck," Imani whimpered. "Why won't she leave me alone? She's the one that dumped me. I just asked her if she'd skip one trip, stay at home the night I came back so I wouldn't come home to an empty house."

"Hmm." Haruka shook her head, drove the rest of the way to the house. Stopped and stared. "Well, I supposed her dumping someone else is a different pattern from the normal one. Usually the other person dumps her. I'm surprised. I thought you were the one breaking it off."

Imani glared at her. "Everybody always says that. Don't know why. I'm not the faithless one. Always do my best for my lovers an' they go and stab me in the back, walk out, take my stuff. Act like they're batshit insane. Ya know. Kinda like this, just not so bad."

Haruka's heart lurched a little. Her fingers ached on the steering wheel. Everyone she'd talked to at the bar said that Imani was the one dumping her girlfriends. Except that the girlfriends in question would rarely say a word about their breakups. Most of them changed

the subject immediately. A couple had looked intensely uncomfortable when Haruka asked what happened.

Sadly, that was fairly common, lesbians looking uncomfortable when Haruka talked to them. The refusal to accept bi women tended to make her few romances failures before they even began. That was part of why Dana's defection had hurt so much. Haruka had thought, believed, that they were working towards something real only to discover Dana considered her a placeholder for a real lover.

She shook her head. "Come on. Let's get you some clothes, then go have some dinner."

Imani stared at Haruka when she got out of the car to go with her. As if Imani should go in there alone. Who knew if there had been a break-in? Someone had to take pictures, document this mess, otherwise it would go on and continue to escalate until something truly lethal happened. Haruka's brother had been through a truly nasty breakup. Learning how to handle such things had been logical and necessary because who knew when something like that would happen to Haruka.

A dozen pictures of the outside damage later, Haruka stood in Imani's vaulted living room while Imani ran upstairs. The house was huge, easily three thousand square feet, with a modern style inside that looked like Imani had bought everything straight out of a catalog. The trophies, all of them with burly women high-kicking imaginary opponents, were all that gave the living room personality.

The kitchen was worse, stark white and completely impersonal. Haruka wasn't sure that the coffee maker had ever been used. The stove looked so untouched that it might have been installed two hours ago. There was even a piece of masking tape on one corner of the oven door showing that it had never, ever been turned on even once. But, curiosity winning over politeness, the fridge was full of fruit, vegetables, plus stacks of meals sealed in Tupperware containers. So Imani did eat here. She just didn't use the stove.

"Sorry, wasn't sure what to wear," Imani said from the kitchen door.

Haruka gasped, slamming the fridge shut and then leaning

against it as her cheeks went painfully hot. "You're back. Oh. That's fine. Really, you don't need to dress up at all."

The swimsuit had been replaced with board shorts, a T-shirt with an enormous calla lily printed on it, and neon green tennis shoes. Imani's hair glimmered in the light from the huge window over the sink so maybe she'd taken a lightning quick shower to deal with the inevitable sand that came from the beach. Or sweat? She'd run to the beach. Several miles. There had probably been sweat to deal with, too.

Haruka sighed when she realized that she was blithering in her head rather than just apologizing for being snoopy.

"Glad you like it," Imani said, grinning. "Ya got a place in mind for us to eat? I don't cook much but I could whip something up. I mean, it wouldn't be fancy but it'd be all right."

"No, I have a place," Haruka said. "Barbeque? You don't have any problems with that, do you? You do have a special diet, right?"

Imani grinned at her as if the concern over her diet was adorable. Her cheeks went red which actually was cute, far too cute for Haruka's brain's ability to form coherent thoughts.

"Nah, BBQ is awesome," Imani said. "Love it. Probably avoid the beans, though. Never have enjoyed them all that much. Makes my Ma side-eye me but they're just not for me."

"Good," Haruka said. "Then let's go. I'll stop snooping through your house. I do apologize for that. I just wanted to see if Celeste broke in."

All the amusement and joy drained straight out of Imani's face. She looked around the pristine kitchen as if expecting to see destruction like what had happened outside. Or maybe, given that Imani started peering under the cabinets and edging way from the doorway, she expected to find spy cameras.

"Could we, like, check the rest of the house?" Imani asked. She clutched her hands to her chest, knuckles white. "I mean, ya don't have to if ya don't want to. I just. That's. She could? Had a key. No guarantee that she didn't make a copy before she threw it back in my face."

"Right," Haruka said after a moment of shock, then fury that anyone would terrify Imani, energetic, strong Imani, that much. "We're checking the house, calling the police, and filing a complaint against her."



BBQ DIDN'T HAPPEN.

Dinner didn't happen. Instead, Haruka stalked through Imani's house like she was a Valkyrie intent on destruction. Except, you know, it was taking pictures and muttering about spy cameras, listening devices and slapping people until their faces fell off. Which, yeah, was an image that made Imani grin despite her worries.

Teeny little Haruka who barely came up to Imani's shoulder going up against six foot one Celeste and her four inch heels. Wasn't like she'd even be able to reach Celeste's face to slap her.

Cops were a thousand times less than helpful. Hell, they would have been more helpful if they'd just stayed away. Two white guys who looked at the spray paint and destruction and shrugged their shoulders. One of them spent his time trying to stare down Haruka's swimsuit top while the other on kept glaring at Imani with one hand on his gun.

She stayed in the background behind Haruka and kept her hands very, very still, her face very, very blank. Because while she could fight with the best of them, there was no winning against a trigger happy cop who'd decided she was a danger explicitly because of the color of her skin and the curl of her hair.

Didn't seem to slow Haruka down at all. She quoted laws, regulations, got both of their names and badge numbers which seemed to be the only thing that made them nervous enough to actually record the complaint against Celeste. Then, right there in front of the twitching cops, Haruka called their precinct and informed their boss that she'd issued a criminal complaint for vandalism, destruction of private property and half a dozen other offenses that went in one ear and out the other for Imani.

"Yes, I will be checking back tomorrow to get the case number for the complaint," Haruka announced with a glare at the cops that would have stripped paint off a 757 at fifty thousand feet. "No, tomorrow. If you persist in this, I will be calling Internal Affairs. Yes. Yes, I know I am. Thank you, that's so kind of you. Good evening."

She turned off her phone, tucked it into her purse and then smiled like a shark getting ready to strike. The cops both twitched. Boob man swallowed and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Twitchy trigger finger backed off a couple of paces while gesturing towards the cop car.

"Ah, we'll be heading back to fill that complaint in now," twitchy trigger finger said. "Ma'am."

"Good," Haruka said and the snap in that one word made Imani flinch, much less the cops who darn near hit the dirt. "Expect there to be some form of attack from Celeste. She is really rather famous for being the crazy ex-girlfriend."

"No, wait, she does this to everyone she breaks up with?" Boob man asked as if it only just sunk in that yes, this was serious and yes, it was his job to do something about it.

"Yes."

That one unadorned word did more than Imani's two-hour deposition three weeks ago, did more than her lawyer had been able to, too. The cops exchanged looks and then got right in their car. They even drove out of the cul-de-sac like they were in a hurry to get back to the precinct.

Haruka snorted. "Idiots. I hate dealing with the police. They're so prejudiced."

"Don't gotta tell me," Imani said. "So um, food? It's like, nearly eight. Probably no BBQ to be had, ya know."

"I know," Haruka sighed. "Which is a pity. The place I intended to take you is really quite good. I generally don't eat much meat but theirs is too good not to indulge myself. How about hamburgers instead?"

"Works," Imani said. She looked at her poor house, the mess that

she'd have to get someone to clean up and then sighed. "Better than looking at this mess and worrying myself into a frazzle, I guess."

"I'll drive," Haruka said.

It was nice, in a way, to get to be the passenger. Pretty much everyone else Imani had dated insisted that Imani should be the one to drive. To plan the dates. To figure out their activities and sort out what to do when and how.

Which, yeah, was nice sometimes but not all the damned time. Haruka didn't seem to have any issues with just... taking charge. Honestly, she seemed to be more than happy to decide everything and then bring Imani along for the ride. By the time they'd crossed town and parked outside of Joe's, Imani's shoulders no longer felt like iron bands and her stomach had calmed down enough that she realized that she was starving.

"Ah, sorry," Haruka said as they headed up the front stairs. Her cheeks were red in the lights pouring through the windows. "I should have asked whether this was okay."

"Oh, no," Imani said, waving her hands to reassure Haruka. "Seriously, that's fine. Jeez, ya got no idea how nice it is not to be the one deciding every last detail. All my girlfriends insist that I gotta do it and, I mean, once in while sure. That's fine. Not all the time. I mean."

She sighed, one hand on the door knob. The night had gone muggy so Haruka's swimsuit-and-dress combo clung a little more than it should to her body. So did Imani's T-shirt. Board shorts were riding up, too. Still, Haruka didn't push to get inside in the AC. Just stared up into Imani's eyes with a worried frown that held way more compassion than Imani was used to getting from the women around her.

"What?" Haruka asked.

"I'm not a man," Imani said, low and quiet because there were people walking by on the sidewalk and no, not getting into a big conversation with anyone listening in. Especially to this. "Seems like people look at the muscles and expect me to just be a guy with boobs, ya know? But I'm not. I'm a woman. And sometimes, at least once in a while, it'd be nice to be treated like someone precious. Someone who

was worth protecting. Instead of always being the strong one who protects everyone else."



HARUKA'S THROAT WENT TIGHT. The sheer hurt in Imani's eyes made her want to scream, to shout, to pull Imani down into a hug. How in the world had she ever gotten the idea that Imani was the big tough butch who took care of everyone else?

The next moment she had her answer and it was one that made her wince at herself. Just as everyone judged Haruka on her Asian looks, she'd judged Imani and applied all the sick old stereotypes of black women without a second's effort to see if they fit Imani. Well, that wasn't going to be a mistake that Haruka continued.

"I'm sorry," Haruka said. She dared to put one hand on Imani's arm, cupping her elbow. "I'm sorry that people treat you that way. I'm sorry that I didn't look past my own preconceptions. I'm sorry that I never asked how you were doing after your breakups. I'm very sorry that I assumed that you were doing the dumping instead of being dumped."

Imani swallowed hard, cheeks going so red that it was obvious even in the dim light on the top step of the restaurant. "Not your fault. I coulda spoken up."

"That in no way excuses me from using my brain," Haruka said. "Come on. We'd best order soon. They won't be open too much longer."

That propelled the two of them into the restaurant where they got tired sighs and glares from the wait staff. It was almost empty, just one very tired, very drunk looking young man in the far corner. Haruka didn't even need to look at the menu. She always got the same item when she came. And she knew what sort of burgers Imani liked from her many stories at the bar about 'perfect' burgers eaten in other cities.

"I'll have the bacon cheeseburger with cheddar, hold the onions," Haruka said as they were seated in a booth near the windows. "She'll

have the teriyaki burger, hold the mushrooms, with Swiss cheese. Both well done. Oh, and lemonade for me. A water and, what? Soda for you?"

"Ah, no, lemonade works just fine," Imani said.

"I'll be right back with your drinks," the server said, staring at little at Haruka before shuffling off towards the back to turn in their order.

Haruka sat, tucked her purse between her hip and the wall and then started laughing at the sheer awe in Imani's eyes. "It's not that much of a surprise that I know what you'd want. You tell grand tales about teriyaki burgers of awe when you get back from your trips."

Imani started giggling, honestly giggling, which just about made Haruka get up and move around too her side of the booth so that she could hug Imani and cuddle her. Someone that big and strong really shouldn't that cute.

"Didn't realize I had such a habit of that," Imani said, grinning as if there was nothing to fear and no one stalking her.

"Oh, you certainly do," Haruka said with a smile of her own. "Quite loudly, actually. It's rather fun to listen to. I've never been able to travel. At first I had no money and now my lease takes up so much of my paycheck that I can't afford to."

"Break the lease," Imani suggested as if it was that simple.

"I can't afford the fees or the cost of first, last and security deposits," Haruka said. She shrugged. "Hopefully soon. I'm saving money, as much as I can. I'll get there eventually."

The drinks came quickly, too quickly for Haruka's comfort. Their arrival shut Imani's mouth again, set her back to looking out the window as if terrified that Celeste might show up. So of course, just as their burgers were delivered a couple of far too silent minutes later, Celeste did stride into the restaurant.

She had on the pure white she always wore when she wanted to convince people that she wasn't absolutely the most abusive stalking monster in their community. Combined with Celeste's pale skin, blue eyes and honey blond hair, she looked like an angel until you met her eyes. Which were terrifying in their intensity, their determination to make Imani suffer.

Imani cringed back into the booth.

Haruka grabbed her cell phone and started taking pictures.



"How COULD YOU?" Celeste shouted so loudly that the drunk in the corner fell off his chair. "I trusted you, Imani! How could you do this to me?"

"Will you just leave me alone?" Imani begged, shoulder against the window and heart beating so hard that she thought it was about to leap out her throat and run away down the street. "You dumped me. Quit following me around, will you?"

Celeste gasped as if that was a horrible accusation. She clutched her hands to her chest while widening her eyes dramatically. The whole thing was calculated, really painfully obviously calculated. Quin lurked by the door, hands shoved into her leather jacket's pockets. She glared at Imani as if it was her fault that Celeste was so focused on her.

"I just made a mistake, that's all," Celeste said. "I don't know why you won't admit that we're made for each other."

"The reason she won't is that you're quite abusive and completely ridiculous in your stalking," Haruka said in that clear, cold, vicious tone that had gotten the cops to sweat. "Nice outfit. Are you going for perfect virginal angel or just innocent child led astray? Because you didn't manage either. Those heels are. Hmm. Well. They tell a different story than the rest of your outfit."

Celeste's eyes went hard as steel as she glared at Haruka. A moment later they went wide enough that Imani risked looking away from her for a moment.

Pictures.

Haruka was recording the entire encounter. Not just pictures but video. Her phone was trained on Celeste's face as she went red with rage, then white with a sort of fear that Imani wouldn't have expected from her and then sly for just an instant. Then Celeste bit her bottom lip, tears welling up in her eyes as if she was utterly hurt.

"I can't believe you're tossing me aside for her," Celeste said to Imani, not to Haruka at all. "She's not even a real lesbian, you know. She's going to cheat on you someday and leave you."

"I didn't toss you aside!" Imani shouted. "For fuck's sake, you dumped me! The hell does Herzog have to do that? You dumped me. You said I was greedy to want someone to come home to and you fucking stole my TV, trashed my couch, and walked out on me."

"Oh, I didn't realize there was already property damage," Haruka all but purred. "The police will be very interested to hear that she's a thief as well as a vandal. Nice. You should have mentioned that while we were recording the damage to your home, Imani."

"Police?" Celeste snapped and wow, all the little drama games went right the fuck away. "What police?"

Haruka smiled her shark's smile at Celeste and yeah, it worked even on Celeste in full drama mode. "We've filed a complaint against you for stalking, property damage, vandalism. How nice that we can add disturbing the public, breaking and entering and robbery to the list. I do wonder how many of your former lovers would find the idea of a criminal case against you enticing. There are so many women you've treated poorly, you see."

Celeste went so white that the veins in her face showed. She stepped backwards, one step, then two. Quin was right there to catch Celeste's shoulders, to keep her from collapsing or running away. There was fear in Quin's eyes, too, a lot of fear so maybe she'd been involved in all the crazy-pants behavior, too.

"Criminal charges?" Celeste whispered but the restaurant was so silent, manager watching with wide eyes, drunk blinking befuddledly at them all, that Imani could hear her.

"Oh yes," Haruka said. She smirked, outright smirked as she took another picture, this time with a flash that made both Celeste and Quin flinch. "Public criminal charges. This should make the most interesting news stories. You know how much they love local crime stories on the five o'clock news. Local woman stalks and attacks lesbian lovers, more news after the break, complete with pictures of you for everyone to see."

Celeste shook her head, mouthed the word 'no' and then shoved Quin out of the way. She ran out of the restaurant. Hit the door so hard that it smacked into the wall but that impact didn't drown out the sound of Celeste's heels on the sidewalk, her car revving into life and the wheels squealing on the pavement.

Took only a couple more seconds for Quin to run out, too. Imani stared at the door as it slowly wheezed shut. They were gone. Maybe gone for real. Hopefully gone out of Imani's life never to return because fuck, if she never saw either Celeste or Quin again it would be too soon.

"Do ya really think the cops'd do anything?" Imani asked.

Haruka laughed, such a low wicked sound. "It doesn't actually matter if they do. The complaint is on file. If she gets out of line I'll contact all her former lovers and tell them to add their testimony to it. And yes, I really would tell the news. I'm sadly less certain that they would cover the story but the sheer threat of the publicity should help keep Celeste in line. It's not a perfect solution--"

"No," Imani said as she reached across the table to seize Haruka's hands, to hold that precious little cell phone that had been the instrument of freeing her. "It is perfect. You're perfect. Ya got no clue how big a deal this is."

Haruka laughed, her eyes going from fierce to gentle, warm. She shook her head, set her phone down and then took Imani's hands. Where Imani's hands were broad and covered with scars, callouses, Haruka's hands were slender, each finger tipped by a perfect French manicured nail.

"I do know," Haruka said. "I truly do. I don't think I'm anywhere near as perfect as you seem to. That's certainly you, not me. But. Well. You proposed that we fake-date to throw Celeste off. Perhaps we could... make it real?"

Imani stared at those delicate little hands, then at Haruka's face. She was so stern, so stubborn most of the time. But she was also kind and smart and fierce enough to take on not just Celeste's special brand of nuts but also cops and everyone else in the world. They were such opposites. But maybe.

"Yeah," Imani said, biting her lip and then laughing because her heart felt like it was dancing the polka inside of her. "I'd like that. I'd really like that. And maybe, ya know, after a while you could move in with me? Got all that space and nothing to fill it. It'd be really nice to have someone to come home to."

Haruka breathed a broken little laugh that was at least half sob. Tears glimmered in her eyes as she grinned. "I can't think of anything I'd like more."

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: SPECIALIST CLASS THREE

This story started as an in-joke between my spouse and I. You see, I have a story that I've yet to publish that they've helped me on. One of the characters is named Martine. Another is named Hasagawa. There's an abandoned alien shipyard involved as well as epic quests. None of which has anything to do with this story beyond the name of the shipping line and the idea of humanity traveling to the stars in cruise liners that the Martine-Hasagawa Company had created.

SPECIALIST CLASS THREE

Naya paused just outside the lift to catch her breath and smooth her dove grey pencil skirt over the charcoal grey leggings her uniform required. The jacket was at least comfortable, more dove grey knit pieced together with black side panels separated by a thin piping line of burgundy that slinked down her narrow torso in an attempt to fool eyes into seeing curves Naya would never possess. Her little pillbox hat, dove and charcoal and more burgundy piping topped by little brass insignia giving her rank as Specialist Class Three for Martine-Hasagawa Cruiser lines, sat perfectly perched on top of her head, the back end of it secured to her tugged tight puff of hair that should have been a ponytail but wasn't.

The view down the hallway was bland, unremarkable. Grey walls with a white ceiling overhead punctuated by recessed lights that illuminated pools of dark brown carpet. Every few yards there was a view screen set to show a slowly rotating assortment of Old Earth art, silent video clips and, once for every hallway on the ship, a feed from the sensors outside.

It was all so tastefully crafted to give a sense of normalcy to something that could never be truly normal.

Even the air was adjusted and tweaked so that it wouldn't remind

the passengers too strongly of the fact that they were in space. Teo had told her when she joined him on the ship that there was a whole department of people responsible for creating artificial wind in the ship. They had scent canisters that they would release in fractional counts into the air supply so the observation deck always smelled faintly of dust and cold, dry air but the cafeteria, grand roomy thing with its dim lights and bolted down tables and chairs, was warm with the smell of baked apples and cinnamon.

So very strange that they would have to sculpt the air and light to keep people from the thing they had paid so much for. Naya shook her head before heading up the corridor. That was irrelevant at the moment.

Riya Brinley had not emerged from her cabin for four days. She had allowed the cleaning staff in, talked graciously with the actual human staff, a huge luxury that the line advertised widely, as they changed sheets, replaced towels, and vacuumed the floor of the crumbs from Riya's dinners.

But she'd stayed inside and that, according to Naya's supervisor Mila, was a worrisome thing. Liner travel was not an intended to be private. Everything was designed to get passengers out of their rooms and into the common areas where the entertainment was delivered. To stay in one's room was to waste the money one had already spent and to deprive the ship of the money one could be spending along the way. Never to mention to possibility of madness brought on by the strangeness and the effects of the Wave drive.

Not that Naya was supposed to bring that or money up. No, her job was more prosaic. She walked up the hallway, regretting that they'd put carpet on the floors in the guest quarters instead of the faux wood floors down in the crew rest areas. It would be nice to hear her kitten heels hitting the floor but nothing could be allowed to disturb the passengers in this area.

Except Naya.

Riya Brinley's room was in the very center of the ship, an outer suite that allowed her to have view ports that looked out on the vacuum of space. Or at least that's what guests were told. The so-

called view ports were actually screens shaped to look like glass portals to the void. The hull was solid on the other side, dappled with little indents that were made to look like windows from the boarding dock so that passengers would believe it was true.

Naya smoothed her skirt one more time, took a deep breath and pressed the incongruous little doorbell button, red, the size of her little finger, inset in the wall just below the tasteful silver and bronze number '17893'.

"Yes?" Riya said, opening her door so freely that Naya started. "That was fast. Ah. Hm. Not my lunch?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Naya said, laughing breathlessly as her cheeks heated, the blush hopefully not showing against the black of her skin. "My apologies but my supervisor was worried that you're not enjoying the trip. We haven't seen you out of your cabin since you boarded."

Riya sighed and sagged against the doorjamb. She looked at Naya with such a weary expression that Naya frowned. Something was definitely not right here. After a moment, Riya gestured for her to come in.

It felt strange to walk past Riya. Not because of the persistent oddness of being in such an engineered space but because Riya seemed even more out of place than Naya. At the very least, Naya could groom her hair, pull it back into a tight puff on the back of her head, put on her leggings and tug the sleeves of her jacket down so that her dark, dark skin didn't show so much. She was at least properly slim, graceful, demure.

Riya strode across the suite's olive, emerald and gold carpet as though it was the bridge of a pirate ship and she was the Captain. The suite was bright, view screens changed to show sun-drenched beaches and flaming sunsets instead of the generic modern art the liner provided. Naya thought that maybe Riya had brightened the lights as well because the room seemed bigger, warmer, more present than it should.

Perhaps that was Riya, though. She wore harem pants in a stunning shade of scarlet decorated with broad gold leaves. Her top was a

simple halter tied at the neck and under her bust. That was sapphire and silver. Riya's hair hung in heavy waves over her shoulders and half down her back, moving like the mane of a lion as it stalked its prey.

"Your supervisor is worried," Riya said as she flung her long muscular body into the couch's cushions. It squeaked in protest, groaning a little as Riya crossed one ankle over her knee.

Naya perched on the edge of the very comfortable chair opposite Riya and folded her hands in her lap. Best to be open with a passenger like Riya. "Yes. Generally when a passenger refuses to leave their rooms it's not a sign of good mental health. We do try to intervene before anything unfortunate happens."

"So they sent in a mouse to beard the lion, I take it?" Riya asked and then laughed, loud, her mouth open and eyes screwed up into slits, while Naya ducked her head.

Naya's cheeks heated. Thankfully it shouldn't show that much, even in the overly bright room. When she could trust herself not to grin hopelessly and helplessly at Riya, Naya raised her eyes and met the now very serious Riya's eyes.

"Someone hurt you," Riya said.

Naya raised an eyebrow, wishing yet again that company policies allowed her to look up a passenger's profession without cause. "An interesting assumption to make. But no. Not everyone is quite so..."

When she gestured towards Riya she got another huge grin. The laughter this time was more of a bark than a roar but it still made something clench just under Naya's breastbone. Oh, this was going to be an interesting assignment, however long it lasted. And whatever directions it went in.

"Bold?" Riya suggested.

"I would have said loud but that suffices," Naya replied and then pressed her lips together against that dreadful grin because Riya spluttered and cackled, both feet falling to the floor so that she could lean forward, elbows on knees and, yes, so intent that it felt like stripping naked in the middle of the shopping concourse on the entry level.

"So what does a Specialist Third Class do?" Riya asked, fingers flipping towards Naya's insignia. "That's what the pips mean, yes? Third class? Can tell you're a specialist by the piping."

"You studied us," Naya said. She nodded. "It does mean third class and yes, I am a specialist. My job is to make our passengers comfortable and happy in any way I can."

Riya's head reared up and she sat stick straight, nostrils flaring as if she'd suddenly stepped in shit. When Naya raised an eyebrow at her, Riya's lip curled. So did her fingers around her knees, digging into the scarlet and gold fabric as if she wanted to tear someone apart.

"You're a whore?" Riya asked and the scorn was quite clear there.

"No," Naya replied in her softest, gentlest tone, the one that made even Teo pause and think before he acted. "I could arrange for one if you wanted, though. We do have several sex workers on staff for passengers who... have those needs."

True as far as it went though they were mostly fully licensed and degreed sex therapists, not less skilled sex workers. Either way, her warning tone or the offer itself appeared to drive Riya back into her seat. She collapsed back against the cushions and stared at Naya, eyes taking in Naya's very precise uniform, the tiny data pad in her breast pocket and then coming up with only questions. Because she frowned, opened her mouth and shut it again while waving both hands in Naya's direction.

"Is there a problem?" Naya asked. She didn't apologize for the sharpness of her tone.

Riya barked that laugh again and stared and then laughed far more gently. "I don't know what to make of you."

"Must you make something of me?" Naya asked.

"Now you sound like you're a counselor," Riya said, snorted, grunted and then peered at Naya. "Are you?"

"I have some training in it," Naya admitted. "Is it so strange that we would invest effort to make sure that our guests are happy and comfortable on their trip?"

Riya opened her mouth and then shut it again. She stood, harem

pants billowing as she paced the sitting room. It took her five steps each way and she did it with hands clenched by her sides as if she expected to be attacked going or coming.

A warrior. She looked and moved like a warrior. It was quite unusual for their liner. Most often people trained to fight preferred to take the faster, less luxurious cruisers. Naya wanted to pull her pad out and note that but no, Riya stopped in the middle of the room so that she could glare down at Naya.

"Yes, it's surprising," Riya declared.

"Indeed," Naya replied, both eyebrows going up just enough for Riya to snort and shake her head. "Well, if you truly desire to be left alone, all you need to do is say so. Given that we are less than a week into a three month journey, though, we thought it best for us to check now to see if there is anything that we can do to make the trip better for you. We do make every effort to accommodate our passenger's needs."

"Including whores," Riya said and this time there was no scorn to the slur, just confirmation of a fact.

"Including sex workers," Naya agreed and her emphasis on the title was enough to make Riya flush and tug at the hair at the back of her neck, sending it in messy, glorious waves over her shoulders.

"Right," Riya said.

She looked towards the fake windows that showed stars invisible to the naked eye. They were already traveling faster than light. There was nothing to see outside the window. Naya couldn't tell if Riya knew that, if it bothered her or was inconsequential. But when she turned back there was a darkness to her eyes and the corners of her mouth were suddenly bracketed by deep wrinkles.

"I want... chaos," Riya said. "This whole thing is... It's disgusting. So manicured and sculpted that it makes me feel like the air is being sucked out of my lungs every time I step outside that door. I know, I know. This is what I signed up for. I just didn't expect that the air itself would have been adjusted. I can't even smell the grease I know has to be there! This is a giant machine. There has to be grease."

"Ah," Naya breathed. She smiled. This was something she could fix.

Naya stood, automatically smoothing her skirt over her thighs. Something about the move, or perhaps Naya's smile, prompted Riya to back off a step, eyes wide. Rather than let Riya retreat even further into her suite, into her complaints about the ship and the, yes, too carefully managed environmental system, Naya held out her hand.

To her amusement, Riya looked at Naya's hand as if it was a snake about to strike, perhaps a cobra or a rattlesnake. It made Naya want to laugh, to let her teeth show but that wouldn't be friendly and Naya did work very hard on being friendly to those she worked with. And for now, until Riya no longer needed her, Naya would be working with her.

It might only be a day or two. Then again it might be for the rest of the voyage. Some passengers needed a confidant among the crew to be able to cope with the vastness of interstellar space pulling at them. Even with the Wave drive tuned as low as possible, extending a journey from mere days into months, the effects of the drive did twist the mind and cause problems where none had been before.

"What?" Riya asked so warily that Naya snorted a little laugh. "Oh, that I like. You can do that a lot more."

"Come with me," Naya said.

"Why?" Riya asked and again it was a wary word but her eyes were alight with curiosity and her lips curled up in the beginnings of a grin that made laughter bubble beneath Naya's breastbone.

"You want chaos," Naya said. "I know where you can find some."

"Without causing trouble for the crew?" Riya asked and now there was nothing but excitement, anticipation, joy, even. "Or the other passengers? Because, let me tell you, the urge to run along that causeway and knock over every single one of those stupid little post-card and knickknack stands was almost irresistible."

Naya ducked her head when the urge to grin became too strong. She kept the hand out despite the way it shook with her laughter. When she managed to get some measure of control back, Riya was

smiling as if she'd just seen the most beautiful thing in the entire galaxy. Silly. That was definitely not Naya.

"Yes, without causing trouble for anyone," Naya agreed. "I must admit that I find the controlled environment disturbing as well. At least fifteen percent of our passengers and crew do. We have... provisions for those who need a bit of chaos, those who need natural living things and air which is not perfectly scented and sculpted."

Riya seized Naya's hand with a smile that held both hopeless adoration and desperate hope. Her hand was warm and broad, so large that Naya felt like a child as she carefully curled her fingers tight. When Naya pulled Riya threw back her head and laughed, dancing in place for a moment.

"Lead on, Specialist First Class Naya," Riya said. "Show me what you've got."

"Gladly," Naya replied. "It's right this way."

Riya followed willingly enough but she flinched at the sight of the grey, dim hallway and glowered when the elevator gave them the smell of cinnamon and mint. Perhaps a nod to the lunch that was certainly now being re-routed. It would cause a bit of trouble for the food staff but Naya had to think they'd appreciate a deviation from their afternoon routine.

Instead of going up to the main decks where the cafeterias and shops lurked, Naya took them down towards the 'keel' of the ship. Truly, it wasn't actually a keel. The thing had been designed into the ship specifically because it gave passengers, and staff honestly, the sensation of an up and a down. Psychology, very useful psychology.

"Where are we going?" Riya asked once the elevator doors opened on a bare, blank hallway with none of the graces of the more commonly used areas.

Bare black floors, hard as the painted steel they were, led to grey steel walls and ugly lights with grills over them that Riya stared at with wide eyes and a complicated mixture of horror and delight. Naya didn't answer. Instead she led Riya up the hallway, around a left and then a right corner, both turns marked by a single green painted arrow at waist height, and up to the heavy door with its locking

wheel, very real and important, topped by a placard which stated 'Authorized Personnel Only'.

"Seriously, where are we?" Riya asked. "Am I even allowed down here?"

"Yes, I've given you authorization," Naya replied.

She pressed her lips together against the need to grin, to laugh at the confusion on Riya's beautiful face. It took a bit of effort, as always, to turn the wheel that unlocked the door. Then they were inside the little air lock. Gusts of air blasted over both of them. Naya held her hat in place, smoothed her skirt and then smiled as the inner door opened.

"Welcome to the community garden," Naya said as she ducked through the smaller, round-edged, inner door.

Riya gasped, leaning back against the door as the heat and humidity of the air hit her. Her hair seemed to curl as sweat beaded up on her forehead and the upper curves of her breasts. Strangely, her eyes were on Naya, not on the riot of plants that grew on either side of the narrow path.

There was corn to the right, a huge bank of it planted by a passenger who complained of the lack of anything fresh. Truth, there. Sweet corn toughened by the minute once you picked it. The harvest should start soon and Naya would ensure that the passenger got as mean ears as he wanted. Squash and pumpkin rambled through the stalks, waiting for the corn to die off so that they could claim more of the artificial sun.

On the left were herbs, mint, sage, lavender, peppers of every variety. Further down, just past the corn were fruit trees planted early on after the ship was launched into service. And grass and flowers and rose bushes that arched over the pathway, thorns sharp enough that you had to duck underneath them. Thankfully, the garden seemed mostly empty on this end. Lunch, Naya thought, nodding as she started walking through the garden with Riya on her heels.

"What is this?" Riya asked as she stopped to kneel down and run gentle fingers over delicate purple pansies growing under the arching

leaves of bright golden day lilies. "There's no plan. None of this makes sense."

"Of course not," Naya said. She laughed again at Riya's stunned expression. "This is the community garden. It was found early on that there are a significant number of passengers and staff who need... something real. This is the keel of the ship, as far down as you can go. It runs the entire length of the liner and it's filled, all the way from stem to stern, with plants that passengers have planted. You can find a bit of soil and we'll help you choose what you want to grow. Or we can go just up under the apple trees and lunch will be delivered to us. You can even sleep here if you want though the staff will roust you out if you spend more than a day or two here."

Riya laughed, soft at first and then louder. She flung back her head, hair glorious over her shoulders and back, even where it stuck in strands and cobwebs in the sweat that dripped down her spine and arms.

Then Riya surged to her feet, her hands clamping around Naya's waist. She lifted Naya up into the air, laughing as she spun Naya around three times and then pulled Naya into a hug that drove all the air right out of Naya's lungs.

She was tall and strong, so powerful that it was like being hugged by a hurricane, and warm as a summer day in New Orleans. Naya stared up at Riya when Riya finally put Naya back on her feet. Riya's hands rested broad over the narrow swell of Naya's hips. A blush crept over Riya's cheeks as Naya stared up at Riya's plump bottom lip, dark and chapped, the narrow arch of her upper lip with a tiny scar bisecting the right corner of Riya's mouth.

Riya's head dipped, her hair swinging forward to caress Naya's cheeks, then pulled back as she started to pull Naya away. Then she leaned again, brows furrowed and eyes hesitant. Naya stood on her tiptoes, caught Riya's strong shoulders and then pressed a feather-light kiss against Riya's lips.

"God," Riya whispered, deep and harsh, as her hands tightened around Naya's hips. "God!"

"No," Naya whispered back, laughter welling up. "Just me."

Riya started laughing, a much quieter laugh that would have been a giggle if it came from Naya. But nothing Riya did could be that girlish, not truly. She pressed her forehead against Naya's, dislodging her cap and sending it tumbling down to the dirt-speckled floor below.

The second kiss was slower, gentle as Riya paused as if she expected to be pushed away and then kissed Naya soft, implacable, warm and wet and so, so strong. Naya wrapped her arms around Riya's neck, knotted her fingers in that glorious dark hair. By the time Riya finally pulled back so that she could press kisses against Naya's nose, her cheeks, her forehead, Naya's heart felt as though it would leap straight through her chest.

"I take it you approve of the gardens?" Naya said and then giggled in earnest at Riya's disgust.

"You..." Riya paused and laughed, slow and then fast and then she had her hands around Naya's hips and they were spinning through the air once more.

"Riya!" Naya gasped. She gasped again as Riya hugged her tight.

"I love it," Riya said. "I do. It's just what I needed. I didn't. This. I didn't expect this."

"Good," Naya said.

She pulled free, gentle and careful so that Riya wouldn't take it as a rejection. When Naya offered her hand Riya took it with a grin that seemed at least half made of adoration. Riya followed along after Naya, scooping up Naya's discarded cap as they passed it by.

"It changes all the time," Naya said, leading the way, "but yesterday there was a beautiful picnic spot up ahead. And tomorrow, if you're interested of course, I could take you fishing."

"Fishing?" Riya said and that was a squeak of Naya had ever heard one. "God, yes, why not? As long as I get to go with you."

Naya blinked and then nodded, shy and pleased and delighted at the same time. Teo would tease her when they saw each other next. He'd promised her that she'd find a shipboard romance eventually. But Naya didn't care. Even if it had a messy ending when Riya left the ship, Naya thought that she would welcome whatever came to her at Riya's side. However long or short her time there might be.

"When I can," Naya said, squeezing Riya's fingers against the sudden worry in her eyes. "I do have my duties, after all. But I should be able to meet with you for, oh, lunch? How about dinner? I get off after six. Would you like to meet me for dinner at half past six, just the two of us?"

Riya beamed like a star coming out from behind an eclipse. Her fingers tightened on Naya's and then Naya was in the air yet again, her nose fractions of an inch from Riya's. One of Riya's arms supported Naya's legs. The other hand spread strong between Naya's shoulder blades.

"That sounds wonderful," Riya said. Her nose wrinkled as she grinned. "Maybe some little hole in the wall?"

"I know just the place," Naya replied and let her laughter out to mingle with Riya's. "You'll love it."

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: MEMORIES OF FIRE

The Unification series started with the idea of hundreds, thousands of parallel worlds being smashed together in a cataclysmic event. Well, cataclysms have consequences, some of which are very scarring. Youneda was a survivor of that event and yes, he definitely carries the scars with him decades later.

MEMORIES OF FIRE

Youneda rolled over, scales rasping against the stone slabs he'd had installed in his front yard instead of that messy, irritating grass. He had no idea why humans loved the stuff so much. Always growing, spreading into the cracks and the pollen! Sticky, stinky, horrible stuff, pollen. Felix next door yelled every time Youneda burned the grass off his front yard but there was no possibility that he'd leave the stuff there. A week, no more than two, and every single crack in the rocks would have roots creeping in and that just wasn't acceptable. Stupid grass getting into everything no matter what you did, wormlike roots creeping through everything even as their dagger-leaves burned to ash.

He opened one eye to glare up at the sky with a shudder. Still overcast. There wasn't supposed to be any rain today, thank goodness, but the clouds were thick enough to block the afternoon sun he'd come out to enjoy. If the fines against weather modification weren't so steep Youneda would cast a spell to clear the skies so that he could properly bask under the sun, even though it never got truly warm in the Puget Sound. Youneda certainly had no intention of investing in sun lamps the way the local government suggested.

How was a dragon supposed to properly bask with sun lamps? He growled, flopping his head against the stones again. Ridiculous thought. He should have eaten that damned pencil pusher for suggesting it, even though human flesh did terrible things to his digestion system. If he weren't so comfortable in his house, especially his new rocket mass heater with the large basking couch covered with thick cushions, Youneda would move somewhere warmer. Maybe the southwest though there were entirely too many dragons in that area. He'd have a hard time even getting a house down there.

"Damn you kids!" Felix bellowed from next door. "Stay off my lawn!"

"Suck it grandpa!"

"Ah, we're just taking a short cut, gramps!"

Youneda opened his eyes, raised his head over the fence and then huffed a cloud of smoke across Felix's lawn. Young Shinji Miyabe, riding his spelled float board that left gouged twin tracks through Felix's beloved grass-patch of a lawn, zipped straight through the cloud while his best friend Mayami sailed higher into the sky, her wings flipping insolently at both Felix and Youneda.

They laughed as they swooped across Felix's lawn, out into the street and then over the top of a Fed Ex truck slowly coming up the lane to deliver who knew what. Probably another stack of books to Fuwa. That was a dragon who could do with a good bit more basking and a lot less hoarding. Pretty soon he wouldn't be able to move inside his house for all the books stacked high. Not that Youneda would help clean the mess out. Fuwa chose that horde. He could deal with it when the health officials came to forcibly remove him from the house until the mess was cleaned up.

"Damned kids these days," Felix grumbled. "No respect."

"Call their parents," Youneda advised in a grumpy huff that scorched a spot of stone in front of his nose but not the sturdy wood fence dividing their properties. Grass-lover notwithstanding, Youneda did somewhat respect Felix. "They should learn proper respect at home."

"That's not going to work," Felix said, waving one hand to blow the smoke away. He didn't appear to mind that much, which made sense given that he had his pipe out and was puffing great clouds of blue sparkly smoke around. It curled around his shoulders as if alive, surrounding him and not spreading across the fence. "Miyabe's parents are both cyber-mages. They don't respect tradition. And Mayami, hmph! That child's dam works on the city council. Last time I had to deal with her all she'd talk about was improving the city water supply and how lovely cell phones were."

Youneda groaned, flopping back onto his stones. Definitely no point there, then. "Next time I'll fry them."

Felix snickered approvingly. It was nearly impossible to catch his scent when he smoked that pixie weed but Youneda thought that he had a hint of fear at the idea, not that Felix would ever show it. Old dragon hunter like Felix would never show fear to a dragon, no matter what.

And wasn't that the summation of Youneda's life? Living next door to a dragon hunter. Friends with one, no less. How the mighty had fallen, not that Youneda was ever one of the mighty dragons. A dragon who hoarded various forms of pottery was never going to rise to power. You needed gold or silver or, better these days, programming skills to do that.

Still, he hadn't done too badly for himself. His horde had some very nice pieces worth quite a lot of money. The occasional sale of one or two provided for him quite nicely and the house, legacy of his maternal great-aunt Ougi, was fully paid for. His needs were modest and at this point in Youneda's life all he really wanted was a nice quiet bask on a warm sunny afternoon. Not that he could get that today.

"Hmm," Felix grunted. "That's odd."

"What?"

"Fed Ex," Felix replied. "Stopping here."

"What?"

This time Youneda opened his eyes. He sat up properly when he saw that the Fed Ex truck actually had stopped in front of their

houses. The young dragon who clambered out was thin, svelte, attractive in all the ways that would have had Youneda preening his wings despite the scars and sagging membranes a few decades ago. Just the lovely lavender and purple scales around her throat would set any dragon to preening even with her beautiful colors half-hidden by a plain brown Fed Ex shirt.

Her tail wagged slowly, invitingly, as she rummaged through the truck for her delivery. Felix snorted, raising an eyebrow when Youneda glowered at him. Really, he ought to allow an old dragon his fantasies. Youneda's scales weren't that faded with age, not yet. Though his wings, admittedly, showed his age in all the worst ways. Flying was such a challenge anymore. That was why his garage had an old Harley Davidson in it instead of racks of pottery for his horde.

"Youneda?" the young Fed Ex dragon asked.

"Ah, yes?" Youneda said, feet firmly planted on the stone despite the way his tail twitched with the need to preen. At least he managed to keep his wings firmly folded against his back where their sagging membranes didn't show quite so badly.

"Delivery," the Fed Ex dragon said, passing him a padded envelope and one of those irritatingly small data pads to sign off on. "Just sign here, please."

"Ah, yes, of course," Youneda said, snorting a little at how little reaction the young Fed Ex dragon had to his size and the breadth of his chest. At least she didn't eye his overgrown belly. Young people these days, no respect for age and power.

He signed, sighed as the Fed Ex dragon flitted back to her truck and then drove away in a roar of pixie dust colored exhaust. Must have filled up on Seventeenth. They never did get the proper gas there.

"So what is it?" Felix asked. "Message from family? Present? You actually spend money on the internet for once?"

"Bite your tongue," Youneda said, glowering at him as he used one sadly dull claw to tear the envelope open. "As if I'd waste money on the ridiculous things they manufacture now."

"Well, didn't really think so," Felix said, puffing at his pipe and

then grumbling that it had gone out. "Nice bit of dragon lass though. Quite turned your head, you ridiculous old fool."

"I'm not that old. I can still look," Youneda complained. "Hmm. Odd."

It was odd. Inside was a cream paper envelope. There was no return address though the thing felt thick and firm enough for a business card inside. Youneda sniffed, nodding that it smelled of human hands though he thought he detected a hint of dragon on it, too. Felix took the Fed Ex envelope, grumbling that there wasn't anything on it to indicate who'd sent it.

"Ah, work," Youneda said, settling down on his elbows to scan through the packet of information inside the envelope. "It's little Morton, you remember, fourth son of Sam Ellis? Went off to college and then became an archeologist."

"Didn't he go to work for some company?" Felix asked, peering over the fence while puffing furiously on his pipe. Sparkling blue smoke crept down over his arms, around his waist.

"No, that was the second son," Youneda said. "The one with the Ferrari."

They both grumbled about that. Paul Ellis was, in both Youneda and Felix's opinions, the bad seed of that lot. Always roaring up the street, bragging about his money and power and then quietly begging his father for a handout when he was in town. No horde sat behind that boy's riches. His credit card debt had to be horrific.

"So what does Morton need?" Felix asked.

"He's found an old teapot from the Opening," Youneda said absently, tapping the back of one claw against the picture that Morton had included. "It's very similar to several he saw in my horde. Wants a second opinion on the thing as there are some factors that don't make sense."

"Right one to ask for that," Felix said with such a bored expression that Youneda's ears slid back against his skull as he lifted one lip in a snarl. Felix snorted, tapping the pixie weed out of his pipe. The smoke immediately dissipated around him in a crackling role of

sparks. "Oh, stop. Wanted to know about weapons you'd ask me. Pottery, that's you. That's all. Still don't know what's so fascinating about old clay pots."

"You're an idiot," Youneda grumbled at him as he carefully refolded the letter around the picture before tucking them back into the envelope. His wing fingers gripped it as Youneda headed back into his house. "Do get to work on your precious grass, Felix."

"Damn kids," Felix grumbled. "Luck to you and all that."



YOUNEDA SMILED as he leaned over the handlebars of his motorcycle, neck stretched out long so that it felt like flying without all the effort. Traffic laws notwithstanding, it was a pure pleasure to spread his wings a bit, just enough to really feel the wind, while barreling along the freeway into Bellevue. The slope of the 405 just outside of Kirkland was always a joy at this time of the afternoon.

Especially since surface traffic had become so rare. It was much more efficient, faster, to travel by hover car or through the new gates the Elves had gotten pushed through three years ago. Where twenty years ago Youneda would have had to contend with a hundred other vehicles on the road with him today there was one little electric car that looked to hold dwarves on a shopping trip downtown and an antique Model T with a tricked out chassis that allowed it to travel a full forty-five miles an hour.

Both slow compared to Youneda's Harley. He blew past them at sixty-five, a bit above the land speed limit but not enough to bother any watching police. If he kept it at sixty-five they might not even bother to send a golem out to give him a warning.

Bellevue's magic sparkled in the distance, lighting the afternoon sky like a display of nonstop fireworks. He much preferred Seattle's quieter aura, staid and old fashioned enough that people still gasped on occasion when he stalked into stores looking for pottery. But Morton was in Bellevue so off to the Magic City he went.

At least he didn't have to go to downtown Belleview. Youneda gladly turned east, away from the towering buildings and shimmering pocket dimensions that made Belleview a challenge to navigate even for a Dragon. Every week you heard about tourists who'd gotten lost in the pocket dimensions of downtown Belleview. The cost to find and retrieve them was ridiculous, especially since tax payers had to front the cost instead of the tourists.

The east side of the 405 was quieter, still busy, still rich and powerful and confident, but not quite so strident about being a 'Modern City'. Fewer pocket dimensions and far fewer skyscrapers made it much more pleasant to visit even if Youneda always hated the swarms of pixies flitting from tree to tree. Messy little people, pixies, no matter how successful their businesses tended to be.

By the time he'd traveled the three miles out to the Museum of Unification, Youneda was ready to turn around and fry and the pack of pixies that had decided to follow him for the last two miles. Hover cars flew so close over his head that he couldn't unfurl his wings, the drivers yelling at the pixies and threatening to turn on their wipers. He'd had one young pup of a dragon honk at him for not tucking his tail against his body as he drove. Ridiculous child was probably barely old enough to even drive that delivery truck.

The Museum of the Unification was, thankfully, shielded against pixie invasion. He snorted as he drove across its boundary spell, the pixies cursing at him before flying away in a cloud to harass someone else. Two school buses sat in the parking lot but other than that there weren't that many people there. A few hover cars, one other motorcycle tricked out in leather pads over the metal components so its owner was probably an Elf and a Ford pickup truck so old and battered that Youneda wondered if it started.

He studied the museum, one ear sliding back as he realized that the physical building hadn't changed since his last visit a year and a half ago. Still approximately five thousand square feet arranged in two stories, the red brick building looked fully human construction until Youneda spotted the, thankfully, discrete pocket dimensional

add-ons that had been installed to give it more space despite its small lot.

"Youneda, sir!" Morton called from the front door as Youneda pulled slowly and carefully into the motorcycle parking slot closest to the front door. He hurried out, beaming at Youneda so earnestly that a bit of Youneda's grumpiness faded. "Thank you so much for coming. I really do appreciate this."

"Not at all," Youneda said, making sure to take the keys and tuck them into the carrying pouch he'd barely remembered to strap around his neck before leaving. "Always good to see new bits of pottery from the Opening. It looked intact in your picture."

"It is," Morton said. He brushed his dark hands over his green tweed jacket, fussed with his glasses and then sighed as he led Youneda past the ticket station with a wave of his hand. "Which is odd. It was found very close to the site of the Opening."

"It should be smashed then," Youneda said, startled enough that he had to consciously keep his wings from flaring out. "Nothing inanimate survived the Opening."

"Exactly," Morton sighed. He looked around, edging closer to Youneda despite the instinctive fear of a human approaching a large predator. Sweat beaded his forehead, turning his dark skin to a shimmering obsidian color that quite suited the young man. "My boss is certain it's real but... well."

"Ah."

Youneda nodded, gesturing for Morton to lead the way. The back hallway was narrow, almost too narrow for Youneda to pass through. He had added a few pounds around the belly over the last few years but well, flying was such a struggle anymore that Youneda thought it quite unremarkable. At least until he had difficulty turning the last corner into the workroom Morton had set aside for their meeting. Stupid hallway was much too narrow for this modern age.

Morton, thankfully, didn't say a thing. He pretended to not notice the way Youneda's scales scraped against the door, but his boss was anything but polite about it as he glowered in Youneda's direction.

Louis would of course not be polite. His catfish-like whiskers fluffed and ruffled along with his mane as his ears tucked tight to his branching horns. Oriental dragons, always such sticklers, even when their long bodies showed significant thickness about the middle, too.

"So," Youneda said before Louis could comment on his weight, "what do we have?"

"Do be careful with it," Louis said, nodding towards the quite lovely little teapot sitting in the middle of their steel table. "It appears to be authentic."

"How close was it to the Opening?" Youneda asked, sniffing at the teapot rather than picking it up.

"...Less than a mile," Louis said after such a long pregnant pause that Youneda looked at him with both ears up and turned in his direction questioningly.

"It can't be authentic," Youneda complained. "Not unless it was sealed in a lead box buried at least twenty feet underground. The concussive force would have been too much."

Louis huffed, steam flowing across the table around the teapot and its simple wood tray. It really was quite nice. Youneda would have added it to his hoard in an instant, certified provenance or no. He waited for Louis' steam to dissipate and then leaned in to sniff carefully.

A very nice porcelain, hand-thrown, which was quite rare for that period of human history. Most teapots had been manufactured in factories rather than made by hand. The glaze was quite lovely, too, creamy white with delicately painted blue roses wrapped around the belly of the teapot. Its handle was clearly designed for female human hands, dainty, just enough room for three human fingers.

"Such lovely work," Youneda murmured. "Did any cups survive? Saucers?"

"No, just the teapot," Louis said, his coiled body shifting irritably. "There wasn't anything there but the teapot."

"It was buried in earth," Morton murmured. "As though it had just appeared there by itself. We didn't find any traces of buildings, furniture, nothing."

"Fabric?" Youneda asked. "Wicker?"

He snorted at the startled looks both Louis and Morton gave him. Really, there had to be an explanation for its appearance all by itself. If there were no buildings, no furniture, nothing to suggest previous human occupation in the area then perhaps it was the sole survivor of a picnic.

"Fabric or wicker would suggest that someone had been enjoying a picnic," Youneda explained. "How widespread was the excavation? Did you scan the area and just dig where there were readings?"

"Yes," Morton said, blinking at the teapot as if he was thinking more positively about it now. "The Elves actually financed the dig. They were quite adamant about only digging where there was a possibility of finding something. The reforestation efforts in the area couldn't be jeopardized with digging."

"And we did find several bodies, two adults, three children, about twenty feet from the pot," Louis murmured as he straightened his back to loom over them both. "A picnic. Interesting. Youneda, what do you remember of the Opening?"

Youneda winced, glaring at Louis. "Very little. I was quite concussed by the explosions and falling from twenty thousand feet."

Louis frowned as if he thought that was a poor excuse for failing to remember every little event of the Opening. He would think that. Too young to remember that far back, Louis had probably grown up on over-blown stories from his parents and grandparents about how the world had changed. So many people made up stories to tell.

Youneda never had. The less time he spent thinking about the Opening, the happier he was. Besides, it was highly unlikely that his memories of the Opening had anything to do with this particular teapot, as lovely as it was.

"Where exactly was it found?" Youneda asked. "I do think it's quite nice but I don't see how it could be authentic unless something extraordinary protected it."

"There is a residual magical charge around it," Morton said as he pulled up the magical provenance for the teapot. It floated in the air, readable from every angle, of course. The museum wouldn't use

cheaper identification methods for their artifacts. "From what Louis has been able to determine it was apparently exposed to some sort of very powerful shield. It's draconic, Occidental rather than Oriental, but no one has been able to identify who the dragon was or how their magic came to mingle with the teapot."

Youneda reared back as the overhead map of the find site came up. His wings snapped out to smack against the wall behind him. He stumbled backwards, eyes locked on the map of the teapot's original location. That place, it was that place, after all these years.

Hissing sounds, alarmed, terrified, filled the room. It took Youneda a panicked moment to realize that they were coming from him. In fact, it took Morton hurriedly turning the provenance off and Louis casting a shield between them and the flame flickering around Youneda's mouth to realize just how badly he'd reacted.

"Excuse me!" Youneda gasped as he whirled and ran for the door, the exit, the fresh air outside.



YOUNEDA SAT on the asphalt next to his Harley, head curled under his wing as if he was sleeping. The asphalt held just enough warmth to allow him to pretend that he was on his couch back home. But he could hear pixies chattering outside the museum shields and two packs of human and Elf children screeched and chattered as they scrambled onto their busses.

His wing membranes were loose enough that he knew that anyone looking his way would see his face, see his expression, but Youneda didn't bother raising his ears or opening his eyes to see the light filtering through his wing. They weren't there. If he didn't see them then they weren't there. It was hatchling logic and Youneda knew it but he couldn't bring himself to act his age, not after all that.

His back ached.

Odd. His back had ached ever since the Opening. It was a fact that he'd gotten used to. None of the healers or doctors he'd gone to

in the early years had anything to offer. After the crash that Youneda had experienced at Opening it was no surprise that he had aches and pains. Broken wings, four fractured vertebrae, a broken hip and a fractured jaw were nothing to sneeze at, even if you were a dragon. Perhaps especially.

A human would have died. So many had. The Opening had wreaked such damage on them all. Youneda sighed as he heard Morton's stiff leather shoes approach, heels clacking against the sidewalk like untrimmed centaur hooves. Rather than say anything, Morton sat on the asphalt next to Youneda, heedless of his expensive slacks and jacket.

And that was so much like the boy who'd visited Youneda's house time after time to learn more about pottery, tea and the times before the Opening. He'd never been comfortable with Youneda but he'd never let it stop him. Morton truly was an amazing child. So convinced of his essential cowardice when he was the one out of his siblings who faced his fears on a daily basis and worked past them.

Youneda waited until the busses drove off before pulling his head out from under his wing. Morton wasn't looking at him. In fact, he was staring up into the sky over the museum where the pixies flew in clouds alongside the sparrows and other small birds.

"I can't imagine the sky without pixies," Morton said. "I've tried. Looked at pictures. Watched old movies. It just seems wrong."

"It is wrong for you," Youneda sighed. He laid his head on the asphalt, wishing for one of the hot days of summer when the asphalt heated to the point it softened.

"You were there," Morton said. "Weren't you?"

"When I work up the strength," Youneda said, softly, sadly, with a shudder that made his wings ripple and his spine ache even worse, "I'll cast a spell. I think the magic you detected was mine, Morton. I think I'm why it survived."

Morton stared at Youneda, eyes wide and so young that Youneda felt even older than he actually was. He blinked several times, looking out towards the street and then back up at the pixies and

birds overhead. Eventually he shook his head so hard that he might have been trying to shake the hair right off his head. The low-level scent of fear faded away into a sort stunned awe that mixed with shame of all things.

"I'm sorry," Morton said. "I didn't realize you'd actually been that close to the Opening."

"I wasn't," Youneda snorted. "I was twenty thousand feet up, traveling in the high rivers, what you call the jet stream. The Opening didn't directly affect me. It was the shock waves that followed that knocked me out of the sky. If I'd been close, I'd have died just like everyone on the ground."

"The lethal radius was ten thousand feet," Morton whispered, eyes troubled as he looked at Youneda. "But everything within fifty thousand feet was impacted."

Youneda winced. He wanted to curl into a ball, to hide from the memories of that horrible day and everything that had followed. The moment of Opening was gone, nothing more than a flash and then the realization that he was dropping like a stone out of the sky. His wings hadn't worked, had screamed agony at him when he'd tried to fly, but his magic was still there.

The only way to survive had been to wrap shields around himself and try to angle for a long sliding impact rather than hitting head-on. It had worked. Then he'd had to lie, wrapped in shields, as the world burned around him. And those were the memories that still haunted his nightmares, that had driven him to live in a cold environment with too much rain and not enough sunshine for his aching bones and dulled scales.

Three days of fire. Six days of ashes blowing around his little shield-den. Then the slow, miserable process of limping his way out of the Opening's destruction zone. It had taken nearly a decade before Youneda had flown again and even now he wouldn't fly high. Too much risk of falling. Too much fear of the pain coming back.

"I survived," Youneda said finally, after Morton sighed, studied the pixies and birds for a while longer and then began to stand up. "Most

didn't. I was lucky. So many weren't. I don't... talk about it, Morton. I never have. It's still too fresh for me."

"You live next to a dragon hunter," Morton murmured, shoulders going up in anger before slumping and shaking his head. "How can you live next to a dragon hunter, Youneda? You were hunted. All the magical folk were hunted before Unification finally happened."

Youneda nodded, snorting a little. "Felix is as much of a dragon hunter as I am a svelte young thing flitting around. He hunted as a child, Morton. He stopped when he was barely a teen. It's fine. We're both old. It's nice to have someone to complain to."

Morton nodded as he patted his pockets, searching for and then pulling out a little polishing cloth for his glasses. He squinted at Youneda's face as he carefully polished his glasses. Without them his eyes looked smaller, darker and much less innocent. Even his face seemed much more mature without the round lenses of his glasses emphasizing the deep brown of his eyes. He looked fierce, determined. Still smelled frightened but that was Morton. Youneda frowned at him, waving one claw hand towards Morton's face.

"Why haven't you gotten your eyes fixed?" Youneda asked. "I'm sure the museum would pay for it."

"Ah, well," Morton said, cheeks heating though the blush barely showed against his dark skin, "I like glasses. They're like a shield against the world."

"And your brothers wouldn't hit you in the face once you got them?" Youneda suggested, tail twitching with amusement.

"That, too," Morton laughed. "But that was just once and really, I caught an elbow when I was trying to break the fight up. It wasn't aimed at me."

They both turned as Louis slithered out of the museum to stare at the two of them. No surprise, Louis hovered rather than walking. His horns sparkled slightly in the dim afternoon sunlight, evidence of his magic working to support his bulk. Youneda sighed.

At his age, Youneda could tell them both to figure it out on their own. He had few enough years left to him. No one would begrudge Youneda the right to drive right back home so that he could start a

fire in his rocket mass heater and doze on the cushions. So few people even cared about the Opening and Unification anymore.

It was done. Over with. Two generations had come and gone since then. Youneda didn't know of anyone else who'd lived through it that still lived. The few survivors of the actual event that he'd know had died over a decade ago. Last year there had been a long documentary about the Opening.

Youneda had declined to talk about his experiences on camera.

There had been a thousand excuses, none of which he'd actually had to offer. He was too tired. He didn't remember that much. No one was interested in one old dragon's experiences. They didn't want to know what had happened to him, in particular. It was the story of the wide events that they wanted to record.

All he'd had to say was no, thank you. Not interested.

As Louis drifted closer, whiskers twitching as he smelled Youneda's emotions, Youneda sat up straighter. His spine cracked, snapping and popping as he stretched himself to his full height and length. The joints of his wings popped dramatically as he stretched them out to their full length despite the sagging, scarred membranes.

Morton's mouth dropped open at the sight of the scars. Louis hissed something in his native language, possibly a curse word that Youneda had never learned. They both looked away as Youneda tucked his wings close to his body again.

"They never were the same again," Youneda commented. "I never was. I don't think any of us were, human or otherwise."

"You never said anything," Morton said, turning back to Youneda with a frown and his bottom lip caught between his lips. "Every time I came and asked you questions. You never said a word about having been there."

"I know," Youneda said. He looked at the pixies, the Harley, Louis' ears tucked tight against his horns in a dismayed realization that had apparently only just hit. Looking at Morton was... impossible. Not with that scent of betrayal overwhelming everything fear-related. "I've never spoken about it to anyone, Morton. Not even at the time. I couldn't."

"And now?" Morton asked hopefully enough that Youneda looked at him for just a moment. His glasses made those eyes look so wide, so young. They truly were a mask to hide Morton's true ferocity.

"You would make a wonderful dragon," Youneda said.

Louis shouted a laugh, one front foot touching the ground for an instant. "He would! That's why he's my assistant."

Youneda nodded. He stared at the asphalt for a long while, heart beating faster and wings quivering with the memory of fear, of pain, of fire raining down around him. Morton watched, waited, his heart beating faster as if he could see, could smell, Youneda's memories.

"I think I do want to talk about it," Youneda said. "I think I do, if you're interested in listening to an old dragon talk about times gone by."

"Come back inside," Louis said. "We'll brew some tea and you can talk all you want."

Morton grinned, white teeth startlingly bright against his dark skin as he nodded. "I'll listen as long as you want to talk, Youneda. Let me go get things set up. We can have some nice black tea. Oh, and there are treats in the fridge!"

He hurried back into the building, pushing Louis' serpentine tail out of the way as if it was a daily occurrence for him to manhandle a dragon out of his way. Youneda snorted, amused despite the old memories and fears shaking his wings and his knees. Louis bowed his head slightly, gesturing with one clawed hand for Youneda to precede him.

Still, Youneda hesitated. He looked at the grass around the museum's foundation, the lawn spread out towards the fence and its narrow band of mercilessly trimmed shrubbery. There had been grass that day, too. A rolling series of hills, concrete paths winding between a creek, a tiny lake, trees off to one side. Youneda shuddered at the memory of the scorched, blackened grass, torch-like trees burning all around him.

"You don't have to," Louis murmured.

"No, I don't," Youneda agreed. He shrugged, cocking his head to

the side and wobbling his wings. "But then again, I think. I think it would help to finally talk about it after all these years."

He walked past Louis, through the doors and past the ticket booth, down the back hallway with its too-close walls. Maybe after he was done, after he'd gone home again, he'd talk to Felix. A little patch of grass in the front yard might be acceptable. Something to brighten it, relieve the stark stones. It was past time for a change.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: FIGHT SMARTER

*A*nwyn from *Matriarchies of Muirín* is a brawler. Give her a chance and she'll be punching. Not so much because she loves to fight (though she does) but because she wants to punch the world into a better place. Unfortunately for Anwyn, the world doesn't like being punched...

FIGHT SMARTER

"*Y*ou know you're not supposed to get in fights right now." Gavin looked up from his job of sorting invoices, absently smoothing his kilt over his knees. His younger sister Gwen's voice carried along the back hallway that ran past his little office. There was only one person she could be talking to about fighting: Anwyn.

Of the entire clan, his little sisters Gwen and Anwyn were the ones most likely to get into a brawl, so when Gwen slowly hobbled into sight a moment later it wasn't a surprise that she was with Anwyn. What did surprise him was that Gwen was supporting Anwyn with an arm around her waist. It was clear Anwyn resented it from the way she tried to lean away from Gwen.

Both of them were filthy, covered in mud from the cobblestone streets. More worrisome, they both had blood on their clothes. Being covered in mud from a fight was normal enough for girls of the Dana family. Well, fights were common all over Aingeal, but even more common for Dana's combative women. What was unusual was the amount of physical damage Anwyn had taken. Normally she won her fights easily.

Anwyn was cradling her ribs as if a few might be broken, but the

scattered bruises and scrapes showing from under her short sleeved tunic and calf-length pants didn't appear to be too serious. Unfortunately, her ankle wasn't supporting her weight properly; it was swollen to the point that the laces of her sandal were cutting into the purpling flesh. Gwen actually appeared far more seriously wounded, given all the blood on her, but she moved easily enough that the blood soaking her vest and shirt had to be someone else's.

"I didn't start it," Anwyn protested, full of seven year old petulance at being told that she taken the wrong tack yet again. "Siobhan started it! She was picking on the other kids. I just made her stop. Besides you hit her too, Gwen."

"Well, yeah," Gwen snorted. "She had you down, Annie."

"I would have gotten up," Anwyn grumbled, her cheeks going as red as Gwen's bloody shirt. "As soon as I got her off my ankle I would have been fine. I didn't need your help then and I don't need help now."

Gwen glared at her before shaking her head in disgust. It was only then that Gavin saw that Gwen had a beautiful black eye. Siobhan must have landed at least one good punch before Gwen managed to put her down.

She scanned the hallway ahead but ignored his little linen closet-turned-office. Its new duty was a recent change so Gwen probably forgot that he'd be here. Pride in his sisters' strength flared for a moment. They were strong and fierce, able to defeat any challenge that came their way. His pride lasted only until he realized just how much trouble was going to come their way because of this. Gavin stood, stepped forward to where they'd see him and glared at them as they slowly hobbled toward his tiny office.

"Blessed Ragna have mercy on both of your souls, you brawlers," Gavin groaned at them. "Get in here before one of the adults sees you."

Both Gwen and Anwyn jumped in surprise when Gavin spoke. They winced when he waved them into his office.

"Sit down, Annie," Gavin ordered. "I swear; the two of you are

impossible! You *know* we're not supposed to be causing trouble right now."

"Siobhan was bullying the little boys!" Anwyn protested as Gwen helped her sit down in Gavin's chair. "She was kicking them really, really hard and then she laughed when they cried!"

"She actually was," Gwen confirmed. "And none of the adults on the street did anything to stop her."

"That's because her family is related to royalty," Gavin said, pinning them with his best repressive glare. "No one but the two of you is willing to risk their family being "audited" for taxes they already paid, having the women seized for military service, or the boys taken to be raised by the crown."

He shook his head at them as he pulled out the bandages and iodine that all the boys and men in the house had learned to keep handy. His little box might as well have said 'For Anwyn and Gwen' on top given how often anyone else needed the contents. Several of their uncles had already labeled their medical supply boxes that way.

"She broke one of the boys' jaws after Anwyn yelled at her, Gavin," Gwen said, deadly serious and more reasonable than he had expected given the glowers the two girls leveled at him. "The boy was all of five, maybe six. Everyone she was bullying was little and boys, just like she does with our brothers. Caddie gets picked on; you don't. Annie gets whumped; I don't. She's a bully and a coward. She laughs when she hurts people and none of the Delbhana will stop her so we did."

"Did not get whumped," Anwyn complained angrily.

"Did too," Gwen huffed. "Look at you. You're whumped, Annie. You're not big enough to fight her. She's almost as big as I am."

"That's because you're short," Anwyn grumbled, though she had the grace to nod a little apology at Gwen when Gavin smacked her, lightly, on the back of head for being rude.

"Well, yeah," Gwen said, grinning wickedly. "But it didn't stop me from breaking her nose."

Gavin sighed at the both of them. He checked Anwyn's ribs and then her stomach; both were terribly bruised. Siobhan must have

kicked Anwyn in the stomach repeatedly. Gavin bit his lip as Anwyn winced and gasped her way through the basic exam.

The ribs he could wrap, though there was a spot on one that seemed to be moving oddly. The ankle was another matter entirely. It was beyond what he could do with his little box of medicines and bandages; that would need to be set properly. But it was the question of whether there was internal bleeding from the kicks that might make this much more serious than he'd thought when he first spotted them in the hallway.

"She could have killed you, Annie," Gavin whispered as he tugged Anwyn's tunic back down over her belly. "This... I can't just wrap these up and let you go back to playing. We need a proper doctor to look at you. You're badly hurt. Mother needs to know about this."

"But Mother will get mad," Anwyn protested, biting her lip and squirming for a second despite the pain she had to be in. "Please? Can't you just wrap my ankle or something? I'm already in trouble. I don't want to get in more trouble. I saved the kids. Siobhan was doing bad things, not me. Please? I still have scut duties from last time and Siobhan started it then too, not me. Please, Gavin?"

She leaned forward to catch his hand but as soon as Anwyn moved she went pale and clutched her ribs. Gwen bit her lip. When she looked at Gavin there was only worry in her eyes. He wanted a grown up, their mother, their father; Great-Uncle Jarmon would be perfect since he was the unofficial leader of the whole clan. They would know what to do.

Rather than yell for someone to "Come quick!" or run shouting from the office, Gavin took a deep breath to calm the rising panic that had his hands shaking and heart beating faster. He was old enough to handle this. He *was*. If he was supposed to lead someday then this was as good a time as any to start thinking like a leader.

While no one knew who he'd end up married to, the assumption was that Gavin's wife would be the official leader of the clan after Mother retired. Gavin would give her 'suggestions' behind her just like Great-Uncle Jarmon did now to Mother. It was a scary thought.

He wasn't sure that he was ready for that. Head of the Dana

should really go to Gwen as the eldest girl but it was obvious that she took too much after their Great-Grandmother Anwyn for that to be good for the family. If she were leader, Gwen would lead the Clan into as many battles as Anwyn got herself into with Siobhan. The last thing the Clan needed was another brawling pirate as their leader.

Gavin looked out the door, plotting what to do. Siobhan's mother had to already be on her way here by now. She'd try and use this against the family. At thirteen Gavin was too young to be married. The Delbhana would take this opportunity to take Gavin, his little brothers and all of their underage male cousins away because of the 'inappropriate brawling' they were exposed to.

It had been suggested many times over the last several months, mostly by Delbhana Clan members. Their real motives were that they thought the Dana were too rich and powerful, granted, but it still scared Gavin.

He didn't want to be forced to join another clan where he might not be treated as well. Many of his friends had mothers and aunts who casually beat them if they talked back. Last month Ferris' mother had beaten him until he'd passed out. She had been annoyed when he needed medical care, and that had been for spilling a drink he'd been serving to a guest.

That was worse than most of his other friends but all of them expected women to talk down to them and treat them like they were worthless. Dana boys never had to worry about that. At home they were respected, well treated and given useful jobs in the Clan's shipping business. Who knew what would happen somewhere else?

Worse, the Delbhana *had* managed to take Brom and Doyle from their family and Gavin had seen how they'd changed afterwards. He wasn't sure that Doyle would ever be the same. Brom still wouldn't talk about what had happened to him during the months that they'd been in the Delbhana Clan house. The really scary part was that they'd been taken for far less cause than the Delbhana had against the Dana. The only thing that had stopped them so far was how powerful the Dana were. This might be the excuse the Delbhana needed to swoop in.

Despite the realities of life in other clans that Gavin knew, the rumors that the Dana boys were abused had been repeated so many times that Gavin had had people come up to him on the street to ask if he was being hurt by his mother or aunts, even though he had not one bruise or sign of abuse at all.

The Tripartate Goddesses only knew what sort of treatment he and his brothers would get if they were taken away from the family. The wards of the crown given to the Delbhana never were treated that well. It wasn't just him, either. There were his brothers Aravel, Cadfael, and Andros, plus all their cousins, to consider.

"No, I won't let them," Gavin whispered, a plan rapidly coming together in his mind. He set his jaw and then smiled grimly when Gwen put a hand on his shoulder with a concerned expression.

He packed the bandages away again without using them. Anwyn would be much more impressive as she was than if he'd wrapped her up. It meant a little more pain for her but much more gain for them all in the long term. As long as he got Anwyn to Great-Uncle Jarmon quickly it should be okay.

Gavin carefully picked Anwyn up, trying not to jostle her ribs. He really was terribly worried about how many ribs were broken. Despite his basic first aid training, Gavin didn't know enough to be sure how many were broken. Anwyn's breathing was too shallow and pained for it not to be three or four, it not more.

There was no way that he was going to let her walk on that ankle, no matter how much she wanted to look strong. Besides, having her curled up in his arms would have a bigger impact on the adults when they saw cocky little Anwyn visibly hurt.

Gavin frowned at the top of Anwyn's head, then looked at Gwen. "Which way did you come in?"

"The side door through the warehouse and then up," Gwen said. "We were headed for Great-Uncle Jarmon."

"They'll come in the formal entrance," Gavin murmured heading that way as quickly as he could without jarring Anwyn, barely listening to Gwen's explanation. "Okay, Gwen, look confident but

worried. Annie, I need you to do your best to act angry but too hurt to do anything about it."

"Easy to do since I am," Anwyn managed a little laugh that ended in a whimper. "It hurts, Gavin."

"I know, Annie," Gavin said as he hurried towards the main stairs and the formal entrance of the Dana Clan-House.

The official entrance to the Dana Clan-house was horribly formal, covered in gold and detailed carvings of the Dana symbol, the whole room inlaid with exotic woods and precious stones Great-Grandmother Anwyn had gathered in her pirate years. Very few houses had such gaudy entry ways anymore, but back when Great-Grandmother Anwyn had built the Clan-house it had shown just how rich and powerful their clan was becoming. Or at least it was supposed to.

Personally, Gavin thought that it showed Great-Grandmother Anwyn's insecurities about how fragile their new clan had been more than anything else. There was no need to have the Dana symbol every six inches, in gold, on absolutely everything.

Normally, Gavin avoided it unless it was time to clean the many bannisters, to polish all the bits of gilt in the area, and carefully beat the expensive rugs. Most of the family did. The only thing this part of the house was used for was impressing pompous people like the Delbhana.

The only good thing in the room was the big mirror on the landing that was perfectly placed to let a person on the second floor see who was in the foyer without being seen. It had been designed that way by Great-Grandmother Anwyn herself. Everything in this area of the house was designed to metaphorically gain the weather gage on their rivals whenever they visited.

Gavin didn't need the mirror to know that Siobhan's mother was there already. He heard her shouting at Mother long before they got to the landing. He still paused on the upper landing with Gwen and Anwyn to use the mirror to see what was happening downstairs. No surprise, Mother was nose to nose with Siobhan's mother, or more accurately nose to breast. Siobhan's mother was much taller. Half a

dozen of his aunts stood clustered behind Mother, all of them glaring at Siobhan's mother.

"The little brat broke my daughter's nose!" Lady Etain, Siobhan's mother, bellowed loudly enough that it probably carried through the entire block-sized warehouse. Where Gavin and Gwen stood on the landing her voice was deafening.

"She probably deserved it!" Mother shouted right back. "Your girl enjoys fouling everyone's lines. Siobhan's stirred up more trouble than my girls ever will."

"She did no such thing," Lady Etain snapped. "The girls in this Clan get in more fights than the thrice-damned army! They go looking for them!"

Gavin shook his head at the both of them. Neither Anwyn nor Gwen should be fighting with Siobhan, no matter what she did. Beyond Siobhan's violent tendencies, explosive temper, and her Clan's royal connections, the tendency was for any adult to always back Siobhan over anyone who fought her. Siobhan was tall and strong like her mother. At nine, she was as tall as a normal eleven year old, much less Gwen who was short for her age. Gavin thought that Siobhan might be as tall as his thirteen year old-self in a year or so given how fast she was growing.

Rather than let the shouting downstairs deter him, Gavin took a deep breath and hurried down the stairs with Gwen by his side. Anwyn bit back whimpers at every step and shook in Gavin's arms. He could tell she was trying to hide the fact that she was trembling with pain. He wasn't sure how much of it was real and how much was Anwyn following his instructions.

As soon as they appeared at the top of the stairs the women stopped shouting. Mother snapped her mouth shut and Lady Etain hissed when she caught sight of the blood-covered Gwen. Her anger faded when she saw how Anwyn lay crumpled in Gavin's arms.

To Gavin's relief Great-Uncle Jarmon was there in the background along with Uncles Harold and Sean. Great-Uncle Jarmon hurried forward to meet them and Gavin passed Anwyn off to be carried over to one of the benches along the wall. Great-Uncle

Jarmon crooned something Gavin couldn't hear to Anwyn. Her reply sounded pouty but was spoken in too low a voice for Gavin to hear.

"What happened?" Mother asked, fortunately much more gently than she'd been yelling at Lady Etain because Gavin was quite aware that his hands were shaking and his kilt was quivering from the way his knees knocked together. "Gavin? Gwen?"

"I caught them in the upstairs halls, trying to get into Great-Uncle Jarmon's medical supplies," Gavin said. He cleared his throat before speaking again. His voice was shaking entirely too much for the impression he wanted to create. "Mother, Anwyn needs a doctor. I think she's bleeding internally."

"Oh, nonsense," Lady Etain scoffed. "You're exaggerating."

"No, he's not," Great-Uncle Jarmon said, glaring over his shoulder at Lady Etain. "The girl's ankle is badly broken. She may have flail chest. She certainly has some internal bleeding."

"What happened?" Mother asked sharply.

She waved Aunt Erlina to run to get the doctor immediately. Aunt Erlina glanced at Great-Uncle Jarmon and then ran for the door when he glared at her for delaying even that long.

Lady Etain didn't look like she wanted to hear the answer to Mother's question. Her expression had gone anxious enough that Gavin knew that they had an advantage. Either she didn't know what Siobhan had done or had hoped Mother wouldn't know. He'd put her off-balance.

It wasn't much of an advantage but it might be enough. He hazarded a quick glance around the room at the women Lady Etain had brought with her for this confrontation.

Lady Bethany, leader of Clan-Crannach, was at Lady Etain's side as she always was. They had been best friends since they were younger than Anwyn was now. Lady Bethany always supported Lady Etain. Behind the two of them were Lady Ciana from the Boid Clan, old Lady Mab from the Griogal, and Lady Fiora from the Ruadh. The three of them were a surprise. They were powerful at Court but they'd always supported the Dana against the Delbhana. Their being

here might be good for the Dana but then again maybe not. Gavin couldn't tell from their expressions.

The women Lady Etain'd brought with her all looked eager to hear what Gavin and Gwen had to say. Gavin took a deep breath and pulled Gwen into a hug despite the drying blood on her clothes. She desperately hugged him back. He only realized then that she was shaking too.

"Apparently, while Anwyn was out with Gwen she saw Siobhan knocking down little boys," Gavin said. "Anwyn being Anwyn, she yelled at Siobhan to stop."

"Siobhan broke the next little boy's jaw," Gwen interjected, anger clear in her voice and face. "I was up the street at Great Uncle Jaryn's wife's knife shop and heard Anwyn yelling."

"Anwyn being Anwyn," Gavin continued while patting Gwen's back to shush her, "she charged in and shoved Siobhan away from the boy instead of getting an adult or the Guard or anything logical."

"And then Siobhan knocked her down, stood on her ankle and started trying to kick her ribs in," Gwen said as she stepped out of Gavin's hug so that she could glare up at Lady Etain as if it was her fault that it had all happened. "So I ran over and broke her nose and then dragged Anwyn back home for medical help."

Lady Etain opened her mouth and then closed it again when Gavin turned to stare up at her. She was more than a full head taller than Mother who was several inches taller than Gavin so Gavin stood no higher than her rib cage.

He knew that Lady Etain's temper was nearly as bad as Siobhan's so getting closer would be a risk but he decided that it was worth it. Most of his aunts were there. Lady Mab was known to have defended boys before. And Lady Fiora's clan was renowned for their kind treatment for the boys in their care.

His heart still pounded when Gavin took a step closer to Lady Etain. He lifted his chin to glare up at her, painfully aware of the way her hands clenched and released with anger. The women around them fidgeted as he took another step towards Lady Etain, holding himself with as much defiance as he could muster. His measured

steps forward shouldn't have seemed like a threat given their size differences but Lady Etain reacted as if they were, one fist coming halfway up before falling to her side.

Gavin was covered in second-hand blood because of Siobhan's actions. That seemed to be enough to make Lady Etain defensive. From the bench behind him, Anwyn whimpered. Lady Ciana frowned over Lady Etain's shoulder, staring at Anwyn with enough worry that Gavin wanted to go to her side instead of continuing the confrontation. Hopefully the blood and Anwyn's condition would be enough evidence of Siobhan's responsibility for all of this.

Now he just had to get them to actively side with the Dana and Anwyn, instead of standing aside and letting the Delbhana get away with whatever they'd planned when Lady Etain came here.

"Siobhan tried to murder Anwyn," Gavin said, carefully pitching his voice so that he sounded confident, not afraid.

"Murder?" Lady Etain gasped. "This was a brawl, not a murder attempt."

"She tried to kick in Anwyn's ribs," Gavin insisted, just a hair louder. "She stood on her ankle and kicked her so hard that her ribs broke. She's probably bleeding internally. That isn't a brawl. Siobhan is a big girl. She's nearly as tall as I am. She knocked Anwyn down and stomped on her. No matter what stupid things Anwyn said--"

"Hey!" Anwyn squawked, and then whined when Uncle Sean shushed her.

"You always say stupid things, Annie," Gavin huffed over his shoulder at her. "I know you. You said something, even if I don't know what, and that got you whumped." He turned back to Lady Etain, letting his anger show. "I know four year old girls who are bigger than Anwyn. No matter what Anwyn said to Siobhan there was *no reason* for her to try and kick Annie's ribs in. It was attempted murder."

Anwyn's protest at the size comparison was a wordless grumble of outrage that made every single adult in the room fight against a grin, although it didn't budge the nervous frown Lady Etain wore. Their family's shortness was the butt of a thousand jokes, and Gavin needed to emphasize it if he was going to make sure that

Siobhan and her family's attempts to destroy the Dana clan were scuttled.

He didn't respond to the grins, didn't respond to Anwyn's grumble. All Gavin did was stare up into Lady Etain's face, sure that he was wide eyed and pale. The laughter died quickly, leaving uncomfortable silence as Great-Uncle Jarmon came over to rest his hand on Gavin's shoulder. Instead of the quelling grip that made his shoulder ache, Great-Uncle Jarmon gently squeezed Gavin's shoulder, encouraging him to continue.

"They're children," Lady Etain protested, fidgeting in spite of her dismissive head toss. "It wasn't serious."

"Anwyn may yet die," Great-Uncle Jarmon said. He said so gently and with so much grief that every single woman winced. "This was serious. Gavin's right. This was an attempt to kill."

"It couldn't be proved in court," Lady Etain mumbled. "No witnesses. And they are still children. No court would ever try a nine year old girl for murder."

"There's a clear pattern of behavior," Gavin said before Mother could do more than glower at Lady Etain. "Siobhan has been picking on young boys for ages now. The garden thing with Annie that happened this summer? That happened because Siobhan wouldn't stop trying to push Cadfael into the fish ponds. When Gwen broke Siobhan's arm and blacked her eyes? That was because Siobhan was picking on our four-year-old cousins. Today she was attacking little boys on the street.

"She broke a little boy's jaw today, Lady Etain," Gavin continued even though she looked like she was about to black his eyes. "His jaw, for no reason at all other than that she could do it and because it would rile Annie up. Every single time there's been a problem, it's because Siobhan has been violent towards boys and then Annie or Gwen objected and they fought. Siobhan doesn't fight with girls her own age. She doesn't fight with girls older than her. She picks on *little boys*."

Gavin had to raise his voice as he went on because Lady Etain started to growl and then squawked as he finished his accusations. By

the time he finished he was at a near shout, and Gavin had tears in his eyes. Lady Etain looked like she was going to punch him in the face. She actually raised her fist at him, but Mother and all of his aunts pulled their knives as soon as she did.

To Gavin's surprise, it was Lady Etain's best friend Lady Bethany who stepped forward. She put her hand on Lady Etain's arm, keeping her from striking Gavin. The support from Lady Etain's best friend made his breath catch. Gavin let the tears in his eyes fall. He was shaking hard enough by that point that he didn't protest when Gwen hugged him again and Great-Uncle Jarmon rubbed his back. Lady Etain glared at Lady Bethany, her eyes wild with anger and fear and something that Gavin didn't recognize.

"The boy's right," Lady Bethany declared. "We've told you before that Siobhan's turning into a bad seed. I know she's your only daughter but the girl's taking a bad path. She needs discipline or she's going to be a monster by the time she's full-grown."

"Discipline?" Gavin squawked, quite deliberately, because he wasn't done yet. Stopping Siobhan was only half the problem. "She needs to be arrested! Or at the very least the Delbhana should be investigated to see who's encouraging her violent behavior toward boys. That doesn't come from nowhere! You have to learn to beat up little boys that way."

"Quite agreed," Great-Uncle Jarmon said. This time his hand on Gavin's shoulder squeezed warningly, not encouragingly. "Though I do think an arrest would be ridiculous given the ages of the children involved. Someone taught Siobhan that it was acceptable to attack little boys. That person needs to be found and punished."

Aunt Erlina flung open the front door and ran in with Doctor Bernice from up the street. They both ran over to Anwyn's side. Lady Etain opened her mouth to protest the thought of an investigation, fear the dominant emotion in her eyes. Mother held one hand up for silence, her eyes trained on Anwyn and Doctor Bernice. It only took a minute or so before Doctor Bernice shook her head.

"She's bleeding internally," Doctor Bernice said to Mother grimly. "I need to operate."

"There's an emergency medical aid room just around the corner," Gavin offered, and didn't feel at all ashamed for the way his voice and hands shook. "I could lead you there."

"Go," Mother said in the 'you will not argue' voice that made even Gwen and Anwyn obey her. "We'll deal with this, Gavin. Gwen, you'll go with him. No sneaking back here, understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Gwen said in a voice as shaky as Gavin's.

It would have been nice if Gavin could have shown Doctor Bernice the aid room and then return to make sure that Mother and his aunts followed up on the opening he'd given them but orders were orders and Gavin knew he couldn't fight. Not when Mother looked that grim, anyway.

He still looked over his shoulder at the brewing confrontation between Mother, Great-Uncle Jarmon and Lady Etain. If they had their family's luck with them then this would be enough to get the Delbhana off their backs. If not, Gavin wasn't sure that Mother could keep Lady Etain from stealing all of the boys away.

The little room that Gavin guided them to was small but well lit by windows all along one wall. Doctor Bernice nodded approval, Anwyn in her arms. She let Gavin help Anwyn get comfortable on the treatment table. She even let him hold Anwyn's hand as she carefully poured anesthesia over a rag held over Anwyn's mouth. Both he and Gwen were shooed out of the room once Anwyn had been knocked out by Doctor Bernice's drugs. All he was allowed to do was to help Uncle Sean gather bandages and supplies for a temporary cast on Anwyn's ankle. After that he was shooed off once more.

"Will she be okay?" Gwen whispered as Gavin led her to the side kitchen to wash the blood off. "Gavin? Will Annie be okay?"

"I don't know, Gwen," Gavin sighed. "The injuries are bad enough that she might not. If the incision gets infected, or she opens the wounds in her gut doing something stupid, probably not. Mother will probably pay for antibiotics for her if the Doctor says they're necessary. It's just... the army takes most of them and even Great-Uncle Jarmon had a hard time getting good quality antibiotics when Cousin Colleen had her ear infection last month. I... don't know."

The side kitchen was empty when they reached it. Gavin pulled out the hip bath, enlisting Gwen's help in pumping water into it. It was the smaller tin one that Father had used to use to bath Gavin when he was little, retired to family use once Raelin and Aravel were born. The base was just big enough for a grown woman to sit in it with her legs sticking out of the tub. The raised back angled away for soaking, not that Gwen was going to soak in cold water. It was just the right size for Gwen to crouch in once she'd stripped her bloody clothes off. Gavin poured water over her. They scrubbed the blood off, rinsing her body and hair several times.

Gwen didn't protest the cold water he used. She didn't seem inclined to protest anything at all in her worry for Anwyn. He wasn't surprised when their sister Raelin showed up with her twin Aravel clinging to her arm. They both were entirely too pale, though Raelin looked relatively calm when compared to Aravel's teary expression. She managed a weak and wobbly smile at Gavin, who smiled back at her, just as weakly.

"Think you two can get me a clean towel for Gwen?" Gavin asked. "The one I brought in is kind of messy now."

"Um, maybe," Raelin said thoughtfully while looking at the linen closet outside in the hallway. "We're kind of short."

"We're all kind of short, Rae," Gavin chuckled. "Use the stepstool if you need to."

Both Raelin and Aravel lit up at that. Having permission to drag the big footstool out of the side kitchen and into the hallway was a treat. At nine, Raelin was just starting her warehouse training and Aravel had started learning food preparation. Time spent on ladders and stepstools equaled fun to them. They took long enough poking through the contents of the linen closet that Gavin was able to finish rinsing out Gwen's hair and mop up the floor around the hip bath a little bit.

"Towel, you two," Gavin called.

"It's cold!" Gwen agreed.

"Sorry!" Aravel said as he ran in with one of the big thick towels

that one of their uncles had embroidered with swirling Dana symbols.

Raelin tugged the stepstool back into the kitchen with Aravel's help. Then they took Gwen off to get fresh clothes, leaving Gavin to clean up the mess and drain the hip bath. He took the time to soak and scrub Gwen's clothes, not that he really thought the blood stains would come out entirely. It was just something to do as he waited to hear what happened to Anwyn and Siobhan.

Only once that was done did he finally allow himself to go linger in the hallway outside the surgery room. Uncle Sean was there, leaning against the wall as he knitted socks. When he saw Gavin, he tucked the knitting into his apron's pocket. Gavin almost knocked Uncle Sean over when he wordlessly offered a hug.

"Do we know anything?" Gavin asked as he clung to Uncle Sean.

"Annie's alive, dear. She's likely to remain that way," Uncle Sean said. "She had two ruptured spots on her intestines. Doctor Bernice sent out word that it wasn't as bad as she'd expected from the severity of the bruising. We'll still have to watch Annie and make sure she doesn't try to get up or fight for quite a while. She does have flail chest, but none of the bones shifted too badly. She'll have a hard time breathing for a while but Doctor Bernice thinks the bones should knit quickly. And the ankle's going to take quite a while healing since several bones were broken, including her shin bones. But she'll live to fight another day, as long as she doesn't get an infection from the incisions."

"Oh good," Gavin sighed. It felt as though most of the tension filling him had drained away. "And Siobhan? Lady Etain?"

Uncle Sean laughed, deep and throaty, as he hugged Gavin tighter. "My dear boy, you did so well setting that up! Lady Etain kept trying to twist it around but your speech about Siobhan abusing little boys was something she couldn't escape. Her own people wouldn't let her, thank the Tripartate Goddesses."

"So?" Gavin asked, hoping desperately that Siobhan's whole family would be removed from power. The Goddesses knew that was

unlikely. Their family might have luck, but they didn't have that much luck.

"Go ask your mother," Uncle Sean laughed. "She wanted to tell you herself. Just please be back within an hour or so. I'm sure that Annie will want to wake up with you and Gwen there."

"Yes, sir!" Gavin said. "Main office?"

Uncle Sean nodded and flapped a hand. It took a quarter of an hour to find Mother. She wasn't in the main office when he got there. Instead she was down in the warehouse, helping out with a big stack of books that were being packaged for shipment to a neighboring city.

Gavin wasn't surprised that he got hugs from absolutely everyone when he showed up. The women all beamed at him. Mother ruffled his hair fondly before pulling him aside so that they could talk somewhat privately. Granted, standing in the middle of a busy warehouse with women working all around them wasn't exactly private but everyone else made an effort to give them a bit of room.

"You're doing all right?" Mother asked, nothing but fond approval showing in her eyes.

"Mm-hmm," Gavin said. "I got Gwen cleaned up and soaked her clothes. What's happening to Siobhan? I want to tell Annie about it when she wakes up."

"It's good enough that it might even keep Annie in bed until her stomach and ribs have a chance to heal," Mother chuckled. "Probably nothing will keep her still long enough for that ankle, knowing that girl. Still, the news is good. The wind turned against the Delbhana today."

Her face lit up with wicked amusement, the sort that made her share of their pirate blood obvious. "Siobhan's being sent off to work as a cadet in the military up on the north border. They stuck her in one of the big fortresses well behind the lines but she'll still be following military discipline and living like any other cadet despite her age and family. Lady Etain made it out to be 'training for her future' but we all know what it really was: ensuring she can't hurt anyone else like she did Annie. Siobhan won't be back for two years

at best, maybe as much as four years. There was some talk as they all left of forcing Siobhan to accept a military commission when she's old enough."

Gavin gasped at that, letting Mother draw him back towards the stairs as she explained. "We're free of her?"

"For now," Mother confirmed. "There was a possibility that the mothers of the little boys Siobhan attacked would press charges against her but they've been paid off quick as Lady Etain could get at them. They formally agreed to stop harassing us, not that I think they'll keep their word. Getting that much took threatening to go to Court with charges against them. Now go get changed, Gavin. I want you to sit with Annie when she wakes up. You know that girl will try and get up right away if someone isn't there to watch over her."

"Yes ma'am," Gavin said.

Their suite of rooms on the top floor of the Clan house was quiet even though all of Gavin's siblings were there. They were watchful, waiting to hear what had happened to Annie, well, quiet other than little one-year-old Andros who was too young to know any better. For once the bright rooms that Mother had built for Father didn't cheer Gavin up.

Their home was too quiet without Annie yelling and getting into fights with Cadfael as they careened around the sitting room. Even the big kids' bedroom felt wrong. It took Gavin a moment to realize that it was because someone, probably Aravel or Father, had come in and made the beds while he was gone. Their bunks looked entirely too neat at the moment.

Mother disappeared as Gavin changed, going to bring Anwyn upstairs to their suite of rooms. Gavin shooed his siblings out before changing clothes. They all clustered around him when he emerged to pass his bloody clothes over to Father.

The little kids' room was messy with a fresh crop of toys and books scattered over the floor so Gavin picked them all up and put them away. He also pinned Anwyn's screen of colorful crystal strands shielding her bunk back so that Mother wouldn't have any problems putting Anwyn to bed.

"Is she back?" Cadfael asked from the doorway.

"Mother went to bring her up, Caddie," Gavin said. "Can you bring my book from my bunk? Maybe we can all sit with her."

"Can I practice my embroidery?" Cadfael asked.

His hands shook against the doorway but Gavin nodded. Embroidery seemed to calm Cadfael down as much as reading calmed Gavin and knitting calmed Aravel. Cadfael came back with Gavin's book just as Mother arrived with a too-still Anwyn in her arms. Gavin got out of the way so that Mother and Father could tuck Anwyn back into her bunk.

Mother gently petted Anwyn's sweaty hair even though she wasn't awake yet. Anwyn was much too pale as she lay lax on the bunk but her breathing was as good as could be expected given the state of her ribs. Gavin reminded himself that Uncle Sean had said that she would be okay as long as she didn't get an infection. The three toes showing out the end of thick bandages wrapping her ankle were purple but he thought that the swelling might already be going down a bit.

"Stay with her," Mother whispered to Gavin as Cadfael curled up on the opposite bunk with his embroidery.

"Yes, ma'am," Gavin said.

It took an hour and a half before Anwyn woke up properly. She floated in and out of awareness several times but it never lasted and she never seemed truly awake. By the time she truly woke Aravel and Raelin had crept into the room along with Gwen and Andros. Cadfael was sitting between them, carefully embroidering a sampler as if it was the most important thing in the world for him to do. Gwen had curled up on her bunk with little one-year-old Andros cuddled in her arms.

"Mmm..." Anwyn sighed as her eyelids fluttered open, finally with awareness behind them.

"No moving," Gavin told her, one hand resting on her thigh to keep her from shifting. "Does it hurt?"

"Yes," Anwyn complained. "What happened?"

"You had surgery," Gavin chuckled, rubbing her thigh gently

through the blankets. "Siobhan has been sent away to the northern border to join the army."

Anwyn gasped and then hissed at the pain, but it didn't dim the delight in her eyes. "Really?"

"Yes," Gavin said, grinning at her. "Her mother couldn't scuttle this mess. Apparently the mothers of the boys she attacked wanted to file charges against her. They've been paid off. The little boy whose jaw was broken was taken to see Doctor Bernice. He'll have a hard time eating until the bones fuse but he'll survive."

"Best of all, the Delbhana agreed to stop harassing our Clan to keep us from filing formal charges in Royal Court," Gavin continued with a huge grin. "It wouldn't have done any real good but it would have embarrassed them so much that it might have weakened their grip on the throne."

"Wow..." Anwyn breathed, blinking sleepily even though she'd just woken up. "Not in trouble?"

Gavin shook his head, smiling at her. "No more trouble than you were before, Annie. You'll be stuck in bed healing for quite a while between the surgery, your ribs, and the broken ankle but no one's upset with you. Go back to sleep. We'll all keep watch and make sure no one bothers you."

Annie smiled, looking relieved. "So glad I didn't get in trouble."

"Not this time," Gavin said with a little laugh at her delight. "But you do need to learn to fight smarter, Annie. No more of this charging straight in. You have to think first before you start throwing blows."

That got him a pout from Anwyn and curious looks from Gwen and Raelin.

"You're little," Gavin continued more for Gwen's benefit than Anwyn's, who was sleepy enough that he doubted that she would even remember this conversation. "You need allies and witnesses whenever you fight. Never, ever strike first. Always make sure you've got someone there to back you up. They need to be people who will back your version of what happened, because you know that Siobhan twists everything around so that she looks like the victim. And in the

names of the Tripartate Goddesses *please* try and play off your size when the adults start throwing blame around!"

"Huh?" Gwen asked, obviously confused.

"Annie's tiny," Gavin explained to her and Raelin. "She looks like a five year old, not a seven year old. You can use that, both of you. A big girl picking on someone half her size is going to get in trouble. It'll just happen as soon as people compare sizes. You've seen how Mother uses her size against people. Learn to do the same thing, please. It will make your life a lot easier."

"Not that little," Anwyn grumbled, but it was more of a yawn than anything else. "And I don't fight stupid. I win. Stupid girls don't win."

"Smarter, Annie. I said fight *smarter*," Gavin said with an amused chuckle at her annoyed expression. "You could have run for the Guard. You could have gone running into the shops screaming about a big girl bullying little boys. There was no need to say who was doing the bullying. You're little enough that people see you as much younger than you really are. They'd help automatically. The Guard would come running for little boys being beaten up. They always do. That's part of why they exist, you know, to protect people. It's their job to deal with things like that, not yours."

Anwyn's eyes went wide as he explained. She gulped around another yawn and nodded. When Gavin looked over at Gwen she was biting her lip again and clinging to Andros as if she realized that she really should have done that instead of attacking straight off. He patted Anwyn's thigh, grateful that they both realized that they could have handled the situation differently.

"I don't expect either of you to stop fighting," Gavin said. "I know you are two brawlers; Dana all the way down to the keel. You'd sooner stop eating than stop fighting. But you can use your brains instead of just your fists. Allies, witnesses, and making sure that you have backup will make a big difference for us all."

Gavin nodded towards their siblings. Anwyn shifted her head to look around the bedroom and only then realized that all of their siblings were there. Gwen beamed at Anwyn with enough relief in

her eyes that Anwyn smiled back, laughing quietly. Little Andros was giggling in Gwen's arms but Gwen barely seemed to notice him.

When Anwyn turned back to Gavin it was with tired relief in her eyes. Their other siblings were smiling, even Cadfael who had every right to be upset about his twin's condition, but right now none of that mattered to Gavin.

All that mattered was that Anwyn would be okay and that their family seemed safe from the Delbhana for the moment. That seemed to be all that Anwyn cared about as well because her eyes slid shut as she fell back asleep.

"Sleep well, Annie," Gavin whispered as he fussed with her blankets. "Ragna bless your soul, you've earned the sleep today."

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: THE HEAT OF THE THORN

In high school I discovered the writings of Fritz Lieber. My favorite was Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser. One day as I was practicing writing teams I remembered those stories. When my fingers hit the keyboard, this is what came out: my homage to those dark, wonderful old adventure stories. This was the start of the Gods Above and Below series which keeps growing and growing every time I think about Fritz Lieber's stories.

THE HEAT OF THE THORN

Xun stopped, panting. Her legs ached. So did her back. Sweat dripped down her spine, beaded on her forehead and then slowly rolled down the arch of her nose to tremble at the tip like a fly that just wouldn't go away. She stank so badly of sweat that she wanted to gag, only she didn't have enough breath to do so.

No flies up here at least. Small grace. Xun would take flies and stink over the too-thin air and trail that went ever upwards until her legs wanted to give way. With her tongue as dry as the soles of her shoes, Xun's mouth tasted as sour as her sweat smelled.

Keanu Marchetti stood a few yards ahead and nearly ten feet higher than Xun, eyes wide as he gazed out over the valley below. His backpack sat easy on his back. Damn him. Didn't look like he'd even gotten winded so far despite climbing all day to get this far. And even further to go before they reached the top.

Valley of the Thorns.

Not what Xun would ever have wanted to do, visit the Valley of the Thorns. Especially in the summertime when the vines would be strong and awake, flexing as they blindly searched for prey. But Mama Rosario had ordered and thus Xun had to follow through. She could have picked someone else, someone bigger and stronger and

better able to climb a mountain and then scramble through predatory vines to save the world.

"The view is amazing!" Keanu exclaimed. "Look, you can see all the way to the bay. I never thought I'd see the ocean."

"This," Garnett growled from behind Xun, "is not seeing the ocean. Are we done standing around? I'd like to get this done with as soon as possible."

His growl was probably for Xun but Keanu still bowed a florid little apology his way, fingertips swirling through the air and sending off bright shimmers of magic. Showy. Far too showy. There were ground voles that would gladly attack anything with the slightest hint of magic off in the gravel scree on either side of the trail. Not that Keanu seemed to care.

No, he bounced up the trail, humming happily while Xun glared at his back and stubbornly put one foot in front of the other as she made her way after him.

Damn Mama Rosario anyway. Six other children, all of them taller and stronger than Xun, and she had stare right into Xun's eyes as she announced the choice had already been made. No arguments would be heard. It was Xun and no one else.

By the time the three of them made it to the top of the trail Xun was completely certain that this was Mama Rosario's way of ensuring that Xun never came back. Ever. She'd die reaching the valley, not crossing it.

"Are you quite all right?" Keanu asked as Xun wheezed, her butt firmly planted on a big rock.

"No," Xun huffed at him.

"Leave her alone," Garnett snapped at Keanu. "She was carrying her own body weight up the trail, unlike us. You could have asked for help."

Xun shook her head. No, she couldn't. They might have food and clothes and, who knew? Keanu probably had frilly little handkerchiefs with lace on the edges and embroidered initials. She didn't.

She had family pruning tools and magical salves that might, maybe, save her life when the thorns attacked. All of it was warded so

that no one else could touch it. And all the food she'd brought was dried, carefully wrapped and spelled to stasis so that the vines wouldn't sense it either.

"Did..." Xun took a deep breath, relieved that the stabbing pain under her ribs was fading. "Did you stasis spell your food? The vines will sense it, seek it out."

Garnett nodded. "Of course. My father gave me a set of charms that should hide our body heat and the vibrations of our feet from the vines, as well."

"Oh." Keanu stared at them both, eyes far too wide. "Is that necessary?"

Xun stared back at him. Then turned to stare at Garnett whose lip had curled up like he wanted to punch Keanu and send him tumbling back down the trail towards the base of the mountain where the voles would eat him alive. She sighed.

"Yes, it is," Xun said. "What do you think we're facing?"

"We're to go into the Valley of Thorns and retrieve Prince Cyrille and his lover Akuchi Nylund from the Priests of Dorji Kita," Keanu said as if that was the simplest thing in the world to accomplish.

"And what do you know of the Valley of Thorns?" Xun asked.

"Not much," Keanu said with such a bright smile that she was tempted to stab him and then throw him down the slope herself. "Apparently, it's rather dangerous but no one said why or how. Ah, do we need to worry about those darling little mice creeping up the gravel towards you?"

"Ground voles," Xun said. She held a hand out to Garnett who shook his head as he helped haul her back to her feet. "They attack in swarms and eat living meat. Like us. We're food to them."

"But they're so cute!" Keanu exclaimed, hands crossed over his chest. "The red eyes are quite darling. Though I suppose the red teeth are a bit disturbing."

Garnett snarled at him while backing away only to freeze as Xun reached into the side pocket of her backpack and pulled out a small bundle of carefully preserved meat. She unwrapped it, broke the stasis spell and tossed it down the slope. Voles erupted out the gravel

in a wave of snarling grey fur and snapping red teeth. When the meat was gone, they turned on each other, tearing into their neighbors' flesh with just as much enthusiasm.

"A present from my gardening instructor," Xun said. She smiled, amused at the horror in both Keanu and Garnett's eyes. "It was coated with a spelled oil that makes them go into a feeding frenzy. We should move on before they get over it and come after us. I've only got three packages of it and we do still need to get back down the mountain."



THE VALLEY of Thorns was really the Valley of Vines. Long sinuous vines with red-green stalks decorated with thorns both long and short. Some were as delicate as the hair on a baby's arm. Others were as long as Xun's thumb. Every single thorn glistened with oils that would burn their skin unmercifully if they brushed against it.

Sweet, cloying sap dripped off the longer thorns, staining the ground and filling the air with the smell of rotting fruit. The smell was so heady that it made Xun's head spin when she breathed too deep. Damn near like that time the hounds had gotten into the winery and broken bottles of cherry wine all over the floor.

Keanu shivered behind her. He'd been stupid enough to touch one of the leaves and now his hand was purple and swollen despite the salve Xun had used. They'd had to tie his arm to his chest, restraining him from swinging it around while yelping his pain, or he would have brought the vines after them for sure.

At least his ridiculously cheerful attitude was gone.

Someone wanted him dead. It was the only thing that made sense. To send a man like that into a place like this was a death sentence.

Xun couldn't in good conscience let him die. Mama Rosario would be very upset if she did. And it would make it hard for Xun to sleep well, too. An innocent, ridiculously inexperienced person like that couldn't just be thrown to the vines to die in agony.

Unfortunately.

Both of the men had been quite surprised that Xun had spelled pruning gear in her backpack. She'd taken the lead, clipping the ends of vines that got too close with her big pruning shears, the ones that were half as long as she was tall. Her little hand ax did a great job chopping down branches that had extended across the trail. So far.

The whole Valley of Thorns was an overgrown mess. Her gardening instructor would have taken one look and promptly started making plans for burning back some of the vines, rooting up others, and generally cleaning the place up. At one time it was supposed to have been the most beautiful garden in the world. Not anymore.

Instead of tending the place, the priests of Dorji Kita had let the vines take over, all the better to shield them from those who would seek to stop their unnatural rites.

The closer they got to the Temple of Dorji Kita, the higher the vines reached. Pretty soon she'd have to enlist Garnett to trim the vines drooping down like arches overhead. She just wasn't tall enough to reach those. And those were the ones that would kill them, snaking down to wrap around their necks, cutting their throats and draining their blood.

Several skeletons half hidden in cocoons of vines proved that.

"I... have a spell that might help," Garnett offered in a low murmur that carried less than an unvoiced whisper. "It will push the vines up and away, back towards their roots."

Xun stared at him and then nodded. Hard. "Please. Just ahead of us, though. Don't use too much strength. How long can you hold it?"

"It should hold for a full day," Garnett said but he didn't look confident of that, not with that bitten lip and the way his eyes shifted to the left so that he couldn't meet Xun's eyes.

He stepped past Keanu, then past Xun. She didn't see if he pulled out a spelled parchment or book or anything. His hands were tucked very close to his chest so maybe it was another of his lovely little charms, like the one that hung around Xun's neck.

Either way, magic swept outwards from Garnett. Soft, gentle, like

Mama Rosario picking Xun's littlest niece up and cuddling her close. The vines quivered and then relaxed as they were slowly draped up and up and up, over until their tips pointed back towards the walls of the valley instead of over the trail.

"There," Garnett whispered. "It's done. We need to hurry. They resisted more than I expected."

"Good job," Xun said.

Garnett stared over his shoulder at her as if he'd never gotten praise before in his life. His cheeks went red. He smiled, shy and sweet, strange on a man so gruff. And when Xun pushed past him to take the lead with her pruning tools, Garnett bowed as if she was the High Queen herself.

"Let's go," Xun said. "Faster we're in the better off we'll be."



THE TEMPLE of Dorji Kita was a squat thing, only a story tall. The roof was peaked. Probably. Hard to tell as the vines had grown over the top of it in a mass that hid its true dimensions. Looked from the doorway that it was made of the same grey slate as the scree outside the valley but there was no way that Xun would cut back the vines to make sure.

Here the smell of the sap was more like the smell of rotting blood.

Or maybe it was actual rotting blood. Hard to tell. Either way, the Temple doorway hung open like the gaping mouth of a corpse gone past rigor mortis and into full-on rot. Xun shuddered as she tucked her pruning shears away. The ax stayed in her hand.

It worked on flesh as well as on vines.

"This is the Temple?" Keanu whispered.

"Yep," Xun said. "Right. Well. They have to know we're here. Might as well head in. Watch for traps. Be ready to defend yourselves. Um."

She looked at Keanu with a frown that made his cheeks go beet-red.

"I can defend myself," Keanu protested, bottom lip pouted out.

"With that hand?" Garnett asked. He'd pulled a pair of matched

daggers made of obsidian that gleamed along the razor-sharp edges with magic.

"I don't defend myself with weapons," Keanu said. He straightened and suddenly the area looked much more peaceful, so much more welcoming. "Or with magic, for that matter. Let's go meet our new best friends."

He swept past Xun with that same gregarious smile that she'd learned to loathe climbing the mountain. Her heart flipped at him walking away. Xun swallowed, whispered a little prayer against Charm and then followed after him.

"So he does have a purpose on this trip," Xun said to Garnett. "I'm surprised."

"As am I," Garnett agreed. "Let's keep close to him. Charm only goes so far."

They exchanged determined looks and then followed after Keanu. Inside, the Temple of Dorji Kita reminded Xun of a corpse even more strongly. The beautiful murals were flaking off the walls, scattered bits of plaster lying on the floor like shed scales. Tiles that had once been beautiful gold-shot marble lay cracked under their feet. Most were heaved up to trip their toes, exposing the bare grey stone underneath.

It was the smell that really bothered her. Rotting flesh and sweet sap mixed together in a stinking cloud that had her pulling out her spelled carrying cloth. Once wrapped around her face the stink was much more manageable. Garnett took her spare but Keanu shook his head no even though he'd taken on the green cast of a man about to throw up everything he'd ever eaten.

Simple design to the Temple, at least. A long narrow hallway led to a perpendicular hallway. That had small rooms to either side. The priests' quarters. Skeletons lay in every doorway. The priests were long gone. Their hallway continued onwards to another huge double door, this one closed.

"The heart of the Temple of Dorji Kita," Keanu murmured as they stood in front of it. "The Inner Sanctum. I've heard that it was the

most beautiful shrine outside of the Holy City of the Mother Goddess."

"I've got it," Garnett said, pushing Keanu aside so that he could test the door latches and then shove the doors open.

They moved smoothly, quickly, banging against the walls and shuddering like muted gongs. Inside, the Inner Sanctum lay dark and cold. No candles, no lanterns, no light at all except what Garnett created when he cast a small light spell over their heads.

No priests, either.

Just Prince Cyrille and his lover Akuchi lying motionless together on the altar of Dorji Kita, their eyes open and their chests still.



"THEY'RE IN STASIS."

Xun looked at Garnett, then at Keanu who looked as serenely confident as anyone ever could. She wasn't. Not at all. The whole thing stank of a trap. And of blood and death and that horrible sap.

"Where are the priests?" Xun asked. "I thought they'd been captured by the priests of Dorji Kita."

The sticky, bloody floor in front of them flexed. Shuddered and rumbled as Xun stumbled backwards, her ax in both hands. Garnett was by her side, knives at the ready, but Keanu stood his ground, smiling faintly as what she'd thought was a floor rose and rose and rose over Prince Cyrille and Akuchi.

Vines.

They were vines, vines decorated by the thorns as long as Xun was tall. The vines spun together into a thorn-covered approximation of a human shape that loomed over the altar like a fallen god bleeding for its crimes.

Maybe more literal than she thought because once the head formed glowing eyes opened to stare down at them.

"I greet you, O Mighty Dorji Kita," Keanu said with that florid little bow that sent sparks of magic from his fingertips.

He didn't seem to notice his swollen hand strapped to his chest.

Or the way Garnett hissed at him. Or Xun's whispered prayers mixed with cursing because Mama Rosario really did intend for her to die here. Pruning shears and a spelled ax against a fallen god? Really?

"Why are you here, godling?" The Temple of Thorns shook from the rumble of Dorji Kita's voice. "This is not your place. It is mine."

"No, it most certainly is not my place," Keanu agreed with that blindingly attractive smile that made the world feel so much better. "I'm much happier surrounded by people. Human people, of course. Other sorts of people are nice, yes, but they're just not as... appetizing, I suppose."

"Answer the question," Dorji Kita said. Its eyes narrowed, the light of them forming a blazing searchlight that sent smoke up from Keanu's sleeves.

He didn't smoke at all even though the floor bubbled under his feet and Xun's face felt like it was being burned just by her proximity to the puddle of light.

"They're mine," Keanu said. He gestured towards Prince Cyrille and Akuchi. "Prince Cyrille swore to me years ago and as they are Mated, that makes Akuchi mine, too. I understand the attraction, the desire to keep them. Prince Cyrille is... well. He's very interesting, isn't he? Such strength. Such power. I was so delighted when Akuchi managed to seduce him. A lovely matched pair. But you can't have them. They're mine already."

Dorji Kita roared, its stumpy fists going up to brush against the ceiling. Then they arced down at Keanu who snorted and stepped to the left, letting the fists brush past him to smash into the floor.

"Now, that's not nice at all," Keanu said. "I'm being very polite about this, Dorji Kita. You stole my property. Unknowingly, I'm sure. But now that you know, well. You have to give them back."

"They are mine!" Dorji Kita roared. "I will consume them and you, godling!"

The roar filled the entire Valley, so loud that it wasn't noise anymore. It was air beating against Xun's body, fury pounding against her mind. She shuddered and fell to her knees, ax still clutched in one hand.

Keanu shook his head as if the roar was nothing at all. His charm was like a living thing around them but Xun could feel the edges of it moving inwards towards Keanu.

Godling he might be but he wasn't enough to stop an old god like Dorji Kita.

But then.

Dorji Kita was an old god. Old with roots stuck deep in the soil of this valley. Its manifestation was the vines and well.

Xun knew gardening.

Get the root, kill the plant. Maybe, just maybe, getting Dorji Kita's root would kill the god, too. Or at least knock it into dormancy for long enough that they could save the prince and his lover and get the hell out of this valley.

"Where's the root?" Xun shouted into Garnett's ear. "Where's it go into the earth?"

Garnett stared at her, blind with panic on his face for a moment, before he started looking around. Not in the Inner Sanctum. The vines of Dorji Kita all swirled back towards the ceiling like ribbons draped from its thorny ankles toward the roof.

So outside.

Xun pulled off her backpack, dragged out the poison packs and spelled saw that her gardening instructor had given her. She shoved the pruning shears into Garnett's hands and then nodded to Keanu who smiled and bowed and then focused all that sucking, terrifying charm on Dorji Kita.

They ran through the hallway, Xun tracing the throbbing vines with her eyes. Ceiling. All of them came down through the ceiling. Now that she was looking she could see how they'd broken through the roof over and over and over. Every door in the priests' quarters had a broken spot above it and a vine extending down into the skull of the dead priest.

What had they done?

The priests must have done something to offend Dorji Kita, to twist it and pull it away from the duties of life and living in a harsh environment. Gods didn't feed on their priests that way unless there

was a reason. Something must have happened to destroy Dorji Kita's faith in its worshippers.

"There!" Garnett shouted once they were outside.

He pointed towards a thickened spot just to the right of the front gate. A place where all the vines went down instead of up and away. Xun barely heard him over the roars of Dorji Kita and the sounds of great thorny fists smashing into the floor inside.

Let Keanu distract Dorji Kita. He would play his part and do it well, even though Xun had thought him nothing more than an idiot and a nuisance. This was her task. And now Mama Rosario's decision made more sense.

Only Xun understood gardening.

"Clip anything that gets close to me," Xun said. She pulled out salve, slathering it on her hands, her face, then his hands and face and especially his neck. "This will only slow it down. Not stop it. Do your best to keep the vines away, Garnett."

"I will," Garnett promised. "Go! Keanu was losing strength when we left. Prince Cyrille and Akuchi must be his only worshippers."

Xun nodded. Godlings were always weakest when their followers were few in number. But that worked in their favor, too. Because Dorji Kita had killed all of its followers. It was strong, terrifying, eating everything and everyone that came in range but that was because it had nothing to support its life anymore.

It would inevitably die.

Inevitably.

Just not soon enough to save the five of them.

So Xun hefted her saw and crawled under the flexing vines. Garnett snipped off several that approached her, him, them. She had to lie on her bell to get close to the base of the vines, the one spot where Dorji Kita's physical form linked to the Earth that supported them all.

Then she started sawing while whispering prayers to the Mother Goddess, the Source of All, that she could saw fast enough to get through the foot-wide trunk that was Dorji Kita's physical anchor.

Sap-blood spurted out over Xun's hands, hot and sticky in ways

that felt all too much like blood. It stank like blood, too, half coagulated and already thickening into ropes as it landed on her body. The sap-blood soaked into her skin despite the salve but the salve's spell protected her from being burned.

A quarter the way through.

Dorji Kita howled from the Temple of Thorns, a wail of mixed fear and rage.

"Hurry!" Garnett yelled. "I think it's pulling free of the Temple!"

It was.

Xun could see the way the roots were flexing, trying to push her away and make her stop. She sawed faster, prayed harder and louder. Halfway through in a matter of seconds and suddenly there was no more sap-blood spurting forth. The roots were still red and sticky but the cut portion above her head bleached brown then yellow then bone-white.

Light burst from the temple as three voices raised up in a song that Xun didn't recognize. It buoyed her spirits, strengthened her right arm, encouraged her as she sawed and sawed and sawed as fast as she possibly could.

Hands clamped around her ankles as Xun hit the three-quarters mark. She shouted back at Garnett not to pull her free but she couldn't even hear her own voice over the sound of Dorji Kita's screams so she didn't think Garnett did either.

She grabbed one of the pulsing, desperate roots and hung on so that she could saw through that last quarter of Dorji Kita's anchor. The vines over her head flexed and twisted wildly, the thorns growing and shrinking as more and more of it went brown, yellow, bone-white.

Garnett pulled hard just as Xun's saw broke through the last bit of stalk, the tiny thread of vine-bark that held Dorji Kita's anchor to its manifestation in the world. He pulled so hard that she slid out of the spot, the skin of her left hand shredding on the root she'd gripped.

Her last sight of Dorji Kita was the leftover stump spurting a great huge gout of sap-blood before it slowly faded to bone-white, too.

Then a soundless wail echoed through the Valley of Thorns, hitting Xun so hard that her sight went white and her ears went deaf.



"AH, THERE SHE IS."

Xun groaned and pushed Keanu's hand away from her chest. She managed to open her eyes and groaned to find all four men staring down at her with something like awe, something like amusement. Every inch of her body ached but her hands, arms and torso were as sticky as the time her little nephews had dumped an entire vat of syrup over her head.

"I want a bath," Xun announced. "A very long, very hot bath. With lots of soap."

Keanu burst out laughing. He clapped his hands and sparkles of magic showered off them. Really. She should have seen his demi-god status the first time he did that. Mama Rosario would have shaken her head and sighed at Xun's lack of attention.

"Well, I'm afraid I can't give you a bath right now," Keanu said so brightly that she glared at him, "but I can confirm that you most desperately need one. You're a bit of a fright. I'm afraid your skin might be. Ah. Altered. A bit."

"As long as I'm not sticky, I don't care," Xun said.

She managed to sit up and the first thing she did was stare at her hands because bravado aside, yes, she most certainly did care. Underneath the slowly drying and flaking off sap, Xun's skin had taken on a blood red hue. It made her look oddly paled given that the rest of her skin was dusky gold.

But she didn't feel different. Or not much different. Killing a god didn't appear to have made her more than human. Or less than human, maybe. Though only time would tell on that front.

"The ground voles are massing at the entrance to the valley," Garnett said as he helped her stand up. "You said you had more of that spelled meat. Do you think it's enough to get us out of here?"

Xun sighed. Stretched and winced at the way her back popped

and cracked. Looked at her backpack with all the gardening equipment, food and clothes. Carrying that thing back down the mountain was going to be such a bother. But there were two more men who could carry things so maybe it wouldn't be too bad.

Her carrying scarf lay on the ground next to her backpack, soaked entirely with the sap-blood. The top half of her face must be marked. The lower half untouched except for a few drips that she could feel trailing down her cheeks.

Her nieces and nephews were going to stare when she got home.

"Right," Xun said as she brushed as much of the flaking sap-blood off as she could. "I'm going to give you guys some of the gardening tools. Won't help much against the ground voles but they're pretty easy to distract with the meat my gardening instructor gave me. I'll toss one packet and then we'll run down the trail. Then the second when we get closer to the bottom. It'll probably be close but the ground voles never leave the scree. Or at least they don't go more than a few dozen feet. If we run, don't trip, and keep going even if we get a bite or two we should be fine."

She looked at them, smiling confident Keanu, his studious Prince Cyrille and tall, muscular Akuchi. They nodded, apparently sharing in Keanu's boundless enthusiasm. Garnett sighed and rubbed his face. There were scratches on his cheeks that looked like they'd burned a bit but her salve had protected him to a degree.

"I'm ready," Garnett said in a tone that implied he was anything but. "Let's leave."

Xun smiled.

Time to leave the Valley of Thorns, graveyard of Dorji Kita.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: THE CRIMSON VEST

The Drath series is a fun one but then I love romance mixed with SF. Especially when I can follow the events from story to story and show the consequences of the actions happening to my characters. Getting to tell a story that shows one set of lovers in another view? True joy. So writing this one with the triad from Reunited Hearts showing up in the background was amazing fun.

THE CRIMSON VEST

The crimson vest slithered through Guanyu's fingers, delicate embroidery snagging against the callouses on his palms. Roses vied with lilies against a background of bamboo leaves, all done in shades of red, burgundy and cream. Despite every square inch of the vest being covered in embroidery, the fabric still moved like water through his hands.

He hadn't worn it for years. Not since he left home. Mother had given it to him when he came of age, beaming at him as he put it on the first time. Guanyu had been thinner then, not much, but a bit. Not that it mattered. The vest was loose, arms opening wide so that he could wear almost anything underneath it. The inside pockets were still strong, bottoms belled slightly so that he could carry a knife or a blackjack.

Not that he ever had. It ruined the way the vest hung around his belly. Better to use pockets in his pants or shirt for that. Besides, he wouldn't want to damage the beautiful crimson vest by getting in a fight while wearing it.

Guanyu sighed.

Black pants tied with a drawstring hung in front of him. He glared at them. Stupid things. The only reason he had them was his boss

had said that sarong was unprofessional. As if that offworlder had any idea what was proper. He didn't even eat poi.

Not that his boss' opinion mattered now. Guanyu's job was gone, given away to an offworlder newly moved in to support the tourist industry building on Tasma. The planet looked so different than it had a decade ago. You could walk outside the dome now, breathe the air without worrying about passing out. Granted, you had to worry about the beasts that the Grazzt had imported but it was a small price to pay for Tasma becoming a real colony instead of just that half-hearted attempt that everyone in the stations ignored and forgot about.

"No pants," Guanyu said as he opened a drawer and pulled out his favorite black and emerald green sarong. "Should wear a shirt today. I am job hunting."

So he added the wonderful old black, gold and green shirt his mother had woven for him. It was just a hair snug over the swell of his belly but Guanyu didn't care. The sarong and shirt worked well together, narrow stripes on the shirt contrasting beautifully with the bold pattern of banana leaves on a stark black background.

"Not quite enough," Guanyu said as he tucked a knife in one shirt pocket and his old blackjack in the other. He looked back at the crimson vest and then snorted. "Why not? It's been years since I wore it."

The vest all but glowed against the dark background of his clothes. Every bit of cream and burgundy embroidery thread stood out, the lovely flowers his mother had stitched looking even more beautiful. Guanyu nodded, smoothed his hands over the vest and then flipped his long braid over his shoulder. Flip flops and he was ready.

Dome nine was the biggest on Tasma, home to more than eighty percent of Tasma's population. Still, it held less than half a million people. The dome was clear at this time of day, showing the stars overhead. During the night, it went dark so that the fierce rays of Tasma's sun couldn't kill everyone inside the dome. He spotted Station 19 overhead, then Station three low on the horizon.

A good clear day outside. Good. They'd had more and more clear days as the Grazzt plants stabilized the soul and thickened the atmosphere.

Guanyu sauntered up the street, moving slowly because he didn't recognize half the people on the street. Strange. He hadn't gotten used to so many strangers on Tasma. When he was a boy he'd known everyone in his town. Pretty soon it wouldn't be possible to do that.

"Ship come in?" Guanyu asked Maria when he stopped at her little cart, buying a cup of cut mango and pineapple to eat along with a nice thick tortilla slathered with peanut butter.

"Yeah," Maria said. She only took half the coins he offered, pushing the rest back at him with a significant glare that he'd try to pay full price when everyone knew he'd been 'laid off'. Bunch of ground pounders looking for adventure with the Grazzt. Heard that they're going hunting wild pig outside the dome. Can't wait for them to clear out. You eat up, now, Guanyu. I don't want to hear that you've started dropping weight."

"I have never in my life dropped weight, woman," Guanyu said with a smug little look that made Maria laugh, even if he didn't feel it. "Go on with you now. Have a good day selling."

She nodded, eyes wrinkling dramatically in a quiet smile. Maria never showed her teeth when she smiled. Didn't have any to show. Guanyu watched her go and then started eating as he strolled. Tortilla went fast, just three bites. Then he slowly at the mango and pineapple, all the while considering just what job he should try for.

Guanyu had never been much of anything. Knew a lot of skills, sure, but he wasn't one of the bright smart ones who worked hard and got ahead. He was slow and steady. His old job had been clerk work, recording tax payments and sending out notices to those who were delinquent. Sort of job that most places had computers for but with all the domes separate, no communication lines between them, that didn't work on Tasma.

Would soon. The big boss, Hasenkamp, had paid out of his own pocket to put in communication systems that worked between the domes. Satellite, of course. No one was going to pay to lay electrical

lines between the domes when they'd just get gnawed on and destroyed by the pigs.

So his replacement would be out a job soon enough. Honestly, Guanyu had seen it coming but he hadn't tried to find something different to do. It had been easier to tell himself that things would settle down in time, that he'd figure something out, that another opportunity would fall in his lap.

Nothing had. Nothing was.

Would just have to make an effort, then. Guanyu paused behind the big new information board that Hasenkamp had put up. It showed news clips, explanations of the laws that he'd put in, and, more helpful for Guanyu, companies that were looking for people to hire. Weren't many jobs that called for a big boned clerk who was more deliberate than insightful but hey, he could go back to his weaving maybe. Hasenkamp himself was looking for weavers. It'd been near two decades since Guanyu sat at his mother's old loom but he still remembered the quiet pleasure of the shuttle flying back and forth, fabric growing under his hands.

"Yeah, might as well try that," Guanyu murmured.

He nodded once and then strolled off towards the center of town where Hasenkamp had set up his weaving center. It was a big building, a full block square, with open sides that let you see the weavers working inside. Second story was enclosed, held the offices, stores, meeting rooms and the like. Guanyu smiled as he got closer.

Silk, dusty on his nose. Cotton with its faint nutty smell. Hemp, too, the raw fiber that looked like grass and smelled like someone had just baled hay. Plus the pungent smell of indigo dye being worked until it was ready for the fabric and the glorious shush and thump of a hundred looms working to create something beautiful.

"Ah, sir, we didn't expect you this morning," one of the supervisors said as Guanyu strolled up. "It's lovely to see you wearing sarong."

"Excuse me?" Guanyu asked, staring at the supervisor who fluttered a hand at him, waving for him to follow. "I don't think..."

The supervisor pressed his lips together, bowed awkwardly and

then fluttered that hand as if to say 'not here'. So what else was Guanyu to do but follow the man upstairs into the offices where voices were, well, not raised but certainly heated in their low tones and matching glares.

All of which were directed at a young man with nowhere near enough flesh on his bones. The kid, no, man, he was at least thirty though the youthful poof of his hair around his head made him seem less than half that age. The man had Ceelen dark skin, a rail thin body that was marked with scars and so much anger in his eyes that Guanyu frowned at the supervisor.

"What happened?" Guanyu asked.

The supervisor sighed. "We caught him stealing. I know you don't approve of punishment but it was a very valuable commission for one of our biggest customers. A specially dyed sarong that was to be given to the customer's wife."

Guanyu frowned. "Stealing."

"He claims that it was his work, not that of the artist," the supervisor said. "Ade Pinho, he's one of our best."

"Ade?" Guanyu said, rocking back on his heels because when the hell had Ade, that old con man and street beggar, been a dyer of sarong? "Ade Pinho is your best? Bloody hell, man you need to hire better people. Never mind, what's your name?"

"Ah, Haris Head, Hasenkamp sir," Haris said, eyes wide.

Guanyu snorted. So that's what had happened. Haris had taken in Guanyu's clothes, his size, the darker than average color of his skin and just assumed that Guanyu was Hasenkamp. No wonder Ade had been able to pull a con on the man. Eyes must be worse than middling horrid for him not to realize that Guanyu had not one facial feature in common with Hasenkamp. Didn't even have the same shape of faces. Hasenkamp's chin was square while Guanyu's face was as round as a rice ball.

Still, no reason to tell Haris that he'd made a mistake yet, not when Ade was getting away with cheating the other man.

"Let's see this sarong," Guanyu said. "Ade around here, yes?"

"Ah, yes, he's downstairs," Haris said.

"Have him brought up in a couple of minutes," Guanyu said. "I want to talk to the boy before I see Ade. Don't let Ade run away, now. He's liable to. Gets nervous easy."

More like he always knew when his cons were about to fall apart and ran for the bunkers before people could catch him. This was the biggest con that Guanyu had seen Ade pull but hey, Ade had always been one for quick and easy money. Probably told the man that he could get his art shown and known and then took credit instead of telling them the truth.

"This is the sarong," Haris said, having one of the others hold up one side while Haris held the right edge.

"Damn," Guanyu said, eyebrows going up. "That's beautiful work."

It was, too, beautiful enough that he put a hand on the man's shoulder so that he wouldn't leap to his feet to rip it out of Haris' hands. Sized for a thin offworlder woman, the sarong was about two and half yards long, a yard and a half wide, white as the raw silk it had been woven from. Delicate pastel lilies and bamboo shoots had been painted on it, each shaded perfectly so that it almost looked real.

"That's mine," the man snarled. He tried to knock Guanyu's hand off his shoulder, failed, glared up at Guanyu. "I created it, not that asshole Ade."

"What's your name?" Guanyu asked. Smiled all soft and gentle because a person with this sort of skill damned well didn't deserve to be used by someone like Ade.

"Hikmat Traviss," the man said. He frowned up at Guanyu. "It's mine. I'm telling the truth."

"Well, it's sure as hell not Ade's," Guanyu agreed. "Fold it up. Hikmat deserves proper compensation for his work. Ade couldn't dye a sarong a solid color. The man's a con artist. I guarantee you that he's been stealing Hikmat's work, presenting it as his own."

Haris' mouth dropped open. He stared at the sarong and then carefully folded it up with shaking hands before presenting it to Hikmat who hugged it to his bare chest. Guanyu patted his shoulder and then lifted his chin just enough that Haris flinched.

"You need to bring Abe up here," Guanyu said. "And then you need to call Hasenkamp. Because I'm not him. Actually came here to see if I could get a job weaving. Hasenkamp needs to know that your eyes are so bad you can't tell two men apart, twice over, and that you're allowing con artists to steal money from the real artists."

The sound Haris made shouldn't come from a human mouth. Guanyu just smiled at the man, his hand still on Hikmat's shoulder. Stayed right there as Haris ran off, hopefully to call Hasenkamp and bring Ade up, but who knew? Everyone watching and whispering stopped the whispering, kept on watching.

"You're seriously not Hasenkamp?" Hikmat asked.

Guanyu sat next to him, kicking off his flip flops and crossing his legs so that he'd be comfortable on the floor with Hikmat. He was tall, actually, thin as a reed and hard muscle all through his chest and stomach, but quite tall.

"Not at all," Guanyu said. "Lost my job and I needed a new one. Do wonder about Haris' eyes. Hasenkamp and I don't look that much alike."

"...I think it's the clothes," Hikmat said as Ade was dragged up the stairs protesting the whole way. "Asshole. I can't believe he stole my credit."

"Hikmat," Guanyu said as Ade was brought over and shoved to his knees next to them at the table, "he stole your money and your job. That's what Ade does. He's a con man. Has been his whole life. That's the problem with bringing in outsiders for an industry like this. You get people taking advantage because they just don't know the locals that well."

"Traitor!" Ade hissed at Guanyu. He didn't attack, didn't try to run, but that was probably due to the big heavily scarred man standing right behind him.

Guanyu snorted, shifting so that he was facing Hikmat and ignoring Ade who gasped as if he'd been stabbed by the snub. Seriously. As often as Guanyu had snubbed Ade you'd think he'd be used to it by now. Hikmat kept his beautiful sarong pressed to his chest, arms crossed so that there was no way Ade could grab at it.

"Ade said there was no money in making sarongs," Hikmat finally murmured as voices started rising downstairs. A good ten minutes of silence which was longer than Guanyu had expected. The man was calmer than Guanyu would have thought given the situation.

"He lied," Guanyu replied.

"That he did," a deep man's voice said from the stairs. "There's a huge amount of money in sarongs like the ones you make. Hikmat Traviss, yes?"

Hasenkamp strode up the stairs like they were flat ground, big and burly instead of round the way Guanyu was. Had to be a good two fifty pounds, all of it muscle. He had on traditional Ceelen clothes, beautiful even with the pants. Nice pants honestly, yards of fabric pleated into a drawstring waistband with a billowing kaftan on top. Red and green and luscious cream done in geometric designs that made Hasenkamp look broader than he was.

"Oh, that is gorgeous," Hasenkamp breathed. He actually stopped in his tracks to stare at Guanyu's vest. "Haven't seen anything like that since I moved to Tasma."

Guanyu laughed, waving for him to come and sit before taking the vest off. "My mother made it for me. She was a wonderful seamstress. Did embroidery to relax herself."

"Don't tell me she's dead," Hasenkamp complained as he sat, completely ignoring Ade's abortive attempt to capture Hasenkamp's attention. He carefully took the vest, spread it out so that he could look at every stitch, every flower, even the pockets on the inside. "My heart might break."

Just made Guanyu laugh harder. Ruler of Tasma, the great Hasenkamp, was as infatuated with fabric as Guanyu was. Maybe Haris' mistake made more sense than he'd thought. Not that it mattered for the matter at hand. Guanyu needed a job. Ade needed to be punished for his crimes. And Hikmat definitely needed to be compensated for the gorgeous sarong he'd created.

"She's dead but my sisters all do the same embroidery," Guanyu said. He pulled himself to his feet and then gestured for Hikmat to stand with him. "This is what Ade's been claiming credit for. Stealing.

I've known Ade since we were kids, Hasenkamp. He's a thief, a liar and a con man. Your people and Hikmat've been hurt by him this time."

If Hasenkamp had been stunned by the crimson vest, he was awed by Hikmat's sarong. He sat and stared at it, eyes tracing the lines of the resist Hikmat had used to define the flowers and bamboo. He looked like he could sit there and stare for hours, days, at the shading of the thing. At least until he stood and came around the table to run gentle fingers over the sarong.

"This is beautiful," Hasenkamp whispered. "I'd buy it myself if it wasn't a commission. Hikmat, you're hired. I'll have you do a series of dye jobs just so we know you're actually the one who did this. But I don't doubt that you did. Just gorgeous."

"I did it, not him!" Ade shouted. He jumped to his feet and swung at Guanyu. "How dare you lie about me?"

Guanyu caught his fist, twisted hard and put Ade on the table face down. Stepped on Ade's ankle so that he couldn't kick and then kept on twisting Ade's wrist until he screamed and sobbed.

"You know better than that," Guanyu said. He looked at Hasenkamp. "There's local records of his crimes, sir. Suggest heading over to the tax office to get copies of them. He's been convicted about twenty times of running cons, and at least fifty of stealing from various people and places. No one here could get rid of him though. We don't have a proper prison and we don't believe in killing people for simple things like this. Rules are different now."

Hasenkamp nodded, eyes hard as he stared down at Ade. He waved one hand and the scar-faced man took Ade, securing his wrists behind his back with a sturdy little link-strip made of the toughest plastic. Another man, covered in tattoos that made him look like a robot, glared at Ade as if he wanted to beat Ade bloody.

Good.

Not likely that Ade would get away with it this time. Hasenkamp frowned at Hikmat, then at Guanyu and finally at Haris who went red and looked away. He waved for Guanyu to put his vest back on and then led the way back downstairs to the dye racks and vats. Scarves

and sarong and long lengths of fabric stretched out so that they could be dyed waited for them.

"Hikmat here is testing for a dye job," Hasenkamp said. "Haris, every single penny you gave to Ade is to be paid to Hikmat. I don't care if it makes your budget break. The man did the work and I want him paid for it."

"You don't... know that," Hikmat said, voice catching when Hasenkamp turned to look at him. "You don't. Ade could have done it. I could be lying."

Hasenkamp snorted and gently took the sarong from Hikmat, passing it to Guanyu to hold. Then he spread Hikmat's hands out, revealing a patchwork of dye stains over his fingers and palms. Guanyu nodded. Those were the hands of a craftsman. Ade's hands were pristine, just like they always had been.

"Your work shows in your hands, Hikmat," Hasenkamp said so gentle and kind that Hikmat's breath caught. "Create something beautiful for me. Haris, make sure he's paid before he leaves today. He's good and I won't have him starve. Especially make sure he's paid for this."

The sarong went into Haris' hands. Which led to bows all around, Guanyu patting Hikmat's shaking shoulder and then Guanyu following Hasenkamp out of the building towards the tax office that he used to work at. Nice part was that Hasenkamp slowed his quick stride to a slower amble that matched with Guanyu's normal pace.

Seemed to do Hasenkamp some good. The tension in his shoulders slowly relaxed. The tattooed man behind them smiled when Guanyu glanced back at him. All right then, relaxing was a good thing.

"I haven't been able to spend the time I wanted with the weaving," Hasenkamp admitted as they turned the corner before the tax office. "Otherwise I would have caught that."

"You're ruling the planet," Guanyu said. Shrugged at the narrow look Hasenkamp gave him. "It's work. A lot of work. Eventually you'll get the time. Not that I care. I'm more than happy just to weave again. Been nearly twenty years since I sat at my mother's looms."

Hasenkamp suddenly beamed at him, making the tattooed man behind them laugh. "You weave? Did you make the shirt?"

"Made the fabric, ages ago," Guanyu said, grinning at him. "Mother sewed it for me. Going to give a me a test before you hire me."

"I think you already passed," Hasenkamp said but he didn't explain that any further because they were at the tax office.

All though the process of bringing up Ade's records, Guanyu's old boss glared at him as if offended to see Guanyu interacting with such important people. Guanyu ignored him. So did Hasenkamp. The tattooed man pulled him aside and said something quiet and harsh that sent his old boss scurrying back into his office. That was nice. Appreciated.

By the time Hasenkamp had all the records he wanted it was just past lunch so they sauntered back to the weaving building, Hasenkamp muttering the whole way about idiots, terrible precedents and making changes. Guanyu let him mutter.

He bought three nice big meat buns from Maria who stared at seeing him in such company. She let him pay this time which he appreciated. Better not to have his lack of funds pointed out right that moment. Tattooed man nodded his thanks for the bun and then groaned when he ate the first bite.

"Hasen, eat," the tattooed man said, poking Hasenkamp in the ribs.

"Fine, fine," Hasenkamp muttered, biting and then stopping in his tracks to stare at the bun. "Damn, you know food, too."

"I know people," Guanyu said. "Maria's an old family friend. Her husband makes the best buns in town. You know what you're going to do?"

He ate as Hasenkamp nodded, enjoying the spicy kalua pork mixed with caramelized onion in his bun. Steamed pork buns were the best thing ever for lunch. Better still, Maria's buns were big enough that they filled the hollows in his belly from his light breakfast. Be nice to have some more fruit, maybe a bit of poi to dip the

bun in, but this was enough. Guanyu wasn't broke yet but he couldn't afford to spend wildly.

"All right," Hasenkamp announced once they were back upstairs at the weaving building only a brief detour for checking on Hikmat's already amazing progress, "Hikmat is now one of our key dyers. That man has skills and I want them properly compensated. Haris, you're still in charge of the financial side of things but I'm bringing Guanyu here on to cover the creative side. He'll be weaving as well, plus I want you to contact your sisters and see if they'd be willing to do embroidery for us. Either way, he outranks you on all employment considerations. He has the technical skills you lack."

Haris only nodded, face so calm that Guanyu felt like the world itself had just rolled right out from under him. He stared at Hasenkamp who grinned, one hand waving towards Guanyu's sarong, shirt and vest.

"Easy choice," Hasenkamp said, smug and confident far beyond what he should have been. "You've got an eye for this. You've got the skills. And, most importantly, you're local. We need that. So you're hired. I'll be around a lot to make sure things are going well but I think you'll work out just fine, Guanyu."

Guanyu stared at him before turning to the scar-faced man and the tattooed man. "Does he do this a lot?"

"All the damned time," the scar-faced man said. He laughed. "Roll with it. Hasenkamp's good at reading people."

"You look like you'll do well to me," the tattooed man agreed with a ready grin. "Can always switch things around if you don't like the job."

Guanyu shook his head as he ran his hands over the crimson vest. His mother's beautiful vest, given to him so long ago with the promise that someday it would adorn him on his greatest day. She hadn't been wrong. He'd just not realized that the worst day of his life was going to turn out to be the best.

"All right," Guanyu said. He gestured towards the table. "Sit down. Tell me what your plans are, how things are working now. Let's see what needs to be done to get where you want to be."

Hasenkamp beamed at him and thumped one strong hand on Guanyu's shoulder. "That's the spirit. Welcome aboard."

As they sat, Guanyu's flip flops carefully set behind him so no one would trip on them, Guanyu pondered his closet full of black pants and plain blue shirts. Those would have to go. He'd send a message to his sisters, ask them to send him sarong and shirts. Ask them to come to visit so that they could meet Hasenkamp.

Maybe his habit of moving slow and steady, waiting out the sudden changes, hadn't been that bad after all. At least he had hope of a new career now, one that would be much more enjoyable than being a tax office clerk. Better still, he could make a difference not just for the workers here but his family, too.

Mother would be proud.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: ONE MOMENT OF CHANGE

This one is also from the Drath series but instead of focusing on the characters, I realized that I hadn't focused at all on the setting. All those space liners filled with people and I'd spent no time at all exploring that. Well, once I realized that I had to change it. Alex and his desperate choice were what resulted once I sat down and started writing.

ONE MOMENT OF CHANGE

Alex shuffled his feet as he waited in line. His back ached. Stupid how much his back ached. No, stupid that he'd allowed himself to be bruised that way. He should have known that Yong wouldn't take no for an answer. Yong had never taken no from anyone from the time they were toddlers. The great Yong Tesar, genius artist and musician, most certainly didn't take no from someone so insignificant as Alex Novak, mere clerk, even if they had known each other forever.

Which, of course, was why Alex was waiting in line to get on a Ceelen space liner so that he could move to an entirely different solar system. One on the exact opposite side of the human sphere from home. Melin. Hexal City. He'd spent his entire life in the suburbs of Hexal City, looking out at the golden sand dunes and rocky cliffs of the gorge. Everything that he was, everything that he'd ever learned, was tied into this place. These people.

And now he was leaving them behind.

It felt good, if only his back didn't hurt quite so much. The many bruises he'd seen in the mirror this morning had told him that he couldn't delay. He'd given his apartment to his sister, twice as big as he was and a bodyguard so she'd be able to deal with Yong's dramat-

ics. Taken his clothes, his little collection of sand-glass figurines bought at a lifetime's worth of corner markets, and gone straight to the spaceport.

At least he had the money to do this. For a while there the banks had locked people out, prevented runs on their money, after the interstellar comms fell. Alex hadn't gone in to try to get his money. He'd waited and taken his pay in cash since his employer, a big manufacturer of food tablets, could get money from the banks unlike ordinary people. Now, six months later, the Drath comm system was up and, more or less, life had returned to normal.

For everyone but Alex.

He shook his head as he finally made his way onto the transport. Found his seat. Put his bag and box in the rack overhead. Then gingerly sat and strapped down for the ride to space. His heart beat faster and faster as time ticked by. Couldn't the others on the transport settle themselves more quickly? Surely they didn't need this long to get into their seats and strapped down.

But no, people shuffled and chatted and fussed with their belongings until Alex's hands shook against his thighs with the certainty that Yong was going to show up and drag Alex off the transport whether he willed it or not. Acid burned at the back of his throat. Sweat crept down his spine, chilling him and making him shudder.

"Got room?"

Alex started and then stared up at the very slender Hyun-Ju man looking down at him. Narrow straight nose, slim eyes, lusciously full lips all set in a golden face that made Alex's stomach lurch in completely pleasant ways. He was wearing black leather. Head to toe. And his hair was braided back tight. Whoever the Hyun-Ju was, he was a very tempting vision even as he frowned at Alex's silence.

"Um, can I sit here?" the man asked again more slowly.

"Ah, sorry," Alex said. "You startled me. That's fine. I believe there's room in the bin above."

"Eh, don't need it," the man said, sitting and strapping in with practiced ease. "Was just playing tourist for the day before heading back up. Didn't find anything I wanted to buy, sad to say. It's a shame.

There used to be some really nice stuff in the Old District but it's all crap now."

A very safe topic to talk about. Everyone, absolutely everyone that Alex knew thought the same. Certainly, the upgrades to Hexal City's infrastructure had been desperately needed but in making the streets and buildings more modern the city had lost a great many of the old craftsmen and women.

"Personally, I think it was a mistake to rebuild the Old District with modern structures," Alex said, shaking his head more to glance out the window by his elbow than anything else.

"That!" The man huffed. "They really should have made it all the same. You know, old wooden buildings, tiny shops full of one of a kind stuff. That sort of thing."

He seemed so very offended by the changes in the Old District that Alex couldn't help but smile. A little smile. Certainly a nervous one. His new friend, not that they were friends, flicked his eyes to the smile, tiny wrinkles forming at the corners of his mouth. No comment but his lush mouth thinned as the door shut finally and Alex turned to stare out the window, waiting desperately for the transport to take off.

It took far too long. At least five minutes. But eventually the engines rumbled and they lifted off, swooping straight up towards the stars so far overhead. Alex bit his lip and smoothed his hands over his thighs as he tried to stop trembling. Wipe off his sweaty palms.

"We're not gonna blow up, you know."

Alex blinked and then stared at the Hyun-Ju man who grinned. Offered a hand as if suggesting that Alex might hold it. Which. No.

"The transport," the man said. "It's not gonna blow up."

"Oh, no, I ah, wasn't worried about that," Alex said. "No, I was. Worried. Um. Well, that we wouldn't take off at all."

"I never gave you my name," the man said, eyes narrowed to slits and lips pressed thin as if he was looking for someone who needed to be killed. "I'm Sabah Henderson, Hyun-Ju warrior."

"Obviously," Alex said, bowing his head and then blushing at the sudden grin he got from Sabah. "That you're Hyun-Ju and a warrior,

that is. I'm pleased to meet you. I am Alex Novak. I'm. Hmm. Well. Emigrating from Melin."

Sabah eyed Alex, the thin look going slowly perplexed as he scanned Alex's simple brown suit, pale green shirt and unscarred hands. He opened his mouth and then shut it again after a moment. Alex laughed softly.

"Emigrating is usually for people what can't find the same sort of job anymore," Sabah commented. "Because their job just became illegal."

"True," Alex agreed, unsure that he wanted to explain anything when he had no idea who was on the transport. For some reason, he didn't fear that Sabah would betray him but the other hundred or so people on the transport were another matter. "Or those who wish to find a different lifestyle."

Sabah nodded thoughtfully.

He didn't ask anything further but Alex could see that he didn't believe that Alex was the sort to pick up stakes and move to another world for anything less than dire reasons. Sabah was right about that of course. If Alex had his way, he'd never have moved at all. He would still be in his tiny apartment with his old stove and new refrigerator, enjoying the same dramas on the vid and working his quiet, repetitive job.

Adventure was anything but exciting in Alex's opinion. It was inconvenient, terrifying and to be avoided at all costs. But one did as one had to sometimes.

The trip into space passed with Sabah's steady patter of complaints about the changes on Melin and suggestions of worlds that Alex might want to go to. All of which Alex nodded and made noncommittal replies to. No reason to give away any more than he had to, after all. As beautiful as Sabah was, he wasn't someone that Alex should instantly trust. No one was safe to trust with Yong sure to follow Alex's trail.

Docking to the liner, the *Starlight Dolphin*, involved a couple of minutes of a tractor beam shimmering outside the window, the gaping maw of the docking bay and then a thunk as they were

deposited in their cradle. Then everyone around them scrambled for their bags as if they could get out of the transport faster by having their things in hand.

"Give 'em a minute," Sabah said as he stayed in his seat, unmoving. "Takes a couple of minutes for the hull to cool enough to open the door. And there's a crowd anyway."

Alex nodded, staying in his seat because what else could he do? "I've never been in space before."

"It's wonderful," Sabah said, smiling that bright smile that showed his teeth and made his eyes disappear as his face squished up. "I love being in space. The Ceelen definitely got the lock on space liners, gotta tell you that. I mean, we Hyun-Ju got some mean freighters and attack ships but liners? Nah, Ceelen ships are top of the line. Kinda jealous that you're gonna get to travel on one."

"It's..." Alex paused as the door opened and then sighed because the crowd of people surged towards the door. "It's a slow way to travel but I must admit it will be interesting. Though I've no idea what there is to do on a liner."

"Anything you can think of," Sabah said. "And a lot more. Ask. They got people specially trained to make sure you feel safe and comfortable and don't get bored."

He stood and pulled Alex's bag and box down, winking at Alex's stunned thanks. Not having to pull them down was a relief for Alex's poor back. Once they left the transport, at the end of the crowd of people, Sabah sketched a little two-fingered salute at Alex before sauntering off to a group of Hyun-Ju warriors muttering together around a far more sleek transport that had been painted like a bird.

A phoenix, perhaps. Red and gold with fierce black eyes, at any rate. Alex watched him go and then nearly dropped his box when one of the attendants cleared her throat.

"My apologies," Alex said, bowing to her and getting a bow in return. "What did you need?"

As Alex went through the necessary exchange of ticket and information for his room assignment and meal ticket, Alex rather regretted that Sabah wouldn't be traveling with him on the *Starlight*

Dolphin. Three months spent with Sabah at his side promised to be a great deal more pleasant than the last few weeks had been.

Pity it wasn't meant to be.

He tried not to wince as he picked his box back up from the floor after tucking his meal ticket away in his pocket. At least there was one benefit to this trip: the *Starlight Dolphin* had state of the art medical facilities. He could get his back looked at and see if Yong had done more than superficial damage.



ODD TO SEE a little clerk traveling so far from home. Sabah watched Alex go, frowning at the way he stood and moved and winced away from every human touch. Poor guy was so obviously abused that he was pinging all the attendants' training. Just like he'd pinged Sabah's protectiveness.

He'd stunk of sweat on the transport, hands shaking as he tried to pretend he was all right. Obviously wasn't. Seriously wasn't. Made Sabah want to track down whoever it was and beat them until all they could taste was blood because all their teeth were gone.

"Who is he?" Gabi Botwright, Sabah's boss, asked because yeah, Sabah really was that obvious about this. He always was..

"Guy I sat next to on the way up," Sabah said. "He's obviously hurt, probably severe bruising to the back, wrists, arms. Possible internal damage but I can't be sure. Didn't smell it on his breath but he was..."

Sabah stopped, remember how Alex had shaken as the transport took off. Terror. He'd been right in the middle of a panic attack and that wasn't good. Seriously, people what panicked on takeoff were generally phobic of space but it'd turned out to be something on the ground Alex was afraid of.

Someone, probably.

"Hunted," Sabah finally said when Gabi poked his arm. "It's setting me off, Gab. I got the option of traveling on the *Starlight*, right? They need more guards."

"They do," Gabi agreed. "We were all talking about taking the

transit out to the far end. It's a long trip, three months to Walker's Hole, but it's something King Ru wants us to do."

"I'll do it," Sabah said without thinking about it. "Send the *Knife* a message to pack my locker and send my stuff over. Oh, and bring my blanket and pillow from my bunk. There's something here and I want to track it down. Can work here just as easily as on any other ship, after all."

"Sure you aren't just looking for a quick lay?" Gabi said as he tapped the implant by his ear and sent the message over their new secure comm system and hadn't it been hell and a half getting a truly secure comm system? "He's cute enough but you've got a terrible track record for romance, kid."

"Eh, I don't think he's looking for romance, Gab," Sabah said. Alex was out of sight now but Sabah still stared down the hallway that he'd disappeared into. "I seriously think he's being hunted. Someone did him real damage and they're not going to let him go."

Gabi nodded at that. "I trust your instincts, kid. Go track it down. Kid like that won't have covered his tracks well. Whoever or whatever it is will come after him."

Sabah headed off and did just that. Took him all of ten minutes to find out that Alex Novak had been 'courted' by the notorious artist and musician Yong Tesar. If you could call being stalked, harassed and attacked courting. Alex's sister was happy to tell Sabah that Yong had already found out that Alex had fled. She'd not told Yong where Alex went or on what ship but it wouldn't take much to find out.

The Ceelen and Hyun-Ju were the only ones with spaceships that took passengers in Melin's system. Hell, in most systems. They tended to dominate the space lanes and made no apologies about it. So figuring out which liner Alex went to and what transport he took would probably take all of three calls on Yong's part. Or on his staff's part.

The net was full of stories of Yong's 'conquests'. Most of them mousy little people who had been bowled over by his money, power and presence. And who'd found out after the fact that he wasn't a nice guy. Not at all. Looked to Sabah like Alex was the latest victim in

Yong's life except Alex had the sense and the strength to cut and run when it got dangerous.

Gab had already notified the head of security that there might be an issue with Alex. And that Sabah was looking into it so when Sabah showed up at the hospital on board no one blinked an eye. Already had his security pass and there were notes in the system saying that Sabah's job was personal protection for abused clientele.

"We can't pass out patient data," the Ceelen nurse said when Sabah asked about Alex's brief visit in the *Starlight's* hospital. Nice one, able to hold the entire crew and passenger list if it had to, just like all Ceelen liners, but still a hospital full of antiseptic stink and the determined cleanness that always made Sabah uncomfortable.

"I'm actually asking because Security believes he's in danger," Sabah explained. "If he was injured when he came on board, especially injuries that appear to have been from a domestic attack, then we have a great deal more latitude to protect him and the rest of the passengers from the individual responsible. And yes, we have identified the responsible party who yes, again, is trying to get on board to follow Alex. Security is putting him off at the moment."

"Ah," the nurse said, warm brown eyes going hard as she nodded. "I can confirm that he was attacked. He has bruising on his upper arms, stomach and chest as well as a pattern of bruising on his back that indicates that he was repeatedly slammed into a wall or some other hard object. He declined to explain how the injuries occurred but," She paused and looked around before lowering her voice, "there were signs of sexual assault as well. Nothing conclusive. But. My supervisor flagged him as needing special attention and care in the system. We'll be checking in with him to see if he needs sleep aids or further medical attention. So far, sadly, he's declined anything but minor pain relief. He said something about wanting to stay alert."

Alert.

Yeah, Sabah had been right that Alex was hunted.

Her dark cheeks flushed red with the same rage that Sabah felt. Right. So now he needed to track Alex down. Well, talk to Gabi and their new bosses first, then track Alex down. Everyone needed to

know that Yong was going to come after Alex so that they could keep the bastard off the *Starlight* and hopefully keep him from knowing which world Alex got off on.



THE SUITE WAS luxurious in ways that made Alex profoundly uncomfortable. When he'd been shown to it he'd been so stunned that he'd tried to say that it couldn't be his suite. But the attendant had laughed and said that yes, the lush little sitting room, bedroom and full bath were his. Apparently the first class suites were so much more amazing that Alex wouldn't have known how to cope.

"I can't believe I'm in space," Alex whispered as he stared at the huge view screen that was currently set to show the curve of Melin's bulk below them.

It wasn't a window, of course. Alex couldn't afford a suite with an actual window. But it was an amazingly accurate view screen that looked very much like a window should have looked. He sat on the couch, staring at the gold and brown continents, the pale blue ocean on the southern hemisphere and the scattered white clouds.

How stunning to see a world hanging below you like a rice ball about to be eaten.

Alex sat, staring, for a long moment and then shook his head. It was a planet, one he would never return to, and thus irrelevant. What was relevant was settling this things into the closet for the long trip to Walker's Hole. Which, hopefully, wouldn't be overrun by greenery and wild animals. The little bit of information he'd found on Walker's Hole before buying his ticket had indicated that it had several very large cities that were quite modern so he should be able to find a job as a clerk there. And not have to deal with dangerous shrubbery or poisonous animals. Neither of which he had any experience with.

He was hanging his four suits in the very large closet, nearly as big as his bedroom in his former apartment, when the door rang. It was very nice charm, soft and polite like an old brass bell that had

only faintly been tapped, but Alex still started so badly that his shoulder hit the closet door.

"Coming!" Alex called.

His shoulder ached enough that Alex rubbed it as he hurried to the door. Really, the suite was so very large. It had to be at least five hundred square feet total. Far more space than he needed. Half that much would have been quite sufficient.

"Hey," Sabah said, beaming at Alex when the door opened. "Guess who got assigned as a guard on the *Starlight*?"

"Oh, ah, congratulations?" Alex said as his cheeks went red. Very red. Painfully red. His idle daydream of having Sabah there the entire trip was... possible? Maybe? Hopefully.

Sabah grinned and then the humor went away like someone had opened a drain in Sabah's soul. "Unfortunately, I got assigned to the *Starlight* as a guard and that means I'm here on business instead of pleasure. Sorry about that. We have a problem. Not with you, per se, but with on Yong Tesar who's insisting that he be allowed on the liner."

Alex opened his mouth, heart dropping through his stomach towards his toes and then found himself backed against the wall in his too-big suite while Sabah stared at him from the doorway. He didn't, quite, remember backpedaling but he'd obviously done it. Damn it. He should have more control over himself than this.

"Ah, can I come in to discuss this?" Sabah asked.

Alex nodded. Swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Yes please."

And then found himself slowly sinking into the couch as Sabah strode in, dangerous as a drawn knife and twice as beautiful as sunrise over the sand dunes in the middle of winter when everything was cold and clear.

Yong was after him. Already. He'd hoped for more time, for the chance to get out of orbit before Yong figured out that he'd fled. Of course his luck didn't stand up to Yong's. So now he'd have to deal with Yong on the liner the whole way, trying to force his way into Alex's suite, trying to force himself into Alex's life.

"All right," Sabah said, "Yong Tesar is well known among both the Ceelen and the Hyun-Ju as an abusive rapist. He's been formally forbidden transit on our ships. As of about two months ago, actually. So his attempt to get up here isn't going well. He's tried to claim that he was supposed to join you, that you were taking a long vacation together."

"No, I'm trying to escape him," Alex replied and was surprised at how steady his voice was when his hands were shaking and his heart-beat pounded in his ears to the point he could barely hear Sabah talking to him.

"That's what I figured," Sabah said. He looked grimly pleased by that. "You willing to give us a statement to that effect? If so, we can report it back to Melin's Guards, seal your records so that no one can access them without your permission."

Alex stared at him, mouth opening and then shutting when only a little whimper made it out his throat.

Help. They were going to help him escape. He wasn't going to be stuck doing this on his own. Better still, he wasn't going to have to somehow buy or make a knife so that when Yong caught up to him again he'd be armed. Yong was vicious, yes, but Alex was quite prepared to stab the man if he had to. They'd stop being friends in their teens for all that Yong wouldn't accept it.

He hid his face in his hands. Even his sister hadn't been willing to help him that much. Take his nicer apartment for him? Oh yes. Beat Yong up or warn him off? Certainly not, that was something that Alex was supposed to take care of himself.

It felt so strange to have someone decide that he was worthy of help. So good. It had been a very, very long time since anyone believed him over Yong. Alex dropped his hands, eyes still shut, and breathed slowly. Opened his eyes and nearly jumped right off the couch because Sabah was down on one knee in front of him with the most adorably worried expression on his face, bitten lip and all.

"Who do I give the statement to?" Alex asked.

Sabah's shoulders relaxed a little. Alex hadn't even realized that he'd been that tense until the tension disappeared.

"My boss Gabi can take it," Sabah said. "You willing to come down to our office? We can do it remote but in person is always better. Melin's Guard takes it more seriously if you report it from our office. Shows that you're serious or some shit."

"You have the worst language," Alex said. Chuckled at Sabah's sudden blush. "Yes, I'm quite willing to go to your office. It is on the liner, yes?"

"Yup, it is," Sabah said. He stood smoothly and offered Alex a hand. "They'll probably want access to your medical file as verification of how serious it is. Just warning you."

"As long as it keeps Yong from following me and finding me immediately," Alex said as he took Sabah's hand and gratefully accepted the help standing up. His back really did hurt.

"Should," Sabah said. "Come on. Let's show that asshole the road."

Alex shook his head, laughing, but allowed Sabah to lead him out of his too big suite. This wasn't what he'd expected but it was a very nice change of pace from before. Maybe this sudden change of dwelling place was the right choice.

Of course, Yong hadn't been blocked from following him yet. Best not to be too excited until he knew just how effective this would be in protecting him from Yong's pursuit.



TOOK ALMOST three hours to get all the statements, findings, medical files and paperwork straightened out between the Ceelen, Hyun-Ju and Melin's Guard. Three very, very long hours that had Sabah doing his best not to pace and curse. Didn't seem to bother Alex at all.

He sat and answered questions so calmly that Sabah had to wonder if he'd been given tranquilizers. Signed a million things, calmly reading every one of them first. Filled out each form perfectly and then verified it even though it was obviously right.

"You are very good at paperwork," Sabah commented during one lull while they waited for the Melin Guard to confirm that they had everything in their hands.

"I'm a clerk," Alex said with a wry little smile that lit his eyes up beautifully even though it barely made his lips twitch up at the corners. "This is my job. I'm good at it."

"I'd go crazy," Sabah confided and then groaned when Gabi snorted a laugh at him. "I would. You know I can't stand all this crap."

"Language," Alex said but he was laughing so it wasn't really serious.

Wasn't much more to be said. It should be all set and ready except the Melin Guard commander and clerk kept frowning and muttering together, just barely audible over the comm. Neither of them looked like they were going to approve the request to seal Alex's files.

"Is there a problem?" Alex asked just before Sabah started cursing.

"Yes," the other clerk said slowly. "I am sorry. But yes, there is."

"What is it?" Alex asked completely calmly other than the way his hands clenched in his lap, out of sight of the screen. "Did we fill something out correctly?"

"No, no, nothing like that," the clerk replied with a startled and slightly embarrassed look at Alex, then a flick of his eyes towards Sabah and Gabi. "It's just that Yong Tesar has turned in a missing person's report for you. He ah, claims that you're engaged to marry him."

"What?" Sabah snapped.

He wanted to yell but Alex held up one hand so commandingly that Sabah automatically snapped to attention. So did Gabi and the Melin Guard so hey, it wasn't just him. Hadn't expected that terrified little Alex the Clerk would be able to be that instantly scary.

"What time and date is on the missing person's report?" Alex asked, eyes laser intent on the other clerk.

"Ah, this afternoon at 17:53," the clerk replied. Pale, convulsive swallow. Yeah, he was caught by Alex, too. Wow.

"That was three minutes after the transport left the planet," Alex said. His lips went so thin they pretty much disappeared while his eyes were hard and sharp as a freshly sharpened sword. "Yong has known me since we were toddlers. He has never respected me nor

has he ever been good at letting things go. I told him that I did not wish to date him. He beat me and nearly raped me."

"Nearly?" Sabah asked because no one had asked that particular question.

"Nearly," Alex agreed, glancing his way and then snorting at Sabah. "I managed to kick him in the groin so he backed off before anything happened. But I knew that he wouldn't give up. You have his contact number, I presume?"

"Of course," the clerk said. He licked his lips, suddenly nervous. "According to protocol we're supposed to notify initiators when we locate a missing person."

"With, of course, my current location," Alex said.

Words came out so coldly that it felt like they'd just had a breach to vacuum opened in the hull. Hell, Sabah could believe that Alex had just sucked all the heat out of the room with those words. From the way the clerk shuddered, he felt it too.

"Yes."

"Which would allow Yong to file a temporary restraining order against the Ceelen that would prevent the liner from leaving orbit," Alex continued as if the clerk hadn't spoken. "And that would allow him to legally maneuver so that I would be ordered to return to the planet. That would give him power over me. My ticket is nonrefundable. I don't have the funds to buy another one. I would not be able to escape. Thus, this is Yong's way of ensuring that I cannot leave him and that he gets what he wants: a piece of my ass."

That one word, ass, was as shocking as a knife sliding between Sabah's ribs. Damn, he'd had one image of Alex in his head, the mousy little clerk who needed to be protected from the world, but this Alex was something else. Really something else. He was strong and stern and sexily scary. This was the sort of person that Sabah would gladly kneel to. For. Hell, he'd bottom for this version of Alex if he was interested.

Alex glared at the clerk and the Melin Guard. Both of them fidgeted, the clerk dropping his eyes to his copy of the paperwork. Neither of them answered.

"I will speak with your supervisor," Alex said except it was an order, as stern and implacable an order as any Sabah had ever gotten. "Now."

"He's, um, busy," the clerk started to say only to snap his mouth shut. "Yes sir. Now, sir."

Took another three very silent, very tense, minutes before the clerk's supervisor arrived, waving his hand at the whispered explanation he got. The supervisor was one of those bluff round-faced Melin men who looked like they'd been sculpted out of rice boiled until it was mush. All soft cheeks, jowls and narrow eyes that didn't even see Alex when they smiled at the screen.

"It's good that you're safe," the supervisor started to say.

"That is enough," Alex snapped and there went the supervisor's eyes going wide. "You've been bribed, haven't you?"

"Excuse me?"

The supervisor's fat cheeks went red, blotchy red, as did his throat. Gabi raised a hand to hide a sudden grin that Sabah couldn't figure out. Hell, how could anyone smile when Alex was that damned mad. As hot as it was, there was no way in any of the thousand hells that Sabah would have crossed him right now. Stupid supervisor had no idea what he was up against.

"Don't attempt to lie to me," Alex said so harshly that Sabah shifted back half a step instinctively. "You've been bribed and you're going to turn me over to Yong no matter what evidence I provide of his abuse."

The supervisor spluttered, waving meaty hands as if to calm Alex but they stilled when Alex turned to Sabah and Gabi. Stilled, dropped, and yeah, he knew something was going seriously wrong now. Good. Asshole.

"I formally request sanctuary from the Hyun-Ju and Ceelen," Alex said. He completely ignored the explosion of protests coming through the comm from the guard, the clerk and the fat fuck of a supervisor. "It is very clear that I will not be safe if I return to Melin and I can see that Yong will do whatever he can to come after me."

"Easy enough to grant," Gabi said. He nodded to Sabah. "I got the authority to do that in cases like this. Take him to see the Captain. We'll get him transferred to another ship, one where he'll be properly safe."

"You can't!" the supervisor gasped. "Do you have any idea what Tesar will do to us?"

Sabah held out a hand to Alex who stared, cold and angry, at the supervisor. "Hopefully he'll kill you. But I doubt it. At least he won't kill Alex."



THREE DAYS. Alex stared around his bunk. It was tiny, barely a hundred square feet, with the littlest bathroom he'd ever seen, a tiny kitchenette that would only be useful for late night or early morning snacks, and a couch that transformed into a proper bed come nighttime.

How odd.

He had a place now, a job. Not on Walker's Hole, but on the *Starlight Dolphin*. Once again, he was a clerk though now instead of being paid for simple records clerk work while doing legal and financial clerk work without being paid for it, he was being paid and trained to be a full CPA for the Ceelen. So very odd to have people look at his skills and experience and decide that he was worth that much money and support.

Alex rubbed his arm where Doctor Thorpe had given him upgraded nanites. Better programming, far more of them, and now, or at least in a few days once they'd integrated into his body, a beating like the one Yong had given him would leave no marks. He'd be stronger, marginally faster, and durable enough that he would survive all but the most lethal of blows. The Ceelen truly took care of their people. He hadn't expected it, none of it.

"Hey."

Alex blinked and found Sabah at the door. He hadn't even heard the door open but apparently he hadn't locked it. Sabah looked

around, his eyes wide and then very wry as he realized that this was all that Alex had.

"Not much to come home to," Sabah commented.

"No, but it is mine," Alex said. "I requested something small and simple. I would prefer that over a larger more expensive bunk. There's no need for more when I have access to the entire liner and everything on it."

"True, true," Sabah said.

He bit his lip and slipped inside, letting the door shut behind him. Oddly, he looked nervous. Alex hadn't seen Sabah nervous. Angry, shocked, delighted, laughing, teasing, shy, yes, but not nervous. The man's face was a perfect mirror for his emotions. It was endearing, especially in a warrior of the Hyun-Ju.

"Is something wrong?" Alex asked.

When Alex stepped close, easy to do in his tiny bunk, Sabah's cheeks went red. Oh. The faint flirtatiousness that Alex had noted on the transport hadn't been his imagination. He'd dismissed that out of his mind over the last few days, unwilling to read something into Sabah's continuing interest in him.

But apparently that had been a mistake. Sabah licked his lips and cycled one hand in the air as he tried to find words that didn't seem willing to come. So Alex smiled and caught that hand, pulling until Sabah stepped so close that Alex could feel the heat of his body.

Alex smiled. "Hi. My name is Alex Novak. I'm new on the *Starlight*. I saw you and thought that maybe you could show me around."

"You..." Sabah blinked and then started laughing. He grinned down at Alex before gently sliding his hands around Alex's hips. "Nice to meet you, Alex Novak. Name's Sabah Henderson. I'd love to show you around. There's plenty to do, plenty to see, if you want. Food and gardens and games."

"Hmm," Alex replied, laughter bubbling under his breastbone. "Well, I was thinking of a particular place we could explore together."

"Oh, what's that?" Sabah asked.

He squawked when Alex caught his face in his hands and pulled Sabah down so that they could kiss. Awkwardly but Sabah adjusted

quickly, shifting so that their noses didn't bump and their lips meshed perfectly. A very good kiss, really, one that made Alex's heart beat faster and his breath come in gusts once they let each other go.

"Nice," Sabah whispered.

"Agreed," Alex said. He jerked his head towards the couch. "Let's spend some ah, time, why don't we? I think I want to get to know you better, Sabah Henderson. We do have a lovely three month trip out to spend together."

"Yeah," Sabah agreed as he let Alex lead him over to the couch. "Anything you want, Alex. Anything at all."

Alex let the laughter out, let himself curl into Sabah's arms. So strange how life changed on you. He'd spent years afraid to try anything new at all and now, just days after he decided he had to flee Yong, he was free.

Free, employed, and in the arms of a man who was a worth a million of Yong.

Thank goodness he'd decided to emigrate from Melin.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: THREADS OF BIRTHING

The Mages of Tindiere series is huge. I've got bits of the story spread all over roughly a thousand years. This bit is the second story in this collection that always makes me cry. Mixing true friendship, humble magic and motherhood just does me in every time.

1. HEADSCARF

"*W*e're hopeful."

Emily smiled at Marjory, gently rubbing her belly as if she was afraid that the contact might cause her newly conceived baby damage. Given that Emily had suffered through six miscarriages in the last seven years, she had every right to worry about it. Marjory smiled with all the confidence that she could. The one thing Emily didn't need is more warnings about being careful and cautious. The poor dear barely dared set foot outside of her bed when she was pregnant.

"I'll be praying to Inina for you both," Marjory said as she finished the last few stitches of the new blouse Emily had commissioned. "I do hope you'll let me make a new headscarf to go with the blouse. It can be my congratulations for you."

"Oh, that would be too much," Emily said even though she patted her scarf a little self-consciously. "You don't have to do that, Marjory."

"Nonsense," Marjory said as she passed the shirt over. "I have scraps left over that are just the right size and shape and you know it wouldn't be a bother. You're my best friend. I'd like to make you something fetching, dear."

Emily ducked her head to hide the pleased smile. The long years

of praying for a baby and never successfully carrying one to term had worn her down from a bright happy girl to a thin, too-quiet woman who bit her nails and avoided meeting everyone's eyes. Her husband Darren doted over her, as did Emily's parents and mother-in-law.

None of that seemed to matter compared to her apparent inability to carry a child to term. Every time Emily saw Louisa or any of the other children in town there was a wounded look about her eyes even if she smiled and laughed for their antics. When Emily looked up her smile drifted away like a mask dropping to the floor.

"I think we've been unlucky before," Emily said, eyes flicking towards the front of the shop. "I... I hope that we aren't this time."

"Your father-in-law is still against charms?" Marjory asked with her own more lingering look towards the street outside. She didn't see anyone who could overhear them talking. Most of the town was busy catering to the influx of tourists come for the twice a year solstice festival that the Temple on Spider Mountain always hosted.

"Yes," Emily sighed. "He thinks they're dangerous. Nothing Darren says will change his mind, I'm afraid. You know that I'd have asked for a charm from you and your mother ages ago if he weren't so stubborn but, well, it's just not worth the arguments."

"Of course it's not," Marjory said even though she really wanted to slap the foolish old man for his stubbornness. "Now, since the blouse has roses I thought I'd embroider roses and vines on the headscarf. Red or yellow, do you think? I have a lovely new stock of fine green silk for the leaves and vines, three different shades. Hmm, maybe both red and yellow? How about some nice little white daisies among them?"

Emily started laughing, waving her hands to try and stop Marjory as she went to the shelves for the scraps and embroidery silk. It wouldn't be proper to make the scarf too ornamented. Emily was, after all, a happily married woman in a very proper family who had no need to attract men's eyes, but Marjory could easily get away with a lovely cluster of flowers on the back near where the scarf would be tied in place.

"Really, you don't have to," Emily said as Marjory started embroi-

dering the border of thin green vines around the edges of the scarf. "Though that does look truly lovely. You're so good at sewing."

"I've been doing it since I could walk," Marjory laughed.

Emily's matching laugh trailed off as her husband Darren came in with her father-in-law on his heels. Darren was no problem at all. He only had eyes for Emily as he came over, gently touched her cheek and then gave her a chaste kiss on the lips. William, on the other hand, frowned at Marjory's sewing as if he suspected the magic she was working into every single stitch.

Marjory ignored him in favor of praying Haraldr to protect Emily from every threat physical and emotional that might jeopardize the pregnancy. Every time she worked a tiny leaf along the vine Marjory prayed to Inina to strengthen the baby and the mother both. It wasn't a traditional pregnancy charm with its proper prayers and symbols specifically designed to help mother and child but it was the best she could do within the limitations she'd been given.

"I thought you just bought a blouse," William growled.

"Oh, she did," Marjory said. "But I decided to give her a gift. The blouse is such a lovely pale rose and I only have this little scrap left. It's about the right size for a head scarf. A quick head scarf to match the blouse and she'll be lovely."

"You still don't have to do all that work for me," Emily said. She smiled but she leaned into Darren's side while eyeing William with worry.

"You're my best friend, dear," Marjory declared firmly enough that it made William wince. "Inina knows that you accept few enough gifts and this one is literally the work of a few minutes. Really, it's not as though you're advertising your sewing skills the way my family does with our clothes."

That finally drove the disapproval out of William's eyes, replacing it with honest amusement. The difference between Emily's simple and lovely clothes with their restrained embroidery and Marjory's riot of colorful embroidery on every single scrap of fabric she wore couldn't be more obvious. Darren grinned at her, nodding approv-

ingly as Marjory finished the vine and switched to red silk for the biggest rose.

"Just the one?" Darren asked.

"I was thinking a big red rose like the ones you grow," Marjory said as she worked the under-stitches for the main petals and then began overcasting them to make the biggest rose stand out properly. "And then along the side two yellow rose buds with maybe three little white daisies. All in the back, of course, so that it will be proper."

Emily flapped her hands as if to tell Marjory that it was far too much work but Darren straightened up and beamed at her so brightly that Emily sighed and shook her head. Neither she nor Darren could see William hide a grin behind an upraised hand. He was standing behind them, after all, leaning against the wall of the shop as if he intended to supervise every stitch that Marjory made.

As Darren nodded and sorted through the silk for just the right shade of yellow to match their rose bushes back home, Louisa ran into the back room. She gasped with delight when she saw Emily and Darren, immediately running over to claim a hug from Emily that made her coo with delight.

"I believe you've grown since this morning," Emily said, patting Louisa's head as if measuring her.

"I have not!" Louisa giggled. She rubbed her nose where it had been broken a couple of months ago but she didn't have the disturbed expression she normally did. "Are you picking up your blouse? The fabric is so pretty! I wanted Mama to make me a dress out of it but there wasn't enough left."

"No, just enough for a nice headscarf for Emily," Marjory agreed as she finished the red rose, took Darren's yellow silk and set to work on the rosebuds. She would have made them larger if William weren't there but she'd make do with what she had if it helped Emily through her pregnancy. "Louisa, be a dear and get the apron strings I embroidered for the cutwork apron you were making."

Louisa peered at the scarf and then gasped, nodding as she ran to rummage through her project bin by the back door. She came back, beaming as she put the apron strings onto the table. They were a

little long for a head scarf but not by much. The apron had been intended for Louisa so the strings hadn't been cut as long as they normally would.

The apron had been a dead loss, sadly. Louisa's cut work had unraveled badly as she worked and the design had too any holes to support the weight of the embroidery. It had been intended as a learning effort, though, so Marjory didn't count it as a failure. Besides, Louisa hadn't sewn the straps. That had been Marjory's contribution to the project and they'd been quite salvageable.

"It's almost the same color," Louisa said as she displayed it for Emily to approve. "Mama did the embroidery on it while I did the apron but that didn't work out very well."

"What happened, dear?" Emily asked, her expression hesitant as she examined the red and yellow roses embroidered along the length of the slightly darker sash. Unlike Emily, Darren looked utterly delighted by the sash, nodding enthusiastically to Marjory that she should use it.

"It... kind of fell apart," Louisa admitted with a huge blush that made Emily start laughing though she did try to muffle it behind upraised hands. "I was learning cutwork and the holes were too big and the fabric tore and raveled and then it sort of... fell apart."

Emily passed the sash to Darren so that she could hug Louisa. Darren immediately passed it to Louisa while William laughed quietly in the background. That was permission enough for Marjory. She set to work on the simple little daisies, finishing them in moments. Attaching the scarf to the sash was the work of moments given that she'd left one edge unsewn so that it would be easy to attach Louisa's apron to the sash. Putting Emily's scarf in its place was simplicity itself.

Instead of rushing through the stitches, Marjory carefully arranged the fabric layers and meticulously stitched them together as invisibly as she could. The sash already had layers of magic worked into the embroidery to encourage a child's growth, safety and happiness. The embroidery on the scarf had focused on ensuring that Emily would be strong and healthy through her pregnancy.

"Blessed Inina," Marjory prayed as she carefully stitched the two separate pieces of work into one whole that hopefully would support and protect Emily and her baby, "please bless this family. Help this baby survive. Help this woman to thrive as she brings your blessing of life to the world. Please, give them both the chance the other babies never had."

Marjory poured her whole heart into the hidden spell. She knew that Emily would never be happy if she didn't somehow give Darren a child. No matter how hard the pregnancies and miscarriages were on her, she wouldn't give up. Darren had already tried twice that Marjory was aware of. If only she could use her magic to help Emily enough that she finally bore the child she'd dreamed of for so long, everything would be worth it.

"There we go," Marjory said as she tied off the last knot and carefully buried the tail so that the magic wouldn't spill out and ruin the working. "All done. Try it on. I think it will look very good on you."

"Rose always has been your color," Darren said as he snatched the scarf from Marjory's hands and gestured for Emily to take off her simpler brown headscarf.

"You think every color looks good on me," Emily said, blushing prettily as she removed her headscarf.

Her hair was still beautifully smooth, a rare deep auburn that shimmered with hints of copper in the light of the lamp. Darren carefully tied the scarf over Emily's simple bun, humming happily as he arranged the tails down the sides of her neck. They hung long enough that the tips rested against her collarbones but the look was quite lovely.

Even William with his strict ideas of propriety nodded his approval, smiling at Emily as if he thought it was a good improvement over the old headscarf. Louisa cooed and clapped her hands enthusiastically. None of them appeared to matter. The only one that Emily looked at was Darren.

"It's perfect," Darren said so proudly that Marjory had to hide a smile behind her hand.

"Well, if you like it then I suppose I should accept it," Emily said.

She clutched the new blouse to her chest, nodding to Marjory. "Thank you."

"You're quite welcome, dear," Marjory said. "Do let me know if you need anything at all, even repairs. You should be taking things easy, after all. I'll be glad to help out in any way that I can."

"Thank you," Darren said with so much meaning that Emily huffed at him, lightly batting his elbow with the back of her hand.

He shrugged, unrepentant, as he helped Emily from her stool. William was the one to pay for the new blouse. He tried to include a little extra to cover the headscarf too but Marjory slid those coins back into his hand. William breathed the ghost of a laugh, half-bowing to her before leaving to follow his family.

As he left, Mother and Father came in, both of them smiling as Louisa ran over for hugs. Mother looked at Marjory with a raised eyebrow. She'd obviously felt the magic that Marjory had worked into the headscarf. Marjory shrugged, slipping into the back room to clean up the thread clippings left over from her work.

"She's pregnant again, I take it," Mother said, worry clear on her face once the curtain to the front was closed.

"Yes," Marjory sighed. "And William is still a stubborn old fool. He won't allow any pregnancy charms, no matter how much Emily needs them. I swear by Haraldr's arrows that the man will let her kill herself trying to bear a child instead of giving her what she needs to bear safely."

"There are reasons for that," Father sighed, Louisa snuggled in his arms. "The town Council is getting more and more reactionary. The government implemented a whole series of new laws against certain forms of magic that they're trying to enforce even in little towns like ours. A couple of the old fools on the Council think that it would outlaw charms and healers. One of them thinks that we need to outlaw the midwives to meet the laws' requirements."

Father sighed as both Mother and Marjory stared at him. The wrinkles around his eyes and mouth deepened. Marjory could feel his sheer frustration, not that there was anything that Marjory could do. Two generations ago, when Mother and Father were young,

women had been allowed to be part of the town council. Marjory's grandmother had actually lead it for many years after she'd trained Mother to take over the family's sewing shop and all her children were old enough to tend to themselves.

That wouldn't happen anymore. The laws and customs had changed enough that women stayed firmly out of ruling the town. It honestly didn't bother Marjory that much, at least not until something like this happened. She sighed and shook her head in annoyance.

"That's so foolish," Marjory complained. "Do they have any idea how much damage that would do?"

"No, they don't seem to," Father said. "I keep reminding them. Keep telling them stories of other lands and their problems. It seems to help but I don't know how long it will work. The central government is getting far more serious about punishing towns that don't comply fully with the rules."

"That would explain why William is so reluctant to allow a pregnancy charm," Marjory said. "Do bring home the information on the laws, Father. I'd like to read them over so that I can talk to my sisters about it. We all need to know how to adjust things so that we don't get ourselves or anyone else into trouble."

"Very well, dear," Father said, smiling tiredly at her. "I'll do that."

2. PICKLES

Marjory hummed as she walked along the main street from the shop towards the edge of town where Emily lived. The last three months had been worrisome. Emily had gotten weaker as her nausea increased. Fortunately, she hadn't lost the baby though Marjory worried that she might. She truly needed more care than she'd gotten but William wouldn't budge. No pregnancy charms were allowed in his household.

Having read the laws that had William and Father so concerned, Marjory could understand why. They were quite draconian. All magic users were required to be 'formally schooled' and 'certified'. That, in itself, wasn't an insurmountable problem. Marjory was quite certain that Mother's teaching would qualify as schooling, though she hadn't been certified as an instructor. The problem was the certification process.

That required testing in one of the bigger cities that were far away, which meant travel through the Gates, money spent on lodging, food, and then the testing itself which from what Marjory could discover took weeks at best. One report she'd gotten through the Temple spoke of the testing taking a full year.

No one in her family could afford that, even if they passed which

wasn't assured. The mages doing the testing were all completely different types from Marjory's family. They were War Mages or Peace Mages, focusing on battle or meditation as their method of working with the power in their souls. The Dance Mages were apparently quite popular in the cities. None of her family's magic worked through movement though.

Not one of the people listed as giving the tests had the Blood gifts that Marjory's family did. None of them worked with the small spells of healing and health, slow improvement and growth that came from working through the blood and bone of your body. In fact, Marjory had been horrified to discover that there were people calling for outlawing Blood Mages as monsters who enslaved souls and poisoned wells.

"Ridiculous," Marjory grumbled. "As if anyone could enslave another person's soul. Not even Sex Mages can do that."

Of course, Sex Mages were the least common of all and the most highly prized for their ability to easily supply power to any other type of mage. Marjory would have thought that they were myths but Father had told her that he'd met several when he was a young man so apparently they were just rare.

At the edge of town, Marjory turned and headed towards the Gate. The big rune-covered stone ring that was the major pathway for people to come to town loomed in the distance next to the big inn that catered to visitors. Emily's house was halfway there, a small, bright house that had a new addition in the back built specifically for Emily and Darren.

Their entire front yard was filled with rose bushes large and small. They'd worked for generations to distill rose oil and rose water so the rose bushes were big, beautiful and so fragrant that you could smell them from blocks away when they were in bloom. Right now, clouds of steam billowed up behind the house and the scent of roses filled the air. They had to be working at the moment but as Marjory approached she saw Emily was sitting on the front porch with one hand resting comfortably on her swollen belly.

"Marjory!" Emily exclaimed. "Goodness, I never see you away from the shop at midday. What brings you our way?"

"Presents," Marjory replied as she entered the yard and climbed the steps so that she could sit next to Emily. "One for you and one for William that you probably won't want anything to do with."

Emily's wary look made Marjory laugh. When Marjory pulled the old swaddling cloth that she'd used for Louisa out of her basket Emily's eyes filled with tears. The old swaddling cloth was a bit worn at the edges but Mother had fixed the embroidery as best she could without disrupting the entire pattern. That would have interfered with the spells on it.

Marjory smiled and patted Emily's arm to reassure her. She got a fierce hug in return, full of tiny hiccupping sobs that Emily obviously didn't want to admit to. When she let go, Emily dashed her tears away and smiled so brightly that Marjory chuckled.

"Mother insisted that you get it," Marjory explained. "It's not as though I'm going to remarry and have more children, no matter how often Louisa asks. I've no interest in finding a new husband."

"Truly?" Emily asked as she unfolded the swaddling cloth so that she could study the embroidered cups and arrows of Inina and Haraldr. "I would think that you'd be lonely."

"No," Marjory sighed, staring out over the rose bushes at the street beyond. Few people were passing at this time of day. Only a couple of old men with big bundles of wood for the smithy and glass forge were on the street at the moment. "I can't imagine finding another man who meant as much to me as Raj did. I'd always intended to name any sons I had after him. It wasn't meant to be, I suppose."

Emily wrapped her fingers around Marjory's hand, squeezing firmly enough that Marjory turned to meet her eyes. They never really talked about Raj or his death. Marjory still wasn't comfortable doing so. Even Louisa avoided the subject when Marjory was around, perhaps because it was the only time she'd ever seen Marjory cry.

"I'm all right," Marjory murmured.

"What else did you bring?" Emily asked rather than press the point when tears were hovering in Marjory's eyes.

"Ah," Marjory laughed. "Well, you remember that shipment of peppers that came in a few months ago? The one that Father was so delighted by?"

"Oh dear," Emily breathed. "Yes?"

Her eyes went wide as Marjory pulled a jar of pickles out of her basket, holding it up as if she was afraid that she'd be polluted by it. Honestly, Marjory was somewhat afraid of the pickles. Father had been entirely too liberal with his usage of the peppers he'd dried. The resulting pickles were viciously hot, so spicy that opening the jar sent Marjory, Louisa and Mother into coughing fits.

"Mother allowed Father to keep one jar," Marjory explained. "The rest are being given away. This is the last one. I thought that William might like it but I strongly suggest that you insist that he eat them outside and that he clean his hands and teeth thoroughly before coming anywhere near you. They set the rest of us into gales of coughing when Father opened his jar in the kitchen the other day."

"Oh no!" Emily laughed. She clutched the swaddling cloth to her chest, making little 'take it away' gestures with her fingertips. "Well, please, don't open it here! I'm out front because the smell of roses got to be too much for me this morning. They're all out back, William included, so you can carry it around back if you'd like?"

"Absolutely," Marjory said. "Really, exile him from the house. I can't believe how strong these are. They're practically a weapon!"

Emily giggled and waved goodbye as Marjory carried the jar of pickles away. The back of the house was much more plain than the front. Their vegetable garden was simple and stark, rows of plants growing nicely. A long woodpile lined the far end of the yard, available for when they pulled the big pots and distillation equipment out of the back shed.

All of the equipment was out right now, tended by Darren and William as William's wife bustled into the house with a tray full of tiny bottles of rose oil fresh from the hot press. William spotted Marjory as soon as she came around the corner of the house. He frowned as if angry to see her intrude on his work.

"Present from Father," Marjory called, holding the jar of pickles

out dramatically, as if she was afraid to keep them any closer to her face.

"The hot ones?" William exclaimed, all anger disappearing into open delight that made Darren laugh and push him away from the press. "I thought he wanted to give them a little longer."

"They don't need any more time," Marjory declared. She passed the jar over but put her hand on top of William's when he immediately started opening the jar. "Not around your roses. Seriously, they're horribly strong. The peppers were much stronger than Father expected. They'll taint the smell of the rose oil if you're not careful."

William's eyebrows went up. He eased his hands out from under Marjory's with a vaguely apologetic expression. It still hurt despite his unspoken apology. When she was a little girl William had always enjoyed visiting. He and Father were friends and had been since they were children. To see him pull away from the family so violently because of these new regulations was painful.

Rather than focus on that, Marjory nodded towards the jar of pickles, quite aware of the fact that anyone walking by in the alley could hear exactly what they said without being seen. Between the back fence and the wood pile there was no way to see who might be passing by.

"I already warned Emily about those pickles," Marjory said so firmly that William grinned. "You eat those outside and well away from the house. If she can't handle the scent of rose oil there's no way that she could handle them. They're horrible. I swear by Harald's scar that I thought my nose hairs were burning."

William burst out laughing. He bowed so extravagantly that Marjory grumbled at him to hide the fact that she wanted to grin. It was far too much like having the old William back. When he stood once more his eyes were troubled. His hands cradled the jar of pickles to his chest as if they were precious.

"She isn't doing very well," William murmured. "Again."

"She won't give up," Marjory sighed, glancing towards the front of the house even though she knew that Emily wouldn't have followed her. "Having children is her greatest dream, William. She'll never give

up. Darren will keep trying with her until her health is ruined. You know how Darren dotes on her."

"I do," William whispered. He glanced at the back fence, fear and worry deepening his wrinkles into gullies between his eyebrows and around his mouth. "I can't risk them. I can't, Marjory. I know you mean well but I can't risk their future."

"I've read the laws," Marjory said, lowering her voice to a near whisper. "I understand your worries, William, truly I do. My sisters and I are already working to find ways to protect ourselves and those we care for. But Emily won't stop trying to have a baby. It's all she's ever wanted."

That truth hurt. It hurt Marjory who knew that Emily would kill herself trying to bear Darren a child. Apparently, it hurt William just as much. He tilted his head back, eyes screwed shut and mouth so tight that his lips disappeared. His knuckles went white around the jar of pickles.

"The laws are clear," William sighed. He looked so stricken when he opened his eyes that Marjory almost expected tears, not that there were any. "No charms unless they've been cast by Academy trained mages. There's nothing to be done."

"Mmm..." Marjory hummed.

She looked first towards the street and then towards the back alley. She couldn't see anyone. Extending her senses as she so rarely did showed no one there though she could feel someone working in William's neighbor's back yard. When Marjory pointed inquiringly towards the next yard William blinked and then started. He craned his neck so that he could see over the fence, nodding that it was okay when he turned back to her.

"Gran Raina," William said. "She's deaf as a post."

"All right then," Marjory said. "The laws don't outlaw charms, William. They outlaw 'spells' and charms have never been classed as spells. Spells are the things that true mages do, not hedge witchery and kitchen magic. Everything I read, and Father made sure that I got all of it, says that they're going to go after hedge witchery eventually

but they haven't done it yet. That means that there's still a little bit of room to work."

"Work how?" William demanded. "They'll still outlaw charms, Marjory! Everything you do is based on it!"

"Heh, but they don't want to give up their old pregnancy charms," Marjory said, smirking. "So charms that already exist, that were created in the past, are legal. They've already put that into the laws. There's a big exception for old charm work from 'The Days Before'. The older the charm is the more acceptable it will be."

William's eyes went wide as Marjory explained the exemption. Her sisters already had plans for how to make their charms look older than they were as well as how to make the magic look as though it wasn't actually there. He shook his head no, though, desperation filling his eyes.

"We don't have any old charms," William sighed. "That doesn't do us any good."

"They can be borrowed or gifted," Marjory huffed at him. "Truly, what good does a pregnancy charm do in a household with no childbearing women? The people writing the laws put in that they could be passed around. They don't want new ones made but they do want to be able to borrow old ones at will. And because of that we can do the same thing."

"That would work..." William whispered, desperate hope blooming in his eyes. It died the next moment as William shook his head no. "It won't matter. A member of the town council can't do that, Marjory. It will doom the whole village."

"Stiff-necked old fool!" Marjory hissed at him, the frustration of all these years of suffering Emily had gone through flaring into fury. "You'll kill her if you keep this up! Father agrees with my reading of the laws. A charm that's old enough is safe. Stronger, too, as they gain power over the years instead of losing it."

William looked away, towards Darren who's stiff shoulders showed that he was trying desperately hard not to interrupt their private conversation, towards the alley, the fence to Gran Raina's yard. He looked down at the jar of pickles with its metal clamp holding the

crochery lid in place. Eventually he looked up at Marjory with his heart in his eyes.

"You're sure?" William whispered. "The laws allow it?"

Marjory nodded, patting his hands once more. It made him start but a beautiful smile bloomed on his lips. This time the wrinkles didn't make him look old. If anything the wrinkles spreading from William's eyes made him look younger and more attractive, not that he could ever compare to her lost Raj.

"If... anything happens," Marjory whispered, "come visit. Mother and I already discussed it. We'll do what we have to to make sure that Emily and her baby both survive. It will be all right."

Marjory turned and left before William could come up with any more questions or doubts. Another crisis might be the one that killed Emily, her baby or both of them but Marjory knew well enough that William had to think it over. The rest of the town would need a little more before they would accept William bending his stiff neck on this issue. All Marjory could hope was that the next crisis wouldn't be the one that killed her best friend.

3. LEGACY

Four very long days passed without a visit from William, Emily, Darren or anyone else in their family. The gossip around town was filled with worried murmurs about how poorly Emily looked. She'd lost more weight instead of gaining it. Her belly still grew but, from what Father had said after his visit out there to discuss getting more of the too-powerful peppers, Emily herself was getting weaker by the day.

Marjory had taken to occupying herself with the most complicated embroidery and sewing projects possible. Keeping her fingers busy helped keep her mind from worrying. It wasn't completely successful but at least it did get more projects done and more money in the shop's coffers.

"Dear, you don't have to finish that in a day," Mother sighed as Marjory determinedly slip-stitched the lining into the body of the coat. "Working too fast will only cause errors that need to be fixed."

"I know," Marjory sighed. "I'm just keeping myself busy."

Mother sighed and patted Marjory's shoulder. She looked as worried as Marjory felt. Honestly, Marjory thought that every woman in town was worried to the point of distraction over Emily's condition. Lara had stopped by last night as they were closing up to rant

and threaten to go right over there with a potion to knock William out so that they could hide every pregnancy charm in the town around Emily's house. Marjory had been half convinced that it was a good plan.

"Hello?"

Marjory dropped the coat mid-stitch as William cautiously pushed the curtain aside so that he could peek into the back room. Mother put one hand on her shoulder, keeping Marjory in place. She nodded to William, gesturing for him to come in.

"Is Emily all right?" Marjory asked before William took more than a step into their workroom.

"Barely," William said.

His voice was hoarse, so rough that Marjory frowned at him. Normally his clothes were perfect even when he was working the presses but this morning his vest was unbuttoned and his chin still sported last night's stubble. The bags under his eyes were so dark and heavy that Marjory had to wonder if he'd even slept.

"She..." William's voice caught so badly that he stopped, clearing his throat a couple of times. "She almost lost the baby last night. My wife, heh, she put her foot down. She said that either Emily gets what she needs or I'll be finding a new wife, a new home and a new business. If she let me live that long."

"Well, it's about time," Mother huffed. "You're a stiff-necked fool who should have learned your lesson last time around."

William sighed and sat on one of the stools, slumping to put his face in his hands. Marjory slipped out from under her mother's hand, going to the basket where they'd put the old pregnancy charm. It was in a nest of embroidered ribbons and carefully tied knots that had all been worked so that they would be effective pregnancy charms, too.

As Marjory carried it back to the worktable, pushing the coat out of the way, William looked up. His eyes were hollow and exhausted, so blank that Marjory's heart clutched at the fear for Emily. He blinked as Marjory spilled the contents of the basket out, sorting them out into stacks according to what they were and how old they were.

"So many?" William asked.

"Of course," Marjory said. "You do realize that I'm one of six sisters and that Mother had nine sisters. That's a lot of pregnancies, many of them at once."

He snorted, reluctantly amused, though the smile lasted only a second and barely extended past his eyes. Marjory ignored him as she reached the bottom of the stack where the precious old pregnancy charm her great-grandmother had commissioned lay in its embroidered bag.

"This is the one I was talking about," Marjory said as she pulled it out. "My great-grandmother Megara had this one created. It was made in the forge that used to be out on the edge of town before they moved to their new location. Iron melted from an ancient charm they found out in the ruins beyond the Gate that had been broken in two."

"Some of the magic carried over even with the old charm being fully melted," Mother murmured. "Grandmother Meg said that she watched the process and sparks floated in the air for hours as it cooled in the mold."

William stared at the charm. It was a heavy pendant that would just barely fit in the palm of Louisa's hand. An image of Inina, carefully detailing her flowing hair, full breasts and belly, sat in the center of the pendant. Flowers and vines surrounded the Goddess' image, while piles of fruit obscured her feet. At the top was a loop for a ribbon so that the charm could be worn around a woman's neck, the better to protect her.

"She had the charm spelled by every woman in the family," Marjory continued, smiling as she threaded the strongest of the ribbons through the charm's loop. "And then she went all the way up to the Temple and had the priests give it their strongest blessings. Once in every generation we do the same thing. And every one of us has prayed over it as well, asking Inina to keep the spells in the metal strong so that it can protect the woman and child that wear it."

"We offered it Emily's first pregnancy," Mother said so sternly that William winced. "We've only let a woman outside of the family wear it one other time, William. Once. Emily will be the second."

"And we do want it back once she's had the baby," Marjory agreed. "My sisters are still having babies and Inina knows that Louisa will want babies someday. This is a loan, not a gift."

"I understand," William said.

He didn't say a word as Marjory added some of the knotted cord pregnancy charms to the pendant and then only smiled sadly when she carefully added an embroidered sleeve with a reinforced window for the image of Inina that would keep the metal from rubbing against Emily's skin as she wore it.

"The rest of these can stay, I think," Marjory commented to her mother as she folded the ribbon and tucked the pendant back into its pouch.

"It should suffice," Mother agreed. "I hope that in the future you'll learn from this, William. Meddling in the affairs of women just leads to women and children dying."

"I was trying to protect her," William complained.

"Instead you nearly killed her," Mother huffed. "And frankly? At this late date there's no guarantee that the charm will be enough. Even with all its power it might not save the baby. It should save Emily and we will give it to her again if she chooses to try another time but it may be too late to save the child."

William went so pale that Marjory thought he might pass out. She shook her head at him, standing and striding towards the front door. Marjory heard him scramble after her but didn't care. Finally, she had the freedom to help Emily. Nothing and no one was going to stop her now.

Lara spotted Marjory striding by as she passed the street leading to Lara's little apothecary shop. She grinned and waved only to glower as William hurried up to walk at Marjory's side. It happened several times over as they walked through town. Women would see Marjory and the little pouch with the charm. Smiles would bloom only to fade into glowers at William.

As they approached William's house, he sighed and rubbed both hands over his face. "I didn't realize so many of the women in town were worried about her."

"Then you're an idiot," Marjory snapped at him, stopping dead in whirl and slap his cheek hard enough that her hand stung. "We've all prayed for her, fretted over her and worried that we'd have to bury her because of your foolishness. Every single one of us has tried to convince her that adopting a child would be better than carrying it. Emily refused to listen to us. Haraldr himself knows that more than one woman offered to carry Darren's child for them just so that Emily wouldn't risk her health. Both Darren and Emily refused but the whole town has worried over them and you're a fool who wouldn't let anyone help."

She left William standing in the middle of the street, mouth dropped open in shock. His cheek was bright red from the slap. Darren opened the door for her. He gasped at William and then smiled so weakly at Marjory that she hugged him tightly. Neither of them said a word as Marjory strode into the house, heading to Darren and Emily's bedroom in the addition in the back.

The door was open, letting Marjory see the wide bed that Darren had made for his beloved bride. Two windows, a huge extravagance given the price of glass, let light into the room. Emily had sewn pretty pink curtains with frills. Their bedspread was one of Emily's complicated patchwork patterns that had interlocking rings pieced together from hundreds of tiny carefully shaped patches.

"Marjory," Emily whispered.

She smiled, pale and wan, against the dusky rose pillowcases. Marjory came in and sat next to her on the bed. Words wouldn't come. The room smelled of vomit and blood despite the little bottle of rose oil open on the bedside table. Darren came and sat on Emily's other side, taking her hand with fingers that shook.

"Both of you stop it," Emily sighed. "You're tiring me out with your worry."

"Not anymore," Marjory declared. She winced at how angry the words came out and cleared her throat while squeezing the old pregnancy charm. "Not anymore, Emily. William finally gave in. Here. You get to borrow this until your baby is about three months old. That

should be long enough. You do need to give it back, of course. It's destined for Louisa and her cousins, you know."

Emily blinked at Marjory, weakly gesturing for Darren to help her sit up. Instead of propping her up, Darren carefully shifted around so that she could lean back against his chest. Marjory hid a grin behind the pregnancy charm, delighted that Emily had enough strength to blush faintly at Darren so blatantly cuddling her.

"Here," Marjory said.

She passed over the charm, watching with both her eyes and her magic as Emily took the pouch out of her hands. The instant Emily touched the pouch magic swept through the room. It was nearly visible to normal eyes, so bright and strong that Marjory knew that Emily had been slowly dying as she lay in her wide bed.

"Oh," Emily breathed. "It's heavy."

Her fingers trembled as she opened the pouch and carefully pulled the charm out. Darren helped smooth the long embroidered ribbon. Emily smiled as she ran her fingers over the carved image of Inina pregnant with the world, her and Haraldr's child. Marjory heard something behind her. When she looked William stood there, a vivid red hand print on one cheek. His wife Sarah stood between him and Emily, so angry that she looked decades younger and nearly a full head taller despite her bent spine.

"This is the pregnancy charm you wore with Louisa," Emily said. Her voice was much louder, much stronger. The color was already returning to her cheeks.

"It is," Marjory agreed.

"I thought that the laws wouldn't allow this," Emily said, frowning over Marjory's shoulder at William. "Oh goodness, Mother, you didn't slap him, did you?"

"I most certainly did not," Sarah snapped. "Marjory did. He earned it, too. I'm half tempted to smack him myself for all this foolishness."

"The laws allow people to use 'ancient' charms," Marjory explained because William looked as though he had no intention of opening his mouth anytime soon with his wife that angry. "That

charm meets and exceeds the requirements, Emily. It was found, broken, when my great grandmother was our age. She had it re-forged, respelled and it's been blessed and passed down for generations. That one is fully legal. Anyone who tries to cause trouble can come straight to me. I'll show them the full provenance and they'll go away. If not, I'll smack them twice as hard as I hit William."

Emily giggled at Marjory's fierceness. She looked over her shoulder at Darren. He kissed her cheek, taking the charm out of her hands. Darren tied it around her neck as ceremoniously as he'd tied the flower necklace that marked their marriage all those years ago. No surprise, Emily blushed and smiled just as sweetly as she had that day.

"Will it work?" Emily asked as the charm's magic spread through her body.

It didn't show to ungifted eyes but Marjory could see the charm's magic. She could see how the charm strengthened Emily's heartbeat and breathing. Her blood, so depleted by the crisis that had hit over the night, immediately began to move better. Marjory could feel the marrow of Emily's bones working to produce more blood to replace what she'd lost.

Better still, she could feel the baby's life, brave little spark gifted by Inina to the world, brightening as well. The charm's magic was almost a melody, a complex harmony of prayers sun in dozens of women's voices. All of them prayed that Emily and her baby would make it through the pregnancy happy, healthy and strong.

"It is working," Marjory said, squeezing Emily's too-thin thigh. "It is working. Praise to Inina, it's working well."

4. JOY

"*A* boy," Emily said, her forehead sweaty and cheeks bright red from the exertion of the birth. "It's a boy, Marjory!"

"Yes, it is," Marjory chuckled.

She'd been visiting when Emily went into labor. Marjory had yelled to William and Darren to run for Lara as she'd agreed to be midwife for Emily but Marjory had been the one to catch the baby. Lara still hadn't gotten there. The baby had come so quickly that Lara hadn't made it. It was just Emily, Marjory and Sarah in the beautiful back bedroom.

The smell of blood was back but there was no vomit or sense of death anymore. Instead, the room felt of life and love and joy. Emily had regained all the weight that she'd lost over the years of miscarriages plus a bit. She was round and plump and healthy enough that she sat on the floor on her own cradling her new little boy in Mother's swaddling cloth.

"He's got your hair," Marjory commented as she helped Sarah bundle up the bloody towels. "Darren's curls but your color. He's going to be quite handsome when he grows up."

"I still can't believe it," Emily whispered. "I have a son, Marjory! I have a son!"

She pressed a kiss against her boy's forehead. He fussed and whined, breaking into a hearty wail that filled the bedroom. Marjory smiled. Good strong lungs and bright red skin; he was so much healthier than she'd feared. Getting the pregnancy charm so late in the term apparently hadn't done the boy any harm.

Sarah beamed, shooing Marjory back to Emily's side to take the boy back. "Go on, Emily, I expect you to get back into your nightgown. You know Darren's going to be back in here any time and the neighbors will want to come and see the boy soon. Best not to make a spectacle of yourself."

"Oh goodness, my hair's down and I'm a mess!" Emily complained. "Mother Sarah, please put them off a bit? And maybe a bit of water so I can wash up quick."

"No one expects you to be spotless, dear," Marjory said as she took Emily's boy. "You just gave birth. They'll all be delighted that you're alive and well. This is probably the one time you can have your hair down and no one will say a word other than to comment on how much his hair looks like yours."

Emily laughed but she still made shooing gestures at Sarah. The bed wasn't stained at all. Marjory and Sarah had convinced Emily that giving birth lying flat on her back was much more work than it needed to be. Instead she'd knelt over towels in a corner of the room, leaving her with a nice clean bed to crawl into once she put on her nightgown.

Sarah returned and helped Emily wash up a bit but as soon as she could she pushed Emily right back into bed. The pregnancy charm hung around Emily's neck, still radiating soothing, healing magic as it helped knit Emily's body back together. As quick as the birthing had been, it had still done the normal damage to Emily's body, not that she was aware of it yet.

"I'm fine," Emily protested as Sarah added pillows so that Emily could sit up in bed. "Really, I feel just fine."

"You'll feel it in an hour or two," Marjory promised. "There's always a bit of time right after where you're too overjoyed to have your baby to realize just how sore you are."

"Really?" Emily asked, looking at Sarah as well as Marjory.

"Yes," Sarah said, barking a laugh. "Goodness, every time afterwards I swore that I was fine for the first half hour or hour. Then I spent the next several weeks swearing up that Haraldr needed to shoot my William in the groin so that he never fathered another child on me. You'll feel it soon enough, dear. I promise."

Emily giggled at the thought of her mother-in-law doing anything like that. She eagerly took her boy back, crooning as she adjusted the neck of her nightgown to let the boy nurse. Marjory chuckled, helping Emily get everything lined up properly. It had taken Marjory ages to figure it out when Louisa was born but Emily seemed to get the knack of it right away.

"I still can't believe it," Emily whispered as she brushed her fingers over her son's downy hair. "It doesn't seem real, Marjory. After so long to finally have a child."

"It's real," Marjory said, patting Emily's plump thigh. "It's real and he's yours and in not too long you'll be cursing at him for being such a boy. We'll just have to pray that Inina gifted him with Darren's sweet nature instead of William's."

That set off another wave of giggles that made Emily grin. Marjory still hadn't forgiven William for the years of miscarriages or the pain he'd put Emily through. Next time Emily got pregnant, if she did, Marjory had every intention of knocking William out if he so much as hummed over Emily taking the pregnancy charm.

Lara finally ran into the bedroom, puffing and wind-blown as if she'd run the whole way across town. She groaned at seeing Emily lying in her bed with the baby in her arms. Marjory shrugged, smiling wryly as Lara grumbled and stomped over.

"I ran all the way here and you're already done," Lara complained. "Haraldr gave your husband wings on his feet and we still didn't make it in time."

"It was a very fast birthing," Marjory said. "Sarah and I handled it but you should probably check Emily out to make sure that everything is okay. I can take the baby and show him to Darren if you'd like, Emily."

"Ah, yes," Emily said, blushing brilliantly at the thought of having an examination while Darren watched. "I think that would be better. I really don't hurt right now but Mother and Marjory both say I should expect to."

"As fast as this was," Lara said as she took the baby, unwrapped him and then smiled while checking his health, "you almost certainly will. It's rare for a first child to be that quick. You might be a bit torn up inside, dear. But this little man is quite healthy."

Marjory wrapped him up again, quickly so that Emily would have a bit of privacy. She didn't wrap the swaddling cloth as tightly as Sarah had. If she knew Darren, he'd unwrap his son to check all his fingers and toes anyway. As Marjory slipped out of the room she heard Emily squeak as Lara pressed on something tender. Shutting the door seemed the best choice, especially when she realized that most of the town's women stood waiting in the other room with bright, curious expressions.

"It's a boy," Marjory announced as she walked straight to Darren so that he could take his fussing son. "Good and strong. He's got a powerful set of lungs and he's nice and red so he's got a good heart, too."

"I have a son?" Darren whispered, his voice almost disappearing under a wave of delighted prayers of thanksgiving to Inina and Haraldr.

"You have a son," Marjory agreed. "Emily's doing just fine too though it was so fast that I suspect she's going to be a bit sore later. Lara's checking her out now. You stay right there and introduce yourself to your son."

Darren looked like he wanted to get up and go straight to Emily's side at first but his son somehow managed to get one hand out of the swaddling cloth. He waved it around, making frustrated little whimpers that transformed Darren's worry into shocked delight.

"A son," Darren whispered as he took his boy's little hand. He beamed as the baby automatically grabbed his finger. "A son!"

William cheered so loudly that Marjory started. The baby howled with outrage which only made William cheer even more loudly.

Pretty quickly the whole crowd of women was babbling excitedly, even with Marjory and Sarah glaring at them. Sarah clapped her hands for attention. Absolutely no one listened.

"Hey!" Marjory bellowed. She nodded as the crowd, other than William, quieted. "Outside with the lot of you. Darren can bring the baby around so that you can see him. Emily will be out when Lara lets her and not one minute sooner. Shoo!"

The baby's howl turned into an infuriated shriek that made Darren gasp and awkwardly pat his son. Marjory shook her head, expertly wrapping the boy back up in his swaddling cloth before cradling him in her arms while slowly rocking. That helped quite a lot though the baby kept crying more quietly.

Sarah pushed everyone out of the house, nodding and smiling absently at the congratulations everyone gave her. She did smack William in passing but he barely seemed to notice it as he did an awkward little jig of celebration by the fireplace. Marjory snorted, gesturing for Darren to stand up.

"Hold him this way," Marjory said as she arranged the baby in his arms. "Now, sway a little bit, back and forth, nice and slow."

"Like this?" Darren asked, carefully copying Marjory's movement.

It worked very quickly, lulling the baby back into exhausted slumber. Marjory smiled and nodded approvingly. Darren sighed, relieved, the stunned grin slowly creeping back across his face.

"He looks so much like Emily," Darren said.

"It's the hair," Marjory chuckled. "He's got your eyes, nose and mouth. Not the ears, I don't think but definitely the rest."

"Well, thank you to Inina for that," Darren said with a little snort of amusement. "No one needs my ears."

Having shooed the women outside to spread the news, Sarah grabbed William and dragged him off into the kitchen for a good scolding. Marjory couldn't hear what Sarah said; she kept her voice low. But she certainly heard the moment where the lecture got cut off. Sarah made a startled sound followed by a pleased hum. Darren laughed.

"Should I go see her?" Darren asked Marjory.

"Not yet," Marjory said, patting her cheeks because she was blushing as if she was a girl again. Really, she didn't need to hear that! "Lara will bring you in when she's done making sure Emily is okay. Best to let them handle that part. Emily would be embarrassed to have you there for the examination."

Darren nodded. "Let's introduce this little man to the world, then."

"Have you picked a name?" Marjory asked. "Emily would never tell me."

Instead of answering, Darren smiled mysteriously. He headed out the front door into the yard with its rose hip decorated bushes. As a fall baby, Darren's son had been born into apples and squash, not roses and summer heat. It looked to Marjory as though the entire town waited outside.

Mother and Father were there with Louisa who danced and clapped her hands in excitement. All of Marjory's sisters were there, too, at least the ones who lived in town still. Even the town council had shown up, old Elder Vernon with his official Register so that the baby's name and age could be recorded properly.

Marjory slipped past Darren, going to pick Louisa up so that she'd stop bouncing around like an excited kitten. Louisa squeezed Marjory's neck in a too-tight hug. She tugged at Louisa's arm until she eased up enough that Marjory could breathe. All around them the chattering crowd stilled as Darren smiled at them all.

"Everyone," Darren called, still rocking and petting his son's hair, "I have a son. Inina blessed me and Emily with a son. Thank you to all of you for your prayers and support. It's meant the world to both Emily and me. I doubt we would have made it through without your help."

He looked straight at Marjory as he said it. She blushed and nodded, rather wishing that he wouldn't focus so hard on her but given her lifelong friendship with Emily it made sense. Still, who knew what might get back to the government if that sort of thing got around? The charm wasn't all that they'd done, after all. Most of it was just hidden.

"What's his name?" Father called, one hand on Mother's hip and the other on Marjory's back.

The crowd took up the call, some people shouting suggestions that made Darren laugh. The baby cried and fussed so Darren waved one hand to get them to quiet back down. It took him a minute to sooth the baby's wails but once he did he grinned at Marjory again.

"We had plans all along for what we'd name our children," Darren explained. His voice carried easily over the now-silent crowd. "My father's been friends with Thomas his entire life. Emily and Marjory have been friends in the same way. It's our hope that our son and Louisa will be friends too and that if we have any daughters they'll be friends to the family as well."

"Oh goodness," Mother breathed, her hands coming up to her mouth as tears welled up. She shook her head as Marjory looked at her curiously.

"Marjory stood by us all through the miscarriages," Darren continued. "We stood by her when her husband Raj died. If we'd had a girl we would have named it Jury to honor Marjory's place in our lives." He grinned as Marjory squeaked and Louisa cheered. "But since it's a boy we decided to name it after the man who introduced me to Emily, Marjory's husband Raj."

"Darren!" Marjory exclaimed. The word came out harsh because her heart had leaped straight into her throat and tears now obscured his face.

"Our son's name is Juraj," Darren said. "Juraj, son of Darren, son of William. May Inina bless his life with joy, love and prosperity. May Haraldr protect him and let him grow tall and strong. We're blessed to have him in our lives, just as we were blessed to have Raj in our lives as for the short amount of time that he was with us."

Marjory cried, hugging Louisa who first giggled and then crooned as she hugged Marjory tightly. The crowd echoed Darren's prayers, clapping and cheering. Someone had brought bells. They started ringing them off to the right, hidden in the crowd. Singing started too but it was a distant concern as Marjory set Louisa down again.

She made her way through the crowd to hug Darren and the

baby, little Juraj. He hugged her back and patted her soothingly as Marjory cried. Darren smiled as Marjory tried, and failed badly, to find words to thank him for the honor. Eventually she managed to make her tongue work properly.

"Thank you," Marjory murmured. "I never expected something like this!"

"You're welcome," Darren said, smiling at her. "Thank you for Emily. Thank you for our son. Thank you for all of your support over the years. You've been Inina's blessing in our lives, Marjory."

"You've been the same in mine, too," Marjory said, laughing as she brushed her tears away only to have more fall. "I don't feel like I deserve a gift this large, Darren. It seems like too much."

He laughed, wrinkling his nose at her. "You're just as bad as Emily at taking gifts, Marjory. Accept it. You're Emily's best friend and we want our boy to know how important you are to us all. Now you can start working on getting Emily to accept present for Juraj as well as for her."

Marjory burst out laughing. After another hug Darren moved off through the crowd to let everyone see his son, not that he let anyone else hold Juraj. Rather than following or going inside to hug the stuffing out of Emily, Marjory sat on the porch.

Come what may, even stupid laws and restrictions on what her family could do magically, Marjory didn't think that she'd ever regret her spell work for Emily. The old pregnancy charm had saved so much more than just her best friend. A new generation had been born and hopefully their future would be bright, happy and full. Marjory knew that she'd do everything in her power to make it happen for Raj's namesake, as well as for everyone else in town.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: THE SHADOW OF TIME'S COURAGE

We return to the Gods Above and Below series for another story with Xun. But instead of facing gods, Xun's facing something much more insidious this time: the corrosive effects of time itself...

THE SHADOW OF TIME'S COURAGE

Xun shifted on the cushion Su Magee had given her. Nice and thick, sure, but the cover was ridiculously rough and the padding was lumpy as Xun's mashed potatoes. And not in a good way. No damned way to get comfortable on the thing, no matter how she shifted. Didn't mean she didn't want to shift again the instant she settled down again.

Su Magee's little house was equally uncomfortable. Little mud-walled hut where the base of the walls was about three feet thick and the tops were only six inches or so. Gave the place a weirdly claustrophobic feeling. The roof was heavy, covered with thatch a good yard deep, but the thatch was so old that it was stained black with smoke and draped with dusty spider webs. Whole place smelled like over-cooked cabbage, liver and onions.

Worst part was that Su Magee didn't seem to mind it. She was short as Xun, but thin and elegant. Her clothes were perfectly neat, sarong without a single spot of dirt or dust. And it was a light-colored one, too, all pastel pink, pale blue flowers scattered on a seafoam green background. Not even a single wrinkle on the thing.

Had her hair loose in a cascade of greying black that brushed against her hips but not one strand drifted into her face or into the

pot of stew she was cooking. How a woman that impeccable could live in a house like this Xun would never know.

But live here Su Magee did, humming and happy despite the stench and the horrible proportion of her house and the way the earthen floor was slowly breaking up and degrading back to just plain old mud. When was the last time she oiled the thing?

Though honestly, given the rest of the house Xun had to admit that the oil would likely be rancid and add to the stink.

"Thank you for coming," Su Magee said, her voice as soft as a dove cooing quietly in the palm of your hand. "I truly do appreciate it, Xun Rosario. I know that you have more important things to be concerned with than my little issues."

"Hey, you're a friend of the family," Xun said, shifting yet again. She made a face in spite of her intention not to when Su measured out a portion of lumpy, greasy stew. "Um. Thanks?"

Su smiled as if the thanks were as genuine as could be. "You're welcome. It's the least I could do."

"So um, what's the problem?" Xun asked, poking at the stew as she wished that Su had a dog that she could feed it to. If the dog would actually eat it. Xun wasn't sure that even a starving animal would eat this.

Su stared at Xun, eyes so wide that Xun looked around, trying to figure out what she'd said. After a second Su's cheeks went flaming red. She dropped the spoon into the stew. It settled in disgusting little glop-noises. Ended up sticking out halfway as if the stew was so revolting that even the spoon wanted no part of it.

"What?" Xun asked. Set the stew aside, thank goodness for the excuse to do so.

"You think I live this way willingly?" Su asked, rage in her voice but shame in her eyes. "After the eclipse, my home changed. My whole life. Nothing I do can restore my home to what it once was and no matter how hard I try, everything I cook here turns into... that."

Xun blinked. Looked around and then her cheeks went red, not that it would show as much. The blood of Dorji Kita that stained her face at least made blushes a less embarrassing thing anymore. Hid

them other than the really bad ones that swept down her chin and throat where she only had drip-marks staining her face.

"Well, it did seem strange," Xun said, rubbing the back of her neck. "But you know, I'm not the best cook in the world and all the Gods know no one wants me cleaning for them. So. I just assumed..."

Su's rage crystalized into sudden amusement that transmuted a moment later into a case of the helpless giggles that shook her whole body. She giggled and giggled and kept right on giggling as Xun groaned and rubbed her face with both blood-stained hands.

Damn it. Honestly, though Xun deserved that. Usually she was a good bit more observant. You had to be, riding around the continent doing quests for the High King. And the Gods. And herself. And pretty much everyone else that came to bother her.

Looked like this was another quest, just one closer to home.

Because Xun knew exactly what had happened during the last eclipse. She'd been there fighting the shade of an Ancient God that wouldn't die properly. And if she'd had any common sense, something that anyone who knew Xun would say that no, she didn't except when it came to gardening, she'd have expected there to be effects at home. Other than the baby she and Garnett had created between them.

"Fine," Xun huffed as Su's giggles died down. "I'm hopeless. I admit it. Now give me more facts. This happen all at once, house was normal before the eclipse and then after it was a mess? Or was it a gradual thing?"

"All at once," Su said, lips still twitching. At least she didn't try to give Xun any of the soup. "I'd run with all the others when the palace was evacuated. My house was normal then. When I got back it was like this and no one could tell me what had happened or why."

Xun nodded. "Any other houses around here affected? Changed? The fields?"

That made Su sigh as she stood and gestured for Xun to follow her. The fields in this area had always been good ones. Nice thick black dirt that gave big healthy crops. No rocks, no water seeps to kill

your plants roots. Some of the best produce in the country came from right outside Su's house.

So it was more than a shock to be led out into the fields and see red-brown clay-sand soil with plants that were struggling desperately just to survive. Xun knelt down and poked the baked-dry dirt with one finger. White bloomed. Salt?

"We're all discussing how to fix it," Su murmured, "but so far nothing we've tried has had any effect. The fields are ruined and we don't know why."

"Okay, yeah," Su said, crushing a handful of the dirt in her hand and frowning as it drained out of her palm like sand. "This is a problem for me. Just not sure yet what I can do about it."



TWO DAYS of checking the fields later, Xun sighed as she studied the red-brown dirt again. Not one other field was affected. Lovely black soil, healthy plants, everything looked just like normal. Grew like normal, too. Everywhere except here.

Come to find out, Su Magee was the only one who'd been willing to admit that their house had gone all wrong with the eclipse. Every single house in this area was off. Bad walls, terrible roofs, food that wouldn't cook right no matter what you did; everyone had the same problems.

Su was just the only one too proud of her housekeeping skills to say out loud that no, she'd not failed instead of claiming that something outside was affecting her home.

Stupid of people but then people were people. They'd always make dumb choices. Like staying put when things went dramatically wrong.

Area that was affected was exactly circular. Two hundred yards in diameter. The edge of the effect was like a knife had cut through the ground, carved up a chunk of land and replaced it with something else entirely.

Xun stood, one foot on the good side, other foot on the bad side.

She'd walked the entire perimeter. Searched the ground. Looked for any signs of magic affecting things. There wasn't even a strange effect like what they'd seen in the jungles to the south.

And of course there was no sign of buried altar like what Keanu had found in the jungle.

"Why would it be easy?" Xun murmured as she strolled slowly through the bad zone. "No reason for it. Problems I get tossed at never are easy to solve."

Still, it'd be nice if this was one that Xun could fix by killing something. Someone. Or bashing things. She'd gotten good at that.

This solving puzzles thing wasn't something she'd worked on over the last few months. That was Prince Cyrille and Akuchi's thing. Magic was Garnett's thing. And of course if there was any hint of godly activities, that sucked Keanu right in.

Still, the others had come, done their things, and nope. No ideas out of them. Garnett hadn't felt a bit of magic. Keanu had confirmed that there wasn't anything godly going on. And Prince Cyrille had gone off with Akuchi to research other places where things like this had happened.

No news yet out of them so Xun was stuck just walking through town and puzzling over the whole mess.

"Have you learned anything?" Su Magee asked, soft and gentle and the sort of implacable that always made Xun feel like she was four years old and caught with her hand in the treat basket.

"I've learned that I'm damned bad at solving puzzles," Xun said, thumbs hooked through her belt. "And that there's no magic or divine work going on here. Gonna have to keep looking at it. Still think it'd be best for you all to move out of the zone for a bit. Last thing like this we found turned out to be quite dangerous."

"Dangerous how?" Su asked.

Her hair was so very solidly grey at the roots. Odd. She'd clearly dyed her hair before. Strange that she hadn't recently. Or not so strange given all the weird stuff going on.

Then again...

Xun wagged one finger at Su, pointing at her hair. "When's the last time you dyed your hair, Su?"

"I... don't?" Su said, head going back as she stiffened as if she'd been slapped.

"Realize your hair's going grey?" Xun asked. She gestured with one hand towards her own mess of hair, cut short and never really properly brushed out. "Right at the scalp. Looks like you'd been dying it and then decided to stop."

Su's cheeks went pale. She ran off. After a moment Xun followed. Found her at one of the little distorted houses, staring at her hair in a mirror held by one of the older women in the area. Though really, it was all older people here. No kids at all.

"Why is my hair gray?" Su whispered.

"How old are you?" Xun asked. "Forty? Fifty?"

Su turned and stared at her. At her temple and throat, Su's pulse fluttered the skin violently. Xun stiffened automatically because this, every instinct she had said that this was the key she'd been missing.

"I'm only twenty-three," Su replied.

"You?" Xun asked of the older woman, easily sixty, holding the mirror.

"I'm thirty," the woman replied. "I've... been trying to convince myself that I was imagining things."

Xun blew out a breath and put her hands over her face. Save her from people who would not see what was in front of them. There was clearly something affecting this whole area and none of the residents would see it. Not 'could'. Would.

"Pack your things," Xun ordered and then glared when both women tried to protest. "I'm a damned princess and I quest for the High King. Everyone in this affected zone will leave. If you don't, I'll have the royal guard come and drag you out by your hair. Or heels. Whichever they can grab. This place is killing you. Leave now."



KEANU STOOD at the edge of the zone, eyes shut. Looking at him was a

lot like looking at the sun. Well, not quite. More like looking at the sun when it was hidden behind clouds that turned it into a pale white disk in the sky. Still bright, still dangerous, but not something that you squinted at and looked away to avoid the light blinding you.

"I feel nothing," Keanu said.

"Know that," Xun agreed. "You already said. But time's gone wrong here, Keanu. Since the eclipse the people here have aged. Ones at the edge have gained maybe a year or so. Those in the middle have aged decades."

"Time has gone wrong?" Keanu asked and then shuddered. "Well, I suppose that makes sense. Given that you were caught in a moment of time during your battle over the period of the eclipse. There must be some result to that. Beyond the baby, of course."

Xun snorted.

"Baby or not," Xun said, "the effect is worst in the middle. You willing to forge in here with me?"

"I... should not," Keanu said so apologetically that Xun frowned at him. "I'm still rather depleted from the sacrificial altar in the jungle."

Inconvenient but hey, Keanu was a baby demigod. He'd always been clear that his power was inconsistent at best and downright inconvenient at worst. Xun nodded, crossed her arms over her chest and then huffed.

"Right," Xun said. "Then I'd appreciate you're carrying a message to Hanne Balint and Agam. I need help with this one and they're the best choices I've got right now."

Because if the God of Death and the God of Transformation couldn't help her figure out what was going on then no one could.



AGAM SWIRLED into existence at Xun's side. It was still a strange shadowy shape that suggested a face, eyes, nose, limbs rather than a real form. No gender, either. No reason why the God of Transformation would, truth be told. Still felt a little odd.

"Good to see you again," Xun said, smiling as Agam swirled large

as she was then down to the size of a kitten by her ankle. "Got a puzzle I can't solve so I figured I'd ask advice. Seems like a thing to do."

Agam's laugh was dry leaves skittering across a tiled floor, rain-drops splashing into a puddle. "I am always glad to help where I can though I do not know that I will be of much use here. This land is already transformed into death."

"Yeah, but I didn't do it," Hanne Balint said as he appeared without a whoosh or a pop or anything by Xun's other side. He scowled around the area, as angry as could be.

"You look better," Xun said without acknowledging the anger. "Eyes aren't so bloodshot."

Hanne snorted, anger fading into amusement for a moment. "Amazing what some proper rest will do. What've you guys done here?"

"I think it's a remnant of the eclipse," Xun said. She explained everything that she'd seen, learned, including the effect on the residents. "So, those at the edge lost maybe two years. Possibly three. Ones in the center lost thirty or so years. It's got to be some sort of time effect. I need to know if it's permanent or short-term. And if it's going to continue affecting everything in this zone or not."

Both Agam and Hanne frowned as they looked around the area. Xun'd lost a big chunk of Dorji Kita's power during the eclipse so she didn't sense their emotions anymore. That was fine by her. Being able to tell what everyone thought and felt had been pretty damned horrible while it lasted.

Still, she had more than enough left to feel the way their power probed out into the soil and the sky and the houses surrounding them. One of the houses shuddered and collapsed as Agam's power touched it. Agam shifted back so sharply that it nearly ran into Xun's shin.

"I would say that it continues," Agam said. This time his voice sounded like the coils of a snake slithering across leather armor as it sought your jugular. "My touch should not have affected it that much."

Hanne crouched down to brush a fingertip over one blade of grass. The whole patch abruptly went brown and dry, then crumpled into dust.

"Yeah, it's continuing," Hanne agreed. "Weird as hell, too. I can't feel what's doing it."

Xun hummed, rocking on her heels as she considered it. When Keanu had found the Ancient altar in the jungle, it'd been buried a couple hundred feet deep under the ground. Right at the center of the area affected. And the worst of the effect was at the very center of this, too.

She nodded. "All right, I need to dig down under the center of this area. If there's an altar or temple or something down there, I need to know about it. Also, can you two leave?"

Hanne's startled look made Xun grin at him. God of Death or not, Xun liked startling the man. He looked like he'd seen everything under the sun so yeah, surprising him was a good thing.

Both Hanne and Agam walked right out of the circle. When they did a whoosh of wind swept over Xun. She felt Dorji Kita's blood go fluid on her face again, felt the cutting of his thorns tearing at her flesh.

A sacred place, one precious to time.

This didn't work the same as Keanu's snow-ash filled clearing. It didn't expand as power filled it. No, this place just gathered power and shifted time as power came and went. Which meant that no, it wouldn't be at the center of the space.

"Dig deep at the edge," Xun called to Agam. "Right down as deep as you can go. Don't worry about making a mess. Just dig until you find something. Probably a wall or an enclosure. Maybe pathway or something."

"Very well," Agam said.

His form shifted long and low, stretching across a good twenty feet of the perimeter. He stayed just outside of the affected area, carving deeper and deeper until there was a huge hole full of vaguely drifting dust.

Xun saw the moment that Agam found the circle, whatever it was.

The sky over her head shifted brown as the deepest part of summer when all the rain had fled and the fields turned golden brown, then that faded tan that promised dust-dry grain that fell straight out of the husk the instant you cut it. So you had to cut carefully and put the grain into sheaves holding your breath for fear of losing half the crop.

"It's a circle," Hanne called to Xun. His voice sounded very far away.

"Break it before it kills me," Xun called back.

She snorted at the sudden horror on Hanne's face. Not the death she wanted, certainly. Especially not with Dorji Kita's power stirring in her, bringing her closer to godhood than mortality. Xun wanted to live a long, long life, to explore the world and see everything before dying in her bed as a ruinously old woman.

If it wasn't going to happen, well, it wasn't going to happen.

She stood as tall as she could, not holding her breath or doing anything other than holding Dorji Kita's power inside of her as Hanne jumped down into the hole. Death could kill anything, even an Ancient spell suddenly revived by the power loosed during the eclipse.

As soon as he attacked the circle, the sky began to flicker between day and night. Summer and fall and winter and spring spun around Xun in a crazy parade that made her gasp and struggle to stand still. To hold still. To not feed whatever this was a single bit more power.

Her skin felt like it was being stripped off, inch by torturous inch. Wind battered her, trying to knock her from her feet. The earth itself seemed to heave as Hanne shouted and something cracked at the bottom of the hole.

And then the world froze.

Time stopped.

Xun gasped, shuddered, looked around. She could see ghostly images of Su Magee moving around the area, the other residents, too. Aging, growing older, changing, a thousand images of them overlaid like streams of light and life that had somehow gotten suspended in the middle of this circle.

This holy place.

A holy place dedicated to time.

Maybe they'd been sacrificing by living here, by staying, all unintended. Not something Xun could really let go on. They'd lost so much, both the people and the land itself.

She reached out, touching the nearest image of Su Magee. "Go back. Go back to yourself, Su Magee. Be whole again. Be your true self. This sacrifice isn't wanted. Isn't needed. All of you, go back to what you were before this woke up."

The world whirled so sharply that Xun staggered and nearly fell. Around her the world snapped back into motion. Hanne threw a great chunk of lovely white marble shot through with gold into the air. It thudded down at Xun's feet.

Denting the rich, black earth.

Xun sighed so strongly that her knees nearly gave out.

"That did it," Xun said. "Good job, guys."

She touched the marble, tracing the old, indecipherable text engraved on it with one finger. A spell of some sort, probably. She'd ask Garnett and Prince Cyrille, call them back from their research. Later.

For now she sat on the ground, breathing hard and wondering why her hands tingled. Why her ears rang as if there'd been cymbals crashing right beside her head. Took her a moment to realize that Hanne was right there in front of her, kneeling on one knee. That Agam was there, too, a little blob of shadow that bobbed and shifted when she looked at it.

"I'll live," Xun said.

"That you will," Hanne said, chuckling as if he was as breathless as she felt. "Worked another miracle, Xun Rosario. I think you'll find that time is on your side now. And..."

He stopped, shook his head and stood. Next second he was gone, leaving Xun to stare at Agam who laughed like a quail startling up into the air with a thunder of wings and fear.

"You may not be his heir anymore," Agam said. "Which I believe Hanne finds reassuring. He does enjoy his work. I think he would be distressed to give it up so soon after starting. Good luck to you. It will

be very interesting to see what you do with... all the time you now possess."

Then Agam spun away into nothingness, leaving Xun to stare at the spot it'd been.

Time.

Great. So she was going to be some sort of Goddess of Time in the future? Xun groaned and dragged herself back to her feet.

Well, that was in the future, hopefully a long ways into the future. Right now she needed to check on Su Magee and her fellow residents. Get that hole filled in, too. Or maybe have the rest of the circle dug up?

Eh, she'd leave that up to Mama Rosario and Su Magee. Not Xun's problem anymore.

At least the problem was solved. Xun wanted to get back on the road again. Solve other people's problems, not deal with puzzles like this. If she was really lucky, the next one would be something she could bash with her ax.

Those were always good ones to deal with. Xun hummed as she marched back towards the palace where Su Magee and the others waited. Her whole body thrummed a bit as she walked. Like she was a harp string just plucked. Probably stupid of her but Xun ignored it.

Not forever.

Just for now.

One problem always led to another. She'd deal with this new power, this new energy, when she had her team back together again. The five of them were always more effective than just one of them alone.

And honestly, she missed the guys.

Time to get back to what Xun was best at, her team at her side.

THE END

AUTHOR NOTE: ANNIVERSARY

I couldn't have a collection of my short stories without including something from the *Debts to Recover* series. Set in a world very like ours, only worse, this story includes terrorism, slavery, BDSM and lovers trying to have a quiet anniversary despite the chaos knocking at their door.

1. DINNER

Andy hummed as he finished the final touches for the evening. The curtains were firmly closed, giving their roomy condo a quiet intimate feel. It also made the room significantly warmer than normal which was a good idea. Even though they were still in the last stages of summer's heat the condo's air conditioning system was efficient enough that it was normally cold inside. Hopefully, if Thomas agreed, they would spend the rest of the night naked together. Warmer would be better for that.

He'd pushed the couch back against the west wall in the living room area and their armchairs up against the opposite wall by the sound system that was currently playing quiet classical music. That left a huge expanse of space open for his plans. The big fluffy sheepskin rug made a lovely base to work from. Their coffee table now held three whips, two floggers and all four of their canes.

Now all he had to do was get their dinner out of the oven and they could have a properly romantic anniversary night. After four years of nothing much special happening Andy thought that taking charge of the night's activities might be okay. Hopefully.

Thomas was certainly the Dom in their relationship but he'd said over and over that he appreciated it when Andy took charge of the

details on things like this. It was still a bit... nervous-making to do this though. Andy much preferred to have someone else giving the orders. Outlines of orders would be enough but he didn't have even that much tonight. Just a hope for something special on their anniversary and a prayer that Thomas would appreciate it.

"God, I hope he doesn't get mad," Andy groaned. "I just... want it to be special."

He shook his head as he checked on their roast chicken. It looked very close to done. The rolls were just about perfect too. He'd already gotten the corn cooked and buttered. A quick zap in the microwave and that would be steaming. The apple pie was perfect and already waiting in the fridge. Thomas' favorite French vanilla ice cream sat in the freezer, too. Andy was ready for anything tonight. Probably.

"Home..." Thomas called from the front door.

"Hey!" Andy called back, shutting the oven and hurrying around the fridge only to stop dead in his tracks. "What happened?"

Thomas winced. His bottom lip was split and a huge bruise covered his left cheek. His glasses looked bent, just slightly, or at least Thomas wasn't wearing them squarely on his head. His jacket had mud on it, too, something that Andy hadn't ever seen. Horrifyingly, Andy could see footprints on his jacket.

"There was... a problem," Thomas sighed. "Give me hand? My ribs are killing me."

"Did you get beaten up?" Andy asked as he knelt and untied Thomas' shoes.

"No, there was this girl at the station at Fourth and Vine. She was getting harassed really badly," Thomas said. He leaned one hand on Andy's shoulder, putting enough weight that Andy had to stiffen his back not to sag under it. "The police weren't doing anything so I did. I got punched, knocked down briefly, and the cops tried to blame her and then me for it. They arrested the idiots after I gave them my business card."

"This is why you need to stop taking public transportation and get a car," Andy huffed. "You work for Master Boles. He'd probably recommend a good armored car dealer. I know that you could get a

credit for one and we have a parking space available. It came with the condo."

Thomas smiled ever so faintly but he shook his head no. That was a battle that Andy wasn't going to win no matter what so he let it go. Along with his elaborate plans for the evening. So much for all his ideas of dinner and then a beating and making love on the sheepskin rug.

When Andy smiled ruefully Thomas frowned and cupped his cheek.

"What's wrong?" Thomas asked.

"Well, I sort of set up a special evening for our anniversary but I don't think you're going to be up for the ideas I had," Andy admitted. "I do have roast chicken, corn, rolls and a very nice apple pie for dinner."

Thomas blinked several times very rapidly. He straightened up and then went to stare into the living room. Andy sighed as he carefully set Thomas' shoes on their little shoe rack. All that work and it just wasn't going to happen.

"Wow," Thomas murmured as Andy moved to stand behind him. "Now I wish I'd just handed the card to the police before getting involved."

"It could be worse," Andy said. "I was thinking about putting in the vibrating butt plug around lunch so that I'd be ready for you when you got home."

"That would be worse," Thomas laughed so ruefully that Andy couldn't help but grin. "We really need to take that vacation I've been threatening. Get out of town. Go to one of those armored, all-inclusive resorts where we can just play and not have to worry about anything."

Andy ducked his head to hide his grin at that thought. They'd talked about it endlessly since they got together. He didn't really think it would happen. While Andy's work was relatively simple, mostly just filing and data entry, Thomas was fairly highly placed in Master Boles' business. It was expected that he be on hand whenever

there were problems and given Black's unending attacks, there always seemed to be problems.

"It would be nice," Andy said with a quick glance towards the oven timer. Still a minute and a half left to go. "Maybe somewhere warm."

Thomas chuckled. He pulled Andy into his arms for a long hug that wasn't half long enough but that might have been Andy's fault. The way Thomas winced for the feeling of Andy's arms wrapped around his ribcage made Andy feel too bad to cling to him.

"Go pull the chicken," Thomas whispered against Andy's lips. "We can still have dinner. Maybe afterwards we can play a little bit. Lightly."

"Liar," Andy whispered with a grin. "I felt that wince."

"Damn it," Thomas groaned. "Fine. No play time."

He laughed quietly despite the groan and obvious disappointment in his eyes. Andy laughed as well. There would be another chance, another time. He got the chicken out of the oven, smiling that the thermometer confirmed that it was perfectly done. The corn heated back up perfectly and the rolls had just the right amount of crispiness. It was a simple dinner, a fairly light one all things considered, but it should still be good.

Thomas carved the chicken. His fingers shook a little afterwards which made Andy frown at him. The carving motion shouldn't have hurt that much. Instead of immediately eating, Andy glowered at Thomas.

"What?" Thomas asked entirely too innocently.

"Let me see those ribs," Andy demanded.

"I'm fine," Thomas protested. He went red as Andy continued to glower. "Andy. I'm fine."

"Ribs."

"If we wrap them up I'll be fine," Thomas said in his 'giving orders now' voice.

"Ribs!" Andy insisted. "Don't you try and order me around outside of sex, Thomas Loomis. I am your husband and I am not letting you risk your life and health because you feel bad about having gotten

beaten up by a bunch of punks. Take that shirt and jacket off or so help me I'm getting the scissors and cutting them off!"

Thomas' mouth worked a couple of times but nothing came out. He sighed, looking at their steaming dinner with enough hunger that Andy almost relented. But if he really did have broken ribs or worse, internal bleeding, eating would be a terrible idea.

When Andy crossed his arms over his chest Thomas sighed. He grumbled as he stomped into their spacious bedroom with it's not going to be used tonight padded cross and definitely not going to be used for anything but sleep king size bed.

Andy had to help Thomas take his jacket off. Thomas went white at putting his arms back for Andy to slip the jacket down his arms. He was so slow unbuttoning the shirt that Andy took over only to freeze when he saw the damage.

Thomas' ribs were covered with bruises. Not just bruises but boot prints that were so distinct that Andy could see the individual tread patterns of three different boots. In one spot along Thomas' ribs he could even make out the exact curve of the boot's heel and the size.

"We are going to the hospital right now," Andy said. His voice came out surprisingly level and calm given that his stomach was churning and his fingers were shaking. Tears had welled up making it hard to see the buttons that Andy now redid.

"I'll be fine," Thomas murmured. "Andy. I'll be fine."

"I can already see the bruises, Thomas," Andy replied. "They're only going to get worse. We're going to the hospital right now because if we don't I'll have screaming nightmares and we'll end up there anyway for my panic attack."

"Ah, right," Thomas said with a tired sigh. "All right. Jacket?"

"It can stay off," Andy said as he finally got the last button. "Did you file a report with the police?"

Thomas nodded confidently enough that Andy let it go. The police had been there. He'd said so. Knowing Thomas, he'd probably told them that he was fine, that he didn't need to go to the hospital. Andy swallowed down a little laugh that had more tears in it than anything else.

"What?" Thomas asked so gently that Andy wanted to hit him.

"You didn't go to the hospital so that you wouldn't ruin our anniversary dinner," Andy said. The words barely made it past the lump in his throat.

"Ah, well... yes," Thomas admitted sheepishly.

His cheeks flushed so brightly that Andy's half-sob turned into a half-laugh. Andy shook his head, tugging Thomas out of the bedroom and back to the door so that he could help with Thomas' shoes. At least Andy hadn't decided to go with a naked dinner. That saved time now.

The smell of dinner cooling in the kitchen prompted Andy to hurry in and cover their plates with foil. Their chicken would still be dry and cold by the time they got back but it wouldn't be as dry. Hopefully. It hardly mattered, really. What mattered was getting Thomas taken care of.

"Don't you dare!" Andy scolded when he rounded the refrigerator to see Thomas attempting to put his shoes on without help.

"I could do it," Thomas grumbled.

"You have no sense," Andy grumbled right back. "None at all. I swear, sometimes I feel like I'm the one taking care of you, not the other way around."

Thomas laughed as Andy knelt and helped him put his shoes on. He waited until Andy was done tying the laces before catching Andy's face in both hands. He deliberately squished Andy's cheeks, making him pucker up even as Andy glared at him.

The squish turned into a gentle caress that threatened to bring down a storm of tears, at least until Thomas leaned over and kissed Andy gently. He rested his forehead against Andy's. Thomas chuckled and his breath washed warm over Andy's lips.

"You do take care of me," Thomas murmured. "You do a wonderful job taking care of me. I love you, Andy. I always have and I always will. No matter what happens on our anniversary, or on any other day, I'll always love you."

"Thank you," Andy whispered. He took a deep breath and

straightened up. "Now quit stalling. We have to get you to the hospital."

Thomas burst out laughing only to wince and clutch his ribs. He grinned despite the obvious pain. Andy stood and slipped on his shoes. It was still warm enough that they really didn't need coats. Frankly, Andy could have worn shorts without too much trouble though he wasn't as confident about his legs as he used to be. Five years of a desk job had added a good bit of weight to his formerly slender frame.

Summer hadn't faded yet. The hallway outside their apartment was swelteringly hot even though Andy's pants were very thin and his shirt was as light as possible with their apartment's air conditioning. Thomas wrapped one arm around Andy's waist. When Andy looked up at him, unused to such a public display of affection, Thomas' lips were too tight and there were deep wrinkles between his eyebrows.

"Idiot," Andy muttered at him. "We're taking a cab."

"...I'll be on the couch if I protest that, won't I?" Thomas replied. His lips twitched a little with amusement despite the signs of pain.

"For quite a while," Andy agreed.

The cab, which was blessedly quick in responding to Thomas' phone call, smelled of faintly alcohol and vomit. There weren't any obvious stains. The seats weren't sticky. But it still felt sordid to Andy. Fortunately, the driver had taken one look at Thomas' arm around his ribs and then at Andy's face and he'd gone silent. Silence was much easier to deal with than attempts at conversation at this point.

Andy claimed Thomas' phone once they were in motion. Master Boles' private hospital was more of a clinic in his mansion but it was still equipped to deal with almost everything short of major heart or brain surgery. He held Thomas' hand as the cab flew around one corner only to slow down as three heavy black police armored personnel carriers barreled by going the other direction. They didn't have their lights on so it couldn't be too urgent.

"State your emergency," the clinic receptionist said in as bored a tone of voice as Andy had ever heard.

"This is Andy Loomis, Thomas Loomis' husband," Andy said.

"We're coming in. Thomas was attacked by some punks on the train. His ribs are severely bruised and need to be checked out."

"Ah, we got the police report on that one," the receptionist said with much more interest. "Master Boles already sent out an order that he was to report to the infirmary first thing tomorrow."

Andy smiled triumphantly at Thomas who just rolled his eyes. He was sweating now which frightened Andy. The cab picked up speed again, thank goodness.

"Any other signs of problems?" the receptionist asked.

"Um, he's very pale and has started to sweat," Andy said. "We're in a cab. We should be there in a minute or two."

"Good, good," the receptionist said in the midst of a flurry of tapping sounds. She had to be typing something into the computer. "I'll make sure everyone's ready for him."

"Thank you," Andy said.

He looked ahead of them, peering past the driver and through the car in front of them. The road looked clear. It should only be a minute or two and they'd be there. Andy let out the breath he'd been unconsciously holding. He smiled as Thomas gently squeezed his fingers.

"Uh-oh," the cab driver muttered.

"What?" Andy and Thomas asked at the same time.

Light and heat exploded around them. Andy screamed as the world, the cab, lurched and tumbled. He felt Thomas' arms wrap around him but the cab rolled and flung Andy into the bullet-proof glass divider between them and the cab driver. Andy's head cracked into the glass and then Thomas landed on top of him.

The cab continued to tumble but Andy couldn't be sure of anything other than pain, stars behind his eyes and the roar of fire expanding everywhere. Something slammed into their tumbling cab and Andy's head cracked against the window a second time, much harder this time. Everything went black.

2. ATTACK

"Can you hear me?"

Andy groaned. Pain. There was so much pain. His head throbbed worse than the most vicious of hangovers. It was worse than the one migraine he'd had a couple of years before meeting Thomas. Beyond that, Andy's shoulders and back screamed of bruises and his hip felt as though someone had punched him hard enough to bruise the bone.

The phone was inches from his face but it was dark in the cab. He couldn't quite see where it was. Thomas lay on top of him, heavy and unmoving. Andy couldn't hear the cab driver moaning. It took a huge effort to move his arm but Andy managed to wrap his fingers around the phone, turning it over so that the light of the screen lit the cab.

What was left of it, anyway.

He blinked several times before realizing that his eyes actually were crossing. Despite that, Andy could see that the front of the cab had been crushed by some other armored car landing on it. No cab driver, Andy thought distantly through the pain. Their compartment was much smaller than it should have been. The only reason they were alive was because they'd fallen into the foot well when the bigger car landed on them.

"Hello? Can you hear me? Please, say something!"

"...hear you," Andy said though the words came out as a croak.

"Thank God," the receptionist sighed. "Oh, thank God! We've got a lock on your signal but there's a major attack going on. People probably won't get to you for quite a while."

"He's not moving," Andy said. He cleared his throat and swallowed, tasting blood. "Thomas. He's not moving."

"Fuck, is he breathing?" the receptionist asked. "Can you tell if he's breathing, Andy?"

"Um..."

Andy very carefully shifted underneath Thomas, trying to jostle him as little as possible. To his relief, Thomas groaned from the movement. He also shifted a little as if trying to get up. Apparently the receptionist heard it too because he heard a sigh of relief from the phone.

"Yes," Andy said.

"Are you trapped?" That was a male voice, one Andy didn't recognize.

"I don't know," Andy said. "The cab driver was crushed. We're in the foot well. There's no light coming in so... maybe?"

"Damn it," the man said. "Andy, this is Master Boles. This is a major attack. You need to try to get Thomas out of there. If possible, you need to get to a shelter."

"They're only two blocks from the gates," the receptionist said.

"Right in the middle of it then," Master Boles growled.

Andy gently shifted out from under Thomas. He kept a firm grip on the phone. It was the lifeline he needed to keep from panicking. Just hearing Master Boles and the receptionist on the other end helped keep the fear at bay. Thomas' phone couldn't keep the pain away but as long as he didn't panic it would be all right.

The windows were completely crushed. There was no way out there. Andy bit his lip, tasting blood and salty tears, but as he moved a little up onto the seat cushion he felt a little breeze on his cheek. It chilled the blood slowly creeping down his face.

"I feel a breeze," Andy said. "Maybe from the trunk?"

"Perfect," Master Boles said. Andy could hear relief in his voice. "Those cabs are designed with escape hatches through the rear compartment to the trunk, Andy. It'll probably be tight but you should be able to push your way through."

"Right, I'll try," Andy said. "Don't hang up."

"No, we won't," the receptionist said. "Don't you hang up on us. We're all rooting for you."

"That doesn't help," Andy said with a shaky groan. "Orders help. Cheering just freaks me out."

To Andy's surprise, Master Boles laughed. The receptionist made a noise like she'd put her hand over her mouth to smother a laugh. It wasn't meant to be funny. Cheering really did frighten him. It always made him feel as though he was on the verge of failure otherwise why would people cheer for him? But he wouldn't fail this time. This was simple. He could move a seat cushion. Even with his head pounding and blood dripping down his face he could do that.

"Push the seat aside," Andy muttered. "Or back?"

"Back," Master Boles ordered in such a deep, confident tone that it calmed Andy's nerves immediately. "It should pop out into the trunk, leaving a hole for the two of you to go through."

"Okay."

Andy tentatively pushed on the top of the seat back but it didn't budge. The bottom gave slightly. He had to set the phone next to Thomas' bloody, too-pale face but that was okay. It gave him both arms to push with and Thomas was right there. He was still breathing. He was pale but he was breathing. Breathing was important.

A good hard shove got one end of the seat back to pop out into the trunk of the cab. It was much cooler, thank goodness. Andy had to kick the other end repeatedly before it would even move. He couldn't get it to come loose but several hard kicks and one screaming punch got it to the point where he had a decent sized hole that they could squeeze through.

"It won't come all the way free," Andy said as he squirmed back around to pick up the phone. The air seemed to be helping Thomas. His face wasn't quite so pale. "I have a hole for us now."

"Good," Master Boles said. He muttered something to someone but Andy couldn't make it out. "Now, the trunk should have a latch on the inside. If you pull it the trunk should open."

"Maybe," Andy said dubiously. "Depends on whether or not the armored car is on top of the trunk, too."

"Give it a try," Master Boles said. "There's another escape hatch that you can use but it's much smaller and harder to get through."

"Trying now," Andy said.

Andy squirmed back into the trunk. The latch was actually really obvious. Someone had painted it yellow and red with reflective tape. He smiled, grateful to whoever it was for realizing that if you had to use the escape hatch you probably weren't going to be coherent enough for a careful search.

"It's..." Andy tugged and then sagged as the trunk popped open easily. "Open. Thank goodness."

"Be very careful, Andy," Master Boles said much more quietly. "You're in the middle of the attack zone. Peek. Don't climb out right away."

"Yes, sir," Andy murmured.

Andy looked back at Thomas first. His eyes were open but Andy could see that Thomas was still dazed. He didn't appear to know where he was or what was going on. But at least Thomas was stirring. He was awake. That was good. It was better than his being completely comatose.

Before Andy peeked, he sniffed. His nose ached and blood trickled down the back of his throat. Andy winced. Behind the smell and feel and taste of blood there was the smell of explosives and burning tires. He could hear the crackle of something burning fast and hard but it sounded as though it was a few dozen yards away. It wasn't right there. His fingers tightened on the phone to the point that they ached as Andy very carefully peeked up out of the trunk.

The street was scattered with burning, burnt and exploded cars. Andy gulped. An arm lay disconnected from anything in a puddle of blood a couple of yards from where he hid. Sirens sounded but they were very far away. A couple of miles, probably.

"They're here?" Andy asked in frightened whisper.

"We don't know," Master Boles murmured. "They could be. What do you see?"

"An arm," Andy replied. He jumped as Thomas' hand closed around his ankle. "Burnt cars. One of them is still burning, very hard."

"Damn, you need to get away from it," Master Boles said. "It could explode."

"Right," Andy said. "Thomas is awake. Give me a second."

He turned and tugged at Thomas' sleeve. Thomas opened his mouth only to shut it again when Andy shushed him. Andy carefully set the phone down and then squirmed around so that he could help Thomas ease his way through the hole.

It was tight, far tighter for Thomas than it was for Andy. Even if Andy had put on a few pounds he was never going to be as wide in the shoulders and chest as Thomas. He had to put his arms through first and then carefully wiggle until he made it through the gap. Andy bit his lip at how white Thomas went as his ribs passed through the hole.

There wasn't enough room for both of them in the trunk of the cab so Andy carefully scrambled out, looking all around for any sign of people. There was only the severed arm, thank goodness. He scooped up the phone before Thomas could flop on top of it, panting

"Ow," Thomas mumbled.

"I know, I know," Andy said. "Okay, I don't see anyone but us. We're both out."

"Good," Master Boles said with enough relief that it made Andy's stomach squirm again. "Can you stand? Can Thomas stand?"

"Um, I can," Andy said. "Not sure about Thomas yet."

"Can what?" Thomas asked in entirely too mushy and confused tone of voice.

"Stand," Andy said. "Master Boles needs you. You have to get up. We're two blocks away."

"The driver," Thomas mumbled as he awkwardly sat up and then crawled out of the trunk of the cab. "How is he?"

"Squished," Andy said.

He grunted as Thomas swayed and nearly fell as soon as his feet touched the ground. Thomas's knees didn't seem to want to hold him but Andy thought it was more because of his head than his legs. There was blood all down Thomas' face, still flowing from a cut on his forehead. Andy could see white at the center of the cut, bone.

"Master Boles is waiting," Andy hissed at Thomas. "Come on!"

"Oh, yeah," Thomas mumbled.

He didn't stand much straighter but he did manage to get his legs underneath him. Andy kept one shoulder under Thomas' arm so that he had some support. Standing up showed even more of the devastation. The armored shutters on the buildings closest to them hadn't closed before the explosions went off. Shattered glass lay scattered over the road and sidewalk.

There was a huge hole in the building right next to them. Andy shivered as he realized that it had to have been from their cab and the armored car smashing into it. Inside he could see people lying in puddles of blood. None of them moaned or moved so Andy decided to ignore them.

Andy couldn't help them. There were too many and he was just one person. Thomas was the most important one, only important person to help right now. He had to get Thomas to Master Boles' men. Once he did that then Andy could have a panic attack but not until then. Andy tugged gently at Thomas, guiding him around the armored car towards Master Boles' compound two blocks away.

"No panic attacks," Master Boles said in Andy's ear.

"Excuse me?" Andy asked.

"Heh, you were talking out loud, Andy," Master Boles said, his voice amused. "No panic attacks."

"Oh yes, definitely a panic attack," Andy countered. "But not yet. After we get there then I get to have a lovely long panic attack complete with tears and sobbing and maybe curling up in a ball under the blankets."

Both Thomas and Master Boles chuckled at that. Thomas winced at his laughter. Master Boles said something to the people there that Andy didn't quite follow though he did hear someone talking about

intercept and medical team. Good. That was good. That was what they needed.

"Come on," Andy said. "It's two blocks. We can make it two blocks, Thomas."

"Hope so," Thomas muttered. "Not feeling... very steady."

"That's because you're not steady," Andy said with a giggle that threatened to turn into hysterical laughter. He strangled it by swallowing several times even though the taste of blood in his throat made him gag and want to throw up. "Neither am I. We'll lean on each other and we'll get there."

They staggered down the street between smoking armored cars. Andy tried very hard to focus only on the phone clutched in his right hand and Thomas draped over his left shoulder. It wasn't easy.

The armored car that had landed on top of their cab had a woman's arm hanging out the window. Except that the arm ended just below the shoulder. Bits of flesh mingled with blood congealing on the side of the car.

"The driver," Thomas muttered.

"Squished," Andy reminded him. "He's squished. We can't get to him. We have to walk, Thomas."

"Right, walk," Thomas said.

The next car was a smoking hulk of twisted metal. If anyone had survived the initial explosion then they'd died before Andy and Thomas woke up. He could smell a horrible cooked-burnt-charred smell. This time Andy did gag in earnest.

"Walking," Thomas said.

"Y-yes," Andy agreed. "We just need to go two blocks. That's all."

It seemed like miles. The burned out cars were clustered right around their cab. They really had been at the very center of the attack. Andy guided Thomas through the burning cars towards the ones that appeared to have been abandoned. Doors hung open with the contents spilled out onto the street. One doll lay by a child seat, abandoned. The child seat was blessedly empty so Andy assumed both parent and child had survived.

"See, there it is," Andy said as they reached the intersection. "I can see it. Well, I can see two sets of gates. My eyes keep crossing."

"Aim between them," Thomas said in an amused but entirely too distant mumble.

"You aim," Andy grumbled at him. "I'm doing all the supporting. It's your job to aim."

Thomas snorted in amusement, flinched and cautiously nodded. He seemed to be a little more focused after that. His legs still wobbled badly but he tugged gently at Andy's waist, keeping them from walking straight into a patch of red hydraulic fluid. At least Andy assumed it was hydraulic fluid. It wasn't dark or thick enough for spilled blood.

They were halfway up the second block, close enough that Andy could see the gate clearly despite his crossing eyes, when a group of armored men appeared. Their visors were down, obscuring their faces. All of them had guns drawn. Even Andy could see that they had their fingers on the triggers.

"Get down!" the armored men shouted at Andy and Thomas.

Something exploded right behind them, knocking Andy's legs out from under him. Thomas gasped and crumpled. His eyes rolled back as he fell to the glass-covered ground. Andy flung his hands out in front of him, phone still in his hand. The ground or maybe his knees made a horrible cracking noise as he hit the glass-covered pavement.

3. STRUGGLE

"Get them out of here!" one of the armored men bellowed.

"Get up, get up, get up!" another yelled at Andy.

The phone was still clutched in Andy's hand. His fingers didn't want to move. Some of them seemed to be at odd angles. He shoved the phone into his pocket. Thomas didn't move. Andy grabbed his shoulders and shook. Nothing.

Soldiers shouted over Andy's head. Guns went off all around him. He flinched. Thomas was bleeding from his back. Andy took a deep breath and rolled Thomas over. His left wrist was strangely weak, barely able to support any of Thomas' weight. Andy ignored that, ignored the glass under his aching knees, ignored the strange feeling of the fingers on his right hand and most especially ignored the way his head throbbed.

They had to get to the gate. The soldiers were fighting. Getting to the gate was the most important thing. If they got to the gate they'd be safe. He had to get Thomas up and to the gate right now.

"Move!" a soldier shouted at Andy.

"Not without Thomas!" Andy shouted right back at him.

He hefted Thomas up, got his arms underneath Thomas' and

then struggled to get his feet underneath him. There was glass in his knees. It hurt and they didn't want to hold him up. Andy ignored that. Stand. He had to stand.

Andy stood. Thomas was heavy and the guns were loud and another explosion went off to his left but it wasn't so close that it knocked Andy down. He was standing. That was what counted. Now to move.

Thomas moaned quietly in Andy's arms. The sound was inaudible over the shouts, guns and explosions but Andy felt it. Thomas was live. He was alive. If he was alive then it was okay. Andy could do this.

He started dragging Thomas towards the gate. Soldiers waved at him, mouthing words that Andy ignored. Their words didn't matter. All that mattered was the next step and then the one after that. Thomas's rib cage was warm. Andy could feel his heart beating. The glass in his knees hurt but Andy kept dragging Thomas.

"Look out!" one soldier shouted as something dark and fast whizzed past them.

It hit by the gate. Another huge fireball went up. Andy staggered as the shock wave hit him but he kept moving towards the gate. There were people on the other side. They had armored helmets and vests, guns and, wonder of wonders, a stretcher that would be perfect for carrying Thomas.

"Almost, almost, almost," Andy muttered as he dragged Thomas across the final intersection and through the rubble that was all that remained of the gate.

"Here!" one of the medics in armor called. "Bring him here!"

"Yes," Andy panted. "Help... would be good!"

He could just see a lightning quick grin behind the medic's visor. Another soldier-medic-whatever grabbed Thomas' feet. Together they swung Thomas onto the stretcher. It was one of the flat ones that had straps to hold the occupant in place, along with hand holds cut out around the edges. The stretcher itself seemed inappropriately yellow, especially as another explosion went off by the gates.

Andy flipped straps to the medic who cursed under his (her?) breath. Maybe. It could have been out loud. The explosions had Andy's ears ringing so badly that he wasn't sure he'd hear anything other than shouts. He helped secure one strap as more shouting and guns sounded over his head. The medic grabbed one side of the stretcher. Another one grabbed a hand hold by Thomas' feet. Two more grabbed handholds on Andy's side.

"Go!" the medic shouted as Andy reached for one of the hand holds.

"Thomas," Andy said.

He grabbed the hand hold closest to Thomas' head with his stubbornly messed up right hand but he stood and ran when they did. The buildings seemed to be miles away. Andy honestly had no idea how far the nearest one actually was. That didn't matter though. The medics carried Thomas to a big armored truck that was easily four times the size of the cab they'd taken.

"Get in!" one medic-soldier-person shouted at Andy without giving him a chance to scramble up the back steps.

The soldier-person grabbed the back of Andy's shirt and picked him up off his feet. Andy shouted as he was literally thrown into the truck. He tumbled and skidded, tearing his palms and knees even worse than they had been before.

"Thomas!" Andy gasped.

He sagged as the medics slid Thomas and his stretcher into the back. Two of the medics jumped in while the other soldier-people slammed the doors shut on them. One medic braced Thomas. The other caught Andy as the armored truck rumbled and then roared into motion.

"Thomas?" Andy whispered, clutching the medic's Kevlar sleeve.

"He's fine," the medic said. He laughed at the scathing look Andy gave him. "All right, he's not fine but he will be. I need you to calm down. I have to look at your knees. They're bleeding badly. So is your head."

"I want," Andy said and was vaguely surprised at how hard it was to form any words other than Thomas' name, "to touch Thomas."

The two medics looked at each other. Andy reached past the one holding him so that he could rest his left hand on Thomas' shoulder. It wasn't much but it was better than nothing. The medic holding Andy shook his head. He let Andy keep his hand there while cursing under his breath at the state of Andy's knees.

Something big banged outside the armored truck and they screeched to a stop. Andy started, his fingers latching onto Thomas' shirt though his grip was far too weak. The back door opened to a thousand voices and faces, all of them saying things that Andy couldn't quite follow. He cringed away from them even though the medic treating his knees urged Andy towards the horde of people.

Thomas' stretcher was ripped out from under Andy's hand. He shouted at them, something wordless, incoherent. When Andy tried to scramble after Thomas the two medics grabbed him and kept him from following. The one who had braced Thomas for their drive kept saying something to Andy but the words didn't make any sense.

He struggled against them, trying to get to Thomas. It didn't work. Thomas had already disappeared into the crowd of people and noise. Andy shook in the two medics' arms as he tried to stand up, tried to follow Thomas wherever they were taking him.

The horde parted as a tall man in a fine black suit with a beard going white at the corners of his mouth appeared. People said things to the tall man but he waved them off. His eyes were focused on Andy and no one else.

It took a moment for Andy to connect the magnetic man in the fine black suit with people that he'd met. His memory didn't seem to be working any better than his hands or his aching head. Even if Andy had a hard time putting a name to the man's face at first, everyone else obviously knew exactly who he was.

"Master... Boles," Andy said finally.

Master Boles smiled so gently that tears filled Andy's eyes. He reached into Andy's pocket and carefully turned Thomas' phone off. Then he gently brushed the tears off Andy's cheeks.

"I need you to focus, Andy," Master Boles said. As soon as he

opened his mouth the noise from the other people in the horde stilled. They all watched Master Boles as closely as Andy did.

"It's hard," Andy said.

"I know," Master Boles said. "Thomas is going to be okay. I saw him. You need medical treatment. Can you let them take care of you?"

Andy shivered, his arms curling inwards towards his chest. He didn't want anyone to touch him. But Thomas would be upset if he hadn't allowed them to treat him. Master Boles said that Thomas would be okay so he would be okay. Master Boles didn't lie. If he didn't know, then he would have said that he didn't know. That meant that Andy would get Thomas back. Thomas would be okay.

"I think I need a very, very strong tranquilizer," Andy said as the shakes overtook his whole body, setting off waves of pain in his head, arms and knees. "And maybe to be knocked out."

"Your skull is cracked," Master Boles chuckled. "We can give you locals but we can't knock you out, Andy."

"It's that bad?" Andy asked.

"I'm stunned you made it this far," Master Boles said. "Do you want to hold onto Thomas' phone?"

"Yes," Andy said immediately. "That would help."

Master Boles put the phone into Andy's hands, smiling and nodding when Andy clutched it to his chest with fingers that wouldn't close right and hands that didn't move the way they should. This time when the medics tried to get Andy to move, he let them help. His knees wouldn't support him at all, surprisingly. They had to bring a rolling stretcher for Andy to ride on.

Once he lay down Andy's head started throbbing unbelievably. The world spun and swooped long before they started moving, while the medics were carefully strapping Andy down and attaching an IV to his left elbow. They let him keep the phone in the other hand.

Andy lost track of where they were almost immediately after they started moving. Master Boles paced by his side, following Andy into a treatment room that looked rather like a surgery. The doctors did X-rays of his knees, wincing at the damage.

He had to give the phone to one of the nurses as they did more X-rays of his hips, chest, arms and head but she gave it right back, setting it next to Andy's cheek once they were done.

The local anesthetics did a lovely job of numbing the pain in Andy's knees. He was desperately grateful that they put up a little screen so that he couldn't see what they did to fix the damage. Andy could still hear the metallic ting of bloody debris hitting a collection bin though. Another doctor numbed the skin on Andy's scalp before slowly, carefully stitching his head up.

"I didn't realize it was cut," Andy said to the doctor.

"It's a nice one," the doctor said. Andy could see his smile behind the mask over his face. His eyes wrinkled with amusement. "You'll probably have a lovely scar when this is all over though I think your hair will cover most of it."

"Good," Andy sighed. "I don't want to see it. I want to see Thomas."

"He wants to see you too," the doctor laughed. "He's being quite obnoxious about staying in bed."

Andy grinned at that. The loopy feeling increased the more they worked on him. Pain-killers, maybe? He didn't know. All he knew was that it was okay now. Thomas was okay. Master Boles hadn't lied. It would be all right now.

"He's a terrible patient," Andy confided. "Whenever he gets sick I have to all but force him to rest. He always wants to go to work and get everyone else sick, too."

Andy shut his eyes to the sound of doctors chuckling. He opened them to quiet beeping and the feeling of someone very gently touching his shoulder.

The disconnect between one moment and the next made Andy blink several times as his eyes crossed and uncrossed several times. His whole body ached but he didn't feel quite so confused, so out of touch with reality.

"Hey," Thomas said.

"You look awful," Andy said, staring up at him.

He did. Thomas' head was wrapped with bandages. The spot

where Andy had seen bone-white had a big bandage. There were more bruises on his face and he had a hospital gown and scrub pants on instead of a shirt and slacks. Bandages wrapped his arms and one smaller one was taped to the side of his neck.

"You're no great prize yourself right now," Thomas said. "Everyone's amazed at what you did."

"What did I do?" Andy asked. "I mean, other than carry you through the gate."

"You got us out of the cab with a cracked skull," Thomas said. "My scalp was cut but I don't have any skull fractures. Then you carried me after the rocket explosion even though both of your kneecaps were fractured and there was glass in the joints. Plus one of your wrists is broken and most of the fingers on your right had were dislocated at some point."

"Uh..."

Andy stared up at him. That didn't seem possible. He blinked several times, absently cataloging the smell of antiseptic and blood, the sound of doctors talking in the distance.

His body really did hurt but it was that distant sort of hurt that went along with very powerful pain killers. Even with the pain killers Andy was highly aware that his head hurt and his knees felt wrong. Now that he paid attention, he could tell that his hands were messed up too.

"Next year," Andy said and grinned at Thomas' startled look. "Next year we are taking a vacation, Thomas Loomis. We are leaving a week before our anniversary and we're not coming back until a week afterwards."

Thomas burst out laughing even though he had to clutch his ribs. "It's a promise, love. Anything you want."

"Good," Andy said. "Because this was the worst anniversary ever."

"I agree," Thomas chuckled. "I totally agree."

He carefully sat on the side of Andy's bed to rest his hand on Andy's thigh. This certainly wasn't what Andy had wanted for their anniversary or any other day but at least they both survived. They

Iridescent

were alive. They were relatively whole, all things considered. Everything else would have to wait to be dealt with.

Andy put his bandaged hand on top of Thomas' and sighed. The world could wait. He had the one person he really needed and that was all that counted.

THE END

**AUTHOR NOTE: THE SHORES OF
TWILIGHT BAY**

*H*aving opened with a love story, I decided to end with one. I live in the Puget Sound so this one has scenes that I see every day mixed with characters that I wish I knew in real life.

1. CLOUDY ARRIVAL

*T*ai bounced on her toes, the dock rocking underneath her. Icy cold water washed up over her shoes, dampening her socks and sending chills up her spine. Such a cold day. May wasn't supposed to be this cold but here she was, standing on the dock with a winter coat, wet shoes and hands that felt like ice cubes.

If the lilacs weren't blooming she'd think it was March.

Honestly, though, you could barely tell that the lilacs were in bloom today. The grape-clusters of blossoms had clamped shut when faced with the cold weather. Her head should be swimming from the drunk-inducing smell of the things lurking by the dock and instead all she could smell was seaweed, that rotting fish up the shore and the snap of salt from the Sound.

Not exactly the best welcome for her friends. Definitely not what she'd intended when she invited them all out for a week-long vacation away from the world. Having your own island, little though it was, in the middle of the Puget Sound was an awesome, awesome thing. During the summer. When winter came around it was a lot less enticing to come out and stay for a while. The way the weather was going, Xinyi's new girlfriend was going to think that it was always rainy, windy and cold here.

If only they'd arrived yesterday when the sun was shining, the water was still as glass and Tai had been wandering around in board shorts and nothing else. No need for anything more around here. The nearest people were miles away and on the other side of the island from Tai's cabin. She could go topless all she wanted.

Well.

She could. She generally didn't. The thought of someone sailing by tended to send her running for the cabin, hands clamped over her teeny-tiny boobs. But she'd been daring and done it yesterday and now it was winter again.

Damn the weather anyway.

Still, they should have fun, once the others got here. Tai had come early so that she could make sure everything was ready. All the food they could eat in a solid month, nice clean sheets, tons of games. She'd made sure that the kayaks were all cleaned up and ready, that the paddles were in good shape. She'd even spent a solid day chopping wood just in case they might need to start a fire.

"Good thing I did," Tai said, glaring up at the sky that was stubbornly grey.

Every so often the clouds shifted just enough that she'd get a glimpse of brightness where the sun was hidden but then the clouds huddled together, blocking the sun again. Made the forest seem like something from a fairy tale, all dark and gloomy and wet. Even the wonderful crisp scent of the cedars looming over the island didn't help. Cedar and ferns and moss-covered rocks didn't appeal when they were covered with rain drops and the wind cut right through you.

Tai bounced again.

Water soaked her shoes again.

Chibuike better have brought booze. Normally, Tai would have forbidden it, knowing that Chibuike would sneak it in anyway, but celebrating Tai's inheritance, Chibuike's new job, Abia's new commission and Xinyi's new lover Shani made a nice night of drinking and telling stories inevitable. Necessary even.

And with this stupid weather the booze would be even more

welcome. Tai would just have to make sure that no one went out on the dock after dark. Too much risk of drowning and even a dip in the Sound could kill you if you didn't get warmed back up again.

"Speaking of which," Tai said as she peered around the end of the island towards the mainland, "where are they?"

Her fingers and toes really did feel like ice.

She stopped bouncing, which of course made the splashing over her poor cold feet stop just as Mother would have said if she'd still been alive to watch Tai freezing on the dock. And listened hard. Water splashing, waves a bit higher than she'd wanted for her friends' arrival. An eagle calling in the distance. The obnoxious honking rasp of a deer over on the next island over, the one that was a nature preserve with too many deer for its size but don't say that to the people back on the mainland. Hunting deer and eating them was evil.

Tai rolled her eyes. As if letting the deer starve to death was better.

Then she gasped and bounced again because there, finally, was the sound she'd been waiting for. The big boat, the one with the heavy engine that could push it through the worst chop on the Sound, was nearing the tip of the island. Give it three more minutes, max, and they'd round the point and enter Twilight Bay.

It only took two minutes for the big boat, lavender hull almost grey in this dismal light, to sail majestically around the point. Tai cheered and started waving, getting only one wave back and that from Chibuike. The others were all hunkered down, probably wrapped up in the old wool Army blankets Mother had insisted on for trips out to the island.

A good idea, if smelly. The wool did keep you warm, even when wet.

Tai's feet were wet right up to her calves by the time Chibuike and she got the big boat tied up to the dock. The others, Abia in particular, were so hunkered down under the blankets that Tai was glad that she'd heated up the hot tub last night. They all needed to get warm. Her included.

Weird part was that there was a spare person in the boat along with the others that Tai had expected. Sure, Xinyi had said that her lover Shani had a roommate who was 'having some trouble right now and in need of a break' but Tai hadn't expected the roommate to come out to the island, too. She'd sort of assumed that the roommate would be perfectly happy to have their apartment to themselves. Privacy was a lovely, lovely thing, after all.

The roommate, whatever her name was, was even lovelier so Tai couldn't help but be glad that the plans had changed. Beautiful dark skin that was mostly hidden away under a huge grey hoodie tempted Tai to introduce herself immediately but the wary look in the roommate's eyes made that a bad idea.

So.

"Come on, get out!" Tai said, grinning at them. And then groaning when Abia pulled the Army blanket up over her head. "Abia. There's a hot tub. And hot showers. And I've got the fire started. I even started a nice stew in the crock pot."

"You promised nice weather," Abia complained. Her voice was muffled by the blanket. "This is not nice weather."

"I promised a nice week of peace and quiet, not 'nice weather'," Tai countered as Xinyi started tugging the blanket out of Abia's hands while Chibuike passed one carryon suitcase and two duffle bags to Tai. "Now come on. It's way warmer inside and my toes are wet."

That got Abia up and moving, thank goodness. Trust Abia to go all Mom on Tai at the drop of a hat.

Where Abia was short, round and busty, an exact opposite to Tia's slender, flat-chested frame, Xinyi shared her body-builder's physique with her lover Shani. Who was even taller than Xinyi at an easy six two to Xinyi's five eleven. The roommate, quiet and shy and very much not even slightly Asian in descent, climbed out of the big boat and hesitantly carried duffles after Tai.

Her eyes were huge and brown as cedar wood that'd been stained, with coppery-brown hair that poofed in tiny ringlets all around her head. Not quite an afro but close. Tai stared for a second, wondering

if the freckles were sun damage or natural. Then she shrugged it off and smiled at the roommate.

"Hi," Tai said as welcomingly as she possibly could because this had to be weird as all hell, going off to an island with a bunch of women she didn't know. "I'm Tai Niven, no relation to the writer. You must be Shani's roommate. I wasn't expecting you but we'll make do. You're totally welcome. Another set of hands to carry stuff up to the cabin is absolutely lovely."

"Ah, thanks?" the roommate said, staring at Tai as if she wanted to run back to the boat and sail right back to the mainland.

"This is Lake," Xinyi said, grinning at Lake as if she'd predicted just this. "Lake Nimit. I told you it'd be fine. Tai's so-called cabin has plenty of room."

"It's a cabin!" Tai protested even though all the others except Lake rolled their eyes. "Come on, guys. It's absolutely a cabin. We've got a generator for power and gas heating, cooking, everything and it's made of logs. It's a cabin."

"It's got eight bedrooms," Xinyi said to Lake whose eyes had only gotten bigger with the teasing. "A hot tub to fit ten people easily and twenty if they're cozy. And the kitchen is the sort of thing you'd see in one of those lifestyles of the rich and shameless shows."

Tai whined and drooped dramatically, almost dropping her duffels into the moss coating the shore instead of grass, but only because she wanted to see if she could get Lake to laugh. It took a moment but as Abia and Chibuike started laughing, and Shani grinned, Lake breathed a little laugh that made Tai's heart do a flip.

And no, no questioning why that flip was so pronounced. As if Tai didn't already know. So no questions, not questions at all, not a single one, especially not if Lake was single and interested in girls.

Not when there were stairs up the shore to climb, luggage to carry and a dozen stories of the trip hear for Tai to exclaim over. Thankfully, even though the afternoon was grey and gloomy, it wasn't so dark that they couldn't see their way up the path through the cedars to the cabin.

Which, no, wasn't a mansion or something. No matter what Xinyi

always said when she visited. It was big, yes, and had a lot of very small bedrooms but it wasn't that huge. Every single log had come from the island. For that matter, most of the furniture had been crafted from wood harvested on the island. From the cedar chairs out on the deck to the bedframes, tables and cabinets inside, it was all native to the island.

"This is... pretty big," Lake said once Tai let everyone inside where, thank goodness, it was much, much warmer.

"Still a cabin," Tai said, bumping shoulders with Xinyi who laughed and bumped back. "Come on. Shoes off. I've got nice fuzzy slippers for everyone. The big sheepskin boots are for you, Abia. I know you're going to claim them anyway."

Tai sat down on the floor and pulled off her shoes and socks, crowing as Abia choked at the sight of water dripping off her socks. Though, granted, her toes were pretty blue. And a little numb. Not frostbitten, no, but very, very chilled.

She listened with half an ear to the lecture Abia leveled on her as Abia bustled around, getting towels to dry Tai's feet, warm socks from Tai's bedroom and then a nice big cup of tea that Shani had somehow prepared all stealth-like while the others focused on Abia and Tai.

Nice.

Shani was going to fit right in if she was the quietly motherly type. She and Abia would team up and make Tai behave in no time. Or they'd try, anyway.

Tai made sure that the others got their picks of rooms, steering Lake away from the bedroom at the far end of the cabin from the great room. That one was always cold as ice, even in the heat of the Puget Sound's brief summer. She ended up directly opposite Tai's bedroom, in the one that was decorated all in forest green and gold accents. It had the heaviest door, made of thick planks of cedar that had been carved in native Salish patterns for bear and salmon and elk.

Xinyi pulled Shani into their room, two doors up, while Chibuiki and Abia pretended to argue about who'd get to have the red and the white rooms next door to Tai and Lake's rooms respectively. But they

ended up exactly as they always did with Abia in the red and Chibuike in the white. Tai shook her head, grinning at Lake who hesitated in the doorway, one hand gripping the handle so hard that her knuckles were white.

"It really is okay," Tai murmured to Lake who started as if more afraid of the gentle tone than Tai's usually loud and obnoxious voice. "I didn't expect you but you're welcome here, Lake. Seriously. You don't have to hang out with us if you don't want to. Oh, but don't go out walking on the shore at night. It's super slippery and you could die really quick in the water if you fell in. The Sound's very cold. Like instant hypothermia cold. If you see the fire's gone down, toss another log on. Other than that, relax. Enjoy yourself. You can unpack or not as you choose. Dinner should be ready in a half hour or an hour. I hope you like it here."

Tai's cheeks were red by the time she managed to stop talking. Darn it all. Lake stared at her, mouth open for a long while. Then she nodded, smiled for a millisecond, and then disappeared into her room.

Tai sighed.

Just like her to be instantly smitten by someone who either wasn't interested in girls or who was so shy that Tai's personality alone would scare them away.

Oh well.

At least the others were here and they had a good long week to relax and enjoy themselves. Even if nothing happened with Lake, it should be awesome.

Though Tai couldn't help but hope, as she headed into the kitchen to start making biscuits to go with the stew, that something would come of her new little crush. Lake was lovely and Tai had been along long enough.

2. MOSSY PATH

Lake licked her fingers. Cheesy poof crumbs. Best thing ever. Maybe.

She didn't look into the bag lying listless and deflated by her side. The porch was cold, damp, quieter than anything Lake had ever experienced. Just blowing wind, waves off on the shores of the islands, and the sounds of birds in the trees. Not one motor anywhere. If anyone asked, she was going to blame the quiet on eating so many cheesy poofs.

First time she'd ever eaten a whole bag by herself in one sitting. She kinda felt queasy. Well, maybe more than kinda. Between the huge bowl of stew last night, with really amazing homemade bread, breakfast this morning with eggs, bacon, more amazing bread topped with six different sorts of jam, and then an enormous sandwich at lunch packed with meat and veggies, Lake had been pretty full even before she sat down with the bag of cheesy poofs.

More food than she generally ate in a week, all spread out in front of her. None of the others seemed to notice that Lake ate and ate and ate. Tai had. But she hadn't frowned or made any comments about Lake's weight or even pulled the food away.

She'd pushed it at Lake and then made more like that was a

totally normal thing for someone to do for an utter stranger who'd shown up without notice to your house.

Lake's cheesy dust coated fingers shook as a chill bounced up her back, shuddering her teeth and spine.

Apparently, Shani had been right. Lake was allowed. Welcome, even. It seemed like a joke where the punchline had yet to hit. People like this didn't welcome Lake. They didn't treat her like a friend or smile when she showed up or, especially, go red and flustered and adorable when Lake looked at them.

Gramma would have said that that was because Lake always put her nose where it didn't belong. And that she was taking things that weren't hers by just being here. Of course, Gramma would have made sure that Lake didn't eat half what she had so far. There was no point to even thinking about what she'd have said or done to Lake for eating an entire bag of cheesy poofs all by herself even if Lake had spent her own money on them.

Lake bit her lip as Gramma's eternal scolding echoed in her head. Even here, a continent away, Lake couldn't get away from Gramma. Nothing was going to change. She already knew that. No matter what Lake tried, she never succeeded at anything. Every time she made an effort she ended up embarrassing herself and skulking back home to Gramma who scowled and huffed and sent her back to her room at the rear of the house with a few well-chosen words about what a waste of breath Lake was.

"Hey, there you are," Tai said, loud and bright as the brassy-loud black and white birds Shani had said were called jays. "Wondered where you went. Oh. You didn't. You ate the whole bag?"

Lake started to apologize automatically but had a delighted grin, the dopey sort that made Tai's eyes squinch up and her molars show as she bounced on her toes. Every bounce made her beaten-up track shoes squish a little as if she already had wet feet. Or was that still?

"Um. Yeah?" Lake said.

"Way to go!" Tai exclaimed. "Man, I never can resist those things. Best damn junk food in the world. Abia's making dinner so she shooed me out. And, of course, Xinyi and Shani are off in their

bedroom making out. You wanna go for a walk? After a full bag like that you're going to want to walk some of it off. Otherwise Abia will make sad faces at you and do that wrist against the forehead thing like you're getting sick."

"How do you people eat so much?" Lake asked as she stood, empty bag in one hand and heart in her throat. "Seriously, I don't get it."

"Eh, food eaten on vacation has no calories," Tai said as if it was law of nature. "We all agreed early on that we're going to enjoy ourselves and good food is part of that. So no calories or diets while we're here."

She snagged the bag and calmly tossed it into a garbage bin that Lake hadn't even noticed was there. It was tucked away into a cedar planter looking thing so it was really well camouflaged. Then she bounced down the stairs, swinging her arms and smiling at the world as if it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Except that she turned and stared up at Lake as if Lake was even more beautiful.

"We've got some great walking trails on the island," Tai said. "We'll probably all go walking tomorrow. Unless it pours. Which it might. There's no TV or internet or anything out here but Abia had the radio on earlier and they said today's going to be misty in the evening but tomorrow will be really glorious. Except for a chance of rain in the afternoon. Which sucks. I wanted to go out fishing sometime this week and it's not looking like that's going to happen. You haven't eaten until you've had fresh-caught salmon straight from the Sound. So rich and just the best."

She caught Lake's hand once Lake carefully went down the slippery stairs and then they were off. Tai kept up a steady stream of chatter about the island, which had been in her mother's family for two generations, then her mother, who'd been dead for two years but who was apparently not all that missed by anyone, and the slugs.

Which.

Really?

Slugs?

"There we go!" Tai exclaimed as they emerged out onto the shore

where the ridiculously lavender boat was tied up. "See? I told you the slugs could get to six inches long."

Tai pointed down towards her feet and then burst out laughing as Lake screamed and scrambled backwards away from the monster slug. Golden-green and easily as long as Lake's hand, the thing slowly slithered its way across the end of the dock, leaving behind a shimmering trail of slime.

"Oh. My. God!" Lake gasped. Her stomach tried to rebel but a hand over her mouth stopped that. For the moment.

"They're harmless," Tai said, grinning at her. "Lots of them, of course, especially at this time of the summer. A few weeks earlier and they'd have been tiny. In another couple of weeks, they'll all be gone. Don't worry about it. Worst that'll happen is that you'll step on one and slip."

"Oh gross," Lake whined. She shuddered and thought about running straight back to the cabin but there were mossy trails and dangling ferns and so many trees that those horrible slugs could be hiding behind. "That's nasty!"

"You are so not from the Puget Sound," Tai said and then burst into belly laughter that echoed over the water.

Her laughter was as bright and open as she was. There didn't seem to be a single thing that Tai hid from the world. She was as open as the water behind her, as clear as glass. Lake stared, heart beating faster from want instead of disgust at the slug.

She'd never met anyone as open as Tai was.

Or as beautiful. Slender, athletic, graceful despite her endless movement or perhaps because of it, Tai looked like a wood nymph made flesh. Except, you know, most wood nymphs probably didn't have an undercut that was dyed purple on the left side of their heads. Or battered shoes that looked like the tops were about to separate from the bottoms. Or a red and black flannel shirt that had obviously been worn so many times that it was as soft as butter in August.

Man, Lake was so crushing.

Not good.

"How about I go first and warn you of any slugs we encounter?"

Tai offered once she stopped laughing with a delighted wheeze and a sunshine-bright grin up at Lake.

"Um. Deal, I think," Lake said. She cautiously slid down the mossy slope to Tai's side. "Is there anything else I should worry about on this adventure?"

"Just spiders," Tai said. Far more seriously. "We do get brown recuses up here so be very careful if you see any big spider webs. I'll be looking, of course, but I could miss them. Brown recluse bites are nothing to mess with. They can do some serious damage."

She headed left, south, away from the dock and the monster slug. Lake was more than happy to follow Tai. The trail was super slick at first, moss covered stones as round as goose eggs making every step a challenge. Tai thrust her arms out and kept on chattering as she walked like she was on a balance beam.

Lake went more slowly, more cautiously, but pretty quickly they were heading up away from the shore and onto a proper gravel-covered trail that led around the perimeter of the island. Which. Wow. Seriously a gorgeous view. The waves were slate-blue topped with whipped cream peaks. No other islands were too close on this side. The water stretched south and east and west to the mainland. Or was that an island off to the south? West had to be an island, right?

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Tai murmured and then snickered at Lake's start of surprise. "You stopped. So I came back. I always loved this view. I used to come out here and stare every day when I was little. No diving, though. The water's not deep enough for it here. There's a great diving spot up ahead. Not that I'd recommend it today. Too cold. But maybe we'll get lucky and there'll be a super-warm day and we can all go swimming later in the week."

"I um," Lake hesitated and then spit it out in a rush because Tai stared at her wide-eyed and eager, "didn't bring a swimsuit."

Tai stared, blinked several times, and then hooted a laugh. She clapped her hands and pranced, giggling as Lake's cheeks went red. Then redder. And then so red that she felt hot from the top of her head right down to her toes.

"No way."

"Hee!"

"You swim naked?" Lake asked. Screeched, really, and man, Gramma would have smacked her for that tone of voice. "No way!"

"Your face!" Tai said, cackling. She wiped some tears away and grinned. "We sure do. Well, topless, mostly. I mean, Abia always wears a swim top. With her breasts she kind of needs to. But I always wear board shorts to swim in and nothing else on the island. I mean, with my chest what else do I need?"

She looked down at her chest, rueful smile in place that looked way too familiar to Lake. How many times had she seen that look in the mirror, especially after Gramma said something mean? A million times, easy.

"I um." Lake patted Tai's shoulder awkward as could be. "I think you look good. Fine. I mean, they're good. I'm stopping now."

Tai beamed and laughed some more as she blushed and then grabbed Lake's hand so that they could continue walking along the trail. Her fingers were like ice but confident ice. No wonder Abia fussed over Tai getting cold. The woman turned into an ice cube at the drop of a hat.

"Thank you," Tai said, skipping for a few steps. "I act all brave about going topless but then I chicken out half of the time. So if you want to wear a shirt or something, you go right ahead and do it. I mean, if we get to swim. Who knows? It might start raining and keep on raining the rest of the week."

"And... what do we do then?" Lake asked because she definitely didn't have enough books to read for a week long stay in the mansion-sized cabin.

Tai's grin took on a decidedly predatory cast as her fingers tightened around Lake's hand. "How do you feel about Uno?"

Lake stared at Tai for a long, long moment, ignoring the heavy lace-like drapes of cedar branches around them, ignoring the glimpse ahead of an isolated looking cove that must be Tai's swimming cove. She even ignored the water that dripped down her neck from a branch overhead.

"Do you want to get us all killed?" Lake hissed. "Uno? For days? That's insane! We'll all end up dead or enemies for life when the first draw four comes out!"

It was mostly a joke. Well, partly. Uno games back home were cutthroat things that had started more than a couple outright feuds in the family. Tai bellowed a laugh as she grinned and nodded enthusiastically.

"Finally!" Tai shouted at the cedar branches dripping down on them. "Someone who takes Uno seriously enough!"

Lake laughed because what else could you do? Beautiful, rich, endlessly enthusiastic and cutthroat at Uno? She'd finally met her dream girl.

Not that it was going to work out but hey. At least she could pretend for a week that it might. As Tai laughed and laughed and then pulled her onwards down the trail, Lake decided that she'd ignore the past, Gramma's pronouncements, and just enjoy herself this week.

As much as possible when it was doomed to fail the moment they left the island.

3. SWIMMING HOLE

The next day dawned clear and cold but the sky was so bright blue overhead that Tai just knew it'd be a great day for swimming in a couple of hours. The little cove that they used for swimming was over an underwater vent that spewed heated water into the Sound. Not too surprising given that the entire Puget Sound was riddled with fault lines and geothermal hot spots. It was just lucky that Twilight Island had one and in such a wonderful spot for swimming.

Abia, of course, insisted on bringing blankets and food and half the towels in the cabin. But then she loathed sitting in a wet swim suit so she was justified in that. Shani looked at the bright sunshine and pulled her shirt off before they'd even left the porch. Her flat chest was marked with hickies that Tai poked Xinyi over while Xinyi just grinned proudly.

Lake blushed.

She had the cutest blush, seriously, a huge wash of red over her cheeks that slowly crept higher and higher until her whole face was blazing and her neck had gone red. Her ears radiated they were so bright. It was adorable and Tai wanted to see Lake blush every single day forever.

"I've got the cooler," Xinyi said as she hefted it up onto her shoulder and grabbed four of the folding chairs. "Babe, can you get the blankets with Tai? Abia and Lake can get the drinks since Chibuike decided not to go swimming with us."

"We got it," Shani said, easy and calm but there was a warning in her eyes as the others trooped off towards the beach with Abia explaining all the warnings to Lake since she'd never been here before.

At least that let Tai stare at Lake's perfect heart-shaped ass as she walked away. Short-shorts and a tank top were a very good look on Lake.

"She was abused," Shani murmured once the others were a bit away and Tai had the blankets in her arms. Shani had all the towels even though the stack was half as tall as she was. "Parents died when she was young so she went to live with her grandmother. Who was white and not at all pleased to have a mixed-race kid living in her house. Lake's pretty messed up about it. I'm letting her stay with me rent-free as she gets on her feet."

"Huh," Tai said, nodding as they followed the other slowly. "I can see that, actually. Recently escaped?"

"Very," Shani said. "So go easy on her, will you?"

"My mom wasn't much better," Tai said. She shrugged at the concerned look. "Mom didn't intend to be awful but she was. Xinyi's probably said a little bit about it."

"Yeah," Shani agreed, still frowning. "You have therapy?"

"Nope," Tai said with her biggest grin. "Just a personality like a rubber ball from one of those vending machines in the grocery store and the best friends the world has ever seen. Friends make a big difference. So is Lake the defiantly determined to succeed sort or is she the inevitably going to fail even as she's doing well sort?"

Shani chuckled, shaking her head. "The second. Shoots herself in the foot all the time. She likes you. Hard not to."

"Well, of course," Tai said with her best wide-eyed innocent look. "I'm amazing."

That gave her a bigger laugh and a grin that made Tai skip down

the trail to the beach. So if she really wanted to seduce Lake, which she did now that she knew Lake was interested in girls and specifically interested in Tai, she'd have to be a little bit careful.

Tai already knew that she didn't want a fling.

There was something about Lake, her hesitation, the way she thought things over, the careful way she approached life, that drew Tai in like a moth to a lantern. To know that Lake had been through some of the same things, at least in general, that Tai had? That just made the draw stronger. The others tried but they'd all had reasonably good families that accepted them as they were. Sometimes Tai really felt alone because she hadn't had that.

But she'd had her friends and now she was free forever from Mom's stupid behavior so it was good. Everything was good.

Especially once they reached the beach and found Abia already in the water, hand in hand with Lake as she explained exactly where the gravel path into the deeper water was and how to stay away from the hot spot over on the far side of the beach where the water came up. It was bubbling, the little bay steaming, so the water should be perfect today. The hot spring was hot enough they had a little fog bank hiding the end of the bay so Tai didn't even have to worry about someone seeing her topless.

Better than that, though was that Lake had taken off her tank top and her short shorts. Naked, Lake was even more gorgeous than she'd been before. Lovely long arms and legs with the most perfectly brown skin Tai had ever seen. She'd pulled her hair up so that it was a poof on the top of her head, and wow.

Lake's breasts were just a hair bigger than Tai's. A little fuller but still small enough that they'd never need a bra. Big nipples, though, big and brown and so tempting.

"Wipe up the drool," Shani murmured as she nudged Tai back into movement. "Come on. Let's go."

"She's gorgeous," Tai whimpered and didn't even mind as both Xinyi and Shani grinned at her. "I'm so doomed. Utterly doomed. Wow. Thank you so much for bringing her along!"

Which got the blankets plucked out of her arms by Xinyi, her

shirt stripped right off by Shani and then she was unceremoniously flung out into the water by the two of them like she was a sack of potatoes gone bad. Tai whooped and then spluttered a laugh as she came back up. At least they'd tossed her from the edge of the cliff on the side of the beach where the water was twenty feet deep.

"That's cheating!" Tai called to them.

"You needed it!" Xinyi called right back.

"What?" Lake asked, staring at Xinyi and Shani, then at Tai and then at Abia.

Who just sighed and shook her head. "It's Tai. Half the time we're at the beach we're tossing her in. That's the deep spot, by the way, a good twenty feet right at the cliff and deeper the further out you go."

"It's cooler over here, too," Tai said. She kicked and swam back to where Lake and Abia were up to their waists. "Oh, it's nice and warm today. The hot spring must be really going to town."

Abia nodded. "It really is. Some days it just stinks of sulfur. Other days it's barely warmer than the water of the Sound. Today's a good day for the hot spring. Just be careful of the moss and algae if you go over that way while walking. It's so incredibly slick."

Tai splashed Abia and then whooped because Abia immediately splashed back a thousand times harder. Full-on whole-body splash that nearly swamped Tai. A moment later it was Shani and Xinyi against Abia and Tai while Lake laughed and backed off, eyes wide at their ferocious water battle.

Man, she was so pretty when she laughed until tears ran down her cheeks. Not that Tai didn't deserve the laughter when Abia caught her and dunked her three times for 'accidentally' splashing water right down the front of her ruffle-edged swimsuit.

"Whee, I love coming to the beach," Tai coughed once Shani and Xinyi got tired of the splashing and Abia went for a graceful swim in the deeper part of the water. "So much fun."

"You're crazy," Lake said but she was laughing and grinning. "Utterly insane."

"True," Tai said, grinning right back at her. "But we have fun."

That's what counts. You fit right in. I'm super-glad you came, Lake. For serious, here. I'm really glad you came."

Even Lake's nipples blushed but she smiled shyly. "Thank you. It's... well. Different. But I'm. Enjoying myself?"

"Awesome!" Tai said. She grinned and caught Lake's hand, hauling her back towards shore. "Come on! Let's go dive in!"

Lake squawked but she didn't struggle. They ran up the gravel ramp, around the edge of the bay and then straight off the little five-foot cliff, Lake howling as they made the jump. Of course, Tai let go over Lake's hand as they jumped. Just not safe to dive while hand in hand, not the first time she jumped with someone new.

It was only as she swam back up to the surface that it occurred to Tai to worry that Lake might not be able to swim well. She spun under the water, heart pounding hard enough that she nearly let her lungful of air go.

But Lake was there, swimming gracefully towards the surface with strong sweeps of her arms and kicks of her legs. Her curls had loosened so that now she had a stream of surprisingly long brown hair coming from the ponytail. Tai stared and then burst through the surface to giggle as Lake laughed and laughed and kicked water in Tai's direction.

So perfect.

Just.

Wow.

The morning passed in a haze of laughter and splashing, jumps off the cliff and occasional water battles that left Lake laughing until tears streamed down her cheeks. She never seemed inclined to join in on the battles. Which, totally fine, that. It wasn't for everyone. There was a time when splash battles gave Tai panic attacks.

Thank goodness that was over.

Around two in the afternoon as the sun moved so that the shadows of the trees crept over their lawn chairs and towels, they all trooped out and wrapped up against the chill in the air. It wasn't seriously cold, not really, but out of the water it felt way cooler than it had before Tai got wet.

To her delight, probably obvious delight, Lake sat right next to Tai.

"This is... a lot of fun," Lake said as Abia stripped off her suit, dried off, put on a real bra and clothes and then started serving them all lunch.

"Yeah," Tai said, sighing as she took a bite of her super-thick roast beef and swiss on wheat bread sandwich. Not enough mustard but Abia had that thing with mustard so it was okay. At least she hadn't smothered it with mayo this time.

"This really is the best place to come for vacations," Xinyi agreed. She'd kicked back with a grilled chicken breast sandwich that she'd somehow added bacon to. Probably from Shani's sandwich which looked suspiciously lean. "Ever since Tai got the place we've been coming out to relax."

"The trips here before your mother died just weren't all that relaxing, Tai," Abia agreed.

"Why?" Shani asked when all Lake did was stare at her sandwich with a fixed expression that said she suspected and didn't want to be the one to bring it up. Sneaky of them. It'd let Lake know that she wasn't alone.

Tai shrugged. "My mom was pretty abusive. Not physically. She'd never lay a finger on anyone. But the things she said and the way she said them were really awful. Not to people who weren't family. Oh no, they were fine. But there was always something wrong with me and how I did things. My cousins, grandparents, aunt, all of us were horrible failures that Mother couldn't understand how she was related to. It sucked. Life's much better now that she's dead."

"Did you actually have the 'thank god she's gone' party?" Xinyi asked, this time for real instead of as a leading conversation. Her scowl said what she thought of that idea.

"You're damn right we did," Tai said and then blew a raspberry at Xinyi's muttering. "Hey, that was my grandparents who set that one up. Not me. But man, I had a blast at it. So many stories of all the crap Mother pulled. You know that time I was working late, dating what was her name? The first girl I ever dated?"

"Lydia," Abia said. "That time you came home and your mother was there waiting to scold you even though you were eighteen?"

"Yup," Tai said, pointing at Abia with her sandwich and carefully not noticing how stunned Lake looked. "Screaming match that brought the cops in, way to make my eighteenth birthday special. Well, she did the same thing all the time when she was my age. Stayed out late, didn't call, didn't explain where she'd been. My grandmother had like twenty stories of her doing that. And my cousins, wow, she was vicious to them. They're all still in therapy to deal with what she did to them when she fostered them."

Lake cleared her throat, cheeks going red as Tai looked at her. "Your mother was abusive?"

"Oh sure," Tai said. "I'm just really resilient. I decided super-young that Mother's opinion didn't matter. She was mean and cruel and nasty. Why would I listen to her? I only was living with her when I was eighteen because my grandparents were taking care of my cousins. Their parents had died in a car crash years earlier and Mother said, 'Of course I'll take the darlings'. Then she treated them like crap. It was sick. I switched places with them and man, I regretted it. But it wasn't that long. Just a few months and I was off to college and well away from her."

Lake stared. Stared some more. Ate her sandwich as the others let her have the quiet to think. She kept quiet the rest of the lunch and then was a lot more subdued when they all started gathering stuff up.

Because the clouds were coming in again so beach time was definitely over.

Tai just hoped that telling Lake hadn't been the wrong choice. The last thing she wanted to do was chase Lake away.

4. EAGLE'S NEST

Rain battered against the windows of the cabin, loud as hail. Lake stood by the front windows, the ones that faced south over the deck. Their third day on the island had dawned as grey and stormy as midnight.

Darn it.

Lake had already added two logs to the fire. The others weren't up yet. Abia had said outright that she was sleeping in today so the others were on their own for breakfast. Xinyi and Shani had headed into their bedroom giggling. Lake really didn't expect to see them all day long given the way the two of them had been flirting over dinner.

And how strange was that? A group of women who were perfectly comfortable being lesbians. Lake kind of wondered how many of them had hooked up with Tai over the years. Because who wouldn't? Tai was...

She was amazing, that's what she was. To have been through so much and to be so open and kind and happy. It amazed Lake. She couldn't figure out how Tai did it. Lake hadn't been through anywhere near that much and she was a mess.

"Hey, someone is up."

The deep words startled Tai. But it was Chibuike, the tall, laconic

woman who'd driven that ridiculous boat over to the island. She smiled and nodded as Lake gestured and then couldn't figure out what to say.

"Third day is usually sleep in day," Chibuike said. "I'm glad I'm not alone in getting up."

"I couldn't sleep," Lake admitted. "Why didn't you come swimming?"

Chibuike studied her for a long moment, something assessing and wary in her eyes before she sighed. "I didn't want to get my falsies wet. Or deal with my swimsuit squishing everything."

Lake blinked. Stared at Chibuike who slowly went red and fidgety. And then frowned.

"I had no idea you were trans," Lake admitted. Her own cheeks were so hot that she had to be blazingly red. "Seriously. No clue. I mean, I'm not the best at noticing things like that but um. Well. Huh. I got nothing."

Chibuike's fidgeting died into a grin and then a low chuckle that made Lake's nervousness subside a little bit. Not a lot. But enough. Instead of saying something, Chibuike shrugged and settled onto one of the couches near the windows, pulling a paperback from her back pocket before she curled up.

Which left Lake the option of standing there awkwardly or curling up on the couch or, maybe better, taking the huge comfy armchair opposite Chibuike. The armchair turned out to be one those swallow you alive super-plush and comfortable ones. Lake sighed and found herself relaxing despite herself.

"Thank you," Chibuike said, soft, gently, relieved.

"Seriously, though," Lake replied, her cheeks going red again. "I really do have nothing. You're you. I don't know any different. So you know. Whatever. Um. What time do people get up normally?"

Chibuike grinned at the desperate change of subject. "Tai will be up soonish. Abia will be up after noon, probably about twelve-thirty or one. And the lovers will be fully invested in staying in bed all day if we don't roust them out. I'd guarantee you that Xinyi squirreled away some food so that they wouldn't have to go out for anything but bath-

room trips. Tai might make the effort even though she'll get things thrown at her."

"She's..." Lake started but couldn't figure out what to say.

"Tai?" Chibuike asked. And then pressed her lips together against a laugh when all Lake could do was blush and nod. "She's a force of nature, Tai. There's a cliff on the north end of the island. Did she take you on the walk around the island?"

"Yeah," Lake said. "The one with the eagle's nest?"

"That's the one," Chibuike said. She waggled her paperback towards the bedrooms as if scolding Tai. "First time I was here, when Tai's mom was still alive and being nasty to everyone around her, Tai would take us out walking and exploring rather than let us stay in the cabin with her mom. Who wouldn't set foot outside until it was time to leave. I mean, what's the point of coming out to your own private island if you're going to stay inside all the time? Anyway, we were up on the point, highest point of the cliff. Her mom had been absolutely horrible to her. When we were leaving, Tai's mom had called after us that maybe we'd all get lucky and Tai would fall off the cliff. Said that it would make everyone so much happier not to have her in their lives. Abia had spent most of the walk sobbing. We were all cringing."

Lake's heart hurt just thinking of it. She'd have been a mess, furious and shaking and sick to her stomach. Chibuike looked like she felt sick too. But there was wonder and admiration in her eyes too so Lake clenched her hands and just nodded for Chibuike to continue.

"Tai stood at the point, right on the edge of the cliff even though Xinyi threatened to drag her back if she didn't move," Chibuike said, her voice going deeper as she told the story. Her dark eyes looked so distant, so far-away. "I was about to pull Tai back when she started laughing. Flung her arms out and did one of her little spins. Not quite a pirouette but close. She stood there on the edge of the cliff and grinned at us like nothing her Mother had said could get at her."

"Seriously?" Lake whispered. Her hands hurt from being clenched so tightly together but Lake couldn't quite let go. "What did she say?"

Chibuike snorted, smile going wry. "She said 'You know, I think

Mother thinks that everyone else is just like her. How sad to believe that the whole world is nothing but misery. And it's such a lovely day! Then she laughed again, grabbed Abia for a hug and skipped on up the trail as if nothing had happened."

"...I think I would have fallen down."

"Pretty much did," Chibuike said, laughing as she opened her book. "It was. Huh. I think that was the first time I really realized that I'm the one who chooses how my life goes. How I respond to things. That I don't have to let people get to me. That I can have horrible things happen but not let them rule my life. It was. Good. Tai's really good at helping people see the joy in life. I mean, my family's always supported me. They were surprised when I told them I was a girl but they let me be whoever I wanted. Tai."

"She didn't have that," Lake said, staring at Chibuike who really seriously didn't seem to see Lake at all. She was staring at the fireplace, eyes distant again.

"No, she didn't," Chibuike said. "She does now, of course, but not then. We all take Tai as she is. Whatever she gives us. But. I know we're... not quite enough. None of us went through that. None of us understand it. What it took out of her as it gave her that strength to bounce back."

Chibuike shook her head, waved one hand and then opened her book to start reading.

Conversation over, apparently.

That was fine. Lake didn't know what to say at the best of times. Now she really had no clue. Because how could you not know what it was like? Were there really families that were that accepting? If Lake had come home and told Gramma that she wasn't a girl she'd have been beaten bloody and locked in a closet until she repented. Taken to church and prayed over, half-starved and shouted at and shamed.

Like when Gramma had caught her kissing Zina when Lake was thirteen.

It would have been even worse if Lake had been trans. Or if she hadn't repented. Even now, Gramma was horrible if Lake even looked at another girl. She could be admiring the girl's hair, her clothes,

wondering where she got that bag, and Gramma would rip right into Lake.

Of course, Gramma ripped into Lake no matter what she was doing. Or not doing. That seemed to be her favorite thing to do in the whole world.

I was abused. Lake wanted to say it. Wanted to admit it without feeling like she was supposed to be horribly ashamed. Wanted to scream it into Gramma's face, throw things at her and storm out of that awful house never to return.

She didn't.

Instead she stared at the fire and thought about what it must take Tai to smile and laugh and bounce when the wounds lingered inside. Lake couldn't believe that they weren't there. They might not be as deep as Lake's wounds. Tai did seem to bounce back from everything where Lake went splat like an egg dropped on a concrete floor. But there had to be wounds.

Did Tai admit that to anyone? Did she ever cry about it? Lake sighed, untucking herself from the armchair of perfect comfort to go add another log to the stove.

"Hey, you're up," Tai said, jaw cracking as she yawned her way out of her bedroom. The flannel shirt was blue and green today, about three sizes too big so it went down to Tai's knees. Which were bare. Just like her feet that were already looking kind of blue. "Anyone else up?"

"Um, just Chibuike," Lake said. She nodded towards Chibuike who gestured with her book, not looking up at either of them. "I was a little hungry. Maybe we could make something?"

Tai smiled, not a wide grin like normal but a welcoming, thankful one nonetheless. There were dark circles under her eyes like she hadn't slept much at all. And her mouth had fine little wrinkles around it that suggested nightmares to Lake. Man, she'd seen that look way too many times in the mirror. Way too many times.

So poking Tai in the shoulder, just a gentle one, was easier than it normally would be. Gentle teasing always helped when Lake was wound up and about to fall apart. Maybe it would help Tai, too?

Though frankly Lake kind of wanted to order Tai to go put on slippers and stop abusing her poor feet with the cold.

To Lake's surprise, Tai squeaked and then stared. She bounced and grinned and whoosh, the exhaustion and remnants of Tai's nightmare seemed to be gone. Tai nodded enthusiastically only to groan as the nod tumbled her hair into her eyes. Both hands weren't quite enough to push all the flying strands away, something that Lake didn't have to worry about with her curls.

Score one for curls. It was a first.

Lake laughed. "Go brush your hair, silly. I'll go fry some eggs or something. I can do that. Eggs and toast. I saw avocados, too. If they're ripe we'll have avocado toast with eggs on top."

Chibuike raised her head to stare at Lake. "I'm in. That sounds good. I think there's still some leftover bacon from the lunch I made myself yesterday. Add that, too."

"You're on!" Tai exclaimed. "Both of you. I'll be right back!"

She scampered back into her bedroom, humming what sounded like a Nine Inch Nails song. Lake shook her head, wandered into the kitchen and set to work figuring out the gas stove. Maybe later, in the evening or tomorrow, Lake could ask Tai about her mother. Tell her about Gramma. Ask how Tai dealt with it all so well.

Tell her that she didn't have to be strong and cheerful all the time.

It was okay to be sad. Angry. To hurt and want to be taken care of. Shani always said so. While Lake still didn't think that she really deserved that sort of consideration, that special treatment, she could see that Tai totally did.

And maybe, someday, Lake would be able to accept that she deserved it too.

Who knew?

5. FERNS DRIPPING RAIN

The rain hadn't stopped all day yesterday. So the minute it stopped the next day, Tai was out the door. Only to laugh as Lake pushed her right back inside to put on shoes. Shoes and nice warm socks because somehow yesterday Lake had elected herself as defender to Tai's feet. It was so damned cute. And sweet. And potentially kinky, not that Tai was really into that sort of thing but hey, if Lake liked it, well, Tai could learn to get into it.

Because seeing Lake wrapped up in one of Tai's flannel shirts really was the hottest thing ever. No holds barred, no stops, just wow. Granted, it was the yellow and black fleece that only looked like flannel but it suited Lake to a T.

It seemed like Lake was just as ready to get out of the cabin as Tai was because she gladly forged out into the dripping pines and drooping ferns, despite the risk of slugs and slippery moss. Sure, she was a lot more careful going down the stairs and along the path than Tai was but that was just Lake.

"I love seeing the island after a good rain," Tai said, swinging her arms and enjoying the cool against her hands. "It's like everything's been washed clean and there's nothing bad in the world."

"Except slugs," Lake said. "Don't you get cold?"

"Not really," Tai said. "I mean, yeah, it's a little chilly but not bad. I grew up in the Puget Sound. The humidity makes it feel cooler than it really is. When I was little I'd run around barefoot from May until September. More if I could get away with it. Heck, I'd go barefoot year round if I could."

"Your poor feet," Lake groaned but she was laughing, too. "I swear, you should have gotten frostbite a million times."

Which Tai could only laugh at. They went north on the trails this time, taking the cross-island trail that meandered through the ferns and cedar trees, slipping down one narrow gully only to haul each other up the other side hand in hand. It wasn't much of a trail. Abia would have insisted on going around. But Tai knew the way and Lake seemed game to trying it even though by the time they made it back to the top she was panting and red-faced and sweating.

"Now I know why you didn't want this one," Lake wheezed as she fanned the back of the yellow and black plaid fleece to cool off. "This thing is roasting me."

"Tie it around your waist," Tai suggested. "Then you'll have it but you won't be dying."

A good practical suggestion that made Tai's mouth go dry because when Lake did it, the fleece emphasized her hips while the sweat made her T-shirt cup the underside of her breasts. Tai's cheeks heated so dramatically that she whirled and headed onwards towards the shore.

They wouldn't get down to the shore on this side of the island but hey, there was a nice view. On a clear day, which this was promising to turn into, you could see the Olympics looking like a watercolor painting rising out of the clouds.

"So where are we going?" Lake asked after a minute or so that let Tai's cheeks cool down.

"The shore!" Tai said. "If it's clear enough, you can see the Olympics sometimes. Not sure if it is yet today but it's still a pretty view. Though honestly every view on the island is pretty to me. I love this place so much."

"Really?" Lake asked.

The surprised, faintly worried tone of her voice slowed Tai's steps. She stopped, one hand resting on the auburn stripes of bark of one of the big cedars. Not old growth. Those had all been logged off decades before the family bought the island. But old. Give it another couple of centuries and the cedars here would be true old growth yards in diameter, towering into the sky.

"Well, yeah," Tai said. She looked and yeah, Lake was frowning at her. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Um, your mom?" Lake suggested. Her cheeks flared red but she kept on frowning at Lake. "I mean, if it was me I think I'd hate coming here. If she was always horrible as your friends said."

"Nah," Tai said, relaxing a little though she wasn't sure why she'd been so tense. Really, she was fine. "Mother was awful everywhere to everyone. Just miserable and angry and it spilled over everything in her life. There was nothing different about her nastiness here. Actually, the sheer fact that she'd let me come out here was always a sign of her trying to do better. She loathed the island. So trips out here were a special treat. I always treasured them."

Lake stared. Mouth open and everything. Then she blinked and shook her head as if she couldn't quite clear her mind.

Understandable. No one else had ever gotten it, not even Chibuike.

"Okay..." Lake said, slow and thoughtful as she came closer, still walking so careful and testing her foot placement before committing her weight to it. "That actually makes a certain sort of sense. The few times Gramma would actually let me have a donut were... special. I still love them. Donuts. I mean, they weren't anything special, just your standard glazed donuts, but to me they were so much more."

She rested her hand next to Tai's, staring through the trees towards the shore, steep as it was. Lake smelled of ferns and water, of bacon and lavender. Lotion, maybe? Good. She smelled good. And looked better as she slowly turned to stare into Tai's eyes.

Still so serious. So intent. And worried.

But why be worried about Tai?

She was fine. Tai was always fine.

Lake put one finger over Tai's lips. "No, you're not okay."

Tai jerked.

"And it's okay to not be okay," Lake said. "I mean, I'm not okay and I know I'm not okay and Shani tells me at least thirty times a day that I'm going to be okay but I never believe it. Everyone I've ever cared about has left. Chased away by Gramma or my worries. I can't. Accept. That someone might like me. I can't. It doesn't sink in. Like all this rain landing on glass instead of the needles and stuff. Just bounces off. It bugs people. So yeah. Um."

She paused, finger so warm against Tai's lips. So terrifying and wonderful and damn it, Tai didn't want tears welling up in her eyes. But there they were, tears blurring Lake's wonderful, beautiful, terrifying face.

"You don't have to believe me that it's okay to not be okay," Lake murmured. Her face was so red for someone with such a serious expression. "I just had to say it. Because it's true. And um. If you want to talk about the bad stuff. I'm. Here? I guess. For what it's worth."

Tai laughed, just a breathless little thing as the tears dripped down her cheeks like raindrops. She nodded and then caught Lake's hand which was so impossibly warm compared to Tai's ice cube hands.

"Thanks," Tai said.

The word came out strangled and weird, thick from the tears that Tai scrubbed off her cheek with one sleeve. But it came out so good enough. They would have to stay out long enough for the signs of crying to fade. No way was Tai putting up with Abia and Xinyi and Shani and even Chibuike fussing over her because she'd cried.

That would be horrible.

But Lake's little smile and the way she held Tai's hand in that warm, warm hand, that wasn't horrible. It was nice. Comforting. Scary, sure, but also really nice. Because Lake'd stabbed right into the heart of Tai's soul, hitting something that she tried really, really hard to ignore.

"I'll be fine," Tai said finally. "How about that?"

"Okay," Lake said. She laughed softly. "Better than me. I don't

know if I'll ever be okay. But that's life. I want to know how you just bounce back so easily. That's amazing."

"Pfft," Tai said, waving away the praise. "That's just the sort of person I am. I think you're amazing. You're careful and thoughtful and cautious and it's so cool. I never slow down enough to realize when I'm messing up. I have to just smack into my messes face first to realize they're there."

She tugged Lake onwards towards the shore because hey, they were almost there. Why not finish the trip? Once there, they could walk up to the eagle nest cliff and then along the other trail that ran along the eastern side of the island. Then maybe they'd get to see the Cascades, too. That'd be cool.

"There you go, bouncing back already," Lake murmured.

"It's what I do," Tai said. She tried a grin but it felt strange on her face. Wrong. So she stopped. "It's... huh. It's how I cope. If I don't."

She stopped and looked back along the trail towards the cabin. Nope. No one following them. No one listening in. And wasn't that a cool idea? Just Lake and Tai alone on the island together, no one else there at all. Maybe someday they could do that. Tai would actually like that.

"If you don't?" Lake asked.

"Um, if I don't admit that the hurt is there then it's not real," Tai admitted. "I just push it away and go on. Yeah, yeah, I know. Not the best way to deal with things. But seriously, Mother is dead. She's gone. Yeah, she hurt us all with the terrible things she said and did but she's one hundred percent dead, buried, gone-gone. It's just. You know. Emotions. And emotions change so fast. No reason to get hung up on them."

Lake laughed like she was about to fall down and cry. Her hand clamped down around Tai's so hard that the bones in Tai's hand grated together. She didn't seem to mind at all when Tai squeezed back.

Shit. Said the wrong thing?

"I wish my emotions did that," Lake said and now her voice was all thick with tears. "I really do. I'm the opposite. I get stuck thinking and

feeling the same thing over and over for days and weeks and just. Months sometimes. It's horrible. I know it's not all true but I still think it."

Tai stared at her for a long moment. "Can I punch your Gramma in the nose? She needs it. Bad."

Lake burst out laughing at the same time the tears welled up in her eyes. She dashed the tears away, nodding that yes, Tai totally could punch her Gramma. Cool. If Tai did meet the old woman and she wasn't some tiny little Santa's wife woman, Tai was going to do it. Pow! Right in the nose and then curse at her and yell a little. Maybe a lot. And drag Lake away so she never needed to spend time with the old woman again.

"Are you plotting?" Lake asked.

"You betcha," Tai said with her biggest grin. "Pow! Right in the nose! With yelling and stomping and waving of arms as I curse at the top of my lungs. That's what I'll do. You just watch me. Nobody gets to yell at you anymore. Not with me around."

The hug nearly knocked Tai over, especially with so much rain-slippery duff under her feet. But Tai managed to stay upright and wrap her arms around Lake. Who was a furnace. Seriously. Radiating heat that made Tai moan and cuddle right up to her when she really shouldn't. She still didn't know if Lake liked girls and there was all the emotional baggage. But...

"Warm," Tai moaned as she pressed her nose against Lake's neck and then laughed as Lake squealed and squirmed and then hugged Tai so hard that she lifted Tai's feet right off the ground.

"You are so cold!" Lake huffed. "Come on. Let's get to the shore and walk again. This is ridiculous. You're made of ice."

"You're a furnace," Tai sighed, not letting go even as Lake laughed harder. "I love it. So warm!"

Lake pulled Tai back into motion, grinning as Tai grumbled dramatically. "Walking! There is walking. And maybe talking. And looking at mountains. Come on. I thought you wanted to show me stuff."

"Yeah," Tai said with a little shrug. "But you're warm and it's awesome."

"If you'd just dress in warmer clothes," Lake started to say only to burst out into belly laughs that echoed out over the Sound at Tai's groan. "Never mind. No warm clothes for you, just cold toes and fingers."

Tai grinned. Her heart bounced inside of her, scared and delighted and happier than she'd been in... who knew? Sure there were scary things she didn't want to talk about at the same time she did want to talk about them but Lake was by her side and laughing and warm and kind and beautiful.

Today was a perfect, wonderful day.

6. KAYAKS IN THE WATER

If there was one thing Lake was ready to admit, it was that paddling was the most peaceful, meditative exercise ever. Paddle dips into the water, pull slow and steady, lift it out and reach forward for another stroke. It was even better sitting in the front of Tai's two-person sea kayak.

Lake had never been kayaking before. Canoeing, sure, tons of times. She'd been out in canoes a million times as a kid. Her parents had loved it. So had all her friends. Montana was full of places to go canoeing and there wasn't much else to do in the summer. So she'd gone and gotten to the point where she loved it.

Kayaking was better.

Low to the water, skimming across the surface of the water like a common loon swimming serenely along, a kayak was the infinite refinement of the bulky canoes that Lake had paddled before.

Add in Tai in the back, gently steering them along as they paddled the waterways between the islands of the Puget Sound and Lake might never go home.

"Oh," Lake breathed. She waved her front paddle towards the crane standing on the shore a few dozen yards away. "Look, Tai!"

"Yeah," Tai said, sounding just as breathless and quiet and

peaceful as Lake felt. "They nest there every year. Same pair comes back year after year. It's a thing cranes do. Their babies come back and nest around the area, too. The others must be nesting or hunting right now."

Lake carefully twisted around to stare at Tai who grinned back at her. Cranes all over the place. Wow. That was incredible. They weren't the huge cranes you'd find down in the south, smaller and grey instead of huge and white, but they were still gorgeous elegant birds.

A blast of water and air exploded upwards off to their left, maybe two hundred yards away.

Lake shrieked and then gasped as she saw the huge black dorsal fin of an orca.

An orca.

Right there, not that far away, swimming in the same water that Lake was paddling.

"Oh. My. God!" Lake whispered.

"Resident pod," Tai said, sounding surprised, not that Lake turned to look. "There should be a dozen or more of them. We'll go closer to shore. You're not supposed to get too close to them."

Their kayak swerved towards the closer shore, the one that Tai had said was another island, this one pretty well occupied though not on the northern shore. Lake paddled half-heartedly, looking for more breaching orcas and gasping every time she got a glimpse of a tail, dorsal fin or blow.

Too soon, they ran up onto a gravelly shore. Lake scrambled out and pulled the kayak up on shore as quick as she could so that she could go back to watching the orcas. Who seemed to be hunting or playing or something because they kept breaching in the same general area. There was one dorsal fin that was huge and straight. Another that drooped to the right. One with what looked like white blotches that were either scars or maybe parasites or something. Lake had no clue. Littler ones that might be babies. Yearlings?

"This is so cool," Lake whispered, tugging on Tai's purple and blue flannel-clad sleeve. "Oh my god, so cool!"

Tai laughed, watching Lake instead of the orcas. "It really is. I'm kind of used to it, I guess. I've seen them most of my life, off and on. We'll let them hunt for a bit and if they don't move on we'll paddle back close to shore. I do try to give them wide berth. Too many asshole tourist ships get right up close. Illegal but tourists."

"Ugh," Lake said, nodding her agreement. "We get people like that back home. So annoying."

Suddenly one of the orcas surged right up out of the water, spinning to crash back down on its back. The wave of water that gouted up made Lake scream and Tai cheer. Ripples spread across the Sound, heading straight for them. It was a calm enough day that the actual waves weren't enough to cancel the ripples out.

"Wow."

Lake really couldn't find other words. She clutched Tai's elbow as another orca breached except it went so high that she glimpsed the tiny little eye on the side of its head and its entire tail extended up into the air as it slowly sank back under the water.

Tai patted her hand and then pulled Lake close for a hug that made Lake's excitement turn into something else entirely. Something warm and scary and there was a terribly squiggly feeling in the pit of her stomach that could be joy or fear or both.

But the joy was louder.

For once.

"You're warm," Tai sighed happily as she put an ice-cold nose against the back of Lake's neck.

"You're still an ice cube," Lake pretended to complain even as she grinned and stared out over the Sound. "What is it with you? You're never, ever warm, Tai."

"Nope, never am," Tai replied, giggling at the way Lake covered Tai's arms around her waist with her own hands. "You feel so good. I like holding you."

Lake shuddered.

Gramma.

That's what Lake's girlfriend had said just before Gramma came in.

Gramma would be screaming already. She'd be yelling about what a horror Lake was. What shame she brought to the family. How she should just throw Lake out and never let her come home again.

The squiggly feeling went all the way to fear and then onwards into heart-pounding terror. Her legs shook. Lake's hands, too, as they went sweaty in the palms. She could barely breathe through the fear even though she knew she was safe right now.

She was.

Gramma wasn't here. Lake didn't have to go back. She had an apartment, a job, a safe place to live and no need to ever, ever, ever talk to Gramma again. No matter what Lake's old friends and relatives said, Lake owed Gramma nothing. She didn't need to call or visit or anything ever again.

And just like that the fear started training away, washing away with the rippled waves that lapped against the shore.

"I don't want to go home," Lake whispered.

"Then stay," Tai said so instantly that Lake twisted in her arms. Her eyes were deadly serious. "You can. Well, not on the island, per se, but you can definitely stay here in the Puget Sound. Shani and Xinyi like you as a roommate. And I've got room if they get too much for you."

"They do make out an awful lot," Lake said, trying to pretend that her cheeks were burning from her blush, not from her panic attack and Tai's very serious offer. "I mean, new romance and everything but seriously? Another day staying in bed?"

"Xinyi's never liked kayaking," Tai said with a startled giggle and then a happy sigh as Lake leaned back into her arms. That cold nose settled against Lake's neck again. "Chibuike's more the powered boat sort of person."

"And Abia made it perfectly clear that she only gets on the water to go from one piece of solid ground to another," Lake said with a laugh. "About thirty times before we even got to that lavender monstrosity of a boat of yours on our way out to the island."

In fact, breakfast had been full of Abia complaining about Tai's plans to go kayaking today. Lake was pretty sure that Chibuike would

have gone with Tai if Lake hadn't. She looked resigned to it. But she wouldn't have enjoyed it very much and what fun would that be for Tai? At least Lake was having a blast.

Other than the stupid panic attack.

"I'm glad I came," Lake murmured. "This is seriously cool."

"I'm glad you came, too," Tai said.

She pressed a little kiss against the nape of Lake's neck, tickling with her breath and nose and the scratchiness of her lips. Lake squirmed and then shouted and laughed and struggled as Tai did it again and again, hanging on to Lake so that she couldn't escape.

Not a bad couldn't escape.

Lake was pretty sure she could have broken Tai's grip easily, but when Lake went left, Tai did too. Right and Tai was right there, laughing against Lake's neck. Even when Lake ducked, Tai ducked with her and then it all went sideways and then tumbled down to the gravely sand together, Lake whooping with laughter that Tai echoed.

"Oh my god, you're nuts," Lake gasped around her laughter. "My butt! My butt is getting wet!"

Tai laughed and finally let go. She helped Lake up, grinning and bouncing with delight that Lake couldn't help but share. Good god but Tai was fun to be around. Brave and strong and silly and just.

Yeah.

"We should probably head back," Lake said.

The water was calm again, no orcas in sight. Not even ripples of them were left so they must have left a while ago while Lake and Tai wrestled with each other. Tai looked for a good long minute, maybe a minute and a half before she nodded.

"Well, we should get back in the water," Tai agreed. "But let's go on a little farther, okay? Just up past the point of this island you get this super-amazing view of the Sound. I wanted to show you."

"Okay," Lake said. "So how do we get back in without a dock?"

That turned into a huge ridiculous production because Tai had to get into the kayak first, then it had to be pushed backwards out into the water just enough for Lake to scramble in. And then they had to sort of push themselves up and backward with their paddles but Lake

kept worrying that she was going to break the paddle so she didn't push hard enough.

By the time they were back in the water and sailing away, Lake felt like a complete idiot and Tai had gone quiet again.

Not the good sort of quiet. At least Lake didn't think it was the good sort where you were happy and content with everything around you. With everyone around you. How could it be? Lake had been such a complete and total doofus.

"Sorry," Lake said as they slowly paddled towards the tip of the other island.

"What for?" Tai asked and wow, she actually sounded surprised.

Lake blinked but couldn't bring herself to look over her shoulder. She shrugged instead, keeping her eyes very firmly on the line where the water met the shore of the island ahead. Shore? No way to know, really.

"I was um, not much help getting back into the water," Lake said eventually when Tai made a little curious noise that was almost enough to get Lake to look back at her. "Kind of useless really. So yeah, I'm sorry. I'll do better next time."

Tai snorted. "Lake, it's always like that when I ground a kayak. Jeez, not even an issue. Besides, from my point of view there's nothing but good ahead of me."

That did get Lake to look and oh my god. Tai was wagging her eyebrows and eyeing the edge of the kayak that rested right where Lake's waist nipped in above her hips. And then Tai grinned, blew a kiss and waggled her eyebrows again.

"Oh. My. God!" Lake shouted.

The laughter won over anything like shame or guilt or Gramma's disapproval in the back of Lake's head. God. What a ham. How could anyone be that perfect and be real?

But Tai was real and she was laughing too. Lake shook her head and paddled. This couldn't last. Nothing good ever did. It was the one truth of Lake's life: she never got this lucky. Something always happened to ruin it.

Iridescent

Maybe this one time, possibly, Lake would hang on with all her might instead of letting go the way she always did.

Who knew?

Tai might just want to keep Lake around for more than just a week's vacation.

7. LILAC PERFUME AND SLUGS

The only bad part about coming out to Twilight Island was leaving. Tai always hated that part. Sure, there was way less to drag back to the big boat. They'd eaten all the food but some chips and a bit of leftover bread that Abia was talking about making into bread pudding. Their clothes were all dirty, shoved into duffles and suitcases rather than neatly folded.

But there was still a ton of trips to be made from the cabin to the dock.

Every single one of them made Tai want to cry. She didn't want this vacation to be over. There were so many things that she hadn't gotten to show Lake. That she hadn't told Lake. Heck, they hadn't even gotten to have that conversation about Tai's mother or said a word about Lake's Gramma. Who really did need to be punched in the face.

It felt like they'd been on the island forever but at the same time it felt like they'd only just arrived yesterday. Seriously, she'd only seen Lake for the first time a week ago? Really?

Couldn't be. Tai really felt as though she'd known Lake for years. Ages. Her whole life.

How in the world was she supposed to let Lake go?

"Tell me there's no slugs on the stairs," Lake ordered as she struggled to balance her duffle on top of the empty cooler that Tai had used to bring all the meat and cheese.

"Nope, not on the stairs," Tai said. She plucked the duffle off which let Lake see for herself. "There were a couple on the paths. I thought you were getting over that."

"Those were little slugs," Lake said in such a lofty, prim and proper tone that Tai had to grin at her. "Not monster slugs bent on world domination. There's a difference. Come on. Give that back. You've got more than enough to carry with the folding chairs and those bags."

Which was true enough so Tai perched the duffle back on top of the cooler. They walked down the path to the shore, Tai looking back at the cabin about six times to make sure that yes, she actually had locked the doors and shut all the windows. Lake ignored the first four, frowned at the fifth and then grinned at the six.

"You want to go back and make sure you closed it all up?" Lake asked.

"That's neurotic," Tai said as she stopped in the middle of the path because hell yes, she definitely did.

"So?" Lake said with a shrug that nearly dumped the duffle into the ferns. At least they were mostly dry today.

"So... I shouldn't?" Tai said, blinking at her.

Lake shook her head. "Nope, if it really will bother you for more than an hour or so, go do it. Heck, I'll go back and help. Xinyi and Shani can get these. They've got long enough arms that it won't even be a struggle for them. If there's one thing I've learned over the years, making sure that you did something one more time is much better than worrying over it endlessly. Or discovering too late that no, you didn't."

There was enough wisdom in that that Tai went ahead and set her stuff down. Lake followed suit, calling to Xinyi and Shani to come get them. Then she followed Tai back to the cabin so that they could check every single window, verify that the stove was cold and the vent shut, and that the gas was properly turned off.

As Tai locked the door, she smiled, shoulder bumping Lake.

"Thanks," Tai said.

"Better?" Lake asked, cheeks going red as Tai smiled at her.

"Yeah," Tai said. "I mean, I still don't want to go back to the mainland. I don't want this week to be over. But I feel better knowing the cabin is secure. I can always come back."

"It has been fun," Lake agreed. "But I think I'm ready for civilization again. I miss TV. And microwaves. They're awesome. Microwave popcorn, a thing this island desperately needs."

Tai burst out laughing. She flung her arms around Lake and buried her nose against Lake's neck. Lake groaned but she hugged Tai, held her close and sighed at the touch of Tai's nose to her skin.

She was still so warm. So wonderfully, perfectly warm. And not just physically. Xinyi would have rolled her eyes at Tai wanting to check the cabin again. Abia would have tapped her foot and scowled. And Chibuike, well, she would have just shaken her head and gone along with it but the whole time she would have had that air of humoring Tai.

Lake had taken it seriously and double-checked everything with Tai.

So nice to have her worries taken seriously. And her heart. And her laughter. And everything.

"I don't want to leave you," Tai whispered, shaking abruptly with the fear that Lake would push her away like so many other lovers had. "I want to spend every day with you. Forever. Not just dates but like, for real."

Lake went still as stone.

She stopped breathing, stopped moving, didn't even make a sound. Tai shuddered and clung harder because no, no pushing her away at the very last second. Not when they'd done so well this whole week. Granted, they'd only just met but that was no reason to hold back. Not when they fit so incredibly well.

Tai didn't want to let Lake go.

But she did so that she could see what Lake was thinking.

The tears made Tai gasp. She cupped Lake's cheeks, trying to

brush the away but more tears fell as soon as Tai dried them off. Lake's bottom lip quivered as she mouthed something. Tai couldn't tell what.

Lake didn't turn away.

But her eyes weren't exactly seeing Tai, either.

Oh.

Panic attack? Or maybe a flashback.

Damn it, that wasn't what Tai wanted to do. She'd wanted to make Lake happy, not freak her out.

Tai pulled Lake back into her arms, crooning softly to her as she hugged Lake. It took a good two minutes before Lake wrapped her arms around Tai's back and hugged so hard that she took all of Tai's breath away. There was a growing wet spot on Tai's shoulder but Lake didn't seem to be shaking.

That was good, right?

"Sorry," Lake whispered.

"No, I'm sorry," Tai said, kissing Lake's ear. "I didn't mean to set off a panic attack. Or whatever? I didn't mean to upset you. I just kind of totally fell head over heels in love with you and I want to marry you. You know, if you want to get married. Lord knows not everyone does. And yeah, I know we only just met but hey, I'm serious about wanting to try for forever. If you're game for it. I'll settle for dating? You know, try to work up to more? If that's what you want. Just. I don't want today to be the last I see of you."

Tai's voice got quieter and softer as she talked because Lake was still as stone again. Not with that same sort of rigidity. She was shivering very, very slightly, just a tiny little tremor. So maybe Tai hadn't set off another round of panic attacks? Possibly?

"How can you be so... sure of yourself?" Lake asked, voice thick as she snuffled against Tai's shoulder. At least flannel was good for catching and drying tears.

"I just keep going," Tai said with a little shrug that made Lake sigh, swallow and pull back enough so that that they could meet each other's eyes. "That's all. I mean, you never know what each day will

bring so it's an adventure and I try to enjoy everything. Because bad happens and it's awful but it doesn't last forever."

"No one has ever wanted to keep me around," Lake whispered when Tai's words ran out again. "Not once. Even Gramma hates having me around. You'll get tired of me. You'll want to dump me. It's going to happen."

Tai studied Lake, frowning.

That sounded more like the old, old murmurs of Mother's abuse to Tai than it did something that could happen. Tai just didn't see herself getting tired of Lake. Not ever. She was beautiful and fun and kind and perfect. Sure, they were both messed up in their own ways. But that was all right.

"I don't think I could get tired of you," Tai said. "You don't think my triple-check thing is crazy. You like kayaking as much as I do. You eat whole bags of cheesy poofs in one sitting and don't think I'm ever going to let that name go. It's perfect!"

Lake spluttered into laughter, tears still dripping down her cheeks. "Cheesy poofs. Seriously? That's why you want to keep me around?"

"No," Tai said.

The sudden fear in Lake's eyes stirred something deep inside Tai. This wasn't a fear that was going to go away. No matter how many times Tai reassured Lake, the fear would still be there. And maybe, just like Tai had been with her friends at first, Lake would never understand just why Tai wanted her around.

That was okay.

"It's just one of the things I like about you," Tai continued, grinning and bouncing and holding Lake's hands. "You're warm and you let me put my nose on your neck. You laugh when we have splash battles. You listen. You help me. You make me smile and laugh and think and just. I fell in love with you."

She had. Pretty much right away. Or maybe that had been lust. Hard to tell the difference sometimes, especially when Tai was looking at someone as wonderful as Lake.

Lake stared at her, eyes wide, no tears anymore. Her mouth

opened but no noise came out. Yeah, Tai was going to have to remind Lake that she loved her every single day. Multiple times a day. How nice! Someone who didn't take Tai's heart for granted. Sure, Lake did it because she didn't seem to think that she was worth loving but Tai didn't care.

"You love me?" Lake asked. "Why? What's to love about me? Really?"

Tai leaned in and, heart pounding, brushed a kiss against Lake's feather-soft lips. She smelled like lilac perfume. Mixed with Lake's scent, lilacs were a thousand times more drunk-inducing than the actual flowers. Especially when Lake whimpered and grabbed Tai for a kiss that went from zero to sixty in no time flat.

"Everything," Tai whispered against Lake's lips, her cheek, her forehead once Lake let her lips go. "I love everything about you, Lake. I mean it. I couldn't point to any one thing because they're all little things that don't make sense when looked at alone. It's you. All of you. Your personality and your history and your future and all the ways you're messed up and all the ways you're not. All of you. I want to live with you by my side for the rest of my life. If I can?"

Lake gulped, tears in her eyes again, but even with her lips pressed together Tai could see her smile. It showed in her eyes and her tears and the way she caressed Tai's cheeks with those wonderfully warm hands.

"I'll mess it up," Lake said and it sounded like a promise, not a threat.

"Don't care," Tai replied. "We'll fix whatever gets messed up together. Date me? Steady-type dating? Please?"

Lake laughed and clung, rocking Tai side to side. "You're crazy and I think I love you, too."

"Is that a yes?" Tai asked, bouncing so much that Lake had to let go.

She laughed as she did, capturing Tai's hands. "Yes. It's a yes. We can date. And um, see if we'll work for longer term stuff. If you want?"

Tai whooped and danced in place which just made Lake laugh all the harder. "Yes! Come on! We gotta tell the others!"

"Watch out for slugs!" Lake gasped as Tai pulled her into a run for the dock. "Tai!"

The warmth of Tai's hand matched the warmth in Tai's heart. She laughed and Lake laughed with her. Lake might not be able to believe that it would last but Tai already knew that she was ready to spend the rest of her life reassuring Lake that yes, it was real.

Yes, Tai loved her.

Yes, Tai wanted to spend the rest of their lives with Lake by her side.

Forever and ever.

Together.

THE END

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AFTERWORD

If there's one thing I've learned as I've written these stories, it's that I have so many more stories to tell. Every day, I sit down and write. I'm incredibly grateful that I have the opportunity to do that and even more grateful that there are people reading my stories.

There will always be more stories as long as I can write. I hope that you enjoyed reading these. And I hope that you'll come back for more in the future. Thank you for sharing these adventures with me.

See you next time.

Meyari McFarland

January, 2018

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AUTHOR BIO

*M*eyari McFarland has been telling stories since she was a small child. Her stories range from adventures appropriate to children to erotica but they always feature strong characters who do what they think is right no matter what gets in their way.

Meyari has been married for twenty years and has no children or pets. She lives in the Puget Sound, WA and enjoys the fog, rain and cool weather that are typical here. When vacation times come, she and her husband usually go somewhere warm like Hawaii or they go on their own adventures to Japan and other far away countries.

Her life has included jobs ranging from cleaning motel rooms, food service, receptionist, building and editing digital maps, auditing and document control.

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