



# Tokala

By Nix Winter

Love does not respect the rules of mortals  
Simply crosses the sand drawn lines  
Like the dew that dances across the field  
To lay gentle kisses where it will  
~ Dano na Saikuru

### Dedication

Thank you so much!  
For the patience of my daughters  
For the lovely art work of Ineke!  
The cover and the line art of Dano were done by Ineke.  
For the friendship of Makiko,  
whose editing saved my sanity,  
but who is innocent of any errors that might remain.  
For the support of Eph and BR  
For the inspiration and sweet love of life given from D

Tokala

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# Precious Gifts

The year 1004

"Elery?" Jared leaned in the door way to Elery's study, flowers and an apple behind his back. She sat on a thick Imperial blue cushion, her back against the stonewall, a square silver mirror resting on her knees. Papyrus unfurled over both sides, without the slightest bit of dignity usually accorded to such documents. Dark red ink made an incredible number of different symbols on the thing, running back and forth. Sometimes Jared was sure that a tiny chicken had made them, running up and down in a drunken dance. "Well? Do you find dire predictions in all these calculations you make?"

She looked up at him and he smiled. Ink dotted across her cheek and she looked for all the world like a scribe and not the Empriatfay. "Jared," she said with a smile, blue eyes coming back from that distant look she got when papyrus and ink had her attention. "I want to build an observatory, record the stars and the path of the moons more closely. The records are not complete and they have not been kept well in the last years. People forget how to write."

Slightly confused, Jared entered his bond's domain, soft leather moccasin like boots not making a sound against the wooden flooring. "We can build whatever you want. Is this instead of the University or something else to build too?"

"Build too," she said, holding out her hand, glass stylus between her fingers. "Sit with me?" Her smile inching a little higher, hinting at something she wanted to tell him.

The evening sun was just starting to come directly into her window, bringing out the russet in her brown hair. From the moment he'd seen her, Jared had never gotten over the feeling that she was the most beautiful person in all the Empire. He lowered himself to the floor, bringing the flowers around to hold them out to her as he lay on his side, arm propping up his head. This wasn't exactly the image of an Empriat that his father had set, but then he really didn't care. "There are flowers in the garden, Elery," he said, holding them out to her in their yellow and blue defiant glory.

"Yes, but I have so much work to do. The last eclipse," she paused and reached for some sheet of copied records, "The tax collections during these years; they dwindle, and before they start coming back up, it's nearly forty winters. Currency was more common then, and I think the population of Equilobos city fell by more than half. In these years of decline, I guess we lost 30,000 households." Her smile was very light, only enough to keep herself from panicking as she leaned over and brought the flowers close enough to brush against her cheeks. "This is not some mystical thing. It's something that could be calculated. If only the records were kept better!"

"Records, chicken scratch! And moons! Tax rolls! Those are the problems of people in the past." Jared

smacked her papyrus with the flowers, glaring at her half playfully, half in frustration. "Do you ever think about anything else? The empire is at peace! The garden is blooming and your bond wants to make you happy!"

After letting out a slow breath, she took the flowers from his hands and set them aside. "Then build me a university where I can find some people who can help me read these records!"

"You'd rather sleep with a scribe! Do you want me to get Luran to bring you flowers? You would prefer my secretary to the company of the Empriat?" He teased, but there was a slight tone of hurt under it. He didn't understand the things that interested her. He couldn't read well, nor help her with the moldering sheets of history.

One hand laid against his cheek, she sighed as her expression became tender. "Maybe the Empriat should have married a warrior and not a shirechild with who spends all her time with chicken scratch."

"But then I wouldn't get to sleep with the kindest and most brilliant scribe in all the empire!" Now his smile was genuine, kind. Jared's father had been stern and orderly, but that was something else that Jared didn't understand.

She shook her head, light blue eyes almost laughing at him. "A scribe and a warrior," she said, moving to straddle him as she pushed him over onto his back. "Not a bad combination. One of us can record our baby's birth date and the other can defend the baby against all dangers."

He accepted her kiss then, returning it in a bemused wonder; all thoughts of disaster and dwindling taxes of history gone from both of their thoughts. When the kiss broke, he asked, "Are you? Are you going to have a baby?"

Her nod as all he needed to make spring and the flowers seem very pale. Cheering he rolled up, catching her in his arms, and then swinging her around. "Elery!! My Lady! It's wonderful! This is so wonderful."

"It's just a baby," she said, her tone making sure there was nothing small about it.

"Just," he said through the grin that wouldn't let go of him. "What if you're carrying Mayonaka? Did you think about that? My father, this child, and me makes the third. Maybe Mayonaka will take the throne again! Then who can stand against the throne? There can be no disaster if Mayonaka is here, is that not so, my lady?"

"Myths. Would a mythical creature like Mayonaka dare to grow in the belly of a scribe like me?" She giggled and held to him, now just a bond and mother and not the Empriatfay of Equilobos.

Just outside the window, the rising moons clung to each other as well. It was left, for later, to see the degree that the smaller moon had moved behind the larger.

## Beautiful Lie

Eight full moons later, in the Temple of Songbirds

"She is dead," Ixsander, High Songbird of Equilobos, said not believing, his voice filled with desolation.

He pressed a hand to the cold blue glass of his private chamber's only window. Manhood had not come to him quickly and it had brought only revolting taste of decay with it. Voice still higher than one would expect, the stubble on his cheeks a dewy blond, soft and pale; he was perhaps five or six winters younger than the late Empriatfay. Beauty clung to him the way his breathe clung to the winter-chilled window and he thought it ironic that he'd been called spring incarnate for the sky blue color of his eyes when his heart felt so much comfort in the white desolation of winter.

Until Elery refused to understand his feelings for her, no one had ever denied him a thing. Not since the first denial that had orphaned him on the steps of the temple had anything he really wanted slipped away so permanently. "I don't want her to be dead. That's not what I wanted."

Only the snow and the shadow standing next to him heard his words. It wasn't his shadow, though it never left him. If he let himself look very carefully, he could see beyond the shadow, see under the cover of it. Ice white hair, dusting the floor, over robes of rainbow flecked silver. Once he'd seen the face of this shadow, seen the perfect slender face and the storm gray eyes, lips with delicate curves that were almost like a woman's. He had no name for this shadow that strengthened his songs that kept him company in the night. "But Ixsander, my love, her death was the only way in which I could give her to you. Her spirit is mine now, to do with what I will. She had not expected two children, so I did not either, but I need only the boy. Her death has given me the door into the boy's mind and I will have his spirit in time. Now, come Ixsander, cease the tears. You wished for this woman, and I will give her to you. When we have taken control of the Lai Lei, I will recreate this woman for you and you may do with her as you please."

Ixsander moved away, just slightly, pressing his cheek against the painfully cold glass, wishing for someday to slip out from under what he knew he'd done. "I could have saved her, I could have gone to her, sung her well. You are a liar. You are deceiving me. There is no way to take control of the Goddess Lai Lei."

The shadow seemed to shiver, huge arched wings rising up behind it. "I can not deceive you with anything you do not wish to be deceived with. I am Logus, the god of logic. Only you can lie to

yourself. You've never needed my help for that. You wanted Elery, and in your dreams, now she will want you as well. I will give you power in your waking hours, so much power that you will never want for anything, until the end of your world, Ixsander. Before the little moon returns, we will be gone from here, gone to power that you can not even dream of here."

"No. None of it matters, power? What good is power? I will always want because I let her die. The price of your power is too high and I don't care what god you are. I will watch over her children, fulfill my role as High Songbird." Ixsander moved away from the glass, making up his mind to have no more personal desires, to be only the High Songbird. "I have disgraced the Celestial Court and I must atone."

"Oh, but you haven't seen what we've done, little one," Logus said, moving closer even as Ixsander moved back. Those wings reached out, breaching the veil of shadow and blocking Ixsander's retreat, as Logus wrapped his arms around the smaller man's shoulders. "She knew what was coming, Ixsander. She was brilliant and she could have found my secrets, found ways to ease the coming unrest. I couldn't let her live, you see. What is the life of one woman when not every life on this planet carries meaning? Only the boy who will open the seal on the Lai Lei and you matter, beloved. Not even Death herself will bar my path this time."

One hand arched across the window, wiping away the color, giving the gently imprisoned mortal a clear view of the night sky. Lunatay's moon in all its pale yellow pride held the sky, full and looking so distant under the partial storm cover. "The storm is breaking already, my love. Mayonaka is reborn and her line is the key to the Lai Lei. I will go home and you with me. This is not truly your home, Ixsander."

Ixsander had songbird blood and the magic of Lai Lei was his home more than anything he'd known or imagined. The Lai Lei was the goddess of Songbirds, the source of their gifts that allowed them to sing magic. Mayonaka had been a mortal woman once, the first Empress of Equilobos, who led the first people of Equilobos across the bridges of stars, but it was the Lai Lei that made the bridges. When the songbirds sang, those songs became the dreams of the Lai Lei, and ensured the fertility of the empire.

That Elery would give birth to Mayonaka's reincarnated soul seemed only just to Ixsander. Mayonaka would grow strong and slay both him and his seductive shadow. Lunatay was Mayonaka's lover, the goddess of night and home, of creativity and insanity. It was said that while the little moon, Mayonaka's moon was gone, that Lunatay could not sleep and would roam the land seeking her lover. "We didn't do that," Ixsander whined, "We didn't make Mayonaka's moon go away. We didn't cause Mayonaka to incarnate, did we? Lunatay will seek us out."

"Perhaps you did not. Perhaps I did not make it happen, but I knew it would come and because of that, this time, I will reach the Lai Lei." He caressed the back of his fingers over Ixsander's cheek. "Now, my dear, we must make her more powerful, so when I take her over, she will be healthy enough to make the journey home. And so we must end the songbirds, Ixsander. I have many new laws you must make. No more songbirds. No more sweet sleep for Lai Lei. We will make a new age, you see, until the end of your world."



"I wouldn't do it," Ixsander said, wishing Elery could have confronted this god of Logic. "There have to be songbirds!"

"Oh, beloved, you will do it," Logus purred, his chin resting on Ixsander's head. "I will give you a gift though. You will create new songbirds, songbirds of logic. I will give you the power to create them with your kiss. You will be the greatest songbird that every breathed. That is what you wanted, is it not?"

So near the glass and the dying storm beyond, the single tear burned hot as it slipped down his cheek.



Jared leaned over the crib, staring numbly at his twins. They had both had his red hair, but their eyes were pale as their mother's had been. The world was theirs now; he was just holding it for them... just for a while longer.

## Bedtime Stories

The Year 1012

"I don't understand." The Empriatsen Charity sulked. A mix of Elery and Jared with a stiff dose of anger and stubborn thrown in, Charity was not easily reckoned with by tutors or her Empriat father.

This is what Jared had been avoiding. Pain shouldn't touch an Empriat. It should keep its distance, be respectful like most of the rest of the world. "You look like your mother," he said, excuse, compliment, time filler.

Charity rolled her eyes, wrinkling her seven year old nose up, her opinion as hidden as the Temple rising up in the center of the city. "I am not her."

Memory of the Carlyes' songbird soothed him, just enough to keep his head, and he closed eyes to try to gather some wisdom, some way of dealing with his daughter. He hadn't expected to be reaching out to his little girl this way anymore than he'd expected a minor songbird to walk right into the palace, then into his room, up to him, and take his face in her hands, kiss him deeply. For a moment he'd thought her a goddess incarnate. He hadn't expected the rush of pain and pleasure as his soul woke up. Elery's death had left him distant from everyone, with the exception of his son, Faile, who was of fragile health. One night with Vanasu had left the palace a different place, left him a different man. Now he found himself in Charity's rooms, feeling the love that had always been in his heart, but only now demanded an expression.

"Do you like your room?" He asked, wondering why he could settle the disputes of blood enraged shire clans, but not talk sensibly to one little red headed girl.

It was a lovely room, done in pinks and yellows, with dolls from all the shires and a cream and lavender carved carousel pony. The bed took the center place though. Carved like a swan, with curtains to either side and painted like wings. Charity wore white velvet pants and a blue sweater that was too pale to look really good with her bright red hair. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared down at him from where she sat on the bill of the swan. Her eyes watched him as if he were some suspect wild dog that might need to be beaten off at any moment. "I want a puppy too. And a horse," she said, accusingly.

The smile that light up his face felt... unfamiliar, like his face hadn't moved that way in years. "A horse? You're too small for a horse."

"Faile has a horse." The accusing tone was sharper now and he wondered for a moment if the tips of her red braids would burst into flames from how hard she was concentrating on him.

"I suppose he does. I was told you had everything you wanted though."

"I asked for a horse. They gave me that." She pointed towards the pastel pony.

The temple had sent tutors for both the twins. It had seemed so easy to simply allow them to care for, train his children. Vanasu's song had grown over his heart though, sent roots down into the shell that broke it open and there was no hope of distance any longer. He nodded, eyes narrowing. "I asked to see my daughter, but they've sent me to see this fox here, who is wheedling me for a horse. Oh wise fox, if I give you the word of the Empriat that I shall take you to select a horse of your choice tomorrow, would you guide me to my daughter? I fear that I haven't seen her as often as I should have, and I don't want to lose track of her now."

Charity snarled at him, as if she were a little fox and scrambled over the head of the swan and down into her bed. Wiggling under the covers, so that she got all the way to the top and tugged them up to her eyes, watching him with just a little bit of a smile in her blue eyes. Trying to sound a little fox like, she said, "Okay, for a horse, you can see the Empriatsen Charity!"

"Oh!" Jared laid a hand on his chest and looked towards the blue sky painted on her ceiling. "A horse and a hound pup are small gifts to give to the fox that leads me to my daughter!"

The covers exploded like a battle flag in surrender. The little red headed Empriatsen launched herself out of the bed, arms going around her father's neck. "And a hound of my own too! Can I name him Tokala?"

Jared held her close, as he sat on the chair beside the carved swan bed. "You may name it anything you wish, but why that? It's such an odd name."

"The boy that was here last night. He had a tail! And his name was Tokala! He was with the dark haired Songbird. Can I really have my own hound? Can Tokala sleep here in bed with me?"

"I don't know. A hound might not want to sleep in the belly of a swan."

"Empriatsen aren't supposed to sleep in the belly of a swan either then. Does the Empriat sleep in a swan?"

"Indeed not! I think we must also get you a different bed tomorrow!"

She held to him, tight. "I want to call you Papa too! Like Strife does to his Papa!"

"I want that too, Charity. I want that too." It felt so good to smile, Jared thought, to see the smiling face of his daughter. Some of Elery lived, here in his arms begging for a hound, holding tight to him. He must seek Vanasu out; reward her for this gift.

## **Keeper of the Tail**

The year 1017, five years later

Some problems were not meant to be solved with an ax.

"Are you awake, Tokala?" She asked, watching the blue velvet quilt move on her son's bed. She tilted her head and thought about how far they were from home. Even in the dim light, she was sure that there were two lumps under the covers. "Tokala?"

"Sleeping," said a small muffled voice. "Sleeping nice." The last word was drawn out in childish emphasis.

Anis, Shirelonfait of Carlyes, bond of Raze Carlyes who was the second Shirelon of Carlyes and a field decorated officer in the Imperial Army, was sure she knew just what was giving her son's covers such an odd shape. "Dano na Saikuru. Are you under that quilt when you know you're supposed to be home in the nursery?"

"No." It was the same voice though.

Slowly the covers pulled down and a blond head peeked out. Blue eyes, pale and blinking sleep away now watched her cautiously. "Mama?"

She leaned back against her cushion. "Come out as well, Dano."

"I'm not here," the younger boy whispered, the covers shifting very slightly.

His mother had died in childbirth, as was so common since the Little Sister had left them. Without the blessing of the little moon, all of life was orphaned. Her youngest blood son was the blond, shyly holding the covers up to his eyes. There were two years between them, with her Tokala being six and Dano being four, but they had formed an inseparable friendship. Part of leaving so early in the morning had been, not only to avoid another argument with her husband, but also to keep Dano from finding his way into the wagon. Dano wasn't likely to be any happier about what needed doing than Tokala would be.

"Then who just answered me," she asked kindly. Tokala would grow to be as beautiful as his father had been, blue eyes and moonlight blond hair, as long as she could free him of this one deformity.

She was plain with soft brown hair and eyes that were a little brown, a little green. She set her crocheting aside and sighed. "You might as well come out. Are either of you hungry?"

Tokala disappeared back under the covers again. A fine quilt of blue velvets, made from her Winter Night's gown. He'd liked the colors, so she'd made him a quilt of it. She'd sewn shapes of animals and letters into the blanket and spent the last year trying to get him to remember them. He could name them now, but she rather thought he was only imitating his younger friend.

Perhaps someday Dano would grow into another Songbird for the shire, she hoped. With more Songbirds, the Little Sister might return sooner. It was the Songbirds who raised love when they sang. Without enough song, true lovers could not find each other, and until Lunatay found Mayonaka, the Little Sister would not return and mothers would die in childbirth, or fail to become mothers in the first place. If Dano were a songbird for their shire, they would perhaps make it passed the time of one moon with fewer deaths, perhaps even avoid starvation all together.

Compared to the problems in the world, Tokala's problem was all that bad. Not that she'd allow her husband to fix Tokala's problem, even if they had a Songbird to sing him well again. If he weren't noble, he could even keep the deformity. She'd thought about it, as attached to it as both the boy's were.

The problem in question slipped over the side of the bed, the tip twitching under the edge of the quilt.

Paler than a mountain lion's tail, it was still thick and furry, and twitching unhappily. One small arm slid forward under the covers and drew the tail back up into hiding. Dano was the keeper of the tail. The nursery staff had steadfastly refused to tell her had given the boy that name, probably with good grounds.

Mumbling from under the blanket made her smile. Both of them had had only each other so far in their lives, each other and the large nursery. Raze would allow no one to see his son, barely came to see him himself, even though Anis knew he loved the boy.

The tail had to go, but it wasn't going to happen with an ax, so she was taking her son to the University where a healer and a Songbird could remove it as painlessly and safely as possible. "Are you going to come out? I brought pastries, enough for both of you."

"No," they said together, curled up in a little ball.

They could almost be twins, if they weren't so very different in other ways. Another head poked out from under the quilt nearer to the wagon wall. Black hair, dark as midnight with blue highlights and violet eyes made him a mirror opposite of Tokala. While Tokala was broader in the shoulders, stocky almost, having more of his father's build, Dano was slender and frail looking and he was clutching Tokala's tail as it twitched against his cheek. "You can't get rid of Tokala!"

"Oh my!" Anis' mouth dropped open. "Why under the Celestial Court would you think that?"

Blue eyes peeked out the other side, big tears forming in them. "I heard Papa say that you were going to have to get rid of it." He scooted closer to his smaller friend, his tail almost disappearing between them, just the tip visible above Tokala's shoulder, right next to Dano's violet eyes.

"Tokala!" Wailing, Dano wrapped his still toddler chubby arms around his friend. "Kitty!"

Tokala responded by making a sound very like purring, while rubbing his cheek against Dano's shoulder.

The tail really had to go, Anis thought sadly as she moved from her side of the wagon to pull both boys up into her arms. "Now, you listen to me! We would never get rid of either of you! You're both precious! When we come home though, you can both go and play in the gardens with the other Shirekin and you can each have a pony, if you want. Dano is a little small to ride yet, but he may still have a pony of his own for when he gets bigger. What color ponies do you want?"

"White, like Toka's tail!" Dano chased the tail with his hand as Tokala snickered and moved it constantly out of range.

"Black! Dano's hair, but faster!"

Just then, Dano's fingers closed around the snake dancing tail. The smaller boy cheered, bringing his captive tail to his cheek. "Soft! I want my pony to be soft!"

Anis hoped when the tail was gone, her son would speak as a child his age should, that would be a normal child.

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The rest of the trip to the capital hadn't had any tears. Anis grew quite pleased that Dano had stowed away. The nanny needed sacked. She'd said the boys would be okay if Tokala were taken to the capital on what would be a month long trip and Dano was left at home, that it might be good for them to be separated. The trip would have been a nightmare without Dano. They slept curled in a ball, like a boy and his kitten. They played together without spoken words. They were really very much like twins, despite the age difference.

Quiet settled in as the wagon they rode in started to bounce on the cobblestones of the city streets. Anis dressed them both in the nicest clothing she had. Tokala got the suit made just for him, dark blue pants, cut to let his tail out, white linen shirt with a quilted vest of blues and yellows, from the same cloth as his favorite quilt. His hair just barely reached his shoulders, but was trimmed neatly into bangs around his face. The day before they'd stopped at an inn and bathed. Bathing them both was not an easy task. She had reconsidered sacking the Nanny.

Dano kept growling like a bear and Tokala wouldn't say anything at all. She'd ended up wet from head to toe. Getting Dano dressed hadn't been any great treat either. The boy hadn't brought any clothes of his own, just the worn second hand pair of breeches and shirt that he'd stowed away in. So Anis had to select something she'd brought for Tokala, something already smallish, that she could mend to fit Dano.

The hand me down clothes did not suit him and Anis felt badly for not having noticed how he was being dressed before. Now he was still dressed in hand me downs, but they were nice cream wool pants that she'd taken up quickly for him and a tan shirt with golden yellow laces at the cuffs and throat. His hair was much longer, down to the middle of his back already. It wouldn't be cut until they were sure he wasn't a Songbird. For their visit to the palace, she bribed him to hold still so she could braid it and tie it off with a nice yellow ribbon.

Both boys sat quietly, only their feet bouncing and playing some game of who could get their foot on top of the other's. Dano had hold of Tokala's tail again, holding it in his lap, as the wagon went over the

cobble stone streets. Arriving, she thought, was the hardest part. Until they'd entered the city, it could have been just some normal journey, some long picnic.

She had her own hair to braid to distract her. Having them realize that she was upset as well, now that they were here, would not be at all helpful. So she got their opinion on her clothing as well, gray shirt with the family crest on the shoulder or a colorful silk one? Tokala chose the gray and she dressed behind the small curtain that divided the wagon. Pulling on her knee high polished brown boots, she didn't understand why it was so hard to talk to them. It made her anger. They should understand this was for the best and then she was really glad of the curtain as she wiped tears away.

Moving through the arched gate way into the Emprial Palace's courtyard cast a shadow over them and Tokala put his arm around Dano's shoulders, holding the smaller boy close. She strapped on her sword, wishing she'd come to the capital now more than once since her tenth year blessing. The wagon opened at the back, but she held both boys back until she was sure her guards were forming a protective ring around the steps. She wasn't sure what kind of reception she'd get bringing a mutated noble child into the palace.

Dano pressed up against her, trying to see out and Tokala was pressed to him, the tip of his tail twitching just on the topside of Dano's enclosing fist. Anis smoothed her son's hair, nervous and apprehensive now that she was here. This was no small shire ten days from the capital; it was the biggest city in the world.

The early spring sky was just as gray here as it was in Carlyes, so it couldn't be that far from home, the people couldn't be that different.

A tenor voice drew her attention back from the sky. She tried to smile, eyes blinking just slightly. Before her stood a tall man in light blue velvet, brown hair trimmed to his jaw and smiling blue eyes. He held up his hand, to help her down. For just a moment, she was sure it was the Imperial signet. "Carlyes Shirelonfait? I was delighted to see your carriage arrive."

She accepted his hand, stepping down. Calling her wagon, even though it had a nice new coat of paint on it, a carriage was very kind. This normal looking man could not be the Empriat himself, the voice of Mayonaka, the keeper of her throne, the leader and warrior protector of all of Equilobos. "Empriat?"

Anis had been to the capital to have the marriage blessed between herself and Raze, but she'd seen nothing of the Palace and not in her wildest dreams did she expect the Empriat to meet her when they arrived. She'd only gone directly to the palace so that she could ask for rooms above the Shirelon Forum. She didn't want to expose Tokala to the crowds or the stares in a public inn. Exposing him directly to the Empriat did not seem like a good idea either.

She stepped down out of the wagon, her hand in his. "Empriat?"

He bowed, drawing her fingers to his forehead. "Jared Larea Soresun, Empriat of Equilobos. And you are from Carlyes?"

"I am Carlyes Shirelonfait, Anis," she said, not at all sure why the Empriat would be greeting her in such a way, to be so happy to see her.

He straightened, smiling. "Have you brought your Songbird?"

"Songbird?" It had been four years since Vanasu's death and Anis had stopped thinking about the Carlyes having a Songbird. His question explained his greeting though. Vanasu had been a beautiful woman, caring, and the best Songbird Anis had ever heard. Even in the short time she'd known the woman, trusting her had been easy, loving her as well. Vanasu had brought a wisdom and beauty to the small shire, shined like an impossible jewel and disappeared leaving only a small dark haired babe.

"I brought Dano. He is her son," she offered. He would probably be a songbird, but they wouldn't know until the gift showed in him or until his tenth year blessing. "Dano, come here."

Jared dropped Anis' hand and stilled as the dark haired boy came forward, slipping past the Shirelonfait. Bittersweet, a tiny smile lifted the corner of Jared's mouth. With respectful, careful fingers, he lifted the childlike hand to his forehead in greeting, before stepping back and asking, "Who is your father, Dano son of Vanasu?"

He paused, violet eyes looking back over his shoulder, then back at the odd man watching him. "The Keeper of the Tail."

The answer that made perfect sense to the four-year-old made Anis wondered if it were possible to die of embarrassment. "This is Dano na Saikuru, son of Vanasu na Saikuru. He may be a Songbird for our Shire. He has only four winters now, so it is too early to tell." Nervous, she caught hold of Dano and drew him away from the wagon. Dano didn't want to go without Tokala. Tail in hand, he dragged Tokala with him. The older boy wasn't far behind anyway, as he was quite sure he wanted to stay near the most familiar person in his life.

The Empriat laughed, smiling broadly as he knelt before both the boys. "Oh! I see. The Keeper of the Tail." On one knee before them, he asked, "And so, you both are very good friends? I do remember you, from when Vanasu brought you here before, Shirechild Tokala. Do you remember that trip?"

Tokala edged behind Dano a bit more, his tail twitching. Dano shook his head and answered for Tokala, "Doesn't remember."



"Do you always speak for him?" Jared held up his hand to keep Anis from interrupting.

Dano tucked his tongue between his cheek and teeth. He didn't know this man, had meet very few people in his four years, so he held Tokala's tail tightly. "Keeper of the Tail," he whispered.

"Where is your mother," Jared asked, quietly, believing he knew already.

"Mother," Tokala said, hugging Dano.

"I see." Jared brushed his fingers over the end of Tokala's tail. "And what a nice tail it is! Not every one has such a nice tail!"

Anis choked and turned away, eyes wide. This was not what she'd had planned for today. Both boys though, decided that they had an ally. Dano jumped first, his arms going around Jared's neck and Tokala followed. The Empriat nearly sneezed as a fuzzy tail brushed his nose. One arm around both of them, he stood up, lifting them with him. "Do come inside, Shirelonfait Carlyes. We were just about to eat dinner. Luran! Get the Carlyes guards garrisoned. Treat them as Imperial retainers."

Luran bowed, giving subtle hand motions to the other servants. "As it pleases Your Majesty. Accommodations for the Shirelonfait?"

"Lady," Jared asked, blowing at the tail to move it a bit away from his mouth and nose. "Will you do me the honor of staying in the palace?"

"The palace," she stuttered. Accommodation on the Shirelon floor of the forum would have been high enough for her. She followed him quickly, feeling like the world had left her behind somehow.

"Lady," Jared teased as soon as they were a few steps from her travel complement. "Do you need a Keeper of the Tail as well?"

"Keeper!" Dano chirped, chasing Tokala's tail as his friend did his best not to get caught while snickering against the nice velvet of the Emirate's shirt.

"Right," Jared smiled, but then to Anis he said, "Come Lady, I offer you my home freely. Would you not do the same if I were in Carlyes?"

"Yes! Of course! But you are the Empriat, carrying the blood of Mayonaka! And we are only from a small shire, having held it only two generations." She hurried to keep up with his long steps, worrying

that she should be getting her son out of his arms. "And we came so the University could help with Tokala's problem."

Jared smiled at Tokala, whose eyes were filling with tears again. "Tail," he whispered as if it were the darkest secret.

"Kitty," Dano explained, also in a very quiet voice.

Anis really wished she could faint now, her cheeks had to have been as red as a fresh burn. "It is a small matter, but I don't wish to trouble you with it. Our late Songbird brought Tokala when he was two. They said that he would be strong enough to have it repaired when he had six winters."

"Tail!" Tokala nearly howled and Dano caught the flailing white furry thing, holding it close to his cheek, stroking and comforting it. Both were crying now and Jared bounced them a little, squeezing gently.

"Now, now," he cooed at them. "We have a kitty here. Would you like to meet Shirelon Gray? She's a fine beast with six toes and she acts like she just knows how the world should be!"

"Kitty," Dano said again, wrapping his braid around the end of Tokala's tail.

"Yes, kitty," Jared said smiling very kindly at Dano. They crossed into the cool interior of the palace. "Charity! Faile! Kai! Ko!" His voice echoed through the entrance hall.

Immediately a slightly blue face, with a silver hoop glittering from a very tall pointy ear appeared around the edge of one of the doorframes. Another child looked around right above the blue elf. Above her, a matching red head appeared, only he was male, and then another elf, the completely mirror image of the first child, though this one had long hair and it hung down like a curtain behind their totem pole. A very fat gray cat strutted around the stack and into the entrance hall, her tail twitching irritably.

"Kitty!" Tokala cheered, trying to wiggle away the moment he saw the gray cat.

Jared squatted, letting Tokala free and more reluctantly Dano as well. Both took off towards the Imperial Quad and the gray cat. "Kai, Charity, Faile, and Ko, allow me to present the Imperial Quad," he said, introducing his own twins and his adopted twins Kai and Ko.

Anis covered her eyes. As soon as the boys were away, she groaned, "He thinks he's a cat! We took all the cats away from the nursery! Oh this makes things so much more difficult!"

A bit sternly, Jared assessed her, taking in all the details he could find. "Lady, I don't know what pressures there are in Carlyes, but in the palace, we may do things a little differently. I assume that you love your son." He tucked her arm around his and drew her farther away from the children.

The Imperial Quad knelt around Shirelon Gray and the two guests. The elf with the long hair kept trying to catch Tokala's tail, but the little blond boy evaded him, without even looking, as if he had eyes in his tail even.

"Lady," Jared started, keeping an eye on the children still. "Dano's mother was Vanasu? She no longer lives?"

Confused, irritated that the Songbird's orphan should become so important to the Empriat when she had come to see Tokala's deformity healed. And fear took a solid old of her as the reason suddenly became unavoidable to her. The last thing the Empriat would need would be proof of broken Temple law that someone could bring against him. "She died in childbirth, Vanasu na Saikuru. The Temple decreed that she had lost Lai Lei's favor, but we hoped that her son would have her gift," she said hedging for a moment, "I know the Temple's new decrees state that the bastard orphan of a Songbird is to be exposed and not given succor, but he was so small and such a beautiful baby. We had to keep him, Majesty! He didn't have anything to do with his mother's broken vows, you see? It seemed like such a small crime and we've hidden him. No one knows! He's barely left the nursery. Both he and Tokala have been secluded. We didn't even order clothes for him, so..." She trailed off, now quite afraid that the displeasure of the Temple would fall on Carlyes and it would be her fault for letting Dano come along. Or Imperial displeasure. Not everyone was happy to have a bastard. She looked past him, at her son and his dark haired friend though and she couldn't really bring herself to regret it. "Please, don't ...Dano is a good, sweet boy."

"I see." Sadness thickened Jared's voice. As he watched the toddler chase Shirelon Gray, he remembered a woman, with long black hair and violet eyes, with kisses that relit the fire in his life. Dano was made in her image, and yet, if one knew what to look for, his other blood line was just as obvious. "We must discuss terms, Shirlonfait."

## **Betrothal**

Early the next morning

Jared did not sleep that night. The papyrus balanced on his fingers as the sun rose. It was a desperate bit of diplomacy, crafted to protect his interests, to protect a son. Politics seemed a rabid horse that one couldn't put down, but had to guide further down the road without spurs and without falling off. He closed his eyes, letting his thumbs run back and forth over parchment.

"Elery," he whispered into the dry air of his office. She would be right. Her University would be right, and the little moon would return, the dying would end, the 'new' decrees of the Temple would end. It was something natural, some natural part of their world. Or it wasn't.

And Ixsander would be right. The little moon would come back only when the Celestial Court had been appeased. Twelve years. The balance had held for twelve years. It would continue to hold until the people who chased drunken chickens over papers made sense of the calculations the late Empriatfay had left for them.

Elery had said once that the past echoes into the present and that one could tell where one was by looking at the echoes that remain. He spoke to her sometimes, his Elery and more than once he wished that she could have met Vanasu. Rising from his desk, he crossed to the fireplace and the huge llama rug laying in front of the remaining embers. On the rug lay the boys, moonlight and starlight, Vanasu might have said.

He lay down, very careful not to disturb them, and watched Vanasu sleep in her son's face. His son. He wanted this boy to stay here, in the palace, to hear his laughter and watch him grow, to hear him sing and watch him fall in love someday, to cherish him just as he did his other children. Watching him play with Faile, Charity, Kai, and Ko had lifted his spirits so much that he now knew how far down they'd been. Here he slept, this little boy with tangled black hair and honey smeared across his cheek. He slept so blissfully unaware of the civil war trying to rise around them, of the politics that would use his existence as a reason to rebel against the throne. Using his older friend as a pillow, head on his shoulder, holding the tail next to his cheek, thumb in his mouth, Jared found in him an innocence that renewed his determination to protect the people of his country, to hold the balance until the little moon returned, until Elery was proved correct.

So there was little he could do for his youngest child, until Elery was proven correct and the little moon returned. Lying on his side in the thick fur of the blanket, he caught a bit of the long black hair between his fingers. What kind of Songbird could the boy be, with both the blood of Mayonaka and na Saikuru blood. Perhaps someday this boy would be the new High Songbird, a bridge between Throne and Temple? Or the final wedge that destroyed? Jared slept then, fingers, holding to silky black hair, worry lines between his eyes even as his breathing deepened.

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"Do you accept?"

Anis read through the betrothal contract again. "I do not understand why you would do this?"

Jared leaned back in his chair, fingers tips pressed to each other. He wore black wool today, smooth and elegant, a jeweled collar lay around his shoulders, holding a large gold Crest of Mayonaka. Frost in his words made them sharp, distant. The children played in the gardens, far enough away that he

could not hear them. "I offer this because it suits me. Do you reject the offer? Do you need the services of my scribe?"

"I can read, better than you can write, it seems," she snapped back, holding the parchment as she shifted the weight of her sword belt. She could, though his handwriting wasn't making it easier. She suspected there were reasons behind this that she didn't understand, consequences that she couldn't plan for. This contract would betroth Tokala to the Empriatsen Charity. The Empriat proposed a transfer of wealth over the coming years that far exceeded the total worth of Carlyes Shire more times than she could figure, a University trained tutor for all of the Carlyes children and a Singer to train the Dano. It was still hard to believe that the Songbird's orphan was Empriatsen. "Why don't you just acknowledge Dano and bring him to live here?"

His head tilted forward just slightly and shivers rolled over his neck, standing his hair on end again. "Shirlonfait. Accept. Decline. These are your options."

She wrinkled her nose and set the betrothal contract on edge of his desk. "Then I decline. I cannot commit my son to something years in advance without knowing some good reason why I should do this. Why not just keep your son here with you?"

"I grow less politically adept every year. I watch my own anger reflect in my daughter. One day, if I do not do it, she will take the head of the High Songbird. For me, it is simply a matter of waiting. I will wait until the little moon returns, and the Temple's power will break. Ixsander cannot impose his new laws when there is nothing for the people to run from. However, right now they are very scared. It has been twelve years since the little moon disappeared. I don't know how long it will be before this crisis ends. It could be a month, or another ten years. What I did with Vanasu healed me of the grief weighing me down after Elery's death. The Temple has declared it an offence against the Celestial Court for Songbirds to be anything less than virgin. If Dano is revealed before the power of the Temple is broken, his life and the Thone would be a risk, even my older children would be at risk. Ixsander is not sane and his own guilt over Elery's death drives him. He truly believes that he is correct in what he does. Therefore, I must hide Dano. By betrothing Charity and Tokala, I bind our houses, provide a way for me to care for my son without drawing too much attention to him. The Temple has been demanding a betrothal for Charity anyway. When the moon returns, then we can null this betrothal, and both children will be free to do as their hearts and logic require of them. I will acknowledge Dano and your house will be a dear friend of the throne. I will not have my son in second hand clothing or have him thought of as a disgraceful orphan."

Anis picked the betrothal contract up again. "Couldn't you get someone to write this who has decent handwriting? Do you always write such contracts?"

"No," he said impatiently.

"Then don't you think that who ever needs to see this will think it a little odd? And is this bit about Tokala's tail really necessary? I don't think making my son a target of pity and amusement suits me

much."

Jared ground his teeth. People who lived in the city usually had a much stronger respect for the Throne or perhaps they were just more careful in their protection of their families. "The mention of his tail is to draw the sympathy of those with such adaptations in the city. By holding the loyalty of such ones, I strengthen the Throne and I make it more difficult for the Temple to call for their deaths. Tokala keeping his tail also helps to preserve the balance."

"I think you just don't want to see your son cry." She picked up the parchment again though. "Five bay mares, a matching stallion, ten iron plows, 300 chickens, and 25 crates of bees. We don't want the gold hilted sword, but you can send a nice dagger for Raze. He prefers hammers. I'd like a mill built as well. Five pair of doves, from where ever the ones we ate last night were from."

"Anything else?" Jared lit the end of the seal wax candle.

"Yes, I want you to promise that when you acknowledge Dano, you'll not just take him away. He's part of our family and Tokala couldn't bare to lose him."

Nodding, Jared turned the parchment, sealed it with the Crest of Mayonaka, then turned it to Anis, who sealed it with Carlyes. "Perhaps they'll wed," Anis said, pulling her ring crest back slowly.

"Perhaps. Now take them. Leave. I will send what we have agreed upon, and please, allow me to send my own travel coach, while we repair the one you arrived in."

"There's nothing wrong with my wagon."

"Allow me to have it repaired, in any case?" He smiled, blowing gently on the seals.

Anis arched an eyebrow, about to express her opinion when Charity burst into the room. "Papa! Shirelon Gray!"

He rose, careful to put the betrothal contract into a drawer and out of sight. "Charity?"

"She's having babies! Six so far! And Dano's singing! I thought she was gonna die! But then Dano started singing! Come Papa! Come see the kittens! "

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Empriat and Shirelonfait stood in the opening of the horse stall. The Emperial Quad and Tokala didn't notice them. The older children watched as Dano held the smallest kitten close to his chest, singing softly to it. He was on his knees, sitting back against his heels, eyes closed, hair loose around his face, the braid covered with stray hairs where it lay on his shoulder. Unaware of the political weight of what he did, Dano sang for the kitty, so naturally. His song didn't even have words, just comforting little kitty sounds and wordless tones. Jared wanted to take him into his arms and hold him safe and surround him with love, family, all the privileges he could offer him.

Biting his lip, Dano opened his eyes and offered the little kitty to Charity, who took it and put it down with the others. It snuggled in closer so that it could nurse as well. Two sets of twin faces looked up at the Empriat. Jared stepped into the stall, drawing Anis in with him. He squatted down and petted his fingers down Shirelon Gray's ear. "Is this the first time you've done this, Dano?"

"Done what?" Violet eyes smiled up at him from where the boy had leaned over to be almost eye level with the new kittens. "I saw kitties born at home."

The Emperial Quad was told not to tell anyone and Anis left with both of the boys within the hour. It was all a bit rushed and not at all what she'd had in mind on the trip to the capital, but in her possession she had a contract that made her son, perhaps, the next Empriatfay. Tokala had his tail still, but he and Dano also had a great pile of parchments bound at the side and filled with pretty pictures and letters and words. Both of them found them interesting enough to be quiet with. They'd come to get rid of Tokala's tail, and instead Dano had become a rogue Songbird, Tokala was betrothed, and Carlyes Shire was about to be a great deal wealthier.

## Charity's Sword

1022, spring

No one spoke of it. No one spoke of the unsung souls. Charity understood her father's grief now, why he'd been so cold when she was little. Faile's soul seemed so close to her sometimes, like crumpled crepe paper sorrow, just hanging in limbo. She told herself that he no longer felt nightmares, that he happiness he'd known with Leticia had returned to him. Leticia had been sung to the other side, but only the High Songbird could sing an Empriatsen to the Celestial Gardens. Charity flexed her muscles and shifted her grip on the training sword in her hands. She couldn't sing her twin's soul to peace, but she'd learned to swing a sword.

Muscles tensed and she swung at the scared wooden pillar. In her sixteen-year-old imagination, simple wood became the beautiful face of the High Songbird. Ixsander's refusal to sing Faile's soul, on the grounds that Empriatsen Autumn was unblessed and should be offered to the Temple so that the child could be raised in a way that pleased the gods prior to the last act of consecration for the Empriatsen Faile, boiled Charity's blood. Her sword struck and sunk deeply into the wood. It sent chills over her as

she tried to free the blade.

The nightmares that had affected Faile had not come to her dreams, but she sometimes heard his lover's cries of pain in the child baring that ended her life, these Charity heard in her dreams and saw her twin's tears over and over again. She felt the cold of the snow in her dreams, for Faile had wandered out of the palace into a blizzard, so strong was his grief over Leticia's loss. Ixsander could have sung them both well, both Faile and Leticia, while they lived. Part of her was sure that Ixsander had been behind her twin's nightmares, for he surely had done nothing to heal them. Her blade won free and she swung from the other side. It was the responsibility of the Empriat to uphold justice, to protect the Temple and the People. Charity did not want to be good at politics. She closed her eyes and swung that sword, her favorite, too large for her, only five moons past. The Swords Keeper had not wanted her to use it, nor any other double-handed sword, but Charity had learned the power of anger in a way her father never had. Never would.

"Majesty!"

The cry caught her attention and she froze, sword paused in the air. Staring down the length of her arms, which aimed right at the boy's chest, she gave her best leave-me-alone-glare. He didn't move, didn't flinch. Little mouse of a boy, she thought, skinny and ordinary. The child of Strife, she recognized him. "Strife'sen?"

"Majesty," he bowed, just the perfect level of respectability, as he just happened to step back from the point of her sword. "The High Songbird approaches the Palace. He has a brace of riders, armed."

"The Empriat?"

"He and his secretary were at the university."

His crisp fact-only manner teased a smile from Charity, even with the High Songbird coming, or perhaps it was that coming that vented her anger away from the boy. Some facts should be too big for little mouse boys, but she nodded, sharply, and swung her sword in the last motions of the Emprial sword kata, cutting the lines of Mayonaka's Crest into the air. As she'd seen her father do so many times, she sheathed her sword, rolled one shoulder that felt a bit sore. Parroting her father's interaction with his father, she commanded, "Evaluate."

He followed her towards the palace, imitating his father as well. "It is highly likely that the High Songbird was aware that the Empriat was gone for the day. The Temple's opinion of Your Majesty is well known. I expect he is coming to try to take possession of Empriatsen Autumn."

Charity paused, turned, studying this child of her father's secretary. About her own age, could be a winter more or a winter less, hard to say. She outsized him though, in her leather armor vest, leather



pants, him in his neat trousers and shirt, a quill tucked behind his ear. "I haven't seen you around. Where've you been?"

"University, Majesty. I was visiting my father between terms, and when the guard saw the Temple party, they... they asked me to fetch you."

Sneering slightly, Charity arched an eyebrow. "They sent you because they were too scared. Do I scare you?"

"A little, Majesty." He said, but his eyes never left hers, his chin didn't bow at all.

"I'm going to kill Ixsander for what he did to my brother, my mother."

"I expect you will," he said without reproach, without judgment. "My family serves yours. I expect it to stay that way."

The agreement reached between them, Charity held out her hand, calloused and sweaty. He put his, nicely done nails and ink stains in hers and they shook. "You can get me some decent clothes and arrange a place for me to clean up. I have to see that Autumn is safe."

He nodded, betraying none of his shyness or self-doubt. "Majesty."

"Strife," Charity said, turning away. She didn't really think about it, about his name, if he had one of his own or not. The Empriat's secretary was called Strife. She didn't know how many generations that went back and really didn't care.

No one questioned him as he went into the Empriatsen'na's Charity's private rooms. They weren't at all what he'd expected. It was as though a soldier had moved into the room of a little girl. Not that either of them were children, he thought. Armor hung over the lavender carousel horse. Someone had hacked off the head of her swan bed and converted the neck to a block to store blades of many sizes in. For a couple of breaths, Mica stood there, for a full breath, considering what kind of person he was now honor bound to serve.

The clothing area wasn't any neater than the rest, though there were clean clothes set aside from the pile of sweaty, bloody clothes. Nothing like this room existed in the neat and orderly world of the university. After shaking his head, he gathered clean clothes, clothes for washing, a towel, and her basin, a pewter pitcher. On the way back down, he called for a servant to fill the pitcher he put in her hand. His father had been secretary, advisor, he expected Empriatsen'na Charity needed both of those and a body servant as well, perhaps the later more than the first two.

A younger boy, looking like an escapee from the kitchens, pointed him towards the front doors, which

stood wide open. The sun had already turned the sky blue and glittered off the white paving stones in the courtyard.

For whatever reason, the Emprial guard seemed to have found other places to be, mostly. They were not made of the same stock as the Tirson'vay, the small elite force that roamed with the Empriat. Only Charity and another girl, smaller and hardly ready to be a guard for the Empriatsen'na stood waiting. Bare arms glittering with a sheen of sweat, even though her sword had been slipped into the sheath, Charity's presence killed the hope that the role of Empriat was one of diplomacy and decorum. Somewhere in the palace the cries of a baby could be heard.

He paused at the top of the stairs, Charity's clothes held to his chest. A nervous kitchen woman approached him, shoved the pitcher of water into his hands and disappeared back into the palace. Fear thickened the air and made him sweat too. There was nothing like this in the University, nothing like this primal struggle for power. As fearsome as the Empriatsen'na was, he realized the real source of fear was the High Songbird.

"Majesty?"

She motioned for him to go back inside the palace, but he stood there, his attention caught by the huge white horse that slowed and neatly danced in through the front gates. Polished silver hooves struck sparks from the paving. The beast had haunches bigger than anything he knew to compare them to. Bits of crystal hung from the mane. Visible magic sparked between the crystals, the white mane. Astride the beast sat a man of moonlight and cutting winds. His hair seemed to have less color than when Strife had seen him distantly on his own tenth Winter Blessing, and the gray eyes scanned the courtyard, pausing only momentarily on Charity. White clad Temple Songbirds streamed in around him, fanning out in the courtyard.

The great white horse sidestepped nearer to the Empriatsen'na, little bits of crystal tinkling sweetly against each other. Ixsander squeezed his knees, stilling the horse when the top of his boot was only a hand's breadth from Charity's face. She hadn't moved so much as a step and now looked up at him, vengeance in her eyes. "What brings the Temple to pay us this honor," she asked, a hand flexing around the hilt of her practice sword.

One platinum eyebrow arched slowly. "Oh, Mayonaka's daughter, does diplomacy burn your mouth? I have come for the child. He belongs to the Temple. Only by honoring the gods, will we restore the smaller moon, and relieve the wandering of your twin."

"Oh?" Charity smirked at him, wincing inwardly at mention of Faile. The sound of a dagger grating against sheath, coming from the girl next to her, filled the space between them for a moment, until Charity smiled viciously. "I thought you'd come for swordsmanship lessons. Or perhaps your new decrees had brought a raving mob to the Temple looking for your head? Perhaps you came here looking for protection for I know you cannot have come for my nephew. The Empriat claimed him. He turns the crest blue. He is Soresun, so there is no need for you to trouble yourself, Songbird." It was an insult,

delivered with the best teenage nobility.

That brought a little color to those pale sculpted cheeks and Charity smiled as one gray eye actually twitched. "Girl. You need a tutor to show you how harmful your attitude is to the whole empriatay. How do you expect that we shall ever win back the favor of the Celestial Court if we do not obey their decrees? It is for your own good. Little girls should know their place."

Color drained from her face, her sword hissed at it slide just a bit up out of the sheath. "I am Empriatsen'na Charity Amil Soresun, child of Elery and Jared. You are only the Songbird of Ghosts. You stink of death and when the little moon returns, and you are proved to be a liar, I will take your head to put on a pike on my walls."

"My my," he soothed. "These are not your walls. The Soresun Dynasty is ended with your father for the Celestial Court will not bless a girl and your brother's child was born out of bond... he is not blessed by the Temple and unless I rear him to bring honor to the Celestial Court, Soresun ends here. Unless of course, your father has some other proof of the Celestial Court's favor towards your family. Alas, he's not likely to sire a Songbird now, is he?"

Stalemate hung between them. It was on her tongue to spit back that her father had sired a songbird, only her vow to keep it secret kept it so. She did not have her father's wisdom, and she knew it. She held her ground, not understanding why the man would use that bait for her and not giving in to the desire to shove her sword into any part of him.

He broke first, shifting his mount a bit, and motioning to the dozen white robed Songbirds with him. "Bring the child to me!" He commanded, voice sweet and seductive, delicate as crystal poison.

It took her a moment to shake off the hold his words had on her, but she put herself between the door and at least some of the Temple Songbirds. "No! I forbid you to enter the palace!"

Extensions of Ixsander's will, two of them moved to engage the Empriatsen'na and the young guard near her. Charity spun to face them, drawing her sword, smooth and aware inside as she stared down the two men. Adrenaline roared up inside of her, sharpening her focus, feeding on the rage within her. It was nothing like the racing heart and excitement of training. This made her forget where her hand ended and her sword began.

"I wouldn't let you take Autumn."

Song from Ixsander echoed in the courtyard. The young woman standing near Charity turned to look at her, confusion in her slowly blinking eyes. Her dagger clattered to the pavement. The songbirds held out their arms out, as if they could block Charity's escape, but she spun to face Ixsander. He shook one finger at her, slowly. "Little girl, you do not possess the power to stop me and would do well to understand who forbids in this world."

"I tell you this, Empriat of Ghosts, my family keeps justice in Equilobos. We will lay your ghost to rest so that you can harm no more!"

Ixsander motioned at three of the other Songbirds to head into the palace, quick small motions of his fingers. Charity brought her sword around, pointing it up at Ixsander's side. "Touch Autumn and I'll kill you."

Laughing, Ixsander leaned forward, so his head was very close to her blade. "You have no power, little girl. The sooner you learn this, the sooner you will find peace."

"Ixsander." Jared's voice broke the trance that had fallen over Charity and she staggered back away from the High Songbird, the tip of her sword falling. More time had passed than she'd been aware of. Strife'sen had dropped her clothes and now struggled to keep the three Songbirds out of the Palace. Or maybe it was that time had slowed. "Unhand my child!" Her father's voice easily filled the courtyard, deep and resonate, unyielding. It was the way she would remember it for the rest of her life.

Ixsander howled a song then, sharp tight notes that filled his hand with light.

"Papa!" She cried out, not feeling like the brave warrior of sixteen winters now, as the light flew. Strife's father, no more a solider than his son, grabbed Jared, covering him with the Empriat with his own body. Light impacted like a ball of living fire, wrapping around both men. Jared's horse screamed when the light sizzled down his flanks, legs buckling, skin boiling.

Strife'sen screamed, now struggling to get passed the Songbirds that held him back. Charity lifted her sword again, hair standing on end and swung, swiping at Ixsander. His hair stood on end too, flying around him like thousands of silver snakes, tinkling crystals bound in the ends. He flicked his fingers at her. Light like silver acid jumped at her and she felt the impact from the side though, hitting the ground hard, rolling away from her sword and the now rearing white horse. Over and over she rolled, held by someone that smelled of ink.

Those hooves struck pavement again and new song blossomed into the air. From where she lay, she saw the green prancing hooves of Ko's Elvish mount. The new song came from Kai, Ko's twin. Ko's song rose to support his brother's and the braided Elvish song, alien to the High Songbird, but stronger for that they were on their home ground and their songs braided together. The energy of the palace surged to meet the blue haired Songbirds, generations of Emprial songbirds lending their energy if only through the memory of their power in the Palace halls.

Eyes closed, held before his twin on Ko's horse, Kai sang peacefully, sweet and seductive, a healing song. Ixsander's horse screamed this time, prancing back away from where he'd confronted Charity. Urgent hands pulled Charity to her feet. Ixsander's eyes had gone wide, his breathing no more than

panting. With a hiss, he leaned forward on his mount and rode out the gate, leaping over the fallen Emprial horse, the two unconscious men.

"Papa!" Strife cried now, but Charity caught his arm, held him back. Ko dismounted, never taking his hands from Kai, gently guiding his twin down from the horse as well, without interrupting their song, Kai the top layer, Ko the supporting.. Perfectly matched, Kai and Ko were forest Elves, colored like the blue sky and the green forest, tall and graceful, exotic with pointy ears. Ko held his twin as they both sank down near where Jared and Tarek lay.

Eyes still closed, Kai reached out and gently touched the secretary. He froze, shivering, his song wavering.

"Papa! Papa!"

Charity wrapped her arms around the scribe, holding him gently. "Kai and Ko will sing them well. They have powerful Elvish magic."

Kai's song grew louder, as he placed both hands on the Empriat. The fallen horse cried out, struggling to get back to it's feet. Charity gritted her teeth. Near where she stood, the girl who'd held her ground with her started to wake. In the distance she could still hear Autumn crying. One of the Songbirds had sat down on the stairs of the palace and was crying. Two more lay dead on the ground, burned by whatever light Ixsander had thrown.

As Kai's song finished, the Songbird elf went boneless in his twin's arms, who stillsang quietly. Ko was crying; Charity could tell from how his shoulders moved. Strife won free from her finally, racing to where his father lay. Before he reached him; she knew. The old secretary was dead, having given his life to protect the Empriat.

She saw her own father's chest rising, falling, but she also saw his eyes open, empty. Shivers went over her shoulders, but no tears came. Cycling through her thoughts, like a powerless song, she thought, 'Live, Papa, live!' Out loud, she snarled, "War. This is war!"

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In Carlyes, a splash of cold, of terrible fear hit Dano and he dropped the ball he'd been running with. Nauseous, he dropped down to his knees, then forward on to his hands. Tokala's fingers rubbed his back as the older boy snarled a comforting sound.

"Oh summon the Celestial Court! That cat and his pet bird are out of the game! Get off the field if you can't play!" Tokala's older brother growled.

"Shut up!" Tokala snarled back, getting an arm around Dano's back, as he dragged them both to their feet.

Dano'd broken out in a light sweat by the time they'd gotten out of earshot of the older shirechildren. Sitting by the river, Tokala nudged him, caressed his friend's face with the tip of his tail. Dano caught the tail. "Maybe I'm getting visions, like Dayle said I might, but Toka, something bad's looking for me."

## **The Price of Peace**

The winter of the year 1022

He was Ixsander, the High Songbird of Equilobos. He could create a Songbird with his kiss; ignite the power of Lai Lei within their very souls. Charity had seen him call forth goyls and ryths with his songs and her soliders had died under the weapons of his callings. He held her father who was paralyzed from another of Ixsander's callings. For this whole year, he'd been running from her. She did not have any more winters than she'd had in the courtyard where he'd paralyzed her father and killed Strife's father, but she was older none the less.

She was Charity Amil Soresun, Empriatsen'na of Equilobos, descendent of Mayonaka, and commander of the Tirson'vay, the most powerful and disciplined standing army that had ever held the law in Equilobos. What had been her father's personal guard was her personal army. As winter closed in on her, she continued her siege of the Castle of Amon'dray; where she'd herded him to, and even though the first snow of the year threatened to fall at any time, she would see this finished, see his head on a pike. Charity tightened the strap on her shoulder guard. Outside her tent, the moonless night held its breath, as the nearly silent army encamped around the besieged castle held its breathe. Inside her tent, it was the same. All around the small space, her advisors, friends, companions lay quite siege to her determination. Yet, she alone was Empriatsen'na.

The war had lasted all year. Her father had been in the 'safe keeping' of the High Songbird for most of that time and the seventeen year old Empriatsen'na could not tolerate the situation, not over the winter, into the next year with uncertain numbers returning to each side.

There were hopes as well within her determination. If she could reclaim her father, then perhaps her songbirds could sing him well again. So her mind was made up, to resolve the war tonight, with her very own hands, before the snow sharpening the air and threatening to fall destroyed her advantage. Ixsander wanted to hide within his stolen castle, hoping the snow would fall and the Trison'vay would disperse for their homes as all the general troops had. The greater part of her force had left already. Charity did not feel like letting him hide any longer.

Kai leaned against his identical twin. Both of them sat on Charity's bed, Ko's arms around his more emotional brother. She almost felt as if her twin were there as well, watching her actions. It was a ghostly judgment she did not truly welcome, did not feel free to wish herself free of either. The four of them had been the Emprial Quad for as long as Charity in her earliest memories until Faile's death. It was right that Faile's ghost should haunt her on this night. Darkly she wished his haunting were more than just the wishes of a surviving twin.

Strife, her scribe sat on the floor, on a small wooden platform, recording whatever it was he needed to record. He's the one that had given her this idea and she expected he was being a bit quiet just in case it went badly and the Empire fell down around their ears. After all, her heir was a babe of not even a year, who had not even a full winter yet, the child of her late twin. Autumn would not be able to hold the Empire if she failed.

Her betrothed was there too. A scrawny boy of nearly twelve winters with blond hair and blue eyes, a lovely boy, but just a boy and a sevit as well. The boy had a tail, long and fuzzy white, the mark of disfavor of the gods. Tokala went nowhere without the smaller boy who held his tail, a dark haired songbird that spoke for both of them.

Her military councils had not been invited to this private plan and it made her heart hurt, to do this. She was the oldest of all of them, the red haired, blue-eyed Empriatsen'na, heir of the Empriat Jared Faile Soresun. The world belonged to her and she had her secrets. "Which of you will sing it?" She asked, knowing what she asked, grieving for it already.

What she wanted had never been sung into being before, but she had what others hadn't, a pair of Elvish songbirds and an Emprial songbird, who did not even know he was Emprial. Two were like brothers to her, the other the subject of a secret she could not risk revealing until she'd taken Ixsander's head. She turned to face them, eyes wandering over their faces, Kai, Ko, Dano. One of them had to sing the forbidden invocation for her. One of them would be at risk of their life during the singing, and sure to die on the stake if she failed and Ixsander took control of them.

She'd sent thousands of lives into battle, accepted calculated losses, ridden into losing battles herself, swinging the Dragon's Kiss or Flicker, but to select one of these three to face very poor odds was harder to do than she'd imagined. Just pick one, she thought to herself. Role a die and let the gods call it.

Dano was only a child though, even if he were the most powerful of the three and already at risk for the Temple's wrath. The death of Kai or of Ko would almost certainly mean the death of the other, but she couldn't accomplish what she had to without this song. So they waited, and she didn't know if they were expecting her to change her mind or not have the strength to go through with it.

For two days Kai and Ko had argued with her, in their own polite ways. Dano hadn't said anything to her, but every time she'd seen him, he'd had the tail in his hand. "Dano, can you do it," she asked.

He was beautiful, really. Just like his mother had been; like her own father had been. It amazed her sometimes when she thought that no one else could just look at the boy and know. In the end, she'd chosen him because he was Emprial too. It was his father she was going to go and save, neither Kai nor Ko's. His ignorance did not free him of Emprial responsibility.

Standing a little straighter, he licked his lips and stepped away from the older blond boy. "I can do it. I memorized the lyrics already."

"Not!" Tokala said, his tail twitching. He hardly looked the role of knight, warrior, at least not until his little friend was endangered.

Dano reached out and caught hold of the tail again, stroking the tip with small fingers. Charity could accept this boy as a brother, she decided.

Tokala's father had been sent home with the regular troops. The boys had stayed because Charity would not part with the young songbird and Tokala was her legal betrothed. "Then do it."

"No, wait," Ko said, slipping away from his brother. "I'll do it. If you really mean to do this, allow me."

The elf pulled the leather thong from his hair, and shook it down. The mark of a Songbird, some said the source of their power, his hair snapped with static, a dark blue veil around his bare arms and slender face. Between Kai and Ko, Ko was the more powerful songbird. Kai drew his knees to his chest, chin on his knees. His own hair was down around his body, shielding in his emotions.

Dano wasn't half of Ko's height, his own long hair a jet-black and still braided. Elves are beautiful, graceful, elegant children of nature, but human children are impetuous and stubborn. Human Songbirds tended to burn out faster than Elvaise ones, and Dano in his ten-year-old glory stuck his tongue out at the nearly adult elf then started to sing.

One note after another, in a bleeding high pitched alien tongue. Tokala was thrown back, pressed to the tent flap. Charity had one moment of second thought before the magic hit her. Both hands flew to her face, covering her burning eyes. To cross the moonless night, scale the wall of a hostile castle and hunt down her enemy; she needed such a simple thing. To see in the dark, such a small thing that needed the laws of nature to bend.

Dano closed his eyes, spinning the ancient song out as he imagined the solution to Charity's request in his mind. Sevrit, Dano had heard the nasty slurs spoken of his Tokala, beast. If the powerful Empriatsen'na wanted to see in the night, he knew what kind of creature could see in the night. Kitty. He poured all the emotion he had into the song. The Empriatsen'na could be sevrit too.



With it he invoked the spirit whose name he didn't even understand he was singing. "Lai Lei hear me, accept the offer of my gift, hear my plea, and bestow the gift." In his mind he saw what he wanted quite clearly; Charity's blue eyes gone slitted and kitty like.

"Dano na Mayonaka," a voice sang back, "Sing the dream."

His eyes snapped open just as everyone else's did. There in the center of them, a rainbow colored woman with violet eyes and rainbow colored long hair, a songbird of light. She smiled and Dano's heart calmed, a floating sensation lifting him. "A gift for a gift," she sang, "But I will give you more than what you asked for."

She turned towards Charity, floating, her bare feet danced a good hand's measure above the ground. "Charity na Mayonaka you will need more than night sight to bring back Lunatay's moon and nothing else will put Logic to death and never to sleep again. I will give you what you have asked for and I will tell you that the Bride of Mayonaka will come to you. And I will heal the break within your heart. Your belly will grow with the new High Songbird. Your brother will be a demon for me, but do not grieve for him for he shall walk the paths of Earth."

Charity's eyes cooled, soothed by the fingers of rainbow light as they passed over them. "In night you will see, of heat will you see, love your brother for what he has given you."

Blinking Charity didn't think her eyes had changed at all. Kai had moved closer to Ko, on hand on his twin's arm. Dano continued to sing the song, mouthing the words almost, his eyes glazed over, trance like. Her brother, what he'd given her? Charity dropped to one knee. "Don't take his gift! Please, let me pay you. What can I offer?"

"There is a balance. There will always be a balance." Lai Lei said, one arm raising, elegantly, human elegance, almost flesh and blood as Dano's song continued to feed her. She pointed at Charity, then Dano, whose knees buckled, leaving him slumped against a furious Tokala, tail twitching, teeth shivering against each other, lip drawn back in a snarl. Then her pointing finger slowed and settled in Kai's direction. Her hand rolled over, palm up and her fingers curled towards her, pulling. Kai looked at his twin, the corner of his mouth trying to lift into a smile. A breeze within the tent lifted Kai's hair, sending tendrils floating towards the goddess Lai Lei. He lifted his chin, managed a smile.

Ko ground his teeth together, then stepped quickly in front of his twin, gently commanding hands pushing Kai behind him in the same moment. And Lai Lei's payment came from him, drawing out of him in vibrant rainbow shades. She drew it out, winding Ko's gift neatly around her fingers, reds and yellows, blues and greens, violet shades.

Kai howled, his arms grabbing hold of Ko as he fell back against him. Ko grabbed hold of his twin's

arm and they sank to the bare ground together, Kai's song swirling around them, refusing to let Ko die. Breath raspy, Ko closed his eyes, but continued to breath.

Lai Lei smiled, closed lip, but deeply satisfied. "What beautiful children, I have," she purred, disappearing like so much mist after a rain.

Charity, numb with what she'd done, with what she'd caused to be invoked, found no tears to cry. Kai held Ko still, his light blue hair shrouding them both. He wiped Ko's sweaty strained face with trembling fingers as he sang healing for his twin's distressed breathing. Dano lay unconscious on the floor, Tokala's arm and body wrapped over him. Tokala looked at Charity with a near snarl, his nose wrinkling and Charity blinked again. Where the boy was an outline of heat gave him the shape of a panther, a large cat, even though she could see clearly that he was a human boy. It didn't matter to her though, if Tokala was half cat or if he loved her brother.

Only killing the man who'd started this war mattered, killing the man who'd killed her mother, her twin, and destroyed her father's mind, and then held him hostage for nearly a year. She picked up the harness with the sheath for Flicker, Vice, and Viper slipping it over her unarmored shoulder, tightening the belt around her waist, as she turned. Strife sat there, stunned, tears running down his face. She had an impression of him being much younger than she'd thought, but she walked right by him, striding silently into the night. Tonight. The war ended tonight.

## **Ko's Gift**

Later that night

Still not completely believing, she stepped out into the night, her eyes closed against tears that an Empriat cannot cry. She had no count of how many had died in this war, but there were three thousand four hundred and ninety two orphans in the Emprial care now. She had 3493 children and that was too many at seventeen. Standing just outside her own tent, she could hear the sobbing within, Kai's soothing words, his song that he sang only for his brother now, as Charity knew Ko would never sing again. Shivers went over her shoulders and she internalized the responsibility for that, for Ko's loss, hoping it would be only his gift and not his life.

Her littler brother, who didn't know he was her little brother was silent still. The one holding him, crying, snarling, and singing to nature in his own sevril way, he was an Emprial Knight, and Charity promised herself freedom for him, someday, when she didn't need the betrothal to him to protect her brother.

Around her, she felt the breeze move and with her eyes closed, she could place layout of the camp. The cavalry of the Tirson'vay, one hundred small tents, just like hers staggered in irregular spirals, surrounded her tent. From the castle wall, it would be nearly impossible to pick her tent out from the rest. Beyond the cavalry, lay the foot soliders' lean-tos, and the archers were interspersed wherever they wished. The Elvish archers had joined her force just after her father's stroke and in battle they

demonstrated a lethal accuracy and discipline, outside of battle they were hardly seen at all. For all she knew, they had their own songbirds and songbridged home during the down times. Saved her food and expense that way, if that's what they were doing. As she stood there, it was like she could feel all these people breathing, feel all their children waiting for them to come home, feel all the fields that needed sowing, all the shops waiting to reopen. It was her responsibility. The sobbing of her best friend shrank when balanced with the breath of all the people of the Empriatay.

She opened her new eyes. It made what she was about to do easier, in some way, to see a tiny spark of light in most of the tents, to see the heat of life dotting the ground around her. Mud clung to her fighting boots as she stepped away from her tent, turning back to look at the live force inside. A single candle burned within, not light enough to be seen before her new gift, but now bright enough to hurt her eyes, and five dots of life there. Ko would live, she determined, decided, demanded.

A path to the castle wall was easy to see now, weaving through the tents and sleeping soliders. One lone woman, too young to have her betrothal blessed and sealed by the Temple her family fought against, she ran now, sword on her back, ice around her heart. Whatever the Lai Lei had given her; she woke none of the smears of light on her way to the castle wall. Predatory silence, Emprial displeasure and vengeance turned to a sweet energy in her body as her strides stretched out.

She crossed the mile of flattened ground to the castle wall faster than she would have thought possible. Her heart beat in her ears like the drums of war. Once at the wall, she slipped off her gloves, brown leather, soft even though they were stained much darker than they had been when new. She tied the laces of them together at the top of her belt, then felt the stone wall she was about to climb. Some castles were built of uncut stone, irregular and full of places to grab hold. Amon'dray though had cut stones, gray and smooth, with narrow lines of mortar. She drew a finger along the thin line and considered how to make it up the wall.

With her new eyes, she could see the lines of black mortar were slightly warmer than the stone blocks. She drew her dagger and poked at the black. Too loud, she decided. She wished she'd thought this out better, and hoped no one ever knew she'd stood at the castle wall wondering how the hell she was going to get to the top. She laid her cheek against the cool stone, watched the snowflakes now in the air. For just a moment she was just a little girl again, who wanted a horse like her brother, who just wanted her father to hold her and love her. She smiled at the memory of her father, of how tall and strong he'd been, kind and just.

He never would have climbed a castle wall, or been willing to sell Dano's soul, or Kai or Ko's. He negotiated to the last moment, and went down under one of Ixsander's songs, a jerking heap of man. That broke something in Charity, something that she understood had broken long ago, as she watched her father change from the Empriat of Eqilobos to a helpless invalid. "I'm coming, Papa," she mouthed to the darkness that no longer hindered her, then slipped her boots off.

For the next few minutes, as she climbed and the snow increased, she thought of nothing, pursued no thought, simply let memory move over her, driving up vengeance. It snowed the night she was born, a

snow that terrified her mother, a snow that Ixsander had called. It fit that it would snow on the night of his death as well. Finger holds, toe holds, she pulled herself up the castle wall without a sound. In the distance, she could hear her camp moving. Troops would be leaving, not that the first snow had started, and it would provide even more cover for her.

The wall seemed to grow as she climbed, reaching ever taller, no matter how many times her fingers found new holds. She'd been inside Amon'dray once, when she was fifteen, before the war. She'd attended as spring festival and climbed to the highest tower, where the Emprial Quad had flown kites in the wind. Ko. Wind blew past her, slipping under her helmet, under the shoulder guard she wore on the left side. Ko loved heights, loved to sing into the wind, had loved.

Once at the top, she slipped over into the walkway, laying tight against the stone wall and catching her breath. The falling snow didn't burn her bare feet and she thought that slightly odd, but now that she was here, she wanted to see her father, wanted to see him with all her being. She rolled onto her knees, and pulled her twin daggers from their sheaths at the small of her back. Vice and Viper, her first daggers, sweet and fast, one in each hand, she moved towards the tower and what would probably be the stairs down.

Amon'dray wasn't a big castle, three towers and a main hall. The gardens in summer were it's main attraction. It was an Emprial holding, no keeper except the servants who kept it in order for the Empriat. Charity paused at the entryway into the smaller tower, and stared over into the courtyard.

The place was empty. Nearly silent, and she scanned the place with her new eyes. No one, it really was empty. There was a new mound in the rear garden. Knowing clicked for her, under any level where she had to process it. All the bondkin were dead, Ixsander's soliders were gone and she didn't want to know where to. Charity's throat shrank, welling up in her chest, while she shifted her grip on Vice and Viper. A blade in each hand, she ran down the stairs clinging to the outside of the tower wall.

Cold stone against her feet, she left the tower without hearing the slightest hint of any kind of guard. Furious that she'd been tricked, bluffed, for who knew how long, she ran out into the falling snow, over the bare ruined gardens. Snow melted down her face by the time she got to the front door of main hall. It was a huge door, of weathered oak and iron fastenings. She shoved it with her shoulder and it creaked, shifting open slowly.

The scent of cinnamon and apples was long gone, replaced by a stench that a year on the battlefields has not prepared her for. Breathing through her mouth, she moved quietly into the hall, careful not to touch the empty armor, the various left over parts of things better left in one piece. It shocked her, what she passed on her way to the wooden stairs leading to the second level. There was nothing in the insane collage that suggested her father wasn't all in one piece though. She did not want to find out she was Empriat already.

Back to the wall, step over step, she moved up the stairs. About half way up, she slipped her daggers back into their sheaths and thumbed open the strap that held Flicker. Flicker was said to be the first

Empriat's own sword, that a woman of Mayonaka's line could only wield it. Charity wiped the sleeve side of her forearm over her mouth, wiping away some of the stench, as she rose high enough on the stairs to see into the second level.

Once it had been the bedchamber set aside for the highest status guest, with a huge oak bed, four posters rising up to the roof, carved like the four winds, swirling around the top, making a canopy railing. Her father lay in the center of the bed, dressed in only a grayed sleeping gown, his reddish hair longer and laying around his face. Around the bed, where the curtains once were, swirled a rainbow light, just like the light that had been taken from Ko.. but bigger, sealing the bed on all sides. Charity let her sword slip free, dropping into her hand with tingle of energy. In her other hand, she drew Vice again. "Ho, Empriat of Ghosts! Time to go home!"

Ixsander turned away from the bed, long blond hair snapping around his face. "You didn't let all your troops in. That wasn't nice of you, not letting them into the safety of my home."

"You killed bondkin that I am responsible for, held my father hostage, drove my brother insane, have lead an uprising against the righteous power of the Throne that has cost thousands of lives. I don't feel obligated to be nice to you." His words were confusing though, politics of a spider.

He just stared at her, right through her perhaps, grey eyes that might as well have been glass. Blond hair danced around him like corn silk. Charity hated him all the more because he was beautiful, a beautiful hope that people had a right to have. He was more than just her enemy. He was the beautiful icon of the hope of spring, of renewal and the return of the little moon. "You didn't win the day, Charity, little girl," he said, voice sweet as flower petals flowing against each other. "Lai Lei has only stalled me, stalled His invocation. It wasn't you, so don't think that it was."

"You're insane," she pronounced bitterly, wanting him to lunge at her, to make some move she'd have to defend herself against. "You're finished."

The only light in the room came from the curtain of rainbow lights protecting her father, and so she saw Ixsander with her new vision. Just as she'd seen Tokala's feline spirit, she saw Ixsander. Wings rose over his shoulders, shimmering with a cool light they seemed tainted in their beauty, their perfect symmetry. As she watched him, those wings solidified. White stone feathers and icy gray eyes only made the surface transformation, this Ixsander was taller, untouched by the frailty that insanity could bring. He turned towards her, his robes no thick and brushing over the wooden floor with a silken his. "You called Lai Lei. Next time she wouldn't be able to save you. If you had been male, I would have had what I wished for already, but instead I had only the craven snip of a twin and your pure and gentle father. Why does the true viciousness only run in the female veins of Mayonaka's children? In ten years, perhaps the babe of your brother will be strong enough to open doors for me."

"What are you? Demon?"

"God. I am Logus, daughter of Mayonaka. Do you think to slay me with that little pie sticker?"

Every hair on Charity's head stood straight up. The wings beat softly as he breathed and all the anger she'd used to protect herself dissolved slowly, eaten away by the sheer beauty and logical rightness of his presence. "Are you Ixsander?"

The parting of his lips, as he prepared to speak again, held her attention, soft lips, pink and flush with the power of life. "Do I look like Ixsander?" he asked, and suddenly he was near her, one wing wrapping around her, slender elegant fingers petting her cheek. "You look like Mayonaka."

His breath smelled like roses, the small white ones that had grown outside her bedroom window and she whimpered, her sword lowering. "Mayonaka," she whispered, looking into the swirling twilight opals that had seemed such dull gray eyes before.

"Yes, beautiful one," he replied, soft lips against her cheek now, other hand moving to cup her cheek, working on getting a good hold on her head, with ever such a gentle touch. "She stole Lunatay away, did you know that? Seduced her away. Turned them all against me, stranded me here."

"Away? Lunatay?" With a trust that she'd not known ever in her life, she looked up at him, having no fear of his one hand at the back her head, the other on her cheek near her jaw. When she looked up though, her hand moved, brushing along the inside of his warm feathered wing. Unaware that she left a trail of blood from the back of her hand against the stone of his feathers, she ran her elbow into the swirling rainbow light that had been Ko's songbird gift. His laughter filled her ears and his song, Ko's deep and resonate voice, welcoming the spring in song not a year gone. The memory of Ko's song, written in the energy Lai Lei had taken snapped through her and she jumped back away from the angelic creature holding her, preparing to snap her neck.

Long nails like claws came from his fingers, diamond glittery and razor sharp. Rainbow energy leapt from Charity to Ixsander and he clenched his hands, anger snapping in his eyes.

"The more you enjoy life, the more I'll enjoy taking it from you," he snarled, but already he seemed to shrink, the wings fading to shadows and Ixsander dropped to the floor, just an old man in a pile of ragged robes and tattered hair. Gone was the overpowering creature of gray rage of the storm eyes.

Charity drew Flicker back, ready to strike, but the High Songbird looked up, blue eyes filled with tears. "He's gone! He's left me!" If nothing more, the desolation in the High Songbird's voice convinced her he wasn't lying. "You drove away a god!"

Vice went back in it's sheath, then Flicker. The curtains of light dissolved and Charity climbed into the huge bed to take her father into her arms. "Papa, I'm here Papa."



Ixsander was the shadow now. Standing outside of his own body, he paced and rubbed his temples as Logus moved his body closer to the Empriatsen'na Charity. He was going to break her neck, Ixsander could tell from where his hands were placed.

All the people his own hands had killed since the last full moon, he'd thought that his hands wouldn't ache so anymore, not for just one more life. Each of the lives that Logus had required had built towards tonight, given the god a little bit more of the puzzle he needed to accomplish whatever it was he wanted. Ixsander didn't fully understand what Logus wished. To travel to another world, create another song bridge. It didn't make sense to Ixsander when his nearly constant companion started to talk of it.

He understood that they'd needed the spirit of a male of the line of Mayonaka to reverse a curse laid on by one of Lunatay's witches. He didn't understand what benefit they'd receive from killing the Empriat, but he'd felt the desire to do so in Logus. They'd killed every other person inside the castle, one by one. Ixsander had woken sometimes, as if he'd been sleeping for months, only to find his body in the process of another ritual, another bloody paving stone in the path for Logus.

Sometimes he wondered if they were really just one person, if he'd gone insane somehow and now did these things because he wanted to. Insane. He didn't want to kill Elery though, and Charity's eyes were enough like her mother's that to Ixsander's half imprisoned mind, they were Elery's eyes. He didn't realize he was doing it, until he felt the result, felt Lai Lei answer to his song. Such a tiny little song, and yet, it wasn't Charity that drove Logus away. It was Ixsander that weakened his control, made him shadow again.

Logus sat near him on the floor, picking at the ruined rags of holy robes Ixsander wore now that the song power of Logus no longer cloaked him. With sweet, forgiving words, Logus coaxed him, "We will win still, Ixsander. Just before the little moon returns, I will be powerful again. Relax now though, there will be nothing hard for you to do for a long time. No more killing, no more screaming, not for a long time, beloved. We will wait for the little Empriatsen Autumn. He will open the final gate for us. Don't worry. Don't cry. Everything will be alright."

## **Fresh Snow**

Early the next morning

Snow fell steadily as Charity dropped the white cloth from the castle wall. Holding the great table length of white damask with one hand as the wind danced over it, furling the edges, she stabbed the upside down flag pole into the hold in the stone. Thus pinned, the signal of surrender fluttered in the snow. She had lifted the portcullis already, swung open one of the main doors.

She stood out sharply in the falling snow, reddish hair standing on end, blue shoulder guard shiny and speckled white. It wasn't long before the Tirson'vay noticed the flag of surrender. Tents fluttered as word passed and her soliders rose from bed mats to see for themselves. She hoped that Kai, Ko, Tokala, and Dano would come out to see her, to see this victory, but that tent did not move.

The time it took for word of her victory to ripple through the army laying in siege gave her time to feel the weight of what had changed. More than just her eyes, victory had laid a blood rage to sleep within her and left her with the prices to be paid and the dull agony of knowing that the rage which had driven her to risk her brother's life would rise again when it felt it needed to. For all she knew, she had destroyed both her brother and her childhood friend.

Goosebumps danced like the little footprints of spiders over her elbow where she'd accidentally touched Ko's life force, no only his Songbird gift. That led her back to remembering the lady, the vision, which had come and taken that gift in the first place. It was one thing to worship a goddess all of one's life, but quite another to have that goddess manifest in a flurry of rainbow and be as mercenary as the wind. What the Lai Lei had given, had ended the war, saved the life of the Empriat, foiled whatever it was that Logus had striven for at the cost of so many lives, but it had cost Ko his gift, a cost that most songbirds did not survive. If Ko died, Charity expected Kai would follow him. She'd never seen any other of there kind and for all she knew they were the only ones remaining. They were the last of her personal friends, in any case.

She was going to have to do something for Dano as well. While she would appoint a new High Songbird, her instinct told her not to acknowledge him yet. The little moon had not returned yet and small shire lords only needed minor excuses to cause major problems. She'd learned two things about war; one she didn't want another and two if there were war the blood rage would rise in her and she'd slay her opponents. She couldn't allow her brother to be that excuse. When the little moon returned and brought with it the favor of the gods, then she would see her little brother Dano proclaimed with all honor and ceremony. Perhaps he could even keep the Sevrit as a companion. Something would have to be done for Carlyes when the betrothal was broken, though already a great deal of wealth had been transferred to the small shire. That ought to be enough, she thought, yet it didn't feel enough.

Several hours later, the castle had been completely secured. Charity sat in her tent with her father and the thoughts she'd had on the castle wall were far away. Her father. The man who'd spun her and Faile around in circles had hands that were fragile thin, long uncut nails. His breath was ragged and clouded with pneumonia. This was the man who'd chased Kai and Ko around for hours n a spring rain, then slipped in the mud with two little blue Elves clinging to him, only to sit there laughing as they ran back into the rain. This was a man who'd sat a warhorse like red lightening. Holding his hand, she didn't feel qualified to be Empriat. There was nothing in her that compared to him, as she saw it. He was the Empriat. She was just his daughter.

"Majesty," inquired a low voice, smooth and reassuring.

She looked up from the where she'd been staring at the dirt floor to find Strife standing just inside the



tent flap. The boy was every bit of what his father had been to her father. She didn't think he could be much older than Tokala though, just a boy made older by gods who couldn't bother to be practical. She sat up straighter, letting her face take on a calm mask. "Strife," she started, appalled by the rough timber of her voice. "Is there something that needs doing?"

"Your arm, Majesty," he said pointing at her elbow with a roll of white cloth. "Allow me to bandage it? Kai wishes to songbridge to the university, to take both you and the Empriat."

"He's not strong enough to do that. Ko?" Angry with Kai for suggesting something so dangerous for himself, she stood and started to examine her own arm. The sleeve was bloody, but dry now, though it was still a bit numb. "I will ride. Ko?"

"He lives, save that he sleeps still. Kai fears for him, but he will not say it."

"Dano?"

"He and Tokala are play tag." Strife said, slightly miffed.

Charity smiled at the thought of her betrothed chasing her little brother around the tents. "Are they laughing," she asked as she started to tug her sleeve away from the gash in her arm.

"They are. Giggling like boys and chasing the snow." he pronounced as he set down the medical supplies he'd brought, a roll of bandage, a amber vial of cleanser, and his sewing kit. She held out her arm and his adept fingers started gently tugging the stuck cloth from her arm.

"I want them to be laughing and chasing the snow, Strife." she said as she moved her stool away from the cot her father slept on. "Think it needs stitches?"

She wasn't looking at it, nor at Strife's face when he grimaced, wrinkling up his nose and looking like a boy himself. "Only a dozen, or so."

"I want you to arrange for Tokala and Dano to be taken home, with a full guard of the Tirson'vay. I am aware that we will have few enough left now that the snow has come, but I want them to ride home with honor. I also wish Meridia to be given to Tokala."

"Your horse?" Strife asked, surprised. Trained and experienced warhorses were very rare and valuable, hardly the thing one gave to a boy who chased snowflakes and sat with his tail in the hands of his younger friend.

"Yes." Her mind felt like it was starting to work again, "And I want to give the Lirnon Lake and the surrounding forest for one hundred miles around to Kai and Ko. Ko once spoke of making a theater. I wish to enable this. I need a list of possible songbirds to replace Ixsander."

"Ixsander?" Strife asked quietly, as he cleaned the needle he was about to use to put stitches into her elbow.

Her face went harder, eyebrows drawing down. "Give him a full flask of varla. Let him know that if he hasn't passed from this life by sunset, I will behead him myself. I want Tokala and Dano gone well before sunset. Kai and Ko as well. As soon as you are finished with that, I need papyrus and ink."

Strife didn't ask her what for. If she'd wanted him to know, she'd have told him to write it for her. "Yes Majesty."

She nodded, then let her eyes fall closed, blocking thought out as he closed her elbow. One thing after another, get some stitches, threaten to behead the man who caused a war, who was partially responsible for her mother's and twin's deaths, who's magic had stolen her Father in mind and soul, if not in body, tell her betrothed why he can't have the one he probably thought he couldn't live without. Stitches were easiest and she almost hoped that Ixsander didn't drink the nice painless poison. She closed her burning eyes and wished there were something she could trade Lai Lei to get her father's mind back, or some way to send Faile's ghost to the Celestial Court. With her eyes closed, she could almost feel him crying. It was hard to understand that he was never aging, that she was older than he now. Her own tears started then and she didn't understand, but she felt he was with her, that he understood somehow.

## **Friends with the Dead**

1031, Ten Month Sixday afternoon

"It wasn't my first choice," Dano said, trying to pretend he was alone.

"You injure me," Faile said, with all due angst. The ghost sat on Dano's bed, watching the songbird decorate himself for dinner. He wore the white linen suit he'd married Leticia in, his red hair bound up around his head with golden circlets. Faile appeared translucent, even to Dano. "The least you could do is let me tell you a secret. Let me make up for that last mistake. Was it my fault those berries would be poisonous? I think you were just allergic to them. Really, they look just like the ones at home."

Dano closed his eyes for a moment, counted to twenty. It was very late afternoon, just a little of the winter sun left. This performance felt like it was one of the most important of his entire life. With eighteen, or nineteen, maybe seventeen winters to his honor, he was sure that this night would make or break the rest of his life. Trying to block out the ghost, he picked up the his kohl stick with all the attention he could give it, the sensation of the smooth rose colored wood in his bare fingers. The powdered kohl shifted under the tip of his stick and he stirred it slightly, enjoying the feel of the

powder's movement. Still doing his best to ignore his friend. "You're lucky my voice came back for tonight. Everything would have been ruined if I'd had to sit up here in my room tonight."

He touched the little stick to his closed eyelid and completely missed the ghost's exasperated look at the ceiling. "Oh yes, that would have been just awful. My sister's a dreadful barbarian. She doesn't much like music."

"She liked my music last time I sang for her," Dano nearly snarled, having to pause as he drew the stick across his eyelid. "You're doing to mess up my make up."

"Really?" Faile said, standing up, scratching the back of his head and smiling suggestively.

The smile was something Dano could feel even with his eyes closed and he spun around, one eye lined with black and the other naked still. Amethyst lightening dancing in his eyes, such that Faile pressed both palms together and did his best to look innocent. "Don't you dare look at me like that. I don't care if I am the only person on the planet who can see you. I am going down there tonight and proving to everyone there that Tokala is not interested in that sister of yours!"

"Don't get testy, Dano. I'm pretty sure she doesn't want him anyway."

Tapping one foot, Dano pointed his kohl stick at the ghost. "Why wouldn't she want him? He's beautiful, smart, gentle. Can you really see those eyes of his in your ghostly state? Even if you liked girls when you were alive, can't you see how beautiful he is?" Dano took hold of his chair, swung a leg over it and propped his chin on the back, arms wrapped around it. Much calmer, he took a deep breath and forgot the ghost completely as he thought about Tokala.

Tokala had been gone all summer, stuck down in Equilobos City with the ghost's sister, the Empriatsen'na. The Empriatsen'na's party had arrived early in the morning and every possible thing that could have come up to keep Dano and Tokala apart done just that, until Dano had given up and gone to his room to get ready for dinner. "Do you remember when he and I rode last? The day before he left. He sits a horse like he's the wind flowing over it. He's got such power in his body and then he just smiles and," Dano let his rambling trail off. "I'm not Emprial like Charity. I'm not wealthy and I'm not powerful. I'm just some small shire songbird and a bastard on top of it, but Faile, he's mine. I've loved him all my life and when I started thinking about.. uh more than just holding onto his tail, it's like.. Faile, you loved Leticia, would you have stopped loving her if you were a poor shire rat and she was going to be Empriatfay if she didn't love you?"

Faile sat back down again, hands in his lap, looking like the teenager he'd been when he died. "No, I did anything and everything to be with her. Dano, it's just, you're more than you think or seem, or I wouldn't be here talking to you. Emprial ghosts only talk to the High Songbird, you know?"

"Nope, don't know nothing about Emprial politics. All I know is that I'm going down there tonight and I'm gonna make Tokala feel what I feel. I'm going to make him know that I'm not a little kid anymore." As carefully as he could, Dano outlined his other eye, shaping it oval and slightly cat like, doing the other over as well.

Neither of them said a word as Dano took down his hair, fingers combing through the dark black braid, fanning it out until it lay around his shoulders, down his back. "Wish you could help me put the flowers in. Faile, there are three other older Carlyes children. Why don't you ask your father why he picked Tokala in the first place? Any of the other children would be better a better bond for your sister."

"I'd ask him but he's not dead," Faile said, moving his fingers absently through the ornately carved poster that he sat by. "He must have had his reasons though. He always did. Can't you feel all the spirits gathering around here? Something's happening tonight. Can't you feel it at all?"

"Nope. I'm not feeling anything except Tokala's back!" With his little finger, Dano picked up a little oil of winter berry, and not the poisonous kind, then smoothed the shiny thick oil over his lips. "Faile, I'd give so much just to kiss him, just to touch him. I'd give my songbird gift to lay next to him, to have him know how I feel about him. It gnaws at me that he doesn't know. He's so kind and honor blinded. Even if he doesn't like me back, I have to make the offer."

"You lose your gift before you send me and I'll haunt you for the rest of your life, Dano. Love is pretty demanding, but try to send me before you lose your gift. Songbirds die sometimes, if they lose their virginity to people that don't really want them!" The ghost fell back over on the bed, hand on his chest, legs out straight like a board, the death march humming in the air around him.

"Damn you're morbid!"

Faile lifted his head and smiled as he put the back of his wrist to his forehead. "Well, I am dead! What do you expect? Besides, if you go down there, I'll have to go too and my son will be there. I haven't seen him since he was born. He's ten. I'm still fifteen. It'll be freaky."

"You're a ghost. What do you expect? Faile, I'll send you, I promise. Tokala loves me, just like I love him. But maybe he's forgotten or something, being around Charity." Dano looked over his shoulder and smiled. "If she's as cute as you, he's probably attracted to her. And she's the Empriatsen'na after all. But he loves me, so my gift will get stronger, and then I'll send you in the morning, before Charity has a chance to have me beheaded, deal?"

The ghost sighed. "Yes, but then who would keep you company? Everyone knows you talk to yourself."

Dano laughed. "Who says I'll stop? How do I look? The black pants are okay?"

The black pants clung tightly to his hips, leaving no doubt at all about his gender. He wore soft black boots with thick hard leather soles, and blue velvet belts and buckles on them. His shirt was loose and white; a stark white in contrast to his black hair, with a V shaped collar and silver laces that went from his neck down to his wrist. His left wrist had a lace cuff that would fall back against his arm when he fingered his violin. The right wrist had no cuff at all, but he wore a silver chain around his wrist that wound around his middle finger. "Well, do I look okay, really? I should put some pearls in my hair."

Faile laughed. "If I liked guys, I'd want to stay a ghost just so I could float around you. Put some rose oil behind your ears."

"I will send you, if you want, Faile, really, but I think I'd miss you." After a small pause, he asked, a bit shyly, "If I do lose my gift to Tokala tonight, are you gonna be able to go out of the room? Losing my gift being just a phrase, you know? Not the real thing."

"I will disincorporate, unless you want to send me first. I don't like men with men, even if you are cute enough to be a girl." Faile said it with a snicker though, friendly and playful.

Dano turned his back on him. "Tonight's the night."

"Yeah," Faile agreed, but he was looking past Dano, off into some spectral plane. "I'll be back, Dano. Don't get in trouble without me."

"Wouldn't think of it," Dano replied sarcastically, putting the rose oil behind his ears.

## **Enemies of the Dead**

1031, Ten Month Sixday afternoon/evening

Faile had gotten used to the spiritual plane. Traveling it had gotten a great deal easier since Dano had come of age and started talking to him as well. He couldn't explain it, and he didn't know if he wanted to explain it or not, but he was growing a lot stronger now that he could talk to Dano. There were times when he almost felt the dark haired singer could have been a brother to him in some other life.

Running in this plane was much easier than it had been for him in life. The nightmares that had taken his sleep from as early as he could remember no longer troubled him and his spiritual body had grown strong. He could cross the distance from Carlyes to Equilobos in less time than it would take Dano to walk down stairs and get himself in trouble. He wasn't quite sure why he felt the need to go to Equilobos anyway. It had been at least nine full moons since he'd left Dano's side.

The farther away he got, the fuzzier his thoughts got. The call drew him to the Temple, a place he'd hated with all his being in life. There he found all the spirits he'd felt at Carlyes, the gathering of spirits rather. Hundreds of them milled around the gardens surrounding the tower of the Temple, walking through each other, searching for something familiar when the familiar was long gone. Faded and pale, the used to beings seemed ghost like to Faile and the terror of his nightmares echoed back up to him.

He wondered if they had color and solidity to themselves, the way he did to himself. As his thoughts grew more frightened, less rational, he started to search for Leticia, even though he knew she'd been sent, couldn't be here among the lost. Searching each face, as if each had something familiar to him, something he needed to see, old faces, ruined faces, Elvish, human, and species that he wouldn't have recognized if he'd had an ounce more rational though, he searched one to the next, asking, "Leticia? Have you seen Leticia?"

So busy searching, he didn't notice the drain on his energy, the fragile build up of life energy that was his being. It was like a tooth ache that he'd lived with so long he'd almost forgotten it, just like when he was living, the constant exhaustion and he didn't even realize he was asking the same spirits again and again, and they him, "Have you seen Haon? Have you seen Amy? Have you seen Xia?" No, no of course he hadn't, but he'd look for them too.

It grew more desperate; there were fewer people to ask now! He thought they must be finding their loved ones and leaving! Leaving him! Just as Leticia had left him.

The smack that hit him then was like living electric, knocking him away from the others, making his head spin in sensation at least.

::Faile! What are you doing? You're giving me a headache! Stop it!:: Dano's voice berated just about better than the winter wind could make bones ache. ::Where are you? Get back here!::

Faile blinked then, absorbing the slap of Dano's song energy. ::I don't know.. Temple. I'm at the Temple.::

::Why?:: Dano asked, talking to Faile the way he always did when he couldn't risk moving his lips, hearing Faile's reply in his head, just as he always did.

Faile realized that he was pressing his ghostly body up against the outer gate of the garden then, and not able to get through. Walking among the disappearing spirits, a winged shadow, long tendrils of hair flowing in breeze that wasn't there. The tips of the shadowy wings shivered each time a spirit disappeared. Several more spirits and the shadow seemed more solid. ::Dano,:: Faile whispered, begged in despair, ::My nightmares, demon, with wings.. it's going to eat me!::

"Faile!" Dano cried the name out loud, sang it and imagined all the pull he could in the same two and a half syllables. Almost immediately, he felt the familiar presence of his friend. ::What in Naturile's tits was that!::

Dano still hadn't left his bedroom. For him it had been only a couple of moments and he'd changed his shirt to a light blue one, that he thought brought out the blue of his eyes better. "Faile? You're here right?"

"It's back! It's coming to get me!" Faile wailed, clinging to Dano's arm.

"I don't know what it is, Faile, but it's not coming here tonight and if it does, I'll," Dano paused, not sure what he'd do to a demon that terrified Faile so much. What color there was to the ghost was gone now and he looked very much like a terrified teenage boy that had been driven to killing himself by nightmares. "I wouldn't let anything hurt you, Faile. I wouldn't."

Faile straightened up a little, looking around Dano's arm to look up at him. "It'll come after Autumn. We have to kill it."

Dano nodded, feeling slightly guilty for still planning on something else tonight. "But tonight, I make my powers greater. Tonight I'm going to bond with my true love."

"Charity's gonna kill you, then it'll eat us both." Faile sighed.

"Have some faith, will you? Just stay close to me tonight, and be bloody quite if I do get alone with Tokala and don't look!"

Faile blushed, a little color coming back to his face. "At least I'm not a virgin."

"I wouldn't be for long, so let's go, uh?" Dano grinned, sliding his little finger under his waistband in a terribly suggestive motion. "Toka's gonna faint!"

But it was Dano who fainted when he took hold of his door and it wouldn't open. He jerked it more, and all that did was rattle the bar on the other side. Opening and closing his mouth, he could not believe he been locked in his room. "NO!"

## **The Observatory**

1031, Ten Month Sixday early evening, just after full dark

Arian turned the knob just very slightly. In his twenty-nine winters, he'd seen this only in his dreams. The great telescope shifted just slightly as the larger cylinder repositioned. He'd never imagined it might be blue. At the very edge of Lunatay a faint blue glow showed. Mayonaka's Moon! Biting his lip, he reached for his papyrus sheet and pencil, eye still at the silver eyepiece. "Donery!"

Below the platform, going patiently through meticulously kept records. The other man put one longer fingernail over the data he'd paused on and looked up. "What?"

"Come up." Breathless, excited, he blindly jotted a message down, time, aspect, then on the same papyrus, calculations. Estimations, he guessed at the size, guessed from what he'd been told of Mayonaka's Moon, and of Lunatay's moon. Before the other astronomer had even climbed up to the telescope platform, he'd done it three times. He backed away, motioning for Donery to look. "72hours. Before Threeday, Mayonaka's Moon will be visible to the naked eye. We won! The Temple is wrong! Donery! We won! The University and the Empriat were right!"

Calmer by far than his colleague, Donery sat and leaned a bit so he could see through the university's telescope. Such a faint blue light flickered there, but he couldn't pretend it wasn't there. "Are you sure it will be that quick? That's so fast, after it's been gone for 30 years."

"Well, I'm not sure! But it seems like it would be that way to me. Professor Sabit was right! The mother/infant mortality is falling because the smaller moon is coming back!"

"Don't talk about the temple like that."

"Donery?" Arian asked, a look of confusion on his face.

Voice deepening, Donery turned, his eyes gone from blue to gray. "Let me see your calculations."

"Your eyes...."

"What? The Temple is a complete fraud, isn't that right? Just out to dominate and humiliate the university for it's vain attempts to gain knowledge without the blessing of the Celestial Court. It's not like one of the gods would actually possess someone and punish one little vain astronomer in person."

"Donery? Are you a Temple spy?"

"No," the now gray eyed man said as he stood and broke off the silver eye piece with one hand. "I am Logus, god of logic."



"Right," Arian said his eyes going wide, face pale as Donery stood and he could see the eyepiece bending, metal crushing under the scribe's fingers. Furiously he, he tried to remember the myths that he'd never paid all that much attention too. "Logic... Logus.. you're in love with Lunatay. Gods aren't real. You're not real."

A moment later, a gray eyed Donery looked over the railing of the platform at a still and oddly bent Arian laying on the astronomy floor. Huge shadowy wings rose up over Donery's body. "You're not dead then, I assume."

He had almost everything he needed to win the great prize, the true resurrection. All he needed now was just one male heir of Mayonaka to open the seal. The last one he'd killed trying to possess him had revealed the location though, of the other. The body he'd taken over had cost him in energy and he didn't want to leave it. Seventy-two hours was not enough time to find a remote shire by horse, so he needed knowledge. He needed a songbird. Seventy-two hours was enough time to open the seal, if he were wise, and he had not waited a thousand years to be unwise.

## Stubborn Knight

1031, Ten Month Sixday early evening, just after full dark

Chastile had the oddest look of satisfaction on her face when she returned to the room set aside for the Empriatsen'na. Charity noted it and told herself to remember to ask what her first lieutenant had been up to. That big of curiosity was about the only pleasure Charity thought she'd be having this evening too. It was cold in the north and to add insult to injury the northerner's hiding her little brother didn't seem to mind in the least. That was a lesson learned from her previous trip up, so she'd brought her own supply of wood.

At least the room was small so there was little need for a bigger fireplace than the one it had. Small rooms and bare stone floors did not do much for her supply of patience. So it was just Strife, Chastile, Tokala, and herself sharing the small room. If she could have gotten away with a songbridge home to her own rooms for the night, she truly would have, but that wouldn't have resolved her goals. Of course, throwing her stubborn betrothed out the window probably wouldn't help matters either. "Enough," she said, thumb pressed against her temple, pointer finger to her forehead. "I have matters of state to deal with. Tokala, please, the Kata of Mayonaka has no meaning that I can explain. Do try to understand though," and that's where she lost the last of her patient tone, her voice raising as if she were talking to a disruptive soldier trainee, "Just bleeding remember what I tell you! I'm only trying to help you! You're going to be Empriatsenfay! You can't go around like a backwoods hick with the mentality of a farm animal as well as the appearance! No get out of my sight!"

Tokala had been sitting across the table from her and he did his best to suppress his smile. Outside of Equilobos there was a forest and some of the Tirson'vay had introduced Tokala to bear baiting. This was his version of the sport, Charity baiting, which too often ended in Chastile-gives-Tokala-extra-hand-to-hand-combat lessons. Those were instructive in their own way, and he much more work for the

blond solidier woman than they had been.

He'd grown a lot over the summer, late spring to mid-winter, really. They'd had to have him measured for clothes five times. It was the sparring, the sports, and the diet. Food in Carlyes was mostly cereal, milk, cheese. In the palace, he'd eaten meat three meals a day and so many different foods he'd never learn all the names for them, but he was three inches taller and weighed half again his own weight from before he'd left. He could use a sword now and he could run well enough to out pace a totally pissed of Chastile.

Charity had insisted that he have his hair cut, so it was only to his shoulder now and just enough yellow to be moonlight colored not snow colored. As they sat across from each other, he knew she saw the laughter in his blue eyes that he was hiding every where else. Not wanting to provoke her too much, when he really did want to go find Dano, get some explanation for where the boy had been all day, he stood, bowed his head politely. His clothing fit him perfectly, made him look the part of an Empriatsenfay. Cream-colored leather pants, knee high polished black leather boots. He wore a dark blue shirt, with full sleeves and a high collar of embroidered velvet, with a matching cream-colored vest. From the front, one could not even see the thick white furred tail that hung down behind his back.

He laid the back of his fingers over the palm of the other hand and bowed politely, to just the right degree, never taking eye contact from her. "Majesty," he said, also using the perfect inflection, not the slightest trace of country hick, "I take my leave of thee with the hope that I shall soon return to your presence." For the moment, he was the perfect courtier.

"Get out," she said, not displeased, but greatly irritated that he would chose this moment to use what he'd been taught, in such a taunting way. "Bumpkin."

He let his hands drop to his side and walked towards the door of his parent's private chambers, currently taken over by the Empriatsen'na. The rings on his fingers, a ruby, two gold, and one black stone, made his fingers feel heavy, unlike his own fingers. He'd agreed to wear them only when she'd threatened to have his tail pierced and get him a small ring and chain for that. His tail was terribly sensitive to touch and he wasn't sure that the whole Tirson'vay could hold him down to have his tail pierced.

Once he got outside his door, he took off at a run for his own rooms, which were in the stables, on the second floor. The only room there was his and he had his old clothing there! He could get out of these rings! He wanted to see his favorite mare almost as much as he wanted to see Dano, and he half hoped that Dano would be waiting for him there. It wasn't as if he'd really had a free moment in the day anyway.

Almost to the main door, he stopped to listen to some commotion coming from the tower. Dano's room was in the tower. He had a sinking feeling that Dano wasn't waiting for him in the stables. He took off back up the stairs three at a time, but this time turned away from the door that lead to Charity's quarters and took off up the spiral stairs on the inside of the tower wall. On the way up he grabbed a bondkin on

the way to alert the rest of the household and sternly told him not to. Whatever it was, he'd handle it without getting Charity involved.

When he got to Dano's door, the violet smoke swirling out under the edge suggested he might be a bit out of his expertise, but he banged on the door anyway. Furiously, he jerked the bar from the outside of the door, but it still wouldn't open. "Dano!"

No response encouraged him to knock harder, this time with his shoulder. "Dano!"

## **Goddess Quest**

1031, Ten Month Sixday early evening, just after full dark

Dano threw himself at the door. The door didn't really mind, but his shoulder called him all kinds of names. They'd locked him in. He couldn't believe it. He glared at Faile. Faile looked at the ceiling.

"Will you go out there and see what's blocking the door?"

Faile blew air into his cheeks, habit even though he couldn't actually move enough air to fill his cheeks. "It's probably the same as last time. I don't see why you moved back down from the aviary."

"Because it's snowing!" Dano snarled. They'd turned his door around and put the bar after Tokala had been taken to Equilobos months ago. Odd that they should object to him running away from home. Twice he'd almost made it to Equilobos. Rubbing his shoulder, he stepped back from door. "I am not getting stuck in this room tonight!"

"Dano," Faile said, inflecting it with all the Emprial caution that a ghost could summon up, "I've never seen your hair have that purple fire at the tips before."

"What?" Dano looked over his shoulder, catching up his hair. The ends danced with flames, little violet and grape flickers. His mouth dropped open, eyes even wider, the sound that came out of his mouth was half scream, half puffing to blow it out. "I'm on fire!"

Faile took a step farther back, trying to look as innocent as he possibly could. "I didn't believe Nana when she said thinking about sex would do that!"

"I wasn't thinking about sex!" Dano howled, chasing the flames over the ends of his hair. "Okay! Maybe a little, but help me!"

"How?" Faile said, pacing around Dano as the songbird.

By this time, Dano realized that his hair wasn't turning to ash though, just being danced on by purple flames. "Oh this is very funny!"

He stopped trying to put the flames out and they quickly danced up to his shoulders, without burning, no ash, no pain. "Alright!! This isn't funny."

From the flames consuming his hair, the outward symbol of his songbird status, the mark of his belonging to Lai Lei, out of this, pulling and then separating from the flames, stepped a woman he'd called before, nearly ten years ago, on the last night of the University War. Lai Lei, a woman made of rainbows, took a couple more steps away from him, her face smiling with suppressed laughter. "You were thinking about sex."

Dano groaned, blushing right up to the roots of his hair. "How would I know! I'm still a virgin and likely to stay that way! I suppose you came to stop me?" He clapped his hand over his mouth, and dropped to one knee, head bowed. "I didn't mean! I'm sorry!"

Her laughter echoed in the room, smooth and soothing, which only seemed to set Dano more on edge. Hair laying over the floor around where he knelt, he hoped without any justification that it would hide his feelings, his fear. He remembered now, this woman, how she'd come and she'd done something that ended the war, nearly killed one of the blue Elves who'd been taking care of him. He was just a boy, only a small child then, he told himself, easily dazzled and frightened. It would be different this time.

That brought more laughter from her. "You're not that much older, Dano. But you are old enough to strike a bargain with me. You're old enough to think about sex."

He hadn't thought he could blush any hotter than he had been. With his cheeks almost painfully hot, he looked up at her, the tips of his fingers pressing against the smooth stone floor. "What kind of bargain?"

"Oh you're precious," she declared, sitting down lotus style in front of him, while floating just above the ground. "You only think you're afraid of me. You're perfect."

Looking her right in her eyes, as much as he could look in her translucent rainbow shifting eyes, he asked, "Perfect for what?"

"I can't believe you don't trust me!" Like a little girl, she drew a handful of her shifting colored hair into her lap and tried to look like she was pouting.

Dano shifted out of the kneeling position and sat down on the floor. "You mean, aside from you making me think my hair was on fire? You hurt Ko pretty bad too. You're our goddess. Why didn't you just help us?"

She spent a moment or two winding her hair around a finger. If he didn't know better, he'd have been sure that she was feeling guilty, or confused, maybe both. Evading his question, perhaps, she said, "I'm in trouble, Dano. I'm not really a warrior. I created the songbirds by giving them a part of myself and for a long time that's enough, but there is a bad man, and he's whispering about going home, about crossing the bridges between the stars again. And it makes it not enough anymore, but I don't like him. He's mean and he doesn't care about love. I like love. I like happy love and I like sad love and impossible love and love that withstands all odds. The songbirds sing to me and I've been happy, but the bad one will make it all go away. Those that want to help me don't understand and you're the only one who can really hear me."

He sat there, lips parted, hair still blazing purple and distantly he noticed that he was smoking, surrounded by a cloud of purple smoke. He'd imagined Lai Lei many times. When he was just discovering what this tightness in the pit of his stomach that shifted his blood supply was, he'd even tried thinking about her then. That was maybe when he'd figured out for sure that he'd liked boys, because only if he imagined she was male had it worked, and in all the many imaginary conversations he'd had with her since the first time he'd seen her, not one had come anything at all close to this. He knew her power, had felt it flow through him and shift the world around him like some box of energized sand, and yet she sat there winding her hair around her finger. Why me, just seemed like too small of a question. "What do you need, Lady? I will help you, just tell me how?"

At the very edge of his mind, he heard Faile muttering about having some humility! Dano shut him out, pushed the ghost just far enough away that he couldn't hear him, or be heard by him. It was embarrassing enough as it was. She brightened though, smiling, and for a moment, Dano thought he might be the oldest person in the room. She held out her closed fist, palm up, tongue held between her lips, she studied him. "You're fearless, Dano, perfect. I will give you the person, the only person whom Charity can truly love. I will give you whatever you ask for, if you will just swallow this one small candy." Then she opened her palm. There in the center lay a purple heart shaped pill, with 'Be Mine' written in pink in the center.

Dano's nose twitched. He didn't really like new spices and candies, let alone ones that were purple. "Whatever I want? The power and strength to protect Tokala? Does he like me? Can you tell?"

She nodded. "Yes, you will have all the strength I can give you. You can protect whomever you like. Promises are only good the moment they're given. If the bad man wins, then I'll have no power to offer you. And you should ask him. I can't read his heart."

"Why not? You can read mine bloody well enough. And what about the power to give life? What if I wanted someone brought back from the dead. Can you bring someone back from the dead?"

"Faile? You want Faile to live?" Now she wrinkled her nose.

"Yes. Don't look like that. If he can hear, it will hurt his feelings. He didn't mean what he did, you know? And," Dano paused, rubbed his eyebrows, tried to remember to breath. "That thing he saw, the thing from his nightmares? Is that the thing that's your bad man too? Guy with wings, eats spirits?"

She shivered, all her colors turning to shades of blue. "Logus."

"Yeah, right, so Logus pretty much killed Faile too, so can you bring him back?"

She motioned with her hand, offering him the candy again. "Eat this."

"Answer the question. And if I eat it, I'm not really yours. I love Tokala."

"You will love Tokala for as long as you shall live, that I know. And yes, if you make the bad man go away, I can make Faile live again. Now eat this, please."

He picked it and turned it all around. It didn't look toxic, but candy given by spirits wasn't just the same as candy from the kitchen. "Does it taste bad?"

"No! It's just a candy heart. They'll have them here someday, once they learn to grow sugar again. Besides, it's not just you. There's some time involved. I can't open the gate for you until you eat that and time's passing. Ming will starve if you wait too long."

"Who's Ming?" He sniffed the thing, but he knew he'd eat it already. "I can still have sex with Tokala, can't I? I mean, I don't want to be some power songbird who has to stay a virgin forever."

"Oh no," she said, shaking her head. "I like sex."

"What has sex with Tokala got to do with you?" He asked holding the candy up, looking at her around it. "But I wouldn't lose my gift if I lose my virginity?"

"Oh no," she said, trying to sound soothing, "Not at all. I like... eat the candy."

"And what do you want back? What price?" He talked to much, he knew it, but there were an awful lot of things one ought to know before making bargains with deities.

"You're my angel and you'll make the bad man go away," she said, smiling innocently.

Dano popped the candy into his mouth and it melted on his tongue like so much sugar. Lai Lei stood up, and drew a circle in the air with her finger. Through the opening, Dano could see a garden, stacked rocks and a waterfall, a pond with large golden fish swimming in it, and on a small patch of green in the center, a lovely girl, long green kimono and a little blue book in her hands.

"That is Ming. Bring her to Charity. Come back soon, and figure out how to make the bad man go away."

"You're the goddess," he said, but now when he looked at her, she seemed to be made of flesh, and the only rainbow remaining was in her hair, but even that was static now, not ebbing and flowing as she breathed. "You should tell me."

"You're my angel. You should know. Hurry now, before the door breaks open."

Then he heard Tokala calling his name, saw the wood buckle under the impact of what he guessed was Tokala's shoulder. He rubbed his own shoulder from where he'd tried that method. Tonight was supposed to be the night. Dano sighed and jumped, going through the circle of purple fire.

"Dano!"

Tokala's voice ripped at him as he passed through the ring, so shallow and yet it took so long for him to make it through. One foot touched down on garden, while the other felt splinters of wood roll over it. He wanted to turn, to promise to come back, but the ring seemed to tilt somehow and he tumbled, hitting the rock, mossy garden and rolling towards the pond. As he rolled, he thought he saw Tokala standing there in the ring of fire. Faile floated through just as Dano hit the water, splashed with his arms out, hair tangling in the lilies and rocks.

When he opened his eyes, something landed on his gut, knocking his air out in a big bubble of protest. Hands caught him and he grabbed back, kicking and trying to reach solid under him. The strong hands that had caught him jerked him upright and even though he didn't get his feet on the ground his head was above the water. A sopping wet Tokala held him, blue eyes looking scared. They were so close that their noses nearly touched, and Dano tilted his head and moved forward, just enough to press his lips to Tokala's. Their first kiss lasted just long enough for Tokala to drop Dano back into the water.

# The Death of Music

1031, Ten Month Sevenday very early morning

Less than a day's hard ride, sunrise was coming just a bit later to the town of Gull's Crest. The town wasn't much, just an inn, a dock that wasn't used often, a rather large farm for gulls eggs that were then pickled and sent down the coast to Equilobos City, and a lot of stories about an ancient shrine to the great Lai Lei, the goddess of the Songbirds.

The Inn was really just a large farmhouse run by the grandmother of the current farmer. It had three guest rooms, a nice kitchen. In the winter, it didn't even smell like vinegar all the time. It had never had all three rooms filled at one time, but no one really complained of that.

There were two guests right now, paying guests, who liked to eat three meals a day and had fought with each other, arguing over points of religion that Grandmother nor anyone else had been aware of the existence of, this was enough to justify the inn for probably the rest of Grandmother's life in any extent.

Both of them were Songbirds and she waiting for them in the kitchen with breakfast and hot tea. They sang every day, these birds and she thought she'd never felt as young as she did. She almost wished she hadn't given her mirror to her grandson's wife. Yes, she truly was tempted to see if her hair had more red in it. Every one knew that Songbirds had such a special magic. There was no truth to the stories that had brought them here though, but she didn't care. She'd happily told them again and again what her own grandfather had seen.

Once he'd been in the high hills beyond the town, two day's hike up into the forested hills. He'd had to promise the girl he loved that he'd build a gullery for her of his own, and that meant new stock, new gulls that were different than the ones his brother and father kept. This meant going higher and higher into the forest.

No one had been that high in longer than people could remember and no one had found what he'd found, not even himself, but he'd brought back proof, yes, yes he had. His proof rested above the fireplace in the kitchen, covered over by the thinnest, smoothest glass maybe in all the northern shires. Just a simple shard of gray and silver metal, as long as Grandmother was tall when she'd been younger, when they'd cleaned it off from all the moss and dirt of the years, in the most ancient carving were written the words, "Servant of Logus, beware!" And under that it was written the name of the first Empriatfay Mayonaka.

At first they'd thought the capital would come and take it from them, but all that had happened was the High Priest of the temple then, a Jade Severon sent them a letter creating a shrine to the memory of Lai Lei and told them that they should guard the prize and take honor that the Goddess of Songbirds had given it to them.



Grandmother sat down at the table and stared at it. She'd told this all to these Songbirds a hundred times since they'd come and she still wasn't tired of telling it. How her grandfather had found the woman, turned to stone and shiny metal pinned under a rockslide, the great shard of metal through her chest. She'd had hair of bright silver spikes and swirls of black stone inlaid into her cheeks. One hand curled around rock, reaching out to the sunlight. Moss covered her over, but he had cleaned it away where he could, run his fingers over her polished lips, over the impossibly soft and yet still unbreakable stone eyelashes. Her beauty had haunted Grandmother's grandfather until the day he died.

It was perhaps her beauty that had prompted him to pull the spike free. Her grandfather had not been frightened by what had happened next, but Grandmother was, still, and every time she thought of it. When she'd been only as tall as her grandfather's belt and he'd told her, she'd cried in fear and no explaining on his part could ease her fears. Now, so close to her own stepping across the bridge into the Land of After, it still frightened her and she didn't know why.

When he'd pulled the spike from the woman's chest, her stone eyelids had lifted; those smooth metal lips had parted and whispered, "Lai Lei."

None of the Songbirds who'd come in the years had explained why Lai Lei would have anything to do with such a woman, or the god Logus. No, they all went out and searched for this silver and gray woman for themselves. Some never returned, but that was just the quest. It claimed whom it claimed. The Songbirds all had different ideas, and different songs. Through the decades, she'd heard so many songs and not always did the same song say the same thing. If there was truth in them somewhere, it was lost now, she had decided long ago. She set her tea down and sighed. There would never be answers from any of these songbirds as to what was really out there. This day would be like any other. These two, a free songbird and a temple songbird, they would argue and bicker and sing.

The energy she'd felt earlier had left her now, but as if someone were watching her from behind, she turned to the window. They had nice windows in the inn, yes they did. Grandmother lifted her hand to cover her mouth, turning all the way around, raking the chair across the wooden floor and knocking her precious mug to a hundred pieces on the floor.

There in the window, golden eyes, small malevolent suns watched in through the smooth glass. Light from those eyes lit up the silver spiked hair and reflected along the lines of black swirling darkness on her cheeks. Grandmother opened her mouth to scream, but found no air in her chest. The window went black and empty again.

She shoved her chair back more, grabbing the edge of the table and clutching her chest as she rose. Dawn! She wanted dawn to come.

Metal on wood creates an odd echo. The sound moving along the back porch brought her back from frozen panic. With a large wooden spoon, she hammered at the glass around the spike. She would put

the spike back where it belonged! Do not disturb! The Lady Lai Lei was not silver not gray! She was a lady surrounded by rainbow butterflies, not a metal rat in the body of a woman.

The glass she'd feared breaking for more than fifty winters wouldn't break, not under the tinkling thumping of her spoon. The back door opened so quietly, as if one of her grandsons were just sneaking in. She took a deep breath and held the spoon in front of her like it would make a good defense. "Who's there?"

Closing the door, the stone woman ran her hand down it as if feeling the wood. "Wood," she said, lisping softly.

"What do you want," Grandmother asked, reaching to pick up the heavy pitcher of milk as well.

Turning back now, warm candle light playing over the pointy spikes on her head, over the shiny black swirls that curled over her unclothed body. "Want? Want Lai Lei. Want home. Want sisters. Want dark dreaming again. Want Logus to leave me alone. Logus is coming. Must wake Lai Lei before Logus eats her."

Grandmother glared at the younger looking woman, as if she could get control if she just were stern enough. "What's all this about Logus? Ain't no gods here, so what do you want here then?"

The woman hissed, rows of sharp teeth silver teeth shredding the candlelight. The pitcher dropped. Cream flew. Droplets hissed in the fireplace. Grandmother backed away, waving the spoon furiously. "You get out! Get out! Logus ain't here!"

"Logus will come for Songbirds," the woman hissed again, sliding her blue stone tongue over her teeth. Nearly singing, she said, "Can't let Logus have Songbird soul. It belongs to Lai Lei."

She sang still as she stepped over the old woman's body. Songbirds had soul energy from Lai Lei. Once she'd freed all the trapped energy, then Lai Lei would wake and they would be safe from Logus.

Stairs creaked under her weight and the banister made the most delightful shriek as she bent it, cracking the old wood.

"Lai Lei?"

Golden eyes focused on the older woman there, in her white robe, hands hidden in the sleeves. To those golden eyes, iridescent rainbow lights flickered around the mortal, the energy that Lai Lei had given to mortals, that now she needed back if she were to defend herself from Logus. "I want your soul."

"Who are you," Anmarie asked, backing away, her slippers silent on the carpet. As she passed her near enemy's room, she banged on it, regretting now the arguments they'd had. "What are you?"

"I am," and she looked for a word to name herself, but found none. "I am the Gift Breaker."

Harmon opened his door and looked out at the back of this creature. Anmarie's eyes were huge. The temple Songbird lunged at the Gift Breaker then, trying to shove her, to take them both over the railing and down to the stone floor below, but the Gift Breaker caught her throat with one hand.

"Give back Lai Lei's soul," she snarled. Her fingers released their hold on Anmarie's throat, long black fingers moving hypnotically to before her face. Anmarie almost seemed to float there, as those onyx passed in front of her eyes.

"Stop!" Harmon yelled now lunging for the stone woman, but she spun right arm coming around to catch him by his throat as she drew the multicolored light from Anmarie's light blue eyes. As it passed from her to pool under the Gift Breaker's palm, Anmarie slumped, her arrogant stance broke and she hung from the light withdrawing from her, gray tears slipping down the sides of her face in the dull light. The Gift Breaker closed her fist around the ball of rainbow light and broke the connection between the Songbird and her gift. She sighed, dropping to the ground with open dull eyes, but no attempt to catch her, both soul and breath gone.

Such small little movements, Harmon watched each, furious at the death of his colleague, perhaps even friend. The creature cupped the light in her hand and brought to her mouth, serrating even the stolen rainbow. Harmon watched this desecration with a grating fury. Anmarie had almost been a friend, even given her complete devotion to the temple and their odd interpretation of the myths. "What are you?"

"Gift Breaker." She said, holding him still as she brought her fingers around, moving them in a subtle pattern. The drawing started like dropping over a hill to fast, like the down side of leap with a horse. The color of his light, he noted with a distance that disturbed him, considering it was his life flowing out of him, but the color of his was brighter more primary colored where Anmarie's had been more pastel and there was more of it. The rainbow flooded her palm and washed over her arm. The loss of his gift drew tears from him too and his hands clutched at his shirt, at the pain in his heart, but he lived. She squatted down next to him as she ate the light she'd stolen from him, having to chew and suck as if it were noodles almost.

Weakly, he laughed at the difficulty he'd given her and she tilted her head and studied him. "You are not like the other."

"She was a Temple Songbird, got her gift from Ixsander. I'm a free Songbird."

"What is a free songbird?" She said, licking that blue tongue over her lips.

"I lost my virginity, and therefore my home, but the woman I lost it to, she and I loved, really loved, so I kept my gift. Lai Lei is a goddess of love. The Temple is corrupt. I answered your question; you answer mine now. Why do this? Why break the gifts of Lai Lei?"

"Because," she said, reaching both hands out to cup his cheeks gently, "Logus comes and Lai Lei is weak." And then she slide one hand to the back of his head and twisted hard.

Leaving the broken Songbirds, she went in search of more. Lai Lei needed to be strong when Logus tried to open the seal.

## **Charity's Evening**

1031, Ten Month Sixday early evening, just after full dark

The message that would have changed her evening never came. Empriatsen'na Charity sat in her chair next to her father's bed. He'd been given a smaller guest room in the Carlyes' tower, the same tower that Dano's room was in, but below it. She didn't hear the door breaking, or see any of the smoke. Her own songbirds had cast wards of quiet and protection around the room when they'd arrived, reinforcing the magics that had hidden Dano from the Temple.

This hour she spent with her father was the quietest hour of the day, a time of stillness when Charity could try to sort out her feelings and thoughts. There were so many things that made no sense. She wished her mother were around to explain why the Temple were wrong and maybe what it was she was supposed to feel for the blond man that she knew was in love with her brother. She needed someone to explain to her why she might end up marrying her brother's lover, to protect both of them, but yet she had found no love, no bond that she wished for herself. Her father, however, had no answers for her. She hugged him before going off to check on Autumn's sleep and carry on with the rest of her tasks for the evening.

Standing in the doorway to the room they'd given to her nephew, the rest of the world, even Tokala and Dano didn't matter. He looked so much like his father and sometimes she missed Faile so much. Right after his death, she'd sometimes thought she could feel him. That happened so very rarely now, but here in this castle, this pathetic example of a castle, she almost felt like she could feel him again, as if he were closer to her here. It made it even more important for her to make the world safe and happy for his son.

Autumn had the same nightmares that Faile had had. Less of them, not enough to ruin his health; she had University songbirds to sing magic wards around him, to sooth his sleep and he was a healthy, happy boy, she thought.

Whatever was in the stars effected his dreams still , and tonight he tossed in his blankets. Arms across her chest, she watched him squeeze the thick wool blanket to his chest and she sighed. As quietly as she could she crossed the room and squatted down by little better than a peasant bed he slept on. "Autumn, shhhh, shh, Autumn, I'm here. You're safe."

His eyes snapped open and he grabbed on to her, arms going around the armor she wore around her shoulders and neck, little hands locking behind her. "Aunt Charity! The big bird was chasing me again!"

"Shhhh, Autum," she comforted, lifting him into her lap. "There there, no birds can get in the castle here and we have the best songbirds in the world here."

"It's angry and it's hungry, Aunt Charity!" he nearly howled, holding tightly to her.

She held him till he was back asleep and sent for one of her songbirds to stay with him, watch over his sleep. She'd been hearing from the University for a month that they were expecting the little moon back. Every day she waited for the message saying they had proof and it.

She had a plot, to rid herself of Tokala and acknowledge her brother in the same sweep. She just needed the message from the University's observatory, that they assured her would come soon, within days. It hadn't come yet though, but when it did, what surprises she would give the world.

Thinking about it put her in an almost decent mood by the time she got back to her own room. Outside the one large window, she watched members of the Tirson'vay spar, even as a light snow fell around them. She leaned back against the stone frame and propped one booted foot against the other side. She still wore the leather vest she'd had on for her own sparring session which had shared with Tokala, before he'd managed to irritate her beyond words yet again. The sparring going on in the courtyard between the main hall and the stables was almost enough to tempt her out to play some more. Strife had to had have his time first though. She leaned her head back against the cold stone of the window and closed her eyes. Peace had held for nearly nine and a half years now, a peace that if she could just get that message from the observatory, she'd turn into a victory that would change their world forever.

Charity could not abide stupid people, groundless superstition, or people who used that to control people. All the people of Equilobos were hers to care for and she'd give them something better if she had to get gray hair waiting for her plans to blossom. She ran a hand over her short hair and wished that Faile were here, with his daring smile and the impossible skill of making bright fire red hair look good. Faile would like what she was planning. She'd heard once that one twin couldn't cross until the other crossed with them, and she wondered if there were really were such things as souls and other sides, if maybe Faile would wait for her, if he missed his twin.

Faile probably would have gone to dinner with her hosts, after coming six hundred miles. Tokala and Dano were going to be down there making eyes at each other like between them they could call Lai Lei incarnate. And she just couldn't do it. Tokala believed all that rubbish about songbirds and their gifts and even believed she'd hurt Dano out of jealousy. It wasn't as though she hadn't encouraged it, but now she needed to undo it and she didn't know how. As annoying as Tokala was, he had a sword strong will and once he made up his mind that he was protecting someone, nothing would really bend him. He'd reject the little violet eyed songbird a thousand times to protect him and probably not even the goddess Lai Lei could convince him to admit his feelings. She tried to rub the tension out of her forehead and considered what to do. The little moon was coming back and she'd brought Tokala home, a Tokala trained as a decent courtier, who was almost good enough to pay court to an Empriatsen who didn't know what he was.

"Majesty?" Strife's voice brought her back from her thoughts and she opened her eyes.

Strife had grown in the nine years since the University war as well. Tousled brown hair and brown eyes that seemed to bulge like a rats behind those spectacles he wore, still, and she thought in a way he'd never left the university, really, never fully recovered from the violence he'd seen in the war. Some souls were just a bit gentler than others. The world nurtured vipers more than honest hearts and a true friend held more value than all the fancy that had once been shoved into the Imperial Palace. With victory almost in her grasp though, she wanted to see Strife rewarded too. If being Empriat were only about swords, the job would be a great deal easier.

"What troubles, Majesty," he asked, dragging a stool over to where she sat, his leather bag of paper work hung around his shoulders.

"Plotting how I'd like the world to be if I could get everything where I think it ought to be," Charity said with a sigh and let her attention fall back to the beginnings of fencing lessons in the yard below. "Faile would have smiled and everything would have danced into place for him."

Strife shifted on the stool and started to draw papers out, three of common papyrus, and one in a white ivory tube, a letter from the temple. Letters from the temple never boded well for the day. "Empriatsen Faile's twin should not underestimate her ability to see things dance."

He leaned out a little and looked around the yard. "I wouldn't have expected such a large sparring ground in this place, or perhaps it's just less well attended."

"Chas took what Tirson'vay is here on a hunting trip, after she and I had a discussion about meddling." Charity smiled at him then, her smirk looking a bit like a cat with a bird under its paw. "Why do you miss someone, Strife?"

Color rose like the dawn over his cheeks and he mumbled something about all the important letters he'd brought for her Majesty. She turned away from the window, both booted feet hitting the floor and the

look of a happy cat got quite a bit more pronounced. "Come now, Strife-ling, one does not keep information from one's Empriatsen'na, now do they? Who is it? I know you come to look over my shoulder everyday, and you watch the Tirson'vay sparring, so tell me, who is it you're day dreaming about?"

He drew himself up and shoved his spectacles up his nose. "Whatever gave you such ideas?" he asked, berating himself for such a lame response. "Here, have your mail, Majesty!"

She laughed then, taking the letters and the cursed tube from the temple, but setting them down on the table she was using as a desk before nearly stalking him back up against the wall, one hand on the white stone, her forehead to his, "Come now, Strife! Give us the goods! I know you like someone! Who is it?"

Strife probably weighed half of what Charity did, a slender little man with shoulder length brown hair, and quite nice eyes, Charity decided, now that she could see past those damn bits of glass he wore, and while he looked like a mouse, he had the heart of stallion. He didn't flinch in the least, staring eye to eye with his Empriatsen'na. Good skin too, she thought, but he smelled like ink and paper. She suppressed a shudder, and planted her other hand on the other side of his head.

"Lieutenant Chastile," he squeaked.

Charity stepped back as if she'd been burned, her eyes blinking out tears already, one hand then the other going over her mouth. Strife and Chas? Chas and Strife? She held her breath, held it really good until the urge to laugh went away.

"OH go on then!" he snapped, slipping his now slightly bent spectacles off and dropping them in the pocket on his shirt. "Laugh! Go on then!"

And she did, staggering back away from her desk, tears rolling down her face. Castile, a blond woman who fought with two small swords and wicked spikes set into the tips of her boots. She took no prisoners and Charity had never seen the woman so much look at another soldier, let alone some lovely mouse of a secretary! Chas fought with a single mindedness that not even Charity hoped to equal. In battle, Lt. Chas often fought back to back with Charity, and as she thought about it now, the laughter finally gave way to actually thinking about this unexpected attraction. She took a slow deep breath, one hand against the wall, her eyes following Empriatsen Autumn through trying to learn his new sword kata, the same one that had nearly melted down Tokala's brain earlier. It was her favorite, what could she say? "What is your true name, Strife? As long as I can remember, I've called you Strife. Since that day," she said, letting it fall away. Since the day his father had given his life to protect hers and hers had only lost his mind, not his body.

"I don't remember," he said, honestly. Something had snapped in him that day, and the only name he'd kept was Strife. He could recall every event of his life, but without sound, without some details that

would have seemed the most important maybe. He remembered the man who'd covered the Empriat with his own body, but not why the memory affected him so deeply. He was simply Strife, the personal secretary and advisor of the Empriatsen'na Charity.

"Well, I can't write you a formal letter of introduction and intention using the name Strife. Even if she knows who I mean, Chas hardly pays attention to anything more than security and swords as it is, and if I tell her that I think she should consider the attentions of my personal secretary and close friend Strife, she's going to laugh at me, and then she's going to try to lay me out next time we spar, for making fun of her. So maybe I'll give you a name."

Strife glared and she could see the sting of tears behind those glass circles he wore. "I did not intend to make a joke of this."

"Now," Charity said, giving him her full attention again. "You are no joke! You shouldn't take yourself that way! Now stand up straight and help me think of a good noble name for you!"

"Michael?"

"Lord Michael Evertrue Strife. I don't know." She tilted her head, pursed her lips, considering, "Michael Truefriend Strife. Yes, because you are a true friend in all the strife. And I will give you land to go with the name, so you may approach Chas with some land on your own. Anyone makes fun of the name Lord Strife, I'll kick their asses so badly they'll have only sevrit children for three generations, okay?"

Her little ink mouse's mouth dropped open. "But Empriatsen'na!" He protested, "I'm only a secretary, just a scribe."

"You're more, Strife. Your ideas carried us in the war, and I should have done this years ago. Still, you can't retire to your land. I need you here. I just don't want the title to have no meaning." She'd learned too, over the years, that mentioning his father would put him off his spar for days at a time, a month or so if she pushed too hard. She understood too, if she could block out the day her father had stopped talking, she probably would. "I need you, Strife."

"Majesty," he started, licked his lip, and started again, but she held up her hand.

"No, leave off. I have you wordless for once and that is very satisfying to me. Now, let us discuss this mail before I go find some breakfast."

More on his own turf now, Strife moved to grab his stool and settle down on the window side of the table, while she sat down facing the window. "Well, the first three are just normal letters. One is from



Lysandra and they say that the taxes, which they were to pay in wine, will be a month late, but that the quality is very high. Siffron sends news that their Lord has died in a hunting accident, but that his son Lief has taken the lordship with no dispute, and the third sends a portrait of their youngest son. The third is a shire in the south wanting to know if you'd care to let their oldest son serve in the Tirson'vay."

"Um," she said, "Okay about the wine. Lief na Siffron is a liar, write that he and his two younger brothers should come to palace within the next month so that I might express my condolences in person. On the third, suggest that they send a child to the University, for the Tirson'vay has enough already."

Nodding, Strife handed her the other communication though. "This I didn't open. The temple seems to have remembered we exist."

She sighed. "I knew this would happen. It just wasn't possible for some random magic to drop on that white phallic eyesore and remove it from my life, not that the wars ever got close enough to the capital, but I can daydream. At least I'm not daydreaming about the Captain of the Tirson'vay."

Strife groaned and made a face at his Empriatsen'na. "There is nothing wrong at all with phallic symbols! Besides, there are those openings at the top, all those arches, so lovely. And those don't seem phallic to me."

"Remind Mirry of that if you get over to the temple any time soon." She said, unrolling the exquisite white parchment, eyes scanning over the black and gold words.

Half way down the parchment, her eyes and expression had gone from cat to hungry lion. "What a puckered eyesore!"

The letter read:

Empriatsen Charity,

As it is nearly the eleventh year since Our Empriatsen'na Autumn's birth, it is time for him to come to the temple to be trained for his duties as Empriat. This has been too long neglected. The Temple bears you high esteem for your efforts at governance on his behalf. The fragility of your feminine nature must have made this a deep hardship on one as precious to god as yourself. For the protection and love, so like a mother, that you have offered him, we are deeply grateful, but a mother's love must give way to the strength of manhood.

Every attempt shall be made to find you a compatible husband who may guide you ever closer to the ideal of feminine glory to which your actions show you aspiring. We fully appreciate how you have

honored your father's choice, carefully treading between honoring the gods and honoring your father. An Empriatsen must never fully consummate a bonding with an sevrin, and we applaud your grace in this difficult situation.

As your father's passing draws nearer, the Temple wishes to offer you all support and guidance into the new age of Man.

It is only natural that your pride should feel some resistance to this wisdom. The Temple is well aware of your success on the battle field, but we caution you to remember that such success was given to you by the One god and by the wise counsel of the same advisors who will be advising your brother, the god chosen heir to the Empire.

It is not our wish to bring the faire Empriatsen Charity distress, but we feel it only our duty to point out that her majesty is tainted by the myths surrounding her birth and that if she should attempt to possess the throne, she may throw the world into greater imbalance than it already experiences. However, were she to accept her position within the new order with a grace and beauty inherent to all women of god, she might find the blessings of God and church flowing over her, providing her with many children and the love of a grateful people for whom she has set the highest example of humility and grace. And with such an example of grace and humility, it may please the Celestial Court so that the little moon returns and allows the blessings of health and children to flow to all the people of Equilobos.

The consequences to resisting what is already becoming and we will not waste the time of our esteemed Empriatsen by heaping the dire consequences of resistance to the future upon her lovely head.

Always in the truest faith,

Mirry, Protector of Man and pairbond of Logic.

Charity set the letter down, her face drawn into an alloy of great amusement and deep fury. "Security on the temple?"

After a deep breath, Strife outlined the new security that had been implemented at the temple. They were not permitted to raise an army, but in the last week, all the female Songbirds had been sent elsewhere and all but one of the four entrances sealed. New art had been placed by most of the windows in the temple and Strife speculated they could be used for dispensing boiling oil, or worse. "I should have realized," he apologized.

"It is the Temple, Strife, er Michael. They've been nice and docile for years. Now, my reply, and translate it to nice speak for me."

"Yes, Majesty," he said, wiggling his eyebrows. When she used the words 'nice speak', it signaled a true challenge arising.

Charity leaned back in her chair and gave vent. "You unmitigated son of a dog fucking a mule!" She paused, fingers laced behind her head and her thoughts lost in just grabbing the High Songbird up by his robes and shaking him.

Strife translated that to:

Oh most esteemed keepers of the Temple;

Charity, growled, "Is your head so far up your ass that you can't control the delusions of your leader?"

Strife wrote, "We regret the need to give you this information, but the great Songbird of Spring seems to be feeling unwell in his thoughts."

Charity continued, "Don't think that some puny little militarization of your white dick is going to keep me from knocking it down and expressing Imperial displeasure at your attempts to make a new 'age'. The one we have is just fine. If you must have magic as an answer to everything, I suggest you try singing us some rain and perhaps screwing a bit more so that there are more children in Equilobos, as you seem to have so much fucking time on your hands that you can cook up such ideas. What is in your head? To decide that because of my gender some particular god doesn't like me? You may be the son of logic, but it was said as well that Lunatay was your mother. Did you inherit only her insanity and none of her compassion and creativity? This world does not need whining cries of those who never get away from their desks to actually do more than decide what may make value in another.

In closing, allow me to express this so that even your logic may get the full understanding, if you or anyone in your organization so much as whispers such treason out side of Mirry's personal toilet, I will come and shove all your theological asses in said toilet. The little moon's imminent return will usher in a new age, but it ain't the age of man nor Temple. The age of knowledge and truth is coming so run like the rabid little mice you are! "

This furious tirade became, "The recent expansions and modifications have not made any significant changes to the structure, the look and function is completely preserved and I congratulate you on the tasteful and minor modifications.

Also Imperial thought believes that the current age has great tradition and value and we are not so swift to embrace a change in age.

We deeply desire you to use the great magic in your Songbird nature to cry to heaven so that heaven may find it kind to send rain and other useful gifts to us.

We look forward to seeing more children from the temple, as the current events of nature seem to have given the temple so much time to create lovely myths of new ages."

He looked at Charity, trying to figure how best to translate the rest of what she'd said, then back at his parchment, writing away, "The gifts of the gods are beautifully evident in the Songbird of Spring and we hope to see the gifts of his mother emerge in a more balanced fashion with greater creativity and compassion emerging soon.

The Empriatsen Charity sends her wishes that such ideas as were expressed in your letter remain forever more in the most private compartments of the Songbird of Spring so that she may never find it needful to stress such intent to the entire Templar body in person.

We do wish to extend a welcome to all those of clear minds to the new age of knowledge and truth.

Always in fairness and justice,

Empriatsen'na Charity Amil Soresun, Heir Apparent to the Empire of Equilobos and commander of the Imperial Army."

"Adequate," he asked, holding it out.

She read it over and sighed. "I really can't threaten to shove them in the toilet, can I? And 'templar' is that a word?"

"I made templar up, but it sounds good, yeah? It's not appropriate, Majesty, to threaten people with toilets, but you could say such things in private."

She signed and affixed her seal. "I hope I don't have to. Make several copies. Chas will probably enjoy it. And send for Kai and Ko. I have something for them to do." Silently, she added, and I have things to make up for with them as well.

"Yes, Majesty," he said, smiling like a boy in love, not like the secretary of a head of state of a state that was about to have a nice civil war.

# **Skiping Stones**

1031, Ten Month Sixday early evening, just after full dark

He felt it. For a millennia he had possessed the palace in Sairun, possessed the minds of the kings of Sairun. Donery's body dropped, abandoned outside the palace and the southern songbird within was never aware that she'd been a target.

Half a world away, a different continent, a different culture, Haika's eyes blinked open. It had been such a deep sleep, untroubled by nightmares. The boy had been selected as heir, months ago, this time for his mind and understanding of government. Logus had meant to leave the boy to guide the people of this country he'd nurtured. Possession shocked the body not groomed for it and Haika's scream broke in half as his body convulsed, trying to throw off the uninvited control. When his eyes opened, brown eyes faded quickly to gray.

Throwing the covers off, Haika-Logus rose and stretched, luxuriating for a moment in the perfect youthful body. Haika would have made a wonderful king for this people that Logus had sculpted, but taking the body without the seduction first tended to destroy the mind. There was one final twitch in the boy as Logus obliterated all resistance. He had only seventy-two hours to take the Lai Lei.

Padding barefooted across the room, he wrapped the silk robe around his stolen body and debated about the most effective thing to tell the guards. They would take whatever he said as law. For a millennia, the storm gray eyes were a mark of the god, a deity he'd worked hard to create. Whatever he said would be law.

It was just deciding what to say for maximum effect, minimal time. One hand on the door he stretched out his senses, searching through the whole palace for the invaders. The white haired sevril, the spirit of the dead Empriatsen, and he thought about it, considered how much of Mayonaka's line he'd have expected to feel, how much of that delicious inbreed power of Lai Lei. There was a great deal more of Lai Lei than he would have predicted. The only logical explanation was that a living heir of Mayonaka was in his own palace, carrying that precious DNA sequence blended with the power of Lai Lei. The magic signature passed sweetly over his senses, exciting him from intellect to primal need. There was an Emprial Songbird. The thought turned the skin of the young body he wore to tingles, hardened him in places that he'd almost forgotten about. Suddenly seventy-two hours seemed a perfectly lovely amount of time. The human form offered so many expressions of pleasure and pain.

He jerked the door to Haika's private room open and a messenger/guard snapped to attention. "Holiness!"

"There are intruders in the harem. Kill the sevril, the one with white hair and a tail. Make sure the dark haired songbird watches. Garrote the sevril, slowly. Bring the songbird to the chapel, unharmed. Kill the girl who is with them. Cut her throat and make sure that some of the blood gets on the songbird."

The guard bowed. "Holiness, as you will!"

## **The Messengers**

1031, Ten Month Sevenday, morning

Morning was sweet. Kai rolled over on the large silk covered bed, twirling sheets around himself and yawned. Morning also came entirely too bloody early. Long blue hair tangled with the sheets and he made no attempt to disentangle himself, instead he yawned again, tears squeezing out from his eyes, darkening pale blue eye lashes.

"Get UP," his twin mumbled grouchily from around tooth brush. Looking around the door to the bathroom and at the bed, at his still statue like brother, Ko considered how upset he'd be if he dragged his pretty brother naked into the streets. That hair was almost enough to make him modest, and somehow, he'd write it into a play... make it a publicity stunt. "GET up, Kai!"

"Oh," Kai said, sitting up, yawning again, "Alright! It's not like your bloody silk wouldn't be there in two hours, is it? Don't you sleep at ALL?"

He rubbed his fist over the back of his eyes and slipped off the bed, graceful as if he were just silk sheets himself. "Did we get hot water this morning?"

"No," Ko complained, spitting out the strawberry foam into the sink. "So you'll have to bath with room temperature water with the rest of us mortals, or sing it hot yourself."

Kai ran his hand over Ko's short blue hair, making it all stand on end, and smiled contentedly. They'd crossed some barrier when Ko cut his hair, accepted the loss of something that could not be lost, accepted that they were not perfect twins any longer. Time and healing just came on a different schedule with Elves. "We should have ordered velvet. It would have matched with your hair better."

This wasn't the palace, but their theater had become home. Ko had no more magic in his music, but love of music was deeply rooted in him and had grown into a love of stories, theater. "I'm going to go see if there is any pastry left from the party last night. Try to clean and dress before someone brings lunch by?"

After sticking his tongue out, Kai kicked the door shut with his foot. Ko had a new kind of magic and some days it put a distance between them. While Kai was happy with his songbird magic, with the

work he did on cogs and gears and the building of the theater, Ko had grown to crave the adoration of the audience, the magic of showing them things that couldn't really be. They'd grown into two very different people and Kai understood and accepted the changes of the last ten years, sort of. He grinned at the mirror, made a funny face at it, wiggled his nose, then settled down to brushing his own teeth. His brush was black. Ko's was silver. He might be the mechanic of the theater, but he was also the songbird and he had music playing in his head as he danced to it, brushing teeth, doing the whole morning routine.

Down stairs, Ko picked over the pastries, saving out several of Kai's favorites. The housekeeper had left them four boiled eggs and a note about how she wasn't cleaning up parties without additional pay. He picked up one of the eggs and peeled it while studying the stage absently, ideas for his new ballet forming in his mind.

He'd been thinking of writing as well, as a way to offset costs during the off-season of the theater. Charity was very generous, but Ko didn't want to live on Emprial generosity forever. It grated on him in a way, all that she gave to them. He understood the choice she'd made and respected it. It was the decision of an Empriat. He'd made his own decision as well, and it would kill him if Kai had spent the years trying to thank him for what he'd done. With the egg peeled, he boosted himself up onto the stage, egg between his teeth, both hands on the edge of the stage. Elfin songbirds worshiped Lai Lei as well, but Ko's personal goddess was Lunatay. Walking the path of the moon, he understood that all the events of his life were a gift. It was his task to nurture them into being such that he was glad to have them, and he was glad to have the theater, glad to be where he was.

From the stage he could see that they'd made a hell of a mess of the auditorium with their party the night before. All the benches were moved to the sides, both the padded and the just varnished. Tables of picked over food and more than a few dance slippers cast off during the night. It hadn't been THAT big of a party, just a few people, just some friends, maybe twenty or so and then the Hunt had shown up and twenty had turned to seventy. He shoved the egg past his lips with a pop and let his arms rise to the music only he could hear. It wasn't songbird magic, it was stage music and, while he couldn't really explain that to Kai, wasn't even sure he wanted to explain it, it was his magic, his music. He didn't owe his gift to Lai Lei anymore and that had come to feel like a freedom. There would be strings and wind for the next ballet, he thought, wondering if he could get Dano to play, at least for one performance. Invite the Hunt and the Queen, he mused.

Wearing just plain gray pants, cut off at the knees with little buttons to the outside of each knee, white stockings, no shoes, and loose white shirt, he held up both arms and closed his eyes. This dance had nothing to do with his new ballet, it was just moving, just greeting the dawn. He drew both feet together, toe to heel, side to side, flawless fifth position, and let himself bow forward, until his face touched his shins and his elbows almost reached the stage floor. His back relaxed into the stretch and he let his thoughts flow over their theater.

It had been his design, his dream, to build such a thing. Charity had smiled when she saw it. Cement blocks, poured in half rounds, laid layer on layer until they rose behind the stage like a thick clamshell, tempered oak cores, eight of them, the longest trees they'd found anywhere, perhaps magically

lengthened and strengthened, made the core form of the shell. This same oak rose above the theater's open air seating, to meet mated oak from the other side. The other side of the clamshell was less dense than the stage side.. and there were sixteen framing oaks, stretching from ground to the apex of the arch. Balconies were suspended from these oak ribs, eight of them. Four across the highest, then two, and two more, closer together, forming a V as it reached down to the ground again. Ivy clung to the oak ribs as well, climbing and twining. The rib east wing also had a climbing rose, twining its way up, with both lavender roses and pink.

In the center of the audience side of the clamshell, smaller oak ribs made an arch that lead out into a foyer, good for taking tickets and having parties, if one did not also wish to be dancing on the stage. Ko slowly rolled up from the stretch. Music.. it must be in his blood. That's what Kai said, but in truth, Kai was just as bad. He threw his arms up, fingers arching and for a moment he was the demon from their last ballet! Slowly he arched backwards, fingers becoming claw like until he broke the stretch and spun, pirouetting on the ball of one foot, his other leg raising and pointing... the spin broke into a roll and he went forward, in nearly the demon's last fall, rolling twice until he rose again, this time on the balls of both feet, arms out to both sides, and broke out of the demon's dance.

More the wizard now his shoulders swayed, arms up, bent fingers spread wide in front of his face.. and he was the young wizard on his first day of school, kicking high, flouncing his foot as if he were wearing the heavy gown of a costume. He made L's out of his fingers and plied, grand plie down to the stage, swaying with the music that went with the young wizard, daring, daring, dare the world!

"Who do you think you ARE," Kai demanded. His bare feet striking the dance floor as he crossed, head down, arms behind his back, being the professor, the young professor. His hair hung behind him, braided and swaying. He wore black breeches that would have matched Ko's except they were darker. His shirt though was tighter, with cuffs and buttons, much more practical. He paused in his approach and caught his braid in his hand, twirling it around and gave the audience they didn't have a groaning and long suffering look. "OH, you must be the New one that everyone's talking about! And you think you can do magic?"

Ko continued the scene rising up tall, his eyes moving stage floor to the accusing face of this new professor, then back to the floor. In the moment of quiet, the professor scanned the student, head tilting. The professor looked at the apex of oak and the student went into a series of pirouettes, around and around, pausing just enough to gather speed again until finally he paused and struck a pose for his professor. Not a word was spoken, and the twins looked at each other, just as professor and student until Kai broke it off. "Well, I sure as hell am not doing that insane set all the way through, not if you want me to carry bolts of silk."

"Oh? But you're so damn cute when you're dizzy. You really should practice more. You should be able to go around all night and not puke."

"And you should be able to run the curtains, without breaking your fingers, but oh well," Kai said, grinning. "Let's get your silk, uh?"



As if all the spinning hadn't done a thing to him, Ko jumped off the stage and grabbed another egg. "There are eggs, Kai-kin."

"And pastries!" Kai jumped off the stage too, caught up his eggs, read the note and sighed. "We'll have to pay, you know?"

"Yeah, but she's worth it and I don't want to clean, do you?"

"No." Kai picked up a pastry and they walked rapidly out of their theater on their way to Justin's Shop of the Unusual.

Kai took hold of the door, released the spell of silence on it and jerked it open, bowing and motioning for his twin to go out first. When Ko didn't move forward he looked up and found a rather large man with a very irritated look etched into his face. Tirson'vay. Kai's stomach dropped down into the foundation of the theater, but he smiled, hoping it wasn't more of a smirk. "Been waiting long?"

"Do you always sleep till noon," Sergeant Casperon snarled, thrusting a sealed letter out at them.

It wasn't noon and Kai was already irritated, which showed in the energy dancing over the end of his blue braid.

Ko took the letter and lifted the seal with his thumbnail. "Kai, Charity needs us in Carlyes."

"Think she's going to really bond with Tokala?" Kai asked, frowning. Dano and Tokala had grown to be friends with the Elves over the years, more Dano really, because in the summer the songbird wandered and often spent some time in their valley.

"I don't want to know!" Casperon gasped, stopping away from the theater. "Elves! Politics! I don't want to hear!"

The twins looked at each other and wondered what kind of problem would have Charity send such a formal summons for. Less than an hour later the whole of the theater in the woods had been hidden with an Elvish cloaking spell and Sergeant Casperon was doing his best to keep up with them on his military issue horse. Carlyes was only a few hours away by Elvish steed or unicorn, just over the hills that kept the snow out of Kai and Ko's valley.

Imperial issue did not keep up well with a Elvish stallion or a companion unicorn. Not long out of the small village of the theater, Empriatsen'na Charity's friends, out paced her messenger to such an extent that he could only watch them gallop across the plain and into the Forest of Reserve. He stopped at the

top of the last hill before the plain and watched them go.

The Elvish stallion was such an odd color, made even odder in the sunlight, sort of a lavender paint with green undertones, like it was part flower, part horse. This was the first time Casperon had ever seen a unicorn at all. The horn held the light like carved crystal, but its hide grabbed sunlight as well, spraying sunlight around both of them even as they entered the shadows of the forest.

Casperon had heard about the beauty of the elf twins who'd grown up with Charity and Faile, that they were perhaps the most beautiful of all mortals, if they were mortal at all. This is something he'd dismissed. Men were not beautiful, pointy ears or not. Watching them as they'd crossed the distance to the forest though, at one with their steeds, the long jewel tone hair of the one flying behind him, Casperon was pretty sure they weren't men. It would be easier to believe they were the spirit of the river incarnate, unstoppable power and, he paused, shifted in his saddle and glared at the forest which had so swallowed them up, yes, they were seductive these Elves. It was good they lived away from the capital. Yes, it was. The Temple wouldn't approve of them at all.

## **The Second Kiss**

1031, but half a world from Carlyes

Dano had kissed him. The time he'd spent in Equilobos had brought him changes, but he hadn't expected the changes in Dano. He remembered a boy, a boy of seventeen winters who was always in trouble, whose main goal in life seemed to creating new types of annoying music and riding horses faster than they were meant to be ridden. Dano had wanted a unicorn and he'd wanted a white violin. The second Tokala had found in Equilobos and sent home. He felt Dano's on his lips still, even as he watched the dark haired man smiling up at him.

He felt the kiss on his lips still, he also felt the tingle of the magic gate he'd passed through and somewhere in his subconscious he was aware that he'd seen Lai Lei again. The world shifted when she was around and things were never the same again. Dano had kissed him. The world had shifted. The man sitting at his feet was no boy. He reached down and caught a hold of his shirt and raised him to his feet, raised him off his feet again.

The scent of him was familiar, immediately comforting, and yet, a scent clinging to him was new as well, like a flower that opened softly against his senses and made him want to grind his teeth, to taste, the kind of scent that folded his stomach into a kind of hunger and need. It wasn't the electric hint of magic, of hair that still danced with static even when soaked in pond water. He licked his lips while searching Dano's eyes, counting the shades of violet that watched him back. The taste of Dano on his lips was forbidden, out of reach by every rule of life he'd learned all his life. Empriatsen Dano. His best friend, but not a brother. Charity's brother, in danger from the temple, from who know what political smoke that Tokala didn't understand. He licked his lips again and tried to make the slightly coffee, slightly berry taste be enough for his lifetime, to remember it, the stickiness of berry oil on his lips.

Emprial Songbird. Dano would be High Songbird as soon as the little moon returned. Tokala knew it. He knew that the lure and power of Equilobos City, so filled with comforts and pleasures not to be even dreamed of in Carlyes would dazzle his friend and he knew just as well that if he returned this kiss, Dano would turn his back on all of it to be with him. Tokala would never be more than a peasant in a nice wrapper. He knew that too, but he leaned forward, soaked up Dano's soft moan of invitation and swallowed him whole. He took Dano's mouth without any polite little steps, lips to lips, tongue tasting and memorizing the songbird's, mastering the smaller tongue and stealing every surface, every moment, each acceptance and the low groan that came from him. The kiss had to last forever, to out run the rational world.

He tangled a hand in Dano's hair, holding him close, even as Dano hooked a leg around his and threatened to send them both back into the water. The need to taste the one he couldn't have ignited and Dano's mouth wasn't enough, he needed his throat and his ear, to breath against it and feel him start to tremble, feel Dano's hands behind his head, demanding just what Tokala wanted to give him.

"Na ri atjinira kura!!!" The girl was screaming at them and neither of them understood her, or really cared what she was yelling at them. "Na! Ri! Atjinira KURA!!!"

Then the rock hit him and Dano opened one eye. She pointed towards the water and his finger followed where she pointed. At first he thought it was some kind of aquatic plant. Blue green slender leaves flowing in the current, but there wasn't really any current and it was getting closer. "Snakes! Toka! Out of the water! Water snakes!"

Tokala blinked, teeth gently closed on the skin of Dano's throat and then he saw them too... blue green eels almost, moving en mass towards them. It was only a couple steps to the shore, but they barely made it and the mass of snakes, like a school of fish filled the water where they'd been standing so that one couldn't even see the rocks below. There were so many that they nearly pushed the nearer ones out onto the rough gravel of the shore. Tokala held Dano to him, both arms around him, scanning the environment for other threats.

"Where are we, Dano," he asked, head resting on the songbird's head.

"Um," Dano said, thinking about where they were. "I don't know where we are, but we're supposed to get that girl and bring her back." He debated with himself about telling Tokala that the girl was Charity's soul mate. "Lai Lei told me to bring that girl back."

"We have to talk about the kiss," Tokala said, trying to sound reasonable and rational, respectful. "After we are home."

Dano wiggled to get a little loose of Tokala's hold and get his arm free to reach up and touch Tokala's lips. "Toka, I love you. I don't care about whatever else, just so I can be near you and know that you'd like my kisses when I can give them to you."

"Fool," Tokala ground out and captured Dano's fingers between his lips as he held him tightly too him.

The girl threw another rock in their direction, yelling in her language again. This time they both paid a bit more attention, though there didn't seem to be any kind of threat this time, just her trying to get their attention. They both leaned a little to the left, scratching their heads, without even realizing they were both doing the same thing.

::He's not your twin,:: Faile complained telepathically. ::Sing an understanding song, so you can understand what she's saying.::

"She's just speaking gibberish," Dano said, looking at Faile.

Tokala looked at Dano, who was looking in the wrong direction. "Yes, I know that. I wonder if she's the one that Lai Lei meant to bring."

"Yeah, she's the one. Look. Oh, and I kinda talk to this ghost now. He showed up after you left."

"I didn't leave on my own." Tokala said, feeling defensive. "And what ghost?"

Dano wrinkled his nose, torn between watching what ever the girl was doing, Faile motioning for him to be quiet, and the look of hurt and fear on Tokala's face. The girl seemed to be doing a very nice job of singing the shackle on her ankle open too. At least someone was doing well, Dano thought. "I don't keep secrets from Tokala," he said firmly, ignoring the pained look that Faile gave him. "Faile, Charity's brother. He showed up when she did last time and stayed. He thinks I'm the High Songbird. Stupid ghost. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, I'm just a little stressed."

Tokala's tail had gone down by his ankle, the tail twitching quite a bit faster than Dano would have liked. "You are the High Songbird. Charity said so as well."

"I am not," Dano said walking a step forward, trying to hear the girl's song and drown out the two idiots behind him.

"Why didn't you send him?"

"Only the High Songbird can send him." Dano picked up a rock and aimed it at the blue eel things.

"Na te!" The girl yelled at him and he sighed, then dropped the rock.

She was free of her chain now and pulling two of the long black lacquer hair pins from her elaborate hair style. Sort of dancing, slowly turning, moving the pins in some complex pattern that quickly outstripped Dano's understanding for patterns, she generated a song without her voice, a humming that slid into the water, slicing it and pulling it apart, drying even the ground below the pond.

Dano stood there, mouth open, hair now drying around him and curling up without any order at all. He couldn't do that kind of magic, he didn't think, but the girl walked calmly across the now dry pond floor and up next to them, and she gave all three of them each their own look of reprimand. Faile moved to hide behind Dano, who wiggled his nose and held out his hand, "Dano na Saikuru, songbird of Carlyes, nothing particularly special, and you are?"

She took his hand, the green silk of her kimono pooling around his wrist. With a quick jerk she brought him forward and took his lips in a kiss, quick and more just a puff of air into his mouth. He flung himself back, wiping the back of his hand over his mouth. He fell as he went back, landing at Tokala's feet and looking up at him, he was quite sure that he'd never seen Tokala angry before that moment. Aggression radiated from those blue eyes and his upper lip seemed to almost draw into a snarl.

The girl smiled though, placed her palms together and bowed slightly. "It is the breath of understanding, spirit-of-tiger-of-snow. Lai Lei said you would come. She did not say you would be so distracted. You are aware that we need to kill a god?"

## **Gift Breaker**

1031, Sevenday, early morning, before Kai and Ko arrive

Yatte drew the string between his fingers, creating yet another design, holding Autumn's attention. "So tell me the rhyme of the spider again."

They sat in the garden, the sun not quite up. Yatte was Charity's Northern Songbird. They didn't really need to be from the north, or south, it was just tradition that the Empriat or ruling Empriatsen'na should have a songbird to call all four corners of the wind. Autumn was much more interested in seeing Tokala's horses, that the sevrit had talked about all summer than doing his lesions, but he was told that Tokala was still sleeping. He didn't really believe that, but once adults started lying, it usually meant someone was in trouble and he didn't want it to be him. "The rhyme of the spider is boring. It doesn't have anything to do with being Empriat. There's no swords and there's no horses. Just a lot of string and laying in wait to eat the right bugs. Can't we please to see Tokala's horses? Please," Autumn begged.

It didn't help matters, Yatte supposed that the young Empriatsen could hear the clash of sparring just around the tower. It was much easier to get his attention in the main palace. "The Rhyme of the Spider

is very important, Autumn. It is the small warrior who lays in await wisely that often controls the web of life."

Autumn jumped down from the bench they were sitting on and recited the poem quickly, adding in all the dramatic moments, the hand motions, but doing it very quickly, skating over it. "Now! Can we please go see the horses, please? Please Yatte! I heard that they have a half breed Elvish steed here. Please Yatte!" Autumn laced his fingers behind his back and smiled. "We could wake Tokala up. He likes his horses a great lot and I'm sure he really wants to show them to me. He said he did. I'll just go get him, 'kay?'"

Yatte did not want for the young Empriatsen to know that his friend had run off with a peasant lover, a bastard songbird. He didn't want to explain adult concepts of vengeance and jealousy to the boy. "I think we should let him sleep. Let's go look at the horses ourselves. Did you know that the Empriatsen'na Charity has sent for the Elves Kai and Ko? They were very dear to her when she was a child and they live near here."

"Ohhhh," Autumn said, reaching out to catch his tutor's hand. "They were the Emprial Quad, with my father."

"Yes, they were." Yatte smiled and together they walked towards the stables. And perhaps they'll be able to find the rogue songbird, and the Empriatsenfay'na Tokala before irreparable damage was done. "I imagine that they will have an Elvish steed and I've heard that the songbird Kai rides a unicorn."

"Ohhhhh," Autumn nearly groaned, eyes filled with the awe. "I wonder if you can pet a unicorn."

"Only if you're very pure and good of heart."

"Kai must be a very odd adult. He is an adult?"

"Oh very much. He is older than the Empriatsen'na Charity." Yatte enjoyed having his pupil's attention and used their chatting between garden and stables to teach as well.

"Yatte, what's a 'falsic' symbol?"

Without moving his head, Yatte shifted his eyes to look at Autumn, who was just waiting for him, and smiled every more brightly at his teacher's expression. Yatte gave in and glared, drawing his eyebrows together, trying to look at least half as frightening as his own tutor had looked. Autumn wiggled his eyebrows. "Empriatsen, where did you hear such a word?"

"Aunt Charity." Autumn started tugging on Yatte's hand then, turning around backwards and pulling at his tutor. "Is it a bad word, Yatte?"

"No. There is no such thing as a bad word, only words which express meanings that might be offensive to certain people." Yatte let himself be drawn along, but he did truly wish that the Empriatsen'na would not use such words to refer to the Temple.

Neither were aware of the gray stone woman moving very slowly across the roof of the stables. It smelled like songbird energy to her. The energy pattern in it smelled of.. Mayonaka'kin.

"What about if someone says Naturile's tits? Is that bad?"

"Well, what do you think they truly mean with that? Are they actually talking about the anatomy of the goddess of nature?" Their conversation continued as they entered into the dark interior of the stables.



Charity hadn't really expected her brother and the sevril to spontaneously combust quite so quickly. It had been the point of this trip, for her, to see them back together, to have Tokala off her hands without distressing her unknowing brother. Still, having it happen so fast and with such, she mused as she rubbed the purple toned char on the floor, to have it happen so quickly was just a bit insulting. She told herself she should have seen it coming. Having spent nearly nine months with the sevril, she understood what her father had seen in them when they were only boys. This fire surely hadn't been visible then, just the unbreakable bond. Laughing, she didn't think Chastile had meant to catalyze them by locking Dano's door.

She could completely imagine her little brother, Emprial will and arrogance in his blood. He'd probably meant to seduce his friend tonight, right under her nose, but then found himself locked in his room and all that pent up passion and Emprial force of will just combusted him. She was still laughing, though she did hope that he hadn't burned himself to ash somehow. Naturile's tits would freeze before she'd explain that to her mute father.

Along with the burn marks on the floor, squiggling purple scorches, the door was splinters, smashed in, she assumed, by a desperate Tokala. It was comforting, in a empty kind of way. She'd brought the sevril to the capital because his mother had said that the relationship between Dano and the blond was nearing being out of hand. Nine months of training in courtly behavior had obviously done nothing to curb it. If nothing else, the sevril would keep her brother safe and teach him about life in the capital. As

soon as she got that message from the University and it would come, the proof of the little moon's return.

Movement outside his window caught her attention. Flash of silver, smear of gray, and she crossed to look out the window. Amazingly, Dano's room looked right out over the stables, where Tokala's rooms were. Charity glared at the roof of the building. Nothing there. Almost holding her breath, she waited, watched, and there it was, a flash of silver and movement again. Charity reached for one of her daggers, only to be reminded that she was unarmed, as she watched Autumn dance around his tutor Yatte. They were just going inside the stable.

Charity turned and ran down the spiral to the main hall. "Get my weapons. Chas! Strife! Demon in the stables!"

Just outside the double main doors, she screamed, "Autumn!"

A nearly fluid like silver flash slipped over the edge and into the stable. Charity ran faster.

Autumn heard his aunt and stopped. Yatte heard her as well, and hugged Autumn to him in some protective instinct. He looked over his shoulder and the white face of the Empriatsen'na, and then the flash of silver. Demon. He'd never seen one before, but he believed the training he'd been given in the Temple, believed it deeper than the trust he had in the University in this moment. Running before he ever turned around, Autumn lifted and held to him. He screamed a song that opened all the stall doors, whipped hay, grain, and anything not bolted down around in a cyclone behind him. Autumn screamed, reaching over his shoulder for Charity, then screamed again as the face of the woman chasing them neared so. It emerged from the storm in the stables, silver teeth gnashing at his outstretched hand.

A mare, pale, but slightly violet reared near them and Yatte dodged. It's hooves smacked against something stone and it ran towards the back entrance. Yatte ran after it, grabbed a handful of mane and sang a slightly different tone that gave him just enough jump to put them both up on the back of the horse, who screamed as something knocked it's hind quarters to the side. It stretched out it's legs and ran for all it was worth.

The horse knew the stables better than the demon did and it leaped out the back door, down half a floor over the entrance to the cellars and ran. Around the side of the of the stables back towards the courtyard where Charity waited. Yatte didn't know how he'd out run the demon other than just stay one breath ahead of it.

Charity did not know anything about demons. She knew the hilt of Flicker and of Vice when she jerked them free of the sheath as Strife held it out to her. She knew the look of battle logic on Chas's face and the smell of leather and sweat of the Tirson'vay, her soliders. She knew the scream of horse wounded in battle and the sound of terror as it ran. She smelled the blood on it's flank as it passed through the Tirson'vay with Autumn and Yatte clinging to it's back. She knew timing and good aim as she launched



herself at the thing chasing the horse.

It ran like a cat, a huge woman/cat, hands hitting the ground legs coming forward, legs bent like a cat with long feet and claws on hands and feet like daggers of liquid silver. Charity hit the thing without armor and it was like rolling in sharpened gravel, but roll they did. Vice did little more than spark as she stabbed.

So quickly the thing was on her chest, one cat like arm drawn back, claws out to slash down at Charity's unarmored throat. Chas lunged at it, shoulder to shoulder and only managed to hit and push. The rest of the Tirson'vay encircled the beast and their Empriatsen'na. Her other hand holding Charity down, both blades in her hands still, but laying the dirt above her head, it wasn't really the stalemate that the Tirson'vay saw. The demon licked it's teeth, the way a cat about to eat might. "The boy can open Lai Lei. Logus needs him. If he dies, then Lai Lei is safe and I don't have to take the lives of her songbirds. See the beauty. Mayonaka, you are honor bound to protect Lai Lei. We are allies. Allies."

Stars circled around Charity's vision, little purple burst of light and her perception of the world shifted, splitting. She was Charity Amil Soreson. She was Jade Mayonaka. She knew this demon, this solider. "Ameriet," she whispered the name, her eyes threatening to roll back in her head. "Leave Autumn alone."

"Dead is alone," the Gift Breaker hissed, but her voice softened just a little, her eyes blinking, "Ameriet. Mayonaka and Luna'tay and haven." The hardness returned though, "Haven from Logus. Logus is here and will kill Lai Lei. Logus is coming!" She jumped then, pushing off with those stone cat legs, to the stable roof and off, spraying tiles to the sides as she ran.



Just outside the inner wall, just into the tiny little village on the other side, Yatte's stolen horse collapsed, taking both the Empriat and tutor to muddy ground. Yatte left it, throwing a stunned and shocked Autumn over his shoulder. The first cottage had a wagon at the door and he tossed Autumn in the back covered him with the oiled canvas and banged on the door only once before grabbing a young woman, chopped wood in her arms, with tousled brown hair and a half laced shirt. Without even time for Yatte to think about why the wagon had two horses still hitched to it, he shoved her up, smacking the horses even as she grabbed for the reins. Her wood went in all directions and an older man, perhaps her father, covered in dirt from the road and a beer stein in one hand came out.

It was the blood in the air, perhaps that spooked the horses, but the wagon took off at break neck speed and the father launched a hammer sized fist at Yatte's face. It hit and Yatte went backwards, sprawling into the road, even as the Gift Breaker came over the castle wall, leaping from the top and galloping across to where Yatte was struggling to rise. The man reached back for his mace, left by the front door and dropped his stein.

Claws digging into the wet ground in frustration, the Gift Breaker hissed, high pitched and targeted like a weapon. The man's huge hands went to his ears as he went to his knees and Yatte squirmed to get free of her grip. It took her perhaps five or six breaths to rip his gift from him and to leave his virginal body for the Tirson'vay that was just getting there.

The girl driving the wagon had reached the edge of the village, but was in no better control of the team of horses. When the Gift Breaker caught up with her, it kept pace with her, running easily, looking up at her. The girl screamed, eyes nearly popping out of her head. She smacked the reigns down on the already terrified horses and the Gift Breaker leaped up into the seat with her. The Gift Breaker grabbed her by her hair and jerked her to her feet, sniffing at her face. "Songbird. You smell like a songbird."

"No no! I'm not!"

"Liar," the Gift Breaker purred. "Liar Liar."

Autumn had had several moments to gather his wits, to calm his breathing. Empriatsen did not hide when their people were in danger. It made him cry, but he knew it was true. Trembling he searched around himself for a stick or a weapon until he found something round and hard. Both hands on it... he stood up, shaking and bouncing into boxes as the wagon veered off the dirt road and into empty field by the river. "Leave her be! Beast!"

One hand around the girl's throat, the Gift Breaker turned to look at the Empriatsen. Surprise and amusement creaked across her stone face. The girl motioned with her eyes for Autumn to jump, even as she carefully drew a deep breath.

The wagon went over a bump, throwing the tail high and Autumn bounced this time high and off. The salami flew up above him, wheeling slowly through an arch to the ground. The girl sang fast and quick, the fastest song bridge that had perhaps ever been sung as the wagon disappeared in a ball of blue electric.

Autumn hit the ground, rolled, till near the place where the wagon had disappeared, then the ground simply gave way, letting him fall into darkness.

## **Shattered Angel**

1031, but half a world from Carlyes

Dano held the spell, chanting it rapidly. Tokala held him, arms around his chest, holding him back against his body, tail wrapped around legs. Ming knelt at their feet, mixing powders in the tiniest cauldron Dano had ever seen. Around them hundreds of soliders searched for them in the wild little

garden they'd found Ming in.

The pond had been drained and the blue snakes were flopping around in hissing fury as they lay on each other and suffered the poking of pikes that dug for bodies or hiding intruders. The spell that Dano sang was one that he and Tokala had discovered during a raid to the palace kitchens during the university war, when they were only ten and twelve. Then he'd held the invisibility for perhaps twenty cycles of the short chant; just long enough for the head cook to prowl past them. Now he'd just started his 194th cycle and only Tokala held him on his feet. Blue tainted the edge of his lips, but he knew, if he stopped they'd be visible and they'd be found.

Faile reappeared beside him, raising a cold wash of sweat over the side of his face and throat. ::He's coming. The one with wings that eats spirits! He's coming! Dano! He's coming for me!::

Tokala felt the increase in Dano's breathing rate, but didn't know what caused it. He touched his cheek to Dano's, caressing, a soft not quite purring sound at the back of his throat. Dano didn't feel Tokala nudge Ming rather roughly with the toe of his boot.

She couldn't respond, only Dano's song was hidden from the soliders. Her voice would reveal them. Not being a goddess herself, not having actually done this spell before, it was taking a bit of effort and concentration. Not more than the width of her hand, a solider passed to her right, poking the ground with the very well made tip of his pike. It would be easier if she had ever been where they were going, so part of the spell as their desire to go home, which much to her irritation, she found sadly lacking.

They all felt the ripple, like icy oil splashing then rolling down the spine, liquid black ice. Tokala held Dano tighter, arms protectively around him. Then the blast hit and soliders fell, dropped like boneless toys. Dano drew strength, drawing energy out of Tokala unconsciously and shift his song to invisibility and shielding. Faile hid between the three of them, cowering like a child. The shield Dano sang for them became visible as the blast hit, shimmering under the attack of hundreds of black crystal spiders. Soliders dropped close enough to them that they could see their faces, eyes already clouding over, souls ripped away.

When only they remained, Dano and Tokala saw Logus for the first time. He came striding across the field, beautiful ivory wings gilded golden by the light of the sun. Haika's body had grown, changed, and what little remained of the smaller golden skinned man. The being navigating through the field of bodies hardly seemed human. Humans were not meant to be that beautiful. He wore a gown of purified sunlight, the night sky glittering in the folds as he walked straight for them.

Lai Lei and Naturile were goddesses of life, accepting of timely and cyclic death, but wounded by violence, offended by life stolen. Life stolen on this scale echoed through Dano, and in moments echoed back from them, with a wave of pain that stopped his song, that brought both his arms to his chest, fists doubled and body shaking. His knees buckled and Tokala went down with him, barely able to hold him because he was shaking so violently. Red bubbled out the side of his mouth and only then did Tokala notice the blue around Dano's lips. Furious, he glared at the now smiling Logus.

Ming also trembled next to him, her fingers still moved through the final symbols of the spell, drawing purple fire in the air above her cauldron.

"None of that now," Logus said sweetly, gracefully holding a hand up that froze hers in place. Ming hissed, but wasn't able to make any other movement. Tokala found himself paralyzed as well, on his knees with muscles that felt like ice. Faile slipped behind Tokala now, back-to-back, eyes closed tightly.

With the side of his little finger, Logus wiped the blood away from Dano's mouth. Panting, Dano sat up in Tokala's unmoving arms, caressed bare hand with a tiny movement that he hoped held all his love.

"Let me help you," Logus said as he took hold of Dano's shirt and lifted him to his feet. "What strength you have to hide from me like that! You do remind me of Mayonaka, but you do understand that I cannot be killed? I might enjoy your company on my journey home. Would you like to see the world where your species originated? See Mayonaka's world?"

"Rabid dogs have to die," Dano choked out.

Drawing Dano closer, Logus ran the back of his fingers over his black hair, combing it back from his face and suddenly it was clean, combed, dotted with little lavender flowers and chains of silver. Lifting him just a little off the ground, Logus traced a finger from the tip of Dano's nose over his lips, down his throat, to the top of his shirt and that rippled away, linen and velvet becoming a white silk kimono. "Now does that not feel better? I've healed you internally. Does it not feel good to be living? That you are claimed by her, only makes you a better key. Do not be afraid, Dano. I will take you to Earth with me. This world does not have half the beauty of Earth. I will teach you of the network, take you to places you can not even dream of now and you will never die, never age. We will be well received when we arrive home. Heroes. You will want for nothing, Dano na Mayonaka."

Kicking at stone hardly helped, but Dano kicked anyway, as Logus' lips took his, prying his mouth open with a tongue that felt like flesh, but tasted of granite. The kiss swallowed Dano's protest, making it an inarticulate cry of desperation.

What hit them from the side felt much more like an angry cat, snarling and clawing and small. "Leave him alone!" Faile screamed, burying his ghostly hands in Logus' head. The tiny moment that bought them put Dano on the ground again. Tokala grabbed him and Ming threw the powder. Purple fire flashed up around them and they dropped into a purple tunnel, Tokala's arms holding Dano close. Logus slapped at Faile, fingers like claws and the last Dano saw was his ghostly friend divided, shattered, a shattered boy angel.

# Empriatsen Dano

1031, Carlyes Shire

Purple light flashed, flared up creating a circle of flame, cutting air and ground in the space before the stables and the main hall. Ming stood near Tokala who held an unconscious Dano. She had her hairpins out again, weaving purple light around them in a smaller version of Dano's invisibility spell.

They were quite visible, but somewhat shielded against whatever dangers might be waiting for them. The gift breaker was gone already and Charity back on her feet, held between Strife and Chas.

Tirson'vay quickly encircled the three, weapons out, shields up, but Tokala made no response. Dano's head lay on Tokala's shoulder, while being held in his arms, legs bent and sprawled on the ground. Mud soaked quickly into the white silk kimono, the white stockings. Tokala was on his knees, holding Dano to him, his other hand combing long black hair, trying to free it of the decorations Logus had put there. He was bowed over him, rocking and what Ming or anyone else did at the time didn't even fully register.

And there they all stood. It was Tokala's mother who broke the waiting.

Unarmed, wearing just a simple tunic of unbleached linen, she tried to force her way through the encircled Tirson'vay. "Toka! Toka!"

They ignored her, if anything closed ranks tighter, mostly to protect her from whatever magic had brought what might only seem to be her son.

Charity tried to stand a bit straighter and ended up holding her side, breathing shallow around a broken rib or two. "Let her through, make way," she said as she herself moved forward. She had autumn to go after, but she also had Dano to protect, as well as everyone else here. Limping, she walked between the saluting short corridor of Tirson'vay, both Strife and Chas still at her side.

Tears were when there was little left to do. Fighting she'd gotten good at. She was the power that protected. She was the Empriatsen'na. Her tears reflected the purple fire surrounding her betrothed and her brother. Her hands were not big enough to hold the sword that would drive evil and sorrow from the world.

The woman holding the spell around them drew Charity's attention away from Dano and Tokala. It was the way the woman looked at her, as if she knew her, had spend a lifetime seeking her. Already feeling small, Charity let her head drop, chin to her chest, she pressed back into the support of her closest friends. Mostly she closed her eyes, hide them, as if hiding her mutated cat's eyes could hide all the decisions she'd made that in the end hadn't protected the one's she loved. In her mind she counted them

off, her mother, Jared, Faile, Ko, Kai, Strife's father, Strife, Dano, Tokala, Autumn... It was easy to find more names to add to the list.

Her knees buckled, and even Chas and Strife together couldn't keep her on her feet. The weight of her armor and sorrow bore her down towards the ground. They went to their knees with her.

Ming changed the pattern of her spell, and drew all the purple light up into a ball. When she walked away from Tokala, he looked up just enough to see her go. Dano lay in his arms, breathing shallow and irregular.

Holding the ball of purple light in both hands, cupping it reverently, Ming crossed the muddy ground to kneel in front of Charity. "Daughter of Mayonaka, soul of my lover, you are my knight and I am your sorceress, always, in all lives have I sought thee. Magic holds no sweetness without the gravitation that draws one to another. Across worlds will I seek thee."

Defiant, angry for some reason she didn't understand, Charity looked up, displaying her cat eyes, the scars and lines on her face. "People keep mistaking me for Mayonaka. I'm not. I'm Charity. If you're in love with Mayonaka, I think she's been dead for a while now."

Ming's laughter broke the tension like a flight of doves, little notes of laughter fluttering through the air. "Charity. I am Ming Sung-Sai. That I have loved you for generations has little to do with what I must do now. You may not remember him, but I have come to kill Logus, to save your brother and nephew, if I can. Now may not be the time for love, but would an ally be unwelcome?"

Shivers went over Charity's shoulders, up the back of her neck. There was something familiar in those green eyes of Ming's, something familiar, something she craved. Love was for other people. "An ally would be welcome. Is Dano dead?"

"Not yet," Ming said, matter of factly, as she closed her hands, pressing palms together and folding away the purple light she'd offered to Charity.

As if everything happened in the same moment, Kai and Ko came through the castle gate and drew up sharply. Ko's horse, not ready to stop the race reared, hooves kicking magic sparks in the air. Ko held his balance easily though, leaning forward, wild as his stallion. Kai's unicorn danced to the side, head down, snorting unhappy to reach the end of the journey. He made it to the ground though, running to Charity while Ko's still danced in circles, refusing to calm.

A bow of respect rippled through the Tirson'vay for the Elvish songbird and his knight and twin. A path was quickly opened for Kai and he dropped down to his knees next to Charity. "Na! Big sister, you should have told us it was this bad! I would have gated here! What happened?"

Charity turned to look at him, smiling. "Kai, if I had known a demon was going to attack me, it wouldn't have been this bad. We have to go after Autumn. The demon is still after him. Help Dano."

"You first, Empriatsen of the Swan," he said, teasing lightly as he laid a hand on her cheek, ignoring the woman also on her knees in front of Charity. Something might have passed between Kai and Ko telepathically because the shorthaired blue elf spun and galloped back out of the castle grounds.

"Dano is Empriatsen." She said, not quite having the will to defer Kai's healing gift twice. "He's my brother."

That delayed it though. Kai pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek, looked over at the still unconscious songbird, his miserable sevril friend, and the sevril's mother holding both of them in her arms, his father standing over all three of them, then back at Charity. "It was an Emprial star," he teased, holding up his hand so that all five fingers would make the five points of a star. "Cherry, you have to tell me these things! I would have given him different advice."

"Is why I didn't tell you. Fix my gods kicked ribs, will you?"

"Now, there's my Cherry!" Kai said, one hand on either of her cheeks as he sang. His song generated a blue light that flowed over her quickly, easily. Kai had no idea how many times he'd knit Charity's ribs back together, probably every bone in her body at one point or another. It took only a few minutes and she was back on her feet, shaking off Chas and Strife both.

Trying her best not to look at the beautiful woman standing near her, Charity moved to stand above Dano and Tokala.

Tokala's sister slipped in between them, holding a thick wool blanket, which Tokala spread over and wrapped around Dano, even as he worked to get the offending kimono off of the limp body. Anis knelt in the mud as well, slipping her hands under the blanket to help, to strip what offended her son from the body of a boy she herself had cared for as a baby.

Charity squatted down and took hold of Dano's face, turning it towards her, then touching her thumb to the black ring around his lips. It was the same black ring that was around her father's lips. "What happened?"

"Lai Lei," Tokala began. "Charity, I want only Dano. I'll be his servant, I don't care, just need to be near him."

Anis smiled at her son touching his cheek softly, and threw the white kimono away. One of the

Tirson'vay kicked it farther and it just happened to get under the hooves of Kai's unicorn. Toka's sister worked on the white stockings, being careful to tuck Dano onto the blanket, and out of the mud. Anis turned then, on her knees and looked into Charity's eyes. "Empriatsen'na, please, I made the betrothal with your father many winters gone. We will return all the pledge wealth. Tokala must follow his soul."

"Indeed," Charity nodded. "Shirelonfait I know. I know why my father made the betrothal. Carlyes owes nothing to Soresun, because Tokala will bond with Empriatsen Dano." Then looking at Tokala, she continued, "Tokala, what happened to Dano?"

Tokala's teeth started to chatter, his fist clenching around a handful of blanket. "Wings kissed him, violated," he said, having trouble now getting words out around his snarl, around his teeth that were just a little too sharp for a human's. "Kill Logus."

"Excellent idea. Logus is feeding from Dano, drawing energy from him and he will be here to collect him soon, I imagine. He needs him to open the seal on the Lai Lei, and to start the engines. Only a male heir can do it. I really hadn't thought we'd have any more of those. My curses must not hold like they used to."

Charity's fingers twitched, hand lying on her hip as if she were reaching for Vice. "You cursed us?"

"It would have been easier on the entire world if Logus had just starved to death for lack of energy. I hadn't counted twins in my calculations, nor a bastard from a songbird powerful enough to evade the curse. Your twin died because of Logus, in body and ghost. I sought only to prevent such deaths. Without a male of Mayonaka's line, Logus cannot ignite the Lai Lei. If he does that. The ship is damaged. If he lifts off with her, there will be an initial ring of devastation at least a hundred miles in diameter. I expect that will include your capital. How many people live there?" Ming moved over to Dano, studying his face where Charity held it. "We must cut the link between him and Logus."

"Will that cause further harm," Strife asked.

"What's a mile," Chastile wanted to know as well. That question slipped silently through the Tirson'vay. They may not have understood all of what Ming had said, but ignite and devastation made clear sense.

"He is lost in nightmares. Harm is a relative thing"

"No. It is not," Charity said, tired of making choices between her people and her loved ones, tired to her bones of being more than just a person. "What will cutting the link do?"

"It will hamper Logus, slow him. Perhaps give us time to reach your nephew. Lunatay's moon is



returning and with it the signal that can control the radiation Lai Lei emits. Once Lunatay's moon returns, Logus will no longer have the opportunity to open her; the seal will be stronger than even he can break. He will weaken, and perhaps we can kill him before the next eclipse. This war is older than your current life. More lives than you can count are weighed in this conflict."

Charity stood then, her fingers pinning Ming's chin. Pinned like that, the foreign sorceress seemed much smaller, a delicate lotus in the hand of the Empriatsen'na of Equal Wolf, Equilobos. "I don't know what was, or how many lives hang where. I know that I know you, but I don't, know how. I know that that's my brother on the ground in his lover's arms and he didn't know anything about this war either. That my father has been lying in a bed for ten winters with that dark circle around his lips. I know that my friends are putting their lives on the line now, to protect and heal and I'm not willing to sacrifice even one of them. This fight keeps growing deeper and deeper and I see no end to it. I know you from some place so deep in my soul it feels like I've lived a thousand winters and if sacrificing hasn't solved it yet, it isn't going to. Wake my brother; don't kill him. Then we will all go together to slay this dark one." Impulsively, breaking from everything she'd bound herself by, Charity leaned forward and touched her lips to the sorceress'. Their kiss lasted only a tiny moment, but it spanned those thousand winters, snapping tight a bond of love that didn't respect intellect or logic and that Charity did not waste energy denying. Charity wanted her songbirds, the one's trained by the university to hear this stuff, explain it with some history or science, but explain it. Yatte was busy with Autumn. Vira was in Equilobos, but Nivra and Quril were here in Carlyes "And where are my other two songbirds!"

Ming blinked, confused by the tears in her eyes and pulled away from the kiss. "I cannot break the link without killing him, or killing Logus."

"Kill Logus," Tokala snarled again.

Kai rose, motioned for Tokala to bring Dano closer, he said "Logus has never done this to Charity. Why not?" As if he were going to slip the next bit of information in so that she might not respond to it very loudly. "Dano and I are the only living songbirds here. I don't feel any others."

"The female DNA carries a marker in the DNA that inhibits the connection and triggers the opening of the seal."

"I thought you said only a male could," Kai said, pulling the blanket back from Dano's face, and wondering what a DNA was. They were friends, the two songbirds. Kai took his time with a long breath before looking into Tokala's face.

"Two hundred years ago, I set a trap. Anyone who crosses into the bridge of the Lai Lei will have their gender transposed."

"This is too complicated for me. Let's just go kill it," Chastile said, eyes skipping from one soldier in the Tirson'vay to the next, making sure of her support.

"We have to find it before we can kill it," Strife objected. "Kai, can you track where Dano's energy is going to?"

A light went on in Kai's eyes and then Charity's. They gave each other a look like two weasels that had just figured out how to open the chicken house. "I could, but Dano could do it better than I. Ko has found an opening in a field a bit off the road too, with Autumn sized footprints on a dusty, but smooth floor below. No sign of any demons. He's going in after him. And Yatte's dead."

"Oh fuck," Ming muttered, one hand over her eyes. "He's on the Lai Lei. We have to go."

"Full armor, fall in!" Chastile gave the order even as she was looking at Charity for confirmation.

Charity was strapping on her own three bladed weapon belt. "Ming Sung-Sai, can you wake my brother?"

"It might be possible. I need a source of life energy that he would allow to mingle with his own soul. Another person to bond him with, but Logus will drain them both and there will be no way to unbond them. Both Dano and whom ever he bonds with will lapse back into a comatose state when the energy runs out. We lose two allies instead of one. And it might just be a waste of time. I've never done any work like that."

"Me," Tokala said, only a little snarl sounding in his words, "Me."

Anis wrapped her arms around her youngest son, even as Raze laid a hand on his shoulder. "Tokala is stronger than a thief."

Pinching her forehead, temple and wrinkling one eyebrow, Ming looked very much like an adult explaining again to a group of stubborn children that chickens do not lay golden eggs. At some point it becomes mute. To save the farm, the chickens had better lay golden eggs. She reached into the folds of her kimono and pulled out her little bag again. From that she pulled a bit more of her sugary powder. With her little finger, she marked Dano's forehead, nose, lips with light purple. "Kiss him then, sacrifice your life, just like a fairytale. Now, I have to go."

She dropped her little bag back into the folds of her kimono and walked right past them, crystal bells tinkling as she made for the main gate. The hem of her kimono floated just above the muddy ground. Charity tilted her head and watched, carefully just to be sure. The woman wasn't leaving any footprints either.

"Kiss him already," Charity snipped, as she finished tightening the shoulder strap and started to follow

after the sorceress, checking out of habit to make sure that both Vice and Viper were where they were supposed to be.

"Wake up Dano," Tokala said, now with a gentle purr to his voice, leaning close to the pale sleeping face. "I am yours, your knight always."

"We'll have a beautiful ceremony in the theater after this is all straightened out." Kai smiled brightly, brushing the back of his fingers over Dano's cool forehead, before moving off towards his unicorn. The connection to Ko was carrying Ko's stress and worry to him, which was as good as a call, a beacon of the brightest light. Charity was his leader, his friend, but Ko was his twin, and he would go where he his heart called him. One hand disappearing into creamy mane, he jumped and mounted, then galloped out the main gates, blue braid whipping around in raising magic.

The Tirson'vay were moving off to obey their captain as well. His mother stayed with him, one hand on his shoulder, her sword in her other. Time had grayed her hair, but the warrior spirit remained.

Everyone went off to battle, and Tokala stood there, holding Dano in his arms, painfully aware of how small he was, of how the strength and intensity of the songbird's personality made up for human fragility. He wanted to whisper that he was sorry, that he'd always protect him from now on. The promise wouldn't rise up out of the stinging in his eyes though. He couldn't give what he didn't have. He had his soul though, the core of life energy within him, and that he could give.

The kiss wasn't graceful. Tear wet lips pressed to unresponsive black outlined ones. Tokala held the kiss though, tightened his hold on Dano, waiting for any kind of response, any kind of waking. Will knotted in his gut, braiding around his fear and his hope. 'Take it! Take my soul!' he screamed silently.

And nothing. Fairytales. If a kiss could have woken Jared, the university would have found a way to do it by now. Refusing to stop the kiss, or deepen it without a response from Dano, he slowly lost his strength, dropping down to his knees again as the courtyard grew quite and empty.

This time the mud was just cold, Dano just lifeless in his arms. Tokala refused to break the kiss though, to move his lips. Dano's light breath touched his cheek and he knew that he lived, even if his body felt like dead weight. It worked in the stories, the kiss! Tears washed down his face and he moaned, trying to make the kiss different somehow, to do it right. And he couldn't.

His mother's hand caressed his hair, soothing, comforting. It wasn't fair! That the gods should come into their lives like this! It wasn't right! Someone had to fix it! It wasn't Dano's fault that evil thing had wanted something from him. Tears filled the cracks between their lips, salty and bitter from whatever power Ming had put on there. Dano was laughter and wicked playfulness, music and stolen cherries. He was innocent seduction and sunlight in raven black hair. No response rose to meet Tokala's kiss, not this kiss.

If the tears had been black acid, they couldn't have felt worse as his lips parted from Dano's. That kiss they'd had at the edge of the pond, that had been sunlight and life and Tokala teeth chattered as he brought a hand up to smear the purple powder over Dano's face, to wipe it away, to take away whatever visible traces of the will of the gods that he could.

Rain started. Big drops hit his back, soaked into the suit he'd worn to impress his friend, infiltrated his hair and washed away his tears like the world just felt like going on without him, like washing away his mark on the world like he'd wash away the purple powder. "Dano," he whispered, voice broken by fury and grief, twisted by vocal cords that had never been fully human.

Whatever violence had taken his lover, locked his mind into whatever place it was in, he couldn't undo what was done. His will alone would not make it different. He'd told Dano that he was his knight. Jaw tight, he looked over his shoulder at his mother. She reached to his cheek and traced the track of his tears with her fingers. "We will fight this thing that has hurt him. He will wake, you will see."

Tokala's tail lifted up out of the mud, twitching, as his mind took in all the parts of the puzzle that he knew. Lai Lei must want something. She would be as old or older and wiser than the sorceress, at least as old as this winged demon. This war had started many winters gone and even the gods were not smart enough to solve it, but they were... not gods, not endless like he imagined Naturile to be. Ming had said.. something, he wasn't sure how she'd said it, but that Dano was the same to Lai Lei as Ming was to Lunatay. They made mistakes. They could be tricked.

"Mama," Tokala said, a plot shifting to the surface of his mind. "Help me get Rain, and a clean blanket for Dano. I need his violin too. I'm going to give Lai Lei what she wanted. Get Rain in a bridle, I'm taking Dano up to my room."

Mud sucked at him as he rose and he shifted Dano in his arms. There was only one person who had the wisdom and power to kill Logus, and it wasn't the sorceress or Charity.

Anis watched her son walk towards the stable, then sheathed her sword and followed. He went up the cracked stairs to his room, stepping easily over the missing step here or there. She set about trying to clear the debris from in front of Rain's stall and ended up getting aid from a couple bondkin.

In the time it took her to get his mare free and bridled, he laid Dano out on his bed and peeled away the muddy blanket. Efficiently, fueled by a dangerous fury with the gods themselves, he wiped away most of the mud, using a sheet from his bed. It was more difficult than he'd thought it would be to dress Dano in a long shirt of his, a pair of his own gray linen pants, which were much too big, a fact that only made them easier to get on. Cinched around his waist with a broken reign that Tokala had meant to repair months ago before he'd been dragged to Eqilobos, Tokala decided the clothes would work. He got some leather socks on Dano's feet and lashed all that hair into a pony tail, close to his head, two in between the start and end and another at the end. The last thing he needed was Dano's hair blinding

him.

All practical now, he lifted Dano and shifted him over his shoulder, letting his arms hang down. If it worked, Dano would live and could be angry with him. If it didn't work, they'd all be dead very likely and not even Dano's anger could touch him if he were dead. But the arrangement got a very funny look from his mother. She waited for him with Rain's reigns in one hand and the back pack that held Dano's violin in the other. An odd shaped wooden case was inside the back pack, the whole thing designed to be carried by a songbird on the long sunwalks they took each summer.

Tokala shifted Dano off onto the saddle, then strapped Dano's violin to the back, behind the saddle where a bedroll would go. Tail twitching at just the tip, he motioned for a bondkin to come closer. They hadn't been much in the habit of obeying him prior to his stay in the capital, but the man didn't hesitate now. Gently, Tokala pulled Dano from the saddle and put him in the man's arms. He boosted himself up into his saddle then held his arms out for Dano. Everything seemed so small, one task at a time, little building blocks of action.

Rain danced to the side as Dano's weight was added and Tokala wanted to imagine they were doing something else, that he wasn't about to just use Dano as bait in a very nasty trap. Dano's head lay against his shoulder and he could taste him still, from their kiss by the pond. He closed his eyes and imagined Dano's open eyes again, filled with love and play. One had to play from where one stood, Tokala told himself and tried not to grind his teeth. "Mama," he said when she touched his knee. "I'm ..."

He couldn't find a way to say what he felt, how darkly he felt about himself and what he alone seemed to see or be willing to dare.

"Toka," his mother replied, laying her cheek against his muddy knee. "I love you."

Unconditional, despite so many things. Tokala squeezed his knees, pressed with his heels, and Rain took off to an easy canter, they'd reached a full gallop when they hit the castle gate.

## Craving

1031, Carlyes Shire

Human life sweet, Logus thought, so, so fragile, so very lovely with delicate lace like power. Each little bit of lace had its own taste; its own flavor. Most were so similar, gruel of souls, not the kind one would cross a world for. The one Lai Lei wanted for herself tasted of summer days and love, of sexual desire and innocence, tasted of coffee and cinnamon, though this world never had those tastes. Logus sat on the roof of his palace, the golden minaret built tall over the city of his pets. Night wind ruffled over his wings, through his hair, and he could taste home, taste the shores of Earth, the sea where he'd lived before they'd moved him into the star ship. If he closed these human eyes he'd created for himself,

he could taste it in the breeze, taste the scent of Cairo, the buildings that scented the air with their heat, baked clay and saffron, curry and the oil used in human hair. Nothing like this world, no matter how hard he'd tried to recreate it.

Just a little waiting more was left and he would explode from this planet with its energy soup and broken rules and mud crawling humans, he'd break free to the stars from where he came! And he wanted just one sweet little mortal to go with him. Lai Lei wanted that mortal too, wanted to smother him in sweet melodrama and romantic stories, lush emotion like an over scented handkerchief, complete with lace and perfect violet eyes. To grind that till nothing remained would be like a balm, a trinket for the time he'd been forced to stay here. She must have known, he thought, how badly he would have wanted this little violet eyed singer. The wanting had bought her a few minutes, tightened his victory over her by a few precious minutes, but he knew. He knew that she would call her little songbird angel to her, call him to her so that she might use all the energy she'd layered into him to seal herself up tighter, safer.

It seemed perfectly fitting to him, that the hawk and the dove would both prey on the little songbird and spill his blood for their own goals. Humans never saw far enough ahead. And so he sat on top of his minaret and waited. As he waited, silence fell throughout his city, the sleep of death settling over people in swaths as he gathered energy. Wailing so easily turned to silence, as he waited.

He drew his wings in a little, shielding himself from the wind as it picked up. There would be no fires for the dead, at least, no thick choking smoke. The energy at his command grew though, until he glowed there right in the middle of the day.

What he waited for finally came, bringing a slow smile to his face. He liked chasing almost as much as he liked feeding and winning. It wouldn't be much of a chase with two on a simple mare though. The light blinked out over the minaret, gone around the world in search of cinnamon songbird soul, and there was not enough silence to snuff the wailing in the city of Logus.

## **Chasing the Cat**

1031, Carlyes Shire

Tokala raced right by the Tirson'vay and the opening that Autumn had fallen into. Rain stretched out her legs as she never had before, her tail lifted and flying. He leaned over Dano, holding him tight, his own tail up, every hair standing out straight. He didn't know how far out he'd have to go to become visible to this winged one. Gods did not have blind spots.

Breathing hard, chest against Dano's shoulder, he closed his eyes for a moment, and knew the road through Rain's body. At very first it was just an odd breeze that opened his eyes, then a sweet scent that clung to his throat. Eyes wide open, he sat up straight, turning Rain as she skidded and screamed.

The being blocking the road might have been made of marble, no taller than he had been, when he'd kissed Dano, but his wings spread out wide in the fading sunlight. Perfect ivory feathers, fluttering softly in the breeze they'd created, tinkling softly like wind chimes. Rain reared and Tokala held onto her and Dano with all his strength. Logus held out his arms, as if offering a hug. Cloth of liquid stone flowing back towards his shoulders as he lifted his arms, he invited, "My children, don't you want to be angels?"

Gritting his teeth, Tokala and Rain spun, kicked dirt in the face of the angel and nearly ran into the demon that had killed Yatte. Rain jumped over the crouching figure. Tokala held to her, tucked tight around Dano.

"No!" The same sweet voice snarled, loud as clawing thunder. Stone grated on stone, and Tokala did not look back to see if the demons fought each other or not. Sweat sleeked Rain's sides and he could feel her heart beating against his legs as well, thumping, racing as she tore over the road back towards where the Tirson'vay guarded Charity and the hole Autumn had gone down.

Never had Rain been ridden like this, probably not hard at all in the months he'd been with Charity and he knew his loyal friend and companion would fall under him soon. It gave a kind of clarity that he'd never known, knowing that he could calculate his life by how many more times Rain's heart could beat.

Wings beating moved air over him and he and Rain both knew she wasn't fast enough. At the top of the last hill before the village, Rain jumped, going too fast to keep the road when she hit the top. Ming stood surrounded by Tirson'vay, weapons out, and she moved those hair pins of hers, but it seemed so in vain to him, almost as if he could see this whole scene playing out time after time before and going horribly wrong for some reason each time. When Rain's forelegs hit the dirt of the road, they buckled and she went down. Tokala felt the hand pass over his back, threw his hair, touching, missing as he fell, Rain's collapse putting him in just the wrong spot to be caught.

So quickly, he hit the dirt, arms up shielding Dano's face as he hid his own face in Dano's back and they rolled towards the river. Logus, furious, hair dancing in electric power around him, wider out even than his wings, spun on the watching Tirson'vay and swiped his hand across, meaning to drag their souls from them, to drop the whole lot of them like so many paper dolls. Ming's purple energy flared, dancing an amethyst fire around them all, around the Tirson'vay and the villagers who'd come to help them. Charity stood behind her, watching with angry eyes, eyes that echoed knowledge in her soul of things that Charity didn't care to remember.

Logus screamed in frustration, palms up, fingers clawing the air. "Mayonaka!"

He spun back around on Tokala, who was just getting back to his feet, Dano held in his arms, one behind his back, the other under his knees, his back to the river.

Tokala watched the emotion move in waves over the perfect face of the man/demon. He needed the next part of his plan to happen. Dano was the one that talked to gods though! Getting the breath together to tell Dano to wake up now and invoke Lai Lei was beyond him. His own heart beat in his mouth and he backed up a step for ever step that Logus took, no matter how much the demon tried to look calm and even friendly. Until Tokala realized that Logus did not want them to fall into the river, that Logus was trying to get them to come away, because Tokala could fall backwards before Logus would reach him.

It wasn't much. It was just one tiny little bit of power. Tokala hated the river really, always had. Cats in water and all that. He took one step back and they fell into a river that was made of just melted snow and glass sharp rocks. Before the cold he expected hit, rainbow light exploded warmly around them, coating and cradling them. Tokala refused to believe that this was death. The gods hadn't been this kind that he knew of!

The rainbow of light shot up over the top of the river, shimmering with the light of Lai Lei as the seal broke. Ming screamed, her shield dropping, raining to the ground in little purple sparks. Logus' wings furled in, neatly and he turned, smiling. He wiped a bit of sweat from his upper lip and took a slow breath. A full hour remained before the moons rose and locked the seal again. He would be nearing the jump by then. Ming dropped to the ground, hands and knees, mouth open in surprise and horror. Logus took the first really deep and relaxed breath he'd had since Charity beheaded Ixsander. He bowed to them, the people on the other side of the road, to Charity and the damn blue Elves, then he backed off the bank of the river and into the rainbow light of the open door.

## **Making an Angel**

Beyond time, within Lai Lei

Lai Lei watched them sleep. Tattered and muddy, Tokala wrapped his arms around Dano, hooked one leg over the smaller man's legs. Sweat and mud matted blond hair clung to his face and she wanted very much to just clean it away, make it all full of static and dancing moon light like it ought to be, but she didn't. She'd been connected to Dano when Logus had put him in the kimono, had kissed him. It was a first taste of what living might feel like and she wasn't sure she really wanted this now. So they slept, on her favorite grassy field, while she thought about if she really wanted to be really alive or not.

She sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, arms wrapped around them and tried to make up her mind. It was much easier to plan this out when she hadn't known just all what it would mean. Romance, in all it's pleasure and angst had always seemed infinitely beautiful to her, as the romance of others moved through her dreams. The sleep of a thousand years and a million beautiful dreams and within moments it would all be over. She would slay Logus, for all the harm he'd done, keep her word to Dano and entomb this egg of her birth, this ship made by the hands of people. Or she would submit to Logus and die, never feeling what happened to Dano or Tokala, no more feeling the dreams of her songbirds and pain would no longer come to so many people.



The kiss Logus had forced into Dano, the feeding on his soul, she felt every fold of pain and shame and the cry of his soul. She felt Tokala's sorrow from the moment he'd kissed Dano and bonded with him and she'd kept Dano from waking. Pain. It was that which looked so sweet in her dreams and almost made the one in pain worthy of love and comfort and she'd focused on that, on the right to love and comfort after. Now, feeling it, being right in it, it just hurt. And she knew if she left her computer as Logus and Lunatay had, that there was no way back. Immortal and powerful, but not able to outrun these feelings, not able to escape the longing and frustration, she wasn't sure that seemed like a good thing to do to herself. So she sat there thinking about it.

If Dano and Tokala died here together, how lovely and tragic it would be. Very romantic. She could snuff them out, prevent Logus from causing them more pain. But. She'd wanted Dano to be her angel.

He was mad at her for not being what he'd thought she was. She'd felt that too, and it had surprised her. He was mad at her for using Ko's gift and he'd blamed himself. So much anger. It made her shudder. She moved dirty black hair from his face, brushed more of the purple powder from his face. He'd had such a faith in some kind of goddess that was so much more than she was. She wished she was what he had faith in. It had seemed so real to him, and as she wickedly flitted through his thoughts, it still did. She was very tempted to root around in his thoughts until she found the source of this faith, of this bigger than him thing that he had trust in, because it was bigger than her and it wasn't... wasn't all fantasy either.

But it had hurt him so deeply when Logus took without asking and she didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want anyone else to hurt him either, and she had an idea. "Tokala, wake up."

He heard her and he knew who she had to be. Lifting his head, he held onto Dano more protectively if that were at all possible. The field they lay in wasn't natural. There was grass, but no dirt, just softness like a mattress, and sunlight, but no sky. "Did I do it wrong? Are we dead?"

"No," she said, smiling very lightly at him. "You did everything right Tokala na Carlyes."

He bowed his head, hiding his face in Dano's shoulder, not knowing what to say to a goddess or how to ask for Dano's life and safety. The High Songbird was supposed to be addressed by 'holiness', but that was by default too low for the goddess of songbirds, so he said nothing, and froze completely when she laid her hand on his head.

"Call me Lai Lei. May I call you Toka? Maybe we could be friends?"

"Friends?" Tokala thought the world had fallen away quite enough when he'd stepped off the edge of the riverbank. He sat up a bit more, drawing Dano into his lap. It left this huge gapping void in him, quite suddenly, this thought of being friends with his goddess, but he drew Dano up into a sitting

position as well, which gave him a breath to think. Dano was the idealist; Tokala the practical one. Now that he wasn't quite so hysterical, he could summon up some of the courtly polite that Charity had worked so hard to teach him.

She didn't look like a goddess to him. It was the same face, as when she'd answered Dano's song at the end of the University War. Dano had drawn her a few times, put his drawings on the wall in the music room, and this was the same woman, but she wasn't made of light, just of flesh with average brown hair and mixed color eyes. He didn't know her more than he'd just meet her and so he took her just as she seemed.

"Lai Lei, what can you do to fight the demon?"

"To fight Logus? Oh I had it all planned out. You all changed my plans a bit, but he's drawing a lot of strength from Dano, so he thinks he can destroy me and take the ship. I want the energy he's got stored up though, because I can use it to free myself, to make myself a living being, like you and Dano."

Tokala wanted Dano to take hold of his tail in the worst way, as if Dano holding his tail would just make the world all stay in one piece. "What does Logus want with a ship when he can move from place to place at will?"

"He can only move in the network. The network is all planetside under the satellites. He wants to go there," she said, pointing up at what was now a brilliant night sky.

That made no sense at all to Tokala. If a god couldn't go to the Celestial Court any time he wanted, the world was in smaller pieces than he'd thought. "How do I kill him?"

"Is it so easy for you then? If you kill him, your life will go on and sometime Dano will be sad and he'll be angry at you and you'll be in pain sometimes. You will grow old and die. There is really no hope, Tokala. Pain is waiting after every breath."

Tokala reached around and caught his tail, tucking it between his chest and Dano who he held to his chest. "Not old today. Today. Today I want Dano okay, for him to be smiling and holding my tail. I want to love him, all of me runs towards loving him. And I'm just a person, I can only fix one problem at a time. Don't need to know what a planetside is, only need to know how to kill Logus and wake up Dano."

"Do you want children, Tokala?"

One blond eyebrow rose up and his nose twitched. Charity had called it abstract thought, when something jumped from what was now to what was maybe or someday or wildly unreal. When he

wanted to, he moved quickly through abstract concepts. They weren't hard, just not interesting. He wanted Dano awake; not abstract, he wanted him very concrete. He didn't know what to say to that question, did he want children? They might as well have been a type of bon bon for all he could think of that just then.

In one blink of his eyes, the grassy field disappeared and replaced by the field by the pond where they'd met Ming. Tokala decided he was completely sure that he did not like abstract thoughts from gods when he was being chased by a demon.

"What kind of question is that for a mutant like him?" Logus asked, looking very comfortable now as he floated just a little above the ground. "Should not tease people who are about to die. It's not nice."

Tokala's mouth had gone dry. He'd missed something. His plan had only gone so far as to get him into Lai Lei's care; he'd thought she'd solve it from there. His mind scrambled for some other bit of the puzzle he'd forgotten or some other place to run.

Logus smirked. "There is no place to run except into the arms of death. There is no god or goddess, Tokala na Carlyes, just the forgotten tools of men greater than you. There is no love, only the desire for comfort and need to procreate." Logus lifted an elegant hand, a ball of dark gray energy throbbing in it and blew it at Tokala.

Death ought to come quickly, or perhaps it does, but something in the make up of life gives every last moment an extra measure of time. Tokala turned to look at Dano, to caress his face, to apologize for failing him in his heart if not in words. His fingers touched those lips again, soft skin so sweet, and he leaned over to touch his lips to them again.

"No!" Lai Lei yelled, but Tokala wasn't watching her as she jumped up in the way of the gray orb. Logus only laughed, happy to drain her first and Tokala after.

Dano responded to Tokala's kiss, his lips catching Tokala's and his tongue slipping out to taste Tokala, to seek Tokala's tongue. His fingers wrapped around Tokala's tail, his thumb caressing, soothing the soft white fur. Their kiss deepened as Dano sat up, moving to his knees. Tokala got his hand behind Dano's head, holding him to him as their kiss blocked out the battle of the gods and the reach of death and turned the flow of energy back from Logus, making their love and passion a well of gravity. The whole fabric of the artificial world around them spun and broke down, ripping apart and whirl pooling around them.

Logus grabbed at Lai Lei, but she too had turned insubstantial, lighter than air, thinner than abstract reality as she slipped through his fingers to orbit around the love between Dano and Tokala. He screamed in rage, as his own energy and being turned granular, slipping away like the falling sands of time. Behind him, seen by none, stood the god of death. In the form of a slender woman with long black hair in a braid on her shoulder, violet eyes, and an irreverent smirk, she reached out and caught

the last willowy black electric of his being, the snake of his living soul. The rest of the living energy drained quickly out of the relic, the now completely abandoned skeletal ship left by humans long gone. Life moved where it should be, on to whatever the other side may hold for each of them. Death, however, left with what she'd come for, and quite a bit more as well.

## Precious Children

1031, Carlyes Shire

Charity lifted Ming from the wet ground, one arm around her back, feeling drawn to the smaller woman and surprised that the drawing could have any noticeable affect while on what was perhaps the last battlefield. The threat of death usually made things sharper, but not oddly sweeter. As she held the woman on her feet, despite the mud that clung to the sorceress' silk slippers and the edges of her kimono, Charity tried to locate all her family and soliders.

They and the members of Tirson'vay and village watched the river rise up out of its lane. Water clung and sizzled around the egg shape of rainbow which pulled a collective sound of hope and pissed off frustration from the mortals watching.

It hung there for a moment, turning slowly, perhaps giving the three men now climbing up over the bank a chance to get on more solid ground before it exploded, spraying water over the area. The swell of water around it fell back to the river, flowing over the banks and sending the three who'd just got their feet rolling forward. For just the barest of moments, the egg of light stretched out, reshaped into the form of a woman.

The Tirson'vay slowly dropped each to one knee, before the embodiment of the goddess Lai Lei. Arms outstretched, she rotated slowly, surveying the world as if she'd never seen it fully. Music rose from the ground itself, vibrating with the air and sky, the rising sun, welcoming her. She broke apart then, harmonized with the song of Naturile, a million droplets of light splashing out and vaporizing into the air.

Kai looked up from the hole where Ko had gone in search of the Empriatsen Autumn just in time to see the explosion of light. A ball of it seemed to head right for him and he ducked, missing it just barely as it dropped dead away into the hole. Kai dropped to his belly, and called out. "Ko!"

The light seemed to have a mind of it's own and Kai watched with wide open eyes and a stomach gone cold as the ball circled Ko, then hit his twin against the chest, knocking him back just a bit as it

disappeared right into his body. Ko braced himself on the rather slippery surface of dusty metal. The young empriatsen held onto him, his face scrunched up in a look of concern. The next surprise was that Ko's hair was starting to regrow. He didn't pay much attention to that though, as he came forward and lifted Autumn up out of the hole. ::Are you okay,:: Kai asked telepathically as he took hold of Autumn, his hand brushing over his twin's arm.

::I'm okay. What's happened?::

::Lai Lei came up out of the river. Dano and Tokala are back, and,:: Kai set Autumn on his feet, then reached an arm back in for Ko, ::I thought I saw Faile.::

"Faile?" Ko asked out loud, getting a grip on the side of the hole so he could help pull himself back out.

Autumn had taken that moment to run towards Charity. "Aunt Charity!"

She turned, holding the sorceress with one hand, the last of the grim battle mindset let go of her when she saw her nephew running towards her, smiling. She held out her free arm to him and he ran right to her, jumping a bit and she bent her knees, caught and lifted him.

Strife looked up from where he knelt, to find his Empriatsen'na still on her feet, bits of rainbow light caught in her eyelashes, her hair. For the first time, he really wondered if she might be Mayonaka.

Autumn looked over her shoulder, one arm held to his chest as if it were sore, the other pointing at the three men getting back to their feet. "Aunt Charity," Autumn said, pointing more, "Aunt Charity, is that my Papa?"

She took a deep breath, pulling her hand free of Ming to rub Autumn's back.

"No, Autumn," she said, but she was turning around, reluctantly giving up the sport of watching Ko's hair grow.

The sun rose to the west, laying red and orange gold over the still turbulent surface of the river. She saw what she saw, but she processed the details to the side before what she could not believe.

Dano held to a man, a boy? Who stood between he and Tokala. Tokala, all wet, tail out straight and shivering as if it could shake the water from itself by will alone.

Tokala's mare lay between them and where she stood. These two and the one she couldn't look at just

yet went to the struggling mare as it tried to rise from the soggy ground with at least one broken foreleg.

Strife looked up from where he knelt, to find his Empriatsen'na still on her feet, bits of rainbow light caught in her eyelashes, her hair. For the first time, he really considered that she might be Mayonaka. Years seemed to flow off of her, and she was the girl he first met when he was little more than a school boy on vacation. His eyes followed her to where she stared without really looking. A boy, young as she was when he'd met her, who looked too much like her, knelt by the struggling horse, helping Tokala as Dano sang it's legs whole.

There, in the outfit he'd wed Leticia in, white pants soaked with river water, and golden brocade jacket no better off, shoulder length red pony tail laying on his shoulder, and not a day older than he'd been when last she saw him, stood her twin, Faile Everett Soresun, Empriatsen of Equilobos. Stunned, Charity let Autumn down, her face twitching, trying to smile, trying to remember to breath.

He ran towards her then, arms out and she took a step back, somehow thinking that to be touched by him would end the world, and yet he caught hold of her, wrapping his arms around her, soaking her with river water that was totally real and recently snow. "Charity!" he yelled. "Charity!"

She looked down at him, blinking, feeling old and scared and so far from the child she'd been when last she'd seen him, but he was still the same, still just as she'd known him, though perhaps stronger, smiling without the fear and shadow over that had been. Acting Empriat for nearly a decade and she stood there, tears filling her eyes, numb arms slowly going around him, as her mouth opened and closed seeking some kind of words. "Faile? Faile?"

"Papa!" Autumn had no trouble accepting. It was the first time he'd said it and he held no reserve back. "Papa!" And then the boy latched onto Faile, one arm around his waist, tugging at his shirt. "Papa!"

Now Faile stepped back, one hand on the side of his son's face; a son who stood better than half his height.

"This is Autumn, your son. I've watched over him for you." Tears washed her face easily now, as if they could cut through the build up of the years, take her back to the girl she was when he'd died, take away the layers of decisions and time. "He is everything to be proud of. Where have you been?"

Faile ran his fingers through Autumn's hair, tilting the boy's head back to look in his face, and impulsively leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "You look like your mother!"

Charity's hand snapped out and smacked her twin. "He's not!" And then she laughed, shocked at how things come full circle.

In the distance, Dano had Tokala's mare on her feet again and barely hidden behind the mare's neck, Tokala was finally kissing Dano. At least some things were going as planned!

She reached out and combed her fingers into Faile's hair, pulling him close. "Welcome back, brat. Are you okay?"

Faile took a deep breath, one arm around Autumn, and grinned. "Yeah, breathing is very nice."

The whole exchange had not taken very long, longer to get there, more emotional, but short in actual time. She clutched him to her again, holding him, not caring that she was taller now or how touched by time she was. "Don't leave me again, Faile! Don't ever go again!"

And then someone noticed and pointed sky ward... in the lightening sky, the larger moon was giving birth to a small light that pressed forward, enough that it was impossible to deny. From their knees to staring at the sky, awe took them again as they all understood... The Throne was correct. The little moon returned. The Goddess Lai Lei had blessed them with the return of the little moon.

Cheers washed the area in sound, a rainbow of sound from housebond's cheers and children's cries to the jubilation of warriors and farmers splashed a rainbow of sound that covered their world with celebration. It quickly traveled, as Kai sang the news to the elves, and they sang it on, confirming, celebrating. Mud splattered and people fell and rolled and laughed and when Charity checked on Dano and Tokala, they were still kissing, so she thought the world was as perfect as it could get!

"Charity," Faile asked, squeezing her arm lightly. "Where's Papa?"

She closed her eyes then, tight, and blocked everything out for a breath, then reached down to take his hand. "I will show you."

Within the Tower ~

At first it was simply an awareness of his breath, cooling his mouth and throat, lifting his chest, warm over his lips as he exhaled. He brought a hand up to his mouth and found stubble, and then, as his fingers moved over his face, a thinness that denied the face to be his own. He must have fallen, knocked himself unconscious. The last thing he remembered was Ixsander raising his hand to throw a ball of magic energy, and Strife tackling him, hitting the ground, his horse screaming, Strife's son calling out for him, and then there was nothing, just blank. A shudder when through his shoulders, and he knew it was bad.

"Jared," a woman called, his name almost a song, "Oh Jared, how I have missed you so. Take of my

strength, for all that you have lost."

Before her lips touched his, he knew her. Vanasu. The kiss was light, chaste as thunderstorms could just edge the horizon. The weakness in his body drained away and only then was he aware of it. Her fingers brushed over his hair, combing the graying strands away from his face. "Empriat Jared fear nothing, my love, for you have slept with Death already and kept the heart of your love true. Your Elery awaits you, but not yet. Live now, this life. For a heart such as yours will teach life to all those it touches, and Death distains to touch those who have not fully lived."

"Elle!" he called out, sitting up straight in the bed, eyes open, but seeing his wife, her smile and laughter, the sunlight in her hair and tears flooded his eyes and down his cheeks. He knew then where he'd been for such a time, so long, so many years and Elle would wait for him again.

Vision blurred, he flung the blankets off of himself, and stood, rolling shoulders that had lost no muscle tone, no mobility in all the time that he had slept. He did not know this place where he was though. Quickly he slipped the boots by the bed onto his feet and moved to the window, which had no glass, but only simple shutters painted with the blue sky and clouds. He opened these, holding them open, one with each arm and embraced the still winter air.

Below, just coming through the main gate on foot were his red headed twins, Elery's children, both of them, and a third, a smaller boy. He watched them for a moment, tears flowing gently. His vision was as good as it ever had been and he was sure. Charity, a warrior Charity, and Faile, just as he remembered, right down to the clothes, though those were now mud and water ruined.

The sevril he'd betrothed his daughter to walked next to her, taller than she by quite a bit, with soaked white hair and that tail still, as straight as it could get and be pointed down, the tail of an angry cat. Though next to him, on the back of a bay horse who pranced as if it had just had its legs reknit, rode his other son, his secret son, who looked so like his mother, the Lady Vanasu. Long black hair lay around the horse's back, and he held onto the sevril's hand, smiling and laughing.

Both of his adopted sons, the elvish twins Kai and Ko were right behind Charity and Faile, the Emprial Quad restored, and they were laughing as well, holding tightly to each other and to Faile, who seemed so young compared to his siblings. The boy, also holding to Faile's hand, looking up at him adoringly, that must be Autumn, Jared decided. So it had been... ten, twelve winters for his sleep, and he looked up then, to see, to see if Charity had been right... and in the morning sky, so dark yet, with just the rising sun breaking the black to morning twilight.. there were two moons. Somewhere in the world, Mayonaka and Lunatay were together again, the cycle complete.

Looking again at his precious children, he saw the dark haired woman for the first time, as she stepped around his daughter, to avoid the droppings the horse was now leaving. Beautiful woman, odd and foreign, just what he would have thought Lunatay would be. Which meant he'd been right, years ago, in the Elery's tower. His daughter was Mayonaka.



He cleared his throat and called, waving, so that they stopped half way between the main hall and the gate. Charity stopped, stopped so that Kai walked right into her and there she stood, looking up at the smiling man waving at her. He could see so much clearer now, the lines of battle and hardness in her, the point of her sword that stood up over her left shoulder and the two handles of daggers at her hips. Death had given him such a gift, this chance to see his children, and he understood what she'd meant about those that needed to be touched by life. "Charity! Faile! Kai! Ko! Autumn?" he paused and hesitated as the dark haired man slipped from the horse and behind his blond friend. "Dano! Dano is my son! Come to me, my children! And bring some tea and cake!"

Faile was the first to break for the stairs, to run for the arms of his father. Autumn followed him easily, and Kai and Ko, telling themselves that responsible parties should be there. Charity held her ground still, feeling ashamed almost to face her father now, to account for the things she'd done. So it was Tokala, who put his arm around Dano and coaxed him around to the front, and who laid a respectful hand on Charity's shoulder. "Take your brother to your father. Dano, go, remember. He was always kind. Charity, show him."

He put Dano's hand in Charity's and they eyed each other for a moment, but then her need to be responsible won out and Dano's need to support gave in and together, they went to see the Empriat.

Tokala stood there in the yard, only to have his own father lay a muscular arm around his shoulders. "Damn fine prince they made you into, son."

He smiled, accepted. It was just that he and Dano were first called 'son' on the same day. "Thank you, Father."

"Come on then! Get out of those wet clothes, and get some dry clothes put together for Dano and Faile. Wasn't he dead? Where were you when you went off the river?"

Tokala turned to his mother, kissed her forehead. "I love you, Mama, but stories will be told so many times today. May I please tell you when I can do it properly?" He was very careful when he spoke to use the full and courtly forms, to speak as cleanly and sweetly as he could, as his mother had always wished for him to do.

"I love you too, Toka. Go. Dress."

And he did.

That Evening ~

The scent of roasting pig, warm ale, fresh bread, compotes of mulled fruit still scented the air. Nearly all the 576 households had arrived at Carlyes and with each new family arriving there was more celebration, more food served and put out to cook. From the top of Dano's Tower, where Dano and Tokala sat on the wall watching, the fire pits glowed brightly.

The moons, the larger yellow, and smaller which glowed slightly blue, hung directly over head now. Dano leaned back against Tokala's chest, looking up at the moons, content with their beauty and the warmth of Tokala's body against his, with the peace of no thinking about all the things which had changed today.

Some of the things that had happened seemed quite important, but he couldn't really tell quite how now. He'd taken a pledge to serve Lai Lei, but she was mostly pretty nonsense and rainbow light. He was told that she'd exploded up out of the river, but he hadn't seen so much as a flicker of her since she'd dumped the three of them in the river. He was quite okay with that, really.

Faile was living again too. That was another thing he was quite okay with. The look of shock on Charity's face alone was quite worth it. He'd never wanted to send his friend.

The high songbird Miry had shown up from Equilobos City at some point as well, listened to all the events of the day and some Emprial secrets and promptly taken to Dano's music room to mediate. Faile had said that he was sulking because knowing that Dano was an acknowledged Emprial Songbird, he now had to pass the title of High Songbird to the younger songbird. That was about when Dano had faded up to his hide out on the top of the tower, by the dovery. He didn't want to be High Songbird.

It had just become okay for he and Tokala to become lovers, so being the leader of a celibate organization did not appeal to him at all. There was also that he'd just gotten a father, a father of his own, and he remembered Jared Soresun, remembered being held his arms and eating honey covered cookies with him. Jared had saved Tokala's tail and now the whole betrothal made much more sense. The return of the Empriat meant more to Dano than a moon he'd never seen before.

Tokala had followed him up to the top of the tower shortly after he'd hidden there. Tokala, now he looked like an Empriat, a member of the Emprial household with fine blond hair and tailored brocade vest, soft beige leather pants, and that beautiful tail wrapped politely around his leg. They really hadn't had time to talk, what with Dano's hair being on fire, then them falling through a magic gate and the whole attack by that winged monster. Sunrise to sunset, the day had slipped by with the drama of Dano being presented to his father, and that whole ceremony he'd been shoved through where Charity acknowledged him and transferred the betrothal to him.

Dano had said this would be the night, but when Tokala had come through the door to the top of the tower, stood there, quiet and beautiful, Dano hadn't known what to say. He'd had it all planned out, how

to start seducing his friend, but things were so different now.

He'd turned, swinging his legs over the inside of the wall, one arm on the archer's hide beside him. Then they'd just watched each other for a few minutes. Dano scratched his head, lifting a curtain of black hair and shaking it as he scratched, then smoothed it out, looking rather ashamed. "Did you know?" He asked about his parentage.

"After I was in Equilobos for a while, I knew. Portraits of Jared are on the wall, and you look like him. It was the only thing that made sense, really. After all, who was I to be betrothed to the House of Soresun?"

Dano jumped to his feet, eyebrows dipping down as he grimaced. "You are brilliant and beautiful and there is every reason for you to be betrothed to the house of anyone that has any need for the beauty of a brave and kind heart!"

"Poet." Tokala said with a smile, as he closed the door and dropped a blanket on the stone floor. "You feel that way because you are in love with me. It is so, is it not? That you are attracted to me?"

Dano blushed then, biting his lip and looking just about anywhere, except his friend. "You kissed me too, didn't you? Were you disappointed?"

Away from everyone else, Tokala's voice served him well, resonate tenor, with just the slightest rumble at the end of some words. "Not in the least, Dano. Kissing you brought my soul out as the sun rises. Would you like it if I kissed you again?"

"Oh yes, I'd like that very much," blushing even brighter now, cranberry bright color on pale cheeks, silky midnight hair brushing against their heat as he held his head up. "I'd like more than just kisses, Tokala."

"Does that mean your hair is going to catch on fire again?" Tokala teased, crossing to his friend, both hands out. "If it does, I'm not letting go. It'll catch me on fire too."

With a slight tremble in his voice, Dano whispered, "I'd like to catch you on fire."

Tokala nodded, and leaned down to meet Dano's lips as he lifted the shorter man's chin with the side of his fingers. The kiss, expected and not rushed this time danced passionate fire between them.

It was well over an hour later, when they were sitting again on the wall, Dano leaning back against Tokala. "We'll go to Equilobos?"

"Most likely. You'll like it. Very interesting." Tokala kissed Dano's ear, then rested his chin on his shoulder.

"I don't know what Lai Lei will want from me, what price she'll ask."

Tokala leaned his head closer to Dano. "She lives on love, Dano. So much I have learned in Eqilobos. We'll create so much of it, that she will sleep in beautiful dreams, wherever it is that she's laid down."

"I can work with that," Dano replied, and turned to kiss Tokala's cheek.

Owari ~

Watch for "Lai Lei's Price" Coming in 2003

## **Vocabulary**

Empriat ~ the person who inherited the throne of the empire

Empriatfay ~ the legal consort of the Empriatat

Empriatsen ~ a child of the Empriat

Empriatsen'na ~ heir apparent

High Songbird ~ Songbird chosen by the Empriatfay

Songbird ~ one given the gift of music from the gods, to be the voice of the Celestial Court and bring fertility and healing to the land and people

Shirelon ~ Person holding power in a Shire

Shirelonfait ~ the legal consort of the Shirelon

Shirelonsen ~ Child of the Shirelon

Shirekin – a free person who lives in a shire

Bondkin - a person who is bound to the land, not free to leave with the Shire Lord's permission

Emperialkin – A Shire lord

Bond - husband or wife