

Allegro

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D. Moonfire

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All characters, events, and locations are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons, past, present, and future is coincidental and highly unlikely.

This novel contains scenes where the primary character and others experience bullying, fire, physical assault, verbal abuse, verbal assault, and violence. There are also scenes where secondary characters experience depression and swearing. There are off-page references to cancer, divorce, and named character death. There is no sexual assault.

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This novel is dedicated to
Lindsey Stirling. *Roundtable
Rival* has been haunting me for
many years and this is the best
way I can show my appreciation
for your inspiration.

Also for Gael Baudino for the
happy memories *Glossomar Axe*
brought me during the rough
periods of my youth.

Lorban

This novel is set in the Kormar countryside where the native language is Lorban. This is notionally translated into English, but there are certain quirks of the language that stand being called out.

- Lorban is roughly based on a casual form of Lojban.
- Names rarely start or end with vowels and native speakers have trouble with Miwāfu vowel endings.
- Lorban is accentless which causes trouble with Miwāfu array of tones.
- The letter “c” is soft and always pronounced as “sh” in “shape.”

Lorban has no capital letters, they are added to satisfy English conventions.

Chapter 1

Always Moving

For eight generations, the Sterlig Family crafted some of the most treasured string instruments throughout Gepaul.

—*History of Traditional Music*

Linsan bounced on her family's new couch. With a flip of her green skirt, she did a somersault along the cushions before flopping against the opposite arm. The couch creaked from the impact but she didn't care. With a grin, she pushed herself over the edge until her head dangled over the blue-and-white patterned rug below.

In her mind's eye, she saw white snakes crawling around the blue waters and slowly reached out to catch one of them before it escaped.

Her fingers bumped against the short hairs of the rug. Stretching further along the arm of the couch, she tried to grab more.

"Are you still alive over there?"

She peeked up past the back of the couch and into her father's brightly lit workroom. He sat in his customary chair behind a heavy wooden table while peering down at the disassembled parts of his latest work. His lenses reflected

the light from the chandelier above him; he always put them up to his forehead whenever he worked on small details.

Linsan took a deep breath, taking in the smells of sawdust and stain. It was a comforting scent, like the flowers inside her mother's pillows and the little bottle of perfume her parents saved for special occasions.

"Did you die?" he asked.

She giggled. "No! I'm right here!"

"You weren't crashing around. I wasn't sure. I always heard that if a four-year-old girl ever stopped screaming, she was either sleeping or dead."

She rolled her body up the arm of the couch and over the back until she was bent over it. One bare foot toyed with the edge of the couch cushion as she watched her father pull out one of his delicate carving tools and hold it over the wooden board on the table.

Lifting her other foot, she waved it. "See? I'm not dead! And I'm five, Daddy! You know that. I'm five and not dead!"

"Oh, good, I was worried there for a moment," he said with a smile. His eyes never left the wood as he carved out a little curl of red. His fingers flexed for a moment before he cut another curl to match the first. Each one was smaller than the ridge of her fingernail.

He paused for a moment before he wiped the side of his cheek. Sawdust clung to his beard but quickly disappeared among the auburn and gray hairs.

"What are you working on, Daddy?"

"Just a special violin for an old friend."

"Why?"

"Because she's getting married to the love of her life."

"Why?" Linsan kicked her feet and stretched out to grab a pillow.

His smile grew broader. "Because she found someone wonderful."

She grinned. "Why?"

"Because if I don't finish this, I'm going to have to eat you instead. I heard four... no, five-year-old girls are delicious."

Rolling over, she shook her head. "No, you aren't going to eat me! Mommy would yell at you. And then you'll get spanked."

Her father had to lift his carving tool as he snorted with amusement. The tip glinted in the lights.

From behind her, her mother spoke up. "Why am I yelling at Daddy?"

Linsan spun around. "Mommy!"

She launched herself off the couch, her bare feet hitting the rug before she remembered the imaginary snakes. With a shriek, she stumbled forward while trying to step over the snakes. "Snakes! Snakes everywhere!"

Her mother dropped the cloth bags in her hand and caught her. Groceries poured out across the floor.

Linsan pressed her cheek against her mother's. The scent of her mother's perfume surrounded her in a cloud. She must have picked up food on the way from her latest show. She turned and pointed to the patterns near the middle of the rug. "There are snakes in the rug," she whispered dramatically.

"Oh no, did Daddy get rid of them?"

"He's working on Palisis."

Her mother frowned as she glanced at Linsan's father, her loose curls rolling off her shoulder. "Palisis? Who's that?"

From the other room, her father grunted.

Linsan beamed. "I named his violin. It looked like a Palisis."

There was a brief silence.

“That’s a pretty good name, I like it. Marin will love it.”

“Who is Marin?” asked Linsan.

“Marin was daddy’s first wife. That’s who the violin is for. She’s getting married to mommy’s best friend from when she was a little girl.”

She kissed Linsan on the top of her head before lowering her head to speak the voice she used for her dramatic parts. Her mouth opened in mock surprise and shock. “Now, if daddy is trapped by the snakes, that means we have to rescue him. How do we do that?”

Linsan bounced, her smile growing broader. Her auburn hair fluttered everywhere as she spun around a few times. “We dance! They can’t bite us if we keep moving!”

Another kiss. “That’s right! Snakes can’t bite us if we’re dancing.” She stood up and took Linsan’s hands to pull her into a lively jig to music that no one could hear.

Before long, they were spinning in the living room. Linsan loved when her mother lifted her hand because that meant she got to twirl rapidly. The sweeping arm movements told her she was allowed to spin away knowing her mother would pull her back. She loved each time she could kick off the ground and skim the couch with her toes before being pulled back into her mother’s embrace.

There was the brief hum of a fiddle and then a cheery tune filled the room. In the middle of a twirl, Linsan peered over the couch to see that her father had abandoned his work and picked up Katsaril, an old fiddle Linsan had named when she was three.

With the music no longer imaginary and the snakes forgotten, Linsan danced happily in the living room with her mother while her father played.

As far as she was concerned, that would never change.

Chapter 2

Early Lessons

Much of the Sterlig fame comes from the distinctive wood harvested from the family-owned valley near the city of Penesol.

—History of Traditional Music

Linsan sat on her father's work chair in the center of the living room. Her bare feet dug into the faded blue rug as she struggled to sit with her back straight. She took a deep breath and worked the rest of her violin back under her chin.

"Now, hold it out to the side like this," her father said. He sat on their worn couch with one of his own violins under his chin. His arm held out at a comfortable angle, elbow bent and the neck of the instrument as solid as the ground beneath their feet.

After four years, the couch was threadbare and worn. She still remembered how springy it was when they had first gotten it. But years of abuse had left it flattened and barely comfortable.

"Pay attention just a little longer. Hold it like this."

She concentrated on her position. Her arm shook with the effort to keep her violin's neck up. Despite watching her

father play instruments her entire life, she didn't realize how hard it was to keep everything together at the same time to play even a single note. She envied how comfortable he looked perched up on the couch.

"Don't focus too much on me. Just look at my bow. Bring it up to the violin like I'm doing and rest it right on the strings."

The bow quivered as she tried to move it gracefully like her father. The hairs bounced against the tight strings. She managed to stop it from jumping, but when she accidentally drew the bow down too fast, the screech rattled her teeth.

Linsan cringed and yanked the bow away. Tears blurred her vision. "I can't get it!" she wailed.

"It's okay. It's okay." He held up his bow. "Everyone gets those notes. It happens all the time."

"You don't!" She struggled to keep her tears from falling.

"Well, Honey, I'm forty-one and have been playing for thirty-seven years. You are nine and have been trying for almost two days. Of course I'm going to make fewer mistakes. You'll get better, but we all have to make the sour notes first. It's required."

"Mommy is going to be here in three days. I'll never be able to play this in time."

He slid off the couch and onto his knees. A groan escaped his lips as he crawled over to the chair next to her and then used it to prop himself back onto his knees. "Listen. You've never wanted to play the violin before. You may know a little piano and the pipe, but string instruments are a very different creature than those two. They require patience."

Linsan stared at her father. On his knees, he was only a few inches shorter than her. "But, she'll love if I can play this, right?" It was her idea as a present when her mother

came home. Though, at the time, she was convinced it would only take minutes to gain her father's mastery.

He hugged her firmly. "And I'm so proud of you thinking about it. But a nine-year-old girl isn't going to pick this up in minutes. It takes time."

"What if I make a mistake?"

"Your mother will never hear it."

"Why?"

"Because she is going to be so happy just to hear you play. Besides, I was terrible when I started. My brother used to say that I woke the dead when I was learning how to play the fiddle. It was his joke that everyone knew it was noon because they could hear me clear at Oak Street."

She sniffed and struggled to grin. "That's like a mile away."

"Three blocks and you know that. You walk further than that to visit your friends every week. I just never taught you..." His voice trailed off. "You know what? Why don't we think about it like dancing? You can pick up your mother's moves in only a few short hours."

"Those are easy."

"Yes because you've been bouncing, rolling, and twirling in this house since you were five and I was carving Palisis."

"That was forever ago."

He chuckled. "It was only four, Honey."

Palisis. She remembered when her father's assistant, Dukan, had come to the house to package the violin to be shipped out. There was so much silk and velvet after he finished crafting a custom case for the violin that he made her a small bear with the remains. She still had a ribbon of the deep purple material in her bedroom and the bear on a shelf.

She looked up to see the sad look in her father's eyes. Something had happened and the violin came back a few

years later. Her father had put it up in the attic and never said another word. "Daddy?"

He looked up and shook his head. "No, let's try this. Learning to play is just like learning a new dance. You start with just one movement, a foot tap."

"What about my left hand?"

"Just hold the neck for now. I'll show you fingering later."

Her father reached up and wrapped his fingers gently around hers. With a firm hand, he adjusted her grip on her bow and brought the neck to a slightly different angle. When he set the bow down on the strings, there wasn't even a hint of noise.

He smiled and drew the bow down. The tone was strong but slightly off. He adjusted and tried again, pulling the bow across and creating a single clear note. "That foot tap is like playing one note. We start by getting good at that one."

With his help, she drew the hairs of the bow along the strings. There was screeching but he helped her find the right speed and the tension needed in her hand. "Just keep playing, one note then another. One more."

While concentrating, she tapped her foot in time with the tone. The feel of the rug on her bare toes helped her focus as she drew the bow back and forth until her fingers burned but the tones were clear.

Her father kissed her cheek. "There you go! Now, ready for the next step."

Linsan pictured the last dance her mother taught her, the one she was no doubt using right at that moment for tonight's performance. "When I slide my foot to the right and step forward."

"I guess. While playing, the next step is this note." He played the two notes repeatedly. "So, try it again. Back and forth, moving in steady strokes."

Furrowing her brow in concentration, she struggled to find the right way of getting her body to listen. Her father's guidance made it easier. Frustrated, she used her bare foot to mimic the maneuver, working her toes along the carpet. It didn't take her long until she found a comfortable balance of music and movement.

"There you go. Now put the two together."

She did, moving her foot and the bow in tandem to chain the two notes.

"And again."

"Again."

It took her two measures before she realized what song he was teaching her. She giggled. It was one of her favorites, *My Ass for a Glass of Milk*.

His smile almost lit up the room. It caused the skin around his eyes to wrinkle and his beard to stick out slightly. "Figured it out?"

"Mommy hates this song."

"Well, it is rude and you were singing it quite loudly in the middle of church. The pastor's scowl matched your mother's. Neither of them are here though and I figured you'd be motivated to learn." He gave her a playful wink. "I bet you can tell what the next note is going to be."

"Yeah," Linsan said with a giggle. She played the first eight notes again and followed by the next one. To her surprise and relief, there wasn't a single screech.

"Good girl!"

"I did it!" She dropped her violin to hug her father.

His eyes widened as he caught it but then lost his balance when she pushed him back. "Careful!" he said before he landed on his rear.

"Sorry!" She was't.

He hugged her tightly. "I'm so proud of you!"

Someone pounded on the front door.

Both of them jumped in surprise.

Her father frowned as he scrambled to his feet. His brown eyes turned toward the dark window. "It's really late, who would be coming at this hour?"

"Daddy?"

"Practice those nine notes. I'll answer the door." He brushed his hips off before heading out of the room.

She looked curiously for a moment and then straightened her violin and took a deep breath.

The first note was a screech.

Linsan winced and the tears threatened to come back, but she pushed the fear aside and tried again. When she heard the clear note, she let out a nervous giggle and continued playing.

"Lin! Get your shoes on!"

She jumped. This time, she set down the violin and bow. "Daddy?"

In the entry hall, her father was speaking to Dukan. The younger man had dark black hair and a short beard that stretched up both sides of his cheeks. Unlike her father's pale skin, Dukan had a tan from the hours outside.

Both of them had serious expressions and she cringed at her father's frown.

"Are you sure, Sian?" asked Dukan. He didn't look at Linsan.

"I don't have time to find someone to watch her!" Her father's voice was sharp and tense. It sounded like when he was furious at someone.

Linsan cringed.

"It's a fire."

"She's nine and her mother is out of town. We aren't going to get too close, but she comes with me."

"I only brought two horses."

“She can ride with me.” Her father straightened, his tone indicating that he had made a decision.

Dukan wiped his face and nodded.

Sian turned and knelt down in front of his daughter. “Get your shoes on. Something is wrong at the workshop and Daddy needs to be there.”

She looked down at her nightgown.

“Grab your bathrobe. I’m sorry, but this is important and I don’t have a lot of time. Please? For me? Don’t ask questions, just do it.”

Minutes later, she was sitting in the saddle of a spirited horse and cradled by her father’s arms and legs. She clutched the pommel with one hand and the shirt gather at her father’s elbow with the other.

Her father held his arm over her chest to hold her in place as they raced through the dark. The only light was a lantern that Dukan held up to lit the way.

As the crisp air of fall rushed past them, she shivered and held herself tight against her father.

He looked nervous, his face pale and his grip tighter than she expected. They were moving too fast for her to ask questions but she knew exactly where they were going, to the large building that housed most of the family’s workshop with the bulk of the wood working tools, drying racks, and half-finished commissioned instruments.

The half hour trip took them through a few valleys to a small woods nestled between two mountains. That was their family forest, the source of the wood that made her father’s violins and the unique sound that came from the instruments he crafted.

There was a fire. She saw the glow of orange two valleys away and smelled it in the next. The stench of burning wood flooded her nostrils, choking her.

Sian's grip tightened. She thought she heard him whisper a prayer to the Divine Couple.

"Daddy?"

He didn't answer.

They came up to the familiar ridge that marked the border of their family lands. The bright orange lit up the dark, billowing clouds that rose up over the burning trees.

Sian yanked on the reins.

The horse reared.

Linsan let out a cry as she felt dizzy. Her hands tightened on the pommel until her knuckles turned white.

Her father sobbed as he released the reins. "No, by the Couple, no. Not that."

She peered over the horse's head.

The workshop was engulfed in fire. A rainbow of colors burst out of the two-story structure. Jets of flames blew out of the windows, spraying color and heat in all directions.

Behind the workshop, the private forest her family owned burned. Ancient trees popped and hissed as the flames danced among the shriveled branches and burning leaves. Waves of heat, even from hundreds of feet away, beat against her face.

"Where is the Couple-damned fire brigade!?" screamed her father. "The entire valley is on fire!"

Dukan started to get off his horse. He looked around in shock. "I-I don't know. I summoned them before I came for you. They should be here."

"Well, they aren't! This is my life!" Tears glinted in her father's eyes as he gestured angrily at the burning workshop. "There isn't anyone here!"

"I'll get them!" Dukan slipped back into place and spun his horse around. "I'll find out what happened."

He kicked his horse to get it moving and the brown equine sprinted back into the darkness, lit up only by the lantern in his hand.

Sian half-slid, half-fell from his horse. His arms were tight on Linsan, guiding her to the rocky ground before he released her. He stepped forward.

The right side of the workshop collapsed.

"No," he screamed in a voice that felt like the heavens had split open and cried. It was a sound she had never heard her father make before and it terrified her.

He staggered forward.

Linsan saw that he was going into the workshop. He was going to leave her alone in the heat of the fire. "Daddy!"

Sian turned, his face sparkling with tears. "Just stay there, Honey. I have to..." He turned and let out a sob. "My life is in there. My grandparents planted those trees, my father built that shop."

"Daddy, I'm scared."

He took another step then stopped. His boots crunched on the rocks underneath him.

"Daddy!" she said, pleading with everything she could. He couldn't go into the fire, he couldn't leave her alone.

Sian looked at the flames and back again. His eyes shimmered and it looked like he was being torn in two. Then, he turned and staggered back to her. Dropping to his knees, he pulled her into a tight hug.

She held him tightly, unsure what to do. There were tears in her own eyes, produced by the smoke that wafted over her and the sorrow she saw in her father's gaze.

He sobbed, the inhuman sound ripping from his throat as he held her tightly.

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Chapter 3

Home Early

No one understands the mystical connection formed during that first note played by a musician on a new instrument.

—*Tears of the Broken Harp* (Act 2, Scene 8)

The rain hammered down on Linsan's wide-brimmed hat. The force was enough to create a stream of water pouring down her back. Her soaked hair and backpack weighed down on her shoulders after her half hour walk from school.

When her fourteenth birthday was rained out, she wasn't expecting it to keep raining for a week. She was already feeling anxious because she wasn't able to visit the family's valley because of a rain-out road. She had been visiting it almost daily for five years ever since she started only a few months after the fire. At first, it was her parents visiting the ruins but now it was just herself going every day after school.

Dragging her thoughts back to the present, she opened the front door, a blast of warmth brought the smells of her mother's perfume and the familiar scents of their century-old home.

Slipping her hat off, Linsan stepped across the threshold. With a hard flick, she threw the water off the brim before bringing it inside and tossing it on a low shelf near the shoes. Her soaked coat and boots followed after that. "I'm home, Daddy!"

She wasn't expecting an answer. Looking around, she saw a pair of boxes at the foot of the stairs. Inside were stacks of dusty books. She picked up the first one, *History of Traditional Music*. It was a third edition. She knew her father had just gotten the fifth edition a few weeks ago. Peering inside, she saw volumes on theories of song writing and more history books.

With a sigh, she set the book back into the box. Looking around, she considered her options. Her father would be in his study. With a little spin, she twirled her way down the narrow hallway to the living room and peered inside.

Her father's office was on the other side of the faded rug. There used to be a couch there, but a few too many leaps from one end to the other had destroyed it and they had to get rid of it a few years ago. In their place, four padded library chairs were arranged in a semicircle facing the old fireplace.

Sian sat with his back to her. His shoulders were hunched over his desk. The four old magical lanterns lit up the cramped room. The light shone on the stacks of newspapers, essays, and books that surrounded him. Even from the next room over, she could hear the slow but steady click of his new typewriter. It was the only major purchase he had made since the fire and even then he fretted about the expense for months.

She padded across the living room and came up to his side. Resting one hand on his shoulder, she leaned over to kiss his cheek. "I'm home."

He paused, his trembling hands lifting off the ivory keys of his typewriter. Instead of looking at her, he glanced at the window. "You're early, usually you don't come home until night."

"It's raining and the road is still out."

He looked again and then made a low grunt. "That explains why my joints hurt. Did you go out and check?"

"Of course."

Sian finally turned to her and smiled. "Rain isn't usually this bad..." The words faded from his lips and a sad look darkened his gaze. He sighed. "I need to work for another hour or so, can you entertain yourself?"

Linsan kissed her father's cheek again. "Any news from Mother?"

"Any minute now. She was heading out of Canton at sunrise." His voice sounded wistful for a moment but then he glanced at the papers and the joy faded.

She grinned. "That means you are taking those boxes into the attic before she notices? You know she hates seeing clutter after traveling all day."

Sian looked at the pages. "I need to have eight more pages written before the courier is here. That's on the hour, um... about forty minutes?"

The silent request hovered between them for a moment.

"I'll put them away, Daddy. You just finish your column."

"Thank you, Lin."

Linsan patted him on the shoulder and felt a moment of sadness as he returned to his work. She couldn't remember the last time he had smiled. It had been weeks for sure, maybe months. She sighed and looked at the plain walls of his office and tried to remember what it looked like years ago when it still had his tools and projects on shelves.

She sighed and patted his shoulder again before heading to the stairs and regarding the boxes. The second was

smaller. She opened it and peered inside. It contained her father's old music sheets, the songs that he had written. The pages were crinkled and old; he hadn't penned a song since the fire. Idly, she flipped through the pages and remembered how he would write and play while she bounced around the room.

It was a different life for both of them.

Linsan grabbed the boxes and hefted them. Fortunately, they weren't too heavy and she managed to stagger up the stairs to the second floor and over to the hall where the chain for the attic dangled from the ceiling.

By the time she managed to get the boxes up the ladder and into the attic, she was sweating from the effort. She stopped to peer around at the tightly-packed room. There were chests and boxes everywhere, all arranged into neat piles.

She took a deep breath.

When she caught a familiar smell, she froze. Underneath the dust and mold, there was a hint of wood stain and sawdust. It had been years since she smelled that.

Curious, she sniffed and circled the empty space until she found where the smells were stronger. The sharp scent, even after years of storage, brought back a rush of memories and she could almost picture her father's workshop before it had been stripped down.

A desperate need rose up and she grabbed the boxes and pulled them aside to try find the source. She peered into boxes as she did, a swarm of fond memories crashing into her thoughts as she recognized paintings that had been mounted on the walls. One of them was of Sian, her mother, and herself. It was a portrait set in front of the forest with him playing his violin as she and her mother danced around him.

Linsan remembered that day. She rubbed her eyes as she stroked her finger along her parent's faces. They were both smiling in that picture. In the last few months, the joy had faded from both of their eyes and she could tell her mother had to force her expression.

The next box had a pile of scorched instruments in it. The stench of burning wood clung to the box, seeping out in memories that darkened the cramped attic. She looked through them for a moment before pushing it aside.

Then she found what she was looking for. A heavy wooden toolbox. She saw down in front of it. With a trembling hand, she worked the rusted latches open and swung the top aside.

A dozen carving tools all lined up neatly as if they were about to be used in only a few minutes. Each one still shone with a thin layer of oil and only a few had spots of rust along the blades. The smell of wood stains rose around her. The familiar scents brought a tear running down her cheeks.

She couldn't remember when her father had put them away. She was ten when she came into his workshop to find the table swept clean and everything put away. The half-built instruments were also gone. It was as if he had given up overnight.

Wiping the tear from her face, she ran her fingers along his tools. He was always so happy when he was working with wood. She loved to dance and bounce as he spoke from his table. Nothing would let her forget the smell of wood stain or the dust that drifted down as he sanded away some tiny imperfection.

The other changes were less obvious. The fire had destroyed their family's reputation. It wasn't that her father couldn't create more instruments, but people stopped ordering new ones as he was forced to cancel the commissions

he had started. Without the unique woods that went into each one, the sounds that made her family famous were irrevocably lost. Without that, he couldn't compete with the cheaper craftsmen who had built factories to produce cheap sounds.

Linsan sighed and shook her head sadly. She closed the lid to the tools and pushed the box aside. She looked around with bleary eyes and a sob caught in her throat. She had been visiting the burnt remains of the workshop and the valley for years without a problem, but seeing the boxes was too much.

She started to push herself to her knees then she noticed a polished wooden box behind everything else. With tears in her eyes, she grabbed it and pulled it into her lap. It was light, not more than ten pounds. She didn't recognize it but their family crest had been carved into the top. Underneath it was a single name: Marin.

"Who is that?" Linsan ran her fingers along the three latches of the box. Curiosity won quickly and she opened it up and peeked inside.

On top was a couple sheets of music for a song she had never heard before, *Safe Adventures, Our Departed Loves*. She picked it up curiously and saw her father's name. But before she read a few notes, she spotted a violin nestled into the velvet indentions of the case.

It was a beautiful instrument. Untouched by dust and flame, it shone even in the dim light of the attic. Along the edge, she could see her father's rich details and carvings. The wood was a warm reddish brown, a beautiful example of the wood of the now burned forest. The neck was smooth, designed for playing. The scroll at the top, on the other hand, was an intricate whorl of wooden petals and vines. Marin's name had been carved in one side and "Pali-sis" on the other.

Linsan stared in shock and longing. It had been a long time since she heard or seen the violin's name. After the fire, her father had tried to continue her lessons but both of them had given up after only a few months. More tears ran down her cheeks as she ran her fingers along the strings. They were loose but it only took a few twists to tighten them.

In that moment, she wished she knew how to play. Only a few weeks of lesson wasn't enough, but the need to hear the past overwhelmed her.

With a delicate flick of her finger, she strummed along the strings. They were all out of tune but she vaguely remembered how each string should ring out. Using her fingers, she pried it out of the case enough to twist one of the keys. When she flicked the string, it sounded even worse and she turned the tuning peg in the opposite direction until it sounded better. Working from memory of what the violin should sound like, she adjusted the other strings until she was satisfied.

Her father would know exactly how to make it sound right but it was close enough for her.

Linsan picked up the song again. She played it out in her head, working through the complex notes across the bars. It was a song for a violin, but a player who possessed considerably more skill than herself. She read through it twice and realized she had no chance of even remotely following her father's creation.

Setting it down, she started to put it away but the lure of the violin was too much. She admired her father's work, from the way the instrument had been fitted together to the incredible shine of the varnish created by their grandfather. It was an instrument that begged to be played.

With a trembling hand, she pulled out the violin and rested it on her shoulder. Pressing her chin against the rest,

she brought her arm out to where she thought she remembered from her lessons.

There was a matching bow in the box. It took her a moment to pry it out. The hair was also loose. She had to put the violin down to tighten them and then took another moment to get everything back up against her chin and shoulder.

Holding her breath, she brought the bow to the strings and let the hairs rest against the strings.

Not even a hum of a noise.

With a hesitant smile, she glanced at the opening in the floor leading downstairs. Then she turned back and tried to remember that fateful night.

The bow came down and the purest, richest tone rose from the violin. She let out a sob at the memories. Her body still remembered the next tones of the naughty song her father had taught her. She drew the bow through the notes; it came out far smoother than she remembered. She reached the end and remembered how her father said one movement led into another. She brought the bow back and continued into the next note. The third turned into fourth, then fifth, sixth, and seventh.

Linsan couldn't remember where the lessons had stopped but she knew the music. She closed her eyes and swayed as she worked her way slowly through the entire song.

With the last tone, she held her breath until the last of the vibrations faded. Then, with tears drying on her cheeks, she carefully loosened the strings and hairs and carefully packed the violin back into its case.

Then she noticed two letters tucked into the case along the side. She pulled them out and looked at the names on the envelopes: one written to Marin and one to Sian, her father. She ran her finger over the wrinkled, aged paper but

didn't open it. Carefully, she closed the box and buried it again.

After shoving boxes into place, she headed back downstairs.

Her mother and father were standing at the foot of the stairs in the entry hall. Both of them had red-rimmed eyes and she could see tears glistening on their cheeks.

Her mother's long blonde hair was pulled into a braid that had already started to pull apart. Her travel dress was soaked and clung down over her slender form. Even though she was wet, she held Sian's hand tightly.

Linsan felt a flash of guilt and fear. "S-Sorry. I didn't mean to play it, I just... I just... I couldn't help it."

Her father sniffed and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"That was beautiful," said her mother.

She let out her breath with a whoosh. Trembling, she reached for the handrail and held it tightly as she inched down the stairs.

Her mother came up to meet her. Her hands were cool but firm. "You know how I feel about that song."

Linsan blushed. "Sorry."

"It was just wonderful to hear your father's work again." Her voice turned into a whisper. "That was Marin's instrument but she never had a chance to play it."

As Linsan's confused look, she amended herself. "I'll explain later."

Linsan gasped and looked down at her father. There was a tradition that the first musician to play an instrument would forever have a special bond with it. She never thought she would be the first one. "Oh, Daddy, I'm so sorry. I-I didn't—"

Sian shook his head. "I should have taken that over to the safe deposit box." His voice was cracked and broken. He shook his head. "It's too late now."

Her mother cleared her throat. "No one has to know a musician had played a song on it."

"I'll know, Tisin," he said sourly. "I'll always know that she was the first. Not Marin."

With a grunt, he shook his head again and headed toward his office. His shoulders lowered with every step and she could almost see the joy pouring out of him and pain replacing what had just been destroyed.

Linsan's tears came back. She hugged her mother tightly. "I'm sorry. I-I just wanted to hear it."

"It was beautiful, Honey." She grinned. "Even if it was a song about butts."

Linsan couldn't tell if she was crying or laughing.

Tisin winked. "We'll just write a little note that it hasn't been played before. I'm sure Dukan can come up with something. That way, if things get bad here, it will have a higher value on the market."

It felt crass to put a price on the last instrument her father had made but she knew that they had already lost so much since the fire. She sniffed and wiped her tears away. "Who's Marin?"

"Your father's wife... from his first marriage. She married my wife when you were young."

Linsan froze as she stared at her mother in shock.

Tisin smiled and drew up to her full height. She still had traces of makeup on her face and half of her hair had gotten loose. Linsan could see a hint of the grand lady who dominated the stages for years. Her pale skin was ethereal, her gaze hovering right at the point of being playful and evil.

Then, her mother almost floated down the stairs, leaving Linsan along to struggle with the sudden change in understanding her parents.

Chapter 4

Solace in Memories

One cannot pick the time when stress ignites the first manifestations of magic, nor can one choose the powers that come forth. Only introspection after the fact can guess the forces that shaped the power that came into being.

—Jakor Habir-Nos, *Threats of the Children with Power*

Linsan loved the first week of spring. As she walked along the overgrown road, she admired the new buds sprouting on the tree branches and the grass just pushing up through the thick mat of rotted leaves. The smells of the forest came to life, thawed by the early seasonal warmth.

She paused to shift her new violin case from one shoulder to the other. It bumped against her school bag until she managed to swing it over to her other side. The heavy weight of the hard case bore down on her, but it was a comforting companion on her long walks through the woods.

When she saw the curve with the three oak trees, some of her good mood faded and her footsteps came to a stop. She looked at the thick forest around her, the way everything was living and bright.

Then she tightened her grip on the strap across her chest. Looking down, she stared at her feet for a moment.

"Come on, Linsan," she said to herself. "You've been doing this for years. You're fifteen, you aren't a little girl anymore."

That didn't make it any easier.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to take a step forward. And then another. Soon, she was back to her steady pace as she approached the curve.

With every passing second, the world grew brighter. The canopy ahead of her opened up and the rich smells faded. Even the calls of the early birds broke up and grew silent.

By the time she reached the curve, the world had changed. Gone were the old growth woods and the rich smells of history. They were replaced by the bright colors of the sun-drenched valley with few plants taller than herself. Where there used to be spruce and maple, there was nothing more than grasses and wildflowers. They peeked up around the rotting remains of the old workshop, ridges of blackened wood sticking up among the rainbow of petals.

Linsan stopped and looked at the valley her family called their own. Six years had erased the memories of what the valley looked like when she was a little girl and was helpless as it burned. She couldn't remember what the workshop looked like anymore, only a few fragments of abstract memories were left behind.

It would be decades before the trees were old enough to lumber and see if they had retained the qualities that made her family's instruments special. By then, all the skills that went into crafting violins would also be gone; her father showed no interest in teaching her his craft.

She started walking again, straight for the ruins of the workshop. Her heart began to beat faster with anticipation.

This was her private place, the quiet valley with painful memories.

Near the opening that once was a door, she set down her violin case and bag. She popped open her case and eased the violin from the velvet. It wasn't one of her father's but a good-quality one her mother had bought without her father's knowledge.

Stepping away into the knee-high grasses, she tuned it carefully and began to play. It had been a year since the fateful day in the attic. Her mother had given her a new violin as a present and she had played it every day since. Now, she was comfortable with the instrument and could play simple songs fluidly.

Her mother was also happy Linsan finally taught herself songs that didn't center on butts, though the childish part of her loved *My Ass for a Glass of Milk* for an entirely inappropriate song.

Linsan started to play. Her first song came out strong, it was a ballad about a girl and a boy. She didn't really know the words, but the melody always drew her. It was sad and sweet at the same time, an appropriate song for the ruins.

Closing her eyes, she just let the music flow around her. She imagined her father playing, the way he swayed back and forth with the movement of the bow. She followed suit, letting the song and the wind move her body as she ran through the notes.

When Linsan finished, she paused only for a moment and let her mind go back over the song with an analytical view. She noticed where her wrist stiffened up and she missed some notes. There was also a part where the notes didn't quite fit.

She took a moment to center herself and started back into the same song. She had to find the right combination of focus and relaxation at the same time.

The sounds of her instrument drifted through the wildflowers and filled the valley.

She lost the ending in a muddled mess. Frustrated, she let the violin slip from under her chin. She had to get it, if anything because she needed to be able to play more songs.

As soon as she started the third attempt, she knew it would end up wrong and she gave up before the fifth measure.

“Damn it,” she snapped. She paced around in a circle to calm herself. Her boots crunched on rotted wood and rocks. She hopped up on one edge of the foundation walls and off again.

After a few minutes of moving around, she was serene again. Steeling herself, she brought her violin up and started the same song. The anxiety and frustration grew despite the first notes coming out loud and clear. To fight it, she kept moving. First it was swaying but that wasn’t enough. She stepped to the side, almost dancing as she swept through the songs.

Music rose from the bow. She felt it as much as she heard it. With a smile, she kept dancing, spinning and sliding with every moment as the song kept going.

When she finished without a single mistake, she couldn’t help but smile. Her entire body hummed with the accomplishment.

She did it again.

With every iteration, she grew more comfortable with the song. Soon she was hopping up the sides of the ruins and twirling around on the narrow bricks. Her music flowed around her in perfect harmony with her movements.

“Oh look, it looks like the squirrels got drunk again,” said a familiar voice behind her.

Ripped from her song and dance, Linsan almost lost her balance. She tightened her grip on her violin as she teetered to one side and then used her other arm to regain balance.

A wave of laughter followed, all girls. They were mocking and cruel. Unfortunately, she also recognized all of them.

Heart pounding in her chest, she looked around until she saw Brook standing near the former entrance of the workshop. Behind her were two other girls from school, all in the same class as Brook. They were leaning against the ruined walls.

A year younger than Linsan, Brook was Dukan's eldest daughter. She had her father's dark hair but the curls tumbled over her shoulders and down almost to the small of her back. Even from the opposite side of the ruins, Linsan could tell that Brook had changed her outfit since school; her fancy dress and makeup would never be allowed in the halls. Nor would the wide-brimmed hat she wore.

Her outfit wasn't appropriate for standing in knee-high grass either.

Brook held the bottom of her sea-green dress away from the ground but the lace clung to the leaves that surrounded her boots. Some of the lace had caught broken leaves and there were little burrs clinging to the fabric.

Linsan glanced at the other two. They were still wearing their school dresses, relatively plain outfits of dark colors and somber patterns. They gave Brook the appearance of stepping off a stage or coming out of a portrait.

Brook made a show of looking around. Her face was twisted into disgust. "Why do you bother with this old place? There is nothing left here. Just some old walls and scorched rocks." Her tone was sharp and cruel, just like whenever she spoke to Linsan at school.

Linsan struggled to not raise her voice. "This is still my family's land. Just because it hurts doesn't mean I'm going to abandon it."

"Hurt? Places don't get hurt. Trees don't hurt. They get ruined and destroyed. Then everyone who counted on those lands fall. They are the ones who suffer, not some grass and rocks." As Brook spoke, her voice grew sharper and more biting. She gestured to the ground around her, her hand almost smacking into one of her friends.

The muscles in Linsan's neck and chest tightened. She let the violin drop but kept it away from the bricks. "What are you doing here, Brook?" What she didn't say was that she would give almost anything to have Brook and her friends just go away.

"Just going for an evening stroll. Like proper ladies do." Brook smiled sweetly but the smile didn't reach her eyes. "Not that your mother had ever taught you how to be anything proper."

"You are an hour out of town unless you have some wagon nearby," snapped Linsan. "In that outfit, the dirt road had to be hell on your ankles and worse on that pretty dress of yours."

Brook's painted lips tightened into a thin line for a moment. "Maybe I just wanted to see you jumping around like a drunken squirrel? Or screeching like some sort of beast with that bit of wood? Everyone needs some entertainment, even refined ladies."

Linsan started to snap back but Brook interrupted her. "Before you ask, we're all going to Koson's for dinner. A very exclusive dinner for people who are going up in the world, not backwater squirrels scampering on branches. Daddy is going to meet us there with a wagon."

Koson was an expensive distillery a few miles past the valley. Even so, Brook had to come out of her way to the Sterlig Valley. It wasn't not an easy place to find.

Linsan flushed. Her stomach twisted as she glared at Brook. "I come here to get away from people like you."

"Yes, you should do that." Brook stepped forward. "In fact, you and the rest of your rotten family should move here to where we never have to see you again." Her dark brown eyes flashed underneath the wide brim of her hat. "You are a stain on Penesol, a reminder that the Sterlig used to be famous crafters, not cowards hiding from their debts."

With a flinch, Linsan had to force herself to relax her grip in fear of breaking her bow. She trembled as the tears rose in her eyes. "My family was ruined in that fire. We lost —"

"So was mine! But we didn't have your mother's fame to keep us floating in the muck. We fell in and drowned. We lost everything, I lost everything." Brook's voice grew sharper. "We had to move. I lost my room and everything in it. We had to sell the pictures, my dolls, and even my paintings. We lived in a tent for a year because of you!" Her screams bounced off the rocks before fading.

Linsan shook her head. "But you're fine now. Your father is one of the richest people—"

Brook stomped hard on the ground. She screamed, "No thanks to you and your damn family!"

A flush of heat and discomfort rolled through Linsan's body. It was shocking how she could almost trace the wave as it radiated from her chest and flowed down into her hands and feet. Her violin trembled, the vibrations humming along the strings.

Brook stepped over Linsan's case and into the empty space between the walls. "Your father didn't help us! Your mother didn't either! Your damn parents walked away when

we needed you the most!" Her face grew redder with every word.

"I-I can't tell you why that happened. I was only nine."

"And I was eight and I lost everything!"

"That was six years ago! We were both little girls!" Linsan desperately wanted to get away. It was turning into a fight but there were no teachers to break it up and they were at least a half an hour away from anyone who could help. She glanced past Brook to her cases. They were now trapped between the three girls.

Brook's face twisted into a deep scowl. "We lived in hell for most of those years! Tents, that horrible cabin, even the Couple-damned apartment filled with bugs! That is our hell and you had to go through none of it!"

One of Brook's friends reached out. "Brook? I think—"

Brook turned on her and snapped. "Quiet!"

Her friend flinched.

Turning back, Brook took another step toward Linsan. The tall grasses dragged at her dress. "You didn't lose anything important. Just this place—"

As Brook gestured to the ruins around her, Linsan ground her teeth together. Brook didn't know what she was talking about. She had no idea how much the fire took out of her family. She opened her mouth to say something but Brook interrupted her.

"No, you don't get to tell me about losing things. It doesn't matter! You lost nothing but your damnable pride. You even still have one of your father's famous violins in our vault. Just a single box as if was the most important thing in the world. It's probably worth more than my father, but your parents don't have," she spat out the word, "to sell that, do you?"

When Brook's father had recovered from the fire, he had bought one of the banks in town. It was where Linsan's father had taken Palisis for safe keeping.

Linsan jumped off the wall toward Brook. "I lost more than that, cow!"

From behind Brook, her other friend spoke up. "Brook? I thought we were just going to tease her? This is going too far." She was obviously uncomfortable. Both of them had stepped back, away from the wall.

Brook appeared to ignore her as she stomped toward Linsan. She released her dress which dragged along the wildflowers that Linsan hadn't crushed with her dancing. She was sweating as she did, droplets running down her face and marring her makeup.

Linsan hesitated at the sight of Brook balling up her hands into fists. Their encounter was rapidly sliding into a fight and she still had her violin her hand. She glanced to the side, looking for some place to toss it safely if she had to defend herself.

Brook stopped in front of her. Her face was red with dark streaks from her ruined makeup.

Linsan backed up. Her mind plotted her next action: duck to the right and throw her violin onto a bed of violets. That looked like the safest place. She could then come back with a punch if she had to.

Brook leaned toward her. "I never want to see you again," she hissed. "Not in school, not in the street. There is nothing good about you or your family and I want the rest of the world to know it." Her breath was hot against Linsan's face.

Linsan felt sick to her stomach. The discomfort had grown rapidly and she was on the edge of throwing up herself. The world spun around her as she stared into Brook's angry brown eyes.

“You and the rest of your drunken squirrels need to go away and never be seen again.”

Trembling, Linsan fought the urge to lash out. She tried to convince herself if she just let Brook threaten her, it would be over. Just a few minutes, she hoped.

Brook seemed to have the same hesitation. She trembled as she kept her face shoved toward Linsan’s. They were only inches away and it felt like the air between them was growing more heated with every passing second.

“B-Brook?” called out the second girl. “We should probably be going.”

Brook’s lips pressed into a thin line.

Linsan wanted to look away, to avoid the conflict, but couldn’t. She stared back and waited for what would happen next. Her lungs hurt and she realized she was holding her breath, but she didn’t dare let it go.

Brook yanked back. “Rot in a pile of rancid crap,” she muttered and spun around. Her dress tugged on the grasses around them as she stormed away.

Letting out her breath, Linsan squirmed. She got a better grip on her bow and instrument; both of her palms were slick with sweat. The rest of her body still felt uncomfortable, as if her skin wasn’t fitting quite right anymore.

She panted as she watched Brook walk toward the entrance. Beyond Brook, her two friends were already walking back. Linsan just had to hold on a little longer, then she and her friends would be gone and she could let herself go, no doubt to cry.

Brook reached the entrance. Before she crossed the threshold, she looked down.

The feeling of something about to turn rose up inside Linsan. She followed Brook’s gaze to where her violin case and school bag were propped up against the wall.

Brook lifted her elegant boot.

"No!" cried Linsan as Brook stomped hard on the case. The thin walls cracked loudly.

Brook didn't stop. She smashed the case twice before kicking it hard. The top cracked loudly as one hinge burst.

Linsan's vision blurred for a moment. She fought back the nausea, she couldn't throw up with Brook standing there.

Brook's friends stopped and turned to look back. Neither were smiling. One slowly lifted her hand to her mouth.

Brook held up her dress and kicked the case again. It slammed into the stone wall and the lid sheered off, bouncing on the stone before falling to the ground.

With tears in her eyes, Linsan walked toward her. "Stop! Why are you doing that!? I bought that with my own money!"

Brook glared at her over her shoulder, her eyes half-hidden by her dark curls. "You don't deserve anything!"

She turned and kicked Linsan's schoolbags. Papers flew everywhere.

Linsan tossed her violin and bow onto the patch of violets. The instrument bounced once with a discordant twang. "Stop that!"

Brook started to walk away. "Fine, I'll stop. I have a better idea anyways."

The tone of Brook's voice sent a pang of fear coursing through Linsan.

"I might as well finish the job the fire started."

The world blurred for a moment. A sick feeling twisted in Linsan's stomach, almost doubling her over in agony. She fought it, trying to keep her gaze focused on Brook's back.

Brook went a few yards before she stopped and looked over her shoulder again. "The nice thing about wooden instruments is that they burn so easily. Only one left—"

Linsan charged forward with a scream, "You leave Palisis alone!"

Brook's smile froze. She turned and raised her arm.

Linsan swung wildly but missed.

"You cow!" snapped Brook. Her fingers raked across Linsan's face, leaving four burning lines. She followed with a kick that caught Linsan's knee.

Linsan dropped to the ground.

Brook rolled her eyes and then brought her knee up. The soft padding of her dress did little to cushion the impact as it connected with Linsan's chin with a crunch.

With a groan, Linsan fell back. She clutched her jaw with one hand and felt the pain radiating from between her fingers.

Brook leaned toward her. "Do you really think a dress is going to stop me? I have two sisters! I know how to fight!"

Sick and dizzy and enraged, Linsan staggered to her feet. "Don't you dare burn Palisis!"

"Pal... the violin? You named that stupid instrument?"

"It isn't stupid! That's my father's! That's all we have left!"

Brook clicked her tongue and shook her head. "That's what wrong with all of you. You cling to those stupid things like they are somehow going to save you. It's just a rotted thing and you don't deserve any of them. You need to lose everything, just like us."

She turned and stomped back toward the ruins. "In fact, you don't deserve this one—"

Linsan didn't hear the rest. She was charging forward wildly. Her shoulder caught the small of Brook's back as she threw all her weight into tackling her. Her incoherent scream echoed across the valley.

The dress tore loudly and the ripping sound filled the air.

"That's it, I'm going to burn both of your violins!"

Linsan kicked and punched as she tried to free herself. Her hands dug into the ground as she crawled to her violin. Her vision blurred but she managed to keep her attention locked on her violin. She had to get it before Brook did.

“You ruined my dress!”

Linsan reached her violin. She grabbed it and rolled over, clutching the instrument to her chest as she stared.

Brook stood in the middle of the ruins. Blood ran down her shoulder and soaked into her ripped dress. Her makeup had been smeared and dirt darkened her skin, adding to the red tone as she stared at Linsan with fury.

Linsan shook her head. She glanced around and saw the bow was only a few feet away. Her stomach rumbled and her skin was flushed. Everything felt like fire but burned deep in her bones than along the surface. She didn’t know what was going on, only that she had to protect her instrument.

Brook pointed at her. “You’re going to get arrested for this! You attacked me!”

“You threatened my family!”

“I’m going to burn that shit-covered violin to the ground! I’m going to ruin every Couple-damn thing you have left to you and when... when you have nothing, I’m going to find every damn, diseased dog in town and have them shit all over your grave and this entire fucking place!” Her arm swept to encompass the ruins of the workshop.

Linsan scrambled to her feet.

Brook flipped her thumb at her. “You hit me one more time and you’ll spend the rest of your life rotting in some jail. I promise you, if it comes between us, you know the town will listen to my dad over yours.”

Hesitating, Linsan didn’t doubt it was true. No one wanted to talk about her father anymore. They averted their eyes whenever he left the house.

“Now, excuse me because I have something to burn!”

Unthinking, Linsan grabbed for her bow. It was light in her hand but somehow it felt alive. She wanted to play, in that surreal moment, the urge to bring music forth was stronger than anything she had felt before.

Brook stepped back. “What are you doing?”

Linsan stepped forward, her jaw clenched tight. She jammed the violin against her chin.

The sick feeling in her stomach soured and knotted. She felt like the world was melting away from her. The trees, the ruins, everything felt unreal. The only thing solid was her violin and her bow.

Brook held up her hands, ready to parry.

Linsan drew a single note across the tight strings.

Her entire world fragmented as something rushed out of her. It blew away from her in almost invisible wave of force. The tall grasses and flowers flattened almost immediately. When the wave hit the ruin’s walls, one of them tumbled apart.

The force slammed into Brook, throwing her back violently from the ruins. Her body flew over the wall, a sharp edge tearing her dress further apart. She landed with a thud.

Linsan gasped but she didn’t lower her bow.

Around them, the forest was deathly silent.

Brook stood up, her arms covered in dirt and blood. “What did you do?” Looking around, she bent over and picked up a large rock. With a grunt, she threw it at Linsan.

Moving reflexively, Linsan didn’t dodge it. She felt the tone before she played it, a single sharp note. It ran out from her violin, drawn by her bow. In her panic, the sound ended with a screech but it was enough.

The air rippled around her as something shot out, spearing the rock and knocking it aside.

Linsan glared at Brook. "Leave my father alone!"

The notes were burning in her head and she played them without thinking. It wasn't any song she had heard before, but it was violent and angry with sharp discordant notes that burst out of her. Each one manifested into waves of force that shot out to punch Brook. Blows caught the other girl's stomach, chest, and thighs.

Brook staggered back. "Bitch!"

Enraged, Linsan continued to play. She pummeled Brook with rapid blows, each one in perfect harmony with the notes in the back of her head. She didn't think she could stop. She wasn't even sure she wanted to.

Brook fell back in a spray of blood. Her shoulders slammed hard against the ground.

Shocked, Linsan froze. Her bow hovered inches above the strings, waiting to strike again. To her surprise, the sick feeling was gone, leaving behind a rush of something far more intense. It felt like she had just finished a dance or dove into water.

A few birds called out.

Linsan's arm began to tremble. The anger ebbed away, leaving behind an exhaustion that startled her. She shook her head. She knew everyone had a magical talent, but no one ever explained how they got it. She always thought it would be some secret ritual her parents would use, but somehow she had just used magic through her instrument.

She glanced at her bow and gave a little hesitant pull. The note rang out and the energy hummed around her. It fluttered against her skin, a little caress of power that was almost invisible in the air.

Brook groaned as she stood up. Her dress was ruined and blood soaked the side of her face.

Linsan focused on her, holding up the bow to strike again.

“This isn’t over,” gasped Brook. “We aren’t done until I say we’re done.”

One of her friends held out a hand. “We should go,” she said.

“Please?” asked the other.

Linsan ignored them. “Leave my family alone.”

Brook stepped back, moving toward the trail leaving out of the valley. She was limping. “Like hell I will.”

Rage surged through Linsan. She drew her bow and played a full measure of rapid, sharp tones.

Brook turned. Her face twisted in rage for a moment, then it turned into a strange look of confusion as she peered down at her bloody palms.

Enraged herself, Linsan’s bow tore another sharp sound out of the instrument and the translucent energy exploded from the violin and shot toward Brook.

Brook looked up. With a scream, she clapped her hands together with all her might.

A burst of raw noise exploded from Brook in a wave. It slammed into Linsan’s music and tore the tones apart. The wave rushed toward Linsan, flattening grasses and shattering the walls of the ruins.

The concussion wave slammed into Linsan’s chest as if a horse kicked it. She was ripped off the ground and thrown through one of the last remaining walls of the workshop. The impact of cracking stone sent sharp agonies along her hips and thighs as she tumbled into the grasses. Sharp rocks and leaves cut at her face, scraping her skin as she flipped over twice before landing heavily.

With ears ringing from the burst, she tried to reach for her instrument but she had lost it. She groaned and rolled on her hands and knees. She knew a blow would be coming soon but whatever Brook had done left Linsan dizzy.

Gasping, she managed to push herself up into a kneeling position. Looking round, she tried to orient herself to her attacker.

Brook wasn't nearby.

Startled, she looked around and realized she was facing the valley. With a sob of pain, she turned to see Brook hurriedly limping toward the road leading out of the valley. Her friends were hovering next to her, trying to help but Brook kept waving them off.

Linsan thought about chasing after her but the cuts and ached throbbed in her joints. Whatever rush came from fight was fading away, reminding her that she had almost as many injuries as Brook.

Her first thought was to run home but there was only one road leading into the valley. She wasn't going to give Brook a chance to ambush her. She had to wait.

With a hiss of pain, she got up and frantically looked for her violin. The fear that Brook had smashed it hovered in her thoughts until she found it unharmed in the grass. With a gasp of relief, she snatched it up and brought it to the smashed remains of her instrument case. The sides of the leather-lined container had been shattered by whatever power Brook had summoned.

Her vision blurred as she looked at the ruined wall of the workshop. Years ago, the fire had scorched the stones but Brook's power had blasted it apart. In the still crumbling opening, she could see the stones scattered dozens of feet in a spray pattern.

Brook's magic was far more destructive than Linsan's musical blasts.

Linsan scoffed. Naturally, the gods decided that Brook would have more talent.

She sat down heavily and stared at the case. There wasn't much she could do to salvage it, but her violin was more

important than paperwork. She emptied out the bag and started to make something to protect her instrument.

Chapter 5

Bitter Partings

The rise of the affluent middle class was a surprise to almost everyone. No one expected that workers would ever have the wealth and power of High Society.

—Wastor da Joknig, *After the Destruction of Natural Order*

Miserable, Linsan limped up the stone path leading to her house. The blood on her hands and face had dried on the long, painful walk home. Every joint in her body ached from where Brook's blast had tossed her aside.

She spat into the wilted flowers along the side of the path and regarded the stairs leading up to her porch. Every step seemed like an agony and the three steps were almost too much.

Linsan stopped. Wiping her forehead, she turned and sat heavily down on the stairs. Her ruined violin case thumped onto the ground next to her. The makeshift binding made from strips of her skirt and her underclothes kept it sealed shut but she could hear her violin rattle inside.

She panted in discomfort and looked at the empty street. Fortunately, they lived on the edge of town and she only got a few curious stares on her walk home. It didn't help that

most of them were double-takes and gasps of surprise. No doubt she was already the subject of gossip.

As much as she hated Brook for mocking her, the other girl was right. The only reason they survived was her mother's singing and dancing. Her reputation kept them on the edge of comfort. Dukan didn't have that steady income. He had worked hard to keep a roof over his three girls. Over the years, he had managed to take his skill coordinating contracts and wrangling suppliers into getting a license to run his own bank in the center of town.

Now, neither of them could afford an embarrassment. She rubbed her aching jaw and shook her head. It was best just to pretend the fight had never happened.

Linsan glanced at the violin case. She wanted to see if the strange magic happened if she played it again. She was also scared that it wouldn't. Worrying her bottom lip, she shook her head and promised to try it again when she headed back to the valley. After the fight, she hoped Brook wouldn't try to interrupt again.

A cool breeze rippled along her thighs. She squirmed in discomfort. After a few minutes, she considered heading up to her room and seeing if she could sneak a hot shower before her father caught her with uncomfortable questions.

Steeling herself, Linsan pushed herself up.

A loud grinding noise echoed down the street.

She froze with a feeling of dread. She had heard of the new vehicles in town and there were only a few people who could afford the expensive machines. One of them was Dukan. With a groan, she watched the column of steam as it approached steadily from a few blocks away.

There were a thousand things she could have done, but none of them seemed to come to mind as the large-wheeled vehicle came to a rumbling halt in front of the house. It was a monstrous thing, unnatural and harsh looking. The

entire thing was black with gold trim everywhere. Near the hood, there was an intricate design of a pair of black clouds on a plaque along with some names and a year, 1842.

The two riders weren't people Linsan wanted to meet either. Dukan got out first, his black suit glistening from the steam that clung to the fabric. He pulled a pair of goggles off his face and snapped them to the side. Flecks of water splattered onto the cobblestones.

Brook slipped off her side of the car. Her shoulders were slumped and her new dress was damp across her body. She wore a deep green color but the ruffles were all limp and dripping.

Dukan strode up the walk. "Lin! You look beaut..." His voice trailed off as he got closer. "Actually, you look like you've been in a pretty nasty fight. Brook did a number on you, didn't she?"

Behind him, his daughter glared at his back. She had a black eye and bandages along her hands and shoulder. Her leather boots scuffed against the flagstone path. She held her dress away from the ground in semblance of propriety but her arms shook from the effort. She was obviously hurting as much as Linsan.

Linsan regarded Dukan. At first, she considered blaming Brook for the fight and the resulting damage. After all, she had ruined Linsan's violin case and started the argument. She deserved all the punishment she would get.

But that wouldn't help anyone. She sighed and shook her head. "It wasn't a big deal," she lied.

Brook tensed and straightened her back. She looked surprised.

"Nonsense, as beautiful as Brook is, she's got a temper. Though, she has a tendency to rip dresses. An expensive habit to say the least."

"Daddy..."

Dukan waved his hand, silencing her. "Is Tisin in?"

Brook glared at him but said nothing.

Linsan shook her head. "No, she's just left for another tour of *My Fairest Rose* along the southern regions. She's coming into her second stop tonight. She'll be there for three days before moving on."

Dukan ran his hand along his short, dark hair. He smiled and shrugged. "Pity. I haven't had a chance to see that play. I've always loved watching your mother dance."

"This is the third season," Brook muttered.

He seemed lost for a moment. Then he smiled brightly. "Your dad in?"

"Probably. I haven't been home long but he's always in the study at this time of day."

Dukan turned to his daughter. "Stay out here and try not to ruin your dress. I'm going to talk to Sian and see if we can smooth this over." He pointed at her. "No fighting."

"Yes, Daddy," came the sullen response. She glanced at Linsan and then pointedly looked away with a lift of her chin and a scowl.

Dukan patted Linsan on the shoulder as he passed her. His polished shoes thudded against the wooden steps. He knocked before letting himself in. "Hey, Sian, got a minute?"

When the door closed behind him, Linsan couldn't help but stare at the door with discomfort. What was he going to say to her father? Was she going to get in trouble? How would her father respond to the broken case or the scratches along her instrument? Both were expensive and they couldn't afford much.

She turned around to glare at Brook.

Brook was only a few inches away from her, glaring back at her.

Linsan gasped and stumbled back until she hit the step with her foot. "W-What?"

"This is all your fault," Brook whispered in a sharp tone as she pointed angrily at Linsan.

"You started it!" hissed Linsan back.

"There is a difference between talking and you throwing blows!"

"You ruined my case."

"It's a stupid case, who cares?"

"I care!" Linsan managed to regain some of her balance and straightened up. She stepped forward, but Brook didn't move back so they were pressed chest-to-chest as the two teenagers hissed at each other. "I paid for it with my own money and you smashed it on purpose. This was your fault, not mine!"

Muscles along Brook's jaw tightened.

Linsan shoving forward with her body. "You're the one who followed me to the workshop. You were the one who said my family was trash and—"

"Your family is trash, you stupid bitch!" Brook shoved back with her bandaged hands.

Ready this time, Linsan stepped onto the step behind her, lifting herself up with the force of Brook's shove. Then, with gravity helping her, she brought her hands down to shove back with all her might. "Our lives got ruined too!"

Brook stumbled back into the grass. Her ankle turned and she let out a hiss before hopping further away. "That was just a burnt-out forest, I'm talking about my future!"

She started forward but when her ankle took her weight, she let out a hiss of pain. Flushed, she forced out the words. "I was supposed to have a pretty power, a silk! Now, every time I clap my hands, every Couple-damned window cracks!" She was no longer hissing, but screaming at the top of her lungs. "What kind of man is going to want a wife

who can shatter walls! I'll never be able to go to shows without being able to applaud, to play games, or anything with these... these things!"

Tears sparkled in Brook's eyes. She yanked her dress from the ground with one hand and tried to lunge forward again. She tripped on her dress and stumbled to the side.

Reflexively, Linsan stepped back for another blow.

It never came. Brook came to a halt a few feet away and then bent over. Her shoulders shook for a moment before she straightened. When she looked up, the tears were rolling down her cheeks. "I'm ruined because of that stupid fight! All because you attacked me!"

Linsan fought the urge to rush forward and slap her. "You threatened to burn Palisis!" she screamed back. "That's all that's left of our family's heritage and you were going to just burn it!"

"It's just a stupid violin!"

Something snapped inside Linsan. She stepped down to rush Brook.

"Stop!" bellowed Sian and Dukan at the same time.

Linsan tripped on the edge of the step and came down hard on her knees. Pain shot through her limbs as she bent forward. When she looked up through the waterfall of her brunette hair, she saw that Brook had also fallen back into the dirt.

"What in the Couple-damned hell is going on?" yelled Dukan. "How is this not starting a fight?"

Brook looked away. "Sorry, Daddy," she said in a girlish voice.

"Quiet, Girl! You obviously can't listen to simple instructions." Dukan's shoes thudded down the stairs. "Get off the ground. You're embarrassing me."

He held out his hand for Linsan.

Crying from the pain, Linsan took it and pulled herself up to her feet. She glanced at her father.

Sian looked old at the top of the stairs. His skin was pale and wrinkled and there was no joy in his eyes as they looked her over from head to toe. With every second, his lips thinned.

She cringed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to get into a fight."

"Anything broke? Do you need a bone setter?" Her father's voice was tense.

"No... it just hurts... a little. I'm sorry." Tears burned in her eyes as she took in his disapproving look.

"No," Dukan said, "I should apologize for my daughter. She obviously can't be trusted to exercise restraint."

Brook started to speak, "Sorry—"

He held up his hand to silence her without looking at her. "Who or what is Palisis?"

Sian spoke from the porch step. His voice was low and listless. "It's Marin's violin. The one I gave her when she married Junith."

"Marin? She didn't keep it? Did... she get divorced again?"

Sian shook his head. "No, she... Jun was there when she died. It was sudden and we didn't know she was sick until it was too late. About a year later, Junith sent Palisis back with her apologies. Having it near her brought up too many memories."

He sniffed and wiped the tears from his eyes. "What could I say to that, Dukan? That I would keep it until I needed money, then sell it off to the highest bidder? I poured my heart and soul into that instrument. It was a gift for the greatest women in our lives."

"It's never been played?"

Linsan tensed. She still remembered the first and only time she played the instrument. It was a beautiful sound and she ached to hold the instrument in her hand to do it a-

gain. But her mother had insisted they said it was untouched when they wrapped it up and sent to the family safe box for keeping.

Sian nodded. "Yeah, never been played."

Even though he didn't say it, Linsan watched as her father's shoulders tensed and he clenched his hand. His eyes shimmered with tears for a moment before he wiped them with the back of his hand.

Dukan looked confused. "It's a virgin Sterlig, Sian. Any musician with talent would sell their souls for the power that comes from being the first. Selling that would get you millions of cuks. You wouldn't have to be writing essays for pittance. Why are you working when that thing could set you for life?"

Sian shook his head. "It's Marin, Dukan. You know that. There isn't another person closer to both of us than her. How could I just... throw that away for some money? We are surviving. It's a hard life but there are some things Tis and I just couldn't give up."

With a sigh, Dukan returned to Sian. He took the first step up to grab Linsan's father's hand and squeezed it tightly. "Forgive me. Marin was my friend too. After all, I was your guard for your wedding. I should have never asked."

Sian nodded but said nothing.

Behind Linsan, Brook whispered to herself. "Women can marry each other?"

Linsan didn't answer.

Dukan patted Sian's hand a few more times before he backed down the stairs until he was even with Linsan. "It will be safe at my bank, Sian. I promise you that. And if you ever do decide to sell it, I will make sure you get everything you need."

Her father nodded. "Thank you, Dukan. I'm sorry for everything. After the fire, I... I... lost myself. Between the

debtors and the loss, we barely made it through in one piece. I'm glad that you came out of this in a better place."

"No one could have known that the fire would destroy everything. However, it's obvious that I've drifted from your life in the last eight years as well. I apologize for that." He glanced at Linsan. "Look, I had a good run of luck lately and life is pretty rosy for our family. Not to mention, money isn't as tight as—"

He turned to Brook with a stern look. "—some of us make it out to be. We are quite comfortable at this point and you know that."

Brook's cheeks colored.

Sian cringed before he said, "Dukan, I'm honored but—"

Dukan turned back held up his hand. "I worked for both you and your father for my entire life. You were always good men and as close to family as you can get. This is the least I can do. Even if you are too proud to ask, let me at least help your daughter. She deserves a better life."

Linsan inhaled with surprise. She glanced at Brook who looked hurt and just as shocked as herself.

"Just a couple hundred cuktins a month? Three? To help with the bills? Make sure she has a good start?"

Sian opened his mouth to say something but then choked back a sob.

Dukan smiled at Linsan who gave him a hesitant smile back.

Then he turned back to her father. "I also came for another reason. I'm moving... to the other side of town, up near the mansions. I bought a nice house for us. They also just opened up a private school for girls and my daughters are switching over in a few weeks."

Sian nodded.

Linsan looked back. Judging from Brook's expression, she obviously didn't know about the move.

Dukan gestured in the direction of the house. "I'm sorry, but you have to admit, we're never going back to the way it was."

Linsan felt her father's profound sadness. Over the years, she's seen her father's friends drifting away as fortunes shifted. Dukan was one of them. The conversation between Dukan and her father felt like she was watching the last plank bridging their past lives and today being removed.

"I understand, Duk." Sian sighed and nodded.

"Please, let me help you one last time? At least until she's done with school? She'll be eighteen then. You could use the money."

With tears rolling down his cheeks, Sian nodded again.

Dukan gave Linsan a smile before turning back to his car. "Come on, Brook. We're leaving."

Brook looked at her, some of the anger replaced by confusion. Then she followed her father back to their car.

Linsan didn't move as she watched them drive away. Then she turned to look at her father. "I'm sorry."

He wiped the tears from his eyes. "I always knew it was going to happen. He was back on his feet less than a year after the fire."

"Daddy?"

Her father stopped moving for a moment, then he turned and opened the door. "Come on, Honey. We might as well start your lessons."

"Lessons?"

"You manifested powers, right?"

"Yes." The memory of the rush after she had used her powers came back. She smiled to herself. "It was amazing."

"The violin?" He wasn't looking at her. His eyes were on the broken case at the foot of the stairs.

She cringed. "Yes."

“Then it would take the Couple walking the earth hand-in-hand to stop you from playing. I’d rather you know how to play properly than to hurt someone with a misplaced melody or note. So, you need to have lessons and I’d rather teach you than you playing on the sly for the last few months when you didn’t think I could hear you.”

She gasped in surprise.

He raised an eyebrow and he smirked. “Your mother is a magnificent creature on the stage but she needs a script to keep her lies together. Her improvisation has always been weak.”

Leaning over, he kissed the top of her head. “Come on. I also have to write a letter to your mother to let her know what is happening so she can stop making those faces when she talks to me.”

Surprised and delighted, Linsan gathered her ruined case and headed up the stairs.

Chapter 6

Revelations

Most creative talents find themselves unable to perform magic while being distracted.

—Wagium de Pun, *Fallacies of the Crystal Spheres*

It was a beautiful summer day and Linsan enjoyed it by happily dancing across the knee-high flowers that had grown up throughout the workshop's ruins. Brightly-colored petals fluttered around her pale blue skirt as she twirled and dipped. A breeze followed after it, buffing her legs and arms with warm kisses.

Her violin dipped and bobbed with her movements. After three years of lessons, she played comfortably despite bouncing across the soft earth and fragrant blossoms. With every note, the air shimmered around her. The sharp notes sparkled and reflected light, adding to an ethereal glow.

Tisin, her mother, danced next to her. Her laughter and smiles brightened the entire valley. She danced as freely as she could but there was still no way of hiding the skill as she kicked off rocks and flew across the grasses. It looked like she was gliding more than jumping.

Linsan felt a bit of jealousy but that didn't stop her from continuing through the bright melody. Each note rippled across the grasses, swaying them with the waves of sound. In the distance, the music fluttered against the growing tree trunks that may become instruments in another few decades.

She reached the end of the song and slowed her feet.

"No, keep going," encouraged Tisin. She deftly jumped on the remains of the wall and danced along it. "Keep going!"

Encouraged, Linsan hopped on the wall and raced along it, jumping and twirling as she did. Her bare feet smacked against the weather-smoothed rock. The sun-warmed stone felt good against her toes as she raced along the side.

She missed a few of the notes but it didn't matter. She leaped off the end and landed neatly on the soft ground.

"Bravo!" Her mother clapped. "You were brilliant!"

Panting, Linsan beamed and let the violin slip from underneath her chin. It was slick with sweat from dancing in the sunlight.

"Bow. You always take a bow when you finish." Tisin bowed deeply, pulling up the bottom of her dress so it caressed the petals of the flowers.

Linsan bowed back. "Thank you, my lady."

"And thank you, my beautiful lady." Tisin straightened and hopped around before heading to the blanket on the ground for their picnic. "Come on, you need a break."

She sat down and picked up a lace-edged hat. Setting it on her piled-high brunette hair, she favored Linsan with a smile. "You've gotten so good at playing, Honey."

Still panting, Linsan sat down heavily next to her. She carefully set the violin back into its case. "Daddy's lessons have helped a lot."

"You were already good before he started teaching you."

Linsan shook her head. "No, these last two years of lessons have done more than I could ever hope to do by myself."

Tisin smiled and patted the back of Linsan's hand. Unlike her daughter, she didn't seem fazed by the dancing in the sunlight. With her pale skin, she looked almost ghost-like compared to Linsan's deep tan from visiting the valley every day. She would burn quickly though, which is why she always wore a hat outside even on cloudy days.

"Thanks for coming with me."

Tisin smiled and looked around. "Your father used to bring me here when we were courting. We would just sit on the porch of the workshop and watch the red birds fly. There were two nests over there and they had the prettiest little chicks." She gestured to an empty space.

Linsan looked around at the few remaining walls. They were almost completely erased by time. In a few more years, there wouldn't be more than a little debris to identify the passing. "It's sad now, isn't it?"

"No."

Surprised, she looked back at her mother.

Tisin looked happy as she peered around. "I guess I could think about what we lost but why? Sadness and hatred are anchors that pulls you down and drown you."

Linsan smirked. "Isn't that one of your lines?"

Tisin gave her a sly smile.

Unable to help smiling herself, Linsan started to say something but then she saw the briefest hint of sadness in her mother's amber eyes.

Tisin looked down and started pulling out sandwiches from the basket. "You... you wanted the almond butter right?"

Wary, Linsan nodded.

Her mother served the sandwiches. When she was done, she leaned back and braced herself with one hand. "I'm glad you are coming up here. This valley needs all the love it can get."

"The trees may not recover to make instruments again."

Tisin shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"That is our tradition. Seven generations."

"Maybe and maybe not," Tisin said. "We never know how the future is going to play. Two years ago, I was convinced that Sian would never play a violin again. But ever since you gained your talent, he's been playing. At first, it was to teach you but now, he just does it because it makes him feel good."

She smiled broadly and licked a bit of butter from the box that held the sandwiches. "I love hearing the sounds of you two when I come in the front door."

Linsan blushed.

"I also love dancing with you. You were always an active child and I was glad that you managed to acquire both your father's and my skills. Though, your father would rather you stop balancing on the good chairs while practicing."

Linsan's blush grew hotter. She hated standing still when she played. Her father could do it, but as soon as she started getting into the cheerful melodies, her feet started tapping.

Her mother chuckled. "You've destroyed a lot of furniture over the years. And your bed. Two of them if I recall." She was smiling as she spoke.

"Sorry."

Another shrug. "No matter. I'd rather have a daughter who found her passions than a pristine bed that was too small for me to sleep in. Your father might not say it, but he's found a new life teaching you how to play. I'm content."

Unsure of how to respond, Linsan focused on eating as she slowly cooled down.

Tisin ate only a few bites before she tilted her hat over her face and leaned back. Her slender arms supported her body with an artful angle. She smiled and closed her eyes.

Linsan glanced at her. There was something not being said. Her mother had been home for almost a month when usually she only stayed for a week at most before going to rehearsals or out on tour. But Linsan hadn't seen her mother do anything since she returned.

"Mommy?" She blushed. "Mom?"

"Yes, Honey?"

"As much as I really enjoy spending time, what is going on?"

Tisin smiled broadly and she shrugged. "No shows right now."

"What about *The Mayor's Mistress*?" It was one of the more recent plays that had started in town. "I saw the bills when we were grocery shopping."

Her mother didn't answer for a moment. Then she sighed. "You know that girl, Valian?"

"She was in my class in school."

"She got the role of the mother."

"She's seventeen!" Linsan shook her head. "That can't be right."

"Eighteen. She was born a year before you, but the director thought she pulled off a better mother than me."

"How can that be? You are a wonderful mother!"

Tisin grinned. "You would think so, but no."

With a frown, Linsan said, "Why not?"

Another shrug. "For most women, there are only four big roles in a lifetime: the innocent child, the petulant teenager, the hopeful mother, and the weary grandmother. I'm just not old enough to be a grandmother and directors like

Kavinar prefer younger-looking women with silver hair than actual mothers.”

It didn't seem right. Her mother was a wonderful actress. She had been touring Gepaul for over twenty years and there were dozens of awards to her name. Linsan had stacks of posters and notices with her face on it as the leading role.

“What about *Gone Without Water*?”

“It's a gay piece, no women. Even the women aren't played by women.”

“And that monster one? Um...” Linsan's voice trailed off as she tried to remember the name.

“*No Soul Left Uneaten*. My tits were never large enough for Tabil and I won't cheat on your father.” Tisin did a little shimmy and a grin, but there was a hollowness in her eyes.

Linsan reached down and plucked some flowers. She toyed with the petals, working her thumb along the edge until it crumbled. She thought about the looks her parents had been giving each other when the topics changed to buying things. She knew how dependent they were on her mother's income. No shows meant nothing coming in. “Are we going to have trouble with money then?”

For the first time in Linsan's memory, Tisin's smile faded.

A cold shiver ran down Linsan's spine.

“We have enough for a while.” Tisin didn't look at Linsan as she sat up. She reached for the jar of ice water they had brought with them. “This will only be a couple of months. We've saved up enough that we don't have to worry for... quite a while.”

Hating the feeling of dread that draped over her, Linsan thought about their situation. She never had to worry about a roof over her head, but she knew it was always tight ever since the fire. It had been years since they lost everything,

everything but a few boxes and Palisis, her father's last violin.

A violin that hadn't been played, a virgin as Dukan called it, would be worth millions at least. That would pay any bill that came up.

"You are thinking about selling the stuff in the vault, weren't you?"

Linsan jumped. "What? No. I mean, yes. H-How? I didn't say anything."

Her mother sighed. "Nothing more than a good guess. I figured your thoughts would go there because that was where both your father and I went. But you don't have the history of that violin that we share. You didn't live through the events that led us to that day: the day when we dissolved our marriages and forged new ones, when we promised to always love each other, when that violin meant that we would all be happy. Palisis was a promise between four best friends who loved each other more than anything else."

A tear ran down her cheek.

Linsan reached up and brushed it from her mother's cheek.

Tisin shook her head, then she reached over to hug Linsan tightly. "Losing you is the only thing worse than losing Mar's and Jun's memory. If it came down to you and it, we'll sell it, but otherwise we're going to keep it until there is no other choice. Once made, that decision cannot be undone."

Linsan nodded.

Tisin sighed. "But, in many years down the line, when your parents are gone, you should consider selling it. It would give you a good life and you don't have the delicate silver chains shackled around your wrists that we did."

It was a good line from one of Tisin's more recent plays, but the words felt bitter and sad. Seeing the tears in her mother's eyes, Linsan nodded. "I'm sorry."

As quickly as the sadness and hardness appeared, they were gone behind Tisin's beautiful smile. "Come on, I think you need a bit more practice."

Linsan was thankful for the change of topic. She forced a smile on her lips. "Practice? You said I was wonderful."

"Well, you misplayed a few notes with that last little bit."

"It's hard to play while bouncing on rocks!"

Tisin smoothly stood up. "The best way to get better is to practice. Come on."

Linsan picked up her violin and started to play. After only a few notes, she was already swaying in time with the complex melody that she was learning. She focused on keeping the music around her, causing ripples in the air instead of lashing out or knocking things over.

Her mother pirouetted next to the picnic basket and then began to dance.

With a smile, Linsan let herself sink into the music. She gracefully brought each note out of the wooden instrument.

Her mother began to sing. It was the wrong song.

Linsan's concentration broke.

Tisin looked at her with a grin. "Why did you stop?"

"You're singing the wrong song!"

"Sorry, which one?"

"*Three Queens of Melodol*. From your last play?"

With a grin, Tisin said, "Right. I'll get it. Start up again."

Linsan took a deep breath and started to play.

Tisin started back into the wrong song.

"Mom!"

"What?" There was a playful tone in her mother's voice.

“Wrong song! I can’t play with you singing the wrong thing!” Linsan knew that there was a whine rising up in her voice but she couldn’t resist.

“You should after four years.”

“Well, I can’t.”

“You need to learn how to improvise then,” Tinsan said with a smirk.

“So do you. Father says so every time you pretend you didn’t buy sweets.”

With a smirk, Tinsin leaned over and kissed Linsan on the forehead. “Then we both have something to practice.”

Chapter 7

Decisions

There is no switch that flips when one becomes an adult in the eyes of the law. No magical changes or alterations, just the same thoughts in an older body.

—*Gone Without Water* (Act 2, Scene 1)

Linsan had only been eighteen for a day and she was about to do the first adult thing she could think of: ask for money. Her mother had not had a job or show since last summer and her father's commissions for essays were dwindling.

Since her mother's confession during their summer picnic, Linsan couldn't help but notice the gradual tightening of the purse strings. It started with buying a little less at the store for food. Then her mother replaced her favorite tea with a weaker, local brand. Then the dairy delivery went from every three days to once a week and then every other week. Her mother's dresses changed with their fortune, the fancy materials carefully wrapped and placed in the attic. The ones she wore to clean house became her daily outfits, though she never stopped wearing hats and the occasional gloves. The fanciest she got was when her weekly students

came in to learn how to sing. There were only three of them.

What started as a vague idea became a necessity when Linsan saw how anxious both of her parents were for the monthly monies that came from Dukan. He had continued to do well for himself with the occasional appearance in the newspapers or a notice about a new purchase he had made. She hadn't seen him in better part of five years though, true to his word, he didn't come around any longer and she only had a vague idea of what he looked like.

The only reminder came once a month like clockwork, two hundred and fifty cukdins on the third day. A bundle of currency cards that were carefully doled out in a matter of minutes.

Dukan had said the money would last until a few years after school. With her final days in a few weeks, she decided to head for his bank and ask for an extension and possibly more money. Maybe he would be generous. Just until her mother got another show or her father got a commission for a book or something more dramatic than the weekly newspapers.

What was the worst that could happen?

The day after her birthday was the best day to ask. From an article in the newspaper, she had learned that he only worked one day a week at the bank and she vaguely remembered that he had said the money would arrive until she turned eighteen. That meant the check her family hoped would show up soon might never come unless she asked.

To make sure she caught him, she left before the sun breached the horizon. It was a cool morning, not quite cold enough to cause her breath to fog but still a reminder that winter had ended less than a month ago. She tugged on her wool coat over her best dress and headed down the walk.

Doubt gnawed at her stomach and she clenched her hands tightly together. She wanted to run back home and just pray to the Couple that the money would remain. To ease herself, she let her imagination run wild to distract herself from her own nervousness.

In her mind, she imagined what he would say. Would he demand some sort of service? If it was to work for him at the bank, she couldn't say no to that. She was about to finish school and a steady job, even one that didn't have anything to do with music, was better than none. She would gladly help her parents with that. It didn't matter if he asked her to become a maid, factory worker, or even a herald.

She wouldn't give up the violin. Even though she didn't fully understand the emotional connection between Palisis and her parents, she knew it was more important than anything else. They were not willing to sell the violin despite a price in the millions. She wouldn't betray them by ever letting that violin go.

Linsan had no clue how Dukan had changed in five years, much less what the bank looked like inside. The newspaper articles had illustrations of him, but the block prints were nothing compared to seeing the real man.

The last time she had even gotten close was after he had moved. Her mother had taken a wheelbarrow to delivery the last of the crates from the attic to the bank vault. Everything of value, from centuries of log books, notes on crafting instruments, and even pieces of music composed by the Sterlig had joined Palisis in the vault, never to see light again.

That was the day when Tisin had made Linsan promise that she would never tell anyone that she had played the instrument. Even a simple melody played by a musician with magical powers would diminish the value of the instru-

ment drastically, turning millions into hundreds. Linsan didn't understand why, but it sounded like superposition more than anything else; she didn't remember a feeling of power when she played it that one day in the attic.

A cold wind blew past her, tugging on her coat.

She ducked her head. Thankfully, she had braided her brunette hair into her best design and stole one of her mother's favorite hair ties to keep it in place. The heavy weight, a staff award for a long-forgotten play, bounced against her back with every step.

It was time to be an adult. Her parents needed it.

Chapter 8

Questions

The most common talents that manifest are elemental and reactional: earth, water, air, fire, and lightning.

—*Talents: The Weaker Powers*

On foot, it took Linsan almost two hours to reach the center of town. Her fantasies and “what if” scenarios petered out in her head when she started going over the same ideas until they were polished. She was sure she could handle almost every offer or suggestion Dukan had. She had worked out how far she would go, what jobs she would take, and how much she was willing to do to earn the extra cash.

With her imagination exhausted, she entertained herself with the construction around the city center. It looked like every fifth building was being torn down. The classic styles with carved pillars and reliefs were in the process of being replaced by two- and three-story buildings with intricate wrought iron, massive windows, and delicate stonework.

In the back of her head, she couldn’t imagine how much the new construction cost. Her family was struggling to pay the bills but everyone else seemed to be prospering.

Her confidence faded with doubt. Did Dukan already have skilled employees? She couldn't do much besides play a violin and dance and she wasn't sure if she had a place among the money being thrown around to build everything.

She reached the city square. The center was a large park with plenty of places for picnics, galleries, and even a small zoo with "marvelous creatures from the forbidden deserts!" She chuckled but didn't have the time or the three cukdins to go through the exhibit.

Not wanting to tease herself with the zoo, she circled around until she spotted Dukan's bank on the far side. It was just like she remembered, a one-story building that reached deep into the block. Six thick pillars marked the entrance, each one a carved figure of a man and carrying something different: a stack of books, an intricate staff, a pair of coins, a large mechanical lock, a miniature house, and an equally small ship. She vaguely remembered them as heads of the various banking unions throughout Gepaul, but she didn't know their names or even the significance of each item.

Linsan hesitated on the opposite side of the road, one foot in the park and the other on the boardwalk that surrounded it. Around her, men in suits and ladies in dresses hurried along as they headed to their jobs and hobbies.

She felt scared and nervous. Tugging on her wool coat, she couldn't decide if she should take it off or leave it on. It was warm but the sweat prickling her brow came from her nervousness, not the sunlight that rose above the roofs.

A high-pitched horn cut through the din. She turned to the sound as a vehicle came rolling around the corner. It was another of the automatic carriages, the black panels shining as the drivers honked their horns to chase horses and people out of the way.

Seeing the car was another change that Linsan hadn't gotten used to yet. Only the rich could afford them but

there were a lot more in the city. She had seen at least three on her way to the bank, but the horses still outnumbered the steam-belching devices.

Linsan didn't like them. They scared her with so much metal and they moved too fast for her liking.

The car coming around the corner started to slow down near her.

She stepped back to avoid it, but then bumped into someone walking behind her. At the hiss, she forced herself to step closer.

To her relief, the vehicle rolled past her. The ground shook underneath her feet from its passing. A cloud of acidic steam followed after it along with the heavy scent of burning oil and wet leather.

The driver surprised her. It was a woman driving by herself. The slender lady wore a beautiful green dress with a matching gloves and hat. The hat had lace covering her face but there was no mistaking the large curls of black hair that fell off a pale neck and silk-covered shoulders.

Linsan smiled to herself. It was an outfit Linsan's mother would have loved wearing on stage. She could almost picture it.

The car squealed and then came to a shuddering halt.

Linsan stepped away.

The lady driver slipped out smoothly and came around the back of the car. She had a small purse in her hand but looked like she was going to a formal dinner with the way she walked with almost perfect posture that left her back arched just slightly and neck held high.

Linsan couldn't help but smile at the sight. After seeing her mother's craft, she could tell the driver strained slightly to keep herself in the right position and watched her steps from the corner of her eyes. She was showing off for the public.

Their eyes met for just a second and then the lady continued past the car without giving any indication that she saw Linsan. She headed straight toward the bank. Her black hair bounced with every step, the curls glistening in the sunlight.

Linsan watched with a sinking sensation. She couldn't just follow after her. She was plain and unassuming, even in her best dress. Pressing her lips into a thin line, she considered waiting fifteen minutes to let the lady driver do whatever errand she needed before she went inside.

She turned and looked back at the zoo. Maybe she could peek at the creatures? She had a few cukdins in her pocket.

"Linsan? Linsan Sterlig?"

She froze at her name. Then cringed when she realized it had to be the lady driver. Slowly, she turned around.

The woman had stopped in the road and turned around. She cocked her head before coming back to the boardwalk. "What are you doing here?"

Linsan opened her mouth but she didn't know what to say.

With a delicate step, the woman in green stepped into the boardwalk. "I haven't seen you in... what? Three years? Four? You still have that ruined valley outside of town? Or that shitty home on the edge?"

It took only a heartbeat longer for Linsan to realize who she was talking to. Brook's voice still had the disdain and disgust from before, but somehow her more refined voice had sharpened the words.

Linsan's stomach clenched and she felt sick and humiliated. "Y... Yes."

Brook snorted and pointedly looked at Linsan from head to toe. Her dark gaze could be felt more than seen. It took a long count before she looked up again. She just shook her head and gave a disapproving sigh.

Linsan blushed.

Brook looked around. "You by yourself?"

All Linsan's "what if" scenarios hadn't covered Brook. She stammered for a moment and then gestured toward the bank with a halfhearted gesture. "I was hoping to talk to your dad."

Brook looked at her sharply. "Selling off the stuff in the vault?"

Linsan tensed. "Never."

"Then what, begging for money?"

Linsan's blush grew hotter. She looked away to avoid looking at Brook.

Brook snorted.

Linsan struggled to say something but then three men walked around them to cut across the street. She spotted a strange case on the back of one of them. It was for a stringed instrument, but the proportions were wrong. The words froze in her throat as she turned to watch them with the scent of wood smoke teasing her nose.

All three wore leather dusters, long coats that were suited for traveling on the roads and less in town. However, the case drew her curiosity. It looked like it was for a string instrument but the shell was too large to be a violin, too small for a cello, and wider than either.

Then she realized Brook was staring pointedly at her. With her cheeks burning, Linsan clasped her hands together and nodded. "Just a little more. We just need a bit more help."

Brook scoffed. "It's been years, what makes you think it's going to get better now? A hundred cuktins more a month or even a thousand, your family is still going to be scraping the bottom of the barrel."

"It isn't that."

Brook pointed at the bank. "It is that! You have that stupid wooden... thing in the vault that would set you up for life. My dad said it was worth millions. Millions of Couple-damn cuks and your parents are so full of themselves that they can't let it go!"

Linsan couldn't respond to that.

In the distance, she heard someone playing music. A few chords of a melody drifted right at the edge of her hearing.

Brook stepped closer, her voice rising. She was slightly taller than Linsan in her boots and the smell of her flowery perfume surrounded Linsan. "You choose this."

"We did—"

"You all made a choice to be poor and you know it. All you had to do was stop clinging to your past and you could be richer than us! But, you decided that it was more important to leave all that money gathering dust in a bank vault than get on with your lives!"

Brook spat on the ground to the side. "That's what's wrong with you. You and the rest of the Sterligs."

Linsan shivered with discomfort. She wanted to run away with doubt. Brook was right, she was asking for money like a fool. Tears burned in her eyes as she berated herself for even considering coming to the bank.

The music grew louder, a curious twang of a style that she had never heard before. She wanted to look back into the park to find the source but Brook kept her pinned with her presence.

"Just leave," Brook said while waving her hand dismissively. "You aren't welcome here. I'm glad we got rid of your family when we did. You, your father, and even your mother are nothing more than a rope strangling everyone you touch."

Linsan's jaw tightened with annoyance. Her right hand tightened into a fist.

Brook's lips curled into a cruel smile. "Try it. You throw a punch and I will have my attorney evicting your parents before you can run home."

"You mean your father's?" snapped Linsan. She was rapidly losing all semblance of control in the conversation.

"No, mine. I pay them." Brook leaned forward until Linsan had to lean back. "Unlike you, I've actually done something with my life and I have a pretty nest egg of my own. It's right there in that bank next to that dusty, old—"

The front doors of the bank burst open in a flash.

Linsan jerked back reflexively.

A wave of heat and noise slammed into the two. She stumbled into Brook. Their cheeks smacked before Brook managed to shove Linsan to separate them. "You fucking bitch, I'm—"

The air around them grew heavy, pressing down on Linsan's skin. It felt as if something was rushing toward them. With a gasp, she looked past Brook's furious face to see another firestorm gathering inside the bank. It was rushing toward the front door, howling as gasses jetted out of the now gaping windows and doors.

With a gasp, Linsan looked at Brook who didn't seem to notice.

"—going to sue—"

There was no time. Linsan grabbed the front of Brook's dress. The material ripped as she clenched with all her might. Then she yanked Brook to the side, bouncing off the back of the car parked next to them before swinging her around the far side.

Brook's shoulder slammed into the back door, cracking the glass. Her mouth opened in surprise as she failed to pull Linsan's hands away. "Get—"

Linsan rolled around and then dropped down to hide behind the door. Her weight tore at Brook's dress even further,

exposing the silk underclothes across her chest but Linsan's effort forced Brook to drop to one knee.

Brook drew back and shoved Linsan with both hands. "—off!"

An explosion drowned out anything else Brook said. The concussion wave crashed into the car, shoving it closer to the curb.

Linsan's foot caught on the wheel but she managed to pull it free before the car tilted toward them. Shattered glass from the windows rained down on them, the sharp edges of the shards cutting across Linsan's face. Scalding liquid added to her cuts as a cup upended from inside the vehicle.

Brook screamed, only stopping as an intense wave of heat blew past them.

Linsan panted in fear as she looked around. Her face was dripping and she could taste a strange sweetness on her lips. Licking it without thinking, she almost coughed on the bitter taste of tea and too much sugar. Her ears were ringing and she couldn't hear anything. In the park, almost everyone had been thrown to the ground and small fires were burning everywhere. Trees and grasses had been flattened by the explosion.

Blood ran down Brook's cheek. Linsan looked in concern but it looked like the glass had left shallow cuts that were already bleeding profusely. She frowned and reached up.

Brook smacked her hand away. Her mouth opened but no sound was coming out.

Linsan limped back and then stood up gingerly. Her eyes turned immediately toward the bank, which was engulfed in flames. Hot jets of fire poured out of the windows and the door. The carved pillars were shattered and broken, the remains scorched and burning.

Something tickled her hand. Glancing down, she saw rivers of crimson pouring down her elbow. Shaking, she followed the blood up to where a large shard of glass was sticking out of the meat of her upper arm. The sharp edge glinted as she stared at it.

Dazed, Linsan reached up and pulled it out. She could feel the wet sucking before it popped free with a gout of blood. Her hand trembling, she tossed the glass aside and then looked around for something to stop the blood that poured out.

She couldn't tell why she wasn't panicking, or why it didn't hurt. She couldn't find anything obvious until she peered into Brook's hand. There was a blue scarf that looked like it was part of a fancy dress but it looked thick. She grabbed it and then wrapped it around her arm, wincing without really feeling the pain.

Brook blinked, her body shaking just as violently as Linsan. She looked up with a tortured expression and then her lips moved a moment before the words came out. "... happened?" It was difficult to hear her over the ringing in Linsan's ears.

Linsan gestured toward the bank. "The bank?"

Brook didn't respond.

Linsan repeated herself.

Brook mouthed the words. Then, her eyes widened as she scrambled to her feet. "Daddy?"

Spinning around, she gasped at the sight of the bank. "Daddy!" she screamed as she raced around the ruined car and sprinted toward the burning building.

Linsan wasn't expecting Brook to run toward the flames. She scrambled after Brook screaming her name.

Brook raced across the burning street, her torn dress fluttering through small fires but she moved too fast for the fabric to catch fire.

To Linsan's relief, she stopped on the sidewalk in front of the building. Even from that distance, the heat was intense. It beat against Linsan's face, billowing at her as they both stared into the inferno in shock.

"Daddy?" whimpered Brook.

Linsan looked around. "Where is the fire brigade? I... I..." She didn't know where to go.

A strange melody drifted through the howling flames. It sounded like a string instrument of some sort and she thought about the unusual men who passed them earlier. Confused, she peered past the broken glass to inspect the musician standing in a circle of fire.

There was a man standing in the middle of the flames, playing with no concern for the fires that roared around him. His leather duster was fluttering as he spun around, playing rapidly a foreign tune. His instrument didn't look like anything she had seen before. It looked almost like a mandolin except the shape was more angular than anyone she had seen and the sounds were compressed. It sounded as if it had metal strings instead of gut.

The man's fingers flew along the neck, tapping along the individual strings with stunning speed. With each note plucked with his other hand, ripples of power radiated along his fingertips until a powerful chord blasted away from the instrument in sheets of flame.

Linsan gasped. The stranger was causing or controlling the flames. She reached out and tapped Brook. "Look!"

Brook followed Linsan's gesture and then gasped herself. "What is he doing?"

The stranger turned and their eyes met. He smiled, his teeth shockingly white in the flames. Then he slammed his hands down across the strings and a chord of music ignited the air around him. It howled as it rushed toward them.

Brook and Linsan dodged in separate directions.

Linsan almost fell as she staggered forward. Then she turned around just as Brook was regaining her feet.

Storming forward, Brook stopped in front of the open door. Beyond it, the fire blazed brightly. She drew her hands back and then clapped them hard in front of her.

A blast of raw noise exploded from the impact, slamming into the fire and shoving it back. The burning frame cracked from the impact as the wave slammed into Linsan, shoving her back with the force of Brook's magic.

Brook screamed and clapped her hand again, a powerful blow that snuffed flames. Embers flew in all directions—including toward Linsan's face.

Linsan raised her arm to protect her face.

When she peeked back, Brook stomped into the burning bank. Her hands clapped together and another explosion blasted the smoking wall away.

"Brook!" screamed Linsan and chased after her and into the building. She didn't have any ability to do anything, not without a music instrument. She had left her own violin at home, never dreaming she would need it, but she couldn't leave Brook to fight the stranger alone.

Inside, the heat was overwhelming. It sucked the air out of Linsan's lungs and caused her skin to crawl with sharp scratches and prickling dryness. Her vision blurred from the smoke and heat.

The stranger picked himself up from the ground. His instrument swung around as he slapped it into place. He managed to blast off a chord with his right hand before Brook's clap punched into him. The force of the blow caused the ceiling to creak as he was thrown back into the wall. Burning wood fell down around him as he managed to keep on his feet.

He yelled “Gab! May!” before slamming out another chord. Flames shot out from his instrument, howling as it blasted toward Brook and Linsan.

Brook had to clap her hands rapidly to stop the flames. She tried to do another powerful clap, but a rapid chord interrupted her and she had to smack her hands to stop the flames from reaching her.

Linsan glanced at the back of the bank. Palisis was in the vault, she could use that to help in the fight. She inched to the side, looking for a path through the flames.

Then, one of the strangers came out of the door leading to the vault. He had a large pack over his shoulder. His eyes grew wide and he came to a sharp stop. He stared at the fight between the stranger and Brook. With a swear, he charged. His hands ignited into white flames as he threw himself in front of the stranger. As soon as he landed, he brought his hands together.

A wave of concussive force like Brook’s radiated from the impact. It didn’t snuff the flames in the same way but instead fanned them. They grew stronger and brighter as they roared toward Brook.

Brook looked frightened as she clapped her hands again. Her gloves peeled back from the blast, leaving blood to splash onto the ground and sizzle in the heat. She staggered back, her feet scraping on the blackened ground.

A third man rushed in from one of the offices. He also had a bag on his shoulder and there were cuds spilling out across the ground before the currency cards ignited from the heat. “Damn! What you need, Til?”

The one playing the instrument called out. “Gab! Car’s out back, clear a path!”

Gab turned, jumped into the air, and then brought his hand down to punch the ground.

Wood and flames burst in all directions as a wave of force shot out from him to crash into the back wall of the bank. It shattered wood and bricks as it carved into the building behind the bank.

When the explosion faded, sunlight streamed in from the far side of the block.

Gab did it again, jumping up to punch the ground and blow out more of the back walls. "Out!" he bellowed before racing down the tunnel he had just created.

Til stepped back, playing faster and harder. Flames and music rose around him, shifting like a snake. It jerked to one side and then to the other.

Brook couldn't reach him with her power as she struggled against the man between them. Both of them were using concussive forces but their attacks couldn't reach other.

However, the repeated impacts were causing damage to the burning bank. Wood and embers plummeted around them. The floor beneath everyone cracked and shuddered with each magical blast.

Linsan focused on the vault but the flames had risen up and her way was blocked. She growled with frustration, she needed to help Brook and she was useless without an instrument; not that she had any skills against a man more adept at using music to attack.

The ground shuddered violently as boards split apart. Jets of flames rose up around all of them.

"Bring it down, May!" bellowed Til as he backed into the burning hole in the back.

May grinned and began to clap fast and hard. Heat and fire gathered around him, punching the air as his powers hammered against Brook.

Brook clapped back, but she had to move faster as the flames engulfed her.

Linsan had to move. “Shit,” she said before she turned away from the vault and sprinted toward Brook.

The ground erupted underneath her.

She spun past, lightly kicking off a chair to dance around the flames. She twirled past as the world slowed and she worked her way back to Brook.

May suddenly drew his hands back and slammed them hard in front of him. A halo of energy flashed around his silhouette. The resulting concussion was less of a clap and more of an explosion as fire blasted in all directions. It tore boards from the ground and ripped apart the ceiling.

Linsan grabbed Brook by her long hair and yanked back with all her might toward the door.

Brook screamed out in frustration as she felt back. “No! Daddy!”

The floor where she was standing burst into flames, the heat shoving them back both. Linsan pulled and yanked at Brook, trying to get her through the door before any more of the building collapsed.

Over Brook’s thrashing form, she saw May stepped back before he turned around and raced for the hole in the back.

In the briefest of moments, as the fires brightened into brilliance, the buffeting winds beat against his back and she saw the distinctive shape of a violin inside his bag before the smoke obscured his escape.

Then one final explosion threw them out the door and into the street.

Chapter 9

Burn Damage

The field of arson investigation has been one of the more successful specializations of guard forces. There are now entire branches of magic dedicated to legally identifying the cause and source of such blazes.

—*When the Fire Burns Blue*

Linsan shifted uncomfortably on the back seat of Brook's car. The shattered glass and twisted metal had been brushed aside to give her as much comfort as she could on the torn and scorched leather. No matter what position she found, a throb or itch from her injuries caused her to find a new location.

Frowning, she scratched the thick pad of bandages wrapped around her upper arm. She could still feel the sting of the stitches the barber had sewn before wrapping them. The hand below her injury shook and she couldn't help but worry if she had lost the ability to play the violin.

She glanced to the front of the car where Brook sat in the passenger seat. Brook's eyes never wavered from the smoldering building across the street, even when the barber held her head to the side to finish stitching the wound in

her brow. Blood matted her dark hair and streaks of crimson had turned brown as they dried.

The barber, an older man with steady hands, had a shop a few blocks away. He was already running up when the explosion threw Linsan and Brook out of the building but it took a while to look for the most serious injuries and dole out bandages.

By the time he came around again, this time for stitches and poultices, it had been almost an hour. The brigade had put out the fires with a bucket brigade and two talents with water magic. She even saw an old woman with ice powers working her way through the flames.

"There you go, Sweetie," announced the barber as he stepped back. "There might be a scar, I can't do anything about that."

Brook said nothing.

He leaned over to peer at her. "Sweetie?"

She leaned to the side to stare at the fire.

With a sigh, he straightened and turned to Linsan. "Anything, Sunshine? How are those stitches holding up?"

Linsan's injuries ached and burned but they were properly bandaged and there was no leaking blood. She had a long time to heal but nothing else that could be done at the moment. "I think I'm good, thank you."

He bowed and then hurried over to the next serious injury.

Linsan returned her attention to the bank. The flames were gone but it continues to smoke and smolder. A guard walked among the ashes; it was a fire fighter judging from his red outfit and the way he picked up blacked hunks of wood with his bare hands. Around him, the air wavered from the heat.

She turned and looked at Brook. Her dark hair was matted with blood. Soot marked her face and hands. Her green

dress had been ruined with various cuts, tears, and scorch marks. She scratched her nose with a finger that had ripped free of her glove.

Linsan didn't know what to say. She reached up to put her hand on Brook's shoulder but then pulled back. She sighed and shook her head. Brook wasn't a friend, not after everything that had happened.

"Dame Kabisal?" One of the city guards came up. It was a hawk-faced woman that looked like she couldn't smile if her life dependent on it. She held a clipboard in her right hand.

"Yes?" answered Brook in a dead-panned voice.

"My name is Tirain Valos, a senior guard here in town. Could you tell me who was in the bank when the explosion started?"

Brook didn't look away from the blackened ruins. "I already told you."

"Please? I need to confirm everything."

"Fine," she said with a sigh. "Before the three men came, only daddy was working today. Everyone else had the day off to celebrate Salamin Day."

Linsan had never heard of Salamin but Tirain just nodded and wrote something down. She shook her head and sighed. Then she looked over her shoulder at the ruins and then back again. She cleared her throat before focusing on her words again. "No one else in the building? Are you sure?"

A prickle danced across Linsan's skin. Tirain was acting as if she had bad news. Linsan's mind spun furiously over the words until only one answer seemed obvious: they had found a dead body. She inhaled sharply. It had to be Dukan. Trembling, she reached over the back of the seat to rest her hand on Brook's bared shoulder.

Brook jumped. She turned and looked at Linsan with a strange mixture of shock and horror. Her brown eyes focused on the hand.

"Please, Dame Kabisal. I need to write this today. You said three men. Could you tell me what you know about them? And if anyone else could correlate?"

Linsan held up her other hand, wincing at the pain. "I saw the three guys go in."

Tirain asked them to describe everything that had happened, including the fight inside the bank. It was tedious and detailed, with the guard asking the same question many times.

By the time the questions trailed off, the fire investigator came walking up. The air shimmered around him as he brushed off embers onto the cobblestones. "Sargent?"

The guard turned to him. "Yes, Mage-Captain Kamel?"

"I have my initial report. You should see this."

Tirain gestured for him to walk a short distance. Linsan watched warily as they talked among themselves. The feeling that there was bad news only grew as she saw the lines furrowing across the guard's face.

Brook pushed Linsan's hand from her shoulder. "Don't touch me."

Linsan flinched but pulled her hand back.

"Why didn't you fight?" Brook's voice was low and bitter.

With a cringe, Linsan sat back. "I tried."

"You just stood around."

"I need an instrument to use my talent. I've tried without, but it doesn't work."

"I don't," Brook said. "I could have stopped them if you were just stronger. If you actually could do anything."

Linsan sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"You should be." Brook turned away from her.

Tirain returned. "Dame Kabisal?"

“Yes?”

“I hate to ask you this, but...” She tightened her grip on her board. “I need you to...”

Linsan finished. “You found a body?”

Brook tensed and her back straightened. “No,” she whispered.

The guard cringed and nodded. “If you can, it would help with the investigation.”

“D-Daddy died?”

Another cringe. “I’m sorry.”

Brook pressed her fingers against her upper lip. Tears sparkled in her eyes. “No.”

Linsan realized she was crying also. She sniffed and pushed herself up. “Can I help?”

Brook glared at her. “You haven’t seen him for years. What can you do?”

“But I can still try.” Linsan frowned at the truthful words. She didn’t know what Duncan looked like anymore, she just wanted to do something.

With a groan, Brook stood up. She stepped in front of Linsan. “I’ll look,” she announced before she strode toward the bank.

“Um, please be careful, your dress might catch fire,” said Tirain.

The fire mage held up his hand and waved it dismissively. “Everything has cooled down, it won’t even scorch the fabric.”

Tirain gave him a hard look. “And the soot, Kamel da Kasin?” The “da Kasin” meant that he was from Tarsan, country to the east.

Kamel, the fire guard, shrugged. “That will probably make a mess of it.”

“I don’t care,” Brook said sharply and kept walking.

Linsan and the others looked at the scorched, ruined dress. A few more moments in the bank wouldn't do any more damage to the already ruined material. They followed after Brook.

The smoking ruins were still hot. Heat rippled the air around him. Linsan was surprised how much damage was burn and how much was cracks and shattered stone. She wondered if Brook's power had contributed to the collapse of the bank.

"In the vault."

The vault was the only part of the building was completely surrounded by stone. It had no bricks, just the smooth surface of magically shaped rock. Despite that, much of it had been burned out and everything was a jumble of scorched wood and pieces of paper. The stench was overpowering.

Then she spotted the body. Right in the middle of the floor, there was a charred corpse. At the sight, Linsan felt bile rising up in her throat. "By the Couple," she whispered.

"I hate to ask, but is there any way of telling us if that was your father?" asked Tirain.

Brook hesitated before she knelt down. She grabbed his wrist.

A stench of burnt meat rose up, choking Linsan. Her stomach heaved for a moment.

Brook let out a groan herself and clutched her stomach. With a trembling her hand, she turned the body's corpse over to show the blackened bracelet. "That's Daddy's," she said in a quiet, dull voice. "The other half of the pair is at home."

She shook as tears splashed down on the charred ground. Lifting herself up, she held her dress off the ground before stepping and then knelt down on the other side. She pointed to his ring. "That's also Daddy's."

Tirain nodded and wrote quickly in her notebook.

Brook patted the corpse's pockets. " He should have his auto-driver activation gear here..." Her voice trailed off for a moment as she finished tapping his pocket. With a sickening groan, she reached over to test his other.

Linsan circled around, fighting the urge to vomit. She couldn't look at Brook or the corpse. Instead, she focused on the ruins inside the vault. There were destroyed shelves everywhere, thousands of boxes destroyed in the flames.

Her foot thudded against a box. She pulled back and then realized it was familiar. Memories came rushing back. It was the wooden case she had found in the attic. The heavy wood was scorched and blackened but it had survived with relatively little damage.

She knelt down and touched the warm surface. She cringed as she opened up the top and let it fall back.

Kamel cleared his throat.

She looked up.

He shook his head.

Brook sighed. "I can't find his auto-driver key. That would be more proof."

Tirain sighed and wrote on her clipboard. "Two pieces of identification is sufficient. Could I summon a wagon to take you home to verify against the other piece?"

Brook stood up. "I guess," she said. Her eyes scanned the room before fixating on Linsan. Then a deep frown furrowed her brow. "Yes, let's go. I need to get away."

Linsan sighed. She looked down at the box. She could see the letters inside, the edges burnt but the names still visible.

The one thing she didn't see was Palisis. There wasn't even charred wood or ashes inside. Only an empty space where the nearly priceless violin would have been stored.

Her ears pounded as she stared at it. She squatted down to inspect the case.

"Dame, you need to also go," said Kamel. He had approached.

"It isn't here," Linsan said as she felt her throat growing tight.

"What isn't here?"

"Palisis. M-My father's violin. It was right here."

"Maybe it burned up?" He said even as he was squatting down himself. His bare hands ran along the velvet inside the case. When he flipped up his finger, it only had a few motes of dust clinging to the tip. He looked around at the damage, obviously looking for it. "Maybe it fell out."

She glanced at him. He had a scruff of a beard just starting to color his cheeks. His hair was short but there was a strong scent of old smoke and wood; after so many years of visiting the ruined workshop, she knew the smell by heart.

After a few seconds of peering around, he shook his head. "Maybe it wasn't. I don't see any metal from the body or anything in the right shape. You're right. If it was here, there would be signs. Maybe your father removed it?"

"No, we wouldn't have touched it. It was precious to my family. No one would have ever sold it. I thought I saw it in May's bag but I couldn't believe it. But... but... it's not here."

"May?"

She blushed. "I-I don't know his full name. He was one of the robbers that attacked us. I... told the other woman."

"Tirain is her name." The guard sighed and shook his head. "Well, I need to report this. But right now, I have more questions. Is your family in town? Where do you live?"

She reflexively gave her name and address.

"Sterlig?" His voice grew sharper. "You had a fire a few years ago. A workshop or store? I remember it being outside of town."

Allegro

She sniffed and nodded.

He straightened. “Come, I’m going to take you home. I have more questions.”

Hard Questions

Never underestimate the techniques of controlling a conversation. Criminals always slip up, you just have to get them to throw out enough lies they can't remember the truth.

—*Flaws of the Criminal Mind*

It didn't take long before Linsan was being driven back home. Kamel and the rest of the guards didn't have mechanical vehicles, so she sat in the passenger side of a small carriage pulled by a single horse.

Sitting next to Kamel felt more like sitting outside the headmaster's room at school. Whenever that happened, she was always on the receiving end of whatever punishment was doled out. Too many times, it was Brook that she had been fighting with. At least until Brook and her sisters left for the fancy school across town.

At the thought of Brook, Linsan's mood darkened. The words she had said before they went their separate ways still stung. Linsan had tried to join into the fight, but what could she do without an instrument? With the guilt rising, she decided she needed to always have her violin with her. Just in case.

Kamel sighed as he snapped the reins on the horse. Ever since she had mentioned the fire at the workshop, he seemed to be on edge. His eyes would snap back and forth and he occasionally made a grunt.

She wondered if she had said the wrong thing. She couldn't imagine what it was, she had told the truth and didn't embellish it. However, he seemed to have responded with a sharpness that worried her.

Kamel stopped the wagon across the street from her house. He looked around for a moment until she gestured to her front door. With a muttered thanks, he got out tied the horse to a nearby tether. "Come on. I have some questions for you and your parents."

She followed him up the walk. The cracked paving stones shifted slightly under their weight and she noticed a few places that she had forgotten to weed. She glanced up at him, hating the feeling of dread that hung over her.

Before they got halfway, the front door was yanked open and her mother rushed out. She was wearing one of her lighter dresses and cleaning gloves that matched the color. Her auburn hair had been pulled back behind a scarf. "Lin!? What's wrong?"

Kamel stepped briskly to the side as Tisin rushed past him.

Seeing her mother, Linsan realized she had to tell her parents about Duncan. A cry rose up in her throat. "Mommy!"

Then, as she fell into Tisin's embrace, the cries turned into a wail. "I'm so sorry! I tried! I swear!"

"What's wrong, Baby?" Tisin was sobbing as she stroked Linsan's hair. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Linsan struggled to explain what had happened. Every time she opened her mouth, a storm of memories and guilt crashed into her. She looked helplessly at her mother,

struggling to find the way of explaining what had happened.

"Oh, Baby. It's okay, I swear. Just take a deep breath." Her voice was wavering. But when Linsan looked into her eyes, there wasn't even a hint of sorrow or fear. With a start, Linsan realized her mother was only playing a role.

Kamel cleared his throat. "Sire Sian Sterlig?"

"What happened?" asked Linsan's father as he approached.

"There was a fire at the Kabisal Bank this morning."

Tisin's arms tightened around Linsan. There was a moment that the gaze cracked with emotions. She turned sharply to the fire inspector. "Duncan? Is he okay?"

Kamel cleared his throat. "There was a fatality. We are still identifying the body—"

"But you think it is Duncan," Sian said in a low, broken tone. He shook his head as tear glittered in his eyes. "Damn the Couple. He was a good man."

Her mother stood up sharply. "What happened?"

Kamel pulled out a notepad. "Actually, I have—"

"What happened?" she repeated. Her voice seemed to take on a different quality. It echoed despite them being out in the front yard. The sound resonated like a finely-tuned instrument, hanging in the air just a second too long.

Kamel groaned. He tightened his grip on his notepad. Sweat prickled on his brow as he shook his head. "I might remind you, it is illegal to use emotional and mental manipulation against guards on duty." His voice was strained and broken. It wavered and cracked.

Tisin's posture deflated. She stepped back as she wrapped her arms over her chest. "Sorry," she said in her normal voice.

Kamel gulped and let out a long groan of relief. "Damn. That was unexpected. You have a beautiful voice."

She smiled but the expression never reached her eyes.

Kamel turned toward Sian. He looked over his shoulder at Linsan and Tisin. "Could we move this inside? I have some questions and some of them are intimate."

Sian turned and gestured toward the house. "Please? Come inside, Captain...?"

"Thank you. I'm Mage-Captain Kamel da Kasin. Captain would be sufficient since I'm here during an investigation." He turned and headed toward the house.

Inside, they settled down around the dining room table. Tisin dragged her chair around the table to sit between to her husband and Linsan. Linsan set next to both of them, feeling scared and nervous.

Kamel pulled his chair across from them. He sighed and tapped his notebook. "This is always the hardest part of the job but I need to ask some questions."

"Was it Duncan?" asked her mother.

A nod. "You knew him?"

Sian shook his head and wiped his eyes. "He was my best friend. We had known each other since he, Marin, and I were in the army. That was about twenty-five or six years now."

Linsan perked up with curiosity. She didn't know that her father was in the army. Actually, she didn't know much about either of her parents.

"Which company?"

"119th Infantry. I never made rank, I wasn't that impressive. Mandatory military service, nothing more." Her father's eyes were shimmering with tears. He wiped them with the back of his head.

Kamel's eyes shifted to Tisin. "You?"

She shrugged. "2nd Entertainment Company, Sargent."

"How did you meet your husband?"

"Marin."

“Who is Marin?”

Sian’s eyes darkened. “She was my best friend. We went through training together. When we were assigned to the same company, I thought I was the luckiest man in the world. She was beautiful, smart, and funny. Of course, Duncan was also in love with her.”

Kamel wrote something down. “What happened?”

Tisin smiled.

Sian shook his head and chuckled. “We were both idiots. I got so focused on fighting with Duncan over her affections, we never realized that we had pushed her away. Or, she never was interested in either of us. It was hard to tell then.”

Tisin rested her hand on her husband’s.

He smiled and patted her hand with his free hand. “She found someone else who loved her more than I ever could.”

Kamel scribbled furiously on his notepad. He seemed to have a grim look. “Duncan?”

“No, my wife.”

Kamel’s head snapped up. “W-What?”

Tisin smiled and leaned against him. “I wasn’t his wife at the time. Junith would be my first spouse.”

“I... see. How did Duncan handle this?” The point of his pen hovered over the notebook.

“He was my best man,” Tisin said. She nodded to her husband. “Sian’s was Marin’s. We were all close after our service. When our tours finished, we all decided to move here and help Sian with the family business.”

The pen dipped slightly. “You were friends? True friends?”

Linsan stared at him. He looked almost disappointed but the look quickly faded. He had at least some of the same skills her mother had, at least at hiding his emotions. Her mother was better though.

Leaning over, Tisin stroked her husband's hand. "Oh yes. It was just the four of us for a long time. Then Junith and I began to drift apart. She wanted more adventures but I was happy here. We separated as friends."

"Did anything between you and Duncan happen then?"

"No, he was already married and had just had his first daughter. Duncan and I stayed working with Sian on the business because we found that we worked well together."

She smiled softly as her eyes grew softer. "He had a talent at knowing everyone. He kept everything flowing, making sales and getting customers to pay the bills."

Then her eyes grew harder and she squeezed Sian's hand.

Sian spoke up. "After the fire, he helped us as much as he could but we lost everything including our names. There was only so much you can do when you lose everything. Most of the Sterlig sound came from the trees in our valley. When everything burned, I couldn't make any more instruments."

"And Duncan?"

Linsan's father sighed. "He had a family. There were bills. He couldn't dedicate his life to me. I was ruined and he needed to move on."

"Marin?"

"She married Junith about six years ago in Stone Over Moon Waters. We couldn't make it, so we sent Palisis as a gift."

"Have you talked to her recently?" Kamel asked, writing down.

"She died of cancer two months after they got married," came the sharp reply from Linsan's mother.

Silence filled the dining room.

Kamel's face grew slack. "When was the last time you saw Duncan?"

"It's been years." Sian bowed his head. "Except for the monthly checks, I really haven't had any contact with him at all."

"Checks?"

Tisin patted Sian's hand.

Linsan closed her eyes tightly. That was the entire reason she had gone to visit Duncan. Her great idea had gone up with flames and she found something new to worry about.

"He's been sending us a thousand cuks every month."

Startled, Linsan stared at them in shock. "A-A thousand? I-I thought it was three hundred."

Sian shook his head. "It hasn't been three hundred for years. He had been bumping it up every year on your birthday."

Tisin gasped as she stood up. Pushing back her chair, she rushed out of the room. "The letter!"

"What letter?" asked Kamel and Linsan. Linsan looked at him and then back to her parents.

Her father gestured through the door that Tisin had exited. "We got a letter last week. Duncan had just set up a trust fund to make sure the checks would continue for the rest of Linsan's life. It was going to be her birthday present."

Linsan stared, her eyes tearing over and her chest hurting. All her plans were for naught? She had worked herself up for nothing? She let out a sob.

They looked at her.

"I-I was going into town to ask for him to keep the checks going. I figured I could earn it."

"That's why you weren't at breakfast?" asked her father.

Kamel spoke up. "You never told her?"

Sian shook his head. "I didn't think she remembered about the checks. She was a little girl then. Money has been tight for a while and that letter was a gift from the Couple."

He turned back to Linsan. "I should have told you, I'm sorry."

Tisin came in and handed the guard the letter.

Kamel read it, shaking his head as he did. He set down the letter and wrote in his notebook. "May I keep this?"

When they agreed, he tucked it into his pocket. Then he flipped a page in his notebook. "Do you think the money is going to continue if he's dead?"

Her father shook his head sadly. "Probably not. I don't know."

Linsan noticed another faint look of disappointment on Kamel's face. He was looking for something but she didn't know what. It felt as if he was trying to trap them.

Kamel wrote for a second.

As he did, Sian told Tisin about Linsan going into town. Her mother smiled at her with more pride than Linsan thought possible.

The minutes crawled by.

Linsan and her father squirmed. Tisin seemed to be perfectly at ease standing next to her husband. She was on stage again, though her expression had just a faintest expression of distrust from the guard.

"Did you have anything in the bank vault?"

Sian nodded. "Some old items, mementos mainly. Memories that we wanted to keep safe." Then he let out a long sigh and seemed to age in a second. "The violin was destroyed, wasn't it?"

The corner of Kamel's lips tightened. It almost looked like a smile. His pen hovered over the page. "Was it worth a lot?"

Tisin said, "Yes and no."

Kamel looked up. "What do you mean?" He looked frustrated and confused.

"It was Marin's but she never played it."

“An unsung instrument is worth a lot of money, isn’t it?” Linsan could hear his voice growing more excited. “As one of the last instruments that you’ve made, that would be worth a lot, wouldn’t it? Millions?”

Tisin looked at him coldly. “Are you suggesting we stole Palisis?”

That seemed to throw Kamel. He glanced at Linsan and she felt a cold shiver of fear racing along her spine. “Your daughter said that name. Aren’t the most precious of instruments named like that? Seems like a useful moniker for building up a reputation to boost a sale.”

“She named it. When she was six,” came Tisin’s sharp reply. “And instruments like that are only precious when they haven’t ever felt the touch of a musician. Palisis has and is only worth the memories and emotions inside that wood and metal.”

“Not according to the card I saw in the box.”

Sian held up his hand. “That was a lie.”

Kamel’s face froze.

“I’m fully aware that a fortune could be made if people believed it was unsung. There are only three people who knew that it had been touched by a bow. While my wife and I would never, ever consider selling that instrument while we lived, we had hoped that Lin would be able to sell it after we were gone and give herself a good life.”

Linsan let out a long whimper. She remembered that brief moment when she felt Palisis in her hands.

Tisin looked at her with an apologetic look. “I’m sorry.”

Scribbling, Kamel frowned and shook his head. He wrote furious for a few seconds. “Still, the insurance would be—”

“There was no insurance,” Sian said.

The pen stopped.

Her father took a deep breath. “If people thought Palisis was unsung and it was truly worth the millions, how much

do you think insurance would cost us? We are struggling to keep a roof over our house and food in our larder. A thousand cuk check is the only thing that is keeping us from losing even that and now you tell us the man who giving it to us is dead.”

Kamel set down his pen. “Then why didn’t you sell the violin and—”

“No,” snapped both Sian and Tisin at the same time.

“What?”

“I made that for Marin and only for Marin. As far as I’m concerned, what my daughter had done has honored her memory but I have no intent to sully either of them by selling Palisis. That instrument means nothing to me or my wife other than the memories of our dearest friend.”

“But the—”

Tisin leaned forward. “Palisis is her memorial. She meant everything to the two of us and I would rather starve —”

Linsan noticed that her mother’s voice was taking on the strange timbre again. It was ringing in her head and each word felt like it was directed directly at her with the force of a gale.

“—than throw it aside for nothing more than a sack of cukdins!”

Kamel was sweating. Linsan didn’t remember seeing him moving but he was a foot away from the table with a surprised look on his face.

The air around them was tense and electric, like when Linsan used her magic while dancing.

Sian reached up and pressed his hand to his wife’s cheek. “Tis, take a deep breath.”

Tisin struggled for a moment. Then she straightened.

The presence that beat in the air disappeared in an instant.

Kamel gulped loudly. He slowly shifted his gaze to Linsan's father. "Do you feel the same?"

"Less empathically, but yes."

Kamel picked up his pen. "And your daughter? Are you going to let her starve?" His eyes focused directly on her parents.

Tisin's jaw tightened.

"A lot of parents will do anything for their child," the guard continued. "You knew she was struggling too, didn't you? She's coming out of school and about to have free reign in the world."

Linsan sighed. She didn't know what she was doing after school ended. In some ways, the fantasies of what job Duncan would insist on for the money was almost a fantasy for herself. It would give her purpose, at least until she figured out what to do herself.

Sian gave him a hard look. "Why are you asking these questions?"

"Because years ago, I was the lead investigator of the fire in Sterlig Valley. I saw a lot of things there, including signs of a magical accelerator used to ensure that valley burned completely."

He turned to Linsan. "Someone used magic to start that fire."

It took a moment for it to register. Linsan's mouth opened in surprise. "You think that guy with the string..." She turned to her father. "Daddy, he had a string instrument like a violin or a fiddle but with a wide sound box with six strings..." It took her another minute to finish describing it.

"That sounds like a guitar," he said looking up at the ceiling. "It's an instrument that has been gaining popularity for the last few years. It came from south of Lankerni but produces a much different sound."

Kamel tapped the table. "How do you know that?"

Sian turned and gestured to his office across the hallway. "I've been writing essays, papers, and columns about trends in the musical industry across three countries for six years. I know my instruments. If you need proof, I recommend you pick up any newspaper in this city for the last few years. If you want, I could give you the specific ones that I discuss the guitar—"

Kamel's shoulders slumped. He held up his hand. "Every time," he muttered.

Linsan leaned forward. "You think it was the same person?"

Kamel recovered and shook his head. "No, I know it was the same person. The resonance is identical. The flames had the same burn signature and temperature. The patterns of the burns on the ground and surfaces is the same. I've been investigating fires for close to thirty-five years. I know fire magic."

He turned to look at Sian. "Whoever destroyed your valley is also the same person who had just killed Duncan and appears to have stolen your violin."

Do Anything

The greatly anticipated auction for Gaminel's Kornalis resulted in a record-breaking 3.4 million crown bid for the previously long-lost instrument. Bidding went on for nearly an hour before the cello was sold to...

It was one of those days where getting dressed wasn't an option. Linsan staggered down the stairs in her nightgown. The railing creaked as she leaned on it, the slow noises making her sound like she was a broken woman. Her bare foot hit the ground floor and she hesitated, unsure if she wanted to head to the kitchen for breakfast or the living room just to sit.

It had been a terrible night filled with nightmares. She half expected to dream of fire and fight but most of her dreams were of endlessly rushing toward danger but unable to reach it. No matter how fast she ran or what shortcuts she could, she never reached the vague dangers before it was too late.

Hooking her messy hair over her ear, she turned and shuffled for her favorite chair in the living room. Sinking

down, she grabbed a blanket and dragged it over her lap despite the morning sun already warming the room.

Duncan was dead. Someone she knew, someone she had grown up with. She struggled to comprehend it, even though she hadn't seen him for years. Should she have visited more often? Was there something else she could have done? What if, years ago, she and Brook had become friends instead of enemies, would he still be alive?

Tears threatened to burn her eyes. She wiped her face and struggled to keep the sorrow from tearing into her heart.

Her thoughts drifted back to the fight before. No matter how she looked at it, Brook was right. Linsan had done almost nothing during the battle. She didn't throw a bunch, pick up a stick, or help at all. She was completely and utterly useless.

The stairs creaked slowly.

Linsan wiped her face again, scraping off the dried tears and clearing her eyes. She lifted her head and watching the opening of the living room to see who was coming down the stairs.

When her mother came to the bottom of the stairs. For the first time in many years, her hair was a messy nest with gray streaking through the pale brunette. Her face looked like it had aged overnight, but it wasn't the lack of makeup but something deeper. The only color on her face were her red-rimmed eyes.

Without looking at Linsan or the living room, Tisin turned and scuffed her way toward the kitchen.

Somehow, seeing her mother in distress made Linsan's despair deeper. Her mother had always taken care of her appearance. She was cheerful and beautiful. That was the way things were. That's the way they should have always been.

Linsan sniffed and buried her face in the warm blanket. Why did he have to die?

Her mother came back after a few minutes. "Lin?"

Linsan looked up.

Tisin stood at the foot of the stairs with a plate of leftovers from the night before. She looked haggard. Then, she cocked her head. "Oh, Baby."

Setting the plate on the stairs, she came over and sat on the arm of the chair. When Linsan shifted over, she slid her rear down and pulled her daughter into a tight hug. "I'm so sorry."

"I-I couldn't do anything."

"That's okay." Tisin kissed her cheek.

Linsan wrapped her arm around her mother and took a deep breath. Even the missing perfume made the experience surreal, too much had broken too fast.

"I could have."

Her mother said nothing.

"He died, Mommy. He died and I couldn't do anything."

Tisin kissed her forehead. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"He was our friend. He's been helping us for so long. Why did he have to die? Why him?"

"I know. I know." Her mother let out a soft sob and pressed her knuckles to her mouth for a moment. Her eyes shimmered until she closed them tightly. "This is just grief. He was our friend and we will cherish him, but right now, we just have to let this happen."

Linsan shook her head. "How? I couldn't—!"

Her mother silenced her with a finger. "You remember, *Tears on a Cat's Whiskers*?" It was an older play her mother had done, about a man who fell in love while training dal-pre, the animal people. Her mother had played Filil, the

leading cat woman who was tragically murdered at the end of the second act.

Linsan nodded.

“After Filil died, what did Padoris do?”

“He tried to kill himself,” muttered Linsan. “First by drinking and then he tried to cut his throat.”

Her mother glared at her. Then her expression softened. “But, he didn’t succeed. He went out and spent much of his fortune educating the dalpre, giving them a home, and helping them stand on their own. He found something to keep her memory going.”

Linsan nodded slowly.

Tisin reached over and cupped Linsan’s chin. “He was sad, he grieved, but then he did something. We’ll do the same. But we all need a little time to let the tears flow. You can’t rush one any more than the other.”

Linsan froze for a moment. That’s what she needed, to do something about Duncan’s death.

“Lin?” There was a worried tone in her voice.

Linsan blinked and gave her mother a smile. “Y... I understand.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Mommy.”

Tisin sighed and looked toward the stairs. “Your father and I are not really feeling up to cleaning today. Is it okay if we just let the world stop? Tomorrow, I’ll go shopping. We can see if the boy next door will pick up a meal for us.”

Nodding, Linsan hugged her mother tightly. Even as she did, her mind spun through threads of ideas, seeking out something she could do to help. The guards were investigating his death, but she doubted the murderers were still in town. They would be fools to do so. There was also no chance the guards would be able to follow them if they had left; they had to remain in town for the other crimes.

Kamel also said the same men had set fire to the family valley. They meant they were probably after Palisis from the beginning, not Duncan. The violin was worth millions and Duncan probably gave his life trying to stop them.

She tightened her jaw. If she could find the murderers, then she would also find her family's legacy. All she had to do was find the violin and then she would find the killers.

"Lin?"

Linsan looked at her mother.

"Don't do anything foolish."

"I won't," Linsan lied. Her mind flashed through possibilities. Trying to take on Duncan's murderers and bringing them to justice on her own was completely foolhardy, not to mention deadly. They killed once, they wouldn't hesitate for an eighteen year old girl.

However, she had seen enough of her mother's plays to know that it only took someone in the right place to disrupt a sale or bring attention to criminals to get them to justice. She could do that. Just find them and make sure their crimes were known.

Her mother's eyes seemed to flicker back and forth as she stared at Linsan. There was the faintest tightening around her mouth but it faded quickly. She sighed and leaned forward to kiss Linsan on her forehead again.

Linsan forced her excitement from her face, her mother would stop her. She put on her most convincing sad expression and nodded. "That helped a lot. Thank you." She hugged her mother tightly.

Tisin levered herself out of the chair. She frowned before heading over to the stairs. "Do you need anything?"

Linsan fought the urge to be excited. "T-That's okay. I'm just going to stay here for now."

Her mother gave her an unreadable look before walking up the stairs.

Leaning forward, Linsan listened to her mother's footsteps. She looked over her shoulder and into her father's study. Stacks of papers and essays were heaped up on the table. The thieves had either stolen Palisis for someone specific or they were going to put the violin up for auction. In either case, it wouldn't happen in a small town like their own. It had to a city known for music or at least had many rich patrons. Her father would have written about them.

Her parent's door closed with a click. A few steps later, she heard their bed creaked as Tisin settled down.

Linsan surged out of her chair and rushed into her father's study.

Chapter 12

Sneaking Out

Can stone call to blood? Can resonance be found in the lifeless stone that answers to the pulse inside one's heart?

—Gabirl na Hason, *Land and Magic, The Unnatural Powers of the Northern Tribes*

Linsan held her breath as she crept down the stairs. Her fingertips fluttered over the banister and caressed the wood but she didn't grip it in fear of causing it to creak. She kept her eyes scanning the dark rooms below.

It was three hours before sunrise, long before her parents were up but she was convinced they were still waiting for her. She kept her free hand inches from her face, ready to silence her if she slipped or gasped.

Years of dancing helped with the slow, steady movement down the noisy stairs. She pictured every step before she took it, reaching over the steps that would creak or click. Her travel boots—already well-padded for her constant trips to the family valley—were only a whisper of noise as she made her way to the bottom of the stairs.

Over the last day, she had secreted her travel supplies and placed them underneath the porch. Even though most

of her trips were to the valley and back, she had a number of week-long camping trips at the ruins. She hoped with her gathered supplies and skills she had learned would help her on her trip.

In the back of her mind, her imagination started going through the possible failures. The biggest one that haunted her was the possibility that she couldn't hunt or scavenge enough food. If things went well, she would hitchhike to Stone Over Moon Waters, the most probably destination for the murderers, and either scavenge, hunt, or busk for food. Any of them could go horribly wrong and she would either end up injured in the wild, robbed, or imprisoned.

Linsan shook her head as she reached the bottom of the stairs. No, she couldn't worry about the worst case. She breathed deeply as she crept over toward the front door. She had left only one thing inside, her violin in its case. It was inside the coat closet, hanging in the back.

Cringing, she eased the door open and pushed her hand past the coats.

Her fingers brushed against the back wall. With a frown, she swept her hand around looking for the comforting feel of worn leather.

"Are you—" started her father surprisingly close to her.

Linsan jumped as all her muscles clenched painfully. Her shoulder thumped against the side of the wardrobe. With a whimper, she leaned against wood and cringed in preparation of being yelled at.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a softer tone.

Linsan nodded.

"Linsan? Hold on." There was a scrape of a candle and then light flooded the entry hall.

She looked over her shoulder to see both of her father sitting on the bench opposite of the wardrobe. He had on his sleeping gown but his eyes were dark-rimmed with ex-

haustion. He didn't look angry, just tired. Slowly, she turned around. "Sorry."

He groaned as he stood up. "Dining room."

As if waiting for his words, she heard her mother opening up the oven. The door creaked open as a loud hiss of the constantly burning fire rune was exposed to the air.

Siam held out his hand.

Gingerly, Linsan took it. Every muscle in her body ached and she hated the anticipation of yelling but she couldn't stop now. She fought tears in her eyes as she let her father draw her into the next room.

When she saw the table covered with supplies, including two violin cases, she stopped in shock. "W-What?"

Her mother came out. She had acquired her normal sense of style again, her presence filling the room as she favored Linsan with a smile. "I've started breakfast."

Linsan clutched her arm tight to her side and remained still as she stared at the table. She had not seen one of the violin cases before, nor did she reorganize a roll of tools or the travel pack. "I-I don't understand. What is all this?"

Siam turned around. "You were leaving."

Wincing, Linsan nodded.

"Were you going after the men who killed Duncan or the ones who stole Palisis?"

The question stunned her.

Her father cleared his throat. "There are many reasons why you decided to leave. Some can leave you... you..." He struggled with the words.

Tisin stepped up to take his hand. "You've been to most of my plays. There are decisions that leave someone poisoned to the world and others that leave it a brighter place. We want to make sure you going for the right reason, not the wrong."

With sweat prickling her brow, Linsan looked at her parents. "You... aren't going to stop me?"

Siam shrugged. "Could we?"

"Yes, but—"

"But you wouldn't really stop. Maybe today, but not tomorrow. We have raised a beautiful, strong, and very independent young woman. You decided to visit Duncan in the first place because you wanted to help." He shook his head. "As soon as that guard said that the fires were started by the same person, I knew that you would do something like this."

She blushed hotly. "I'm sorry."

Siam stepped forward and pulled her into a hug.

Linsan held him tightly.

"It would have been nice if you told us though."

"I thought you'd stop me."

He stroked her hair, holding her tight. "I know. I've spent the last two days terrified that I would never see you again. That was the first thing I thought when you came home, about how close you were to dying in that fire and I would never be able to see my baby girl again."

Linsan closed her eyes tightly and tears leaked out. She held him tighter. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

Tisin joined in the embrace but said nothing.

Linsan didn't know what to think. She thought she was keeping it a secret, but knowing her parents were aware of it somehow made it better. She let herself smile and held tight.

No one said anything for a long time. It felt like hours but was probably only ten minutes. Finally, Siam slipped out of the embrace and gestured to the table. "D-Duncan's first check came in and we realized you are going to need it. So your mother got your bags from underneath the porch and we've added a few things."

Linsan stared at the new violin case.

Siam chuckled. "That's last thing. It's the most important."

He picked up two wallets. "This is some travel money. Keep them separate in case you get robbed. Each one has a few hundred cukdins in fives. There is also two hundred sewn into the lining of the backpack and another two hundred inside the lining of the violin."

She stared in shock. "That's—"

He held up his hand. "One rule. You will not say no. Do you understand? We... we can't be there with you and..." His eyes shimmered with tears. He cleared his throat. "We..."

Linsan started to cry herself.

"We can't be there for you, so this is the best we can do. I know you will be safe, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to worry every day and every night until I see you again."

"Daddy." Linsan hugged him tightly and then moved to her mother.

He had to clear his throat twice. "Also, you need to remember this phrase: In the valley where it burned. Also remember 932."

"In the valley where it burned?"

"Your mother went into town and set up an account with the Ralonix Network. That's Duncan's network. He used to do money transfers with that before he started his bank. With that, we can send messages back and forth. If you need more money, we can send it that way. You should always be near a bank that can help."

Tisin pointed. "At least once a week, I want a letter. It doesn't have to be long, but us where you are and if you are safe."

Linsan stared. "And the phrase?"

"That's how they know you are you. Give your name but don't ever say the phrase. They'll ask you to write ITVWIB

932 on the paper they give you. Show it to them but do not let them take the paper. You destroy it once they use it.”

Linsan repeated the phrase and number to herself. She nodded, already feeling overwhelmed but at the same time buoyed by their love.

Tisin smiled before she headed into the kitchen.

Her father gestured to the table. “Almost everything else is just travel supplies, food, clothes better for travel. The bag has an enchantment to be stronger than normal and also lessen weight. It is a stable resonance, so it shouldn’t cause problems and it won’t burn unless you get into a magic battle.”

At the suggestion of battle, she found herself looking at the strange violin again. The case itself looked different than anything she had seen before, the opening was on the side and it had a large latch that looked flat but also secure.

He pulled her into a hug. “I’m going to miss you.”

Linsan embraced him tightly.

Her mother came up. “Lin, take this.”

Linsan broke free of the embrace to take a hair pin from her mother’s hands. It was relatively plain looking but heavy. The tip had an intricate flower and a name engraved along the side along with a year. She stared at it a moment and then looked up. “This is your award for *Strangers in the Gale!*”

Siam smiled and plucked it from Linsan’s palm before reaching up and setting it in place in her daughter’s hair. “There are some things money can’t buy. I can’t offer much, but you might find some solace from the plays and shows that travel around. Bring them this. Almost anyone will recognize it.”

Tisin was holding onto her emotions better than Siam, but Linsan could tell she was also on the edge of breaking

down. Her fingers were shaking as she pushed the tins in place and pulled back.

"They may ask you to repeat a line but you know my plays almost as well as I do. I don't know if it would help but it can't hurt."

"T-Thank you," Linsan whispered. She sobbed. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Tisin smiled broadly and gestured to the house. "We are actors, all of us. Dramatic and independent. You wouldn't be my daughter if you sat still nor would you be our child if you didn't try to help. I'm proud of you in more ways than I can describe but I can tell you one thing, I'm—"

Linsan grinned. "—honored to be the one to sire you, my lord king?"

Tisin's eyes sparkled. "Okay, I stole the line."

Linsan laughed and sobbed at the same time. "It's a good line. I always liked it."

"It is."

Siam returned from the kitchen. "The food is cooling," he announced before picking up the case that drew Linsan's attention. Bringing it around, he held it up to her.

Hands shaking, Linsan reached out and fumbled with the lock. It took her a moment to puzzle through it, it required using her thumb to push down and then her fingers to rotate it but then it easily popped off. Inside, she could see the delicate curve of a violin she had never seen before. The smells of the wood brought back instant memories of her childhood, of endless hours in the workshop and the scent of the valley.

She looked up with a gasp. "It's a Sterlig!?"

Siam was crying. "My daddy made this when I was young. It won't ever be a famous violin, but if my daughter is going to go out in the world, I want her to be playing a Sterlig."

Linsan couldn't help but cry as she reached in and pulled it out. The wood was warm underneath her palm but it was already pulling emotions up. It felt more comforting than anything she had ever played before, anything besides Palisis. Her breath came in shudders as she pulled it out and held it up to the light.

It was beautiful despite being designed to be functional. She could see her grandfather's hand in the scroll and the little scratches of an instrument that had been used and loved.

"I-I thought we didn't have any left."

Tisin leaned into her husband. "We borrowed it from Tabil."

"Tabil? I thought he... I thought you wouldn't work with him. He just left his wife and he's going to push you to cheat on daddy."

Her mother shook her head. She looked at Siam before leaning on his shoulder. "Don't worry about that. You need the Sterlig more than I need to avoid a pervert. He has a part that I more than capable of fulfilling. It's a grandmother piece and only for a single act, but he wants my name on his bill and he had the Sterlig."

Linsan looked down at her namesake violin. Was this how they were going to keep her from going too far? "When do I need to bring it back?"

They shook their heads.

"When?"

Siam reached out and rested his hand on hers. "When the time comes. If it is a week, a month, or a lifetime. You were born into these instruments. Your powers? I have no doubt they will be stronger and clearer with this in your hand. Beyond all the money, favors, and supplies, this is probably the best thing we can give you before sending you out in the world."

Linsan looked at the case for a moment. Then she set the instrument carefully on the table. With a soft cry, she held her parents tightly. “I love you two so much!”

When they broke, all three of them had to wipe the tears from their faces.

Her mother gestured to the violin and her father cleared her throat. “Before you leave, I am going to play a song with you and your mother is going to dance. You are going to do both.”

With shaking hand, Linsan picked up the violin and followed her parents into the living room. It took only a few moments to push the chairs aside. Her father picked up his violin and her mother kicked off her shoes.

Linsan held her breath as she set the bow on the string. It felt different playing already, as if it was made for her. She closed her eyes and drew the bow.

The single clear note felt like it was being drawn from her heart. The air shimmered around her, warping and sparkling as she felt the energy gathering. With a smooth twist of her wrist, she drew it up and started into a jig that set the room alight with magic and her feet kicking.

Chapter 13

The Next Step

A journey that starts in tears can end in laughter.

—*Fox of the Gossamer Nights*

Linsan couldn't help but smile as she walked along the dirt road. Everything felt right in that moment: the afternoon sunlight filtering through the canopy of trees, the crunch of dirt underneath her boots, and the love of her parents who had seen her off on her adventure. She had dreamed about heading out on her own so many times, she couldn't believe it had finally happened.

She caressed the violin case hanging on her shoulder. It was a modified case designed to be opened and the instrument pulled out with one hand. The inventor had a similar talent to her own, he could use his fiddle to create storms. He was a mercenary for many years before he retired but the side-loaded case was one of his legacies. It didn't matter to her, the opening was still exotic to her. She kept toying with the latch. The smooth metal flipped open and snapped close with her footsteps.

Reaching one of the many curves of the winding road, she flipped open the case and delved her hand into it. Her

hand caressed against the smooth, warm wood of the Sterlig violin. Her fingertips tingled as she drew her hand along the body of the instrument.

A warm breeze blew past her. With it came the smell of wood smoke. With it came the memories of the bank burning around her.

The smile faltered on her face.

Linsan wasn't supposed to be enjoying herself. This wasn't an adventure to see the world. It wasn't a fantasy that she had been dreaming about for years. There was a reason she was on the road, a purpose for the supplies on her back and the violin underneath her fingers.

The breeze that tugged her hair no longer felt warm and comforting. It stunk of smoke.

Trembling, she looked at the road ahead of her. The league to the next village seemed like a thousand miles. A distance she could never make on horse or car, much less on her own two boots. The world was too big for her and she was doomed to fail.

Linsan shook her head and fought the urge to cry. She wasn't even a mile beyond her family's valley and she was already considering giving up. She shook her head again and closed her eyes tightly, fighting the fear that clawed at her heart.

Her hand caressed the violin. The warmth helped a little.

"It's for Duncan, right?" she whispered to herself.

The smell of burning rose around her. She glanced over the trees to see if she could see smoke but there was nothing but blue skies and white clouds. The day that was beautiful only moments ago remained in place, hidden behind her guilt.

"For Palisis?" Linsan wasn't sure why she was on the road anymore. Slowly, she looked back over her shoulder toward the way she had come. It was home back there, a valley she

knew and a town she had grown up in. Her parents would understand if she came back. They would return the Sterlig and the pain of Duncan's death would eventually fade.

She couldn't.

Turning back, she forced herself to take two steps and line up her feet toward the next village. She had to keep going. It didn't matter how long it would take, no matter her doubt or struggle. She had to keep going.

"For both," she said and took a step.

The leaves above her rippled, sending motes of sun dancing along her skin. She carefully closed the violin case and snapped it shut.

Linsan took a deep breath and took another step. "For my parent, my family."

The next step was easier.

She was on an adventure but also a mission. She had seen enough of her mother's plays and read her father's stories. There were going to be joys and tears ahead of her. As much as the dire hunt had to continue, she had to also give herself permission to laugh.

Breathing easier, she continued on her way.

An Empty Room

The cheap busker moved from inn to inn, always looking for the next crown and a new story to tell.

—Horgoek Ladow, *Never Stop Falling, Never Stop Playing*

Linsan stepped out from the village store and struggled to keep disappointment from her face. As the door closed behind her with a click, she looked up at the reds and oranges that had spread across the sky since she went inside. There wasn't enough time to get to the next village before nightfall.

She took a few more steps to clear the door and glanced around. The village wasn't large. It had the general store behind her, a woodworking shop, and a public house that had just put out the sign for the night. She couldn't image there were more than twenty people in the village.

With a sigh, she headed toward the public house. At the door, she peered inside. "Hello?"

An older man looked up from pushing chairs into place. "A new face?" He smiled broadly. "Oh, welcome to Gainsburg!"

Linsan stepped inside. "Thank you."

His eyes dropped down then he made a face. "I can't do much for buskers. Neither of us are going to make enough to cover your room much less food." His eyes scanned over her. "You probably eat like a horse, right?"

"No, sir."

With a sigh, he shook his head. "This place ain't big enough for you with a fancy tool like that."

Linsan couldn't help but be disappointed. Much of her fantasies were about playing and dancing her way across the country. She flicked the lock on her case and turned to leave.

The innkeeper groaned. "You need food?"

Linsan's stomach rumbled. She nodded and came back. "I can pay."

"You can use that? It's just not because you feel pretty carrying it around?"

"I can play and dance. I'm good at both." She couldn't help but bristle at his words but snapping at him wouldn't help her situation.

"Got references?"

She shook her head.

"Five cuks and I'll feed you dinner and something on the way in the morning. You busk and get five paying people in here before the sun hides and I'll give it back."

It was a pathetic amount of money, but she nodded. It was cheaper than paying full price. "Could I also get a place to sleep?"

"Thirty for a room, ten to sleep in the basement but I lock you in to keep you from stealing."

A shiver ran down her spine at the last suggestion. She shook her head. "A-A cheap room."

He grunted and tapped a table. "Sit here and put your money down. Everything up front for strangers."

She stepped into the room and came over to the table. Watching the innkeeper, she waited until he wasn't looking and then eased her wallet out to pull thirty-five cukdins out in a small stack of yellow and orange cards.

When he didn't come back, she nervously looked around. It was an empty room. Unsure of what to do, she set her case on the table and ran her fingers along the latches to open them. Reaching in, she eased the violin out and moved the case to the floor.

The Sterlig was old, beaten, and well-used. It was an instrument that had played for countless plays and shows. The edges were scuffed and scratched.

It was beautiful.

She ran her fingertips along the neck and up to the screws. With one hand, she gently plucked the strings while adjusting the screws. The clear tones rose up around her, flutters of noise that caused the edges of her vision to dance.

"That's an old tool there. Older than you?" The innkeeper set down a plate of steaming food. It was thick and meaty with a small pool of juices at the bottom.

Linsan thanked him and then said, "Yes. My grandfather made it a long time ago."

"You know, there was a family of instrument makers about five leagues to the west. They had some tragedy but that thing reminds me of the ones they brought around."

"Sterlig?" Linsan looked up curiously.

The innkeeper frown for a moment and then nodded to himself. "That sounds right! Yes, it was the Sterlig Family. Right famous for fifty years. Then something bad happened."

It was surreal listening to someone talk about her family's fortunes without knowing the full story. Linsan had grown up during the experience and knew many of the inti-

mate details, but the innkeeper was a stranger. She wavered on the idea of revealing her heritage, but then decided to keep it silent.

She looked at the plate and then the violin.

“Eat some, it will get greasy if you wait.”

After thanking him, she ate quickly.

“You know, the younger of those Sterligs got himself married to this really pretty gal. She was top billing on some plays.” The innkeeper sighed. “I remember seeing her in this show about a living plant that wants to touch the moon.”

“*Reaches for the Stars Unknown*,” Linsan said automatically.

The innkeeper frowned at her and then chuckled. “Watching her on stage is what made me a man.” He took her empty bowl and left her some fresh bread, cheese, and water. “Prettiest girl I had ever seen.”

With conversation growing uncomfortable, Linsan carefully set her pack down and propped her violin up on her chin. She took a deep breath before drawing the bow across.

The clear harmony filled the public house and resonated against the walls. In the corner of her vision, the world seemed to flutter and an invisible breeze plucked at the curtains in the window. She could feel her energy rising up to the music but she didn’t let it manifest beyond little eddies of wind.

She smiled, adjusted the violin, and then started on a song from her mother’s play, *A Hundred Years Reaching*, which was a cheerful ditty from the first act of *Reaches for the Stars Unknown*.

The innkeeper’s head rose up slowly until he was staring at the ceiling. There was a look of happiness on his wrinkled face and his eyes no longer focused.

She smiled to herself and played louder, shifting out of her seat to sway in time with the music. Her boots scuffed on the ground as she twirled around, letting the music rise up inside her and fill the room.

Linsan finished one song and moved into the other. As she did, she kept an eye on the door leading into the place. It was getting dark but no one had come in.

Disappointed, she finished one song and picked another one about coming out from the rain. It was a popular tune about twenty-five years ago, her parents loved to hum it when they were out walking together. With a smile, she threw herself into the song.

The song filled the main hall. She pranced to the door to let it out across the village.

No one was in sight.

Linsan worried for a moment but then decided to let herself just get lost in the song. She half-closed her eyes and swayed around with the melody.

The innkeeper seemed to enjoy himself. His head bobbed in time with the music as he prepared for business.

Then a scuff of a boot caught Linsan's attention. She turned to see an old woman staggering up the stairs of the public house. Her cane wavered with every step as she half-walked, half-fell into the main room and slumped into the nearest chair. "Bil!"

"Coming!" he said as he delivered a good-sized beer to her. When he served the old woman, he gave Linsan an approving nod before moving to another patrons who was coming in the door.

High at Night

The first time I paid for dinner with money I'd earned was an experience I could never forget.

—Horgoek Ladow, *Never Stop Falling, Never Stop Playing*

The public house closed before midnight. After playing for four hours, Linsan was more exhausted than ever. There was a big difference between playing for herself and the stamina needed to keep the music going hour after hour.

She also felt more alive than ever before. She had never played for strangers before. Her first night was an unqualified success. Over two dozen people came in, most of them after sunset, but they listened to her music. Many applauded in all the right places and two older folk dropped money into her violin case. Admittedly, it was only three cukdins between the two of them but it was more money than she had ever earned before with using her skills.

Her hands trembled as she nestled the violin back into the case. The strings were still warm from playing and she could almost feel energy pulsating inside the wood. With a smile, she ran her fingers along the edge. “Good night,” she whispered.

It only took a short period to get the rest of her supplies packed up.

“You are play good for a girl.”

She smiled at the inn keeper. It didn’t matter than only three people came in before nightfall, the buzz of playing and seeing the nodded heads and tapping fingers was payment enough for her.

When the inn keeper looked at her expectantly, she thanked him.

He cleared his throat and looked away. “Mind helping me clean up the last stuff?”

With nothing else to do, Linsan helped. It only took twenty minutes to wipe down the tables and put away the food. The innkeeper had done much of the work in the last hour when there was only three people inside the public house.

She had just finished flipping chairs when she saw a pile of cushions stacked up on the back table next to her violin. There was also a wooden key and a small card. Confused, she padded over and looked at it.

The innkeeper was at the table next to her, gathering up some dishes. “Giving you twenty back for the entertainment. The key is to room one. It’s the nice one. No one came in tonight so you can use it. Just don’t make a mess and fold the blankets when you leave tomorrow. Good?”

Linsan stared at the money in confusion. She hadn’t earned it. “Thank you.”

“You may not have brought anyone in early, but they stayed longer and dropped a few more coins than normal. As I see it, you gave us a few more stories, brought back some memories, and we had a good night. That’s worth a room for me, I just need to pay for food.”

He rubbed the top of his head before picking up his tray. “Good job, Girl.”

Linsan picked up the card. It had a hand-drawn picture of the inn with a blocked symbol underneath it.

"You're new to busking, aren't you?"

At her nod, the innkeeper gestured to the card. "That's a reference. It's only good for about thirty or forty miles, but most of the inn, public houses, and venues have met me. This basically says you were good and others should hire you."

Linsan look up at him. "Thank you."

"Don't see many girls out on the road these days, even less with your talent. Though, you are wasted in small houses like this. You need to head somewhere bigger, like Malcom City or even Moon Waters."

She sighed and finished putting the money into her wallet. "I'm heading to Stone Over Moon Waters actually. I told..." Her voice trailed off as she realized she had never asked innkeeper about the murders. "I was wondering, have you seen three guys come through the village in the last day or so? One has a guitar, kind of like a violin but wider body. They had floor-length coats."

He frowned. "No... can't say it rings any bells. Except for you, almost everyone is just driving or riding by. Were they heading toward Moon Waters?"

She shrugged. "I hope so. I'm not really sure. No one has seen them since I headed."

"Think you are going the wrong direction?"

She looked at him and gave a weak shrug.

He chuckled. "I've seen that look before. Don't worry, you'll find them sooner or later. It's a big world but you're going to find it much smaller than you think."

"Thank you."

He hefted his tray and headed into the kitchen. "Best of luck, Girl. There is a water closet in the back. You got about a half hour before I'm done and need it."

“Thank you again.”

He smiled but said nothing.

Linsan gathered her things and headed back to get cleaned up.

Less than a half hour later, Linsan was lying in an empty bed and staring at the ceiling. So much had happened and yet she felt like she was further away from her goal than ever.

Despite her setbacks, or more accurately the lack of anything, she had succeeded in her fantasies. She was on the road, earning her keep, and surviving.

Linsan smiled to herself. She was on an adventure. With her heart pounding with excitement, she wondered if she could even fall asleep in the excitement.

Luck and Wagons

Outside of winter, hitching a ride on passing wagons was a relatively safe way of traveling long distance. The war changed that.

—Gardol de Hastor, *The Changing Ways of Transportation*

Linsan yawned as she walked along the side of the road. Unable to sleep because of her excitement, she had fretted and dozed throughout the night before giving up near the false dawn. A quick breakfast with the innkeeper's wife got Linsan on the road and she had been walking ever since.

Fortunately for her, there were villages every couple leagues along this part of the country. Judging from her current pace and her memory of geography, she had another night or two of being able to sleep in public houses before the distances between the villages grew too much. By the end of the week, she would be camping at way stations or in the wild.

Patting her violin case, she tried not to think too far into the future. There was a doubt scratching the back of her head that she had picked the wrong direction and would spend a week walking nowhere only to find that she had lost the trail entirely.

Linsan steeled herself and kept on walking. She would make that decision tomorrow. If she hadn't seen even a hint of the murderers by the time she had to camp, then it would be time to consider her options.

She let her mind drift to looking across the fields and trees that butted against the road. Even walking at a brisk rate, she saw landmarks hours before she reached them. The glacial pace was frustrating but she didn't have the stamina to run between villages. However the fantasy of having the ability to move quickly entertained her as the minutes slowly slithered by; her mother had been a play about people who could fly fast.

A creaking behind her caught her attention. Slowing down, she peered over her shoulder while she rested her fingers on the latches of her case. It was a wagon pulled by a single horse. It bounced and squeaked as it swayed down the middle of the road.

As it got closer, Linsan could tell it was driven by a middle-aged woman with pale brown hair and a deep tan. She had a glove on her left hand but not her right.

The driver slowed down and the woman leaned over. Her eyes looked over Linsan from head to toe and back again. "You alone?"

Linsan nodded. "Yes, dame."

"Walking to Palanis?" That was the next village according to the sign Linsan had passed recently.

"And beyond. I'm heading to Stone Over Moon Waterss."

The driver whistled. "That's a pretty good hike. About three or four weeks walk, I be guessing."

Linsan tried not to think about it.

The other woman's eyes lifted for a moment. Then she looked at Linsan with a nod toward the back. "Want a ride? I'm heading through the villages until Roldal. Then I'm heading west to Gamis but you'll still be going north there."

Linsan let out a sigh of relief. "Please? That would really help."

"I'm Maril, but I have to warn you. I'm not the fastest driver on a good day and this week is slower than usual. I'm in the midst of my cramps and the shits are pretty bad, so there is going to be a lot of stopping along the way. If you are in a hurry, feel free to get off any time but no complaining."

Linsan was startled. Her mother had never been as frank about her period as Maril. In fact, Linsan's lessons were just a few short, vague conversations in the hallway.

She gave Linsan a grim smile. "I'm probably not much in the mood to talk either."

"That would be good. I'm looking for someone, so I've been asking in every village along the way."

Maril smiled broadly and gestured to the back. "Then the Divine Couple have blessed both of us. Crawl in the back and don't step on the boxes. That's our supplies and I'd rather not be coming to words over them."

"Yes, dame."

Thankful, Linsan carefully crawled into the back with a silent prayer to the Divine Couple for helping her along. A wagon would be a lot faster and maybe she would finally catch up.

A Glimmer of Hope

It is considered poor form to demand payment from hitchhikers. However, requests to pay for meal and supplies are allowed, as long as they are truly requests and not demands.

—Gardol de Hastor, *The Changing Ways of Transportation*

After another day of disappointment, Linsan didn't have hopes for the next village. After the good luck with earning her keep with her violin and then catching a ride with Maril, she had hoped that the gods would reveal the murderers within hours. Sadly, even as wagon stopped at each village throughout the day, no one could provide even a hint to the men Linsan was chasing.

With a sigh, she leaned against the canvas bags heaped on the side of the wagon and peered down at the wheel. There was still mud still clinging to the wagon. As the wagon rattled over a wooden bridge, flecks of half-dried mud cascaded down and created a path.

Maril groaned. She squirmed in her seat for a moment before flicking the reins to sped up her horse along the bridge.

“Going to make it?”

The older woman waved her hand dismissively. "Been doing this ride for thirty years. I know every bathrooms and water closet for fifty leagues. It's the way my dad had to travel and it's the way my girls will when they become old ladies."

She pointed ahead to a brightly painted building on the side of the road. "In fact, Old Gal's Pals has one of the best ones in the areas. Old Gal runs the general store and the public house here in Jonas's Gate. Gal's sisters are all pepper farmers and they all make award-winning chili. Once a year, they have a fair for their meals and you really appreciate indoor plumbing that night."

Maril grinned. "Those girls really like to be comfortable when enjoying their rings of fire. They have books, perfume, and even heated water."

Another groan faded her smile. She wiped her forehead and returned her attention to the road.

Linsan watched her for a moment and then sat back down. She watched as the village revealed itself among the trees.

"Lin? You got a few cuks on you?"

"Yes, do you need me to get anything from the store?"

"Some willow bark would be nice. Something to chew on, not drink. I've been peeing enough as it is."

Linsan had enough for that. "No, that's okay. I can get those. Fair is fair. After all, you are giving me a ride."

"Thanks." Maril groaned again. "Hitch the horses too."

As soon as the wagon came to a stop in front of a building with a mural of pepper flowers, Maril hopped and rushed inside.

Linsan crawled out of the back and gingerly took up the reins. Slipping off the wagon, she gave the horse a wide berth to tie the reins to a hitching post. Unsure of the knot, she did her best before stepping back to look around.

It was another village, just like the dozen she had pass since the beginning of her adventure. It had been built at the intersection of two dirt roads. Except for what looked like four businesses, there were only a few dozen houses that clumped around the center of the village.

Linsan considered her options: she could easily identify the general store behind her, a blacksmith, and a carpenter. The fourth was less obvious, but there was a sign hanging from one screw. Curious, she walked across the street to peer at it.

It was a bank.

Remember what her parents had done, she stuck her head inside the open door. "Hello?"

A young man in his mid to late twenties yanked his feet off a counter. There was a thump as he looked around wildly for a moment before focusing on her. "Oh! Sorry." He had an nice voice and a tousle of dark hair.

"Are you on Ralonix?" She hoped she got the name right.

His eyes widened. "It's our own network. Are you expecting money?"

Nervous, she inched inside. "I want to send a message. I can do that, right?"

He looked stunned for a moment.

Linsan stepped back.

"No, no! Please, come in. I don't get much business here during the day. Yes, of course you can send a message. Have you done it before?"

"No." She hefted her violin case on her shoulder and walked up to the counter. The wooden floor underneath her boots creaked.

"Your name?"

"Linsan Sterlig. My parents just opened the account."

He was starting to reach for a thick leather tomb but then stopped. His hand went to a thick pad of paper in-

stead. Pulling it open, he leafed through it. "Sterlig... Sterlig... here you go. You have a code?"

"I'm suppose to write it down?" She felt uncomfortable with the new experience but she trusted her father's directions.

Shrugging, he put out a piece of paper and a pencil on the counter.

She write it down and showed it to him.

He peered at it, referred to something in the paper, and then nodded. "Good. It matches. According to this, messages are collect on arrival so you don't have to pay anything now. Let's see."

The banker fumbled with some papers before he handed her another one, this one had about a hundred squares in five lines. "Okay, fill out the message. One letter per square, put a space between the words."

Unsure of what to write, Linsan hesitated for a moment. "What's the name of the village?"

The banker half-stood with a look of surprise. Then he looked around furiously and started pawing through papers.

Linsan looked curiously.

He let out a surprised noise and pulled out a piece of paper. "Most of the time I'm dealing with folks... sorry. Here!" He flattened the paper on the counter and tapped one of the first symbols. "Just put this in a box by itself. It doesn't need any spaces around it. It's a good one to memorize, it means the name of the sending bank." He shrugged. "In most cases, it's the same as the village."

The rest of the paper had other single-square images to use for each of the surrounding villages, the next town, and other common phrases.

With his help, Linsan wrote a quick message that said told her parents she was safe, still on her way, and she was still looking.

He took the completed note and set it down. A large box filled with white tiles came out from a drawer.

Curious, she watched as he pulled out the tiles for the letter she had just written and placed them in a stack. Each tile was made of some sort of crystal or glass. Flickers of energy raced along the side.

He looked up in surprise. "You have a powerful talent."

"I do?"

"Yes. I can't use this spell with you in the bank, you might cause something to crack. I can't afford to replace these."

Blushing, Linsan backed away. "Sorry."

At the door, she remembered her purpose. "Excuse me, have you seen three guys in leather dusters? I don't know when, maybe in the last few days. One of them had a guitar on him?"

The banker didn't appear to be listening to her as he concentrated on stacking tiles.

Linsan sighed and turned around.

"I can't tell you about them," he said suddenly.

She froze. "W-What?"

"Banking regulations. I can't tell you what they were doing in the building."

Spinning around, she grabbed the door to peer in. "But they were here, right?" Her voice rose in excitement.

He peered up at her, nodded, and then returned to his tiles. "Try Gal's. They stopped there for dinner."

Linsan gasped and then raced away. Her violin thumped against her hip as she crossed the road and into the general store.

Inside, the brightly-painted business was both a store and a public eating area. The separator between the two was a table filled with jars of peppers, jellies, and other savories. Everything had a pepper motif from the murals on the walls to the tablecloths underneath the supplies. Even the little price tags neatly affixed to the wall had hand-drawn peppers.

Her ears pounding with hope, Linsan looked around for someone to ask. She spotted the hallway leading to the water closets before her eyes caught movement on the corner of her eye. Turning, she saw an old woman sitting behind a counter reading a book that had a half-naked man painted on the front.

“Excuse me?”

The older woman set down her book and gave Linsan a brilliant smile. “Welcome to Old Gal’s! It’s my place and you can call—”

“Actually,” interrupted Linsan.

“Oh, the bathrooms. Just down the hall, door is open—”

“Sorry, I actually have an important question.”

There was a faint creasing around Gal’s eyes. She cleared her throat. Her annoyance was painfully obvious.

Linsan cringed. “Sorry.”

After a second, Gal’s expression grew less stern but didn’t quite disappear. She didn’t speak but picked up her book and tapped it against the counter.

Quietly berated, Linsan waited impatiently as Gal rapped her book a few times before setting it down carefully.

Linsan opened her mouth.

Gal stopped her with a look. She rotated the book slightly on the counter. Then, she folded her wrinkled fingers together and leaned forward. “Now, how may I help you?”

Sheepish, Linsan forced herself to take a deep breath. She wanted to scream or call out. She was close to finding

out that she was going in the right direction. “T-The banker said three men had come in earlier. They all had long, ground-length coats and wide-brimmed hats. One them had a guitar. Have you seen them?”

Gal smiled brightly. “Of course, Sweetie.”

Linsan grabbed the edge of the counter. “R-Really? You saw them!?”

A stern look stopped her.

She trembled as she forced her fingers off the counter. “S-Sorry. I’ve been chasing them for a few days now and no one else had seen them.”

“I can’t imagine why, it’s been four... no three days since they came driving through.”

Linsan froze, her heart pounding and the world spinning violently around them. “T-Three days? How did they get here so far? No, it can’t be them.”

Gal shrugged. “Not a lot of people play guitars. And wear coats like that. Sounds like your guys. Your band abandon you?”

Linsan took a deep breath. She considered lying. “N... No.”

“Groupie?”

“What’s are those?”

Gal grinned. “Pretty girls like you chasing after singers because they got a wink or just want a chance at their beds?”

Linsan stared for a moment. Then her cheeks began to burn. “No... no! They stole something of mine... ours and I’m trying to chase them down.”

Gal cocked her head for a moment, her eyes peering at her.

“Please?” Linsan whispered. “I just need to find them. I’ve been going for three days since... since...” Tears welled up in her eyes. She didn’t know why, but she didn’t want to

say they were murderers. "... I just need to find them. I swear."

Gal's eyes softened slightly.

"Please?"

Gal shrugged. "Well, you are a couple days behind them. They were just for dinner before driving off. They didn't even stay here for the night. Just bought a few snacks, two jars of jam, and headed out."

"Left? At night?"

"Well, they are making those auto-driving vehicles faster these days. It was a pretty nice one too. All black and gold. You don't see fancy ones in villages like this very often."

Linsan froze. They had a car?

Tears burned in her eyes. She couldn't catch up with a vehicle. Not with a wagon and definitely not on foot. She gripped her violin tightly as she tried not to burst into tears.

Gal's eyes flickered as she stared at Linsan's face.

"S-Sorry." Linsan wiped her eyes. "I didn't mean... I... sorry. I've never done this and they... I can't catch up, can I?"

She stepped back, and shook her head. "I can't. I can't," she whispered to herself. Tears ran down her cheeks as she shook her head.

Gal didn't say anything.

Wiping her face, Linsan took a deep breath and tried to stop the sudden despair that had slammed into her. All she wanted to do was drop to the ground and curl up in a ball. Or scream at the top of her lungs.

No, she couldn't. Not in front of Gal.

She spotted the chews that Maril wanted. With a shaking hand, she picked them up along with some snacks and carried them over to the counter. "C-Can I get these?"

"Of course, Sweetie," Gal said in a sympathetic voice. "That will be four cuks."

As Gal took Linsan's money and recorded the sale, Linsan lost herself in despair. With a car, the murderers would easily outpace her. Even at her best, she couldn't hope to catch with them. However, she was heading in the right direction and now she knew to ask about a car.

Would it matter if they would get to Stone Over Moon Waterss long before her? How long would it take to set up a sale? Or if they already had a buyer, how long before they moved on?

"I'm sorry, Love, I thought you knew." Gal handed her Maril's supplies in a small paper bag.

"I didn't. It just..." The storm of emotions made it impossible to make a decision. "... I'll catch them sooner or later," she finished with a lie.

Gal leaned over and peered at her closely. "What did they do?"

Linsan hesitated. Was she suppose to say she was chasing murderers? Or thieves? Her parents haven't given her any suggestions. Then she sighed. "They killed a friend and stole something precious from my family. I was hoping to catch up to them, tell some guards about it, and then somehow get them back home to pay for their crimes."

The harsh look on Gal's face hardened. "Killed?"

Linsan nodded. "He was a friend. He ran a local bank in Cobbler's End. Like the one here. "And... and... I just want to find them."

"That mean you're leaving to go after them? By yourself?"

"I have to wait for someone. She's in the bathroom."

A smile broke the harsh expression on Gal's face. "I thought I saw someone rushing by. Well, why don't you sit down and help yourself to some bread and jelly. It's my special recipe. On the house."

"I really should get going." Linsan gathered up her purchases. "Thank you."

Dejected, Linsan returned to the wagon to wait for Maril. As she did, her mind worked through the overwhelming realization that she will never catch up to the others. She couldn't stop though, she had to keep hunting them down. Palisis may be lost forever but if she could bring the murderers to justice, it would be worth it.

She noticed Old Gal coming back from the bank without remembering when the older woman had left the store. Linsan watched her for a moment and then returned to her musings.

When Maril finally came out, it felt like it had been an hour. "Sorry about that. Oh, is that willow bark?"

Old Gal came out with a basket. "Wait!"

Linsan watched curiously as the old woman came to the side of the wagon and stopped. "What's the name of your friend? The one who died?"

"Duncan Kabisal."

Gal shoved the basket in Linsan's hands. "My nephew said there was a shut down notice for your bank and Duncan's death was announced. It may be a lie but it's a realistic one. Here, take this for the road."

"T-Thank you," said Linsan in shock.

"I don't know if it would help, but they are heading to Stone Water right now."

"Stone Over Moon Waterss?"

Gal said, "Probably. The message was short but they were 'on schedule for the sale in Stone Waters.' Does that mean anything to you?"

A sob rose in Linsan's throat. She was going the right way. "Y-Yes! How did you find that out?"

"He's my nephew. Now, take the basket and catch up."

"How?"

Old Gal shrugged and patted Linsan's hand. "I don't know, but I found that the Divine Couple blesses those who

Allegro

try so don't give up and you'll make it. Good luck and may the Couple look over you."

Chapter 18

Whispers in the Night

Only a fool rides a horse into the night. For this woman, I am that fool.
—Kadem Gasinar-Mordan

Linsan tried to find a comfortable position on a heavy canvas bag. The fragrant perfume from the contents rose up around her with every shift of her body. She wasn't entirely sure what was inside the bag, only that Maril said it was a dried vegetables medley used for soups. Occasionally, when she found a new position, she got hints of onions and garlic.

She squirmed for a moment and then tried to convince herself to sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, though, her thoughts began to spiral into despair as she thought about how far ahead her quarry was.

With a groan, Linsan rolled over and tried to find a new position to sleep. She tried pushing the contents of the bag around to adjust but the bag remained an uncomfortable lump digging into some part of her body.

On the other side of the wagon, Maril let out a loud snore. She had three blankets on top of her and another

two wrapped around her feet. One hand was wrapped around a short knife and the other on a metal bar.

Linsan sighed miserably. It was near midnight but she couldn't go anywhere with Maril sleeping. No matter what she did, the wagon wasn't moving until morning.

Every hour the older woman slept was one more hour that the murderers got ahead. Every minute Linsan wasn't rushing forward, they were going ten times as fast. In their car, they could easily travel a hundred leagues in a day where she could only do a dozen. The wagon wasn't much better, even with the increased comfort.

Nothing would let her catch up.

Tears threatened to rise up. She fought them, not willing to break down.

With her throat dry and her chest aching, she looked around for any comfort. Spotting her case, she reached down and picked it up. The leather scraped against one of the bags. Pulling it into her lap, she wrapped her legs around the base and pressed the head against her belly.

She bowed her head. Taking a deep breath, she let the smells of wood stain, dust, and oils fill her lungs. The comforting smells of an old instrument pushed back the growing despair.

Tightening her grip, she rocked back and forth.

Why wasn't she giving up? Why couldn't she just turn around and head home? She knew her parents would understand. No one would blame her when she walked back into the house.

Linsan let out a long, shuddering breath.

She would know that she had given up.

After so many years steeping in the history of her family, so many visits to the ruins of the workshop, all the music, playing, and seeing her family being worn down, she couldn't give up.

She pressed her lips against the violin case. "I can't," she whispered. "I can't. Even if it takes me years, I can't give up on you."

She wasn't sure if she was talking to her mother, father, or both. Her thoughts were too confused. For all she knew, she was calling out to Palisis or Duncan's spirit.

Wrapping tighter around the case, she closed her eyes tightly. "I can do this, right?"

No answer came.

She gulped and took a deep breath. "I can do this," she whispered. Her voice cracked as she realized she was lying to herself.

"I can do this, right?"

"I can do this."

Her chest ached. She wanted to burst into tears.

"Please?"

Chapter 19

Prayer

The worship of the Divine Couple, or Matrimonism, is practiced by about seventy percent of Kormar. The degree of belief varies greatly, however, so one couldn't say Kormar itself was religious.

—*Survey of Religions Across the Lands*

After two nights of being unable to sleep, Linsan's days had become a hellish mixture of dozing and anxiety attacks. More than once she caught herself considering jumping off the wagon and running the opposite direction. She had also found herself praying that she wouldn't wake up when she began to doze.

"Have you tried prayer?"

Linsan looked up in confusion.

Maril glanced over. "Something is eating at your gut. Old Gal told you something?"

Cringing, Linsan nodded. She hadn't told Maril what Gal had said. However, the wagoner had made an announcement that the worst of the pain had passed and she started skipping villages. They had easily doubled their rate but it was still glacially slow compared to whatever vehicle the killers drove.

“Something is eating at you, Lin. Even I can tell that. Is it about the men you are following?”

Linsan nodded.

“How far ahead are they?”

“I don’t know, but they have a car.”

“Are they still heading to Moon?”

She nodded again.

Maril glanced at the road ahead and then turned her body. “Thinking about giving up?”

Linsan poked at the bag underneath her. “Yes.”

The old woman said nothing for a moment. “Why haven’t you?”

Linsan struggled with her answer. “I don’t know. I... I know I can’t catch up in time, but maybe I can do something. I just don’t want to give up.”

Reaching back, Maril patted Linsan’s thigh. “If you have to take another ride, I’ll understand. But let me know, otherwise I’ll be waiting for you and that’s just rude.”

For some reason, that brought a smile to both of their faces.

Linsan nodded. “I promise, I’ll let you know.”

Maril patted her again. “Good. Now, let’s see if we can find you a faster ride. Most of today is just going to be little one store villages but we’ll be coming up to New Brunil tomorrow afternoon. If you are going to find a faster ride, that will be the place.”

The tension in Linsan’s shoulders relented slightly. She didn’t even realized she was clenching them.

What wasn’t said was that any faster ride might be more than Linsan could afford. She might be able to buy a horse, but not a carriage and definitely not a car.

She glanced at Maril to make sure the wagoner wasn’t looking at her and then let her face fall. Thought it may lose

her more precious days, she may have to busk a lot more to afford a trip.

Despair rose up, a choking grip that squeezed her throat and chest. She shook her head.

“Try praying,” Maril said without looking back.

Linsan and her family wasn’t religious, but she knew at least the basic prayers. They had taught them in school. It was better than nothing. Closing her eyes, she began to whisper what she remembered.

After a few phrases, Maril joined her. “For the Divine Couple who watches over us, grant us blessings to make it through our journeys. From the Blessed Wife, all we ask are lessons to help us grow as your humble children. May they be difficult but educational. And from our Holy Father, watch over us to see what we stumble, then take our hand to give us one more step. Grant us respite so we may learn, darkness so we can dream, and the bright sun to wake us again.”

The prayer didn’t give Linsan any peace but hearing the comforting voice that spoke them did. Linsan let the tears flow as she closed her eyes. Her lips worked the prayer along with Maril, stumbling over the words she couldn’t remember but not caring anymore.

Then, with a smile, she finally fell asleep without the threat of nightmares or fear.

Chapter 20

New Brunil

Money lubricates the gears of the world. Until it doesn't.

—Stalor Gimbol, *The Adventures of Ramus Kain*

Linsan walked along the street of New Brunil with a sense of dread and hope. She also was completely overwhelmed by the crowds that streamed along both sides of the road. There were people wearing work clothes, suits, and fancier wear that looked more like her mother's outfits for the stage than something to be worn in the middle of the day.

No one was looking at each other as the chaos swirled around her. She kept bumping into people. Every time she found herself pressed against one of the many painted brick walls of the city, she wondered how everyone else could move without touching others.

Leaning against the sharp edges of brick that framed a shoe store, she let out a shuddering breath. Maril didn't even give her a hint of how noisy and overwhelming it would be.

She clutched her violin case with one hand and looked down at a piece of paper in her other. The local Ralonix branch had helped her come up with a list of seven garages

that were most likely to have serviced the murderer's car. The banker's reasoning was confusing, but apparently most vehicles had a guild affiliation with the current warring mechanical guilds. Most the guild-affiliated garages would hesitate to work with an outside car which winnowed down the list to only a few.

She flipped the paper over. There were also three names on the other side, all stables. It was her second task for the day, to find a way of catching up. A horse seemed like the best option. With her limited funds, she could only afford a cheap one.

Linsan dreaded the idea of going to the stables. She wasn't comfortable around equines. Taking care of the mount was also outside of her expertise, which meant more expenses to pay for stables along the way.

She wasn't sure if a horse was even an option she should take. It would require her to ask for more money from her parents. She hated to even venture to ask because they would try to give her what little they had remaining.

A vague idea that she could busk for the money didn't help her either. She had only played for a single night to a small village in the middle of nowhere. She doubted she was good enough to earn enough for a horse.

Maril had given her three hours to find what she can. Linsan would decide about the horse then.

Linsan shook her head and turned over the page. She didn't want to even think how she was going to leave town. Running her thumb down the alphabetical list, she picked one in the middle: Glorious Mechanics of Iron and Steel. It had a fancy name, maybe it would be a good choice.

At least until she found herself standing in front of a crumbling brick building with a fading sign. The place had originally been called "Mechanics" but someone had added " of Iron" in one pain, "and Steel" in a second paint, and

then “Glorious” with a third. The sloppy artwork and graffiti did nothing to comfort Linsan.

The front of the garage had two large doors but they were both closed except for a crack of darkness. She could see where they had been dragged through the rocks and dirt by the swept area in front of each one. A smaller door to the right had a small glass window.

Linsan made a face. If this was the best choice the banker could come up with, the rest of her investigation bode poorly. She rested her hand on her violin case and stepped forward.

“Get away from me!” screamed a familiar voice from inside the garage. Brook’s tone was infuriated and furious, a sound that Linsan had heard many times over the years.

Linsan stumbled to a stop. Her hand gripped on her case tightly as she stared in shock. Brook was here?

“I said stop!”

The front doors to the garage exploded in an explosion of sound and wind. Tools and men came flying out in a cloud, flung off the ground from Brook’s blast.

Linsan braced herself and ducked her head to protect her face. The concussion wave slammed into her, crushing into her chest for a moment as her body was pushed back from the force. She shook her head and looked up before her ears stopped ringing.

Brook stood to one side of the garage’s interior. To her back was a workbench heaped with tools but the rest of the room had been tossed apart. Her small hat was half caught in her hair and she wore a blue dress with a dark stain on one shoulder. There were more stains on her matching gloves as she pulled them apart to clap them together again.

Across the garage, four men stood up. One of them, the leader Linsan guessed, wiped his chin and shook his head.

“That was stupid, Doll. Now I’m going to take a lot more than purse of yours.”

To either side of Linsan, the men who were tossed out of the garage were scrambling to their feet. She saw one of them flick his hands up and the rocks around his feet rose up in the air to orbit around him. Another one snapped his fingers and his hand burst into flames.

Inside, the leader held out his hand and beckoned toward Brook.

Brook crouched down but then a hammer launched itself from the workbench behind her and shot toward the leader. The iron head slammed into her shoulder, twisting her out of place, before the tool smacked loudly into the man’s hand.

One of the men behind the leader stepped up as his squat body began to shimmer. “I’ll catch the noise, Rab. You teach her a lesson.”

“Thanks, Cal.”

Linsan watched both men near her from the corner of her vision. She ran her finger along the quick release of her case and slid her hand to wrap around the warm neck of her Sterlig.

Brook groaned as she straightened. She clutched her shoulder as she looked around. When her eyes caught with Linsan’s, they opened wide.

Rab stepped forward and hefted his hammer. “Now, be a good girl and hand over that little purse of yours. While you’re at it, the key to your hotel because I’m sure you have a lot more with you. Rich dames like you never travel light.”

Brook’s eyes didn’t leave Linsan’s. There was a moment of rage, surprise, and then pleading.

Linsan wasn’t sure how to respond. Her heart beat loudly but then she concentrated on the strings that were strumming underneath her fingers. She nodded once and then

spun around, dropping the case as she pulled out her violin. With practiced skill, she jammed it along her neck and brought the bow into position as she finished her turn.

The first note cut through the air with the sharp sound of the battle anthem from *Death of the Butterfly King*. It was a song that she knew Brook had heard, she only hoped it would help in some manner. She threw herself into the rapid crescendo of the second movement. Her body vibrated with power as the world around her shimmered with energy.

The man with the floating rocks turned with a hiss and threw his hand toward her. The rocks shot out with dizzying speed.

Linsan's notes cut through the air, catching the rocks and tossing them aside.

Brook clapped her hands together, blasting the air around her. The concussion wave slammed into Cal's shimmering body and split apart, tearing apart the back wall of the garage but leaving three of the men untouched. The fourth was slammed into the wall and he slumped to the ground.

Rab threw his hammer at her with a loud grunt.

Brook jerked to the side, but the tool swung around and came back with violent force. It clipped Brook again, knocking her to the ground as the hammer slammed back into his palm.

Linsan started toward Brook but heat blasted her. The other man's flaming hand slammed into her shoulder and singed her hair.

Spinning away, Linsan sent a blast of music toward him.

Brook's concussion blast destroyed Linsan's sound before it could strike him.

Linsan frowned and then dodged more rocks. She couldn't keep her music attacking if Brook interrupted her.

They had to work together which meant their attacks had to synchronize. "Brook! Only on the beat!"

"What?" Brook dodged another hammer throw and clapped her hand again. The energy tore through Linsan's music and tossed the telekinetic rocks aside but otherwise missed the man attacking her.

"On the Couple-damned beat!" screamed Linsan. Her bow brought out a quick flurry of notes to knock aside the rocks being thrown at her. She belted out an uplifting measure to slam into the flaming attacker before he could hit her again.

"Like hell!" snapped Brook. She brought her hands up to clap again.

Rab held out his bare hand. The tools behind Brook began to shudder as they were summoned.

"Just listen for once you, you stupid cow!" Linsan snapped. She twisted between her two attackers and then sent a sharp note screaming into the garage. The force smashed into the screwdrivers lifting from the workbench and threw them into the far wall. Their points stuck into wood as they shook violently.

"On the beat!" she yelled and then spun around with a kick that caught the fire wielder in the knee.

He dropped with a bellow of pain.

Linsan turned to see more rocks flying toward her. She couldn't form the music to block them. Cringing, she steeled herself for the impact.

The music reached the brief pause where a beat would be. Hoping Brook understood, Linsan braced her foot against the ground.

There was a concussive blast.

Air slammed into Linsan, the two men, and the rocks. Only Linsan remained standing.

She couldn't stop. Still playing furiously, she brought herself around as she thought through her song. "Brook, your part is coming up! Get out of the garage!"

Brook frowned but she backed away from the workbench and toward the door.

A hammer came flying.

Linsan knocked it out of the air.

There was a rhythm section in the song, a place where the drums beat with a steady beat. If Brook caught her cue and used it to attack, she would be vulnerable.

The mechanics were following faster Brook, shielded behind Cal. Rab was summoning more tools to his hand.

Linsan took a deep breath and let her body relax. She had to time her notes between the beat of Brook's clapping. Grimly, she tensed herself.

"You better be right," snapped Brook.

"Now!" Linsan brought the song into the bridge.

Brook screwed her face and beat her hands together, slamming wave after wave of concussive force into the garage. The blasts tore the doors off the hinges and caused the walls to shake. The workbench collapsed, spilling looks across the ground.

Rab threw screwdrivers and chisels at her with lethal speed.

Linsan's notes caught them and tossed them aside.

Brook continued to pound her hands together. The walls began to crack and the ceiling sagged. With her back to Linsan, the noise was quiet but she could see Cal and the other man clapping their hands over their ears as they dropped to their knees.

Linsan saw the man with rocks getting up. She continued to play notes to block Rab's attack as she hopped over and kicked him in the face. The solid impact caused her to

miss a note but no tool flashed out to strike either Brook or herself.

Soon, they were next to each other. The air beat around their bodies, vibrating with the music and the steady pounding that tore the garage apart.

Brook's face was screwed in concentration. Her hands were shaking. "This is really hurting."

"Then one big one, bring it down," gasped Linsan.

She shielded Brook as the other woman brought her arms far apart and then clapped them as hard as she could.

The concussive wave slammed into the garage, collapsing the front wall.

Rab stopped throwing tools when Cal grabbed him and all three of them sprinted out the door as the roof collapsed on itself.

Linsan grabbed Brook by her dress and pulled her back. "Run!"

Brook hesitated only for a second, then she turned and sprinted away.

Linsan snatched up her violin case and raced after her.

Chapter 21

Separate Ways

For all the talents in the world, no one is good enough to get a cat to sit on command.

—*The Sand Piper's Daughter* (Act 1, Scene 6)

Linsan struggled to keep up with Brook. Despite being only a few seconds behind, it was difficult to keep holding her violin, bow, and case with two hands while running along the cobblestones. Her boots slipped on the edges and she stumbled.

Brook didn't slow down. She had hiked up her dress with both hands and was pulling away from her. Despite her boots having heels, she was a lot steadier without having to juggle so many things.

"Brook, wait up!" The bow threatened to slip from her fingers. Linsan swore and slowed down to grab it before it fell. "Stop, please!"

She almost dropped the case. After a few seconds of fumbling, Linsan looked up to see that Brook was still running away. With another curse, she stopped and focused on setting the violin properly into the case along with its bow.

As she did, she kept looking up to see Brook getting further away. She also looked behind her to see if Rab and his men had taken up the chase, but to her relief, they weren't chasing her.

Sweat prickled on Linsan's brow as she got everything settled into place and she closed the case with a snap. Standing up, she looked for Brook.

In the few moments it took Linsan to stow her gear, Brook appeared to not have stopped running. She had slowed down but she still moved as a hurried pace. Her blue dress fluttered as she wove through the crowds.

"Brook!" Linsan called out at the top of her lungs.

Brook glanced once over her shoulder, her dark hair bouncing, and then she turned sharply and took a side street.

"Damn the Couple," swore Linsan. She grunted as she ran faster to keep up while trying to stuff the violin back into her case. It quickly became obvious she couldn't do it. With the pressing need to catch up burning in her mind, she had to force herself to stop and ease the instrument into the case without harming it. As soon as it latched shut, though, she started running again.

By the time she reached the corner that Brook had taken, the other woman had disappeared into the crowds. There wasn't even a hint of her dress in sight.

Linsan stopped and groaned. "Damn."

She took a deep breath and ran down the street. As she did, she peered along the alleys and streets she passed. The crowds got thicker around her; she was heading toward the center of town.

After a few blocks, she realized that she wasn't going to chase after Brook. There were too many people milling around, vehicles and horses to distract her, and a thousand

other things that would make it nearly impossible to find just by wandering.

She reached out for the nearest person. "Excuse me, have you seen—?"

"Back off, beggar!"

"I'm not begging," she cried but the person had moved out of her range. She walked toward a woman in a green dress. "Have you seen a woman in blue?"

At the scowl she got, she stepped back.

The woman dug into her purse and then threw a few coins at Linsan as if she was sick or injured. The look on her face was a terrifying mixture of horror and distaste.

Linsan stepped back and considered the other pedestrians. None of them were going to know where Brook went. With every passing second, the chance of finding her would diminish greatly.

With a grumble, she considered her options. She didn't know if it Brook was running away from Rab or the both of them. The only way to get an answer would be to hunt Brook down.

On the other hand, Linsan still had a list to go through. Digging into her pocket, she pulled it out and pressed her thumb against the second item on the list. It should only be five or six blocks away, but it was in the opposite direction Brook took.

To Linsan's surprise, she found herself craving Brook's company. It had been only days since she left home but the comfort of being near someone who knew her—even one who hated her like Brook—brought a pang of homesickness that startled Linsan.

She looked at the list again and the desire to go to the next mechanics waned. She ran her thumb along the list, trying to decide which one was more important.

With a sigh, she knew her search was important. Maybe Brook was heading in the same direction and they would encounter each other again.

Linsan snorted. She was sure Brook would be happy if they never met again.

Though, they did defend themselves well against Rab and the others. She had never thought their magic was complementary but the way Brook's concussions worked with Linsan's string work, it was almost in harmony.

Curious and amused, Linsan turned and headed for the next mechanic.

Disappointment

In a world of magic, where spells can alter reality itself, it is remarkable that faith burns strong in every aspect of society. It is as if the growing knowledge of man only enhances faith.

—*Surrendering to the Holy Father*

Linsan sat on the end of Maril's wagon with one arm over the back and her knees up near her chest. She stared aimlessly across the houses and farms that surrounded New Brunil as they grew more sparse and scattered.

Maril cleared her throat. "You've been in a sour mood since you returned. I was praying that you'd find something to give you hope."

The memory of the fight rose up. With the bitterness of Brook running away was tempered by the rush of using her magic in a fight. It felt good. She smile bitterly. "I found something, just not what I thought I'd fine."

Maril chuckled. "That's the Couple for you. They give you want you need though it is rarely what you want. Reminds me of when I was younger. There was a young boy named Gastor. He was so handsome and I loved watching him play Clashball."

She sighed wistfully and transferred the reins to one hand to twist around to look at Linsan. "I thought I was going to marry him and he was going to lead his team up to the national ranks."

Linsan smiled. It was a new story that Maril hadn't told before.

"I was even prepared to tell my parents that I was going to marry him."

"What happened?"

The old woman shrugged. "The spring was warm and I got a crop of strawberries three weeks early."

Linsan frowned. "What? I don't understand."

"The Couple provides. I decided to share a bushel with Gastor. So I made up a picnic and headed out to his house."

Linsan thought about all the plays her mother had been. She chuckled. "He was cheating on you?"

"What? No!" Maril shook her head. "No, I found out he was Lutian." Lutian was an offshoot religion from the Divine Couple. Linsan didn't know much about it other than it didn't have a Blessed Mother and only focused on the Holy Father as the sole protector and guide of humanity. Her mother didn't care for followers of Lutian, except when she had a play a role that required faith. Her father cared only for their music, must like any other melody that played near his ears.

Linsan laughed. "I didn't see that twist."

"Neither did I, but my mother didn't raise a girl who didn't believe in the Couple." Maril sat back in her bench. "So I married Tilain and I've been content ever since."

There wasn't anything Linsan could respond to. She turned back to watch the surrounding landscape as it passed but this time there was a smile on her lips. She tapped on the side of the wagon as she let her thoughts drift through memories drift through the fight and try to puzzle

out how to be better. That is, if she ever found herself defending herself with Brook again.

As if the gods were listening, she heard a roar of an engine. She hadn't heard a car along the road in days and a sense of foreboding rose as it grew louder with every passing second.

Maril sighed and clicked her tongue to move closer to the side of the road. "Another driver. One of these days, they are going to learn not to run so loud they spook the horses."

"Yeah," Linsan said as she peered down the road.

A cloud of dust grew larger as the vehicle approached. She knew the engine was a steam engine by the steady thumping of the pistons driving the wheels. She expected to see steam rising up among the dust but there was nothing.

Then she spotted it. It was a pink buggy with thick tires that were easily five feet tall. Even from a distance, she could see the pistons driving the wheels. With the small body of the vehicle, it looked like some sort of comical insect racing toward them.

Linsan stared at it, trying to see if it was Brook behind the windshield.

The car overtook them and blew past with a roar of the engines. Linsan snapped her head to peer at the driver just as Brook glanced her way.

It was almost impossible to tell with the thick goggles over Brook's face, but the blue dress and matching leather gloves were unmistakable. Brook wasn't wearing her customary hat, but instead had her curly hair pulled back into a tail.

Then the vehicle was gone.

Maril muttered something under her breath. It was as close as the old woman would come to swearing.

A high-pitched screech filled the air.

Linsan spun around on her seat to see the buggy fishtailing on the road. The thick wheels gripped the dirt easily but even then one wheel lifted off the ground before the car came to a shuddering halt blocking the road.

Maril yanked on the reins. "Stop!"

The horse stopped faster than the car but the wagon twisted violently. Heavy canvas bags bounced on her side, almost crushing her and her violin.

Linsan had to grab the wagon to keep from sliding. She yanked the violin out of the way and took the blow to her hips. The impact stung and she let out a little cry.

A door slammed shut and Brook came storming around the far side of the vehicle. Her boots thudded against the ground as she came up to the wagon. "What in the Couple's worst day is wrong with you!?"

Maril leaned toward Brook. "Are you—?"

"No! I'm talking to the pile of shit in the back!" Brook's scream was painfully loud. She slapped the side of the wagon. "Answer me! Why are you here!? What is wrong with you!?"

Linsan scrambled around to face Brook. She lifted herself up to her knees. "I'm trying to help."

"Everything you do is shit! You and your family are nothing but a curse! A Couple-damned pox on everything holy!"

"Blasphemy!" snapped Maril.

Brook turned on her. "Shut up, old woman!"

Maril's mouth opened in surprise. It quickly twisted in a scowl.

Slapping the side of the wagon again, Brook spun back on Linsan. "And you! You aren't supposed to be here. You weren't suppose to be at that damn garage."

"I'm trying to help!"

“No, you are trying to find that piece of crap violin you are obsessed about!”

“And the men who killed your father!” Linsan’s eyes burned with tears. “I’m going after them too. This isn’t about—”

“I don’t want your Couple-damned help—”

Maril held up her hand. “Stop blaspheming!”

Brook gave her only a half-second glare before returning to Linsan. She held up her fist, the blue glove creaking. “Go away! I don’t want to see you ever again! Do you hear me!? Find a rock to hide under, that’s all you Sterligs are good for. Nothing but shit-covered, curses of the Holy—”

Maril reached over and grabbed Brook’s outstretched wrist. She yanked hard. When Brook turned, Maril slapped her with her other hand.

The goggles flew off her head and fell back to tangle in her hair.

Maril leaned down while she pulled Brook closer. “You can have your disagreements all you want,” she said in a terrifying calm voice, “but if you insult the Couple one more time, I’m going to get down and spank your ass like a petulant little brat.”

Brook shook as she glared at Maril.

Linsan stared in shock, her gaze moving from Maril to Brook and back again.

Grinding her teeth together, Brook yanked her hand free. She stepped back out of range of Maril and pointed at Linsan. “I’m going to find my Daddy’s killers without you. Just stay out of my way. You hear me? Stay away!”

She turned and stomped away.

Maril sat back down on her bench. She sighed and then began to whisper a prayer. “Forgive me, my parents for I have...”

Linsan listened with only half an ear as she watched Brook get into her car. The grills on the side flared up as the fire rune inside was exposed to the boiler. The wheels turned a few times, then the car slowly straightened itself and pulled away. It was slow but accelerated steadily but before she knew it, the pink buggy was racing down the street.

Maril finished her prayer but made no effort to grab the reins.

Linsan shook and sat down hard. Tears ran down her cheeks. "I just wanted to help."

"I know, Love."

The sound of Brook's car faded away.

Linsan shook her head. She exhaled hard. "W-We should get going."

The wagon didn't move.

"Maril?"

The old woman turned and there was a sad smile on her face. "I'm going to miss you."

"W-What? I didn't mean to upset you."

"No, but this is where we are parting ways."

Linsan looked around at the empty road. She thought they would have separated in a town or city, not on the side. It was fitting though, that is how they started traveling together. She shook her head and closed her eyes tightly. "I'm sorry."

Maril beckoned for her. "Come on, wait on the bench with me."

Confused, Linsan looked up.

"Your friend will be back." All the anger and annoyance had faded away from Maril's face. She was once again the kind and cheerful woman that Linsan had been traveling with for days.

"I—"

"We prayed and the Couple has answered. Come on, she'll be back soon."

Linsan gathered her pack and case and crawled up to the bench. "I don't know. Brook is pretty stubborn. She and I have been fighting for years, ever since... the fire. Why do you think she'll be back."

The road ahead of them was empty and quiet. No hint of the buggy or the driver.

"I have faith."

Minutes passed by.

"She'll figure it out," Maril said.

Linsan squirmed uncomfortable. She thought about what she would say if Brook did come back. Would she gloat? Or fight? Would it just end up being another screaming fight? She shook her head.

Time continued to pass painfully slow. She listened to the birds call out as the sun crept toward the horizon.

Finally, Maril sighed. "I guess I was wrong. I could have sworn that the Mother and Father had given you exactly what you needed: someone who was looking for the same —"

There was a faint roar of an engine.

"—thing as you. Someone who..."

The sound grew louder. Ahead of them, dust boiled around the pink buggy as it raced back.

Maril chuckled. "Thank the Couple," she whispered.

Linsan shook her head in amusement. She didn't think Maril was right but she was proven wrong.

Maril turned to her. "Friends fight all the time."

"She isn't a friend."

Maril responded by taking Linsan's hands. "Friends fight. They argue and they snip. But this is where you need to go. Just... let it go and trust the Couple. They will find both the

killers and this instrument of yours before you know it. I have faith.”

“T-Thank you.” Linsan reached over and kissed Maril’s cheek.

Brook’s car reached them. The sound of the brakes squealed as she slammed on them. Then the car swung around on the dirt road, blowing past them as it spun until it was facing the same direction. With a rattle of pistons and the groan of steam pressure, it pulled up and came to a hissing stop.

Brook, her cheeks wet with tears, leaned over the passenger seat and stared out the window.

Linsan clutched the wagon and stared back. She didn’t know what to say but she knew that the first words couldn’t get out of her mouth.

Brook said nothing. Her jaw tightened as her eyes shimmered.

Uncomfortable, Linsan felt her body growing more tense with every passing second. Her mind spun furiously as her desire to be with Brook warred with their past.

Finally, Brook sighed. “Please?”

All the speeches faded. The only thing Linsan could do was slip off the wagon and get into Brook’s buggy. She put her pack and case on a narrow back bench before slipping into the passenger seat. Even the first touch, the soft leather underneath her sore rear, told her that being in the buggy would be a completely different ride than the wagon. She decided it was scarier. She glance at Brook.

Brook stared straight ahead. Her jaw worked for a moment. She used one hand to wipe the tears from her face before she grabbed the steering wheel with her gloves. The blue leather creaked.

Linsan cringed but she settled into the seat. The smell of perfume and sweets filled the air. She looked down to see

that Brook had a tray of sugared treats on top of a stack of papers. There were maps and notes jammed up against the driver's seat. A cup of something steaming rested inside a wire cradle near the center.

"Door," Brook said in a strained, cracked voice.

"Oh, sorry." Linsan blushed and closed the door. She waved to Maril who waved back.

"Blessed journey!" called out the older woman. "I'll pray for both of you!"

Brook slammed on the accelerator. Grills flared on the side of the buggy as a blast of heat poured out from underneath the engines. Steam hissed loudly as the car lurched forward. The pistons creaked twice and then began to force the wheels to turn.

In the first seconds, it was only loud and hot inside the cabin. Then a steady force pushed Linsan back as the vehicle accelerated. The pressure increased dramatically and she sank back. Frightened and startled, she gripped the handle of the door as the car shot forward.

A Mapped Route

Once society accepted that technology wasn't just a passing fad, a new war started as different guilds attempted to control the newborn industry.

—*Wrench and Blood*

Compared to the wagon, Linsan was almost frightened by how fast Brook's vehicle moved at full speed. Between the large tires and the soft seats, it felt like they were floating more than riding. After days on the wagon and feeling every bump and rut, it was a godsend.

Slowly, she relaxed her grip on the handle. Her fingers ached from the effort as she peeled one finger off and then the others. She groaned and rubbed her palm with her fingers as she looked around.

Brook's gaze was fixed forward. She had one hand on the steering wheel and the other on a stick rising up from between the two seats. On each side of the stick were two buttons that she would occasionally push down as she rocked it back and forth.

Linsan had no clue what Brook was doing.

Ahead of them, she saw a village approaching. In her mind's eyes, she thought about Maril's directions. They had covered three hours of the wagon's travel in only a half hour.

Brook slowed slightly near the buildings but then passed through the town.

Linsan watched the buildings rush past. She spotted people outside, folks who may have seen the murderers passing by. However, Brook didn't seem to be inclined to stop. "Do you know where you're going?"

Someone swore at them and the sound rose and fell before fading.

Brook's grip tightened. "Stone Over Moon Waters," she said in a strained tone. It was just on the edge of annoyance, anger, and obsession. "It's the closest place to sell that piece of crap violin of yours."

Then she grew silent again.

Linsan sighed. She looked around the cabin. It was small but comfortable, the best that a rich person could afford in a vehicle. Or at least she assumed, she never even had a fraction of Brook's money. She was sure it was more comfortable than even her bedroom at home.

They left the village as quickly as they arrived.

Linsan squirmed. The silence and Brook's tension was grating on her nerves. "How did you find them?"

Brook's shoulder hunched for a moment. With a groan, she squeezed the steering wheel before she slowly slumped back. "They stole Daddy's 1842 Deanglen Black Thunder. There were only twenty of them made and none of them near home. Daddy..." Her voice cracked as her eyes shimmered. "Daddy always said that Deanglen was high when he made the car. It was always busting a joint and leaking something on the garage floor. It couldn't get more than a few hundred miles without something breaking off, so I

drove around in circles until I found a garage that had serviced it.”

She let out a choked sob. She released the wheel to wipe her face, but stopped. She glanced toward Linsan and then pressed her hand firmly against her thigh.

Linsan stared in discomfort.

Brook picked up a cup from a hook near the dash and drank from it. When she finished, she put it back and returned her palm to the steering wheel. “So... Daddy thought this war between the Mechanics Guild, Artificer Academy, and the Pistons is horse shit, so he never registered any of our cars with the guilds. That means, the... the...” She caught herself. “They can only go to an unaffiliated shop because they don’t have time to get it registered.”

“Is that why you skipped the village?”

Brook nodded. She glanced down and then back up to the road. Her hand patted the small table between the seats for a moment and then pulled out a map. It was drawn on heavy paper with hundreds of colored symbols everywhere.

Linsan took it and peered at it. She frowned as she stared at the unfamiliar shapes. She had tried to read a map a few times in her life but very little made sense to her. There was a line that ran from their home town of Penesol to New Brunil. Along the way, there were a dozen gear and wrench symbols of different colors; Brook had circled the black wrenches along the path.

Brook spoke after a few moments, “The next place is a town called Jamorel. They have a mechanic on the north side. I also sent a request for a room at one of the local inns through Daddy’s network.”

She took a deep breath. When she spoke again, her voice was steadier. “I’ll get you a room. No reason for you to sleep in the car when I have a bed.”

Linsan bristled. "I can pay my own way." True, she had only done it once and she wasn't sure it would happen again. The casual way Brook mentioned it felt like Linsan had been clawed.

Brook gave her a hard look. She rolled her eyes before returning her attention to the road. "Don't worry, it won't be a fancy one."

Linsan glared at her. "I can pay," she muttered again.

Brook responded by accelerating her vehicle and pushing Linsan back into her seat. When Linsan looked over, she was had a condescending smirk.

With her mood quickly souring, Linsan turned away to look out the window. Maybe she should have stayed with Maril. At least, endless talks about the Divine Couple were better than being humiliated by... whatever Brook was to her.

Checking In

The fastest way to make an impression is do something so incredibly rude the audience has to struggle whether to be offended or amused.

—Ragon Victor

Linsan wasn't expecting Brook to slam on the brakes. Her shoulder slammed against the dash and a burst of pain sent stars exploding across her vision. The momentum yanked her off her seat and she slumped to the floor of the car before her knees hit hard against the metal. She managed to throw her arms up to catch herself before her face stuck the dash, but the impact against her forearms stung as much as her shoulder.

Underneath her, the car shuddered and shook as it screeched to a halt in front of a large public house. Bright lights speared into the windows of the car.

"You could have warned me," muttered Linsan as she pried herself off the floor.

She glared at Brook who sat elegantly in her seat. Her entire body shook with the car but she was moving with the vibrations instead of bouncing around like Linsan. Only a few coils of her dark hair seemed out of place.

The car came to a halt. Wisps of dust and steam rose up from the engine, as if it was panting.

Linsan shuddered as her stomach tried to settle into place.

Brook sighed and set her drink back in her cup holder. "Come on," she said curtly before kicking open the door with her heeled boot and gracefully stepped out. The door creaked as it swung back. When it latched shut, the entire cabin shook again.

Confused, Linsan stared at Brook through the windows as Brook headed to the rear of the car. She unlatched the boot and lifted the lid. Instead of pulling anything out, she turned with a flutter of her dress and headed straight toward the front entrance where a burly man held open the door.

Linsan cleared her throat. "W-What do I do now?"

No one answered.

A prickle of annoyance and frustration rose up. Linsan reached back and grabbed her own travel pack. She felt dirty and disgusting. Fumbling with the door, she figured out how to open it and got out of the vehicle.

Every muscle in her backside protested. Three hours in a seat had left her aching. She groaned and rubbed it, limping slightly as she stepped away from the vehicle before circling back toward the rear.

They had stopped in front of a public house. Like many of the ones she had seen on her trip, it was a wide building with a deck along the front. Chairs and tables had been arranged underneath globes of light hanging from the rafters. Almost all of the tables were occupied by customers with waitresses weaving around to serve and take orders.

To Linsan's relief, the customers weren't dressed up as fancily as Brook. Their outfits were closer to what Linsan wore every day, though hers was dirty after days of travel-

ing. Almost immediately, she desperately wanted a clean bath and a cleaner set of clothes.

Scratching her now itchy chin, she peered into the back of the car. There were two large, matching suitcases in the back along with a smaller case. They all had the same pattern on them, a blue flower with three petals.

She looked at the front door and then back to the boot. Was Brook expecting her to bring them in for her? Was she going to be Brook's servant for the rest of the trip?

Linsan clamped her jaw tight as she stared at the suitcase. As much as Brook's attitude was annoying, they had covered half a week's travel on Maril's wagon in a single day. What was an overwhelming task was suddenly possible. Subservience may be worth the price of hunting down the murderers. Not to mention, Brook had showed up just as Maril was talking about the Divine Couple providing.

She shook her head. "Maybe there is something to prayer," she muttered before pulling out one of the suitcases. It was heavier than she expected. With a grunt, she let it thump against her side before she adjusted her own bags. She staggered to the door where the muscular guy held the door open.

He made no effort to help her as she passed him.

Brook stood at the bar, looking completely out of place. Her blue dress was completely out of place among the more drab customers. It almost shone in light from the globes glowing near the ceiling.

She turned as the door closed behind Linsan. Her gaze flickered down and the corner of lips curled into a smile. "The staff gets those. You should know that." She waved the pair of gloves in her hand in Linsan's direction.

Any charity or thankfulness Linsan had faded almost immediately. She dropped the suitcase on the ground. After

only a brief hesitation, she abandoned it and headed straight for the bar.

The bartender, a middle-aged woman with light brown hair, looked up to her and then glanced at Brook. She smiled smugly as she returned to wiping a glass off with a rag. There was something in her expression that made Linsan uncomfortable, as if a stranger was reading something more into their relationship.

Brook smirked and turned back to talk to the bartender. "Might as well get her a room too."

The bartender looked up. There was brief moment of confusion as she looked at Brook and Linsan. Then she shrugged. "Of course, Dame. Top floor?"

Brook shook her head. "First floor is good enough for her."

Linsan didn't need to be told the room was utilitarian. She fought the urge to glare at Brook. Instead, she took a deep breath and hefted her violin case further up on her shoulder.

"As you will, Dame." She reached under the counter and pulled out a box. Shuffling through the keys, she handed Linsan one with a black handle on the end of it. "Room 019."

Linsan thanked her. By the time she had gathered the key, Brook was already gone and there was employee carrying both of her suitcases up the stairs. Linsan rolled her eyes and turned back. "What a damned cow," she muttered under her breath.

"Trouble?" asked the bartender.

"No, I'm just a little out of place apparently." Linsan looked around. She didn't have many experiences with public houses, but the main room was clean and brightly lit. She guessed there were twenty tables, most of them already filled with various groups drinking and eating and having fun. In the corner, she saw three musicians setting up. One

of the players had a bright blue fiddle and damp hair. Her skin crawled with the need to get clean but she wanted to hear how he played.

Curious, she turned back. "Is there a chance I can join in?" she asked while gesturing to her violin case.

"Do you play professionally?"

Linsan blushed. "I paid for a room by playing a week ago."

The bartender laughed. "That would be a 'no,' then. Good thing. It's amateurs only tonight. You play for tips, house takes half."

Linsan's skin crawled. "I could use some cleaning up."

The bartender gestured to the key. "First floor has a shared bathing area at the end of the hall. Your key will open it up. There is soap and shampoo, but you want to bring your own."

A half hour later, Linsan returned to the main hall wearing her cleanest blouse and a flowing skirt. Both were good for moving around since she frequently found herself dancing whenever she played.

The room was more crowded and she noticed a lot more people drinking lagers and ales. The waitresses were busy moving among the tables. Two bouncers watched from opposite side of the hall but there didn't seem to be much trouble yet.

A wave of nervousness slammed into her. She clutched her case tightly as she stood near the opening to the room hallway. Her excitement for playing faltered as she imagined sixty or seventy people staring at her as she played. What if she made a mistake? What if she wasn't as good as the others?

The bartender noticed her and gestured for her to approach.

Linsan inched forward, her brow prickling with sweat.

The older lady set down a large glass jar on the bar and held out a grease marker. "What's your name?"

"Linsan Sterlig."

After writing her name on the side of the jar, the bartender handed it to Linsan. "Just put this up there with the rest. Good luck."

Linsan's hands shook as she took it.

The bartender winked. "You're going to do great. Once you start playing, you won't notice a single thing."

The words were encouraging. Linsan nodded and thanked her again before carrying it to the front of the room.

The fiddle player made a spot for her. When she set down her case, he pointed to it. "Fiddle?" His voice was warm with a faint accent.

"Violin."

He whistled and shook his hand. "Fancy. Don't usually see those on the circuit."

"I'm... new."

His gaze dropped down to look at her and then he came up smiling. He had a goatee that was black as pitch and thick eyebrows to match. "I'm sure you're great. My name is Ragon. Ragon Victor."

"Um, Linsan Sterlig."

One of the other musician's head snapped up. "Sterlig?" she said in a raspy voice. "That's an obscure name."

Linsan flushed.

The female player came over. She had a flute on her hand. "Where are you from?"

Ragon held up his hand. "Be nice, Wendil."

"I'm just curious where she be from."

"Why—?"

Linsan cleared her throat. "Penesol."

Wendil's eyes narrowed. "Who's your mother?"

"Tisin of Penesol."

Ragon took a step back. "The Feathered Queen of the Stage?"

Linsan blushed and then some of the tension went out. She knew her mother. "She hasn't been called that in a long time. Not since she got the award for *Strangers in the Gale*." Then she remembered that she had her mother's pin from the celebration. With a smile, she held up her hand and opened up her case.

When Linsan picked up the violin, Wendil gasped. "That's a Sterlig! I haven't seen one of those in years!" She gulped. "C-Can I hold it? I promise, I'll be gentle."

Nodding, Linsan handed the violin over. She kept an eye on Wendil as she dug into the case to get the award and held it up. "This was mother's too. She gave to me."

Ragon took it and inspected it. He said "Damn" and then handed it back. "Well, then I guess we got some competition tonight, don't we?"

Linsan's cheeks burned even more. "I'm still new to this."

Wendil handed the Sterlig over. "I wish I could play this," she sighed. "When I was younger, I heard three of these being played at the same time Stone Over Moon Waters and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever heard. Your mother was there."

"*The Immortal Cranes Atop of the Mountain*. I was three when the entire family spent the summer traveling with mommy... mother. My daddy brought some of his best instruments for the charity auction. It was the only time I've ever seen the grand cathedral with all those blue tiles on the ceiling." Linsan smiled at the vague memories. It was back during the happier times of her life.

Wendil sighed. "I missed those days."

She wiped her eyes before she spoke to Linsan again, "I look forward to hearing this old thing played again. I doubt

I'll hear a Sterlig many more times after what had happened... twenty years ago?"

Linsan sighed herself. The familiar loss of the fire and everything that had followed. "I hope not. I'm actually heading over to Moon Waters now. There might be another Sterlig for sale." She almost mentioned it was stolen but didn't.

Ragon set down a lager in front of her. "This is on me. Another Sterlig? That's going to shake things up among the rich patrons. It's probably worth millions now." He sighed. "I envy the musician commissioned to play it."

Linsan nodded.

"Going to buy it?"

She shook her head. "I can't afford that. I... just want to meet the sellers. To talk to them."

The other musicians stared at her, she guess waiting for her to explain. She worked her mouth to explain what she was doing.

Then someone in the audience called out. "Play something, damn it!"

There was a round of laughter.

Ragon looked at Linsan and gestured toward the front. "What's your act? Just playing?"

Linsan glanced at the crowd and felt a different type of embarrassment rising to choke her. "And dancing?" she said with uncertainty.

"Go for it. Here, let me moving this table back."

Linsan and Wendil helped to clear her a space.

"Play something cheerful, that always gets people in the mood," Wendil told Linsan.

"Play something raunchy." Ragon chuckled. "Everyone like a good rude start."

"Says the man who knows thirty songs about asses."

Linsan got an idea. She knew the perfect song. Her mother hated it but it was the first song she learned how to play and she knew a thousand variations. “You know *My Ass for a Glass of Milk?*”

Wendil groaned as Ragon smirked.

“My favorite. Mine if I join you?”

“I would like that. I’m kind of scared right now.”

“Nothing like playing an ass to help the jitters.”

Thankful, Linsan picked up her violin and came out in front of the tables. She was exposed, vulnerable. Hundreds of eyes were staring at her.

Ragon came up. His bright fiddle rocked in his hands. “Good evening everyone. We have a newcomer here, so let’s give a lovely greeting to Linsan Sterlig!”

Linsan didn’t think her cheeks could burn any brighter.

“And I’m Ragon, your local boy who you’ve heard a thousand times. Don’t worry, Carl, I’ve already fixed the hitch.”

Someone in the audience snickered.

Ragon stepped back and gestured to Linsan.

Heart pounding, Linsan found herself in the middle. Her hand trembled as she lifted her bow to the violin. It almost hummed with her nervousness but when she touched the strings of her violin, all the nervousness slipped away and there wasn’t even a hum.

The room quieted.

Taking a deep breath, she swept her foot out. Her skirt fluttered around her.

She played the first bar of the song.

Immediately, someone laughed.

Encouraged, she looked around the room and shifted to a new position to play the second.

More laughter.

Ragon came up and played the third bar. He winked at her.

Someone started to clap.

She spun around and looked at him as she played the next few. The sweetness of the Sterlig couldn't be mistaken. It was almost as if someone was singing a choir next to her, a chorus of the opening lines of the rudest song she knew.

He responded in kind. His instrument was rougher than hers, the sound more of a twang and a buzz but it sounded just as good.

The back and forth between them accelerated. She danced with her parts, twisting her body back and forth. On the sharper bits, she bumped her hips.

The room was silence.

Ragon and her ceased to play back and forth and joined together into the song. No words were needed but she could hear a few people in the audience singing along anyways.

Their melody filled the room, growing raunchier. She included the song in her dance, sticking out her ass in the right place and spinning in the others. Her body moved in harmony with the song as all the nervousness faded away. Only joy and playfulness remained.

When the song ended, they stood there looking at each other and panting.

Ragon grinned. "That was beautiful."

"Thank you."

The room burst into applause. It was the first time she had ever heard it beating off the walls and rattling the windows. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she looked past the crowds to see that the people from the deck and upstairs were packed around the entrance.

Brook stood in the middle of the crowd. With a fresh dress on, one with white and yellow trim, she was still completely out of place. The light seemed to be drawn toward her, setting her up as if she stood under a spotlight.

Their gazes met.

Brook smiled and started to join in the applause. Then, she stopped with her hands inches away from each other. Looking down, the joy drained from her face.

Linsan's heart fell.

Brook shook her head and turned away. Linsan thought she saw a tear before the other girl shoved her way through the crowd and out of sight.

Ragon clapped her back and stepped away.

A moment later, Wendil stepped up. "Lin?"

Linsan sniffed and turned. "Yes?"

Wendil's eyes were shimmering. "Would you do the honor of playing with me?" She held up her flute. "Maybe *Dance of the Butterfly Court*?"

With one last look in hopes that Brook had remained, Linsan was disappointed to see that her companion had left. She shook her head before focusing on Wendil. "I would be honored to play with you."

Networking

Knowing the right people can sometimes be more important than having the information on hand.

—Saul da Grasil

Linsan woke up sprawled across her narrow bed, one foot hanging off the edge and her head pulsing with a headache that felt like one of her father's saws tearing into her forehead. With a groan, she planted her hand on the side table and levered herself up into a kneeling position.

Something heavy slid off her thigh and tumbled toward the edge of the bed. Immediately, she thought about her violin and grabbed it before it could break. Her fingers bumped against the edges of her case and she managed to dig her fingertips into the opening before it completely fell off the bed.

Awake from fear, she rolled over and hauled her case back on the bed. Propping it between her bare thighs, she ran her fingers along the lid before opening it.

The case was empty.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Pushing her auburn hair out of her face, she looked around frantically. She didn't remember coming back to her room, nor did she remember creating a bed from her clothing for the Sterlig. The neck stuck out from a pair of her underwear and she had one of her shirts tucked over the curves as if it was wearing a pair of pajamas. Her mother's award pin had been used to tuck in the outfit.

Linsan stared at the instrument for a moment and then snorted with amusement.

Her laughter ended abruptly with another throb of her head. With a moan, she pressed her palm against her skull and looked around for clean clothes that weren't propped up on her musical instrument.

A half hour later, she was dressed and ready to face the world again. She had her travel pack slung over her shoulder and her case held with both hands. Memories danced across the back of her mind, a night of dancing and singing not to mention the applause. She slowed down with a smile. The audience loved her judging from their cheers and calls for more sets. Even with the haze of her hangover, she couldn't help but feel a quickening of her heart and a growing desire to bask in the attention again.

Stirring herself, she headed straight for the main room. However, as soon as she came around a corner, she came up to a packed hallway. Surprised, she slowed down and joined a line that had formed that brought her closer to the main room.

The noise was almost deafening. Her headache throbbed in pain as she saw far more people packed into the tight quarters of the relatively large room.

Linsan stalled in the entrance but someone jostled her from behind. Overwhelmed, she stepped into the room while searching for some place to look around without being in the way. Not even the main entrance to the pub lo-

oked safe with steady streams of people, luggage, and staff going in and out.

“Lin!” Ragon stood on a chair in the corner. He waved to her and called out her name. His dark hair was wild, sticking out in tufts and he had a scruff of a beard. In one hand, he had a large glass that was only half-full of beer but he was splashing the contents in all direction with his waving. “Over here!”

Thankful for someone familiar, she waved her pack over her head and made her way around the jostling folks and over a line of luggage before sitting down in a proffered chair. Looking around, all she could see was a press of travel dresses, luggage, and suits. “Wow! I’ve never been anywhere so crowded.”

Wendil, wearing a dark flowered hat pulled down to her eyebrows and a simple flowered dress, picked up a glass of lager and sipped at it. “It’s worse at the end of a weekend. Everyone is in a rush to head home. We usually wait for the noise to die down before heading out.”

Ragon dropped a glass of lager in front of Linsan. “Sometimes, if I’m lucky, there are fist fights. I like those. As long as I’m not the one swinging.”

Wendil glared at him. “You just like it when the women fight over their luggage.”

Ragon shrugged, his eyes sparkling. “Why not? Nothing like seeing a flash of ankles or a blush to keep me going in the long days of working.”

“How does anyone get out of here?” Linsan asked.

Ragon gestured around and then toward the door. “Follow the lines back from the exit, you’ll see it is actually really organized. Kuris and the others with the orange hats tell everywhere where to line up. Outside, Ganil and her gang wrangle the horses and wagons up and bring them according to the dance cards. Basic order is: food, check out, get

in line and then get out. As long as no one jumps line, this entire room will empty out in thirty minutes.”

Linsan’s jaw opened with surprise. “If someone jumps the line?”

Ragon chuckled. “Then I get to see someone get kicked out of the inn in a most agreeable manner. It’s even better than the mouse fights.”

Linsan looked around for Brook but couldn’t see far through the press of people. She lifted herself up and peered over the sea of hats, feathers, and faces but still couldn’t spot her travel companion. With a frown, she wondered if she was in the wrong place.

A young girl tugged on Linsan’s shirt before setting down a full platter of food. “Breakfast for you, dame,” she said before diving back into the crowds.

Linsan looked down at the heaping pile of eggs, grilled sausages, and breads. There was even fresh fruit on the edge. Tucked under the other side was an envelope with her name on it. “What is this?”

Ragon reached over to snatch up one of the fruits. “Best food in the city. I may not make a lot performing, but food is on the house for the entertainment.”

He tapped on the envelope. “Your cut of the night’s proceeds. You probably want to count it later, that way you won’t make us feel bad. You were stunning and everyone is going to be talking to you for months.” He leaned toward her and whispered loudly. “I made almost thirty-six cuks last night.”

Wendil smirked. “Forty-two and that is because I don’t insist on playing songs with asses.”

Linsan smiled. “I wasn’t that good.”

Ragon pointed at her. “You were and you know it. Once you get over the jitters, you are going to steal the show

every time. You are beautiful, talented, and competent. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

A warm feeling filled her. She smiled and toyed with the edge of the table.

From the other side, Wendil gestured to the lager. "You going to drink that?"

His mouth full, Ragon snorted. "Of course she'd want more of the piss that got her here."

The idea of prolonging the hangover didn't appeal to Linsan. She pushed the foaming liquid over and traded it for a glass of clear water from in front of Ragon. After squeezing a bit of fruit juice into it, she wiped her hands and drank. "That's what I needed. My mother always said don't drink spirits in the morning."

"Bah," Ragon said grabbing Linsan's old lager to pour half of it into his own glass before returning it. "More for me. I'd rather not go to work sober, if you know what I mean."

Linsan looked over her shoulder again for Brook.

"You with someone?" asked Wendil. "You seem to be looking."

"Yeah, a woman named Brook. We grew up together but... not really. We were heading over to Moon Waters together. Both of us..." It took a moment to remember what she had told Ragon and Wendil earlier. She cleared her throat. "Both of us have some questions about the Sterlig."

When she noticed the others were looking at her with obvious questions, she blushed and dug into her breakfast. It was good, richer than she had in a long while with just a hint of spiciness.

Ragon swallowed loudly. "What does she look like? Pretty? Unmarried? Nice tits? I mean really firm ones that—"

Wendil smacked him. "Women are more than breasts, Rag!"

He laughed and waved her off.

Wendil turned back to Linsan. "She wasn't staying with you? I saw you had your own room."

Linsan looked at Wendil curiously.

Ragon smirked. "Were you stalking Lin?"

Wendil's cheeks colored. "I was not! I was in the room next to her and we stopped at the same time. She even asked how to dress up a baby before crashing."

It was Linsan's turn to blush. That explained a little about the violin in the nest of clothes. Then she answered. "No, Brook got her own room before I got inside. She had a reservation. Probably for one of the expensive rooms. She likes to live like she dresses, fancy." Linsan remembered how Brook stood out among the others. "Even for her, she is always dressed up pretty like she's going out on a night."

Ragon's eyes lit up. "Oh, was she driving the pink Glass-coaster buggy?"

"I don't know what type, but it has big wheels and it's pink."

He grinned. "She is beautiful. Is she married? Do I have to get rid of her betrothed? I'm a noble fighter."

Wendil reached over and smacked him before stealing the rest of his drink. "The car is probably registered with the Artificer Academy or the Mechanics and you are never going to get within miles of that tailpipe. Either of them," she finished wagging her finger.

Ragon sighed. "Yeah, sweet buggies like that always go with the Pistons anyways. No chance it will be driving into our garage."

Linsan almost choked on her food.

Raul smacked her shoulders until she stopped coughing. "Are you okay?"

"You're with the unaffiliated mechanics in town?"

Ragon said nothing for a moment and then grinned broadly. “Dorsen and Sons, only unchained mechanic in thirty leagues. I’m neither Dorsen or one of his four daughters.”

“Are you one of his sons?” Linsan asked.

Ragon grinned and winked. “Dor doesn’t have sons. He had two but they both turned out to be girls. I blame him drinking on the job for not seeing it earlier.” Then he shrugged. “Not really. Everyone knew he had four daughters before he put up that sign, but he’s a penny-pinching bastard and left it up. All five of them of them work the garage. I’m just their errand boy and do the little jobs around the shop.”

Wendil tapped the edge of her hat. “I own a hat shop in town, about five streets down.”

It was obvious that Wendil was feeling left out of the conversation but Linsan was too close to be pulled aside. She looked pleadingly at her for a moment and then turned back to Ragon. “I... we were going to be visiting you today.”

Ragon blinked. “You were?”

Wendil almost choked on her drink. “You were?”

“Yes. Have you seen a... a... 1842...” Linsan struggled to remember the car. “Deanglen Black Lighting?”

Ragon smirked. “No chance in the Seven Saints’ Assholes that someone drove a Black Thunder into our shop. Why would they?”

Linsan realized her mistake. “Black Thunder. It isn’t registered with any of the guilds and there were probably three guys in it. One of them had a guitar that did fire magic.”

Wendil tapped the table frantically. She was draining the glass but kept going until it was done. Slamming it down, she said with a spray of foam, “The fire guitar is Tilbin. Remember, he played here a few years ago. Did the whole light and dance show?”

Linsan's heart swelled. They had heard of the murderers.

Wendil turned to Ragon. "Do you think he's still hanging around Mayforn and Gabaw? Those three were always sticking together ever since Gabaw got fired by Dorsen."

"Did they have fire powers too?" asked Linsan, her voice cracking.

Wendil nodded. "Oh, but you better stay away from those three, Lin. They are trouble no matter what they are doing. Last I heard, they were blackjacking across the country."

Linsan shook her head. "Blackjacking?"

"Arson, stealing, and robbing people. They are just assholes on a good day but brigands in the middle of the night. They hadn't gotten to murder as far as I know but I doubt it would stay that way. They were always chasing after the next score."

Ragon shook his head. "Gabaw got caught trying to filing off the registration numbers off of vehicles and selling them at Dorsen's."

Linsan's stomach twisted violently. "Arson? Like setting someone's lands on fire?" Or killing Duncan?

Wendil shrugged. "Yeah, if someone wanted to ruin some trees, I guess. There had to be... a..." Her voice trailed off. Then she gasped in surprise. "Do you think that is what happened to your family? I heard the Sterlig Forest had caught fire some years ago."

Linsan nodded slowly.

Ragon groaned. "Oh, that would be horrible. I'm still dreaming of hearing your play and it's only been a night. There is something about you and that instrument."

"That would be Tiblin." Wendil shook her head. "He'd murder his father if someone paid him."

"He killed his best friend's wife, remember. Nasty, nasty man. It was over land ownership in some shitty town, but

that didn't stop him. Be careful, Lin. Be really careful, he won't hesitate to hurt you if come up on him."

Ragon started to say something but then his eyes glanced up. Sharply inhaling, he stood up abruptly just as Brook slapped her hand on the table next to Linsan. She was wearing a dark green gloves with the fingertips exposed. To Linsan's surprise, Brook's fingernails had been painted to match.

"Get up! We need to get out of this damn place and find my buggy! No one is bothering to help me," she snapped.

Linsan jumped before turning to look up at her. She wasn't surprised to see that Brook was wearing an elegant evening dress but the contrast between her companion's outfit and everyone else was startling. Brook's blue dress looked more like the ones in the paintings, with ruffles and delicate embroidery. It was coordinated with her gloves and her fingernails. She even wore a hair piece with a bit of lace that covered part of her face and her dark curls.

The words died in Linsan's throat.

Compared to the other women in the pub, Linsan was overdressed. Linsan had noticed it before but the contrast was almost painful.

Brook held out her hand with an exasperated scoff. "Well? Get up."

Linsan looked back. "We should wait. The lines will clear out soon enough and we can get going."

The green glove tightened into a fist on the table. "I have no interest "You just want to spend more time with these... tuneless..." She shook her fist as she struggled with the word. "... ragamuffins!"

Wendil's jaw drop in shocked.

Ragon just smirked.

Brook leaned over and hissed, "Get up and help me get my damn car. We need to get to Dorsen and Sons and see if

they found those damn—” She cut herself off and looked sharply at the other people at the table.

Ragon smoothly stood up and held out his hand. “Excuse me. You can call me—”

Brook settled a withering glare at him and his hand.

He pulled his hand back and then set down. He gave Linsan a sympathetic look. “I can see why you didn’t want to spend the night with her. I bet she bites in her sleep. Or at least kicks.”

There was a stunned silence around the table.

Linsan looked up to see Brook’s cheeks were colored underneath her scowl. Then she turned away. “Ragon, just tell her what you told me.”

Ragon crossed his arms over his chest.

“Please?”

He rolled his eyes and then sighed. “Fine.” Rolling his head to the side, he stared at Brook. “Tiblin and his friends would never go to Dorsen’s. Not after Gabaw got fired from there when—”

“How would you know that?” Brook’s voice cut him off.

Ragon snapped his finger and held up his hand. “Listen, Snake Tongue”.

Brooke drew herself up, a look of outrage on her face.

“I work at Dorsen’s. If you are capable of closing your pretty mouth and listening, maybe I—”

Wendil smacked Ragon.

He glared at her but then continued. He appeared to calm down. “If they were going anywhere with a shiny car like Lin described, they would head straight for Geb’s barn. It’s about a day’s walk off the main road leading to Moon Waters to one of the smaller villages.”

Brook glared at Linsan who ducked her head.

“How far?” Brook asked.

Ragon smiled. “Sit.”

“No.”

“Well, then I guess you’re going to miss it, snake in ruffles.” Ragon smiled. It looked cheerful but there was a hardness in his eyes.

“Ragon,” said both Wendil and Linsan.

“No, if she’s going to be a snake, why would I help her?”

“I beg your pardon,” Brook said, her back straightening.

Ragon leaned forward. “You don’t have a ticket which means you haven’t checked out. Even if you got in line, you’re going to be waiting at least a half hour before you get into that Glasscoaster of yours and head out.”

Brook’s jaw tightened.

“So, please sit and relax. Getting breakfast won’t stop you since you don’t have to talk to Dorsen or his daughters.”

“Sons,” Brook said.

“Daughters,” said everyone else at the table. Linsan grinned at the private joke.

Brook tensed for a moment. Then she looked around at the crowded room.

“Come on, give me a chance,” Ragon said, a bit of his charm rising in his voice.

“I’d rather drink poison.”

He grinned and held up his empty glass. “A lager then? Or do you prefer something stronger.”

Brook made a face before she pulled out a seat between Linsan and Wendil. Primly, she sat down. “Tea. As strong as they’ll make it. Then plenty of cream and sugar.”

Wendil leaned forward. “Grabil or Tinkoil style. Or something more exotic like Nasanogin?”

“*Asanōgi*,” Brook said prolonging the middle. It also began and ended with a vowel, which gave it a jarring sound when every name Linsan had heard started and ended with a consonant. “I like it with a lot of cream and sugar.”

Linsan looked at the two.

Wendil grinned and tapped her hat. “I serve tea to my customers. They like to hear the exotic styles. *Asanōgi* is pretty rare though, it is almost burnt tea with an obscene amount of cream and sugar.”

Brook seemed to relax. Her eyes scanned over Wendil for a moment. “Millinery?” When Wendil nodded, Brook held out a gloved hand. “May I see?”

Wendil’s smile glowed as she took off her hat and handed it over.

Inspecting it carefully for a moment, Brook relaxed even more before she handed it back. “Very well,” she said, “I’ll play. Tell me more.”

Linsan gently nudged her with an elbow.

Brook’s jaw tightened. “Please?”

Planning

The Glass Fallacy: a theory that unskilled men will overestimate their ability to perform an action, usually resulting in complete failure and humiliation. See Broken Glass Heart.

—*A Gathering of Useful Phrases*

As the buggy took a hard corner around a steep hill, the force drove Linsan's shoulder into the side of the door. She winced at the pain before levering herself back into position. With a sigh, she pushed her hair over away from her face. "You could take those curves just a little slower."

Brook's jaw tightened. Twisting her hands on the steering wheel, she shook her head. "We're so close. I have to keep going." Her voice was tense, almost vibrating.

"Ragon said it was going to be almost a day until we reached Fanasis Village. Even then, it's going to be another half day—"

"Not the way I drive," snapped Brook. "I need to get those bastards and I'll be damned if I'm going to let the sun set with them f-free." Her voice cracked slightly and her eyes shimmered with tears.

A wave of guilt slammed into Linsan. As passionate as she was about Palisis, it was nothing compared to losing a parent. Her own throat seized up as she thought how she would respond if it was her own father who died. Sniffing, she turned away and looked out the window before Brook noticed.

As Brook's driving continued to jostle her, Linsan wondered what she was supposed to say. She glanced back just as Brook reached out for one of the cups of tea that she had ordered from the inn.

Her fingertips picked up the cup by the rim. She shook it slightly and then set it down. A few papers rustled. The fingers moved to the next cup and rejected it as empty. Shaking her head, Brook gripped the steering wheel again.

Linsan reached back to where two more cups were nestled in hooks behind the center ridge. It was heavy and still warm in her hand. Surprised at the heat still inside after almost five hours in the car, she held it out to Brook as she moved one of the empty cups into the back.

Brook's fingers brushed Linsan's briefly. She tensed for a heartbeat before she took the cup gently from Linsan's grip.

Linsan sat back in her seat.

Brook took a deep drink and then let out a long sigh of pleasure. She seemed to relax minutely. Her eyes flickered to the side toward Linsan and then back. "I... thank you."

There was just a hint of the same reluctance that Brook had at the inn.

Linsan shifted slightly. She clasped her hands together and squeezed. "I'm really sorry, you know."

"About what?"

"Y-Your father. I can't... I'm sorry. I don't know what to say or how to say it. I liked Duncan. He was an uncle to me, but he was your father." Linsan's throat was tight. "I would

be broken if they killed mine and I can't really find words to say how much I'm sorry."

A tear ran down Brook's cheeks.

The vehicle slowed.

Trembling, Brook tried to set down her cup in the hook. The rim kept slipped on the edge. After a third try, she managed to get it in.

"Brook?"

With tears in her eyes, Brook just nodded.

Linsan struggled with her own emotions. As she did, she noticed that the world was blurring less. The buggy was slowing down dramatically. She watched through the window until she could make out the branches of the trees. "Why are we slowing?"

Brook cleared her throat. "I... I don't know what to do when we get them. Do you?"

Linsan almost said that she didn't, but then she remember how well they had fought together in the first garage. They had a talent together. "Fight?"

Brook tensed. "Fight?"

"Why not? Between your..." Linsan hesitated knowing how much Brook hated her power.

"Blast," came the disappointed answer.

"... and my violin, we might be able to do something by ourselves. It might be better than just finding them and running for the nearest guard to tattle on them."

"That was your idea?" Brook looked at her incredulously.

"What was yours?"

It was Brook's turn to look sheepish.

"You were going to run them over?"

Brook suddenly smiled and Linsan noticed that her lipstick was also coordinated with the colors of her outfit. "No, but that's a better idea than I had. I was just going to clap as hard and loud as I could until their eardrums burst." She

gave a bitter laugh. "Failing that, just slap them until they pass out or my hand breaks."

Linsan smirked. "I could see you doing that."

"Remember that fight?"

Brook didn't need to give any more details for Linsan to know what fight she was talking about. Even years later, some of the memories were still raw. She sighed. "Yeah."

"Do..." Brook hesitated. "Do you think we could learn how to fight together?"

"We did at the garage."

Brook's grip tightened on the wheel. "Do you think we could do it on purpose? To win?"

"Against three men with fire powers?" Linsan took a deep breath. "I don't know about you, but I'm willing to try. You lost your daddy and that is the most important thing we need to focus on." Despite her desire to get Palisis, she was surprised that she meant it.

Brook didn't respond. Instead, she picked up her tea and took a sip.

When Brook didn't say anything else, Linsan wondered if she had said the wrong thing. She turned back to the window and fretted to herself. Talking to Brook was always a thorny problem for her. She never knew when something would ruin the mood or her chances to ease the conflict between them.

A few minutes later, she saw a road sign for Fanasis. They were only a few leagues away and it was just past noon. If they hurried, they would make it to Gabaw's home before the end of the day.

"I think we should stop."

Linsan glanced at Brook. "What? Why?"

"Because we're idiots and about to do something stupid. These asses have probably been robbing and murdering people for years and we've only been in three fights togeth-

er. And the first time,” she said in a low tone, “we were trying to kill each other.”

Linsan blushed. “I wasn’t trying to kill you. I just wanted to be left alone. That’s all I wanted to ever be.”

“Fine.” She opened her mouth as if to say something else but then shook her head. “Even a little practice would be good, right? I don’t really understand your music, but things seemed to flow better when you were playing. If I know the song, maybe we can do more damage.”

“So just find a field or a clearing and try it out?”

Brook’s lip curled in a smile. “Why not? We’ll do it in sight of the road from Fanasis to Little Rock. That way, we’ll see and maybe even hear them leaving.”

“Why if they don’t go to Geb’s barn?”

“Daddy’s car doesn’t go that far. They went there.” The muscles in her jaw tightened. “They have to have gone there.”

They drove in silence for a little while.

“Should we see if people in town would tell us if they passed? That might help. I think I’ve gotten decent at that.”

Brook nodded, her eyes back on the road. She reached for the cup but then pulled her hand back. “I’ll get us rooms for the night while you do that. Then we can change and get some practice before dark.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Brook held out her hand, palm up.

“What?” asked Linsan.

“I-It was something daddy always did when you said that. You slap palms. Slap as in ‘Sounds. Like. A. Plan.’ It was...” She sniffed. “It was always his joke. None of us could stand it but right now...” Her voice trailed off and she sniffed loudly.

Linsan reached out and gently smacked Brook's palm. The soft leather glove felt like skin against her touch, soft and delicate.

Brook coughed and pulled her hand back. She took a deep breath and grabbed her tea again. Before she drank, she whispered something to herself but Linsan couldn't make out the words.

The Feathered Queen

Famed for her brilliant performance as the old crow woman, the vile fae that ruined the lives of five helpless woodcutters in exchange for one wish each, Tisin of Penesol's reputation grew throughout Kormar. By the end of the second season, she had won many prestigious awards including being formally declared The Feathered Queen of the Stage by the Golden Queen herself.

—Manidail Sidorai, *Patron of the Arts: The Golden Queen's Contribution to Society*

Over an hour later, Linsan trudged along a narrow dirt trail that wandered over every single hill surrounding Fanas Village. On occasion, it would branch out toward a house in the distance or to a small pond with a table next to it. If she was native to the area, she would no doubt know which trail led to which location. Without that knowledge, she had been forced to repeatedly cross as she chased after rumors and suggestions.

She wiped the sweat from her brow. The sun had beat down on her for most of the trip and she was tired of sweat clinging to her skin.

“Why does every damn farmer in this village insist on sending me across the center of a field?” she muttered as

she stepped over a thick exposed knot. She glanced past a narrow line of trees to her destination, a tiny cabin on top of a hill and surrounded by raised planters.

No one answered her.

She rolled her eyes and muttered again as she broke from the tree line and started to climb up the hill. As she approached, she noticed an older woman sitting on a rocking chair. Even from a distance, it was obvious that she had reddish-brown hair and wispy hair that stuck out in all directions. Her skin was mostly covered by intricate tattoos that others in the village had possessed. It was a tribe that Linsan didn't know and none of them had been willing to even address her.

Steeling herself for another rejection, Linsan hefted her violin case over her shoulder and raised her hand. "Hello! May I ask some questions? Just a—"

The woman raised her head. Milky eyes turned to stare at her. "No."

Linsan stumbled to a stop. Her case thumped against her hip. "What?"

"You deaf, Girl? Old Gab is tired and has no interest in any young kid's shit." She lifted one wrinkled hand and pointed behind Linsan. "So turn that tiny little ass of yours around and head back to the square."

It was more words than she had gotten from any other tribe member, but the rejection still hurt. Shaking her head, Linsan apologized and then turned away.

She made it only a few steps before Gab called out. "What kind of person carries a damn musical instrument around here in the heat? Do you know how hot it is? What if you drop it in a creek?"

Linsan couldn't escape the sweat that prickled on her brow. She shook her head and clamped a hand over her

case. She looked over her shoulder to answer. "It's important to me."

The rocking chair creaked as Gab leaned forward. "Let me guess, spent your last dime on it? Waste of money, that's for sure."

"No, my grandfather made it. There aren't a lot left anymore."

Gab scoffed and leaned back. She tugged a blanket up over her waist despite the sunlight that painted her lap. Her middle finger on the right hand was missing. "Never cared for those things. Just a bunch of noise, screeching and banging around."

Linsan's shoulders tensed. She wanted to snap back but the words wouldn't come. She sighed and turned around. "Thank you."

"Can you sing? If you can, I might have a cuk or two."

For a moment, it was tempting but the old lady obvious didn't have a lot of money. A single cukdin might be an entire meal for her. Linsan shrugged and kept walking away. "I can, but not as well as my mother."

"Oh, why would that matter? Is she important? Who is she?"

Linsan waved and tried to escape the conversation. "Thank you!"

"Who's your mother, Girl? Answer me!"

"Tinsin of Penesol!"

"Speak up!"

Linsan rolled her eyes and repeated herself, louder so the old woman heard her. She turned back to see if Gab would respond, but the rocking chair was empty. The blanket on her lap had been folded neatly and set in the middle of the season, but Linsan couldn't imagine how the old woman would have enough time to tidy her seat in a matter of seconds. With a frown, she turned back.

Gab stood in front of her, only inches away. She squinted at Linsan with one eye and then the other.

Linsan inhaled sharply in surprise.

A waft of a flowery perfume tickled the back of her throat. Flecks of pollen hung in the air around them as the old woman inspected Linsan's face from one angle to another.

Up close, the tattoos were easier to mark. They were vines and flowers that inched across the seasons with flecks of snow and sunshine spread out. They appeared to be coming from underneath Gab's shirt and they reached up to her chin and down to her knuckles.

Linsan gulped. "H-Hello. I'm Linsan."

"Your mother is Tinsin? The Feathered Queen? She was in *Tears on a Cat's Whiskers!*" The old woman's breath was musty.

Startled by the closeness, Linsan took a step back and shrugged. "My mother played Filil in that. Three seasons, actually."

Gab smiled broadly, revealing three missing teeth. "Oh, I loved that play! I saw her performing that in Jamorel when I was just a weed." She sighed and smiled. "I loved to hear those voices, when they weren't being drowned out by all those damn screeching things." She gestured to the violin.

Gripping her case tighter, Linsan forced a smile on her lips. "She does have a beautiful voice."

Gab pointed to her cabin. Both sides of her hands had been tattooed almost entire in gnarled branches with only a few pale leaves. "Come up and talk to me. I have tea."

"I really need to ask some questions."

The older woman looked at her pleadingly. "Please? There isn't anyone left in the village who appreciates songs. At least not... your type of songs. Just a little while for Old Gab?"

Linsan groaned. "I... need to find someone. A man named Gabaw."

Gab's face dropped. "What do you want with that bastard? I'd pray his dick would fall off into compost, but I wouldn't plant anything in that shit." She spat on the ground.

"He stole something from me."

"Oh, so you don't like him."

Linsan frowned as she wondered how much she should tell. Gab's response to his name encouraged her to speak up. "He killed someone I know. I want to bring him to justice."

Old Gab's smile grew wider and she cackled. She gestured to a dirt road barely visible from their vantage point. "He and the other vermin headed down there two days ago in some black metal monstrosity. It made such a racket."

Linsan's heart beat faster. "R-Really? He went home?"

When Gab looked at her curiously, Linsan stammered, "I-I've been looking for him for a week or so. Some buskers in Jamorel told me that he might be heading home to repair the car he's driving."

"You aren't lying to me, are you? You aren't friends with that shit, are you?"

"Oh, no. I swear, I want him arrested."

Gab's eyes flickered to the side and then up to the cabin. Linsan could see her fighting with some thought. She guess Gab was considering withholding information to force Linsan to talk.

Desperate, Linsan held up her hand. "I'll sit and talk, I promise. I just need to make I'm going in the right direction."

"Yes, yes, he's still down there. Damn fool's wagon was belching white smoke everywhere and the men with him

were yelling the whole time. You could hear them from here.”

Linsan almost moaned in relief. “Oh, thank you! I can’t tell you how badly I needed to hear that.”

Gab patted Linsan’s shoulder. “I guess you better get going then.”

Linsan glanced at the road and back. As she did, a wave of dizziness washed over her. It cleared as fast as it came.

By the time her eyes focused, Gab was gone.

Lifting her gaze, Linsan saw that the old woman had returned to her rocking chair, shoulders slumped and blanket once again across her lap. There was no dust or wind to mark her passing and she looked as if she had been there for hours.

Her mind screamed to return to the village and get Brook. They needed to hunt down the murderers. But her heart told her to stay. Even though she risked losing her quarry, Linsan headed up the hill.

“Don’t you have a man to catch?” Gab said tiredly. “That’s what you do, right? Get what you want and leave?”

“Mother always said I need to stop and admire the spider webs.”

The old woman frowned. “That’s a line? I don’t know it.”

“*Three Queens of Melodol*. It was a play she was in a few years ago.”

The look of hope and joy almost melted Linsan’s heart. She could see the hunger in Gab’s eyes, the desire to talk.

With a smile, Linsan snapped open her case. “Want me to sing one of the songs?”

Training Day

Tarsan is a strict, patriarchal society where the husband is socially, legally, and financially responsible for his wife and all his daughters. In his house, he is the master of everyone within his walls.

—Kasadil da Robin, *Responsibilities of the Father*

Linsan didn't know if it was the relief of finding news of their quarry or the joy of talking about music and her family for an hour, but her good mood carried her back to the center of Fanasis Village. She had been only in the village for less than a day, but she still recognized one of the paths leading to the village center and followed it. As she did, she skipped over the roots and screes until she came up between the village general store and the blacksmith.

Inside the store, she spotted a couple speaking to the storekeeper. She had met both of them earlier. They all had many unpleasant things to say about Tilbin and the others, but none of them knew if they had passed through town toward Stone over Moon Waters or down to Geb's barn in Little Rock.

Adjacent to the general store was the village blacksmith. When Linsan had first started asking questions, it was cold

and unoccupied. She peered inside to see if the situation had change but no one was working. Linsan was about to look away when she noticed what appeared to be a pleated skirt discarded on the floor near the anvil. She smirked, at least she knew why the blacksmith wasn't banging on his forge.

Linsan made her way across the square. The other side had the public house and a house without a sign on it. She switched her violin case to the other shoulders and focused on her destination.

Brook stood up from a bench outside the public house. She had not changed out of her fancy dress. The shades of blue caused her stand out on the dirty planks that made up the deck between her Glasscoaster and the open doors leading inside. She put one hand on her hip. "Where have you been?"

Linsan prickled at the tone. She pushed down her annoyance and gestured toward one of the smaller roads leading "I found someone who saw them heading to Little Rock only a few days ago. No one in the village has seen them come back through toward Moon Waters, so they are still down south."

Brook's scowl faded. "Truthfully?"

Linsan smiled broadly and then nodded. "I wouldn't lie about this. I also found out that if they don't come up through this village, it's at least a hundred leagues out of the way to find another route to Moon Waters."

Brook sighed and waved her gloved hand. "You did better than me. I couldn't find anything about anyone here. No one wanted to talk, even when I offered to pay for information. The marked people were the worse, they wouldn't even look at me."

She seemed annoyed that her money couldn't give her the answers she needed.

Linsan wondered how far Brook had actually gone or who she had asked, but it didn't matter.

With a sigh, Brook stepped off the deck and brushed the dust off the ruffles of her dress. She looked pleased with herself. "However, I did have a lovely talk with the mayor. He has a field behind his house that we can use. There is a ridge between his place and the field, so my blast shouldn't break any windows."

Surprised, Linsan smiled. "Wow, I'm impressed."

Brook looked at her in confusion, gave a hesitant smile, and then started walking toward the house. She had to hike the hem of her dress to keep it from the ground while she stepped off the planks.

Linsan's expression froze. "You aren't changing?" she asked as she gestured to the ruffles and lace.

Brook turned with a confused look on her face. "No, why should I? What's wrong with this?" She gestured down to her dress. The ruffles rippled in a light breeze.

"I've been walking around these trails for hours. They are really rough and your boots are... are..." Linsan had no clue how to phrase it delicately. "They are very pretty and they have narrow heels."

"So?"

Linsan wanted to say something but she couldn't. Instead, she sighed and shrugged. "Let's go."

Her fears were confirmed when Brook lead her around the mayor's house and down another trail. It quickly became ragged, with roots crisscrossing the path and large rocks.

Brook strode forward. Her gloved hands caught one of the branches to pull herself up.

Linsan hung back.

The shiny boots slipped on the ground. Brook slid back with a grunt.

Reflexively, Linsan reached up and caught Brook. Her palms crushed the ruffles of the dress before they smacked against Brook's buttocks to stop her companion's slide.

With a shriek, Brook stumbled forward but then slipped further down. Her leg caught Linsan's and the dress tangled both of them.

Linsan stumbled. Grabbing her violin case with one hand, she snaked her arm around Brook's waist and braced herself.

Together, they slid a few feet before coming to a ragged stop.

In her grip, Brook trembled. Slowly, she looked up with wide eyes and a flush. "Lin?"

Linsan wasn't sure how to respond. There was something in Brook's eyes that wasn't spite or anger. She stumbled for a response before finally she said, "You might consider better shoes out here. You can twist your ankles with those heels."

Brook cleared her throat and looked away. "Could you help me up?"

"Oh," Linsan blushed. She stepped back and helped Brook to her feet. Then she stepped apart until they were only holding hands. "Come on, need help?"

Looking down at her boots, Brook sighed. "I don't have anything better to wear."

"Really?"

Brook nodded slowly. "It isn't lady-like to wear trousers and shirts."

"Makes it hard to get into a field to practice though."

Brook sighed. She was still trembling.

Linsan squeezed her hand.

Glancing down, Brook stared at their hands and then yanked hers away. "W-We should practice."

With the air between them uncomfortable, both Linsan and Brook headed over the ridge and into a farrow fields. The knee-high grasses tugged at Brook's dress as they made their way to the middle.

"So," Brook said with a sigh. "How do we practice this?"

"I don't really know."

Brook tugged her hat off, the black lace catching on her nose before it came off. She looked around for a moment, as if she was trying to find a table. With a sigh, she held it to her side. "Should I hire someone to attack us?"

Linsan grinned. "No, I'm sure we can find something. Remember during the garage, we had to work in sync?"

"You mean when you called me a stupid cow?"

Linsan froze. Her blood ran ice-cold.

Brook's lip curled in a smile. "I might have deserved it. Were you thinking about when you told me when to clap in time with your music?" She took a deep breath and fluttered her hat against her hip.

"That is exactly what I had in mind. What songs do you know?"

Brook looked up and swayed her hips as she thought. "I guess, mostly Guder, Padorsin, and Rag. Those were daddy's favorites."

All three were composers for symphonies. Sedate ones with grand sweeping music that rose and fell like the waves of the ocean. It was the music that was perfect for dramatic scenes for her mother. However, none of them had the steady beats and rhythm that would let Linsan's magic to build nor the crescendos and twists that allowed her to manifest an attack.

Brook rolled her eye and gave an exasperating sight. "What? Wrong type of music?"

"Well, Guder's music more heavily focuses on wind instruments with less emphasis on strings or percussion.

Even if we focused on his elemental period, he never wrote many pieces—”

“I don’t need to know the damn history about the music. It’s the right music. The type good people listen to.”

It was Linsan’s turn to be frustrated. “If we are going to use music to fight, then we need to use music that takes advantages of our powers. That means we need to pick ones that have a steady beat for your magic and a melody for mine!”

She then registered the second part of Brook’s statement. “And what do you mean, the type ‘good people listen to?’”

Brook waves her hand dismissively. “You know... good people.”

“Good people?” Linsan wanted to throttle Brook. “What do you mean, good people?”

“You know what I’m talking about. People like... m... Daddy... and me.”

“You mean rich people?”

When Brook nodded, Linsan said, “Is that why you are always wearing dresses and fancy shoes? And the shoes? Just to show everyone you are the richest person in Penesol?”

“We aren’t the richest—”

“Your family is richer than most of the town. There might be a few others about as rich as your family, but your daddy owns—” She cleared her throat. “Your daddy owned the largest bank, three other businesses, has at least five different cars, and can afford to send his daughters to any school in the country. You are rich and you want everyone to know it.”

Brook squirmed. She crushed her hat in her hand as she glanced away. The muscles in her jaw tightened, one muscle flexing along the bottom edge. Some of her anger was

returning and Linsan had no interest in hearing the sharp tones.

"Any other music you know? Wave, folk, Hidanork, rhythm—"

Her companion held up her hand. "You don't have to show off that you know all the songs."

"My father writes about music. I read his essays and lessons."

"Well, not the right types."

"He wrote plenty of papers about Padorsin and Rag if you bother to read them. We were your friends before all this happened."

Brook's fingers flexed. She brought one hand away from her hip. She appeared to be clearing her hand.

Linsan held up her hand. She took a deep breath and let it out with a long exhalation. "Look, we need to find something."

"Well, I'm not going to stoop down to things like damned ass song."

"We don't have to do *My Ass for a Glass of Milk*."

Brook screwed her face in disgust. "It's a terrible song. Proper people don't listen to songs like that."

Linsan bristled. She glared back. "That was very popular at the inn! I had a standing ovation and they asked me to keep playing."

"It's a song about butts!"

Linsan opened her mouth for a moment and then shrugged. Brook wasn't wrong, but at the same time, it was an almost perfect melody to start with. Even a little girl could learn how to play it. "It's a simple song."

Brook shook her head and then turned around. She started to put her hat back on but realized she had ruined it. She shook her head and then gathered it in both hands.

Feeling dejected, Linsan knelt down and pulled out her violin. Her mind furiously spun through her father's lessons. Talking about the ass song gave her an idea for other melodies that were simple and catchy. Some might even Brook's self-importance.

"We don't have to sing the words, right?"

Linsan looked up with surprise. "N-No. It's just the beat and melody we are about."

"I just wish it wasn't that disgusting song."

With a smile, Linsan finished pulling out her violin and set it against her neck. "If it helps, the song was originally a Tarsan drinking song called *A Mass for a Glass of Crass*, a song about being forced to go to church after an epic swearing session. It wasn't until about sixty or so years ago when... the ass song became popular in this area of Kor-mar."

Brook blinked and her shoulders seemed to relax. "Really? T-That is better." Her voice grew more wistful and she ran her finger along the edge of her hat. "Tarsan is the very definition of high society and I can understand blasphemy."

Linsan's opinion of Tarsan wasn't nearly as rosy. The country was known for being heavy-handed and obsessed with social order. Women were treated as nothing more than property and almost slaves. Her mother hated shows in Tarsan. However, it was obviously important to Brook. She made a non-committal grunt.

"We can start with that, right? The crass version?" The hope in Brook's voice was ephemeral and delicate. "That's much better."

Linsan grinned. "It's popular." She brought the bow and rested it on the strings.

"It's still disgusting."

Linsan smiled and cocked her head. She played the first few bars of the song. The clear tones of the violin rippled

along the grasses around them. Behind the notes, translucent waves of energy danced in the air and glittered off the leaves.

Brook's face twisted into more of a grimace. She tugged the bottom of her gloves. Then she hovered her fingers over her palm. "When is the beat?"

The muscles in Linsan's back tightened.

"I don't know music."

Linsan thought for a moment. "Let's start with the basics. Music is based on measures. That is how you emphasize the music. Most Tarsan songs are quintuple meter which means they have five notes in a measure. Some notes are fast, others are slow, but we just have to teach you how to measure out those five. Later, we can talk about the desert's and the tribe's fondness for quadrupedal meters."

To demonstrate her point, Linsan slowly played the first few measures. As she did, she ducked her body with each beat until she got to the fifth where she gestured to Brook. She also fought her desire to speed up the music so she could dance, but when she started to sway, her magic swelled and the ground trembled.

At first, Brook stared with confusion. Then, as Linsan played again, realization dawned on her face. She held up her hands, the blue gloves bright in the sea of grasses. When her beat came, she brought her hands together but didn't quite touch.

Linsan realized she was tense. Even though it had been years since Brook had used her concussion blast against her, the memories were still raw.

Brook glared at her and shook her head with disappointment. She held up her hand.

With a blush, Linsan played the melody again. She spoke out the notes as she played. "One. Two. Three. Four. You. One. Two. Three. Four. You."

Brook mimed clapping her hands in time with the music. "You can say five."

Linsan grinned. "... Four. Five. One. Two..."

The music danced around the both of them, translucent ripples of power that stirred their hair and ruffled Brook's dress. Without being directed toward something by Linsan's will, the magic only stirred the air and flashed in time with the melody.

Brook's gaze drifted up to the dancing patterns. Even as her jaw dropped with surprise, her hand still mimed clapping in time with Linsan's music.

Linsan was surprised how easily Brook kept up with the time. Without hearing the clapping, it seemed like she was keeping up perfectly with the melody. She started to play the music faster, to bring it up to five beats per second,

Still keeping in time, Brook stared around them. The air was glowing now, responding to the faster beats with brighter lights and more energetic swirling. It felt like they were in the middle of a storm, or under a porch in the rain.

Brook let out a gasp. "Oh, I can feel it."

Elated with the rush of using magic, Linsan gestured to her palm. "Try yours."

Brook started to and then turned to the side. She held out her hands.

"Gentle."

She glared at Linsan before lightly tapping her fingers against her palm on her beat. Despite it being the lightest of touches, the air thudded against Linsan's face and the grass in a two yard arc in front of her flattened instantly.

Even though the beat was just a hair off in timing, the field of energy surrounding them responded instantly. It flared up with colors that Linsan had never seen before. The colors traced the wake of the concussion wave before fading.

Both Linsan and Brook stared in surprise.

"What was that?" asked Brook. She had resumed miming her clapping.

"I don't know." Linsan as she continued to play.

Brook stirred and then resumed her clapping. The timing was off, but not slow or fast. To Linsan's surprise, Brook had the rhythm almost perfect, only that she was off.

"Your timing is off. Just a bit too fast."

Brook's brow furrowed. One of her claps came off harder than the others, sending flares of color around them. Then, she turned back to the quieter. "I'm following your beat."

"I know... how? I mean, your sense of timing is amazing." Linsan meant her compliment.

Brook grinned but kept her eyes toward the waves of grass ruined by her clapping. "I stare at a RPS gauge every time I drive. I know how to handle something slow like a five beat."

Linsan giggled. "Slow?"

"My engines run between eighty to one-twenty. I can feel the pistons shaking the chassis and the spin of the axles through the floor. This is easy." Brook smirked.

"Well, then can you shift your beat forward just a hair?"

"That feels wrong. It feels like I would be late that way." But, even as she spoke, she beat faster and then resumed the five-count. The flashing energy surged for a moment and Linsan felt an incredible rush of excitement before it faded with the colors.

Beads of sweat ran down Brook's neck. The short hairs clung to her skin.

"It isn't. My father says you have to learn your body when you play. How long it takes for you to swing takes a bit of training. Just a tad slower. Now faster. Just... a bit faster."

Brook's jaw tightened by she obeyed.

They continued to work, shifting and adjusting. Linsan's hips swayed with the music until she clamped down to avoid letting her powers respond with anything besides colors.

Then they got the timing right.

Brook's clap struck at the perfect moment and all of Linsan's energies flared up in response. Colors blossomed around them in a shower of brilliance. A rush of euphoria flooded through Linsan and she couldn't help but let out a moan of pleasure and relief.

Brook's clapping faltered.

Linsan shook her head. "W-What?"

"My blast, when we got it, it stopped right at the edge of your energies instead of doing further. How?"

"Really?"

Without another word, they focused on their timing again. The simple melody rolled off the bow and filled the air. Brook's blasts shook the now crushed grass in a ragged pattern.

When they got it right again, the wave of energy from the clapping appeared to pour into Linsan's music instead of radiating away from Brook. It strengthened it and gave it a structure. The ripples of power seared the air for the briefest of moments.

Brook gasped. "I felt that."

"I-I did too!" Linsan smiled broadly.

"Why doesn't it go anywhere?"

"What? Oh, the music?"

"In the fight, you were sending it out in waves." Brook wiped the sweat from her forehead. Beads of sweat glittered along her neck and soaked her lace collar.

"I'm not dancing."

Brook did a double-take. "Really? Is that why you are always spinning around?"

Linsan nodded. "As long as I don't move, the music is going to just hang around us. But if I move, I can direct it."

There was a look in Brook's eyes, one of anticipation and hope.

"You want to see it?"

Brook's eyes turned to focus on her. There was something else in her attention. Her bright brown eyes almost glowed and she looked like she was on the edge of saying something.

Unexpected, Linsan's chest felt tight for a moment. She cleared her throat and then motioned with her chin toward their surroundings. "Want to see?"

Her friend nodded.

Linsan grinned and then let the tension out of her back. She had been struggling not to move while working on their timing. Dance had been part of her music since she was a little girl, it was difficult to fight the desire. Being able to move was a relief.

She closed her eyes and then swirled her foot. Her violin bow hummed along the strings.

The dancing energies around her shifted with her movement. Instead of swirling around them, it streamed out in the same direction as her sweet. A narrow whip of visible energies cracked through the grass, uprooting them in a deep gouge. Leaves, roots, and dirt burst out in a three yard-long line.

"Blessed Mother," gasped Brook.

Clods of earth thudded on the ground.

Surprised herself, Linsan could only shrug.

"What happens if I clap at the right time?"

"Want to find out?"

Brook grinned. "Yes."

They started to play again. It took a few tries to get their timing right again, but then Linsan felt when Brook was a-

bout to strike her palm at the perfect time. She spun around and dipped while directing her powers in a different direction.

Brook turned with Linsan so they were facing in the same direction. She slammed her hands together in a powerful clap.

The timing was flawless.

Brook's power channeled through Linsan's whip. The translucent shape became a burning white line of raw power that slammed into the ground with incredible force. The earth underneath them buckled violently as a hundred-foot long exploding line raced away from them in a blink.

Linsan almost lost her balance.

Brook did. She let out a shriek as she fell back.

Turning to try catching Brook, Linsan's fingers caught one of the ruffles. The fabric tore as Brook hit the ground.

Then Linsan realized that the world had gotten suddenly darker. She looked up with growing dread. Seeing a cloud of earth and leaves above her, she swore and stumbled away.

Before she got through a few steps, she realized that Brook was helpless on the ground. Snatching her violin case, she lurched over to Brook and knelt down. Using the case as a shield for herself and her body as one for Brook, she held her violin close.

Brook let out a whimper as their bodies pressed together. She crossed her arms over her face.

Then a rain of clods slammed down on them. They hammered against Linsan's back like a dozen fists. More of them hit Brook's shoulders and legs and she screamed out.

When the rain stopped, Linsan panted. Even though her back hurt, she couldn't help but smile. "That was intense."

Brook peeked out from her arms. Then her body jerked as if she was crying.

“Brook? Are you hurt?”

“N-No,” Brook said. She relaxed her arms to reveal she was smiling. Dirt had streaked her face but she seemed in good spirits. “No, I’m fine. I’m just—” Her voice stopped sharply.

Linsan stared into her eyes for a moment. Then she stirred to pull herself off Brook and sat back. She pulled the violin to her lap and inspected it carefully. There were a few new scratches and a clod inside the case. She grunted with disappointment before holding it above her head and rolling it out.

“That is important to you, isn’t it?” Brook groaned as she sat up. “It’s it just a violin.”

Linsan stroked her hand along the warm wood. “My grandfather made this before I was born. My father borrowed it to make sure I had a Sterlig with me always, even if I was alone.”

Brook didn’t say anything.

“I was going to sneak out of the house and come after Tilbin. They figured it out and made sure I had, well, this.” She gestured down to the violin and sighed. “This will probably be the only Sterlig that I will ever get to play.”

“How much did it cost?”

A wave of sadness swelled up and a tear ran down Linsan’s cheek. “My mother’s pride and reputation.”

When Brook didn’t respond, Linsan was almost thankful. She focused on clearing out the instrument and replacing one of the strings that looked weapon.

“What’s its name?”

Linsan looked up. “Name?”

“The other Sterlig had a name, right? Why not this one?”

“I never thought about it.”

“So give it one.” Brook inspected her dress. It had torn and ripped in three places. She glanced up at Linsan and shrugged. “That seems like the thing you would do.”

“I was three when I named Palisis. I was just a little girl!”

Brook shrugged. “Seems like one of the last Sterligns should have a name.”

“I’ll think about it. How is your dress?”

Brook sighed before she got to her feet. “Ruined.”

Linsan joined her. Together, they walked at the long line of torn up earth from their attack. It was impressively destructive. She toyed with the violin, wondering if they could do it again.

“I want to go again.”

Linsan smiled broadly. “Yes, please.”

Understanding Music

They chose to honor Cros de Goslin, Bankol de Goslin, and Tamir of Kor mar for slaughtering dozens of people and injuring hundreds! They rewarded this devastation because of the faux history of the game imitating war and not a sport! This is a game, not a bloodbath of epic destruction.

—*Bloodball*

Hours later, Linsan was exhausted, burned, and covered in debris. She had blood caked across the fingertips on her left hand and her right wrist ached. Her boots felt like stones as she struggled to make her way over the ridge.

Behind her, Brook was equally tired. She groaned as she clasped the branches of the bushes that grew wild over the ridge. Her dress was ruined and her gloves shredded. They had lost her hat somewhere in the field along with yards of lace that had torn off her outfit.

Linsan reached the top and turned around.

Brook gasped and strained at the bushes.

Grabbing onto a thick branch of a nearby tree, Linsan inched down and held out her hand.

Brook looked at it for a second. For a moment, Linsan didn't think she would take it. Then Brook shrugged and

grabbed Linsan's hand. With a grunt, she pulled herself up the steep embankment.

As soon as they were closer, Linsan slipped her arm around Brook's waist and helped her up to the top of the ridge. With the more voluminous parts of Brook's dress gone, their hips bumped together and she could feel her companion's body heat against her skin.

"Fine," Brook said in a weary voice, "the heels were a bad idea."

"They were pretty."

"Right up to the point you missed and burned the laces." Brook held up her bare foot. Flecks of dirt fell from her wiggling toes.

Linsan cringed. She had bruises down her right thigh and shin from the same mistake. "That was not our best practice round."

With a gasp, Brook snatched her hand from Linsan's and turned away sharply. She leaned away from Linsan's grasp but didn't break out of the grip. "Not as bad as the time you set fire to your case."

Linsan glanced at her case. It was scorched and dented. She had forgotten to seal it shut but fortunately the white flames from their musical attack didn't last long and the violin wasn't inside the case. She made a mental note to check the money her parents had secreted inside it to make sure the bills were still usable. Her mother's award pin was also in the case.

Then she realized her arm was still around Brook's waist. Slowly, she relaxed her grip and stepped away. Her fingers ran along the lace before they parted.

Brook looked at her, an unreadable expression on her face. Her cheeks were smeared with dirt and her makeup had run. It gave her eyes a smoky appearance, a hint of black and blue dusting underneath her eyes.

Linsan blushed. "What?"

Brook shook her head and looked away again. "Nothing."

Feeling uncomfortable, She let out her breath in a long shuddering gasp as she looked around. The public house caught her attention, there were a dozen wagons pulled in front of it and at least twenty people sitting in chairs between wagons and the front of the inn. "Brook, look at that."

"What's going on?"

"I don't know." Linsan watched another wagon pull up. "You got your room before we did this, right? I don't think there are any openings left."

"Two of them. One for me and another for you. Both of them were the best the place had to offer, plus hot bath services, and full meals. They don't know how to handle cars here, so I also paid for two horses."

Surprised, Linsan could only stare. "Not the cheap room for me?"

"We're in this together, aren't we?" A ghost of a smile crossed Brook's face. "Come on, I really could use a bath and a dress that isn't utterly ruined."

When Linsan noticed Brook limping, she held out her hand.

Brook stared at it. Her cheeks colored almost immediately. "No, I'm good."

"Come on, I'm tired and not walking well either. A little support would help both of us."

Brook's jaw tightened.

"It doesn't mean anything other than we're helping each other." She shook her hand once.

Somehow, that made the blush only hotter. Brook looked down to grab one of the strands of ruined lace. She stared at it as she toyed with the end.

Linsan pulled her hand back. "Sorry."

The gesture didn't seem to help Brook's sudden change in attitude.

"Come on," Linsan said in a soft voice.

After Brook nodded, the two of them walked out from behind the mayor's house and up to the inn. Their footsteps were ragged and unsteady. Every step dragged Linsan down.

The front of the inn had tables set up along the wall for the entire length of the walk. There were more clustered around the base of the stairs on each side. Each table had a couple chairs around them.

The inn's guests appeared to be local farmers, hunters, and workers. Most of them had a strange symbol on them, a blue shield with two white lines down the middle. Linsan caught some of the conversations about a ball game between Saint Gaveil and Tercar.

Brook drew even with Linsan. "What is crashball?"

Linsan leaned over. "A rather violent game in these parts. Two teams try to get a ball to the opposite end using fists, kicks, and magic."

"How do you know that?"

"*The Widow of Balls*, a short-lived play based on the final days of Cros de Goslin."

"Oh, your mother."

Linsan shook her head. "No. She doesn't like that type of play. Actually, a playwright named Tabil in town."

"I know Tabil, he went to a lot of Daddy's parties. Always has a new girlfriend."

"You mean he's a leech and keeps trying to bed my mother. H-He also owned the Sterlig my grandfather made. They borrowed it."

Brook's jaw tightened. "Your mother's pride?"

Linsan nodded. Then she slowed as she noticed that conversations had died around her. The other customers were

staring at the two of them, their eyes scanning them from head to toe. She could imagine what they were looking at, two women who looked like they gone through a battle.

With a blush, she hurried to the door and through the open door.

Inside, the main room was packed with more people wearing the blue and white. Almost as one, they looked up at the two women and the conversations trailed off.

With her cheeks burning, Linsan headed toward the side where there was a bar with bottles behind it.

One of the men in the chairs stood up. He was an older, balding man with weathered skin and rough hands. Dense, swirling tattoos reached out from his stained clothes to his elbows. Most of them were flower and leaf patterns. The designs reminded her of Old Gab's. "Hey, Har, you said the good rooms were taken by a pretty lady? That her?"

A man behind the bar looked up. He looked annoyed. "Yes, Cal. What's your point?"

"I just have to convince her to give me my room back?"

Brook stopped. She straightened and planted her fists on her hips.

The bartender spoke first in a sharp tone, "If you try, you'll upset the dame and she paid far more than you ever had. Not to mention, there is only one of her and she doesn't insist on jamming six in one room and never cleaning his shit."

"I can't even ask?" Cal said. He glanced down at the people at his table and then back at Brook.

The bartender glared. "I'm going to kick you and yours out for the season. Given that every pub and inn is filled for ten leagues around Gaveil, you're going to either be sleeping in that wagon of yours or driving a long time and will miss the game."

Cal looked at the bar. "How could you say that, Har? I come here every game, every time. You know I'm good."

Har gestured to Brook. "Not tonight. She got the room first. You're going to have to share your cousin's room like everyone else. Why do you think I'm not serving beans tonight?"

A ripple of laughter filled the room.

Linsan cringed and glanced around.

Cal cracked his knuckles and looked over Brook. "Well, that all said, welcome to our humble little village, Dame." He took a deep bow to her.

Brook nodded curtly.

"Though, I'd be honored if you be willing to share your room with me," he said with a grin. "I'm a considerate lover. Just me, though, none of these—"

"Shut your mouth, Cal," Har said with a warning tone. "She's a lady and you are not."

Brook held up her pale hand. "Additionally, I'd rather sleep with a venomous snake on a bad day than get anywhere near you. I find those..." She gestured to his hands. "... markings to be disgusting and wouldn't deign to have them anywhere near my body."

Linsan cringed at her sharp tone.

Cal looked down at his reddish brown skin and tattooed elbows. For a moment, there was a silence, then he laughed loudly. It was a booming laugh but no one else in the room had joined him.

A man at his table patted his hand. "Just sit down and shut up. You're going to get us kicked out."

The laughter stopped. Cal looked around while his smile dropped from his face. "Shit," he muttered.

The bartender pointed to the door.

Cal's face darkened. "I'll come back when I've sobered."

"That would be best," said the bartender.

No one else said anything.

Pushing himself away from the table, Cal walked past them. "My apologies," he said curtly before leaving.

Brook strode past Linsan and headed straight for the bar.

Linsan didn't know if she should follow or remain in place.

At the bar, Brook spoke the bartender for a few moments before coming back. "Do you want the hot bath first? There is only one tub upstairs and it takes about an hour to heat."

Linsan looked at Brook's ruined outfit. "No, you. You need it far more than me. I can wait."

"Thank you." There was something else she was about to say. Linsan could see it in her eyes. Brook closed her mouth and sighed. Shaking her head, she finally said, "I-I should go."

Linsan waited until Brook headed upstairs for the bath before she looked around. The room was crowded. Even Cal's seat had been taken by someone else.

Holding her violin case close, she headed outside to find a table to wait for one to open inside. The tables outside were just as crowded except for the furthest one where Cal sat on the edge of the lights.

Linsan toyed with the idea of taking a walk but then decided she was tired of trails or sitting in the Glasscoaster. She headed to the table with Cal.

"Don't worry, I won't say anything else," he said in a low voice. "I've been coming here since I was a boy, I'm not going to make myself any more of a horse's ass."

"It's been a long day for both of us. A lot of travel and then..." She had no idea how to explain their practice.

"We heard." Cal chuckled. "We could also feel it through the ground. Whatever you were doing behind the mayor's place was pretty loud."

She didn't know how to explain or even respond. She sat down gingerly and set the case in front of her. Without trusting Cal, she rested one hand on the surface after wrapping the strap on her other hand.

"That a music maker?"

"Yes, a violin."

"I don't know what that is."

Linsan shrugged. "It's used in plays, orchestras, and other music. Think of it like a fiddle."

"Plays? You known what? Tomorrow you should head over to the north side and look for an old goat on a hill. Not a real one, just a cranky old woman in a cabin."

"Old Gab?"

He smiled broadly and nodded. "Ah, Gab. She is the sweetest woman in the entire world."

Linsan gave him a hard look.

"Of course, she is also wrapped in a thick layer of thorns, poisonous berries, and thistles," he ended with a snort. He turned his shoulder to show his tattoo. "I take you met my aunt."

Linsan could help but smile also.

Cal rubbed his belly. He was stocky but there was still muscles underneath his hairy arms. "I'll tell you what, Mum was happy to leave this town. We may have started here in town, but now the only family I have left here are Old Gab and Mis. Everyone else blew away in the winds once we lost our roots."

"Mis?"

"My cousin, the blacksmith."

When Linsan didn't say anything, Cal spoke up again. "You play?"

"I'm learning how to busk."

"Play then."

"It's been a long day."

He reached back and pulled something out of his pocket. He pushed it across the table to her. It was a money clip with a bundle of orange cards. "Please? Show me what Old Gab hears? She's been talking about music for years but I never understood. I never had the ears for it, but I have a feeling you do. Maybe, if I could understand, then maybe I can see her smile again."

Linsan stared at the money clip for a long moment. She was exhausted and tired, but the lure of music called to her. She didn't care about the money as much as feeling the bow hum in her hand.

She unlocked her case and pulled out her instrument.

Rough Driving

When it became obvious that machines of war were the future, very few expected the Glasscoaster to be one of the first vehicles purposed for battle. Agile and resilient and cheap to build, it would become the new calvary in the coming age.

—Gustail Makim-Koril, *Weapons of War*

Early the next morning, Linsan and Brook were back in the Glasscoaster and driving along the rutted trail between Fanasis Village and Little Rock. She decided the villagers calling it a road was being generous, the path ahead of her looked more like a game trail that happened to have two ruts instead of one. It also disappeared more than once and they had to stop and search through the tall grasses for it to resume.

Brook's dress was, according to her, the most functional one she possessed. The yellow-green fabric had less ruffles and pleats than her others. The material was a richer green and looked almost the same color as her boots. Her fingerless gloves were lemon-colored silk.

Linsan shook her head and looked away to hide her smile. Brook's idea of functional was still more appropriate

for the stage. A Kormar stage at that since the colors were closely related to that country instead of Gepaul's fondness for triads and jarring tones.

"I'm glad my sister insisted on getting the Glasscoaster."

The buggy lurched violently. Linsan braced her knee against the center console. One of the covered mugs tilted dangerously close to her knee. Brook alternated holding the other mug in place and grabbing the steering wheel with both hands. She didn't stop moving as she continued to race the vehicle along the dangerous terrain.

"What?"

"When Daddy bought us all cars, she and I fought over this one." She nodded down to the wheel. "She was the apple in his eye which is why I got the Klaston-Garis. It would have been... during..."

Her jaw tightened and she grabbed the wheel tightly.

Reflexively, Linsan slammed her feet against the floorboard and her arm against the door.

The vehicle bounced twice before launching itself into the air. It was only a few feet, but the sensation of floating in air sickened her before they landed with a loud crunch. The buggy bounced twice and veered dangerously toward a muddy field.

Linsan whimpered.

"There's going to be another lurch in a few seconds." Brook's voice's had the tense, controlled quality that Linsan only heard when she was driving. "You probably want to stay braced."

Linsan tightened her muscles and gripped her violin tightly. The hard case dug into her breast and ribs but she couldn't afford to lose it.

Know it was coming, the next surge felt like only a small, violent bump.

Unwilling to relax her grip, Linsan blew the hair out of her face. "It is possible to drive slower, you know."

Brook shrugged. The path widened and the ruts grew less pronounced. Under Brook's driving, the car fishtailed for a second and then straightened. The engine roared to life and pressure drove Linsan back into her seat.

"Or go faster," Linsan muttered.

"They killed my Daddy. I can't let them get away."

Linsan sighed. "Sorry, I'm just not as comfortable as you are inside in this thing. I feel like we're going to jump off the road every curve. I'd rather be still walking when we catch the bastards."

Brook snickered. "Don't worry, I've gotten better at driving at these speeds."

Linsan looked at Brook in shock. "Better?"

Bobbing her head, Brook looked at her sheepishly. "I borrowed the buggy a few times from my sister. She was pretty furious, but only after I flipped it the second time."

Another whimper escaped Linsan's throat. "Second?"

Brook grinned and nodded. "I was pissed. Daddy—brace!"

Her grip tightened on the wheel and she twisted hard.

Linsan obeyed, catching herself before she slid off the seat.

One of the tea mugs started to spill. Cringing, she smacked her hand over to top and the hot liquid splashed across her palm.

The buggy straightened and the engine's roar lessened.

Brook sighed and shook her head. "Just a little too fast on that turn. Sorry about that."

Linsan shook the hot tea from her hand. She wiped it on her trousers before resting it on the side of the seat in case she had to brace herself.

Brook suddenly smiled. "Cars are like music. You just have to know the beats and rhythm."

"What beat?" Linsan cocked her ear but all she could hear was the roar of the engine and the patter of grasses striking the undercarriage. "It isn't any song I know. Or instrument that I have heard."

"Oh, there are instruments: engine, gears, the wheels. If you drive fast enough, you have the smack of insects on the windshield. Even the road makes different sounds based on where you drive and how fast." Brook's voice grew quiet.

Linsan watched her as Brook's eyes began to shimmer. Her companion's eyes continually scanned the road ahead of her but, with every passing second, they grew more liquid.

A wave of guilt filled Linsan, she didn't want to be privy to her friend's inner thoughts. She started to turn away but then looked back. Brook needed comfort.

Linsan didn't know how to give what Brook needed. Her family was close-knit but Brook's was obviously more fractured. They may have lived in the same house, but it was clear that they were living separately.

Brook reached down for her tea.

Biting her lip and praying she wasn't about to do something wrong, Linsan reached out and rested her hand on Brook's hand.

Brook tensed.

"I'm sorry."

When Brook looked over, there was a sad smile on her face and a tear running down her cheek. Underneath them, the car's engine slowed down and grew quieter.

"We'll get them, I promise."

"And Palisis too."

Hearing the name of the violin hurt her chest. Linsan shook her head. "Even if I never see that again and we get

the men who killed your daddy, then this will all be worth it.”

Brook sniffed and nodded. Her eyes flickered to the road. Linsan pulled her hand back.

They drove in silence for a few minutes, with the rumble of the engine speeding up. With Brook’s words in her head, Linsan listened to the noises and started to hear a hint of the music that Brook had mentioned.

They passed a mile marker.

“About two hours to Little Rock,” Brook said.

Two hours until they face the murderers.

One More Question

Most villagers never travel more than twenty leagues from their home. Their entire outlook comes from those who venture out once in their youth and then return to become adults.

—Landris Jib, *The Silver King's Proclamation*

Little Rock was similar to all the other villages and hamlets that Linsan had passed through in the first few days of her trip. There were only two businesses, a public house and a general store. A smattering of houses surrounded the two with narrow trails wandering between every building.

In the noon sun, Linsan didn't see anyone out in the heat. From her experience, most people spent their days in the public house to get away from the boredom and to enjoy company. The others would be at work, toiling away on farms and duties, and not helpful for the information she needed.

Brook pulled the Glasscoaster in front of the store. The engine rumbled before settling down with a plume of white smoke. She frowned for a moment at the hood and then let out a little sigh of disapproval.

“Problem?”

"I'm going to need to find a mechanic soon myself. That smoke, not steam, which means some of the joints are cracking again. After we find these guys, I need to get the Glasscoaster into a garage for repairs." Unsaid was that Brook had no intent of relenting until they had caught up with the murderers.

Linsan smirked. "I heard there is an unaffiliated mechanic in town."

Brook glared at her. Lifting one hand from her mug, she clenched her hand and before flicking her thumb toward Linsan.

Linsan cringed. "Sorry."

With a frown, Brook started to say something but then shook her head again. "I don't know how to do this. How do we ask? What do we do?" She looked down at her hands.

Linsan's mood darkened.

"W-What if we make a mistake? What if one of us gets hurt?" Tears started to shimmer in Brook's eyes. She gripped the steering wheel tightly. "I-I don't know what to do."

Linsan reached over and clasped her hand on top of Brook's.

Brook stared at their hands.

"I don't know either. All I know is that we are both here. I also know—that of all the people in the world—you are probably the only one who can work with me."

Brook ducked her head. "I hated you, you know."

"I wasn't really fond of you either. I think neither of us are entirely to blame."

"Well, maybe. You were always so independent. You never needed anyone when we were growing up. And you always had the prettiest mother." Brook wiped the tears from her eyes.

“And you were always the pretty one in class. Everyone loved you and you had all the friends.”

Brook turned her hand over and clasped her fingers over Linsan’s.

They held each other tight for a moment. Then Brook sniffed again. “I need to get a better dress if I’m going to keep doing this, aren’t I?”

Linsan laughed. “Yes. I’m sorry, but fighting in that is going to get you in trouble.”

Brook looked at her. “Thank you.”

“Friends, right?”

“Yes. Friends.” Brook squeezed tightly.

“Let me start, I’ve been asking villagers questions for weeks now. We’ll find them.”

Slowly, Brook relaxed her hand. The strange look in Brook’s eyes came back, it was intense as she stared at Linsan.

Linsan gave her a long look and then stumbled out of the Glasscoaster. She headed straight for the public house. She could feel Brook’s eyes on her as she crossed the dirt road and to the front door.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she considered her options. They were in Gabaw’s home village and she couldn’t assume that he and his friends were hated like the previous village. She needed to be affable to find out but couldn’t be as direct.

At the door, she steeled herself and went inside.

The general store looked less like a store and more of someone’s living room with wooden shelves on one wall. Three large couches dominated the room around a wooden table. All of them were occupied; three men and two women, all in their later years, had started up a card game on the table. Half-empty glasses of water circled the edge of the table.

As one, the occupants looked up.

Two men leered.

A woman scowled.

The furthest man, a balding man with a fringe of white hair in a rim, grunted. "You lost, Girl?"

Linsan's original plans of being affable fled out of the window. Something about their attitude and her gut feeling told her that the people in front of her wouldn't accept it. However, she quickly came on a second alternative. Putting on her best distressed face, she gestured to the back. "I'm so sorry, but me and my friend are stuck. She borrowed her daddy's driver and it started smoking really bad."

She reached inside like her mother taught her, to find some sad memory to bring up the tears. The vague images of the burning workshop came up, an image that brought almost instantly a pang of sadness.

"I-I... we weren't suppose to take it out. I-I think it was just going to be little drive. But then there was smoke and it started rattling and... and..." A tear finally crept out and rolled down her cheek.

Almost instantly, the mood in the room changed. It wasn't entire compassion that drove them, though she could see a hint of it in their faces as they scrambled to their feet. No doubt, all of them had heard the Glasscoaster pull up and one of them must have peered out the window. They knew that one of them had money, probably Brook since she still wore a beautiful dress while Linsan dressed more plainly.

A role began to form. She would play the poor friend being impressed by Brook. Hopefully, she could let her companion know it time when the older folks followed her out of the store.

"Let me get you a drink. We only have water and beer?"

"Oh, poor darling, you must be terrified."

Others spoke up as they surrounded her. The older man who spoke first hung back from the others to circle around and look out the window. From the corner of her eye, Linsan notice him pick up a glass of water that had been sitting underneath it and drank from it. She kept her observations to herself, he already knew exactly what had been parked outside.

Linsan threw herself into the role, making it up as she went. She remembered how her mother said to keep it simple and vague, to let the emotion come out more than the words. "I'm so scared. Her daddy is going to get so furious. It was just a drive. A little drive."

A man patted her hand from a man who leered. "Just you and your friend out for a drive?"

"Y-Yes," Linsan responded. She kept clinging to the memories to let the tears roll down her cheek as she struggled to keep the despair of the day in her role. "Her daddy is going to be so angry at us. He... he might forbid me to care for her after this."

"Well," he said patting her hand more. "My youngest boy fancies himself a mechanic. We're pretty far away from the main road and supplies are expensive, but I'm sure he could fix anything wrong."

"Really?" she gasped as she pulled her hand free. "You think he could?"

Two of the other men walked out the front door.

Linsan cringed when the realization she should have told Brook her plan before she walked in. Now, the lack of communication could risk everything. She faltered as she looked at the door and back around.

One of the grandmothers drew her attention. "Come on, my old man is going to see what he could do. Why don't we bring out some treats for your friend? I'm sure you two could use a little sweet after all this."

Stuck in her role, Linsan could only agree. Together, they gathered some sweets in oiled papers. She noted the price, two cukdins each, and then headed outside.

Outside, Brook was bawling as someone had just killed someone in front of her. Unlike Linsan, it appeared that her companion had no trouble bringing up a river of tears and drama.

Linsan froze, her body tensing.

"I-I don't know what to do! I push the pedals and then all this smoke came out. It was horrible, and it stunk, and it is in my hair." Brook sobbed as she tugged her dark curls. "I'll never get this out without my hairdresser. She had to..."

Linsan's concerns faded quickly and then she had to hide the smile that threatened to broke out. Brook figured it out fast enough.

Linsan was guided to the car.

The men circled around it, peering into the foreign machinery as if they had an idea of what they were doing. One of them poked his finger inside and came out with a bloody finger. Another burned his palm on the boiler.

The lady with the sweets set the packet inside.

The original man who spoke grunted. "Do you think this thing will make it a few miles? Old Straw is the only one with a wagon big enough and he won't be in for at least a few hours."

Brook sobbed and nodded. "I-I think so. Maybe a couple more before my bro—"

Linsan interrupted. "It doesn't matter. Her daddy is going to kill her if we bring it back broken. Please, sir, all we need to do before we get in trouble."

Brook's eyes narrowed and Linsan cringed. She shouldn't have said Brook's father was the one who would punish her.

"Don't worry," said the creepy old man. "My boy will take care of you. Just try to get there on your own. If you can't,

I'll catch up. Ponar has a pair of draft horses that would work and it's only a twenty minute walk to get them." He drew himself up, the suspenders on his belt straining to keep his dirty pants up. "Just head south until you get to the bird tree. Take the first right and follow that to the wind-mill. Then a right until you get to the two barns."

There was a brief moment of silence.

Linsan wiped the tears from her eyes. "Bird tree?"

"You'll know it," said three of the old people around them in a chorus.

The woman with the sweets patted Brook's hand. "I left you something on the seat. I made them with my own hands. They aren't much but you girls need them." She turned slightly away. "Just twenty-five cuks."

Linsan almost choked on the double of the price.

Brook nodded and dug into her purse. She pulled out a few money cards and pressed them into the woman's hand. "Thank you. I owe all of you," she announced.

Getting into the car, she started up the buggy. It made a roaring, guttering noise. Linsan could see that she was holding both of the pedals with her feet while she twisted something hard.

A cloud of white steam belched out of the car.

The men and women surrounding them staggered back. One of them said "Oh dear, you better hurry."

Thanking them profusely, Brook pulled away. The car lurched a few times before it smoothed out. Streams of steam trailed behind them.

After a few seconds, Linsan ducked her head. "Sorry."

"You had your reason?"

"One of them was Gabaw's father. I thought the helpless maiden would be more effective. I didn't mean to use your father, I'm sorry."

Brook sniffed and wiped tears from her eyes. "As long as we get them."

She released the lever under the dash and vents belting out steam slammed shut. Leaning to the side, she pressed down on the accelerator and the buggy smoothed out as it began to race down the road.

Flame and Song

Combat magic is shaped by the one manifesting the power which means personality, history, and themes are all reflected in the energy's appearance.

—*Crystal Spheres Techniques*

As the people in the village said, the tree was impossible to miss. Hundreds of birds fluttered on leafless branches that looked more like claws than something growing from the earth. With all the beating wings, Linsan half expected the roots to lurch out of the ground and the entire tree to sail into the sky.

She clutched her violin case and stared at the tree. She couldn't tell if it was dead or twisted because of some magic spell, but nothing about the tree made her comfortable.

"Blessed Couple," whispered Brook as she careened to look at it. "That's creepy."

Linsan whimpered soft. "Why aren't they making any noise?"

Brook released the accelerator and the car grew quieter but no sounds of the birds rose up to fill the silence. Not even the whisper of feathers or the creak of wood. They

rolled past with the crunch of dirt underneath the buggy's tires.

As soon as the vehicle passed, Brook revved the engine and shot out down bumpy road.

Linsan braced herself and watched for the turn-off. She spotted it after only a few minutes. "There!"

Brook barely slowed down as she spun the buggy. The back end fish-tailed violently and the wheels kicked up a cloud of dirt.

Linsan barely had enough time to clamp her hands over the drinks and brace herself. The pressure drove her back into the seat as the vehicle launched itself down the bumping road. As they did, she tried to prepare herself for a fight. It was hopeless to even imagine how it would go, they were going blindly into a battle with nothing more than untried skills, a few hours of practice, and dreams of success.

She glanced at Brook. Seeing the dark-haired beauty's face twisted in a scowl, Linsan knew that she wouldn't be able to stop Brook either. They were committed to getting the murderers and recovering the violin.

When they reached a broken-down windmill, Brook turned hard to the right and followed the road. The car roared while it covered the distance.

"Just like we practiced?" asked Brook through clenched teeth.

"Yeah. Just like we practice. Fast songs, work on the beats. Start with the guitar since he's the leader."

"This better work."

"It will," Linsan said, not entirely sure of herself.

It took a few minutes before they saw the blue barns along the horizon. Linsan smiled grimly.

Then she caught sight of the main village roofs off to the side. It was pathetically close, less than a few hundred feet. "Damn the Couple!"

“What!?” Brook glanced to the side but then snapped her head forward to keep the car on the road.

“That’s the village! It’s right next door. Those old bastards sent us the long way around—”

Brook slammed on the accelerator and the engine’s roar became a high-pitched scream. Needles on gauges rose rapidly, dipping into the bright yellow areas and then into the red.

Behind them, something began to whistle and a deep rattling shook the vehicle.

Linsan braced her foot on the dash of the buggy and retrieved her violin. She quickly tugged it out and stowed the case behind her. Just outside of her window, she could hear the wind howling as the vehicle ripped down the road, kicking up dust, dirt, and leaves.

She gasped as her heart pounded in her chest. The violin strings hummed underneath her fingers, the warmth of the Sterlig giving her strength and a sense of calm despite her anxiety. “Work on the beat, work on the beat,” she whispered.

“I’m going to bring the Glasscoaster around to use it as a shield. Try to block off their escape. Use it until we can get our bearings. You go after the guitar, I’ll cover. You lead.”

“Count the music coming in?”

Brook grinned, her eyes scanning back and forth on the road. Her dress ruffles fluttered with every bounce of the road but she kept it moving forward. “Third bar, start with the drinking song.”

“*My Lady of the—*”

“Yes!” Brook rolled her eyes and smacking the steering. “Is the name that important right now!? How can you remember all that?”

Linsan grinned. “Been living it all my life. A thousands songs are stuck in my head.”

“Just keep it fast and hard. The milk song next, and if we are still fighting, then go into that anthem we only tried twice.”

“Plan,” Linsan said with a nod. She double-checked her bow. Taking a deep breath, she made sure she was braced and brought the violin up to her chin. It was going to be cramped playing in the Glasscoaster, but they had to come out swinging.

“Okay... we’re coming around the corner.”

Linsan threw herself into the rapid bars of *My Lady of the Dark Unders*, a drinking song that ended with a powerful beat to simulate a fist fight for the woman in the song. Both of them thought it would be perfect with Brook’s concussion blasts. The rich sounds of her violin filed the cramp quarters of the buggy.

The car burst out of the tree line. They were still a quarter mile away.

Ahead of them, she caught sight of the man wearing a duster and the wide-brimmed hat. It was Tilbin, the leader of the trio of killers. Even from a distance, she could see his guitar swung over his shoulder as he rapidly threw what appeared to be bags into the back of a vehicle of his own.

Compared to Brook’s Glasscoaster, Dukan’s Black Thunder was a startlingly different vehicle. It looked low to the ground with a buggy near the back third. Mechanical ports and gears shone along the entire length of the trunk. Nestled between fat tires, the chassis looked more like a cat stretching out with its rear rising up where Tilbin threw possessions into the open trunk.

Another man leaned on the front of the car where he had been peering under one of the hoods. He bolted to his feet and then turned to the barns. He waved his arms.

Judging from the way Tilbin responded, he was yelling but Linsan couldn't hear from the distance or the roar of the Glasscoaster.

"He saw us!" snapped Brook. She kicked the vehicle but it wouldn't go faster. "Shit! Shit!"

The third of the men, Mayforn, raced out of one barn. He held up his pants with one hand and had a single bag in the other. Whatever was in it snapped back and forth. He raced straight for the car, but didn't throw the bag in as much as carefully set it even with his bare ass sticking out.

Linsan's heart skipped a beat. The care Mayforn took implied the item in the bag had worth. "That's Palisis, it has to be."

The three killers quickly slammed hoods down and doors closed before tumbling into the car. In a matter of seconds, Mayforn was in the driver seat and a cloud of white steam burst out of the back of the car.

"He's about to release the pressure valves," Brook said. Her lace gloves tightened around her steering wheel. "We aren't going to get fast enough to block them in."

"How?"

"The Thunder has four pressurized tanks to get it moving quickly. Otherwise, it's too heavy to move without a horse. Those are going to go off and the entire thing is going to lurch. I just... need to stop it!"

Rapidly losing any semblance of control, Linsan cradled her violin and braced herself. "Are you going to crash?"

A wild smile gave an answer Linsan dreaded.

"Is this going to hurt?" she whimpered.

"Probably." Brook suddenly looked around the cabin and then toward each side of the car. "I'll hit on my side, back of the car. It might knock Daddy's off angle so it charges into the fence or that boulder near the front. Even if it doesn't, it

might break something more important. The Thunder is a lot more fragile than this buggy.”

Linsan stared at the furious glare that came from the driver’s eyes. She whimpered and braced herself the best she could, cradling her naked violin and bow in her hands.

She noticed that Brook tapped the steering wheel with her thumb. She still kept the beat. Inspired, Linsan used her own finger to pluck out the song they had started. The tinny sound bounced around the cabin.

Brook smiled and her tapping grew more confident.

In the briefest of moments, Linsan heard the beat of the song match the throb of the engine.

“Brace!” screamed Brook.

The buggy slammed into a fence surrounding the yard with the Black Thunder. The entire chassis shuddered violently. It bounced hard on the thick tires.

Brook twisted the steering wheel hard to the side. Her feet slammed against the pedals in a rapid-fire beat of her heels against the metal.

The pressure of their speed shifted and drove Linsan against the car door. She let out a cry of surprise as she slammed one hand against the frame and the other to the violin. The sound faded.

The buggy twisted to the side, then the engine began to scream as they slid sideways toward the front of the Black Thunder.

Just as the two cars met, a powerful boom exploded from the back of the Black Thunder.

Glass shattered and metal tore.

Linsan’s scream faded underneath the burst of noise that assaulted her. It felt like someone had punched her in the throat, chest, and stomach at the same time.

The buggy jerked violently to the side.

Linsan was dazed and blinded.

“Shit on them!” screamed Brook, apparently unaffected by the collision. Her boot punched the accelerator and the buggy shot forward.

The pressure driving Linsan into the seat was almost comforting. She pawed helplessly as she struggled to focus.

“Are you with me, Lin?” Brook said with a hint of fear in her voice.

Linsan shook her head one more time and her vision came into focus. She looked out to see the world screaming past her, wind howling past shattered glass and the grasses on each side of the road nothing more than a blur.

The Black Thunder raced ahead of them, belching out steam as it bounded on the road. The left tire rattled like a snake’s tail and streamers of steam poured out of ruptured vents.

“He got the charger off. I need you now!”

Linsan whimpered but the tone of Brook’s voice and the closeness to the murderers forced her to push her thoughts aside. She grabbed her bow and twisted her body so she could play.

With the wind plucking at her hair and instrument, she struggled at first but she knew the song. The rapid, sharp tones rose up and the air around her shimmered. She focused on the energies, feeling how they rolled over her skin and warped the air. With a flex of her power, she used part of it to deflect the wind ripping into her and gave her a bit of breathing room.

Tilbin stood up from the back seat of the Black Thunder. His hat was off, revealing a man who would have been handsome if Linsan could have seen past him being a murderer. With his cocky smile, he brought his guitar in front of him and slammed down on the strings.

The air around him ignited into flames. The musical notes hung in the air for a moment before forming into fireballs that launched themselves at the Glasscoaster.

“Linsan!”

“Got it!” Linsan accelerated her own play, shaping the notes of her own song into tendrils of force. The rippling of song and magic snapped forward and twisted, directing the fireballs to the side where they exploded into the field. A crescendo came up. Knowing the beat after it, Linsan formed it into a sharp point of pure energies.

Right at her moment, Brook released the steering wheel and slammed her hands together. The concussive blast exploded from her palms. It blasted the remains of the front windshield and threw twisted metal and glass along with Linsan’s magical attack.

Tilbin stumbled back as he was peppered by the attack.

Brook grabbed the steering wheel and wrestled the car back underneath control

Linsan grinned at their triumph.

He came back without his cocky grin and blood dripping down the side of his face. With a glare, his hands raced along the strings, sending off riffs faster than she could. More fireballs formed around him but they didn’t shoot forward.

Linsan worried as she tried to catch his song. It sounded familiar, but the instrument and the wind made it difficult to identify. She focused on her song and used it to form protective energies in front of them.

“Not much more, your magic is making it hard to see the road.”

“Hard to play in here,” Linsan gasped. Her hand guided the bow as she watched more of the fireballs gathering behind him. “Very cramped. Ready?”

She focused on turning the defensive energies into another attack. “Three. Two.”

Tilbin grinned and his teeth shone. He punched down on his strings.

Mayforn surged up from the driver’s seat. The Black Thunder swayed back and forth. He slapped his hands together and then threw them apart. As he did, a barely perceptible wave of force struck the fireballs.

Accelerated by Mayforn’s magic, the fireballs shot out in all directions faster than Linsan could track. They blossomed out before streaking in toward the Glasscoaster from too many angles to redirect.

Linsan’s bow screamed as she redirected as many as she could, but it felt like using a spoon against a flood. Her sonic whips tore out chunks of the ground and scraped both the Glasscoaster and the Black Thunder.

“Fuck!” screamed Brook. She slapped her hands together, using her blast to blow away the ones screaming toward the open windshield and the front of their vehicle.

Neither of them were able to stop the ones that came from the side and top. Bursts of heat and fire scorched the air, setting fabric and hair aflame. The impacts shook the roof and bounced the buggy along the ground.

One hit the side of the door and bent the frame against Linsan’s leg. She only had a second to register the hot metal before she jerked away.

She bore down and switched songs. She didn’t know why, but the *Rider in the Storm* felt like the right choice. The dark tones filled the cabin, bouncing off the roof and warping the air.

“I don’t know that song!”

Linsan’s brow furrowed into a scowl. It was wrong, the song needed more room. She needed to hear it, she needed

to move to summon the energies. "Damn, I can't play it." She shifted back to a song.

"What was that? I felt that! That's what we need!" Brook yelled over the wind.

"The right song, but I can't get it off."

"Why not!" Brook's voice had a shrill tone over the win.

"Not enough room. Too cramped." Linsan wasn't entirely sure how to describe the feeling in her gut.

"Brace!" Brook twisted hard on the steering wheel and the vehicle bounded off the road.

A fireball exploded where the buggy had been.

The thick tires of the vehicle took the uneven ground easily but the entire car bounced rapidly as they raced over furrowed ground.

Linsan tried to keep her bow on the string, but the rattling made it impossible.

"How much room?" Brook said as she waved the buggy around fireballs exploding around them. Chunks of scorched dirt and rocks peppered both of them. "The roof?"

"I-I think so."

Brook grinned. "Grab the wheel and hold tight."

"What!?"

"Grab it!"

Linsan snatched the wheel. It jerked and bounced in her grip like a furious beast. She dropped her bow and the violin into her lap as she clamped her other hand on it.

Brook grabbed something between the seats and jerked back. Her seat fell back and she slumped with it.

"Duck your head!"

Linsan let out a cry and buried her face into Brook's dress. She clamped her eyes tightly together until tears leaked out from the pressure.

Something punched her from above. A powerful boom drove the buggy into the ground. Linsan could feel the

clods of dirt and rocks scraping along the undercarriage. Then it bounced back up and there was nothing but silence for a single terrible moment before it crashed back into the ground.

Brook grabbed the steering wheel and pulled herself up. With her other hand, she grabbed Linsan's hair and pulled her out of her clothes. "Get playing!"

Linsan looked around with curiosity and fear. Then she realized there was nothing above her, no metal or wood. Just bright blue sky creeping past her.

Only twisted and stretched metal braces remained of the roof. To the side, they had passed the village and were already on the route back toward Fanasis Village.

Brook slammed the seat back into place. "Enough room now?"

Hope filling her, Linsan nodded. She grabbed the violin and bow from the ground and settled them into place.

"Now, let's get these cow shits!" Brook yanked the steering wheel and the buggy raced back toward the road. "What's my part?"

Linsan realized she didn't know how to communicate it. She looked around furious even as she started the first bars of *Rider in the Storm*. The punchy song started quickly and her hands were a blur as she raced along the notes.

The measure of the song meshed with the thudding of the engine. She synchronized to engine and felt more power surging through. She channeled it and let the wavering energies gather around her. With the room, they stretched above her in a maelstrom of power.

"Give me a beat, Lin! You need me!"

Linsan tried to speak but the notes faltered. *Rider in the Storm* had always been a more complicated song. Feeling the power behind the rhythm, she could tell why but it made it impossible.

Remembering how Brook tapped the steering wheel, Linsan got an idea. Turning her back against the still hot door, bent her leg, and jammed her foot between Brook's thighs.

Brook let out a yelp and looked shocked.

Linsan cringed. "One, two, beat!" she managed to belt out while only losing a few notes. As she counted, she tapped her foot on the softness of Brook's inner thigh.

Brook squirmed, her legs clamped down on Linsan's, then she nodded.

Turning her attention back to the song and the drive, Linsan gathered up more power. Her foot twitched as she concentrated on moving at the same time as the song.

The first moment came right as the buggy hit the road. Linsan tapped it against the inside of Brook's thigh as the music rose into a crescendo.

One.

Everything slowed down, moving on the pulse of sound and energy.

Two.

Linsan ripped through the last chord. Around her, the maelstrom shot out in a spiral of energy that lit up the sky with blue streaks.

Three.

Brook released the steering wheel, lifted herself with Linsan's foot still caught in her thigh, and then clapped her hands together with all her might.

The concussive wave exploded in a tsunami of brilliant blue, sucking the maelstrom into it. It tore up ground and the road in a flash before rising up to come down like a hammer against the back end of the Thunder. The sheer force of the power sheered off the tanks before crushing them into the ground.

The buggy bounced once over the flattened metal.

Tilbin stared in shock, the wind whipping at his duster. Then he peered over.

A single bag hung out of the back of the Black Thunder, the distinct shape of the priceless violin fluttering as it bounced.

“Palisis!” screamed Linsan.

Tilbin grinned and snatched it up. He tossed it into the back side. It bounced off the back of Gabaw’s head.

“Again!” snapped Brook. “Keep playing!”

Without saying anything, Linsan started into *Rider in the Storm* again. The energy quickly gathered around her.

Playing his guitar, Tilbin sent fireballs racing toward them but Brook dodged out of the way.

Linsan’s bow sparkled with energy with her notes. Each one danced off the string and rose up like rainfall to accumulate in the gathering maelstrom.

The beat came up.

She tapped her foot into Brook’s thigh. In the corner of her eye, she watched as Brook’s lips pressed into a thin line.

One.

Two.

“Now,” bellowed Tilbin. He leaned back and slammed his hands down across his guitar. The power chord rose up in a column of flame and heat.

Gabaw surged out of his seat and jumped up.

Linsan tried to get out the note in time but Tilbin had somehow known the timing; he had heard the song once and knew how to use it.

The flame pillar gathered in Gabaw’s hand. When he brought them down in a double-fist punch, the fire left a streak that traced his movement in brilliant white. Both Gabaw’s hands and the fire formed into a large, hammer-like bullet that punched into the ground right behind the Black Thunder.

The ground in a hundred feet behind them shot straight up in a column of flame and earth. Heat tore out of the earth and burst up, picking the Glasscoaster completely off the ground and tossing it aside. Trees, bushes, and rocks flew in all directions from the smoking crater that the Black Thunder left behind.

A sickening feeling caught her as the world stopped, a brutal silence.

Then the buggy plunged into the crater with brutal efficiency.

Linsan only had time to wrap her body around the Sterlig and grab Brook's hand before they crashed to earth.

Chapter 33

Tears

Family are those who hold your hand as you pass from this world and into the next.

—Achyoni Kekināmi

Every part of Linsan's body ached. She couldn't isolate one pain from the other, it felt like she had been battered from all angles and then tossed off a cliff.

"W-What..." Her tongue didn't move as easily as she thought it would and the words stumbled from her lips. "What happened?"

No answer.

Linsan shook her head to clear the haze before she realized the seat of the buggy had been tilted at a strange angle. Before she knew it, she started to slide forward toward the dash. The impact caught her shoulder and sent a sharp wave of pain sparking along her nerves.

Grunting, she braced herself and held herself still until her vision sharpened and she could inspect her surroundings.

The buggy had fallen hood-first into the crater that Gabaw had created. The impact had crumpled the front

and ruined the tires. One of the axles had been twisted until the end pointed straight up. Weak trails of steam rose from dozens of cracked joints.

“Oh, shit,” Linsan said in a hoarse voice. She peered down, found a safe spot, and then planted her feet to lever herself up and out of the seat.

The violin against her chest began to slip away and she clutched it. A broken string cut into her skin and she froze. “Shit!”

Holding herself still, she inspected the violin in fear that she had cracked the Sterlig. When she saw deep gouges in the wood, she cringed. With tears in her eyes, she used her fingertips to inspect each one in fear that the violin had been pierced.

Finding no damage, she flipped it over and tried not to think about the sinking sensation in her stomach. More cuts and scrapes marred the almost priceless instrument.

Linsan didn’t find any serious damage in the violin. The bow, on the other hand, had been snapped in two and she had lost two of the strings. Tears burned in her eyes as she looked at the damage; it would be almost impossible to replace either in a rural community.

“Damn. Damn.” Her hands trembled and tears painted her cheeks. She looked around with a sudden need to escape the ruined buggy. Spotting a flattened area, she carefully set her violin down on it and then pried herself free. As soon as she could dig her fingers into the scorched earth of the crater, she retrieved her violin and staggered away from the wreckage.

Linsan made it a few yards before she remembered her companion. “Shit,” she muttered. “Brook? Brook!”

Clutching her instrument, she hurried back to the hole and peered down. Her eyes scanned looking for Brook or

even the bright colors of her dress. When she didn't spot her friend, she circled around the crater calling out to her.

Brook sat a short distance away on the far side of the crater. Her yellow-green dress was torn and shredded, exposing a generous amount of bare thigh and bloody scrapes. Her dark hair spilled out over her shoulders except where a few strands clung to the rough bark of the tree at her back.

"Brook!" Linsan rushed over. She dropped to her knees and peered at her friend.

With her face tilted up into the noon, Brook's cheeks glistened with her tears. Her red-rimmed eyes focused on the leaves above her but she didn't move except for a pulse along her slender neck.

Linsan's chest felt tight. "B-Brook?"

Brook let out a long shuddering breath.

"Are you safe?" Linsan glanced down. Seeing the still-crimson wound, she reached out for it with a shaking hand. Her fingertips pressed lightly a few inches away.

Brook flinched.

"S-Sorry. I wanted to see how badly you're hurt."

Without looking down, Brook gestured to her other side where strips of her dress had been bundled up. The fabric had been stained and soaked crimson. Then she lifted her injured leg and flexed it. The heel on her shoe creaked and swung independently with only two nails keeping it in place.

"Good, no broken bones. Nothing else?"

Linsan waited for a response but there was only an uncomfortable silence. Behind them, something in the buggy gave and she could hear metal scraping as it settled further into the smoldering hole.

"Brook? Please, just say something." Linsan reached out for her friend's face. "I need you to be okay."

A fresh tear rolled down Brook's cheek. She was just on the edge of crumbling, judging from her struggles to keep her face smooth.

"Brook?"

Brook let out a long, shuddering wail. Clamping her eyes tightly shut, she reached out blindly for Linsan. Her fingers patted Linsan's thigh before gripping it and pulling herself away from the tree.

Linsan crawled forward to pull Brook into a tight hug.

After a second of hesitation, Brook buried her face into Linsan's shoulder before letting out a long, shuddering wail. "I lost my Daddy!"

Linsan's heart strained at the pitiful sound. She opened her mouth to say something but the words froze. There was nothing to compare to the agony in Brook's voice. Instead, she closed her eyes and held Brook tightly as the tears wracked her friend's body.

"I couldn't catch him. I tried so hard, I... I couldn't do it."

Linsan stroked Brook's hair. "It's okay."

"No." Brook sobbed. "It won't ever be okay. I broke everything. There is no way we can catch up now." Her body continued to shake against Linsan.

"We'll fix the car."

"It's in a hole! A Couple-damned hole! We aren't ever getting out of this!"

"We'll find them." Linsan sniffed on the edge of tears herself. "We know where they live. Even if we have to stay here and watch the place, we can wait. We aren't going to give up."

The words between the faltered and Linsan kept holding Brook until the shuddering stopped.

Then silence, punctuated by sniffs and tears.

Finally, Brook spoke. "They'll sell your violin."

Freezing for a second, Linsan thought about Palisis. There was no question the murderers were going to sell it now. She looked down. "It's just a violin."

"An expensive one." Brook lifted her head to look into Linsan's eyes. Her red-rimmed eyes shimmered with tears. "Not even Daddy's wealth could afford Palisis, no one in town could. You..." her lips parted to say something else, but then a strange look crossed her face. Then she lifted her head slightly.

Linsan became aware of how close their bodies were. Pressed up against each other, there was no mistaking the warmth of Brook's body nor the way their curves ground against each other.

Brook took a deep breath. Her breath came in short pants. Her eyes were wide as they stared directly into Linsan's. Her lips pursed for a moment and she inched closer.

If Linsan didn't know better, she would have thought Brook was steeling herself up to kiss Linsan. Her cheeks began to burn with her thoughts.

"It-it's just a violin," Linsan stammered. She froze. It felt like she had just jammed a dagger into her own gut. She was talking about never seeing Palisis again, losing her family legacy forever to the thieves.

The look in Brook's eyes faded. She shook her head as fresh tears ran down her cheeks. "My fault. I lost my daddy. My fault."

"No, no," Linsan said quickly. She hugged Brook tighter. "It was us. We did this and we're going to finish it."

"How?" came the whimpering cry.

Linsan moved her hands to cradle Brook's chin and cheeks with both hands. She stared into her friend's eyes. "I promise. Come water or winds or flame, I swear on my blood, we will hunt down those men and bring them to justice."

Brook trembled in her grip. “H-How?”

Linsan blinked past her own tears. “I don’t know yet. But we will. Somehow.”

Brook took a deep breath and then buried her face into Linsan’s shoulder again. Her sobs wracked her body but the sharpness had faded.

Unable to do anything else, Linsan held her friend and said nothing more.

An Offer of Help

At the height of their society, the Usaili territories covered much of the southern parts of Gepaul.

—Janil da Krisol, *Lost Natives of the Land*

The warm blew past Linsan, bringing with it the smell of flowers, rain, and smoke. Slowly, she lifted her head and took a deep breath. At first, she thought the smoke came from the ruined car behind them but the wind blew in the wrong direction.

Underneath her embrace, Brook nestled closer to her. “Sorry...” she murmured, half asleep in her grief. She drew her knee up and tugged her dress over her bare, scratched skin.

Linsan didn’t want to move, but the smell worried her. She peered down toward Gabaw’s village in fear that a mob of villagers were coming to finish the job. Seeing only an empty haze hovering along the grasses that grew along the ruts, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Shifting her body, she flipped her head to the other side and looked the other way.

A wagon approached from the north, moving with a stately pace with an old horse or mule leading it. She could see two people on the driver's bench, one broad-shouldered and the other smaller. They were talking to each other and, even from a distance, Linsan could hear a man and woman laughing.

"Brook, I need to talk to these people."

Her friend sniffed and looked up. "Who?"

"I don't know, but they came from Fanasis and not Gabaw's. They have a wagon, maybe they could help us get the buggy out."

Brook rubbed her red eyes. "I doubt it, that is a ton of iron, copper, and bronze."

"I'm not giving up."

Brook gave a small nod and then pushed herself up to her feet.

Linsan made sure she was steady and then walked with her back toward the road. Along the way, they looked at the hole that the buggy had fallen into. It looked even worse and Linsan had to look away. She knew she couldn't give up, but seeing the damage made it impossible not to burst into tears herself.

At the edge of the road, she waited until the wagon got close enough to see her and then waved to them. "Hello!"

The two on the wagon stopped talking. The driver flicked his reins and hurried the horse along. Even though it was only a few hundred yards, it felt like forever before the wagon got close enough for her to identify the driver.

"Cal!?"

Cal straightened and then smiled broadly. "Music girl!"

Brook grumbled. "That's the drunk from the public house? The one who wanted to bed me?" She glared at him and the wagon.

"Yes."

“Why are you excited to see him?” Her voice was sullen and bitter.

“Because he knew that he said the wrong thing and left. We talked while you were bathing. Not to mention, he has a wagon and might help us.”

Brook scoffed and looked away.

Cal hopped off the wagon with a thud. “Hey, Mis, this is the music girl I was just telling you about,” he called to his companion before standing in front of Linsan, his hands out in a hug but not pulling her in.

He had done the same thing when they parted ways. Linsan had felt uncomfortable then, but the stress and excitement of the day had worn down her defenses and she let him pull her into a firm hug.

For a moment, she was enveloped in hard muscles and the smell of smoke. Then he stepped away. “I was just talking to you with my cousin about your playing. She heard it last night but was too busy to check on me. Old Gab yelled at me for not bringing you over since you played some songs she had never heard.” He grinned. “She’s jealous.”

Linsan brushed her hair from her face and looked up as Cal’s cousin stood up from the bench. She was slender with startlingly golden hair. Her waist had an almost perfect taper that only a corset could create; Linsan could spot some of the boning underneath the white cotton shirt she wore. However, his cousin wore brown trousers instead of a dress. With hands in both pockets, Cal’s cousin gracefully stepped off the wagon and dropped the ground.

The impact looked graceful, but the ground shook as if someone had dropped a heavy rock from the wagon.

“Oh, Linsan, this is my cousin, Miska atoi pin Strali.”

It took Linsan a moment to register the foreign name. In the language of the land, Lorban names began and ended with constants. Having a trailing vowel gave the impression

there was something left, a sound missing. She struggled. "Hi, Miks... Mik..."

Miska's smile grew more forced.

"Miska?"

"Good enough," Miska said. Her voice was tense, with a fluid sound that almost sang.

"Be nice, Mis."

Miska rolled her eyes.

Linsan caught sight of Miska's hands. Like her cousin and Old Gab, she had intricate designs tattooed along her limbs reaching out from her sleeves and down to just shy of her elbows. The ink was shades of blue, green, and reds with plenty of flowers, leaves, and bare branches of winter. The material of her shirt, above where the corset bound her, gave a hint that there were more tattoos along her sternum and belly.

Linsan took a deep breath. Her mother had taught her enough to know that saying someone's name right was important. She cleared her throat. "Miska atoi Strali?"

Cal chuckled. "Almost, Music Girl! Just shorten the final 'a' and 'i' and you'll be good. If you want to be formal, throw that 'pin' in there but we'll forgive you if you miss it."

Miska glared at him for a second, her skin darkening slightly.

After a few more attempts and ignoring his cousin, Cal declared that Linsan had it right.

"So what's your name?" Linsan asked.

"Calibo atoi idu Oparil. It means Burning Woods that Comes From Oparil." He gestured north. "A few miles north of Fanasis, back before..." He sighed. "A while ago. Miska and I share a grandmother on my mother's side and her father's."

Even though she was confused and there were no songs or plays she could use to supplement her knowledge, Linsan glanced at Miska.

"It doesn't mean anything, don't ask."

"She's from Starli," Calibo said with a grim tone.

Miska turned away. "Starli is lost."

With her hands still in her pockets and walked over the edge of the crater. In the last few hours, most of the flames and smoke had faded. She leaned over and then shook her head. "Gab again?"

"Looks like it," Cal said as he joined her. "What happened, Music Girl?"

Linsan worried for a moment. "We were trying to stop him. He... did something and we were hoping to bring him to the authorities."

Miska snorted.

"However, the villagers lied to us and they were able to warn him and his friends that we were coming."

Miska's head snapped up. "They didn't send you past the Itanith Tree, did they?"

Linsan started to ask then realized what she was talking about. "The tree with all the birds?"

"Bad luck, no surprise you ended up here."

Calibo leaned over. "That tree curses strangers who pass it. Until sunset, things won't go your way."

It was Brook's turn to snort.

Miska leaned over, sticking her rear out as she did.

Brook's eyes flickered down toward it. Then she looked away sharply.

"Looks like he tried to set this thing on fire," said Miska.

Linsan turned back to the damage. She sighed and nodded. "Fire hammer attack of some sort. He brought it down on the hood and we fell in. Broke my bow."

"And ruined the car?" asked Miska.

"Yeah, sorry. The car is also ruined," Linsan said with a glance to Brook."

A smile crossed Miska's face. "No, not ruined. Just looks like the metal is twisted." Then she jumped into the pit to land on the hood. There was a powerful bang when she hit and the hood deformed underneath her weight.

Linsan was impressed how easily she moved while wearing a corset.

Miska pulled her tattooed hands from her pockets and slid down the rest of the way to the smoldering ground to start inspecting the damage. "What happened to the roof?"

"Brook removed it."

Miska looked up with a smile. Her lip curled into a sly smile. "Did she? She has more than a pretty face and a purse?"

Behind her and away from the edge, Brook made a scoffing sound.

"These scratches are too clean for fire magic."

Linsan saw scores along the metal from her own magic. "My magic."

Calibo chuckled. "You weren't toying with them, were you?"

"No."

"So who did they kill?"

Linsan tensed.

Calibo chuckled. "We all heard you practice. Butterfly kisses and roses don't make shake the ground in the village. You intended to hurt those men." As to make a point, he slammed his foot into the ground and the soil shuddered.

"Careful, Cal!" snapped Miska. "I don't want to be buried."

She pulled her shirt from her bottom and fumbled with her clothes for a moment. The ties of her corset came lose and her waist took on a more natural shape as she tugged it

free. A flash of bare skin revealed that her tattoos circled her navel with a ring of dead branches and snowflakes but became a fan of bright greens in less than an inch.

Linsan blushed and looked back at Brook who was limping away. She sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry."

Calibo followed her gaze and then sighed. He leaned closer and spoke in a quieter voice. "Family?"

Linsan nodded. "Her father," she whispered. "They were robbing my family and killed her daddy. We were going after them to bring them to justice."

"Just the two of you? That's risky."

"We thought we had a chance."

Calibo patted Linsan on the back. "You were damn close. That loud monster they were driving was on its last legs and leaking oil. I'll be surprised if it takes it more than a few leagues before giving up."

Hope blossomed. "They might be in town?"

"No chance. They wouldn't be caught dead near Miska, but they are going to be stuck for a few days down the road repairing their damage. If we can get you back on the road and give you some help, maybe you can catch up."

Linsan stared at him, her jaw slack.

Calibo winked. "Call it an apology for being drunk and rude." He leaned over. "So, what do you say, Mis? Think you can get them driving again?"

Miska glared up at him. "I don't know, Bobo," she spat out the name bitterly. With a casual toss, she threw her abandoned corset out of the crater and to the side. "But we need it out of this hole and to my forge. That means your wagon."

"Ah, blessed soil, that means I'm not going to go drinking tonight?"

Miska grinned with just a hint of malice. "If you give a *ji-nkoa*, they will never leave your side. Plus, you are the one

who tied petals with her.” She followed by something in a different language, a foreign tongue that sounded bitter and mocking.

He shook his head. Then he pointed at her. “Be nice, *achil deblo* made your grandmother smile.”

“That would explain the coming storm. I can smell winter already in the air.”

Linsan worried her lip. “What can I do?”

“Just stay out of our way, Music Girl. Our bones are of the earth and we know how to move among the stones.” Calibo said before turning and heading to the wagon.

Brook came up to Linsan. “How much is this going to cost?”

The two cousins looked at each other. Then Calibo shrugged. “Nothing. You stop those men and we’ll call it an even trade.”

She shook her head. “No, I can’t—”

Calibo looked at her. “Nothing.”

“But—”

“Nothing,” he said in a tone that allowed no argument. When Brook sighed, he reached in and grabbed a large coil of heavy rope and pulleys.

From inside the hole, there was a groan of metal. Linsan peered down to see Miska lifting up the front of the buggy with one hand. The weight of the vehicle drover Miska’s feet deep into the earth but it didn’t look like she strained with the effort to kick one foot free and roll a large rock underneath the corner of the Glasscoaster to brace it.

On the edge of her vision, Linsan watched as Calibo picked up the end of the wagon that easily weighed hundreds of pounds. Without even a grunt, he dragged it until it lined up with the edge of the crater.

Linsan decided to stay out of their way and tugged Brook to the side.

Negotiations

To brighten their lives and enjoy the game, thousands will travel all day to spend the night at a nearby inn, share a wagon ride to the game, and then come back for drinks and celebration, all before heading home.

—Podalis Krum-Tercier, *A World Without Vehicles*

When Linsan saw the crowd gathered around the inn, she groaned.

Calibo let out a laugh. “They take games seriously around here. If I wasn’t needed for doing deliveries tomorrow morning, I would have stayed here.”

“You mean, if it wasn’t for Poladio snoring, you would be sharing a room and sleeping off another hangover.”

Calibo gave his cousin a pointed look. Then he said something in their language. The cadence sounded wrong as did the words but Linsan picked out a few of the rhythms.

Miska responded mockingly but she still smiled at the end.

Calibo glanced at Linsan and Brook before shaking his head. “At least I do is give them a little privacy.”

“They made you sleep on the floor again.”

Another look.

"You know you could have come to my place," Miska said while leaning back. "You are family."

"You sleep in the back of a forge, there are no walls, and you had company."

Miska shrugged. "No one I wouldn't have kicked out of my bed for you."

"You know what they say about cold *mefechu*..."

Rolling her head to give her cousin a sardonic look, Miska said, "If Gab made it, remember to finish the bowl at the latrine."

Calibo laughed. "She isn't that bad of a cook. We all survived her meals for years. Besides, she puts all of her sweetness in her deserts. Oh," he said with a groan, "I could use a bowl of *longi* right now."

Linsan listened while she sat next to Brook. They were both in the space between the front of the ruined buggy. Brook's hand rested in her palm but neither of them were inclined to let them release. It was a comfort with an increasing strange day.

She wondered if Calibo and Miska were speaking Lorban for her benefit. Half of the words didn't make sense. She guessed Calibo had taken an effort not to speak whatever language they shared because Miska frequently answered with no regard for Linsan's eavesdropping.

Miska sat up. "Just bring the wagon up in front of the smithy and help me shove it off. I'll start tonight and see what I can do."

"Need my help?"

She shook her head. "See if the—" the rest of the words were in the other language. While the words weren't clear, the tone was and Linsan bristled at the insult.

Calibo pointed at his cousin sharply.

In response, Miska hopped off and hurried ahead to open up the doors. She reached in and grabbed the underclothes that Linsan had seen earlier and tossed them aside. "Come on, get the front in here."

Calibo stopped the wagon. When he stood up, he gestured for Linsan and Brook to leave before he started unhitching the horses.

Exhausted and aching, the two women backed away as the cousins maneuvered the wagon in place.

"What do we do?" asked Linsan.

"Let's get rooms for the night. Then come back and see if we can help."

"Good idea," Brook said. The defeated tone in her voice was heartbreaking. Her hands shook as she opened up the boot of her car and fumbled through the cases before pulling out a mid-sized case. She reached for another one but then shook her head.

"Are you sure?" asked Linsan as she gathered her relatively smaller bag from the seat of the car. She took more time to pull out the violin case and cradled it in her arm instead of slinging it over her shoulder.

"You won't be able to do much at first," Miska called out. "Get some sleep, if you can, and find me in the morning. I'll probably be in here."

"Are rooms okay?"

"Yes, but you should consider getting one for Bobo too since it will be too dark to make it home with a large pit on the road."

Calibo shook his head. "No, I'll sleep in the wagon. Don't worry about me, the inn is going to be packed with the game. It sounds like Saint Gaveil won so they are going to be drinking well past midnight. I'm still being held to the fires for last night's words, so I'd also rather not risk being banned for life."

Linsan frowned. "I'm sure I could talk to Har—"

He gestured to the inn just as a cheer rose up inside. "There is no chance I'll find a bed in there. I have doubts you will either. But try. If you can't, I have room in the wagon. Or, I'm sure you can stay with Miska." He ended with a grin.

His cousin threw something at his head.

Brook looked sharply at Linsan. "Hopefully two. Come on, let's find out."

Walking into the inn felt like walking into a windstorm. Everyone was chatting and cheering and drinking. Lagers and stouts splashed everywhere as people talked about their favorite plays.

Linsan cringed as they worked their way to the bar.

Har's eyes opened wide at the sight of them. "What happened?" he bellowed to be heard over the din.

"Fireball!" Linsan responded just as loudly. "Any chance of a room and a bath?"

Har's pained look didn't need to be told. "We're completely full."

Brook leaned over. "I really a bed tonight. Can I ask for one?"

Har frowned and then pointed to a large group that was slightly less enthusiastic than the others. "That's my biggest group today but they lost. If you have cuks, they might be willing but I doubt it."

"Thank you!" Brook said. She grabbed Linsan's hand and dragged her toward the group. Reaching them, she screamed out for attention. "Oi!"

A half-drunk man looked up. "What you want, Dresses?"

Brook seemed to ignore the insult. "How much for one of your rooms?"

They laughed.

Linsan looked around. There was no chance she could busk with this crowd. They were more interested the game they had returned from and would make poor pickings.

Brook's voice sharpened. "Two hundred crowns for two rooms?"

Linsan froze and then stared at Brook. That was easily four times what any of them had paid.

A different look crossed his face, then he grinned. "There are twelve of us. We aren't going to sleep on top of each other for less than a thousand."

Brook's face darkened. "Three hundred."

The leader leaned forward. "How about four hundred for one, Dresses?"

Brook's grip on Linsan's hand tightened. "Two for one."

"Three—"

Someone kicked him. He glared at them and then back. "Fine, two-fifty."

"Deal!"

"Cash, Dresses, right—"

Brook slapped a pile of currency cards on the table. "Key, now," she snapped with her hand open.

He started for the money.

"Key!" Her voice carried over the din. "I'm tired, I hurt, and I want hot water!"

There was a brief moment of quiet.

Linsan cringed at being the center of attention, or at least standing next to Brook.

The other man dug into his pocket and pulled out a key. He started to hand it over, but then changed his mind. He snapped his fingers at one of his companions who fished out their own key and handed it over.

Brook took it, looked at the symbol engraved into the side, and then lifted her hand away from the cuckdins. The brightly color money spread out slightly.

By the time she turned around, the money had been pocketed. "Come on, Lin, let's see about hot water. I need a bath."

"That was a lot of money," Linsan said worriedly.

"Worth it," grumbled Brook.

At the counter, she held up the key.

Har shrugged. "That was a lot of money," he said quietly, repeating Linsan's words.

The muscles in Brook's jaw tightened. "A bath?"

He tensed.

Brook looked like she was about to burst into tears.

Har's face softened. "That room is barely large enough for the bed. But, if I can trust you, I'll give you a key to another but you have to be out by midnight. Just a bath and don't go snooping."

Brook sighed and dug into a small pocket in her dress. She pulled out a few green cards and set them on the table. "Bless the Couple."

Har swept the bar and pocketed the money. Then he dug into his own trousers to pull out a well-worn key. "You're in seven, I'm in one. I'll bring over some hot food, once I get a chance, and leave it by the door. You know where to draw water?"

When they both nodded, he smiled grimly. "Don't tarry, that's my room and I better not find you when I go in there. You look like good girls and I'd hate to throw you out."

Chapter 36

Waiting

Why did I fell upon your arms? Was gravity dragging me down or your beauty tugging me beneath your sheets? I pride myself on being the stronger man, but in your presence, I am but the weakest.

—*One Mistaken Night* (Act 2, Scene 1)

Still covered in soot and dust, Linsan was afraid to sit on the bed. If she did, she had no doubt she would be ruining the blankets in a matter of seconds. It was also the one truly clean thing in the cramped room that Brook had paid too much money for.

Two hundred and fifty crowns for a single room? That was far more than Linsan's father made in a month and Brook had slapped it down in a fit of rage and impatience.

She had to admit, having access to money made life easier. Though, there was no money in the world that would bring Dukan to life or return Palisis. Well, money would probably get Palisis back, but it would far more money than Brook had access to.

Linsan sighed and shook her head. She didn't know what she was doing at the moment, other than struggling with

her skin crawling with disgust and the desperate need to sleep away the rest of the night.

She glanced at the bed. It was about the same as her bed at home, which was barely enough for her to spread out. She couldn't even imagine how both Brook and her were going to sleep in it.

For the countless time since entering the room, she considered sneaking out and taking up Calibo on his offer. Sleeping out in the air wouldn't be comfortable, but she had never shared a bed with anyone before and she had only her mother's plays and stories to fall back on.

Somehow, she doubted sharing a bed with Brook would result in the romantic drama of *One Mistaken Night* and Brook didn't have a husband that would hunt Linsan down like in *Hunter, Prey, Brother*. She chuckled to herself. Her mother played the sister in *Hunter* and Linsan remembered sitting on the edge of the stage with her father as they cheered for her.

Exhaustion turned her chuckle into a giggle. Linsan blushed and covered her mouth until she could control herself.

She looked at the foot of the bed where Brook had put her traveling case. It took over much of the remaining space in the room but she didn't want to move it. Brook had left it open to reveal a neatly packed container with dividers separating bathing supplies, sleeping outfits, and even a pair of morning dresses. The corset that Brook had been wearing earlier hung off one edge from where she had tossed it.

To Linsan, Brook's case looked more a case for the costumer, the woman who did makeup and hair for larger plays. It also smelled much the same, with multiple flowery perfumes filling the room. The source came from four bottles neatly tied to the side of a divider with ribbon. There

were other containers with hair oils and lip waxes, various dishes of makeup, and even a small sewing kit.

Linsan yawned and she glanced at the door. "Come on, I need a bath too."

She decided to distract herself by walking over to the case and looking over Brook's outfits. Wiping her fingertips clear first, she teased up the top one to look at the one below. It had lace and embroidery on it, which surprised Linsan. She set it down before she noticed her fingers left a faint smear on the white fabric.

Swearing to herself, she clasped her hands and looked over the rest of the case. The morning dress caught her attention. It was the plainest thing she had ever seen in Brook's outfits. Only a little embroidery but with no ruffles or lace. Compares to the frilly dress Brook had tossed behind the lid of the case, the morning dress would have been a far better choice for their fight.

The door creaked open.

Linsan stumbled back, blushing as if she had been caught.

Brook slipped in and closed the door behind her. Her cheeks were flushed, though Linsan didn't know if it was from the heat or the chance she would be caught seen in public. She wore one of her sleeping shirts; the brilliant white material sloped off her shoulders and breasts before reaching down to cover everything but her ankles. Brook's dark curls had been weighted down by her bath. The strands marked a dark calligraphy along her skin and shirt. She had also removed her makeup, leaving a plainer face but one that looked more honest to Linsan than ever before.

"I was just looking," Linsan said.

Brook's cheeks turned red and then she glanced at the bed. "I don't mind. I left it open, didn't I?"

Linsan nodded. She felt uncomfortable in the tight quarters with her former enemy. The need to run away rose up, choking her. It couldn't have been Brook's more intimate outfit. Linsan had been behind the scenes in a multitude of plays where actors would strip with no concern other than switching outfits before their call. Nothing Brook had would surprise her, but somehow being in a room together left her feeling awkward.

She cleared her throat. "I-Is there hot water?"

Brook pushed a strand of hair that had clung to her cheek and pushed it over ear. She nodded and then circled around the tiny room until she could pull herself up on the bed. She almost seemed deliberate as she tucked her ankles to the side before looking at Linsan.

Linsan gulped at her dry throat.

Brook arched her back slightly. The fabric of her sleeping shirt shifted to outline her breasts and hard nipples. Her eyes were wide and focused on Linsan.

Linsan couldn't help but think Brook was searching for a response to her arrangement. Her stomach fluttered with nervousness. There was something about the look, it reminded her of the same one Brook had given her in the car in the village. She didn't know what it meant, only that it was different than every other expression she had seen on her friend's face. Struggling with a blush on her cheeks, she cleared her throat. "I-I should get... I need to take a bath."

Before Brook could respond, Linsan grabbed her travel pack and stumbled out of the room.

Chapter 37

A Hot Bath

Only a man knows how to truly embrace another man, to give his heart and innocence completely and without hesitation.

—Hasil na Karnes, *The Gift of Decades*

Linsan peeked out of Har's room and down the hallway. A trio of drunks were staggering toward her, singing and muttering at the same time. One of them fumbled for their key, pulling it out and waving it toward the door to the right.

She braced her foot behind the door just in case they came toward her and tightened her grip on her bag. After enjoying a warm bath and finally getting a chance to wash her hair, she didn't want to put on dirty clothes. She only wore her drawers and her camisole. She considered pulling out her last clean outfit, but felt foolish to wear it just for the ten feet to the other room.

Outside, the drunks stopped in front of the door. Two of them sang three different songs while the other took a few attempts to get the key into the lock and turn it. Together, they stumbled into their room.

As soon as the door latched, Linsan slipped out of Har's room with her supplies, made sure it was locked behind her, and then raced over to her own room. Her bare feet smacked against the wooden planks. At the door, she rattled the handle to get it open and then thrust herself inside. Blindly, she closed the door behind her and made sure her clothes were trapped.

Brook turned to face her. She sat on the end of the bed while she worked her fingers through her dark hair. The smell of hair oil filled the room and Linsan could see it glistening on the white gloves Brook wore. She gave a half-smile and continued to work her hair. On her lap, a hair bonnet rested on one thigh while a number of ties straddled the other.

The perfumed scent brought back a flood of memories of Linsan's mother. As an actress, she had countless tasks focused on her beauty. Her bedtime ritual was hours long, though it had whittled away when they went years without her getting an acting job. But even in the last days, she had watched her mother carefully using her fingers to detangle her hair after every bath and brush it out every morning.

In a flash, Linsan wished she was back at home with her parents. She didn't want to be cramped into small inn rooms, walking along the road, or even being stuck in a vehicle for hours at a time. The longing for her old life, back before the fire that ruined everything, slammed into her gut. She struggled with sudden tears that threatened to form and the tightness in her chest.

She would have given anything to be able to hug her parents in that moment.

Brook froze. "W-What's wrong?"

"I..." Linsan took a short breath to keep herself from sobbing. "I miss my mom and dad. I... I don't want to be here

anymore,” she finished in a hoarse whisper and a broken voice. She slumped back against the door.

Brook stood up, spilling the contents of her lap onto the floor. She hurried over.

Linsan watched her, unsure how to respond.

Brook took her hand and held it firmly. The grip was soft from the glove but slick from the oil, it didn’t matter to Linsan in that moment. “It’s okay.”

Not trusting her voice, Linsan nodded.

“We failed but we can keep going, right? This is just a set back and Mis is going to get us on the road soon enough.”

It was the same thing Linsan had told Brook when their positions were reversed. The irony wasn’t lost and Linsan let out a choked giggle. “Y-Yeah.”

Brook stroked her arm. “It’s going to work out. I promise.”

Linsan couldn’t help but squirmed slightly.

Brook’s smile froze. “Shit,” she muttered. “I’m sorry.”

When she started to back away, Linsan grabbed her wrists and held her close. “No, please.”

The unreadable expression came back as Brook came up. Their bodies were close, inches away, and the warmth between the two of them felt thick. Linsan remembered how she thought Brook was seconds away from kissing her in the car. In the tightness next to the door, the same thoughts came up and she found herself growing more open to finding out.

She swallowed to ease her dry throat. “I don’t want you to leave,” she whispered.

Brook let out a soft exhalation.

In the public room, a cheer shook the floor.

Linsan’s body grew hotter. She found herself trembling as she stared into Brook’s eyes. She didn’t know what to do, what to say. The little thought in her head, the idea of a

kiss, continued to burrow deeper into her consciousness until it was the only thing she could think about.

Brook sucked on her bottom lip, just a little until the tips of her teeth were visible. Up close, her breath smelled of the sweet fruit from her lip wax.

Linsan squirmed. The heat seemed to be spreading into a tingling pleasure along her breast, stomach, and between her legs. It was an unfamiliar sensation for her, she had never been attracted to anyone before. But, in the closeness to Brook, she felt the first curls of desire beginning to spread out.

“Lin...” Brook whispered.

Linsan tightened her grip on Brook’s hand.

“Are we still enemies?”

Arching her back slightly from the wall, Linsan shook her head. “We haven’t been in a long time.”

“Friends?”

“Yes,” said Linsan. It was getting harder to get her tongue wrapped around the words, even simple ones. She let out a soft moan as she took in a quivering breath. She arched her back slightly in an attempt to breath and their breasts touched.

Even through the white material of her camisole and Brook’s nightshirt, the touch was electric. Tendrils of tingling spread out from the contact. She started to squirm but forced herself still to avoid breaking the contact.

Brook inhaled and her lips parted.

The urge to kiss Brook rose up. It almost choked Linsan but she didn’t know why she was hesitating, other than the fear that somehow she was reading the situation wrong.

“Lin?” Every breath Brook took caused their bodies to touch even more. She was leaning forward gently.

“Yes?”

“I would very much like to kiss you.”

With a surge, her body grew heated and slick. She could hear her heart pounding in her ears as she struggled. She wanted to be kissed, to have their bodies touched more. She wanted to feel Brook without even the thin layers of fabric between them.

Brook started to pull back. "I-I'm sorry. I-I didn't mean to... I meant—"

The last thing Linsan wanted was for Brook to pull away. Throwing all her own fears to the side, Linsan leaned forward and kissed Brook on the lips.

Both of them froze, caught in place. The electric touch from their hands and breasts was nothing compared to the surge of pleasure that came from the softness of Brook's lips. The faint taste of fruit teased her tongue as she leaned into the embrace.

Brook's warmth surrounded her as Brook reversed and then leaned into Linsan, pinning her against the door. She tilted her head to the side and opened her lips in invitation.

Working only instinct, Linsan mirrored her movement and sank further into the pleasures of kissing her former enemy. Everything felt right as she ran her hands along Brook's arms and then down to her waist. The warmth seeped through her fingers as she caressed soft skin.

In the great room, another cheer shook the building. The floor shook as they stomped their feet. The beat was a counterpoint to Linsan's own rapid beats.

When they finally broke for air, Linsan gasped. She looked into Brook's eyes and only saw joy and desire. "I don't know what I'm doing," she couldn't get her voice higher than a whisper. "I've never been with anyone."

Brook smiled. "No one, not even a man?"

"No... you?"

"Twice, but I didn't enjoy it." Brook smiled as she started to trail her hand down before she gasped. Slowly, she drew

up her gloved hand and then rolled her eyes. "Oh, Brook," she whispered as she peeled off her glove. "I should have taken these off earlier."

Linsan giggled. The humor broke some of the intensity, but at the same time, it cleared her mind to realize she wanted to keep going. She wanted to be with Brook. "I don't mind but what do we do?"

Brook tugged her from the door and guided Linsan toward the bed. "I have an idea."

"Have you been with a woman before?"

It was Brook's turn to blush. "No, but I've read a few stories and I'm sure the rest is going to be obvious." She hesitated at the edge of the bed. "Do you want to keep going?"

Linsan took a deep breath and nodded. She was flushed and excited and Brook was exactly what she needed that night. "Yes," she said before she kissed Brook again.

The Morning After

As for being your lover, I'll be honored to take the job until you find another warrior who wields a sword as mighty as yours.

—*What Lurks at the Heart of the River Sin* (Act 2, Scene 5)

For the first time in her life, Linsan woke up with the feeling of contentment. She took a deep breath and drank in the scents of perfumes and sex. It was a sweet smell, light and musky. It brought a smile to her lips and she felt a welcoming warmth along her body at the memories the smells recalled.

It was the first time she ever been with anyone sexually. Her mother's plays talked about it constantly, but Linsan had never felt the urge or desire. Male or female, no one had ever "ignited a flame" or brought "a flutter to her breath" which happened constantly in the plays. In fact, if it had not been for Brook, Linsan may have never even considered the possibly.

Linsan was happy Brook made the first move. She smiled to herself, lifted her head, and opened her eyes. The cramped bed was otherwise empty except for twisted blankets and pulled sheets. A few of Brook's dark hairs curled

delicately on the pillow and there was a faint smear of hair oil on the edge.

Unconcerned, Linsan sat up. Realizing she was naked, she looked around her for her camisole. Spotting it on the floor, she reached over and grabbed it.

The door rattled for a moment before it opened.

Linsan stiffened and straightened, pulling the thin material to her chest.

Brook looked at her and smiled broadly. There was no hesitation, no pulling back, no flickering anger. For the first time, Linsan realized she was seeing true happiness in her former nemesis. Holding up a tray of steaming food and three mugs, Brook said, "Good morning."

Even her voice was cheerful.

Linsan grinned back with the fading pleasures tickling the back of her thoughts. "Good morning. Thank you."

"They didn't have much to drink, just cider and tea. I got you a tea and breakfast. It looks like eggs, potatoes, and some purple vegetables that I'm sure aren't poisonous."

Linsan thanked her. Brook held up the tray for a moment and then brought it over to the suitcase. With Linsan's help, she closed the lid and set the tray on top of it. She hesitated with the last step, her hands hovering over the surface for a moment. Then, she straightened slowly, turning until she faced Linsan. "Um, Lin?"

"Yes?"

Brook worried her lip. Then she grabbed one of the mugs and held it to her chest. Her fingers gripped the edge tightly until her knuckles whitened. "About... about last night?"

Linsan wasn't sure how to answer. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt other than it brought her happiness. She tried to imagine Brook differently, as a loving spouse or the couples she had seen going to her mother's plays.

She couldn't.

The silence grew between them. It turned the air stifling.

When Brook started to fidget, Linsan realized she had to say something. Shaking, she patted the bed next to her.

Brook sank down a foot away. Their bodies were almost touching. She wore one of her travel dresses, one that wasn't damaged in the fight or practice. The bright blue lace fluttered with her movement. She took a deep breath and then another.

Linsan reached out with her hand.

Brook took it with her own gloved hand. Her hand was shaking and she griped Linsan tightly. "Are we... are we still enemies?"

Not expecting the question, Linsan could only laugh. "No, Brook, we aren't enemies." She giggled. "I meant that last night. I don't think we've been that way for quite a while."

"When?"

"I'm going to say that fight in the garage."

"But I left you." Brook's grip tightened.

"You came back. That's what matters. Now, we're together."

Brook's eyes flickered back and forth with her thoughts. She looked down and then brought her other hand up to clasp Linsan's. "But... what are we now?"

She gestured to the bed with her chin and then to where Linsan had her other hand still holding her camisole to her bare breasts.

Linsan looked down at her other hand. She didn't have an answer herself. Everything was new to her, terrifying and excitedly new. "What do you want to be?"

Brook looked away as she tightened her grip. "I don't know. I didn't even know that this was possible until years ago. Remember when we had that big fight? You limped

home. That was the day I found out that your mother had a wife first.”

Linsan thought about Marin. She would never meet her father’s first wife nor Junith, the woman that married her mother and would later marry Junith. Learning about the relationship was a revelation to both Linsan and Brook that day. “I was more surprised my father’s first wife married my mother’s. How did that work out?”

“I don’t know, I’ve just been thinking about it a lot. Ordering stories, trying to meet others. I haven’t had a chance to... physically do it, but I’m pretty sure I only have the eyes for women.”

“And you were hoping I liked the fairer sex?”

Brook blushed. She tried to pull her hand free.

Linsan smiled and reached down to kiss the hands clasping her own. The memories of their bodies writhing warmed her up. “I’m going to say I enjoyed last night a lot. I just never thought about it before.”

“Always fancied boys?”

“No,” Linsan said with a shrug. “I guess... I didn’t really think about it?”

Brook’s lips tightened. “Didn’t you think I was pretty?”

“Of course, I did. I said it before, even when you were fighting. You were the prettiest girl in school and you are more beautiful now. I meant that with my heart.”

“But I don’t... make you moist?”

There was something in Brook’s tone that caused Linsan to hesitate. The wrong word and Linsan would drive a wedge between them. She didn’t want to lose Brook, not for their quest but also not as her best friend. She smiled and kissed Brook’s hand again. “You are the adventure I would be most honored to take.”

Brook smiled, and then she let out a little snort. “That’s a quote, isn’t it?”

“Yes... from *What Lurks at the Heart of the River Sin*.”

Brook’s lips tightened.

Linsan cringed, afraid she said the wrong thing.

Then a smirk. A snort before Brook’s shoulders shook with her laughter. “Oh, how could you use that line? Even I know that play. And that was the worst line in it! How could you?”

Linsan smiled bashfully. “This is all new to me. I don’t know what to do, what to say.”

Brook scooted closer. Their clasped hands shifted until Linsan’s arm was pressed against her breast and Brook’s body was warm against her own. “Lin, would you mind if we try?”

Another line came up. Linsan leaned forward. “We will always be friends, that part has been set in stone and into the weave of destiny.”

Brook smiled, her eyes shimmering. She obviously never been to a showing of *Haston and Grail*.

Linsan grinned as another line came up from *What Lurks at the Heart of the River Sin*. It was terribly written but playful in the right places. “As for being your lover, I’ll be honored to take the job—”

Brook’s eyes softened and she leaned forward to kiss Linsan.

Linsan struggled to keep a straight face. “—until you find another warrior who wields a sword as mighty—”

Brook stopped with a gasp. Then, with a look of mock anger, she yanked her hands free to find a pillow to smack Linsan and silence the laughter.

Estimation

Beyond the basics of blacksmithing, the skill to do detailed repairs was rare. This ensured the prices remained high for many years after auto-drivers took to the roads.

—Padid Has-Glorian, *Early Years of the Auto-Drivers*

An hour later, Linsan and Brook walked hand-in-hand from the public house and across the road. She couldn't see the buggy but she heard a steady banging from a hammer striking metal.

No one else was moving about town. There was not even sign of the party from the previous night. Almost everyone had left before sunrise and returned to their homes for duties and jobs.

The starkness of the abandoned village was overwhelming.

Calibo looked up from where he was lashing some heavy planks into his wagon. He smiled broadly. "Good morning! Did you get a chance to sleep in comfortable beds?"

"What does that mean?" asked Brook, her tone sharpening.

Linsan looked at her worriedly.

He shrugged, then hopped down. Like his cousin, the ground shook from the impact. "You didn't come back to the wagon or head over to cousin's, so I hoped you found yourselves room."

"Oh." Brook's grip relaxed. "We did. It was a pleasant night." Her tone softened and she squeezed Linsan's hand. Sharing a smile, she gestured to the entrance of the smithy. "Is she working on my Glasscoaster?"

"Head on it, it's safe if she isn't banging on things."

Linsan spoke up. "What are the planks for?"

"I figured I'd build a bridge over that hole those assholes made. Or least make something to warn other wagons before they fall in. You folks with combat arts don't always think about the damage left behind your fights."

With a blush, Linsan looked at it. "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that."

He shrugged. "It wasn't your fault they decided to start killing and stealing. Their family has been doing that for generations. You weren't the one that put them in Greol's barn that night. You weren't the reason for who they are."

With a groan, Calibo arched his back. "No, you were trying to do the right thing. And, if you happened to get them tied up, I suspect you wouldn't be thinking about cutting throats, right?"

Nausea rose up, choking Linsan. She had not considered what would happen if she managed to stun them, other than a vague idea of finding authorities. She held up and her hand and shook her head. "No, no! I wouldn't do that."

"Well, then I won't blame you for a hole in the road," Calibo said with a smile. "I'm a man of earth, I can patch her wounds with a smile."

Brook tugged on Linsan's hands.

Linsan glanced over and then slipped her hand free. She turned to whisper to Brook. "I think I should help."

Brook looked at the wagon and then to the blacksmith. She whispered back, "Please? I don't want to see how bad it is on my own."

"I will. Then may I?"

Brook nodded and whispered thanks.

Linsan held up her hand. "Cal, mind if I help you? I can't lift much, but I helped make that hole. But I want to see the buggy first."

Brook stepped toward the forge.

Calibo grunted and shook his head again. "It's going to take me hours to finish and I wasn't planning on coming back. I have work in Little Rock and my home is south of that. Once I finish, I need to get working and can't afford the time to come back here and still get a day's work. Don't worry," he said flexing his arm, "I can handle a little bridge."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Why don't you see if Miska needs your help and then maybe work on fixing your bow? It sounds like you'll need that if you're going to keep going."

The sick feeling from before rose up. In the rush of sex and emotions, she had forgotten that her bow had been cracked. "Sorry... thank you."

"No, thank you. It takes a kind heart to offer. Go on, your friend is going to need some support. In the morning light, that car looks like terrible shape."

Linsan followed after Brook who stood in the entrance of the forge area. When she came up, she could see tears in her friend's eyes but also a different look, one that she had just seen the night before.

Calibo and Miska had dragged the buggy into the center of the forge area. Twisted and torn metal stuck out in all directions. The front looked like it had been crushed as easily as a paper box.

Miska stood near the front, wearing a pair of functional and stained trousers, a heavy leather apron, and a greasy shirt. To Linsan's surprise, she didn't have a hammer in hand.

Wearing gloves, Miska picked up one end of a fender. Bracing it against her thigh, she raised her fist into the air and brought it down. The impact sounded like a hammer strike and the metal shook violently from the impact. A blast of warm air blew past Linsan bringing the smell of scorched metal and wood.

Brook leaned over. "Is she...?"

Miska slammed her hand down again, flattening the metal against her thigh. Sweat dripped down her brow as she adjusted it and hammered it again.

Linsan shook her head in amusement. "Fixing your buggy with her bare hands and against her thigh? Yes."

Miska groaned and released the metal. Standing up, she ran her gloved hand across the side of her face. Sweat sluiced off the leather and splashed down to soak her shirt. She caught sight of Linsan and Brook before doing a double take. A scowl etched across her face. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Y-You were pounding," Brook said in her quiet voice. Her eyes scanned up and down, taking in the look of Miska with more than a little desire. It was a new expression for Linsan, but there was no question that something about Miska that excited Brook. After the morning's revelation, Linsan wondered if their night together had opened new possibilities for her.

Brook's eyes flickered to Linsan's and then a blush burned on her cheeks. She reached out and grabbed Linsan's hand and held it tight.

Linsan wasn't sure how she felt about Brook's attraction and dismissed it for later. She clasped Brook's hand and

gave her a comforting smile. They would figure it out, together.

When they looked back, Miska was watching them carefully. "What do you want?" she asked in a sharp tone.

"How bad is my car?" Brook said, the familiar sharpness of her tone coming back.

Miska shook her head and rolled her eyes. She turned and pointed to the car as she spoke. "It looks the frame had been snapped her and here. The front is trashed, but the engine looks in pretty good shape. I'm thinking if I can most of this front repaired and pulled off, I'll have a better idea about midnight."

"Midnight?" Linsan asked.

Brook's spine stiffened. "That's all day. We can't wait that long."

Miska glared at her. "Well, then prepare to wait a lot longer because you trashed your Coaster and it's going to take me a lot of effort just to get your damn pretty ass back on the road, now isn't it?"

Brook opened her mouth but Linsan knew nothing helpful was going to come out. She squeezed Brook's hand tightly for a moment. When her friend looked over, Linsan shook her head. Brook closed her mouth with a snap.

"Let's let Miska do what repairs she can. We have other things we need to do."

A flush colored Brook's cheeks and a smile quirked the corner of her lips.

Linsan grinned. "That or repair my bow and figure out how we're going to defeat Til, May, and Gab."

Brook's smile dropped instantly.

As much as Linsan wanted to crawl back into bed and explore Brook's body, they had a duty before them. She took a deep breath. "Tonight? I promise. But Miska is right, we have to plan better. And that means learning new songs. We

obviously can't reuse the same song from before, Til figured it on the second play. That means we need to learn and practice a lot more if we're going to have a chance."

For a moment, Brook resisted. Then her shoulders slumped. "Very well. What do you need?"

"Horse hairs at least and probably some tools."

Turning back, Brook cleared her throat and spoke politely to Miska. "Excuse me, do you know where we could find someone who keeps horses?"

Centuries

The hand of a craftsman is more treasured than any tool on the table. A tool needs not years of training and practice. A blade can never be as sharp as the mind that wields it.

—Gregor Maldin-Cross, *The Art of Carpentry*

Linsan sat at one of the tables in the public house. An array of tools and scraps of wood from around the village spread out around her on a tablecloth as she worked a thin knife back and forth to create a channel for the spline. It was tedious and precise work but also something she had been doing since she was a little girl.

“Why not just wrap it together?” Brook asked.

“Because...” Linsan said in a distracted voice, “my dad would kill me if I didn’t repair this right. And that type of fix would never last with the amount of playing I’m going to do. I need a strong core but nothing too heavy to disrupt my movements.”

“And this will?”

Linsan let out her breath and carefully tapped the opening to dislodge the wooden slivers. “Better than wrapping. I couldn’t find a good spline to use, much of the wood aro-

und here is too brittle to use and that big tree that we found was too oily and crumbled. But what I did find will work for a while, maybe a month or three. After that, I'll need to fix it properly if I didn't already ruin everything."

"Then couldn't you just replace it? You can carve a new one, right?"

When she was a child, Linsan had asked the same question. She grinned at her father's lecture and tried to boil it down. "I could carve a new one in no time. It just wouldn't last long because a bow is more than shape, it's moisture, flexibility, and strength. Good bow wood is seasoned for half a century before—"

"Half a century!?"

Linsan looked up. "That's why the Sterlig family was devastated when we lost our forest. We had spent generations breeding the right trees for the ideal wood and we were curing generations of musical instruments when it went up in flames. People would pay us a century ahead to make the perfect instrument for their grandchildren and then..." She choked on the sad memories. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and set down the knife. "... when everything burned up, we had to pay back those commissions to avoid debt collectors. Our income and reputation were ruined forever in that night."

Brook said nothing as she looked down at her tea. It was in a large beer mug and Linsan could see the heavy cream and sugar swirling at the bottom.

Linsan shook her head. "It will probably take us two or three centuries until our lands can grow good instrument wood again. Assuming there is enough that has the right combination of resin and strength. Then another fifty before we can even start to make an instrument. After that... no one knows how long it would take before Sterlig meant something in the music world again."

“Four hundred years... what do you? How do you recover from that?”

“Learn as much as I can from my father and then teach my children in hopes they will pass it down before we forget everything. Have faith, I guess.”

She worked the slice open until it was ready for the spline. Gently, she blew it clear.

“I guess you’ll have to find a husband then.” Brook’s voice was low.

Even though her parents never brought it up, Linsan knew she was the last of her line. But as she told Brook earlier, she had no interest in man or woman. She shrugged. “I don’t have to birth a child to call it my own nor do I have to share blood to call someone family. I don’t even need them to have my name to walk in our traditions.”

She looked up and smiled. “With those rules, I have plenty of time before I need to make a choice. I will not abandon you, Brook.”

Brook looked up and there was a brief flash of vulnerability, and then she smiled sadly.

It took another half hour before Linsan dipped the spline in a glue mixture Linsan had put together more with intuition than skill. Carefully knocking off a drop, she eased it into snugly into place. Carefully, she worked the halves of her bow back together before using a small hammer to tap a pair of brass nails into the wood and through the spline. It was an impromptu fix, but she was confident it would perform its duty to find Dukan’s killers.

She carefully wiped everything down and then set the bow aside. Her breath came in a ragged exhalation as doubt and fear bubbled up. She had never had to repair anything in the field before, nor for something so critical in her life. If she made a mistake, then she had no doubt the bow

would fail her in the middle of a fight when she needed it most.

Pushing everything down, she carefully picked it up and carried to their new room, paid for with a reasonable amount of money once the crowds had left. She took a second trip for the rest of her supplies: the borrowed tools, the metal pieces of the bow, and the horse hair they had gathered from around the village.

Brook was standing by the front door when she came back. She had a piece of paper in her hand.

“What’s that?”

She held it up. “Y-You said we had to learn new songs. I had a few that I thought might work but... I don’t know their names or anything.”

Linsan grinned as she inspected it.

While Brook’s handwriting was beautiful and calligraphic, she had never learned how to write or read music. She had “lots of string instruments and...” with lines showing the notes rising and falling.

Combing through her mind, Linsan tried to puzzle the names from the notes.

Brook blushed and looked away. “It’s okay if we use only your songs. You know how—”

“No, I know most of these.”

Her dark curls bounced as she turned back sharply. “They are? I mean, you do?”

Linsan hummed through the first one.

“That’s it!”

“*Ode to the Champion* and this one is *What Comes of the Nightbird*, my mother auditioned for the play that introduced that one. These are really good songs for us, Brook. They have solid rhythms for you and I can adapt the music to my violin.”

“R-Really?” Brook looked surprised. Then she beamed with a relieved smile.

Encouraged, Linsan hugged her. “Come on, let’s learn how to turn these songs into something violent.”

Song and Dance

The nature of combative music is not the force of the notes but the way they twist and turn through defenses. But to know the song is to know how it ends, and no offense can conqueror if the end is known.

—Jaber Darsil, *The Inefficiencies of Military Music*

Linsan's ears rang from Brook's latest concussion blast. Her hand dipped for a moment before she brought it up. "Almost. This time, remember it's one... two... three... clap. You want to clap just as I hit the high note."

Sweat trickling down her brow, Brook signed. "It would be a lot easier if I could hear you play. Your hand gestures are hard to track."

"Want to go back to me squeezing your hand?"

Brook smiled. "No, that was easy. You were doing all the work. I need to learn the songs myself, not trust you to tell me when to clap. Besides, what if we get separated?"

Linsan groaned. She felt useless practicing without being able to play. She was a poor conductor when the songs were inside her head were Brook couldn't hear them. "I know, but what else can we do? Give up for—?"

"No. We can't give up." Brook straightened. She had on a pair of black lace gloves that were pristine when she started. After only an hour, the material had started to break and the delicate strands of lace curled out and gave the backs of her hands a fuzzy appearance.

Linsan wiped the sweat from her face and then straightened. "Okay, so the drum of *Ode to the Champion* goes ba-da ba-da ba-da-da-dum. So, you want to clap—"

Brook didn't move.

Stopping, Linsan looked at her curiously.

"Dance for me."

Linsan stumbled on her words. "W-What?"

Brook worried her bottom lip. "You used to dance when you played, remember? You were always twirling around on the tops of fences and on the rocks. Remember that time you were on the balcony and the teachers thought you were going to fall?"

It had been a while since Linsan had done that, it felt like a different life. She grinned. "And the professor tried to tackle me and almost fell off himself?"

"That. You were always jumping and twirling. It was... I thought you were always so graceful, as if you could dance on the head of a needle."

"That's why you beat me up?"

Brook flushed. "Look, I was—"

Holding up a finger to Brook's lip, Linsan grinned. "A storm long since past. You want me to dance for you?"

Brook's cheeks colored and her eyes crossed to look at Linsan's hand. "Yes. Please."

Stepping back, Linsan pictured the movement. "Okay, so how about this... ba-da ba-da?" As she said the beats, she swayed her body and stepped high, striking her feet in time with the beat. A familiar rush came. "And then we ba-da-

da-dum!" She kicked up her feet, arched back, and then hopped forward.

Her foot thudded on the ground. Peeking up, she saw Brook watching intently. Linsan smiled and felt a thrill of desire rushing through her. Despite being in the middle of the field, it felt as if they were once again in the bed exploring each other's bodies. "Again?"

Brook nodded.

Linsan closed her eyes and moved to the music, first saying the beats, but then using her voice to mimic her violin's notes.

At the right moment, she felt Brook's concussion beat. Instead of it throwing her forward, it buoyed Linsan's step and she lightly skipped to the next step.

When the beat came again, the ground shook but Linsan barely felt it as she spun and continued on, dancing and singing as her friend clapped out the rhythm to the song. With the blasts shaking the air and shaking her chest, it felt naturally to leap and bound in time with the music.

As the song came to an end, Linsan circled back around until her final step brought her face-to-face with Brook. She stopped, inches away, panting lightly as she looked into her friend's brown eyes.

Brook froze, one hand on each side of Linsan. Surprise and shock painted across her face but it quickly coalesced into a smile. She leaned forward and kissed Linsan on the lips. It was a light and fleeting touch, a promise of something intimate later.

Without thinking beyond the moment, Linsan stepped forward until their bodies pressed together. She kissed her friend back with more passion, parting her lips as she lost herself briefly in the embrace.

Brook's hands rested against Linsan's hips, holding her close.

Linsan reached down as she broke the kiss. Resting her hands on Brook's, she tightened her grip and tugged. "Come on, dance with me."

"W-What?" Brook's eyes fluttered. "N-No, I can't dance."

Tugging Brook forward, Linsan shook her head. With every step, she swayed her hips. "Ba-da."

"Stop," Brook laughed.

"Come on, feel the beat. Besides just clapping along. You need to move around the battlefield. Move your body. Ba-da," Linsan smirked as she rocked her hips the other way.

Brook started to move with her, a hesitant smile on her lips. Then she seemed to relax and began to match Linsan's movements.

"Come on, back and forth, just like last night." Linsan sounded out the beats. "Ba-da-da—"

Just as she reached the last beat, Linsan released Brook to separate themselves so both of them could clap their hands.

In close quarters, Brook's gentle clap beat against them with a dull thud. It shook Linsan in her chest and along her bones.

"Ba-da ba-da..." Linsan pulled Brook into her dance until they were in step, pounding together along the grass. Their bodies split apart to the music, weaving along the song as the two danced alone in the field.

Chapter 42

Overtime

We can't always choose the fields our battles. The enemy comes when we least want it and never when we are prepared. Always be ready, even in the moment of your greatest weakness. Damn it, where are my fighting flowers?

—*The King of All Moles and Other Insignificant Accomplishments* (Act 3, Scene 7)

Linsan limped as they walked back up the road toward the public house. She had twisted her ankle one too many times and the dull throb rose up; hopefully there wouldn't be a fight in a couple of days until she recovered. She wiped her face, scraping off dirt, sweat, and grass from her cheeks and brow.

Next to her, Brook staggered next to her. She had refused to take off her heels even in the grass. When Linsan had offered to help her, she claimed that they were both too hot but she remained within arm's reach.

It was late evening but Linsan didn't remember the day passing until she was tripping over roots she couldn't see. She groaned and took a deep breath to speak. "That was a good practice. I think we've mastered the first six songs,

three of yours and three of mine. And we've almost got the seventh done."

Brook perked up. Her hair was a mess, the black curls cascading down her face despite her effort to push them back. She arched her back.

One button snapped off.

She lurched forward, a blush coloring her cheeks. One hand smacked against her chest to keep the dress from bursting open.

Linsan stopped and turned to shield her from the public house.

Blushing hotly, Brook looked down and gingerly pulled her hand away. The opening gaped slightly but the other buttons held. She let out a sigh of relief.

"Going to be okay?" whispered Linsan.

"Nothing I can't fix in the room." Brook smiled at her. "Might have to strip down first."

"You mean, take a bath?"

Brook's nose crinkled. "I stink of sweat."

"You're wearing a dress in the field."

Her eyes widened as she looked up. Before Linsan could say something, she tightened her grip on her dress as if Linsan would insist she change.

Seeing the look of fear, Linsan realized there was something more than just wearing pretty dresses to Brook. It was important to her friend. She smiled as sweetly as she could and then ran her thumb through the dirt smeared on Brook's cheek. "I'm never going to tell you to take off any dress."

"Y-You aren't? My sisters always said I was being childish."

"No. I won't."

"Even though I shouldn't be wearing it in that field?"

Linsan chuckled. "You already know that, don't you? But we can't choose the fields of your battles. As long as you are careful, and we stop before someone gets hurt, we should be okay."

Brook gave her a pointed look. "Is 'choose the fields of your battles' a line from a play I don't know?"

Linsan had to stop and think. After a moment, she shook her head slowly. "I-I don't think so."

"You mean, you have words of wisdom that didn't come from someone else."

Rolling her eyes, Linsan laughed. "Maybe?"

Brook reached up and pulled Linsan to her side. She leaned into her. "Good. I like it when you're leading."

Linsan blushed. She slipped her arm around Brook's waist and led her toward the public house and a hot bath.

There were a few villagers coming in and out of the building, mostly for the communal dinner that Har provided for those who worked all day. A couple waved to them as they approach.

Then they heard the pounding of metal coming from Miska's smithy.

Brook's arm tightened around Lin. She looked longingly at the warm light spilling out from Miska's door. "Lin?"

"Come on, let's see how your Coaster is doing."

Heat rolled out of the opening as they approached, the hot air sending swirls of nearly invisible eddies across the ground. The beat was steady and powerful, not unlike Brook's clapping during the fight. With every slam, the ground shook underneath their feet.

Brook broke away from Linsan and hurried forward. But as soon as she looked inside, she came to a stumbling halt. Her jaw dropped as she peered inside.

Linsan approached a few moments later and peeked inside.

Miska stood near the center of the room. She had a long piece of metal braced against a heavy-looking stone as she pounded it with her fist. The place where she struck glowed a reddish-orange and wisps of smoke rose around her, only to be pushed away each time Miska's fist struck the metal.

Linsan glanced around the room, seeing dozens of metal pipes and gears scattered on every flat surface. Some of them were steaming while others looked like they were scorched black.

The heat caused more sweat to prickle along Linsan's brow, but she was fascinated how Miska was somehow heating up the metal as she worked the metal back into shape. The blacksmith had a rhythm, more simplistic the songs Brook and Linsan had been practicing, but they were steadier than Brook's clapping; almost as if Miska had a metronome in her head.

Miska turned and smiled. "Like what you see, Princess?"

Brook made a gasping noise and then turned away. She was blushing.

Linsan frowned and then she noticed that Miska appeared to be wearing a pair of canvas shorts and an apron, nothing else. Sweat and soot covered her entire body, causing it shimmer in the light glowing from the metal she worked. Her tattoos covered more than Linsan guessed, from just below her knees up to the nape of her neck. Swirls of patterns and shapes were dark against her glistening skin and covered every visible inch. With so much exposed, Linsan could see that they originated from her navel and spread out. The designs marked the four seasons in cycle as they stretched across her body.

Miska grinned as she set it down and walked closer. As she did, she fanned the apron to move the air underneath. "Working metal is hotter than you'd think and I'll be

damned if I'm going to do it in a pretty dress to ruin. Besides, the embers don't burn for long in sweat."

Brook's lips parted as she started to say something, then she stepped back to stand next to Linsan.

Linsan took in the sight and then gestured to the car. "How is the Coaster?"

"Fighting me like a bull in spring." Miska tested her hair which had been pulled back into a pony tail and then let it go. Her hair, like her skin, was blackened by soot. "I should have the frame finished in about an hour and start working on the smaller pieces."

"Midnight?"

Miska sighed. "Sorry, but that won't happen."

Brook whimpered and Linsan felt a tightness in her chest.

"But, I'll have you on the road by first light, come the winter winds. Even if I have to get out and push you all the way."

Brook turned back. "How much to get us out by midnight?"

Miska laughed, a surprisingly deep sound from the blonde. It was also a bitter tone. "Money? You think money is going to make me faster?"

Brook tensed.

"I'm going as fast as I can, Princess." Miska gave Brook a hard look and then shook her head.

"What about someone to help you?"

"The nearest smith is over in Tabin-Over-Bridges, that's twenty miles away and the bastard hates me. You have to go at least thirty north or west to find someone who would work for me, as a woman or *Feil*. And without your car, you're looking at twenty or thirty hours walk to find out."

"I could get a horse."

“Still, you’d be riding all night with a horse you don’t know to a place you’ve never been. Think about it, you really want to risk that much money instead of waiting a few more hours.” Miska sighed. “No, Princess, your money isn’t going to help you now.”

Brook’s lips tightened into a thin line.

“And offering to bribe me isn’t going to make me any faster. You’d have better lucky paying to get into my shorts and I’m too busy for a roll on a mattress, I don’t whore myself out, and you are way too uptight to get between my thighs.”

Brook inhaled sharply.

Linsan caught her hand and squeezed it. Then she addressed Miska. “Thank you. Is there anything we do to help? Buy you dinner or something to drink?”

Miska’s shoulders relaxed perceptibly. “No, smithing and drinking are a good way to lose a finger. After, maybe.” She stepped back. “I need to get back to work, Dancer, but I appreciate the offer.”

Then she looked at Brook. “Good night, Princess.”

Brook growled at the back of her throat, but Miska turned and strode back into the smithy.

Linsan tugged Brook away. “Come on, let’s get dinner and a bath.”

“She’s... she’s...”

“She is helping us, Brook, and we need to let her work.”

Brook flounced back toward public house, muttering under her breath, “... ungrateful cow, what does she think...!”

Linsan trailed behind, enjoying the moment of silence except for the steady beat of fist against metal. She swayed to it, it was definitely something she could dance too.

Her ankle twinged and she stumbled.

With a hiss, she stopped and mounted the stairs. “Too bad we can’t ask her to join us.”

But that wasn't a question she could bring up with Brook nor one she could ask of Miska.

Then a thought rose up. The "choose the fields of your battles" line was from a play that her father had written about, *The King of All Moles and Other Insignificant Accomplishments*.

"Damn the gods, I thought I was being wise for once." She sighed ruefully and headed inside. She had to tell Brook.

Repaired

And if it wasn't for that stowaway, the entire crew of the *Mary Glory* would have been lost.

—*The Ghosts of the Mary Glory* (Act 4, Scene 11)

Neither Brook nor Linsan slept well that night.

For Linsan, the thought of heading out back on their hunt was terrifying. As she bobbed in and out of consciousness, nightmares gnawed at the edges of her thoughts. If it wasn't getting lost in the wilderness with a broken car, it was holding Brook's body in her arms as her best friend bled out. It felt like a hundred ways of failure beat against Linsan's thoughts and there was a hint of despair lurking her mind when she finally drifted to sleep.

When she woke up again, Brook had already packed and left the room. The smell of perfume brought a smile to Linsan's lips and she dressed quickly before inspecting the drying bow. The glue had set and appeared to be hard. In a perfect world, she would have let it still for another week, but in that same world, she would have her family's wood to repair it, her father's glue and traditions, and probably a violin crafted directly for her.

She enjoyed the idle fantasy of having the perfect instrument while she set the bow into the case, made sure the violin didn't have any new scratches, and then sealed it up. She gathered up the borrowed tools to carry everything down to the main room.

Down below, she saw Brook and Har at the bar. Brook wore her yellow formal dress, with little blue embroidery along the bottom and matching gloves, boots, and a narrow-brimmed hat with a blue flower on it.

"Are you sure?" asked Har as he poured a canvas bag of what appeared to be sugar directly into a cast iron pot on the counter.

"Yes, yes," Brook said as she stirred. "Just a bit more and it will be perfect." She reached over the counter to grab a handful of leaves and dropped them in.

Har shook his head as he emptied out the bag. "How are you able to sleep after drinking this?"

Brook grinned and stirred the pot. "Oh... this is just about right. Please simmer it for about ten or twenty minutes until it is just about syrup and then add the milk."

He groaned as he set aside the empty bag. "A girl as thin as you should not be able to drink this. For what? A week's supply?"

Linsan grinned as she set down her case and tools. "That's probably just for today."

His eyes widened and he looked at Brook who nodded sagely.

"I like to drink while I drive," she explained.

"You probably go further if you don't have to stop to pee every hour."

"I don't stop. Besides, a lady doesn't talk about that."

He glanced at Linsan who shook her head. Then his gaze dropped to the tools. "Why don't you leave those here? I'll get them returned."

“Are you sure?”

Har reached out and pushed the tools away from Linsan. “You have a pressing need to be anywhere. Besides, if I don’t get you out of my village, your friend is going to consume every sweet thing we own.”

Brook looked up from stirring the pot. “I’m sorry. How much?”

“Only what you’ve already paid, Princess.”

A flicker of annoyance crossed her face.

“Sorry. I should have asked. Do you mind being called that or do you prefer Lady Kabisal?”

She shrugged. “Princess is fine as long as I’m on the road soon.”

“If Miska said she would be done, she would have never stopped. She was working all night and finished up only a few hours ago. One thing about the *Feil*, if they swear on the winter winds, they will walk past the Couple to fulfill their promise. Miska is one of the good ones, you can trust her.”

He smacked the counter. “So, what can I get you for breakfast?”

Brook pointed to the pot. “I’m good.”

Har looked pained.

Linsan chuckled. “Could we get something to go? Something simple that won’t make a mess?”

He grunted.

“Come on, Brook, let’s check out the Coaster.”

“But, my breakfast...” Brook pouted as she inched away from the pot.

“I will deliver whatever you call that with the rest of your breakfast.”

Reluctantly, Brook let Linsan lead her out of the public house and across the road to the smithy. It was dark and silent, but the front of the Coaster was clearly visible. The

front appeared to be pristine, from the shimmering metal to the smooth surfaces. There was no hint of a hammer or even Miska's fist. Even the top had been replaced, though the metal work looked entirely different; no doubt since the original was in some field miles away.

Brook let out a squeal and rushed forward. Her heels rapped against the ground as she plunged into the smithy.

Linsan followed slower. As she approached, she noticed a piece of paper tucked underneath a bar near the windshield. Tugging it free, she started to read it.

"What in the Father's fury!?" Brook's voice was a mixture of surprise and anger.

"Let me guess, we have a smith in the back seat?"

"She's practically naked!" Brook snapped. "Why is she there!? This isn't a bed!"

Linsan finished reading the note. "Because she got the Coaster running but doesn't think it can take more stress. So Miska decided to come with us—"

"No!" snapped Brook as she stormed out. Her face twisted in anger. "We are not letting that... woman in my Coaster!"

"She's a mechanic, Brook."

"I don't care! I want to get away from her! She's like a tick, sticking in where she isn't wanted!"

Linsan stared for a moment. "Calm down."

"I will not—"

"Brook!" yelled Linsan.

Brook snapped her mouth shut.

"She repaired your Coaster. She is getting us on the road to get your daddy's killers. She can fix the car if those men attack us again and she isn't asking for money."

"I can—"

Linsan tapped her friend's sternum. "Quiet! You may not like her right now, but she's offering something we don't have but we desperately need."

"She's..." Brook quieted at Linsan's glare.

"Look, I know it sucks. But you can see that we need to move and we need to catch Tilbin and his assholes. What if they do that fire hammer on us again? Can you afford to give them a few days head star? Can you trust you'll find a mechanic that happens to be willing to work for us?"

Brook's lips tightened.

"We'll keep you two apart from each other. Different rooms, even if I have to busk to pay for it. But we need her more right now. We need her to do what we set out to do, right?"

Brook's cheeks colored again as she balled her hands into fists. Then she sighed. "Damn the Couple."

"Let's not piss off the gods right now. We still don't know if Tilbin is actually heading to Stone Over Moon Waters or not. The faster we can catch them or know their destination, the better we have a chance to fight on our terms instead of being tricked into being cursed by a damn tree."

"What if she is tricking us?"

"Then she's putting an awful lot of effort into the con. That Coaster looks nothing like the wreck we brought in only yesterday. If it drives, then we're good. Right?"

Brook let out a long sigh. Tears glittered in her eyes but she nodded. "For Daddy."

"For your Daddy."

Brook sniffed and then pulled Linsan into a hut. Her body trembled with tears as she squeezed for a long moment before releasing her. "S-Sorry... I don't know how much more I can take."

“Just focus on the goal. We need to catch his killers. We’ve practiced and we know what we’re going to do. He won’t play the same tricks on us again.”

“I... I should get my drinks and breakfast.”

Linsan let Brook go before she headed into smithy herself. Curiosity rose and she peered into the back of the Glasscoaster where Miska was sprawled out in the back seat. She had on a short top and her stained shorts on. A pair of boots were resting on the floor but there were no other travel supplies.

Automatically, Linsan glanced at her toes and winced at the rough-cut nails, dirt and grime, and scratches. She was used to the delicate flowers that stood on the stage whereas Miska looked like she could walk miles in her bare feet.

She glanced up at the tattoos, trying to discern the pattern. There was one, but she couldn’t figure it out. They didn’t appear to form words she knew or images she could picture.

Setting Miska’s appearance aside for later, she checked the boot of the Glasscoaster to drop off her own supplies but didn’t see anything else. To occupy herself until Brook returned, she circled around the smithy looking for Miska’s clothes.

There was a chest of drawers in the back next to a hammock. Inside where crumbled clothes and tools jammed into each of the drawers. Gathering a healthy supply, Linsan put them into the cleanest canvas bag she could find and tossed it into the trunk of the car.

She started to close the trunk but then wondered if Miska would need repair supplies. She used her fists to shape metal, but there were pliers and other strange tools, not to mention stacks of metal bars. Worrying her bottom lip, Linsan looked over them and scooped up a handful of

the metal bars and tossed in what looked like to be frequently used tools.

The carriage of the Glasscoaster sank slightly and Linsan worried that she was overloading the buggy.

“Got it!” Brook said, her voice a little more sullen than before. “Ready?”

Without waiting for an answer, she slipped into her Glasscoaster and settled into place. Her bright yellow gloves were almost shining as she set down her first drink in the holder and put the rest next to Miska’s boots.

Linsan thought she saw her hesitate but then Brook was back in her seat.

“Come on, Lin.”

Shaking her head and wondering what she had gotten herself into, Linsan settled into place.

Brook started the engine before Linsan closed her door. The entire buggy roared to life, shaking underneath them with the familiar gurgle and hiss of the steam boiler heating up. Moments later, gauges began to climb on the dash.

With a sigh of contentment, Brook eased it out of the smithy.

Har stood at the entrance of his place and waved.

Linsan waved.

The buggy lurched forward, engine rising in pitch as it accelerated. Moments later, it was out of the small village and racing along the road. The force pushed Linsan back into her seat with the familiar sense of acceleration.

“How does it feel?” she asked.

Brook’s smile was all the answer she needed.

Chapter 44

Princess

The Glasscoaster continued to be a viable mode of transportation for almost half a century despite the considerable advances in technology.

—Forsindea Casin, *The Legacy of the Glass Vehicle Company*

Linsan didn't realize how much losing the Glasscoaster had stressed her. Being in the leather seat felt like a comfortable bed and the heat filtering through the windshield made it hard to keep her eyes open. Underneath her, the rumble of the engine and the thump of pistons were a lullaby.

She yawned and turned to the side.

Next to her, Brook was on her second glass of tea. She looked more relaxed than Linsan, with a smile on her lips and an almost meditative look on her face as she scanned the road ahead. Her hand constantly shifted from the gears, to her cup, to her lap, and then back again. It was graceful how she moved.

Linsan regarded her friend. Even though there was a new intimacy between them, she wasn't sure what would happen with them. She had no idea if she was in love, lust, or something else. Her knowledge of plays and songs

couldn't help her; her heart wasn't bursting with joy and not a single bird gave her a monologue. She was also sure that she wasn't looking at Brook in the same way her mother looked at her father.

She sighed and closed her eyes. What was love? Affection? Lust? Something else? She enjoyed the closeness and the sex was enjoyable, but she couldn't imagine dressing up like Brook any more than she could imagine Brook wanting to dedicate her life to the Sterlig grove which Linsan could never abandon.

No answers came from fairies flying into the car or that one talking cat from *Gone With Winds and Flowers*. Linsan smiled to herself and began to hum one of the songs from the play before glancing at the back seat.

Miska was still sprawled out on the back seat, knees up to her chest and her blonde pony tail resting on her shoulder. But her eyes were wide open, staring at nothing.

Linsan's heart skipped a beat for a moment.

Then Miska looked at her and smiled.

Linsan did a double take.

With a yawn, Miska sat up and leaned into the gap between the two seats. Her eyes scanned the road and then she pointed forward. "You need to get stop at that village in about three leagues."

Brook jumped. "Mother damned!"

The buggy swayed violently for a moment before she got it under control.

"What is wrong with you?"

Miska didn't seem perturbed. "You are burning off your water. I figured you have about five to ten leagues before you're out. The village up there is a cistern and a place for me to patch up the boiler."

Brook peered at one of the gauges. "It says I'm good."

“Well, I say you are leaking water, Princess. So do you trust that I installed that thing properly or the fact I can hear your water tank running low?”

Brook’s lips tightened.

They continued down the road, not slowing at all. The Glasscoaster bounced off a rut and Brook smoothly brought it back into line.

Miska shrugged and then leaned back. “You’re choice, Princess.”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Well, stop dressing up like some doll and acting like you have a stick rammed up that ass of yours and maybe I will.” Miska clicked her tongue as she sat back heavily.

Brook’s face purpled. “You have some nerve.”

“And you should be a lot more grateful I’m trying to keep you on the winter-blown road!”

“It isn’t even winter!”

Miska said nothing.

Linsan groaned. The two were going to be fighting for the rest of the trip if she didn’t find a way of getting them to talk to each other. They both had a lot in common, if they stopped and listened.

A league raced by then Miska groaned loudly. “Damn, I should have packed some supplies.”

Linsan leaned into the space between the seats. “I wasn’t sure, so I found some of your clothes and put them into the trunk. I also threw in some of your pieces of metal.”

“And my hammer?”

“Um... no. But I did put some pliers and other tools into the back. Plus you can use mine, but they’re rather delicate and suited for maintenance of instruments.”

Miska chuckled. “Good girl. I guess I won’t have to go buff after all.”

Brook’s nose wrinkled. “That’s disgusting.”

“Eat my ass, Princess, and maybe I’ll do the same.”

Brook started to say something, but her mouth remained open as her eyes widened. A blush colored her cheeks.

Seeing a possibility, Linsan sat back with a smile.

Brook glared at her.

Up ahead, Linsan spotted a sign for the village. “Are you going to stop?”

Brook made an annoyed noise in the back of her throat. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. The Coaster began to accelerate, pushing Linsan back into her seat.

“Brook?”

“Fine!” Brook snapped before pulling her foot off the accelerator.

Chapter 45

Challenge

You ply your skill for a bit of coin just as I do for another. In the end, we have two bits to rub together and nothing more. But as one, we make far more than our hatred would allow separately.

—Linslar Gabon-Forst, *As Two Brothers Fight, A Tale of Choices Most Dire*

Linsan sighed as she sat on a bench near one of the city fountains. When they arrived in Sicmla Rihemlan early in the morning, she had high hopes they would be able to find Tilbin or at least confirmation of their destination with Palisis. But hours of walking through the city, asking everyone she could find, there wasn't even a hint of the murderers.

She rocked her violin case back and forth between her knees as she leaned back. The sun painted across her face and she sighed again. Despite the clear skies, it was a cool day and perfect for walking around town. But she was tired of chasing after Tabil. The feeling of being lost rose up and she groaned.

“Hey, you a student?”

Linsan lifted her head to see a young man about her age standing a few feet away. He had a pair of drums on a strap

around his neck and a dozen sticks in his deep pockets. There were scars around his neck and his hair flopped over one eye, obscuring it. She gave a tired smile. "No, just passing by."

"That a fiddle?"

"Violin."

His shoulders sagged. "Damn, I was hoping for someone to play with."

Her curiosity piqued, she sat up. "Can't play with violins?"

He turned and waved dismissively. "You all sit like rocks on a bench, flipping your sheets as if you were someone famous. I'm sure you're great, I would just rather have someone moving."

Linsan smiled to herself. Maybe a little playing would help her. "Is that a challenge?"

He stopped and looked over his shoulder. His eye looked at her. "You think you can move?"

Heartbeat quickening, she stood up. "Do you think you could keep up?"

"Half and half?" She was startled by the question before she realized he was talking about money from busking.

Even with Brook paying for almost everything, Linsan enjoyed being able to prove some of her way. She nodded.

"Got a permit?"

Her face fell.

He grinned. "Don't worry, I have a plus one. Name's Ravel, but you can call me Rav."

She picked up her case and walked over to him. "I'm Lin. And why do you have a plus one if you aren't playing with anyone?"

Ravel waved his hand. "Oh, I like to challenge players. The problem is none of them are any good. Well, Valil over there is decent." He pointed to a trumpet player on the op-

posite side of the square, an older woman with about half a dozen people listening to her play an upbeat tune.

He gestured to a spot at the corner. It had a number of signs but Linsan spotted a musical note on one of them, a busking spot. She had never seen a formal one before but her father had told her about many of the customs around them.

It took her a moment to set down her case. She pressed the button and rotated it. The case popped open and her Sterlig shone in the sunlight.

Ravel whistled as he dropped a bucket in front of them. "That's a quick release case. You a combat player?"

His question stopped her for a moment. "Kind of. Not very good though."

"Got sonic powers?"

She nodded.

"How is the city resonance for you?"

It was a difficult question to ask. When she was younger, she knew that every place had a magical resonance, a frequency of power that meshed with those who lived there. Foreign cities had different energies and she could feel the differences of power as a faint tickling in the back of her head where she couldn't scratch it.

Thinking about it made it worse. She squirmed for a moment before pulling out her bow and inspecting the repairs. It looked ready to play but she hadn't tested it. "It's okay, I never felt it before."

Linsan gingerly tested the tension on her strings and then stood up. Fitting the violin under her chin, she played a single hesitant note. It came out screeching and she winced at the name.

Ravel exhaled hard, his hair fluttered up to reveal that his other eye was milky. "Not a good combat player, huh? You always take this long to get ready?"

She shot a glare at him. "This is the first time I've played since I've repaired the bow. I'm..."

"Just play."

"What?"

"Play." His hands danced over his drums. Fingertips caressed the edge for a moment and then he tapped a beat. "Come on. Give me something new. Anything."

"Anything?" She said, her heart fluttering.

Ravel tapped his fingers along the heads of his drums. With every strike, colors blossomed from the impact in bursts of blue and yellow. The beat was a simple one, three fast and then a loud one but it was also the opening rhythm for a tune she knew.

Tensing, Linsan played the first four notes. She didn't use powers but the tones rang out with the clarity from before. The bow felt right in her hand, just a few grains off center from before. She almost sobbed in relief.

He scoffed. "That's it?"

His hands ran through a riff, eight notes a few bars into the song. With each strike, flashes of colors burst out in clouds around him. It was a complex song for a drummer, with winding beats and changing patterns.

Linsan followed suite, playing her eight notes as she adjusted to the differences.

Ravel responded, skipping his feet as he twirled around.

With a smile, Linsan played her bit and kicked her foot up as she spun around.

"There we go!" He played another few bars, skipping a few. He spun around and kicked off into another spin.

Feeling playful, she played her bit and matched his moves, adding a hop to her spin. "Do you know the whole song, or just the good parts?"

He responded while playing in bursts of colors. "Well, trying to figure out what you can do. So far, you aren't anything fancy."

Linsan launched herself into her part before the colors faded around him. She focused herself into her song, letting the power spiral out of her and plucking at the clouds of color.

The burst around him shot straight up in a flower of brilliance. She finished with a low sweep. "Just warming up." She was grinning.

"Then, play!" He plucked a pair of sticks from his pockets and then burst into a flurry of beats of the song. The sticks didn't diminish his power and he was quickly surrounded by clouds of colors.

The duet part ending, she joined into his song. He played fast, but she could keep up as they circled around each other, spinning and kicking. Her powers launched his colors into the sky until they formed a multi-colored canopy above their heads.

Their challenge became one of dance but the music didn't stop. He mimicked her move and added one. She did the same, her body loosening up as she let herself be drawn into the bliss of music and movement.

She was dimly aware of a crowd gathering but her mind remained focused on keeping up with Ravel's song. There were differences, either wrong strikes on his part or regional changes. She kept her part up, playing and correcting to keep them in harmony until the song finally wore down.

A cheer rose up and the patter of coins landed into the bucket.

Ravel grinned. "Okay, you aren't half bad."

She panted softly. "I could say the same."

"Want to go big?"

"How so?"

“Equal shares if I call in others?”

Linsan just wanted to play. She nodded.

Ravel’s smile grew wider. Then he turned toward Valil.
“Oi! Grandma Toot! Get your ass over here! Equal share!”

From the other side, a fiddle player called out. “What about me?”

“Come on, we need it!” He glanced at her after he yelled.

She nodded. Noticing that the edges of the crown were starting to drift, she started up a jaunty tune to delay as the two other players hurried over. A third, another drummer, showed up.

They introduced themselves as they approached.

“Valil.”

“Bok,” said the drummer simply.

“Strin.” The fiddler player looked at her violin and then down to his scratched and beaten instrument. It had seen better days and she felt uncomfortable seeing the obvious repairs that were made with string and wire.

She gave him her best smile.

“Know Queenie?” asked Ravel. He beat a sample series on his drum. Linsan frowned until the Strin and Valil joined in; it was obviously a song they all knew. It took her only a few notes to realize it was *The Queen’s Triumph*, a song about the neighboring country’s Silver Queen.

With a grin, Linsan played her part firmly. Her bow swung as she danced over the complex introduction and then slowed into the first quiet part of the song.

They all stared at her.

She slowed, wondering if she had started the wrong song.

Then Ravel shrugged and grinned. “Apparently there were some notes we didn’t know about. Well, boys and girls, I say Lin leads. Good?”

With a round of agreements, they launched themselves into the next song. Linsan lead the way, twirling and dancing with Ravel as the others joined in.

It was quickly clear that Ravel was a performing drummer and the others couldn't keep up, but there were smiles and Linsan slowed and let the songs focus on each one in an attempt to encourage them.

Coins clicked into the bucket, a few of them bouncing off their bodies when they danced too close to it.

Linsan laughed as she spun and kicked and wove around the others. Her bow never stopped moving as the tones rose up and sent the brilliance of clouds high above them.

Other illusions added to their song: little silver flowers growing up from the cracks underneath her feet, flashes of lightning in the cloud above her, and the smell of citrus that trailed behind her in clouds.

Along with it came prickles and itches of magic in close proximity. It wasn't painful, but she couldn't help but notice them as she sailed around.

The song ended and another started. Then another.

In the middle of one, she noticed Ravel dump the bucket into her case to empty it and then set it out again. He winked at her.

There were only two more songs before Linsan felt a beat shaking the ground.

Miska stood to the side, clapping along with the beat. Heat shimmered above her as she grinned. Reflexively, Linsan used her measured clapping as a metronome to keep the song moving steadily.

When it finished and they all gave a bow to the applause, she had to hold up her hand. "No more. My friend is here." She gestured to Miska who approached.

Ravel glanced at her and then did a double take. He stepped away from Miska. "But she's..." His jaw clamped and he looked down. "Leaving?"

"I need to be somewhere."

"Well," his smile returned. "You were a worthy challenge, Lin. Feel free to come back any time. I'm sure you won't keep up next time." He rapped along his drum and bursts of blue surrounded him.

Valil panted. "Shares?" She looked nervous.

Linsan looked at her and saw repaired clothes and thin shoes. The other players, including Ravel, looked the same. These were buskers who struggled to make ends meet. She was a woman with a rich friend. She had more money hidden in the case than any of the musicians probably saw in a year. With a sigh, she scooped out the coins from her case as her mind spun furiously.

Ravel knelt down and poured all the coins into a pile between the five players. "Strin, want to sort? Five even piles."

Linsan made a decision. "Four."

He looked at her sharply.

"I don't need any shares. I was just in for the challenge."

"You played better than most of them."

She gave him a hard look. "You all need it more than me."

Strin knelt down next to them. He tapped four fingers against his palm three times.

There was a tickling of power and then the coins rolled away from each other, forming four loose piles in front of the players. Two coins spun in the center until Ravel pushed one to Valil, one to the other drummer, and then added a coin from his pile to Strin's. "Fair is fair, you all were great."

Valil and the drummer snatched up their share and hurried away.

Ravel stood up. "What's your play?" he asked Linsan. She blushed. "You need it. I have plenty right now."

"No, I don't like charity."

"It isn't charity, Rav. Money isn't what I'm looking for."

"What is it then?" he said in a tense tone.

"What?" she asked. Then she shook her head. "Don't worry about it."

"Tell me. I won't let you give away your share."

"Rav."

"Tell me or I'm dumping all my money in your case."

Linsan rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'm looking for someone driving a big black car, a Black Thunder. I don't know if it came through here or not, but I'm hoping."

Ravel's attitude softened. "Damn, I thought I could help. I haven't seen any. Have you, Strin?"

"No, they don't allow cars this far into the city. Someone you know?"

"A man I'm hunting. He..." she didn't know how to explain either the murder or priceless violin with a street musician. "... set a fire using magic with his guitar and—"

Strin gasped. "Three guys with fire powers!?"

"Y-Yes!"

"I saw someone like that! On the south side! I wanted to check out the guitar but he must have thought I was trying to steal it. He chorded the strings and hit me with a burst of fire. And then one of his friends chased me off."

Strin rubbed his arm. "I just wanted to hear it. All I have is my Fetpahin here," he said as he hefted his fiddle.

In that moment, if Linsan had her shares, she would have dumped them on Strin. Instead she hugged him tightly. "Thank you! That's exactly what I need."

Strin smiled hesitantly and hugged her back, his fiddle bumping against her back.

She separated quickly with a blush. "S-Sorry, I need to go."

Ravel leaned forward. "We're good?"

"Yes!" she said as she quickly packed her instrument. Then she made another choice. Shoving her hand into the tight gap, she pulled out a small stack of bills that her parents had hidden in the lining before she sealed her case and straightened. Without inspecting the money, she roughly split the five cukdin bills into two piles and handed each one to Ravel and Strin.

Both of their eyes grew wide as they stared at the brightly colored money, the stiff card-like material sticking out from their fingers.

"I can't thank you enough!" she called before Miska and her ran off.

Chapter 46

Pistons

No one knows how the world war would have ended if the guilds of machine had solved their conflict earlier.

—Ryochi nea Fameril

Linsan didn't know exactly where she was going, but just knowing Tilbin was in the city gave her hope. She headed toward the south before she realized that Miska was leading the way. "Do you know something?"

"There is only one mechanics shop in this part of town. A bunch of *bagatos* running a Piston shop."

"*Bagatos*?"

Miska smiled grimly. "Men who lie out of their assholes." Linsan smirked.

"They told me that it wasn't a woman's job to work metal. I was going to let that slide since they have hearts of brick, but if they know about the Black Thunder, I need to ask again."

Linsan hurried along. As they strode through the city, a thought started to grow in her head and she realized she needed ask. "Miska? Why are you helping us?"

Miska looked at her and shrugged.

"No," Linsan said stopping near the front of a baker. "You wouldn't just rip up your life to travel across the country for a stranger."

"Maybe I would." Miska's eyes flashed and her shoulders tensed.

Linsan stared at her, waiting for the answer.

After a moment, Miska glared at her and then stepped out of the road to the side of the shop. The smells of baked breads wafted past them from the alley at her back. "You know what it is like growing up as a *Feil*?"

"I heard the name but I don't know what it is."

"It's the name of my tribe, not that anyone remembered it. We used to call that entire area our home, but then the armies came through. They left behind assholes who claimed the lands since it was 'abandoned.'" She spat on the ground.

"But you lived there? How could they do that?"

Miska gave her a bitter smile. "Never thought about people living before you all shows up?"

Linsan tried to think about all the plays that she knew, none of them talked about the tribes except for a handful where the villians were aboriginal." She blushed and shook her head.

"Don't have to lie to me."

Linsan ducked her head. "Sorry."

Miska scoffed and scratched her nose for a moment. "Mayforn's family owns most of Little Rock. The other assholes doled up our lands and farmed them for their profits. They are rich boys who don't have to work which is why they run around stealing and killing."

Growing more uncomfortable, Linsan squirmed.

"So, Music Girl, I have my reasons to making sure Tilbin, Gabaw, and Mayforn's lives become a living hell. And I will

walk the winter trail if it means Old Gab and Cal can breath easier.”

Without waiting for a response, Miska turned and stormed off.

It took Linsan a few seconds before she caught up and walked even with her.

It didn't take them long to get to a beautiful building painted a bright blue. It had faux pistons on either side of the three large doors leading inside. The design was simple, about on par with a stage decoration, but it was a clear indication of which guild the mechanics were associated with.

Even with the cool day, they were wide open as a dozen men worked on two cars inside. They looked rough, with greasy hands and stained clothes.

Miska went for the middle door. “Gentlemen!”

A man underneath the vehicle, a narrow-wheeled car with a tall smokestack and large boiler, pulled out and sat up. “Back for more? This isn't a place for you, Girl. Get your tattooed ass away before someone gets hurt.”

Miska's expression darkened. “I was willing to let that pass but then I found out you lied to me.”

Scoffing, he stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets. “No, I said it wasn't any of your business and to get out before I spank you because you're too big for your britches.”

Mistake stopped in front of him and glared. “You service that Black Thunder that came into town?”

He jaw tightened. “Still ain't your business, Girl.”

“I need to know.”

The other mechanics spread out around Miska and Linsan.

Fear prickled down Linsan's spine. She lowered her hand to her latch, mentally preparing herself to pull out her instrument.

Miska stepped away, toward the side of the garage and the other car. The second one was twisted and bent, the metal broken. The damage looked almost as serious as the Glasscoaster from earlier but only on the surface. Linsan could see that the engine appeared to be intact.

The men followed as their leader spoke.

“Now, I don’t care how offended you get, I’m not going to tell you anything. Pistons have pride in their business.”

Miska stopped near the decorative piston. “I plan on asking more aggressively. Maybe negotiating.”

He scoffed again. “I doubt anyone such as yourself has anything of worth.”

Miska signed and the air around her began to warp. “Maybe, but let’s start with a simple offer?”

She took one step back, spun around. The air around her began to crawl as the heat blasted away from her. She punched the side of the decorative piston and there was a powerful thud as the metal burst open. Splatters of molten metal spread out as she tore out a hunk of the softened metal as her fist continued through.

Miska followed her punch, stepping into the entrance of the garage and stopping in front of the devastated car. Holding up her hand, she glared as the paint smoked away leaving red metal that brightened. “Now, behind me appears to be a fully functional Daster engine. Those run... what... ten thousand cuks at the cheapest?”

The men’s mood changed in an instant, from a threatening to surprise and fear.

“Now, I’m betting I can put my fist through that engine faster than you can stop me.” Miska clenched her hand and the remains of the piston dribbled out of her hand.

The supervisor held up his hand. “Now, listen, Girl, you —”

Then she smiled brightly, her anger disappearing in a flash. She patted the twisted frame. "Or, you give me an hour to shape this metal and save you the two days it would take your men to do it."

Everyone grew silent.

"I don't care about getting paid and I'm sure you'll still charge the time, but I want to know about that Black Thunder and I'm willing to earn it." She wiped the last of molten metal from her palm on her trousers. The fabric smoldered before it cooled.

The supervisor glanced at Linsan who still had her hand on her case. Then he turned back. "Why?"

"Because those men killed someone. They need to be brought to justice."

"Then let the guards do their job."

"It was in a different city and you know that authority ends at the city boundaries."

The supervisor shook his head. "Guild laws say I can't—"

Linsan spoke up with an idea of her own. "But does Piston want to be known for servicing murderers?"

His head snapped toward her.

She hefted her instrument. "I'm pretty good at busking and I'm sure I can come up with a catchy song. Give it three... four days until I can have everyone singing it in this city."

Miska's shoulders shook as she struggled not to laugh.

He glared at her. "What makes you—?"

A loud hissing noise interrupted him. He looked back to see Miska had her hand on the vehicle hood. The metal was already turning red underneath her grip and the paint blackening.

One of the mechanics lowered his hammer. "Boss?"

The supervisor sighed. "Fuck me on a pike. Fine. Two hours of work and I tell you what I know."

"I start working, you start talking, my friend leaves and I finish the job. Your men are menacing and I don't trust a delicate girl like her with them."

The metal under her hand grew brighter.

"Prove you can work."

With a shrug, Miska lifted her hand from the hood. Leaning over, she picked up a twisted rod of metal and snapped it clear from the vehicle.

The supervisor groaned.

Her hands shimmered as she pumped the metal in her grip, sliding up and down with hard strokes. As she did, the metal grew hotter and began to shift. A few moments later, she twisted and straightened it out. Turning back, she measured it against a spot on the frame and worked to fit it into place.

The other men stared at her in shock.

"Get to work!" snapped the supervisor then turned to Linsan. "My name is Caver. What do you want to know?"

"Anything?"

"Not much to tell you. They wouldn't give us a name but they had a guild services guard. That's an agreement where they aren't allowed to use another guild mechanic but get discounts on our services. We offer it—"

"Please, sir?" Linsan interrupted.

"Well, I can't give you their number but I can send word that they are accused of murdering someone. Let the higher ups know what happened."

"Anything else?"

"Whoever ruined their car did an impressive job. The metal was sheared clean off and most of the joints were busted. It took us hours to repair the holes and scrape away the scorching."

Linsan smiled at the description of Brook's and her abilities.

"I had three full crews working full time for a day on it. We had to pay a premium to the Mechanical Guild for some supplies and two of their forgers, but they paid everything without question."

"Then, they have lots of money?"

Caver shrugged. "Maybe, but they had to go to the bank twice to pay for everything. Final bill was just shy of sixty thousand cuks. Twenty went to those damn thieves over at Mechanical."

Linsan perked up. "Bank? Which bank?"

"I'd have to check." He looked around and then beckoned for her to follow. "In my office."

Linsan hesitated, then called out. "I'm going into his office."

Miska looked up from where she was straddling the frame and pulling it back into place. "Be safe."

The other mechanics were still staring at her as Caver and Linsan threaded their way into his office. It was crowded with paperwork, tools, and boxes. He had a small safe in the back which he opened before pulling out a black bag. Pulling out a bank note, he handed it to her.

Linsan looked over it. It was a thousand cukdin note with the Ralonix Network embossed on the corners. It had an address near the center of the town.

She was holding more wealth in her hand than she could imagine. It felt like she should have background music welling up behind her or at least a choir singing for the drama but she was neither on a stage or feeling any joy. It was blood money. She asked for some notes and wrote down the serial numbers from a couple of the notes.

"Did they really kill someone?"

She looked up and nodded. "They robbed a bank in Cobbler's End and killed the manager."

"And they sent a girl and a tribal... excuse me... two girls to hunt him down?" Caver sighed. He had thinning dark hair plastered to his head. When he ran his hand through it, it stuck up in little spikes.

"The manager was my friend's father. They also stole his Black Thunder to escape."

"These are dangerous men."

"I'm not going to fight them," she lied. "I just going to find them and have the local guards arrest them. I just need to know where they are going."

"Stone Over Moon Waters."

She froze and stared at him.

"That was what they needed. Enough to get them to Stone Over Moon Waters. I heard them talking about a sale in eight days, I assumed it was for the Black Thunder. It is a beautiful car but they weren't concerned about looks, only that it could drive."

Eight days. They were going to sell Palisis in eight days. A swelling of sorrow rose up and her vision blurred. "T-Thank you. That's exactly what I needed to know."

Caver put the notes back into his safe. "Look, if these men are arrested, send me a notarized notice. I'll have them banned from Piston services for life."

"Thank you."

"Do you know how to find the Ralonix bank?"

She didn't. He gave her directions.

Outside, she waved to Miska who was still the center of attention. Even in a few minutes, the front of the vehicle looked considerably better.

"Be safe," Miska said before she returned to work.

Authorization

With magic capable of breaking everything, it is the unassailable rules that prevent our society from collapse.

—The Silver King, *The Mandatory Auditing Act*

Linsan hurried down the road, weaving through the press of people. Her eyes scanned the front of buildings until she came up to the marble entrance to the *River Bank Trust*, the Ralonix location. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs to catch her breath.

She wasn't sure what the bank could do or tell her, but it had been a while since she sent a note to her parents and Brook maybe inside since it was her father's network.

She straightened and steeled herself to go inside and look for her friend.

"Lin!" Brook called from behind her.

Surprised, she turned to see Brook at a café with a wrought iron fence around the steps. She sat with a slight arch to her back and looking poised.

Panting, Linsan crossed the street.

Brook had three cups in front of her. Two were still filled but the third had the milky brown that she favored in her

drink. She smiled and gestured to the seat across from a blue purse that matched her dress.

Linsan chuckled. "Your drink sweet enough?"

"No," Brook said with a wrinkle of her nose. "There is a shortage of sugar here and they would only give me two lumps for each cup."

"So you ordered three and combined them?"

With a grin, Brook tilted her head. Then she looked over Linsan. "You look sweaty. Is something wrong? Did you find Miska?"

Linsan described her visit to the Piston mechanics. As she did, Brook's smile faded to be replaced with a hard look.

When Linsan finished, she stood up and worked her way out of the café's outdoor seating before leading Linsan to the bank. "Come on, I have questions."

"Can they tell us anything?" Linsan felt a little lost as she trailed behind her friend.

"Normally no, but I have a small measure of authority with this network." She straightened her back and then strode through the front door as if she owned the building.

Inside a guard stood up. "Welcome back, Lady Kabisal. I thought your business with us was concluded."

"New information has presented itself. Could I speak to Lord Smal again?" Brook spoke with a haughty tone that Linsan remembered from earlier years, it was proud and confident and demeaning at the same time.

"I'm sorry. Lord Smal is currently at lunch. He will be back—"

"This is important."

The guard looked annoyed.

"Very important," Brook said.

His look didn't improve. They stared at each other with hard looks.

Linsan wanted to sneak out but she couldn't take Brook next to her and the guard watching. Instead, she looked up at the vaulted ceiling and the carved pillars. The bank was far more impressive than the one at home, but it looked impractical and the acoustics were poor with so many hard, flat surfaces.

Finally the man relented and gestured to leather-bound chairs next to a door. "Please wait over there, Lady Kabisal. I will see if he is amenable to interruption."

"Thank you," snapped Brook.

As the guard headed to a nearby counter with an employee standing behind it, Brook lead Linsan to the chair. She sat down with a straight back and stared forward.

Linsan look at her friend.

The little muscles on Brook's face were tight but they quivered. She could see Brook's eyes glistening as if she was fighting back tears.

Gingerly, Linsan rested her hand on Brook's. "What's wrong?" she whispered.

Brook worked her mouth for a moment and then leaned over. "This morning, I tried to make a withdrawal using my... my daddy's code book but it didn't work."

"I-I don't understand. What is that?"

"It's a pad of authorization codes, you use the top one and destroy it once you use it. It lets you make large withdrawal or transfers safely. When... when he was gone, I took his book from his office before leaving."

"You're stealing from—"

Brook's eyes widened and she planted her gloved hand over Linsan's mouth. "Shush!"

Leaning forward, she continued. "I'm not stealing, it is legally my money and my inheritance. I get one sixth of what he left, my mother got half and my sisters split the

rest. I've been keeping track of the amounts to make sure everything lines up when we get back home."

Linsan said nothing underneath her friend's trembling hands.

"But the code didn't work today. It also didn't work in the last bank either. I thought I had it memorized wrong, but I didn't. That meant that they either burned the book or someone else has a copy. I did a withdrawal with my own account, but there are fees that daddy didn't have to pay that I do."

Linsan pushed Brook's hand down. "You're afraid that they stole more than his car?"

A tear formed on the corner of Brook's eye. "Y-Yes. I need to know. With your serial numbers, I can—"

Movement caught Linsan's attention. A slender man was striding up to them, followed by the guard and a portly gentleman with a thick patch of gray hair. She nodded and pulled back.

Brook wiped the tear from her eye and stood up. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, Lord Smal. I pray this will only take a few minutes."

Smal, the slender man, stood in front of her. "Explain," he said curtly.

"I got confirmation that the men I'm looking for used this bank for large transfers."

Smal sighed. "As I told you, Lady Kabisal, privacy rules will not allow—"

"No, but I have serial numbers of the scrip that was issued and I'm allowed to request the authorization codes used for the transfer."

The slender man closed his mouth. He had a short cropped beard that twitched as the muscles in his neck flexed.

Brook snapped her finger toward Linsan.

Startled, Linsan pulled out her notes and handed over the numbers. "It's the numbers on the bottom—"

"I know how to read our own numbers," he said sharply. Linsan bristled but said nothing.

Smal handed Linsan's note over to the portly man. "Please hurry up, my lunch is getting cold and I want this disruption."

"Yes, sir."

As the other man left and the guard returned to his post, Lord Smal gestured to the door. "Please, sit in my office."

Brook lead the way and they filed into the room. Inside was much larger than Linsan expected for a windowless room. It was easily twice the size of her bedroom with a desk made of dark wood and thick carpet. Three cushioned chairs were arranged in front of the desk.

Lord Smal circled around and then sat down in his chair. He leaned back and stared at Brook.

Brook properly sat down, moving with a poise that looked nothing like the woman who sat behind the wheel of speeding car. She was elegant and refined, more like Linsan's mother.

Neither said anything as they waited.

Linsan struggled not to fidget.

When the door swung up, she jumped.

The aide handed Lord Smal a thick stack of papers.

He nodded to his aide. "Shut the door behind you but remain close."

A moment later, they were alone again.

Lord Smal sighed as he paged through the paperwork. His eyes scanned through the intricately decorated pages filled with numbers and phrases that Linsan couldn't decipher as they flipped past.

Brook sat there, her eyes shimmering again and her muscles tight.

Linsan reached out and took her hand.

Her friend gave her a sad smile and wiped the tears.

After a few minutes, he shook his head. Taking one page, he set it down on the table. Spinning it around, he pushed it toward Brook while keeping his fingers on the paper. "All of the transfers were authorized by this number."

Brook looked over. Then a sob tore out of her throat as the tears flowed. She flipped her hand to squeeze Linsan's hand tightly.

Tears of her own blurred Linsan's version.

For the first time, Lord Smal looked surprised. "Is there something wrong?"

Brook opened her mouth but only a strangled noise came out.

Linsan spoke up. "I think that is Dukan Kabisal's authorization code."

Brook nodded sharply as another sob ripped out her throat. The tears were rolling down her cheeks as she gasped for breath.

"I failed to see the connection."

Linsan cleared her throat. "He was murdered by the men who made the withdrawal."

Lord Smal's eyes widened but he said nothing for a long moment. Then, he grunted before he spoke. "Pardon me?"

"Dukan was killed by three men who robbed the Cobbler's End branch of this bank network." Linsan was surprised how calm she was as she spoke. "They used magical fire when they stole something priceless, a family heirloom, from the bank vaults. They also had stolen his vehicle and apparently his code book also."

His eyes flickered back and forth for a moment. "Those are serious claims. Do you have any proof?"

Brook fumbled for her purse but her fingers slipped. She was still sobbing as she tried again.

Linsan eased it off her shoulder and opened it up. Among the makeup, a surprisingly large stack of cukdin bills wrapped in strips of paper, she spotted familiar paperwork from the investigator. It had been another lifetime for Linsan since she saw it. Pulling it out, she unfolded it until she could get the notes.

Lord Smal took it gently from her hand and began to read.

Brook's sobs died down as he paged through the papers. Finally, he got to the end with a long, dramatic sigh. Leaning over, he ran a bell that stood on the corner of his desk before pulling out the last page of the notes.

His aide entered.

The lord handed over the page. "Verify this, rush order on the bank's account."

"Yes, my lord."

The door closed with a click.

The lord looked at Brook sharply. His expression was stormy as he stared at her.

Brook sniffed.

"I presume the code you tried to use was from his book?"

Brook hesitated and then nodded.

"That is clearly in violation of our network's regulations."

"I-I know."

Linsan felt a sick feeling in her stomach.

"You realize you have put me into a situation where I must respond to that in addition to dealing with this." He tapped the investigation papers on the desk.

Brook's hand tightened on Linsan. "Y-Yes, my lord."

The aide knocked.

"Enter," commanded Lord Smal.

"The code is valid, my lord. Duly authorized."

"Very well. Start an priority order."

The aide looked surprised and then pulled out a notebook with multi-colored pages.

Brook inhaled sharply.

“Seal the accounts of Dukan Kabisal, Brook Kabisal, and the rest of their immediate family. No withdrawals, no transfers, no deposits. On my authority.”

Brook let out a choking noise.

A muscle in the aide’s cheek jumped. “Yes, my lord.”

“Emergency order.”

The aide flipped to the next page in his notebook.

“Burn the codes for Dukan Kabisal authorization code. Request apprehension if anyone tries to use it. On my authority.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The lord looked directly at Brook. His voice was barely contained fury, “Emergency order. Brook Kabisal of Cobbler’s End has been banned—”

Brook let out another sob and closed her eyes tightly.

“—from Ralonix network and properties until an investigation has been completed. Details to follow. On my authority.”

“Yes, my lord.” The aide ground his teeth together as he finished scribbling the order.

Lord Smal stood up and crossed his arms behind his back. “You have one minute to leave my bank. Otherwise, I will have you arrested.”

Chapter 48

Sullen

Tribal members who have not embraced the teachings of the Divine Couple for at least seven full generations at a single church cannot: 1) have title to registered lands, 2) exercise direct control over any business, coop, or legal entity, 3) earn a title of nobility or be awarded governmental honors, 4) utilize financial networks or instruments beyond direct currency, 5) adopt children for any reason, 6) claim...

—*Unified Codex of Gepaul Laws*

Linsan fought back the tears as she carried a cup of tea back to the Glasscoaster. The large mug had an obscene amount of sugar in it and the heavy cream swirled with every step. She even asked for a bit of whipped cream on the top though she didn't have faith it would do anything.

They were two days out from Sicmla Rihemlan in a small town on their way of Stone Over Moon Waters. The hot morning beat down on her back, cutting through her clothes and causing her skin to stick to the fabric.

Miska rolled out from underneath the buggy. She wiped the sweat off her brow as the air around her wavered and shifted from her magic. "I fused the leak on the tank. We must have scraped against a rut and busted some seams. I had to use the last of our plates to fix it."

“Will it hold?” Linsan asked quietly as she looked through the window to Brook.

Her friend sat in the driver’s seat, not moving. She had abandoned her usual finery and wore her simplistic gown without makeup, hat, or even her gloves. Instead, she looked plain and broken.

“She can’t take much more.”

Linsan sighed. Then she glanced at Miska quizzically. “The Coaster or Brook?”

The blonde tugged her pony tail for a moment. The sweat glistened over her tattoos through the opening of her plain shirt. “Both, I think.”

Miska looked sad and shook her head. “She’s getting caught in the winter cold and I don’t know how to warm her seeds.”

The phrase didn’t entirely make sense to Linsan, but it felt right. “I know, I don’t either. I guess the only thing we can do is love her, take care of her, and let her know that we aren’t going to give up.”

Linsan shook her head. “She’s lost right now.”

“Then we drive.”

Linsan bumped her shoulder against Miska. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Even with the reason you came, it was a choice you made and I’m thankful you did. Without you, we would have been lost.”

Miska grinned. “Well, I also wanted to. I’ve lived my entire life between four villages. People come and go but I never left. I always assumed I would end up rooted to the ground like Old Gab. But even she left the village once.”

“She told me.”

"I know, you were probably the brightest star in her twilight. The only one who understood music. She couldn't stop talking about you."

Linsan blushed.

"I wanted to hear what she heard. Just a song that filled my heart and kept me growing..." Miska sighed. "... just growing for decades."

She smiled to Linsan. "Old Gab's oldest daughter died on the trip to Jamorel. She got broke her leg. The wound got poisonous and the healers there wouldn't help..." She gestured to her tattoos.

Linsan didn't know how to respond to the sudden uncomfortableness. She clamped her mouth shut and ducked her head.

"But she was listening to this play through the window of the hospital and it kept her..." Miska sniffed. "It kept her going. She made it home and never left again but she never forgot that song."

"It was my mother singing."

Miska wiped the tears from her eyes. "Old Gab let us know that too. We live in a small forest and the fruits never fall far. Our lives were intertwined and we grow for many reasons. I'm honoring Old Gab's memory by following you through the end just as I am here to ruin those men's lives."

Linsan smiled sadly.

Miska took a deep breath. "Might get a few new adventure for my skin during the process. But right now, we have someone who needs us badly and she needs to drive into that sun."

"After this? Maybe Brook will get her money back and use it to buy those lands?"

A flash of sadness cross Miska's face. "You know tribal folk can't own land, right?"

"W-What?"

“That’s the law. We can’t own lands, have bank accounts, or run a business. I have to rent the smith from Har and give him the money for taxes. He’s a good guy, but he still shaves a little off the top for himself.”

There were no plays or trivia that Linsan could say.

“It sucks being born this way, you know? But the weed that grows in the cracks of the stone honors the winds more than any pretty garden.” Miska crawled into the back seat and settled into place. She turned until her back was to Linsan tucked her head against her arm.

Linsan got into her seat and held out the cup to Brook. “I got you a fresh drink.”

Brook didn’t look away from staring through the windshield. “Are you ready to go,” she said in a low, monotone.

“Come, have something to drink. I put lots of sweet in it.”

“Are you ready?” Brook’s voice remained a monotone.

Linsan fought back the tears. She swapped the drink for the still full one in the cup holder and poured out the old drink. Shaking it clear, she carefully set it in the back and shut her door.

Brook mechanically turned on the engine. As soon as the pressure built, she eased it forward and accelerated as fast as the Glasscoaster could handle.

Chapter 49

Screams

With my love bloodied on the ground, his life spilled out in a fit of my anger, I finally realize the mistake I had made.

—*Maiden, Mother, Murderer* (Act 3, Scene 5)

Linsan clung to the side of the Glasscoaster as it rumbled over the deep ruts of a road she could barely see. The sun had set an hour before and it was getting dangerously close to being dark for the speed they were going.

“Brook, we need to stop.”

“There is a village ahead,” came the sullen tone.

“Yes, ten miles ahead and we aren’t going to make it.”

“I have headlights.”

“You have one headlight,” snapped Miska from the back. She was braced against both sides of the Glasscoaster. “You shattered the half of them when you lost control an hour ago and hit that tree!”

“We’ll make it.”

“Brook!” Linsan said. “Stop!”

Brook frowned but the Glasscoaster didn’t slow. It hit another rut and the entire vehicle twisted violently to the side before it began skip against the rough, dirt road. She

grabbed the steering wheel and twisted hard, turning into the curve until it fishtailed back into place.

Linsan whimpered as she braced her knee on the dash. "Please... please stop!"

Brook's eyes glittered with tears as she shook her head. "We can make it."

Ahead, the dusk was quickly darkening as the shadows stretched across the road. The single light from the buggy did nothing to reveal the deep ruts in the poorly maintained surface.

"Brook, please."

Brook sniffed as tears ran down her cheeks. She shook her head. "I-I can't."

Linsan wish she understood how the controls on the car worked but she didn't think there was a way to wrest control. She dismissed it and then tried another tactic. Picking herself up, she knelt on her seat and leaned over to talk into her friend's ear. "Please... just stop. We'll make it."

A sob.

"I don't want you to get hurt."

Another sob. Brook shook her head. "N-No."

"Brook, I can't lose you. Not now, not ever. You're my friend." Linsan had no idea of the words were reaching into Brook's despair.

The buggy nailed another ridge. The force shoved her back and she tumbled over the top of her seat and into the back. Her limbs caught among Miska's as they were jostled violently.

Claustrophobic, Linsan flailed for a moment before she found some sort of balance.

Miska chuckled. "Hi, there."

Their faces were only inches apart.

"You seem to be grabbing my tit."

Linsan looked down. She had one hand braced against the back of the seat and the other was cupping Miska's large breast. Her knee had planted between the blonde's thighs. She gasped. "S-Sorry!"

Miska grinned. "I'm honored to say the least. You are a beautiful woman, but I really have no interest in getting into your panties."

Linsan started and then chuckled. "That's good, because I don't want to be in yours either. I don't really go for women."

The vehicle seemed to slow but Linsan couldn't tell if it was her imagination.

"Oh?" Miska said while gesturing to Brook's seat. "You seem to like Princess enough. I know what a woman being pleased sounds like."

Linsan flushed.

Miska gestured silently again to the seat.

It took a moment to register, then Linsan grinned as she realized they were playing for an audience. "Well, when we were girls, she tried to kill me in the forest. I tried to hurt her back and the next thing we knew it, there was magic flying everywhere, punches thrown, and then our daddies made us behave." Gingerly, Linsan adjusted her hand so they were in less of a provocative position.

"Did you kiss and make up?"

Linsan chuckled. "Eventually." Her words were a bit louder than needed. The memory of their first night together as lovers made her squirm.

"So you're saying if I keep fighting with Princess, maybe she'll be interested in me?" The question was clear as was the questioning look in Miska's eyes.

Linsan cocked her head. She started to answer, playing a part, but then the Glasscoaster swerved violently and she abandoned her role for a moment to keep in balance. As

soon as the buggy straightened, she grinned back. "It really depends, I guess," she said mimicking her mother's tone as she cobbled together lines that were popular from a number of plays.

"On what?" Miska seemed amused but there was a flush on her cheeks that wasn't directed toward Linsan. She wanted Brook, more than Linsan could ever give her friend.

"If you want to lose and have her be your queen or if you want to try conquering her kingdom by yourself."

"You think you're smart, don't you? Have all the pretty words?"

Linsan shrugged.

"How do I have both? How can I lose and yet conquer at the same time? What if I just want to be her queen?"

Brook's foot slammed into the floor of Glasscoaster and the brakes slammed into place. Both Miska and Linsan were pitched forward to the floor. The tight space ground their bodies together as the amusement between them crumbled.

As soon as the buggy stopped, Brook reached back and smacked Linsan's head. "I am not a prize to be traded!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. Her door swung open and she bolted out.

"Shit," Linsan said as she scrambled to free herself. It took a minute and some difficult positions until she was able to crawl over the seat and out the door.

Brook was only a rod away, stomping in a circle. When she looked back, her cheeks were wet with tears. "I'm not a character, Lin! I'm not some play you can rattle off the top of your head!"

"Brook—!"

"No!" Brook stormed forward. "I just lost everything! Again! I had to give up my daddy! I just caused my family to

lose their money and they don't even know why!" Her voice was shrill.

Miska grunted as she tumbled out of the Glasscoaster. It was tilted against the ditch that ran along the road. One wheel bobbed with the movement.

Linsan turned back to her. "We both lost something, you know that."

"You lost a Couple-damned instrument that no one plays! I don't care how much money it is. I lost my dad! My family! My money! I lost everything!" With a snarl, she brought her hands together.

Linsan only had a heartbeat to brace herself before the world exploded into a boom that tore the ground up and threw it away from Brook.

She winced as a second one came, hammering into her and throwing her back.

"Damn you, Linsan! Damn everything about you!" Brook screamed as she clapped again. The sharp sound punched Linsan.

Miska grunted and stepped forward.

"Rot in the ground!" Brook's voice cracked before she clapped her hands.

Linsan tried to brace herself but she stumbled from the force that punched her.

Miska stepped forward, her hair snapping in the wind. Her feet dug into the hard ground as heat shimmered around her.

Brook's next clap shattered the window of the Glasscoaster.

Miska stepped forward even as Linsan was shoved back.

"Get away from me!"

"No!" snapped Miska. She forced herself forward.

Brook stepped back and clapped her hands again, magic bursting as it tore apart the ground around her.

Clods of dirt and rock flew at Miska but the blonde shrugged them off as she did the waves of force that hammered into her.

Linsan could only watched as Miska closed the gap.

“Go away!”

Another step.

“Leave!”

Miska was only a yard away.

“I hate you!” Brook sobbed and spread her arms to clap again.

It only took a single step as Miska came up to her. Her hands caught both sides of Brook’s chin before she pulled Brook into a kiss.

Brook froze, her hands apart.

Linsan stared in shock, her face burning and her ears ringing.

Miska held her close as she continued to kiss. It wasn’t a tender embrace like on the stage but something far more intimate than Linsan could have ever given Brook. The air around them rippled as Miska moved with Brook.

Tears glittered on Brook’s cheeks then her arms fell. A moment later, she slumped down.

Miska knelt down with her, cradling her body as they both dropped to their knees in the middle of the blasted field.

A muffled sob rose up and then Brook wrapped her arms around Miska tightly.

Linsan turned her head. This wasn’t a moment for her. She cupped her ear to try drowning out the ringing and then limped around the Glasscoaster to see if she could find a better place to camp for the night.

Chapter 50

Dancing

I have longed for those moments when your beats shake the ground. My heart quakes as I yearn to join in and let it fill my soul with your sweet presence.

—*The Living Mountain* (Act 2, Scene 1)

Linsan sat on a rock as she watched the fire flickering in the makeshift ring they had made. The Glasscoaster sat only a few yards away, the side reflecting the light as she listened to the bubbling of a tea pot nestled in the coals.

Brook sat on a log near Miska with her hands in her lap. They weren't touching nor were they moving away from each other. Her dress, stained and torn, fluttered in the breeze as she stared into the flame with red-rimmed eyes. Occasionally, she sniffed and rubbed her ruby nose.

Miska sat on the ground closer to the flames. She wasn't bothered by the heat as she occasionally reached into the flames to adjust a log or stir the coals with a stick. Her loose blonde hair fluttered in the breeze and she had a foot propped up on a rock only inches away from the flame.

The pot whistled and sputtered into the flames. The water splashed onto an iron pot that cooked their dinner and sizzled loudly before disappearing in a wisp of steam.

Miska reached over and plucked the pot out. She grabbed Brook's mug and filled it up until the tea leaves on the bottom floated just below the edge. The top was almost black with the handful of leaves that would seep into the strong flavor Brook craved.

Miska set the pot aside.

Brook sniffed. "S-Sorry about that."

Linsan gave her a comforting smile. "We all have our low points in our lives."

Brook glared at her.

Holding up her hands, Linsan shook her head emphatically. "I swear, that isn't a line! I don't know a single play or song that uses those words."

"Really?"

"I swear," Linsan said with a little doubt.

A smirk. Brook shook her head and looked away. "Thank you for trying."

Miska leaned over to look at Linsan. "Plays and songs really are your life, aren't they?"

"They are. From the day I was born, my family was about the music. Making it, creating it, and performing it. Before the fire destroyed everything, there wasn't an day that we didn't have some music. My mother was famous across the entire country and she would have dad and I play her opposites to practice. Though, I could never sing like her and dad used his instruments to play her duets."

"... but you are a far better dancer than she ever was," Brook said. "I've seen you."

Linsan blushed. "T-Thank you."

Miska looked back at Brook. "You can dance too though."

"Not as well as her."

“Show me.”

Brook pulled back and shook her head. “W-What? No. I can’t do that.”

Miska pushed herself up to her feet. “Please?”

Brook blushed. “I’m not good. Ask Linsan.”

“I don’t want her to dance for me. I want you to dance for me.” Miska stepped back and then forward. “With me? Dance with me. Right here and now.”

“W-With?” Brook looked shocked.

Miska smiled. “Please, my queen? This is something that you and Linsan share. I have been listening for days to your beats shaking the ground and my heart. Every hour you were practicing in the village, I could feel it through my soles. Please, I want to see the woman who make the sounds that moved me.”

Brook blushed hotly, then she glanced at Linsan. There was question in her gaze.

“Those aren’t lines from a play.”

Brook scoffed. “Do you mind?”

Linsan grinned. She shook her head. “No, Brook, I told you. I would be there for as long you need me, but I’ll stand aside when—”

Holding up a finger, Brook shook her head. “No. No more lines from plays from you. Not tonight.”

Linsan leaned back and lifted her case. “How about I just shut up and play something?”

Brook’s expression softened. “You really don’t mind?”

Linsan answered by opening her case and pulling out her violin. It only took her a moment and get everything situated.

Miska pulled Brook to her feet. “Come one, dance with me.”

Brook giggled nervously. She pushed her hair behind her ears and then held up her hands.

Miska stood close. With a smile, she slipped her hands around Brook's waist. "Now, my queen, dance with me?"

With a frightened look, Brook looked surprise but then she lowered her hand to Miska's shoulders. It took her a moment but then she relaxed perceptually.

Linsan rested her bow on the strings for just a heartbeat before starting a ballad.

Miska smiled and guided Brook by her hips as they swayed in time with the music. There was a grace in her movements, something more than a dancer.

Brook followed, mostly by letting Miska guide her. They slowly danced around the fire as the smoke and wind followed after them. Their footsteps were soft as whispers with the song coming from Linsan's violin.

Linsan stood up, to move herself, but she made no effort to approach the two women. They were lost in each other's eyes and bodies, swaying with more than music in their minds.

She watched them and wondered why she didn't feel any jealousy. She knew hundreds of plays and songs that focused on the rage and frustration that came from a lover stolen away, but to Linsan, it didn't feel like she was losing a lover but seeing a friend grow.

It may have been the same question she asked herself about love. Just as there was no bitter fangs of jealousy or the impotent rage, neither was there the brilliance outpouring from her heart or the song that refused to fade.

And still no talking cat trying to guide her through adventures of the heart.

She decided it didn't matter. Brook was happy. Miska was happy. They found each other and still remained friends with Linsan. That, she decided, was more important than trying to force an emotion that wasn't there.

Allegro

With a smile of her own, she spun and danced with herself as her two friends fell further in love.

Denied

The ideals of Tarsan superiority afford little mercy to those who lived on the lands they conquered. Their languages, ways of life, and even their skin was first presented as trophies, then as examples, and then dismissed as savage.

—Paramol da Jast, *The Colonizer's Blade*

It was a small village only two days from their destination. Linsan stretched while walking around the back end of the Glasscoaster where Miska was finishing up inspecting for more damage.

The blonde crawled out from underneath the boiler. “Everything is holding well. I think I’ve replaced the entire thing by now.”

Linsan gestured to an engraved plaque near the back. “Not this. This looks original.”

Miska swung her arm away as the heat gathered around her. Linsan snatched her hand back before Miska punched the plate, denting it with a burst of light and flame. With her fingers, she dug into the plate and then tore it off.

The smoldering metal landed on the ground, hissing.

Miska spat on it. “Better?”

“Good thing that wasn’t attached into the boiler, otherwise you’d be leaking water all over.” Linsan kept her voice steady, as if she was being sarcastic.

With a start, Miska looked down at the opening but there wasn’t any water coming out of the holes. She let out a sigh. “Don’t scare me like that!”

With a grin, Linsan said, “Sorry, couldn’t resist.”

Miska draped her arm over Linsan’s shoulder and guided her toward one of the few buildings in the center of the village. It was the mayor’s house and doubled as the general store. The sign next to it said “Welcome to Two Pines! Population 18.”

“Are you okay with this, Lin?”

“Your arm around me?” Linsan leaned against her. “No, I don’t mind at all.”

“I meant what is going on between me and Princess. I feel like I stole her.” Miska sighed.

Linsan shrugged. “Are you taking care of her?”

“Yes and I intend to keep doing that.”

“Is she happy?”

“I mean, she sounds happy when I’m—”

“I know what a woman being pleased sounds like.” Linsan smirked at Miska’s previous line. “No, what I meant was, I think she is happy with you. I... I want to be her friend, but I’m not the lover she needs.”

“At all?”

Linsan shrugged. “Maybe? I mean, it felt good but I don’t think we really ‘loved’ each other but I could be wrong. We were intimate but I saw how she looks at you over breakfast.”

“You mean when she offered me her drink?”

“Well, she’s never done that for me.” Linsan chuckled. “Let Brook be Brook. If you two are in love, or lust, or just

want to have fun, then it won't bother me. I want both of you to be happy and my friends."

Miska kissed Linsan's ear. "Thank you, *gífil*."

As they approached, three men about Linsan's age looked up from a small table. They held cards in their hands and had mugs of drink near them.

Linsan glanced at them before starting up the two stairs leading to the front door.

One frowned and a prickle of concern rippled along Linsan's skin.

"Hey! She can't come in."

Linsan glanced through the window to see Brook had a large pile of supplies on the counter as an old man tallied up her purchase. Then she looked at the speaker. "Why can't I?"

"Not you. Her." He pointed at Miska.

Miska tensed.

Linsan stepped up. "Why not?"

"We don't serve dirt here."

Linsan started forward, but Miska held her back.

"Don't," she whispered. "Just... let's go and wait for Brook at the car."

"Why?" Linsan asked, fighting the growing rage.

"Because this never works out for us." Miska's eyes were hard and angry but her voice was steady.

The door creaked open and Brook stuck her head out. "Do you two want... what's wrong?"

Linsan gestured to the guys. "They won't let Miska in."

With a confused look, Brook looked at Miska and then to them. "Why?"

The speaker stood up followed by his friends. "You two are friends with dirt? She smells like shit. Why debase yourself by standing next to her? You best get rid of that beast before she cuts your throat and robs you."

Linsan wished she had her violin. She saw Brook's hand tightened on the door.

Brook's lips tightened. Then she pulled her head back to talk to the old man. "You have a problem with my friend buying something?"

The shopkeeper leaned out a window to look at them and pulled back. "She can stay outside," he said with a grunt.

Brook's teeth ground together. In an instant, she plastered a smile that Linsan could tell was fake. Opening the door sharply, she strode out the store and down the stairs.

"Oi! What about your stuff!?"

Brook waved dismissively as she headed straight for the Glasscoaster. "Didn't pay for it, haven't taken it."

Miska and Linsan hurried after her.

The door slammed open and the old man stormed out. "You better pay for it, Miss!"

"Don't owe you anything, old man!"

The three young man came down the stairs, their faces twisted in rage. One in the back snapped his fingers and flames covered his hand. A knife appeared in someone's hand.

Linsan tensed. There were four of them and she didn't have her violin. She imagined how long it would take to get to the buggy to defend herself.

"I'll call the sheriff!" yelled the man.

Brook spun on her heels. "You do that!" she screamed. "And I will call my daddy and his lawyers. Let's see how that turns out!"

It was a lie, but the fury and anger was palatable. If Linsan didn't know better, Brook sounded exactly like the spoiled princess from their youth.

The man with a knife hesitated.

“When we’re done, then he will buy out whatever loan you have on this shitty village and make sure you know exactly what happens when you mess with his baby!”

All four of them stepped back.

“Drown me,” whispered Miska.

Brook’s face darkened. “Now, I can’t stand the smell of this crappy place anymore. So I’m going to get in my buggy and I’m getting out of here. You keep your shit and leave us alone!”

They managed to hurry to the buggy and get inside. A moment later, Brook was accelerating out of the village.

Linsan sat uncomfortably as the pressure ground her into the seat.

Brook let out a sniff and tears sparkled on her cheeks. “I shouldn’t have lied about my daddy.”

Miska reached around the seat to hug her from behind. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Chapter 52

Visitors

Stone Over Moon Waters was named for the stone shrines that dotted the thirty-eight islands of Moon. Their purpose has been lost in history and no one knows who carved them.

—Paramol da Jast, *Origin of the Moon Shrines*

Linsan couldn't move fast enough as she scrambled out of the Glasscoaster. She careened her head to look at an elegant glass and metal arch that soared above her head and crossed the narrow passage of water to the next island over. She was finally in Stone Over Moon Waters at the entrance of the largest city she had ever seen in her life.

There was something about knowing that Stone Over Moon Waters had been built over thirty-eight islands and the colleges from her father's essays and experiencing how every breeze set off a song and everything shone brilliant in the noon light.

The city had been built to demonstrate the arts and it showed. None of the builders were mere squares rising up but curves and colors and shine that made it feel like she had entered the fairy realm in Haladin's *Towers of Diamond*.

She smiled broadly and closed her eyes, just to feel as the ocean wind blew through the city and strummed along decorations designed to turn wind into horns, strings, and drums. It was disharmonious in many ways, chaotic in others, but there remained a rhythm of music that could not be escaped.

Miska chuckled as she crawled out. "I think she found love. Sorry, Brook, Linsan just had her heart stolen by another."

Linsan wanted to pull out her violin and play. The city demanded it but so did her quest. She took a long deep and finally caught the salty scent of the ocean blowing past her.

Brook rested her hand on Linsan's shoulder. "You okay?"

Linsan nodded and smiled. "I always dreamed of coming here when I grew up. This is where music grows, the center of my family's life."

"Hasn't your family always been in Cobbler's End?"

Linsan rolled her eyes and playfully bumped Brook with her hip. "Yes, but my mother has sung here so many times and she would come back with so many amazing stories that sounded... amazing. But just this little bit," she gestured to the courtyard with a dozen cars and two dozen horses that marked the entrance to the city, "is so much different than what I imagined."

Brook's eyes softened and she nodded before turning away.

With guilt plucked like the wind-blown sculptures, Linsan tore her attention away from the beauty and focused on her two friends next to the Glasscoaster. "Okay, I'm done marveling for now."

Miska grinned.

Brook settled next to her, her light blue dress rippling along Miska's shorts and stained top. She looked at the city

but it wasn't joy that painted her face. "We have two days before the sale."

Miska laughed. "You drove like a spring fury which is why we have so much time. If we're lucky, we beat them here. Too bad this city has so many ways to sneak in."

Stone Over Moon Waters was officially built over forty-three islands with bridges and constructions linking them together but it also filled a bay and there were as many boats as horses, pedestrians, and vehicles pouring into the city.

A smile almost showed up on Brook's face.

Linsan returned to the buggy and leaned opposite of them. "So, we have time before Palisis. I hope that gives us enough time to find someone who can help us, catch Tabil, and try to rescue Palisis."

Miska cleared her throat. "Why don't we just go to this place selling it and tell them the violin was stolen?"

Brook shook her head. "Won't work."

"I was hoping that we somehow missed the obvious. When the tax collector or the sheriff came by, they were always useless for what mattered."

"Why would they?" Brook asked quietly. "They work for rich people who wouldn't care that the violin was stolen. If anything, they would consider that a spice or a bit of excitement as they showed it off to others."

"Speaking from experience, Princess?"

Brook glared for a moment. "Daddy never had that much money. We were rich, but not that rich. Lin, how much do you think the violin would sell for?"

A flicker of sadness raced across Linsan's thoughts. She had been thinking about the violin more often as they approached the city. "At least a million cukdins, probably more. The fire that destroyed our lands has to be known by

now, so Palisis would fetch more knowing it will probably be the last virginal violin ever made by a Sterlig.”

Waving her gloved hand dismissively at the city, Brook muttered. “That’s the problem. The auction house probably already guessed that it was stolen, but they don’t care. They get their cut from the sale. The people buying it have more money to burn and no desire to help others with it.”

Linsan dragged her toe in the ground as she tried not to think about how overwhelming their situation.

“As I see it,” Brook continued. “We can tell the auction house, but we need to look like we belong to just get through the door and bring enough influence to stop the sale or at least make it embarrassing enough they hesitate.”

Linsan perked up.

Brook grinned for a moment. “Money is willing to ignore us until we get annoying. Make enough noise or scandal and you have a chance of stopping it.”

Miska leaned against Brook. “And if we don’t make enough?”

Brook’s smile faded. “Best case? They throw us out and we lose. Worst case? They arrest us and destroy our family’s lives.”

An awkward silence stretched out for a long moment.

Linsan let her mind drift through stories and plays she knew about. They had to do something, anything. “We’ve come this far, I don’t want to give up.”

“We have to try,” Brook said and Miska nodded with agreement.

“Then, focus on what we know. We need a place to stay. Brook, do you still want to find an inn to stay at?”

Brook ducked her head and shook her head. Her dark curls bounced off the roof of the Glasscoaster. “N-No... I can’t.”

Unsaid was the pain of being banned from her father's bank and the access to her wealth. She confined that she only had about a thousand cukdins left.

Miska hugged her. "I'll go with you. For moral support."

She looked up with a pained expression. "T-Thank you, but... you probably shouldn't. Remember the last stop?"

Miska's eyes darkened.

Linsan cringed. The event at the village was an uncomfortable reminder that they were only three women traveling alone and Miska was far out of her comfort area. She shook her head as she thought. Then, she remembered a play. "How about as a servant?"

"What!?" explained Brook and Miska.

"Look," Linsan held up her hands. "It was in the play—"

"No!" Brook said pointing. "Do not tell me the name!"

Miska smirked.

"Or the history. Or the writer."

Linsan sheepishly said, "Playwrights. There were two—"

"No! Just tell us the idea."

"Fine. This 'completely random idea in my head' was to dress Miska up as your servant. You said we had to look the part and you know how to act rich. So, you are the leading lady. Play the *débutante* with questionable tastes." Linsan gestured to Miska.

"I am not questionable!"

Brook wrapped her arm around Miska's waist and pulled her close. "Sorry, my love. I think here, you are questionable."

"Fuck you," Miska said without much spite.

Brook smiled but the mirth didn't reach her eyes.

Linsan cringed. Her idea felt thin and poorly planned, but it was something. "Maybe stop by and see if you can dress her up to look like your servant. I don't think shorts and a shirt with grease stains will pull it off. Then, a room

appropriate for your position instead of the cheapest place that won't rob us like we originally planned."

Brook sighed. "That will eat up most of our money. A good room here would be about a hundred cuks a day."

Linsan winced as she watched Brook carefully. "There will be a Ralonix branch here. I can stop by there. My parents said they would leave me some money, it might be a hundred or more, but that would give us more time."

Her friend rested her head against Miska's shoulder but said nothing. Her grip tightened on her lover's.

"We know we only need a few days. I might be able to busk or we can figure out how to get more money while we're here. But having Miska as your servant would also protect her from being attacked for being tribal or banned from entering buildings because she would serving her lady. I'm guessing they will disapprove but let you?"

Brook nodded. "Yes, they will disapprove. Sneers, comments, and attitude. I've seen it all. I've... done it all. But Miska would have to be very servile and I would have to make a show of making her do petty things to sell it."

Miska made a face. Then she took a deep breath and then grinned. "Fine, but after this, Princess gets to be my servant for a week."

Brook's head snapped up as she stared at Miska. At the blonde's playful grin, a blush darkened her cheeks.

Miska leaned forward. "And you have to do every little thing I tell you to do."

In a matter of seconds, Brook's entire face was red and she squirmed.

Miska turned to Linsan. "For that, I'll kiss her toes and her ass," she announced with a grin.

Linsan looked to Brook who continued to squirm. "Could you do it?"

Brook gulped and nodded sharply. “Y-Yeah... it might... I think it will work. We will use up most of our money to do it, but it would get us invited into places none of us could reach alone.”

“It sounds risky.” Miska shook her head.

Linsan grinned. “I’m sorry, just an idea.”

“No, no,” Miska said holding up her free hand. “It’s a good idea. But never tell me which play it game from or who wrote it.”

Linsan held up her hand. “Deal.”

“So, dress me up in a damn dress, get an inn. You’ll go... to the bank and get more money. Try to find out what you can and meet us at the inn?”

“Plan,” Linsan said.

Brook sighed and then straightened. She tugged on her dress to make sure it was smooth and then headed toward the entrance of a building with a “Welcome” sign on it. The center would have maps of the city along with places to stay and their prices. “Come along, servant.”

Miska followed while making obscene gestures to Brook’s backside.

Messages

A mother should never bury her daughter, not in a shallow grave and not with hands soaked with blood of her child's murderer.

—*The Ghosts of the Mary Glory* (Act 1, Scene 5)

Linsan smiled to herself as she slowly walked down the stairs from the bank. In her hand was a message from her parents, written in block letters after being translated by the strange device that allowed for communication across distances.

hope you safe. miss you. please respond. love
mum dad.

She brought the back card up.

never give up. dad.

Her steps stopped as she looked at the other.

ghsts of mary glory. a4s9.

Linsan smiled as the tears burned her eyes. She knew exactly what her mother was trying to say and whispered the line, “Oh, daughter I miss you so. I reach for you but my fingers cannot touch. I call but no sound will travel. I long to run my fingers through your hair as you walk a path I have not been able to follow.”

She sobbed for a moment hoping it wasn’t the next line that her mother referred to: “The icy waters on my neck tell me that I will be with you soon enough and I pray you are waiting for me at the crossroads of shadow and hope.”

Linsan sobbed through the rest of the cards to calm down but it quickly became apparent that the little abbreviated messages continued to keep her crying with joy. She shoved them deep into her pocket, along with the six hundred cukdins her parents had sent her, minus the amount to send a message back.

She sighed and continued down the stone stairs. At the foot, she saw a flutist playing classical music at the bottom. A wisp of a girl who stood there, nodding to the padding pedestrians who paid her no heed. Around her waist, a bright red badge had “Musician”, the date, and a number.

Linsan slowed with a desire to know how much it would cost to busk in the city of music. Then she spotted the same number on a pole above her. The flutist had to pay for a single day at a single location.

“Damn,” Linsan muttered to herself. It would make sense that a city dedicated to music would not only have heavy competition to play but also regulations. Playing for some cash wouldn’t be an option for her.

She shook her head and tightened her grip on her violin. With her awe of the city diminished, she headed down the street toward the *hotel* that Brook had selected; Linsan had never heard of a place only dedicated to sleeping with no food or drink available.

Along the way, she admired the architecture and art while listening to the music around her. There were musicians but relatively few performers at almost every corner, each one with a red badge for that day.

At one corner, she came up to a town crier holding up a newspaper. "Breaking news, auction for priceless artifact moved up to tonight!"

Icy claws raked along her senses. She spun on her heels and hurried back. At the sight of Palisis as an ink drawing on the front, her throat tightened. She frantically bought a copy and read the announcement.

Private sellers have procured a promise of sale for the legendary Palisis Sterlig, a virginal violin rumored to have been destroyed in a devastating fire thirteen years ago. The artifact has been split from a previously scheduled event for a one-night-only opportunity for local collectors to acquire to this treasure. Minimum bid, five million cuks. Bidding one bell after sundown. Lord Xasnal, 18 Xasnal Court.

Her hands trembled as she read through the rest of the article. There was no mention of who was selling it by name, but an ink drawing of Tilbin, Mayforn, and Gabaw wearing black suits next to the violin said enough.

"Shit!" Linsan turned on her heels and sprinted for the others.

New Plans

Third time to that door for sisters three. Two chances gone and only one left to save me from that cold ditch at night.

—Paun Goss-Masters, *Stolen Hearts in My Palm*

Linsan sat on the richly appointed bed and tried not to think about the luxury. The *hotel* was definitely more impressive than she thought it would be, with a marble tub with magically heated water and perfumes of every time. The carpet was thick and rich. Through one door, she spotted a second bedroom and small quarters for the “servant” but Miska had made it clear that only two beds would be occupied that night.

On the far side of the room, Brook paced back and forth as she frowned. She had said nothing since reading the newspaper announcement.

Miska sat in a corner, watching Brook move but saying nothing. She wore her usual shorts and stained shirt, but a deep red dress hung on a rod behind her. She had a box of matching shoes on the table next to her.

Linsan couldn't picture the blonde wearing anything with so many ribbons and ruffles, but she was curious to see the results.

Miska pushed herself up. "Princess?"

Brook held out a hand. "Okay, I have an idea."

"Which play?" Miska said with a sly grin.

Brook glared at her, then snorted with laughter. "No, no play or story. We're going to invade the auction."

Linsan said, "I could probably get in as a musician...?" She said, her voice trailing off as she thought about the badges. A high profile auction would be a perfect opportunity to look for a patron; there would be competition to play and she doubted anyone would allow a nobody to slip in. She wondered if her mother's pin would have a chance, but she couldn't imagine anyone could remember her mother with so many talents in one place.

She shook her head. "No, that won't work."

"Right," Brook said. "Then, you're coming in as my lover."

Linsan blinked. "W-What?"

Miska snorted with amusement.

Brook blushed. "It's just a role, just like you suggested with Miska. I have my servant—"

Miska cleared her throat.

"—and she's already an odd choice for these closed-minded assholes. I've already heard some of the gossip starting. Not to mention, that cow in the back room obviously thought that I was sullied by even letting Miska touch me."

"How?" Miska added. "She just poured you a glass a wine and practically shoved her fingers in my ass to measure my 'inseam' whatever that is."

"I grew up with this crap. I know the looks, I know that sniff and attitude. But let's use it. I'm traveling alone, there are so many pretty people on every single corner, so it might make sense I would pick up someone that caught my

interest. A brief fling of fun before tossing you aside. Right?”

Linsan cringed at the idea, but then she remembered *Garters Sweet and Soft*, a song about the very thing they were talking about. She smirked and opened her mouth.

“No!” snapped Brook. “Do not tell me! No!”

Linsan laughed.

Then Miska joined in.

Brook tried to resist but then smirked. “But, it would work, right?”

Linsan shrugged. “We can try. It’s the only thing we can do. What about you? Are you coming with us?”

“No. I need to take the investigation paperwork to the local guards. It might convince them to help, but I doubt it. They aren’t required to do anything as we are rather distant from Cobbler’s End, but the notary statements are verifiable and we might be able to prove that those bastards—”

She smacked the picture of the murderers.

“—are the ones who killed my daddy. Or at least enough to make a scene while we find others to disrupt the sale.”

It was a thin, fragile plan even worse than their previous one. But Linsan couldn’t think of another. “I’ll do it.”

Brook’s shoulder slumped. “Um... one other thing.”

The tone worried Linsan.

“The paperwork doesn’t talk about your daddy’s violin. They didn’t know it was stolen. There is barely a chance we can get the murderers, but you might see your family’s legacy sold off in front of your eyes.”

Linsan struggled with the sudden surge of sorrow. She tensed for a moment to fight the emotions and then nodded. “I told you before. I’m here for you. I will try to save Palisis, but if I have to choose you over it, I have no doubt I will pick the one that means the most in my life.”

“And that is me, right?”

“Yes, you fool. I will choose my friend.”

Brook smiled. “I-I’m sorry.”

Linsan hurried over to hug her tightly. They held each other close, not as lovers but as close friends. It felt right and she smiled at the sense of peace that filled her. “Come on, I have to play your star-struck lover ready to seduce you into bringing me into your life of luxury.”

Linsan broke the embrace and headed for the door.

Miska went ahead of her with the shoe box in her hand. She held the door open for Linsan.

In the entrance, Linsan turned around. “Oh, Brook?”

Brook sniffed. “Y-Yes?”

Linsan grinned and stepped around the corner as she called out. “You have a great idea. Just like in the song *Stolen Hearts in My Palm*.”

The door closed as Brook screamed “Bitch!”

Grand Entrance

I know we have only this moment together, but don't let them steal this trinket from me. It is the only memory I have of my daughter and I cannot let it go until it is stained with the blood of her killer.

—*Bear's Hunt for His Cub* (Act 4, Scene 2)

Linsan had to admit, they all looked beautiful. The seamstress had a dark blue dress that needed only minor alterations and had a beautiful bustle of cream lace and ribbons. Intricate lace ran along the top. Originally the dress was off the shoulder, but Linsan insisted on having it brought tighter to ensure she would have the maneuverability to play her violin if needed. She also had to abandon the full bustle for something narrower that danced along her hips. A quick coat of paint and some ribbons for her case covered up the worst of the burns and scratches; she didn't want to be far from her source of power.

Miska's dress had gloves that disappeared into her sleeves and almost completely covered up her tattoos. The intricate weaving of darker ribbons almost matched the patterns on the skin underneath. The neck had also been brought up tight to cover her markings though there was an

occasional flash of tattoo when she swallowed or turned her head.

Both of them had stopped at a hairdresser who brushed out and did their hair in a high pile with artful braids and what felt like a pound of pins. All topped with hats with lace and mesh and flowers.

But compared to Miska and Linsan, Brook shine. She had a green dress the color of the ocean with a moon motif embroidered on it. Layers of taffeta and lace flowed with her flowing movements that must have taken her hours to perfect. Her posture was also flawless; Linsan thought that she looked a lot like Linsan's mother as she laughed gaily with strangers.

The auction house had too much gold and marble for any reasonable building, and that included the banks Linsan had visited. Even in the entry hall—larger than her parent's house—there were easily hundreds of people in dresses and tuxedos milling about. Their discussions were cheerful and gay. Conversations had nothing to do with the violin or the sale. Linsan guessed they just had an excuse to be seen more than the heirloom somewhere in the building.

A thrill raced through Linsan's veins. Despite the reason they were there, it reminded her of the opening nights of her mother's shows. She had only seen a few of them but they were imprinted on her. Reaching up, she stroked her mother's pin for comfort. It was like having a part of her along and Linsan could easily picture her mother taking a deep breath and saying "time to shine."

"Are you two ready?" Brook asked, a flicker of nervousness audible in her voice. She gestured with a lace fan toward the inner entrance where two guards stood and watched over everyone who passed into the inner chambers.

Beyond the door, Linsan could see more people carousing among the tables covered in white silk and a stage with performers beyond them. She tightened her grip on the handle of her violin case, wishing it was her up on the stage instead of the high-risk position they were in now. "I-I guess. I'm just worried I'm going to screw it up."

Miska leaned over. She scanned the crowds with an uncomfortable look. "Are we betting on who gets kicked out first?"

It was a lame joke and Linsan could only dredge up a little gallows humor to match it. "I have ten cuks on me."

"Twenty on—"

Brook's lips tightened into a line. "Please... don't... no..."

She paused to take a deep breath before her eyes flickered to the side. She put on a smile that looked faked as a pair of men passed them. Then the smile froze before she turned to the girls. "No, I'm sorry. We're all anxious here and I have no clue what we're doing. I'm just throwing up whatever sounds right out of my mouth. The only thing I know is that we have to look like we're having fun, we belong here, and we are beautiful."

Miska grinned, one that reached her eyes. "We all have the last one in crate. We all look amazing and there are already eyes looking toward us."

"Appreciative looks?" Linsan asked, not wanting to look.

"Yes and more. They make me uncomfortable, I can't tell if they are undressing me or trying to approach me."

Brook chuckled and fluttered her fan. "Then we're doing it right. If we looked out of place, one of those guards would be asking us to leave. You want the attention of society, not their servants."

"You mean those guards we need to pass?" Miska added as she looked at the guards ahead of them.

At Brook's nod, she grunted. "Then, my lady, your humble servant is ready to follow you pass those gates."

Brook glanced at Linsan. "Ready to play your bit?"

"I'm the daughter of Tisin Sterlig, so... no because I'm not my mother. But I'll do my best."

Brook pulled her into a tight hug. "Come on, let's find either Lord Xasnal or the auctioneer, Tasire Dalisan da Genifir. If we're lucky, maybe we can convince one of them enough to summon the guards since those assholes laughed me out the door." There was a flicker of annoyance, but then her brilliant smile followed.

Linsan nestled against Brook and put on the face of a young hopeful. It was scary, but she had seen her mother play the role enough times to remember some of the things. Wide-eyed, she looked around as she clung to Brook.

They got into the short queue for the door. An elderly couple said nothing ahead of them and four women were chatting happily about a sailboat race from a few days ago.

At the door, the guards looked them over. Brook gave her best haughty look, but the guard focused on Linsan. His eyes were piercing as he scanned her over from head to toe, but his gaze settled on her violin case. "No instruments."

Linsan froze for only a heartbeat but then responded reflexively. "But sir," she said in the breathless voice she had practiced as a child, "this is my life! I swore to keep it next to my heart the day it was given and I will not let my child escape my fingers until my heart no longer beats in my breast. Please... she's all I have."

Inside, Linsan cringed. She had meant to alter the line directly from *Three Score and Seven Seasons* but the "child" slipped in automatically.

The guard's mouth opened to say something.

Panicked, Linsan turned to Brook. "Please, my lady, I beg you. I know we have only this moment together, but don't

let them steal this... her from me.” It was a line from a different play, but it meshed together with line from the first one with some alterations.

His eyes softened slightly.

Brook gave him a hard look before turning back to Linsan. She had on the annoyed look that Linsan remembered so well before both of them had become friends. It was like looking into a painting. Brook spoke in a tense voice, “She not here to play and she knows the consequences from... both of us. I only allowed her to keep the silly thing since I don’t want to replace it with one of mine.”

The other guard stood up, a burly man with a cropped black beard. “No exceptions, no instruments.” He shot a glare to the first one.

Brook’s jaw tightened.

Linsan felt a urge of panic and clutched her case tighter.

“My lady,” Miska said. “How about I guard your... fling’s case while you carouse.” She managed to put in a petty glare to Linsan before she continued.

Brook spun on Miska, her eyes wide.

Miska gave a blank look but there was tension in her shoulders and hands. Linsan couldn’t imagine her reasoning, but it was obviously wasn’t her first choice.

With a sniff, Brook turned back, looked past the guards before she gestured curtly to the side of the door. “My servant can stand by the entrance. She is clearly not a musician. Have her stand just inside where both you and I can keep an eye on her.”

The second guard looked annoyed and glared at her.

Brook matched his gaze, not even a twitch of her neck or flex from her pursed lips.

The first grunted. “Very well, stay away from the stage and remain by the door. If she leaves our sight or disappears without permission, we’ll have her thrown out.”

While Linsan handed her case over to Miska, he continued. "If that case opens, then all three of you will be asked to leave. And she will have to be out of the room during the auction."

Linsan caught sight of the four women watching the encounter and she blushed. It was the wrong type of attention they wanted. As soon as Miska had her case, she turned back on both friend and her only means of defending herself and stood by Brook.

In the back of her mind, she wanted for the guards to chase her off.

The first one looked her over and then stepped aside.

Brook lead the way into the main hall. It was easily triple the size of the entry hall with even more gold, marble, and silk. On the walls between the columns, she could see pastoral scenes of women playing musical instruments with sculptures filling in the space. Along the back wall, where Miska situated herself, a buffet table filled with finger food had ice sculptures of violins and women playing instruments.

On the opposite end was the stage where musicians were set up on both sides of the stage and a duet played out between them. Linsan strained to hear the words but couldn't over the sounds of conversations. She drew her attention away to look at the others with them, the high society who milled around and gaily chatted with each other.

Everyone was dressed to impress. About a third sat or stood at tables along the two sides of the room but the bulk of them appeared to be happy to walk from clique to clique while greeting each other as long-lost friends or talking to one cluster or the other.

Brook chuckled. "It's just like one of Daddy's parties. Only the jewelry is flashier and there are a lot more like them."

“And the after-show parties for my mother.” Linsan grinned. “But the jewelry isn’t flashier but I’m pretty sure it isn’t paste and paint.”

Brook favored her with a smile. “Then we know what to do. Find Xasnal or Dalisan.” She pronounced the “X” as a delicate rasp in the back of her throat. “Then, do our best to convince him that the sale needs to stop and those men need to be invested.”

She gestured back toward Miska with her head. “Miska has the paperwork since this dress doesn’t have even a hint of a pocket in it.”

Linsan grinned. She gestured one direction. “Then, if my lady desires, I will trail behind in breathless adoration as we hunt our men.”

Surprises

The entire point of high society is to be seen and talked about.
—Halistin Gor-Takil, *Lifestyles of the High and Rich*

Linsan stood near the edge of the stage and stared rapturously at the young woman singing.

The singer was introduced as “Lilian the Songbird” and her voice carried more than the flawless tune of *My Memory of Tears*, it brought up memories that Linsan had forgotten. She could almost smell the attic when she rediscovered Palisis and played those few stolen notes to her parent’s surprise. In many ways, that was the beginning of her adventure and she was half a world away from that young girl.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she listened to the raven-haired beauty singing on the stage. It was impossible to move away even if she wanted to. Instead, she just smiled and let the memories wash through her mind.

When the song ended, Lilian gave a bow and wiped a tear from her eye.

“I wonder what she remembers when she sings that song,” asked a voice next to Linsan.

She jumped and looked to see an older woman looking up at the stage. The newcomer was her parents age, but had a beauty that held up against the advancement of years. When she looked at Linsan, there was a sadness pooled in her light brown eyes.

“W-What?” Linsan asked.

“Lilian always cries when she sings that song. You can feel the longing in her voice. But the images that well up in my mind are not hers, they’re always mine. That her talent, to make you feel her songs with her heart. They call her one of Moon Water’s treasures.”

“I saw... I remember being in my parent’s attic. I was playing something I shouldn’t have found.”

“Good memories then?”

Linsan smiled. “Yes, the best. Not at the time, but now? It was the best memory.”

The older woman turned and looked at her. “So, an actor?”

An icy grip ran down Linsan’s spine. “What? I’m not an actor.”

“Yet you quoted both *Bear’s Hunt* and *Three Score* in that little speech to keep your toy.” There was a sparkle in her eye as she turned her back to the stage. She had on a gold-trimmed dress in black. It was loose around the waist with a curved bustle and a generous amount of bared shoulder. “I’m guessing you were either an actor or a musician, but the musicians around here usually treats plays as below their station.”

She pursed her lips. “This city think plays are for the poor and unrefined, with shallow plots and actors who failed. They spend their time worshipping Tarsan classics and the old master’s styles.”

Fretting, Linsan looked around for Brook but couldn’t find her friend.

“What about you? I haven’t seen you at one of these affairs before. I’d remember a beauty like yours.”

Linsan froze. Was the old woman trying to seduce her? What if she had fallen into the very thing they were pretending had happened between Brook and herself? “I’m just here... with someone. I need to find her.”

Lilian stood back up to sing another song.

The older woman gestured toward the tables to the side. “Come on, we can find your friend better from the edges. No doubt she’ll be at the center of attention, she’s a beautiful girl.”

“She is.” Linsan spoke as she followed the other woman away from the press of people at the stage. It only took a few steps to get away but a longing to return rose up. She fought it, moving blindly in the wake of her sudden companion.

At the edge, the other woman sat down. “You can call me Jun.” It was a starkly informal of a name given the situation. Jun winked. Linsan couldn’t help but think that she was still being seduced.

Linsan blushed. “W-We’re not,” she stopped as she realized she was supposed to play something more intimate. “I mean, I’m here because she told me to come.”

“I doubt that. If you really didn’t want to come, you wouldn’t have.”

“I don’t know, my lady. When Lady Kabisal asks, I have to listen, right?”

“Jun. And yes, you do. Because everyone knows musicians are like cats and no one is good enough to get a cat to sit on command.”

Linsan smirked. “*The Sand Piper’s Daughter.*”

“Not a popular one in this area, but it was when I was your age.” Jun tapped the table. “Come on, let an old lady talk about something she missed.”

"You aren't old," Linsan said with a bit more confidence. "You're as beautiful as the crystal freshly cut in the sun."

"Oh, going more south and west this time. *The Tension*, a dreadful play about politics but that was a good line. The rest of it was mostly self-congratulating pride about conquering the native tribes of Tarsan."

A servant stepped up and asked for drinks. Linsan said nothing as Jun ordered something for both of them. Then, as he left, she watched as Jun followed his movement with his eyes until he was out of sight before returning her attention to her.

"What is your favorite play, Lin?"

"I think I like—"

Jun held up her hand. "No, just pick one. Something that is appropriate for now. Right here."

"I guess *Tears on a Cat's Whiskers*?" Nervous, she reached up to stroke her mother's pin. "No, *Strangers in the Gale*."

Jun cocked her head. "Now, that is a play I haven't seen in a long time. It was actually here in town. The lead actress was so beautiful and wonderful, Tisin Sterlig."

Linsan paled at her mother's name.

"They won an award that year. That was the last time I saw Tisin, you know." Jun smiled and then dabbed the corner of her eye. "It was only a few years after I left her and she married my Marin's former husband and my best friend."

Linsan's heart began to pound in her ears. A soft whimper rose up in her throat as she realized she was talking to her mother's former wife, Junith.

Junith smiled sadly but didn't look away from Linsan as she continued. "She had come up one week for an encore. She had a surprise for us, her newborn. I remember how happy she looked as she sat between the acts, nursing her

newborn daughter. Sian gave her something I never could, something she always wanted.”

With everything spinning around her, Linsan felt sick to her stomach. In all the chaos and focus to get to Moon Waters, she never imagined that she would meet up with Junith. Shaking violently, she pushed herself up. “I-I-I have to go.”

Staggering away, she dove into a knot of people to escape Junith and clear her head. Tongue clicks and sniffs of disapproval followed her, but she cut across the main room to the far side before headed to the front door.

“Why am I crying?” she whispered to herself as she wiped her tears. She headed along the side until she spotted Brook in a cluster.

Her friend was laughing and joking, with one hand resting on the arm of a much older man wearing military ribbons. It was impossible to tell if she was acting or enjoying herself, but Linsan could see that Brook looked as if she belonged among the rich.

Linsan started toward her but then noticed that she couldn’t see Miska along the back wall. Frowning, she circled around the clusters of the rich and peered along the entire wall.

No Miska. No violin.

Still trembling from her encounter with Junith, Linsan spun around and hurried over to Brook. Coming up behind her, she rested her hand on Brook’s hip and whispered into her ear, “Miska is gone.”

Brook inhaled sharply and then turned around. Her eyes widened as she looked along the wall and then took a step away.

“Something wrong, my dear?” asked the man with the ribbons.

“No, Lord Ruger. I was just looking for my servant. She was supposed to stand over there with her instrument case.” She pointed to Linsan.

One of the other people nearby leaned over. “Oh, the young lady in a red dress? She was escorted through that door into Lord Xasnal’s private wing.”

The door had a guard standing in front of it, glaring at everyone. In front of them, a circle of empty space marked out five paces in all directions.

Linsan fought back a whimper. She looked back to Brook and then to peer around the room.

Brook sighed and made a show of rolling her eyes. “I better find her. Excuse me,” she said with a bow. Then she smiled brilliantly to Lord Ruger. “And it was wonderful hearing your stories, my lord.”

“Thank you for listening. Everyone else here just listens impatiently so they can tell their own stories and we all pretend we haven’t heard them a thousand times.”

A ripple of polite, but uncomfortable, laughter.

Brook took Linsan’s hand and headed straight for the door. “Sorry, I lost track of you.”

Linsan nodded.

Brook hesitated. “What’s wrong?”

“I met my mother’s former wife.”

“Marin? I thought she died of cancer?”

“No, Junith. Marin had married my dad before they were divorced and then Junith and Marin got married.”

Brook blushed. “I remember that part.”

Linsan smiled uncomfortable. The night was not going the way she expected. She cleared her throat before they reached the door.

“No admittance.”

“Excuse me,” Brook said with her sweetest voice. “My servant was brought through her and I would like to know—”

“No admittance,” repeated the guard and flexed his thick arms over his chest. There was a finality in his voice.

Brook tugged Linsan away. “Shit, what do we do?”

Linsan looked at him and then back to her. “I-I don’t know. I mean, we can’t start a fight and I have no clue about the layout. Can we sneak in another entrance?”

Brook worried her lip. She looked torn.

Linsan rested her hand on Brook’s arm. “Worried about Miska?”

At the nod, Linsan tried to give a comforting smile. “She’ll be okay. This is Miska. She can punch her way through steel.”

“Ladies?” said Lord Rugar from near the door with the guard.

Confused, Linsan looked up to see him gesturing for Brook and herself.

Brook pointed to herself.

He nodded.

They approached.

Lord Rugar looked at them both. “Now, I’m not entirely sure what is going on, but after so many years on the field, I know the look of two people scheming.”

Linsan blanched.

The guard growled and clenched his arms.

He gave them a hard look. “You are also moving as if the winds were chasing you. So, what is your intent at this party. Are you here to steal the violin?”

“I would never steal Palisis!” Linsan snapped before she realized what she said. With a gasp, she clapped her glove hand over her mouth.

He raised an eyebrow. “Palisis is it? Rather unusual name for a young lady.”

“No, my lord,” Brook started. “Palisis is the name of the violin being sold today. Yes, we have an interest in the in-

strument but also the men who are selling it. We need to speak to Lord Xasnal or Tasire Dalisan about a most important matter.”

“And that is?” The lord’s voice grew more tense.

Linsan glanced around.

Brook shrugged and gazed stonily back. “Something not appropriate to discuss in public.”

They locked stares.

Linsan squirmed but no one else seemed to notice.

Then the lord chuckled. He turned back to the guard. “Come on, let us through.”

“My lord?”

“I’ll watch over them. If you want, have someone join us but these two ladies have nothing to hide your master’s silvers and I think they have a story I want to hear.”

Reluctantly, the guard unlocked the door and held it up.

The lord gestured for Brook and Linsan. He waited until Linsan pasted before coming up behind her a short distance. “After all, the only reason I’m here is to bid on the violin for a friend but I’m curious why a Sterlig has shown up personally for the sale.”

The door closed behind them with a firm snap of the lock.

Linsan inhaled, waiting for the next sentence.

“Call me Calor and tell me a new story.”

Requests

It is one thing to lie to the unwashed masses, to deceive the foolish public, and to scam those who don't know how to manage their money, but one does not lie to High Society. There is no anger that can be heated for as long as a slight on society's honor.

—Gandon Morelir

Linsan heard the kitchen long before they reached it. The sounds of raucous laughter and cheering beat against the walls. It sounded more like nights the village pub than the formal affair going in the main halls.

Calor guided them from behind, nodding as Brook gave an abbreviated version of their story. He didn't say anything, only listened.

Entering the kitchen area, Linsan saw Miska sitting at a table arm-wrestling with one of the guards. Her elegant dress had been hiked up to her thighs so she could straddled a scorched box. A few of the seams of the expensive outfit had burst open, revealing her tattoos stretched across her straining muscles.

The guard was also in poor shape, with his outfit ripped in places as he groaned and put all his weight into forcing Miska's hand back.

She grunted back with her effort to stop him. Sweat ran down her brow and neck as she gripped the table with her other hand. Woodsmoke rose up from where her grip had burned through the table cloth.

Surrounding them were a handful of guards along with high society members wearing dresses of gold and silk. They were all cheering and throwing money down into a pair of metal bowls as they encouraged the two contestants.

Miska glanced up and then smiled as Brook entered the room. She gave a wink before turning her attention back to her efforts. "Time to give up." Her voice was strained.

"Never—!"

A blast of hot air exploded from her as she slammed him down. The effort collapsed the table underneath them and he fell back, tumbling backwards until he flipped face-down on the ground.

A cheer rose up as two people helped him up.

Miska rose with him. "Good game."

For a moment, the losing man looked like he would say something rude but then he shook his head. He held out his hand. "I stand corrected."

She grinned and patted his shoulder. "You did great. Against another man, you would have easily won."

Playful laughter filled the room as Miska pushed her way to Brook and then pulled her into a passionate kiss.

Brook looked surprised but then melted into Miska's arms. A moan rose up between them.

Another round of cheer, this one far more enthusiastic than the first one.

Calor made a grunting noise. "You seem to have a lot of lesbians in your life, Lin."

“Just my mother.”

“And Junith, Marin, those two. You lean that way? Have a fancy for peaches?”

“No, I just want to have friends I love and a chance to play.” She could feel her cheeks warming and tried to tamp them down.

“Speaking of which...” Calor held up his hand. “Sop! A minute?”

On the far side of a kitchen, an old man with a cane looked up from his wine. Then he gestured for Calor.

Calor tugged Linsan by the elbow across the room. “Come on, let’s talk to Lord Xasnal.”

Lord Xasnal was about eighty years old with a heavy cane under one hand and a droop to his face. He looked tired as he finished pushing the money he had apparently bet on Miska to a young woman standing next to him. “Calor,” he said. “What brings you down? Your wife chase you away?”

“No, Rose is at home with the boys. I’m here for Junith.”

The older man groaned and shook his head. “Damn the Couple, that woman is sticking her fingers everywhere. She’s got at least three others to ask me to stop the auction ever since it was announced.”

“Are you?”

“Of course not. She has a history with the violin, but sob stories only add spice to the bidding and bumps up the price.” There was a hardness in his voice.

Any hope Linsan had started to crumble.

He looked at her. “And this is...?”

Calor held up a finger. “Sorry, my manors. Linsan, this is Lord Sopenar Xasnal. His family has been in Moon Waters for almost four centuries and he owns the fine establishment that we currently stand in.”

Sopenar tilted his head.

“And this is Linsan Sterlig, a young lady with a name shared with the item being sold.”

The old man’s eyes sharpened on Linsan.

Linsan cleared her throat as her skin crawled. She steeled herself before she answered, “My father was Sian Sterlig, he crafted Palisis when I was young. I... I named it.”

He stared at her for a long moment, before he coughed. And then coughed again. When he stopped, he shook his head. “Junith has been trying to stop this sale ever since it was announced. I never thought she could convince a Sterlig across the country.”

“I’m trying to stop it because Siam would never have allows that violin to leave his family! I never asked for her to come here!” snapped Junith as she strode across the room. Brook and Miska followed with curious looks. “There is a Sterlig here on the eve of its sale. There has to be a reason beside my own.”

Calor slid his arm around Junith’s waist. “There is. Palisis was stolen and a man murdered in the process.”

Junith gasped and looked at him. “M-Murdered?”

Brook held up her hand. “My daddy, Dukan Kabisal. The three men selling it burned him alive. I-I have the investigation papers.”

Around them, the kitchen grew silent.

Pop’s gaze slid back to Linsan. “Well? Are you trying to stop the sale?”

Linsan felt the pressure of attention but she steeled herself. Drawing up, she remembered how her mother always looked at the audience and mimicked it. “Yes, my lord. It was stolen from us.”

Lord Xasnal groaned and shook his head. He pointed to Junith. “A gut feeling.”

His finger gestured to Brook. “A claim.”

“Excuse me—!” started Brook angrily.

He pointed to Miska. "Papers that cannot be confirmed from across the country."

Finally his finger gestured to Linsan. "A birthright that cannot be verified. These are all reasons, but they aren't enough. You could be working for someone who needs more time to come up with more money, a scheme to steal from me, or something else."

He drew himself up straighter. "I need proof. Something I can see with my own eyes, something that I can confirm. I've been hosting these auctions for many years and I've been tricked, lied, and deceived more times than you have stepped on the earth. I have lost millions, so I need something rock-solid."

Linsan ducked her head and fought back the tears.

"Tears don't move me, girls. The sale goes on and I will not allow you to disrupt my honor."

Thinking furiously, Linsan tried to think of some line, some play that would convince him. But they felt hallow and empty at the moment, nothing was appropriate.

Sopenar shook his head. "I'm sorry your violin was stolen and your father killed. But that was somewhere far away and outside of my domain. Good evening."

He limped forward the door.

Linsan cleared her throat. There was one thing that she hadn't told anyone, a trivial thing but it was the last thing left to her. "Palisis has been played before," she said quietly.

Sopenar stopped but didn't turn back.

"I played it, in my parent's attic. It isn't a virgin." She sniffed. "I didn't know it wasn't supposed to be at the time, but my parents decided to not tell anyone just in case we had to sell it."

The silence pressed down on the room, stifling the air as it settled into place.

Everyone stared at Sopenar, waiting for his response.

He turned his head so he was looking at her. "But what are you?"

"S-Sorry?"

"An instrument is played by the one who created it, to tune and adjust it. It is a mother's touch for her daughter, not a lover's embrace. So I ask you, what are you?"

Linsan sniffed and then nodded. "Yes, I am the daughter of Sian Sterlig. My blood runs through the veins of the wood that gave birth to Palisis. My hand helped him carve and shape it. I named it, so I might be his mother."

She took a deep breath. "But I am also the daughter of Tisin Sterlig, the queen of the stage and I have played her songs and roles my entire life. I have been in her shadow except for when I play. I have only set my bow on his strings as one who loves the song more than anything else."

Sopenar slowly turned. "Prove it."

"H-How, my lord."

He pointed to the violin case that was once again in Miska's hand. "Play me a song that only the daughter of Tisin would know. Give me a song that has never been on a stage or sung in the world."

Linsan frowned as she tore through her memory, casting through the history of her parents. She teased the pin in her hair. "There is no..." she glanced at Junith who was crying. Then she remembered the sheet music in the case, the torn paper with a single song she had never heard of before. "*Safe Adventures, Our Departed Loves.*"

Junith inhaled sharply.

Sopenar cocked his head. "I'm surprised you know that song. I thought there was only one copy ever made. Your father was very insistent on that."

Linsan worried her lip as she retrieved her violin.

Brook stopped her. "Are you sure? You know this song?"

Linsan shook her head. "I saw it once, years ago. I've never played it but I think I remember the melody."

"Oh, Couple." Brook buried her head against Miska.

"I have to try," Linsan felt on the edge of tears herself. "I have to."

She set her bow and then brought up the faded memories. The first few bars were easy to remember but she had only looked at the first page. She worked the song in her head but then realized it wasn't enough.

Fear raced through her veins.

"I'm waiting." Sopenar looked at her intently.

Her heart fluttered. In her mind, she tried to guess the next measures of the song. Little fragments from her past rose up: her mother humming a strange song while she did her makeup, or the way her father arranged his music, and even the way the notes naturally fell off the bow strings.

"Sterlig?"

Linsan answered with clear notes filling the kitchen. It was unsteady at first from her nervousness but she regained her nerves by the end of the second measure. It took her only precious seconds to reach the end of her knowledge. Desperate not to see him acknowledge a failure, she closed her eyes and let the music flow.

She dragged her toe along the floor and then ducked her body with her song. She didn't need to see to avoid the tables and counters, they were just part of her dance as she spun and swayed with the ballad.

Gasps rose up.

Linsan cracked open one eye to see smiles across from her. Motes of power and ripples of energy radiated from her body, swirling with the same movements as her body.

She let her gaze rake the room. There were more smiles and looks of joy and wonder on the faces of the guards and

society alike. Sopenar had a faint smile on his lips as he rocked his body in time with the music spun from her bow.

Linsan let her attention focus on him and finished the song, filling the room with music and ripples of power before pulling the bow away. The last note hung in the air, sparkling with energy, before it faded like embers into the night.

Junith let out a sob from where she had her face buried into Calor's shoulder. Her pale hands trembled as she knuckled his shirt.

Brook and Miska held each other and watched her with glistening eyes and bright smiles. They looked terrified and in awe at the same time.

There were others. Some started to applaud her, others were not moving as they seeped in their own thoughts.

Every breath was attenuated as she turned back to the lord. "My lord?"

"Close but not quite."

Her shoulders lumped. "I'm sorry, it was a long—"

He held up his hand and her voice trailed off. "Linsan Sterlig, that was not entirely the song that your father had written. I remember the opening notes intimately, but the others were not. Where did the rest come from?"

"I... I guess what my dad would have written knowing my mother's ability. I assumed it was sung by her as Junith and Marin left."

He turned away.

Linsan's hope faltered and she fought back her own sorrow.

"No, it was when your parents left, not the other way around. They are all stars in Moon Waters but your father's mother fell sick and he had to return to Cobbler's End. We always assumed Marin would go with him, but then everyone was surprised when our four stars of Moon Waters—"

He looked at Junith and held out his hand.

She reached out to take it and squeeze it.

“—split in unexpected ways. With hindsight, it was obvious how they had cleaved but it was that song that the four announced the decision.” He smiled warmly to Junith. “A single song that played to the back stage of the final showing of *Strangers in the Gale*. Only the actors, the band, and those honored by granting patronage were able to hear it.”

The room was silent.

He turned back to Linsan. “I thought I would never hear it again in any form. You have honored your father’s memory, your mother’s kill, and proven that you have talents that shine among theirs.”

“Fuck me,” gasped Miska.

Linsan tried to clear her suddenly dry throat. “T-Thank you, my lord.”

Sopenar’s eyes hardened. “Do you swear you played Pali-sis?”

Linsan wiped her eyes. “Yes, my lord.”

“That I can verify.” There was no smile or humor from him as he turned to the young woman serving him. “Summon Tir Nolig with all haste. She will be packing up to leave if she hasn’t left already. I will give you one bell to return with her.”

“Yes, my lord.” She bowed deeply before running out of the room.

The lord ordered another servant to bring the city guards who had talked to Brook to the auction house, but through the side door.

Finally, he addressed Linsan directly. “You have earned the opportunity to prove yourself. I will delay the sale for one bell and not a minute longer. If Nolig can verify your claim, then I will halt everything and have the men selling it detained until a full investigation can take place. Failing

that, you will suffer consequences no matter what blood you claim.”

Linsan nodded and let out a gasp of relief. “Thank you, my lord.”

“Come on, I need to make the announcement before the hammer falls.”

Chapter 58

Proof

It is easy to make a claim but far harder to prove it.

—Kyōti proverb

Even in the narrow hallway leading to the great hall, Linsan could hear the rapid patter of the auctioneer speaking loudly. “Do I hear twenty-two. Twenty-two. Twenty-three to the lady in the red dress. Twenty-three million folks. Twenty-five! Twenty-six!”

It took all of her effort not to crawl over Lord Xasnal who lead the way or the guard walking behind him and ahead of Linsan. She wanted to scream at them to hurry but Sopenar appeared to have only one speed, a slow walk.

“Thirty million! Thirty-five! Six! Seven.”

Someone called out loudly. “Forty!”

“Forty million cukdins for this priceless treasure.”

She cringed as Sopenar approached the door.

“Forty? Going once. Going—”

Sopenar stepped in the room and held up two fingers, then four.

Linsan’s heart skipped a beat.

“Sorry, my lords and ladies, bidding has been halted. I currently have forty million cuckdins to the Lady Pinialis.”

A ripple of noise rose up as Linsan entered the room. After the claustrophobic hallway, the great hall felt like stepping outside. In the short period of time, rows of seats had been arranged in front of the stage with a narrow space down the middle.

On stage was a pedestal holding a red velvet pillow. On it was Palisis. The violin had been polished until it shined and lights had been focused on it to show off the delicate hints of purple and red veins that ran underneath the polished surface. Next to it was the bow her father had crafted, a matching pair with the same designs and carvings.

It had been years since Linsan had seen the musical instrument. A longing rose up, a desire more intense than anything she had felt before. The urge to reach out for it and pluck it from the pillow rose up and she struggled being so close.

The gathered people, the high society of Moon Water, looked around in confusion. A few stood up to turn to the back toward Sopenar. Linsan noticed a few just ducked their heads and continued to stare forward.

“There they are!” whispered Brook loudly.

Linsan focused her attention on stage where Tilbin, Mayforn, and Gabaw stood to the side of the violin. All three of them were wearing tuxedos but she remembered their faces from the day of the fire.

Tilbin stood ahead of the other two, his head turning as he scanned the crowds. Mayforn did the same, his face pursed as his head moved from point to point. Gabaw stepped back toward a table barely visible behind the chairs where the musicians had sat.

Sopenar lowered his fingers. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry to stop the moment right at the cusp of tension, but I have been presented with a credible doubt."

Whispers and exclamations rose up in a wave across the room. A few of the buyers stepped away from the gathered chairs. Most of them remained in place.

Tilbin stood up. An easy smile crossed his face but it didn't reach his eyes. "Please explain, Lord Xasnal. You have already done a full suite of verifications for this sale was approved." He had a remarkably cultured voice for a man who grew up at a farm in the middle of nowhere.

The front door creaked open as a man in a deep blue uniform strode into the hall. He had a badge on his left chest and a pair of ribbons on the right. He had a deep tan and a full beard pulled into a braid.

Six other uniformed men filed in after him. They were armed with short swords and all six had their hands on the sheathed weapons.

Tilbin's turned slightly to look at them and his jaw tightened.

"Shit," Mayforn said sharply and stepped past Tilbin to the other side. His attention focused on Linsan and a scowl etched itself across his face.

Brook shoved her way past Linsan and rushed down the center aisle. Her inarticulate scream rose up to fill the room.

Linsan and Miska charged after her.

Just as Brook reached the stage, one of the buyers who had not looked back suddenly stood up and spun into the aisle. There was a flash of a metal, a knife, in his hand.

"Brook!" screamed Miska.

Brook slammed into the man, her entire body shuddering. She looked up and then gasped. "D-Daddy?" Her voice filled the sudden silence that draped the room.

Linsan slid to a halt as she looked at the man who had stabbed Brook. It was Dukan Kabisal.

He had grown a beard since she last saw him, but it was a poor disguise. There was no mistaking his shoulders or the shape of his face. His eyes were hard as he looked down at his daughter. "You're the reason my code book was burned, wasn't it?"

"D-Daddy?" Brook said in a weaker voice. Crimson droplets splattered to the ground, slashing brightly on the wooden floor.

"Bad girl," he said. Then he shoved Brook back hard, throwing her into Linsan and Miska.

Panicked, Linsan grabbed at Brook and held her down. There was a growing stain on her abdomen, near her naval. "Brook! Brook!"

Dukan stepped back and tossed the knife to the ground.

On stage, Tilbin's guitar flew in the air. The murderer caught it and slung it over his shoulder in one smooth movement. His fingers dropped to the strings and he strummed them.

A ghostly fire flickered around his body and instrument.

Despite the fear for her friend and the growing terror, Linsan forced herself to her feet. "Dukan! That was Brook! How!?"

Dukan stopped at the bottom of the stairs. His face was a mask of rage, a bitterness palatable in the air. "You were supposed to be the brash one, Lin. That knife was for you, not her."

"You were going to kill me?" Her world spun but she forced herself to focus on him.

The strum of a guitar string caught her attention and she picked up the opening chords to a popular drinking song.

Dukan's face twisted even more. "Of course I would! You're a Sterlig! You are all fools and idiots. You sit on a

priceless artifact because of pride and honor. Your parents would rather starve than give up a memory to some woman who has been dead for decades!”

Behind Linsan, Junith let out a sharp gasp.

Linsan stepped over Brook. “Palisis isn’t yours.”

Dukan started up the stairs, one step at a time. “It doesn’t have a name, Lin. It’s an instrument, something to be played and sold. And for me, that means one more sale of a precious Sterlig before I leave this shitty country.”

“I won’t let you,” she announced as she spun the lock on her case. She grabbed the neck of her violin and her bow with one hand as it clattered to the floor.

Dukan smiled and stepped back behind Tilbin. “You have other problems to deal with.”

Tilbin started into a series of high speed riffs. It was the song she had heard, but played at double speed. Fire flared along his guitar strings before it rose to envelope his entire body.

A wave of heat rippled away from his body, visibly distorting the air in an increasing sphere of energy.

The audience screamed as they scrambled to pull away.

Linsan gasped and yanked her violin into place.

Gabaw jumped off the front of the stage and slammed his fist into the floor. A line of fire burst out of the wood straight for her, the heat rising in a wall of fire.

Linsan stepped back, but caught Brook’s legs. With a scream, she stumbled back while trying to keep her grip on the violin.

Miska surged up between them and the fire. She crossed her arms and plunged into the flames. With a deafening roar, the line of fire split in half around her body and jetted into the empty chairs on each side.

Whimpering, Linsan untangled herself from Brook’s legs. She wanted to check on her friend or at least drag her

to safely, but then she heard the riff hit the beat and the distinct sound of fireballs launching. She looked up to see them arcing around Miska and slamming into chairs and people, throwing them aside.

“Fuck,” she screamed. “We need to get these people away!”

“Little busy!” snapped Miska and she struggled against the flames that tore at her body, setting the ends of her hair on fire and burning at her dress.

Brook pushed herself up. Her dress was ruined but there was a bandage made from Miska’s dress hastily wrapped around her belly with a knot of fabric pressed directly into the wound. Brook’s face twisted into a grimace of pain as she lurched to her knees.

Linsan started for her but flashes of light warned her of two fireballs that streaked toward her and Brook. Without thinking, Linsan swung the violin to block of the first one, catching the searing heat with the back of her instrument and swatting it to the ground.

Linsan jumped over Brook and spun her body to catch the fireball against her back. Her senses exploded into agony as the force drove her to her knees. The smell of burning fabric and hair filled her world.

Brook reached for her. “Linsan!”

“Get. Away!” sobbed Linsan through the pain. She tried to put out her dress and the violin at the same time, but her limbs didn’t quite move fast enough. She gave up the violin with a sob and dropped to her back to roll back to extinguish the flames that tore at her back.

Brook’s face twisted into a mask of pain and determination. She pulled back her arms to clap and screamed out a warning.

Both Miska and Linsan cringed as Brook clapped her hands together with all her might. The concussion blast ex-

ploded from her. It launched chairs, papers, and hapless bystanders into the furthest edges of the hall.

In the corner of her eye, Linsan saw her violin rolling away, the flames flaring up as more of the wood caught. She let out a sob and crawled after it in hopes of rescuing her only chance to defeat the four men.

“No, pick it up! Get it!” bellowed Dukan. His voice had a frantic tone to it.

Linsan looked past Miska’s burning dress to see that Brook’s concussion blast has knocked Palisis off the pedestal. The precious instrument had landed near a hunk of burning stage.

Dukan struggled with the musician’s chairs on the side. They had caught him when they were thrown to the back of the stage and his limbs were entangled. He grunted and thrashed before he managed to crawl out. Frantic, he scrambled across the stage.

“No!” screamed Brook as she clapped again. The explosion tore the ground apart underneath the concussion wave. It struck the stage and the wooden structure buckled from the impact.

A snapping board launched the violin into the air.

Mayfor and Dukan lunged for it.

The violin reached the apex of its flight and came down.

“Palisis!” Linsan screamed desperately with her hand reaching out for the instrument far out of her reach.

The strings of the violin rang out, played without a bow being touched to them. Translucent energies flared around the instrument and enveloped it. It fell only a foot before bouncing off some invisible force inches way from two murderer’s outstretched hands.

Linsan froze as the violin bounced again, kicking away from the stage and directly toward her. It struck the ground

and then spun and skipped across the splintered wood and exposed rock to stop at her knees.

Linsan stared down at it, her body shaking from her fear and her mind unable to see what had deflected the instrument.

Brook groaned in pain. "Just. Pick. It. Up!"

"But—!"

"You said you played it, so play it because we're going to burn!" She sobbed through the pain as she staggered to her feet. One arm pressed the ruins of Miska's dress against her wound. "Now!"

Linsan reached down for Palisis. She knew that she may have ruined the chance of getting it back if she played it, but Dukan's betrayal couldn't be forgiven.

To her surprise, the paired bow came to a stop next to the Palisis. She hadn't seen it slide toward her, but it was obvious that the violin had demands of its own.

The strings ran out again, dancing and humming the closer her fingers came to the instrument.

When she wrapped her hand around the warm wood, she felt a surge of power rising through her. Energies flickered on the edges of her vision as invisible currents stirred her hair and clothes.

Palisis fit against her neck as if it belonged. She held the bow over the strings for a moment.

Tilbin's next song broke the moment.

With a glare, she drew the bow across the strings and played a single note. It hung in the air, setting off eddies of power around her. With a sad smile, she started one of her own attack songs.

"Yes!" Miska said as she clapped her hands.

Brook joined, the impacts a dull thud that boosted the power that surrounded Linsan. She staggered to her feet but never stopped keeping the beat.

Gabaw struck fire, slamming into the ground and sending a line of fire directly for Linsan and Brook.

In time with Linsan's music, Miska stepped up to Brook and spun her around as Linsan spun in the opposite direction. The flame burst harmlessly against Miska's shoulder in a wave of heat and pressure.

Linsan reached the upward trill that shot arrows of force away from her. The beat of her two friends added to them, increasing their strength and speed.

The arrows slammed into the stage, missing Tilbin but striking Gabaw and Mayforn.

Gabaw fell back in a spray of blood. His back slammed into the wreckage of the stage. He struggled to get back to his feet as his hands burned brightly.

Tilbin's riff slammed the air, punching it with the complex sounds of the guitar. With his fingers sliding along the frets, he summoned dozens of fireballs that surrounded him in a halo.

It was the same attack as the one from the car.

Linsan changed the pace of her song and summoned the power to block his magic. When the fireballs came screaming from all directions, she was ready. Assisted with the steady beat, she launched arrow after arrow into the blasts and they burst harmlessly around her.

Before the fire faded from the air, her defense song reached an inflection point where she could use the power to attack. She launched a single arrow of force directly for Tilbin's chest.

Mayforn caught it with a backhand and then spun to join in the rhythm of Tilbin's attack. Gabaw also added a beat of his own and Tilbin's power grew.

They traded fireballs and arrows for a few seconds.

Tilbin suddenly smiled. He pointed at Miska and then hammered a series of riffs that brought up fireballs launching directly at her.

At the same time, Gabaw slammed his fists into the ground and set another fire burst directly at her.

Miska had to abandon her clapping to block the attack. She groaned as the heat pounded her body, tearing away at with steady thumbs that Linsan struggled to ignore while still maintaining her own song.

Then there were more fireballs arcing from the side but they were aimed at both Brook and Linsan.

With a gasp, Linsan spun away.

Brook wasn't fast enough. All of Tilbin's attacks jerked away from Linsan to drive into Brook. The steady thumps of fire pummeled her body as she lost her balance.

Linsan no longer had the beat. She danced away.

Tilbin and Mayforn followed. The guitar set off bursts that Mayforn's clapping boosted Tilbin's power. They screamed through the air as they streaked toward her.

Without her friends helping, Linsan had to play faster while twisting to avoid the attacks. Sweat burned at her brow as she struggled to block. There was no opportunity to strike herself.

She slipped. With a yelp, she fell back as one of the fireballs slammed into her. Heat crushed against her body and she tried to twist Palisis away from the flames.

To her surprise, the heat didn't touch the violin. A shimmering force wrapped around the instrument and the flames slid harmlessly off the violin.

Hitting the ground with one shoulder, Linsan kicked back and flipped back onto her feet. She landed next to Brook's smoldering form.

A sob rose up. "Brook?"

Brook looked up, her hair smoking. She looked at them and then glared. "*Safe Adventures, Our Departed Loves.*"

It was a ballad, a song with plenty of opportunity to build up power but there were desperately few places where the song could be used to attack.

"Are you—?"

"Play it! The cow fuckers don't know it." Brook wiped her forehead, leaving a streak of blood. She stood up and clapped hard to knock away the attacks. With a powerful step forward, she smacked her hands together again but this time one palm slid off the other.

A narrow wave of force shot out of her hand, narrowly avoided Miska as it cut through Gabaw's line of fire. It struck him and threw him into the stage.

Gabaw's body bounced off the wood before he was propelled into the chairs below.

Sobbing, she stood even with Miska. With a smile to her lover, she began to clap out the rhythm of the song.

Miska joined immediately, her precision pounding fitting with Brook's mechanical timing for a song they had only heard minutes before.

Trusting her friend, Linsan began to play.

As the fireballs came raining down, the three wove around each other. Miska would turn so the fire struck her body and Brook clapped to blow away the fire bursts that reached past.

Only waves of heat struck Linsan as she improvised her dance. All the hours of practice sank in as she took her skill to recreate the song and used it to find a dance that would match it.

Her friends worked with her as they blocked the attacks even as Gabaw returned to strike at her.

Heat and fire raged through the hall.

She danced remembering the purpose of the song, of four lovers that found each other and switched while remaining friends. The happiness of her parents: her father's pride and her mother's resilience. They had suffered for her because of love just as Junith did for her Marin. Linsan has stepped aside for Miska, but she loved them both.

The song grew louder, magnified by dance and beat. She was playing her family's legacy and she would not let their betrayal be forgotten.

When the cusp of the song came, the crescendo that Linsan could finally turn into an attack, she was ready.

Linsan drew the final note with a flourish as the world around her became a storm of shimmering power. An arrow flew out. Then another and another. They came faster and she joined, breaking away from the song as she accelerated her playing.

Miska and Brook joined her after only a few beats, clapping and pounding faster as each note became a weapon that rained down on the stage.

Tilbin broke off his song to switch to another one, no doubt a defensive one, but the arrows didn't stop. They pounded ceaseless, exploding into brilliant force as they tore apart wood and stone. They tore into the three murderers, sending them back with spurts of blood and groans of pain.

Tilbin's fingers slipped on the strings.

The magic resisting her faltered.

Linsan directed a wave of power toward his guitar.

As the spectral heads struck it, the wood crack before it shattered from the force of its own strings. His hands were lacerated as he fell back to the ground.

Linsan directed the attacks at the other two men as they dove to the side.

The song ended. She tried to stop it but there was no way to keep playing without losing everything. There were no more notes left to play, no more energy to fuel them.

She stopped sharply, her body shaking as all the energy and emotions drained out of her in an instance.

Empty, she stared at the carnage before her as she sucked in one breath after the other. Sweat soaked her skin and her muscles trembled from the effort. The air smelled of lightning and flame, a bitter taste that seared the back of her throat.

She was vaguely aware of the magenta motes that floated in the air. They were the feedback from two power forces colliding with each other. The more power, the more light but she had never seen a cloud filled with the baneful light that scorched the entire hall.

Ahead of her, Brook leaned against Miska. She let out a whimper. "D-Did we win?"

Miska clutched her. "I don't know. We got the three but I don't know where your daddy is."

"He hurt me. My own daddy," Brook said as her knees collapsed and she sank to the ground.

Cradling her lover, Miska dropped to her knees to cushion the blow. "I know. But he will never hurt you again, I promise."

Linsan threw herself to Brook to hold her tightly, Palisis resting in her other hand. "Oh, Brook!"

Brook's bright brown eyes grew cloudy. "It was a good... song..." And then her eyes rolled up and she slumped forward.

Decisions

... those of native blood may hold no office or position of authority with in these lands.

—*The True and Complete Laws of Gepaul*

Linsan sat on a chair next to Brook's head, holding her friend's hand as Brook slept. Even though the healers said that Brook would survive, Linsan couldn't help but worry every time a whimper of pain escaped Brook's lips or she trembled.

Miska sat on the opposite side, her head rested on Brook's pillow as she stretched out across two chairs. Pillows and blankets spilled out underneath her from her attempts to make herself comfortable.

"Miska?" Brook's voice was broken and hoarse.

Linsan sat up sharply.

"Did you get Palisis!?"

Wiping the sudden tears, Linsan nodded. "I got it back. Lord Xasnal was annoyed that I ruined his commission, but he decided that he would look the other way since Tilbin attacked first."

She gave a rueful smile. "We don't have to even pay for the damage to his hall, but I did have to promise to play for him once everything was rebuilt."

Brook frowned. "I'm so—"

Linsan held up her hand. "No, it's good. He's going to give me patronage for a year to let everything settle, the investigations to finish up, and your father's trial to proceed."

Her eyes widened. "D-Daddy?"

"They caught him. He was trying to escape on a boat, but the city guard have a number of water talents and he was unable to escape. And Gabaw..." Linsan voice broke as she struggled with the words. "Gabaw made a deal with the authorities. He said he had proof that Dukan ordered the fire on our woods and was selling off Sterligs over the years. That is why Dukan had so much money, he had been trading our legacy for cash. The captain's men are escorting him back home to get it."

Tears ran down Brook's face. "Oh, Lin. I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"There was... they already seized your... Dukan's assets here and back home. You got a bunch of letters from your sisters while you were unconscious. I can't imagine they are happy news."

Brook's face fell. "Then I have nothing either."

Miska looked up through her hair that had draped over her face. "You have us."

Brook gave a weak effort at a smile. She pushed the hair away and looked at Miska with love and affection. "That's all I really need, right? You two?"

"That's right, Princess." Miska leaned into Brook's hand and nuzzled it. "The healers said it would take a month or three to recover from your injuries."

"I hope so. It really hurts right now."

"You aren't getting out what you owe me."

At Brook's confused look, Miska grinned. "I get a royal servant for a week, remember?"

Brook giggled and then winced. "O-Ouch."

"Just because you got stabbed by your own father doesn't let you get out of obligations." Miska grinned and ran her thumb along Brook's cheek.

"I know! Just don't make me laugh!"

Miska crawled onto the bed and pressed her body to Brook's. "No laughter, but you don't get to escape me."

Brook leaned back. "I'm caught by my obligations, they are a chain around my neck." Then she lifted her head. "Yes, I know that's from a play."

Linsan shrugged and kept her mouth shut.

"And your mother was in it."

It took more effort not to smirk.

Resting her head back, Brook stroked Miska's hair. "Do you think there is a chance we could seize Tilbin's, Gabaw's, and that other guy's assets?"

Linsan cocked her head. "Mayforn? Why?"

"I heard you talking back when I was upset about losing access to the bank. I thought about it while I was driving. They own the land they stole from Miska's tribe. She can't own it herself, but I know daddy got around that by having some tribal folk own stocks in a company."

"We can't own a business either, my love."

Brook grinned and then winced. "Owning stock is not control. If we got those assets, put it into a company, and then you and the other *Feil* could have their land back. At least on paper."

Miska sighed. "How would that help? It would still be one of you in charge and that person would still be able to steal from the lands."

“Pick someone who had your interests. I already know from daddy’s... Dukan’s work, that the person in charge doesn’t have to be the one who makes decisions.”

Miska’s face brightened. “Are you offering yourself, Princess?”

“To be your puppet leader?” Brook smiled with a blush. “Maybe. Yes. I mean, maybe.”

“Does that mean I get to stick my hand up your—?”

“No!” Brook said, her face coloring. Then she glanced at Linsan and back to Miska. “M-Maybe? If Linsan is okay with it?”

Linsan stood up. “As I told you before, you will always be my friend and I would be your lover until you find someone more worthy of the role. You’ve found your champion now, so I can happily go back to being merely your best friend for the rest of your life and leave you in the hands of your lover.”

Brook’s eyes watered for a moment. “That’s a line, isn’t it?”

“I think so.” Linsan grinned broadly. “But it isn’t from a play. At least not yet, I’m going to try my hand at writing one just so I can say it is.”

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

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