

Toini Comes Home

Version 2

Draft 1

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paladin

/'palədɪn/ n.

1. a holy warrior

2. a person appointed by a god to be their representative in the physical world

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One

Gosmarin Ship Yard

The morning is dull and grey. Towers of wood and steel rise against a pale sky. Rain hangs in the air. It's still early spring and not many ships are moored to the towers. The tourist season has not yet begun, and most ships floating in the air above the shipyards are freighters and haulers. Big ships. Dull colors. Heavy loads from far away.

And then, there's the Orange Cream.

Too small for a hauler. Too big for a camper. Too old and beat up for the fashionably rich. And it's orange.

The ship hangs moored to a tower on the outskirts of the shipyard, a careful distance from any other vessel. As if scared to come too close. Thick cables and rubber pipes connect to the tower, charging the ship's batteries, dumping waste, refilling water and fuel.

She's moored to restock, refuel, refill. Came in last night but has yet to file for a departure slot.

On the ground and in the towers, yard workers talk. Hushed tones. Furtive glances. The orange ship did not report its purpose, declared no cargo, and has yet to send anyone to ground.

Yard workers keep their distance. Ships like this are not unheard of. Whether good or bad, one does well not to get involved outside the line of duty.

On this morning, the Orange Cream causes no trouble. Workers of the yard go about their business. The sky stays gray, and soon enough rain begins to fall.

Two

The Orange Cream

Aboard the ship, a bell rings. A low chime – friendly, and without urgency. There is a meeting, and the crew should gather, but there is no rush.

Get yourself in order. Put your tools away. Tidy up your workspace – then go to the lounge. That is what the bell says.

In the lounge waits the ship’s commander.

A woman in her thirties. Short and stocky – dressed in army green. Sturdy boots and combat fatigues. Knitted sweater and infantry cap.

A daughter of the north. Eyes of blue and steel. Tattooed vines climb her neck, across her right cheek, and disappear into her hair – long blonde dreads tied back in a bundle. A small silver ring pierces her lower lip on the left side of her mouth.

A holy warrior. Claimed by her god to do his bidding in the world.

It is she who called the meeting, and she likes to be there when her crew comes in.

Toini Elsikulta Riveniemi, Paladin of Ek. Commander of the Orange Cream.

If you call her by her middle name, she’ll break you.

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One by one, her crew drops in – fighters, scientists, engineers. Humans, most of them. Two elves. Two dwarves. One fylk. Another elf, and a plain old regular ship’s cat, and it was really there before the commander herself, sleeping on the shelf above the radiator.

Soon enough, a ship’s crew is gathered. Seats are found. Conversations die down. A meeting can begin.

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Toini drew herself up and cleared her throat. “Good morning everyone.”

Her crew nodded or mumbled their greetings back, acknowledging they were there, that they’d heard her.

“I’ve got a few things this morning.” She paused and surveyed the room to make sure she had everyone’s attention. “First of all: I have a quest.”

For a moment, everything was still. No one said a word. Anticipation filled the room.

Their commander hadn’t had a quest in a long time – months. She’d still kept them busy. Church always had something that needed doing that she could get behind, but nothing like a god-given quest.

When her god spoke to her, their commander would drop anything she was doing – anything – and set off across the world to fulfill her calling. It’s what she lived for, her reason to exist, what kept her going. In many cases, it’s why they followed her.

And now, it was time again.

“This is a simple one, and it should be quick,” said Toini.

The tension in the room sagged. They’d been waiting for something meaningful to do. Waiting, and hoping. Someone sighed.

“None of that.” Toini scowled and snapped her fingers, demanding attention. “It’s still important.”

“I need to go to Kul Viller to meet a new member for the crew. Time is a factor, so I will go by train. Raoul will be coming with me. The rest of you will come with the ship.”

“Ned.” Toini turned to the ship’s captain. “Kul Viller should take about a five days from here, right?”

Ned nodded. Short and scrawny. Full beard, knitted sweater and a skipper’s hat. “Aye, boss. Five days, give or take, depending on wind and customs.”

“Good. You will handle customs yourself. I will not have the time to set things up for smooth passage for you.”

“Roger that, boss.” Ned touched a finger to his forehead in some kind of salute.

Toini nodded back. She paused for a moment, and then drew herself up again. “Second: this will be Raoul’s last mission with us.”

Silence clamped down on the room.

Toini studied her crew. No one looked at Raoul – not directly. Furtive glances shot his way, where he stood over by the door. Tall and dark and handsome – just the right kind of unshaven. Dark suit, white shirt, no tie.

The odd one out. The man who didn’t fit.

Here and there, Toini spotted the odd smug grin, but not many, and those she saw disappeared fast. Her crew may not be fond of her chronicler, but they were good enough not to let it show – much.

“We’ve talked it over, me and Raoul, and we’ve agreed it’s the best solution. If anyone has any questions about this, please address them to me in private.”

She turned to Raoul and nodded.

Her chronicler said nothing, and after a moment he nodded back.

Toini cleared her throat and addressed the room again. “After we’ve picked up our new addition in Kul Viller we’ll head directly for Knysvian. Once there Raoul will sign off and we’ll be assigned a new chronicler. I expect this to take at least one week, but probably more.”

She sighed, and then a small grin appeared on her face. “During this time I’m unlikely to be needing any of you for anything in particular, and you’re free to spend the week as you wish.” The grin bloomed into a full blown smile. “Try not to embarrass me too much.”

Grins and chuckles swept through the group. Someone elbowed the person next to them. Someone punched another’s shoulder. It was all good. The kind of reaction she’d expected.

They needed a bit of time off. Too long with boring missions that didn’t mean anything. It kept her in good standing with Church, but it wasn’t what her crew had signed on for. They were hers, all but Raoul, and they wanted to help her with the quests her god gave her – not unrelated assignments provided by a faceless clerical bureaucracy.

A bit of vacation would do them good, and then some proper work to get back into the swing of things.

Toini snapped her fingers, calling the meeting to order again. “Ned, Kul Viller to Knysvian will be about two weeks, right?” She looked at her captain.

Ned shrugged. “At the very best. Probably more like three at this time of year. It’s a long flight against prevailing wind.”

“Hmpf...” Toini scowled. “Very well then. You heard the captain. Five days to Kul Viller. Three weeks

to Knysvian. Should be smooth sailing, and then one week vacation for the lot of you.” Her face stern she let her gaze sweep over her crew. “Questions?”

“I have a question.” Mareetha, ship mechanic and engineer, raised her hand. A big woman, probably in her mid fifties – not that anyone would ask – dressed in blue coveralls and a checkered flannel shirt. Brown hair. “I wonder... Can you tell us anything about this person you’re meeting in Kul Viller?”

Toini lowered her eyes. Of course someone would ask. She’d been more surprised if no one did. “No. I can’t.” She sighed, and then she faced her crew again. “But, to answer the question you’re all asking: yes, he’s a close combat specialist and will be taking over Lorang’s old job.”

Lorang was dead. Killed in her service. Bad stuff. Two other members of her crew had lost their trust in her and left because of it. The rest of them would stay, but a death on the team always caused a lot of strain.

“Boss.” Mareetha scowled at her. “There’s something you’re not telling us.”

Toini nodded. “Yes.” She nodded again. “Yes, there is.”

Mareetha crossed her arms over her chest. “Uhu...”

“It’s not important. He’ll probably tell you himself when you meet him.” They had to trust her. She couldn’t go telling them personal things for no good reason. It wouldn’t be like her. They’d think she was losing faith in them.

“Oooh...” Mareetha raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. “Interesting...”

“Enough!” Toini snapped her fingers, and her face grew beet red. So much for being calm and collected.

She cleared her throat and took a deep breath to compose herself. “If no one has any other questions the meeting is over. Raoul, get packed. We leave in an hour. Ned, make sure the ship is fully refueled and restocked. We will not be staying in Kul Viller longer than absolutely necessary.”

Three

City of Border, on the border of Viller and Fors

The day is over. The sun is long gone, midnight is just around the corner, and the rain still falls. A paladin and her chronicler will go no further this day.

A small town, right on the border. Trains stop here. Travelers step off and go through customs. Show their papers, declare their goods, that kind of thing. Then they step on a new train and leave.

Old fashioned. Inconvenient. Inefficient.

But no train leaves at this hour, and travelers must stay the night. A room has been booked at a cheap little place. It is soon time to sleep.

Soon, but not just yet.

A paladin and her chronicler have spent a day on and off trains. More hours than they care to remember. There is a need to wind down and relax. A bit of food. Something to drink. Tea for him – coffee for her.

A quiet seat that doesn't move, from which the view does not change. A street light and a rubbish bin. A closed convenience store across the street. The water on the window runs straight down instead of to the side.

There's a candle on the table, and jazz in the speakers. A paladin and her chronicler each have a cup of their own, and food is on its way. Should not be long. A cafe is mostly empty.

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"I'll never understand how you can drink coffee this late," said Raoul. "How do you sleep?"

"I don't know." Toini set down her cup and leaned back in her chair. "Old habit I guess. Never been an issue."

And then they just sat there, looking at each other across the table, not saying a thing. So much for conversation.

Toini had changed into a red parka and baseball cap for the trip. Raoul had donned his black leather coat, but now it hung over the back of the third chair at the table, together with their bags.

The hours of traveling had barely ruffled his suit, and he looked as fresh as if he'd just stepped in for a quick brunch between meetings. Always impeccable. Proper. Polite.

Definitely the odd one out.

Taking another sip of her coffee, Toini glanced over towards the counter where the barista was preparing their sandwiches. Better be done soon. It had been a long day, and while Raoul might look chipper, she knew they both needed their sleep.

"So, ahem..." Raoul cleared his throat. "What can you tell me about the quest? You've barely said a word all day."

"Mmm..." Toini stared down into her mug. White, ceramic, and with a handle big enough to fit her entire hand around. A little more than half-full. The cafe too dark for her to see her reflection.

"Boss, come on." Heaving a sigh, Raoul drummed his fingers against the table "You know I have to provide a full account of your activities – and it's better if you tell me before the action starts."

“Pfft... Action.” Toini snorted.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, yes.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll tell you.” Might as well get it done and over with.

The barista appeared beside them and set down two plates with their sandwiches on the table. “There we go.” He clasped his hands in front of him and smiled down at them. Tall boy, spoke with an accent. “Ham and egg for the sir. Salami and brie for my lady.”

“Thank you.” Raoul nodded up at him.

“Can I get you anything else?”

Raoul shook his head. “No, that will be all thank you.”

Toini’s belly rumbled. She donned a little smile and nodded up at the boy. “Thank you.”

“Just wave if you need anything. Enjoy.” Smiling, he nodded at each of them in turn, and then left.

A moment later they both snatched up their sandwiches and dug in.

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A paladin and her chronicler eat in silence. Jaws crush down on bread and meat. Sips of tea. Sips of coffee. Sighs of satisfaction.

Rain still falls outside a window.

A candle still burns on a table.

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“So...” Raoul put down his sandwich, most of it gone. He cleared his throat and reached for his tea. “A quest?”

“Yes...” Toini nodded and kept chewing. She paused, swallowed, and took a sip of her coffee. “A quest.”

Raoul raised an eyebrow. “Uhu?”

“Easy. I’m getting to it.” Glaring at him, Toini set down her mug.

With a nod, Raoul took another bite of his sandwich.

“The quest is to acquire a new member for the crew.”

“Yes,” he said between mouthfuls. “You explained that this morning.”

Toini scowled at him.

“Sorry. Go on.”

Still scowling, she took another bite of her sandwich. He could just wait. It was her quest. Her story.

A few moments later she swallowed down the last bite. She paused a little longer to collect her thoughts, and eventually she cleared her throat. “To do this, I need to find my sister in Kul Viller. She will put me in touch with an old childhood friend.”

Raoul raised an eyebrow, “Sister?”

“Yes.” She glared at him. “I have a sister.” She could have a sister like a normal person. Just because she never told anyone didn’t mean she couldn’t.

“Is that wise?” Frowning, he leaned back in his chair.

Toini shook her head. “No. It’s not. It’s really bad, but that’s the quest.”

She grabbed her mug of coffee and stared down into it. Almost empty. A big lump grew in her throat and she swallowed. “If Ek tells me to go see my sister, then I’m going to go see my sister.”

Across the table Raoul crossed his arms over his chest. Frowning, he stared at her. “He’s testing you?”

A test indeed. Toini nodded, but didn’t say anything. It had been long since last. She’d always passed, or she wouldn’t be here, but it had never been easy. Her faith was strong, but her god knew her weak spots.

“I have to trust in Ek,” she whispered.

“I see... I see.” Raoul nodded and stroked his chin, rubbing his fingers against the stubble. “Is that what you didn’t want to tell your crew?”

“Uhhh...” Her crew? Sure, it was her crew, but he was part of it too, at least for a little longer.

She raised her head and looked at him. Small wonder he didn’t fit in. It wasn’t just the clothes and the well groomed appearance.

“Yes.” She pulled a smile onto her face and nodded. “Yes, exactly. That’s it.”

”Uhu... Okay.” Still stroking his chin, Raoul pursed his lips and frowned. “And then?”

“Then?”

Raoul rolled his eyes. “You said your sister will put you in touch with an old childhood friend. What’s next?”

“Nothing. That’s it.”

Frowning, Raoul stared at her. “That’s it?”

“Yes.” Toini stared back. What was the big deal? “That’s it.”

Again, Raoul leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin. He looked out at the rain for a moment and then back at her again. “So that childhood friend of yours – they’re the new team member?”

Toini stifled a yawn. All these stupid questions. “Yes...”

She shrugged and sat up a little straighter, drained the last of her coffee, and sat the mug down – perhaps a little too hard.

“Tell me.” Raoul still sat there with his fingers on his face, like some therapist asking her about her father or something.

“Alright...” She let out a long breath, and let her shoulders slump. “Roy. His name is Roy. I’ve known him since I was a little girl.” Since forever – as long as she could remember.

Across the table from her, Raoul just nodded, and for once didn’t say anything.

”He was Paivi’s best friend and...”

A few steps behind, a few years too little, a few teeth short of a smile. She’d been the annoying little sister. Tiny Toini. Always a nuisance – a chore for her sister to look after. And Roy had always been there. Her sister’s awesome cool friend.

Roy.

He’d always been nice to her. Nice to her sister too. To everyone really. Then, as they grew older, things had changed, as things do. She’d still been the little sister, but somewhere along the way she’d

gone from being a nuisance to being one of the gang, and she hadn't even noticed.

And then Paivi had landed that manager job at the pub, and for a while it had just been the two of them.

Toini shook her head to clear her thoughts. Not now.

"He's a good guy." She yawned and covered her mouth with her hand and hoped the cafe was dark enough it didn't show her cheeks turning red.

Raoul picked up his cup and looked down into it, swirling the tea around. "Paivi is your sister's name?"

Nodding, Toini grabbed her mug as if to drink, frowned down into it like she'd forgotten she'd just emptied it, and then put it back on the table.

"When was the last time you saw her?" Raoul looked at her, and then back into his cup again. "Or, this Roy?"

Toini stifled another yawn, and rubbed a hand against her face. "Long time ago." So long ago. So very long ago. "Back before all this. Twelve years, I think, maybe." A different time. A different life.

"Do they know?"

"No..." She wrapped her hands around her mug. It had gone cold since long, but she held it anyway.

"Not even your sister?" Raoul looked up from his tea cup and raised an eyebrow at her.

"No!" Toini spat out the word. "No one knows." Her grip around the mug tightened, and her jaws clenched. "They all think I'm dead. I haven't spoken to anyone. You know this."

She stared at him across the table. He knew she couldn't let her past life get in the way of her calling. She belonged to her god now. Completely. She was a different person.

That woman she'd been, the one her sister knew, she might as well be dead.

"I see..." Raoul rubbed at his chin again, a thin smile playing on his face. "Interesting..."

Bastard. Interesting indeed. Her entire life. Yeah, getting a new chronicler was definitely a good decision.

Toini took a deep breath, and it rumbled through her throat as she let it out again. "I'm done here. Go pay."

Raoul's smile slipped for just an instant, and then he nodded and got to his feet.

Toini yawned wide and stretched. She stood up, grabbed her bag from the chair, and headed for the door. Out into the rain. To the room they'd booked. To a bed.

Sleep would be good.

Four

The Kingdom of Viller

A new day is dawned, but a rain still falls. Under a tree, in a field, stands a cow. Alone. Cold. Damp. Water drips from leaves above. A faint humming in the distance grows to a rumble, a howling, a roar, and a train thunders past on the railroad down at the edge of the field. A monster of steel and science, with passengers from here to there.

A cow raises her head to look, but a train is long gone, and the noise with it. There's just the cow now, and the rain.

In a train, by a window, on her own, sits a paladin. Group of four seats and a table. Plenty of space, but still she is alone. No one wants to sit near a weirdo with dreads in her hair and tattoos on her face.

Her chronicler is elsewhere. Getting more coffee, and a tea. Leaving her alone. Not that he speaks. Not that she answers. It is still good to be alone.

Her mind wanders.

Outside a window, her homeland glides past. Fields – vast and green under a grey sky. Far to the south are hills and mountains. On a clear day you can see them. Snow tipped peaks glistening in the summer sun. But not today.

A paladin remembers. She knows those mountains. Knows these lands. It is far too long since last.

Toini sighed and reached for her cup. Still empty. She frowned and put it back on the table. A plain paper cup with a plastic lid and the International Rail company logo printed on the side. Crap coffee, but still coffee, and that's what mattered.

She stared out the window. A familiar view. Not that she'd traveled this way a lot, but it still felt familiar – like home. The land spoke to her in a way it didn't do anywhere else, and she'd been a lot of places. All over the known world, and more.

Her calling had shown her lands she'd never dreamt of seeing with her own eyes. Jungles, mountains, deserts, swamps. Doing her god's will where he needed her to. Upholding the laws of nature. Saving lives, dealing deaths.

That too, she'd never dreamt of – not like that.

Sure, she'd been in the army. She knew what that meant, but it wasn't the same. Up here, in the peaceful north, war had been an abstract concept – something that happened elsewhere, to other people in other lands.

She'd trained and served and done her duty, but when the weekend came, or in the evening if she wanted to, she could take the train home and see her sister and her friends. Her home had still been there.

Even when she'd signed up for the international peace keeping force her home had still been there. She'd always known she could go back and that her sister would be there and that Roy would crack some stupid joke and punch her in the arm.

And then that all changed.

A routine mission that went wrong. Stranded in the jungle. Captured, tortured, broken.

Her squad. That had been the hardest. They'd been used against her. One by one. Anderson, Rayfolk, Ephraheim. Slowly and without mercy. She never even knew why. Still didn't. She hadn't known anything, hadn't been anyone, carried nothing important.

In the end she'd been the only one left, and then it had been her turn.

Pain and hunger. Thirst, darkness, madness.

And then the heat. Burning, searing heat, full of screams and shadows, and someone had told her not to worry and that she'd be safe and she'd wanted to believe but it had all been a lie and the pain hadn't gone away and the shadows hadn't stopped screaming and the hands that tore her flesh hadn't let go and they would never let go and she couldn't breathe and she would never see her sister again.

Toini pressed her eyes together and pushed the memories away. Clenched her jaws, clenched her fists. Took a deep breath. Took another.

Calm down.

Keep it together.

Little by little she cleared her mind. She barred new thoughts from entry and let the ones still there run their course, fade out, and go away. Eventually there was just she left. She, Toini, the paladin.

That woman she'd been, she'd been wrong. She would see her sister again.

Beside her, someone cleared their throat, and she opened her eyes.

Raoul stood next to the table, a steaming paper cup in each hand, and a worried frown on his face.

"Boss? Are you okay?" He set down one of the cups on the pushed it over towards her. "You don't look too good."

She rummaged through the pockets of her parka for a napkin. He was probably right.

"I'm okay."

Toini dabbed at her face. Damp with sweat.

She reached for her coffee, removed the plastic cover, and took a sip. Hot, black, and bitter. Better now. With a sigh she leaned back in her seat and a faint smile pulled at her cheeks.

Raoul nodded, but his frown didn't go away, and he remained standing.

"It's okay. Just memories." Her smile stayed on – grew, even. "Nothing serious."

"Do you want me to..." He weaved down the aisle, back the way he'd come from.

Toini shook her head. "No, it's fine. You can sit down. I'm okay. Really."

He nodded and took his seat, diagonally across the table from her. Sure, he was a nuisance to be around, but when it really mattered he knew to shut up. He had that going for him at least. Good when it mattered.

She turned back to the window and stared out over the rain drenched fields on the other side. Here and there a lone tree. A muddy road ran some way from the track, but she saw no one on it. A small village, complete with a windmill on a hill, but no one was out, and then more fields.

It was one of those days. You wouldn't leave the house unless you had to. There was cooking to do. Attics to clean.

“I always thought I’d never see my sister again...”

She wrapped her hands around her cup of coffee, warmed her palms, held it close to her face and smelled the fumes. Sure, it wasn’t all that, but it was warm, and she was home.

“...and now I will.”

On her left cheek, among the green vines, a small bud blossomed.

Five

Kul Viller Grand Central

Everything is just the way it always were. In reality it is not, but a paladin does not care.

The sounds of the trains. The doves up under the rafters, and the steel beams holding up the roof. People everywhere. Alone and in groups. Families and couples. Everyone going somewhere. Home, or far away.

Yes, there are new shops in the gallery at the arrivals hall, there is new paint on walls, and giant monitors show arrivals and departures. Yes, things have changed, but nothing that matters is different.

It is still the Grand Central Station, and its spirit is still awake.

A paladin and her chronicler walk slow. Crowds part around them – the tall handsome man; the short hippie woman. There is no jostling, no accidental bumping. No one gets close. No one is a bother.

A spirit is curious. A mighty presence walks its halls – new and unknown, yet trusting and comfortable. It is good. It is all so good. A spirit fills with joy and confusion. For the rest of the day, no train leaves on time, but no one really minds. No children get lost, no luggage is misplaced, and no one misses a connection. It is a great day to be a train station.

“Hey, boss. Would you mind if I just stepped in to get a paper?” Raoul nodded over towards a news agent. “It’s been ages since I read the Viller Wall.”

Toini stopped. She frowned up at Raoul, started to say something, shrugged, and then nodded. “Just make it quick.”

Might as well. Better keep him happy. Easier that way.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Raoul snapped around and headed off towards the little shop. Toini sighed, shoved her hands into her pockets, and trudged along after him.

Raoul found his paper right away. That wasn’t the issue. It was the amount of people in the line ahead of him waiting to pay, and it was the old man serving them – each one in turn, with a kind word and a smile, and without even a hint of urgency.

Raoul looked at Toini. Raised an eyebrow.

Toini looked at Raoul. Lifted her shoulders and shrugged.

Raoul looked at Toini. Rolled his eyes and grinned.

Muttering to herself Toini walked the aisles of the little shop, looking at the wares. Candy she hadn’t tasted since she was a little girl. Advertisements in her own language. Brand logos from her childhood. Symbols of her long lost past.

And in the magazines section, among tabloids and gossips, a well known face smiled at her from glossy covers.

She stopped with a gasp. Adrian. Memories hammered into her. Assaulted and overwhelmed her. Adrian. She couldn’t breathe. The observation deck on the Golden Lancer. The ten-mile track outside

Hemofil Base. The officer's ball that winter. Roy and Adrian fighting.

Toini stared. He was right there, right in front of her. Gorgeous as ever. Drama at the royal castle. Heartbreak. Girlfriend in tears. The headlines screamed their message. Single again. The kingdom's most eligible bachelor. Big capital letters.

Groaning, Toini hung her head and covered her eyes with her hand. She did not need this.

"Hey, boss. What's up?" Raoul appeared beside her.

"Nothing," she said and looked the other way. "It's fine."

For a moment, Raoul said nothing, and then he began to chuckle. "Really, boss? Prince Adrian?" He nudged her in the side with his elbow. "Catching up on your teenage crush?"

"No! Idiot!" Toini spun around, shoved Raoul out of the way and stalked out of the shop, muttering to herself.

Raoul caught up with her outside the shop, but Toini kept on walking, staring straight ahead, not looking at him. He was grinning. She knew it. That smug, infuriating grin he always had when he knew he was getting to her – and no, it was not stupid charming.

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A paladin moves with determination. Strides through a crowded station, out through doors of glass, into a city grey with rain. In the plaza outside the station she stops to wait, making sure her chronicler keeps up.

Water drips from the brim of her cap, seeps into her hair, and runs down her parka. It does not bother her. Rain is a part of nature, is a part of life.

Finally, her chronicler catches up, him and his suitcase on little wheels and his fancy coat and his stupid umbrella.

She nods. He nods. And together, side by side, but still in silence, they head for the subway.

Six

Kul Viller Subway – Yellow Line (eastbound)

A subway train is nearly empty. A paladin and her chronicler sit near the end of their car, on each side of the aisle. She has one foot up against the edge of the seat facing hers, just like in her youth. Old habits come back so fast.

Outside the window, a tunnel is dark. Obviously.

A train rattles and clanks. Metal grinds against metal. Breaks screech and engines growl. Doors pull open. Slam shut. Now and then, sootkin howl through the darkness outside, playing in the airstream of the train – like dolphins by a boat.

Someone steps off. No one steps on. A train car is empty.

It is all so very familiar.

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Toini tugged at her parka. Too warm. It had been over a decade and they still hadn't fixed the heating in the trains. Always too warm. That was one thing she wished wouldn't have stayed the same.

On the other side of the car Raoul cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "Alright boss, what was that all about?"

"What?" Toini frowned.

"Back at that shop. Prince Adrian and everything."

"Oh, just drop it." Toini sighed. Why couldn't he just let it go? "It's nothing." She scowled at him and turned back to staring out the window. "Nothing..."

"Seriously boss. I really didn't expect that of you."

Again, there was that smugness about him, in the way he spoke. She could hear it even when she wasn't looking at him.

"I said drop it!" Toini rolled her eyes. "And it's not like that."

"Sure looked like it boss." Raoul chuckled.

Grumbling, Toini turned to face him again. "It's not like that. Okay?" She made a chopping motion with her hand to underscore her point. It really wasn't anything like that.

"You're standing there moaning like a lovesick teenager." Raoul shrugged, a big grin on his face.

"What else am I going to think?"

"Seriously Raoul." Toini sighed and shook her head. "You know me better than that."

"Well..." He splayed his hands and raised his eyebrows, a total picture of innocence. "I thought I did."

Toini hung her head. Her shoulders slumped and she let out a long breath. Might as well tell him. It wasn't like all the memories weren't coming back on their own as it were anyway. Stupid Adrian. Stupid Raoul.

It was supposed to be a good day. She was going to meet her sister.

She cleared her throat and straightened up. And then she just sat there, staring up the length of the empty subway car, sorting through her thoughts. This really wasn't part of the plan. How could she

have forgotten about Adrian? The train rattled on, clanking and grinding, taking her closer to her destination.

Raoul, wisely, said nothing.

Eventually, she took another deep breath. “We were in the air force together.” She looked down at her hands in her lap. “I served with him both at Hemsfil Base and aboard the Golden Lancer.”

“Oh, the exiled son.” Raoul whistled through his teeth. “The plot thickens.”

Toini clenched her jaws and shot him a glare. “He was a really good friend of mine.”

“Was?” Smirking, he raised an eyebrow at her.

Her blood boiled. She shot to her feet, and fists raised she took two quick steps towards him. Raoul shrank back, the smile gone from his face. Bastard. Cower.

“I’m stupid dead!” she shouted. “Everyone thinks I died. That life is gone. I have no old friends anymore.”

She stared at him, arms wide, fists clenched. He just wouldn’t get it. Chronicler or not, if he didn’t shut up, she’d beat the crap out of him.

“Oh...” Raoul cast down his eyes and shifted in his seat – put his feet together, bit on his nails. “Yes... Right.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Toini lowered her arms and returned to her seat, but her heart still beat hard, like she’d been running. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself down.

It wouldn’t be much longer. A few weeks and then she’d have a new chronicler. She didn’t care how good Raoul was at his job. It’d be a relief to not have someone around who pissed her off with his very presence.

She sighed and leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. “It’s a shitty situation, but I’d like to keep it like that. If Adrian finds out I’m here he’ll want to join the crew, and there’s no way that’ll ever end well.”

Really, it would be a disaster. No one would want that. Her god might be testing her by sending her back to her hometown, but even he wouldn’t want her to bring the stupid prince onto the team.

Over on his side of the car Raoul cleared his throat and tried a little smile. “I see.”

“Yes. Good. Can we drop this now?” Toini crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in her seat, “It’s from before I was consecrated so it’s really none of your business. Okay?”

Raoul nodded, and said nothing else.

Seven

Kul Viller – Old Town

A small spring, halfway up a hill, overlooking a river flowing into a big lake. Once upon a time, a forest ended here. So long ago barely even the hill remembers it anymore.

This is where the city began.

Here, a wanderer dug the first fire pit. Here, a shelter was first raised. Here, settlers staked their claims, and traders plied their wares – and when the first road finally found its way around the lake, this is where it came.

That road is long gone now, just like the forest.

But a spring still has water, and a city still grows.

Only, not right here. Not much has changed since the last fire. A century and a half ago the hill burned. Fires raged for days and when rain finally put it out only smoldering heaps of rubble remained.

It was rebuilt, of course, and quality work it was too, for the time. Stone and wood. Brick and mortar. Cobbled streets with actual gutters. Gas light. The pride of the city. For a while.

It no longer is.

The people who live here keep their homes together, but the age shines through. Old buildings. Old streets. Few visitors. The subway stops at the foot of the hill and it is a steep climb from there.

Halfway up the hill, five streets meet. A cobblestone square with a fountain in the middle. Water spurts from the mouth of a dragon made of stone, into a bowl that overflows into a basin at the dragon's feet.

Around a square are shops and pubs. Small, old-fashioned places, where regulars are known by name, and you can pay another day if money is low.

Tourists don't come here. There are older buildings to see – prettier ones, with more history, where famous people have lived, closer to everything else.

But a paladin and her chronicler are not tourists, and a steep hill is no deterrent.

Neither is rain.

Where the street entered the square, Toini stopped. "There." She raised her hand and pointed. "That's my sister's pub."

Raoul nodded. "I see."

A narrow two-story building at the far end of the square, wedged in between a greengrocer and a butcher – uphill from where they stood.

Toini sighed. "It looks just the same."

Green wall. Darker green door with a window in it. Square windows flanked the door on either side, each with sturdy wooden bench under it. Candles burned in the windows.

A wooden sign hung above the door, too faded to make out any words. Her sister still hadn't repainted it. She always said she would, but never got around to it. It had been the same with the previous owner. Probably a spirit thing.

Raoul nodded again.

Her sister would be in there. Working. It probably wouldn't be busy. Mid afternoon didn't pull much of a crowd during the week. Especially not in this weather. People would stay home, or at work.

"I want you to keep out of the way."

"What?" Raoul turned to her with a frown on his face.

"Inside, there's a booth to the left of the door. Grab a seat there and keep out of the way."

"Toini..." Raoul rolled his eyes. "I'm your chronicler. It's my duty to keep a record of your activities. You know this."

"It's a small room. You can see most of it from the booth." Toini sighed. "Just stay out of the way. Okay?"

Raoul scowled at her, drawing himself up to his full length. "This is an important part of your quest and you're asking me to not bear witness to it."

"No, you idiot." Toini glared at him. "I'm about to meet my sister for the first time in twelve years, and I really don't want your stupid face hanging over my shoulder."

She took a deep breath. "If you sit with your back against the window you'll see and hear just fine." Forcing a smile to her face she planted her hands on her hips. She had to try to be reasonable. This would be a really bad time to pull rank. "Just let me pretend I have some privacy for once. Please."

Raoul looked down on her. He started to say something but stopped himself. He looked out over the rain soaked square, at the little fountain with the dragon, at the wet cobblestones. Water dripped from his umbrella. Not a person in sight. Miserable day.

Eventually he turned back to her and nodded. "Okay. I'll keep in the background."

Toini sighed with relief. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." He smiled, trying to look amiable, or something. "You won't even know I'm there."

"I appreciate it." Toini turned and looked across the square again. Right there. Twelve years.

She took a deep breath, and another. She shrugged, flexed her fingers, clenched her jaws. And then, finally, she set off across the square.

Eight

Paivi's Pub – Basement

A naked bulb shines its light across a room under ground. Concrete walls. Concrete floor. Cracked, bare, and dirty. Stacks of kegs. Full ones to the left, empty on the right. Tubes and pipes and cables.

This is where the beer is, and the cider – in the basement, right below the bar.

A pub's master is swapping out kegs. Taking out the old and bringing in the new. Back and forth to the storage shed out the back yard. Two kegs each way. Two empty. Two full. One in each hand. Muscles bulging. Breath ragged.

Skulls and roses. Daggers and dice. A gun. A bleeding heart. A werewolf dancing in the pale moonlight. Tattoos cover her skin. Symbols of a life lived hard, from shoulder to wrist, across her back and chest, but her face and neck is clear.

She's in her late thirties. Tall and pale – lean and sharp. Wears a red bandana over long black hair. Wears blue jeans. Wears a washed out black top with the logo of some band that played here that she can't remember hearing for having worked too hard all night. Drummer was good though.

A pub's master is a tough bastard.

With a grunt Paivi heaved a keg up on top of the stack. Almost done. Only a few trips left to go. Two – maybe three. She shrugged, stretched, and bent down to lift up the second keg.

The pub tensed. The heart of the house skipped a beat, and the light in the ceiling dimmed.

A moment later it came on again – a little softer, a little warmer, a little bit more friendly.

Paivi sighed and rolled her eyes, but couldn't quite keep a smile off her face. Silly pub. People had been coming here for drinks for centuries, maybe even longer, and the spirit of the place still got as excited as a little puppy when an old regular returned.

Then again, the shamans liked it, and that helped keep a lot of bad news out. She still kept a bat behind the bar, but that was just common sense. She did serve alcohol after all.

Probably, some elf stood at the bar now, soaking their soul in nostalgia and basking in the warmth of welcome. They probably hadn't been here for hundreds of years, and would gasp in mock surprise at being told their favorite brew from when they were here last was no longer available. They liked to do that she'd found.

Then she'd pour them a pint of Gotecan Black on the house and let them tell her about how it used to be back in their day and how it looked all different now but still felt the same.

Well, except she was down in the basement now. Ali'ast would have to handle them. He'd been around the block a few trimes and knew how it went. Most likely, he wouldn't offend them – and even if he did they'd be happy enough to be back to overlook it until she could get back up there and sort it out.

Still smiling, Paivi shook her head and got back to the task at hand. She bent down, grabbed the keg, and hoisted it up on top of the stack. Five high would do. Ali'ast always got pissy if she stacked them higher. Short git.

Grinning, she brushed her hands off against each other, grabbed two empty kegs from the stacks on the right and went to put them out in the shed. Not much left now. Then coffee.

Nine

Paivi's Pub

Rain patters on a plastic roof. Water splashes in a barrel at the corner of a shed.

A pub's master trudges through a back yard with a burden of beer. One full keg in each hand. She shuffles and grunts. Strains and sweats. It is not an easy burden, but she does it anyway – because she can.

Careful steps down old stone stairs, through an open door, and into a basement.

Stone walls. Concrete floor. Rows of shelves and piles of junk. A storage room is full of things that may come in handy some day – perhaps.

Along a wall are doors. Wardrobes and cabinets. Other rooms where no one ever goes. Some doors are locked, some are not. Some have keys, some do not. It is of no matter. Doors are closed for a reason and there is plenty of space in other places.

A stairway at the far end, by the keg room door, leads up – to a bar and a kitchen, and a master's apartment above.

Not much further now, and then just one more trip. Another two kegs and then a break. Coffee.

“Hey! Boss!” Ali'ast shouted from up the top of the stairs. “Boss, are you there?”

Paivi paused at the foot of the stairs. “Yes. I'm here.” Groaning, she turned and sidled through the door to the keg room.

Footsteps drummed down the steps of the staircase and Ali'ast appeared in the doorway behind her. Short and thin and brown. Bald as an egg but with a thick black beard that had started to go white in place. Sometimes she called him Guru Al when she wanted to tease him about something.

White t-shirt, blue jeans, and a white apron with grey stripes. He even still held on to the broom for some reason.

“Hey, boss. There's someone looking for you.” He looked at her with wide eyes. “I think it's important.”

The pub hadn't been wrong. There definitely was some elf standing in the pub right now wanting to talk to her. They'd probably pulled some trick on Ali'ast to get him worked up enough to come running for her.

He knew she was doing the kegs. She'd be done soon enough. No need to run around and holler like loon. How important could it be?

“I know.” Paivi set the kegs down on the floor. She stretched and took a deep breath. “Give them a pint and tell them I'll be there soon. On the house. Just gotta get this sorted. Only two more kegs after this.”

“Uhm... Boss...” Ali'ast squirmed. “She didn't seem to keen on waiting.”

Paivi groaned and bent down to grasp one of the kegs. “Don't be ridiculous. I'll be five minutes. She can wait.”

Ali'ast's eyes grew wide. “No!” The word burst out of him and he clamped his mouth shut and stared at her – his face growing redder by the moment.

“I mean...” He clasped the broom in both hands and swallowed. “I don’t know... It just it seemed really important. I think you should go talk to her.”

“Geez Al.” Paivi frowned at him and then she hoisted the keg up on top of the pile. “What’s gotten into you?” She flexed her fingers and turned to the other keg. “It’s just some elf. They live for stupid ever. She can wait another five minutes.”

Ali’ast cleared his throat. “It’s not an elf, boss. She’s a human.”

“Really?” Paivi straightened up and raised an eyebrow at him. “I felt the whole building react. You must have noticed it too. It was a big one.”

“I didn’t think about it.” He shrugged and leaned on the broom. “But I haven’t been here half as long as you have.”

“But... No human would cause that kind of reaction.” Her brow furrowed, and she scratched her head. She’d been on vacation once, a few years back, and had been gone for over a week. All she’d felt when she came back was relief at being home, and that was probably just her. The spirit hadn’t had anything to do with it.

Something wasn’t right. “What did she look like?”

Ali’ast frowned. “Some kind of hippie chick. You know the kind. Short and chubby.” He held up a hand at about eye level, for him. “She had tattoos all over her face, and dreads too.”

“What?” Paivi grimaced. “Little hippie with tattoos on her face?”

Perhaps she was from some band that had played here. She’d remember that though, and he too. He’d just have told her it was this or that person from this or that band. He wasn’t one to fuff about.

“Did she give a name?”

“Yeah, Toini. She said her name was Toini.”

“What?” She stared at him for a moment, and then the name hit her like a sledgehammer in the guts.

Her mind reeled and her knees grew weak and she reached out a hand to steady herself against a stack of kegs. It could not be. Images flashed through her mind. It must be a coincidence. Cheeks as round as apples. Blonde locks. Smiling eyes. Afternoons in the park, and a pearling laughter she would never hear again.

A plain brown letter.

“Err, boss, what’s up?” Ali’ast took a step towards her and reached out a hand. “Are you okay?”

A plain brown letter from the International Peace Keeping Force of Knysvian.

She hadn’t gone to the park since then. Not like that. Not that park.

Paivi closed her eyes and shook her head. She took a deep breath, and swallowed. “Are you’re sure you heard right?” It had to be a coincidence. It had to be someone else. “Are you’re sure she said... That name?”

She still had that letter in a box upstairs.

“Well, duh! Of course I am.” Ali’ast frowned at her. “Do you want me to run her off? She didn’t look very tough.” He leaned on the broom nodded back up the stairs.

“No!” Panic. She had to see for herself. Had to know. It would be some cruel coincidence, but she had to know.

Ali'ast stared at her, and her face grew red. She hadn't meant to shout at him. It wasn't his fault. He didn't know. She should have told him. Long ago really. It wasn't that she didn't trust him. There just hadn't been a good time and it hadn't seemed important and everything was just fine anyway, right?

"I'm sorry." Paivi swallowed and forced a smile on to her face. "It's fine. I'll talk to her. I... I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Worry creased his brow. "You don't look too good."

She straightened up, shrugged, and brushed her hands off on her hips. "Did she say what she wanted?"

"No, err..." He paused for a moment and then scowled at her. "I didn't ask. I just got this feeling it was important."

"Really?" Paivi crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot against the floor.

Ali'ast drew himself up and planted his hands on his hips. "Why don't you just go and talk to her?" He nodded back towards the door and the stairs up. "She's right there in the bar. I can take care of the kegs."

She looked at him. Looked at at the door. Swallowed. Looked at the kegs. He was right – of course. What other option was there? She had to go look.

"Yes... Yes, okay. Good. I'll go."

Ali'ast smiled and nodded. He stepped out of the way with a swagger and leaned on the broom. "Don't worry boss. I've got this."

"Thanks."

Ten

Paivi's Pub

A paladin stands alone in a familiar room. Dark wood and candlelight. A rock song from before she was born in the speakers. Two old men in the corner by the bar. The fireplace in the snug in the other corner. The shelves behind the bar. Each with bottles waiting to be used. Each with a mirror behind it.

Everything is just as she remembers.

Somewhere behind a radiator is a coaster she dropped on her first night she worked here with her sister. Sixteen years, a few months, some days.

A paladin sees herself in a mirror. Fractured through rows of glass and liquid, sparkling with reflections of candle flames. She knows it is she. Knows the mirrors and the bottles and the room around her.

Safe. Warm. Home.

She is right there, looking back at herself, but will her sister know? She has changed so much. Some shows. A lot is hidden. But her sister will know. Surely. She will be happy to see her.

Her sister will be so surprised.

A paladin smiles. She keeps a giggle in, but a smile pulls at her cheek so hard it almost hurts, and she is a paladin no more.

A young woman is giddy with excitement. Bounces almost. She has got the best surprise for her sister. The best. It is going to be awesome, and she just cannot wait to see the look on her face.

— — —

The door behind the bar opened and a woman stepped into the room. Paivi. Her sister.

It was really her – right there. For real.

Toini swallowed, and her mouth went dry.

She raised her hand, blushed, and wiggled her fingers. A nervous, dainty little wave – like she hadn't waved since she was a teenager and her big sister had to come pick her up after the police took her in for being underage and drunk off her face.

“Hi. It's me.”

Stupid. After so long, and that's all she could think to say. Stupid.

The song on the speakers ended.

Paivi stared at her.

Toini swallowed. She lowered her hand, and her face grew even redder. “Uhm... Paivi?”

Her sister spun around, ran back through the door, and slammed it shut behind her.

She stared at the door. That had been her, hadn't it?

A single glass fell off its shelf.

The two old men in the corner turned to look at her.

And then the door flew open and Paivi burst out and slammed her fists into the counter. “Where have you been?” she screamed. “Where?”

Eyes wide, nostrils flaring.

Toini shrank back. She hunched up her shoulders and ducked her head. This wasn't how it was meant to go.

Squirming, she glanced up at her sister, into a face deformed by anger, into eyes burning with rage. A woman in pain.

Cold and festering. Underneath the rage – hidden away behind walls of strength and pride. So much pain.

Fear. Sorrow. Loneliness.

“I...” Toini swallowed. She hadn't known. Hadn't realized. She could have done something. “I'm sorry.”

It was all her fault.

Paivi stared at her. Chest heaving, breath ragged.

“You're sorry.” With a sneer she pushed away from the counter, spat on the floor, and walked off towards the swinging half-door at the end of the bar.

Everything was wrong. This wasn't what she'd wanted. This wasn't what she'd thought.

And then Paivi was right there, and her big sister wrapped her arms around her and cried.

— — —

Two sisters. Close together. One with her arms around the other. One stiff. Rigid.

A little sister does not move. She keeps her arms down. Her eyes open.

A big sister is wracked by tears.

Silent. Together.

It is good and it is bad. Right and wrong. It is a whirlwind of emotions at war with one another, and a young woman is scared.

Confused. Afraid.

And behind the thoughts and questions, in the chaos of her mind, where everything is different, a little sister hides, and a young woman goes away.

It is all her fault.

A paladin moves. Lifts her arms and hugs her sister back. Leans her head against a shoulder. Is an anvil of support.

A paladin closes her eyes.

— — —

Eventually, at long last, her sister's shoulders stopped shaking. The crying died down, and Paivi released her grip around her and pulled away.

Toini lowered her hands and tried to smile. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Paivi rubbed at her eyes with back of her hand, wiping her tears away, and then she let out a little laugh and a smile twinkled in her eye. “Hi.”

“Uhm...” Toini's smile grew wider, and her cheeks grew warm.

Paivi reached out with both hands and grabbed her by the shoulders. "It's you. It's really you."

"Yes." She swallowed. "It's me."

"But, where have you been? What happened?"

Paivi's smile faded, and the words came faster. Louder. "I thought... They said... Why didn't you say anything?" Her face grew tense, and tears rose in the corners of her eyes. "They said you died!"

Toini lowered her gaze. Pretended to study the tattoos on her sister's arm. "It's complicated..." It was. It really was.

Blushing, she raised her hand and coughed into her fist. "And... Uhm... I've been busy..."

"Busy?" Paivi stared at her. "You've been busy?"

"Yes..." She swallowed. Perhaps that hadn't been the right thing to say. "I'm sorry."

"You died." Paivi clenched her teeth, and her grip on Toini's shoulders tightened. "You left me to think you dead for ten stupid years because you were too busy to call a single stupid time?"

Toini swallowed. Definitely not the right thing to say. She looked up and met her sister's eyes. Cold as frozen steel. This was her responsibility. It was her fault, and she would live with it and face the consequences. Come what may – she would accept it.

Then she nodded.

Paivi jerked away, and her body tensed. Her nostrils flared. Her breath came ragged, and her eyes filled with fire.

A paladin's world spins. She floats. Flies. The silence is absolute and the world keeps on spinning.

Dark wood and candles. Glass and burning eyes. She falls. Turns. A paladin explodes in pain and her faces crashes into the floor.

Eleven

Paivi's Pub

Running feet. Angry screams. Something clattered. Something fell. Shouting, cursing, yelling. Pain. Pain. Pain.

She'd been shot again.

Strange.

There hadn't been any guns. She'd have known. Only hers and Raoul's.

Raoul.

Raoul would never shoot her.

He'd been screaming. He and someone else. Shouting. Cursing.

Had been. It was all silent now.

Her face ached.

Groaning, she tensed up, pulled her elbows in, pushed, and rolled over onto her back.

Raoul stood next to where she lay, pointing a submachine gun at her sister and the little brown skinned man from earlier.

Raoul. Tall and dark and handsome.

She knew that stance. Armed and dangerous. Terrible in his fury.

Yeah, he was good when it mattered.

Poor fools to get in his way. Poor fools.

And then the memories clicked into place and Toini gasped. Her heart froze.

Her sister.

She'd been talking to her sister, and she'd said something bad and made her sister angry and now Raoul had pulled arms and if Paivi as much as looked at him wrong he'd shoot her.

"Raoul! Stop!" Toini slapped at his leg. "Stop!"

"Toini." He didn't take his eyes off of Paivi. "Get up. I've got you covered."

"Toini? What's going on?" Paivi screamed.

"Shut up," Raoul barked. "Shut up!"

"Raoul..." Toini took a deep breath – got to keep calm. "Raoul. Stand down."

"Get up Toini." Raoul didn't move an inch. "She hit you."

"What?" She stared up at him. "I said stand down." He'd just disobeyed a direct order.

"She hit you."

"I know!" Toini clenched her teeth and slammed her fist into his foot. "She's my stupid sister and she gets to stupid hit me if she stupid wants to." She ground her teeth and glared up at him. "Now stand down! That's an order."

Raoul twitched. Once.

For a moment he stood absolutely still, and then he lowered his weapon. “Yes, your holiness.”

Without another word he spun around and stalked off – back to the table in the booth by the door where he’d sat down when they came in earlier.

Toini exhaled and let herself relax. Her head fell back against the floor, and a jolt of pain shot up into her jaw and made her groan with pain. Stupid.

“Toini.” Paivi appeared at her side, knelt down, and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry Toini. Are you okay?” She shot a glance over towards the door.

“I’m fine.” Toini forced herself to smile and then grimaced when another another stab of pain shot through her. Her sister sure packed a punch.

“Ali’ast, get some ice and a pint of water,” Paivi shouted over her shoulder.

“Yes boss.”

Toini didn’t see the man from where she lay, but she heard his footsteps and the creaking of the half-door by the bar. Water gushed from a tap, ice cubes crunched against each other.

“I’m fine,” she repeated.

“Yes, yes. Of course you are.” Paivi grinned at her and patted her shoulder. “Just you stay there and we’ll get you some ice to put on your chin.”

Toini scowled at her. “It’s okay. It’s nothing.” She squirmed and pushed herself up on her elbows. Her head swam and she blinked a few times.

Paivi looked at her – eyes full of worry, and with her hand still on her shoulder.

“I’m fine.” Toini closed her eyes, pushed the pain and the dizziness to the side, and forced herself up into sitting.

Just at the edge of perception, the pain still reached for her. It wanted back. She still hurt – was still damaged – and her body wanted to make sure she knew.

“Toini. Take it easy. You should lie down.”

“I said I’m fine,” Toini grunted. “Where’s that ice?”

“Here lady.”

The short man from earlier – Ali’ast – appeared behind her sister and handed her a plastic bag full of ice. She took it, and he held out a pint of water towards her.

“I’ll take that.” Paivi took the water from him. “She’s only got two hands.”

“Thanks.” Toini pressed the ice against her cheek where her sister had hit her. The pain hammering at her mind receded a little. It was still there, but now it had to fight against the cold too. Good.

“Right, let’s get you off the floor.” Paivi pushed herself up to standing and reached down towards her. “You think you can stand?”

Toini looked at her sisters and scowled. She didn’t need any help. She could stand on her own – and then she sighed and reached out and let herself get pulled to her feet.

Paivi grinned at her. “That’s a good girl.”

A chair by the fire in the snug by the bar. A paladin is looked after by her sister. Lets herself be helped. Drinks her water. Presses ice to her face.

Coffee is offered and accepted. A big sister goes to see it done. Looks after her regulars, yells at her assistant.

Relaxed, alone, and in comfort. Padded chairs. A rickety old table.

Burning candles, crackling flames, and speakers full of blues. A faded photo above the fireplace, and a sturdy little stool just high enough to put your feet up.

“Hey, Toini, are you okay?” Raoul stood in the opening of the snug, leaning against the wall.

He’d put his weapon away but kept his coat on – still tense. He held up Toini’s bag for her to see and then tossed it onto one of the chairs beside hers. “Your things.”

“Thanks.”

“Everything okay?” Raoul crossed his arms over his chest and looked at her.

Toini nodded. “Yes. I’m fine.”

“Okay.” Raoul nodded back. “Good.”

Paivi appeared in the doorway beside Raoul, carrying a tray with two large mugs and a pot of coffee. “Hey.”

Raoul frowned at her, but didn’t say anything. After a moment he took a step back and let her through.

Ignoring him, Paivi stepped into the snug. She shoved a chair out of the way with her leg and set down the tray on the little table in the middle.

“There we go.” She grinned and started pouring coffee into a mug. “Say stop.”

Nearly full. “Stop.”

“Aww, you’re no fun.” Paivi grinned at her. “I even brought a tray with high edges.”

“Next time. Just you wait...” Toini grinned back, and then she winced and pressed the bag of ice against her jaw a little harder. Silly. Probably best to wait a bit with the hot drink.

Paivi chuckled, poured coffee in her own mug, and sat down in one of the chairs across the table from Toini. “Have you had anything to eat?”

“No.” She shook her head – carefully. “Is the kitchen still open?”

“Nope. Lunch is over and we’re not serving again until evening.”

Toini sighed. A pie would have been nice.

“You could get take-out though. Mossy Barn does decent food all day.”

A wave of nostalgia washed over Toini, and her eyes grew wide. “Mossy Barn! I’d completely forgotten.” Her face cracked open in a big happy grin, and she didn’t even care that it hurt. “Do they still do their lingon and meatballs deal? Is Lilac still around?”

Paivi tossed her head back and laughed. “Yes, Toini, you can have meatballs and lingonberry jam.” She took a deep breath and composed herself. “Lilac’s gone though. She only stays there in the winters now and spends the rest of the year on the road. You know how monks are.”

“Aww...” Toini’s smile dropped a little. She’d have liked to have seen Lilac. The little fylk had always

cheered her up when she was young. Still, it couldn't be helped.

A lot of things couldn't be helped. Her smile faded completely, and she sat staring at her coffee in the mug on the table. Steaming black liquid. The mug would be warm to the touch. Friendly. Some things didn't change. You could trust a hot mug of coffee.

She shrugged and pulled the smile back on to her face. "Food would be good though." It barely hurt at all anymore. "They don't deliver, do they?"

"Hah!" Paivi chuckled. "Orthodox summer anfyhk. They don't even have a phone number you can call." She raised her coffee to her lips and winked. "Someone's gonna have to walk."

Toini too raised her eyebrow, and then she turned to Raoul. "You have a mission."

Raoul sighed and his shoulder's slumped. "Seriously?"

"Don't worry, Raoul." A mischievous grin tugged at her lips. "I won't do anything important until you're back."

From the other side of the table Paivi smirked at him. "Your woman needs her food. Shoo."

"What?" Toini stared at her sister. That's not how it was.

"Ah, yes, of course. My little woman." Snickering, he bowed his head at Toini. "Of course dear. Meatballs and lingonberry jam from Mossy Barn, right?"

"Raoul." She ground her teeth. "Just go." Words would be had. Chronicler or not. Words.

"At once honey. Just you take it easy there. I'll be right back." He stepped away from the door and raised his hand to wave. "Bye bye."

Toini hung her head and pinched her nose. She couldn't be rid of him soon enough. In her other hand, she still clutched the bag of ice, mostly melted now. She tossed it onto the table and sat back in her chair.

"Sister..." Paivi fixed her with worried eyes. "Your boyfriend's an asshole."

Twelve

Paivi's Pub

Two sisters sit in silence. Fire crackles. Music plays. Moments pass, and a paladin fumes.

A chronicler brings his luggage. Big and unwieldy. A suitcase is not needed for fetching food, and tiny rubber wheels are no help on streets of cobblestone.

Looks are exchanged. No words said. Chronicler. Paladin. A suitcase is safe and attended. Some things are best not left to chance. An understanding exists and a chronicler nods farewell – for now.

Two sisters sit in silence. Waiting for the sounds of departure.

Hinges whine. An old bell rings. Candles flare in a breeze that smells of rain. A chronicler is gone, and a pub's door grinds shut behind him.

— — —

Toini shifted in her seat and glared at Paivi. “Raoul is not my boyfriend.”

Paivi raised an eyebrow and grinned at her. “Okay.”

“He's not. Okay?” She reached for her coffee and grabbed the mug from the table.

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” Paivi crossed her arms over her chest and snorted. “He's still an asshole, and if he comes in here waving guns around again I'll beat the crap out of him.”

Toini sighed. “It's fine.” She sipped her coffee and put the mug back down. “We've got our papers in order and we know what we're doing.”

“Fine?” Paivi stared at her. “He threatened to stupid kill me.”

“Of course he did.” Toini splayed her hands. “You knocked me out cold. If I'd known you'd do that I'd have told him to back off in advance.”

Paivi's jaw dropped. “What?”

“Look.” She took a deep breath. No point getting into an argument about it. That wasn't why she'd come. “It was just a misunderstanding.”

Paivi sat stock still, mouth wide open, just staring at her. She started to say something, stopped herself, and instead reached for her coffee and took a big gulp.

“You know what? I don't stupid care.” She set the mug down with a thud, splashing coffee on the table. “You don't bring guns into my bar, and that's final. No guns, no knives, no magic. Is that clear?”

Toini lowered her gaze and looked away. She'd forgotten about that. Old habits. Different culture. She'd felt the same back then. It was just one of those things. Everyone did.

It was a different world up here, in the north.

She glanced down at her bag on the chair beside her. “Do you have a safe or something? I can't leave mine unguarded.”

“You too? Seriously?” Paivi stared at her. “What do you need guns for anyway?”

Toini cleared her throat. “Comes with the job.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I'm a paladin.”

There, she'd said it. It wasn't how she'd thought it'd be, but at least she'd said it. Her sister would just have to make of it what she would.

“What?” Eyes wide, Paivi stared at her. “You’re a what?”

“I’m a paladin – paladin of Ek.”

Saying his name always made her feel better. She sat up a little straighter, breathed a little easier. She was what she was, and there was no changing that.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Paivi scoffed at her. “That’s bullshit.”

Toini said nothing. She met her sister’s eyes straight on, and a faint smile tugged at her lips. Confident. Determined. Perhaps a bit smug, but it was sometimes hard not to be when you were the mortal representative of a major god.

“You’re serious...” Doubt. Disbelief. Confusion.

“I’m serious.” Toini nodded. Kept her face straight.

“But...” Paivi stared at her. Her mouth opened and closed. “How did that happen? I mean...”

She paused, swallowed, and blinked a few times. “What happened? I thought...” She sniffled, and rubbed at her nose. “They said...”

And then she stopped talking completely. Her shoulders tensed and her back grew rigid. She closed her eyes and clenched her fists against her lap.

Toini just sat there. Hollow and useless.

Her sister suffered. She could see it. Feel it. Right there in front of her and she should do something to help her. Reach out. Say something. Touch. Care. But she just sat there and did nothing while her sister dealt with her pains alone.

“You stupid died!” Fire burned in Paivi’s eyes, and tears rolled down her cheeks. “I got the stupid letter upstairs! They told me you died!”

“I’m sorry. It’s complicated.” Toini hung her head. Too late to do anything now.

Paivi leaned forward, elbows on her knees – eyes big and pleading. “Please, just tell me. What happened to you?”

Toini swallowed. Not that. She couldn’t do that – not already. She needed time. “How much do you know?” She reached for her coffee, took a deep sip, and stared down into the mug. Black, warm, bitter. “What did the letter say?”

“Uhm...” Paivi sat back in her chair, clasped her hands in her lap, and her gaze drifted off. After a long silence she cleared her throat. “Your ship got shot down somewhere over the jungle.” She paused for a moment. Sniffled once. “There were no survivors.”

“Anything else?” There wasn’t anything else. She’d read the reports.

“No, that’s it. Just...” Paivi swallowed. “Just a lot more words.”

“Okay.” Toini pressed her lips together and nodded. She’d known this would come. Of course her sister would ask – and she had a right to know.

Her shoulders tense, she slowly drained the rest of her coffee and set the mug down on the table.

Paivi looked at her. “Why? Wasn’t that it?”

“No. That was it.” Toini squirmed and looked into the fire. “We were shot down.” Flames licked at blackened logs and lumps of coal. She swallowed and tried to keep her thoughts in check. “It was pretty bad.”

Smoke. Heat. Burning flesh.

“More coffee?”

Toini nodded. She could do this. Stay focused.

Across the table, her sister grabbed the pot and refilled their mugs. Toini’s first, then her own. Slow, measured motions. Not rushing. Not spilling.

Paivi took her time. Paivi understood. Paivi let her baby sister collect her thoughts.

“Thanks.” Toini forced herself to smile and reached for her mug.

Paivi didn’t look – only nodded, just barely.

It was okay. It was in the past now. She’d lived through it.

Toini clasped the mug in her hands and stared down into the coffee. Sometimes she wondered if she really had survived. So much had changed. The woman who’d crashed in the jungle wasn’t the same one who’d come out of it.

She looked at her reflection in the black liquid. How much was the same? What was left of the girl her sister used to know?

Paivi said nothing. Sipped her coffee and waited.

Eventually, Toini set down her mug, clasped her hands in her lap, and cleared her throat. “Most of my crew died in the crash, and the rest in the following days.” Days. Nights. Slowly, cruelly. Lives torn from their bodies. She’d watched. Every single one. Some of them had lasted weeks.

“In the end it was just me left.” She closed her eyes and focused on keeping her breathing steady.

“Oh no. That must have been horrible.”

Toini nodded. She still didn’t know why.

Her squad had been part of the international peace-keeping force, on their way to a village in the jungle to oversee the construction of a medical station. They posed no threat. They knew no secrets. Her captors didn’t even speak a language she knew.

There had been no reason.

“I’m sorry.” Paivi smiled at her. “Go on.”

“I don’t remember much else.” Toini lowered her gaze. She wished. “I caught a fever or something. It’s very hazy. I know I fell...” Knocked to the ground. Pulled up and thrown down again. Stabbed. Beaten. Burned. “I couldn’t get back up.”

“The next I know...”

Strapped to the back of some huge beast. Pain and fever. Unable to move. Unable to scream. Shadows tearing at her skin. A soothing voice that said she would be fine but she never was and the pain didn’t go away and the shadows never stopped screaming.

Toini shrugged, and shook her head. “The next I know I’m in a bed in a temple in the mountains, and there monks looking after me.”

Paivi’s eyes grew wide. “Really? What happened?”

“I’m not sure.” It didn’t matter. Didn’t want to know. “Someone must have helped me.” Didn’t want to think about it. “The monks said they’d found me in their garden one morning.”

More dead than alive. More burns than skin.

“Huh, weird.” Paivi frowned at her. “Is that how you became a paladin?”

“No, not right then. That happened later.” Toini took a deep breath and clenched her jaws. That too was a story she must tell.

“Okay.” Paivi held up her hand and began counting on her fingers. “So you got shot down in the jungle, someone saved you, and then the monks took care of you. Then what?”

“Yeah, that’s about it.” Toini nodded. “I stayed at the temple for a long time. I’d woken up and I could walk around, but I never really got better.” Even then, it had been a good time. Simple. Peaceful. “I could help out in the gardens a little, but only just – no heavy tasks.”

Paivi grinned at her. “You always enjoyed a bit of gardening.”

She had, and the gardens at the temple had been like nothing she’d ever seen before. In a way, the gardens were the temple. The little shrines and buildings were just homages to the wonder and beauty of the life that thrived around them.

A smile tugged at her face. Wonder and beauty indeed. She’d loved that place, despite the pain and the weakness. She’d been happy in those gardens – walking along the paths, sitting in the grass, smelling the flowers and listening to the singing of the birds and the wind whispering in the trees. If she got old enough to retire, she’d return there.

It probably wouldn’t happen, but it was nice to dream.

Across the table, Paivi slurped her coffee.

Toini’s mind jerked back into the present. There was more to tell, and the gardens were far away. She sighed, and her smile faded. “Then, after almost exactly a year I suddenly got worse. It was really bad. I couldn’t move or eat or anything.” Her body stopped listening to her. Became her enemy. Tried to cast her out. “Everything just hurt.”

“What happened?” Paivi looked at her – eyes full of worry.

Toini clenched her fists and swallowed. “Turns out I’d caught some kind of parasite in the jungle after the crash.”

They’d cut her up and planted eggs inside of her. Seared the scars shut with fire and magic.

“Parasite?”

“I’d carried it inside of me the entire year.” The monks hadn’t noticed. She’d been too scarred for them to see. “That’s why I never got better, and now it wanted out.”

Paivi gasped, and covered her mouth with her hand.

Toini swallowed. She sat up a little straighter, smoothed out her face – shut out all emotions. “It was eating me alive from the inside.” Maggots. Slithering within. Burrowing through flesh. Writhing under her skin. She’d tried to scream, and her throat had filled with them.

She clenched her fists. Pushed them against her lap. Pressed her jaws together closed her eyes breathed faster. She held her mental shields up and kept the mindless howling at bay. She couldn’t break now.

Sweat broke out on her forehead. Couldn’t.

“I’ve never hurt so much.”

“What happened?” Paivi stared at her, eyes wide and hands pressed to her face. “How did you make it?”

“Ek saved me.” Just saying the name helped. The terror faded. Muscles relaxed.

He always listened.

“Ek?”

Toini nodded. “The monks found a glowing seed in the center of the gardens.”

Flames of life. Warm light playing on the walls of her chamber. The seed’s glow cast no shadow – shone through the monks standing vigil around her bed. It danced for her alone. Sang to her of life. Held her soul while her body died.

“The elder said it was a sign, so she made a hole and planted the seed inside of me.”

Plunged a knife into her belly and slit her open. Shoved the seed inside and screamed for everyone to stand back. There hadn’t been time for anything else.

“What?” Paivi gasped.

“Right here.” Toini poked herself in the side – on the right, just below the ribs.

“Wow! Did it work?”

“Yes.” She nodded, and her face turned serious again. “Without it, I’d be dead.”

“That’s amazing.” Paivi stared at her with wonder in her eyes.

“Yeah.” She cast down her eyes. “It’s in the records as a miracle.”

Paivi raised her eyebrows. “Heh, no shit.” She grabbed her mug and drank.

Toini leaned back in her chair. “That’s not all though.” She let a smug grin play on her face. This would be good. “The seed took root and sprouted.”

“What?” Paivi’s head jerked up and she nearly splashed coffee all over herself.

“See this?” Toini lifted her hand to her face, and ran her fingers over the vines on her right cheek. “It’s not a tattoo.”

“Say what?” Eyes wide, Paivi stared at her.

“Yeah.” Her cheeks warmed with pride. Finally she’d managed to impress Paivi on her sister’s own terms – with something she knew. “It looks like one, but it all grew out of the scar left from when Cherry cut me open.” She reached for her mug. “It even changes with the seasons.”

“Cherry?” Her sister frowned at her.

“The elder monk.” Toini smiled and sipped her coffee. “Her name was Cherry.”

“Oh...”

“It was she who convinced me Ek had chosen me for his paladin.”

The birds and the trees and the entire garden had chimed in too, but it had been Cherry who’d laid out the details and performed the consecration.

Paivi nodded, and stared down into her coffee.

“She’d had her suspicions, apparently, but the seed taking root sealed the deal for her.”

“Wow.” Paivi sloshed the coffee around in her mug, and then she looked up with a stiff smile on her lips. “So you became a paladin the old-fashioned way.”

“Yep.” Grinning wide she straightened up and planted her fists on her side. “Toini – paladin of Ek.

That's me." She puffed out her chest and did her best mock-serious face.

Paivi smiled back, and her face relaxed a little. "That's amazing."

Toini blushed, and hid her face behind mug.

"I mean..." Paivi hesitated for a moment. "It is really cool and all, but who's Ek?"

A groan escaped her before she could stop herself. "Paivi..."

"Well I'm sorry, your holiness." Paivi glared at her. "I've got a pub to run and I don't have time to keep track of the whole stupid pantheon." She drained what was left of her coffee and sat her mug down on the table. "I pay my church tax and that's it."

Toini sighed. Of course her sister wouldn't know. It wasn't her world. She should have thought of that. "Ek is a class A good. His aspects are life and nature."

"Never heard of him." Paivi crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. "Is that why you look like such a hippie?"

"What? What's wrong with how I look?"

Out in the main room of the pub the bell on the door jingled, and a gust of wind from the street rushed in and made the candles flicker. Hinges whined and eventually a dull thudd signaled the door had closed.

A moment later Raoul appeared in the doorway of the snug.

Thirteen

“Hey.” Raoul lifted a hand and waved. “Food’s here.”

Toini and Paivi both looked up at him from their seats. Neither of them said a word.

“Bad time?” He nodded towards the bar. “I can wait.”

“No.” Toini shook her head. “It’s fine.”

Paivi shot her a glare and got to her feet. “I’ll go get plates.”

“Great. Thank you.” Smiling, Raoul stepped out of the way to let her through.

Toini stared after her, muttering to herself. There was nothing wrong with how she looked. Her clothes were clean and mended and the rest wasn’t anyone else’s stupid business.

Ignoring her frown, Raoul stepped into the snug, set down a canvas bag on a chair next to the table, and began unpacking the food. “Meatballs. Spuds. Sauce. Lettuce.”

One by one he placed the packages on the table. Carefully wrapped in waxed cloth and tied up with strings. The sauce even had a little urn of its own, but they’d have to bring that back later.

“And last but not least...” Raoul grinned wide at her and retrieved something from the bag. “A big jar of lingonberry jam.”

He held it out for her to see. Big indeed. Proper homemade East Hemsfil lingonberry jam. Handwritten label. Unsweetened – and way too much for just one meal. She’d have some later, with a glass of whiskey. Not that she was a proper lady or anything.

Toini took the jar from him and weighed it in her hand. Heavy. “Thank you.”

Maybe they could stock up a little while they were here. There should be room on the ship for a few jars. She could get a cookbook and give Lavanje, and he could try out some northern dishes for the crew.

“How did it go?” Raoul shuffled some chairs around to get a seat by the table, careful not to move the one Paivi had sat in. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m okay.”

Maybe it would be better not to. Maybe she ought to keep her old life apart from who she was. It had worked out well – so far.

Raoul sat down. He fidgeted for a moment and then cleared his throat. “How about your sister? How’s she taking it?”

“She’s fine.” Nothing to talk about. “No problem.” Toini crossed her arms over her chest.

“Are you sure?” He leaned back in the chair and stroked his chin. “She seemed a bit... upset?”

“Heh...” No kidding her sister had been upset. “Let’s say she wasn’t too happy that you threatened to shoot her in her own bar.” She rolled her eyes and tried not to sigh too loud.

“She shouldn’t have attacked you then.” Grinning, Raoul splayed his hands.

“I told you to back off,” she snapped. “You disobeyed a direct order. You undermined my authority.”

“You know what my standing orders are, Toini.” Still smiling, Raoul leaned forward and started untying the strings around one of the packages on the table. “You’d been knocked senseless.”

“I’m your commander.” Toini clenched her jaws together. “My orders take precedence.”

“Yes, but I judged you were not aware of the gravity of the situation.”

He folded out the paper wrapping and uncovered a big pile of meatballs. Small ones, barley larger than a thumb’s width, pan-fried and glistening with grease.

“You judged wrong!” Toini grabbed the armrest on the chair to keep from slamming her fist into the table. “We only have a few weeks left together.” She raised her hand and jabbed a finger in the air at him. “Let’s make them as easy as we can. Do not disobey me again. Is that clear?”

Raoul looked up. Smile gone. Face serious. “Clear.”

“Further.” She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest again. “We are not to bring weapons into the pub again.”

“Say what?” Raoul’s jaw dropped, and he stared at her.

“You know what they’re like up here.” Toini began counting on her fingers. “No guns, no knives, no magic. It’s not like in the south.” She clasped her hands in her lap and pulled out a big smile. “Don’t worry though, you’re on vacation. After the meal I want you out of here.”

Raoul froze. “What?”

“Hey guys.” Paivi stepped into the snug carrying two plates and two pairs of knife and fork wrapped in napkins. She put it all down the little table, careful not to knock any of the food over the edge. “Here you are.”

“Thank you.” Toini smiled up at her from where she sat. Not a good time. Go get something else. Please.

Paivi looked at Raoul, frowned, and turned to Toini.

Toini smiled as wide as she possible could and nodded her head in the direction of the bar.

Rolling her eyes, Paivi stretched and flexed her shoulders. “You can start without me, I’ve already eaten.” She spun around and headed for the doorway of the snug. “I’ll get you something to drink.”

Raoul looked after her, muttered something under his breath, and then turned to Toini. “What do you mean vacation?”

Toini glared at him. “You know what I mean.”

He knew very well. They’d been through this before – several times. They both knew they’d be better off without the other when things were quiet. Sure, when the going got tough they worked together like a mind in two bodies, but that was a different kind of tough – the kind where people died if they made mistakes.

Raoul cleared his throat and met her glare straight on. “You still have a quest to complete and I’m required to observe it to the best of my ability.” He raised his hand and wagged a finger in the air. “If you order me away you’ll risk your funding.”

Toini stared at him. Smug bastard was right. She’d completely forgotten about Roy and about her quest. Too many memories. Too much emotion. Seriously. Not good. She didn’t do well with emotions.

Smiling faintly, Raoul leaned forward again and undid the strings on the other package. “Are you sure you’re okay Toini? This is not like you.”

Potatoes. Boiled and peeled by hand. Ready to eat. There ought to be a little tub of butter around as well.

Toini sighed. "I'll be fine. I just need some food." She would. She hadn't eaten all day. It didn't help. Raoul nodded, and began unwrapping the lettuce. It came with its own little basket to keep it from getting too crushed. They'd have to bring that too back later.

She'd do that. In a bit. It'd be good to get a little time alone, even if just for a short walk.

Taking a deep breath she composed herself. She had a job to do. "After the meal we'll find Roy, get him on board, and then I'd like you to take some time off. Okay?"

Done. Sorted. Agreement achieved, whether he liked it or not.

"Okay." Raoul nodded.

"It's only a few days, and nothing important is going to happen." It'd better not. She'd smite someone, sinner or not. "If something goes down, I'll call you."

Grinning, he leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow at her. "Will you now?"

Toini rolled her eyes, and then she tilted her head and smiled at him, batting her eyelids. "My crew. My funding." She knew he hated it when she tried to look disarming, and she couldn't quite keep her face straight. "Don't worry, I'll call."

Raoul grumbled, opened his mouth as if to say something but stopped himself when Paivi stepped into the snug again carrying a tray with three pints of lager.

Slowly, she navigated her way to her chair and sat down. "There we go..." She balanced the tray on her lap and set the pints out on the table. "Hemsbrew Lager. Should go well with the food."

Smiling, Paivi started dishing up food on one of the plates, grabbing hot meatballs and potatoes with her fingers without hesitation. She uncorked the urn, poured a rich brown sauce over everything, and tossed some lettuce on top of it.

She handed the plate to Raoul and then prepared another one for Toini.

Raoul said nothing.

Toini remained silent.

For a moment, no one moved. Raoul and Toini with their plates. Paivi with her beer, looking from the one to the other.

Toini grabbed her knife and fork, and a moment later Raoul did the same. Neither of them looked away from the food in front of them. Neither of them said a word.

The food looked really good.

She had no appetite. Wasn't hungry. Didn't feel like eating.

"My my my..." Paivi sighed. "Aren't you two in a cheerful mood?"

"It's fine." Toini looked up and forced herself to smile. "Just... work stuff."

Raoul too looked up, smiled, and reached for his pint of beer. "Thank you." He raised the glass at Paivi and took a sip.

Toini looked at her beer in its glass. She probably should eat first. Her eyes fell on the jar of jam on the table. Maybe that's what was missing. She grabbed it, twisted off the lid and used her fork to scoop up a big glob of jam on her plate.

Nope. Still not hungry.

She stared at her plate. It looked so good. Why wasn't she eating. Raoul was gulping it down already. Big loads. Shoveling in.

Her stomach tied herself into a knot and her mouth dried up. She'd have to ask her sister about Roy soon. Ek sure knew how to set her a challenged.

"Well!" Paivi sat down her pint on the table with a thud. "Since you're both so talkative, I have a question."

Fourteen

Toini looked up – a hopeful smile on her face. “Aha?”

Something to break the silence. Something else to talk about. A distraction. Anything.

“Why didn’t you call?”

“Call?” Why would she call? She hadn’t known she was coming until yesterday.

Paivi sighed. “Why didn’t you let me know you were still alive?” She crossed her arms over her chest. Not a hint of a smile on her face. “You must have known I was still here. You can’t have been that busy?”

“Oh...” Toini’s heart sank – it was that question.

She stared into the fire. The flames were just flames now, crackling to themselves, leaving her memories alone. That demon had been put to rest, for now. There were other challenges to face.

Toini steeled herself, took a deep breath, and tried to think of a good answer. “Safety precautions.”

“Safety?” Paivi scoffed at her. “Who’s safety? Mine or yours?” Glaring at Toini she took a swig of her beer. “That’s ridiculous.”

“No.” Raoul put down his knife and fork, and dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. “The nature of our duties is such that associating with any friends or family will put their safety at risk and potentially jeopardize our integrity as operatives.”

“Yes.” Toini nodded. “That’s correct.” It was. A bit formal, but correct all the same.

“What?” Frowning, Paivi looked from Raoul to Toini and back again.

Raoul cleared his throat. “Maintaining contact with you would be a security risk, both for you and for Toini.”

Toini kept her face serious and nodded again. Bastard was good with words. She’d give him that. Then again, that’s why he was the chronicler. Knew how to express himself.

“Seriously?” Paivi looked back and forth between the two of them, mouth open and eyes full of disbelief.

“I make a lot of enemies.” Toini shifted in her seat, grimaced, and faced her sister. “They can’t get to me directly, but if they hurt you... If they even threatened to hurt you, it’d ruin me – both as a paladin and as a person.”

It was the only way. No matter how bad things got for her, her sister would always be safe and happy up here in the north. She took great comfort in that. Always had. It kept her strong. “I’m not a popular paladin. It’s better this way.”

Paivi gasped. “Better!” Her eyes clouded over and her lip pulled back in a sneer.

Toini said nothing. Without blinking she met her sister’s stare straight on. She’d known Paivi wouldn’t get it. Not at first. That didn’t change anything. She knew she was right. That’s just the way it was.

“I haven’t spoken to my mother for six years,” said Raoul.

Toini glanced over at her chronicler. She didn’t need his help. He had a point though.

“Raoul’s from these parts too. He could go visit his family now that we’re...” She shouldn’t be saying too much. “Now that we’re in the region, but he won’t.”

Clasping his hands in front of him, Raoul turned to Paivi with his most winning smile. “Toini actually offered me the choice on the way here, as I will be leaving her retinue shortly, but I decided against it. It’s just not safe.”

“Yeah, well, but at least your family knows what you’re doing.” Paivi glared at him. “Your mother knows that you’re alive.”

“Yes.” Raoul nodded, and for just a moment the smile wavered. “But she also knows that at any time she could receive a letter that says I’m not.” The smile slipped, and his face turned serious. “Every single day she dreads opening the mailbox. For six years. That’s the magnitude of the risks we’re dealing with.”

Paivi leaned forward in her chair and stared at him. “I already got that stupid letter,” she snarled. “Your mother still has hope.”

Raoul stared back. “That letter could come any given day. Don’t think it’s easy for me to know what she’s going through, but it’s for the best.” He straightened up, nodded towards Toini, and turned back to Paivi again. “What we do is bigger. It matters.”

“You utter bastard!” Paivi shot to her feet. Teeth bared. Fists clenched. “Do you have any idea what you’re putting her through?”

“Hey, let’s not fight, please?” Toini raised her hands, and motioned for her to calm down. “Paivi, why don’t you tell me how it’s been here?” Change the topic. Something nice. “How’s mom? Dad?”

Paivi froze. Her face paled, and for a moment her eyes drained of life.

Toini gasped. Pain seeped out of her sister in cold sluggish waves.

“You! Raoul.” Paivi’s raised her hand, pointed at the opening of the snug, and growled. “Leave. Now. This is personal.”

Raoul ducked his head. He tried a smile, but it fell right off. A moment later he got to his feet, picked up his pint and his plate, and left.

Paivi looked after him, standing tall with her hands on her hips, taking slow, deep breaths. Eventually she sighed and sat down again. “Eat, Toini. You haven’t touched your food.”

Toini swallowed and picked up her knife and fork.

Fifteen

She stared at her food. It probably looked delicious. She just didn't feel it. Didn't care. Didn't want any. It was just substance. Matter on a plate.

Something was wrong. Her sister had something to tell her – something bad. The hollowness in her stomach had nothing to do with hunger. She knew she ought to eat, but not right now. First, she had to know.

“What are you waiting for?” Paivi sat down in her chair again. She waved at Toini's plate. “Eat. It's getting cold.”

Toini stared at her. She looked down at her food and back up at her sister again. She poked at one of the meatballs with the fork. Still steaming, glistening with grease, and resting in a pool of brown sauce.

Not hungry.

Paivi reached for her pint and drank deep. “You got your lingonberry jam – like you asked for.”

Toini pushed her fork into the meatball. “What's up with mum?”

Her sister stared into the fire. Lips pressed together. Face pale.

“She's dead, isn't she?”

Paivi nodded. “Overdose. Four years ago.”

“Oh...” Toini's heart sank. The hollow in her stomach grew deeper. “I'm so sorry Paivi.”

“It's in the past now.” Paivi sighed. “Sorry won't change that.”

Toini winced. Those were her words. Sorry never changed anything. She'd said the same so many times. You learned and you made better. It's what she told the members of her crew when they messed up.

Life went on, and you'd better go with it.

“No. You're right. I'm...” Toini stopped herself and sighed – wouldn't change anything. “I guess it was to be expected.”

She should have seen it coming. Would have – if she'd thought about it. Only she hadn't, and now it was too late.

Paivi's eyes never left the flames, and after a while she nodded. “She did well for a bit. Snapped out of it for a few years after you died, but then she started slipping again.”

Keeping herself still, Toini waited. Said nothing. Gave a slow nod.

“I don't know what happened.” Paivi shrugged. Brought her beer to her lips and then lowered it again without drinking. “I guess I was too busy or something. Didn't keep in touch.”

The words stabbed into Toini. She too had been too busy. She too hadn't kept in touch.

Her jaws tensed. She pressed her eyes shut. If she'd been here she could have done something. She could have helped her sister, supported her mother, made a difference – done something. Anything.

She'd told her sister she'd been busy.

“After you...” Paivi stopped herself and cleared her throat. “We were good for a while. Spoke on the phone every week. Had coffee. That kind of thing.” She sniffled, and rubbed at her eyes with the back

of her hand. “She even had a job.”

Paivi turned to look at her. For a moment, her eyes met Toini’s, and then she looked away again, back into the dancing flames. Eventually, she nodded, sipped her beer, and nodded again.

Lowering her gaze, Toini stared down at her hands. She still held on to the fork – one little meatball speared on it, dripping sauce down on the plate. She should eat it. It’s what it was there for. You shouldn’t waste food.

She still hadn’t touched her beer. Paivi was almost done with hers. Better eat first.

Put food in mouth. Chew. Swallow. Repeat.

At first, she had to force herself, but after a few bites it got easier. Meatballs and potatoes. Brown sauce and lingonberry jam. Memories.

The local Penny Dinner had served this every Sunday, and they probably still did. Sometimes mom would come with them, but most of the time it had just been her and Paivi. The old matron always used to sneak them an extra apple for dessert.

Then later, they’d learned to cook it themselves, not that it was difficult, but still. Toini peeled the potatoes. Paivi rolled the meatballs. Sometimes they even had mushrooms for the sauce.

The food of youth and childhood. A different time, and a different life.

She hadn’t planned to go see her mother. Hadn’t even thought about it. It stung a little, but she pushed those thoughts away. It was in the past now, and you shouldn’t let regrets gnaw on you.

Her mother’s life had been one of pain and confusion, anger and frustration. She’d gone to join her gods now, whoever they were – probably Telos. She’d be at peace. At last.

Toini sighed and chomped down on a potato. She’d grieve later. Tomorrow, or the day after, she’d go down to the cathedral and pay her respects to her memories. It wasn’t her way, or Ek’s, but it’s what you did up here, and she’d feel bad if she didn’t. Tradition.

Her sister would probably come along too.

— — —

Flames flicker in a fireplace. Candles burn in empty bottles. A trusty old rock song rolls through a pub, and in the corner by the bar, two old men talk about whatever old men talk about when they’ve known each other longer than either of them cares to remember.

A paladin and her sister sit in silence. Unmoving. Alone together with their memories. Reliving days long gone.

Outside, in an empty street, a rain still falls.

— — —

Toini tore her eyes away from the fire. Brought her thoughts back to the present. She took a sip of her beer, and filled up her plate with a second helping. Raoul had brought a lot.

She took another swig from the pint. Lager. Plain and reassuring. Friendly, but a bit dull. The kind she’d drunk to oblivion as a teenager.

“What about dad?” She grabbed her knife and fork and made to attack her plate again. “Is he still around?”

Her sister took a deep breath, shrugged, and pulled herself up. “He’s in jail.”

“Again?” Toini groaned, and she rolled her eyes. Big surprise there. Not. “What did he do this time?”

Paivi stared down into the empty glass in her hand. “Murder.” She paused, took another deep breath, and turned her head away. Stared into the fire again. “Got drunk. Killed his girlfriend and her kid.”

Toini couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. She stared at her sister. Stared until her eyes hurt. Blood ran cold. Heart stopped beating. Stared. It couldn’t be. It mustn’t.

And yet it was.

Her sister told no lie. Their father was a murderer – a killer of innocents.

Something clattered against the floor. Toini gasped and jerked her head up, looked around, and then down. Her knife and fork lay between her feet. She stared at her hands. Flexed her fingers just to see them move.

Her father was a murderer.

She had killed more people than she could count, but none of them had been innocent. None of them had been a child. She was a paladin. He was not. When she took someone’s life, it was by divine right – by the will of her god. He did not have that right.

Life was sacred. You did not kill innocents.

Toini grasped for words, but found none. Her head spun and her thoughts ran in circles. Her mouth opened and closed. Opened, and closed.

Paivi swallowed. “Beat them to death with a frying pan.”

Bile rose in Toini’s throat. Her stomach roiled. She put her hands against the edge of the table to keep from toppling over. Blood. Murder.

Images flashed in front of her. She knew her father. She’d seen him angry. Had hid from him – under the bed, in the wardrobe, behind the shed in the back yard. They used to wait behind the fence across the street, she and her sister, until he left, or until mom turned off the bedroom lights.

Paivi set down her glass on the table. “Kid was five.”

Toini clasped her hand over her mouth. She tasted vomit. Taking long deep breaths she forced herself to calm down. Five years old.

“I’m so sorry Paivi. I didn’t realize. I didn’t know. I...”

So what if sorry didn’t change anything? She still was. Sad and upset and revolted and horrified. That also didn’t change anything, but she was that too.

“Yeah.” Paivi nodded, her face grim. “It’s been pretty shit up here.”

“Yes. I realize...” Toini swallowed and reached for her beer. Her mouth still tasted like bile. “I realize now. I thought you’d be safe.”

Perhaps it would have been better if she’d said something, kept in touch somehow. She could have sent a card – anything. It would have been a risk, but perhaps it would have helped, even just a little. She’d do better now. She’d figure something out.

“I get by.” Paivi shrugged, and a wry smile tugged at her lips. “Life goes on.”

“It does...” Toini nodded. That was something else she used to tell her crew. “Better go with it.”

“Eat your food.”

Sixteen

A paladin finishes her meal. Scrapes her plate clean. Downs her beer. Done.

Without a word, but with a smile, a big sister clears a table. Picks up plates and cutlery, glasses and napkins. Carries everything off. Leaves a paladin alone with her thoughts and memories.

Here she has sat before. By the fire in the snug in the pub in the oldest part of town. She and her sister. She, her sister, and their friends. In another life.

A young woman puts another log on the fire. Kneels on the floor and warms her hands on the flames. Warms her cheeks. Smiles at the butterflies in her belly. Her new life lies before her. A letter of acceptance. A position at the academy. A chance at a proper life.

She'll join the army. Be an officer, have a career, a command, maybe see the world. A young woman will stand on her own two feet and start her life anew. She'll cut loose and hoist her own sails.

Her sister will understand and soon enough her friends will too. This is who she is and this is what she wants. The city can't hold her back and no one will stop her, for she holds the winning hand of life in her own trembling fingers.

She must tell them. Her sister. Her friend. The rest of them. Everyone.

A young woman's face glows with anticipation and joy. Brighter than the flames on the hearth. Smiling, she rises to her feet. Ages. Travels. Dies, and lives.

Where a young woman once knelt, a paladin stands – far from the dreams and hopes of what she longed to be. Her smile does not shine, but her eyes hold a warmth all their own.

Toini turned away from the fireplace and sat down in her chair.

In another chair, near the opening of the snug, sat Raoul. He'd come back while she put the log on the flames. She'd heard him, or heard someone and assumed it was him, but hadn't bothered about it. Nothing would happen to her here.

"Hey." Toini nodded. "Welcome back."

"How did it go? You okay?"

She studied him for a moment. "No." A wry grin tugged at her face, and then she sighed. "I'm fit for duty, but it's a lot to take in. I'll need some time alone once we're back on the ship."

Raoul nodded.

He knew the deal. It wouldn't be the first time she'd locked herself up after a quest. As a paladin she was never off duty, but sometimes her god required her in far away places, and she did a lot of traveling. She loved sitting by the window in her cabin and looking down upon the world. Her world.

It would have to wait though. There were other things to do.

She took a deep breath, sat up a little straighter, and smoothed out her face. "My mother is dead. My father is in jail."

Raoul looked at her. Stared, for just a moment, and then he looked away. "That's gotta hurt."

"There's more, but it can wait."

"I understand." He fidgeted for a moment. "Did you ask about your friend?"

“No.” Toini sighed. “There was no time. I’ll do that now when she comes back. She’s bound to wonder why we’re here.”

“Yes.” Raoul nodded. “Yes indeed.”

And then neither of them said anything else, and they waited in silence.

A little bit later, Paivi showed up in the snug again. She set down a tray with three pints of stout on the table. Gotecan Black, no doubt. Each with a thick layer of creamy foam on top, almost green in the light of the dim pub.

“Here.” Paivi grinned at the two of them and put out. “Good for washing down the meal. Nice and slow now.”

“Thank you.” Toini nodded, and reached for her pint.

Raoul did the same.

Soft creamy foam, thick against her lip – and then the thick dark liquid slipped into her mouth. Autumn. Nostalgia. Wet leaves on the ground. Wind howling down the street and tearing at the trees. Knitted sweaters. Woolen scarves. Black clouds over the lake, bringing in an early evening and a storm to last the night. Good friends, harsh weather, and a brew that puts the gravel in your gut.

Toini sighed and closed her eyes. This was the stuff. And now to find that old friend.

“Ah, that was good.” Smiling, she set down the pint on the table.

Beside her, Raoul nodded.

Paivi grinned at her. “Only the best for our guests.”

“Yes, so, about that.” Toini shifted in her seat and cleared her throat.

“Yes...” Paivi dragged out the word. Long and slow – expectant.

Toini lowered her eyes for a moment, looked at her black pint where a drop of foam slowly made its way down the side, glanced over at the fire and the dancing flames, and then back to her sister again. “I guess you’re wondering why I’ve come here now?”

“Yes.”

Her sister sat stock still, not smiling, not saying anything else – most of all not cracking any stupid jokes about how it was completely natural for her little sister to come waltzing in for a pint after a decade of being thought dead.

In a way, it would have been easier if she’d made some quip about it. Something to lighten the mood a little.

Toini too sat silent. Collected her thoughts. Tried to think of where to start, what to explain, how much to include.

Let’s just go with it. “I’m here on a quest.”

“A quest?” Paivi tilted her head and raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

Raoul cleared his throat and turned to Paivi. “A quest is a kind of holy mission.”

“Well, duh...” Paivi rolled her eyes at him, and then she grinned. “I know what a quest is, but what’s it about?” She sipped her beer and a glint of mischief sparkled in her eyes. “You’re not going to smite me for my heretical ways are you?”

“That’s not a joking matter.” Raoul glared at her. “She’s done that you know.”

“Shut!” Toini snapped her fingers, and her hand flew out to point straight at him.

They stared at each other for a moment and then Raoul bowed his head and looked away.

Toini nodded, and turned to her sister once more. “I’m here to find a new member for my crew. There’s a slot open and it needs filling.”

“What?” Paivi’s jaw dropped. “No way.” Chuckling to herself she took a big swig of her beer. “No stupid was. That’s out of the question. I’m not going to join your crusade. I’ve got a pub to run.”

This is where it was going to get awkward. Her sister would laugh her out the door.

Toini smoothed out her face and swallowed. “It’s not you.”

Paivi snapped her mouth shut on her chuckle and a deep frown appeared on her face. “Heh, okay. So what about those security concerns you talked about? Don’t they apply anymore.”

“No.” Raoul shook his head and put on his reassuring smile. “You’re fine.”

“Yes. They still apply.” Toini glared at Raoul. This was her talk. She didn’t need his interruption.

“Heh?” Paivi looked back and forth between the two of them. “They do or they don’t.”

Toini took a deep breath. “They still apply, but part of the quest is to seek you out. Ek wouldn’t do that if it wasn’t safe.” She leaned forward and grabbed her pint from the table.

“So I’m under some kind of divine protection now or something?”

“No.” She took a small sip and pondered for a moment. “It’s just safe for me to visit you now.”

As far as explanations went, that was pretty bad. She couldn’t put it any better though. It was just the way it was. Her god wouldn’t ask her to do anything that put her safety and integrity outside of her own sphere of influence.

Theologians still argued about the how and why of that, because sometimes it did happen anyway. She would just have to take it on faith that this wasn’t one of those times and that her sister would be safe.

“Uh...” Paivi frowned. “Okay?”

“Look.” Toini set her pint down on the table again. “Ek’s a mean, ruthless bastard of a god, but he’s not stupid. He knows the risks, and he wouldn’t gamble on something like this.”

He wouldn’t. He just wouldn’t.

“Heh... So what does your Ek need me for?”

Toini tensed up. Here it came. “You know where my new crew member is.” She felt her jaws tense up as she tried to force herself to keep her face straight.

“I do?” Paivi’s frowned grew deeper.

“Yes, you do – and you will put me in touch with him.” Her cheeks grew warmer.

“Oh, will I now? Paivi crossed her arms over her chest and scoffed at her. “You haven’t even told me who it is.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She cleared her throat, smoothed out her face, and tried not to blush but failed miserably. “It’s Roy.”

Across the table, Paivi’s mouth fell open. Her eyes grew wide, and she stared at Toini like she’d grown a second nose.

Then she howled with laughter.

Seventeen

+++

therianthropic

/ˈθɪəriən ˈθrɒpɪk/ adj.

- 1. having a partly animal, partly human form*
 - 2. being able to shift between human and animal form*
- see werewolf*

+++

Toini squirmed. Her cheeks burned, and she didn't quite know where to look or what to do with her hands. In the end she grabbed her pint with both hands and stared down into it.

Paivi kept laughing.

Of course her sister would find it funny – hilarious even – she'd known that. This though. It was a bit much.

“Yes yes.” Toini took a deep breath. “I get it.”

Across the table from her, Paivi gasped for air, unable to stop herself from laughing.

“Hey! That's enough.” Toini sat down her pint and slapped the palm of her hand against the table. “It's not that funny.”

Paivi set a hand against the table to steady herself. “But it is...” She grimaced. Tried to compose herself. “I'm sorry... It really is.” And then she couldn't keep it together anymore and burst out laughing again.

Toini crossed her arms over her chest and stuck her nose in the air. “Okay then. Go on then. Just keep laughing will you. I don't care.”

Revers psychology didn't help.

Over in his chair, Raoul looked back and forth between the two of them, a confused frown on his face.

“Stop it!” Toini slammed her fist into the table and fixed Paivi with a glare.

Paivi clamped her mouth shut, pressed her lips together, and sat up straight – but her eyes still sparkled with mirth.

At least she'd stopped laughing.

Toini waited. Said nothing. Sat still.

“I'm sorry Toini.” Paivi ducked her head, tried to look sheepish, but failed miserably and started to giggle. “This is just too good. Your god's pulling your leg.”

“What? No. Stop laughing. I'm serious. I need to find Roy.”

“Toini, Toini, Toini.” She heaved a deep sigh. “He's messing with you. Roy's in Tin Jian.”

“What?” Toini's jaw dropped.

“What?” Raoul gasped.

Paivi looked back and forth between the two of them, her smile fading a little. “Roy. He's in Tin Jian.”

“No.” The world spun. Her stomach filled with ice, and she gasped for air. “He can't be. It can't be.”

“Seriously.” Paivi paused and smoothed out her face. “Roy's in Tin Jian.”

It was wrong. It couldn't be. They'd come all the way up here. There must be some kind of mistake. A misunderstanding. Something. Anything. They'd been in Tin Jian only half a year ago.

Toini took a deep breath and looked her sister straight in the eye. “Are you sure? Are you really really sure?”

“No. I just made it up.” Paivi stuck out her tongue at her. “Of course I'm sure. I've got his number here. Do you want me to call him?” She pulled out her phone from the pocket of her jeans and tossed it onto the table.

“What?” Toini felt her face drain of color. That must not happen. Roy couldn't know. He mustn't. “No,

no. That's fine. Don't call. We'll go see him."

Raoul jerked upright. "But that'll take months." Eyes wide he stared at her "You can't possibly get any further from here."

"Heh." Paivi raised an eyebrow at Toini. "You'd go to Tin Jian just like that? It's at the other end of the world.

"Seriously? No!" Raoul threw his arms wide, his voice nearly a shout. "We're not going to Tin Jian. I won't stand for it. You'll have to find another chronicler first."

"Shut up!" Toini yelled and slammed her fist into the table. "Shut up, both of you."

Chest heaving, Toini glared at them. They needed to shut up and let her think. She was missing something important. Ek wouldn't send her here if this wasn't where she needed to be. At the same time, Roy wasn't here, and there was no way it could be anyone else.

Her vision had clearly said she had to meet her childhood friend. Paivi didn't count, and then there was only Roy. She hadn't had any other friends. They hadn't – she and Paivi.

Toini closed her eyes and slowed her breathing. Shut the others out. Retreated inside herself.

Something was up. It was important to Ek that she met Roy – so why had he sent her here if Roy was in Tin Jian? Why?

Silent, she waited. Alone in her own mind. No visions. No answers. Ek, always present, kept silent. She was on her own.

Apparently this was as it should be. She had to figure it out herself.

Very well then.

Taking a deep breath, Toini opened her eyes. "Okay. I'm good." She reached out and grabbed her pint, not looking at either of them. "What's Roy doing in Tin Jian?"

"Fighting," said Paivi.

"What?"

"You heard me." Paivi paused and cleared her throat. "Look. It's a long story. Give me a moment. I'll explain."

Raoul shifted in his chair. He reached for his pint, but stopped himself, and leaned back again. His mouth opened and closed, and he drew breath as if to speak.

"Shut up Raoul." Toini snapped her fingers at him.

Raoul lowered his eyebrows and glared at her, but remained silent.

Toini glared back, and a moment later she turned to Paivi and nodded.

Paivi nodded back. "The last time you saw Roy..." She paused for a moment, and her eyes grew distant. "Something happened, right?"

"Ehm..." Toini squirmed in her seat.

How did she know about that? Had he said something? What had he said?

"Just before you left on your tour of duty abroad, right?" Paivi paused and waited. "You two had fight, didn't you?"

She lowered her eyes. A fight. Yeah. You could call it that.

“Thought so.” Paivi nodded. She sipped her pint. Took her time about it.

Of course she’d know. Of course he’d said something. He was her sister’s friend too.

Toini pressed her lips together.

“So, anyway...” She set her pint down. “A few days after you left, Roy showed up and told me he’d be going away for a bit. He needed a break or a change of air or something like that.”

“Did he...” Toini steeled herself. “Did he say anything?”

“About you?” Paivi raised an eyebrow. The hint of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “No. Nothing. Just said he’d go down the river, see the valley, maybe all the way to Komost and the sea. He didn’t seem to have much of a plan.”

“Heh...”

“Yeah, exactly.” Nodding, Paivi reached for her pint again. “I didn’t think of it until later, but it wasn’t really like him.”

Not like him at all. He always had a plan – not necessarily a good one, but always a plan.

“Anyway, he left, and he never came back.” Paivi sighed. She drank her beer, and her gaze drifted off into the fire.

Toini waited, but her sister said nothing else.

“Never?”

Paivi shook her head. Slowly – back and forth. “No, not since then. He got a job somewhere. Security guard for a shipping company. I got a postcard now and then, and sometimes he’d call.”

He’d stayed in touch. That was something at least.

“And then you died.” Paivi made a face, and her shoulders slumped. “I had to tell him, off course.”

Toini’s heart sank. Of course he’d had to be told. “How did he take that?”

“He disappeared.” She clutched her pint with both hands and stared down into it. “No calls. No cards. No nothing.”

“Ow...”

Poor boy. That news would have done a number on him. That wasn’t her fault though. She couldn’t be held responsible for what ideas he got into his head.

“Yeah...” Paivi nodded. “He didn’t even send a note for your memorial ceremony.”

Toini closed her eyes. Of course they’d have had a memorial ceremony. They all thought she’d died.

She’d used to think it was best like that. Now, she wasn’t so sure anymore. Not even a note.

Raoul shifted in his seat. “But he got back to you eventually, right?”

When they both turned and glared at him he paused and swallowed. “I mean, you said you have his number, right?”

“Yes. Eventually.” She took a sip from her beer and thought for a moment. “It took a few years. He wrote a letter – told me he was in Tin Jian. He had his own little company in the security business.”

Toini nodded. “That’s nice...”

“I thought you said he was fighting?” said Raoul.

Paivi nodded. “Yeah. The thing with the security business is just something he tells me so I won’t worry.”

“Heh...” Toini frowned. “Are you sure?”

That wasn’t like him. He’d always been honest about what he did. If he didn’t want Paivi to worry he could have just told her. The Roy she remembered would have.

“Yes. You know how it’s legal for terries to fight professionally down there.”

“It’s therianthropes,” Toini glared at her. “But yes, I’ve heard about it.”

“Whatever...” Paivi shrugged. “Anyway, he’s doing really well with it.”

“Really? I know he’s into martial arts, but I couldn’t see him doing that for money.”

A big lump of worry formed in Toini’s stomach. That didn’t sound like the Roy she’d known at all.

“Hey, Toini.” Raoul raised a hand in the air. “You didn’t tell me he was a terry?”

Toini glared at him. “He’s a therianthrope. What’s that got to do with anything?”

They should show some respect – both of them. Ray was Paivi’s friend too, and Raoul really should know better.

Raoul’s face brightened up. “Wait, I get it.” He turned to Paivi with a big smile on his face. “This is Roy van Waldenberger isn’t it? He’s really famous.”

“No...” Toini frowned. That wasn’t his name.

“Yes, that’s him.” Paivi nodded. “Three times world champion. He changed his surname.”

“Why? What’s wrong with Stugknutsson?”

Paivi shrugged. “Easier for the people down there to pronounce I guess. Looks better in print.”

“Oh...” Definitely not the Roy she’d known.

She’d missed so much. She hadn’t even known.

Raoul sipped his beer and set the pint down on the table with a light thud. “Too bad... He’d probably have been a good replacement for Lorang.”

Toini stared at him. “Probably? He’s perfect. What do you mean by that?”

“Don’t tell me you still think it’s him.” Raoul rolled his eyes at her. “Not after Ek had you go all the way up here.”

“It’s him!”

Lazy git. She couldn’t wait to be rid of him, but it looked like she’d have to drag him around for still some time. A quest was a quest, and she couldn’t just take a break from it for personal reasons. Her god trusted her to do as she was bidden, and she would live up to that trust no matter the cost.

“We know where to find him.”

“But he’s in Tin Jian.” Raoul threw his arms wide and stared at her.

Toini’s jaw set. “Yes. So?”

Raoul’s mouth fell open. “You can’t seriously drag us to the other end of the world on just a hunch.” Sputtering, he waved his hands in the air. “What about that other guy? Adrian?”

“Adrian?” On the other side of the table, Paivi burst out laughing. “Yes, Toini, what about Adrian? It

could be him.”

“No.” Toini groaned. Not this. Anything but this. “It’s not Adrian.”

“But it could be.” Raoul clasped his hands in his lap and put on his most reasonable face. “He’s in town and everything.”

“Yes! And I’m sure he’d love to come.” Paivi’s eyes sparkled with mischief enough to light a bonfire.

“He could be your Prince Charming.”

“Shut up!” Toini snapped.

She did not need this. It was bad enough Roy had gone to the other side of the world to beat people up for money. There was no way she’d let Adrian onto her ship as long as she had a say in it. That was not part of the quest.

Paivi smiled so wide her head might as well split in half. “I can call him.” She picked up her phone from where it lay on the table and wiggled it between her fingers. “I’ve got his number too.”

“That’s enough!” Toini slammed her fists into the table and shot to her feet. She stared down at her chronicler and her sister. Miserable nuisances both of them. She had to get out. Get some peace and quiet. Think.

“You two shut your stupid mouths,” she yelled. “Leave me alone!”

For a moment, she just stood there looking at them – eye’s burning – and then she marched out of the snug and made for the door.

Eighteen

Rain. Grey skies. Wet cobblestones. A dragon made of stone in a fountain in a square in a forgotten part of town.

A paladin thinks.

Red parka. Sturdy boots. Feet and belly warm and dry.

Drops of water, fat and heavy, fall on a head of thick blond dreads. Water runs down a troubled face. Calms an upset mind.

Memories of a past long lost.

Questions for a present full of change.

Flashes of uncertain futures.

Dark windows. Closed doors. A city huddles indoors. Hides from the cold and the wet. Waits for a better day to shine.

A paladin thinks.

Much is different.

A mother is dead. A father is a killer. A friend of old is gone, and a plan needs adjusting.

— — —

Toini shifted on her feet. A drop of water ran down the side of her nose, and she wiped at her face with the hem of her parka. It didn't make any difference, but she did it anyway. A small symbolic gesture of defiance against the elements – or perhaps just an instinctive reaction to something touching her skin. It didn't matter.

She had more important things to worry about.

Roy was gone. She was probably the reason he'd left, but it wasn't her fault he'd not returned. Poor idiot. He'd never been good at dealing with things not turning out his way.

Him and her. That really hadn't turned out the way he'd hoped for.

They'd had a good run. Growing up together – he'd been her sister's best friend and she'd been the annoying kid sister that eventually grew into a person in her own right. They'd grown close, she and Roy. Became good friends, confidants. He was the closest thing to a brother she had ever known.

He'd wanted more, and in the end she'd served him a frying pan to the face and walked away. That had been bad. If he'd been a normal human he probably wouldn't have survived. He'd been fine though. She'd checked his heartbeat before she left.

She hadn't expected him to just leave and never come back though. That was a bit excessive. She'd just wanted him to take a hint and back off for a bit – not run away for ever.

Toini shrugged and hunched up her shoulders. She was being unfair. He'd thought her dead after all. Things like that were hard on people. And now she was back and soon he would know and that'd probably mess him up good too.

He couldn't be pining for her still. It had been so long. He was a wrestler. Successful too. They lived rockstar lives. He'd have found someone else and moved on. He'd better have. Life was too precious to be hung up on impossible dreams. She'd kick his ass if he hadn't.

She probably would anyway. Make her travel to the other side of the world like that. Sure, he hadn't known, but that wasn't the point. She had to vent, and that was his job. He was her best friend. She'd kick his ass.

Toini grinned to herself where she stood. Things hadn't gone as planned, but they would work out. They always did, and good too.

And then her smile faded and she closed her eyes. What if she was wrong? What if it really was Adrian she was meant to collect? Her god had set her challenges before. He could do it again. Adrian could be one of them. Toini groaned.

The stupid prince.

They'd met in the army – at the air station. She, an ambitious young officer full of ideals and aspirations. He, an embarrassment the royal family shipped off to a military installation to keep him out of trouble and away from the press.

For the longest time she hadn't even known.

Sure, she'd seen the glossy magazines and the tabloids, but never made the connection. He'd just been one of the other officers in training. A nice guy. Friendly, charming, handsome. They'd gotten along well, had some good times together, and become friends.

He'd asked her to be his date for the officer's ball, but she'd already asked Roy, and Adrian had shrugged and made a joke of it and asked someone else instead.

And then, at the ball, her friends had gotten into a fight. Roy and Adrian. Proud young men. Ripped shirts, ruined suits, and fists red with blood. It had been her face on the covers of the tabloids then.

The memory sent her shivering to the very core.

She could never be someone's princess. Not that she wanted to. Or anything else like that. Didn't need anyone else. She was her own woman. Hers and Ek's. She belonged to her god now. Life, body, and soul.

— — —

A paladin thinks.

Red parka. Sturdy boots. Hair wet with rain. It is not tears that run down her cheeks.

A mind races through time. Back and forth. For moments at a time a paladin is a young woman once more. Innocent. Unknowing. In the future she is old. Worn and tired. Dead. Tending the gardens of the temple. Fallen in battle. Talking to the trees. A whisper on the wind.

Most of all, time and time again, a paladin returns to the present.

Choices already made mature and become decisions. Instinct becomes certainty. Speeding thoughts slow down. A chronicler will do his duty as instructed. A sister will be left alone once more. Emotions grow still, and plans become clear. A friend of old will join a crew. A city will be left behind once more, and a prince will never know.

And then, just like that, everything feels a little bit better.

Nineteen

Inside a pub much is unchanged.

A chronicler sits by a bar. Nurses a pint. Tries to make conversation.

An older sister sees to a barkeep's chores. Empties a dishwasher. Puts glasses on shelves. Tries to hum and nod in the right places.

Candles still burn on tables. Music still play in speakers. Flames still flicker in a fireplace, and remnants of a recent meal still wait to be cleaned up.

Two old men sit in their usual spot. Watching and whispering. Suspicious and curious. Entertained.

A bell rings and a door opens.

Sounds and smells of rain and chill sweep through a room. Reminders of an outside world.

Appointments. Responsibilities. Crowded subway trains and empty apartments.

A paladin shuts a door. Candles stop flickering and warmth returns to a pub. Grumbling old lips grow silent and drink from half empty pints.

— — —

Toini walked up to the bar, her boots loud against the floorboards. She clambered up on one of the bar stools – always made for people just a little bit taller than her – sighed, and rested her elbows on the bar.

Silence.

Raoul looked at her. The two old men over in the corner looked at her. Paivi faced the other way, carefully placing one glass after another on a shelf, but she no doubt knew Toini was there. The entire back wall of the bar, behind the shelves and everywhere, was one big mirror – cracked, but still a mirror. She knew.

The song on the speakers ended.

“Well?” said Paivi and took the last glass from the tray.

She turned around, held the glass up to Toini, and raised an eyebrow.

Toini nodded.

A new song began. Something old. A good one. It had been old already when they first started coming here. Memories.

Paivi put the glass under the tap and began filling it up. Gotecan Black. Good stuff.

“I’m good,” said Toini and nodded again. “I’m good.”

“Good,” said Paivi and flipped up the handle of the tap to stop the flow.

And then they waited, listening to the familiar chords and watching the stout settle. Foam falling away into black liquid.

Beside them, Raoul cleared his throat. “So, what’s the plan?”

Toini turned to him and smiled. This would not go down well. “The plan is we wait until the Orange Cream arrives, then we go to Tin Jian and pick up Roy.”

“What?” Roy’s jaw dropped.

“Really?” said Paivi. “You’d go to Tin Jian just like that?”

“I need Roy.” Toini smiled at her. “If he’s in Tin Jian, then that’s where we’ll go.”

“Oh...” Paivi’s eyes grew wide and a big grin spread across her face. “You need him? Just wait until he hears that.”

Toini rolled her eyes. “Paivi...”

Raoul groaned. “Please Toini. It’s going to take weeks. Months even.”

With a sigh, Toini turned to Raoul. “Yes. It will. So?”

“So? So!” His mouth wide open, Raoul stared at her. “You said I could leave after we were done here. I don’t want to get dragged along to the end of the world for however long that takes.”

“I said you could leave after this quest.” Toini shrugged. “This is the quest.”

“What?” His eyes filled with disbelief. “You can’t do that to me.”

Toini took a deep breath and slowly let it out again. Patience. Patience.

“We go to Tin Jian. We get Roy on the crew.” She raised her hand to forestall further complaints. “Then we go to Knysvian, and as soon as we get there I’ll sign you off with all the paperwork and recommendations and everything.”

She forced a smile to her face. “Okay?” Tried to look reasonable. Accommodating. “All that crap that Church likes.”

Raoul sputtered. “But that’s going to be at least two months.” He threw his arms wide and splayed his hands, almost knocking his pint over in the process. “I thought I’d be out of this by the end of the week.”

“Seriously Raoul.” So much for reasonable. Toini sighed and rolled her eyes at him. “You know the amount of hoops we have to jump through before I can let you go if we’re going to do it properly. It would not be done by the end of the week regardless of whether Roy was here or not.”

His shoulders slumped and he reached for his beer. “I know, but we could at least have started.”

On the other side of the bar, Paivi cleared her throat. “Can’t you go by Knysvian on the way to Tin Jian? It’s not much of a detour, is it?”

“No.” Toini glared at her. “It’s another week just in travel.” She did not need this.

“Toini...” Raoul sighed. “It’s not that far.”

“Raoul, it’s Knysvian...” Toini paused and took a deep breath. “They’ll tie me down in paperwork for weeks if I show my nose there.”

“Well, that’s not my stupid fault now is it?”

“Oh, shut up.” Toini raised a warning finger at him. “We’re not going by Knysvian and that’s final.”

Raoul said nothing, just glared at her, his lips beginning to curl ever so slightly.

Toini glared back. They both wanted him off the crew. His presence grated on her more and more for every day. The constant arguments. The whining. She couldn’t wait to be rid of him, but the quest was more important. Everything else could wait – he too.

Behind the bar, Paivi pulled the handle of the tap and began filling up the last of the pint.

They stared at it in silence. Pale foam billowing in the black liquid as the glass filled to the brim. Paivi

flipped up the handle and stopped the flow. The stout began to settle. Curtains of foam sinking and dissolving into the darkness at the bottom of the glass.

The power of nostalgia. Toini's mouth watered.

Once the pint was done, all black except for half an inch of foam at the top, Paivi lifted it from its place below the tap and place it on the bar in front of Toini.

"I'll put it on your tab."

Toini grinned at her sister. That was code for "on the house." They'd used it whenever there were people around that Paivi didn't feel like giving free beer to. She too didn't approve of Raoul. Then again, that had been pretty obvious from the start.

"Thanks."

Smiling, Toini sipped her stout. Thick, creamy, filling. Hints of burning firewood. Hillsides covered in fog. Rough woolen sweaters. Just like she remembered. The smile grew on her face.

That hadn't gone too bad. It could have been a lot worse. Raoul could be such an ass sometimes.

Beside her Raoul cleared his throat, and for an instant Toini sat absolutely still. Jinxed it. Slowly she set down her glass. Kept her face straight.

"Yes?" She did not turn to look at him.

"How about local Church? We need to report in with them anyway. Perhaps they have someone available."

"No." Toini sighed. "We're leaving as soon as the Orange Cream arrives. There's no need to talk to Church here."

"What? But you have to." He leaned towards her, reached out as if to grab her arm but stopped himself in time and instead crossed his arms over his chest. "We're staying more than forty eight hours. You have to register."

"No." Toini sipped her beer.

Keep calm. Don't let him get to you.

"It's too much attention. It'll interfere with the quest." She sat down the pint and turned to face Raoul head on. "We will not talk to Church."

Raoul straightened up where he sat. Raised his chin just a fraction. "It's regulation."

She knew very well it was. Bastard didn't have to remind her.

"No Raoul, it's a pointless hassle." It was, but that didn't mean it was regulation too. "It'll take too much time for no good reason."

"It's not interfering with the quest." Raoul shook his head. "We're just sitting around waiting."

Toini clenched her jaws and grabbed her pint. "We're under the radar. I don't want anyone knowing we're here."

She turned away from him and looked straight forward, faced herself in the mirror behind the bar. Distorted and fragmented through rows of empty glasses on the shelf in front of the mirror, but still there. A blonde woman in a red jacket. Drinking beer. Nice and calm. Perfectly normal.

There was no reason to be upset or angry about anything.

"You have to report in. If they find out you didn't report they'll cut your funding."

Toini snapped around and slammed her fist into the bar. “Are you threatening me?”

Raoul shied back and for a moment his hands went up as if to shield himself. “You know the rules as well as I do.” He cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest once more. “You can’t just go ignoring regulations whenever you feel like it.”

Really, she couldn’t? Where had he been the last five years?

“I can and I will, and you know that stupid well.” Toini made a chopping motion with her hand. “We do not need the attention that reporting in will bring. Is that clear?”

Without taking his eyes off of her Raoul reached for his pint and put it to his lips. He drained what little was left and set it down with a thud. For a moment he just stared at her, and then he nodded. “Yes, your holiness. That is perfectly clear.”

“Good.” Grumbling under her breath Toini reached for her own pint and took a long sip.

She thought for a moment, rubbed her hands together, and eventually she cleared her throat. “Now, here’s what we’ll do...”

Raising her hand, she began counting down on her fingers. “I’ll stay here, chill with my sister, and keep a low profile. You will go to Church, file an Incognito Presence report with a six month release, and then you can do whatever you stupid want until the Orange Cream arrives. Understood?”

Raoul drew breath as if to say something but stopped himself. He checked his pint and found it empty. He rubbed at his chin, gazed up into the ceiling, glanced at the mirror behind the bar. He took a deep breath, let his shoulders slump, and shrugged.

“Understood,” he said.

“Good.” Toini nodded. “I’ll see you on board.”

His face grim, Raoul got to his feet. He grabbed his coat and umbrella and picked his suitcase up from the floor. Without looking at her he turned around and walked off. At the door he stopped and put his coat on, buttoned up against the rain, pulled a pair of gloves from his pocket.

Then he opened the door and left.

Twenty

A door to a pub swings shut.

Silence spreads through a room. Old men shut their mouths. Music fades from speakers.

No candles flicker. No one makes a move. Out in a kitchen a fan slows down and stops, and down in a basement, an old mouse pricks her ears and waits. A building holds its breath.

A paladin stares at a door.

Eventually, soon enough, half an eternity later, a paladin turns back to her pint. Heaves a sigh. Shakes her head. Lets her shoulders slump.

Alone. For the first time in years. Alone. No one watching her back. Alone. No one by her side. Alone. No one looking over her shoulder, asking questions, taking notes, demanding answers, poking, prodding, doubting.

A paladin is alone, and hints of a smile tug at a troubled face.

Tension drains from a room. Candles burn brighter. Breaths come more easy. Pints half empty become pints half full. Old men in a corner grin and sip their drinks. Behind a bar a big sister breathes a sigh of relief, smiles, and gets back to work.

A young woman's favorite song comes on – a hit from bygone days. Long summer evenings. Nighttime swims in the river. Afternoons on a blanket in a park.

A paladin smiles, and tiny flowers blossom in her hair.

It's good to be back.

— — —

Paivi came out from the kitchen carrying a stack of plates – still tidying up after lunch. She glanced over at Toini and the nearly empty pint in front of her. Grinning, she set down her burden on the bar, reached for an empty glass, and put it under the tap.

“Thanks,” said Toini. She paused for a moment and then smiled. “It's been a while. You'll get me smashed.”

“Nonsense. You'll be fine.” She flipped up the handle on the tap and winked. The beer stopped flowing. “No one's getting smashed until I say so.”

Toini raised an eyebrow. “Very well then. If that's how it is.”

“That's how it is,” said Paivi.

She moved the pile of plates into a cupboard down below the counter and then she headed back out into the kitchen.

Smiling to herself, within and without, Toini drained the last of her pint. No point in saving it if there was more to come.

She hadn't been drunk in ages. Sure, there was booze on board the ship. She ordered most of it herself, but she rarely tasted it. It was mainly for the crew, and even they tended to drink in moderation.

Three days. Two nights. Probably. She hadn't had that much time to kill on her own in years – not off the ship. Locking herself up in her cabin to fast and meditate wasn't quite the same.

There wouldn't be any of that today. More likely her sister would have to drag her up the stairs and

dump her on the couch in the apartment above the pub. Wouldn't be a first.

Good thing she'd gotten Raoul out of the way. He'd have a field day with that. She'd never hear the end of it. Now, it was just her and her sister. Just like back in the day. If only Roy had been here it would have been perfect.

"Can't you just leave without him?"

"What?" Toini looked up.

Paivi stood in the doorway to the kitchen. Leaning against the frame of the door, with a scowl on her face and her arms crossed over her chest.

What did she mean? She needed Roy on the team. She had to go get him.

"That guy." Paivi nodded towards the door. "He's an asshole and you know it. You'll be better off without him."

"Oh... Raoul..." Toini's shoulders slumped. Why did she have to go and bring that up. "He's not that bad. We just don't get along very well."

"No, he's an asshole and you need to get rid of him."

Toini sighed. "It's not that easy." She reached for her glass, remembered it was empty, and clasped her hands in her lap. "I have to have a chronicler, and he's really good in combat situations."

If she didn't have a chronicler, she wouldn't have a ship – wouldn't have a crew. No funding. Everything would be so much more complicated.

"Combat?" Paivi raised an eyebrow.

"He's saved my life nine times." That's the times she knew for certain it was all on him. "We work really well together in the field." It was true. They did. Like rain and gravity.

Paivi snorted. "Didn't look like it to me."

Toini rolled her eyes. "It's fine... It's just..."

Her crew. Her responsibility.

It was she who'd hired him on. All those years ago. It was she who'd asked him to join her crew. Highest qualifications. Excellent recommendations. Not the other way around. Someone like she wouldn't get a second chance at signing on someone like him. She'd been in the right spot at the right time and she'd gone for it.

He was good at his job. As good as they came. And he was crew. Her crew.

"It's just we don't see eye to eye on some of the day-to-day work." On anything. Ever.

You had to stand up for your crew.

"You can't stupid stand him." With a sneer, Paivi stepped over to the tap to fill up the last of pint she'd left there to settle.

"Don't be ridiculous." Toini stuck her nose up. "Of course I can. He's on my crew."

"Yes. Yes of course." Paivi placed the pint in front of Toini, smiled, and gently patted her sister's arm. "You're so happy to be rid of him your hair's growing flowers."

"What! No?" Eyes wide, Toini touched her hands to her hair and stretched her neck to get a better view in the mirror behind the bar.

Tiny flowers, white and pink and yellow, dotted her hair – lots of them, like sprinkles on a scoop of ice cream.

“No! Stupid hair.” She curled up where she sat, bowed her head and tried to hide her hair with her arms. “No no no.”

“Aw, don’t be like that.” Paivi giggled. “It’s pretty.”

Toini raised her head and glared at her, still with her arms around her head. “Shut up! I don’t do pretty.”

Paivi just laughed and shook her head. “Tsk tsk, shush now, you were always the cute one.” She raised her hand and wagged a finger at Toini. “Now sit down and drink your beer like a good little girl.”

“I’ll smite you.” Still glaring at her sister, Toini snatched up her pint and drank deep.

Stupid hair. So much for laying low and staying under the radar. Good thing there weren’t more people here. She glanced over at the two old men in the corner, but they seemed deep in conversation with each other – at least they didn’t stare at her.

It had been years since last she got it bad like this. Sure, every now and then a flower would sprout behind her ear, or a vine would wind itself down her back. Not like this though. Her hair was flowering like a meadow in spring.

The seed the old monk had planted in her side was making a fool of her again. It didn’t care what she thought. Didn’t care about her logic and reasoning. It just went straight for her deepest emotions, fed on those. The vines across her cheek probably had little butterflies along them as well now.

She tried to sneak a glance at herself in the mirror without being too obvious about it, but couldn’t quite make any details out at the distance. Well, whatever. It wasn’t like she could do anything about it now anyway. Just keep a good face and let herself be laughed at.

Her sister was probably right. She needed to get rid of Raoul. Not like she didn’t know. She hadn’t felt this free in a long time. How had it gotten that bad? Why hadn’t she realized sooner? Always working. Never a spare moment away.

And now, without any real warning and without any time to prepare, she found herself with nothing to do. She could just sit here, get drunk off her face, and pass out upstairs – and it wouldn’t matter at all. Her sister was here. It’d be fine. Everything would be fine.

She took another swig of her beer, licked the foam off her lips, and smiled.

Behind the bar, Paivi raised her hand and coughed into her fist. “It’s good to see you.” Her cheeks reddened a little, and she cast down her eyes.

“It’s good to be back.” Toini’s smile grew wider. She was home.

Paivi straightened up, shrugged, and cleared her throat. “I sent a message to Roy.”

“What?” The words hit Toini like a punch in the gut. “No! Please tell me you didn’t.” She mustn’t have. She couldn’t.

“Did.”

“But...” Toini’s mouth fell open. She grasped for words. “But why? I told you not to do it.” She’d been very clear about it. There’s no way she could have been misunderstood. Was it so hard to do as you were told.

“You’re not my boss.” Paivi held her head high and crossed her arms over her chest.

Toini’s face grew red. “That’s not the point.” Not the entire point at least. “You know what he’s like.

What if he does something stupid?"

He would. She knew it.

Paivi shrugged. "He'll be fine, and he deserves to know."

Well, maybe he did. That wasn't the point though. Toini heaved a sigh and hung her head. "I just wish you hadn't done that..."

"Relax. It's fine." She rolled her eyes. "How bad can it be, and it's done now anyway. Not much you can do about it."

"It could ruin everything!" Toini stared at her. It could. Seriously.

Paivi sighed. "Don't be so dramatic. It'll be fine. Check with your god or something."

Toini started to say something but stopped herself. Muttering under her breath she scowled at her sister, and then she lowered her gaze. She took a deep breath and slowly let it out again. Might as well.

She closed her eyes, and let her thoughts run their course, fade out, and disappear. Eventually, there was just she left, alone in the darkness of her mind. Warm. Comfortable. Safe.

Silent, she waited, and alone.

Time slowed down. Perhaps it stopped. Emotions settled. A great calm wrapped itself around her. Peace. And yet, she remained the only presence in the dark. Her god would not come. He saw no need to meet her. Gave no reassurance.

And wasn't that good enough? Certainty grew on her, like lichen on a rock – slow, stubborn, unstoppable – until she knew.

— — —

Toini opened her eyes, blinked a few times, and squinted in the light of the candles. How long had she been gone? Was that a new song on the speakers? With a groan she raised her arms above her head and stretched. Definitely a new song. Never heard that one before. She'd been out a while alright. Her back creaked.

She felt along the counter for her pint. Found it. Drank. Slowly, the real world came back to her.

"Well?" Paivi still stood in the same spot where she'd stood before, but now she held a big cup of coffee in her hands. Steam rose from with it.

Toini's face twitched. She grimaced, and took another swig of her pint. Still frowning, she set it down and glared at her sister. "I still wish you hadn't done it."

"Oh snap out of it." Her sister rolled her eyes. "Roy's a tough guy."

"Yes, but—"

"I said snap out of it!" Paivi interrupted. "You're a big girl now."

"Shut up!" Toini clenched her jaws together.

She glared at her sister. Her big sister. Always knowing better, always being right, always having an answer for everything. It was so unfair. Just because she was the little one. And then something tugged at her mind, and her cheeks grew warm and she wasn't twelve anymore.

Toini took a deep breath. She looked at the pint in her hand. Not the hand of a little girl anymore.

She looked up at her sister – standing, while she sat – not so much older now. Almost the same age. Close enough not to matter anymore.

The frown disappeared from her face, and she raised her pint in salute. “Cheers.” She paused for a moment, and then she grinned. “Bastard.”

Paivi tossed her head back and laughed.

Toini rolled her eyes, and then she smiled. This was as it should be. Normal. Like it used to. It really was good to be back.

“Okay, so what’s the plan?” Paivi sipped her coffee and raised an eyebrow at her.

“Plan?”

“What do you want to do – now that you’re here?” She nodded in the direction of the two old men in the corner, set down her mug, and grabbed two empty pints from the shelf behind her.

Oh, like that. “Nothing...” Toini lowered her gaze. She hadn’t really had time to think about it. Roy should have been here and she’d have helped him get sorted before they left. “I just need to lay low for a few days until the Orange Cream arrives and then we’re off again.”

Paivi began filling up the pints. Her jaw set, she stared at the liquid flowing out of the tap. “No plan then?”

“No.”

“Good.” A smile tugged at her lips, and her eyes filled with mischief. “I’ll give Ali’ast a few days off and you’ll take his place.”

Toini froze, her pint halfway to her mouth. Slowly, she set it down again. “Uhm... Sure...” Carefully, she clasped her hands in front of her and looked up at her sister. “Mop the floors, do the dishes, that kind of thing?”

“Yes.” Paivi beamed at her. “And tend the bar – and you’ll have to wait the tables during lunch.”

“What?” Toini’s mouth fell open. “No!”

She couldn’t do that. She’d be found out. Something would happen and she’d have to interfere and the news would be out and the press would be on her and there’d cameras and journalists.

“I need to lay low and keep quiet. What if someone recognizes me.”

Her sister didn’t understand. It wouldn’t be safe.

Paivi sighed and placed her hands on her hips. “Toini, even I barely recognize you.”

Toini grimaced. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Whatever.” Paivi grabbed the pints she’d been filling and carried them over to the old men in the corner at the far end of the bar. “You’ll work the bar with me or I’ll send a message to Adrian too,” she yelled over her shoulder.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Toini shouted after her.

Paivi ignored her. She set down the pints by the old men, took their pay and brought them their change.

Eventually, she came back to stand in front of Toini again – her jaw set and her face serious. She fidgeted for a moment, stared off into the distance, and finally crossed her arms over her chest.

“Look,” she said. “I want to spend time with my sister.” Her lips twitched, and her cheeks reddened ever so slight. It was hard to tell in the light of the candles.

“I can’t close the bar, and Ali’ast hasn’t had a night off for ages. You can work here with me for the next few days and then...” Paivi stopped. She swallowed and blinked her eyes a few times. “And then

you can run off and disappear and never come back again ever.” She sniffled, looked away, and rubbed at her nose with the back of her hand. “Okay?”

“That’s not...” Toini began, and then her sister’s words caught up with her.

Stabbed her like a dagger in the heart.

Her mouth fell open. Her eyes grew wide. Watered. She blinked a few times. Closed her mouth, lowered her gaze, clenched her jaws together. She grabbed her pint and clutched it until her fingers hurt.

“Okay,” she said eventually,

There was no other way. She had to. Paivi was right. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t safe – didn’t matter that it was the wrong thing to do. This was her last chance to really do something for her sister. Something that mattered – that could be remembered.

She’d deal with the consequences later.

Toini took a deep breath and raised her head. “Okay,” she said again, and then she put on her best mock serious face. “But I will not be dancing on the tables. Got it?”

Paivi scrunched up her face in a grimace, but her eyes shone like the sun. “Deal.”

Twenty One

As is decided, so too is done.

A paladin is shown the ropes. How a cash machine works. Load a dishwasher. Swapping kegs, pulling pints, taking orders for food when a kitchen is open.

Old memories stir to life. A young woman helps her sister at her new job. Tries her hand at honest work. Picks up some real world skills – the kind you do not learn at school. Pulls a decent stout. Whips a sharp tongue.

Pints of stout are swapped for mugs of coffee. Old men in a corner leave and others take their place. Candles burn and music plays and afternoon moves to evening. A familiar accents trickles back into a paladin's speech. A right upriver lass she is.

A paladin slips into her role as barmaid. She knows her tasks and finds her ways. An old pub is not a stranger. Is happy to see her.

One by one, in pairs and in groups, men and women step through a door. Weary from a day at work. Wet from a walk through rain. Local folk, welcome in the warmth of a local haunt.

Words bounce back and forth. Paladin, sister, patrons. Conversations, banter, jokes. Talk is easy. Words are spoken and nothing is said and no one really cares.

It is not a night for gravity, and a pub has heard too much this day. It is time to chat, smile, heal. Laugh, drink, hug.

A room is warm and full of people. Wet coats. Sweaty brows. Shining eyes.

Perhaps this night more hands are held, and shoulders wrapped by loving arms. Perhaps more pints are raised, and songs sung along to. A paladin does not notice, and a sister does not care. Both are too busy. Both are too happy.

And behind a bar, in a pub in a forgotten part of town, a woman with flowers in her hair does not dance, but her hips sway to the rhythm where she walks.

Time passes in a haze of smiles and beers and song, and all too soon a night comes to an end. Lights go up. Music stops. Patrons of a bar make their way through a door. Leave in the night. Disappear in the dark. Head home.

All that remains is two sisters and a mess left by a good night out. Two sisters and a pub.

Toini sighed and let her shoulders slump. She leaned against the bar, supporting herself on her elbows and leaning her forehead against her arms.

Finally, silence. Her ears rang, her feet hurt, and her mind was finally starting to spin down. There were no more orders to take. No pints to pull, crisps to serve, or change to give. She still needed to take a washcloth to the bar and clean up the spilled beer, but that could wait. There wasn't anyone left to put their arms in it anymore.

Except, well, her...

Cursing under her breath Toini pushed away from the bar. She whipped her arm back and forth trying to shake as much as possible off and then reached for a pile of napkins on the bar.

She'd removed her parka before the evening even started, leaving her in a washed out green tee with its

arms ripped off. Functional, comfortable.

“You okay?” Paivi appeared in the doorway to the kitchen.

“Smear beer all over my arm.” She rubbed the napkins against her arm, but still felt sticky.

Paivi grinned at her. “Smooth girl. Smooth.”

“Yeah, well, so’s your face.” Toini shot back, and then she too grinned.

“Read to get started, or do you want to take a moment.” Paivi nodded out towards the room.

Toini took a deep breath and took in the room around her. She’d seen battlefields tidier than this.

Crushed pints and broken bottles. Forgotten hats and twisted umbrellas. Candle wax. Crisps and peanuts. Peeled off stickers from bottles of beer and crumpled up packets of cigarettes, and on the floor a soggy mess of spilled drinks and mud dragged in by rain-wet boots.

Next to an overturned chair stood a pair of sparkling high-heeled pumps that someone forgot to put in their purse before they left.

Who in their right mind wore high heels in a place like this?

“Uhh...” Toini took a deep breath. “Might as well.” She paused and shook her head. They’d be here all night. “It’s not gonna clean itself is it?”

“No, let’s do this.” Paivi snapped her fingers and pointed towards the door. “We’ll start outside.”

“Outside?”

“There’s always a mess outside and we need to take care of that too.”

“Oh...”

“I’ll go grab the stuff. You go check there’s no gathering outside still.”

“Okay.”

— — —

A cold rain falls over a city tucked in to sleep. Few people linger in a square in a forgotten part of town. A young couple huddle in a greengrocer’s doorway. A group of people stand by a fountain and its dragon, arguing about something – or maybe singing.

Two sisters stand outside a pub. One tall and dark, one short and blonde. One in raincoat, one in sleeveless green.

A mess is not so bad out here. Bottles. Bags of paper and wrappers of plastic. A few forgotten pints now full of rain. Cigarette butts.

Water and wind keeps a street clear.

Two sisters get to work. Two brooms and a shovel and a square metal bin. Sweep. Gather. Dispose.

A blonde woman shivers. Cold. Wet. Tired. Stubborn as ever. Work is work and work needs doing. No duty fulfills itself.

— — —

Toini rubbed at her arms and muttered to herself. She shouldn’t have said no to that spare raincoat. Stupid.

Water ran down her face. Her tee clung to her skin, her hair hung heavy from her head, and her fatigues

had begun soaking through

It hadn't been long – and they'd be done soon – but she was already soaked to the bone. Only her socks were still dry.

She grabbed another bottle and placed it in the bin. Half a pint glass. Not much left now. A plastic bag with two soggy apples and an empty water bottle. Almost done.

“How's it going?” Paivi's voice came from across the street. She'd been down to the fountain to check on the group of people gathered there.

Toini straightened up and pushed a few dreads from her face with her free hand. “Good. I think. Almost done.” She smiled for a moment, and then the cold and rain wiped the smile away.

Paivi came up to stand beside her. She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the area in front of her pub. After a moment she nodded. “Yes. This will do. It's good enough. Thanks.”

“No worries,” Toini muttered, clenching her jaws together to keep her teeth from clattering.

“Great.” Paivi bent down to pick up the shovel from the ground next to the bin. “Let's get in and do the rest and then we can have a cup of tea before bed.”

Inside.

Toini groaned. She'd forgotten about that. It'd take forever to clean that mess up. Dirt and mud and broken bottles everywhere.

She just wanted to sleep. It was cold.

“Chin up sister. We'll be done in no time, you and me.” Paivi raised a hand and poked her in the arm – and then her eyes grew wide and her mouth fell open. “Toini! You're freezing. I'm so sorry. I didn't...”

“It's fine.” Toini shrugged and forced a wry grin onto her face. “Don't worry. I'm fine.”

Really. She was just tired. She'd had far worse than this. Just cold and tired.

“Nonsense!” Paivi wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her towards the door. “Let's get you in by the fire. I'll get you something warm.”

“Let off!” Toini threw her arm up and shrugged out of her sisters grip. “I can walk on my own.”

Paivi rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, but lets get inside and get warmed up.” She waved her hand towards the door. “I'm cold too.”

Toini scowled at her, and then she nodded. She went and picked up the square bin with the rubbish they'd collected. “Come on. Get the brooms.”

“Aye aye, captain.” Paivi throw a mock salute and went to grab the rest of the things.

Shivering in the rain, Toini looked towards the door. She was being an idiot, and she knew it, but she was the stupid paladin here. No way she'd let her sister tidy up after her while she could still stand.

She'd help tidy up the bar too. There was a clean sweater in her bag she could wear. She'd be fine. Rest later.

Stupid paladin indeed.

Two sisters stand inside the door of an old pub. Still. Silent. Unmoving. Two mouths hang open. Four eyes stare wide.

It is all done. A room is in order – neat and tidy.

As clean as an ancient old pub can be. Dark wood polished to a shine. Floor scrubbed. Brass fittings gleaming behind a bar.

Everything is in its right place. No crushed glass, beer stickers, crisp packets. Fresh candles burn on every table. Empty glasses line shelves behind a bar, and soft music streams from speakers – something with a violin.

No chores remain for two sisters to complete.

It is all done.

— — —

“What?” Toini said after a long moment of silence, and then she ran out of words. “What?” she repeated – just to say something.

Beside her, Paivi said nothing. Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. She blinked a few times, sniffled.

Eventually she took a deep breath and rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. “It hasn’t done that in years.”

“It?” Toini stared at her.

Paivi nodded. “It.”

She set down the brooms and shovel she’d been holding on to. Leaned them against the wall beside the door and took a few steps into the room. “My pub. The building itself. Its spirit.”

“It can do that?”

“Yes.” Her sister nodded again. “If it wants to. It almost never does, but it can.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.” She set down the bin she’d been carrying and walked over to brush her fingers across the surface of a nearby table.

Spotless. Not a speck of dirt.

“It must be really happy to have you back,” Paivi said from over by the bar.

Toini closed her eyes and felt it. Warmth. Welcome. Joy. She belonged here. She was safe here. Loved. Here.

Cold. She was also cold. A shiver wracked her shoulders and she sneezed.

“Come.” Paivi beckoned to her. “Let’s get you out of those wet clothes. Come sit by the fire.”

Yes.

— — —

In the snug, in front of the fireplace, she pulled her wet tee over her head and tossed it over the back of an empty chair. She unlaced her boots and wriggled out of her fatigues. Almost naked, in only her underwear, she knelt down in front of the fire, let the heat of the flames warm her skin.

She reached out her arms. Warmed her hands. Let life back into her body.

Her sister brought her a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Heat licked her cheeks, bit her lips.

Eventually she drew away, pulled the blanket close around her and sat down in one of the chairs. She pulled up her knees and wiggled her toes. Warm and happy. Mostly dry. Her hair could take care of itself. It'd be fine soon enough.

Her sister brought two steaming mugs and set them down on the table.

“Mulled wine,” she said with a wry grin. “The tea’s gone missing and the bastard pub has locked the door to the kitchen.”

— — —

Paivi woke up.

She wished she hadn't.

Her head ached, and her tongue tasted like someone had used it for an ashtray. The light that filtered in through the curtains hurt her eyes. Thoughts dragged themselves through her mind like tired feet through wet sand.

She was in her bed. On her bed. Across it – with her feet sticking out the side. She still had one of her boots on.

Her head ached.

At least she was at home. She couldn't remember going to bed though, or up the stairs.

Someone snored in the other room. The noise tore at her ears and she groaned and that hurt too. Crap. Stupid.

Had she pulled? She hadn't. Please say she hadn't.

Groaning again, she rolled over and pushed herself up to sit on the edge of the bed. Her head swam and bile rose in her throat and she clenched her fists against her knees and pressed her jaws together.

Get a grip.

What had she done last night? It had just been a normal evening, hadn't it? She closed her eyes and tried to collect her thoughts.

The last things she remembered was pouring six shots of whiskey for her and her sister.

Sister?

And then the rest of the memories from the day before slammed back into her mind like a demented ogre with a battle axe.

Her stupid sister had come back from the dead and they'd decided to have a quiet drink after they closed the pub for the night. Yeah, that had worked out nice. Stupid Toini.

A tired grin spread across her face. Pushed through the pain and the nausea. Her sister still snored like a stupid lumber mill.

On the floor in front of her lay her phone. She must have dropped it during the night.

Paivi stared at it for a moment, and then she bent down and picked it up – slowly. It was not a morning for hasty movements.

She had one new message.

It was from Roy.

“Don't let her leave. I'm coming home.”