

## A Beacon of Life

by Maven Treecat

<https://www.weasyl.com/~maventreecat>

*Content Warning: Blood, alcohol, suggestive themes.*

"Yuh-huh!"

"Nuh-uh!"

"Yuh-huh!"

"Nuh-uh!"

The bickering cubs' back and forth didn't draw any eyes from the infrequent passersby that walked through the small stone streets beneath the shade of the palms and eucalyptus trees. The fox girl dug her hands into the sides of her long dress and tugged downwards as she stuck her tongue out at her opponent; the pony boy balled his hands into fist, arms straight and backwards as he leaned forward to return the gesture twice as hard. The locals at least understood the two were merely cranky they'd been kicked out of their respective houses for the time being; those just stopping by the oasis town merely ignored the childish conflict.

"*Yuh! Huh!* She totally is, and she's gonna curse your house!" the sandy-furred girl insisted.

"*Nuh! Uh!* She's perfectly nice! And even if she were, she's going to your house next!" the brown-haired boy huffed. "So she'd curse yours too!"

"No way!" the fox huffed. "Daddy's way too strong to get a curse!"

"...your daddy's ahead-" the horse began, only to catch his tongue from a lesson he'd gotten not too long ago. "...no wait, that'd be mean. Sorry."

"Pff. Say it!" she goaded. "You won't."

The horse's ears turned red at the dare. "...your daddy's already cursed!"

The fox gave a hurt gasp. "*Nuh-uh!*"

"Yuh-huh!"

The roles effectively reversed, the kids might have gone for another round of petulant exchanges were it not for a tweak of their ears—a literal one.

"Wayra. Qullqi. Just *what* are you arguing about?"

The two slowly turned their eyes back and up, gazing at the source of the adult voice. It only took a second for their eyes to adjust to the backlit lady that caught them before both shrieked. The wingtips seizing them by the ear with such effect, experienced enough to serve just as well as a pair of nimble hands, belonged to a plump sparrow woman splattered in red all across a formerly white apron as if she'd walked straight out of a knife-murder scene.

Their shrill frightened eeks would've alarmed Holly in many other contexts, but she was in a good mood. Their fear was only heightened by her good-natured belly laugh at the situation, too young to not take it as a more evil and maniacal expression like from the villains in their story books. "Haha, kids! Children...it is alright," the sparrow assured the kids in a soft yet firm tone once her laugh had vented the excess mirth, "but if the sight of me scared you, I hope you can understand why we had you stay outside."

"...d-...did you kill my mommy, Miss Holly?" Wayra asked, tears welling in the boy's eyes.

"What? No! Absolutely not," she firmly asserted, "and I am offended by the suggestion. Do you not know the most important rule for a healer at work? Have I not said it time and time again?"

"Y...yes..." the young colt sniffled.

"And what is it?"

Both kids chimed in. "Do no harm."

"Very good," Holly said with a nod, releasing their ears and bending down to their level. "Your mother is fine, Weyra. And so is your new sister."

The boy's eyes grew wide, a sudden excitement at the news seizing him. His hoof scuffed the ground in preparation to bolt inside to see.

"*Ahp-ah-ah-ah!*" Holly caught his shoulder with her wing. "No rushing in. It was very hard for both of them, so I need you to be strong and calm. And I *also* need you to not be arguing! So tell me what you two were arguing about, and I'll see if I can't help. *Then* you can go see your mommy if you promise to be a good boy."

The horse and fox kids looked at each other for a moment. Then Qullqi opened her mouth to jump on the topic and get her side in first...only to catch the bloodied sparrow lady's stern gaze and close her mouth. "Qullqi was saying you were a witch," the boy explained, already taking a tone that was reserved for boasting or telling on somebody, "that you can curse

people if they're noisy like my mom was when I came to get you. And I told her you were too nice."

"Witches can be nice," the girl muttered. "B-besides, Wayra said my daddy's cursed, and that's not true! Daddy's a strong fox."

Holly couldn't help but smirk. "Well, first of all, did either of you ever think to ask me?"

"...no." "No..." came the staggered replies.

"Well, then both of you already were being very silly," the sparrow judged, speaking as a teacher to a disruptive class that had finally calmed down. "Qullqi, it's rude to talk about other people behind their backs, especially saying things to scare people. And Wayra, you should know better than to say things like that about your friend's father!"

"She dared me..." he mumbled guiltily.

"That doesn't make it okay." The boy nodded, already knowing Miss Holly was right. "Now then...why would you say I am a witch, Qullqi?"

"You heal people! Like, when nobody else can heal them," the fox girl explained, counting on her fingers her exhaustive proof. "And...and you know things other people can't! Like you knew when his mommy started growing a brother or sister! And you knew Sinchi was hiding in your closet, like, immediately when we told you we couldn't find him. And you knew when that stranger was stealing a drink while you were still in the back room that one time! And, and, and you curse people! Like that angry guy who kept tripping and then fell asleep before he could pick a fight...and that rich guy who wanted to buy your inn and kept arguing with you suddenly kept spilling his purse!"

Holly nodded along, but it clearly seemed like the tall-eared girl was taking another breath to spill into another litany of 'evidence'. "Qullqi. Healing people isn't always a *power*," she explained. "There's lots of things that can heal, even in the desert! You just have to learn what helps people with what. I gave you cactus juice when you hurt your arm, remember? Nothing special. Just plain cactus juice. And it healed quicker, didn't it?" The sparrow's beak settled into a gentle, knowing smile. "There's a lot of ways to heal someone. I've learned over many years, through experience and from other healers. So if I'm healing things others can't? It doesn't mean they needed magic. It just means I figured out something."

"As for knowing things...do you know how your daddy always seems to know when you've been bad?" Holly chuckled at how the girl's ears flattened. "Well, adults know how to look for clues...and we also know from experience when something might happen. And Wayra's mommy had clues that even she knew meant she might be making a little sister for him before I was called the first time. And the angry guy and rich guy? Well, the reason I don't let you kids

drink the adult drinks is because it makes you clumsy and messy when you've not grown up big and strong. It can even be dangerous for even adults if they're not careful. And if you're angry? A lot of people didn't grow up learning how to be big and strong in their hearts either. Angry can make you just as clumsy and messy as adult drinks!"

Holly hugged the two, careful not to press any of the drying blood on her against the children. "So I do a lot of jobs. But I'm not a witch. I love all of you too much to curse any of you even if I could." Feeling the two relaxing in her embrace she released them to look at those bright, energetic faces once more. "Besides, Qullqi *is* right. There *can* be good witches. But you still shouldn't trust strangers, especially ones who can be dangerous with spooky magic. Okay?"

"Okay," Wayra said, more excited for his new sister than proud Holly said he was right.

"Okay!" Qullqi said, satisfied with the consolation point awarded by the sparrow matron.

"Okay. Can you be calm for your mommy, now?"

Wayra nodded. Holly didn't miss how his hooves still scuffed eagerly on the stone path, though. Yet she still waved a wing, allowing the horse boy to jog, stop, walk, and then speed-stride like a golem in a hurry into his family's home.

The sparrow turned to Qullqi. "Your dad isn't cursed, he's just ill," she assured her, anticipating the question. "Now...I know you've been waiting very patiently for me. Let me wash up at the pump and we'll head straight for your home, okay?"

The girl smiled, worried but understanding, watching the town's sparrow-of-many-roles walk away to gain her more cheery appearance back from the grizzly decorations provided by a rough delivery of new life into the world.

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"Well," Holly sighed, leaning back from the bedside with a sigh, rotating her neck to relax it again after having craned it to put her feather-hidden ear hole to the fox's chest, "my medicine isn't letting you get any worse. But that's all I can say for it. Your lungs still sound swollen, and your breathing isn't getting any better. If you're stuck like this for too long, there's going to be even more issues."

The prone fox grimaced at his words, displeased to be still looking at the stucco ceiling of his desert home. "Your honesty is appreciated, Holly, although I can't help but wonder if you could've lied."

"Yanta, a lie wouldn't help you get better. And you'll be happier with an explanation than hurting from something you don't understand."

He tried to nod, but only succeeded in triggering a series of deep, wet coughs.

Qullqi wasn't happy at hearing that, hugging tighter into Holly's ample side.

"Qullqi, dear...I hate to get you out of your own home again, but could you go visit Wayra again?" The girl only hugged the sparrow woman tighter. "*Dear*, it will help me greatly. And I promise I will have good news when you return. Okay?"

The fox girl reluctantly released from the sparrow and walked off. "...thank you, Miss Holly."

Holly paused, waiting for the footfalls to grow distant and silent and the house's door to shut firmly. That criteria satisfied, she scooted the stool she was seated upon closer to the child's sick father. "...Yanta. I fear I am not *always perfectly* honest," she said quietly to the man, the words causing his head to turn and face her more directly. "...my medicine is helping, yes. But you are getting worse. This certainly is a persistent case of pneumonia, especially in one still as young as you."

"Ah yes, Yanta at a young and spry 39 years of age."

The healer allowed the wry humor to stretch her beak into an appreciative smirk. "But...I do have options."

The fox blinked. "Options?"

Holly nodded. "...I have tried all relevant natural means of healing I have. Surgery would not help and is my least practiced field anyhow. This is beyond my medical knowledge, and it is possibly beyond medical knowledge even of the city-educated doctors."

"...that sounds like no options."

"That sounds like *one* option."

His face fell in contemplation. "...so you *are* a witch."

"Not exactly. But I do have magic...and my magic is specially-tuned to life itself."

Yanta frowned. "That sounds like a witch."

"Yanta, I will discuss the distinction with you at length once you're better," she said, an earnest sternness slipping into her voice, "but right now...I am confiding this with you because it is an *option*. I do not use it lightly; I have always preferred to not use this privilege I've been

given when normal means are sufficient, *especially* in places where it is despised and feared.” Her wing stretched out, taking one of the fox’s limp hands. “Yanta. How long have I been here?”

“...2 years.”

“And in that time, have I ever given you reason to doubt me?”

Yanta’s frown relaxed ever so slightly. “...no. You arrived with those adventurers, asked if we would allow you to build an inn here in our insignificant town, and...you stayed.” His eyes shifted away. “...you made our home better.”

Holly smiled. “That’s all I desire. To provide shelter, healing, and cheer. To help bring good business and lead those with ulterior motives away. To nurture and guide. To be a matron in your town is an honor, no less of one than any other town that I’ve served this role in. I didn’t make it better; I merely empowered you all to see how good you can be.”

Yanta shifted his feet awkwardly beneath the sheets the sparrow had pulled back from his chest for her examination. “...you’re asking permission to heal me with magic.”

“I’m begging you to consider it,” she insisted, “for it would hurt me to have this privilege and watch you wither from something it could have tre-”

‘Okay.’

“...okay?” Holly asked after a pause.

The fox closed his eyes, smiled, and turned his head back to the ceiling. “Heal me. So long as you can promise me this magic will not touch my family. I accept any curse you might inflict so long as it does not hurt my wife and daughter.”

Holly stood up and gently brushed her patient’s hair to one side. “Yanta, there will be no curses. And none of this will affect anyone but you. It is like scissors to a barber: it does its work without ever having to remain with you.”

Yanta didn’t move. He simply tried his best for a deep breath and failed.

The sparrow woman smiled and closed her eyes with a breath of her own. Deep inside herself, she gently nudged awake the spirit that resided inside her. “...*your gift, spirit...may I use it?*” she thought to the image within her, a glowing shape that grew more and more defined as she held it in her mind. Eventually, two eyes peeked out from the glowing shape, one vaguely reminiscent of a small feathery biped standing to attention.

*But of course. It is entrusted to you in good faith. You are, after all, a beacon of life.*

Holly's wings gently laid across the fox's chest. A gentle glow, green at first, then white, enveloped the pinion feathers before slowly trickling down like water. It pooled beneath her touch on Yanta's pained chest, and then it began to sink in, down, down beneath his fur and flesh. The light, even in the darkness within another person's body, continued to trickle and cover, embracing that which Holly instructed it to: those swollen, tired lungs.

The light embraced, and then the healer *truly* got to work.

When she left, Qullqi had returned and was smiling, and Yanta was sleeping with a familiarly strong and raucous snore he'd not had for weeks.

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"A new girl and a healthy man! Three cheers for our favorite brewer! Hip hip!"

**"Horray!"**

Holly laughed, her apron off, washed, and folded inside her dresser off in her room and the stress of a healer also tucked away. "Don't think leading a cheer is getting you any free drinks, mister!" she teased, wiping out a tankard as her always-present tavern chicken Annie pecked at a small dish of oilseed on the table behind her. "You have to pay and handle your liquor like everyone else."

"Aw, but Miss Nunez!" the dog snickered as the patrons in the inn's bar who'd joined his cheer resumed their own merriments, "such a radiant woman such as yourself truly doesn't need to concern herself with her best regular's constitution. Your work is of such divine quality, why, I believe the alcohol has been blessed away like a sacrament!"

"I also don't see you lining up at the local shrine when a cleric's in town, Inriki!" she countered with a grin as she put the tankard up and put her wingtips on her hips, "so I think you ought to take your 'blessings' more slowly before it becomes a sin."

The dog's two drinking buddies had a laugh at his expense while he gave a playful tisk of disappointment. "You can't pull one over on the matron," his hyena friend said, "she's the town mom, through and through."

Inriki didn't mind the laughter. "Can't blame me for trying!"

"No, I cannot!" Holly agreed.

"Speaking of..." he slurred, leaning forward over his still half-full tankard and scooting closer upon the seat of his stool, "if you're the town mom, who's the town dad?"

"Whoever it is, we're certainly not married." The sparrow caught the gesture of a coin and the call for one of her recently tapped beer kegs to be the supplier, and she moved to snatch a fresh tankard and put it to the spigot.

"Well, then, a single mom like yourself could use some company!" the dog declared. "...at night~"

His two friends gave a low ooh of suspense. Holly partially provided an answer by walking the filled and frothy cup to that paying customer and exchanging it for the offered coin, Inriki having to watch the woman he'd propositioned with her back to him. Granted, as many drinks deep as the dog was, he simply took it as an opportunity to look at the plump bird's fanned tail-feathers.

"Sometimes, Inriki!" Holly chirped, briefly stunning the dog and his two friends.

"...wait, really? I thought you were like...the most no-nonsense woman around," his boar friend said, mind already becoming fascinated with the mental image of the healer, babysitter, midwife, innkeep, bartender, and teacher actually engaging in 'nonsense'.

"Nothing nonsensical about a bit of pleasure," she mused. "Besides, you really also think I don't sample my own brews? Just because I don't drink while on duty making sure people are taken care of doesn't mean I don't drink at *all*."

The three leaned forward, wide-eyed and jaws slack. Inriki, though, quickly shifted to excitement. "So then...?"

"Not with you."

The words bowled over both boar and hyena, leaving the dog's expression to fall into disappointment and embarrassment. "Aw, c'mon, Holly. Why not?"

Holly tutted at the question. "Firstly, you're drunk. I don't do that sort of fun with people already on a different type of fun. Not really consent like that, now is it?" she chided. "Secondly, from your stories, I know I've different interests than you...at night. Thirdly, I know how you talk about these things, and I'm not just a lay for barroom bragging."

"And fourthly," she said, Inriki's face having fallen deeper and deeper into a pouty blush, "I know these things because *I'm* the one serving drinks when you're telling your tall tales." The sparrow's eyes glinted, wings spread against the counter as she leaned down. "You really want to lose one of your most interested listeners by giving away what's fact and what's fiction?"

The dog blinked as he looked at the bartender bird's expression...then his face stretched into a big, wide grin once more. "...yeah. Yeah, you're right, Holly! What would I ever do without you?"

"Be sober?"

"And that would be the *worst!*"

The cheer of the tavern was free, even the heaviest drinkers knowing the keen sparrow woman's eyes and motherly senses were keeping an eye out for when they edged too close to their own personal line of alcohol tolerance. Her beers and liquors were appreciated even by visitors, the local drinkers finding great pride that one of their only options in their out-of-the-way oasis town provided quality too. And, word having gotten around the area that a good inn was set up at the oasis, it wasn't infrequent now that explorers, traders, and adventurers would make this a stopping point while following newly viable routes and journeys.

It was little surprise, then, when a lynx slipped quietly into the establishment, carefully looking around before spotting the well-fed sparrow woman behind the bar. The toned feline strolled forward, shifting the stowed polearm on their back into a more comfortable position and leaning into the bar. "This one...establishment owner, yes?"

"That would be me, yes. Holly Nunez, at your service."

"Miss Nunez..."

"Call me Holly. Miss Holly if you *must*."

The lynx blinked, shifting her locs out from front of her face as she examined the sparrow's expression. "...hm. Holly. Revya would like to request room for the night."

"Certainly! A silver and I'll get you the key. Includes breakfast."

The lynx made the exchange, watching the sparrow as she moved about yet affording glances at the brown chicken that had paused its snacking to start staring her down. "Holly Nunez," the lynx repeated as she took the key and numbered fob in hand, "Revya hear you used to be adventurer, no?"

"I don't have *too* firm roots, no," the sparrow admitted indirectly. "If an interesting group comes along and the town seems alright without me and ready to take over the work? I'll travel with them until both they seem alright and I find a new interesting location. What can I say? I might be a *little* adventurous."

Revya's ear twitched. "Adventurous. Just how adventurous?"

Holly gave a beaky grin. "Woman like me? I'll try anything once. And people seem to always be surprised by what I've already tried. Can't be wise without being experienced!"

The lynx's tail swayed. "...Revyra be adventurous too," she said. "Revyra would like to know what this one has tried...would like to try."

"Oh?"

"...maybe, hmm...bird play with cat?" the traveler proposed, a smile growing on her face. "Cat promise not to use claws. Cat *not* promise not to use rope. Or teeth."

A nearby trio quieted as the matron of the establishment carefully scrutinized that face, a face that suggested it was up to no good. Surely, a dangerous stranger would be a terrible thing for a responsible town mom to...

"Oh! My mistake, I gave you the wrong key," Holly chirped, taking Revya's key before she could respond and sauntering back to the key drawer to fish out an item from the back. She returned, dropping a new key and fob into Revya's hand. Rather than a number, the fob only had the image of a chicken marked on it. "I regret to tell you *that* room is best unlocked only after bar hours are done. You might have to stay up a few hours more to get in. Why don't I get you a tankard of some juice so you can stay sharp while things wind down here? On the house, my own blend with local ingredients."

Revyra couldn't stop herself from giving a low rumble as she understood the implications. "Revyra understand and...look forward to tasting your...juices," she hummed, pulling a nearby seat to the bar and settling in for some drinking.

The trio stayed silent for a while, dog, boar, and hippo stunned back into their own minds as Holly bounced between her usual routine and new exchanges with the now juice-sipping lynx with black locs who'd just walked into town. Eventually, all they could do was laugh, finish their drinks, and admit that their motherly town sparrow would always have something up her sleeve for at least as long as she remained there.

When the bar was closed, the locals walking home and the other visitors headed for their inn rooms, Holly took a moment to give her chicken companion a scratch behind the neck. "You can close up, right, Annie? I'm going to live a little," the sparrow woman told her feathery friend before heading into the back hall with the younger lynxen visitor.

Annie didn't mind. She fluttered from table to table, eyes glinting with a hidden light as she snuffed out each and every candle that had illuminated the bar during that busy and fun-filled night. Annie, in fact, appreciated that the matron she accompanied had her own fun. After all, a shaman like Holly wouldn't be much of a beacon of life if she didn't live a little.