

ASSUMPTIONS – 1

What woke him was the incessantly chirping bird that only intensified the pounding headache he already had. This headache was far worse than when he'd taken a glancing blow to the side of the helmet from a battle axe in combat and that bird was intensifying it. Taking stock of himself he discovered every part of him hurt. With a touch of gallows humor, he was pleasantly surprised he was still alive. Fortunately, for his pounding head, the chirping had stopped but there were no other noises, none at all. He chalked that up to it being a Moonless, black as pitch, night. He was lying on his back, with his head cradled by something soft. Reaching up to touch whatever it was, pain shot through his shoulders, a very bad mistake trying to move that way. Getting an elbow into the ground he slowly tried to sit up. Immediately a firm but gentle pressure was exerted against his chest. It felt like a hand, but also felt too big to be one, a foot perhaps?

"Hold, Child of Eve, do not move; you will aggravate your injuries further." said a voice with a rasp like gravel in a bucket and a rumble like distant thunder. There was also the faint aroma of sulphur. As he stopped trying to sit up, the pressure slackened. The contradictions between the gentleness of the touch and the roar of the voice intrigued him. He wasn't frightened, very much to the contrary, very intrigued. Quite the opposite of the prickling caution the smell of sulphur caused in him.

"I smell sulphur, is there a Hades Vent nearby?" he asked trying to locate the smell.

"No, there are no volcanic activities anywhere in this area." she replied after a moment's pause.

"I see. Will you light a fire?" he asked the voice, "I can't see a thing."

"It is day, I feared a loss of your sight, it is a side effect ... a happenstance ... of your fall." she answered struggling to find the correct words. Missing parts of the language was already becoming a stumbling block.

"A happenstance of my fall, you know the Healer's arts?" he asked trying to locate the voice. "How long before it will return?"

"A few days, a few cycles of the moon, a few seasons, never, it is hard to say." was the reply.

Alive but blind, not a welcome revelation he thought, well make the best of it. Whoever the voice might be; did seem to be concerned about him, this is good, he thought to himself.

"I have few possessions, if you plan to rob me. They're in my pack I left at the trunk of the tree." he said. Even though the voice seemed concerned about him, he was testing for one last positive reaction. A foolish thing to do, perhaps, but he was as good as helpless at the moment.

"No, I do not intend to rob you, your possessions are safely stored with my own." she replied after a few moments pause.

“I suppose you don’t plan to kill me then, either, or you would’ve done so already.” he said.

“I am a Medic ...” started the voice.

“A what?” he interrupted, unfamiliar with the word.

“A ... Healer, I do not take life unless there is no other choice. Rest in comfort, I have not spent this much time tending to your injuries to kill you out of hand.” was the very exasperated reply. The language was becoming a huge stumbling block, she knew how she was speaking was stiff and probably sounded overly formal.

“My apologizes for doubting your generosity.” he replied, feeling quite stupid.

“No offense has been taken.” she said. “Now be still, I need to see your eyes.”

The same gentle firmness held his face as the aroma of sulphur became quite distinct.

“What is that sulphur smell?” he asked as he pulled his head out of the hands grip, trying to cover his nose and mouth with a hand.

“My deep regrets ... my apologizes; I have just recently eaten. The smell is caused by the particular way my race digests food.” she replied.

“Your breath smells of sulphur?” he asked still holding his hand over his face. This was new to him, he’d been with Draconid and Trollkin before and never encountered a sulphur smell to either races breath. This would make the voice a member of an unknown race.

“Only after I have eaten, it will pass shortly and be at acceptable levels.” she replied now quite embarrassed. “Fear not, I will hold my breath as I examine your eyes.”

Once again the hand held his face and, one at a time, his eyelids were gently lifted. She knew she had frightened him with her breath, that would not happen again, she would remember to not eat before any future examination of his eyes. The same unfamiliar feelings that she had felt watching him from the runabout washed over her as she held his face. She was touching him, interacting with him and didn’t understand why she felt such heat in her face because of it. The frustration from not understanding what was happening to her was maddening.

“The blackness seemed a bit less deep, what did you just do hold a candle before my eyes?” he asked.

“Yes.” she replied, after a few moments pause from reading the medical sensor array she’d used to scan his eyes.

“I felt no heat, how did you do that?” he asked turning his face toward the voice.

“I played a hand torch ... a flameless candle into your eyes, they appear to function ... to be working correctly.” she answered trying not to let her further frustration at the language sound in her voice.

“Oh, that’s good then?” he asked, not fully understanding what was said.

“Yes, very good, Child of Eve, the odds of recovering your sight have improved.” was the reply.

“Why do you call me ‘Child of Eve’?” he asked, intrigued by the extreme formality of whoever the voice was.

“Does not your race believe you are descended from Eve, The All Mother?” she asked.

“That’s the belief for many of my race.” he said, then continued after a pause. “I believed in that myself, once, but a long time ago. My full name is Willum Third Son of Willard, but please call me Willum. It’s so much less formal than ‘Child of Eve’.”

“As you wish, Willum Third Son of Willard.” she said.

“Just Willum, no one has called me by my full name in decades.” he said, smiling in the direction of the voice.

“Very well, Willum, I shall address you in that manner.” she replied and found herself smiling at him in return.

“Thank you and what is your name?” he asked. The pause grew extremely long, long enough that he began to feel he had overstepped a boundary between them.

She hesitated and the hesitation grew longer. “In my native tongue, my name is Twanju Haoq. In your tongue it means Last of Twelve.” she answered as feelings of sadness and anger surfaced with the memories.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but why are you named ‘Last of Twelve’?” he asked, then immediately regretted asking. Out of courtesy for his unknown benefactor he did not want to offend. Again, there was a long pause.

“I am the twelfth offspring, so I am named accordingly. When my parents had no more, ‘Last’ was added to my name.” she answered as the sadness deepened. Why was this bothering her so much, she wondered. She’d left the past long ago where it belonged, deep in the past.

“Your voice sounds almost heartbroken, does my question sadden you?” he asked.

“Yes, Willum, it does. As the Last, I was almost nonexistent, virtually ignored by my parents in all matters of the family. That is the primary reason I joined the ... I became a wanderer.” she replied trying to find a way to change the subject.

“We have something in common then, that’s the very same reason I became a wanderer myself. I am the last son, not of much use for my father at all. If your name saddens you, then I won’t speak it. Do you have a different name you’d like me to address you by?” he asked, trying to lighten the conversation.

“I have never thought of any other for myself.” she said.

“Well, I can’t just call you Healer or ... what was the first word you said you were, Medic? From the size of your hand and the sound of your voice, I believe you are Draconid or Trollkin perhaps, what race are you?” he asked.

“You are very observant, even blinded, I am Mang Gaawn.” she answered and smiled again.

“In all my years of wandering I’ve never heard of the Mang Gaawn, where is your homeland?” he asked after pausing a few moments.

“Across the ocean of stars ... across the sea ... more leagues distant than you can comprehend.” she replied, struggling to find the words again.

“Hmm, as your race is Mang Gaawn, if you like, may I address you as Mang?” he asked and smiled again.

“Yes, I believe I will like that. Call me Mang, Willum.” Mang replied.

“Done.” he said and held up his hand.

“Why do you hold out your hand, Willum?” Mang asked.

“For you to shake hands with me, it’s a gesture of agreement for my people.” he replied, still holding his hand out.

“Very well, as you wish.” Mang replied and he felt a hand take his. He had been right, the hand was at least half again the size of his own and he was above average in size. The palm was smooth and very warm to the touch but the back of the hand, where his fingers touched it, was extremely rough almost scaled. More like a Draconid he thought to himself.

“May I sit up, Mang? Lying here is a bit uncomfortable on my poor back.” he said.

“Yes, but let me help you, Willum.” Mang replied. A moment later he felt the same presence standing over him as he had when the ghost had left the cakes for him. Large hands gingerly slid under his arms. “I will bring you up and then back against the tree. Gently, Willum, slowly and gently.” He was lifted as if his weight was nothing of consequence and gently slid back until he was resting on a tree trunk.

“Thank you, this is much better.” he said, stretching as much as his aching body would allow and tried to bend his legs a bit. His left bent freely, his right didn’t move at all. Winching, as he bent forward, he reached down and felt something as hard as rock surrounding his right thigh.

“Your femur may have been cracked from the fall; I put a cast on it as a precaution.” Mang said.

“My what is cracked and you did what?” he asked. Mang spoke in plain language but in words he didn’t understand at all.

“Now it is my turn to apologize, I use too many Healers terms. Your thigh bone may be cracked and I surrounded your leg with quick drying clay to protect it.” she replied slowly getting over the frustration of the language barrier. She’d have to learn as she spoke more with Willum.

“I know a little of the Healers arts, I’ve picked them up from my years of wandering, but I’ve never heard of this ‘cast’.” he said and continued to touch what he could of it.

“It is a common enough art for Mang Gaawn Healers. Where is your homeland?” Mang asked changing the subject quickly.

Thinking for a moment, he decided that there was no harm in explaining his past to Mang, there was no advantage in hiding it. “Originally my home was Orphic in Boreas, on the southern coast of the Inland Sea. I was born into a very well to do family, but as the third son, our early life stories are similar I suspect. I, too, was pretty much ignored by my family and sent away for schooling at Gelius in Thrace. My purpose in life, I still believe, was as nothing more than an extra son incase anything happened to the two elder ones. Being sent away may have just been the reason I’m here today. Shortly before my 18th year, I received a letter from my mother explaining that a plague had descended upon Orphic and I never heard from my family again. With no income and no real skills, other than the sword, I joined the army of Thrace. Soldiering suited my youthful enthusiasms but, by my 25th year, I’d seen too much of war. I turned my back on it all and walked away. I’ve wandered over as much of the world as possible for the last 35 years. I suppose I’m very similar to Alicia, from the storybooks, I really don’t have a destination in mind. I wander until I find something that interests me and stop there for a time. I don’t regret any of my decisions in life, even falling from a tree I shouldn’t have climbed. I wouldn’t have met you had I not.” he said.

“Did you ever return to Orphic to determine what happened to your family?” she asked after a long silence. She was afraid of his answer, she hoped she was wrong but almost knew she wasn’t.

“I tried once, but discovered that whatever the plague was, it was still very much alive. None could get within leagues of the city; an army of allied nations was camped around it preventing this. Any who managed to venture in, stayed, Orphic had become a place of the dead. How about you, has your wanderings brought you back home?” he asked.

“I can never return to my homeland, Willum, it is an impossibility.” Mang replied after another long pause.

“I’m sorry, Mang, my questions have brought you sadness.” he said knowing that he’d asked far too much of a painful nature.

“It is alright, Willum, this is the first I have grieved in years. Now, it is time for you to rest and heal. I have made tea for you that will help.” Mang said and he felt a warm mug being placed in his hand. He reached out with his free hand and caught Mang’s as the mug was released.

“Thank you, Mang; I hope someday I can help you as much as you’ve helped me.” he said. Tentatively smelling the aroma of the liquid, he wrinkled his nose a bit. “What’s in it?”

“Local herbs, spices, and several ingredients that would be impossible for me to describe to you, Willum.” Mang replied. “How would you like me to prove to you it is not poisoned?”

“I can’t see you drink it, so I’m forced to trust you, Mang.” he replied grinning. Sticking a finger in the tea, to collect a few drops, he tasted them. His headache started to slacken almost immediately from just a few drops on his tongue.

“Drink the tea, Willum, and rest.” she said and gently squeezed his hand. The heat returned to her face along with a feeling of contentment she’d never felt before. She’d interacted and had physical contact with others before, why did she feel this way about Willum she asked herself.