

The wind whistled across the rolling hills, the long grass of the steppes whipped along with it. It was peaceful and quiet so far above the world. The towering stone wall provided a fantastic vantage point to look out across the land. Aside from some grazing animals and the dance of birds, no figures could be seen below. The vigilant eyes of the warrior on the wall flicked to the horizon, just able to make out the colossal kypari trees off in the distance. She frowned, the scowl hidden by the red silk covering her face. Even after invasions occurred, she knew that historically those with vision as keen as hers ought to be able to see the dim haze surrounding the trees betraying the activity of the mantid. Indeed, leading up to their assault they had been whipped into such a frenzy at times they blacked out the sky behind them. Now, there was nothing. She knew better than to think their ancient foe was extinct. Maybe someday in the future that would happen, but it was not yet that day. Still, with their ominous shadow gone, and the yaungol both placated and their numbers thinned, it was strange to see so little movement. Not for the first time, her eyes narrowed, keeping herself focused through the tingling nerve of such an eerily still scene.

The pandaren turned and walked to the other side of the Serpent's Spine, surveying the Vale. A faint pang struck her heart, a tension in her chest mixed of sadness and anger. So much of it was still in ruin, but slowly it was healing an inch at a time. At least the Sha had been pushed back, the foul, fuming corruption the black heart had left in its wake no longer seeping into the sky. She rested her hand on the great, curving sword that hung at her waist. Its familiar binding and reassuring weight brought her mind back to herself. She took a step back from the ledge, armor clinking lightly as the plates settled from her shifting weight. Just as the blackguard went to return to her post, she spotted, far down the southern curve of the Spine, a strange figure on the wall. Here and there, indeed, were fellow warriors making their watch on the wall, but following the path north was a figure dressed in green, their head hidden from the sun under a wide hat much like her own. The wind gusted again and a long trail of hair rushed away from the figure, almost certainly a woman. As the stranger passed each of the sentinels, they straightened, looking her over with a cautious hand ready to attack, but relaxed, bowed, and resumed their duty. She would return the same courtesy, patiently awaiting their judgement that she was no threat. It was unusual to see travelers along the wall nowadays. Typically, such access was strictly forbidden, but allowances had to be made during wartime for the assistance of the empires across the sea. Her eyes narrowed, curious who this person was to bend the rules now that they were, in theory, reinstated. Time would tell.

Minutes flowed by, the traveler slowly making her way closer. Her movements were serene and bore a fluid grace to them. No pandaren she knew that could move like that was without some skill in combat, though admittedly she knew of few people who were not of the Shado-Pan, and she suspected the bamboo staff the stranger carried was for more than assuring her footing. She got closer and the warrior became increasingly certain this wanderer was a monk, from the way she carried herself to the simple appearance of her garb to the small details in her dress and belt. The wind rose and the woman's hair swirled about her back again in a rich, deep shade of brown that shimmered auburn in the afternoon sun. She came close enough to see

all her details, the equally bold dark stripes in her ruddy fur, the thick tail that swayed behind her. She wore little for a top, enough for modesty and support, which only further solidified the guess this was a monk.

“Hold,” the warrior said. The stranger did so. Her head was tilted forward slightly and her hat obscured her eyes, but she saw the faint smile stretch across her face. The blackguard looked her over and spotted the medallion bearing the seal of the White Tiger slung about the traveler’s neck. She was granted safe passage by the Shado-Pan. That, she knew, was a rare and honorable gift. She placed her hands together and bowed deeply. “Forgive the intrusion.”

“I know,” the traveler said, sounding slightly tired but nevertheless bemused, “It is your duty to protect us all.” Her voice was sweet and melodious, neither high nor low but still seemed to ring like birdsong. There was something familiar about it. She returned the bow. “And I thank you for it, even if most of Pandaria never sees you doing it, or as anything more than an ominous shadow in the mountains.”

They both straightened again and their eyes met, the stranger’s smile widening warmly. The warrior’s dark eyes widened in the shock of recognition, the easy care in her face, the brilliant jade hue of the monk’s eyes, the purple highlight in her hair... “Wait, I – I know you!”

*Her heart hastened its pace as memories, so vivid she may have been experiencing them in the here and now, returned to her. She was poisoned in hatred, hungering only to make these foreigners suffer for stepping foot in her homeland. She wanted to hurt them, to kill them, all of them, for despoiling her people and blighting her land. She thought she would drown in all that loathing, the urge for violence, but through that smothering blackness someone reached in and grabbed her, pulling her free of the mire. Suddenly light and life flooded back into her, gasping for air and wide-eyed as she tried remembering where she was, what was happening. And there, that sweet, worried face, was directly across from hers, searching her eyes with palpable concern.*

*“Oh, thank the Red Crane, it worked!” She exhaled forcefully, relief washing through her. She placed a strong hand on the warrior’s face. “I have you, you’re all right now.” Her tongue had a strange accent, perhaps one of the pandaren from across the waves on the Wandering Isle. A rough, guttural voice shouted out incomprehensible words, and the monk looked up to listen. She called back in the same harsh language, then looked back and embraced the blackguard. “You’re safe, now. Go back to the front gates, there are more reinforcements coming, they’ll see to your injuries. I must go. Take care, my friend!” And like that she was gone.*

“Yes, I’m certain it is you!” she said, closing quickly to her. The monk’s reaction was unexpected and swift. She drew back away, her staff brought between them ready at the defense. While the red pandaren was not afraid, her eyes nonetheless betrayed caution as she watched her. “Wait, no, I’m sorry, I did not mean to startle you!”

The monk paused before responding, “Most do not react well to seeing one of the Shado-Pan come to them so quickly and without warning.” Her tone was not angry or worried or confrontational, just smooth and strong like an ancient tree.

The warrior's senses returned to her and she suddenly realized what this must look like. She glanced up and down the Spine and saw the heads of her comrades turned to her, some already drawing weapons and starting to approach. She gestured for them to stand down. They did so, but continued to glance back with frequency.

That done, she bowed again, far deeper than before. "Please forgive me, ma'am. I was simply surprised by your appearance."

"What is surprising about my appearance?" she answered, relaxing her stance slightly.

"No, not how you look, just...you saved my life. I never learned who you were, but I would not be here without you. I am certain it is you." She looked up and saw the skeptical expression awaiting her. "And you don't remember me..." She deflated, now feeling equal parts foolish and disappointed.

The monk laughed, and it sparked a touch of anger. "You are Shado-Pan, dear! Your face is covered, and it probably was when we last met. You'll have to give me a little more than that if I'm to remember you!"

Would there be no end to her embarrassment today? Of course, how could she recognize her if she'd only ever been seen covered in armor and her identity hidden? "Ah, yes, that's...a very good point. It was in the Shado-Pan Monastery, when the Alliance and Horde were led in to help us. I don't remember anything until after you pushed the Sha out of my spirit, but you were so very relieved, like you didn't think it would work. And...then you hugged me."

The monk's face lit up. "Oh, yes! I remember you!" She grinned. "You are quite right, actually, I had never tried any sort of spiritual cleansing like that before, I wasn't sure if it would work."

Akira stared back at her in disbelief.

"Is something wrong?"

"I...had taken you as one of the Zen masters, to pull off a ritual like that."

The monk beamed. "Nope!" she answered cheerfully, "I was so young back then, a true novice." Her smile faded when she saw her companion was hardly placated. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head and blinked, "Please forgive me, I guess I had built you up in my memory as some grand sage sent by Chi-Ji himself."

The mistweaver snorted, grinned, and burst out laughing. The guard was equal parts flustered and amused, but beneath her veil she smiled sheepishly. The stranger's pure and simple joy was too infectious not to. "You must really not remember what happened, then, for you to think that!"

"Well...no, as I said there was nothing before you pulled me free of the Sha's grip. I was disoriented at first, in pain from the injuries it caused, and you were there."

"Hmm...I'm glad you don't remember where you got your injuries from, then."

"...it wasn't from the Sha?"

"No," she said in a teasing voice, "It was from me."

The blackguard looked at her with extreme skepticism.

“You know you Shado-Pan are not the *only* great warriors in the land, right?”

She grinned and shook her head again. “No, no, you must have gotten lucky, I was handicapped at the time.”

“Oh, of course, blame your inability to fight me on the Sha of Hatred.”

“See? I was quite distracted!”

They shared a round of laughter, and soon silence fell upon them. The monk continued smiling cheerily, though the warrior felt some unease come upon her. “I...suppose I should know your name, after all these years.”

“I am Miyuki Fireheart,” she said promptly, bowing her head, “Student of Chi-Ji and follower of the Huojin path.”

“It is a pleasure to finally meet, truly. I am Akira Thunderclaw, Blackguard of the Shado-Pan.” She brought her hands together and bowed deeply. When she straightened again, she saw that Miyuki was looking off to the north with the same passive, observant expression she had when she thought Akira was attacking her. She glanced the same direction and saw a group of fellow Shado-Pan walking down the Spine. “Oh, there is nothing to worry about, Master Fireheart, the guards are changing.”

“Oh, they’re not here for me?” she answered with a grin, “Oh, and please don’t call me that. ‘Miyuki’ is fine.”

“Miyuki, uh...were you going somewhere?”

“Hmm?”

“Where were you going when you came upon me?”

“Oh, I was going wherever I wanted.”

Akira blinked. “You didn’t have a destination?”

“No, just wherever my feet carried me.”

“How could that be? I’m sorry, I just...where do you live?”

“I usually manage to find someplace to spend the night.”

“Where are you from? Not...the Turtle, where do you call home?”

Miyuki shrugged, but Akira’s trained eye caught the momentary deflation of her posture, the wistful look flashing across her face before vanishing back to the placid expression she once had. “No, no home.”

Akira decided it wasn’t wise to press. “I mean, if it wouldn’t be an inconvenience, and you don’t have anywhere you were going, I have the next few days to myself. I was planning to spend it with a relative in the valley. Would you like to come with me?”

“I would love to! Thank you so much.”

The advancing group of guards came upon them, one staying behind as the others kept walking. He bowed in greeting of Akira, saying nothing, and she returned it. In a quick little ritual she must have practiced hundreds of times she passed off a small scroll of paper to the newcomer, who accepted it with dignity. She stepped aside and he took her place on the wall.

“Are you ready, Miyuki?”

“If you are, certainly!”

Akira offered her arm to Miyuki.

“Oh, you are too kind.” She looped her arm around Akira’s. “And...a little short.”

Akira’s head snapped to Miyuki. “I’m not that short! You’re not even a paw’s length taller than me.”

“What’s that? Pretty sure you just said I’m taller than you.”

Akira tutted and loosened the strap on her hat. “I’m an acceptable height, you’re just a giant.” She pushed it back and freed her hair, cut relatively short and bound into a small tail. Miyuki could now see the shocks of red dyed into it. Akira pulled away the scarlet scarf that hid her face, revealing a strong jaw and ready, confident smile. “There, now you’ve seen my face.”

Miyuki stopped and turned to her slightly, her arm slipping out of its place. “Let me take a look.” Akira found it a little odd, but waited patiently while Miyuki put a hand to her chin and looked her over. After a few seconds, her searching expression became pleased and said, “It is a very lovely face, dear.” The monk continued on down the wall, leaving Akira confused behind her.

The warrior jogged back up to her. “What was that about?”

“Fortune alone is not enough that I should meet you again all these years later. If it was my fate to meet you again, I should know what you look like. So I wanted to make up for it.”

“You act like we should have known each other better.”

“Shouldn’t we?”

Akira nodded, conceding the point. “Well...if we are to know each other better, do you mind if I ask you something serious?”

Miyuki’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh? Of course!”

A few more paces passed in silence.

“Akira?”

“I’m sorry, it’s something I’ve been wondering for a while, but I fear you may find it offensive.”

“It’s okay, dear, ask away!”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The language you were speaking, when we first met. It was Orcish, was it not?”

Miyuki tilted her head in thought. “Mmm...yes, I would imagine so.”

“You were with the Horde, then?”

“Still am, I suppose.”

Akira furrowed her brow and looked up at Miyuki. “I didn’t think they’d let you leave.”

“That’s what I mean, I am still in the Horde. I just...haven’t been in Horde-controlled territory in a while. Since the Siege of Orgrimmar ended and the bulk of the cleanup was taken care of, I’ve been wandering Azeroth.”

“How...how could you side with Garrosh?”

“I was on the sieging side, not the defending side,” she answered as though it was obvious.

Akira smirked and gently punched Miyuki’s arm. “You know what I mean.”

“I suppose we didn’t know much about the Alliance or the Horde when they first came to the Isle. We certainly didn’t see for ourselves what Garrosh was like until after it was far too late. If I knew then what I know now...as much as I prefer the Huojin path to the Tushui, they both have merits, and I would likely have gone to join the Alliance instead. Garrosh’s monstrosity should have never been tolerated, never been allowed to grow.” She bowed her head. “I still often think Taran Zhu was right, we should never have been allowed to come here.”

“I’ve thought on that for a long time. While that orc committed untold atrocities, I am not certain we would have been better off for it in the end.” Silence fell. Akira took it as an invitation to continue. “The awakening of the mantid and their early assault coincided too perfectly with your arrival. While the other Sha may have gained their power through the actions of the Alliance and Horde, I still have my doubts that the Sha of Fear was one of them. At the speed with which they attacked, I think that would have happened anyway. The Shado-Pan would have been pressured severely to handle that without aid.”

“But you wouldn’t have been fighting the other Sha.”

“That is true, but we still would have had to contend with the Lei Shen and the Zandalari. Without the outsiders...”

Miyuki’s face turned very grim.

“That is why while I want to hate those that came to our lands, I am not sure it is so easy as that. I fear the pandaren would have been overrun without them.”

“That has occurred to me as well, but...how much do you know about what happened in Orgrimmar?”

“Ah, not much.”

Miyuki shook her head. “The horrors he committed... He was ready to tear this world apart. Pandaria would just have been the start.”

“But he’s gone now. He was slain by the shaman Thrall. Right?”

“Yes,” she answered quietly after a pause, “He’s dead now.”

They walked on in silence for a while, Miyuki looking over the scenery and taking in the natural beauty of the land, Akira more preoccupied with the monk. “Miyuki, may I ask something else?”

“Sure,” she said, voice still quiet.

“Is...what happened in the Siege why you’re wandering, away from the Horde?”

Miyuki bowed her head and grinned, a rush of breath forcing its way out her nose in a wry laugh. “That obvious, am I?”

“I get the impression that nothing about you is subtle.”

The jaded expression became genuinely pleased. “You’re not the first one to say that about me. There is likely some truth to it.” She sighed. “Yes, I have spent a long time trying to put myself together. My time with the Horde, in Pandaria and back in Durotar, was not even remotely what I thought I’d be doing with my life when I was younger.”

“The Shado-Pan spend years training us mentally for the life we are to live. It’s not for everyone, and I cannot imagine throwing people not prepared for that into the fray. Was the Dominance Offensive the first time you were in real combat?”

“Yes. I had only trained in dojos prior to that. Blood was only spilled on accident.”

Akira shook her head. “That’s no way to prepare someone for war. I can understand why you wanted to get away from it all. Someone like you would have a hard time facing that.”

Miyuki looked askance at her and answered with a hint of offense, “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

The warrior held up a placating hand. “Didn’t mean to insult, I was just thinking, well...”

“Go on,” she prompted, tone prodding.

“Your eyes, they just looked too...kind. They weren’t the eyes of a killer. Before I said anything, before I fully came back to myself, you looked so worried. I’ve seen, then and now, that you possess great strength of body and spirit. I’m sure, if pressed to it, you *would* do what the moment demanded, but I feel like you’re the sort of person who would never live it down. You remember the face of everyone you had to fight in the Siege, don’t you?”

Miyuki stopped and looked down at Akira. Her expression was blank, but her eyes looked so pained. “Are all Shado-Pan this good at reading people?”

“We kind of have to be.” She reached out slowly for Miyuki’s hand, who offered it to her. “I’ve dealt with many people who were not ready for that kind of life.” She turned to Miyuki and took both of her hands in her own. “What I’m glad for, though, is that your kindness wasn’t smothered by that hard a life.”

Miyuki’s expression broke into a pained but happy smile. She squeezed Akira’s hands in her own. “Of course. I’m still here, in spite of it all, and still me.”

She felt an odd texture at her finger tips and looked down at Akira’s hands. She lifted her right paw and examined it. There, burnt into her flesh, was plain to see the mark of the Xuen the White Tiger. Her finger traced the ridges of the brand.

Akira spoke before Miyuki could ask the question forming in her head. “All Shado-Pan earn this mark as a rite of passage, in order to be accepted into our order.”

“Oh, I knew about it, but it seemed so...harsh. I thought it was something my grandmother had made up to scare me off.”

“Scare you off?”

Miyuki looked bashfully away, a childlike grin exploding onto her face. “When I was a little girl, a long time ago and a world away when I was still living on the back of Shen-zin Su, it was my dream to join the Shado-Pan. I would make believe I was the greatest warrior in all of Pandaria, eventually besting and tanking the place of Taran Zhu.”

Akira gave a bark of laughter at that. “Beat Lord Zhu? He almost stopped Garrosh when he was mortally wounded and half-crippled!”

“Can’t let a six-year-old have her dreams?” Miyuki retorted.

Akira sighed as her laughter faded, “You must have been such a fierce child.”

“I was all set on being a follower of Xuen until I was about fourteen. It just...wasn't for me.”

“Too soft?”

Miyuki raised an eyebrow. “Again with my softness.”

“It's a good soft!”

“Hrm, I've heard that one before,” she answered, tone dry and unconvinced. “But, I suppose in a way it is correct.” She looked back to Akira. “But I am not some squishy little pushover.”

The warrior held her hands defensively, “No, I wouldn't dare.” She grinned.

“Akira...I must admit you seem oddly open to the idea that I prefer not to fight.”

She looked confused at the statement. “You've demonstrated you are willing to if necessary.”

“Is that the only reason you think that?”

She let out of slow breath. “You're thinking the Shado-Pan is full of pandaren who think the ends justify the means, that necessary action at any price must always be taken?” Silence. “You are not wrong, I would certainly agree that is the standard opinion. We do what we must, but we try to remember a sense of justice, simply when it is decided that severe action must be taken we do not hesitate, striking swiftly and with extreme force. I was one of them, for a long, long time. But, while my experience of your Horde was punctuated by great, mighty events, the attack on the Monastery, the invasion of the Mantid Empire, the efforts to bring down Lei Shen...most of my interactions, by the day, were with people like you. Not great heroes seeking to save the world or earn glory, but ordinary people trying to make the world a better place for those they cared about. I could see, if only told the ideals of the two factions, why you may have chosen to be with the Horde over the Alliance. I appreciate what the soldiers and priests of Stormwind have done for us, but they seem too fixated on talking about what ought to be done than doing it. The Horde does not have that issue.”

“Nor do the Huojin.”

“Exactly. But...while spending many weeks healing from the Sha's ruin on the Monastery and on the Vale, I had ample time to reflect. One day, I believe, we will no longer need people like me. It may be long, long after I am dead, but someday we will live beyond the need for swords and the magics of war. On that day, it will be those that worked to heal the world, to make something for others, for our loved ones, that will lead the way forward.” She looked up at Miyuki. “People like you. When I say I'm glad that your kindness wasn't smothered, it is important to me on a personal level. It means that my hopes for the future aren't dead, too.”

The monk smiled. “You keep the Red Crane in your heart, and one day that future will become our reality. These great and terrible battles make for sudden change in the world around them, but lasting change comes from the small efforts made by small people day after day.”

The Spine rolled and twisted along the landscape, turning across mountains before coming to the fertile Valley to the south. They continued to walk into the evening, cheerily



discussing many topics of their past, stories of glory and adventures, and how the intervening years had treated them since they first met. They came upon a garrison tower in the Wall that overlooked a forest tucked into the valley between the wall and the mountains on its inner side, and the vast, scarred wasteland on the outer side of the wall. They descended through its long, spiraling stairs until reaching the gates at its feet. The guard there removed the immense wooden brace keeping them shut and permitted Miyuki and Akira to leave. The monk stopped and bowed to them before removing the pendant from her neck and returning it to them, her guarantee of safe passage ended now that she left the ground controlled by the Shado-Pan.

It was a short walk from there to a quiet village secluded in the trees and bamboo. The path was shady and cool under all the foliage, and upon seeing the buildings through the greenery both pandaren quickly became aware of how far they'd been walking, both ready to put up their feet and relax. The homes were simple, comfortable affairs, none particularly large or showy. Akira led them to one of the larger homes near the middle of the settlement. Attached to it was a smithy, the air still heavy with the smell of smoke and fresh steel. There was a pandaren at work carefully polishing something small, the object obscured by the cloth in his hands. He was built just as broadly as Akira, similarly with black fur and hair. His beefy arms looked tireless and industrious. All around, he was a large man, spending his days doing hard labor. He looked up as they approached and his solid, stern expression broke into a welcoming grin.

"Akira! So good to see you! And who is your dashing friend?"

"Jian!" she leaned into the smith and hugged him. He returned the embrace, keeping his dirty hands free of her armor. He grunted from the pressure she put on him, though Miyuki could tell he was squeezing just as hard. "This is Miyuki. Miyuki, this is my cousin, Jian."

Miyuki smiled and bowed, "I am most pleased to meet you, sir!"

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine, Miyuki."

"Jian, would you object if she stayed with us?"

"Might be a little cramped, but I certainly wouldn't mind. Should ask the missus first, though."

"Ask me what?" came a voice from through the nearby doorway. A young woman appeared, close to Miyuki's age, with a shining coat of brown. Her piercing gaze fixed on the monk. "Who's this?"

"Xiuying," Akira quickly stepped in, "This is Miyuki, I was hoping she could stay with us while I'm here."

The pandaren pursed her lips. "We only have the one extra bed, either the two of you are sharing or one of you is sleeping on the floor."

"Oh, I'll be on the floor," Akira said, but faltered.

At the exact same time as her, talking over each other, Miyuki said, "We can certainly share!"

They looked at each other, but Akira suddenly felt flushed. "Well...I mean, whichever you prefer, I can do," she managed.

Miyuki merely giggled.

“Mhmm...” Xiuying rolled her eyes slightly, clearly not impressed with this stranger, “Whatever you come up with, just let me know sooner rather than later if I need to get another set of blankets. Come, let’s get you out of that armor.”

She turned and went back inside, Akira following and, with a gesture to do the same, Miyuki as well. The kitchen and sitting room was, indeed, quite small. The table to one side would only just have enough room for all of them, as Miyuki observed considering the new face she saw kneeling before it. The boy looked up from the paper and brushes before him and beamed when he saw them.

“Aunt Akira!” he ran to them with the exuberance only children could muster and raised his hands up to her.

She bent down and scooped him up as he arrived, quickly hauling him up in a hug. She balanced him off her side, holding him in one of her strong arms. She held her free hand up to his chin.

“Hey, little man. What have you been up to? Get in any good fights?”

“Please don’t encourage him!” Xiuying scolded.

“What’s wrong with a good fight?” Akira asked. “So long as you play it fair and everyone knows it’s in good fun, a little scrap can be great!”

The tension in Xiuying’s shoulders tightened further. Miyuki understood it, as she used to be that same rambunctious little child constantly getting into trouble, and only worse when a relative came by to encourage it. It wasn’t until years later she could appreciate the stress that put on her parents, as no doubt was the case here.

“All right, all right.” She put him back down. “You can tell me later, Sho.” she said to him quietly with a wink. It earned a grin from her nephew.

She walked over to the paper wall that divided the room from the rest of the house and slid one of the shoji open. With a nod of her head she indicated Miyuki should come with her. The bedroom that awaited was clearly used more for storage, with domestic odds and ends stored in cabinets or in piles on shelves. The bed was clear, as was a space on the floor almost as large as the bed itself, and little else.

“Are you sure you want to share that bed?” Akira asked as she began to unlace her swords from her belt.

Miyuki slipped off her heavy pack in an instant and set it upon the floor. “Well, it’ll be cozy if we do.” Both exchanged grins, though Akira’s was tinged with nervousness. It was clear to them that they would certainly be laying against each other. Even then, whoever wasn’t against the wall would likely have a limb or two hanging to the floor. She removed her hat and laid it atop the bag, shaking out her long hair.

“Ah...much better. I suppose I’ll give you some privacy, then, unless you need help getting all that off.”

“No, I should be fine. Thank you!”

Miyuki nodded and exited, leaving her alone. Her hands jumped from snap to buckle to strap to fastener around the plates of her armor, retracing paths they’d followed thousands of

times. Truthfully, having Miyuki's help would've made it much quicker, but she didn't feel like stripping down to her undergarments in front of her. It was too personal, seemed too soon for anything like that. Soon she was changed into far more comfortable clothing and stepped out. Miyuki was sitting next to Sho, who was eagerly showing her the new Mogu characters he learned to write, as well as the doodle he made when his mother wasn't looking. Akira settled in across the table from the monk and looked over the papers.

Now that the plates of her armor had been removed, wearing only a simple black, sleeveless top tied with a red sash, red pants, and sandals, Miyuki could see her physique. She had guessed correctly that she was strong, but the armor had hidden the extent of that. She figured her build would be more like her own, thick with dense muscle and a healthy layer of fat. She was right about the muscle part, built powerfully. Only a few back at her monastery on the Turtle ever developed to such an extent, and Miyuki knew well it meant Akira spent almost every day training, working, fighting, in order to maintain a shape like that. The pandaren had only a little padding to break the hard lines of her body, almost reminding her of the orcs, though decidedly more wiry than them.

Sho was regaling Akira with his latest little scuffle when she held up a hand to quiet him. Her eyes grew distant, listening for something off in the distance. Miyuki stiffened as she did so.

"What is it?"

"Shouting, someone is coming..."

She quickly grabbed a sword from her room and ran outside. Only just after she left could Miyuki hear the commotion herself. She joined Akira as well, staff in hand. They went to the edge of the village facing the heart of the woods where a group and started forming.

"What's going on?" Akira demanded. The crowd suddenly ordered itself with the arrival of the Shado-Pan.

One man, out of breath and clothes a mess with a cut on his arm through his shirt, spoke up. "Akira, thank Xuen you're here. The hozen are raiding Ji-Lung's home."

"Ji-Lung?" Miyuki asked.

"A hunter, brings in hides and meat for the village," Akira quickly said to her. "Thank you, I will go at once."

"Where is it?"

"Back up the trail," he answered, hooking a thumb over his shoulder.

"Miyuki, you should stay here."

"Like hell I will!" She started taking a few steps towards the path.

"Miyuki, please, the hozen may do something reckless. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Then I guess you'll just have to guard me, then!"

Before Akira could get in another word, the monk was already sprinting down the trail. She cursed and followed swiftly behind her.

"Miyuki, you should stay back at the village."

"They're just some hozen! Weren't you just saying how good a nice fight is?"

"They're not going to hold back."

“Yes, and generally they only fight because they want their prize, not to kill.”

Akira breathing started to get heavy as she maintained the dead sprint while shouting to Miyuki. “You’re not going to take ‘no’ for an answer, are you?”

“Now you’re getting the idea! And...are you getting winded? I’d think with all that armor off you’d be practically floating.”

Akira looked sideways at the monk. Her breathing was fluid and regular, but hardly sounded labored. “Monks and their chi...”

“Oh, quit your whining!” Miyuki teased.

The mistweaver brought her hand across Akira in a sweeping gesture. A wash of reddish-white light flashed over her and she suddenly felt pure elation fill her. She had never felt so light on her feet, in fact she felt if she tried hard enough she could even fly. Akira had felt the surge of magic from Shado-Pan monks doing similar, but the effect seemed so different, more about the rush of adrenaline and the readiness to go to war. Perhaps there was more to the devotion of a monk than just from what Celestial they took their lessons. The message of Hope lifted her, rather than the message of Strength driving her. She felt some of that same joy that was apparent in Miyuki. Her paws slammed into the earth and churned it fiercely under her, and she began to pull ahead of the monk.

They burst through the brush and almost collided with a group of the hozen. Both reacted instantly, Miyuki rolling to the side and sweeping her staff in a low arc, taking out the legs of two of them. Akira doubled down on her trajectory and slammed her shoulder into the back of the closest one. It went flying and was stopped with a loud thud against a tree trunk. Panic among the hozen broke out instantly. The dim light made it hard to see what was happening, between the setting sun above the forest and only a few fires the tanner had been using, or perhaps started by the hozen themselves. Many of them bolted back into the forest immediately, several dropping what they had been holding in the rush.

“No, wait a jibbet, why you drop da good gibbins?” one shouted. “Dat’s da whole reason we here!”

“Wikkets gonna grook us! We get gibbins someplace else!”

Some of the bigger ones, less frightened by the attack, started scooping up sacks of meat they had come for.

Akira drew her sword, its curved steel glinting in the twilight. “Drop it, now, and we’ll let you go.”

Miyuki dashed to the sides of the clearing, far ahead of Akira, and rapped her staff against the hands of some of the hozen still holding pilfered goods. They howled and let go, massaging their knuckles as they fled.

“Wikket think jab-jab gonna stop us! We got a grookin’ flinger, too!” The hozen held up a bow with its arrow already notched, giving Akira pause. This wasn’t a typical weapon for them, did it actually know how to use it, or did it steal the hunter’s bow just now? It pulled back and released almost as fast, its aim terrible. The arrow dove into the soil hardly a third of the way to way to Akira.

She grinned and stepped forward, seeing Miyuki round the other side of the clearing and come back towards her. “Is that all you have?”

“No! Got anudder one right here!” He pulled out another arrow and readied it. He was so busy fiddling with the unfamiliar weapon he didn’t notice his comrades starting to back away as the pandaren approached. He fired, the shot going off to the side and away from Akira entirely. She realized immediately, though, that it was the direction she last saw Miyuki moving.

“Miyuki, look out!” She dove backwards, driving with her elbow to try and push the monk aside without her sword getting too close, and was met with empty air. She looked and saw Miyuki duck low and advance on their assailant. At that moment, she realized the arrow never stood a chance of hitting her.

And then her thigh split into burning pain. Akira roared in anger as her nerves told her about the sudden wound high on her leg and without a second’s hesitation launched herself forward off her good leg. Her katana swept out and plunged the tip of the blade into the hozen’s chest. His breath caught in his chest and his throat gurgled, but otherwise he made no sound as he collapsed. The few who had remained had seen enough and retreated, not wishing to test the pandaren further.

Miyuki looked at Akira, outrage plain on her face. “You didn’t have to kill him! He was... Your leg, you’re hurt!”

“It’s nothing, was just trying to protect you.”

Miyuki made a noise that distinctly informed her she was not impressed. “Let me take a – hey, don’t!”

Akira reached down and snapped off the arrow shaft above the head. “It’s not the first time I’ve been wounded in battle, Miyuki, I know not to pull them out.”

Miyuki huffed and went to her side, “Come on, let me help you.” She reached for Akira’s arm but she pulled it back.

“It’s just a scratch, I can walk on my own.”

“Akira,” she said sternly, “You hurt yourself trying to save me from something that didn’t need saving, and as a result of it you killed someone who didn’t have to die. If you’ve been trying to do all of this for me, you could actually do something I want you to do. Let me help you.”

“It did, though.”

“What?”

“The hozen. It did have to die. It was a thief and was willing to kill to steal.”

“*He* was a hungry hozen without much capacity to make something for themselves. Teaching them that stealing is a bad idea is the right way to do it.” She took Akira’s arm and placed it over her broad shoulders and took her weapon and scabbard from her. They started back down the path they came from.

“Miyuki, would you really have just given them a slap on the wrist if they successfully struck you?”

She heaved a sigh. “No. I still wouldn’t have killed them, probably just broken some bones, but —”

“What if you had a weapon that made lethal force come more easily? What if that was a spear?”

Miyuki became very silent as they hobbled along. Finally, she said, “There is a reason I don’t carry such weapons.”

“Not anymore?”

Miyuki glared at Akira, who recoiled and immediately apologized. “That didn’t come out how I meant it to, I just assumed you had previously, since you fought in wars with and against Garrosh.”

Miyuki looked ready to shout and took a deep breath. Akira winced and braced herself. The monk shushed her, no different than a mother to a child. “You are digging your grave deeper with every word. Stop talking. Yes, I used to use a naginata. It is much harder to kill people when you lack the means to do it, so I stopped.”

Another couple minutes slowly ticked by in silence. “I’m sorry, Miyuki.”

“For what?”

“What?”

“What are you apologizing for? Tell me.”

“I...I can’t imagine how I must seem to you, so ready to end another’s life just because they were a little aggressive.”

“I don’t believe the Shado-Pan generally concerns itself with that.”

“Well, no, we don’t. But I’m concerned about what *you* think.”

“Why is my opinion so special?”

Akira swallowed. “I...” she took a breath, trying to keep her tone even, “Only have my life still because of you. I saw what happened to those we couldn’t free from the Sha, I still have the occasional nightmare about it. So, I feel like I owe something to you, and I fear I may have failed you because of how I’ve chosen to use the life you gave me.”

“I don’t own your life, you may use it however you please.” She looked at her. “And you’re not a failure. I’m a little disappointed to see that you aren’t more careful about how you choose to use your talents. I’m not faulting you for having them, or what you do for a living, it is a necessary thing, but it would be a favor to me if you were to spend more time considering when it is appropriate to use them.”

Akira felt her heart pang at hearing Miyuki’s disappointment. It was remarkable how the pain of an arrow in her leg was nothing compared to that of letting down someone she had held in such high esteem, someone who seemed to match all the dreams Akira used to craft an image of who she must have been. She was worth that to her. She’d have to try harder, to live her life in a way the monk would be proud of, to be the sort of person she’d be glad to have gone out of her way to help.

Miyuki stumbled slightly on a root, interrupting her rumination. They almost tumbled, but the mistweaver caught them and maintained her footing.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, it’s just a little awkward walking stooped over like this.”

“Damn it, Miyuki, stop making me out to be some dwarf!” Despite the heat in her voice, she was grinning.

“You’ve got the muscle for it... Are you sure you’re not a dwarf?”

“If it’s so uncomfortable for you, why don’t you just carry me?”

“I might, would certainly get there faster. Night’s about here.”

“Don’t worry, just around the bend there.”

They returned to the town, the villagers crowding around them and asking what happened. They thanked Miyuki and Akira for their help, many going back up the path to clean up and take stock of what was stolen. They lit lanterns and torches, a few readying weapons and preparing to stand watch in case the hozen returned. This time they would be prepared.

The pair made their way to Jian’s house.

“Akira, are you badly hurt?” he asked upon seeing them.

“Nah, she’ll walk it off!” Miyuki quipped.

“Is there anything we can do to help?”

Miyuki handed off Akira’s sword and scabbard. “This could use to be cleaned.” She looked at Xiuying. “I could use some hot water, bandages, and some clean cloths I can use to wash her wound.”

Xiuying nodded and set to work. She shoed her son into the other room so he’d stay out of everyone’s way.

“Miyuki,” Akira quietly said to her, “Is this all really necessary?”

“Yes, come on.”

The monk carried her into their room and set her upon the bed, keeping her injured leg straight and elevated. Xiuying came in behind her with a pot of water and picked out the cloths from the room Miyuki would need.

“We were just getting ready to have tea, this should no longer be boiling hot.”

“This is perfect. Thank you so much!”

“I’m a little handy with taking care of cuts and scrapes, about the best in the village. Are you sure you don’t want my help?”

“Xiuying,” answered Akira, “Miyuki is a mistweaver of Chi-Ji, I think she’ll be fine.”

“Oh!” her eyebrows rose, “Really?”

“Yes, ma’am, it’s true.”

“Well...you’re in far better hands than mine. Be safe.” She nodded and departed, sliding the door closed behind her.

Miyuki laid out her materials, a few tools from her bag, and looked back to Akira.

“Okay, take your pants off.”

“Miyuki?”

“Do you want to get that patched up or not? I need to get to the wound, so your pants need to come off, or I’m cutting them off.”

“Can’t you just...use magic?”

“Yes, and I intend to, but if I can directly work with the wound it is a lot easier.”

“But I’ve seen mistweavers in the heat of battle just mend terrible injuries with a wave of their hands!”

Miyuki grumbled and puffed a breath out her nose, crossing her arms under her chest. “Akira. What you front-line fighters never seem to get is that that sort of magic isn’t easy. Not only that, it is exhausting. Yes, I could do that, but then I would be dead to the world for the next day or two. It’s not just mentally taxing but spiritually draining to do that. On a battlefield, we’re lucky if we get five minutes to catch our breath and maybe a drink of water to refresh ourselves. Even that is often a luxury. Now, I’d rather not lose all my energy for several days just because you’re being shy or prudish. I’m a physician, Akira. I’ve studied pandaren medicine for many years. Yours are not the first genitals I’ve seen, nor will they be the last. I’ve got them, too,” she waved a hand at her groin to reinforce her point. “So, are you going to let me help you, or would you rather be all modest and bleed to death?”

While she spoke, Miyuki noticed Akira becoming increasingly tense. She took a deep breath and added, in a far softer tone. “Please, Akira, it’ll be all right. Let me help you get them off, and we’ll get you all fixed up.”

The warrior nodded slowly. “All right, yes, okay. What do I need to do?”

Miyuki knelt on the ground adjacent to the bed. She gently reached up and gripped the waist of Akira’s pants. “When I say so, you’re going to push off the mattress using your hands while not putting any strain on your lower body. While you’re up, all pull these down and we’ll get started. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said quietly, “Say when.”

“One, two, three.”

They moved in unison, Akira pushing off with a wince and a grunt and Miyuki pulling down the garment in a quick, fluid motion. The warrior flopped back onto the bed when her clothes were free. Miyuki looked up to continue removing the breeches, but paused momentarily. Her brow furrowed and gave a soft noise of interested surprise when she saw Akira, in fact, did not have the same genitals as her, but instead saw a man’s penis and testicles. She sniffed and her expression resumed the calm, professional manner it had been just a moment prior, continuing her work as though nothing was out of the ordinary. She picked up a large set of tweezers and held them over the wound on either side of the arrowhead.

“I’m going to open the wound slightly to help get this out without tearing your flesh more. This is going to hurt. Would you like something to bite down on?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“Are you saying that because you’re trying to appear tough to me?”

“Miyuki...”

“Have it your way. On three. One, two, —” She pulled open the wound and grabbed the arrow with her other hand, swiftly plucking it free. Akira gritted her teeth, a low growl rumbling deep in her chest. “And it’s out!”



Akira released the tension that had built up and panted, trying to cool off the pain and recollect herself.

“Worst part is over, dear!”

Miyuki stood up and retrieved one of the cloths and the pot. She carefully opened the lid and dipped it inside to wet it, then set the pot down and returned to Akira’s side. She began brushing at the area around the wound, cleaning her blood from the black fur.

“Miyuki?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry.”

The monk smiled. “Tell me what you are apologizing for.”

“I...I deceived you.”

“About what?”

Akira looked at her as though she had lost her mind. “Isn’t it obvious? I let you think I was a woman. I’m not, though. Not really. I...” She cleared her throat. The pandaren’s rough but otherwise feminine voice dropped a couple octaves. “I should have told you before this happened I was just...acting like one.”

“Why were you presenting yourself as a woman?”

“Oh, just...” she heaved a sigh, “I don’t know.”

“You spent years telling everyone that you are a woman, using a woman’s name, dressing and acting like a woman, even your family and the Shado-Pan, for no reason? That sounds hard to believe.”

“No, not no reason, it’s just...not a good reason.”

“Try me.”

“I just...felt better that way. It’s always been so messy, and I never felt right in my own skin. There was something about the way it felt, though, being thought of as a woman and especially being called one, that was so much better. But...I’m not. I’m a man.”

“What changed?”

“What?”

“Why are suddenly not a woman? You were for years, based on how Jian and Xiuying were treating you, but now you’re a man, apparently. What changed?”

“You...know I have a penis. How could I be a woman if I don’t have a womb?” She gestured at her chest. “Or breasts? These are just my fat and muscle.”

“Oh,” she dragged the sound out, understanding hitting her. “So, as I have a womb that makes me a woman.”

“Well...yes.” She answered as though it were completely obvious.

“Got it, what makes me a woman is that a man can put a baby in me, or I can have a baby latched onto my nipple and feed it.”

“Wait, what?”

“Isn’t that how you know I’m a woman? You can just knock me up, right?”

“No, there’s a lot more to it than that!”

“Like what?”

“Women are...they’re...I mean really they can do whatever. Having kids and leaving it at that...that’s just animalistic. Women can be great warriors, proud leaders...” She gestured at Miyuki, “Practiced monks and healers, anything they set their mind to.”

“Men can do that, too, can’t they?”

“Of course.”

“So, you just described women using a bunch of things that also apply to men. What makes me a *woman*?”

“I...I don’t know, Miyuki, I can’t tell you. It’s complicated.”

“Hrm, it’s complicated.”

“Yes.” She stopped to think. “*People* are complicated, they’re not just any one thing. Yes, you’ve got the parts that we’d call female, but...there’s a lot more to it than that.”

“Who gets to define, then, whether I’m a woman or a man?”

“...does it matter?”

“No, or at least it shouldn’t, but this is something we clearly care about.” She put down the damp, bloody cloth and looked into Akira’s eyes. “Listen to your voice, you sound dejected and worried. Your shoulders are tense, and you are fidgeting. This is something that matters to you, and indeed it does matter to everyone, but most of us just never really think about it. Honestly, this deep voice you’re using now sounds fake to me, forced. No doubt it’s because I’ve spent an entire day talking to you and got used to how you sounded in the meantime. You are correct, this is complicated. I’ve got the typical lady-parts you’d expect on a woman, but I’m not just some animal to be bred and milked. I’m a person with hopes and dreams, a complex past and a long future ahead of me. There’s a lot more to being a woman than pumping out babies and feeding them, just like men don’t exist simply to run around and stick their penis into every vagina that will let them. What you have here,” she pointed to Akira’s groin, “Doesn’t have anything to do with what you have here,” she pointed at Akira’s heart. “You a person first and foremost, Akira, and as you’ve hit upon the line between man and woman is rather fuzzy, aside from our parts, but as you’ve also realized there is a lot more to it than that.”

“I...feel like we haven’t gotten anywhere.”

Miyuki smiled, “Messy subjects are often like that.”

“So...what do you think makes you a woman?”

“I say I am,” she answered plainly.

Akira blinked. “That’s it?”

Miyuki shrugged. “Why not? Why does there need to be more to it than that? It is my life, my being. If I should choose to describe it one way or another, who is to stop me? Should my first concern and duty not be to myself and my health and happiness? Yes, how we define ‘man’ and ‘woman’ changes from place to place. What an orc thinks of as behavior typical for a one or the other isn’t the same as what a human thinks, and certainly neither are the same as us. If we are using only what others have to say on the matter, then whether you’re male or female

changes depending on whoever you're talking to at the time. Now that doesn't make sense, does it?"

"No, I guess it doesn't."

"If you are a woman, it is because you say so, Akira, not because I tell you that you are. It is your life, your mind, your body. If that is how you feel comfortable, how you feel right in your body, then all you have to do is tell me so, and I will call you and treat you as a woman. If you want me to treat you like a man, I'll do that, too, but if I'm doing that, it's because it's how you feel about yourself, not because you have a penis."

Akira was still, mouth open slightly as she looked at Miyuki. Her eyes slowly began to water a little. She swallowed and sniffled, wiping at her eyes with her hand. "Is...is that really all there is to it?"

Miyuki nodded. "You are you. Now tell me, who are you?"

"I..." She took a deep breath and smiled. Her voice rose again, as she had been talking all day. "I am Akira. And...I want you to call me a woman."

Miyuki stood up and beamed at her. She leaned over and hugged Akira tightly. "It'll be okay, Akira. Sometimes people may not respect that decision, as you know it's hard to imagine others complexly, but you know in your heart it's right, and I accept it." She let go. "And clearly your family accepts it, too."

"Well...the ones that know do, for the most part. Some don't get it, but they go along with it regardless. I haven't told my parents, nor anyone on my father's side of the family, they're a very proud, old-fashioned sort. I know I've taken advantage of the fact that my way of life keeps me away from most of the outside world. And the Shado-Pan...they don't particularly care, which I suppose is better than telling me to be one way or another. They care more about duty and what you can do than who you are. I can still fight, and that's all they want to hear. I can respect that."

"It isn't the most personable approach, but I understand where they're coming from. I can respect that, too. As for the rest of your family, that is, of course, the hard part. Those are the people whose opinions you value most, who you want to accept you and your choices. You do have to tell them, one day, but they don't need to be told just yet. If it helps, you can do it alongside someone you trust, who makes you feel confident. They're your family, Akira. If they truly love you, they will accept you."

She looked at Miyuki. "The world needs more people like you."

"I'm just one pandaren working hard to leave everywhere I go a little better than when I arrived." She shrugged. "Not much to it. She looked back down at Akira's leg. "Okay, this is ready for me, now. Are you?"

"Yeah, I'm good to go." She grew pensive again, thinking about what Miyuki had said. She wiped at her eyes to clear away her tears.

The monk closed her eyes and began slow, rhythmic breaths. Akira couldn't help but mirror the effects. They were quite calming. The pandaren gently placed her hands on either side of Akira's wound, and the warrior could feel a strange warmth radiating out from it. Small

wisps of jade mists condensed out of the air between Miyuki's hands and spiraled into the wound, tingling and cool on contact. The pain vanished almost immediately. The hazy magic hid the effect from her sight, but once it cleared enough for her to see her leg again, the wound was gone.

"There," Miyuki said, reaching for some of the bandages. She held Akira's leg in her arms and began to gingerly wrap her thigh where the cut had been, leaving the cloth snug but not constricting.

"If you used magic to heal it, why are you still bothering with bandages?"

"I want to help ensure that it's properly healed. No strenuous activity on this leg for at least the next day, okay? I'll check the wound again in the morning and before bed tomorrow."

She affixed the bandage. She put the rest aside then slowly bent Akira's leg. It was stiff and a little sore once fully flexed, but otherwise the injury was gone. The monk leaned forward and kissed the bandages. "There, all better." Akira chuckled in pleased disbelief. Miyuki just grinned back at her. "It does feel better, right?"

"Yes, Miyuki. Everything feels...so much better than it did. Thank you so much."

"It was my pleasure, dear!"

"Ah...now what?"

"Now, we go to bed."

"Guess you're taking the floor, then, because I'm injured? Oh, we forgot to say we'd need another set of – Miyuki!"

Miyuki's was busy fidgeting with the buckle on her top. "No, we didn't forget anything, and I'm still sleeping in that bed. We'll share, there's plenty of room."

Akira felt embarrassment returning to her. "Ah...I don't have any sleepwear here."

"That's fine, neither do I." The buckle came free and she began to slide out the leather tongue.

"Oh, uh, let me close my eyes..."

"I just got done saying I have nothing else to sleep in, just my hide. You're going to keep yourself blindfolded all night?"

"I..."

"Besides, it's just a naked body. You've seen them before, right?" Her top was removed and Miyuki's breasts suddenly were free. She sighed with relief and, after tossing the harness aside, scratched underneath them where the strap had been. "Oh, that feels so much better..." She turned around and sat on the bed. "Could you do me a favor and scratch my back where my harness was covering?"

"Uh...sure, of course." Akira slid over into a more comfortable position and got to work. She tried not to react as she noted how incredibly thick and soft Miyuki's fur was. She had never felt anything like it before. She felt her heart pick up a little bit in excitement. She *had* experienced more personal, intimate nights with others before, but not in a very long time, and certainly not with someone she had thought about for so long. Her life never particularly gave her an opportunity to get to know people, to develop more than a physical interest in them. But

Miyuki was someone she had remembered for years, had felt certain she would have been the kindest person she'd ever met. And so far, all of that seemed perfectly true.

Miyuki purred with delight. "There...thank you." She removed her hair sticks and untied the leather strap keeping her mane in check. It all tumbled down, covering Akira's hands in their silky strands. Miyuki untied her belt and hooked her thumbs into her dress and slid them off. Akira watched in quiet awe as she saw Miyuki's full figure become revealed inch by inch to her. The monk glanced back at her and grinned to see the enraptured expression on her. "You going to keep that on?"

Akira looked at her own top. "Ah...no, I think that'd be silly, all other things considered." She removed it and had it join Miyuki's clothes in a pile on the floor. She removed the small cord keeping her warrior's tail up and her short hair fell to her neck.

Miyuki looked Akira over, now that the warrior was as similarly on display as she was. Her coat was heavy, almost shaggy, quite reminiscent of other pandaren from the Kun-Lai Mountains. She placed a hand on Akira's shoulder and offered her other to her. "Come on, let me help you down."

Akira accepted, allowing Miyuki to guide her down and straighten out her legs. No sooner was that done did Miyuki slide in beside her, pressing up against her body. She quickly put her arms around Akira and held her gently. "I hope you don't mind," she whispered.

"N-no, not at all!"

"Good." She lay her head on the pillow looked over her shoulder. She stretched an arm out behind her and smothered the lamp they had been using, then returned to her former position cuddling against Akira.

"Thank you, Miyuki, for...everything" Akira said with some tension, not used to having someone like Miyuki sharing a bed with her in general, let alone so close while they were both so...naked. "You've done so much for me, I don't know that I deserve it."

"Of course you do, all people do." She leaned forward and tenderly planted a kiss on her cheek. "And you are most welcome, Akira." She took a deep breath and let it out in a low hum. "Mmm, could you please scooch over? My butt is hanging off the bed."

"I'm not sure there's enough room for that."

"My butt isn't *that* big," she murmured.

"No," Akira answered with a gentle laugh, "I mean I'm already almost against the wall." She did her best to move over, with Miyuki's help so she wouldn't strain her leg. She kept right with her, her soft warmth never leaving Akira's side.

"There, much better. Thank you." Miyuki's thick tail curled over her knees and draped across Akira's calves.

"Good night, Miyuki."

"Sweet dreams, Akira," Miyuki replied, resting her chin against Akira's head.