

In the morning I woke up to find her lying in the crook of my arm, with her head on my shoulder. Her skin was amazingly smooth and warm. She was asleep on her side, with one hand nestled into the notch over my sternum. Her hair fell over my shoulder but just barely touched the pillows. When I inhaled it left them, but settled again afterwards. Watching that I stroked her hand and face.

Eventually she woke up. Coffee colored eyes glanced up at me, as dawn light trickled through the window. It was still dark, but now her skin was burgundy.

“Hey, you,” she said quietly, with her voice still sleepy.

“Hi.”

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Warm,” I replied.

“I noticed. Its amazing. I haven't been this warm since I left Paragon.”

“I'd wondered where you were from,” I said simply.

“You should have asked. It isn't a secret.”

“Well, now I know,” I said, and poked her very gently on the tip of her nose. She scrunched it up to frown at me, and then closed her eyes and relaxed. For a while my fingers stroked her face, and then they settled onto the curve of her throat. My eyes grew heavy, and I fell back asleep.

When we finally did get out of bed, which was not until much after we woke up the second time, I let her cook me breakfast. She made vegetables and eggs, and a warm flatbread dish, like a pancake, served with cinnamon and sugar. It was very good, but I didn't really pay attention to the food. I was watching the quick, almost unconscious movements of her hands as she ate. After the meal she took a plate up to her mother and spoon fed her. When the dishes were done I joined her, and we talked while her mother stared blankly at the wall.

“Do you mind?” I asked, gesturing towards the little old lady. Salation looked at me curiously, before catching my meaning.

“Please,” she invited.

I reached out and gently touched her mother's face. The skin was warm. I pulled down her eyelids and glanced at the underside of her eyeballs. Then I poked her chest, listened to her breath and counted out her pulse. She responded to stimuli but only made reflexive actions.

“Well?” Salation asked when I was done.

“She isn't coughing, which is good, but you can still feel difficulty when she breathes. There's a lot of fluid in there. I'll go to a herbalist later and see what I can do,” I promised. Then, suddenly worried I'd said too much, I clarified, “If there is anything I can, that is. She's old, and even if I-”

The young woman reached out a coppery hand and still my words with a hand on my arm. “I

understand. We've been through this before. If there's anything you can do, thank you." She smiled at me, gratefully, but full of sadness.

Later, we went down and opened the shop. It wasn't hard, but I had never opened a clockwork store before. She showed me how to wind up all the pieces that sat on the windowsill to attract attention, and where to put the lights to show off the pieces in the back to the best effect. Once everything was ready and she was about to open the door, I paused her and held her again. She settled easily into my embrace, and her smell filled my nose again.

"I don't know if they do things different here," she commented as I clung to her. "But you're a lot sadder than I expected for a morning after, all things considered."

I laughed, and picked her up so I could sit her on my lap as I sat in my usual chair. "It's not that. You were wonderful. It's—" I stopped, at a loss.

"The thing you wanted to tell me last night," she guessed.

I stroked her arms. "I came to Lookshy looking for instructions on how to fulfill an oath. I didn't even know if it was possible. Last night I found out there was a way. After taking care of a few loose ends I have to go."

She sank slightly and leaned into me. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "The next step is Murada. I don't know where I'm going after that."

"Where's Murada? I've never heard of it."

"North," I said simply. "North of Halta."

"Oh," she said, and then she understood.

"I'm sorry. Would you rather we not if you had known?"

Salation shrugged, still with her face in my chest. "It doesn't matter, does it? We did. I don't regret it."

"Good." Then, because that sounded insufficient, "You were wonderful."

"Yes. I know," she said, and her whole demeanor changed. Like pinching out a candle her sadness was gone, and she stood up and stretched languidly. "I'm like that."

I smiled at her and stood up. Putting my hands on her sides I pulled her against me as she stretched, watching the way she arched her back and the way it made her breasts move under her clothing. She leaned in to me, and I kissed her again.

"Are you going out to do more unspoken work?" she asked.

"Yes," I admitted. "But I'll go to the herbalist first. I have a couple ideas."

"Don't worry about it," she said calmly. "The new stuff the apothecary gave us stops the coughing."

That's better than she's been since my father died.”

“Well, we'll see,” I said noncommittally and let her go. She walked me to the door again, and let me out as the store opened for the day. “One question. Do you follow the immaculate faith?”

She looked at me archly. “You mean the parts about how men and women should relate?”

“No,” I replied. “Just in general.”

“Not really,” she admitted. “I'm not quite a Hundred Gods heathen, but in the part of Paragon I'm from we don't worry too much about what a fiery dragon says we should do.”

Hopefully that meant she broke with their stance on Anathema, and the 'must kill on sight' part of the sacred precepts. I didn't necessarily intend to reveal all to her, but it was the sort of thing that was useful to know.

“I'll see you later. After I go to the herbalist,” I told her.

“If you want,” she said with a shrug and turned back inside to work on her clocks. I disappeared into the city streets.

As things worked out I went to nine different herbalists. Each of the naturalists had some of what they wanted of varying qualities. At the first I bought everything they had, for fear I wouldn't find it anyplace else, but at the second I could be a bit more selective. By the time it was evening and I'd finished my rounds I had everything I wanted, a glass jar to mix it in, and a bit of marble for my grinding. I returned to the clockshop to find Salation's perpetually moving hands strangely still as she stared into the brass gears before her like they had hidden depths.

“Hi,” I said, stepping in the door behind her. She glanced up at me, and her expression looked vaguely hollow. Then it flickered, like before, and she was calm and unperturbed.

“Hello. How are you?”

“Good,” I replied cheerfully. “Better now. I found everything I wanted.”

“Oh, you went to the herbalists? I told you not to,” she said, a little surprised.

I shrugged. “It could do no harm. Mind if I head up to your kitchen to mix this up?”

“No, that's fine. I was actually getting ready to close up.”

“Take your time,” I replied simply.

“All right then. You know where the kitchen is.”

“Thanks.” I was suddenly unsure if I should kiss her or not. Instead I hustled upstairs.

First I slid the glass jar onto a table and filled it half way with strawberry rum. There was no medicinal purpose to that except it tasted good. Then I measured out the herbs I wanted, piled them all up on the

sheet of marble, and glanced around to see if anyone was watching. No one was.

I filled my hand with gold light, raised the intensity up to 'noon in the desert of fire' and slammed my open palm with boiling essence into the stray herbs. Forcing the power into them suddenly filled them with arcane vitality they could not endure, and seconds later they crumbled into multicolored powders. The room smelled of sunlit fields atop the mountains of the east. I scraped the residue into the vial with a knife, corked it, and let that seep. Below, the front door bolt slid home and soon thereafter Salation appeared.

“Hey, beautiful. Think you can talk your mother into drinking this?” I asked, showing her the vial. It looked like muddy water.

“What's that smell?” she asked, ignoring my question.

“What's in here,” I replied. “Some gherst, some alanic, some strawberry rum for the taste. This and that.”

“Will that help her?” she asked me, eyeing the vial. She took another deep sniff, and the aroma of the kitchen filled her nose. Unconsciously she stood straight, and the faint tension in her face as she held her smile faded. Her body relaxed, and she reclaimed a little of the transcendent beauty she'd had when we woke up that morning.

“It won't hurt,” I said truthfully. “Why don't we go give her a sip?”

She mulled over it, but the fading scent of herbs relaxed her doubts. Eventually she gave me permission to give her mother a taste.

“There's not too much rum in there, is there? She's old, and can't handle it if it's strong.”

The whole vial was only slightly larger than a skimpy shot at a cheap bar. “She'll be fine. Promise.”

She eyed me, but lead the way to where her mother sat, staring at a wall. There was a bit of phlegm on her lips which I dabbed off with a napkin. “What's her name?” I asked Salation. I'd always referred to the family matron as 'your mother.'

“Telitia,” was the reply.

“Well, Mrs. Telitia, this probably won't even taste as bad as the other stuff you've getting,” I told her conversationally as I opened her mouth. My elbow managed to bump a fork from lunch off a table, and it plunged for her daughter's sandaled foot. She jerked it back out of the way, taking her eyes off her mother for a brief second. That was enough for me to send a blast of power into the vial, bringing it to a rolling boil that had nothing to do with heat, and pour the liquid down the old woman's throat. She swallowed instinctively. “Sorry,” I said to the daughter as I silently began to count in my head. “Did I get you?”

“No. I noticed you try, though,” she said archly, picking up the fork. She was joking, I hoped, for I had only intended to miss. “Is that it?”

“For her? Oh, yes. Just a little sip.”

She stared at her mother in silence for a few seconds. "Is something supposed to happen?" she asked politely.

"Oh, not immediately," I assured her. *Not for at least thirty eight more seconds.* I glanced at the woman who still hadn't moved. Her catatonia seemed complete. "Do you mind if I go wash this out?"

"Oh, that's fine," she said, with a wave downstairs. She wasn't paying attention to me at all, and I began to understand how deeply she had been hiding her hope that this would work.

"Thanks."

I rose and went back to the second story kitchen. I poured a little water into the vial and set it on the counter, before leaning against the door frame as my count went to zero. I listened so hard I could hear the boards creaking as the house settled downstairs, footsteps in adjoining houses, and finally two heart beats upstairs. One was fast and tense, while another was very faint. I held my breath.

With a thud, the faint one suddenly stabilized, and started beating firmly. There was a faint cough, then another louder one, then a great hacking projection of all the gunk the apothecary's worthless tincture hadn't allowed the old lady to clear from her lungs in weeks. Then her breathing was slow and easy.

"Dear?" asked an old, confused voice.

The young woman broke down weeping. I diplomatically crept downstairs to go outside and find a child. I gave him some money and sent him off with strict instructions to bring me a specific bottle of wine. That put me almost broke again, but sacrifices had to be made. Once that was done I went back to the first floor and considered the pantry. Telitia would want food with strong tastes. I grabbed bread, garlic, oil, various spices and meat. By the time I'd whipped that up the boy had returned. I gave him a few extra coins for this trouble. Then I took the platter, three glasses, and one of the best bottles of High Realm Red upstairs to the ladies.

"Hello, Mrs Telitia. We've met, but I don't think we've been properly introduced," I said as I laid the tray down. "My name is Crimson Wing."

The old lady looked up at me. Her face was flushing as unaccustomed blood flowed through her veins. For so long her body had made due with insufficient oxygen that the plethora of it running through her lungs nearly overfilled her blood. I suddenly reconsidered giving her any wine. She was half drunk on being able to breath alone.

She was a little birdlike woman. Her head made the same quick, unconscious motions that her daughter's hands did, turning about as she glanced at me. She had a bob of wispy white hair and skin the texture of shoe leather. Once it got some blood in it, it would be even darker than Salation's. Her eyes were a little foggy, and the intelligence behind them was still somewhat bewildered from both the soporific she'd been on and oxygen intoxication.

"Hello, sir. It's nice to meet you," she said politely, and we shook hand. I kept a hold of her afterwards and took her pulse again. Then I took a moment to glance at Salation.

As expected, she'd needed a few moments to get herself under control. Now there were no traces of her

tears but a faint redness in her eyes and wet spots on her shirt collar. Yet her face was lined with nigh invisible traces of salt, and her red skin was a slightly deeper shade. Being naturally dark, crying didn't make her skin look splotchy. Instead she just turned a darker tan shade. She was blindingly gorgeous, and I couldn't believe the luck I had.

Her mother's pulse was steady. I'd known that already but wanted confirmation. "Now, I know a little bit about medicine, so please excuse me for being so forward, but would you mind opening your mouth? Thank you, ma'am."

There is a near mandatory period of poking, prodding, and staring into someone's head after a sudden recovery from catatonia. It's possible to avoid but unwise if not completed. While Salation's mother got her wits about her as I checked for side effects, I also took subtle care to ensure the raw essence I'd just funneled through her was doing its work and abating. There seemed to be no reason to worry. The stiffness of the old lady's lungs was gone. Her breathing was easier. There was no tint of the peculiar diseased taint on her chakras, and the natural flow of the bodily energy was good. I sat back.

"Crimson, I-" Salation began, and her voice was almost steady. I stopped her by bouncing my finger against her lips.

"Don't. But you may pour the wine. Not much for your mother, I'm afraid. Just a sip."

"Why not?" the matron demanded in a querulous but good natured voice. "I love a bit of wine."

"And a bit is all you'll get," I assured her. "I'm your doctor."

She frowned at me and looked seriously at her daughter. "Don't listen to this quack. Do what your mother tells you."

Salation gave an exaggerated sigh, and poured three equal glasses. "You know I can't disobey her," she pointed out seriously.

I rolled my eyes and admitted defeat. The old lady was going to be drunk as a lord halfway through that glass. The Dragon-Bloods of the Realm made the best wine in Creation, but they made it strong. Glasses were distributed, and we drank to Telitia's health.

"Are you hungry?" her daughter asked solicitously. "We've got some bread, some spiced meat, some-"

She stopped because her mother passed out and dropped face first towards the table. There was a smack as her forehead hit my hand, and that was as gently as I could catch her. I settled the old lady's head straight back, and checked her pulse and breathing again. Then I glanced over at her daughter, and realized the girl was in worse danger of dying via shock than her mother.

"That was faster than I expected," I admitted blandly.

"Well?" the terrified daughter shrieked at me.

"She's fine," I said, trying to sound reassuring. I could hear the old pulse, strong again, and the rush of blood through her veins. In fact the old lady was snoring very slightly. "However she's old, and now she's a bit tipsy. She'll sleep this off overnight, and be ravenously hungry in the morning."

“Oh, oh,” Salation started sputtering. I stopped her by tapping her lips again.

“Don't. She's fine. She's just a little drunk.”

“Okay,” the daughter accepted. I handed her the bottle and glasses, which she took numbly. Then I picked her up under one arm, and took the tray in my other. With girl, food, and drink, I left the old woman to sleep and recover her strength.

Shortly thereafter in the kitchen, I set the girl down and placed the tray on the table. She poured us each a new glass, and we finished those off to her mother's good health.

“I'm sorry, I didn't realize you could do that,” babbled the girl as she tried to get her wits together. “And I can't thank you because you're leaving and-”

I cut her off again. If the problems she'd had with me walking her home from the mugging were indicative of her dislike of being helped for free, this was going to nearly break her. “Actually, there is something you can do. I don't have a place to sleep tonight. If you let me sleep here until I have to leave, I would really appreciate it.”

“Okay,” she accepted.

“And I don't intend to do much sleeping” I added, leaning in until my face was inches from hers. Her breath was hot on my lips.

She reached around my head and laced her fingers through my short hair. Our faces were so close her lips brushed mine when she spoke. “I can put you to sleep,” she promised.

I pulled back, grabbed the bottle, and picked up it and the girl. “Good. We need to go bed.”

She kissed me again, and she meant it like a drowning woman breathing in pure air. When I carried her to her bed, she opened for me until I lost the ability to think, and then pillowed my head with her breasts as I drifted to sleep. I wondered how long I could put off going to Murada.

In the morning I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the rising sun. One of the incidental perks of being one of the Sun's chosen is the ability to stare directly into the burning disk of my patron indefinitely. It was coming from the east, and reminded me of unstarted business in that direction. The chimney's of Lookshy were just beginning to send up smoke.

“You're awake early,” Salation said. Blankets were wound about her supine form, and she slithered to rest her head against me. Once she could feel my back heat she closed her eyes against the sunlight.

“It's the sun. It usually wakes me up.”

“That's why I have shutters, you know.”

I smiled. “I like it. It's refreshing in the morning.”

“Weirdo.”

I shrugged, and slid my hand down her face to rest on the curve of her neck. “About last night, you didn't have to do anything,” I said awkwardly.

“I was wondering if we'd have this discussion. Men are always confident to begin with, and then have doubts when there's no further point in them,” she said philosophically while she started tracing the contours of my side. Her eyes were still closed tightly, and I shifted so my shadow covered her face. “You're leaving, 'Red. You're going away for a long time, and you don't know if you'll come back. I'm not happy about it. I'm very not happy about it. But I'm not not happy about it enough that I'm not going to be happy while you're still here.”

“All right,” I accepted that. She sounded confident, and her voice betrayed no doubts.

“Besides, you're warm,” she concluded and wiggled to get comfortable. I stroked her jaw and went back to staring at the distant sun.