

# **A Collection of Fantasy and Science Fiction Short Stories**

Senior Creative Writing Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in Creative Writing at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Spring 2009

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## **“Azro’s Journey”**

He knew the forest was dangerous, and that was why Azro had to go. Everyone in the village had heard the stories about the creatures that lived there, contained in the thick, dark woods by an ancient magic cast by the dragons hundreds of years ago. If he could just slay one of those creatures and return with its head, Azro was sure the village would finally acknowledge him as a hero and not just a dream filled young man.

Azro stepped onto a large wooden crate and began his yearly declaration.

“This is the year! I will go into the forest and return a hero!” He flung his arms wide, embracing the future, the land, and the people of the village.

They paid Azro no mind and continued to enjoy the celebrations at the fall harvest festival. They had heard and seen this speech many times before. Surely it would end the way it always did. Azro would only make it to the edge of the forest, then stand there staring into the darkness for hours before returning home and claim that he had chosen the wrong day or year and would make his quest some other time.

Agitated by their lack of response, Azro flung his head, black braids slapping his face, and planted his hands on his hips. “I’m serious. This time the wind is blowing from the east. You will all be cheering my name in just a few days.”

He ignored the jeers and laughs that followed as he stepped down from the wooden crate and into the crowd. He had only traveled a few steps before a hand as strong as iron gripped his arm.

“Azro, when are you going to stop doing this?”

Azro looked up at his father and shrugged as if the answer should have been obvious. “I will stop when I bring home the head of a troll or some other beast. I won’t stop until I become a hero. They’ll—“

“Sing of your adventures for centuries to come, right?” Tiloft sighed as he rolled his eyes and turned away. Each time it was the same answer. “You’re sixteen-years-old now, Azro. You’ve been doing well as an apprentice blacksmith. In a few years you could leave your brother’s forge and start your own. Or at least take over mine when I become too old to lift a hammer.”

Azro stared at his father’s broad back—saw the thick dreadlocks that stretched all the way down to the middle of that wall of muscle—and shook his head. There were no signs of old age in that strong back. It would be decades before his father would give up blacksmithing.

“I don’t want to spend my life making weapons. I want to help people,” Azro said as he followed Tiloft through the rows of stalls set up for the festival.

Tiloft shook his head and looked down at his son. “Swords help people Azro, and you’re better at making them than you are at using them.”

“Yes, but only because there aren’t any master swordsmen around here. I would be better if I had someone with more skill to spar with. If we lived closer to the capital I could have found someone to train under years ago.” Azro spotted the tightening of his father’s jaw and stopped walking.

“I will leave tonight, Father,” he called to Tiloft’s receding back. “Your youngest son will become a hero soon.” He turned and looked at the surrounding stalls. Prized fruits and vegetables were being judged to his left, directly in front of the school house,

and Azro stared at two dark green cucumbers as thick as his head was round. They were nearly the same size and he knew they would have to be weighed to determine the winner. He moved down the row, away from the critical inspections and jabber of the judges until he reached a section where food was being sold.

“Azro, I hear you’ve been off making heroic boasts again.”

He looked into the crinkled face of the old woman known by the villagers as Auntie. “I’m only stating a fact. This year is defiantly it.”

The crone picked up a small pie and held it out to him. “Take this with you. A growing young man like you will need to keep up his strength.”

“Thank you, Auntie.” Azro took the offered food with a smile and left the old woman.

When he arrived home his mother was sitting on his bed. She held a cloth bundle in her lap and stared down at it as she spoke to him. “You’re going to the forest again.”

It was not meant as a question, but Azro nodded as he took a seat beside her.

Batan’s hands tightened on the bundle and her voice strained as she forced each word from her mouth. “Azro. Promise me that this will be the last time. I don’t want you going near that place again.”

Azro sprang from the bed and began to search through all of his belongings. He kept his back to her as he spoke. “After I become a hero, I won’t go there again, so don’t worry Mother.”

Batan placed the bundle on the bed and stood. “I don’t want you to end up like Jina. Be safe and come back alive.”

Azro listened to her footsteps as she left the room.

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His strides long and sure, Azro headed for the forest. A sword forged by Azro's own hand was strapped to his side and he wore thick leather pieces as armor for his chest, back, torso, forearms, and thighs. With the wind blowing from the east and his brown eyes set on the future, Azro stepped into the dark forest for the first time in his life and smiled. He had finally done it. He took another step, grinned wider at his increasing success, and continued walking as the east wind blew him along on his journey.

Azro recalled his first attempt to enter the forbidden forest. It had been on year after Jina's death. He had no weapons on him then, just the will to face what had haunted his nightmares for months. He had no intentions of fighting, and no intentions of going over the invisible boundary that separated them, but Azro went there every day and stared unblinking into the darkness, continuing the ritual until the sight of the woods no longer made his heart hammer erratically in his chest.

The following year, Azro turned twelve, and began to spend more time with his father, learning the trade of blacksmithing.

"Azro," Tiloft had said, "put on an apron and help me with this short sword." He pulled the metal frame from the fire and placed it on the anvil. "Your mother told me you've been sneaking off to listen to that storyteller again. I told you not to waste any more money on those useless tales." He chose the middle sized hammer and brought it high above his head.

Azro stared blankly, eyes dull with boredom as the hammer came down, sending red sparks through the air and leaving his ears ringing.

“You need to start focusing more on our family’s craft,” Tiloft called out above the ringing, his low voice booming strong against the high pitched striking of the hammer against metal.

“I don’t want to be a blacksmith, I want to become a hero and go on important quests.”

Tiloft laughed and patted the top of his young son’s head. “Yes, I dreamed about being a hero when I was your age. Having an imagination is fine, but there will come a time when you need to face reality Azro. Now, go watch Dovo work on that armor, but don’t get in his way.”

Azro brushed his childhood memories aside. He moved carefully through the thick woods and tried not to think about how it had suddenly become so quiet, so dark. The sound of whispers followed him as he squinted into the darkness. He glimpsed swirling black shadows which somehow evaded the small beams of light that barely managed to squeeze their way through the tree canopy. He paused and reached inside his pack. After some fumbling, Azro finally lit his lamp, lifted it above his head, and took a good look around.

A circle of ogres had already surrounded him.

He could not fathom how he had missed their approach. Had it been when he was lighting the lamp, or had they been the swirling shadows and whispers that followed his movements from his very first step into their territory?

Azro felt his brow become damp as he quickly grasped for the hilt of his sword to remove it from its scabbard.

The ogres grinned at the human. It had been some time, probably half a century, since any mortal man or woman foolishly set foot onto their land. By the looks of the fumbling boy, he would be easy to kill. The ogres' eyes glowed dark red, their grins turned to snarls, and they poised themselves for the attack, each wishing to land the first blow.

Azro's hand shook fiercely as he held the sword in front of him.

In the treetops above, a young dragon called Helisho watched the scene, his silver eyes curious. This human boy lacked much common sense from what the dragon could gather, but there was something about him that caught and held Helisho's interest.

Helisho slipped from the trees and landed in front of the young human.

Overcome with fear, Azro's hands began to quake so much that he nearly dropped his only source of protection. His fear of the ogres was nothing compared to that of the black dragon before him. It was as big as a house, its long serpentine body was darker than the forest itself, yet its silver eyes shone brightly. Azro shrunk back from the dragon as it opened its mouth to speak.

"This boy is not to be harmed or else you will deal with me," Helisho's voice was loud and clear as he addressed the circle of ogres.

They snarled at the dragon and raised their clubs but did not dare attack. No ogre ever survived a fight with a dragon, even one as young as Helisho. Knowing this, one ogre stepped forward.

“Why should we let you have him? We found him first.” His words were followed by nods and grunts of agreement from his fellow ogres.

Helisho dug his claws into the hard dirt floor of the forest. A growl took form in his chest and it gathered like distant thunder until it finally erupted into a savage roar. Azro fell to his knees and the ogres fled, trampling on one another as they went.

“That’s why,” Helisho let out a huff of a laugh and turned his head to Azro. “You can calm down now. I’m not going to hurt you. I suppose I should make myself a little less intimidating?”

Bright silver light began to emanate from the black scales and the dragon’s size began to slowly reduce until he was about the same size as a horse. The light soon became too bright, blinding Azro as it engulfed Helisho completely. When it subsided, a human like figure stepped forward.

Azro, still quivering from fear and awe, raised his lamp to get a better look. The figure appeared to be a boy around the same age as himself. He was half a head shorter than Azro, his hair and eyes were silver, and his skin was as black as the obsidian stones Azro had often seen at the market. Looking closer, Azro saw faint outlines that looked like reptile scales traveling up the dark arms and legs before disappearing under a plain tan shirt and pants.

“Who are you?” Azro asked, staring at the strange boy who stood where the dragon had once towered above him.

“I am Helisho, the dragon that just saved you.”

“You don’t look like a dragon.”

“Well, I don’t look like a human either, do I?”



Azro opened his mouth, closed it, and shook his head. “No, you don’t. Only old people have silver hair.”

Helisho laughed at that. “True. And perhaps you mistook my scales for wrinkles?”

“Perhaps,” Azro smiled. This smaller, human-like dragon was a lot easier to talk to than the colossal version that had scared away the ogres.

“Why did you stop the ogres from attacking me?”

“Because I felt like it. Don’t I get any thanks for saving you?”

Azro nodded rapidly and put away his sword. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now,” Helisho took the human’s hand and began to drag him deeper into the forest, “let’s get to know each other. I’ve been in the Dragon Realm for three centuries, and I’m afraid my knowledge of human history is lacking.”

Azro struggled to keep up with Helisho’s quick strides. “Where are we going?”

“I’m not really sure,” Helisho said, navigating his way through the forest, “some place that would be safer for you.”

They walked for what Azro thought must have been hours until they reached an open area where the trees were separated in wider intervals.

“Have a seat anywhere,” he told Azro.

Azro sat while Helisho used his feet to clear away twigs and leaves until he had uncovered a large area of dirt. Helisho took a step back and blew a stream of silver flames into the area that he had just cleared.

Azro stared, his jaw slack.

The dragon clicked his tongue in distaste. “I forget how much harder it is to use fire in this form.” He shrugged the irritation away, deciding that the magic fire was best in the long run because it would continue to burn without needing wood to fuel it.

“How many forms do you have?” Azro asked. He picked up a near by stick and began to poke at the shimmering silver flames.

“Only two, both of which you have already seen. This humanoid form allows me to be smaller and walk on two legs, but my abilities are limited.” Helisho jerked a clawed thumb at his back. “I had wings, but they’re gone in this form, so I won’t be able to fly.”

Azro pulled his stick from the fire and watched in fascination as the silver flame at the tip slowly turned orange and red as it ate at the dry wood. His stomach began to grumble and he smothered the burning stick into the dirt before looking up at Helisho. “Are you hungry?” He asked the dragon and reached into his pack. He pulled out the bundle that his mother had given him before the journey, then put it back and searched around for something else.

“Yes, I am, but you don’t need to share your food with me. I’ll go hunt for my own,” Helisho replied.

Azro gave a nod and began to eat the small pie that Auntie had given him. He swallowed and stared down at the bit of food as a thought occurred to him. “What do dragons eat?”

“Meat,” Helisho grinned and stood up. “I’ll be back. Stay close to the fire and you’ll be safe.”

“Alright, good luck hunting.” Azro leaned back against a tree and continued to eat his pie as Helisho left. He savored each bite and licked the flakey bits of crust from his lips when he was done. Auntie was defiantly the best baker in the village.

He licked his fingers clean and tried to imagine how Helisho hunted. What would he find? Would he cook it first? Probably not. Azro was honestly disgusted at the thought of seeing Helisho tare into the flesh of some dead uncooked animal, but he still wished he could have seen how it was done, no matter how it would have undoubtedly made his stomach churn. He knew he couldn’t. Helisho had said to stay by the fire. The forest was a dangerous place to wonder about in, and Azro didn’t want to have to be rescued by the dragon a second time.

“But why did he say I would be safe if I stayed by the fire?” Azro asked aloud.

There was a soft giggle to his right and he looked down to see a purple pixie dancing around in the leaves. “Obviously the silver fire is magical.”

Another giggle made Azro turn to his left.

“Obviously,” echoed a second pixie, its skin a pale lilac color.

Azro crossed his arms over his chest and glared at each of them in turn. “Well, obviously it’s not obvious to me!”

The pixies twittered with laughter and began to dance together. Azro watched them, captivated by their strange movements and the way the air surrounding them seemed to shimmer. A twig snapped, the sound jarring Azro’s attention away from the pair of dancing pixies to discover a third. This third pixie had lavender skin and it was currently trying to steal Azro’s pack.

“Hey! That’s mine!” Azro lunged for the bag as he silently berated himself for being so easily tricked. All of his food, extra clothes, and supplies were in there, and Azro wouldn’t be able to last very long in the forest without it. He curled his fingers into the fabric and pulled.

The dancing pixies joined their companion and the trio clamped onto the pack.

Azro shook the bag, hoping to knock the pixies off, but they clung on tightly. He growled in frustration and swung the bag round. As it got closer to the fire, the pixies shrieked in terror and finally let go to scamper off back to wherever they had come. He sighed in relief and sat down with the pack clutched in his arms as he awaited Helisho’s return.

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“Did you catch anything?” Azro asked Helisho as the dragon sat down beside him.

“Yes. I didn’t eat much though. Why are you holding your pack like that?” Helisho nodded to Azro’s hands that still held the bag tightly in his lap.

“There were some pixies here and they tried to steal it from me.” Azro’s grip loosened and he placed the bag on the ground next to him, making sure that it was well within arms reach.

“Ah, pixies. The fire should have kept them away. You weren’t attacked by anything else, were you? No ogres then?”

Azro shook his head as he was reminded of the encounter. His first heroic deed had been a pitiful display. “You never actually told me why you stopped the ogres from attacking me.”

“You’re interesting. A human boy traveling into a forest full of ogres armed only with a sword must be courageous or, perhaps, foolish. I want to figure out which one you are.”

His cheeks burned with shame, but he raised his head and stared into the slit-pupil eyes of the dragon. “How are you going to do that? Could you train me?” Azro had longed for a master for years, but his village was small, and masters of combat rarely traveled near it, and those that did had no desire to look after an apprentice.

Helisho saw the hope in Azro’s eyes. The spark intrigued him. If Azro was worthy, maybe Helisho could find someone to help him.

“I could train you a bit, but I’m still learning a lot of things myself. If you compare my dragon age to human years, I would say that the two of us are close to the same age.”

The air became colder as the two companions sat and talked about their lives and their reasons for being in the forest.

Helisho leaned closer. “I know you want to become a hero, I just don’t really understand why.”

Azro stared long and hard into the flickering flames before he replied. “My sister Jina was four when she wandered off. I was about ten years old when it happened...”

He could still remember the feeling he had when he arrived home that night. Something hadn’t felt right from the moment he stepped inside.

Batan had scooped the ten-year-old Azro up into her arms—something she had stopped doing years ago—and held him in her lap. She murmured prayers and cried silent tears against his freshly braided hair, never answering Azro when he asked her what was wrong and only crying harder when he asked her where Jina was. It was only when his brother Dovo came home that his mother finally let go of him.

They spoke in quiet voices away from Azro, and when they were done, Dovo led his little brother into the kitchen while their mother ran out of the house and into the night.

“Where’s Mother going? Why didn’t Father come in with you?” He was about to ask about Jina when Dovo placed both hands on his shoulders and looked down at him with a very serious expression.

“Jina has been missing all day. Some villagers went looking for her.”

Azro’s eyes had begun to burn as his emotions caught on faster than his thoughts. “Did they find her? Where is she?”

Dovo pulled Azro into his arms. “They found her in the forest, but she’s not alive anymore.”

The rest of his memories were only bits and pieces. Dovo running after him as he ran to the forest. His mother holding his sister’s limp and torn body. His father crying. Azro would never forget the tear streaked face of his strong father.

“I knew I couldn’t have done anything to save her, but that’s when I realized I didn’t want to see that happen to anyone else’s little sister.” Azro shook his head and gave a laugh that lacked humor. “Thank you again for saving me. I would have ended up just like Jina even though Mother told me to make sure I come back alive.”

The silence was long and heavy as Helisho remained quiet and let Azro gain control of his emotions.

Helisho slowly smiled. “That’s a very good reason to become a hero. How many people have you tried to save since then?”

“Uh, none,” he rubbed at the back of his head and avoided Helisho’s silver gaze. “There are no beasts to fight in the village.”

“Fighting is not the only way to help people, Azro.”

The human smiled slightly. “My father said something like that before I left. He’s a blacksmith, so he thinks making swords helps people more than trying to become a hero.” Azro shook his head and idly broke a stick into small pieces as he spoke.

“Well, there is some truth in what he says,” Helisho pointed out after a pause. “If you know how to use a sword, you are able to protect yourself and the people that you love... But your beliefs are correct as well. Sometimes people aren’t strong enough to protect themselves and need a hero to do what they can’t.”

The young man sighed and tossed his wood pieces into the fire and watched the colorful display for reds and oranges within the silver flames. It had an interesting effect, like looking at the surface of a clear lake and watching the fall leaves floating along top.

“So, what about you. Why are you here?”

Helisho grinned and leaned close, his voice low when he spoke. “To see the human world. It’s so interesting to be here now that so much has changed. I was here three centuries ago, but we had to leave early because of the spell that was going to be cast on the forest.”

“The one that keeps all of the creatures from leaving and attacking the village? Do you know why the dragons decided to do it?” Azro asked.

“Yes. The creatures are criminals and this is their prison. There needed to be a separate place for those who had life sentences and those who only needed to be contained for shorter amounts of time.” Helisho saw Azro’s eyes go wide and quickly waved his hands. “Don’t worry. The creatures here are dangerous to humans of course, but they aren’t major criminals. Those are kept on a far away island. Besides, dragon magic is strong. That spell will last for six hundred more years at least.”

He was relieved at that, but there was still some unease within him as Azro realized how foolish he had been for walking into a forest full of prisoners. Surely they were all bored, and the chance of attacking a human would have been a great entertainment.

“You should go to sleep now. I’ll keep an eye on your pack, so don’t worry about the pixies.” Helisho said with a wink.

Azro grinned and shook his head. “Actually, I don’t think I want to sleep here. Would you like to come home with me? I can show you more of the human world and then you can decide if I’m worth training.”

Helisho stood up in his excitement, “Then why are we still here? Let’s get going.”

“Right,” Azro stood up as well and checked that he had everything with him.

Helisho waved his knobby black hand over the silver flames and they slowly receded into nothing.

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Azro took out a cloak from his pack and handed it to Helisho. “You should put this on. It will be dark in the village, so I don’t think anyone will realize you’re a dragon if you keep the hood on.” He helped Helisho into the piece of clothing and stood back to look at him. “Good. Keep your head down and hold the front closed. Hopefully no one will give you a second glance.”

“Is all of this really necessary?” Helisho asked with a sigh of annoyance in his words.

“I just don’t want anyone to start panicking, that’s all. My family won’t be very happy, but at least we’ll be able to control their reactions if I introduce you in private.” Azro checked Helisho’s appearance one last time and then lead the way to the village.

Helisho followed closely behind the human as they broke through the trees and the magical barrier. “Do you think they’ll like me?”

“Well...I’m not sure about how they’ll react at first. But once they know you’re not out to kill them, I think everyone will be friendly to you.” Azro said with assurance.

“Are you just saying that to make me feel better?”

“Yes, but it’s true. They will defiantly be afraid of you in the beginning, so don’t be offended if they say cruel things to you.”

Helisho nodded at Azro’s words and they continued to walk.

The sun was already set, but the sky had yet to become fully dark. It was just enough light to allow Azro to walk without relying on his lamp. Not an hour had passed when they finally stepped onto the main road, and the shadows of the early evening were

molding themselves within the folds of Helisho's cloak, hiding his appearance to the few people they had passed.

"Where is everyone?" Helisho asked curiously.

Azro smiled to see that Helisho was just as full of questions as he himself had been when they were in the forest. "This is the first day of the festival for fall harvest. Most of the villagers should still be there. I think they should be announcing contest winners before the evening music and dancing starts."

He moved down a side road to a small one story house with smoke billowing from its chimney. Azro couldn't be sure about his brother Dovo, but he knew that his parents would be home as they hadn't stayed for the festival dancing since their early years of marriage. "Wait here while I talk to them. And make sure no one else sees you." He said to Helisho before slipping into the house.

Tiloft looked up from picking at his nails and shook his head when he spotted Azro. "Back already?"

"Yes, and I have a surprise!" Azro grinned and gestured for his mother to come closer.

Batan wiped her wet hands on her apron and walked over to her son. "What's this surprise? Have you brought back that troll's head that you always talk about chopping off?"

"Not exactly," Azro said as his smile slipped a fraction. "Is Dovo here?"

"No, it's just us, now get on with it boy," Tiloft barked, his voice filled with irritation.

Azro took no offence to the tone. Tiloft had been selling weapons at the festival to travelers, and he quickly lost his temper with those outsiders who tried to haggle him down to insultingly low prices, which caused him to be in a foul mood for the remainder of the day. “I just thought I would include him in the surprise, but if he isn’t here, than that’s alright.”

The young man took a deep breath and dived in. “I’m sure you’re going to panic when I introduce my guest, but please don’t... I found a dragon and he’s very friendly and even saved me when I first entered the forest.”

Tiloft jumped from his seat and shouted at his son. “You brought a dragon into the village? Have you lost your mind?”

Azro cringed. “I told you, it’s perfectly fine. He won’t hurt anyone. He just wants to see the human world.”

“Are you sure you can trust him?” Batan asked as she rung her hands and glanced out the windows and into the night, wondering how close Azro’s dragon guest was.

“Yes.” The confidence in Azro’s voice did not go unnoticed by his parents, but they still weren’t sure. Their son spotted this and put a hand on each of their shoulders. “He looks strange, but Helisho won’t hurt you, I swear. He’s curious about our life style and we can learn a lot about the dragon’s from him.” For now, Azro left out Helisho’s promise to make him a hero, deciding to face one issue at a time.

Banta and Tiloft gave worried looks to one another and then nodded to their son. “Alright, we’ll meet your friend,” Tiloft said, “but if he destroys the village it will be on your conscious.”

“Right, of course.” Azro smiled despite his nerves and opened the front door. “It’s ok to come in now.”

Helisho stepped into the room, still covered by the cloak Azro had given him.

Azro closed the door and then nodded to his friend.

Tiloft and Banta stared as the knobbed looking black fingers with claw-like nails reached up to pull back the hood of his cloak. Their eyes went wide as they took in his features: the way his obsidian black skin shimmered like scales, the slits of his silver eyes, and his matching hair. Banta even noticed that his ears and teeth were slightly pointed, but despite this, she could see that he wasn’t as frightening as she had expected.

Helisho gave them a tentative smile and leaned over to whisper to Azro. “Don’t mention my other form until later.”

“Right,” Azro whispered back, and then spoke up as he pointed to the man then woman. “My father Tiloft and my mother Banta. This is Helisho. I hope all of you will get along.”

His parents gave stiff, silent nods, and Azro realized that this was the best he was going to get out of them for now. “Why don’t we leave them to get used to this idea? We can take a walk outside and maybe we can find my brother so you can meet him as well.”

The dragon nodded and fixed his cloak before they went into the night once more.

“That went fairly well,” Helisho mused as they took a winding road towards some of the farm houses.

Azro laughed and patted Helisho on the back. “Give them time.”

“Right. How many hours do you think it will take them before they get over the shock?”

The two friends laughed and debated the numbers as they continued walking.

Helisho smelled the smoke and heard the girl's screams before Azro. He grabbed his friend's arm and started running.

"What are you doing?" Azro asked, confused as he trotted in the direction he was being pulled.

"I hear screaming, and there's the smell of smoke in the air." Helisho pointed towards the horizon.

Azro squinted and saw a faint red glow coming from the direction of a farm house. If Helisho was smelling smoke, then there must be a fire. Azro pumped his legs faster and was soon traveling the familiar trail to his cousin's stable.

The smell of smoke suddenly hit him, and the screams of the girl reached his ears. He knew from her voice that it must be Coravanne. He turned to Helisho. "Go to the village and tell them the stable's on fire and Coravanne is inside. I'll try and save her." He tried to leave, but Helisho grabbed a tight hold of his arm.

"Wait, I thought we were trying to make sure I wasn't seen by anyone."

"Well, just... start screaming 'fire' when you're too far away for them to see you. Make sure you throw in 'stable' and 'Coravanne' so they know where to go."

"Ok," Helisho's legs carried him faster than any human's would have. He smiled softly to himself, glad that Azro hadn't automatically asked Helisho to save the girl.

Azro did not stand to watch Helisho. He picked up a bucket and dipped it into the horse's water troth, then dumped it onto his head. After repeating this twice more, he kicked open the burning door and sprinted inside.

Five-year-old Coravanne was huddled in the corner of a stall, tears streaming down her face as she hugged her knees and finally stopped screaming when she saw someone she recognized. Azro gathered her up and spoke soothing words to her as he quickly and carefully went back to the door. A burning beam crashed down, blocking the path, and Coravanne began screaming anew. He turned in a small circle before he spotted an unblocked window. He moved quickly and carefully to it, knocked away the glass with his elbow, and pushed the girl through it.

She landed safely on the other side. Azro smiled and patted her head. She spoke but the words didn't reach his ears.

Azro gazed out the window, ignoring the girl's insistent tugs at his arms in attempt to urge him through the small opening. He could see that some people were coming on horseback. The smoke was getting into his lungs. He coughed and choked. Coravanne's parents scooped her up and the three of them began to cry.

*What now? Azro thought. I saved her, but now I'm the one trapped. But I guess its better this way.*

He stepped away from the window and continued coughing as he sat down on the floor.

*I just need to rest now, that's all. Close my eyes for a little while.* The smoke filling his mind and lungs, Azro began to drift off.

"Azro! Stay awake, Azro!"

*Helisho! The dragon, my friend who's going to help me become a hero. I can't sleep. I haven't proven myself to him yet.* Azro felt himself being lifted up and carried out

into the night. He choked and wheezed then breathed deeply at the fresh air. He smirked up at Helisho's grinning face.

"You can't die yet," Helisho carefully placed Azro down. "You're my ambassador to the human world. I still need you to introduce me to the village."

Azro held on to Helisho's shoulder to steady himself, "I'm not leaving. I haven't proven my capabilities yet."

Helisho shook his head and squeezed Azro's hand. "You already have. Coravanne is safe because of you. All that's left now is for you to train."

The pair walked together, and Azro grinned so hard that his cheeks began to ache. As his relatives and the villagers patted his back and praised him for such a courageous rescue, Azro realized that, finally his dream was coming true.

## “For Shelly”

### 1.

The advertisement almost escaped his gaze as Jeff sat on the couch, lazily scrolling through the morning newsblog articles on his parent’s air computer. Tucked in a corner next to a flashing blue rectangle promoting a low-fat 30sec microwave meal, there was a wanted ad searching for people to test prototypes.

Bino Technical Corporation: Searching for adults between the ages of 18 and 30 to test products. Each participant will be paid \$45 or more.

“Say no more, I’m there!” Jeff raised his hand and clicked the image on the suspended screen before him. It seemed like a good, quick way to earn some easy cash. He used a finger to push the newsblog’s window off to the side and it hovered next to the easy chair as Jeff opened a new window. He did a quick search and read up on information about Bino. There were a few articles, all written for scientific journals and full of complicated language that made little sense to him, but Jeff managed to figure out that they specialized in transportation, mainly hybrid cars and teleporters. Jeff closed the multiple windows that he had opened up until he was back to the original advertisement to get the information number.

The next morning Jeff ate breakfast with his mother while his father (who didn’t have to work until a few hours later) slept in.

“You haven’t gotten up this early in months,” the woman commented as she spooned more eggs onto his plate. “What have you got planed today?”

“I’m helping with a prototype test at Bino and I have to be there at eight.”

“That technical corporation?”



Jeff nodded as he shoveled eggs into his mouth then swallowed before speaking. “I don’t really know what we’re doing. They probably just want to get opinions of potential customers before it gets put on the market.” He stood and put his dishes in the dishwasher.

“Ok, you be careful. If it looks too dangerous, you can always back out of it and come back home. I don’t want you getting any unnecessary injuries.” She kissed his cheek and gave a wave as she focused on her own breakfast.

Jeff left the house and walked the three minutes to the station and was just in time to take the 7:46 am teletube to Bino Technical Corporation. He didn’t like public teletubes very much, especially those made for massive amounts of people. Groups of ten to forty people walk into a painted circle on the ground to stand directly beneath a giant tube that sucked them up and spat them out at their destination. Home teletubes—which Jeff preferred—worked differently; more like materialization, but the technology only transported two people safely. Anything more than that and people come out with arms sticking out of their heads.

Jeff arrived early to make sure he didn’t get lost. The place was bigger than he thought it would be; it easily could have held a small amusement park. He walked through the automatic doors and gave his name to the woman at the front desk. Her smile was polite and false as she nodded and began clicking away at her computer. She asked for photo identification and carefully checked it over before returning it to him.

“Ok, you’re in test room 49-Q.” She continued, giving Jeff directions on which elevator to take and which wing to enter and how many doors he would be passing. He

looked at her with dazed eyes and she rolled her own towards the ceiling and handed him a laminated map. “Just follow this.”

Jeff decided the woman was too rude to spare a “thank you” to, so he walked away without a word, turning the map seven different ways until he finally figured out he had been looking at the wrong side.

## 2.

George’s wife never came home that night. She should have arrived one hour after him, allowing George some peaceful quiet time in front of the platinum definition television with a beer or two before she began to clank around the kitchen making dinner. When two hours passed and there was no call from Rachelle, George rose from the couch and pulled a 30sec microwave meal out of the freezer. By midnight he had tried calling her different contact numbers four times and received no answer.

When he woke up the next morning he expected to turn over and see her sleeping beside him. Instead, George found the divorce papers lying limp against the curve of her unused pillow. A month later and they were still lying there.

George showered, brushed his teeth, but skipped shaving. Rachelle used to make goofy faces in the mirror behind him when he shaved in the mornings. Now he could only bring himself to do this grooming ritual every other day, if even that. He went into the kitchen, the smell of fresh brewed coffee soothing him as he took out a 30sec breakfast meal. George poured the dark brown life liquid into a cup and turned the kitchen’s television to listen to the news. He needed something to fill up the silence that Rachelle had left behind.

His breakfast and coffee finished, George carefully washed out the mug.

*“You think Shelly is more important than I am. Tell me who she is!”*

Rachelle’s voice echoed in his head and George turned off the water, dried his hands, and gathered his things for work.

\* \* \*

“Good morning George!”

George took his white lab coat from his work locker and slowly forced each of his arms through the arm holds. He glanced at Hannah but did not return her greeting.

Hannah smiled at him anyway. She was always smiling. “It’s Monday morning and we have the whole week ahead of us. Doesn’t that make you excited?”

“No,” George slammed his locker shut.

“Well, I have a new group coming in to do some prototype tests today, so I’ve got enough excitement for the both of us,” Hannah chimed.

George groaned and scratched at the coarse hairs of his chin. “Yeah, you do that.” People like Hannah made him want to start smoking again. He tried to maneuver around her, but Hannah placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Rachelle’s lawyer has been calling here for you almost everyday. She left her number and said that you really need to get in touch with her by next week.”

As she waited for a response of some sort, George didn’t miss the twitch of the woman’s lip, and knew she would just love to dig up some sort of scandal so she could spread it around to the other staff members. “Ok, thanks for the message.”

George left the employee room and took the teletube to the basement. It was deserted as it almost always was, and he finally felt like he could breathe normally. He opened the door to Shelly's room and stepped inside, "How's my favorite girl today?"

### 3.

There were already about a dozen people in the testing room, all sitting at desks that were identical to the ones Jeff had sat in during high school—the same tiny wooden table-chair combination but without the pencil doodles and the chewed gum clinging underneath. Technology had advanced so much since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet school desks are still as crappy as they were when Jeff's parents were in school. Everyone was avoiding making eye contact or small talk, and Jeff felt as if he were truly back in school, waiting for the teacher to give instructions on how to shade in your answer circles.

With his stomach stirring with pre-test nerves, he sat down at a desk in the back, placed his clammy hands on the desk and tried to relax. *This is not a test*, became his silent chant.

"Good morning!"

There was a woman standing in front of us. She was dressed in a gray wool skirt with matching tights and shoes. The only color to her outfit was her hot pink sweater; warm clothing for late May, but smart considering the intensity of the building's air-conditioning system.

"My name is Hannah and I will be administering this product test today." She smiled and began to pass out paper and pencils.

Any earlier nerves that Jeff had about the test resurfaced once again. *Chill, it's not a standardized school test*, he thought as he received his materials.

Hannah was still speaking as Jeff tried to calm down. He noticed that she smiled too much. She was excited and enthusiastic about this product. She was seriously getting on his nerves. Before he even made the conscious decision, his hand sprang into the air.

“Oh... Yes?” She smiled, all teeth and very little gums.

Jeff scrambled for something meaningful to say, some question in relation to what Hanna had been talking about. “Can I go to the bathroom?” It wasn't what he had been searching for, but it served its purpose in not making him look completely stupid in a room full of strangers.

“Of course you can. It's at the end of the hall. Hurry back. We need you to sign a few forms before the testing can begin.”

*End of the hall. End of the hall. I had no idea the hall would be so long*, Jeff thought as he walked down the long passage. He sighed when he finally reached it and stepped inside. It wasn't until he felt that unmistakable elongated stretch of his stomach that he realized he had made a mistake. He had stepped into a teletube, not the bathroom, and in the blink of an eye, he found himself in a completely different part of the building.

There weren't many people around. In fact, there weren't any as far as Jeff could tell. He wondered where security was (were they on a break?) and why no one had passed in the hallways as he walked around. He decided that the area must have been the basement, which might explain why he hadn't seen anyone if it was a place that was rarely visited

It wasn't dark like a typical basement, all of the lights were in perfect shape, but the floor was concrete, unlike the other floors he had been on which were made of tile. The walls were different too, concrete with red painted letters and numbers that didn't mean anything to him, but they seemed to be arranged in a logical and orderly formation so Jeff followed them. *Maybe I can find where they start and hopefully there might be a staircase or something that can get me out of here.*

Jeff walked for only five minutes before he heard something. It was a dog barking, a sort of high pitched yapping that reminded him of the puppy his cousins had when they were younger. He opened the door to find the biggest Beagle he had ever seen. No, it was the biggest dog he had ever seen period. It was bigger than a horse—maybe the size of an elephant—and it was locked in a cell. Its floppy brown ears lifted slightly when Jeff came in, and then it sniffed the air and happily began to wag its tail.

“Hey there buddy,” Jeff cooed as he moved closer.

#### 4.

George watched the young man as he held out his hand out for Shelly to sniff, and heard him laughing a little as her tongue must have tickled him.

“They must be feeding you steroids or something,” the intruder said as Shelly lay down so he could reach through the bars to scratch at her ears.

“We tried that, but the result was...unsatisfactory,” George said when he finally spoke up and made his presence known.

The man, probably no older than nineteen, twirled around and stared at George with wide eyes. His stare was so intense that George chanced a look down at himself and

his work area. His lab coat was hanging on the back of his chair and he was sitting in a sort of slump. He figured he probably looked like he hadn't slept in a week; but even so, George looked back at him with sagging bloodshot eyes that closely watched the man's every move.

“Oh...What did you do then?”

He stared at him until the other man broke under the pressure and looked away. “We injected different things into him when he was still an embryo.” He sipped his coffee, grimacing as he swallowed it. “This coffee tastes like crap even when it's cold. God I hate this place,” he muttered. But the coffee was tolerable and he needed the caffeine, so George tilted his head back and swallowed what was left.

He walked over to Shelly. The dog's ears perked up and her tail thumped an excited beat against the concrete floor as she caught George's approaching scent. “You're here for one of those prototype tests, right?”

“Yeah.”

George chuckled. “So, how did you get lost? You even make it to the testing room?”

“Heh, yeah I did, but I think I stepped into a teletube when I was trying to find the bathroom.”

“I told them to put up a sign or move the telematt, but they never listen to me.” George shrugged, his slim shoulders bunching under his wrinkled white shirt.

They talked for a while longer about simple subjects and George learned the young man's name and age and his reasons for taking up the advertisement job.

“You ever think about college or the military?” George asked.

“I’m not stupid or out of shape, I just don’t like being part of a system.”

That made George laugh. “That’s good. The system is all BS anyway.” He knew he should have called security by now. The prototype test no longer mattered, as it was probably going on without Jeff, but the issue was that he wasn’t authorized to know about Shelly. No one was authorized to know about Shelly except for the scientists and people working with her. Rachelle wasn’t allowed to know.

“I’m getting out now while I still can. Takin’ that pup with me. I could use the help.” The words were spilling out of George’s mouth before he realized he was speaking them. Once they were out, he knew they were true. Jeff reminded George of a younger version of himself.

Jeff was visibly taken aback. “Why? Won’t you get fired or thrown in jail or something?”

George shrugged. “Not if they can’t find me.”

“Ok, but why?” Jeff asked as George glanced at the clock on the wall.

He stood up. “I’ve been working here for six years, and I can’t take it anymore. At first it was just getting adjusted to the workload, but I could deal with that. Then they put me on this special project, wanted me to develop some sort of mutated animal that could replace automobiles. They said an animal would be better for the environment, ending the need for petroleum and getting rid of a ton of air pollution. I didn’t want to be part of it, but I didn’t really have a choice in the matter.” George reached into a small locker and took out a bag and coat.



“How could you say no to this cute face?” He reached up above his head, stretching his toes to their limit as he patted the underside of the beagle’s chin.

“What’s his name?”

“*Her* name is Shelly. If you’re going to help me, you better make a decision now.” George was looking frantically at the door as he talked, and Shelly’s ears were perked as if she were listening to something outside of the room. “Look, I’ve got just about a ten minute window to get Shelly out of this room and the building without being noticed. Come with me or not.”

## 5.

They got out using the public teletube. If Jeff had known George was going to make such an obvious escape, he would have declined and asked for directions back to the prototype testing room.

Their hiding place was an old abandoned tech building three states away. George seemed to have the whole thing planned out, because there was already food, water, and other supplies when they arrived. Although Jeff was pleased that they had these “accommodations”, he was beginning to regret the split second decision he had made. George assured him that he had a plan, but Jeff wasn’t convinced that it had been thought out past this “hide out”.

## 6.

“Can I at least call my mother? We’ve been gone for nearly two days now. She’s probably lost her mind, thinking I got killed during my dangerous prototype test.”

George glared at Jeff. How many times did he have to repeat himself? “No. I told you we have to wait longer. They know you’re with me.” He sighed and laid his head on his arms. “I’m taking a nap. Wake me up if anything happens.”

Despite his efforts, sleep would not come to George. He wondered if this was the right decision. Should he have killed Shelly before the pup was born? He had thought about backing out of the program, but it was his first job after getting a PhD, and he didn’t want to go through with the grueling job search again. Besides, Rachelle had been happy then; ecstatic about their new three bedroom home complete with front yard and a pool in the backyard. Shelly was already a fertilized egg when Rachelle began to hint at having children. George loved the idea. It hit Rachelle hard when she learned about a rare disease that left her unable to fulfill her fantasies. George had suggested adoption and surrogate mothers, but the more he tried to comfort her, the angrier she became. The more they argued, the more George began to stay late at work; raising Shelly and making her into the “transportation vehicle” that the corporation wanted her to be.

With his morals already against the project, Rachelle’s divorce papers had made up George’s mind for him. He contacted trusted friends from Grad school who worked at Bino’s sister companies and learned that Shelly was not the only case in size mutation animals. Since his discovery of the divorce papers, George spent the month planning on how to save Shelly. They were headed to California which he had learned held shelters for animals like Shelly. She would be safe there.

“George...I think there are military cars coming towards the building.”

7.

Jeff wasn't sure about how Bino corp. had found them, they tried to escape on Shelly, but evading their pursuers proved difficult. This time they had guns and Jeff was not feeling very safe even though George given him a protective vest to wear. He soon realized that even though the opposing side had guns, they weren't using them, probably worried that Shelly might get killed accidentally, and Jeff felt for her. He decided not to leave George; that he would stay until they safely reached California, too see this rescue through until its end.

### **“What Fate May Deal You”**

Aken thinks he is a prince. He glides around his sitting room, a glass of chilled wine in one hand while the other twitches with excessive gestures that he thinks make him look sophisticated. His voice, while naturally loud, is cringe worthy. I don't watch him do any of this. I can see it clearly in my mind as I kneel at the hearth to revive his dying fire.

*Thinks he's a prince; wishes he was a prince is more like it, I think as I slip a hand into my apron and pull out a small pouch. Aken's over-the-top attempts to impress his guests continue behind me as I do what I can to breath life into the pile of embers before me. I feel around inside the pouch and pull out some dried leaves and tuffs of finely shaved bark that look as if they might be soft to the touch. They aren't but they make perfect nests for the flames to catch onto. I don't need those just yet, so I place them onto the smooth rock surface of the hearth and turn towards my left to grab some fresh wood. I expect the case to be empty and am surprised and pleased to see that there are two large pieces waiting to be used.*

With these two thick logs that are about half the length of one of my arms, a fist full of glowing red coals, and the shaved bark fluff along with the crushed leaves, I've got more than enough to work with. I grab an iron shovel and rake the coals closer together and place one log over them with the second propped up on top of the first log, making sure not to smother the precious coals. Next I put in the wood fluff and leaves and in a few heartbeats the structure begins to smoke.

*Why does he always wait until the last minute to send for me? As his family's Firemaid it is my job to keep their home (and the servants' quarters) warm through the*

*cold months. Not only that, but I have to heat bathwater as well, and I do most of the woodcutting myself. At least this time he called before the room could get too cold.*

I sit and watch as the logs slowly begin to catch fire, the orange light flickering and growing brighter as it climbs up the edges of the wood.

“Oh, Saran, you’re still in here? Shouldn’t you be done already?” Aken asks.

I can feel him behind me hovering like a ghost. His voice makes me want to cringe. “I’ll be done in just a moment, sir.” I had wanted to make the fire like a normal non-magic human, but of course Aken wouldn’t want me sitting around here while I could have it done in the blink of an eye. So, despite my wants, I stand up and brush off the front of my dress and apron even though they aren’t very dirty at all. Stretching my palm out towards the wood, I take a deep breath and release it slowly. I can feel the energy in my arm, warm and tingling as it moves out to my hand, getting hotter and hotter as it travels. A jet of red hot flames streams from my outstretched palm and crash into the wood. I keep the fire stream going for three heartbeats until I feel that they have grasped the wood and begun to burn on their own.

There is light applause behind me and I turn to regard my young master and his guests. Aken is clapping the loudest so they must only be copying their host in an effort to appear polite. They are dressed in fine clothing, so I don’t see why they would find my firemagic remarkable. Each of them probably has a firemaker in their servant staff or pay for a temporary one during the winter. I glance at Aken who’s smile is too wide as he walks toward me. Was I their entertainment? Was he expecting me to bow?

“What a wonderful gift you firemakers have! Thank you Saran.” Aken tries to put his arm around me but I step away at the last moment and head towards the door.

“Of course, Aken. Please excuse me.”

I scramble out of the room and close the door behind me. I glare at my feet and ball my hands up into fists to keep from screaming my irritation. Aken was so ignorant of what his guests might mistake what he had just tried to do. Knowing my young master, I'm sure he was only trying to make himself appear friendly to all people, wealthy and servant alike; but to his guests, it might appear as if he were flirting with me, and the wealthy do not flirt with the poor.

Before he can attempt to lure me back into the room, I scurry down the servants' stair and out the door into the cold air. The sun has begun to set, and I guess that I have three hours to prepare for the evening fires before Cook calls the servants in for dinner. It was plenty of time to chop wood and transport it to the correct places, and I would need a large amount to heat up the baths for Master Aloschen's family. The women were very specific about the temperature of their baths, and each expected to be soaking in their perfectly temperature water at a specific time. The four females were picky, but I didn't mind that, as I understood their desire to feel, smell, and be as clean and beautiful as possible; however, heating baths is not an easy task. Somehow I manage, focusing my attention on three baths, or sometimes four, at one time, keeping each at a different but constant heat. It requires a calm mind and absolutely no distractions. By the end of each night, it's sometimes hard to gather my magic, and I always send a silent prayer to my mother, thanking her for teaching me how to make fire the “normal” way.

I watch my brown booted feet leave little oval tracks in the snow as I make my way to the woodshed. The door is open and there is a fresh stack of wood on the right side that hadn't been there this morning. I smile at this bit of luck and begin to gather the

logs onto a sheet, carefully selecting each one, checking for any wetness or other factors that might cause it to burn poorly. When I am done, I wrap the edges of the sheet around the wood, squat, and pick up the bundle with a soft grunt from the effort. It is heavier than I expected, but lift it up and head towards my nightly route to the manor's baths.

I finish with my work just in time to be one of the first servants in line for dinner. Cook places the pots of food on the thick wood table and we all help ourselves to his hot stew and warm bread. I sat down in a corner and quietly ate every last bit. I even scrapped the edges of the bowl with bread and had second servings of each. There was chatter surrounding me as the other servants conversed about their day, but I don't like speaking while I'm eating, so I stay out of the conversations. This leaves me with a quiet life, but I like it that way.

\* \* \*

It is hours after moonrise when I wake from my pallet by the kitchen hearth as someone runs past me. I yawn and stretch and check on the fire. It is still going strong, and it must, for it keeps the main part of the house warm through the night and I have to attend to it at all times. I stand up and walk outside to see a sight that I was not expecting.

Aken is standing in the snow with a bag in his hand. He frowns deeply to himself as he turns around in a circle as if confused about which direction he should take.

"Are you alright?" I step out of the shadows cast by the house and he gives a startled little jump.

"Saran, I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

“No, I was watching the house fire,” I lied.

He nodded and fiddled with his bag. “I see. Well, you should be getting back to that then, shouldn’t you.”

I dip into a quick bow and turn away from him to walk back into the house. I hide in the shadows of the door and watch him as he marches off into the night. “Where could he be going so late?” I whisper before slipping out and following him.

He is walking more than ten paces ahead of me, his head bent as his breath heaves in great clouds that hang in the winter air. We go up a trail that leads away from the manor. *Aken is running away from home. What a fool. Why would he do that?* I can see no reason why he would want to leave the comfort of his family, the protection of his father and the promise that he would receive all of Master Aloschen’s land, servants, and money. *That must be it then.* But I didn’t want to make an assumption about the young heir. Maybe he is meeting some girl, but that seems foolish as Aken is very open with his courting habits.

Aken stops and makes a frustrated noise as he looks around the forest trail. I don’t bother to hide myself. “My young master, I think you should return home,” I say quietly, more as a suggestion than an implication that I was of status to order him around. I look up when he laughs.

“Well, you would be the only one who thinks I should do that,” he says in a bitter tone that I have never heard him use before.

“Your family would miss you, and what about your friends who were just visiting this afternoon?”



Aken shook his head and leaned his body against a tree. “They are only acquaintances,” he said with a dismissive flourish of his hand. “My father would rather have one of my sisters’ potential husbands inherit his wealth instead of me.”

I moved closer to him, but I was not foolish enough to make myself within his arms reach. “That can’t be true. You’re his blood, his first and only son.”

“He made it clear to me this evening that he was not pleased with me. He told me he would soon disown me if I didn’t correct myself.”

For a moment, I could think of nothing to say. Aken was known for his desire to enjoy life. He went to parties nearly every week, he spent large amounts of his father’s money on new clothes, and he flirted shamelessly with nearly every woman he saw. Aken had just reached the age of adulthood a month ago, but Aloshe refused to acknowledge it, claiming that his son was still a child.

“Well,” I said when I could finally voice something worth saying, “what were you expecting to do with your life after running away? Do you have anyone to stay with?”

I saw him shrug in the darkness, a gesture that his mother always berated him for. He really was still a boy in many ways. I spoke again when it became apparent that he had nothing to say. “Maybe you should think this over and try running away another time?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but a loud, earthshaking crash stopped him.

We both cried out and turned toward the manor to see that it was being hit by flying balls of fire. I felt my magic stirring within me and realized that those flames were not natural, but magic cast by a firewalker, a much stronger one than myself.

Aken began to run towards his home but I wrapped myself around him and pulled him back with all of my might. “No! It’s under attack. If you go over there you’ll get yourself killed.” He struggled against me and I did the only thing I could think of to keep him from leaving. I kicked him straight between the legs.

His body crumpled to the ground, his face twisted in a silent scream. I whispered an apology and dragged him over to some bushes. “We need to stay hidden. The attackers probably don’t know you weren’t in there.” I felt him nodding beside me, and we lay there for hours, well after the screams died down and the sun came up. I used my firemagic to raise my body temperature and stayed close to Aken so that he wouldn’t freeze. I didn’t like the closeness of our bodies, but I bore with it as I didn’t want him to die, even if he was foolish.

When it seemed like the attackers were not going to return, Aken and I cautiously made our way toward the burnt ruins. It was amazing that just yesterday the manor had been standing perfect and tall, bustling with life as people traveled in and out. Now it had been defeated, its insides ripped out and burned. We saw many bodies littering the ground, most of them burnt so badly that they were unrecognizable. I nearly vomited several times and was surprised when Aken showed no signs of it bothering him.

He walked through the maze of debris and bodies, carefully looking at each thing. I realized that he must have been looking for answers. Why this had been done, if his family was alive, what valuable things had been destroyed or stolen. He was quiet through it all, his clenched fists the only sign whatever contained emotions he was feeling.

When we were done, we concluded between the two of us, that we had been the only ones to survive. Our tears were silent streaks upon our faces as we worked through the mess to gather whatever we could.

Aken brushed a hand across his sweaty brow and gave a choke of a laugh. “Ah fate, I think she is punishing me for not taking my life seriously.”

I consider this and nod. “Maybe. I hear she can be quite cruel when she’s angry. But she should know that Master Aken would not to surrender himself to her so easily.”

“Yes,” a small smile tugged at his mouth, “Master Aken will have to seek revenge on her and the people who did this. Of course he will need help from the beautiful Saran; expert firemaker.”

I laughed, but even with how ridiculous it sounded, I liked it. “Saran will serve you to the best of her capability.” I smiled up at him and felt proud. Yes, fate was cruel, but her life teachings were a necessity. Master Aloschen would surely love to call this new born man his son and heir.

## Healing Wounds

Yellow moonlight threw shadows into the narrow passageway as Miladyn took the stairs three at a time while dragging her fingers along the cracked wall. Pausing in the doorway, she inhaled the night air, warm and heavy with humidity from a storm that passed only a few hours ago. A light breeze drifted by and brought with it the smells of rich spices. She would need to get started on her own dinner. *It will have to wait a bit longer*, Miladyn thought as she stepped out of the doorway and onto the open roof.

She took a small journal from her pocket and sat down to write.

### Summer: Day 18

*Five children died today, two more than Healer Don predicted during last week's estimation. I don't know how long the children's hospital will last with this death fever spreading through the city. I've delayed my trip to Kintoba village for as long as possible, but Healer Don says I must leave tomorrow. If I come back in the fall, will the hospital still be open? I hope that it will be. After three months of work, I'm—*

“Mila! Where are you?”

Miladyn started and then relaxed. “I’m on the roof!” She closed the journal and leaned back, waiting patiently as she looked at the night sky. The second moon was barely out, just a slim orange crescent a hand’s length away from the full yellow moon that dwarfed it; but the tiny white stars cast their light as well, threatening to outshine the twin moons.

Kana’s heavy footsteps stopped and Mila shifted her eyes towards the stairs. Kana was leaning against the wall, chest heaving slightly as she tried to regain her breath. The heavy set woman smiled and lifted up a small black pot. “You haven’t eaten yet, have

you? We had some extra left so I thought I'd bring it over for you." It was an excuse that Kana used often. Mila knew it was just the woman's attempt to make sure she was well fed.

"You're sure your husband won't mind that I'm stealing his second serving?" Mila teased.

Kana chuckled. "Don't you worry about Don, he had three helpings tonight. Besides, you're leaving tomorrow afternoon so this will be the last time you eat my glorious cooking."

Mila smiled at Kana's reply and stood up. They left the roof and went down three floors and stopped at the first floor where Mila's living area was. She placed her hand on a small metal plate secured to the wall. A moment later it reacted to her magical signature, sending a small current through the wall, across the ceiling, and to a small glass blown globe that hung in the middle. In the blink of an eye, the room was cast in a dull yellow light.

At the center of the room were a small round table and two chairs. Mila sat down as Kana busied herself with dishing out the warm soup and bread. Besides the furniture, the room contained only boxes stacked side by side and on top of one another. There were only two other rooms that belonged to Mila, and they were just as bare. All of her possessions had been packed away, ready to be carried off with her when she left the next day. Mila felt a lump in her stomach as she picked up the spoon and began to eat. *I'll be back here soon. I won't miss this place because the village work will keep me so busy that I probably won't even have time to think.*

It really was too much food for her, but Kana's looming yet kind presence forced Mila to shove every last bit down her throat until there was no more.

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Summer: Day 20

*After two days of traveling from the capital, I will be reaching the village of Kintoba shortly before sundown. I thought I would be going by airship for most of the journey, but three days ago they began to shorten their route because of bandit air-attacks, and now I'm doing the last part by cargo lizards and my own two feet. The giant lizards make me a little queasy, but I keep chewing special plant roots to keep it under control.*

*During my time on the airship and various cargo lizards, I have seen many different people; and the farther I get from the capital, the more it becomes apparent that the outer villages are in need of Healers. I expect that I will mainly be taking care of children, which I don't mind because of my time at the children's hospital, and I'm sure that at least one baby will be guided into this world by my hand and powers. If I were religious, I would send a prayer to the Gods and Goddesses to watch over me; instead, I will clench my jaw and face whatever I am dealt.*

*I must stop writing. The lizard is going up a rocky hill.*

Mila looked at her barely legible writing and sighed. The sun was falling closer to the horizon, and as the cargo lizard waddled up the hill, she began to see the first houses of Kintoba village. Many of them were hardly big enough to be considered houses as none of them looked to have more than two rooms. They were made from wood and had roofs of leaves that were tightly woven together, simple but acceptable and easy to repair.

*I hope my place for the summer is bigger, Mila thought as the lizard continued deeper into the village. I have too many healing supplies and books to live in such a small place. Two rooms would be enough even if it might be cluttered and cramped. It's only for the rest of the summer and part of the fall.*

The sun was nearly touching the horizon by the time Mila's things had been put into her living area. Tired from her journey, the young healer curled up on her cot, still in her traveling clothes and fell into a gentle sleep.

She was shaken awake two hours later by a young boy shoving at her shoulder. It was Fionglé, one of the children who had helped her carry the smaller boxes into her home.

“Healer Miladyn, my brother David has a bad fever!” He cried as he pulled her arm and dragged her out of the door, down the dirt road to his home.

Mila entered the hut and spotted David laying on a pallet. She crouched down next to him and immediately began to work. Her hands glowed faint purple as she dragged them along his body, looking for any other injuries or sicknesses besides the fever. When she found nothing else, Mila focused her attention on his hot forehead and took note of the way he was breathing. She was glad when she knew that it was not the death fever that had claimed the children at the hospital. “Don't worry Fionglé, David will be fine.”

She calmly but quickly began to take things from her pack, mixing substances together to make a thick cool paste. She had their mother apply it to David's forehead and chest. It was always nice to include family members in the healing process, and she put Fionglé in charge of cleaning off and reapplying the paste every four hours until the fever

was gone. Fionglé assured her that he could do it. Mila stayed long enough to make more of the paste and explained the fever to the children's mother as she worked.

Mila went back to her cot and lay down. Her first healing had gone well. She had expected that the villagers would be skeptical of her, but this presented an opportunity to show that she could be trusted to look after them. She realized how fortunate she was that David's fever was not life threatening. It would be a bad sign for her first patient to die only hours into her temporary job.

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Mila had expected her time in the village to be simple and easy, but there were difficulties that she had not anticipated. And although she did not deal with many patients, she learned how to work alongside the villagers: helping them with laundry, watching small children for busy parents, or assisting with the teaching of the older children who attended the school house.

David soon became her favorite child. He had some magical talent, and within the few months that she was their, Mila taught him how to heal small cuts and bruises, pointed out important herbs, and let him read from her books. In turn, David showed her to the village's "secret" swimming area.

"How far away is this place David?" Mila asked, panting as they hiked up the tenth hill that morning. Her legs were aching, it was hot, and she couldn't help but feel envious of the children's youth as the little ones sprinted on ahead of her.



David laughed and tugged at one arm while Fionglé pushed her from behind. “A bit more, a bit more.” He insisted.

“You keep saying that, but it’s never just a bit!”

The boys laughed and dragged her to an area that was (thank the Gods and Goddesses) level and shaded by trees. They followed a trail until they reached a closed off area of stone and the bluest water she had ever seen.

“We call it The Blue Basin,” David grinned and urged her to sit down and soak her feet.

Mila sighed at the cold blue water and tilted her face up towards the sun. “Thank you for bringing me here, David.”

“It will help heal your wounds.”

“I’m not injured.” Mila looked down at him, her face confused.

He smiled and shook his head. “Your heart hurts.” He closed his eyes and placed his hand on her shoulder. “I can feel it, just a little. You’re not sick, but you are sad. Healing makes Mila’s heart sad, but makes it happy too.”

Mila, in her months of being around him, and not known that David had this ability. Her eyes were filled with tears as she nodded to him. “Yes. I don’t like it when I can’t save people. What good is being a healer if you can’t save anyone? So I try to help as many people as I can, but sometimes I still cry when one of my patients dies.”

David put his small arms around her and gave her a tight hug. “Heal your heart wounds here.” He pulled Mila into the deep water with him.

She closed her eyes and slowly let go of her worries as the laughs and playful shrieks of the children sounded around her, echoing off of the basin walls a thousand

times until they rang gently in her heart. Mila closed her arms around herself and embraced the gift, the ability to take things as they come and cherish the good and the bad.